

Unleashed Bonus Chapter

By Callie Harper

Declan

Kara stood at the vanity in a red teddy built for sin, brushing her hair like she didn't know she made me hard the second I saw her. When I'd left her that morning for a quick meeting with a business associate, she'd still been sleeping. It was a 17-hour time difference between New York and Fiji where we'd spent our honeymoon. Even a seasoned traveler such as myself had trouble with that time change. Kara would get used to it, though. I planned on showing her the world.

Coming up behind her, I slipped my hands around her waist, caressing the soft silk of her lingerie.

"You're back!" she exclaimed with delight as I kissed her neck.

"How's my wife?" I couldn't help it. I knew it was cheesy, the sort of affectionate term of endearment that a year ago would have made me wretch. But with Kara, I let myself go.

"Your wife is happy to see you." She smiled at me in the mirror.

"How are you feeling today?" With great care, I brought my hands around to her still-flat stomach. I couldn't believe she was pregnant and that we were going to have a baby together. To say it blew my mind would be a complete understatement.

"I'm excited! I can't wait to meet your grandmother!"

Yeah, that. With a grumble, I leaned back against the vanity and ran my hand through my hair. That's why we were in New York. We were going to meet my brand-spanking-new family, wrapped up and delivered to me in a bow. Today, we had plans to meet my biological grandmother and my half-sister over lunch. Then, tomorrow, we'd have a ceremonial Reviewing of the Will and then Saturday, their annual holiday party.

I was sure they would all be thrilled to meet me, the bastard born out-of-wedlock trying to hone in on their inheritance. They'd be sure to greet me with open arms.

The thing was, it wasn't me that I really cared about. I could take a few cold shoulders. But if anyone was anything less than 100 percent kind and gracious to Kara, I'd rip their fucking teeth out. I hadn't grown up on the Upper East Side with a silver spoon in my mouth like they had. I was the bastard, the forgotten kid, and I knew how to use my fists. They'd just better not give me a good reason.

"She sounded really nice on the phone."

"What?" When had Kara talked to my grandmother?

"Oh, I called her this morning while you were out. I wanted to double-check the address and time and all that. And see if we could bring anything."

“What, like a fruitcake?” I didn’t get the down-home holiday vibe from this British grandmother of mine. In pictures, she looked as relaxed as the Queen of England at a coronation.

“Well, I suppose that would work since it is the holiday season, but no one really likes fruitcake anyway.” Kara scrunched up her nose. “She said to bring nothing, but we can have your driver stop somewhere on the way up. I wish I could bring some homemade cookies. But we’ll have to settle on something from one of these fancy stores around here.”

I had to hug her again, big like a bear around the middle. Homemade cookies. You could take the girl out of Montana, but the Montana would most stubbornly not get out of the girl. Good. I didn’t want it to.

“I like you in this teddy.” I caressed my hand along the silk, bringing my palm up to cup her breast. I didn’t know if it was possible, but her gorgeous breasts already seemed larger. Was it wishful thinking? Or had Christmas come early?

“I probably have to change and wear clothes,” she told me regretfully. “Your grandmother is 83. She might not approve of my showing up for lunch in sexy lingerie.”

“How do you know her exact age?” How long a conversation had they had earlier that day?

“The dossier.” Kara referred to the black leather-bound file the Kavanaughs’ attorney had given us on the family. My biological father’s family. My family.

“Sounds like you’ve memorized it.” I wasn’t teasing. Kara was so excited to meet my relatives I think she might have done just that. I was the former foster kid suddenly thrust into a large, wealthy family, so I guessed I should have been the one pouring over the pages. But the only thing I wanted to examine every inch of was Kara. I looked at the clock. Damn it, we had to leave in about ten minutes. Not nearly enough time to give her the attention that she deserved.

Resigned, I let her head to the closet. “I liked Fiji. You wore bikinis all the time.”

“Sometimes not even that.” She winked at me before turning her attention to selecting a conservative lunch outfit. It made me grumble again.

I paced, waiting for her in front of the fireplace. It was nice and big, a working one at that. I’d make sure the firewood got stocked for later. At some point this lunch had to end. And when it did, I’d take Kara back here and get a good fire roaring, inside the fireplace and inside Kara as she lay on the soft rug in front of it.

Far too many minutes later, Kara came out in far too many clothes. I thought I saw a turtleneck tucked in underneath a scarf and a great big coat. Frowning, I offered her my arm.

“I’m so proud of you for doing this, Declan.” Impulsively, she threw her arms around my neck. “I know it’s hard.” What, was she sobbing? I brought my arms around her and held her close. “It’s complicated, meeting your family.” She sank back down onto her feet, taking a finger to wipe her eyes. “But I think it’s really important. And good for you to meet them. For us to meet them. Because we’re starting a family of our own now.”

She started crying again and I wrapped her up in my arms, feeling kind of choked up myself. She needed to stop saying things reminding me how much I loved

her. I'd spent years with my emotions turned almost completely off and this woman threw that all to hell. Of course, I loved her for that, too.

Kissing her on her hair, I wiped the tears away from her cheeks. "Come on, now. Let's do this."

She nodded. "I'm really excited." She smiled up at me through tear-stained eyes.

"You really seem it," I responded drily. I brought my hand to her lower back and we started toward the door. Until I stopped her.

"One more thing," I added, turning to point at the fireplace. "When this is all over, I'm going to take you back here, make a roaring fire, and fuck you hard on that rug in front of it."

She cleared her throat. "Wow." She fanned herself. "Better make this a quick lunch!"

Our driver, Vladimir, took us up Manhattan to the Upper East Side. Along the way, Kara found a tin of cookies that suited her at a specialty shop. She held it on her lap and unconsciously drummed on the metal with her fingertips.

"I can't believe your brother's a rock star."

"Half-brother," I grumbled. "And he's not going to be at lunch today." Or at the holiday party Saturday, if luck went my way. If you believed the press about him, the guy was a real letch.

"I've seen him in the news lately. I'm trying to remember why?" Kara scratched her head. "Oh, yeah. He broke that nice girl's heart."

"Who?" I had to admit it, I'd gotten distracted by a text from an investor. He was expressing concern about a new acquisition. I needed to turn off my phone.

"The one who was on American Idol," Kara continued, clearly on a new conversation path I hadn't followed.

"Who are we talking about?"

"Mandy Monroe, that's her name."

"I'm not following."

"Your brother's ex-girlfriend!"

"Kara, come on now with that word 'brother.' You're throwing it around fast and loose."

"Brother," she taunted me, sticking out her tongue. I gave her a warning look, licking my lips as I locked in on her tongue. I'd give her something to do with that tongue. She was good at using it just the way I liked.

The car stopped. "Here we are," my driver announced.

Red-coated doormen stood underneath an elaborate awning at the Park Avenue address.

"Does she live in a hotel?" Kara asked me as one of them came to help her out of the car.

"No, the nicer places in the city have doormen."

She whistled as she looked up at the building in all its restored post-war glory. Up in an elevator, we were greeted by another man in uniform as the door opened into a magnificent, high-ceilinged penthouse.

"Hi! I'm Kara." Kara shook his gloved hand. I hoped she never stopped greeting the serving staff. I loved this woman.

An older woman approached wearing a worsted wool suit, clearly tailored for her slender frame. Kara had said she was 83, but her posture was as perfectly erect as a youthful ballet dancer. Her silver hair was swept into a classic bun neither severe nor untidy.

"Welcome," she greeted us warmly, or at least as warmly as a wealthy, elderly British woman would allow. "Margaret Kavanaugh." She extended her hand, the epitome of grace and excellent breeding.

"Oh, hi!" Kara leaned in and gave her a hug. I noted a look of surprise on Margaret's face, but then it melted into a smile.

"Well, hello!" She took Kara by the shoulders. "Are you Kara, now?"

Kara laughed and introduced herself with the kind of vivacious ease she alone could bring. I, of course, stood stiff and gruff.

"Declan." I stuck out my hand like a tin soldier. I wasn't trying to be unfriendly, but this had to be one of the stranger meetings I'd ever attended.

"Hello." I met her eyes and, I have to admit, I was struck by her. The cheekbones. Those were the cheekbones that looked back at me in the mirror every morning. Holy shit. This was my grandmother.

And she must have been struck as well, because I saw her eyes fill. Briefly. Then she cleared her throat and composed herself.

"I see so much of your father in you." She took my hand, clasping it between both of hers. She felt thin but not frail. "I'm so very glad to meet you. I'm deeply grateful that you came today. And that you'll be joining us on Saturday."

Kara swept in with laughter and the tin of sweets and before I knew it the two of them were linking arms and discussing the best way to care for ferns. Apparently they were a tricky indoor plant and required a good deal of talking to. Kara professed that what they most enjoyed was singing, and Margaret agreed that she'd give it a try.

"Do you ever watch *Downton Abbey*?" Kara exclaimed as the butler led us into another room with a table laid out for lunch. "You remind me so much of Maggie Smith!"

From anyone else, it might not have struck the right chord to say you bore a striking resemblance to an 80-something actress in a famously stiff and snobby role. But from Kara it sounded all compliment. Margaret laughed and promised she'd watch an episode. I had to admit, I saw some resemblance, too. I'd caught an episode or two when Kara had been watching it over the past few months. I could see the strand of pearls Margaret wore looking right at home on the actress in her role.

"So you're British, Declan!" Kara exclaimed as we began our lunch. Literally, finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off along with a light watercress salad and what might have been a mushroom soup. Not my idea of a hearty meal, but I could always get a steak somewhere later on for dinner.

"May I offer my congratulations on your marriage." Margaret beamed at the two of us with what honestly looked like familial pride. "My son would have loved meeting you both." She paused, clearly overcome with emotion, but she didn't break. I could tell, she was a tough one. Maybe I'd inherited that from her as well.

"Thank you so much!" Kara reached over a hand to hers and held it for a moment. "I am such a lucky woman. Declan is so amazing. You're going to love him

when you get to know him." Looking at me as I sat there scowling and stiff, she added, "He can be a little gruff sometimes."

"Oh, my dear, what man can't?"

"I hear you."

I cleared my throat and gruffly took a bite of a dry cucumber sandwich. I was glad they were hitting it off. Behind Margaret, I couldn't help but notice a huge portrait of men and horses on the hunt. A flash of a fox gleamed from the corner of it.

I'd always identified with the fox, the one with the odds against him. The underdog who had to fight and claw for survival. Now, it turned out I was descended from the hunters. Looking at that giant painting, it had the look of an authentic, commissioned piece dating back a couple hundred years. Those were probably my great, great, great grandfathers.

"Thank you for coming to lunch, Declan." Margaret drew my attention to her. "I understand that this might be somewhat strange for you. But I assure you, your father very much wanted you to be a part of this family. He simply was not able to locate you before his untimely passing."

"I understand." I know when I'd first heard that from the Kavanaugh family attorney six months ago I had snorted and rolled my eyes, my bullshit detector sounding on high alert. But I'd had my own guy look into it. It turned out that my mother had used a whole bunch of fake names and false identities, filling out everything from leases to job applications at least a dozen different ways. Couple that with the fact that we'd moved at least every six months, and then my time in foster care and what you got was a kid that was hard to track down.

Plus, if my late father hadn't wanted me to be a part of the family, he could have simply left me out of his will. He didn't have to dangle two hundred and fifty million dollars in front of me. And he could have set out different provisions for the funds to be disbursed. As it was, all he required of me to receive the inheritance was meeting my family. Hard to argue with the wishes of the deceased. He had attached strings to the money, but they seemed to be the well-meaning kind.

"It certainly seems as if you've accomplished a great deal all on your own," Margaret continued. Her grandmotherly praise felt strange but good. "Your father would have been very proud of you. You should be quite proud of yourself."

I grunted. I didn't want to be rude, but I really didn't know what to say.

"See, there's the gruff," Kara explained. "But he means thank you."

Kara would really piss me off if she weren't so wonderful.

"I'm so looking forward to having you both at our annual holiday party this weekend," Margaret exclaimed as a woman in a crisp white shirt and black slacks whisked away our plates. "Friends and relations will all be in attendance and it will be a lovely way in which to officially welcome you into the family."

"I am just so excited to meet everyone! And it's at the Waldorf Astoria!"

There were many reasons I was grateful for having Kara as my partner in life. Her ability to talk was one of them.

"We give the party there every year. It's always a delight."

"I love Christmas!" Kara declared.

“Yes, I imagine that you do.” Margaret made the observation without sounding condescending. She actually sounded delighted.

“Oh, I’m so glad that you’re not horrible.” Had Kara just said that out loud? I looked at her somewhat sharply, but she kept right on going. “I was worried you were going to be all fancy and rude. But you’re lovely!”

“Well, thank you very much! You’re lovely, too, my dear.”

I didn’t know if it was just good breeding, but Margaret didn’t look phased at all by the comment. Maybe I was starting to like her after all.

“Now tell me.” She leaned in slightly closer to Kara and asked, conspiratorially, “When are you due?”

“What?!” Kara sat back in her chair, her cheeks flushing pink, her hand to her belly. “How did you know?”

“My dear, you’re positively glowing, as if you have a fabulous surprise that you can’t wait to share.”

“I do!” Kara burst out with a laugh, and I couldn’t help but laugh as well. “I’m not even two months along yet so I know it’s early to be talking about it, but I’m due in July which is so amazing because Fourth of July has always been one of my favorite holidays and I can’t help but wonder what if I had the baby on that day! Then our baby’s birthday would be the same as America’s birthday!”

“Much as it pains my English heart, I share in your enthusiasm.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Kara drew back, looking appalled with herself. “I didn’t think that would offend you!”

“No, my dear.” Margaret patted her hand. “I’m teasing you. We Brits have overcome the great disappointment over our tragic loss in 1776.” Looking up at me, she smiled. “Declan, you’ve made me so happy. This will be my first great grandchild, you know.”

“I didn’t know that.” I found myself smiling back at her. And just like that, things clicked into place. What did it matter, the past? So, I had a few issues to work out. My mother had dragged me around and my father had been absent and all that.

But now, I was about to become a father. And I wanted my child to know the family.

“We’ll have to come visit with the baby,” I said, inspiring a quick burst of a delighted hug from Kara.

“I would love that.” This time, my grandmother’s voice did break, but only a little and very briefly. She dabbed at her bright eyes with the corner of a linen napkin, then sniffed and drew her shoulders back up, posture erect. “You’ll have to come out to Yorkshire,” she declared. “This city air is no good for babies.”

“I absolutely agree,” Kara concurred.

“I have to say, you’ve really set the tone, Declan. As my eldest grandchild, I’m quite pleased. You’ve done so well for yourself. You married a lovely woman. You’re starting a family. Now we just have to see to it that your brothers and sister follow suit.”

“Ooh!” Kara clapped her hands together. “Project!”

“I’m in my 80s now, you see, and it’s absolute nonsense to wait much longer. I intend to see all of them married within the next five years.”

I chuckled, already seeing the writing on the wall for the rest of this Kavanaugh clan I had yet to meet. They might not know it yet, but if our grandmother had decreed it to be so, I bet there'd be wedding bells pealing out before long for every last one of them.

They might come along kicking and screaming. Lord knows I had. But as I watched my beautiful wife chat away with my grandmother, I knew deep in my heart that sometimes what we feared the most was what ultimately brought us the greatest joy.

Kara

"OK, so I've been trying to memorize everyone's names. I'm so excited to meet the family!"

"Yes, well." Margaret cleared her throat and took a sip of tea. Even through my exuberance, I could tell she felt slightly uncomfortable. "May I speak with you candidly, my dear?"

"Oh, of course!"

"They may not all be equally delighted to meet you."

"I knew it." Declan growled by my side, wrapping a protective arm around my waist. "I'm not going to expose Kara to that."

"Now, wait a moment, please." Margaret held up a slender finger and much to my surprise, Declan waited a moment. I'd have to ask her her secret for taming the beast. "I'm not attempting to dissuade you from attending our fete. Far from it. I'd very much like you to come as my honored guests. It was your late father's dearest wish."

She took a sip of her sparkling water, then added, "However, I do think it's always in one's best interest to be thoroughly prepared. Don't you agree?"

"That's why I've been studying the dossier!" I exclaimed. "I want to know everything about everyone!"

"And that's what I'd like to share with you today. The kind of information that you won't find in a dossier from an attorney. It will help everything go smoothly. Do you understand?"

She cocked her head and looked at Declan as she asked. He gave a quick nod of assent.

"Excellent. Now Richard's widow, Brandi, absolutely detests your very existence. Almost as much as his first wife, Bebe, does, though she won't be in attendance at either Friday's reading of the will or at Saturday's party."

"Detests?" I repeated the word, looking to Declan for confirmation or at least explanation of what she was talking about.

But he simply nodded his head briefly at Margaret. "Go on."

"Richard's eldest, Colton, is taking this rather hard as well. He's taken on a great deal in his father's wake. Far too much, if you ask me."

“Colton’s the one who...” I trailed off, not knowing how to put it delicately to this elderly British woman. But I remembered who Colton was. He’d been the newborn baby back home while his dad had gone off to Montana and had himself a wild time.

“Yes,” Margaret finished for me, tactfully. “And he’s none too pleased at your emergence.”

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” Declan protested, his pride rearing up.

“Unquestionably,” Margaret soothed him.

“And I’m not trying to get any money out of this.”

“Oh, no.” Margaret shook her head as if she found even the word “money” distasteful. Dreadful business, money. “Mind you, Colton’s not overly concerned with your portion of inheritance. It’s his mother he’s concerned about. You see, when Richard’s first wife Margot learned about your existence she took a bit of a...turn for the worse, shall we say.”

I could read a world of hurt between her words. I bet she’d fallen completely apart when she’d learned not only of her husband’s infidelity, but of his out-of-wedlock child. Conceived while she’d been home with an infant. I knew I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but what an asshole move.

“Colton is quite protective of her. He bore the brunt of her collapse. And your re-emergence, well, it has him worried.”

“I’m not going to mess with her.”

“Of course not.” Margaret smiled reassuringly. “It’s simply a matter of putting these old, painful emotions to rest. They’ve been stirred up again with your discovery.”

“Again, I didn’t mean—”

“Declan, dear, I’m absolutely thrilled that you’re in our lives. And people will come around. I simply want you to be prepared for the landscape into which you are about to set forth.”

I loved how this woman talked. I’d never met anyone like her.

“Colton’s a proud man, like his father before him. They’re so alike. He’s inherited the title, you know. Baron of Warwick.”

“What?” I dropped my fork. It clattered loudly against the china.

“Yes, my late husband bore the title. In the House of Lords, you know.”

No, I did not know. I needed to fan myself a bit with my hand. “You’re royalty? Do you know Kate and William?”

“Yes, I have had the pleasure of meeting the Duchess of Cambridge. She’s lovely.”

“You’ve met her!”

“On a few occasions. And Princess Charlotte.”

“You’ve met their baby girl!” Now I knew my voice was reaching an unnaturally high octave as I clutched the arm of my chair. Declan placed a hand at the middle of my back, maybe recognizing he might need to hold me back from leaping up into the air. “She’s so cute!”

“That she is. And I know you’re going to have one just as sweet.”

"I can't believe it!" I'd joked with Declan about him being related to royalty, but he was. He actually was. I turned to him, my hands clasped together at my heart. "Maybe we can have play dates with the princess!"

"Hold on, now. Settle down." Declan spoke to me the way I'd heard him speak to skittish horses, talking them down, soothing them so they didn't go so wild they broke their leg.

"You are a peach," Margaret declared with a smile on her face.

"And here I thought the most exciting thing about this family was Ash Black! A real live rock star!"

"Oh, Asher is terribly exciting," Margaret agreed, taking another sip of her water. "He never fails to entertain."

"Will he? On Saturday night?" I didn't think my heart could take much more of this. Was I about to see Ash Black perform?

"Would you like to see him sing a song?"

"Yes!"

"Keep it calm, now, honey." Declan rubbed my shoulder.

"Then I'll see to it that he does. Perhaps some Frank Sinatra."

I had no words. I might actually explode from glee. And just when I thought it couldn't get any better, a gorgeous young woman floated into the room with a welcoming smile on her face.

"Gigi!" Margaret exclaimed, rising to greet Declan's half-sister.

"Oh, no, don't get up!" Gigi hurried to her side, greeting her warmly with a kiss on each cheek. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I hope there's still time for me to say a quick hello!"

She was as friendly as you could imagine. Only about 20 years old, but she spoke just like her grandmother. Minus the British accent, but more vocabulary words than a dictionary. Neither of them sounded stuck up, though. They really put me right at ease.

Declan, he didn't seem as at home, but he wasn't what you'd call a relaxed man in general. Only I got to see that side of him. It made me smile, seeing him so gruff and stiff. He was a good man, as protective of me as a bear.

"And so you live in Montana? I've heard it's absolutely gorgeous there." Gigi turned her charming attention to Declan and even he warmed up a bit. He invited her up to one of the ranching properties he owned.

"The one in Bozeman is my favorite," I told her.

"Maybe during my summer break," Gigi agreed. "Thank you for the invitation." She explained that she was studying at Vanderbilt University, which apparently was down in Tennessee. She was in a sorority there and had declared her major as English. No wonder she had a way with words.

"You're going to have a lovely time Saturday night," Gigi assured me as we made our way to the door. Lunch had been so pleasant, but I knew Declan wanted to get out of there. I wanted to be alone with him, too.

"And you're sure Ash Black will be there?" I had to ask. I knew I was sounding starstruck, but that's because I was.

"Yes," Gigi assured me with a laugh.

"Everyone will be there." Margaret joined in. The way she said it made it sound like there was no alternative for family members. Again, I wanted to ask her her secret. She was so pleasant but I also had the feeling that absolutely nobody crossed her. How cool was that?

"Not everyone," Gigi added in a quiet voice I wasn't sure anyone else could hear.

"No?" I asked, suddenly wanting to give her a hug. She looked sad. Maybe she was thinking about her father.

"He's received an invitation, dear." Margaret murmured to her. Apparently she had heard her. "But you know his work takes him overseas."

"Yes, of course." Gigi recovered herself, giving her shoulders a small shake as if to rouse herself from her momentary slump.

Naturally, I was full of questions, but even exuberant me knew when to hold my tongue. It was hard, though. I figured I'd get it out of Gigi at the holiday party. I couldn't drink anyway with a baby on the way. What better way to dig up a few family secrets than stay sober at a party with a free, open bar. At least I figured it would be a free, open bar. This family didn't seem to stint on anything.

A servant of some kind brought us our coats. Over the past six months with Declan he'd taken me to some awfully nice places, but I still wasn't used to having people paid to wait on me. Even waiters and waitresses still seemed more like my kinfolk than my underlings. Declan seemed to have grown accustomed to it all, without ever seeming dismissive or spoiled. I guessed maybe I'd work my way there, but maybe not.

In the car back to our hotel I took the opportunity to snuggle into Declan. The heater was on, but the seat still felt chilly. He radiated heat, though, my big man.

"How'd that go?" I asked him, admiring his handsome profile.

"You tell me."

"Oh, you know I had fun. I can't believe your grandmother has met the baby princess."

"Yes, because what's better than a princess?"

"A baby princess!" I elbowed him in the ribs because I knew he was trying to get a rise out of me. He didn't go gaga over celebrities or royalty, but I was a mere mortal and, yes, I got excited over all those kinds of things.

"Do you think I can ask for Ash Black's autograph Saturday night?"

"Just don't ask for it on your boob."

"Declan!" That earned him another elbow to the rib. "I know I'm sort of hyper over all of this. But honestly, it's like this extra bonus gift."

"You sound like he's a prize at the bottom of your Cracker Jack box."

"Yes! That's exactly it!" Declan hadn't actually meant it, but that's really how I felt.

"OK, but let me just ask you this." He sounded serious. I turned to him, looking into his eyes. "Are you or are you not going to sew the family tree onto a pillowcase?"

I burst out laughing. "Don't be ridiculous. The family tree is clearly a needlepoint project! And you wouldn't put it on something you'd sleep on. You'd want to frame it."

“Naturally, naturally.”

We teased and laughed as the city blocks passed, but as we drew closer I had to ask.

“You’re sure you’re OK? Was that strange for you?”

“Sure, it was strange. I’d never have been there if not for you. And none of it feels like it’s my life.”

“I know, I mean, how crazy nice was her place?”

“Crazy nice.”

“They’re, like, billionaires.”

“And royalty.”

“I mean...” I didn’t really have words. I’d certainly never rubbed shoulders with the likes of the baroness.

“But I’m glad we did it.” Declan clasped my hand and brought it to his lips for a gentle kiss. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You’ve done everything.”

He ushered me upstairs to our hotel suite. He’d booked us at a boutique place that had such charm. Having grown up around rough-hewn wooden planks, all the lavish detail wowed me, the crown moldings and ornate carvings along the fireplace mantle.

“What do you think these are?” I asked, tracing the carved decorations with my finger. To me, they looked like dancers but I couldn’t decide if they were supposed to be people or some kind of mystical creatures like fairies. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

Declan wrapped his large, strong hands around my waist. “You’re beautiful.”

“Wasn’t Gigi pretty?” She had light strawberry blond hair and a petite figure. I had to have a good 20 pounds on her, easy. But that was true of a lot of women in New York City.

Declan grunted. “I guess.”

“It’s so crazy, she’s your sister! Half-sister, I mean.” I had to watch my words with Declan.

But then he started kissing my neck. “Mmm.” I leaned into him, loving his touch. I’d craved it for so many years, longed for it, and now I had him whenever I wanted. I wasn’t used to it yet. I still marveled over the ability to reach out, touch him, tell him exactly how much I loved him. And then get all the same right back from him.

“How are you feeling?” He rubbed my stomach and I smiled.

“Great, honestly.” No sign of sickness at all. Of course, I wasn’t even a full eight weeks along yet. It might be right around the corner.

“Let me bring you some water.” Declan headed off into the bathroom and I had to smile again. He was so solicitous, so concerned about my health even though you couldn’t even tell I was pregnant yet.

I did wish I had my mother still alive to talk about it all. She’d died in childbirth with me. You’d think that might make me more nervous about going through labor, but I didn’t worry that history would repeat itself. My mother had been out on our ranch, far from a hospital when she’d gone into labor. She’d lost too

much blood by the time EMTs arrived. I knew Declan would ensure I had the finest round-the-clock care, and as I drew near to full term we'd both make sure that I stayed within a quick drive to a full team of doctors.

But it would have been fun to talk to my mother about what her pregnancy had been like. Maybe she hadn't been sick at all, not a single day? But now my father had passed along with her, so I couldn't ask him, either. It made me sad that he never got to see me properly settled. He'd cared so much about me marrying well. Funny, he'd chased off the one man I truly loved—a man who it turned out loved me back. And that was worth all the money in the world.

It just so happened Declan also was worth a lot of the green stuff, too. A ton he'd made on his own, and now a bundle from his crazy wealthy biological family.

The baroness. Thinking of her perked me up. I bet I could talk to her about pregnancy. Maybe not about all the details of physical changes, but about the feelings and the process. I bet she'd be great at offering guidance. And maybe support, too.

And maybe arrange playdates with Princess Charlotte!!!

"Here you go." Declan handed me a glass of water. I took a sip even though I wasn't particularly thirsty. Drinking for two and all that. And it was so nice of him to think of me. I'd always known a kind man lurked underneath all that glowering. Turned out I'd been right.

He started to make a fire in the fireplace, and had it crackling in no time.

"Come here." He beckoned me over in front of it. Enveloping me in his huge arms, he kissed me. "Are you cold?"

"A little," I admitted. For a girl born-and-bred in Montana, it seemed a silly thing to admit. But in New York today it was in the 20s, and I wasn't dressed for it like I would be at home on the ranch. In place of wool socks and work boots, I had on pretty little shoes with high heels. They looked great with my slim-cut black pants and soft black cashmere sweater, but they didn't exactly provide warmth.

I was proud of myself, though. I remembered the first time I'd visited New York I felt like such a country bumpkin. This time around I thought I did a slightly better job of blending in, though I doubted I'd ever master that sophisticated fast-paced hustle of native New Yorkers. First, I smiled way too much. Second, I liked having random, friendly conversations with strangers. And finally, I enjoyed crafting. Those facts alone seemed as if they'd to keep me forever separate from the true heartbeat of the city. But it was a fun place to visit, especially with Declan.

"Let me warm you up." With his arms around me, I was already feeling pretty toasty. Next to the crackling fire, he eased off my jacket and kissed my throat. I sighed into him, loving his nearness. As much as I liked visiting with and meeting his family, nothing beat time just the two of us. We'd spent all those years apart. Now, I never wanted to let him out of my sight.

He took my hand and we sat down on the soft rug in front of the fire. He pulled me into his lap and I leaned back against his broad chest.

"This sweater's soft," he murmured into my ear, grazing his palms along my sides, my stomach, around my breasts. "But not as soft as your skin." With a swift motion, he pulled my sweater up and over my head, discarding it onto a chair behind us.

I'd noticed just in the past week or so that my breasts were starting to get bigger. That must be the first response my body was having to pregnancy, and my regular bra felt somewhat tight. I spilled out of the cups, my breasts practically tumbling out, begging to be freed from the restraints.

Declan growled with satisfaction and I felt it rumble in his chest as he pressed me into him. He cupped my breasts in his large hands.

"So beautiful," he murmured in appreciation, massaging me, swiping his thumbs across my nipples. He always made me so aware of my sensuality, his touch and his words creating the sense that I was the ultimate seductress. I'd never felt particularly confident in my sexual appeal. In fact, for years after Declan left I'd turned off that whole side of myself. I'd functioned on autopilot for a long time.

But that time was over. Back with Declan now, he'd opened the floodgates and passion flowed through me, never far from the surface. I arched my back, pressing my breasts into his hands, loving the way he touched me, the rough possessive feel of his masculine hands, the sure and steady way he held me against his strong body.

Against my rear, I could feel him growing hard and I pressed against him, wanting more. He hissed between his teeth and brought a hand to my hips, pushing me where he wanted me.

"You see what you do to me?" he asked, grinding against me, and I moaned in response. He was such a master at building my arousal, guiding my anticipation until I panted and begged for him. Right now with just the pressure of his shaft against me, I could imagine how good it would feel if he sank into me. How fully I'd take him in, how deeply he'd plunge into me.

His fingers wound lower and unfastened my pants, then slid them down my legs. I kicked them off, happily giving him access, and he whispered his way back up my inner thighs.

"I've wanted to take you here in front of a fire from the minute we walked into this room."

I tipped my head back, luxuriating in his kisses along my throat, up to my ear. He slipped a finger along the seam of my panties and I shivered at his touch.

"But I want to make sure, are you feeling up to it?" As he asked me, he pressed his thumb against my clit. I still wore my panties, but he knew exactly how to touch me.

"Yes, Declan," I panted, bucking my hips up to his hand. Why didn't he slip his fingers under my panties already? He liked to keep me waiting but I didn't want to wait.

"You have to tell me if you're not," he warned me, stroking slowly along the silk. "Over the next few months you may have days when you're not feeling your best."

Oh, no, was he talking about cooling things off during my pregnancy? That was not happening. "Listen," I turned my face toward his. "You'd better not be thinking of not touching me when I'm pregnant."

He chuckled low in his throat. "Easy, now." He brought me back again, pressing me against his long, hard cock. I sighed in pleasure at the feel of him. "No one's talking about not touching." As he spoke, he drew his fingers along my skin.

The reverent way he touched me, it almost made me feel as if he were worshipping at my altar.

"I just want you to know, I obviously can't keep my hands off of you. So if you need me to cool it—"

"Declan! Don't talk like that!"

He laughed again, clearly enjoying my desperate response. I liked that he was being sensitive and all, but there was a time and a place. Maybe when I was big as a whale in my ninth month I'd be feeling differently. But we hadn't reached either that time or that place yet.

"So what you're telling me..." he drawled lazily, sweeping his hands along my body. "What I'm hearing from you..." he teased me as I started to pant under his hands, wondering if I was going to need to rip my bra and panties off of my body myself. Because I'd do it, see if I wouldn't.

"What you need..." Finally, his hand slid underneath my panties, his fingers finally against my slick slit. With his other, he palmed one of my breasts, pulling down the cup to let me spill out for his pleasure. "You need to be fucked." As he spoke, he plunged two fingers up into my wet, quivering sex.

"Ah!" I cried out, my eyes closing at the sensation. He knew how to make me feel so taken with just his fingers.

"You need to be fucked hard and rough." He took my nipple between his fingers and rolled it, then pinched it with his thick, calloused thumb and forefinger.

"Yes!" I cried out, pleasure shooting directly to my clit.

Without another word, he rolled me onto my back and tore off my panties. He ripped my bra to the side, yanked his own pants off and bore down on me. The rug felt soft against my back but he pressed down on me, hard, and then draped my legs up and over his shoulders one after the other. He tilted my pelvis up, his massive hands clutching my ass, his fingers biting into my cheeks in rough possession. I could feel the head of his huge cock right at my wet entrance and wanted nothing more than to sheath him in my heat.

"You want it?" he teased, looking down at me already panting and writhing beneath him.

"Yes!" I begged, knowing at this angle it would feel intense.

He sank into me, full to the hilt, filling me up and my eyes rolled back into my head at the intensity of it. I clawed at him, screaming with pleasure as he started fucking me, pounding into me, relentless.

"Declan!" I cried as he worked me, grinding my pussy against him. I felt so completely possessed, so dominated as he thrust into me again and again.

He reached out one of his large, strong hands and grabbed onto my breast, holding it as he pounded into me. "So. Fucking. Hot," he groaned out, watching my breasts, watching his cock pound into my wet heat, feasting on my reactions.

In our frenzy, we moved along the rug and I felt the edge of the couch now grazing the top of my head. I brought the palms of my hands up to it and pushed against it so I could get more purchase, grind into him harder. I needed him so fiercely, I needed him to consume me, take me right up over the edge.

"Yes," he grunted, liking that I pushed into him, aroused that I wanted still more from him. "You like it like this."

“Yes,” I moaned, loving that he knew everything about me. I had nothing to hide from him, nor him me. We were the perfect fit to each other’s puzzle.

“I want you to come for me, baby.” He thrust into me, his cock impossibly huge. His words sent me over the edge.

“Ah!” I screamed, the waves of orgasm crashing over me, engulfing me whole. My mind went blank as pure pleasure, white hot, raced through my entire body.

“Take it!” he roared as he exploded in me, his come rocketing out deep inside. I could feel the force of him, the fierceness with which he possessed me.

“Declan,” I cried out, pulling him nearer, needing him even closer though he was already deep up inside of me. He unwrapped my legs from his shoulders, easing them down on the floor, and brought his chest down to mine, still supporting the majority of his weight on his elbows.

“I love you, Kara.”

No matter how many times he said it, it still thrilled me to my soul. I’d been so convinced for years that I’d never hear him speak those words. It still seemed impossible to me sometimes, but there he was, with me, my husband.

“I love you, Declan.”

I didn’t even realize it until he brought a finger to my cheek.

“Don’t cry, Kara.” He kissed my cheeks, stroking my face.

“Oh, you know I’m just happy,” I reassured him. This was part of the whole floodgates thing. He’d opened them up and now I had some strong feelings flowing unrestrained through me.

“I’m so happy, too,” he murmured to me, nuzzling into my hair. “Happier than I ever imagined.”

We lay like that in front of the fire, sharing bits of thoughts, both of us wrapped in the joy we had together, and would soon share with our baby.

“It keeps getting better, Declan.” I smiled at him and played with his thick hair. I wondered if he’d know what I meant.

“It does,” he smiled in agreement.

He knew. What we had between us. Just when you thought it couldn’t get any better, it did. What a future we’d have together. Starting now.