

*Dear Baby,
Um... Hi. - KS*

CHAPTER 1: LOVE IS PATIENT

*M*ATHEW IS NOT

January 26th

Mat Goodroe glared at his ex-wife as he let himself out of the house to talk to her. Natalie Bahman was standing on the porch, her hands shoved in her pockets, looking like literal hell. Despite their divorce he tried to be civil, maybe too civil considering how easy it was to text her at 3 A.M. Today, however, she'd immediately picked a fight with his brother Vinnie so he was lacking the patience to deal with whatever drama she was trying to drop into his lap.

"What the hell do you want?" He demanded.

"We need to talk." She shifted on her feet and that put him on edge. Natalie was the picture of confidence even when she was rattled.

Mat motioned for her to follow him over to her car in the driveway and away from his Uncle's and his brother's possible eavesdropping.

"So talk."

"There's no easy way for me to say this." She bit down on her lower lip and covered her stomach with her hands.

He wasn't stupid, outside of being dumb enough to hook-up with her on Christmas Eve. The baby she was implying existed with her body language wasn't his. He'd regretted sleeping with her as soon as he was sober, praising any god listening that he wasn't capable of impregnating her. "If you got knocked up, it ain't mine. I got snipped, remember the fight we had about it? I do." He folded his arms over his chest. "I got that shit tested after and I know I'm firing blanks. I'm not stupid enough to..."

"Not stupid enough to run around with me again! Yeah, I heard your little 'thank god' in the morning and it pissed me off. You were always pissing me off when we were together, insisting that we weren't going to last, but I knew..."

"You served me divorce papers when I was in prison! That pretty much guarantees not gonna make it." He motioned between them, "And for the record, we were done the day you hung me out to dry. I slept with you because you texted me and I wanted to get laid, nothing more and nothing less."

"I stole your sperm sample."

He'd frozen in his tracks instantly, she couldn't have... Natalie was crazy, but she wouldn't have...

"Bree's working at the clinic where you had the procedure done and I remembered

that I made you give a sample before you went through with your vasectomy. I emailed her to send it to my office looking official, then delete the request to hide the papertrail, but somehow there was no label and... ended up..."

He was trying to focus on her words, but it was getting harder to breathe, harder to stay calm.

"...She was supposed to come help me after hours...no one was supposed to be..."

"You knocked yourself up with my sperm?!? What the fucking fuck is wrong with you?!? Christ, you railed for years about Vinnie being crazy. But clearly you're the mental one!" He was yelling loud enough that he wouldn't be surprised if his family overheard, but he didn't care. "I want no part of whatever..."

"I'm not pregnant. I wanted to be; I wanted this for us." She reached for his arm, but he jerked away from her. "I wanted us to be a family and I thought it would bring us back together. But there was a mix-up." She choked up, but at the moment he couldn't care less.

"What kind of mix up?" He pressed, if this was her just telling him that his potential kids wouldn't be born, he was perfectly fine with that. Some people were just too messed up to try and raise kids. His own father had been one of those people. If it hadn't been for Rex taking him and Vinnie in, who knows how much worse he woulda ended up. Natalie didn't answer, instead she started to fidget with her hands, that dread was coming back, "It ain't a cocktail drink, Lees. Define mixed up."

"There was another woman at the clinic and I don't even know how it happened. The order that I wrote-up ended up in her file instead of mine and the doctor inseminated someone else."

"What?" He managed barely above a whisper. He clenched his fists at his sides and felt the tic in his clenched jaw. "What the hell is wrong with you?!?"

"Mat, that's not fair. It was an accident."

"Which fucking part was an accident?!? The part where you stole my goddamn sperm intending to knock yourself up or the part where someone else got my DNA?!? What is wrong with you?!?"

"Matty..."

"No, don't you fucking *Matty* me. This is just one more thing in a long list of shit that you've subjected me to. I went to prison! I lost everything! You nearly cost Rex his business. But *this* is the last fucking straw! I don't know why I even spoke to you again after all that other than you were an easy lay."

Natalie slapped him across the face, then flinched back putting some distance between them even covering her face momentarily before realising he wasn't going to physically retaliate. As angry as he was, he wasn't going to hit her; he didn't hit women.

She sighed, dropping her shoulders, looking defeated as she offered a piece of paper to him. "The doctor told the patient that she'd been inseminated with the wrong sample and she tested positive on a pregnancy test. So she knows and she wants to talk to you." The note with tomorrow's date, a time, and an address was written in polished handwriting. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

He snatched the paper away from her. "Get off my property. I'm calling a lawyer about this shit."

January 27th

“Can you make me mac and cheese tonight?” Her brother’s voice was nearly drowned out by the loud guitar music in the background as he posed the question before she was even able to say hello.

“Huh?” And granted it wasn’t the wittiest response for her younger brother and fellow college student, but Kassarah Shatan’s brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders. She blinked and tried to regather her wits to continue the call.

“Guys, turn it down!” He hollered and she flinched, pulling the phone away from her ear. “Sorry about that. I said; can you make me mac and cheese tonight, please?”

She sighed, “Noah, you have a meal card with money on it, go to the main cafeteria. I’m sure you can get mac and cheese there.”

“Awe, Kassie, they use the box stuff; it sucks. I’m dying from a lack of homemade meals. No one makes comfort food like you do.” The guilt-trip was unmistakable and not entirely unexpected.

He’d done this to her the whole time they were going through high school. Noah had a lightning metabolism, a bottomless pit for a stomach, and no kitchen sense. She’d even driven home last year to ‘help’ him make Yakgwa, a traditional Korean honey pastry, for his senior class project. Help had translated to her hunting down a recipe and making the dish, while Noah practiced his presentation and she assured him that he didn’t sound like a dummy. The day she’d gotten back to campus as a thank you he’d ordered a meal delivered to her dorm from her favorite restaurant. He really was a sweet brother, even when he was pushing her buttons.

“Please, don’t call me Kassie. It’s bad enough Daddy still does it.” She shifted on the bench, to try and get more comfortable. “I don’t even think I could get access to the kitchen tonight. My dorm’s only got one real kitchen and it’s been busy down there lately.”

“Then bring the stuff and cook it in our kitchen during shared hours.” Her brother persisted. “Or better yet, I bet I can even get the guys to chip in for the ingredients and you can eat with us. Family meals are better.”

Now he was tugging on her heartstrings, but she didn’t know if she could handle being in a boy’s-only dorm with all those smells. She shuddered at the thought of a body odor and body spray combination. “Even if I was to agree to, and I’m not, you’d be paying me to cook if I came over there.”

“Please, Kass, you’re my favorite sister. I miss you.”

“Noah, I’m your *only* sister and you saw me a couple of weeks ago at Christmas.” She watched a pair of squirrels chase each other up one of the trees that lined the paved park walkway. “You could have seen me more if you hadn’t spent the whole break disappearing. Where did you keep going?”

Noah cleared his throat nervously, “Oh, um, ya know nowhere special, just bumming around.”

“Uh huh.” She pursed her lips even though he couldn’t see her. He was clearly hiding something, but was it serious or just little brother shenanigans? One way to check this easily... “I guess I could come over tonight and make you mac ‘n’ cheese then we could talk about where you were going.”

“Um...It wasn't anything interesting or anything so yeah...Maybe come over on Saturday instead and I can look at your car for you.” He sputtered.

“When did you learn to work on cars?”

“You can find anything on Youtube if you look hard enough.” He boasted.

“Noah, as much as I love you, I think I'd rather be poor and pay a mechanic.”

“Or you could find a boyfriend and he could help you.”

“And I could teach your girlfriend to make you mac and cheese, so we could get to know each other.”

“You already...I um... I didn't say I had a girlfriend.” *Oh, that was Noah's guilty tone.*

“I knew it.” Kass laughed, “When do I get to meet her?”

“I gotta go, the guys are ready to practice. I'll talk to you later, Kass. Love you. Bye.”

Kass shook her head as the call had already terminated. She wondered who the girl could be. It seemed like Noah was trying to hide the girl's identi...or what if it wasn't a girl? What if it was a boy? Could that be the reason for his avoidance? They had grown up in church, but it was decently progressive considering the small town it was in. They certainly didn't teach bigotry as a rule. Maybe she should drop a pro LGBTQIA+ post on one of her social platforms to show that she'd be accepting? She'd do it later tonight so it wouldn't look too obvious that it was about him.

She glanced at her phone's lock-screen to check the time, the image of her family reflected back at her. She was still early for what she hoped would be a positive meeting. She didn't even know if the guy would show. The nurse hadn't been very encouraging about it, but had agreed to give the note to him when Kass mentioned a DNA test.

She set down her phone and drew in a long deep breath. She didn't know what to expect or how this conversation would go. She reclasped her hands in her lap and whispered quietly to herself drawing in another cleansing breath. She wasn't an impulsive person; she hadn't been raised to be. She was the personification of the “good girl” from a small town where your business was everyone's business and she'd wanted nothing more than to get out into the world.

College had been her way out. She'd applied herself, got the grades, and supplemented her family's limited financial means by writing essays for scholarships. It hadn't been easy, but she'd made it work. She lived in the dorms this year, but she was planning to move off-campus next year to save money. She handled her expenses carefully, she didn't want to be a burden on her father or anyone else. She was responsible for herself.

Unfortunately, before Kass had returned home for Thanksgiving break a letter arrived informing her that one of her spring scholarships had been rescinded from lack of funds. She'd been devastated. It had been her largest scholarship and to make up that much money, so fast seemed impossible. She'd nearly spent her entire break researching scholarships, grants, and finally loans. The idea of being in that kind of debt had made her uneasy.

She'd exhausted herself trying to figure out how to get ten-thousand dollars plus money for room and board. She needed help, but she couldn't make herself ask her father. It wasn't his responsibility to take care of her, she could do this. She just needed a plan of action.

Still looking for a solution before Christmas break, she'd barely been able to focus on

her finals. Looking for any way to get in the school's good graces, she'd stayed on campus a few extra days to grade tests for the professor she assisted. She didn't always go to church when she was in Houston, but she had gone the Sunday before her break began. Normally being in church calmed helped her center, but it hadn't that day. She had been a zombie barely able to focus on the sermon, finally forcing herself to turn off her phone to keep from looking at it.

Her eyes had kept watering, but she'd felt so silly crying over her situation when it could be worse. She had scribbled down notes on the worship program trying to focus. "Trust God to bring into your life what you need, when you need it. Trust His timing."

When the service had ended her note was running over and over in her head. "God will bring what you need when you need it." She had powered on her phone and prayed under her breath, "Any scholarship ideas? I need some help here. Because as much as I want to trust Your timing, the admissions office has payment deadlines and I'm getting desperate enough to think about selling a kidney. That's not a sin, is it? I mean it is my kidney and I'd be helping save a life."

She shook her head, that's not how things worked. You had to put things in motion if you wanted them to stay in motion. She couldn't just wait for some miracle solution to fall into her lap. Kass knew better than that.

Then it had been like lightning or eavesdropping, unintentional of course. She had been putting on her coat when she'd overheard two couples talking and what was being said stopped her in her tracks. Could this be her answer? This had to be a sign; some kind of fate. Maybe it was a miracle? Those still happened. Before she could think herself out of it she went and introduced herself.

Kass let out a heavy sigh and unscrewed the lid of her metal bottle. *She was a naive idiot.*

Mat double checked the note one more time before shoving it back into his pocket and trudging down the path. He was late. He straightened his tie while walking, finally seeing the gazebo that was mentioned on the note. He got closer and the only person he could see was a teenage girl sitting on the bench. *No. No. This couldn't be who...Hey God, we don't talk much, but if you could do me this solid, I swear, I won't drink or cuss for an entire fucking year. Shit!*

She was looking off in the distance, as she sipped from her water bottle and the wind rustled her flower-printed dress. Had he walked onto a Hallmark movie set? She must have heard him approaching because with a swish of her long hair she turned to face him and she was pure girl-next-door. Mat was staring at a teenager. The chick he was meeting was a teenager. Natalie had knocked up a teenager with his sperm?!?!

He had rehearsed about a hundred speeches on the drive here and they were: calm, reassuring, nonthreatening, and *not* rude. Unfortunately the first words that he said to her were: not calm, not reassuring, could certainly be thought of as threatening and were unquestionably rude. "Jesus Fucking Christ, are you even fucking legal?!?"

She dropped her water bottle and jumped off the bench scrambling to her feet as she grabbed an object from her bag that he identified as pepper-spray.

"Whoa! Whoa!" He put up his hands, "I'm the guy you're supposed to be meeting, I

think.” The girl’s green-ish eyes were full of uncertainty and he dug her note out of his pocket, holding it out to her. “See? This is you right?”

She kept her finger on the pepper-spray’s trigger but leaned closer to inspect the note and his face. Finally easing up her grip on the self-defense device, “I don’t know your name. The doctor...Dr. Styles, he didn’t give me... well, he said he couldn’t give your information, because of confidentiality. But the nurse from the clinic let me leave that note for you. But she wouldn’t give me any information about who you were either, which is ridiculous considering...” She motioned to her stomach exasperated, then blinked as if catching herself, and offered him her hand. “I’m sorry, I’m Kass Shatan, well Kassarah actually, but everyone calls me Kass.”

Her hand was tiny, she was short, and so freaking young. She cleared her throat and he realized that he was still holding her hand without saying anything and was probably scowling based on her expression. “Sorry. I’m Mat, Mat Goodroe.” He pulled his hand away and motioned back to the bench, “You wanna sit?”

“Do you mind if we walk? I took the bus here and I’ve been waiting a while, it would be nice to stretch my legs.”

He nodded and they started down the paved path. They walked in silence both sneaking glances at each other, trying to figure out what to say. She sipped from her green water bottle and stepped closer to him as a bike sped by them. He touched the small of her back for a half a second, while he switched their positions so he was closer to any oncoming people. He kicked himself mentally, he shouldn’t have touched her without asking or saying something. *Way to make her think you’re a creep. Perfect flush with making the worst impression he possibly could.*

“I’ll be twenty next month.” She muttered looking down then back up at him, “You kinda asked me if I was an adult, and I am. I’m nineteen, but my birthday’s next month. And I’m studying to be a nurse; I’m in my second year for the four-year program, it’s an honors program. So I’m a legal and college student, not a minor. Which given that you didn’t do anything to me wouldn’t matter anyway, but if that were the case it would complicate things. But that isn’t the case, so it’s not a concern.”

She was a little talky when she was nervous, it might have struck him as cute if he wasn’t trying to keep himself from freaking the fuck out. *Why did she go to a clinic to get knocked up anyways? Why would a nineteen-year-old volunteer to get pregnant in the least fun way possible? She was young to want a family. Maybe the guy she was supposed to be having the kid with was older? Was this a sugar baby type situation?*

Kass massaged her temples in slow circles, “I can’t believe this is happening. Why did I think this was a good idea?” Her eyes filled up with tears.

He reached out for her on instinct, he hated when women cried. It made him antsy. *Thanks for that dad.*

“Look I’m not judging you one way or the other. Whatever you choose to do with your life, is your prerogative. I’m not trying to be a bastard or anything, sorry about all the language and shit from before. This is just a lot for me to deal with.”

“A lot for you to deal with.” She scoffed, moving away from him abruptly.

He grabbed her arm, before she got any more distance between them and pulled her back, spinning her back to face him. “Whoa, hey, slow down. I didn’t mean...”

She started to turn her head away, but still threw-up all over the walking path and...his shoes. He managed to grab her hair to keep it out of her face. He let her finish coughing

and helped her off the path to a bench. "Here, sit down." He made sure she was settled then wiped off his shoes in the grass before plopping down next to her.

"Is that how you figured out about..." He motioned at her midsection. "...About it."

She rinsed out her mouth and spit next to the bench in the most ladylike he'd ever seen, before shaking her head. "No, I got the call from the clinic about the mix-up on Monday and they did a blood test to confirm that I was pregnant. Normally morning sickness doesn't happen this early in pregnancy, so it's either psychosomatic or I'm really unlucky."

"Yeah you and me both." He reclined against the back of the bench and glanced at Kass, giving her a once over. She was pretty, but he certainly didn't need to be looking at her. He instantly felt like a son-of-a-bitch for even doing it in the first place so he closed his eyes. She didn't need him staring at her when she was feeling out of sorts. He cracked his neck to relieve some of the tension that had gathered. He needed to relax, and they both needed to push through this and get the conversation over with. Given the circumstances, it was gonna be awkward, but he didn't even figure the conversation was going to be this long or much of anything to be honest.

He expected the conversation to go as follows: I'm Mat, sorry my ex-wife is psychotic and inadvertently got you knocked up when she meant to knock herself up, here's the money for you to take care of what you clearly didn't want to happen, and have a nice life. He'd already made an ass out of himself and it would be nice if he could manage the rest of this chat without making it worse.

"So why kids?" Her voice cut into his thoughts and his eyes snapped open at the question. She had mirrored his posture on the bench, so she was staring directly into his eyes, it caught him off guard and he flinched away from her. She blinked at his reaction and clarified with a comforting tone. "I mean, why did you decide that you wanted to have a child now?"

"I didn't."

"Then why was your sample even there?" Kass looked confused.

"Because Natalie is batshit crazy."

"Wait, you know the nurse that called me from the clinic?"

"Yeah, she's my ex-wife. *She* talked me into doing a just-in-case sample, but I wasn't ever planning on it being a thing. See I had my vasectomy done before I did a stupid thing, which was good, because that stupid thing got me sent to prison. I don't want kids, period." He loosened his tie, before crossing his arms over his chest. "She decided to use that sample to get herself pregnant to get back at me for being a dick. Whatever sense that doesn't make. This whole thing is a big fucking mess."

"Oh."

He wasn't sure what she was 'oh'ing about, because it could have been the 'I don't ever want kids' thing, the ex-con part, or all that drama he'd just word-vomited. Why were they still talking? He might as well get to it and rip the bandage off. Let her off the hook. "You don't have to."

Kass arched her eyebrow, "I don't have to what?"

He sighed heavily. Why him and why this nice girl, who never asked for any of his shit? "Have it. You don't have to have it. If you don't want it, then I'm not keeping you on the hook. This isn't what anyone was planning on, so you don't have to keep it."

"Um..." She hesitated, turning the ring on her finger. "I don't think I could not have it."

God's got a plan...I mean, I wouldn't feel comfortable making that choice for myself. I wouldn't judge if someone did, but..." She trailed off, because he must have been making a hell of a face, "What?"

"So you're like a church girl?" He concluded although it sounded like a question. Oh, he did not like where this was going. This thing was a mistake. You didn't have a kid out of guilt. She didn't even need to feel guilty. Him not having children was not going to be a loss to the world at all. She didn't do anything wrong and she shouldn't be forced into this. Shit like this just did not happen, except apparently to him.

"I'm a preacher's daughter, actually," Kass informed him.

"Fuck me."

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