

# *Misconception*

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PANTERA  
PRESS

# Before

Tom grabbed Ali from behind as soon as she closed the front door.

‘How about we get started now?’ His voice was husky in her ear, and even though her head was still reeling from the bombshell he’d just dropped on her, the usual zing wound its way down her back at his touch.

Ali turned to face him and put her arms around his neck. ‘You do know I’m not going to get pregnant the first time, right?’

His lips traced a tingling line along her jaw and down to her collarbone and she shivered. He gave her a crooked smile as he loosened his tie. ‘It only takes one time.’

Their progress was slowed as they paused in the living room and the hallway to kiss, shedding clothes as they went. By the time they reached the bedroom, they were both breathing heavily.

Ali placed a hand on Tom’s chest. ‘I’ll be with you in a minute.’ She backed into the ensuite.

As she brushed her teeth and washed the make-up from her face, her heart pounded with desire and the lingering shadow of uncertainty. She was far from convinced she wanted to go down this path, but Tom had been so excited when she’d

agreed. She'd had no idea he'd been harbouring the desire to be a father, but she knew, just knew, that he'd be a great one. Memories flitted through her mind of her own father, teaching her to ride a bike, his hand warm on her back, laughing. But then her smile faded as she recalled her mother standing off to the side, hugging herself, calling out to Ali to be careful, that she might fall.

It would be different for them. Maybe Tom's enthusiasm would be enough to make up for her reticence. Maybe it was worth all the changes a baby would bring to their lives. It had to be worth it.

She fished in the second drawer where her packet of pills lay waiting. The foil crinkled in her fingers as she picked it up. Every night before bed she popped a tiny pill out of its foil and plastic casing and swallowed it with a mouthful of water from the tap. No matter what had happened that day, no matter how eagerly her husband awaited her in their bed, she always remained faithful to her date with contraception.

She stared at the row of little yellow pills, tempted to follow her usual routine now, give herself some breathing room while she got used to the idea. Her thumb poised above the first pill in the packet, ready to release it from its prison.

And then, before she could change her mind, she turned on the tap and pushed each pill out into the sink. As the torrent of water sent them swirling down the drain, a rush of emotion that was equal parts exhilaration and terror swept through her.

They were really going to do it.

# Ali

Claudia had already ordered her lunch when Ali rushed through the door of the cafe.

‘Sorry hon, I’ve got a meeting at two so I can’t be too long,’ she said as Ali took the seat opposite her.

‘That’s OK, sorry I’m late.’ Ali shoved her handbag onto the floor, puffing with the exertion of the brisk walk from the office. ‘The boss has been on my back all day, and of course he chose the moment I was on my way out to tell me about the urgent thing that absolutely had to be done right then.’

‘Is this the minister?’ Claudia rested her elbows on the table. ‘What’s his name again?’

‘Not Geoff, no. It’s the chief of staff, Alex. We used to get along fine, but ever since he found out I’m pregnant he’s been treating me differently.’

Claudia nodded. ‘The old go-easy-on-the-pregnant-woman treatment, like you might break if you actually have to use your brain. I got that too.’

‘Actually, he’s been pushing me even harder than before.’ Ali’s job as media adviser to the state government’s education minister had been more frenetic than ever since rumours had begun to circulate a few months ago that the chief executive of

the education department had been misusing government funds for travel. Pre-pregnant Ali would have thrived on the extra pressure, but each day she felt a little more tired than the day before. It was becoming harder and harder to put in the hours that were expected of her.

‘Hang on, I’ll just go and order.’ She swung one leg out to get up from the chair, but a searing pain in her hips made her gasp out loud.

‘Stay there,’ Claudia commanded. ‘I’ll order for you. What do you want?’

‘Caesar salad, please. No chicken.’

Ali grimaced as she moved her leg back under the table. She hated feeling so helpless. Her physio had diagnosed pelvic girdle pain just as she’d clicked over into the third trimester. She’d been doing exercises that were supposed to help, but none of them seemed to make much difference. The pain got worse every day.

She watched Claudia standing at the counter, her own pregnant belly just beginning to strain against her white tailored shirt. It was good to be back in regular contact with her again after so long. Ali, Claudia and Kayla had been inseparable in high school, but Claudia had drifted away when they’d all graduated and moved on to uni. Kayla had later reconnected the three of them, but as the only childless one of the trio, Ali had felt alienated by their overwhelming focus on their children. But now, Claudia was expecting her third child and Ali herself was pregnant, and it was good to have someone to share the journey with.

‘Caesar salad, no chicken coming up,’ Claudia announced as she slid back into her chair.

‘Thanks.’ Ali nodded at Claudia’s belly. ‘You’ve really popped out now.’

## *Misconception*

‘I know, it’s amazing how much quicker you show with each successive kid. How are you going, anyway? Work getting you down a bit?’

Ali sighed. ‘I still love the work, but not the way I used to. I didn’t realise this baby would take over my life so much. She had the hiccups the other day, and I got sprung at work just sitting at my desk staring down at my belly. Not that I get many of those moments with Alex ordering me around.’

Claudia’s brows knitted together. ‘Make sure you don’t overdo it. Everything you do affects the baby inside you.’

Ali let out an exasperated groan. ‘I’m not working in a nuclear power plant, Claudia. Office work isn’t going to give her deformities.’

Claudia pulled the ridiculous prim face she always assumed when someone didn’t like what she had to say. ‘No offence intended. Just the stress, you know. But if you’re all good, it’s all good.’

‘I’m good.’

Their meals arrived together and Ali stabbed her fork into a segment of hard-boiled egg.

‘How’s Tom?’ Claudia asked around her mouthful.

‘Going to Sydney again next week. I hate it when he’s away. He’s been cooking dinner every night when I’m too exhausted to get off the couch. I live on baked beans on toast when he’s not around.’

Claudia frowned again. ‘He won’t travel this much when the baby comes, will he? It’ll be hard on you being on your own.’

‘We’ll be OK.’ Ali felt disloyal to Tom for complaining. ‘It’s for our future, so it’ll be worth it in the end.’

Claudia gave a little shake of her head. ‘It won’t be worth it if he misses all the baby’s milestones.’

‘He won’t,’ Ali said firmly. ‘He’s been so involved in the pregnancy. He’s on this email list that sends weekly updates about the baby’s development. I think he knows more about what’s going on in here than I do.’

Claudia tilted her head to the side. ‘That’s sweet. He’ll be a great dad.’

‘We’re going shopping for the cot and pram this weekend,’ Ali said. ‘He’s so excited, you’d think we were buying a sports car.’

Claudia laughed. ‘You always seemed so determined you were never having kids.’

‘I was,’ Ali admitted. When she and Tom had got married they’d agreed they weren’t going to have children. But when Tom had broached the idea of having a baby over dinner two years ago, Ali’s carefully curated world had tilted on its axis. She’d carved out a successful career, first as a journalist and then in the political field, and she had a strong, loving marriage with a man who shared her goals. There was little room amid all that for babies. And then there was her own mother; the ultimate cautionary tale against ever becoming a parent.

Ali had always been the kind of person others described as an overachiever. Everything she put her mind to, she excelled at. English, maths, science. Even sport. She’d been one of the only graduates in her journalism year to pick up a cadetship straight out of uni. Then, after five carefree years of singledom, she’d found the perfect man and married him. So when she’d agreed to Tom’s idea at the age of thirty-eight, it never occurred to her that she might not be good at making babies too. She hadn’t imagined then that it would take two years to get to where she was now. Her throat constricted with an ever-present fear and she clutched her fork more tightly.

## *Misconception*

Claudia suddenly straightened and moved both hands down to her belly. 'The baby just moved!'

Ali snapped back to the present. 'Is that the first time you've felt it?'

Claudia nodded. 'I'd forgotten how cool it was.'

'It's not quite so cool when they're dancing on your bladder at four thirty in the morning.'

'Yeah, that sucks,' Claudia said. 'But it's just the baby's way of helping you get used to waking up in the middle of the night.'

'Oh, do shut up, Claudia. You're only the twenty-third person to tell me that, and you'd be surprised to discover it doesn't make me feel any better.'

Claudia laughed, and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

'Anyway, this one's not moving anywhere near as much as before,' Ali said after a while. 'I think she's running out of room.'

Claudia's smile vanished. 'Have you told your obstetrician?'

'No.' Ali frowned. 'Isn't it normal for them to slow down in the third trimester?'

'Neither Ellie nor Jacob slowed down until I went into labour. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure they're supposed to stay active. You don't sleep on your back, do you? That's supposed to be one of the risk factors for stillbirth.'

A cold spot formed next to Ali's heart. 'Sometimes I wake up on my back. I don't see what I can do about that, though.'

The little crease between Claudia's eyes was still there. 'I used to stick a tennis ball in the back of my singlet just in case I rolled onto my back in the middle of the night.'

Ali stared at Claudia for a moment, then burst into laughter. 'You're nuts!'

Claudia's face turned pink. 'It's the pregnancy hormones. They turn me into a lunatic. Still, though, I'd keep an eye on the movement thing if I were you.'

Ali bit back a retort, but then the baby pushed a foot right into her ribs. She pointed with triumph at the top of her belly. 'See, there she goes now. Nothing to worry about.'

Claudia flashed a quick smile. 'Of course, I'm sure everything's fine.'

But when they'd finished their meals and parted ways on the street, the little pinprick of doubt was still there in Ali's chest.

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Ali opened her eyes on Saturday morning to the weak winter sunlight filtering past the edges of the blinds. The bed was empty. She rolled over and winced as the familiar wave of white-hot pain flashed through her groin and hips. It was always worse first thing in the morning. The digital numbers on the bedside clock told her it was eight twenty. She hadn't slept this late in months.

'Thanks for the sleep in, little one,' she murmured to her belly.

'Talking to yourself again, honey?' Tom appeared in the doorway, a cup of tea in each hand. 'You slept late.'

Ali grimaced as she pulled her ponderous body into a sitting position. 'She gave me a break this morning.'

Tom set the cups down and propped both of their pillows behind Ali's back so she could lean against them. 'Considerate baby.'

Ali laughed. 'Let's hope that's a sign of things to come!'

Tom settled in beside her and placed a hand on her belly. He constantly wanted to feel the life inside her. Ali hadn't thought it possible to be more in love with her husband, but he couldn't get

## *Misconception*

enough of caressing and resting his head on her pregnant belly, talking to the baby as if she were able to understand his every word. He was going to be an amazing father, just like her own.

‘Things are pretty quiet in there this morning,’ she said. ‘She must be saving her energy for today.’

‘She’s gonna need it.’ Tom’s eyes were bright. ‘That baby store’s not going to know what hit it.’

Ali rolled her eyes. ‘We don’t have to get everything today, you know.’

‘I’m looking forward to buying things for her. It makes it all seem more real.’

‘You are aware of how much stuff a baby needs, right?’

Tom grinned. ‘Cot, pram, nappies? How hard can it be?’

Ali nodded absently, but she wasn’t really listening. She was trying to remember the last time she’d felt the baby move. The last few days at work had been busy, and she’d gone whole afternoons without feeling anything.

She smiled down at the top of Tom’s head as he whispered something to her belly. Claudia had spooked her, that’s all. Shopping for the baby was just what she needed to get her mind off her friend’s paranoia.

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But by the time they got home from the baby store, Ali’s concern had bloomed into worry. She hadn’t felt anything all day. Tom remained oblivious to her stress. He’d enjoyed himself so much at the baby store that she hadn’t wanted to let him in on her irrational fears. God knows there’d been enough of them over the course of this pregnancy. The baby would move soon enough and then she’d feel silly for worrying.

While Tom lugged the flat pack containing the cot they'd bought into the house, she went straight to the bedroom and stretched out on her left side on the bed. Claudia's words ran on an endless loop in her head as she tried to force her limbs to relax.

When had the baby last moved? Was it last night? Yesterday morning? Was it normal to have such a big gap, or should she already be at the hospital?

She clutched her heavy belly. 'Come on, little one. Give me a sign. Kick me in the ribs. Poke me in the bladder.'

Nothing.

Tom appeared in the doorway. 'Could you come and give me a hand with the cot?'

'I'm tired, Tom. Do we really need to do it right now?'

'I just need you to hold one end while I get the screws in. It won't take long, I promise.'

She sighed and allowed him to help her to her feet. Maybe getting everything set up was just what she needed to convince her that everything was OK. 'I'll be with you in a minute.'

She took a detour to the kitchen and took the bottle of Coke out from the shelf in the fridge door. If anything was going to get the baby going, a caffeine and sugar hit would do it. She grimaced as the bubbles fizzled in her mouth, then gulped down more before joining Tom. He was crouched in the middle of the room, fenced in by the four sides of the cot lying flat on the floor. Screws littered the carpet around his feet.

The syrupy sweetness of the Coke joined her sense of foreboding in a sickly, swirling cocktail. 'I don't think we should do this now.'

Tom looked up at her. 'C'mon, Ali. It's exciting, isn't it? Let's do it while it's still fresh.' He stood up and held one of the ends

## *Misconception*

upright. 'Could you hold this steady while I put the sides on? Hold it on an angle. Yeah, like that.'

Ali did as he asked, but her eyes saw nothing of what he was doing. She was deep inside herself, not wanting to miss the slightest flutter from within. The sugar was already coursing through her; it should have passed through to the baby by now.

But there was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Fear whirled through her, overtaking her, suffocating her. She couldn't breathe.

'Almost done.' Tom straightened. 'Now we just need to put on the other end and we'll be—Ali? Are you OK?'

Ali met his eyes, tried to slow down her breathing. There was a sinking sensation inside her, as if the life were draining out of her. 'I haven't felt her move since yesterday.' Somehow, admitting it out loud made it real. Urgency surged through her. 'I don't know what to do.'

'Let's call Amelia.' Tom's voice was surprisingly calm. 'I bet she'll tell you it's nothing to worry about.'

'It's Saturday, Tom, her office is closed.'

'Then we'll call the labour ward.' Tom hurried away, leaving Ali alone in the room. She buried her head in her hands. This couldn't be real.

A few minutes later, Tom reappeared in the doorway, his face pale. 'The midwife I spoke to called Amelia. She said we should probably go straight to emergency at the Women's and Children's.'

A little more hope trickled out of Ali. She'd hoped Tom was right; that they'd say she was overreacting. But to be sent straight to the specialist public hospital was confirmation that she should be worried. Not just worried. Terrified.

They hurried to the garage and got in the car. The panic was taut between them on the drive to the hospital. Tom kept squeezing Ali's hand and trying to catch her eye. Ali stared down at her belly. Hoping.

But there was nothing.