



*Kathryn Ascher*

*What  
it Takes*

# Prologue

**K**elsey Morgan was pregnant.

She stared at the two blue lines of the test in her hand and looked at herself in the mirror. She gazed into her own green eyes, brushed a stray lock of brown hair off her full cheek, tucked it behind her ear, and inhaled deeply. Her mother would not be happy.

Kelsey tossed the stick into the trash with the three other used tests, all positive, and turned to leave the bathroom. The smell of the apple pie baking made her smile. She was in the middle of fixing Tim's dinner, a tradition they'd adopted just after they'd started dating. She and Tim were seniors in college; they'd been dating for almost three years. At the end of every break, the weekend before their classes resumed, Kelsey always welcomed him back with his favorite meal, just as her mother always did for her father when he returned from his conferences.

She'd returned to her apartment two days early to prepare for this dinner. She walked into the kitchen, peeked at the pie to make sure it wasn't overcooking, then started washing potatoes. Once they were all clean, she carried them to the counter so she could slice them before putting them into a pot of water. As she picked up the knife, she glanced at the pictures taped to the cabinet. They were all of Tim and her. She grinned as she thought about the early stages of their relationship.

They'd met in a literature class during the fall semester of their freshman year. He started sitting behind her after the second class and by the end of the second week he was walking her to her Intro to Theater class before rushing across campus for his Biology class. His witty humor reminded her of her brother and how much she missed him. Tim's unruly blond hair and clean cut look were different from any of the boys she'd known growing up, who

believed jeans, t-shirts, and ball-caps were the highest fashion. He always knew the right thing to say to make people feel good about themselves, especially Kelsey.

He complimented her often, on her clothes, her hairstyle, even on something as small as her earrings. He was so charming; all the girls loved him and flirted with him constantly. He may have flirted a little with them, but he flirted hardest with Kelsey. She'd playfully scold him for his shameless behavior, but was secretly thrilled that he paid attention to her instead of, in Kelsey's opinion, the prettier girls. By the end of the spring semester, they'd begun dating.

It hadn't taken long for them to discover their mutual love for the outdoors and found themselves outside as much as possible. Whether they were rollerblading, biking, or simply studying, they preferred to be doing it outside if the weather was cooperative. They also loved going to the football games and post-game parties on Saturdays. Tim was her biggest supporter when it came to her performances in the school's plays, as well. Whether it was a small role or one of the leads, it didn't matter; he was always in the front row on opening night with a dozen red roses to give her after the performance.

For their first anniversary, he'd surprised Kelsey by taking her to a sushi restaurant. She'd been begging him to try it, but he'd always found a reason to say "no," and she knew it was because he hadn't wanted to eat raw fish. Her mother had always said that the best way to keep a man happy was to let him have his way, so Kelsey had never pressed the issue. She'd been ecstatic when he'd pulled into the parking lot and told her he'd try it for her. He had ordered something cooked from the kitchen but had also tried one piece of the California roll. They'd made love for the first time that night.

As they'd settled into their relationship, Kelsey felt as if they got along the way her parents did, or the way her sister, Janelle, and her husband did. Things were never hard for them, they almost never argued. Kelsey knew for sure that, like her parents and her sister, she'd found her mate. Tim was "the one" for her.

Kelsey shook her head back to the present and began slicing potatoes. Tim probably wouldn't be happy about the pregnancy. But they'd been planning their future together and had even talked about marriage. She was

majoring in communications with a minor in theater. She really wanted to go into acting in movies and television, and her choice of studies had been a battle with her parents. Her mother had insisted that she wouldn't pay for Kelsey's education if she majored in something useless like theater, while her father, a lawyer who had taught his children the value of a well thought out argument at a young age, had let her plead her case and agreed to allow her to minor in it.

Tim was a hospitality and tourism major and thought they should manage a ski resort together and put both of their degrees to good use. He'd told her she could always get into local theater when they settled down, if she had time. Eventually, they'd start a family.

It appeared that would be happening sooner than expected.

She put the pot with the potatoes on the stove to boil and began to fix the fried chicken. Forty-five minutes later, the meal was ready and Kelsey's stomach was in knots. Since she'd decided to wait until dessert to break the news of the pregnancy to Tim, she hoped for the best. When she greeted him at the door Tim pulled her against his hard, broad chest and gave her a passionately warming kiss.

"I've been looking forward to this meal all day." He grinned and abruptly kissed her again. "You make the best apple pie. Did you remember the vanilla ice cream?"

"Of course," she said with a laugh.

His hazel eyes danced with mirth as he tweaked her nose and released her. "You always take such good care of me."

"I try." She knew how much he loved her cooking, but hearing him say it always made her feel special. She followed his tall, slightly muscled form into the dining room. "If you want to grab a seat, we can eat."

"Great, I'm starving."

Tim sat down and she brought the food in and set it on the table. They'd been through the routine a hundred times and there was something comforting in the familiarity of it. As soon as Kelsey sat down, he started telling her about his month off.

His parents lived near a ski resort and Tim had grown up on the slopes. He talked during the entire meal, describing the Blue Square and Black Diamond trails he'd skied, the new mogul courses that had been added, and

the cross-country skiing he and his friends had done. Because it meant so much to him, she had tried skiing once, but hadn't really enjoyed it. She'd never done it again and only had a vague idea of the lingo, mostly from listening to Tim talk about skiing so much. Channeling her mother, she patiently listened, nodded, and asked the right questions at the right times.

Finally, when dessert was served, he looked into her eyes and beamed brightly. Her heart skipped a beat and she almost felt giddy.

"So how was your break?" he asked.

She tried to smile around the lump in her throat and folded her hands on the table in front of her. "I'm pregnant." Her eyes rounded slightly in surprise. She hadn't meant to simply blurt it out like that.

He laughed out loud and shook his head. "Okay, okay," he said, still smiling. "You've made your point. I did monopolize the conversation during dinner and I'm sorry." He took her hand and kissed the knuckle. "You've got my attention. How was your vacation?"

Her already weak sense of happiness waned some more. "Tim, I'm pregnant."

He laughed again, then actually looked at the expression on her face. "You're serious?" he asked, still sounding amused. She nodded and his laughter stopped. His eyes narrowed slightly as he pursed his lips. "You can take care of that, can't you?"

Her head tilted slightly. "I thought we could take care of it," she said, "like a family."

"Kelsey," he said as he pushed his untouched pie away, "why would I need to go down to the clinic with you? I'll pay for half, but I'll give you the money up front." He stood and walked to the narrow wall beside the kitchen door.

"What?" She could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Go to the clinic?"

"For the procedure." He raised his eyebrows and nodded his head in a way that stated his meaning should be obvious.

Kelsey's heart sank and she started to feel nauseous, and not from morning sickness.

"Procedure," she breathed. "Tim, I can't do that. You know how I feel about abortion."

“Kelsey, we can’t have a baby now. We’re still in college,” he argued.

“We’ll have graduated by the time the baby’s born.” Her legs felt weak and she was glad to still be sitting. He took three steps toward the door.

“We’ve gotta find jobs and a place to live. We’ve gotta get settled. And what about going to Hollywood? You can’t take a baby to California,” he said, his eyes narrowing even more.

He’d blindsided her with that argument. While he supported her work on the stage, her dream of acting on the big screen was one that Tim almost always dismissed. Moving to Hollywood had never been an option for him. Until now, apparently.

“Then we’ll stay here and raise it,” she stated. “We’ll have four months between graduation and the due date, that’s plenty—”

“No,” he snapped. “Kelsey, we’re not ready for this. I’m not ready to be a father, not yet, not for a few more years.” He picked up his coat and opened the door. “I’ve gotta go.” He stepped out and a cool breeze slapped her in the face as the door closed behind him.

Numbly, she cleaned up the dinner dishes and put the food in the refrigerator. She replayed their conversation over and over again in her mind, trying to figure out where it had gone wrong. She’d expected him to be a little upset about the pregnancy; she had been. He had a point. They were still in school and had a lot to do before their baby was born. Although the abortion suggestion had been a shock, him walking out on her had been a bigger one.

When everything was put away, she crawled into her bed and stayed there for all of the next day.

Kelsey got to their Monday morning class early and saved him a seat next to her. Tim came in just as the lecture started and sat at the back of the room. He wouldn’t look at her and, when class ended, was gone before she could collect her books.

Tuesday was much the same. Tim arrived late and sat beside one of his friends. When the friend saw Kelsey looking at them, he elbowed Tim and pointed in her direction, but Tim ignored him. At the end of class, he disappeared before Kelsey stood up.

On Wednesday, after he’d made a point of ignoring her again, she was surprised to see Tim approaching her when class was over.

“Can I come over later?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said with a smile. “Do you want me to fix something?”

“No,” he firmly replied, and she knew things weren’t going to go well. “I’ll be there around four.” He was gone before she could speak.

When her last class let out at two fifty, she raced home and paced the living room for the next hour. Tim arrived right on time and came into her apartment like a stranger. He didn’t even take his coat off.

“Okay, so I’ve reconsidered,” he said and for a moment her heart floated with hope. “I’ll pay for the whole procedure.”

Just as quickly, hope sank.

“Tim, I’m not getting an abortion,” she said.

“Damn it, Kelsey,” he snapped. “Why do you have to be so stubborn?” He paced in front of her. “We’re not ready for this.”

“We’ll have time to get ready.”

“Are you trying to make me marry you?” His normally soft hazel eyes were dark, almost black.

Ice began to form in her veins. “It’s not like we haven’t talked about it,” she replied meekly. “We don’t have to get married before the baby—”

“We’re not having a baby, Kelsey!” his voice boomed.

She took a step back, speechless.

“We were safe. We used condoms every time. I even brought them with me so I’d know you didn’t—”

“Didn’t what?” Kelsey saw red. “So you’d know I didn’t tamper with them? Didn’t poke holes in them? They aren’t a hundred percent safe, Tim. Do you think I did this on purpose?”

“Didn’t you? You’ve been talking about marriage for a year now.”

“*We’ve* been talking about it, Tim. It wasn’t a one-sided conversation. You were an active part of it.” Her heart raced with anger and hurt as betrayal started to flex its fingers.

“I was always saying ‘if,’ Kelsey. You were always saying ‘when.’ There’s a big difference.”

She stopped breathing. Was he right? She’d never noticed before.

“I don’t even know this baby’s mine. Maybe you should find its real daddy and trap him.”

Her legs gave out and she plopped onto the couch. “Tim, you are the baby’s father,” she said quietly, tears pooling in her eyes. “I’ve never been with anyone else. You know that.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Kelsey,” he snapped. “You don’t think I believe it, do you?” Her eyes rounded with pain. “I’ve seen the way other men look at you.” He paused in his pacing to glare at her. “They flirt with you everywhere we go. And you . . .” he sneered at her and resumed his pacing, “you priss around, pretending not to notice as you bat your eyelashes at them.”

She’d never acted like that and he knew it. Yes, she’d noticed other men looking at her, but she’d never encouraged them or flirted with them in return. “Tim, you’re imagining th—”

“I am not!” he roared as he walked toward her, hatred written on his face. “You’re a fucking slut.”

Tears trickled down Kelsey’s cheeks and her body weakened under his misguided accusations.

“All of my friends notice it. Hell, you even flirt with them.”

“Tim,” she sobbed, “no. I’m not like that.”

“Save it,” he snapped and backed away. “You’re nothing but a whore, Kelsey. You should do real well in Hollywood. I’m sure you’ll get a lot of good-paying jobs that way.”

She bit her lip, stunned into silence.

“You know, there is one thing I regret.”

“What’s that?” she asked quietly, feeling defeated and small as she studied the coffee table.

“I wish I’d known sooner,” he growled. “Then I could’ve pimped you out and we both could’ve gotten something out of it.”

Wide-eyed, she looked up at him, tears streaming, mouth open. How could he be so cruel? Tim narrowed his eyes one last time before turning and walking out the door and Kelsey crumpled on the couch.



Kelsey didn’t move from the couch for two days, not until her sister, Janelle, showed up at her apartment.

“Kelsey, why haven’t you been answering your phone?” Janelle asked after