

This is a series about bellies, pregnancy, clothes, weight gain, and fictional politics in a fictional world. If you don't like any of those things, this story is probably not for you. Additionally, any similarities to current political issues is absolutely not to be taken as a statement by me. Don't flame me bro.

Camilla looked at the ring on her finger. Dual rose gold bands connected with zigzags, supporting a lightweight fixture and an exquisite square cut amethyst. The purple stone caught the light of her suspended living room.

Her cat, Muzi, sat in her lap. Her only interest in the ring was that it took attention away from her head scratches. She pawed at her master's hand.

Camilla corrected Muzi with a gentle swat. She meowed in annoyance.

The ring collected stories. Moments. And every day it gathered more. Her cat's jealousy was the most recent one. It reminded her of the supportive comments from customers as they had their measurements taken. And before that, it made her remember Zach's nervous recollection of the ring's history.

The ring's story went back a long way. The stone was mined nearby a century and a half before. It was cut and affixed to a ring and given to the heiress of the local mining company. Tragically they died young, so the ring got passed around through marriage until it ended up forgotten in a dusty puzzle box hidden away in an antique shop's bargain bin.

Zach bought the box for the craftsmanship - to see how it was built. Only after he solved it did he find the magnificent stone. He had a new setting made, and once that was finished, he offered it to her.

So many stories. Memories. The ring made all her customers share their wonderful and extravagant proposals, and the events that led up to them. Wonderful tales of love and excitement. The ring made her remember things. But it didn't just bring up recent things.

Tears fell down onto Muzi causing her to scamper away. Camilla hugged her legs to her chest as the past surfaced.

Pine scented wind blew her hair back while a brown-haired man with stylish stubble knelt and held out a ring. She shook and gasped and embraced him. They went to stores, toured halls, swiped their cards, and signed checks. There were fittings for suits and dresses. Choices of bunting and seating arrangements.

Then there were two lines on the test. The greatest gift.

As she crossed off the days on her calendar leading up to the double-feature of major life events, she learned to fit clothes for her growing body. She was thrilled to make the space, both in her clothes and other places. They painted, and moved furniture.

Then, they finalized the contracts and sent out invitations. Dozens of them. Close to a hundred.

She grew softer. Her stomach pressed outward in all directions. They carried her swelling belly to all manner of appointments. Smiles and met milestones. They looked in awe and love at ultrasound photos.

The day of dresses and suits drew closer. Less than a week away.

But then they saw a doctor. Then several more. Hospitals. Gloves. Panic.

Absence.

She wrote cancellation letters stained with tears. They argued over bills. Hospital bills. Canceled venue fees and lost deposits. The doctors she saw only had bad news and worse.

With time, she didn't remember the words that were said. But the meaning lingered. *'...All this went wrong because of you... All the money is gone because of you...'*

Then she was alone.

Later in the day, Camilla straightened displays that held aloft stacks of fabric samples. Keeping herself busy helped stave off a spiral. It was a day where that's all she could manage.

Gravel crunched as someone stepped into the shop from the rocky parking lot. "I'll be with you in a minute."

She plopped the fabric down and turned to attend to the new arrival.

"Hey honey," Zach said with a smile and hands in his pockets.

"Zach, Darling, what are you doing here?" She said, and let out a shallow chuckle in surprise.

"I was just - you know - around. Thought I'd stop by and see my soon-to-be."

Camilla trudged over and gave him a hug. "I know you have things to do, you don't need to check up on me."

“You’ve taken care of yourself for a long time, obviously you don’t need babysitting. No, I just wanted to see you.”

Camilla scoffed and squeezed him a little harder.

Zach grabbed her by the waist, and pushed her to arms length. He took a deep breath, then smiled along with his exhale. A moment of locked eyes. “I did have something to talk about though.”

“Oh?”

Zach pulled a quarter folded stack of papers out of his back pocket. “I know this is very soon and everything, but it’s on my mind, obviously. I’ve been thinking about places we can rent out. Big venues. Small ones. I’ve toured a few and got a few others I think might be nice. Then I also found a few places for food that might be good. You know, catering and the like.”

Camilla’s hands went tense. She forced herself to take a breath. “Venues for what?”

Zach chuckled and kicked at a rock on the concrete floor. “The wedding, of course. What else would we need a big space for?”

Her corset was too tight. Her throat closed up and dried. Swallowing felt like choking down hair. Her temples echoed with a pulsing pressure. “Why do we need someplace big?”

Zach cocked his head. “It’s kind of a big day.”

Camilla rubbed her eyes with a bridged hand. “How can you think about spending so much money?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I didn’t say anything about how much they cost yet.”

“But you did. That comes along with the word ‘big’. Why are you talking about renting a big place so soon?”

“Woah, hold on. I didn’t say nothing about whipping out the check book yet. I’m just looking for a place for when we are ready.”

Camilla stamped forward. "You're just going to put all the blame on me if something goes wrong. All out talk of togetherness and connection will go right out the window when money gets in the pictures. You own a business like I do! The money -"

Zach stepped back, hands up. With furrowed eyebrows he said "I didn't say a damn word about money, Camilla. What's your problem? Everything was just fine and dandy a few days ago. A few minutes ago." He took another step back, squinting and watching. "Maybe," He said, calmly, but with hesitation. "Maybe I was wrong about all this."

Camilla squeezed all the muscles in her face. "See! Now you'll run, like everyone else! Fine. Go then."

Zach huffed. He shook his fingers loose, clenched his fists then turned toward the door.

Camilla struggled to breathe.

After a few paces, however, Zach stopped. He took a breath into his shoulders, then changed his course to the nearby trash can. There, he took the folded papers, tapped them thoughtfully against his hand, then tossed them inside.

"So, this really is it," Camilla said. Her tone was unclear. A question? A statement? An affirmation?

Zach sighed as he rubbed his brow. Then he turned and walked back to her. "Camilla, clearly you've got something going on. Something I don't really have the knowledge to begin to understand. I'd like to apologize for being so confrontational just now. I'm sorry."

Camilla stood watching him with suspicion and crossed arms.

Zach continued with his open hands held towards her. "If you've got the time and the will, I'd be glad to listen to whatever awful thing is bothering you. Or, if you'd like some space, then I can do that too." he took a step back, and spread his arms reverentially. "But I'm not leaving. Not in any philosophical sense of the word."

Camilla sniffled as her protective facade weakened. After a deep breath out she grunted and sneered at herself. The amethyst ring glinted in the sunlight coming through the open front door. She shook her head. With a meek, barely audible voice, she replied "Please don't go. I'm sorry."

Zach smiled and chuckled. "I appreciate that, but I'm more worried about you, honey."

A few angry tears escaped her eyes. "Hormones, and all that..." She said deflecting.

“You don’t have to make excuses. You’ve been vague about things, but it’s clear you’ve been through something harrowing. You’ve stepped in shit. And there’s no shame in being bothered by the smell that follows you around because of that.”

Camilla chuckled and shook her head. “Where did that expression come from?”

“I don’t know. I might have just made it up right this moment.”

With short, shame-filled steps, Camilla hugged Zach and buried her face in his shoulder.

“If you don’t want to talk about it then that’s fine by me. It would help for me to know what not to do though, dear.”

Camilla hugged him deeper, absorbing his warmth and tender touch. The steadiness of his heart and breath. Minutes passed in silence. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “No big wedding.”

“Oh. Fine by me. I can do that. Not an issue,” he said, patting her gently on the back as they rocked side to side.

Camilla sighed as she gathered the words and confidence to elaborate. “I make wedding dresses all the time. I see it all. The stress and the strain. Weddings push relationships till they break something. And...” Camilla stopped and took a shuddering breath, “And they’re bad when they blow up in your face.”

“Ah,” Zach groaned, nuzzling his head against hers. “I get it.”

“I don’t want any dumb stress taking what I’ve gained...”

Zach grabbed Camilla by the shoulders and held her at arms length again. “I understand. This town... It’s not really about extravagance, is it? Why don’t we just make a simple day of it, go down to the courthouse, and just make it official. We can get the paperwork out of the way. Then we can have a separate, low stakes celebration. Something small. Something personal. And we can do it at a leisurely pace. Hell! Maybe I can make a quaint little white gazebo, stick it in the forest somewhere, and we can do it there.”

Camilla wiped tears from her eyes and laughed. “You make filling out a bunch of forms sound almost romantic.”

“You let me know what I can do to make it go smooth.”

“The courthouse thing sounds good...”

“Perfect. An honey? If things start smelling like shit again, please let me know? If I can’t clean off your boots, at least maybe I can bring some flowers. Or an air freshener...”

They both laughed.
