

# **The Perfect Blend**

**A Novel**

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**Approximately 85,000 words**

## Chapter One

### Nikki

I knew it was time to have my husband's baby on Sunday, May 12. I know, it was Mother's Day, but there was more to it than that.

The day didn't start too poorly. I was a newlywed four months into marriage, minding my business and preparing for church with my husband, Mitchell. I was in the kitchen of our new home, cooking some turkey bacon on the electric stove and slicing up a cantaloupe, three apples, and a bunch of grapes for fruit salad. Java simmered in our high-tech Mr. Coffee as I hummed along to a gospel jazz CD I'd bought the week before.

Turning off the bacon, I wiped my brow and checked my watch. If Mitchell didn't get his butt downstairs now, we were about to be late, and I didn't need to hear my mother-in-law's mouth if we walked in after the choir's processional. "Any day now, babe," I yelled over my shoulder.

My words had barely melted into thin air when my husband's hands slid around my waist. I shivered at the tingling sensation of his teeth as they gently locked around my right earlobe. He's a sneaky something when he wants to be.

"I felt your call before you spoke," he whispered playfully. His grip, however, tightened, and I could feel that he was more than happy to see me.

Sliding the bacon from the skillet onto plates — real glass plates, I figured I'd start using paper after our six-month anniversary — I sighed in mock protest. “You don't even care that it's Sunday morning, do you?”

“Uh well,” he said, grinding gently against me, “when God said be fruitful and multiply, how'd he expect us to do it? Nothing wrong with a little love, is there?”

I turned to face him and cupped his chin, staring into his wide, adorable eyes. “You've had plenty of love these past four months, whenever you've wanted it.”

“And I ain't done yet. Now come here and —”

Mitchell's antics were cut short by the purr of the phone. Reluctantly, he let me go and slid across the hardwood floor in his bare feet. He snatched the cordless phone from its wall mount. “Yeah?” He can be rude when he's horny.

The way Mitchell's expression changed suddenly, from annoyed to frightened, I knew it could only be one person. Gina Tatum, my husband's “baby mama.”

“Now, hold on,” he was saying into the phone, looking at the receiver like it was a person, “you're not making sense, Gina. Last night you said Clay was fine and ready to go with us this morning. He got the flu that quick?”

I stood at our cedar-topped island, our plates of bacon and fruit salad ready, our cups of coffee poured and steaming. As trickles of sweat began to soak the starched collar of his oxford shirt, Mitchell paced from one end of the kitchen to the other. He passed me three times as he waited out Gina's argument.

“Let me come get him,” he said when she apparently came up for air. “I swear,” he whispered through gritted teeth, looking at me. “Gina, the court order didn't make exceptions for Mother's Day. I let you keep him yesterday to celebrate, but legally I

could have picked him up Friday like usual. Just let us come over and — ” Mitchell, waiting out another verbal tirade, held up his hand as I walked to him. “Forget it, you enjoy your son on Mother’s Day, but tell him Daddy loves him.... No, I don’t want to talk to him right now because he’s sick, remember? Let him get some rest. Bye.”

As only she can, Gina left my six-foot, broad-shouldered husband as impotent as Bob Dole without Viagra. We wolfed down breakfast in relative silence, punctuated mainly by Mitchell’s hushed profanities, then made the drive to Trinity United Methodist, where we attend as regularly as we can.

It was a beautiful sunny day out, the prime spring temperature at seventy degrees with a nice breeze wafting in and out of my new Infiniti. Our surroundings were beautiful, but the mood inside the car was not so fresh.

“You know,” I said, sliding a hand over Mitchell’s as he pulled onto I-57, “we can talk about it.”

Blowing air through his nostrils, he tugged at his tie and shook his head. “It’s moments like these, I know I’ve let you down.”

“Now look, we’ve done this. I married you knowing I was in for drama. I looked past that. I looked at *you*.”

Clay wasn’t supposed to be Mitchell’s son, you see. Mitchell and Gina hadn’t been a real item in the first place. When the little guy was conceived, the two of them were going through bedmates like J-Lo goes through husbands. Granted, I’d had an issue when I first learned Mitchell might have gotten Gina pregnant. He and I weren’t exclusive either, but I’d known Gina enough to be disgusted that he’d even swapped fluids with her.

Then came Gina's Act I, where she moved out to Los Angeles and swore there was little chance of Mitchell being the father — she'd been with so many guys during the same time that no one's odds were worth calculating. Eventually, I forgave Mitchell's dalliances and figured Gina would turn out to be right. I mean, I knew it was common, but who really wants a blended family of "hers and his kids" if they can help it?

Wouldn't you know my optimism was not rewarded? Gina returned to Chicago to have the baby, and two months later decided her son should at least know his full genetic history, just in case. Mitchell was one of the guys who contributed a blood sample, and my man was blessed with the luck of the draw.

By the time we arrived at the church, Mitchell had calmed down. "Nik," he said as he put the car into the park, "God smiled on me, keeping you in my corner." He leaned over and the smell of his cologne, mixed with the new leather scent of my car seats, set me off. We embraced desperately, suddenly, forgetting where we were as we kissed and groped each other like it was our first date. We cooled it when a playful passerby tapped his horn at us.

Giggling at ourselves, we walked hand in hand into the sanctuary and took a seat on the same pew with Mitchell's mother, my long-time girlfriend Angie, and her two little stair steps, Sarah and Milton. Sarah is eighteen months and Milton is eight months. Baby number three is due around Thanksgiving, so yes, my brother-in-law, Marvin, has kept Angie busy in the literal sense of the word. She hasn't made it back to her reporter's desk at the *Chicago Tribune* since she said "I do." Today as usual, Angie was on her own with the little ones while Marvin, a successful attorney and former college football star, did his duty as a soloist in Trinity's choir. He was on stage in the risers, beaming

down at us and giving a thumbs-up. We'd made it just in time to avoid Mrs. Stone's righteous wrath.

The senior church deacons were winding down the morning's devotion, and as the sanctuary hummed to life with the notes of the organ, I held one of Mitchell's hands and peered down the pew at my mother-in-law, who was leaning past little Sarah and Angie while holding baby Milton. "Don't you want one?" she whispered, nodding toward the little bundle in her arms. I smiled back innocently and threw a soft elbow into Mitchell's ribs. I made a mental note. This was three times now Mom Stone had nudged us about starting our own family. Having survived the first few months of marriage, we were now fair game.

I knew Mitchell was probably more annoyed by this than me. I grudgingly understood where he was coming from. We probably did need time to get settled as a couple before the interruptions of a baby, especially given the instant drama Gina and Clay injected into our marriage. All the same, I'd gladly give birth tomorrow to Mr. Mitchell Stone, Jr. or maybe Ms. Ebony Stone (who would be named for my mama).

I'd already geared everything into place. Mitchell had cut down on his meat intake around the time we got married, to keep his weight down. I'd read somewhere that a vegetarian diet could endanger a man's fertility, so I'd started spiking my baby's coffee with a carefully selected zinc supplement, to make sure he came correct when the time was right. I had also convinced him to start sleeping in boxer shorts — roomy boxer shorts — after reading up on the importance of keeping male equipment at room temperature. I even made sure I prepared, or at least bought, all of our meals. As a busy

music executive, I don't hardly have the time, but it's been the best way to keep Mitchell's diet free of sperm-blockers like excessive bran or caffeine.

Now don't trip and start talking about me behind my back. You don't know what you would do if you found yourself thirty years old, newly married, and feeling stalked by your past. I mean, I don't just hear the normal biological clock ticking; I have extra issues. When you've had a nameless one-night stand from college give you the gift of a burning pelvis, you realize you can't take having children for granted. Time was when I could push it from my mind, when I gave up on the idea of Mr. Right and was content to focus on my career and the occasional empty dance between the sheets. Mitchell, I have to admit, changed that. After years of dating players and roughnecks who probably reminded me of Gene, the father who barely acknowledged me until the last couple years of his life, I've finally settled down with a man with whom I can make a home.

So there I was, feeling a little pressed about adding to my family as Pastor Wright announced the morning's Mother's Day tributes. Several children formed a line at the front of the sanctuary and gave glowing praises to their moms, one by one. It was deep, seeing several sisters my age quiver with tearful appreciation as their teenage kids read how their mothers had sacrificed and supported them. Of course, these sisters couldn't have been my age with kids in their teens, right? They probably just looked good for their age; at least that's the story I'm sticking with.

When the choir launched into the congregational hymn, I patted Mitchell's hand and scooted into the hallway to visit the ladies' room. The tributes to moms had been sweet, but given that we wouldn't see my mama until this afternoon and I wasn't a member of the club myself, I felt a little lost. "Easy girl," I whispered to myself as I

stood in front of the cracked rest room mirror, “you’ll get yours. You and Mitchell.” I had to give him time, I knew it. Mitchell had been laid off from his most recent job at our company, Empire Records, and to be honest, he’s been trying to find himself for the past year. He has a good job as a business manager for O.J. Peters, an up and coming deejay, but his heart’s not really in it. I knew I had to give him time before pressing him about starting a family. Blinking a tear out of one eye, I hugged myself and did my business, then returned to the lobby.

As the rest room door closed behind me, I nearly ran over Ms. Gina herself. Tall for a woman, around my height, and not looking like she'd ever carried a baby, Gina Tatum stood there in a dazzling white silk dress, her hair styled attractively as a short, spongy natural. I wish I could say she looked a mess, but truth is truth.

My heart in my throat with shock, I looked down and saw little Clay Stone himself, clinging to his mom’s left knee. Styling in a sharp little navy blue suit, white oxford shirt, and a clip-on tie with a sailboat down its middle, he was as adorable as always.

Looking at me with deadpan eyes, Gina tugged at one of Clay's arms. "Tell Nikki hi, sweetie."

Grinning at me mischievously, Clay covered his eyes, then emitted a high-pitched "Hiiiiiii, Nik."

I knew from experience that "Nik" was the best he could do for now. Smiling at him, I knelt down, grabbed him in a big hug, and pinched the little cheeks that reminded me of Mitchell’s baby pictures. "Look at you, a week goes by and you're already an inch taller," I teased, tousling the jet-black, fine head of hair Clay got from his daddy.

Standing and balancing in my heels, I cast a sideways glance at Gina. "He's better already, huh?"

Gina gave me another deadpan look, then the sanctuary doors burst open, flooding all three of us with the morning hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." Licking my lips, I stood back and let Gina and Clay go down the aisle in front of me, as the usher led us up to Mitchell's pew.

That's when everything went off the rails. Heads turned, one row after another, as Gina and Clay made their way down the aisle in all their glory. I saw people pointing, whispering "Mitchell's boy," or "Clay and his mama." Some choir members even stopped singing long enough to point the blessed mother and child out to one another. I realized it had been a few months since we'd brought Clay to church with us, between us being out of town and assorted other excuses Gina found to limit Clay's time with us. For most of the congregation, this was their first time seeing Mitchell's son since he'd passed the bumbling toddler stage.

Not to mention, Gina was pretty stunning in her own right. Mind you, I was no slouch myself, with my newly styled reddish-brown cornrows, sapphire-blue pull-string skirt with matching top, and a figure pretty close to what it was in high school. Who was I kidding, though? All that was nice, but on Mother's Day it was pretty much irrelevant.

We reached the pew, and before I knew it Gina plopped her lithe, long frame into my seat, leaving me with no room to scoot in. As I hovered in the aisle feeling homeless, Mitchell shook as if he'd been slapped and stood, motioning for Gina to move down the aisle closer to Angie and her little platoon. Grunting without meeting my piercing gaze, Gina scooted an inch down and acted like that was the best she could do.

Narrowing his eyes, Mitchell turned and motioned at the lady in the pew behind him. She had extra room, so Mitchell scooted out past Gina and we squeezed in there, sitting a few inches from Gina's back. Oblivious to the tension, Clay climbed up over Gina's shoulder and reached for me. I tried not to yank him as I removed him from Gina's grasp and placed him in Mitchell's lap, before giving him another kiss on the cheek. It was hard, loving a little guy whose existence could hurt so much, but there was nothing I wouldn't do for little Clay Stone. It was his mother, the one who'd tried to sit there like she was Mitchell's woman, who was angling for a smack down.

Sensing my mood, Mitchell squeezed my hand and leaned over. "Hey," he whispered, "my boy must have had the one-hour flu, huh?" We shared a conspiratorial wink and chuckled loud enough to make Gina glance over her shoulder.

The laugh was nice, but for me it ended as we stood in the rear of the sanctuary with Mitchell's family and the ministers. "This must be your baby," said Sister Jenkins, a sweet older lady who baby-sat for Mitchell, Marvin, and their sister Deniece when they were toddlers. She walked up to Mitchell and held her hands out for Clay. "He look just like you." Mitchell handed Clay over, and the little guy promptly knocked Sister Jenkins' yellow, bejeweled hat from her head.

"Clay, stop, that's not right," Mitchell said, stooping to get the hat and then accepting his giggling son back from Sister Jenkins. "Two years old and already a pistol, I'm afraid."

"He's a baby, you'll raise him right, I know your family," the sister said, smiling wide and pinching Mitchell's cheek as if he was still in grade school. She paused

suddenly, looking between me and Gina, who was standing on the other side of Mitchell and Clay. “Now,” she said, trying me first, “this your baby right?”

“Oh, no,” I said, clearing my throat, “I love him like a son, though — ”

“I’m the mother,” Gina purred as she extended her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, I should have known,” Sister Jenkins said, smiling in recognition, “the baby has your nose. You’re blessed to have a child with this one,” she continued, patting Mitchell on the back. Good stock, you know.”

I stood there and watched in disgust as Sister Jenkins completely ignored me and interviewed Gina like a reporter for the *New York Times*, trading mothering tips along the way. It was the same humiliation I endured any time Gina came around with Clay in tow. It wasn’t long before Mrs. Stone, Marvin, Angie, and their kids joined the party as well, tossing Clay around like a toy and feigning interest in Gina’s upcoming graduation from Roosevelt University’s journalism program. It took Angie, my old friend, to break away from the pack and come stand by me. Ignoring little Sarah’s insistent tug at her leg she rubbed my back slowly, not saying a word. None was needed.

I guess I’ve learned there’s a moral weight, a certain significance a woman gains the moment she gives birth. She’s no longer some female responsible only for herself, no longer just a potential feminist and ladder climber or an easy target for men’s lustful affections. No, she’s a *mother* — an expected provider, protector, and teacher to a life force that may sink or swim based on her efforts.

There was a time when I didn’t need any of that extra weight or moral significance. I felt I had plenty on my own, and I suppose I still do, but the game’s

changed now. I love Mitchell Stone, and I know he loves me. Problem is, it's clear Gina thinks she can break that bond by dangling her connection to him like a toy prize.

I won't let it happen. Our home will always be open to Clay, and I'm going to be a kick-ass stepmom. But the best way to get Gina to back off is to show her a real, live, tangible product of my love for *my* husband. Whether he knows it or not, Mitchell is going to help the stork make another delivery, ASAP.