

I once imagined the hardest thing a man could accomplish was getting the woman he loved to the altar. This view instantaneously changed, however. Marriage by far wasn't easy—far from it. It's a boundless enterprise consisting of endless negotiations and compromises.

Our marriage may be new but we've been through the troughs and hurdles.

Though fate had dealt us a harsher hand prior to our marital union, I believed my wife and I will overcome whatever tribulations given to us.

We've come a long way...we've come so far to let misfortunes separate us.

We're stronger together, weaker when apart.

## BASS

They say unconditional love could be instantaneously felt the moment your eyes set on one's child. The life-altering experience consumed me in one hasty moment. I felt it all—in that swift instance—my life changed forever. Indescribable emotions ran through me. Transformed from being a married man to a father.

*A father.*

A parent... a weighty word entailed more than just a title. It demanded continuous undying commitment to be my son's protector. His guide. The very person to instill moral compass, but above all, the person to show and teach him how to properly love, respect and value himself and others around him.

All the insecurities I harbored, questioning if I'm to end up like my reckless absentee of a father, had all been extinguished the second my eyes caught sight of those sleepy little blue eyes gazing back at me. Swaddled in blue and white striped baby blanket, my heart erupted from elation and overwhelming joy.

"Congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Cole. He's just so precious," the smiling nurse cheered as she cautiously handed my son.

Infinite euphoria seized me as I held my son for the very first time. It was this very moment—where the world stood still—and all of my undivided attention zoned in on the tiny bundle of joy.

Ten fingers.

Ten toes.

One cute button nose and a smaller version of my lips.

My son.

*My beloved son.*

There was no mistaking who fathered him. He had nothing of Emma's. Even the particular shade of his blue eyes—he was mine through and through.

"He looks exactly like you—a Bass junior," Emma drowsily murmured as she lovingly smiled at the men in her life.

My wife laid flat on the operating table. Her face a combination of elation, exhaustion and satisfaction. There's a jubilant look about her tired pallor but the massive grin spreading across her face proved just how relieved she was that the operation progressed without any complications. The steady stream of tears sliding down her temple warmed my heart. Gently, she brushed the back of her forefinger on his soft chubby cheek.

"Hi little man. Mom and dad are so happy you're finally here with us." Emma had the same awestruck expression as I did.

We both were overwrought before the delivery, but upon his arrival, all the worry immediately diminished. A proud, profound moment for Emma and me. We were delighted beyond measure.

Jagger had no idea just how much his arrival meant to us, enriching our lives. After losing our first baby, we had no idea how profoundly we wanted to be parents. So here we were, a year later, a solid family of three.

“Thank you, moro mou...thank you.” I kissed her, softly, passionately, grateful and indebted for the beautiful priceless gift she’d given me.

This pregnancy had put us through the wringer. My ever-forthcoming wife unfortunately failed to mention she had placenta Previa—a complication where a partial part of her placenta had inserted in her uterine segment. Had I known this life-altering fact, I’d have stood my ground and wouldn’t have allowed her to fly across the Atlantic to attend Lindsey’s wedding in Greece. The very night she came back, the bleeding began—we’d been vigilant since.

Her condition limited her movements. Lifting anything substantial was strictly prohibited. She had severe order to rest as much as possible. A chef was hired to plan out her meals. A nurse to monitor her vitals and pre-eclampsia. There hadn’t been a day passed I didn’t go overboard with my overprotectiveness. Emma had accused me of suffocating her but I cared not about her complaints. The no sex rule didn’t even faze me. I might’ve gone overboard but I didn’t care, I needed to do something. So, I did just that. I even did the nanny interviews myself, ensuring the two we hired were properly trained with great instincts and warmth. After going through over a hundred interviews, I finally found the perfect candidates. My wife and child were at risk—nothing mattered but their utmost safety.

“Mr. Cole?” Dr. Landis interrupted behind me just before a nurse came to take my son away to be properly evaluated, ensuring our little bundle of joy was well and healthy.

Cautiously, I handed Jagger over to the nurse while the doctors informed Emma they’ll, operate on her before sewing her up.

“Do you have a moment?” Dr. Landis gestured, taking me to the side corner of the room. Her usual serene, soothing appearance were somewhat nonexistent.

Before giving the doctor my undivided attention, I kissed her warm forehead. “I’ll be right back, my love.” Smiling down at her, I gave her a reassuring glance just as a nurse came to her side.

Stiffly walking towards the end of the room, past the divider and Emma’s hearing distance, my nostrils flared as I breathed in, my peter-pattering heart merely escalated at the grim expression the doctor threw me.

I rigidly nodded, nervous all of a sudden. *If something happens to Em...*

*No—don’t go there, idiot.*

Positive thoughts.

*She’s great. Jagger looks great. We’re all great.*

My throat bobbed up and down, swallowing saliva to coat my esophagus became a hardship. “Everything good, right?” I managed to finally ask, feeling like a total pussy for not confronting the doctor head-on.

Doctor Landis bit the side of her lip before shaking her head. “Yes...*and* no.”

Fuck. The *no* part had me on the edge.

My heart hammered against my chest. My temples throbbed. My entire body tensed as I anticipated for her to continue, but it seemed she was giving me the option of which news I’d be willing to hear first.

It did little to my already chaotic mind.

Knowing how my mind would ceaselessly torture me if I didn’t address the issue, I manned up and squarely gazed straight into her considerate eyes. “Give me the bad news.”

She made a curt nod before sliding her hands into the pockets of her white jacket. I’m an actor and even though I acted for a living—I knew this gesture—it’s what doctors did to make them seem professional, more detached before the big blow.

The stomach churning intensified as I openly pleaded with my eyes.

“I am sorry, this is all my fault. Even with advanced technology sometimes life gives us surprises and miracles happen...and in this case, it failed to flourish. I don’t know how to say this but I should’ve ran more tests to prevent such things from happening—but with her condition it became a challenge.” Eyes sorrowful. Her face contorted with regret. “Mr. Cole, your wife... she had twins—but the smaller baby, your baby girl, was tucked behind her twin—”

“*Twins? Where’s—*”

“She’s smaller than the boy—I believe the severe bleeding, the lack ultra-sound and close monitoring, along with other complications contributed to the cause of her death.”

My heart stopped. My entire world halted as the doctor’s words sunk into me. Slowly. Deafeningly.

*Cause of her death.*

Death.

*My child is dead she said...*

The words kept swirling in my head. It echoed so loudly, I felt dizzy. All the soaring, all the blissful elation consuming me seconds ago had all but vanished. My ears rung. My world spun—it kept spinning—and spinning while I reeled from the shattering news the doctor just disclosed.

*A baby girl.*

Twins.

*My baby girl...was dead and we couldn’t save her.*

Fuck.

My throat constricted. My eyes stung. It instantly filled with moisture and I had to immediately look away, stunned by it all. Oh fuck. How could this have happened? Why did any of the test show that Emma was carrying not one *but* two babies?

*And now it's too late to save her life...*

“Does my wife—*does she know?*” From the looks of it, she didn't seem to but I had to make sure. Emma hid her placenta Previa, she could easily hide this from me too.

The doctor shook her head, squashing whatever spouting doubts I had seconds ago. “No—I could tell her but if you prefer to tell her yourself, I'm always here to help and answer questions you two have.” She stated in a somber manner. “Again, I am so sorry for this error.”

Emma missed appointments. She did quite a long list of things pregnant women shouldn't even be considering. This could possibly be the doctor's fault as well as Emma's. But blaming anyone for my daughter's demise wouldn't solve anything.

I...what will I tell Emma? The question plagued me. This will undoubtedly destroy her just as it did with me. But mothers take it much differently than fathers did. Theirs were intrinsic on another level. She'll certainly blame herself. If that happened, what about our baby boy? Will she love him the same? All these troubling questions kept piling in my head with no answer to satisfy them.

I felt desperate. Heartbroken. Yet whatever it was I was feeling had to be set aside. My family came first—my priority. Always.

*My family.* Our little unit barely just began, and we're already faced with something no parent should ever feel.

My reluctant eyes briefly directed towards where Emma was positioned. The IV drip stood right behind her as the nurse checked on her vitals. My wife looked dog-tired, drained from complete exhaustion. Adding this earth-shattering revelation would send her spiraling to a place where I might not be able to control...Lord knows she was unforgiving to herself after she miscarried our first child—and now this...it terrified me to even conceive where this devastation will take her.

Seeing I'm the man of our little family, it was my job to protect them...the job also insured I make tough calls—and in this instance, this surely called upon for such a challenging decision.

Directing the doctor, a pleading yet severe stare, I grounded my stance on one of the hardest decisions I have faced in my life. “I'd prefer to tell Emma myself. Please, for her sake, don't mention a word. Inform the nurses as well. It's the least you can do for us—we've been through so much—” *We won't be able to overcome this*, my mind finished since the words got stuck in my throat. My hand flexed as I tried to control the emotions rolling off of me, seizing me from properly functioning.

The doctor's pitiful gaze did little to ease the pain in my chest. Nothing would be able to ease it—I knew that much. “I hope you understand...she's in a delicate stage. When the time is right, I'll tell her...but that moment isn't right now...give us time—to adjust—we have a son to care for...we must put him first. He needs his mother now more than ever. So, I beg of you, let me handle this in our own time, away from here...and when we're a little bit stronger to face it together.” This

was my full intention but when the time was right. Tonight wasn't the exact moment to break her heart.

“As a doctor, I highly don't advise this.” She paused, the crow's feet next to her brown eyes deepened as she bore a grave expression, sympathetic to my decision. “But as a wife and mother myself, I understand where you're coming from.”

My wife's mental health was vital for this family to survive. After seeing her suffer during and after the miscarriage, I wouldn't risk that down rotten road again.

Once she's recovered, and out of the post-partum depression risk, I'll tell her of our departed baby girl.

So, as I strode back to hold my wife's hand, my eyes travelled towards across the room, towards the glass partition—where I knew for certainty, my dead baby girl was—dead and cold as the night.

They had distracted us with Jagger, we didn't realize what truly was going on behind those knowing yet quiet silent gazes.

The shock hadn't worn off. The secret felt heavy to bear but it's a cross I must endure for all our sakes.

And I knew, once they wheel Emma back into her room to recuperate, I'll stay behind and see my little angel, for the first, and last time.

Saying goodbye to one's child was a harrowing experience. As a new father, nothing could ever prepare me for this heartbreaking, heart-gutting moment.

No parent—should never ever know the heart-shattering loss of losing one's child. No matter the circumstances.

This was a crippling punishment. No matter our sins, my wife and I didn't deserve this ill-gotten gift. Tonight, was supposed to be one of our greatest joys. How could life be so cruel to overshadow such joyous moment for us, granting us new life yet rooting death within our hearts.