



THANKING
HER BROTHER'S
Best Friends

A SINGLE MOM, SECRET TRIPLETS, REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

AJME WILLIAMS

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

*So come on love, draw your swords, and shoot me to the
ground.*

Angus and Julia Stone, *Draw Your Swords*.

DESCRIPTION

Being a national sensation failed to prepare me for a life of scandal that comes with sleeping with three men at the same time.

I have a son to consider. What was I thinking?

They are just not any men. *They are my brother's best friends!*

Aiden is the hottest introvert I've ever met. He makes me want to cuddle next to him on the couch all night long.

Dominique's strength feels like protection. His arms touch my curves and bring out the joy that I haven't felt in years.

And **Niall's** charisma and love for music has me dancing like a teenager.

My over-protective brother would lose his mind... along with the rest of the country.

My toxic ex has made it impossible for me to consider love, let alone love with three men.

But Aiden, Don, and Niall make me want to smash my past and risk my future.

Especially now that I have three more babies to be grateful for this Thanksgiving.

And with my growing belly, this secret is just impossible to hide.

PROLOGUE

Selene

I needed a sign.

My eyes closed as I hummed along to Coldplay's *Let Somebody Go*.

I wondered how the lyricist had felt when he'd written that line—and whether love always had to be equal to the pain.

Today, on the most successful streak of my career, all I could think about was going home and hoping my marriage would not fall to ruins. That my son would not lose his father.

It would be the biggest failure of my life.

Which was perplexing because, on the face of it, things had never been better. Take today, for example. I'd had a very, very successful day of meetings.

My patisserie posse was over the moon because we'd won the *BakeMaster* accolade for being the best pastry shop in all of Boston for three years running.

The accolade was the most prestigious one in the entire country in my profession. The irony, however, was not lost on me. I was no Master, but Mistress probably didn't do the role justice.

It should have, but these were the little ways in which the world kept telling me that if you were born a woman, you learned to make do with what you could.

Not that I'd listened to what society had tried to teach me. My whole life was the product of an extended rebellion.

I stared at my phone screen as the latest updates from *CBS News Boston* unfolded.

We'd come a long way from the little shithole I grew up in to today, where Ayanna Pressley had catapulted to an influential congresswoman serving Massachusetts's seventh congressional district. It wouldn't be as important if she were another whitewashed figure.

But no, Pressley was a woman of color who came from a complex background. Her mother had worked multiple jobs to support the family.

Her father struggled with addiction and spent most of Pressley's childhood incarcerated.

He did redeem himself with those degrees and that professor role he got, but the marriage ended in divorce anyway.

"Times sure have changed, haven't they?" I said to no one in particular. Chloe, sitting next to me in the Fortuner, grinned.

"You could say so. I guess it doesn't apply to the scars we still carry around."

Chloe gave me a knowing pat on the shoulder. "Don't do that to yourself. Don't go back there. Look where you're at right now."

I wanted to. I let my gaze hover over the cars moving through the busy roads, their caterwauling a strange contrast to the whimsical tunes being belted out by street musicians.

Pedestrians strolled the sidewalk, their eyes lit and mouths open in animated conversation. I liked to wonder what they were talking about.

A little girl and her mother walked hand-in-hand. The girl was pointing at a candy shop, eagerness in her eyes. On the other hand, the mother kept looking at her watch and then back at her child.

Hers was an expression of urgency but also tender love. She finally nodded and picked her up, and the two of them disappeared through the door to the shop.

Struck by an unconscious thought about the biggest love in my heart, I smiled. I would do the same thing for him.

It didn't matter if I was late to my show or to an award ceremony. Oliver always came first.

My heart ached to be back home as soon as possible and rescue him from his father. Not that I didn't love the man, but he wasn't great fun to be around.

"I can't wait to see you become Boston's Nigella Lawson," Chloe said, her voice carrying a pitch of excitement. "It's gonna be literal food porn."

I sighed. "I don't know if I'm gonna be all that good. It's a steep reputation to live up to."

Chloe snorted. "Are you kidding me? You've got this nailed like no chowderhead ever could! Selene, you rose like a literal goddess from the ashes of broken-down trailer parks filled with unemployment and drug pushers. You went to Cordon Bleu. Girl, I don't know why you keep putting yourself down like that, but as long as I'm here, I'm gonna keep holding you up and putting you back on the damn pedestal, just where your sweet BBW ass belongs."

This made me chuckle. Chloe Nguyen was a direct import from Japan, where she'd grown up with her African American mother and Asian father.

Now twenty-seven, she moved to Boston five years ago to study culinary arts and wound up apprenticing under me. The day I hired her, I knew she would be much more than just another employee.

Her acumen was sharp, her tongue sharper. You don't get people like that often. She showed me parts of myself that I couldn't bear to bring out. Because I . . . even with everything I'd achieved in my thirty years on this Earth, I was inadequate.

Nothing could convince me otherwise.

There was so much I still had to do. So much I needed to build for the fire in my heart, the song in my veins, my son. I needed to make an empire for him.

And time just wasn't long enough.

The Southie I'd grown up in belonged to working-class Irish Americans.

It was one of the oldest American neighborhoods, and the people who made it home were mostly immigrants who needed to flee from the potato famine that struck Ireland in the 1800s.

Imagine living in a neighborhood where every damn person is somehow connected to the other. You literally began your conversations by saying, "Do you know . . . ?" It was expected that each of us had to be related to someone from the other end of town.

Living in Southie branded me the day I made my appearance in Greenwood Hospital on the Lower End.

In 2014, a news article debated the possibility of changing "Lower End" to "Broadway Village".

I grimaced at the thought.

You could try to take the classism out of the name, but you couldn't take it out of the minds of the people who defined my childhood. Even at the time, the city side of South Boston was undergoing gentrification at lightning speed. One day, it would go on to become one of the highest-valued realtor locations in Boston.

My childhood was spent in the West Side, or, like I said, the Lower End. This little stretch was dominated by housing projects. My family lived in a row house near a traffic circle separating Old Colony from Old Harbor.

I was the youngest of five children.

I did not know much about my father, but from what I'd gathered—and word travels quickly when you're in a town where everyone knows each other—he was a gifted student who met my mother at South Boston High.

He had the mouth of a Boston cabbie and a reputation for being a notorious charmer.

And my mother, bless her soul, was always soft when it came to men. She liked to think that her validation depended on the men in her life finding her beautiful.

There were days I worried I'd inherited that from her. On those days, Chloe was my refuge.

Anyway, Dad died a month before I was born. Again, I only heard what had happened, but it was an overdose. But Mom used to tell me he was a good man, never had an affair, and never had eyes for anyone but her and the children.

I liked to believe that. I liked to believe that he was the singular manly angel in her life before it went to shit because each guy she brought home after that routinely abused her and us kids.

When I finally escaped, I thought I'd never forgive her.

But there are occasions when I feel I may have been a little too hard on her. She was the product of poverty, multiple jobs, and running after kids she didn't ask to have. It couldn't have been easy.

I was glad I didn't feel the same way for Oliver, though. To me, he was my sunshine. Maybe part of the reason I clung to him so hard was because I could never get pregnant again.

"Hey," Chloe said, her soft voice jolting me out of my golden hour flashback. "You okay?"

I shook my head. "Yeah, no. I'm fine. Just had to go back for a minute there. But I'm alright now. I can't wait to tell Dave the news."

She grimaced. "Sure. I'm happy he gets to know he's living with a prodigy. But don't get your hopes up, okay? You know how he is."

Chloe, like everyone else in my team and life—barring my older brother, Ben—thought that I was wasting my time around Dave.

They believed I was destined for more incredible things. They could be right, but likely because they didn't understand the need. I had to think he would come around and see that my successes weren't hinged on his failing at life.

He'd come to a point where he honestly thought that he couldn't keep up with me because I was becoming too "common". That was what he liked to call people who made it on their own. He believed I'd do better if I stayed at home, cooked his meals, and tended to our son.

But I was stubborn. I wouldn't leave him—growing up in a Southern Baptist home had taught me to stick it out no matter what—but I wouldn't let him command my life.

"You should leave him, you know." Chloe scowled heavily. "Good for nothing asshole that he is, I can guarantee he's going to throw a hissy fit when he hears Netflix has given you your own show. He'll say shit like you don't deserve it, you're gonna mess it up . . . you know where I'm going with this, Sel."

I did. But my family wouldn't. Ben would be the one having the hissy fit if I brought up the topic of divorce. Marriage was the most sacred of unions to him—even if we'd grown up knowing nothing but failed relationships. And I adored Ben.

He was more than my older brother. He was the only one in my family I still had any connections to. I cherished that.

"Ben would be the one throwing the hissy fit if I left him, Chloe."

"You Southern Baptists," Chloe grumbled.

"You should try speaking to the Lord sometimes," I teased her, knowing full well that Chloe was an absolute non-believer.

"Hey, the last time I prayed to the Lord, I asked him for a martini instead of a miracle," she replied before breaking into an infectious bout of laughter that caught on to me.

The driver banged a Uey, and I was home in five more minutes.

My penthouse in Seaport was a far cry from the rowhouse of my childhood. It was one of the most secure residences in the city.

I'd left no stone unturned when it came to surveillance and comfort. My son would have the best of the best.

I said goodbye to Chloe and asked the driver to drop her home. On the way up, my mind was full of all the possibilities that were about to unfold.

"Please, God," I murmured. "Give me a sign. Show me he's still with me, and he still wants to fight for our son and our marriage. Don't let him give up on me."

It was as if I already knew he wasn't going to give me an easy time. Dave had been a different man when I was new to this city. He was one of the first friends I'd had. This was before he gave in to alcoholism, the Irish scourge.

It began with one drink, and he was hooked. There was a time when he was on the route to becoming one of the best gastronomic chefs in Boston. But restaurants refused to hire him when he gave in to his vices.

He became a liability—misbehaving with customers, messing up orders, believing he was a god. In the service industry, all of this pointed to a man unhinged. Soon, he was unemployable. Not before the media ripped him to pieces, though.

I still thought part of the reason he hated me was that the media portrayed me as someone relatable, someone easy to fall in love with—while he was often shown as the singular impediment in my life.

They thought they were doing me a favor by stirring the pot of my marriage. They refused to believe all they were doing was causing me a world of pain.

I stepped into the living room, running a trembling hand over my sleek ponytail. A sigh escaped my lips as I stepped out of my Louboutins and felt my feet touch the soft ground.

Modern and minimalist, my home's clean, neutral lines welcomed me like a haven.

“There you are.”

His drawl told me everything I needed to know. Against everything I’d decided, I felt my blood begin to boil. It wasn’t even seven in the evening, and my husband lay sprawled on the couch, his eyes red, his hands nursing his favorite mistress.

“Are you out of your mind?” I hissed. “Where’s Ollie? Why aren’t you watching him, Dave?”

“Oh, shut up!” He tossed the empty glass in my direction. But I’d long practiced dodging his antics, so I moved deftly. It hit and shattered against the north wall, shards ricocheting across the room.

“Look how fat you’ve gotten,” he hissed, leering a smile at me. “I’d still do you, but no one else will. Is that why you’re still here, Sel?”

“Or is it because of that two-faced fucker of a brother you have? Did you read the *Daily Herald*?”

He mimicked a girlish, high-pitched voice. “*Our beloved Kitchen Goddess deserves so much better than the drunkard she’s made her home with! Vote if you think there’s something going on between her and Andy Cruz!*”

He got up but decided he wasn’t feeling stable enough and dropped back down before pointing an accusing finger at me. “I thought you were working with Andy Cruz on a new project. Is this your project?”

He scoffed. “Getting close and sticky in the kitchen? Do your customers know you’re serving them a side of his nasties?”

I felt my ears go red. “Andy is nothing but a colleague,” I replied tartly, refusing to let him get to me. “You know that as well as I do. I refuse to have this conversation with you right now, Dave. Talk to me when you feel sane.”

I tried to walk past him, but he reached out, pulled my hand, and pushed me down on the floor in front of him.

“That’s where you belong,” he hissed. “At my feet. Have you forgotten it was me? I gave you your fucking wings. I was

your friend. Look what you've gone and done to us."

I held my tears back, knowing full well they were wasted on him. "Dave," I said, trying to still be gentle. "Don't do this. You know I love you. You know I want us to survive, to get through this—for us, for our child."

"*Pshaw.*" He snorted, pushing me backward. I fell back on the carpet. This time, I got up, dusted my skirt, and sighed.

"I'm going to bed."

"Go to a whorehouse where you belong, cunt. And don't talk about me being here for you or that boy. Everyone knows you both hate me and want me gone. He's nothing but a little shithead, anyway."

There. That was the exact moment that blew my fuse. I had this little quirk from my childhood—maybe it was born of a base urge to keep myself safe, no matter what.

I reached into my skirt pocket and withdrew a sleek pocket knife. In a quick second, I was next to him, holding it against his throat.

He let out a scruffy chuckle. "Whatchu gonna do, Sel? Kill me? *The Kitchen Goddess loses it in a fit of passion and murders her husband!* That's some headline."

"I'm not going to kill you, Dave," I whispered, my eyes burning. "But you say one bad word about Ollie, and I'm gonna cut your face up so bad your whore from two doors down will scream and run when she sees you next. Now, fuck off. Get out. Come back when you're sober."

It hit him where it was meant to.

He hoisted himself from the couch and muttered profanities all the way to the main door. I could still hear him cursing as he headed to the elevator, likely to end up in the arms of one of his one-night stands.

I shivered and closed my eyes. I wouldn't think of that. Instead, I spent the next thirty minutes cleaning the living room. I didn't want Oliver to wake up to this.

A tiny shard of glass pricked my finger as I cleared the clutter that had become my life.

I ignored the jab, and once I was done and had taken a shower, I slowly made my way up to my son's bedroom.

I opened the door and found him sitting on his bed. He looked at me with bleary, doe-like eyes. "Dada okay?" he asked, his tone a little sad.

How my heart broke.

I climbed into bed with him. "He'll be okay when he comes back home, darling. How was your day?"

He shrugged his little shoulders. "Was ok. Marla said I getting good in math. I learn tables."

I hugged my little boy, reveling in the sweet smells of bubblegum shampoo and honey on his skin. I couldn't ever be near enough or hold him close enough. "You're going be the best little mathematician."

"But I want to go space," he quipped, giving me a toothy little smile.

"You'll be amazing no matter what you do, Ollie." I kissed the top of his head and opened a book to read to him.

He fell asleep on page five, where a wizened old wizard told a little adventurer that the world would always hold magic for those who believed.

I read the line again and again after my son drifted off. At some point in the night, my eyes closed as well.

The following day, I woke up to a number of messages on my phone. Most of them were congratulations from my friends and extended family for bagging the show.

Ben's frantic text said he'd proposed to his childhood sweetheart, Abigail. And there was something from Dave. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

But deep inside, I'd already known this was going to happen.

I deserve better than staying at home with a little brat and watching you live the life of my dreams.

Sorry, Sel. I'm leaving you.

SELENE

Three Years Later

There were worse things than not being the maid of honor at my brother's wedding. Abigail had reserved that spot for her best friend, and honestly, I was fine with it.

We got along because we both loved Ben, albeit in different ways. I wanted Ben to be free and have his own life. Abigail was the kind of person who needed him around every second of her day—and that was okay too.

In fact, I think that was what Ben preferred. He liked the idea of being grounded to someone.

“Sel, you look so pretty,” Abigail said as I stood in front of her in my lilac bridesmaid's dress. I'd kept my red hair loose, allowing it to just blow in the ocean air. A pair of diamond huggies clung to my ears.

I didn't want to take any attention away from the bride today. And she looked stunning in her pristine white gown, her eyes shining with the prospect of the future.

“Forget me,” I replied. “Look at you. you could literally be a fairy walking down the aisle. Ben's lucky.”

“Oh,” she replied, giving me a smile. “That's so sweet of you to say. I know this will happen to you again! Just be open to options, you know?”

Chloe took a sharp breath beside me, but I flicked my hand, willing her not to pull one of her classic stunts and say something ridiculously inappropriate.

This was how Abigail and I spoke for the majority of our association. I knew I'd learn to love her as a sister-in-law, but hell, I'd never like her.

She reminded me of everything I wanted to leave buried in the past.

About an hour later, we gathered around the venue.

"Uncle Ben looks handsome," Oliver said. I wholly agreed with him as I watched Abigail walk down the aisle to marry my brother. I was unabashedly weepy.

The tangy aftertaste of happily ever after mingled with salt from the ocean and settled on my skin and lips. I was so proud of my brother.

"Do you know why Uncle Ben married Abigail, love?" I asked Oliver, playing with the rush of red curls on his head. My son was growing into a beautiful little boy.

He was a bit gangly for his age, but with those hazel eyes and fierce, shocking crop of ginger hair, he could light up any room.

"Because he loves her?" he replied innocently.

"That, and because they are best friends."

The bride and groom exchanged vows upon a wedding aisle adorned with delicate rose petals and embellished in coral and gold shades.

Rustic wooden chairs flanked the aisle, each complete with billowing fabric in soft pastels dancing in the summer breeze.

"This is a dream wedding," Chloe said, letting out a sigh that sounded a bit like a grunt. "I swear, if I ever get married and I don't do it near the ocean, send me to jail or kill me before I walk the aisle."

"I can't kill you, Chlo."

"Oh, what good are you?"

Beyond the aisle lay the majestic expanse of the Boston Harbor. The azure waters of the calm Atlantic glistened under the sun's setting glow.

It was a picture-perfect melding of bronze and honey-lemony-yellow. It reminded me of the sunsets I used to enjoy with Ben when we were kids.

This was a little weekend luxury for us. Anytime I needed a break from home, he'd bring me near the ocean, for this was where I felt the most alive.

"Sel, one day," he'd say as we strolled the Harborwalk. "One day, you're gonna be old enough to make choices. I want you to do something that makes you happy, but also, don't stray too far from your roots."

That was always Ben. He was the family's loyalist. I liked to think that he had to be that way because he grew up faster than the rest of us kids.

By the time I was twelve and he was sixteen, he was more of a parent to me than my mom.

I learned cooking from him. He mastered the basics at a young age because he needed to take care of us.

But the day I stepped into our stuffy little kitchen, its expanse rife with the smells of garlic slowly roasting on a stovetop, I knew I'd found heaven. I was about three or four years old at the time.

From then on, I'd stuck to him like a leech whenever he went into the kitchen. I loved being around food. It was so vibrant, freeing, colorful, and lush—it reminded me of everything my life could not be at the time.

"I'm going to be the greatest chef in the world," I'd vow, giving him a little grin as he'd hand some sweet treat he'd gotten for me.

It was usually whoopie-pies, these cake-like crumbly sandwich cookies that had a creamy marshmallow filling in the center. I could still taste the sugar on my lips if I closed my eyes.

I'd experienced a world of luxurious dining from then to now, but nothing would ever come close to the fulfillment of eating a whoopie pie on the Harborwalk.

“Chef, huh?” he’d tease me. “You gonna go abroad and do fancy courses?”

“I sure am. And I’m gonna learn to bake, and then one day, I’ll have my own little shop. You can come and get all the goodies for free, Ben. I’ll never charge you!”

He’d stopped and turned me around so I faced him. His silhouette was mirrored against the backdrop of a blood-red setting sun, and it cast a strange halo over him, almost like he was on fire.

“Then hold fast to that dream because you gotta get out of here, Selly. When the time is right, you need to work hard enough to make that dream of yours come true because the longer you stay here, the staler you’ll get.”

I admit it. I didn’t fully grasp the meaning behind his words then, but looking back on things, Ben was the sole reason I managed to get out of Boston, even with the scholarship.

My mother refused to hear of it—it was unfathomable to her that a girl could actually leave her home turf and go to a foreign country to achieve shit. She wanted me to marry and settle down and give her grandkids.

This was part of the reason she never got to meet Oliver. Like I said, Southie had changed. The scars . . . they remained the same.

“Just look,” Chloe said, taking my hand and pointing to the horizon. Waves rhythmically lapped against the shore.

Against a setting sun cast in gold and scarlet, a smattering of colors unfolded in the sky.

All at once, it came alive in shades of vibrant pink, fiery orange, and soft purple against an indigo expanse. The sun cast a fiery sheen upon the water.

Suddenly, I could not tell the difference between the sky and the sea.

“They’re making their vows,” I whispered, leaning forward. Oliver moved closer to me as if by instinct so we

could listen to Ben and Abigail make their promises to each other.

The sweet words were tinged with the hope of forever. I never found it cliché because what would we have without these words? I wished . . . but no, I would not think about the divorce today. That was done.

We finished the final procedure last week. Dave had been mercifully sober during the proceedings. I'd allowed supervised visitation on the grounds that he went to counseling.

I was pretty sure that'd end up in complete and utter failure.

He was a changed man, but not in a good way. He'd grown thinner than before, with all the bearings of an alcoholic whose life had gone to shit. Last I heard, he'd found himself a job in another country. Good for him.

"Hey." Chloe nudged me gently. I cast my eyes at her, and I knew she could see the sadness in them.

"You did your best, Sel."

We watched Ollie jump up from his chair and run toward the newly-married couple.

"Did I? Maybe the knife bit was overkill."

"I'd have actually cut him up instead of just threatening him," she snapped back. "He had the gall to insult your kid. That's the person he's supposed to be protecting. All he's ever done is make you feel like crap, Sel. And he keeps blaming his failures on you and Ollie. Tell me you can see that?"

I could. "I know, Chlo. It's just not easy. Not with the background I have."

Even Chloe understood this. As one of the few Southern Baptist families with an origin point from Southie, I'd been indoctrinated and inundated with ideas regarding the sanctity of marriage.

People in my extended family didn't care if I lived separately from my husband, but the second the topic of

divorce cropped up, I was into taboo territory.

Love and respect were secondary to social commitments, and by agreeing to Dave's request, I'd pretty much alienated myself from all my family except Ben in one fell swoop.

Even Ben—there were times when he kept asking me to reconsider and speak with Dave and sort things out. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that this was no one-way street.

"It's going to fall in place," Chloe replied after a moment's silence. "But right now, can I interrupt the cloudy skies in your head with a bit of a sunny forecast?"

I grinned. "Fire away."

"There's this absolutely dreamy guy who can't take his eyes off you. He's just sitting two chairs back, but don't make a fool of yourself, for God's sake."

Of course, I did just that. I turned my head back immediately, hoping to scare off said man with a glare. But the face that my gaze landed on left me stumped for a good second.

I knew he'd be here. He was, after all, one of my brother's three best friends. Plus, it was his restaurant—Harvest and Hearth—that had done the catering for the event. But I'd never get used to having him around.

He raised the glass in his hand to me, his smile lazy and devilishly charming.

And I could feel this churning in my stomach that made me want to do sinful things. I turned my face forward, my cheeks furiously red.

The bride and groom moved to cut the cake, which had come straight from my pastry shop. It took me about a day's time to make, and I couldn't be happier with the result. From the looks on the faces of the guests, it delivered in taste too.

Lunch was an equally glorious affair. I could have lived on the lobster rolls alone, but everything else—the decadently lush chicken marsala, the tender prime rib roasted with

seasonal vegetables, and the delicately baked scrod—screamed perfection.

Dessert was a sweet surprise, fresh Boston cream pies.

“Oh my gosh, these are so good!” I rolled my eyes as the sweet cream exploded on my tongue. “I’m glad I didn’t do the desserts because this is better than anything I could have come up with.”

“That’s high praise coming from the best pastry chef in all of Boston.”

I wheeled around, almost dropping my plate in haste at the sound of the honeyed baritone that sounded way too close for comfort. Aiden Brown was standing in front of me, that same lazy grin on his face.

Oh, God, he was handsome. He was built just the way I liked—steel but with a touch of human softness. He’d grown a chestnut stubble to complement his unruly hair, and his green eyes bored into mine.

It was like he had X-ray vision and could totally see what I’d look like without this skimpy satin number on me. I felt the same way I had when Ben brought him over from school one day.

I’d trailed after the two of them like a lost puppy. When I’d finally gone to get Aiden my last pie from the fridge, I’d overheard him calling me “Chubby Selly” and asking Ben when I’d leave the two of them alone.

I was eleven at the time, and I still considered this my first heartbreak.

“I always give credit where it’s due,” I replied tartly. My internal monologue was doing stupid stuff to my brain cells.

Tell him you still have a crush on him.

God, look at how cute he’s gotten.

How the fuck are you not kissing him?

I had this irresistible urge to toss the plate of food aside and bolt from there, but before I could do any such thing, Ben

strolled up to me with Abigail on his arm.

He was being trailed by the other two of their fantastic four—Dominic James and Niall Donovan. I couldn't take my eyes off the boys.

It struck me as ridiculously unfair that they'd all struck the genetic lottery while I felt like an overheated casserole on my best days.

“What is this, some kind of a hunk fest?” Chloe hollered, and for once, I couldn't blame her.

Dominic was so chiseled he looked like he'd been cut from the most expensive marble by the Maker himself.

Jet black hair, messy curls, sinful chocolate eyes.

And every inch of Niall's arms was covered in tattoos. He could be in a band with that messy bun and those fuck-me-right-now blue eyes.

The three of them looked like they were the male versions of *Charlie's Angels*, and for once, I wouldn't mind being Charlie himself.

Make no mistake—I knew the limitations of my upbringing. I made my peace with it on most days, even the most conventional parts of it. It didn't mean that I agreed with any of it.

And right at that moment, I was getting a good old-fashioned reminder of all the ways I'd wanted to be loved by men who knew what they were doing.

“Look how you've grown up,” Niall said. His voice sounded like aged wine and something akin to the deepening of the night. “And become all gorgeous too.”

Immediately, the defensive streak that was primary to my nature came through. “Really? So you're saying I don't look like ‘chubby Selly’ or smell like day-old clothes and stale bread?”

The men exchanged glances and a quick grin. “Nah,” Aiden drawls. “You don't. But you still got that wildcat streak in you.”

Ben cleared his throat, clearly not liking the direction in which the conversation was going. Abigail was already casting dagger eyes at his friends.

She was likely wondering about the ways in which she could keep Ben from spending too much time with them. I pitied her for that—nothing would keep my brother away from these three.

“Sel, stay for the night?” Ben asked, his tone slightly reproachful. “It’s hardly any fun if you’ve got to leave right now.”

I shook my head but leaned in to hug him. “You know how it is, Ben. I have to be on set at six in the morning. And Ollie needs to get some sleep.”

All this while, Ollie remained steadfastly hooked to my skirt, but when Aiden leaned down in front of him and whispered something in his ear, he broke out into peals of laughter. I looked at Aiden suspiciously.

“What did you just tell my son?”

“Just boy stuff,” he replied. I wanted to whack him for his audacity. But I hadn’t heard Ollie laugh like that in a long time.

“Abigail.” I turned to my sister-in-law, wanting to end the evening on a peaceful note. “You’ve never looked more beautiful than you do tonight. I’m so happy for the two of you.”

“Oh, I’m just looking forward to when I’ll be maid of honor at your next wedding!”

Way to go, bitch.

I decided I’d had enough of her backhanded compliments and kissed Ben’s cheek before picking Oliver up and heading toward the exit. It was getting late, and I needed to put him to bed and get some work done before the morning.

On the way to the car with Chlo, Aiden caught up with me. “Hey, can I take a minute?”

“I don’t have one.”

“How about half a minute?”

I groaned and stopped in my tracks. Chloe disengaged Oliver from my arms and carried him back to the car, a smug smile on her face. I knew she'd be asking about him and the other two the second I got in.

“What? What do you want, Aiden?”

Aiden continued looking at me for what felt like much more than thirty seconds.

“It's just . . .”

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to finish his thought.

“I thought it was stupid of Abigail to say what she did. And I think you're doing an amazing job for yourself. You don't need a man to complete you. Maybe you need one or a few to . . .” He teased over the words lightly. “Show you a good time.”

Oh, God. I knew I was turning my least favorite shade of beetroot red.

I should have felt scandalized. I should have thought of all the boundaries. But all I saw at the moment was this green-eyed hunk who was saying something that made me feel more alive than I'd ever felt, even with Dave.

“That's . . .”

“Scandalous?” he asked, chuckling. “What's life without a little scandal now and then, Selene? From what I remember, you always liked being the rebel.”

With that, he turned around, whispering a low tune under his breath. I watched him walk away, the twinge between my legs growing and stretching into my belly.

I tried to shake off the feeling of being unbalanced and made my way to the car. True to my prediction, Chloe immediately bombarded me with questions about Aiden, Niall, and Dominic.

“Chlo, you gotta stop badgering me,” I finally groaned. “I don’t know what they want. They’re fucking gorgeous, but Aiden . . . those boys are bad.”

Luckily for me, Oliver was sound asleep.

“So, why can’t you have somethin’ good with bad boys? What are you, a grandma?”

“Do you know how wrong this could go?”

“All I know is all of them looked like they could eat you up.”

SELENE

Two Days Later

“O liver!”

I STEPPED into my son’s bedroom and sat down beside his bed. His cheeks were still flushed with sleep. He opened his eyes and gave me the softest smile. “Hey, Mom.”

Our cat, Lady, was sleeping next to him. She stretched as he opened his eyes and gave me a most injured expression, as if I’d done a great injustice by waking the two of them up.

This smile reminded me of how he used to look at me after waking up from contact naps when he was a baby.

Science told me that a babe needed eight weeks to focus on the faces of their parents. But my heart told me my son had known my soul right from the moment of his conception.

I tousled his hair. “You’ve got to get ready for school, baby.”

He let out a little breath and sat up on the bed before stretching like a cat. “I wish we could go on a very long holiday.”

“Like, a month long?”

“A year,” he replied with a little giggle. “I would make you take me to France.”

“What do you know about France, Ollie?” I asked, wondering when he’d begun learning about other countries.

“I know they have the kind of food you like best.”

This made me laugh. “It sure does. But that’s not the only country with great food, love. Anywhere you go, when you get older, you’ll find that each new home has a little tradition surrounding food. Sometimes, you may not even agree with it. But always remember to respect it because for most of us, food is one of the biggest love languages we have.”

On occasion, I wondered whether my words made any sense to him at all. But he looked at me with those bright baby-blue eyes that he hadn’t grown out of, and it was as if he held a world of understanding in them.

I loved him so much, my little Oliver. He had no idea how many times he’d saved my life by just existing.

“Come on,” I said, kissing his forehead. “Get ready and come downstairs. I’ll get your breakfast ready.”

After going downstairs and getting Lady her food, I checked on Susan to know whether she’d be home by the time I brought Oliver back from school. I needed to finish breakfast, drop Ollie off at school, and then go to my shop.

Today was experimental day, which meant I got to go crazy trying out different pastry combinations until I found one that would just stick.

“What’s for breakfast?” Ollie asked, pottering into the room.

My son could be a little fussy around food. Ben told me time and again that I was spoiling him. But I loved whipping up treats for him, and no one was going to stop me from making all of his little whims come true.

“Blueberry pancakes with syrup, but can you eat a banana for me first?”

He made a little face at me, scrunching up all his features to look like a very angry young man. “I don’t like bananas.”

My first instinct was to toss the banana aside and tell him he didn't need to eat it, but I tried persisting.

I wondered, sometimes, if he had any of my genes in him. Even with his usually sweet nature, Ollie could be a little stubborn when things didn't go his way.

Perhaps it was because he hadn't grown up in the same circumstances that I had. As soon as I thought this, a shiver ran up my spine. Come what may, I'd never want Ollie to experience that life or know what hunger could do to the mind.

"Just half, then?" I cajoled, trying to find a middle ground.

"But they taste mushy and yucky," he grumbled, sitting down on a chair, his face still forlorn. "Do I have to?"

I sighed and relented. "No, baby, it's okay. You can just finish your pancakes."

"Thanks, Mom!" The joy in his response was immediate. He gobbled up the hot pancakes in a jiffy. I finished my coffee and toast, and after a quick shower and change of clothes, I dropped Ollie off.

As always, he looked at me a little sadly before jumping down from the car.

"Be a good boy today!" I called out after him as he ran to catch up with a few of his friends. I hoped he'd settle into this school because this was his third change in the last two years.

He was subjected to relentless bullying in the first, and the media kept finding ways to invade his privacy in the second.

This time, though, I'd made a pact with the principal where my son's security and freedom were to be given paramount importance. He deserved to enjoy his childhood like a normal kid.

I planned out the rest of my day on the way to *Pâtisserie du Ciel*. I didn't have much on the agenda, but that was most welcome. Slow days had become so rare I'd come to love and cherish them. I'd probably kick back with a good book and a chilled beer in the evening.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air as I stepped into my cozy little shop. My team greeted me with wide smiles and sleepy eyes.

“Morning, team!” I said, grabbing a cup of coffee and taking a hearty sip. “Today, we’re going to bake like never before. We’re going to push the boundaries of flavor and create something truly extraordinary!”

My team exchanged excited glances. Martha, our talented baker with a knack for whimsical creations, spoke up first. “Selene, I’ve been tinkering with a recipe for lavender-infused croissants. How about we give it a try?”

I inclined my head, intrigued by the idea. “Sounds delightful, Martha! Let’s sprinkle some magic in our croissants today.”

As we mixed and kneaded, laughter filled the kitchen. Sofia, our ever-enthusiastic intern, couldn’t contain her excitement. “What if we make a cupcake that tastes like a rainbow and shoots out confetti when you take a bite?”

I laughed. “What does a rainbow taste like, though? Give me your ideas.”

“Sweet, tart, maybe even a little fluffy!” she responded immediately.

I nodded. “Brilliant! Let’s call it the ‘Confetti Explosion Cupcake’. We can make marshmallow fluff on top of each piece for that cloudy moreish mouthfeel. And maybe add a citrus lemon curd inside each of them.

“As for the confetti, I’m thinking sprinkles, but I don’t want something too sugary. Come on, shoot me.”

This meant the team was to bombard me with ideas, which they did. I hadn’t felt this active in a while, mostly because my thoughts had been fixed on Aiden, Dominic, and Niall.

It still frustrated me beyond measure that I was dreaming about them. In fact, last night, I happened to see a dream where they had covered me in whipped cream.

Of course, I was buck naked besides the cream. And it didn't end there. The mere things I'd dreamed made me blush, standing there in the kitchen.

“What are you thinking, Boss?” Chloe asked, giving me a suspicious look-over. “Got anyone in mind that you want to surprise with these pastries? Is that why you're so excited about 'em?”

I tossed an apron in her direction, and the others laughed.

We continued our pastry revolution. There were macarons infused with exotic spices, a tart with a burst of mango salsa, and éclairs with a savory twist of blue cheese and pear.

Finally, as the sun began its descent, I stumbled upon my masterpiece—a creamy matcha cheesecake with a delicate strawberry glaze. It was a harmonious blend of earthy and sweet, a taste that sent shivers down my spine.

“Team!” I cried out, holding the cheesecake triumphantly. “This is it! The Holy Grail of pastries! We shall call it ‘The Zen Master’. If this doesn't bring enlightenment, I don't know what will.”

“Look at you,” Chloe replied, grinning from ear to ear. “You're behaving like a little kid in a cake shop.”

“But honestly, taste it.” I almost shoved the cheesecake in her mouth in my excitement to get her opinion. She took a bite and rolled her eyes.

“Oh, my God, heaven. See, if you'd ask me to pray for this, I'd do it. I ain't even lying.”

A sudden onslaught of customers caught us unawares. We'd kept the store closed today so we could come up with a new menu, but clearly, the “closed” sign on the front door hadn't done the trick.

Or some people just needed to prove they were bigger than anything.

“Hey.” A girl—she had to be in her early twenties—strutted up to us in a full face of make-up. It was very early for this. I could see the corners of Chloe's mouth twitching.

She'd likely take me aside later and tell me something about the girl coming to the shop on the way home on her walk of shame from some rando's apartment.

And I'd remind her that the last time she'd woken up next to someone, she hadn't even gotten his name right. He'd been pretty nice to her about the mishap, too, the poor man.

"Hello," I replied, keeping the smile on my face intact. "We're unfortunately closed today, but our online delivery channel is open if you'd still like to get something."

"Nah, we're not from Boston, just visiting. We were hoping you'd show us around this shop. Heard a lot about it. See, my boyfriend and I . . ." She paused to pull the sleeve of a boy standing next to her.

Until she did this, he was staring at my intern. I knew what that look meant. He was obviously in this for the heck of the ride.

"We run an Instagram channel. You can check us out at *SexyEats*. We've got over a hundred thousand followers and shit."

"How nice for you," I deadpanned. I knew what was coming next, and it wouldn't be the first time.

The way social media was mushrooming, a time would come when one of these assholes would go into a Michelin-star restaurant and demand a full-course meal in exchange for "likes" and "views". Because, of course, we needed it no matter who we were.

My choice here was simple. I could throw a hissy fit and ask them to get the fuck out of my shop. Or, I could just stay calm and put them in their place. The way I'd seen it, throwing fits never helped because people like these two were always ready with comebacks.

The last time I'd lost my temper, I'd landed on the front page of multiple sensational papers and channels. The headline had to do with my becoming unhinged after Dave left me alone to raise a kid.

I didn't want to risk that happening again. I could take it, but hell no, not Oliver.

Every little move I made would have a ripple effect on my family, which encompassed my son and his heart. No way would I risk causing injury to that.

"I'm sorry, but you've truly caught us at an inopportune time," I said, widening my smile and the emphasis on my words. "I would so love to show you around and give you a taste of our shop's delicacies. But we're in the process of revamping our menu, and there's nothing on the counters today. If you'd like, I can do signed copies of my book and some pictures too!"

You give some, you get some.

The influencers exchanged a glance, and the girl told me to "give her a minute." They were negotiating, apparently.

Then, they came back. "How about this? We get one box of your creations and leave a review, and get a picture with you?"

I wanted to reach out and smack her smug face. But, circumstances. Honestly, I had far bigger battles to fight and win than to bother about one box of pastries. I nodded. "Please wait here. I'll have a box arranged for you."

Chloe followed me to the back of the kitchen. "Check their socials and verify they have the numbers," I told her.

"Hold up."

I stopped in my tracks.

"They do have a following, but it's not a hundred thousand, Sel. It's just short of ten K. And look at the comments—they all look AI-engineered. I'd say they've purchased most of their following."

My blood had begun boiling. "Okay. Get a box, and pack two pastries in it."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Chloe went inside, packed the box, and brought it back to me. I walked over to the counter and handed it to them.

“Just two?” the girl hollered, her eyes widening. “Man, that’s really cheap. We can’t review you like this.”

“You won’t need to. But you will be paying for those pastries,” I replied pleasantly. “You see, this shop has in-built surveillance, which will have captured your statement regarding your followers. My assistant has checked your socials. We happen to understand your real footprint is something else?”

The girl blushed. “Look. We’re sorry. We’re just . . . Okay, we’re not influencers. That’s not . . . that’s not my boyfriend. We just . . . we live in a trailer park in South Boston, and we got thrown out of our home a couple of days back. I used to make money working bars, but they won’t take me ‘cause I got debt back there. And we’re just really hungry, man. We know you do good Samaritan shit, so we—”

I sighed. “So you decided to come here and lie? You’d have done much better with the truth.”

The girl looked down and shuffled her feet. I gave Chloe a resigned shrug. “Pack them a box of donuts. And get some coffee in their system.”

“Thanks, man,” the girl said, her tone whispery with gratitude. “We really appreciate it.”

“Try leading with the truth next time,” I replied.

I went back inside to wrap up the work we’d done this morning.

The menu was looking good, and we’d launch the new creations tomorrow. I had to get some pictures taken first, and I liked to do this myself.

“Guys, you can take the day off,” I called out to the team. “Not you, though, Chlo. I need you.”

“Oh, ma’am, for the love of a vacation!” Chloe replied, flailing her hands dramatically. “Will you not give me a sock? I would be a free elf!”

“Stop with the *Harry Potter* references. You’ve already got Ollie asking when he’ll get his letter to Hogwarts.”

“You tell him he has to wait in line. I still haven’t gotten mine yet.”

Over the next hour, we worked on accounts and settled some dues. We finished setting up the menu, and I took some photos. Chloe was the tech whiz, so she handled putting them online on our social media channels.

“Whoa, ten minutes, and we already have over fifteen thousand likes, Sel,” she gushed as I finally took a long sigh and poured us two cups of coffee. “It’s going to be a busy promotions day tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait, honestly.”

“Hello, anyone here?”

The rich baritone that sounded through the room and echoed where we stood made me almost spill my coffee all over the floor I’d just cleaned.

Say what you will about being a multi-millionaire with a world of assets. I had this thing for clean surfaces, and it extended to my needing to clean them myself.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I asked Chlo frantically. “And why the hell do people not understand what a *Closed* sign means these days?”

“Who’s here?” Chloe replied, walking to check on the new entry. “How did you recognize his voice . . .” She trailed off, but the smile on her lips became prominent.

“Look at you! You knew it was that hottie from your brother’s wedding! You even have his voice memorized. That’s so cute.

“I swear, I’m gonna be the maid of honor at your wedding, Sel. If you pick Abigail over me, I’m gonna—”

“Oh, shut up.” I hastily cleaned the front of my apron, which had collected a generous smearing of buttercream in different colors we’d been experimenting with.

“Do I look civil?” I asked her. In my head, I pictured a frenzied antelope running around the room.

Chloe snorted in response. “You’ve been running around this place like a hot mama all day, Sel. You don’t look civil, but you do look cute. Like, a murderly-kind of cute. He could be into that.”

“I hate you.”

“But the real question is, can you live without me?”

I muttered something about shoving confetti up somewhere and trudged out of the back of the shop to glare at Aiden Brown, who met my fiery gaze with a perfectly charming smile.

He looked like he’d just gotten out of bed and decided today was the day to feature as a fucking GQ model. His hair was wonderfully messy, and the sun rays falling on it illuminated him.

I found myself imagining the sensation of running my fingers through it . . . pulling him closer . . . damn my aprons, what the hell was I doing?

“We’re closed today,” I said, baring my teeth. “Nothing’s available.”

“Are you, though?” he asked, catching me totally off guard.

“What?”

“Free?” he asked, looking at me hopefully. “Because I wanted to show you our restaurant.”

I opened and closed my mouth like a pufferfish. My lack of a response was punctuated by the alarm going off.

Saved by the bell, ping, blaring sound, whatever you would call it.

“I’m not, actually. I have to go pick up my son.”

Chloe emerged from the back. I couldn’t tell whose smile annoyed me more—because just then, it felt like both of them were running a betting match to see who could do it better.

“I’ll hold the fort down,” she said, winking at me. “Go get your son.”

“Thanks, Chlo. Sorry, Aiden. I’ll see you around.”

I spent the next hour picking Ollie up from school.

He chattered all the way back home, telling me about a new teacher who taught geography by referencing a wise old wizard and something about flat-earth believers belonging to a cult.

I didn’t know whether I should have felt proud about my kid picking things up so quickly or scared that he’d figured out the meaning of “cults”. I decided to have a talk with him about it later.

By the time I got him home, made sure Susan was in, and came back to the pastry shop, all I wanted to do was get the pots and pans cleaned for tomorrow and head home.

To my immense chagrin, it was apparent that I wouldn’t get to do that anytime soon.

“You’re still here,” I said, stating the obvious to Aiden, who was sitting at one of our tables with Chloe, apparently lost in a conversation about grills and barbecues.

“And you,” I continued, giving my best impression of a very angry boss at her. “Did you finish cleaning up?” I honestly didn’t think she had to clean up at all. We always did this together.

I just didn’t want her out here chatting with someone who made me feel this uncomfortable.

“I was waiting for you, Sel,” she replied with a conspiratorial twinkle in her eyes. “And then I got a bit carried away in discussing the best grills for brisket.”

“You . . . don’t . . . eat . . . meat.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “But I can still be an admirer, right?”

I wanted to stamp my feet on the ground like an angry little child and break into a bout of crying. So, I decided to just

sit down.

“Aiden, what do you want?”

“I just want you to come to Harvest and Hearth with me, Sel. Remember how much you loved our food at the wedding? Wait until you see what we’re doing back in the kitchen. It’d be pretty massive to have you there.”

“And this is not a joke which will end with me getting trolled somehow?” I asked him suspiciously. He could be hot now, but I’d never forget how he treated me when I was a kid.

“I promise.” He crossed his fingers. “I know I was a dick to you in school, okay? It’s not just you, I was a dick in general at the time. Let me make it up to you.”

“That’ll take ten years.”

“Okay, so let’s start with day one of those three thousand, six hundred and fifty.”

AIDEN

“Don’t worry about the shop,” the pretty brown-haired girl called out as I half-pulled Selene out and toward my car. “I’ll close up once I’m done.”

I’d taken advantage of the second of dumbfounded silence that resulted from my last reply to get her out of her *Pâtisserie du Ciel*.

She got into the car with little resistance, but I could see she was trying to come up with some kind of reply. I wanted to tell her a lot of things too.

For one, I really wanted her to know that I’d spent a pretty fucked up couple of days dreaming about her. This never happened to me. Usually, with women, I got what I wanted, and that was it.

I didn’t do serious relationships. I had nothing against women. In fact, Dominic liked to say that I just went from one to the next because I “loved all of them a little too much.”

But honestly, my apartment had a single bed, one toothbrush, and one towel. It had every other imaginable comfort, but all of this was designed for one human being. No one got to stay over.

“I have to get back here to take my car,” Selene finally grumbled. She was sitting close by, and I could get a whiff of everything she’d been working with this morning—citrus, chocolate, salted butter.

Perhaps something minty and some kind of a berry emulsion. She smelled fucking delicious.

My reason for being here was pretty basic. When I set my eyes on someone, I needed to have them.

You could mistake this as my ego or my penis talking on behalf of my brain, but I saw it more as a philosophy.

At least, if I didn't win this round, I'd go down trying. That was worth more than sitting back and watching her slip by. Somehow, I didn't want that.

"Don't worry about your car, Selene," I replied. "I can have one of the boys pick it up for you. And thanks for saying yes to this."

"But I didn't," she sputtered. "You pretty much kidnapped me back there."

I let out a wry chuckle. "Consider it a social service, Miss. You work way too hard."

From the corner of my eyes, I saw her full mouth open and close. Did she even know how beautiful she was? She had all the curves, hair like red sunset, and the most impossibly blue eyes.

I remembered her being cute enough in school, but back then, my defense mechanism relied on my being an absolute asshole to girls.

It was what I'd unconsciously learned from my father and brothers. They taught me that being vulnerable meant being exploited.

And I ingrained that into my system right until the time I started working and made the *stupid, stupid* mistake of falling in love.

We were supposed to achieve great things together. Somewhere down the line, she decided her version of greatness didn't align with mine, which meant she deserved better. It was fair enough. Many would ask why I didn't stay and fight.

You can't fight for something that's already dead.

Sure, you could cherish the memories and hold on to the good times—and we did have those. But in the grand scheme of things, you couldn't stop a progression just by saying, "We can still make this work."

And once I re-learned this, life became better for me too. I didn't need that kind of love any longer. I was fine on my own.

Selene reminded me of the things I'd felt in the first few weeks of being in love, though. Those same butterflies, that same sense of wonder that painted everything a stupid shade of pink.

Even in the damned car, I wondered what her lip gloss tasted like, how her hair would feel under my fingers, if she remembered that one time I saw her crying in school and got her chocolate.

"So, what made you who you are, Selene Baker?"

"Hmm?" she asked, her tone softer. "Are you seriously asking about my history? When did you become so interested in the lives of women, Aiden Brown? Last I heard, you were simply content with sleeping around."

I smiled, not in the least bit offended. She was a refreshing change from the women who understood I didn't do relationships and still went along thinking they could get me to change.

"Let's just say I'm interested in you," I replied, casting a sideways look at her. She'd left the window open, and the wind was doing magical shit with her hair, making it fall over her eyes and freckles.

"But since you already know my reputation, I'll temper this by saying I'm just curious. We grew up together in the same shithole. Not a lot of us made it past our demons. What pushed you?"

Selene considered my question. I loved that she wasn't scandalized by my frankness. "I don't know, Aiden. Honestly, the day I learned to cook my first meal, I knew I could never have a life without food. And when I was old enough, it felt like I could do so much and learn so much more. I think when

you're cast into corners like we were, escaping becomes a base instinct."

"I get that," I replied. "I thought about getting out all the time too."

"You learn to live for it. It's different if you're born into a life of opportunities. If you're not, you're always thinking, 'I need to make this happen.' It's like a siren call. You never get out of it. I'm still in that mode. I keep thinking I can't be successful enough."

I wanted to come up with a cool reply, but this girl had me absolutely tongue-tied.

Selene peered at me, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. She tilted her head, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "Aiden, you're being awfully quiet. Cat got your tongue?"

I couldn't help but laugh, relieved at her lighthearted response. "More like a whole pride of lions! But hey, if cats are involved, I'm all ears. Maybe they could lend me some feline charm."

She chuckled, the sound like sweet music to my ears. "Well, if we're talking about feline charm, I'm the crazy cat lady in training. I've got enough charm to supply the entire neighborhood."

I raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. "Oh, so you're saying I've stumbled upon a cat charm black market? No wonder you've got me under your spell!"

Selene playfully swatted my arm. "Careful, you never know what those spells could do to you. You could wake up tomorrow and find that you've become a toad."

I grinned, unable to resist the banter. "Oh, I see how it is. Well, I'll have you know I come equipped with my own array of endearing quirks. I'm like a walking charm factory."

She raised an eyebrow, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. "A charm factory, you say? What kind of charms are we talking about here? Lucky socks? Cheesy pickup lines?"

I chuckled. “Well, this should be a secret, but my charms are top-secret, patent-pending. They range from perfectly timed dad jokes to random acts of clumsiness. They’re guaranteed to make you laugh or groan, depending on your tolerance level.”

She burst into laughter, unable to contain her amusement. “I can see you haven’t changed at all, Aiden. Man, I wish we could go back to our childhood sometimes. Do you think we’d grow up the same if we got a chance at redoing those days?”

I shrugged at that. “I don’t. I think we did the best out of what we could. Even the darkest parts are extensions of how hard we’ve fought to get where we are,” I finished, my tone softer. I knew about Selene’s past with Dave.

In fact, I knew that jerk from school, and I could tell that Selene would have done her best to put up with his shit.

“Enough about me, though.” Selene’s reply was quiet. I could sense she’d understood the topic was going somewhere else—somewhere she didn’t want to be. “Tell me, how did you go from being a hot-shot lawyer to . . . well, this?”

I grinned at that.

A few years ago, I found myself in The Mirage, one of the most notorious casinos situated in the Las Vegas Strip.

“Have any of your culinary pursuits taken you to Las Vegas?”

“Not really. I don’t know that I’d go there just yet. Maybe when Ollie is a little older,” she replied. “Imagine carrying my son around and playing a hand in a casino! And I’m not going to Vegas and coming back without visiting a casino.”

I laughed. “A girl after my own heart.”

A moment of silence followed, after which I picked back up. “I was working on the Las Vegas Strip a couple of years back. I can’t describe it as anything except a neon-lit stretch of indulgence.”

And so it was. Towering, hotel-like casinos rose like colossal monoliths, their façades screaming, “Come try your

luck.”

The Strip saw throngs of people, a ceaseless tide of visitors from all corners of the globe eager to experience the American dream of unrestrained indulgence.

It was a funny dream, given how many of us actually spent our whole lives trying to make ends meet. Some of us never got to experience the indulgence that made the rest of the world make googly eyes at the mere mention of The States.

“I’ve heard you have lots of street performers there.”

“Oh, on a good day, you could meet anyone. You could run into Elvis Presley’s best lookalike to about twenty Marilyn Monroes, each trying to be more tragic than the real lady, who, in my humble opinion, was more of a fighter than anything else.”

Amid billboards and digital screens, there flowed an incessant barrage of promises, beckoning the masses with illustrative evocations of tantalizing buffets and star-studded shows.

What came through the loudest was the ludicrous call of ‘*get lucky tonight*’ within the gilded confines of each resort.

“So, one night, after work, I went out with some colleagues to The Mirage. It was a different sensory experience—the air was thick with perfume, cologne, and cigar smoke. It intertwined with the clink of glasses and the constant chatter of gamblers. Do you know what living in such a place does to you, Selene?”

“No, but I have a feeling you’re about to tell me.”

I gave a wry chuckle. “It makes you think you’re sharing a bed with Lady Luck, no matter how skewed the relationship is. You keep thinking your fortune can turn each day you wake up, even if you’ve had a bad run for about a year.”

The memory of just the floors, illuminated by the glow of neon lights, was stark in my mind. In particular, I remembered one incident involving a roulette wheel.

My colleague, Anthony, was the man who kept thinking his luck would turn. I'd told him, again and again, to stop before he ended up in a debt collector's office or worse. But he was just that kind of a bloke, as my English ancestors would say. He was the product of generations of endless optimism. It *never* ran out.

So, as the relentless spin of roulette wheels filled the room, a chorus of groans and cheers punctuated the casino's air.

"Red twenty-three!" the croupier cried. All of us held our collective breaths as the ball danced around the wheel before settling in a pocket. I'd never forget the shock and subsequent, overwhelming joy in Anthony's eyes. "I told you!" he kept saying. "I told you my luck would turn!"

Of course, he didn't stop there. He moved on to another table where a croupier was shuffling a deck of cards as he dealt a game of blackjack. He won that too.

Then came the craps table. Everywhere he landed on that fateful night, Anthony just won. By the time we came out of the casino, he was screaming, "Winner, winner, chicken dinner!" incoherently.

"So, that night, the colleague I went out with experienced a very lucky turn of events," I said, my eyes looking ahead. "He kept winning everything he touched. It was as if he'd become Midas overnight. And I remembered asking him—what are you gonna do with all this money?"

"I imagine he would have been too excited to say anything sensible?"

"Actually, no. He told me he'd take the money, quit his job, and do what he'd always wanted to do in his life—set up a socks company."

"What?"

I inclined my head toward her and gave her a half-grin. "Crazy, right? But that's how it is with people. And it made me think. Around the same time, Dominic was in Boston, thinking of leaving the kitchen he was working in and setting up his own place. We didn't have a lot to work with. Almost

nothing, in fact. But we had a shared love of food. I know you understand how that works.”

She smiled softly. “It consumes you. I think, growing up as we did, food brought us together. There was so much violence—gangs, drugs, those rowhouses escaped nothing. But when it was time for dinner, somehow, it meant all of us got to get out of whatever pit of hell we’d dug for ourselves for a little bit.”

I nodded. “And that’s what drove us. We wanted to create a space where people could visit us and forget the daily noise in their lives. Like a brief interlude, you know? And food can do that to you. It can take you into a whole other journey and open up emotions you never thought existed.”

I remembered the first time I’d felt the most sinful, decadent kind of love. It coincided with my first taste of a premium dark chocolate slab. A single bite, and I’d waited for the flavor to melt and settle on my palate.

It enveloped my tongue and the roof of my mouth, not bitter at all. Instead, it reminded me of a rich pine forest, walking barefoot on crunchy ground minutes before a storm, the taste of a beautiful woman’s mouth.

It was a crescendo, layer upon layer of complexity unfurling as robust cocoa flooded my palate, married with a subtle tang dancing straight at the edge.

“So, when we made the decision to open our own place, I told the boys I’d take charge of the legal aspect of things.”

Selene tilted her head slightly. “So, what does that involve?”

“I navigate all the legal and financial aspects of Harvest and Hearth—ensuring compliance with permits and regulations, handling contracts and licenses, and all that jazz.”

“Have you ever had trouble with zoning laws?”

“Never, but then again, we’re always on top of all laws, including health and safety and employment practices. I’m also in charge of budgeting, funding, just making sure we’re a profitable venture.”

“I’ve been wanting advice on risk management,” she replied thoughtfully. “I may just have to seek your help if I don’t find anyone better.”

“Oh, ha-ha,” I replied sarcastically. “I can bet on that.”

“Hit me.”

“Find a better risk manager in a week, or you have to come down to our restaurant every week.”

“Do you guys need lessons in pastry?” she teased. “Because that’s all I can do.”

“Are you sure about that?” I responded, my tone low and rich. From the corner of my eye, I saw her blush. Fuck, she was perfect. She could feign all the disinterest in the world, but I knew Selene felt something in the narrow air between us.

I convinced myself that my feelings resulted from her being this fucking gorgeous and out-of-reach. I was used to having my way with women, but this was a fresh change, a game I could play and enjoy.

“You know,” she said, her tone pensive, “Ben was pretty cut up when you left town.”

“Oh, I can’t tell you how much I missed home. And home meant Ben and the boys.”

Suddenly, the car took a sharp turn at a curve. Selene, who wasn’t expecting it, slipped, and I raised my left hand to draw her in so she wouldn’t fall over.

It wrapped around her waist. The left side of my body touched hers, and the heat I felt was unexpected. If I’d known I’d wanted her before, I knew the *extent* of it now. I needed this girl.

If it were for a second longer, I’d pull her in closer, turn her to me, and kiss that mouth. But she pushed back immediately, her face red. “I’m sorry,” she said. I could see her hands trembling.

I wanted to tell her not to be sorry and to just surrender to what was going on, but there was no chase in that. If this was a long game, I intended to enjoy every second of watching

Selene succumb until she'd no longer be the proverbial sour grapes on the high tree.

“Happens,” I told her. “And on that note, we're here!”

She'd be mine sooner or later. I wasn't going out of this without a win.

Aiden Brown never lost.

SELENE

I *'m not looking for a relationship. I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm not looking for a relationship.*

You could repeat the same line a hundred times, but you know you want to jump his bones.

My internal monologue was beginning to sound like a normal conversation I'd have with Chloe.

She'd end this by saying it was totally okay just to have sex with Aiden. I didn't need to do anything beyond that. I didn't have to "catch feelings".

It sounded pleasant enough because there were moments when I just wanted to let loose and have fun. I'd been in that dead-ass serious relationship, and honestly, it sucked. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt happy around Dave.

In fact, I couldn't remember feeling happy at all, except for the first few years when he still found me more important than cheap alcohol. I stuck out for the rest of the ride because I'd convinced myself I didn't deserve anyone better.

But what if I did? And what if being single meant that I could, for the first time in my life, have fun and experiment without being obligated to fall in love?

That second of almost falling into Aiden's arms told me a lot about what I wanted to do to him. Or *him* to do to me. I could picture it now—him lifting me against a countertop, running those long hands over my thighs . . . I blushed once again.

“And on that note,” Aiden said as I pushed myself off him and tried to regain some of my quickly vanishing frosty nonchalance, “we’re here.”

Stepping out of the sleek black car, I was immediately thrust into a whirlwind of flashing cameras and invasive reporters. Their cacophonous questions filled the air.

“Selene, who are you dating?”

“Selene, when are you going on your next food tour?”

“Are the rumors about you and your show’s producer true, Selene?”

I flashed a practiced smile, gracefully dodging their queries. “Guys, you know I love y’all, but if it were up to you, I’d be dating every single eligible bachelor in town!” I teased and giggled, avoiding any direct answers. “I gotta go, but see you around.”

“We love you,” they shouted back. Someone hollered something about my getting paid enough to lose weight and take better care of myself.

That never stopped bothering me—how we’d come so far as a society and how we’d still keep stooping to abysmal depths to tear each other apart.

“Only love to y’all,” I replied.

With a swift sidestep and a well-timed spin, I made my way to the entrance of Harvest and Hearth. Aiden almost got swallowed by the reporters for a bit, but he came through and led me inside.

“Whoa, these guys work harder than the Amazon’s mosquitoes,” he grumbled. “I’ve never been so traumatized.”

“Wait until Harvest and Hearth gets bigger,” I replied, giggling. “You’ll learn to work around them.”

Inside the restaurant, I finally exhaled. Aiden’s smile grew warm. “Ready to escape the madness for a bit?”

A soft, spontaneous laugh slipped out. “Never been readier.”

Harvest and Hearth was one of the prettiest restaurants I'd been to. It blended rustic charm with sleek minimalism.

Warm wood accents contrasted beautifully with contemporary furnishings, building something that was both welcoming and soothing. Polished marble floors led to a grand staircase.

"It must be beautiful when the sun sets, no?" I asked wistfully.

"Oh, the rooftop is a literal heaven. We hang back after the guests leave, y'know. Nothing like standing near the water at night with a cold beer or two."

Aiden led me to the rooftop. As I climbed, the scent of the sea mingled with the warm breeze. In due course, the seafront view stretched before me like an open embrace of blue and gold.

"We designed this place to showcase the harbor's natural beauty." I could sense the pride in Aiden's voice, and it touched me.

It reminded me of the same possessiveness I felt when my own shop was in the making—it was a different kind of a baby, a different love, but a very fulfilling one all the same.

"You did good," I replied, taking in the expansive floor-to-ceiling windows framing the panoramic vista. In the distance, there was sparkling blue as far as the eyes could see. Lively sailboats bobbed up and down on the distant outline of the city's skyline.

"I love the seating. It just maximizes the view." Plush loungers and intimate tables decorated with simple, clean linens were positioned to capture the waterfront experience.

And I loved that the boys hadn't tried to go too heavy on the music. The gentle lapping of the waves was the best soundtrack they could have.

Lush greenery, carefully curated to enhance rather than distract from the backdrop, lined the rooftop's perimeter. Fragrant flowers added bursts of color, while tall potted palms swayed gracefully in harmony with the ocean breeze.

I was impressed.

“You’ve really captured the spirit of this place. It’s warm, inviting, and stylish. How did you strike the golden balance? From what I remember, you were pretty clumsy back at school.” I grinned at the last sentence, my words teasing a small smile from his mouth.

God, that mouth—even now, I just kept wondering what it would feel like to kiss it.

“I won’t deny I wanted to go all out, but the boys helped with the balance. It was like mixing the perfect batch of chowder—ya gotta have just the right amount of tradition and innovation.”

“What have you guys done for the menu?”

“Dominic is the resident expert on that. We source our seafood from the local fishermen. Our vegetable-forward options celebrate the nearby farms. Other than that, he’s your guy. The man is a literal beast in the kitchen.”

“I love this place.” I sighed, unable to stop sounding happy. “It feels like a haven.”

“Aye, it does. When it comes to good food and good company, we Southies don’t hold back. It’s about keepin’ it real, servin’ up dishes that make your heart sing, and creatin’ a place where everyone feels like family.”

Everything about Aiden screamed straight-up honesty. And this propelled me to ask my next question. He was leaning against the railings, with the sea wind doing magical shit to his hair.

His green eyes had a different kind of light in them now. They looked calm, settled, almost like a deep ocean. I could make out the ripples of muscles on his biceps against the crisp white shirt he’d donned.

What would they feel like under my palms? He turned his head to me and offered a cocky little grin, almost as if he could read my mind. “What are you thinking?”

That I'd like you to take me somewhere private and bang me senseless.

I gulped. No, the least I could do in this situation was ask about his past—maybe get some sense of who he had been all these years.

“You’ve told me so much about your love for food. What about women?”

His grin became a tad feral. It should have made me feel afraid, but somehow, I just ached for him all the more.

“I love ’em too. I’d never lie. But I don’t do relationships. I feel it’s best to just go into everything being as open-minded as you can be. And sometimes, relationships take away from the better things in life.”

I nodded. This should have comforted me because I wasn’t looking for a relationship either.

At the most, I could do a long summer fling—hell, a very long one for someone this hot. But somewhere, his words struck me. It was that age-old aching spirit coming alive inside me, telling me, “Look, you’ve found your next project.”

I needed to sit down with that spirit and tell them that every unavailable and single man did not need to become a project. That I could do without needing them to fall in love with me.

Maybe this was life’s way of teaching me to grow up.

Adulting at thirty-two. Sounded nice enough. Better late than never, at least.

“I get that. I’m at a place in my life where the idea of a long-term thing freaks me out too. I think I have room for only Ollie and Ben in the long run of things.”

“Well, I gotta admit that stings a little,” he replied, his tone teasing me. “But good for you, Selene. You deserve to get out there and explore life, have fun, and play.”

He moved closer, and suddenly, his hand was on mine, and he was looking straight into my eyes. “You’ve had a tough run. A very long one too. Maybe you should let some guys

into your life, guys who can tease and torment, ease that little wildcat out of you.”

It wasn't what he said so much as the *way* he said it. The rich baritone of his voice enveloped my skin. It made my fingers tremble as he ran his thumb over my knuckles.

He was saying things that should have made me run, but all I wanted was to kiss him.

He was human and flawed, but so was I. This was no recipe that I could perfect, no dish that could be made a certain way.

As if he'd read my mind, his mouth moved closer, so close I could smell the mint on his aftershave and feel the hot air between us graze the open skin of my shoulders.

I instinctively arched against his lips, wishing he'd get closer.

“The tastiest of dishes happen because the chefs trust their gut and the moment,” he whispered. “Nothing exciting comes out of routine, Selene.”

“You're being inappropriate,” I said, but my tone meant something else. It was whispery, quiet, and laced with how much I wanted him to touch me.

“Am I?”

“This isn't normal.”

“Isn't it amusing that we're all trying so hard to be normal when we could be fucking fascinating instead?”

“I—”

“Don't you want . . .”

He let the unfinished sentence hang in the air like a loose thread. I wanted to snatch at it.

Yes, the Chloe-like voice inside my head told me. Kiss him. Turn around so he can kiss you.

God damn it, I thought to myself.

But then, Aiden paused seconds shy of his lips touching my neck and let out a low rumble of laughter that sent chills up my spine. “Come on, let me take you to the kitchens. That’s where the real magic happens.”

I half-stumbled into his arms, almost wanting him to carry me into the kitchen. I told myself I hadn’t fallen to the point where I had to become a damsel in distress just because Aiden was so unfairly hot and squared my shoulders.

His smile remained intact as if he were teasing me, wanting to see how far I could take it before succumbing to his bad-boy charm. Ugh.

“I’m coming,” I told him, and he just chuckled.

“That sounds like a very welcome proposition for another time.”

I blushed harder, wondering whether he had this uncanny ability to make everything I said sound deliciously dirty.

Aiden led me through the restaurant and into the back area. The scents of simmering marinara, fresh-baked sourdough, rich parmesan, and fragrant herbs mingled in the air. They built an intoxicating symphony.

The space hummed with vibrant energy, accentuated by butter sizzling in pans, the chopping of fresh ingredients, and the occasional shouts from servers and cooks.

Vibrant colors—red Roma tomatoes, green basil, and plump ivory garlic cloves—greeted me from the countertops.

I’d never felt so much peace in chaos.

There, amid the culinary symphony, was Dominic, looking like he had stepped straight out of a Renaissance painting. He was a male Adonis, commanding the kitchen with grace and skill.

His strong, tattooed arms effortlessly maneuvered pots and pans, calling out commands in a voice that could have belonged to a rock star.

It was as if he was born to be in the kitchen. His culinary prowess radiated from every pore of his being.

Beads of sweat glistened on his brow, accentuated his chiseled features, and added more character to his raw intensity.

His eyes looked up and looked straight into mine. The momentary peace that I felt was broken into a thousand shards as hot, balmy chemistry filled the salty air between us.

“Hello, Selene,” he drawled, brandishing a ladle at me like it was the sexiest thing in the whole fucking world.

An unspoken language danced in the air between the three of us. Although we were surrounded by cooks, at this moment, it was just him, Aiden, and me.

“Hey,” I replied, my throat distinctly dry. “Busy?”

That had to be the stupidest reply I could have come up with. Selene, Kitchen Goddess, the best show host in all of Boston, was apparently unable to string together coherent words.

To my relief, he responded with a laugh and said something to one of his sous chefs before leaving the pot he was working on and coming over. Even as he walked, I could make out every chiseled line and curve of his muscles.

And beside me, I could hear Aiden chuckling as if he was not offended by my distinct discomfort. Instead, he seemed to relish in it, like he wanted me to know that this world existed and it could be mine for the taking.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the wedding,” Dominic said as he got closer.

“Oh?” I blushed, my mind full of all the possibilities. What had he been thinking?

“That cake was some of the best shit I’ve ever had. You need to come in here and teach me to mix flavors like that,” he said.

I felt disappointed for just a second before the ridiculousness of the whole thing got to me, and I began giggling. I couldn’t tell if this laughter resulted from my nervousness or an early mid-life crisis.

But, it broke through the tension between us.

“I can totally show you my way with pastries, but for that, you’d have to visit my kitchen,” I finally said. “It’s a fair trade, no?”

Dominic inclined his head, that same slight smile playing on his lips. “Sounds pretty good to me. So, how did you find Harvest and Hearth?”

“It’s stunning,” I gushed. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but you guys have done an amazing job with the place. I loved the rooftop and how you’ve decorated the walls with sea shells and pictures of South Boston.”

“Well, we had to bring our roots with us, right? You can’t become anyone else even if you leave them behind.”

What was it with these men, how they looked and spoke? How could they take the most ordinary of words and make something so magical out of them?

And, more importantly, why the hell did I want the two of them so badly? Like, I craved them.

“Can I have some water?” I asked, knowing full well that no water would quench this thirst.

DOM

I was a sane person. Honestly. This never happened to me.
Until Selene, that is.

She stood near me, smelling like a summer meadow. In an instant, I realized I had become the worst cliché ever. I literally wanted to make my best pastries for her . . . or just take her to the back of the kitchen and kiss her until she'd be breathless.

And crave for more.

We were in the midst of rush hour, though, so I needed someone to take over for me. Orders were flying in. The air was filled with the sweet-savory-umami marriage of dishes.

“Give me a minute,” I said to Aiden and Selene. I wasn't about to let him have more alone time with her. Pity Niall had to visit one of our patrons today. He had no idea what he was missing out on.

I turned to Pierre, my second-in-command. “Hold down the fort while I catch up with these two, P. You got this,” I said, patting his back. “And try not to let our guests overdose on sodium.”

Pierre was a direct import from France, and while he was a brilliant chef, his fingers loved to be generous with the salt. I didn't mind it—but some of our guests did, and Pierre usually loved getting into trouble. In other words, he refused to admit less salt was better for the heart.

“Aye, these Americans,” he grumbled, taking over my pan and tossing julienned scallions before adding a pinch of sugar

to caramelize them.

“They make big Instagram posts about Heart Attack Grill and stuff themselves with cheese and put sweet sauces on everything savory. But I put some sea salt and no, they want to light my chef’s hat on fire! *Comment est-ce juste?*”

“No, it’s not fair at all,” I responded hurriedly. “You’re the best we have, and we all know it. Come on, now, don’t burn my kitchen with that temper!”

I left him chuckling unwillingly and took Selene and Aiden aside, where we chefs would usually hang out between hectic services with bottles of cold pop. I did not like drinking on duty, but we also kept beer in case we’d had a really tough day and needed to kick back after the last service.

“So, Selene, we all know you’re doing the Netflix show. I can’t tell you how proud I am that a Southie’s painting all of America red!”

Selene smiled, and it was as if her whole face became illuminated. For a second, I thought I could drown in those baby-blue eyes. Heat coursed through me as I pictured her in this very kitchen after hours, pushed against a wall as I touched her.

She had a curvy figure, and she knew how to carry it. I loved that.

Her reddish-gold hair fell in loose waves past her shoulders, and the only makeup on her face was liner and gloss. It should have been criminal to be this gorgeous, but hey, I’d give her a free pass.

My thoughts were spinning like a blender on high, churning up a chemical concoction of desire and jittery nerves.

“Look at you boys,” she said, leaning against a counter, her expression devilishly innocent. “It’s as if y’all have forgotten that you made my life in school hell!”

My heart began pounding like Pierre’s mallet when he was tenderizing a stubborn piece of meat and blabbering about not being allowed to season it enough.

“You should completely blame Aiden for that,” I replied quickly, ignoring the glare I got from him. Hell, I followed his commands back in school, and I refused to take the proverbial fall for that now.

Actually, looking back, all of us had the hots for Selene, even back then. She had no fucking idea how beautiful she became post-puberty.

And there we were, a bunch of gangly boys dealing with acne breakouts, oily skin, and a sudden itch between our damned thighs.

She was the goddess in a sea of plebians, and we hated the kind of pull we felt toward her. Aiden’s response was to treat her like she was a skipping stone.

She replied with an easy laugh. “It’s okay. Honestly, considering what the media has put me through the last couple of years, you guys gave me the unintentional training I needed to survive.”

I had heard morsels of Selene’s story from Ben and gleaned the rest from online platforms and her interviews.

She applied for a scholarship to attend Cordon Bleu’s Paris institution. Ben was sure she’d make it, and he was right. From what I knew, she finished her training there and went on to work in some of the top kitchens across Europe before flying back to her homeland.

In between, she was a food writer for *Epicurean Eats*, one of my favorite culinary magazines of all time.

This work of art featured articles from kitchen notables like Marco Pierre White, Gary Mehigan, Gordon Ramsay, and a few rare pieces from Anthony Bourdain before things went south.

I loved it because of its raw exposés and its depiction of the humanness of kitchen workers, particularly chefs.

That was what Selene brought to the table. I smiled as I quoted one of her articles straight to her. “*Imagine, if you will, a bustling kitchen. It’s akin to a circus, with pots and pans flying through the air. Chefs are like acrobats performing a*

culinary juggling act. On the other end of the kitchen, the tables are pristine and the lighting is artistically poised to whet your palate. You see the carefully crafted dishes and taste the results of the ordered chaos that flourishes inside. Chefs are, after all, superheroes, attempting to bridge the discord between salt and sugar and leave you with just the perfect balance of both.”

“I’ve never had someone quote my writing back to me!” Selene’s reply was almost child-like in its innocent glee. “It makes me feel like a total celebrity.”

A rumble escaped my throat and echoed across the room. “Are you serious? I’m pretty sure we’re catering to a full house at noon only because you are here! I can totally see you prancing out of this kitchen like you’re on a ramp walk and everyone clapping or losing their shit. You deserve every bit of that glory.”

After the success of her work in kitchens and as a food writer, Selene went on to become a consultant and a public speaker and did all sorts of little gigs until she gave her heart and soul to *Pâtisserie du Ciel*.

And then, the Netflix show happened, and she became pretty much the pride of every culinary artist in Boston. The girl was living the dream, and I loved that for her.

I realized I was gawking at her like a horny teenager. From the corner of my left eye, I could totally make out Aiden snickering as he regarded my star-struck expression.

When I spoke next, my voice was unreasonably high-pitched. If this were *Harry Potter* and I were The Fat Lady, I’d be breaking glasses with my pitch.

“Selene, man, you’re making me feel like burnt toast. Charred with all these fucking emotions that I can’t handle.”

Her luminous eyes widened with surprise and her lips curved into an amused grin. She leaned in closer and replied with a slight chuckle in her voice. “Burnt toast, huh? I think I could do better than that.”

“Hey, hey, now,” Aiden said, furrowing his eyebrows at the two of us like a pedantic teacher. “No getting sticky in the kitchen! Wait until after-hours for that!”

All three of us burst into laughter, the mirth swirling in the air like rising steam from a simmering pot.

We were so involved in our conversation that I completely forgot about Pierre, who was in charge of the busy kitchen. He surveyed the array of dishes that needed attention and confidently directed the line cooks.

Then, I heard him shouting at one of them—a barely adult Max. And by barely adult, I meant this boy had an affinity for mischief.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I called out, trying to make sense of the commotion.

It turned out that when Pierre had reached for a saucepan, Max had slyly sneaked up behind him with a can of compressed air.

He then sprayed the compressed air onto his back, creating a loud, startling noise that resembled something that had no business belonging in a kitchen.

Startled and embarrassed, Pierre jumped in surprise, causing the saucepan to slip from his hand and crash to the floor, splattering its contents everywhere.

The entire kitchen froze, the bustling chaos turning into momentary silence. Pierre’s face turned beet red as he sheepishly glanced around at his astonished colleagues. Sauce dripped from the walls, the floor, and even the ceiling, transforming the kitchen into a surreal art installation.

I was drawn by the commotion. I rushed back to the scene. I surveyed the saucy chaos, my face transforming from surprise to a mix of frustration and amusement. Trying and failing to maintain my composure, I finally let out a chuckle, unable to suppress my laughter.

“Ah, Pierre! It seems the saucepan had its own ideas for the evening.” I spoke through my laughter, patting Pierre on the back once again.

“Let’s salvage what we can and turn this around. We’ll be known as the kitchen that defies gravity with our sauces! Selene, on that note, come here. I want you to taste something.”

She came over and gave Pierre a smile that made even the seasoned old chef blush like a schoolgirl. I went to our pastry chef and came back with one of the tarts on our tasting menu.

This was a savory item, topped with a concoction of full-fat cottage cheese, chives, a hint of burnt garlic butter, and crisped bacon. The catch was a burst of finger lime infused into the cottage cheese right in the center. “Try this.”

Selene took a bite of the crust and the topping and made a very gratifying sound that immediately produced another spell of sinful thoughts surrounding a bed and her moaning at other things.

I launched a brief internal monologue with my penis and asked it to shut the fuck up.

“My goodness,” Selene said, licking her fingers. “This is delicious. What order have you placed this dish on?”

“It’s an interlude between the main course and the dessert,” I replied, smiling. “Like a palate cleanser with that hit of citrus. It should help the guests prepare for the toffee pudding we have as the final course on the lunch menu.”

“I love how adventurous you guys are with your menu,” she said, sighing as she looked around her. “I’ve been trying to get more inspiration for some of my desserts, like introducing unconventional flavors. But I feel stuck.”

“Well, I can think of a hundred different ways to get you all unstuck,” I responded, my voice suddenly low.

She returned my reply with a befitting gaze. It was intense, the way she looked at me. Like she too wanted more from this, and if we were alone right now, she’d also let that primal being in her loose, let me taste her—

“I’ll literally have to put a barricade between the two of you, at this rate,” Aiden drawled, his lips curling into a grin. “Seriously.”

There were moments in my life when I felt like a male character being written by a woman.

As I looked at Selene, I saw her cheeks bloom with subtle warmth, like the first blush of a sunrise gracing a summer sky after a prolonged winter.

I realized that was how I wanted her. And it made me feel a different kind of emotion—something steadier, almost protective.

Amid the silence punctuated by calls from the expediter and the clattering of stainless steel and cast iron, an intrusive trill from Selene's phone made her blink. She checked the time, answered the call, and hung up with an apologetic look in her eyes.

“Trust me when I say this—I've had the best time of my life this afternoon. But I gotta go home to my kid because I miss him. Anytime I'm away from him for too long, I feel like I'm near-combusting. But this has been a real pleasure.”

“Did it slap?” Aiden asked, releasing a playful, subdued snicker.

She rolled her eyes. “Damned lingo. I swear, one day, Oliver will be all grown up and he'll talk in a language that I will not understand. That's how I feel around the Zoomers today.”

We accompanied her to the exit, and as I had predicted, the entire restaurant came alive as she walked from the kitchen to the door.

People weren't clapping, but I heard all kinds of excited murmurs, and some even came up for autographs and spoke of their love for her writing and relatability.

Outside, she was surrounded by reporters before we could say our goodbyes.

“Selene, can you give us any details on your divorce with Dave?”

I wanted to punch the paparazzo, but Selene handled it like a fucking champ. With a sly grin and a hint of sarcasm, she

tossed her hair and an appropriate reply back at them.

“You’re really digging for the scoop, aren’t you? My ex and I were like a faulty recipe. Let’s just say you can’t make a trifle pudding with beef mince like Rachel did in *F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* Besides, life is too short to dwell on half-baked relationships.”

Her words hung in the air for a moment before a chorus of laughter erupted from the reporters. “Selene, you always know how to put a spicy spin on things! Can we expect any new flames in your life soon?”

Selene, flashing a mischievous smile, retorted with a playful tone.

“Well, let’s just say I’m more focused on finding my perfect recipe for happiness right now. And who knows? Maybe I’ll stumble upon a secret ingredient that’ll spice things up in the romance department.”

And that was when it happened. Someone said, “Did you know Dave was spotted just outside your home a few days ago, Selene? Are you guys hoping for a reconciliation?”

And Selene’s face just changed. It was suddenly white and pale, and her usually happy eyes became dark. Before we could step in and do anything, she pushed her way out of the crowd and got into her car.

I saw the look she had seconds before the car’s door shut in our faces.

She was afraid.

SELENE

An impending sense of cold dread followed me all the way back home.

Usually, I chatted with Louie, my driver, en route to my penthouse from the kitchens. But what the paparazzi had said left me completely shaken. But I would not lose focus.

If Dave was skulking around my penthouse, that meant he was being driven by some ulterior motive.

I needed to get to the bottom of it before the selfish demons in his heart gave him enough leeway to destroy my life.

On arrival, the first thing I did was concentrate on my son.

I found him in his bedroom, busy with his latest obsession. I entirely blamed my friend and business contact, Renzo Caruso, for this mess.

Caruso was one of my oldest friends from our heyday at Cordon Bleu. He was a steady rock in the perennial shitstorm of drama I kept landing in. Which was funny, considering how I, as a person, honestly loved being drama-free.

Anyway, Caruso and his wife loved Ollie, and on their virgin trip to the States and to Boston, they spent a whole week being charmed by his antics. This included leaving him with a curious penchant for poker.

Ollie tried to teach me, but I just never caught on. I sat down beside him and attempted to be a serious competitor, but

he won the next two rounds easily—and not even because I wanted him to.

I collected the cards to shuffle them. “Seriously, Ollie, when Uncle Caruso came here, I thought he’d get you interested in anything else, just not cards!”

He replied by trying to wink, only, he blinked his eyes instead and followed that up with a feral little smile. “I’m a card shark!”

I wanted to smile and pull him into my arms immediately, but I settled with a leveled “*At this rate, you may well be one in the future*” look instead. The boy had an impossible level of dexterity for an eight-year-old.

“Alright, Mommy, pay close attention. This is the ultimate winning tactic. It’s called *Oliver’s Super Sneaky Shuffle*.”

Oh, my heart. For the next few minutes, he launched into a description on the science of shuffling until I gave up, and he ended up winning the next round as well.

“Here’s me, totally destroyed by your super sneaky shuffle,” I responded, now pulling him close. I inhaled the bubblegum scent of his hair. He was at this phase now where he hadn’t quite begun rejecting the obsessive mom hugs.

I wished it would last forever.

“Can I have a cookie, Mommy? Please?”

I didn’t want to resist the sweetness of his plea or how he pulled at the strings of my heart with nothing except his little grin. But it was almost time for his dinner.

“Just one cookie, okay?” I replied, trying and utterly failing to keep my voice stern. “Only on the condition that you eat all your veggies at dinner.”

He bobbed his head up and down enthusiastically. “Done deal, Mommy. I’ll eat them all, I promise!”

I took him down to the kitchen and handed him a chocolate cookie from the batch I’d baked last night. A twinge of guilt came over me because I knew full well that I spoiled him a bit. But that joy on his face meant the world to me.

He munched on the crumbly confection, bits adorning his chubby cheeks like edible confetti. I picked him up and put him on top of the table, from where he could see me get dinner ready.

Soon, I prepared a plate of colorful veggies with a healthy side of protein. Ollie got down and sat on his chair, and I put the plate in front of him. I knew what was coming, so I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him my best stern voice.

“Alright, young man! Time for your veggies. Let’s see if you can keep your promise.”

He eyed the colors skeptically, and his lips wrinkled at the sight of the poor Brussels sprouts. Although, the way I’d roasted and tossed them in a secret blend of homemade spices wouldn’t make them taste as wet or bland as they usually did. Ollie’s face contorted into a mock frown.

“Aw, Mommy, do I have to eat ‘em all?”

I tilted my head, feigning an injured expression.

“Remember, Ollie, a gentleman never goes back on his promises. Besides, eating your veggies will make you big and strong, and then you can become just like one of your favorite superheroes!”

“Could I become a marine?”

A cold chill ran up my spine, and I wondered how it would feel if my son really grew up and decided to serve. How would I live, knowing he was in the line of fire every day? I gulped. That was a thought for a future time.

“Like the best marine in the whole of the USA!”

His resistance melted away. “Okay, Mommy, I’ll eat ‘em only if you promise to eat with me!”

I reached for a fork, my heart melting into a puddle, and sat next to Oliver.

“Deal! We’ll conquer these veggies together and totally save the day!”

After dinner, I sat with Ollie for a long time until his nanny took over and got him ready for bed.

I went to read to him, kissed his sleepy face goodnight, and as I sat by him, my housekeeper, Alec, told me my guest was downstairs.

“Thank you.” I got up from my seat and planted another kiss on my boy’s forehead before descending the spiraling staircase down to where a man waited for me, his face akin to a rock that had stood still through many, many storms.

His face was entirely passive.

“Have you found anything for me?”

Alex Reynolds, ex-LAPD, and a man with a relentless taste for justice, shook his head worriedly as he handed me some files. “Selene, have you considered changing base?”

I stepped into the balcony and gazed at the overcast sky. It would rain tonight. In the distance, the lapping waves of an endless stretch of water reminded me of how false my purported sense of security was.

“Oliver’s school is in this district. And I’ve put him through enough already. I won’t change homes just because I’m being stalked.”

“This is more than just being stalked,” he replied, his tone still even. “Even with your arsenal, you have had your delicacies stolen from your last home.”

He was right. This was what prompted me to move to the penthouse Ollie and I lived in now. I had fortified it with every last security detail I could put together.

“Did you find out anything about the panty-thief?” I asked instead, not wanting to remember the day he’d told me my missing underwear was no mere coincidence.

CCTV footage had captured stills of a man escaping my apartment after shuffling through my clothes cabinet.

“Not yet,” he replied, casting his eyes away in response to the way I referred to my stalker as a panty-thief. “But this is

not the first time a celebrity has been harassed by crazy fans. The fingerprint analysis was inconclusive.”

I sighed and turned my face away from him. Out on the balcony, I pressed the switch on a remote, and ambient lighting sprang up, breaking through the pitch-black darkness that was rapidly descending on us.

A strong wind was beginning to take hold.

As the lights came on and cast the rooms in a warm, balanced glow, our unmoving shadows sprang against the walls.

“Don’t lose out on hope,” he said. “We can’t give up just yet.”

“I have no intention of giving up,” I replied, my tone biting. I began shivering against the wind. All notions of safety I had built after moving to this penthouse suddenly felt like an illusion.

What if I couldn’t keep my son safe?

I pressed the remote again. The lights went off. I did this a few times, my eyes wandering on the juxtaposition of rich, brown wooden panels cast against the ivory sheen of marbled floors. What good was this fortress if it would not help me protect my son?

“What if something . . .”

I could not bring myself to finish the words. I could not imagine something happening to Ollie because it would finish me. It would be akin to someone pulling my heart out of my throat and making me watch as they ripped it from vein to vein.

“Nothing will happen to your son, Selene.” Reynold’s tone was as gentle as he could make it. Which was saying something, because he was, as they said, Boston’s Slow Killer.

He could be anything you needed him to be, from a gatherer of evidence to a hit man, if situations warranted it.

No wonder he had a resume that was as formidable as the Atlantic on a stormy night.

“I would still suggest moving to another place until things . . . grow calmer.”

“Why should I go?” I almost shouted back at him. “I’ve built my whole life from scratch here!”

“And it is in danger,” he replied, his blandness cutting through my terror like a razor-sharp knife.

“You’re not being very helpful, Reynolds.”

“I would say that is because you have hired me to be realistic, Selene. The list of people who could wish you harm is endless. We cannot begin and end with a definitive set of names because you are worshiped across this country and abroad.”

He sighed. “Do I need to tell you more about what unhinged fans are capable of?”

He really didn’t. I already knew what people could do. I’d seen celebrities get gunned down simply because they believed in a philosophy that did not match that of a fan. Or because they refused to sign an autograph. The world was a ruthless, cruel place.

And amid all of it, I had my sanctuary in Oliver—a little haven of safe, nurturing love. I would do all I could to keep it intact.

“The paparazzi caught hold of me outside a restaurant today.” I finally said what had been going on in the back of my mind all day. “They told me Dave is back in Seaport and was spotted near here.”

Reynolds raised his thick brows. “Last I checked on him, he was only here for a few days. But I will look into this. Are you worried he could try to disrupt the peace of your home?”

“I’m worried he is linked to the stalker . . . or worse. The man was a monster when he was drunk. I wouldn’t put it past him to do something exorbitantly cruel for the sheer pleasure he would get out of it.”

“Very well. I’ll look into this tonight.”

I nodded and pointed to the duffle bag on the table. “Payment for last month’s services. All cash, as discussed.”

His expression did not change, but he gave me a slight smile. “Good night, Selene. As promised, your package is on the table.”

I waited until he was gone before I walked up to the table and sat down beside a sleek thing wrapped in a subtle brown paper.

Growing up where I had, one of the earliest things my brother had taught me to do was defend myself. If I had to kill someone to do so, I would.

This urge was exemplified on the night I almost took a knife to Dave because he said unthinkable things about my son.

Come what may, storm or hail, I would stand like a fucking Goliath between the world’s agonies and Oliver.

I undid the package and felt another tremor course through me as the cool sheen of the metal settled against my balmy, clammy palm, riddled with sweat and nerves.

Compact, slim, and concealable.

I raised the Sig Sauer P365 to my lips.

As Caruso would say, *Vai in guerra per chi ami.*

Go to war for the ones you love.

AIDEN

Dom was on the verge of going up in flames.

I was in the kitchen, watching the boys go at it. My mind was on a lot of things, but most of all, I regretted missing out on a very specific thing I should have done two days back.

It had been troubling me all morning, but right now, I was kinda enjoying watching the back-and-forth between my best friend and his sous-chef.

“I’m telling you, Dominic!” Pierre punctuated his words with a number of obscene flourishes. “That man is impossible. This is the third time he has sent the steak back, yes? Once, it was too well done. Next, not cooked enough. Now, he is saying it looks like it could moo if you stare at it long enough. I tell you, this is an insult to my capabilities. *Vous devez le gronder, oui?* I cannot take it! I will go and cut this piece of meat in front of him and shove it down his throat! I—”

“For the love of all your French ancestors in heaven, Pierre!” Dominic sounded like he just wanted a cold shower and to run away for a bit.

“I understand he is difficult, but such is the line of service. We will make him another steak, okay? And I will personally see to it that he does not leave any bad comments this time.”

Pierre responded with more insults and cooked another filet mignon. Even to me, the amount of waste happening on account of this customer was too much. So, once it was ready, I stepped forward. “Come on, Pierre. Hand the plate to me.”

“Aiden.” Dominic’s tone carried the beginnings of a warning. “You’re not going to go in there and drop the steak on the gentleman’s head.”

I smiled benignly at him. “Now, that happened only once, and it was with cold noodles. The man kept asking for his cold noodles to be hot—what did you expect me to do? I promise, this time, he will praise your cooking skills to all the culinary gods, Pierre.”

Pierre huffed and left the plate on the counter.

Dominic added the finishing touches, and I lifted it with a flourish and pranced out the back door into the dining area in an exaggerated ballet style of walking.

The man sitting at the hallowed table had a gaunt expression on his face.

Honestly, he looked like the type of guy who’d had it up to his balls because he was always getting shouted at by his boss or wife, or kid.

And since he couldn’t take it out on the world, he’d chosen to vent his anger on helpless people in the service industry.

Not cool, but then again, I was a tad quick to assume things. I set the plate down in front of him. “Your steak, sir,” I said, biting into each of my words before tossing them out.

“I do believe this is our third attempt at perfecting your meal, and I hope it is to your satisfaction. However, if it is not, my sincerest apologies to you. Perhaps, in that case, you would do me the humble honor of teaching our chef the proper method of cooking meat! Trudy?” I called out to a server. “Fetch Pierre for me, would you?”

In a minute, Pierre shuffled out from the kitchen, his face a ruddy red. He gave the customer a death stare.

“Now, I have just told our esteemed guest that if he still has a problem with our cooking, he will demonstrate how to fire a steak in front of everyone! We have the open kitchen working, yes?”

He nodded brusquely. “We do.”

The gentleman had turned a very odd shade of purple. “What is the meaning of this? D’you know who I am? One review from me and you would—”

“But sir, how could you fault us for wanting to learn from you?”

He turned an ugly shade of purple like his pinstriped shirt was far too tight for him. He cut into the steak and gave a curt nod. “It is great. Thanks.”

“The pleasure is all ours, sir!”

Turning around, I placed a firm hand on Pierre’s shoulder. This was partly to stop him from picking up the steak knife and poking a hole in the gentleman’s eye.

“It has been handled, Pierre. We do not need to waste more expensive beef or our time on this sad excuse for a human. Come.”

“He is a bad man,” Pierre grumbled.

“And you are *wicked smaht*,” I replied, resorting back to my South Boston way of talking for a second. “You’re the best we have, Pierre. Don’t let the idiots bring you down.”

In this industry, you could never get ahead if you weren’t thinking on your feet. This brought me back to the issue with our supplier—it had been going on for a while now.

It went back to two months ago. Our best friend Niall, who was also the operations manager, walked into my office which was a floor above the restaurant. He had a concerned look on his face.

“Aiden, we need to talk about this new supplier. I’ve heard some unsettling rumors,” he said, taking a seat across from me.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “I know, Niall. That’s why I’ve been knee-deep in research. It turns out they have a history of deceptive practices and subpar product quality.”

Niall’s brows furrowed. “Damn, we can’t afford to compromise on quality. Our customers trust us to deliver the

best. What's our plan?"

"We need to confront the supplier and negotiate a fair agreement," I replied, determined. "I won't let them manipulate us with hidden fees and unfavorable terms."

A few days later, I found myself in a sleek conference room, face-to-face with the supplier's representative, Mr. Rossi.

He exuded confidence, but it was a cunning kind of ease.

Y'know that feeling you get in your balls when someone just looks wrong? Yeah, people call it gut feeling. I preferred to think of it as a testicular reflex.

Mr. Rossi flashed a brilliant smile as he handed me a contract. "Aiden, let's discuss the terms. You won't find a better deal anywhere else."

I scanned the contract, my eyes narrowing at the fine print. "Hidden fees, reduced quality control . . . these terms don't align with our standards," I countered firmly, pushing the contract back across the table.

Mr. Rossi's smile faltered, replaced by a hint of irritation. "Come on, Aiden. Everyone cuts corners. It's just business."

I leaned forward, my voice steely. "Not for us. We've built our reputation on delivering the best to our customers. I won't compromise on that."

Realizing he couldn't sway me easily, Mr. Rossi shifted tactics, attempting to convince me of all I could gain if our restaurant went with him.

But I had gone prepared. I presented a wad of incriminating reports, customer feedback, and legal documents challenging his claims.

The tension in the room grew palpable as Mr. Rossi squirmed in his seat, forced to face the truth. He sighed with a touch of resignation in his voice. "Alright, Aiden. Let's find a middle ground. We can revise the terms and ensure quality assurances."

Relieved that progress was being made, I nodded. “Fair pricing, transparent terms, and stringent quality control. That’s non-negotiable.”

Days turned into weeks as I explored alternative suppliers, leveraging competing offers to strengthen our position. Negotiations became a strategic dance, a battle of wits and numbers.

With Niall and the management team by my side, we brainstormed cost optimization strategies.

We pored over data, considering portion control, menu engineering, and renegotiating contracts with other vendors.

We were determined to find the delicate balance between maintaining quality and maximizing profitability.

As we implemented these strategies, the true test lay in the hands of our customers. Would they notice the changes? Would their feedback reflect our efforts?

We anxiously monitored their reactions. I think I lost out on a week’s worth of sleep.

But as the months passed, our efforts began to bear fruit. Positive feedback trickled in, and our profitability showed signs of improvement.

We still had a very long way to go, but hey, any good progress was worth the effort.

After Dom and I got Pierre back in good spirits, I headed back up to my office. I crossed the polished wooden desk and the leather chair to stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows framing a panoramic view of the ocean.

Normally, the office would be flooded with natural light. I liked to surround myself with the sun’s golden warmth as much as I could.

Too much time in the darkness, and I’d retreat to a place I didn’t want to face. I didn’t want to think of the past right now.

Instead, I focused on scrolling through Selene’s Instagram profile and cursing myself once again for not taking her number.

“Fuck it,” I muttered before leaving her a message. It probably made me look like one of those dicks trying their luck on a verified celebrity’s DMs. Maybe she’d see it.

Or maybe a dragon would come and light my ass on fire. The latter seemed more probable.

The *ding* of a notification caught me completely unaware, and I almost dropped my phone. It was her.

She’d responded to my bland “*hey*” with a tentative *hi*.

My fingers worked at breakneck speed, bringing back fond memories of when I was a teenager.

What are you doing right now?

Selene: I’m at the pastry shop. Full house today.

Me: When do you get off from work?

Selene: Why, what d’you have in mind? Looking for more ways to convince me you’re a reformed bully?

I chuckled at that.

Me: How about I come over and show you?

The seconds dial on my watch ticked furiously. Time seemed to slow down and open a chasm.

Selene: Drop in at eleven. I’ll go home, put my kid to bed, and come back. Could do with picking that lawyer’s brain tonight.

A window had opened.

SELENE

I spent an entire night dreaming about my ex coming to steal my son away from me.

By the time morning rolled in, all I could think about was how angry it made me feel. This rage followed me, from making breakfast to taking Ollie to school to work.

Ollie and Chloe did their best to cheer me up, but it was just one of those days. You know, the kind when you wake up, and your body is just screaming at you, saying, “Girl, stop. Even the biggest creatives need time off.”

But the idea of not doing anything was scarier. I wondered how people could just have an off-day of lounging around, visiting the spa, or sitting for hours on end without worrying about falling behind.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd even had a facial or a mani-pedi without thinking that shit took way too much time.

To compensate, I told Chloe I'd do it at home—slap a face pack on and work while it dried. Chloe's response involved a jet of profanities and something about cucumbers. I think she wanted to stress that if I could, I'd just cut up cucumbers and put them on my face while cooking to save time.

A.K.A. avoid self-care.

It wasn't that I didn't take care of myself. I loved long showers. I loved appearing clean, collected, and precise. My outfits were always tailored to the bigger reasons behind wearing them.

When I'd head to a set, it was a power suit or a pencil skirt with a pastel shirt. For a night out, a cocktail dress. But I chose to look at all of it as a way to weaponize myself, not to feel good. Maybe that needed to change.

The bigger reason this was bothering me right now was that I'd called Aiden over because I wanted to give him a chance.

I already knew the possibility of something long-term here was as slim as a lactose-intolerant person not choosing harm by drinking a thick, delicious mango lassi at an Indian restaurant.

Maybe that lactose intolerant someone was me, calling Chloe up and crying about how unfair life was at one in the morning because I was severely dehydrated from all the bathroom visits that followed one glass of dairy. I'd do it again, though.

Now, coming back to the topic of Aiden. We were an hour away from closing the pastry shop—and Chloe looked like she had no intention of leaving until I gave her the truth.

“You have to tell me,” she insisted, a wicked little smile on her lips. “Are you calling him over just because, or *because* because?”

I wanted to whack her with the spatula in my hand. But then again, she'd probably dodge like a bloody Olympian and cover me in flour.

“I'm calling him over because I want to see where it goes.”

“Girl, you know neither of you is lookin' for something serious. And that's fine—I think it's high time you just have some fun, no strings attached. But I wanna know, what prompted you? Because nothing Selene does is by chance, right?”

I cast a long, withering look at her. “What if it is? What if this is the reason, Chlo? I—okay, look. Remember the producer of *ChefTalk*?”

Chloe wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I ain't forgetting him all that easily. What about him?”

Caleb Mercer. I personally thought another name suited him better—Asshole Mega-Asshole. He was a hotshot producer who worked exclusively producing films and documentaries on self-made chefs and workers in the food industry.

Back when I was catapulting to fame—there, but not quite—he wanted to sign a contract with me. An exclusive documentary on the life of Selene Baker, a rising prodigy from a forgotten part of South Boston.

On the face of it, things sounded interesting enough. I'd be talking about my background, and part of the documentary would show the Boston I grew up in. This involved drug trafficking, the way we lived in rowhouses, and corruption.

And then, it would show how I went on to make waves in Paris and other parts of Europe and Asia before returning to my roots.

When I went to meet him, I was likely the most excited twenty-five-year-old in the world. This could have been huge.

But in his office, sitting on that stupid plush chair and smoking his ridiculously fat cigar, he'd taken a look at me and said, "Look, Selene, you're pretty, but not sexy. We need you to lose some weight before you can do the documentary. Or, we could hire someone to play your part. But if you do it, drop those pounds, honey. The audience will lap you up."

The joke was on him because the world lapped me up anyway, plus-size, with freckles and unconventional hair and a tongue that could drip acid sometimes. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Even if I wasn't high on self-care, I would not stand for someone bringing me down or telling me a certain way of existing was better based on pure sex appeal.

"You did the right thing by throwing the contract in his big, stupid face, Selene. I would have probably torn it to pieces and made him eat it."

"You would. I think you would have gone a step ahead and also beaten him with the file before tearing it and feeding it to

him.”

Chloe laughed. “Yeah. So, is this why you’re taking a chance on Aiden? Because you don’t want to judge him before you . . . test him?” She winked at the end, playing on “test” as if it was the same as “taste”.

I replied with an amused snort. “That’s about it. And you’re right about the rest too. Last I spoke with him, he made it pretty clear that he’s not looking for anything serious. Neither am I. In fact, the only serious relationship I need or want right now is with Oliver.”

That was a gross mistake, and Chloe made a dramatic gesture and sound as if someone had thrown a sack of rice at her. “Ma’am,” she replied, rolling her eyes for added effect, “I am so shocked, so hurt—”

“And you,” I replied hastily, knowing I was about to get it. “Of course, you!”

“Don’t be telling me that now, that’s just a consolation prize,” she replied, sniffing. “Hmph. I gotta go home and drink myself to sleep.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said, giggling. I pulled her to me and enveloped her in a tight hug. Honestly, my world was incomplete without Chloe.

“You’re doing the right thing,” she murmured. “Just be careful, okay?”

Just as she finished speaking, there was a knock on the kitchen’s back door. I had told Aiden to come to the rear exit to avoid being seen unless he wanted his face splashed over all the papers tomorrow.

He came inside and saw us hugging and immediately said something snarky about a threesome and his fondness for sandwiches before Chloe looked daggers at him. That made him shut up very, very quickly.

“You two have fun, but y’know—don’t get too frisky with the new supplies.” She chuckled before packing up. “See you in the morning, Selene.”

“See you, Chlo.”

I waited until the door closed and locked up after her. I’d leave from the back exit as well. Aiden helped me clean up. As we worked on arranging everything, we chatted.

It was like the years between us had never existed and he was someone I’d known all my life—the butterflies and my body’s electric responses to him not included. I wondered if he could tell how he made me feel.

“Ben came to our restaurant for lunch today,” he said, washing a saucer while I checked on the supplies for tomorrow’s new launches. “Brought that prissy wife of his along. I think she hates that he hangs out with us.”

I grinned. “Maybe it’s not her fault. Ben would literally spend all his free time with the three of you if he could. How is that supposed to make her feel?”

“All of us know she’s a piece of work, Sel,” he replied, turning around and leaning against the sink. From where I stood, I could see the veins running on his muscled arms and how his skin shone under the yellow lighting. He was fucking beautiful.

Suddenly, I couldn’t think of anything else beyond how much I wanted him. My breath hitched. In a very primal way, my body responded to the raw magnetism emanating from him. Heat surged in me, and I was acutely aware of the pulsating pull of his body, calling me to him.

“Well, well, well,” he said, his eyes lingering on my mouth. “It seems we may be feeling the same things.”

I didn’t know about him, but all I could focus on was every tight sinew of his body. His chiseled chest, covered only by the thin cotton of the shirt he wore, rose and fell with every controlled breath.

My gaze traveled lower. My eyes hungrily devoured the sculpt of his hips. And then, to my—was it horror or delight—he proceeded to unbutton his shirt.

“What—”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head. I did not. Shirtless Aiden Brown was a much better companion than his clothed counterpart. He took it off and set it aside.

My breath caught in my throat as I hungrily looked at the sculpted ridges of his abdomen, the thin line leading down and disappearing below.

Each vein was like a river of desire, tracing intricate pathways on his bronze skin.

He moved toward me, one slow step at a time, and I found it impossible to think. When he was close enough, I was the one who pulled him in. My mouth reached for his, hungry for more.

Our lips met in a frenzied kiss that began slow and hot, and soon, he had me pushed against a wall as his tongue parted my willing mouth, seeking more, demanding more.

My hands traveled up to his thick, abundant hair. I tangled my fingers in them as he broke the kiss to hold me captive with his smoldering eyes. I saw it, how he burned for me, and I felt the same way. I could almost taste the passion beneath the surface, feel its salty, slick tongue on my naked skin.

“Selene.” His voice was rough and breathless, his hands on my apron, undoing every fastening as quickly as he could. “I have wanted you for so long. All I have thought about this last week is you, the taste of your mouth, the heat of your skin. I would have you, Selene. I would have you or pursue you until you—”

“Hush,” I replied, not needing any further admission save the way his lips laid claim on me. “In this moment, you have me.”

I couldn't wait to do more. I wanted to unbutton his trousers and hold his erection in my hands. Few things rivaled the satisfaction of seeing someone you craved respond to you the way he was.

And the game. I had no idea what I was missing.

“This game had better be good,” I said, teasing him. His chuckle, low and honeyed, echoed through the room. He undid a single button on my shirt and grazed my lips with his.

“I know a good lawyer in case you feel like tonight doesn’t live up to your expectations. We can totally sue me,” he whispered into my ear before darting that sinful tongue of his across my earlobe.

I shivered and let out a tiny moan, immediately digging my nails into his skin. He responded with a satisfied growl, gratified with how I reacted to him.

I completely expected him to finish undressing me. Instead, he picked me up so my legs straddled his hips and carried me to one of our countertops. “You gotta help a man out,” he said, his tone gravelly. “Where do you keep the champagne?”

I chuckled and pointed to the wine storage. He turned his back to me and strutted there like a proper male stripper or an underwear model. This man would be a glorious lover. He liked to take his time. *Player.*

He came back with a bottle of Château Margaux and two glasses. We toasted to each other, and while he took a sip, his eyes never left mine. I was already dripping down there.

All I could think about was my mouth on his taut chest, my hands on his cock, and him calling out my name while fucking me senseless. This man made me want to become an animal, and I enjoyed it.

“I wonder how you’d taste if I paired you with the wine,” he said. Leaning in, he kissed me while the wine was still in our mouths.

All at once, the velvety texture of the Margaux and its spice profiles was amplified by the subtle tang of our tongues. I bit on his lightly, making him groan. His fingers were on my buttons, undoing every last one until my shirt was off.

The skirt went after that, lying in a forgotten heap on the floor. I undid his trousers and boxers, and he stepped out of them.

My God, his cock. I'd never seen something this big and thick and pulsating with raw desire. I'd done that to him. I grinned.

"Wow," I said, my tone slightly edgy.

"Wow yourself," he replied before lowering his mouth and biting down on my neck.

This was going to be a night for the ages.

AIDEN

She smiled at me with that full mouth, and her eyes lit up before I leaned down to bite her swan-like neck.

Her moan was instantaneous.

It was cute.

She was beautiful.

I undid her bra and tossed it aside. Every inch of her, soft and curvy and glowing, invited, teased, and tormented me.

And I was going to enjoy every second of tonight pursuing, hearing, and watching her while I fucked her.

“We had a customer who canceled an order today,” she said between kisses. Momentarily distracted, I lifted my head to look at her.

“I’ll be back.” She hopped off the counter and sauntered over to one of her freezers.

She opened it, leaning down so her rounded ass curved out seductively. I could almost picture entering her just like that.

“Found it,” she murmured. She turned around with a rich chocolate mousse cake in her hands. The top was a layer of intricately designed white frosting. I immediately knew what her plans were.

“Be a shame to waste that beauty,” I said. My mind conjured images of lathering her plump, deliciously full breasts with the buttercream frosting and licking her clean.

“Who said we’ll be wasting it? Let’s see how much we end up eating,” she replied, her eyes gleaming mischievously.

She set the cake down on the counter before cutting a slice. She took a bite and offered it to me. Before I could follow, she smeared the piece on my bare chest and proceeded to lean in and lick me like I was milk and she was a very hungry cat.

A groan escaped my mouth as she left tiny bites in between longer licks. I was going crazy. I picked her back up and put her on the counter again, this time laying her down so her legs came around my thighs.

“Let’s see how good your desserts are, Selene,” I muttered hoarsely before taking the frosting off the cake and lathering every inch of her body that I could with it.

I covered her full breasts, that deliciously curving belly, and her long belly button, and traced a line of cream down to where her panties began.

I leaned down. “Dessert always goes to the heart,” I said, a burst of low laughter escaping my throat before I began taking my time licking her up.

I swirled my tongue around and over her nipples and in between, taking time to move it up and down the valley that separated her soft, giving mounds. She tasted so good, so sweet.

“Oh, my God, Aiden,” she moaned in response, her body writhing in ecstasy. With my hands, I held hers over her head, pinning her down while I focused on her neck and ears.

I drew my tongue across her earlobes, licking in and around the edges and taking immense satisfaction in how hard she cried for more.

Her legs began pulling me closer so my cock touched the exterior of her panties. I could feel her wetness even like that.

Letting go of her hands, I traveled down to her navel and licked her belly, dipping my tongue into her navel and lapping up every last inch of the creamy frosting.

“Fuck,” I growled, continuing my descent until I reached the lace lining of her underwear. Using my teeth, I pulled it down partly, inhaling the scent of her. She writhed in response.

“Oh, please,” she pleaded.

“Not so soon,” I replied, taking my time to peel her panties off, inch by inch until they were past her knees. Struck with an idea, I took them and fastened her hands over her head with them.

There she lay, the girl I’d fantasized half my teenage life about, in all her naked glory.

I moved up again and leaned to close in on her left nipple. Incited by her moans, I sucked her stiff, aching nipple into my mouth, running my tongue back and forth to get every last remaining drop of cream. Then, I bit down and began tugging at it.

My hands traveled down and raised her up so they could rest between the countertop and the curve of her ass cheeks.

I squeezed and pinched each of them. In response, I saw her clench her hands tightly. Her eyes rolled back into her head as she mewled.

“Oh, my God, yes!” As I sucked and bit her nipple, I raised my right hand to grab her other tit and lifted it up, stretching the nipple as far as I could.

She couldn’t hold back, and she let a deep, primal moan escape. This encouraged me to suck her harder. I let go of her ass and slid my hand between her legs, relishing the warmth pooling there. I stroked the soft skin of her thighs before sliding my fingers over her pussy.

I began stroking her feverishly.

“Oh, fuck, Aiden! Yes, don’t stop!” She cried out as my index finger slid between the folds of her womanhood and began rubbing.

I increased the speed of my strokes, almost making her sob as my middle finger joined the index, spearing deeper into her folds, thrusting in and spreading her wide. My thumb found

her sweet spot and began rubbing vigorously while I finger fucked her.

“Do you like this, Selene?” I asked. “Do you enjoy being tied up and touched and fondled?” My voice was low and hoarse. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Oh, God, no, please.”

I didn't need to hear any more.

Moving up, I kissed her mouth once again, strong and fierce. My tongue slid between her lips as she moaned around it. It met her tongue and ran across her teeth before I caught hold of her bottom lip and tugged on it.

She shivered and groaned against the kiss as my fingers continued sliding into her wet, open pussy, thrusting in and out, stuffing her. She mewled and cried.

The heat was building faster. I could feel her legs trembling. Her stomach quivered, and she let out a tiny grunt. My thumb on her clit went into a frenzied motion. I stroked the swollen nub hard and pressed down on it.

“Fuck, yes!” she shrieked and started to come, hard and fast. She cried out and trembled as her body shuddered through the climax. “Please, Aiden, I need you to fuck me already!”

“Since you asked so nicely,” I murmured. Her legs wrapped around me and pulled, and my cock thrust into her welcoming body.

Her inside muscles immediately started squeezing and milking my manhood.

I groaned in pleasure and leaned down to kiss her hard as I thrust into her, ramming my cock harder because of how perfectly wet and tight she felt. She clamped her pussy around me as I thrust in and out, settling into a rhythm of lust.

“Just like that,” she moaned, her legs pulling on my hips. I thrust in time with the pressure of her ankles on my ass. The head of my cock rubbed against her G-spot, making her cry out in pleasure.

She maneuvered herself so her torso raised up. “Please untie me, I need to . . .”

I undid the panties and freed her hands. She raised them and snaked them around my back. Her nails dug into my bare skin as she pulled me into her.

We fucked like this for a while before I realized I wanted more. “Wait,” I murmured before pulling out.

I lay back on the counter this time. She climbed on top of me. I slid my hands around her waist and pulled her down onto my rod. It slid easily into her wet, open folds. She grunted in response, feeling my thick, hard organ fill her up.

Reaching up, I grabbed her breasts and squeezed them hard, holding her upright as she straddled and gyrated on my cock. Her hair, loose and without any restraints, fell past her shoulders.

Her face was bathed in warm sweat and the glow of the room and our actions.

I pushed my engorged cock harder into her as she pulsed around it, moving back and forth in rhythm to my up and down motions.

I wasn't done. Without warning, I swung her up and carried her, my cock still impaled in her pussy, until I had pushed her against a wall. “Aiden,” she cried out as I lifted her right leg to get better leverage, my thrusts wilder.

“Tell me what you want. What you need.”

I smacked her ass, eliciting another hard moan as I kept fucking her. Her mouth was slightly open now. She had begun panting. “Answer me.”

“Fuck me harder, just keep fucking me!”

With all those years of pent-up desire, I slammed into her.

Her body braced for impact as I claimed her, again and again. Her back arched in response, and I felt her quiver and come all around my cock. She screamed and clung to me as her orgasm rippled through her body, claiming complete and total hold of her.

“Oh, my heavens,” she said, her words interspersed with rough breaths. “I—”

“Who said we’re done?” I asked her, my lips curling. Taking her hands, I led her to a table and propped her up there before kneeling in front of her.

I had wanted to taste her pussy for a long, long time.

SELENE

I felt oddly vulnerable, but in the best way possible.

He was bent at his knees, his face so close to my wet folds that I could feel his breathing on the tenderest part of me.

It was something else, watching the boy I'd dedicated my first-ever poem to on the verge of going down on me.

I giggled.

"Humor me too," he responded.

I raised my back up by putting support on my arms and smiled at him. "I always wondered what it would feel like to watch my bullies go on their knees."

"And now?" he asked, his tone playful.

"I guess we're about to find out."

He timed his first lick with the last word I said, and I immediately followed with a gasp. I let my arms loose and my back arched upon the table as his tongue moved with deft ease, licking back and forth, his pace deliciously slow.

Suddenly, I felt cold—like his mouth was ice on the contrasting heat emanating from my pussy.

"What—"

"I thought it'd be fun to try something with a mint," he replied before diving in. And oh, God, it was something else. The juxtaposition of his cold tongue against my warmth drove me to the edge almost immediately.

He increased his pace, and while he licked me, one of his fingers entered my pussy.

“Oh, yes!”

He growled in response, flicking his tongue ferociously on my sweet spot as another finger joined his first. I arched my back up again and reached out to hold his head between my hands, pushing his tongue down. He responded by driving it in. My juices were in free fall, coating my opening, and he licked every last drop, savoring me like I was his final meal.

“Fuck, Aiden!” I groaned. “You—”

“You taste fucking delicious,” he said, cutting me off before flicking my clit.

His tongue drove into me with manic intensity, and he tilted the front of it back and down so it curved and enveloped me. I began shivering, knowing I was very, very close to my third orgasm. I’d never thought this could be possible.

I closed my eyes in ecstasy as his hands pried my legs further apart so he could stick his tongue deeper into my body.

“Mmm, yes! That feels so good!” I moaned louder and grabbed his hair hard, holding his head on my pussy. He slowly worked up and down and inside before centering on my clit once more. “Just there, Aiden!”

“Yeah?” he asked, his tone almost menacing. “You like it just there?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

He responded with a long lick just at the spot before nipping down on it with his teeth. I exploded then and there, my orgasm shattering through me.

He had to hold my legs to keep me from caving as I came, my body’s quivers in tandem with the tiny moans escaping my lips.

Emerging victorious, he gave me a smile. I turned on my back so my ass was now facing him. “I need you inside me,” I said, going on my hands and knees. “Please!”

I felt his cock against my opening, thick and stiff. Inch by inch, he entered my folds, making me gasp at how big he was and how he stretched me. Once he was all in, I took a second to breathe before I felt him beginning to move once again.

“Oh, my God, yes.” I raised my head up and felt his hand grab my hair into a ponytail and pull it back as his thrusts gained traction. He plunged in and out of my pussy, and the only sounds that matched the wet thrusts were my own cries and his grunts in response.

His pace was relentless.

“You like that, Selene? You like being my dirty little girl?”

“Oh, yes,” I moaned out. “Yes, please! I love being your dirty little girl!”

“Then take this,” he growled, slamming into me and slapping my ass at the same time. “And this!”

“YES!”

His thrusts were so fast and hard that I could feel the table tremble. His groans were becoming rougher too—a sign that he was also nearing the edge.

My mouth was open by now, and I had completely surrendered to him. His cock impaled me, taking every last breath out of my body as he fucked me again and again. This man was a beast.

“I’m nearing—”

“I want you to finish in me,” I cried out, almost incoherently.

“Are you sure? I—”

“Yes!” I replied, thrusting back to meet his arching pushes into my pussy. “I can’t get pregnant. Come inside me, Aiden!”

His breathing was becoming ragged. His cock moved faster, plunging into me like he was in pursuit of some treasure. I felt myself spasm around it, knowing I was about to come a fourth time.

“Fuck me!” I cried out.

“Selene!” he responded, beginning to shake. I felt hot streams of his ejaculation enter me as his cock throbbed inside my pussy, filling me with his seed.

I moaned and climaxed in response. He leaned forward and held on to my waist as he kept unloading in me until he finally took a deep breath.

He planted a gentle kiss on each of my Venus’s dimples before pulling out and turning me around. “That was . . .”

Lightning and fireworks, I wanted to say. Everything I’d dreamed about, and then some.

“Chocolatey?” I responded instead, alluding to the mousse cake that we’d done sinful things with. “What the hell am I going to do with the rest of the cake?”

My stomach rumbled as I finished speaking. Aiden sat down beside me and handed me a fork. “After the workout we’ve just had, we deserve a good meal. By the way, your desserts are truly otherworldly. If we lived in the age of werewolves, even the Moon Goddess would be visiting you for your baked stuff once a month.”

“There’s an idea,” I replied, taking a mouthful of the dark-chocolate goodness. “I’d totally give her a special discount.”

“And me?”

“You just got the discount of the century.”

That made him laugh, and we fell into an easy, companionable silence.

“So . . . about the pregnancy bit.”

“Oh,” I said, shrugging. “That was nothing. After Oliver, my doctor pretty much told me I’d never have another kid. It was an ectopic pregnancy. I . . .”

I let the words trail off. This wasn’t something I really talked about, and even now, the mere mention of the words made my eyes sting.

A year ago, a paparazzo asked me a question that would haunt me forever. He had also been the only pap I’d been

horrendously rude to.

“If you have another kid, who will you love more, Selene? Do you think it’s true what they say about firstborns? That you’ll always love him most?”

My response involved telling him to shut up and take his stupidity somewhere else. Because to me, I could never imagine having two kids and not loving both of them just as hard.

What good was love if I’d have to divide it into portions? We weren’t designed to feel it in quantities—I couldn’t love Ollie fifty-one percent and another kid forty-nine.

I’d love both of them a hundred fucking percent each. But that wasn’t a possibility.

I told Aiden the story, and he listened to me intently before wrapping an arm around me. “Reporters are assholes. Most of them don’t even think before throwing questions at you. But then again, Selene, not everyone needs to know or understand who you are from within. Not everyone needs to get that you’re made of sacrifice, and that involves the deepest kind of love which doesn’t seek to quantify itself.”

I rubbed my eyes to keep the tears from falling and sighed. “You’re right. I let life get to me sometimes, but honestly, Ollie is worth every fucking thing.”

“Someday, I’d love to come meet him. I remember him from Ben’s wedding. Takes after you. He’s going to be a complete heartbreaker someday.”

“I’ll make sure to beat him with a bat if he tries to be a perv,” I replied, laughing. “There’s an unusual thought for a mom.”

“It’d be a better world if more parents thought that way, so no, you’re good.” He leaned in to kiss the side of my head and pushed an errant lock of red hair behind my ear.

“Plus, you’re like the prettiest person in the entire bloody world, so I’m only half-listening to you.”

“What’s the other half of you doing?”

“Thinking of how stellar tonight was and wondering what the hell I did to deserve it.”

I chuckled. “I guess you showed up at the right time.”

He placed a hand over his heart and gave me a mock sigh. “And here I was, thinking it was all because of my rippling muscles and searing smile.”

“That too,” I replied, laughing.

He took my left hand and ran his eyes over a tattoo near the wrist. It depicted a wrist holding on to a blooming vine.

“Ascension,” I said in response to his unasked question as he traced the skin over the tattoo. “My idea was that no matter where you are or how life is treating you, the basic instinct of each human being is to push forward. It is a good instinct.”

He nodded. “Worth holding on to.”

I sighed. “We should be getting home, Aiden.”

“We should.”

I turned my face to the side so I could look at him. He smiled and tilted my chin, leaving a lingering kiss on my mouth.

Chloe had told me to be careful. And we were. There was nothing between the lines here. I knew he wasn't in it for the long haul, and neither was I, because what was the long haul, anyway?

How would I know it wouldn't fizzle out and end the way it had with Dave? Who knew anything when it came to the future, except that each moment was infinitely precious and deserved to be lived as we had tonight?

“I'm going to dream about you tonight,” he said as he hopped down. We got dressed slowly.

“That makes you sound like you're fourteen again,” I replied snarkily.

He laughed. “Who knew, Selene Baker?” He hugged me before taking the exit first. “Come over to Harvest and Hearth tomorrow?”

“I will. I missed out on meeting Niall last time.”

“You’re going to love him,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Almost as much as you loved Dom.”

“Oh, you’re the worst,” I replied, laughing. “Just checking—did that feel weird? Me—”

“No,” he replied. “I don’t think there’s anything weird about sharing. It’s always hotter when it’s between friends.”

With that sexual-promise-loaded riddle hanging in the air, Aiden went out the back exit. I followed half an hour later, making sure everything was clean and that my staff wouldn’t have a collective heart attack after coming to work tomorrow.

The car was waiting for me. I closed up around one. I checked my phone to make sure Ollie was okay. The nanny had messaged saying he was fast asleep. And then, I leaned back in the car and closed my eyes.

Aiden had pretty much said he wanted me to explore.

The other part of the riddle . . .

Did that involve exploring with Dom and Niall?

NIALL

Words are the most powerful things in the entire world.

Of course, you could counter me by saying there are other, more immovable things that signify status.

A country could be deemed developed based on its penchant and prowess in education, economy, lifestyle, and trading systems. But to me, all of this came second to the human mind's ability to attach emotions to language and phonetics.

So, when the retired United States general spoke about his mother crying during beer commercials, I could relate to it.

He prefaced this by stating that the Irish are very emotionally moved. See, I got that. I got that because when I felt something, I felt it with my whole fucking heart.

My memories of my mother were as warm as a gentle summer day. I leaned on them as one would on the reminiscences of buttery yellow sunshine if they were to live in a land where a night lasted six months.

Regions in the far north actually experienced this.

In particular, I recalled some of her phrases most of all. She was an unusual woman.

She chose to maintain her brogue accent even though we were generations ahead of our ancestors who came to the Port of Boston during the Great Irish Famine.

Growing up in South Boston, I wanted to be Americanized as soon as possible. She, on the other hand, would always remind me that my blood and roots belonged somewhere else.

“Remember, Niall. The immigrant’s heart follows two different rhythms. One belongs to the old homeland, and the other to the new. You have to bridge the two worlds so you can live comfortably in the new while also holding on to the best of the old.”

Ironically, though, most of my people had lost touch with their Irish ways of living in a more nuanced sense.

By 1850, we had become the largest ethnic group in Boston. Most Irish immigrants of this time were poor, unskilled laborers from rural backgrounds. They settled in the slums of Fort Hill, the North End, and the South Cove.

My ancestors were not just destitute. They were also weakened by typhus contracted on the coffin ships that brought them to the golden land where opportunities would apparently grant them a new lease on life.

Many of them were sent to a quarantine hospital and almshouse on Deer Island. Hundreds died, only to be buried in unmarked graves. In 1849, a cholera epidemic ravaged Boston.

Over five hundred Irish were killed.

The health inspectors in the city described the slums the Irish lived in as a hive of human beings, existing without comforts and common necessities. They thought my ancestors huddled together like brutes with little regard for age, sex, or decency.

It was under these circumstances that my great-great-grandmother, Kathleen O’Toole, like many of the Irish women of her time, found work as a domestic servant.

From there, she met, fell in love, and built a home with Mike O’Toole, a laborer who helped build the business district behind Faneuil Hall.

Boston during the 1860s was marked by stark class divisions and social inequality.

But even amid the struggles, Irish Americans survived because of our shared cultural identities and rich traditions.

The West End community gathered in local establishments, which eventually became social hubs where they could share stories, enjoy live music, and revel in spirited tunes and traditional melodies.

My great-great grandparents settled in a small, modest tenement apartment in the West End.

The smell of the apartment still lingered in the recesses of my mind, as did the faded wallpapers and pictures of nameless people. My mother insisted each of them was important because they crossed the oceans in search of a better life.

On one such evening, I sat with my grandmother, Mary, in the kitchen by a worn wooden table. The scent of freshly baked soda bread mingled with the faint warm tint of peat burning in nearby fireplaces.

Among the other dishes on the table, one item would *always* comprise potatoes. On most days, it was a simple mash.

When there was a special occasion, my mom or my grandmother would roast potatoes in their skins with home-churned butter, salt, and pepper. Even today, this is the sole meal I turn to on days I need to remember where I came from.

Like other evenings, my grandmother would eat and share stories. Most of them were about the community she grew up in.

“One day,” she’d say, her voice raspy and gentle, “you will see that the world is a better place because people have their traditions to go back to. Without those, you become like a tree with no roots. People who break from traditions necessarily make their own.”

I was too young to understand most of what she said, but I remembered the vivid recollections of music, dance, and storytelling.

She loved talking about *ceilidhs*, festive gatherings where friends and neighbors would come together to share tales of

the homeland, recite poetry, and sing songs.

In time, that kitchen became a microcosm of more than food or the intermingling of cultures. The flickering gaslight would cast our shadows on the worn walls.

My shadow would follow me around forever, mold my spirit, and transform the way I looked at food.

My thoughts were momentarily disturbed by Dominic throwing a kitchen towel in my direction. “I thought you came here to look at the menu, but for the last hour, all you’ve done is stare at that bloody wall. What’s up?”

I tossed the towel back at him, and he caught it with a fielder’s ease, grinning from ear to ear as he did so. “You’re still cut up that you didn’t get to meet Selene, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” I grumbled. “You could have totally told me she’d come, and I’d have left work immediately.”

Normally, work meant being in the office right next to Aiden’s on the top floor of Harvest and Hearth. But on that day, I had to go give training to a group of new front-of-house operatives.

We had come a long way from our humble beginnings. After graduating from high school, I went on to study further and work in kitchens.

Over the years and with experience, I ventured into restaurant management.

This was also when Aiden and Dominic approached me about opening our own venture, and lo and behold, here we were today.

Touch all the wood in the world, Harvest and Hearth was doing monumentally well.

I was responsible for curating the menu, ensuring compliance with health and safety regulations, engaging with customers, and everything related to management.

On days when my mind refused to settle down, I liked to be in the kitchen, trying to get inspiration for new menu items.

This entire morning, I'd been struggling with one thing—how to introduce unconventional flavors into a celeriac mash and what to pair it with.

“Take an off day,” Dom advised, turning his back to me as he worked on his signature dish. “You can mash your ideas tomorrow.”

“I'm not mashing my ideas,” I replied sagely. “You'll see. It's going to be the most delicious, silkiest—”

“Niall?”

Annoyed at being cut off in the middle of describing everything I hoped the damned mash would be, I scowled heavily at Harvey, one of the newest bussers in our restaurant. Good kid, but a bit terrified of the chaos that usually characterized kitchens.

“You just had to interrupt a genius on the verge of his next great discovery.”

His face immediately transformed into looking like he was a lost puppy with frightened eyes.

I sighed and immediately retraced my steps. “Only kidding, Harv. You need to stop taking everything I say so seriously. What is it?”

“We have a new guest. Sandy told me to tell you.”

“So, ask Sandy to get them seated and show them the menu and ask them what they'd like to drink—what's so difficult about that?” I asked him, frowning slightly.

“No, it's that lady. Selene.”

A clatter behind me told me Dominic had also heard Harvey and responded in the most Dominic-way possible. But this was my opportunity. “Don't you dare,” I snarled at him. “You had your shot last time. I get to go say hello first today!”

Look at us, my logical mind taunted me. Behaving like a bunch of rowdy teenagers calling dibs on their favorite girl.

Dominic raised his hands. “Okay, okay. I'm too busy, anyway. Go make your move.”

Chuckling slightly, I hopped down from the counter and headed through the back doors and into the main dining area. There she was, sitting at a corner table, a sweet smile on her lips.

Man, she was so beautiful. Like Aiden and Dominic, I'd had the hots for her for as long as I could remember. But we were assholes in school, and like my best friends, I kind of grew up thinking girls were enemy territory.

She had been on my mind since the day of Ben's wedding. As I approached her, the playful tilt on her lips grew wider. This girl knew she was pulling at my heartstrings.

For a celebrity, she was dressed simply—jeans, a shirt, hair loose, freckles free, and a dash of gloss and eyeliner to amplify what she already had. She was beautiful, in the most endearing sense of the word.

I sat down beside her. "Can I tell you I was totally heartbroken when the boys said you'd come over to Harvest and Hearth when I wasn't here?"

She laughed in response. I liked how her eyes and face lit up when she was amused. I liked a lot about her, actually.

"Straight to the chase. Well, here I am, making up for it. I had some time between work today, so I thought I'd come in and get a taste of your seasonal menu."

The new menu I was curating had almost come together, except for the damn mash. "Would you like to try the different dishes we're launching tomorrow? It's all experimental right now but nothing I wouldn't do for a special guest." I punctuated the last bit with an aggressive wink and then thought it probably made me look stupid.

She took it as gracefully as I'd expected and responded with a happy, "I'm game."

I almost ran back to the kitchen like my pants were on fire and only Dominic would be able to put it out. He took one look at my distressed face. "What did you do?"

"I may have told Selene that she can try out tomorrow's menu."

“Ai, ai, ai!” He glared at me. “You’d make me change today’s plan completely because you’re in love?”

“I’m not in love,” I replied defensively. “Come on, help a brother out!”

Dominic continued glaring at me for a full thirty seconds before finally relenting. “Fuck you. But I love you, so I’ll do my best. And also because it’s Selene.”

I went back to Selene’s table and waited for each course to arrive. As it did, I watched her like she was the most important experiment I’d ever invested in.

The first course arrived, a delicate heirloom tomato salad. We were introducing gentle spices into the new menu. The plate comprised vibrant red and yellow tomatoes, ripe and bursting with flavor, carefully paired with fresh basil and creamy mozzarella.

In between bites, you would get hints of a green-tea-infused balsamic reduction accentuated with warm black pepper. I watched her like a hawk as she took her first mouthful.

She met my gaze playfully. “Oh, my God, I don’t remember anyone looking at me like this—not even the time my show producer brandished a contract in my face and worried whether I’d sign it!”

I balked at that. “Sorry, sorry,” I muttered. “I just . . . it’s all very exciting.”

She nodded appreciatively and took another mouthful. “It’s also very, very delicious. I love the warm and cool undertones and how you’ve merged them.”

Relief washed over me. Validation was always sweet, but it tasted a special kind of amazing when coming from the girl you’ve coveted your whole life.

As the meal progressed, I continued to present Selene with an array of carefully crafted courses. A velvety butternut squash soup, rich with warming spices, came next. This was followed by a succulent seared scallop served on a bed of creamy risotto.

What touched me most of all was how completely she enjoyed each mouthful, right from the salad to the dessert, a simple rice pudding with cardamom and dried fruits.

You ever get that feeling of utmost satisfaction when you watch someone treat what you love with equal, or more, affection? It was endearing, wholesome, and it made me want to be around her.

“I swear, if this is your seasonal menu, you can expect to see a lot more of me.”

“Don’t go making promises unless you mean to keep them,” I said, laughing. “I will totally expect you to show up every day and then get heartbroken if you don’t.”

Selene set her fork down and folded her hands before looking directly into my eyes.

I didn’t know why, but that gaze of hers . . . it made me want to reach across the table and lean in to kiss her mouth. It had the look of someone who had been through a world of trouble but would never want the same for anyone else.

“So, what made you change, all three of you?”

“Hmm?” The question caught me off guard.

“You guys were jerks in high school,” she replied, her eyes still twinkling. “But look at you now! Is it really just a high school thing?”

No, it was more of a *you’re way too out of my league* thing.

I swallowed, thinking of a way to respond to this without sounding like a complete jackass.

SELENE

I could be losing it.

In all fairness, Aiden and I were not in a relationship.

We'd already established that he was open to my experimenting and that there were no strings attached to the night we'd shared.

Earlier this morning, Chloe and I had a long conversation on this very topic. I went back home at the crack of dawn, and it was hard going through the motions, although I did them all.

After dropping Ollie off, I went to the pastry shop and then decided it was the perfect time to begin crying over a pastry shell that didn't turn out the way I hoped it would.

Chloe, always my soldier-in-arms, pulled me out of the kitchen and made me sit at a table. She plied me with coffee until I was in a place where I could express the emotions running through my system.

"I feel like I'm only ever making mistakes."

"That's because you're one of *those* people, Selene. You've talked yourself into a place where you can't look at all the good things you do."

"But why? Why am I like this?"

"You've become hardwired to pick at all the negatives in your life—the small and the big. Every time something good happens and it gives you joy, you get afraid," she said, taking big gulps from her own cup.

“You think that if you get too happy, something will come along and snatch that happiness from you. That becomes the reason for you to find fault with the good things too, because that way, no one can take your happiness. You’re doing it to yourself.”

I tried to register what she was saying, but my mind was pulling a major blank. “It was beautiful,” I finally said. “Last night. I don’t know whether that came from the lack of obligations or just how natural everything felt, but I was so fucking guilty after I got home. I’ve never done this—never been with someone and had no strings attached. Fuck, forget strings. I usually attach a whole fucking ball of wool to my relationships. Or a truck full of ’em.”

“A truck full of balls of wool?” she asked, her lips curling into a slight smile. “There’s an image. I don’t know why, but it makes me sleepy. Selene, listen to me. This is simply how your life needs to be right now. Do you hear me?”

I responded dully. “I hear you.”

We looked outside at the line gathering near the door. Every morning before my shop opened, sharp at nine thirty, lines four times the size of our seating capacity would wait their turn.

It was a very humbling experience, in the best way possible. It told me that I was doing something right with my life, at least when it came to work. The rest, well . . .

“Take the rest of the day off.”

“What?” My eyes widened in horror at the prospect of doing nothing to battle the stress raging in my heart. “No way! There’s too much to do.”

“You don’t have to visit the set today. We can easily run the shop for the next few hours. And the nanny’s picking Oliver up from school today, right? So, you have absolutely no excuse for not taking some time to go do literally anything else except stew in your thoughts.”

Trust my best friend to tell me I had no excuse for doing absolutely nothing.

“But . . .” I waved my hands desperately. “What will I do with the free time?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Just look at you. I honestly need to get you out of the kitchen more. Go visit a good restaurant, Sel. Or go shopping. I would take you myself, but man, I live for rush hour, and if I took off with you, you’d probably go ballistic.”

I chuckled weakly. “That I would. You’re sure you can take over for me?”

“Positive.”

With that, I decided to go home for a little while. Ollie would stay longer at school because the kids were practicing for a mid-term drama show.

He was still cut up that the teacher had cast him as one of the good little guys in the show. He thought he could play a villain “mighty well”.

I really hoped this was just a phase. Sticking around at home, though, all I could think about was Aiden and Dominic and how attracted I was to both of them. I decided I needed a dose of Southern Baptist love and called Ben.

An hour later, I walked through the bustling corridors of Faneuil Hall Marketplace. I spotted Ben waiting for me near the Quincy Market building.

The sight of his warm, kind, homely face just put me in the right spot. This was what I’d been needing. To meet my brother.

“Finally, my superstar sister has found some time for me!” he exclaimed, gathering me into a warm embrace. I laughed and punched his shoulder. “Please, Ben. I’m just Sel from that TV show.”

“That TV show that’s caught the attention of all of America and is about to get renewed for two more seasons?” he replied, curling his arm around me as we broke into an easy, comfortable walk.

“How is everything?” I asked, hungry to know more about home. “Did you visit Mom? How’s married life treating you?”

“I met Mom two weeks ago. She’s getting older. You know what it’s like around her.”

He didn’t need me to tell him I did. Mama Baker was a sore point for the two of us because Ben felt it was time for me to forgive her for how she’d treated me in the past. I could let go of a lot, but I couldn’t go back to loving her up close.

Some relationships just did better if you learned to distance yourself from each other. I loved her because she was my parent. But if there would have been no shared blood between us, I don’t think either of us would have liked each other.

She believed in a different kind of lifestyle. It included getting married young and producing grandchildren like the female body was nothing but a reproductive factory.

It also involved sticking around with your husband, no matter how impossible the situation became.

Mama Baker was schooled in very old, very conservative ways, and to an extent, they had served her well. If not much else, they had helped her survive. But in the process of surviving, she tried to make sure that I would become an extension of her. I was no martyr.

I wanted a free life, one I could live on my own terms. She didn’t understand that. And I didn’t understand her.

We had a lovely morning. We visited boutiques selling crafts and trinkets, and I found a pretty silver bracelet that I had to bring home.

The shopkeeper insisted on it being a gift, and I insisted on telling her that I’d visit her again and again, but only if she let me pay. A bit of back and forth later, she did let me pay for the pretty bracelet.

We browsed through specialty food shops, tasting local cheeses, freshly baked pretzels, and God knew what else. In between, I asked Ben about his married life again because I kept noticing he pushed it to the background.

This time, he shrugged.

“It’s going okay. Abigail doesn’t like it if I spend too much time with the boys. But we’re married now, so that is legitimate.”

“You literally meet them once a week on Saturdays.”

“I mean, it’s the weekend and she’d like for the two of us to spend it together.”

“Why don’t you take her along? The guys seem like good fun.”

I almost immediately regretted saying this, because I didn’t want him to know I’ve been in touch with them. Ben had something I liked to call the big-bro radar. He instinctively understood when trouble was headed my way, especially if I was calling it myself.

He was one of the few people who’d warned me about Dave, saying he was too *flamboyant* to make for a good marriage partner. I had refused to listen. He was right, of course, but his feelings toward Dave changed when we got married.

This had less to do with Dave becoming a good person and more with my brother’s view of marriage as the epitome of all things sacred.

“Have you been in touch with them?” he asked me delicately.

“Not really,” I replied, almost a little too quickly. “But Aiden dropped by my shop a few days back and gave me some great ideas for work. He seemed changed from the little ruffian he was in school.”

Ben laughed in response. “Aye, he has grown up. All of them have matured in their own ways. Be careful around Aiden, though.”

I could sense that a lecture was incoming.

“We didn’t really talk all that much.”

Because last time, we were way too busy doing other things.

“Nah, it’s not that. Aiden was in a very serious relationship with a girl from his college days. She broke up with him, and it left him pretty torn. He’s not . . . he kind of made up his mind then and there that he wouldn’t do relationships any longer. He got used to seeing women differently. And I’m not saying that’s a bad thing. Far as I know, he’s pretty open with them, doesn’t give them any false expectations or anything. But he’s not the kind of guy you want around in the long run.”

I considered his words. I understood a lot of what he meant to say, but I couldn’t help thinking that for my brother, relationships only made sense when they headed in a specific direction.

There had to be an order—dating, courtship, marriage, children, death. God forbid something happened that disturbed this order. He considered it a break from the norm and it upset him.

He was a wonderful human being, but sometimes, I couldn’t relate to this one-direction way of thinking.

Yes, all natural things had to have a progression. But sometimes, the manner of their progress would be indeterminate, no matter how hard we tried to define things.

I missed childhood Ben sometimes. Back then, he was so cute and had such chubby cheeks. I’d stuff his mouth with candies just to see how many would fit. He was a darling child, always hanging around me even as our siblings grew up.

He awakened a tenderness in me that no one else in my family could.

And it was wonderful because a time came when he filled the need I had to love someone in my family and also *like* them.

Ben could be stern on occasion. He was frugal and hated wasting food.

Once, I was dawdling over my breakfast and asked him to make me another bowl of porridge. He responded by telling

me he'd do it only if I ate every last drop before school.

Halfway through my second bowl, I gave up and looked at him with big, sad eyes. And he told me he'd let me off the hook, but next time, I'd wear my breakfast all the way to school. I took him seriously—Ben wasn't a funny guy, not even then.

“Remember when Mom would take us on the ferry to Nantasket Beach?”

“Oh, I'll never forget it,” he replied, smiling wide. “It was a semblance of a normal family life, for all of us.”

“I loved it. I loved going to Hull and getting on the Paragon Carousel. I still remember the cotton candy and how it used to put you into a sugar-induced state of silence. You'd cry on the carousel, you know?” I chuckled.

Ben would always get on the ride with me because he didn't like letting me do things alone, and then he'd regret it because it gave him motion sickness.

I absolutely adored the beach because it was so clean and different from the Riviera. We'd feast on hot French fries generously sprinkled with salt, served in bright little boards with a tangy, hearty tartar sauce and coleslaw.

Mom would be lenient on these occasions, and I got to taste the fizz of soda pop. I'd never forget how surprised I was the first time I tried it and it went straight up my nose. The years were long gone, but the happy memories helped.

And I guess this was what Chloe had meant when she tried to get my mood to improve this morning.

“D'you ever feel like we sabotage ourselves?”

“How?”

“Like sometimes, when I'm really happy or proud of something I've done, I experience this urge to counter the joy by forcing myself to think of something unpleasant. I used to think it was a coping mechanism.”

We had reached the Rotunda, an observation deck in the center of the Quincy market. As we walked up the steps, we

were greeted by the gentle glow of a setting sun that graced everything around us with the warmest gold.

The deck was an open-air space with wrought iron railings from where we could get an unobstructed view of the city skyline and Boston Harbor.

“I feel like we don’t let ourselves be happy because we’re too scared of what’ll happen when we’re not. It makes us think in numbers, Sel.” Ben and I looked at the sun descending toward the horizon, painting the sky in oranges, pinks, and purples.

The skyscrapers of downtown Boston stood, silhouetted against this fiery spectacle, their long windows reflecting the last of the fading daylight.

“How do we stop doing it?”

“By accepting that all we can control is right now, and if something in this moment, here and now, is making us happy, then we should let it.”

He angled his head in my direction as he spoke, and unwittingly, he showed me that everything was going to be okay.

We stood for a few more minutes, watching boats glide in the distance, their wake trailing behind like liquid ribbons.

“I’m really glad I got to see you today,” I said, wrapping my arm across Ben’s shoulders. I had to stand on tiptoe to do this. He returned my half-hug with one of his own.

“I’m really glad too. Are you heading home now?”

I had some time to kill before the nanny would bring Oliver back. And I didn’t want to spend it at home. “I need to do some shopping for tomorrow, and yes. Home after that.”

Ben and I said our goodbyes, and I got into my car, not to go home, but to visit Harvest and Hearth. And that brought me to this moment, where I sat in front of Niall, my heart and head swimming in the same sea of uncertainty.

Up until now, I’d understood my body was responding in funny ways to both Aiden and Dominic.

Ways that involved a lot of heat. I thought that was enough.

Apparently not, because I happened to have decided that Niall was just as gorgeous.

And that he can *also* play me like a fiddle. Niall's charm was in his distinctive, drop-those-panties smile and the messy bun he wore with such ease.

I looked like a frumpy mess when I tried to do a bun like that.

The irony of it all. The world's three hottest men had to be best friends with my brother. They were all forbidden territory, so far as Ben was concerned.

And here I was, venturing freely just where I wasn't supposed to.

I asked him the same question that I did the others because I wanted to know if, by some odd twist of fate, he'd also felt something for me in high school.

Funny, because this fed into such a stereotype. I'd normally never forgive it, but if he groveled enough and looked this cute doing it, *maybe* I'd make a third exception.

"I—I kind of had no idea what I was doing back then," he mumbled as I set the spoon down after finishing the rice pudding.

Every meal I'd had today, from the marketplace to here, had been committed to my memory. And my belly, of course.

But I'd been the girl who'd spent years trying to fit into jeans. My mind loved me more when I sized up instead of forcing myself to look at numbers.

"Funny, that's also what Dom and Aiden said," I replied snarkily. "Who told you guys the best way to win over your crushes was by being mean to them?"

"Someone very stupid," he said, his tone apologetic and funny. "If I ever find him again, I'm going to choke him with his own tie."

I laughed. "I'll hold you to that."

There was more that I wanted to say, but I could not. Because, right in front of my eyes, the doors of the restaurant opened once again, and the man who walked in was straight out of my worst nightmare.

The hundred alarm bells programmed into my skin rang the same warning at the same time.

Run.

DOM

“Selene, are you alright?”

“I will be, as soon as that asshole in the gray polo leaves.”

Surprised at the vehemence in Selene’s voice, I went up to the service window to see who had riled her up this much.

Her eyes were fixated on a wiry man sitting at a table toward the eastern corner of the restaurant. He had chosen a relatively quiet location to sit at—and the table gave him a vantage point to notice who’d come and leave the dining area.

Sometimes, you happened to come across people who just rubbed you the wrong way through no fault of their own.

It could have something to do with their appearance, or merely the way they spoke, or an annoying laugh. My point is, first impressions are often visual. And right now, I didn’t like the look on the man.

He had narrow, suspicious eyes. A thin scar ran across his left cheek. And his mere countenance, including the fleshy jowls that were uncharacteristic for his otherwise slender stature, told me he loved his drink a little too hard.

“Do you want me to get rid of him?”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t want you guys to get a bad review by tossing a customer out just because I can’t keep my shit together.”

I looked away from the kitchen window and focused on Selene. She'd pelted through the doors a minute ago, looking like she was running from the worst nightmare of her whole life.

Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open. It took me every last drop of reserve to not reach out and pull her into my arms and tell her I'd take care of her.

For one, I didn't know what was going on. Plus, Selene was the kind of girl who could take care of herself.

"Okay, just sit. Tell me about your day."

"Really?" she asked with a slow smile building on her lips. "I barge in during a very hectic service, and you're asking me about my day? You should be telling me to get out."

"Why should I do that? Selene Baker's in my kitchen, and my chefs are going to work doubly hard because they know who they have to impress today. Plus," I said, grinning, "*Selene Baker is in my kitchen*. That's always a win for me, no matter the context."

She looked really touched by that. I loved how she wore her heart on her sleeve, and every emotion going on within her seemed to mirror itself in her gaze.

"Honestly, I had a pretty good day. I met Ben today and then came over here. Everything was stellar until my archnemesis decided to show up and prowl around your restaurant. Is he a regular?"

I took another look at the man. "I can't recall having seen him before. Oy." I gestured to Harry, one of our waiters. "That man there, he come here often?"

Harry was usually always out front. He loved watching the footfall in the kitchen, and the diners adored him because he was lively and prefaced each dish with context. So, a soup could be warm or cold depending on the season.

Harry would make sure to specify that so the diners would get an overall experience that went beyond just tasting the food.

“No, I’ve never seen him before.” He frowned at the stranger. “He looks wasted.”

“You don’t say?” I replied, my expression turning grim. I turned my attention back to Selene. “Are you sure you don’t want me to do anything?”

“Not yet. If he messes up in there, and I have a feeling he will, be my guest, although I’m the one in your kitchen.”

I laughed. “You got it. So, you met Ben? How is he? I can’t believe I’m asking this. But he’s been super busy post his marriage. We haven’t seen a lot of him.”

“Yeah, Abigail thinks weekends are only wifey-time.”

“Ah. She’s not wrong, though. But she could come along with Ben—except . . .” I paused, unsure of how to say none of us really liked Ben’s saintly wife without being too rude.

“Hey, there’s no love lost between me and her,” Selene replied, reading my face. “I think Ben deserves to have his own life, and so does she. Just because two people are married, they don’t need to become an amoeba-like cluster with no distinct shapes. That’s kinda gross if you ask me.”

All of sudden, the image hit me—Ben and Abigail transforming into one mass and floating around Boston. I couldn’t help snickering. “This shit will haunt me worse than the last episode of Black Mirror I saw.”

“As it should. But honestly, marriage should be . . . simpler. Don’t you think? When you settle down with someone and promise to spend the rest of your life with them, wouldn’t you want them to become part of this life, not the entirety of it? Who said love has to be a limitation of ourselves and the things we enjoy?”

While she continued speaking, all I could think about was how she had no business looking that good and making so much sense at the same time.

The girl was the full package, and the funny thing was how unaware she seemed of her own charm.

I fixated on the rosebud of her mouth and how it resembled the softest, most luxurious silk—the kind you could sink into and forget yourself. If I had to make a dish with Selene in my mind, I'd choose a velvety, rich mousse.

Something with coffee, cinnamon, and hints of dark chocolate. Moreish and worth remembering.

“Hey, I'd totally be offended at someone giving me the silent treatment, but since you're looking at me like that, you get a free pass,” she finally said, her lips curling into a teasing smile.

I snapped back from a world where I was happily wondering whether her lips tasted as soft and lush as they looked. “Sorry,” I replied, caught completely off guard. “You kind of do this thing where I get all tongue-tied and don't know what to do with myself.”

She turned a pretty shade of peach. “I'm going to take that as a compliment.”

“You should. Not too many people can come in here and make me feel like I'm out of my comfort zone. In my fucking kitchen,” I said, somewhat gruffly.

Harry opened the kitchen doors and peeked his head in. “Dom, that guy you asked about? He's being pretty nasty.”

I raised my brows. “What's he done?”

“He refused to order and said he needed more time with the menu. Well, he's been here for the last half-hour, still deciding.”

He shook his head. “Julie went up to ask if she could help him, and he kinda thanked her by calling her a cunt.”

No one treated my staff that way. No one came into my restaurant and made them feel like shit, not today, not ever.

“Give me a minute, Selene.” I touched her shoulder lightly.

“Dom, don't let him get to you,” she whispered urgently. “This is just what he does to everyone. He's not a good person, but you don't want any controversy—”

“It’s not even about the controversy.” I made my way to the kitchen doors. “It’s about standing up for my people because this place would be nothing without them.”

I stormed out of the door and toward the diner. He already knew someone would be coming because he had the face of a guy who was here to pick a fight.

From time to time, we got difficult diners. People who had no idea what to order, people who couldn’t make up their minds whether they wanted their food raw or well done, people who were just plain rude.

The last group maddened me the most because they had no idea how tough the service industry could be.

Most of my servers were young college students who were working here to pay bills. They struggled immensely and put in an insane amount of work. They didn’t deserve added heartache.

“Sir, I believe there has been an issue with you and one of my servers, Julia?”

The man replied with a sycophantic smile. It indicated that he did not regret anything he had said. “Busy chick, your server. You should consider firing her.”

“How about you consider leaving without wasting any of our time?” I ask him, keeping my tone pleasant. “We don’t tolerate anyone treating our staff the way you did.”

“Are you serious?” His eyes bulged out, and droplets of spit came out of his mouth. “I’m the customer. I’m the God! What the fuck is wrong with you lot? You think you can tell me what to do? I’m the one paying your bills, aren’t I?”

“Well, since we’ve never seen you before, that would be an overstretch. And our restaurant policies state that if there are signs of unruly behavior, we reserve the right to refuse service to the perpetrators of said behavior. So, either you can leave on your own, or I can help with that.”

I folded my arms in front of my chest, flexing my muscles intentionally. On any day, I was twice the size of this rat.

He opened his mouth once again, but Niall came to stand beside me. Taken together, we could pummel the shit out of this stick.

“You’ll regret this,” he finally squawked in a tone that he supposed was confident. “You don’t know what I can—”

“Come on, let’s get you out.” Niall placed a firm hand on his shoulder and almost pulled him from the seat. “You can complain on the way.”

And he did. He jabbered on and on about how big he was and the many ways he’d fuck us up until I lost my patience and almost tossed him out like he was garbage.

“Well, that was nice.” Niall grinned as we watched him swear and flail his arms like an angry chicken running around. “We should do that more often.”

“Sure, let’s get his address from Selene and pay him to come around so he can help us clean our negative energies and shit like Ben would say.”

Ben was big on Reiki, for context.

“What do you think about Selene, by the way?” Niall asked as we headed back to the kitchen.

I gave him a wry grin. “Kind of like what we felt in our teens, but it’s more intense this time.”

Niall, Aiden, and I were no novices when it came to sharing women.

We’d done it before, and we all found it amplified our bond instead of pushing us away from each other.

This was until Aiden fell in love with Maisie, a girl who basically ripped his heart out and probably made jewelry with it.

“You think she’d be game?”

“She’s just our type.”

We entered the back doors and found Selene busy learning something from Pierre, whose animated voice and flourishes told us he was in his element.

“Hey,” I called to her. “Got a second?”

“No,” Pierre replied for her. “I am teaching her to make a delicious little sauce—”

“Please, Pierre, if you’re doing that, you’re gonna keep her all day. Just give us a minute.” Niall chuckled.

Pierre glared at the two of us, and Selene said something sweet that made him smile and blush like a ripe tomato. She came over with a sauce ladle in her hands.

“I’m thinking I should introduce a seasonal savory menu. And . . .”

She smiled at the two of us. Her lips parted slightly, and she spoke in a soft voice. “I loved what you guys did back there. You stood up for your staff and got rid of an asshole in the process. You guys are total hotties in my book, but I’m still taking some points off for the bullying.”

I felt like I was back in school once again, dreaming of the day Selene would kiss me.

“There’s more where that came from,” Niall said, grinning suggestively. “If you let us make it up to you. We promise we’re not the assholes we used to be.”

“Well,” she replied thoughtfully. “There’s only one way I can see that happening.”

“We’re game.”

“You guys should come over to my place and cook dinner for my kid and me. He’ll be the judge of whether I should forgive you.”

SELENE

Every morning after waking up, I established a small ritual of sorts. I wouldn't necessarily call it productive, because it involved spending about thirty minutes on Instagram.

In these thirty minutes, I would scroll through filtered pictures of people living perfectly happy lives and wonder how much of it had been filtered for an audience.

I was no stranger to this—a lot of my online persona had been made-up and polished to suit the world as well. News flash—Selene Baker wasn't always cheerful.

She didn't like cracking relatable jokes *all the time*. But I portrayed a practiced image that came with years of learning and unlearning. I knew that the more vulnerabilities I showed, the deeper the cuts would be.

Today, I came across a really sweet video of a mother making a lunchbox for her school-going kid. The comments section was smack-dab full of so much hate, it stirred a world of disquiet inside me.

So much salt? Are you trying to kill your child?

Oh my goodness, look at the oil!

Kids shouldn't have bread.

Don't give them meat, teach them to go vegan right now!

Minutes later, I landed upon another video of a girl showcasing her transformation. She'd lost a lot of weight over

a year, and she mentioned how empowered it made her feel.

Now, I didn't equate the scales with happiness because I had been on both ends of the spectrum. After Dave made me feel like a pig on my best days, I went through a long period of binge eating and guiltting myself into purging.

Those were the darkest seven years of my life. To the point that when I learned I was pregnant with Ollie, I thought God was telling me to stop, that I had hurt myself enough, and that my body deserved some love.

But for people who did feel that losing weight was a form of empowerment—I understood that too, and I felt happy she'd found her mojo.

Again, the comment section had torn the girl apart from limb to limb, including some people who had the ridiculous notion that she was “consciously running a hate propaganda that was #fatphobic.”

I mean . . .

I sighed and set the phone down. Sometimes, in the deep of the early morning, I felt a gnawing urge to create. This could be anything, from writing to drawing to listening to music to forming new recipes.

Ben liked to say that I was born with the urge to make new things out of nothing. This also included problems, by the way.

Today, as I sat with my pen, staring down at an empty piece of paper, I felt on the edge of my control. And then, I began writing.

Creation. It was a slow, sweet tolerance, wearing on my soul and the solitary nature of our endless, numbered days. When we make, we must dissociate from the world that is around us—even if they are in our thoughts.

The act of creation was, by necessary means, often lonely. It could be sleepless nights, pen stuck on top of the ear, cup of coffee in hand, weary eyes.

It could be dawn after sleepless nights, hanging low on your shoulders and heart, telling you that it was too much, that

you were too tired, but you'd have to push, you'd have to go on.

Because without it, without the act of making—which is what women were essentially born to do—where would we be?

Every woman I had ever known was a creator in some way or the other, and this had nothing to do with motherhood, per se. It was in our blood and bones, in the very air that defined the nature of our beings.

Quiet hours were filled with desperate inspiration, glorious rage, frenetic joy, and anguished conversations with people who felt the same urges that I did.

And on days like this, I wished my words could flow and connect me to you—to every person who would understand and feel and celebrate the little things that made us so human.

After I finished writing, it was as if a weight had lifted from my shoulders. I went through the motions of the morning.

Once Oliver was in school, I prepared to visit the set. I had a feeling today would be a good day. Plus, the boys were coming over in the evening, and that made me feel all tingly and excited. Nervous, but in a good way.

I drove my car to the set of Kitchen Goddess. The moment I stepped out of the car, the production crew swarmed around me, buzzing with energy.

“Selene! You're here! The kitchen's superstar has arrived!” one of the producers exclaimed dramatically.

I struck a superhero pose, flourishing my right hand as if I had a spatula held in it. This was all part of the show. “Fear not, citizens of the culinary realm! I am here, and hopefully, I will not burn the cake or set my guest's apron on fire like I did last time!”

It did happen, by the way. I was having one of my days.

The crew burst into laughter, their excitement contagious. Tony, the director, approached me with a twinkle in his eye.

“Selene, darling, we have a special treat for you,” Tony said, grinning mischievously.

I raised an eyebrow, playing along. “Oh, do tell, Tony. Is there a villainous vegetable lurking in the pantry?”

Tony chuckled. “Even better! We have a celebrity guest today, and he’s going to show us his secret rigatoni recipe.”

I gasped dramatically, feigning surprise. “A secret rigatoni recipe? I must uncover its mysteries!”

With exaggerated determination, I made my way toward the set, where Chef Andy, our eccentric guest, awaited. He was dressed in a flamboyant chef’s coat.

I knew this man from his videos on YouTube. He was a brilliant food blogger, and like me, he loved to engage with his audience.

“Ah, Selene! The goddess of the kitchen has graced us with her presence!” Chef Andy exclaimed, bowing dramatically.

I curtsied in response. “And you, Chef Andy, are the master of culinary theatrics! Shall we entertain our audience with our gastronomic wizardry?”

Chef Andy winked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Let the show begin!”

As the cameras started rolling, Chef Andy and I dove into our culinary extravaganza.

However, it quickly became apparent that our cooking styles were as different as night and day. While I focused on precision and technique, Chef Andy embraced chaos and theatrics.

“Selene, my dear, watch and learn!” Chef Andy proclaimed, tossing a handful of rigatoni in the air and catching them with an expert flick of his wrist.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, Chef Andy, you never cease to amaze! But let’s see if you can juggle tomatoes while you’re at it!”

The audience erupted into laughter as Chef Andy attempted the impossible, only to have the tomatoes slip from his grasp and splatter across the countertop.

“Oops! Looks like my juggling skills need some work.” Chef Andy chuckled, wiping the torrential projection of ripe tomato pulp that had marked his coat—like a culinary baptism of sorts.

At one point, he attempted to flip a pancake, only to have it land on his head. The crew erupted into laughter, and I couldn’t hold back my own giggles.

“Chef Andy, I think you’ve just invented the latest fashion trend—the pancake hat!” I teased, pointing at the pancake perched on his head.

He grinned, playfully adjusting the pancake. “Why, thank you, Selene! I always strive to be at the forefront of culinary fashion!”

The laughter echoed through the studio, infusing the atmosphere with lighthearted energy. Despite the culinary mishaps and hilarious blunders, we managed to create a delicious rigatoni dish.

After we wrapped up, I spent some time with the crew and Tony before heading to the shop to check on Chloe and my staff. Then, it was straight home. Oliver would be returning a little later with the nanny.

As I stepped inside the fortress of my penthouse, I suddenly felt a little empty. I walked over to the balcony, a cup of tea in my hand.

From tomorrow, I told myself, I’d go get Ollie from school even if it was evening and exhaustion had seeped in. I missed our banter on the way back home, how he’d regale me with stories about his teachers and take joy in every little new thing he learned.

He was back pretty soon, though, and before I knew it, the clock struck seven.

The boys had said they’d arrive by eight, so I decided it was time to get ready. I took a long shower, donned simple

jeans and a top, tied my hair in a messy mom-bun, and sat down with a truckload of butterflies doing Zumba in my stomach.

This wasn't the anxious kind of truckload, though—more the kind you feel when there's something exciting about to happen in your otherwise routine life.

As the hour grew closer, I stood in the foyer amid a sea of marble flooring and draped in the soft light of elegant chandeliers, unsure of what to do.

A sleek intercom panel was mounted on the wall nearby. I activated the system.

The screen prompted me to select a function, and I chose the "Guest Access" option to open a list of registered guests. I had fed their names into the system.

After the recent scares, I wasn't taking any chances. I scrolled through the list, my manicured finger gliding across the touch screen.

Each guest's name, accompanied by a photograph, appeared on the display. At that exact moment, the light next to Adam's name and photo went green, and I smiled.

I tapped on it, and a live video feed emerged, displaying a high-definition video of the penthouse's grand entrance gate. My smile grew as my eyes landed on the three men.

"Welcome to my humble abode," I said, my voice projected through the intercom speakers. I selected the *Open Gate* option, and the massive iron structure swung open, revealing the meticulously manicured grounds beyond.

"Come up the driveway. I'll wait for you at the entrance," I instructed.

"Aye-aye, ma'am," Aiden replied, not without a hint of his snarky confidence.

A low thrill coursed through me—and even as I stepped out, I couldn't help wondering where the night would take us.

Their car glided along the driveway, making its way to my home's entrance.

As it stopped, the system went quiet, allowing me to personally welcome them. Positioned strategically near the entrance, a pair of stone pillars stood tall.

I liked them because they made me think of stable, secure stuff. Stuff that was grounded.

As they stepped down, Aiden let out a low whistle, his eyes on the archway above the entrance to the tallest apartment building on the block.

My bodyguards stood near the doors. I'd asked them to not bother, but they still observed each of the boys, and well, if I were new here, I'd be terrified.

Each of them came with a heavy resume and a long list of achievements.

Aiden, Dom, and Niall exchanged amused glances.

They'd dressed well for the occasion—simple, crisp T-shirts and jeans, tousled hair, and loads of masculine energy.

“Selene, you've literally built a fortress,” Dominic said, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I feel like I'll have eyes on me all the time in here.”

I was in the moment once again and playing a part. But this was a part I'd really enjoy.

The boys were here to show me they wanted me in their lives.

“Come on in,” I said before turning around. “Your judge is hungry.”

SELENE

My boy was in the nursery, finishing his homework. I spent some time showing Aiden, Dom, and Niall around the penthouse.

All of them really liked the balcony—which happened to be my favorite corner too.

The darkening sky was illuminated by stars, their earthly reflections manifesting in a thousand lights spread across the expanse of the city.

I had been ambitious as a child, and I had known that someday, I would own a big place with all the embellishments. But then . . .

“Unreal.” Aiden leaned on the banister, his face turned upward. A gentle breeze fell upon his features and played with his hair. It tasted of salt and something sweeter, almost floral.

“Just asking—and mostly because I’d go crazy if it was me surrounded by so many eyes—but don’t you ever feel like . . .” He waved his hands as he turned toward me, his back against the railing.

“Like I’m being suffocated?” I asked. It wasn’t an unexpected question. The only person who thought I could do with more security was Reynolds. Even Ben had tried to suggest the measures I’d taken were too much.

“To the contrary,” I continued, joining him and peering out into the horizon. “I like knowing that I have eyes watching the place while I sleep.”

Dom walked over to stand beside us. His eyes traced the outline of the city. “It’s so funny, thinking back on how we grew up and the kind of lives we lead right now.”

Somehow, this talk was putting me on edge. Today, I didn’t want to think about all the dues I’d paid to get where I was. Because that was an unspoken, established rule—you lose some, you win some.

Distant sounds of music and laughter wafted up from the streets below, blending harmoniously with the gentle hum of the city.

The panoramic view showcased the iconic landmarks of Boston, from the illuminated waterfront to the silhouette of the historic buildings.

I looked down at my outstretched hands, fixating on my carefully manicured nails.

I’d done them myself, and it had taken two hours of my time—but hey, I’d also recorded ten new recipes via voice notes while I worked on the French tips. So I didn’t feel all that guilty about them.

“It doesn’t matter, if you ask me,” Niall said, his eyes fixed on me. He folded his muscled forearms, showcasing an impressive play of blue veins rippling upon his tattooed skin.

Dirty thoughts awakened in my already unruly mind, and I turned my gaze away. “What doesn’t matter?” I asked lightly.

“Whatever it took to get here. I mean,” he continued speaking, “it does from the POV of growing and learning, but other than that, I don’t think we need to keep beating the past until it curdles. It can just stay where the fuck it belongs.”

I smiled at him, appreciating the glint of protectiveness that was etched on his features. “Come on,” I finally said. “Let’s go meet my kid.”

I guided them toward the nursery where Oliver was busy in a world of his own making—though it was mostly homework.

His geography teacher loved letting her students sketch and make maps. Oliver loved her and his geography homework because of this.

I opened the door, revealing a room filled with colorful books, educational toys, and a small desk where Oliver sat, engrossed in painting a gateway to some demonic underworld. Good God, this child perplexed me sometimes.

Franny was nannying for us this week. She was a college student and very good with Ollie. But even she looked up at me with a resigned face. “He said demons are cleverer,” she said blandly.

Aiden burst out laughing. “They’re definitely sharper.”

I engaged in an eye-rolling performance worthy of an Oscar. They’d just arrived, and Aiden was already making headway with my son, who looked up appreciatively at him.

“Are you a chef like Mommy?” he quipped innocently, brandishing a pencil like a sword at him.

“Boys, meet my greatest joy, Oliver,” I announced.

Oliver’s bright eyes widened with excitement. “Mom! Are these the guys from your famous cooking show?”

I laughed, ruffling his hair affectionately. “No, darling. These are Mom’s friends from work.”

“Can they cook like you?”

“Look at you, going all gender equality on us,” Niall drawled, chuckling slightly as he observed my kid. “You’ll make a Major League boyfriend someday.”

“Don’t go putting ideas in his head,” I retorted, scowling at Niall.

Aiden knelt down to Oliver’s level, a playful twinkle in his eye. “Well, well, Oliver. Your mom has told us all about your genius mind. Are you plotting world domination in here?”

Oliver giggled, his face lighting up. “Nah, Aiden. I’m just learning some math and geography. But who knows? World domination might come later.”

Dom joined in the banter, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. “Watch out, world! Oliver, the mastermind, is honing his skills as we speak.”

Niall added, feigning seriousness. “I, for one, welcome our new pint-sized overlord. What’s the plan, Oliver?”

Oliver leaned back in his chair, a mock contemplative expression on his face. “First, ice cream for breakfast. Then, unlimited playtime. Oh, and mandatory nap time for everyone except me.”

Okay, that was cute. That tugged at my heart and reminded me of all the little reasons Ollie was my North Star, my compass, my whole fucking world. He had a way of infusing everything with a sense of wonder.

I tousled Oliver’s hair, a current of tumultuous emotions swelling up in me. “Well, boys, it seems Oliver has already concocted a master plan for our day. Are you up for the challenge?”

Aiden grinned. “Absolutely! Ice cream for breakfast and world domination by naptime? Count me in.”

Dom nodded enthusiastically. “I’m all for Oliver’s rule. Just make sure to save some ice cream for me.”

Niall chimed in, playfully saluting Oliver. “Commander Oliver, your loyal subjects are at your service.”

“We can do ice cream later,” I said, laughing. “For now, let’s just go make dinner. Ollie, you finish your homework first, and then come down to the kitchen after cleaning up, okay?”

Oliver nodded. “What’s for dinner?”

Aiden flourished his hands like he could conjure bunnies out of the air. “That’s for the both of us to find out, young man.”

I almost had to drag the three of them into the kitchen. “Come on,” I said. “I’m hungry too!”

I led the boys into the penthouse kitchen, a space that blended sleek minimalism with warmth and beauty.

Pristine white countertops contrasted with the rich, dark wood cabinets, marrying modernity with functional comfort.

Potted plants adorned the windowsills. I loved that they added a touch of greenery and freshness. The kitchen boasted open views, allowing us to soak in the stunning cityscape even while indoors.

“Welcome to my kitchen, guys,” I said with a smile. “Take a look around. Make yourselves at home. Don’t burn anything, and don’t you dare make any comments about my obsession with cast iron stuff.”

Dom whistled appreciatively. “Cast iron slaps, Selene. No complaints there.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Did you just say something slapped?”

He laughed. “I’ve been watching too many influencers, probably.”

Niall glanced around, his eyes alight with curiosity. “I’m excited to get cooking!”

With that, the boys set to work in the kitchen, donning aprons and gathering ingredients.

“If we mess up, Selene, just remember we’ll need legal counsel to defend us against Oliver’s potential lawsuit for ‘bad food’,” Aiden joked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

I chuckled. “Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. But don’t worry. I have faith in your cooking abilities.”

As they started preparing the food, I couldn’t help but feel touched by their instinctive understanding of what an eight-year-old would enjoy.

Oliver had a penchant for food that not only tasted good but looked pretty too.

I leaned in and whispered to the boys, “Oliver has a thing for aesthetically pleasing food. Make it look as pretty as possible, and he’ll love it even more.”

They nodded. “Challenge accepted,” Dom said, manifesting Barney from *How I Met Your Mother*.

In no time, mouthwatering aromas filled the kitchen as hamburgers sizzled on the stove and fries turned golden in the oven.

Aiden set to work cutting up some vegetables to make a fresh garden salad.

“Good luck with that,” I muttered. “He’s been giving me hell with the veggies.”

“Ah, but we must be persistent, yes?” He playfully drizzled some balsamic on the veggies and made a reduction of hot honey with brown butter. “You can tell a lot about a man by the way he treats his food.”

I smiled. “Did you guys ever watch Anthony Bourdain?”

“That’s like asking us if we believe in God,” Dom replied, setting the veggies to sauté on high heat over an open flame.

“D’you remember that clip where he goes, ‘*if you don’t like food, we have a problem*’?”

Niall let out a throaty laugh. “Truer words cannot exist.”

The boys masterfully crafted the plates, arranging the food in the most visually appealing way I had ever seen.

As Oliver joined us at the dining table, his eyes widened at the sight of the beautifully plated food. “Whoa, this looks amazing!”

Dom grinned. “Don’t go making comments before you eat, though. It’ll break our hearts, and worse, your mom has plans to sue us if the food doesn’t taste good!”

Oliver opened his mouth to give us a very toothy, naughty smile. “You’ll go to jail if I give you bad marks?”

“Yes,” Aiden replied, twisting his hands in a mock display of seriousness. “Don’t sell us short, little guy.”

Oliver took a bite, his face lighting up with delight. “This is delicious! You guys nailed it.”

Throughout the meal, playful banter filled the air as Oliver and the boys exchanged jokes and stories.

Laughter echoed in the kitchen as Ollie told us about his day and how the gates to the demon kingdom were actually supposed to be closed by a wolf who would then eat all the baddies up.

That comforted me a little bit—but one of these days, I'd have to sit down and talk to Ollie about the things going on in that vast little heart of his.

After dessert, the nanny arrived to take Oliver upstairs to prepare for bed. He gave the boys a high-five, his eyes gleaming with happiness. “Thanks for the awesome dinner, guys! Promise me you'll come back, and I'll give you full points.”

And just like that, my breath caught in my throat.

Come back. Like his dad never did.

What if . . . what if this repeated itself, and I created false expectations in his mind about Aiden, Niall, and Dom?

But Aiden took over easily. “We'll be back whenever you call us, Little Lord. We hereby commit as your butlers. And chefs. Whichever you'd prefer.”

Ollie giggled and pattered away, leaving me surrounded by the men and a sea of my own twisting thoughts.

I waited until ten minutes had passed. “You guys okay to hang out for a bit? I'll just go say goodnight to Ollie.”

There was a unified “Go on,” so I quickly went up to Ollie's room. Franny had tucked him into bed, and his face was flushed with the beginnings of sleep. My kid had never been a difficult sleeper.

Even now, when he shut his eyes, I knew he wouldn't wake up before I got him out of bed tomorrow morning.

I kissed his head softly.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Very much.” He beamed. “I like your friends, Mom.”

I ignored the knife twisting my guts and planted another tiny kiss on his little nose. “I like them too. Goodnight, Ollie. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

I closed the door behind Ollie and went down to the kitchen. The boys were busy.

“You okay?” Dom asked as he began cleaning up the table.

“I—”

I swallowed. “Back when Ollie was a baby, everyone used to tell me not to fuss over him as much as I did. Like, I was always holding him. And they’d insist on my putting him down, letting him cry to comfort himself, just letting him grow up. But man, that was my baby. What did he know about the world back then?”

I scoffed. “Can you imagine, landing in a cold crib after nine months of toasty warmth and comfort in a mother’s womb? Everything feels alien, and then, I was apparently supposed to teach him to get over it and do shit on his own. I couldn’t, of course. I held him as much as I thought he and I needed it—it wasn’t for him alone. And I loved and comforted and fussed over him all the time because he was the light at the end of the tunnel for me.”

I raised my chin. “There are times when the greatest fear I have isn’t about letting him down, but rather breaking that heart of his.”

“Selene.” Aiden’s piercing green eyes scanned my face. “We meant what we said.”

There were a lot of redeeming things that served to mollify Aiden’s relationship issues. In fact, I wouldn’t call them issues because he was transparent about what he wanted. And his bluntness—I didn’t know how other people would react to it, but I found it oddly comforting.

“You’ve had a shitty past,” he continued as he stacked the dishes in the dishwasher. “And Oliver has faced it, by extension, because of one asshole who couldn’t fucking man up. But—and I say this with complete confidence—we’re not

going to do that, no matter where this goes. It's not routine, what we're on the verge of. That means that it could go anywhere. But when it comes to your kid, we promise we won't let our personal stuff get in the way of showing up if you and he want us around."

I took a whole minute to compose myself. "Thank you for saying that. And now, I want to change the subject. Where are we . . . what are we doing here?"

Talk about jumping from the frying pan into a fired clay oven.

"You tell me," Aiden said. Suddenly, he was walking in my direction.

With every step he took, I felt flutters erupt like I was living a high school dream. He picked me up and set me down on a counter. "You tell me, Selene."

He pulled me to him and kissed me. The touch of his lips was real and electric, so soft and hot that I practically melted against him. His chest against my palm felt like safety and adventure at the same time.

He carried the scent of regency romances about naughty dukes and blasphemous acts. I parted my lips by sheer instinct and the urge to deepen the symphony of our movements. He groaned into my mouth and thrust his tongue inside, taking control of my waist, hips, and mind.

Aiden kissed like a man on a mission to make his lady wet—and if that was true, he'd succeeded within seconds. I moaned as if set on fire, desire settling on me like a balmy summer morning.

I was acutely aware of Dom and Niall watching us, their own expressions hungry for more.

It was fucking sexy.

AIDEN

That had to be the mother of all kisses.

Selene, her legs wrapped around me, leaned back on the countertop as I invaded her mouth like I was on the hunt for some treasure only she had access to.

I felt parched as if I had gone to sleep and woken up days later in the middle of a desert. There, in front of me, was the oasis.

Her.

She made me feel like I was water and air and every atomic particle of every substance.

As I broke the kiss to leave a trail of kisses on her neck, she opened her eyes and looked at me, mirroring the same, gnawing hunger that I felt. That I knew Dom and Niall felt as well.

“Are you . . .” Niall asked her shakily. “Are you okay with us being here?”

“I like being watched,” she replied, curling her lips into a slow, burning smile. “So stay, by all means.”

“Give me a minute,” she murmured to me.

I moved aside to let her get down from the counter.

As Selene walked to the expansive fridge that pretty much took up one entire wall in her kitchen, she dropped pieces of clothing on the way.

It was like watching a jewel unfold itself. The jeans went first, then the T-shirt, and finally, the bra. She left her panties on.

My body responded in kind, growing hard simply by watching her strut around in her element.

In my mind, I was already miles ahead, with my hands around her waist and my cock buried deep in her body.

She opened the fridge door and leaned to look inside, giving all three of us a long look at her shapely legs. When she emerged, she had a bowl of cream in one hand and strawberry jam in the other.

“I made this batch fresh this morning,” she said, laughing. It was fucking beautiful, how unaware she was of just how sexy and adorable she could look at the same time.

“And now, I’m in the mood for doing a trial run.” Her tone became low, and she drawled over the words as her eyes fixated on all three of us. “I want you all out of your clothes.”

She didn’t need to ask twice.

I let out a low breath of anticipation as she walked back to me. She mixed the contents of the two bowls with her index finger before lifting it to paint a stripe down my chest.

“Fuck!” I winced slightly at the coldness. Selene painted another line over my chest. She then proceeded to lick all of it, her tongue flicking rapidly over me as she lapped up the sweetness.

“How does it taste?” I asked her.

“Why don’t you tell me?” Her eyes gleamed as she handed the bowl to me. I took a bite of a whole strawberry and used the remaining half to act as a spoon.

I lifted dobs of cream with it and lined her nipples with it. I sucked on her nipples, my teeth biting and pulling them.

“Fuck, yes,” she sighed, rolling her head back. She scooped more of the cream onto her fingers before trailing it down my stomach to my already engorged shaft.

Kneeling beside me, she licked down the creamy honey trail. Her ruby-red lips parted as her tongue darted out to remove the cream from my cock. She licked the head clean before taking my shaft in her hand.

At this point, I could barely speak except to emit guttural groans. She stroked back and forward while her other hand cupped me. She kissed the head yet again before slowly parting her lips over it, sucking it into the warmth of her mouth.

“Fuck, what are you?” I asked, arching my back as I felt jolts of electric pleasure run through my skin. My groans grew as I watched my cock disappear into her mouth. Her tongue swirled over the head rapidly until she tasted my precum.

“Your turn,” I muttered, holding her still so I could pull out. I got down from the countertop and picked her up. “Where’s the bedroom?”

“Are you going to carry me there?” She giggled.

“Let’s say I’m your chariot for the next two minutes.”

She laughed and led us to the guest bedroom, which was on the same floor. Once we were inside, I set her down, closed the door, and locked it.

Turning, I witnessed Selene sandwiched between Dom and Niall. She was moaning softly as they kissed her naked body. Dom’s finger slid down to her slit, which was so wet it slid inside easily.

I went up to her, hungry for more. She turned her head in my direction, and we kissed again, wetter and harder than last time. She gasped into my mouth as Dom’s finger delved inside her, working in and out.

“Come with me,” she murmured before going over to the bed and lying down. I went first, positioning myself on top of her. Her mouth tasted of strawberry jam and cream, sweet, heady, lush. I kissed her lips before redirecting my tongue down to her belly button.

“Give me your cocks,” she called out to Dom and Niall. They climbed on either side of the bed. She wrapped her hands

around their shafts, stroking them as I continued my downward descent. I took her clit between my teeth and lips while my finger entered her wet folds.

“Oh, fuck, don’t stop!”

I had no intention to.

She gasped in ecstasy as I drove my tongue inside, lapping hungrily at her. I licked all the way up to her slit and returned to that little button while two fingers entered her, fucking her hard.

“Aiden.”

I knew. I could feel her building toward an orgasm. Just as she was about to come, I withdrew my fingers and released her clit from between my teeth.

“No!” She cried out at the deprivation.

I laughed at that. “Someone’s being impatient.”

“Don’t fucking stop, please!”

I rose as she continued working the others’ cocks with her hands. My tongue parted her lips to dance with hers. My hardness pressed against her mound.

She freed her hands to slide them down my back, squeezing my ass cheeks before sliding a hand between our bodies and wrapping it around my cock. She squeezed it before slowly pumping it back and forward.

“Oh, you like playing, don’t you?” I growled into her mouth.

“Mmm-hmm,” she moaned, building into an orgasm as she pressed the head of my cock against her clit while continuing her agonizingly slow strokes.

“I need you,” she whispered between heavy breaths.

I kissed her as I lined my shaft up with her pussy.

“Oh, my God!” She gasped, and her mouth remained parted as I slowly penetrated her. I could see her climax as I

reached the deepest part of her. I withdrew quickly, pulling out entirely and making her cry out before plunging in once again.

“FUCK!”

Her body began shaking around me as my speed increased. I pulled myself up so I could thrust deeper, and my pelvic bone met her clit. She wrapped her legs around my hips, pulling me into her. Her hips bucked up to collide with my thrusts.

“Harder!” she cried, her nails digging crescents into my back as I continued pounding into her. I thrust faster, ramming in and out. As I fucked her, I pressed one finger against her clit, and she came the next second, crying out for more.

“Oh, God, yes, yes!”

I could feel the end approaching, and I wanted it to take more time. I pulled out of her once again. My cock was hungry for more. She could see it in my eyes as I looked down at her, splayed on the bed, face like a goddess, body like the sweetest sin.

“Turn around,” I commanded.

She sensed the urgency with which I spoke and complied. Dom stood up on the bed and moved his cock close to her mouth. She obediently parted her lips and swallowed him, making gurgling noises as he held her head to establish a pace.

I lined my cock to that tiny little pucker between her pert ass cheeks, and I could feel her body tremble in surprise.

“Oh,” she cried out, letting Dom’s cock slip out of her mouth. “Aiden—”

“I’m going to fuck your ass, Selene,” I replied, my tone low. “I’m going to fuck it long, slow, and deep.”

SELENE

O h, he was about to do it. And I didn't want him to stop.

I'd never tried anal in my whole life. But tonight, unhinged and raw and crazy as it was, this felt like the most natural thing.

A guttural gasp escaped my lips as he rubbed the head of his cock, already wet with my juices, against my pucker. I was helpless.

He would ravage me, and I wanted it. I craved it.

Dom positioned my face over his cock once again, and I parted my lips hungrily. My other hand reached out into the open air. Instinctively, Niall responded by feeding his hardened rod into it.

I felt Aiden rub something on the tiny crevice. And then, his head slid in—not even the first inch, maybe half. I moaned, hard, around Dom's cock.

Inch by inch, he speared me open, and I fucking loved it. It was a different kind of fullness, like being claimed in ways I never thought possible.

“Fuck,” he groaned as he continued moving inside until the last of him was buried deep in me. I was so full at this point, I could only emit tiny moans as Dom kept fucking my mouth.

“I want . . .” I barely got the words out. “Niall . . . my pussy. I want to be fucked everywhere.”

Niall positioned himself underneath me even as Aiden kept my ass impaled with his tool. He let me maneuver slightly so my hips aligned with both of them.

“Oh, my God,” I said, my head tilting to the side as Niall entered my pussy. I tried to focus on Dom’s cock, taking it back into my mouth and licking all over it.

Then, Aiden and Niall began moving at the same time. They were different kinds of thick—both had big cocks, but Niall’s was more compact, and Aiden’s was a fucking beast.

A series of moans escaped my lips as they began pacing themselves. I was getting fucked in every way possible, and it felt powerful.

I began arching my hips and moving in rhythm to their motions. I clenched the muscles of my pussy and asshole alternately. They responded by pounding harder.

“Fuck, Selene.”

Aiden’s voice was all kinds of hot as he gripped my legs harder. Each stroke was deeper than the last. He was losing himself, which meant he had no more willpower to go slow.

I wanted that. I moaned harder around Dom’s cock.

“Fuck, I love the way your ass clenches my cock,” he said, slapping my left butt cheek for good measure. “Fuck yes.”

“Then show me just how much you love it,” I purred back. He grabbed a handful of my hair, freeing my mouth, and pulled me back.

I arched upward. He planted his palm between my shoulder blades and pushed me onto Niall, who responded by thrusting into me like his life depended on it.

Aiden’s fucking had become animalistic. It was like he really meant to plunder every last breath out of me.

“Fuck yes, just like that!” Niall drove his hips up into me, making all my senses ramp up. I was a mess of raw nerve endings, craving for more.

Aiden groaned as his thrusts reached a feverish pitch. I knew he was at the edge and clenched my ass muscles around his cock once again.

“Fuck, I’m coming!” He thrust into me and filled my hole with his milky seed, breathing hard and deep.

As he pulled out, it felt like I was suddenly emptied—but only for one brief interlude before another cock lined up in the same space. I gulped.

“Think you can take another?” Dom chuckled.

“I know I can,” I replied snarkily. The next second, my breath was sucked out of me as Dom rammed his cock into my asshole. He was the biggest of the three, and his thickness made me grunt as I held on to Niall for dear life.

Their combined thrusts pushed me to the edge where all I could do was clench and moan and hang on as they made me climax not once, but three times in quick succession.

At the third orgasm, Niall joined me, filling my pussy with his hot load, so much so that I felt his and my juices spill out of my folds.

He remained buried in me as Dom thrust harder, faster, and rougher, carrying me to my fourth climax and meeting me there.

Dom bent down and kissed the back of my neck as the both of them pulled out, slowly so that I could adjust to their lengths emptying out of me.

“Fuck, our clothes are still out there,” I said frantically.

Aiden volunteered to be a brave Neanderthal and scooted out of the bedroom with a bedsheet around his body. He was back a few minutes later, all our clothes bundled in his hands.

I laughed as he tried to unload them and ended up whipping the bedsheet into a mess. He sat down and shook his head. “Miss ma’am, give me a minute to compose myself after what we just did!”

We settled down on the bed. I sighed, feeling strangely content even though I had just had three cocks buried in me

like it was the most ordinary thing.

“Did that . . .”

Niall opened and closed his mouth. I knew he was wondering whether I felt uncomfortable now that it was over. I shook my head and touched his back. “It was good. Amazing, actually.”

And I meant every last word of it. I’d never thought I could be the girl to end up in a polyamorous situation, but if it had to happen, I was glad it had happened with these three.

My phone screen lit up momentarily, distracting me. I scooted to the side to take a look at the message. It had to be Chloe. No one texted me this late at night.

But it wasn’t her. In fact, it was a video.

Of me.

Showering naked.

I almost cried out. My breath hitched in my throat as a message followed shortly after the video.

Having fun with your three boys, Selene? You dirty little whore.

My hands began trembling so hard that my phone fell to the bed.

“Selene?” Aiden looked at me, concern etched on his face. “What is it? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. He raised his hands immediately, surprised by the defensive edge to my tone. But I couldn’t stop. I needed them out of the penthouse right now.

Otherwise, there would be more videos. And they would target my privacy, my sanity . . . *my son.*

“Guys,” I said quickly. “You have to go.”

“What?” Dom and Niall exchanged glances. “Selene, what is it? Why are you acting so—”

“I don’t have time to explain,” I replied stiffly. “Please leave. And can you take the back exit from the kitchen? I’ll

have your car sent there.”

Aiden continued looking at me. There was a shadow on his face. It hurt me to see it because it seemed to stem from an idea—maybe he had felt a genuine connection somewhere.

But this wasn't my fault, and I never told him this would be anything more than what it just had been.

He hadn't wanted anything more, either. Nothing was more important than getting around this situation right now.

“It's after three a.m.”

Niall checked his slim Cartier watch.

“Selene, you can tell us if something is wrong. Who knows, we may even be of some help.”

Oh, I wanted to. I wanted to spill everything and depend on them, but being vulnerable in front of men had never taken me anywhere good unless the men were singular, and the singular meant Reynolds.

I shook my head. “I'm fine, guys. I just need time to myself, and I have a lot of work in the morning. I'd really appreciate it if I could get some rest now.”

“Are you sure?” Aiden asked, his tone quiet as the night. My heart screamed *no*, but I met his eyes and said “yes” as convincingly as I could.

“Very well, then. There's nothing more for us to say or do here.”

As always, Aiden was blunt regardless of the circumstances. I couldn't fault him for it, though.

“Aiden . . .” Dom tried to say something, but Aiden turned and gave him a look.

I didn't know what it meant, or the content of the silent conversation that transpired between them. But after a minute, the men got up.

“We'll show ourselves out. Have a good night, Selene.”

I watched them leave. Aiden was the last out the door, and he shut it behind him. I waited to hear the soft click of the door latching before falling back on the bed.

I wanted to cry, scream, rage, call Reynolds, and ask him to book tickets for Ollie and me so we could spend a year somewhere else.

Who was doing this to me, and what did they stand to gain from it? From force of habit, I flicked my Instagram open again.

On the News Feed page, I found three or four pictures, all of them bearing the same curried captions with different flavors.

Selene's Ex is back in town to whip up some trouble!

Our Kitchen Goddess's First Husband was just spotted leaving the chic restaurant Harvest and Hearth! Sources tell us Selene was there too—could love be on the menu once again?

Dave Baxter, the bad boy of the culinary world, is back to win Selene's heart!

Then there were some AI-generated images showing the two of us back together. These were the worst of all.

The grotesque closeness, the way he had his arm warped to fit over my shoulders or around my waist—it showed the extent people would go to build the reality they wanted, regardless of how it impacted others.

My heart felt as sharp as a knife sharpened on a honing rod. I dialed Reynolds's number.

“It's four in the morning.”

“What does that matter when you're not doing your job?”

Momentary pause. “Tell me what's happened.”

“Someone sent me a video. It's me, showering.”

I listened to Reynolds bark out instructions. After that, I rounded up the bodyguards and told them to do a thorough perimeter check.

After all of it, I climbed upstairs and opened the door to Ollie's bedroom. My boy was sleeping, all scrunched up in a fetal position.

His hair, curly and abundantly red, shone softly as the moonlight fell on it. I climbed up beside him and curled my body around his. "Mom?" he asked sleepily. "You okay?"

I wasn't. I'd just straight up told the three men I'd felt a connection with to leave me the fuck alone. I was being stalked.

Dave was back, and I knew he was connected to this massive shitshow.

But I smelled the baby shampoo in Ollie's hair and the precious innocence of his love and held him close to me. "I'm fine, baby. I got you."

DOM

Niall let out a frustrated groan. I heard it but did not know how to respond.

“You know, I’ve seen a documentary of beluga whales making the exact same noise. Time for a habitat change?” Aiden’s voice remarked from the living room of his high-rise apartment.

After last night’s debacle, which I could not even characterize as a *conventional* debacle, the three of us decided to fuck off to his place.

Fan Pier was a waterfront development of clustered, luxe residential buildings with views of the Boston Harbor and the city skyline.

Aiden loved it for the modern architecture, high-end amenities, and proximity to upscale dining and the local farmer’s market.

He also loved it because he was within an arm’s throw of an entire street of strip clubs and bars.

I half-expected him to roll off into one of them after Selene tossed us out. But he just said he wanted to go home and wash the day off him.

“Seriously, Aiden, not the time,” Niall muttered as Aiden appeared in our line of sight wearing nothing but a half-open shirt and boxers. “I’m pretty cut up.”

He set two cups in front of us. “I’m not feeling too hot myself, but what can we do about it?”

“It just . . .” Niall shrugged and took a long sip. “It felt like something bothered her. She was fine before that call came, and then she clammed up on us.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t read too much into it.” Aiden turned his back to us and walked over to the table. He shuffled through the papers, frowned at some of the headlines, rolled his eyes at some others, and then punctuated the air with an “Eh.”

“Doesn’t it bother you, though?” I asked him as delicately as I could. “I mean, you seemed pretty invested in her.”

The energies in the room experienced a subtle shift. Aiden didn’t respond verbally at first, but I saw him square his shoulders.

“What d’you mean? I’m no pussy.”

Niall and I exchanged a long glance.

At one point in time, Aiden had been the mooniest lover boy.

He’d gone the whole nine yards, including attending a Taylor Swift concert, writing crappy poems that still made me cringe, and drowning his sorrows in copious amounts of alcohol.

He liked to say that Lila and he did not work out because the time wasn’t right. They had different plans for the future.

All the crap you’d say to make yourself feel better after getting dumped the night before you were planning to propose.

Lila found out from a friend and panicked. She had too much living left to do to tie herself to a man who was still figuring his shit out.

To be fair, at the time, all of us were in the same boat. We didn’t know if our business would stand or what the future would hold.

But if you asked me, relationships—at least the ones worth sustaining—were supposed to survive that shit, not break because of it.

It was hard convincing Aiden to look at his first and last relationship in that sense. He'd painted it with a stiff golden coat of nostalgic shit.

That meant that whenever we tried to reason with him or help him understand that the relationship had been doomed from the start, he'd become a brick wall. He had a period of blaming himself, cue the crappy poems.

This was followed by blaming her, and then blaming the entire universe of relationships and how fickle they were by nature.

Aiden had reached a point in his life where women weren't the problem, but a relationship? Hell no.

If we ever faced off with our demons, that would be his.

"The sex was pretty amazing, though," Niall offered, trying to lighten the mood. All of us had been feeling low this morning, so I made a decision and decided to keep the restaurant closed for the day.

"It was that bloody phone," Aiden replied, sitting down on the chair and tossing the papers over at us. "And something to do with this shit."

I looked over the first few pages and found a section about Selene's ex, Dave Baxter, who was back in Boston.

I didn't know where he'd been before, but I recognized him immediately. The picture was of the same asshole Niall and I had tossed out of the restaurant a couple of days back.

"Look at this." I handed the paper to Niall.

He took one look at the picture and scowled. "Can you imagine being stuck with a turd like this for as long as she was? I wonder how the hell she put up with him."

"Relationships will do that to you."

I braced myself and looked at Niall. Niall looked back at me. Aiden was about to launch into an impassioned discussion of why relationships were the absolute worst thing.

“Maybe she was too young?” I tried to change the topic. “Okay, how about going out tonight? There’s a new Indian place not too far from here. I’ve heard they have the most amazing vindaloo.”

“She probably stuck with him because he’s the father to her kid and because she felt she could change him into someone else.”

Aiden completely ignored my comment on the vindaloo—a mistake, I’d actually heard rave reviews about it—and let out an angry grunt. “Because that’s what all women do, don’t they? They have this perfect image of their partner in their heads. I think they even make these imaginary suits. And when they find someone who just about feels like a good fit, they force that fucking suit on him.”

“Could be ‘her’ too,” Niall interjected delicately. “We’re all for free love, brother.”

“Yes, him, her, they, it, whatever you’d want to say.” He flicked his hand impatiently. “That doesn’t matter. It’s the fucking suit that’s the problem. What if it’s a few inches too loose or too tight?”

“We go to a tailor?” Niall asked blandly. I kicked him under the table.

“Oh, shut up.” Aiden got up and began pacing the room.

“My point is, you have to meet a set of requirements to please women, and the funniest thing is, they often don’t know what they want themselves! Do you know how frustrating that can be? It’s like shooting blanks, only even that feels less complicated at times. At least you know what the fuck is wrong with you.”

“You sound impassioned,” I remarked, not without a slight smile. Selene had rubbed off on our boy. And he was in it, deep.

He wouldn’t admit it—in fact, I had no idea if he would carry this secret to his grave. I could only hope that would not happen.

“Can we still take a moment to talk about the sex, though?” Niall asked again, even more hopefully this time.

I kicked him under the table again, but he moved his leg at the last second and I stretched mine too far and earned myself a cramp.

My face crumpled. “Damn you.”

“And fuck you,” he replied easily. “Aiden, we never got to discuss the polyamory bit.”

“What about it?” Aiden asked testily. “I’d rather Selene be with us than hang around with a bunch of strangers we don’t know. Plus, have you seen social media and the news? I kinda think something’s going on with her, especially after that thing she saw on her phone last night. Dunno what it was, but it shook her up pretty badly.”

“So, you think polyamory is okay because . . .” Niall let the empty space hang in the air, waiting for Aiden to fill it up.

Aiden shrugged like an angry bull. “I don’t know. I just think she’s safe with us. We’re not going to hurt her.”

There it was. I had to pretend to scratch my beard to hide my smile.

“Wipe that stupid grin off your face. It’s not what you think,” he grumbled. “I hate this shit.”

He *was* feeling stuff for Selene. Niall could see it, and so could I. But it would not be right to keep pressing on the matter.

This was his road to walk, and we could support him on the way, but he’d have to do the walking himself.

There was no denying how special Selene was too. If anyone laid claim on all three of us, I was glad it was her.

Aiden mumbled something about needing a shower and disappeared from the room. Niall sighed. “Do you think we need to be worried?”

“About whom? Selene or Aiden?”

“Both of them,” he replied. “Like, he’s clearly moping over her. And she . . . I don’t know how she feels about us, but I don’t want her to get any wrong expectations. Aiden will likely eat bricks before he admits anything.”

“And you’re worried that Selene could misinterpret the signs and think he’s in love and get hurt?”

“Pretty much. He’d also regret it later. I feel protective toward both of them.”

“There’s not much to do here except see where things go, buddy.” I tapped his shoulder. “I don’t think we need to interfere. If it’s right, let’s trust that it will work out.”

“Isn’t that leaving too much to luck?”

I smiled benignly. “Maybe. But luck hasn’t treated us too badly, wouldn’t you say?”

“Hurry up and get ready. I want to go dig into that vindaloo. Dom, it had better be good.” Aiden’s voice carried over from the bathroom.

We spent the rest of the day going over inventory at the restaurant.

It felt nice to work in an empty space, surrounded by rows and rows of fresh ingredients and spices.

Afterward, we went to the Indian restaurant, and the food was every bit as good as the hype.

Niall wanted to go shopping, so we did that. And by the time night had rolled in, Aiden decided all of us needed a breather. This meant going to a bar.

I was the most reluctant of the lot—I didn’t want Aiden putting himself through the wringer.

From sheer habit of knowing him for so many years, I could tell this was his way of convincing himself he wasn’t a clown in love around Selene.

We had an argument. This ended with him saying, “Fuck off, then. I’m going whether you come or don’t,” and me replying with,

“I’m not letting you get wasted alone.”

Niall served as the referee, and we wound up going to The Azure Lounge, not too far from Aiden’s apartment.

We got past the bouncer and entered the bar. It was a nice enough place, although I’d lost my liking for the raucous music and the drunk dancing a long, long time ago.

I decided this was something I was doing for my best friend. So I followed him to the bar and kept an eye on him as he downed two drinks in quick succession.

Soon enough, a siren made her way toward us. This girl would be a ten on her worst day—legs for days, tits like Aphrodite, and an ass that she knew how to move.

Just Aiden’s type. I could feel Niall stiffen beside me as she came straight to Aiden. “Hey.”

She wasn’t wasting any time, either.

Aiden gave her a once-over. Then, he turned in my direction. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

AIDEN

My fifteen-year-old self would kick me in the balls or tell me to go bury myself in the desert. And I would totally agree.

Dom raised his brows as I looked at him, waiting for him to tell me why there was a stunning woman standing in front of me, and more importantly, why the fuck I didn't give a shit about it.

She was insistent, too.

“Buy me a drink and maybe we can talk about fixing what's wrong?” she asked, smiling at me.

Niall groaned from the side. And me? All I wanted was to finish this drink, go home, and think about Selene.

On a normal day, I would play it cool and enjoy the game until this girl and I would land up at someone's apartment. Or a back alley. And I'd fuck her brains out.

I was apparently done having those days.

No point keeping her hanging. Dom decided it was time for him to take the lead. “You're very lovely. But my friend here has a dysfunctional libido.”

“What?”

I gave Dom an angry scowl and mentally promised to get back at him for this before tilting my glass to my lips. “You heard him,” I muttered. “Major issues.”

“Gross.” The girl turned around and disappeared into a sea of dancers. She’d find someone else soon enough.

“Seriously? All the things in the world, and you had to give me a bad libido?”

Dom became very busy examining his hands. “I always wanted to try that one and see how it went.”

“Splendidly. I’ll remember to return the favor sometime in the future.” I set the glass down on the bar counter. “I think I’ll just go home, boys. No point hanging out here since my cock’s decided to go on leave.”

Dom and Niall nodded in unison. “Yeah, we have a long day of work tomorrow. Want us to walk you back?”

“No, man. What are we, a bunch of high schoolers? Go on home. I’ll be fine.”

I left the bar and headed to my apartment.

The lights of Fan Pier’s towering buildings shimmered in the night, casting a glow over the Boston Harbor. The water rippled gently, reflecting the illuminated cityscape.

Bostonians, always on the move, strolled along the waterfront, drawn by the allure of the Seaport’s bustling nightlife.

Laughter and the clinking of glasses spilled out from open-air patios.

The Seaport district was a microcosm of Boston’s dynamism. From the murals to the people, everyone here had a reason that kept pushing them forward, all the time.

It was comforting at times because the business of all of it sucked you in. And then, there were moments like tonight, when it left you feeling alone even though you knew you had friends to count on.

Once I was back home, I poured myself a glass of whiskey and spent some time going over Selene’s social media profiles.

Something was there. I didn’t want to put a name or label to it, and I didn’t want to rush into anything, but seeing her

scared or unhappy did stuff to me.

Leaning back against the plush fabric of the couch, I closed my eyes and imagined her here with me. In nothing except a towel.

I pictured her straddled on my lap, my cock buried inside her.

Selene, looking down at me, her eyes soft and deep.

Selene, speaking the way she did, the little things only she could do to make everything seem so special.

From the day of the wedding, I should have known that there was always going to be more to us than just sparks, that my body could make do with the bare minimum, but my heart?

I shook my head, still refusing to acknowledge the chaos inside. It could not be.

Love was never my thing, and it wouldn't cripple what I'd found with her. This was just a phase. It had happened because I was seeing her after so many years.

It would pass, I convinced myself. I could almost see Dom do his sarcastic lip curl.

Sure, it will.

As I scrolled through her feed, a message notification caught my attention. I opened it immediately.

Selene had made a group with the three of us and her. And she'd named it too.

The Baker's Boys.

I laughed at that. And then I realized it was the first time I'd laughed this entire fucking day. What the hell was this girl doing to me?

Selene was typing, so I waited.

Selene: Hey, guys. I was a total jackass to you last night, and I'm really sorry about that. Shit's been weird around here

lately, but I don't want to trouble you with that. I had a really lovely time.

Dom: Baker's Boy One responding here. It was a bangin' night, sorry for the miserable pun. But Selene, if you want to talk about the weird shit, we're here for that too.

Niall: Totally. Do you need us to beat someone up? Looking at weapons options as we speak.

Given how fond Niall was of packing, and that his brothers went on to join the SEALs, I wouldn't be surprised if he was actually doing that.

The chat had fallen silent. I realized all of them were waiting for me to respond.

I gulped and began typing.

We're glad you're okay.

No. Delete. Too generic.

I was worried something had gone wrong.

No. Delete. She's not ten years old. Thank fuck for that too.

I thought about you all day.

No. Abso-fucking-lutely delete. Damn it.

I tapped my phone's screen impatiently for a minute.

Dom: Maybe Aiden's in the crapper.

Fuck him.

I frowned and began typing again.

Aiden: Not in the crapper, just sitting back with a whiskey. Selene, don't worry about last night. We had a really great time. And we're glad you're feeling better.

I read the message four times before sending it. It felt worse than the last time I'd had to write an answer to pass an exam.

Selene: Thanks, guys, You lot are amazing.

Niall: Now, when do we get to test your cooking?

Selene: Did you just pull a Reverse Uno on me?

I chuckled like a randy love fool.

Dom: Come on, Selene. You have to!

Selene: Okay, okay. Oliver's been asking about you guys ever since this morning. Do you want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?

Niall: I'm in.

Dom: I'm in too.

I was almost tempted to say no. I could see myself falling deeper and deeper into it with Selene. What if . . .

But the alternative, not being there, not seeing her, knowing she'd be disappointed, was far worse.

I sighed and typed my reply.

Beer's on me.



AS IT TURNED OUT, Selena was going to be late coming home from work today.

And the three of us may have been a little too excited. So we showed up at her place on the dot, only to find that she wasn't home.

“Hey, Selene, we're already here. Waiting for you because we don't want to get caught breaking into the fortress.”

She exhaled over the call. “Fuck, guys, I'm so sorry. It's a mess at work tonight. I'm trying to wrap up as soon as I can, but it'll be at least an hour more. I've told Biscuit to let you in.”

“Biscuit? Do I dare ask who this is, and if he is to be enjoyed with a side of tea?”

Selene snorted. “Dad jokes on point. Ollie would really appreciate this. Biscuit is ex-SEAL and head of my security team. Go up to the gate. He'll be there.”

“With a gun and a threat?” Dom asked nervously.

I relayed his concern to Selene, who said something about men and their weak balls before replying with, “Not unless you guys have anything to be afraid of.”

We pulled up in front of her penthouse and waited for Biscuit to let us in. Sure enough, the doors swung open and he stood there. He had a massive body and an oddly tiny head in proportion to it.

“Man, the guy’s making me regret all my life decisions and he hasn’t even said fuck all yet.” Niall shifted on his feet.

Biscuit introduced himself and let us in. He told us Ollie was in the nursery.

We couldn’t get up there fast enough. For one, we wanted to see the kid again. Plus, being around this massive mountain of a man and needing to call him Biscuit just felt . . . all kinds of wrong.

As we approached the nursery, screams and cries punctuated the otherwise clinically quiet air.

The door was open.

I peeked inside.

Ollie was in the throes of a huge temper tantrum. Toys lay scattered across the floor. In one corner of the room, his nanny sat, nursing her foot. “Lego damage,” she muttered to me. “It’s a war scene in here. Be careful where you step.”

I nodded, resisting the urge to laugh.

“Ollie, please clean up your toys,” the nanny pleaded. “You know how Mommy is about this, right?”

“YOU DO IT!”

Ollie had transformed from a sweet child to a mini devil, sans the red skin. Although, given that his face was flushed, we weren’t too far from that stage too. He was breathing hard, and he’d obviously been shouting for quite some time.

Man, I knew Selene loved her kid. She carried a sword in her heart for him. But this wasn’t okay, merely for the reasons

that he'd grow up and think it was okay to treat people as he was treating his nanny.

The boys and I exchanged a look.

I knelt down on the floor beside Ollie. "Hey, little man. How about we make this a high-stakes game?"

Ollie stopped crying and looked at me, questions burning in his eyes. "What is that?"

"Well, let's say you have two choices. You can not clean up, but that means that the three of us won't think you're as cool."

"Really?" he asked, looking at all of us innocently. "But I'm cool!"

"We think so too. We think you're an absolute champ. So, if you clean up in here, we'll know for sure."

"And you'll take me out to get ice cream?"

I chuckled. The boy knew how to negotiate. It would serve him well.

"Sure, kid. We'll get you the best ice cream in all of Boston."

He nodded slowly. "I like to be cool. I'll clean."

And then, he potted toward each of his toys and began picking them up to put them in their baskets. He even patted his nanny on the knee.

"Sorry, Franny. You are good. Would you like some ice?"

"No, darling," Franny replied, still pressing her foot gingerly. "I'm fine. And you're doing amazing."

"Who taught you that ice heals wounds, Ollie?" Niall asked.

He tried to move to help him, but I held him back. "Let him do it," I muttered. "We'll know if he needs help. He will ask."

Niall inclined his head. "Man, he's so cute I feel like doing everything for him."

“Mom did,” Ollie said. “I had to get ice for her sometimes.”

We exchanged another long glance. “When was this?” I asked, unable to keep the slight hint of anger from my tone.

“Many years ago,” he replied thoughtfully. “When Dad lived with us.”

I inhaled sharply. “You’re a good little man, Ollie.”

He turned his face to me and gave me a ferociously toothy grin. He was missing one of his front teeth right now, and it just made him more adorable. I hated that he’d gone through what he had.

“Almost done,” he announced, scrambling to pick up the last pieces of Lego.

We were standing facing the nursery door.

“Man, I can totally see why Selene spoils him as much as she does,” I said, “given that he’s absolutely precious.”

“You guys think I’m spoiling my kid?”

The three of us wheeled around at the same time, and Ollie ran to the door to jump into Selene’s arms.

She replied by hugging him tightly and told him to go take a shower before dinner. Then, she turned her attention to us with her hands on her hips.

Man, she looked like she could kill the three of us with her bare hands.

SELENE

“No, seriously.” I stormed into the living room with the intensity of a furious tap dancer. “Educate me on how to be a better mother for my child. Who better to advise me than three men who—oh, the irony—haven’t even fucking parented a fucking plant in their whole lives.”

I swung around on the boys, who looked like they were in the principal’s office for some wrongdoing. If my memory served me right, they used to spend a lot of time in Mrs. Adleman’s office when we were kids too. I glared at them.

“Heh,” Dominic emitted a nervous chuckle and shifted guiltily on his feet. A bead of sweat trickled down from his forehead to his neck.

“Come to think of it,” he said, blinking at me warily, “I did try to grow a few philodendrons, but I can’t say I did a very good job.”

I snorted and folded my arms across my chest. “So, what were you doing in there? Teaching my kid to think that he can’t rely on his mom?”

“With all due respect, Selene,” Aiden said with a touch of defiance in his tone, “you *have* spoiled your kid.”

A low groan sounded from the depths of Niall’s throat, and Dominic looked like he wanted to be anywhere else in the whole world except here.

“Come again?” I asked, my voice equal parts deadly and quiet. “And clearer this time. For the whole room.”

“Look,” Aiden continued.

He stood up from his perch on the modular, L-shaped leather sofa that formed the centerpiece of the room, its metallic accents attuned to the ambient lighting. “Selene, no one here is questioning your abilities as a mom.”

“Oh, thanks,” I responded, my voice dripping in sarcasm, “because that totally did not cross my mind.”

“I get why you’re being defensive, but that was never our intention. When we got here, we found that Ollie had transformed his nursery into the Gates of Hell. Lego blocks everywhere. Toys scattered around. And he refused to listen to your nanny. He was throwing a screaming tantrum.”

Against my hardest attempts to keep glaring at Aiden, a tinge of worry seeped into my eyes. I took a seat on one of the low-profile armchairs upholstered in supple white leather. I traced the clean lines and polished chrome frames, reminding myself to breathe.

Aiden wasn’t wrong.

I loved Oliver with every last drop of blood in my body, but of late, there were more and more moments when I could not figure out whether there were any likenesses between us except the way he looked.

Right from the time he was a baby, Ben and everyone else used to say he was more of a mini-me, even though he was a boy. He had the same shade of reddish hair, the same eyes, even the little ways in which I smiled or spoke or my mannerisms—they were all ingrained in him.

But I came from an impoverished background that taught me to be kind to everyone around me. After catapulting into wealth, I realized that it was easy to be mean to people.

Sometimes, it wasn’t even intentional. With Ollie, it was more that he’d become so used to having things handed to him that he couldn’t imagine life would ever be any different.

“Did he say anything bad to Franny?” I asked quietly, tapping my foot nervously against the seamless expanse of polished marble.

“No, he was just—let’s say if this were American Idol, he’d definitely win awards for shattering glass with his pitch. Selene, the boy needs to learn humility. And he won’t get that from expensive gifts, holidays, or your bending over to every little command he makes.”

I raised my face to align my gaze with Aiden’s. Part of me wanted to shout and tell him that I didn’t *bend over* to my kid’s demands. But Aiden and that bluntness of his . . .

There were no lies there. And in that instant, I realized that this was the first time Oliver had real father figures around him, barring Ben. That these three boys *actually* wanted him to be an upstanding little man.

The thought was terrifying. I was used to caring for and loving my kid alone.

“I guess I never thought about it this way.” I rubbed my face wearily. “I’m sorry, guys. I’ve had a long day, and the media has been unrelenting. Then, coming home to this . . . I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. Sorry I launched at you like a furious hedgehog.”

“You’re a very cute hedgehog,” Niall mused, stroking the stubble on his chin. “It’s an uncanny resemblance, though. The little suckers in the wild always curl up into balls and have their spikes out when they feel threatened.”

His tone softened. “But we’re not trying to threaten or even question what you do as a mom, Selene. There can be no better parent than you for your kid. No one can know the ins and outs of his heart or what makes him tick. Ollie is such a precious little boy. He just—sometimes, all of us need help. Even him, even you. And that’s where we come in.”

A torrential wave of emotions was washing over me. I could tell that I’d burst like an overburdened dam at any second, and I did not want to be around the boys when that happened.

“Can you . . . I’m sorry,” I mumbled, wringing my fingers. “I know I promised to make dinner, but the time and my energy have just slipped away from me. Can you sit with Ollie

for a little while? I'll just go take a quick shower and come back."

"Don't worry about dinner." Dom checked his watch. "You go freshen up, and we'll hold the fort down."

I gave him a grateful nod and got up from the armchair. Thoughts of Dave and how different he had been with Ollie followed me all the way upstairs to my room and to the shower. I waited until the first stream of ice-cold water hit my bare skin before letting the tears fall freely.

Dave had never—he could never be what these guys were trying to be for Ollie, not once in all the years he'd stayed.

Thankfully, the team of nannies I had for Ollie had more or less been around ever since he turned three, and I knew I could rely on all of them. But none of it sufficed for his absence, even though his physical presence loomed large in the halls of our old home.

He just wasn't *there*.

What if these guys ended up leaving too? My mind felt like a jumbled jigsaw of mismatched pieces, and the more I tried to move the pieces around, the more it hurt.

I'd convinced myself that what we had was fine for the time being. That love wasn't right, not when it had never been.

But . . . there was this tiny, persistent, and terribly irritating voice in the back of my head going "What if?" I wanted to take that voice out and kick the shit out of it. But I also wanted an answer.

I finished showering, put on a change of clothes, and headed down. The living room was empty. I heard the clink of cutlery and cheerful voices coming from the kitchen and dining space.

My lips curled into a little smile as I narrowed in on Ollie's excited chirp. He was telling the boys about his day and how he wanted to learn to play hockey and also become the world's best assassin, like John Wick, spurred by the righteous need to avenge lost wives and puppies. Oh, well.

“Hey, Aiden, have you ever played hockey? It seems so cool!”

Aiden leaned forward, a gentle smile on his face. “Oh, buddy, I used to play hockey back in the day. I was a fan of the Boston Bruins, one of the most popular teams here. You know what? I’d be honored to teach you. We’ll start with the basics, and soon enough, you’ll be gliding on the ice like the legendary Bobby Orr! I can totally see you going to Harvard and kicking some serious butt in the hockey team! Our boy’s gonna go all the way!”

“To the Beanpot tournament?” Ollie asked, his eyes flashing excitedly.

I stood in the shadows, my left hand unconsciously over my heart. How quickly was my little boy growing up? I knew he loved sports, but I didn’t know how hard.

Suddenly, the desolation in me amped up. I couldn’t fucking teach my boy hockey, and that felt like the end of the world.

Hell, I could teach him to make the best confit duck and braised potatoes, but put me on ice and I’d fall flat and break my nose.

Did this mean I wasn’t enough?

I tried to make sense of the lump in my throat. “Oh, Ollie,” I murmured.

Dom, his voice filled with affection, added, “Oliver, you’re going to love it. Hockey creates friendships and unforgettable memories. Just imagine yourself skating on the ice, scoring goals like the great players of the Bruins!”

Oliver’s eyes widened, his excitement growing. “And can we also play basketball?” he asked eagerly, turning to Niall.

Niall chuckled and shook his head. “No basketball for hockey players, my little buddy. But we can always shoot some hoops together. We’ll work on your dribbling skills, passing like a pro, and sinking those shots like a Boston Celtics player!”

I could just see my boy's sweet face light up with joy. He'd probably dream about donning the jerseys of the Bruins and the Celtics all night long.

"Selene, what're you doing, sulking over there?" Niall looked up and saw me hiding like a thief in my own home. "Come here."

I stepped across the threshold into the suddenly quiet room, feeling like I'd broken the liveliness that had characterized it just a second ago.

Then, Ollie turned to me with his Bambi eyes and said, "Hey, Mommy, d'you wanna learn hockey too?" and the world was okay again.

My boy didn't want to do this separately from me. He wanted me to be a part of all of it. My heart swelled as I sat down beside him and planted a kiss on the top of his head.

"Mommy sucks big time on ice, baby. But I'll go to every practice session you have and cheer you on."

As dinner went on, I remained quiet for most of the conversation. The boys, including my own, talked about everything under the sun.

And as I sat there surrounded by and basking in the genuine warmth of their connection, that same, prickly little voice got more insistent.

Selene, babe, you know this isn't just to pass the time.

If I would have been a donkey or a mountain goat, this would have been a great time to aim a kick at myself.

I'm fine, I argued, feeling like one of Shakespeare's crazed heroines launching a disturbing internal monologue with themselves. *I don't need love.*

You can scream that shit to all of Boston, the voice croaked. *But how're you gonna convince yourself?*

SELENE

“Visit us after hours tomorrow?” Niall’s question settled warmly on my skin.

They were standing outside the main door. Dinner had ended, and although all of us wanted more, tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Plus, I had to help Ollie with a science project before I tucked him in for the night.

Biscuit was standing close by, a passive expression on his massive face. He chewed the inside of his cheeks with practiced precision.

It made him look like he was permanently holding on to a sea of insults.

“I feel like he can see inside me.” Aiden squirmed. “But yeah—Selene—about what Niall said, please say yes?”

The sight of three impossibly masculine, ripped, gorgeous men looking at me like three golden retrievers had the dual effect of making me laugh and melt. “Okay. I’ll drop by. Franny should be good to watch Ollie tomorrow night.”

Their faces transformed immediately, the way a sweet golden’s did when their human parent returns after five minutes spent anywhere else without them.

After they left, Ollie and I worked on his project for an hour. Once he went to sleep, I checked in with Reynolds.

The stalker was maintaining a very low profile, but something told me he was outside, in the hedges, keeping an eye on me and my son all the time.

It felt criminally invasive. I had begun considering sending Oliver away to Ben's for a few weeks. I made up my mind to have a talk with him tomorrow.

The first message I woke up to in the morning was from the producer of Kitchen Goddess, William Turner.

It put a smile on my face because he was just that kind of a man—portly, fatherly, and always excited about the prospect of food. For years, he had doubled as a mentor and a father-figure to me.

Turner's office occupied a prime location within the bustling hub of Seaport Square, the very epicenter of the district.

"I'm telling you, he's going to come up with some crazy idea about the next season," Chloe said, waving her piping bag at me.

"I'm not denying he's an eccentric old bat," I admitted fondly. We were in my pastry shop, getting orders out. I'd go to his office once the first half ended. "But he knows how to work his audience, Chlo."

"That he does," Chloe breathed, masterfully piping a sea of roses on top of a decadently lush chocolate cake. "I'm just waiting for the day he'll pack his bags and say he's off on another adventure."

"Like a hobbit?" I asked, imagining the sight of Turner leaving his comfortable little nest and then getting two hours ahead and crying about how cozy his home was.

"Aye, and he'd probably ask you to go with him, and then you'd land in some exotic country eating elven breakfasts and forgetting all about me." Chloe looked up from her creation with a scowl on her face.

"I'm not allowing it. But also" —she sighed wistfully— "it would be pretty fucking amazing."

“I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves,” I said bemusedly. “I’m only hoping we get a renewal.”

Chloe responded with an impressive snort that sounded like something you’d hear on a jungle safari. “Please, that should be the last of your worries.”

It *should* have been, but it wasn’t. Not for people like me who’d internalized the scarcity mindset far too hard.

“You’re thinking about shit not working out once again, aren’t you?” She made dagger eyes at me.

“I demand that you stop right now. Girl.” She made a dramatic gesture of floating with her hands. “Repeat after me. *I embrace abundance. I choose it, I love it!*”

“No thanks,” I replied, choking back my urge to laugh. “I’m not in the mood for Zen boomer bullshit right now. Not that I have anything against positive affirmations,” I added hastily as she proceeded to look very hurt. “I just think you need an obscene amount of confidence to really believe that shit.”

“One of these days, you’re gonna see—what you *feel* is what you *attract*.” Chloe’s voice became all sing-song and mystic, and she flounced into the kitchen.

I proceeded to echo her snort and got back to immersing myself in decorating the pastries.

A couple of hours later, I followed a primly-dressed woman, her hair pulled up into a sleek ponytail, through a maze of carpeted floors and strategically positioned potted plants.

I loved Turner’s office—the rows of wooden shelves holding first editions of the rarest culinary books, the quaint windows overlooking a very lively Seaport Square, and the general hum of activity inside.

Turner’s secretary paused in front of a set of wooden doors and rapped sharply. She poked her head inside for a moment and then opened the doors wide. “Mr. Turner will see you now.”

I stepped in and was immediately enveloped in a bear hug by the man himself. “Selene, my dear, seeing you is always the highlight of my day! This has been the most excellent season, oh, yes!”

He led me to a chair in front of his polished wood table. As I sat down, he made two coffees for us personally.

Little things like this made me adore the man more. I fucking loved unassuming people, especially if you couldn’t tell that they were one of Boston’s earliest self-made billionaires.

“So,” I began, taking a sip of the most delicious coffee. “What are we discussing today? Tell me everything is fine with the show?”

His grin widened as he leaned forward. “Selene, my dear, everything is great. This is just me and you brainstorming about the next season. I’ve been thinking, and I want to bring a taste of wanderlust to the kitchen. We’ll transport our viewers to vibrant food markets, bustling street stalls, and hidden culinary gems around the world. We’ll make them feel like they’re right there, savoring the flavors and embracing the cultures.”

My heart skipped a beat at the prospect. Chloe hadn’t been too far off. I made a mental note to ask her whether she had psychic abilities. “Go on.”

Mr. Turner’s eyes twinkled. “So, we’ll do this in two parts. One part could involve virtually collaborating with chefs from other countries. We can do debates on local cuisine, farmers, and food artisans who have mastered the art of their trade. We’ll celebrate their traditions and share their stories with the world.”

I leaned in. My mind buzzed with excitement, ideas swirling like spices in a bustling market. “Have you narrowed down on any potential names? Who are the culinary pioneers we can collaborate with?”

He tapped on the table enthusiastically. “We’ll seek out the rebels, the ones who challenge the status quo and redefine the

culinary landscape. I'm thinking chefs like David Chang, José Andrés, and Christina Tosi might join us on this journey. But wait, there's another part."

I nodded, waiting for him to go on.

He removed his spectacles and wiped them on a handkerchief as he spoke. This time, his voice was quieter. "You are doing excellent work, Selene. And the show will be yours, as will the final decision. I know you have a son, and you're his sole caregiver. There's time to make this decision, and I will support it regardless of what you choose."

Okay, why was my heart thumping? I took another swig of the coffee. "I'm listening."

"I would love for you to visit some of the prime locations. As of now, we have narrowed down places in India, Thailand, and Vietnam. As we move forward, we'll have more locations. It could . . . it is very ambitious, but you would go global, and so would the show. The possibilities are endless."

This was the most wonderful thing. This was like a fairy godmother telling the fifteen-year-old me that the biggest dreams I'd had were about to come true.

But . . .

Those dreams existed before Ollie happened.

I continued looking at Turner's face, my lips moving without making any audible sound.

Turner finally took the initiative to break the silence by reaching across and patting the hand I was resting on the table. "I don't want you to decide right now. Take a month or two. Just let me know when you're ready."

Slowly, I got up from the chair, a massive feat considering my legs felt like poorly-set jelly.

"I—I just wanted to say that this is the most beautiful opportunity." These were the only words that would come out. "And I can't thank you enough for extending it to me."

He regarded me from the rims of his glasses, his gaze sharp and piercing. "I'm on your side. Always have been,

always will be.”

I stepped outside Turner’s office and headed toward my car. Biscuit flanked me, his big frame oddly comforting.

A few reporters emerged. I was caught unawares, partly because my mind was still reeling from the discussion with Turner. I stopped to greet a few fans who came up to me.

“Selene, can you share any hints about the upcoming season of Kitchen Goddess?” a reporter called out.

“Selene, how do you feel about the rumors of a cookbook in the works?” another voice chimed in.

As I tried to maintain composure, my heart skipped a beat when I caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd.

Dave, my ex, stood there, his eyes filled with a mix of anger and desperation.

Panic surged through me as I realized the potential for a public scene unfolding before my eyes.

“How long will you keep my son from me, Selene? Come on!” Dave’s voice boomed, cutting through the chaotic noise of the paparazzi and onlookers.

The reporters wasted no time in clicking pictures and bombarding me with the cannon fire of invasive questions.

My bodyguards immediately closed ranks around me, creating a protective shield.

Their stern expressions and firm stance reassured me, but the emotional turmoil roiled within.

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be answering any personal questions at this time,” I managed to respond.

The camera flashes intensified, freezing the moment in a flurry of blinding light. My instincts took over, and I withdrew, seeking solace in the safety of my bodyguards’ presence.

As we made our way toward my waiting car, I could still hear Dave’s voice piercing through the chaos.

Finally, the car door closed behind me, muffling the external noise. Leaning back against the comfort of the dark interiors, I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart.

I just wanted to not think. For a little while, or the rest of tonight.

I checked my phone to see if there was a message from Franny. She'd sent one minutes ago, confirming that Oliver had been the best boy tonight.

Choking back tears, I called home and spoke with my son for a few minutes. After he hung up, I told the driver to take a Uey and take me to Harvest and Hearth.

Once I reached the boys' restaurant, I took the elevator to Aiden's office. The door was open, and he was standing inside, his eyes glued to something on his phone.

Both Dom and Niall were there with him.

"Selene?" He looked up and saw me, and his face reflected the turmoil I felt. "We just saw the shitstorm on some asshole's Instagram Live. The nerve of that fucking man to accost you like that and bring Ollie into the mix. We—"

Before he could say anything more, I crossed the room and walked into his arms, only stopping once my lips met his. He stiffened for a brief second before responding to the kiss.

"Make me forget," I demanded. "All of you. We can talk about this later. But right now, I just want to forget."

Aiden's arms wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me closer to him. I tasted red wine on his lips.

In the background, my mind registered a faint *click* as one of the other boys closed and locked the door.

AIDEN

I could not get enough of her.

If the end of the world were ten seconds away, this was how I'd like to go, with Selene in my arms and our lips wrapped together.

I parted her lips with intensity, reaching deeper and coursing my tongue over and around hers, swirling, claiming, clashing, groaning.

She clung to me for dear life as I wheeled her around and pushed her against a wall, my hands working fast to undress her.

Her dress came down in a pool at her feet. Impatience marked my movements.

A subtle *rip* echoed across the room, punctuated by a low whistle from Niall. "Man, you gotta buy her a new bra now, Aiden."

I looked down to survey the damage, the taste of her sweet mouth lingering on my tongue. Sure enough, the expensive lace and wire entrapment was ruined, ripped right at the top.

Her full tits spilled out. I groaned harder at the way they curved and how the low, dim lights of the office illuminated the darkening pink at their tips.

My left hand went to her back, and I undid the clasp.

The damaged bra came undone, and I tossed it aside before burying my face in the valley between her plump, juicy

mounds.

“I’ll get you a lifetime supply of boobie holders,” I said with a muffled chuckle. She responded with a moan that told me she didn’t give a fuck about the bra either.

I moved my hands to cup her breasts, marveling at how they gleamed like moonlight—but prettier, and with perfectly peachy centers.

I could enjoy a lifetime of desserts shaped like boobs, but nothing would come close to the sweet perfection that was Selene’s.

My tongue moved like a crazed traveler, licking around each areola, one breast at a time. I nipped the pointed ends before opening my mouth wider to taste as much of her as I could.

Her left leg wrapped around my hip, and she ground against my hardness. My cock was ready to burst out and fuck her, but I wanted to take it slow.

“Fuck.” She undid the button on my trousers, and I wriggled out of them, standing only in my boxer briefs.

“I’m thinking I’d like to play a little.” She grinned before extricating her breast from my mouth and dropping down to her knees.

Oh, fuck.

She pulled the briefs down with one firm *yank*.

My hard cock sprang up and bounced in front of her face. She looked at it and chuckled, wrapping her soft hand around the hard shaft and gripping it firmly.

“Boys, does either of you have a mint on you?”

“Huh?” Dom and Niall had been so caught up watching the two of us that the question caught them unawares.

“A mint,” Selene repeated, turning her sultry eyes in their direction.

“Yeah, I have something,” Dom said. He took out a lozenge from his shirt pocket, opened the packet, and put it in

his mouth. He crossed the room to where we were.

“You’ll have to get it yourself.” He leaned down and pulled her up till his face was level with Selene’s. Selene parted her lips, and Dom kissed her hard. When she emerged from the kiss, she had the candy in her mouth.

“Should I be worried?” I asked her with a hint of a smile playing on my mouth.

“No. You should be in heaven.”

She parted her lips and dropped her mouth to the head of my cock, closing around it just behind its head. She sucked on the mint and my shaft hard.

“Oh, my fucking God.”

My mouth fell open at the simultaneous play of cold and heat. My cock responded to the coolness of her tongue by becoming stiffer.

She ran her tongue over and around the head a couple of times before sliding her mouth down the hard shaft.

“Holy mother of no gag reflex,” I groaned, barely getting used to my cock’s engorged response to the mint as she proceeded to take more than half of my length into her wet mouth on the first attempt.

She gripped the base of my cock with one hand and pumped it while she sucked the rest.

I reached out to grab the nearest table, unable to stand still.

She moaned at the first hit of salty precum and sucked on the head hard. She pumped the shaft firmly to squeeze more out of me, and my cock rewarded her with a squirt.

“Mmm, I love how you taste,” she murmured, greedily swallowing it down. She slid her mouth up and down on my shaft, intent on watching me surrender to her. If she kept up her pace, it wouldn’t be too long before I did.

The boys had undressed.

Dom went to the ground, on his knees, and whispered something in Selene’s ear.

She nodded with my cock still firmly planted in her mouth and repositioned herself so she was now on all fours, her ass in the air while she continued tongue-fucking my organ.

“Ah, fuck, yes, that feels so good!” She paused for a quick second as Dom’s cock aligned with her wet pussy. With one swift and guttural groan, he was inside her.

Selene looked up at me as Dom fucked her from behind. She smiled around my cock, her expression equal parts amazement and arousal.

Her mouth hung open slightly, a thin line of saliva trickling down to her chin. I’d seen all of her by now, and this—this was her at her sexiest.

“I’m gonna make you come now, Aiden,” she said breathlessly while her hand still pumped the base. “And I wanna taste you and feel your cum on my tongue. Don’t you dare hold back.”

Before I could say anything, she clamped her mouth back onto my cock.

The only word that escaped my lips was a resounding and gloriously loud “*FUCK!*” She took as much of it inside her mouth as she could on each stroke, covering everything shy of the last inch.

“Mmm, oh!” She moaned as Dom’s movements increased, and he began slamming into her in earnest.

“Niall!” she cried out.

Niall almost killed himself as he tried to trip over a mountain of shirts and trousers in his hurry to get to us. On any other day, I would have made a very poor joke. Right now, my blood was in a different place.

He came to stand beside me. Selene released my cock momentarily and held out her tongue for Niall’s. She was panting from the force of Dom’s shaft plunging into her.

The room was full of the sound of his hips slamming against her pert ass cheeks as he grunted and plunged his cock in her body.

Niall fisted her hair and pumped his hips as he began fucking her mouth. She moaned in response and gave him a playful lick before pulling away and doing the same to me.

A slow smile of disbelief spread across my lips. She was teasing us, driving us out of our fucking minds.

“Fuck yes, babe,” Niall groaned as I watched her suck on his cock, the shaft slick and shiny with her saliva.

She took mine in her grip and pumped me in her hands, attending to all of us as only *she* could. I was nearing the end. I could just tell.

“Selene—”

She understood the cue and went for the kill. She replaced her hand with her mouth. I felt the first familiar twinges in my balls that signaled an oncoming orgasm.

This one would hit me hard and fast. It built quickly, quicker than anything I’d ever experienced before.

“OH, MY FUCKING FUCK!” I gasped before it hit.

“I’m gonna come!” A split second later, I did. I groaned loudly through gritted teeth as I came, my cock exploding in Selene’s warm-cold mouth.

“Mmm!” She moaned around my cock as it pumped and filled her mouth.

At the same time, Dom’s slamming had reached a feverish pace. He grunted hard as his cock ravaged Selene. I could see her hips twitching. “Dom,” she cried out, removing her attention from me for a second. “Dom, I’m coming!”

“Come for me, then,” he roared, slapping her ass cheeks hard as he continued to mount her.

I could feel her hips buck and twitch—the sensation of her climax seemed to carry over to her very lips and tongue as she moaned and trembled around my cock, enveloping it in her mouth once again.

She gripped the shaft tighter in her hand as she sucked out every last drop. I put my hands on her hair and held her close,

shoving my rod forward and deeper as I continued to spill into her.

“Nngmph,” she moaned incoherently as I held on to her hair, my cock shoved into her mouth until I felt the head hit the back of her throat.

She grabbed my thighs and made the most impossibly sexy sounds.

I did not know if it was the sight of her claiming me like this, or the moans, or how her saliva mixed with my cum and trickled downstream, right to those fucking tits, those tits that I dreamed of day and night.

My cock’s throbbing slowed as my orgasm began fading. I removed my hands from her head and gasped for breath.

But she wasn’t done playing femme fatale—maybe it came naturally to her. She grabbed the base of my cock with her hand and continued pumping it firmly to get every last drop out of me.

She slid her mouth up the shaft to swallow before finally slipping her mouth from me.

“Fuck.” I breathed hard. My heart was in overdrive. I leaned down to kiss her lips. My chest heaved as I stood back and watched her waste no time in turning her lips to Niall, who was waiting.

NIALL

I opened my hands and grasped Selene's head as she went to town on my cock. In the background, I could hear Dom panting as he fucked her.

Aiden was still breathing hard. I didn't blame him. Selene was fucking alchemy.

That tongue—it was insane, what she could do with it. It was something else watching her clean Aiden's dick like that.

It felt insanely filthy and hot at the same time because she was *our* girl. No one else could boast of this kind of a vice-like hold over us. Only her.

“Mmm?” She posed a very legitimate question to me as she looked up at me with my cock in her mouth.

She swallowed deep, as if the abyss of her throat were a vacuum, and paused to lightly tongue and nip the head before licking the underside in one swift stroke.

“Yes,” I groaned, hoping this was the right answer.

It had to be because she responded with increased fervor and lifted her hands to stroke and cup my balls as her mouth continued to work my rod. Her moans were growing desperate.

“Selene—” Dom called out. The man was speeding into her like a freight train. “I'm gonna come.”

She opened her mouth long enough to say two words before busying herself around my cock once again. “In me.”

The command was clear, and Dom complied. Her moans heightened in rhythm with his final thrusts as he climaxed inside her, slamming hard and fast until he had buried every last inch of himself inside her pussy.

“Fuck!” she cried out, coming from the sheer intensity of Dom’s climax. Her cries reverberated around my cock as she wrapped her tongue over it. I was close—so close.

Aiden took Dom’s place, his cock already prepared for a second round. I couldn’t help but emit a wry chuckle, but it was quickly replaced by a gasp as she bared her teeth to graze the surface of my rod.

“Selene?” Aiden called out her name like it was a soft prayer.

“Yes,” she cried out as he positioned himself. “Fuck my ass, Aiden.”

I saw him grunt as his cock invaded the tight upper pucker, inch by inch. Selene’s gasps and moans were becoming unhinged, and she was driving me crazy.

“Oh, fuck.” Aiden breathed hard as he filled her ass with his tool, pausing as the last inch went inside so the both of them could get used to having him in there.

“Niall,” she cried out, her eyes holding an unspoken request.

I nodded as if my brain was in tune with my penis—which never usually led to anything good—and slipped under her body.

In the next minute, we adjusted so Selene was between Aiden and me, our cocks buried in both her holes.

“Fuck, I’m so full,” she groaned. That was our cue, and we began pumping into her at the same time. Our cocks moved in tune with each other’s.

I slowed down when Aiden increased his speed and paced up at the reverse.

“Oh, fuck yes!”

“Would you like to slow down?” Aiden asked.

“Fuck no,” she cried out. “Don’t you dare!”

He chuckled. We began fucking her in earnest, our cocks slamming into her depths together. Her moans rivaled our frenzied grunts. I could tell all of us were right on the edge.

“Fuck!” Selene cried out as I reached her shoulder and bit the soft skin seconds before erupting into her.

She clamped her pussy’s muscles around my cock, willing me to fill her with every last drop of cum that came out of me. I groaned and held on to her hips as she bucked, clenched, and twisted over me.

Load after load shot out, drawing her to another orgasm.

As I finished, my cock lay buried in her while Aiden continued pounding her ass. Her sweet mouth was open, and I filled it with my tongue, kissing her deeply and gently as Aiden neared the finish line.

“Fucking hell, I don’t believe it!” she cried out, surprising even herself as she rode high on the wave of yet another climax, mirroring Aiden’s starry-eyed expression as he came in her ass.

“YES! YES!” I could feel her vibrations surround and cover me, and I held her like I was a blanket, carrying her through the orgasm.

Slowly, as the three of us finished, we began getting back to our senses. Dom was watching from the side, enjoying the show with a glass of wine in his hands.

The fucker had finished and found the time to make himself a drink. He raised his glass at us. “A-plus performance.”

I rolled my eyes at him as we tried to catch our collective breaths. Aiden gently lifted Selene to her feet. “Bathroom’s to the right,” he said while kissing her mouth softly.

“Wanna join me?” she asked, playfully batting her eyelashes at us.

Dom let out a shaky chuckle behind me. “I’ll need an hour, and possibly a pep talk. I think you just took me on the roller coaster of my life and I’m still at the top.”

Selene’s smile was part shameless, part victorious. “Well, what good is any ride if you plummet downward too soon?”

She blew a kiss at the three of us and disappeared to take a shower. Aiden and I got our clothes back on, and I poured whiskey into three glasses. An evening like this felt like it demanded some Hibiki.

“By the way,” Aiden said as he sipped on his drink. “We need to do something about Selene’s ex—that Dave fucker. He’s a bad seed.”

Dom tilted his glass and examined the amber liquid with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Do you think she should involve the police? For him to come and be so nasty to her in front of a whole gathering, it tells me there’s nothing he won’t do.”

“He’s done more.” Selene’s soft remark carried through the room. She’d washed up and was back in her pretty paisley dress. But her face was sorrowful.

“Talk to us.” I poured her another glass and offered her a chair. “How long has this been going on?”

She took a jittery sip and nursed the glass in her hands. “A while. At first, both my PI and I felt that I had a crazy stalker fan on the loose. The signs pointed to it too. Someone had gained access to my old home. And . . .”

I watched her bite her lower lip and proceed to unconsciously nibble her fingers. She did this a lot when she was anxious.

“You’re safe here.” I sat down beside her and planted a gentle hand on her back.

She nodded slowly. “They were taking videos of me while I was in the house. Nothing to do with my son, but it still shook me up pretty badly. Then I found some of my underwear had gone missing.”

“What?” Aiden choked on his drink and disappeared behind a bout of coughing. When he finally got his voice back, he looked livid. “What the fuck? Did the police catch him?”

Selene smiled sardonically. “You think? No leads. There was nothing to work with, so I left the old place and moved to Seaport. For a while, I felt safe there. With all the fortifications, security, top-notch bodyguards—it should have been enough.”

“Are you still getting blackmailed?”

The question hung in the air, and for a long time, Selene did not say anything. When she did respond, it was with a slight jerk of her head.

“Selene, you need to get the authorities involved.”

“They’ll do nothing except find reasons to take Ollie from me,” she replied, her voice jangled and nervous. “The world is hard enough for a single parent, especially one who lives in the constant light of media attention, Aiden. I can’t risk it. Plus, my PI is literally more useful than a hundred working policemen, and even he . . . even he’s not gotten too far ahead. He thinks that whoever is doing this is already close to the family or to someone near me.”

She shivered. “That’s why he keeps getting access. That’s why he keeps hunting me down. When I tell you how helpless it makes me fucking feel . . .” Her voice died down, and her eyes began burning.

“I’ve been thinking of sending Ollie to Ben’s for a while. Maybe he will be safer there.”

“Listen.” Aiden moved his seat closer to Selene’s. “Let’s say you do that for a week. But unless you find the man who’s doing this, you’ll always be in danger, Selene. And by extension, so will Ollie.”

Realization hit her face and made her features bigger. She looked like a frightened lamb, a disturbing contrast to the powerhouse woman we knew.

I hated that someone had the guts, the fucking nerve, to do this to her.

“Can you think of any legal way to help her?” Dom asked Aiden, his face also cast in a frown.

“Yeah.” Aiden’s expression changed, and he worked the insides of his mouth like a cow chewing on cud. It would make anyone else look comical, but he was a handsome devil, so any shit he did somehow managed to suit him.

“Listen, can you do something? Begin documenting every interaction and incident involving Dave. If he sends you any emails, messages, voicemails—anything at all—you need to make sure you take screenshots and keep copies of everything.”

Selene nodded. “Okay. I can do that.”

“And if you can, try to reach out to any common friends from your past—or even if you know people right now who witnessed the hell you and Ollie went through when Dave was in your life. I wish . . .” He sighed.

“I wish I’d have known you back then. I’d have told you to keep live footage of how he treated you at home.”

“Wait.” Selene closed her eyes, trying to remember something. “Our old home—where Dave and I had a showdown before he abandoned us—there were cameras in the living room. I don’t know if I still have the footage, but I’ll go over some of the boxes I brought back from there. It’s been years, but I haven’t been able to open many of them.”

“If you need help, you know all you need to do is ask, or just look at us like you do because that’s enough to make us want to move mountains for you.” I stood up to fetch Selene’s phone from her bag. It was ringing.

When I handed it to her, she had a very soft light in her eyes. She smiled at me. “Did you mean that?”

I responded with a nod. “Hey, I say it like it is.”

Selene’s nanny was calling.

“Hey, Franny, what is it?”

“Selene, I’m so sorry to spring this on you, but Ollie has been having nightmares once again, and he’s crying for you.”

DOM

My grandmother loved to throw random Irish quotes at me whenever I complained about life turning out less than ideal. Which was most of the time after I began school, to be honest.

But most of all, she clung to one saying when I began hiding the problems that I'd started facing. I was a misfit all through school life, and this meant that most of the time, I was either trying to stay hidden or to run from bullies because my hiding spot wasn't good enough.

This changed slowly once Niall and Aiden came into my life, but for a long while there, it was a rough road. And Grandma used to tell me that *two shorten the longest of roads*.

It felt inconsequential at the time. I was pretty convinced no one could help or understand me.

But there were days in the present moment when I traveled back to sitting in her kitchen and watching her slice soda bread into neat little squares as she tried to get me to open up. I missed the smells of laundry soap and love on her.

And tonight, when Selene told us her kid was having a nightmare and it was likely the result of trouble at his school, I wanted to show up for him.

Aiden and Niall decided to stay back and hunt through social media. Some of Aiden's friends had gone on to become private detectives, and he knew one who worked nights.

“I’ll go with you, if it’s okay.” I looked over at Selene. Aiden had his laptop open, and he was typing furiously to someone in his Facebook contact list.

She cast a worried glance at me, and it told me what I needed to know. She was afraid of wasting my time and involving me in what could be a tricky situation with her son.

But Niall and I had already figured something out. We knew it would take Aiden longer than the two of us to get to this stage, but we knew what we did.

We didn’t want to do anything to hurt Selene. And that was big, but not in a gloating or ridiculous, self-righteous kind of way. It simply meant that if there were a way for us to lessen any amount of pain in her life, we’d go in guns blazing to do what we could.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I am.”

“Cool.” She tossed her phone into her bag. “Guys, I gotta go. And I’ll be taking Ollie to Ben’s tomorrow. Let me know if you find anything, and thanks a million for trying.”

Aiden looked over the screen of his laptop. “We’re doing this because we want to be around you, and we want that chickenshit ex of yours to burn in front of our eyes. Prime satisfaction guaranteed.”

She let out a snort and laugh mixed into one adorable little grunt. “I’ll take that. Come on, Dom.”

“You know, don’t be too worried,” I tell her as we got into her car. “I understand saying this is pointless and Ollie is your kid, so you can never *not* worry when he’s upset—but boys his age don’t have the easiest time getting through school.”

She reclined back in her seat and covered her face with her hands. “Oh, trust me, I know. I feel responsible because I’ve made him change schools in the past. He deserves more stability, and I feel like I keep taking that from him?”

The last line felt more like a question than something she was just saying, so I shook my head. “You’ve been protecting

him, Selene. Sometimes, that means making tough decisions that he won't quite understand at his age. But there's always a way through—let's see how he's doing right now, and we can work from there.”

She reached her hand out and laid it over mine. “I can't tell you how much I appreciate this.”

“It's the most natural thing for me,” I replied. “What's the point of being around someone so special if I can't take care of them when it's rough weather?”

She let her hand rest, and I did not remove mine either.

The rest of the ride back to her place was quietly companionable. The warm summer air drifted in, mixed with ocean salt breeze and slight melancholy. Neither of us felt the need for stupid small talk, and she got some shut-eye on the way.

Once we got down, Selene ran through the main door and called out to Ollie as soon as she was in. His cries were audible, even from the ground floor.

Franny came down the stairs with visible distress on her face.

She quickly relayed the events of the night. “Oliver was fast asleep but suddenly woke up crying for you, Selene. He even wet the bed, which is unusual for him.”

Selene's eyes welled up with tears, her voice trembling with worry. “This is my fault. I should never have left him alone.”

I'd seen and known Selene enough to understand that she had a way of taking the burdens of the world and forcing her shoulders to carry all of them.

She'd always end up looking for ways to blame herself—even if she was far removed from the scene.

I held Selene's quivering hand, trying to calm her racing thoughts. “Take a deep breath, Selene. Let's go find him. Trust me, we'll figure this out.”

Turning to Franny, I asked urgently, “Where is Oliver now? Show me to him.”

She led me to the nursery, where we found Oliver huddled in a corner, tears streaming down his face.

Selene’s heart broke at the sight of her distraught son, her maternal instincts urging her to rush to his side. But I gently held her back, reassuring her with a squeeze of her hand.

Sitting down beside Oliver, I spoke to him calmly. “Hey, champ. What’s going on?”

Oliver didn’t respond immediately and continued sniffing. I tried an alternative approach. “Whatever it is, I think our boy is strong enough to face it. You’re not alone, Ollie. We got you. Talk to us.”

Oliver looked up at me, his eyes red and filled with vulnerability. “I dreamed that those bullies Nate and Clive were chasing me to the bathroom again. They locked me up and told me I could only come out when they gave me permission.”

Selene let out a strangled gasp, and I felt a dire urge to personally find the two boys and give them a good, old-fashioned ass whooping.

“Well, we’re going to get that sorted out for you. But even if we couldn’t, you know what? We think you’re much more capable of getting rid of those bullies on your own! What good is that dimwit principal, anyway?”

Ollie let out a weary chuckle. “You know Mr. Sanders?”

I had no clue about him. bless the bloke. But he was obviously doing a shitty job.

“Sure, I do,” I lied shamelessly. “Now, what do you have that the bullies don’t?”

Ollie scrunched his face in ferocious thought. “Better food?”

“You sure do,” I said as I ran a gentle hand over his hair, “but also something else. You’re much, much cleverer than those crappy little idiots, you hear me?”

“You swore,” Oliver said innocently. “Now you have to put a dollar in the swear jar.”

I exchanged a glance with Selene, who flailed her arms helplessly. “I’ll put a whole twenty in there. That should tide me over until tomorrow night. Now, the next time those bullies try to get to you, you know what you’ll do?”

“No?”

“Well, you tell them you have something special for them, and that you’re going to give it to them once school ends. After it does, Mommy and her honcho—Biscuit—will be waiting for you near their car, you hear me?”

Oliver nodded, his eyes rapt with attention.

“You can leave the rest to Biscuit, can’t he, Selene?” I smiled at her. She nodded immediately, understanding the assignment.

“You’ve been bullied? What happened to you?”

Oliver’s tears began to subside, replaced by a glimmer of hope. “Does it get better?”

I smiled warmly at him. My voice filled with reassurance.

“Yes, Oliver. Over time, things always get better. You learn to stand up for what you believe in and stop giving a crap about what other people want to force you to believe. Yes, that’s another dollar for the damn jar.”

Oliver’s face brightened, and a small smile formed on his lips. “I want to be strong like you, Dom.”

I patted his shoulder gently. “And you will be, Oliver. You’re already showing incredible strength. We’ll work through this together, and I promise you, things will get better.”

With Selene’s worried gaze fixed on us, I extended my hand toward Oliver. “Why don’t we go back to your room, Oliver? We’ll stay with you until you fall asleep. You’re not alone in this.”

Oliver hesitated for a moment, then reached out and gripped my hand, his small fingers seeking reassurance. Together, the three of us walked back to his bedroom, Selene following closely behind.

I watched as Selene tucked him in and read him a story. Ever so slowly, he drifted off to an easy sleep. Even after that, we stayed by his side for an hour.

“Leave the little blue light on,” Selene whispered as we finally stepped out of his bedroom. “It gives him comfort on the harder days.” As we walked down the hall, she held my hand.

“You were amazing. That thing with Biscuit. I wouldn’t have thought of it myself.”

“You’re too close to the scene,” I replied. “And that’s fine, Selene. It is as it should be. It’s hard to look at stuff objectively when the person you love the most in the whole fucking world is in pain. Man, that swear jar will be stuffed by the end of this night.”

Selene laughed. “You’re forgiven. Don’t worry about it.”



Selene

BISCUIT and I stood by my Fortuner, waiting for Ollie to appear. School had just ended.

The carpool lane of Southridge Academy looked less like a normal place for picking up kids after school and more like a runway for luxury automobiles.

Parents came, dressed as if they were headed to a fancy Sunday brunch. By contrast, I wore a simple suit, with my hair tied into a sleek bun. Attention followed me around, anyway.

“There they are,” Biscuit said passively—not unlike spotting a friend and waving them over for a comforting cup of tea.

But Biscuit was at his professional best when he was passive because internally, it meant he was seconds away from combusting—if the situation demanded it.

Sure enough, Ollie came toward me, followed closely by two burly boys who took one look at my face and turned to run.

I had a hunch Biscuit wouldn't need to work too hard.

“Don't do that,” I called out to them, keeping my tone pleasant although it was the last thing I wanted to do. “Stay a minute. We'd love to chat.”

I held out a box of hot, fudgy cookies I'd baked this morning. Biscuit stood beside Ollie, positioned like a living, breathing mountain.

“Now, I hear that you've been having some trouble adjusting to Ollie, boys?” I smiled and opened the box. “Go on, take one each.”

The boys gaped at me like a couple of trolls who'd spent too many hours in the sun. “Take them,” I said again. This time, my voice was sharper than a fresh knife. “Please.”

They got the message and quickly took two cookies in their hands. “Thanks, Mrs. Baker.”

I bared my teeth in my best impression of a mother jaguar. “Good. Now, take a bite.”

“Can we just go?” the heavier one asked.

“Do what she says, or there will be more trouble.” Biscuit spoke as if he was saying the most ordinary thing. “We don't like trouble.”

He gulped and his friend nudged him. They took two quick bites.

“Nice?”

They nodded their heads like Russian dolls. “Very nice, thank you.”

“Now, Biscuit here loves these cookies. Almost as much as he loves Oliver. You know what Biscuit hates?”

My voice was dangerously low. But I knew they heard every word.

“He hates bullies who think they can get away with doing whatever they want because of their size. You think that’s reasonable, don’t you?” I asked sweetly.

The boys shuffled uncomfortably. They looked like they needed a long, long hour in the crapper. “We do, Mrs. Baker.”

“Will there be any more trouble?”

“No, none at all.”

“Very good,” I exclaimed and brandished the box at them. “You may go. Please give the cookies to your parents, compliments of Selene Baker!”

I watched them scamper down the lane as fast as they could go. The burlier one stumbled and hit the curb, and his bully buddy did not stop to help.

“Hey, wait up, don’t leave me with that crazy lady,” he hollered at him.

I stifled a laugh as his companion paid no heed to his cries for help. He eventually got on his feet and ran as fast as he could.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I leaned down in front of my son and took his face in my hands. “We’re a team, Ollie. Don’t you ever forget it.”

As I stood back up, a figure stepped out of his car and headed toward us. By this time, I’d seen Dave enough times to know he was in town and hell-bent on making my life go to shit.

But it would *never* feel comfortable.

“Biscuit.”

He didn’t need any further instruction and flanked Ollie and me immediately.

“Selene.” Dave spoke in a surprisingly toned-down voice. “I promise I’m not here to hurt you. I just wanted to see Ollie.”

Ollie was already squirming in my arms. I cast a protective arm around his shoulders, and he looked up at me with big eyes. I did not know the expression in them—they looked like a strange mix of fear, guilt, and longing.

But what was the guilt doing there? I ignored the rising unease creeping up my skin.

“Dave, do not cause a scene here. Not in his school, not around the other parents.” My tone held the makings of the strongest warning I could muster. “You will not ruin this for him.”

“I’m not here to ruin anything,” he protested. He looked lanky and careworn, but there was something else in the depths of his gaze. Something sinister—like a man who was at the end of a long rope and would do anything to take someone down with him as he fell.

“Then leave. Leave and do not bother us anymore.”

“What if he wants me around?” he asked defensively, casting what I could only label an offensive glance at my kid.

I opened the door of the Fortuner and asked Oliver to get inside. He complied quietly.

“You’re making a mistake.”

“I made so many of them when I was married to you,” I replied as I followed my son inside. “I know what mistakes feel like, and this sure ain’t one of them.”

“Selene—”

He tried to lurch forward, but Biscuit grabbed his shoulder and held him like a rag doll. “What’ll you do?” asked Dave, his mouth open and his teeth showing visible yellowish-red stains. “Will you run like a little coward?”

And there, at that moment, I met my ex-husband’s lecherous gaze with murderous calm in my own. “No, Dave. I won’t run. But pull any more shit, and I sure as hell will ride you out of my fucking town.”

SELENE

“Selene, this is such a pleasant surprise!”

Abigail had a big, plastic smile slapped on her face. I wondered how many hours of practice she'd had in the mirror since last night when I'd called Ben to tell him I'd be sending Oliver to stay with them for a few days.

“Is everything okay?” he'd asked.

“Can you do it?” I'd evaded the question with another.

“You know you don't need to worry about Ollie.”

I didn't. Ben and Abigail both loved my son—even if Abigail's love was fashioned to suit a specific construct. She thought Ollie deserved a full home, which, according to her, meant a home with a father, no matter that the father had been a proper asshole.

“It's good to see you,” I replied, trying to be as genuine as I could.

Ben's apartment was situated in the family-clustered heart of Beacon Hill, Boston.

Located just a stone's throw away from the picturesque Boston Common, the apartment boasted a prime location that offered a perfect blend of urban convenience and natural beauty.

Or at least, that's what the real estate agent had told Abigail in a sickeningly saccharine voice. It worked.

I ascended the steps of a well-maintained brownstone and entered through the main door, stepping into a cozy foyer, complete with a vintage chandelier and an antique hall table.

The air was filled with the scent of freshly brewed coffee.

“How are you?” I asked Abigail as she ushered me toward a seat.

“Oh, we are both very busy,” she said, her tone slightly aggrieved. “I keep telling him to not spend so much time outdoors on the weekends. We should be focusing on starting a family, you know?”

I did not know. By experience, it never helped to rush head-first into having kids, especially if you had your own issues to resolve.

That just perpetuated an existing line of generational trauma. And I could tell—even though Ben never said the words himself—that it wasn’t all roses and buttercream in his marriage.

“Where is he?” I asked, shifting in my seat. “I was hoping I could have a quick word with him before I get to work.”

Ollie had pelted through the door before me, launched himself at Abigail and been heartily rewarded with a hug and kiss, and disappeared into their nursery. Yup, they had a fully functional one. Forward planning.

“Right here,” Ben remarked as he trundled into the room, still in his pajamas. His hair was ruffled, and he looked like he needed ten shots of caffeine or a week in bed.

I wasn’t sure which he’d prefer more.

“Tell him he should be serious about planning a family, will you?” Abigail hissed at me like I was expected to understand and empathize wholeheartedly with this maddening urge to fulfill oneself via a child.

I smiled brightly at her as she straightened up, kissed Ben on the cheek, and disappeared into the bedroom.

“So, Abigail thinks you should be having a kid?” I offered.

“Well, Abigail can think a lot of things, and so can I,” he grumbled. He was in a fine mood.

I sighed. “Are you guys doing okay?”

He shrugged and poured a copious amount of coffee into a ridiculously large mug. It looked more like a breakfast bowl.

He chugged the whole thing down, poured a refill, and then sat down in front of me and stretched like a distressed cat.

“We’re fine. You know how it is in marriage, Selene. Can’t be sunshine all the time.”

I nodded affirmatively. “Of course it can’t—so long as you guys are talking about the clouds too. You could tell her the time isn’t right?”

He snorted into his cup and then choked on the next gulp of coffee.

I waited until he was done making sounds like a monkey in the wild. “Are you crazy? Tell Abigail I’m not ready for a kid yet? She’d never understand.”

How is this not a problem?

He must have read the expression in my eyes because he exhaled and took another gulp. “Sometimes, you gotta do what you can to keep things going. So, what’s up with you? Anything to do with Dave?”

Of course, he knew. The whole of Boston probably knew by now.

“Yeah,” I remarked drily. “He’s back in town and trying to get to Ollie.”

“And is that so bad?”

I opened and closed my mouth, repeated this same action about ten times, and then proceeded to tell him just what I felt with an angry, incoherent sputter.

Ben merely responded by waving his now empty mammoth cup at me. “Now, don’t go losing your temper. I didn’t mean it like that. But Selene, you guys were married.

Maybe you two should sit down and resolve your issues between yourselves? Why d'you need to keep fighting?"

"Marriage is not the be-all and end-all of my life," I snapped back. "What the hell is wrong with you, Ben? You knew how he was and how he treated the two of us."

He knew everything except the parts about Dave physically abusing me. That, I could never muster enough strength to talk about. Even to Ben, and on days like this one, *especially* to him.

"Maybe he's changed?" Ben rubbed his face wearily. "Maybe he wants another shot, and this is his way of asking you? I know you don't see marriage the way we do—"

"What way is that?" I snarled back. "The only way? Ben, do you really think marriage is the same as getting imprisoned for life?"

He shook his head stoically. "I never said that. But it is a commitment."

"IT DOES NOT EQUAL YOU SELLING YOUR BODY AND SOUL TO SOMEONE ELSE!" I bellowed at him. Oliver poked his head around the living room door.

"Mom, are you having a hissy fit?" he asked innocently.

Just perfect.

"Where did you learn that word?" I asked him, making a very poor attempt to sound dignified.

"Aunty Abi told me to not disturb you because hissy fit," he replied innocently. Ben let out a strangled grunt as I made dagger eyes at him.

"Thanks for telling me, baby. But I'm fine. Did Aunty say what you'll be doing this evening?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Amusement park and cotton candy, if I'm a good kid."

"You're always a good kid, Ollie," Ben interjected warmly. "Why don't you help your aunt in the kitchen? We'll be along shortly."

I watched as he withdrew his head. The sound of his footsteps pottering down the hallway kept me quiet. It would suck to live in that penthouse without him.

But I had to keep his safety first. Abigail was a bitch, but she would never harm my son.

I couldn't say the same for my ex.

"Stay for lunch?" Ben asked. "I think Abi's got something special planned."

"No," I replied. "I have work to do."

"Selene . . ." Ben looked at the window, then the potted plants that lined the space under it, then fixed his eyes on me. "I'm sorry for being so blunt before. I just think everyone deserves a few chances to get their shit right."

Not when the shit involved hitting your sister and bailing on her kid because the asshole thought he deserved better than him. But no one is telling you that, and it's my fault.

"You can't change someone who wants to stay the same."

As the words slipped out of my mouth, a dreadful realization occurred to me.

Wasn't I, unconsciously and over the span of the while I'd been with Dom, Niall, and Aiden, also trying to do the same to all of them?

Even Aiden. Especially Aiden.

The idea that this wasn't anything serious, that I was fine with the four of us having a series of one-night, one-morning, one-afternoon stands, had long gone out the window.

Of late, I'd mostly been telling myself I just liked them for the company.

And because they treated my kid right.

But deep inside, I *wanted* Aiden to be present. All of him. *I wanted him to be in love with me.*

Because I was in love with him. With all of them.

Fuck my life.

“Selene?”

I stood up and my head immediately swam. “Sorry, Ben. I gotta go. Thanks so much for Ollie.”

“Are you—”

“I’m fine,” I said briskly. “Just got my mind on work. I’ll see you next week.”

Ben wouldn’t be Ben if he didn’t try one last time. “At least think about talking things out with—”

I cut him off before he could finish saying Dave’s name. I did not need this day to get any shittier. “Ben, I love you, but I said no. And no doesn’t mean you’re going to keep trying to convince me. I’m sorry.”

Ben looked shocked for a second. I knew I’d hurt him by being this raw, but it felt legit. He’d chosen a jail for himself. That didn’t mean I had to as well.

I went to the dining room. Ollie was busy cutting cucumbers into little star shapes while Abigail told him something about embracing a vegan lifestyle. I snorted, knowing full well that this was what was coming for Ben next.

“Hey, honey.” I dropped to my knees in front of him and bundled him into my arms. “Promise me you’ll be a good kid? I’ll pick you up from school every day and bring you back here. But you gotta keep your end of the bargain, okay?”

He nodded, his face a little sad. “I’ll go home soon?”

My heart broke into a million fragments, but I had to hold it together. “Yes, baby,” I croaked. I wanted to sound reassuring, but my throat was heavy with misery. “In the blink of an eye.”

I undid the Apple watch on my wrist and slipped it around his. It looked clunky on his little hand, but something told me that I’d rather have my son safe. I could worry about the specifics of fashion later.

“Listen up, little man,” I murmured. “You don’t need to wear this all the time, but whenever you go out, make sure it’s

on your wrist, okay? That way, I'll always be connected to you."

"Goodness, Selene, isn't he a little too young for that?" Abigail sounded scandalized. I ignored her.

"You do this, and I'll take you out for ice cream very, very soon. We have a deal?"

Oliver bobbed his head brightly. "Deal!"

I straightened and nodded at Abigail. "See you around, Abi."

"D'you want me to pack some lunch for you?"

"Thanks, but I'm headed to the shop anyway." I turned to leave.

At the door, I stopped for one second and looked back. Oliver was busy learning something else now, and Ben was in the middle of an animated discussion with him.

It involved boats and sailing and visiting the harbor.

He did not look up to see the tears in my eyes, and I turned without making any further fuss. I couldn't get inside the car fast enough.

I typed a quick message to Chloe, asking her to take over for me. My head hurt, and my heart hurt more. And then, I typed another message to Niall.

You free?

I knew this was me, acting on impulses. Same old Selene.

He responded almost instantly. *Where do you need me to come?*

My lips curled into a small smile.

My place.



WHEN NIALL SHOWED UP, I took him upstairs to my bedroom.

I said nothing until he closed the door behind us, and nothing after that. Instead, I pulled him to me and kissed him, hard, fast, and furiously.

“Whoa, Selene,” he breathed into my mouth. “Are you—”

“I don’t want anyone else asking me if I’m okay.” I broke the kiss and looked at him expectantly. “This is what I want.”

His eyes swept over my face, and then, he pulled me back to him and kissed me hungrily.

NIALL

“Are you gonna stand there and look at me, or are you gonna come in, bend me over, and fuck me like you mean it?” Selene asked from behind the open shower door.

Trickles of water ran down her naked skin. She'd left me blue seconds ago after kissing me as if her life depended on it. She'd given me one prompt. “Bathroom, forty seconds later,” before vanishing in there herself.

My brain wasn't functioning. Not its fault, given that all my thinking was happening through my dick.

“I'm gonna bend you over and fuck you,” I replied, returning her smile.

She turned her back to me and faced a corner with a built-in seat. She leaned over and put her hands on the seat, thrusting her pert, shapely ass back at me.

Her already-wet pussy glistened with her juices. I dropped my jeans and boxers, took my hard cock in my hand, and stepped forward between her outstretched feet. I placed a hand on her hips.

“Oh.” She moaned in anticipation, making me harder. I rubbed the head of my cock up and down between her outer lips. They parted, beckoning me.

Splashes of water hit my skin and ran down my body, increasing the sensations rippling through my cock. I placed the head of my cock against her slick opening and pushed.

“Mmm, yes,” she moaned at the same time as I let out a deep exhale and slipped inside her.

“Fuck, that feels so good!” I arched against her as she pushed back into me, opening wide. I went deeper inside, slipping more of my cock into her tight, wet tunnel. Slowly, I worked the whole length in.

She was wet, tight, and fucking perfect. She cried out and put her hands against the shower wall in front of her before gyrating her hips to match my thrusts.

“Oh, fuck.” I clamped my hands on her hips, pulling her back to me.

“Yes, yes, yes!” She gasped as my rod penetrated deeper and deeper into her body. She pushed back in time with each of my thrusts, tightening and clenching her muscles around my cock.

It was fucking insane.

She gasped as the head of my cock bumped the deepest end. My balls were level with her clit. Reaching down, she gripped and cupped them in her hand, tugging playfully.

“Come on, Niall,” she begged. “Fuck me hard and fast.”

Of course, I did.

“Yes, that’s it, Niall! Just like that!” she gasped, looking back over her shoulder at me as she rested her hands on the wall for support once again. “Fuck me just like that! Shove that hard cock in and make me come!”

I spanked her ass cheeks and increased my thrusts, my balls slapping against her ass with each forward motion. She groaned loudly and reached down to rub her clit as I fucked her, hard.

“Fuck, Selene, how gorgeous are you?” I groaned, leaning down to bite the bouncy flesh above her hips before straightening again. In response, she clenched her pussy around my cock once again.

“You keep doing that,” I warned her, “and I’m gonna fuck you even harder.”

“Try me.”

I went in, breathing in ragged bursts as I pounded her pussy. My hips smacked against her thighs, and I gripped her hair and lifted her head up as I rammed my cock into her.

“Oh, my God, I’m gonna come, Niall, I’m gonna come!” she panted. I reached between her parted legs and worked her clit furiously while my cock continued to plunder her pussy.

She cried out as her orgasm exploded inside her. I felt her pussy flutter around my dick but did not stop.

I continued thrusting as she rode high on the wave of her climax. She pushed back, fucking me even as I pounded her.

“Come for me, Niall,” she begged, reaching down and grabbing my balls once again. “Come inside me, fill me up!” She cried out, pulling and tugging on them.

I increased the speed and force of my thrusts, slamming in and out of her pussy in long, deep, and hard strokes. I felt the load building inside me—and I called out her name again and again.

“Selene!” I groaned, pounding inside her body.

“Give it to me!” she begged, pushing her hips back against me as my balls slapped her clit. I groaned loudly as I came. I shoved my cock forward, and it exploded in her pussy, shooting hot streams of cum deep into her.

She cried out as she felt my cock unload in her. I was fucking her very, very hard now, so much so that she had to remove her hand from my balls and hold on to the wall for dear life.

As I kept filling her, pumping stream after stream of hot cum into her, she joined me, crying out as a powerful second orgasm tore through her.

I pushed her hips forward and buried my dick inside her, as far and deep as I could manage.

She squeezed every drop out of me, clenching and gyrating as only she knew how. When we finally stopped, it left the both of us panting for breath and wobbly in the knees.

I held on to her hips for a minute as we calmed ourselves. Slowly, I pulled out, and she stood up and turned to face me, smiling like a vixen.

“That was hot,” I said, leaning in to kiss her.

She increased the speed of the shower, and we stood there until the water hardened me once again, and I fucked her one more time, her leg cast over my left arm as she cried out my name.

By the time we got out of the shower, I could say I’d never had so much exercise in my whole adult life.

We put our clothes on, and she told me she wanted to take a nap. I stayed in bed beside her while she slept, her mouth slightly parted as she took shallow, soft breaths.

How could one human being feel so fucking special?

Dom wasn’t kidding when he said he’d toppled hook, line, and sinker. I was right there beside him, falling hard and fast.



Selene

“TELL ME WE HAVE SOMETHING.” My voice quavered slightly as I stood before Reynolds. The man looked more weathered than last time.

“We do,” he said with a satisfied nod. “My team was able to nab a man slipping out of a celebrity’s home two evenings ago. Not a celebrity—well . . .” He paused and looked like he was rolling words on his tongue before he eventually said them.

“A TikTok star. She’s had a meteoric rise to fame in the post-COVID era. She . . . erm . . . she makes money by impersonating Billie Eilish.”

I blinked at him. “Is this a real job?”

He looked at the table as if it were the most interesting object. “Well, she earned a million last month in brand deals

and collaborations, so I'd say she isn't doing too badly for herself."

I had an impossible urge to laugh and cry at the same time. "What a time to be alive."

"As I was saying," he continued, clearing his throat.

I realized that if we dwelt too long on the topic of the TikTok star's monthly income, he would either have an aneurysm or consider a career change. I did not fancy my most reliable PI turning into a social media influencer overnight.

"The man was caught leaving her premises by a team of ex-SEALS who work at my agency. The modus operandi was very similar, including the removal of an item of underwear from the scene. When we narrowed in on him, he folded like a pack of cards. Just took the right questions—they all have something they'll sell their souls for."

So do I, I thought, disconnecting for a moment. *So does Reynolds and every last one of us.*

"What did you find?" I asked him.

"The man is a professional underwear thief," he responded with a faint hint of incredulity in his voice. He turned a brilliant shade of sunset red as he spoke.

Poor Reynolds, I suddenly thought. This was likely the last conversation he ever thought he'd be having with one of his clients.

"A professional underwear thief?" I repeated his response faintly. "Are you for real?"

"Unfortunately," he replied politely, "I am. It turns out that he works for clients. He—erm—he takes requests from them and collects materials specific to those requests."

"So," I reply, trying to piece together the jumbled mess in my head. "Someone was paying this creep to steal my panties?"

Reynolds squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. "It would appear so. And we have a name. Our fall guy was paid via

cryptocurrency, so it took some backchecking to get to the real source, but it's something you can work with."

I smiled slowly. "Show me the money, Reynolds."

"We went through a maze of blockchain transactions," he said. "A digital maze of breadcrumbs that revealed a highly encrypted cryptocurrency. It led us to a cluster of transactions, each marked by a singular, unique identifier."

I was no stranger to this world, although it was never something I'd dabble in. But I knew one man who was obsessed with it. The pieces began coming together.

"We found a recurring alias across multiple encrypted chats. I cross-referenced the intercepted communications with other evidence, and then, there was a correlation between the timing and content of some of the messages sent to the fall guy."

"One man paid him for multiple things?" I asked, a bead of sweat trickling down my forehead. Unusual because the evening was not balmy.

"Yes. And it came down to you," he replied, his eyes piercing into mine. "Stealing your underwear. Stalking you and taking your videos. Leaving those messages."

"When we infiltrated the chatrooms, we learned about one man's obsession with a particular celebrity chef. It took some time, but eventually, a member agreed to help us in exchange for a price."

"You cut him a deal?"

"Not much I can do now that I'm no longer commissioned," he replied stoically. "But I have useful friends. Don't worry. This member was harmless. I believe he likes to make odd purchases from time to time."

I did not want to know what those purchases entailed, whether they were farts in a can or cheese that smelled like feet. I'd heard enough. "A name, Reynolds."

"The man told us a new member had joined a few months ago, hell-bent on ruining the life of this celebrity chef. The two

had grown close.”

I waited.

“You already know the name,” he finally breathed. “And now . . .” He handed me a sheaf of papers containing paper trails of financial transactions, a written confession from the fall guy, and the details of the jobs he’d been asked to do. “You can do something about it too.”

I looked at the name. *Dave Baxter*.

A lot of feelings went through me. Involve the police. Send Biscuit after him. Kill him myself. But before I could close in on any of them, a wave of impossibly hot nausea hit me like a dumpster fire.

I wobbled up and ran to the nearest bathroom. I was sure the sound of my hurling would have finally sent Reynolds over the edge, but he stood there, passive as ever, when I finally returned.

“Thanks, Reynolds,” I said briskly.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t do anything yet, okay? I need some time to process everything.”

He nodded. “Don’t delay this. We have a very strong lead.”

I gave him a grateful smile, which was monumental considering the extent of the worry that had taken root in me. I was in a shitload of trouble.

After Reynolds left, I called Franny, who’d gone shopping for groceries. I asked her to visit the pharmacy on the way home.

And then, I curled up on a couch by the fireplace and stared at my knees.

With my PCOS, periods had never been a regular occurrence, so I had happily chalked up their two months of absence as something that was routine. Not pleasant, but not unexpected.

Plus, I was probably making a mountain out of a molehill. I couldn't—no. The doctor had told me it was impossible.

Franny came home in twenty minutes. I took the pharmacy bag and thanked her before rushing to the bathroom. Sitting on the toilet, I thought about a lot of things.

Most of all, I wondered what God was playing at.

One minute.

Two.

Three.

I looked at the Clearblue stick in my fingers.

My heart thumped as the truth stared me back in the face.

Two lines. Two lines, both clear as day.

SELENE

Dave was M.I.A.

That gave me more reason to feel panicked and imbalanced.

I stared at the face of the well-dressed detective standing in front of me in the Boston Police Department's District A-1 Station. He was saying words, but all of them spelled trouble.

"Surely, you have an entire force that can locate him?" I sputtered, unable to fathom why so many professionals were having trouble narrowing down on one man with a history of domestic violence, boundary problems, and alcoholism.

"There is a protocol we must follow, Ms. Baker," he deadpanned, revolving his pen in long fingers. I noticed he wore a garnet gemstone on the index finger of his left hand.

"Capricorn?" I asked him.

"Hmm?" He was momentarily caught off guard by my question.

I pointed to the stone on his ring, and he responded with a slight smile. "Indeed. You have a good eye. Ms. Baker, I assure you we are on this case, and we will do our best to apprehend Mr. Baxter as soon as possible."

All I could respond with was a strangled "Thank you," and "Please keep me updated." This wasn't the first time Dave had managed to skirt his way around the cops. From what I remembered, he was pretty good at breaking rules.

But I had a lot more on my plate. The next place I needed to be at was an entirely different setting, but no less nerve-wracking.

Chloe was the only person who accompanied me.

“Selene,” she murmured, reaching out to take my hand as the car went barreling toward the clinic. “It’s going to be alright. Listen, there’s no . . .” She thought about what she wanted to say for a second. “You’re not losing anything here, are you?”

I looked out of the window at the streets flying by. “Depends. How do you qualify losing?”

If it meant the pregnancy, then no—there could be no bad news. If it was a false alarm, I’d learn to make my peace with it and move on with life. And if . . .

My heart expanded at the mere hope of hearing a new heartbeat. For someone like me—a woman who had been told she could never have a child again—this was incredibly humbling.

“You’re worried about telling the boys,” Chloe observed placidly, watching the changing expressions on my face. “You don’t think they can handle it.”

That pretty much summed up hitting the nail on the head.

In particular, I was worried about *one* of the boys. Aiden, his penchant for his single life, his refusal to believe that anything good could come from commitment, and his general desire to remain suspended in free fall.

How would he handle this news?

“Are you going to do a paternity test?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think it would matter. As far as we’re concerned—we’ve been in this together, Chlo. It’s not like I’m in an individual relationship with one of them. It feels like either all of them should know, or none at all.”

Chloe replied with a quiet nod. “Understandable. Okay, we’re here.”

The interior of Remedy Diagnostics was warm and inviting, not the least bit clinical or medicinal as I'd expected it would be.

"Well," Chloe said, looking at the expansive windows and the lined arrangements of Boston ferns and plants. "This isn't all that bad."

I had to agree with her. This was the most generic reception area I'd seen in a long while—it could lead to a dungeon or a library, and I wouldn't be able to say, "I didn't expect that."

A receptionist came forward and asked Chloe to wait in the lobby. She led me down a carpeted hallway after some routine questions.

I'd never get used to being in an examination room, but I told myself to suck it up and lie down on the table.

The ultrasound technician dabbed cool gel on my stomach, and I closed my eyes and said a small prayer.

He placed a probe on my skin and focused on the monitor. And then, I heard him emit a tiny exclamation.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, worried out of my mind.

"Oh." He looked at me kindly and smiled. "Everything is just fine, Ms. Baker. I believe congratulations are in order. You're carrying three viable embryos."



"SELENE, this is a very high-risk pregnancy. You have one functional fallopian tube. As your doctor, I have to inform you of the options that you have available. The decision to move forward, of course, is entirely yours."

Armed with my USG report, which told me I was six and a half weeks into my pregnancy, I sat across a sleek wood table from the doctor. I couldn't believe it. That must mean I had become pregnant from the very first, maybe the second time the boys and I had ever been together.

My new OB/GYN, Dr. Patil, regarded me from the other end. His expression was slightly worried.

“Doctor, I am moving ahead with the pregnancy,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “I only want to make sure it is as healthy as possible.”

“I understand,” he replied, his gaze softening. “Well, we can certainly proceed with specialized prenatal care. This will involve frequent visits, genetic screenings, advanced ultrasounds, and blood tests. I will put you in touch with a perinatologist. Feel free to reach out to them at any point if you are overwhelmed or have a specific question that needs answering.”

He grinned at me. “Your diet must be very healthy. Exercise often—nothing too heavy, but long walks, swimming, anything that keeps your body and mind busy. And then, the usuals—no alcohol or tobacco, and most importantly, keeping stress at a manageable level.”

Dr. Patil guided me through an extensive list of specific medications, possible complications, the chance of an earlier delivery, and the procedures surrounding close fetal monitoring.

By the time I was ready to leave, my head and heart were both suspended.

I almost hurtled out of his office and into Chloe’s comforting arms, because even with three whole little hearts beating inside me, I felt impossibly alone.

Chloe took me back home and made me a cup of chamomile. I could not eat anything. Now that I knew what was going on, the mere idea of food somehow made me feel nauseated.

“Why are you afraid?” she finally asked me. By this time, I’d been pacing around the whole living room like a wild animal in captivity. “Selene, can I say something?”

I shrugged. “Go on.”

Chloe cleared her throat. “For as long as I’ve known you, I’ve seen you play a lot of roles. And you’re damn good at all

of them. But listen. The role that makes you the happiest—the one that always, always makes me go, ‘such a Selene thing’ is so obvious—it’s your role as a mom!”

I halted in my tracks and turned to her. My heart suddenly expanded at the realization that I’d been holding back on.

“I’m going to be a mom again, Chloe,” I whispered. The tears came, slow at first and then like a steady river in the monsoon. “I’m going to be a mom again.”

“And you’re going to be the best fucking one, okay?” Chloe got up to pull me into a tight hug.

“What if something happens?” I sniffled. “What if something goes wrong and the world takes this away from me?”

“Nothing is going to happen,” she said calmly, patting my back as I began hiccupping. “Everything will be just fine, and in a few months, your life will be fuller than ever before. Right now, all you need to do is focus on yourself and make that one last decision.”

I knew what she meant. And I’d been wanting to see the boys all day long. I ached for the comfort of their arms and their languid banter.

After I felt calm enough, and Chloe left for home, I sent a message on the group thread.

Are you guys free?

Aiden was the one who responded.

Niall’s gone to visit his parents over the weekend, but Dom and I are both available and at your mercy, Madam.

I couldn’t help smiling at the way he wrote the message. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe I could tell the two of them right now, and Niall later.

Come over?

His reply came a quick second later.

Tripped and twisted my knee in the hurry to get my pants on. Limping my way to you and bringing Dom along.

They reached my penthouse within the next hour. And I planned to tell them, but afterwards.

For the first time since my life had become a mess of handling Dave's disappearance and then the avalanche of unexpected events, I wanted to celebrate.

I told them to come up to the bedroom, where I stood in front of a long mirror in the skimpiest negligee I owned.

When I wore this, I felt like Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*, but with a touch of something softer. It made me look and internalize the role of a *bad girl in the bedroom*.

The door opened, and Dom let out a long, low whistle. "Looks like Christmas has come early this year."

SELENE

I turned, and the black lace babydoll outfit swished in the most satisfying way. “You think?” I smiled.

Aiden almost stumbled through the threshold trying to get to me.

Hands came on my waist and lifted the lace up to reveal that I wore nothing underneath.

“I need to feel your lips around my cock,” Dom said, moving directly in front of me. He grabbed my hair, and I obliged by going on my knees to unbutton him.

His cock sprang free, thick, veined, and slightly curved. It was already twitching in anticipation.

“Mmph,” I cried out as he teased my lips open with the head and pushed himself into my welcoming mouth. He gave a low, guttural groan of satisfaction as my warm tongue licked and swirled around him.

“Oh!” While I was on my knees, Aiden lay down on the carpeted floor and repositioned me so my legs went on both sides of his head, leaving my pussy in direct contact with his lips.

The first long, sultry lick left me panting around Dom’s dick. He groaned as he thrust deeper into my mouth, feeling the head of his cock push up against the back of my throat.

Aiden licked and nipped my pussy’s lips, stopping in between to clamp his teeth on my clit. I squealed in response. I tightened my lips around Dom’s shaft and began sucking in

earnest, my tongue running under and along his thick rod as I slurped along its length.

“Fuck yes!” He groaned as he felt my lips and tongue slide along and around his length. My legs began bucking as Aiden licked me up like I was honey on his breakfast pancakes.

I popped Dom’s cock out of my mouth long enough to say, “I want you inside me.” Aiden lifted my legs up slightly, turned around to the other side, and then, I could feel the head of his cock teasing my wet, aching slit.

“Oh, yes, Aiden.” I moaned around Dom’s dick. “Fuck me with that dirty cock!”

Aiden reached his hands up to cup, pinch, and slap my protruding ass cheeks. Dom thrust in and pulled back out, only to thrust in again, filling and fucking my mouth with savage intensity.

And then, Aiden plunged inside me.

“Oh, my fuck, yes!” I bounced and bucked as Dom continued pushing deep into my mouth, holding me in position so Aiden could thrust all of himself into my pussy.

Drool spilled out of my mouth and on Dom’s cock as I cried out at the intensity with which Aiden pushed into me. He pulled out completely and thrust all the way in once again.

I pulled my negligee up and tossed it aside so I could grab my breasts and play with them. Dom reached down enough to pinch my nipples and run his fingers on the swollen areolas.

“Lick yourself for me,” he commanded.

I bunched my tits so they reached close enough to my mouth for me to extend my tongue and lick the tender flesh. He groaned in response and pulled my hair, raising my head up so he could claim my mouth once again.

My body shuddered and twitched and writhed as the boys played with and filled me with their fast, furious cocks, pounding into and owning me just like I wanted them to.

I could feel my pussy clench around Aiden’s enormous cock when Dom pulled his dick out of my mouth and said,

“Come to the bed.”

The three of us barely made it. Aiden lay down first and positioned me on top of him while Dom stood at the edge, his feet planted on the floor.

Aiden entered me almost immediately, making my head roll back as he filled me.

“Fuck,” Dom whispered as he lined up his tool with my ass. My heart began pounding furiously as he pushed in. My ass burned and clenched around his enormous length.

Aiden bit on my swollen tits and tugged the nipples as he continued pounding into me, and I screamed and moaned and begged for more.

The pleasure was so hot it felt like pain and bliss at the same moment, and I rode each wave that came once, twice, thrice.

I lost count of how many times the boys made me come until I was mindless, just a sensory being of pleasure and raw, glorious sex, running on high.

Ecstasy shot through my pussy and into my very veins, hot, clammy, and euphoric.

Ripples of pleasure filled my tits. I clenched both my ass and pussy at alternate intervals. I thrust my ass toward Dom, willing him to fuck me deeper. I moaned and cried and opened my heart and body to them.

They were nearing the end too. Dom came first. He grabbed my ass cheeks and squeezed till it was borderline painful. Then, he shoved forward with a deep-throated groan and came.

Shoots of thick, hot cum filled my ass, and I cried out and came at the sheer power that it made me feel. I did that to him.

Aiden reached his limit, grabbed my hair, and pumped deep into my pussy. He shoved deep, so hard that I could almost feel him in my stomach.

“Fuck!” He cried out and began spasming as his cock unloaded into me. I clenched my pussy, hard, willing him to

give me every last drop of his seed, crying as I came once more.

As we rode down the intense wave of our individual orgasms, the boys pulled out slowly, and Aiden laid me back on the bed gently.

“You’re something else, Selene. You’re magic.”

I chuckled throatily. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

As we lay in quiet company, I framed the things I wanted to tell them in my head.

I’m pregnant. There are three of them.

You guys don’t need to be involved if you don’t want to be.

Don’t get overwhelmed.

It’s not a big deal.

But no matter what I thought, I felt the very contradiction of that thought. It was overwhelming. I wanted them to be involved. It *was* a big deal.

Ultimately, I decided it was time to bite the bullet. “Guys? I was wondering—and I don’t mean this in a cheesy, corny, or obsessive way . . .”

I fell silent, and Dom turned and looked at me. “Go on, Selene. What’s on your mind? You can tell us anything.”

Even the fact that I’m pregnant with three fetuses and I don’t want to know who the father is? Even if I told you, I just want you guys to be here and be as overjoyed about it as I am.

Because that was what mattered the most. I wanted the boys to cherish this news the way I did. I didn’t intend for it to be a burden.

“How do you guys think we are doing? Does it ever feel uncomfortable?” I tried to find a way around the topic.

“Not to us,” Dom replied slowly. He reached out and played with a lock of my hair. “In fact, all of it feels really natural, like we’re having the best time of our lives. How about you?”

“Oh.” I smiled. “I love it. I love being with the three of you and how this is so different from what I ever thought I’d have—but in the best of ways, you know?”

“We know,” Aiden said, running his fingers over my shoulder. “I think it’s because we’re non-exclusive, and we don’t have those usual relationship burdens. Like, we’re not obligated to be with each other. We’re just here because we enjoy it.”

The words hit my skin like whiplash.

I didn’t know if Dom felt any differently because I saw his expression grow dark and he gave what looked like an annoyed glance toward Aiden. But that was probably the product of my reactive mind.

The boys weren’t thinking about anything long-term.

They just enjoyed this because we were non-exclusive, because we didn’t have anything to define the limits of this relationship, if I could even call it that.

And just like that, I knew I could not tell them. What good would this news be to them if they would only become worried or devastated or burdened in the wake of it?

I remembered Dave’s last message the day he quit on Ollie and me.

He thought he deserved more than being burdened with a wife and child. He thought we were the reason for his failures.

What if Aiden, Dom, and Niall felt like their lives, careers—whatever made them feel free and unencumbered—would be lost because I was pregnant?

I didn’t want that.

Hell, I didn’t need that. Neither did the little ones inside me. I could do this on my own.

“What Aiden means is,” Dom butted in while scowling heavily at Aiden, “that we really appreciate how well all of us have adjusted to each other.”

“Yeah,” Aiden continued, completely oblivious. “That wouldn’t be possible if we didn’t go about this so freely, right? I mean, all of us got in this knowing there are no strings attached. It’s a lot less messy that way.”

“Totally,” I replied, unable to keep my voice from shaking just a little. “No, I get what you mean. I feel the same way.”

I sat up on the bed.

Dom reached out and touched my back lightly. “Selene, are you alright?”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, my voice suddenly high enough to rival a chipmunk’s. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

My back was turned to the boys, and I used a whole minute to compose my features into what I hoped would convey a cheery spirit. It wasn’t easy, considering all I wanted to do was kick the two of them out, curl under the sheets, and drown myself in tubs of Cherry Garcia.

“Are you sure? Because you don’t sound okay,” Dom persisted, and his questions just got more and more uncomfortable. What the hell was I supposed to say?

Thankfully, Ben’s calling my number offered me enough reason to jump out of bed and run to the charging station like my life depended on attending his call.

“Hey.” Even as I said hi to my brother, my voice came out unnaturally high.

It reminded me of the time I’d done poorly at school and tried to cover up by marking over my grades with a sketch pen. Ben had been the one to save me from Mom’s wrath that day.

“Selene.” The voice at the other end of the line was, somehow, just as high-pitched. And at that exact moment, all the neural wirings that connected me to my son started firing off.

I knew. I just knew.

“What is it?” I shrieked. “Ben, tell me immediately.”

Dom and Aiden were beside me in a second. Aiden reached out to touch me, but I jerked my shoulder away from his hand. It was the last thing I needed.

“Selene—” Ben’s voice was muffled and broken. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know how it happened. Abigail had let him out to play, and he got too far. Abigail went after him, but before she could bring him back, Dave—”

“WHAT DID HE DO?”

“He took Oliver,” Ben whispered. “Abigail got his number plate. It’s BOS-1549, a steel-colored Honda CR-V. I’ve informed the police, Selene—”

I hung up and checked Oliver’s live location, hoping that Dave had, by some ridiculous turn of fate, not taken the watch off or thrown it away.

His specific coordinates appeared on the screen. I rushed to get my car keys.

I frowned for a second. Dave was headed in the direction of the Harbor Tunnel. Could he—was he fucking going to the airport with my son?

“Selene, what’s going on?”

It didn’t even matter what had just happened or failed to happen between us. Right now, all I needed was to get my son back.

“Where’s your car?” I snapped.

“We’ll get it right away.”

“No, wait, don’t bother. Who here can drive fast?”

Aiden came forward.

I tossed the car keys at him. “Dave has my son. Drive like your fucking life depends on it.”

AIDEN

The sky rumbled overhead. *Rain in fucking June. Great.*

“Why the fuck did you have to be so fucking mean to her?” Dom snapped at me as we ran through Selene’s front door. She was shouting instructions to her bodyguards.

Biscuit looked like he was more than ready to kill someone. Hopefully, Dave.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I snarled back. I knew I’d blabbered too much back in the bedroom. None of the words made sense if I paused to think back on them. It was my fucking age-old defense mechanism telling me to save myself from the dreaded *talk*.

“Fuck you.”

I ignored Dom. He had reason enough to be mad at me, but all I wanted right now was to get Oliver home to his mom, safe and sound. The look on her face—fuck, I couldn’t take it. How was he? Was he okay?

Fuck, the second I saw Dave, I’d launch myself like a grenade without a pin on him. I’d—

“Come on!” Selene shouted. “Hurry!”

We bundled into her Fortuner, and she fixed the tracking app on her phone to the front so we could trace Oliver’s exact coordinates.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white as adrenaline coursed through my veins.

The engine roared beneath the hood of Selene's Fortuner.

"Everybody hold on tight!" I shouted over the blaring sirens and pounding rain. "We're going to catch that bastard!"

With a flicker of determination in my eyes, I pressed my foot against the accelerator, urging the SUV forward.

The tires screeched in protest as we shot through the busy streets of East Boston, maneuvering through the labyrinth of cars.

"Dom, keep the police informed," I barked, my voice barely audible over the cacophony of the chase. "We need eyes on Dave's every move."

Dom's voice crackled through the noise, his words laced with urgency. "We're tracking him, Aiden. He's heading straight for Logan International Airport. He's desperate to escape."

My heart pounded in my chest as I deftly navigated the slick roads, my senses hyper-focused on every turn and intersection.

The neon lights of the city blurred into a vibrant tapestry as we sped past, leaving trails of determination in our wake.

Selene's hands clenched the edges of her seat, her eyes locked on the road ahead. Fear and determination mingled in her gaze. I could see the unspoken vow in her eyes—we would bring Ollie back, no matter the cost.

"Wait," Dom called out as we sped toward the tunnel. "Wait."

I brought the car to a screeching halt and gave him my best murderous glance. The door of the Fortuner opened, and a police officer hurtled inside.

"Dom, my boy." He nodded briskly. "More reinforcements are on the way."

"Thanks for doing this," Dom muttered. "Guys, this is Officer Riley."

Riley shrugged and turned his attention to the road. “I owe you.”

Raindrops streaked across the windshield, distorting the world outside as if mirroring the chaos within us. My eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of Dave’s Honda CR-V.

The Harbor Tunnel loomed in the distance.

“He’s almost at the tunnel!” I shouted, my voice echoing through the car. “We can’t let him disappear!”

The tension in the vehicle reached its peak as we hurtled into the entrance of the Harbor Tunnel.

Darkness engulfed us, the only illumination coming from the intermittent glow of the fluorescent lights lining the walls.

Rain thumped rhythmically against the tunnel’s concrete walls, adding a haunting soundtrack to our pursuit.

“Hang in there, Selene,” I called out, my voice resolute. “We’re going to end this nightmare.”

The tunnel seemed to stretch endlessly before us, each passing second intensifying the urgency within. The sound of screeching tires reverberated through the enclosed space as we looped through traffic, each maneuver calculated to inch closer to our quarry.

“We’re close,” Selene said. I didn’t know why, but it felt like I could hear her heart beating out of her chest. “I can see his car! We’re close!”

“He’s not getting away.”

As we closed in on Dave’s car, adrenaline surged through my veins, heightening my senses. The rain-slicked road seemed to bend to our will as we scrambled to close the gap.

“This is it!” I exclaimed, my voice a mix of determination and desperation. “We’re taking him down!”

Blaring sirens echoed off the tunnel walls, the sound blending with the roaring engine and the furious beating of our hearts.

And then, as if time had slowed, we emerged from the tunnel, our vehicles side by side. The moment Dave saw Selene, his face took on a look of panic. In the back seat, Ollie thumped on the window, screaming soundlessly.

“Ollie!” Selene cried out, her voice breaking. “Hang in there, baby. We’re coming.”

But Dave was a man in the throes of desperation. He knew—if it wasn’t this, it was jail. He picked up speed.

A chorus of police sirens blared behind us as their vehicles closed in on our collective target. Flashing lights illuminated the rainy night, casting an otherworldly glow on everything.

“Stay behind us!” a commanding voice crackled through the police radio, its authority cutting through the chaos. “We’ve got you covered.”

With a synchronized display, the police vehicles maneuvered expertly, forming a protective shield around us. Their presence emboldened us, allowing us to focus solely on the task at hand—bringing Dave down and rescuing Ollie.

I could feel the weight of the moment, the culmination of our tireless efforts, and the stakes that hung in the balance.

Adrenaline surged through my veins as I closed the distance between us and Dave’s car. The tension in the air was palpable, the intensity building with every passing second.

Suddenly, a burst of police radio chatter filled the car as officers relayed snippets of urgent information to Riley.

“Cut him off at the next intersection!” a commanding voice boomed over the radio, punctuating the air with a sense of finality.

As if guided by an invisible force, the police vehicles surrounding us orchestrated a coordinated maneuver, boxing in Dave’s car.

The screeching of tires mingled with the pounding rain, creating a cacophony that mirrored the intensity of our pursuit.

“We got him!” Riley shouted.

With a precision akin to a well-choreographed dance, the police vehicles closed in, strategically immobilizing Dave's car.

The sound of doors slamming and officers barking orders filled the air as law enforcement officers moved swiftly to apprehend him.

"Step out of the vehicle with your hands up!" a commanding voice echoed through a loudspeaker, its authority carrying the weight of the law.

Dave, his face etched with desperation and defeat, slowly emerged from the Honda CR-V. He was cornered.

Selene's eyes locked onto him, a mix of relief and fury burning within her gaze.

More police officers closed in, surrounding Dave, their badges glinting in the rain-soaked night. Handcuffs clicked into place.

The whole road had come to a standstill. Yet, somehow, the media had managed to find a quick route to capture everything on camera.

"Mommy!" Oliver threw himself in Selene's direction as Riley opened the Honda's back door to gently escort him out.

"My brave, brave boy." Selene bundled him into her arms and held him tightly. There were no tears in her eyes, only the fiercest fucking love I'd ever seen. She looked at Ollie's empty arms. "Where's the watch, Ollie?"

Ollie lifted his left leg and pulled his jeans up a little to reveal a watch tied to his ankle. "When Daddy told me to come, I thought he wanted to go get ice cream, Mommy. He always took me to get ice cream when he came home."

"What?" Selene's voice was strangled. "Baby, did Dave come to the house?"

"Once. He had the same outfit as the delivery boy, Mom," Ollie said, his tone worried. "He said he was going to tell you sorry and we would be a family again. But then today, I got in the car and he told me he would take me away. So I quickly

took the watch and I . . .” He stopped talking, overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of everything that had happened to him.

Selene wrapped him in her arms and kissed his forehead. “You’re a genius, Ollie. Don’t ever let the world say otherwise.”

“Really?” Ollie’s voice was muffled as he buried his face in her hair.

“Absolutely.”

We had succeeded. Ollie would be safe.

“Hey,” I said, prodding Dom as we watched Selene and Ollie. “Why did Riley say he owed you?”

“Well, he wanted to propose to his girlfriend at H&H. I knew the girl. More because she’d been there a night ago with another guy, and they’d pretty much made out through the entire dessert course. Did him a favor.” He shrugged.

“Guy’s happily married to the love of his life now, and has two kids too.”

“What did you do?”

“What any bro would do. Stopped him from making the biggest fucking mistake of his life.”

I looked at Riley as he sat beside Ollie, getting details on the incident and checking him for signs of any injuries.

“But he made it to a happy ending anyway.”

“Sure he did. Just because it went wrong with the wrong person, why should it be wrong with the right one?”

Selene turned her face to the two of us and smiled. It was a grateful little smile, like the one you’d share after completing a mission together.

And it hit me, standing there in the middle of all that rain and after everything that we’d just been through.

None of the shit I’d told her earlier was true.

I fucking loved her.



Selene

WATCHING Dave get hauled away by the police, and holding my son in my arms, solidified the decision I needed to make.

Dave tried to reason with me, even as the police took him away.

“Selene, we can still work this out.”

“I made you who you are, you bitch!”

“You’re nothing without me!”

“That kid is a loser.”

Smack.

I did what I’d wanted to do forever.

The well-aimed Nike Air Max 97 LX hit him right across the face. It almost happened in slow motion, and the satisfying crunch of what sounded like one of his teeth breaking made my fucking heart sing.

Shutters clicked furiously, but I couldn’t care less. Hell, I wanted this news to come out.

I hoped it would tell enough women that they had whatever the fuck it would take to get out of abusive relationships and own themselves.

“Whoa, nice shot, Selene!” Riley called out. One of the officers gave him a reproachful look, so he toned it down.

“I mean, calm down, ma’am,” he corrected himself hastily. “We got this.”

Ben’s car reached the spot within the next five minutes, and he had the look of a man who’d been struck by lightning. I did not hold anything against him, but Abigail . . .

“Selene, I am so, so sorry,” he said, rushing out of the car toward us. To my surprise, Niall got out with him. “I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “He’s safe.”

Niall’s eyes lingered on me. He looked like he wanted to bundle Ollie and me into his arms, but I’d already made too many assumptions about the men in my life.

No more.

I bent down to kiss Ollie’s forehead and asked him to wait with Ben for a minute. Niall had gone over to talk to Aiden and Dom. I went to the three of them.

“Guys?”

They wheeled around to face me simultaneously.

“I . . . ah—”

“Selene, I’m so sorry I couldn’t get here earlier.” Niall’s face was stricken. “Fuck, you have no idea how glad I am that he’s safe, that—”

“I think we should take a break.”

His mouth hung open as if he wasn’t sure he’d heard the right thing. Dom and Aiden looked at each other and then at me.

Aiden was the one who spoke next. “Selene, what is it? What did we do wrong?”

If I’d have to show that to him, then it wasn’t any good, anyway. My voice was stuck in the back of my throat. Words had never felt more difficult.

“You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s just that, with everything that’s happened, I feel like we all need to step back and reassess what we’re doing here.”

“Selene.” Aiden stepped forward, and I took a step back. Dom reached out to hold his hand. His face was withdrawn and remote.

“We understand, Selene,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Aiden’s voice rose, but it fell silent when he looked at Dom’s eyes.

“Let her go.”

AIDEN

Ten Weeks Later
She called us.

“Aiden, Selene has called us to *Pâtisserie du Ciel*.”

I tore my eyes away from the paperwork spread out before me, my brow furrowing as I shot Dom a withering scowl. He returned my gaze with perfect equanimity.

Harvest and Hearth had just had a very busy month. This was a good time for tourists to pool into Boston, which meant it was also a good time for business.

I’d kept myself busy ensuring Harvest and Hearth had all the necessary permits, licenses, and certifications needed by local and state authorities.

This would help our restaurant operate smoothly and ensure maximum footfall.

Honestly, the work was a blessing. Anything that helped me forget was a blessing.

“I’m not going.” I returned to my documents, feigning complete disinterest. A mammoth achievement, considering my heart felt like it could pop out of my mouth at the very mention of *her* name. “There’s too much to be done.”

“Nice try, my boy. But you’re not really fooling anyone.” Dom folded his arms in front of his chest. “And why don’t you want to go?”

I kept my eyes fixed on a row of neat legal jargon. “Because she said she doesn’t want us around? Or did the three of us hear different things?”

“She said what she did. That was months ago. This is different, Aiden.”

I smacked my hand on the table, losing the last ounce of patience I had left. “Dom, this is why men keep losing, okay? She cast us out. She told us she didn’t want to be with us. And she was MIA this whole time, even though we tried to reach out on multiple occasions.”

He groaned, and I rolled my eyes. “Why do you keep insisting on pursuing this? She’s probably gonna call us there and give us more reasons justifying why the breakup was *healthy* and shit. I’m sorry, you can fall for that sappy shit as many times as you like, but I’m not going to.”

“Do you ever hear yourself?”

The faint note of disgust in Dom’s voice surprised me. I’d known him to be angry with me before, but this . . . My lips curled. “Only all the time. Someone has to be the voice of reason.”

“And yet,” Dom said, moving two steps toward my table, “it is never you. Fuck, Aiden, when did you become this fucking pathetic?”

I wasn’t about to sit there and let Dom lecture me on the specifics of how big a failure I felt.

“You think you can just mess with me and get away with it?” I growled, clenching my fists.

I lunged forward, aiming a punch straight at him. But Dom, quick on his feet, dodged my strike with a nimble sidestep. He raised his hands defensively.

“You fucking idiot.” Dom was still infuriatingly calm. “Do you not see how much you hurt Selene with the shit you told her in the bedroom that evening? Are you really this blind?”

But I was raging in the heat of the moment. I swung again, this time aiming for his shoulder, but Dom deflected my punch

with a skillful parry. His eyes narrowed, and he retaliated with a jab of his own.

It hit me smack in the nose. I groaned in pain and reeled back, seeing stars. Seconds later, the taste of warm salt on my lips told me I was bleeding.

“Fuck.” Dom took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me. “I’m sorry about that.”

I sighed, the last of my defenses collapsing. “Don’t be. I probably deserved it. I know I treated her like shit that day. I didn’t mean it.”

Dom responded with a brief nod. Both Niall and he had been quiet with me for a while. We still talked. We hung out and discussed business, but I knew things had changed.

“Can you just come meet her? I’d go with Niall, but she specifically asked to see the three of us. It’s okay if you can’t, though. We’ll figure something out.”

Dom turned to leave. It hurt, watching him treat me so frigidly, like I was a big disappointment to him, nothing more.

“Wait.” I sighed. “I’ll come.”

His shoulders were hunched slightly, but he did not look back at me. “You sure?”

“Yeah, but send a fucking ice pack for my nose first, and give me ten minutes. I don’t want to make a fool of myself in front of her.”

Dom emitted the smallest chuckle. “Sure. I’ll do that. Sorry for hitting you, man.”

“Sorry for starting it.”



Selene

I CALLED THEM.

Did I spend a single moment this entire time when I wasn't thinking about them? Not really. When I wasn't awake, I dreamed of them. When I was awake—you get the drift.

Ollie missed the boys too. Perhaps that propelled me to make this decision. That, therapy, and this persistent, nagging little voice in the back of my head.

About forty percent of me still didn't want to let them know anything about my pregnancy.

I was angry and hurt with what Aiden had told me and how he kept going *on and on* about how great it was that we were non-exclusive.

Like, I got, it, you didn't want to tie your balls to any string.

There was no need to keep making pamphlets on the subject.

But the rest of me—the saner, calmer mother who knew that secrets like these would come out eventually and lead to the spilling of a can of worms—that person believed they had the right to know.

I had started showing, anyway.

This was my second pregnancy, and I had three tiny humans inside me. I looked in the mirror this morning, and already, the bump was getting huge.

At this rate, telling the boys would be the easier thing. Telling Ben? Oh, well.

I'd cross that bridge and hopefully not have to burn it when I came to it. I'd been avoiding him too—not because I didn't miss him, but because he refused to acknowledge Abigail's role in being careless with Oliver.

I was not without faults either.

My home—with all the security and the mountain of reinforcements I had engineered—had not been enough to keep Dave away from my son. I got his breakfast ready and watched him eat, curbing the urge to homeschool him for the fiftieth time since this morning.

“Ollie,” I said, going slowly so that I wouldn’t open up any unpleasant memories for him. “Baby, when Dave came around as a delivery boy, were you outside?”

He gave me a guilty little gaze. “I learned to play with the talking machine, Mommy,” he mumbled while gesturing at the intercom system.

“And I wanted to do a grown-up thing. He was only here a minute,” he continued, his eyes wide and big.

“Were there no guards out there at the time?”

“I told them he was a delivery boy, Mommy.” His lower lip trembled. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. Come here.” I wrapped him in a hug and kissed his head. “Don’t ever be sorry for wanting to be around your dad, okay? It’s an unfair world, and that’s why we have to do this, because it’s the only way for you to be safe, but that doesn’t make it easy. One day, my brave Ollie, one day when you’re old enough, you’ll know that sometimes, the things we must do are the hardest.”

I hated that he was learning such heavy things at such an early age.

Ollie looked up at me curiously. “But I liked learning this, Mom.”

I gave him a surprised little smile. “Really? Why?”

“Because it means you’re not doing everything alone.”

My eyes misted, and I lowered my head to his tuft of hair, willing myself to not sob like a buffoon. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

After dropping Ollie to school, I headed to the shop. I still wasn’t sure about what I wanted to tell them or how the conversation would go.

All I knew was this surprise pregnancy had been a secret for far too long—and I’d rather be the one breaking the news to them before the media did it.

While at the shop, Chloe and I worked through our new menu for the fall season. I was very deep in a conversation about mini pumpkin pies when I got a phone call from my therapist. I went outside to take it.

“Selene, I’m confirming your appointment for this Saturday.”

“Yeah. I—I wanted to say something. I called the boys to the shop today.”

“Are you going to tell them about your pregnancy?”

My voice grew a little high-pitched, as it always did when I was nervous or excited. “I don’t know, Evans. I’m going back and forth all the time.”

“Take a deep breath. What’s stopping you most of all?”

“I think they’re going to look at my pregnancy as a huge burden, and it’s going to ruin every happy feeling I have about it.”

“What did you just say?”

I was standing just outside the shop, my phone connected to the AirPods in my ears. I wheeled around as the question cut through the din of traffic and the thumping of my own heart.

The boys were here.

And they heard everything I had just said.

“Evans, I’ll call you back.” I focused my attention on Aiden, Dom, and Niall. I wasn’t sure which of them looked more stricken by the news.

Oh, correction. Aiden. Definitely Aiden, because he looked like he was a tree caught in the heart of a cyclone.

“Selene,” he whispered, his eyes darting over my body. “Did we hear that right? Are you . . .?”

He couldn’t even say the fucking word.

“Yeah,” I answered what he could not ask. “I’m pregnant . . . with triplets. That’s why I had asked you how you felt

about us the last evening we were together.”

I stopped for a second and dug my nails into the skin of my palms, pushing in deep. *Do not cry. No matter what happens, don't you dare cry.*

“You can be as involved as you'd like,” I continued, keeping my throat dry. “I just—”

“Selene, what the fuck?” Dom moved forward. “You kept this from us for more than two months! Why didn't you just tell us?”

“Why?” I snapped back, realizing full well that there were eyes on me. People had stopped on the road. I ground my teeth. “I'm not doing this out here. Either you guys can come in, or I'll just . . .” I shrugged. “I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to think this was a burden on your single, free, *non-exclusive* lives. Sorry about that.”

“Selene.” Dom sounded miserable. “I know how terrible that was of us, okay? I know we said all the wrong shit at that moment, but listen, you have to understand this. We—”

Before he could say anything more, Aiden let out a sound that resembled the cry of an angry ostrich, turned, and broke into a run.

Dom and Niall shouted after him, but man, Aiden could have given Usain Bolt a run for his money. In another context, I'd have found this faintly amusing.

If only my stupid heart would give me a break and stop shattering. By this time, I was surprised it was even keeping up.

He turned a corner and disappeared within two minutes.

I felt a lot of things. I said only one of them.

“Seems like I got my answer.”

AIDEN

As I headed to the office, I already knew Dom and Niall would be waiting for me. It had been about twenty hours since Selene had told us she was pregnant with triplets.

I didn't know who the father was. It did not matter.

All that did matter was that in the span of these twenty hours, I revisited my childhood home, now derelict and abandoned. Dom and Niall left a truckload of messages and voice notes. I did not listen to any of them.

I stayed in that moldy little row house where I grew up. I spent the night there, going back and forth on the sum total of every decision that had ever brought me to this point, where I had made the biggest fucking mistake of my life.

“Aiden!” Dom’s furious voice greeted me the second I crossed the threshold into the office. Niall stood beside him. Both of them looked just about ready to kill me.

“Are you out of your mind?” Niall hissed. “We had a chance to make things right yesterday, and you bailed on all of us.”

“You don’t need to be involved,” Dom said, his tone raw and on edge. “Just stop doing this, Aiden. Stop putting her heart on the line and let her down easily. *We* still want to be with her. We don’t know if she’ll be okay with that because she’s always seen us as a team. But we’re willing to let her make that choice. But you gotta stop playing, man. She doesn’t deserve this.”

I jerked my head slightly and looked at him with haunted eyes and the ghost of a smile. “You’re right, guys. She doesn’t deserve this.”



“SELENE, the three assholes are here to see you.”

I looked up from the book I was reading and at Biscuit’s placid face. I liked how he managed to call them assholes and behave like it was just the most natural description for them.

“Did they say why?”

Biscuit shrugged. “Naw. But I can shoot them or send them away if you’d like.”

I sighed. “Thanks, Biscuit. I can’t say these are not unwelcome options, but let them in for the time being. If I give you a signal, feel free to shoot.”

He nodded and went to let them in. I wondered if I’d done the right thing for a second. Giving a license to Biscuit to shoot someone probably meant telling him he could *actually* do it. I cursed under my breath. I’d deal with this later.

Dom and Niall had tried their best to convince me they wanted to be around for me, Oliver, and my pregnancy.

I loved them and wanted them to be part of it too. But it was doubly hard knowing they’d go back to their restaurant and hang with Aiden.

Maybe even talk about my pregnancy like it was the most casual thing. It wasn’t about my being with one or two of them.

It had always been about me and the *three*.

I couldn’t get out of that bind, and I’d told them to give me some time to think things over. Of course, they could be involved in the pregnancy. As for the rest . . . my heart was at war.

I stood up from the lounge and walked over to the balcony.

TO THE EAST, an endless body of water stretched out before me, shifting between shades of cobalt and emerald.

Sailboats and yachts gracefully glided through the water, their sails billowing in the breeze. Seagulls soared overhead, their wings catching the warm sunlight, their cries echoing through the air.

Seaport hummed with the vibrant energy of a place on the cusp of transformation. Modern glass and steel structures towered alongside historic warehouses.

Nature, too, joined in the celebration of the changing season. In the distance, the sun, still in its ascent, bathed the city in a soft, golden glow.

Its gentle rays kissed my skin, a gentle reminder that summer's grip was loosening.

It's all sickeningly beautiful.

I sighed and turned around and almost gavemyself a heart attack.

The three boys, on their knees, lined up in front of me, looked up at me. Aiden had a box in his hand.

“What the heck?” I stammered. “What’s going on?”

“What should have gone down a long, long time ago,” Aiden said.

“Selene, I want to ask you the question, but before that, I also want to ask you if you have it in your heart to forgive me for being the stupidest fucking person in the whole world.”

I clutched the nearby table for support.

“When you . . . when you said what you did yesterday, I only thought one thing. That this girl, this beautiful girl with her unbelievably large heart—all she has ever done is love, nourish, and support the asshole that I am. At no point did you ever question my decisions or nature, even though . . .” Aiden stopped talking and swallowed.

“Even though I said things that were absolute shit. And I don’t know if you can forgive me one more time, but if you do, Selene, I swear on whatever is good in this world that I will spend the rest of my life loving you. I would, even if you were to say no, but—ugh, words.” He stopped and scowled for a second. I wanted to cry, laugh, and break down, but most of all, I wanted him to finish.

“Go on,” Dom said, his expression passive. “You’re doing a helluva job.”

“A little help here?” Aiden snapped.

“No, no,” Niall replied. “I think Selene is enjoying this more. Aren’t you?” I nodded, unable to keep a little smile from my lips.

“I—” Aiden looked at me like a little puppy and made another attempt. “Selene, I ache for you. When I’m with you, I’m my best self. And even in your absence, I’m always thinking of ways to be the man you want me to be. I’m not good with words. I think we’ve all established that. But I—all three of us—we love you. We love you, and we love your kid, and we love the little ‘uns that are on the way too. It’s the biggest, sweetest gift that we don’t deserve. And I just—marry me, Selene. Marry me and be with us, because without you, life sucks big time.”

A strangled little cry escaped my lips.

“If you say yes.” Niall smiled. “You’re saying yes to all of us, Selene. We don’t want you to do this alone. Hell, we know you can. There’s nothing you can’t do. But we want to be part of this journey and every subsequent one you go on.”

“Of course,” Dom interjected, “if you want us. We won’t—we’re not imposing, not putting any limits on you. It’s us, Selene.”

Aiden’s smile was like the sun. “We’re endgame.”

I glared at him through my tears. “Why did you run yesterday?”

He winced slightly. “I went home to the old row house where we grew up. I know it was stupid, running like that. But

I wasn't . . . I didn't want to run from you. In that one second, I realized too many things, including how I'd been sabotaging myself my whole life. How I had something so good in front of me, and I'd been so blind to it all the time. And the more life flashed in front of me, the more I needed to get away from myself. I'm sorry, Selene."

I rubbed my face and cleared my throat. "Come on, then. We've got to go."

Aiden almost fell on the floor. "Ow, cramp," he groaned. "No, I mean, where?"

I was already at the door. "To tell Ben I'm getting married and having three kids. I'm not doing that shit alone."

The boys got on their feet as fast as they could and ran after me. I got into the car. "We have to get Ollie from school first."

Aiden nodded. From the corner of my eye, I could see he looked like he was about to pee his pants.

"Scared that Ben's probably gonna hyperventilate and have a self-righteous heart attack?"

He exchanged a quick glance with Dom and Niall. "We're pretty sure he will," Dom replied. "But we'll be there to soften the blow."

I nodded briefly. This was the first time in the last few months when I felt almost happy. *Almost*. I was optimistic and hopeful the whole time, not for anything else but for my children. But happiness?

Against my own urge to remain cool and unbothered, a goofy smile showed on my lips. Aiden caught it immediately, but he didn't say anything. He just extended his hand and left it on my lap as I drove.

I didn't move it away.

Oliver was beside himself with joy as soon as he saw the boys. It made my heart sing to see that look of pure, utter bliss on his face.

“Hey, if it isn’t our favorite little man.” Dom chuckled and picked him up. “How have you been, Ollie?”

“Why didn’t you visit me for all this time?” He scrunched his features into a little scowl.

“We had to go away to do something important, Ollie,” Aiden said, ruffling Ollie’s hair as Dom put him down. “But we’re back now, and we’re staying.”

“Really?”

I considered the oddness of the situation. Me telling my son I was getting married in the school parking lot. But it felt like the most ordinary thing, given that this was *my* life, and most of it was anything but ordinary.

Aiden’s eyes met mine, and I nodded.

“Really,” he said, hugging Ollie. I bundled Ollie into the front seat, and the boys settled down in the back. As I got in the car, I fixed Ollie’s seatbelt.

“Ollie, d’you think it’s a good idea to let Aiden share the penthouse with us?”

“I want all of ‘em to share!” he squealed.

We had considered the option of telling him I was tying myself to all three of them, but it would be too much for an eight-year-old to take. Instead, Dom suggested we tell him I was marrying Aiden. He and Niall, as he joked, came with the package.

“Then that’s just what we’ll do,” I replied, kissing his little nose. “Aiden and I are getting married, Ollie!”

“Whaaaaa?” His eyes widened. “Really?” He turned his head back to look at Aiden, then at me, then back again. “And I’ll be the best man?”

Aiden chuckled. “You’ll be the chief guest, little man.”

“And there’ll be ice cream at the wedding?”

My heart.

“As many flavors as you want.”

“Okay,” Niall said, his tone slightly anxious. “This is like the sweetest moment, but I’m also freaking out.”

I focused on the bend in front, turned the car, and then stopped it. Ben’s place came into view. Abigail was out in the garden, and Ben was standing beside her. The two looked like they were bickering about something.

Abigail saw me step out and fixed her special plastic smile on her face. She gave me a light hug. “So glad to hear everything is fine, Selene. We were very scared about Ollie!”

Of course, she wouldn’t mention how she’d let him out of her sight. I didn’t expect it.

And I didn’t want to open a book I’d chosen to close a while back. Abigail and I would never get along. It was just that.

Not all stories needed to have a definitive end.

“Come on inside, Ollie,” Abigail told my son. “I’m baking fresh dino cookies!”

“What are those?” Oliver asked curiously as he let his aunt usher him to the kitchen.

“Selene. And . . . guys.” Ben came toward us, his expression equal parts delighted and confused. “What’s going on?”

I could virtually hear Aiden panicking beside me. Chicken.

Ben led us to the living room, and we settled on couches, and chairs, wherever we could plant our asses and take comfort in being rooted.

He gave us cups of coffee and then sat down in front of me.

“So, your message seemed urgent. Is everything okay?”

I gulped and took a big sip. The liquid was still hot, and it burned my tongue. Maybe that spurred my answer.

“Ben, I’m pregnant.”

SELENE

“**I**—wow, congratulations!” Ben’s eyes widened, and he seemed unsure of what else he could say. But, bless his heart, he tried to be supportive. I’d give him that.

“It’s just hit me unexpectedly,” he explained before getting up and coming over to hug me. “But I’m so happy for you! When did you find out?”

“A while back,” I replied, biting my nails nervously. “So much has been happening that I didn’t have the chance to tell you. I should have done that sooner.”

“No, don’t worry about it.” He sat back in his chair.

“You told me when you felt it was most appropriate, and I’m super happy for you, Selene. The father . . .” His tone became less *Ben, my best friend*, and more *Ben, my big brother*. “You have told him?”

“A while back.” I was painfully aware that I sounded like a broken recorder on repeat, churning out the same three words again and again. “They were happy to hear it.”

He exhaled a sigh of relief. “Wow, great. I’m glad to know that. I was afraid you were planning to do this out of wedlock once again.”

Ah, the age-old conundrum. I came here with the intention of telling him about me and the boys, but this, this jarring issue—it just made my walls go up.

I was done staying quiet. I was done telling Ben it was okay for him to keep bringing up the issue of marriage like it

had to be the most important thing in my life.

“Not that it makes a difference to you,” I said, my tone suddenly low, “but why is this important?” The room’s atmosphere changed in an instant. I could hear the boys breathing.

Dom was probably telling me to calm down mentally. But I didn’t want to calm down. I wanted to fucking rage.

“I—what d’you mean, why?” Ben let out an uneasy chuckle. “Selene, you’re about to bring new life into the world. Surely, you don’t want them to grow up without a father?”

Niall groaned, and even Aiden muttered, “Ben, dude, time and place.”

“What?” Ben looked at all of us defensively. “Is that not depriving a child?”

“You’d call it depriving even if the father was Dave, wouldn’t you?” I replied, my tone just as low as before. “Even after what he tried to do, right in front of your very eyes.”

“I’m not saying it was right,” Ben said, his voice faltering for a second. “But, Selene, he was—see, I think he’d become an emotional wreck, and that pushed him to make such an extreme choice.”

“Are you hearing the words coming out of your mouth?” I asked him. My voice was rising at an exponential pace. “Are you seriously going to sit there and justify my son’s kidnapper doing what he did because he felt cornered?”

Ben opened and closed his mouth. “I just think the father should be involved.”

I smiled viciously back at him. “Well, that’s great. Because he is. All three of them are.”

“What?”

Ben had never looked so shocked in his entire life, and he’d heard some pretty shocking stuff before. In fact, he hadn’t seemed this stunned the day I told him I was divorcing Dave, which, for someone like him, meant the end of the world.

“Selene, what nonsense is this? Guys, do you know what she’s going on about?”

“I—”

“We—”

“Ben,” I tried again, this time with patience that I did not feel. “Aiden, Dom, Niall, and I—we’re in a relationship. And we’re getting married. At least” —I sighed— “Aiden and I are. The others are part of it too.”

“What?” Ben was the broken recorder now. “What? Part of what?”

I wrung my hands in a frustrated attempt to make sense. “We love each other, okay? And we’re . . . we’re together.”

“You mean . . . all of you? Like you’re—you’re with my three best friends? Selene!” Ben jumped up from his chair. “What nonsense is this? One was bad enough, but you—**THREE OF THEM?**”

“Stop talking to her like she’s a criminal, Ben,” Aiden said, rising from his chair and moving close to mine. I was surprised by the menacing threat in his voice. “She doesn’t deserve what you’re doing to her.”

“**AND WHO ARE YOU TO TELL ME HOW I SHOULD TALK TO MY SISTER? YOU BASTARD!**” Ben launched himself at Aiden.

The next second felt like a live action rendition of the cartoons where the main characters got lost in a cloud of dust as they fought each other. It took Abigail’s screams to make Ben stop.

“Get out,” he finally said, rubbing his bruised chin. “All of you. I’ve put up with enough nonsense from you over the years, Selene. But this is the last straw.”

“Boys, give me a minute with my brother. Take Ollie and wait in the car.”

Niall fetched Ollie from the kitchen, and they took him out.

“I don’t have anything more to say to you.” Ben averted his gaze from me.

“But I do,” I said passionately, finally allowing myself to cry. “I have so many things to say to you, Ben, because I know you as the boy who loved me enough to be the only one to make me believe in myself when no one did.”

“You should leave, Selene,” Abigail said shrilly.

“BITCH, GO BACK INSIDE AND SHUT UP!”

“Selene!” Ben rounded on me, his expression horrified. “You can’t talk to Abigail that way!”

Abigail had already vanished from the spot. I could hear her wailing somewhere in the distance. Good.

“Ben,” I said, my voice trembling. “For the last few years, you have only ever let people come between us. Mom, your wife, Dave, for crying out loud. Every time I tell you something, I have to put my Ben filter on. Is this good enough for Ben? Will this hurt Ben? Can Ben take this? And I’m fucking tired.”

Ben’s expression became steely. “I’m sorry I made you feel that way.”

“Did you know the extent of damage that’s been done to our relationship?” I tossed my hands around frantically.

“Ben, *Dave was an abuser, for crying out loud.* He physically abused me. He told me he deserved a better life than being stuck with Ollie *when Ollie was still in the same room.* I could never fucking tell you any of this because, oh, *how will my brother take it?*”

“Selene, what?” Ben took a quick step toward me, concern in his eyes, but I stepped back.

He wasn’t Ben anymore. He looked like poison, yes.

Sweet, raw, hurtful poison, the link to more pain and hurt that had been caused to me than I deserved.

“You didn’t think,” I said, blinking through the curtain of tears. “And then, Abigail—oh, God. She told me, at your

wedding, that I'd catch a husband soon enough. What century are we living in? You know how she talks about me and the kind of life I lead. You fucking know everything, but if you could *see* it, you'd also know that you're not happy with her. God, it's so obvious.

I shook my head. "But you needed to convince yourself that marriage is the most virtuous thing, even if it's downright the shittiest part of your life. And it's not enough for you to convince yourself, so you need to do that to me too. You won't stop to see that this—what I have with the boys—" My voice broke.

"Is the happiest I've been in my whole fucking life. For once, I feel like I'm in love and I'm safe and I won't be beaten, abused, or tossed around like junk. But you'll only see what others will say, won't you? Because my happiness, my love, my desire to fucking be safe? That's not enough for you. That was never enough for you."

I turned on my heels and stormed to the door. "I'd want nothing more than for you to be involved in my life and that of my kids. But this, Ben? All the time, I kept wondering if I would ever be good enough to be part of your family. Guess what? I'm done trying. I don't know if *you're* good enough, Ben. Have a great life. I'm sorry to have been nothing but a pain in your ass."

As I ran to my car, I could hear Ben say some incoherent, jumbled sentences. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to hear anymore. I got into the car. Niall was in the driving seat. Bless him.

"Let's go home."

"Selene—"

"Please, guys. I don't want to talk about it anymore."



BACK AT HOME, I helped Ollie freshen up, gave him his lunch, and sent him to take his nap. He kept chattering about his day

and how happy he was that we were getting three roommates.

The prospect of having so many other houses to stay in and new parts of Boston to discover excited him too.

Aiden, Dom, and Niall did not let me out of their sight. They fixed me a quick lunch, took care of everything else that needed doing in the house, and even tolerated a few dirty looks from Biscuit.

“He’ll come around,” Dom said, running his hands through my hair as I lay in bed. “It’s Ben, Selene. He takes time to process these things. But he will come around.”

I chuckled wearily. “Put it as number two on the list of things that are probably never gonna happen.”

“What’s number one?”

“Aiden doing a naked dance for me on our wedding night.”

“Hey,” Aiden protested.

“What?” I inclined my head to grin at him. “I said *probably*.”

I closed my eyes. “Guys, I need to take a nap. Can you . . . I’m sorry.”

Aiden leaned down to kiss my forehead. “Sleep, Selene. We’ll be here when you wake up.”

AIDEN

Two Weeks Later

The boys and I were busy planning a dinner for Selene and Ollie when Biscuit trundled into the kitchen. I could never figure out whether this man wanted to be on our team or beat the crap out of us.

“Hey, Biscuit, fancy a cookie?” I asked him with false cheeriness. I held up a choco-pecan cookie and wondered if he’d break it into component parts and shove it down my throat.

“Hmm.” He actually took the biscuit and chomped on it thoughtfully. “It’s good,” he concluded. I decided this was as close as we’d get to being friends. “You have a guest.”

“Who is it?” I asked, surprised.

“Waiting for you in the foyer.”

He rumbled back out, and I signaled to the boys. “Someone’s here.”

“Should I take a knife?” Dom asked, brandishing one of Selene’s choppers at me. I rolled my eyes. “Sure, big boy. Whatever helps you feel better.”

We stepped out into the foyer, expecting just about anyone but the person who stood there.

“Ben.” I didn’t know whether to say sorry or shout at him for what had gone down between him and Selene. It was a

rough way to find out things, but in our case, there was no easy way at all.

“I have one question before I meet Selene.”

“Fire away.”

“Do all of you love her enough to never hurt her the way Dave did?”

Ben honestly looked like he'd been through hell in the weeks that had passed since his last meeting with Selene. His posture held a weariness that was hard to ignore.

Lines of worry and sorrow etched deeply into his face, like rivers carving paths through rugged terrain. The furrows on his brow bore evidence of how difficult the ride here must have been for him.

“Ben, we'd never hurt her.” I shook my head. “We love her, but more than that, we respect and cherish what we have, and we totally think she has the capacity to whoop all of our asses if we try to cross any limits.” My voice softened.

“Honestly, you don't ever need to worry about that. We know what she's been through with Dave. She's not going to go through it again.”

“And you—” His voice broke. “You're not going to bail on her? Forgive me, Aiden, but I know how it's been for you and women.”

Ah. Okay. I'd be hurt in any other context, but Ben was Selene's brother. And even though he'd been stupid—not unlike what I'd been in the recent past too—he loved her.

He had every right to ask these questions.

“I'd die if she wasn't in my life,” I said simply. “I've tried it for a while, and it's killed me internally. I can't say what has changed, but I know I'm here for the long haul.”

Ben responded with a brief nod. “And you guys?”

“We feel the same way,” Dom replied. “We love her, Ben.”

I thought of something else to say, but before I could, Selene appeared at the foot of the stairs. “Ben?” She took one

look at him and broke down.

Ben crossed the distance between them as fast as he could and wrapped his arms around his sister. He held her as she cried and cried, her face buried against his chest.

“Got room in your heart to forgive another asshole?” he asked, hugging her tightly. “Selene, I’m so sorry. About Dave, about never asking you why you left—and everything. I don’t . . .” He took Selene’s hands and held them earnestly.

“I won’t lie and tell you I understand what you guys have going on here, and I . . . God knows, it’s not something I can relate to, but I’m going to support you. Whatever it takes for you to be happy. You deserve it. You always have, right from the time you were born.”

“You mean it?” Selene whispered.

“Selene, Mom used to say that I take such good care of you, it’s like I’m a godsend in your life,” Ben replied. “But it was always the other way around. You saved me. Not once, but multiple times. Growing up would have sucked without you. You’re more than my sister. I felt like I could always boss you around because of the hold I had on you. That was shitty of me. And the things you said about Abigail—”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “The words kind of burst out.”

“You were right,” he replied quietly. “We’ve had problems since long before the marriage because she was in love with someone else. We fell out of love a long time ago, but we’d been together for so long, it only felt like a natural progression to seal the relationship that I now realize we never had.”

“Ben.” Selene hugged her brother again. “Fuck, I’m so sorry. I didn’t . . . I never would have said these things if I knew.”

“I’m glad you said them, and the other things too. You’ve had a tough run, Selene. And you’ve been so strong throughout your life. I know you’ll never stop being strong, but you deserve to rest for a season, to just enjoy the good things around you.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

Ben turned to the three of us, and while he was smiling and had distinctly misted eyes, he bared his teeth in the best possible impression of an alligator.

“You guys, if any of you does anything wrong, so help my next to zero knowledge of cooking, I’m going to have Biscuit cut you lot up and cook you into stew.”

“Heh.” Niall chuckled. “No, okay, I’ll tell you Dom’s secret recipe so you can cook him just how he likes it.”

Dom balked at that. “Hey, that’s my grandma’s recipe. I ain’t sharing that with no one. You can take Pierre’s Italian stew recipe instead. Very umami and hearty.”

Selene wrinkled her nose. “Ew. What in the mother of the next potential true crime documentary is this? Ben, there’s something else you need to know.”

“I don’t think I have room for another stroke,” Ben joked, dropping his arm around Selene’s shoulders. “But try me.”

“The boys and I . . . we’re pregnant with triplets.”

“Oh, my heck.” He smiled. “Fuck, Selene, I am so, so happy for you. The last time, after what happened with Ollie and your doc telling you it would be your last pregnancy . . . I knew how cut up you were. And for the years to wind down and come to this . . .”

The boys and I moved closer to them.

“I should be thanking your best friends,” Selene mumbled between tears and a little snort.

“Nah,” I replied. “We should be thanking you, again and again, Selene. You complete us.”

SELENE

T *hree Months Later*

To the east, the vast expanse of the sea stretched out, its azure waves gently crashing against the shoreline. The water glistened like liquid sapphire.

A crisp, cool breeze whispered through the air, carrying with it the scent of salt and the faint aroma of distant coffee shops.

The leaves, vibrant in their seasonal transformation, adorned the trees in a riot of fiery reds, burnt oranges, and golden yellows. Thanksgiving was almost here, and I had so much to be grateful for.

Towering glass and steel structures mirrored the brilliance of the morning sun, reflecting the ever-changing palette of the sky.

Boats and ships gracefully navigated the harbor, their sails billowing against the backdrop of the open sea. Elegant masts and white sails dotted the horizon.

I was getting married.

Aiden and I had applied and had been approved for a marriage license through the City Clerk's office, so this was more of a coming together of everyone close to us.

I chose to have the wedding in the penthouse itself, near the balcony overlooking every part of Boston that I loved best.

The aesthetic I had envisioned included soft pastel tones with delicate drapes cascading from the ceilings. Twinkling fairy lights and flickering candles added a touch of magic and a whole lot of warmth.

After Ben walked me to the altar, Niall leaned in and whispered, “Hey, beautiful.”

I smiled. “Hey.”

There was no jealousy, conflict, or tension between the boys and me.

We knew the marriage was an aesthetic formality, and so far as we were concerned, I had a team of lovers, husbands, partners, and best friends.

Damn, I felt lucky.

Chloe stood by me through everything, like the rock she always was.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered as she fixed my train. “My warrior girl.”

“I love you,” I murmured back. “Thanks for being the best, best friend to me, Chlo.”

“Hey, in a few years, I’ll be on your back, urging you to take Turner’s deal and tour the world. But for now, I think you’re complete, Mama.”

She was right. One day, I would be ready for that too. And Turner had promised to wait.

It wasn’t going to be anytime soon because right now, I felt like the snuggliest homebody.

But one day.

Soft strains of music played in the background as Aiden reached out to take my hand. He was handsome as always, but in the warmest of ways today.

“You look breathtaking, Selene,” he said. “Thanks for making an honest man out of me.”

“Ha-ha at that.” I grinned. “But it was sweet.”

“Hey, if I can’t be corny today, then what good is all this?”
He flourished his hands dramatically.

Our vows were simple. I knew I was marrying my idea of a home.

“I love you more than words can express, Aiden. Today, I promise to stand by your side, through thick and thin, to support and cheer you on, to be a pillar on your hard days and a friend to your joys.”

His eyes glistened with emotion. “Selene, you are my rock, my anchor. I promise to cherish and protect you, to be your partner in all of life’s adventures.”

Behind Aiden, Dom couldn’t resist injecting his humor into the moment. “Aiden, don’t forget to take out the trash and make her coffee every morning!”

Laughter filled the room as Aiden playfully nudged Dom. “I promise to make her coffee and do the dishes, Dom. And you’d better hold me to it!”

Oliver stepped forward, holding a small ring box.

“Welcome to the family, Aiden.” He grinned up at his soon-to-be stepdad.

Tears of happiness welled in my eyes as Aiden embraced Oliver. “It’s an honor, little man.”

With a gentle kiss, Aiden and I sealed our union.

“I’m the luckiest man alive,” Aiden whispered in my ear as we swayed together on the dance floor.

“And I’m the luckiest woman,” I replied, resting my head against his shoulder. “This is just the beginning.”



AFTER THE WEDDING, Ben took Oliver to his place to help the boys and me settle down and get the place cleaned up.

I was getting very close to my due date, so I mostly waited for them to finish. It wasn’t long before they had finished and

we were in the bedroom.

“Are we sure this is safe?” Dom asked only once—although his eyes were chock full of longing. “You’re so close to term.”

“Doctor didn’t forbid it.” I grinned. “So I don’t have anything to complain about.”

Aiden helped me slip out of the wedding dress. Soon, it was us, just us, with no encumbrances. I lay back down on the bed, and the three of them climbed in with me.

Dom parted my legs, pulled down my panties, and proceeded to lick my pussy.

Niall’s hands squeezed my tits, pinching and flicking the nipples while Aiden watched, a slow grin on his lips. Dom’s tongue focused on my swollen clit, licking hard.

I shook my head as my already sensitive body responded to the increasing intensity of his motions. My hips bucked in pleasure, and he continued to lick me through my orgasm. “Fuck, Dom, please—fuck me!”

My cries worked on exciting him as my body spasmed in the aftermath of the climax. Dom mounted me and thrust inside, pounding my pussy like a man possessed.

I felt heat course through my skin and screamed as my body responded.

“That’s it, baby,” he said as he slammed into me. “Come for me.”

I’d already submitted to the pounding of his rod inside me, and as he moved quicker and quicker, I cried out for all of them.

Niall’s mouth was on my tits now, biting, licking, nipping the swollen areolas and nipples as Dom fucked me to another climax.

I clenched around his cock and grabbed fistfuls of the bedsheet for support. Dom responded by throwing his head back and grunting as he came with me, shooting his seed inside.

Aiden wasted no time in taking his place and filling me with his huge cock. I came at the intensity of his first thrust.

Damn, he could fuck.

He lifted me up by my shoulders as his cock plunged in and out of me. Our positions changed, so he was on the bed, legs outstretched, while I straddled him.

Niall came behind me and lined his shaft between my ass cheeks.

I moaned hard, knowing I was about to get fucked in both holes. They'd do me at the same time, pounding hard and fast.

I could feel Niall swelling and press into me from behind, and it made me come, my juices squirting all over Aiden as he increased his pace and fucked me furiously.

“Yes, Selene, come for us,” he growled. “Baby, you’re so beautiful like this.”

“Fuck!” I cried out at the sheer, raw love in his voice.

Their arms were wrapped around me, and Aiden’s mouth was clamped on my breast as he continued to pound into my pussy, his balls slapping the inside of my thighs as he pushed in and out.

“Fuck, yes! Yes, just like that!” I cried again and again, screaming for more. My nails dug into Aiden’s bare back.

My head rolled back on Niall’s shoulder, and he ran his tongue over my earlobes. My pussy and ass ached as I submitted myself to their cocks, tongues, hands, and commands.

I quivered and shook and climaxed again, this time taking Niall with me. He shot a lot of hot semen into my ass and bit down on my shoulder as it filled me up.

The sheer intensity of it made me clench Aiden’s cock with my pussy. He responded with a groan. As Niall pulled out, Aiden laid me back on the bed, picked my legs up, and fucked me like there was no tomorrow.

I reached my hands back to grab the headboard as he rammed his shaft in and out, moving faster than I'd ever thought possible.

And then, he was coming with me, into me, pouring his body and soul into mine. I moaned, and he captured it in a kiss as he filled me with his cock.

“Fuck.” I finally breathed. “That was better than the curry we had for lunch.” Aiden laughed and kissed my lips gently.

He pulled out slowly and put a blanket over me. “It feels like we’re just where we need to be,” I said, my voice heavy with sleep.

One of the babies kicked my belly in response, and I chuckled. The boys put their boxers on and got into bed with me.

“Can you imagine how full this place is gonna get?” I asked them sleepily. “I’m so happy, guys. I—oh—hey—”

I winced in pain.

Sharp contractions coursed through my body.

I have to call my doctor, now.

EPILOGUE

Selene

I was wheeled in for delivery via Cesarean. Since my pregnancy was a high-risk one, it was the safest route.

But the process was mercifully forgiving, and even though I was exhausted and drained and experienced delayed first contact, I would not change any damn thing.

Oliver chose the name for my baby girl. *Aurora, of first sunlight*. Green eyes and an impossibly tiny, freckled face.

The boys chose *Cillian* for my second baby, a boy with the bluest eyes and a head of fiery gold-red hair.

And I chose to call my third *Liam*. The protector. He almost did not make it. And then, he did. He was my little miracle. All of them were, but Liam reminded me of the tenacity of the human spirit.

I held my babies close, and Oliver perched on the bed beside me.

Ben, Niall, Aiden, and Dom surrounded me like an army.

“The family feels complete,” Ben said, grinning at all of us. “It’s like the best kind of a really crowded place.”

I chuckled, albeit a little weakly. “Who would have thought so much could happen in a year?”

And it was true. A year ago, I would never have imagined that life could have changed and warped and expanded into what it has become today.

Maybe that was what made it so damn beautiful. Maybe one day, I'd be able to be the woman who traveled to different countries, too. See other lives and cultures with my kids and my family. Find more reasons to be humble and grateful.

Chloe had disappeared for a bit because she'd met a cute intern. She galloped back in the room with a victorious expression on her face. "Hmm. Mission accomplished."

"Hey, Chlo?" I called out to her.

She came forward and kissed my forehead. "What is it, Mama?"

"I need more of those positive affirmations in my life."

What a perfect Thanksgiving, I thought. So much love to be thankful for.



Oliver

I LOVED OUR LIVING ROOM. It was always so cozy and fuzzy, like the insides of a big Christmas sock. Which reminded me Christmas was almost here!

My mom sat snuggled in her armchair with my baby sister, Aurora. I liked her name. Sometimes, I asked her if she would play with me.

But Mom said I needed to wait a little more for that. I didn't mind.

Liam and Cillian were with Aiden and my Uncle Dom. Mom said these were my new baby brothers and sister.

They were so tiny and cute! I was bursting with excitement to be their big brother.

The room felt all warm and snuggly. The lights twinkled, and the air smelled like cookies. We were all gathered together

as a family, and it felt really special.

Mom looked at us with a big smile, her eyes shining. “Guess what, guys? Since it’s almost Christmas, I’ve been thinking about planning a super-duper trip for all of us! We’ll have a grand adventure!”

Aiden, my awesome stepdad, grinned and asked, “Where do you think we should go, Oliver?”

He’d told me I could call him Dad, Aiden, or Captain Aiden Sparrow-Brown, inspired by my favorite character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*! One day, he said, he would teach me to fight with real swords.

When I learned that, I’d teach my brothers and sister too.

I jumped up, my eyes wide with excitement. “Can we go everywhere, Mom? I mean, like, see all the places in the whole wide world?”

Mom chuckled and playfully messed up my hair. “Well, maybe not everywhere, but we can definitely visit lots of cool places, Oliver. We’ll have the best time together!”

Aiden nodded, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “And what about food? Oliver, if you could have any treat in the world, what would it be?”

I thought for a moment, my tummy rumbling with anticipation. “Ice cream! I want to try every flavor out there, even the ones that sound really crazy!”

Laughter filled the room, and I joined in, feeling all giggly and happy.

Dom and Niall, Aiden’s super cool friends who were like my uncles, cheered along with us. They always knew how to make everything extra fun.

“You’ve got the right idea, Oliver! Ice cream adventures await!” Dom exclaimed, giving me a high-five.

One day, I decided I would make the most giant ice cream factory in the whole world. It would become as famous as my mom’s pastry shop!

And we would have different flavors like fluffy marshmallow, chocolate, and cherry, maybe even something with peanut M&M's. I loved peanuts in chocolate!

My mom looked in my direction and smiled. She always looked happy these days. It was really nice. "Ollie, what would you like for Christmas?"

I grinned back at her. "I already got everything, Mom. But also, a bike! And to learn to bake!"

From across the room, Aiden laughed. "Well, Selene, you've got yourself a whole army of sous-chefs now!"

In mood for another sizzling hot, holiday themed reverse harem romance?

[Checkout Unwrapping Their Christmas Present here.](#)



**I needed to tear my eyes away from Jake Jacobs...
*immediately.***

**One glance at the hot older lawyer and I knew I was in
trouble.**

Jake unwrapped me like his little Christmas present.

Even though I was his new employee that he absolutely shouldn't have claimed...

But he wasn't the only one that broke the rules at his law firm.

Jake's associates Zachary and Thomas also made my body tingle in ways that it never had before.

Jake's fancy dates made me forget that I had my own bills to pay.

Zachary distracted me with his gorgeous eyes.

And don't even get me started on Thomas.

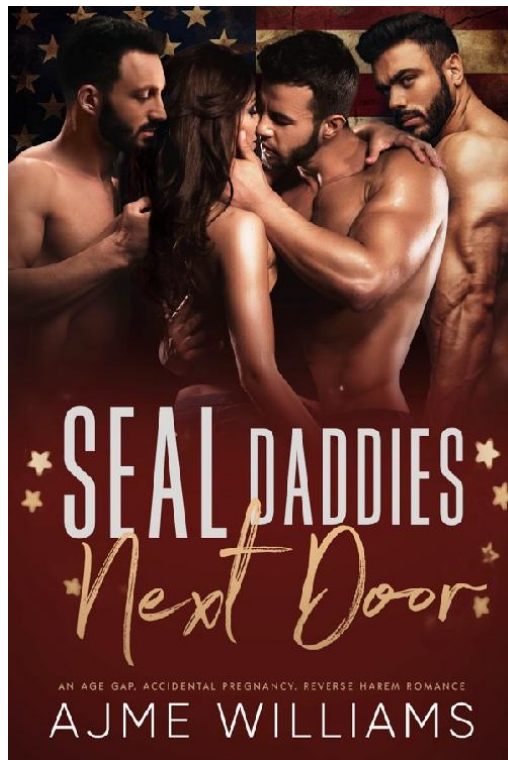
His sense of humor almost eased my stress about the shitstorm I was in.

Just when I thought I could get myself out of the mess, the media found out about the three men in my bed.

But the secret that I'd discovered literally made my world spin...

[Get your copy here](#)

SEAL DADDIES NEXT DOOR (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**Becoming rich overnight led to a series of nightmares.
But the three *much* older Navy SEALs that entered my life
as a result were more like a fantasy come true.**

The electricity I feel with them makes me forget that the man
who surprisingly left me an inheritance has been murdered...
and I'm the prime suspect.

Reed, a protective single dad, has a rugged charm that could
steal any woman's heart.

Asher could cut glass with his razor-sharp features. Yes, he's
exceptionally strong but what draws me to him is his heart of
gold.

Miguel has Spanish blood in him. His temper is unmatched,
but you'd never guess that when he cracks dad jokes.

These men fill my heart with joy... and my bed with heat.
My soul belongs to them, but do I even know who they really
are?

Their traumatic past won't let them get too close to me, even
though the two pink lines on the stick bind us together.

I may not know who the dad is, but I'm taking a leap of faith.

They say I'm too innocent for my own good.

Am I naïve to think that I can trust them with my life, and with
my baby?

Our baby?

Juniper

2 ⁰²¹

Item one: go on a date before Mama chews my ears off.

Item two: don't say anything stupid on the date.

Item three: don't run away if he calls you sugar.

Item four: okay, maybe run away, but tell Mama you ran because you got a case of the collywobbles. Do not, I repeat, do not tell her the date went to pot.

I'd had it up to here with my mama telling me I was gonna die a "lil' ole spinster." It used to be cute about five years ago.

But now, at the tail-end of twenty-nine, it was like I had this massive time-bomb strapped to my chest, and it'd explode any second.

I could almost hear her southern drawl in the back of my ears. For context, most of our conversations flowed along the same pattern these days.

"Well, sugar, I was just wondering if you'd met any nice fellas lately."

"Oh, Lord. Here we go again."

"Now, don't you go getting all huffy on me, Juniper. I just want you to be happy."

“I’m perfectly happy, Mama. I don’t need no man to make me happy.”

“Now, that’s just plain silly. Everybody needs somebody.”

“I’ve got plenty of somebodies in my life, Mama. I’ve got my friends, my books, and that dratted cat who visits me now and then. I think he likes me more than he does his folks.”

“I don’t know about that. That cat’s not gonna take you out to dinner or dance with you under the stars.”

“I can take myself out to dinner, Mama. And as for dancing under the stars, well, I’ll ask the cat. Who knows, maybe I could bribe him into it.”

“Hey, Ms. Davis?”

I looked up, pen in my mouth, at the little kid standing in front of me.

“What is it, Janie?” I smiled at her. Cute kid.

“Well, ma’am, I was just wonderin’ if it’d be alright if I kept holdin’ onto that *Faraway Tree* book for a spell longer.”

“I know I missed the due date and all, but it’s just so dang good, and I got a heap of homework that’s been eating up my time somethin’ fierce.

“Could I maybe bring it back in four days or so, pretty please?”

Janie’s tongue grew sweeter than the tea in front of me with each word she uttered.

Her eyes enlarged in a dual attempt to convince me she was an adorable little Dachshund and that I had to excuse the late return.

It never failed.

I covered my lips with my hand in a poor attempt to conceal my grin.

“Okay, Janie, but this is the last time. Do you promise to read to the younger kids next week in return?”

She bobbed her head of golden hair enthusiastically. “I do!”

“Good girl. Off you go.”

It was an unseasonably warm day here in the heart of Oakmont, Georgia, but I wasn’t complaining.

I sat behind the circulation desk of The Quill and Hearth Library, a place as whimsical as its name. We actually allowed patrons to sip on sweet tea while they read their books.

I enjoyed the slow heat and the bird-like chattering of children. I loved the lower level for this very reason. It was a wonderland for the little ’uns.

We had a storytime event later that day. I could count on the little regulars to show up and demand a new fairytale. I’d been studying up for it too.

Maybe I could just talk about how Rapunzel should have gone renegade and used her hair to whip the shit outta that evil woman who’d caged her.

Or maybe I was just mad because I’d had a pretty sour conversation with Mama not ten minutes ago.

Funny thing about people who adored you—they knew your cues.

They didn’t need to say much, but oh, when they were positioning to attack you, and I mean verbally decimate your soul, all they needed was one word.

Or a line. Or a few of them. You get what I mean.

“You’re about to hit the big three-o and still ain’t got yourself a man. What the hell are you waiting for?”

“When you gonna find a beau who’s worth his weight in grits?”

Ugh. She didn’t need to tell me I was old and single. In fact, no one did. I could feel the life force between my legs drying up.

I tried to focus on the pretty little place that gave me so much joy.

Big windows let in buttery-yellow sunshine, and every nook and corner had a cozy reading space.

There were rows and rows of books, neatly arranged by subject and author and utterly orgasmic for my OCD-fueled mind. Hey, I was a girl who loved her lists and her shelves.

You wanted fun? You had to have a method to it.

I let out a satisfied sigh as a ray of light fell most becomingly over the dark wooden shelves. They looked lush as a lover's embrace, a comfortable in-between of secrets and safety.

My job was to make sure this place remained as calm as it looked.

Easier said than done when I was always around kids.

I couldn't help chuckling as I heard a "squee" from their section. Some newbies had to have found a new adventure. That's why we turn to books anyway, right?

We couldn't physically be everywhere all at once. But in the library, you could train your mind to take you wherever you wanted to go.

You could even get married to the fanciest Prince Charming. Not that it would ease my mama's heart.

Life was good in Oakmont, though, all things considered. As they said around here, "If you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes."

And I didn't mind sticking around longer. Better than going home to nothing. I could call Sadie or one of the girls.

I just didn't want another pity party today. Hell, I'd get enough of it in a week when I actually hit the big three-o.

Bam!

I jumped up from my desk to investigate the source of the loud crash. On crossing two rows, I found a group of kids who'd built a fort out of picture books.

They were all hooting and hollering, running around as if they were facing down an army of monsters.

I could hear one of them, a scrappy little boy with a missing tooth, shouting, “Y’all ain’t gonna beat us! We got the strongest fort in all of Oakmont!”

Another little girl, a bandana wrapped around her head like a pirate, squealed in her tiny voice, “We’ll see about that! We’re gonna knock that fort down and take all your treasure!”

The boy with the missing tooth turned to me with a big smile and said, “Hey, Junie. Wanna join our army and help us beat the bad guys?”

I bit back a laugh and replied, “Well, I don’t know if I have what it takes to be a soldier, but I sure can cheer you on!”

The kids all laughed and kept on battling, and I stood there a little while, basking in the warmth of their innocence.

They’d gone and made a whole little world inside the library. Anything was possible, and the only limit was their imagination.

Suddenly, my eye fell on a dark-haired boy standing some rows away and eyeing the tyrant group with sad, dog-like adoration.

I walked over to him and knelt down. “Hey there, what’s your name? Are you new here?”

He shot me a furtive look before nodding. “Yep. I’m Billy. I came to get an action book.”

I looked him up and down, and my gut instinct kicked in.

“How’d you like something with more adventure and magic? We’re doing a reading of *The Hobbit* soon. Wanna stick around for that?”

He blushed. “Ah . . . I don’t think I can.”

“Why not?”

He shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor. “I . . . my dad says magic is for little sissy girls, and I need to be a man.”

Ah. Of course his dad said that.

I pursed my lips together and thought for a second before replying.

“Well, little Billy, what do you want to read?”

His face was immediately lit by hope. He looked like a sunny day. You know, the kind where trees sway gently in the breeze and leaves rustle softly in the wind. You look overhead and see a brilliant shade of blue, with just a few straggly clouds drifting lazily. It’s everything you hope for, especially if it’s hurricane season and you don’t know what the next moment holds.

“I’d love to read magic books,” Billy mumbled, “but I know my dad won’t be happy about that.”

“Where’s your dad right now?”

“He’s at work. He said my nanny will come pick me up after one.”

“What if we make ourselves a little secret? You stick around for *The Hobbit* readin’, and I’ll treat you to a good ol’ fashioned fairy tale ‘bout a Wishing Chair that can take you anywhere you want to go. Why don’t you give it a try and see how it makes you feel? Don’t let your dad be the one callin’ the shots all the time, now.”

The hope that burst across that little face made my heart churn. Man, I was sure his dad loved him, but fathers could be assholes sometimes.

But then again, at least his one stuck around. Mine wasn’t even there to see me get born.

“You won’t tell on me?”

I made a three-finger salute. “Scout’s honor.”

After Billy potted away to join the other kids, I made my way to the history section. I was doing a bit of reading about the Ku Klux Klan, and it caught my interest.

This fascination had begun the very night I finished my tenth re-read of *Gone With The Wind*. Say what you would, but I’d never get enough of O’Hara and her damned gumption.

I was neck-deep in the Civil War era when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. Turning, I smiled. “Hey, Harold. Here for some history?”

“No, I just came to meet you. And I saw you getting that young’un into trouble!”

Harold Montgomery, sixty-something, missing two teeth (one he’d retouched in gold), and as eccentric as a pink-haired lady driving a blue Cadillac.

He’d become my friend over the last six months. I’d met him when he was scouring through the Civil War section, looking for titles on ancestry.

We got on like a house on fire, so to speak. It was actually funny, the things we had in common.

I squared my shoulders defensively. “Ain’t no one telling a kid that they can’t have their fairy tales. The world will mess ‘em up soon enough. Let ‘em be young while they can.”

Harold chuckled. “Young lady, I have no complaints. In fact, I think you did the right thing. The father deserves a sentence for trying to deprive his son!”

I relaxed. “Maybe I could go all Avenger on him.”

He walked with me to the counter. “What are you doing tonight?”

Nothing. I was just gonna go home and sit on the back patio in a pair of pajamas with my mama’s quilted throw over me. I’d probably bury my face in a tub of bourbon pecan ice cream straight from the tub with extra bourbon and maybe a drizzle of dark chocolate.

A perfect dinner for a single lady on the verge of discovering her first gray hairs.

In all fairness, this dinner would pass muster with my mama.

She approved of a lot about me, even some parts that could make others run the instant I opened my mouth.

Harold probably surmised the extent of my evening adventures from the dreamy look on my face.

“I can see you’re getting distracted, so I’ll be quick. I’m hosting a dinner at my mansion. I want you there.”

My eyes bulged. No way.

Nestled amid old oaks and magnolias in the very heart of Oakmont’s historic district, the Montgomery mansion had become the stuff of local legend.

The house itself was a masterpiece of Antebellum architecture with its grand columns and sweeping porches, but it was the rumors that made me uneasy.

It was common hearsay that Harold’s ancestors were all members of the Klan, and they’d even used the house as a meeting place during the Civil War.

Some even whispered that the hidden rooms and secret tunnels beneath the mansion housed the Klan’s loot.

But despite what I’d heard, I believed my heart more.

Harold was a gentle soul, always ready with a smile and a kind word for his neighbors.

Sadie used to tell me it’d take him a lifetime to undo the reputation of his ancestors, but you had to give a man props for trying.

He continued surveying my face like I was some fascinating archaeological artifact. Or a gecko.

“So, what’s it gonna be?”

I smiled. “Will you have bourbon pecan ice cream for dessert?”

Why did he look so relieved, like he *needed* me to be there?

His Southern drawl came through immediately, although he’d spent almost his entire life out of the country and in London.

Harold wasn't one for convention—it seemed to hurt his soul.

But in moments like these, he was as Southern as the rest of us.

“Bless your heart for sayin’ yes. I reckon this shindig is gonna open doors for you. It’s gonna be like a lit matchstick, sparkin’ up a whole new flame in your life.”

Well, bless his heart too. What in tarnation did that mean?

Juniper

I unlocked the door to my lonely, single life.

Okay, I totally did not mean to sound that bitter. At least I had my own little space in Oakmont's central precinct.

Magnolia Street was home to my quaint apartment, filled with charming brick buildings and old-world trees.

I stepped in through the front door and immediately found myself surrounded by the warm glow of the setting sun. It cast a soft halo of light across my living room.

The neighborhood cat, Bumbles, was already snoozing out on the balcony, his furry body stretched out on the cushion I'd left for him.

This was the fourth night he'd stayed with me. I knew the neighbors were gonna say I'd kept him high on catnip.

From my window, I could see a pair of graceful egrets flying toward a nearby marsh.

A group of chatty cardinals hopped along the branches of my old friend, the oak I'd named, well, Mr. Oakwood Hardy.

Yes, not all was bitter about this place. It was small, and there were days I wished I could open the door and shout, "What's for dinner?" but . . . it was okay.

I was okay.

Sighing, I made myself more sweet tea and settled down on the sofa with a new list. The sound of a distant train whistle floated through the open window.

My phone drawled out a lazy tune. I looked at the name on the screen and groaned.

“Hey, Mama.”

“June bug! How about you come on back to the nest and let Mama feed ya? I’m fixin’ to fry up some chicken.”

My mouth watered at the words. No one could make fried chicken like my mama. Juicy and tender, it exemplified Sunday meals with her.

She did mashed potatoes and gravy, collard greens and cornbread . . . the whole nine yards.

I loved to soak up the gravy and potatoes in the bread and do a perfect bite with a bit of everything.

But again, after I moved out, my mama’s invitations to dinner became more and more of a call to an unavoidable war.

She’d feed me and bombard me with questions I had no clear answers to.

Some of them weren’t all that bad—like what kids I’d met at the library or what Sadie’s husband was doing.

The moment she moved to Sadie’s husband, she’d redirect to ask me when I’d catch my own.

Like this was an unavoidable bout of a new strain of COVID that I just had to have.

I sighed and shook my head, almost picturing her crestfallen face.

“Mama, I’d love to, but I can’t tonight.”

“Oh?”

It was plain as day that her curiosity had been piqued by my words, as I could hear the telltale lilt in her voice.

Lord have mercy. I reckoned I could’ve phrased that a mite bit better.

No doubt she'd be fixing to inquire about my plans and whether there were any fine gentlemen involved in them.

“You headed out with a good-lookin' fella tonight?”

Talk about hitting the nail straight on my own fuckin' head.

“No, Mama. No date. I just got an invite to this fancy dinner.”

“Where?”

I hesitated for a second. My mama, like all the old-timers in this city, did not trust men with a tarnished reputation—even if this reputation had nothing to do with them, per se.

They could be golden, but if there was one black sheep in the family, it meant they had a little devil in them.

Plus, my mama hated Harold Montgomery.

I honestly had no idea why. It began the day he met me in the library and insisted on dropping me home. In his Aston Martin DB11.

At the time, I was still living with Mama. I'd only moved to this place about twenty days ago, mostly because I wanted to be able to walk to work. And I felt like I was getting too old to share space with someone I loved but who also drove me nuts.

Mama took one look at him and told me never to see him again.

I didn't push it then, and I didn't want to push it now. But I was never good at one thing when it came to her. I didn't lie to her. I couldn't.

Not when that's what she'd known the entirety of her life before I came along. That's all she had from the one other person she loved—the one who got away.

“Harold Montgomery's party, Mama.”

She sounded like she'd choked on a peach.

“Hell no, Junie! You’re not going to that man’s house! You know what they say about that place and the secrets? You know his ancestors used to torture others to get money and loot their jewels, right? Why do you want to associate yourself with that?”

Why did I, actually? Apart from the obvious curiosity I had about the house, there was just something so affable about Harold.

He was old and weathered and sweet. He talked to me like he really cared and wanted to be part of my life, even if it was just a sliver.

That meant something.

“Mama.” I spoke sotto voce. “Harold’s tried to undo all that his entire life. Maybe we could just give him a chance.”

“Child, I ain’t givin’ no man like that the time of day, and neither should you. Don’t you remember what I done told you about your daddy? You gotta be strong, just like your Mama. You hear me?”

Okay. Not the way I’d hoped this would go. Against my better judgment, a swell of bitterness rose inside me.

“Mama, I don’t want to have this conversation. Not when I’ve asked you about Dad so many times and got nothing back.”

“Honey, you know good and well he was nothin’ but pure evil. The second he found out I was carryin’ you, he up and left without a second thought.”

And you’ve never let me forget it.

“I’m sorry I’m such an inconvenience.” I spoke sharply. “But I’m old enough to make my own decisions. I understand you may not agree with them, but I hope you’ll care enough to respect them, anyway.”

“Junie, now you listen to me—”

I hung up.

Oh, I'd never hear the end of this. But I'd deal with her temper and tears tomorrow. I knew she meant well.

But even I got tired of being made to feel like I was responsible for her never getting married.

All I ever knew about my dad was that he was super rich, and his folks told him he could either be livin' in the boonies with my mom or he'd have to leave her and return to his roots.

No points for guessing what he chose.

I wanted to make peace with it. But that was damn hard when the topic kept cropping up like an unrelenting tide of heat poking like nails on my skin.

My phone rang again. I just flipped that switch to silent and high-tailed it outta there.

I reckoned I needed to blow off some steam, so I went to dump a bucket of ice-cold water over my head.

By the time I got out, it was already sundown. The buttery glow of the last rays of amber sunlight had melted into soft pinks and purples against a deep blue sky.

My invite said I needed to be at the party by nine, so I took some time to gussy up.

Hell, I'd be a Southern belle ready to stir up some trouble at that party.

I slipped into a ruby red cocktail dress, feeling like a hot tamale in a sea of ice cubes.

The entire next hour saw me hurling a tirade of cuss words as I tried my best to coax my curls into shape. I managed to tease my hair up high and let it fall in loose, beachy waves around my shoulders.

I could have sworn Dolly Parton would be proud of that hairdo.

The figure smiling back from the mirror was all curves, gentle, swaying, and redolent of summer scents. And I loved it.

I loved every stretch mark woven like lightning on my skin, each freckle and meander and wrinkle.

It had taken me years to come to this place where I was learning to fall in love with myself. I'd spent two decades on the other side.

Then, two heartbreaks and a side of controversy later, I realized I could spend all my life at war with myself, but it would never make living any easier.

And I didn't want to remember myself that way. When I turned gray and crocheted my way into retirement, I wanted good memories.

This was me making those happen.

I finished by adding just the right amount of sparkle to make my eyes pop and my lips pout. With that, I strode into the living room and immediately regretted my decision.

You ever been around an introvert?

You know, that special breed of people who get excited to make plans and then immediately run out of social battery the second the plans are about to begin?

Yup, that was me.

Too late to back out. My Uber had already arrived.

I stepped out of my apartment, suddenly feeling like a toad in a dress. Thankfully, my Uber driver, Hank, was an angel.

"Howdy, Ms. Davis. I'll be your Uber driver for the evening. You look pretty as a peach in that red dress!"

I chuckled. "Thank you kindly, Hank. You sure do have a way with words."

As the ride began, I lost myself in the easy ramblings of Hank's thick drawl and the sights I saw on the way.

Old oak trees blurred into a bouquet of brown, green, and yellow draped in a soft evening wind and Spanish moss.

Every brick building here had something that tied it to the remnants of life from the Civil War era.

I leaned back and sighed. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to live anywhere else but the South.”

Hank cleared his throat. “Well, speakin’ of living here. A few years ago, I was driving this very car when all of a sudden, I hit a pothole so deep it swallowed my tire. I was stuck there on the side of the road, wondering what to do. That’s when a bunch of good ol’ boys in a pickup truck pulled up beside me and asked if I needed help. And you know what they did? They pulled out a rope, tied it around the car, and yanked me outta that pothole like it was nothin’!”

“Only in the South, right?”

Hank grinned. “You got that right, Miss Juniper. We may have our share of potholes, but we sure do know how to help each other out.”

Before I knew it, the easy ride brought me to the drop-off leading up to the main door of the Montgomery mansion.

The pathway was lined with lights and an abundance of heady flowers. I followed a trail of guests to the door.

A tall, silver-haired figure stood at the threshold.

He looked like a direct import from England. Like he’d been flown in after a long-standing decade of serving the Queen herself.

“Name, please?”

“Ha!”

Why did I say that? Why was I so awkward? I wished the marble floors would just swallow me whole.

“I mean . . .” I fumbled, trying not to let his hawk-like eyes pierce through me. “I’m Juniper. Juniper Davis.”

He took a minute to go over the names on the list he held in his hands. A very agonizing minute.

Maybe this was some joke Harold had played on me?

I nearly turned and pulled a Cinderella before he spoke again, his tone cold as day-old turkey right outta the freezer.

“Welcome to the Riviera party, Ms. Davis. You may go through to the salon.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Before I could give him the chance to throw me out for the stupidest comeback ever, I ran into the salon.

I was immediately bombarded by an onslaught of people in clothes worth more than my year’s salary.

On any other day, I’d curse myself for being a social anomaly, but right now, I was absolutely blown away by the opulence of the interior.

The entire salon could have swallowed my apartment, with ceilings so high they could go on forever. Tall windows, rich, warm walls, and ornate moldings were everywhere.

I meandered through the room, but not before I overheard a conversation between two guests.

“My dear, it comes as no surprise that Mr. Montgomery has spared no expense for this evening’s affair.”

“I hear he’s preparing to make a rather momentous announcement. No doubt, an attempt to conceal the origins of his vast wealth.”

“Truly, the Montgomery family has a dubious reputation in certain circles. There are whispers of thievery and deceit.”

“I have heard tales of a scandalous affair involving Mr. Montgomery and a woman of questionable reputation in his younger days.”

“It is quite clear that he is a man with many secrets.”

They turned around and saw me, and one of them—a big ol’ fella in a fancy vest, his eye accentuated by a ridiculous monocle, scowled.

I took off running quicker than a spooked hen.

Trying to shake off the heaviness of the air, I approached a group of people near the bar.

“Hey there,” I said, raising my voice and giving in to the sudden burst of social energy. “What’s everyone drinking?”

One of the men in the group turned to me and grinned. “Whiskey, of course. We’re in the south, honey. What else would we be drinking?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I shoulda known better. Make mine a double.”

A few drinks later, my bladder had a mind of its own. I rushed out of the salon and found myself in a maze of a corridor. Where the hell was the washroom?

I was about to give up when one of the doors burst open and Harold stormed out, his face red, angry, and unlike anything I’d ever seen before.

Something made me hide behind the wall opposite the room.

A young man followed him his hands bunched into fists.

“You’re gonna regret this. You hear me?”

I realized I knew his face. And it was one of the few things I wanted to forget most in the world.

End of preview. [Get the entire story here.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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