

SILVER FOX DADDY'S

Baby Surprise

I V Y K A R R

Silver Fox Daddy's Baby Surprise

An Enemies to Lovers Billionaire Romance

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Also By

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Chapter 1

It's You

Serena

I've forgotten how busy American airports are, especially the Los Angeles International Airport.

It made me realize how much I have missed this bustling city I call home. The excitement of being back here makes my smile even brighter.

Walking toward the exit, I pull my cart filled with my suitcases and luggage, feeding my eyes with every new thing I see.

Everything looks different and brand new, making me want to tour the city before heading home to see how much things have changed.

But I also want to see my uncle.

I've missed him so much.

For the three years I was away in Milan, we got to FaceTime and call each other only a few times due to our busy schedules.

But that didn't strain our relationship at all.

Uncle John is like a father figure to me.

After my parents died in a plane crash when I was very young, he took me in and treated me as his own. He never got married because most women competed for his attention with me.

But I don't want him to remain lonely because of me. I want him to eventually find love because he deserves someone to care for him as he has cared for me.

My smile widens when I see my uncle's driver, Jeremy, holding a placard with my name. It's been a while since I've seen him, and I'm glad he is still around. He sees me and smiles back.

Jeremy is loyal, so I understand why my uncle, John keeps him around.

"Hello, Ms. Coleman," He greets me cheerfully, giving me a slight bow. "Welcome back." He adds. He is very respectful to me, even though he's much older than I am.

"Good to see you, Jeremy," I smile at him, giving him a once-over. "Gosh, you haven't aged a day." I tease him, wiggling my brows at him. He laughs.

"And you haven't lost your wit," He teases back, and I laugh too.

"Let me get that for you," He offers to take my cart, and I thank him as I give the cart to him. He leads me to the car and unloads my bags from the cart into the trunk. I breathe in the fresh air, smiling in nostalgia.

“I’ve missed this place,” I say, feeling the sun on my face.

Jeremy chuckles. “Welcome back to Los Angeles. No place like home, right?” He chips in, “How was your trip back? You must be jet-lagged.”

“It was smooth, but you are right. I am jet lagged.” I say with a yawn. “I need to rest,” I add.

“I bet your uncle has other plans,” He gives me a knowing look while I look back in confusion.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You’ll see.” He smirks.



“My girl has finally returned home,”

John’s cheery voice greets me as soon as I walk through the front door of his home. I smile, dropping the small duffel bag, and run into his waiting arms.

His laugh echoes through the house as he hugs me.

“I missed you, John,” I whisper into his chest, tightening my hand around his middle.

“I missed you too, pumpkin.” He replies.

He’s been calling me ‘pumpkin’ for as long as I can remember. I scoff, pulling away from him to give him a face.

“You really need to stop calling me that,” I say, wagging my finger at him.

“Never!” He doesn’t budge with a smirk on his face. I scowl at him.

“You are so stubborn,” I ask, folding my hands across my chest. “No wonder you have so much gray hair on your head.”

The teasing expression on his face wipes off, switching to one of horror.

“Gray hair? Where!” He starts to run his hand through the mass of hair on his head frantically, and I laugh at the comic sight of it.

John hates any indication that he is getting old. Any slight hint of the gray strand in his hair will make him dye the entire hair dark brown.

He is only in his mid-forties, but he is very conscious that he is not getting any younger.

Apparently, he wants to remain young forever.

“Calm down,” I say between laughter. “I’m only teasing you,” I add, to put John out of his misery. He gives me a look.

“You definitely haven’t lost your wit, I see,” He notes.

“That’s exactly what I said to her,” Jeremy chips in as he brings the rest of my bag in. I roll my eyes, shrugging.

“Only when you two are involved,” I gesture to the both of them.

“Thank you for getting her home safely,” John says to Jeremy, who nods back with a smile, taking the bags up the stairs. John looks at me again, chuckles, and pulls me on for another hug.

“God, I really missed you,” He sighs. I hum in response, hugging him back tighter. “Welcome home,” He adds.

“Thank you. It’s good to be back,” I answer.

“Oh, that reminds me. I have a huge surprise for you,” John lets me go, walking further into the house as I follow him.

“A surprise?” I repeat curiously. John turns around to face me with a big smile before suddenly calling out into the air.

“You can come out now!”

I’m about to ask him who he is talking to when someone peeps from behind the wall with a wide smile. My eyes grow huge with shock and excitement as I watch the young woman walk into the living room, her face registering in my mind.

It can’t be!

“Cassie?!” I call her name to make sure she’s the one I see.

“Surprise!” She shrieks. I join her, screaming with so much excitement as I draw her in a bear hug.

Cassie was my childhood friend. In fact, she was my only friend since I wasn’t very social in middle school or high school. But we parted ways when I went to the UK for college, and Cassie stayed in the US. We kept in touch, and the last time we spoke about a week ago, she was in Paris.

But now, she’s here. I can’t believe it!

“It’s so good to see you again!” I say to her, pulling away to look at her. She looks so good.

“It’s so good to see you too! I’ve missed you so much,” She tells me. I coo, pulling her in for another hug.

“I’ve missed you too,” I reply, pulling away again. “Wait, how come you’re here? You told me you were in Paris for business.”

“I was, but—” She steals a glance at John, who has been watching us with a smile. “Your uncle told me he was planning a welcome back party for you, and I just had to be here.” She explains.

“Welcome back, party?” I look at John.

“Just a small welcome back intimate get-together,” He paraphrases. “Between friends and family,” He adds, punctuating with a casual shrug.

“Why do I feel it will be a full-blown big party instead of an intimate small gathering?” I squint at both of them.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Cassie loops her hand with mine. “Leave everything to Uncle John and me. All you need to do is show up looking smoking hot,” She smiles.

Cassie is the polar opposite of me when it comes to socializing. Extremely hyper, a complete party freak, and a social butterfly. Some of her even rubbed off on me over the years we were together.

She is the best event planner, after all. No wonder Uncle John asked for her help to plan this party.

“Fine,” I sigh in resignation. “Do whatever you want.”

Cassie squeals, clapping her hands in delight.

Cassie and I go to my room, and as I pick an outfit for the party inside my closet, Cassie asks, “So, what’s going on with you?”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes because I know what she wants to know.

“What do you really want to know, Cassie?” I glance at her from behind the closet doors. “You can say what you mean directly,” I add.

She laughs.

“It’s just a general question,” she defends herself.

“No, It’s not, and you know it,” I answer her, looking at the two outfits I picked and trying to decide which one to wear for the party.

Usually, I can pick what to wear quickly, but I’m too tired to decide right now.

“Fine,” Cassie finally gives in. “It’s been a while since we talked about your love life,”

There it is. I chuckle lightly.

“That’s because there is nothing to talk about,” I answer, finally deciding on the red sequin dress over the plain black one.

I start to put it on.

“Why not?” She whines. “I’m sure you must have met some hot guy in Milan. That city is well known for their hot men.”

She says.

I scoff.

“Yeah, I got to meet some hot guys, but none of them piqued my interest.” Not since that one guy, at least.

Did he ruin men for me? Doubtful.

I’ve not just been in the mood.

Cassie goes silent for a moment.

“Don’t tell me you are still thinking about that guy you met at the club in Milan two and a half years ago.” Her voice gets louder with amusement. I feign a nonchalant scoff, rolling my eyes.

“You know me better. I wouldn’t get hung up on the one-night stand from two and a half years ago,” I put on my outfit, checking myself out in the mirror. I nod in approval.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Cassie sighs. “But wait, you mean you haven’t had sex in the last two years? Yikes!”

“Unlike you, Cassie, I don’t have sex with anybody easily.”

“Ouch!” she feigns hurt, and I chuckle.

She gasps in awe when I come out of the closet to show her my outfit. And I chuckle, twirling a bit.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“Perfetta.”

Her faux Italian accent makes me laugh, and she joins in.



By 8:00 pm, the house was already buzzing with loud music, and people started to troop in twos and threes. By 8:30 pm, the house was already filled up, and everyone was partying.

I enter at 9:00 pm, per Cassie's orders, and as I join, everyone screams and chants my name.

"Oh, my God!" I gawk in awe.

"Welcome back, girl!" Cassie screams, hugging me. She is all dressed and made up, looking as beautiful as ever.

"Cassie, where did all these people come from?" I ask, both shocked and impressed. "I don't even know half of them."

Actually, I don't know most of them...

"Babe, you and I know people in this city throw a party for whatever reason. They don't care who is throwing the party or what the party is for as long as there is free booze." She yells over the loud music.

That makes sense. I shrug.

"Besides," She continues. "You don't have to worry about who these people are or if they are having fun. This is your night, and you've got to have fun. Maybe even get laid while at it."

"Cassie!" I chide.

"What!" She shrugs. "It's the truth, and you know it. You need a little bit of action after years of celibacy."

"Nothing wrong with celibacy." I tell Cassie.

“Whatever!” She screams back at me. I roll my eyes but still chuckle.

“Why don’t you get us drinks while I go find John in all this chaos,” I tell her, and she nods.

She moves toward the kitchen while I take the opposite direction to John’s study since I’m sure John is working as usual.

How can someone be working with all this chaos? I shake my head.

I get to his study, and just as I’m about to open the door, someone opens the door from inside. Thinking it’s my uncle, I look up at the person.

But it’s not him.

It’s someone else.

Someone I definitely didn’t expect to see here, of all places, or at my welcome-home party. In fact, he is someone I thought I’d never see again.

My breath hangs in my throat, and my eyes widen.

“Oh, I’m sorry...” He starts to apologize, but I cut him off.

“You,” The word comes out before I can stop it.

His eyes settle on me, and his expression immediately mirrors mine.

“You,” He repeats, looking as shocked as I am.

Oh shit!

Chapter 2

Oh No!

Michael

I weave through the sea of bodies, my irritation mounting with each step. I can feel the heat radiating off the throngs of people and hear the bass thump from the speakers.

I was asleep when John's emergency phone call woke me up, demanding I come over immediately. Half asleep, I put my clothes on and went to John's house, only to find myself in the middle of a party.

As I finally reached the end of the crowd, I sighed in relief. Then I look around for John's study room, trying to avoid the drunk people stumbling around and spilling their drinks all over.

What was John thinking hosting a party like this in his house? I shake my head.

"You better have a good reason for pulling me out of bed at this ungodly hour?" I fire at him as soon as I walk into the

study

John grins, “Come on, man, don’t be like that. Besides, since when do you go to bed early?” He asks.

“Not everyone likes to overwork themselves, John,” I tell him, plopping down on one of the chairs.

“And what the hell is going on out there?” I ask, jabbing my finger toward the door to indicate the party. But then, I immediately decide that I don’t want to know.

“You know what? Forget I asked,” I dismissed with a wave of my hand.

But John answers anyway.

“I’m sorry about the chaos out there,” He says. “I’m just throwing a welcome back party for my niece who just returned from abroad. You know I told you about her.”

I can’t remember the details of whatever he told me about her.

“Whatever. Can you please tell me why you called? I want to get back to my sleep.” I urge him.

“Right,” His expression suddenly turns serious as he starts tapping some buttons on his tablet, then pushes it toward me.

“What’s this?” I ask

“It’s the latest development from our competitor in the Caribbean,” John replies, running a hand through his hair.

“I just don’t get it. We’ve just expanded into these countries, and they follow us doing the same thing. Our stakes have dropped. We need to come up with a plan to stay competitive.”

Being in the hotel and resort business, we are bound to have a lot of competition. Our biggest competitor, Rodriguez Group, just opened their latest resort on the same island, Saint Lucia. They have to have it all, going head-to-head with our establishments in the Caribbean.

But we aren't backing down, either. Forget about going back to my sleep. I am now focused on beating our competitor.

I nod grimly. "It's a tough market out there. But we can't just give up. We need to come up with a plan fast."

John nods. "Agreed. But what can we do? Their resorts are just as luxurious as ours and offer competitive prices."

I tap my fingers on the table, deep in thought. "We need to offer something they don't have. Something unique."

John raised an eyebrow. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well," I begin. "We need to focus on sustainability. Our guests are becoming more environmentally conscious, and by demonstrating our commitment to sustainability, we can attract these conscious guests."

John considers this for a moment. "That's a good point. We could even market ourselves as the 'green' resort company."

I nod. "Exactly. And we could partner with local environmental organizations to show our commitment to the cause. It would generate positive publicity and attract environmentally conscious guests."

John smiles. "I like it. And we can also invest in more high-end amenities. Offer experiences that Jade Mountain can't. For

example, we could build a private beach club exclusive to our guests.”

We continue brainstorming for more ideas.

“We need more outside-the-box thinking if we want to beat their new resorts,” I say firmly.

John nods in agreement. “Yes, you’re right. But what else do you suggest?”

“Well, we could also start by expanding our offerings,” I suggest. “Maybe we could add more activities for our guests, like horseback riding or water sports.”

“Good idea,” John says. “And we could also invest in renovating our rooms and adding more luxury amenities.”

I nod. “Exactly. And we could also focus on marketing to a different demographic, like younger travelers or families.”

John smiles, impressed. “This is why you are my go-to guy. I like it. Let’s start putting some plans into motion.”

I nod. “Yes, that’s a great idea. And we could expand our activities beyond just the resort. Maybe offer tours and excursions to nearby attractions. We must ensure people know we’re not just a hotel but an experience.”

John sits back, feeling a sense of relief. “I think we have a plan. We’ll focus on sustainability, high-end amenities, and unique experiences that Jade Mountain can’t offer. It’s time to show them what we’re made of.”

I stand, energized by the conversation, “I’ll call for a meeting with the major stakeholders and get them up to speed on our plan. It’s about time we put the Rodriguez Group back in their place.”

“I knew I could count on you.” John stands and smirks.

“We are partners, remember?” I respond as we shake hands.

After a few moments of clarification and deliberation, I walk towards the door. My mind is still buzzing with business ideas when I open the door, and I don’t notice the figure in front of me until we are standing face to face.

“Oh, I’m sorry....” I gasp, halting the rest of my apology.

She gasps, staring at me.

“You,” She whispers.

Immediately the voice registers in my head.

I know that voice. Fuck, I know that voice!

My eyes widen at the sight of the person before me. She looks just as shocked as I am, certainly thinking the same.

I can’t believe it’s her.

“You,” I repeat.

It’s her. Serena.

I haven’t seen her since our one-night stand over two years ago on my business trip to Milan. I can feel my pulse racing as I take in her familiar features, the way her brunette hair falls in soft waves around her face.

Our eyes meet, and time seems to stand still for a moment. I can't help but stare at Serena, taking in every detail of her appearance. Serena looks more beautiful than ever before, dressed in a red sequin dress that clings to the curves of her body in all the right places, with matching red lipstick.

My mind suddenly takes me back to our time two and a half years ago. Fuck, I can still remember the way her voice sounded when she moaned softly under my touch, and the memory sent a shiver down my spine.

She looks just as surprised to see me as I am to see her, and I can feel the tension building between us. It's been over two years, and she still holds so much over me. All from one night.

This is unhealthy. I say to myself, taking a step back to try composing myself.

We stand there in silence for a moment, looking at each other. Despite my rational mind knowing I'm not supposed to feel this way, I can feel all my emotions bubbling up inside me.

I didn't think I'd ever see her again, especially here, in John's home.

What is she doing here, anyway?

"Michael?" she says after what feels like an eternity.

"Serena," I reply, "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," she says, raising an eyebrow.

I swallow hard, and suddenly I become acutely aware of how close we're standing. "I'm here on business. John and I are

partners.”

She looks confused momentarily, and then something clicks in her head. “John? As in, my uncle John?”

Uncle John? My heart sinks as I realize what it means. Serena is John’s niece. She’s the one John was talking about earlier.

Fuck!

“Yeah,” I say, clearing my throat and pretending to be unfazed. “John is my best friend and business partner.”

There’s an uncomfortable pause as we both process this new information.

I can feel my emotions pressing down as I reflect on that night with Serena.

Hel, I haven’t completely stopped thinking about her since that night....

Serena clears her throat awkwardly, bringing me back to this moment.

Michael, stop thinking with your dick.

“I should probably get back to my party,” She mumbles, more to herself than to me, turning around to walk away.

“Are you here to see John?” I quickly interject, stopping her. “We are done with our meeting,”

John comes out from the study on cue, interrupting our tense and awkward conversation.

“Hey, you two!” he says cheerfully, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I see you have already met. Serena, this is Michael.

He's my partner in the hotel business. Michael, this is my niece, Serena."

I grin, trying to appear nonchalant as I shake her hand like I'm just meeting her for the first time, "Nice to meet you, Serena."

"Likewise," she responds, pretending nothing is wrong, but I can see in her eyes that she's not as calm as she's pretending to be.

Who am I kidding? I'm not calm, either.

She finally takes her eyes away from me and looks at John. "Uncle John, can I talk to you privately for a minute?" She asks.

John nods, giving me a friendly smile. "Good to see you, Michael. We'll catch up later."

I force a smile in return as John disappears into his study with Serena. Alone now, I let out a sigh and turns to walk away.

I make my way down the hallway, through the sea of bodies again, out of the house, and into the driveway where my car is parked. But I can't focus on anything else. All I can think about is how screwed up this situation is and how impossible it might be to keep our past a secret.

Bumping into an old flame is the last thing I expected today. Actually, Serena is not so much of an old flame. It was only a one-night affair, two and a half fucking years ago.

Yet, I can't figure out why seeing her again gets me all riled up like this. And the fact that she's John's niece means I'll see her around more often.

I'm left with a sense of unease. I know this is only the beginning of a complicated situation for the three of us, and I have no idea how to navigate this.

Chapter 3

What Happened In Milan Stays In Milan

Serena

I suddenly feel cold.

I am freezing from the inside out, and my thin-strapped dress doesn't keep me warm.

My legs are rooted to a spot, and my mind shuts down. I am still processing the shock of seeing him again.

The soft slam of the door reminds me of John's presence behind me. It causes me to flinch, but I don't turn around. He shuts the door and walks past me like a breeze, chuckling. Then, he slides into his swivel chair.

His eyes drift to mine, sensing my uneasiness immediately.

"Well, don't just stand there, Pumpkin." He teases me. My lips are stiff at his attempts to lighten the atmosphere. But then, I remember how observant he is.

He can pick up on my discomfort in a nanosecond. So, I mask my nervousness with a forced smile.

“Ugh! What will it take to finally get you to stop calling me that?” I ask him, moving from where I stood. My legs wobble as I slump forward into the chair before him.

“Nothing.” He replies.

“You can’t get me to stop calling you that. Now, wipe off that frown from your face.” He dismisses my sulking and stands up.

Knowing him well, I know he will fetch a drink from the bar at the rear end of his study.

Sure enough, he grabs a drink and offers me one.

I plan to decline his offer but realize I need a drink now.

He walks back to the table, hands me a glass of red wine, and sits.

My heart jams against my ribcage, pounding furiously. I immediately chug the red wine down my throat to ease the tension. I am at a loss for how to ask John the question that nags at the back of my mind.

“You asked if we could talk in private....” John’s voice trails off. It is difficult to maintain eye contact with him without swallowing.

“I am sorry I couldn’t introduce you properly to Michael. He apologizes. My heartbeat quickens at the mention of his name.

It's been over two years, for goodness' sake! How can he still affect me so much?

Heck, it was only one night.

"Who is he?" I play dumb. Even though he had just introduced him to me as his business partner.

"I know all your friends, John. You certainly didn't tell me about him." I arch a brow at him.

"And from what I saw out there, you two look quite cordial." I sit up, waiting for an explanation. John cannot conceal the smile on his face. The hint of glee in his eyes indicates that John holds him in high esteem.

He leans into his seat, taking a sip from his wine glass.

"Michael is my partner in the hotel business. We met a few years ago." He answers.

I furrow my brows at him.

"How did you meet him?" I ask.

He picks up on my eagerness to know more about Michael and continues.

"It's quite a funny story, actually. We met at a conference about three years ago. It was around the time when you left for Milan." He explains.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat at the mention of Milan. It triggers memories I would rather bury within me. It's best if they never see the light of day again.

"Oh," I mumble.

“It was like we have known each other for years. We clicked immediately, and it got even better after I realized Michael was also in the hospitality business,”

“We decided to give our partnership a shot, and it’s been nothing short of amazing since then. Michael is my business partner, best friend, and brother.” He adds, unable to conceal his admiration for him.

John rarely gets impressed by people, and his being fascinated by him only means that he is as good as John is painting him.

“Hmm.” I hum absent-mindedly, twirling with my wine glass.

“Are you sure you are okay, Serena?” John’s worry is evident in his voice.

I glance up at him, nodding my head.

“Yes, John. I am fine.” I add to assure him.

His eyes linger on me momentarily, and my heart jumps.

“Why are you suddenly so curious about him, though? You’ve just met him.” He asks, looking a bit confused.

I chuckle nervously. I drop my empty wine glass on the table and stand up.

“No reason, old man.” I tease him, grinning, and he frowns at my word choice, causing me to chuckle.

“Is there anything wrong with wanting to know about your friends?” I respond with the question to avoid answering his question.

And he played right into it.

“What? No!” He counters me, chuckling. I rose, leaning over the table to kiss his cheek.

“Let me get back to the party,” I tell him.

“All right, Pumpkin.”

I huff and walk out of his study.

The moment I step out and shut the door, I slam my back against it, releasing a shuddering breath. I still can't believe what's just happened. I pinch myself to make sure this is not a dream.

So, the man I had a one-night stand with three years ago is my uncle's best friend and business partner.

Great, Serena. Just great.

“Girl, you are so screwed,” I mumble to myself.

I move away from the door. My heels suddenly seem like the wrong choice of shoes because I feel like I am going to trip if I try to move any faster.

My mind is plagued with thoughts of Michael as I head down the stairs, and the more I try to shut them down, the harder it becomes.

I rush to descend the stairs, desperate to escape from the hallways that lead to John's study, where Michael's presence lingers everywhere.

I ran into one of the waiters that had a tray filled with champagne flutes in his hand. I snatch one from the tray,

chugging champagne down my throat, hoping it would erase his memories from my head, but it doesn't help.

I walk further into the living room, still bustling with the crowd. The bubbly atmosphere, in sync with the loud music blaring from the speakers, does nothing more than spike my irritation further.

My eyes survey the room in search of Cassie or anything that can serve as an escape from my thoughts that threaten to consume me.

We only had one night together. It should not have so much effect on me. Why am I so frazzled by this?

Is it because he suddenly shows up in my life again after all these years when I had moved past it? No, I don't think I ever moved past it. A tiny voice echoed in my head, but I shut it out.

I take a moment to wrap my head around how my night would have been if he didn't show up. I would have enjoyed the party with my friends and family. They put such a massive effort into making this evening memorable for me.

But then, everything goes down the drain when he shows up. The only thing I can think of now is him. It's a total disaster!

"Oh, there she is! Serena!" Cassie's chirpy voice disrupts my thoughts.

I swing my head sharply in the direction of her voice. She is standing by the kitchen island in the company of a petite blonde and a dark-haired man.

Finally, a distraction.

She handed me a champagne flute once I got to her. I take it from her without hesitation, not sparing a glance at her guests. I had far more consuming thoughts in my mind.

“Serena, meet Kayla and Adam. Kayla is a colleague at work, and Adam is her friend.” Cassie grins, introducing her guests to me.

“Hi. Thank you for coming.” I greet them.

“Hello,” They both smile at me. The dark-haired guy’s eyes linger on me for a little while. I turn to Cassie immediately, uninterested in his show of interest in me.

Cassie senses something is wrong.

“Kayla, Adam, I will be right back.” Cassie excuses herself, grabs my hand, and leads me out of the kitchen. She brings me into the nearest restroom and shuts the door behind her.

I stand there, shifting uncomfortably in my heels.

Cassie is staring at me so intensely she makes me want to crawl into a hole and hide there. I can’t maintain eye contact because it’s uncomfortable.

“Serena?” She calls me in a questioning tone.

I look up, sending her a stiff smile, and she scoffs.

“You have to tell me what’s on your mind. I am your best friend, Serena.” She reminds me as though I had forgotten.

If anyone is capable of figuring me out in a second. It’s Cassie. And knowing how stubborn she is, she will not back down

without finding out what's happening.

I walk past her, settling on the sink counter. She arches her brow at me, demanding answers.

"I saw him..." My voice trailed off.

She looks at me in confusion until her eyes widen in surprise when she catches on to what I mean.

"What? No way!" She screams.

"How in the world did that happen?" She asks.

"I don't know, Cassie." I don't mean to, but I shout at her. I exhale. "I don't know," I add quietly.

"I was just going to check in on John upstairs, and then I ran into him," I tell her. Her bulging eyes urge me to go further.

"Cassie, I didn't just run into him. He was coming out of John's study, and I found out from John that he is John's business partner and best friend! You can imagine how screwed up the whole thing is!" My voice rises in frustration.

Cassie sighs and joins me on the counter.

"I am sure all this must be overwhelming. I am so sorry, babe. What are you going to do now?" She inquires, squeezing my hands.

"There's nothing to do, Cassie. It was just a one-night thing. We have no business being together. I don't know him. He doesn't know me. End of the story." I say firmly.

The look in Cassie's eyes shows she wants to say something but holds back.

“Good. It has to stay that way. It should stay that way. There are better men out there. Getting entangled with your uncle’s best friend is the last thing you need right now.” She tells me, engulfing me in a hug.

I ease into it and allow her to hold me.

“What happened in Milan stays in Milan.” That is the last thing I say to Cassie. But why is my chest constricting in pain?

After all the partying, I quickly retreat to my room and shower, changing into my PJs. I get under the covers and pull it over my head, shutting my eyes and hoping to drift asleep.

But then, when I shut my eyes, our meeting earlier tonight kept replaying. I shift beneath the covers, huffing. I am restless. I can’t think straight. I close my eyes, and the only thing that comes to my mind is Michael’s olive-green eyes.

I get out of bed, sliding my feet into my flip-flops. I trudge into the bathroom, open the faucet, and splash water on my face. My eyes drift to my reflection in the mirror, and against my will, they snap shut, and those memories come flooding in like it was yesterday...

Chapter 4

Trip Down Memory Lane

Serena

Milan. Two and half years ago...

“I thought I could do this, but everything is so exhausting. And I’m barely a year into this internship.” I whine to Cassie, who grins at me on my phone screen.

“Awww, babe.” She coos.

“It will take some time to get used to it. You know that, right? It’s you. You can adapt to any situation.” She assures me, and I huff, rolling my eyes.

“I got to be honest; it doesn’t feel the same without you.” I pout.

“I know you can’t do without me,” She gloats, and I roll my eyes. “But this is such a big opportunity for you. Be a little excited!”

I am excited... just getting entirely exhausted with the pressure.

“You have always wanted this, remember? Maybe you just need to live a little and stop working so hard, Serena. Does it suck that you are not here? Yes. Can we do anything about it? No.” She shrugs.

“Yeah, You are right.” I brush my hair off my face.

“I am just really bored and mostly stressed. There’s not much to do here.” I add, sighing.

“You know what?” I can hear some rustling in the background. Her bright eyes indicated that she just had an idea.

I arch my brow at her.

“Why don’t you go clubbing? Milan is a beautiful city. I am sure it has some really nice clubs you can attend.” She suggests.

“You know you want to,” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, and I chuckle. Well, it doesn’t seem like a bad idea.

“I know of a club not so far from here. I’ll go get dressed.” I grin, suddenly excited at the thought of going clubbing. “Now, that’s the girl I know and love!” Cassie chirps.

“I’ll talk to you later! Love you!” I smiled at her and made a kissy face, hanging up.

Cassie is right. Instead of sitting here and moping like a little girl, I can make the most of tonight by going out there to enjoy myself. I dig my fingers into my hair, trying to untangle the

knots that must have formed since I have been curled under the covers all day.

I push the cover off my body, my eyes doing a lazy sweep of my messy room, which I haven't gotten a chance to arrange since my arrival.

It can wait.

And with that thought in mind, I head for the shower. I don't take much time to glam myself up. I glance at my reflection in the mirror, nodding in approval. I grab my clutch, stuffing it with necessities before leaving the house and flagging down a cab.

I stroll past the bouncers after they grant me access to the building. The deafening music that blared from the speakers seemed like it would bring the building to its feet. The vast, bubbly space was illuminated by neon lights that reflected on the sweaty skin of the dancing crowd.

I try to avoid bodily contact with them as I weave through the crowd, bobbing my head to the music.

I giggle, sliding into an empty seat by the bar.

"Whiskey. Neat." I smile at the bartender, who fetched my order, pushing it toward me.

"And I'll pay." I glance up, holding my drink in my hand. My eyes land on a curly-haired man, who leers at me, his eyes fixated on my cleavage. I frown and look away.

"I can pay for my drink." I dismiss him, taking a sip from my drink.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be like that, doll face. I saw you walk in here not quite long ago.” He smirks. His posture and tone make it easy to deduce that he is drunk.

“Don’t call me that!” I snap. I rise to my feet, picking up my drink. I try to walk past him, but chuckling, he grabs me by the waist.

“Leave me alone!” I cried, splashing my drink in his face. His grip becomes tighter. He frowns.

“You stupid bitch!”

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER!” The deep, authoritative voice behind me causes me to freeze. My assaulter’s hold becomes lax, allowing me to leave his hands.

“This is none of your business. It’s between me and her.” He frowns, and I take a step backward, whirling around. My eyes clash with a cold pair of green eyes that causes my breath to hang in my throat.

“The lady clearly doesn’t want to talk to you. Get out of my face while I am still being nice.” The green-eyed man spits out his words like they burn his tongue. The curly-haired man glares at me before stomping off.

I sigh in relief, but it doesn’t last long because the green-eyed man turns to me, his riveting orbs settling on me. I take a step backward, reflectively. My heart seized for a second, my eyes exploring every inch of his flawless face.

Perfection.

That's the one word that comes to my mind. His hotness is both rugged and attractive at the same time. He doesn't strike me as someone in my age range, probably a bit older, but it doesn't change the fact that he's drop-dead gorgeous.

His eyes are so attractive. His muscular frame towers over mine, making me feel smaller than I am. His thick, tousled black hair fell over his face, matching the midnight black shirt that clung to his muscles sinfully.

I swallow, unable to hide that I was checking him out, which made him smirk. Fuck.

I blink.

"I was asking if you are okay..." His baritone voice trails off teasingly. My cheeks flush in embarrassment. He steps forward, reducing the space between us. His vast frame radiates with a heat that dries up the saliva in my mouth.

"I...I am fine." I stutter.

"Michael," His name rolls off his tongue, his voice sounding lower than usual. I have never heard a sound so seductive.

"Serena," I whisper.

"Let me buy you a drink." I bite my lower lip. I don't know where the boldness comes from. His eyes darken at my action, and he nods wordlessly. I walk forward boldly. I grab his arm, leading him to the bar.

We make small talk, and one drink turns into two. Two turns to four and four turns to rounds of shots I can't keep track of. I know I am not in my right state of mind anymore, and what

further confirms it is me asking him to dance when another music cues in.

I grabbed his arm and led him to the dance floor. His eyes were fixed on me the whole time. His gaze is so intense, and those green orbs leave a burning sensation everywhere they dart.

He slips one of his arms around my waist, tugging me forward, and a soft sound escapes my lips. I swallow, soaking in his breathtaking appearance under the led lights.

He spins me around, my ass landing on his crotch, eliciting a grunt from him. I smirk, shutting my eyes. I slowly start to grind against him, losing myself to the music.

His grip tightens around my waist, with low grunts emitting from him occasionally. His large hands rove my body so airily, leaving me so restless. They burn through the flimsy fabric of my dress, setting my entire being on fire.

“Fuck, Serena!” He releases a guttural sound, grasping my waist possessively.

I moan.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I ask him breathlessly. He spins me around to face him, and our bodies flush together. His lips brush my skin, and I shiver in anticipation.

“My hotel room is just around the corner.” He tells me in a breathy whisper. His air caressed my skin so softly, earning a moan from me.



I moan, tossing my head backward as he latches his mouth on the skin of my neck, squeezing my ass through the fabric of my dress. He swipes his key card against the door and kicks it open.

His mouth does not leave my neck for a second, his feathery kisses extracting breathy moans from me. He shut it with his leg, slamming my back against the door.

Our lips collide in a fiery kiss.

It numbs my senses, weakening my legs. I clenched my thighs around him, and he cupped my ass skillfully, pressing me against the door. His soft lips stroked mine hungrily before he delved his tongue into my mouth. I moaned against him, fisting his hair.

He grunts.

He breaks the kiss, his sultry eyes meeting mine, knocking out every ounce of breath I have left in my lungs. His breathing is ragged and uneven.

“I have never wanted someone this bad,” He whispers, trailing his fingers up my thigh. I shuddered, brushing my hair backward.

“Me too,” I affirm.

I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol talking or me talking. I mean, I just met this man. But right now, any voice of reason is pushed

to the deepest part of my mind, and I just want to please my heart.

“Kiss me,” I moan, yanking him to myself with his shirt. My mouth descends on his lips again. I grab the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head and discarding it. His hand crawls beneath my dress, tugging at the hem of my panties.

He got rid of it without breaking the kiss. I am too distracted to notice his fingers brushing my thigh before they graze my clitoris, causing me to gasp. He slid a finger into my wet pussy, and I moaned loudly, clamping my teeth on my bottom lip to submerge the wanton sound.

He detaches our lips and presses a kiss on my jaw, trailing feathery kisses from my jaw to my neck and earning breathy sighs from me.

“You are so wet!” He groans, burying his head into my neck as he strokes my sensitive nub. I cry in pleasure, my legs almost giving me away because they wobble heavily. He holds me firmly and continues torturing me with soft strokes.

Then, he plunges a finger into me.

“Oh, my God!” I moan.

“You love that, huh?” He chuckles against my neck, lowering the strap of my dress. I am not wearing a bra underneath the padded dress, so he can easily take in one of my nipples in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it.

“Oh, fuck!” I cry.

The pleasure that shoots through me consumes me, weakening my vision. My eyes flutter shut, his heightened strokes tossing me into an abyss of ecstasy. My walls clench around him as heavy knots build in my abdomen.

I cup his head, grazing his scalp with my manicured fingers. That earns me an approving growl, which causes him to add one more finger into my opening, curling them.

“I am going to— oh, my God!” I sob, my muscles clenching.

“Yes! cum for me, Serena.” He orders me, brushing his nose against my neck. And with those words, I shatter into a thousand pieces in his arms, tears filling my eyes at how good it feels.

“That’s my girl,” He murmured, chuckling. I grab the back of his head, kissing him, and he responds with equal intensity, adjusting me in his arms. He leads us away from the door, not breaking the heated kiss.

He drops me softly on the bed, gathering my hands. He pins them atop my head, hovering above me but careful enough not to crush me with his weight. He kisses every inch of my body as though marking me, eliciting breathy moans.

I wiggle beneath him, my pussy drenching with each kiss. I throw my legs around him, loving the grunts of satisfaction he makes whenever I squirm at his touch.

“Michael, please!” I beg.

A deep, erotic chuckle leaves his lips.

I push myself off the bed, arching my back to meet his touch. He uses that opportunity to remove my dress by moving his hands to the zipper. He draws it downwards, pulling the material over my head.

I am now bare underneath him. He takes his time to stare down at me, his fingers brushing my cheek. I shiver, sighing. I don't break eye contact with him, despite how it feels like his gaze wants to embed itself in my skin.

"You are so beautiful," He swipes his thumb against my lips before he kisses me. I reach for his buckle, undoing it alongside his fly. He breaks the kiss momentarily and gets a condom from who knows where.

He removes the foil wrap and rolls the latex over his length. My veins course with an insatiable hunger...the need for him to dominate me. I am filled with desperation.

He leans downward, placing his palm on mine that is strewn on the bed. He entwines our palms, his eyes steadily on mine, and slowly slides into me.

I gasp at the impact, arching my back off the bed. His length stretches me, filling me up. He waits for me to get accustomed to every inch of him. I let out a wanton moan at how good he feels inside of me, biting my lips.

He delves into me without warning, catching me off guard.

"Michael!" I moan.

He groaned, pulling out of me. He slams into me again with a force that has my eyes rolling back into their sockets. My

brain melts into a puddle, and a wave of pleasure shoots through me. He moves out again, grunting, and then thrusts into me again, fisting our entwined hands.

“Shit, you are so tight!”

I moan, grasping the back of his head and sliding my fingers into the thick mass of hair, fisting them. My walls clenched tightly around him, his cock stretching me.

I cry out in bliss, throwing my head backward.

He feels so good. So fucking good. I can't help the tears that form in my eyes.

I throw my legs around him, clenching my thigh around him as he moves in and out of me, each thrust more intense than the last. He must have noticed my desperation. My need for him to move faster than he was. He doubles up his pace, pumping and out of me with vigor.

He slams into me mercilessly, my screams echoing through the room's walls.

His thrusts were mind-numbing and filled me with euphoria. They extract sounds from me. The ones I didn't know I was capable of making. They sound so foreign to my ears.

“Fuck, Serena!” A growl ripples from his chest, his thrusts growing more potent. My legs quake uncontrollably beneath him. I writhe in pleasure, suppressing my moans with my mouth. But he brushes my palm off my mouth, wanting to milk out every sound he can get from me.

“Oh, shit!”

“Yes, that’s it. Cum with me, Serena.” He groans, fiddling with my nipple. His thrusts and his fingers on my breasts stimulate me, heightening my pleasure to its peak. I clench around him, my toes curling, and we both hit our climax with an animalistic growl eluding him.

His head drops to my chest, and mine drops to the pillow. Our loud breathings fill the room. My eyelids became heavy, and I could barely move a limb. He pulls out of me, discarding the condom. Then, he kisses me softly before rolling off me.

I snuggle into him, placing my head on his chest. My eyes snap shut.

That one night. Filled with an intimacy that shook me to the core. I could have seen everything coming but not waking up to a cold bed. I woke up that morning, hoping to see him.

But he was just gone without a trace.

Like he was never there. Like he never existed.

Chapter 5

Déjà vu

Serena

My head hurts so badly. A banging headache hammers at my temples, and my eyelids are itchy. My mind is a mess, and I am restless. I barely got any ounce of sleep last night. My thoughts are occupied with the events from three years ago that still felt as fresh as yesterday.

I lay lazily under the covers, staring into space.



Spending a passionate night in the arms of a stranger, only to wake up to an empty, cold bed. A harsh reminder that what we shared the night before was just a fling. He left me without a word. He didn't even have the decency to allow me to wake up first before he left.

We could have handled it like adults and gone our separate ways after saying goodbye. But no, he chose the easy way out

and disappeared without a trace.

His disappearance made me feel like I was nothing to him that morning. I didn't know him, but I allowed him to use me. It was painful.

My struggles to move past it was overwhelming. His face, his touch, and every word he said to me lingered in memory, and I had a hard time letting it go.

And now that I'm back in the US to start fresh, he comes back into my life like nothing happened.

I scoff humorlessly.

"You are a joke, Michael. A fucking joke. That's what you are." I speak to myself like I am delusional, but I don't care.

I throw the covers aside, getting up from my bed. I grab a band from the dresser, tucking my hair into a messy bun. I snatch my phone off the nightstand.

I am done dwelling on the past. Michael is a coward, and he isn't worth my time. I shouldn't be thinking about it. I have done my best to repress the thoughts concerning him, and his showing up shouldn't disrupt that. He is my past, and he is going to stay that way.

Given how he was best friends with my John and his business partner, I am bound to see him now and then. I am not going to allow that to deter me. I am going to make it my life's mission to avoid it. He stopped existing to me two and half years ago. There is no reason for him to spring back to life now.

With that thought in mind, I pranced into the bathroom to prepare for the day. My ringtone interrupts my brushing session, and I pick up the phone to check the caller.

It's Cassie.

"Hey, you!" She mumbles groggily. She's just waking up.

"Hey," I say with a mouthful of paste, and I hear her grumble 'yuck' under her breath. I chuckle at her silliness.

"I was just calling to check in on you," She says softly. I spit out the foam in my mouth, rinsing my brush and mouth afterward.

"Are you okay?" She asks quietly.

"Yes, Cassie. I am okay. You don't have to worry about me. I am not going to do anything stupid. I promise." I assure her.

"Stay away from Michael, and everything will be fine. He's not worth losing what you have with John. John is your family." She adds. I bob my head in response as though she could see me.

She's right.

"Thank you," I smile to myself.

"You are welcome. I gotta go. My head is banging. I had too much to drink yesternight. I love you." She hangs up. I sigh, dropping my phone on the sink surface.

I cast a wry glance at my reflection, nodding afterward. John has been in my life long before my path and his cross. I

shouldn't complicate things further by crossing the line over a meaningless fling.

Keep lying to yourself. The tiny voice in my head mocks me. I tune it out.

"I am in control," I smile and quickly shower.

After I change into comfortable clothes, it takes a while before I go downstairs. I had to tidy up my room. I leave my room afterward.

I stop short when I get to the living room. The massive space is disorganized, crawling with maids trying to put everything back in place. I turn around to leave, but I decide to seize the opportunity. Returning to my room means being alone, and it's the last thing I need right now.

"Good morning, ma'am," They greet me. I flash them a smile.

"Good morning. You all can return to other chores; I will handle the living room." I tell them. They try to counter me, but the arching of my brow prevents them from saying anything else. They excuse themselves from the living room, leaving me all alone.

I have to stay busy to distract myself.

I get to work immediately, taking out the empty bottles and cups. By the time I am done, the living room is sparkling clean. It's back in its default state.

Throughout the day, I hop from one chore to another, not allowing my thoughts to resurface. It's already nightfall when I finish cleaning the whole house.

I go into the kitchen to fetch myself something to eat, but the scantiness glares right back at me when I open the fridge. I groan, shutting it close.

“Ugh! John!” I suck my teeth in annoyance. After all this while, he still hasn’t changed. It’s a habitual thing for John to forget to stock his fridge. We are always quarreling about it. I do all the shopping when I am around.

Now that I am back, it’s still the same story. I huff and walk out of the kitchen. I quickly go upstairs to change into a summer dress and retrieve my purse. I snatch a key off the tray. I head out and get into the car, pulling out of the driveway and driving to the nearest grocery store.

I sigh in relief, seeing as the store is still open. I turn off the ignition and pick up my purse, letting myself out of the car. I stroll into the store, flashing a smile at the cashier. I grab a cart and stop at each aisle, dumping necessities into the basket.

I end up shopping more than I intend to. But it’s always the story whenever I go shopping.

I wheeled my cart to the counter, and the cashier took out a bunch of paper bags, stuffing my groceries into it. She gives me my bill, and I pay with my card.

I try to balance the heavy paper bags in my hands as I leave the store. I unlock the car and dump the bags in the back seat, getting into the car.

I drive out of the parking lot, heading home.

I am almost a few blocks from the house when my car suddenly stops moving. I furrow my brows, getting out of the car to check what's wrong with it.

I open the bonnet, and it soon dawn on me that I don't know what or where to check in the car. I sigh in frustration, digging my fingers into my hair. I yell out in frustration.

"Oh, come on! You stupid car!" I shout, throwing my hands in the air in frustration. I took off one of my ballet flats, hitting it on where I presume to be its engine.

"God!" I sigh.

I slam it shut, heading into the car to fetch my phone. Then, it hit me. It's only my purse that I took when I left the house. I didn't take my phone.

My eyes look around the quiet neighborhood, fear creeping into me. I shudder, resigning to walk the rest of the distance. I am only several blocks away from home. I can walk the remaining distance.

I just have to find a way to balance the paper bags in my hands. I retrieve the bags from the backseat, alongside my purse. I lock the car with the keys and start walking home.

I quicken my steps when I realize I am approaching an alley. The hair on my nape stands erect in fear. My heart lurches to my throat when I hear some catcalls.

"Hey, pretty thing!"

I stop walking, and my eyes dart to my left. They land on two guys strolling out of the alley, sporting sinister smirks on their

faces.

Oh, God. This isn't good.

I don't answer them. I continue walking.

"Don't be such a prude!" It all happened so fast. One minute I am trying to get away from them, and then the next, one of them grabs my arm. My heart drops to the pit of my stomach.

The bags in my hands drop to the floor.

"Let me go!" I screech.

"She's a gorgeous one," The other man snickers.

"Please, just leave me alone!"

"We just want to talk to you, no pressure." His hand brushes my arm, and I scream, tears filling my eyes.

The screeching of tires was what I heard next. I squeeze my eyes shut, my heart hammering against my chest. The loud slam of a door accompanies it, but I am too shaken up to open my eyes.

"Lurking around the neighborhood at night is one thing; harassing a woman is another!" The all-too-familiar voice bellows, causing my eyes to snap open.

My gaze anchors on a familiar pair of green eyes, which were very cold. They are narrowed in slits at my assaulters.

"Stay out of this, man." The other man frowns.

He strides forward, his muscular figure looming closer.

"What did you just say?" Michael's voice is daring and cold.

“Let’s just go. She’s not that pretty anyways.” The guy who was holding my arm says and lets me go. He kicks my bag and dashes off with his friend. I am left alone with him.

I breathe, shaking, suddenly feeling cold.

“We really have to stop meeting like this, Serena.” Michael’s deep, alluring voice filters into my ears. I take a deep breath, meeting his gaze. My legs wobble slightly.

I scoff, not saying a word to him. I crouched to the floor to gather the items scattered on the tarred road. He imitates my posture, reaching for a tube of whipped cream.

“Get your hands off my things!” I yell.

I hate this. It’s so triggering. It’s like reliving the memory of the first time we met. I am no damsel in distress. I don’t need his help.

My tone catches him off guard. I rise to my feet.

“I don’t need your help, Michael. I was fine on my own. I had it all under control!” I snap. He stares at me and scoffs in mockery.

“Sure, you had it under control.” He shoots back at me sarcastically.

“Why are you even here? Are you stalking me?” I query him, squinting my eyes at him. My question feels like a whiplash to him because he stares at me in disbelief.

“What?!”

“Now, I am stalking you? How does saving your life equate to me stalking you? Do you know what could have happened to you if I didn’t show up?” He demands, stepping forward. His masculine cologne slaps my nostrils.

“Get off your high horse, Serena, and stop acting like a fucking child!” He bellows.

“Well, you slept with this child, remember?!” I yell back at him, chuckling humorlessly afterward.

“Oh,”

“Still hung up on that night, huh?” He chuckles coldly. His words hit me like a pang in my chest. I walk forward, masking my hurt. I stop right before him, jabbing my finger at his chest.

“No, I am not. I got over it. You should, too, stop following me around like a damn puppy.” I spit out venomously. His frown deepens. He will say something to me, but I cut him off.

“Go to hell,” I whisper, walking away from him and abandoning my grocery bags.

“Serena! Get back here!” He shouts at me, calling me incessantly, but I don’t listen. I walk as far away from him as possible. I break into a run after a while.

I don’t stop running until I get into the confines of my home. I run upstairs and dash into my room, shutting the door behind me. I slam my back against the wall, my lips quivering as I slid off the door.

I can’t hold it in anymore. I break down into tears.

Fuck! Why am I so emotional?

Chapter 6

A Bad Idea

Michael

Stalker? I scoff.

I can't believe Serena is accusing me of stalking her. It's absurd.

I get it. Meeting me again wasn't exactly a part of Serena's plan, but it wasn't a part of my plan, either. I'm not some crazy stalker! I just happened to be in the neighborhood, and all I did was try to save her from a very dangerous situation.

She could have said 'Thank you' instead of calling me 'Stalker'....

I scoff again.

And despite my protests, she still doesn't listen to me.

I know I'm not supposed to be bothered by it, but it gets on my nerve.

It was the same way two and a half years ago, but now it's more complicated.

I had no idea she was John's niece and that John raised her as his own daughter then. If I had known, I would have never slept with her.

The sex we had was probably the best sex I had in my life. She ruined me for other women, and I was never the same after the night with her. It was like she used some spell on me. I suddenly craved her, like an addict to ecstasy.

When I returned to the hotel room and didn't find her there anymore, I looked for Serena all over Milan. I had to give up when my business trip to Milan was over, but I still wanted her even after that.

I still want her.

But now, there are so many gray areas. I can't have the same feelings for Serena anymore. She is now completely off limits, and wanting her is simply a suicide mission. That's what makes this a whole lot more complicated.

The best thing I can do is to avoid her just as she has chosen to avoid me. It should be easy because she doesn't want me anyways.

All I know is that I must stay away from her, and it would be best to pretend we never knew each other for John's sake. The last thing I want is for Serena to feel bothered by me and for me to ruin the relationships Serena and I have with John.

Unfortunately, my plan to avoid her doesn't last long...

“You called?” I say as I walk into John’s office, shutting the door behind me. He looks up from his laptop.

“Ah, Michael,” He beckons me to come closer. I walk over to one of the visitor’s chairs by John’s desk, flipping open my blazer before sitting down.

“What’s up?” I ask him. He smiles, turning his laptop around for me to see. I smile as soon as I see the screen.

“Your ideas on how to make our hotels and resorts unique have been working,” John says. “Our stakes have gone over the roof, and I’ve been getting calls from several investors. You, my man, are a genius!”

He leans over to pat my shoulder, and we laugh.

In this partnership, John focuses on executing the ideas that I come up with. He wants to ensure that the ideas we agreed on become a reality and our company becomes a global sensation.

I do my work remotely most of the time to develop ideas, and John brings them to the spotlight. But we work side by side as an unstoppable team when it’s time for both of us to be at the forefront.

“You said it,” I shrug, feigning modesty. “I’m your go-to guy when coming up with ideas. I’m glad everything worked in our favor, and Jade Mountain Rodriguez is going to lose. Rodriguez Group won’t know what hit them.”

“You’ve got that right!” He agrees. “But that’s not the only reason why I called you here,”

My brows furrowed, urging John to go on.

“Since our business is booming,” John begins. “I’ve been thinking about where we should expand to next. Let’s focus on some new countries with great tourism potential that we have never touched.”

“I agree,” I nod. “What countries were you thinking of?”

“Well, first on my list is Brazil,” John says. “It’s a huge country with a lot of potential for growth in the tourism industry. Plus, they’re hosting a few world events in a couple of years, so many visitors will be coming in.”

“That’s a good point,” I agree immediately, my mind buzzing with lucrative ideas. “And there’s also the Amazon rainforest and the beaches. Our guests can enjoy both nature and luxury resorts.”

“Exactly,” John snaps his finger. “Another country that has a lot of potential is Thailand. It’s a popular tourist destination with beautiful beaches and rich culture. Plus, the cost of living is relatively low, so we could save money on labor costs.”

“That’s a good idea,” I smile. “We could also offer wellness and spa retreats. They are becoming increasingly popular.”

“Great idea,” He smiles back. “And lastly, I think we should consider expanding to Spain. It’s a popular destination for Europeans with rich culture and history. Plus, we could offer luxury resorts along the Mediterranean coastline.”

“I like that idea,” I lean back against the seat. “We could also offer cultural tours and experiences, like wine tastings and flamenco dancing.”

“I like the way you are thinking,” John says. “Do you have any more suggestions?” He asks me.

I think for a bit.

“Now that you mention it,” I lean against the table. “I’ve also been researching some potential countries for us to expand our hotel and resort business. Countries that will have the economic capacity to aid us.”

That immediately piques John’s interest. “What countries are you thinking about?”

“Well, I’ve narrowed it down to three; Mexico, Indonesia, and Portugal.”

John furrows his brows in thought, stroking his chin.

“Interesting choices,” He nods slowly. “Why do you think these countries would be good for us to expand to?”

“For Mexico,” I start to explain. “It’s a popular tourist destination with a growing economy. Plus, the government has been investing in infrastructure and tourism development. It’s a great opportunity to tap into the market and offer our services to travelers.”

John nods.

“I never thought of that. Sounds good,” John nods in approval. “And Indonesia?”

“It’s the largest economy in Southeast Asia and has a growing middle class,” I tell him. “The tourism industry is also

booming, with Bali being a popular destination. We could expand our business there and cater to the luxury market.”

“Interesting,” John is in awe, impressed. He is buying into the idea. “How about Portugal?”

“For Portugal, it has a stable economy and a growing tourism industry. It’s also a popular destination for European travelers. We could offer our services to them and tap into the market.”

“Great ideas,” John comments, and I smirk, proud of myself. “They are all excellent points. Do you have any concerns about expanding to these countries?”

I shrug, “Of course, there are always risks involved in expanding to new markets. We must do our due diligence and ensure a solid business plan.”

John nods, “That’s true. But I think it’s worth exploring all these opportunities. Let’s start putting together a plan and see where it takes us. We should also travel there soon to map out spaces and talk to some investors. I think this will be a good thing for our business.”

“Definitely,” I nod, standing. “Just let me know when you are ready to leave, and I’ll be right there,” I tell John.

John’s face suddenly lights up like he just thought of something, and he looks at me.

“There’s something I might need your help with here, so I might just go alone on the trip,” He says.

The look in his eyes makes me quite curious.

“Okay? What is it?”

“I would need a favor from you for when I’m gone on the trip to the countries,” He tells me, making me even more curious.

Now, it doesn’t sound business related. And I know that John wouldn’t ask me for a favor outside of business unless it was vital.

“What is it?” I ask, folding my hand across my chest.

“Given that I’m going to visit a few countries, I might be away for a while,” I nod, urging him to go on. “So, I’d need someone to look after Serena for me,” John says.

I feel a knot form in my stomach, and my face immediately frowns when he mentions Serena’s name. Just when I decide to avoid her, this happens. I want to make sure things don’t get more complicated.

“John, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to watch her,” I say hesitantly. “From our encounter at her welcome home party, I don’t think she likes me very much.”

“What?” John looks confused. “I don’t think so. Maybe you just misread her energy. She was pretty tired that day. She’s a very amazing kid.”

Sure. Of course. I try not to roll my eyes in sarcasm.

“I’m sure she is, but I think you need to ask for her permission first,” I say. “Besides, why does she need a babysitter? I’m sure she’s old enough to take care of herself and stay on her own for a few weeks. She stayed alone in Milan for three years.”

John sighs.

“It’s quite different now. Serena just got back from Milan. And the other day, I came home to find her crying her eyes out.—”

What? She cried. My shoulders fall.

“—She told me she almost got harassed by a couple of men when her car suddenly broke down in the middle of the road. Thank God for the kind stranger that helped her out.”

“Oh,” is all I can say.

“Look, Michael. You know I wouldn’t ask you if I had any other option. But I can’t leave Serena alone now, and you are the only one I can trust with this. Please, help me.” He begs.

I can see the desperation in his eyes, and I know I will have difficulty saying no. John has always been a good friend, and I hate to disappoint him.

“Okay,” I say finally. “I’ll watch Serena for you.”

John’s face lights up, and he doesn’t stop thanking me. I try to push my reservations to the back of my mind and focus on the task. I know I have a difficult road ahead, but I’m determined to make it work.

But why do I feel like I just signed my death warrant?

Chapter 7

Asshole

Serena

“No.”

I walk out of John’s study, hoping that he will accept my answer, but I immediately know that he wants to change my mind when I hear his footsteps behind me.

John is asking me to spend a month with Michael while he is on a business trip, and I’m not happy about it. I can’t even believe he’d suggest something like that.

Okay, maybe if John knew my history with Michael, he would not be suggesting this arrangement with Michael...

I don’t think things will get better between Michael and me after our last encounter when my car broke down. What John is requesting now will only complicate things further between us.

“Serena, come on! Don’t be like this,” John tries to appease me, still following behind me as we get to the living room.

“This is not as hard as you are making it seem.” He adds.

I turn around to look at him as we enter the kitchen area.

“You are the one who is making this harder than it is,” I counter him with a casual shrug, trying to look as carefree as possible so that he won’t suspect that there’s more to my refusal.

“My answer is simple,” I tell him. “I don’t want to stay with your friend while you are away. That’s it.” I fold my arms across my chest.

My uncle sighs.

“It’s only for a month, Serena,” He explains as if that would be enough reason for me to change my mind on the spot.

“He is staying back to oversee the company’s affairs while I’m on the trip. And I think keeping each other company would be good for you both.”

That sounds so wrong in my head. I swallow.

“Jeremy is still around,” I tell John, trying to joke around, but he is not smiling.

“Serena, be serious,” He says, and I roll my eyes. “Besides, I’m giving Jeremy the time off since I won’t need him here or abroad. He should be with his family, and I need you to be safe. Michael is the only one I trust to care for you while I’m away.”

“But I am safe.” I defend, biting back the frustration building in me. I lean back against the counter.

“And I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I was alone in Milan for three years, John, remember? I’m sure I can manage without you for one month. I don’t need Michael to babysit me.”

John’s eyes narrow slightly. “Serena, do you remember what happened a few weeks ago when you were harassed and almost got mugged on your way home from shopping? Do you want something like that to happen again?”

My heart sinks at the memory. I had tried to brush it off and forget about it, but now it all comes rushing back. It was awful and traumatic.

“That was a one-time thing, Uncle John. I don’t think it’s going to happen again.”

John leans forward with his firm voice. “But it could, Serena. And I don’t want to take any chances. Michael is a responsible man. He’ll make sure you’re safe and well taken care of.”

I want to argue and tell him I don’t need anyone’s help. But the memory of that night is still too fresh in my mind. I know deep down that John is right.

John sighs, and his expression softens. He then reaches across the table to take my hand.

“Serena, I need you to listen to me. Michael is my best friend and business partner. I trust him with my life. And I trust him with yours.”

But John doesn't know that I don't trust myself around Michael. My emotions get heightened around him, and I just lose my head. The mere thought of spending a month with him fills me with anxiety and uncertainty.

Deep down, it also fills me with anticipation of what might happen between us, knowing our history in Milan two and a half years ago.

"I'll think about it," I say, leaning forward. "But I'm not promising anything."

John nods, looking relieved. "Thank you, Serena. I promise you won't regret it."

I pull out my phone and dial Cassie's number. This whole thing wouldn't have been up for debate if Cassie was still in town, but she returned to Paris after my welcome-home party a few weeks ago.

"Hello," Her chirpy voice answers from the other end of the phone.

"Hey, Cassie," I say, trying to sound upbeat.

"Hey, Serena! What's up?" Cassie responds with her usual high energy.

I take a deep breath before answering. "Well, you know how my uncle is going abroad for a month, right?"

Cassie giggles. "Yeah, I remember you telling me that a few days ago. What's up?"

My heart sinks as I prepare to deliver the news. “Uncle John wants me to stay at Michael’s house while he’s gone.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. I can hear the cogs turning in Cassie’s head. “Michael’s house? As in Michael, the guy you hooked up with in Milan? The same guy you have been avoiding like a plague since you found out he’s your uncle’s best friend?”

I roll my eyes, feeling my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“Yeah, that Michael.”

Cassie lets out a low whistle. “Wow, talk about awkward. So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I say, feeling the weight of the situation. “Things are going to get more complicated between us. We haven’t spoken since he helped me that night, and I’m not sure I want to talk to him.”

“I get that, babe,” Cassie sighs. “But I don’t think anything can be done about it. It seems like your uncle has made up his mind already.”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t know what will happen between us while I’m there with Michael. I don’t want things to get weirder than it already is by continuing to avoid him in his house, but at the same time, I don’t want to give him the wrong idea by hanging out with him.”

Cassie pauses for a moment before speaking. “Well, what’s the worst that could happen? You stay there for a month, and things return to how they were before.”

I shake my head, feeling a sense of unease. “I don’t think it’s that simple, Cassie. I mean, what if he thinks I’m interested in him? I don’t want to give him that idea.”

Cassie sighs. “I get it, Serena. But you can’t control how things will play out no matter how hard you try. And you can’t control what he feels, either. All you can do is be honest and see how things go from here.”

I nod, “Okay, I’ll try to keep that in mind. But I’m still nervous about living with Michael in his house for a month.”

Cassie chuckles. “Well, just think of it as a chance to get to know him better. Maybe you’ll find out he’s not the guy you thought he was.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, right. I know who Michael is, Cassie. We had a one-night stand, and he left me in a cold bed alone the next morning, remember?”

Cassie laughs. “Okay, okay, I get it. But people change, Serena. Maybe he’s not the same guy he was two and a half years ago.”

I sigh. “I guess we’ll see.”

Cassie and I talked about it a little longer before hanging up. I can’t help but feel anxious about staying at Michael’s house for a whole month. It will be awkward and uncomfortable, and I don’t know if I can handle it.

But Cassie’s words stay with me, and I try to keep an open mind. Maybe things will work out for the best. All I can do is take it one day at a time and see how things go.



I stand outside my house with John and Michael, feeling mixed emotions as I say goodbye to John. He's leaving for his month-long trip out of the country, and it's now official that I will be with Michael. I'm still not thrilled about the arrangement, but I must accept it.

John gives me a tight hug before turning to Michael. "Take care of her, Michael. And make sure she doesn't get into any trouble."

"John!" I whine.

Michael nods, a small smile on his face. "Don't worry, John. I'll make sure she stays out of trouble."

I roll my eyes at Michael's comment, feeling slightly irritated. "I can take care of myself, you know."

Michael chuckles, and I can hear the undertone of sarcasm. "Of course, you can. But it doesn't hurt to have some help."

I resist the urge to snap at him, instead opting to smile tightly because John is watching us. "Thanks, Michael. I'll keep that in mind."

John gives us one last wave before getting into his car and driving away. I watch him go, feeling a sense of loneliness wash over me.

Michael clears his throat, drawing my attention. "So, do you want some help with your suitcases?" He tries to help me carry them into his car.

I turn down his gesture, not wanting to seem weak or incapable. "I can handle it myself," I tell him bristly.

Michael shrugs, not looking too bothered. "Suit yourself."

As we get into the car, I feel the tension between Michael and me. It's uncomfortably quiet for the first few minutes, and I can't help but feel anxious. I do my best trying to hide it.

"Michael, we need to talk about ground rules," I say, breaking the silence.

"I am way ahead of you, Serena," Michael replies, not bothering to look at me.

I can feel my irritation growing. "Of course you are. So, what are the rules?"

Michael finally looks at me, his expression stern. "Serena, I'm serious. I need to ensure you're safe while you're here."

"I'm not an idiot, Michael. I know how to take care of myself," I snap back, my frustration building.

"Fine. But you still can't go out on your own, and I need to know where you're going at all times," Michael says, his tone final.

My head snaps in his direction.

"Excuse me!"

He doesn't seem affected by my outburst and continues listing off the rules he memorized.

"You cannot bring anyone to this house without my permission. You cannot leave the house after 9 pm and must

be back by 10 pm. You cannot use any of the rooms except the ones I assign to you, and you cannot touch anything in the house without my permission,”

What the hell! I stare at him in disbelief.

My annoyance grows as he continues to list off more and more rules. It feels like he is treating me like a child, and starting to feel suffocating. I try to interject and counter him, but he doesn't listen.

“So, what am I supposed to do all day? Sit around and do nothing?” My voice is trembling with anger.

“You can read, watch TV, and walk in the garden. I have a library full of books and a pool in the backyard. John tells me you are still scouting for fashion industries to work; You can do that online. You won't be bored,” Michael says, his tone dismissive.

I can't believe how arrogant and controlling he is. “You know what, Michael? I don't need your permission to do anything. I'm an adult, and I can make my own decisions.”

“I'm sorry if you feel that way, Serena, but these are the rules, and they are non-negotiable. John tasked me with keeping you safe, and I will do that. If you have any problem, you take it up with him.” Michael says firmly.

This asshole! I fall back to the leather seat of his car, fuming.

The rest of the car ride is filled with tense silence. We arrive at Michael's house, and he shows me to my room. It's a nice

room, but it's also bare and impersonal. I can't help but feel like I'm in a prison cell.

"Freshen up. The dinner will be ready soon," Michael says, not letting me speak before he walks out and slams the door.

I can't believe how rude he is.

Asshole! I cuss at him again and begin to unpack my things. Looking around the room, I feel trapped, like I'm in prison and Michael is the warden.

Unlike what Cassie said, getting to know him will be futile. I don't even want to get to know someone like him.

My biggest regret is that I wasted my time with someone like him.

I can't wait for this month to be over and get out of here.

Chapter 8

Disaster Magnet

Serena

I sit on my bed, staring at my phone, waiting for Cassie to answer my call. When she finally answers the phone, her face appears on the screen, and I can see the Eiffel Tower in the background. I smile at her, so happy to see her but sad that I'm stuck in Michael's house.

"Hey, girl," I say, trying to sound cheerful.

"Hey Serena, how's it going?" Cassie asks, looking concerned.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm going crazy here. Michael's been keeping me locked up in his house like a prisoner. I can't leave the house without his permission and can't stand it anymore."

Cassie sighs sympathetically. "I know how you feel. How long has it been? A few days?" She asks.

“A week,” I answer, running a hand through my hair. “And it feels like a month. I can’t take it anymore. I can’t wait for Uncle John to return so I can have my freedom back.”

Cassie smiles. “I hear you. So, where do you want to go when you get out of there?”

“Anywhere but here,” I say with a half-smile. “I just need to leave this place and let loose for a night.”

Cassie grins mischievously. “I know just the thing. Why don’t you go to a club? Just to have fun for the night like you said.

I hesitate for a moment, “The club? I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Honestly, I don’t even need to go that far. I would kill for a stroll. As long as I could be outside of this property, I would be happy.”

Cassie rolls her eyes, “And where is the fun in that? If you want to escape that prison, you must make it worth it. You deserve to let loose and have fun, or you might lose your mind.”

I hesitate for a moment. “But what about Michael? He will flip if he realizes I have gone to a club!”

Cassie rolls her eyes again; I fear it will get stuck at the back of her head. “Since when do you care what happens to Michael? And what if he finds out? He can only yell at you after you have had fun, and he knows that will be completely useless anyways.”

Good point. I shrug, a thoughtful look on my face.

“He isn’t with you right now, is he? You’re not a child. You’re a grown woman who deserves to have some fun. Besides, I’m sure your uncle won’t mind.”

I consider this for a moment before nodding. “Okay, let’s do it. But I can’t take my phone since Michael can track me with it.”

“No worries, girl. Just leave it there. You’ll have a great time, I promise.”

I smile, my eyes glomming with so much excitement. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Cassie grins. “I knew you’d like it. You have to wear something super sexy, okay?”

I laugh. “Of course. Have you met me? I’ll show you what I’m going to wear.”

I put the phone down on the bed and rummaged through my wardrobe for something to wear. I finally settle on a black dress that hugs my curves in all the right places. I slide it on and check myself out in front of the mirror.

I look good.

“Okay, Cassie, what do you think?” I hold the phone up to the mirror so she can see me.

Cassie’s eyes widen. “Damn, girl, you look hot! Michael is going to regret locking you up in that house when he sees you in that dress.”

I giggle, rolling my eyes. “Oh please, Cassie. I’m so excited to get out of here and have fun.”

Cassie nods. “Just be careful, okay? Don’t do anything too crazy.”

“I won’t,” I promise.

I grab my purse and slip out of the room, leaving my phone behind. I don’t want Michael tracking me. I sneak out of the house and into the Uber I reserved. I tell the driver to take me to the hottest club in town since I’m behind on all the latest happenings in LA.

When I arrive, I’m a little nervous. It’s been a while since I have been at a club alone. I don’t know anyone here, but I take a deep breath and walk inside, trying to look confident.

As soon as I step inside, the music hits me. It’s so loud I can feel the rhythm vibrating in my chest. The lights are flashing, and people are dancing and having a good time.

It’s contagious.

I make my way to the bar, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone.

“Can I get a vodka tonic, please?” I ask the bartender, raising my voice over the thumping music.

He nods and starts to mix my drink. I take a sip and feel the alcohol start to take effect. It makes me feel light-headed and carefree, and I move my body to the beat of the music.

I dance for about thirty minutes, losing myself in the music. Suddenly, a guy comes up to me and starts talking to me.

“Hey,” He smirks at me. I look away, trying to ignore him, but he doesn’t stop trying to get my attention.

I move away from that side to dance somewhere else. He follows me.

Can’t this man take a hint?

He starts to dance with me, grinding against me.

“Please stop; I’m not interested,” I tell him politely, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s drunk and getting handsy, and I start to feel uncomfortable.

“Get off me,” I try to push him away, but he won’t take no for an answer. Before I know it, he’s groping me, and I feel violated.

There is a sense of Deja Vu here. This is about the same thing that happened in Milan two and a half years ago. Only this time, Michael isn’t here.

I slap him across the face, hoping to get him to back off. But it only makes him more aggressive.

“Bitch!” He grabs my arm and tries to pull me closer to him. Everyone is dancing like a drunk, and no one seems to care about what’s happening around them.

When I think I’m trapped, a firm hand grabs the guy’s shoulder and pulls him away. I see Michael standing between me and the drunk guy, towering over him and glaring down at him.

“Leave her alone,” Michael growls, his voice low and threatening.

“Fuck off!” The drunk guy spits out, trying to push Michael, but Michael doesn’t budge. He punches the guy in the face, knocking him out cold.

I gasp, placing my hand over my mouth.

The music and the dancing halt as everyone turns to look at us.

Michael grabs my hand and leads me out of the club. I stumble after him, still feeling dizzy from the alcohol and the adrenaline.

Once we’re outside, Michael stops and turns to face me.

I see him disappointed and angry.

“What the fuck were you thinking!” he snaps, his voice harsh.

I shrink back, feeling a little scared. “I-I...” I stutter, fumbling with my words.

“You know what? I don’t even want to know. Get into the car.” He doesn’t wait for me as he goes to the driver’s side. I rush to the passenger’s side and get in.

Michael pulls out of the parking lot and into the busy streets.



I sit in the passenger seat, my hands folded tightly in my lap. It’s quiet in the car except for the sound of the engine, and tension is in the air.

I steal a glance at Michael out of the corner of my eyes. He is gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turn white. His jaw is clenched, and his eyes are fixed on the road ahead. I can feel his anger radiating off of him, making me nervous.

Oh shit...

When we pull up to the house, Michael gets out of the car without a word. I follow him along the walkway, but he's walking too fast for me to keep up.

This is such a mess, and I'm in big trouble...

"I'm sorry," I try apologizing, but he doesn't respond. He scoffs and walks faster, ignoring me.

I'm getting annoyed now. Why does Michael have to be so upset? It's not like my life was in any danger. I was trying to have a good time. Yes, things got a little messy, but everything is good now.

"What's your problem?" I ask. "I just apologized. The least you can do is acknowledge me."

He stops and turns to face me, his eyes blazing with anger.

"My problem is that you can't seem to take responsibility for your safety," he says, staring at me with his angry face. I scoff, folding my arms across my chest.

"You knew you weren't supposed to leave the house without telling me. And yet you went out anyway."

I feel my anger rising now. “You can’t just lock me up like a prisoner,” I say. “I’m an adult; I can make my own decisions.”

“You’re damn right you’re an adult,” he says. “And as an adult, you should know better than to put yourself in danger like that for the second time!”

“I wasn’t in danger,” I protest. “Before you came in, I had everything under control!”

He lets out a sarcastic laugh.

“Of course you did!” He responds in mockery.

“Michael, it wasn’t a big deal!”

His expression transcends anger to hurt, and it does something to me.

“You didn’t think it was a big deal?” he repeats incredulously, his voice trembling. “Do you know what could have happened to you out there? You could have been kidnapped or worse. And I would have had no idea where you were.”

My heart fell to the pit of my stomach, the seriousness of the situation sinking in.

He closes on me, standing barely inches away and towering over me. My breath catches in my throat, and I look up at him. His expression is softer, filled with worry.

My heart starts to beat rapidly against my chest.

“Do you know how scared I was to come back home and see you were not home?” His tone is gentle now. “And what’s worse? You left your phone. Why the hell would you do that?”

I couldn't reach you, and I was fucking terrified. I had to call your friend in Paris who confessed that you had gone to a club, but she didn't know where. I had been to every club in the city looking for you."

I feel so guilty after realizing how worried Michael was and becoming emotional.

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice shaking.

"Your uncle entrusted me with your care, and I take that responsibility very seriously. And you don't make it easy for me, Serena." He whispers.

"I'm sorry...." My shoulder slumps.

Michael sighs, and I start to think he would just walk away from me at that moment, but no, he pulls me into a tight hug instead. And I could hear his heartbeats. My emotions get the better part of me; tears start to fill my eyes.

"It's okay," He whispers soothingly, tightening his hands around me.

"I'm so sorry," I mumble against his chest, throwing my hands around his waist.

"It's alright. I'm just glad you are okay."

I don't know how long we stand there, but I relish being in Michael's arms.

It feels so lovely. It makes me feel safe.

Chapter 9

Misunderstanding

Michael

I'm sitting on the sofa beside Serena, my heart heavy with guilt as I watch her teary eyes. The last thing I want is to cause her pain. But here we are, and I can't help but feel responsible for the tears filling her eyes.

I was just terrified when I came home and didn't find her. And to get to that club and see that fucker's hands on her, it infuriated me to the core. I wish I did more than punch him in the face. He deserves to be beaten up.

"Serena, I'm so sorry," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't mean to make you upset. The last thing I wanted was to make you emotional."

She looks up at me with her teary eyes. "I know, Michael," she says softly. "I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have snuck out of the house like that. I should have told you where I was going before leaving."

“I know,” I say. “I was just being too insufferable. I understand why you did it. You just needed some breathing space. I’d be too if I were you.”

She nodded, “I just feel so trapped sometimes,” she admits. “Like I can’t be myself around you. You make it hard to be me around you.”

A pang of guilt surges through my chest. Have I been that overbearing? Have I been holding her back?

“I’m sorry for that, Serena,” I say, feeling a lump in my throat. “I never meant to cage you up like that. I care about you so much and don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She stares at me, looking a bit confused.

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” She asks me.

My brows furrow, and I nod to the side to look at her quizzically.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Serena sighs with a thoughtful look and then shakes her head.

“You know what? Don’t worry about it. It’s silly,” She dismisses, but that makes me more curious.

“Tell me,” I urge her. She sighs.

“I know it’s supposed to be a thing of the past, and we haven’t exactly discussed it since we saw each other again,” She starts. I immediately knew what she was talking about.

Our time together two and a half years ago.

“But I need to know why you left after we....” She trails off. She doesn’t need to complete her statement before I understand what she’s saying.

Wait, did she say I left?

I furrow my brow in confusion. “What do you mean? I didn’t see you again after that night. I thought you were the one who left.”

Serena’s eyes widen in surprise. “No, I woke up the next morning, and you weren’t there. You disappeared without any trace.”

As the realization dawns on me, I let out a small laugh. “Oh, Serena, I didn’t leave you that night. There was a conference in the same hotel, and I had to attend a meeting. When I got back to my room, you were gone. I thought you’d left.”

We both stare at each other for a moment and then laugh. It’s incredible how such a simple misunderstanding caused so much confusion and heartache.

“Wow,” Serena says, wiping tears of laughter. “I can’t believe we never talked about this before.”

I shake my head, still chuckling. “Me neither. I guess we both just jumped to conclusions.”

“So, it has been a misunderstanding all these years.” She whispers, and I laugh again, shaking my head.

As our laughter subsides, we call a truce, agreeing to leave the past behind us and focus on our friendship. We head to bed,

and as I lay there, I can't help but feel a sense of relief that things have finally worked out between Serena and me.

My heart swells with happiness, knowing we've cleared the air and can move forward.

In the quiet of the night, I admit that I still find Serena incredibly attractive. I can't deny the chemistry between us. Still, I know that pursuing anything more than friendship with her is completely off-limits. I don't want to lose John's trust.

As I drift off to sleep, I decide that remaining friends with Serena is the best choice for both of us. It's less complicated and allows us to preserve the bond we just built.

The following day, I woke up feeling lighter and more at ease than I have in a long time. I head to the kitchen to make coffee, and as I do, I catch a glimpse of Serena walking down the hallway, her hair a messy tangle and her eyes still heavy with sleep.

She runs her hand through her hair, and the baggy shirt she has on allows her flawless thighs to show.

Damn.

"Morning," I say as she enters the kitchen, my voice grouchy and husky. I muster a smile.

"Morning," she replies, returning the smile.

As we stand there, sipping our coffee and chatting about our plans for the day, I can't help but feel a sense of contentment.

We've weathered the storm of our misunderstanding and come out stronger. Although a part of me wonders what our relationship would be like if we didn't have that misunderstanding, I know our growing friendship will be worth cherishing.

But why do I feel like it's not going to be enough?



I arrive home from the office, my mind buzzing with excitement. I can't wait to see Serena and share my surprise with her. As I step into the house, I see her on her laptop, her brows furrowed in concentration. She looks up as I greet her, but her eyes are distant, lost in thought.

"Hey, Serena," I say, walking over to her. "What's on your mind?"

She sighs and says, "I've been trying to find a job in the fashion industry, but I'm not finding anything that fits what I want to do."

I feel a pang of sympathy for her. I know how passionate she is about fashion and how hard she's been working to make a career for herself in the industry. "What kind of job are you looking for?" I ask her.

"I don't know, something that allows me to be creative and make a real impact," she replies.

I smile, knowing I have just the thing to brighten her day. "Well, I might have some good news for you," I say, reaching

into my bag and pulling out a letter. “This is a letter of employment to work at the House of Luxxani.”

Serena’s eyes widen in surprise as she takes the letter from me.

“What? How did you get this?” she asks, looking up at me with excitement and disbelief.

“I called in a few favors,” I tell her, trying to sound nonchalant. “John told me about your dream to work there, and Cassie helped with your portfolio. I took it to them a few days ago,”

“Oh my God,” She places her hand over her head in awe.

“Besides, the company’s CEO happens to be an old friend of mine. I told him about you and your passion for fashion. He looked at your portfolio and your designs, and he was impressed. He wants you to start as soon as possible.”

Serena’s excitement is palpable as she leaps off the chair and throws her arms around me. I laugh, holding her tightly against me, feeling her body pressed against mine.

“Thank you!” She screams. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Her enthusiasm is contagious, and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride that I was able to help her achieve her dream.

As she pulls back, she subconsciously pecks me on the cheeks, and immediately the air around us changes to something tenser.

Our faces are so close. Just a slight nudge, and we'll be kissing. I can feel my body responding to Serena's proximity, feeling myself getting hard as her body presses against mine.

Fuck!

I try to suppress my feelings for her, but it's getting harder and harder. I want her badly and wonder if she feels the same way. The one thing I know for sure is that I can't act on these feelings.

It makes it so infuriating.

Serena clears her throat and pulls away.

"Thank you," She whispers, her voice breathless, and I smile, trying to hide my feelings.

"You're welcome, Serena," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "You deserve this."

She smiles and says, "I can't believe it. The House of Luxxani has always been my dream, and I never thought I'd get to work there. Thank you so much, Michael."

I feel a sense of satisfaction as I see her still smiling. Seeing Serena happy is all I could ever ask for, even if it means suppressing my feelings for her.

"You're going to do great things there," I tell her, "I can't wait to see what you achieve."

Serena nods, her eyes shining with excitement. "I can't wait to start," she says with excitement. "My first day is next Monday, so I should start preparing."

I watch her as she disappears up the stairs, feeling my heart beating faster with each passing moment. It's getting harder and harder to hide my feelings for her, and knowing how she looks at me, she might feel the same way.

I want her so badly, but I can't act on those feelings. We are doing so well as friends now, and I don't want to risk losing her.

Besides, John will never approve.

But I can't stop thinking about how Serena looks at me and how her body is pressed against mine. I want Serena so badly. I don't know how long I can keep these feelings hidden inside.

Chapter 10

A Kiss

Serena

I stand in the kitchen, fully engrossed in preparing dinner, when I hear the front door opening and Michael coming towards me. My heart flutters at the thought of him, and I feel a jolt of electricity running through me as he enters the kitchen.

“Hey, Serena,” he greets me with a warm smile. “Need any help?” He asks, dropping his briefcase on the counter.

I turn to face him, trying to hide the surge of emotions that overwhelm me. “I’m almost done. Why don’t you go freshen up? I can handle the rest.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind getting my hands dirty. Let me assist you.” He moves to come close, and I pause, considering his offer.

The longing to have him by my side in the kitchen is undeniable. Still, I remind myself of the boundaries I need to

set, reminding myself of the complications that could arise by being close to him.

“No, really, Michael,” I hold my hand out and place it on his chest to push him back, feeling the rippling muscles of his chest beneath. “I appreciate it, but I’ve got everything under control. Go and freshen up.”

He hesitates momentarily, his gaze lingering on me before reluctantly agreeing. “Alright, but don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything. I’ll be quick.”

As he retreats to the bathroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts, I take a moment to reflect on the situation. There’s no denying the truth—I’m falling for him, bit by bit, with every passing day. He has been showing me another side of himself that sets my heart ablaze, and it’s both intoxicating and terrifying.

But I know I shouldn’t fall for him, and I better not act on these feelings.

We have a good thing going as friends, and I don’t want to ruin it. We’re good as friends, and our bond means the world to me. Now that we have buried the hatchet and moved on from the past, I don’t want to complicate things or risk losing what we have.

Not to mention the delicate balance between me, Michael, and Uncle John. I can’t afford to disrupt the relationships among us.

Yet, Michael isn't making it easy for me despite my best efforts to suppress my emotions,

His innocent yet fiery touches, the way he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, or listens intently as I recount my experiences at my new job—those little things really touch me.

They ignite a fire that overtakes my logical reasoning. It's so hard to keep my emotions in check when Michael is around, and I really don't want to hold them down.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart as Michael returns to the kitchen with his wet hair. *Oh, God, he looks so sexy...* His eyes meet mine, and I feel the electricity between us. The intensity of his gaze unsettles me, awakening desires I've tried so hard to suppress.

I force a smile, hoping to hide the turmoil within. "You're back. That was fast." I scrunch my brows.

"Unlike you ladies, I don't spend time in the bathroom," He chirps. I give him a look.

"Yeah. Tell that to John," I tell him. He laughs, and I join.

It's an inside joke since we both know that John spends so much time in the shower. I'd say he spends more time in the shower than any woman.

When our laugh subsides, we both stare at each other. We are so close to each other that I can feel his body heat.

Oh, God.

“Let’s set the table, yeah?” I manage to say, trying to hide the turmoil within.

He nods, slightly smiling as if he senses the tension between us.

The air in the room feels charged, heavy with unspoken words and unfulfilled desires. We move around each other, our bodies occasionally brushing, sending shivers down my spine.

Michael’s hand touches mine as we lay the tablecloth, causing a spark to surge through my body. I struggle to keep composure as my rational mind battles against my emotions.

He looks up, and our eyes meet... This is so much harder than I thought.

We sit across from each other at the dining table, enjoying a cozy dinner.

“So, how’s work at Luxxani?” Michael asks, breaking the silence.

“It’s great,” I reply with a smile. “Working at Luxxani has been incredible,” I say, a smile lighting up my face. “I’ve had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with some of the most talented individuals in the fashion industry. Some are famous actors or musicians; it’s like stepping into a world of creativity and glamour every day.”

“I’m happy for you,” he says, looking into my eyes. “I told you you’d accomplish great things. You deserve it.

I feel a warmth spread through my chest from his words. His genuine interest in my work makes me feel valued and

appreciated. I've always admired how he takes his time to truly listen to what I say. It's one of the many reasons why I feel so comfortable around him.

Michael stands up as I clear the table and follows me into the kitchen. I can't help but feel a jolt of anticipation running through me as he follows me into the kitchen.

I can feel his presence behind me, making me hyper-aware of my body. I try to focus on the dishes before me but can't help stealing glances at him.

"I can help," he says, standing beside me and reaching for a dish.

"It's okay, I've got it," I reply with a wink.

My heart pounds in my chest as I become acutely aware of his presence, standing right behind me. His proximity sends a shiver down my spine, stirring up conflicting emotions. The kitchen feels smaller, and the air thickens.

"I told you I can handle it," I insist, but I can't hide my nervousness.

He remains undeterred, his hand gently brushing against my arm. His touch is sending a surge of warmth through my veins. I turned to face him, meeting his gaze, and my breath caught in my throat.

"You look incredibly sexy right now. It's so hard for me to resist you." His words hang in the air, leaving an undeniable tension between us.

At that moment, the world outside fades away, leaving only the two of us. Unable to resist any longer, I surrender. Our lips meet in a passionate kiss, and I shiver from the anticipation.

Time seems to blur as our connection intensifies. Michael's touch ignites a fire within me, his hands exploring the contours of my body. The kitchen becomes our sanctuary for unbridled passion.

With a surge of strength, he effortlessly lifts me onto the kitchen counter; our bodies are pressed tightly against each other. Every sensation is heightened, every touch electric, as we continue our heated exchange of kisses.

The intensity of the kiss makes all the nerves in my body light up.

My hands roam over Michael's broad shoulders while he holds me close. His hands explore every inch of my body. No words are exchanged as we let the passion take over.

It's as if nothing else exists at that moment, kissing and pressing against each other with all the longing we've had bottled up.

As our lips part, Michael looks into my eyes. "I want you, Serena," he breathes out.

My eyes suddenly widen with shock at his words, realizing the path this could lead to if we don't stop ourselves.

"I'm sorry, Michael," I say, my voice cracking with emotion. "I can't do this."

I don't wait for his response before pushing him away and rushing past him. I run out of the dining room and into the safety of my bedroom. I know I have to put some distance between us, so I won't lose control.

But what have I done?

Chapter 11

New Possibilities

Michael

I step into my spacious office, closing the door behind me.

The sound of the latch clicking echoes through the room, isolating me from the bustling world outside. It's finally quiet, allowing me a moment to gather my thoughts.

Since that passionate kiss, we shared a few days ago, Serena has been avoiding me like the plague. It's as if she's afraid of confronting the feelings that stirred between us, and it tears me apart. The connection we shared was undeniable, electric, and it's all I can think about.

I look at the clock, realizing how pathetic I've become.

It's become a routine now, observing Serena's elusive patterns. She waits until I'm off to work before coming out of her bedroom. Or sometimes, she comes to the kitchen in the early hours and returns to her bedroom before I come in for breakfast.

It stings to know that she's deliberately avoiding me.

I find myself wondering what made her pull away.

Did I misread the situation entirely?

Was I too forward with my feelings?

But the truth is, I don't regret that kiss. It intensified my desire for Serena, like pouring gasoline onto an already raging fire. I yearn for her lips against mine again to explore our desires.

Yet, I'm well aware of the danger of our entanglement. John cannot know what happened or my feelings for his niece. I'm playing a dangerous game here, allowing myself to be consumed by her.

But damn it, I can't resist her allure. She's like a drug, and I'm hopelessly addicted.

My reverie is abruptly shattered as my assistant barges into my office without knocking. Startled, I quickly straightened my tie, trying to compose myself. She clears her throat, and its sound grating against my frayed nerves.

"Michael, the investors are waiting for you in the conference room," she announces urgently.

I curse, realizing I've lost myself in Serena-induced reveries again. I gather my composure and give my assistant a tight-lipped smile.

"Thank you, Jennifer. I'll be there shortly," I reply, trying to keep myself calm.

She nods curtly, retreating from the room as quickly as she enters. As the door closes behind her, I'm left alone once more, grappling with the inner turmoil. The investors may be waiting, but my mind is fixated on Serena's absence like an open wound.

I take a deep breath, attempting to prepare myself for the business ahead. But my thoughts drift back to Serena—her intoxicating scent, the warmth of her body pressed against mine, the taste of her lips.

She's become an obsession, an ache that refuses to be ignored.

With a heavy heart, I leave my office, forcing myself to focus on the upcoming meeting. But deep down, I know that until I can unravel the mystery of Serena's avoidance, she will continue consuming my thoughts.



I settle back into the comfortable leather seat of my car. The rhythmic hum of the engine is in the background as John and I catch up over the phone.

I can't help but ask him where he is at the moment. "Hey, John. Where are you now?" I inquire, trying to keep my tone casual.

His voice crackles through the phone, reminding me John is visiting a remote location.

"I'm in Thailand, Michael. Things are going well here. We're making great progress with our hotels and resorts."

It makes me happy to hear that our business ventures are thriving, and a surge of pride washes over me.

“That’s fantastic news, John. Keep up the good work. Our investors will be pleased.”

Taking advantage of the conversation, I decided to share some positive news.

“By the way, I had a few meetings with the investors today, and they went quite well. It seems like we’re on the right track.”

John chuckles, his enthusiasm evident in his voice.

“That’s excellent, my friend. We’re building something amazing together. Nothing can stop us.”

As we continue talking, John’s attention shifts to Serena. I internally brace myself, trying to hide my nervousness.

“Serena is doing great, John. Everything is going smoothly on our side.”

He thanks me for caring for Serena and helping her secure her dream job. I respond with a modest acknowledgment, keeping my answers short, not revealing what happened between me and Serena.

“You know I’ll always be there for her, John. She’s like family.”

You don’t kiss family like that.... I exhale at that thought.

Our conversation continues, but my gaze drifts absentmindedly outside the car window. And there she is—

Serena.

But she's not alone.

Sitting at a roadside cafe, she's engrossed in conversation with a man laughing. All of a sudden, I can feel the anger bubbling up from inside, tightening my grip on the phone.

What the fuck?

“Driver, stop the car!” I demand abruptly.

The car screeches to a halt, and I hastily unbuckle my seatbelt. Stepping out onto the pavement, my eyes remain fixed on Serena and the man sharing what looks like an intimate conversation.

Fueled by jealousy, I approach them with determination.

Serena's eyes widen in surprise as she notices my presence. The man turns his head and looks totally confused. But I disregard his existence.

Suppressing my anger, I force myself to maintain composure as I address her. “Serena, what's going on here?”

Her expression shifts, a mixture of shock and confusion. “Michael, what....”

Serena is trying to speak, but I'm not interested in her explanations. Jealousy has clouded my judgment, overpowering any rational thought. As the tension hangs heavy in the air, I stand before Serena, my voice firm.

“Serena, we're leaving. Now.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Michael.” Her defiance fuels her response, and her words cut through the charged atmosphere.

Growing impatient, my grip tightens around her hand, intending to pull her forcefully. But before I can act, the man sitting with her rises to his feet, protecting Serena.

“Get your hands off her. She doesn’t want to go with you!” His voice pierces through my ears.

A rage engulfs me, my gaze locking onto the man challenging my authority. “This doesn’t concern you,” I snap, unable to hide my anger.

The commotion has drawn the attention of bystanders, and their curious eyes fixated on our heated exchange. The weight of their gazes bears down on me, but I’m undeterred.

“Serena, let’s go. We need to talk.” I plead with her, my voice straining with frustration.

She resists, “I don’t want to go anywhere with you right now. Look around you, Michael. See the commotion you’re causing.”

Her words hit home as I stare at Serena—a battle of wills, wounded pride, and unresolved emotions. The weight of humiliation settles heavily on me, and I realize my irrational behaviors.

Defeated, I release Serena’s hand. The judgmental whispers and curious glances from onlookers only magnify my humiliation, exposing my vulnerabilities for all to see.

I retreat from the scene with a heavy heart and burning anger directed at myself. My car becomes a temporary refuge as I slump into the seat while thinking of the consequences of my impulsive actions.

Frustrated with myself, I command the driver to take me home abruptly.

As the car pulls away, the outside world blurs. The road stretches before me but offers no relief from the regret and self-loathing that weigh heavily on my chest.

Each passing mile is a painful reminder of my inability to control my emotions and the damage I've inflicted on my relationship with Serena. Anguish and anger intertwine within me, a tormenting reminder of how I behaved.

It's silent in the car, and I can't help but replay the scene in my mind, dissecting every word and action, punishing myself again and again.

I step out with a heavy heart when the car arrives at my home.

I walk to the bar and reach for the whiskey. The glass is heavy in my grasp.

I take a sip as the burning sensation down my throat reminds me of the painful mistakes.

Time stands still for a few moments until I hear the door creak open. My heart skips a beat as I turn to see Serena looking hurt and disappointed, intensifying my remorse.

Our eyes meet, and I'm unable to hide the guilt on my face. Serena's voice trembles with frustration as she asks the

question.

“What the hell was that all about, Michael?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me...” I shake my head, but my apology falls short of mending the damage I’ve caused.

She refuses to end the conversation with my apology, determined to make me understand how stupid I was behaving like that.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Michael. Do you have any idea how embarrassed I was out there? I was out for lunch with a colleague, and you came to lash out at me.”

Her words strike me like a dagger to the heart. I realize the pain I caused her and struggle to find the right words to describe my regret.

Serena continues, “He’s gay, Michael. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

At that moment, I feel a mixture of relief and shame. Closing the distance between us, desperate to convey how sorry I am.

“I don’t know why I acted so irrationally, Serena. I’ve been a mess since that kiss, and it drove me crazy that you avoided me since. I couldn’t handle the thought of losing you, and seeing you with another man brought up so much anger and jealousy inside me.”

My guard has been stripped away, and I become so vulnerable as I tell her the truth. The uncertainty of how Serena will respond makes me nervous.

She sighs, her expression softening as she steps closer. She reaches out to give me a big hug.

“You have no reason to be angry, Michael. I’ve been avoiding you because I needed time to sort through my feelings. I do care about you a lot.”

At this moment, I lean in and kiss her without hesitation.

The world around us fades away. The only thing I feel is our lips connecting. The kiss deepens, growing more intense with each passing second.

Our mouths move in perfect synch. Serena’s soft lips fuel the fire within me, releasing all the suppressed emotions and unspoken desires. She responds eagerly, her lips parting to welcome my exploration.

Our tongues intertwine, dancing in a passionate rhythm. The intensity of the kiss sends shivers down my spine, igniting a hunger I’ve longed to satisfy.

I can hear the soft moans escaping Serena’s lips, surrendering to the pleasure. Our desires for each other cannot be denied. Every touch heightens our senses to the next level.

My hands grip her waist, pulling her closer to me. Her skirt bunches around her waist, revealing more of her beautiful thighs. The warmth of her body against mine sends pulses of desire coursing through my veins.

With a surge of strength, I lift her into my arms, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her over to the sofa. I lay

her down, hovering above her as I continue to kiss her passionately.

My hands roam over her body, tracing every curve and dip as I explore her with my fingertips. I can feel the heat of her core through our clothes as I grind against her. My desire grows every second, and I leave a trail of heated kisses along her neck.

It's hard to resist the temptation to explore further. Still, I decide to only pleasure Serena and not fuck her until she is sure of our relationship. I whisper in her ear, "I just want to pleasure you now," I bite her ear lightly, "Let's wait for my turn until you're sure about us."

I slip my hand up under her shirt as I kiss her breast, teasing her nipple with my tongue. She arches into my touch, her moans growing louder as I continue to touch her.

The room is filled with our mingled moans from the pleasure ignited within each other. Our bodies move in unison, grinding against each other, seeking the ultimate release of passion.

I grind against her harder, her moan echoing through the room. I reach down and slip my hand into her panties, feeling the wetness of her arousal as I finger her.

She moans loudly, her hips bucking up against my hand as I touch her. I can feel her getting closer and closer to climax with every second.

"Oh, Michael!" She shrieks.

I don't stop, my desire growing as I pleasure her with my fingers. Finally, she climaxes, her body shaking with pleasure as she comes beneath me.

I collapse on top of her, both of us panting heavily as we catch our breath. After catching my breath, I raise my head to look at her. She looks spent.

"That was amazing," I whisper,

She nods, a contented smile on her face. "I know," she says. Then she looks up at me with questioning eyes.

"But now what?" she asks, knowing this moment has changed things between us.

I take a deep breath, my heart racing as I look down at her. "Now," I say slowly, "we explore our relationship. We see where this takes us."

She nods, smiling. "I like that," she says. "I like the idea of exploring our relationship."

I lean down and kiss her softly on the lips, feeling a sense of excitement. This opened up a world of new possibilities for us.

Chapter 12

Date Night

Serena

I see Cassie's mischievous grin through the screen as we connect on our video call. My hair is styled, and my makeup is done, ready for my date night with Michael. Cassie wastes no time diving into the juicy details as we exchange greetings.

"So, Serena, have you and Michael finally taken things to the next level? Have you guys had sex yet?" she asks, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

I laugh at her audacity, shaking my head in response.

"No, Cassie, we haven't gone all the way yet," I reply, still chuckling. "We've been enjoying each other's company and building our relationship."

Cassie raises an eyebrow, looking at me curiously.

"Well, I'm sure tonight is the night, Serena. You two have been dancing around each other for a couple of weeks. It's

about time you let things get steamy. The chemistry between you two is undeniable.”

I shake my head, “Cassie, I called you for some outfit advice, not for a discussion about my sex life,” I say, “Let’s focus, shall we?”

Cassie laughs, “You’re right, Serena. I got carried away. So, let’s see the options. What are you thinking of wearing tonight?”

I hold up a few dresses in front of the camera, showcasing each one. We discuss the pros and cons of each outfit, considering the venue, the weather, and of course, the impression I want to make on Michael.

After much deliberation, we settle on a gorgeous wine-satin long dress with thin sleeves and a high slit. It’s elegant and sensual, the perfect combination for a romantic evening.

“This one,” I declare, slipping into the dress. Its smooth fabric embraces my curves, making me feel beautiful and confident.

Cassie’s reaction is priceless as she screams through the screen with her uncontrollable excitement. She hypes me up for the night ahead.

“Serena, that dress is absolutely stunning! You’re going to sweep Michael off his feet. He won’t be able to resist you in that.”

I can’t help but blush at her enthusiastic response.

“Cassie, you’re exaggerating. But thank you for the vote of confidence.” I reply.

Cassie winks at me through the screen. “Trust me, girl. Michael won’t know what hit him when he sees you in that dress. It’s going to be a night to remember.”

“Okay, okay, Cassie. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. But I appreciate your support. Let’s hope I don’t trip over this long dress. I say with a wink, and we laugh.

“Stop keeping things PG, Serena,” Cassie advises me, “Just enjoy yourself tonight and let the magic happen. And don’t forget to have fun taking that dress off later.”

I roll my eyes at Cassie, but I can’t help smiling.

“You’re insufferable, Cassie. But I love you anyway. Thanks for helping me choose the perfect dress. I’ll make sure to enjoy the evening and let things unfold naturally.”

“That’s the spirit, Serena. Now go and have an amazing time. You deserve it!”

We end the call with a final laugh and promise to catch up soon. I take a deep breath, feeling excited and nervous at the same time. Tonight will be a special night, and I can’t wait to see where it leads us.

And with renewed confidence from Cassie’s comments, I’m ready to embrace it fully.



As I descend the stairs, excitement runs through my body. I see a sleek car waiting for me and the driver standing by the open door. I approach, and he greets me with a warm smile.

“Good evening, Ms. Coleman. Mr. Durand asked me to pick you up,” he informs me. My heart skips a beat when I hear Michel’s name.

As I step into the car, I smile, feeling the anticipation grow with each passing moment. The door closes behind me, and we’re off to our destination.

Minutes pass in a blur, and soon we arrive at the venue. The driver opens the door, and I step out, taking in the sight before me. Another man, dressed impeccably, stands nearby, ready to guide me. He motions for me to follow, and I trail behind him.

We enter a grand glass building, and the journey continues in an elevator. My curiosity gets the better of me, and I can’t help but ask where we’re headed.

“Where are we going?” I inquire, my voice filled with anticipation.

The man looks at me warmly and replies, “We’re going to the rooftop, Ms. Coleman.”

My heart flutters as we ascend, and a breathtaking scene welcomes me when the elevator doors open. My eyes widen in awe as I take in the romantic atmosphere surrounding me.

Gold and red petals are scattered across the floor, and candles cast a soft, flickering glow. A table for two stands in the center, surrounded by elegant decorations, while a violinist fills the air with beautiful classical melodies.

Michael stands amidst this enchanting setting, looking drop-dead gorgeous in a black tux. His smile lights up the entire

rooftop, and my heart swells affectionately.

I walk towards him, unable to contain my joy and gratitude. This grandeur setting is beyond my expectation, and I'm overwhelmed by the thought and effort he put into this surprise.

"Michael, this is incredible," I whisper, my voice filled with awe and appreciation.

He takes my hand, sending a delightful shiver down my spine.

"I wanted tonight to be special," he says, "You deserve nothing less."

I can't help but feel a surge of affection towards him. The beauty of the rooftop and the thoughtful gestures intertwine to create a surreal moment.

As we settle at the table, I can't help but be captivated by how gorgeous he is. His eyes lock onto mine with adoration. I know tonight will be magical. With a grateful heart, I prepare to cherish every moment.

As we settle at the elegantly set table, I can't help but express my delight at seeing the culinary artistry before me. Each dish is a masterpiece.

"Oh, Michael, this looks absolutely amazing," I exclaim, "How did you arrange all of this?"

Michael chuckles, "Well, being in the hotel business has its perks," he replies with pride. "Creating unforgettable experiences for guests is what we strive for, and tonight, I wanted to create something extraordinary for you."

I can't help but feel my heart swell with appreciation and affection. The effort Michael put into this evening shows the depth of his feelings for me. I'm in awe of his thoughtfulness and how he deeply captures my heart.

As we indulge in the exquisite flavors, our conversation flows effortlessly. Michael asks about my work in the fashion house.

"Oh, you know, it's been a whirlwind of creativity and excitement," I reply, my eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "The latest collection is coming along beautifully, and I've had the opportunity to work with some incredible designers."

Michael listens attentively; his genuine interest is evident in his warm gaze, making me feel valued and supported.

"And how about you, Michael? How do you manage to handle everything without John?" I ask.

It's shocking how I can casually mention my uncle's name in this situation and yet not feel scared about him finding out about us.

It's so ironic.

Michael smirks, "Well, it can be challenging sometimes, but I have an amazing team that helps me make it all happen. It's all about attention to detail and creating unforgettable experiences for our guests. Besides, John calls to check in often."

I nod in admiration, appreciating his dedication and passion for his work. It's clear that he pours his heart and soul into everything he does, and it only deepens my feelings for him.

As the evening unfolds, an hour slips away in laughter, shared stories, and stolen glances. The sounds of the violin continue to fill the air.

Michael's eyes meet mine, and he extends his hand, "Dance with me?" he asks.

I feel delighted as I accept his offer. We rise from our seats, moving to the center of the rooftop. The soft sway of our bodies matches the rhythm of the music, creating a world where it feels like it's just the two of us.

As we dance, I find myself lost in the warmth of his embrace, the touch of his hand sending shivers down my spine. I gasp softly as his fingers trail along my bare back, igniting the sensations that make my heart race.

In our shared intimacy, our eyes lock, and our lips meet in a slow and passionate kiss. The outside world ceases to exist as we revel in the intoxicating moment.

When we finally part, I break the silence. "Can we get out of here?" I whisper, unable to hide my sensual desire.

"Let's get out of here," he kisses me again and puts his arm around me, leading me to the private room.

As we leave the enchanting rooftop setting behind, my heart races with anticipation. I can't help but think of Cassie's words.

Tonight will be a night to remember—a night of endless passion.

With each step we take, I feel the excitement and anticipation building up within me.

Chapter 13

A Night To Remember

Serena

As I step through the front door, a surge of electricity runs through my body.

The anticipation has been building all evening, and now that we're alone, the air sparks with undeniable chemistry. Michael's eyes meet mine, and a pang of hunger matches mine.

Before I can catch my breath, Michael presses me against the wall, his strong hands holding me in place. Our lips meet, and a fire ignites within me. It's a passionate, urgent kiss filled with longing that can no longer be contained.

As we break apart for a moment, gasping for air, Michael whispers into my ear, "I've been waiting to take your dress off, Serena." And his words send me shivers. His hands trace the curve of my body, and I can feel the heat radiating between us.

A rush of exhilaration surges through me, and I lock my eyes with his. “Then take it off,” I respond with a newfound boldness. This moment feels like a lifetime, and I’m ready to embrace every second of it.

Michael’s fingers delicately find the straps of my dress, and the fabric loosens its grip on my body, sliding down inch by inch, revealing my body beneath.

I stand before him, naked, except for the delicate lace panties that cling to my skin. I feel exposed and vulnerable at that moment, and my instinct is to shield my breasts with my hand.

Michael steps back, his eyes fixed on me, and he speaks words that resonate deep within me.

“Don’t ever cover yourself from me,” He gently instructs me. “You are magnificent,” he breathes in awe. His words reassure me, and I let my hand fall to my side, allowing myself to embrace this new level of vulnerability.

His lips find mine again, but this time it’s different. The kisses are slower, more sensual, and filled with tenderness that eases my nervousness.

I’m at ease with him, knowing that this moment is more than physical.

Driven by the intensity of our passion, I help him remove his suit and shirt, my fingertips grazing his bare skin, feeling the warmth of his naked torso with my touch. A low, primal growl escapes him, igniting an initial response within me.

In one fluid motion, he lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist, holding onto him as he carries me up the stairs.

A thrilling sense of anticipation builds within me. The world becomes a blur as we reach the room, and Michael gently drops me onto the soft bed. We're still entwined in a passionate embrace, our lips hungrily seeking each other's, our bodies yearning for more.

His kisses trail a scorching path down my neck, causing a moan of pleasure from my lips p echo through the room.

Fueled by desire, my hand ventures down his chiseled torso, navigating the landscape of his body until it reaches its destination—a throbbing erection that yearns for my touch.

A guttural growl escapes Michael, and I can't help but revel in my power over him.

I whisper as I ask, "Do you like that?"

"Fuck, Serena!" He responds breathlessly, and it ignites a spark of excitement within me.

Encouraged by his words, I eagerly assist him in unbuckling his belt. A hunger to please him guides my actions. The fly yields to my persistent tugging, granting me access to his raw and pulsating member.

My hand wrapped around him, my touch firm and purposeful, unleashing waves of pleasure through his body. Each stroke is met with a primal response—a growl reverberating through the room, urging me to continue.

“Don’t fucking stop!” His commands and I relish in the delicious torment I’m inflicting.

But just as he nears the climax, I abruptly halt my caress. Michael stares at me, shaking his head. “You naughty girl,” he growls.

Instead of being scared, I’m more excited.

As a punishment, Michael swiftly pulls down my lace panties, exposing me to his gaze. I am at his mercy, fully surrendered to the whims of pleasure that he bestows upon me.

With a determined hunger, he descends between my trembling thighs, his lips and tongue becoming the catalysts of ecstasy.

The sensations overwhelm me as he skillfully explores my most intimate desires, causing me to throw my head back and clench the sheets in my fist, screaming with pleasure. The room is filled with my moans and the rhythmic sounds of his devotion.

“Oh, my God, Michael!” I scream as I reach my climax.

I surrender to the potent embrace as the waves of pleasure wash over me. Michael’s exquisite attentions push me to the peak of ecstasy until I almost pass out from the overwhelming release. The echoes of my pleasure fill the room.

After the powerful release of my climax, Michael rises, his lips finding mine once again. In that passionate kiss, I taste the remnants of my pleasure, a reminder of what we’ve just explored together.

Time stands still as we pull his pants off, and he prepares for his thrusts. Our hands intertwine, fingers laced together, as Michael holds my gaze with an intensity that sets my heart ablaze.

With a breathless gasp, I feel him enter me, the intrusion causing a delightful shock through my body. He growls in response, his desire mirroring my own.

His movements within me begin a slow, deliberate rhythm that builds with every thrust. Our moans mingle, filling the room with a symphony of pleasure; each sound affirms our ecstasy.

Michael comments on the tightness that envelops him. I respond with a heated moan, lost in the sensations only he can awaken.

As the pace quickens, the intensity of our connection deepens. Michael moves faster, pounding inside me with an enthusiasm that drives us both to the edge of rapture. The room becomes a sanctuary for our shared desires, our bodies merging into one, defying the physical boundaries.

My moans grow louder, a desperate plea for more, as I urge him not to stop. The pleasure builds, spiraling higher and higher as we approach the pinnacle of our release. And when the world narrows down to the electrifying connection between us, Michael whispers the words that echo through my soul.

“I love you.”

At that moment, as his words caress my ears, I feel an overwhelming surge of emotion. This profound love heightens the intensity of our physical union.

His final thrust slams into me, sending me cascading over the edge of bliss. I cry out, tears fill up my eyes with the ecstasy that washes over me.

Michael's climax follows, letting out a primal growl as he finds release within me. Our bodies tremble and meld together, the culmination of our desires leaving us breathless.

As our bodies tremble and quiver, we hold each other tightly, catching our breaths and feeling the rhythm of our hearts gradually slowing.

Michael gazes into my eyes, his touch gentle as he brushes away the strands of hair that cling to my dampened face. We share a tired kiss, the tenderness of our love lingering in the air.

"I love you," Michael whispers once more.

"I love you, too," I whisper back.

We drift off to sleep, our bodies entwined, knowing that the connection we've just had is more than just physical.

In the quiet of the night, I find solace in Michael's arms as our dreams carry us to distant realms.

And in our dreams, we find respite, knowing that tomorrow will bring a new chapter of our love.

Chapter 14

Promises

Serena

I wake up, and as my eyes adjust to the morning light, I realize Michael is not beside me. I become uneasy remembering what happened two and a half years ago that caused my heart to ache.

But this time is different. I glance around the room and see Michael's scattered clothes strewn across the floor, his phone resting on the bedside table. With a happy sigh, I fall back onto the bed, feeling content as I reflect on our delightful experience together last night.

Images flash through my mind—passionate kisses, his soft touch, hard thrusts, and our heightened senses as we reach ecstasy.

I cannot deny the truth. I've fallen in love with him. My feelings for Michael are beyond the physical attraction. Our

emotional connections keep me safe in his arms, but amidst the euphoria, uncertainty tugs at my heart.

What will happen to us when Uncle John comes back?

The fear of the unknown looms, casting a shadow over my heart. But as I lie here, my body still tingles from last night's event.

I push aside the doubts, and I choose to embrace the present moment. Even though the path ahead may be uncertain, I'm willing to explore it with open arms, ready to see where our love takes us. For now, I am holding on to hope and silently whispering my desires to the universe for our love to blossom.

A rustling sound catches my attention as the door swings open. I turn my head to the door and see Michael walking in with a tray of breakfast delicacies. His presence instantly lit up the room.

With a flick of his leg, he kicks the door back. As our eyes meet, he smiles and sees me already smiling in anticipation. With each step he takes, my heart flutters, and I can't help but admire his gorgeous shirtless body.

"Good morning," Michael greets me with a smile.

"Morning," I respond, also with a warm smile.

Our lips meet in a gentle kiss, and the taste of his lips reminds me of the passion that ignited between us last night.

Michael settles himself beside me on the bed, and I can feel his warmth against my skin. When he places the tray between us, I see an irresistible assortment of breakfast delights, and

the aromas waft through the air. I appreciate the effort he put into creating such a beautiful meal.

“It looks lovely,” I remark, “Thank you. You must have put a lot of thought into this.”

The flavors explode on my tongue as I take a bite. “Mmmm... It’s so good,” I say as I savor each mouthful and indulge myself.

“You truly are the best.” I can’t help but compliment him.

“I am, aren’t I?” Michael gives me slow teasing kisses along my neck.

The sensation sends a jolt of heat through my body, intensifying the desire for Michael and urging me to explore the pleasure we shared the night before.

He murmurs, his lips still exploring my skin, “Last night was magical.”

I nod in agreement, “It truly was.” I’m filled with a sense of contentment, forgetting any worries from earlier this morning.

We continue indulging in the breakfast before us, exchanging glances and affectionate touches.

As I look into Michael’s eyes, I am filled with hope. Our path ahead may be uncertain, but with him by my side, I am confident we can navigate the challenges and embrace the unknown together.

I gather the courage to raise the question that has been nagging me. I turn towards Michael, searching his eyes for answers,

and ask, “What should we do now?”

Michael gets confused, his brow furrowing in surprise. “What do you mean?” he inquires with a gentle voice.

Carefully choosing my words, I delicately bring up the subject that has been weighing on my heart.

“Are we... Are we in a relationship?” I ask, “Or are we just... having fun?”

Michael reacts swiftly, reaching to hold my face and assuring me, “Serena, we’re not just having fun. I love you and am ready to do whatever it takes to keep our relationship.” His words comfort me.

“I love you, Serena.” Michael repeats, and I am momentarily breathless before I reply in a whisper, “I love you, too, Michael.”

However, a trace of worry comes back in my mind.

“But John...” I confess my concerns about my uncle. “What if he finds out about us? He won’t approve of our relationship.” I’m scared of how Michael will respond.

“Don’t worry about John,” Michael says with unwavering confidence. “He isn’t here yet and will accept us when the time comes.” He reassures me

“Look at me,” He cups my face again. “We will find a way to overcome any challenges when the time comes, I promise. “

His words soothe my anxieties, and I feel a sense of relief. I trust in Michael’s commitment to us at this moment. I lean into

him, allowing myself to be held by him.

Sensing a shift in the atmosphere, Michael asks, “Do you want to shower together?” I respond to his mischievous smile, “I’d want nothing more.”

Taking his hand, I lead Michael toward the bathroom, and the anticipation builds with each step.

As the water cascades down on us, our bodies are entwined in a sensual dance within these steam-filled walls. The sound of my pleasure fills the air, resonating throughout the house. We lose ourselves in the raw passion. The heat from our intense love is rising.

The outside world disappears, and every thrust fuels the flame of our longing, taking us closer to the peak of ecstasy. As we indulge in the pleasure, my screams echo through the house. Our bodies quiver as he releases his love inside of me.

Chapter 15

Satisfaction

Michael

I enter the boardroom, my laptop in hand, ready for another pivotal meeting with the investors. Today, we have the pleasure of having John join us virtually. Since this project is critical to the success of our ambitious hotel venture, Delicia International Resort, I must ensure that every detail is carefully executed.

His guidance has been instrumental in bringing our dream of expanding Delicia International Resort to new locations, and I eagerly anticipate his insights.

As John's face appears on the screen, we see palm trees and azure waters in the background, confirming he's in Mexico. I'm excited to hear John's update realizing that our hotel projects are taking shape in multiple countries.

"Good morning, everyone," John greets us with his customary warmth. "I'm pleased to inform you that I'm currently in

Mexico, overseeing the progress of Delicia International Resort's one of the new locations. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and I couldn't be more proud of our team's efforts."

Tyler, Austin, and Lyla exchange glances, clearly impressed by John's words. I feel proud, knowing that our collective vision is becoming a reality.

"Well done, John," Tyler commends with genuine admiration. "Expanding Delicia International Resort across multiple countries is no small task. Your leadership and the team's hard work are paying off."

John nods appreciatively, his eyes scanning the room. "Thank you, Tyler. But I must say, we wouldn't have come this far without Michael and his exceptional business strategies. He has some innovative ideas that I believe can further drive Delicia International Resort's growth."

My heart beats fast as the spotlight turns on me, and I take a deep breath.

"Thank you, John. I appreciate your kind words. I've been analyzing the market trends and consumer preferences in each location. We can introduce tailored experiences and exclusive partnerships to enhance our guests' stay and differentiate ourselves from the competition."

As I articulate my ideas, I notice the investors leaning forward, showing interest. Lyla interjects.

“Michael, your insights are valuable. We’re always looking for ways to provide unique and unforgettable experiences for our guests. Let’s explore those ideas further and discuss the potential partnerships.”

I feel the excitement from everyone, and we delve into a spirited discussion, brainstorming innovative concepts and strategic alliances that can elevate Delicia International Resort to new heights. The investors’ enthusiasm is palpable, and I can’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

Just as the conversation reaches its peak, John comments, “While we’re on the topic of growth, I must mention that I’ll need to stay on-site for a few more weeks, perhaps another month. I want to ensure everything is running smoothly before I return.”

I react with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I’ll continue to have more responsibilities here while John is away for another month. On the other hand, I’ll be able to spend more quality time with Serena.

Nodding in agreement, I respond, “Thank you for your dedication, John. Your presence will ensure that every aspect is meticulously executed. We appreciate your commitment to Delicia International Resort’s success.”

Tyler, Austin, and Lyla echo their support, understanding the significance of John’s extended stay. The meeting ends, but the excitement lingers in the air.

As I pack up my laptop, my mind drifts to Serena. John’s extended stay in Mexico will allow us to spend more time

together.

As I step out of the meeting with the investors, I find myself engrossed in analyzing the data we gathered for our new hotels and resorts.

Compared to the achievements of our competitor, Rodriguez Group, our company's growth statistics hold my attention. I smile as I observe the upward trajectory of our resort.

Delicia International Resort has undeniably become a leader in the industry, and its stakes are soaring higher every day. The satisfaction of witnessing our labor and vision come to fruition fills me with joy.

Lost in the sea of data, a gentle tap on my shoulder interrupts my focus. I turn to find my assistant, Jessica, standing beside me. She looks confused, and I'm curious about the unexpected interruption.

"Michael," she begins, "Someone is waiting for you in your office. It's rather unexpected."

I'm perplexed by an unannounced visitor in my office. "Who is it, Jessica?"

"The visitor introduced herself as John's niece. I knew who she was because I'd seen her photo hanging on his office wall."

My heart somersaults with excitement. Serena has never come here to see me before. "Thank you, Jessica." I offer Jessica a grateful nod and hastily make my way to my office.

As I approach my office, my pulse quickens with anticipation.

I push open the door, and there she is, standing by the tinted window. The soft glow of sunlight streaming through the window casts an aura around her delicate silhouette.

My eyes sweep over her outfit, emphasizing her alluring curves, and I feel my body responding.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my surprise evident in my voice.

“I just wanted to check up on you,” she replies. Serena walks toward me, her hips swaying with a hypnotic rhythm. I can’t help but be drawn to her.

When she reaches me, I can no longer resist. I pull her into my arms and kiss her passionately.

As we pull away slightly, Serena’s hands reach my tense muscles, massaging them with expert care. I let out a low sigh, feeling the tension melt away under her skilled touch.

“You feel so tensed, Michael,” Serena says in a soothing voice.

“Serena—” I breathe out when her heated hand caresses me.

“Shh...” she hushes. “Let me take care of you.”

She pulls me towards the couch, putting me down to the soft cushions. I settle in, the anticipation leaving me craving for her intimate touch.

Serena kneels before me, determined to please me. My breathing becomes ragged as I watch her. She begins to undo my belt and unzip my fly.

With each movement, my excitement builds, and I can feel the throbbing pulse of pleasure coursing through my veins. The moment intensifies as Serena reaches into my briefs, freeing my fully erect member.

“Oh, fuck, Serena....” I growl, surrendering to the overwhelming sensations. My head falls back against the headrest of the couch, and a loud groan escapes me when her warm mouth envelops me, sending jolts of pleasure through every fiber of my being.

My hand moves to the back of her head, fingers digging into her scalp as I guide her at the pace I want her to go.

The room is filled with the sounds of our breaths, punctuated by intoxicating moans and sighs from me.

“Yeah... just like that,” I whisper.

Serena’s skilled tongue pushes me closer to the edge, each movement heightening my pleasure, my hips bucking whenever she does something with her tongue.

Soon, she increases her pace, bobbing her head up and down my length. My groan increases and echoes through the room. I’m thankful my office is sound proof so no sound will get out.

Gradually, I can feel myself getting closer to the climax.

“Serena... I’m going to come!” I growl out the warning.

She doesn’t stop but instead intensifies her movements, and I explode on her face down to her upper chest with a loud groan.

“Fuck!”

Serena keeps my release and then climbs onto the couch, straddling me. She leans down and kisses me deeply, letting me taste myself on her lips. I reach up and run my hands over her curves, feeling the softness of her skin with my fingertips.

“You are so naughty,” I whisper when I pull away. Serena smirks.

“And what do you do to this naughty girl?” Her tone is sensual and suggestive, and in no time, I am hard again.

As I take her to my desk, I lift Serena, her ample curves fitting comfortably in my arms. With one swift move, I clear away all the files on the desk, making space for her.

She giggles, squirming in my arms as I roughly turn her around, her back facing me. I lift her dress, seeing that she’s not wearing any panties.

“You naughty girl,” I tease, smacking her butt playfully. She giggles, her breath hitching as I start to rub my hardened member against her core.

“Is this what you want, Serena?” I ask her teasingly.

She moans out a yes, her hands gripping the desk’s edges. I pull back slightly, lining myself up with her core before slamming into her hard. She moans loudly, and I grin before I continue to pound into her, each thrust harder and faster than the last.

Serena begs for more, telling me to pound her harder and faster. I oblige, enjoying the sounds of her moans. I can’t help but think she’s the most beautiful woman in the world.

I focus on the rhythm of our bodies moving together. I'm thrusting harder and harder inside her, and as I hear her gasps and moans, I know she's about to come. Her hands grip the table, holding her up as she braces herself for what's coming next, begging me to thrust her even harder and faster.

"Go harder, Michael. Faster," she pants.

I don't need any more encouragement. I can feel the pleasure building, and I increase my pace, slamming into her with all my might. Her hair is everywhere, splayed out across the table, and it's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

I can feel the sweat pouring down my body as I continue thrusting into Serena, desperate to make her scream my name. She meets my every move, throwing her hips back to meet my every thrust. I indulge in the pleasure, pounding into her with everything I've got, panting and gasping as I take her closer and closer to the peak.

I start to pound into her with even more force, my hips slamming against hers, her loud, approving moans urging me on. I can feel the tension building between us, the excitement almost too much to handle.

"I want to come..." She whispers.

"Hold it," I tell her, my breath labored. "I'm almost there, baby,"

I pick up the pace, my heart pounding as I drive deeper into her. The sensation is almost too much to handle, and I can feel my release start to build deep inside me.

Wrapping my hands around her, I hold her up from the desk, her back pressed to my chest, crouching a bit so that I can keep slamming into her. She moans loud, begging me to let her cum.

“Come for me, Serena. Come for me.” I command.

With one final, wild thrust, I feel all the tension snap, and my body convulses with pleasure. I hear Serena scream my name as she follows me over the edge, our loud groans echoing through my office.

We collapse in a heap, both panting and gasping for air. I look at her and know that I’ve never been more attracted to anyone in my life. She’s simply stunning with her sweaty body and flushed face.

After what seems like ages, I manage to catch my breath. I pick Serena off the table and carry her over to the couch, where we collapse. We’re both sweaty and sticky, but we don’t care. We take time lying on the couch together, trying to catch our breath.

I pull her closer to me, my fingers tracing patterns on her back as I savor the afterglow.

“That was amazing,” she whispers, and I can feel her warm breath on my ear.

“You were amazing,” I answer, my heart still racing.

I kiss her and start reminiscing about how happy I am with Serena. I’ve never met anyone who makes me feel this alive, and I don’t want to lose her.

We lie there for what feels like hours, basking in the glow of our shared pleasure. I feel a sense of happiness and contentment. Being with Serena feels like coming home.

For the first time in years, I feel I'm exactly where I need to be.

Chapter 16

Secret To Keep

Serena

As I stand in front of the mirror, my hands tremble slightly as I apply my makeup. Today is the day I've been dreading. My uncle John returns from his two-month-long business trip.

I've missed John terribly and can't wait to see him, but I don't know how to explain the relationship I've built with Michael over the past months. He will never accept my relationship with Michael, and I'm unsure how to make it work between my love for him and my deep affection for Michael.

I love John deeply, and his opinion means the world to me. Yet, I can't deny the intense love I feel for Michael. I'm not ready to let go of what Michael and I built in the past months.

It's a dilemma that weighs heavily on my heart, and I'm unsure how to navigate it.

Michael's gentle touch on my shoulders jolts me back to reality. I look at him through the mirror, trying to hide my

inner turmoil with a smile. He looks handsome in his plain shirt and jeans, and I'm captivated by his irresistible charm for a moment.

"Hey," I mutter. Michael responds with a warm smile, bending down to kiss my forehead tenderly. His simple gesture comforts me, easing the tension momentarily.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his eyes meeting mine through the mirror's reflection.

I nod, attempting to project confidence I don't entirely feel. "Yeah, I am," I respond, but my voice sounds less assured than I hoped.

The truth is, I'm not ready. I'm not emotionally prepared for the storm waiting when John discovers our relationship. The fear of losing John or Michael weighs heavily on my heart.

Michael reaches out to me, holding me close as if trying to silence my anxieties. At that moment, I allow myself to hope that everything will be okay. I sigh, relishing the comforting sensation of his arms around me.

As Michael releases his arms around me, I take another deep breath, ready to face the challenges that await us. We make our way to the car, hand in hand. The atmosphere is mixed with quiet anticipation and unspoken fears.

Silence envelops us like a thick fog during the car ride to the airport. I steal glances at Michael, seeking solace in his presence, but he looks just as torn as I am. I can't even

imagine what's going on in his mind, knowing he might have to choose between me and his best friend.

This is so messed up.

As we arrive at the airport, the adrenaline runs through my veins. Michael's voice cuts through the bustling crowd, "We should be seeing him any moment now," He says as his eyes scan the sea of faces. I nod, my heart weighing heavily in my chest with mixed emotions.

And then, we spot him amidst the chaos. John emerges, pushing his cart toward our designated meeting spot. I smile and raise the placard with his name for him to see. He finds us and waves. A familiar sight that warms my heart. We wave him over, and he hastens his steps, eager to be reunited with us.

The closer he gets, the more conflicting emotions surge within me. I'm so happy to reunite with John, yet, my secret affair with Michael bears down on me, casting a shadow of apprehension over the moment.

John reaches us and engulfs me in a bear hug, lifting me off the floor. I laugh heartily; my joy spreads through the bustling airport.

"Put me down, John! I'm not a kid anymore." I playfully hit his back.

"Oh, my God. I've missed you," John exclaims as he sets me down. His words make me smile.

“I’ve missed you too,” I respond with genuine sincerity. “How was the trip?” I ask, hoping for a positive response.

John’s face lights up, “Very successful,” he replies. I’ve always admired his dedication and determination, and knowing that his trip was very successful fills me with joy.

Michael and John also greet with a big bear hug. Their friendship is evident in their actions. They delve into a lively conversation about John’s business trip and their grand vision for their hotels.

I get a bittersweet feeling as I observe them. If only things weren’t so complicated.

As we make our way to the car, our conversation flows effortlessly. John’s astute observation breaks the lighthearted atmosphere, causing me to hold my breath. “You two seem to be getting along so well,” he remarks with a hint of surprise. I blush, not knowing exactly what to say.

Michael maintains his composure as he replies, “It’s been a pleasure to spend time with Serena and get to know her.” He gives me a knowing look.

Oh, God...

Thankfully, John remains oblivious to the hidden reality, expressing his satisfaction with our improved relationship.

“I was worried that you two wouldn’t get along, but I’m glad to see you are doing better together now,” he says, smiling with genuine happiness. “Seeing two of my favorite people arguing with each other was painful.”

I'm unsure if I should be happy that John is glad to see us get along or if I should be sad because he doesn't know how Michael and I get along. I want John to know the truth, and I want him to approve our relationship, but I'm afraid it's not that easy.

Throughout the car ride, we continue our conversations. We catch up on each other's lives and share laughter. The camaraderie between John and Michael is undeniable. Their shared jokes bring a smile to my face.

Yet, beneath the surface, the tension of my secret love affair simmers. I find myself torn between wanting to preserve their friendship and business partnership and being able to embrace my love for Michael openly.



My heart continues to feel heavy as I find myself between my love for Michael and my loyalty to John.

The past few weeks have been challenging since I spend most of my time with John. Seeing Michael has become rare. It's limited to brief phone calls that leave me longing for more.

The situation has become unbearable, and I had to talk to Cassie about my predicament.

"It's so difficult, Cassie. John is everywhere, and I barely get a moment alone with Michael," I lament. "I can't even visit Michael at the office anymore since John might see us and get suspicious."

Cassie listens intently, understanding my dilemma. “You know, Serena, maybe it’s time to consider telling John about your relationship with Michael,” Cassie suggests. “Keeping it a secret only complicates more and worsens the situation.”

I sigh, feeling the weight of her words. “I know you’re right, Cassie, but it’s easier said than done,” I reply. “I’m terrified of how John will react. I don’t want to risk losing him or Michael.”

Unable to bear the separation from Michael any longer, I decided to take matters into my own hands. With the help of Michael’s assistant, Jessica, a secret rendezvous at his office is arranged. I follow Jessica through the hallway.

“John is out for a meeting now. So that leaves about one to two hours for you to have alone time with Michael.” She explains, and I nod.

As we get to Michael’s office, my heart races with anticipation. “Thank you so much, Jessica,” I express my sincere gratitude.

“It’s all good. And please, don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.” Jessica offers a reassuring smile before leaving me.

I take a moment to compose myself before opening the door to see Michael sitting at his desk, looking startled at my sudden appearance.

“Serena,” Michael gasps, quickly rising from his seat and rushing towards me. “John may see you visiting me in my

office. You shouldn't be here. He is going to wonder why you are here."

"Don't worry; John is out. Jessica arranged this so that I could see you secretly." I reassure him.

"Jessica." Michael seems shocked that Jessica knows about our relationship, but I assure him our secret is safe.

"I just had to see you," I confess, unable to hide my longing to be with him.

Michael's concern turns into passion as he pulls me into his arms, kissing me intensely, and I respond eagerly. It feels like an eternity since we last shared such a moment, and I relish the feeling of being held by him once more.

Carried away by our emotions, Michael lifts me and places me gently on the desk, our kisses growing more passionate every second. My body starts to tingle with excitement, my hands gripping his face as I pull him closer, not wanting to let him go.

I've missed him so much.

Finally, we break the kiss, but our foreheads are still touching as we breathe. "I've missed you so much," Michael whispers.

"I've missed you too," I reply.

"I don't think I can handle being away from you anymore," I admit. Michael sighs, cupping my face in his hands.

"I think it's time we tell John," He suggests, looking determined.

I shake my head with fear. “He will never approve of it. He’ll try to keep us apart, and I can’t bear that.”

Michael holds me tightly, trying to reassure me. “I don’t want anything to come between us, Serena,” he says softly. “But going behind John’s back will only cause more harm. We must find a way to make this work.”

I realize the truth in Michael’s words. We must find a way to navigate this complicated situation without damaging their relationships.

“I’m scared, Michael,” I admit. “But I believe in us. We’ll find a way to make it work, and I won’t let anything come between us.”

He holds me even tighter, making me feel safe. “I promise you, Serena, I’ll do everything in my power to ensure that nothing comes between us,” Michael vows as he looks into my eyes.

I find a glimmer of hope, and I pray that we will find a way to protect our relationship while working towards a future where we can openly embrace our love without fear.

Chapter 17

Truth Is Out

SERENA

Deep down, I know Michael was right when he warned me that lying to John and hiding our relationship would only make things worse, but I haven't been able to bring myself to break the news just yet. I'm unsure if I am the right person to tell John; I need more time.

Countless times I've tried to gather the courage to tell John the truth, only to chicken out at the last moment or have my plan disrupted by unforeseen circumstances. It seems like there is never a right moment to reveal our secret.

My phone starts to ring, and I notice it's Cassie calling me back.

"Have you told John about your relationship with Michael yet?" She asks me, her face on my phone screen cracking slightly because of the bad network connection.

I sigh.

“No, Cassie, I haven’t,” I tell her. “It’s been such a challenge. I’ve tried several times, but something happens, or I lose my nerve whenever I’m about to open up. There is never a right time to tell John the truth.”

“Serena, I understand it’s not an easy conversation, but you can’t keep putting it off. The longer you wait, the harder it will be. John deserves to know the truth, especially if you want to keep your relationship with him.” Cassie states point blank.

I run my fingers through my hair.

“I know, I know.” I feel so drained. “It’s just that... I’m scared of what might happen if I tell him the truth. I don’t want to lose John, but I don’t want to lose Michael, either. It seems there is no way out of this situation without getting hurt.”

“I get that it’s a tough spot for you to be in, but you must realize that keeping this secret puts both relationships at risk. John deserves to know the truth, and Michael deserves a chance to be open about his feelings for you with John too. Sweeping everything under the carpet isn’t fair to anyone involved. It’s time to take responsibility and face the consequences. It won’t be easy, but it’s necessary for everyone involved. Relationships are built on trust, so if you want to rebuild that trust, you have to start with honesty.”

Her words hit me hard, and I can’t stop thinking about it. I tell myself to stop settling for the easy way out and have the courage to deal with the situation head-on.

And so, on this particular day, I follow the plan. I pretend to be ill, hoping to create an opportunity for Michael to come over.

John checks up on me, “I wish I didn’t have to go to work this morning,” he says, looking worried. I muster a weak smile and assure him, “Don’t worry about me, John. I’ll be all right. You go ahead to work, and I’ll rest.”

Reluctantly, John gives in, kissing my forehead tenderly before heading out. “Call me if you need anything,” he reminds her.

“I promise,” I whisper.

I lie in bed, my heart pounding in my chest as I wait for John’s car to fade into the distance. The guilt gnaws at me, but I push it aside, telling myself I need more time. I grab my phone and quickly text Michael, my heart beating fast with anticipation.

“Come over now, please.” I text, keeping it short and to the point.

I hear a soft knock on the door within minutes, and my heart jumps in excitement and fear. I take a deep breath and open the door quickly. My heart is pounding in my chest as I see Michael standing there.

Without saying a word, we reach out to each other, our lips colliding in a desperate, passionate kiss. My body melts into Michael’s arms as he wraps them around me, lifting me effortlessly off the ground.

He carries me to my bed and lays me gently on the bed. The mere touch of his hands on my skin sends shivers down my spine. Our kisses deepen, becoming more urgent and hungry.

His hands explore my body, caressing every inch, igniting a fire that cannot be put out. Soft moans escape our lips, and I arch my back, losing myself in the pleasure that sweeps through me.

I can feel the tension building, reaching its peak as our bodies move faster and harder. The pleasure washes over me in waves, and I'm consumed by a sequence of ecstasies that leaves me breathless and wanting more.

As we finally find the release, our bodies quiver in sweat, and we indulge in a sense of contentment. We lay there, catching our breath, our bodies still intertwined.

The room is filled with a peaceful silence, broken only by the sound of our deep sighs of satisfaction, feeling alive and free.



We're still in bed, wrapped tightly in each other's arms. The warmth of Michael's body against mine is comforting, but the weight of the unveiled truth hangs heavy in the air.

"I think we need to tell John the truth," Michael says softly, breaking the peaceful silence.

I sigh, burying my face deeper into his chest. It's hard to admit, but he's right. "I know, but it's so damn hard, Michael. What if he never approves? What if we lose him?"

Michael's fingers gently stroke my hair, "Serena, it will only get harder if we keep lying to him. We owe it to him, to be honest."

Tears well up in my eyes, “But what if he hates us, Michael? What if he can never forgive us?”

He cups my face and looks deep into my eyes, “I won’t let anything come between us, Serena. And I don’t want to lose John, either. We have to find a way to tell him together. It’s not fair for John, and he deserves to know the truth. “

Tears stream down my face as I nod in understanding.

I know Michael is right. We can’t keep lying to John, pretending everything is fine when it’s not. I promise Michael that I’ll find a way to tell John the truth, and I’ll be the one to convince him to accept our relationship.

“You’re right, Michael. I’ll find a way. I’m the only one who can convince him to accept our relationship.”

Michael squeezes my hand, reassuring me. “I’ll be right by your side, Serena. Always.”

“I love you,” I whisper, looking into his eyes.

“I love you too,” he replies, keeping our eye contact.

Our lips meet in a deep and passionate kiss again. But before we can truly lose ourselves in the moment, the door bursts open, and John’s angry voice fills the room.

“What the fuck?!” he screams, unable to hide his anger.

Time seems to stand still as John’s rage fills the room. Without hesitating, he yells at Michael, his fist swinging high. Michael tries to shield himself, his arms desperately fending off the blows.

“John, stop!”

I scream with fear and desperation. As I rush towards them, desperately trying to break them apart. But John shoves me away, his force causing me to fall painfully on my butt.

Something inside Michael snaps. Seeing me fall on the floor triggers his anger, and he fights back, throwing punches in defense. His fist hits John’s face. It’s total chaos.

With all my strength, I scramble to stand up and position myself between them. My arms outstretched, pleading for them to stop. Tears stream down my face, my voice cracking as I beg for this madness to end.

“Please, stop!” I cry. “We can work this out, but we must stop fighting first!”

John’s eyes meet mine with both hurt and rage. He shakes his head at me and turns to Michael again. “Get out, Michael.” John’s voice cuts through the chaos, “Get out and never come back.”

The room falls silent, John’s words heavy in the air. I watch Michael’s face contort with pain. I feel my heart breaking as the reality of the situation sinks in. We knew this day might come, but the truth is much more brutal.

My sobs intensify as I realize that our worst fears have come true. The love and happiness Michael and I found in each other have come at a great cost, and I’m left devastated, knowing that our world will never be the same again.

Chapter 18

Choice To Make

Serena

I stand in front of John, my tears still flowing down my face. John paces back and forth in the room, not knowing what to do with his anger and frustration.

I know that saying anything right now will escalate the situation further, so I remain silent. But amidst all the chaos, the only thing I can think of is Michael, who left the house with bruises on his face.

John may have suffered a busted lip in the fight, but it's small compared to what happened to Michael. I know Michael held back during the fight because he understood why this fight started.

John stops pacing and looks at me, causing me to avert my gaze. I'm overwhelmed with shame. I should have told him about my relationship with Michael when I had the chance.

Now that John has caught us in our lie, things will become even more complicated.

“Did he force you?” John’s question catches me off guard, and I look at him in shock.

“What?” I manage to utter, looking totally confused.

“Did he force himself on you?” John growls with a frightening tone.

“No!” I quickly shake my head. “No, he didn’t force himself on me. Everything you saw was purely consensual.”

I try to explain, but John’s frown only deepens.

“How long has this been going on?” he asks again, demanding an answer.

I don’t know where to begin.... Should I start from the night we first met about three years ago in Milan, or should I mention our recent reconnection a few months ago?

Who am I kidding? I should know by now that I have to tell the whole truth, including all the details. It might help John understand the relationship between Michael and me if he knows how it developed.

So, I begin by sharing how Michael and I met in Milan.

“It was almost three years ago,” I start, “About six months into my stay in Milan for the internship. One night, I decided to explore the local nightlife, hoping to escape the stress of the work for a while.”

John's gaze remains fixed on me, and his face shows mixed emotions. I can sense his skepticism and struggle to comprehend the situation, but I press on, determined to make him understand.

"I ended up at a small, vibrant club," I continue as I recall the vivid details. "That's where I first met Michael. He protected me from the drunk guy harassing me and wouldn't let go of me. Michael had this magnetic presence that drew me in. We started talking, and before I knew it, hours had passed in the blink of an eye."

I pause, allowing my memories to come back fully. It feels so long ago, yet the memory of how I met Michael is still vivid in my mind.

"We had an instant connection, John," I say, "It felt like we had known each other for a long time, even though we had just met. We laughed, danced, and eventually returned to his hotel."

John's brows furrow, suspecting what happened next and not eager to hear about it. I continue after a pause and with a bit of hesitation.

"We slept together that night, but it was more than just physical, John," I confess in a soft voice. "We shared something deeper—a connection on an emotional level. It wasn't just a one-night stand, but a moment of true intimacy."

I see John's jaw tense, his hands clenching slightly. My heart aches, knowing the pain my words are causing him, but I must be honest.

“After that night, Michael and I didn’t see each other again,” I explain, my voice heavy with regret. “Life took us in different directions, and we lost touch. But the memory of that connection stayed with me.”

I take a deep breath, gathering the courage to reveal the more recent chapters of our story.

“A few months ago, I returned home, and by some twist of fate, Michael and I crossed paths again, but only to find out you and Michael are business partners and best friends.” I continue, “Despite the circumstances, the spark we felt in Milan was reignited, and our connection became stronger than ever.”

I glance at John, hoping to see any sign of understanding or compassion. But he seems detached, guarding his emotions hidden inside.

“John, I know that finding out our relationship like this has caused you pain, and I’m truly sorry,” I say, tears streaming down my face. “But please try to understand. Michael and I didn’t plan for any of this to happen. We definitely didn’t mean to betray you or anyone else. We just wanted to follow our hearts.”

John’s countenance remains unchanged throughout my narrative, and it terrifies me.

“I love him, John,” I cry out desperately. “We love and care deeply about each other. I know we lied to you initially, and I am really sorry. We tried to tell you the truth so many times,

but it was never easy. And I understand how angry you are now, but this is the truth – Michael and I are in love.”

John starts to laugh, “What the fuck do you know about love?” he fires at me, jabbing his finger into my chest.

His words strike me hard. “You know nothing—absolutely nothing about love. You’re just a delusional kid, and Michael found it so easy to prey on. He took advantage of you! He saw you as an easy fuck.” He snaps.

“No!” I refuse to accept his accusation. “It’s not like that. It’s never been like that!” I snap back, my voice trembling with anger. “Michael didn’t take advantage of me. He loves me, and I love him too.”

“And me?” As he beats his chest, John’s voice is filled with pain and betrayal. “After everything I’ve done for you, you find it easy to betray me. Where does that leave me?”

His words pierce my heart, causing it to shatter into a million pieces.

“You’re still my uncle... my dad,” I say, my voice filled with sadness. “I’ll always love you and forever be grateful for everything you’ve done for me. But I love Michael too, and I can’t choose between you and Michael.”

“Well, you have to,” John says, looking serious, and it shocks me.

“What!” I exclaim, unable to believe what I’ve just heard.

“You have to choose between me and Michael. It can’t be both of us. It’s either me or him.” John repeats.

“You can’t be serious!” I protest, desperately hoping that he’ll take his statement back.

But John holds my gaze, “I am serious. You have to choose. It’s either me or him. Deep down, you know that too. Make a wise choice, Serena.”

And with that, John walks out of the room, leaving me standing there in utter turmoil. I burst into tears, feeling completely torn apart. The weight of the choice I’m forced to make crushes my spirit, and I find myself lost in a sea of conflicting emotions.



Sitting inside the Uber, I’m consumed by a storm of emotions. Thoughts whirl around and collide in my head, and I’m left feeling utterly torn.

I never thought it would come to this. How could John, who raised me and cared for me all these years, suddenly force me to choose between him and Michael?

It’s incomprehensible. The love I have for John never competes with the love I have for Michael. John is my father figure who provided stability and guidance when I needed it the most. I’m eternally grateful for what he’s done for me.

But with Michael, it’s different. He ignited a fire within me, showing me what it truly means to be in love. No one has ever made me feel the way he does. The depth of my feelings for him is undeniable.

And now, here I am, forced to choose between the two people I care about the most. I know that whichever path I choose, someone will be hurt, and I can't bear hurting either John or Michael.

The Uber slows to a stop in front of Michael's house, interrupting my thoughts. I thank the driver and step out of the vehicle. I take a deep breath before I walk towards his front door.

I called Jessica earlier, confirming that Michael hadn't been at the office for a few days. His car is parked in the driveway giving me a sign that he's home. Uncertainty swirls within me as I stand in front of the door, unable to decide to knock on the door.

Will Michael let me talk to him? What should I say to him? How is he going to respond? Would he hate me? Would he hate John?

Pushing aside my doubts, I knock on the front door.

Michael opens the door. He is standing in front of me with his eyes wide open in shock. He calls out my name, questioning my unexpected visit, "Serena, what are you doing here?"

I see Michael's bruised face and struggle to find the words.

I gasp, and my hands instinctively reach out to hold his face. "Michael," I whisper, tears welling up in my eyes. "I didn't realize... I didn't know how badly John had hurt you." I'm shocked and concerned.

Michael's expression softens as he wipes my tears and says, "It's not your fault, Serena. None of this is your fault." He gently wraps his arms around me, and I sink into his embrace, feeling the warmth and appreciating his love.

I hug him back tightly, but he groans from the pain I caused as I unintentionally tighten my grip. Instantly, I release my hold and apologize profusely.

"I'm so sorry, Michael. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's okay," He whispers, pulling me closer again.

As I hold him, tears streaming down my face, "I'm so sorry, Michael," I manage to speak between sobs. "I never wanted any of this to happen. I didn't mean for things to get so out of control."

Michael pulls away slightly, his hands cupping my face, his eyes staring into mine.

"Serena, listen to me," he says firmly, "This isn't your burden to bear alone. I should have handled things differently. I shouldn't have asked you to talk to John more urgently, especially knowing your bond with John."

I lean into his touch, drawing strength from his words.

"But I don't know what to do, Michael," I admit, my voice trembling. "I'm torn between the love I have for John and the love I feel for you. I don't want to be forced to choose one of you because I don't want to hurt either of you."

His gaze softens, "I know it's a difficult choice, Serena. And I don't expect you to have all the answers right now. But please

remember that you're not alone in this. We'll find a way through this together."

.

It's hard to see him in such a vulnerable state, making my visit even more difficult.

Moments later, I find myself seated beside Michael on the couch, carefully tending to his wounds. Michael winces in pain as I peel away the worn dressing. I apologize as I continue my task more carefully.

"How's John doing?" Michael's question catches me off guard, and my heart swells at his genuine concern. He still cares about John despite everything.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts before responding.

"He's not talking to me," I say softly, "We're essentially living as strangers under the same roof." I shake my head with a heavy heart, "I didn't anticipate things would escalate to this extent."

Michael's gaze remains fixed on me, trying to ease my worries.

"It's hard, Serena, I know. But we have to give him some space. Eventually, he'll come around. We just have to show him that what we have is real."

I stand up abruptly and walk away from Michael. "I don't know if he'll ever come around," I respond in frustration and despair. "I don't think John will ever be ready. He's given me

an impossible choice and does not want to talk about anything else.”

Michael looks confused and his eyes searching for clarification.

“What do you mean?” he asks. I can sense his concerns.

Gathering my courage, I reveal John’s request—the choice between him and Michael.

Silence settles between us. Michael’s mind processes the information, and then after a long pause, he asks, “Is that the reason why you came here, Serena? Did you come here to break up with me?”

Tears well up in my eyes again as I struggle to find my voice. “I don’t know... I don’t know what to do,” I manage to say through sobs. “I love you, Michael. I love John too. But I can’t bear to hurt him.”

His face softens with understanding, yet his voice carries a deep-seated hurt.

“But you’re willing to hurt me,” he murmurs, his words piercing the silence. “You’re willing to let go of what we have.”

I shake my head vigorously, “No, no, that’s not what I want. I don’t want to hurt either of you. But John means so much to me; he has been there for me since I was a kid. I can’t leave him.”

“Right,” Michael nods slowly with a sad smile. “Message received.”

The reality of my decision starts to sink in....

Michael and I are done, maybe for good.

As I leave Michael's house, tears streaming down my face. I can't help but feel a profound sense of loss and regret. It was the decision I was forced to make, and I can't shake the feeling that I've made a grave mistake.

The future seems bleak, and I'm left to live with the consequences of my choice.

Chapter 19

Confrontation

Michael

My room is surrounded by darkness, except for a solitary lamp's dim, flickering light. The smell of alcohol permeates the air. It's a bitter reminder of my futile attempt to escape the painful reality. Empty glasses lie scattered on the floor, mirroring the shattered fragments of my heart.

Anger courses through my veins, boiling beneath the surface of my despair. With a violent sweep of my arm, I send another glass crashing against the wall, the shattering sound echoing my inner turmoil. I scream into the emptiness, trying to release my frustration and sorrow.

But as the scream fades, my desolation settles. I collapse onto the floor, surrounded by the empty glasses, remnants of my self-destruction.

Tears stream down my face, and I run my hand through my messy hair, trying to regain composure in the face of

unbearable loss.

In the depths of my sorrow, memories of Serena flood my mind, a bittersweet reminder of the love we once shared. Amidst my misery, a single flashback emerges, vivid and tender.

I find myself transported to a scene where Serena stands before me, her warm smile casting a gentle glow in the room. She is preparing a meal. I creep up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, holding her tightly from behind.

Her laughter fills the room. She turns around, glowing with joy, and I'm reminded of the depth of our connection. In that precious moment, our lips meet, and the world fades away, leaving only the intoxicating taste of her lips.

As we reluctantly part, we press our foreheads together, enjoying the remnants of the sensation from our kiss.

"Serena," I murmur, "I want every day to be like this. I want to wake up to your smile and sleep with your kiss. I can't imagine a life without you."

"Michael," she whispers, "I feel the same way. You are my everything, and I can't imagine a future without you." Her heartfelt response comforts me.

We find ourselves lost in another tender hug, our lips meeting once more. But as the memory fades, I am pulled back into the grim reality of the present, being lost in despair.

I love Serena enough to understand her situation and the difficult decision she was forced to make. Yet, her decision

weighs heavy on me, leaving me in anguish.

John is my dear friend and a trusted business partner. I understand why he felt betrayed because of how he found out about our relationship. Yet, I can't hide my anger towards him for forcing Serena to choose one of us.

I am left shattered by losing Serena and the injustice she endured.

As I lie there on the cold floor, tears filling my eyes, I am left to wonder if I didn't do enough to keep Serena and me together.



The tension between John and I is evident as we enter the boardroom. We exchange curt nods, maintaining a facade of professionalism for the benefit of the shareholders seated around the table. The weight of our strained relationship hangs heavy in the air, threatening to suffocate any chance of productive conversation.

The meeting begins, and the discussion centers around the growth of our hotel chain in the countries where we have established a presence. It's a topic we both feel passionately about. Still, our personal conflicts simmer beneath the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment.

John leads, presenting the financial projections and outlining our aggressive plans for the coming year. His voice carries confidence and authority, but I can see the tightness in his jaw and the strain in his eyes. He's trying hard to keep up the

appearance that nothing is wrong between us, but I can sense his frustration towards me lingering.

As he finishes speaking, all eyes turn to me, expecting my input. I clear my throat and look at John quickly before addressing the shareholders.

“Thank you, John, for your comprehensive presentation,” I say, doing my best to hide our strained relationship. “The projections look promising, and we are indeed excited about the potential growth in these markets.”

I see a flash of irritation in John’s eyes, but he quickly composes himself and nods in acknowledgment. The shareholders seem oblivious to the tension between us, engrossed in the details of the business plan.

I continue, my voice steady as I outline our strategies and initiatives, carefully avoiding any direct clashes with John’s ideas. It’s a delicate dance, navigating the business conversation while tiptoeing around the broken personal relationship.

I choose my words carefully, maintaining a professional demeanor, while every fiber of my being yearning to let out the bottled-up frustration and anger.

Throughout the meeting, I catch glimpses of John’s clenched fists and the subtle twitch of his jaw. It’s clear he’s struggling to keep his composure, just as I am. But for the sake of our company and the shareholders, we both push through, feigning unity and collaboration.

The shareholders ask questions, seeking reassurances and asking for more details. I respond with calculated precision, providing the necessary information while avoiding confrontational remarks.

I am tired of this constant battle to pretend nothing is wrong with the partnership between John and me. After the meeting concludes, John strides out of the conference room quickly, trying to avoid confrontation. But I can't let it go.

"Can we have a fucking conversation!" I yell, fueled by frustration and yearning for resolution. John finally stops, turning to face me, his eyes filled with restrained anger.

At that moment, it's as if the world narrows to just the two of us. Jessica, who watches from the periphery, wisely chooses to retreat, sensing the situation's intensity.

My hands are up in the air, reflecting my exasperation.

"Why are you doing this?" I demand, "You're going to throw away the years of our friendship just like that?" I snap my fingers.

John grits his teeth and clenches his jaws.

"That's the problem, Michael," he retorts. "You talk about the years of our friendship, yet you're the one fucking my niece. That's what I can't get over."

I feel my anger boiling up.

"Our relationship is not just physical. We love each other. Why can't you hear us?"

John's jaw clenches, his face contorted in anger. But I refuse to back down.

"Listen to me, John. I love Serena," I tell him with a firm voice. "I fell in love with her three years ago, and I fell in love with her even more when I found her again. What we have is special. I'm sorry we kept our relationship a secret from you, but I'm not sorry for loving her."

"And I love her too!" John raises his voice, his eyes burning with frustration. "Do you know what I've done to ensure Serena has a good life? I've put everything on hold and made sacrifices to ensure she grows up happy. She's my life, my only family. All I've ever wanted is to give what's best for her."

I raise an eyebrow and respond with skepticism, "Yet you've put her in a position to choose between us. Do you honestly think that's the best thing for her? Does she seem happy after she's made the agonizing choice?"

John is silent, and I can see the gears turning in John's mind.

"You think you're hurting me, but you're hurting Serena the most. What you're doing is not best for her; deep down, you know it. You're doing it because you're selfish. Because you can't bear the thought of her being away from you."

John's face contorted with anger and pain from my words striking his nerve.

"Fuck you, Michael," he yells, turns around, and walks to his office, slamming the door shut behind him.

I stand in the empty hallway alone with mixed emotions. I know this conversation is far from over, and the future is still uncertain.

But I'm determined to fight for what I believe in and the love I share with Serena.

Chapter 20

Surprise

Serena

I wake up to another dreary morning, the weight of my heart sinking deeper into my chest. The room is covered in darkness, reflecting my inner turmoil.

Ever since the day Michael and I broke up, the gnawing pain lingers and consumes my thoughts.

Tears have become my constant companion, falling like raindrops as I lie in bed, longing for what Michael and I used to have. I cry myself to sleep most nights with my shattered heart.

Michael was my reason for waking up with a smile on my face. He's gone, and I'm left drowning in an ocean of guilt and self-loathing.

Avoiding John has become my daily mission. I know it's been eating him inside, but I didn't care. John forced me to choose between him and the love of my life, and I resent him for it. I

hope he is happy with the result. The void Michael left feels unbearable, and I miss him so much.

My work has suffered too. I haven't been able to concentrate, lost in the memories of what I've lost. My boss has noticed my distracted state and finally gives me some time off, convincing me I'm not well.

And my boss is right. I haven't been feeling well. Mornings bring waves of sickness, and the scent of food makes me nauseous. It's almost as if my body is trying to tell me something, but I'm too lost in my misery to listen.

John has tried to take care of me, offering comfort and support. But I've been pushing him away, snapping at him every time he attempts to help. I don't want his pity or love; I only want Michael.

It's as if a wall has been built around me, shielding me from the world, and without Michael, I feel utterly alone.

My suspicions grow stronger daily, and I can no longer ignore the signs. I decide to get a pregnancy test kit, hoping it's all just a false alarm.

Holding the box in my trembling hands, I feel nervousness wash over me. I can't face this alone, so I dial Cassie's number.

"Hey, Cassie," I say so softly that Cassie can barely hear me. "I... I bought a pregnancy test kit."

Cassie's face contorted with concern. "Serena, take a deep breath. It might just be a false alarm. You need to take the test

to be sure.”

“But what if it’s not a false alarm?” I choke, “What if I’m really pregnant?”

Cassie’s words are gentle, her voice filled with reassurance. “Serena, everything will be okay. Maybe this is what will bring you and Michael back together. It could be the beginning of a new chapter, a chance for a fresh start.”

With Cassie’s encouragement, I gather my strength and head to the bathroom. The test feels heavy in my hand, a symbol of both hope and fear. I carefully follow the instructions, my heart pounding in my chest as I wait for the results.

Minutes tick by, each second feeling like an eternity. Finally, I muster the courage to look at the strip. And there it is. A small but unmistakable sign.

Two lines. I am pregnant....

Emotions flood through me like a tidal wave. Joy, fear, and uncertainty collide within my heart, and I crumble to the floor, tears streaming down my face.

The realization hits me with a mix of overwhelming emotions. I am carrying a tiny life inside me, a piece of Michael and me intertwined. It’s a bittersweet revelation, knowing that this could connect us again, but also realizing the challenges this could cause.

I cling to the phone as if it were my lifeline, desperate for Cassie’s voice to comfort me.

“Cassie, I... I’m pregnant,” I manage to say through choked sobs.

Cassie pauses. She does not look shocked. Instead, she seems understanding.

“Serena, take a deep breath. This is a significant moment, and I understand it’s overwhelming. But remember, you’re not alone. You have people who care about you, and they will support you through this.”

Her words offer a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness. “What about Michael?” I ask, my voice trembling. “Do you think this will bring us back together?”

Cassie’s voice holds a mix of optimism and caution. “Serena, it’s impossible to predict the future. But this could be an opportunity for healing and re-evaluating what truly matters. Michael loves you deeply even though he was forced to be apart from you. Perhaps becoming parents together could bring you closer.”

As I hang up the phone, I can’t help but hold onto a flicker of hope that this pregnancy might be the catalyst for reuniting with Michael.

At that moment, I realize my life is about to change in ways I can’t imagine.



The atmosphere in the dining room is heavy with tension as John and I sit across from each other, our plates filled with

untouched food. I can feel his gaze burning into mine with a silent plea for connection. But I remain silent, unwilling to engage in conversation.

Tonight, I am here with a purpose—to break the news of my pregnancy to him. And if John can't handle the news, so be it.

Finally, unable to bear the uncomfortable silence, John clears his throat and speaks.

“Serena, are you enjoying your meal?” he asks, attempting to initiate a conversation. I know he cooked this meal, hoping for some reconciliation.

I offer a simple nod in response, avoiding eye contact. His next question comes as no surprise.

“Are you getting better?” he asks, his voice tinged with frustration. I nod again, feeling the weight of his expectations pressing upon me.

With a sigh, John breaks the silence that hangs between us.

“How long will you give me the silent treatment, Serena?” he asks, pleading. “I’m only doing what I believe is best for you. You’ll realize it soon enough. I have your best interest at heart.”

His words ignite a spark of irritation, and I can no longer contain my frustration.

“Does this seem like what’s best for me?” I snap with bitterness. “I’m completely miserable! Your version of ‘what’s best for me’ has ripped my heart apart.”

John's face contorts in pain as he tries to defend his actions. "Serena, all I ever want is what's best for you. Michael is not the best choice for you."

I scoff at his statement, anger bubbling within me. "Why? Because he's older than me? Because he's your best friend and business partner? "

"Why are you being so difficult?" John's voice is filled with anguish. "Why can't you see that I love you, and I say Michael is not the best choice because I care about you?"

I do my best to stay calm and I speak with clarity.

"When have I ever said you don't love or care about me, Uncle John?" I pause, gathering my thoughts. "I love you, and I'm grateful for everything you've done to raise me, but I need to live my life outside of your care. And you need to live your life outside of taking care of me. Your world has revolved around me for so long that it's become hard for you to let me go."

My words strike a chord with John, and I see the rigid stance he held is beginning to thaw, and his heart is opening up.

As the silence stretches on, I know it's time to drop the final bombshell. I take a deep breath before I say, "I love Michael... and I'm pregnant." John's eyes widen in shock, and he struggles to find words.

"What?" he stammers, shaking his head.

"I'm pregnant, Uncle John," I repeat, "And I'm going to tell Michael."

Before John can react or try to stop me, I push my chair back and swiftly exit. I can hear him chasing me in desperation, but I don't stop. I rush out of the house and into one of the cars, gripping the steering wheel tightly as I drive toward Michael's house. My heart races, fueled by fear and determination.

The street is in the soft glow of the streetlights as I speed up along the road, my heart pounding. Thoughts of Michael consume my mind, and the urgency to reach him overpowers any sense of caution.

I fail to notice the red light ahead and go through the intersection.

As my foot presses against the gas pedal, time slows down as my thoughts focus solely on the destination. The sound of screeching tires fills the air as my car hurtles forward, colliding with another vehicle that has innocently entered the intersection.

I can hear the sound of destruction – metal colliding with metal, glass shattering and flying like deadly confetti.

The impact jolts my body violently, propelling me forward into the dashboard. It leaves me breathless, my body lurching against the unforgiving restraints of the seatbelt, and I feel like I am being punched in the face as the airbag explodes. Pain radiates through every fiber of my body, and I'm in agony.

In that suspended moment, time stands still. The world around me becomes a blur of fragmented images—a shattered windshield, the eerie glow of the streetlights casting an

ethereal haze, and the scent of burning rubber mixed with the metallic taste of blood.

Silence follows after the chaos as the car comes to a screeching halt. It hangs heavy in the air, broken only by the sound of my labored breaths and the thoughts of fear and regret. My vision blurs and the darkness creeps in to engulf me completely.

Reality crashes back as adrenaline fuels my desperate fight against unconsciousness. With trembling hands and aching limbs, I fumble for the door handle, my body protesting in pain with every movement. The door creaks open, and I stumble out, but my legs are like jelly beneath me.

The scene before me is devastating – Twisted metal wreckage. Smoke rising. Sirens wail in the distance, and the sound grows louder with each passing moment, heralding the arrival of help. It's chaos.

Pain radiates through my body, sharp and insistent, but it pales in comparison to the ache in my heart. Michael's face, his smile, his touch—it all floods my thoughts, mingling with the fear and uncertainty from the accident. With every breath, I pray for strength and a chance to reach Michael to tell him the news of our baby growing inside me.

As the first responders arrive on the scene, their urgent voices and hurried movements surround me. They assess the situation, their trained eyes scanning the wreckage, searching for signs of life. And in that chaos, I whisper Michael's name

and send a prayer to the universe that the news of the baby will reach him.

The pain intensifies, reminding me of the consequences of my recklessness. Even though my body starts to give up, I am determined to fight for the life growing inside me and the love I hold dear for Michael.

As I lay there, the world spinning around me, I cling to the sliver of hope. My baby and I will survive, and I can share the news with Michael.

Chapter 21

Unexpected Call

Michael

The soft glow of the dining room casts a gentle ambiance as I sit alone for a quiet dinner. The clinking of silverware fills the air, reminding me of my solitude.

As I sit alone at the dinner table, my thoughts are consumed by Serena. My heart aches for her presence. The room feels void as the familiar sounds of shared laughter and conversations are replaced by an eerie silence. Food tastes bland in my mouth, and my appetite wanes, longing for her company.

It's so painful not being able to see her. I miss her warm smile and the soft touch of her hand.

I've fought against the temptation to visit her workplace just to catch a glimpse of her through the glass windows.

The urge to pick up my phone and call her to hear her voice is overwhelming. Yet, I resist, knowing the last thing I want is to

cause her trouble with John. Instead, I find solace in our shared fond memories that once filled our lives.

But memories can hold me back only for so long.

The longing grows with each passing day, my heart aching with the desire to hold her close, to feel her warmth against my skin. Her presence brought me peace, and without her, I feel adrift, lost in uncertainty.

But I must stay strong, reminding myself of the decision Serena made. I want her to be happy, and I will honor her decision. If she wishes to preserve her relationship with John, I must stay away from her.

All of a sudden, my phone disrupts the stillness of the room and my thoughts.

I'm taken aback by John's name on the screen. It's been weeks since we last spoke, the wounds of our strained relationship still raw and unhealed. My hand trembles slightly as I answer the call, unsure of what awaits on the other end.

"Hello, John?" I inquire with mixed emotions.

But instead of the composed voice I anticipate from John, he is frantic, talking gibberish. His panic is evident even through the phone. I try to calm him down to understand what he is saying.

"John, slow down," I plead, "Tell me what's going on."

John's voice trembles with fear, his words coming out in disjointed fragments. "Michael...Serena...accident..."

My heart stops, and the world around me fades as John's words hit me like a tidal wave.

"What!" I exclaim, dropping the silverware. Adrenaline runs through my veins, and a surge of panic overwhelms me, but I continue to speak to John urgently.

"John, hang on. Please take a deep breath and tell me where she is. What hospital?"

His voice quivers in fear. "Jackson Central Hospital...please, Michael...hurry."

In an instant, my mind goes into overdrive. Time ceases to exist as I grab my car keys, my hands trembling with anxiety. I dash out of the room, leaving behind the abandoned meal and the chaos of my thoughts.

The only thing that matters now is reaching Serena, ensuring her safety.

The car engine roars as I speed up through the familiar streets, my heart pounding like a battle drum. Images of Serena flood my mind—her laughter, smile, vibrant spirit. I can't bear the thought of her in pain as her life hangs in the balance.

With each passing second, the distance to the hospital closes. The scenery blurs around me, streetlights streaking as I fly down the street at night. My grip on the steering wheel tightens, knuckles turning white as I drive my car even faster to outrun the fear that threatens to consume me.

As the hospital comes into view, I feel reassurance despite my heart still racing fast. I park the car with an abrupt screech,

barely seeing the startled glances of passers-by. Every fiber of my being is focused on finding Serena and holding her close.

I burst through the hospital doors, my heart pounding in my ears as I approach the reception desk. Breathing fast, I ask, “Serena...Serena Coleman, please. Where is she?”

The receptionist sees me with a concerned look. “Sir, she’s in the emergency room. Take a left and follow the signs.”

My legs move on autopilot as I navigate the maze of corridors, the sterile scent of disinfectant filling my nostrils. Each step feels like an eternity as I repeat a prayer.

Finally, I reach the emergency room filled with tension. Nurses rush past me, focused on their patients in need. I spot John in the corner with his eyes bloodshot.

Our eyes meet, and we nod with a shared thought, desperately hoping that Serena will make it through this ordeal unscathed.

As I approach him, I can sense his guilt and fear.

“John, what happened?” I ask.

He exhales, his voice shaking, “She was in a car accident, Michael. I don’t know all the details, but she was in a collision. We have to pray, Michael. We have to believe that she’ll be okay.”

In agreement, I squeeze John’s shoulder and respond, “We will. We’ll pray and believe that she’ll be okay. Serena is strong, John. She’ll fight through this.”

Time passes by as I pace anxiously outside the operating room, my heart pounding in my chest. Every passing second feels like an eternity; I pray for Serena's well-being with each heartbeat. The sterile hospital corridor, filled with antiseptic scents, heightens my sense of unease.

Finally, the double doors swing open, and a team of doctors emerges. My heart leaps as I hastened towards them, unable to hide my desperation.

"How is she? Is she going to be okay?" I blurt out.

One of the doctors stops short and makes eye contact with me. He takes a moment to assess who I am to the patient. I turn to John, who stands next to me, looking worried.

Without hesitation, I step forward and firmly state, "I'm Serena's boyfriend." I stare at the doctor, pleading for answers. John remains silent.

The doctor nods as his expression softens. He turns his attention to me, his voice calm and reassuring.

"She made it," he says, "It was uncertain at first, but she's now stable. She will have a full recovery."

Tears well up in my eyes with relief as I look at John, but he averts his gaze. The doctor's following words hit me like a lightning bolt.

"And congratulations, Michael. We also managed to save the baby."

My heart is frozen in disbelief. "What do you mean?" I ask in a whisper. "I don't understand."

The doctor nods with a warm smile and confirms, “Yes, based on our examinations, Serena is approximately six weeks pregnant.”

Confusion still clouds my mind. Everything is a blur as I try to absorb this new information. Serena is carrying our child – a little life growing inside of her. A swell of emotions rises within me—joy, awe, and a sense of immense responsibility.

I turn to John, searching for answers, but his silence tells me he already knows. Our eyes meet briefly, his eyes brimming with sorrow and regret. The circumstances of Serena getting into a car accident while pregnant weigh heavily upon him, as they do upon me.

But now, John and I must set aside the complexities of our relationship and focus on what truly matters—Serena and the baby’s well-being.

The doctor’s words have touched me deeply, and tears well up in my eyes. I’m overwhelmed with emotions as I run a hand through my hair before I can speak.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” I stammer.

The doctor smiles, “We’ll continue to provide the best care possible,” he replies, “I assure you Serena and the baby are in good hands.” The doctor continues to explain the precautions and care Serena requires.

With gratitude in my heart, I thank the doctors feeling a sense of relief.

As the doctor exits the room, leaving us with renewed hope, I turn to John.

“How long have you known about the baby?” I ask him.

“I didn’t know until today,” John answers, shaking his head.

“Serena was on her way to tell you,” he murmurs with unspoken regret. “To share the news about the baby... when the accident happened.”

Tears start to fill my eyes as I struggle to make sense of the circumstances that have brought us to this point. I promise myself to focus on taking care of Serena and the baby from this moment on rather than blaming myself and regretting what happened in the past.

Moments later, John and I stand outside Serena’s hospital room. The door creaks open, and I step inside, my heart pounding. The room is lighted in a soft glow. The only sound I hear is the steady rhythm of Serena’s breathing.

Approaching her bedside, I reach out to caress her cheek. “We’re going to get through this, Serena,” I whisper, “You’re not alone. I’ll be here every step of the way.” I assure her.

With a heavy but determined heart, I settle into the chair beside her bed, refusing to leave her side. John looks at me from across the bed and nods, confirming that I can take good care of Serena and the baby.

Chapter 22

Forgiveness

Michael

I smile as the gentle morning rays filter through the curtains, casting a warm glow on Serena's face. The sleepless night has taken its toll, but I'm staying by her side, waiting for her to wake up.

I continue to whisper words of love and encouragement, hoping she will hear my words somehow. Time passes as I remain sitting by her side, holding her hand. The soft rhythm of her breathing continues and calms my restlessness.

The door swings open, breaking the silence, and the doctor enters the room accompanied by John. I stand up and greet John and the doctor.

The doctor greets me with a warm smile and approaches Serena's bedside. His gaze shifts between Serena and her vital signs displayed on the monitors. I hold my breath, waiting for his assessment.

“Good morning,” the doctor begins in a calm voice. “I’ve reviewed Serena’s medical records and the reports from the operation. Everything went well, and she’s currently doing well.”

A wave of relief washes over me, and a heavy weight is lifted from my shoulders. I exhale slowly, with my eyes still fixed on Serena’s face. The doctor’s words give me hope that Serena will recover fully.

“However,” the doctor continues, “Once Serena wakes up, we’ll need to keep her under observation to ensure her well-being and that of the baby.” The doctor explains.

I nod and thank the doctor.

John stands by my side with his gaze fixed on the doctor. John and I exchange glances, silently confirming our responsibilities to support Serena throughout this journey.

The doctor’s voice breaks the silence, addressing us both. “I understand this may be a challenging time for you both,” he says with empathy. “But rest assured, Serena and her baby are in good hands. We will make sure they are well taken care of..”

“Thank you so much, doctor. It means a lot to us.” I respond with a deep appreciation for the doctor’s commitment.

The doctor smiles, “It’s our duty,” he responds.

As the doctor retreats from the room, an uncomfortable silence settles between John and I. I can feel his gaze fixed on me.

Finally, John breaks the silence and says, “I’m going to get us some coffee.”

I respond with a grateful nod. John retreats from the room, leaving me alone with Serena again.

I take a deep breath and look at Serena’s serene face. The soft glow of morning rays illuminates her features. She looks fragile, vulnerable, and my heart aches at the sight. I gently brush a strand of hair away from her face.

“I love you, Serena,” I whisper, “I’m here for you through it all.”

I lower my head to put my forehead gently to touch hers, hoping she hears me. The rise and fall of her chest, and the soft rhythm of her breathing, provide a calming effect on me.

Outside the room, life goes on, the hospital bustling with activities. Doctors, nurses, and patients traverse the hallways, and each is lost in their own world. But within this hospital room, time seems to stand still.

As I sit in the stillness, fond memories of our time together flood my mind.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps breaks the silence, and I raise my head to see John returning with two steaming cups of coffee. He smiles as he places one cup before me. I nod and thank him, appreciating the gesture.

The aroma of coffee fills the room. I take a sip, feeling the warmth going down my throat.

John sits beside me, and the silence continues, occasionally broken by the sound of sipping coffee. I can feel his gaze lingering on me, but neither of us can start a meaningful conversation. I occasionally make eye contact to let John know silently that I love Serena very much and am ready to do whatever it takes to support her and the baby.

As the room remains quiet, John clears his throat while his gaze is still fixed upon Serena's peaceful face. I turn my attention to him, recognizing his desire to speak. I meet his eyes, waiting for him to share his thoughts.

"Michael," John begins, "Do you truly love Serena?"

My response is immediate, "With all my heart," I reply without hesitation.

Silence comes back again as I watch John's expression shift. I can only wonder what kind of turmoil his mind is in right now.

I break the silence with genuine concern. "What's going on in your mind, John?" I ask gently.

A heavy sigh escapes from John, his hand instinctively covering his face. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice filled with remorse. "I'm sorry for everything, Michael."

I feel the heaviness in his words as he admits his guilt and acknowledges the pain he has caused both Serena and me.

His voice cracks, and tears well up in his eyes. "After Serena's parents died, I took her in and raised her as my own. I dedicated my entire life to protecting her, and I thought I was doing the right thing by keeping her away from you."

John's words hang heavily in the air, reflecting the sacrifices he made to raise Serena by himself. I reach out and place my hand on his shoulder, offering him comfort.

"John, I understand," I assure him with empathy, "You have always been the one who takes care of her, and I know you want the best for her. I want you to know that I love Serena with all my heart, and I am committed to making her happy."

Tears stream down John's face as he lowers his head, overcome by his emotions. "I didn't realize the depth of my actions until now," he confesses. "I took the responsibility of protecting her so seriously that I lost sight of what truly mattered – Her happiness."

John continues, "I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to her."

I embrace John tightly. "John, you have done everything out of love for Serena," I tell him, "I understand your sacrifices, and I want you to know that I bear no ill will towards you. We are both here for Serena, and that is what truly matters."

We stand there holding each other tight, embracing the strength of our bond and our mutual love for Serena.

As we slowly release each other, words are no longer necessary.

Amidst our reconciliation, our eyes turn toward Serena as her eyelids flutter open, her consciousness coming back. John and I share a look before rushing to her, feeling elated.

She's waking up.

Chapter 23

Waking Up

Serena

I'm coming out of unconsciousness, where all I can hear is silence, all I can see is darkness, and numbness envelopes me.

I am trying to move, but it's as if something's holding me back. And then, I realize that I am the one who is holding myself back because it terrifies me to go back to reality, where everything has gone into shambles.

I try to remain unconscious, but the more I try, the harder it is.

My eyelids slowly flutter open, but it grows heavier again, snapping shut. My body is trying to tell me I'm not ready to handle a truckload of physical and emotional pains waiting for me in reality.

Every inch of my body feels so heavy. I cannot move it.

“...give her some space...”

“She's...”

“...let her breathe....”

The voices that filter into my ears feel like screeching and constant ringing. They sound distorted, and I can barely tell who is speaking.

I slowly open my eyes with renewed energy that came out of nowhere. This time, my vision is so blurry, and surges of bright lights are directed into my eyes simultaneously. It's overwhelming and causes me to blink rapidly.

I try to use my voice, but my words only come out in a whisper. Realizing that nothing is working out, I stop struggling. The blurry figures above me become clearer bit by bit. It's like a thick fog is clearing off.

My hand is being held by someone.

“Serena? Baby? Can you hear me?” The soft voice reaches out to me.

“Oh, for the love of God, Michael, let her breathe!” The other masculine voice chides the first person who spoke to me.

When his figure comes into view, I furrow my brows in recognition.

“Michael?”

“Hey, baby.” He smiles, looking relieved. I take my time to assess his somewhat slouching frame and the tired look on his face. His hair is rough and sticking out in different directions, and his stubble is getting longer.

He moves closer, grabs the tons of pillows to put them under my body, and props them upward before he proceeds to help me sit up properly.

I look around the room, and it dawn on me that I am in a private hospital room.

And then, the memories come rushing back.

I discovered I was pregnant, and Cassie suggested speaking with John about the baby. The dinner with John went south, and I stormed out of the house to talk to Michael about our baby. I had been so consumed with the thoughts of breaking the news to Michael that I wasn't paying attention to the traffic light as I drove into the intersection....

I disregarded the red light, and before I knew what was happening, a car collided with mine, and everything went into shambles. The last thing I remembered was giving into the darkness, even though the thought of Michael kept me in the light as long as possible.

A thought strikes me from nowhere, jolting me back to the present.

“My baby!” I am trying to yell, but it only comes out in a hoarse whisper. I hold my tummy protectively. Michael cups my face, compelling me to look at him. My eyes are already filling up with tears.

“Our baby is fine. Our baby is safe.” He assures me, smiling. He attached his forehead to mine, softly kissing my lips. A wave of relief instantly washes over me.

My baby is safe.

“I am so sorry for putting you through this.” He chokes up.

It hurts me to watch him in pain.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. All that matters is that you are here now. I just really wanted to see you. I wanted to tell you about our baby,” My voice is barely audible, but luckily, he can hear me since he is so close to me.

“I let my impatience get the better of me, and I put me and our child in harm’s way,” I sigh in frustration.

He kisses me again.

“You have no idea how happy you have made me by coming back to us...” His voice trails off, and when he says ‘us,’ I lift my head, look behind Michael, and find John leaning against the wall.

He can’t hold my gaze for long and breaks it off quickly. I understand he feels guilty, but I don’t want John to feel that way.

Michael understands me without saying a word, and he lets me go.

I flash a smile at John, and he exhales with mixed emotions. He walks over to the bedside, pulling the empty chair to the edge of the bed.

John is hesitant, so I make the first move by shifting my body on the bed, taking his hands in mine, and squeezing them gently.

“Uh...” He chuckles painfully. “I can’t even look at you without feeling guilty for what I put you through because of my selfishness.”

“It was just so hard to bear the thought of you leaving me. It was tough because I have put all my efforts into giving you a better life ever since your parents died. It has morphed you into this amazing young woman that I am so proud of,” He smiles at me through his tears, expressing his admiration for me.

I chuckle.

“When I found out about you two, it felt like he was stealing you away. I didn’t like it. I didn’t even want it. I let my selfishness get the better of me. I should never have made you choose, Serena.” He shakes his head in disagreement.

“And because of that, I put you in harm’s way and refused to see the bigger picture. Heaven knows I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I had lost you.” His voice is laced with anguish. His facial expression is forlorn.

I sigh.

“You have always looked out for me, John, and I appreciate it. I love you so much. Being with Michael doesn’t change that. Better yet, it will bring us even closer. You have always seen Michael as family. It won’t hurt if he officially becomes part of the family.” I convince John, and he nods with a smile and sends Michael a smile, also.

“I am so sorry for trying to come between you two. I am very sorry.” He apologizes to Michael and me.

“Michael is an amazing man, and I am glad he is the one your heart chose. Even though I wasn’t willing to see it at first, I can’t think of anyone else to trust you with.” He grins at me.

“So, does that mean you’ll accept me to be with him?” I can’t stop smiling.

John nods with a smile, “Yes, Serena. I don’t want to stand in the way of your happiness. You love him; he loves you. What’s not to accept?”

I reach out and give John a big hug. It brings me so much joy that the two men I love aren’t fighting anymore, and I don’t have to choose between them. I can have them both on my side.

“Thank you,” I sob in his arms.

John lets me go after a while, planting a kiss on my forehead. I turn to Michael, who takes my hands and gives me a hand kiss.

“I love you,” Michael whispers.

“I love you, too,” I say, pulling him in for a soft kiss.



I flip the page of the book I am reading, snuggling under the covers. I have decided to make myself comfortable since I am still under the doctor’s care in the hospital. I look up from the book when the door swings open, revealing Cassie’s slim

figure. She's carrying a giant teddy bear in her arms alongside her bag.

My face brightens immediately.

"Hey!" I chirp, and she rushes towards me. She crouches to my level and pulls me into a tight hug.

"I will start thinking something is wrong if you don't start hugging me back." She says, and I groan.

"I can't breathe. You're holding me so tightly." I mumble, and she chuckles, freeing me from her grip. She sits beside me on the bed, tucking my hair behind my ear.

"I missed you so much." She says softly.

"I am so glad you're getting better." She pulls me in for a hug again, pressing a kiss on my hair. I'm tearing up a bit as I allow her a soft embrace.

"I missed you too, Cassie," I murmur.

After holding each other for a while, we let go of our hug and step back a little to look at each other.

"You didn't have to fly back just for me, you know," I say.

"Nonsense," She dismisses me with a wave of her hand. "My best friend got into a car accident. I came here as fast as I could,"

We smile. Who am I kidding? Cassie would fly back just for me, even if I told her not to.

"Here, I got you this." She grins at me, handing me the teddy bear.

“It’s cute. I love it.” I squeal, putting the teddy bear aside. I give her a quick hug, and she chuckles.

“How are you feeling now?” She asks me.

“I feel much better than I did yesterday.”

“I am sorry I couldn’t make it here on time. I am so__” I cut Cassie off.

“There’s no need to apologize, Cassie. You are here now, and that’s all that matters. You don’t have to blame yourself for anything. I love you, and I am glad you are here now.” I place my hand on hers, squeezing it softly.

She nods with a sigh, then her facial expression soon brightens.

“What about Michael?”

“He stepped out not so long ago. He’ll be back any moment now.” I answer her. I sit up, grinning from ear to ear, and it piques her curiosity.

“Michael and I can finally be together. John gave us his approval. I am so glad.” I ramble at her, and her eyes widen.

“Oh, my God! Really?” She squeals so loud I extend my arm to hold the phone away.

“Ugh, you two are going to have the cutest babies! I am so happy for you, Serena. I am glad John finally accepted you guys being together.” Cassie’s eyes twinkle with happiness.

“I told you everything was going to be fine.”

“Yeah, you did. You’ve been nothing short of amazing.” I tell her.

The door creaks open, and Michael enters the room with a bouquet of roses. His presence shifts my attention away from Cassie, and I can’t suppress the wide grin on my face. He is in much better shape than he was when I first woke up.

He smiles back at me, then turns to Cassie. “Hey, Cassie.” Michael greets her.

“Hey, Michael. I should have known you were the reason why she zoned out on me.” Cassie huffs, moving away from the bed so Michael can sit beside me.

“Hey, baby.” He says softly, looking into my eyes. The bouquet in his hands drops with a soft thud when I cup his face to lock our lips in a kiss.

“You kept me waiting,” I mumble, brushing my palm against his cheek.

“I am sorry. I wanted to pick this up for you.” He motions at the bouquet, picks it up, and hands it to me. I brought the red roses to my nose to enjoy the wonderful smell.

“You are so sweet. Thank you, baby.” I give him a quick kiss.

“I am still here!” Cassie announces her presence, and Michael and I chuckle.

He looks at me like I am the most precious thing in the whole world, and I love it.

Chapter 24

Say Yes

Serena

“So, has he told you where he is taking you?”

Cassie’s question causes me to settle for the black thong I was thinking about wearing earlier. I snap the drawer shut and turn to her, sparing her a smile on the screen where her face is displayed.

She’s grinning from ear to ear like a child who’s offered her favorite candy. Her eyes sparkle with so much delight.

“No, he hasn’t told me where he is taking me, but does it matter?” I question her, slipping on the thong.

“Honey, it does!” She sounds so dramatic.

“Cassie,” I halt and turn to her. She’s already arching a brow at me.

“Listen, I don’t care where he is taking me; all that matters is he’s taking me on a date, and we don’t have to hide from John

anymore,” I explain, and she responds with an eye roll.

“I know. I know.” She agrees.

“But come on. Aren’t you curious where Michael is taking you out?” She demands, winking at me.

“I am not. It might be the hotel where we had our first date. The rooftop thingy,” I reply to Cassie, shrugging my shoulders with a smile.

“Oh, please!” She discards my words.

“We both know your man,” She sends me a teasing look. I can’t help blushing when she calls him ‘my man.’ It feels so surreal.

“He loves luxury!” She emphasizes the word luxury.

“He is not a man of subtlety. He is in the hospitality business and works every day to give his customers unforgettable experiences.” She groans. “So please, stop acting like you don’t know how far he will go for you to have an unforgettable experience. That man loves you too much not to go all out for you.” She smirks at me, and I facepalm.

“Cassie, you are like a dog with a bone!” I whine.

“Why did I Face-time you?” I ask rhetorically.

“Because you know I give you the best advice.” She wiggled her eyebrows at me, and I send her a glare resisting the urge to turn off my phone.

“Okay, don’t get so irritated by me. Your mood swings these days can be cute and annoying at the same time.” Cassie

chuckles, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“Good,”

I am glad she is aware of my mood swings. It has been popping up since I was discharged from the hospital. I usually try my best to control it, but sometimes it controls me.

“Now, can we skip to the part where you help me pick a dress?” I ask in exasperation, and she nods with excitement.

“Sure!”

“Let’s see what we have here!” She chirps, clapping her hands.

I move to the array of expensive clothing in my closet, browsing through them with keen eyes, and then I fish out two dresses. I want this evening to be perfect.

The green velvet dress is a total turn-off, so I stuff it back onto the hanger and settle for the black dress.

“What do you think?” I ask with a broad smile, placing the A-shape silk black dress with a droopy neckline on my body.

“Girl, it’s perfect!” Cassie squeals.

I giggle like a teenage girl.

“Now, shoo, and go put that dress on. You still have to do your makeup. The goal is to make Michael unable to keep his hands to himself.” She grins mischievously, and I smirk in return.

I get out of my towel and slip on the dress. It fit like a glove, and it was straightforward to rock this mid-thigh length dress. I tug at the thin straps softly and turn to Cassie for approval.

“God, I wish I wasn’t stuck on this business trip!” She cries out.

“You look like a million bucks.” Her eyes widen in admiration.

“Thank you,” I smile.

“Now, go make that man’s head spin. I love you, babes.” She smiled at me and blew me a kiss. I do the same, and she hangs up.

I sigh, running my hands over the fabric of the dress, and then I proceed to do my makeup and style my hair in a neat bun. I grab my purse, stuff necessities into it, and stroll out of the walk-in closet.

When I get to the living room, John is not there. He is either out or sleeping upstairs. I make a mental note to check in on him when I return.

If I return, I suppose... My cheeks flush in embarrassment.

The chauffeur is already waiting in front of the house. He pulls the car door open, and I slip into the car, greeting him. He turns on the engine and drives us out of the property.



I push myself off the plush leather seat when I notice where the driver is taking me doesn’t look familiar. My brows furrowed in confusion. My eyes won’t stop looking around in confusion.

“Where are we going?” I speak up when I can no longer hold it in me anymore.

“We are going to meet Mr. Durand, Ma’am.” He answers me, sparing me a glance through the rear-view mirror.

I am even more confused.

“But this is not the way to the hotel,” I argue.

“Mr. Durand isn’t at the hotel, Ma’am. He is at the Marina.” His words catch me by surprise, and my eyes widen in shock.

“Marina?”

“What is Michael up to?” I frown, leaning back into the seat. Cassie’s words flash in my mind. “Stop acting like you don’t know how far he will go for you to have the unforgettable experience.”

I am starting to think Cassie might be right. I had expected the date to be at the rooftop like the last time, and I couldn’t hide my shock when the driver told me we were going to the Marina.

I try to remain calm in the backseat, sighing softly. I might make myself comfortable since I do not know what Michael is up to.

The drive to the Marina took longer than I expected. In no time, the driver is pulling over at the parking lot, and a guard is already opening the car door so I can step out.

I look around the less crowded area but don’t see Michael anywhere.

“This way, Ma’am,” The guard’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I trail behind him as he leads me to the docks.

It doesn’t make any sense at first, but when he leads me to the docks, my eyes drift to the luxurious yacht afar, and my jaw drops in surprise. I chuckle softly, taking in the welcoming scenery. My eyes wander around with utmost satisfaction.

The cold breeze that brushes my skin makes me shudder softly. I would have brought a coat if I knew I was coming to the seaside.

The ocean view from the yacht deck is more breathtaking than it is from the pier. I don’t even realize when the guard leaves me all by myself. I am far too immersed in the sheer beauty the well-decorated deck holds under the moonlight, casting its glow on the water’s surface.

It’s so peaceful out here.

The table for two that occupies the deck has a white tablecloth over it. A bouquet of red roses sits in the middle of the table, surrounded by two large candles enhancing the glow of the moonlight. The ambiance it created is so beautiful.

The smell of the beautiful rose petals spread on the floor is lovely. Delicate glass lanterns illuminate the space and give it a soft, romantic glow, highlighting the dinner. It’s in perfect synchrony with the stars shining above.

I walk forward in search of Michael, but I sense his presence behind me, and it causes me to smile.

“Hey, beautiful.” His deep voice comes from behind me, and I spin around to face him. He looks gorgeous wearing a navy tux over a crisp white shirt, taking my breath away.

“Hey,” I mumble, suddenly so shy in his presence.

He chuckles, pulling me closer. He kisses my lips softly, and I kiss him back urgently. Oh God, my hormones. They are already controlling me to skip the dinner and get to the part where he gets me out of this dress.

“You look stunning, baby.” He says in his deep voice and smiles at me. He reaches his hands below my waist, grabbing my ass softly.

“Michael,” I gasp breathlessly.

“So responsive, as always.” He teases me, pressing his lips against mine. The night has barely begun, but I already want us in bed naked. He knows it too, but he acts like he doesn’t.

“Come on, let’s get you settled down.” He urges me forward, slipping his hands around my waist. He leads me to the table and pulls out a chair for me.

I take my seat, and he drops a kiss dangerously close to my cleavage before taking his seat in front of me.

“Michael, this is....” I trail off, looking around in awe.

“It’s so beautiful. How did you come up with this idea?” I can’t refrain from asking him. The man has a way of catching me off guard.

“I am glad you like it. I wanted to do something special for you.” He says softly, brushing his thumb against my palm.

The yacht sails at a very slow speed which I find very soothing. It allows me to take in the mesmerizing sight of the sea and immerse in the sound of its gentle waves crashing against one another. It’s so calming and magical.

Michael beckons the chef, and with his assistant, they troop in with trays of mouth-watering delicacies that cause me to salivate upon its arrival.

They dish our food, and I dig in without wasting any time. The thought of devouring the rack of lamb grilled to perfection with the mustard-shallot sauce is so tempting. I shredded the meat with cutleries, drizzled the sauce, and then took a forkful into my mouth.

The taste is exquisite, and I can’t resist taking a few more bites. I nod in approval with every bite I take.

I am too immersed in my meal to notice Michael smiling at me. I stop eating immediately, and I blush in embarrassment.

“I am sorry,” I mumble.

“My appetite these days is quite alarming,” I add, and he chuckles, slicing a chunk of his lamb before putting it in his mouth.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. You looked cute, and I couldn’t resist watching you eat.” He smiles at me, and I smile back in adoration.

“You don’t want it to get cold, do you?” He smirks, and I pick up my cutlery.

Our laughter is carried by the soft waves, resonating throughout the vast ocean as we make small talk between our meals. Michael’s gaze doesn’t leave mine for a second, making me feel like I’m the luckiest woman in the world.

“Come on,” He gets up, stretching his hand forth. I smile at him, dropping my palm into his, and I pick up my wine glass with my other hand.

I hardly noticed that his hand had slipped out of mine. I was far too fascinated by how the moonlight streaks touched nearly every inch of the water. The gentle breeze caresses my face so lightly, eliciting a sigh as I lean on the rails and take a small sip from my wine glass.

“Michael—”

I lose my breath when I spin around to see him on one knee a few feet away. The navy velvet box in his hands is pried open enough for me to see its content.

A diamond ring.

In shock, I slap my palm over my mouth and try not to cry.

“Michael,” I whisper.

He stares back at me with a smile on his face. I see happiness and adoration in his eyes, but I can also sense his nervousness.

“My life before I met you was bland,” He begins, and tears start to fill his eyes.

“The night I met you in Milan changed everything. You made me happy in a way I didn’t even expect, but it was short-lived because fate drove us away.” He pauses and checks to see if my demeanor has changed.

“But when I wasn’t expecting it, you waltzed back into my life after two and a half years, and I knew you were my girl from the day I met you again.”

“I love you, Serena. You bring so much joy into my life.” His eyes are filled with tears, but he still smiles through it.

“Serena, I want you, all of you. I want to be by your side for better or worse. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Tears start to run down my face.

“Baby, will you marry me?” He looks at me with a smile.

I let out a full-blown sob, not caring that I am smearing my makeup. I can’t bring myself to say a word. The only thing I can do is nod.

He let out a teary chuckle, standing up, stepping forward to put the diamond ring on my finger. I lean forward, grab him by the back of his head, and kiss him.

He pulls me closer, my body pushed against his. His hot lips trace down my neck and slowly come back up to my lips again. His tongue opens my lips and connects with my tongue eagerly, causing my knees to wobble from the sensation. I grab the back of his head to kiss him back harder while he secures me with his strong arms.

He breaks the kiss to look me in the eyes and whispers, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Michael.” I smile, taking his lips back in a passionate kiss.

With Michael and our baby growing inside me, I know my life will be full of joy.

Epilogue

It's Time

Serena

Three years later.

“Okay, people!” I stroll into the bustling studio, clapping my hands to catch the attention of the designers, who are so immersed in their work.

It's one of our busiest weeks at the company. We have several deadlines, and more orders are coming in non-stop. It still baffles me how my company, SCD Luxe, has managed to be in the fashion industry spotlight in such a short time.

It all happened so fast, and it still feels so surreal that I run one of the most sought-after fashion design companies in the country.

The humming of the sewing machines that fill the air earlier comes to a halt, and the chattering ceases. Their attention drifts from the cutting tables scattered across the room and the clothes strewn on the mannequins that filled the room.

“Good morning, everyone.” I smile at them, and they greet me. They watch me with eager smiles on their faces, and I can sense the excitement in their eyes.

They make me feel like a source of inspiration to them at times. I can hear it in their words, and I can see it in their actions. I have the best team a girl can ever ask for.

“Good morning, Ms. Durand,”

I groan, facepalming.

“You can call me Serena,” I smile.

Their chuckles fill the room quickly, and I roll my eyes. My eyes dart to my assistant, Brenda, hanging by the doorframe, and I nod her over. She comes forward with my sketching pad.

“You wouldn’t believe who we are styling next!” I squeal like a little girl.

“Iris Thompson?”

“Margaret Wells?”

“Riley Hawthorne?”

They all call out the names of different celebrities, but none of them is correct.

With a smirk and a hair flip, I drop the bombshell. “Cora Miller!” I shriek, and the entire team goes wild with cheers. Seeing how excited they are, I can’t hold back the soft chuckles.

Cora Miller is a renowned actress. The twenty-five-year-old rose to stardom at the early age of sixteen and has been in the

spotlight since then. She is Hollywood's highest-paid actress and is among the top five influential celebrities in the world, in the Forbes magazine.

“Oh, my God!”

“The Cora Miller?”

“This is huge!”

“I know. I know.” I grin.

“And..., the more reason why we have to bring our A-game into this work is that this is not just any dress,” I pause, examining their faces.

“She's wearing this dress to the red carpet of the Vevee Awards,” I add, and their eyes were nearly bulging out of their sockets.

“Cora Miller, in a few words, is the perfect definition of stylish and distinct. We have to bring that to life. She doesn't just want to wear a dress. She wants to look stylish in a creative dress that sets her apart from anyone else. Let's help her set the trend.” I stare back at them, hoping they get my message, and they nod eagerly.

‘Yes’ echoes throughout the room.

“I sketched what she would be wearing, according to what suits her personality the most.” I wave the sketchpad in the air, and Brenda steps forward with photocopies of my sketch.

After the copies are distributed, they browse through them while I shift my weight on my other foot, supporting my bump

with my hand on my belly.

Their faces light up with smiles, and they can't hide their excitement after seeing the sketch.

"It's so beautiful."

"It looks so elegant."

"This is stunning."

My heart flutters at their compliments.

"Thank you," I smile, blushing with excitement.

"We have to get started on it as quickly as we can. I will be back soon to monitor everything. So, that'll be all." I send them a warm smile and leave the studio, heading straight for the office while Brenda follows me.

"Your phone rang twice. It's your husband." She says to me as we walk into the office. I plop gently on the chair, taking my phone from her.

"Thank you, Brenda. Can you please get me a glass of water?"

"Sure, Ma'am."

I dial his number, and he picks up immediately.

"Hey, baby." I hear his deep voice through the speakers. Arianna's babbling voice echoes in the background, and I giggle.

"Hey, honey." I smile, and I wish I could see Michael and Ariana.

“Are you okay? You sound tired.” I can detect the hint of worry in his tone, making me roll my eyes.

“I am fine, Mich__.”

My words got caught off when I felt a warm liquid trickle down my legs. I froze in my seat, my mind going blank for a while.

“Baby?”

“Uh...babe, I think my water just broke,” I whispered.

“Shit!”

“Baby? Baby, can you hear me?” I can feel Michael panicking on the other side of the phone.

I release a shaky breath. “Uh...yeah! Yeah,”

“I am going to call John and Cassie. Is Brenda there?”

A contraction hits me, and I can't hear anything anymore.

“Argh!” I grunt.



“My back hurts so badly,” I cry, panting heavily. My back hits the pillow with a soft thud, and I hold Michael's hand as tightly as possible.

He connects his forehead with mine and softly kisses it, sighing softly.

“Baby, look at me,” He urged me, and I sobbed. The pain that shoots through me only intensifies with every passing second.

“Just make it stop,” I groan, tightening my grip on his hands.

“Hey, hey, baby,”

“Look at me,” He says softly, cupping my face. I take short rapid breaths while I keep my eyes locked on him.

“Good girl.” I can see the apprehension on his face, but he tries to remain calm in the tense moment. He smiles at me softly, and I shake my head, continuing with my rapid short breaths,

“Breathe, baby. Breathe.” He tells me.

“I am breathing!” I snap. Beads of sweat break out on my face again, tiredness washing over me. He does not take my harsh words to heart; he holds my hand in his, kissing it softly.

“You can do this, baby, just like you did before. I am here. I am not going anywhere. Do you understand?” He asks me, and I nod with tears streaming down my face.

“I am so tired, Michael.”

“I know, baby. I know. Just one more time, and he’s out. I promise you.” He kisses me softly.

“Okay, one more time,” I add, panting heavily.

He stares at me with a comforting smile, and I smile back at him, turning to the doctor afterward.

“Are you ready now, Serena?” The doctor asks me. His voice is soft and comforting.

I nod my head, unable to speak.

“Good,”

“Now, I need you to take a deep breath,”

I take a long breath and puff it out as slowly as possible. The doctor smiles at me, Impressed.

“Try to relax. Breathe as much as you want to. We are almost there.” He tells me.

“You are doing amazing, baby. I love you.” Michael’s words of assurance seem to be the push that I need. It fuels me with a renewed sense of energy.

“I will need you to push with all you have, Serena. Can you do that for me?” He asks.

Michael’s eyes lock with mine, and he holds my hand. Right there, I nod to confirm I can get through this.

“Yes,” I answer breathlessly.

“Come on, now push.” The doctor tells me.

With all the strength left in me, I let out a deep grunt, digging my nails into Michael’s wrist. I land on the bed with a soft thud, breathing heavily.

“That’s it, baby. We are almost there.” Michael leans over and kisses my forehead, squeezing my hand softly.

I am so tired.

“I can see his head, Serena. Just one more time, and he is out.” The doctor says softly, and I exhale. I can feel my limbs growing weaker every second, but I am not about to give up now.

I take a deep breath in, and I push harder this time. The loud infant cries fill the room. I gasp softly, falling onto the bed.

“Oh, my God,” I whisper.

“You did it, baby. You did it,” Michael kisses me softly. “I am so proud of you.”

“Can I hold him?” I ask the doctor, and Michael moves away from me to cut the umbilical cord. He gently takes the baby from the doctor and walks towards me, placing him in my arms.

I can't control my tears at seeing the baby because he is so perfect and beautiful. It's my first time holding him, but my heart is filled with so much love for this little one already.

“He's perfect, Michael.” My voice is quivering as I rock his small frame in my arms.

“Yes, he is.” He whispers, trailing his fingers on his cheek.

The nurses come to take him afterward to clean him up properly. Michael sits beside me, propping the pillows against my back so that I can be seated appropriately.

“You made me a father, once again. You don't know how happy you've just made me, Serena. I love you so much.” He says to me, his voice filled with so much tenderness.

“I love you too, baby.” I flash a tired smile, and he leans in to kiss my forehead—the doors to the labor room swing open. John and Cassie practically barge into the room. I giggle at them.

“Babes, I am so proud of you!”

“Congratulations, brother!” John grins at Michael and pulls him in for a hug, patting his back. Cassie engulfs me in a side hug while she holds a sleeping Arianna against her shoulder. I plant a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Hey, you,” John smiles at me, kissing my cheek. “You did amazing, Serena. I am so proud of you.” He tells me, his voice filled with so much admiration.

Tears of joy are flowing down my face.

“Where’s the little one?” Cassie asks, and on cue, the door swings open, and they wheel the new addition to our family into the room. My heart swells with so much happiness as the nurse carefully wraps my baby in a shawl, takes him out of the infant crib, and hands him over to me.

“Hey, baby,” I whisper, gazing at him with a warm smile.

“He is so beautiful!” John and Cassie smile.

“He is a miracle,” Michael says, giving me a soft kiss.

“Have you guys thought about names for him yet?” Cassie asks, and I can’t wait to tell his name.

“Michael John Jr.,” I whisper.

“Michael John Durand Jr.,” Michael adds, smiling as he looks at John, whose eyes are wide open, elated with this surprise.

“My boy gets his name from two of the most important men in my life,” I smile.

“I love you, baby.” Michael kisses me on my forehead and the baby on his cheek.

Lost in my family’s excited chatters, I know there is nothing I could want more than this.

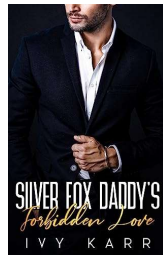
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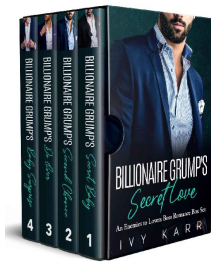
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