

## Chapter 3

It was already 8 p.m. when I left my aunt's house.

I took a cab home, only to realize I'd forgotten my keys.

I called the property management to help unlock the door, but they told me the only option was to break the lock and replace it with a new one.

This was Sean's apartment, and as an outsider, it didn't feel right to change the lock without his permission, especially since I'd be leaving soon anyway.

I reluctantly called Sean's number. It took three tries before the call was answered, but the voice on the other end wasn't his. It was Serena who answered.

"Gina, Sean's cooking right now. It's so late. What do you need?" she asked sweetly, then quickly added, "Gina, don't get the wrong idea. I just got back to the country, and I don't really know anyone else. I can only rely on Sean. He's just being kind and looking out for me because of our past. There's nothing more to it."

I hesitated, unsure how to respond, when I heard Sean's voice in the background, distant but unmistakable.

"Serena, the fried chicken wings are ready! Who's the little foodie that can't wait to eat?"

My chest tightened as I hung up the phone. Memories of the past nine years with Sean flooded my mind, leaving me feeling bitter and wronged.

I called the property management again and told them to replace the lock. I didn't want to waste any more time. I needed to pack my things and move on.

As soon as I stepped inside, Sean's call came through.

"Gina, what's wrong with you? At the mall today, you told me you didn't care, but now you've gone behind my back and been harsh to Serena? She's so upset she's skipping dinner! She wants me to talk to you, and if she gets low blood sugar, what am I supposed to do?!"

His voice was angry, his breathing heavy with frustration. I could also hear Serena in the background, softly trying to calm him down, her voice sweet and delicate.

"You've changed so much," Sean continued. "At the welcome dinner the other night, I wanted to introduce you two, but you just left without saying a word. Did I ever get mad at you for that?"

"Serena is gentle and well-mannered. She'd never say anything harsh. She just quietly puts up with everything. If you're upset, take it out on me!"

Through the phone, I could hear the anger in his voice and Serena's soothing attempts to de-escalate the situation. Her gentle, considerate image—his idealized dream girl—felt so different from what I'd just experienced.

But I understood her intent now.

And from the way Sean was acting, it was clear: she had succeeded.

"Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean for you to come back. She's on her own, and it's not easy for her. Stay with her. I forgot my keys, so I've already had the lock changed. The new key is with the property management. If you come back, you can pick it up from them."

I hung up before he could respond.

Halfway through packing my suitcase, my phone started buzzing with constant notifications. Sean's group chat with his friends was unusually lively. The source of the excitement? Serena had sent a picture of Sean cooking.

"Wow, the great Sean Everett was actually cooking!"

"Didn't know Mr. Everett had such a domestic side—makes me want to marry him!"

The teasing comments from his friends kept coming.

"Is that fried chicken wings? Looks delicious! I'll bring my own utensils. I'm begging for a bite!"

"Keep dreaming! The only thing you'll get from Sean is a smack. The only one he cooks for is his little foodie—his future wife!"

For a moment, I recalled back to the time when Sean first added me to this group chat.

Back then, his friends used to say he'd changed. They joked that instead of discussing basketball strategies, he'd started talking about stomach-friendly recipes.

Sean had a habit of secretly snapping pictures of me eating, proudly declaring that he took great care of me. His friends called me his "nurtured girlfriend," and I'd saved those messages, often looking at them and smiling like a fool, thinking I was the luckiest woman in the world.

But the sweetness of those days had turned unbearably bitter now.

Serena's return had made one thing clear: Sean wasn't nurturing me. He was nurturing the version of Serena he'd always dreamed of—the one he couldn't have back then.

After warning everyone in the chat to stop mentioning me, Sean added Serena to the group.

His friends began lamenting how they hadn't ended up together before, conveniently forgetting it was Serena who had walked away from Sean.

Now, they celebrated how fate had brought them back together, calling her his little foodie, the future Mrs. Everett.

After that, no one dared to bring me up again.

I realized then that I was just a fleeting presence, someone who had accidentally stolen nine years of sweetness. And now, I'd been forgotten.