

November 7, 2005

Takes place before the epilogue

Aoife

When I blinked awake the first Monday in November, the first thing I registered was the familiar sound of “Semi-Charmed Life” from Third Eye Blind as it echoed through the house.

“Jesus, again?” I mumbled to myself, as I grabbed my pillow and covered my face with it.

Since discovering one of my old mixtapes soothed AJ, we played it constantly.

Not a mixtape, I mentally corrected. *This song*.

The irony that the only song that settled our son was one about crystal meth didn’t escape me, either.

Rolling onto my side, I took note of the empty bassinet for a brief second before bolting out of bed, feeling a combination of lethargy and sheer panic.

Lethargy because I hadn’t slept properly in months, and panic because today was my first day at Tommen, which meant I would have to leave AJ with my mam for seven whole hours.

Naked as the day I was born, I grabbed a rogue t-shirt off the bedroom floor and went in search of my baby.

The jittery nervousness that had been steadily growing in my belly all week was temporarily set aside when I jumped off the bottom step of the staircase and took in the sight of both my baby and his daddy.

With his back to me, Joey swayed and shimmied to the music with AJ snuggled on his shoulder.

Clad in nothing but a pair of black boxers, I watched as he flipped a pancake in the pan, while humming along to the lyrics of the song playing on repeat.

Oh, dear Jesus.

Regular Joe was irresistible, but daddy Joey? Dear God, he was too much for my poor, barely recovered ovaries.

These past two months hadn’t been easy, but we were doing it.

Together.

I had my best friend back, my partner in crime, in life, and in parenthood.

“How much for a private show later?” I teased, thoroughly amused by his exhibition. “Nice moves, stud.”

“You couldn’t afford me,” came Joey’s smart-ass response, as he turned back to wink at me. “Morning, queen.”

“Then it’s a good thing I own you and don’t have to pay,” I replied, sidling up to him, eyes locked on AJ. “How’s my baby?”

“That you do, Molloy.” Leaning in, he pressed a kiss to my temple before handing AJ over to me and turning his attention back to the cooker. “You know, I’m sure he’s cutting a tooth.”

“Thank you!” Cradling my little pudge in my arms, I blew raspberries on his chubby cheek, causing AJ to grin up at me. “I’ve been saying this for days, but Mam and Casey said I was being daft because he’s only a couple of months old.”

“Well, Casey doesn’t know shit because his gums are like rocks,” Joey shot back. “And no offense to your mam, but she doesn’t know AJ best. You do. You’re his mam, and you’re on the ball with him, baby.”

“I am?”

“You are.”

I beamed down at AJ’s little face, feeling an immense amount of pride at being praised for my parenting skills. It meant a lot coming from Joe. Then again, he was always the first to praise me—not to mention the first to step in and back me up when Mam got a little overbearing.

My mind drifted back to the day I’d moved out and the epic showdown between my mother and my boyfriend...

“Who’s AJ’s mother here, Trish? You or Aoife? Because I’m sure as hell his father and, no offense, but I know for a fact, high or not, that I didn’t climb on top of you nine months ago.”

“Joey!”

“No, this overbearing grandmother shit has to stop,” my boyfriend interrupted, taking our sleeping son out of my mother’s arms and placing him back into mine—where he had been until Mam had snatched him off me. “We appreciate everything you’ve done for us. More than can be said. But Aoife’s his mam. And she’s a fucking brilliant mam.”

“I know she is—”

“Then let her be one, and stop undermining her,” he snapped, tossing my clothes into black bin liners. “Stop interfering and making her question everything she does for the kid,

because she can do this.”

“*Am I undermining you, Aoife?*” Mam asked, turning her attention to me. “*Do you feel the same way as Joey?*”

“*Uh...*” Yes, absolutely. *I cleared my throat and shrugged. “Maybe a tad.”*

Joey cut me a look that said “coward” before turning his attention back to my mother. “You know I’m mad about ya, Trish. You’re like a second mother to me,” he tried again. “And there’s no one else I would trust to mind our son, but it’s the little comments directed at Aoife and the constant running commentary when she’s looking after our son that has to stop.” Unrolling another bin liner from the pack, he shook it open and continued to empty my wardrobe. “I can take it because, quite frankly, I don’t give a shit what you think about my parenting, but Aoife does. It’s not doing any good for her confidence, so I need you to cut the motherly apron strings and let your daughter breathe...”

“Oh Jesus, your mother is here already,” Joey announced, dragging me back to the present as several enthusiastic knocks came from the other side of our little front door. “At half seven in the morning.”

“She’s excited,” I offered, swallowing down my laughter. “It’s her first day minding AJ.”

“Yeah.” Looking comically flustered, Joey pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

“She just wants to help me, Joe,” I tried again, resting my hand on his forearm. “Don’t be cranky.”

“I get that,” he agreed with a solemn nod. “But her version of helping you doesn’t always help *you*, Molloy.”

“And I get that,” I agreed right back before heading toward the porch. “But she’s doing a lot better lately, and besides, who else are we going to trust with AJ when we’re both at school?”

Joey leaned a hip against the kitchen counter and shrugged. “Edel offered.”

“Edel already has her hands full with your brothers.”

“I just don’t want anyone making you feel bad about yourself.”

“That’s really not what she’s trying to do, Joe,” I replied. “She loves me. Her version of loving me is trying to take away my worries.”

“By taking your kid.”

“Joe.” I batted my eyes at him, knowing that this argument could go on forever, and we didn’t have the time. “Please.”

“Fine.” Throwing his hands up in defeat, he shook his head and turned back to plating up the pancakes. “I won’t say another word on the matter.”

“Thank you.”

“Unless she starts taking over again,” he called after me. “And in that scenario, all bets are off.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I called back to him before opening the door and welcoming my mother inside.

* * *

Joey

Deep down inside, I knew I had lucked out in the mother-in-law department. Trish Molloy had a heart of gold. She had given birth to and raised the mother of my son and had forgiven me for my endless stream of misgivings against her daughter. Problem was, since AJ’s birth, the woman had been driving me batshit crazy. She constantly wanted to be overly involved in every miniscule detail of her daughter’s and grandson’s lives, which was a huge problem for me considering her involvement usually resulted in her daughter in tears.

Tony hadn’t changed one bit since AJ’s arrival. He was the same at work as he’d always been. In fact, our relationship had improved, if anything, but Trish? Yeah, she was getting on my last nerve.

Maybe it was because of how I was raised that I had such a problem with her lack of boundaries and incessant intrusiveness on my little family, or maybe Trish and Molloy’s relationship had always been this way and I had been too high to notice or care, but I was here now.

Clearheaded and present, and going out of my fucking mind.

According to Kay, this was normal behavior, and his own mother was just as heavily a meddler in his life, but since Edel had been nothing but respectful of my boundaries, and my own mother had been mentally absent for most of my life, I had nothing to compare this to.

Retreating upstairs to our bedroom for the sake of both my sanity and sobriety, I stalked into the shower in the adjoining ensuite bathroom, praying that the water could somehow burn the agitation out of me.

A few minutes later, Molloy hurried into the bathroom, looking flustered and panicked. “Joe!”

“What, Jesus, what?” I demanded, equally panicked, as I turned around to face her.
“You hurt?”

“It won’t tie!”

“Come again?” I asked, wiping the condensation from the glass so that I could see her.

“My skirt,” she cried dramatically, tossing a flimsy scrap of navy fabric on the sink.

“It won’t fucking tie, Joe!”

“What do you mean it won’t tie?”

“I mean, you ruined my body with your big dick and your son ruined my body with his big head and now I can’t fit into a size ten skirt!”

“A size ten?” I balked, repressing the urge to remind her that she had never been a size ten to begin with. My baby had always been a size twelve. I knew this because I had been dragged along on enough shopping trips over the years. “Molloy, you literally had a baby two months ago. The fuck were you thinking buying a skirt size that Shannon would struggle to fit into?”

“Oh, please. Shannon’s a size six.”

“Molloy!”

“I had this whole healthy eating and exercise plan with Casey to lose the baby weight before I started at Tommen.”

“And you did,” I replied, before quickly following it up with, “Not that you had anything to lose to begin with.” Clearing away the condensation once more, I took a slow appraisal of her body and blew out an impressed breath. “You look fucking amazing.”

“That’s it. It’s a sign.” She threw her hands up in defeat. “I’m not supposed to go back to school. I’ll stay home with AJ. That’s where I should be anyway, and I’ll miss him too much if I have to leave him all day. Besides, it’s not like I’m going to do wonders academically anyway. We both know that I’m no Kev.”

“Like hell you’re not going back.” Switching off the shower, I stepped out and grabbed a towel. “You’re going to school, Molloy.”

“Well, I can’t go now, can I?” she countered huffily. “Unless you want me to walk into Tommen with my bare ass on full display.”

“You can absolutely do that,” I replied, stalking towards her. “But just know that I won’t be around to sit with you in class because I’ll be too busy getting expelled for killing every bastard that ogles your ass.”

“Be serious.”

“I am,” I told her. “Now, give me your skirt and I’ll take it next door. I’m sure Edel can do something with it. Let it out an inch or whatever it needs.”

“Edel?”

“Yeah, she does clothes and shit, remember?”

“No, you don’t have to do that,” she mumbled, cheeks reddening. “I have one in a bigger size in the wardrobe.”

“Then what’s the problem, Molloy?” I demanded. “Because you’re not getting out of going to school, baby…”

“Look at this, Joe,” she cried, gesturing to the soft pouch of silvery, loose skin under her bellybutton. “I’m going to be the only girl at Tommen with a Joey pouch.”

I cocked a brow. “A Joey pouch?”

“Yeah,” she sniffled, nodding solemnly. “It’s my own personal version of a mummy tummy. Except it’s called a Joey pouch. You know”—she paused to choke back another dramatic sob—“because you put it there.”

Give me strength. “You listen to me.” Backing her up against the far wall of the bathroom, I tilted her chin up to look at me, while adjusting the towel around my hips to hide the solid semi I was sporting at the mere sight of her. “You are fucking gorgeous, Aoife Molloy.”

“Past tense.”

“Past, present, future tense,” I cut her off with a growl. “Infinity tense. There isn’t a girl at Tommen—or BCS, for that matter—who can hold a flame to you.”

“Joe, I just want to be me again,” she admitted with a sigh. “I want to be the me I used to be when you and I…you know.” Shaking her head, she released a heavy sigh and mumbled, “I just want to be like I was for you.”

So, that was it.

She thought I didn’t want her like before.

Because we hadn’t been intimate since…Jesus, since before my mother died.

“I want you,” I said gruffly, reaching down to cup her cheek. “Desperately.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You do?”

“At what point in time have I given you the impression that I’m not completely besotted with ya?”

My words were direct, straight to the point, and stunned her into a rare moment of silence. “You’re besotted with me?” she finally asked, fumbling over her words in a very un-Molloy-like way. “I just…it’s been over two months, and I thought since you haven’t tried

to—”

“If I could have been with you the second I got home from rehab, I would have,” I hurried to interject, needing to fix this before it grew into something that festered between us. Needing to give her my truth. “I wanted to. More than life. I *still* want to. Morning, noon, and night, Molloy.” Blowing out a frustrated breath, I said, “You’re the mother of my child, Molloy. You’re my best friend in the whole world. Christ, the only place I ever want to be is inside you.”

“Then why haven’t you, you know, initiated anything?”

“Because you were healing after giving birth,” I admitted honestly. “Because you’re still healing, and I won’t be my father.”

Her brows furrowed in confusion. “Your father?”

“I spent a lifetime listening to that man force himself into my mother’s body. At times, seeing it happen, too.” The words were a torn admission from somewhere deep within. Somewhere I didn’t like to visit often. “After Tadhg, he waited a few weeks for her to heal after giving birth, but after the rest of them, it was a matter of days or hours.”

“Oh my god.” She sucked in a sharp breath. “Joe...”

“So, the reason I haven’t initiated anything physical isn’t because I don’t want you, but because I won’t be him, Molloy,” I reaffirmed, both to her and myself. “And I won’t ever turn you into her.”

There was a long stretch of silence after that where no words were spoken between us. Instead, we just stood in the bathroom, eyes locked on each other as she absorbed my truth and I grounded myself in her presence.

“Tonight,” Molloy finally broke the silence by saying. “After AJ goes to sleep.” Reaching a hand up, she pushed my hair off my forehead before leaning in to press a kiss to my shoulder. “I’m ready.”

Instantly hard at the thought, but desperately trying to repress the carnal urge I had to take her against this wall, I swiped her hand up and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. “It’s a date.”

“Condoms, stud.”

“On it, queen.”