



Earn Me

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Description: On the day Viktor Biancardi disappears, four letters are delivered—

And four blood debts must be collected.

Their recipient: a mafia billionaire whose duty is to protect a girl who doesn't know she's a Biancardi...until death do them part.

My mafia billionaire ex-husband made one thing clear: if I want him back, I'll have to earn his forgiveness—one sinful command at a time.

Three years ago, I walked away from Keiran de Laigny. My parents told me he was cheating on me. I believed them.

I was wrong.

Now I know the truth—but the beautiful, possessive man who once cherished me doesn't just want an apology. He wants ownership.

He wants me on my knees, begging for a second chance. My pleasure? His to control. My heart? Already his to break.

But just when his touch starts to feel like love again, I uncover the real reason he brought me back:

This isn't about reconciliation.

It's revenge.

And he'll ruin me—body, mind, and soul—before he ever lets me go.

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Cadence

PRESENT TIME

I see him even before he sees me, and my heart jerks to a stop at the sight of him.

Tall and lethal like a swordsman.

Raven black hair and smoke-gray eyes.

Skin like golden ivory, and a presence so sexually potent it makes a girl's heart skip a beat just by being near him.

And mine still isn't any different, unfortunately.

You'd think after all this time, my heart would know better than to react to him.

AKA...

The love of my life.

The one who got away.

The man who once promised—

Oh my gosh, Cades, get a grip!

It's just him.

Just Keiran de Laigny.

And it's been three years, two months, and nineteen days since he walked out of my life.

Not that I've been counting.

I'm just, um, good with numbers.

And regrets.

Laughter spills from the dining room as I stare through the kitchen's two-way glass. He's seated with all the town's power players, and he looks so utterly at ease with them. No, scratch that. Keiran doesn't just look like he belongs. If anything, he looks as if he's their master, and everyone around him is simply there to either do his bidding or worship at his feet.

Stop it, Cades.

Stop looking at him.

Stop being pathetic.

My brain is near tears as it pleads with me, but I just can't seem to look away. Is it just me or have the chiseled angles of his face become more prominent over the years? Is it just me or does he look more cruel now, more intimidating, and somehow, more beautiful as well?

The girls at the next table giggle behind their wine glasses, but Keiran doesn't even

glance their way. Then again, that's how he's always been.

And now that I'm no longer the naïve wide-eyed girl he once married, I know that's how he will always be.

A one-man woman, even if his ruthless ways suggest otherwise.

Gemma bursts into the kitchen, eyebrows hiking in puzzlement. "Cades?"

This is usually the time I make my rounds and welcome old and new diners alike to my restaurant. It doesn't matter if they're rich or poor. If they're just ordering coffee or the most expensive items on our menu.

It's all about making everyone feel at home, the way I never got to feel welcomed and accepted in mine.

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And that's why Gemma's now looking at me in confusion, and all I can do is muster a smile.

"I need a minute."

Or two.

Or a thousand.

Gemma disappears back into the main dining hall, and a memory ambushes me as soon as I'm alone.

Keiran

THREE YEARS AGO

Fascinated.

That was the only word for how the women looked at Keiran de Laigny the moment he walked into Harbour Locke Country Club. One tried to play it cool with a sip from her drink, only to snort it up her nose, and end up being that month's meme with her coughing fit.

The men Keiran walked past also ended up staring, albeit with more bitterness than admiration. Keiran's tall, lethally powerful build was pure testosterone. Next to him, they were nothing but cholesterol in golf shirts.

Their reactions, however, meant nothing at all to Keiran.

He was here to do one thing, and the sooner he was done with it, the better.

Check on the girl. Get all bases covered. Leave.

That was the plan.

But when he slipped inside the library, and he saw Viktor Biancardi's half-sister about to fall off a step ladder—

What the hell?

His instincts kicked in even as his jaw clenched in disapproval. Having everything planned out - and never deviating from it was how he had always lived his life and defeated his enemies. So catching Viktor's little sister in his arms like this when they weren't even supposed to interact?

Not good.

And when he gazed down and saw the way she was stared up at him?

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Even worse.

Keiran gritted his teeth as he set her on her feet. "Be careful next time," he bit out before swiftly turning his back, not wanting to give her the chance to speak.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

There was a reason this girl was the adopted daughter of Marvin and Gail Quinn. And it was the same reason Viktor hadn't let her know she was a Biancardi. Viktor's world only meant death and darkness. And since that world was also where Keiran belonged, to be seen with him was a curse innocent girls like her didn't even deserve to know existed.

Do better, de Laigny!

Keiran had introduced himself to the club manager as the owner of a small carpentry business. It was a cover-up, of course, and he had offered the lowest bid for his services because he needed the quickest and safest access to the club.

His blood debt to Viktor Biancardi was like how all deals were made in their world.

A life for a life.

It was that simple.

And in their case, Viktor held the key to unmasking the people behind Onesimus' abduction.

In return, it would be Keiran's lifelong duty to take care of Cadence Quinn, and this included having secret cameras installed in her home, her school, and every place she frequented, including this posh little club where all the rich folks in their town enjoyed flaunting their newest clothes and toys.

Keiran gave his men a week to finish the job. But what he didn't realize was how by the end of that same week...he would also end up rescuing Cadence from disaster two fucking times more.

There was that day she had her nose stuck between the pages of another cookbook, and she was so intent on what she was reading that she didn't even realize she was about to walk straight into a wall...if not for Keiran seeing her from across the hallway and saving her cute little nose from a bloody fate.

And then there was the other time when she didn't see a wet spot on the floor, and it was Keiran again losing his cool as he sprinted like the next fucking Usain Bolt, and all so he could keep her from cracking her skull wide open.

Thank fuck his men were about to finish the job today...or this girl would kill him far more easily than his enemies ever had a chance to.

But just as Keiran was about to leave and walk out of her life for good—

Are you fucking kidding me?

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw a girl with shoulder-length caramel-colored hair balanced precariously on a flimsy-looking branch as she tried her best to reach for God knew what.

What the hell was wrong with this girl?

Keiran was tempted to just walk out then and there.

But then he saw the branch start to break——

Ah, fuck.

Cadence could only gulp when she once again found herself in the arms of the only man she had ever crushed on.

Keiran.

And as always, he looked absolutely furious with her as he dumped her back on her feet.

"Why can't you just fucking ask for help when you need to?" Keiran snarled.

"I—I'm s-sorry," Cadence stammered. "I didn't m-mean to——"

"Then stop trying to give me a heart attack, dammit!"

"I wasn't——"

"Then why do you keep getting into trouble whenever I'm around?" Keiran growled.

"Or is that your way of trying to catch my attention?"

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Cadence's face turned red when she realized what he was implying. "I...I..." She found herself taking a step back as her body started to shake. "I would n-never..."

Keiran realized two things as he watched her doe-like eyes slowly fill with tears.

The first truth that hit him? He had hurt her.

The second truth that hit him? He cared that he had hurt her because he wanted her.

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.

All Cadence wanted to do was flee, but no sooner had she turned around when he spun her back around, and she found herself gazing up into Keiran's eyes.

"Damn you."

The words should've hurt her. Scared her. But instead it made Cadence catch her breath because of how his voice had suddenly turned rough, and even in her innocence, there was no mistaking the desire in his eyes.

"I d-didn't mean to fall," she heard herself say unevenly. "I'm n-not lying——"

"I know."

Then why did he——

"I wish I could convince myself you're lying," Keiran bit out, "but I know you're not,

and that's what makes it hard for men like me to forget why we have to stay away."

Cadence swallowed hard. She knew she wasn't supposed to say this, but...

"What if I don't want you to stay away?"

One second, they were standing a few feet apart.

The next moment, she was pressed against a stone wall in the garden, hidden behind a curtain of hedges and flowering vines. Far from prying eyes. Far enough to hide what he was about to do to her.

His mouth crashed into hers.

It wasn't gentle.

It wasn't slow.

It was like a man on the edge of death, dragging her down with him.

Cadence moaned into his mouth, fingers clinging to his shirt even as he kissed her like he hated her for being so damn perfect.

Keiran's hand slid under her skirt, and a groan escaped him when he found her already wet for his touch.

Cadence bit her lip to keep from making a sound, but then his fingers stroked her again, deeper, slower, and her knees buckled.

"K-Keiran—"

He clamped his hand over her mouth, his voice like gravel against her skin. “Don’t. Say. My name.”

Her body trembled as his fingers found the sensitive nub at the center of her, circling, pressing, teasing.

She whimpered behind his hand, and Keiran could only clench his jaw as the sound had him throbbing more painfully behind his pants.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he growled. “No idea how close I am to ruining everything.”

He slid two fingers inside her, and she gasped against his palm.

“Shh,” he whispered, his mouth brushing her temple. “It’s okay. I’m just giving you what we both want. And you want this, don’t you?”

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His Cadence nodded frantically, her breathing coming out in cute little gasps, her sweet hips already starting to move with his rhythm.

“That’s it,” Keiran urged. “Just like that. Take what I give you.”

Her hands reached back, clinging to his thighs as her body started to shake.

“I can feel it,” he murmured. “You’re close. You’re so fucking close.”

Her muffled moan was his undoing.

Keiran pressed his palm tighter against her mouth, his fingers working her relentlessly as she came—hard, shaking, helpless. Her body clamped around him, her moans swallowed by his hand as she slumped against the wall, spent.

An eternity seemed to pass before Cadence was able to find the strength to look up, and her chest squeezed when she saw his hooded gaze.

"W-What now?" The words came out in a tremulous whisper. "Are you going to pretend nothing happened between us?"

"No." His lips tightened. "I'm going to pretend I won't do it again."

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

Memories of our past blur, and I'm not even surprised to find my cheeks wet with tears. Just a week after our first kiss, we'd eloped. Two months after that, and my father had destroyed our marriage with his poisoned whispers.

Of course he's after your money, you idiot!

Do you really think a man like him would want you for anything else?

You said it yourself—he's gone every night, and he never tells you where he's going? Wake up, for fuck's sake!

I remember begging Keiran to explain.

But he had been so proud.

Too proud.

When all I could do was cry, he hadn't even waited for me to speak.

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He had just...walked out.

On me.

Our marriage.

And the life we'd built.

My heart's been in pieces since then, and it had shattered even more when a couple of months ago I found out - completely by accident - that my father had lied.

Keiran had never cheated on me. Instead, it was Keiran who had caught my father having an affair with his secretary...and Marvin selfishly deciding to destroy my marriage to keep Keiran from ruining his.

What's done is done, Cades.

There's no going back from the past, and I quickly wipe my tears away with the back of my hand. There's still work to do, and—

SHOOT!

My heart nearly leaps out of my chest when I see my ex-husband inside my kitchen, and looking far too handsome for my mind, heart, and body to bear.

Oh...no.

My fingers dig into my palms as I fight against the urge to fidget.

Distract yourself, Cades!

Distract yourself!

And so the first thing I blurt out is—

"I've had my hair cut."

—something so idiotically obvious, I am seriously questioning if even I have a functioning brain at this point,aaargh!

"I did notice that, yes."

His words draw out memories I once thought were long buried.

Oh cripes.

And I suddenly find myself remembering how he used to love gripping my hair while I pleased him with my mouth.

Cripes, cripes, cripes!

Why am I remembering things that are making my stomach clench with need? Mortification fills me even as desire makes me shift on my feet. My gaze flies back to him guiltily, and that's when I see his nostrils flare.

Oh no.

Why do I have this bad feeling he knows exactly what I'm trying my best not to think

of?

And when I see his gaze narrows—

Crap.

I'm absolutely certain now.

He knows I still want him, and it's why my heart breaks when he starts to turn away.

Keiran knows how I feel.

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But he's still going to leave me.

I know I told myself that there's no going back from the past, but instead I still hear myself whisper his name.

Keiran.

He stiffens, but he still doesn't turn my way.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," I choke out.

A part of me is already convinced this won't change anything.

But it does.

Because the next thing I know, he's suddenly standing right in front of me, his strong fingers cupping my chin as he makes me look up...so I can see the unforgiving darkness in his gaze.

"Are you saying this because I'm a lot richer now?"

Hurt lashes my heart at his words, but I tell myself I deserve such a question, and all I can do is shake my head.

"Then what exactly are you saying, Cadence?"

My heart hammers in my chest. "Just s-sorry—"

"And that's it?"

What else does he want me to say?

"Because this is the only chance I'm giving you to tell me what you want."

My mouth dries when I realize what he's asking for.

"I won't ask you again after this."

And it's something that I've long given up on—

Because he once told me he was never the type to give second chances.

To anyone.

Agonizing fear and excruciating hope war inside of me. But as soon as I see Keiran straighten off the wall as if preparing to leave, my world threatens to crumble, and one thing becomes painstakingly clear.

I can't lose him again.

And that's when I hear myself whisper, "Please take me back."

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Cadence

PRESENT TIME

Quinn Enterprises Under Federal Investigation

It's become my habit in the past week to check the news as soon as I wake up, and I'm not surprised to find all the local papers - whether it's Harbour Locke Daily or Connecticut Today - still talking about my father's downfall.

That's just how the world works,I reflect absently to myself while looking at my wardrobe. Misery loves company, and most people have a tendency to feel better when they see others have it worse. It's just how the world works—

"Not that one."

—while what clearly isn't working at all is our building security, which has me clumsily spinning around and gaping at the sight of Keiran leaning against the doorframe like it's the most natural thing in the world to be in my bedroom at 6 a.m. uninvited.

“H-How did you—”

"I own this building."

What?

"And while we're being honest, I'm also the one behind DL Venture Capital."

No wonder my rent here is so unbelievably cheap.

And when I remember how I cried in relief after receiving DL Venture Capital's offer to bankroll my restaurant startup...

The blouse I'm clutching falls from my fingers, and I fall back down on the edge of my bed when my knees threaten to fold. I used to feel proud about finding a way to free myself from my parents' control and do things on my own. But am I really as independent as I thought I was...if Keiran had been pulling the strings from behind all along?

"Aren't you going to tell me I'm lying?"

I shake my head. Keiran doesn't lie. I had to learn that the hard way. But one thing I still don't understand?

"Why?" Why go through all those lengths to help me?

"Because you're my responsibility," he answers curtly.

He's basically saying he no longer loves me.

Right?

Questions race through my mind, but I'm scared to ask any of them.

Everything's happening so, so fast.

Just like before.

"Did you mean what you said last night?"

Please take me back.

My head jerks up at the question. "Yes." Because if there's one other thing I've learned from the past three years, it's how much I love him, and how that will never change.

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"And are you willing to do anything to make it happen?"

"Yes."

"Then you can start by working for me——"

As what?

"—if you want to earn me back." He walks to my wardrobe and skims through my clothes with a cursory glance. "This." A black pencil skirt. "And this." A pearly white silk blouse.

He lays the outfit he's selected on the bed then produces a garment bag I only notice just now. "Just bring this with you. I'll let you know when I need you to wear it." Keiran checks his watch, and I recognize the model since it's the one my father has always wanted...but never could afford. "You have fifteen minutes."

"Where are we——"

"Fourteen now."

"But——"

"Do you want me to help you shower?"

Yes!

Oh yes!

I mean, no....not yet?

Keiran

HIS CADENCE WAS STILLthe same.

And he hated it.

He hated that he still thought of her as his.

Hated how she still made him feel all the things she used to make him feel...despite choosing her parents over him.

He had seen in her eyes how she had almost taken him up on his suggestion.

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Almost.

And he hated that, too.

Why the hell did she still have no sense of self-preservation until now? She was always so damn honest. He just fucking wished she had it in her to realize that he was no liar either. Because they would still be together if she had, and then there would be no need for him to hate himself...the way he was hating himself now for still wanting her.

So fucking bad.

To the point that he just fucking couldn't make himself turn away the moment he realized she hadn't completely closed her bathroom door.

The tiny crack was enough to afford him a glimpse of her bare breasts as she undressed—

Fuck.

And Keiran was harder than a rock in an instant. Harder than he'd been in the past three years actually, and he hated her for that as well.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He knew he should stop staring.

But he couldn't.

And the only reason he was finally able to turn away was when he felt his phone start buzzing in his pocket.

The message was from Giancarlo Marchetti, asking to meet with him.

Giancarlo was the eldest grandson of La Strega, the matriarch of the Marchettis, who was New England's most powerful famiglia.

More importantly than that, however...

Giancarlo was also Viktor Biancardi's former best friend.

And if rumors were to be believed—

He was the last person to see Biancardi alive before his disappearance.

Cadence

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KEIRAN'S CHAUFFEUR is an older man in his early sixties. He introduces himself cheerfully as Onesimus and tells me to ignore Keiran's bad mood while handing me my coffee with a grin.

Easier said than done, since the one and only time I saw Keiran this grim was that awful day my father had made me believe his lies.

We don't speak for the rest of the ride, which thankfully lasts only for ten minutes. We arrive at a huge construction site, and my eyes widen when I realize what's being built. A hotel? Is this what made Keiran impossibly wealthy in just three years? His carpentry business has somehow turned into a real estate empire?

He leads me inside a modular office that offers views of huge cranes working in the distance and men in hard hats assembled like platoons for morning inspection.

"Take a seat, Cadence."

I do as asked and struggle not to fidget as he leans against his desk. "Have you figured out what your job is?"

I shake my head.

"Take a guess."

"Your secretary?"

"No."

"PA?"

"No."

I slowly shake my head. "I'm not sure——"

"My mistress."

I'm about to laugh nervously but stop when he only stares at me unsmilingly.

"Which means you'll be living with me and keeping me company wherever I go."

Oh.

Okay.

I feel like I should be shocked and hurt and humiliated.

So why are the butterflies inside my stomach flapping their wings excitedly instead?

"Do you have anything to say?"

I shake my head.

"If you give up just once, I'll let you go. But that means it's completely over between us. For good."

"I understand."

"People will start talking sooner or later."

As expected, with my father's financial problems...

"And when they do——" Keiran's handsome face hardens. "It will be just like before. No one can know we're married."

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Keiran

THREE YEARS AGO

She was still in her dress when he carried her over the threshold of his modest two-bedroom apartment.

It wasn't what she deserved.

The couch was secondhand, the lighting too dim, and the place still smelled faintly of sawdust from his last project. She didn't seem to notice. But Keiran did. He wanted to give her chandeliers. Marble floors. A damn penthouse with her name on every deed.

And he would do so.

One day.

He would give her all of those things and more...once it was safe.

But until then...

All Keiran could do was hold his wife in a tight embrace as the innocence of her smile cleansed his soul.

"I can't believe we're married," she whispered, eyes wide and awestruck.

Neither can I, Keiran thought.

She slowly reached up to touch his cheek. "And this. I can't believe I can touch you——"

His kiss cut her off, with the sweetness of her words once again his undoing. Her lips parted under his without hesitation, her breath audibly catching as she felt him unzip her dress from behind.

It was a simple little thing, a silk sheath that followed her every curve. She had made an exquisite bride in it earlier, but just like this damn house, their hurried wedding ceremony was far from what his Cadence deserved.

One day, Keiran swore to himself. One day he would give her everything. But for now, all he could do was this.

A night solely dedicated to his wife's pleasure, and it began the moment Keiran gently laid her down on his bed.

He took his time even as desire raged inside of him. Worshipped every inch of her soft, tender skin with his lips. Ran his fingertips over her sensitive flesh like she was as precious and fragile as porcelain. Lavished attention on the pink buds of her breasts until he had her whimpering and writhing helplessly under his rigid form.

Only then did he enter her, his throbbing shaft piercing the flimsy barrier of her virginity, his mouth swallowing her gasp of shock as her body arched against his.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as he started to move. Her hips meeting his every thrust as he increased his pace.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Never had he been possessive towards any woman...until her.

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His Cadence was the only one for him.

She was his everything.

And when her dazed eyes lifted up to his—

Yours.

I'm yours.

Always.

What little of his control was left snapped, and Keiran surged into her with only one thought in mind.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

He pounded into her harder and harder. Faster and faster. And so damn deep that he reached all the way to her womb—

"Keiran!"

She sobbed his name out as she started to come, and he was right behind her, the

sound of his name on her lips causing his big, hard body to stiffen just before orgasm took over, and he was filling her with his seed in powerful bursts.

His wife curled against his chest, and Keiran could not remember anyone making him feel this tender...and vulnerable.

"I love you."

She mumbled the words as her eyes drifted shut.

But just as he was about to whisper the words back, it was then he heard something.

And he knew then and there they were not alone.

Keiran waited for his wife's breathing to become slow and even before carefully slipping out of bed and arming himself.

Across his house stood a woman who looked glaringly out of place in his middle-income neighborhood with her cropped top, tattooed belly, and a leather miniskirt that could easily pass as her underwear.

He had never seen her before this, but when she saw him walking towards her, the woman's expression turned to one of longing.

Ah.

Rule #1 for concocting cover-up stories: keep it simple, stupid.

And was there any easier kissthan an affair between two people?

She handed him a phone without a word, and Keiran took it.

"What game are you playing at?" Viktor's tone was cold.

"I'm in love with your sister."

"Fuck you."

"I'll protect her with my life——"

"You mean you'll try. Because you can also fail, just like you failed in protecting the old man who raised you like a son."

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Keiran's hand tightened around the phone. "I learn from my mistakes."

"We'll see."

Viktor hung up, and Keiran handed the phone back to the woman.

"Any instructions from the boss?" she asked.

"None——"

Fuck!

The woman had caught him off guard as she managed to land a kiss on his mouth.

"You know how this works," the woman said with a shrug. "No one can know who she is...or who sent me."

Damn her. Damn Viktor. And damn this world they were all born to.

Keiran took a shower and brushed his teeth thrice before he felt marginally better about slipping back into bed and pulling his wife into his arms.

"Where have you been?" she whispered.

"I thought I heard a noise in the living room. Nothing to worry about." He kissed the top of her head. "Go back to sleep."

He closed his eyes as well as he said this, and it was why he didn't see the way his wife's face turn ashen...because she had seen him through the bedroom window earlier.

Talking to a woman across his house.

And that woman kissing her husband like she had a right to.

She had seen him do all of these things, and that was why she no longer knew what to think...at the way he so had just lied to her so, so easily.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

The drive to the meeting is spent in silence. Again.

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I think there was one point that Onesimus looks as if he's dying to speak, badly.

And he's not the only one, to be honest.

I want to talk about the past. I want to ask for his forgiveness. But the moment either Onesimus or I open our mouth, Keiran gives us a look, and we both shut up.

Our shared master wins again, 2-0.

Heads turn as soon as our limo cruises to a stop...at my own restaurant?

Seriously?

Gemma rushes to me, whispering, I thought you said you couldn't come to work.

I thought so, too, but obviously not, and so all I can do is smile weakly. "It's complicated."

I follow Keiran inside our largest function room. Everyone on the table is a familiar face, and all eyes are on Keiran, then me.

He makes no explanation of my presence, only taking a seat on the head of the table before causing multiple jaws to drop as he calmly asks me to sit on his lap.

When he said he wants me to earn him back, he clearly wasn't joking.

I meet his gaze and say cheerfully, "Don't mind if I do."

Three years ago, I hurt my husband by letting other people's words get between us.

Never again.

Keiran says nothing as I take a seat on his lap, but his arm curves around my waist as soon as I do. He then makes a slight gesture with his hand, and it's as if everyone's bottoms are on fire.

His VPs start talking. Fast. I do my best to listen, but he's hard. I mean, it's hard. Because of, well, that. It's really, really hard, and twitching just as hard.

Is it just me or do I need to call someone to check if our AC is working?

"We've gone through the updates," a woman in a blazer is reporting nervously. "Our only concern is the zoning on the west lot. The original environmental study flagged potential traffic overflow."

"And your proposed solution?" Keiran asks.

An idea occurs to me, and I start typing on my phone. My dad used to get me involved in planning corporate events, and I had really enjoyed the logistic side of it. I'm guessing, for Keiran's upcoming hotel, we could have a private shuttle for guests and event staff. We could also plan a re-routing for a secondary drop-off—

Keiran swipes my phone from my hand, and my cheeks turn red as I listen to him share the suggestions I've jotted down in a silky tone.

Eep!

I'm about to apologize for being so presumptuous...when everyone on the table suddenly starts speaking at the same time, thanking and praising me for my input

with looks of visible relief on their faces.

Huh.

Were my suggestions really worth considering—or were they just happy for me to be a distraction that effectively got Keiran off their backs?

The meeting rolls on. Keiran asks me point blank at certain points, and I end up answering two more questions and correcting one minor error in a materials report.

By the time the meeting ends, everyone is officially confused, and even I'm not sure what just happened. Did I somehow misjudge him? Isn't me being his mistress Keiran's way to punish me for the past? So why give me a chance to demonstrate I'm not as brainless as most people may have assumed?

Another wave of his hand has everyone quickly saying goodbye and thanking Keiran and me for our time. But when I try to stand up—

"Not so fast."

His hands settle on my waist, and before I can blink, I'm no longer on his lap—I'm seated on the edge of the table, legs dangling, Keiran standing between them.

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“You did very well today, Cadence.”

My heart pounds as his fingers press lightly against my inner thighs.

“But it’s not enough.”

I forget how to breathe at his words, and my senses reel as his hands slide higher—slow, steady.

"I want you to touch yourself."

My eyes widen.

"W-What?"

His expression doesn’t change.

"You heard me.”

"But—here?”

He takes his seat like he's about to get a show.

Gulp.

"Have you changed your mind about wanting to earn me back?"

I start to shake my head, but he cuts me off.

"Then prove it."

My fingers tremble as I reach beneath my skirt. Heat rushes through me before I even find what I'm looking for.

Keiran's eyes never leave mine. He doesn't speak. Doesn't move.

Just watches as I touch myself.

Tentatively at first. Then with more confidence when I see the way his gaze tracks every movement.

I want him to tell me I'm doing good.

I want him to touch me himself.

But Keiran remains frustratingly silent and still, his gaze hooded.

My breath turns into short little gasps as I get close.

So close.

But just as I'm about to fall over that edge, Keiran's fingers suddenly close around my wrist.

"Stop."

My entire body freezes.

“You don’t get to come until I say so,” he says curtly.

Did he j-just say what I thought he said?

"Do you understand?"

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I want to shake my head. Tell him this is too much. But when I catch a glimpse of something sharp, vulnerable, and furious in the smoky-gray depths of his gaze—

Oh Keiran.

It's been three years, but for both of us, it still feels like yesterday that I had chosen my parents over him, and he had walked out on our marriage.

And that's why he wants to hurt me.

Because he's hurting.

And he will never stop hurting me...even if it means hurting himself in the process.

Keiran

THREE YEARS AGO

She was wearing his hoodie. Again.

The sleeves were too long, the hood too big, and she looked like something he should've locked away from the world.

Keiran watched her tiptoe barefoot across the marble floor, muttering to herself while holding a giant mixing bowl like it could explode at any moment. Her hair was piled messily on top of her head, a few caramel strands escaping to frame her face. She had a smudge of flour on her cheek, and he found himself staring at it, wondering when

this – her – had become so fucking important to him.

"You're going to make a mess," he warned, stepping into the kitchen.

Cadence turned. "I measured this time."

"Last time, the flour exploded."

"That was your fault," she said piously. "You startled me."

Her eyes lit up despite her accusation, and that thing in his chest twisted again – that uncomfortable, unwelcome feeling that made him want to simultaneously shield her from the world and show her every dark corner of it.

He crossed the room slowly, until her back was pressed against the counter.

"And if I do it again?"

His wife gasped when he reached past her to take the bowl. "Keiran!"

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"Hmm?" He set it aside.

"You're ruining the batter—"

He kissed her, and the way she melted instantly in his arms...

Fuck.

That was what always got to him.

Her complete and instant surrender, with the way Cadence's fingers were now clutching his shirt as her hips arched eagerly toward him.

"I w-was trying to bake," his Cadence gasped when he moved to her neck.

"You're sweet enough."

Keiran's heart clenched as he felt her smile against his skin. He'd never known what peace felt like before her. Never expected to find it in a girl who baked cookies at midnight and tripped over her own feet when she saw him without a shirt.

He lifted her onto the counter, slid between her thighs, and kissed her until her laughter turned to gasps.

She was soft. Willing. And deliciously bare and irresistibly wet under the hoodie.

"No underwear, Mrs. de Laigny?" he purred against her ear.

His Cadence's blush deepened, but her eyes held his without shame. "I was waiting for you to come home."

Ah, fuck.

His wife killed him every time she said things like that.

"Do you know what you do to me?" Keiran growled.

His Cadence shook her head, eyes wide with that intoxicating mix of desire and innocence.

"You make me forget, Cadence. Every damn time," he gritted out while pushing the hoodie higher.

"F-Forget what?"

That I don't deserve you.

That being with you is a mistake.

That if I ever lose you, it's for the better.

All of it was the truth.

But because he was a selfish bastard who could no longer imagine a life without her—

I love you.

And this, too, was true.

He loved her to the point of madness. And it was this madness that could no longer be satisfied. Madness that kept him from reaching the bedroom.

It was madness that had him sweeping everything off the counter so he could take her on the kitchen counter. Her legs hooked over his broad shoulders as he pleased her with his mouth. His tongue. And later on, with his fingers pinching her nub to make his wife come so, so hard that she would eventually pass out in his arms.

Mine.

Mine.

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You're mine, Cadence.

And at that time, Keiran had believed it would always be so.

But he was wrong.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

I finally know what's inside the garment bag Keiran handed me earlier.

Because it's what I'm wearing now, and it's what has me pacing back and forth for the past five minutes.

He really wants me to wear this. Seriously?

The powder room in my restaurant has a full-length mirror, and my reflection on it has me alternately cringing and wincing.

This is just...this is just not enough to cover a human being, for crap's sake!

A red shimmery slip of a dress with spaghetti-thin straps, a deep V neckline that dips dangerously low, and a thigh-high slit on one side that makes me feel like I'm one wrong move away from a wardrobe malfunction.

Oh, let's just get it over with, Cades!

I march out of the room with my chin held high...and my entire staff does their best to snort back their laughter. Most supportive team ever? NOT.

"Knock them dead, boss," Gemma calls out from the corner.

Not if I die first, argh!

"But not Grant! I really think he'd die if he sees you in that."

Cripes!

I trip over my feet at the mention of Grant's name, but unlike before—

Keiran isn't there to catch me, and I end up flailing my arms for several long seconds before finally managing to grab the back of a chair to keep myself from falling. Phew. I almost thought I'd end up kissing—

"Let's get moving."

Keiran's already walked out of my restaurant by the time I recover, and Gemma rushes toward me with a guilty look on her face. "I was just joking, I'm sorry." She looks at me nervously. "Did I make your new boyfriend mad?"

"It's fine. He's not mad."

"And the bit about him being your new boyfriend?"

I shake my head, and Gemma's eyes widen. "But the others said—"

Onesimus suddenly shows up, saying wryly, "He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Oh, right, crap.

"Text me if there's any emergencies," I call out to Gemma even as I follow behind Keiran's chauffeur in a hurry. Once inside the limo, I turn to Keiran, intent on apologizing for making him wait—

Gulp.

His handsome face looks as if it's carved from stone.

"You're still in touch with Poorly then."

Poorly?

Who's—oh.

I clear my throat. "Grant's last name is Porely—"

"That's not an answer to my question."

Oh, right, um...

I know I have nothing to feel nervous or guilty about, but that's exactly what his cold gray eyes is making me feel.

"He and Dad are business partners."

"Of course."

Is that...innuendo I'm hearing?

"But we're just friends."

"And does he think that, too?"

Keiran's mocking tone throws me off for a loop. Is he accusing me of being a flirt? Or am I allowed to think that Keiran is feelingjealous furiousaffected over hearing Gemma talk about another man?

"Uh..."

"If you need time to think about what to say, then that's all the answer I need."

My eyes widen. "No, that's n-not—"

Oh.

I'm no longer able to speak when I realize we've already reached our own destination.

Harbour Locke Country Club.

My stunned gaze flies to him, but Keiran's expression reveals nothing.

Why?

Why bring us back here of all places?

What is he planning?

Keiran

THREE YEARS AGO

The pretentious laughter of Harbour Locke's wealthiest residents filled the dining room, but Keiran only had eyes for his wife. Cadence sat beside him, looking almost tragically beautiful in her luminous blue dress.

She looked as if she was about to shatter any moment, and it was all because of her half-drunk father, who had spent the past forty minutes doing his best to make Keiran feel humiliated.

"So there he was, fixing the cabinets in the club's old warehouse—you should've seen the dust all over him—and he has the audacity to ask about my daughter!" Marvin chuckled, swirling his expensive wine. "Can you imagine? The help thinking he had a chance with my daughter?"

Keiran didn't flinch. Let the bastard think what he wanted. But what pissed him off was how Cadence looked close to tears, her hands twisting nervously under the table, caught between loyalty to her father and her secret husband.

What kind of father was so willing to hurt his daughter just to put another man in his place?

"Dad, please," Cadence whispered.

"Oh, I'm just teasing," Marvin said with a dismissive wave. "Besides, I'm sure Keiran knows his place now, don't you, son?"

Keiran's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Absolutely, sir."

His place was beside Cadence, whether her father liked it or not. But for her sake, he'd play along with this charade a while longer. His hunt for Onesimus' abductors was coming to an end. He could feel it in his bones. And once that was done...

Marvin would be the first to have the pleasure of being acquainted with who Keiran truly was.

As they walked out of the club later that evening, Keiran noticed Grant-Whatever-His-Last-Name-Was eyeing Cadence like she was a prize he'd been denied. Marvin had made no secret of his preference for Grant as a son-in-law, and when Keiran and Cadence had told them the truth about their marriage, Marvin had demanded they keep it a secret if they wanted his blessing.

'I need time to accept this' was how Cadence's father had put it, which of course Cadence had believed to be true.

But it wasn't.

Because even to this day, Marvin was still shamelessly feeding Grant's hopes about eventually winning over Cadence's heart. And the time he asked for was time for Marvin to figure out how to tear Keiran and his daughter apart.

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Jealous rage simmered in Keiran's blood as he watched Marvin jovially throw one arm around his daughter's shoulders and another one over Grant's...before pulling the two close for a group hug that also happened to cause Cadence's body to press closely against the other man's.

Damn him.

Keiran had seen enough. But just as he was about to give both Marvin and Grant a taste of reality, and have them fucking enjoy a glimpse of the monster inside of him—

We found him.

It was a text from Viktor's messenger, and tension gripped Keiran's frame.

Finally.

He pulled Cadence to the side, saying quietly, "I'm sorry about this, but do you think you can sleep over at your parents' place for now?"

"I...I could, but...why?"

"Just some business to attend to."

A weak laugh escaped her. "At ten in the evening?"

He kissed her forehead, thinking she was just being cute. "I'll make it up to you, I

promise." With his mind already on what could possibly be his last mission before he could safely reveal the truth to his wife, Keiran missed the devastated look on his wife's face as she watched him drive away.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

I'm no longer seated on Keiran's lap, but everyone is still staring. No surprise since it's obvious that the other members definitely remember my dad treating Keiran as just the hired help when we were "dating" years ago.

Michael Preston and his son James are with us. Michael, a former business partner of my dad, looks uncomfortable seeing me with Keiran. And James? Well, he's about my age and struggling not to stare at me in this barely-there red dress.

"Cadence," Michael says carefully, "are you here to represent your father's interests?"

Before Keiran can answer, I say cheerfully, "I'm just here as Keiran's lunch date."

"Oh." The weight of that single syllable is crushing. Everyone at the table seems to reach the same conclusion simultaneously: I'm selling myself to Keiran because my dad is bankrupt.

As Michael and Keiran talk business, James leans closer to me, his voice low. "So, does this mean Grant is out of the picture?"

Oh no.

I glance nervously at Keiran, but he's still deep in conversation with Michael.

Phew.

"We were never a thing," I whisper to James. "That was just all my dad's wishful thinking." I'm hoping that would be the end of it, but James proves surprisingly persistent, and he comes up to me just as we're all about to walk out.

"So..." James' gaze darts between Keiran and me. "Does this mean you two are exclusive?"

Since I'm supposed to be Keiran's mistress, I say right away, "No—"

"Yes," Keiran says at the same time.

And that's when I realize I'm about to die if I don't figure out a way to dig myself out of this.

"No," I say again with the brightest smile I could muster. "No, as in no, you're not mistaken."

James stares at me, confused. Keiran's expression doesn't change, but the temperature around us seems to drop several degrees.

Oh, I'm so dead.

When we get inside the limo, the privacy window slides up with a soft mechanical whir.

Oh no.

"Get on your knees."

I freeze.

He doesn't raise his voice. Doesn't even look at me when he says it, his gaze fixed on the tinted window as the car pulls away from the curb.

"If t-this is about Grant—"

"This is about reminding you who you belong to."

Um, doesn't that mean the same—

"Now."

His savage tone makes me forget everything else. My hands move before my brain can stop them. I sink to the floor of the car, heart pounding as I reach for him.

His hand settles in my hair—not yanking, not guiding. Just... holding.

His other hand unfastens his belt. Moves with infuriating patience.

I don't rush.

Not because I'm teasing. But because I want this to matter.

Because I remember the way he used to look at me. Like I was the only thing in the world he wanted.

And even if this is just a way to mark me—to control me—I want it.

I open my mouth.

He groans, low and rough, as I take him in. One hand tightening in my hair, the other curling against the window behind him.

The car turns. I shift with it, my hands steady on his thighs.

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His breath catches when I hollow my cheeks.

And when I glance up and see his jaw clenched, his eyes dark and locked on me—I feel it again.

Not just lust.

Possession.

Desperation.

Need.

He comes with a harsh exhale, fingers fisting my hair, his hips stuttering.

I swallow everything.

When I sit back, flushed and breathless, he tucks himself back in like nothing happened. Straightens his cuffs. Adjusts his tie.

Then he looks at me when it's all over, his gaze burning into mine.

"Now it's your turn."

A gasp escapes me.

"Touch yourself."

I can't help it—having him watch me turns me on, makes heat pool between my thighs. My hand slips under the slit of my dress, finding the wetness there.

The car cruises to a stop in front of his apartment building.

"Come for me now."

My body obeys, just like it always has where he's concerned. My back arches, a soft cry escaping my lips as pleasure washes over me.

When it's all over, he helps me fix my dress but doesn't allow me to fix anything else. I follow him out, all eyes on us, and they know exactly what we've been up to.

And the strangest part? I don't even care. Because for the first time in three years, I felt like I belonged to him again.

Even if it's only for show.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

Keiran's penthouse apartment is just like his watch.

It's everything my father would have loved to own, but it's also something he was never able to afford.

I run my fingers along the cool marble countertop, taking in the floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the Boston skyline like an expensive painting. Even the air smells expensive here—some subtle masculine scent that isn't quite cologne but distinctly Keiran.

But seriously, though.

How did my ex-husband get this rich in three years?

A part of me wonders if this is all ill-gotten wealth. But then there's also the possibility he's won the lottery. Or maybe he married someone really rich and really, really old?

"Everything alright?"

I try not to look guilty as Keiran's cool tone has me spinning around to meet his gaze. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, his white shirt rolled up at the sleeves revealing forearms corded with muscle. His dark hair is slightly damp,

like he's just stepped out of the shower.

"Yup." There is absolutely no way I am going to tell him I find his lifestyle a little too good to be true. My heart still hasn't fully recovered from the last time I showed any kind of distrust.

Smoky-gray eyes narrow at me. "Are you sure?"

I fidget with the hem of my blouse, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. "It's my parents," I hear myself lie, and with far greater ease than I expected myself to manage. When you've recovered the most important thing you've lost, it can make you desperate enough to do the impossible, apparently.

"I haven't been able to contact them since last night."

And in this case, it's this newfound skill in telling little white lies without fidgeting.

"You can always visit them," Keiran suggests. He moves into the kitchen with the silent grace of a predator, reaching past me for a glass. His proximity makes my pulse quicken.

I shake my head, a few strands of hair falling across my face. "They're not in town. The press has been hounding them nonstop since news of Dad's problems broke."

"And you?" Keiran questions silkily, pouring water from a crystal pitcher. "Did your parents remember to include you in the equation?"

My fingers curl around the edge of the counter. "I'm not a child—"

"But you are still their daughter. And that makes you a target as well." His voice is casual, but his knuckles are white around the glass.

"I can handle myself." I lift my chin, trying to project confidence I barely feel.

"Or you're just not willing to face the truth about your parents." His gaze is unrelenting, picking me apart.

And there it was again, I can't help thinking.

I should've known it would come to this.

Keiran and I were only married for two months, but it was enough time for him to form extremely strong opinions about my parents.

The kind that hurt me dreadfully.

And when no amount of pleading could convince him to at least pretend he liked them——

There were nights that I had opted to sleep in the guestroom just to make my point.

God, I was so immature back then.

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Memories of how childish I had acted during our marriage make me wince, and I think...I think it's time I owned up to that.

"Keiran?" My voice comes out softer than I intended.

Smoky gray eyes turn to me. Cool. Assessing. Unyielding. The late afternoon light from the windows casts half his face in shadow.

"I'm sorry." The words feel inadequate on my tongue.

"For what?" He sets his glass down with deliberate care.

"For making you feel like my parents were more important." I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the warmth of the apartment.

"They were." His tone is flat, final.

I can see he really believes this, and it hurts. The ache settles beneath my ribs, familiar and sharp.

"We've never talked about it," I hear myself say unevenly, "but I was seven when they adopted me. Since then, they made me feel like I had to earn their love. And their approval. So, my whole life, since becoming a Quinn, that was all I wanted. And that was why...when I married you——"

"It turned out to be the biggest mistake of your life?" Keiran asks mockingly. He moves closer, close enough that I can smell his soap, see the tiny scar near his temple

I used to trace with my fingertip.

I slowly shake my head, my eyes never leaving his. "Marrying you was the only time I disobeyed my parents. And I just felt so guilty over that I just wanted to make it up to them. They've given me everything——"

"Stop lying to yourself," Keiran bites out. His jaw tightens, a muscle jumping beneath the skin. "They didn't give you anything."

"Keiran——" I reach for him instinctively, my fingers stopping just short of touching his arm.

"If they really gave you everything, then why did they make you feel like you had to pay them back?"

My lips part, but no words come out. I feel like I've been struck, not with violence but with truth.

I really thought I had it all figured out by now.

But just like before——

Keiran is always the one to open my eyes to the truth, no matter how uncomfortable.

"You're right," I hear myself whisper. "You're absolutely right." My heart shatters at each word, but it's the reality I have to face. "My parents did make me feel like I owed it to them to be the perfect daughter, and that's why marrying you made me feel so guilty."

"If it's any comfort," Keiran says tauntingly, "I'm sure they'll be singing a different tune this time, now that I'm no longer a pauper——"

I'm shaking my head again, and his lips tighten into a thin line.

"I didn't feel guilty about marrying you because you weren't rich." My voice trembles but grows stronger with each word.

"There's no need to pretend," Keiran says impatiently. "You have no other reason——"

"I felt guilty about marrying you because my parents knew...the moment I disobeyed them." My eyes fill with tears I refuse to let fall. "T-They knew..."

"Knew what?" Keiran demands.

"T-That I loved you more than I ever loved them, and always would."

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Keiran

ONE WEEK AGO

The little cottage wasn't so little. Four bedrooms, wraparound porch, private beach access. The kind of "modest" hideaway that cost seven figures in Martha's Vineyard.

Marvin had chosen well—an island sanctuary where the wealthy went to escape. Far enough from Harbour Locke to avoid the press, exclusive enough to keep out unwanted visitors.

But not far enough to keep out Keiran.

He didn't bother knocking. The security system disarmed under his touch—money well spent on the information his men had gathered. Inside, the cottage was all bleached wood and nautical blues, trying too hard to seem casual when every fixture screamed luxury.

Voices drifted from the back deck. Keiran followed them.

"The lawyers think they can delay for another month," Marvin was saying, a glass of red wine dangling from his fingers. "By then, the media will have moved on to someone else's scandal."

"And Cadence?" Gail asked, her voice slightly tremulous. "Have you spoken to her?"

"Not since last week. She'll be fine—that restaurant of hers is doing well enough."

Always was a stubborn girl."

Keiran stepped through the French doors. "A quality she didn't inherit from either of you."

The speed with which Marvin's face drained of color was almost comical. The wine glass slipped from his fingers, shattering on the deck.

"How did you—"

"Get past your security?" Keiran smiled without warmth. "The same way I got past the federal agents watching your accounts. The same way I got the proof of your embezzlement. The same way I found out who you really owe money to."

Gail's hand fluttered to her throat. "We don't know what you're talking about."

"Four million to the Costello family," Keiran said flatly. "An organization not known for its patience or forgiveness."

Marvin rose shakily to his feet. "What do you want?"

"To deliver a message." Keiran moved closer, enjoying the way Marvin flinched. "Stay away from Cadence."

"She's our daughter—"

"She's collateral damage in your pathetic attempt to save yourselves." Keiran's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "And I won't let you use her again."

"We've never used her," Gail protested weakly.

Keiran turned his cold gaze on her. "You made her believe she owed you for adopting her. Made her feel like she had to earn your love. And when she finally found happiness, you destroyed it with lies."

"Now, see here," Marvin blustered, some of his courage returning. "Whatever Cadence told you—"

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"She told me nothing," Keiran cut in. "She still believes your lies. Still thinks I'm the one who betrayed her."

Understanding dawned in Marvin's eyes. "You know."

"I know you told her I was cheating when it was you in that hotel with your secretary. I know you manipulated her fears, her insecurities—everything you'd spent years carefully cultivating."

"It was for her own good," Marvin insisted. "You were nobody. A carpenter with no background, no family—"

Keiran moved so quickly neither of them saw it coming. One moment he was standing three feet away, the next, his hand was around Marvin's throat, lifting him inches off the ground.

"I was her husband," he said, each word precise and deadly. "And you took that from both of us."

Gail's scream was distant, irrelevant. Keiran's focus narrowed to Marvin's bulging eyes, his desperate gasps.

"I could kill you right now. Make it look like an accident. A heart attack brought on by stress. No one would question it." He tightened his grip slightly. "No one would miss you."

"Please," Gail sobbed. "Please don't."

Keiran held Marvin a moment longer, watching him struggle, before releasing him. The older man collapsed to his knees, gasping for air.

"Here's what's going to happen," Keiran said calmly, as if he hadn't just nearly choked a man to death. "You're going to disappear. No calls to Cadence. No attempts to contact her. As far as she's concerned, you've abandoned her—just like you really did when she was six."

Marvin's head jerked up, shock written on his face. "How did you—"

"I know everything about her. About you. About Elena Biancardi." Keiran smiled at their expressions. "Yes, that too."

"You can't tell her," Gail whispered. "We promised—"

"I know who you promised. And what he'd do if you broke that promise." Keiran straightened his cuffs. "Consider this your one warning. Stay away from Cadence, or I finish what the Costellos will start when they find you."

He turned to leave, then paused. "Oh, and Marvin? If I ever hear you've spoken a word against me to Cadence again, I'll make sure the only thing they find of you is your watch."

The terror in their eyes was answer enough.

THE PUNCHING BAG SWUNG wildly as Keiran's fist connected with brutal force. Sweat ran down his bare chest, his breathing controlled despite the exertion.

Left hook. Right cross. Roundhouse kick.

The memory of Marvin's face played across his mind with each impact. The fear. The recognition that the "nobody" he'd dismissed was something far more dangerous.

Keiran had wanted to do more than threaten. Had wanted to make Marvin suffer for every tear Cadence had shed, every moment of self-doubt he'd planted in her mind.

But that would have raised questions. Drawn attention. And Keiran needed to stay in the shadows until he'd secured what mattered most.

That I loved you more than I ever loved them, and always would.

Her words from earlier echoed in his mind, throwing off his rhythm. The sincerity in her voice. The pain. The naked vulnerability that always made him want to both shield her and shake her.

How could she still be so trusting after everything?

"Working hard, I see."

Keiran didn't pause his assault on the bag. "What do you want, Simus?"

Onesimus leaned against the doorframe of the private gym, unfazed by Keiran's hostility. "Chef would like to know if Mrs. de Laigny—"

"Don't call her that." The punch that followed split the leather of the bag.

"—has any allergies."

"She doesn't." Keiran delivered a vicious kick that sent the bag swinging wildly.

"Now leave."

"Perhaps it would be better if you asked her yourself."

Keiran stopped, turning to face the older man. "I'm warning you, old man. Don't interfere."

"You might as well ask me to stop breathing." Onesimus's weathered face remained impassive, but his eyes reflected decades of loyalty—and the earned right to speak truths no one else dared.

"Simus, dammit."

"I was one of the reasons your marriage broke down—"

"She's the only reason our marriage fell apart." Keiran ripped off his gloves, throwing them aside. "Because she didn't trust me."

"You gave me a second chance."

The words landed like a physical blow. Keiran turned away, reaching for a towel.

"You were grieving for your wife. That's how you ended up abducted. You had a weakness other people took advantage of—"

"And she doesn't have this? A weakness that her parents didn't take advantage of?"

"It's different." Even to his own ears, the argument sounded weak.

"I accept that," Onesimus said with surprising gentleness. "Because I can be replaced, but there can only be one woman for you—"

"She's not it." Keiran's voice hardened. "She will never be it."

"And yet she is the only woman who has earned a second chance with you."

Keiran laughed, a harsh sound with no humor. "This is me killing two birds with one stone. I have a blood debt to her brother that I swore to repay. And while I'm keeping her safe, I'll take the opportunity to punish her as well."

"Keep saying that, and maybe you'll convince yourself one day." Onesimus stepped further into the room, his usual deference falling away. "You've already made several attempts to humiliate her. And failed. Because she is that determined to win you back."

Keiran tossed the towel aside. "I don't need your psychological analysis."

"No, what you need is to think very hard if this path you are on is worth losing any chance of having a life with her again."

The words hung in the air between them, too close to the truth for Keiran's comfort.

"When did you become such a romantic, old man?"

"When I watched you tear your own heart out three years ago," Onesimus said simply. "And I've been watching you try to live without it ever since."

Keiran had no answer for that.

"Dinner will be ready at seven," Onesimus continued, as if the conversation had been about nothing more significant than the weather. "I told Chef no cilantro. She hates it but never says anything."

The casual observation was like a knife to the ribs. How many little details about Cadence had Keiran collected over their short marriage? How many did he still remember?

The way she sneezed in her sleep. How she looked in his oversized shirts. The cookies she baked at midnight when she couldn't sleep.

"I have a meeting," Keiran said abruptly. "I won't be back until late."

Onesimus nodded, unsurprised. "I'll let Mrs. Quinn know."

"Cadence," Keiran corrected automatically, then scowled at the slip.

Onesimus's smile was knowing. "Of course, sir."

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After he left, Keiran stood in the center of the gym, suddenly restless. The punching bag hadn't helped. Nothing helped. Not one thing to block out the words that threatened to tear him apart—

That I loved you more than I ever loved them, and always would.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

He walked out on me. Again.

It's all I could think about since our unexpected confrontation in the living room. Just when I've bared my heart to him, Keiran curtly tells me it's all in the past, to focus on the present, and then that was it.

The sound of my bedroom door opening startles me from my thoughts, and I turn just in time to see Keiran walking towards me.

I jerk to my feet, feeling self-conscious and more than a little nervous. My bedroom's en-suite suddenly feels too small even when it's not. And is it just me—or is the AC not working again?

Our gazes meet as he stands before me, and my heart skips a beat. My heart may still be hurting, but my eyes are still working fine, and right now, my ex-husband is looking absolutely dashing in his tux.

Yum.

I mean, wow.

"You look beautiful," he says quietly.

"You, too."

Keiran arches a brow. "Don't you mean handsome?"

I shake my head, and he looks at me for a few seconds before slightly shaking his head as well.

"You still don't know when to quit." His voice is gruff. But it's also tender. And just like that, my heart is no longer hurting, and well...

It's true.

I really don't know when to quit because the next thing I know, I'm running to his arms, and he's gripping my hair as he covers my mouth in a kiss so hard and deep it has every fiber of my being tingling and burning for more.

A whimper of protest escapes my lips when he pulls away, and smoke-gray eyes gleam down at me.

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"Patience, Cadence."

He whispers the words into my ear, and my knees threaten to crumble.

His hands settle on my shoulders, and my heart leaps to my throat.

Is he going to—

Oh.

—turn me around so I can see myself in the mirror?

Okaaaay.

His fingers brush the nape of my neck as he gently gathers my hair on one side. The necklace he fastens around my neck is made entirely of diamonds.

But...

Keiran raises a brow as he meets my gaze through the mirror. "You don't like it?"

"I love it," I say quickly.

"But?"

"It's a choker," I say helplessly. "D-Does this mean you're, um, you know..."

"No, I don't know."

"The, um..." My face starts flaming. "Kinky master and sub—"

Amusement gleams in his gaze, and I think...I think it's time for me to just smile and say weakly, "It's beautiful, thank you."

Keiran steps back. "Turn around for me."

I do so slowly, and I can feel my breasts swelling behind my strapless gown at the way his gaze caresses my flesh.

"Very good." Keiran's voice is now rough, and my belly tightens with need.

"Do you want me to look like now?"

"A much loved secret ex-wife?"

His eyes bore through me, and I can only smile sheepishly. "I did tell you I want you back—"

"That's your answer right there."

Huh?

"You look exactly how I want you to look."

Which is...what?

"A woman who's willing to do everything she's ordered, everything she can think of—to earn her man back."

Keiran

PRESENT TIME

He'd made a fucking mistake.

The thought became clear to Keiran as soon as he saw his wife's eyes light up. The last time he saw that, she had tried climbing another tree for another "rare" fruit. And of course it had also ended in mishap, since that was the story of her life.

That last time, he had managed to save her, but it had also resulted in him spraining his wrist, which he had barely managed to hide from her. This time, however...

"Are you ready?" Keiran asked, his voice deliberately cool despite the heat coursing through him at the sight of Cadence in the midnight blue gown.

"Ready."

Her fingers shook as he held her hand. He gazed at her for a moment, seeing the way her gown left her shoulders bare, its bodice gently hugging the curve of her breasts before cascading silkily to the floor.

The diamond choker he gave her sparkled under all the lights like a chain of ice.

His chain.

His claim.

Because she was his.

And he would always want her to be his, whether or not he learned to trust her again.

"I don't know how to be a proper mistress," she confided to him as they began walking.

"I don't think you're supposed to be proper for one," he pointed out dryly.

"I..." Her expression turned sheepish. "I didn't think of it that way."

"As expected."

She sputtered, and Keiran's lips pressed together in a straight line. Biggest fucking mistake ever, he found himself thinking again. Everything she said and did right now was just too damn adorable, and he had a feeling it would be a lot worse once they arrived at the ball.

Once inside the limo, she immediately plopped herself on his lap, catching him off guard completely. But all she did was smile at him. "Just doing what mistresses do."

His gaze narrowed at her. "You're up to no good, aren't you?"

She peered up at him from under her lashes. "I have no idea what you're implying."

"Think twice before you start playing with fire," he advised silkily.

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"If it means the two of us burning together—" Cadence's tone was somber. "I don't think I'd mind at all."

Keiran was starting to feel on edge. "Cadence—"

"Oh, look, we're here."

The car had already cruised to a stop, and a valet was promptly opening the door for them.

Fuck.

Keiran reluctantly stepped out and as he took her hand to help her out, he then heard her whisper, "Thank you...Master."

Keiran almost lost his footing at that.

Fuck.

And so it began, with Cadence doing her best to do what she believed mistresses did best, and that was to stare up adoringly into his eyes, stay by his side every moment, with her breasts pressed tantalizingly against his arm.

"I'm going to punish you for this," he growled under his breath as he swept her onto the dance floor.

The words only made her eyes twinkle mischievously. "Promise?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Nothing seemed to faze her, not even when they danced beside a couple who seemed to take pleasure in talking about women who didn't see anything wrong in selling their bodies for financial gain.

Hearing this had Keiran stiffening, but it was Cadence herself who had asked him to ignore them.

"It's alright," she said softly.

No, dammit.

It was not fucking alright.

But it should be.

And that was what was killing him.

Because wasn't this what he wanted in the first place?

What he had planned from the start?

Hadn't he asked her to be his mistress so he could punish her?

And now that the whole damn world did see Cadence as his mistress, all he wanted was to kill everyone who was thinking what he meant them to think.

"It's really okay, Keiran." Cadence's voice drew his attention back to her. "I really don't mind being talked about."

He could tell she wasn't lying, and yet...

"Something's still bothering you."

Her gaze turned uncertain.

"Speak," he ordered.

"I just hate that they have to talk about you, too," she admitted. "Three years ago, it was my dad who wanted to shame you and had everyone talking. And now, it's happening——"

He pulled her close, his mouth claiming hers in a hard and possessive kiss, one hand tangling in Cadence's hair as the other pressed against the small of her back.

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When he lifted his head, Cadence was clutching his dress shirt, her gaze clouded with desire. "W-Why did you do that?"

"To prove to you how bothered I am about public opinion."

"O-Oh."

"Do you need more proof?" Keiran drawled.

Three seconds passed.

I'm fucked.

Because he had seen her eyes lit up, and he didn't even have time to step back. She was already pulling him close and raising herself on her toes—

FUCK.

She had pulled his lower lip between her teeth to give it a bite, and it was all Keiran could do not to fuck her then and there.

When Cadence pulled away, all eyes immediately zeroed in on the impressive evidence of his arousal.

"Dammit, Cadence."

She was about to laugh when she belatedly noticed what had practically every woman

in the room staring, and she ended up gulping instead.

Keiran bit back a groan. Seeing that only made him think of what else Cadence could be gulping down her sweet throat.

"K-Keir—"

"I'm going to take a walk," he bit out.

"Oh, should I—"

He glared at her, and Cadence said meekly, "Enjoy your walk."

Keiran stalked off, needing air and distance from the temptation he had only himself to thank for. The balcony was mercifully empty, the cool night air helping to calm his body if not his mind.

What the hell was wrong with him?

This night was supposed to be about making her pay. So why the hell—are you fucking kidding me?

Keiran had just turned back toward the ballroom, and the first thing he saw were both James Preston and Grant Poorly taking advantage of his absence by swarming around Cadence like starving flies.

Assholes.

He was about to return to the ballroom when the doors to the balcony swung open again, and a man in his late thirties walked out to join him.

Giancarlo Marchetti.

Keiran's face turned impassive as he came face to face with Boston's most powerful mafia billionaire.

"You're a hard man to get a hold of, de Laigny."

"I wouldn't have attended tonight if I hadn't met you," he said evenly.

"I had a feeling that much was the case."

"What do you want, Marchetti?"

Giancarlo leaned against the railing, his posture deceptively casual, but Keiran wasn't fooled at all. Most people thought Giancarlo's rise from the dead was an urban legend to turn him into a more terrifying boogeyman than he already was. But Keiran's trusted sources had told him otherwise.

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Everything he heard about Giancarlo Marchetti was true...for better or for worse.

"I thought it was time we were formally acquainted, all things considered."

"Don't beat around the bush."

"You are not the only one who has a blood debt to pay," Giancarlo murmured, "and just like you, it is one I intend to keep, even if it costs me my life."

What the fuck was this man playing at?

Keiran stared at the other man, saying grimly, "You're the last person to be seen alive with Viktor Biancardi."

"Indeed." Giancarlo's smile was razor-sharp. "And I could say the same for him almost three years ago...when he attempted to kill me."

Keiran had heard of this, but it was a completely different thing to have it confirmed. And to cross a Marchetti, well...it could only mean one thing, even for men like Viktor Biancardi, whom everyone knew was once a close friend of Giancarlo himself.

"Are we going to be enemies, Marchetti?"

"I'm hoping we won't be, but it remains to be seen." Giancarlo's eyes were calculating. "Because contrary to what you obviously assume I'm here for, I'm on your side. I will go as far as thinking of myself as your ally even...whether you want it or not."

"But there's a catch, of course," Keiran mocked.

Giancarlo shrugged. "It would not be a deal in our world if there is none, si?" His gaze turned back to the ballroom. "But perhaps it should be something we can talk about later. I believe you have more pressing things to attend to."

Through the glass doors, Keiran could see it was just Cadence and Poorly now, and how the hell did she not notice the way the other man was staring hungrily at her breasts?

"You should do something about that, don't you think?" Giancarlo suggested.

Keiran wanted to do exactly that, but what was it to Marchetti if he did or not?

Giancarlo smiled. "Have I been remiss in telling you something? We've sworn to protect the same person, de Laigny. And so I shall be your faithful ally...until our objectives no longer align. But I hope that day won't come."

Cadence

ONE MOMENT I'M ALONE, and then the next thing I know, Keiran is suddenly by my side, and he's dumping his jacket forcefully over my shoulders.

"I think you're cold."

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"Actually——"

Smoke-gray eyes glare at me, and I say right away, "I really am so, so cold. How wonderful of you to notice!"

Keiran then turns to Grant, and I open my mouth, thinking I should re-introduce them, but Keiran beats me to speaking.

"Leave."

Grant stiffens.

"Now."

He opens his mouth to argue, but when Keiran takes a step towards him, Grant ends up backing off. He leaves without meeting my gaze, and I don't know what I should feel first. Pity? Shock? Dismay? I turn to Keiran, and the moment I see the jealous rage in his gaze——

Oh.

It all becomes clear now, and I know exactly what I should feel.

And it's hope.

"That wasn't nice of you," I say chidingly.

"Are you taking Poorly's side?" he grits out.

I choke back a laugh. "It's Porely, and you know it."

"Who the fuck cares?"

"I care——"

"Oh, do you?"

"He's a very good friend——"

Keiran looks as if he seriously wants to kill me. "Is he?"

"He is," I say softly. "Because in the three years you've been gone, he was the only one willing to listen to me talk about how much I love and miss you...even during the years I believed you cheated on me."

Keiran's eyes squeeze shut.

"And when I did find out you didn't cheat on me——"

"Don't say another word," he grits out.

He's looking at me again, but this time I find it impossible to read his eyes, and it's scaring me. Was I wrong, after all? Is there truly no hope——

"Because if you do, I don't think I can control myself."

Oh.

My lip starts to wobble even as my body starts tingling all over. I didn't realize it was possible to feel sad and happy, relieved and aroused, all at the same time. I just feel so, so much, and when I look up at him, I simply can't hold it back any longer.

"I love you——"

Keiran grabs my hand, and it's all I can do to match his pace as he swiftly leads us out of the ballroom. We don't say goodbye to anyone, we don't make any excuses. We're simply walking out like we're in our own world, and the moment the elevator doors close behind us——

Aaaah.

I'm up against the wall, Keiran's mouth is claiming mine in a punishingly sweet kiss, and his hands are everywhere.

Everywhere!

"Is this what you wanted?" Keiran growls. "To drive me out of my fucking mind with desire in front of everyone?"

"Y-Yes——"

"Damn you!"

Keiran's mouth crashes back over mine, his hands gripping my hips as he lifts me against the wall, and my legs wrap tightly around his waist. Our bodies grind against each other, and my moan melts into his growl. Keiran's hand slides up, cupping my breast through the bodice, and another moan spirals out of my throat as his thumb brushes over one pouting tip.

"You keep making me break my own rules," he rasps out. "All I end up thinking is fucking you——"

The elevator slows as it approaches the lobby.

"K-Keiran," I gasp, pushing against his chest. "We're almost there."

He lowers me to my feet, but instead of letting me go, his mouth latches to my throat just as the elevator doors slide open.

Nooo.

When he pulls away, the side of my neck feels like it's burning, and so do my cheeks, the moment I realize the number of people staring at us from outside the lobby.

"To be continued," Keiran says, his eyes on me.

And of course, everyone just has to hear that, and I just want the earth to swallow me up at this point.

When we're back inside the limo, I'm scared and hopeful that he'll pull me close, and we'll indeed continue where we left off.

But he doesn't.

Instead, Keiran makes me sit on the opposite row.

"Patience."

It's that word again, aaargh.

Every time he asks for patience, the more I want him urgently. I think he knows this, too, and that's why he asks it of me.

The minutes tick by, and I can feel myself growing wetter and wetter between my thighs.

"I can smell how much you want me, Cadence."

Nooooo.

I'm torn between mortification and desire.

And by the time we're back in his penthouse, I'm already panting and shaking, I feel like I'm about to pass out or pounce on him.

I just...

I just want him so, so bad!

The moment the bedroom door closes behind him, everything happens in a blur. We don't even make it to the bed. We don't even get to take our clothes off. I just need him so, so bad that I'm sobbing his name out as I bend down while hitching my gown up—

"P-Please."

He slams into me so hard that I start seeing stars.

"K-Keiran."

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He slams into me again and again, and his hands are everywhere once again—

Everywhere!

"P-Please."

"Tell me exactly what you want," he growls.

"M-More."

"More what?"

"Everything!"

"Not enough."

And when I feel him start to withdraw as if he's about to punish me—

Nooo!

And that's when I find myself saying all the things I truly feel.

H-Harder.

J-Just like that.

M-Make me f-feel like y-you're about to t-tear me apart.

And that's exactly what he does.

The moment he swells to an impossible size inside of me——

Thrusting so, so deep that we're truly one flesh——

Aaaaaaah.

Pleasure tears me apart as he fills me to the brim, his thick seed running down my thighs.

And when I wake up in the middle of the night——

He does it again.

Because when I wake up, he's gone——

No, no, no.

And I suddenly can't stop crying, suddenly can't stop wondering if it's going to be the past all over again.

No, no, no.

Because I just heard the front door beeping as it unlocks.

Please, no. Please.

But I know I didn't imagine it.

Keiran is leaving me.

Again.

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Pain threatens to swallow me alive.

I don't understand.

Keiran told me he had never cheated on me.

I had caught my own father lying about Keiran when the investigation revealed how his meetings with his "partners" coincided with the same night he supposedly caught Keiran with another woman...on the other side of town.

So why is this happening again?

I don't understand.

Please help me understand, God.

It's my first time to pray to Him after so many years. But this time, I felt completely lost, like I had never felt lost before.

I thought I could earn Keiran back.

I thought it was what I was supposed to do.

But what if he never planned for me to earn him back?

What if all he wants is to punish me?"

Keiran

PRESENT TIME

Bex's skin started crawling as soon as she entered Harbour Locke Country Club, and it had nothing to do with the way everyone was looking down their noses at her appearance.

Yes, folks. Skirts can be made of leather, too. Duh.

What really had her feeling jumpy was the sheer number of unguarded exits this place had.

Like, seriously.

This place needed double the security it currently employed, and maybe four times the security cameras it had installed. Then again, when one knew what to look for...

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I see what you did there, de Laigny.

By the time she made it to the private dining room under Keiran de Laigny's reservation, she had been able to spot about eleven of the cameras he had secretly installed three years ago. And she also had no doubt those weren't all of them.

The man who insisted on escorting her from the entrance turned to her with a smile. "We hope you enjoy your stay with us, Ms. Becks. Please use the Call button if there's anything you need. We'll inform Mr. de Laigny of your arrival. Good day."

The attendant closed the door behind her as she entered the room, and the first thing she saw was a figure emerging from the shadow—

Shit.

Bex was not afraid to have a gun pointed at her, but she was annoyed with herself for not seeing this coming. Keiran de Laigny stood across the room, his weapon trained steadily at her forehead, his shuttered expression giving nothing away.

"Who are you working for?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Bullshit."

Three years ago, this woman had almost ruined his wedding night by sending a message to him from Cadence's half-brother. But now that Marchetti had as good as

confirmed the truth last night?

Keiran's finger went to the trigger. "Viktor's dead. So don't lie to me again."

"I'm not." Bex's gaze didn't waver. "But you're not the only one with blood debts."

Fuck.

Keiran dropped his gun back into a secret pocket in his jacket. How the hell did Biancardi get to be so damn good at collecting these debts? Even in death, Viktor's reach extended far beyond what any normal man could hope to achieve.

Bex raised a brow at Keiran. "Not gonna apologize?"

Keiran took the seat at the opposite end of the table. "You'd have done the same thing in my position."

"Touché." Her lips curved into a smile that held no warmth. "We're all just monsters playing by the same rules, aren't we?"

"Why are you here then?" Keiran demanded, already tired of the word games.

"Same reason Marchetti is here." She perched on the edge of the desk, perfectly at ease now that she was no longer held at gunpoint. "We've all been keeping an eye on Cadence. Have you not realized that by now? When you walked out on your marriage, good riddance. A girl like her doesn't deserve you."

"We're from the same world," Keiran bit out, hating the truth of it.

"And so I knew better than to involve someone who's innocent...and should've stayed innocent." She shrugged. "But...it's all water under the bridge. Marchetti is a happily

married man, so I'm guessing it changed his list of priorities, made him care more if you two are heading towards happily ever after or never again. Me, still the same. Hearts break all the time. But they only stop beating once and for good. So I'm here because of the Quinns."

Keiran tensed. "What about them?"

"They've figured out you're family and powerful enough to help save their asses from their enemies. So now they've started telling everyone you're their son-in-law."

"Fuck." The word exploded from him before he could hold it back.

This was exactly the kind of reckless move he'd expect from Marvin Quinn. A desperate grab for protection, with no thought to the danger it would bring to his own daughter.

"Their enemies will be knocking on your door soon. Thought you'd appreciate the heads up." Bex slid off the desk, straightening her skirt. "Oh, and last advice—"

"I didn't ask for any," Keiran cut in sharply.

"You should start thinking of telling Cadence the truth. Women have a feel for these things, believe it or not. And if you want to know what I feel—"

"Still not asking for any advice."

"Tick tock, de Laigny. You're running out of time. You either come completely clean or it will be too late for you to save your marriage."

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Keiran stayed motionless after she left. Rage simmered inside of him, but it was not directed at the girl he had spent the last three years hating. He was furious at Bex for making it seem as if he cared about saving his marriage. But he was also furious at himself because it was true.

Why, dammit?

Why did she matter to him so damn much even when she had chosen her worthless parents over him?

When Keiran finally returned to the penthouse, it was with a weight on his shoulders that felt heavier than any he'd carried before.

As soon as he stepped into the living room, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Giancarlo was seated on the couch, looking perfectly at ease. Cadence sat across from him, her face drained of color.

Keiran's blood ran cold. One look at her face and he knew exactly what Marchetti had told her.

"Is what he's saying true?" Cadence asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

FUCK.

How did one explain just because he was famiglia did not mean he was a monster...or had to stay one at least? How to explain that it was not his choice to be born in a

different world, and one that was soaked in blood and scarred by sin?

"Cadence——"

"Just answer me. Yes or no."

His heart thudded against his chest. What would he do if she couldn't accept him? If she asked——

"Are we still married?"

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

My mind is still blank when Keiran comes back to the living room, alone.

"Giancarlo?" I hear myself asking.

"Gone."

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We look at each other. The silence stretches between us, suffocating in its weight.

"It's true," he says curtly.

"H-How?" My voice comes out shaky, alien to my own ears.

"You signed the papers, I didn't. You only presumed I did."

I try to process this. All this time, I thought we'd been divorced. That our brief, intense marriage had been legally dissolved. That the only thing binding us was the lingering pain of what might have been.

"But you asked me to be your mistress."

"You are one in other people's eyes." His voice is flat, emotionless.

"But I'm also your wife."

"For now."

"Stop that," I whisper.

Because I think...I think I have enough of his insinuations. Enough of his games and half-truths and the way he keeps me dangling between hope and despair.

"I was wrong to believe Dad over you. I was just so guilty about loving you more that I felt I should believe him, because he was with me longer." The words pour out of

me, unstoppable now. "But you...you made it so easy, too!"

"Inevercheated—"

"But you were gone almost every night and you never told me where you were going!" My voice rises, years of suppressed hurt finally finding its voice. "You told me you didn't leave on our wedding night but I..." My voice breaks down. "I saw you, Keiran. With a woman. And she kissed you."

Keiran whitens. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I asked you, and you lied!"

He takes a step toward me, but this time I step back. I've spent three years blaming myself for our relationship falling apart. Three years wondering what I could have done differently. And all this time...

"Who is she?" I ask again.

"Bex." His voice is strained. "Her name is Bex and she works—she used to work for your brother."

I don't remember sitting down after that. Actually, I don't remember much, don't remember anything beyond all the things that Keiran told me.

My half-brother used to be a mafia boss.

And so was Keiran.

Giancarlo was another one and oh, there's a fourth one who might want me dead because of my adopted parents.

It's all so confusing, and I'm tempted to laugh and cry at the same time.

Maybe I would have if not for that one thing which I'm sure of—

One painful truth that's about to rip me apart from within.

"Cadence—"

He tries to hold my hands but I can't.

Not just yet.

"I need some time alone."

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He whitens.

"P-Please."

He leaves.

And that's when I cry.

Because the greatest lie of all was the one we didn't talk about.

I thought he married me because he loved me.

But now it turns out he was only forced to marry me because of a debt he owed my blood brother.

Keiran

PRESENT TIME

The door closed behind him with a soft click, but it might as well have been the sound of a coffin lid sealing shut.

Keiran stood in the hallway of his own penthouse, more lost than he'd ever been. Inside that room was his wife—legally still his wife—crying because of him. Because of lies that had seemed necessary at the time but now felt like poison that had seeped into every part of their relationship.

"You see it now, don't you?"

It was Giancarlo.

Standing outside his apartment.

Bex was right, he thought numbly. The man had changed. He was Boston's most powerful mafia billionaire. But all the man cared about was a girl's heart shattering to pieces.

"You love her," Giancarlo spelled out grimly.

Keiran wanted to deny this. But how could he when all he saw was the look on her face?

And the moment he started seeing the past in her eyes—

God, what have I done?

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It was Keiran's first time to call out to God.

Because his whole life, he had been too ashamed to ask for God's help because he had believed he was beyond saving.

But now...

"Yes," Keiran said rawly. "I love her."

He had always loved her.

And yet he had never tried to see it from her eyes.

Never tried to consider what she would be thinking, all those times he was gone, hunting for Onesimus' abductors.

His gaze turned to Giancarlo, terror gnawing at his heart. "What the fuck do I do now?"

"You grovel. But not now. I stayed behind because I've just received word. The Castellors are on the move."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"They want you to pay for the damage Marvin Quinn's fraud caused them."

"And if I don't?"

An alarm sounded off at that moment, its eerie timing almost suggesting it was the answer to his question.

"Is that what I think it is?" Giancarlo asked grimly.

"It's going to buy us some time. But not much."

The sound of an alarm cut them off, Keiran's security system alerting them to the possibility of an attack.

Fuck.

Neither of them bothered to speak, both of them springing into action as they walked back to the penthouse.

Onesimus was already in the living room, and although Cadence's pale cheeks were still streaked with tears, the expression on her face told Keiran that she had already been briefed about the situation.

"We need to keep you safe," he told her grimly. "Will you go to Giancarlo? They won't think to look for you there. I'll take care of business here."

"I don't want to leave——"

"You'll only distract me." Keiran turned his back and faced Giancarlo right after, missing the way his abrupt tone and words caused a stricken look to cross his wife's face. Keiran pointed to the ten-foot-tall painting in the dining area. "That will take you to the building next door. Keep her safe."

He turned to his wife again, but this time she was clearly avoiding his gaze. "Cadence?"

"I s-should go. We don't want to distract you."

Fuck.

He realized too late that he had hurt her with his words.

Again.

He had hurt her without meaning to.

Hurt her even though she didn't deserve it—

Again and again.

Cadence

PRESENT TIME

I've never been on a private jet before—not even with Keiran.

Fancy is the only word I can think of to describe its interior, but as much as I want to enjoy it...

"How are you doing?"

I can't.

Not when my whole world is falling apart.

And so all I can do is muster a weak smile for Giancarlo. "I'm coping."

"That's more than good, all things considered."

His gentle voice makes me want to cry, and I'm not even sure why that is.

My mind drifts back to the past, and I remember how Giancarlo and I made our escape from Keiran's penthouse apartment. And the entire time, all I could think about was...

Is this really happening?

Is it?

Really?

And to be honest, the question is still at the back of my mind, like some ingested poison that's about to take effect at any given moment.

"We're here."

I glance out of the window...but it's not Boston I see below.

St. Martha's Vineyard?

"Think of this as a proactive strategy," Giancarlo murmurs. "We cannot let your parents be used as leverage against your husband, sì?"

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All I can do is nod...while the poison starts to spread.

Is this really happening?

Is it?

Really?

I thought we'd be waiting for days. But all it takes is twenty minutes for Giancarlo's men to extract my parents from their self-purchased (un)safe house with military precision.

The look on my father's face when he sees me seated inside Giancarlo's private jet is almost...comical. But I think I've lost my sense of humor, and so all I can do is stare.

"Cadence? What the hell—"

"Hello, Dad."

My mother comes in next, and she loses all color when she sees me. "C-Cadence?"

Am I being too sensitive here...or are my parents really not happy to see their one and only daughter?

"Apologies for cutting the family reunion short, but we need to take off immediately. So Mr. and Mrs. Quinn, if you will?"

Giancarlo's silken drawl has my parents hurriedly doing his bidding.

The seatbelt sign lights up. We take off. And all I can do is watch my parents look anywherebutme.

Because they know what they've done.

And just like always, they're unwilling to take the blame.

A few more minutes pass before the seatbelt sign goes off, and before I realize what I'm about to do——

"How could you?"

I'm already crying the words out.

Because all I can suddenly hear in my mind is the alarms in Keiran's penthouse apartment going off.

"You used his name——"

My dad bristles. "He's my son-in-law——"

His gall nearly has me throwing up. "So now he's your son-in-law...just because it suits you? You painted a target on his back——"

"Stop talking to your father like that," my mom says shrilly. "We had to do what we had to do! And that man is one of them——"

"You should be the one to stop," I burst out. "Just stop talking about Keiran like he owes us something when he never did. I was the one who was lucky——"

"You've clearly lost your mind," Marvin rages at me. "You always lose your mind where that man's concerned——"

"That man has a name!"

"Do I look like I care?"

"If you know what's good for you——"

It's Giancarlo who says this, and the dangerous softness of his tone has both of my parents stiffening in their seats.

"You should choose your words very carefully from here on. Keiran de Laigny is the only reason I wasted my time in saving you."

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Marvin looks at me again, and his gall...

It just makes me want to throw up.

How can he not see how selfish he is?

How?

"Are you going to let this man get away with talking to us like that?" Marvin demands.

"I think I should," I say unevenly, "since I don't think I can say something just as polite——"

Marvin turns red with rage. "You ungrateful——"

Giancarlo casually takes his gun out.

——and my dad is forced to swallow the rest of his words.

"I cannot believe you are treating us like this," Gail throws at me.

Back at you, Mom.

Because I honestly can't believe how they're still capable of being so...vile.

"We raised you——"

"But you never loved me," I whisper.

"And you think that man you married does?"

No.

Now that I know the truth about my brother and the blood debts he's asked of other people—

I don't think Keiran ever loved me.

But even so.

"Keiran never made me feel I wasn't good enough for him. And that's why I fell in love with him. And why I'll always love him..."

And why I have to let him go...

Even if he chooses to come back to me.

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Keiran

THE MOMENT THE SECURITY alarm had gone off in his penthouse, Keiran had known it was the Castelllos.

Three men in the lobby.

Two more circling the building.

Professionals, but sloppy enough to trigger the silent alarm he'd installed after Cadence left.

Instead of retreating to safety, Keiran had headed straight for the garage. He knew exactly where to intercept them. Harbour Locke was his territory, and he'd mapped out every possible hiding place an enemy might use—the abandoned shipping warehouse on the waterfront being the most obvious choice for outsiders who didn't know the area.

He'd had it wired and monitored for precisely this scenario.

By the time Keiran parked two blocks away and approached on foot, night had fallen. The warehouse loomed against the skyline, and through his phone, he watched the thermal signatures of the Castelllos moving inside—exactly where he'd expected them to regroup after their failed attempt at his penthouse.

He entered through a service door, the security system recognizing and admitting him silently. They thought they were choosing the battleground, but they'd walked into his

trap instead.

"We know you're here, de Laigny," Benny's voice echoed through the cavernous space. "Your men failed to stop us at your apartment. What makes you think you're any safer here?"

Keiran didn't bother answering. Instead, he moved deeper into the warehouse, past stacked shipping containers and rusted machinery. The arrogance of these men, thinking they had the upper hand in his own territory.

Three years ago, he wouldn't have walked into such an obvious trap alone. But three years ago, he'd had something to live for. Something to protect. Now she was gone, safe under Marchetti's protection—a fact that burned him more than he cared to admit.

Four men emerged from the shadows, guns trained on him. Keiran assessed them with a practiced eye. Young. Nervous. Expendable. Behind them stood Benny, flanked by his older brother Berto.

"You have balls, I'll give you that," Berto said, his voice raspier than Keiran remembered. "Coming here alone."

"Who says I'm alone?" Keiran replied, his voice cold.

Benny laughed. "Your bluff is almost as pathetic as your attempt to protect those Quinns. You should've let us have them. They're nothing to you."

"They're family."

The lie tasted bitter on his tongue, but it served its purpose. The Castellós believed he'd claimed the Quinns out of obligation. Let them.

"Family?" Berto scoffed. "They treated you like garbage when you were nobody. Now that you're somebody, you protect them? You're softer than I thought."

"Or maybe I'm exactly who you fear I am."

Keiran's hand moved to his pocket, retrieving not a weapon—as the Castellós' men clearly expected from the way they tensed—but a phone. He tapped it once, and the warehouse filled with red laser dots, blossoming across the Castellós' chests like deadly flowers.

"What the—"

Benny's face drained of color as he realized how completely he'd miscalculated.

"You should've known better, Benny," Keiran said, his voice terrifyingly quiet. "This is my territory. And people only walk out of my territory alive...if I say so."

"This is a mistake," Berto stammered, his earlier arrogance vanishing. "We can negotiate—"

"Can we?" A new voice cut through the tension, smooth as silk and cold as ice.

The Castellós froze. Their men exchanged terrified glances.

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From the shadowed catwalk above, a figure emerged—tall, lethally elegant, emanating an aura of controlled violence that made even Keiran's presence seem mild by comparison.

"Impossible," Berto whispered, genuine fear crossing his face for the first time.

Benny simply stared, speechless.

"Le Dauphin Tueur," one of their men whispered, his gun trembling visibly now.

The Prince of Killers descended the metal stairs with unhurried grace, each footstep echoing like a death knell. Unlike the Castellors with their flashy suits and gaudy jewelry, he wore simple black, the quality apparent only to those who knew what to look for. His presence, however, needed no adornment.

"I wasn't aware the Castellors had business in Connecticut," the Dauphin said, his accent a subtle reminder of European origins. "Especially not with my associate."

Keiran gave no sign of surprise at the Dauphin's appearance. They had never worked together directly before, but their interests had aligned on occasion. This, apparently, was one of those occasions.

"Your associate?" Benny found his voice, though it cracked on the second word.

"Did you think de Laigny operates independently?" The Dauphin's smile didn't reach his eyes. "How... provincial."

Keiran observed the silent terror spreading across the Castellors' faces. The Dauphin's reputation preceded him—not just as a killer, but as something else entirely. An enforcer of boundaries. A shadow that fell across those who disrupted the delicate balance of power.

"We didn't know," Berto said, his face ashen. "We wouldn't have—"

"You wouldn't have what?" The Dauphin circled them slowly. "Wouldn't have come uninvited into territory under my protection? Wouldn't have threatened a family under de Laigny's protection? Wouldn't have been so incredibly stupid?"

Keiran stepped forward. "The Quinns are not worth bloodshed." He glanced at the Dauphin, a silent communication passing between them. "But the Castellors' attempt to breach my home cannot go unanswered."

"Agreed." The Dauphin turned his attention back to the Castellors. "Sicily. Permanent retirement. Your legitimate businesses remain yours, but you relinquish all operations on the East Coast."

It wasn't a negotiation. It was a verdict.

Berto understood this immediately. "We'll need assurances—"

"The only assurance you need," the Dauphin cut in, "is that you'll leave this building with your lives. Whether that remains true tomorrow depends entirely on how quickly you disappear."

Benny opened his mouth to protest, but Berto gripped his arm hard enough to bruise.

"We accept your terms," Berto said, the words leaving him like a surrender.

The Dauphin gestured to one of the corners. A man—whom Keiran hadn't even noticed was there—emerged with a briefcase, opening it to reveal documents already prepared.

"Sign," the Dauphin ordered.

The Castellós' hands shook as they signed away their empire.

When the warehouse emptied, leaving only Keiran and the Dauphin, the tension in the air shifted from deadly to merely dangerous.

"I didn't request your intervention," Keiran said, straightening his cuffs. "But I appreciate it nonetheless."

The Dauphin's expression softened fractionally. "Consider it a favor to Jacques. He speaks highly of you."

Jacques—the Dauphin's cousin. Keiran had worked with him once, years ago. "How is he?"

"Happily married. Expecting a child." A shadow crossed the Dauphin's face. "But that's not why I'm here."

"I assumed as much."

"Viktor Biancardi's sister. You married her."

What the hell?

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"Let me guess," Keiran said unsmilingly. "You owe a blood debt as well."

The Prince of Killers inclined his head. "It should be obvious to you by now, de Laigny. His sister's happiness matters to us. And so if she chooses not to take you back..."

The sharpness of the other man's smile was a deadly promise.

"Then it will be so. You will not be able to take her back."

Now and Forever

TWO MONTHS LATER

The gardens of the Marchetti estate bloomed in defiance of the approaching autumn. Stone gargoyles kept watch from the corners of the enormous property, their weathered faces holding centuries of secrets.

Cadence stood at the edge of the fountain, trailing her fingers through the cool water. She had grown used to this place over the past months, finding comfort in its ancient stones and formal beauty. The gargoyles no longer seemed threatening, merely watchful. Protective, even.

"He's here again."

Cadence didn't turn at the sound of Potenziala Marchetti's voice. La Strega moved with surprising grace for a woman of her age, the strand of pearls at her throat

catching the late morning light as she came to stand beside Cadence.

"This makes it, what? The twentieth time?"

"Twenty-third," Cadence said reluctantly, "over eight weeks." And it gave her no pleasure to know this.

"You've been counting," La Strega observed shrewdly. "Not exactly something one would do if she didn't really care, no?"

Cadence made a face. "I know what you're trying to do, signora."

"Then you should be able to guess what I'm about to tell you, sì?"

Cadence suddenly found it difficult to breathe. She should've known this time would come. But even so. "Signora——"

The older woman's face softened. "I understand you are scared."

"Then——"

"But——" La Strega's tone was final. "You cannot delay the inevitable, bambina. Your husband is clearly at the end of his tether. He may wage war if he doesn't see for himself that you are well."

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She shook her head. "He wouldn't—"

"Trust me on this,mm? The men of my world are my...expertise."

Cadence couldn't help smiling despite everything. That was actually an understatement, considering howLa Stregahad so expertly arranged marriages for all of her grandchildren. She had found Cesare's missing bride. Stopped Massimo from marrying the wrong twin. And so forth.

But...

"I can't keep being a burden to him," Cadence choked out.

"Just talk to Keiran,"La Stregaurged her. "Once and for all. And if you still do not want to go back to him——" The matriarch's tone turned steely. "Then you will not. You are in Boston, after all."

KEIRAN WAS ALREADYexpecting someone to ask him to leave.

He was already planning his next visit in fact.

And it was why, upon turning around, he had the shock of his life upon seeing his wife.

Cadence.

The sight of her after so long hit Keiran with physical force. She was still too beautiful for his heart to bear. Too innocent. And right now, a little too thin and pale for his comfort.

"I'm glad to see you're well." Cadence was the first one to break the silence between them. "I never got the chance to thank you for helping my parents——"

"I didn't do it for them. I did it for you."

Cadence's fingers dug into her palms. "I didn't want you to risk your life——"

"I'd do it again if I have to."

Of course he would, Cadence thought, and that was what had been breaking her heart for so many weeks now.

Keiran shoved his hands deep into his pockets. Why was this so hard? Why did it feel so damn awkward between them? His gaze scanned her still-too-pale features, and his chest tightened.

"You lost weight," he said tautly.

She nodded, and he immediately felt like an arse.

"I'm sorry." Why was he so bad at this? "I meant...you look beautiful."

"You don't have to lie——"

"I'm not," he countered sharply.

She nodded again, and Keiran had a bad feeling he was just making things worse with

every word he uttered.

"Signora Marchetti said you wanted to see me?"

"And you know why that is."

Cadence's throat tightened. She hadn't expected him to be so forthcoming, and she just didn't know how to feel about that.

"Cadence——"

Hearing her name on his lips hurt.

More than she was prepared to.

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And because she didn't know what to do about that either—

"I, um, started taking Italian lessons."

Cadence found herself starting to babble instead—

"Signorasays I'm learning at an impressive speed."

Anything to distract her from the pain gnawing at her heart.

"I've also been helping out with one of the restaurants they own. I've been busy, really busy. Italian recipes are—"

"Is this your way of telling me you've started a new life without me?"

No.

Never.

But if she said any of those things, wouldn't she end up being a burden to him again?

"Look at me."

It hurt to hear the tightness of his voice.

But what else was there for her to do?

She started to shake her head. "Can we just—"

"Take me back."

Her gaze flew up to him.

"Take me back, Cadence."

Those were her words before.

"Please."

And it broke her heart to hear him say them back to her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

More than he would ever know.

"But no."

The rejection hit him like a physical blow, and Keiran felt the blood drain from his face.

"Why?" The question escaped before he could stop it, desperate and raw.

"I just can't," she whispered, and for a moment he thought she might cry.

Keiran felt as if he was about to lose everything. Again.

But this time would be final.

This time there would be no more visits, no more chances.

The finality of it crushed the air from his lungs.

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"At least tell me why——"

"Please just go." Her voice broke. "I don't want to hear anymore."

She turned to leave, and something inside Keiran snapped.

He couldn't lose her again.

Not like this.

"Don't do this." Keiran moved after her, not touching her but close enough that she stopped. "Please don't leave me. Don't——" His own voice cracked. "Tell me what you want, I'll give it to you. It's not like before now. I'm not...I was never...I won't make life hard for you again."

But all she did was stare at him, with tears running down her cheeks.

God, please.

Why did it feel like the more words he said, the more the distance between them grew?

Please help me.

Keiran tried again, more desperately. "I...I have a home in France. More than one, actually. They're all yours. We can live there. Or wherever you want. Whatever you want. I'll... I'll even pretend I like your parents. You can choose them over me

anytime. I'll make it up to you any way—"

"Stop it." Cadence could no longer bear hearing more of these concessions.

"Then tell me," he bit out. "Tell me——"

"There's nothing you can do," she said shakily. "Nothing. I can't keep being a burden——"

"You were never a burden," Keiran gritted out.

"Then what would you call being forced to marry me because of a blood debt?" she demanded brokenly.

Keiran could not believe what he was hearing.

"I don't want——"

Fingers gripped her shoulders, cutting her words short.

And then he was giving her a hard shake as if he believed she had lost her senses.

"You got it all wrong," Keiran said fiercely. "Completely wrong."

"M-My b-brother——"

"——wanted to kill me for marrying you."

She stared at him, unable to understand what he was saying.

"He wanted me to protect you from afar. Not make you my wife and have you enter

the world he had tried to keep you from."

"I d-don't understand."

"I had no right to be with you," Keiran said unevenly. "But you were just so hard to stay away from. And you just keep getting into trouble, and the next thing I knew——"

Cadence could barely hear his voice over the thunderous pounding of her heart.

Was this really happening?

Was it?

Really?

"I fell in love with you."

Keiran...lovedher?

"And I never stopped," Keiran said rawly. "I thought I did. When I thought I hated you. But even that was a mistake, and I...I know I don't deserve to be forgiven for that either. I didn't even know I was putting you through hell. You have every right to hate me, but I just...I can't let you go, Cadence. I love you. I willalways——"

Keiran didn't get to finish, with Cadence throwing herself into his arms with such force that they both nearly fell.

His arms closed around her automatically as he lost their balance. They tumbled onto the soft grass, with Keiran making sure he landed on his back and Cadence on top of him.

"Cadence?"

She gazed down at him, and her heart ached upon seeing how her husband—her husband!—was still ashen with fear.

"I love you, Keiran," she said, her voice steady despite the tears still glistening on her cheeks. "So, so much."

His kiss was desperate, filled with all the words he couldn't say. When he finally

pulled back, Cadence could see the wetness in his own eyes, though he would never admit to tears.

Keiran rolled her to her back, and her tears fell faster at the way his hand shook as he touched her cheek. "I was sure I had lost you."

She shook her head as she covered his hand with hers. "Not possible." Her voice caught. "B-Because I think I know the truth now. I was born to be yours."

Epilogue

ONE MONTH LATER

Cadence slipped through the back door of the Harbour Locke Country Club. Technically, she could enter the place any way she wanted. Keiran, after all, had purchased this as his belated wedding gift to her.

But...it was still something she had a hard time wrapping her head around, and so she ended up tiptoeing around the place and...

"Good morning, Mrs. de Laigny."

Cadence quickly summoned a smile when a member caught sight of her. "G-Good morning."

Would she ever get used to people talking to her so...respectfully?

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Cadence could only shake her head as she thought of how much life had changed in the past month. With Cadence now hands-on in managing the club, Gemma had been promoted to manager, and Bex, the club's chief of security (Cadence was quite happy about this, since she no longer had any reason to be jealous of the other woman).

Her parents, on the other hand, had been relocated with new identities after agreeing to testify against the Castellós. Moreover, they were also forbidden to have any contact with anyone from their former lives—including her.

It made her sad at times, but she could also see that maybe...it was for the best for now.

As Cadence passed the pro shop on her way to the offices, she caught sight of La Strega surveying the newest selection of golf clubs, and of course she had to drop in and say hi.

"Signora Marchetti, buongiorno," she greeted the older woman with a smile. "I hope you're enjoying your stay in our club?"

"Indeed, I am. It is nice to get away from Boston once in a while, be an ordinary citizen."

Riiiiight.

The matriarch arched a brow. "You do not believe it's possible for me to ordinary?"

"I'd really like to," she said earnestly.

"But?"

"For one thing——" She gave the older woman a helpless look. "Your family is New England's most powerfulmafia——" Cadence caught the older woman wincing, and she hurriedly corrected herself. "I mean,famiglia." She really had to remember that in this new world she lived in, the M-word was considered a terrible cliché.

"I may befamiglia," the matriarch was saying, "but surely I do not look one?"

Hmm.

It was true thatLa Stregalooked no different from all the other rich old women who were members of their country club, but——

"Youstillhave your pearl-studded revolver in your handbag, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"And you really think that's something any ordinary person would do?"

"Ah." The older woman's expression turned thoughtful. "So you want me to carry just an ordinary revolver, is that it?"

Cadence could only bite back a smile, knowing when to admit defeat. Anyway, it was really quite cute ofLa Stregato want to be ordinary.

A group of ladies started whispering as they walked past Cadence, and it was unfortunately quite easy for her to overhear what they were talking about.

Can you believe it?

They've been married for years!

Neither of them said a word!

It had been Keiran's idea to throw a lavish ball in the country club, and during his speech, he had casually greeted Cadence with a 'Happythirdwedding anniversary, wife', and well, that was it...

They became an overnight sensation, or make that two weeks now and counting.

KEIRAN'S LIPS CURVEDthe moment he saw his wife heading down to join him in the parking lot next to the golf course.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," Cadence confessed.

Her husband raised a brow. "What for?"

"Um..."

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Keiran waited patiently.

"I missed you?"

He was a changed man, Keiran reminded himself. One of the promises he had made to God even before getting his wife back was that he would be a good man, and that included not swearing...even if his wife was very good at making him want to do exactly that with her unbearably sweet ways.

Cadence looked at her husband uncertainly. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart."

Then why did he look like he was having trouble breathing? Or maybe...this was normal for someone who was famiglia? Were their wives not supposed to be this open about their feelings?

Cadence gnawed on her lip. Being married to a billionaire already took a lot of getting used to, but the part about Keiran being famiglia, well...

Keiran took his wife's hand in his once he was certain he had regained his composure. "Our new golf carts have just been delivered. I'm just about to test it..."

Cadence's face brightened. "Can I ride with you?"

"Of course."

"Yay!"

Keiran inhaled and exhaled.

His wife was still too easy to please, and Keiran found it both adorable and worrying. What if another man came along and learned to please his wife just as easily?

The golf course stretched before them, emerald green under the autumn sun. Few members were out playing today—most avoided the hours when they knew the new owners might be present. It suited Keiran perfectly. Privacy was becoming increasingly rare as the business expanded.

He helped Cadence into the passenger seat, his hand lingering on her waist longer than necessary. A month of having her back in his bed hadn't dulled his hunger for her. If anything, it had intensified it.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he slid behind the wheel.

"Everywhere," he answered. "Nowhere." He guided the cart down a small hill, away from the clubhouse. "Just wanted you to myself."

"Oh, Keiran."

She really had the sweetest husband in the world...

And the wickedest, Cadence realized just five minutes later, with Keiran cutting the engine so he could pull her across the console and onto his lap.

"K-Kei—"

The rest of her words was lost in his kiss, and his hands busy sliding under her skirt.

A gasp escaped her as he found the edge of her underwear. "S-Someone might——"

Oh!

He already had her positioned above him, and the next thing Cadence knew, he was slowly pulling her down on his throbbing length, and her senses reeled as the size of him had her walls straining in the most exquisitely delicious way.

"Ride me, wife."

W-Wife.

She just couldn't get enough of him calling her that, and a whimper slipped past her lips as she strove to obey him.

Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

And——

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Aaaaaah.

Keiran had found that special spot of hers, and with one flick—

"Come for me, sweetheart."

She came apart around him with a cry muffled against her husband's shoulder, and Keiran was right behind her, his grip on her hips almost bruising as Keiran pulsed powerfully inside her.

LATER THAT NIGHT, KEIRAN slipped from their bed, careful not to wake Cadence. She slept deeply these days, a far cry from the restless nights that had plagued her during their first weeks back together.

He padded silently to his study, closing the door with a soft click before turning on his computer.

"What are you doing?"

Keiran turned to find Cadence in the doorway, sleep-rumpled and beautiful in one of his t-shirts.

"You should be sleeping," he said, closing the laptop screen.

Pain flashed in her eyes. "Are you keeping secrets from me again?"

He whitened. "Cadence——"

A smile burst on her lips. "I'm just kidding."

What the——?

Cadence was about to laugh...when she realized her husband had yet to smile back.

Uh oh.

She tried to spin around and escape—but of course she was too slow for her husband, and Cadence could only gasp as he had her laid out on his huge desk.

"You think that's funny, wife?"

Danger glinted in his eyes, but instead of feeling fear, her body ended up trembling in excitement while moisture grew between her legs.

"Keiran..."

Heat blazed from his eyes.

But before he could say another word or do anything else——

Beep.

And both of them froze.

"Is that what I think it is?" Cadence whispered.

Keiran pulled her up, took a seat, and drew her back to his lap as he opened his laptop.

Two weeks ago, Giancarlo Marchetti had confided the truth to Keiran and Cadence. She was not the only half-sister of Viktor Biancardi, but their identities were only known to her brother and no one else.

Five days ago, Keiran had figured out a way to send out an anonymous invitation online, one that could only be deciphered by people who owed blood debts to Viktor.

And tonight—someone had finally answered his message.

The End