







# House of Soot

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** He swore he loved me.

Then he used me to destroy the only man I'd ever wanted.

Blaise Ifrinn wasn't just another soldier in the Kean empire.

He was a ghost from a burned-down past...

A hidden heir with a vendetta—and I was his perfect pawn.

I gave him my secrets.

My trust.

My innocence.

He repaid me with betrayal so brutal, it nearly got Ronan Kean killed.

And now that I've seen the monster behind the mask?

I ran.

Too bad I'm not just running from him.

I'm running with his baby inside me.

And Blaise?

He's coming back for what's his.

Not just revenge.

Not just blood.

But me.

And the heir I swore he'd never know about.

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# Page 1

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1

JENNA

The rich soil crumbles between my fingers as I dig another hole in the garden bed. Spring blooms wait in their plastic containers. Right now, I'm preparing to plant purple bleeding hearts in their new home in the Kean estate's flower beds. I've always loved the colorful heart-shaped flowers, but right now, the moment is bittersweet as I remember kneeling beside my mother as a child when this was the Ifrinns' garden, her hands guiding mine as we planted the pretty bushes.

"Nature knows what it's doing, sweet pea," she'd say, showing me how to pack the soil. "We're just here to give it a helping hand."

I sniff away the sadness, trying to focus on the beauty of nature instead. Mom can't garden anymore. She can barely make it from her bed to the bathroom some days. The doctors say her heart is failing. When I think about losing her, I feel like mine is failing as well.

I grab another bleeding heart, pulling it from its container and lowering it into the hole. Why can't replacing a heart be as easy as transplanting plants? I suppose it's because you can't just run down to the nursery to get a new heart. The transplant list is so long, and Mom's getting weaker. She's all I have in the world. I'm not sure how I'll survive without her.

"Girl, if you don't get your butt inside right now, I'm gonna drag you by those muddy gardening gloves!"

I jump at Debbie's voice. She stands at the garden entrance, hands on her hips, giving me her best attempt at a stern look, which mostly makes her nose scrunch up like an angry rabbit.

"Five more minutes?" I pat the soil around the plant's base.

"That's what you said an hour ago." Debbie marches over, her heels sinking into the soft earth. "The flowers will still be here after lunch, but my sanity won't be if I have to watch you skip another meal. You're gonna waste away into nothing, and since you're my only friend here, I can't have that."

"I'm not skipping—" My stomach betrays me with a loud growl.

"Uh-huh." She plucks the trowel from my hand and dangles it just out of reach. "When's the last time you ate?"

I open my mouth, then close it. The breakfast granola bar doesn't count, and we both know it.

"That's what I thought." Debbie tosses the trowel into my garden basket. "Come on, I made those cucumber sandwiches you love. You know, the ones with the fancy cream cheese spread?"

"The ones with dill?"

"And extra pepper, just how you like them." She extends her hand, wiggling her perfectly manicured fingers. "Plus, I need someone to complain to about Mrs. Adams and how she's making me do all the work in the kitchen."

I laugh as I take her hand and let her pull me up. Debbie is around my age, twenty-three, and much more outgoing and worldly than I am. Aside from my mother, she's

my only real friend.

As Debbie heads toward the house, I pause to gather a few fresh-cut flowers from the west garden bed. The spring blooms are perfect for the foyer. Mrs. Kean always insists on fresh arrangements.

"Just a quick stop at the cutting garden," I call to Debbie, veering off the stone path. My pruning shears snip through green stems.

"Good God, girl, didn't you already bring in fresh flowers this morning?" Debbie's voice is filled with irritation now.

"These are for the foyer." But I can't help but wonder if Ronan Kean needs more flowers in his office. The ones I brought him yesterday might be starting to wilt.

My eyes drift to the third-floor window where I know his office sits. I can imagine him there looking powerful and handsome. He's always been good to me and my mother, taking us in after the Ifrinns' home burned down.

What a sad tragedy that was. The Ifrinns were good to my mom, letting her keep me around while she worked the gardens when I wasn't in school. It's why I know these gardens so well. I grew up in them.

When the Ifrinns were tragically killed in the fire, the Keans, close friends and associates with the Ifrinns, stepped in. They rebuilt the home and kept my mother on as the groundskeeper, and later, as she got ill, they hired me to tend the land and have helped me care for her.

I hurry to catch up with Debbie, careful not to disturb the pretty blooms. The kitchen welcomes us with the aromas of fresh-baked bread and herbs. I place the flowers in a temporary vase while Debbie slides a plate of perfectly triangled sandwiches across

the marble counter.

“Did you hear the FBI wants to talk to Mr. Kean?” Debbie leans forward, lowering her voice despite our being alone.

“The father or Ronan?” I really don’t understand what all the hubbub is about. Okay, so I know that the Keans’ business practices aren’t always on the up and up, but what large business ever is? Corporations commit fraud and take advantage of laws all the time.

“The father. Questions about the fire ten years ago.”

I shake my head, not believing the rumors. Several months ago, an article came out questioning whether the fire was an accident and hinting that the Keans may have set it to take over the Ifrinns’ business. I don’t buy it for a minute. The Keans and Ifrinns were friends and business associates. I know Hampton Kean respected Patrick Ifrinn. He’d have never killed Patrick, much less his wife and possibly their four sons, none of whom have been seen in a decade.

I take a bite of sandwich, the cool cucumber and creamy spread almost making me forget my growling stomach. “Society always likes to tear down successful people. The Keans have always been good to this community.” They’ve certainly been good to me, helping me with my mother.

## Page 2

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"Good people can still have enemies." Debbie sets a glass of lemonade in front of me. "They've been hiring a lot of extra security lately. Have you noticed?"

I have noticed. "Security wouldn't protect them from the FBI, though. Do you think there's other people out there trying to hurt them?" There was a disturbance outside the house seven months or so ago, but I never heard any details about it. The Keans act like it was nothing, although it does seem like they've been more careful since then.

Debbie's eyes dart to the kitchen door. "I overheard Mr. Kean on the phone yesterday. He was talking about 'reinforcing our position' and 'showing strength'. That doesn't sound like normal security upgrades to me."

All of a sudden, the estate feels exposed, vulnerable. "Should we be worried?"

"The pay is good, the benefits are better, and now we've got an army of professional soldiers protecting us." Debbie attempts a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "I'd say we're safer than ever."

Her words don't settle my unease. I've worked on these grounds since I was old enough to hold a trowel. I know every bed, every bush, every secret corner where wildflowers peek through the manicured lawns. This place is more than just a job. It's home.

"What if whatever they're protecting us from gets in anyway?"

"Then I guess we'll find out what all those soldiers are really made of." Debbie points



to my sandwich. "You should eat. You'll need your strength if we're invaded."

I roll my eyes and eat my sandwich as Debbie prattles on about house gossip. Most I don't pay too much attention to until she says, "I heard Mr. Kean wants Ronan to marry."

For a moment, I imagine me in a white dress walking down the aisle with Ronan staring at me with loving awe in his eyes.

"Did you see Mr. Kean this morning?" I blurt out. "That navy suit he was wearing—"

"Oh, girl, you've got it bad." Debbie laughs. "You should stop wasting your time. He doesn't know any of us exist."

I know she's right. I mean, I've known Ronan since I was a child and he's barely ever noticed me. I've had a crush on him forever, even though he's older than me. Really, it's only five years' difference, which was big when I was thirteen, but now that I'm twenty-three and he's twenty-eight, it doesn't seem like an age gap at all.

"He smiled at me yesterday when I brought fresh flowers to his office. Maybe he's finally noticing me."

"Trust me," Debbie says. "Ronan Kean doesn't date the help. Remember what happened to Sarah?"

Sarah was a gold digger who ended up fired when she snuck into Ronan's bed.

"Maybe I'm different. He seemed genuinely interested in the gardens when I mentioned the new rose varieties I'm thinking of adding." There's a part of me that knows she's right. He'll never see me as more than the help. But a girl can dream, right?

A tall stranger enters the kitchen. "Ladies, I hope I'm not interrupting."

Debbie and I both startle at the unexpected intrusion, especially from a man we've never seen before.

"Just doing my rounds," he says, leaning casually against the doorframe. "I'm Blaise Tine, new security detail."

"I'm Debbie. I work in the kitchen." She's regained her composure and is now taking a long, appreciative look at the man. I don't blame her. He is handsome.

"Jenna Hart," I introduce myself. His eyes narrow slightly as he studies me. His expression seems confused, as if he were expecting something else.

"Haven't seen you around before." Debbie's gaze is still all over the man.

"Just started last week." He winks. "Thought I should get to know everyone. Especially the lovely ladies who keep this place running."

I don't know why, but I blush. Embarrassed, I go to arrange the flowers in the crystal vase for the foyer.

"Well, aren't you sweet?" Debbie fans herself dramatically. "Most of the guards just grunt and glare at us."

He laughs, and I'm intrigued by his easy, friendly manner. Debbie isn't wrong. Most of the men who work here are more like cavemen. They're either ogling us disrespectfully or barking at us.

"Their loss. Besides, who wouldn't want to spend time with such beautiful company?" He's a charmer too.

“Well, I’d love to stay and... chat.” I can tell that Debbie would like to do more than “chat” with him. “But I’ve got to inventory the pantry.” She leaves us alone in the kitchen.

I can’t explain it, but I feel a little off kilter about being alone with him. I fidget my fingers as I try to figure out my escape. It would be rude to just leave him, wouldn’t it? I wonder when Mrs. Adams will return.

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"The gardens look amazing," he says, nodding to the flowers I was arranging. "You must be the one responsible for that."

"You noticed? Most people just walk past without seeing how the colors complement each other or how the heights create depth..." Oh, my God, I'm rambling. It's not very often anyone takes a real interest in my work. "Sorry, I get carried away talking about plants."

"Don't apologize. It's refreshing to meet someone passionate about their work."

Our eyes lock, and for a moment I'm lost in him. In many ways, he's similar to Ronan. Blond hair. Green eyes. Fancy suit. Hint of danger. But Ronan is intense, controlled. This man, Blaise, has a refined appearance, but there's something wild about him, something that makes my pulse quicken.

"I should get back to work," I murmur, but I don't go to leave.

"Of course." He straightens up. "Maybe you could show me those roses sometime?"

My mouth goes dry. Is he...? No. Men like him don't ask out girls like me. Especially not with that heat in their eyes that makes my skin tingle. I must be misreading this.

He cocks his head, his smile widening, those green eyes flickering with interest, and I'm completely enthralled. "I'd like that."

BLAISE

I arrive at my brother Phoenix's place after my shift at the Keans'. I had to go home and shower first, feeling the need to wash those motherfuckers off me. It's not easy protecting the people I know killed my parents.

The rest of my brothers, Phoenix, Ash, and Flint, are already there.

"Well, look who decided to grace us with his presence." Flint lounges on the leather sofa, feet propped up on the coffee table.

Ash raises an eyebrow from his perch by the window, studying me. "You survived."

"Was there a question?"

"Just worried you might blow your cover."

"I think you have me confused with Flint."

Flint gives me the finger.

Phoenix emerges from the kitchen, a steaming mug in hand. "How'd it go?"

"Like taking candy from a baby." I shrug off my jacket, tossing it over a chair.

"No one recognized you?" Phoenix asks.

"Not a single person." I take the mug from Phoenix. "For me? You shouldn't have."

He rolls his eyes but allows me to keep the cup of coffee.

“Are they still shitting their pants?” Flint asks.

“They’re cautious and keeping low... for now. Hampton is pissed, and Ronan is chomping at the bit to go on a rampage against anyone and everyone who looks sideways at them.”

“So what’s new? He always was an asshole.” Ash moves from the window to join us.

“What about the woman?” Phoenix asks, returning with another cup of coffee.

I think about Jenna and how she was nothing like I imagined. It’s difficult to reconcile the innocent looking woman with the traitor I know her to be. “I found her and introduced myself as one of the new soldiers. She didn’t show any signs of recognizing me either. She tends the gardens.”

"The same gardens her mother worked in at our estate?" Phoenix's jaw tightens.

I drop into an armchair, careful not to spill my coffee. "Yep. Still crushing on Ronan too, although I doubt he knows she exists.”

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“Really? After she handed him the keys to our kingdom?” Ash’s eyes flash with heat, the same anger I feel.

“Yep. I have to admit, she’s not what I expected. She comes off as shy, innocent. She blushed a lot.”

"Don't." Flint's voice carries a warning. "Don't start humanizing her. She's one of the reasons our parents are dead."

"Trust me, I know. I intend to make her pay as well. I don't think it would take much to woo her away from Ronan." I'm sure I saw interest or at least intrigue in her pretty green eyes as I flirted.

Flint's eyes narrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just stick to the plan," Phoenix says. "Get close to Kean's people and find out everything you can about the operation."

“Oh, I'll get close.”

“Jesus, you're not into her, are you?” Ash glares at me.

“What? No,” I say, perhaps a little too forcefully. I mean, I'm not into her like Flint is into his wife, Lucy. Is there an attraction? Sure. Jenna is pretty. She's got a hot little body. I'm a man, after all.

“The last thing we need is you falling for the woman who helped the Keans take

everything from us,” Ash warns.

The reminder stings, but he's right. I can't let myself forget why I'm doing this. Jenna Hart might look sweet and innocent, but appearances can be deceiving. I should know. I'm counting on that very fact.

“Fuck that,” I say. “I haven’t forgotten that she handed Ronan exactly what he needed, wrapped up in a pretty bow. It’s hard to look at her and not want to—” I don’t finish the sentence.

Phoenix arches a brow. “You need to dial it back or she'll sense something's wrong.”

Flint nods. "He's right. One slip and our whole plan falls apart. We can't afford mistakes."

"I know what I'm doing. Trust me, she won't see anything but what I want her to see."

"Really?" Ash narrows his eyes at me like he doesn’t believe me.

“Yes, really.” I glare at him. “I’m going to kill her with kindness. I’m going to make her fall for me. Hard. Show her everything she thinks she wants in Ronan Kean. Then when she's completely invested, I'll let her discover exactly who I am and watch her whole world crumble when she realizes what she did to us."

"Jesus." Flint shakes his head. "That's cold, even for you."

"It's what she deserves."

"And you're sure you can keep your cool long enough to pull this off?"

I meet Ash's skeptical gaze. "I've waited ten years for this. I can wait a little longer."



But Ash just shakes his head, unconvinced. "Just remember, we need information more than we need revenge at this point. Don't let your personal vendetta compromise that."

I roll my eyes. "This entire mission of ours is a vendetta. I know what I'm doing. Besides, it will be easy. All I have to do is give her a little attention."

"And you think that'll work?" Flint crosses his arms.

"You didn't see her face when I flirted. One smile, and she lit up like a Christmas tree." I can't help the cruel twist of satisfaction in my gut. "She's starved for attention. Ronan's spent years ignoring her, treating her like she's invisible. I'll be everything he's not, attentive, caring, interested in her precious flowers."

Ash's expression darkens. "You're playing with fire."

"No I'm not. Besides, what better way to hurt the Keans than to turn their most loyal servant against them? When she falls for me, she'll spill every secret she knows."

"This kind of manipulation..." Ash shakes his head. "It's risky. Personal. You could lose objectivity."

"I won't." My voice hardens, wondering why Ash is being such an ass about this. "Every time I look at her, all I see is our parents' blood on her hands. She might act pure as snow, but she's just as guilty as Ronan."

"And what happens when you have to get close to her?" Ash pushes. "When you have to kiss her, make her believe you're falling for her too?"

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"Then I'll give the performance of my life." I spread my arms wide. "After all, she taught us how convincing an innocent face can be."

"Just be careful," Phoenix says. "Your being in the house is already a huge risk should anyone recognize you. Don't push your luck."

"You two worry like old ladies. I know what I'm doing." I rise from my chair and go to put my cup in the kitchen, ready to go home and get a few Zs. It's been a long night.

Flint enters the kitchen after me. "You're walking down a dangerous path, Blaise."

God, not him too? "My being at the Keans' is part of the plan?—"

"Seducing the gardener isn't."

"Save the lecture. I know what I'm doing." I set my cup in the sink.

"Do you?" His voice drops. "Because revenge could be clouding your judgment. Trust me, I know how vengeance can?—"

"If my judgement was off, I'd have tried to kill Ronan already. I've had the chance."

"And the woman? You're really going to fuck her as punishment?"

I never said anything about fucking her, although I suppose that could happen if my plan worked.

“Her punishment will be to have her heart broken. It’s less than she deserves, or have you forgotten what she did?”

He shrugs. “I haven’t forgotten, but she was practically a kid. Maybe she wasn’t aware of what she was doing.”

“You and I did all sorts of bad things as kids. Do you think we didn’t know what we were doing?”

He blows out a breath. “No, but?—”

“No, but nothing. I’ve got this, Flint.”

“I just...” Flint runs a hand over his face. "What you’re doing is dangerous, and if you let the revenge take over, it can twist you up.”

"I learned from your mistakes." I set my hand on his shoulder. "No emotional outbursts. No impulsive decisions. I'll be the perfect gentleman, gain her trust, and extract every bit of information we need."

He stares at me squarely in the eyes. "And the cost to your soul?"

"My soul?" I bark out a laugh. "That burned with our parents."

"Blaise—”

"I appreciate the concern. But we’ve planned this for ten years. I'm not going to let feelings get in the way."

"That's what I said too."

"The difference is, I mean it. Jenna isn't like Lucy. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be home helping with that new boy of yours?"

His smile is swift and wide. "Yeah, I should."

Good, because I'm done with this conversation. Even so, his words stick with me after I leave and head back to my place. My brother might have found love in the midst of seeking vengeance, but I'm different. More controlled. More focused. And while Jenna might look sweet and innocent, I know the truth. The blood of my parents is on her hands.

At home, I grab a sandwich and scroll through my phone looking at the notes I have on Jenna Hart. Every detail of her life is mapped out like coordinates on a battle map. Her mother's declining health, her financial struggles, her work schedule at the Kean estate.

Tomorrow, I'll ask her out, I decide. I'll play the role of the charming new guard who sweeps her off her feet. I'll listen to her talk about her plants, ask about her sick mother, pretend to care about her hopes and dreams, a masterclass in manipulation designed to make her believe she's finally found someone who sees her.

And when she's completely invested, when she's given me every secret, every weakness, every vulnerable piece of herself, that's when I'll reveal the truth. I'll watch those green eyes fill with horror as she realizes who I really am. I'll watch her perfect world crumble as she understands exactly what she did to my family.

Some might call it cruel, this calculated destruction of an innocent soul. But Jenna Hart lost any claim to innocence the day she helped murder my parents. My revenge will be just as beautifully packaged.

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Let her think she's found her fairy tale. I'll be her Prince Charming right up until the moment I become her nightmare.

3

JENNA

The late afternoon sun warms my cheeks as I lead Blaise through the winding paths between my flower beds.

"These are my prize tulips." I gesture to the bright colorful blooms. "It's difficult to keep the deer from eating them."

Blaise leans in close to examine one of the flowers, and the scent of his cologne mingles with the garden's perfume.

"The colors are brilliant." His fingers brush the petals with surprising gentleness for such strong hands. "You must spend hours out here."

"I do." A smile tugs at my lips. "It's my favorite place to be."

He straightens, and those intense green eyes lock onto mine. "I can see why. You've created something special."

My heart skips at the compliment. No one other than my mother has ever shown such genuine interest in my work before.

"The Bleeding Hearts are lovely too." I lead him down another path, hyperaware of his presence behind me.

"Bleeding hearts?"

"Yes. See." I gently hold one of the blooms. "They look like bleeding hearts."

"Sort of macabre, isn't it?" There's a flash of something dark in his eyes that has me stepping back from him. As if he realizes it, he smiles. "You really know your stuff." His shoulder brushes mine as he examines the plant.

I decide I misread that earlier expression. He's smiling now, and I realize that I'm staring back like a silly lovesick girl because he really is exceptionally handsome.

It feels surreal having someone actually listen, actually care about the things that matter to me. I point out more details about various plants and bushes in the garden. Each time, he asks thoughtful questions that show he's really paying attention.

"Anyone who can bring this much beauty into the world deserves to be taken out somewhere nice." Blaise's voice drops lower, more intimate. "What do you say to dinner with me tonight?"

My breath catches. The invitation is unexpected and thrilling. But Ronan's face flashes through my mind. He's the man I've wanted to show the garden to, the man I've always admired. The man who's never noticed me.

"I..." My fingers twist together. "That's very kind of you."

"I sense a 'but' coming." Blaise takes a step closer, and I catch another whiff of his cologne. "Is there someone else?"

Heat floods my cheeks. "No, not exactly. I mean..." How do I explain my feelings for someone who doesn't even know I exist?

"Then let me take you out. Nothing fancy. Just dinner and conversation." His smile softens. "I promise to have you home at a reasonable hour."

I glance toward the main house where somewhere inside, Ronan is probably in another important meeting, making decisions that affect everyone's lives. He's never once stopped to ask about my flowers, never noticed how I arrange fresh bouquets in his office every Monday morning.

"Okay. Yes, I'd like that."

Blaise's entire face lights up. "Yeah? Seven, then?"

I nod, and my heart does a little flip when he grins wider.

"I'll pick you up at your cottage."

I nod again, a little worried that I look like a loon.

"Tonight, then."

As I watch him walk away, I'm filled with a mix of excitement and guilt. For years, since I was a girl, I've held on to this fairy tale dream of Ronan, but maybe it's time to face reality. Debbie is right. Even if Ronan were interested in me, it wouldn't be anything serious. I'd be another one of his many conquests.

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But Blaise, the way his eyes light up as I share my work, how he listens to me... In fifteen minutes, he showed more care for my passion than Ronan has in all the years I've known him. Maybe it's time to stop watering dead soil and plant something new. Something real.

"Miss Hart?" One of the kitchen staff calls from the back door. "Phone call for you. It's about tomorrow's nursery delivery."

Yep, time to move on.

I finish my work for the day and then take the gravel path that winds to the cottage Mom and I live in. Mom's flowers line the walkway, her signature touch from better days when she could still tend them herself.

When I enter the small home, Mom is in her favorite chair, a half-finished crossword puzzle in her lap. Her face lights up when I walk in, but I catch the slight wheeze in her breath.

"Did you take your medication?" I drop my bag and kneel beside her chair.

"Yes, dear." She pats my hand. "All three doses, right on schedule. The new prescription seems to be helping."

I study her face. The color in her cheeks looks better today, though dark circles still rim her eyes. "How's your breathing?"

"Much easier." She shifts in her chair, reaching for her tea. "I even managed to fold



that basket of laundry earlier."

"Mom!" I grab the cup before she can strain herself. "You're supposed to be resting. I would have done that when I got home."

Her laugh turns into a small cough. Maybe going on a date isn't such a good idea.

"I'm not an invalid, Jenna. Besides, sitting around all day drives me crazy. I miss being out there with you, helping with the gardens."

"I know." I hand her the tea. "But the doctor said?—"

"The doctor says a lot of things." She sips her tea. "You worry too much, sweetheart. I'm feeling stronger every day."

I rest my head against hers. "Someone has to worry about you."

"And you do it so well." She squeezes my hand. "But you need to live your own life too, not just take care of your old mother."

"You're not old." I kiss her cheek. "And there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

I'm certain she's putting on a brave face. Life is a struggle for her. It's frustrating that I can't make it easier for her. Medicine, with all its advances, doesn't seem to help much either.

Mom sets down her tea. "I noticed the new landscaping near the east wing. The Keans really are investing in the estate."

"They are." I rise, rethinking my date for tonight. "Mrs. Kean approved all my proposals for the spring planting. She's even increased the budget when I mentioned

wanting to recreate some of the designs from before the fire."

Mom's expression softens. "The Ifrinns had such beautiful gardens."

"Well, of course they did. You tended them."

"With your help." She sighs. "But the Keans have been so good to us, letting us continue to stay in this cottage, keeping me on as head gardener, and then passing the job to you."

"They were good to all of us," I agree. Mr. Kean made sure all the staff could keep their positions if they wanted. Not many would do that.

"He's done a good job honoring his friend's legacy," she says wistfully. "I hope Mr. and Mrs. Ifrinn are resting in peace."

I don't like thinking about the fire ten years ago. It seems inconceivable that the large, solid home could burn to the ground, just like it didn't seem possible that a larger than life family could perish. I can remember like yesterday watching the flames from the cottage. There'd been running and screaming as I watched the house burn. So many people died. Mr. and Mrs. Ifrinn. Staff we'd worked with. Friends who'd been staying over. Then there was the sad news about the Ifrinn boys. They'd all been home, but their bodies were never found. Sometimes, I wonder if they got away. Other times, I wonder if they set the fire.

I remind myself of what the Ifrinns lost and how lucky I am that my mom is still here with me. She's all I have in the world.

"We're lucky," I say softly, taking her hand. "After everything that happened, we landed somewhere good."

She squeezes my hand. “We’re very lucky, indeed.”

Neither of us speaks for a moment. Finally, I say, “I have a date.”

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Her eyes light up. “Really? Ronan?—”

“No. It’s with someone new here on staff.”

I think I see relief in her eyes. Like Debbie, Mom thinks it’s time for me to accept the truth that Ronan won’t ever see me as more than the gardener. “Is he handsome?”

Blaise’s green eyes flash in my mind. “Yes.” I feel the heat of a blush in my cheeks. “And he enjoyed my tour of the gardens.”

“A man after my own heart. You have a lovely time tonight, Jenna. Don’t worry about your old mom.”

I kiss her temple. “It’s just dinner. I won’t be gone long.” I head to my room, all of a sudden nervous. What should I wear?

Twenty minutes later, I’m checking my reflection in the hallway mirror. The soft green fabric is comfortable but nice, and I’ve let my curls down from their usual practical tie.

"You look beautiful, sweetheart." Mom beams from her chair. "Now go, and have a good time."

As if on cue, a knock comes to the door. My heartbeat cranks up to a million. I open the door to find Blaise in dark jeans and a fitted blue button-down that makes his green eyes pop.

"Wow." His gaze travels appreciatively over my dress. "You clean up nice, flower girl."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "You too. Very different from your work clothes."

He shrugs. "I hope you don't mind? A suit feels too much like work."

"Nope, I don't mind at all."

He escorts me out to a waiting car and we head out to the city. I can't remember the last time I left the grounds for something other than shopping for necessities or Mom's doctor appointments.

"Do you go out for fun often?" Blaise asks from the driver's seat.

"No."

He glances at me. "Why not?"

I shrug. "No opportunity, I guess." I don't want to give him my sob story about having to take care of my mom and not having time for fun. Or that I'm not a woman men generally take an interest in. Not that I'm ugly or lacking in personality. I think I'm just too... blah, uninteresting. It sort of makes me wonder what Blaise sees in me.

We park near the waterfront, and Blaise leads me down cobblestone streets I knew about but had never explored. He points out little gems, a tiny bookstore tucked between restaurants, a cafe famous for its cannoli.

"How do you know all these places?" I ask as we pass an antiques shop.

"You like gardens, I like discovering the heart of a city." His hand finds the small of

my back, guiding me around a corner.

At the restaurant, he pulls out my chair and helps me sit, like a true gentleman. He orders us wine and then we order our meals.

“So, Jenna Hart, tell me about you.” His green gaze watches me and for the first time, I feel seen.

“There’s not much to tell. I was raised by my mom. I’ve learned all there is to know about gardening on the estate from her and took over when she... retired. What about you?”

He shrugs, swirling his wine in the glass. “Born and raised in Boston. I now work as part of the Keans’ protection unit.”

“Do you have family?”

Again, I see a flash of something dark that makes me recoil. But as quick as it’s there, it’s gone. “My parents have passed. I have a few brothers.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” I reach out and put my hand over his. He stills and his jaw tightens. I imagine the loss must have been difficult. Considering his reaction, I’m surprised when he turns his hand over and clasps my hand.

“It was a while ago.”

“Still. I can’t imagine your loss.” I think about my mother, knowing her illness will likely take her from me sooner than later. I don’t know how I’ll survive without her.

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The conversation continues, and I'm amazed at how he actually listens when I talk about my dreams for the estate gardens. His eyes crinkle when he laughs at my story about the time I accidentally fertilized the roses with coffee grounds and the whole garden smelled like a cafe for weeks.

His genuine interest warms something deep inside me, a place I didn't realize had grown cold from years of one-sided pining. I take a sip of wine to hide my smile, but it spreads anyway. How many times had I tried to share these same stories with Ronan? The attempts always ended with his brushing past, phone to his ear, too important and busy for someone like me. Just the help.

"You know what's funny?" I trace the rim of my glass. "I used to practice conversations in my head while I worked, imagining a magazine wanting to do a story and asking about the gardens."

Blaise's hand finds mine across the table again. His thumb brushes my knuckles, sending tingles up my arm. "I'm not a magazine, but your practice has paid off."

I tilt my head to study him, feeling a little bit like he's too good to be true. "Please tell me you're really interested in gardens."

His eyes sparkle. "I'm really interested in you."

All those years spending my heart on someone who never gave me a second glance. And now, here with Blaise, I finally understand what real connection feels like when it's two-sided.

He gives me a sheepish smile. “This is the time when you tell me you’re interested in me too.”

My face feels hot. I duck my head, too embarrassed to meet his gaze. “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t interested.”

He laughs. “But you’d rather be with Ronan?”

My head snaps up. “What?”

“It’s no secret that you like him. I can see why. Rich. Powerful. Handsome.”

“You’re handsome,” I blurt out.

“Well, I’ve got one thing going?—”

“And you’re kind. No one has ever shown an interest in the garden like you have.” I have this panicky feeling like he’s going to leave. “Ronan doesn’t know I exist. It was just a silly school girl crush. For a time, I thought if I worked harder, planted prettier flowers...” I shake my head, realizing I’m babbling.

"No." Blaise squeezes my hand. "Sometimes, the best blooms come from letting go of what isn't growing."

A laugh bubbles up. "Did you just make a gardening metaphor for me?"

His grin dazzles me. "Maybe I'm learning a thing or two from you."

The joy fizzes through me like champagne bubbles. I can't remember the last time I felt this alive. This is real.



“And for the record, Ronan is an idiot to ignore you, although if you tell him I said that, he might have me killed.”

I flinch. It's not like I don't know the sort of business the Keans are in. But they're not murderers. I decide it must be a joke, albeit not a good one. He's just trying to make me feel good.

“For me to tell him, he'd have to notice me.”

Blaise pulls my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. “I notice you, Jenna. From the moment I laid eyes on you.”

I swallow, feeling overwhelmed by all this. Maybe I'm dreaming. If I am, I'm not ready to wake up.

After dinner, true to his word, he drives me home. Helping me from the car, he walks me to the front door of the cottage.

"I had an amazing time," I whisper, not ready for the night to end.

"So did I." Blaise steps closer, his green eyes intensely gazing into mine. My breath catches as his palm slides up my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps. His other hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing across my bottom lip.

"Jenna..."

The space between us disappears. His lips capture mine, soft at first, then with growing intensity. My hands find his chest, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. He tastes like the tiramisu we shared for dessert, sweet and rich and perfect.

The world narrows to just this, the press of his body against mine, his fingers tangled

in my hair, the small sound that escapes my throat when he deepens the kiss. All thoughts of Ronan vanish. For the first time in my life, I'm with someone who wants me right back.

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He pulls back, his eyes narrowed as if he is experiencing something unexpected. For a moment, I worry he didn't like the kiss.

A smile forms on his face. "Goodnight, Jenna."

"Goodnight, Blaise." I lean against the door frame, watching him walk back toward the main house. My lips still tingle from his kiss, and I press my fingers to them, savoring the memory.

Everything feels different. Brighter. More vivid. The stars seem to shine just for me, and even my garden glows in the moonlight. I've spent years dreaming of romance, but nothing in my fantasies comes close to this reality.

God, what a silly woman I am. All those hours I spent arranging Ronan's office flowers just so, hoping he'd notice the careful color combinations. The way I'd time my garden work to catch glimpses of him through windows... What a waste of my time.

This thing with Blaise is real. He doesn't just see me. He wants to know me.

I unlock the door, floating more than walking inside. Mom's already asleep in her chair, her crossword puzzle fallen to the floor. As I drape a blanket over her, I realize I'm smiling so hard my cheeks hurt.

For the first time, I understand what I've been missing. Love isn't about chasing someone who doesn't see you. It's about this wild, wonderful feeling of being wanted in return.

## BLAISE

The taste of her lingers on my lips as I walk away from the cottage, and it's...well... fuck... Like her, it wasn't what I expected.

Until I kissed her, the night was going perfectly. Her shy smiles, the way she leaned into me during dinner, how easily she opened up. All according to plan.

The irony of it all. She's spent years mooning over that entitled prick, Ronan, and here she is, falling for a son of the family he helped destroy. The same son whose parents died because of her loose lips. She's falling into my trap.

But then I kissed her. It replays in my mind. Her body melting against mine. Her soft gasp when I tangled my fingers in her hair. The sweet taste of her lips. Something twists in my gut, different from the satisfaction I expected. There was an innocence in the way she kissed back, hesitant at first, then eager. Real. Intoxicating.

"Fuck." I'm not supposed to like being around her, kissing her. That's not a part of the plan. She's supposed to be a means to an end, my way into the Kean estate, my chance to destroy Ronan's world piece by piece. Starting with the girl who worships the ground he walks on.

But there was something in that kiss, a spark I didn't anticipate. No. I shake my head, forcing those thoughts away. She's the enemy. The girl who got my parents killed. This connection I think I felt, it's nothing.

But fucking hell, how does a woman pull off acting so innocent after betraying the people who'd taken her in? Maybe Ronan manipulated her somehow, used her obvious crush on him to extract information she didn't realize would lead to murder.

No. I can't start making excuses for her. She's not some wide-eyed innocent caught in Ronan's web. She works for him now, doesn't she? Lives on his property, tends his gardens, probably still follows him around with those adoring eyes when I'm not there.

Even if she was manipulated before, she's chosen her side. She's loyal to the family that murdered mine, that stole everything from us. That makes her the enemy, no matter how sweet her smile or gentle her touch. No matter how real that kiss felt.

I push away my reaction to the kiss and focus on hers and how I'm sure I can make her fall for me. And the harder she falls, the sweeter my revenge will be when I finally show her exactly who I am.

I head to the security office in the main house to get ready for my shift. I'm glad no one recognizes me, but it's fucking insulting at the same time. The Ifrinns have been completely erased from the place they built. As I holster my gun, I have a fantasy of walking into the house, guns blazing, killing them all, not just Ronan and Hampton, but Mrs. Kean and maybe even Keira, Ronan's sister, too. She and my brother had been close, and the few times I've seen her, she doesn't seem to care about anyone or anything except the kid Mr. and Mrs. Kean have taken in. I'll spare the kid. She can't be more than nine or ten. She really is an innocent.

I live in my revenge for a moment and then like Jenna's kiss, I push it aside to focus on my job. Not the one where I protect the Keans but the one where I map out the estate's security system. Flint's already identified that at least one of the secret access points is still there, but we need more.

I enter the house, making my way back to a room where all the property's surveillance system is set up. As I round the corner, I run into Ronan. He has his phone to his ear, but he holds his hand up to stop me.

"Yes, Father, I understand." He rolls his eyes. "The shipment needs to be clean. We can't risk another incident like last month."

I force myself to breathe normally, to keep my face neutral. I keep my head down, like any good subordinate would.

When he hangs up, he studies me, and my pulse kicks up wondering if this is the moment he realizes who I am.

"Have you worked for us before?"

I shake my head. "No, sir. I'm brand-new."

His brow furrows. "Maybe we went to school together?"

Ice slides down my spine. We didn't go to school together, but we knew each other as kids and later teenagers. We weren't close. My brothers and I always thought Ronan was a prick. But our families were friendly. Hampton was my father's friend. Or so my father thought.

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"I doubt it, sir. I'm afraid I wasn't able to attend a prestigious school like you did."

"Huh." He steps closer, and I resist the urge to reach for the weapon at my side. "Could've sworn I knew you from somewhere. Junior year, maybe? You played lacrosse?"

"Never touched a lacrosse stick in my life. More of a hockey guy myself."

The lie flows smoothly. It's not even completely false. I did play hockey.

"Must be thinking of someone else, then." Ronan starts to walk away but then stops again. "You know what? This is going to bug me. I'm going to figure out why you seem so familiar."

My mouth goes dry, but I force a casual shrug. "Like I said, sir, I must have one of those faces."

"We'll see."

I don't think he means it as a threat, but it does feel threatening to me. If he figures out who I am, I'm well and truly fucked.

"Of course, sir." I keep my voice steady, deferential. It's not easy because he deserves my wrath, not my respect. "Though I'm sure you have more important matters than checking up on a new hire."

He doesn't respond, just gives me another long look before finally walking away. I

keep my stance relaxed until he disappears around the corner. Only then do I let out the breath I've been holding. Close call. Too close.

Still, there's a certain thrill in standing right in front of him and lying to his face. He has no idea who I really am. The son of the family he helped destroy is now walking his halls, learning his secrets.

Ten years ago, he knew exactly who I was. Now I'm just another face in his army of guards. It's almost poetic, how completely he's forgotten the family he burned to the ground.

Fucker.

I enter the surveillance room, rolling my shoulders to release the tension. I feel like the fox in the hen house. It won't be long now before the Keans and Jenna Hart pay for their betrayal with their lives.

5

JENNA

The sun barely peeks through my window when I wake. I love the morning sun and dew on the garden, and so my first thoughts in the morning are always bright. But as I rise, reality quickly dampens my spirits as I tend to my mother. Her condition has been worsening at an alarming rate.

I slip on my slippers and make my way to her room. Mom's propped up against her pillows, her face pale in the dawn light. The circles under her eyes have deepened, and her cheekbones seem sharper than yesterday. I don't think she's eating enough.

"You're up early." She pats the space beside her on the bed. "Come sit with me."



I perch on the edge, taking her hand in mine. Her skin feels paper-thin. "How are you feeling?"

"Better today." It's an automatic statement she makes every day. I'm not sure whether she's trying to convince me or to manifest it.

"Let me get you some breakfast."

"Tea would be nice." She moves to rise from bed, but moving to sit takes up much of her strength.

"I wish we could do more for your health."

"The Keans have already done a lot. We can't ask for more." She touches my cheek. "Besides, I have you. That's worth more than any medicine."

I lean into her touch, but I can't ignore how cold her hand feels against my skin or how shallow her breathing has become. The worry gnaws deeper, and I wonder how much longer we can pretend everything's fine.

I help her to the small living area into her chair and make her some tea, eggs, and toast. "Promise me you'll eat this. You need your strength, Mom."

"I promise. You go to work. Maybe take some pictures of the garden. It must be filled with spectacular color now."

I check that I have my phone so I can take the pictures. I think again about getting a wheelchair so I can give her a tour of the gardens since she doesn't have the strength to walk them.

"I will. See you later." I give her a kiss on the forehead and head to the main house.

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I slip into the kitchen through the back service entrance, the scent of bread baking greeting me. Debbie's already at her station, chopping vegetables for a later meal, but she drops her knife the moment she spots me.

"Hey, girl." Her grin spreads wide across her face. "Got any good gossip about a certain new guard?"

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

The truth is, I haven't seen too much of Blaise in the last week. Just a few minutes here and there, but he hasn't asked me out again. I try not to think too much about what that means. He's been working different shifts. Important security stuff. But when we do chat, he seems as interested and flirtatious as usual.

Debbie hip-checks me as she moves past to grab carrots. "I'd settle for knowing if that gorgeous man has any brothers."

"I think he does." I remember his saying he did, but he hadn't gone into detail. In fact, in many ways, he's still a stranger to me. "We haven't talked much about family."

"Too busy with other things?" She waggles her eyebrows.

"Debbie!" I throw a dish towel at her head. "It was just a kiss."

"Girl, it's been a week. Time to step things up." She shrugs, completely unapologetic. "And take notes so I can live through you vicariously."

I shake my head. "You're incorrigible."

I head to the garden. Today, I'm planting new bulbs. The garden is my happy place. There's something peaceful about working with plants. Mom used to say flowers speak their own language. Right now, they whisper promises of spring, of new beginnings.

My thoughts drift back to Blaise. The way his eyes crinkled when he laughed at my silly plant jokes. How his hand felt warm against my lower back as he guided me through the restaurant. That kiss... No one's ever kissed me like that before. Like they couldn't get enough.

The crunch of gravel catches my attention, and I look up from the flower bed to see Ronan striding toward his car. His shoulders are tense, jaw tight as he barks orders into his phone. Two guards flank him, scanning the grounds as they escort him to his waiting SUV.

There was a time when the sight of him would make my insides light up, but right now, I feel unsettled. The security detail, the way everyone's on edge, tells me something's wrong.

"Hey." Blaise's voice startles me. He's appeared beside the rose trellis, casual in his suit. "You okay?"

"Just jumpy, I guess." I wipe my hands on my gardening apron. "Everyone seems tense."

"Don't worry about it." His smile is warm, reassuring. "That's what I'm here for."

I glance back at Ronan's departing car. "But what if?—"

"Trust me. Everything is going to work out as it should."

The car disappears down the long driveway, and I feel myself relax. It's strange how Ronan's presence affects me now. It's like the rose-colored glasses are off. The schoolgirl crush that kept me hoping for years has evaporated now that Blaise has arrived and shown me attention that Ronan never would.

"Earth to Jenna," Blaise teases. "Where'd you go?"

I shake my head, smiling. "Nowhere important."

"Speaking of important things..." Blaise squats down next to me. "When do I get to see you again?"

Excitement fills me. Finally, he's asking for a date. "You're seeing me now."

"You know what I mean." He leans closer, his green eyes sparkling with amusement. "I want more than stolen moments between my shifts."

I bite my lip, trying to focus on anything but how good he smells.

"How about you meet me at lunchtime near the east gate?"

"East gate?"

"We'll have a picnic."

It's the most romantic idea I've ever heard. "I'd like that."

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"Then it's settled." He hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my face up. "You're cute when you blush." His voice drops lower, sending shivers down my spine.

"I'm not blushing." But I can feel the warmth in my cheeks betraying me.

"No?" He leans in closer, his breath fanning across my face. "What if I do this?"

His lips brush mine, soft and teasing. Immediately, the world falls away until there's just him. The solid warmth of him, the way he makes me feel like I'm floating and grounded all at once.

When we break apart, I'm breathless.

His forehead rests against mine. "Now you're definitely blushing." He presses a quick kiss to my temple. "I've got to get back to my rounds, but I'll see you then."

I watch him walk away, my heart doing little flips in my chest. For the first time in forever, I'm not thinking about Mom's illness or the strange tension in the house. Instead, my mind fills with possibilities.

"Miss Hart?" one of the maids calls from the terrace. "Mrs. Kean needs the floral arrangements for tonight's dinner changed."

"Coming!" I grab my garden shears but can't wipe the smile off my face. Even last-minute changes to the flower arrangements can't dampen my mood. Not when I have lunch with Blaise to look forward to. I can't help but feel there's something special between us. Like maybe he's the one for me.

## BLAISE

I spread the blanket under the old oak tree, the same tree I used to climb as a kid and later make out with girls under as a teen. The memories of the house and yard have hit hard, rising up at unexpected times. This was my home and the Keans invaded it. They burned down the main house, but this is still my place. I can't wait to run them out.

Until then, I play my part, which right now is setting up a romantic lunch for Jenna. This is the first time I've been able to make time to continue my plan to find out why she betrayed us and then make her pay for it.

Jenna appears around the bend in the garden path, her curly hair escaping its tie, cheeks flushed from the walk. She carries herself with a grace that seems effortless, like she belongs among the flowers she tends. Her smile lights up her whole face when she spots me. I push down the guilt that arises from her genuine pleasure at seeing me.

"This is beautiful," she says, gesturing at the spread.

I can't stop staring at her lips, remembering how soft they feel against mine. For a week now, that kiss on the porch has haunted me. I gave her another quick kiss this morning, wanting to prove to myself that the wild sensations from the first kiss were a fluke. Turns out, they weren't. Her kisses are divine. But she's the enemy. She helped destroy everything I loved.

"I found it during my patrols," I lie, patting the space beside me. "Thought you might appreciate somewhere quiet."

She settles next to me, close enough that her arm brushes mine. The contact sends an unwanted spark through my body. She smells like earth and flowers and something uniquely her. I hate how much I notice these things about her.

"It's perfect," she whispers, and for a moment I forget why I'm here, lost in those green eyes that seem to hold no guile, no deception.

But I can't forget. Won't forget. No matter how innocent she seems now, she's the reason my parents are dead.

"Try the strawberries." I hold one out to her.

Jenna takes it delicately between her fingers, and my pulse jumps when her lips brush against the fruit. Nothing about her screams murderer's accomplice. No shifty eyes, no nervous tics. Just pure, unguarded pleasure as she savors the berry.

"These are amazing." She reaches for another. "I haven't had strawberries since last summer."

I spread some cheese on a cracker, watching her movements. "You don't get out much?"

"Mom needs me here." She drops her gaze. "And the gardens keep me busy."

The gardens. Where she learned all the secret ways into our house. Where she probably watched my family's routines, reporting back to Ronan.

"Here, try this." I offer her the fancy brie I picked up, anything to keep my hands busy, to stop them from shaking with rage. "It pairs well with the fruit."

She takes it with a shy smile that confuses me. How can someone so deadly look so

damn innocent?

“You’re quite the connoisseur.”

“Did you think my being a guard means I don’t have any sophistication?”



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She studies me like she's worried she offended me. "Not at all."

I laugh to ease her worry. I need her relaxed if she's going to talk to me. "It's okay. I know I can be a brute." I hand her another cracker with cheese.

"You're spoiling me." Her shoulder bumps mine. The casual touch sends electricity through my veins, part attraction, part revulsion for my attraction.

"You deserve to be spoiled."

She blushes. "No one's ever done anything like this for me before."

Not even Ronan, I bet. The thought brings a savage satisfaction that wars with the unexpected tenderness trying to take root in my chest.

"So, it's just you and your mom here?" I keep my tone casual while reaching for more cheese, avoiding her eyes.

"Yeah, since my dad died when I was little. Mom has worked here forever, though, first for the Ifrinns, then the Keans." She wipes cracker crumbs from her lips with her fingers. "She taught me everything I know about gardening."

The mention of my family name on her lips makes my teeth grind. I force myself to relax. "Must've been hard growing up without a father."

"Mom made up for it. She's amazing." Her face lights up, then dims. "Well, she was. Before she got sick."

I lean back on my elbows, studying her profile. "What happened?"

"She has heart problems." She swallows hard. "Some days are better than others. The Keans have been so kind, letting us stay in the cottage, keeping me employed so I can care for her."

The Keans, kind? They're murderers who stole everything from us. I wonder if caring for her mother and letting them live in the cottage are payment for showing Ronan how to breach our defenses?

"Lately... well..." She shrugs and looks away for a moment.

"That must be tough, watching her decline." The sympathy in my voice isn't entirely fake, and that unsettles me more than anything.

"It is." She wraps her arms around her knees. "The doctors say she needs specialized care. But I can't afford it on my salary, and I won't put her in some state facility where she'll be alone."

The raw devotion in her words mirrors my own feelings for my brothers. We'd do anything for each other, sacrifice everything to keep our family safe.

"So you stay." I fight the feeling of sympathy toward her. I don't want to understand her.

"Where else would I go? Mom needs stability, familiar surroundings. This garden is all she has left. And the Keans let us stay in the cottage, and they give me steady work."

I hold back the urge to tell her the truth about her beloved Keans. The Keans aren't saviors. They're thieves who stole my family's legacy. Except she knows that, right?

But watching Jenna with her shy naivete, her love toward her mother, I can't reconcile the innocent woman before me with someone who'd help murder an entire family.

"You're a good daughter," I manage. Because it's true. I wonder if I'd be willing to destroy another family to save my own. I know I'd do anything to protect them. Had Ronan offered her a deal, help us kill the Ifrinns and we'll save your mother?

"We've been lucky. The Keans stepped in right after the fire. They didn't have to, but Mr. Kean insisted on keeping all the staff. Said it was important to preserve what was left of the estate."

My vision blurs red. Preserve? They're the ones who fucking destroyed it.

"They're good people," Jenna says with such conviction it physically hurts. "Everyone says the Ifrinns were good too, but after they died..." She shakes her head. "The Keans helped us all heal, gave us purpose again."

A laugh threatens to escape, harsh and bitter. Good people don't burn families alive in their beds. They don't steal legacies and twist histories.

But looking at Jenna's face, the pure belief shining in her eyes, I realize she actually buys their lies. The Keans have her completely fooled with their careful manipulations and false kindness.

"You really believe in them, don't you?"

"Of course." She smiles, and it's like a knife to my gut. "They saved us all."

She has to pay for what she did. For helping destroy my family. For still worshipping the ground Ronan walks on. For making me feel things I have no business feeling.

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But when I think about hurting her, about crushing that innocent light in her eyes, my stomach revolts. The truth is, I'm starting to crave her smiles, her sweet kisses, the way she looks at me like I matter.

And that makes me hate her even more.

Before I can stop myself, I lean toward her, drawn by some magnetic pull I don't want to analyze. My hand slides behind her neck, tangling in those soft curls. This will show her, show them all, how easily she can be manipulated.

But when my lips touch hers, everything shifts. She melts against me with a small gasp that shoots straight through my body. Her fingers curl into my shirt, pulling me closer. The taste of strawberries lingers on her tongue.

I meant to dominate, to prove my control, but her eager response sets my blood on fire. My other hand finds her waist, tugs her against me, and she arches into me.

The heat between us builds faster than I anticipated. Need courses in my blood. My hands slide down her sides, testing, exploring. She shivers under my touch but doesn't pull away. Instead, she presses closer, her fingers curling into my shirt. It ignites the fire inside me even hotter.

This isn't supposed to be like this. I'm supposed to be the one in control, the one playing her. Instead, I'm the one fighting not to lose myself in her.

She tilts her head back as my lips find her neck. The scent of flowers clings to her skin, intoxicating. I trail kisses down her throat, feeling her pulse race beneath my

lips. Her small gasp when I find a sensitive spot drives me wild.

Fuck. I need to have her. I'm powerless to stop.

"Tell me to stop." The words come out rough, desperate. I need her to push me away.

But Jenna's hands slide up my chest, tentative yet eager. "I don't want you to stop."

I capture her mouth again, harder this time. She matches my intensity, opening for me with a soft moan that shoots straight through to my already rock-hard cock. My fingers tangle in her hair, freeing more curls from their tie.

She's responsive to every touch, every kiss. When my hand slips under her shirt to caress bare skin, she arches into me with innocent abandon. There's no pretense in her reactions, no calculation, just pure, unfiltered desire.

It's addictive, this power to make her tremble. But more dangerous is how much I'm affected by her honest responses, her complete trust in me. I should feel triumphant about seducing her, about taking what Ronan could have had.

Instead, I'm the one being undone by each breathy sigh, each touch of her hands exploring my chest. I'm quickly sinking and I can't stop from drowning.

7

JENNA

I feel like I'm living in a dream. A perfect, romantic dream.

The picnic blanket beneath us is soft, and the spring breeze carries the scent of blooming flowers from my gardens.

Blaise has pushed up my shirt and bra, exposing my breasts. I feel like I should be embarrassed, but an urgent need has me arching into his touch.

"You're beautiful," Blaise whispers against my neck as he rubs the palm of his hand over my nipples, making my entire body tingle. I've never felt anything like it, like every cell in my body is alive, vibrating.

In all the years I've pined for Ronan, I'd never felt anything close to this. My yearning was always just in my chest. A childlike crush. But he's never noticed me. For years I've watched Ronan walk past me like I'm part of the scenery. I'm just another servant, invisible unless I'm useful. But Blaise sees me, really sees me.

He dips his head, his tongue laving over my nipple, and oh, my God. A moan rips from me as pleasure shoots straight to my center.

"You okay?" His green eyes search mine.

I nod, unable to find my voice. My heart pounds against my ribs. I've never been touched like this, never felt so wanted. The few fantasies I'd had about Ronan seem childish now.

Blaise's lips find mine again, and I melt into him. His kiss is hungry, demanding, making my head spin. My fingers seek to touch his skin as he's touching mine. I push the hem up, splaying my hands on his chest. The muscle is hard, the skin warm. This is real. This is what it feels like to be desired, to have someone's complete attention.

"Tell me what you want," he breathes against my ear.

"You," I whisper back, a little shocked not just at the intensity of need I'm experiencing, but at how easily I'm going with it. No hesitation. No doubt. I want this. I want Blaise.

I lose myself in Blaise's touch, my mother's words echoing in my mind. She always told me that true love would feel like floating and falling all at once. That when the right person came along, I'd know it in my bones. She'd know. She always said my father was the one true love of her life.

Blaise's fingers trace my collarbone, and I shiver.

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"What are you thinking about?" Blaise asks, his thumb brushing my bottom lip.

"That I want to be brave." I pull him closer, pressing against the hardness I feel against my belly, surprising myself with my boldness.

His lips crash into mine, and I throw caution to the wind. I give myself fully over to him. Not just physically, but emotionally, all that I am.

His fingers trace patterns on my skin, and I shiver. "Cold?"

"No." I press closer, breathing in his scent, wanting, needing more, more, more. "I've never felt more alive."

It's true. Every nerve ending tingles with awareness. My heart races not from nervousness, but from pure joy. This connection between us feels real, tangible. Nothing like the fantasy I built around Ronan. No, this with Blaise is pure and true. It's love.

"I've never felt this way before," I whisper, touching his face. His stubble scratches gently against my palm.

"Me neither." His voice is rough with emotion.

When he kisses me again, it's different, deeper, more intense. My whole body vibrates with anticipation.

I moan in frustration. "Blaise..."



It's almost as if something snaps in him. His hands are everywhere, removing clothing, touching me flesh to flesh. The world spins as he moves over me, his hips settling between my thighs. I open for him, needing him as much as I need my next breath.

I feel a soft pressure that grows more intense. "Oh," I gasp and arch, gripping his shoulders.

He lets out a feral growl followed by, "Fuck."

The next moment, he's seeped inside me. It happens so hard, so fast, with a quick, piercing pain that steals my breath.

"God, you're so fucking tight." His lips crush mine again. His hips rock against me. Soon, pleasure is coiling tight, tighter. My breath comes harsher. My hips move in rhythm with him.

He levers up on his hands, and his moves pick up speed. Faster. Deeper. Harder. Pressure builds. More. More. More.

And then I'm at a precipice. He drives in, grunting, grinding against me, and pleasure explodes. My body pulses around him, shudders as the most delicious sensations flood my body.

"Fuck, yes!" He thrusts in again. Warmth fills my body.

I hold on to him as the wondrous feelings cascade through me, slowly dissipating. He collapses on me and then rolls to the side, his breath coming as quickly and harshly as mine.

I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Joy bubbles up inside me, pure

and bright. I've found him, the one person for me.

"I love you." Blaise's words wash over me like summer rain, sweet and perfect.

I snuggle closer to him. "I love you too."

I know it's been only a short time, but the words feel right, like they've been waiting to spill from my lips. After all, I so willingly, without any hesitation, handed over my virginity to him. While I know sex isn't love, I know that this isn't just sex. This connection goes deeper than that. I know it. I feel it deep in my soul.

He kisses my forehead, and my heart swells. Every touch, every look, every word between us feels like a gift. Like finding a piece of myself I never knew was missing.

This isn't a school-girl fantasy. Blaise is my happily ever after.

8

BLAISE

Ille next to Jenna under the old oak, her breaths now slow, a smile of contentment on her face. I'm filled with self-loathing. That felt... well... it was too much. It went beyond a simple fuck to something deeper.

I mean, yeah, I told her I loved her, but that was part of the make-her-fall-for-me-then-break-her-heart plan. So why the fuck did it make my insides twist?

"I'm glad you were the one," she says.

“One what?”

“To give myself to for the first time.”

Her first time. The knowledge should fill me with smug satisfaction, another way to hurt her. To take something precious from her before I destroy her completely. Instead, an unwelcome heaviness settles in my chest.

I turn away, unable to look at the pure adoration in her eyes. This wasn't part of the plan. She wasn't supposed to be so... genuine. So trusting. The memory of her soft gasps and innocent touches haunts me.

"Are you okay?" She props herself up on an elbow, concern etched across her features.

"Yeah." The word comes out rough. I force myself to meet her gaze, to maintain the façade. "Just processing how amazing that was."

Her answering smile is radiant, and for a moment I forget that she helped destroy my family. I forget everything except how she looks right now, hair wild from my fingers, lips swollen from my kisses, completely unguarded.

The guilt claws at my insides. I'm no better than Ronan Kean, using her innocence for my own ends. But then I remember my parents, their bodies in that burning house, and I steel myself against these unwanted feelings.

This is just another step toward revenge. Nothing more.

I pull her closer, pressing a kiss to her temple while she sighs contentedly. Her complete trust in me is a weapon, one I'll use to bring down everyone who wronged my family.

It was almost too easy. A few sweet words, some attention, and she fell right into my arms.

"I love you," she murmurs, nuzzling closer.

The words should please me. They're proof my plan is working perfectly. Soon, I'll have her wrapped so tightly around my finger that when I crush her, she'll shatter completely. Just like my family shattered because of her.

I picture her face when she realizes it was all a lie. When she discovers who I really am. The devastation in those trusting green eyes will be beautiful. Maybe I'll wait until she's totally dependent on me, until she thinks we have a future together. Then I'll tear it all away.

The power I hold over her right now is intoxicating. One word from me and she'd do anything, give me any information I need about the Keans, tell me all their secrets. And she'd do it with that same innocent smile, never suspecting she's helping destroy the family she's so loyal to.

"I love you too," I whisper to play my part perfectly, ignoring the feeling that I'm the biggest piece of shit in the world.

I trace the curve of Jenna's spine, plotting my next move. I need answers. How did such an innocent-looking creature orchestrate my parents' murder? What did Ronan offer her? Money? Status? Protection? Saving her mother?

"You said someone else used to live here?"

“Mmm-hmm. The Ifrinns. But they died when the house burned down.”

My fingers still on her skin. "Tell me more about the night of the fire."

She stiffens slightly, and there it is, her guilt coming through. "What do you mean?"

"Must have been scary, watching a house burn down."

"I try not to think about it." She shifts against me, her voice small. "It was terrible. All those people..."

"But you were here? You saw it happen?" I keep my tone casual, though rage bubbles beneath the surface.

"I was in bed. Mom woke me up when she smelled smoke. By then, the whole east wing was engulfed." She shivers. "The screaming..."

I bite back a snarl. East wing, where my parents' bedroom was. Where Ash's room where the woman he loved slept. Where Ronan's men trapped them.

"Did anyone make it out?"

“A few, but...” Her voice cracks. "So many didn't. Mr. and Mrs. Ifrinn. Some of the staff..."

“None of the Ifrinns?”

She shrugs. “Their sons may have lived. Their bodies weren't found, but they haven't been seen either. That's why the Keans stepped in. They took care of everything after the fire. The funerals, the staff, making sure we all had jobs. Rebuilding the house. Keeping the businesses going.”

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God, she talks about them with reverence like they're fucking saints. Does she think she's a saint too for having helped pull it off?

I want to shake her, force her to admit her role. How she showed Ronan the secret access into the house. How she traded my family's lives for whatever he promised her.

"You must have known them well, the family that died."

"The Ifrinns. They were kind to us. I was a kid, but Mom always said they treated staff like family."

The casual way she says my family's name makes me sick. I curl my fingers into fists, fighting the urge to confront her here and now.

But no. I need more than these vague memories. I need her to confess exactly what she did, what deal she made with Ronan. Only then will my revenge be complete.

Jenna traces her fingers along my chest, drawing invisible patterns that leave trails of fire on my skin.

She looks up at me with those damned innocent eyes. "What are you thinking about?"

I'm thinking about how impossible this feels. How someone capable of betraying my family to their deaths couldn't possibly have such kindness in their touch, such genuine warmth in their smile.

"Just... taking this all in."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

"No." It's true. Oh, sure, there have been a few women I'd enjoyed spending time with, but love was never a part of the relationship. I don't have time for that. Not when for ten years my brothers and I have worked and plotted to take back what the Keans stole from us.

"Me neither."

"Not even Ronan?" I arch a brow.

She gives me another one of the damned sweet smiles. "That was a silly crush."

She killed my parents over a silly crush.

"You're different. You're real. You see me. I've never felt like this." She burrows in closer to me. "You make me feel special."

Fucking hell. I'm so confused. The calculating traitor who sold out my family doesn't match this woman who is handing over her heart, soul, and body to me.

"You are special," I say, and I hate how much I mean it. It has me questioning this whole situation. Could I be wrong? Is it possible she hadn't helped Ronan access the house to kill my family?

I quickly dismiss my doubt. The facts are clear. Ronan told Lucy that Jenna Hart had shown him how to get into the house through a secret passage. He had no reason to lie considering he was planning on killing Lucy at the time. No, Jenna helped Ronan. My parents died because of the information she provided.

Jenna sighs contentedly against my chest, and I realize my biggest challenge isn't maintaining my cover. It's maintaining my conviction in her guilt. I need space. I need to think without her disarming presence clouding my judgment. I have a mission. I need to follow it through.

"We should head back." I push myself up, avoiding Jenna's questioning gaze.

She scrambles to get dressed, her movements quick and self-conscious. Different from the bold woman who gave herself to me less than ten minutes ago. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No." The word comes out harsh. I soften my tone. "Just need to get back to work. I imagine you do too."

Her fingers fumble with her buttons. A lock of hair falls across her face, and I resist the urge to brush it away. Every touch feels like a betrayal now, of my mission, my family, myself.

We head back to our respective jobs on one of the gravel paths. Jenna's hand brushes against mine, and I fight the urge to intertwine our fingers. I maintain a careful distance, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching for her.

We reach the garden. "Blaise?" Her voice is small, uncertain.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I turn away before I can see her face fall, before I can reassure her and get ensnared by her again.

I stride toward the guard quarters. Behind me, I feel her watching, probably wondering what went wrong, how our perfect afternoon shattered so suddenly.

I wonder the same thing.



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This wasn't supposed to happen. I can't let her disarm me. I need to remember why I'm here, why I infiltrated this place. The Keans must pay for what they did, and Jenna... Jenna is the key to making that happen.

Even if something inside me breaks every time I use her for my family's revenge.

9

JENNA

I float into the kitchen. Even after a few days, my body still tingles from Blaise's touch. Every inch of my skin remembers the press of his fingers, the warmth of his lips, the way he felt moving inside me.

Debbie looks up from chopping vegetables. "Good God, girl, what is up with you? For the last few days, you look like your feet haven't touched the ground. Has Ronan finally taken an interest in you?"

I shake my head. "No, but I am in love." I haven't told Debbie all the details about Blaise. I don't know why I've held back, except maybe out of fear that it wasn't real.

"Do tell." Debbie abandons her knife and drags me to the corner table.

"It's Blaise."

"Hot new guard Blaise?"

I nod. "He packed this amazing picnic. We went to a spot near the east gate. There's an oak grove... He brought me strawberries, and we talked. He actually listens to me, you know?"

"And?" Debbie leans forward, resting her chin on her hands, eyes sparkling. "That dreamy look says there's more."

My face burns hotter. "We... um... we... ah... you know."

"Oh, my God, Jenna, did you fuck him?" She grabs my hands.

Fuck sounds too feral for what we did. We made love. "It wasn't just the act. It was perfect. The way he held me, how gentle he was... And afterward, he said he loves me."

Her head jerks back and her eyes narrow. "Already? Wow."

"I know it sounds fast, but when you know, you just know." I press my hands to my chest, feeling my racing heart. "It's nothing like my crush on Ronan. That was just fantasy. This is real. Blaise sees me, the real me."

Debbie squeezes my arm. "As long as you're happy."

But I sense her concern. I get it. I hardly know Blaise. And up until he showed up, I was smitten with Ronan Kean.

"I never knew I could feel this way. I never wanted to give myself like I wanted?—"

"Wait. Was that your first time?" Now her eyes are rounded.

"Yes, and it was... well... perfect."

She smiles, but it doesn't quite mask the concern I see in her eyes.

"I thought you'd be glad I'd given up on Ronan."

"Well, I knew that would go nowhere. And if you're happy and sure about Blaise, then I'm happy for you. And I'm happy that I won't have to listen to you describe Roman's perfect hair for the millionth time."

I give her a small whap. "I wasn't that bad."

"Yeah, girl, you were."

She's right. "God, I was pathetic." I cover my face with my hands. "Nearly ten years of pining after someone who barely knew I existed. The most attention he ever gave me was asking about the rose bushes."

"And you replanted that whole section three times trying to make them perfect."

What a dummy.

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“But you were what... fourteen when you developed your crush on him?”

“Thirteen—”

“Right. Those first loves are brutal. Especially with someone older. I mean he was what, eighteen? Did he even notice you then?”

Memories from a summer ten years ago flood back. This was before the fire and my mother worked for the Ifrinns. I always helped during the summer, partly hoping to get a glimpse of Ronan who often came with his father, Hampton. The Keans and Ifrinns were business associates and friends, spending a lot of time together.

I remember being in the yard, clipping some roses when Ronan stopped to examine them.

"These are pretty," he'd said, leaning close to inhale their scent. His shoulder had brushed mine, sending electricity through my body. "Are you working with your mom this summer, Jenna?"

He'd known my name that day.

I remember how he'd lingered in the garden, asking about the different varieties. For those precious minutes, I wasn't just the gardener's daughter. I was someone whose knowledge he valued. He'd even smiled, a real one that reached his eyes.

There were other moments that summer. I was dealing with ivy growing up a trellis, and instead of walking past like usual, he steadied the ladder, telling me stories about

using a trellis to sneak out of his house.

Or when he found me crying behind the greenhouse after Mom's health first started to decline. He'd sat with me, awkward but saying if he could help us, he would. And after the fire, he did just that, making sure Mom and I had a place to stay and a job, a job that has come to me now that Mom can't do it.

Those glimpses of kindness made me believe there was more to him than his cold exterior. That maybe, just maybe, he saw me as more than staff. Now I have to acknowledge that in my youth and naivety, I imagined deeper meaning in simple acts of kindness. I'm still grateful to him for all he's done for me and Mom, but I have to accept that he has no interest in me beyond caring for the garden and setting up floral arrangements.

"He'd talked to me a few times, but I read more into it," I answer Debbie's question. "But Blaise, he noticed me right away. He's so sweet, and he kisses—" I stop myself, not sure if I want to go into more detail than I already have.

"Oh, no, you can't say that and not finish the sentence," Debbie teasingly admonishes me.

"He kisses really well."

"Well, he's definitely better than Mr. High-and-Mighty who can't remember your name half the time."

"Have you noticed that Blaise knows everyone's name, from the kitchen staff to the grounds crew? He treats people like they matter."

"Plus he actually asked you out instead of making you wait around hoping he'd notice you exist."

"Exactly." I smile, remembering how nervous I'd been when Blaise first approached me. "It's nice being with someone who wants to be with me too."

"That's what real love should be."

"It is real, Deb. When he said he loved me, I knew it was true."

Again, her expression becomes concerned. "I know you're feeling all the feels, Jen. But it's okay to take things slow."

"I know it seems fast and it is a little scary, but it's also so wonderfully thrilling." I laugh giddily. "Remember when we'd watch those romantic movies, and I'd always say how unrealistic they were? How no one actually falls in love that fast or feels butterflies just from someone looking at them?"

"You're eating those words." Debbie grins.

"Completely. When Blaise looks at me, my knees go weak. When he touches me?—"

The kitchen door swings open and immediately, Debbie and I rise from our chairs, not wanting to be caught sitting on the job.

Ronan strides past us toward the office that Chef Marcus is currently working in. "We'll need the full spread for Saturday. Father's bringing in some important associates," Ronan tells him.

A year ago, that voice would have melted me into a puddle. Now I notice how he speaks down to the staff, like we're beneath him.

"Of course, Mr. Kean." Chef Marcus nods. "The usual selections?"

"Add caviar this time. And make sure there's enough champagne. Staff needs to be in full dress." Ronan's eyes sweep the kitchen, passing over me like I'm part of the furniture. "These people expect the best. And the floral arrangements need to be impressive."

"I can handle those, Mr. Kean," I speak up, my voice steady. The old Jenna would have stammered.

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He finally looks at me, but there's no recognition in his eyes. "Good. Make them spectacular. Nothing ordinary."

I think of all the times I rearranged entire garden beds just because he mentioned liking a certain color. How I memorized his schedule so I could "accidentally" be working near the path when he took his morning walk. God, I was such an idiot.

"Yes, Mr. Kean." I meet his gaze now, something I never dared before. He's still handsome, but the spell is broken. I see the coldness behind those green eyes, the way his smile never quite reaches them.

I watch Ronan leave, the door swinging shut behind him with a soft whoosh. It's almost like my childhood has left with him.

"Hey." Debbie squeezes my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just... It's strange. He's not as appealing as I remember."

She snorts out a laugh. "Blaise helped you take those rose-colored glasses off. Thank God."

"I guess I was a silly girl. I used to think if I just tried harder, worked longer, made everything perfect, then he'd see me."

"He doesn't see anyone but himself. Have you noticed that whenever he passes a reflective surface he checks himself out?" She purses her lips and shakes her head.



“He does?” I’m not surprised. Ronan is vain.

“And you’re not silly. You were young. We’ve all been there. I remember crushing on my eighth grade English teacher and bawling my eyes out when I learned he was married.”

I give her a hug. “You’re the best, Deb.”

“Of course. Don’t forget it.”

“I’ve got to get to work. I’m checking the arrangements in the house first.”

“Will I see you for lunch or will you be fucking behind the old oak tree?”

My cheeks heat. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

I leave the kitchen, making my way toward the foyer to check on the large floral display on the entry table. The stems aren’t wilting and the flowers are bright and open, so I decide it can stay one more day.

I start toward the living room when Ronan approaches me. His eyes narrow, like he's trying to place me in his mental catalog of servants even though he just saw me five minutes earlier. "You're the gardener's daughter."

“I was. Now I’m the gardener.”

"Jenny—"

“It’s Jenna. Jenna Hart.” My voice is firm, not wistful like how I used to be around him. "I've been tending your gardens for three years."

"Right. The roses." He crosses his arms, actually looking at me for once. "This meeting on Saturday is important. Everything needs to reek of power and money, even the flowers."

"Okay. I could sketch some arrangements if you'd like to see them first." Already, I'm thinking I might have to order flowers, as we have a limited number of blooms in spring in Boston. Plus, ordering something exotic would help him reek of power and money.

Something flickers across his face—surprise, maybe, or curiosity. "You sketch the designs?"

"Every arrangement. It helps visualize the final piece." I meet his gaze steadily now, where once, I would have looked away.

"Do that. Leave them with my mother or Keira. One of them will take care of it." He glances at his watch, already dismissing me. "Just make sure they're impressive."

"Of course, Mr. Kean."

He's already turning away, phone in hand, probably forgetting I exist before he reaches the door. For a moment, sadness fills my chest, but it's not at his dismissal of me. It's for the girl who wasted so much time trying to earn his attention. Ronan was my first crush, my teenage dream.

But now I have something real, someone who doesn't make me question my worth or leave me wondering whether I matter. I have Blaise, whose eyes light up when he sees me. Who asks about the garden and actually listens to my answers. Who touches me like I'm a precious treasure.

I return to work, and I think of ways I can do something to make Blaise feel as

special as he makes me feel. For the man who taught me the difference between dreams and reality.

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Maybe I've fallen too fast, too easily, but after years of holding back, of loving from afar, I want to embrace this feeling with both hands. I want to hold on to it, cherish it, give myself fully over to it because I trust Blaise with my heart.

10

BLAISE

My shift drags on as I patrol the perimeter of the Kean estate. Resentment grows inside me. It's not easy to protect the people who killed my family. But I'm not really protecting them. I'm scouting, observing, looking for ways to use their weaknesses against them.

Three cameras on the west side have blind spots wide enough to slip through. The old oak tree's branches stretch over the wall, perfect for a climbing rope. And the old maintenance shed? The lock's rusted, begging to be picked. Someone could stash weapons there, waiting for the right moment. I make note of each vulnerability, mapping them in my head. It's clear to me that Hampton Kean's arrogance shows in every security flaw. He thinks no one would dare challenge him after what he did to my family.

I reach a side gate and make it look like I'm checking for breaches when I'm actually dropping a rock marked with a symbol telling my brothers everything is a go. I kick the rock under the gate and continue on.

I pause near the garden where Jenna spends her days. I swear her scent still lingers on my skin from our encounter in the woods. The image of her innocent eyes looking up

at me with complete trust comes to mind, followed by a twist in my gut. Everything about my mission is going as planned, except for her. Or more accurately, except for my feelings about her.

My radio crackles. "Southeast checkpoint, report."

"All clear," I respond, finishing my round and returning to the main security office just off the house. A sense of excitement crackles through me knowing that all hell is going to break loose shortly.

A flash of movement catches my eye, and there she is, Jenna stepping out of the shadows with a covered plate in her hands. My heart rate spikes before I can control it. Fuck.

"I thought you might be hungry." Her smile radiates warmth as she lifts the cloth. The scent of cookies fills the air. "They're chocolate chip. Just out of the oven."

I hate how sweet I feel her actions are. It's probably why I'm so gruff. "You shouldn't be out here this late."

The brightness in her eyes dims slightly, verifying that I'm an asshole. "I wanted to surprise you. I knew you'd be back from your patrol."

She's been paying attention to my schedule. In a different circumstance, this knowledge would make me cocky. A woman watching my every move. But this is Jenna, the woman who used her observations to help the Keans kill my family. Does she have some agenda that requires her to keep tabs on me?

"Try one?" She holds out the plate.

The first bite floods my mouth with sweetness.

"Do you like them?" Her eyes search my face.

I want to hate these cookies, want to hate her for making me feel something other than rage. But they taste like childhood and home and everything I lost.

"They're good."

Her whole face lights up at the praise. No guile, no hidden agenda. Just pure, uncomplicated joy at making someone else happy.

This is wrong. All wrong.

I need to get away from her before these doubts take deeper root. "I need to get back to work."

She bites her lower lip and looks down as if she's nervous. "Actually, I was thinking maybe you'd like to come over for dinner on your night off?"

No. I need to say no, except getting close to her is part of my mission as well. I still don't know why she betrayed my family.

"I was hoping you could meet my mom," she continues, fidgeting with the empty cookie plate. "I make a mean lasagna. Family recipe."

This woman is twisting me up in knots because this is a perfect opportunity to learn more about her sick fascination with Ronan that had her helping him, but it feels so fucking wrong. How can a woman who looks and acts so sweet be so dangerous?

"That sounds..." I swallow hard, fighting the war between my mission and these unwanted feelings. "Nice. Really nice."

Her face brightens. "Really? I was worried you might think it's too soon."

Too soon? We're way past 'too soon'. I've already taken her virginity. Meeting her mother, sharing a family meal, shows just how committed she is to me. And how sweet my revenge will be.

My watch beeps and I check it, reminded that in twenty minutes, another “random” attack will be launched against the Keans, thanks to my brothers. Worry about Jenna getting caught in the middle has me guiding her toward the main house.

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“I’ll be there for dinner on my next night off. Right now, I need to get back to work.”

“Is there concern about more attacks?”

If she only knew. Over the last several months, my brothers have launched mini-attacks on the property. Each calculated strike chips away at Hampton Kean's defenses, keeping him off balance. The idea came after the distraction we caused to help Flint rescue Lucy from the house last year.

“It’s just a precaution.”

"But who would want to hurt the Keans? They've done so much good."

I’m glad to hear her concern for the Keans as it reminds me that she’s on their side. The side I’m against.

“Will you be okay?” She puts her hand on my arm, her worry about me dislodging the resolve to hurt her that I had a moment before.

"I'll be fine. Go."

She hesitates, then stretches up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "Be careful."

I watch her disappear into the house, making sure she's safely inside before radioing the other guards. Time to play my part in this charade, pretending to defend the very people I'm here to destroy.



"Someone's got it bad," Jones, another guard, elbows me as I return to my post.  
"Dinner to meet the mama."

"You know what that means," Donnelly, who works with me and Jones, taunts.

I do know. Meeting the parents is a sign of just how deeply Jenna feels for me. I should feel triumphant. But because I'm such a fucking twisted mess, I feel like shit.

"Eavesdropping?" I ask lightheartedly to keep up the ruse that I'm their buddy.

"It's our job." Jones grins.

"Can't blame you. Garden girl is hot."

I try to smile, but it might look like a grimace as I want to punch Donnelly's face in for ogling my girl.

"Yeah, well, she never looked at you like she does him," Jones says.

I narrow my eyes. "Like what?"

"Like you hung the fucking moon or something."

I remember that look. The pure adoration in her eyes when I told her I loved her. With that memory, the self-loathing returns. I'm the biggest piece of shit for my plan to destroy her heart.

I force a laugh. "Don't you know? I did hang the moon."

They laugh. "She used to look at Mr. Kean, the son, like that. Looks like you cured her of that," Jones says.

Again, I try to keep things light, but I feel my jaw tighten. “What can I say? I’m a catch.”

The guys move on to other topics, thankfully. I’m totally fucking this thing up with Jenna. Why is it so easy for her to mess up my emotions? I need to remember why I’m here. Remember the flames that took everything from me. Remember that in minutes, the world around me is going to explode, literally.

A flash of orange light blazes over the wall, landing with a deep boom at the front corner of the house. The alarm system screams to life.

The first “package”, as Ash called them, has been delivered. Two more blasts follow in quick succession. Right on schedule. The attack is more about smoke and sound than doing real damage, and it’s working. Guards sprint past me, shouting into their radios. I join the chaos, barking orders. If I do this right, the Keans will be impressed by my quick action and leadership and give me a position closer to them.

"Secure the perimeter!" I command, watching Hampton's men scatter like ants.  
"Teams of two, standard protocol!"

The front doors burst open. Hampton emerges, rage twisting his features as he surveys the damage to his stolen kingdom. Behind him, Ronan appears.

"Find them!" Hampton roars. "I want whoever did this dead!"

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If he only knew how close his enemies were. The irony almost makes me smile.

Another explosion rocks the foundation, this one closer. The force knocks several guards off their feet. Smoke and dust cloud the air, perfect cover for what comes next.

Time to play my part, the loyal soldier defending his boss while my brothers torment Hampton and Ronan. This time, I do smile because I'm enjoying this game. Yes, revenge is sweet. While no one will die tonight, when the Ifrinn plan is fully activated, the Keans will be dead and Jenna will regret having betrayed my family.

11

JENNA

I'd rushed down the path to the cottage to check on Mom before I returned to work. I was barely inside when a boom shook the windows.

"Mom!" I hurry in, not sure what's going on but needing to find Mom.

"Goodness, what is that?" my mother asks from her chair, her gaze pointed out the window. But from there, you can see the house and that's where the loud sound came from.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I just?—"

Another explosion rips through the air. I go back to the door, looking out toward the house. My heart stops. Flames leap into the sky, casting an orange glow across the estate grounds.

“Oh, God, not again.”

"Jenna?" Mom's voice sounds far away.

The smoke. The heat. It's happening again. In an instant, I'm thirteen, standing in this same house, watching while screams pierce the night as flames devour the mansion. Black smoke billows from every window. Someone grabs my arm, Mom, pulling me out the door and deeper into the property, away from the inferno.

“Jenns?” Mom’s voice snaps me back. "What’s going on?”

“I don’t know except... there’s fire... I think there must be another attack.” Realizing we could be in danger, I slam the door and lock it. I rush around, making sure the windows are locked and curtains are closed. I want to call Blaise, but I know he’s busy protecting the house and the Keans. That is if he’s not already dead from the attack.

How could this be happening again? I’m terrified that I’ll need to witness another family's world burn to ashes. But this time it's different. This time, someone I love might be caught in the blaze.

More explosions rock the ground. The guards are shouting. Sirens wail in the distance.

"Blaise."

"He's trained for this, sweetheart. The guards know what they're doing."

I pace the small living room, unable to stand still. Every explosion makes me flinch.  
"But what if?—"

"No what-ifs." She grabs my hand as I pass, her grip surprisingly strong. "Come sit with me."

I sink into the chair next to her, feeling scared and helpless. The smell of smoke drifts into the house.

"I just invited him for dinner to meet you."

"I know."

"I can't lose him, Mom. We just found each other."

She strokes my hair like she did when I was little. "You won't."

But her reassurance doesn't help. I press my face into her shoulder. "I should be out there. I should help?—"

"You'll only get in the way of the emergency crews." Her words are gentle but firm.  
"The best thing we can do is stay here where it's safe."

She said the same thing ten years ago, assuring me that everything would be okay.  
But it wasn't. So many people died.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:11 am*

Mom cups my face, forcing me to look at her. "I'm sure they have precautions in place. After all, they know what happened before too. You need to have faith in the Keans and those they have to protect them."

I try. I really try. But all I can think about is how quickly happiness can turn to ash. It seems like forever before I look out of the house. There is still a lot of smoke, but no fires. The house is intact.

I have to know if Blaise is alright. I slip away while Mom is resting in her room.

"Blaise!" My voice gets lost in the mayhem of shouts. Guards sprint past me, weapons drawn. "Has anyone seen Blaise?"

A flash of movement catches my eye. Blond hair and strong build. My heart leaps. Could it be him?

"Blaise!" I start toward him, but strong hands grab my shoulders.

"You shouldn't be out here. Get inside." Mr. Jones, one of Mr. Kean's guards who works with Blaise, spins me around.

"Is Blaise okay?" I resist his effort to push me back.

"He's doing his job." His grip tightens. "This is an active situation. We can't have you wandering around." His tone leaves no room for argument. He even waves over a younger guard I don't recognize. "Get her to the cottage."

The guard takes my arm, steering me away from the chaos, but I resist, tugging my arm free.

"But—"

"Seriously. You'll make it worse for him, for all of us. Get the fuck back!" Jones barks.

I don't want to make it worse, so I let the guard lead me back.

"Stay inside," the guard says when we reach the door. "Lock up."

The door closes behind me with a final click.

"Jenna?" Mom's worried voice carries from her bedroom.

"I'm here." I go to her.

"I've been calling. Did you leave?" She looks terrified.

"I had to check on Blaise."

"Don't ever scare me like that again."

I sit with her, taking her hand. "I'm sorry."

The night drags on as I wait to get the all-clear, but it doesn't come. I try to go to bed, but I stare at my ceiling watching the time drift by. Two AM. Three. Four. Sleep doesn't come. Every time I close my eyes, I see flames, Blaise running toward danger instead of away from it.

Dawn creeps through my window. I drag myself out of bed and splash cold water on my face, but it doesn't help. The mirror shows dark circles under my eyes, skin pale as milk. I look as haunted as I feel.

The kettle whistles as I make Mom's morning tea.

"You should eat something." Mom appears in her robe.

I shake my head. "I can't."

"Just toast? For me?"

I don't want to add to her worry or stress, so I make toast, but I force down only two bites before pushing the plate away. Why has no one come to let us know all is well? Why hasn't Blaise come to check on me? Are they all dead?

"I need to go see what's going on." I put my coat on.

"Don't get in their way, sweetheart."



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"I won't." I step out the front door. We're angled to the house and I can see that the back is untouched. But the bushes and trees near the front of the house are burned. The smell of smoke still lingers. Guards patrol the grounds. Work crews are assessing the damage. There doesn't seem to be a lot of damage, considering the noise.

But no Blaise.

"Hey!" I catch the sleeve of a passing maintenance worker. "Have you heard anything about casualties? The guards who were injured?"

He shakes his head, pulling away. "Sorry, we're just here for cleanup."

I enter through the back kitchen. It's buzzing with activity, as if nothing happened.

"Is everyone alright?" I ask Debbie, who barely looks up from the French toast she's cooking.

"Oh, hey. You good?"

"Yes. What happened? Is everyone alright?"

"I have no clue. No one does. No one has explained anything. We're told just to do what we normally do."

"Less talking, more cooking," the head chef snaps.

Through the kitchen windows, I spot a familiar figure on the lawn. My heart stops.

Blaise. He's alive, standing there, talking to Ronan like it's any other day. They shake hands and then Ronan walks off.

I bolt from the kitchen, running as fast as I can across the grounds. "Blaise!"

He turns at my voice, and everything else fades away—the smoke damage, the workers, even Ronan. I crash into Blaise's chest, my fingers clutching onto him like I'm afraid he'll disappear.

"You're okay. You're really okay." I press my face into his neck, breathing in his scent beneath the lingering smoke. "I was so scared."

His arms wrap around me, steadying my shaking body. "Hey, I'm fine. Just doing my job."

"I couldn't sleep. Couldn't stop imagining—" My voice breaks. "Why didn't you come tell me you were safe?"

"Things were chaotic. We had to secure the perimeter, check for more devices." His hand strokes my hair. "I'm sorry I worried you."

I pull back just enough to see his face, needing to memorize every detail. A smudge of soot marks his cheek. His suit reeks of smoke. But he's whole. Alive. Here.

"You're okay? I was told you and your mom were in the cottage."

I nod. "Yes. We were fine. Just worried. It felt like déjà vu... the Ifrinns all over again." I look up at him. "Who would do this? The Keans are good people."

Blaise stiffens. "Are you saying the Ifrinns weren't good people? They deserved?—"

“No, not at all.” I narrow my eyes at him, wondering why he’d say that. “No one deserves this. I’m just saying... without the Keans, Mom probably wouldn’t be here. I certainly couldn’t be taking care of her. That’s how good the Keans are.”

The muscles in Blaise's jaw tics. "Maybe someone has a different perspective on the Keans."

"What perspective could justify this?" I gesture at the scorched walls, the broken windows. "They're good people. And now someone's trying to hurt them just like the Ifrinns. Why? It doesn't make sense."

He studies me like he's surprised. Like he thinks I should know reasons someone would want to hurt the family. I'm not so naïve that I don't know the sort of business the Keans are in. I suppose they could have made enemies. Maybe this is a retaliation. For a moment, I think of the four missing Ifrinn brothers. Would they come back and do to the Keans what was done to them?

I quickly dismiss that idea. The Ifrinns and Keans were friends and partners. The sons would know they have no reason to hurt the Keans. In fact, I imagine that if the boys, now men, returned, Mr. Kean would take them under his wing and help them like he helped the rest of us.

“What?” I demand. “Do you know why?”

“I need to get to work. Ronan and his father have promoted me.”

I feel like I should congratulate him, but I'm a little peeved that he acts like the Keans are the sort of people someone would want to blow up or burn.

“That’s great,” I manage. Then, worried that I’m being silly, I ask, “Will you still be able to come to dinner soon?”

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His shoulders relax. “I’ll need a few days to help get this situation settled, but then yes, I can come.” His thumb brushes along my lower lip, sending a delicious thrill through me. The annoyance I felt before is completely gone, replaced by a longing for him to kiss me.

He gives me a slow smile, like he knows his power over me. Luckily, he doesn’t lord it over me. He bends to me, giving me a small, but still potent, kiss.

Then I watch him walk away, his blond hair ruffled by the wind, his shoulders strong, his gait powerful. He’s sexy beyond belief and he’s all mine.

12

BLAISE

All is going to plan. The blasts were loud and smoky but didn’t cause much damage, just as my brothers and I planned. During the attack, I took charge, directing the men on where to go and what to do. To be honest, I was a little surprised at how little direction Hampton and Ronan gave. They were surprised by the attack, which they shouldn’t have been considering the regular harassment they’ve been getting from my brothers. They also seemed unsure as to what to do tactically beyond ordering us to “kill them all.” It appears the Keans have gotten fat and lazy.

But I rose to the occasion, just as planned, and in the early dawn of this morning, Ronan sought me out. For a moment, I was worried he’d caught on to who I am. But that concern was for naught as he shook my hand and offered me a leadership position within the inner sanctum.

I maintained a stoic expression expected of someone receiving a promotion to head of security. Inside, satisfaction burns bright. Everything went according to plan and the Keans suspect nothing.

Ronan had barely left me when Jenna barreled into me, wrapping her arms around me like she'd never let go. As usual, I was filled with warmth from her love and guilt at my plans to crush her heart. Up until that moment, I was proud of how I'd been able to do my job without her distracting me. Mostly. Did I check on the cottage throughout the night to make sure it was safe? Yes. But I didn't check on her personally. I didn't make her and her mother move to another location like I'd have preferred.

Her raw, honest fear for me and relief that I was okay made my heart squeeze tight. But then she started talking about the Keans like they're fucking saints and who'd want to kill them. It's almost as if she doesn't know they were the ones who killed my parents. It's inconceivable. She's the one who made it possible for Ronan to carry out their plan to destroy us.

Over the next few days, I'm hyper focused on my new job. I've analyzed the attack and used it to reorganize schedules and change security details. The best part is that I'm in even deeper with Ronan and Hampton. I know enough about the house and security that I could have my brothers crawl up Ronan and Hampton's asses.

This afternoon, I stand at Ronan's shoulder, watching him review security footage from the night of the attack. His perfectly pressed suit and manicured nails paint the picture of privilege. Everything was handed to him on a silver platter, including my family's legacy.

"Look here." He points to the screen. "The timing was too precise. These weren't amateurs."

"No, sir." I keep my voice neutral despite the urge to strangle him with his own expensive tie.

He runs a hand through his styled blonde hair. "Hampton wants increased patrols. I need you to coordinate with the team leads."

"Already on it." I maintain my professional mask. It's easier with him than with Jenna. No internal struggle, no conflicting emotions. Just pure, crystalline hatred and imagining how sweet the revenge will be when he realizes he's been beaten by his own game. The fantasy has sustained me through years of exile.

Ronan adjusts his tie in the reflection of the window. "Good work so far. You've proven yourself valuable."

"Thank you, sir." My hand fists, and I flex it to hide my true feelings and intentions.

He turns, green eyes sharp. "I still haven't figured out where I know you from."

My pulse quickens, but my expression remains carved from stone. Let him look. He sees what he wants to see. Another loyal soldier in his arsenal, not the son of the family he destroyed.

"I must have that kind of face," I say with a shrug.

He laughs, the sound grating against my ears. "Maybe that's it."

This evening, I'm off, and I should be at Phoenix's place, meeting with my brothers. Instead, I stand at Jenna's door, a bottle of wine in hand, giving myself a talk about keeping my heart in a steel trap and focusing on learning all I can about why Jenna betrayed my family. As I knock, I work to shake off the nerves at seeing Mrs. Hart again. Her mother worked for my family for fifteen years before the fire. If anyone

could recognize me, it would be her.

Jenna opens the door, radiant in a simple dress. "You came." She stretches up to kiss my cheek.

"I said I would." Her scent envelopes me, and I think my heart has already lost the battle and I haven't even stepped inside yet.

The cottage is small but well-kept, filled with potted plants and herbs that perfume the air. Photos line the walls—none from before the fire, I notice. It occurs to me that I've never been in the cottage. It was here when I was growing up on the estate, but I'd never been in it. I'd never bothered to know the staff or how they lived. I try to ignore the idea that it makes me just as big of an asshole as Ronan.

A woman sits in an armchair by the window, thin and pale but with Jenna's same kind eyes.

"Mom, this is Blaise." Jenna's hand finds mine.

I hold my breath as her mother looks up at me. I think I see recognition flicker across her face for a moment, but then it's gone, and I think my paranoia is getting to me.

She smiles warmly. "It's lovely to meet you. Jenna talks about you constantly."

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Relief floods through me. Of course she doesn't recognize me. I was just a scrawny teenager then, and my coloring takes after my mother's side. Still, I know I need to keep my responses careful, measured.

"The pleasure's mine, Mrs. Hart." I present the wine. "I hope red is okay."

"Perfect." She gestures to the small dining table. "Please, sit. Jenna's been cooking all afternoon. I swear, if she were to ever give up gardening, she could be a master chef."

I can see and hear the love she has for Jenna, who blushes at her mother's praise. "I'll never give up gardening. I love it too much."

The table is set with mismatched plates. Jenna chatters about her garden as she serves each plate with a healthy portion of lasagna. Her enthusiasm is infectious and for a moment, I'm caught up in it. All this feels so warm and normal. Like I could belong in this warm little cottage with these kind women.

"I hope you like it," Jenna says as we sit to eat. "The herbs are from my garden."

I take a bite of the cheesy, tomatoey pasta and close my eyes. The flavors explode on my tongue. It reminds me of my mother's lasagna she'd make for my and my brother's birthday. Other than that, she rarely cooked, but when it was our birthday, she did it all. Dinner and cake.

"This is incredible." The words slip out before I can stop them, completely genuine.

"It's an old family recipe," Jenna says, pleased by my reaction.



“Actually, I got it from someone I worked for... before,” Mrs. Hart says.

Everything inside me goes cold. Is this my mother’s recipe? Anger I don’t understand surges through me. Like how dare they take and enjoy my mother’s recipe after what they did.

“I told him about the fire... the Ifrinns.”

I take a gulp of my wine.

“Mrs. Ifrinn was such a lovely woman.”

I do all I can to shake away the anger and pain. “That’s the family that was here before?”

“Yes.”

“And she cooked?” I act like it’s odd since the family would have had servants.

“Not often. For her sons’ birthdays. It was a tradition. And they loved it.” Mrs. Hart’s voice is sweet and wistful. It makes my chest ache for those days.

“What happened to the sons?” I ask.

“No one knows,” Jenna chimes in.

“I like to think they’re off living their best lives somewhere, but Jenna is right. No one knows. I think most people believethey died, but there’s no evidence of that.” Mrs. Hart wipes a tear. Is she grieving for my family? I glance at Jenna, wondering how she feels about her mother showing such emotion toward the family she helped destroy.

Jenna gives her mother a wan smile and squeezes her hand. “They’d be grown up now, wouldn’t they?”

Mrs. Hart perks up. “Yes, they would. I wonder if they’d marry?”

I think about Flint and Lucy with their son, Flynn. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They were handsome boys. Had their pick of the girls, and they enjoyed it. Except Ash.”

I watch Mrs. Hart intently, finding it strangely odd to hear her talk about my family.

“What about him?” I prod her.

“He had a lovely girlfriend. Meghan, I think was her name. Poor thing died in the fire.”

Jenna squeezes her mom’s hand again. “We’ve been so fortunate to have the Keans’ generosity in letting us stay after that tragedy.”

For a moment I was feeling warm and nostalgic, but it’s that statement that brings me back to reality and my mission.

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I grip my fork tighter, forcing myself to smile and nod as they praise the family that murdered my parents.

"Yes, the Keans have been good to us," Mrs. Hart agrees.

"More wine?" Jenna asks, touching my arm.

"Please." I hope I'm smiling, but it could be a grimace.

After dinner, Jenna clears the dishes as she encourages me to talk to her mother who's slowly moved back to a chair in the small living area. I join her, studying her as memories come back to me. I remember her working in our garden and how my mother used to love to talk to her and learn about the plants and flowers. Does she know that her daughter helped kill my mother?

"Mom, did you take your evening medication?" Jenna's voice carries an edge of worry.

"Just before dinner, sweetheart." Mrs. Hart's smile is tired but genuine. She catches me watching them. "She fusses too much."

"I do not." Jenna arranges her mother's pillows, checking her temperature with the back of her hand. The gesture is so natural, so filled with love. I can see her doing that with her children. For a moment, I imagine it, Jenna's smile and infectious laugh as she corrals a group of children. I rub a hand over my chest to get rid of the odd sensation burning there.

This isn't what I expected when I planned my revenge. I thought I'd find co-conspirators, people who knowingly helped destroy my family. Instead, I'm watching a daughter desperately trying to hold onto her only remaining parent.

The irony of the situation isn't lost on me. I know the terror and grief of losing family. And now I'm planning to inflict that same pain on Jenna.

Mrs. Hart's breathing grows labored, and Jenna immediately reaches for the oxygen tank beside the chair.

"I'm fine," Mrs. Hart insists, but her pallor says otherwise.

Jenna meets my gaze, vulnerability raw on her face. Guilt, my now default feeling around Jenna, rises for being the bastard plotting to break her heart while she deals with this.

Again, I feel like there's a war going on inside me. I can't reconcile this warm, loving woman with the one who helped the Keans take everything away from us. And because I can't, I feel like the fucking monster in this situation.

"I have to admit, I felt a bit of déjà vu the other day with all that commotion," Mrs. Hart says.

Jenna sits next to me, her hand squeezing mine, and I hate myself for how natural it feels.

"It was a lot of bark, but no bite," I say.

"Why?" Mrs. Hart shakes her head. "What was the point? Do you know who's behind it?"

“No. But it’s all under control.”

“Ronan gave Blaise a promotion.” Jenna beams at me like she’s proud of me. Again, it does all sorts of things to my insides that I don’t like.

“Congratulations,” Mrs. Hart says.

"You must have been so scared." Jenna’s hand tightens around mine.

"I was more worried about everyone else." The half-truth slips out before I can stop it. I did worry about her being too close when the bombs went off. But if Ronan or any of his men got caught up in one of the blasts and were maimed or killed, I wouldn’t give a shit.

She smiles up at me, trust shining in those green eyes. "That's what I love about you. Always thinking of others first."

The words hit like shrapnel. If she knew the truth, that I orchestrated the attack, that I'm using her, that smile would shatter. It’s what I want. But fucking hell, she’s making it hard.

My brothers would call me weak. Maybe they're right. Because sitting here with the woman who is the villain of my life’s story, I'm starting to forget which version of myself is real, the vengeful son plotting destruction or the man who's falling for Jenna's pure, unguarded heart.

13

JENNA

The night has filled me with joy. The two people I love most in the world are here

together with me. But Mom is tired, so I help her down the narrow hallway to her bedroom, supporting her slight frame against mine. Her steps are shaky, uncertain, and my heart squeezes at how frail she's become, especially at such a young age, forty-five.

"I can manage from here, sweetheart." Mom pats my arm, but I keep hold until she's settled on the edge of her bed.

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"Let me get your night meds." I grab the organizer from her nightstand, counting out the evening pills while she catches her breath. "Did you enjoy dinner?"

A soft smile lights up her tired face. "He's wonderful, Jenna. The way he looks at you, it reminds me of how your father used to look at me." She accepts the pills and water glass from me.

Warmth spreads through my chest. "Really?"

"Mmhmm." She takes her medication and puts on her nightgown. Then she lets me help her lie back against the pillows. "I haven't seen you this happy in years."

I tuck the blanket around her. "I am happy, Mom. Blaise is... he's everything I never knew I needed."

"Better than pining after young Mr. Kean?" Her eyes twinkle with mischief.

Heat floods my cheeks. "Mom!"

"A mother notices these things." She catches my hand, squeezing with what little strength she has left. "But Blaise sees you. The real you. That's worth more than any crush."

I lean down to kiss her forehead. "Get some rest."

Mom's approval means everything to me. After all we've been through together, knowing she sees the same goodness in Blaise that I do makes this feeling even more

special.

Back in the living room, Blaise sprawls on our worn couch, his long legs stretched out. I curl up next to him, fitting perfectly against his side. His arm wraps around me, pulling me closer.

"Your mom okay?" he asks.

"Yep. She sleeps pretty well, all things considered."

"You take such good care of her."

"She's all I have." I trace patterns on his chest. "Well, had. Now there's you too."

He stiffens for a moment, then relaxes. "Lucky me."

His reaction unsettles me a little bit. Is he having second thoughts? I tilt my face up to his. "I mean it. These past few weeks with you... I've never felt like this before."

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm glad. You and your mom seem to be doing alright. What happened to your dad again?"

"I was just a baby when he died, but he worked here like Mom did." I snuggle closer.

"So he worked for the Keans?"

"No, the Ifrinns. Mom always says he was the bravest man she knew. Speaking of bravery..." I poke his ribs. "My hero, helping put out that fire the other night."

He catches my hand, bringing it to his lips. "Just doing my job."



"Well, your job got you a promotion. Soon, you'll be running the whole security team."

"Planning my career path already?" His eyes crinkle with amusement.

"Maybe." I grin up at him. "Someone has to look out for your future."

"And that someone is you?"

"Obviously. I make excellent life choices."

His laugh rumbles through his chest, and it soothes the concern I had earlier. "Like letting a guard sweet talk you into a picnic?"

I feel the heat of a blush on my cheeks. "Yes."

Blaise shifts. "What were the Ifrinns like?"

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I lift my head, studying his face. "You ask a lot about them. Why so curious?"

"Just trying to understand where you come from." His green eyes lock with mine.

"The history of this place, now that I'm moving up."

I trace the line of his jaw. "Most people don't know there was another family before the Keans."

He tenses, almost imperceptibly. "That's sort of sad. An entire family forgotten?"

He's right. It is sad. "Not by us. The Keans rebuilt the home. Mom worked in the garden just as Mrs. Ifrinn liked until she got too ill."

"You knew them too?"

"A little. Mom and I lived here then, just like now. The Ifrinns were good people. Kind. Like the Keans."

"Were you close with them?"

My brow furrows, wondering why he has such an interest in the Ifrinns. "Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't. I just..." He pauses. "You're important to me. I want to know everything. If they're mostly forgotten, it sounds like they didn't leave much of a legacy. You can tell me the truth. Did you not like them?"

Something in his tone catches my attention. There's an edge there, hidden beneath the warmth. Like he's searching for specific answers but won't ask the questions.

“Like I said, I was a kid. I didn’t know them well, but my impression of them was that they were nice.”

“Hmm.”

I get the feeling he doesn’t believe me. “I know the Keans better. They’ve been so wonderful to everyone. They took over after that horrible tragedy with such grace. Ronan's father made sure everyone kept their jobs, took care of the staff's families.”

His jaw clenches. He must feel the same annoyance that someone would be after such an upstanding family.

"And now they're under attack." I shake my head.

“I don’t think that was a real attack. I think someone is just fucking with them.”

I stare at him wide-eyed. “Really?”

He nods. “That was designed to make a lot of noise and smoke, but that’s about it.”

“Still, who would do that? After everything the Keans have done for this community.”

He strokes my hair. "Shh. The Keans are well-protected. Especially now."

I take in the man I love and admire. "Thanks to you. You're their hero."

“You give me more credit than I deserve.”

“Modest too.” I give him a quick kiss. “What about your family? You've never mentioned them.”

He tenses again. “Not much to tell. Pretty standard childhood.”

“Standard how?” I shift to face him better. “Where did you grow up?”

He shrugs. “I told you before. Boston, for the most part.”

I bite my lip, sensing his withdrawal. “And your parents?”

“Gone.”

“I'm sorry.” I squeeze his hand.

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"It's been awhile now." His jaw tightens. "Listen, it's getting late. I should head out before your mom needs anything."

"You don't have to go." I press closer, trying to recapture the intimacy from earlier. "Stay. Talk to me."

"Nothing interesting to share." He kisses my temple, but it feels distant. "Some stories aren't worth telling."

The warmth from dinner fades, replaced by a chill I can't explain. Every attempt to know him better hits a wall. He knows everything about my life, my mom, my work, my dreams. But his past remains a mystery, locked away where I can't reach.

"Everyone's story is worth telling," I whisper against his chest.

His arms tighten around me for a moment. "Not mine."

Blaise's silence wraps around us like a heavy blanket. I trace the ink visible at his collar, wanting to bridge this sudden distance between us. His skin burns hot beneath my fingertips.

"Hey." I tilt my face up, meeting those mesmerizing green eyes. "You don't have to tell me everything. Just... don't shut me out."

His breath catches. Something dark and unreadable flashes across his face before he captures my lips with his. The kiss starts gentle, almost hesitant, but quickly blazes into something more. My fingers curl into his shirt as he pulls me closer, practically

into his lap.

My heart pounds against my ribs. Every brush of his lips, every stroke of his hands sets my skin on fire. I've never felt anything like this, an all-consuming need that makes me forget everything else. The questions, the mysteries, they all fade away under the heat of his touch.

"Jenna," he breathes against my mouth, and my name sounds like a prayer and a curse wrapped into one.

I press closer, wanting to dissolve into him completely. His fingers tangle in my hair, tilting my head back as his lips trail down my neck. A soft moan escapes me. The intensity of my feelings for him overwhelms me. I feel like I won't be able to breathe without him.

His hands slide down my back, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I arch into him, lost in the storm of sensation and emotion. Nothing has ever felt this right, this perfect.

When he pulls back, I know he's going to try and leave, but I'm not ready. "Come with me." I stand and reach for his hand. I guide Blaise down to my bedroom.

"Your mom..." he breathes against my ear.

"She's asleep. Her meds knock her out." I twist the doorknob, tugging him inside.

Blaise pushes the door shut and pulls me against him. His mouth claims mine, hungry and demanding. My fingers fumble with his shirt buttons while his hands slide under my top, skimming bare skin.

"So you liked what happened on the picnic," he murmurs against my neck.

“Yes. I want this. Want you.”

His thumbs trace circles on my hips. “But we don't have to...”

Does he not want to? “I know I’m not as pretty?—”

“You can shut the fuck up about that.” His hands cup my cheeks. “You’re beautiful, Jenna. Beautiful and sexy.” He kisses me again, and I press against him, feeling the hard length of his erection. He groans low in his chest, and suddenly, I'm airborne, tossed on the bed. He quickly follows, tugging his clothes off quickly and then lying over me.

“Do you think you can do this without screaming my name when I make you come and waking up your mother?”

A laugh bubbles up in my chest. “I think I can manage.” I arch a brow. “How about you?”

“I guess we’ll find out.” His eyes glitter in the darkness as he hovers over me.

My hands slide up his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath my palms. This moment feels stolen, secret, special. Just ours.

Blaise's lips trace a path down my neck, his touch feather-light. Every brush sends sparks through my body. I bite my lip to keep quiet when his hands slide under my shirt, finding my sensitive nipples, squeezing, rubbing until I’m writhing and moaning beneath him.

“Shh,” he whispers, and I can feel his smile against my skin. His weight presses me into the mattress, grounding me as my head spins with desire.

I arch into him, gasping softly as his hands wander. He swallows my sounds with kisses. The thrill of secrecy, of potentially being caught, adds an edge to every touch. My nails dig into his shoulders when he hits a particularly sensitive spot.

"Easy, love," he breathes against my ear. "Don't want to wake anyone."



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The reminder only makes everything feel more illicit, more intense. I pull him closer, desperate for more contact.

He trails kisses down my neck and lower. His lips wrap around my nipple and suck.

“Oh, God.” I press my hand over my mouth as sensation shoots straight to my core.

I give a little whimper when he stops and continues down, cascading kisses along my stomach and lower. He pushes my thighs open, and I wonder what he’s doing.

He slides his hands under my backside, then looks up at me from between my thighs. “Hold on, sweetheart.”

I realize what he’s about to do, and I’m shocked and excited and embarrassed all at once. “Blaise.”

He gives me a sexy, cocky smile and dips his head. His tongue slides between my folds and oh... my... God. One hand fists in the sheets while the other covers my mouth as the most delicious and torturous sensations pulse through my body.

His mouth is wet and warm as he licks and sucks until I’m a whimpering mess. I feel like every neuron is vibrating, coiling tighter and tighter until my world comes apart. Pleasure floods my body and it’s so, so good.

I feel boneless as Blaise kisses his way back up my body. “Ready for more?”

More? He sinks into me, and I gasp at the invasion and am shocked how my body

once again pulses with energy around him. As he moves, I hold on to him, opening myself to him. Not just my body but my heart, my entire soul.

Emotion and sensation mix and I know, without a doubt, we're meant to be together. Two parts of a whole. Forever.

14

BLAISE

My dick has never had it so good. She's tight, wet, hot, and like an addict, I can seem to get enough of her. I must be losing my mind because I shouldn't be fucking the woman who helped kill my parents. I shouldn't think what a loving and patient daughter she is to care for her mother the way she does. She once again praised the Keans, putting them on a fucking pedestal, while saying my family was forgotten. So yeah, what the fuck is wrong with me?

Even as unsettled as I am, I can't stop. I drive into her body. She arches. She gasps. The way she responds drives me wild, heightening the sensations. It's like she was made for me. God must be a sadist to have the woman I want most in the world be the one who ruined my family's life.

"Blaise." Her fingers dig into my shoulders and I know she's close again. I lever up, sitting back on my heels as I grip her hips and thrust again, and again, and again, watching her tits bounce and sway.

Her pussy clamps around my cock and her body bows up as her orgasm slides through her again. It's all I can do not to come right then and there, but I'm not done. I'm nowhere close.

A nagging thought breaks through the pleasure haze that I'm not using protection.

Again. The responsible thing would be to ask if she's on birth control before I release my load, but I don't. She might have been a virgin, but she's not unworldly. Surely, she knows about birth control and must be on it. She wouldn't be the first woman I've met who took the pill for reasons other than sex.

I roll us over until she's on top of me. "It's your turn."

Her hair is a mess, her lips red and full from kisses. Her hands rest on my chest as she looks down on me with uncertainty. "What do I do?"

"Do what feels natural." My hands on her hips help her move, and it isn't long before she's riding me like a pro. She rocks back and forth, rises up and down, and I'm in fucking heaven.

"Yes... Jenna... fuck..."

"Blaise." Her pussy contracts again, and I feel like I've shoved my dick into a light socket. Stars burst. Electricity sparks. I buck under her, coming so hard I feel the pressure from my head to my toes. My orgasm goes on and on until I can't move. My body is like a wet noodle, limp and immovable.

"God damn," I muster.

"Is that good?"

I nearly laugh. "It's more than good." I tug her down until she's lying on my chest.

She nestles against me. "I love you."

I tense at the words. The trust she places in me should make my revenge easier. Instead, it fucks me up inside. This isn't a game to her. Not a ruse. Not a mission. I'm

succeeding at exactly what I set out to do, and I feel like shit about it.

Her lips find mine in the darkness, and I forget why I ever wanted to hurt her. My hands slide down her sides, memorizing every curve, every shiver that runs through her body at my touch. The way she responds to me is intoxicating, pure, honest desire without calculation or pretense.

"Blaise," she whispers against my mouth, and something inside me breaks.

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I roll her beneath me, drinking in the sight of her, hair spread across the pillow, eyes heavy with want. My original plan seems distant, unreal compared to the solid warmth of her body against mine. This connection between us transcends the physical. It's raw and real in a way I thought only existed in fairy tales.

"You're amazing," I murmur into her skin, and for once I'm not playing a part. The words come straight from my heart.

She arches up to meet me, and I lose myself in her completely. For these precious moments, I'm not an Ifrinn seeking vengeance. I'm just a man falling harder than he ever thought possible.

My release crashes through me as Jenna comes apart in my arms, her body pulsing around mine.

"Oh, God, Blaise..." Her voice breaks on my name.

I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in. My heart thunders in my chest, and it's not just from exertion. This feeling, this warmth spreading through my chest, it's dangerous. Fatal.

She wraps herself around me, all soft curves and tender touches. I should pull away, should maintain distance. Instead, I press closer, letting her sweetness envelope me.

The contentment flowing between us feels right in a way nothing has since my parents died. That thought should anger me, remind me of my purpose. But with her heart beating against mine, thoughts of revenge drift away.

If I can't control this, I'll betray my parents and my brothers. If I follow through on my plan, I won't just break her. I'll break myself. I'm well and truly fucked.

I blink awake in the early morning to find Jenna tracing the tattoos on my chest. Her touch is feather-light, hesitant. When our eyes meet, a blush spreads across her cheeks.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." She starts to pull away.

I catch her hand, pressing it flat against my heart. "Don't stop."

Her fingers resume their exploration, following the dark lines of ink that tell stories she doesn't understand. Stories of loss, of revenge, of a family torn apart. But her innocent touch transforms them into something else, something less bitter, which makes no sense when she's part of the reason I have them.

"I've never..." She bites her lip. "I mean, this is all new to me."

The vulnerability in her voice stirs something protective in my chest. I cup her face, thumb brushing her cheek. "Hey, look at me."

Those green eyes meet mine, full of trust I don't deserve. She's given me everything, her virginity, her heart, her complete faith. And I'm supposed to destroy her.

"You're perfect," I whisper, and I mean it.

Her body relaxes against mine, completely trusting. "I've never felt like this before."

"Neither have I." And it's true, even if I don't want it to be. I trail my fingers down her spine, loving how she shudders in response. "Sneaking boys into your room at night? Who knew you were such a rebel?"

Jenna's cheeks flush pink. "I'm not... I mean, you're the only..." She ducks her head against my chest. "You're the first person I've ever let stay over."

"Not even Ronan sneaking through your window?"

She shakes her head, hair tickling my skin. "No. He doesn't know I exist. And well, I haven't had time for relationships with Mom being sick... or maybe no one was interested until you."

"You're surrounded by idiot men if they're not interested. Lucky me if they're not. I'd hate to have to hurt them."

Her smile is sweet. "I wouldn't want that either. I'm glad it's you, Blaise. You make me feel seen and safe."

"No one's going to hurt you." I wrap my arms around her, drawing her closer. "I won't let them." The irony of that promise isn't lost on me. I came here to hurt her, but now all I want is to protect her from the very pain I planned to inflict.

I press a kiss to her forehead to hide my conflicted expression. She sighs contentedly, completely unaware that she's fallen for the man who plans to destroy her.

She shifts. "I need to check on my mom, but it would be best if you... weren't here." Her expression is apologetic. "It's just that I'm not sure how she'd feel and I'd like to?—"

"Say no more." I roll out of bed and find my pants. "I get it. I've snuck out of girls' bedrooms before." I wince, realizing that's not something a woman wants to hear. Then again, if I can tarnish her opinion of me, perhaps I'll be able to do my fucking job.

“So you’re an expert.”

I give her a sheepish smile. “Maybe we don’t talk about that.”



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She rolls her eyes as she puts on her robe. “You don’t like talking about anything about yourself.”

She’s not wrong. At least in my current situation. If I told her about myself, she’d likely turn me in to Ronan. Perhaps he’d notice her then. Take her to his bed. The idea of it makes me want to walk over and put a bullet into his head now.

I finish dressing and walk over to her. “There’s nothing in my past that is important. I like to live in the now. And right now, I have to sneak out of your room before you mom knows I stayed and gave you multiple orgasms last night.”

The blush to her cheeks is adorable and at the same time makes me feel like the biggest asshole in the world.

“You had at least two,” she quips.

“I did. They were fucking fantastic. I love your pussy, Jenna.”

Her cheeks go a shade pinker. “I love your...”

“Say cock,” I prompt her.

She bites her lower lip. “Cock.”

My dick twitches, and I wish I could have one more fuck before I had to leave. “I’m going to be hard all damn day.”

“Because I said cock?”

“Fuck, you’re doing it again.” I give her a quick kiss and then quietly creep from her room and out of the cottage.

The estate looms before me, the large mansion surrounded by manicured lawns and perfect gardens. For ten years, it’s stood as a symbol of what the Keans stole from my family. But now, looking at the gardens, I don’t see the Keans’ betrayal. Instead, I see Jenna on her knees in the dirt, carefully tending each plant with those gentle hands that traced my tattoos last night.

Fuck. This wasn’t supposed to happen. She’s supposed to pay for her betrayal. Instead, she’s becoming my weakness. I can’t stop replaying the night in my mind. The way she touched me. The soft sounds she made as I claimed her body again and again. How she curled into me afterward, completely trusting. None of it was fake. None of it was calculated. And that terrifies me more than anything else.

The question is, what the hell am I going to do about it?

15

JENNA

My morning is normal. Well, except for the waking up next to Blaise part. I could definitely get used to that.

I prepared my mother’s tea and helped her get ready for the day.

“I half expected Mr. Tine to be here this morning,” she says, watching me over the brim of her cup. Did she hear us last night? I’m mortified by the thought.

I rein in my embarrassment. "Would that be a problem?"

"Awkward, maybe. I know you're a grown woman and need to live your life, but you're still my baby. It's hard to think of your being sexually active."

It's hard to have my mother think of my being sexually active. But at least now I know she's okay with Blaise staying over. Maybe he could move in. No. I can't get ahead of myself. Yes, I love him. Yes, I'd love for this relationship to stand the test of time. But I also recognize there is a lot I don't know, a lot he doesn't seem to want to share, and that requires that I put the brakes on a little bit and not rush this thing.

When I finish with breakfast, I head toward the main house. When I arrive, I see Keira and little Brigit, the Keans' god-daughter, having breakfast. I wonder if the Keans will send them away for their safety. I get the sense Keira wouldn't mind leaving. I don't sense a closeness between her and her parents. But she is fond of the girl.

Before I can say my good mornings, I'm called to a house staff meeting. I join my colleagues in the grand hall, my shoulder brushing against Debbie's.

"What's going on?" I whisper to her. She spends more time inside the house and is privy to more gossip than I am working in the garden.

"I think it has to do with the attack the other day."

Mrs. Kean takes her place at the front of the room and we all quiet down.

"Recent events have made it clear that we need to implement stricter security measures," Mrs. Kean states. "Everyone will receive new ID badges by the end of the week. These must be worn at all times."

I remember Blaise saying he thought the attack was more to cause trouble than harm, but the Keans are treating it more seriously. I'm glad. It seems to me that things have been escalating. I don't want to live in danger, but I don't have other prospects for work that will help me take care of my mom.

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I spot Blaise standing at attention near the door, his face unreadable. Our eyes meet for a moment, but he quickly looks away.

Mr. Patterson, the manager of house security, steps forward. "We'll be installing additional cameras and implementing random bag checks. No exceptions."

A murmur ripples through the crowd. Susan from housekeeping raises her hand. "Even for those of us who've worked here for years?"

"Everyone," Mrs. Kean confirms, her gaze scanning the crowd. "Even if you live on-site or on the grounds. I know these changes may seem extreme, but they're necessary for all our safety."

"Department heads will review specific protocols with their teams," Mr. Patterson continues. "Anyone found in restricted areas without proper clearance will face immediate termination."

The managers' faces are grim as they nod along. Even Debbie, who usually has a smile for everyone, looks severe. Something about their expressions makes my stomach unsettled. Why did Blaise play down the attack when clearly, it triggered big changes?

"We've canceled the breakfast for Saturday. However, we'll be hosting a celebration the following Saturday. I'd hoped to announce this under better circumstances, but we'll be celebrating Ronan's engagement to Hannah O'Donnell."

My gaze jerks to Debbie's, who looks as surprised as I feel at the announcement. I

didn't even know Ronan was dating.

"I thought the Keans and O'Donnell's were having issues," one of the maids says to the woman standing next to her.

"What better way to fix family feuds than an arranged marriage?"

Arranged marriage? Really? That still happens?

"Is it safe?" one of the underbutlers asks Mrs. Kean.

"Absolutely. Despite all these changes, our events will proceed as planned."

I'm concerned too. On the one hand, they're locking us down like Fort Knox, but they're still going to entertain. I'm not sure what to think.

"We refuse to bow to intimidation tactics." Mrs. Kean's chin lifts. "The Kean family will show Boston society that we remain unshaken."

Ronan appears in the doorway, tall and imposing in his tailored suit. My old feelings are dormant at the sight of him now. He takes his place beside his mother, and they share that same steel-spine posture.

"The guest list has been thoroughly vetted," Ronan adds. "Security will be doubled."

"The gardens must be perfect." Mrs. Kean's gaze finds mine. "Miss Hart, I trust you'll have everything ready? That little stunt a few days ago scorched some of the bushes near the entrance."

"I'll clean it up and plant something new."

"Good. Also, I'd like you to help with the kitchen and serving staff. I'm more comfortable with you doing it than bringing in outside help."

"Of course." I'm pleased that she trusts me.

"Hampton and I expect nothing less than excellence. This party will remind everyone exactly who the Keans are."

I catch Blaise shifting his weight by the door, his jaw tight. When our eyes meet this time, there's something dark in his expression that I can't quite read. Is he upset that people are being invited in, making his job of protecting the Keans harder? Except he indicated the attack wasn't that serious.

"That will be all," Mrs. Kean says with a wave of her hand. "Return to work. We have a celebration to prepare for."

I trail behind Debbie as we exit the grand hall. The new security measures should make me feel safer, but I actually feel more unsettled. At least the Keans are taking real steps to protect us all.

"Can you believe this?" Debbie whispers. "Bag checks? Like we're terrorists or something."

"After what happened with the explosions, I'd rather be safe."

"I guess." Debbie shrugs. "But random checks? New badges? Feels like overkill."

"Remember the break-in last year? And now the explosions. Someone's clearly targeting the family."

"True." She glances around before leaning closer. "Think it has anything to do with

those rumors about Mr. Kean's business dealings?"



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I look at her in confusion. “What dealings?”

She tugs me to the side and scans the area as if she doesn’t want anyone to hear. “You know. That article that came out a while ago that hinted that the Keans may have been involved in shady deals and the disappearance of a family.”

I’d forgotten that. I’m not so naïve not to know that the Keans’ business practices could be questionable, but what corporation doesn’t lie, cheat, and exploit the law? But I can’t believe they’d make a family disappear.

“That was a while ago. Why would that be an issue now?” I ask.

“Because of all the increased trouble.”

My emotions are playing tug-of-war. Should I feel less safe because of all this or more safe because of the additional security being put in?

Over in the foyer, I spot Blaise conferring with Mr. Patterson. His presence among the security team settles something in my chest. Whatever threats are out there, we have good people watching over us.

“I don’t think we need to worry.”

Debbie laughs. “You don’t. Not with your badass boyfriend keeping you safe at night.”

I gape at her. Does she know he slept in my bed?

“Heard he got a promotion.”

My cheeks warm. "He was just doing his job." But she's right. I do feel extra secure having Blaise here.

She tilts her head. “You’re not upset that Ronan is engaged?”

“No.” And I’m not. “I’ve got something better.”

“Yeah, you do, girl.” Debbie waggles her brows.

We return to the kitchen to discover others contemplating about the uptick in trouble and linking it to the article. I make a mental note to find the article and read it again. I wonder who the reporter interviewed and why that person would tell such lies? Perhaps it’s a part of all the trouble we’ve been having. The Keans are big on reputation. Perhaps this assault isn’t just to harass them at home but also to ruin their standing in the community.

Maybe I could call the reporter and tell them all the wonderful things the Keans have done. I’m a nobody, but that is what would make my story all the more impactful. The Keans don’t owe me anything, and yet, they gave my mother a job when the Ifrinns died. And they gave me my mother’s job when she got ill and allowed us to stay.

I’ll ask my mom her thoughts, and if she thinks it’s a good idea, perhaps I can bring it up to Mrs. Kean. Or Ronan. I owe them so much. The least I can do is stand up for them against this terrible onslaught of false rumors and attacks.

After my appearance this morning, I sneak away, making an excuse about checking a section of the property. Slipping away unnoticed will be harder now that I've been promoted, but I know Ronan and Hampton are in town at the office, so I'm counting on my absence not being noticed.

The woods beyond the property shield me from the Keans' surveillance cameras. I move swiftly now, no longer needing stealth. Flint's motorcycle idles along the road, right on schedule.

He scoots forward on the seat to make room for me. "Cutting it close."

"Unexpected security meeting this morning." I climb on the back of his bike, and we race off to Phoenix's place.

I'm barely in the door when Ash is on my ass. "Any progress on getting closer to Ronan?"

"Got a promotion. He's keeping me closer now." I sink into a chair, happy to take a load off for a moment. "They're still throwing a party... Ronan's engagement to Hannah O'Donnell. I think it will be a good time to hit." I pull out building schematics I lifted from security and set them on the table.

"Hannah O'Donnell?" Flint asks. "I've been hearing grumblings that O'Donnell isn't happy with Hampton. Never has been, actually."

"All the more reason to have an arranged marriage. Anyway, I'll be coordinating guards for the party."

Ash studies the blueprints, his finger tracing potential entry points.

"They've got bigger balls than I thought," Phoenix says. "I'd have thought they'd

cancel the party.”

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“I think Lucy’s story hit them harder than the attack. They’re scrambling to save face with this party.”

"More than scrambling." Flint's lips curl into a satisfied smirk. "Some partners are getting nervous, including O'Donnell, especially after Lucy's story. Phoenix is making contact with him."

“Really?” I arch a brow. “As an Ifrinn?”

“Not yet, but soon.” Phoenix glances at me and then Ash. “We’ll need to offer something to build a partnership with him.”

“Like what?” I don’t like how he’s looking at me. Ash is making a face.

“Let’s focus on the Keans and this party.”

I pull the guard rotation schedules and guest list, setting them on the table by the blueprints. "They're inviting every influential family in Boston. Hampton needs to prove he's still in control. But they're paranoid. Double the normal security detail. We'll need perfect coordination to pull this off."

Ash crosses his arms. "What about the girl? Is she going to be a problem?"

I tense. "Jenna's not a threat. She'll be working the party."

"That's not what I meant." Ash's eyes narrow. "Your little side quest to make her pay. Is that going to be a problem?"

“Why would it be?” I snarl, annoyed. I’m hoping he thinks I’m irritated that he’s questioning my ability and not see that it is difficult. Some way, somehow, Jenna has gotten under my skin.

"Just remember why we're here," Phoenix cuts in. "We can't afford any complications."

I nod, pushing away memories of Jenna's smile, her gentle touch. "Trust me. When this is over, she'll know exactly who I am. They all will." I focus on her betrayal. She gave away our home's vulnerability. She fucking stole my mother's lasagna recipe. She worships the Keans, for fuck's sake.

"Speaking of Jenna..." Flint's tone carries an edge I don't like. "You sure you're not getting too close?"

"Please." I force a laugh, keeping my voice steady. "She's desperate for attention, starved for affection. The kind of girl who'd do anything for someone who shows her a scrap of kindness." And she did, for Ronan.

“You’re sure she’s not remembering you? Or her mom?” Ash asks.

I shake my head. “She was thirteen when it happened. She says the Ifrinns have been all but forgotten.” My fingers curl into fists. "She worships the Keans. Thinks they're some kind of saviors who nobly took over after our parents' 'tragic accident'."

Ash and Phoenix nod, seemingly accepting my response.

Flint, on the other hand, isn't sold. "That doesn't answer the question."

"Neither of them recognizes me. There's no way she'd be able to hide if she did. She's one of those people who wears their emotions on their sleeve. I've got her

wrapped around my finger. She won't know what hit her when she realizes who I really am and I make her pay."

"She's not our priority," Phoenix says.

"She's the key that let Ronan in," Flint says.

"But like you said, Blaise, she was thirteen with a schoolgirl crush. I'm not saying we don't use any information we get from her. I'm just saying she isn't our priority. Ronan set that fire. Hampton is the one who wanted us all dead."

"So who is on our list? They wanted to kill us all, but Phoenix, you've been adamant about no women and kids. What about Mrs. Kean? Ronan's sister, Keira? They've got some godchild living there too." Keira and the child, Brigit, are rarely seen publicly or even in the house. It's almost like they live separate lives in a different wing of the house. The few times I've seen Keira, I think she likes to stay out of her parents' way as much as possible.

Phoenix's jaw tightens when I mention Ronan's sister. It makes me wonder if he ever got over that little fling he had with her during better times.

"What, now they're taking in orphans?" Flint says.

"I don't know. To be honest, the only person who shows an interest in the kid is Keira. And Keira... there's something going on there. She might beat us to the punch and kill her parents in their sleep. She keeps to herself, but you can see there's no love lost there," I report.

"Our targets are Ronan and Hampton." Phoenix's response is firm, decisive. Almost like he doesn't want to discuss the others, or perhaps Keira.

“And Jenna,” Flint adds. “Woman or not, she was instrumental in the Keans’ carrying out our family’s destruction.”

I should be glad that he sees her as complicit and needing to pay, but hearing it from him doesn’t sit right. It’s proof that I’m fucked up inside.



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“Ronan and Hampton are our targets,” Phoenix reiterates. “And if I understand Blaise, he just wants to crush Jenna’s spirit, not kill her. I’m not averse to that.”

“Can you do that?” Flint asks me.

"She's just another pawn," I assure them, needing to convince myself as much as them. "I won't let anything compromise our revenge."

"I feel like I've heard that before," Ash says with a look at Flint. "Look how that turned out."

"Hey," Flint says, annoyed. "It turned out awesome. I'm happier than any of you motherfuckers. I've got a fantastic wife, an awesome son, and because of Lucy, we know Jenna was the snitch, and her article has pushed the Keans back on their heels."

Ash shakes his head. "I stand corrected. If you want to fall in love and make babies with Jenna, the woman who?—"

"I don't." But my insides do a full somersault. I’m not sure if it’s because the idea is ridiculous or the disturbing realization that I haven't used protection with Jenna. Not once. Fucking hell.

"You okay?" Flint asks.

"Yeah, just..." The words stick in my throat. I've been so caught up in revenge, in playing my part, that I didn't think about the consequences. A baby. My baby. With Jenna. The woman I'm supposed to destroy.

“It’s all good,” I say, but my voice lacks conviction. I’ll find out if she’s on anything, make sure there’s no chance. But even as I think that, I know it might be too late. We’ve been together multiple times. And the thought of her carrying my child while I plot to break her heart makes me feel sick.

“Has she been able to give any insights that help us get to Ronan and Hampton?” Phoenix, always focused on the plan, asks.

“No. She’s focused on her job and caring for her mother. But like I said, she’s full-on in love with me. If we need her to do something, I’m sure I can manipulate her into doing it.”

“Even if it involves Ronan? I thought you said she had a thing for him and thinks the family walks on water,” Ash reminds me.

I give him an irritated glare. “As Phoenix says, she’s not our focus, so why are your boxers all in a bunch?”

Ash gives me the finger.

“Has she said why she betrayed us?” Flint asks.

It’s the one question I don’t know the answer to yet. “No. I’m working on it.”

“Hopefully, in your off time,” Phoenix says.

“Maybe she was used? Or didn’t realize what she was doing?”

We all look at Flint.

“Are you defending her?” I ask. “The woman who invited the enemy in?”

“She was a kid. And I’m not defending her, I’m just saying maybe she doesn’t realize?—”

“She told Ronan how to break past our defenses. How do you do that by accident?” Ash asks.

Flint shrugs. “Just saying.”

"We need to discuss guard placement," Ash says, but I barely hear him because it's possible Flint is right. I could totally see Jenna giving away some bit of information out of infatuation. But how could she not put two and two together? She gave information and right after, our home was invaded. And the person she gave the information to took over everything.

"Blaise?" Flint waves a hand in front of my face. "You with us?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Guard rotations. I gave you the current schedule there. I'll get you the party schedule when I make it."

Phoenix and Ash debate strategy, their words sharp with revenge, but all I can think about is Jenna's gentle touch and sweet smile. The way she hums while she works in her garden. Her quiet strength as she cares for her dying mother. How can she be both an innocent, sweet woman and a monster?

"Earth to Blaise," Flint snaps. "Get your head in the game."

I straighten, forcing myself to focus on the blueprints. If they knew the war I'm constantly playing against myself in regard to Jenna, my brothers would call me weak. Maybe I am.

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The meeting breaks up, and I follow Flint back out to his motorcycle so he can bring me back to the house. I've been gone for just about an hour, so I need to get back before anyone starts to wonder where I am.

Even without looking, I sense his concern. It's always been this way between us, that twin connection everyone talks about.

"You're falling for her." It's not a question.

"Don't start." How can he fucking tell? Is that part of the woo-woo twin thing too?

Flint blocks my path. "I've seen that look before." He taps his chest. "In the mirror, when I was fighting my feelings for Lucy."

"This is different. Jenna helped kill our parents."

"It's why I know you caught feelings. If you were as pissed at her now as when you entered that home, she'd already be suffering a broken heart and you'd know exactly why she betrayed us."

"She did it for Ronan."

Flint purses his lips and stares at me in a way that reminds me of our mother when she wasn't buying whatever excuse we were trying to sell her.

"She was a thirteen-year-old girl with a crush. She's not the same person."

He's not wrong about that. "She's nothing like I expected. She's..." I struggle to find the right words. "Pure. Genuine. The way she cares for her mom, how she lights up when talking about her garden. She fucking looks at me like the sun rises and sets by me."

"And that scares the hell out of you."

"Either she's the world's best actress or..."

"Or we were wrong about her involvement." Flint finishes my thought. "Look, I get it. Revenge is simpler when the enemy has a clear face. But sometimes, hate and revenge hurt you more than the person you're pissed at. Look at me and Lucy. I found something better than hatred."

Something twists in my chest. The image of a future, a real one, not built on lies and revenge, flashes through my mind. Jenna in my arms, genuine smiles, maybe even...

No. I can't think like that. "That's different. Lucy was innocent."

"And you're sure Jenna isn't?" He raises an eyebrow.

I stare him in the eyes. "She told Ronan how to get into the house. Our house. Whatever her reasons, that alone means she's not innocent. Our parents are dead because of her. Our legacy is gone because of her. So I don't care if she was manipulated or blinded by love. Her actions destroyed us. Even people who accidentally kill people have to pay for their actions. She has to pay, Flint."

He holds his arms up in surrender. "Okay, okay. I just... you look like shit. Like you're fighting with your soul or something."

"I've got this under control." It's a fucking lie. Every time Jenna touches me, every

genuine smile she gives, chips away at my control. It would be so much simpler if she were the monster I'd imagined, cold, calculating, deserving of my revenge.

“You sure?”

I motion to his bike. “Can we go now before they start looking for me?”

He shrugs and gets on his bike, with me climbing on the back. Moments later, the engine drowns out everything but my thoughts blowing through my head like a whirling dervish.

When he lets me off, Flint says, “The mission is Hampton and Ronan, so if you want to leave the girl out of it?”

“I don’t. Now fuck off and let me do my job.” I don’t look at him as I scale the wall again, glad that I was in control of security that would let me leave and return unnoticed. I head back to the security office, passing Jenna’s cottage. My heart beats hard, my chest filling with emotion, and it pisses me off. I’m stronger than this. I have a mission, and I can’t let my libido or whatever the fuck is going on inside me get in the way.

I can’t let my family down. The Keans need to pay for their treachery. So does Jenna. With the party coming, it’s time for me to find out the truth about her and then put an end to us.

17

JENNA

I didn’t see Blaise most of the day, except for a short moment when he told me to dress up because we were going to dinner.

Now, standing in front of the mirror, I can't stop smiling as I smooth down my dress, the nicest one I own. My reflection in the mirror shows a girl I barely recognize. These past weeks with Blaise have been like living in a dream.

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The knock at my door makes my heart skip. I open it to find Blaise looking devastatingly handsome in a tailored suit, his green eyes sparkling as they take me in.

"You look beautiful," he says, drawing me close for a kiss. Yes, I'm living a fairy tale.

"You look handsome." More like a million bucks. If I didn't know better, I might think he came from money. The suit fits him like a glove.

I look over my shoulder. "You'll be okay, Mom?"

"You two have fun. Don't you worry about me. I'll be just fine."

The restaurant he takes me to is the fanciest place I've ever been. It's the sort of place the Keans might go to, or movie stars.

I feel out of place. "I've never been anywhere this nice."

Blaise's hand finds mine across the table. "You deserve nice things. I want to give them to you."

I'm confused. Not that I thought he was poor, but I never thought he was the type to afford places like this. If he's rich, why is he working for the Keans as a guard?

"I hope you're not wasting all your money on me."

"I don't have much opportunity to spend money. I might as well spend it when I can



on you.”

After years of caring for Mom and pining after someone who never saw me, having someone want to spoil me feels surreal.

"Thank you," I say softly. "For everything. These past weeks have been amazing."

His smile falters for just a moment before returning brighter than before. He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles that sends shivers down my spine.

Blaise orders a bottle of wine I can't pronounce. Everything gleams, from the polished silverware to the gold-rimmed plates.

"Have you been here before?" I fidget with my napkin, hyper-aware of how out of place I must look.

"No. But I've heard the duck here is excellent. Would you like me to order for both of us?"

I nod, grateful. The menu prices make my head spin, and half the dishes are in French.

The sommelier appears with our wine, presenting the bottle to Blaise who swirls, sniffs, and tastes it with practiced ease. My brow furrows. For someone who told me he grew up ordinary, he moves through this world of luxury like he was born to it.

"How do you know so much about wine?" I ask.

"Picked it up here and there." He redirects smoothly, reaching across to take my hand. "You look stunning tonight. That green brings out your eyes."

The compliment makes me blush, momentarily forgetting my curiosity. When the waiter returns, Blaise orders in French.

He catches my surprised look and winks. "High school French class really paid off."

I laugh, but something niggles at the back of my mind. Everything about him tonight feels... different. More polished. Like he's revealing glimpses of someone else entirely. It's unsettling until he smiles, and I'm dazzled by it. I push the confusing thoughts away. He's just trying to give me a special evening. And boy, is he succeeding. I need to appreciate it.

After dinner, Blaise leads me to a small dance floor tucked into the corner of the restaurant where other couples sway to the live jazz band.

I've never really danced before, not like this. "I don't know how."

Blaise pulls me close, one hand settling on my waist. "Just follow my lead."

His chest is solid against mine as we start to move. The music wraps around us, and somehow, my feet know exactly where to go. Blaise guides me with subtle pressure, making me feel graceful instead of clumsy.

"See? Natural talent." His breath tickles my ear.

I laugh softly, relaxing into his embrace. "More like excellent teaching."

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We turn slowly, and I catch our reflection in one of the mirrors lining the walls. We fit together perfectly—his height, my curves, the way my head tucks just under his chin. The sight fills my heart. This feels right. Everything with Blaise feels natural, like we were meant to find each other. I close my eyes and breathe him in.

After dancing, he escorts me to the entrance of a posh, expensive hotel. “If you want to go home, I’ll take you, but I thought it might be nice to be together with some champagne and a very large bed.”

My girlie parts sing. “I’d like that.”

He gives me a cocky, knowing smile. “I thought you might.”

Up in the room, he takes the already waiting bucket with the bottle of champagne and brings it into a bathroom that is nearly the size of my cottage.

“How about a bath and champagne?”

I didn’t think I could ever feel more like I was living a romance than I do at this moment. “Sounds wonderful.”

Steam curls around us as Blaise fills the massive marble tub. He undresses, and for a moment all I can do is look at his perfect form. He’s tall and strong, sculpted. His tattoos are like art on his chest. He could stand like this in a museum and people would admire his beauty.

“You need to strip too.”

I quickly undress.

Blaise holds out his hand. "Come here." He helps me into the tub, his gaze intense. The way he looks at me with hunger makes body come alive. No one's ever looked at me like that before.

The water is perfectly hot as I sink in, my back against his chest. He hands me a glass of champagne and I sip the cool bubbly. I want to pinch myself because this moment with this man feels so surreal, like a fantasy come true.

Blaise sets his glass aside and slides his hands over my shoulders. I melt into his touch.

"I like touching you," he murmurs, pressing kisses down my neck. "So responsive."

His fingers trail lower, skimming my sides, and I gasp. Every touch feels electric, like he's lighting me up from the inside out. I set my glass aside, and water sloshes as I turn to face him, straddling his lap.

"Do you like it?"

He laughs. "Have I given any indication that I don't?"

I duck my head, feeling a little embarrassed at needing his reassurance.

"Yes, I like it. I like it a lot." Blaise captures my mouth in a searing kiss that steals my breath. His hands tangle in my hair, angling my head to deepen the kiss. My body, already humming, begins to sizzle with need. I rock against him, desperate for more contact.

"Tell me what you want," he growls against my lips.

"You. Just you."

"Who?"

"You."

He stops, holding my head with his hands. "Say my name, Jenna. I need to know that you're not thinking of Ronan Kean when I fuck you."

His words shock me. Does he think that? A part of me feels like it's a step too far. But another part knows that my history of pining for Ronan is long. Perhaps like me, Blaise just needs reassurance.

"Blaise. I want Blaise Time."

"What would you do for me?" His hands cup my breasts, kneading and sucking until I can hardly think.

I grip his head to me, wanting to make sure he doesn't stop. "Anything."

"Anything? Would you suck my dick for me?" His fingers slide between my legs, and I gasp, partly at his words and partly from the shock of pleasure that rockets through me.

"Yes. I've never..." The words are lost as his fingers thrust inside me. My hips rock, riding his fingers as pressure builds in my core.

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“Would you tell me secrets?”

His words are filtering in by snippets. Sort of like when the reception on a radio goes in and out. “Secrets?”

“Would you betray others for me?”

“I, ah...” My orgasm slams into me so hard that for a moment, I can’t breathe. I’m barely done when Blaise gets out of the tub and has me join him.

He makes me face the mirror, and I’m a little afraid only because this is so different. At the same time, I know I love him and I want to make him happy.

He stands behind me, his eyes watching me through the reflection in the mirror. “Look at me, Jenna.”

I do as he says, my hands resting on the sink counter as I prepare for whatever he’s going to do.

“Look at the man you say you love.”

“I do love you.” I want to turn and face him, but his hands are on my hips.

He presses his dick between my thighs, and arousal blooms in me again. “Would you do anything for me?”

“Yes. Anything.”

“Just like you did for Ronan?”

What? I don't know what he's saying. But I don't have time to ask as he thrusts inside me, filling me.

He shocks me by lightly biting my shoulder as he finds a steady rhythm driving in and out of me. “Who's fucking you, Jenna?”

“You—ah—Blaise.”

“And you like it.”

“Yes. I love it. I love you.” I give in to the sensations overwhelming me. I don't understand what's going on with him, but I trust him. Maybe something happened at work and he needs this to let off steam.

“Fuck... I'm close. Touch yourself. Touch your clit and make yourself come.”

I do as he asks and immediately, pleasure blasts through me.

His fingers grip my hips and he throws his head back as he lets out a feral growl. He bucks into me, again and again. Each time, warmth fills my womb.

He drops his head to my shoulder, and I wait, unsure of his mood. He steps back abruptly and shakes his head. “Fuck.”

He grabs a robe and wraps it around my shoulders. Then he yanks a towel from the rack, wrapping it around his hips and leaving the bathroom.

I'm stunned as I look at myself in the mirror. What just happened? I slip my hand through the sleeves of the robe.

I leave the bathroom to find Blaise standing at the window with what looks like a double pour of something potent.

I stand watching him, not sure what to do.

He doesn't look at me when he speaks. "I was rough. Did I hurt you?"

"No." I wait a beat. This moment makes me realize there is still a lot I don't know about him. It doesn't change how I feel, though. It only reminds me that I need to take things slow. "I... ah... Ronan isn't?—"

"Don't."

"I just... if you're worried?—"

"Don't."



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My mouth snaps shut. What's going on with him?

For a moment, I wait, but all he does is look out the window and down his drink. Should I leave? Should I just keep waiting?

Finally, I move closer to him, but I don't touch him. I look at him through the reflection in the window instead of directly.

"I don't know what's going on, but I've waited for a man like you, Blaise. You're all I've dreamed about but never thought was real."

His eyes close, and I hold my breath, wondering if he's upset at my words or if they're reaching him. He turns to me, and I shift to look at him.

"Who are you?" he asks.

I don't know what he's asking from me, so I simply say, "I'm just me. Jenna."

His eyes are piercing and intense as he stares at me. It's like he's looking for something. I hope he finds it.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He gives a small laugh. "I don't know." He seems to be coming back.

"I liked the way you touched me before. You didn't hurt me."

He nods and turns his attention back out the window. Am I losing him again?

“You asked if I’d suck your dick. Can I do that now?”

His head whips to look at me.

I bite my lower lip and take a chance by tugging his towel until it drops. “I might not be good at it, but I want to learn.” I slowly lower down until I’m on my knees. His dick is slowly thickening, hardening. It’s amazing to watch. “Your dick seems to like the idea.”

“Fucking hell, Jenna...” His voice is strained, almost like he’s conflicted. But then he says, “Treat it like a lollipop.”

I smile up at him. “I like lollipops.” I take a breath and then snake my tongue out to lick him. The skin is soft and warm, while underneath is hard. He lets out a harsh grunt.

Feeling empowered, I suck the tip of him into my mouth.

He groans again, his fingers lacing through my hair as he holds me to him.

I’m still unsettled by the change in him, but relationships can’t always be rainbows, right? I need to be here for him, to support him in whatever challenges he’s facing. And if right now, all I do is make him feel good, then that’s what I’ll do.

18

BLAISE

This woman is going to be the death of me. One minute, I’m charging forward, doing

what I set out to do, force her to tell me why she helped Ronan kill my family. I'm rough and demanding, and fucking hell, she goes with it. It's hotter than fuck and short wires my brain until I feel sick from what an asshole I'm being. The drink and disengaging to stare at nothing out the window aren't helping. Especially when she joins me, looking sweet and innocent and eager for more. Who the fuck is this woman?

But now she's kneeling in front of me, her strawberry lips wrapped around my cock, and I'm gone. Completely helpless. Powerless to resist her. I should resign from my brothers' plan because clearly, I'm ineffective. If I'm not strong enough to resist Jenna, how can I possibly use her to take down the Keans?

She makes an "mmm" sound that reverberates along my cock, sending a shock of pleasure coursing in my blood.

"Take it deeper," I demand, pushing my dick deeper into her mouth.

She looks a little surprised, but she doesn't resist. Whatever I ask, she does. Which takes me back to whatever Ronan asked, she did. The arousal mixes with anger again. I rock, fucking her mouth. Her eyes water, but she doesn't move to stop. She sucks and licks and in the end, she wins, bringing me to my knees as I come hard.

She stares at me, looking uncertain. "Was that okay?"

Good God, this woman... I can't take it anymore. "It was great. I'm just going to clean up."

Once again, I leave her side because I can't deal with my conflicting emotions. I look at myself in the bathroom mirror wondering if this is how Flint felt as he fell for Lucy. But Lucy wasn't a traitor. Lucy hadn't hurt our family. So no, it couldn't be the same.

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When I return to the main room, Jenna is lying on the bed. "We still haven't used this big bed."

My dick perks up at that, the fucking traitor. "I'll need a few minutes."

"Okay." She smiles, and I feel like I've been pushed off a ledge and am free falling.

I lie next to her, and she nestles into my arms, her head resting on my chest.

"It feels like forever since I've been away from the estate," she says, curling closer to me. "I mean, we had dinner the other night, but this feels different. Like an escape. Between Mom and work, I barely leave the grounds anymore."

My fingers trace patterns on my arm. "You work too hard." And it's true. She's on twenty-four, seven between the Keans and her mom.

"Maybe." She lifts her head to look at him. "But the Keans have been good to us. Especially with Mom's medical bills. I owe them."

I fight the tension that wants to snap. Seems like they owed her for helping them destroy my family. "Still. Everyone needs a break sometimes."

"That's why I'm grateful for you." She presses a kiss to my jaw. "You make me feel normal again. Like there's more to life than just... surviving."

I resist the urge to tell her what real survival is like. How to escape a burning house fire. Dealing with the grief of losing your parents. Having people you thought were

allies take everything from you. Had we not run and hidden, the Keans would have killed us too.

“Are you worried about the problems at the estate? I can't believe they're still having the party after everything that's happened.” She shudders. “What if something happens during the event?”

I’m planning on it. But I play my part. ““Hey. Nothing's going to happen. Security's been doubled.”

“But why take the risk at all? Mr. and Mrs. Kean seem so determined to prove everything's fine when it's clearly not. I've never seen the estate like this. Everyone's on edge.”

“The Keans know what they're doing.” It’s so fucking hard to act like I’m on the Keans’ side. “They wouldn't put anyone in danger.”

She bites her lip like she’s not convinced. “I just worry. About your being in the middle of it all. About Mom being so close to the main house.” She looks down at our intertwined fingers. “I couldn't bear it if anything happened to either of you.”

“It will be okay.” I hold back on offering a promise.

“I just don't understand who'd want to hurt the Keans,” she says, annoying me with her inability to let this go. “They've done so much good for the community. For me and Mom.”

“Sometimes, people aren't what they seem.”

“It's like history repeating itself. First the Ifrinns, now this. What kind of monsters would?—”

"The Ifrinns?" The invocation of my name makes my voice come out sharp.

"Sorry, I shouldn't... It's just bringing up old memories. But it's so strange that these attacks are happening again."

"Everything's under control. Trust me." I'm near my limit. I'm about to expose myself. But I can't. Not yet.

"How can you be so sure? What if next time, someone gets hurt?"

"That won't happen."

"I feel so helpless." Her green eyes hold mine, like she's trying to make me understand her thoughts or like she thinks I can do anything about it. "Like we're just waiting for the next attack. And now this party... it feels reckless."

"The increased security?—"

"Isn't enough!" she snaps, surprising me with the outburst. "Sorry, I just... I'm scared, Blaise. And angry. Why us? Why now? Nothing makes sense anymore."

I'm beginning to wonder if she knows what the Keans do. They've actually been pretty lucky not to have more problems over the last ten years.

"The Keans have a way of doing business that sometimes upsets others."

She purses her lips at me. "All businesses do sketchy things, but you don't go around spreading rumors and blowing up their homes."

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Tell that to the Keans, I think but don't say.

She sits up next to me. "I've been thinking that maybe we could help the Keans fight these rumors. I could talk to some reporters about all the good they've done for me and Mom."

My body goes cold. "What?"

"Well, they helped so many of us after the fire?—"

"No." Her words feel like a knife in my chest. Once again, she wants to help the people who killed my family.

She pulls back, her eyes wide. "But if people knew..."

The truth is sitting on the tip of my tongue. The Keans are murderers who stole everything from the Ifrinns, and you helped them. You're complicit, Jenna. How does it feel to be a murderer?

I take a breath. "The press will twist anything you say. Or people will think the Keans paid you to say it. Plus, the Keans might not like a lowly staff person acting like they can save the family. It's better to stay out of it."

"I just want to help." She reaches for my hand, but I roll out of bed. It's time to end this before I blow the mission altogether. "Blaise? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just drop it, okay?"

"I don't understand why you're so upset. If we could show people the real Keans?—"

"The real Keans?" I let out a bitter laugh. "You don't—" I stop myself.

"I don't what?" She rises from the bed, standing before me, arms crossed. "Why are you acting like this?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. "The press is dangerous, Jenna. They'll dig into everything, everyone. Including you. Including your mom. Is that what you want?"

"No, but?—"

"Then leave it alone." I need to get this ship back on track. I soften my voice. "Please."

She studies my face like she's trying to read my mind and figure me out. Before she can say anything, her phone rings. She pulls it from her purse and answers it. Immediately, her expression falls.

"What? But I just saw her... She was fine."

Shit. That doesn't sound good.

"I'm coming. Tell her I'm coming." The words tumble out of her as she scrambles to find her clothes.

I catch her shoulders. "What happened?"

"Mom's in the hospital. I have to—I need to?—"

"I'll drive you." I quickly dress, and we hurry to the hospital. I pull into the



emergency entrance. "Go. I'll park and find you."

Jenna is out of the car before it fully stops.

I park and head to the emergency room. Jenna isn't there, and I hope that means she's able to see her mother. I'm worried sick. I'm worried for Mrs. Hart, who I don't have any qualms with. And I'm worried for Jenna, who a few minutes ago, I wanted to hurt the way she made me and my brothers hurt.

What the hell am I doing? This isn't part of the plan. I'm getting tangled up in her life, feeling things I have no business feeling. But I can't shut it off, this need to protect her, comfort her, be there for her. Maybe I'm crazy.

I pace the hospital waiting room replaying Jenna's earlier words about defending the Keans to the press. The family that murdered my parents. The family she helped.

The rage I need to follow through on my mission bubbles up. The Keans took everything from us, and here's Jenna, ready to sing their praises.

But then Jenna emerges, eyes red and puffy, and something in my chest constricts. She walks straight into my arms, burying her face in my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt.

"The doctors say she's stable," she whispers. "But her heart... it's getting worse."

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I stroke her hair, hating how natural it feels to comfort her. How right she fits against me. My brothers would be disgusted if they could see me holding the enemy close instead of crushing her. But that's the problem, I realize. I don't see an enemy when I look at Jenna anymore. I see a woman with a gentle soul and fierce love for her family.

Just like I loved mine.

Except... My parents are dead because of her. Because she helped Ronan Kean get to them. No amount of sweetness or vulnerability can erase that betrayal.

I tighten my hold on her, torn between wanting to protect her and wanting to make her pay. Between the mission I swore to complete and these unwanted feelings growing stronger by the day. Something is going to give, and I'm worried what will happen when it does.

Jenna returns to her mother's side when I assure her that I'll wait. As the time passes slowly, I sit to rest, but I can't sleep. The hospital chair digs into my back as memories of earlier tonight flood my mind. Jenna's soft skin under my hands at the hotel, her breathy moans against my neck, the way she arched into me.

"I love you," she'd whispered.

I scrub my hands over my face, trying to erase the image of her trusting eyes, her complete surrender. When I first seduced her, it was calculated, each touch designed to make her fall for me so I could destroy her later. Now I crave touching her, not for revenge, but for the pure pleasure of being with her.

The way she gasps my name. How she clings to me afterward, pressing lazy kisses to my chest. The smile that lights up her whole face when I walk into a room.

Fuck. The guilt churns in my gut. Either I'm the world's biggest asshole for enjoying intimacy with someone I plan to destroy or I'm betraying my family by developing real feelings for the girl who helped kill our parents.

There's no winning here. No way this ends well for either of us.

A doctor walks by, and I hurriedly move to intercept him. "Mrs. Hart. What's going on with her?"

"You are?"

"Her son. My sister is with her now." The lie comes easily. If only I could lie to myself, I could tell myself that Jenna is a monster who needs to be destroyed and believe it.

The doctor glances at his chart, his expression grim. "Her heart is failing rapidly. The medications aren't working as effectively anymore."

"How long?" They're not just waiting for her to die, are they?

The doctor's hesitation tells me everything. "Without a transplant... a few months. Her condition is deteriorating faster than we anticipated. She's on the transplant list, but there are many in front of her."

"How do we move her up?"

He arches a brow. "There's no official way. Those before her get a heart or... some may pass, but?—"

"There has to be something else you can do."

"We're doing everything we can. I'm sorry." He turns to walk away, but I can't let him go. I know what it's like to lose parents. I want my revenge on Jenna, but not like this.

"What would it take to have something unofficial?"

"There is no unofficial route."

"There's always an unofficial route," I say, leaning in closer. "I work for Hampton Kean, who's fond of Mrs. Hart."

"Wait, I thought you said you were?—"

"I have money, if that's what it takes. But you'll make this happen..." I let the threat hang. If this gets back to Hampton, I'm fucked. Maybe I should tell him who I really am, but the Ifrinns are all but forgotten. The name doesn't carry the weight that it used to.

The fear in his eyes tells me he understands what I'm saying.

"Even if I could move her up the list, you never know when a heart will come available."

"Mrs. Hart gets priority. You pull every string, call in every favor, I don't care what it takes." My fingers dig into his whitecoat. "Because if anything happens to her, if Jenna has to watch her mother die?—"

"I understand." He nods frantically.

"Good." I release him with a shove. "And Doctor? This conversation never happened."

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He straightens his coat with trembling hands. "Of course. Please let Mr. Kean know that I'll take care of Mrs. Hart personally."

I watch him hurry away. I can't deny it feels good to throw my weight around for a good cause. I hate that I had to use the Kean name to do it, though. But I couldn't stand by and do nothing. I can't watch Jenna suffer through the same loss that broke me. Not even for revenge.

19

JENNA

My back aches as I push myself up from the flower beds. I've been running myself ragged these past two weeks, splitting time between taking care of my mother after she was released from the hospital and working extra duties to prepare for Ronan's upcoming engagement party.

"You should rest." Mom's voice echoes in my head, but I can't. The Keans have been too good to us. I have to make sure everything's perfect for their party.

I stumble slightly, catching myself on the garden wall. My stomach churns. It's been doing that a lot lately. The stress of everything is getting to me.

The doctors say Mom's recovery is going well, but she still needs constant care. I wake up at dawn to check her vitals and give her medication before rushing to work. Then it's back home at lunch to make sure she eats, followed by more work, then dinner prep, more meds, and helping her with physical therapy exercises.

Blaise tries to help when he can, but he's busy with increased security duties. I miss him. We haven't had much time together since Mom had to go to the hospital. Just stolen moments and quick kisses between his shifts.

I'm hoping everything will calm down after the party and the exhaustion and unsettled stomach will go away.

A warm smile spreads across my face as familiar footsteps crunch on the gravel path behind me. Even without turning, I know it's Blaise.

"Thought I'd find you here." His arms slip around my waist, and I lean back against his chest. "You're working too hard."

"Just want everything to be perfect for tomorrow." I close my eyes, savoring his warmth, the solid strength of him. "But this is nice. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." He presses a kiss to my temple. "How's your mom doing?"

"She's rallying, but..." I turn in his arms, drinking in the sight of him. The green eyes I've come to adore, the slight stubble on his jaw. "Thank you for being there at the hospital... for everything since."

His thumb traces my cheekbone. "You don't have to thank me."

"I do, though." I rest my head against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. "Between Mom's recovery and all this party prep, I'm barely keeping it together. But then I see you, even just for a moment, and everything feels manageable again."

He tenses for a moment and then tightens his arms around me. "I'm glad I can help."

I stretch up on my toes to kiss him, pouring all my gratitude and affection into it. His

hands cup my face, and for a perfect moment, the world narrows to just us. But we can't stay here for long. Soon, he's off on some errand and I'm back to pruning and planting.

The sharp trill of my phone startles me. I almost let it go to voicemail, but something makes me grab it. The hospital's number flashes on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Hart? This is Dr. Reynolds. I tried to reach your mother, but she's not picking up. Since you're on her contact list for healthcare, I wanted to let you know that a compatible heart just became available. We need to prep your mother for surgery immediately. Can you bring her in now?"

"Yes! Yes, of course." I'm already on my feet. "We'll be there right away."

A heart. They found a heart. After all this waiting, all the close calls, it's finally happening. I feel a little guilty knowing that someone else had to die in order for my mom to get a new heart. I shouldn't be celebrating that. Still, hope and happiness surge through me as I head to Mrs. Kean's office to let her know I need to take Mom to the hospital. It should be okay to leave early today. The garden looks beautiful, and I've already shared the sketches planned for the floral arrangements for Ronan's party.

I knock softly on the heavy wooden door of Mrs. Kean's office.

"Come in." Mrs. Kean sits behind her mahogany desk, elegant as always in her tailored suit. She glances up from her papers. "Jenna? What can I do for you?"

"Mrs. Kean, the hospital called. They found a heart for my mother. The surgery is today. I'd like to take the rest of the day off to take her to the hospital."



"Oh, dear." She sets down her pen, fixing me with a sympathetic look that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "That is wonderful news about your mother. But Jenna, you understand the party is crucial for our family's reputation?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do. But?—"

"And you're aware that your position here, the cottage where you and your mother live... these arrangements depend on reliability?"

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My stomach drops. I want to tell her that flowers won't make or break a business deal or Ronan's engagement. "Of course, Mrs. Kean. You've been so generous to us. I just... it's her heart surgery."

"Jenna." She stands, walking around her desk to place a manicured hand on my shoulder. "Your mother will have excellent care at the hospital. But we need you here. I'm sure you can arrange other transportation for her. You understand, don't you?"

Tears prick at my eyes. No. I don't. I want to tell her that a garden and party aren't more important than my mother's health, but I can't risk getting fired. This job keeps Mom and me sheltered and able to scrape by with her healthcare needs. "Yes, Mrs. Kean."

"Good girl." She squeezes my shoulder. "I'm sure your mother would want you to honor your commitments. After all, where would you both be without this position?"

I'm more than stunned. Her attitude is a harsh reminder of my position.

"That will be all," Mrs. Kean says, already returning to her paperwork.

I stumble out of her office, barely making it to the hallway before pressing my hand against the wall for support. The gardens must be perfect. The party must be flawless. And my mother... my mother, who's finally getting her chance at survival... she'll face it alone because I'm trapped here, arranging flowers and maintaining appearances for people who see us as nothing more than convenient servants.

But I can't wallow in the hurt. I need to figure out how to be in two places at once because I can't risk losing our home, can't let Mom wake up from surgery to find us homeless and jobless.

I exit the house, but instead of going to the garden, I head to the cottage. "Mom..." My voice cracks as I enter. "Mom, they have a heart for you."

Her eyes light up. "What? So quickly?"

I nod, sniffing away my tears. "You need to go to the hospital now, but I can't take you. Mrs. Kean won't let me leave. Not without risking my job, our home."

Mom's voice softens with understanding. "Listen to me. You've carried so much on your shoulders. Too much. I can call for a ride to the hospital. There won't be anything for you to do when I get there, so you might as well stay here and work. It will be a good distraction."

"But you shouldn't have to do this alone. I should be there for you."

"We need a roof over our heads more than you need to hold my hand," Mom says firmly. "The doctors will take care of me."

My chest feels like it's being crushed. "It's not fair."

"I know, baby. I know, but we'll get through this. We always do."

I hug her. "I love you, Mom. I'm so sorry."

"I love you too. Now dry those tears and go make those gardens shine. I'll call for a ride?—"

“Maybe Blaise can take you.”

“Oh, I don’t want to bother him.”

But I’m already dialing his number.

"Jenna?" His voice washes over me like a balm.

"The hospital called. They found a heart for Mom and she needs to go now, but Mrs. Kean won't let me leave."

There’s a long pause. “Are you saying you’re not taking your mom to the hospital because of your job?”

I close my eyes because it sounds like I’m choosing my job over my mom. But even she understands that if I lose this job, we have no home and no way to afford her healthcare.

“It’s more complicated?—”

“What’s complicated about choosing to save your mom’s life?” His words come out harsh, making this difficult situation even worse.

"I—I can't lose this job. We can't lose our home."

"There are other jobs. Other places to live. But there's only one chance at this heart transplant."

I can’t breathe. He’s not wrong, but hearing the judgment, the venom, even, in his voice is ripping me apart.

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"Blaise, please. I just need help getting my mom to the hospital."

"Good people don't force you to choose between your job and your dying mother."

I'm practically sobbing. "I'm scared. I can't lose her, but I can't care for her if we don't have a home or healthcare." I take a breath to pull myself together. "I... I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll find another way?—"

"I'll take her."

I feel relief, but it's mixed with guilt and even a little resentment toward Blaise for not understanding, which is silly because he's not wrong. Mrs. Kean is cruel in insisting that her gardens and floral arrangements are more important than my mother's life. But right now, I'm between the proverbial rock and a hard place. I have no choice but to stay and work and pray that everything turns out. If my mom passes and I'm not there, I don't know how I'll live with myself.

20

BLAISE

After I left my short visit with Jenna in the garden, I headed out under the guise to investigate who might be planting negative information about the Keans. Since it's my family who's arranged the negative publicity, I don't actually have to do anything but come up with a lie. Instead of investigating, I headed to Phoenix's for a meeting with my brothers.

On the drive over, I did the mental gymnastics of telling myself that stopping to see Jenna before I left was part of my cover, even though my conscience was calling bullshit. I visited her today because I couldn't help myself. She's like a fucking drug, bad for my health but too addicting to quit.

Today, my brothers and I reviewed the security setup. It's large, but with so many important guests, security will be spread thin.

"Ronan's bound to slip away at some point. He always does at these things to smoke or make a call or have some woman suck his dick," I'd told my brothers. "When he does, I'll kill him."

"What if there are others around, like a woman sucking his dick?" Flint asked.

"I'll wait until she's done. I'm not such an asshole that I won't let him have one last orgasm."

Flint snickered as he shook his head. "Such mercy for a man who doesn't deserve it."

"How will you get out?" Ash, always serious, asks, apparently not amused by my generosity.

"The secret passage Flint used. As far as I can tell, most people have forgotten about it. Even Ronan hasn't mentioned it as part of what we need to guard." I pointed to the map. "The other side of the woods will be the closest you can risk getting without being noticed by the extra security. If you could pick me up here or leave a car, that would be great. Hopefully, I can do the deed, get to the basement, and exit before anyone knows he's dead."

"Can the girl help isolate him?" Ash suggested.

I didn't like that one bit. The thought of using Jenna as bait doesn't sit well with me. "No."

"Why not?" Phoenix's eyes narrowed. "You said yourself that she's wrapped around your finger. And you want her to pay."

I couldn't stop seeing Jenna with her bright green eyes, staring at me with trust and like the world revolved around me. "She's not part of this."

"She's been part of this since she helped them kill our parents," Ash reminded me.

He was right, of course. And therein lay my problem. I keep letting myself forget what she did, distracted by her warmth, her kindness, the way she makes me feel...

And then she called and told me she couldn't take her dying mother to the hospital because the Keans were too important to defy, and I was reminded again why she deserves to be ruined. But I won't destroy her by being a part of her mother's demise. As far as I can tell, Mrs. Hart was always loyal to my family. She's the only one on the estate who deserves to live.

I pull up to the small cottage, and Mrs. Hart is already waiting on the porch. Despite her frail condition, her eyes are sharp as she studies me through the car window.

I jump out, grabbing her bag and helping her to the car.

"I hope I'm not too much trouble. I know Mr. Kean won't like my taking you away?—"

"I'm not on duty right now," I lie. But I figure I can come up with another excuse about why I came back to the property and then left again. It's not like the Keans are paying attention to someone like Mrs. Hart to notice her being gone.

Once she's strapped in, I head to the hospital.

"Thank you for this, Blaise. For everything."

"I'm not doing anything." At least not anything anyone with half a heart wouldn't do. I know the Keans don't have a heart, but Jenna? She should know better.



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“I’m pretty lucky to get a heart so fast.”

“I guess the universe knows it needs you.”

She laughs. “I don’t know about that.” She pauses for a moment. “I suspect someone got me bumped up the list.”

“Huh.” I act nonchalant.

She puts her hand on my shoulder. “It had to have been you.”

"I don't know what you mean." I shift in my seat, avoiding her knowing gaze. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I don't want her to view me as some hero. After all, I'm planning on breaking her daughter's heart.

"Please. I've been on that list for two years. When I was last in the hospital, they said the prospects weren't good that I'd last long enough. You were at the hospital then too. I may be dying, but I'm not stupid."

I shrug. "The doctor found a match. I understand that it's not just who's next on the list, but who is a good match biologically and all that."

“Hmm.” She’s not convinced. “Well, thank you. Not many men would go to those lengths for their girlfriend's mother."

The gratitude in her voice makes my chest tight.

She studies my profile. "You seem troubled. Is it because I've figured out your secret?"

For a moment I tense, wondering if she's realized who I am. This woman is too perceptive. "It's complicated."

"Life usually is." She sighs.

"She should be here," I growl, unable to hide my disgust at Jenna choosing the Keans over her mother. "Her mother needs her, and she's choosing to stay and arrange flowers for the Keans."

"You don't understand what that place means to her." Mrs. Hart's voice is soft but firm.

"It means more than you?" I glance at her, dumbfounded at her defense of Jenna.

"No. It doesn't. But it's the only home she's ever known."

"It's just a house."

"No, it's her whole world." Mrs. Hart shifts in her seat, wheezing slightly. "She was born in that cottage. Her father worked for the family who lived there before."

She's talking about my family.

"Jenna learned to walk in those gardens. When her father died protecting the estate, she was barely old enough to remember him. But she remembers following me around while I tended those flowers, learning their names, their seasons."

The mention of Jenna's father catches my attention. I hadn't known he died protecting

my family's estate. Another layer of complexity I don't want to deal with.

"Still doesn't make it right," I mutter.

"Maybe not. But Jenna's never stepped foot outside that property except for school and occasional errands. She's never had another job, never lived anywhere else." Mrs. Hart's eyes are knowing when they meet mine. "It's easy to judge when you have options. My daughter thinks she doesn't, and I suppose right now, she's right. What would happen to me if we don't have a home and healthcare? That's what she's thinking about."

I don't like how my feelings are turning wishy-washy again. How knowing that Jenna's world has been so small and sheltered that she's trapped by it. That her loyalty to the Keans may not be about her crush on Ronan but simply a function of not knowing any other life.

"She deserves better from them," I say, noting my anger has drained from my voice.

"Yes, she does." Mrs. Hart reaches over to pat my shoulder again. "Maybe you'll be the one to show her that."

For a moment, I imagine it. I imagine being on the estate back in Ifrinn control. Of Jenna by my side, day and night. Her mother healthy, helping with grandkids.

Good God, what the hell am I thinking?

"I worry about her." Mrs. Hart's words help push away images I shouldn't have about a future I don't want. "She's spent her whole life taking care of others. First helping me in the gardens when she was little, then caring for me when I got sick."

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I strive to hold on to resentment, but it's hard when her mother is so understanding. If her own mother isn't pissed, what right do I have to be upset?

"She's never had the chance to live for herself," Mrs. Hart continues. "Never traveled, never dated, until you. I used to think it was sweet how she pined after Ronan, but also sad. We all knew nothing would come of it, her included. But it was a way for her to have a little romance in her life."

I turn into the hospital parking lot, not sure how to respond to her.

"The way she lights up when she talks about you..." Mrs. Hart's knowing look makes me shift uncomfortably. "It's the first time I've seen her choose something for herself."

Now I'm the asshole. Because she hasn't chosen, not really. I've manipulated her, seduced her, all while planning to break her heart. And for what? Revenge against a woman who was only thirteen years old when her actions led to my parents' death. Does she even know what she did?

"I'm happy for her that she has you. And I'm happy for you that you have her."

I swallow hard, unable to meet her eyes. She is being completely honest and sincere. And I have to admit that Jenna is too. She doesn't know the real me, but I have no doubt she loves me. She never hides it. She sees me and it's like the sun lights up her face. Whatever I throw at her, she takes it. I treated her badly at the hotel, and she ended up seeking to comfort me from whatever demon had possessed me.

For the first time since I started this mission, I'm not sure I can go through with it.

I push my doubts away as I help Mrs. Hart check in at the hospital reception.

My phone vibrates, a message from Jones wondering where I am. I silence it. I'll come up with an excuse for my absence later.

"You don't have to stay," Mrs. Hart says, easing into a wheelchair. "I know you have work."

I do have work. And my brothers are counting on me to carry out our mission. But leaving Mrs. Hart alone feels wrong. "I can spare a few minutes."

As we wait for the pre-op nurse, I do what I can to make her comfortable. She must be scared to death. If someone were going to crack my chest open and take my heart out, I'd be fucking terrified.

"You're hovering," Mrs. Hart says with a weak smile. "Just like Jenna does."

The comparison makes me flinch. Because Jenna hovers out of love, while I... what am I doing here? Playing the devoted boyfriend while plotting to break her daughter's heart? No. It's more than that, and that's a problem. I'm too enmeshed with Jenna and her mother.

A nurse appears and begins the process of preparing Mrs. Hart for surgery.

"You don't need to stay." Mrs. Hart takes my hand. "In fact, I'd rather you be with Jenna. This is so hard for her."

I nod.

“And will you look out for her... in case I don’t make it?—”

“You’ll make it.” If I have to take on God himself, Mrs. Hart will make it.

“Jenna is a smart woman, but she’s been sheltered. She’ll be alone if this doesn’t work. Promise me you’ll look after her.”

“I promise.” The words leave my lips before I can think. The scariest part is that they’re not said to be deceitful. At that moment, they are sincere.

But if I’m to keep my promise, I’ll need to break one I made to my brothers.

21

JENNA

My stomach lurches again and I bolt for the bathroom. After emptying what little remains in my stomach, I splash cold water on my face. The mirror shows dark circles under my eyes, worry etched into every feature. Mom has to make it through this surgery. She's all I have left.

Guilt mixes with the nausea. I should have taken her to the hospital. But how? If I get fired, how can I take care of her?

My phone buzzes against my hip, and I fumble to pull it from my pocket.

Your mom is heading to surgery. She’s in good spirits.

Blaise’s text loosens the knot in my stomach just a fraction. I type back with trembling fingers.

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Thank you. For everything.

The words feel inadequate. How do you thank someone for potentially saving your mother's life? For being there when you need them most?

Another wave of nausea hits, but this time it's different, more like butterflies than sickness. Is this what real love feels like? Not the painful yearning I felt for Ronan all those years, but this bone-deep certainty that I've found someone who sees me, who shows up when it matters most?

I know he's disappointed in me for not taking my mom to the hospital. Clearly, he doesn't have to worry about losing his job if the fancy dinner and hotel the other night are any indication. It's a reminder of how much I still don't know about him.

I force myself back to work. The Keans seem extra tense lately and want this engagement party for Ronan to go well. I try to keep that in mind as my resentment grows for making me choose between my job and my mother. The Keans took us in after the fire, gave us a home, jobs. But today... today, something shifted.

The garden has always been my sanctuary. Now it feels like a prison. Every flower I tend reminds me that I'm here while Mom faces surgery alone. Well, not alone, thank God for Blaise. But I should be there.

With my head down, I work and work. Hours pass until I'm almost done for the day. But each minute of those hours, I'm worried sick about my mom.

Finally, my phone rings with the hospital's number. Fear steals my breath. I send a

silent prayer that everything is fine.

“Hello?”

"Ms. Hart?"

“Yes. This is Dr. Wallace. Your mother made it through surgery. So far, everything is going as expected. She’s in the CICU where she’ll be for the next five days or so if everything progresses well.”

My legs nearly give out from relief, even as I know it’s early days. Still, she survived the surgery.

“Can I see her?”

“She’ll have a breathing tube and be unable to talk. We’ll remove that tomorrow. But you can come and sit with her.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” Mom's alive. The transplant worked. After years of watching her fade away, there's hope.

By the time I finish cleaning up my work area, my workday is done. The drive to the hospital is a blur. I park haphazardly and practically run toward the entrance.

“Kendra Hart,” I ask the nurse at the desk.

She gives me the room number and floor, telling me to check in at the nurse’s station. I take the elevator up, my body a bundle of nerves. Until I see my mom, there’s a part of me that worries.

When the elevator doors open, the smell of antiseptic hits me and my stomach



revolts. I barely make it to the nearest trashcan before losing what little I have in my stomach.

"Are you alright, Miss?"

I wave off the concerned security guard, mortified. My cheeks burn as I wipe my mouth with a tissue. What's wrong with me? Mom's okay. I should be celebrating, not throwing up from stress.

But as I straighten up, another wave of nausea hits. The enormity of everything crashes over me—Mom's surgery, the Keans' threats, Blaise's condemnation of my choice to work. It's too much.

I grip the edge of the trashcan, taking deep breaths to pull myself together. Mom needs me now.

“Can I help you?” a nurse asks when I finally straighten.

“I’m sorry. It’s nerves. I’m here to see my mother. Kendra Hart. She just had a heart transplant.”

She studies me. “If you’re unwell, now isn’t a good time to visit. Your mother's immune system is vulnerable after the transplant. We can't risk any infections.”

My heart sinks. Of course. How could I be so selfish? Mom needs a sterile environment, not her mess of a daughter potentially making her sick.

"I... I didn't think." My voice cracks.

“Do you have a temperature?”

I shake my head. “I’m just under a lot of stress.”

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The nurse looks at me with sympathy. “We could check you out. Just to be safe. And if it’s only stress, you can see your mom.”

I nod numbly, following her down the sterile hallway.

"When did the nausea start?" the nurse asks.

"Not long. Mom’s illness and events at work... It’s been a lot.”

“Anything else? Fatigue? Aches and pains?”

“I am tired, but no aches or pains.”

She takes my blood pressure, which is a little high. I have no temperature. “Let’s order a couple of tests.”

I wait anxiously, desperate to see Mom but knowing I need to make sure I won't harm her.

It seems like forever before she returns. “Well, you don’t have anything contagious.”

That’s a relief. “I can see my mom?”

“Well, yes, but you should know your symptoms aren’t from stress.”

I blink, wondering what she could be talking about. "Ms. Hart, you're pregnant."

The room tilts sideways. "What?"

"I take it this is unexpected."

Maybe I'm sleeping and all this is a dream.

"Have you been using any form of protection?"

Heat floods my cheeks as I realize Blaise and I never discussed it. Not once. I'd been so caught up in the romance, the excitement of being desired. What an idiot.

"I... ah..." I don't want to admit I was too lost in love to think about birth control.

She launches into a speech about prenatal care and options, but her words blur together. All I can think about is Blaise. What will he say? We haven't known each other for long. I don't even know if he wants children.

My hands drift to my stomach. A baby. Blaise's baby. The thought sends a fresh wave of panic through me. I'm barely keeping it together caring for Mom. How can I possibly handle a pregnancy too?

"As far as seeing your mother, you can. As part of the regular protocol, you'll need to wear a mask, gown, and gloves."

"Of course." I need my mother now more than ever.

The nurse leads me to the ICU, which is quiet except for the sounds of monitors and breathing machines.

"It's important that we keep your mother comfortable. Try to avoid saying or doing anything that might upset or excite her."

I suppose a pregnancy fits that bill.

Mom looks so small in the hospital bed, tubes and wires everywhere.

“I’m here, Mom.” I carefully take her hand, noting a restraint about her wrist.

“That’s for her protection until she comes fully out of sedation,” the nurse says. Then she reaches over to an over-table near Mom. “Your mother insisted on writing this before surgery.”

My heart stalls, unsure whether I want to read it.

To my baby girl,

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In case things don't turn out, I want you to know that I love you and that I'm happy you found Blaise. He hardly knows me and yet, he's the reason I'm having this surgery so quickly.

To be honest, I don't condone his method and I feel guilty going out of turn, and yet, I want to live.

Blaise reminds me of your father, so willing to move heaven and earth to protect those he loves. I've never seen you happier than you've been these past weeks with him.

I know the timing of this transplant seemed miraculous. Now you know why. Your Blaise made it happen.

All my love,

Mom

Tears blurry vision as I fold the letter, trying to understand. Blaise did this? How? What was his "method" that is questionable? Did someone else lose their chance at a heart so my mother could live? What if their family is grieving right now because Blaise pushed my mother ahead in line? The guilt gnaws at me. I've always tried to do what's right, to be good and fair. Yet I can't bring myself to wish he hadn't done it. Does that make me a terrible person?

I watch the steady rise and fall of Mom's breathing. Blaise made this happen. He gave my mother a second chance at life.

How do you thank someone for something like this? A fruit basket and a thank-you note seem laughably inadequate. I owe him everything. My mother's life. Our future together. The chance for her to meet her grandchild...

The steady hum of machines fills the silence as I watch Mom's chest rise and fall. I want to tell her everything about the baby, about my fears, about how deeply I've fallen for Blaise. But the breathing tube makes conversation impossible, and it might upset or excite her. So instead, I squeeze her hand gently, hoping she can feel how much I love her even in her sedated state.

I'm already picturing her well again. Tending the garden again. Being a grandmother. And Blaise is there too. My heart swells with emotion at the thought of being a happy family.

I rest my free hand on my stomach, where our child grows. Maybe this baby is a gift I can give him in return for my mother's life, though I know that's not how it works. Still, the timing feels like fate, like everything in my life is aligning in ways I never imagined possible.

But other moments nag at me. How he deflects questions about his past. The tension in his shoulders whenever I bring up the Keans. That night at the hotel, he practically shut down when I suggested speaking to the press about how good they've been to us. He was rougher, darker with me. At the time, I thought it was passion. Now I wonder if it was something else. Frustration? Anger? At me?

The baby changes everything. I need to know if what we have is real, if his love for me is as deep as mine for him because there is something in his eyes sometimes, a darkness that doesn't match his tender touches and sweet words. Like he's fighting some internal battle I can't see or understand.

BLAISE

I watch Jenna park her car and make her way around the house to the cottage from the window of the security room where Ronan is bragging about his latest exploit, a threesome.

But my attention is on Jenna. My chest tightens at the sight of her as it always does. It's driving me mad. I came here to destroy her, to make her pay for betraying my family. Instead, I watch over her like some lovesick fool.

Watching her now, so innocent and pure in the silvery light, I can't reconcile this Jenna with the conniving girl who helped murder my parents, the girl who worships the ground Ronan walks on while he barely knows she exists. The loyal servant who defends the Keans even as they threaten her livelihood.

I want to hate her. I need to hate her. But every time I'm with her, every kiss we share, every smile she gives me chips away at my resolve. She's burrowed under my skin, into my heart, and I don't know how to cut her out without bleeding myself dry.

I catch the shift in Ronan's expression before he even turns his head. That entitled smirk I remember from ten years ago spreads across his face as his gaze fixes on Jenna while she stops briefly to check on a flower.

My blood runs cold. After all these years of Jenna pining after him, now he notices her? Now that she's with me?

"Do you think she's as innocent and pure as she looks?" he asks.

I want to smash his face in.

He tilts his head, studying her like she's a shiny new toy. "Funny how you don't



notice someone until..." He trails off, that arrogant smirk widening.

Until what? Until she's happy with someone else? Until she's no longer mooning over you? My fingers itch to wrap around his throat, but I keep my hands relaxed at my sides.

"She seems different lately," he continues. "More confident. Less..." He waves his hand dismissively. "Mousy."

Because she's with me, you pompous ass. Because I make her feel valued, not invisible. The irony of my defensive thoughts isn't lost on me. Aren't I supposed to be using her? Breaking her heart?

"I should reacquaint myself," Ronan says, adjusting his cuffs. "After all, it's important to know one's staff."

His meaning is quite clear. My hand flexes then fists in response. But what right do I have to feel protective? I'm planning to hurt her far worse than Ronan ever could.

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Aren't I?

"Miss Hart's mother had surgery today," I say, keeping my voice carefully neutral despite the rage churning in my gut.

"Did she now?" Ronan straightens his already perfect tie. "Perhaps I should pay her a visit. Show the staff we care about their personal matters."

My fingers curl into fists behind my back. The audacity of this entitled prick, pretending to care now when his mom wouldn't even let Jenna take time off to get her mother to the hospital.

"I suspect there's limited visitation."

"Ah, well." He shrugs, utterly unbothered. In fact, he's probably relieved he doesn't have to make a show of concern.

I think he's going to move on to the next thing when he says, "But I can go offer my support to Miss Hart. A pretty girl like her shouldn't be alone at such a time. I bet I could make her feel better."

The men around us snicker. My vision goes red. My hands shake with the effort not to kill him here and now.

"Besides. It's been a while since I've had a little fun with the help. And she's certainly... blossomed recently."

I force myself to breathe slowly, to maintain my neutral expression even as murder pounds through my veins. I can't blow my cover, not when we're so close. But God help me, the thought of him touching her...

I force myself to take a deep, steadying breath, pushing down the murderous rage threatening to explode. "Sir, with respect, shouldn't we focus on the upcoming party?" I keep my voice measured, professional. "There's been talk of potential threats, and your father stressed the importance of maintaining appearances with the other families."

"Always so serious," Ronan says with that dismissive wave I'm growing to hate. "But I suppose you're right. Can't have anything disrupting our little soirée. The other families are already circling like vultures after those ridiculous allegations and these petty attacks."

I seethe at his casual reference to my parents' murder as 'ridiculous allegations'.

"Then again, she could know something. The staff are often the best sources of information."

I still at his words. Is that why he'd asked Jenna about secret ways into the house?

"I could speak with her, sir," I say, keeping my voice casual. "Find out if she's noticed anything suspicious around the grounds. You have more important things to deal with than talking to the gardener."

Ronan's eyes narrow slightly. "You don't think I can talk to her?"

"I know you can, but as head of security, it's my job to investigate all potential leads." I shrug, affecting an air of professional detachment. "As the gardener, she has the most access to the perimeter. If anyone's been testing our defenses, she might have

seen something. But it's my job to find it out. You have more pressing issues to deal with."

He studies me for a long moment, and I force myself to meet his gaze steadily.

"Fine," he says finally, though his tone suggests he's not entirely convinced. "But I want a full report of anything she tells you. And don't think this means I won't have my own chat with her eventually."

My fingers twitch at the implied threat, but I maintain my neutral expression. "Of course, sir. I'll speak with her now."

"See that you do." He straightens that damn tie again. "Now, about the security rotation for the party..."

I let out a slow breath as he moves on to other topics. I make my exit proud that I haven't killed him yet. Knowing I will do so soon is the only reason I have the self-control to hold back now.

I head to Jenna's cottage. When she opens the door, I see a mix of emotions playing across her face—exhaustion, worry, hope.

"Hey."

"Blaise!" She throws herself into my arms, and I catch her automatically, breathing in the familiar scents of flowers and earth that cling to her skin. "Mom made it through surgery. The doctors say it went really well."

I hold her tighter, feeling her slight trembles. "That's great news."

"They say the next few days are critical." Her voice quavers. "There's still a risk of

rejection, and she's so weak..." She pulls back just enough to look up at me, tears gathering in her eyes. "I'm scared. What if?—"

"Hey, no." I cup her face in my hands, thumbs brushing away the tears that escape. "Your mom's tough. She made it this far, didn't she?"

Jenna nods, leaning into my touch. The complete trust in her expression makes my chest ache. She has no idea who I really am or why I'm here.

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"I just... I don't know what I'd do without her," she whispers. "She's all I have."

What about me? The thought comes unbidden. Unwanted. Worse, I want her to need me not as part of my plan to ruin her, but because I need her to need me. Like deep in my soul.

I pull her closer. "I'm here."

She melts against me with a shaky sigh, and I hate myself for how right it feels to hold her like this. For how much I want to protect her, even as I plot to destroy her.

Jenna's hands tremble as she unfolds a paper. "Mom wrote this before surgery. She wanted me to have it, just in case..."

I take the paper she offers. Her mother's shaky handwriting fills the page with warmth and love for her daughter. Then my breath catches as I reach the part about me.

"You helped get her the heart?" She turns those bright green eyes on me, brimming with tears. "How did you...?"

I cup her face, trying to find words that won't reveal too much.

"Your mother deserved a chance," I say finally. "I just made sure the right people understood that."

She launches herself into my arms again, pressing her face into my neck. "Thank you. I can never repay you for this."

The pure gratitude in her voice tears at something deep inside me. This is exactly what I wanted, to make her indebted to me, to strengthen her emotional attachment before I destroy her. So why does it feel like I'm the one being ripped apart?

"You don't need to repay me," I murmur into her hair. "I did it because..." "Because I'm falling for you. Because seeing you hurt kills me. Because somehow, you've made me forget everything except wanting to make you happy."

"Because what?" she asks softly.

I pull back, reality crashing over me like ice water. What am I doing? I can't tell her any of that, can't admit how deep she's gotten under my skin.

"Because you both deserve it."

"That promotion gave you a lot of power and influence, I guess," she says.

I shrug, knowing that she's caught on to my using the Keans' power and influence to help her mother. I just hope it doesn't get back to them. "It's part of my job to protect the Keans and what's theirs."

"You must be good to have Ronan trusting you like he does."

"Right place, right time, I guess. They needed someone who could handle crisis situations after the recent attacks."

"And you certainly proved yourself."

The irony of being praised for handling a crisis I created makes me want to laugh. Or scream. Instead, I kiss her temple. "Just doing my job."

“I don’t know how I’d get through any of this without you. You’ve proven yourself to me too.”

Guilt threatens to break me. For a moment, I consider telling her everything, laying bare all my sins and secrets, consequences be damned. About who I really am, about my brothers waiting in the shadows, about how every step closer to the Keans is meant to destroy them. And her.

“I’m happy that you let me in.”

She smiles up at me, her eyes studying me like she’s looking for something. “There’s a lot to you, Blaise Tine. I want to know it all.”

Oh, how I wish I could let her know all of me. “Oh?”

“Like how you can afford fancy restaurants and expensive hotels on a guard’s salary.”

“I save my money.” That’s not a total lie. I’m actually a pretty frugal guy. But my father had hidden away a fortune that I and my brothers got access to after his death. Plus, my brothers and I have our own businesses to help fund our revenge.

Her eyes narrow as if she doesn’t believe me.

Eager to change the subject, I trail my fingers along her arm. "You know, if you really want to repay me for helping with your mom..."



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Her breath catches at my touch. I watch her pupils dilate, her lips parting slightly. So responsive, so easy to read.

"How would you like me to repay you?" Her voice comes out breathy, uncertain but eager.

I lean closer, letting my lips brush her ear. "I can think of a few ways."

A shiver runs through her body. The flash of heat in her eyes, the way she unconsciously leans toward me, it's all so genuine, so trusting. She has no idea I'm deliberately manipulating her reactions, using her attraction against her. I hate myself for it.

"Like what?" She wets her lips, and my eyes track the movement, my dick immediately growing as hard as a rock.

"Why don't I show you?" I cup her face, my thumb brushing across her bottom lip. The soft gasp she lets out shoots straight through me.

Her pulse jumps under my fingers as she tilts her face up to mine. "Please..."

I pull Jenna closer, her warmth melting into me as she wraps her arms around my neck. The tenderness in her touch threatens to undo me.

"I love you," she whispers against my lips.

My heart twists painfully. I should feel triumphant. Instead, guilt claws at my chest as

I capture her lips with mine.

She responds instantly, sighing into the kiss. Her fingers thread through my hair as she presses closer.

I try to remember my mission, my revenge. But with Jenna in my arms, all I can think about is how right this feels. How perfectly she fits against me. How her little gasps and whimpers drive me crazy.

"Blaise," she breathes my name like a prayer.

The raw emotion in her voice makes me falter. She believes in me so completely, trusts me without reservation.

But I can't stop now, can't pull away from her sweetness, her light. Even knowing I'll be the one to extinguish it.

I trail kisses down her neck as she arches into me, her pulse racing under my lips. Her complete surrender only adds to my growing conflict. This isn't just physical attraction anymore, and that terrifies me.

"I need you," she whispers, and I'm lost.

I lift her, carrying her to her room. If I were a good man, I'd end this now. Not to hurt her as I'd planned, but to stop this revenge plot that is threatening to destroy me too. But I'm not a good man. I'm a man who is desperate for this woman. Selfish. Cruel.

In her room, my hands roam freely over her, unbuttoning her blouse, exposing the delicate lace of her bra. Delicate and pretty just like her. I trace the edges with my fingertips, loving how she shivers in response, how her nipples harden.

I unhook her bra, revealing full, plump tits that my mouth waters to taste. I suck one nipple, my tongue teasing the sensitive peak.

"Oh, Blaise," she moans, her head falling back as pleasure ripples through her.

I continue my sensual assault, my hands and mouth working in tandem. I kiss and nibble my way down over her belly that tenses under my touch. On my knees, I tug her pants down and then look up at her naked, exposed before me. In this position, I feel like I need to beg for forgiveness.

"You're so beautiful," I say instead.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders. "Please. I want you."

I don't need any further encouragement. I rise and with lightning speed, I undress. My ego rises as Jenna's gaze latches on to my cock, hard and desperate for her.

I kiss her, laying her on the bed. Her hands explore my body, and I give in to the feeling of being loved by this woman. A love I don't deserve. A love I've curated in a way that will surely send me to hell.

I roll her under me, positioning myself between her thighs. My cock strains as it presses against her hot wetness, teasing her pussy. She arches her back, offering herself to me.

"Fuck." My frustration isn't about the need clawing through me. It's about my abhorrent plan. About my weakness.

It doesn't stop me from thrusting inside her, filling her completely.

She cries out, her body welcoming me, her walls clenching around me. God, she feels

so fucking good. I close my eyes,savoring the sensation of being buried deep within her. Of being a part of her.

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“Blaise.” She wraps her legs around me, holding me to her.

I move, my hips driving in a steady rhythm, my dick sliding in and out of her. She matches my pace, her nails digging into my back.

"More... more," she pants, her voice laced with desperation.

I comply, thrusting harder, faster, driving into her with crazed abandon. Her cries fill the room as I pound into her relentlessly. Her body trembles on the edge of release, and all of a sudden, I don't want it to end. Not yet.

I still. She moans in annoyance, her body rocking underneath me.

I look down on her, pushing her hair from her face. “There’s no hurry.”

Her green eyes blink up at me. “I need to come.”

I smile. “You will.” I lean over and kiss her, wanting her to feel the truth of my love for her. For this one moment in time, we are exactly what I’ve led her to believe we are—two people in love. It would be nice if it could absolve me of my sins, but it won’t.

I push away everything. My revenge against the Keans. My plan to hurt her. The past and future don’t exist. Right now, the world is just me and Jenna. I savor it. I imprint it into every cell in my body. For the rest of my lonely, fucked up life, I’ll carry this moment.

JENNA

I need to come. My need is a torturous ache. But as Blaise holds me, there's something else. It almost feels sad.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, baby. I just want to make this last." He kisses me, soft, sweet, and my heart breaks open. I've loved him from the start, but now I'm hopelessly his. It scares me because there's still so much I don't know. But the way he's touching me, loving me. Surely, he feels the same.

"I love you," I tell him.

His eyes close, and it's almost as if he doesn't want to hear it. It occurs to me that he's said the words once to me back under the oak tree, but not again since then. Before I can think too much about that, he begins to move again.

"Come for me." He hooks his hand under my thigh, pulling it up higher, opening me more. He sinks deeper. "I want to feel you come around my cock."

His words are a trigger, sending me flying. My body convulses, my pussy clenching and milking him as pleasure explodes and ripples through me.

"Oh, fuck yes," he cries out, his body tensing as he continues to drive in and out of me, drawing out my pleasure. I continue to pulse around him until with a final, powerful thrust, he comes, his dick throbbing as he empties inside me. The warmth fills me, reminds me of the lack of birth control and the resulting baby.

He rolls to the side, and I snuggle against him. I press my face into his chest, breathing in his scent. The steady thump of his heart grounds me as my thoughts spiral. I should tell him about the baby. The words sit on the tip of my tongue, but something holds me back.

At the hotel, his whole demeanor was different, and I still don't know what it was about. And now this revelation about his influence on the hospital. Throwing around his weight, or the weight of the Keans. Who is he really? Every time I try to learn more about his past, he deflects or changes the subject.

"What are you thinking about?" His voice rumbles through his chest.

"Just... thank you. For my mom. I still can't believe you made that happen."

"Just doing what needed to be done." His arms tighten around me, but there's tension in his voice.

Something flutters inside me. I know it's too early to be the baby, but it makes me think of the pregnancy. I really should tell him. He deserves to know. But doubt keeps me quiet. For all the passion between us, for all that I love him, there are so many questions... questions he won't answer. And yet, he should know.

I lift my head, meeting his eyes in the darkness. "Blaise..."

His finger presses against my lips. "Shh. Let's just enjoy this moment."

My courage falters. Maybe tomorrow.

Three days later, I still haven't told him. My excuse is that we've both been busy. Preparations for the party are taking up a lot of both of our time. I'm exhausted and still throwing up, but I can't afford to slow down. Not after Mrs. Kean's warning

about my job security.

A wave of nausea hits me, and I press my hand to my stomach. Morning sickness doesn't care what time of day it is. I take deep breaths and find a cracker in the baggie I carry for moments such as this. It's the remedy my mother suggested when I finally told her yesterday about the baby. The doctors had removed her breathing tube two days ago, but it wasn't until yesterday that her coloring and energy seemed better and I found the courage to tell her.



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Her eyes widened at the news and then narrowed as she studied me. "I won't ask how that happened, but..."

I didn't want to admit to my mother that we didn't use any protection. "I'm happy about it." Nervous and scared as hell, but happy. It means another person in the family.

She squeezed my hand. "Does Blaise know?"

"Not yet. I... I haven't found the right moment."

"Jenna." Her tone carried that gentle reproach I've known since childhood. "This isn't something you can keep to yourself for long."

"I know. I just want to be sure..."

"Sure of what?"

"Of him, I guess. There's so much I don't know about him. Sometimes, he seems distant, like he's holding back." I don't mention the darker moments from the hotel.

"He got me this heart transplant. That says something about his character."

"Yes, but how did he do it? He won't tell me anything about himself or his past."

"Everyone has their secrets, dear." Mom's voice was gentle but her eyes held concern.

"And regardless, he deserves to know. He has rights and responsibilities."

I rest my hand on my still-flat stomach, knowing she's right. I need to tell Blaise soon, but first, I need to understand why he keeps so many secrets.

I adjust another flower arrangement, fighting back another wave of nausea. The grand ballroom sparkles, flowers strategically placed to create the perfect atmosphere for tonight's party.

"Those peonies are drooping." Mrs. Kean's voice cuts through my concentration. "Fix them."

I nod, reaching for the stems even though they look fine to me. My stomach lurches, and I steady myself against the table.

"Are you ill?" She narrows her eyes. "We can't have sick staff tonight."

"No, ma'am." I don't give any excuse, knowing it won't matter. I mean, the woman threatened my job over taking my mother for lifesaving surgery. She's not going to care that I'm pregnant or tired.

When she moves on, I check my phone. No messages from Blaise. He's been busy with increased security for tonight, and I've barely seen him. Every time I think about telling him about the baby, my courage fails. What if he's not ready? What if it changes everything between us?

"Jenna!" Debbie waves from across the room. "The caterers need those centerpieces in the dining room."

I gather up the arrangements, careful not to disturb any blooms. As I pass the entrance hall, I catch sight of Blaise directing other guards. He looks so handsome in his suit, so in control. Our eyes meet briefly, and he gives me a subtle wink that makes everything just fine.

Tonight. I'll tell him tonight during the party. Maybe we can steal a moment alone in the garden where we first met. The thought makes me nervous but excited too. After everything he did for my mom, surely, this news will make him happy?

The party is in full swing. I weave between clusters of Boston's elite. My stomach churns at the smell of seafood canapés, but I force a polite smile and keep moving.

"Another tray of champagne." Debbie bumps my hip as she passes. "You okay? You look green."

"Fine." I adjust my stance, trying to find relief for my aching back. "Just tired."

Across the room, Blaise stands at attention near a marble column. Even in the sea of expensive suits, he draws my eye. His gaze catches mine, and that familiar spark ignites between us. A slight smile plays at his lips before he returns to scanning the crowd.

But there's something guarded in his gaze, like always. For all our intimate moments, for all that he's done for my mother, there's still so much about him I don't understand.

Would knowing about the baby break down those walls, or would it make them higher?

"Girl, you've got it bad." Debbie laughs.

"Jealous?"

"Absolutely." She trades my nearly empty tray for her full one. "Here. Take these to the library. He's heading that way now."

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My heart speeds up as I follow the path Blaise took. Through the party's noise, I catch fragments of worried whispers about investigations and rumors. Mrs. Kean won't like that.

I enter the library just as Ronan corners Blaise by the fireplace. They speak in hushed tones, Blaise's jaw tight with barely contained emotion. Whatever Ronan's saying has him on edge.

"Champagne?" I offer, approaching with measured steps.

Ronan waves me away without looking, but Blaise's eyes lock onto mine. The intensity in his gaze makes my breath catch. There's something dark there, something that makes me hesitate on my resolve to tell him about the baby.

"That will be all," Ronan dismisses me.

I retreat. Maybe tonight isn't the right time, after all. I make rounds through the room, stealing glances at Blaise. He's speaking with another guard, his expression serious, focused.

I watch as he excuses himself from the other guard and heads toward the garden doors. Maybe I should follow him, tell him about the baby now.

"We need more wine," the head server tells me.

"Right away." Still, I go to Blaise first. "I have to go to the wine cellar. It's dark and scary. I think I need a guard."

It takes a moment for the guard part of him to shift. "Is that so?"

"I'll make it worth your while." I don't know what's come over me all of a sudden, but I want to jump him.

I move on, bringing the tray to the kitchen and then making my way down into the basement to the wine cellar. The basement is huge with a theater, gym, storage, and of course, the wine cellar. What many don't know is that there are all sorts of secret passages throughout the house, with several in the basement, including one that exits to the road outside the wall. When I asked Mom about it, she said she thought it was put in during prohibition but was out of use once alcohol was legal again.

I laugh at myself, thinking of the memory of showing the passage to Ronan when I was just a girl. It was one of the few times he showed me attention.

I slip through the door, breathing in the musty scent of aged wood and cork. Rows of bottles line the walls.

"Jenna?" Blaise's voice carries through the cellar. "Everything okay?"

I step out from behind a rack of vintage reds. "More than okay." I don't hesitate. I fuse my lips to his, press my body to him.

He groans, his hands settling on my hips, pulling me closer.

His breath catches as I trail kisses down his neck. "You tricked me down here to fuck?"

"Mmhmm. I want to show you how grateful I am." I reach for his belt, turned on and excited. I'm going to love my man and then tell him how our love created a life.

## BLAISE

I don't know what I was expecting in the cellar. Maybe a few stolen kisses, but not sex. Not that I'm complaining. Ronan has been busting my balls. The only bright side tonight is seeing Jenna in her server's uniform. It brings about all sorts of maid fantasies that are apparently going to come true.

She throws herself into my arms, her lips crashing into mine with unexpected passion. The kiss steals my breath, ignites something primal within me. Her fingers thread through my hair, and I press her back against the stone wall, pinning her there with my body.

"Someone could come down here," I murmur against her neck, though I make no move to stop. The risk only heightens every sensation, the softness of her skin, the catch in her breath, the way she arches into me.

"I don't care. I need you." She's finally gotten my belt and pants undone.

I slide my hands up her thighs, lifting her dress. I'm lost in her, the sweet scent of flowers, the little sounds she makes as I kiss down her throat while my fingers slide over her pussy as I yank her panties down. The party feels a million miles away. Even so, the possibility of discovery sends electricity down my spine.

"Please, Blaise."

I capture her mouth again, swallowing her gasp as I lift her against the wall. Her legs wrap around my waist, and I sink into her sweet, wet pussy. Fucking hell, she's a man's fantasy come to life.

We move together with rising urgency. Somewhere above, glass shatters and laughter rings out. The sound reminds me of where we are, what we're risking. But I'm too far gone to care. I continue to drive into her, need coiling tighter and tighter.

“Yes, Blaise... yes... Oh.” Her body goes taut. Her pussy clamps around my cock. It’s so fucking good. I yanks me right off the edge into oblivion. I continue to rock into her, my cum filling her.

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When it's done, I collapse against her. Thank fuck for the wall as it's the only thing holding us up.

"Well, that took the edge off." I finally find strength in my legs and straighten. I help Jenna adjust her uniform, my hands lingering longer than necessary.

She smiles up at me and the words 'I love you' dangle at the end of her tongue.

"Blaise, I need to tell you something." Jenna's face is flushed, lips still swollen from our kisses.

"I'm not sure how much longer we can be here before someone comes looking." I press a quick kiss to her forehead, already calculating timing, exits, guard rotations. "I have to get back upstairs before someone notices I'm gone."

"It's important."

"Tonight's not good." The words come out sharper than they should. But I have to focus. Time to remember why I'm here.

Ronan Kean dies tonight.

With that thought, I remember where we are. The murder of my family started down here. I recalculate and realize that now's my chance.

"I'm sorry. I'm just... this party is a security nightmare." I glance around the cellar. "I mean, anyone could be lurking down here. I've heard rumors of secret



passageways.” I raise my brows. “Actually, you've lived on the property your whole life. Have you ever come across any?”

Her brow furrows. "Secret passages? I mean, they're all through the house.”

“But down here?” I glance around again.

She shrugs. “I found one once when I was a kid, before...” She trails off, looking uncertain.

"Before what?"

"Before the fire. I found a hidden door. I don't know if it's still here.”

“Anyone know about it?”

“Ronan. I told him about it a long time ago. But then there was the fire and when the Keans rebuilt, I don't know that they kept it.”

I fight off a surge of bitterness at hearing her confess to telling Ronan about the tunnel. This is the moment where I find out why she betrayed my family.

"You told Ronan about a door before the Keans lived here?”

She bites her lip. “Yeah, we were friends back then. Or I thought we were." She gives a sad little laugh. "I was just a kid with a crush.”

I don't know what to feel. I mean, all the anger is back. The desire to hurt her is back. And yet, I feel like I'm being ripped in two. I love this woman, and she helped kill my family. Admits it openly. Admits she did it because she had a crush on Ronan.

“Well, if it’s still here, it could be a source of a breach, and since it’s my job to keep the family safe, I should check it. Can you show me where it is?”

“Over here somewhere.” Jenna heads to the back corner of the cellar. “There’s a rack that is a secret opening used during prohibition.”

I follow her. “Did you ever go inside?” I keep my voice light, though my fingers itch to grab her shoulders and demand answers.

“No.” She frowns, still searching. “Ronan wanted to, but I was too scared. It was dark and smelled musty. Plus, I didn’t want to get in trouble.” She stops near an empty rack. “Here.”

“That’s incredible,” I say, moving closer to examine it. “You must have been quite the explorer as a kid.”

“I guess.” She wraps her arms around herself again. I wonder if it’s guilt that is causing her to fold into herself. But is it guilt over betraying my family or simply nostalgia for her childhood friendship with Ronan?

I tug at the rack, pulling it open to reveal a door. I open it and look inside. I’ve never seen this, but I know about it because Flint used this tunnel to get into the home to save his wife, Lucy, last year. Does Jenna know about that?

“Anyone use this now?” I ask, proud at how I’m able to keep my voice from revealing my horror at what Jenna did.

“I don’t think so.”

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"I'm told something happened last year." I study her reaction.

She shrugs. "There's been a lot of odd goings on over the last year. I don't know that it has anything to do with this tunnel." She glances toward the exit. "I should get back to work?—"

"Actually, you could help me with something. I need to talk to Ronan about these tunnels."

"Why?" Her eyes widen with concern.

"Security reasons. Anyone could get into the house through this. And tonight would be a prime night to do it. Could you find him and send him down here? Tell him I found something important."

Jenna hesitates. "I don't know. Mrs. Kean was very clear about staff not bothering the family during the party."

"This is about keeping them safe." I cup her face, knowing exactly how to play her loyalty to the Keans against her, and I don't feel guilty about it one bit. Well, maybe a little. "You want to protect them, right? Like they've protected you and your mom?"

"Of course." She nods, determination replacing uncertainty. "I'll find him right away."

"Just be discrete. We don't want to alarm the guests." I press a quick kiss to her forehead.

I watch her hurry up the stairs, my hand already reaching for my weapon. Everything's falling into place. The tunnel, Ronan, my revenge. Yet something twists in my gut as I think of Jenna's smile, her absolute trust in me.

I shake it off. There's no room for doubt now. Ronan will come down those stairs, and I'll finally make him pay for what he did to my family. Then I'll use the tunnel to leave, as planned.

As soon as Jenna's footsteps fade, I pull out my phone and tap the secure messaging app my brothers and I use.

Target incoming. South cellar tunnel confirmed.

My fingers hover over the keys before adding, Will have clear shot. No witnesses.

Phoenix responds first with a thumbs up. Then Ash sends,

Car parked on road, keys on floorboard.

Flint's message comes last.

Sure about this? No turning back.

I think of Jenna's innocent description of finding this tunnel, how she handed that information to Ronan like a gift. And yet, I can't leave her vulnerable to him.

I'm sure. See you on the other side.

I check my weapon one last time, ensuring the silencer is secure. The wine cellar feels different now, no longer the place where Jenna and I just made love, but the beginning of my family's resurrection. These stone walls will witness another death,

but this time, it will be justice, not murder.

I position myself in the shadows beside the tunnel entrance, where I'll have a clear sight of the entrance to the wine cellar. Years of training with my brothers kicks in. Steady breathing, loose muscles, mind sharp and focused. I'm ready. Now all I need is for Jenna to deliver Ronan right into my hands.

Footsteps echo down the stone stairwell. My grip tightens on the gun as Ronan enters the wine cellar, followed by... my blood runs cold. Jenna trails behind him, wringing her hands. Fuck. I didn't want her to see this.

"This had better be important," Ronan snaps, adjusting his silk tie. "I have guests to attend to."

I can't worry about Jenna now. I lift my gun and point it at Ronan.

25

JENNA

My heart stops at the sight of Blaise aiming a gun at Ronan's head. The dim lighting of the wine cellar casts menacing shadows across Blaise's face, transforming the man I love into someone I don't recognize.

"What are you doing?" The words tumble from my lips.

Blaise's eyes dart to me, widening slightly as if he didn't expect to see me here. His grip on the gun tightens. "You weren't supposed to come back down."

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My mind struggles to make sense of the scene before me.

"Lower the gun." Ronan's voice stays steady. "Whatever grievance you have?—"

"Grievance?" Blaise's laugh sends chills down my spine. "You still don't recognize me, do you?"

"Should I?" Ronan's gaze narrows. "You're just another guard who—" His words cut off as recognition floods his face. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Like my parents?" Blaise's finger tightens on the trigger. "The ones you murdered?"

The room spins. Parents? Murdered? "Your parents? What are you talking about?"

"Stay out of this, Jenna." Blaise doesn't look at me. "You've done enough damage."

Me?

"Blaise Ifrinn." Ronan's voice holds a mix of shock and something else—fear?

It takes me a moment to register what he's just said. Ifrinn. The family who lived here before. The family who died in the fire.

"But that's impossible," I whisper. "The Ifrinns died."

"Is that what they told you?" Blaise's question drips with bitterness. "Is that what you believed after you helped them murder my parents?"

Shock runs through me. "What? I never?—"

"Don't." Blaise cuts me off. "Don't pretend you're innocent. You showed him the passage. You helped him kill my parents."

What is he talking about?

Blaise turns his attention back to Ronan. "Life is full circle now. Here we are by the passage Jenna showed you that you used to kill my family, and now I'm going to use it to escape after I kill you."

"You won't get away with this," Ronan says with more confidence than I'd expect under the circumstances.

"As long as you're dead, I don't care whether I get away with it or not."

"No. You can't. What are you doing?" I can't make sense of any of this.

Blaise sneers at me. "I should have known that when it came to choosing between us, you'd choose him."

My mind is whirling. "No. I love you. I don't... Why are you doing this?"

He shakes his head. "It's okay. I used Ronan's tried and true method with you. Sweet words, those tender moments. It was surprising how quickly you believed me."

Bile rises in my throat. Every kiss, every touch, every whispered 'I love you' were all lies. My hands drift to my still-flat stomach, where our baby grows. The baby he doesn't know about. The baby he'd clearly not care about.

"The sex was unexpected, though. You saved yourself for Ronan all those years, and

I took that from you too."

Tears blur my vision. I think of our picnic in the woods, the nights spent wrapped in each other's arms, his comfort during my mother's surgery. "But you helped my mom?—"

"I did. I saved your mom even though you killed mine. I heard her screams as fire consumed her." Tension rises as he adjusts his aim at Ronan. "You're a sick motherfucker."

"I'm not the one fucking the gardener as a means to?—"

"You hired me," Blaise reminds him. "You're so out of touch, you hired the guy whose family you killed, whose business you stole."

It finally occurs to me that Blaise is accusing Ronan of starting the fire ten years ago.

"And you," Blaise says to me. "You made it all happen when you showed Ronan how to get into my house. MY HOUSE! How dare you?—"



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“I didn’t know?—”

“Karma’s bitch, isn’t it, you two? Now, she’s shown me the passage so I can take my revenge.”

"You showed him the passage?" Ronan's voice cuts through my despair. "After everything we've done for you and your mother?"

My voice cracks. "I thought he was just concerned about security."

"Stupid girl." Ronan advances on me, making me shrink against the wall. "You handed over our secrets to the first man who batted his eyes at you?"

The contempt in his voice makes me flinch. This is worse than being invisible to him.

"I trusted him because?—”

"Because what? Because he made you feel special?" He sneers. "Look at you. The naive little gardener, so desperate for attention that you'd betray everyone who's ever protected you. Just like you did ten years ago."

“No.” I look between them, still not understanding how I play a part in all this.

"Don't play innocent." Ronan's face twists with disgust. "You were always hanging around, always watching. Always trying to get my attention. And when I asked about ways into the house, you couldn't wait to show me. Just like you showed him."

The memory returns. All those endless days trailing after him, my heart fluttering every time he glanced my way. How special I felt when he finally noticed me, finally spoke to me.

"You were so excited when I asked about the house." His lips curl. "Practically tripping over yourself to show me every secret passage you'd found. Just like you did with him." He jerks his head toward Blaise. "Some things never change. Still the same pathetic little girl, buying men's attention by betraying the people who put a roof over your head."

Finally, the synapses are connecting. Blaise isn't just accusing Ronan of setting the fire. He's accusing me of helping him by showing him how to get into the house. Which I did, but I had no idea Ronan would set a fire. The fire was an accident, wasn't it?

"No. That's not... I never..."

"You did." Ronan's voice drips with contempt. "And now you've done it again. Some things never change—you're still that pathetic girl, so desperate to be noticed, she'd do anything for attention."

"That's not what happened." I glance at Blaise, horrified that he'd believe I'd help Ronan kill his family on purpose. "I didn't know?—"

"Didn't know what? That giving away estate secrets might have consequences?" His laugh is cruel. "We took you and your mother in after the fire. Gave you jobs, a home. And this is how you repay our kindness?"

The walls close in as I realize I unknowingly helped cause the fire that killed the Ifrinns.

“History repeats itself, eh?” Blaise asks, seeming amused by this exchange between me and Ronan.

“Where are the rest of you?” Ronan asks Blaise.

Blaise gives a sinister smile. “They’re just as eager to see your family pay. I find it interesting how you berate Jenna for betraying you after all you’ve done. I could say the same for you and your family. You were all nothing until my father took you in. And look how you repaid us.”

My gaze shifts to Blaise, seeing him through new eyes. The son of the family that it appears I’ve inadvertently helped destroy. And every kiss, every tender moment between us had been his revenge.

I think of our baby. A child conceived in lies and manipulation. A child whose father plotted to use me just like Ronan did all those years ago. They’re right. I was desperate for love and attention. I wanted so badly to be seen, to be loved, that I never stopped to question why either of them would be interested in me. God, I’m pathetic.

The bitter taste of bile rises in my throat as I realize how both men played me. One when I was an innocent child, the other when I was a lonely woman. Different methods, same result.

“And you...” Blaise looks at me with disdain but also hurt. “My mother first gave you that cottage. Allowed you to tag along while your mother worked. I wonder what she’ll think when she learns you?—”

I can’t bear to hear the accusation again. “I never knew what I’d done. But you... You made me fall in love with you to what? Break me? Are you going to kill me too?” Until I say the words, I hadn’t considered that. Fear rips through me.

“I did use you.” There’s something in his voice, though, that belies the coldness of his words.

"None of it was real?"

"How could it be?" His laugh is hollow. "You helped kill my parents. Did you think I could actually love the person responsible for destroying my family?"

My voice trembles as I take in the man I don’t recognize anymore and ask again, "Are you going to kill me too?"

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The question hangs in the air. My hand presses against my stomach, wondering if telling him about our baby would change anything. Would it matter to him? Or would it just be another weapon he could use to hurt me?

Blaise's eyes flick to me briefly before returning to Ronan. "No. I'm not going to kill you. I already did what I set out to do with you. Breaking your heart was enough."

The casual way he dismisses me hurts me as much as any physical blow. In this moment, I realize he never saw me as anything more than a tool for his revenge. Not when he kissed me in the garden. Not when he made love to me in the woods. Not even when he helped save my mother's life.

"And then there is the bonus of showing Ronan here how easily his loyal little gardener could be turned against him."

"You fucking bitch," Ronan's hand swings out, catching me in the face, knocking me so hard that I stumble and fall to the ground. At that moment, I almost wish Blaise would kill me.

26

BLAISE

The sharp crack of Ronan's hand against Jenna's face echoes through the wine cellar. She crumples to the ground, her palm pressed against her reddening cheek. Blood trickles from the corner of her mouth.

My finger tightens on the trigger. Every muscle in my body coils, ready to spring. How dare he touch her. But then I remember her betrayal. I think about how she's still trying to protect him when she should be apologizing to me.

"I should have set the cottage on fire too."

Jenna stays curled on the floor, shoulders shaking. The sight of her tears tries to work into my sympathy, but I fight it. I've worked hard for this moment. I need to revel in it.

"I didn't know," she whispers. "I was just a child. I thought?—"

"You thought what?" Ronan's voice drips with contempt. "That I actually cared about you? That anyone would?"

The gun wavers between them as conflicting impulses war inside me. Protect her. Hurt her. Save her. Destroy her.

She looks up at me, those green eyes swimming with tears, and for a moment I see the innocence there, the genuine shock and horror as the truth crashes down around her. Maybe she really didn't know what she was doing ten years ago.

But then I remember my mother's screams. My father's body. The inferno that stole everything from us. All because this girl wanted a boy to notice her.

The rage wins out, turning my heart to stone. I steady the gun, aiming at Ronan's chest. Let her watch someone else she cares about die. It's only fair.

"You don't understand." Her eyes plead with me. "They've been good to us. My mother would have died without their support?—"

"And my parents are already dead because of your loyalty to them!" The fury explodes out of me, making her flinch. "Even now, knowing what they did, you're still defending them." I walk over to her, seething with rage. "And let me remind you of who made sure your mother got a new heart. It wasn't this motherfucker. And who took her to the hospital because the Keans whom you so adore threatened to fire you if you did? It was me, Jenna. And after all that, you still choose them."

The rage burns hotter, threatening to consume me. After everything, the dates, the kisses, the intimacy we shared, she's still theirs.

"Why would I choose you when it wasn't real?"

Except it was real and it's killing me. Fuck.

The movement catches my peripheral vision, and in the split second of my distraction, Ronan bolts.

"No!" I swing the gun back toward his retreating figure, squeezing off a shot. The bullet strikes stone, sending fragments flying.

I fire again. Miss. The sound of his footsteps echoes up the stairs as he disappears back up to the house.

"Damn it!" Ten years of planning, destroyed in seconds because I let myself get distracted by her.

I turn back to Jenna. She's still on the floor, eyes wide with terror. Good. She should be afraid. I want her to feel a fraction of what my family felt that night.

Except looking at her tear-streaked face, my chest aches. The urge to comfort her wars with my need for vengeance. I hate that she has this power over me. That even

knowing what she did, part of me wants to protect her.

I go to her. "Are you hurt? Let me see?—"

She slaps my hand away and scrambles away, using the wall to help her stand. "Don't touch me. I can't believe you used me. That everything between us was a lie."



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"Not everything." The words slip out before I can stop them. Damn it. Even now, I can't maintain the cold façade I need.

"Really?" She wipes blood from her lip, eyes blazing. "Which part was real? When you seduced me? When you took my virginity? Or when you made me fall in love with you just to get to Ronan?"

I don't like how her accusations feel, which is crazy considering it's all true. I achieved what I set out to do. But instead of feeling victorious, I feel like shit.

"All to make me pay for something I did as a child. Well, congratulations, you succeeded."

"That thing you did as a child killed my family. It killed nearly a dozen of the staff who worked here. Staff you knew. Do you really not see that?"

"How could I have known?" She shakes her head and pushes past me.

"Jenna—"

"Don't. You're just like him." Her words cut deep. "Using me. Making me think someone could actually love me. God, I'm such an idiot."

"You think I manipulated you?" I advance on her, fury burning away any lingering tenderness. "What about how you led killers right to my family?"

"I didn't know!" Jenna backs up against a wine rack. "I was just a stupid kid with a

crush.”

"And that makes it okay?" My voice rises, echoing off the stone walls. "Your schoolgirl fantasy was worth my parents' lives?"

Her eyes seem to show remorse, but she hasn't once said she's sorry. "Please, I never meant?—"

"Never meant what?" I slam my palm against the rack beside her head, making her jump. "Never meant for them to die? Never meant to help murderers into our home? Tell me, Jenna, what exactly did you think would happen when you showed Ronan the secret passage?"

Tears stream down her face, but I won't be swayed by them. "He said he just wanted to see me. That we could spend time together?—"

"And you believed him. He was seventeen years old. Did you really think he'd be interested in a kid?" Disgust coats my words. "So eager for attention, you never stopped to question why he finally showed an interest. Just like with me."

"That's different." Her chin lifts defiantly. "What we had was real. I felt it."

"Did you?" I lean closer, using my height to intimidate her. "Or did you just want it to be real so badly, you ignored all the warning signs? Again."

She flinches like I've struck her. Good. Let her hurt like I've been hurting for ten years.

"Your desperation for love got my parents killed." The words tear from my throat, harsh and raw. "Your blind trust in the Keans destroyed my family. And you're still defending them!"

"I was thirteen!" She shoves against my chest, surprising me with her strength. "They took care of me, gave me a home when I had nothing. What was I supposed to think?"

"You were supposed to think about someone besides yourself for once." The bitterness I've carried for years pours out. "But you couldn't even do that, could you? Not then, not now."

She sags into the rack like all the air has left her. "I just wanted him to like me. He was the only person who ever noticed me besides my mom. Who made me feel special."

My hand tightens around the gun at my side. I shouldn't care about her pain. I've waited ten years to make her suffer like this.

She lifts her gaze to me. "I didn't know what they were going to do. I swear, Blaise. I thought... I thought maybe we'd meet in secret, like in the stories my mom used to read me. I never imagined..."

She wraps her arms around herself, rocking slightly. "When the fire happened, they told everyone it was an accident. That the Ifrinns died in their sleep. That the Keans were heroes for honoring the Ifrinns by rebuilding and taking care of the surviving staff afterward."

I really want to hate her, need to hate her. But watching her fall apart, I see the child she was. Lonely, naive, desperate for connection. Just like I've been these past weeks with her.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, the words catching on a sob. "I'm so sorry. If I'd known... if I'd understood what Ronan really was... God, what have I done?"

Her genuine remorse cuts deeper than any calculated manipulation could. It would be easier if she were truly evil, if she'd known exactly what she was doing when she betrayed my family. Instead, she was just a foolish girl who made a terrible mistake, one that destroyed both our lives.

I hear commotion upstairs and know that we're running out of time. I have to get my shit together. I can't let my emotions take over now.

Reality crashes back and I realize that I've failed. Not only did I miss my shot at Ronan, but I've blown my cover completely. Any second now, Kean soldiers will swarm this cellar to kill me. And Jenna too.

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"Shit." I check my ammunition. "Come on, we need to get out of here." I reach for her to lead her out the tunnel.

She jerks away like my touch burns. "Don't touch me."

"You're not safe here anymore. Ronan knows you helped me. He'll make you pay for it."

"I didn't help you?—"

"He'll think you did. Just like I thought you helped him."

"I didn't."

God, how do I make her see? "We don't have time to discuss this. You're in danger."

"You could kill me?—"

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. I don't kill women. The Keans do. You know it now. They killed my mother, so many of the staff who worked for us."

"What about my mother?"

"I'll protect her too. But we have to go. Now."

Shouts echo from above, growing closer. We're out of time.

"What do you care?"

"I don't want you dead. I've never wanted you dead. I know you hate me right now, but I can protect you. Your mom too. We'll send for your mother once you're safe." I reach for her again.

"Are you acting like you care now? Using me like you've done this whole time?"

"That's not—" I cut myself off. What can I say? That I fell for her despite my best efforts? That every moment wasn't a lie? She'd never believe me now.

"I trusted you." Her voice cracks. "I gave you everything. My heart, my body..." She presses a hand to her stomach so briefly I almost miss it. "And it was all just part of your revenge plot."

"That is all true. But right now, you have to decide if you want to go with the asshole who broke your heart or face a murderer? Do you want to live or die? This asshole can keep you safe."

"Safe?" She laughs bitterly. "You're the most dangerous person I've ever met."

"Jenna—"

"No." She cuts me off and jerks away again. "I never want to see you again. Ever."

She turns and flees out of the wine cellar, leaving me alone in the cellar. The sound of her footsteps fades, mixing with the approaching guards' steps.

I should run. Every survival instinct screams at me to get out while I still can. But watching her disappear feels like losing my family all over again.

JENNA

I stumble through the dark halls of the mansion, my cheek stinging from Ronan's strike, but the physical pain is nothing compared to the ache in my chest. The world I thought I knew has shattered around me.

Ronan. I'd been so eager to please him, to show him I could be useful, hoping he'd see me as more than just the gardener's daughter. But he only wanted information he could use to hurt people. To kill people.

And Blaise... Every touch, every kiss, everything was a lie. He used my loneliness, my desperate need to be loved, against me. Just like Ronan did. The memory of giving him my virginity makes me physically ill. I duck into an alcove and retch, though nothing comes up.

How could I have been so blind? So naive? Twice now, my foolish heart has led to tragedy.

The Ifrinn family. They were good to Mom and me, just like she always said. And I helped get them killed without even knowing it. Their blood is on my hands because I was a stupid girl with a crush.

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The sounds of shouting and running feet echo through the halls. The mansion is in chaos, but I can't bring myself to move. What's the point? Everything I thought was real has turned out to be lies.

Mom. The thought cuts through my spiral of self-pity. She's helpless in that hospital bed, recovering from major surgery. What if Ronan sends someone after her?

I force myself to stand on shaky legs. I have to get to her. Have to protect her. She's all I have left in this world. My stomach roils at the realization that even my mother's heart transplant is tangled up in this web of lies. Did Blaise only help get her the heart to manipulate me further?

Footsteps thunder down the hallway. I press myself deeper into the alcove's shadows. Two guards rush past, guns drawn. These men look deadly serious.

I need to think. The Keans aren't just the wealthy family with possible shady businesses. They're killers. They murdered the Ifrinns in cold blood. And now I know too much. Both Ronan and Blaise just revealed secrets that could destroy them both.

I need to get out to protect myself, my child, and my mother. I avoid the main way up the stairs, working my way through the basement. I know another way out through the old servant corridors that connect to the wine cellar.

The thunder of feet and shouts from upstairs only confirms Blaise's prediction that people will come down to kill him. And maybe me too. I've never heard such commotion in the mansion before. Not even during the recent attacks.



My hand traces along the rough wall as I navigate the dimly lit passage. I know every corner, every hidden doorway from years of exploring as a child. Back when I thought this place was magical rather than dangerous.

I reach the old service door that leads to the east wing. The handle creaks as I turn it, and I freeze, hoping the noise doesn't carry. Blaise may have been lying about everything else, but he wasn't lying about the danger. I've seen the change in Ronan's eyes, the flash of cruel calculation when he struck me. The mask of the charming heir has fallen away to reveal something terrifying beneath. Perhaps I should have gone with the asshole choice instead of taking my chances on my own.

I slip through the door, easing it shut behind me. I continue through the hall toward an old storage area that I know has an exit to the back of the house. If I can just make it there without being discovered...

I'm trembling with fear. I've never felt more alone. For a moment, I wonder if Debbie could help me. Debbie's been my friend for years. She knows all the service corridors too. She could help me escape, maybe even help with Mom.

But like me, Debbie relies on the Keans for her livelihood. Would she choose our friendship over her security? Could I ask her to make that choice?

No. I can't. The fewer people who know where I am, the better. I can't risk trusting anyone right now.

I reach the storage room and for a moment, I hide in the shadows, too afraid to leave. A door slams somewhere above. I flinch, pressing deeper into my hiding spot. I wonder what's going on upstairs. Many powerful families are here. Are they aware of the chaos? Are they like the Keans, eager to kill their enemies?

Minutes tick by and slowly, the frantic energy upstairs seems to have dissipated.

What does that mean? Is everyone outside looking for Blaise? Have they left in search of him outside the estate walls? Is there anyone lingering, looking for me?

I can't stay here forever. I need to get moving. I need to get to Mom. I weave through the storage area and up the stairs, pushing through the exit hidden behind large shrubs along the house.

I'm terrified as I emerge into the night air. The mansion looms behind me. Guards patrol the perimeter, their flashlight beams cutting through the darkness. I duck low, using the hedges and flower beds I've tended for years as cover.

The path to my cottage has never felt so exposed. Every rustle of leaves makes my heart jump. But I know this garden better than anyone. I stick to the shadows of the oak trees, moving slowly to avoid detection.

A guard rounds the corner ahead. I freeze behind a rhododendron bush, hardly daring to breathe. His boots crunch on the gravel path, pause for a moment, then continue past. Only when his footsteps fade do I dare move again.

The cottage sits dark and still. No lights shine through the windows. No movement inside. I open the door and quickly enter. Inside, the cottage is exactly as I left it this morning. Empty. Quiet. The moonlight filtering through the curtains reveals nothing out of place.

I close the door behind me, careful not to make a sound. For the first time since fleeing the wine cellar, I let out a shaky breath. But I can't relax yet. This is just the beginning. I need to grab essentials, then find a way to get to my car and escape.

I take a single step into my darkened living room when a lamp flicks on revealing Ronan sitting in my mother's favorite armchair.

“You’ve never been very smart, have you, Jenna?” He rises, and it's then I notice a gun in his hand. "Running home to hide like a scared little girl is very predictable."

For a wild moment, I wish Blaise were here. But he betrayed me too, used me.

"You know, I actually forgot about your showing me that passage all those years ago. Imagine my surprise when it all came rushing back tonight." He takes a step toward me. "You were so eager to please back then. So desperate for attention."

“You acted nice so you could kill the Ifrinns? They were your friends.”

“It’s all about money and power. I should thank you for helping.”

God. How am I going to live knowing I helped him kill so many people? “I didn’t know what you planned?—”

"Of course you didn't. You never mean to cause trouble, do you? And yet somehow, you always manage to be at the center of it. First the Ifrinns, now this mess with their vengeful son."

He steps toward me. "You understand why I can't let you leave, don't you?" He sighs, as if this is all terribly inconvenient for him. "You know far too much now. About the Ifrinns, about tonight. It's really your own fault for being so... accessible to men with ulterior motives."

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My breath comes in short gasps as he advances. The weight of every mistake, every naive decision, crashes down on me. I trusted the wrong people, believed the wrong lies, and now I'm going to pay for it with my life.

"Please. I won't tell anyone. I'll leave Boston. You'll never see me again."

"We both know that's not true." Ronan keeps the gun trained on me as he moves closer. "You can't leave. Your mother's here. And even if you could, you're not smart enough to stay hidden."

My legs wobble, but I fight to stay strong so I can run if I get the chance. "I'll do anything. Please, Ronan. We've known each other since we were kids. I used to bring you flowers from the garden, remember? Fresh arrangements for your office every Monday."

His face remains cold, unmoved. "Always hoping I'd notice you." His gaze rakes over my body. "Shame I never took you up on it. It might have been fun."

God. How had I ever liked him, wished for him to notice me?

He clicks off the gun's safety. "This will be quick, Jenna. Try to be grateful for that much."

The barrel of Ronan's gun fills my vision. My heart pounds. Time slows. Ronan levels the weapon at my head.

My hand instinctively moves to protect my stomach. My baby. Blaise's baby. Even

now, facing death, I can't help but mourn all the possibilities that will die with us. A future I'd barely had time to imagine.

"Any last words?" Ronan asks, his tone casual, as if he's asking what I'd like for dinner.

I try to speak but my throat closes up. Tears blur my vision as memories flash through my mind. Mom's smile, Debbie's laughter in the kitchen, the warmth in Blaise's eyes when he kissed me. All the people I failed. All the trust I misplaced.

Ronan's finger tightens on the trigger. I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to watch death coming for me.

"Time to die, Jenna."

28

BLAISE

I hesitate at the tunnel entrance, my escape route beckoning. The passage stretches dark and narrow before me, promising safety and freedom. But something holds me back. The image of Ronan's cruel face, the way he struck Jenna, keeps flashing through my mind.

I close my eyes, exhausted by the war between my heart and head. Part of me still wants to hate her. It would be easier than facing these new, protective feelings. Easier than admitting I've fallen for the girl who helped destroy my world.

My fingers tighten around my gun. Jenna may have betrayed my family, but she was just a kid manipulated by a monster. And now that same monster will kill her. I can't leave her to face him alone. Not when I'm the reason she's in danger. I may have

failed to kill Ronan, but I won't fail to protect her.

"Fuck," I mutter, turning back toward the wine cellar. The smart move is to run. My brothers are waiting. But a protective rage burns inside me, different from the cold vengeance I've nursed for the last ten years. This isn't about revenge anymore. It's about protecting what's mine.

The irony isn't lost on me that I so effectively broke Jenna's heart, and yet, I still feel she's mine. The look of utter horror and hurt from my deception is seared on my brain.

"I didn't know..." she'd sobbed. And I believe her. That's what burns the most. All this time plotting my revenge against a calculated betrayer, when really, she was just another of Ronan's victims.

But the betrayal in her eyes wasn't just about my deception. It was the shattering of her entire worldview. Learning Ronan's true nature, realizing how they'd manipulated her as a child. She's spent her whole life serving the family that murdered mine, thinking they were good people. It's that knowledge that I hope will help her see that I'm her best bet for survival. But first, I need to find her.

I move silently through the darkness, hearing the sounds of shouting and running filter down from above. Ronan's men are spreading through the estate.

I press against a cold stone wall, concealing myself in shadows. Where would she go? Is she in the kitchen? Does Ronan have her already? I can't risk going up to find out without ensuring my own death.

A door slams somewhere above, followed by urgent voices. They're getting closer. Every second I stay puts me at greater risk, but I move deeper into the basement. I take refuge in a dark corner near the storage area. I pull out my phone when I realize I

need to let my brothers know what I'm doing.

Fucked up. Ronan got away. Cover blown. Jenna in danger.

Phoenix responds instantly.

GET OUT NOW

I grit my teeth, shame burning in my gut. Years of careful planning, destroyed in seconds because I lost focus. The moment Ronan struck Jenna, rage took over. Now the Keans know an Ifrinn survived, know we're coming for them.

Can't leave. They'll kill her.

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Ash's reply pops up.

She's with them. Not worth dying for.

My jaw tightens. They don't understand. They didn't see the confusion in her eyes, the horror when she realized what her childhood crush had manipulated her into doing.

I can't leave her.

That's not our problem, Phoenix writes. Mission compromised. Leave NOW.

I close my eyes, fighting the urge to throw the phone against the wall. My brothers are right. This isn't part of the plan. But I can't leave her.

I type back firmly.

No. Need someone at hospital to protect Jenna's mother.

A long pause follows. I can picture my brothers arguing, Flint probably the only one defending my choice.

I don't have time to argue over text, so I put my phone in my pocket and move on to find Jenna. I don't recall hearing her take the main steps up. So maybe she heeded my warning and headed somewhere else. I know she'll want to get to her mother, which isn't a wise move, but Jenna is a sweet, innocent gardener who somehow missed the ugliness of the Kean world around her and how they operate.



I decide she's probably making her way to the cottage to grab essentials. It's exactly the kind of practical thing she'd think of, even in a crisis. That mix of responsibility and innocence that first drew me to her before I twisted it into something to despise.

I hear Ronan's men reach the wine cellar and I know the passageway there is no longer an option for escape. So once I get Jenna, I need another way out. One that I can get Jenna through as well. Can she climb a wall?

But my first obstacle will likely be convincing her to let me help her escape. At the very least, I want a chance to explain myself. How I wanted to destroy her, but somewhere along the way I fell for her, totally and completely. She probably won't believe me. Why should she? I used her feelings against her, just like Ronan did. The difference is, I fell for her in the process.

But explanations will have to wait. First, I need to get her somewhere safe. Then I can try to earn her forgiveness, if she's willing to give it. Right now, all that matters is protecting her from Ronan's cleanup crew.

I reach a service door that leads toward her cottage. Pressing my ear against it, I listen for movement outside. Nothing. Time to move. I quickly and quietly move through the door. Guards patrol the perimeter, but I know their patterns since I helped design them. Moving through shadows between the sculpted hedges, I keep low and quick.

A light flickers on in her cottage window. My pulse spikes. It's like a fucking beacon to Ronan and his men that she's there.

The curtain shifts slightly, and I catch a glimpse of movement inside. Not Jenna's delicate frame. No, this is someone larger. Male.

Ice floods my veins. Ronan. He knew she'd come back here just as I did.

I reach the cottage, pressing against the outer wall. Voices drift out, too muffled to make out words, but I recognize Ronan's smug tone. Then Jenna's higher pitch, tight with fear.

My fingers curl around my gun. Keeping to the shadows, I circle the cottage, checking entry points. Front door, back door, two windows. Limited options, all likely to alert Ronan. But I can't risk waiting. Not with that bastard alone with her.

Jenna's frightened voice rises, though I still can't make out the words. I need to get in there. Now. I head to the front door, knowing they're in the living area.

"I'll do anything. Please, Ronan. We've known each other since we were kids. I used to bring you flowers from the garden, remember? Fresh arrangements for your office every Monday."

The terror in her voice guts me.

"Always hoping I'd notice you. Shame I never took you up on it. It might have been fun."

Mother fucker.

"This will be quick, Jenna. Try to be grateful for that much. Any last words?"

There's a long silence and then, "Time to die, Jenna."

Oh, God, oh, God. I have a sense of déjà vu. My world is burning up and I'm unable to stop it. I failed to protect my family a decade ago. I won't fail to protect her now.

"Please don't. I'm pregnant!"

Pregnant. The word ricochets through my head.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:11 am*

A baby? Our baby. Growing inside her right now as that bastard threatens her life.

“You think I’d spare your life for a bastard? Probably an Ifrinn bastard?” Ronan scoffs. “The baby will die with its whore of a mother.”

Red fills my vision. The rage that consumes me is unlike anything I’ve felt before. It’s primal, all-consuming.

I kick the door in, wood splintering under my boot. The crack of gunfire follows before the door even finishes swinging open. No hesitation. No warning. Just three precise shots, center mass.

Ronan's eyes go wide with shock as the bullets tear through him. His own gun, half-raised toward Jenna, clatters to the floor. Blood blooms across his expensive suit jacket.

He stumbles back, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. "You..." The word comes out wet, gurgling.

“Time to die, Ronan.” I repeat the words he said to Jenna as I point the gun at his head. He staggers and then crumples to the ground.

I step closer, wanting him to see my face, wanting him to know exactly who ended him. "That's for my parents. For Jenna. For our baby." My finger tightens on the trigger one final time. "And that's for thinking you'd ever touch what's mine."

The last shot echoes through the small room. Ronan goes still, eyes staring sightlessly

at the ceiling.

Ten years of plotting revenge, and in the end, it wasn't about vengeance at all. It was about protecting the future I didn't even know I wanted until tonight.

I rush to Jenna huddled in the corner.

My hands reach for her, but she flinches.

"Are you hurt?"

She presses herself further against the wall. Her eyes, wide with fear of me, cut deeper than any wound I've ever received.

"Don't touch me." Her voice shakes, arms still wrapped protectively around her middle. Around our child. "You killed him."

I'm confused. I mean, yes, I did kill him. Surely, she knows that if I hadn't, he'd have killed her.

"Jenna, we're still in danger. We need?—"

"You used me. Just like him."

It doesn't sit well that she's comparing me to Ronan. But as I watch her shrink away from me, I understand the full magnitude of what I've done. I didn't just plan to hurt her. I became exactly like Ronan. I used her innocence against her, just like Ronan did when she was thirteen.

"Jenna, I..." The words stick in my throat. How do I explain that in exacting my revenge, everything changed? That I fell in love with her? That all I want to do right

now is get her safe and protect her and our child for the rest of our days?

The fear in her eyes tells me it's too late. I've broken something precious. Her trust in and love for me are irrevocably destroyed.

29

JENNA

I feel utterly destroyed. In a matter of what feels like minutes, everything I thought I knew about my world crashed around me. The worst of it is from Blaise. The man I gave all of myself to, whose DNA runs through our baby, stands before me with blood on his hands. Ronan's body lies on the floor lifeless.

My shoulders shake as sobs of fear and pain rack through me. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold the pieces together as my world shatters.

"We need to leave. Now." Blaise's voice cuts through my tears. "Ronan's men will come looking for him soon."

I press closer against the wall, torn between the urge to run from him and the cold reality that I have nowhere else to go. My eyes dart to the door, but Blaise shifts to block my escape route.

"I won't hurt you." His hands raise, palms out. "I know you don't believe anything I say right now, but we're both in danger."

I can't get over the image of his face, the deadly coldness in his eyes as he fired shot after shot, killing Ronan. How can I trust a stone cold killer?

And yet, if he wanted me dead, he could have let Ronan do it, unless he wanted the

satisfaction of doing it himself.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:11 am*

I don't want you dead. His words in the wine cellar come back to me. He could have escaped, but he found me to protect me. He shot Ronan to save me.

“I’ve sent someone to protect your mother.”

His words shock me out of my fear-filled haze. “My mother?” She's still recovering from surgery, vulnerable and alone.

He nods. “I don’t know that she’s in danger, but in case the Keans want to use her to get to you, or me, I have someone protecting her.” He reaches his hand to me. “Right now, though, you and I need to get the hell out. Now.”

Whatever Blaise's true intentions, he helped save my mother’s life. Got her the heart transplant she desperately needed. I feel like I don’t have much choice at this point but to trust him. Not with my heart. Never again with my heart. But if he can get me off the estate and me and my mother safe, I’ll trust him this one time.

A sound outside makes us both freeze. Footsteps crunch on gravel, drawing closer to the cottage.

"Jenna." Blaise's voice drops to an urgent whisper. "Please. Trust me one last time. Just until we're safe."

I push away from the wall, wiping tears from my cheeks. "Fine. But only because I don't have a choice."

I force my shaking legs to move, following Blaise toward the back door. Every



instinct screams at me to run the other direction, away from the man who betrayed me, away from the killer who shot Ronan. But logic wins out.

We exit the back door and I follow Blaise, moving like a shadow through the yard, staying close to the hedges. I stumble after him, my heart thundering so loud I'm sure it will give us away. When I trip on a root, his hand catches my elbow, steadying me. The touch sends electricity through my skin, familiar yet foreign now that I know the truth.

"Stay close," he whispers, leading me toward the grove of oak trees near the back of the estate. The same grove where we had our picnic. Where I gave myself to him completely, believing in our connection. Fresh tears blur my vision, but I blink them back. I can't afford to break down now.

A shout rings out from the direction of the main house. Flashlight beams cut through the darkness, sweeping across the grounds. Blaise pulls me behind a thick oak tree, pressing me against the rough bark. His body shields mine as the lights pass by.

His breath fans across my face, and for a moment I'm transported back to all the times he's held me like this before. I remind myself that those moments were lies and I have to fight the urge to shove him away from me.

The voices fade and Blaise steps back, checking our surroundings before motioning me forward. We weave through the trees, moving deeper into the shadows. I begin to see each step as moving away from everything I've ever known. My home. My job. Where am I going? What will I do?

The massive oak looms ahead, our oak. I nearly weep as the memories flood back. Blaise pulls me behind its thick trunk, his body pressing close as voices echo in the distance. His familiar scent surrounds me. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting the urge to lean into his warmth like I would have just hours ago.

Blaise pulls out his phone, keeping his voice low while scanning our surroundings.

"Phoenix, we need extraction at the gate. Through the woods. Where Flint picked me up—" Blaise pauses, listening. "Yes, both of us."

Flint. Blaise. All of a sudden, it hits me. The Ifrinns. I look up into his face, at the man I'd known when I was child and he was a teen. I never recognized him.

"Have the car ready." He ends the call with a sharp tap.

More shouts echo from the direction of the house. The search parties are spreading out, methodically covering the grounds.

"We need to move." Blaise reaches for my hand, but I pull back. The hurt that flashes across his face almost breaks my resolve. Almost.

"I can follow on my own." My voice comes out steadier than I feel.

He nods once, sharp and professional. Like we're strangers. I suppose we are. I never really knew him at all.

"Stay close. The gate's not far, but it will feel like miles." He moves forward, picking a path through the trees.

I trail behind him, trying to step where he steps to minimize noise. Each snapped twig makes me flinch, certain it will give away our position.

The voices grow fainter as we push deeper into the woods, but I can't shake the feeling of being hunted.

A twig snaps behind us, and before I can turn, a guard steps out from behind a tree.

"Found y?—"

Blaise's silenced shot is so quiet I almost miss it. One moment, the guard is reaching for his radio. The next, he crumples to the ground. Just like that. A life snuffed out in a nanosecond.

My hand clamps over my mouth to stifle a gasp. Blaise moves with terrifying efficiency, dragging the body behind some bushes. There's no hesitation, no remorse in his movements. This isn't the tender lover I thought I knew. This is a trained killer.

I watch in stunned silence as Blaise plucks the radio from the dead guard's belt. He adjusts something on the device, then speaks into it with an accent I've never heard from him before.

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:11 am*

"Sector four clear. Think I saw movement near the north wall heading to the garage." The voice doesn't sound anything like Blaise. "Yeah, heading that way now."

Static crackles through the radio. "Copy that. Teams two and three redirecting to east fence."

The moonlight catches his face as he turns to me, and I see no trace of the man who held me so gently just days ago. His features are hard, eyes cold as he scans the tree line. The gun in his hand looks natural, like an extension of his arm.

My stomach lurches. How many others has he killed? Was this what he was thinking about during our intimate moments, ways to murder Ronan and his family? The casual way he took that man's life makes me wonder if anything about him was real.

Blaise reaches for my elbow, but I stumble back. "Don't touch me. You just... you killed him like it was nothing."

"We need to move." He doesn't respond to my comment. "They won't stay fooled for long."

He urges me forward, and I continue our path toward the gate. The metal door looms ahead. At one time, I used to have a romantic notion of the doors in the walls. Like the door to The Secret Garden. Now, it's my last barrier between captivity and freedom. Between the life I knew and whatever uncertain future awaits.

"When this door opens, you run, Jenna, as hard as you can through the woods to the road on the other side. You understand?"

All of a sudden, it sounds like I'm going alone, and as much as I despise Blaise right now, I know I need him until I'm safe.

"I'll be right behind you, but you have to run. Don't stop, no matter what, okay?"

Fear grips me, paralyzes me.

He rubs my arm, and for once I don't flinch away. "You can do this." He nods as if he's reassuring me.

He unlatches the bolt and swings the door open. "Run!"

I do as he says. Gunfire sounds. It pings off the open door.

I sprint to the woods, my feet carrying me faster than I knew I could move. Branches whip at my face as I crash through the underbrush.

A gunshot cracks through the night, making me stumble. Another shot follows, then another.

"Keep going, Jenna."

More shots ring out.

"Oh! Mother fucker!"

I slow to find out what happened.

"Don't stop, Jenna. Run!"

I realize he's running behind me on purpose to act as a shield. I try to pick up the

pace, but my lungs are heaving and my legs burn.

A bullet whizzes past my head, so close I feel the air displacement. I dig deep, finding the strength to run harder, faster. Branches tear at my face and arms. But I don't slow down, can't slow down. The baby and I will die if they catch us.

Finally, I burst through the tree line. Moonlight spills across an empty stretch of road where a black SUV idles. For one breathless moment, hope surges through me. I've made it.

A man steps out from behind the vehicle, gun raised and pointed in my direction. I haven't made it at all.

In this moment, suspended between life and death, I wish I could go back. Back before I learned the brutal truth about everyone I trusted. Back before I fell in love with a lie. Back before my childish crush led to so much death and pain.

But I can't change the past. All I can do is stand here, terrified and broken, as another stranger decides my fate.

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BLAISE

“Oh! Mother fucker!”

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My shoulder blazes with white-hot pain, but I force myself to keep moving, pushing through the thick foliage, making sure to stay between Jenna and the threats behind us.

Jenna slows, probably in response to my yelling out.

“Don’t stop, Jenna. Run!” If I have to carry her, I won’t let them get to her.

Branches whip at my face as we crash through the underbrush. The car is just ahead. I can see its outline through the trees.

As we exit the woods, a figure steps from behind the car with a gun. Jenna stops short with a gasp of fear.

I couldn’t stop in time if I wanted to. So I barrel into her, wrapping my arms around her and lifting her.

“No!” She cries out, and I realize she must think I’m kidnapping her.

“That’s Phoenix,” I say as I continue to run as best I can with a hole in my shoulder and carrying Jenna. "It's okay. He's my brother."

Phoenix keeps his weapon trained on the woods behind us, his stance alert and ready. “Hurry.”

"The car. Now." I guide her to the SUV, pushing her into the backseat, ignoring the searing pain that rips through my shoulder as I dive in behind her.

Gunfire erupts behind us as Phoenix opens fire into the woods.

"Stay down," I order, pushing her head below the window line as bullets ping off the car's exterior.

Phoenix jumps in the driver's seat. "Let's get the fuck out of here." He slams the accelerator, tires spinning before finding purchase. The car lurches forward just as our pursuers break through the tree line behind us. I twist in my seat, returning fire through the back window as we speed away into the night.

Phoenix tenses, raising his weapon. "We've got company."

The car approaching from the front of us is coming on fast. Too fast. My heart pounds as I consider our options. There are no side roads to this one.

"Get your belt on, Jenna." I reach across her for the seat belt, hoping that if we hit head on, those fuckers ahead will die and she and our child will live.

Her fingers shake, but she gets buckled in.

The approaching headlights grow brighter, filling the cabin with harsh white light. I squint against the glare.

A flash of movement catches my eye behind the approaching vehicle. It's gaining on it. Is that another Kean guard?

The vehicle reaches the one barreling down on us, maneuvering to the other lane. Then it turns in, hitting the car's back bumper and sending the car spinning off the road, metal screeching against metal.

"Way to go, Ash!" Phoenix whoops.



Relief floods through me as Ash's sleek black car slows and makes a U-turn, then stops until we drive past.

I turn to look out the back window, watching as Ash's car pulls out and maintains a protective position behind us. The adrenaline begins to fade, making the pain in my shoulder more pronounced.

"Who were they?" Ash's voice comes through Phoenix's speaker.

"Kean's men," Phoenix replies. "Looks like they've sent a fucking army after Blaise."

"Takes more than an army to kill Blaise," Ash replies.

I glance at Jenna. Now that the immediate danger is over, I need to check on her.

She sits rigid in her seat. Her face is pale. The sight of her like this, terrified and hurt, guts me. This is my fault. I did this to her. God, I'm such a fucking asshole.

"Are you hurt?" My voice comes out rough. When she doesn't respond, I try again. "Jenna. I need to know if you're okay."

She lets out a shaky breath. "Okay? How can I possibly be okay? You killed people. Like it was nothing."

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"I know." I want to reach for her, to offer some comfort, but I'm not sure I have that right anymore. "I'm sorry you had to see that. But I'm not sorry for protecting you."

"Protecting me?" She laughs, but it's a hollow sound. "After spending months lying to me? Using me?"

I wish I could deny it, but I can't. "Yes. I started this wanting revenge. But somewhere along the way, everything changed."

She turns to look at me then, really look at me, and she doesn't know me. That's how she looks at me. Like I'm a complete stranger.

"Ronan would have killed you," I say lamely, as if that will make up for all I've done.

"Stop saying that like it makes it okay!" She presses her hands to her face.

"If it makes you feel any better, one of them got me pretty good." I try to inject some levity into my voice despite the burning pain in my shoulder. "So maybe that's Karma catching up with me."

Jenna's eyes flash with anger. "You think this is funny? That getting shot somehow makes up for lying to me? For using me? For making me fall in love with you when it was all just some sick game of revenge?"

The venom in her words hurts more than my bullet wound.

"You got hit?" Phoenix glances at me through the rearview mirror.

“Shoulder. Hurts like a mother fucker, but I don’t think it’s fatal.” I look over to Jenna, wondering if she wishes it were fatal.

She turns away from me, staring out the window into the darkness. The silence that follows is deafening. Even Phoenix stays quiet as he drives.

I’ve succeeded in my mission. I’ve killed Ronan. I’ve destroyed the woman who helped him kill our parents. But I feel like the biggest piece of shit on the planet. It gets worse each time I hear Jenna’s breath hitch with suppressed sobs.

"I understand if you can never forgive me," I say softly. "But please believe that keeping you safe is all that matters to me now."

She doesn't respond, just curls further into herself.

The ride is quiet until we reach the safehouse we’d hidden Lucy in when she was in danger from the Keans and their minions.

“Let me see that wound,” Phoenix insists once we’re safe inside. He goes to get the first aid kit, but my attention is on Jenna, who’s huddled on the couch looking so small and lost. And there’s nothing I can do to fix it.

Phoenix works efficiently, pressing gauze against both entry and exit wounds before wrapping the bandage tight around my shoulder. The pressure sends fresh spikes of pain through my body, but I endure it silently.

“Lucky for you, the bullet went through,” he says.

“What about Jenna’s mother?”

“Flint’s with her.”

Jenna's head snaps up at the mention of her mother.

"Flint won't let anything happen to her," I try to assure her. "Once she's better and can leave, we'll move both of you somewhere safe. Somewhere the Keans can't find either of you."

She falls silent again. It gives me hope that she at least believes that I want her and her mother safe, even if she can't trust anything else about me right now.

"Well, well." Ash's voice cuts through the room as he strides in. "Looks like someone forgot the first rule of infiltration—don't get shot."

"Funny. I was a little busy trying not to get Jenna killed."

"What I want," Ash says, crossing his arms, "is to understand how my most calculating brother managed to blow his cover, failed to eliminate the target, and ended up shot, all while trying to save the very person he set out to destroy."

"Not now, Ash." The words come out as a growl, but I know I messed up. "Look, I know I fucked up. In the end, Ronan is dead. The real problem is they know it was an Ifrinn."

"This actually works in our favor," Phoenix says, pouring a stiff drink and handing it to me. "Let them know the Ifrinns are back. Let them feel the fear of knowing that we've returned for revenge."

"Please." Jenna's voice breaks through, small but desperate. "You can't hurt everyone at the estate. Most of them are just workers, like me. They don't know anything about what happened to your family. I mean, Debbie, she never worked for the Ifrinns. And Brigit, the Keans' goddaughter, is only nine."

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"We're not going to hurt the staff," I say firmly, meeting Phoenix's gaze. "This isn't about terrorizing innocent people."

"We go after the ones responsible. Hampton Kean. His inner circle. The ones who actually had a hand in killing our parents. No one else," Phoenix says with the authority that has led us to where we are now.

"Your friends will be safe. I promise," I say, although she has no reason to believe me.

"The Keans didn't give a shit about who they killed when they burned our house down." Ash's dark gaze is hard as he looks over at Jenna. "Some of those people you knew. Your mother worked with them. And you helped the Keans murder them."

I bolt up, blocking Ash's view to Jenna. "That's enough." My voice comes out rough, dangerous.

"Is it?" Ash's eyes narrow. "Our parents burned alive because she showed Ronan that passage."

Behind me, I hear Jenna's broken sob. The sound tears at something deep in my chest.

"She was thirteen," I growl, "a child who had no idea what the Keans were capable of. Just like I had no idea what I was capable of when I set out to hurt her." The admission costs me, but it's true. "We were all innocent once. Before the Keans poisoned everything they touched."

"Innocent?" Ash scoffs. "Her crush got our parents killed."

"And my revenge nearly got her killed tonight." I step forward, not sure what I plan to do. Ash is my brother. I love him. And he's not wrong. It's the same thinking I had when I infiltrated the Kean estate. "If you want to blame someone, blame me. I'm the one who failed the mission. I'm the one who fell—" I cut myself off. My feelings don't matter here.

"Fell what, brother?" Ash's voice is deadly quiet. "In love with our enemy?"

I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that's exactly what I did.

"She's just as much a victim of the Keans as we were." I meet his gaze steadily. "And I won't let you hurt her for their crimes."

31

JENNA

Isit huddled on the couch, my arms wrapped around my knees as I try to make sense of everything crashing down around me. The safehouse feels both too small and too vast at once.

Ash's words cut deep. I made their parents' deaths possible. A thirteen-year-old girl's stupid crush led to murder. That truth threatens to crush me. All these years, I thought the Keans were good people who stepped up after tragedy struck. Instead, they orchestrated that tragedy using my childish infatuation to gain access.

These men are strangers to me, and yet, I knew them once. I was a child. They were teenagers whom I saw only on occasion as they were always busy with school and other activities. If I study them, I think I see the young men I knew, but they're so

different now. Gone are those carefree sons. In their place stand hardened men shaped by loss and revenge.

"I didn't know," I whisper, more to myself than them.

Blaise's head snaps up at my words, his green eyes intense. For a moment, I see a flash of the gentle man who held me. But then his jaw clenches, and I remember how easily he killed tonight. How naturally violence comes to him now.

The nausea rises again as I realize I'm carrying the child of a man I barely know. I thought I knew his heart, but everything was built on lies. And yet he came back for me. He killed Ronan to protect me. He defends me to Ash, who is accusing me of the same thing Blaise earlier accused me of. I don't know what to believe anymore.

Phoenix's phone cuts through the tense silence.

"Yeah, everything's fine here. How's it looking there?" He nods, listening. "Good. Keep us posted."

He turns to me. "Your mother's stable. Flint's keeping watch, making sure no one from the Keans gets near her."

My shoulders sag with relief. At least Mom is safe. But can I really trust Flint to protect her? These men are killers. I've seen that firsthand tonight.

"When can I see her?" I twist my hands in my lap. "How long do I have to stay here?"

"Until we're sure it's safe," Blaise answers before Phoenix can. "The Keans won't let this go easily. Not after tonight."

I close my eyes, wishing this were all a bad dream. The thought of being separated

from Mom while she recovers is unbearable. I need her. Now more than ever, which I suppose is selfish considering she's recovering from a heart transplant. I need to be stronger, to learn to stand on my own. I need to be there for her.

"She needs me," I say. "She just had major surgery. I'm supposed to help with her recovery?—"

"You can't help her if you're dead," Ash cuts in.



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“Fucking hell, Ash.” Phoenix shakes his head at him.

“What? Am I wrong? They’ll be looking for her. She’ll lead them right to her mother.”

Blaise walks closer to me but thankfully doesn’t try to sit with me. “He’s right. Ronan knew, just as I did, that you’d be at the cottage. Your next stop would be your mother. When they find Ronan in the cottage, they’ll think?—”

“Everyone thinks I’m a killer?” It makes no sense to me how Blaise and now the Keans blame me for their stupid games.

“You’re stuck in the middle, and I’m sorry for that. But you won’t be able to see your mother until she’s stronger and we can move her to a safer place.”

The tenderness in his tone makes my heart ache. Even now, after everything, his concern feels genuine. A part of me wants to lean into that comfort, but I can’t forget how easily the lies fell from his lips before.

"She'll be scared when she learns what happened."

"Flint will make sure she knows you're safe." Blaise takes a step toward me, then stops when I stiffen. "I promise, as soon as she's strong enough to travel?—"

"Your promises don't mean much right now." The words come out sharper than I intend, but I can't take them back. Not when they're true.

His face falls, and for a moment I glimpse real pain in his eyes. It mirrors my own hurt, and that shared understanding only makes this harder. How can I hate him when he looks at me like that? When he took a bullet protecting me? When he's trying to keep both me and my mother safe? God, it's all so confusing.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, changing the subject. "You should eat something."

I turn away. "I just want to be alone." I glance over at Phoenix, who I've been able to determine is the leader. "Is there a place for me to lie down?"

"I'll show you," Blaise says.

I'm too tired to insist on someone else showing me, so I let Blaise guide me down a narrow hall to a bedroom.

My skin prickles with awareness as he closes the door behind us. The space feels too intimate, too reminiscent of other private moments we've shared.

"Is it true?" His voice comes out rough. "What you told Ronan about being pregnant?"

My hand instinctively moves to my stomach as I sag down on the bed. I could lie, tell him it was just a desperate plea to save my life. The words hover on my tongue. But I'm not like him. I won't be cruel, but neither will I spare him the reality of what he's ruined.

"Yes." I lift my chin, meeting his gaze.

He takes a step toward me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you didn't want to listen to me. Instead, you told me to get Ronan. Should I

have told you when you pulled a gun on him? Or maybe when you were telling me how you'd seduced me to break my heart?"

His eyes close for a moment, and I hope the shame I think I see is as deep as an abyss. "Jenna?—"

"Don't." I hold up my hand. "You don't need to pretend to care now. I can handle this on my own. I've been taking care of myself and my mother for years. One more person won't make a difference."

His face twists with something that looks like pain, but I can't trust that anymore, can't trust any of it. The tenderness in his eyes, the way his hands flex like he wants to reach for me, it's all suspect now.

"If you never loved me, if it was all just part of your revenge plan, then consider yourself free of any obligation." My voice only shakes a little. "I don't want anything from you."

"You don't get to decide that for both of us." Blaise steps closer, his presence filling the small room. "Not when I've spent weeks fighting my feelings, telling myself they weren't real when they are, Jenna."

I lean away from him, wishing he'd disappear. "Stop. I can't handle more lies."

"I'm done lying." His voice drops low, intense. "I came here wanting revenge. I blamed you for betraying my family to the Keans. But I was wrong."

"How can I believe anything you say?"

"Because fighting my feelings for you nearly destroyed me. Every time you smiled at me, every moment we shared, made it harder to hold onto that hatred."

“You didn’t have that much trouble in the wine cellar tonight.” God, was that tonight? This night seems to be never ending.

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He lets out an exasperated sound. "When you defend him... that's hard for me, Jenna. It made it easier to tell myself you were on his side. I hurt, and it made me want to hurt you."

"Well, you did. Good job."

"I don't want that anymore, Jenna. When Ronan hit you tonight, I lost my mind." His voice roughens. "In that moment, I didn't care about revenge or justice. I just needed to keep you safe. That's when I knew I couldn't deny it anymore."

Tears slip down my cheeks, and I hate that he can see it. I don't want him to think there will ever be a chance for me to trust him again. "Deny what?"

"That somewhere between plotting revenge and falling into your arms, you became more important than my hatred. I love you, Jenna."

I jump up from the bed, wanting to hit him. Instead, I push him. "Don't you dare. You said you loved me under the tree, and like a dummy, I believed it. But I won't believe you anymore."

His hands fall to his sides. "I know I hurt you?—"

"Hurt me?" A bitter laugh escapes. "You made me fall in love with you. You had sex with me with the sole purpose of humiliating me. Of breaking me."

He looks stricken, as if he realizes just how heinous his actions have been. "I never meant for any of this to happen."

"That doesn't make it better. You used me to hurt me?—"

"At first, yes." He reaches for me again, but I slap his hand away. "But things changed?—"

"When? When exactly did they change? Was it before or after you took my virginity? Before or after you told me you loved me? Before or after I gave everything I am to you?"

His face twists with guilt.

But before he can say anything more, I cut him off. "I don't want to hear it. I don't want explanations or apologies or declarations of love. I just want you to leave me alone."

"What about the baby?"

"A baby created out of your sick plot for revenge. I'll handle this on my own. I don't need you pretending to care about me or this baby out of some misplaced sense of duty."

"It's not duty?—"

"I want you out of my life." My words hang in the air between us, sharp and final. The hurt that flashes across Blaise's face tries to create doubt, but I force myself to hold firm. I've been naive enough for one lifetime.

"Okay." He retreats away from me. "You'll never have to see me again after tonight. I'll make sure you and your mother are set up somewhere safe, far from Boston."

He pulls a burner phone from his pocket and holds it out. "This is encrypted. You can

use it to contact your mother through Flint while she's in the hospital. Once she's strong enough to move, we'll arrange everything."

I take the phone, careful not to let our hands touch. "Thank you."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I am sorry, Jenna." His shoulders slump. "For everything. You deserved better than being caught in the middle of my revenge."

I turn away, unable to look at him anymore. "Just go."

The door clicks shut behind him, and I sink onto the bed. I want to weep. I want to scream in frustration. Instead, I dial the number to my mom's hospital room.

"Yeah." A male answers.

"It's Jenna Hart. Can I talk to my mom?" My voice has no affect. It's like I'm completely gone.

"Hold on," he says, and there's rustling before Mom's weak voice comes through.

"Baby girl? Are you okay?"

The sound of her breaks something inside me. "Mom... Everything's fallen apart. The Keans... they're not who we thought. They killed the Ifrinns. And Blaise, he's one of them. An Ifrinn son."

"I know, sweetheart. Flint told me everything." Her breath wheezes slightly. "How are you holding up?"

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“He lied to me.” Now the tears are falling, and I can’t stop them. “He was only using me for revenge. He thought I helped kill his parents.”

"Oh, Jenna." Mom's voice is soft with sympathy. "I wish I could see you now." I find it odd that she’s aware of the danger. Is it possible she knew more about the Keans than she let on?

“I wish I could too, but they say it’s too dangerous.”

"As soon as I’m better, we’ll be together. We’ll get through this. Is the baby okay?”

“I think so.” I sniff. "I'm so scared, Mom. I don't know what to do."

"First, you breathe. Then you rest." Her words wrap around me like a hug. "The baby needs you strong. Everything else, we'll handle one day at a time."

I curl up on the bed, clutching the phone like a lifeline. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, baby girl. So much." She pauses, and I hear her labored breathing. "Try to sleep. Things will be better in the morning."

When I hang up, I feel like I’ve been wrung out. I’ve lost nearly everything in the matter of hours. I don’t see how sleep is going to change that. But since there’s nothing I can do, I give in to the fatigue and the despair and let the darkness take me away.



BLAISE

I slump into a chair, my shoulder throbbing where Phoenix patched up the bullet wound. My brothers stare at me, waiting for answers.

But all I can focus on are Jenna's words, running through my head in an endless loop. I want you out of my life.

"What the hell happened in there?" Phoenix demands.

I know he doesn't mean in my discussion with Jenna a few moments ago, which went like shit. What an idiot I am. I'd been falling for her the whole time, yet when the moment came, I followed through on my plan and as a result destroyed a sweet woman and the best thing that could ever happen to me.

"I had Ronan right where I wanted him." I run my hand through my hair, frustrated at how it all went sideways. "But Jenna showed up with him."

"The girl screwed everything up again," Ash says. "Just like she did ten years ago."

"She didn't know what she was doing. Either time." The words come out sharp. I'm not in the mood for Ash's bullshit. "She was just a kid when Ronan manipulated her. And tonight..." I trail off, not wanting to remember the awful things I said.

"It was your idea to go after her," Phoenix reminds me.

"I did break her heart. But it wasn't as satisfying as I thought it would be." I meet their skeptical looks. "Because somewhere along the way, I fell in love with her."

Ash makes a face and shakes his head. "After what she did to our family?"

I wish Flint were here. He'd understand. "She was used. When she realized how Ronan used her, she was devastated."

Ash opens his mouth, but Phoenix holds his hand up to stop him. "Okay, fine. But we don't have the manpower yet to be spending it on protecting her and her mother."

"I just need a little time. When her mother can be moved, I'll make the arrangements to send them away." My head sags back on the couch and I scrape my hands over my face. "She's pregnant." The room goes silent. "And before you ask, yes, it's mine."

"Jesus Christ, Blaise." Ash paces the room. "You were fucking her with the intention of breaking her and got her pregnant?"

God, it sounds awful. It is awful. I'm such a dick.

"What is it about you and Flint? Didn't Dad give you the talk?" Ash finishes.

I said the same to Flint when he told us about Lucy's pregnancy. I can see now why he didn't think it was funny.

"She doesn't want anything to do with me, so like I said, I'll get her and her mother set up with enough for the child too and..." And I'll live the rest of my life regretting having lost Jenna.

"If you were in love with her, why did you follow through with hurting her?" Phoenix asks, finally acting like a concerned brother, not a fearless leader.

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"I know I fucked up. But when Ronan hit her, when he was about to kill her..." My fists clench at the memory. "I couldn't let her die."

"I've got a place upstate we can take them," Phoenix offers. "Remote location, private security. They'd be safe there while we deal with this mess."

I shake my head. "Her mother just had heart surgery. She can't be moved yet."

"Then we keep someone at the hospital and rotate security," Phoenix says decisively. "Once she's stable enough, we move them both."

"And just abandon your child?" Ash asks.

The guilt is about to pull me under. "They'll have what they need. Just not me. I don't deserve either of them."

"Blaise—" Phoenix starts, but I cut him off.

"What kind of man does what I did? What kind of father could I possibly be when I'm capable of such cruelty?"

"Bullshit." Ash's voice reverberates off the walls. "The Keans are the monsters here, not you."

"I used her."

"To get justice for our family." Ash leans forward, his eyes blazing. "And the

moment you realized she was innocent, you protected her. Hell, you took a bullet for her tonight."

"That doesn't erase what I did."

"No, but it proves you're nothing like them." Ash stands over me. "You have every right to that baby, to happiness with her if you can earn it back. Don't let the Keans take another thing from you."

I narrow my eyes at him. This is a change from the man who is always talking about how love only brings misery.

"She won't ever forgive me."

"So, what? You're just going to give up? Hide her away somewhere and pretend that child isn't yours?"

"I'm giving her what she deserves, freedom from the man who broke her trust." I look up at him, willing him to stop pushing this. "She trusted me, Ash, gave herself to me completely. And I used that trust to try to destroy her."

"You fell in love with her. That's not destruction. That's redemption."

"Love doesn't excuse what I did." I press my fingers against my temples. "She deserves someone better."

Ash glances at Phoenix, who shrugs. Good, maybe they'll finally let this topic go.

"I need someone to watch over her while she's here. I promised she wouldn't have to see me again. Can you do it, Ash?"

Ash's face darkens. "I'm not a fucking babysitter, Blaise. You want me to sit around watching your pregnant girlfriend while you do what? Blubber?—"

"Ash," Phoenix chastises.

"She needs protection."

"Then hire security." Ash stalks away to find his drink. "Just because I watched Lucy for Flint doesn't make me the family babysitter. I'm not spending my time playing guardian angel to the woman who helped destroy our family."

"Someone needs to protect her. Plus, she's pregnant."

"Which is your problem, not mine."

Phoenix steps between us before I can respond. "Ash, it would only be temporary. Until we can move her and her mother somewhere secure." He gives me a pointed look. "A few days at most. We need someone we can trust, and you're the best choice right now."

"The best choice?" Ash scoffs. "Because what?—"

"Because of your effervescent personality," Phoenix quips. "Just help Blaise out. We need a few days to regroup now that the Keans know at least one Ifrinn is alive and are looking for him and maybe Jenna."

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Phoenix turns to me. "Go to my place, Blaise. Hide out. Get some rest."

The last thing I want to do is leave Jenna, but I promised her.

I push myself up from the chair, grimacing at the pain. "Call me if anything happens. If she needs anything?—"

"We've got it covered." Phoenix steers me toward the door. "Go. Sleep. Process everything that happened tonight."

I pause at the doorway, glancing back toward the room where Jenna's hiding. Part of me wants to go to her, try to explain everything again. But what's the point? She made it clear that she wants nothing to do with me. Forcing her to listen to my groveling and begging will only hurt her more.

The drive to Phoenix's place is a blur. My shoulder screams with every movement, but it's easier to focus on the physical pain than the emotional wreckage I've created. I collapse onto Phoenix's couch, too drained to make it to the bedroom.

My sleep comes in small snippets. It's almost not worth trying to sleep. I'm not sure how long I've been trying when the front door opens and Flint walks in.

I jump up. "Who's guarding Mrs. Hart?"

"Phoenix. He told me to come check on you." His gaze scans me from head to toe. "You look like shit." He drops into the chair across from me.

"Feels worse than it looks." I gesture to my bandaged shoulder, but we both know that's not what he means.

"Phoenix filled me in." Flint leans forward, elbows on his knees. "About Jenna. The baby."

"Come to tell me what an idiot I am?" I can't meet his eyes. "How I screwed everything up?"

"Actually, I came to make sure you're okay." His voice softens. "This can't be easy."

The understanding in his tone breaks something in me. "I don't know what to do, Flint. I went in wanting revenge, convinced she was this manipulative person who helped destroy our family. But she's not. She's kind and genuine, and I've ruined any chance of her ever trusting me again."

"You're not the only one who's done things they regret in pursuit of revenge," Flint says quietly. "Remember how close I came to losing Lucy?"

"That was different. You weren't actively trying to destroy her."

"No, I lied about who I was." He shifts forward. "The question is, what are you going to do now?"

"Protect her. Make sure she and the baby are safe." I press my fingers against my temples. It would take a tanker full of pain medication to stop the tension headache I have. "Even if she never wants to see me again."

"And if she does?" Flint asks. "If there's a chance to make things right?"

"How can there be? I used her, manipulated her feelings." The guilt threatens to

drown me. "I don't deserve her forgiveness."

"Maybe that's not your choice to make," Flint says. "Maybe you owe it to her, and your child, to try."

"There's no coming back from what I did."

Flint sits back in the chair, studying me for a moment. "You know, when Lucy first found out who I really was, I thought I'd lost her forever. The look in her eyes was like she didn't know me and everything we had suddenly meant nothing."

The anvil on my chest crushes deeper. It's the same look I saw in Jenna's eyes tonight.

"But Lucy taught me something important," he continues. "Love isn't about being perfect or never making mistakes. It's about what you do after those mistakes. How you choose to move forward."

"This is different," I argue. "You were trying to protect Lucy. I deliberately set out to hurt Jenna."

"And yet the moment she was in real danger, you went after her knowing it would likely get you killed. You saved her. Took a bullet for her." Flint leans forward. "You chose her over your revenge. You protected her because you love her. The same way I chose Lucy over our vendetta. Sometimes, love sneaks up on us when we least expect it... or want it."

"How did you fix things with Lucy?" I shouldn't ask this. Developing hope is the last thing I need right now.

"I just bared it all. Put it all on the line. Showed her I was the man she fell in love with."



I scoff. “She fell in love with a lie.”

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“Tell me the truth. How soon in your seduction plan did you feel something other than revenge?”

From the fucking moment I first saw her in the kitchen. “That’s not the point?—”

“It is. Because that’s the moment you were you, that she fell for the real you, and you just need to help her see that.”

“She knows my plan and in her mind, anything I say or do now is suspect. I don’t blame her.” I rise from the couch needing a drink.

Flint's jaw tightens. "Stop making excuses."

"They're not excuses. They're facts." I pour two fingers of whisky from Phoenix’s bar. "Jenna fell for me deeply, so... purely." Again, guilt spears sharp. It nearly steals my breath. “How can she ever trust me?”

Flint stands, blocking my path back to the couch. "You're not the same man who set out to destroy her. He wouldn't be tearing himself apart with guilt right now."

"Guilt doesn't change what I did."

"No, but what you do next might." He grabs my good shoulder, forcing me to look at him. "You want to prove you're worthy of her trust? Then step up. Be the man she deserves. Show her that your feelings are real, that you'll protect her and your child no matter what it costs you."

"How?" The word comes out broken. "How do I even begin to make up for what I've done?"

"By being completely honest from this moment forward. And by accepting that she might never forgive you but trying anyway because she deserves the truth and your child deserves a father who didn't give up. I'm not saying it will be easy. It may take time, but trust me, Blaise, it will be worth it."

I know there is truth to his words. I need to step up for Jenna and the baby. Not to win her back, but to provide her everything she deserves.

"You're right." I turn back to Flint. "Even if she never forgives me, I have to show her the truth of me." I swallow hard. "She made me feel whole again, even when I was trying not to feel anything."

He smiles. "I felt the same about Lucy."

Something settles in my chest, not peace exactly, but purpose. It's time to step into the light, face my mistakes, and prove to Jenna that the man she fell in love with wasn't entirely a lie.

I don't deserve her forgiveness, but I can't live without trying. For the first time since everything fell apart tonight, I feel steady. Determined. Whatever it takes, I'm going to fix this.

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JENNA

I wake with my stomach churning. It takes a minute for me to orient myself in my surroundings. Then it all comes back in a flood—Blaise ambushing Ronan in the

wine cellar and telling me his love for me was all a lie to get back at showing Ronan how to get into the house. The chaos when Ronan got away. Ronan's dark, empty eyes staring down at me as he held a gun, ready to kill me. Blaise barging in, killing Ronan without a second thought. His killing the guard. And then coming here. I lie in bed, feeling the loss of everything I've ever known.

My stomach both rolls over and growls. I need to eat something.

The house is quiet as I pad down the hallway still in clothes from last night. Maybe everyone's asleep and I can raid the kitchen in peace. At the very least, I hope Blaise isn't here. I can't look at him and not feel like such a fool for buying everything he said and did.

Ash Ifrinn sits at the kitchen island, a steaming mug of coffee in front of him. His blue eyes lock onto me the moment I enter. They're the same shape as Blaise's, but Blaise has green eyes. In fact, Blaise is different from his brothers in that he has blond hair instead of dark brown. But there's no mistaking the resemblance. I can see their mother in them. Mrs. Ifrinn was a kind woman. I think about Mrs. Kean who also does generous things, but in comparison to Mrs. Ifrinn, Mrs. Kean does them to boost her reputation. Mrs. Ifrinn did it out of genuine goodness. Or at least that is the impression I remember of her.

"There's cereal in the cabinet." Ash's voice carries none of the hostility from last night. "Or I can make eggs if you want protein."

I hover in the doorway, unsure whether to bolt or stay. The smell of coffee makes my stomach flip. "Can I have toast? I can make it if you show me where things are."

"Sit." He points to a stool across from him. "You need to reduce your stress."

My hand instinctively moves to my stomach. "Did Blaise tell everyone about...?"

"The baby? Yes." He points again at the stool. "Sit."

The kitchen suddenly feels smaller, more confining. This man blamed me for his parents' deaths just hours ago. Now he's offering to make me breakfast like we're family.

"How long do I need to stay here?"

"Until your mom can be moved." He holds up a tea kettle. "Tea?"

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I nod, wondering if this is just a surreal dream. Ash, the brusque man who thinks I helped kill his parents and clearly isn't happy about having to guard me, puts water on and then drops two slices of bread in the toaster.

I wish my mother were here. I think of the phone Blaise left me. I had a moment to consider calling 9-1-1, but I didn't. I can't say why for sure. Perhaps because I know the Keans have friends in the police, and I can't be sure it would be safe. "Have you heard anything about my mother?"

"Phoenix took a shift last night. Flint should be back today."

The kettle whistles, and he pours water over a bag of herbal tea. The toast pops, and he puts it on a plate, setting it on the island. He pulls butter and strawberry jam from the refrigerator and sets them next to the toast. I spread the jam on the toast and take a tentative bite.

"Your mom usually up this early?" Ash asks.

"Probably not." It is just after six in the morning. I hope she's resting.

"Flint says she's doing well. The doctors are happy with her recovery."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Everything feels like a trap, their kindness, their concern. Just like Blaise's attention felt real until it wasn't.

"He really does care about you."

My gaze jerks up to him.

"Blaise isn't the type to risk everything for someone unless they matter."

"He pretended to care to hurt me and get to Ronan."

"If that were true, he would've let Ronan kill you last night. Instead, he blew his cover and got shot protecting you."

All of a sudden, I'm not hungry anymore. I push the plate away. "He came to kill Ronan, not save me."

He rolls his eyes. "Blaise was ready to leave through the tunnel when Ronan escaped. So no, he didn't hunt down Ronan to finish the job. He hunted you down to save you. And lucky for you, he did, or you and your baby would both be dead."

He's definitely not one to mince words.

"It doesn't change that he used me. Do you know how violated I feel? I gave him... well..." I don't want to tell this man I gave my virginity to his brother.

"I see. So using your reasoning, I don't have to forgive you because your being a kid blinded by schoolgirl love doesn't change that you let a murderer into my house, killing people I loved."

I swallow, feeling the weight of the guilt he's purposefully piling on me.

"People fuck up, Jenna." He shrugs like this isn't a big deal when it feels like the whole world to me. "Ronan was the target, but Blaise always felt the traitor who let him in the house should pay too. Ronan knew exactly what would happen when he got that information from you. Blaise thought you did too and were just as complicit."

Ash's words make me think. All those times Blaise asked about the past, probed for details about the fire, he wasn't just gathering intel. He was looking for a confession.

"I didn't know." My voice comes out small, broken. "I swear I didn't know they would hurt anyone. The Ifrinns were good to us. My father died protecting them."

"Then why tell Ronan about the passageway?"

I want to cry out, to go back to my thirteen-year-old self and warn her away from her silly crush. "The Keans were friends with the Ifrinns. It was just a game. I... I don't know." I look up at him. It's finally getting through to me just how much my actions hurt them. Accident or not, they lost their family and home. And just like I bought Blaise's lie, I bought the one the Keans told us about honoring the Ifrinns by rebuilding and running the business in their stead.

"I deserve whatever punishment you think I deserve," I whisper. "But please, my mom and the baby..."

"You don't deserve punishment." Ash's voice cuts through my spiral of self-loathing. "And neither does your baby. That's what I'm trying to tell you about Blaise."

I look up, catching a glimpse of something like understanding in his blue eyes.

"He went in ready to hate you, to make you pay. But the more time he spent with you..." Ash shakes his head. "I watched my brother change. He'd meet with us to report on his mission, and he'd seem conflicted. The rage that consumed him for years started slipping away."

If only that were true. "He was just playing a part. Last night, he told me it was all a lie."



Ash laughs, and I want to slap him for mocking my pain. “The lie was when he acted like he didn’t care for you. It lasted what, all of two seconds? The minute Ronan hit you, Blaise’s mission stopped being about killing Ronan and became all about protecting you.”

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I remember the fury in Blaise's eyes when Ronan hit me, how quickly he moved to check whether I was hurt.

"The Blaise I knew six months ago would have completed the mission at any cost. He didn't count on you."

The sincerity in Ash's voice makes me want to believe him, want to believe the connection I felt with Blaise wasn't entirely fake. But the memory of his cold eyes in that cellar, the way he threw our relationship back in my face...

"If he cared, why did he say those horrible things? Why tell me it was all just manipulation?"

"Maybe because you were standing next to Ronan, defending him. Still on his side... showing him how to ruin the Ifrinns."

I shake my head. "No, I never—at least not on purpose."

"If you hit someone by accident while driving, aren't you still responsible?"

I swallow hard. "But I was just stupid. A silly girl with a crush." Ten years later, I was still that girl, eating up Blaise's attention just like I'd done with Ronan.

"What did you think Ronan would do knowing about the passage?"

"I didn't think he'd burn the house down," I snap. I close my eyes, knowing I'm trying to defend myself from a man who lost so much because of my own naivety. I

look up at him again. "I'm sorry that my actions led to your losing so much. Truly. I just was enjoying the attention Ronan gave me. I thought it was a game. If I'd known his intentions, I wouldn't have shown him. I'd have told someone. I swear. I'm so, so sorry."

"You were thirteen." Ash's chair scrapes against the floor as he stands. "The question isn't whether you deserve forgiveness for being manipulated as a child. The question is, whose forgiveness do you really want? Mine? Or Blaise's?"

The question knocks me off guard. I hadn't thought about Blaise's forgiveness, but of course, he lost as much as Ash did.

"I guess I'd like all of you to forgive?—"

"But you won't forgive Blaise. You acted with childish naivety. Is that so different from his acting from a place of pain? You realize your mistake, just as he does. Why should you be given forgiveness but not him?"

"How can I believe him when he admitted it was a lie?"

Ash's blue eyes narrow, as if they're searching for something. I do all I can not to flinch or look away.

"How can we believe you didn't know what Ronan wanted? Blaise's impression for a long time was that you'd do anything for Ronan. Including betray our family."

"How can I trust him?—"

"How can he trust you? If Hampton Kean were to find you and tell you Ronan always loved you and you owed it to him to expose us, would you?"

“No.”

He leans forward. “How can we trust you about that?” He steps back. “So far, I haven’t seen anything from you that suggests we can trust you except perhaps you haven’t called the Keans on the phone Blaise stupidly gave you.” He sets his coffeecup in the sink. “But Blaise, on the other hand, he’s already arranging safe houses, new identities, whatever you need to live happily ever after without him.”

"Because of the baby?"

He whirls around. “Fucking hell, you’re dense. It’s because he loves you.”

I flinch.

“There was no baby when he risked the Keans’ wrath by throwing their influence around to get your mom a heart. There was no baby when he did the dumbest thing in history by not leaving through the tunnel and instead went to save you. Ronan wouldn’t have done any of that for you, but Blaise is the asshole?”

He looks at me like I’m the lowest form of life on earth. “The sooner you’re gone, the better. Blaise will never be right as long as you’re around.” He stalks out of the kitchen, leaving me stunned, confused, and feeling oh, so guilty.

Is it my wishful thinking or naivety that has me wondering if not everything between me and Blaise was a lie? That somewhere over the course of his revenge plan, Blaise started caring for real, as Ash says? Can I trust that? Can I build a future on such a shaky foundation?

I retreat to the bedroom, my conversation with Ash echoing in my head.

I need to hear Mom's voice, need her wisdom now more than ever. I dial the number.

"Jenna?" Mom's voice sounds weak but alert. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:11 am*

"I don't know." Tears spill down my cheeks. "Everything's such a mess. I... it's my fault the Ifrinns died." It's the first time I fully acknowledge my part. No, I didn't know what Ronan had planned. But Ash is right, my actions helped destroy the Ifrinn family. No wonder Blaise wanted to hurt me.

"What? No."

"I didn't mean to. I didn't know..." I let out a sob. "But I showed Ronan the passageway into the house. He set the fire."

"Oh, honey, you were just a child."

"But people died, Mom. Mr. and Mrs. Ifrinn were good to us after Dad died, and I—" My voice breaks. "I trusted the wrong person."

"Like you trusted Blaise?"

"He lied to me."

"Did he?" Mom's voice grows stronger. "He got me a heart transplant, Jenna. He made sure I had the best care. Those aren't the actions of someone just playing a part."

"He wanted to hurt me. I can see why now, but?—"

"Maybe at first. But people change. Plans change." She pauses. "Feelings change."

Does she know something I don't? Why is she so easily taking the Ifrinn side? "Have you seen him?"

"No. Phoenix came last night. Oh, my goodness, Jenna. He's a strong, capable man, like his father. I remember them all being so young. And here they are, fully grown men. Alive and well. I'm happy about that."

"They planned to kill Ronan?—"

"Who killed their parents and some of the people we knew, if you remember."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Why not put them in jail? Why all this killing and manipulation?"

There's a long pause. "I thought you'd have figured out by now how the Keans operate... how the Ifrinns did. They live by a different set of laws. The Keans haven't been arrested probably because they pay people in law enforcement to protect them. The boys' only recourse is to take back what was stolen. And if your father were alive, he'd be helping them."

Deep down, I knew that. Isn't that why I didn't call 9-1-1?

"I'm scared, Mom. I don't know who to trust."

"I don't blame you, but isn't Ronan the one who tried to kill you and Blaise the one who saved you?"

"He had to hate me so much to do this."

"Yes, he did. But then he met you, learned the truth of you, and you stole his heart. Flint here has been telling me just how much Blaise is torn apart by his actions."

"I don't know what to do."

My mother's voice softens. "You don't have to decide anything right now. A lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours. You need to take care of yourself and the baby first."

"I'm in a safehouse. They won't let me leave."

"Don't leave, Jenna. No matter what you feel about Blaise, let the boys protect you until I can leave." My mother's voice is different from anything I've heard before. She sounds more like the Keans and Ifrinns. Like she knows their world. I suppose she does. She just never gave me the details about it.

"I've sheltered you too much," Mom says with a sigh. "After your father died, I was so afraid of losing you too. I kept you close, kept us both working on the estate where it felt safe."

"You were protecting me."

"Maybe too much. You were so young when you lost your father. Then the fire..." Her voice trails off. "I convinced myself that staying with the Keans was best. That we needed the security. Especially once you got my job, I figured you'd be safe and happy in that bubble. I can see now that I was wrong to keep the truth from you."

Once again, I feel my world tilting on its axis.

"But you're a strong, intelligent woman. Plus, you're going to be a mother yourself. It's time for you to make your own choices without worrying about what I think or need."



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

Panic rips through me. I can't do this without her. "But your heart?—"

"Is stronger every day, thanks to Blaise." She pauses. "Whatever you decide about him, about your future, I'll support you. Even if that means leaving Boston behind."

Tears blur my vision. All these years, I've based my decisions around her advice, her needs. The thought of choosing for myself, for my baby, feels terrifying. After all, being left to my own devices is what had me making the worst decision to trust Ronan, to trust Blaise.

"I don't know what I want," I admit.

"That's okay too. Take time to figure it out. Just know that I'm here, whatever you decide."

When we hang up, I lie on the bed, wanting to disappear. If it were just me, I might. But I have a baby to think about. My mom's words echo through my mind. You're a strong, intelligent woman. It's time I took control of my life. I just need to figure out what that looks like.

34

BLAISE

I wake the next morning feeling like shit. My shoulder burns. My heart has a hole in it where Jenna's love used to be. I deserve all this pain.

I roll from bed and immediately get into the shower, not caring if it fucks up my bandage. When I get out, I dress and head for the coffee.

Phoenix's place is empty. I check my phone and see that Flint is back on hospital duty. Ash messages that Jenna is fine but he won't stay another night. Phoenix sent a message that he's off to see O'Donnell.

That concerns me. While I can tell O'Donnell doesn't have much respect for Hampton Kean, he had agreed to marry his daughter Hannah off to Ronan. He was at the party last night and he knows the chaos I created. Oh, and that Hannah won't be marrying Ronan. He might not like all that.

I text Phoenix to tell me where he is and I'll come as backup. Phoenix texts back that all is well and to meet him at the safehouse in an hour. I don't want to go to the safehouse. I promised Jenna she wouldn't have to see me. But Ash can't leave her so it's the only place we can meet.

I down several pain relievers with my coffee and check my phone for news. Weirdly, there's nothing about Ronan's death yet. I now wish I'd moved him out of Jenna's cottage. I'm a little worried the Keans will try to pin his murder on her. I'll bring it up with Phoenix and Ash when I see them.

I arrive an hour later with Ash giving me the stink eye. "I don't know what you see in her. It's like she's completely oblivious?—"

"She's sheltered and naïve." I stop him from saying something that might have me punching him. "But she's good and sweet and I love her, so shut your fucking mouth."

Ash holds his hands up in surrender. "It's your heart, Brother."

“Yes, it is.” And it sits in a million pieces in my chest.

“Good, you’re here,” Phoenix says, joining us.

I want to see Jenna, at least ask how she is, but Ash’s comment makes me hold my tongue.

“Did you notice there’s no news about Ronan?” I say, sitting on the couch nearly in the spot Jenna did the night before. I swear I can smell her pretty floral scent.

“Yeah. I’m not sure what to think of that,” Phoenix says.

“Did you ask O’Donnell?” Ash takes a seat at the dining table just off the living area to clean his gun.

“He seemed a bit entertained by Ronan’s panicked shouts of an Ifrinn in the house. It was all his mother could do to calm the crowd, especially when Hampton wouldn’t let anyone leave. He didn’t mention Ronan’s demise, so he must have not known before he left last night, and the Keans aren’t telling.”

I think about that for a moment. “Do you suppose they haven’t found him?”

“I don’t know. Could be they don’t want it out that we’re back right when they’re trying to reassert their power.” Phoenix goes to stand by the window and sips his coffee.

“I’m worried they’ll try to pin it on Jenna.”

Ash laughs, but I send him a look before he can say anything.

“No. That will make them look even weaker.” Phoenix looks at us with a sinister

smile. “They’re shitting their pants, my brothers. They know at least one of us is back. They have to be wondering if we’re all back, and that’s got to terrify them.”

Ash grins, a rare thing. “I wish I could see that.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

If Flint were here, he'd be seconding that. His absence reminds me of Mrs. Hart.

"Any word from Flint?"

"Last update was an hour ago. Hospital's quiet. Mrs. Hart's vitals are stable. I suspect the Keans have too much on their plate now to worry about her or Jenna, but..." He continues before I can express my belief that we still need to keep them safe. "We'll still protect them until we can get them to safety."

I glance toward the hallway where Jenna's room sits. The door is shut and it's quiet. Is she resting? Hiding? Crying? God, I'm such a fucking asshole.

"So, what about this meeting with O'Donnell?" Ash asks.

"O'Donnell hasn't been happy with Kean for a long time. If we can prove we can retake what's ours and run it like Dad, he'll help us."

That's good news. "So he's not broken up about Ronan not being able to marry Hannah?"

"He doesn't know Ronan's dead, but he did say he'd be willing to break the arrangement if we help clear the debt he owes Hampton."

"If we can afford it, it might be worth it. We'd always be at risk of O'Donnell going against us if Hampton holds that debt over him," Ash says.

Phoenix nods. "There's one more thing." He looks at me and then Ash. "Someone

needs to take Ronan's place."

I frown. "Do you mean marry or get murdered?"

"Both suck. I'm not doing either." Ash makes a face of disgust.

"He feels a marriage between the families shows more commitment."

My brow furrows. "So he wants Hannah to marry you?"

Phoenix practically gags. "No. I dissuaded him from that." He eyes me. "He was impressed to learn you infiltrated the Keans."

"Me?" I do that thing in movies where people look behind them thinking there must be someone else there that Phoenix is referring to. There is no one. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious." Phoenix's eyes meet mine. "We need his men, his resources. A marriage would cement his loyalty."

Ash perks up, probably because he's not being volunteered to marry Hannah. "Come on, Blaise. You're single, good-looking..."

I gape at them for the audacity to suggest such a thing, especially with Jenna in the other room. "I'm not marrying O'Donnell's daughter."

"Why not?" Ash asks. "It can't be because of her." He nods toward Jenna's room. "The woman can't stand you. You said so yourself that you're going to send her and her mother off to live away from all this."

Phoenix's expression is a bit more sympathetic. "It could help you get over her?—"

“No.” I look at them, wondering how they could even think I could marry someone else. “I don't care if she never speaks to me again. I won't pretend to love someone else when I'm in love with Jenna. It wouldn't be fair to Hannah.”

“None of us love her. She doesn't love us. Fairness has nothing to do with it.” Phoenix reminds me more and more of our father, his ability to say something that sounds so outrageous but make it seem normal... Perhaps in our antiquated world, it is normal.

“Then you marry her. Or Ash can marry her.” I rise from the couch with no clear plan. Maybe I'll go to the kitchen and find the booze.

Ash's face darkens. “If the reason you can't marry is because you love someone else, then I'm going to use that excuse too. I love someone else.”

I'd be an even bigger ass if I pointed out the woman he loves is dead. She died in the fire that killed our family. Her death nearly destroyed Ash. Even now, a decade later, the pain is etched in his face.

“The woman I want to marry is down that hall,” I say instead of dwelling on his old wounds. “And she's carrying my child.” The words come out raw, honest. “I can't do it, Phoenix. I won't.”

Ash leans forward. “Noble sentiment, Blaise. But the Keans won't care about your feelings when they come for us. We need O'Donnell's men.”

“Then you marry her.” I turn my attention to Phoenix. “Find another way.”

Phoenix's gaze moves from me to something behind me. I swivel around to find Jenna standing at the opening of the hall. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders, and dark circles rim her eyes.

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She's wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, and I wonder where they came from and then chastise myself for not thinking about the things she needs.

"Thank you for these," she says to Phoenix.

He nods. "Flint's wife, Lucy, thought you might like a change of clothes."

Her gaze turns to me, and I'm filled with fear and hope. "I owe you an apology."

I can't imagine why.

"I truly didn't know Ronan's plan all those years ago. I thought the families were friends. And after, they played it like they were honoring your memory." She looks so broken, and I want to hold her and put her back together. "I know I'm complicit, but mostly it's because I was a dumb girl. If I had known, I would have gone to your father. Honestly, I would have."

"I believe you." And I do. The truth is, I should have acknowledged earlier that she was used by Ronan. Before and after the fire. I have no doubt that he kept Jenna and her mother on the estate as a way to protect them from anyone finding out the truth. I should be glad he didn't kill them.

"Do you?" Her demeanor is so different from last night. Is this her reaching out to fix what we had? Or is she just seeking forgiveness before she leaves me behind?

"I do. I should have recognized Ronan's manipulation sooner." My fingers itch to reach for her, but I put my hands in my pockets knowing I don't have the right.



"Instead, I let my anger blind me, made you pay for something you didn't even know happened."

"I did show him the passageway." Her expression is stricken. "Your parents died because of me."

"No." I shake my head, not wanting her to carry the guilt of my parents' death. It's ironic, I know, considering that is exactly what I wanted last night. "They died because the Keans are murderers who manipulated a thirteen-year-old girl. That's not on you."

Tears fall over her cheeks, and this time, I can't stop myself from stepping closer. When she doesn't back away, hope blooms in my chest.

"It doesn't change that I helped." The guilt in her eyes mirrors my own, and I understand her struggle.

"I know what it's like," I say softly. "To wish you could change the past. You wish you didn't show Ronan the passage..."

She nods.

"And I wish I'd told you how I really felt when I felt it instead of holding on to my anger."

"I keep thinking about everything." Her eyes meet mine. "About us. About how real it felt, even when you were pretending."

"I stopped pretending a long time ago, Jenna." How can I make her understand that? I said horrible things. My initial intentions were rotten. But my feelings were always genuine.

Taking a breath, I step closer. The space between us crackles with electricity, memories of every kiss, every touch. "I fell in love with you, Jenna. Even if I tried to fight it. Even if I told myself it was just part of the plan." I look for a sign that she believes me, but I don't think I see it. "Everything else might have started as a lie, but loving you? That's the most honest thing I've ever done."

I ache to pull her into my arms, to show her that despite everything, my heart beats only for her.

"I know I hurt you," I whisper. "I know I broke your trust. But I swear, Jenna, I will spend every day making it right if you'll let me."

"How can you not hate me? After everything I did..." She lowers her gaze as if she can't meet my eyes. "I gave them the key to destroy your family. You lost your parents... everything because of me."

My heart shatters at the raw pain in her voice. Before I can stop myself, I cross the final space between us and cup her face in my hands. "Listen to me. I could never hate you. Never."

She tries to pull away, but I hold firm, gentle but insistent. "I came here wanting to hate you, believing I already did. But the woman I fell in love with? She's incapable of the kind of malice I imagined."

I cradle her face. "You were a child, Jenna. A child who thought she was impressing her crush. The Keans are the ones who twisted that innocence into something dark."

"But—"

"No." I press my forehead to hers, breathing in her scent of flowers. "I've spent ten years carrying hate in my heart. For the Keans. For the person I thought betrayed us."

But you? The real you? There's no room for hate anymore. Only love."

Her hands come up to grip my wrists, but she doesn't push me away. "How can you be sure?"

"Because hating you would mean hating the best part of myself. The part that learned kindness and love."

My thumbs brush away her tears as I gaze into those green eyes that first captured my heart in the kitchen. "I want to be the man you deserve, Jenna." My hand drifts to her stomach. "This baby... our baby... it's a miracle. When I lost my parents, I thought I'd never have a family. With you, only with you... I have a chance." Just in case Ash and Phoenix get any ideas about me and Hannah O'Donnell.

“I don’t know how you can look at me and not see the part I played.”

I look her in the eyes. “The moment I met you, you turned my world sideways because I kept having to tell myself you played a part. I always forgot because when I was with you, I was happy. I tried to deny it, but I couldn’t. So no, I don’t see you as anything but another victim of the Keans.” I suck in a breath because I feel like she might be mine again, except she hasn’t forgiven me. “But I know you look at me and you see the monster I was in the cellar... and the killer. I suppose that will never go away. Unless... you can forgive me.”

She sniffs. “I’m scared.”

Fuck. How do I fix that?

“I love you so much... but you hurt me.”

I nod, knowing that what I did was unforgivable.

“I want to believe you now. I really do.”

I swallow. “Give me the chance to prove to you that my love is true. No games. No manipulation. Just me spending my life showing you I love you and our child.”

Her fingers move to my chest, and I’m worried she’s going to shove me back.

Desperation fills me. “Please. The man you fell for under the tree... that is me, Jenna. I tried to deny it, but I couldn’t. What we started was real.”

Her fingers grip my shirt. “It feels real.”

“It is, baby. So real. Let me prove it to you.”

She sags into me, her head against my chest not far from my wound. It hurts like a mother fucker, but I don’t care. She’s in my arms, and I’m never going to let her go.

"Get a room, you two." Ash’s irritated voice breaks through the moment.

"We're in a room," I growl. "You're the ones interrupting."

“Come on, Ash. Let’s get out of here and figure out our next steps with O’Donnell.”

“I’m not marrying his daughter,” Ash says, following Phoenix to the door.

“What’s that about?” Jenna asks once they’re gone.

“I believe Ash might be engaged. But I don’t want to talk about him.” I look down on this beautiful woman and feel like I have a second chance to do everything right. “I want to make you happy, Jenna. What do you need?”

“Blaise Ifrinn.”

Hearing my name, my real name, does something to me. It’s like I feel seen for the first time since we left the fire to hide from our enemies.

“He’s yours. He has been since the moment he laid eyes on you.”

Her lips crash into mine, desperate and hungry, and I’m filled with relief. My hands slide into her hair as she presses closer, molding her body to mine.

"I missed you," she whispers against my mouth. "Even when I was angry, even when I thought I hated you, I missed you."

Something breaks inside me at her words. I trail kisses down her neck. "I missed you too. You're everything," I murmur, walking her backward down the hall to her room.

She shivers at my touch, arching into me as we fall onto the mattress together. I feel like I might be dreaming.

I lie over her, looking into her beautiful face. "What changed your mind about me?"

"Your brother Ash?—"

"Oh, hell. God, what did he say? I'm sorry if he was an asshole."

She smiles up at me, her fingers brushing my hair from my brow. "He helped me see beyond my own pain. Helped me understand." Her expression turns pained. "You lost so much because of me?—"

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“No. Not you.”

“I can understand why you have so much hate for them. Why you lied to seek the truth. I didn’t know any of it, so your actions didn’t make sense, but now I see it. I get it.”

Does she?

“When I rethought everything, I knew I was manipulated and lied to by them. You lied to me too, but you saved my mom. You risked your own job to help her. I know I’m sheltered and easily manipulated.”

God, does she think I’m manipulating her now?

“But I see everything clearly now and realize that while I don’t like what you tried to do, I totally understand why you did it.”

“Do you forgive me? I was so horrible to you.”

“Yes. I forgive you.”

“Thank fuck.” I kiss her then, wanting to show her and tell her everything I’m feeling. I worship her body with lips and hands, drawing soft sighs and desperate moans.

“Blaise... I want you.”

Her words wrap around my heart, start mending it together again. I sink into her, joining more than our bodies. The connection feels sacred, like I'm merging my soul with hers. For the first time in my life, I feel whole.

"I love you," I breathe against her throat. "Only you. Always you."

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, but I don't feel the pain. She's like a soothing balm. I rock in and out of her, savoring her gasps, the feel of her pussy pulsing around my dick.

"Blaise!" She arches, coming apart beneath me. I want to hold on longer, but as her body squeezes mine, I'm lost. I fly over the edge with her.

"I'm never letting go," I whisper against her cheek.

Her arms hold me tighter. "I'm nervous."

I lift my head, worry filling me. "About what?"

"All I've known is that house. That garden. When we escaped last night, I felt like I lost everything." Her green eyes look at me with emotion. "It's how you felt, right? After the fire."

I nod.

"I mean it's not quite the same. I still have my mom. But I didn't know what I was going to do."

I want to tell her what is going to happen next. She and her mom will live with me. As soon as she fully trusts me, we'll get married. And we'll spend the rest of our lives together. But something inside me tells me she's not looking for someone to tell her



the next steps in her life.

“Do you know now?” Worried about crushing her and the baby, I roll to my side, but I keep her close.

She gives a soft laugh. “Not really, but I hope it’s with you?—”

“It’s absolutely with you. And your mom. And this little person.” I rest my hand on her belly. I’m concerned about telling her the next bit, but she needs to know. “The issue with the Keans will escalate. My priority will be to keep you safe from that, so there could be some limitations to what you can do.” But already, I’m planning on buying her a fortress with a garden for her and her mother and a large playground for our child.

“As long as I have you and my mom, and the baby, I’ll have all I need.”

Relief fills my chest. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

She smiles, and it’s wide and radiant, filling me with warmth and love. “Because all I need is my family?”

“Because you have a generous and open heart and... you gave it to me when I don’t deserve it.”

Her hand presses on my cheek. “I love you.”

I close my eyes, savoring her words. Then I kiss her and vow to spend the rest of my days making up for the hurt I caused her, bringing her light and joy like she brought me, loving her with all my heart until my dying breath.

### EPILOGUE

#### Jenna – Two Months Later

I stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror, barely recognizing the woman in the flowing white dress. My hands smooth over the delicate lace bodice, and my heart fills with overwhelming joy.

"You look beautiful," my mom says from her chair by the window. Her color has improved so much since the transplant, and seeing her healthy smile makes my eyes water.

"Don't cry!" Lucy, my future sister-in-law, rushes over with a tissue. "We just finished your makeup."

I laugh, dabbing carefully at the corners of my eyes. "I can't help it. A few months ago, I never imagined I'd be here."

The world has shifted so dramatically since that night at the Kean estate. Learning the truth about my past, about Blaise, about everything, it nearly broke me. But somehow, through all the pain and confusion, we found our way back to each other. His love proved stronger than his desire for revenge, and my heart proved capable of forgiveness.

"Your father would be so proud," Mom says softly.

"I'm just happy to have another woman in this family. Two, actually," Lucy says,

glancing at my mother. I've so enjoyed meeting her and getting to know her. I was shocked to learn she was the one who wrote the article that had the Keans scrambling to fix their reputation. To think I'd wanted to meet with her and tell her how good they were. When I think of it, I feel foolish, followed by guilty.

"Five minutes!" Phoenix calls through the door.

My stomach does a flip. In just moments, I'll walk down the aisle to marry the man I love. The man who showed me what real love feels like.

"Ready?" Lucy asks, adjusting my veil one last time.

I nod, and my hand drifts to my slightly rounded belly, where our baby grows. Some might think we're marrying so quickly because of the baby, but they'd be wrong. We marry today because I can't wait another moment to become Mrs. Blaise Ifrinn. Well, not officially. The brothers are still operating in the shadows, not using their real names and even dropping Tine, the fake last name they'd been using before. But in my heart and someday when this war with the Keans is over, I'll be Jenna Ifrinn.

There was a moment when being an Ifrinn was the last thing I wanted. But back at the safehouse, Ash had helped me understand Blaise's actions and the intense pain that led him to do what he did, not just to Ronan, but to me. When Blaise bared his soul to me, I believed him, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit I was afraid to be hurt again. I just couldn't deny the love I felt for him and knew I had to learn to trust him one more time.

He knew it too, if his actions following that day are an indication. He started with little things. Fresh flowers on my windowsill each morning at the safehouse. Tea exactly how I like it, boiling hot with one ice cube.

When Mom was ready to leave the hospital, he brought us both to an amazing home

outside the city with a large yard and security greater than Fort Knox. The home has an attached apartment complete with an accessible bathroom and an emergency call system for Mom.

In the yard, Blaise spent weeks creating raised beds and installing irrigation systems. Now, roses climb the arbor where we often sit in the evenings, and my herbs perfume the air.

"Plant whatever makes you happy," he told me, bringing home packets of seeds. "This is your space to create beauty."

When I worried about the baby, he came to every appointment. When nightmares of that terrible night plagued me, he held me close and whispered his love for me until I fell back asleep in his arms.

The real turning point came when he took me to his parents' graves. I'll admit, it was difficult to see them knowing the part I played in their deaths. But Blaise wasn't there to shame me. Instead, he laid flowers I'd grown in our new garden and told me about their love for each other and their sons. Then he turned to me saying he wanted that for us as he dropped to one knee and gave me a beautiful diamond ring that had several marquis-shaped emeralds, making it look like a flower with green leaves.

"They would have loved you," he said. "Just like I do."

There was no hesitation when he asked me to be his wife. The trust we'd rebuilt wasn't fragile anymore. It was stronger for having been tested.

"Yes," I whispered, and his arms wrapped around me, solid and secure.

That's what I feel with Blaise now. Completely safe. Not just physically protected, though I know he'd die before letting anyone hurt me or our baby. It's deeper than

that. I trust him with my heart, my future, my everything.

“It’s time,” Lucy says with a grin.

“It’s past time.” I’m so ready to join my life with Blaise’s.

We’re marrying in a small ceremony at Flint and Lucy’s place, with Mom giving me away. Only family is allowed since we’re trying to stay out of the Keans’ and their minions’ radar. My heart aches thinking of Debbie, who should be here as my maid of honor. But having her here would put both our lives at risk since the Keans are looking for Blaise and would likely hurt Debbie if they knew she had any contact with us.

As I look up toward the makeshift altar, I see Flint, Blaise’s twin, although their colorings are completely different, standing next to Blaise. He’s holding his baby son, Flynn, picking up the boy’s hand and waving toward Lucy as she makes her way to them. She takes the boy and goes to stand to the side.

Phoenix and Ash stand with Blaise as well. Ash leans forward and whispers something. Phoenix makes a face while Blaise gives him the finger. I smile, loving how these four brothers who lost everything somehow held onto their humanity and their deep bond with each other.

Music begins playing, and my heart swells with emotion as Blaise turns to watch me, his blue eyes shining with pure adoration.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

Mom squeezes my arm. "Ready?"

"So ready." I glance at her, and it feels like a miracle that she's here with me. Not long ago, I feared I'd lose her. Now, she's not only walking me down the aisle but also glowing with health. And it's all because of Blaise. Another miracle.

She catches my gaze, and I see tears shimmering in her eyes. "I'll admit that I've had concerns about Blaise, but the way he looks at you, like your father used to look at me, I know he loves you."

To hear she had concerns surprised me when she first mentioned it since she'd quickly latched herself to the Ifrinns the night everything went down. For some reason, she knew to trust them over the Keans, at least with our safety. With my heart? That was a different story.

"He's a good man, sweetheart. The kind your father would have approved of."

Her blessing means everything, especially knowing how protective she's been since that terrible night at the Kean estate.

As we take our first step forward, something shifts inside me. My entire life, I lived behind a wall, sheltered, coddled. But as I walk toward Blaise, I'm feeling empowered. Like I'm finally moving forward in my own path, not one set by my mother or confined by the Keans.

I reach Blaise, who takes my hands in his as we face each other before the officiant. He mouths that he loves me and that I look so beautiful. I want to throw my arms

around him and kiss him, but I'm able to restrain myself for the moment.

I'll be honest, the ceremony is a bit of a haze. Finally, we get to the vows.

"I spent so long living in darkness," Blaise begins, his voice thick with emotion. "Then I met you and it was like having the sun on me for the first time in so long. You taught me that love is stronger than hatred, that forgiveness can heal even the deepest wounds." His thumb brushes over my knuckles. "I promise to protect you, cherish you, and love you more fiercely each day than the last. You and our child are my everything."

Tears blur my vision as I start my own vows. "You showed me what real love feels like and that it's something worth fighting for. I promise to stand by your side through whatever storms come our way, to be your shelter just as you've been mine."

"I love you so fucking much," he says, causing our families to laugh. He blushes as he realizes his use of the F-word, but I don't care. I love his intensity.

When he kisses me as his wife for the first time, I feel like I'm in a fairy tale come true. I'm not so naïve to think our lives will be smooth sailing from now on, but I know our love is strong and it will help us endure anything and everything.

After the ceremony, during the intimate dinner, I notice Mom and Blaise sitting together in quiet conversation. She reaches out to pat his cheek in that maternal way of hers, and he captures her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. My mother's forgiveness means everything to Blaise. And her acceptance of him, despite everything, tells me I've made the right choice in following my heart.

The dinner feels intimate and perfect, with just our small family gathered around the table. Watching Ash and Phoenix tease Blaise about his lovesick expression makes me laugh.

“They’re just jealous,” Flint says, patting Blaise on the back. “Just wait until they fall. Then they’ll know there’s nothing better.”

I catch Lucy's eye across the table, and we share a quiet laugh. She understands what it's like to fall in love with an Ifrinn brother despite all odds.

The evening flows with wine, sparkling water for me, laughter, stories, and inside jokes. Mom dozes in her chair, a contented smile on her face. Looking around at our unlikely family, I feel truly at peace for the first time in months. Maybe ever.

Blaise rises and holds his hand out for me. “Time for the honeymoon.”

My body tingles already at how he’ll touch me tonight. We say our goodbyes, and then Blaise takes me back to the hotel we were at before.

I’ll admit, a small feeling of unease hits me when the memories of that night return. He’d been so different. In hindsight, it was probably because I kept wondering why anyone would want to hurt the Keans. It had to be like a stab in the heart each time I defended them.

“I fucked up last time,” he says, as if he can feel my unease. “I’m going to make it right this time.” Blaise carries me across the threshold.

"Is it safe for us to be here?" I ask, unable to completely shake my fears even on our wedding night. The Keans still have considerable influence in the city.

Blaise sets me down gently, his hands lingering at my waist. "No one gets near this floor without our knowing." He brushes his lips against my temple. “Tonight is just you and me. And tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, for forever.”



I laugh. “What about your mission to take back the Ifrinn legacy?”

He shrugs. “For now, I’m passing that on to Phoenix and Ash.”

"But you're still part of the family business?"

"Yes, but in a different way now. I'll focus on legitimate ventures, building something safe and stable for our future. The dangerous work, that's for Ash and Phoenix now. Flint and I will offer support, but our focus is on our wives?—"

“Wives.” Joy whips through me. I’m his wife.

He laughs. “That’s what you are. My wife. And I’m your husband.” He places his hand on my stomach. “And this is our child.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

Movement rolls through my belly. Blaise's eyes widen. "Is that indigestion or?—"

"No, you silly. That's your son or daughter."

Emotion sweeps over his face. He drops to his knees and places a kiss on my belly.

"Daddy loves you, little one."

"What about me?"

He laughs and rises. "I love you too, my sweet, sweet Jenna." His lips meet mine with infinite tenderness. This kiss holds all the promises we've made today, of trust rebuilt, of forgiveness given and received, of a future filled with hope.

"My wife," he whispers against my lips, and the words send shivers down my spine. His hands slide down to my waist, drawing me closer until I can feel his heartbeat matching mine.

He slowly unzips my dress. I reach for his tie and loosen it.

"I love you," I breathe, and his response is to tug me onto the bed in a tangle of half-removed clothes and tender touches.

Emotion overwhelms me as I consider how far we've come. We were two broken people who've set out to build something beautiful from the ashes of the past. I have no doubts about Blaise or his love for me. I know my love for him will endure until I die. Tonight is the first night of the rest of our lives together, forever.

## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Ash

I adjust my tie for the hundredth time, staring at my reflection in the mirror. I curse Blaise for fixing things between him and Jenna. Okay, so I'm happy that they're living in wedded bliss, but it's left me the only one to marry Hannah O'Donnell. Well, Phoenix could have done it, but I drew the short straw.

My brothers crowd around me in the small room, their chatter doing nothing to ease my distress. It's not marrying a woman I've never met to help save my family that has me in knots. It's betraying the woman I love by marrying someone else that is killing me.

"Stop fidgeting." Phoenix swats my hand away from my collar.

"Fuck off."

Flint catches my eye in the mirror. "I think he needs a drink."

Blaise quickly brings me one.

Phoenix doesn't give a shit about my inner turmoil. "The O'Donnells are powerful allies. With them on our side, Hampton Kean won't stand a chance."

"Yes, I know," I bite out. Knowing the reasons for this marriage doesn't fix what's twisting me up inside. This marriage is about revenge, not romance, which is good. I learned ten years ago that love could kill you without actually taking your life.

"Getting married seems less dangerous than infiltrating the Keans like Flint and I did," Blaise says.

"Fuck off." I run my hand through my hair, immediately regretting it as Phoenix sighs and steps forward to fix it.

I'd rather walk into the Kean mansion, which used to be my family home, and risk getting shot in the head than get married. But here I am, about to be married.

The truth is, I haven't let myself think about marriage since Meghan died in the fire that took my parents' lives. She was supposed to be my wife. We had it all planned out. Now I'm marrying O'Donnell's daughter because we need his army more than I need my heart.

"Hannah's gorgeous," Flint says, handing me a boutonniere. "Wild red hair, green eyes?—"

"I don't care what she looks like. It's only business."

Phoenix raises an eyebrow. "You'll need to make it look real. O'Donnell expects grandchildren."

"Not happening." The words come out sharp enough to make my brothers step back. "I'll marry her. That's it. The marriage stays unconsummated."

"Ash..." Blaise starts.

"No." I cut him off. "I won't betray Meghan like that."

"She's gone, brother," Phoenix says gently. "She'd want you to move on."

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

The rage burns hot and fast. "You don't know what she'd want. She died in my bed because I wasn't there to save her. Because I was too busy playing video games with you assholes while the Keans set our house on fire."

Silence fills the room. We all remember that night. The smoke, the screams, the way our world burned down around us. But they don't understand. They didn't lose what I lost.

"I'll do what needs to be done for the family," I say, trying to rein in my rage. "But don't ask me for more than that. I won't share my bed with another woman. Not now, not ever."

The room is quiet until Phoenix checks his watch. "It's time."

My brothers gather around me, their presence both comforting and suffocating. This is what we fought for, what we killed for, the chance to take back what's ours and make the Keans pay.

Blaise hands me another drink. I down it, then straighten my shoulders and nod. "Let's get this over with."

I walk down the hallway to marry Hannah O'Donnell, who initially was supposed to marry Ronan Kean. Instead, Blaise put several bullets in him. Of course, that was the plan all along. I just hadn't realized that with Ronan gone, and John O'Donnell wanting a marriage to solidify the alliance, I'd be the one having to get married.

Phoenix keeps saying we're lucky O'Donnell agreed to the switch, that he'd rather

align with us than the Keans. But standing here in this suit, about to marry a woman I've never met, it doesn't feel like luck. It feels like another sacrifice on the altar of revenge.

Ten years we've waited. Ten years of planning, hiding in the shadows. Now we're finally ready to step into the light and take back what's ours. All it costs is my freedom to choose whom I marry.

I remind myself that this marriage isn't about love. It's about power. Strategy. The final piece falling into place so we can destroy the men who murdered our parents. I can align myself with a wife without betraying Meghan as long as it stays strictly business, right?

I take my place at the altar. John O'Donnell, Hannah's father, scrutinizes me. I manage a smile. To be honest, I doubt he cares much how I treat Hannah. The fucker was going to marry her off to Ronan, a shithead if there ever was one.

He nods and heads out to the vestibule of the tiny church. It's a risk to marry in public. The Keans could severely knock out their competition if they showed up today. But Phoenix and John have assured us all that not even the Army could get to us.

The double doors open and John reappears with his daughter. Hannah steps into the opening and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. Flint is right. She's stunning in ivory lace, her red hair a blazing halo around her face.

But what hits me hardest is how young she looks. Then I remember. She's eighteen. Christ, she's barely more than a child.

My stomach twists with unease. At twenty-nine, I'm far too old for her. She should be going to college, living her life, not being married off to a broken man consumed by

revenge.

Hannah lifts her chin as she walks toward me, green eyes bright with determination. There's no fear in her gaze, no hesitation, just pure, unwavering confidence that I can't help but admire. After all, she's being forced into this marriage as well.

Her father escorts her down the aisle, and when she reaches me, she takes my hand. Her palm is warm against mine, fingers threading through my own like she's done it a thousand times before. The gesture is so natural, so trusting, for a moment, I go with it. And then the guilt slices through me.

"Hi," she whispers, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

I try to smile back, but it feels more like a grimace. Up close, her youth is even more apparent, fresh-faced and glowing with life, while I feel ancient, weathered by a decade of hatred and loss.

The priest begins speaking, but all I can think about is how wrong it is for this vibrant young woman to be tied to someone as damaged as me. Someone who can't give her the love and devotion she deserves because I already love someone else.

The priest's words blur together as I stare straight ahead, refusing to look at the woman beside me. I wish I drank more earlier because the whisky I've had barely dulls my senses.

Hannah takes my hand for the ring exchange. Her touch sends an unwelcome jolt through my system. I repeat the words the officiant speaks. I slip the ring on her finger, all the while pretending this is some bad dream.

"You may kiss the bride."

I finally turn to face her, and my breath catches. Her red waves frame a heart-shaped face, and those green eyes... Christ, they're like emeralds.

Hannah tilts her chin up, waiting. I lean in, intending a quick brush of lips, an expected but passionless gesture. Instead, the moment our mouths meet, electricity crackles between us. Her lips are soft, yielding, and taste of mint. My body betrays me, responding instantly, craving more.

I jerk back, horror and desire warring inside me. Guilt crashes over me. Guilt for wanting another woman, guilt for betraying Meghan's memory.

The music plays, and thank fuck, we can get out of there. Well, sort of. There is still a reception. The minute we get into the car to take us to the O'Donnell home for the reception, I'm pouring a drink. When I arrive at the reception, I make a beeline to the bar. I'm desperate to numb this attraction before it destroys what's left of my sanity.

"Time for the happy couple's first dance," John announces. Happy couple?

The band strikes up a slow melody as Hannah steps into my arms for our first dance. I try to hold her at arm's length, maintaining as much space between us as the dance allows.

"You're a good dancer," she says, following my lead with natural grace. I'm acting like an oaf so it's probably a surprise that I have basic dance skills.



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:12 am*

"Basic training for any Mob boss's son." My voice comes out clipped.

She tilts her head, red curls bouncing. "And here I thought you might have learned for fun." Is she poking at me?

"Nothing about this is fun." The words slip out before I can stop them.

Her smile doesn't falter, though something flickers in those green eyes. "It could be, if you'd let it."

I focus on a point over her shoulder, counting steps. One-two-three, one-two-three. Anything to avoid looking at her directly. The scent of her perfume, something light and floral, threatens to break my concentration.

"You know, most men would be celebrating the partnership this marriage brings."

"I'm not most men."

"Clearly. But you could try being less... rigid." Her thumb traces a small circle on my shoulder. The intimate touch sends unwanted heat through my body.

I tighten my grip on her waist, stopping her movement. "Don't."

"Don't what? Try to connect with my husband?"

"This is a business arrangement. Nothing more."

She laughs, a bright, musical sound that draws too much attention. But as I watch her, I sense she's not really amused. It's more like she's putting on a show, wanting others to think we're getting along. Is it for her father? For my brothers? Or for herself so she doesn't have to feel like she's a commodity her father just sold to my brother?

"I know this isn't what either of us wanted, but that doesn't mean we can't find a way to make it work."

The song ends, and I step back, dropping my hands like her touch burns. "I won't hurt you. You can do whatever the fuck you want. But this marriage is in name only. It means nothing except for the alliance between our families."

Without another word, I turn and walk away, leaving my new bride alone on the dance floor.

I drink too much, but luckily for me and this alliance, I hold my liquor well. Unfortunately, it's not working to sooth away guilt and pain at betraying my one true love.

Finally, it's time to go. Hannah and I leave. I'm forced to bring her to the honeymoon suite of the hotel her father owns.

Once inside, I loosen my tie and grab a pillow from the bed, heading for the couch across the suite. The leather cushions aren't ideal, but they're better than lying next to Hannah and fighting the pull she has on me.

"What are you doing?" Hannah exits from the bathroom where she'd gone to do whatever women do.

"Getting ready for bed." I don't turn around, focusing on arranging the pillow.

"On the couch? That's ridiculous. The bed is huge."

"I told you how this was going to be. I'm not going to fuck you." I'm an asshole, I know, but I'm holding on by a thread. My heart is tearing up.

"Okay. But that doesn't mean you have to sleep on the couch." She steps between me and the couch, forcing me to look at her. The silk of her nightgown catches the low light, and my mouth goes dry. Fucking hell, she's like a wet dream come to life, both angelic and sexy all at once.

"I understand that you don't love me or find me attractive."

Jesus, if she only knew the truth. It's this attraction that requires me to avoid her. It's not that I haven't fucked in the last ten years. Mostly, I watch porn and jerk off. But on occasion, I've had a woman. A woman who didn't make me feel anything except the pop of an orgasm.

But Hannah... something about her tugs at something inside me.

She reaches for my hand, and I let her take it, even though I shouldn't. She leads me to bed. "We can just sleep, Ash. Nothing more."

She's like a Svengali. I find myself lying down on the bed. The mattress dips as Hannah settles in beside me, and every nerve in my body ignites. Part of me wants to give in, to let her chase away the shadows that have haunted me for ten years. But Meghan's face flashes through my mind, and guilt slashes through my heart.

"Good night." She gives me a sweet smile and then turns away from me. Her breathing evens out, soft and rhythmic in the darkness. She's close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from her body, though we're not touching.

I stare at the ceiling, hyper-aware of every small movement she makes, the rustle of sheets as she shifts.

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Meghan used to sleep curled against my side, head tucked under my chin. The memory adds to the growing guilt. What would she think of me now, lying next to another woman? A woman whose very presence makes my skin tingle with awareness?

Hannah sighs in her sleep and rolls toward me. Her hand brushes my arm, and electricity shoots through my veins. My body responds instantly, hungry for touch after so many years of self-imposed isolation.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to fight the attraction. I roll away, putting as much distance between us as the bed allows. But I can still feel her presence behind me, still smell her floral scent. Sleep is impossible.

I slip from the bed, careful not to wake her. I have to escape my own lust.

As I make my way to the couch, Meghan's face floats in my mind. I think of the ring I'd planned to give her that still sits in my desk drawer, a talisman to keep her near me. It's all I have left of us.

I suck in a cleansing breath as I lie on the couch, steeling my resolve. I won't let my libido get the best of me. No matter how much Hannah calls to me, I'll resist.

I vowed to Meghan that I'd love her forever. I won't break that promise. Never.

TO BE CONTINUED.