



His Redemption (Mafia Masters #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I ran from him.

From the wedding.

From the lie my life had become.

Finn O'Neill was never supposed to be mine.

He was my enemy. My punishment.

My uncle handed me to the mafia prince like a gift wrapped in blood and secrets.

But I wanted him anyway.

Right up until the day I left him standing at the altar.

Now I'm back in Boston.

Back in his world.

And Finn?

He's not the boy who once loved me.

He's a man forged in violence and vengeance—cold, dominant, lethal.

He says I owe him.

Says I belong to him.

And the worst part?

I want to believe it.

Even if surrendering to him means losing my freedom...

Or my heart.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

G alway, Ireland

Three Years Ago

The dress was perfect—ivory silk, custom fit, boned bodice and lace hem. Finn had sent it himself, said he wanted to give her something soft to walk down the aisle in, something beautiful.

Keira Lynch stood in the back hallway of the O'Neill estate chapel, her hands clenched around a small folded piece of paper.

It was old—creased a hundred times over, the words smudged where she'd cried on it the night before.

Her uncle Cathal's handwriting was unmistakable. So was the truth it held.

"You were never meant to love him, girl. You were leverage. I got you close so we could all come out clean. One marriage. One debt erased. Con wants blood; I offered you instead, and he accepted."

As she read the words again, the dress began to feel like armor—too heavy. Too tight. Like it was choking her. She was a bargaining chip. Not a bride.

Not a woman who'd spent the last year learning how to breathe with Finn O'Neill beside her. Not the girl who'd told him she loved him on a rooftop under winter stars.

Not the woman who'd said yes, thinking—for once—it was about choice and not survival.

“You ready, love?” one of the O'Neill enforcers asked, poking his head around the corner.

Keira turned. Smiled. Lied.

“Almost.”

He nodded and disappeared.

Her throat was raw. Her pulse a riot.

She didn't remember walking to the side entrance. Didn't remember stripping off the veil or changing into shoes in which she could run. She just knew the next breath she took was on the street, cold air slicing into her lungs like punishment.

She ran—not for her life, but for her soul. She would not allow what small bits remained of her self-worth to be bought and sold like mafia property.

She left Finn standing at the altar, and she never looked back.

Boston, Massachusetts

Present Day

Boston hadn't changed.

Still full of ghosts. Still full of rot beneath its stone and steel skin.

Keira stepped off the train, one backpack slung over her shoulder, hoodie pulled up tight. She blended in with the crowd. No silk. No heels. No wedding bells. Just adrenaline and a bone-deep dread that made her teeth ache.

She hadn't set foot in Ireland or this city since she'd left him.

But she didn't have a choice.

Not after Dubai.

The job was supposed to be clean. A quick hack-and-grab, cracking into a shell corporation to retrieve damning evidence for a whistleblower client.

She'd done a dozen like it. Only this time, the files weren't about corporate corruption—they were about people.

Dangerous people. A ledger tying the O'Neill family to offshore accounts, laundering and hits. And one line she could never unsee:

F. O'Neill—Primary Enforcement Asset.

She hadn't been the only one watching.

Within twelve hours, the corporation's building from which she'd hacked the data went dark.

The safe house was compromised. The client disappeared.

And someone left her a message on a phone for which no one knew the number—
"Run faster, little fox. Your debt has been acquired. The terms are now enforced by
The O'Neill. "

She dumped her real ID, wiped her drives, and went to ground. But they found her anyway.

Keira had faced cartel fixers, Russian hackers, MI-6 and the U.S. government—but nothing made her stomach turn like the thought of walking back into Finn's world.

Not because she hated him.

Because some twisted, stupid part of her still loved him.

Because the idea of seeing him again—after what she'd done—made her feel twenty-one and shattered all over again.

She hadn't stopped thinking about him once.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

Boston smelled like blood and salt.

The cab driver dropped her off two blocks from her destination. Not invited—summoned. She still didn't know who the hell her mystery client had been—only that they'd sold her debt like it was a piece of meat at the market.

Someone delivered the message with a clipped Belfast accent, conveying a feeling far colder than a simple monetary transaction.

Now, like some twisted mafia Cinderella, Keira walked into a glass tower in Boston—miles and years from the chapel in Galway she'd fled, broken, in sneakers and a silk wedding dress.

Back then, it had been candles, white roses, and the man she loved waiting at the altar.

But she'd run from all of it—Finn, her dreams, her life—because she finally saw the truth: her uncle had set her up, bartering her to clean up a mess she hadn't made.

Now, she was walking into another kind of trap, older, sharper, and a hell of a lot more jaded—with nothing but her pride in one pocket and a feeling of dread tightening at the base of her spine.

She yanked her hoodie tighter around her shoulders.

The wind bit beneath the threadbare cotton as if Boston knew of her past sins and held a grudge.

The chill wasn't just cold—it was personal, like the city had been waiting for her to crawl back to the life she'd tried to leave so it could slap her with every mistake she'd ever made.

The building was high end, all mirrored glass and sleek stone. The doorman took one look at her and nearly swallowed his tongue until she muttered the code phrase: "He knows I'm coming." And then continued with, "Don't make me hack your security system."

His radio crackled. A nod later, she was on her way up. All the way up. To the penthouse, of course. Nothing like being humbled by altitude.

The elevator doors opened to silence. Clean, sterile, and cold as hell—until her boots stepped onto marble and the scent hit her.

Leather. Aged whiskey. Smoke curling like memory.

Power thick enough to taste. The scent hit her like a sucker punch of memory—every heated night, every whispered vow twisted into something sharp.

Her stomach clenched. Her knees damn near buckled.

It was like a knife to the heart, dragging her back to nights tangled in silk sheets and whispered promises that turned into lies.

It was him. It was always him. And her body remembered before her brain had a chance to protest.

Finn.

“Oh no,” she whispered to no one. “Nope. No...”

“You’re late.”

His voice had changed little—deeper, maybe.

Rougher. Still laced with that dry, wicked Irish edge that used to make her toes curl and her heart thud in warning.

It was the kind of voice that slipped past your defenses, curled around your spine, and whispered promises you couldn’t afford to believe.

A voice that could fuck you senseless or ruin your life—and make you beg for both.

Keira pivoted, ready to bolt, but he was already behind her, spinning her around to face him.

Finn O’Neill stood like a goddamned ghost—impossibly tall, tailored black suit clinging to broad shoulders, arms crossed, expression carved from shadow.

His hair was a little longer, beard sharper, but those eyes... slate-gray. Still sharp enough to cut through every lie she wanted to wrap herself in.

“You’ve got five seconds to explain why I’m here before I do something dramatic and regret it later,” she snapped, chin lifted like she wasn’t quaking inside.

Finn didn’t move. Not even a twitch. “Try it, a stór . I dare you.”

Her breath caught. Not because of the endearment. He used to call her that.

No—because of the way he said it. Low. Lethal. Like it still meant mine, like he dared her to deny it.

She took a shaky step back. “This is bullshit. I don’t owe you or the man who holds your leash.

Con O’Neill’s quarrel was with my father and sister, and he killed them.

I have no doubt they tried to kill him first, but none of it has anything to do with me.

I don’t know what Con and my uncle believe, and I don’t care.

I never signed up for some—some mafia kink ransom. ”

Finn cocked an eyebrow. “This has nothing to do with your family or what they tried to do to Con. You took a contract that put you square in the cross hairs of two members of the royal family in Dubai. You didn’t vet the person from whom you took the contract.

That wasn’t wise of you, but it’s not my fault. ”

“You bought me?”

“I bought your debt,” he said coolly, stepping forward. “If I bought you, I wouldn’t be offering a deal, and if I hadn’t bought the debt, you’d be dead.”

“Bullshit,” she hissed again.

“Truth,” he countered. “You screwed up, but one of the two men who placed a price on your head wanted something from Con. He agreed to give it to them in exchange for your life. I bought the debt you owed Con from him.”

“You can’t go around buying and selling people like property or merchandise.”

“You keep saying that, Keira. But here you are.”

“No one gave me a choice.”

He stopped in front of her. Too close. Always too close. She refused to back down.

“I should’ve let you hang back then,” he said softly. “I should’ve let Con put a bullet in your kneecaps, drop you to your knees, and use that talented mouth of yours until you broke. But I stepped in. Gave you a choice.”

“You call that a choice? Or this?” she shot back, but her voice wavered.

Some part of her—deep, stubborn, and stupid—still wanted to believe he meant it.

That there was a version of this where she wasn’t just being maneuvered again.

That if he’d ever truly fought for her, maybe this wasn’t punishment. Maybe it was something else.

“You’re still breathing, aren’t you?”

Keira growled under her breath. “You know, I used to find you charming.”

“You were mine... you still are.”

Silence.

He didn’t look away. He didn’t blink. And suddenly, all the years melted away, and it was just them again—staring across a chasm of hurt and history, the air between them

thick with words never spoken, her name hovering on his lips like a loaded gun—part promise, part threat.

“No,” she whispered. “Don’t. Don’t do that. I left for a reason.”

“You ran,” he corrected. “You ran on our wedding day, Keira. Left me standing at the altar in front of everyone—no call, no note, just gone. I was ready to burn the whole damn world down for you, and you disappeared like I never meant a thing.”

She swallowed hard, fury and guilt twisting like barbed wire in her throat. “I wasn’t a sacrificial lamb—yours, Con’s or my uncle’s. Thank god, I figured that out in time.”

“I never offered you up.”

“No, everyone else did. You were the one to whom they were sacrificing me!”

Finn stepped forward slowly, closing the space between them like it was his to take.

Keira didn’t stop him. She raised one trembling hand and pressed it flat against his chest, not to hold him back—but to feel him, real and solid and too close.

His heart thundered beneath her palm. Then his hands came up, threading through her hair with reverence and restraint, tilting her face up to his like a vow.

That dark, hungry heat she thought she’d buried roared to life, curling around her like smoke and memory.

“I’m not your enemy,” he said, voice softer now. “And I sure as fuck never stopped wanting you.”

Her laugh cracked, brittle and raw. “That’s not reassuring. It’s a damn warning

label—and you know it.”

Reassurance would have meant safety, comfort, softness, something she hadn’t known since she was a girl.

And Finn—he was the opposite of safe. He was sharp edges and dangerous heat, the kind of man who could ruin her with a word, a look, a kiss.

Even so, some traitorous part of her ached for the wreckage.

He stepped even closer, so close she had to tilt her chin up to keep staring him down. His breath was warm against her cheek. “You think I don’t know what it’s like, Keira? To realize the people you trust would sell you for the right price?”

His fingers brushed her wrist. The barest touch.

Electricity. Fire. Her breath caught, chest tightening as memories surged—his hand gripping hers as they danced in the dark, his touch after long nights tangled together.

She told herself she hated him, but her skin didn’t lie. It sparked. Reacted. Reached for more.

She snatched it back as if she’d been burned.

But he wasn’t done. “You think I didn’t fight for you? Con may have told me to take you as a bride, but I wanted you. I could have refused. I chose you, and I waited.”

“For what?” she asked, voice breaking before she could catch it.

“For you to come back.”

Her throat worked. “You didn't wait. You ordered me here.”

He shrugged. Regret flickered in his eyes, or perhaps the ache of a man left too long in the cold. It was gone in a blink, buried beneath steel and command, but it hit her like a punch to the gut all the same.

“You’re only waiting for an excuse or even a chance to disappear... again.”

Keira’s hands balled into fists. Finn’s jaw tightened, just a fraction—enough to betray the crack in his armor. “Maybe that's because every time I even think about letting you touch me, I forget how to breathe.”

He smiled, reaching up slowly, cupping her jaw with one broad, calloused hand. She hated that she leaned into it. Hated how much her body remembered him.

“That’s not fear, a stór. That’s instinct.”

“You don’t get to call me that anymore.”

His thumb stroked over her lower lip, and she shivered.

“I’ll stop when you stop trembling every time I touch you.”

“You’re an arrogant bastard.”

“You’re flushed, trembling... soaking wet. I can smell your heat, Keira.”

She slapped his hand away, heart pounding, furious at herself. “God, you’re....”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

He growled low in his throat and seized her waist, dragging her hard against him in one commanding pull.

Her breath hitched as her chest collided with his, hard muscle meeting softness in a perfect, dangerous fit.

One of his hands fisted her hair, the other gripped her hip possessively, anchoring her in place.

Then he kissed her.

She didn't even mean to kiss him back. But her mouth opened under his like it had never forgotten the taste.

Her brain screamed to pull away, to remember every reason she'd walked away the first time.

But the feel of him, the scent of him, the way his lips moved over hers like he still owned her—it melted her resistance like snow under flame.

She hated that it felt like coming home.

His tongue stroked hers, coaxing a moan from her throat she couldn't bite down in time.

He walked her back step by step, her breath quickening with every inch lost. She didn't realize he'd cornered her until her spine met the wall with a soft thud, cool

marble biting through her shirt.

His hands didn't falter—they were already at her waist, then sliding upward, mapping familiar territory with devastating precision.

He paused just long enough for her to catch the flicker of restraint in his eyes—like he was offering her one final out.

Then he crushed her against him, his thigh wedging between hers, firm and deliberate.

A jolt of heat rocketed through her, her breath catching as arousal twisted with panic.

She hated how her body responded—how her pulse raced, how her hands curled into the lapels of his jacket instead of pushing him away.

Every instinct screamed at her to flee, yet every inch of her skin buzzed with need.

She was drowning in the memory of him, in the sheer force of his presence, and for one blinding second, she didn't know whether she wanted to fight him or beg him not to stop.

She felt his hands and strength everywhere—crowding her, claiming her space, his heat wrapping around her like a second skin.

She arched into him like an alley cat in heat, as if she needed to be claimed.

And maybe she did, but not like this.

Keira gasped and shoved him back. “No. No, I am not doing this.”

Finn breathed raggedly, his eyes glowing faintly—something wild and unnatural sparking there, like a storm barely contained.

His chest heaved with restrained power, muscles tight beneath her fingers, jaw clenched like he was wrestling back something barely human.

He radiated dominance so intense it made her knees weaken, some primal part of her reacting to it before logic caught up.

The glow in his eyes wasn't normal. It wasn't human.

And for one dizzying second, a shiver chased down her spine—not fear, not quite—but a deep, visceral knowing .

She didn't understand it. Didn't want to.

But the way he looked at her—like prey and possession, like worship and hunger—made her stomach flip.

His voice, when it came, could've sounded like a promise or a command. Maybe both.

"I'm not yours anymore," she said, voice shaking. "I never was." It sounded strong—defiant even. But inside, a voice whispered, she was lying. Not to him. To herself. Because part of her had always been his, and that was what scared her most.

He stared at her like he could see straight through every part of her.

"Liar."

Her knees threatened to buckle. "This was a mistake."

“You’re here,” he said again, quieter. “You’re home. And I won’t let you run this time.”

Keira wrenched herself out of his hold, her palms pressing hard against his chest as she pushed with more desperation than strength.

It felt like tearing out a piece of herself.

Every nerve screamed in protest, her body aching from the loss of his heat, his weight.

Shame rose fast behind her ribs, clashing with a grief she refused to name.

She wasn’t just pulling away from him—she was trying to claw back pieces of herself that had never stopped belonging to him.

He let her go, but not without dragging his gaze over her like a brand.

Her legs felt weak, her skin flushed, but she forced one foot in front of the other, her boots echoing sharply across the marble as she stumbled toward the elevator.

Each step was a rebellion against every cell in her body, screaming to turn around.

Her chest felt tight, breath shallow, as if she’d left part of herself back there with him.

Her hands trembled at her sides, and her eyes stung with unshed tears—rage, confusion, arousal, grief, all tangled together.

But she kept moving, because she had to.

She needed space. Air. A second to remember who the hell she was without

him—without that scent, that voice, that pull threatening to unravel her all over again.

Finn didn't chase her.

But his next words followed her all the way out the door.

“You think you're here under duress, Keira? But you came the second I called.”

The elevator doors slid shut. Keira pressed her back against the cold interior wall, trying to steady her breathing.

Her hands trembled as she wiped them on her jeans, as if she could rub away the heat of his touch.

Her heart thundered in her chest, a wild, traitorous rhythm that refused to calm.

She hadn't known it would be him—hadn't suspected, hadn't even dared to guess.

Con had summoned her. She thought it was a message from the past, not from him. Not Finn.

Now she couldn't decide if she was angry or relieved, terrified or just undone.

Because he was right. The moment the summons came, she'd responded—instinctively, recklessly.

Not because she had no other option—but because some reckless, bleeding part of her still wanted him.

And that terrified her more than anything.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

FINN

She'd been a ghost for years. A memory wrapped in silk and thorns—untouchable, unforgettable.

But when the elevator doors slid open and her scent punched into his lungs, it all came rushing back like blood to a wound.

Warm skin, the faintest hint of citrus and jasmine, the echo of laughter he hadn't heard in years. She wore the scent like a challenge, and it hit him in the chest. He hadn't expected the look in her eyes, hadn't braced for the sharp, skeptical cut of her gaze.

Like she already knew his worst secrets and was daring him to lie.

And what hit him then wasn't just attraction—it was something older, something primal.

Recognition. His pulse had spiked, not from fear, but from the sudden, bone-deep certainty that she would matter more than she should.

And for a while, he didn't question why she'd been there, why Con had handed her off like a peace offering. He didn't care.

All he saw was her.

But looking back, it was obvious. Cathal had thrown her to the O'Neills like meat to

wolves, hoping a wedding band could erase the spilled blood and betrayal her father and sister had perpetrated.

She'd learned the truth the morning of the wedding—while she was getting dressed, hair half-pinned, the silk of her gown still cool against her skin.

Finn had known none of it until after she'd run.

Only then did the pieces fall into place—why she'd left, why she hadn't just confronted him, why she'd vanished without a trace, why she'd left him at the altar without a word.

Finn hadn't lied to her—that part had been on her uncle.

If the bastard had kept his mouth shut, that day in Galway might've ended with vows and a kiss, not an empty chapel and scorched pride.

But Cathal Lynch couldn't resist—he'd made sure Keira knew the truth before she ever reached the altar: that she was a bargaining chip.

Offered to the O'Neills as a last attempt to end the blood feud with Con.

A deal sealed not in affection, but desperation.

And Con, ever the strategist, hadn't just agreed to the deal.

He'd given Keira to Finn—not out of obligation, but because he saw the truth Finn hadn't dared admit.

That he wanted her. Badly. Enough to make a future with her.

Enough to be tamed. Con had handed Keira over as both gift and anchor, believing she might be the only thing strong enough to hold Finn in place.

Finn hadn't seen her that day—hadn't known what had happened until long after—but he imagined her in that quiet dressing room, alone, blindsided as her uncle laid out the truth like a death sentence.

He didn't know what she'd been wearing or what she'd done in those last moments—only that she'd run.

He imagined her hearing it from her uncle, learning her life had never been hers to begin with.

That she was a bargaining chip. He didn't know how she reacted—whether she screamed, wept, or went utterly still—but whatever happened, it had driven her away from him.

That was the moment something in her changed—when love tangled with betrayal and pride, and she chose escape over trust.

And Con, clever bastard that he was, saw exactly what Finn wouldn't say out loud. That he wanted her. Not just to keep the peace—but for himself. Con hadn't forced the pairing. He'd exploited it. Gave her to Finn, knowing full well what she would become to him.

And then came Galway.

The storybook-like chapel, old stone with ivy trailing up the bell tower, sat nestled in the hills; inside, soft candlelight cast golden halos on pews packed with O'Neills, Lynches, and uneasy allies.

Finn had never worn a tux before that day, and he never would again.

It hadn't just been a suit—it had been armor, a symbol of the man he thought he could become with her by his side.

Hope had looked good on him, but it didn't survive the silence of her absence—that hollow, merciless vacuum where her footsteps should have been.

Not the quiet of a chapel, but the kind that settled in his chest and stayed.

That tux, given to a charity organization, had carried the ghost of her—her scent, her smile, and the illusion that love could rewrite bloodlines.

The collar of his tuxedo shirt had felt too tight, the air too still, and yet none of it mattered.

Not when he was waiting for her.

He'd stood at the altar, fists clenched at his sides, trying to tame the nervous energy riding his spine. The priest had looked calm. The guests had whispered behind programs. And Finn—he had been something close to happy.

Then the seconds dragged into minutes. Heads turned. The whispers stopped.

No music. No footsteps. No bride.

Just the squeak of a wooden pew as someone squirmed uncomfortably, and the faint cough from a guest trying to fill the aching void. The silence pressed in, thick and merciless.

He remembered the way the light changed—how it moved just slightly through the

stained-glass windows, casting red across the white runner like blood. The priest cleared his throat. Someone in the back got up. And Finn knew.

Not because someone told him. Not because of some sound or sign. Because she wasn't coming.

He stood there anyway. Because part of him couldn't move. Wouldn't believe. Couldn't believe. Not yet. Not until someone said the words.

But they didn't have to. The silence was loud enough—pressing in on all sides, as if the stone walls themselves held their breath.

The echo of what should have been—of footsteps, of vows, of her voice—hung heavy in the air.

It was a void that wrapped around his chest, tight and merciless, until he could barely breathe.

She was gone. No explanation. No message.

Just absence, sharp and clean—a scalpel slicing through his chest with surgical precision.

It wasn't chaos or drama or fire. It was quiet devastation.

Precise. Measured. Final. The kind of wound that didn't bleed until you looked straight at it and realized you were already bleeding out.

And he had to walk out past all those faces—Con's tight jaw, Cathal's pale grimace, the pity in the eyes of men who'd kill for him but couldn't meet his gaze—feeling like someone had carved him open and left him to bleed out in front of everyone.

Just an altar, a bouquet, and a hole in his chest—one carved by absence, by the echo of words never spoken and promises never made.

The silence hadn't just hollowed out the room; it had hollowed him, scraped him raw from the inside out.

That altar had been the place where he'd planned to build something new, something sacred.

Instead, it had become a monument to what he lost the moment she didn't walk through that door.

He'd written vows for her—words he never spoke aloud to anyone.

Promises inked on the back of an envelope and stuffed in his jacket pocket.

Promises to protect her, to walk away from the blood and power games if it meant giving her peace.

He'd planned to tell her she was his future, his tether to something better.

Instead, all that hope had curled into ash the moment he realized she wasn't coming.

But she'd run. Left him standing at the altar, fists clenched, heart cracked clean through.

Even so, he'd protected her. From the fallout of her own choices.

From Con's wrath, which would've lit a fire Finn couldn't put out.

From the truth of what he was, because deep down, he didn't care if she chose him.

He made that decision the moment he first caught her scent.

She was his fated mate—destined, bound by something older and deeper than either of them could name.

Whether she accepted it or not didn't change the truth.

He would claim her. Sooner or later, she'd know.

She'd feel it. And he would no longer hold back.

An hour after she left, Finn stood in the rooftop garden, the wind twisting around him like a living thing.

It snapped at his clothes, tugged at his hair, and tried to slice through his skin like glass.

But he stood unmoved, chest rising slow and steady, as if the surrounding chaos was nothing more than background noise to the storm inside.

Keira was still in his blood, still in his head, and not even the wind could shake her loose.

He didn't feel it. Never had. Cold didn't touch him—not since the beast had first stirred beneath his flesh.

The city stretched out around him, a glittering sprawl of light and noise, but none of it reached him.

Not when every breath he drew still carried a hint of her—warm skin and something wild underneath, like jasmine and danger.

It stirred everything in him: desire that curled low in his gut, rage at her absence, and betrayal that hadn't dulled with time. She was an ache and an addiction, and the scent of her only made him want to hunt or hold—he hadn't decided which.

It didn't calm him. It burned, stoking the need that never truly left. Every inhale dragged her deeper into him, made it harder to think of anything else. She haunted his senses, not like a ghost, but like a fever he didn't want cured.

Not when his blood simmered with the memory of her mouth, her voice, her fight.

She was out there somewhere, pretending she had a choice.

And he stood in the dark, every instinct alive with the truth—she was his, and the only thing that remained was to make her accept it.

His control snapped the moment the cab pulled away with her in it.

She hadn't even looked back. One flick of her eyes would've been enough—one second of hesitation, one sign that she still felt the pull between them—but she gave him nothing.

And that emptiness opened the door he'd kept shut for years.

The change took him fast.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

Not because of rage. Not even grief. It was something more raw—a surge of need and helplessness so visceral it hollowed him out from the inside. She'd left again. No glance back. No signal that she'd felt the same fire threatening to consume him. That void ripped the restraint from him like paper.

A flash of heat. A thunder crack of instinct.

Mist spiraled up from the rooftop stones as the beast surged to the surface, all sinew and shadow, sleek and furious.

One blink and the man was gone. In his place, the panther landed silent and deadly on all fours, as if he'd always belonged to this darker, more honest form.

It was the only shape that could hold the ache clawing at his chest without being torn apart.

He didn't run. He didn't roar. He crouched at the edge of the rooftop garden, eyes locked on the street below.

Vision sharper than any human's. Breath tasting of metal and jasmine.

The beast inside him trembled—not from fear, but from intent.

She was gone, again. But this time, he wasn't just mourning.

He was claiming.

Mist gathered again around the rooftop stones, swirling like smoke caught in moonlight.

The storm that had wrapped around him in his panther form began to calm, quieting in his blood.

Finn took one slow breath, then another—and let the beast release its hold.

The transformation was instant. The swirl of color brightened to white, then vanished with a subtle flash of light.

In the space where the panther crouched, Finn stood—naked, chest heaving, skin flushed from the raw pulse of instinct.

He stepped back from the edge of the roof, jaw tight, and reached for the small black bag tucked behind a ventilation shaft.

He always had a backup. Pulling on jeans and a dark henley, his fingers worked on autopilot, grounding him back in the man, not the beast. Only after fully clothing himself did he breathe deeply.

She was still there. Somewhere.

Finn turned at the sound—the soft metallic sigh of the elevator opening behind him—his senses already confirming who it was.

The shadows near the far edge of the rooftop pulled slightly as Donal stepped into view, the ever-present wind tugging at his coat.

Their eyes met, a silent understanding passing between them. No words needed but offered, anyway.

“She must have doubled back on foot,” Donal murmured.

“Didn’t approach, but she watched. From the alley.

She caught the tail end of it—the swirl of the mist, the shadows twisting, that shimmer before the thunder cracked.

It was fast, but enough. She flinched, yeah, but she didn’t bolt.

Just stood there like she couldn’t tell if it was real or her mind playing tricks.

Like part of her didn’t want to know... and part of her already did. ”

Finn’s smile was faint but knowing. “Curious kitten.”

“She saw something.” Donal tilted his head, brow furrowing. “Maybe not enough to name it. But she froze—like her brain was trying to make sense of what didn’t fit. Confused. Maybe even a little afraid. But curious too.”

Finn’s eyes darkened. “The mist?”

Donal nodded. “She caught the tail end of it. Saw it swirl and vanish. Maybe even heard the thunder.”

“She saw the edge of what she wasn’t supposed to,” Finn muttered. “Didn’t know what she was looking at. But it hit her.”

“She’ll have questions.”

“She always did.”

“And if she figures it out?”

Finn’s smile vanished. “Then I’ll have to decide whether to lie again.

Or show her exactly what I am.” He didn’t fear her knowing the truth because of what she’d think of the monster—no, the real fear was losing the glimmer in her eyes when she looked at him like he could be more than blood and violence.

He didn’t want to see that light flicker out.

But he also couldn’t keep hiding behind half-truths and silence.

The full truth was what she deserved, even if it destroyed whatever remained between them.

That choice carried weight. If he lied, he might buy them more time—keep her close long enough to remind her of what they were.

But if she found out on her own? If she discovered the truth without hearing it from him first?

That betrayal could break anything they’d built. And if he told her? If he bared everything—the beast, the bond, the ancient tie neither of them had asked for—she might never look at him the same way again. He could lose her for good. But pretending wasn’t in his nature. Not anymore.

Donal’s expression turned serious. “And if she runs?”

“She’ll run,” Finn said. “But this time... I’ll be faster.”

He turned back to the edge of the roof, the wind curling around him like a whisper of

her hair.

“She’s already mine,” he said softly, his fingers curling into fists at his sides, jaw tight as a wire. His eyes tracked the edge of the city skyline like a predator watching for movement.

“She knows it. She just doesn’t want to admit it.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

The first thing Keira noticed was the sheets—soft, expensive, cool against her skin. A disorienting contrast to the fire curling in her stomach. Her pulse ticked unevenly in her throat, and for a moment, the unfamiliar calm around her felt like a trap disguised as comfort.

Her body tensed, heart slamming against her ribs as if to scream that something was wrong.

Soft. Expensive. Probably Egyptian cotton.

The second thing was the unmistakable scent of Finn O'Neill embedded in them—dark spice, masculine warmth, and something a little wild beneath.

She sat up too fast and instantly regretted it. The room spun.

“Oh hell no.”

Memory came back in a rush. The alley—the shadows, the wild pulse of her heart, and the building across the street looming above.

She couldn't see Finn from where she was—just the strange mist curling up over the rooftop, the sudden flash of lightning, and the crack of thunder that didn't belong to any storm.

It lit up the sky for an instant, surreal and electric, and something primal inside her

recoiled.

She ducked deeper into the shadows, trying to make sense of what she was experiencing.

Whatever had just happened, it wasn't natural.

And somehow she knew it had come from him.

Then... nothing. Minutes passed. She stayed crouched in the alley, hidden in the shadows, straining to hear more. Her breathing slowed, but her body remained tense, every nerve alert. The rooftop had gone quiet again; the mist dissipating into the night.

Then came faint voices—male—carried by the wind.

Too muffled to understand. Calm, almost intimate in tone.

Not the violent clash she'd expected after that unnatural display.

She couldn't make out who it was, but something in her gut twisted.

Finn was up there, and someone was with him. That much she was sure of.

She stayed there, pulse ticking in her ears, nerves drawn taut as wire. Long enough for the quiet to stretch thin and brittle. Long enough for the fear to settle like weight on her chest.

Then came the silence. A beat later, the sound of a car door.

She'd crept forward just enough to see Finn stepping into a parked car at the curb.

Fully dressed and composed, he appeared as if he hadn't just conjured lightning from the sky.

She didn't know how he'd gotten there so fast, and she didn't want to think too hard about it.

That heat, that pull—it had rooted her to the spot.

Then, without thinking, she'd run. Not toward anything. Just away.

Away from everything she couldn't explain.

From the impossible swirl of mist and lightning she'd seen on the rooftop—unnatural, powerful, and undeniably tied to him.

The way the lightning had forked above the building, searing the sky with eerie brilliance, had sent something screaming through her gut.

Whatever happened up there wasn't right—she knew it.

But none of it seemed to matter when she remembered his mouth, his hands, the way his voice commanded her.

Heat flushed beneath her skin. Panic rose sharp and sudden as she realized the truth: no matter how far she'd run the first time, her heart had never truly escaped him.

Her legs had carried her halfway down the block before everything tilted sideways and the pavement caught her.

And now—now she was in his bed.

Keira flung the covers off and scrambled to her feet, heart racing.

She was still dressed, thank God, though someone had taken off her boots and put her to bed.

She scanned the room—a bedroom that screamed restrained masculine luxury.

Walnut furniture, clean lines, blackout curtains slightly ajar to let in muted morning light.

Too perfect. Too calculated. Just like him.

“Keira.”

Her head snapped toward the voice. Finn stood in the doorway, arms crossed, leaning against the frame like he had all the time in the world.

His dark shirt clung to him in all the wrong-right ways, the top buttons undone, the fabric stretching just slightly across his chest. His tattoos were barely visible beneath the open collar.

His eyes raked over her, slow and unreadable.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like someone dropped me in a cage lined with thousand-thread-count sheets.”

He smiled, just a little. Bastard.

“We found you passed out on the sidewalk. We brought you back here...”

“Exactly where is ‘here?’” she asked.

“My home—a brownstone in Back Bay. You’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Oh, so waking up in my ex-fiancé’s bed without my boots on is the good outcome?”

“A better outcome would have been you waking up naked and sated in my arms.” His voice dipped into something edged—rough silk with heat beneath. “Still, I figured I’d let you wake up with your dignity intact. This time.”

Keira could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks. She could feel his words stirring her arousal a lot more than she wanted to admit.

“Why am I here, Finn?”

He pushed off the doorframe and stepped into the room, bringing that damn presence with him. It was like trying to hold your ground against a storm. She hated how her pulse reacted, hated how her stomach flipped—hated the way her traitorous body warmed at the sound of his steps.

“You’re here,” he said, calm and infuriating, “because you owe a debt. And I bought it. I could’ve let them have you—locked away, forgotten.

But I didn’t.” He took a slow step closer, voice dropping.

“You passed out in the street. I brought you here. Safe. You want the truth?” His gaze swept over her, the heat unmistakable.

“I didn’t enjoy seeing you that way—half-conscious and running on fumes.

I wanted to strip you down and take care of you, but I let you sleep.

Clothes on. Boots off. A blanket instead of my arms. You should thank me. ”

Her mouth opened. Shut. “Don't hold your breath. Wait... you what?”

“That job in Dubai? The one that went sideways? Someone compromised you. They knew it was you and where you were. They would have put you in a tiny, very dark room for the rest of your very short life. Con had placed you under my protection, so I bought you out of it. You belong to me now.”

She stared at him, blood pounding. “So what now? I'm your possession?” Her voice crackled with fury and disbelief. “You think slapping down some money means you get to own me like a damn prize horse?”

“No. But the people who held your debt didn't see it that way. I gave them what they wanted and assured them you wouldn't be a problem in the future. You're under my roof. My protection. My rules.”

He stepped closer. She didn't shrink back—still seated upright in his bed, covers bunched in her fists—because she knew that's exactly what he expected.

His eyes locked on hers, full of dark challenge and control, daring her to flinch, to yield.

The dominance rolled off him like heat, thick enough to taste.

“And if I refuse?”

His gaze dropped to her mouth, then lower, lingering like a caress.

"You won't," he said, voice low and confident.

"Because your body already made the decision your pride won't admit.

You're still in my bed, sweetheart—and if you were really planning to walk, you'd already be gone.

But you're not. You're here. And whether or not you like it, you still want to know what it feels like to break under me. "

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.” Her voice was sharp, but her insides curled traitorously.

She hated he might be right—that some part of her did still want what he offered, even if everything logical screamed at her to run.

The heat in his gaze was like a match struck too close to dry kindling, and she was terrified how easily she might burn.

“I know you. And I know you’re smart enough not to walk back into the mess I just pulled you out of.”

Her jaw ached from clenching. Her mind screamed at her not to engage—not to fall back into the gravity of him—but her curiosity, her need for answers, overrode logic. “What exactly do your rules entail?”

“You stay. You work. You don’t run. You check in with me. You don’t lie. And if you’re going to sass me, you’d better mean it and expect consequences for it.”

“I always mean it,” she snapped, fingers tightening in the blanket pooled around her lap.

His grin was lazy. Dangerous. “Then we’ll get along just fine.”

“I want a shower. And coffee. In that order.”

He moved aside, motioned toward the door that led to the attached bath. “Right through there. Coffee will be ready when you are.”

She threw back the covers and rose, spine straightening as she moved with slow, deliberate steps.

Padding barefoot across the cool floor, she passed him, brushing his shoulder on purpose—more defiance than accident.

“This isn’t over, O’Neill,” she muttered, not bothering to look back as she disappeared down the hallway toward the bathroom.

His voice followed her, dark silk laced with steel. “No, Keira. It’s just beginning.”

She shut the bathroom door with a little more force than necessary, and leaned against it, heart hammering. The worst part wasn’t that he’d brought her here. It wasn’t even that he’d made some kind of deal to extricate her from a job gone sideways and put her in his debt.

It was that some treacherous part of her had breathed easier the second she knew it was his voice in the bedroom and not someone else’s. The way her body had responded to his presence like no time had passed, like her dignity wasn’t supposed to matter.

That’s what shook her. That’s what scared her most of all.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

Her skin still remembered the heat of his body—the press of him behind her, his breath skating over her neck, his hands gripping her hips like they were meant to fit there.

Her mouth remembered the shape of his name not just as sound, but as plea, as surrender, whispered into dark rooms and buried in fevered kisses. And that wasn't okay.

Not when she couldn't trust him... and not when she couldn't trust herself.

She headed into the kitchen a while later, towel-dried curls loose around her shoulders, her body wrapped in borrowed softness—a shirt of his, because of course the asshole had not left her anything else to wear in the meantime.

The shirt smelled like him—dark spice, heat, and something sharp beneath, like danger wrapped in silk.

The scent curled around her like a noose, tightening with every breath, dragging memories she wasn't ready to face.

Her stomach knotted, chest tight as the fabric clung to her skin like an echo of his hands.

It shouldn't have made her feel safe. It shouldn't have made her ache.

He stood at the stove, barefoot and casual, flipping something in a pan like he wasn't the devil incarnate.

The scent of sizzling butter and eggs mingled with the dark spice of his cologne, making it hard to breathe.

The domesticity would've been disarming if it hadn't been for him—another layer to the illusion.

Finn O'Neill, master of comfort and chaos, dishing out breakfast with the same hands that could break a man.

The man was lethal, even when he cooked—especially when he cooked.

He didn't turn around. "Coffee's on the counter. Eggs?"

"I'm not staying."

"You're staying."

Keira poured coffee with a sharp clink of the mug on granite. "You're very fond of issuing commands."

Her voice was light, teasing, but a knot of tension tightened in her stomach. Because his commands didn't sound like threats. They sounded like promises. And worse, they stirred something in her she didn't want to name.

His voice was quiet. "And you're very good at ignoring common sense."

Finn plated the eggs with practiced ease, sliding them onto two simple white plates.

He carried them to the small round table and set one in front of her without a word, then moved to her side and pulled out a chair, gesturing with a tilt of his chin for her to sit.

She hesitated for a heartbeat before accepting the unspoken truce, and sat down.

They ate in silence for a few moments—he'd made her scrambled eggs, buttery and light, with a hint of pepper and fresh herbs she didn't want to identify but absolutely wanted to inhale. The toast was golden, not burnt, with real butter melting into it.

Even the damn coffee was perfect—strong, dark, rich. It pissed her off how good it all tasted.

Eggs and coffee and a tension so thick it might as well have been on the menu.

Finally, she set down her fork. "What happens when I've paid my debt?"

Finn met her gaze, dark and steady. "Then we'll talk about what comes next."

"And until then?"

"You follow my lead."

"Careful, Finn. That sounds dangerously close to a Dom/sub proposition."

"You always were a smart girl," he said, grinning at her over the rim of his mug as he took a sip of coffee.

She'd meant it to be flippant, but her voice hitched just slightly, heat blooming in her chest like a warning flare she couldn't ignore. Her mind screamed caution, but her body betrayed her with the memory of how it had felt to surrender to his touch, to lose herself in his control.

He raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't be the worst dynamic for us."

Her breath caught—because her body remembered.

It remembered the way his voice could turn her muscles to molten heat, the way his hands had known exactly where to touch, how to claim.

It remembered how she'd melted beneath his gaze, how easily he could draw desire out of her with just a word, a glance.

And it wanted—not just the physical ache, but the surrender wrapped in safety, the dark thrill of giving in.

Even now, wrapped in doubt and fury, her body betrayed her.

Heat pooled low in her belly, memories curling like smoke in her mind—his mouth tracing the curve of her collarbone, the rough edge of his voice when he'd made her beg.

Her fingers itched with the memory of how tightly he used to hold her, not to restrain, but to possess.

It wasn't just arousal—it was the terrifying recognition of a need she'd never fully shaken.

She narrowed her eyes. "You're playing a dangerous game."

"Who said we're playing?" he countered, voice low. "But you're welcome to test me."

Challenge lit behind his words, something primal and electric. Keira's fingers curled tightly around her mug, knuckles whitening. Her breath caught for just a second, traitorous and sharp, as if her body reacted before her mind could stop it.

Keira, despite herself, wanted to rise to it.

Her breath hitched, heart stuttering against the pull he ignited in her.

It was reckless, dangerous—and yet a part of her burned to meet that challenge, to push back, to test just how far he'd take it.

The tension wasn't just heat anymore; it was a fuse, lit and hissing toward detonation.

She set her mug down, slowly. "Fine. Let's play your game. But I get to set a few rules of my own."

His grin was all predator. "Negotiate away, sweetheart."

The words dripped heat.

And in that moment, a memory hit her—flashes of the night they'd almost gone too far. His hand at her throat, not choking, just holding, grounding. Her wrists pinned above her head. The way his voice had gone silk-slick and dark when she'd begged for more.

She'd trusted him then. And wanted. God, she'd wanted.

Before she could open her mouth, her phone buzzed on the counter.

She glanced at it, heart skipping, uncertain if she should answer.

Before she could decide, Finn leaned over, picked it up, and handed it to her without a word.

The warmth of his fingers brushed hers, a subtle reminder that he was still too close,

too aware.

Blocked number. She hesitated, thumb hovering over the screen, stomach twisting. Then she picked it up. “Hello?”

The air in the room turned electric, her pulse thudding as if her body already knew the voice she was about to hear.

A familiar voice, smooth and cold, slid down her spine like ice. “Running again, Keira?”

Her blood went cold and she felt it drain from her face.

Finn moved fast, reading the change in her face before she even said a word. His hand landed lightly on her lower back, grounding, possessive. Protective. She didn’t flinch. She couldn’t. Because some part of her—stupid, reckless—wanted him close when the darkness reached back out.

She met his eyes, voice flat.

“It’s not over.”

FINN

“ I t’s not over,” she'd said, her voice stripped of anything but truth. Not panic. Not bravado. Just the bleak certainty of a woman who'd heard the devil on the line and knew he wasn't bluffing.

The second her expression changed, he knew.

Her control was ironclad, surgically honed.

So when that split-second falter passed through her, the faint twitch at the corner of her mouth, the hard swallow she didn't quite suppress—he saw it all—and he knew exactly what it meant.

Her lips parted slightly, breath catching in her throat.

It was instinct, maybe, or memory—something primal flickering through those stormy eyes.

But Finn saw it. Felt it like a tremor in the earth.

Something was very, very wrong.

Keira didn't scare easy. At least, not before. Back then, nothing could rattle her for long—she'd face off with cartel muscle or black hat hackers and still crack a joke.

But now? She hadn't moved from her chair. The half-eaten toast sat cold beside her.

Something had changed in the time they'd been apart—something that had worn her thinner, made her shoulders tighter and her silences sharper. And that look in her eyes? That was someone hearing the door creak open on a nightmare she thought she'd locked away.

Finn's eyes locked on her face as she stared at the screen. Her knuckles whitened around the phone, tension rippling through her shoulders. But it wasn't just a reaction to danger—it was habit. Muscle memory born from too many close calls.

This was a woman recalculating her odds like they were stacked against her.

There was a wariness now—tight, restrained—like she didn't know who to trust, including herself.

He didn't know everything that had happened after she left, but whatever it was had etched itself into her bones—carved in like a scar no one could see but him.

It was in the stiffness of her posture, the way her eyes scanned for exits even when she pretended not to, how she held her breath just a second too long when silence settled.

Whatever had happened, it had marked her—permanently.

And it lit something dangerous in him. Not just protectiveness—possession.

He would find out who had carved that look into her. And he'd make them bleed for it.

“Who was it?” he asked, voice low, even.

Keira didn't answer.

Her fingers twitched—just barely, a tremor running from her wrist to the tips like the phone weighed a hundred pounds.

He remembered how steady those hands used to be—back when she could dismantle a hard drive or shut down a surveillance feed with steady hands and sharp precision.

But now? That slight shake was a red flag.

And it lit something savage in his chest. One breath.

Then another. Shallow, calculated. She wasn't panicking, not exactly—but she was choosing every movement like it might set off a mine.

He didn't wait. "Keira."

Finn hadn't heard the voice, hadn't needed to.

He'd been watching her the whole time, close enough to see the blood drain from her face and the tremor she tried to still in her hand.

The room felt colder now, like the call had opened a window to something foul.

Keira met his gaze, and the look in her eyes—flat, shuttered, bracing—hit him harder than any bullet ever had.

Something cold unfurled in Finn's chest. Riordan. It had to be. And if that bastard was calling now, it wasn't a threat—it was a warning shot. A signal that blood was about to spill, and Keira was at the center of the target.

She hadn't put the call on speaker, and he hadn't heard the voice himself, but he didn't need to. He knew the look she gave him wasn't for effect. With her father

dead, it could only be one person. “That was Riordan, wasn’t it?”

Keira nodded. Finn’s blood turned to ice.

Riordan—a mercenary ghost connected to the Dubai fallout.

A mercenary with too many identities and not enough conscience.

Finn hadn’t dealt with him directly, but he’d tracked the man’s trail after Keira’s job went sideways.

Riordan was the type who didn’t issue warnings.

If he was calling now, it meant the kill order was already in motion.

She didn’t flinch. Didn’t confirm or deny. But she didn’t have to. He knew. That voice had haunted their briefings for weeks after the Dubai job exploded. The kind of man who enjoyed leverage—especially when it came in soft, stubborn, female form.

Finn’s voice dropped an octave. “How did he get your number?”

“I don’t know.”

“That was a secure line, wasn’t it?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Apparently not.”

“Don’t get cute with me, Keira.”

Her arms crossed. “You already got me out of a jam, remember? I don’t need to rack up any more interest on that debt. Or is there a new clause I missed?”

He took a deep breath, slow and measured.

His instincts were clawing at the surface, snarling for control.

Every muscle in his body tensed with the urge to drag her into the safest corner he could find and bar the world from touching her again.

He wanted to cage her. Lock every door and weld it shut.

Chain her to him if he had to. But she wouldn't take that well—and she wasn't someone who responded to chains unless she chose them herself.

"I'm increasing security," he said, stepping back. "No more going out alone. Donal will double the shadows. You don't leave this building without my say-so."

"You don't own me."

He rounded on her. "Want to bet? I protect what's mine, especially if you have a target on your back."

"That's not fair."

"No," he agreed, voice like gravel. "It's not. But neither is having to watch your reaction to that bastard's voice come through your phone like he's whispering death in your ear."

She blinked. Just once. That was her tell—when she was thrown but didn't want to show it.

No flinch, no gasp. Just that tiny pause, barely more than a muscle twitch.

But to Finn, it was as loud as a scream.

Her guard was up, but the crack had shown.

And he felt the urge to tear down the world until it went away.

“You think I don’t know what this is?” he asked, stepping closer again. “You think I don’t know what he wants?”

“And what’s that, O’Neill? A second date?”

He didn’t laugh.

Her smile faltered.

“Men like Riordan don’t waste time on warnings,” he said, voice low.

“Then tell me why I’m still breathing.”

Finn’s eyes darkened. “That was him pulling the pin before tossing the grenade. You know it. I know it.”

“I can handle myself.”

“Maybe. But not alone.”

She rolled her eyes. “Because clearly, being locked in a brownstone in the Back Bay with a broody Irish control freak is the height of strategic planning.”

Finn stepped into her space again, watching the quick hitch of her breath. “You’d rather I be soft? Lie? Let you pretend everything's fine?”

“I’d rather you weren’t involved at all.”

“You want to die? I’ll treat you how you need to be treated,” he said, voice rougher now, “like a target.”

The words tasted like ash even as he said them. It wasn’t the whole truth, and he knew it—but admitting more felt too dangerous. Not yet. “One I plan to protect,” he continued. “Whether you like my methods or not.”

Keira exhaled sharply. “You don’t get to decide that.”

“The hell I don’t.”

Silence stretched between them like a tripwire—tight, waiting, ready to detonate with the slightest misstep. The kind of silence that crackled with everything they weren’t saying. With fury, with fear. With history that refused to stay buried.

Finally, she sighed, breaking eye contact. “Fine. Ramp up your security. Play your war games. Just don’t expect me to start curtsying.”

Finn gave her a ghost of a smile. “I won’t. Besides, it wouldn’t suit you anyway.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Damn right it wouldn’t.”

He let it drop. For now.

“I think I heard Donal bring up your backpack. Go change,” he said, nodding toward the hallway. “You’re still in my shirt.”

She didn’t move. “I kind of like it.”

Finn's nostrils flared, heat punching low in his gut.

His shirt clung to her body like it had been made for her, the hem barely grazing the curve of her ass.

Bare legs. Damp hair curling at her shoulders.

She looked like a siren, dropped right into his war zone.

She had to know—had to see the way his hands flexed at his sides, the way he fought not to grab her and show her exactly what she was tempting.

His pulse pounded in his ears, louder than the conversation they'd just had.

She was fire in his territory, and he was seconds from burning.

"Go," he said, voice ragged, not trusting himself to say more.

She turned—too slow, hips swaying like she knew exactly what kind of test she was putting him through—and disappeared into the hall.

The second she was out of sight, he grabbed his phone. "Donal," he barked when the line picked up.

"Aye."

"She just got a call. Riordan. Full voice transmission. It means he knows where she is."

Donal swore. "Do we need to sweep again?"

“Yes. I want a firewall double-checked, signal triangulation cross-referenced, and every shadow doubled. No one breathes near this brownstone without my clearance.”

“And if Riordan makes a move?”

Finn’s voice dropped into the dangerous calm that always came before blood. “Then we cut him down.”

“Aye.”

Finn ended the call and stared out the window.

Morning light spilled through the tall windows, casting long shadows across the hardwood floors of the brownstone.

Outside, the neighborhood moved with quiet, oblivious normalcy—dog walkers, coffee seekers, the steady rhythm of commuter foot traffic—all unaware of the predator drawing his net tighter.

But Finn felt it. The air was heavy, charged, stretched to a breaking point.

This wasn’t just instinct—it was prophecy, humming beneath his skin like static before a lightning strike.

Riordan didn’t issue warnings. He hunted.

He toyed. And that call? It meant the game was already underway.

Finn clenched his fists. His beast stirred beneath the surface, restless.

Keira wasn’t just some ex or former lover.

She was his. Always had been—even if she'd run, even if she denied it now.

And the threat against her wasn't just business.

It was a blade pointed at something vital inside him, something feral and sacred he wasn't ready to name.

Every instinct screamed to lock her down, keep her close, and hunt whatever dared to breathe in her direction.

He wouldn't lose her again—not to fear—not to a bastard like Riordan.

Losing her once had gutted him, ripped out something vital and left it bleeding for years.

He'd buried it under work, violence, control. But now that she was back, breathing the same air, looking at him like he might still matter? No. He wasn't going through that again.

Definitely not to her own damn stubbornness.

She returned a moment later in jeans and a black tank top, barefoot, hair pulled up into a loose knot. "You done barking orders?" she asked, arms folded.

"Not even close."

"Great. Can't wait for my all-access babysitter pass and bulletproof corset."

Finn's lips twitched, but the smile didn't quite land. "You in black leather and attitude? Might actually make this tolerable."

She rolled her eyes, but he caught the flicker of amusement she tried to hide.

It twisted something in his chest—something old and reckless and aching.

For a second, just one, she looked like the Keira who used to make him laugh right in the middle of chaos.

And damn if that didn't make it harder to remember why keeping his distance was supposed to be smart—especially when one look from her could crack through years of practiced control.

It twisted something in his chest—something old and reckless and aching.

“You’ll get a panic button and a new phone.”

She paused. “Actually, the panic button sounds kind of cool.”

He cracked a real smile this time. “Knew I’d win you over.”

“You haven’t yet.”

Finn stepped toward her again. He didn’t touch her—barely even moved close enough to breathe her in—but the shift in the air between them was instant. Charged.

“You’re still here,” he said softly.

Keira swallowed. “For now.”

“That’s enough for now.”

Her gaze flicked to his mouth and back. “Cocky much?”

“Always.”

She held his gaze for a heartbeat longer. “I’m not yours to protect, Finn. Not anymore.”

He nodded once. “You keep saying that and yet here you are.”

Before she could reply, a buzz cut through the room—his private line. Donal. Again. Finn froze mid-step, spine locking, hand curling into a fist at his side. The vibration seemed to echo louder than it should have, humming against the hardwood like a warning shot.

Finn answered. “Talk.”

“We’ve got movement. Someone tried to ghost through the secondary access. Didn’t get far, but it’s coordinated. Could be a probe.”

Finn’s blood went ice cold.

“Triple lockdown,” he ordered. “No one in. No one out. I want eyes everywhere. And prep the tracker drones.”

Donal’s voice was tight. “Already done.”

The line went dead.

Keira’s face had lost its color. “They’re here?”

“Not yet.” He turned to her, voice absolute. “But they’re coming.”

And this time, if they got close—he’d show them exactly who they were fucking

with.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

She followed Finn in silence, her mind still wound tight from their latest clash.

The tension between them hadn't eased—it had only gone subterranean.

Whatever this next room held, she braced for it to be another reminder of how thoroughly he controlled every variable.

No more open confrontations, no raised voices.

Just a walk through shadows and surveillance—where every step was likely being logged, tracked, and analyzed.

She didn't need to see the blinking lights or hear the hum of hidden tech to know Finn had eyes everywhere.

The deeper they went, the more the air crackled with the quiet hum of systems at work, watching, recording, controlling.

He led her through the kitchen, past the back door, and down a narrow flight of stairs she hadn't noticed before.

The air cooled as they descended, heavy with the quiet hum of electronics.

She didn't ask where they were going. Part of her didn't want to know—because knowing meant facing how deep this rabbit hole really went. Finn didn't speak.

Halfway down, he glanced over his shoulder and said, almost offhand, “You said you wanted to work again. Figured it’s time I gave you the tools.

” He didn’t wait for a response. He didn’t have to.

He simply led her deeper into the bowels of the brownstone, into a room she hadn’t seen—she’d been out cold when he brought her here last night, and this was the first time she was seeing anything beyond his kitchen and bedroom.

Keira stood at the threshold of what she assumed was some kind of surveillance control room and exhaled a slow, disbelieving breath.

A solid wall of monitors blinked back at her—thermal imaging, street cams, even interior feeds from various parts of the brownstone.

Her gaze ticked to the upper-left screen, which showed a live shot of the main floor space—just past the kitchen’s edge, near the back door and stairwell.

The same narrow flight of stairs she’d just descended—tucked behind the kitchen and almost hidden if you didn’t know to look. It made sense that Finn would want the entrance to his surveillance bunker as unobtrusive as possible.

Still, the sight of it on a screen, looping her own movements back to her in real time, was deeply unsettling.

It mirrored her vulnerability in ways that made her skin crawl, and the repetition of her own movements—seconds delayed—only heightened the sense that nowhere in this house was truly private.

“You’ve got cameras inside the house?” she called over her shoulder.

“Mostly in the common areas, and I can have them turned on and off at will,” Finn’s voice came from behind her, calm and maddeningly unapologetic.

Keira’s stomach gave a lurch, a cold ripple crawling under her skin.

She hated how fast it twisted—discomfort giving way to something else entirely.

Unease. Vulnerability. The idea that he could watch her without her knowing made her feel exposed in a way that wasn’t entirely about privacy—it was about power.

And how easily he still held it. “And only while you’re a target. Standard protocol.”

She turned to face him. “That’s not surveillance. That’s stalking with a Wi-Fi connection.”

One eyebrow arched, that ever-present smile barely tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You’re not wrong.”

She threw her hands in the air. “Oh great, so we’re just owning our control issues now? Is that what we’re doing?”

Finn crossed the room with slow, purposeful steps. He didn’t crowd her, but his presence was like gravity—heavy, inescapable. “You want honesty or comfort?”

She scowled. “I want autonomy.”

“That’s not on the table while Riordan’s breathing.”

God, he was infuriating. Sexy, arrogant, utterly maddening.

The worst part? A piece of her still wanted to trust him.

The same part that remembered nights bound to his bed—breathless, aching, pushed past limits she hadn't known she had.

And she hated herself for it. Hated that some part of her had been so easily swayed by her uncle, who'd almost seemed to enjoy watching her walk away, knowing the truth would cut too deep for her to stay.

She crossed her arms. "So what, I'm under house arrest?"

Because it sure as hell felt like it—even if he'd wrapped it in reassurances and disguised it as concern.

Reinforced digital freedoms, though she suspected those came with invisible strings.

A carefully offered car and driver, if she played along.

All the tools she could ask for—but the walls were still his, and the lock fit her far too well.

It was still a gilded cage. And she'd always known how to spot a lock, no matter how polished the metal.

"I prefer the term protective custody."

"Oh well, when you say it like that..."

He gave her a look, the kind that said he wasn't in the mood for games but would absolutely indulge them if they helped him keep her safe. Which only made it worse.

"You said something about work?" she asked, remembering the offhand comment he'd made earlier upstairs—something about giving her space to earn, under

supervision.

It hadn't registered at the time. Now, with a full tech command center blinking at her, it was clicking into place.

She asked, changing the subject before her mouth could outrun her sense of self-preservation.

Finn nodded toward the other end of the room.

A sleek workstation hummed to life with a touch of his hand, the screens flaring on with a soft glow that lit up the corners of the dark space.

"Everything's clean. Secure server, isolated network.

You'll find encrypted access to the darknet, shell profiles for contracting, a dedicated crypto wallet, and a virtual airgap kill switch if you need to wipe fast. It's configured to your known aliases and can spin up fresh ones if you need. "

He stepped back, arms crossed, watching her with that unreadable calm that drove her insane. "Keyboard's weighted the way you like it. Optical trackpad, military-grade firewall, your preferred font settings. Even the background code was set to dark mode."

She stared at the station, something sharp and uncertain twisting low in her gut. This wasn't just tech. This was intimacy. It was a man who remembered every keystroke she favored, every quirk of her digital habits—and had rebuilt them from memory like it was nothing.

He hadn't just given her tools. He'd built her a temple—silent, precise, and carved from memory.

Every detail, from the slight tilt of the monitors to the backup redundancy in the drives, screamed of someone who hadn't just remembered her habits but had honored them.

Revered them. Like a worshipper rebuilding an altar to a goddess who'd once ruled his world.

And damn him, part of her still ached for the devotion buried in every byte.

Her jaw ticked. "All yours, you mean. Let's not pretend I'm not still inside your cage."

His voice dropped. "I'm not pretending anything. You asked for a way to work. I gave you one. Full sandbox access. Nothing leaves without your key."

That actually gave her pause. She stepped toward the terminal, fingers hovering over the keys like it might bite.

Her breath caught, just a little, the muscle in her jaw tightening.

He'd remembered everything. The keystroke responsiveness, the anti-glare coating on the monitor, the exact layout of a workspace that once felt like home.

It was like slipping back into a life she'd buried—and finding it still warm.

The setup was impressive—overkill, really.

But efficient. Brutally efficient. And that efficiency made something tighten low in her belly.

She wasn't sure if it was awe or unease—or the terrifying possibility it was both.

The thought that he could know her this well, down to the granular quirks of her work rhythm, wasn't just unsettling.

It was invasive. Intimate. And it scraped against a raw nerve she hadn't realized was still exposed.

She glanced sideways, suspicion flickering beneath the casual tone. "What's the catch?" She didn't trust gifts—not from him. Not when control often came dressed like kindness.

"No catch." He shrugged. "I just want to know if you're building a firewall or burning one down." His tone held that razor-thin line between warning and challenge—meant to rattle her, or maybe test if she still knew how to rattle him back.

Keira huffed a breath that might've been a laugh. "You always were good at knowing just when to push and when to back off."

"And you were always good at pretending you didn't like it."

Her cheeks flushed. Dammit. She looked back at the screen, forcing her voice to stay cool. "So, what—are you gonna be watching me while I work, too?"

"I have better things to do than babysit your keyboard."

"Oh, right. Like glowering at poor Donal until he develops a stress ulcer."

"He's already got one. Nothing to do with me."

"Uh-huh."

They fell into a silence that wasn't quite comfortable but no longer sharp-

edged—tense, but tolerable. Keira sat, her fingers flying over the keys with muscle memory that surprised her.

She toggled through system diagnostics, sifted through access logs, poked around the sandbox, and ran a couple of fake intrusion tests just to be sure.

The hum of the machinery under her fingertips, the subtle warmth of the monitors, and the faint electric tang in the air all wrapped around her like a second skin.

This wasn't just work—it was homecoming, laced with unease.

The architecture was flawless. Not just functional—it was intuitive, like the machine could anticipate her next move before she made it. It felt like sitting down to an instrument she hadn't touched in years and still knowing the song by heart.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

And worse—he knew her well enough to build exactly what she needed.

The keystroke feel, the nested access layers, even the digital watermark she used to hide in her code—he'd recreated them all.

He hadn't just rebuilt her system, he'd resurrected a part of her she'd locked away.

Even now. Even after everything. And worse, she wasn't sure she wanted to lock it back up.

She'd pulled her legs up into the chair without realizing it, bare feet tucked beneath her as she hunched over the keys.

The hum of the system and the soft tap of her fingers had become a rhythm—one that filled the silence without needing to be broken.

At some point, she'd shrugged out of her sweater, leaving it draped across the back of the chair.

The longer she sat, the more the space started to feel familiar—dangerously so.

Like it belonged to her. Like she belonged there.

“You're quiet,” he said finally.

She didn't look up. She'd heard him, of course she had. That voice was impossible to ignore—low, deliberate, laced with that maddening blend of authority and intimacy.

Her first instinct was to pretend she hadn't.

Let the silence stretch until he went away or lost interest. But that wasn't how this worked. Not with Finn. Not with them.

"I'm working."

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"The one that says you're planning something."

"I'm always planning something."

He moved closer, enough that she felt the heat of his body behind her. Not touching. Just present. "Then maybe plan how to stay alive. Riordan doesn't make idle threats."

Her fingers paused over the keyboard. "You think I don't know that?" Her breath caught, just for a second. Not enough to show weakness—but enough to remind her that fear could still slip past the walls she'd spent years building.

"I think you try to pretend it doesn't scare you. And that kind of pretending gets people killed."

Keira stood abruptly, the chair scraping back against the floor. "You don't get to psychoanalyze me, O'Neill. You lost that right when I walked away."

He didn't flinch. "You think I let you go?"

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

“You think I stood at that altar, waiting like a damn fool, because I didn’t care? You didn’t say a word—you just ran.”

“I think you let your family use me like a pawn and didn’t stop them.”

Finn’s jaw flexed. “You’ve got it backwards.

It wasn’t Con who offered you up—it was your uncle.

Cathal handed you over like a peace treaty wrapped in a bow.

Con... he’s a romantic. He thought giving you to me might make up for the blood on both sides.

He thought I could protect you, because he knew how I felt.

But I wasn’t calling the shots then. Not the ones that mattered. ”

“And now?”

His eyes darkened. “Con is still The O'Neill, but I have a lot more sway and power than I did before.”

For a long beat, neither of them moved. The air between them snapped tight, electric—like a live wire strung too close to skin.

Keira's breathing slowed, each inhale sharp with tension, her body caught between instinct and memory. She felt it—his presence, his pull—as if gravity itself had been altered. But she didn’t step forward, and he didn’t reach for her.

They stayed suspended in that impossible moment, neither willing to break the spell

first.

Keira's pulse thudded in her ears. "I'm not the same girl who knelt for you in a ring of candlelight and let you mark every inch of me."

As the words left her lips, the memory rose unbidden—flickering candlelight dancing across the walls, the quiet rasp of his voice in her ear, the sting of his mouth on her skin followed by the weightless warmth that had once felt like belonging.

She shoved the image back where it came from.

She couldn't afford to let it live too long.

Not now. Not when her body still remembered too well what her heart was trying to forget.

"No," he agreed. "You're stronger. Smarter. Braver."

She swallowed hard. "And harder to break."

His voice was quiet. "Good. Because I don't want to break you. I want to earn you."

The words hit her harder than they should have.

Keira turned away, needing space. Air. Something to break the magnetic pull of his voice and the look in his eyes.

Her steps were slow, measured, as if putting space between them could somehow neutralize the heat rolling off him.

She paused near the edge of the room, dragging in a breath that didn't quite reach her

lungs.

The distance helped—barely. His presence still clung to her skin like the heat from lightning, alive and electric, even without his touch.

Behind her, Finn didn't follow. Didn't push, didn't speak—but somehow, his absence burned hotter than his presence.

It settled over her skin like static, humming beneath her nerves, louder for being invisible.

She didn't have to turn around to know he was deliberately holding back, giving her space the way he thought she needed it.

And maybe she did. But it only made her want to close that distance more. Damn him for knowing that too.

She needed to remember why she ran. Why she stayed away.

Not just the betrayal, but the way her world had collapsed under the weight of everyone else's agendas.

The way her choices had been rewritten as strategy, her love weaponized without her consent.

She needed to remember how that felt—like drowning in a room full of people who thought they were saving her.

And she needed to do it fast—before the warmth of his voice and the pull of his presence made her forget how to stop wanting him.

Just then, the intercom buzzed. Finn answered it in a clipped tone, his voice stripped of warmth.

When he turned back to her, the mask was back in place—his expression blank, jaw set, eyes unreadable.

The easy confidence and controlled menace he wore like a second skin had vanished, replaced by a kind of clinical detachment that sent a prickle of unease down her spine.

And that unsettled her more than she wanted to admit.

The sudden return of his emotional armor—the chill in his tone, the flatness in his eyes—it wasn't just defensive.

It was deliberate. Controlled. Like he was switching modes.

And if Finn O'Neill thought whatever was coming warranted that level of shutdown, she was damn well worried.

"What?" she asked, keeping her eyes on his face.

"We've got a visitor," he answered.

"Who?"

"Your uncle."

A chill sliced down Keira's spine, cold and fast. Her blood turned to ice. She hadn't seen Cathal in years, and yet his name still triggered every survival instinct she had.

Of course Cathal had appeared out of the blue—because the devil always knew the worst time to knock.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

FINN

Finn watched the color drain from Keira's face. Her spine didn't bow, didn't bend—but he knew the signs.

She'd gone still—the way prey does when it senses a predator nearby.

Not fear, exactly—Keira didn't frighten easily—but a razor-edged alertness.

He'd seen that look before, in a few of Con's best men right before a hit.

And he imagined she must have looked that way years ago, just before she disappeared without a word, leaving him at the altar, bleeding in front of everyone they'd ever known.

Cathal Lynch had that effect on people.

"I'll handle it," Finn said, voice low.

Her expression shuttered, lips pressed into a thin, unreadable line. But after a beat, she gave a single nod—small, stiff, like the weight of it cost her something. That was trust, whether she liked it or not. The kind that lived buried under bruises and betrayal, raw and reluctant but real.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Finn pulled it out, saw Con's name, and exhaled through his nose.

"I have to take this," he told Keira, already turning for the stairs.

He left her in the basement control room and took the call from Con upstairs in his office.

He needed the separation—not just for the security of the conversation, but because seeing her unravel and not reaching for her was already costing him more than it should.

The moment the door clicked shut, Finn leaned back against it, every muscle in his body tense. The line connected with a soft chime. Con's face filled the screen, rain soaked and windswept from his country estate on a private island off the coast of Ireland.

"Finn," Con greeted, glass of whiskey already in hand.

Noting the whiskey, Finn asked, "That bad?"

Con grinned. "It's well past midday here in Ireland. You look like absolute shite, by the way."

"You should see the other guy," Finn muttered. "What's going on?"

Con's smile vanished. "Riordan's not the only one sniffing around Boston.

One of the gobshites from the Dubai job's made his way across the Atlantic.

Whether he's flying solo or someone's pulling his strings, it's no accident.

Word is he's already touched base with a few of the dodgier lads skulking about your city. "

“Names?”

“Still working on it, but you’d best get your house in order, Finn. If word gets out that Keira’s under your roof...”

“I know.”

Con studied him through the screen. “You look wrecked, lad. Getting any kip at all?”

“Define sleeping.”

The O’Neill chuckled without humor. “Mind your flank, lad. Cathal might be the devil she knows, but even the feckin’ devil’s got his pets.”

“Yeah,” Finn said, jaw tight. “He’s knocking on my damn door.”

“Then it’s time to remind him whose bloody castle he’s banging on.”

"Already done. Donal will send him away and make sure he understands that it is the O'Neills who hold Boston."

"Damn straight. Good lad."

The call ended. Finn stood there a moment longer, fists clenched, the echo of Con’s voice still hanging in the room like smoke.

Con didn’t give warnings unless the storm was already on the horizon—and this one was close enough to taste.

Finn paced once, twice, then planted both palms on the desk, grounding himself.

Keira's face flashed behind his eyes. If the bastards from Dubai were in Boston, they'd already be hunting.

And she was the prize they'd kill to collect.

Back downstairs, Keira was still at the terminal, her fingers flying over the keys like her nerves might riot if she stopped.

Her shoulders were tight, hunched with tension, but her hands moved with clean, precise efficiency.

She didn't look up, didn't break stride in the code she was building, but her voice cut through the hum of equipment—sharp, on edge, and coiled like a spring ready to snap.

“So?” she asked.

“Cathal's leaving. I made sure of it.”

“Pity. I didn't get to tell him to go to hell first.”

His lips twitched. There she was.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Oh, let me guess—this is the part where I clutch my pearls, collapse in a dramatic swoon, and beg you to save me from the big bad?”

Finn chuckled. “You always were good with metaphors.”

She spun the chair toward him, eyes narrowed. “What now?”

Finn felt the flicker of a grin tug at the corner of his mouth.

She wasn't backing down—never had, not when it mattered.

That fire, the defiance in her gaze, did something sharp and reckless to him.

It was maddening. Addictive. And familiar enough to remind him exactly why losing her had left such a crater in his life.

“You need to learn control.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

He extended a hand. “Come upstairs.”

The top floor of the brownstone was locked behind a steel-core door with a biometric scanner. He hadn't taken anyone up there in years—not since he moved into the place after Galway, when the ashes of their almost-wedding were still warm in his chest.

Not since everything fell apart. When the door slid open, Keira stepped into the space and stopped cold.

The dungeon spread out before her like a shrine to restraint and power.

Keira took one step inside and faltered.

Her eyes swept over the gleaming wood and brushed steel, over cuffs that gleamed like jewelry under recessed lighting, and heavy chains that hung like quiet threats.

Her breath caught. Not in fear—never fear—but in that gut-deep awareness of exactly what this place represented.

Her arms folded tightly across her chest, as if she could shield herself from memory.

He caught the way her breath hitched, just for a second.

Her pulse stuttered—he could feel it even from across the room, or maybe he was just that in tune with her.

Polished wood gleamed under soft overhead lights.

Stainless steel rigs and dual-purpose training gear were arrayed with the kind of precision only obsession could build.

Padded mats absorbed sound, while mirrored walls stretched the room into something endless.

It was a space designed for control—and every inch of it reminded him of her.

“I see you’ve kept busy,” she said, voice dry.

“It’s not just for play,” he said. “A lot of this doubles as a gym. Strength. Balance. Control.”

She arched an eyebrow. “And you brought me here to... what, relive the glory days?”

He stepped onto the mat and turned to face her. “I brought you here to see if you remember how to fight.”

“I didn’t come here to spar with you, Finn.”

“No, but if you want to survive, you’ll do as I say. Con says one of the bastards from Dubai is here in Boston. Your survival just got more complicated.”

Her eyes flashed. “I’m not helpless.”

“Prove it.”

“Fine. But if I break your nose, I’m not apologizing.”

He grinned. “You won’t.”

They circled. Her movements were sharp, defensive, honed by instinct more than training.

Finn clocked each step, calculating. She still moved like she expected to get hit, not like someone confident in her ability to win.

But there was grit in her stance, and when she struck, it wasn’t tentative.

He was surprised—not just that she remembered how to move, but that she wasn’t afraid to challenge him.

That spark of hers hadn’t dimmed. If anything, it burned hotter now.

He moved slower, deliberate, letting her push first. She struck low—an attempt to unbalance him.

He parried, grabbed her wrist, and twisted.

She twisted, pivoting hard on the ball of her foot, and used the momentum to snap her leg out in a clean arc.

Her heel slammed into the meat of his thigh with enough force to make the muscle seize.

It wasn't just fast—it was controlled, calculated.

A strike meant to sting and remind him she wasn't just here to play by his rules.

Pain bloomed, sharp and immediate.

His thigh pulsed where she'd landed the kick, muscle already tightening.

But beneath the ache, pride roared to life—hot, primal, and laced with something dangerously close to admiration.

She wasn't just fighting back; she was fighting him, with focus and power.

And damn if it didn't make him want her more.

“Not bad,” he murmured.

She huffed. “I haven't been sitting on my ass, Finn.”

He lunged with force, aiming to close the distance.

She ducked under his arms, fast and fluid, her instincts sharp.

He caught her ankle mid-move, twisting just enough to unbalance her, and swept her legs with a fluid, practiced motion.

She hit the mat hard, the impact echoing off the walls—but she didn't hesitate.

She rolled to her side, sprang up, her momentum building into a full arc, and her fist came swinging in a blur.

It connected squarely with his jaw, snapping his head slightly to the side with a clean, bone-ringing crack.

The crack echoed, sharp as a gunshot in the quiet space.

She froze mid-breath, arm still extended, eyes wide as if even she hadn't expected to land the blow.

A flicker of something crossed her face—shock, maybe a sliver of regret, or worse, the surge of satisfaction that came with finally hitting back.

His smile was slow, feral. “Better.”

Keira's breath was ragged. “Are you enjoying this?”

“Immensely.”

Another exchange—punch, counter, grapple.

Finn felt the rhythm of her body, the way she moved with intent and control.

She wasn't flailing; she was adapting, learning him again like a dance she'd once known by heart.

Her breath was loud, ragged, but her eyes never wavered from his.

A sliver of sweat tracked down his temple as he matched her, holding back just enough to test her limits.

But even in the control, his pulse pounded with something wild.

This wasn't just sparring—it was a storm barely held at bay.

He pressed her to the mat, her wrists pinned above her head. Their bodies aligned, chests heaving.

“Finn—”

He didn't move. Just stared down at her, voice low and rough. “Still think this is about play?”

She glared. “No. I think this is about control.”

He bent slightly, brushing his lips near her ear. “Then you understand what's at stake.”

Her pulse thundered beneath him—he could feel it where his hips pressed into hers, the rapid flutter just beneath her skin.

His own restraint pulled taut, muscles straining with the effort not to grind down into her, not to give in to the magnetic pull that had never dulled.

Every nerve was on edge, the beast in him pacing behind his control, restless and hungry.

Every inch of her was taut with tension she refused to show.

But her voice—God, her voice—stayed level, even. “Let me up.”

It wasn't a plea. It was a dare wrapped in silk—taunting, velvet-edged and dangerously calm.

And it punched straight through his restraint, stirring something feral and possessive in his gut.

He wanted to dominate that defiance, to tame it without breaking her.

But that wasn't the game they were playing. Not yet.

He didn't release her right away.

Instead, he searched her face—anger, challenge, and that ever-present defiance tangled with something hotter.

Her cheeks were flushed, eyes dilated, lips parted on a breath she hadn't taken.

It would be so damn easy to tip the scale, to bury himself in the heat of her and take what he'd been denying himself for years.

But this wasn't about easy. It never was.

And he'd be damned if he touched her without knowing what burned behind those eyes was real—and meant for him.

His voice was hoarse. "Not until you admit you don't want me to."

She went still.

A beat.

Then another.

The air between them fractured, sharp as a crack of thunder. Keira's gaze locked with

his, daring him to see past the words. Her voice came low, wrecked and raw. “I don’t.”

And just like that, the tether snapped.

Finn’s breath left him in a rush—not from surprise, but from the violent need that roared to life deep within him. Because no matter how she said it, it wasn’t a rejection. It was a confession dressed in defiance, and it changed everything.

KEIRA

Keira didn't break eye contact with Finn as she slipped out from under him.

The heat of his body still clung to her skin, and her breath came in shallow bursts, each one edged with something dangerously close to longing.

Her pulse was a drumbeat in her ears, her breath caught halfway in her throat.

She wanted to spit something biting, something to slam the emotional door between them, but nothing came.

Just heat. And the sharp sting of everything she hadn't said.

He let her go. Not because he wanted to, she was certain—but because control was his drug of choice, and letting her go gave him the upper hand.

Still, there'd been a flash in his eyes—something raw, bruised, and barely leashed—that made her blood move faster than it should've.

His hand had twitched slightly at his side, jaw grinding tight as if reining himself in took more effort than he'd let on.

Of course it did. She saw it in his eyes—that guarded flicker of something unspoken, something that burned hot beneath the surface.

It didn't scare her, not exactly. But it pulled at her in ways she wasn't ready to admit.

That was the game they played—push and retreat, strike and parry.

But that last look in his eyes? It wasn't the Finn she remembered.

That wasn't her charming fixer with a wicked grin and a hand always reaching for hers.

As she moved away, he lingered a moment longer, breath shallow, jaw tight.

Then, with one last glance at the rooftop door, he turned and made his way out of the playroom.

His footsteps were quiet but deliberate as he descended the stairs, disappearing toward his office and leaving the charged air of the top floor humming behind him.

That was a man unraveling by degrees.

And she wasn't sure which one of them she was more afraid of—him, with that dark hunger creeping in at the edges, or herself, for the part that still ached to be devoured by it.

Fear tangled with longing in her chest, regret a quiet echo behind it all, and for one disorienting moment, she couldn't tell which would win.

She padded to the far end of the playroom, bare feet silent on the hardwood, until she reached the French doors that led out to the rooftop deck. The cool air hit her skin, shocking her back into herself. Dammit, this place got under her skin fast. And the worst part? She let it. Let him.

She made her way to the second floor, intending to check the guest bedroom, but was stopped short by one of Finn's men blocking the hallway. He didn't say a word—just

inclined his head toward a door she was sure led to Finn's office.

Typical. A message, loud and clear—she wasn't in control here, and every move he made was designed to remind her of that. It made her want to scream... or hit something.

Keira stalked toward his office, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. She didn't care if one of his men reported her tone, her look, or the way her jaw was locked tight enough to ache. Let them. Perfect.

Keira crossed the last few feet in three long strides and flung open the door without hesitation, the force of it slamming the wood against the wall with a satisfying crack.

"I need a shower," she said, not bothering to mask her irritation.

Finn tilted his head toward the stairs. "Your room is the primary suite downstairs."

"So that's how we're playing this?" she muttered. "I don't need a power play or a leash, Finn. I need a shower,"

"And you'll find the one you used attached to the bedroom in which you woke up this morning is still there. Do you want a leash, love? If so, you know where to find one," he murmured without missing a keystroke.

"You do know how psychotic that sounds, right?" she snarled.

"Plenty of things sound worse when you take them out of context."

She threw up her hands, exasperated. "Fine. But keep pulling this high-handed crap and I swear, I'll start reprogramming your fancy security system just to screw with you."

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She spun on her heel and stalked back through the hall.

Her footsteps struck the floor with crisp, deliberate weight—each one a punctuation mark of her rising frustration.

She pushed open the door to the main bedroom and stepped inside, this time noticing how opulent it was.

The room exhaled wealth, taste, and something deeply personal.

The bed was a towering four-poster made of dark carved walnut, its posts twisted with Celtic knotwork.

The duvet was a deep, moody green that mirrored the mossy hills of western Ireland, offset by copper-threaded pillows and heavy velvet drapes in a shade of burnt gold.

An antique armoire dominated one corner, its polished surface reflecting the soft, amber glow from wrought-iron sconces on the walls.

Every piece of furniture was old-world Irish—sturdy, elegant, and heartbreakingly beautiful.

Her reaction to the ensuite was the same.

She took in the massive—sleek slate tile, rainfall shower, and a long marble counter lined with high-end toiletries.

Heated floors warmed her bare feet instantly.

Plush towels were stacked in precise, almost obsessive folds—luxury in every detail, the kind that whispered wealth and control.

Probably cost more than her last laptop.

Of course he'd make even a shower feel like a power move.

She stripped quickly, stepped under the hot water, and groaned as the heat soaked into her muscles.

Her head tilted back, eyes fluttering shut, letting the cascade of the rainfall shower drown out everything else.

For a moment, it was just sensation—heat, water, and memory.

Her hands slid up to cup her breasts, fingers grazing over her nipples, and in that moment, she let herself sink into the ache she'd kept buried. It wasn't just arousal—it was loneliness, longing, a quiet desperation she rarely allowed herself to acknowledge.

Her mind—traitorous and sharp—summoned the feel of Finn's hands instead.

The way he used to touch her, firm and unrelenting, like he had every right.

His palms ghosting over her skin, thumbs teasing just beneath her breasts, that possessive grip at her waist that had always made her shiver.

She remembered the way his breath used to roughen against her ear, the scrape of stubble at her throat, the low growl of his voice that always made her knees go weak.

Heat pooled low in her belly, desire twisting through her like a live wire.

A soft gasp escaped her lips. She shouldn't be doing this.

But her body didn't care. It had been too long—too many nights curled alone beneath unfamiliar ceilings, too many mornings waking up with nothing but the echo of dreams she never let herself finish.

She was used to taking care of her own needs, to keeping things efficient and impersonal.

This, though—this wasn't routine. This was indulgence. Memory. Hunger.

Her right hand drifted down her belly, slick with steam and need, until she found the throbbing ache between her thighs.

She pressed, circled, teased herself with maddening slowness, imagining Finn behind her, breath hot on her neck, mouth curved in that smug, devastating smile.

Her hips rocked gently, the water masking the quiet sounds of pleasure she couldn't suppress.

But as the tension crested, a flicker of guilt laced through the heat—because while her body chased its release, her mind still clung to Finn.

The man who'd locked her in his world, who stirred things in her she wasn't ready to name. . And still, she didn't stop. Couldn't.

Because even here—especially here—his presence clung to her like the heat in the air, thick and sultry, seeping into her skin with every breath she took.

It threaded through her limbs like smoke, pooled low in her belly, and pulsed beneath her skin with an ache she couldn't shake.

He was everywhere—on her lips, in her mind, curled tight between her thighs—and it felt as inevitable as gravity.

Inescapable. And dangerously, deliciously welcome.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in the control room, hair towel-dried, dressed in a pair of black leggings and a slouchy chestnut-colored sweater.

The clothes weren't revealing but clung to her body in all the right places. Still, the feel of the soft silk of the sweater clinging to her skin made something low in her belly tighten. Even though she was dressed in her own clothes, she still smelled faintly like him—clean, dark spice, and something unnamable that brought back memories she didn't want to unpack. Not now.

She tucked one leg beneath her in the chair, anchoring herself in the familiar posture, as if reclaiming even a sliver of control could steady her.

Emotionally raw but reaching for balance, she needed to feel grounded before diving into the digital shadows.

She booted the system and logged into one of her offshore sandboxes—a digital dead drop she'd built years ago, buried beneath layers of shell corporations and encrypted nodes.

It took some coaxing, but she finally cracked open a dormant thread linked to the Dubai mess.

What she found made her pulse jump—a trail she hadn't expected, buried beneath layers of obfuscation, coded just subtly enough that most eyes would skim past. But not hers.

The telltale fluctuation in timing. The inconsistency in IP mapping.

It screamed movement. Hidden hands moving familiar pieces on a new board.

The funds had been restructured through a shell in the Caymans.

On paper, nothing unusual. But the timing?

Off. Less than forty-eight hours ago, someone moved half a million through a front that just happened to be registered to a Boston-based import company.

The same name she remembered from one of the low-level logistics files buried in the job parameters she never got to finish.

Her fingers flew, dancing across the keyboard with muscle memory precision.

This was her domain, her cathedral—code and firewalls, logic and instinct.

Here, she wasn't under anyone's thumb. The rules were hers to write, the locks hers to pick, the secrets hers to unearth.

In the quiet hum of circuits and blinking monitors, she found the kind of freedom Finn's gilded cage could never offer.

The noise of the house above faded, replaced by the familiar hum of focus, adrenaline laced with curiosity and drive.

She dug deeper, bypassed a soft firewall, pulled up the surveillance logs from a week ago. Nothing. Then last night... Static. Then mist. Thick and unnatural, blooming across the camera's view like smoke pouring in from nowhere.

She squinted, leaning closer to the screen as a chill traced down her spine. Her heart stuttered, a beat gone sideways with recognition and dread. There—just for a moment—the unmistakable blur of something not quite natural.

The same mist she'd seen from the roof last night.

Not fog. Not smoke. Something else—denser, almost luminous, with a cold shimmer that made her skin crawl.

It had moved like it had intent. Worse, it had left the air around it still, heavy, and wrong.

Silent in a way that pressed against her ears.

Her skin had prickled as it passed, an electric awareness crawling over her flesh.

And she'd heard it too—heard the low, distant rumble of thunder that shouldn't have been there. The night had been cold and clear, not a cloud in the sky. But the sound had rolled across the rooftops like a warning, dark and deep, right before the mist appeared. Something she couldn't explain.

The camera feed cut out. Then came back with empty frames. No people. No activity. Just a faint echo of something that had passed through and left nothing behind.

She leaned back in the chair, tension knotting in her gut. Her jaw clenched and one hand tapped a restless rhythm against the armrest, the need to move or act winding her tighter with each passing second. "What the hell?" she whispered.

She wouldn't ask Finn.

Not yet.

But the questions were forming—stacking up like live wires in her brain, sparking hotter by the second.

And soon, she'd demand answers he might not be ready to give.

FINN

Finn watched from the doorway of the brownstone's control room, arms crossed, one shoulder braced against the frame.

Keira was deep in the system, her fingers flying across the keyboard like she was playing a piano only she could hear.

The screen's glow flickered in her eyes, and she murmured softly under her breath, the words half-code, half-spell, as if conjuring something only she understood.

Intense. Sharp. Fucking brilliant. It should've eased his mind to see her locked in that zone, back in her element, but all he could think about was the fine edge she walked—too close to something she wouldn't know how to fight.

She'd become more and more restless over the past few days. Her gaze kept darting toward the windows, toward the locked doors, like the walls were pressing in. She clenched her fists against her sides, the tension running down her arms like a live wire, as if bracing for something she couldn't quite name.

She paced. Fidgeted. Snapped. She needed air.

She needed space. She needed out before the fire building under her skin forced its way loose.

He waited until she shut the system down before speaking, eyes scanning her posture for signs of resistance—or maybe hesitation. "Pack a bag, love. We're leaving."

Keira swiveled slowly in the chair, one eyebrow arched in challenge.

Finn's mouth twitched—half irritation, half arousal.

Christ, he'd missed that spark in her eyes, the way she never backed down.

It made him want to kiss her and pin her to the wall in equal measure.

His pulse ticked up, her stubborn fire tugging at the dominant edge in him like a live wire waiting to spark.

She didn't know the half of what she did to him—and if she did, she'd be even more dangerous.

"Is that you tugging on the leash, Finn?" she asked.

He grinned. "You were always too clever by half. We're heading to the Cape.

My place. Off-grid, secure, bigger than this bloody brownstone and it sits right on the water with acres between us and the neighbors.

You'd have some room to move and breathe.

You've been working really hard and you're starting to climb the walls. "

She snorted, a sharp, dry sound. "You just want to isolate me somewhere new—tuck me away like a problem you don't want to deal with. Preferably somewhere with worse Wi-Fi and better curtains."

He shrugged and flashed her a devilish grin. "And if I do?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she stood with a huff, the fire in her gaze daring him to push her further. “Fine. But I’m bringing my gear—and if you so much as breathe near my hard drives, I swear I’ll reprogram your security system to blast Taylor Swift at full volume every time you enter a room.”

Finn paused just long enough to glance over his shoulder, one brow arched. “Taylor Swift? Bloody hell, woman. That’s cruel and unusual.”

But the grin that followed told another story—one that said he’d missed her mouth, her bite, the way a single look from her could throw him off balance.

The snark, the challenge, the sheer audacity of her had always lit a fire low in his gut.

Christ, he’d lived off that heat once—and when she left, it had nearly destroyed him.

He turned and walked out, smug as sin, fully expecting her to follow—and to grumble the whole damn drive, just to prove she hadn’t lost the fight in her.

The drive to the Cape was quieter than expected, but not empty.

Keira rode shotgun, her laptop bag tucked between her feet, a hoodie draped over her knees.

Finn kept one hand on the wheel, the other resting loose on the gearshift.

The city gave way quickly to stretches of tree-lined highway, warehouses turning to winter-naked woods, traffic thinning to a long, steady rhythm.

Keira fiddled with the radio until she found a classic rock station. Something slow and low filtered through the speakers, and Finn chuckled under his breath. "Sweet Baby James. My ma used to hum that to herself when she baked."

Keira shot him a look, but her lips twitched. "Didn't figure you for a James Taylor fan."

"I'm not, exactly," he said. "But I know and appreciate what peace sounds like."

"You haven't had much peace in your life, have you?"

"No, but then neither have you..."

Keira shook her head. "I had more than you or my sister.

When my parents separated, they made a deal, my sister Siobhan would stay with my father, and I would go with my mother.

For the most part she kept me isolated from the mafia stuff.

I was pretty naive about what was going on in Galway until my uncle chose to enlighten me on our wedding day. "

"Bastard," Finn growled.

"You don't get to lay the blame totally on him. You should have told me, Finn."

"Aye. I probably should have, but I had a plan to walk away... to get us out. I didn't want it to touch you."

"Have you ever thought that if maybe you'd told me, we could have done it together? That we would have been stronger if we were united?"

Finn took a deep breath. "Every damn day since you left, but once you knew, you could have come to me."

“Not bloody likely,” Keira said with a dry laugh.

“Uncle Cathal made sure I knew—right before he went down to wait for me, ready to walk me down the aisle. In that moment, running felt like the only choice I had left... so I ran. But that doesn’t mean there weren’t weak moments when I wondered—what if. ”

Looking at her, for the first time he realized neither of them had escaped the experience unscathed.

They didn’t talk much after that. The air between them hummed with things still left unsaid.

The miles blurred. The sky went from steel gray to something softer.

Out the passenger window, Keira watched the land stretch out, low and windswept.

Salt marshes. Cranberry bogs. Abandoned farm stands shuttered for winter. Everything quiet. Waiting.

Finn glanced at her. The way her face softened just slightly when she wasn’t trying to fight him.

How the stress melted from her shoulders when she wasn’t locked in battle with her past or her need to stay five steps ahead.

This drive, this silence—it was the first time he’d seen her like this in years.

It did something to him. Opened a crack in that armor he kept around his heart—a hairline fracture that pulsed with the ache of old hopes and raw, lingering want.

It wasn't just the sound of her voice softened by distance, or the way her expression had eased.

It was her presence, calm and unguarded for once, and it hit him in the ribs like a sucker punch.

He wasn't prepared for it. Didn't know if he wanted to be.

"We'll be there soon," he said softly.

She didn't answer. Just leaned her head against the window, eyes closed, the wind from the cracked window lifting strands of her hair.

Her lips parted slightly, a soft breath fogging the glass as if her dreams had just barely begun to spill free.

For a moment, the sharp edges of her fell away, revealing the girl she must have been before the world hardened her—before blood and betrayal stole her softness.

Finn kept his eyes on the road, jaw tight, heart too full.

He didn't dare speak. Didn't dare ruin it.

He let the road carry them the rest of the way.

The estate sat nestled between a thick swath of pine forest and the craggy, secluded edge of the Atlantic.

The house was a warm sprawl of old money and deep wood.

As the tires crunched up the long gravel drive, Keira leaned forward, taking it in—the

sweeping veranda, the weathered stonework, the towering pines that whispered overhead like a hush meant only for them.

"It looks like the kind of place someone would write a mafia romance in," she muttered.

Finn chuckled. "Not a bad idea. I've often thought about writing a novel."

Keira laughed. "A PR firm would have a field day with that—they could tout how authentic it is because you were once a mafia made man."

"Finn snorted. "No think about it. It would be so on the nose. Brooding crime boss, hidden retreat by the sea, mysterious past, emotionally scarred heroine? All we're missing is a storm and a secret baby. "

He chuckled as he shut off the engine, and two black SUVs rolled up behind them. It was all he could do not to wince, when he saw her body tense. "Give it a day," he whispered taking her hand. "I'll try to keep them as unobtrusive as possible, but I need them here to ensure your safety."

She nodded, but said nothing.

Finn got out of the Range Rover and came around to open her door and help her out. He led her up the stone steps and through the massive double-doored entry.

He didn't say anything as she stepped inside, letting her take it in.

She stood just past the threshold, eyes scanning the foyer, the warm glow of antique sconces brushing soft light over deep walnut floors and the polished banister of the sweeping staircase.

Her gaze caught on the carved crown molding, the art hanging above the mantle, the way the deep burgundy runner quieted their steps.

She didn't say a word, but her lips parted just slightly.

Finn's heart gave a slow, stupid knock in his chest.

He'd always thought of the brownstone as a showpiece.

A facade. The place he brought business associates and enemies alike to show he had control, power, means.

But this estate? This was his. The only place he'd ever let his guard slip for more than a breath.

He wasn't sure if it unnerved him or comforted him that she was standing here now—seeing it.

She tilted her head, stepped toward the living room, and ran a hand along the edge of the old Irish sideboard he'd hauled across the ocean himself. Her fingers brushed the worn edge of the wood, the corner where the finish had gone soft from years of hands.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

"You always were an old soul," she murmured.

Finn swallowed, then followed her in.

Once the staff had unpacked their bags, Finn showed her to her suite and gave her a tour of the lower floor.

When he gestured toward the primary bedroom, Keira planted her feet.

"Seriously? The primary suite? You expect me to sleep in what is very obviously your bedroom? What happened to the guest rooms? Surely a house this big has some."

Finn arched an eyebrow. "It does. I just like the idea of you in my bed—even if I'm not in it with you. The space suits you."

"You do realize that forced proximity and kidnapped mafia princesses are, like, the most overused tropes in existence, right? Should I expect the storm and the secret baby next?"

Finn chuckled, enjoying her light-hearted banter. "Should I be insulted you think I'm that predictable?"

"Oh, please. You're practically a walking plot device. Brooding alpha with commitment issues? Classic."

Finn's mouth twitched. "I've missed that smart mouth."

"Don't get used to it. And don't think for a second I'm not locking that door."

"Wouldn't expect anything less."

She huffed and stalked off to the bath, her muttering trailing behind her.

Finn waited a beat longer, listening to the low click of the door locking behind her before turning away. He descended the staircase with smooth precision, each step sure and measured across the wide treads in the hush of early afternoon.

Dinner was simple but satisfying—roasted chicken, potatoes, and a dark leafy salad served with a good bottle of wine.

Finn had insisted they eat in the smaller dining room off the kitchen, the one with the stone hearth and a view of the sea just beyond the bay windows.

They didn't talk much, but it wasn't the same sharp-edged silence from before.

It was easier. Companionable. Like an old rhythm still buried under the ruins of what they used to be.

Keira had picked at her food more than eaten it, eyes shadowed with thought. She excused herself early, mumbling something about exhaustion. Finn didn't press. He watched her go, her steps slow but determined as she made her way up the stairs.

He couldn't see her, but he could feel the hesitation in the silence that followed. Then the soft creak of the door opening, the whisper of her slipping through, and finally, the firm click of the lock sliding into place, like a final line drawn between them..

That sound echoed down the hall, sharp and final.

He closed his eyes. He could picture her clearly—leaning back against the door, breathing out the day, letting it crush her for a moment now that no one could see.

He'd lit the fire before she returned, knowing the room would be cold otherwise.

The flames would be dancing now, casting warm light across her skin as she undressed in silence.

He swallowed hard, the image of her slipping out of her clothes branded behind his eyes. Slow, methodical. Not sensual—just tired. Worn down to the bone. She wouldn't cry. Not Keira. But he knew that kind of quiet. Knew what it cost to carry that much alone.

She'd slide into the bed like it was the only place she could keep breathing. Outside, the ocean whispered to the cliffs—steady and indifferent, like time itself.

Sleep wouldn't come easy for her. He knew. Because it wouldn't come easy for him either.

The house had long since gone quiet, the hum of the evening settling into the bones of the place.

He crossed the main floor without turning on a single light, navigating by memory and moonlight slanting through the tall windows.

In his study, the fire in the hearth had burned down to embers, casting low golden flickers across the old oak desk.

He sat, activated the secure line, and keyed in his codes to check for updates from his men.

Just because they were away from Boston didn't mean the threat had vanished.

Leaving his phone on the kitchen counter, Finn strode out the back door, the screen clicking shut behind him.

The air was cold, clean, and thick with pine.

He crossed the wide stretch of yard, boots moving across the lush lawn, and didn't begin stripping until the tree line swallowed him whole.

Inside the cover of the woods, he pulled his shirt over his head, removed the rest of his clothes, exhaled, and let the wildness rise.

The change came fast. A sudden, twisting rush in his core—hot, familiar, and unrelenting.

Finn welcomed it. The raw power surged inside him, like a muscle stretched too long finally snapping back into place.

Bones didn't crack—they liquified and reformed.

Skin prickled as fur pushed through. His vision narrowed, sharpening to slits of moonlit clarity.

The air buzzed across his nerves like static, and his pulse surged with primal certainty.

A swirl of mist surged up from the ground, curling and thickening until it wrapped him in an electric cocoon.

Finn felt the temperature drop, his skin tingling as the energy coursed through him,

humming beneath the surface like a storm ready to break.

Thunder cracked with the mist—sharp, immediate, and close.

The scent of loam and ozone filled his nose, heady and wild.

In that moment, the world narrowed to sensation: the tension in his muscles, the static dancing along his spine, the flash of light behind his closed eyes.

Then, as quickly as it came, the mist began to recede, falling away to reveal the lithe, powerful form of a black panther crouched in its place.

Finn breathed in deeply through his snout.

The air tasted alive. Wild. Free. He surged forward on four paws, claws silent over damp pine needles, every motion sleek and purposeful.

His panther form stretched luxuriously, every movement fluid, silent.

The world snapped into sharp relief—sound and scent and movement heightened to something almost otherworldly.

He bounded through the forest. Fast. Hard.

Trees whipped past in a blur. The earth pulsed beneath his paws, steady and grounding—an old, familiar rhythm that settled something deep inside him. This was freedom. This was power.

A scent on the wind—wrong. Copper. Sweat. Metal. The brush of voices.

He veered toward the beach, low and fast, his body hugging the terrain with a

predator's grace.

The brush thinned and the dark expanse of the shoreline spread before him.

There—two figures hunched near the surf, dragging equipment from a bobbing Zodiac raft.

One had a rifle slung across his back, the other hauled what looked like a heavy satchel lined with wires and metal tubing.

Smugglers? Saboteurs? His muscles tensed.

As Finn crept closer, the wind carried their voices—low, urgent, in an accent he didn't recognize.

He caught the flash of a blade, a glint of something metallic passed between them.

They weren't amateurs. These were professionals, armed and precise.

One turned, eyes sweeping the tree line, and suddenly froze.

His mouth opened in a curse. He raised a pistol and took aim.

Too late. Instinct surged through Finn—feral, unfiltered, and deadly.

In this form, there were no words, only raw awareness.

His vision tunneled on the target, every muscle tuned to act.

Danger. Intrusion. Defend. The scent of blood stoked the furnace in his chest, hot and primal.

No hesitation. No mercy. His pulse beat not in his ears but in his bones.

Protect. Eliminate threat. Guard the den. Nothing else mattered.

He exploded from the tree line, a blur of muscle and fury.

The gun fired—a hot crack that missed wide.

Finn launched, claws out, fangs bared, and hit the first man square in the chest. The scream didn't last long.

One brutal swipe shattered bone and sent the man sprawling.

A second man bolted for the raft. The first, bleeding and gasping, managed to crawl to the boat.

The second intruder pulled the first into the boat.

The man collapsed, unconscious, trailing his bloodied limb in the surf.

The engine fumbled to life and peeled away, the raft lurching wildly as he cast one last glance over his shoulder.

Finn stalked the waterline, body taut with readiness, eyes scanning until the boat was a speck in the dark.

Satisfied—for now—that both were gone, he turned and headed back toward the house.

The trees thinned as he padded up the slope, and the dense forest began to give way to the manicured lawns of the estate. Just before the line where the wild gave way to

order, he paused—bare, battered, and humming with residual power.

He crouched low beneath a tangle of brush, moving silently, step by step.

The sound of the ocean faded behind him, replaced by the whisper of wind through the needles overhead.

Finn's pace slowed as he neared the edge of the tree line.

He could see the glow of the estate just beyond, the stark contrast between wild and civilized.

The mist churned again at his feet, lightning sparking once more as the shift overtook him.

There was no pain—just that strange, surging pressure and the sudden awareness of skin again.

Naked. Human. He exhaled through clenched teeth, the rush of air sharp in his lungs.

His feet pressed against the loamy forest floor, cool with dew and damp leaves.

Branches snagged his arms as he pushed forward, weaving through the tight thickets.

The air was rich with pine and moss, every breath grounding him.

Glancing down, he noted his skin was blood-slicked so he didn't stop for clothes. He padded barefoot up the trail, every line of him sharp and dangerous.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

Keira stepped out onto the deck, the cool salt air wrapping around her like a veil.

She'd woken tense, unsettled, with a crawling unease she couldn't explain.

It pressed behind her ribs like a storm waiting to break, her breath catching under the weight of something just out of reach.

A prickle ran up her spine, as if the air itself had shifted—leaving her hollow, alert.

Her nerves buzzed faintly, her instincts whispering truths her mind hadn't yet caught.

Restless, she moved further out onto the deck, letting the chill clear her thoughts.

Below, the waves crashed in steady rhythm, the stars dimmed only slightly by the pale glow of the moon.

Then she saw it—the same weird, swirling mist. Rolling in at the tree line, dense and glowing. Her heart tripped as a figure stepped free from it, tall, muscled, hung, and utterly naked.

Finn.

He moved like something born of the woods, all muscle and menace, each step deliberate and fluid.

Moonlight slicked across the contours of his body, picking out the sculpted lines of his back, the flex of his thighs, the untamed power carved into every sinew.

He didn't look human—he looked ethereal, feral, as though the forest itself had shaped him and set him free.

Her breath caught, tight in her throat, as heat curled low in her belly.

She watched him ascend the steps to the deck, each movement a testament to restrained power.

Mist still clung to his skin, gleaming in the moonlight, his bare chest rising and falling with slow, controlled breaths.

Their eyes locked, and something passed between them—unspoken, electric, and inevitable.

Her lips parted, but no words came, not yet.

Her heartbeat skittered in her chest, caught between instinct and something dangerously close to awe.

"What the hell did I just see?" she asked.

He didn't flinch, but he didn't answer immediately either.

"What do you think you saw?" he rumbled.

Keira crossed her arms. "Don't play word games with me, Finn. I saw the mist. The lightning. I heard the thunder—and this isn't the first time."

He exhaled, slow and heavy. "It's complicated."

She stepped closer, eyes narrowed. "Then start uncomplicating it."

The air between them snapped tight, the shift in energy almost audible. Her voice dropped, low and sharp. "You don't get to walk out of a glowing mist—naked—and expect me to swallow a half-assed deflection."

Finn didn't blink. Didn't flinch. Just held her gaze with that maddening calm—the kind that made her want to throw something hard and breakable at his stupidly composed face. Or maybe just throw herself at him and make them both deal with the fallout.

"You want answers?" he asked. "Fine. Come with me."

He turned, completely unbothered by his state of undress.

Keira, by contrast, was flushed head to toe—not just from the sight of him, all glorious muscle, unapologetic scars, and those damn eyes that always seemed to see straight through her, but from the chaos erupting inside her.

Her breath hitched, fingers twitching at her sides as heat pooled low in her belly, tangled with the jagged edges of anger, confusion, and a maddening, reluctant ache.

Vulnerability rose like a tide she couldn't stem, crashing into the part of her still raw from everything they'd lost. She hated that he still had this effect on her. Hated more that some deep, traitorous part of her didn't want it to stop.

She followed him down the hall and into his study, the door clicking shut behind her like the final beat in a trap snapping closed.

The room was dim, lit only by the embers in the hearth and the low amber glow from a lamp near his desk.

Leather. Mahogany. Bookshelves that reached the ceiling.

It felt like stepping into some dark fairytale.

Finn moved with purpose, grabbing his phone from the desk and tapping the screen.

"Aidan, it's Finn. We had company on the beach.

Two men. One's injured, the other helped him get away.

They left by Zodiac. Double the perimeter patrols.

Get eyes on the shoreline and send a team into town. Quietly. I want them found."

He ended the call and turned to face her, expression unreadable.

Keira stayed rooted to the spot, her heart thudding in her chest as she studied him—broad-shouldered, jaw tight, eyes giving nothing away.

A prickle of apprehension climbed her spine, but beneath it, curiosity stirred—sharp and insistent, curling around her ribs like smoke.

Her breath hitched, heart caught somewhere between dread and a hunger for truth she didn't want to admit, raw and insistent.

Something in his stance told her this wasn't just about the rooftop, the brownstone, or the edge of the woods. This was deeper—personal. Something he'd been carrying for a long time, keeping from her. And whatever he was about to say... it was going to

change everything.

"Now," he said, reaching for a crystal decanter and pouring two fingers of whiskey into a glass. He pushed it into her hand. "Drink."

She took it, but didn't sip. Her eyes tracked the blood streaking his chest and forearms, drying in thick smears down the hard lines of muscle. "That was a hell of a lot of cloak and dagger just now. And don't think I didn't notice the blood. Yours? Theirs?"

"Theirs. I've increased security and I have my people looking for them. Any chance you'll let it go at that?"

"None whatsoever. I want to know what's going on. What's with the localized thunder and lightning, the eerie mist... and how come you're walking around naked?"

"I didn't want to get blood on my clothes."

Keira slammed the glass of whiskey on his desk. "Damn it Finn. I want to know what's going on and I want to know right now."

He grinned—it was feral, predatory. "I'd forgotten how beautiful you are when you're pissed off."

"Have you forgotten what it's like when I kick you in the shin or punch you in the nose?"

That made him laugh. "Actually, I haven't. What's really sick is that it kind of turns me on," he said looking down at his rising cock.

She glanced around, looking for something—anything—and came up empty.

Scowling, she snapped, "Find something to cover that thing up and tell it to settle down."

Finn didn't move.

Her jaw tightened. "Answer me."

"That's not as easy as you think," he said, voice low, unreadable.

"You were always good with words, Finn."

He exhaled through his nose, then reached down, and pulled open the lower desk drawer. He grabbed a towel and wiped the blood off before grabbing a pair of sweatpants. Without ceremony, he stepped into them and tugged them on. "There's so much you don't know."

He picked up the whiskey from the desk and held it out to her. "Take a sip. You're going to need it."

It wasn't a request. The growl in his voice did something indecent to her spine.

Keira sipped the whiskey, because she was smart, not because he told her to. She kept the whiskey in hand, though, the warmth of the glass a poor match for the heat rising in her chest.

He sat across from her, forearms braced on his knees. His voice, when it came, was low and steady.

"I'm going to say something, and I need you to keep an open mind."

Keira narrowed her eyes. "I hate it when people start conversations like that."

"The O'Neills—at least Con's branch of the family—we're not just men, Keira. Not entirely. Some of us are what are known as shifters..."

"You mean like in the paranormal romance books?"

"Not exactly. In most of those books, shifting is shown as painful, monstrous—something out of control. That's not how it is.

The truth is, humanity didn't evolve along just one track.

There were three: human, animal, and a rare hybrid lineage—what we now call shifters.

In some places, at certain times in history, those of us who can move between our human and animal forms had advantages that helped us survive, even thrive, where others couldn't."

Keira took another sip of whiskey, the burn sliding down her throat sharp and satisfying—but it did little to calm the restless energy churning beneath her skin.

It simmered there, just under the surface, a low, insistent tension that refused to ease.

No amount of liquor could drown the pull tightening in her chest or the wild, unsettled need crackling through her veins like a storm waiting to break.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the glass, grounding herself in the sting and heat, even as her mind tried to claw through the impossible truth Finn had laid at her feet. "Seriously Finn? You expect me to accept this line of bullshit?"

"I expect for you to believe when I answer your question as honestly as I can."

"So... what... you shifted earlier tonight?" He nodded. "Liar. There's no full moon."

"Our ability to shift is not dependent upon lunar or any other earth cycle. Shifters are panthers, wolves, lions and a host of others. Being a panther-shifter is part of the O'Neill legacy. It's in our blood, our bones, our very DNA."

Keira stared at him for a solid five seconds.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, a strange mix of disbelief, fear, and something far more dangerous—curiosity—curled low in her gut.

Her eyes searched his for a flicker of doubt, some sign that he was messing with her.

But there was none. Just the quiet certainty of a man who believed every word he'd just said. Her throat tightened. This was madness. It had to be. And yet... she couldn't look away.

Then she took a much larger swallow of whiskey.

It burned like fire all the way down and she coughed, sputtering. "Jesus, Finn. You could've started with aliens or vampires—I might've believed that first."

"I'm not joking."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

"Clearly," she wheezed, wiping her mouth. "Okay, so what, you're telling me you're some kind of shifter. That the Irish mob has were-panthers..."

"We find the use of the term 'were' offensive. It locks us into some stereotype invented by humans to keep us separate. We prefer the term shifter as in panther-shifter, wolf-shifter..."

"Well excuse me all to hell. Let's put whether or not I believe you aside for a minute. You just... what? Forgot to mention that little detail before we almost got married?"

Finn didn't blink. "It wasn't safe to tell you. And I never wanted to scare you. I planned to tell you before I claimed you..."

"Wait 'claim' me as in, what, suck my blood?"

"That's vampires," he explained patiently. "Shifters claim their mates, and turn them..."

"Whoa! You were going to 'turn' me into some kind of freak?"

"Not a freak Keira; a panther-shifter. You would have a longer, healthier life, more finely attuned senses and there's a freedom..."

"Stop. Can you not hear yourself? You sound deranged. First you want me to believe you can change from a man to a panther, and now you want me to embrace being like you?"

He nodded. "It's the truth. It doesn't have to be terrifying."

Keira stood up, pacing the length of the study. The whiskey glass shook in her hand. Her heart was beating too fast.

"Why don't I know about this? Did I inherit some monster gene from my father? Is my Uncle Cathal one of you? Was my sister secretly a panther?"

Finn rose too, slowly, coming toward her like one might approach a spooked animal. "No. You and your family are human, Keira. Through and through. If you weren't, I'd know."

"How would you know?"

He stepped closer. Close enough to touch. Close enough for her to feel the truth of what he was saying.

"Because the first time I scented you, I knew. You were mine."

The words slammed into her. Hot and direct and terrifying.

She shook her head, trying to push the fog out of her thoughts. "No. No, we are not doing the whole fated mates trope. This isn't a fantasy novel."

He smiled sadly. "It isn't a trope. It's biology. It's instinct."

Keira felt like the world had tilted off its axis, gravity pulling in the wrong direction.

Her legs gave out beneath her and she dropped into the chair with a graceless thud, the whiskey glass thumping against the table.

Her fingers curled tighter around the cut crystal as if it could anchor her to reality.

The burn of his words hadn't even fully registered yet—her pulse galloped, heat and disbelief crawling up her throat.

Her breath came in shallow gulps, heart pounding like it was trying to outrun what she'd just heard.

Finn crouched beside her, his hand reaching for hers with a quiet, steady intent.

She let him take it—partly because she didn't have the strength to pull away, but also because some small, fractured part of her needed the connection.

Her fingers were cold, stiff, but they curled around his instinctively, the warmth of his palm grounding her even as her mind reeled.

A hollow ache opened in her chest, raw and painful, too tangled in shock to name.

She didn't know what she believed—but in that moment, she didn't want to be alone with it.

"You're not crazy," he said gently. "And neither am I. You're not broken. You're the only person who's ever made me feel like more than just a weapon."

Her throat worked, trying to swallow down the swell of emotion rising like a tide.

Her eyes burned, not from the whiskey or the firelight, but from the sharp sting of feelings she hadn't let herself acknowledge.

His hand in hers radiated heat—steady, grounding, and yet so overwhelming it made her want to bolt.

It tethered her to the moment, even as her instinct screamed to run from the truth settling over her like a weighted shroud.

"Finn..."

He leaned in, close enough that his breath fanned over her lips—warm, whiskey-laced, and tinged with the primal scent of the forest still clinging to his skin.

The heat of his nearness prickled across her cheeks and down her throat, her breath stalling as something tight and trembling took root deep in her belly.

"You feel it too. You always have."

Then he kissed her. Not soft. Not sweet.

It was fire and hunger, the kind of kiss that bruised and branded, tongue and teeth sliding over lips that trembled from more than just surprise.

His hands cupped her jaw, fingers splayed against her cheeks like he was afraid she might disappear if he let go.

The taste of whiskey lingered between them, sharp and smoky, and Keira gasped into his mouth as heat unfurled low in her belly, liquid and urgent.

Her whole body arched into him like it remembered something her mind wasn't ready to accept.

Her fingers clawed into his shoulders, desperate and possessive, grounding herself in the sheer physicality of him—the hard planes of muscle, the raw male heat of his skin, the silent vow buried in the pressure of his lips.

She kissed him back like she was drowning in him—hungry, desperate, her body moving instinctively, seeking heat and grounding.

His lips were fire against hers, and the taste of him—whiskey, wildness, the lingering smoke of something feral—ignited a slow, aching heat low in her belly.

Her heart pounded like it wanted to tear free from her ribs, and her breath hitched with every brush of his tongue, every pull of his mouth.

The kiss deepened, darkened, turned into something raw and consuming.

Her fingers twisted in his shirt, knuckles white, anchoring herself as much as claiming him.

Every breath between them was friction, every moan a confession she wasn't ready to say out loud. This was no gentle remembering—it was a violent reminder of what they'd been, what they still were, and what might burn them alive again.

A promise. A challenge. A whispered scream for more.

She tore away, breath ragged, eyes wide and wild—shining with emotion she couldn't name, heart slamming in her chest like it had broken free.

“Don't,” she said, her voice barely above a breath.

Finn froze, his gaze locking on her face, trying to read the storm behind her eyes—was it hope, hesitation, or something even more dangerous?

Her lips parted, cheeks flushed, eyes shining with emotion she hadn't let fall.

For one suspended heartbeat, everything in him stilled—muscles taut, breath held.

“Don’t make me fall in love with you again unless you’re planning to stay this time,” she whispered.

The air between them thickened, charged not just by the weight of her words, but by the raw gravity pulling them together—grief, longing, and something deeper still. Finn didn’t move. Couldn’t. One wrong word and she might shatter. Worse, she might walk away again.

“I’m not the one who left.” His voice was soft, stripped of anger, nothing but truth. “But I won’t let you leave me again.”

The silence that followed wasn’t empty—it vibrated, alive with everything they hadn’t said. Keira felt it in her bones. This was the edge. One more step, and there’d be no turning back.

But Keira wasn’t ready to leap. Not yet. She rose, heart still hammering in her chest, and backed toward the door, eyes locked with his. “I need to think, Finn. I need to breathe.”

He didn’t stop her. Just watched her go, his body tense, his jaw clenched like he was biting down on a scream... or a roar.

She stepped into the hallway, the door closing softly behind her. Her legs carried her on instinct, but her mind was a storm. The truth was out now—but whether she could survive it, trust it, want it... that was another story entirely.

Keira paused at the landing, something tugging at her senses, raw and elusive.

She moved to the nearest window, her fingers brushing the cold glass as she peered into the darkness beyond the garden.

A chill ran across her skin, not from the breeze that crept through the old frame, but from a sensation deeper—primal, instinctive.

In the shadows just beyond the spill of golden light from the study, something unseen stirred.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

FINN

The door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving Finn staring at the empty space she'd just occupied. A muscle ticked in his jaw as his breath dragged in—tight, unsteady. His heart gave a low, reluctant thud, as if it too recognized the weight of what just passed between them. He exhaled slowly, pressing a palm against the doorframe for balance, fighting the urge to follow. Not yet. Not while the words between them still echoed like live wires in the air. For a long beat, he didn't move.

Regret flared sharp in his chest, tempered by longing and a pulse of helpless anger.

He hated this helplessness, this ache he couldn't kill or claim.

It wasn't in his nature to wait, but for her—he would.

For now. Her scent lingered in the air like smoke after a fire—warm, bittersweet, impossible to ignore.

It clung to him, curling in his chest, a phantom ache he couldn't shake.

Keira's retreat echoed in his chest—spine straight, breath shaking—as she walked away. He let her go because she said she needed space, but a sharp edge of doubt gnawed at him. Did she really? Or was that just her armor talking?

Every muscle in him screamed to follow, to bridge the aching distance. But pressing her now—after what he'd revealed—could drive her away.

So he did the hardest thing he'd ever done. He let her go. For now.

He stood quietly, the echo of her presence still ghosting over his skin. The taste of the conversation, of her uncertainty and his restraint, still lingered like something half-swallowed. He knew one thing for certain, this wasn't over.

Finn adjusted the waistband of his sweatpants and stepped out of his study, moving quietly up the stairs. At the top, he paused in the shadowed hallway outside the primary suite, the silence stretching between them like a taut thread—strung tight with need, caution, and everything they hadn't said.

After a long moment, he exhaled and turned away, bare feet whispering over the polished floor.

He walked down the corridor and slipped into the guest suite.

The door closed behind him with a soft thud, sealing off the tension he'd left behind.

He needed a shower—needed the heat and solitude to clear his head before he faced her again.

But it gnawed at him. Every minute dragged, stretched thin like wire drawn too tight. She'd left him at the altar, and all he'd been left with was fury and betrayal. He told himself he'd let her go—but the truth was, he never really had.

He remembered the blur of days after, the wreckage of that morning pounding through his skull like a war drum. The chapel's stained-glass windows had bled morning light across empty pews, his vows ash on his tongue, tuxedo suffocating as the truth set in—she wasn't coming.

Con had tried to pull him away from the altar, but his feet had stayed rooted, as if he

could will her back with sheer force of need.

Grief had come first. Then the rage—white-hot, feral.

He'd punched a wall, bloodied his knuckles.

And then the search. Quiet, surgical. He'd told no one.

Not even Con. For months, he scoured cities, trailed shadows—snippets of data, whispered sightings.

London. Paris. A club in Barcelona that played deep and harbored ghosts.

He caught her scent once in a Dublin train station and chased it until he lost it in a crowd.

Then, finally, a solid lead—an old hacker contact in Prague swore she'd seen Keira.

He had a name, an address. A one-way flight booked.

And then—he stopped. Pride wrapped cold fingers around his throat.

She left, didn't she? Walked away without a word.

She hadn't looked back—just vanished like smoke, leaving behind silence and the bitter scorch of abandonment that cut deeper than any blade, slicing through bone and pride alike.

If she didn't want to be found, maybe she didn't deserve to be.

He'd told himself it was mercy. That letting her disappear was the kinder choice. That

she didn't want him.

And it had cost them years. Years when he could've held her. Fought beside her. Built something real.

Instead, he'd walked the streets of Prague, fists in his coat pockets, watching her old haunts from a distance he told himself was safety—but it was cowardice.

Every time he got close, the question burned—what if she turned him away again?

What if she hated him? What if the pain in her eyes was deeper than anything he could fix?

But he hadn't stopped dreaming. Not once.

Her voice haunted his sleep, soft curses and clever laughter echoing in the void.

His need for her never dulled—it sharpened, honed itself into something jagged and brutal.

Something he buried in work and war, in strategy and syndicate politics. But nothing drowned it out.

Now she was back in his orbit, close enough to touch—but no more his than she had been then. An hour. Then another. Pacing the length of the guest suite like a caged thing, trying to get his breath to slow, his instincts to heel.

He stepped out of the shower, pulled on a pair of jeans and walked back to the primary suite. He opened the door to find her standing by the window, wrapped in one of his old dressing gowns, staring through the glass like it held answers. She turned slowly as he entered, her expression unreadable.

"You said you needed to breathe," he said quietly, voice pitched low. "I let you."

He took a step closer, squaring his shoulders to hide the vulnerability gnawing at his center. His tone hardened, more shield than strength as he met her gaze. "You're still under my protection, Keira. That comes with boundaries I won't compromise on."

Her eyebrow arched. "Rules, huh? Am I allowed to negotiate, or is this more of a 'do as I say or else' situation?"

Finn crossed the room in three strides, stopping just short of touching her. "You can question them all you like, but they stand. No sneaking out. No disabling any of the security systems. You don't leave the lawns or courtyard here at the house without me or my men."

"So much for trust," she scoffed.

His lips tightened. "It's not about trust. It's about keeping you breathing. Which, despite everything, I still care about more than I should."

The silence stretched between them, thick with emotion and unspoken need.

He wanted to close the distance, to pull her in and lose himself in the warmth of her skin, the weight of her presence—but not now.

Not when fear still lingered in the air like smoke, and every nerve in him was strung tight with restraint.

Shaking his head, he took a step back.

"I'll be sleeping in the guest room. Just down the hall if you need anything."

He turned and walked out before she could stop him, his jaw tight, every step a silent act of control. The door clicked shut behind him with a quiet finality, like the hush before a blade drops—sharp, irrevocable, and echoing with everything he hadn't said.

Hours passed. The darkness deepened even as the moon crept higher into the sky to play hide-and-seek amongst the clouds.

The fire in the guest room had dwindled to embers, but Finn hadn't slept. He'd tossed his shirt onto the bed as soon as he entered and stretched out on the too-small bed in his jeans, staring at the ceiling like it might offer salvation.

Then came the soft knock—a hesitant, almost apologetic sound that made Finn's breath still in his chest. He didn't move at first. Just stared at the door, listening to the silence that followed, heart thudding like a war drum in the aftermath of battle.

He didn't need to ask who it was. He knew.

She opened the door without waiting for an answer. Her eyes were shadowed, her mouth a tight line. There was no trace of her usual sarcasm or defiance, only stark determination. No games. No snark. Just Keira, stripped of pretense, standing in his doorway like a storm held in check.

"I can't sleep," she said simply.

He sat up, muscles tensing. "You shouldn't be here."

"I know. But I didn't want to be alone."

"Keira..."

"Don't. Just... I don't know what I want, Finn. But I know it's not a cold bed and this

distance between us."

Her voice wavered, tinged with a raw edge of vulnerability Finn hadn't heard from her before—a tremble that cracked through her usual strength and settled deep in his chest, raw and unexpected.

It was unguarded, unpolished—like she'd peeled back one of the last layers of defense and left it bare between them.

Keira's breath hitched audibly. For a heartbeat, she looked like she might bolt—eyes wide, jaw set—as though saying the words had taken more strength than she thought she possessed, and now she wasn't sure she could survive their echo.

He stood slowly, hands clenched at his sides. She looked up at him, emotions churning just beneath the surface. "You don't get to use me to feel less alone, Keira."

She stepped closer, her gaze steady. "And you don't get to pretend you don't want me here."

His growl was low, feral. "You have no idea how badly I want you. But you walked out on me once. Do you not get that you can just open my veins and let me bleed? You've always had that ability, and god help me, I don't care. If you stay, I'm going to fuck you, and I won't stop."

Her breath caught. She stepped into him, placing her hands flat against his chest. "Then don't stop. Just promise me one thing."

He looked down at her, heart thudding. "Anything."

"That this doesn't make me yours again. Not yet."

His hands slid to her waist, grip firm. "Fair enough. But I need your words, Keira. Consent. No games."

She nodded. "I want this. I want you. But I don't want pain tonight. No belts. No ropes. Just... heat."

He bent his head, brushing his mouth over hers as he swept her up in his arms and carried her back to bed. If he was going to have her, he meant to have her in his bed where she belonged.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

As he closed the door behind them, she whispered, "One more thing first. Safe sex."

He blinked. "Seriously? Now?"

She grinned. "Afraid so. I've had a recent physical. I'm clean, and I'm also on the pill."

"Same, and that's sweet of you, love," he murmured against her neck, his voice a low rasp. "But panther-shifters can't father children with humans unless the mate-bond is fully sealed. It's a safeguard—biological, mystical, take your pick."

Her breath hitched. "So... no risk?"

"No risk," he confirmed. "But every reward."

She pulled him to the bed, then paused, her eyes flicking down with heat and certainty. The silk of the dressing gown slid from her shoulders, pooling at her feet like melted moonlight. Naked, unflinching, she sank to her knees before him.

Finn's breath hitched, a low growl rumbling from his chest as her hands reached for the waistband of his jeans.

Her fingers were confident but reverent, making quick work of the button fly.

When she freed him, he hissed through his teeth, the sight of her—kneeling, willing, eyes locked on his—nearly undoing him.

She looked up at him with something like defiance and devotion twisted together, then took him into her mouth with a slow, deliberate hunger. Heat surged through him, his hand sliding to the back of her head, fingers threading into her hair as her lips worked magic and fire across his skin.

"Fuck, Keira," he rasped, his hips twitching forward despite his best intentions. Her tongue was sin and salvation, each swirl a promise, each pull a demand. He let her set the rhythm, watching her, undone by her boldness, her devotion, the way she worshiped him with her mouth.

When he was close—so close he saw stars—he pulled her up, catching her mouth in a feral kiss as he lifted her, turned, and brought them both down onto the large bed in a tangle of limbs and desperate want, kicking off his jeans as he did so.

What followed was far from gentle. It was a primal need, igniting sharply and instantaneously, a raging inferno of desire and appetite colliding with a sense of urgency.

He captured her mouth first, taking it with deliberate force, his lips embracing hers, stealing every breath she attempted to draw, and replacing it with a hunger that consumed any hesitance.

Each kiss was an order, each swirl of his tongue a requirement.

It wasn't just passion—it was complete ownership expressed through inhales and the clashing of teeth.

She arched her back beneath him, his name both a curse and an invocation.

He held her wrists above her head, his voice a menacing whisper. "You tell me if this gets too much. You stop me if it feels wrong. But right now, I'm going to make you

feel every damn second we've been apart."

She gasped his name while lifting her hips to meet his own. He emitted a low growl, his teeth nipping at her throat. "That's it. Give me your fire."

His hand ventured between her thighs, fingers teasing and probing curiously. She had already grown wet and eager with anticipation, twitching with desperate need. Her body squirmed about, craving more contact.

"So responsive," he murmured. "Just like I remember."

Every caress from his fingertips was purposeful and exact. He drove her to the brink of climax only to draw her back repeatedly until she couldn't take it anymore.

"Finn, please..."

"Beg louder, little hacker. Let the house hear."

"I need you?—"

"You'll have me. But only when I say."

Her orgasm surged powerfully, seemingly drawn out by the sheer intensity of his determination. He kissed her through it all, whispering curses into her mouth tenderly as he penetrated her slowly yet relentlessly until she quivered and clung to him like a lifeline.

He dominated her body with authority, barely held in check by a razor-thin line of self-control, each thrust a desperate surge of need just on the verge of being unleashed, akin to a storm looming on the horizon.

She matched his intensity with her own blend of fury and submission, her nails digging into his back, her voice hoarse with desire.

When she shattered beneath him once more, he gave in, body jerking as pleasure ripped through him like a tide breaking loose.

Her name tore from his throat, a raw, guttural sound, as though he could summon forgiveness from the darkness with nothing but the heat of their joined bodies and the brutal honesty of their need.

After, she curled against him, silent. Finn wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her close.

Her cheek rested just above his heart, and for a moment, everything was still.

He watched the ceiling, listening to the cadence of her breath, wondering if sleep had taken her or if her silence masked something deeper.

He didn't ask. Not yet. But the weight of her against him made the sharp edges inside ease.

He closed his eyes and pressed a kiss to her hair, breathing her in slowly—letting her scent settle in his lungs, a balm and a brand. His arm tightened around her just slightly, a silent vow written in the quiet of their tangle.

It should have felt like peace. But to Finn, it was only the lull before everything changed—the breath held before the sky cracked open and the real storm began.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

Keira lay still in the aftermath, tangled in sweat-slick sheets, her body purring with the kind of exhaustion that blurred the line between satisfaction and shock.

Emotion twisted through her chest, thick and knotted—too tangled to name.

A fragile warmth lingered in her limbs, but it battled a tide of uncertainty rising like a slow wave.

The air smelled like sex and salt and something older, deeper.

Her mind spun, replaying every word, every touch, trying to understand where lust ended and something terrifyingly real began.

Her limbs felt boneless, her breath shallow, her mind a tangle of pleasure, disbelief, and something dangerously close to longing.

The echo of his touch haunted her skin, and beneath the quiet, a storm brewed in her chest—part exhilaration, part dread.

Her skin still tingled where his hands had gripped her, where his mouth had pressed and claimed. Her breath came shallow, uneven, her pulse racing beneath her skin like a drumbeat she couldn't control.

What had she done?

Her body still hummed with aftershocks, but guilt crept in around the edges, insidious and cold.

She'd crossed a line—one drawn in blood and betrayal, and now smeared in sweat and satisfaction.

She'd let him back in, let herself burn in his arms when she should've run.

Her thoughts battled the warmth still lingering in her limbs, her mind yanking against the leash of reason.

This wasn't just about lust. It never had been.

Her mind scrambled for rational ground, some firm explanation she could cling to.

A lapse in judgment. A release of pressure.

A moment of weakness. But none of them fit.

Because it hadn't been weak. It had been everything she'd been holding back and everything she'd been afraid to want.

It had been primal, yes—but also heartbreakingly intimate.

He stirred beside her, rolling onto his side and brushing a kiss to her shoulder—a soft, lingering press of lips that carried more weight than she'd expected. The heat of his breath ghosted across her skin, sending a ripple down her spine. It wasn't just a kiss—it was grounding, intimate, as though he was anchoring her to him without words.

Keira's breath caught in her throat, and she closed her eyes, startled by how much she

felt in so simple a touch.

The warmth of his lips lingered, a gentle brush that sent a shiver down her spine.

It wasn't just the touch—it was the weight of it, tender and possessive, like a promise whispered against her skin.

Her breath hitched, and her eyes fluttered shut, betraying the storm still churning inside her.

A low hum of satisfaction rumbled in his chest, and it rolled through her like another kind of touch.

She swallowed hard.

“You okay?” His voice was rough, still half-feral.

Keira kept her eyes on the ceiling. “Do I look okay?”

He propped himself up on one elbow, brushing her hair back with the kind of care that was more dangerous than his teeth. “You look flushed. Sated. Sexy as hell.”

She shot him a sideways glare, the corner of her mouth twitching with a mix of warning and lingering tension. “I’m serious, Finn,” she said, her voice low, caught between exasperation and something she wasn’t ready to name.

“So am I.” He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her temple. “But I get it. You’re in your head. Talk to me.”

Keira pushed herself upright, dragging the sheet with her, suddenly needing the barrier between them. Her heart thudded dully against her ribs as she stared at the

fireplace, watching the last embers flicker and fade like the remnants of sanity.

"It doesn't make sense," she murmured. "One second I wanted to punch you, the next I was... letting you crawl into my bones." Her voice cracked on the last word, shame and hunger tangled in her chest.

He moved behind her, letting out a breath through his nose, irritation flickering just beneath his steady tone. A firm hand settled on her lower back, grounding them both. "That wasn't just about sex. You know it. So do I."

"I don't know what it was. I just know it scared the shit out of me."

His hand moved up, slow and sure, to tangle in her hair. Not yanking. Just holding. "Because it's real. Because it still matters."

Keira closed her eyes. "It's not supposed to. Not anymore."

"That's a lie you keep telling yourself, love. But your body doesn't lie."

Her breath caught, her pulse hitching sharply, and she hated how right he was.

The truth settled over her like a net—inescapable, tightening with every beat of her heart.

Resistance sparked behind her ribs, flaring hot, then sinking fast into the tangle of longing twisting tighter in her chest. She wanted to shove him away, to claw back the walls she'd built so carefully.

But her body refused to move, sunk deep into the warmth of him, traitorous and craving.

Her limbs stayed heavy, her nerves alight, betraying every ounce of control she tried to hold.

When he lowered her back down onto the pillows, she melted into them, pliant but trembling.

His lips traced the line of her spine in slow, reverent passes, igniting goosebumps in their wake.

When his hand slid beneath the sheet and found the lingering heat between her thighs, she gasped, her hips lifting in response, not with reason, but with need—fierce, helpless, and unbidden.

Her body betrayed the conflict in her mind, rising into his touch with aching urgency.

“You’re thinking too much,” he whispered against her skin. “Let me remind you how this feels.”

This time was different. Slower. Less a storm, more a seduction.

He kissed every inch of her like he was reclaiming it—her collarbone, the hollow of her throat, the soft skin beneath her breasts.

Worship and possession twisted together as his mouth roamed her neck, her shoulders, the small of her back, and lower still.

As he reached her thighs, he gently parted them with utmost care.

Feeling his breath on her skin, she shuddered when his tongue touched her wetness.

Her hips jerked in response, a gasp escaping her lips.

He groaned against her, the vibrations traveling through her core as he licked and teased her clit—first softly, then more forcefully.

She gripped the sheets, head thrown back, thighs trembling.

He devoured her as if she belonged to him, eliciting moan after moan, making her convulse under his skilled mouth. When she could no longer hold back, she came with a cry that signaled both relief and submission.

Finn flipped her onto her stomach gently but assertively. He guided her hips into position as she lay face down on the bed. Her arms stretched above her head, body pliable and hot with anticipation. The silky sheets caressed her skin, the coolness contrasting with her flushed body.

As instinct took over, she spread her thighs, the air heavy with desire. Finn positioned himself behind her. She felt his erection between her legs and knew what was coming next—his presence was both commanding and comforting. Trusting him completely, she let go of control one breath at a time.

He blanketed her body like an unspoken vow.

She felt his lips at the nape of her neck—where instinct overruled reason—and tensed, breathing heavily. "Finn...?"

"Just feel it," he growled as his canines elongated into fangs and he sank them into the nape of her neck.

His teeth grazed the tender skin—not maliciously but definitively—with intent and conviction.

Her breath hitched as electric sparks ignited beneath her skin. The sensation shot

through her—an intense wave that elicited a strangled gasp from deep within. Her whole body arched rigidly while quivering uncontrollably as overwhelming passion consumed them both.

A needy moan escaped—as sudden and raw as the feelings enveloping her. Her back arched even more, spine curving, fists gripping the sheets for some semblance of stability amidst the disorienting whirlwind they were both caught in.

An ancient, primal force stirred within her—a surge of raw heat and instinct coursing through her veins, a connection to something greater than herself.

She knew what he'd done. She recognized that unspoken declaration even as her conscious mind shied away from naming it. A claiming. A bond. Whole. Real. Unchangeable.

And she hadn't stopped him—hadn't even protested.

When he entered her from behind, their bodies merged once again with an almost supernatural intensity.

Pain and pleasure collided, setting her nerves ablaze and leaving her breathless in the aftermath of raw sensation.

Her body responded with unrestrained passion, thighs opening further, hips undulating to meet his every thrust.

Thoughts scattered like ashes in a storm, overwhelmed by the potent press of him inside her.

She let out a keening cry, utterly undone by his relentless force.

Logic and reason had no place here—only desire and the need for completion.

She succumbed fully to the carnal needs that drove them both towards ecstasy, embracing the unbridled truth that this man had brought her to the brink of oblivion—and she welcomed it with open arms.

When he rolled from her, he pulled her to him so that their limbs were still entangled and she lay draped across him, her cheek to his chest, listening to the thunder of his heart.

"Tell me that that bite was just some new kink."

He stroked her back, slow and steady. "You know better. You felt it."

"Then tell me you lost control that you didn't mean to..."

"You know better than that. You are my fated mate and I have claimed you."

She didn't answer.

He tipped her chin up so she had to meet his eyes. "Say something."

Her throat was dry. Her voice rough. "Did you plan it or was it instinct?"

His jaw tensed. "I hadn't planned to do it tonight, and the instinct to claim what was denied to me all those years ago didn't help, but I had always meant to make you one with me."

Her fingers reached around to touch the bite mark. Her skin tingled there, like it buzzed with a low current. "Is it permanent?"

His gaze darkened. “It already is. That bond can’t be undone.”

She didn’t know how to answer that.

So instead, she whispered, “I need water.”

He chuckled, low and lazy, and rolled out of bed. "What you need is a whiskey."

Keira watched him go, still aching, still open, and profoundly adrift.

A part of her longed to call him back, to demand answers and comfort in equal measure, but the rest of her stayed silent—frozen between pride and confusion.

Her body still tingled from his touch, but her heart felt heavy, swamped in uncertainty.

Had she surrendered something vital, reclaimed something long denied or had it been taken from her? She didn’t know. Couldn’t know. He’d left her there, raw and unraveling, wondering if she’d just stepped toward redemption—or ruin.

Then came the soft thud at the window—a low, dull impact that snapped her thoughts in half.

It sounded too deliberate to be random, too close to be coincidence.

Her breath stilled in her lungs as adrenaline surged, her nerves lighting up in warning.

The noise vibrated against her skin, sharp and cold, making the hairs on her arms rise as a sense of wrongness settled heavy in the pit of her stomach.

There was a low, muffled sound that cut through the silence.

It wasn't loud, but it carried weight. Her breath caught, and a chill raced up her spine, the primal part of her brain snapping to attention. Something was out there.

She turned.

A shadow moved outside. Too fast to be wind. Too still to be natural.

She rose slowly, wrapping herself in the previously discarded robe.

Outside, something waited. Keira's breath stuttered as her gaze locked onto the shifting silhouette just beyond the windowpane. The hairs on her arms rose beneath the robe, her instincts screaming a warning her mind couldn't place. She couldn't make out what it was—just that it was there.

FINN

The sound came sharp and sudden—a muffled thud that didn't belong.

Finn froze, heart kicking against his ribs, a flare of instinct racing through him.

His breath hitched, a primal jolt firing through his chest like a warning flare, hot and immediate—an instinctive recognition that danger was near.

Something was off. Wrong. Not just unexpected, but invasive.

Finn's hand tightened around the glass, the whiskey forgotten as he froze in the kitchen. This wasn't just a sound—it was a threat. A chill slid down his spine, his pulse spiking hard in the sudden stillness. Every instinct screamed alert.

The noise wasn't just wrong—it was uninvited, predatory. The hairs on his arms rose, his body already tensing into readiness before his mind fully caught up. Whatever it was, it was close. And it was getting closer.

Instinct slammed through him like a punch—sharp, sudden, and primal.

The kind of alarm that came not just from training, but from something ancient and feral, buried deep in his blood.

It wasn't panic. It was precision—hyper-focused awareness snapping through him like a live wire.

A warning that bypassed logic and went straight to the spine.

He felt it in his gut, low and immediate, like the split-second breath before a trap snapped shut.

The room pressed in around him, heavy with silence, as if even the walls were waiting.

He set the glass down without drinking, muscles going taut, every nerve ending straining toward the disturbance.

The old burn of danger surged in his chest, sharp and primal, stirring a flicker of memory—Keira's scent laced with adrenaline, the unshakable sense that something was about to go terribly wrong.

He didn't bother with the security panel. His instincts had never lied to him—not once. A single, out-of-place thud on a quiet night wasn't coincidence. It was intention—silent, precise, and aimed. In his world, intention wasn't just a warning; it was a prelude to blood.

As he moved, he keyed his comm. "All units, report in. East perimeter sweep. Full circle."

Voices crackled back with affirmatives. Finn's jaw locked, his expression darkening as he turned on his heel and strode to the front hall. With deliberate precision, he unlocked the weapons cabinet, fingers moving with muscle memory honed from years of readiness and wariness. This wasn't just preparation—it was a warning: anyone watching would learn just how ready he was to protect what was his.

Seconds later, Donal appeared at the back entrance, breath fogging in the cold. "You hear it too?"

"East side. Something off."

Donal nodded. "Partial prints in the garden just past the terrace. No breach, but someone was damn close. Might be testing us."

Finn pulled on his coat and stepped into his boots. "Or planning something bigger. Get three men on the ridge and two more at the boathouse."

"Already moving."

The cold slapped him as he stepped outside. The night air bristled with salt and pine, but something else rode beneath it—a synthetic tang, sharp and chemical. Alien. Wrong. A warning in the air, too faint for humans, but screaming at every predator's instinct in him.

He broke into a run, feet silent over the gravel path leading to the eastern edge of the estate.

The cold bit into his face, sharp with salt and pine, but he didn't slow.

When his boots hit the shadowed grass beyond the tree line, he yanked off his coat and let it fall behind him.

Hidden in the dense cover of trees, he dropped to one knee and pressed his palm to the earth, drawing in a breath of the air—cool, tinged with mist and something other.

Then, with a focused breath, he gave himself over to the beast.

Mist burst around him like a living thing, brushing cool against his skin before quickly warming, crackling with barely contained energy as it wrapped his body in a charged veil.

It clung to him like breath and shadow, electric and intimate, as if the air itself recognized the beast within.

His skin prickled with heat, muscles tightening as the world narrowed to instinct and sensation.

The shift came swiftly—no pain, no tearing, just the seamless shift from man to beast, as natural as breathing. The cold vanished. The dark welcomed him. And he moved through it with the lethal grace of a predator who'd always belonged.

The scent trail was faint. Whoever it was had masked themselves well, but not perfectly. He followed the traces: crushed leaves, a snapped twig, the shallow indentation of a knee near the perimeter fence. No signs of forced entry. Just someone watching.

Then he caught it—a whisper of blood on the air. Not Keira's. Male. Familiar. Feral. One of his own, carrying the scent of pain and warning like a flag in the dark.

Finn bolted, paws pounding the earth with silent precision. He found Ewen sprawled behind a tangle of brush, his body limp but his pulse strong. A dart jutted from his neck, its shaft barely visible in the moonlight.

A message.

Finn leaned in and sniffed. The chemical trace hit his senses—non-lethal, a tranquilizer. Not designed to kill, just to incapacitate. Whoever had been here wasn't hunting. They were scouting, assessing, leaving a message without bloodshed—for now.

Finn shifted back as Donal emerged from the trees, his breathing hard but eyes sharp and alert.

Dropping to a crouch beside Ewen, Finn scanned his packmate's face, watching the shallow rise and fall of his chest. The tranquilizer had done its job—but only just. Rage coiled in his gut like a live wire, pulsing beneath his skin. Whoever had done this hadn't come to kill. They'd come to make a point.

"They didn't kill him," he said, low and cold. "They're watching. Measuring."

Donal scanned the trees. "Testing the perimeter. Looking for weaknesses."

Finn's expression turned grim. "And they're too fucking close. We reinforce every blind spot. Double shifts. No one goes out alone."

Donal gave a sharp nod, his expression grim, and strode off into the trees, already barking low commands into his comms as he disappeared into the dark.

Finn stared out into the woods for a long beat, something raw tightening in his chest. This wasn't just about defense. This was personal. A warning. He looked back toward the house, where Keira waited, unaware. Vulnerable.

He would not fail her.

He was halfway up the stairs when it hit—an electric charge that jolted straight through his chest like a sudden bolt of static.

His breath caught. Her scent had changed.

No longer soft and familiar—it was edged now, sharper, feral.

The hallway filled with it, thick and urgent, curling around him like smoke before a blaze.

He reached the upper landing and bolted down the hallway, heart hammering as he closed the distance to the primary suite. Whatever was happening, it was pulling at every feral instinct he had, and all that mattered was getting to her.

Finn burst into the bedroom just as Keira doubled over with a cry—more surprise than pain. Her skin glistened with sweat, hair stuck to her cheeks. Her fingers clawed at the sheets, her breath jagged and shallow.

"Keira!"

She didn't respond. Her eyes shimmered faintly, the pupils dilating until they were nearly black. Her body trembled, caught in something that looked like pain—but wasn't. It was more than that. It was instinct. Need. A raw, primal change taking hold.

"No, no, no... not like this," he whispered, dropping to his knees beside the bed. He cradled her shoulders, brushing damp hair from her face. Her skin radiated heat, her breathing a frantic rhythm.

"It's happening," she ground out. "Finn... I can't..."

"You're shifting," he said. "Something's accelerated it. Just hold on to me. Breathe through it. I've got you."

She arched suddenly, her whole body caught in a full-body spasm as mist erupted around her like a pulse of energy.

The room seemed to breathe with it—dense, electric, and charged.

Her outline shimmered, light and shadow folding in on themselves, as her body melted into something sleeker, leaner, more powerful.

"Fuck," he whispered, holding her steady as the transformation completed with breathtaking speed and eerie grace.

The transition had happened faster than Finn anticipated—startlingly so. One moment she'd been caught in a buildup of raw, restless energy, the next, her panther had surged forward, as if pulled by instinct and the scent of threat in the air.

Mist surged up around her, thick and charged with latent energy, as her form shimmered and blurred at the edges—less a transformation and more a seamless merging of flesh and instinct.

The air seemed to contract, drawn to her as though recognizing its own.

Her eyes burned gold, wild and alive, as the change took her—swift, complete, and undeniable.

Mist burst up from the floor like steam from a ruptured pipe, swirling dense and electric around her as her body arched in a final, shuddering spasm.

Her cry changed to a rasping growl, and then silence fell, thick and charged.

Where Keira had been moments before, a sleek black panther now crouched on the bed, her chest rising and falling in sharp, steady breaths.

She was smaller than him, built with a delicate, deadly grace, each line of her body fluid and precise.

Her coat gleamed like shadow poured in moonlight, and her golden eyes locked on his—not wild, not afraid, but burning with intelligence and resolve.

Power radiated from her in steady waves, fierce and undeniable.

She looked at him—no fear in her eyes, only challenge. A flicker of defiance lit her golden gaze, sharp as a blade drawn under moonlight.

His throat closed, a rush of heat flooding his chest. Pride surged, sharp and visceral, as he stared at her—the creature she had become. It was breathtaking, the raw beauty of it, the sheer rightness that thudded deep in his bones. She'd done it. Not just survived—she'd risen.

He rose with deliberate slowness, palms open in a silent gesture of respect and caution, his gaze never leaving hers as he gave her the space she needed to orient herself in her new form.

"You did it, love," he whispered. "You made it through."

She stepped off the bed with a fluid grace that knocked the breath from his lungs and brushed against him—a soft, tentative swipe of fur against his thigh.

Finn dropped to his knees and met her gaze. Now you really are mine."

She didn't speak—couldn't—but her eyes flared in answer.

And then, with one graceful leap, she launched herself through the open balcony doors, landing in a crouch below with feline precision. The wind stirred the grass where she landed, her muscles taut and fluid as she gathered herself and sprinted into the dark, swallowed by the waiting night.

He gave her a head start, a feral grin breaking across his face, chest still tight with awe.

The energy she left in her wake pulsed through him—wild, electric, familiar.

Pride warred with desire, and for a moment, he simply breathed it in—the sharp rush of adrenaline already coursing through his blood, the thrill of the chase alive in every beat of his heart.

Pride swelled in his chest, fierce and protective.

This was Keira—his mate—bold, wild, unbroken.

For a beat, he let himself feel it fully: the awe, the connection, the raw promise of what they were becoming together.

With a low growl, he surrendered to the wild inside him and surged forward.

Heat pulsed beneath his skin, his body caught in that breathless, suspended moment before instinct reclaimed him entirely.

Power built in his limbs as the shift overtook him —effortless, silent, a rush of sensation like diving into a darker, deeper current.

In the space of a heartbeat, man became beast.

Mist rolled in as his body answered the call.

Heat surged over his skin, muscles flexing as the world around him narrowed to pulse and instinct.

No pain, no tearing—just the seamless, breathtaking release of his other self.

One breath he was man, the next he was predator, sleek and black as the night.

With a growl that rumbled from his chest, he launched into the dark, paws barely

touching the railing as he bounded off the balcony and hit the ground before he chased the echo of her wild energy through the trees.

KEIRA

Keira surfaced slowly, her awareness returning in fragments that clicked into place one by one, each breath dragging her closer to herself beneath the looming sense of something vast, primal, and impossible to name.

Her body felt alien and electric, alive in a way that was both disorienting and intoxicating.

Emotion warred with sensation—relief tangled with fear, awe laced with a flicker of unease.

What had she become? What did it mean to belong to this world now, not just beside Finn but inside something primal and inescapable? She didn't know, but as she lay still in the dim morning hush, she wasn't ready to look away.

Cool sheets tangled around her legs. A pulse of warmth curled low in her belly, hazy and slow like the afterburn of a dream. The morning light was barely a suggestion at the edge of the curtains, but she was already awake. Too aware. Every sense humming just under the surface.

She didn't open her eyes right away—not out of fear, but because she needed a moment to reconcile the girl she'd been with the creature she was becoming.

Her body hummed with something wild and new, and her thoughts felt stretched between past and present, instinct and memory.

A breath caught in her throat, not from pain, but from the weight of everything that had changed in the space of a heartbeat.

Because the world felt different now. Or maybe, just she did.

The night before was a blur of heat, mist, and something wild that still lingered in her bones, pulsing like an echo she couldn't shake.

Her muscles tingled with the phantom echo of that leap—the rush of it, the wind tearing past her face, the jolt of pure freedom.

The intoxicating power still clung to her skin, even as her mind scrambled to catch up, chasing the reality her body had already embraced.

She stretched, testing her limbs. Everything felt sharper. Not just more sensitive—more hers. Strength lingered in her muscles, not brute force but something nimble, tightly wound, fierce. And beneath that, the memory of Finn's voice.

'You really are mine now.'

The words hadn't struck like a claim or a threat.

They settled over her like gravity—undeniable, inevitable, pulling her toward something she hadn't let herself name.

A truth that had always been there, waiting in the quiet, biding its time until she was ready to feel it all the way down to her bones.

She opened her eyes slowly, blinking against the soft light filtering through the curtains.

Finn sat across from the bed in a low chair, forearms resting on his thighs, his gaze steady—not watchful like a guard, but waiting, like a man who'd been holding his breath since the moment she leapt from the balcony and disappeared into the woods.

He looked like he hadn't slept. His hair was tousled, the top buttons of his shirt undone, sleeves rolled to his elbows. That familiar, dangerous calm still wrapped around him like armor—controlled, composed—but the edges had softened, just enough to reveal something raw beneath.

There was a stillness in him that unsettled her in the quietest way, a kind of quiet devotion that stripped him bare more than any words ever could. He wasn't here out of duty. He was here because there was nowhere else he'd ever let himself be.

"You stayed?" Her voice came out rough, dry. Raw in a way that had nothing to do with her throat.

He nodded. "I always will."

She blinked, thrown by the simplicity of it.

Finn rose slowly and crossed the room, each step fluid with predatory grace.

The control in his movements was absolute—measured, grounded.

Still very much the predator. But now, so was she.

That knowledge sparked between them, alive in the silence, a low hum of shared instinct that tasted like danger and belonging.

And damn if that didn't spark a fire low and molten, something reckless and challenging that curled in her chest and made her want to test him—test herself—just

to feel that heat blaze brighter.

He reached for a glass of water on the nightstand and held it out.

She took it, her fingers brushing his. "Am I supposed to feel different?"

His lips quirked. "You do feel different. You just don't realize it yet."

She drank, the water cool and grounding. Her body buzzed beneath the stillness, restless and waiting, but for what?

Finn sat on the edge of the bed beside her, his thigh brushing hers, the warmth of his body a furnace against her skin.

The nearness wasn't accidental—it was possessive, a silent claim wrapped in heat and tension that made the air between them feel heavier.

She could smell the salt of his skin, the faint spice of whatever soap he used, and beneath it, something darker, wilder.

Her pulse answered before her thoughts could catch up, a slow, insistent heat that sparked low between her legs and climbed steadily into her chest.

"There's more coming," he said quietly. "The instincts. The strength. The need."

She swallowed hard. "Need for what?"

His gaze burned into hers, unwavering. "Everything," he said, the word low and rough like gravel dragged through heat. It wasn't a demand—it was a confession, a promise, and a dare all in one. Her breath hitched as it settled between them, heavy with implication.

The word ignited something inside her, a flash-fire of heat that surged low in her belly and radiated outward, threading through her like molten silk—hot, decadent, and impossible to ignore.

Her cheeks flushed, but she held his gaze. "I'm not broken. I don't need fixing."

"No," he agreed, voice low. "But you were always meant to burn. Now you just know how."

Something in her chest cracked open at that—sharp and soft all at once.

She set the glass down with hands that trembled just enough to betray her composure.

Then she reached for him, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt, tugging until he leaned in, his breath brushing her cheek.

Her heart thudded against her ribs, not from fear, but from the ache of knowing she was about to fall—and wanting it anyway.

"Show me."

She offered him her submission with her eyes first—steady, intelligent, no flinching—but beneath it all, something trembled. Not fear. Not doubt. Just the raw ache of surrender brushing up against the last walls of pride she hadn't realized were still standing.

His hands were on her before the first breath could settle.

One anchored firmly at the back of her neck, thumb brushing the line of her jaw.

The other glided down her ribcage to her hip, then around to her lower back—a

deliberate caress that left her gasping.

He moved with purpose, not haste. With heat that smoldered, not scorched.

Each touch branded her—intimate, controlled, and unmistakably his.

"Say it," he whispered.

Her lips parted. "Yours."

He groaned low in his throat, the sound vibrating against her skin—a raw, primal sound that sent shivers down her spine.

Keira's breath caught, her body arching into his as if drawn by the gravity of that hunger.

Her heart pounded, the charged silence between them bursting with want, and in that moment, she felt utterly known—unraveled and remade in the space between restraint and surrender.

And then, like a dam breaking, restraint gave way to hunger. There was no more waiting.

Clothes disappeared between fevered kisses and roaming hands, landing in forgotten heaps at their feet.

Her skin buzzed, hypersensitive, as though every nerve had been rewired.

The overload—his scent like smoke and spice, the rasp of his stubble, the low growl vibrating in his chest—was a sensory storm crashing through her.

His body caged her against the mattress, heat and power pressing her down, not with force, but possession.

But it was the way he held her—palms reverent, arms unyielding—that unraveled her completely.

Like she wasn't just wanted, but claimed.

Like she was his gravity, his center. And God help her, she wanted to be.

He pushed her back into the mattress his grip firm yet reverent as he pinned her wrists high above her head.

His mouth moved with greedy precision—along her jaw, down her throat, over her breasts—each lick and bite a declaration, every caress marked by heat and command.

"Mine," he rasped against her skin, his breath hot and unrelenting.

"Smart girl. Beautiful. So fucking brave. "

His teeth grazed the sensitive curve beneath her breast, tongue chasing the sting with soothing heat.

One hand tightened around her wrists, the other sliding down her ribs to palm her hip, dragging her closer as his mouth mapped her like sacred ground.

The air between them thickened with tension—raw, electric, carnal.

She bowed beneath him, a whimper catching in her throat as his praise sank in, igniting every place his touch had yet to claim.

Her body arched, chasing the ghost of his touch, every nerve lit up like a fuse burning toward detonation.

The sheets rasped against her heated skin as her thighs pressed and shifted, slick with need.

Tension gathered low in her belly, a molten knot of urgency twisting tighter with every breath.

He hovered just beyond contact, watching her squirm with a dark, ravenous gleam in his eyes—silent, commanding, ruthless in his patience.

She whimpered, her breath catching in short, shallow bursts, the ache for him a fire under her skin.

Her voice cracked on a whispered plea, raw and aching—and only then did he move, unleashing the storm she'd begged for.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

He teased her with his mouth until she was shaking, every flick of his tongue deliberate, merciless.

He licked, sucked, and tormented her with precision—slow drags, sudden flicks, then maddening stillness that made her hips jerk and her breath sob out of her throat.

His fingers spread her thighs wider, anchoring her open as he feasted with cruel, clever hunger, every moan of hers chased by a deeper one from him.

Her nails scrabbled at the sheets, pleasure a relentless climb that made her toes curl and her vision blur.

Her spine arched as she writhed under his control, pleasure twisted so tight in her gut it burned, raw and aching, a fuse drawn taut and begging to ignite.

“Not yet,” he growled, voice like gravel edged with steel. His hands clamped her thighs apart, his thumbs digging in— not cruel, but absolute. “You come when I say. You’ll take every second of it, and you’ll thank me when I let you fall.”

She whimpered, her thighs trembling and fists clenched in the sheets, every muscle tight with the excruciating ecstasy of denied release.

Her breath hitched, eyes squeezing shut as the ache rippled through her—hot, insistent, and maddeningly incomplete.

The hunger built with nowhere to go, crackling inside her like a live wire waiting for the strike.

It shouldn't have turned her on more, but it did.

He dragged her to the edge again and again, mastery in every motion—pulling her back with a single word murmured like a spell, a possessive squeeze of his hand, the rough scrape of his stubble grazing her inner thigh, or the low, feral growl he let spill hot against her slick skin.

Her whole world funneled down to those ragged moments, his command the only anchor in a sea of ravenous pleasure.

And when he finally let her go, it shattered her—splintering through her like a lightning strike in the marrow, every nerve ending flaring raw and holy.

Her cry broke free, wild and wordless, the culmination of hunger and helplessness and surrender.

Her body convulsed with release, each pulse dragging her deeper into a dark, glittering edge of pleasure where thought dissolved, and only sensation remained—scorching, sacred, and his.

She came with a cry that echoed through the walls, her body locking around his as he surged into her, hard and deep. He didn't let her catch her breath, taking her through wave after wave, his rhythm brutal and perfect.

After, he framed her face in his palms, the pads of his thumbs stroking her cheekbones with a reverence that steadied the rawness still pulsing in the space between them.

His breath came hard and uneven, chest heaving with restrained intensity.

Eyes locked on hers, burning and unguarded.

"You with me?" he asked, voice hoarse but commanding, threaded with the authority of a man who took what was his—and the tenderness of one who never forgot the cost of that claim.

She nodded, her limbs still trembling, her breath shallow. Words stuck somewhere behind the swell of everything he'd just undone in her. Too wrung out to speak, but grounded. Aware. Utterly, irrevocably present.

He kissed her forehead—slow and deliberate, a benediction. His lips trailed down to her cheek, lingering with a soft scrape of stubble that made her shiver. Then lower still, claiming her mouth in a kiss that was all heat and possession, a deep, unhurried demand that curled through her like smoke.

Then, with deliberate slowness that sent a ripple of heat down her spine, he reached into the drawer beside the bed, the quiet rasp of wood sliding against wood heightening the charged silence between them and felt loud in the quiet, a sensual promise wrapped in anticipation.

Her breath hitched, the muscles in her belly tightening as the air thickened with unspoken need.

Her heart kicked. "What're you doing?"

He pulled out a collar made of white diamonds strung together, each one catching the light like fire. They moved like a serpent, fluid and hypnotic. From the center, an emerald trinity knot hung—a symbol of unity, eternity, and something far more ancient than words.

He didn't speak. Just waited.

Keira stared at it. And then slowly, deliberately, she nodded.

He fastened it around her throat with a reverence that bordered on worship, each movement slow and deliberate as he locked it in place.

The white diamonds draped like liquid fire over her skin, the emerald trinity knot settling in the hollow of her throat with weight and promise.

His fingers lingered against her pulse, warm and steady, grounding her as his gaze held hers—unchanging, unrelenting, and utterly hers.

When it was done, she exhaled. Not from fear. From release.

He kissed her again, softer this time, and murmured, "I love you; now we begin... again."

Keira nodded with tears in her eyes. "I love you too... I always did."

Later, after she'd showered and dressed in one of his shirts, he led her out to the terrace. The air kissed her skin with cool clarity, the scent of pine and sea salt sharper, richer—like the world had slipped into high-definition. Every color seemed bolder, every sound etched in crystal.

The world smelled different. Brighter. Deeper.

Every sound cracked like lightning.

"First lesson?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this where I learn to fight?"

"No," he said, stepping behind her, hands settling on her hips. "This is where you learn to survive."

She tilted her head back. "I'm listening."

"Your instincts will mislead you at first. Sounds will crash in, scents will stretch for miles, and every shift in the wind will feel urgent. Breathe through it. Filter the chaos. Trust what sharpens your focus—not what scatters it."

She absorbed that, eyes scanning the trees.

"And what if I don't want to fight?"

His grip tightened. "Then don't. But you'll know how. That's the difference."

She leaned into him, breathing in the grounding weight of his touch, the tether of their bond alive and pulsing like a second heartbeat.

He kissed the back of her neck. "You choose what kind of panther you are. That's your right. No one else's."

Keira closed her eyes. She didn't have all the answers. But she had this—him, herself, and a new truth humming through her veins like an ancient melody. It wasn't loud or obvious, but steady, undeniable—a rhythm her bones recognized, a call that had always been waiting just beneath her awareness.

He collared her with his hands and his mouth and his will?—

—and in the pause before breath returned, Keira let him. Body bowed, heart bared, she surrendered not out of weakness, but fierce, trembling choice.

FINN

The night still echoed with the heat of her surrender, the memory etched into every nerve of his skin.

Finn hadn't slept. He'd stood at the bedroom window for hours after Keira had slipped into sleep, the soft rise and fall of her breath the only thing anchoring him as he stared into the mist blanketing the estate.

The fog rolled in thick off the water, swallowing the moonlight, curling like ghostly fingers across the grounds. He watched it breathe and shift, silent and heavy, waiting for the dark to speak back—or strike.

Eventually, the tension coursing through his blood refused to be still.

He moved quietly through the house, every creak of the old floorboards speaking to the unease rising in his chest. Downstairs, the quiet was unnerving—the kind of silence that hunted.

He poured a glass of water he didn't drink, eyes drawn again to the mist creeping against the edges of the estate.

Something out there didn't belong. And it had finally come close enough to matter.

The ocean hit him first—brine and minerals, the sharp tang of wet stone biting at his nose.

Beneath the salt and rock, something darker slithered in.

Not just different—wrong. A shadow of a scent, acrid and foreign, curled in the back of his throat—threaded with engine oil and cold metal, laced with something synthetic and sterile.

It didn't move with the wind—it sliced through it. The mist seemed to carry it deliberately, like a hand-delivered message. It sank into his skin like ice water, setting every nerve on edge, a whisper of threat he felt more than understood. It didn't belong.

And it didn't pretend to. And that was what made it dangerous.

Finn stood at the bluff's edge, muscles taut, every sense flaring with tension and the metallic taste of a storm about to break.

His breath came slow, measured, each inhale a silent assessment.

His eyes locked on the shadows slipping through the dunes, shapes too purposeful to be wind or wildlife.

The mist crept like smoke through the trees, thickening in unnatural pockets.

The last rays of the moon bruised the horizon, turning the estate silver at the edges and smearing the landscape with a sense of impending violence.

His beast stirred—not from rage, but from the taut, electric hum of readiness.

Every nerve vibrated with tension, honed to a lethal edge.

Instinct snapped into place, cold and exact.

His scouts were late. That was never just an inconvenience—it was an omen.

The kind of silence hanging over the estate wasn't stillness.

It was a breath held too long, the charged pause before all hell broke loose.

And tonight, it settled like iron across his shoulders, heavy with expectation.

Footsteps approached—measured, familiar. The cadence was unmistakable, firm and unhurried. Ewen's presence, grounded and sure, cut through the charged stillness like an anchor dropped in stormy seas, the tension in Finn's body easing just a fraction as he turned toward the sound.

"Donal just checked in. The scouts are back. Two are banged up, but nothing serious. They ran into something—someone."

Finn turned, jaw flexing, tension tightening across his shoulders. "Where exactly?"

"Southern ridge. Coastal side. Found boot prints, a gear cache. Whoever it was knew the land."

Finn's eyes narrowed. "And knew our patrol schedule. That wasn't an accident."

Ewen gave a clipped nod. "Orders?"

"I'm going out. Prep the perimeter. Double the night watch. Arm the eastern trail sensors. If they came once, they'll come again."

Ewen didn't hesitate. "Aye."

Stripping was precise, almost reverent—boots, shirt, trousers, each movement

deliberate.

The night air met his skin with a chill that raised goosebumps and stirred something deeper.

His heart gave a single, thunderous beat.

Then silence, thick and electric. The mist swirled tighter, curling around him like silk drawn through static.

Power gathered in the hush, pressing close.

In a breathless instant, his body blurred, shimmered—and reformed.

Where Finn had stood, a black panther now prowled forward, sleek and soundless, as if he'd always belonged to the dark.

He moved low and silent, paws eating the ground with fluid, predatory grace.

Each stride was a calculated whisper against the earth, strength wrapped in silence.

The forest exhaled, shadows lengthened and the air was thick with the weight of the night.

Leaves rustled above like old secrets. His nostrils flared, tasting the dark.

Sap. Squirrel. Ewen's old trail. Then—everything snapped sideways.

A break in the pattern. The scent twisted—wrong and unsettling.

Male. Sharp. Tainted by the bitter stench of brake fluid and cold metal, the tang of

sweat-laced adrenaline, and the artificial sting of synthetic fibers clinging to engine grease.

It wormed through the underbrush like a parasite, greasy and invasive.

It sliced through the known world like wire through muscle—alien, yes, but worse than that. It reeked of intent.

His ears flattened, the weight of the scent burning through his sinuses. Breath low and steady, he pressed forward, one paw after another, instincts cutting like knives through the quiet. He followed it—silent, lethal, a shadow on the hunt.

Tracks veered west, hugging the tree line like a second spine.

The intruder had avoided the cameras with precision, sticking to blind spots Finn had mapped years ago—but they'd slipped.

A spent casing glinted from the moss near an uprooted pine, half-buried but not hidden.

A rookie mistake. Or worse, bait laid with intention. A signal.

Not just sloppy. Deliberate.

Finn's chest tightened. Whoever left this had wanted him to find it. It wasn't an oversight—it was a message. And he'd received it, loud and clear.

Further south, buried beneath layers of damp leaves and moss-slick stone, Finn uncovered the gear cache nestled in the crook of a collapsed tree root.

A waterproof bag, military-grade and sealed tight, lay partially concealed by debris.

He eased it open with a paw, claws retracting as muscle reshaped and settled.

Inside: topo maps marked with scouting routes, a burner phone with encrypted software still warm from recent use, protein bars in vacuum-sealed wrap—and a knife.

Not just any knife. The handle bore the Lynch crest etched into darkened steel—sleek, deliberate, and damning. Not Cathal's blade—Finn knew the curve and weight of that one—but unmistakably crafted for someone in his inner circle. Blood-tied or bonded. Trusted. Dangerous.

Too fucking close.

The hairs along his neck lifted. This wasn't a scouting slip. It was a message. A warning. A test.

A low growl rumbled from his chest.

His mind flicked to fire, to blood, to the massacre at Con's abbey above Galway—when everything changed, and Con moved their people to the island off the Irish coast. And then Siobhan Lynch had followed them there to try to exact revenge.

Keira's father—one of the Lynch brothers and Cathal's blood kin—had been shot on the beach alongside Siobhan after she'd pulled a weapon on Con's mate, Katie.

Con hadn't hesitated. Siobhan went down first, and when her father lunged toward her weapon, Con's second shot ended it. The sand drank their blood, and the sea breeze carried away the echoes of their final, fatal mistake.

They'd come for Katie—Con's mate. They'd meant to end her. Instead, they'd ended themselves. The justice Con meted out had been cold, precise, and absolute. There

had been no room for negotiation. No room for doubt.

Finn had stood beside Con, breath shallow, rage singing through every nerve. That day, Con hadn't been just a leader—he'd been the storm. Silent, devastating, and final.

It was the moment Finn had shed the last of his hesitation. The last of his youth. It wasn't loyalty alone that had bound him to Con from that day—it was conviction, ironclad and unshakable.

Con fought not for power, but to protect what could not protect itself. And Finn had vowed, that day, to be the same.

Finn crouched by the cache, tail twitching, muscles drawn taut with instinct.

The scent curled in his nose—sharp, oily, edged with sweat and static.

Fresh. No more than four hours old. Whoever had been here wasn't just scouting.

They'd lingered, confident enough to leave a signature, cocky enough to think they wouldn't be tracked.

Cathal wasn't just posturing—he was testing, hunting.

He circled the estate like a predator tracing the scent of vulnerability, searching for a break in the defenses.

This wasn't random. It was surgical. Designed to scatter Finn's focus, to create distance between him and Keira.

To see what line he would cross—and which he would not.

And if Finn hadn't picked up the trail, it might've worked.

Finn turned, every muscle pulled tight like drawn wire, his body alive with barely restrained force. In the span of a breath, he launched into motion—swift, precise, and deadly—like a predator who'd waited just long enough to strike.

Sand exploded beneath his paws, a plume of grit trailing in his wake as he surged across the dunes.

The wind howled past, raking his fur, carrying with it the sharp tang of the ocean and the faintest echo of something fouler.

Trees streaked by in a blur, branches grasping like skeletal fingers.

Overhead, the moon rose sharp and high, not a blade now—but a beacon, silver and unrelenting, as if bearing witness to the hunt already in motion.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

He shifted just inside the tree line, the soft swirl of mist brushing against his bare skin like breath from the earth itself. Naked and alert, he stepped onto the back lawn, the cool air wrapping around him. Every nerve sparked with warning, tuned to the pulse of something near—something wrong.

And there she was. Keira stood barefoot in the grass, eyes locked on him like she'd been waiting—not with fear or surprise, but with something deeper, ancient.

A primal awareness that mirrored his own, wild and unblinking.

Her posture was relaxed but alert, bare toes curling in the cool blades, like the earth itself had whispered his arrival.

Her pulse quickened, steady and strong in the space between them, not loud, not frantic—just steady, tethered to something older than words. There was no need to speak. Not yet. Not with the tension crackling between them like a live wire waiting for a spark.

"You felt me coming," he said, striding up to her.

She nodded slowly, the wind stirring her hair. "Like I could taste your breath on the wind." Her voice was soft, tinged with awe—and something else, something that hummed low in her blood. It wasn't fear. It was recognition.

He touched her chin, searching her face, watching the subtle flicker in her eyes that betrayed everything she was trying to process.

Her senses were already adapting—too fast, almost unnaturally so.

He could feel the ripple of energy coming off her in waves: tightly wound control, new strength pressing beneath her skin, and an awareness that hadn't been there before.

Power hummed through her, restrained only by instinct and sheer will.

"You need to get inside."

"Don't tell me to hide. I can feel things now. Sense things."

He didn't argue. Not tonight. He simply reached for her hand and squeezed once—solid and silent—before turning away.

His eyes swept the perimeter again, instinct on a knife's edge, the world outside humming with tension.

There was no room for comfort. Not with danger closing in and the scent of war still lingering in the air.

Inside, Donal waited with a burner phone in hand and a storm in his eyes. "This came encrypted. Triple-layered. Just cracked it," he said, his voice tight with restrained urgency. Finn's jaw tightened. Messages like this didn't come casually. Not with triple encryption. Not now.

Finn took the phone, scrolling. The message was short, brutal.

The attack on Con's island fortress failed. Con and the rest of the O'Neills live. Unless you get Con to yield control of the syndicate, she dies. This is your only warning. If you keep pushing, retribution will be swift and brutal.

Finn stared at the screen, his jaw tightening, his fingers curling around the device. The air thickened with meaning.

Keira stepped close, eyes scanning. "He means me."

"Cathal," Finn said flatly.

Donal nodded. "Confirmed via the relay. Origin point pings from a hidden network node near Galway. Cathal's just burned the bridge behind him."

Keira's spine straightened, her voice laced with disbelief and heat. "What does he think? That he can use me like a bargaining chip? Like I'm some pawn he can slide across a board and trade for power?"

"He thinks my loyalty and love for Con are greater than my loyalty to you," Finn said.

Keira crossed her arms. "The two aren't mutually exclusive."

"No," Finn growled. "We end this. But not by putting you in his crosshairs."

"I'm already in them, Finn. You just said it. You think staying in this house is going to protect me?"

"No. I think I am."

Their eyes locked.

Finn took her hand, guiding it to the center of his chest, where his heart beat steady and fierce beneath her palm. "This is yours to protect as much as mine to give," he said, voice low and lethal. "And I swear, nothing will take you from me."

His beast threatened to surge forward again—it was ready, watching, waiting. The primal drumbeat of protection hammered in his blood, demanding action, the air around him vibrating with the same electricity he felt threading through his chest. Something was coming. And it wasn't going to wait.

He could feel the pulse of the pack around them—an invisible tether alive with energy, vibrating just beneath the surface.

Old loyalties twisted with new uncertainties.

Rising threats sharpened the air like a blade drawn slow.

The tremor of fate wasn't distant anymore.

It beat like a second heart inside his chest, urgent and undeniable.

Finn crossed back to her, brushing hair from her face. Her eyes flashed—not with fear, but with fight. With the wild clarity of someone who'd seen her own blood on the wind and decided it didn't mean she had to bleed again.

She was still his to protect—but not to cage.

His thoughts raced as they moved toward the study. Donal was already patching lines, Ewen coordinating scout rotations. The entire estate had gone from guarded calm to military readiness. Every hall was alert. Every man keyed up.

The attack on the O'Neill compound had failed. Cathal's play had been bold, but it had cost him more than he knew. He'd exposed his desperation. And worse, his plan.

Finn would teach her to stand. He would teach her to strike. And when the next move came, they'd make it together. Outside, the wind howled. But inside, the fire burned

hotter.

Keira was no longer a bystander. She was the match—and Cathal had no idea how close he was to burning.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

KEIRA

Keira stood at the edge of the bluff, the wind off the Atlantic fierce and wild, tangling her hair and stinging her eyes.

The sea stretched endless and sharp beneath the gray sky, a living thing with moods and secrets, and it mirrored everything she felt.

All the weight. The ache. The breathless tension still tightening in her chest.

Below, the estate buzzed with restless energy—men checking sensor lines, updating satellite feeds, rotating guard shifts with military precision.

The faint scent of something electric lingered on the wind, sharp and unsettling.

Unease settled over her like a second skin, each gust threading through her nerves, setting them on edge, as if the air itself waited for a spark to ignite the storm.

The threat hadn't come yet, but it was coming.

She felt it. The calm wasn't calm at all—it was a breath held too long, a silence too sharp.

It clawed at her nerves, scraped the edges of her thoughts.

Everything was poised on a razor's edge, and she stood at the precipice, waiting for the storm to break.

And Finn... Finn was a storm dressed in quiet—power wrapped in stillness, danger laced in restraint.

That same calm rage that had once made her bolt for the safety of distance now rooted her in place.

Not because it frightened her. Because it made her feel seen.

Cherished. Safe in the fiercest way possible.

And for the first time, she didn't want to run from the things that frightened her, she wanted to burn them down.

"You planning on jumping or just need the altitude to plan your next sass assault?" Finn's voice slid behind her, deep and dry.

She turned. He stood barefoot and shirtless, black tactical pants riding low on his hips, each movement laced with latent power.

Scars mapped his chest, the kind that told stories no one lived to repeat.

The light carved shadows along his muscles, but it was the look in his eyes—haunted, unrelenting—that stole her breath.

He wore the weight of too many wars, not just on his shoulders, but in the quiet hardness of his jaw, the stillness of his stance, the tension barely leashed beneath his skin.

"I was thinking about flying." She arched an eyebrow. "But apparently, you need wings for that. I've got claws instead."

He came up beside her, gaze sweeping the horizon. "You've got more than claws, sweetheart. You've got instincts. Teeth. Fire. And me."

Her smile twisted. "Just a wee bit possessive, aren't you?"

He grunted. "Aye. And you're still here. So either you like it, or you're just as broken as I am."

She nudged him with her shoulder. "You're not broken, Finn. You're forged. There's a difference."

His hand caught her chin, gentle but firm. "And you... you were the one thing I didn't think I deserved. Still don't. But I'll bleed before I give you up."

Keira's throat tightened. God, he meant it. Every brutal, protective, infuriating word. It pressed against the walls of her heart, fierce and unflinching, shaking loose something she hadn't dared to name—hope.

"So what now? We wait for Cathal to make the next move?"

"No," Finn said. "We go to him."

Her stomach dropped. "You're kidding."

He looked down at her, deadly calm. "Cathal wants to use you to leverage me. He thinks threatening you weakens me. It doesn't. It sharpens me. Makes me lethal. I won't sit and wait for his trap to spring."

She swallowed. "And if he comes after us before that?"

"Then we make it the last mistake he ever makes."

The boat knifed through the black water just after midnight, silent as a threat. Its matte hull sliced the waves like a blade, not built for comfort—built to strike. The air reeked of salt and violence.

Keira stood near the prow, the cold wind slashing across her face, but she didn't flinch.

Behind her, the crew Finn had handpicked moved like wolves in a kill zone.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to. Each one was a weapon sharpened by war and loyalty—dead-eyed, muscle-tight killers who answered to one voice.

Finn's.

"You stay close," he said, not looking at her. His voice cut through the wind like a command wrapped in threat. "If things go sideways, you don't think. You run. I'll find you."

Keira's jaw clenched. "I'm not here to run."

He turned then, slowly, eyes like molten gold in the dark. "You're here because I said you could be."

Her pulse thumped hard in her neck. He took her hand, rough and warm, anchoring her without gentleness.

They hit land an hour later—dark cliffs rising like jagged sentinels from the crashing waves, black and sheer against the churning gray sea.

No welcome, no mercy. Just unforgiving stone, slick with salt spray and silent threat.

The wind howled through crevices like a warning whispered through clenched teeth, and every shadow seemed to twitch with hidden eyes.

The place reeked of ambush—of blood old and waiting to be spilled again.

Finn shifted first.

No warning. No pause. One second, a man. The next, a black panther, sleek and lethal, melting into the rocks like shadowed vengeance. Keira followed—then the mist hit her.

It moved like smoke with teeth, sliding over her skin in sinuous coils.

Her breath caught mid-inhale, chest frozen as the air thickened around her.

There was no scream—just the lurch of the world shifting beneath her, as if gravity itself tilted sideways.

She plunged, fast and weightless, down into a silence so dense it pulsed.

And in that dark quiet, something ancient stirred, stretching awake inside her like a memory clawing back to life.

No cracking bones. No torn flesh. Just a snap of instinct and then?—

She was the panther. Low to the ground. Eyes burning. Every nerve alive and sparking with wild power.

She blinked, and there he was. Finn, waiting. Still. Watching. Dominant.

He dipped his head once. Permission.

She growled low in her throat. Submission—but not surrender.

Then they ran—silent and swift, muscle and instinct moving as one.

Two predators unleashed, hunger and vengeance boiling beneath their skins.

Blood stained their memories, not their muzzles, but their intent was lethal.

They streaked across the rocks and mist, black shapes against silver night, each breath syncing, each stride feeding the other.

They didn't need to speak. They didn't need to look back.

They were the storm now—and they were hunting.

The confrontation with Cathal detonated like a fault line buckling beneath their feet—sudden, violent, and final. The air shattered around them, tension ripping through the space like a thunderclap, every muscle primed, every instinct honed to a blade's edge.

He hadn't seen it coming—none of them had. Not the guards at the perimeter. Not the lookouts on the ridge. And definitely not Cathal himself, tucked deep inside his compound like a rot hiding deep inside the stone.

They struck just before dawn. Fast. Precise. Lethal.

Keira moved with Finn, glued to his side like a shadow tethered to a storm.

Her beast pressed against the inside of her skin, restless, teeth bared in silence.

She didn't shift—yet—but every breath she took came laced with the wild.

Her heartbeat matched his, synced to the rhythm of a hunt with no room for hesitation.

They were a force—cold, coordinated, and utterly merciless.

Finn's crew moved like wraiths through the compound, each motion honed to lethal perfection.

Blades flashed in silence, guns coughed their deadly whispers, and blood spilled cleanly, without fanfare.

No shouting. No chaos. Just the brutal, rhythmic cadence of trained predators dismantling an empire one heartbeat at a time.

Keira watched one of Cathal's lieutenants stumble into the open, blood pouring from his mouth, eyes bulging in terror.

His voice caught in a strangled gurgle as he raised a hand in a futile plea for help.

Before the sound could escape, a blade flashed—fast, clean, silent—and sliced through the space between them.

It lodged deep in the man's chest. He buckled, the life draining from his eyes before his knees hit the ground.

The thud of his body hitting the dirt was the only sound that followed.

Finn didn't pause.

He moved with an inevitable kind of determination, a silent reckoning forged in blood and control, carving through the compound with lethal calm.

With each step, the walls seemed to contract, the shadows recoiling from his path.

And when they reached the inner chamber—where Cathal stood, spine pressed to cold steel, wrapped in shadow and false bravado—the very air thickened, weighted with the gravity of the moment, as if the world itself braced for the violence to come.

Cathal reached for a weapon, his hand jerking toward the holster at his side.

Finn didn't hesitate. With a single stride forward, he closed the distance and kicked the pistol hard, sending it skittering across the stone floor with a metallic clatter.

The weapon bounced into the shadows, useless.

Finn kept moving, predator-smooth, each step a warning that the final reckoning had arrived.

Keira felt it like a ripple in her blood. Not of body, but of command. Finn was no longer just the hunter, he had become the executioner.

“No clever lines today?” Cathal spat blood onto the floor, grinning through the break in his lip. “Thought you liked the sound of your own?—”

Finn moved, swift as a lash. One brutal step forward and his open palm cracked across Cathal's face with bone-breaking force.

The blow sent the man sprawling backward, slamming into the stone wall hard enough to rattle the shelves.

He slid down in a heap, a strangled gasp escaping as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Keira didn't move. She didn't have to. Finn's voice cut through the tension like a blade wrapped in velvet—low, deadly calm, but sharp enough to bleed the silence.

“You don't touch her. You don't breathe near her. You don't think about her. Ever again.” He crouched to Cathal's eye level. “Or I'll take your throat and feed it to the tide.”

Silence. The silence after Finn's promise didn't last. Cathal, cornered and bloodied, still had pride left in him—and pride made fools of men on the edge of death. He lunged. Desperate, reckless, teeth bared like an animal too stupid to die quietly.

Keira moved to intercept, but Finn was faster.

Finn's hand locked around Cathal's throat with lethal precision and slammed him back into the wall hard enough to send cracks spiderwebbing across the wall.

The impact echoed like a rifle shot, shaking the dust from the rafters.

Cathal gagged, his fingers clawing helplessly at Finn's iron grip, feet kicking off the floor as he struggled for air.

His face darkened, veins bulging, the frantic rasp of breath barely audible over the pounding blood in Keira's ears.

The power radiating from Finn was volcanic—controlled, but only just. The room stank of sweat, terror, and the copper bite of blood already spilled.

“You had your warning,” Finn said, voice low and razor-sharp. “You didn't heed it; so now, you die.”

“Finn...” Keira started, but the word barely left her mouth before Finn shifted.

Fully. All the way. His jaw widened. His teeth lengthened. His voice dropped to something other.

Keira froze, blood turning electric. She'd seen him shift before. Fought beside him. But this—this was different. This was personal.

Finn's claws punched through Cathal's skin like obsidian daggers. He didn't hesitate.

He drove them straight into Cathal's gut—up and under.

A wet, sucking noise filled the room. Cathal's body seized, eyes blown wide with the realization that this was real, that there was no bargaining, no crawling away from this moment.

The maelstrom of color, thunder, lightning and violence swirled up around Finn as he became man once more. "You thought you could threaten her and walk away?" Finn's voice dropped lower. "You think this is a story where you crawl off into the dark and come back for revenge?"

Cathal gurgled. Blood foamed at his lips. His fingers twitched uselessly against Finn's arm.

"No," Finn whispered. "This is where it ends."

With flesh torn and bones broken, Cathal's body dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, blood soaking the floor beneath him in a widening pool.

For a second, the world stopped.

Keira stared. Not out of shock—but because something deep inside her—the beast, the woman, both—approved. It was justice, raw and red. Not clean. Not fair. But true.

Finn stood over the body, breath steady.

Keira walked to him, close enough to feel the heat radiating off his skin.

He looked at her, not asking for forgiveness. Not needing it.

She nodded once, then they shifted and together they turned and left the ruin behind them.

Days passed. The threat was over, but the world hadn't gone still. It had only changed into something new.

Keira stood at the edge of the estate's southern bluff again, now wearing one of Finn's shirts, the collar still faintly scented with his skin and smoke.

Behind her, the house was quieter. The guards were still there, but the tension had less teeth.

Finn found her there. He came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist.

"You still dreaming about flying?"

She leaned back into his chest. "No."

He paused. "No?"

She smiled. "I already have everything I need to run."

Finn's chuckle was low, rough. "Then let's run."

She turned in his arms. "Now?"

He nodded. "Now."

They didn't undress. Didn't wait.

The mist came like breath. Familiar. Warm. Laced with the wild.

She shifted first this time. The mist wrapped around her, silk-soft and alive, threading through her limbs as her breath caught.

Then came the rush—weightlessness, heat, a deep pull from within.

Her body rippled with memory, not pain, as instinct overtook thought.

When it cleared, her panther stood sleek and black, the moonlight catching the gleam of her gold eyes.

A whisper of power lingered in her paws, and she exhaled a silent growl that tasted like freedom.

Finn followed.

And together, they ran into the dark—two shadows, two predators, two souls finally unbroken.

Together.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

Cape Cod, Massachusetts

A week later, Finn's estate breathed easier. The threat from Cathal and his people had been neutralized. Keira sat in the solarium, sipping strong tea as the sunrise kissed the horizon.

Finn walked in, shirtless, wearing only worn jeans and a predatory grin.

"You planning to spend the whole morning ignoring me, love?"

She raised a brow. "You planning on giving me a reason not to?"

He crossed to her and plucked the cup from her hands, set it aside, and tugged her into his lap.

"Thought I gave you plenty of that last night."

She bit her lip. "You might need to give me a few lessons."

"God, I love your mouth."

She leaned in. "Then use it wisely."

He kissed her slow, deep, with the kind of promise that didn't need words.

Outside, the wind swept through the trees like a hymn. Safe. Strong. Home.

She had found her place. Her mate. Her strength.

And nothing would ever take it from her again.