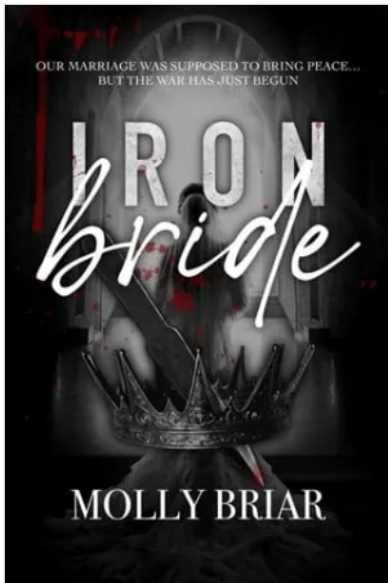




Iron Bride (Will of Iron)

Author: *Molly Briar*

Category: Romance

Description: There are no snakes in Ireland because they're all here, in New York.

Gia Durante's grandfather had owned the Mafia underground until he was killed before her eyes when she was only two years old. The man who wielded the knife that put her family on its knees was none other than her future father-in-law, Eoghan Green.

Her marriage was arranged to make peace between rival Mafia families, but the war has just begun.

After all, vendetta is an Italian word.

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Gia

Boston, Massachusetts

Blood. So much fucking blood.

The blade moved with each pulse. The edge cut deeper into my flesh with every heartbeat.

A serrated knife. How fucking great.

The red brick at my back scratched me through my winter coat as the snow fluttered down from above.

Bleeding and cold. Exactly how I thought I would go.

“Durante whore!” was all I’d heard before pain struck between my ribs.

I was walking home from my last class of the semester. I was elated and careless. I trusted that after all these years of hiding in academia, no one would come after me.

Complacency. That was my downfall.

“You’re a traitor to Morelli!”

Over and over again. “Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! ”

I ran as fast as I could.

As fast as my burning lungs would let me.

Fuck Boston. Fuck Massachusetts. Fuck, fuck, fuck !

Do I leave the blade in? Do I take it out? Cazzo!

The blood was warm on my cold, trembling hands. Just as it had been over twenty years ago, when I screamed over my grandfather's corpse. His hot blood drenched my little, frozen fingers as the snow cascaded from above.

It was just so fitting. My first memory was of my nonno 's slit throat as he took his last breath.

My father and grandfather died the same way—by an Irishman's blade. I knew that I would meet my end the same way. It was the curse of my bloodline. The only question was... when?

Not today.

I grabbed the handle of the knife. I screamed as I pulled it from its perch and threw it with what little strength I had left. It clattered on the concrete ground as I placed my trembling hands over the wound.

I would not die until I took my enemies with me.

“Gia! Gia!”

I heard the voice cry out from the darkness. The voice of a friend. He was silhouetted in shadow as he blocked out the light. Still, even in the darkness, I knew it was him.

I was safe. He would save me.

“Marco? Marco! Help me.”

That was the last thing I said before the world turned black.

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Chapter one

Red and Green

Cillian

Four Days Later

“ R ed goes well with Green.” Randa’s crisp, pin-striped suit was as sharp as my own as we stood front and center, at the holiday altar of holly and berries.

She was remarking on my family name and the crimson decor that hung on every surface: red ribbons, red Christmas balls, and the red berries strung up above.

“Hmm,” I said, assessing the overdressed bishop who’d been carted in for the occasion. “A Christmas wedding. How nauseating.”

My fucking wedding day.

My parents had been planning this since I was two years old. Now that the appointed day had arrived, it felt oddly anti-climactic.

“Christ.” Randa lifted a single condescending brow. “We should change your name to Ebenezer Green.”

“Bah, humbug!” I said quietly as we both chuckled at the procession of gowns and suits that paraded before us as the witnesses to this farce.

Randa, or Miranda O'Malley, was the daughter of my father's favorite guard. Three years my junior, she was raised as family. Now, she was my right-hand man.

"Your mother is putting on a lovely event, Cillian," Randa chided. "The least you can do is show some appreciation, you overgrown brat."

Was she an unconventional choice for best man?

Yes. But she was my only trusted friend.

My brother, Riordan, tried to depose me at every turn.

My sisters were as disinterested as could be, and as for other "friends"—well, they weren't aware of this sham of an engagement.

One that was manufactured when we were still in diapers.

The people outside of the life weren't privy to how medieval we were in these echelons.

"Appreciation?" I stared out into the crowd, where Riordan schmoozed with the District Attorney. "Thank you, Mum, for forcing me to stick my cock in the ice queen."

I theatrically shuddered, and covered my nuts, as if they were shrinking from the cold.

"Gia's really not that bad." It was Randa's same old song and tune. "If you'd take the time to know her."

"She's as frigid as a Serbian winter." I was referring to the ice witch that was my

fiancée. “And you don’t know her. You just spy on her.”

That was Randa’s gift. She had a network of backstabbers and spies that was unmatched. An intelligence network that clandestinely kept us in control.

“Truly, I wonder if I should abdicate the throne, and pass it to little Rio,” I joked. “Let him take the arctic bitch.”

I’d never give it up. Not now. Because the twerp was second. Second place, second to me. He was the first loser, and nothing more. I would never let him lead. Ever!

“Do you know why your fiancée came back to New York so suddenly?” Randa tilted her head, as if this was an interesting puzzle that would help us pass the time.

I hadn’t thought about it. I spent a lot of time not thinking about Giovanna Eugenie Durante.

“I thought she was going to stay in Boston for a few more months.” Randa reached out and fidgeted with my pocket square, tugging at the corners where it had fallen limp.

“Is that right?” I faced Randa fully as we tilted our heads together in whispers.

“She packed up her apartment three months before her lease was up. As far as I can see, she hasn’t gone back to her mother’s house. I can’t track down where she’s been staying.” Randa clicked her tongue. “That’s not like her.”

My eyes flitted around the room, to the mix of Irish and Italian features that lingered, parted down the middle like they were the Red Sea.

The old war didn’t die when my father slit Eugenio Durante’s throat. It didn’t die

when his granddaughter and I were betrothed. It was still alive and well, judging by the polarization of our wedding guests.

“She’s very steady and disciplined.” Was Randa impressed? “Not impulsive in the least.”

‘You mean icy and frigid?’

“Potato, po-tah-toe.”

“Does anyone actually say po-tah-toe. I mean—”

The air left my lungs the instant she came into view. It was those crystal eyes that sparkled brighter than the diamond studs on her ears that did me in.

I hated my cold, treacherous bride with a passion—but those eyes did something to me. She had no business having such stunning windows into her perfidious soul.

It had been seven years since I’d seen her. It was at our ‘engagement party’ when we formally announced this travesty. I had placed the obnoxious ten carat diamond on her skinny hand.

She was a frizzy-haired, zit-covered thing.

Well, ugly ducklings, and swans and all that ...

She glided toward me, her arm linked with her weeping mum, Cosima Durante. The witch was dressed from head to toe in the black of mourning. Like she was attending her daughter’s funeral, instead of her wedding.

I could make the change in program if she wanted...

With their steps in time with the melancholy rendition of “In the Bleak Midwinter”, there was a thawing in my bride’s exterior. It was slight. But I had never seen it before. The closer she got the clearer it was. It was a single unshed tear that lined the lower lashes of her left eye.

Like the Madonna weeping.

“Doesn’t she look lovely?” Randa nudged me with her shoulder. “Your mouth is open, Cill.”

“If you say so,” I grumbled, shutting my lips.

Randa was right. But I would never admit it.

It didn’t matter how great the prize was if it wasn’t my choice.

I could never call off this joke of a wedding.

My parents would never allow it, since it kept the peace between us and the Mafia rebels who groused and moped underfoot, promising to overthrow their Irish masters.

My father should have crushed them all instead of granting leniency during the great war.

When Giovanna Durante stood before me, her mother kissed her cheek. The two gazed at each other as if she was about to set sail on a transport ship to Australia. A bit dramatic, if you ask me.

The bride raised her chin, clenched her jaw, and turned to me with great disdain. “Cillian.”

The tear in her eye disappeared, and she was the regal frigid flower once again. A marble statue, covered with icicles.

My name was a curse on her pretty lips. So why hadn't she called this wedding off?

My parents would have granted her that. They were protective of her. They loved her. They doted on her and spoiled her far more than their own children, and I didn't know why. Even my father looked at her with a level of gentleness he didn't have for his own spawn.

"You came," I whispered, as I took her hand in mine and bowed, pressing my lips to the back of her knuckles.

If we were in a medieval arrangement, then I would play the part.

She lifted an irritated brow.

"The Green family called." She stepped away from me for a moment, then quietly mumbled, "Like your dogs, the Durantes must obey."

I smiled, despite myself.

"I should place a collar on this pretty throat." I reached out and grazed the back of my index finger along her pretty pulse point.

Her skin flushed at my insult. She might be a marble bitch, but I did delight in her annoyance. It showed me that there was a beating heart somewhere under that cold exterior.

"It's been seven years, little Gia. You've been far away in Boston." I looped my arm around hers, tugging her closer to me. "I've missed you."

I said it to annoy her, and to punish myself.

How easily these words of lovers slipped from my mouth. How I desired them to be true.

“I hardly know what you’ve been up to out there in Harvard.” Which was bullshit. I had our Murphy cousins in Boston looking into her. I had weekly reports on her security, her grades, her habits...

But Randa had opened the door to new information—that my bride came home too quickly. What coup was my lovely Italian prisoner trying to plot?

I stared at the ice queen, who did everything to avoid my gaze. No matter, it meant I could observe her more freely.

Her gray eyes and her pale, snowy skin contrasted against her dark walnut hair.

Her stark white dress matched her skin perfectly, except for the slight pink on her cheeks.

I stared harder, looking at the blush beneath the layer of makeup.

It must be positively red beneath all the war paint.

Was she blushing? Maybe she was fevered.

How like a Durante to come to a wedding sick and contaminate us all. I didn’t think that the Mafia would resort to biological warfare, but the clever girl at my side would do anything to subvert my family.

I was surprised she didn’t run from me screaming, just to humiliate the Green family.

But she'd played her part. She was stiff and robotic, bordering on malicious compliance. But it was compliance, nonetheless.

The vows were unremarkable. I hadn't even brought my blade.

Why would I? Handfasting, and blood vows, were done for love. There was none of that here. We hadn't written our own vows but parroted what the bishop said, and let that be the end of it.

We didn't even hold hands as we walked down the aisle. Instead, she strode on, the bouquet of lilies in her fist facing down, like sad little funeral bells. She dumped it on a decorative end table before we walked into the reception hall.

"Quite a romantic, your bride," Randa teased with a smirk.

"Oh, shut up," I grumbled as I followed my wife to the grand staircase where the obligatory photos would be taken.

She and I stood at the bottom, her white, muslin, and crystal dress draped long beside her as we stood, side by side, with my family behind us, and her mother hovering like a devil on her shoulder.

"Mi perdoni ," her mother wept, holding my bride's face in her hands. " Mi perdoni, bella."

What the hell was she apologizing for?

I rolled my eyes, grabbing my wife around her waist.

"Least we can do is look the part," I muttered into my wife's ear. "Look at least a little pleased on your wedding day, Mrs. Green."

She practically snarled at me. It was adorable. Like a kitten showing its claws after I'd irritated it for too long.

“Smile,” I said with a wink, as I looked up to the camera that clicked and flashed its lights.

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Oh, she didn't smile. I was certain of it. I just didn't care.

I was finding this whole thing quite delightful.

As soon as we were done sucking in the parts that needed sucking in, standing like statues for the society paparazzi, Giovanna left my side and fast-walked into the grand reception hall.

"Be gentle with her." My mother came over and played with my lapels, smoothing my tie, which didn't need to be smoothed. "This is hard for them."

"You're too soft on the Durantes." I spoke to my mum, but I stared at my father over her shoulder. "They've been given too much leeway over the years."

In what fucking world did it make sense to kowtow to your enemy?

"She's a Green now, lad." My father, who made me in his image in every possible way, glared at me. "And under your protection."

Eoghan Green, once the most vicious man in New York City, had been softened by my mother. And this was the price.

This wedding made peace with the Durantes when he should have slaughtered them all—my bride included.

History teaches one lesson—that peace only comes with total war. Burn your enemies down, and when they are nothing but ash, bury them in salted earth so that they can

never re-emerge.

But my father was a romantic.

The Grand Kintyre had been my father's present to my mother. We stood on the ground Mum had lived in years ago, before he swept her up in their whirlwind romance. When the dilapidated building was for sale, my father bought it, and knocked it all down to build the Grand.

He placed it, and all its profits, in Mum's name so that only she could control it.

As an act of love, he gifted her a way out of their marriage. As her gift to him, she moved her entire family into its penthouses, and made it the center of every Green event. Every Christmas, holiday, birthday was spent in the Grand.

Her way of saying that what was hers, belonged to us all.

Who said romance was dead, eh?

Oh, right. Me.

"Go dance with her." My mother pushed my shoulders towards my bride who marched through the crowd of gossiping ingrates.

I groaned. She had gone right into the heart of the Grand, and gracefully stepped onto the hardwood dance floor where the waltzing had already begun.

No one made any pretenses that this wedding was anything more than an alliance, and that their presence here was simply proof that the deed was done. I was surprised there wasn't going to be a bedding ceremony to ensure the next generation of heirs.

Giovanna was so impeccably timed, that she didn't need to dodge a single swirling couple as they waltzed to Silver Bells.

In the middle of the floor, she turned around and looked at me, hands on her hips, tapping her high-heeled, silver shoe like an irritated, boreal angel.

I followed her, having to stumble and halt as couples came my way, but managed to get through unscathed.

"Dance?" She raised her arms, as if one was on a man's shoulder, and the other in their hand. All that was missing was the cutout of the chump who'd occupy that space. I was certain that's how she saw me. One Green brother, that could be easily replaced with another, were I to meet my untimely end.

"Aunt Kira instructed me to dance at least three with you tonight," she said, as I took the first step in the waltz, and she followed.

It always irked me that she called my parents Aunt Kira and Uncle Eoghan. It seemed mildly incestuous, even. A kink I most certainly did not have.

"Only three? They told me five," I remarked as I looked down my nose at her.

"I negotiated."

Of course, she did. I wasn't surprised that they had acquiesced.

"You must have withered them with that frosty glare."

She didn't respond. Much like she never responded to anything else.

The light sheen on her skin, a dewy glow, seemed to grow as we danced in silence.

One song ran into another. The intention was clear—for everyone to see that she and I were together and in love. Let the photographers and journalists snap away, to give this marriage the appearance of legitimacy.

As the third song started, she stumbled, but I caught her.

She whimpered as I pulled her in, until her front was flush against me. She was warm. Too warm.

“You’re pale.” I looked down at her porcelain skin. “And you look tired.”

Was she actually ill?

“Calling the bride tired and pale?” Her words came out choppy, as she pushed them out between gasping breaths. “Care to call me fat, too, and make it a trifecta?”

Her chest rose and fell in a frantic rhythm. The dress wasn’t fitted with a corset. We weren’t twirling in a reel or dancing a polka. We were slowly waltzing, for God’s sake.

So why was she struggling to breathe?

She wobbled on her feet. I tightened my arms around her waist, taking all of her weight. For a piece of marble, she was surprisingly pliant.

“Are you alright?”

She had always been pale, but now she was downright sallow. Her eyelids fluttered, as she slowly nodded.

“I’m fine,” she said in a barely-there whisper.

“You’re not fine.” I tightened my arm around her as I looked around. I called out, “Randa!”

“How dare you... call... her... ” She slipped, her knees buckling beneath her. “It’s our wedding.”

Was my darling fiancée jealous?

I didn’t think she was capable of such a thing. How delightful.

Randa was by my side in an instant. “What can I do?”

“Damnit, Gia,” I snarled when the ice queen melted like a snowman in summer, losing her footing completely. I barely had time to catch her.

I pulled her into my arms like the reluctant bride she was and ignored her mumbled protests.

“Get Maeve to go up to my penthouse, and have her bring a doctor.”

Randa nodded at me, her phone at her ear. Who knows where in this gargantuan hall my sister would be.

“One more dance, and I can...” Gia said, her eyes were half closed as her head lolled onto my shoulder. “I can... leave.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I quietly growled down at my darling, “Your night is over.”

The crowd around us had stopped dancing, and stared at us like we were a car crash on the side of the highway.

Riordan appeared beside me. “Is she alright?”

I never knew if my brother’s concern stemmed from affection, or from something else, like a concocted plan to thrust me from my position as heir. I’d care about that some other time, though.

“She’s not feeling well. Probably just all the stress,” I said, excusing us. “Come on, love, let’s get you home.”

“I’m fine,” Gia said, gasping for air in my arms.

I carried her off the dance floor, through the Grand, and took her to the private elevator behind the front desk. I ensured that no one followed us into the elevator car before I pressed the button to our home.

As I waited for the mirrored doors to open to my floor, I tightened my hold on her.

“What—and I can’t stress this enough—the fuck just happened to you?”

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Chapter two

No Snakes in Ireland

Gia

There are no snakes in Ireland because they all came to America.

They washed up right here, in New York City. Green snakes that killed my father and pumped their venom into my mother's heart, which poisoned me until I was as hard as petrified wood.

I would have been born Giovanna Morelli, had the green snakes of Ireland not slithered onto these shores.

I blinked my eyes open, as the unfamiliar scents tickled my nose. Far from the smell of winter berries and wool, I was surrounded by pine and other woodsy scented things. These were not from cheap grocery store candles. No, they were from expensive, cool diffusers that kept the scent subtle.

Far too rich for my taste. Sterile. Sophisticated. Lifeless.

The sheets were silk instead of flannel. Instead of the red brick of my apartment, there was drywall, painted a deep gray, or maybe even black. Expensive, moody dim lights accented the grim place.

My New York apartment bustled with the sound of foot traffic, bars, and the markets

below. But this room was absolutely silent.

Cold. Controlled. Just like him.

And yet, I felt the warmth of relief spread over my chest. My foolish, stupid, traitorous chest.

You're a traitor to Morelli!

No truer words were ever spoken.

I thought the Serpent Prince was a dream.

A dark angel who watched me from a black and gray armchair, hidden in the shadows.

An avenging angel of my sad, little girl fantasies.

The boy who I secretly hoped would look at me with warmth.

With the promise of happy endings as he led me from the darkness.

Before I could stop myself, I whispered, "Are you here to save me?"

And in a blink, the warmth was gone, as the weight of reality crashed down.

I was too old for things like hope. Or dreams. Or happy endings.

I was born in blood. I would die in blood. Just like my father and grandfather before me.

That was my curse.

He leaned forward, the lamplight casting shadows over his face. His lips peeled back into a menacing, predatory grin.

“Sorry to disappoint, Wife,” he growled as his black eyes bored into me, as molten as his touch. “What—and I cannot emphasize this enough—the fuck did you think you were doing?”

His voice and his Irish accent sent vibrations under my skin, tingling at the small, romantic place that I needed to kill if I was to have my revenge.

“I-I-I...” I had no idea what I was supposed to say. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You passed out in the middle of ‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas,’” he said with that sardonic bite to his Irish lilt. “Care to explain to me why my bride fainted in my arms, when I wasn’t doing anything particularly romantic?”

If he and romance met in a dark alley, he’d stab her and piss on her corpse.

“It was just a bad cold.” I pulled my legs up, my fingers searching for the edge of the blanket so I could get the fuck out of this prison of duvets.

“Is that right?” His expressionless face seemed to darken, even when he didn’t move a muscle.

“Yes.” My frantic searching turned into a panic. I was drowning in blankets.

I finally found the edge and pulled it off of me, exposing my naked legs.

What happened to my tights? My shoes? My dress?

My underwear? Fuck! Where were my...

I was in a huge t-shirt that drowned me down to mid-thigh. A gray Vasali University shirt.

“A cold?” Cillian tapped his finger on the arm rest, as he stared at me with his strange, obsidian eyes. The same ones as his father.

The last eyes my father, Giovanni Morelli, saw before his throat was slit by that iron blade. The iron, handleless blades of the Greens. That was their legacy, and their tradition.

The blades that served as their decoder rings, membership jackets, and secret passcodes. It also served as the marker for their most significant murders.

“Yes, a cold,” I said in frustration, as my feet touched the ground.

In a flash, he was on me, hand on my throat, his dark eyes a black fiery void of hatred.

“Do not lie to me, wife. ” His fury made me clench my thighs as his possessive hold on my throat tightened. My nipples pebbled and begged for his menacing touch. “I will take it as an insult. Now, lie down.”

His jaw was so tense, I saw the muscle pulsing at his molars.

His heated gaze was... intoxicating.

It shouldn't be. I was staring into the eyes of a murderer, but the electricity between us sent a jolt through me that I couldn't ignore. And I very much wanted to ignore it.

“Fuck you,” I choked out against his hand.

“I am not accustomed to repeating myself.” His voice was deceptively calm. “Lie down, or I will tie you down.”

I wanted to fight him. I wanted to defy him. But dizziness overtook me.

He let me go, and I gasped in the air I didn’t know I needed. Not when his hand had beckoned my heart to beat.

Of course, he’d own me. Uncle Eoghan must have laid an Irish curse on me when he tied us together.

Cillian handed me a glass of water from the nightstand and opened a yellow prescription bottle, dumping two pills into his rough palm.

“Tell me, my little Gia.” Even the way he said my name was full of arrogant contempt. “What kind of cold causes a knife wound in the abdomen?”

Shit. Of course, he had seen it. He had probably been the one to change my clothes.

Why didn’t I feel violated? Why did being unconscious and naked before him not send a shiver of disgust through me? I hadn’t consented. I would never want him to see me so vulnerable.

And yet, I wasn’t upset at that.

I pulled up the shirt to look at my wound. Black, medical-grade stitches poked out of my skin. The swelling that I had tried to cover up with gauze and antiseptic had healed, a little.

He bounced the pills in his hand, a clear command for me to take them.

I delicately pinched them from his hold, trying to minimize how much contact we had before examining them.

The medical name for them was stamped along the sides, so if he was trying to kill me...

he'd certainly have gone through a lot of effort to fake a painkiller and anti-inflammatory.

"Did you stitch yourself up?"

His hands were in his trouser pockets. He'd removed his tie; the top two buttons of his tuxedo shirt were unfastened. His hair was a mess, like he'd been tugging at it in frustration.

"Yes," I admitted. Because the alternative was to lie, and then they might blame Marco for the poorly dressed wound. Who knew what they'd do to him.

"Why didn't you come to me? To my family? To the fucking hospital?" he asked. "You had an infection, and the damn thing was a disgusting oozing mess before Maeve fixed you up."

"Maeve isn't a doctor," I remarked.

At least she wasn't yet. A med student.

"And yet, she did a better job on you than you did on yourself!" He yelled, then seemed to regain his control, and softened his voice. "If you hadn't fainted, and we hadn't fixed the wound, you would have died. Do you understand that?"

If Maeve knew I'd been stabbed, then my mother would too. The Green grapevine of gossip would have done its full rounds. I had hidden my wound from Mamma for four days, not wanting to break her heart any more than it was. Four careful days were now wrecked by the green serpents of New York.

I was going to throw up.

"Oh," I said, stunned.

"Yeah." He stepped away from the side of the bed, leaning back on the black-paned factory windows of his renovated penthouse. For good measure, he lifted a single brow, and sarcastically mocked, "Oh."

He pulled the blade from his belt and started cleaning his nails. His initials, CKG—Cillian Kent Green—were etched on the handle.

My father's last moments were with a blade that looked just like it, with slightly different letters.

Blood. So much fucking blood. The Greens were obsessed with spilling it, bathing in it, painting with it...

My grandfather's blood. My father's blood. My blood.

"Who did it?" he asked so casually that he might as well have been inquiring about my dinner plans.

Blood. So much fucking blood, I could smell it. I could taste it.

The iron taste, like their iron blades.

“Who did... what?” I swallowed the bile creeping up my throat.

He rolled his eyes, flipped the iron in his hand, and slipped it back in its sheath.

Suddenly I could breathe again.

“Who stabbed you, Wife?” Did he make his Irish accent thicker?

Jesus, he was born in the United States. His father had an accent, but he was born in Derry, so that tracked. But him? His mother was born in Hawaii and had no accent whatsoever. So, I knew that this was a put on.

He looked at me like I was some kind of simpleton, as he probed, “Well?”

“It was a mugging,” I said.

“A mugging you say?” And the accent grew thicker still. Was that how he got chicks? “And yet you have your phone, wallet, your keys. Your bank accounts haven’t reported a cancellation of stolen cards. So—”

“Are you stalking me?”

“Stalking?” His chuckle was sardonic, and cruel. So why did it warm me? Why was his cruelty so pleasant to my ears? “Love, you seem to be under the impression that you’re not, in fact, a prisoner on a very long leash.”

There it was.

The secret none of us mentioned because it was impolite to discuss. They had access to my accounts. My mother’s accounts. The Morelli and Durante fortunes were under their guardianship to ensure that my mother and I didn’t mutiny against our

circumstances.

To the victor go the spoils. And I was a spoil of the Irish-Italian Mafia war.

Engaged to their prince, as a condition of surrender.

“Who stabbed you?” Cillian asked again, and I knew that not answering would just incur his wrath.

“What will you do if I tell you?” I asked, quietly.

I knew that whoever did it was Italian. If they knew that, they’d take it as an excuse to disrupt what limping power we still had. The Greens would punish us all, indiscriminately, just as they did during the war that our fathers fought.

“No one touches a Green without consequences.” Cillian practically sung their family motto.

“I’m not a Green.” I couldn’t stop the words from slipping out.

It was habit. A phrase I had repeated and again to my own people. But now, it was a lie.

“Oh, but you are.” Cillian winked, an evil glint in his eye darkening to something... lustful. Or... sadistic. I wasn’t sure. “Tell me who did it.”

“No.”

“No?” There was a lift of that eyebrow again, delightfully surprised that I had defied him.

His mouth straightened in what was almost a frown, as he stalked towards me until his shadow darkened my vision.

“I’m not in the habit of making requests, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart.”

“No, you’re right. You’re a wife.” He held out his hand and stroked the pad of his index finger from my forehead to my temple. Then, he gently tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

His finger continued down, until his touch landed on the pulse of my neck. I could do nothing but sit completely still under his intensity.

“Most girls are made of sugar and spice. But not you. You’re made of ice.”

“I wish that were true,” I whispered to myself, more than him. “Ice doesn’t bleed.”

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Chapter three

You Can't Comfort Ice

Cillian

She was right. I had never seen the ice queen bleed. Nor did she cry, sweat, or flinch. As cold as a New York winter.

So, who was this vulnerable little princess in my bed?

“Last chance, love,” I whispered. “Tell me who did it.”

Her jaw twitched as she bit down on her molars, her glassy eyes uncertain as she searched my face, probably trying to read my intent.

I prayed and hoped she'd get the message, but when she opened her mouth, I was disappointed.

“It was a mugging. I don't know who it was.”

A fucking lie.

There was nothing more insulting than a fucking lie.

My finger and thumb moved to her chin when she tried to look away. I restrained the incredible need to punch a wall as I stared at my deceptive bride.

I leaned down, placing my nose near hers. She smelled like sweet berries. Like a kiss beneath a mistletoe. She felt like temptation, carnal and crude. The forbidden fruit.

“You might not know me well, Wife, but for the sake of our marriage, I suggest this be the last time you lie to me.”

I pinched her chin until she winced.

I let her go, and she cast her eyes down, looking at something on the white duvet. She took a deep breath, her posture straightened. I knew that she was building her defenses up again. Her lips parted to tell me more untruths, and I couldn't stand it.

I am not an impulsive man. But this one time...

I plunged my tongue into her mouth to stop her transgression.

I cupped her cheeks in my hands, clamping her face to mine, as I devoured her whole. The sweetness of her lips made me want to suck the breath right out of her lungs. To steal her air, her soul, and everything that she was.

It was several long minutes before I realized that she wasn't reacting as planned. I expected her to slap me. To push me away. To protest. Then I would assert my dominance as her husband, and she'd acclimate to her new life.

But instead, she returned my passion threefold. I savored it. I moaned into her lips, as she whimpered into mine.

There was nothing but the softness of her tongue, the roughness of her teeth, and the deep, sensual groan of her acceptance. There was nothing but the haze of bliss as white as a snowstorm, and as warm as a crackling Yule log.

Was the treacherous witch fucking with me?

I flinched away, catching my breath to fight the haze of desire.

Her eyes were closed, lips parted, and cheeks a sweet, warm pink. No, she wasn't playing a game. This was honest, true, mutual attraction.

I grabbed her thigh, digging my nails into her flesh and parting her legs. I had daintily covered her in my own college shirt, and placed the blankets at her hips, so that she was modestly protected apart from the wound I found on her rib.

I didn't want the doctor to get any wild ideas.

Side note: I'd need to make sure all future doctors were all female.

There was no reason for anyone to ever see my wife naked. She was mine. End of.

I kissed down her abdomen, to the small divot of her belly button.

Then lower, to the shaved mound that I had averted my eyes from all night.

Her pale complexion extended to every part of her body, except for the sweet pink petals between her thighs.

I suspected that her nipples would be quite rosy too, but that wouldn't be my focus for now.

Not when she was so compliant and smelled so divine.

Don't look an Italian gift horse in the mouth. Not when you can ride her bareback instead.

I placed myself between her thighs, lips hovering over the cunt I was ravenous for. She tensed, fisting the blanket at her sides.

Does she think I'm going to bite her? Because she'd be right.

I took a sweet fold into my mouth and grazed my teeth along the delicate flesh. She moaned as her eyes fluttered closed. I swiped my tongue along her slit, groaning against the musky delight of her wet pussy.

She was eager. It was undeniable.

I was surprised. But also, a man. And she was my bride—so surely this was my right. To feast on her, and delight in the pleasures of her body.

Marriages had been built on far, far less .

When her thighs shuddered, and her moans turned into screams, I pinned her thighs to my shoulders, took her clit in my mouth, and held on for dear life. My body rejoiced in her orgasm as her wetness coated my chin as she writhed to unseat me from my new favorite place.

She came again and again, as eager and wanton as any fantasy I had conjured in all my years.

“Please, stop,” she said, her hands pushing at the top of my head as tears streamed down those full, rounded cheekbones. “I can’t.”

“One more,” I demanded, as I sucked a final throaty scream from my sweet little delight.

She was crying when I crawled up her body. The tears streamed freely down when I

cupped her face, placing my weight on my elbows and knees so I didn't crush her.

"Have I hurt you, Wife?" I asked, kissing her cheeks.

What instinct made me act this way? I wasn't sure.

She shook her head. But still, the tears flowed.

"Don't lie to me," I said, frustrated that even now she was holding herself away when I wanted nothing more than to peel her apart.

"I'm not lying," she said quietly.

"Then speak, woman, before I call the doctor back here to confirm—"

"It's not fair that you can do this." Her interruption took me by surprise. "I hate you. I fucking hate you. But you can do this. You have a right to do this. And I can't stop it."

I waited, wiping each tear as it appeared, choosing not to kiss them away, even though that was what my soul longed to do.

"I'm your prisoner. As you said. I have no choice in this." She shook her head, bringing her hand to her face, batting my palms away. "The least you could do is not make me feel anything when you do it."

I was confused. Her words made no sense.

She's lost her marbles.

"Have the decency to just... fuck me and get it over with. Don't make me feel this."

“Feel what ?” The frustration crept up my chest, and doubled when I realized that I wanted to comfort her.

You can’t comfort ice! For fuck’s sake.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she whispered.

She tried to get up, but I placed a hand on her shoulder, keeping her down. She didn’t put up much of a fight, but surrendered, as she winced from the pain of her stitches. There was no reason to fight me.

I had never been in this situation before. Not in a position to hold a woman in my hands. The need to comfort, protect, and to give was overwhelming.

I placed a kiss on her forehead, and rolled over to my side, pulling the blanket up to cover her bare thighs.

She gazed at me with confusion, her eyes begging for answers to questions she hadn’t asked.

“Sleep, love,” I whispered. “We’re going to have a long day tomorrow.”

I rolled over to the nightstand, flicking off the light switch to the room and plunging us into darkness.

I turned over, emboldened by a new resolve, and took her in my arms. With my bicep beneath the crook of her neck, her cheek on my chest, I felt her fall into slumber as I stared at the dark ceiling.

As my wife slept in my arms, I contemplated the strange enigma of Giovanna Eugenie Green.

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Chapter four

Mrs. Green

Gia

I slept the day away and woke up cold in an unfamiliar bed, unsure if the previous night had just been a fever dream.

Pills, a glass of water, and a covered plate of toast and eggs was left on the nightstand along with scrawled instructions on a white piece of paper.

A woman came in nurse's scrubs, offering to help me shower but I'd shooed her away. Still, she lingered, per "Mr. Green's instructions."

I was clothed, fed, my bandage changed, before a housekeeper came in and gave me a little curtsy.

"Mrs. Green," she said demurely. It took a moment to realize she was talking to me, and that Aunt Kira wasn't somewhere, skulking about. "Mr. Green said he'd return for dinner and wanted you to acclimate to your new surroundings. Would you follow me? I'll give you a tour of the penthouse."

I was Mrs. Green, now. And he was Mr. Green.

I had lost another part of myself and become a part of him. One more part of me, lost to an Irish serpent.

The housekeeper showed me around my new prison. It wasn't a long tour. After all, it wasn't a mansion. Just a penthouse, with five bedrooms, a formal and informal living room, a grand dining room, expansive restaurant-style kitchen, four staff members, and a gym.

There was a lovely balcony that I could fling myself from if things got dire. Over seventy floors up, I'm sure it would be painless.

When the maid, whose name I wasn't ready to commit to memory—call it a sense of denial—left me alone, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, and called the only person I could trust.

“Marco?” I said, before he had a chance to greet me.

“Are you okay?” he said without a greeting.

I began crying. Bawling, in fact.

I wasn't okay. Nothing was okay. Nothing would ever be okay again.

“Gia?” he asked, quietly over the phone, when I didn't stop.

“I don't know how to get out of this,” I wailed. “I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, please!”

“Gia...”

Marco Rossini was the only friend I had. The only person I could trust. I needed him. I needed him so badly that it hurt.

“He'll never let me go,” I cried. “He'll never let me out of this place.”

“Gia,” he said, his voice gentle as ever. “Gia, please, don’t cry. We’ll get you out of there.”

“Marco, please... please don’t leave me here with him. Please.”

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Chapter five

It's Not Regal to Have a Knife In Your Back

Cillian

“What have you found?” I mumbled as I stared at the large red painting that my father made from the blood of his enemies.

The painting had once hung in our family home, but now, it was in the Grand Kintyre’s foyer, serving as a reminder to all that no one laid a hand on a Green without consequences.

Most people thought the thing about blood was just a story. But we knew the truth.

My father had kept Giovanni Morelli hostage for years, bleeding him to make paint.

I delighted in that bit of sadism.

But now that I looked at it, I wondered if it still belonged here, where my wife would need to see it every single day. Was it just? To punish her with such a macabre sight?

“It’s not good.” Randa fished a phone out of her pocket, unlocked it, and began to play a video.

“Who is that?” I said, as I stared at the man on screen.

He was olive skinned, with jet black hair that pulled back behind his ears.

“Unsure,” Randa said, taking her phone back. “He was at every surrounding business the hours before the attack. Then he was there again afterwards, with a limping Giovanna in his arms.”

I froze. Something squeezed at my heart. An unpleasant ache that I didn’t want to give name to.

“Her lover?” I asked, quietly.

“I have no real indicators of that but, possibly.”

Then I’d have to kill him.

I turned away and led Randa down a corridor into the conference rooms where all Green Fields Enterprise business was discussed.

The two of us took seats at the conference table, leaning over on our elbows.

This was the New York City war room. The place where all our great plans for world domination were decided.

Randa gave me a sideways glance and smirked. “Would that bother you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure, you don’t, champ.”

“How do we know he wasn’t helping her? That he’s not...” I swallowed as the bile rose up my throat, “The hero in our little princess’s tale?”

Randa leaned back and stared at me with her peculiar shade of navy-blue eyes. They were unsettling. Interesting, but slightly off-putting.

“A feeling? A gut instinct?” She pursed her lips to the side. “When you hear hooves, you think horses, not zebras.”

“And you’re hearing horses?” I wasn’t sure I was understanding her point, but I was trying to.

“A fucking stampede of them.” She leaned forward on her sharp elbows, chestnut bob falling from its perch behind her ear and obscuring half of her features. “She was stabbed four days before your wedding. Who would benefit from the alliance not holding?”

The list was long and distinguished. Antoine Morelli, my wife’s distant cousin. Luis Durante, a distant uncle. Hell, even Ariana Bournes, a former lover of a man my father executed for treason... Though, strangely, an Irish villain didn’t seem to fit the mold for this misdeed.

No, it would be one of my Gia’s compatriots. I was sure of it. The rambunctious Italians who never wanted to see us wed. The ones who did not want to surrender.

The ones who whispered that vendetta was an Italian word.

Little did they know that revenge was an Irish hobby.

“That explains why she’s protecting them,” I concluded. “Because they’re one of her own.” I scoffed, almost disappointed at her naivete.

Oh, sweet ice queen. It’s not regal to have a knife in your back.

I reached my hand for Randa's phone, and I put in her code to open the photo again.

"I have seen this man before, I think," I whispered, as I examined the man's features.

I snarled, looking down at the ground as the embarrassing truth hit me square in the chest.

"You're sure?" Randa asked.

"I'm certain of it." I fidgeted with the cuff link on my silk shirt, as I considered my next move.

Another deception, dear ice queen of mine?

This was becoming a habit. One that would land her over my knee, if she wasn't very, very careful.

"Looks like me and the misses are about to have a long tete-a-tete."

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Chapter six

Does This Hurt, Love?

Gia

I stared at the diamond eternity band, stacked on top of my engagement ring. It was large. Obnoxious. A weapon in itself. I wouldn't need to hold my keys between my fingers when walking at night. I could just back hand them and do some serious damage.

I was married, now, sitting in my husband's living room, staring at the city of New York from above. Like a bird of prey, glaring down at the mice in the field below.

My wedding day would be the second date on my tombstone. My death date.

Gone was Giovanna Durante, and in her place was some stranger called Giovanna Green.

Was I a ghost? A ghost of Christmas future?

“Darling—” The low rumble of his voice sent a shiver through me. “I’m home.”

My husband.

He stared at me with those disturbing eyes.

“Did you miss me?” He smirked, his eyes lazily scrolling down my body.

Memories of the other night flashed through my mind. His golden hair between my thighs, as he stared at me. He’d given me pleasure I didn’t think was possible.

I wish he’d beaten me instead.

I said nothing as he approached, pushing his sleeve up his arm, flashing those veins that advertised hours of physical labor.

“I’ve sent everyone home.”

I glanced around, realizing that the tittering staff who kept looking in on me were absent. I had done such a good job of ignoring them that I hadn’t even noticed that they were gone.

My husband’s long shadow crossed my sight, plunging me into his darkness.

I shivered, both from the growing cold of his presence and the sudden dread of being alone with a serpent, ready to strike.

I took a deep breath, swallowed the lump in my throat and met the monster’s gaze.

“We need to talk,” he said flatly, his dark brow arching as his wicked little smirk promised terrible—or wonderful?— things.

“About?” I said, in a voice so breathy it sounded like a whisper.

But it was all I could manage.

“Come with me,” he commanded, and walked to the bedroom without looking back,

already knowing that I would obey.

And I did. Because what choice did I have?

He strode toward the bedroom, stepping aside at the door to let me through first. I did enter first, even though having the monster at my back made my skin prickle in goosebumps. The electricity in the air made my hair stand on end.

“You look beautiful.” I jumped when his voice was at my ear, heated breath grazing over my skin. His fingers traced the light straps at my shoulders, pushing them down my arms, bringing my camisole to my waist. My bared nipples pebbled in the cold, and I immediately covered them with my hands.

He tsked lightly, as his hands encircled my wrists, bringing them down.

“So soon, you seem to have forgotten.” He kissed the crook of my neck. Then the bare skin of my shoulder. “ Mine .”

He kissed down my back, and I helplessly stood there, my eyes shut, as I tried to phase out of this part. I had always known this would happen. Heirs. That was something that our marriage depended on.

I thought that maybe I could just lie back, close my eyes, and let it happen while my mind meditated somewhere else.

But his touch, his kisses, his voice... they kept me rooted in place. My body shivered at the pleasure and fear this man made me feel.

He kissed down my spine, coming to his knees behind me, dragging my camisole and sweatpants down. I wanted to seem as unattractive to him as possible, to buy myself more time from his intoxicating touch. But it hadn't worked.

He pulled my underwear down too, kissing every new inch of exposed skin until I was naked in front of him, my clothes piled on the floor around my feet.

“Go to the bed, love.”

I didn’t move right away. I couldn’t trust my legs. I couldn’t trust my mind.

I was so confused at how I felt, and what I desired. Did I want this? Maybe. After what he did last night? Probably. But I also didn’t want him. I couldn’t develop feelings for my husband. I couldn’t. That would be a disaster.

“To bed.” And there he was again, at my shoulder, whispering like a dark angel, sweetly beckoning me to do terrible things. “Or must I carry you?”

I didn’t move. I couldn’t even if I tried.

He picked me up, and carried me to the bed, laying me down with my head on the pillow.

I felt like I was in a daze. Like a princess in a fairy tale, in awe of her prince.

He pulled the green and silver tie from his throat, and in an instant, fashioned a knot around my wrists, restraining me to the headboard.

“What the—”

“Don’t struggle, darling,” he warned casually. As if he were telling me that a plate was hot, or to mind the curb. “Before you cause yourself more damage.”

He was... different from the night before.

He was determined, and sure. Controlled.

His fingers traced from my forehead, down my jaw, to my throat.

Then he touched the hollow at my clavicle, down the space between my breasts.

Right down the middle until he grazed above the new, black stitches that held my torn flesh together.

“Does this hurt, love?” he asked, kissing the skin around the tender flesh.

“No,” I gasped, as his soft lips sent heat down to my core. “And.... And... don’t call me that.”

I tested the silk binds on my wrists, and shuddered when they didn’t give. Not even a millimeter.

“Don’t call you what?”

“Love.”

I swallowed, hoping he didn’t ask why those words felt so... harmful. Like it was a wielded knife ready to plunge into me again.

“But I like that particular word for you,” he said against my skin, dipping down lower until his lips lingered at my navel. “It seems that the ice queen is more capable of that warm emotion than I originally thought.”

He kissed the skin under my belly button, his breath racing over my pale stomach. My thighs clenched in anticipation as my body ached for him to do his work. To make me feel that dreaded ecstasy again.

He kissed my inner thigh, the tender place so close to where I wanted his lips.

“Tell me darling,” he kissed the other side. “Who’s your lover?”

“Wha—Ah!”

He bit down hard on my thigh, the sensitive skin sucking through his teeth as he viciously bit down on the flesh.

Not enough to tear, but more than enough to bruise.

He sucked and marked the pale skin, as I struggled to get away, but he held me down, his arms encircling my legs to keep me pinned to him.

“Your lover,” he said again. “Who is he?”

“I don’t... have a...”

The slap on my ass cracked like thunder in my ears.

“Don’t lie to me,” his voice boomed. “Or I’ll take it as an insult.”

He bit down on the other side until I whimpered in agony. “Stop!”

“Why? Afraid he’ll see these marks and get jealous?” He growled as he crawled over my body, reaching down to cup my pussy in his rough hand. “Worried he’ll realize that you don’t belong to him? That this pussy belongs to me, and me alone?”

His fingers pushed my thighs further apart, as he licked his lips.

“I will happily slit his throat and fuck you in front of his dying eyes, if that’s what it

takes to get my point across.” He bit his lower lip, before his wicked eyes glinted up at me. “No one touches a Green without consequences.”

Those words, which had seemed so protective before, were a very different threat now.

“I don’t have a lover.” I tried to enunciate, but lost my words in a groan, as he slipped one finger into my wetness.

“Don’t you?” He lifted a brow, as another went in.

Then his expression changed. It was one of confusion. Disbelief. And then, with a shake of his head, he threw his doubts aside.

“Send him this message for me, love.” His fingers slipped out, as I heard, more than saw, him unfasten his belt and unleash his thick, hard, angry cock.

I fought against the silk restraints at my wrists until they dug into my skin. I felt the cold trickle of sweat on my brow. My heart thumped loudly in my ears as earlier lust turned into fear.

But even that was exhilarating, as his finger moved gently in and out of my core.

“Cillian, please...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I couldn’t tell him to stop.

I bucked my hips. But I didn’t know if I was pushing him away or inviting him in.

He made the choice for me before I could protest. His cock slid into my entrance and ripped me apart at the seams.

I screamed, my entire body shaking in both fear and desire.

Fear of the pain that I knew would come. Fear of the feelings he'd rip from my soul. But I longed for the release that was promised. A release I'd never felt before. A wave of pleasure unmatched by any I could have dreamed of.

He pushed in, and I wailed, tears streaming down my face as the pressure of his engorged tip opened me further, carving itself into my most sacred place.

This was how it felt to be invaded. To be conquered, body and soul.

"Jesus!" he grunted. He pushed himself up by his arms, taking his weight off of me, so we were only connected in a single, primal place. "I need you to tell the fucking truth, Gia."

"What?" I gasped, unsure why he'd ask me a question at this moment.

Why now? When I could barely think? When everything felt like a muddled haze of nothing but light and darkness. Even the meaning of words felt different now. Feelings were given shapes as solid as the flesh.

"Are you a virgin?"

Why would he be surprised?

"No," I almost laughed. "Not anymore, at least."

"For fuck's sake," he growled. "Will you never give me a straight answer, woman?"

"Your question is ridiculous," I said between gasps.

"You think I'd risk it? Risk the harm you serpents would bring on me?"

On my mother? If I came to you as anything less than pure?

This is the Dark Ages, Mr. Green. Women are bought and sold to marriage, and I wouldn't risk the life of someone I loved for a moment of...

of..." I couldn't put to words the action we were taking.

We weren't making love. But fucking wasn't descriptive enough. "Just for a moment like this."

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His hands. His fucking hands. Why were they so warm and electric? Why did they land on my body so roughly, then gentle in a blink? And why did I respond to every bit of it?

“Look at me,” he whispered.

“Am I more precious now that you know I don’t have a lover?” Would he taste the bitterness of my words, as clearly as he would taste the salt of my tears?

He shook his head, not as a denial, but in frustration.

“You need to look at me Gia,” he whispered.

And my foolish body obeyed. I looked into his black eyes and waited for him to command me. To tell me what to do, as everything throbbed with need, and fear. Desire, and despair.

With one hand, he slipped it into the space between us, his palm landing on my shaved mound, his thumb circling on my clit.

My eyes fluttered shut, as I moaned beneath him, writhing against his touch, pushing against that delightful, happy thumb.

But with the slow move of my hips, I felt his cock inside me move.

Pushing further still, my eyes flew open at a flash of pain.

He was watching me. He was as still as a statue, the only movements from that delightful thumb.

It took several more sways and thrusts before I realized that I was fucking myself on him. In my eagerness to chase my high, my hips had moved back and forth, undulating like a wave against his stiffened cock as he patiently waited...

Waited... for what?

“Cillian...”

“Shhh,” he said quietly. “It’s alright, love. You’re starting to relax. You’re opening for me. Just breathe.”

His black eyes were as hot as lava, and as deep as the ocean. I was lost in them. Lost in their hypnosis. Lost in the eyes of a snake.

“You’re alright, Wife,” he whispered, as he leaned down to bite the lobe of my ear. “My lovely bride,” he cooed, before he bit down on my throat, sucking the flesh into his teeth as I whimpered. “My darling Mrs. Green.”

He bit down hard on my shoulder, and I didn’t even pull away. I accepted the pain. I took it with eagerness and moaned against the forming bruise his teeth made on my flesh.

“You’re doing so well.” His praise made my nipples heat with need, my chest arching towards him, as though my breasts begged for his mouth.

He smirked, looking down as the little pink skin rose to his lips.

“Are you offering these to me?” he whispered, his lips grazing them lightly. “It’d be

impolite to say no, I think.”

He latched on, biting down on them with the same aggression he had used everywhere else. Teeth scraped, then soothed the tender skin, and I wept with pleasure. My hips moved harder, bucking against him and his hand, until my thighs protested the exertion, but still, I couldn’t stop.

“Cillian, please,” I whined again.

He let my nipple go with a pop, smiled down at me—not smirked, but genuinely beamed with pride.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

Ready for what? I had no idea. But the answer was a resounding, “Yes! Yes! Yes !”

He lifted himself up, his hand on either side of my head, boxing me in.

He pulled himself out, until only the tip connected us. Then he violently thrust in, entering me easily and quickly, the slick sound of my juices accentuating the slap of our hips.

I screamed. I screamed and struggled, but not to escape. To get more.

He thrust in again, and the corners of my vision blurred. Another thrust, and I lost all sense of the world. I was floating on a cloud, my body coiled in anticipation. One more thrust, and I was in ecstasy and bliss, high above the clouds, cresting a wave that pushed through my entire being.

“My God!” I marveled, unsure how any one person could hold such feelings within themselves.

“Well done,” he praised, bringing his face down to my throat.

In a flash, the binds around my wrists were undone.

“Wrap your arms around me. Wrap your legs too.” The instruction, like all the others, was obeyed. “Don’t let go.”

He rode me like a madman. I saw my own feelings mirrored in his frantic movements. Despair, desire, desperation. His skin heated, just like mine, as the sweat pooled between our bodies. He kissed me.

I was surprised. I never thought that Cillian would be the kind of man to kiss. But he was.

And I liked it.

The words blared in my mind.

And even that was a robbery. He stole another part of me. I didn’t even get to choose whether I liked this arrangement. This marriage. My husband.

He growled, as his pace increased, his hips rubbing against my sensitive clit until a second wave went through me.

My back arched, my hands clawed at his skin, he moaned in pleasure as our bodies bucked together, slamming as one until the final, hard thrust that joined us.

The sensation of him coming inside me was thrilling and satisfying—even more than the two orgasms he’d granted me.

The feeling of him, satisfied inside of me.

Our arms and legs tightened, as we clung on, holding each other until we fell back down to earth.

The haze of lust burned away, and sadness gripped me in its jagged claws.

I was a traitor to Morelli. I had betrayed my father, my mother. My family.

“It’s alright, love,” he chanted over and over again.

I realized that I was crying.

“It’s alright, sweetheart.” He went on and on. “You’re alright.”

I clung on tighter. I held on and wept.

“Talk to me, Wife,” he whispered against my cheek as he kissed a tear away. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s not alright,” I wept. “It’s not right.”

“What’s not right?”

“This. This isn’t right.” I balled my hand into a fist and slammed him on the chest. But he didn’t move. “I hate you. I hate you so much.”

He kissed my other cheek. “I know.”

“I hate you.” I wept as if he hadn’t said anything. “And you’ve taken my hatred too. You’ve taken everything. You’ve even taken this. The choice. I didn’t even get to choose who I gave my virginity to. It wasn’t a gift. It was a commodity.”

I was so distraught that I didn't feel it when he rolled us to his back. That he had brought me to his chest, and held me to him, his fingers stroking my back.

"I can't even choose how to feel, " I wailed like a child. "I can't even choose to feel violated. I can't even hate you, the man who has taken everything from me."

When had he tucked us beneath the blanket? I wasn't sure.

I just cried and cried. And when my vision cleared, the lights were out. The blanket was tucked up to my chin, and his arms held me to him. Safe and secure.

"I wouldn't have harmed you, you know," he whispered against my hair.

I didn't know what he was talking about. Whatever it was, I didn't want to know. I didn't need to feel anything for my husband, but he wouldn't be dissuaded.

"I didn't expect you to be a virgin," he said, as his lips grazed my forehead. "I wouldn't have been angry, if you weren't."

He adjusted us, so that we were on our side, staring at each other.

"I'm not the villain you think I am."

Chapter seven

Never Take a Green At Their Word

Cillian

I t's like she'd lived her life in a cult and been fed lies. Now she was in the real world—in my world—and trying to apply her old schema on current events.

I expected her to have had a lover. Most women did by our age. A first, a second, a third... a great love affair, as well as several meaningless ones. I didn't expect to be the first. I just knew that I would be the last.

It made sense to grab onto someone when marriage wasn't your choice. The liberty to give herself to a man she loved... to take a bit of power back? I couldn't blame her for that.

But she hadn't.

And that made me... elated. Relieved? Honored.

"I'd never take a Green at their word," she whispered. Desperate to still see me as a cloaked, evil villain.

"Then don't, love," I said against her skin. "But I am not a liar."

She would learn that soon enough.

“You’ve always been allowed to do what you want. To the victor go the spoils, right? The Greens were the victors. I’m the spoil?” She was somewhat right about that. That was a natural consequence of being on the losing side. “Just because you can have mistresses and—”

“I don’t have mistresses.”

I almost heard her roll her eyes.

I grabbed her chin to force her to look at me.

“I have never had a mistress,” I said with all conviction. “I might not be as pure as you, love. But I have never had a mistress, a girlfriend, or a lover.”

“Please...” she tried to pull her face away and I chuckled.

“Who knew my wife would be so jealous?” What an unexpected pleasure to see a flaw within the frigid ice queen.

“I have never lied to you. I will not lie now. I have done things with women, sure.” She tried to pull from me, and I held her tighter.

There was no escaping from this reality, from this conversation, or from this marriage.

“But I have never stuck my cock inside another woman’s cunt. Is that clear?”

I had never admitted my own status before. The assumption that I had mistresses had flown from overblown statements of quick fondles in coat rooms, and gropes in the backseats of town cars. Women who wanted to hitch their wagons on a rising star.

But to seal the deal? To do more always felt wrong when I knew I was promised to another. It was wrong for me, for them... for the bride I despised. The one who was shackled to this fate.

Her brows knit together. Her face scrunched in confusion. "But... why?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Why is the sky blue?"

Because it never felt right.

"Because sunlight reaches the Earth's atmosphere and is scattered by gases and particles," she whispered. "Blue light is scattered more than other colors at a broader angle because it travels as shorter, smaller waves. It's called Rayleigh scattering."

I smiled to myself, as I tucked my nose into her hair.

"I've been in school as long as possible to delay our marriage," she admitted. "I learned a thing or two."

"That you did," I chuckled.

I knew she was reluctant to marry. My parents delayed our initial marriage date until she and I finished university. Then afterwards, she went for a masters, requesting an additional delay. She would have gone for a PhD had my father not put his foot down and said we had waited long enough.

"Will you still be finishing your doctorate, then?" I asked, casually twirling a finger in her chestnut-colored hair.

She flinched, looking up at me. "I didn't think that was a choice."

“Of course, it’s a choice.” I shrugged. “When things calm down, you should tell me if you want to.”

“Only in New York, I imagine,” she whispered, forlornly.

“For now,” I admitted. “But if things calm down, if you’re willing to wait, then you could go anywhere you wish.”

Her face was stuck in a mask of confusion. Like I was throwing too many curve balls at her at once.

“But,” I said, dramatically. She almost looked comforted with that single word—the one that could contradict all that came before it. “You must be honest with me.”

Her face closed again. Expressionless. Cold.

I liked this version of her the least. This was the one she presented to me all those years. To my parents. To the world. The one that had no feelings, and an impenetrable surface. Like a frozen lake with all the activity hidden beneath the still surface.

“We don’t have to be enemies, Gia,” I whispered, almost desperate to reach her. “We can be allies. We can be friends. We can work together in this world if you let us.”

She turned away again, and I grabbed her chin to turn her back to me.

I liked doing this—controlling where her gaze landed and ensuring that it stayed on me. Was I a narcissist? Maybe.

“We were thrown into this together, love,” I whispered against her lips. They parted, her tongue darting out to wet that plump bottom lip. “We had no choice. We can

choose to make this marriage work.”

“Would you let me choose to divorce you?”

“No.” The word came out stronger than I meant it.

The disappointment in her eyes had me back pedaling.

“At least not yet. I have no interest in the Mafia-Irish war resuming. That’s bad for business.

That’s bad for us. But if we ever get to a real situation of peace...

if you were truly unhappy... then we’d talk about it. ”

Over my dead body.

We’d talk about it. The answer would still be no, but she didn’t need to know that.

She looked at me and smiled, sadly, as if she could read my every thought. As though she knew each and every deception in it but appreciated my attempt.

She lay silent for a moment, and my eyes couldn’t help grazing down the long lines of her lithe body.

Sensual, curved, and perfectly formed. I was developing an unhealthy obsession with the way her hip rounded, as she lay on her side.

The beauty of the slight bend in her knee, and how I wanted them parted on either side of me as I drove myself in her again.

I needed to ask her about Marco. About the man in the footage. The man who followed her like a limping, love-sick dog.

But he wasn't her lover. She had never had one. In some way, we were fated to only be each other's. And there was comfort in that. One that heated my blood with a possession I never knew.

My cock throbbed with lingering desire, reignited.

Surely, we could discuss the important things tomorrow.

Or better yet, after Christmas.

I caressed her skin, and she gasped, her eyes fluttering closed with a reciprocated lust.

I deserved a little honeymoon. We deserved it.

"Let us be allies, you and I." I gently pushed her onto her back and kissed the pretty valley between her breasts.

"We can't be," she whispered.

"Why not?" I'd be disappointed. Hell, I might even feel hurt if her words had any teeth.

She liked my kisses, and my touch. She liked my voice, and my words, the same as I liked hers.

What more does one need in an arranged marriage?

"Because vendetta is an Italian word," she whispered.

“That has nothing to do with us,” I told her. “The past is the past.”

“And the future can only have one victor.”

I kissed her nipple, chuckling, as my breath traced over the delicate skin. “Rubbish.”

I sucked the hardened nipple into my mouth, tasting it like it was the most delicious morsel. I spent the darkened hours of night between my wife’s thighs, kissing, tasting, fucking. No words, just gasps and whimpers, intertwining until we couldn’t move.

We slept the morning of Christmas Eve, fingers and legs locked together.

Vendetta might be an Italian word. But we were in New York City. Unlike our parents and grandparents, we were born here. The past belonged in another land, and the future was whatever I decided it would be.

Chapter eight

We Lost Everything

Gia

I didn't hate being a wife. I didn't anticipate Cillian being an attentive husband. When I was too sore and tired to do my "wifely duties", he picked me up, and placed me in a warm bath. Sitting in the clawfoot tub, he held me up above the bubbles as he tenderly cleaned my skin, and washed my hair.

He took his role as a husband seriously, and with far more devotion than I would have guessed.

It was almost painful, how much his attention softened every part of me.

How could I keep my defenses up? How could I stick with the plan? The fate that was laid out for me the moment my father's severed head was thrown at our feet all those years ago?

Why did the son of my enemy have to be so human? He wasn't a reptile. He wasn't cold blooded.

He was warm and soft. His fingers, his lips... he wielded with a lethality more damning than those iron blades they carried with them.

He kept me in a lusty trance.

I thought that I had missed Christmas until he rolled out of bed, stretched, and cracked his muscular back.

“Pick a dress, love,” he whispered over his shoulder. “We’re having Christmas in my parents’ suite. Your mum will be there.”

His naked body was something to behold. Like a Michelangelo sculpture, but far more well-endowed.

I looked at my hands and saw the dried blood beneath my fingernails. Had I done that? I must have.

My body heated at the memory of holding on to him. Of throwing my arms around his back and clawing to get closer and closer. I had marked him with my claws while he had marked me with his teeth. I was a hawk, and he was the serpent, and we clashed even when intertwined.

“Darling?” He looked at me with amusement. “Did you hear me?”

I blushed. “I’m sorry, what?”

His face was suddenly serious, as a storm brewed in his eyes. Not like the one I had grown used to. It was... something else.

“Is there someone else we should be inviting on your behalf?” he asked, leaning down, until his arms boxed me into the mattress. “Another family member, perhaps? A close friend?”

I shook my head, sure that there was definitely a right and wrong answer to his question.

“Just my mother,” I whispered. That strange uneasiness coiled around me again. One that had been absent over the last two days of what I could call a honeymoon. “She’ll probably bring her staff with her, but that’s it.”

“Her staff?”

“Yeah,” I blurted out, needing to say something— anything —that could burst the bubble of this unease. “She might bring her housekeeper, Loretta. And, of course, Marco, her main bodyguard.”

“Marco?” He narrowed his eyes. Was Marco the wrong answer? “Her... bodyguard?”

“Yes. Marco Rossini.” Why did I give his full name? I wasn’t sure. “His mother, Loretta, has stood by my mother for decades. Since before I was born. So, naturally, he was hired later. Especially since...”

Fuck. I was talking too much.

It was as though the screams of passion had opened the floodgates, and the dam was broken. I couldn’t hold back the secrets I needed to against the man who increasingly didn’t feel like my enemy.

“Since we lost everything.” I finally finished because it was too late to take back.

When they killed my grandfather, and the family lost its standing, we were abandoned.

Everyone went underground or disavowed the Durantes.

Everyone except for Loretta Rossini and her family, who stood by.

I grew up alone, without friends and family.

Alone, except for Marco, the only person my age who would look at me without that combination of fear and disdain.

Anyone with the name Durante had become the third rail.

“No one else was willing to be associated with us,” I said, feeling every bit the defeated prisoner that I really was.

“Of course.” Cillian traced his thumb against my chin and lifted my face up to meet his. “Is that all I need to know?”

My heart skipped a beat. His eyes, no matter his expression, always stole my breath.

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Chapter nine

Merry Christmas

Cillian

“A re you sure you want to do this?” Randa was pestering me again.

Did I want to do this? Did I want to upset the peace we had made inside our marital bed? No.

But at the same time, it needed to be done. Definitive action was better than bleak half measures.

I was never more certain of this than when she came out of the bedroom, looking more seductive than when she was fully naked. She wore a red velvet dress, instead of the expected green. I wasn't sure if that was a conscious choice—was she defying me? Defying us?

My mother always wore green. So did my sisters. It was an intentional choice. A homage to the family name.

The red pleased and infuriated me in equal measure. Red was the color of the Durantes. So why would she not wear it? Why would we not advertise our two families together? She wore my ring. Though, I was starting to think that she needed emeralds around her throat and dangling from her hand.

She didn't speak much. Not on the way down in the elevator to my parents' floor. Not when we entered the room. Instead, she wrapped herself around my arm, holding onto my hand. Like my triceps could defend her from the world.

That was fine with me. I found her silence comforting. It made it fun to watch her face and decipher the light in her eyes, the quirk of a brow. The little twitch on the corner of her lip. She was an enigma. And enigmas were interesting.

I wondered how she'd react at dinner.

I knew so little about the woman I was sharing my life with.

But was I ever truly meant to share my life? Or was I meant to simply tolerate her enough to whelp out some pups, then live separately? It was never clear.

Marriage, aye. Sure. But my father never said I had to handfast her. I never had to take the blood oath that she would be my one and only until the end of my days. It was a tacit expectation that I step outside the marriage. That both of us would, at some point.

But that seemed... unlikely now.

Unlikely. Impossible. Undesirable.

My mum sat at the head of the table with my father to her right. The two held hands, as always. I took the seat facing my father, to the left of my mum. Then grunted, standing back up, before pulling out the seat beside me for my wife.

"Sorry, Love," I apologized as I pushed in the chair, planting a kiss on her temple.

"Sorry... for?" she asked, watching me take the seat beside her.

“For his poor manners in not seating you first, of course,” my father explained. “He was taught better than that.”

I smiled, as my father kissed the back of Mum’s hand. I did the same, kissing Gia’s before placing her palm on my thigh, my hand covering hers.

“Merry Christmas, Gia,” my mum said, looking over to my wife with a kind smile.

“Merry Christmas,” Gia mumbled. “Thank you for having me, Aunt Kira.”

The rest of the rascals came in. Riordan, Maeve, Quinn. They all sat down, slumping in the chairs. Riordan was in a suit, trying to look like a distinguished man. Quinn was in sweats. Maeve wore something in between. Casual, but not loungewear.

The joys of us all living in the same building meant that we all had slightly different impressions of what it was to dress up for each other’s homes.

When the elevator dinged for the final guests, I straightened.

Randa, wearing her work attire as always, led the way for Cosima Durante, the final matriarch of the Durante clan. Her bodyguard, Marco Rossini, close beside her.

I scrutinized him. Everything from his slicked black hair and thick lower lip. From the slight freckle beneath his left eye, to the way his hands splayed to his side.

I even watched as my sisters nudged each other, as they looked at him with flirtatious glints to their childish expressions.

Over my dead body.

Like a servant, he stood back when Cosima was seated, and stared aimlessly forward.

“Take a seat,” I called out to him, my eyes pointing down to the vacant chair by Cosima.

There was no Loretta, as my wife had thought. Which was curious, but not wholly unexpected.

He looked at me with a quizzical expression, then glanced at Gia.

He must have read something in her face, because he did sit down, and watched me like a hawk.

“A toast, I think,” I said, coming back to my feet. “To my bride.”

How little my darling trusted me. Then again, she had no reason to. After all, I was about to cause her great pain.

“To the miracle of matrimony.”

I held up the champagne glass, as Riordan stared at me like I was a dog that had learned to speak. My sisters, on the other hand, were just looking with amusement, wondering at what drama was about to unfold at the family dinner.

Randa, on the other hand, stepped forward from the wall she was holding up, to come behind Cosima and Marco.

“To a partnership,” I stared down at my lovely wife.

She looked so much like the Beauty that was sent to the Beast. Her chestnut hair parted down the center, curled to ringlets down her heart-shaped face.

I swallowed my drink and slammed the glass down, as the base shattered across the

table.

“Cillian!” My mother chided, at the same time my father fumed.

“To a wife of honest virtue,” I whispered. “My love.”

I tucked a finger under her chin. The past few days creating a habit, my darling wife turned to me on instinct, without force.

I pointed a finger at Marco and demanded, “Tell me who this man is.”

Randa placed her large hand on his shoulder, pinning Marco Rossini to his seat.

“Where was he, when you were stabbed?”

“He...” Gia’s eyes widened in fear.

“Who is he to you!” It was an exclamation, not a question. Because I knew. I knew that she called him. I knew that he’d rescued her. And worse, he had something to do with it.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was that she had to tell me.

She had to use her words and tell me what happened.

It’s not a great demand to beg a wife to confide in her husband.

But here I was, begging all the same.

“Tell me what happened, my love.” I snarled the insipid words through my teeth.

“Tell me now. Do not force my hand!”

Those arctic eyes stared at me, and I watched them freeze, cell by cell. I watched the water turn to frost, as she locked herself away in the prison of her mind.

“Please,” I begged, holding her chin, as I stared into those winter eyes. Quieter this time, I asked again, “Do not force my hand.”

Her smile was a slap to the face. Bland. Cold, and lifeless.

“But husband,” she said, her voice sweet and airy. “How could I force your hand?”

She took my hand and pulled it away from her face, before gently setting it on the table, cutting the contact between us.

“I’m just a helpless prisoner.” Somehow that was colder than any profanity that she could have slung in my face. “How could I possibly stand up to a Green?”

Oh, my sweet little snow angel.

“You forget, Wife—” I straightened away from her. “You are a Green.”

My eyes went around the stunned table. To the curious and amused eyes of my sisters. The perplexed eyes of my brother. To my parents, who held hands, their faces the very picture of restraint—as the heir, they wanted me to take charge. And this was what that meant.

My mother-in-law’s eyes were as cold as her daughter’s. A genetic trait, I was sure. But it was Marco’s dark brown eyes that made me feral with rage. The way he looked at my wife with a plea in his eyes. A plea, and an irksome protectiveness that was not his place.

“And no one lays a hand on a Green without consequences.”

With a snap of my finger, Randa had a gun to Marco's head. My wife screamed. My sister Maeve clapped. Quinn smirked at the possibility of violence to be committed.

Riordan stared at my wife with eyes that were far too concerned, and too... interested

.

I would deal with him later.

"Take him to the hole," I commanded Randa, who smirked with sadistic glee. I took my wife by the hand and dragged her through the long corridor to the darkest corner of the Grand Kintyre. "Come, Wife, and see what family business you have married into."

And may God forgive me for what I am about to do.

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Chapter ten

I Forgive You

Gia

“Mamma!” I called, like a little girl that was lost in a mall. Crying for my mother like a pathetic, weak little thing. “Mamma!”

“I’m coming, Bella!”

My mother was hard on our heels.

“Where are you taking him?” I pulled against Cillian, but it was no use.

That witch, Randa, had a gun to Marco’s head, as she marched him through a black door. A dark room, covered in white subway tiles. The floor bowed in the middle to a drain, and manacles hung from the ceiling.

I knew what this was.

“No,” I whimpered. “Please, don’t do this. Cillian.”

I fell to my knees, as the tall redhead bound Marco to the ceiling, my husband let me go as he rolled up his sleeves.

He ignored me. He wouldn’t even look at me, as he flashed that cursed blade in his

hand.

“Marco Rossini.” Cillian just saying the name placed the threat in the air. Like an executioner, before he declared the crime. “Where were you the night my wife was stabbed?”

Marco wasn’t looking at him, though. He was looking at me.

“He rescued me!” I screamed, throwing my arm out towards him from my place on the floor, but a single glare from Cillian kept me from running to my friend. My only friend.

My mother fell beside me, holding me back by the shoulders.

Her common sense hadn’t died like mine. She knew that we could not fight what was about to happen.

“I found her! I got her out of there!” Marco stammered his confession. “I saved her.”

“And what about before?” Cillian waved the iron blade in his hand, and I shuddered like it was the scythe of death itself.

Before? What was he talking about?

“Why were you in the area less than forty minutes before my wife arrived?”

What was he talking about?

Marco’s eyes widened, as Randa pulled the chain on the manacles until he floundered, the toes of his shoes barely grazing the ground, his shoulder sockets bearing the brunt of his weight.

“I-I-I...” Marco slipped, his weight collapsing beneath him as his shoulder cracked out of place. He screamed, and I screamed with him.

I covered my mouth, holding back the whimpers and cries.

“Gia,” my mother hissed into my ear in Italian. “Do not show them weakness.”

“They’ll kill him,” I grabbed onto her as she held me back. “Stop them, Mamma.”

Mamma looked at my husband, then grabbed my face like she did when I was a child. Holding my attention to her because she had something important to say.

“Don’t waste your breath, Bella ,” she said, the despair laced in her features. “Don’t bother asking anything of a Green.”

“I’m sorry, Giovanna,” Marco’s bellow pulled my attention from my mother. “I was trying to stop them.”

He was pathetic, his hands tied above his head, his toes barely grazing the ground, his calves shaking under the strain of holding him up in the stress position.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me. Forgive me.” His plea broke my heart.

“I do! I do!” I wailed, trying to go to him. “I forgive you!”

I looked around, frantic for anyone to hear.

“What the hell are you forgiving him for?” My husband bellowed; his voice held a level of anger I had never heard before.

“Anything!” I screamed back at Cillian. “Everything! I don’t care!”

Cillian tsked, turning around to look at Marco. “What were you trying to stop?”

“The Italians don’t want this marriage. The Mafia. The old families loyal to Durante. They don’t want—”

Cillian’s hard fist landed in Marco’s stomach, as he grunted in pain.

“You knew they were going to attack her, and you let it happen!” Cillian’s words sent a cold shiver down my spine. “You could have killed her!”

Another punch. All the while, I watched the iron blade in his fist, the blade pointed out, as he punched Marco in the face, the stomach, the chest. Blood dripped down Marco’s face. Blood. Not drawn by the blade, but I knew it would only be a matter of time.

“You should have stopped her from going!” Cillian punched him again, and blood gushed from Marco’s nose.

“Stop!” I screamed.

Marco’s head bowed, and all the while his eyes didn’t leave me. “I’m sorry, Gia. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to.”

“Don’t look at her!” Another punch with the fist that held his blade, the tip close to slicing Marco’s face.

“He didn’t mean to do it! I forgive him. Please! Let him go!” I begged.

I wept like a weak prisoner, hoping for a fate that would not happen.

I wanted to embrace him and hold him up, to take the weight of his body onto myself.

To take his burden.

“Marco saved me! He still saved me! I’m alive!” I held onto that. I held onto it like it was the only raft on an open, angry sea.

Blood trickled down Marco’s face. Drops of it dotted the white tile beneath us, staining the pristine floor.

“You shouldn’t have needed saving in the first place.” Cillian pointed the blade at me, and my throat went completely dry.

The point of his iron blade was lighter than the rest. It shined from hours of sharpening. Hours of molding it into the most dangerous thing that it could be. A thing that would draw blood. A thing that had killed my father, and grandfather. And soon, it would kill me.

“Please, don’t hurt him,” I said through the desert of my throat.

“Don’t, Gia!” my mother warned, snarling not at me, but at the serpents that surrounded us. “There’s nothing you can do for him.”

“She’s right.” Marco winced, as his foot slipped from beneath him, the harsh binds on his wrist cutting into his flesh. “She’s right, Gia. You... you can’t do anything.”

His head slumped as the defeat of those words weighed us all down.

I knelt in his blood. In Marco’s blood.

My hands were soaked in it. My hands, my dress, my soul was soaked in blood.

But now they were mixed with something else as well. They were mixed with my

tears.

Tears that had been dislodged by my own husband. A husband who promised that we could be different. That we could be allies. That we could be more—but that was a lie.

Everything was a lie.

It hurt that there was hope. An insipid hope that I could have a marriage that resembled something that looked like happiness. True happiness was out of reach. But I had thought for a fleeting moment that maybe something less than complete despair would be in my future.

I didn't feel pain for a few days and falling back into the status quo just... hurt .

“Please,” I whispered. “Please...”

I don't know who I was begging. My husband? Not likely.

For Marco to not leave me? Maybe.

Or maybe I was begging for my father's strength. The strength where he looked his own death in the eye and stood tall.

No, that wasn't right. Maybe I was just begging for my hands to not be soaked in blood.

“Gia,” Marco said, his deep brown eyes ready for death. I saw it in their indifference to the pain that must have wracked his entire being. “Vendetta is an Italian word. But not all of our blood is the same.”

“Marco?”

“There are some who think that they can step into the Durantes’ shoes, if they can break all ties to the Irish. They want to go back into the past.” Marco dropped his head. “I’m sorry. I tried to protect you, but... but...”

He let out a long breath. And the last of his resolve left his body.

“I am a dead man, so what does it matter?” Marco chuckled, and it was the most heartbreaking sound I had ever heard.

“Elijah Morelli thinks that he can take the shoes of Eugenio Durante. He wants to rebuild the Italians under his rule and go back to the Mafia wars. It was his men that plunged the knife in you.”

The ache in my ribs from the reminder burned fiery hot.

“He was threatening my sister,” Marco confessed. “Forgive me, Gia. That’s why I wasn’t there. I wasn’t supposed to find you. I was supposed to stay away, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t let them... do that to you. I love you, bella .”

A rumbling growl sent a shiver through me, and my eyes turned to my husband, whose teeth bared, ready to strike his venom.

“Forgive me.” Marco’s heartbreaking laugh of defeat echoed off the walls. “I’m sorry. Your family was always good to us. Forgive me.”

“I forgive you!” And I meant it with every fiber of my being.

But if my husband was jealous, then maybe... jealousy was a sign of passion. And passion was a symptom of... love?

“Please, Cillian,” I whispered, unsure why I thought begging would help. It hadn’t this far.

I knew you could not beg a Green for mercy. But I wasn’t begging a Green. I was begging my husband. He said that meant something.

“Please,” I dipped my palms in the blood, then held them up. “Please, he has spilled enough blood. Please.”

Cillian looked at my hands, and then my face, then back again.

“Please, Husband,” I whispered again. “I am begging you. Let him go. He’s one of the few people I have.”

I would crawl on my hands and knees if he told me to. I’d kiss his feet. I’d do anything to save Marco’s life.

Cillian shut his eyes and looked away. His expression was unmistakable.

It was shame. He was ashamed of me.

But I was beyond pride.

Then the look of disgust crossed his features, and I knew I had lost. That I was nothing.

“No one harms a Green without consequences,” he said.

The fall of the executioner’s axe was on Marco. It was on me.

In a single stroke, the iron blade glinted through the air, as it came down fast. The

deep gash opened down the side of Marco's face from forehead, barely missing his eye, slashing down a nostril, over his top lip, and to his chin.

I wanted Cillian to kill Marco mercifully. I did! But selfishly, I also wanted another moment of being someone's friend. Of having someone in my world, breathing, and caring for me. Someone who wasn't my mother.

Just for a minute longer, I wanted the number of people who cared about me to be higher than... one.

Marco bore his new wound with dignity.

"I'm sorry, Marco," I whispered.

"I'm sorry, Gia," he whispered back.

Cillian's growl was low, and frightening. Like the rattle of a hidden snake in the grass.

His knife plunged into Marco's thigh, and the blood flowed faster, down his leg.

I fell forward, my hands in the blood, and I wailed. For Marco. For my grandfather, Eugenio Durante. For my father, Giovanni Morelli.

I wailed for me.

Goodbye, Marco.

I waited for the pool of blood below me to turn into a flood. But it didn't. I heard the body fall to the floor, a grunt, and the sound of flesh on concrete.

A bloodless death, then. Maybe that was a mercy.

“Leave New York City.” Was my husband commanding me to leave his side?

I looked up, but far from seeing Marco’s corpse. He wasn’t dead. He was very much alive, staring at my husband in shock.

“You will disappear.” Cillian wiped his bloody blade on his trouser leg. “If you come anywhere near my wife, my family, or my city, I will bleed every Rossini dry and create a canvas so magnificent, it will cover the facade of the Grand Kintyre.”

Cillian took two steps forward, until he blocked Marco from my sight.

“Am I understood?” Cillian’s growl sent a shiver of fear and hope through me. Was this a trick?

Marco nodded his head, before looking at me, unsure of what to do.

“Get up Giovanna.” Cillian strode to my side, offering me his hand.

I looked at my blood-covered palms, and up at my husband. I tried to wipe them off on my velvet dress, but he grew too impatient. He leaned down and roughly pulled me to my feet.

He grabbed my face in his hand, pulling me up for a simple kiss on the lips.

“He betrayed you,” Cillian said, his breath grazing over my mouth. “And yet you beg me to let him live?”

I nodded because I was too stunned to speak.

He traced his lips along my cheek bone until he was at my ear. “Your mercy will get us killed.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:38 am

Cillian

I sat in the dark of our penthouse. Mine, and my wife's.

I'd opened the bottle of Redbreast Whiskey— something that had been aging since before I was born. I don't know why I opened it now. I had always thought to keep it for a special occasion. Instead of celebrating, I drowned in it, staring out the window as the snow blanketed the city below.

I don't know how many hours had passed before the door opened. The quiet footsteps of Mrs. Giovanna Green came over the soft rug.

She waited, probably trying to figure out what to say.

I saved her the trouble and spoke first.

"Is he your lover then?" I asked, not deigning to look at my bride.

The honeymoon was over. It had never even started.

"How can you ask that?" she whispered. "You know I was a virgin when I came to you."

"I didn't ask if you'd fucked him." I brought the whiskey to my lips, and downed the half-empty glass, before pouring myself another. "I asked if he was your lover."

You could have cut the tension with a knife as the silence grew between us.

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me rephrase then,” I said with a sad, pathetic chuckle. “Are you in love with Marco Rossini?”

Was that why she had begged so beautifully for his life? Was that why she had fallen to her knees for a man who was complicit in cutting her flesh?

“No, Cillian.” Her answer was concise. No prevaricating or attempts to sidestep. “I am not in love with Marco, or anyone else. I have never been in love. Nor do I think I ever will be.”

The latter was meant to be a slap in my face. Cute.

“But...” The gentleness of her tone was harsher than a blow to the head, and I looked up to watch her as she stepped towards me. She was graceful, her movements languid and sweet. If I was to be bound to someone I didn’t know, then at least I was given a beauty. “I wanted to thank you.”

“For?” I asked, taking another drink as she came closer.

Her fingers crawled to her legs, bunching up the fabric of her dress until it rose to mid-thigh. Those pale, supple legs caught my attention—as pale as the snow outside. She straddled me, and I was paralyzed by all the warring emotions that flooded my drunken mind.

Lust. Was that an emotion? Probably. Desire, denial, anger, frustration... it flavored everything with bitterness and spice.

“For letting him go.” She brought her hands to my shirt, and began to unbutton it, laying her cool palm on my bare skin.

But all I saw was another deception. Another ploy.

What did my wife really want from me?

“For listening to me.” She bent down, her lips grazing my Adam’s apple before kissing my jaw.

“You’re my wife,” I whispered, swallowing the tension that crawled up my throat.

“Not all husbands listen to their wives.” She planted a kiss on the spot behind my ear, and I almost groaned. “Nor do most wives have a husband who they want to touch.”

“What are you doing, Gia?” I wanted to get to the bottom of it. To figure out what she wanted.

“I want to accept the truce you offered. To be allies.”

Fat chance. I chuckled, taking another drink.

As I placed the glass back down on the end table, she picked it up from my hand, and downed the contents herself. She wiped a drop that slipped from her doll-like lips.

She put the glass down, never breaking eye contact with me.

“This part of our marriage works.” Her hands slipped down, as she brazenly undid my belt, pulling out my cock, and fisting it in her cold hand. “Marriages have been based on much less.”

She reached between her thighs, and tucked her lace thong to the side, as she placed my head at her entrance, and lowered herself down.

She squealed with the effort, her eyes closing as she tried to push herself down to the

hilt. But she was too tight.

“You need to slow down, Gia,” I groaned, placing a hand on the back of her neck, darting out my tongue to taste the drop of whiskey on her chin. “You need to give yourself time to... prepare... for me.”

I wasn't sure how to explain it to her. I had never thought I'd have to talk someone through the intricacies of sex.

I thickened inside her, remembering that I was the first. That I'd be the only one that would taste this bit of heaven.

She kept on trying to push herself down, and I placed my hands on her hips to stop her as she winced in pain.

“Slow down, love.”

“I want to be good at this for you,” she whispered.

I grasped her face in my hands, as the warmth of her seeped into every cell of my being.

I chuckled, “This is the one thing you and I don't need to work at. It's just there.”

I took her hand, and kissed her palm, and shuddered at the thought of my knife slicing into the thickened skin and marking her as forever mine.

The handfasting that marked my parent's marriage, as they took a blood oath on their wedding day.

A vow that declared their undying love until the end of their days.

Handfasting had been done away with, though couples in love still took part in the archaic ritual.

And why shouldn't we do it to cement our alliance? Why shouldn't we cut our palms, and bind them together, letting our blood mingle to make us one flesh?

But my wife wasn't an Irish Green. She was a Durante.

Such a custom would frighten my tender-hearted bride.

I kissed her because I could. I tasted her skin because it was my right. She got hotter, and wetter, with every tender tease of my fingers.

I thrust up, and she moaned in pleasure.

"There," I said, curling my fingers through her hair. "See how good it is, if you give yourself time to adjust?"

With her eyes firmly shut, she began to thrust her hips, rolling them against me, the bend in my cock grazing the soft, tender spot inside that beautiful heat.

She nodded, as she began to move her body in sync with mine, her hands braced against my chest as she took her pleasure from me, riding herself into a frenzy.

"That's right," I encouraged, stuck on the beauty of her skirt hiked up to her waist, her thighs wide open. "Such a beautiful wife."

The sleeve of her dress fell down one shoulder, and I tugged it down her arm until her beautiful breast was revealed to me, bouncing against her movements, mesmerizing me with its perfection.

She screamed, and it tipped me over the edge. I spilled inside her, roaring with my

release.

She collapsed on top of me, her head burying into my neck.

I stroked her hair and ran my hands over her shoulders.

“Such a pretty sight,” I gasped bitterly, “My wife, fucking me, because I spared another man”.

Gia and Kieran's full Trilogy will come in 2026