







# King of Ashes (Kingdom of Sinners #4)

**Author:** *Ajme Williams*

**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Im about to marry the man who wants to destroy me.

Phoenix Ifrinn doesnt want love—he craves blood.

And Im his prey.

Our families ripped each other apart.

Now, for ten years, he's been sharpening his blade, planning my destruction.

But he doesn't know the truth.

I've been hiding his child for a decade.

Brigit isn't my goddaughter—she's ours.

Our marriage is a death sentence wrapped in white silk.

Every night, he breaks me.

Every morning, I bleed.

Every day, I watch our daughter call another woman mama.

He thinks Im weak. Broken. His perfect victim.

Tonight, when bullets shatter our bedroom window and his enemies close in,

The truth detonates between us like a bomb.

Phoenix discovers hes been torturing the mother of his child.

And that changes everything.

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

K eira – Ten Years Ago

Something isn't right. I can feel it deep in my soul.

Or maybe it's just paranoia. Since my parents have banished me to my room without my phone or computer or anything to contact the outside world, I've been left to wallow in worry and sadness. If only I could talk to Phoenix. He'd know what to do.

My parents' voices drift up from downstairs, their harsh tones carrying through the old mansion's walls. They're discussing my future again, arrangements, alliances, suitable matches. None of them include what I want.

I go to sit in the window seat. This morning is rainy and dreary, a metaphor for my life.

I bring up memories of happier times. Of sneaking out to meet Phoenix.

Feeling exhilarated at riding on his motorcycle.

Feeling my heart soar when he'd kiss me.

I'd grown up feeling meek and unseen. Phoenix changed all that. With him, I feel strong and cherished.

Clearly, I only feel that around him because now, sent to my room with no way to reach him, I'm lost, uncertain as to what I should do.

I wrap my fingers around the little crystal pendant he gave me.

“It reminds me of you,” he’d said. “At first glance, it’s just a clear stone, but then the light hits it and it’s full of color and life. There’s so much more than meets the eye.”

I hold the crystal up, but there’s no light to reflect through it. The color and life have left it, just like they left me.

"Miss Keira?" A maid's voice comes through the door. "Your father requests your presence."

It’s not a request. It’s a demand.

My feet drag across the Persian carpets as I make my way downstairs. Father's study door stands open. Mother's perfume wafts to me, mixing with Father's cigar smoke. The scent combination turns my stomach.

"Close the door behind you, Keira." Father stands from behind his desk, and there’s something different about him. He seems taller, his chest puffed out more, as if he’s more powerful.

I step inside, ever the dutiful daughter. I’m eighteen, legally an adult, but my family operates under different laws. I’m their property until I’m married, and then I’m my husband’s property.

Mother perches on the edge of Father’s desk, spine rigid. My brother, Ronan, stands behind my father. He has that same attitude of smug power radiating off him.

I stand, quietly waiting for whatever they plan to tell me.

“How does it feel to be looking at the new king of Boston’s organized crime?”

Father's smile is triumphant.

I glance at my mother and then to him, not sure what he means. Patrick Ifrinn, Phoenix's father, is the so-called king. He's well respected, even by my father. Or he was. My father has grumbled some lately that Mr. Ifrinn was weak, but I have no idea what he's referring to.

"I... ah..."

"You should congratulate your father," Mother prompts.

"Congratulations." I have a sick feeling in my stomach. Patrick Ifrinn isn't just going to hand over control to my father, which means something happened. Fear grips me that something has happened to Phoenix too. He's Patrick's heir, after all.

"They're dead. The house was torched. Burned to ash," Ronan says with a glee that is unsettling.

The words finally register. "All of them?"

"All of them," my father confirms.

My heart drops. My knees nearly give out. "Even..." I want to ask about Phoenix, but I know my parents don't approve of him. Not anymore. "Their sons?"

"All of them. Even your precious Phoenix." My father sneers, clearly trying to hurt me.

"You..." My voice catches. "You murdered the entire family?"

"We protected our interests. The Ifrinns were weak, and because I was pointing it out,

they planned to destroy me. Your Phoenix was their weapon."

I shake my head, memories flooding back. Phoenix's gentle touch. His dreams of us running away together. The way he looked at me like I was his entire world. "No. He loved me."

"Love?" Mother scoffs. "He used you, got close to you so his family could destroy ours. And look what it got him, exactly what traitors deserve."

The room tilts sideways as I try to make sense of it all. Every secret meeting, every whispered promise... was it all part of some grand scheme?

"It's your fault, you know," Ronan jeers.

"Me?" I glance between my parents, terrified that this isn't about power but reputation instead.

Father shrugs. "If you weren't so insistent on keeping your little secret, maybe..."

My stomach churns, and I cover it with my hand as if it will keep me from being sick.

"We should marry you off, but I've got too much on my plate right now to find a suitable partner who'd accept tainted goods." Father looks at me like I'm nothing. I suppose he would. He knows the one value I had for him is gone. "Instead, we're sending you to Europe."

To be honest, if Phoenix is really dead, I don't want to be here. I want to grieve and figure out my life away from my parents. I have no illusion that they're setting me free, but time away is exactly what I need.

"You leave tomorrow. We need you gone before anyone discovers your betrayal."

Mother looks at me with the same disdain as my father and brother do.

I say nothing. I turn and stumble from Father's study, my legs barely holding me up. My stomach heaves. I make a beeline for the first bathroom, slamming the door behind me. I collapse to my knees on the cold tile, emptying what little breakfast I managed to eat into the toilet.

It can't be true. My father wouldn't... would he? Did he massacre an entire family?

Another wave of nausea hits. Tears stream down my face as I retch, the physical pain nothing compared to the emotional torment tearing me apart.

I press my forehead against the cool toilet seat, not caring about propriety anymore. What does it matter now? Everything I believed in, everything I've held onto these past months, it's gone. And maybe it was all built on lies.

"I hate you," I whisper, but I don't know who I'm talking to anymore. Phoenix for maybe betraying me? My parents for their calculated cruelty? Or myself for being so blind?

My fingers curl against the tile floor, seeking purchase in a world that's lost all stability. I want to scream, to break something, to make someone feel as shattered as I do right now. But all I can do is sit here as everything I thought I knew crumbles around me.

There's so much more than meets the eye.

Phoenix's words from this summer echo in my memory. I don't know if he was using me, but the words find a foothold, give me strength.

I pick myself up off the floor. I splash water on my face and study my reflection in



the mirror. I don't recognize myself anymore. The innocent woman who believed Phoenix and in true love is gone. It's me against the world, and I plan to survive.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

Chaos erupts through the house. Everyone from my mother down to the lowest member of staff is panicked. For a moment, I wonder where my father is, but then it doesn't matter. The house is under attack, and just like I've had to do over the last ten years, I need to protect myself.

I rush from my bedroom where I'd been working on my latest book, my secret career I'm using to save money to finally escape my family and this Mob world.

Funny how it's Mafia romance that's funding my plan.

If women really knew what it was like, they'd probably think twice about wanting to live in this world.

For example, would they like living in a home rebuilt over the ashes of what their father burned to the ground, killing so many people? It's creepy, right?

But that's where I've lived since returning from my one-year exile in Europe.

My parents even gave me the room that would have been Phoenix's had his house not burned and had he lived.

Except, as it turned out, he did live. He lived and spent the last ten years hiding and planning.

He didn't come back for me, which tells me my parents were probably right. He

didn't love me. He used me.

Phoenix and his brothers' return has been filled with violence. They killed Ronan. And I suspect they're why my house is currently filled with gunfire and screaming. They've come to take back what my father took from them.

I run up the back stairs to the third floor where Nanny Fiona is busy putting Brigit, my parents' nine-year-old goddaughter, to bed. Brigit is the center of my world, the only reason I haven't tried escaping sooner.

Nanny looks at me wide-eyed, holding a bat and pushing Brigit behind her as I enter. "Oh... it's you."

"You need to take Brigit and hide in the attic." I grab clothes and Brigit's favorite stuffed animal.

"What's happening, Keira?" Brigit's voice quavers. It breaks my heart and makes me hate my parents and Phoenix even more, which is a lot considering I've had ten years to stew on it.

"I don't know exactly, but it's really important that you hide. No one can know you're here." Especially not Phoenix. "Take the back stairs. Go into the secret room. When I can, I'll come up and let you know what's going on."

"Come on, sweetie," Nanny says, ushering Brigit out the door.

"Keira, will you come with us?" Brigit asks, her gray eyes looking up at me in fear.

"I can't right now. But I'll find you. Listen to Nanny Fiona, okay?" I pull her in for a hug, but it's a quick one as I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. "Go. Hurry."

I watch as they rush to the end of the hall and disappear around the corner. The house is loaded with secret passages and tunnels. Some are from the original estate. Others, like the secret rooms in the attic, were added by my father.

“You!” A hand wraps around my arm and yanks me back.

“It’s the Keans’ daughter,” another man, who I recognize as working for John O’Donnell, says.

John’s daughter was supposed to marry my brother Ronan.

Maybe if he had, we wouldn’t be in the mess.

But Blaise Ifrinn killed him. And now Hannah O’Donnell is married to Ash Ifrinn, probably in a deal to secure the O’Donnells’ alliance against us.

All of it has apparently led up to the overtaking of my home.

My parents and I will certainly be dead before the night is through.

“Bring her down. We’ll hold her until Phoenix tells us what he wants to do with her,” the second man says.

The first man’s gaze leers over my body. “I know what to do with her.”

Why do men always think with their dicks? And why are sex and violence as close together as love and hate?

He tugs me downstairs and puts me in my mother’s parlor, and there I wait, and wait, and pray that no one finds Brigit.

It's hours before a man enters the room. "Boss wants to see you."

I imagine that's Phoenix. He's won, after all.

I rise, keeping my head lifted as I follow the men through the house and down the stairs to the basement.

I've spent ten years toughening up. Learning to be strong.

Standing up when I have to and knowing when to back down.

I won't tremble for them. If I can arrange my freedom and Brigit's, I will. If not, I'll die.

I come around the corner and nearly stumble at my first look at Phoenix in ten years.

For a moment, I'm eighteen and seeing the man I love.

He's older, thirty-one now, but I can still see Phoenix in his features.

He watches me and for a moment, I think he's back ten years ago too, but then his eyes harden, becoming dark, deadly, filled with hate.

Now I don't see Phoenix, the man I knew, at all.

I'm brought to him, and that's when I see my parents imprisoned, my father on his knees.

I won't lie, I like it. Phoenix and his brothers have brought my father down and I'm glad of it.

But that doesn't mean I'm ready to align with the Ifrinns.

I still don't know if they started all this by sending Phoenix to woo me as part of a plan to ruin my father.

I clasp my shaking hands in front of me, the terror of the moment finally catching up to me but not wanting him to see my fear.

He steps closer to me. "Your mother offers you to me like chattel. I wonder, would you willingly sacrifice yourself to save your family?"

I arch a brow, not at all surprised my parents would trade me for their lives. It's that anger at all of them for treating me like chattel that has me saying, "You need a cow, Mr. Ifrinn?"

His expression stays cold and calculating. "I don't."

"But you need a wife," Mother says. "You know how much more respect married men receive."

He shrugs. "Maybe, but why would I marry the daughter of the man I just defeated? It looks weak."

I can't stop the stab of pain at his words. At one time, he spoke of love and marriage to me. Now he looks at me with the same disdain my parents do. No, not disdain. Pure hatred.

"Those who still respect Hampton will be forced to respect you since he approves of the match?—"

Father growls at Mother. "I never said?—"

“Let your wife finish, Hampton,” Phoenix snaps at him.

“And you’ll have a Kean under your thumb. Isn’t that what you want, Mr. Ifrinn? To humiliate us?”

I hate you. I hate you all.

"Marriage. A true union between our families." Phoenix’s gaze travels over me much in the same way that O’Donnell’s man had. I feel violated. Ten years ago, I’d have never expected Phoenix to look at me like that. At anyone like that. It proves how naive and wrong I was about him.

"You'll be mine in every way. No conditions, no escape clause. Your complete surrender in exchange for your family's lives," he finishes.

Mother makes a small sound of triumph.

"Your parents will live, though imprisoned. But you..." He steps closer to me, close enough that I can feel the heat, the hate, radiating off him. "You belong to me. For me to do whatever I want, whenever I want."

I understand what he means. Like everyone else, he’s turned into a man who uses his dick to oppress and control women.

“Not imprisoned,” Mother says. “In exchange for our freedom.”

He laughs. “That’s not happening. Not anytime soon. But I won’t kill you.” He turns back to me. “What do you say?”

I won’t exchange my life for my parents’. They didn’t earn that sort of loyalty from me. Not after everything they’ve made me do.

I also don't want to give Phoenix the satisfaction of seeing my fear or hurt, so I lift my chin in defiance. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I destroy everything. All of you. Even that kid you've got hidden somewhere in the house."

My breath catches. How does he know about Brigit? I remember how his brother Blaise had infiltrated the family. Had he paid enough attention to know about Brigit? I'd heard he'd married our former gardener, Jenna. Maybe she told him.

He can smell my fear. He leans toward me, his voice dropping lower. "That's right. I know there's a child somewhere in this house. I know you're the one hiding her."

He's threatening to kill her too. How had I ever loved this man?

I can't think about that now. Now, all I can do is try to save Brigit. "I'll do it. I'll marry you, Phoenix." I'll do anything to protect her.

He grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger and without warning, he claims my mouth with his, kissing me hard enough to bruise. I gasp against his lips, and for a moment, I'm back to those stolen moments ten years ago, when our love felt pure and possible.

But this isn't that innocent time. This kiss is about possession, about power, about marking me as his. My fingers dig into his shoulders, wanting to make him stop, but he doesn't. It's like power is building in him the longer the kiss goes on.

But if he thinks he can own me, he's got another thing coming. Oh, sure, he can force me to be his wife. He can claim my body. But I'll never be his.

Never.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I break the kiss, but the taste of her fingers on my lips. My fingers dig into her arms, probably leaving marks on her porcelain skin. The urge to pull her closer wars with the need to get her away from me... far, far away.

Keeping her close wins for the moment as I trace my thumb across her bottom lip, remembering all the nights we spent wrapped in each other's arms. Back when I was young and stupid enough to believe a Kean could ever love an Ifrinn.

Memories flood my brain. The scent of smoke. The heat of flames. With that, I shove her away, unable to look at her face without seeing the inferno that claimed my parents. The screams. The burning flesh. All because of her family's greed.

"Phoenix—"

"Don't." Ice coats my words. "You lost the right to say my name when your family murdered mine."

But even as hatred courses through my veins, my traitorous heart skips at the way she says my name. Ten years. Ten fucking years I've spent burying every memory of her beneath layers of rage and revenge. Yet one kiss threatens to unravel it all.

I turn away, focusing on her parents, her father still on his knees where I forced him to beg for his life. He stares at me with a murderous hate, and it reminds me why I'm here. Why I can never let myself feel anything for Keira again.

"I claim Keira as my wife, but don't mistake this for forgiveness. Your family took everything from me. Now I'm going to take everything from you."

I glance over at Keira. Her expression is impassive. Almost like she doesn't care what I do.

"Take her back to her room," I command one of my men. "Make sure she stays there."

He grabs Keira's arm, but she yanks away from him. Her chin lifts in a defiant tilt that she hadn't had ten years ago.

"I can walk myself."

The sway of her hips as she leaves burns into my retinas. Marrying her is a bad idea and yet, a perfect one as well.

I turn to face Hampton and Lana Kean. She's helped him off the floor, and now they sit on the old bed.

I wonder how many people they'd held down here as prisoners.

There are a shit ton of missing people surrounding them, my brothers and I included until we returned to reclaim what is rightfully ours.

But the others I imagine are dead and buried.

"Comfortable?" I crouch in front of Hampton, close enough to see the hatred blazing in his eyes. "Don't worry, you'll get to attend your daughter's wedding. Though the accommodations until then might be less than what you're accustomed to."

“This is unacceptable,” Lana protests.

I rise, brushing imaginary dirt from my pants.

“Unacceptable? Let’s see... What is unacceptable is how you killed my parents.

Torched our home and killed nearly a dozen people in it.

How you had the gall to take over the business.

” I feign thinking for a moment. “Oh, and how you kidnapped my brother’s wife.

You'd better hope she’s okay or my mercy may end tonight. ”

I make a mental note to check in with Ash to see how his wife, Hannah, is doing.

She’d been lured by a family still loyal to Hampton and he’d kidnapped her, holding her thinking Ash would come and he’d kill him.

Well, surprise. Not only did Ash come, but also the rest of the Ifrinns and an army of friends ready to get rid of Hampton.

"You can rot down here for all I care. Everything you took from us is mine now. Everything you killed for... it all belongs to me."

Hampton grits his teeth. “We’ll see about that. When?—”

My fist flies out, catching him in the jaw, the jolt of it reverberating up my arm. “You need to learn when to shut up.”

I walk out of the room to find my brothers Flint and Blaise leaning against opposite

walls of the hallway, matching smirks on their faces. I imagine they're wondering why I agreed to marry Keira. Why I kissed her.

"Shut up." I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, but Keira's taste refuses to fade.

"Didn't say anything." Flint pushes off the wall, arms crossed.

"I always thought you had a thing for Keira?—"

"I don't have a thing for her. This is business."

"Sealed with a kiss?" Flint snickers.

"It's called establishing dominance." Why am I defending myself to these jokers?

Blaise snorts. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days? Because from where I was standing, it looked more like you were trying to devour her face."

"You want to test how dominant I can be?" I step toward him, but Blaise just grins wider.

"Come on, Phoenix." Flint's voice turns serious. "If you hate her this much, why marry her? We've got control of the Keans, the house, and shortly, the business. You don't need?—"

"Because controlling them makes things much easier. With her by my side, anyone who might question my authority won't. It will make the takeover all the easier, lessen the chance of a war."

"And the fact that you used to be in love with her has nothing to do with it?" Blaise

quips.

How did they know? Keira and I had kept our little summer fling on the down-low. "That was a lifetime ago. Before her family murdered our parents."

"Right." Flint exchanges a look with Blaise. "Because that kiss definitely screamed 'I'm over you.'"

"Focus on the plan." I jab a finger at each of them. "The Keans are going down, and Keira's going to help us do it whether she wants to or not."

"Look, Phoenix. You don't need to do this to yourself. We can find another way to take them down that doesn't involve your being miserable for the rest of your life," Flint says.

I wave off his concern. "It's just marriage. Hell, Ash got stuck in an arranged marriage and he's doing fine."

Blaise lets out a laugh. "Are you kidding? Ash isn't doing fine. He's fucking in love."

"And I'm glad for it," Flint adds. "He deserves to let Meghan go and find peace and happiness."

"Lucky him," I quip.

"He didn't marry her to make her miserable." Flint shakes his head.

"No, that was Blaise."

Blaise gives his signature smirk. "I tried to seduce Jenna out of revenge. I married her because I love her."

"Fuck, you two can be such assholes." I rake my fingers through my hair. "Let's focus. Flint, check on Ash and Hannah at the hospital. Make sure Hampton's men didn't do any permanent damage when they grabbed her."

Flint's expression darkens. "I'll call him now."

"Good. Keep me updated." I turn to Blaise. "I need you to sweep the house. Make sure we've secured every entrance and exit. Post guards at strategic points. The Keans have more allies than cockroaches. I don't want any surprises tonight."

"Already on it." Blaise pulls out his phone. "O'Donnell's men are setting up a perimeter."

"Check the secret passages."

"Speaking of secrets..." Blaise's eyes narrow. "What are we doing about the girl?"

It takes me a minute to figure out what he's talking about. Then I remember the child. The child that had Keira's eyes change from defiance to panic. The child that made her decide to marry me.

"She stays where she is for now. As long as Keira cooperates, no harm comes to her or the nanny."

"And if she doesn't cooperate?" Blaise asks.

I meet his gaze. "Then she learns exactly how far I'll go to destroy her family."

Flint and Blaise exchange looks. "A kid, Phoenix? Really?"

"I didn't say I'd kill her. Who is the kid, anyway? For all we know, the Keans stole

her and there's a mother out there looking for her child."

Flint checks his watch. "I'm going up to call Ash. Should I let him know about your upcoming nuptials?"

"Get out before I shoot you."

My brothers leave, their footsteps fading down the hall.

I rub my temples, feeling oddly tired when I should be euphoric.

I've done it. I've overcome my enemy and stand on the verge of taking back everything that Hampton stole from us.

But all I can think about is Keira upstairs, probably plotting ways to escape.

Let her try. She's about to learn that the boy she knew died in that fire ten years ago. All that's left are ice and vengeance. And her kiss won't change that.

I head upstairs, striding through the Kean mansion's grand foyer, now my grand foyer. O'Donnell and Riley's men snap to attention as I pass, their eyes filled with respect. The Ifrinn name still carries weight, even after a decade of exile.

"Sir, the west wing is secured." A soldier approaches, back straight as steel. "Found a couple of Kean's men trying to access the computer systems. They're detained."

"Good. Lock down all communications. I want every scrap of data from their servers."

The mansion buzzes with activity. My men sweep room by room, securing decades of Kean secrets. The same halls where Hampton ruled his stolen empire now fill with

soldiers loyal to the Ifrinn name. Loyalty bought with blood and vengeance, but loyalty, nonetheless.

I pause at the base of the sweeping staircase, taking in the house built upon the ashes of my parents' home.

The footprint appears similar, yet it's not the same.

No, this place was built on betrayal and murder.

A part of me wants to torch it just like Hampton and Ronan burned my parents' home down, but I'm a practical man.

Taking over this house will be a symbol of what I've achieved, of who is boss now.

Maybe the house isn't the same, but the land is Ifrinn land.

I take the stairs up to the second floor and down to the room I'm told Keira is being held in.

I push open the door to find Keira perched on the window seat, moonlight casting silver threads through her platinum hair.

She doesn't turn at my entrance, but the rigid set of her shoulders tells me she's aware of my presence.

"Can't sleep?" I prowl closer, drawn to her like a fucking moth to flame. "Or plotting your escape?"

"Would it matter? You've made it clear I'm your prisoner."



"My future wife. There's a difference."

She spins to face me, gray eyes blazing. "Is there? Your guards suggest something different."

"Your family deserves everything coming to them." Ice coats my words as I close the distance between us. "And you'll do exactly as I say if you want them to survive."

"Or what?" She tilts her chin up, defiant as ever. "You'll kill me too?"

The space between us crackles with electricity. Her exotic perfume fills my lungs, making my head spin. I plant my hands on either side of her, caging her against the window.

"What are you going to do with me?" She's showing bravado, but I see fear in her eyes. What's odd is that I'm not so sure whether it's fear for her life or her family's. Or the girl's.

"Whatever I want." I trace a finger down her throat, feeling her pulse jump beneath my touch.

"The Phoenix I knew would never?—"

"He's dead." I curl my fingers around the back of her neck. "He burned with everything else that night."

"I see. So all is fair in revenge?" She stares up at me, and I don't like what I see. It's not fear. It's not even defiance. It's something like disappointment. It twists in my gut.

"Why not just kill me with the rest?" she finishes.

I'd be lying if I said I wished I could. Killing Hampton and his wife would ensure he couldn't come after me and mine again. But killing Keira... the thought of her dead makes my chest cave in.

"Maybe I will. Just not tonight." I step closer to her, her tits brushing against my chest, sending an inferno of need to my dick.

She sucks in a breath. "Is that what you are now? A man who doesn't respect the word no?"

"You haven't said no. Besides, despite what your mother said, you're no virgin." My gaze drops to her lips, wanting to taste them again. "Tell me, how many men have you let touch you since me?"

Pain flashes in her eyes before hardening to steel. "You don't get to judge me. Not after abandoning me."

"Abandoning you?" I bark out a harsh laugh, happy to break the spell she had on me. I step back from her. "Your family tried to kill me. They murdered my parents."

"But you weren't dead. No, apparently, you've spent ten years plotting revenge." She looks at me with disgust. "And now you're just like them. Using fear and threats, your dick, to control and punish everyone around you."

The accusation doesn't sit well. My vision goes red as I slam my palm against the wall by the window. The glass rattles in its frame.

"I am nothing like Hampton Kean." My voice comes out low, lethal. "Everything I am, everything I've become is because of what they did."

"I can see wanting vengeance on my parents, but threatening an innocent child,

forcing me to marry you, using people as pawns in your revenge game? The Phoenix I knew would never?—"

"That Phoenix is dead!" The roar tears from my throat as I grab her arms. "Your family killed him the night they murdered my parents. This is what's left. This is what they created."

"Your parents would be so proud," she sneers.

The monster I've become stares back at me in her eyes, but I don't retreat from it, even knowing she's right.

While my father would understand the wisdom of marrying Keira, he'd be disappointed at my threatening a child to make it happen.

But I push that away. He's not here. And it's his gentler nature that got him killed.

No. To fully take back the Ifrinn legacy, I need to be ruthless. I need to embrace the monster.

"Get some sleep. Tomorrow, we start planning our wedding." I flee the room like a coward, her accusations chasing me down the hall. The monster inside me howls for blood while something else, something I thought long dead, whispers that she could soothe my bitter soul.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

The door slams behind Phoenix, the sound rattling my bones. I sink back onto the window seat, my legs unable to hold me up any longer. The man who just left isn't the boy I fell in love with. His eyes are cold and dead now.

But maybe they'd always been that way and in my youth and naivety, I missed it. He hid it in his plot to bring my father down. A plot that failed when my father killed Phoenix's parents first.

My family destroyed his, and I've spent ten years trying to convince myself that it wasn't my fault. I couldn't believe it when my father told me ten years ago that Phoenix used me and as a result, he had to kill the Ifrinns.

"You did this." My father's words echo through time. "Your little secret forced our hand."

It was impossible to believe the man I'd fallen for was capable of such treachery and betrayal.

The man with the empty, soulless eyes I saw tonight is capable of that and more.

So why does his kiss linger? Even angry, even cruel, his touch still sets my skin on fire.

I hate that he can affect me this way after everything.

A sob builds in my throat but I swallow it down. Crying won't help anyone. Not me, not my parents locked in their own basement, not Brigit. She's the only reason for me to follow through with whatever Phoenix wants from me. Even if it means handing over my body.

Anger courses through me at my parents and Phoenix.

How dare they lay their crimes at my feet?

I was eighteen, still believing in love and happily ever after.

More importantly, I was a young woman with zero agency in her life.

Yet somehow, I'm to blame for all this destruction?

I'm the one who has to pay for it? They were the ones who chose violence, who orchestrated annihilation.

The anger gives way to grief and guilt. For ten years, I've carried the burden of Phoenix's death. If I hadn't loved him, if I hadn't been so naïve about life...

But Phoenix isn't dead. He's here, breathing, living, hating.

All these years of mourning him and the dreams we had.

He was alive, and he never made it known until he and his brothers blew into our lives, killing my brother and taking over the house, threatening us all with death. Including an innocent child.

Why didn't he come to me, take me away from here like he promised?

He knew how I felt about my family. He knew my life here was untenable.

All those secret walks in the garden or when he'd sneak me into his house through private passages, and we'd talk about life and love and a future together.

Then he'd kiss me, and I felt cherished.

It was the only time in my life I truly felt loved and respected.

His lips were soft then, gentle. Nothing like the bruising kiss he forced on me today. That kiss tasted of rage and revenge. And it's clear from his comments tonight that he sees me as a spoil of war, something he can do whatever he wants with whether that's to take me against my will or kill me.

The house is quiet now, but his hatred fills every room, seeping through the walls like poison.

Not that the house ever felt warm and loving.

That had been the Ifrinn home. Phoenix's parents were kind and sweet, at least to me.

I knew the rumors that Mr. Ifrinn could be lethal if warranted, but whenever I saw him, he had a smile on his face and he loved his family.

I thought that's what I'd have with Phoenix.

But perhaps the warmth and love burned away when Ronan set the house on fire. This house my father built has never been warm, has never had love. And it appears it never will, at least not in my time.

I'm going to continue to live in this loveless home married to a man who hates me.

Who'll probably someday kill me. As soon as my parents and I are of no use to him, we'll disappear. It's how this world works.

A floorboard creaks outside my door, and I freeze. Heavy footsteps pass by. Probably one of Phoenix's men making their rounds. My heart pounds as I think of Brigit hidden away with Nanny Fiona in the secret room. God, I hope they're okay. I pray they haven't been found.

Brigit is my focus now. I know I'm a dead woman walking, but I can use the time I have to protect her.

To figure out how to get her out of here and somewhere safe.

Sadness fills me at the idea of sending her away.

She's the only bright spot in my life. But for her safety, I'll do anything, including risking Phoenix's wrath.

My stomach churns at the thought of playing nice with the man who's taken over my world. But what choice do I have? Every defiant word from my mouth puts Brigit at greater risk. One wrong move and Phoenix could tear this house apart and find her. But if I play my cards right, I can appease him while I make plans for Brigit's escape.

I'll give Phoenix whatever he demands—my submission, my dignity, even the twisted marriage he's forcing upon me.

But Brigit stays safe, hidden, protected.

She's all that matters. I'll burn the world down before I let anyone hurt her.

Boots stomp up the main staircase. More of Phoenix's men, their voices carrying

through the walls. They're methodically searching every room, every closet, every possible hiding place.

"Check for secret doors," someone calls out. "Rumor is the place is filled with secret passages."

I close my eyes, willing them not to find the secret room in the attic.

It's not on any blueprints. But one wrong move, one loose floorboard, and they'll find it. If Phoenix discovers her, nothing will stop him from using her as the ultimate weapon in his revenge. I can't have that.

I'll kill him before I'll let him destroy Brigit.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I stalk the halls of the house built on my family's ashes.

Hampton's desire to replace my father was so complete that the home is nearly identical to what had been there before.

It doesn't escape my notice that Keira's room is nearly in the same location as mine had been.

Did she choose it on purpose to remember me or to mock me?

I'm also keenly aware of how comfortable she is. Like this is her place. Her space. It feels like a slap to the face. I hold on to that feeling to guard against the sweet memories that want to break through. Memories of secret rendezvous. Of sharing dreams. Of making plans.

"You're everything," she'd whispered once, pressed against me in the shadows. "I'd choose you over anyone."

How many of our moments were orchestrated? How many times did she run straight from my arms to report back to her father? I imagine her laughing about it later, the foolish Ifrinn heir, so besotted, he never saw the blade coming.

The worst part? I believed her. Every soft touch, every tender look. I drank it all in like a man dying of thirst. She played me until I was completely under her spell.

I'd given her everything. My trust, my love, my future. And she'd handed it all to her family gift-wrapped with a bow. The perfect inside source, feeding them exactly what they needed to destroy us.

She chose her family's wealth and power over my love. Chose to stay silent while they murdered mine. Chose to inhabit my home, my legacy, as if it were her own.

Our marriage will change that. This place will become her prison. The wedding ring will be the chain that traps her here, like a collar around her neck, marking her as mine in the cruelest way possible.

I give my head a hard shake to rid it of Keira. This isn't about old wounds or broken hearts. It's about justice. About making the Keans pay for what they've done. And Keira is just another weapon in my arsenal to make reclaiming my throne easier. Nothing more.

I search for a room that doesn't stink of the Keans, which isn't easy.

In fact, my skin crawls at the idea of sleeping under the roof of the man who ruined my life.

But I need to stay, need to sleep under this roof that Hampton Kean stole from my dead parents.

It's the only way to make the other families see that the Ifrinns have come home to reclaim what's ours.

Already, the old guard is falling in line, remembering their allegiances.

Power recognizes power, and Boston's underworld has a long memory.

I finally find a guest suite that will do.

Inside, I pull out my phone and dial Ash's number.

It's late... or I guess it's early, but I don't imagine he's sleeping.

I know from Flint's text that Hannah will be fine, but Ash is my second in command.

I want him to hear from me how we've succeeded.

How our parents and Meghan, a woman he once loved, are being vindicated.

"Ash, how is Hannah?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed and rubbing the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger.

"She's going to be fine. She woke up and... we're all fine."

All? "Was there a question about that?"

"I've been a dick, but she's forgiven me."

"Please tell me you finally told her you love her." I can't afford to have his attention divided because he and Hannah are at odds.

"I did." He lets out a breath. "Fuck, Phoenix. I'm going to be a father."

It takes me a minute to register the words. "She's pregnant?"

"Yes. That fucker Hampton... the bullet hit her in the side, but she and baby are fine. But I want to kill him. He's mine. Promise me."

“When the time comes, I promise.”

“As soon as Hannah is stable?—”

“It won’t be tonight.”

There’s a pause on Ash’s end of the line. “Why? You’re not going to let him live after everything.”

“He’s more useful alive right now than dead. At least until we get the business fully in our grasp. He’s locked in the basement with his wife.”

“What’s the plan?”

I’m thinking now isn’t the time to reveal my plans. Not while he’s with Hannah and celebrating their love and impending parenthood.

“Phoenix. The plan,” he demands.

“I’m going to marry Keira.”

Again, there’s a pause. “Well, I guess it will be a big fuck you to Hampton to reveal you and Keira?—”

“It’s not a love match, Ash. Far from it.

It’s business. I know you love Hannah, but considering how your marriage started, you understand, right?

” I don’t want my brothers getting ideas that I’ll end up with some fairy tale romance like they have.

I'm happy for them, but there's no love ever after in my future.

I'm still focused on taking back what's mine, making those who wronged me pay.

"Sure, but if you have control, you don't need to marry her."

"Like keeping the Keans alive, it can serve a purpose. It will be harder to go against me if my wife is a Kean."

"Maybe."

I don't like his doubt.

"It's a risk. And what do you do when you don't need her? If you're married to her, you can't just... get rid of her."

I can't think about killing Keira now. "It doesn't matter. What's important now is making sure everyone knows an Ifrinn is in charge now. I know you need to be with Hannah, but I'm going to need you soon."

"I'll be there."

When I hang up, I have a moment to be happy for Ash. He's found peace from the guilt over losing Meghan ten years ago in the fire and new love and happiness with his wife. And they're having a baby.

I laugh. It seems none of my brothers ever learned to use a condom. Flint is already a father, and Blaise and now Ash are both expecting.

The image of Keira carrying my child comes to mind unbidden. It pisses me off and I nearly pitch my phone across the room in frustration. I need a drink.

I wander out of the room and toward where my father's study had been. As expected, Hampton's is in the same location.

"Fucker." He's got a fully stocked bar with expensive booze.

At least he has good taste in whisky. I pour two fingers.

My father used to drink this same label while working late in his study.

Now I'm standing in what used to be his space, trying to understand why I don't just kill them all now.

I could wipe the Keans off the face of the earth just like they planned to do to my family.

It would be clean. Simple. The ultimate revenge.

But strategically, I know keeping them alive right now is the wiser choice.

Marrying Keira is a part of that, and I won't be dissuaded or undone by memories of a girl who betrayed me.

In fact, forcing her to marry me is an even better revenge.

Making her live with the consequences of her family's actions.

Making her watch as I dismantle everything they built on my family's bones.

Making her feel the pain and fear my brothers and I have endured for ten years.

Making an example of her to anyone who might challenge my right.

I take a gulp of the amber liquid, feeling it burn down my throat as I plot how to break the woman who broke me. Physical violence holds no appeal. It's too quick, too merciful. No, Keira Kean deserves the kind of suffering that lingers. As do her parents.

The wedding will be my first strike. I'll parade her in front of Boston's elite, make her smile and play the blushing bride while everyone whispers about how the mighty Keans have fallen.

Her pristine reputation, the one thing she's managed to maintain all these years despite not being a virgin, will crumble as I expose every dirty secret her family tried to bury.

I'll take everything she holds of value, everything provided to her by her father through the spoils of her father's betrayal. She can wear beggars' clothes for all I care.

The society papers will eat it up, Boston's ice princess caught in a scandal. I'll leak stories about her parents' murderous rise and fall and about how she sold herself to save their worthless lives. Watch her perfect mask crack as her world burns down around her.

"Time to see how you handle being powerless, Princess," I vow as I down the last bit of my whisky.

The true beauty of my revenge is that she'll have to smile through it all. One wrong move and her parents pay the price. Or that kid. I need to find out who that kid is. Maybe I'll be a hero and return it to whoever the Keans took her from.

My lips curl into a cold smile as I imagine the pain and fear she'll feel. It's only fair after what her family did to mine.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

Sleep claims me despite the terror I feel at my predicament.

The night has been crazy. Phoenix isn't dead, and yet he's not the man I knew.

It's a disappointment on so many levels, but the first is that for a split second, I thought maybe he'd finally fulfill his promise to take me away.

Maybe we could be a family. It must be that hope that has my dreams rolling back the years to when I was eighteen and I'd snuck out of the house to meet him.

In the dream, it's late at night as we sneak through his house trying to be quiet as we laugh and kiss and get lost in each other.

He grabs my hand and tugs me into the library.

"Aren't you supposed to be studying?" I tease him. It's summer and he's just finished college, but he's taking a special course to get some sort of license to work in his father's business.

"I'd rather study you." He sets me on the desk his mother uses to run the house.

"Someone could see us." But I don't try to escape. I never could resist him.

"Let them." His fingers trace my jaw. "I'm tired of hiding how I feel about you."



My heart soars. So far, our relationship has been a secret.

While our families work together and are friendly, there's been growing tension.

Phoenix says he feels it too, and he has a sense that his parents are looking to arrange a marriage between him and another family.

It breaks my heart, but Phoenix says it won't ever happen.

He'll run away, take me with him, before he'll be forced to marry someone else.

But he's not the only one who has felt the need to keep our relationship a secret. I've given Phoenix something my father feels is his to give away, my virginity. Then again, if he knew I'd had sex, he'd force me to marry Phoenix, and that's what I want more than anything in the world.

I rest my head on Phoenix's chest, memorizing the steady rhythm of his heart. "We could run away."

"We could do anything." His lips brush my temple.

But I want more. I find his lips and kiss him.

He groans and traces kisses down my neck as his hands roam lower, setting my skin ablaze through the thin fabric of my dress.

He pushes it up and wraps my legs around his waist. Everything else fades.

Family expectations, social obligations, the growing tension between our households.

Here, we're just Phoenix and Keira, two hearts beating as one.

Phoenix's fingers tangle in my hair, and I melt further into his embrace. Our clothes disappear, and his lips suck on my nipples, making me whimper with need. The next moment, he thrusts inside me and I gasp at the wonderful sensations. My mother always suggested that sex was a chore, but with Phoenix it's amazing.

He rocks inside me, and I hold on to him, savoring the feel of him, the building friction.

I'm teetering on the edge of bliss. It sits right there, a moment from shattering.

My breath hitches and holds as I hold in that limbo between tension and release.

Suddenly, the warmth vanishes. Phoenix's grip tightens painfully in my hair, yanking my head back. His eyes, once soft with affection, now glint with malice.

"Did you enjoy playing with my heart?" His voice drips venom as he transforms into a stranger wearing Phoenix's face. "Making me believe you actually cared? It was an act, wasn't it, Keira? You whored yourself for greed."

"I do care. I love—" My protests die as his cruel laugh echoes through the room.

"Your family destroyed mine." He releases me with a shove. The books around us burst into flames. Smoke fills my lungs as the inferno consumes everything. Phoenix's silhouette stands unmoved among the blaze, his expression twisted with hate.

"This is what your so-called love did to me." He spreads his arms wide as fire licks up the walls. "Burned everything I cared about to ash."

I bolt upright in bed, sweat coating my skin.

My heart thunders as reality crashes back.

The memories of young love have morphed into this nightmare.

Phoenix isn't the boy from my dreams anymore.

He's become exactly what he said, a monster forged in the flames of my father's betrayal. And I'm his prisoner.

I press my palms against my temples, trying to silence Phoenix's accusations echoing through my mind. Monster . Whore . Each word cuts deep.

I understand his pain, even his hatred toward my parents.

But he's not blameless. He whored himself for his family too.

In my father's eyes, he took my only value and then tossed me aside.

I don't condone my father's actions, but neither can anyone be surprised that he sought retribution for what the Ifrinns did to me, all to humiliate my father.

And now, ten years later, Phoenix and his brothers are back for vengeance. I have no doubt we're being kept alive so he can humiliate us. And when he's done, we'll all be dead.

Brigit. I can't let her become another casualty of this war. I have to make sure she's okay and then figure out how to get her out of here and away from Phoenix. For her, I'll risk everything. I've spent nine years protecting her. I won't fail now.

I slip from bed, not bothering with my robe as I make my way to check on Brigit. The door handle rattles, locked from the outside. Of course. I'm his prisoner now.

But then I remember Phoenix teaching me how to pick the lock when I told him my father sometimes locked me in my room.

I run to my bathroom and grab a bobby pin and return to the door.

I pray there isn't a guard outside as I slip the pin through the hole and poke around until I hear the tumbler release the lock.

I freeze, heart thundering in fear, but no footsteps approach.

Easing the door open, I slip into the darkened hallway.

I start down the hall to the back stairs to the third floor.

The stairwell is pitch black, but I know my way even with my eyes closed.

I reach the landing and start toward the door to the attic at the end of the hall.

Each step, I'm terrified I'll be stopped.

I'm panicked about what I'll find when I finally reach the secret room.

What if Phoenix posted guards? What if they've already found her?

My chest constricts. I should have fought harder, should have run with her years ago. Should have?—

A floorboard groans. I duck into an alcove, pulse racing.

I listen for footsteps, but I can't hear over the roar of my heartbeat in my ears.

After a moment, I continue my journey. The door to the attic is so close now.

Just a few more steps and I can ensure she's safe.

Then back to my room before Phoenix discovers I'm gone.

My heart leaps into my throat at another creak. The darkness stretches endlessly before me. Phoenix's men could be here, and I wouldn't know. Maybe they're following me, looking for Bridgit. I stop, second-guessing my plan.

I release a shaky breath and continue forward. The familiar path now feels like navigating a minefield. My fingers trail along the wall, a guide as I move closer to the door.

Strong arms lock around my waist from behind. A large hand clamps over my mouth, stifling my startled gasp. My back slams against a solid chest, the impact forcing air from my lungs.

Cologne fills my senses, making my blood run cold. I know that scent, know the feel of those hands. But this isn't the gentle touch from my dreams. This is the grip of a predator who's caught his prey.

I try to twist free, but his hold only tightens. His breath fans hot against my ear, and I can feel the rage radiating off him in waves.

My heart slams against my ribs as his grip tightens. The hand over my mouth presses harder, fingers digging into my cheeks. I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't move.

The darkness of the hallway spins around me. My bare feet scrape against the floor as he drags me backward, away from my destination, away from?—

No. I thrash against his hold, but it's like fighting steel bands. My nails claw at the arm covering my mouth. He doesn't even flinch.

My teeth snap at his hand. He jerks back with a curse, but his other arm locks tighter around my ribs, and I gasp as the pressure steals my breath. I remember a self-defense move one of my guards taught me. I drive my elbow back, twist to the side, feel his grip start to loosen.

Before I get away, he pushes me against the wall. "Going somewhere, Princess?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

What the fuck is she doing?

I was awakened with a start, my body hard and aching from dreams of Keira's blonde hair spread across silk sheets and gray eyes darkened with desire. It turns out, even in sleep, I can't escape her.

A creak in the hallway caused me to slide my hand under my pillow, wrapping it around my gun as I silently rose from the unfamiliar bed. I approached the door. Another soft footstep padded outside, too light to be one of my men.

I eased the door open, catching a glimpse of Keira sneaking down the hall. Of course it was her. I watched for a moment, noting her thin, barely there night clothes that sent electricity crackling across my skin, memories of my dream mixing with the reality before me.

I followed her silently, keeping to the shadows, doing my damndest not to remember how we used to sneak around. How many times did I pull her into dark corners, tasting her gasps as I...

Fuck it. I closed the distance in two long strides, wrapping one arm around her waist while my other hand covered her mouth, muffling her startled cry. Her body went rigid against mine and she fought, using her teeth and elbow.

But now, with her pressed face toward the wall, I have the upper hand as long as I ignore the fire coursing through my blood at the feel of her body against mine.

"Going somewhere?" I growl.

"None of your business."

How the fuck did she even get out? I'd locked her in her room. Then it comes to me. "You picked the lock." I should have never taught her how to do that.

"Let me go, Phoenix." Her whisper carries more steel than fear.

"Sneaking out to fuck someone?"

"You're a pervert."

A bitter laugh escapes me. I'd underestimated her back then, assumed she was just the innocent girl next door. Now I wonder how many other skills she's hiding behind that angelic face.

"Oh, come on now. You can't really think I'll believe you haven't used your skills of seduction on someone else. Are you setting him up too? You know plenty about deception."

She struggles against my grip, but I hold firm. "I learned from the best, didn't I? You're the one who played me."

I spin her around to face me, keeping my hands locked on her arms. In the dim light, her gray eyes flash with defiance. "Where were you headed? Your parents are locked in the basement, so I know you weren't going to see them."

Her pulse races beneath my fingers, but her face remains a mask of composure. The same mask she wore all those years ago when she was playing me for a fool.



"I needed water." She lifts her chin, but the lie is transparent.

"The kitchen's the other direction." I lean closer, watching her eyes widen. "I'm right, aren't I? You're off to a secret lover hidden away in this massive house?"

Her breath catches. A telling reaction.

My fingers dig deeper into her arms, rage burning in my blood that another man is touching her. "Who is he, Keira? One of the staff? One of your guards?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"Am I? You always did have a talent for keeping secrets." I'll tear this house down brick by brick to find him. "Tell me, does he know what you really are? How you can look a man in the eyes and make him believe you love him while plotting his family's destruction?"

"Stop it." She struggles despite how useless it is.

"I asked you a question, Princess. Who were you going to see?"

She finally stops fighting. She simply looks up at me with those defiant eyes.

"Your silence is very telling." I lean closer until our faces are inches apart. "You know what happens to men who touch what belongs to me?"

"I don't belong to you." She pushes against my chest, but I don't budge. "And what I do with my life stopped being your business a long time ago."

"Wrong." My fingers thread through her hair, gripping tight enough to make her gasp. "The moment you agreed to marry me, everything about you became my business."

Including whoever you're protecting right now."

"There's no one?—"

"Don't lie to me." The words come out as a growl. "I can see it in your eyes. There's someone you're willing to risk everything to see tonight."

Her breath hitches, and that small sound feeds the fury building inside me. I picture her wrapped in another man's arms, giving him the same soft sighs she once gave me. Letting him into her tight, warm body.

"When I find him, and I will find him, I'm going to make an example of what happens to people who touch my wife.

" I trace her jawline with my thumb, feeling her tremble, and while it makes me a bastard, I'm happy for her fear.

"I'll start with his dick. I'll cut it off and give it to you as a memento right before I put a bullet in his head while you watch. "

"You're a monster." Oddly, her expression isn't one of fear. No, it looks a lot like disappointment. She's judging me and what I've become, and it's surprising just how angry that makes me. How dare she judge me. I'm of her making.

"You helped create this monster, sweetheart. Now you get to live with the consequences."

She laughs. Actually laughs. Sure, there's no humor in it. It's closer to a scoff. "You forget that my life isn't my own. Has never been my own. I live the consequences of the monsters in my life."

“Poor little Keira.” I want to wipe the smirk off her face. “Tell me about your lover boy now, and maybe I’ll be merciful. One chance, Keira. Who are you protecting?”

She meets my gaze, chin lifted. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Nothing?” I press her harder against the wall, and I’m annoyed to find my dick is hard against her. The last thing I want is for her to think she can seduce me. “Then why did you pick the lock? Why risk sneaking around in the dark?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Her gray eyes bore into mine. “Your reign of terror is working, keeping me awake. You should be so pleased. But if you had any conscience, you’d be aware that there are people here who are innocent?—”

“Innocent.” This time, I’m the one who scoffs. “Oh, sweetheart, we know you’re not innocent. And as far as a conscience, your conscience didn’t seem troubled when your family murdered mine.”

“You don’t know anything about what happened.” Her hands ball into fists against my chest and I’m sure she’s getting ready to punch me. That’s okay. I can take it.

“I know enough.” I make the mistake of leaning in even closer. The scent of her skin clouds my judgment, making me want things I shouldn’t. “Last chance. Tell me who you’re protecting, or I’ll tear this house apart room by room until I find them.”

Her chin lifts higher. Her eyes narrow. “Do whatever you want, Phoenix. You will anyway.”

The challenge in her voice ignites something primal inside me. She thinks she can protect whoever she’s hiding? Fine. I’ll make her watch as I destroy everything she holds dear.

"Have it your way." I grip her chin. "But remember, whatever happens next is on you. You could have prevented it."

A flash of fear crosses her face, quickly masked by determination. It feeds my rage, knowing she cares this much about someone else.

"Maybe I should take you right here." I drag my fingers down her neck, feeling her pulse race. "See if you're still as eager as you used to be."

Her breath catches, but she doesn't look away. That stubborn defiance only makes me want to break her more.

"Remember how you used to beg for my touch?" I press closer, grinding my dick against her. "Or was that all part of the act too?"

"You don't know anything about?—"

"I know exactly what you are." My hand slides up her side, just below her tit. "A beautiful liar who'll spread her legs for anyone who can advance her family's agenda."

Her hand flies out to slap me, but I catch her wrist. The contact sends electricity through my veins. "Careful, Princess. You don't want to make me angry."

Her eyes flash with hatred, but there's something else there too. Something that makes my blood burn.

"You're shaking. Is it fear? Or something else?"

Her silk pajamas are thin enough that I can feel every curve pressed against me. "Tell me you don't want this." I grip her hip, grinding against her. "Tell me you haven't

thought about it since the moment you saw me."

A small gasp escapes her lips, and triumph surges through me. She can pretend to hate me all she wants, but her body remembers.

"That's what I thought." I lean in until my lips brush her ear. "You always were a terrible liar when it came to this part."

"I hate you."

"Keep telling yourself that." I bite her earlobe gently, feeling her shudder. "Maybe eventually, you'll believe it."

Her hands push against my chest with force enough that I step back. I laugh as I grab her wrist and drag her down to the second floor and to her room.

Inside her room, I release her with a gentle push. She spins to face me, backing away until she hits the bed. The sight of her there, disheveled and defiant, sends a flood of need coursing through my blood.

I force myself to step back before I do something we'll both regret. "You're mine now. Whether you like it or not, this is happening. The sooner you accept it, the easier things will be."

She says nothing, but the heat in her eyes tells me volumes.

"I'll have guards posted outside your door. Don't try picking the lock again."

The wedding can't come soon enough. Once she's officially mine, I'll take my time breaking down those walls she's built.

I'll make her body remember every touch, every kiss, until she can't deny what's between us. Until she begs for more. And then... and then, I'll take everything she loves. Payback is a bitch, baby.

But not tonight. Tonight, I need distance before I lose control completely. The thought of another man touching her drives me crazy, but the marriage will fix that. She'll be mine in every way possible.

"Sweet dreams, Princess." I lock the door behind me, already planning tomorrow's security changes. No more midnight wandering for my future bride. No more secrets.

Whatever, whoever, she's hiding, I'll find them. And then I'll show her exactly what happens to people who try to keep things from me.

I post two guards outside Keira's door, men I trust to keep her locked away until morning. "No one goes in or out without my direct order."

"Yes, Boss." They take their positions, weapons ready.

Back in the hallway, my skin still burns where she touched me. The scent of her lingers on my clothes, driving me mad with memories. The way she felt pressed against me, soft and yielding despite her defiance. The small sounds she made when I touched her.

I slam my fist into the wall, but it doesn't do anything to reduce the anger and frustration. Nothing helps when it comes to Keira. Even after everything her family did, even knowing she probably played me for a fool, my body still craves her.

I stalk back to my room, shove my lounge pants down to my ankles, and grip my dick.

I stroke it hard, nearly to the point of pain as I imagine fucking Keira.

At first, she's staring at me with those defiant, angry eyes, but my release won't come.

Not like that. Only when I imagine her surrendering, arching back and letting out a long moan do my balls tighten.

I stroke faster, faster until my cum sprays out, making a mess over the hardwood floors.

I'm pissed again. Angry that even in my fucking fantasies, she wins. Maybe I'll have her clean up my cum to punish her. No, then she'd know what she does to me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I shouldn't have agreed to this marriage. I can't see surviving years of clawing desire mixed with rage. It will kill one or both of us for sure.

But I can't back out now. I have to follow through and do what I can to bring about her submission. To have her learn to accept her place at my side, whether she likes it or not.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

I press my back against the door after Phoenix locks me in, sliding down until I hit the floor. My skin still burns where he touched me, his accusations cutting deeper than any knife could. The way he'd grabbed me, spoken to me... treating me like some common whore sneaking off to meet a lover.

My tank top has twisted around my torso, and I yank it straight with indignation. "Damn you, Phoenix." I wrap my arms around my knees, fighting back tears. I refuse to let him break me.

If he only knew the truth, but how can I possibly tell him now?

The hatred in his eyes tells me that there's nothing I can say or do to change things.

Even if I wanted to explain everything, he'd never believe me.

Not after what my family did. Not after he's convinced himself I betrayed him too. Hypocrite.

I can't stay here on the floor and wallow. There is someone relying on me. Someone I have to protect. I only hope that I can.

I force myself to stand. I need to be stronger than this.

Smarter. Phoenix is in charge, and I imagine he'll continue to be.



I can't hope my father's men will rescue him, and even if they did, my situation wouldn't be much improved.

My only recourse now is to bide my time and play my cards right.

Even if it means letting Phoenix think I'm exactly what he believes me to be.

I climb into bed frustrated and worried about Brigit. I can only believe that if they'd found her, Phoenix would be demanding to know more about her. I shudder to think about it.

If I'd been stronger back then, fought harder against my parents, maybe things would be different now. But I let them lock me away, cut off all contact. I believed their lies about his family's deaths.

Worse, I let them use my mistakes as justification for murder. "We did this because you want to keep your little secret," they'd said. The words still echo in my head, a constant reminder of my role in destroying the man I loved.

I retrieve my secret phone from where I'd hidden it beneath the mattress before Phoenix's men stormed the house. I'd learned long ago how not having a phone made me vulnerable and powerless.

My fingers hover over the keypad as I craft a message to Nanny Fiona.

Are you both safe?

I delete it immediately. Too obvious.

Everything okay with the renovations?

I type instead, hoping Fiona realizes what I'm trying to find out. Phoenix's men could be monitoring my phone. They could trace the message. I need to make it as benign as possible.

I press Send before fear paralyzes me completely.

The message shows as delivered, but no reply comes. It is the middle of the night. Minutes stretch into eternity as I stare at the screen, willing those three dots to appear.

Nothing.

God, what if they found them? What if Phoenix already knows? What if?—

The guard's boots scrape outside my door, and I nearly drop the phone. I shove it under my pillow, patting it down. When it's quiet again, I pull it out.

Five more minutes pass.

Surely, Phoenix would have said something if he found them. My stomach twists into knots. I remind myself that Fiona knows what to do. She won't fail now.

My phone buzzes, and relief surges through me.

Project looking lovely. No concerns about the new paint job.

Brigit is safe and well. I delete both messages immediately, tucking the phone away. I settle into bed to sleep. I have a fitful night, but at least Phoenix doesn't show up in my dreams again.

The next morning, I rise, shower, and dress like my life is normal. When I finish pulling my hair back, my door opens and one of our servants brings in a tray of food,

setting it on a small table near my window.

Knowing Brigit and Nanny Fiona will be hungry, I make egg sandwiches from the toast and wrap it in my napkin. I'll figure out how to get it to them later. I eat the fruit parfait and drink the coffee.

I hide the food when the servant returns to pick up the tray.

When she leaves, the guard locks my door and I'm stuck wondering how I'm going to get food up to the attic.

I hear talking and go to the door to listen.

I'm in luck. The guards are being called downstairs.

When I'm sure no one is in the hall, I get the food, pick the lock, and hurry down the hall, up the stairs, and toward the door up to the attic.

I feel like at any moment Phoenix is going to appear, but he doesn't. I enter the attic, open the door to the secret room, and step in.

"Oh, thank God." Nanny Fiona stands with Brigit behind her. "We've been so worried."

Brigit launches herself at me, and I gather her close, relieved to find her safe and well.

"I brought food." I pull back, brushing Brigit's dark curls from her face. "Are you both okay up here?"

Fiona takes the wrapped bundle, but her eyes never leave my face. "What's happening

down there? We heard fighting..."

"Phoenix Ifrinn is alive." The words still feel strange on my tongue. "He's taken control of the house."

"The Ifrinns?" Fiona's face pales. "They're dead."

"Not Phoenix and his brothers." I guide Brigit to the small table so she can eat. "It's important that you stay hidden, but I'm not sure how often I'll be able to come up. He's locked me in my room."

"Why are they so mean?" Brigit asks around a mouthful of eggs and toast.

"They feel they were wronged. You know how you get mad if you think someone was mean to you first?"

She nods.

"It's the same here." Except with guns and killing . I kiss her forehead, forcing a smile. "We're going to be brave, just like always. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

But as I hold her, I wonder how I can possibly keep that promise when Phoenix's hatred is at lethal levels.

"Well, isn't this cozy?"

My blood turns to ice at Phoenix's voice behind me. I spin around, instinctively stepping to block Brigit from his sight, but it's too late. He fills the doorway of the hidden room, his massive frame blocking our escape route.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve sneaking out again.” His eyes scan the space, taking in the makeshift beds, the food on the table. “Quite the setup you've got here.”

“Phoenix—” My throat closes around his name.

“Who's hiding up here that's worth risking everything for?” He steps closer, but I lift my chin. He won’t get Brigit. Maybe at least he’ll drop the idea that I have a secret lover, although I prefer that to his knowing about Brigit.

“Leave her alone!” Brigit darts around me before I can stop her, planting herself between us with her tiny hands on her hips. “Two wrongs don’t make a right!”

Phoenix goes completely still, his eyes locked on Brigit's face.

Everything inside me goes still. “Brigit, go to Nanny Fiona. Now.”

“No!” She stamps her foot. “I want to stay with you. You promised we'd always be together!”

“How old are you?” Phoenix's question cuts through the air.

Brigit lifts her chin. “Nine. And I'm not afraid of you.”

“You're the only one who isn't.”

I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't do anything but stand there as my carefully constructed world crumbles around me.

“You living in the attic?”

“We’re just playing up here,” Nanny Fiona says.

Phoenix's eyes narrow. "Who are you?"

"The nanny." Nanny Fiona is trying to look strong, but I hear the fear in her voice.

"Nanny, take the girl to?—"

"I have a name. It's Brigit."

I close my eyes, for once wishing Brigit weren't so outspoken.

His eyes narrow, but his lip quirks up as if he's amused by her. "Take Brigit to her room. You're both to stay there."

Brigit takes my hand. "I don't want to leave Keira."

Phoenix's lips curve into what might pass for a smile, but his eyes remain cold. "You have no choice."

The casual way he says it sends chills down my spine. There's no mistaking the underlying threat, the absolute control he now wields over all of us.

Fiona hesitates, her gaze darting between Phoenix and me. I give her a slight nod, knowing we have no choice.

"Come along, dear." Fiona gently pries Brigit's fingers from my arm. "Let's get you comfortable downstairs."

"But—"

"Now, Brigit." The steel in Phoenix's tone brooks no argument.

Brigit's bottom lip trembles as Fiona leads her away. She looks back once at Phoenix. "You're mean." She disappears with Nanny Fiona.

The silence stretches between me and Phoenix, thick with unspoken accusations. The stillness feels like a noose tightening around my neck.

Phoenix's fingers grip my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. "How long did you think you'd be able to hide them up here?"

As long as it took. "They're innocent in your vendetta. Let them go." The idea of losing Brigit nearly brings me to my knees, but if I have to let her go to save her, I will.

"I suppose you want me to think this is where you were going last night." His thumb traces my bottom lip, the gentle touch at odds with the fury in his eyes. "Clever ruse, really. Once again, I've underestimated you."

"Phoenix—"

His grip tightens, not enough to hurt but enough to remind me who holds the power. "I don't want to hear your lies."

"You don't seem to want to hear the truth, either." I can't say where my bravado is coming from. Desperation to save Brigit, I suppose.

"You know what happens to people who keep secrets from me?"

Before I can respond, his phone buzzes. He steps back, never taking his eyes off me as he answers.

"What?" His expression remains passive. "Good. Have everyone gather in my office."

Now." He ends the call, tucking the phone away in his pocket. "Time to find out exactly what's been happening under my roof."

I nod. "I'd like to go to Brigit?—"

He laughs. "I don't give a flying fuck what you'd like to do. You're coming with me. It's time to discover your secrets." His smile is sinister as he gives me a push toward the exit. "This should be fun."



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I scan the faces of every staff member gathered in my office, searching for signs of guilt or deception.

The girl in the attic, Brigit, has thrown me off balance.

Her existence here makes no sense. When Blaise was undercover here, he'd mentioned Brigit saying she was a god-child of the Keans.

Hampton and his wife had two children, but to my mind, it was more out of duty than the love of parenthood.

Why would they take in a child who wasn't theirs?

I recall Blaise saying that Keira was the one who gave the child the most attention. But whose child is this? The daughter of someone they killed? The Keans strike me as people who'd send a kid into foster care, not take them in.

Maybe she's Ronan's kid. He definitely wouldn't want to be a father, but perhaps duty required that he keep the child. Where's the mother? Now that Ronan is dead, the Keans apparently still feel a duty to keep the kid.

What I don't buy is that Keira was sneaking out to see the kid last night. First, it was the middle of the night. Second, she was dressed for sex. So for now, the kid takes a back seat to finding out who's been fucking my fiancée.

"I'll make this simple." My voice echoes through the room as I force Keira to stand next to me. "Someone here has been meeting with Miss Kean in secret. Step forward now, and I might let you keep your job. Maybe even your life."

The staff shifts uncomfortably, exchanging nervous glances.

A maid near the back wrings her hands in her apron.

The butler's face remains impassive but sweat beads on his forehead. Only Blaise at the back of the room is unaffected, although a quirk of his eyebrow suggests he's surprised by my assertion.

"No one?" I lean nonchalantly against the desk. "That's interesting, considering Miss Kean was caught sneaking around last night."

Keira stands at my side, her cheeks flushed with anger or embarrassment, probably both. Good. Let her squirm.

"Sir," the butler clears his throat. "I can assure you that none of us would dare?—"

"Spare me the lies." I hold my hand up to stop him. "You all worked for the Kears. Your loyalty means nothing to me."

A young man catches my eye. He can't be more than twenty. His gaze keeps darting to Keira then away. Found you .

"You." I point at him. "What's your name?"

"T-Thomas, sir."

"Phoenix," Keira hisses at me under her breath, and now I know for sure who's she's

fucking.

I close the distance between me and Thomas. "And how long have you worked here, Thomas?"

"Two years." His voice shakes.

"Two years." I tap my chin. "Plenty of time to develop... certain arrangements with the lady of the house."

I grab Thomas by the collar and slam him against the wall. His fear is palpable, exactly what I want the staff to feel. But something's off. He's too young, too green.

"Sir, I promise my son would never disrespect the family?—"

I whip my head to a man in his forties. "Thomas is your boy?"

"Yes sir. He works with me. Parameter. We're rarely in the house."

"Please, sir." Thomas's voice cracks.

"Phoenix." Keira steps forward, her gray eyes blazing. "Stop this. You're terrorizing innocent people."

I release Thomas but keep my gaze locked on him. "All women are free to get back to work. The men remain."

The female staff scurry from the hall like rats abandoning a sinking ship. Only Keira remains, her chin lifted in that defiant tilt that I both admire and hate.

"Phoenix, what are you doing?" Blaise asks, his brow furrowed.

He's the only brother here with me. Ash is attending to Hannah while Flint is off meeting with our law enforcement contact about arranging for the Keans to rot in prison while keeping us safe from criminal prosecution.

After all, they're locked in the basement. That's a crime.

"I'm looking for the man my fiancée tried to fuck last night."

"For God's sake, Phoenix, there is no lover." Keira crosses her arms. "You're seeing ghosts where there are none."

"Then why were you sneaking around in the middle of the night?" I close in on her, backing her against the desk. "What other secrets are you keeping, besides the girl in the attic?"

Her breath catches. There it is, that flicker of fear when I mention Brigit.

"She's my god-sister. She's not a part of this."

"No." I shake my head. "I may have been gone ten years, but I'm not stupid. There's something off about her being here."

"You're paranoid." But Keira's voice quavers, telling me I'm on to something.

"And you're lying." I lean closer, our faces inches apart, trying to keep her scent from fogging my brain. "But that's nothing new, is it? You've been lying to me since the day we met."

"That's not true. I never lied?—"

I scoff. "Then prove it. Tell me what you're hiding."

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“The fuck you aren’t.” I turn my attention to the men. "Someone knows something. I’ll reward anyone who can give me information."

The butler shifts his weight. "Sir, if I may... perhaps Miss Kean was just checking on the little one? Miss Brigit, I mean."

My jaw clenches. "At three in the morning? Half-dressed. No one visits a child dressed like that. Try again."

“I was in my pajamas?—”

My jaw clenches. “I know. I saw you. Remember what it did to me?” I lean toward her. “Remember what it felt like pressed against you?”

She sniffs and looks at me with disdain.

The remaining staff exchange uncomfortable glances. They're hiding something. I can smell the deception, but what is it? And why protect Keira after I've taken control? Is it just loyalty?

I scan their faces one by one. Someone in this room knows the truth about Keira's midnight wanderings. And I'm going to find out who.

I yank Keira against me, her back to my chest, her body flush with mine. "You see, gentlemen, Miss Kean here thinks she can fool me. But I know exactly what kind of woman she is."

My fingers dig into her waist. She tries to wrench away, but I hold firm.

"The kind who spreads her legs for anyone who'll give her attention." I drag my nose along her neck, breathing her in while watching the men's reactions. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"Let go of me." She struggles harder.

"Why? So you can run back to whatever pathetic excuse for a man you've been letting touch you?" I reach around and push her chin up. "Look at them. Is it one of them? Have you been letting the help satisfy your needs?"

None of the men do anything.

"You're disgusting." Keira spits the words.

"Am I? I'm not the one sneaking around in the middle of the night wearing next to nothing." I slide my hand over her belly, up just below her tit. "Tell me, does he know how to make you scream?"

A collective intake of breath from the men. Good. Let her lover reveal himself through his anger.

"I bet he's gentle with you." I trace her bottom lip with my thumb. "Treats you like you're made of glass. But we both know that's not what you really want, is it?"

Keira's eyes flash with rage and something else, hurt maybe, but I don't care. I need to know who she's been with, who dared touch what belongs to me.

"You want it rough." I tug her hair, exposing her throat. "You want to be owned. And trust me, Princess, by the time I'm done with you, everyone will know exactly whom you belong to."

Keira's face goes blank, her earlier fire extinguished. She stares past me like I'm nothing but air, and something in my chest constricts. This isn't the reaction I wanted. I need her angry, need to see that spark of defiance.

"Nothing to say?" I release her hair but keep her pinned against me. "Where's that sharp tongue of yours now?"

She blinks, slow and deliberate. The staff watch our exchange with growing unease, but still, no one steps forward. No one defends her honor.

"Look at them." I sweep my arm toward the men. "Not one of them has the balls to stand up for you. Is this really who you've given yourself to? Some coward who won't even claim you?"

Nothing. Not even a flinch. Not even from her.

Her indifference irks me more than her smart mouth and defiant attitude. I spin her to face me, searching her eyes for any crack in her mask.

"A real man would fight for you." My fingers dig into her shoulders. "He'd tear me apart for touching you like this. But these pathetic excuses for men just stand there and watch. Is that what you want? Someone weak?"

She lifts her chin, but her eyes remain distant, detached. Like I'm beneath her notice.

Rage burns through my veins. "Answer me!"

"Why?" Her voice is soft, empty. "Nothing I say matters to you, anyway."

The quiet dignity in her tone slashes through my control. I've seen Keira angry, seen her scared, but this... this emptiness is wrong. She's turned to stone in my arms, and

I've never felt more powerless.

"These men have no honor, Keira. Surely, you demand more than this."

Her laugh surprises me even as it sends me into a rage with its mocking tone. "Honor? You wouldn't know honor if it slapped you across the face."

My grip tightens on her shoulders as I catch the staff's reactions. Their eyes round in surprise, and a few even dare to smirk. She's making me look weak, challenging my authority in front of these men who need to fear me.

"You want to talk about honor?" I lean in close, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "How about I strip you naked right here? Let everyone see what kind of woman you really are? Because that's my right now. You're mine to do with as I please."

"Phoenix." Blaise's voice carries a warning edge from the doorway. "A word?"

"Not now." I keep my eyes locked on Keira.

He doesn't defy me, but I'm sure that growl of frustration is from him.

I lift my gaze to the men. "You really going to let her be humiliated like this?"

Suddenly, Keira drops to her knees. I think she's about to beg for mercy, but then she reaches for my belt. My body reacts instantly, but my mind screams in protest. What the fuck is she doing and how has this turned into such a shitshow?



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

"What are you doing?" I grab her wrists, but she looks up at me with steel in her eyes.

"Giving you what you want. Isn't this the point? To use sex to break me in front of everyone?"

The staff shifts uncomfortably. Blaise curses under his breath. This power play has spun completely out of my control.

I haul her to her feet, my fingers digging into her arms. "You think you're clever?"

"No." She meets my gaze without flinching. "Which is it, Phoenix? You want compliance? You want to denigrate me? Or not?"

I pull her closer, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Be careful, Princess. Next time, I might not stop you."

I shove Keira away from me, needing distance before I completely lose control. "Take her to her room," I order Blaise. "Make sure she stays there this time."

My brother's green eyes flash with judgment as he takes Keira's arm. The disapproval radiates off him in waves. Now his silent condemnation cuts deeper than I want to admit.

Keira doesn't resist as Blaise leads her away, but she holds her head high. Even in defeat, she maintains that aristocratic bearing that used to drive me wild with desire. Now it just fuels my rage.

The remaining staff stand frozen, waiting for dismissal. I wave them away with a sharp gesture, unable to stomach their presence any longer. They scatter and I pour a finger of whisky, downing it before pouring another and then sitting at the desk.

Blaise returns minutes later, his face hard. "What the fuck was that?"

"You don't get to judge how I handle this."

"Someone has to." He looks at me like he doesn't know me. "You nearly sexually assaulted her?—"

"I did not!" The accusation burns. "But even if I did, it's my right. She's my fiancée."

Blaise stares at me. "Who are you?"

"You have no right to judge me. You fucked Jenna for the sole purpose of humiliating and breaking her so?—"

"I didn't assault her?—"

"I didn't assault Keira either." I throw my glass across the room, the sound of it shattering echoing through the room.

"You threatened to do it in front of your men. Seriously, you're fucked up. The Phoenix I know would never, ever, even threaten to do what you just did."

"The Phoenix you knew died with Mom and Dad in the fire. Along with any mercy I might have had for the Keans."

Blaise shakes his head, disappointment etched in every line of his face. But I can't bring myself to care. I need this hatred. It's all I have left.

“Dad wouldn’t torture innocent staff or humiliate women in front of an audience.”

"Innocent?" I bark out a laugh. "They worked for the Keans. Protected them. Protected her."

"And what, exactly, did Keira do?" He steps closer. "Besides make the mistake of falling for you?"

My gaze slices to his. How did he know about us? We’d been a secret. “She never fell for me. No. She used me to help Hampton destroy our family. There. Do you still feel sorry for her? She killed our parents.”

“Are you sure about that? We thought the same about Jenna.”

“This is not up for discussion.” I move past him, but Blaise catches my arm.

“This won’t do, Phoenix.”

"Watch yourself." I wrench free. "Don't forget who's in charge here."

"That's right, you're in charge. She knows it more than anyone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's a woman in a world in which women have no power. All she has is her dignity, and clearly, she'll be damned before she'll let you take it. The question is why are you willing to sexually assault?—"

"I did not?—"

"You threatened it. In front of your men. There are lines, Phoenix. Lines that others

might cross, but not us. We swore we'd never be like that."

"I don't remember you backing off your sexual campaign against Jenna."

"I've seduced information out of people." He runs a hand through his hair, and I suspect he still feels guilt over his treatment of Jenna, the woman he now calls wife. "But I've never used sexual humiliation as a weapon. That's not who we are."

The truth in his words stings. Our parents taught us better than this. Even in our darkest moments seeking revenge, they would have expected us to maintain some semblance of honor.

"She makes me crazy." I press my palms against my eyes. "Every time I look at her, I see everything we lost."

"No." Blaise's voice softens. "It's more than that. This isn't just about our parents anymore, is it?"

My silence answers for me. The memory of young Keira, innocent, passionate, mine, collides against the reality of who we've become.

"I want to break her." The admission tastes like ash in my mouth. "Make her feel as destroyed as I did when she betrayed me."

"Has it worked?" Blaise asks. "Did threatening her make you feel better? More powerful?"

I think of her blank stare, the way she shut down completely. That wasn't victory. It was resolve. She was going to take the punishment without giving me the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

I meet Blaise's judgmental glare. "If I were to walk down and put a bullet in Hampton's brain, would you lecture me about honor?"

"Hell no. He took our parents. Our lives."

"So did Keira. I loved her, Blaise, and she used it to burn our lives to the ground."

For long moments he just stares at me. "I hope you're right. Because if you're not, you're no better than Hampton."

"Get the fuck out." I point toward the door.

He shrugs and does as I order, leaving me to stew alone with the shitshow whirling in my brain.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

I sink onto the edge of my bed, my legs finally giving out as the reality of what just happened crashes over me.

And the stupidity of it. Challenging Phoenix like that, in front of his men.

I don't know what came over me except that I wanted him to know he might have power over me, but he won't break me.

I press my fingers into my eye sockets as the memory of the look in his eyes when I reached for his belt comes back to me. For a moment, I saw a flash of the boy I used to know, horrified at the idea of hurting me.

But that boy is gone. This Phoenix is capable of anything.

I need to remember that if I'm going to keep Brigit safe.

God, when he found us this morning, I was terrified.

She's safely tucked away in her room, but for how long?

What if my defiance makes him change his mind?

I don't even want to think about what he might do.

I have to be smarter than this. Every move I make puts her at risk. But watching him

try to humiliate me in front of everyone, treating me like some common whore, is unbearable. I'd never have thought he'd be capable of such cruelty and depravity.

Ten years ago, Phoenix would have moved heaven and earth to protect me. Now he's the one I need protection from. I don't blame him for his anger at my family. But why is he taking it out on me?

I have to find a way to handle this—to handle him—without losing myself completely. But how do I reason with someone who sees me as nothing but a tool for revenge?

I drag myself to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face.

The woman in the mirror looks haunted, but I suppose I've been like this for ten years. Back then, I was naïve and weak. In the last ten years, I've learned to survive in a world in which I have little to no power.

I've been able to avoid all my father's attempts to pass me off as a virgin in marriage.

I've navigated our family mostly by avoiding them, spending my time shielding Brigit from their toxicity.

In reality, nothing has changed. It appears Phoenix plans to rule with the same disregard for anyone but himself and his need for power.

I dry my face and straighten my shoulders. I can do this.

I return to my room, my prison, and sit in the window seat taking in the sunny day outside.

It brings back the summer Phoenix and I would walk through the gardens here.

It was his family's estate then. He'd hold my hand.

Sometimes, he'd stop at a tree and kiss me.

It was all so innocent and lovely. I was a fool to think it was real, to think he'd take me away from all the violence and pain.

The key scrapes in the lock. My pulse jumps, but I force myself to remain still, perched on the window seat like I don't have a care in the world.

He wants to see me broken, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

Inside, I mentally prepare to face him. Whatever he throws at me, I can take it.

For Brigit. Everything I do now is for her.

If that means swallowing my pride, biting my tongue, playing whatever role Phoenix demands, so be it.

The handle turns, the door swings open, and Phoenix fills the frame, his broad shoulders blocking the light from the hall. He steps inside, closing the door with a soft click that belies the hardness in his features.

"You put on quite a show back there." He moves toward me like a predator. A chill slides down my spine as I wonder if he's going to make me follow through on my actions in the office. "I'd almost forgotten how spirited you can be."

I press my back against the window. He stops a few feet away, hands loose at his sides, but there's nothing relaxed about him. Every muscle looks coiled to strike. Would he? It wouldn't be unusual for a man in our world to use his fists against a woman.



"I won't apologize for defending myself." The words come out steadier than I feel.

His lips curve into a smug smile. "You were always so soft and innocent looking, and then you'd do something crazy.

Remember that time you decided to avoid seeing your father and Ronan here visiting my father, so you climbed out my window and tried to leave by shimmying down the tree?

" He looks past me out the window. The tree isn't there.

Cut down by my father when the house was rebuilt.

Phoenix's gaze returns to me. "You got all scraped up and my mother had to clean you up wondering why you'd do something so nuts."

The memory is bittersweet. His mother had been so gentle. I'd felt safer in her care than I ever did with my own parents.

"Don't." I wrap my arms around myself, not wanting to be lulled into submission by the memories of happier times. "Don't pretend this is some fond trip down memory lane."

"Why not?" He takes another step closer. "We shared so many memories in this house. Well, not this one, since your family built this one over the ashes of mine."

I close my eyes knowing he has every right to be angry and vengeful toward my father. "What do you want, Phoenix?"

"Want?" He reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. I fight not to flinch. "I want you to be honest with me."

His fingers trail down my neck, settling over my thundering pulse. "So tell me, love. Who were you really going to meet last night?"

His fingers on my neck make it hard to think straight. Every touch brings back memories of softer times, when his caresses meant love instead of control.

I give my head a shake. I can't let the past soften me. "There is no lover. I know you won't believe me, but?—"

"Shh." His thumb traces my bottom lip. "I understand, you know. Ten years is a long time. Did you think I expected you to stay faithful to a ghost?"

The gentleness in his tone catches me off guard. I search his face, trying to read him. Is this some manipulation, a new tactic, or have the memories brought the old Phoenix back?

"If you're honest with me now," he continues, "maybe we can start fresh. Clean slate." His hand cups my cheek. "Just tell me who he is, and I'll be... reasonable."

For a moment, I'm tempted. Not to lie about a lover, but to tell him everything. About Brigit. About why I never married, about how I've loved only him all these years. But the calculated look in his eyes stops me.

"Phoenix..." I lean into his touch, letting him feel my surrender. "I swear on my life, there's no one else."

His fingers tighten fractionally on my jaw. "And I'm supposed to trust the word of a Kean?"

"Trust your own eyes." I meet his gaze steadily. "You've taken over the house. You have men watching my every move. If there were someone, you'd know."

Something flickers in his expression, doubt, probably. His thumb strokes my cheek once more before he drops his hand.

"We'll see." He steps back, creating space between us that allows me to take a breath. "For your sake, I hope you're telling the truth. Because if I find out you're lying..." His smile turns sharp. "Well, let's just say I won't be nearly this understanding."

I shake my head and look out the window.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

"No. I'm resolved that you'll only believe what you want. Nothing I say or do will matter."

"You can't blame me for not trusting you after you betrayed me?—"

My head snaps back in his direction. "I didn't betray you."

"The fact that my parents are dead and we're standing over their fiery graves says differently."

This conversation is pointless, so I don't respond.

"No response to that?"

"Nothing that you'd believe. Why are you wasting your precious time on me when you think you already know all the answers?"

His jaw tics and I know I need to rein in my annoyance. "Well, you and I are getting married and you're going to plan it. You can arrange whatever you want as long as it impresses all the families. By this time next week, you'll be my wife."

"A week?" I don't hide my shock. "You want to plan an entire wedding in a week?"

Phoenix shrugs. "Problem? I thought most women dreamed of planning their perfect wedding."

"Most women get more than seven days." And are fueled by love for their fiancé, but I don't say that.

"Money's no object." He waves dismissively. "And I'm sure you know how to run a household efficiently. Boston's elite must see that there is a new sheriff in town."

"You want Boston's elite to attend a wedding where the bride is your prisoner?" I let out a harsh laugh. "They'll see right through that."

Phoenix's eyes narrow. "You'd be surprised what people will overlook when they're afraid."

"And what about the staff? After that display in your office, how am I supposed to command any respect? You made sure they saw me as nothing but your?—"

"My what?" His eyes glitter dangerously. "Say it."

I lift my chin. "Your whore."

"Yet here you are, about to become my wife." He moves toward me again, and I do my best not to lean away from his advance. "And you'll do it with a smile, won't you? Because we both know what's at stake."

My teeth grind to avoid calling him vile names. "I can't organize anything locked in my room. I'd need access to the house."

"Supervised access." He stops in front of me. "You don't really think I'd let you wander freely?"

"Then find someone else to plan your spectacle." I turn away, but his hand shoots out, gripping my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"You'll do it," he says softly, "or I'll methodically kill every man in this house and whoever you're protecting will die."

I force myself to meet his gaze steadily. "Why do you care so much? You clearly despise me."

"I won't be cuckolded, Keira. If you ever undermined me in any way..." He doesn't finish the sentence, but he doesn't have to.

I decide to return to the wedding topic. "The staff won't follow my orders, not after you effectively ruined any respect they might have for me."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

His fingers tighten briefly before releasing me. "I'll make sure they follow your orders related to the house management and the wedding."

Maybe this would be an opportunity to find a way to better safeguard Brigit. "Fine. But I can't coordinate everything if I'm locked in my room with guards watching my every move."

"Careful what you ask for, love. More freedom means more chances to disappoint me."

"I'm not asking for freedom." I gave up on freedom the day my father told me he'd killed the Ifrinns. "I'm asking for the ability to do what you want. Unless you'd prefer a disaster of a wedding that makes you look weak to the other families?"

His jaw tightens, but I see the calculation in his eyes. He knows I'm right.

"You'll have access to the main areas of the house," he says finally. "But step, one toe out of line, and this deal is over. I'll torch everyone and everything you hold dear."

I do my best to hide the shudder of fear. "I need access to a phone and a laptop. Your men confiscated mine."

He gives me a smug smile, like he feels he's won. Would he be angry if I told him I've thrown the match? "You'll have what you need to get the job done. Nothing more. And remember, I'll be watching. Every. Single. Move."

"Understood." I keep my voice neutral. "Now, can I get started, or would you like to

waste more time with threats and humiliation?"

He smirks. "This is going to be interesting. I hope I don't regret it.

" He walks to the door to leave but pauses and looks over his shoulder at me.

"Tell me. Were you really going to follow through back there?

Drop to your knees and suck my cock in front of everyone like the obedient little wife you're pretending to be? "

"I guess we won't know. I wonder why you stopped me since sexual humiliation seems to be your goal. I have to say I'm surprised."

"Really?" He looks more intrigued than annoyed.

I shrug, trying to act nonchalant. "It's so unoriginal. For all your talk about how you'd be different, you've become just like my father."

For a moment, I think I've gone too far. The rage firing in his eyes, the way his fists clench, I'm pretty sure I won't be planning a wedding. Instead, I'll be planning funerals.

"Careful, Keira. You don't really want to test that theory, do you?"

I say nothing.

Our gazes hold and for a moment, I wonder if he's thinking the same thing as I am.

What happened to the young couple who'd been so in love?

But then it's gone, and I have to accept that to him, I'm nothing but a means to an end. The girl he once loved is as dead as he was supposed to be. Today, we're a twisted version of the past, him the vengeful master, me the conquered prize.

"Nothing to say?" His lips curl into a cruel smile. "That's new."

What can I say? That each degrading comment chips away at what's left of my soul? That every time he treats me like a possession instead of a person, I die a little more inside? That's the point. I'm not going to give him the satisfaction.

No. He can control my body, my movements, even my wedding. But I won't let him see how deeply he wounds me. I have too much at stake to break now.

"I can see the wheels of your mind spinning, Keira. What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?"

"Nothing important."

He leans against the doorjamb like he's settling in for a long discussion. "I'll be the judge of that. Come on, tell me. Are you imagining all sorts of ways to kill me?"

"What? No." And it's true. I might want him gone, but I don't want him dead. What has killing ever achieved?

His brow furrows as if he didn't expect my reaction. But he recovers quickly. "What are you thinking?" he demands.

"Fine, you want to continue to kick me when I'm down.

I'm thinking you can parade me around like a trophy, use me to prove your dominance, even force me to my knees in front of everyone.



And it's a profound disappointment to me that you find such glee in it.

I wouldn't have thought you, of all people... ”

His eyes darken. “This is what you get after you and your father took everything from me.”

“Something tells me your father wouldn't?—”

“You shut the fuck up about my father.” His finger jabs toward me and I know I've again crossed a line. “You need to accept things as they are now, Keira.”

I lower my head, a move I learned to do a long time ago when having to yield to my father.

“I know how things are now. I have no power.

No control.” I spread my arms wide, offering myself up like a sacrifice.

“So go ahead. Humiliate me. Degrade me. Show everyone how thoroughly you've conquered the Kean princess if it makes you feel good.

You want to break me. To make me feel as helpless and betrayed as you did. ”

Something flickers in his eyes, but it doesn't appear to be violent rage. His face twists. Pain and confusion war in his expression before the mask slams back into place. He turns sharply, his shoulders rigid as he strides out the door.

I sink back wondering why I keep challenging him like that. It's stupid. At the same time, I may be powerless, but I'm not broken. Not yet. And as long as Brigit needs me, I'll find a way to survive whatever cruel games Phoenix has planned.

I replay those last moments with Phoenix, surprised he didn't lash out stronger. The quick flashes of something other than anger make me wonder if there is still a part of him that is good. He clearly remembers our past. Is it possible to bring him back?

I shake my head. What we had is dead and gone. Whatever good is left in him won't be spared on me. And I deserve every bit of his contempt. My family destroyed his, and I've carried that guilt for a decade.

But Brigit doesn't deserve to be caught in this web of vengeance. She's the only pure thing in this whole mess. The thought of Phoenix using her as another tool to break me terrifies me.

Phoenix wants a submissive bride to parade in front of Boston's elite? Fine. I'll give him exactly what he wants. I'll plan his perfect wedding, smile at all the right moments, play the role of the conquered princess. Whatever it takes to keep Brigit safe.

My reflection stares back at me from the window glass. I'm shaken and afraid but not defeated. I rise from the seat, knowing I've got work to do. One week to plan a wedding. One week to convince everyone I'm the willing bride. One week to figure out how to protect what matters most.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I sit behind Hampton's desk—my desk now—a little annoyed that I'm not feeling more satisfaction with my feat.

I've achieved what I set out to do. Mostly.

Hampton and his wife are imprisoned. Keira is mine to use as an example.

The house and property are now in my control.

All that's left are the businesses and respect of the other families, and those are in process.

So why don't I feel like the king of the world?

So go ahead. Humiliate me. Degrade me. Show everyone how thoroughly you've conquered the Kean princess if it makes you feel good.

Keira's words come back to me. Hearing them felt wrong, even as she was right. I want her to pay for betraying me and my family. So why did it feel like shit to watch her gracefully accept her lot in life?

My brothers fill the room with their restless energy. Ash paces by the window, jaw clenched tight. I have no doubt he's thinking of a million ways to kill Hampton. "So we're really letting that bastard live. After what he did to Hannah?"

Flint sprawls in a leather chair, deceptively relaxed, while Blaise leans against the bookshelf, arms crossed.

"We need him alive," I say, my voice level. "For now."

"For now?" Ash turns, blue eyes blazing. "He kidnapped my pregnant wife. He would've killed her if we hadn't gotten there in time."

"I understand?—"

"No, you don't." Ash cuts me off. "You promised me. I've followed your orders for the last ten years. I married when I didn't want to?—"

"And it seems to be turning out?—"

"That's not the point. The point is I've asked you for only one thing, and after everything I've done, you're denying it?"

"It's not like you didn't want to enact our revenge too. Hampton stays breathing until we've secured our hold," I say. "Then you can have him."

Flint shifts in his chair. "And what about your bride-to-be? That wasn't the plan. Where does she fit in all this?"

My jaw tightens at the mention of Keira. "She's insurance. The families respect her, even if they feared her father."

"That's not what I asked," Flint says, and I know Blaise has shared with them both the meeting I had with the men earlier today.

Blaise pushes off from the bookshelf. "You crossed a line today, Phoenix. That shit

you pulled with the staff, that was fucked up.”

I can't stop the look on Keira's face when she dropped to her knees from flashing back through my mind. Not only is she resolved to her situation, but she was calling me out. Wanting to know if I really was the monster I'm purporting to be. She's learned that I am.

"One week," I say, changing the subject. "We announce our return to Boston with a wedding that no one will forget."

“What about those who helped us? Seems like we should do something to show our appreciation,” Blaise says.

I nod. “Let's have a dinner. Tomorrow. Rileys, Donovans, all of them. It will give us a chance to let them know our plans.”

“Short notice,” Flint says.

“I'll take care of it.” I decide I'll personally invite the families and make the arrangements. It's the least I can do to thank them for how quickly and effectively they responded to take down the Keans. Moving on to the next topic, I ask, “What's the latest on the law enforcement angle?”

Flint pulls out his phone, scrolling through messages. "My contact at BPD says they've been building a case against Hampton for months with help from information Lucy was able to deliver. Tax evasion, money laundering, murder and arson." He glances up. “They're pinning Marshall's murder on Ronan.”

“Lucky son of a bitch,” Blaise quips. And it's true since Flint is the one who killed the police superintendent a year ago. He did it to protect Lucy who was about to be killed by the man.

Flint flicks his glance toward Ash. “The cops and Feds could put Hampton away without us having to get our hands dirty.”

I lean back in the chair, possibilities spinning through my mind. "How reliable is this information?"

"Very."

Ash's gaze jerks between Flint and me. "No. Hampton is mine."

Flint shrugs. "If Hampton goes down legally, it creates a power vacuum we can fill without looking like we orchestrated a coup."

"It's cleaner," I admit. "Less blowback from the other families."

"And it gives us plausible deniability," Flint adds. "We just happened to return right when Hampton's empire was crumbling."

“No one will believe that,” Ash argues, looking at Blaise for support.

“We said we’d do things differently. More like Dad,” I say.

Blaise scoffs. “Dad wouldn’t have mom on her knees ready to suck his dick?—”

“That’s different,” I snap.

“Yeah, you are different.”

I shift in my seat not liking the disappointment I see in Blaise's eyes. He and Flint have always looked up to me. It doesn't sit right that I'm losing their respect.

Again, I change the subject. "How soon would they be able to arrest them? I want Hampton to watch his daughter marry me before they take him away."

Ash's laugh is sharp enough to cut glass. "You want him to watch the ceremony? That's your big revenge plan?" He stalks toward the desk, planting his palms flat on the surface, leaning into my space. "Hampton Kean doesn't deserve to live another week, much less rot in a cushy federal prison."

"We've been over this?—"

"No, we haven't." His voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "You've decided, and we're supposed to fall in line. Like always."

The tension in the room thickens. Blaise and Flint exchange glances but stay silent.

"What happened to Hannah wasn't just business," Ash continues. "He put a gun to her head while she was carrying my child. He ended up shooting her."

I meet his gaze steadily. "I understand?—"

"Stop saying that!" Ash slams his fist down, sending a pen holder crashing to the floor. "You don't understand. None of you do. You think this is just about our parents, about reclaiming what's ours. But it's more than that now."

He straightens but looks at me with the same disdain as Blaise. "Every day Hampton breathes is another day he could have someone come after us. After our families."

"We have him locked up," Flint interjects.

"You know as well as I do that he'll have loyalists or a contingency plan. People on the outside ready to act if something happens to him." He looks at Flint and Blaise in

turn. "What if it's Jenna? Or Lucy?" He turns back to me. "Or your precious bride?"

He's not wrong. I have no doubt Hampton will kill Keira if it means his own freedom or revenge. The thought of Keira in danger sends an unexpected surge of protectiveness through me. I push it away.

"As long as he's alive, none of us are safe," Ash says, quieter now. "None of us will ever be safe."

The room falls silent. I know he's right. Hampton alive is a liability we can't afford long-term. But I need him for now. I need the families to see his public fall from grace. But I can't dismiss my brothers' input.

I rub my temples, considering Ash's words. The weight of leadership has never felt heavier than in this moment, with my brother's rage burning across the desk between us.

"You're right," I finally say, breaking the tense silence. "Hampton is a liability. But killing him now would create chaos we can't afford."

Before Ash can say anything, Blaise steps forward. "Phoenix is right. The Kean men are watching us, testing us. If we appear weak or divided, they'll turn on us before the week's out."

"Eliminating him will show strength and take away any hope they have for his return." Ash makes a good argument, but my mind is made up. At least for now, Hampton stays alive.

"We need to solidify our control. Make it clear to everyone in Boston that the Ifrinns are back and stronger than ever."



The wedding will be more than just a marriage ceremony.

We invite every family in Boston. Not just to witness our union, but to pledge their loyalty to the Ifrinn name.

" My voice grows stronger as the plan takes shape.

"We'll make it a ceremony of fealty. One by one, they'll kneel before us and swear allegiance. "

"With Hampton watching from the sidelines," Flint adds, a cold smile spreading across his face. "Seeing everything he built transferred to us."

"Exactly." I nod. "And once we have their pledges, once our position is secure?—"

"Then I get Hampton," Ash finishes.

"Then you get Hampton," I confirm.

Blaise crosses his arms, considering. "It could work. The old families respect tradition. A formal pledge ceremony would carry weight."

"And anyone who refuses to attend..." Flint trails off.

"Marks themselves as our enemy," I complete his thought. "Making our next targets clear."

My brothers exchange glances, and I can see the plan taking root. The tension in the room shifts from conflict to purpose.

"One week," I say. "One week to bring Boston to its knees."

They nod in unison, and I feel our collective resolve solidifying, as strong as it's ever been in the last ten years since we first vowed to avenge our parents.

"I still don't get why we need Hampton for this. He didn't hesitate to try to wipe us out."

"Because we're not them," I snap, annoyed that he won't let this go. I rise to go pour myself a whisky. "We're smarter than them. More strategic."

Flint leans forward. "Public humiliation would hurt Hampton more than death. Make him watch as we dismantle everything he built."

"Exactly," I agree, swirling my drink. "We strip him of his dignity first, then his empire, then his life."

"Mercy could be seen as weakness," Ash argues.

"Or strength," Blaise counters. "Controlled power is more intimidating than blind rage."

I down my whiskey in one burning swallow. "We make an example of Hampton at the ceremony. Force him to publicly transfer power to us before the other families."

"Hampton dies," I assure Ash, meeting his furious gaze. "But we do it our way, not his. We show Boston the difference between Kean brutality and Ifrinn justice."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

Flint taps his fingers against the armrest. "And Keira? Where does she fit in this example we're setting?"

My jaw tightens at her name. "She's different."

"Different how?" Blaise presses. "Because from what I saw this morning, she's a target of your humiliation plan."

I stare at Blaise, feeling the heat rise in my chest. "She's a Kean. Her family destroyed ours."

Blaise shifts uncomfortably. "I'm just saying... Keira wasn't the one who ordered the hit. She was young?—"

"She was about your age. Did you have any trouble wanting the Keans dead at seventeen?"

"They killed our parents. Keira... what could she have possibly done?"

"She knew." My voice hardens. "She knew exactly what her family was planning and never said a word. In fact, she probably fed them information."

"Probably?" Flint arches a brow. "You're going to marry and torment her on 'probably' she's guilty of something? What if she wasn't?"

"What if she wasn't?" I repeat incredulously. "Are you serious right now?"

Flint and Ash exchange glances as Blaise steps closer. "I get the plan to marry her in terms of gaining family support, but to humiliate her publicly... it feels excessive if she wasn't directly involved."

"She was involved," I spit out, my control slipping. "She was fucking me while her family plotted to murder mine."

All eyes widen, and I realize that it's first time I admit to my relationship with Keira.

Blaise shakes his head. "That doesn't mean she knew?—"

"Enough!" I slam my empty glass down. "She knew something was coming." How could she not? "She was their spy. She got close to me to learn our weaknesses, our routines. How else would they have known exactly when to strike?"

Blaise stands his ground. "Jenna showed Ronan the passageway. You're making assumptions based on circumstantial?—"

"Our parents burned alive!" The words explode from me. I can't believe I have to remind them of all we lost. "They died screaming while the Keans watched the house go up in flames. And you want to give her the benefit of the doubt?"

"Did you love her?" Flint asks.

I take a step back, caught off guard by his directness. "What the hell kind of question is that?" I growl.

Flint doesn't back down. "If you were just using each other for information, that's one thing. But if you were actually involved emotionally?—"

"My relationship with Keira is none of your business."

"It is when you're using it to justify how you're treating her now," Blaise counters. "Look, I get that her father is a monster. Hampton deserves everything coming to him. But Keira? She was practically a kid."

"She was old enough to know what she was doing." My fists clench at my sides. "Old enough to betray me. This conversation is over."

"Why? Because you might have to consider that you're wrong about her?" Blaise pushes. "Phoenix, we've all made mistakes in the name of vengeance. But if you're marrying her as punishment for something you can't be sure she did?—"

"I would have married her anyway!" The words burst out even though I don't want to say them.

The room goes silent. My brothers stare at me, and I feel exposed, raw.

"What?" Blaise asks quietly.

I turn away, hating looking weak in front of my brothers. "Before the fire. I was going to ask her to marry me. I thought she felt the same."

"Dad wouldn't have allowed that," Ash says. "He didn't trust Hampton anymore."

"I know." I run a hand through my hair, suddenly unsure of everything I've believed for a decade. "But if Dad saw Hampton's betrayal coming and still got killed, that means someone was feeding him information."

Flint shrugs. "Hampton had been around enough for years before their falling out to know this house and Dad's routine."

I try to reconcile a decade of hatred with this new doubt gnawing at me.

“Besides, if Hampton knew about your relationship, he’d have every reason to push for a marriage between you and Keira. He’d see it as another step closer to power,” Flint finishes.

The idea nearly makes my head explode because he’s right.

If Hampton thought Keira and I would marry, he’d have no reason to kill my family.

It still doesn’t answer the question about whether or not Hampton pushed Keira to get close to me for his own ambitions.

Did she really care for me or was it a part of her father’s grand plan?

“If Hampton broached a marriage with Dad, Dad would have told him no,” Ash points out. “Hampton would see that as the ultimate in disrespect which could have motivated him to kill.”

“This is all speculation.”

But it’s enough to bring my anger surging back. “She still could have warned me! She knew what was happening in her own house.”

Blaise rolls his eyes. “He probably kept her locked up like you do.”

“She knows how to escape. I showed her how. She could have warned me.”

“Hampton wouldn’t have looped her into his plan so she wouldn’t have known to warn you, but even if she did, if Hampton suspected she was communicating with you, he would have locked her down completely.”

“You don’t know that.”

"Neither do you," Blaise counters. "You're assuming the worst because it's easier than considering the alternative."

"Which is what?" I demand.

"That she was as much a victim as we were."

I shake my head, unwilling to relinquish the certainty that's fueled me for ten years.

"She had connections. Friends. Ways to get the word out if she really wanted to."

"Phoenix—" Ash starts.

"No." I cut him off. "I knew her. She was resourceful, determined. If she wanted to warn me, nothing would have stopped her."

"She's locked in her room," Flint points out, his voice maddeningly reasonable. "If she's so resourceful and you taught her how to escape, why is she still here?"

"She did. Last night. I caught her sneaking down the hall."

Blaise's eyebrows shoot up. "And you didn't think to mention this?"

"She was going to see her lover," I snap, my anger growing at the idea of another man touching her.

"Her lover?" Ash repeats skeptically. "In our house? Under guard?"

"Yes, her lover," I growl. "Why else would she be sneaking around in the middle of the night wearing next to nothing?"

"My question would be why wasn't she sneaking out? Escaping? Why is she staying

and putting herself through the humiliation you've promised her?" Blaise appears intrigued by Keira's action.

"I told you, she has a lover?—"

"Or it's the girl," Blaise continues, ignoring me. "When I was undercover working with the Keans, Keira spent a lot of time with her. I always got the feeling she didn't like her parents, but she loves that kid. Maybe she was checking on her since we'd just invaded their home."

"At three in the morning? Kids are asleep then." I shake my head. "No. She has someone here. Someone she's been with all these years while I—" I cut myself off, not wanting to articulate what a sap I am.

"While you what?" Blaise presses. "Thought she was mourning you?"

I glare at him. "While I was planning how to destroy her family."

"Phoenix," Ash says quietly. "Is this really about the Keans, or is it about her?"

The question slices through my defenses.

There's no doubt I want Hampton Kean to pay for killing my family, but I can't deny how much I need Keira to feel my pain.

"It doesn't matter. Keira Kean is the daughter of the man who tried to wipe out our family.

Her punishment serves a purpose beyond my personal feelings. "

I face my brothers again, resolve solidifying within me. "The other families need to



see what happens when someone betrays the Ifrinns. Hampton will face justice for his crimes, but Keira will be my wife. My possession. Living proof that everything the Keans had now belongs to us."

"And after?" Flint asks softly. "After you've made your point?"

I don't answer immediately. The truth is, I haven't thought that far ahead. I can't allow myself to.

"She's a means to an end," I say finally. "Nothing more."

My stomach tightens, calling me a liar, but I ignore it. I have to. Because the alternative, that I still feel something for the woman whose family destroyed mine, is unthinkable.

KEIRA

A wedding. My wedding to Phoenix Ifrinn, the man who once held my heart and now wants to crush it beneath his heel. How am I supposed to plan a celebration for my own public humiliation?

I can't think about that part. I need to focus on the task and the new freedom I have. Granted, I can't run away, but I have access to the house and technology. I can plan to have Brigit sent somewhere safe. Before I do anything, I need to see her, make sure she's safe.

I open the door of my bedroom, finding a stern-faced man waiting. Phoenix's watchdog. I guess we'll find out if I truly have freedom to roam the house or not.

"I need to check on my god-sister," I say with as much authority as I can muster.

He raises an eyebrow. "Boss said you can move around, but I follow."

"Fine." I stride past him, not waiting for permission. "But understand something—Brigit is innocent in all of this. You need to stay away from her."

He shrugs like he doesn't care one way or the other.

As we walk toward Brigit's room, my mind races. I need to convince Phoenix that he can trust me to toe the line and that Brigit doesn't need to be under heavy guard. The fewer eyes on us, the easier it will be to sneak her away.

When I open the door and see her sitting on the bed with Nanny Fiona, the weight crushing my chest eases slightly. Brigit is safe.

"Keira!" Brigit jumps up, running toward me with outstretched arms.

I drop to my knees, pulling her into a tight embrace. Her small body feels so fragile against mine, yet she's the strongest thing in my world.

"Are you okay?" I pull back to examine her face.

She nods, but her eyes tell a different story. Fear lingers there, clouding their usual brightness.

"Nanny Fiona, could you give us a moment?" I ask, glancing at the doorway where my guard stands.

Once Fiona steps out, I sit on the edge of the bed, patting the space beside me. Brigit climbs up, tucking herself against my side.

"I was scared yesterday," she confesses in a small voice. "When those men came..."

My throat tightens. "I know, sweetheart. I was scared too."

"Where are?—"

"They're in the basement," I say, knowing she's asking about my parents.

"Are they dead?" Brigit's eyes are wide.

"No." Not that I'm aware of. "They're fine."

"Who is that man? The one who found us in the attic?" Her fingers fidget with the hem of her shirt. "He looks at you like he's mad."

How do I explain Phoenix to her? The truth is too complicated, too dangerous.

"His name is Phoenix. He and his brothers used to be friends with our family a long time ago."

"But not anymore?"

I smooth her hair back from her forehead. "No, he's not. But I need you to know something important." I turn to face her fully. "No matter what happens, I will always protect you. Always."

She studies my face with those perceptive eyes that sometimes seem too wise for her nine years. "Why are they here? They seem meaner."

That is saying something considering my parents' cruelty knows no bounds.

"It's a long story, baby." And to be honest, I'm not sure how much to tell.

I've always tried to protect her from the realities of our lives, which has been hard lately.

Over the last year, we've been on lockdown as attacks have been made on us.

Now, I know Phoenix was behind those. My brother was killed in the cottage our gardener used to live in, and I can easily guess that was his bidding as well.

"Why don't they like us anymore?"

I sigh. "Because we did something bad to them and they want to make it right."

"I didn't do anything. And you didn't, did you?"

I shake my head. "No. That's why we'll be alright. This is still our home. Things are just changing a little."

"Are the scary men staying?"

"Yes, they'll be staying." I smooth her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear. "Phoenix and his men will be here. You'll see the same staff as well."

She frowns. "Do they all look mad like him?"

Despite everything, a small laugh escapes me. "No, not all of them. But they're very powerful men, Brigit, and it's important that we show them respect. Avoid them if you can."

"Like with your dad?" she asks, her voice dropping to a whisper.

My heart twists at the comparison. Hampton Kean had never shown this child an ounce of warmth.

"Yes. Stay with Nanny Fiona when I'm not around. If you see any of the men, be polite but keep your distance."

She nods solemnly. "Stay out of their way."

"Exactly. And if Phoenix or any of his brothers ever speaks to you?—"

"I should answer respectfully and then find you or Nanny right away," she finishes.

"That's my smart girl." I kiss her forehead, inhaling her sweet scent. "The most important thing is that we stick together. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes." She wraps her small arms around my neck again. "Will you still read to me at night?"

"I'll do my very best," I promise, not wanting to lie. Who knows if Phoenix will lock me up again? "And when I can't, Nanny Fiona will." Then I get an idea. "Maybe you can help with something. We're going to have a big party and Phoenix wants me to plan it."

Her eyes light up. "A party? With cake and everything?" I guess this situation doesn't sound so bad to her after all. Good. I want to hide all the ugliness of our world from her.

"With cake and everything," I confirm. "It's going to be a very special celebration because it's a wedding." My stomach knots. There was a time I wanted to marry Phoenix. The old adage, Be careful what you wish for, comes back to me.

"Who's getting married?"

"Me and Phoenix."

Her brow furrows. "Why? He's so mean. In the books, the prince loves the princess."

"Real life is different from books. But like I said, everything will be okay. We'll have a big party and all the important families will come to see."

"Will I be there too?" She bounces slightly on the bed.

"The prettiest dress we can find."

Brigit tilts her head, studying me with those perceptive eyes. "Do you love him?"

Once, the answer would have been an unequivocal yes. Now...

"It's complicated, sweetheart." I take her small hands in mine. "Sometimes, marriages aren't just about love. Sometimes, they're about bringing families together."

She frowns, processing this. "I like my books better."

"I know." I squeeze her hands gently. "But that doesn't mean it can't still have happy moments."

"Will you be happy?" Her question is so direct, so innocent, it nearly breaks me.

"I'll have you," I say, but inside, my heart breaks because I'm already planning to send her far away from Phoenix. "And that makes me happier than anything in the world."

Her nose wrinkles. "But why him? I don't like him. He's mean."

"He wasn't always like that. A long time ago, he was different."

"Different how?" Brigit pulls her knees up to her chest, curious despite her aversion.

"He used to smile. He loved books and could quote poetry without even trying. He taught me how to pick locks and climb trees."

The words flow easier than I expected. Over the last twenty-four hours, I learned the man I loved was still alive, but not the man I remembered, and yet, the memories are still there, sweet and pure.

"He sounds like a different person," Brigit says skeptically.

"He was." I pause, wondering if in my youth and innocence, I saw what I wanted to see. Maybe he's always been like this.

Brigit's small hand covers mine. "Are you sad?"

"Sometimes. But I have you, and that's all that matters."

She wraps her arms around me and I return the hug, savoring the warmth and innocence of my child. Of Phoenix's child. Brigit is the beautiful living proof of what Phoenix and I once shared.

Ten years ago, when I discovered I was pregnant, I knew my parents would be angry, but I understood our world enough to know that my father would see it as an opportunity to get closer to Patrick Ifrinn. He'd use it as an excuse to merge our families.

Apparently, Patrick Ifrinn didn't care that his son had taken what wasn't his to take nor felt the need for Phoenix to do right by me. And so my father destroyed him. As he set out to kill the Ifrinns and take over power, he'd locked me away, preventing me from contacting Phoenix.

And when it was over, they made me a deal. I could keep my baby close, but never as my daughter. They would claim her as a distant relative's orphaned child, their godchild, and I would play along or they would send her away where I'd never see her again.

I had no choice. Eighteen, heartbroken, believing Phoenix dead in that fire my parents orchestrated, I agreed to their terms. I would be Brigit's god-sister, her friend, anything but her mother in name.



In retrospect, maybe I should have let her go. Placed her for adoption. Then she wouldn't be living in fear. But what's done is done, right?

I wonder what Phoenix would do if he knew the truth? Would it snap him back to the wonderful man I'd fallen in love with, or would he use her as a weapon against me? I can't afford to find out.

I can't risk finding out. Not when she's all I have left in this world. Not when she's the only pure thing to come from the love I once believed would last forever.

The guard knocks sharply on the door. "Time's up."

I give Brigit a final squeeze and stand. Phoenix may hate me now, but I'll endure whatever comes next to protect the secret sitting on this bed, the one beautiful thing we created before everything turned to ash.

"I'll see you later, okay?" I promise, forcing brightness into my voice.

Brigit nods. "Will you tell me more about the party later?"

"Of course, sweetheart." I smile, backing toward the door. "Start thinking about what color dress you want."

I blow her a kiss and then follow the guard down the corridor.

For ten years, I've lived a half-life. A mother but not Mother, always close but never close enough.

My sacrifice has been worth it. I've watched Brigit grow from a helpless infant into a bright, compassionate girl with Phoenix's sharp intelligence and my stubborn determination.

I've been there for every milestone, first steps, first words, first day of school.

All while pretending to be something less than what I am.

My parents thought they were punishing me, forcing me to hide my relationship to my own child.

Instead, they gave me the only thing that mattered.

Proximity. I would have agreed to anything to keep her close.

Some days, the pretense is crushing like when she runs to Nanny Fiona instead of me for comfort, when she calls me "Keira" instead of "Mommy".

But now Phoenix has returned, bringing chaos and danger into our carefully constructed world. If he discovers the truth about Brigit...

Before, I could only think about keeping her near.

But with uncertain times and a vengeful Phoenix, I have to protect her by sending her away.

Perhaps a boarding school in Switzerland, far from Boston's violence and Phoenix's reach.

The thought of sending her away makes me physically ill, but her safety comes first. I have money my parents don't know about, emergency funds I've been squirreling away for years with my secret writing, preparing for a day I could leave. I imagined I'd run away with her. That won't happen now.

For a moment, I let myself imagine us as a family.

I've fantasized about it often through the years.

Wishing Phoenix were alive and would save Keira and me.

He is alive and he's returned, but he's not here to save us.

He believes I betrayed him, that I was complicit in my family's treachery.

Would knowing about Brigit change that? Or would he simply see her as another Kean to punish?

I can't take that risk. Not with her life. Not with her happiness.

As I reach the main staircase, I straighten my shoulders.

I am not the frightened eighteen-year-old girl anymore who needs saving.

I am a mother, even if I can't claim the title openly.

And I will do whatever is necessary to keep my daughter safe, even if it means marrying the man who now hates me more than anyone else in the world.

### PHOENIX

My brothers' voices echo in my head as I descend the stairs to the basement. Their questions and comments are impossible to wave away. We've been one mind since the night our parents were murdered by the Keans.

Now, we're fracturing. Ash is angry that he can't kill Hampton.

Blaise and Flint disapprove of how I'm treating Keira.

In the end, what they want or think isn't important.

I'm the head of this family. I have been since my father died.

Whether they agree or not doesn't matter.

The basement door creaks as I push it open. Cold air rushes up to meet me, carrying the musty scent of concrete. Two armed men stand at attention, nodding as I approach.

I make my way down the hall to where Hampton and his wife are being held.

"Leave us," I command the two men outside their door.

They exit without question. The power feels good, intoxicating even. After a decade of exile, of rebuilding from nothing, Boston is bending to my will. The Ifrinn name still carries weight, still commands respect. Our birthright was never forgotten,

merely borrowed by unworthy hands.

I pause at the door, collecting myself. Hampton and Lana Kean. The architects of my family's destruction. The people who tried to erase us from existence.

The people who raised Keira.

My jaw tightens at the thought of her. The way she dropped to her knees yesterday, calling my bluff. The flash of defiance in her eyes even as she pretended to submit. It was a move I didn't anticipate, a reminder that she's not the same girl I knew ten years ago.

I unlock the door and step inside. I savor their misery. Hampton sits with his arm around Lana, both looking like deflated versions of the power couple that once ruled Boston.

Hampton's expression hardens when he sees me. "Come to finish the job?"

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead." I lean against the wall. "Consider yourselves lucky that you're more valuable alive."

Lana's eyes dart to mine. "Where's Keira? What have you done with her?"

Something in her tone catches my attention. Not the concern of a mother for her daughter, but something colder. Calculating.

"She's fine. Planning our wedding, actually."

"We gave her to you and now you need to let us go," Lana insists.

Something in my gut twists as my brothers' doubt about Keira and the question about

whether Hampton proposed the marriage to my father who turned it down, prompting retaliation. What if all that is true?

“Do you want her back? I’m happy to send her and the kid down here.”

“You think you’re so much better than us, but you’re not.” Hampton's face contorts with rage.

"Careful," I cut him off. "Remember your position. You're alive because I allow it."

“What would your father think?” Lana straightens, attempting dignity despite her circumstances.

“Well, I can’t be sure because you killed him.”

“He was better than this, Phoenix. Surely, you aspire to be like him.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. He ended up dead.” The truth is, I’d love to have my father’s approval. I’d love to know if he’s proud of how I looked out for Flint, Blaise, and Ash and helped them become men.

“You’ve won. Why torture us?” Lana asks.

“Torture. You think this is torture?” My anger rises at the gall. “How about I light a match and you can burn to death? Would that be better?”

She huddles against Hampton.

Hampton's jaw tightens. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

“For one, this is my house. Two, I wanted to check on my future in-laws. I’m

thinking of letting you attend.”

Lana's eyes shine with hope. “I can help Keira with the plans?—”

“No. But we’re planning quite the celebration and I’m thinking you should be there.”

“Yes, of course?—”

“It’s a power play, dear,” Hampton interrupts his wife. “He needs to show everyone we’re under his thumb to get their loyalty.”

I tap my nose. “Of course, I could show them your dead bodies instead.”

“Keira would never forgive you if you killed us.”

“What do I care if she forgives me? This is business.”

Lana shifts uncomfortably. "When will we be released?"

"That depends." I push off from the wall, stepping closer. "The wedding will coincide with a loyalty ceremony. Every family in Boston will pledge allegiance to the Ifrinn name, with you two serving as the perfect example of what happens to those who betray us."

“You’re overconfident, Phoenix. You can’t?—”

"I can do whatever I want." I lean down until we're eye-level. "You took everything from me. Now I'm taking it all back, with interest."

Hampton lunges forward, but his weakened state makes it pathetic. I don't even flinch.

"Save your strength," I say, straightening. "You'll need it for your public humiliation."

Lana grabs Hampton's arm, pulling him back. There's calculation behind her eyes, the wheels turning as she searches for leverage. It tells me she's no victim in this situation. Just like Keira isn't.

"When will we be released?" she asks again, her voice strained with forced composure.

"When the police are ready to arrest you. You've been a very naughty boy. Extortion. Racketeering. Murder. Including the murder of my parents. It's that last one that is saving your asses. Without justice for my parents' deaths, there'd be no deal. I'd be the one enacting justice."

Hampton's face reddens until I'm worried it might explode. "That's not the agreement! You said you'd spare us if Keira married you."

"I said I'd spare your lives," I correct him. "And I have. Prison is better than the alternative I had planned."

"You son of a bitch," Hampton seethes. "You think you've won?"

"Yes. I do. I've beaten you. I have my property back and shortly, all the businesses. I have your daughter under my thumb. I think that's the very definition of winning."

They are quiet for a moment. "Keira is no innocent," Lana says.

I'm curious about where she's going with this. "I know. I'm the one who fucked her."

She flinches at my vulgarity. I push down the kernel of self-loathing that takes root in



my stomach at making my relationship with Keira back then sound sordid.

Lana resets her composure. "She's lying to you."

My interest piques. "Is she? About what?"

"Don't waste your time." Hampton pats his wife's thigh.

I can't believe Hampton would be protecting Keira so I wonder why he's not rubbing whatever he knows in my face. Could it be they're hoping Keira can arrange their freedom? I've given her free reign of the house. Has she been down to see them? Have they begun plotting an escape?

Anger builds again at the betrayal. It's a reminder that Keira isn't the woman I thought she was.

"No, let her speak," I say, stepping closer. "I'm curious what lies Keira is spinning now."

"It's nothing." Lana shirks back.

I draw my gun in one fluid motion, and I level it at Hampton's forehead. "What lies? Or we could handle this the Hampton Kean way."

The color drains from Hampton's face. Lana makes a strangled sound, pressing herself against him.

"That's what you did to my parents, isn't it?" I continue, stepping closer until the barrel nearly touches Hampton's skin. "No warning. No mercy. Just fire and blood and screams in the night."

My finger caresses the trigger, and I'm surprised by how steady my hand is. Ten years I've waited for this moment. Ten years of nightmares and rage and planning.

"Phoenix," Lana whispers, her voice trembling. "Please."

"Please?" I laugh. "Did my mother say 'please' when your men poured gasoline through our home? Did my father beg when they lit the match?"

Hampton swallows hard. The arrogance that defined him for decades has vanished, replaced by naked fear.

"Nothing to say now?" I press the cold metal harder against his skin.

"No." His lips press into a thin line, eyes wide and fixed on mine.

"That's what I thought." I lean in close, my voice barely above a whisper. "Remember this feeling, Hampton. This is how my family felt in their final moments. Helpless. Terrified. At your mercy."

I hold the position for several heartbeats, letting the terror sink in. Letting them feel what it's like to have your life balanced on someone else's whim.

Then I step back, gun still trained on them. As much as I'd like to end them, they're a part of the plan. And Ash would never forgive me.

"You don't deserve a quick death," I say. "You deserve to watch everything you built crumble. You deserve to live with what you've done."

They don't respond.

"Keira's lie?" I prompt again.

Hampton starts to open his mouth, but Lana squeezes his hand and speaks instead. “You weren’t her first.”

If she stabbed me in the gut, it wouldn’t hurt as much as those words. But I swallow it down. “And now? Who is she fucking now?”

They exchange glances and then look at me. “We don’t keep up on Keira’s sex life,” Hampton says.

I take a moment to consider what this could mean. Do they know the man and he’s working for them helping Keira plan an escape?

“I’ll find him and kill him. And don’t worry. Keira will pay too.” I exit the basement, blood pounding in my ears. The door clicks shut behind me, sealing Hampton and Lana back in their concrete tomb. Let them rot there.

I return upstairs and am glad the house is quiet. Staff are going about their work. My brothers are handling business elsewhere. I step into my empty office, shutting the world out. The solitude suits me. Gives me space to think.

Why would Lana think it’s important for me to know I wasn’t Keira’s first?

To knock down my ego? Make me jealous? It could backfire and cause me to reject Keira, which they don’t want unless they don’t care about Keira.

They never seemed like a warm, loving family, so I suppose that’s a possibility.

Perhaps they’re just being assholes, not wanting to see Keira survive the ordeal.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

The doubt about Keira that's been gnawing at me since I saw her again, since I felt her lips against mine, threatens to surface. For a moment, I allow myself to remember the girl I once knew. The way her eyes lit up when she laughed. How she'd slip notes into my pocket when no one was looking.

You weren't her first.

It sure as hell felt like I was her first, but how could I know for sure except for what she told me? Did Keira lie to me? That thought brings back memories of the fire. The screams. A decade-long plan to make the Keans pay.

They know they're fucked. So the only thing I can think is that they're relying on Keira to save them.

I know she hasn't asked about them or attempted to see them, but that doesn't mean she's not planning something.

Keira is no innocent young woman anymore.

She's cunning and brave. She could have been a part of my family's destruction and now, her parents' only hope of survival.

The thought hardens something inside me. Whether she actively participated or simply stood by while her family murdered mine, the result is the same. She's a Kean. And all Keans must pay for what they've done.

I leave my office and head upstairs to her room, violent energy coursing in my veins.

I reach the landing and pause outside her door. Two of my men stand guard, nodding respectfully as I approach.

"Has she been out?" I ask.

"Not since this morning when she saw the kid. It's been quiet since."

I dismiss them with a wave, waiting until they're out of earshot before I unlock her door. She needs to understand her position. Needs to feel the weight of what her family has done.

The wedding will go forward as planned. But it won't be the fresh start my brothers seem to think I should give her. It will be the beginning of her reckoning, a public reminder that the Ifrinns always collect their debts.

And Keira Kean owes me more than she could ever repay.

I find Keira sitting at a small table scrolling through a tablet. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a messy bun, a few strands escaping to frame her face. She doesn't notice me at first, too absorbed in whatever she's scribbling in her notebook.

For a moment, I simply watch her. The focused furrow of her brow. The way she bites her lower lip when considering something. Is she planning a wedding or her escape? Perhaps giving her some freedoms was a bad idea.

In three strides I reach her and grab the tablet, looking at the screen and then checking the open tabs.

"Is there a problem?" Her voice lacks heat or attitude. It's like she's resolved that I'm an asshole.

Everything on the screen seems to be related to wedding planning. Flowers. Food. Two dresses, one for a woman and another for a child. But I remind myself that Keira is intelligent. She's smart enough not to get caught planning an escape.

"I have additional requirements for our wedding." I shove the tablet back at her.

She looks up at me, her gray eyes guarded, wary. Good. She should be.

"Beyond the impossible timeline you've already given me?"

"The wedding will now include a loyalty ceremony. Every family in Boston will pledge their allegiance to the Ifrinn name. You'll need to incorporate that into your planning."

Her eyes widen. "That's... that's not possible. Not with only a week. The venue would need to be larger, the security arrangements more complex. I'd have to completely rethink everything."

"Then I suggest you start rethinking." I glare down at her, crossing my arms. "Unless you'd prefer for your parents to remain in that basement indefinitely."

She makes a face as if she doesn't care.

It unsettles me. Does she really not care or is this part of her effort to make me believe she's indifferent to them?

Ten years ago, she talked about wanting to get away from them.

I'd promised to take her away. But when all was said and done, my parents are dead and she's still here with her parents. Her words back then were another lie.

“It doesn’t matter what you threaten. You can’t expect me to pull all this off in a week.”

"I can and I do. This isn't a negotiation, Keira. It's an order."

She stands, color rising in her cheeks. "I'm doing my best in an impossible situation."

"Your best isn't good enough." I step closer, close enough to catch the scent of her perfume. Fucking hell, I want to kiss her. Not in punishment. No. I want her, the woman I thought she was ten years ago. I ache for that woman.

To stop myself from doing something stupid, I step back. "On top of that, we'll be having a smaller dinner tomorrow evening. A celebration for my brothers and the people who helped us reclaim our birthright."

Keira shakes her head. "You can't be serious. I won't have time to organize that as well. It's physically impossible to?—"

"You won't need to do anything for the dinner," I cut her off, enjoying the way her mouth snaps shut. "That's already being handled."

She blinks, confusion replacing her anger. "Then why tell me about it?"

"Because you'll be attending." Forgetting myself, I move closer, watching her instinctively step back until she bumps against the table. "As my fiancée."

"I see. So you're going to parade me around as a happy bride-to-be?" She lifts her chin. "You must think I'm a good actress to pull that off while you threaten me and my family."

I laugh derisively. "Oh, I know exactly what a good actress you are." I grip her chin.

“And you should thank me. Your family is lucky to be alive. Most people who cross the Ifrinns don't get second chances.”

Her gray eyes flash as she jerks her chin from my grasp. “Is that what this is? A second chance?”

“For them? Barely.” I reach out, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, satisfied when she flinches at my touch. “For you? That depends.”

“On what?”

“On how convincing you can be tomorrow night.” I let my fingers trail down her cheek, a ghost of the tenderness we once shared. “These are important allies, Keira. People who risked everything to help us. They need to believe this union is solid.”

She swallows hard, and I watch the movement of her throat with strange fascination. “What do you expect from me?”

“A smile. Appropriate affection. The appearance of a woman pleased with her engagement.” I drop my hand, stepping back because I’m precariously close to losing myself. “Nothing you haven't faked before.”

Her brow furrows in confusion for a moment. “And if I refuse?”

“Do I really need to detail all that could happen to those you hold dear?” I keep my tone casual.

Keira's fingers curl into fists at her sides. “You're a monster.”

“I think we’ve established that I’m what your family made me. Consider this an opportunity to make amends.”



She gives me a nod telling me she'll behave. But can I trust her? Perhaps she's giving me a false sense of her submission. I need to make sure she truly recognizes that she has no power here. Any attempts she makes to save her family will be met swiftly and violently.

"One of the staff will help prepare you for the event," I say.

The anxiety in her eyes deepens, and I feel a rush of satisfaction. "What does that mean? 'Prepare me'?" Her voice has a slight tremor now.

"It means you'll be dressed and presented appropriately as the future wife of an Ifrinn." I reach out, tilting her chin up with my finger. "Don't worry. I want you to look your best when you play your part."

Something flickers in her gray eyes, fear, defiance, I can't quite tell. For a moment, guilt needles at the back of my mind. This is the girl I once thought I'd spend my life with, the one whose laughter used to make my heart race.

But then I remember the flames. The screams. The years of exile and planning.

I drop my hand and step back. "Don't disappoint me, Keira."

KEIRA

I 'm doing my best to appease Phoenix, but he's insufferable and infuriating.

After he left my room yesterday, I found it difficult to plan a wedding.

So now I feel behind today as I arrange for floral deliveries, order champagne, and make the final decision on a dress.

I once dreamed I'd wear a custom wedding dress when I walked down the aisle to marry Phoenix.

Now it's an off the rack order that I hope will fit.

"Miss Keira, would you prefer the orchids or lilies for the centerpieces for tonight's dinner?" Margot, one of our long-time staff members, hovers beside me with sample arrangements.

"The lilies." I don't even look up. What does it matter? This isn't a celebration but a public humiliation.

Margot hesitates. "Are you certain? The orchids were always your favorite."

"That was a different lifetime." I meet her eyes briefly. "Phoenix prefers lilies."

He doesn't. I have no idea what flowers Phoenix likes now. But something in me wants to erase every trace of the girl I was when I loved him.

As evening approaches, I open my closet and stare at the rows of dresses I've accumulated over the years. The last formal dinner in this house ended with my brother dead and Jenna, our gardener, taken.

I run my fingers across the fabric of a midnight blue gown, remembering how Ronan was full of himself that night and how my father had been so focused on business deals that he never noticed the danger circling us.

I realize now that it was Phoenix and his brothers.

All the troubles we've had over the last year were from them.

I'd overheard staff whisper that Blaise Ifrinn has infiltrated the family, killed Ronan, and kidnapped Jenna.

No, not kidnapped because she's married to him now.

Not an arranged marriage like me. No, this is a love match if the servants have it right.

The Ifrinns have probably planned this takeover since my father killed their parents. I don't blame them. What my father did was heinous. But I wasn't a part of it. At least not willingly. Why doesn't Phoenix understand that?

I select a simple black dress. It's fitting for an elegant dinner, but also for my situation. I once dreamed of Phoenix every night, hoping he hadn't died and would come back for me. I imagined our reunion a thousand different ways. In none of those dreams did he look at me with such hatred.

Does he ever think about how we used to be? Does he remember how my skin felt under his hands? Does he hate himself for those memories the way I sometimes hate

myself for still cherishing them?

A sharp knock interrupts my thoughts. I open the door to find Eliza, one of our newer maids, holding a garment bag with both hands like it might bite her.

"Miss Keira," she says, eyes downcast. "Mr. Ifrinn sent this for tonight. He insists that you wear it."

I take the bag. "Thank you, Eliza."

She hovers. "He... he said I'm to wait and make sure it fits properly."

My stomach tightens. "That won't be necessary."

"Please, Miss." Her voice drops to a whisper. "I'll be in trouble if I don't follow his orders exactly."

I nod, understanding her position all too well. "Come in, then."

I slide the zipper down and pull back the protective covering.

I close my eyes when I get the first glimpse of the garment.

The dress, if you can call it that, is a brilliant crimson, the color of fresh blood.

The fabric shimmers under the light, thin and clingy with a neckline that plunges dangerously low and a slit that reaches mid-thigh.

"He can't be serious."

Eliza says nothing, but her expression confirms what I already know. Phoenix is

deadly serious.

I slip behind my dressing screen and shed the black dress I'd planned to wear. The red sheath slides over my skin like water, clinging and molding to every curve of my body. There's no room for undergarments, clearly by design.

When I step out, Eliza's eyes widen. "It's... striking, Miss Keira."

I turn to glimpse my reflection in the full-length mirror and gasp.

The dress barely covers my backside. If I bend even slightly, everything will be on display.

The neckline is so low my breasts threaten to spill out with each breath, and the fabric clings so tightly I can see every curve and contour of my body.

I look more like a mistress, not a fiancée. The red fabric makes my pale skin glow, my gray eyes appear almost silver. I look desirable, available, and utterly owned.

My first instinct is to rip it off, to tell Phoenix he can go to hell. I've endured enough humiliation.

"Why bother? I should just go naked." I tug uselessly at the hem. "It's indecent. Please tell Mr. Ifrinn I need something else."

Eliza wrings her hands, her eyes darting nervously to the door. "Miss Keira, I can't. He was very specific. He said if you refused, I was to remind you that your parents' comfort depends on your cooperation."

"Did he say that exactly?"

"Yes, Miss. And..." She hesitates. "He said to tell you that this is what happens when you behave like a whore—you dress like one."

I close my eyes, understanding washing over me with sickening clarity. This isn't just about control. It's about humiliation. He wants to parade me in front of his brothers and associates like some trophy, a symbol of the Keans' fall from grace.

I don't want my parents to die, but neither do I feel it's my responsibility to save them. They are where they are because of their choices. If the situations were reversed, they wouldn't think twice about having Phoenix kill me. After all, they'd handed me over to him to try and save themselves.

But I have to think of Brigit. He could threaten her. For her, I'll endure any humiliation.

"I see." My voice comes out steadier than I feel. "Thank you for being honest, Eliza."

I stare at my reflection again, seeing Phoenix's strategy for what it is. Another power play. Another reminder that I am at his mercy. He thinks I'll beg and plead to wear something else. More than that, he hopes to see me break under the demeaning stares of his guests.

But I won't give him that satisfaction. If he wants to dress me like a conquest, I'll wear his scarlet dress. But I won't wear the shame he's trying to drape over me.

"You can tell Mr. Ifrinn the dress fits perfectly." I straighten my spine, lifting my chin. "And that I'll be down shortly."

I straighten my shoulders, watching my reflection harden with resolve.

I descend the staircase one deliberate step at a time, my hand gliding along the

polished banister, my chin lifted. He can take everything except my dignity. Granted, in this dress, that assertion is being challenged, but I'll fight tooth and nail to retain my self-respect.

I step into the large living area where the guests have gathered. The conversation quiets as I appear, and I feel every eye turn toward me. My skin burns under their scrutiny, but I force myself to keep moving, to keep my chin lifted despite the heat crawling up my neck.

Phoenix stands near the fireplace, a crystal tumbler of amber liquid in his hand.

He freezes mid-conversation when he sees me, his eyes darkening as they travel slowly from my face down the length of my body.

The hunger in his gaze is unmistakable, and I hate the way my body responds to it, a traitorous flutter low in my belly.

He doesn't love you, I remind myself. Maybe he never did.

"There she is," he announces, voice carrying through the room. "My bride-to-be."

He moves to me, extending his hand. I have no choice but to take it, his fingers closing around mine with possessive strength.

"You look magnificent," he murmurs, just loud enough for those nearby to hear. His thumb traces circles on my palm. "Red suits you. The color of passion." His eyes flick down to the neckline of my dress. "The color of power."

"I'm glad you approve," I reply, keeping my voice neutral despite the rage simmering beneath my skin.

Phoenix pulls me closer, his lips brushing my ear. "You were born to be a queen, Keira. My queen." His breath is hot against my skin. "Though I never imagined you'd embrace the role so eagerly."

"Eager isn't the word I'd use." I try to step back, but his arm snakes around my waist, keeping me pressed against him.

"You've always looked good in expensive things," he continues, fingers splaying across my lower back where the dress dips dangerously low. "Though I think you'd look even better wearing nothing but my name."

Someone nearby chuckles, and I realize we have an audience. Of course we do. This is exactly what Phoenix wanted, to display me like a conquered territory, marked and claimed.

"Smile, darling," he whispers. "Everyone's watching the future Mrs. Ifrinn."

I feel dozens of eyes on me as Phoenix guides me through the room, his hand possessively at the small of my back. The thin fabric offers no barrier between his touch and my skin. I force my face into a pleasant mask, refusing to let him see how much this humiliates me.

"Keira, you remember my brothers," Phoenix says, stopping before a small group near the fireplace.

Ten years ago, they were all around my age. Today I see grown men, hardened, and yet, not as bitter as Phoenix.

"This is Flint," Phoenix introduces. Flint, covered with more tattoos than I remember, stands with his arm around a petite blonde woman with intelligent eyes. "And his wife Lucy. Her articles haven't been very complimentary about you and your



family.”

Lucy glances at Phoenix with disapproving eyes but then smiles when she turns to me. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” I look to Flint. “I’m so glad to see you alive and well.”

Flint nods. “Thank you, Keira.”

“You remember Blaise, Flint’s twin.”

Blaise is different from his twin with his blond hair and green eyes. He’s holding hands with a pregnant woman whose face I recognize immediately.

"Jenna?"

Jenna’s smile is hesitant. "Hello, Miss Keira."

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

“You don’t work for her anymore,” Blaise says, but kindly. Not in the way Phoenix might demean me.

“Please, call me Keira. How is your mother?” I remember Jenna’s mother had a serious health condition.

It had shocked me that my family had provided for her and Jenna...

until I realized that they'd used Jenna in their plan to kill the Ifrinns. My parents didn’t care about Jenna and her mother.

They cared about keeping them controlled and quiet.

“She’s very well thanks to Blaise.” She looks up at him with pure, unadulterated love. My heart squeezes knowing I’d once felt that for Phoenix. I understand now that it was a childish love. How could I ever love a man who could treat me like this?

“And congratulations. I heard you’re married.”

She leans toward Blaise. “Yes. Life takes unexpected turns.”

Phoenix's grip tightens on my waist. "Quite unexpected. Like finding out your fiancée's family murdered yours."

An uncomfortable silence falls.

Lucy clears her throat. "Dinner should be interesting."

During the meal, I'm seated between Phoenix and an associate I don't recognize. Phoenix barely acknowledges me except to occasionally brush his fingers against my exposed thigh, a gesture meant to remind me of my place. It makes me shudder in disgust although it's possible he'll think it's in lust.

When the men become engrossed in business talk, I turn to Jenna across the table. "I see you're expecting."

Jenna looks down at her belly and then at Blaise, who smiles at her. "Yes. It won't be long now."

"Flynn will have a cousin to play with," Lucy says, sitting on the other side of Blaise.

"Flynn?" I ask.

"Flynn is my and Flint's son," Lucy answers.

"Oh, how wonderful." I think of Brigit and the cousins she'll never know. For a moment I feel bad about that because Lucy and Jenna are good people. Even Flint and Blaise seem okay.

I turn my attention back to Jenna. "I'm delighted to hear your mother is well. She, and of course later, you, always had lovely orchids in my room."

Surprise flickers across Jenna's face, perhaps that I would remember such a detail. "She is doing wonderfully. She had a heart transplant last year."

"That's wonderful news," I say, genuinely pleased. "I'm so glad to hear it."

Jenna's smile seems genuine. "She speaks of you fondly sometimes. Says you always made sure she had the proper supplies for the greenhouse."

I feel Phoenix's attention shift to our conversation, though he pretends to be listening to the man on his other side.

"Your mother taught me everything I know about gardening," I tell Jenna.

"I'm terrible at it, of course. A complete black thumb.

" When my father rebuilt this home over the Ifrinn house, I was in a terrible state. It felt wrong to live here. I grieved for Phoenix and his family. Jenna's mother coaxed me little by little into the garden.

Had me dig my fingers into the earth. Shared her love of gardening with me.

She planted seeds in me, helped me bloom and become a woman who could weather harsh storms.

I noted earlier that a brother is missing, but wasn't sure if I should ask. But I figure Jenna is a safe person to inquire to.

"Is Ash unable to join us tonight?"

Jenna immediately looks at Phoenix whose fingers tighten on my thigh under the table. "He's with his wife. Hannah was shot during Hampton's little kidnapping scheme."

I nearly choke on my wine. "Shot? My father kidnapped someone?" I don't know why I'm surprised. Many people have gone missing or dead at the hands of my father.

The table falls silent. All eyes turn to me with expressions ranging from surprise to suspicion.

"You didn't know?" Lucy asks more out of curiosity than surprise.

"No, I..." My voice trails off as I process this revelation. "I've been... removed from family business for some time."

Phoenix's laugh is cold. "Removed? You live in the same house."

"Living here doesn't mean I'm part of what happens here," I say quietly. He should know this. Why does he act like I'm part of my father's inner circle?

Ever since I came home from Europe with Brigit, I've existed in a careful bubble within these walls. I avoided dinners where my parents hosted his associates. I turned a deaf ear to the raised voices behind closed doors. I pretended not to notice when strange men came and went at odd hours.

All to protect Brigit. To keep her innocent. To shield her from the violence and corruption that defined the Kean legacy.

"So you're claiming ignorance?" Phoenix's voice is dangerously soft. "That you had no idea what your father was doing under this roof?"

"It's the truth." I meet his gaze steadily. "My only concern has been..." I trail off, not wanting to remind him about Brigit.

His eyes narrow. "Your lover?"

I roll my eyes and purse my lips as I turn away.

"Who's the girl?" Blaise asks, and inwardly, I wince. The last thing I want to do is bring attention to Brigit.

“She’s my god-sister.”

“You’re close to her,” Blaise states, but it seems like a genuine statement, not a threat. I recall he’d infiltrated the family, so he’d probably seen me with her.

“I am.”

“The things she must have seen,” Phoenix quips, shoving a piece of steak in his mouth. I wish he’d choke on it.

“She hasn’t seen anything.” I look at Phoenix, wanting him to do this one thing for me. Keep her out of his plans. “She deserves a childhood untainted by...” I gesture vaguely around the table. “All of this.”

Phoenix studies me, his blue eyes searching mine, for what, I’m not sure. Deception, maybe. For a moment, I see a flicker of the boy I once loved, thoughtful, perceptive.

“I noticed the household was highly compartmentalized,” Blaise offers unexpectedly. “Jenna worked here for years and didn’t know half of what was happening.”

Jenna nods. “It’s true. I was blissfully... or perhaps ignorantly... unaware.”

I give her a grateful look, though I know her support won’t sway Phoenix. He’s determined to see me as complicit in everything my family has done.

But for the first time since he stormed back into my life, I see uncertainty in Phoenix’s eyes.

The evening drags on, each minute stretching like hours. Phoenix and his brothers share celebratory stories with Rileys, Donovans, and the other families who helped them bring my father down.

When dinner is finished, I don't want to leave the table as I'm able to hide much of my body in this ridiculous dress under the table.

As we move from dinner to drinks in the parlor, I feel eyes following me, assessing, judging.

The red dress Phoenix forced me to wear has achieved exactly what he intended.

I've become a spectacle to ogle and sneer at.

"Phoenix, you lucky bastard," a man with a thick Boston accent calls out, raising his glass. "You have excellent taste in women."

Another chimes in, "Kean's daughter in your bed? That's the sweetest revenge I can imagine."

I stand perfectly still as they discuss me as if I'm not present. My cheeks burn but I keep my expression neutral, refusing to give them the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort.

"Tell us, Phoenix," a third man asks, leaning forward with a leer, "does she fight you or has she learned to submit already?"

Phoenix's laugh is dark and cruel. "I don't fuck and tell." He slides his arm around my waist, fingers pressing into my hip. "But I will say that Keira knows exactly who's in charge now."

The men roar with approval while across the room, I notice a cluster of women whispering behind their hands, shooting glances my way.

Their expressions range from pity to disgust to smug satisfaction at my fall from

grace.

Only Lucy and Jenna avoid participating in my public humiliation.

They actually look horrified. But what can they do? Nothing.

"I need some air," I murmur, attempting to step away from Phoenix's grip.

His fingers tighten. "Stay," he commands softly, for my ears alone. "You're exactly where you belong."

I meet his eyes, searching for any hint of the boy who once looked at me with tenderness, who whispered promises under moonlight. I find nothing but cold calculation.

Phoenix raises his glass. "To new beginnings," he announces to the room. "And to my beautiful fiancée, who looks absolutely ravishing tonight."

The guests cheer and drink, but their eyes tell a different story. To them, I'm not a fiancée. I'm a trophy, a spoil of war, physical proof that the Ifrinns have reclaimed their throne.

I smile because I must, laugh when expected, and let Phoenix display me like a prized possession. Each moment chips away at something vital inside me, but I endure. For Brigit. For survival.

The evening seems never-ending, but I'm finally able to excuse myself to get another drink, desperate for just a moment away from Phoenix's possessive grip.

As I reach for a glass of champagne, a hand brushes against my exposed lower back. I stiffen, turning to find one of Phoenix's associates, a heavyset man with thinning hair



and alcohol-flushed cheeks.

"The boss is a lucky man," he slurs, his eyes roving over my body. "But maybe you'd like to try something different before you settle down?" His hand slides lower, cupping my backside through the thin fabric.

I step away, revulsion crawling up my spine. "Remove your hand before I remove it for you."

He laughs, crowding me against the bar. "Feisty. I like that. Come on, sweetheart. Why would Phoenix whore you out like this if it wasn't to reward men like me who helped him claim you?"

"I believe my fiancée made herself clear." Phoenix materializes beside us, his expression murderous.

The man withdraws his hand immediately, a nervous smile replacing his leer. "No harm intended, Boss. Just admiring the merchandise."

Phoenix's jaw tightens. "Get out."

The man scurries away, but instead of checking whether I'm alright, Phoenix rounds on me, gripping my arm painfully.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

"Enjoying the attention?" he hisses. "Is that why you wandered off? Looking for someone else to fuck?"

I stare at him in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Playing the tease seems to come naturally to you."

Something snaps inside me. Without thinking, I throw my champagne directly in his face. The room falls silent as the liquid drips down his shocked features.

"How dare you," I whisper, trembling with rage. "You dress me like a prostitute, parade me around like a conquest, let your friends talk about me like I'm not even human, and then wonder why your men think you've offered me up to them?"

Phoenix's eyes are dangerous, his breathing heavy as he wipes champagne from his face. For a moment, I think he might strike me.

But I'm undaunted as I continue. "You did this." I gesture at my dress. "You created this spectacle. You wanted me humiliated. Don't you dare blame me for the consequences of your sick game."

The silence in the room is thick. Everyone stares, frozen in place, witnessing my defiance and Phoenix's fury. The champagne drips from his face onto his expensive suit. Each droplet feels like a death knell.

"Come with me." Phoenix grips my arm again and hauls me out of the room.

"Phoenix—" Blaise begins.

"Don't." Phoenix glares at him as he drags me out of the room and through the hall to his office.

When we're finally alone, Phoenix pushes me against the closed door. "You want to talk about humiliation?" he growls. "How about the humiliation of discovering the woman who said she loved you, that said she'd never loved anyone else before, was a fucking liar."

My brow furrows wondering what he's talking about.

"Or worse, learning she was using you while her family plotted to murder yours? That she said nothing as they set fire and burned my family alive."

For the first time, I see pain in his handsome features. I see the horror and grief he must have felt as his house burned with his parents inside. Something inside me breaks. Ten years of guilt and grief come pouring out.

"I loved you," I whisper. "I loved you so much?—"

"Bullshit!" His hand slams on the door next to my head, making me flinch. "You used what you learned from me and helped them?—"

"I didn't." I shake my head. If he believes nothing else from me, I desperately want him to believe that I was not complicit, at least not knowingly or willingly, in his family's destruction. "I had no idea... until..." I'm not sure I should tell him what I know.

"Until what?" His hand slides over my chest and upward toward my neck. He doesn't squeeze but the threat is there.

“It was too late. They’d already taken my phone and locked me away when my father told me what he’d done. He said you were dead, but I prayed you weren’t. I prayed you’d still come for me.” I haven’t cried since that day, but the pain of it is back, so perhaps that’s why tears spill down my cheeks.

His expression flickers with confusion. "How can I believe you?"

"If you had come back for me—if you had just checked—you would have known I had nothing to do with it. I was a prisoner in my own home, just like I am now. The only difference is the jailer."

Phoenix steps back as if I've struck him. "You're twisting everything. You used me. Your family?—"

"My family is not me!" I shout. "I am not Hampton Kean. I am not Ronan. I was eighteen years old and in love with you, and they destroyed that because—" I stop because he can't know about Brigit. I can't risk what he might do.

“Because what?” He looks so tormented that a part of me wants to soothe him.

“You know why. Your father didn’t want us together.”

"You could have warned me," he insists, but there's less conviction in his voice. "I showed you how to break out."

“I didn’t know what they were planning, but if I could have gotten out, I would have. All I wanted back then was to be with you. Like you, my father put guards on me. One slept in my room. Practically watched me in the bathroom. What should I have done, Phoenix? Peed on them?”

We stare at each other, both breathing hard, caught in this endless cycle of blame and

pain. I realize then that there is no going back. He'll never be able to look at me and not see his home and family burning to the ground. That loss will always make me a target for his rage.

I wipe tears from my face. "This is getting us nowhere. You want your revenge? Take it. But stop pretending this is about justice when it's just about making yourself feel better."

I turn away from him, exhaustion settling deep in my bones. I reach for the doorknob, desperate to escape this room, this man, these impossible feelings that refuse to die despite everything.

"Keira." His voice is softer now, stripped of its earlier venom. "Wait."

I pause but don't turn around. "What more could you possibly want from me?"

His hand touches my shoulder. I flinch but don't pull away.

"Just... stay. Please."

The word 'please' catches me off guard. It's the first time he's asked rather than commanded since his return. Slowly, I turn to face him.

What I see nearly steals my breath. Phoenix's mask has slipped, revealing something raw and unguarded in his eyes. Confusion, pain, and something else I dare not name. The cold calculation is gone, replaced by the shadow of the man I once loved.

"Why should I stay?"

He doesn't answer with words. Instead, his hand slides up to cup my cheek, his touch unexpectedly gentle. I should pull away. Every instinct screams at me to protect

myself, to remember what he's done, what he's capable of doing. But I remain frozen, caught in his gaze.

Phoenix leans in slowly, giving me time to retreat, to refuse. I don't. Perhaps it's weakness or exhaustion or the foolish heart that never learned to stop loving him. Whatever the reason, I stay perfectly still as his lips meet mine.

The kiss is nothing like the brutal claiming of before, but neither is it gentle. It's like he's trying to recapture something he lost. My eyes flutter closed against my will, my body remembering what my mind wants to forget.

He deepens the kiss, drawing me closer until I can feel the rapid beating of his heart against my chest. I shouldn't respond, shouldn't show him this power he still holds over me. But for a moment, I do.

When you behave like a whore—you dress like one. Eliza's words from Phoenix come back to me and with them, the horror of what I'm doing. He's not the Phoenix I once loved. He's made that clear.

I twist away from him, disgusted with myself that for a moment, I wanted him.

“What's wrong?”

I look up at him. His confused expression suggests he's truly clueless as to why I might not want to kiss him.

“I won't fight you, Phoenix. I know I can't. But I'm no whore no matter how badly you want to make me one.” I hold my hands out to my sides, offering myself like a sacrifice. “Take me if you want. I won't fight it. But I won't forget either. I'll never forget what you did to me tonight.”

### PHOENIX

My chest feels like it's being torn apart. I've spent ten years building walls around my heart, constructing justifications for my hatred, for my cruelty. But Keira throwing it in my face is shattering everything. It's pissing me off, making me feel like a fucking abuser, and breaking me apart all at once. Worse, it makes me doubt myself. What if I've been wrong? What if she was clueless to her father's plan a decade ago? What if she's as much a victim as I am?

"You think that this is what this is? That all I want is to fuck you and humiliate you?"

She laughs derisively and gestures to the dress. "Come on, Phoenix. Why else would you have put me in this? Showed me off like I'd go to the highest bidder?"

Her accusation makes me sick even as I know she's not wrong.

I remember her entrance tonight. How she navigated the room full of predators with her chin held high despite the dress I forced on her.

My first thought had been she's fucking magnificent.

The crimson dress clings to her body like a second skin, revealing more than it conceals.

I meant to break her, to strip away her pride, yet she's maintained more dignity in her humiliation than I have in my revenge.

"I can't do this anymore," she says, her voice breaking. "Just let me go."

But I can't. I've never been able to let her go, not really. Even when I thought she'd betrayed me, her ghost haunted every quiet moment, every dark night.

A pounding echoes through my door. "Phoenix!" Blaise's voice follows.

"Go away." I can't hardly think with Keira stripping away everything I thought I knew. I can't add dealing with my brother on top of it.

"No can do, Bro." The door opens and both Blaise and Flint push their way in. Their gazes immediately go to Keira and I see relief in their faces. What the fuck did they think I was going to do to her?

Blaise turns his attention to me. "You've got guests."

"They can wait."

"If you want to reassure them of your power, you'll return to them." Flint takes off his coat and offers it to Keira. The gesture pisses me off more. I'm not a monster.

Liar , my conscience says.

To my surprise, Keira shakes her head. "Thank you, Flint, but I think I'd just like to return to my room, if that's okay with you." She looks at me, and I see so much pain and humiliation, and yet strength, it nearly brings me to my knees.

"You can go." My voice sounds hollow, distant. I feel like I've lost control of this night. Of everything.

"Good night, gentlemen," she says to Blaise and Flint. She turns and heads out the



door. I watch her, mesmerized by her as I've always been. She should look broken, yet somehow, Keira moves with a dignity that shames me.

The minute she's out of sight, my brothers turn on me.

"What the fuck, Phoenix?" Flint's eyes burn hot. "I didn't fully believe Blaise when he said?—"

"What?" Blaise interrupts. "You thought I was lying?"

"I thought you were exaggerating. But holy fucking hell. Please tell me you haven't forced yourself on her."

I close my eyes, hating that they'd think I'd do such a thing. The fact that they do sends me into a rage. "It would be within my right?—"

They gape in shock. "Jesus, Phoenix."

"But no. Despite what you think, I have a few scruples left." I need a drink. I push past them and return to my guests. "I need a bourbon," I say to a passing server.

"Yes sir."

John Donnelly puts a hand on my shoulder. "That was quite a display, young man." John is a large part of why I'm here and the Keans are in the basement. This party is to celebrate him and the others who supported me and my brothers' return to reclaim what Hampton Kean stole.

"I have to say, I'm glad Hannah is married to Ash and not you. Not sure I'd have wanted to see my girl paraded around like that," he finishes, referring to his daughter and my brother's arranged marriage that has turned into a love match.

“I wouldn’t have paraded Hannah,” I say through gritted teeth. “Keira is a Kean.”

“Quite right. Good move to marry her. But you might consider not being so obvious in your disdain if your goal is to appease Hampton loyalists. They’ll see it as a reason to challenge you.”

I take the bourbon the server hands me and down it. “Let them come.”

John lets out a sigh. “Ah, the self-confidence of youth.” I’m not sure if he’s given up on me or decided he said what he needed to say, but either way, he moves on to another group.

“I see your fiancée hasn’t returned,” one of Riley’s men says to me with a gleam in his eye. “I guess you had to show her who’s boss.” He waggles his brows.

Fucking hell. They all believe I’d force myself on Keira. And this dickwad is all for it. Worse, I have to go along with it. I can’t let them think Keira got the best of me when she tossed her drink on me.

“She’s not the only one.” I set my sights on the fucker who dared touch Keira. I’m surprised he stuck around. I stride over to him. “You touch what’s mine again and you’ll pay with your life.”

The man flinches. “I meant no disrespect, sir... It’s just that... well, you...”

“I what?” But I know what. Keira was right. My actions weren’t that of a possessive fiancé looking out for his woman. I was showing her off to leering men like a spoil of war.

“I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“Make sure that it doesn’t.”

I scan the room. A few have taken notice of my return and chastising of this man. Most are engaged in conversation and partaking of free booze. My brothers stand with their wives, disapproving expressions on all of them. It breaks me a little to think I’ve lost my brothers’ respect.

I do my best to salvage what’s left of the celebration. As the last guests leave, I think they feel adequately appreciated for their help in bringing the Keans down and are ready to support me in bringing more profits and power to all of us, just as my father had done.

Thinking of my father brings more shame. He’d have hauled me out of this room the minute Keira entered in that fuck-me dress and given me a scolding of a lifetime. My father believed women needed to be protected, respected, and worshiped. It’s how he treated my mother.

I argue with myself that had he been supportive of my love for Keira ten years ago, tonight wouldn’t have happened. I’d be the husband he’d want me to be. Hell, my parents might still be alive.

“Well, that was quite a night,” Lucy says. She’s never one to mince words. I keep expecting Flint to explain to her how things work in our world, but it turns out he likes her being unafraid to express her opinions.

“I hope Miss Keira is alright,” Jenna says softly.

“She’s fine. And she will be fine,” I say tightly.

They all look at me dubiously.

When they all leave, I head upstairs. I consider stopping by Keira's room to check on her, but what's the point?

Instead, I take a shower like that will wash away my anger and shame. I don't bother putting on sleepwear as I slip into bed.

Sleep is elusive, though, as I replay the night in my head.

For a decade, I've pictured Keira laughing with her father over my family's deaths.

I've imagined her celebrating on the ashes of my childhood home, counting the money her betrayal earned them.

Every night in exile, I fell asleep to thoughts of revenge against the woman who used our love to destroy everything I held dear.

But tonight... something didn't fit.

When she greeted Jenna, genuine concern flashed across her face. Not the performative sympathy of a socialite, but real warmth. The story she shared about Jenna's mother expressed true admiration of the woman.

Then came her reaction to Hannah. The shock in her eyes when I mentioned Hampton shooting Ash's wife wasn't feigned. Her face went pale, horror etching across her features.

She didn't know. It happened just days ago and she didn't know. It seems inconceivable unless my brothers were right. What if she really had been locked away? What if her parents kept her in the dark about everything including their plan to destroy my family?

I think back to the party. I'd kept her close not so much to dominate, but to let the men ogling her know who she belonged to. When she'd finally gone off on her own to get a drink, one of Donovan's men sidled up next to me, his gaze fixed on Keira's ass.

"Your bride is something else, Ifrinn. Wouldn't mind a taste of that myself."

My hand tightened around my champagne glass. I'm surprised it didn't break. "Watch your fucking mouth."

"Hey, you're the one who dressed her like a five-star meal and served her up."

The truth was like a sucker punch, accentuated even more when I saw that other fucker squeeze her ass. I put her in that dress. I paraded her around like a trophy to be gawked at. And then I blamed her for everyone's reaction.

But she deserved this. Her family destroyed mine. She betrayed me.

Didn't she?

I scrape my hand over my face feeling the weight of my ultimate douchiness. No wonder my brothers look at me like I'm a total stranger.

I close my eyes, thinking back to better times.

Keira at eighteen, the moonlight catching in her blonde waves as we lay hidden in my father's garden.

Her fingers tracing my jaw, her whisper against my lips.

"Promise we'll find a way to be together, no matter what."

" The desperate way she'd clung to me, as if she knew something was coming that would tear us apart.

But what if Blaise and Flint are right? What if she's just another victim of Hampton's ambition?

The hope that rises is dangerous, a weakness I can't afford. If I'm wrong about her, I've hurt someone who might have suffered as much as I did. Who could be an ally in my conquest of Hampton Kean. Who could love me as I'd loved her.

I fall asleep, but Keira seeps from my memory into my dreams. It's not eighteen-year-old Keira, but Keira today. We're in my office, just like we were earlier. I'm kissing her, but not to punish her. No. It's soft and sweet. Her mouth opens under mine, her tongue meeting mine with equal fervor.

Her hands slide up my chest, fingers curling into my shirt like she's afraid I'll disappear. I back her against the door, pressing my body against hers, drinking in the taste I've dreamed about for a decade.

I break away just enough to look into her eyes. I need to see desire, not fear or resolve. She needs to want me too. I see the same hunger I feel. Like she's been starving for this as long as I have.

I deepen the kiss, all the anger, all the hatred transforms into something else entirely, raw, desperate need. My hand tangles in her hair, tilting her head back as I claim her mouth with mine.

"Phoenix," she breathes against my lips.

I lift her without thinking, her legs wrapping around my waist instinctively. The red dress rides up her thighs as she locks her ankles behind me. Her arms circle my neck,

pulling me closer as if she's afraid I'll vanish if she lets go.

The weight of her in my arms feels right, like reclaiming something that was always mine. I carry her across the room to my desk, never breaking our kiss. Papers scatter as I set her down, her body perched on the edge.

My hands slide up her thighs, beneath the hem of that fucking sexy dress I forced her to wear. Her skin burns beneath my touch, soft and familiar. I've dreamed of this, of her, for so long.

I tear my lips from hers, trailing kisses down her neck, her collarbone, the swell of her tits above that damned red dress.

I drop to my knees before her, looking up to find her eyes wide with surprise.

My hands slide beneath her dress, pushing it up her thighs until she's exposed to me.

The sight of her like this, perched on my desk, breathing hard, her hair falling around her flushed face, makes my blood burn.

I press my mouth to her wet pussy. Her taste floods my senses, familiar yet new, and I groan against her flesh. Her fingers tangle in my hair, not pushing me away but pulling me closer. I devour her like a starving man, every gasp and whimper fueling my need to possess her completely.

"Oh, God," she moans, her hips lifting to meet my mouth.

I grip her thighs, holding her open for me as I work her with my tongue. The power I feel isn't the cold satisfaction of revenge, it's primal, possessive. Mine. She's always been mine.

Her body tenses, trembling beneath my hands as she approaches the edge. I look up, needing to watch her face as she comes apart for me. Her head is thrown back, lips parted, completely surrendered to the pleasure I'm giving her.

"Let go," I command, driving two fingers inside her pussy. "Come for me, Keira."

She shatters with a cry, her body arching as waves of pleasure wash through her. I don't stop finger fucking her, drawing out her climax.

When I rise to my feet, she reaches for me, pulling at my belt, my zipper. I free my dick, positioning it at her entrance. I thrust into her in one powerful stroke, burying myself to the hilt. The sensation is overwhelming, hot, tight, perfect. No protection. No barriers. Just us.

I'm driving into her, faster, harder, careening toward oblivion. I'm teetering on the edge. I need to feel her come around me. To take me over with her.

I look into her face, to her eyes, and my world stops.

Her eyes are flat and empty.

"Keira." Panic fills me.

Her gaze locks onto me. "Take me if you want. I won't fight it. But I won't forget either. I'll never forget what you did to me tonight."

I bolt up in bed. My heart races, but not from sexual adrenaline. No, it's from sheer terror that I've become what my brothers, what Keira, accused me of.

But even as self-loathing washes through me, it's followed by anger. I'm not that man. Sure, I'm an asshole, but I'm not a monster.



You keep telling yourself that , Blaise's voice echoes in my brain.

I flop back in bed wondering how this perfect plan has gone so far off the rails. I guess it started when Lana Kean offered Keira to me in exchange for their lives and I took it as an opportunity to make Keira pay for her deception. A deception I'm now not so sure of.

But just because I have doubts, doesn't mean I believe her. Keira is hiding something. She's brave and strong-willed, and yet willing to submit to anything I do to her. The only reason she'd do that is to protect someone. It could be that kid. Or it could be her lover. Maybe both.

The end result is that I can't fully trust her.

KEIRA

I sit on the edge of my bed as I unhook the diamond earrings I wore tonight.

The clasp pinches my skin, a small pain compared to the emotional lashing I endured.

Never in a million years would I have expected to be treated like a whore.

Bossed around and dismissed, yes. But not flaunted for men to gawk at.

The red dress puddles at my feet like spilled blood. I kick it away, wanting nothing more than to burn the thing. Phoenix knew exactly what he was doing, parading me around like a prized possession in front of his brothers and associates. Making me feel exposed. Vulnerable.

Yet I didn't break.

When that vile man touched me, when Phoenix accused me of encouraging it, I didn't cower. I threw champagne in his face. The memory brings a small smile to my lips despite everything. The look of shock in his eyes was almost worth whatever punishment awaits me.

He won't break me, I vow. At least not completely.

I go to the bathroom and wipe away my makeup and brush out my hair. I pull on a soft nightgown ready for this night to end.

Ten years ago, I was a different person, naive, hopeful, desperately in love with a boy who looked at me like I hung the moon. Now that boy is a man who looks at me with contempt yet still wants to possess me.

The kiss we shared burns on my lips even now.

For a moment, I felt the Phoenix I once knew and oh, how I wanted to sink into him again.

But the man I loved is gone. The man who kissed me tonight is the one who sought to humiliate me, so of course I had to push him away. My dignity is all I have left.

I'll play his games. I'll be his obedient bride.

I'll stand by his side while he consolidates power over the families of Boston.

I know my place in this twisted arrangement.

I have no power here except what I can carve out through small acts of defiance.

Through maintaining my dignity when he tries to strip it away.

But I'm not without strength. I proved that tonight. If Phoenix thinks I'll crumble completely under his thumb, he's underestimated me. I may have agreed to marry him, but I haven't surrendered my soul.

I curl into my bed, pulling the covers tight around me. Sleep feels impossible with my mind racing through the events of tonight. The humiliation, the accusations, the painful reminder of who Phoenix has become, a stranger wearing the face of someone I once loved.

In the quiet darkness, another memory surfaces. The look in Blaise and Flint's eyes when Phoenix was parading me around in that dress. Unlike their brother and all the other men, there was no crass comment or lewd stares. Instead I saw concern and disapproval.

During dinner, Blaise had caught my gaze across the table, his expression softening for just a moment. Something like regret flickered across his features before he masked it. And I caught Flint frowning at Phoenix more than once, his condemnation evident in the tight set of his jaw.

They're different from him. They haven't let hatred consume them entirely. I wonder why? Is it because they found true love? Phoenix had true love, or at least that's what I thought we had.

I press my face into the pillow, tears threatening. What happened to you, Phoenix? He's alive and yet, the man I knew is dead. He died the night my parents took everything from him.

My parents. How I hate them for what they've done.

Not just to the Ifrinns, but to me. To Brigit.

They've stolen so much from all of us with their greed and ambition.

They destroyed everything. Ruined the man I loved.

Forced me to give up being the mother of my own child. All for what? Power? Money? Reputation?

The bitter irony doesn't escape me. My parents schemed and murdered to secure their position, only to end up prisoners in their own basement, waiting for the police to

take them away. I'm not sorry for it.

They deserve to go to jail. But I resent that I'm the one Phoenix will torture for the rest of my life in punishment for their acts.

And then there's Brigit. If Phoenix discovers who she really is, that she's his child, what would he do? Would he use her as another weapon against me? Or worse, would he take her from me completely?

I need to get Brigit somewhere safe as soon as possible.

But how? I consider the tablet that Phoenix let me have to plan the wedding.

I could research boarding schools to send her to.

But nothing is truly private on these devices.

Whatever I type, whatever sites I visit, Phoenix could have someone monitoring everything.

Technology leaves traces that can't be completely erased. I'm surprised no one has mentioned finding my hidden business on my laptop.

It's all in the cloud, but I'm sure anyone with any tech knowledge could access it and figure out I've been squirreling away money.

I should have taken Brigit and run sooner. Or placed her for adoption when I had the chance. I was selfish in wanting to keep her with me and now she's in danger. If Phoenix discovers I'm trying to send Brigit away, what would he do? To her? To me? To Nanny Fiona?

But I can't risk having her grow up in a home filled with hate and retribution. I need to figure out a way to get her away. The wedding could be the best opportunity. The house will have guests and extra staff. Nanny Fiona could sneak away with her in the commotion.

I glance at the clock. Nearly midnight. Nanny Fiona's room sits just next to Brigit's, and I desperately need to speak with her about getting Brigit away from here.

I push my covers back to go to her, but Phoenix's accusations echo in my mind.

His jealous rage when he caught me in the hallway, his certainty that I was sneaking off to meet a lover.

If he catches me again, especially after tonight's confrontation... I can't risk that.

I roll onto my stomach, burying my face in the pillow to muffle my frustrated groan.

I can't talk to Nanny Fiona now, but I can make plans.

Switzerland would be ideal for Brigit, far enough that Phoenix couldn't easily reach her, with schools that ask no questions when wealthy families need discretion.

But getting her there requires documentation, transportation, money I can access without leaving electronic footprints.

Brigit's passport is in my father's safe. I know the combination, but reaching it means getting to his study undetected. I could send money ahead, although I'd want a device that Phoenix doesn't know about to make the transfer.

A wild, desperate idea flashes through my mind as I stare at the ceiling.

What if I just told Phoenix that Brigit needs to go to boarding school?

I could frame it as what's best for her education, say she's been accepted to an exclusive program that would secure her future.

I could even suggest it would keep her away from the ugliness of what's happening between our families.

Or one less person for him to have to think about.

For one brief, hopeful moment, the plan seems perfect. Simple. Direct.

Then reality crashes down around me.

Phoenix would never allow it. Not now. Not when he's seen how much I care for Brigit. Not when he's discovered a perfect pressure point to control me.

If I suggested sending Brigit away, he'd immediately become suspicious. He'd wonder why I suddenly wanted my "god-sister" out of reach. He might start digging into who Brigit really is.

And if he found out...

My stomach twists with fear. Phoenix in his current state would use that information mercilessly. He'd either take her from me completely, my ultimate punishment, or use her as permanent leverage to ensure I never step out of line again.

No, I can't risk suggesting boarding school. I have to find another way, something that doesn't involve Phoenix's permission at all. Something he won't discover until it's too late to stop.

I slip from bed and find a piece of paper.

I write down all the access information Nanny Fiona needs to access my accounts.

I can't just hand it to her without my guards noting it, so I slip it into a worn copy of Jane Eyre on my bookshelf hoping no one would think to search my room that thoroughly.

As I put the book back on the shelf, I wonder how my life has become this cloak and dagger situation.

The next day, I head to Brigit's rooms when I know she's done with her homeschooling, a situation started nearly a year ago when we started suffering attacks.

I'd insisted that for her safety she needed to be educated at home.

My parents went along with it not so much out of concern for Brigit or respect for me.

Their minds were elsewhere and as long as we were out of their way, they were fine. I should have left then.

The guard Phoenix assigned to watch me shifts his weight by the doorway as I enter Brigit's room. His presence is a constant reminder of my captivity, even as I'm allowed to move through the house.

"Keira!" Brigit's eyes light up when she sees me. "Nanny Fiona says I did excellent on my fractions today."

"She did," Nanny Fiona confirms.



"That's wonderful, sweetheart." I pull out the chair next to her and sit down. "Would you like to help me with something important?"

Her eyes shine with interest. "What is it?"

"Well, it's for the wedding." I slide the tablet toward her, showing her pictures of flower arrangements.

She wrinkles her nose slightly. "To that mean man?"

"Yes, to Phoenix. And it would mean so much if you helped me choose some things for it."

"Will I get to wear a pretty dress?" Her practical mind jumps to what matters most to a nine-year-old.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

"The prettiest dress we can find. First I need help with floral arrangements." I pull up images of flowers, feeling bad that if things go as planned, she won't be wearing a pretty dress, at least not at my wedding. She'll be on a plane heading for a better life.

"I like the purple flowers best," Brigit declares, pointing at a lavender arrangement.

"Those are lovely," I agree, making notes while keeping my voice steady. "What about these for the centerpieces?"

While we discuss ribbons and cake flavors, my mind races through contingency plans.

Should I tell her she might need to take a trip soon?

Prepare her for separation without frightening her?

Will it slip out? I hate to whisk her away without a goodbye, but I can't risk anyone finding out and stopping me.

"Can I be in your wedding?" Brigit asks, her eyes shining with excitement. "Like a flower girl? Lila was one at her aunt's wedding and got to throw rose petals everywhere!"

My heart constricts as I watch her enthusiasm.

She's bouncing slightly in her chair, already imagining herself in a special dress, being the center of attention.

The image would be perfect, my daughter walking ahead of me down the aisle, not knowing she's participating in a ceremony uniting her real parents.

"You'll definitely be part of the day, sweetheart," I say carefully, choosing my words with precision. "You'll stand with the family as my support. That's even more important than being a flower girl."

Her smile falters. "But no petals?"

I brush a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "I think it's better if you stand with Nanny Fiona during the ceremony. You'll have a special seat right in the front row where I can see you."

"Will I still get a pretty dress?" she asks.

"The prettiest dress we can find." I hate deceiving her.

She considers this, her little brow furrowed in thought. "Okay," she finally decides. "As long as I get to be with you."

"Always," I whisper, pulling her close and breathing in the scent of her hair. "You'll always be with me."

Even as I say the words, I know they're a lie if my plan works. She'll be far away from me soon, safe from Phoenix's revenge. And if he discovers who she really is, I might lose her anyway.

"Can I make the flowers? I can draw what they look like," Brigit says. It warms my heart how much she wants to be a part of this even as she doesn't like Phoenix. She's doing it for me.

“That would be lovely.”

She leaves her chair and goes to her art area near the window. Her tongue peeks out in concentration as she begins sketching flower arrangements for the wedding.

"I'm going to draw the prettiest flowers ever," she declares, not looking up from her paper. "With butterflies too!"

"That sounds beautiful, sweetheart. I need to speak with Nanny Fiona about your dress." I motion for Nanny Fiona to meet me at the other side of the room, away from the door where my guard is stationed and from Brigit.

"I need your help, Fiona. We have to get Brigit out of here."

“I’ve wondered if you and Mr. Ifrinn had plans.”

“I have plans. He can’t know. It’s a lot to ask of you and if it’s too much, just tell me.”

Nanny Fiona's eyes widen, but she doesn't look surprised. “I’m committed to Brigit and you.”

"There's money," I continue, words tumbling out urgently.

"In a Swiss account under the name Catherine Doyle.

It was my grandmother's maiden name. I've been adding to it for years. There is enough for her to go to private school and for you to live near her, at least for a few years.” I pray I can continue to make money in secret to fund their lives until Brigit turns eighteen. Another reason for me to be compliant with Phoenix. Maybe he’ll let me have my laptop back and I can continue to write and publish in secret to insure

Brigit has all she needs.

Fiona nods, her face set with determination despite the fear in her eyes. "I'll do whatever is needed."

"Perfect." I grasp her hands. "The account information is hidden in a book in my room, Jane Eyre , page ninety-four. There's enough for new identities, new papers. Enough to keep you both comfortable for years."

Fiona squeezes my fingers. "What about you, Miss?"

I shake my head, willing tears to stay at bay. "I can't come. Phoenix would hunt us all down if I disappeared."

"You know I'd die before letting anything happen to that child," Fiona says fiercely. "She's been mine since the day she was born."

I look down because as much as I love to hear that, it hurts too. Brigit is mine and no one knows it but me and my parents.

"I know. That's why it has to be you."

I spend the next hour coloring with Brigit and then go back to my room to finish wedding preparations. I eat my meals in my room and successfully avoid seeing Phoenix all day.

That night, I'm sitting in the window seat ready for bed but unable to sleep. I'm going over and over again the plans Nanny Fiona and I have made to use the distraction of the wedding to sneak her and Brigit out of the home.

My door opens without a knock and Phoenix strides in. "I assumed you'd be asleep by

now.” He closes the door behind him.

“Did you come to watch me sleep?” The fact that he thought I’d be sleeping suggests he was thinking of doing something unsavory.

“No.” He crosses the room with predatory grace, and I steel myself for what's coming. After the humiliation at dinner last night, after that searing kiss, I can’t help but think he’s come to claim what he believes is his.

I lift my chin, determined not to show fear. "Let's get this over with."

Phoenix stops, his expression shifting. "Get what over with?"

"Isn't that why you're here?" My voice is steadier than I feel. "To remind me of whom I belong to now?"

Something flickers across his face, surprise, perhaps even regret. He runs a hand through his dark hair and takes a step back, creating space between us.

"I didn't come here for that," he says, his voice lower than before. "I came to... apologize."

Of all the things I expected him to say, that wasn't one of them. I blink, certain I've misheard. "You came to what?"

Phoenix sucks in a breath. "At dinner last night. With that dress. All of it.”

I remain silent, searching his face for deception.

"This marriage doesn't have to be..." He pauses, seeming to search for the right words. "It doesn't have to be filled with hatred, Keira. We have history. Before

everything went wrong, we had something good."

"You think we can go back to that?" I ask, incredulous. "After everything you've done?" I told him I'd never forget and within a day, he's asking me to do just that.

"Not back," he says. "Forward. Something different. Something that doesn't destroy us both."

I search his face for signs of manipulation, but what I find instead makes my heart bloom with hope that the man I once loved isn't completely gone. Of course, I'd be an idiot to think there's enough of that man left to override this new version, so I push away sentiment.

"Forward," I repeat.

He nods.

I stand, needing distance to keep me strong. "I'll be what you need me to be in public, Phoenix. I'll stand beside you at the wedding and play my part in your revenge. I'll be the dutiful wife who helps cement your position."

His eyes darken. "And in private?"

"In private..." I take a steadying breath. "I can't forget the man who humiliated me in front of your associates, your brothers and their wives, who made me feel like property rather than a person."

"Keira—"

"I'll try," I cut him off. "For both our sakes, I'll try to find a way forward. But don't ask me to pretend the past few days never happened. Don't ask me to forget who

you've become."

His expression looks pained. Is it guilt?

Whatever it is, for a moment, I want to soothe it.

I close my eyes as I'm forced to acknowledge that the line between hating Phoenix and wanting him is easily blurred when he's not being a jerk.

My body remembers his touch even as my mind catalogs his cruelties.

My heart recalls his tenderness even as it guards against fresh wounds.

I don't know if I can trust this change in him. I don't know if I can trust myself.



*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I stand before Keira, watching her steely eyes take my measure. The woman I once knew is still in there somewhere, beneath layers of armor she's built against me. Against the world. Against pain.

"I don't expect you to love me again," I say, the words making my heart ache. "But I need this arrangement to work."

Her laugh is sharp, cutting. "And humiliating me in front of your men was your strategy for making it work?"

The memory of last night's dinner flashes through my mind, her in that red dress, my cruel words, the champagne dripping down my face. Shame crawls up my spine.

"I wanted to hurt you." There's not trying to deny it.

"If you want revenge so badly, why focus on me instead of my father? He's the one who orchestrated everything. He's the one who destroyed your family." Her expression is genuinely puzzled.

Why indeed? Hampton Kean deserves every ounce of my hatred, yet I've been pouring it all onto Keira.

"I suppose it's because I don't expect anything different from your parents. But you... you betrayed me."

"Did I?" Her gray eyes search mine, and I wonder what she's looking for. The old me, maybe. "Or is it easier to believe I betrayed you than to accept that your father played a part in bringing this on?"

Anger rises. "Don't you dare blame my father?—"

"He and my father are from the same ilk. Do you think he wouldn't have killed my parents?"

She's not wrong, but... "My father was nothing like your father. He'd have never killed innocent people."

"Maybe not." She nods, and my rage dials down to a simmer. "But he didn't approve of us?—"

"He didn't know about us."

She gives a small laugh. "He did when my father told him and your father wouldn't approve of our match."

I turn away, unable to face the truth. It's easier to hate her. Easier to believe she never loved me. Because if she did, if what we had was real, then I lost something far more precious than I've allowed myself to admit all these years. And my father played a part in it. That's hard to accept. Could I have changed his mind if I'd told him how much I loved her?

But then I wonder out loud, "How did your father know? Did you tell him?"

She hesitates and looks away. "There wasn't much I could do then, as now, that someone isn't reporting it." She returns her gaze to me. "My father is a terrible man. What he did is unconscionable. But I'm not him. Why do you punish me and not

him?"

"You don't think being locked in the basement is punishment? Would you rather be locked up down there?"

"Yes, I would," she says without any doubt or hesitation. "Given the choice between being left alone in a quiet cell to being demeaned and humiliated as a sexual object that all your associates probably jerked off to last night, I choose a cell."

The image her words conjure up make me want to kill every associate who leered at her last night. It burns in my gut that I'm the one who set it up. What sort of fucked up shit is that?

I turn away, running a hand through my hair, unable to face her, to face my shame. The anger that's fueled me for a decade feels different now, heavier, more complicated. It was easier when I could direct it all at her, when I could believe she was just as guilty as her father.

"Do you know why I'm so angry with you?" I ask, not looking at her.

"Because you think I betrayed you."

I face her again. "Because I loved you. Because I would have given up everything for you." The admission costs me something, leaves me feeling exposed in a way I haven't allowed myself to be since I was twenty-one and believed in things like love and loyalty.

"And then your family took everything from me. My parents. My home. My future. And in my mind, you became part of that betrayal because how could they have pulled it off otherwise? Because you didn't warn me.

" My chest feels tight. "Hate is simpler than grief.

I've been living on hate for a very long time. "

I take a deep breath, steadying myself after this unexpected moment of vulnerability. "I want us to work together in this marriage, Keira. We can build something functional out of this arrangement. Something that benefits us both."

Her eyebrow arches skeptically. "By 'working together', you mean I comply with your demands while you parade me around as your trophy wife?"

"That's not what I meant." But even as I deny it, I recognize the truth in her words. "I need your cooperation?—"

"My compliance," she corrects sharply. "Let's call it what it is."

Frustration builds in my chest. "Fine. Yes, I need your compliance. But that doesn't mean we can't find common ground."

Her eyes flash with irritation. "Common ground? You humiliated me in front of your men and accused me of sneaking around to meet some imaginary lover. And I've taken it.

I nearly sucked your dick in front of your men to appease your cruel need for revenge.

What exactly is our common ground, Phoenix? What more do I need to do?"

Her words hit me like ice water. What am I doing? This isn't who I want to be. I don't want a submissive wife who fears me. I want...

The realization comes suddenly. I want what we had before. The partnership. The mutual respect. The trust. The love. Of course, none of that is possible now. Except maybe the partnership.

"Do you remember that summer day at the lake house?" I ask, my voice softening. "When we snuck away from both our families and spent the whole day just talking about what we wanted from life?"

Her expression softens, and it pleases me that at least her memories of us are sweet.

"You said you wanted to travel the world," I continue. "See places your parents would never approve of. And I promised I'd take you everywhere."

"I remember," she says quietly.

"I meant it then. Every word."

She looks at me, really looks at me, for what feels like the first time since I returned.

"I know you did. And I meant all the promises I made to you too. Those feelings didn't just disappear, Phoenix. They're still there, buried under everything else."

Hope blooms in my chest. "Then maybe?—"

"But so is everything you've done since you came back," she interrupts. "The threats. The accusations. You can't erase that by reminiscing about the past."

"Did you ever truly love me, Keira?" The question escapes before I can stop it.

Her eyes narrow. A flush spreads across her cheeks, not embarrassment, but anger.

"Did I love you?" Her voice trembles. "I loved you so much I couldn't breathe sometimes.

I loved you when my parents locked me away to keep me from you.

I loved you when I heard your family had been killed, when I thought you were dead.

" She steps closer, her finger jabbing toward my chest. "I loved you when I cried myself to sleep for months.

I loved you when I had to learn how to live in a world where you didn't exist anymore. "

The raw emotion in her voice strips away my defenses. This isn't the calculated response of someone who betrayed me. This is pure, unfiltered pain. And I know pain.

"Then why didn't you warn me?" How could she not know something was up?

"I couldn't! They took everything from me—my phone, my freedom. I was a prisoner in my own home! Not much different from now."

She turns away, wrapping her arms around herself. "Do you know what it's like to hear the person you love most in the world has been killed? To believe for ten years that they're gone forever? And then to have them show up and look at you with nothing but hatred?"

I want to reach for her, but my hands stay at my sides. "If you loved me so much, why didn't you leave after? Why stay with the family that destroyed mine?"

Something flickers across her face, hesitation, fear. It reminds me that she's holding

something back.

"It wasn't that simple," she says finally.

"What does that mean? What could possibly keep you here with them?"

She looks at me for a long moment, her gray eyes filled with something I can't quite read.

"Some chains aren't made of metal, Phoenix," she says quietly. "Some are made of love and responsibility."

I step closer, drawn by the vulnerability in her voice. "Tell me. Whatever it is?—"

"No." She shakes her head firmly. "You betrayed me too, Phoenix. You promised me you'd take me away, and you didn't."

"If I had known, I would have found a way to you. I would have torn down walls, bribed guards, done whatever it took." The admission costs me something, but standing here with her, seeing the pain etched across her face, I can't maintain the lie that I didn't care.

"We could have had a life together," I continue, stepping closer. "Away from all this. Away from our families and their blood feuds."

Her eyes widen slightly, disbelief mingling with something that looks like hope.

"I used to dream about it," I admit. "A normal life. A home that wasn't built on violence and power. Kids running through hallways without armed guards at every door. I wanted that with you, Keira. Only you."

She gives me a wan smile. “That would have been nice. But that dream is gone.”

“Is it? Maybe it is, but we could still build something.”

She stares at me, and I imagine she’s trying to decide what I want and whether I’m being sincere. I don’t blame her.

“You want children?”

I hadn’t thought about it until this moment, but now I do. Several of them, even knowing I’ve ruined any chance of that. “Yes. I hope that we can make them without your doing it out of a sense of compliance or duty.”

My hand moves of its own accord, fingers brushing against her cheek. She doesn't pull away. Something breaks open inside me, and before I can second-guess myself, I lean in and capture her lips with mine.

This kiss is nothing like our earlier ones. There's no anger driving it, no need to dominate or punish. Just raw need and ten years of buried longing.

To my surprise, she doesn't push me away. Instead, her hands slide up my chest, fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt as she pulls me closer.



## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

The heat between us ignites instantly, familiar yet new. My hands frame her face, thumbs stroking her cheekbones as I deepen the kiss. She tastes exactly as I remember.

A small sound escapes her throat, part surrender, part demand. My control snaps. I back her against the wall, lifting her as her legs wrap around my waist. Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, and it feels surreal. After everything, she wants me.

My lips trace the column of her throat as her head falls back, exposing more skin for me to taste. Her pulse hammers beneath my mouth, matching the thundering of my own heart.

I carry her to bed, our clothes falling away in our haste to feel skin against skin.

I'm frantic, wanting to touch and taste every inch of her.

Now. My hands roam. My lips taste. I reacquaint myself with her body.

It's her. My Keira. And yet different. Rounder in some areas.

Softer in others. But still her. Really her.

More intense than memory, more consuming than fantasy.

My dick is throbbing to be inside her. I reach between us, sliding my fingers through her pussy lips, finding them wet. I groan at how wet. It's like a fucking miracle.

When I finally cover her body with mine and thrust inside her, the sensation is overwhelming, like finding a piece of myself I didn't know was missing.

She arches under me, taking me deeper. Does she feel it too? God, I hope so.

I lose myself in Keira, in the feel of her beneath me, around me. Ten years of hatred and anger melt away as we move together, our bodies remembering what our minds tried to forget.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, pulling me closer. I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her scent, letting it wash over me. How many nights had I dreamed of this? How many times had I woken up reaching for her, only to find cold, empty sheets?

I watch her face as pleasure builds. She's so fucking beautiful.

"Come, Keira. I want to watch you come."

Her breath hitches, her body arches, her pussy clamps down around mine. As her orgasm overtakes her, I memorize every detail. The way her lips part, the flush that spreads across her cheeks, the soft sounds she makes as I continue to drive into her, hitting the right spot.

"Phoenix," she gasps. My name on her lips is the final straw. I buck, plunging deep inside her as my orgasm slams into me, fast, hard, intense. I radiates from my dick out to every cell in my body. It feels out of control, but so fucking good.

I collapse over her, spent and breathless.

I want to savor this moment. To believe the last ten years are erased.

Or that we can start new. But reality hovers in my mind, threatening to intrude.

There are still so many questions unanswered, so much pain between us.

And can I be sure that she really wanted this?

Could this be a duty fuck? The idea of it makes me sick.

I don't want her to hand her body over without her wanting mine in return.

I pull away from Keira, angry at my lack of control and resenting her for making me question what, for a moment, was perfect.

"I should go," I mutter, reaching for my clothes scattered across the floor.

She doesn't stop me, doesn't say anything at all. It reinforces the idea that she just did this to appease me. Why would she do that? She fights me on so many things, and yet gives total compliance. Why? Is it to keep me happy as she plots something? Is it to protect someone?

Fucking hell, that must be it. There's no doubt she's hiding something. I've spent too many years reading people not to recognize the signs. All I can think of is the other man.

"You're mine now, Keira, whether you like it or not. Tell your lover it's over."

Her eyes flash with something between hurt and fury as she pulls the sheet tighter around herself.

"Message received, loud and clear," Keira says, her voice cutting through the lingering intimacy between us. "I'm being exactly what you wanted. The dutiful

fiancée. Isn't that what this is all about? Making sure I know my place?"

Her words gut me. I feel like I opened a vein for her, but she sees what just happened as my claiming ownership of her. Of her submitting to me. Performing a wifely obligation.

"That's not—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"No need to explain. I understand perfectly." Her smile is brittle, practiced. "This is just another part of our arrangement."

Fuck. I know my part in this, but it doesn't stop the resentment from growing. "I don't need pity fucks, Keira. And this doesn't change anything," I say harshly. "We still have arrangements to finalize."

She nods once, her face a careful mask. "Of course."

The ease with which she accepts this makes me wonder if I've been played. Was this her strategy all along? Give in to me to gain leverage? The thought sours everything we just shared.

I leave without another word, closing the door firmly behind me. I need space to think, to process what just happened and what it means. I head down to the kitchen and grab a glass of water, leaning against the counter.

What the hell am I doing? One moment, I'm plotting her humiliation and the next, I'm groveling, wanting what we lost and then fucking her. For ten years I've been focused and methodical. Nothing has derailed me. But Keira... She confuses me emotionally and psychologically. I'm not in charge of this game we're playing anymore.

The sound of small feet padding across tile breaks my reverie. I look up to find Brigit

standing in the doorway, her hair mussed from sleep, eyes wide at finding me here.

"I'm hungry," she announces simply, as if my presence in the kitchen at this hour is perfectly normal.

"I can make you something," I offer, surprising myself. I've never been around kids. Hell, only just an hour ago, I realized I might want one.

Brigit tilts her head, studying me with that unnerving directness she possesses. "You know how to cook?"

"I do." I open the refrigerator, scanning its contents. "How about a grilled cheese?"

She climbs onto a stool at the counter, nodding eagerly. "With tomato soup?"

The request hits me with unexpected force. Tomato soup and grilled cheese was something I used to make for my brothers in those first terrible months after our parents died. Quick, simple comfort food I could manage while juggling grief and sudden responsibility.

"It's late. Didn't you have dinner?" It occurs to me that I don't know what she does all day. She doesn't go to school because no one comes or goes without my knowing. Does her nanny educate her? Where does she eat?

"Yeah, but I'm a growing kid."

My lips twitch upward. "Coming right up."

I move around the kitchen, finding bread, butter, cheese. The motions are soothing, grounding me after the emotional whirlwind upstairs. I open a can of soup, pour it into a pot, adjust the heat.

"You're not as scary when you're cooking," Brigit observes, swinging her legs.

I glance at her, surprised by her frankness. "Am I scary other times?"

"Sometimes." She watches me butter the bread. "Especially when you look at Keira. Your eyes get all crazy."

My hands pause momentarily. "It's... complicated between us."

"Grown-ups always say that when they don't want to explain things."

She's not wrong. "Some things are hard to talk about."

"Like why you're marrying Keira if you don't like her?"

Fucking hell, she's blunt. I flip the sandwich, buying time. "What makes you think I don't like her?"

"Because you make her sad on purpose." Brigit says this matter-of-factly. "And you don't smile at her like people who love each other do."

I slide the grilled cheese onto a plate and ladle soup into a bowl, setting both in front of Brigit thinking this could be a perfect opportunity to find out what other people, or man, loves Keira.

"You know," I say casually, leaning against the counter, "it sounds like you care about Keira a lot."

Brigit nods, dunking the corner of her sandwich into the soup. "She's the best person ever."

"Does she have other people who care about her that way? People who love her?"

Brigit considers this while chewing. "Nanny Fiona loves her. They talk all the time."

"Anyone else?" I press, keeping my tone light. "Maybe a special friend? A man who visits her?"

She shakes her head. "No men. Just me and Nanny."

I try a different angle. "Does Keira ever go out at night? Or have someone call her on the phone that makes her smile?"

"No." Brigit looks up, her eyes suddenly concerned. "Is that why you're marrying her? Because no one else loves her?"

The question catches me off guard. "What? No, that's not?—"

"Because I love her enough," Brigit continues earnestly. "She doesn't need anyone else. She has me."

The fierce protectiveness in her voice strikes me. There's something about the way this child talks about Keira. I'm no expert, but my sense is that kids feel strong bonds toward those who care for them. Hampton and Lana are her godparents, but she hasn't asked about them. Only Keira.

"How long have you known Keira?" I ask.

"Forever," Brigit answers simply.

No lover. No mysterious man. Just this little girl and her nanny. So why was Keira sneaking around the other night? What is she hiding?

“Why are you so mean all the time?”

Her question snaps me out of my thoughts. “I just made you food. That’s not mean.”

She rolls her eyes. “To Keira. Why don’t you like her?”

I’m not sure what’s appropriate to share with a kid. "Sometimes, people can have complicated feelings for each other. Sometimes, they do things that make you angry."

"But doesn't being angry all the time make you unhappy too?"

The simple wisdom in her question stops me. Does it? Have I been unhappy, carrying this burden of hatred and revenge? I hadn’t been up until Keira came back into my life.

"You're pretty smart for a kid, you know that?"

She grins. "Keira says I'm an old soul."

"She might be right about that."

She finishes her food. “Thank you. It was good, even if you didn’t cut the sandwich into triangles like I like.”

"You're welcome." Next time, I’ll remember to cut her sandwich into triangles.

She hops down from the stool, carrying her dishes to the sink with careful concentration.

"I can wash these," I offer, but she shakes her head.



"Keira taught me to clean up after myself." She stands on tiptoes to place the bowl in the sink, then turns to me with an unexpected smile. "You're not so scary."

Before I can respond, she wraps her small arms around my waist, pressing her face against my stomach in a tight hug. I freeze, hands hovering awkwardly at my sides. When was the last time anyone hugged me like this? With such simple, uncomplicated affection?

Slowly, I place one hand on her head, feeling the silky softness of her hair beneath my palm. Something shifts inside me. Warmth spreads through my chest. This child, this innocent who knows nothing of the blood feud between our families, embraces me without reservation.

"Hugs get rid of bad feelings and be happy."

"It's hard to be happy after losing my family." I kick myself for saying that. She doesn't need to know the horrors of my life.

"I lost my family but I'm not mean and grumpy." She shrugs. "When I feel sorry for myself, Nanny Fiona says to count my blessings."

"You have blessings?" I've invaded her home. Been mean to Keira. What blessings does she have?

"I have Keira and Nanny Fiona. I have a big house to live in and lots of toys."

"I see."

"Well, I'm going to bed. Thanks again." She looks up at me with those clear, guileless eyes. "Maybe you could make sandwiches for Keira too. She forgets to eat sometimes when she's busy."

"Maybe I will," I reply, surprising myself with the sincerity in my voice.

After Brigit leaves, I remain in the kitchen, staring at nothing.

The revenge I've planned so meticulously suddenly feels hollow.

Is this what I truly want? A marriage built on resentment and retribution?

What happens after I've extracted my pound of flesh?

Will it bring back my parents? Heal the wounds of the past?

For the first time since returning to Boston, I allow myself to consider an alternative future, one where healing might be possible. Where happiness isn't just something I help my brothers find, but something I might claim for myself as well.

But can I find that with Keira again? She's not the same woman, although I can't deny her strength is something I admire about her.

And there's the fact that I've killed whatever affection she'd had for me.

But even if that weren't the case, I can't get rid of the nagging thought that she's hiding something.

We have nothing with which to build a solid foundation beyond an arranged marriage for business's sake.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

I stare at the endless lists spread across the table—florists, caterers, decorators, invitations. My head pounds as I try to focus on wedding preparations that feel more like funeral arrangements. The tablet Phoenix gave me blinks with unanswered emails from vendors demanding immediate decisions.

"He wants a loyalty pledge ceremony," I mutter, massaging my temples. "As if a forced marriage isn't humiliating enough."

My fingers hover over the seating chart. How will I be able to face these families again after what Phoenix did at dinner? But that humiliation isn't as bad as wondering why the hell I had sex with him last night.

My body still tingles from the encounter despite how wrong it was.

For those brief moments with Phoenix, I let myself believe we were those young lovers again, sneaking around and dreaming of forever.

His hands remembered every curve, every spot that makes me gasp.

My body betrayed me, responding to his touch like no time had passed at all.

And for a heartbeat, I wanted to tell him everything. About Brigit. About the pregnancy.

But once the orgasms were done, he was out of my bed and once again accusing me

of having a lover.

"Stupid," I whisper, pressing my palms against my eyes. "So stupid."

It's a reminder that I need to focus on getting Brigit safely away before Phoenix discovers who she really is. One night of passion changes nothing. If anything, it makes everything more dangerous. Phoenix may own me, but he will never own my daughter.

I knock softly on Brigit's door, steeling myself for the heartbreak ahead. My sweet girl sits cross-legged on her bed, surrounded by colored pencils and sketches for "our" wedding. The innocence in her eyes nearly breaks me.

"I like this one for your bouquet," she says, holding up a drawing of wildflowers tied with ribbon. "They're like the ones you used to pick for me when I was little."

I sit beside her, memorizing every detail of her face. She has my eyes, but I can see Phoenix in her as well. My chest tightens. How can I send her away when she's been my entire world for ten years?

"Those are perfect," I say, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"When you're married are you going to have babies?"

I jerk, taken off guard by the question.

"I... ah..." It's then I realize that Phoenix didn't use a condom last night.

I close my eyes that I may be in the situation I was in ten years ago.

Did he come to my room for the purpose of claiming me, but also insuring my loyalty

by making a child? He did say he wanted kids.

“Because that would be fun. I could help you.”

God, I love this kid. “You’d be a great big sister.”

She looks up at me and her smile is so full of light. “I’m not really your daughter, but I could be like one. Sometimes, I pretend you’re my mom.”

I hate that I can’t tell her the truth. “I like being like your mom.”

Brigit gives me one of her sweet smiles and then returns to drawing. “Mr. Ifrinn isn’t so bad. He’s just grumpy.”

My brow furrows. “Have you seen him?”

She looks at me, her eyes wide and round like she realized she revealed too much. “I was hungry and went to the kitchen. He made me a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup.”

For a moment, I’m panicked. I can’t have her growing attached to Phoenix. Worse, having her front and center in Phoenix’s mind. “That was nice of him, but honey, you need to avoid him. He’s a dangerous man.”

“Then why are you marrying him?”

“It’s best for the family.” I hate to take away her childhood ideals of true love, but I can’t lie to her either. “But I’ll protect you, sweetie. I promise. Just please, avoid Phoenix, okay?”

She shrugs. “Okay.”

Nanny Fiona enters with Brigit's lunch. "Oh, I'm sorry. I should have grabbed something for you too."

"No. It's okay. I'd like to talk to you for a moment."

Nanny Fiona gets Brigit set up to eat at her little table with her dolls to keep her company.

A shadow passes the doorway, one of Phoenix's men, always watching. Always listening. "Over here," I say, moving to the closet and acting like I'm talking about Brigit's wardrobe.

"Were you able to get the book?" I ask. It's now more important than ever to get Brigit safely away from Phoenix.

She nods. "I'd feel better if you were coming."

"It would be too dangerous. With everything Phoenix has going on, I think it will take him time to notice you and Brigit gone, but here I can keep an eye on him, warn you if needed." Worried I'm asking too much, I say, "But if you don't want to do this?—"

"I do want to do this. I just... she loves you so much and I know you love her. It will break her heart to leave."

I fight back tears. "It has to be done. Here are the wedding arrangements." I hand her a paper which if found would look like a schedule for the wedding, but coded with instructions on how and when Nanny and Brigit leave using one of the hired vendors as cover.

"You'll need to lie to her to get her to go. "

She nods. "I know. Hopefully, she'll forgive me."

"I'll have a letter you can give her." I hope it will be enough for her to forgive me as well. "Take her to Switzerland. My father had an old contact there who can help you get new identities. After that, disappear." My voice cracks. "Don't tell me where. It's safer if I don't know."

I pull out a small flash drive. "This has her birth certificate, medical records, everything you'll need. I haven't gotten her passport yet, but I will."

"The guards watch you constantly," Fiona whispers. "How will?—"

"Phoenix needs to go to my father's downtown office if he plans to truly take over. I'll figure out a way to get into the study and my father's safe. I need you to be ready and have Brigit ready by the wedding, but she can't know. We can't risk her saying something to the wrong person."

Fiona's eyes fill with tears.

"Once you're gone, don't contact me. Not until it's safe." I swallow hard. "If it's ever safe."

"She'll miss you terribly."

"Tell her..." My throat tightens. "Tell her I love her more than my own life. That everything I've done has been for her."

"What happens when he realizes we're gone?"

I have no idea. Best case scenario, he won't care. Two less people to worry about. "I'll face whatever comes." Remembering one more thing, I reach into my pocket and

pull out a locket. “Give this to her when the time is right.”

Nanny Fiona sniffs as she looks into the locket to see two pictures—one of me just after Brigit was born, and one of baby Brigit. I’d had them taken just before I returned home after giving birth. I needed the pictures in case they sent her away.

That night, as I get ready for bed, I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I’m not the young, naïve woman I was when Phoenix and I conceived Brigit. I see a strong, determined woman on the verge of breaking, not because of Phoenix’s punishments, but at losing my child.

I’m proud of my strength even as I resent having to access it. But I’ve made my decision. The only way to ensure Brigit’s safety is for me to remain here with Phoenix, keeping his focus firmly on me and away from my daughter’s trail.

Being with him isn’t about love or hoping to find the man I once wanted to spend my life with. I can’t afford wishing for fairy tales. This is about survival. About ensuring Brigit has a safe, fulfilled life away from the violence and vengeance now filling this house.

I’ll do my part and be the wife every Mob leader wants. And I’ll do it willingly because every moment I spend in his presence, every time I endure his touch or his rage, will be a moment he’s not hunting for Brigit.

Chances are Phoenix won’t miss Brigit when she’s gone. She’s just a child he barely knows. Hampton’s goddaughter, nothing more to him. The thought is both relief and knife-twist. My daughter means everything to me and nothing to her own father. How bitterly fitting.

It breaks my heart that Brigit won’t know I really am her mother. Not one she needs to pretend about. But I’ve spent ten years pretending she isn’t mine. What’s a lifetime



more of the same lie? At least she'll be free.

I step out of the bathroom and climb into bed. I lie awake, staring at shadows dancing across the ceiling. My body is exhausted, but my mind races. I hope I've planned this right. I hope I've anticipated all the areas it could go wrong and made contingencies.

Am I doing the right thing? What if something goes wrong? What if Phoenix discovers them before they can escape?

I curl onto my side, pulling my knees to my chest like I did as a child when the world felt too overwhelming.

How ironic that all I've ever done was try to give Brigit a life in which she didn't have to know this feeling.

I wanted to give her everything I never had. Safety, unconditional love, freedom.

Instead, I'm sending her away with nothing but cash, fake documents, and a nanny who loves her like family but isn't her mother.

God, I hate my parents for this. For all of it. For forcing me to hide my pregnancy, for making me pretend my own child wasn't mine, for murdering Phoenix's family and blaming it on me. They took everything from me. My love, my future, my right to be a mother to my own child.

And Phoenix... I hate him too. For not believing in my love ten years ago.

For thinking I'd betray him after I gave all of myself to him.

For not recognizing that I never stopped loving him, not for a single day in ten years.

For being so consumed by revenge that he can't see that we could have had a second chance... a chance he ruined.

I wonder what my life would be like if Phoenix could find his way back to the man he once was. The boy who looked at me like I was the center of his world.

What if we could build something real from these ashes?

If the hatred in his eyes could soften to forgiveness.

If the cruelty could melt away to reveal the tender heart I once knew.

Would we wake up on Sunday mornings with Brigit bouncing on our bed, demanding pancakes?

Would Phoenix help her with homework and teach her to stand tall against the world's cruelties?

I close my eyes and let myself imagine a future where Phoenix knows Brigit is his daughter. Where instead of rage, he feels wonder. Where he holds her small hand in his and sees himself reflected in her eyes. Where the three of us become the family we were always meant to be.

In this dream, Phoenix's laugh returns, that full-bodied sound I haven't heard since we were teenagers sneaking kisses in his father's library. The darkness that haunts him fades in the light of our daughter's smile.

But dreams are for children and fools. And I stopped being either long ago.

Even if by some miracle he could find his way back to himself, how could I ever trust him with my heart? Or with Brigit? How could I risk her happiness, her safety, on the

chance that his love for her might overcome his hatred for my family?

I press my palm against my heart, feeling it break all over again. Some losses cut too deep to ever heal properly. This one, losing Brigit, losing the future we might have had, will bleed inside me until the day I die.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I sit at my desk, rubbing my temples as I try to make sense of it all. Three days of surveillance, and nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing.

"She's not meeting anyone?" I ask again, looking up at Davis, one of the men I assigned to watch Keira.

"No, sir. She spends most of her time organizing the wedding. Makes calls to vendors, reviews menus, checks floral arrangements. Standard stuff."

"And when she's not doing that?"

"She visits the kid—Brigit. Usually in the afternoon. They talk, sometimes draw together. Nothing suspicious."

I lean back in my chair, frustration churning in my gut. This doesn't make sense. That first night, she was desperate to get out of her room, dressed in next to nothing. I was certain she was sneaking off to meet a lover.

"You're positive you haven't missed anything? No coded messages? No suspicious phone calls?"

Davis shakes his head. "We've been thorough, Mr. Ifrinn. She hasn't tried to contact anyone outside the approved list. No suspicious behavior at all."

I dismiss him with a wave, then pour myself two fingers of whiskey. The amber

liquid burns satisfyingly as I swallow it down.

What game is Keira playing? I was so sure she had someone she cared about enough to risk my wrath. Yet now she's the picture of compliance, planning our wedding like the dutiful fiancée.

The sex we had... it felt real. Too real. For a moment, we were who we used to be before her family destroyed mine. Before I became this version of myself.

I pace the length of my office, the whiskey glass dangling from my fingers. The memory of Keira's body beneath mine haunts me. The way she moved, the sounds she made. It wasn't the mechanical compliance she'd hinted at when it was over. It was passion, raw and honest.

Could we find our way back to what we had? The thought is both terrifying and intoxicating. I remember how it felt to love her without reservation, to plan our future together in whispered conversations.

But the doubts crowd in immediately. She's hiding something significant enough to risk everything for. Trust is impossible without truth, and Keira Kean is keeping secrets.

I've survived this long by trusting my instincts. And every instinct tells me there's more to Keira's story than she's letting on—something that could change everything if I discovered it.

I drain my glass and set it down harder than necessary. Women are supposed to be my brothers' weakness, not mine. Yet here I am, obsessing over Keira Kean like a lovesick teenager instead of focusing on cementing our family's reclaimed power.

I catch my reflection in the window and barely recognize myself. I've become hard,

cold. Necessary traits for survival, but I wonder what they cost me.

I think of Brigit's words in the kitchen the other night. So simple, yet they've been eating at me. Why choose to be miserable? It wasn't a choice. In losing my parents, losing everything, there's only grief and anger.

It's fueled my vengeance. I've won, but my parents are still dead.

The Keans still need to pay. It's not a matter of choosing how to feel.

That's the reality of my life. When Brigit's older, she'll understand.

Maybe she'll get angry at the Keans too for taking away her parents.

Perhaps I'll bring her peace in knowing they're in prison.

It's odd that neither of them, not Keira nor Brigit, have asked to see Hampton or Lana. Most daughters would be begging, pleading to make sure their parents were safe. Not Keira. She's mentioned them only when necessary, her voice flat, emotionless.

It's another piece that doesn't fit the puzzle I've constructed over the years. Ten years ago, Keira wanted out of this house and away from her parents. She was unhappy and felt unloved. I wanted to give her all the love she craved. But then the fire took everything from me, including my innocence around love. She had to be a willing accomplice to my family's downfall. Everything about our love had been a lie. Hadn't it?

But her indifference toward Hampton and Lana now suggests otherwise.

I think back to the night I returned, the fear in her eyes when I brought her to the

basement to discuss her family's offer, a marriage to Keira in exchange for their lives. Keira's first response was asking what would happen if she refused.

I roll my shoulders as doubt creeps deeper. No, it wasn't until the child was brought up that she became compliant.

The anger that's fueled me for a decade still burns, but uncertainty creeps in. I've built my revenge around the belief that Keira betrayed me, that she knew what her family planned. What if I was wrong?

Fuck. I can't afford to doubt now. The Keans destroyed everything I loved, and Keira is a Kean.

Yet the memory of her in my arms, moving against me with such desperate need... That wasn't the response of a woman who hated me. Nor was it mere compliance.

I down my drink, disgusted with my weakness. This is why mixing business with pleasure is dangerous. One night with her and I'm questioning everything.

Even if she wasn't directly involved in the plot against my family, she's still keeping secrets. Significant ones. And until I know what they are, I can't trust her. I can't forgive her.

"Trouble in paradise?" Blaise says as he saunters into my office.

The rest of my brothers, including Ash, file in after him. The three of them together always remind me of when we were kids, inseparable, loyal to a fault.

"You called for us?" Ash asks, taking a seat. He looks better than he did a few days ago, the worry over Hannah easing from his features.

"Wedding preparations are almost complete," I say, keeping my tone neutral. "I wanted to make sure we're all on the same page before the families arrive."

Blaise leans against the bookshelf, arms crossed. "And how's the bride-to-be handling everything?"

There's an edge to his question that I don't miss. My brothers haven't forgotten how I treated Keira at the dinner.

"We've reached... an understanding."

"An understanding?" Flint raises an eyebrow. "What does that mean?"

Blaise shakes his head. "He's probably got her in some sexy French maid outfit doing the floors in the war room."

"What the fuck, Blaise?" Now I'm pissed.

"War room?" Ash asks.

"It's the room the guards and crew use to monitor the property and plan," Blaise explains. "And don't act all offended. You're the one who dressed her like a slut and?—"

"Shut the fuck up!" I growl and slam my fist on the desk. My brothers aren't intimidated, but they stay quiet. I take a breath to calm down. "Things between Keira and me are complicated."

"Because you're making them complicated," Blaise mutters.

"Look," I say, meeting each of their gazes in turn. "I know you think I've been too



harsh with her. Maybe I have been. But there's something going on."

Ash leans forward. "What do you mean?"

I hesitate, unwilling to reveal the full extent of my suspicions or my growing doubts. "She's hiding something. Something important enough that she tried sneaking out of her room in the middle of the night."

"And you're sure it wasn't to get away from you?" Flint asks bluntly.

"I'm sure." I stand up, pacing behind my desk. "Look, we're on better terms now. I'm... I'm treating her with respect."

Blaise's posture relaxes slightly. "Good. That's all we wanted to hear."

"But?" Ash prompts, reading my expression.

"But I can't shake the feeling that whatever she's hiding could change everything." I stop pacing. "I need to know what it is."

My brothers exchange glances, a silent conversation passing between them.

"Look," Ash says, his voice hardening, "if Keira's not giving you answers, maybe it's time to focus on her parents instead. They're the ones who torched our lives."

I blow out a breath and settle back in my chair, glad to be moving on from Keira. "They're safe and sound?—"

"Enjoying home cooked meals and boredom while you torture their daughter."

"I'm not tort?—"

“They're the ones who orchestrated everything against our family. If anyone knows all the secrets, it's them.”

Blaise nods slowly. "He's right. And they might be more willing to talk now that they've had time to stew."

"Hampton's always been a selfish bastard," Flint adds. "Threaten the right things, and he'll sell out his own daughter to save himself."

He already has when he gave her to me in marriage. Will he expose her if I push the right levers?

I nod. "Maybe it's time to remind them exactly what position they're in."

Ash smiles grimly. "Exactly. Let them feel the weight of what they did to us. And while you're at it, find out what Keira's hiding."

"Hampton might even tell you just to hurt her," Blaise points out. "There's no love lost between them from what I've seen."

My attention goes to Blaise. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “When I was working with Ronan, I’d see her around on occasion. Mostly, she stayed away from the family. When she was around, you'd see she didn’t think much of them.”

I remember Keira's indifference toward her parents, how she hasn't once asked to see them. The pieces start shifting in my mind, forming a new pattern.

"I'll handle it," I decide. They destroyed my family, burned our home with my parents inside, and left my brothers and me for dead.

All for power and greed. And now they're going to tell me everything.

About the fire, about the past ten years, and most importantly, about what their daughter is hiding.

Whatever game Keira's playing, I'll know the truth before I marry her. One way or another.

"What's the update on the legal situation?" I ask, turning back to my brothers and other business at hand. "How long can we realistically hold the Keans before questions start getting asked?"

Flint straightens in his chair. "It's complicated. Hampton's disappearance is already raising eyebrows. The cops who are on our payroll can only deflect for so long before someone higher up takes notice."

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

"Give me a timeline," I demand.

"A week, maybe two at most," Flint says, rubbing his jaw. "The Feds are already sniffing around. Hampton had too many connections, too many business partners who are wondering where he vanished to."

"And if they find him in the basement?" I ask.

"Kidnapping charges would be the least of our problems," Flint replies bluntly. "We could lose everything we just reclaimed. The businesses, the territory, all of it."

I nod, absorbing this information. "Then we need to be strategic about this."

"We could just kill them," Ash suggests, not for the first time. "Clean, simple, problem solved."

"No," I say firmly. "The families need to see their ruin for us to solidify our power."

We'll hand them over to the authorities on the wedding day.

After the loyalty ceremony, after everyone has pledged themselves to the Ifrinn family, we'll make a show of turning Hampton and Lana over to the police. "

"With evidence of their crimes," Flint adds.

"Exactly. We'll be the upstanding citizens who discovered Hampton's illegal activities and did the right thing." I smile coldly. "He'll spend the rest of his life in prison,

watching as I take everything he built and make it mine—including his daughter."

Ash shakes his head. I know he'd rather kill Hampton, and I don't blame him. We all have a reason to want him dead, but I'm more and more enjoying the idea of thinking of him rotting in prison.

"It's a good idea, but not without potential problems. The wedding gives our enemies the perfect opportunity," Blaise says, lowering his voice despite our being alone in my office. "All the families in one place, including us. We'd be exposed."

"He's right. We'd be fools not to prepare for it," Flint agrees. "We're back from the dead, Phoenix. Some people may question our legitimacy or our strength. There are plenty of people who'd benefit from seeing us gone permanently."

He's right. The wedding is a potential trap. It has my mind spinning with possibilities. "What about Keira?"

Blaise's eyebrows shoot up. "What about her?"

"Could she be involved in something? Planning something?" The moment I say it aloud, I realize how paranoid it sounds. Yet the nagging doubt persists. Maybe I'm overthinking this. But what if while I've been plotting my revenge, she's been plotting hers?

I've been so focused on the idea that she might be protecting a lover, I never considered she might be playing a longer game.

Hampton Kean didn't build his empire by raising a naive daughter.

He raised her to be cunning, to see opportunities where others see obstacles.

What better opportunity than marrying the man who just took everything from her family?

The theory builds momentum in my mind. She submitted to this marriage too easily.

Even her defiance could be calculated, enough resistance to seem genuine, but never enough to truly jeopardize her position.

And the sex... God, the sex could be the oldest manipulation in the book.

Make a man think with his dick instead of his brain.

How many times throughout history have men fallen for that particular trap?

How many empires have crumbled because a man couldn't see past his desire?

If she's planning to reclaim her family's power, she'd need allies. People loyal to the Keans who are biding their time, waiting for her signal. The wedding would give her the perfect opportunity to enact her revenge.

Maybe that's what she was doing that night, meeting with conspirators, planning how to turn my triumph into my downfall.

"You think your bride-to-be is plotting to kill you at your wedding?" Blaise asks, not hiding his doubt to my theory.

"I don't know what to think anymore." I stand up, frustration building. "She's hiding something. If it's not a secret lover, maybe it's a resistance team. She's very, and I mean very compliant. Why do that if you're not trying to give me a false sense of security?"

My brothers glance at each other, all looking uncertain.

“She could be a part of something, but I doubt she’s organizing it,” Flint says.

“Keira strikes me as a woman who’s given in to her lot in life,” Ash says, which is strange since he hasn’t seen her since our return.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“You know. Learned helplessness. She had her chance to get away with you, but then that all went up in smoke, literally. I can’t imagine the fire didn’t send a message to her as well.

Be careful fucking with the Keans or they’ll burn you alive.

So she does what she's told. She becomes the dutiful daughter... now the dutiful fiancée. She knows she has no power.”

“It sounds like a bleak existence,” Flint says, sounding like he’s feeling sorry for her.

“Maybe that’s why they got the kid,” Blaise offers. “Give her something to focus on. Keep her minimally happy.”

But that brings me another thought. “Why didn’t they marry her off?”

Ash gives me a pointed look. “Maybe because she wasn’t a virgin anymore.”

“So this is all my fault?” It’s not the first time I’ve heard that my parents’ deaths were the result of being with Keira and my father’s disapproval, but fucking hell, would Hampton really burn everything just because my father didn’t support a match?

That seems over the top even for Hampton.

No, he wanted to take what my father had.

“No it’s Hampton’s fault. And I’m not saying we shouldn’t be cautious. We absolutely should. But Keira planning your murder? That seems far-fetched,” Blaise says. I suppose he’d know better than anyone since he spent a great deal of time infiltrating the Kean family.

Even so, the suspicion has taken root. "Then what is she hiding? Why the secrecy?"

“There are a thousand possibilities between 'innocent secret' and 'assassination plot’.” Blaise smirks at me.

“We could bring the wives in,” Flint says suddenly, interrupting my spiraling thoughts.

I look up, confused. "What?"

"Lucy, Jenna, and Hannah," he clarifies. "They are going to be sisters-in-law with Keira. They could help us figure out what Keira's hiding. Lucy’s real good at ferreting out information."

"Hannah's still recovering," Ash objects immediately, protective as always.

"I'm not suggesting we put her in danger," Flint counters. "But think about it. Women notice things about other women that we don't."

I consider this, seeing the logic. "You think they could get Keira to open up?"

"Maybe." Flint shrugs. "At the very least, they could keep an eye on her, see if



anything seems off. Lucy's got journalist instincts. She can spot a lie from a mile away. And Jenna's so unassuming that people tend to let their guard down around her. Plus, she knew Keira."

"It's not a bad idea," Blaise admits reluctantly. "Jenna's been asking about Keira anyway. Says it must be hard for her, being surrounded by enemies with no allies."

Of course Jenna would take Keira's side. I like her, but she's got too soft a heart for this life. Still, the idea isn't a bad one. "We could make them bridesmaids."

My brothers look at me with varying degrees of surprise.

"It makes perfect sense," I continue, warming to the idea. "It shows unity between our families. Makes the marriage look more legitimate to the other families. And it gives your wives a reason to be around Keira constantly in the days leading up to the wedding."

"Will Lucy be alright with spying on Keira?" Blaise asks.

"If she's concerned about our safety, yes." Flint looks at me. "Although, she wasn't happy with that display at dinner the other night. I think her words were something like, 'I didn't realize Phoenix was such a misogynistic pig.'"

I grind my teeth while Blaise snickers. Even Ash's lips twitch up.

"You do seem a little full of yourself, Phoenix. We stand behind you, but remember what they say about power. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

I arch a brow. "You think I'm corrupt?"

"Hell yeah," Blaise says. "We all are. It's the nature of the business, but Ash is right.

Don't let it go to your head. Or maybe it's not power. Maybe it's your dick, but you have to keep whatever has you like a rabid dog around Keira."

I don't like any of these analogies. "I'm not any of those things."

Ash shrugs as he stands. "Good. I've got to take Hannah to the doctor and then I'm working at home."

"She'll want to be in on the bridesmaid thing," Flint says, rising from his chair. "We'll make sure she's safe."

"How do you know what Hannah wants?" Ash asks, peeved.

Flint laughs. "Lucy knows everything about everyone."

I watch them file out and for the first time since we invaded the Kean home and took back what was ours, I feel it.

The satisfaction of it. The pride in it.

And in a few days, I'll make our claim even more solid by marrying Keira.

The Ifrinn and Kean families will be bound together in a union built on revenge and suspicion.

What a foundation for a marriage.

I rub my eyes, feeling the weight of sleepless nights. Every time I close them, I see her. Sometimes, she's the girl I loved ten years ago, sometimes, she's the woman who might be plotting my downfall. Which version is the truth?

What I hate is that deep down, I still feel something when I look at her. When I touch her. Something that goes beyond desire, beyond the physical connection. Something I've spent ten years trying to bury alongside the memory of my parents.

But I can't afford to let those feelings cloud my judgment. Not when so much is at stake. Not when I've fought so hard to reclaim what was taken from us.

This wedding isn't just about Keira and me. It's about securing the Ifrinn legacy, about showing Boston that we've returned to claim what's ours. It's about honoring my parents' memory by rebuilding what Hampton Kean destroyed.

And if that means keeping my wife under constant surveillance, if it means never fully trusting the woman who will share my bed and my name, then so be it. I'll do what needs to be done.

I'll make this marriage work, not because of what we once had but because of what we now represent. I'll be the husband she needs publicly, the leader my family needs privately, and I'll keep my eyes open for any sign that she's playing a different game.

Because whether she's hiding a lover or a plan to reclaim her family's power, I'll find out. And when I do, I'll be ready.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

KEIRA

Three days until I become Mrs. Phoenix Ifrinn. At one time, I wanted that more than anything. Now the thought sends a shiver down my spine.

I stand in the grand ballroom, clipboard in hand, watching staff hang crystal chandeliers that catch the morning light. Despite my situation, I feel a flutter of satisfaction seeing it all come together.

"The florist needs your approval on the final arrangements, Ms. Kean," says one of the staff, hovering at my elbow.

I nod, making another check on my list. "Tell her I'll be there in ten minutes."

The chef and I finalized the menu yesterday. A seven-course meal that would make even the most critical Boston elite nod in approval. The cake arrives tomorrow, a towering creation of sugar and fondant that cost more than most people's cars.

I've done everything Phoenix asked. The invitations went out express delivery to every family that matters in Boston's underworld. Each envelope contained not just a wedding invitation but a summons to the loyalty ceremony prior.

Every detail I arrange is another step toward the wedding day, the day I've planned for Brigit's escape. The timing must be perfect. During the ceremony, while all eyes are on Phoenix and me exchanging vows, Nanny Fiona will slip away with my daughter.

I paste on a smile as Phoenix's man watches me from across the room. I've played my part well, the dutiful fiancée, throwing herself into wedding preparations. No one suspects that behind the scenes, I'm orchestrating something else entirely.

My heart aches knowing I won't see Brigit grow up, but at least she'll be safe. That's all that matters now.

I'm in the middle of coordinating with the security team about where to position men during the ceremony when the double doors to the ballroom burst open. Three women sweep in, all smiles and excitement.

"Surprise!" The blonde one, Lucy, Flint's wife, calls out. "We're your bridal party!"

I freeze, clipboard clutched to my chest. Hannah, Ash's wife, beams at me despite the slight paleness to her complexion that speaks to her recent injury. Beside her stands Jenna, looking shy but determined.

"I... what?" I stammer. This isn't part of my plan. I don't have time for this distraction.

"Phoenix didn't tell you?" Jenna asks, her voice gentle. "We're going to be your bridesmaids."

I feel a headache forming behind my eyes. "That's very kind, but I have so much to do. The seating chart is a nightmare, and I still need to finalize?—"

"Which is exactly why you need help," Hannah says, stepping forward. "No bride should handle everything alone."

Lucy holds up her phone. "We've already made appointments at three bridal boutiques for bridesmaid dresses. We can go this afternoon."

"My dress is already finished," I say quickly. "And I really don't have time for shopping. The wedding is in three days."

"Phoenix specifically asked us to help you," Lucy says. "He thought you might appreciate some female company."

I don't buy it. Phoenix doesn't care about what I want or need. I imagine they're here to check up on me. Clever to use my future sisters-in-law to do it. I grip my clipboard tighter. This feels like surveillance disguised as friendship. Phoenix must suspect something.

"And we can help with your to-do list," Jenna adds. "I'm great with flowers and decorations."

"Phoenix mentioned you've been working non-stop," Hannah says. "He's worried about you."

"I doubt that," I quip before I think better of it. It won't be smart to air my grievances with the wives of Phoenix's brothers.

"We won't take no for an answer," Lucy says with a smile. "So, what do you say? Girls' day out, then we'll help with whatever you need to finish?"

I study these women and see the trap Phoenix has laid. Three pairs of eyes to watch my every move, report back my every word. My carefully constructed plans suddenly feel fragile.

I glance at my guard, who gives a slight nod. Of course Phoenix has already cleared this. My jaw clenches involuntarily.

Going with them means precious hours away from finalizing Brigit's escape. Hours I

can't afford to lose. But refusing would only raise suspicions I can't afford.

"I haven't left the estate since..." I trail off, not needing to finish. Since your husbands stormed in and took everything over. Since my world collapsed. Since I became a prisoner in my own home.

"All the more reason to get some fresh air," Lucy says.

I weigh my options quickly. If I go, I lose planning time but gain their trust. If I refuse, I might as well paint I'm hiding something across my forehead.

"Alright," I concede, setting down my clipboard. "But just for a few hours. We'll need to be back by four."

The relief in their smiles seems genuine, making me wonder if they're as uncomfortable with this arrangement as I am. Are they here as spies or potential allies? Either way, I can't risk confiding in them.

What Phoenix doesn't understand is that nothing, not even three watchful bridesmaids, will stop me from protecting Brigit. If anything, this outing might be exactly what I need to throw off suspicion.

I sit in the backseat of Lucy's sleek black car next to Hannah as we head toward downtown Boston. No one is really talking, and that's when I remember they saw my humiliation at dinner.

At least Lucy and Jenna did. They watched with disapproval but didn't say a word.

Then again, what could they say? Their husbands are now the most powerful men in Boston.

Hannah leans toward me. “Are you okay?”

I give her a fake smile, the one I’ve perfected over the years. “Of course. Why?”

She glances toward the front seat and then back to me. “I just heard... well... Phoenix was terrible at dinner.”

My cheeks burn with the memory. The revealing red dress. The leering men. Phoenix's cruel accusations.

"I was hoping we could all pretend that never happened," I manage, staring out the window.

“I almost didn’t believe it when I heard about it,” Hannah said. “Phoenix always seemed so... kind, more even-keeled than the others.”

“I witnessed it and it was all Flint could do to keep me from scratching Phoenix’s eyes out.”

My lips twitch upward but I hide it.

Jenna turns back to look at me from the front seat. “Blaise was livid. He and Flint talked to Phoenix. I hope it will get better.”

“You know, I don’t understand how in this day and age arranged marriage still exists. In Boston, of all places.” Lucy shakes her head.

“She isn’t from our world,” Hannah says. “I have an arranged marriage.”

“But you two love each other. That’s as clear as the nose on my face.” Lucy glances in the rearview mirror. “Why are you doing this?”



Jenna turns to her. "Lucy, she has no choice."

"That's against the law. I swear, you want me to drive you to Canada, I will."

I study her and then the other women in turn. This is not at all what I expected. "We all do things for a reason. I'm no different."

Lucy blows out a breath. "Whatever your reason, I hope it's worth it."

"The good news is that you now have three sisters," Jenna says.

"My father and brother tried to hurt you, did hurt your husbands. Why?—"

Hannah takes my hand. "You're not your father, Keira. And we're not ours either. We get to decide who we are."

For the first time in days, I feel something crack inside me. Not hope, necessarily, but a fissure through which a little light can shine through.

We reach the little boutique and browse through the delicate silks and sparkling accessories. The women's kindness feels genuine, even if I remain cautious of their sudden appearance.

"What about these for the bridesmaids?" Hannah suggests, holding up a sample in a rich burgundy that complements my ivory gown.

"That's actually perfect," I admit, running my fingers over the fabric. "It matches the roses I've ordered."

Jenna smiles. "See? We can be helpful."

For a moment, I allow myself to imagine what this might have been like under different circumstances. Planning a wedding I actually wanted, surrounded by friends rather than allies of my captor.

"Have you thought about your something borrowed?" Lucy asks, inspecting a display of hair accessories.

"I hadn't gotten that far," I confess. "There's been so much to coordinate." What is the point, really? I suppose I could raid my mother's jewelry box if necessary.

"I have a beautiful ruby bracelet," Hannah offers.

Their kindness is disarming. After days of isolation and Phoenix's hot-and-cold behavior, just being treated like a person feels revolutionary.

We find a style that has a size for each of them and pay a fortune to make sure they're ready in three days. Lucy then suggests that we go for coffee.

We settle into a corner of a café. The conversation flows more easily now, and I find myself laughing at Lucy's story about how she and Flint met.

"The whole time I was falling for him, I thought his name was Flynn."

"How'd you find out the truth?" I ask, thinking as deceptions go, that one isn't so bad.

Her smile falters slightly. "Marshall, the former police superintendent, was threatening me and Flint intervened. He exposed who he was to protect me. He killed to save me."

I frown. "My brother was suspected of killing Marshall."

All three sets of eyes round as if they're worried about my response to learning Flint was the one who actually killed Marshall.

"It's my understanding that your father and Ronan were okay with that as it hid the fact that the Ifrinns were back," Lucy says.

I nod. "Sounds like something they'd do." I study them. "Are you involved in the business?"

"I'm a writer," Lucy says. For a moment, I want to share with her my secret writing, but while I'm enjoying these women, I'm not ready to share my secrets. I may never share them with anyone.

"I helped Ash... ah... with the families..." Hannah looks nervous.

"The ones who worked with Phoenix to overthrow my father."

She swallows and nods.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

“I garden and take care of my mother. Soon, I’ll have a new little one,” Jenna blurts out like she’s wanting to change the subject. “Hannah is expecting too. And Lucy, well, they have little Flynn.”

I turn to her. “Flynn. Full circle, then.”

She nods. “We’ve all been fortunate to find love with an Ifrinn.”

I shake my head as I turn my coffee cup in my hand. “That ship has sailed for me and Phoenix.”

All eyes are on me.

“Ash said that he thought you and Phoenix once... before...”

“Blaise thought so too.”

“And Flint.” Lucy looks at me with sharp eyes. “Phoenix has never said anything, but after the display at dinner?—”

So much for the secret we thought we were keeping. And I’m wondering if this is what this little outing is about. "Is that why you're all here? To report back to your husbands about me?"

Lucy frowns.

"Phoenix sends his brothers' wives to befriend me three days before our wedding.

One of whom happens to be a journalist. What am I supposed to think?"

Lucy has the grace to look embarrassed. "I'm not on assignment, if that's what you're asking."

"But you'll tell Phoenix what I say," I press. "Or tell your husbands who will tell Phoenix."

"We won't tell them anything that will hurt you," Jenna says.

"But we won't keep anything from them that could hurt them," Lucy says, fierce protection of her husband in her tone.

Hannah puts her hand over mine. "It was Phoenix's idea that we be bridesmaids, and I don't know if that's to be nice or he thinks we'll get information. I know for my part that I want to be your friend and sister-in-law."

It occurs to me that at one point Hannah was to marry Ronan, which would have made her my sister-in-law then too.

Jenna nods in earnest. "We're not here to spy. We really do want to support you."

"Especially if Phoenix is going to continue to be an asshole," Lucy finishes.

I can't help but laugh at that. "He wasn't always like that." And just like that, I'm sharing my history with them. I can't say why. I don't fully trust them, and yet, I desperately want their friendship and support.

"Phoenix and I were young. I was eighteen and he was twenty-one, home for the summer from college. Our families were friendly then, or at least that's what it seemed like.

” For a moment, I’m transported to the night it all started for me and Phoenix.

“His family was hosting a charity ball. Mrs. Ifrinn did a great deal to help the community.

Phoenix asked me to dance, and I remember thinking he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

Dark hair, those blue eyes..." I trail off, lost for a moment.

“The Ifrinns do have it in the looks department,” Lucy says.

“Did he feel the same?” Hannah asks, her eyes a little wistful at my story.

“It felt like it. I mean, it was like instant. Like my soul was tied to his. But we had to keep it a secret. I know you think it’s old-fashioned, Lucy, but our world has rules including that I couldn’t be with a man except for one my father chose. Phoenix’s father wouldn’t approve either?—”

“What? Why?” Jenna’s brow knits together.

“Mr. Ifrinn would have wanted Phoenix to marry someone who strengthened their position, and my family wouldn’t do that. And I think by then, there was tension between them. I suspect Mr. Ifrinn had something personal against my father, who was likely pushing back and openly challenging him.”

"So you snuck around," Hannah says, leaning forward.

"Yes." I twist my napkin between my fingers. "Secret meetings in the library at his family's estate. Notes passed through trusted staff. My father got suspicious and so would lock me in my room, but Phoenix taught me how to pick locks and how to

climb down a trellis without breaking my neck."

Hannah smiles. "That sounds romantic."

"It was." The ache in my chest intensifies. "We were so careful, but when you're that young and that in love... well, we probably weren't as discreet as we thought we were being. My father found out." I don't mention the pregnancy. That secret will now go with me to my grave.

The women exchange glances.

"What happened?" Jenna asks gently.

"My parents locked me away. Took my phone, my computer, everything. They posted guards around me 24/7 so I couldn't sneak away. I couldn't even warn Phoenix that my father knew." My voice catches. "The next thing I heard, the Ifrinn estate had burned down with everyone inside."

"Oh, God, how horrible," Hannah says, her hand squeezing mine.

"I'll never forget that night." Jenna shudders, and it reminds me that her mother had been the gardener back then. They'd have seen the fire from the cottage where they were living.

"You thought Phoenix was dead?" Lucy asks.

I nod. "Yes, otherwise, he'd have come for me. He promised he'd take me away."

Lucy arches a brow. "I can't imagine your surprise when you saw him again."

I close my eyes, feeling the shock and, for a moment, hope that he'd finally come for

me. But he hadn't. Instead, he hated me.

"My father told me it was my fault for getting involved with Phoenix. For years, I believed him. I believed I was responsible for killing the man I loved and his entire family."

"Oh, honey." Hannah puts an arm around me. "That's terrible."

I seem to be on a roll. "Phoenix thinks I betrayed him, that I was part of my father's plan. But I would never. What we had was real. It was everything to me."

"Of course it was." Jenna's expression is equally as sympathetic.

"How could he think I was working with my father? Or that I wouldn't have tried to stop him if I knew?" I take in a breath. "The fact that he does think that suggests he didn't really know me, couldn't have really loved me, right?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm sure what happened messed things up for him, but that doesn't mean he didn't love you then," Lucy says, making me wonder if she's on Phoenix's side.

I shrug. "Irony, really. I'm about to marry the man I once loved more than anything and who now can barely stand the sight of me and is using our marriage as revenge. God." I pinch the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. "If I'd accepted one of the men my father tried to marry me off to, I wouldn't be in this situation. "

"I didn't realize you had other opportunities to marry," Jenna says.

"My father was always trying to push someone on me. I always sabotaged the dates so they didn't want me. The closest I got was an older widower whose wife disappeared under questionable circumstances. He dumped me after I pretended to



have a psychotic episode at his family's estate."

Lucy's eyebrows shoot up. "You didn't."

"I did."

"Why go to such lengths?" Hannah asks.

I look down because I feel like such an idiot.

All those years I grieved for Phoenix when he spent those same years planning to ruin me and my family.

"Deep down, I couldn't let go of Phoenix. Even believing he was dead, I couldn't bear the thought of belonging to anyone else. My parents called me stubborn, difficult, ungrateful. It's the only battle I've ever won against them. "

I laugh. "And now here I am, getting exactly what I once dreamed of, marrying Phoenix Ifrinn. The universe has a twisted sense of humor, doesn't it?"

Lucy stares at me, her brows furrowed. "Wait—you never loved anyone else? In ten years?"

I wonder why that's a big deal. "How could I? Phoenix was The One ."

"But you thought he was dead," Hannah says gently. "You couldn't have mourned him forever."

"Couldn't I?" I had Brigit, a piece of him. That was all I needed.

Hannah's expression shifts, a shadow crossing her face. "You know, Ash had

someone before me too. Someone he loved very much."

My stomach tightens. I've heard rumors about Ash's past, about a woman who died in the same fire that took his parents.

"Her name was Meghan. She died in the fire. Like you, he spent the last ten years grieving and feeling guilty."

The air feels suddenly thin. My father's work. My family's crime. Another life destroyed because of the Keans.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, the words painfully inadequate.

Hannah gives me a wan smile. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel worse. I'm telling you because he found love again. He still loves and mourns Meghan, but he loves me now too. It's different, I think, but still wonderful."

And my father nearly took her away from Ash as well. God, no wonder Phoenix hates all of us.

"It's not quite the same, though, is it? I mean, I won't find another love because I'll be married to Phoenix."

"Yeah, that sucks," Lucy says, shaking her head.

"The worst part was believing I caused his death. All their deaths. That my love for him was what killed him." I take a shaky breath.

"Did you ever try to tell him the truth?" Jenna asks.

"Would you believe me if you were him?" I counter. "After ten years of hating me?"

After believing I helped murder his parents?" I shake my head. "Besides, he's not interested in the truth. He wants revenge. He wants to make an example of me."

"So why go through with it?" Lucy challenges. "Why marry him?"

"You aren't from our world, are you?"

"I live on earth in the Twenty-First Century." Lucy purses her lips at me.

"Yes, well, our world is more archaic. The truth is, I didn't have a choice."

"God, when I saw you at dinner... The way you kept your head held up high, I thought you were amazing," Jenna said. "You don't have a choice but you weren't going to let him bring you down."

"I liked it when you threw your champagne in his face."

I smile. "Yeah, well, that sort of behavior isn't smart."

"It's Phoenix who isn't smart. I imagine if he'd see the truth, you and he could have something special," Lucy says.

I shake my head. "When pigs fly."

"I don't know. I mean, I never thought Ash would be anything but cold and difficult," Hannah says.

"What changed?" I ask, almost afraid to hear the answer, afraid to hope.

"Patience. Eventually, he had to make a choice between holding onto his pain or reaching for something new." She smiles, her hand moving to her belly where her

child grows. "He chose life. Chose love."

Could Phoenix make that same choice? Could I? It seems impossible.

"I don't know if Phoenix can let go of his anger at my family. Even if he could see I wasn't a part of betraying him, he can't look at me and not see a Kean."

"Well, then he's an idiot." Lucy flicks her hand like she's swatting a gnat away.

"Let's talk about something else. Tell me about little Flynn, and Jenna and Hannah, about your pregnancies."

I'm relieved when they eagerly change the subject.

I'm grateful for their kindness even if I'm still wary of it.

Having female friends feels odd after years of isolation.

My marriage will be a cold and difficult one, but these women as sisters-in-law could be a bright spot.

They won't replace the emptiness I'll feel when Brigit is gone, but they'll be a distraction.

A way to cope through a long, unhappy life with Phoenix.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

The first time I walked into the downtown offices of my father's business, I was four or five years old.

He stood me by the window overlooking the city and told me that as the oldest son, someday, this would all be mine.

He explained the responsibilities of being the head of the family that not only included running the business, but also taking care of my brothers.

I was thrust into the role of leader of the family at twenty-one, not quite ready but fueled by loss and anger.

I succeeded. As I look out that same window now, I hope my father is proud of me.

My brothers are happily married, one with a child and the other two with babies on the way.

I've taken back the business. Granted, he might not like my marrying Keira or how I've treated her, but I also think he'd understand.

"He really did want to inhabit Dad's life, didn't he?" Flint says as he enters the office. It's the first time all of us have been back in ten years. "He built nearly the same house over ours and this place hasn't changed a bit."

I turn to greet him. "It's ours now. Like it should have been."

Blaise and Ash follow him in, and I sense the same feelings of satisfaction, of feeling Dad looking down on us approvingly, in them as I feel.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Blaise says. As usual, he stays standing while Flint and Ash take a seat in soft leather chairs near my desk. I sit behind the desk, happy to finally be here, yet sad that my father didn’t live to see this.

"Our informants confirm Hampton's accounts are vulnerable," Flint says, sliding documents across the table. "We can start the asset transfer tomorrow."

I nod, studying the papers. "Good. We need to reclaim everything he stole from us. Every business, every property, every connection."

"What about the shipping routes?" Blaise asks. "The Keans rerouted everything through their own channels."

"We take them back," I say simply. "I've already reached out to our old contacts in the harbor. They remember the Ifrinn name. They remember who treated them fairly."

Ash scoffs. "They remember who paid better. Hampton bought the loyalty we earned."

"Then we'll remind them what happens when you choose the wrong side." I tap my fingers on the table. "We're not just taking back our operations. We're erasing Hampton's legacy entirely."

Flint leans forward. "The loyalty ceremony will help with that. Most families are eager to pledge to us now that they know we're alive."

"And the rest?" Blaise asks.

I meet each of their eyes. "The rest will fall in line when they see what happens to the Keans. When they see my marriage to Keira."

"About that," Ash starts, but I cut him off.

"It's decided. The marriage gives us legitimacy with the old guard and sends a message." I don't add that I can't seem to stay away from her, that something beyond revenge pulls me to her.

"Fine," Ash concedes. "But we need to move quickly on the businesses. Hampton's lieutenants are already trying to carve up territory."

"Let them try," I say coldly. "By the end of the week, Boston will know the Ifrinns are back. And we're taking everything."

The meeting shifts to logistics as we hash out details for the ceremony. Blaise passes a tablet around showing security plans when my phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number.

Watch your back .

I'm about to mention it when the office door bursts open.

"Get down!" I shout, reaching for my gun I'd set on my desk.

Three men in tactical gear storm in, weapons raised. I recognize Carson, Hampton's head of security, leading the charge. My gun is already in hand as I duck behind my desk.

Thank fuck, my brothers are moving as well. Ash reacts instantly, flipping a worktable for cover while Flint pulls his weapon. Blaise is already moving, tackling

one gunman before he can get a clean shot.

"You're supposed to be dead, Ifrinn!" Carson shouts, firing wildly in my direction.

I squeeze off two shots, catching his shoulder. "Sorry to disappoint you?"

The office erupts in gunfire and shattering glass. A bullet grazes my arm, hot pain slicing through my skin. I ignore it, focusing on the threat.

Flint catches the second man with a clean headshot. The body drops like a stone.

Blaise is wrestling with the third attacker, their struggle violent and desperate. I can't get a clear shot with them tangled together.

"Hampton sends his regards," Carson snarls, pressing forward despite his wound.

Ash emerges from cover, firing twice. Carson staggers, red blooming across his chest, but stays upright through sheer hatred.

I rise to my feet, my weapon trained on his heart. "Hampton should have sent more men."

He raises his gun for one final attempt. I don't hesitate. My bullet catches him between the eyes.

Behind me, Blaise finally subdues his opponent with a sickening crack of bone. The man screams, arm bent at an unnatural angle.

"Secure him," I order, pressing a handkerchief to my bleeding arm. "He's our message back to whoever organized this."



Ash kicks away the fallen weapons while Flint checks the hallway for more.

“That took some guts,” Blaise says, pushing the moaning man into a chair until we can tie him. “Hampton's reach is longer than we thought.”

“Or someone else wants us gone,” Flint adds, returning with zip ties he tosses to Blaise to use on the surviving attacker.

My thoughts immediately turn to Keira. Is she involved? Did she know this was coming?

“Who gave your orders? Hampton? Or is someone else trying to take over?” I bark at the man.

“Fuck you.”

Ash puts his gun to the man's head. “That's fuck you, Mr. Ifrinn.”

The man sneers up at him.

“Let's see if he enjoys the accommodations with Hampton.” I grab my coat and put it on. “Let's get these other gentlemen out of here as well.” I glance at the door. “Any concerns out there?”

“They killed two men on the way in,” Flint says. “The secretary was under the desk. She looks terrified.”

So she probably wasn't a part of the plan to let them in. “Let's go.”

We drag the bodies back to the SUV, the one living attacker still struggling despite his broken arm. Blaise shoves him into the trunk with little ceremony, ignoring his

muffled curses.

"He'll talk," Ash says, pressing a makeshift bandage to my arm. "They always do."

I nod, scanning the street for witnesses or additional threats. "Let's move. I want him secured before anyone realizes what happened."

The drive back to the estate is tense, everyone on high alert. My mind races through possibilities.

One is that someone inside the house is secretly conferring with and sending out orders from Hampton. One of the men we think are loyal to us? Keira?

The other option is that someone, either a man of Hampton's or another family, sees an opportunity.

"You think Keira knew?" I ask out loud without meaning to.

"Oh, geez, not this again." Blaise rolls his eyes.

"What?"

"You act like she's a witch with magic powers or something. You have her locked in the house surrounded by guards. How could she arrange this?"

He's right, but I play devil's advocate. "One of the guards could be helping her."

"Has she visited Hampton in the basement?" Ash asks from the passenger seat next to me.

"No. But that doesn't mean she's not a part of this."

Flint laughs.

I glance at him through the rearview mirror. "What's so funny?"

"You are. You're grasping for reasons to hate her. Why? You afraid you might love her again?"

"Two little love birds..." Blaise sings.

"Shut up, Blaise." As I drive through the gates of the estate, uncertainty gnaws at me. Just when I'd started to doubt my suspicions about Keira, this happens.

The estate gates close behind us with a reassuring clang of metal. Our security team meets us at the entrance, faces grim as they take in our disheveled suits, the blood on my sleeve.

"Get him to the basement," I order as Flint and Blaise haul our captive from the trunk. "No one speaks to him but me."

The man spits blood at my feet. "You're all dead men walking. Hampton has friends you don't even know about."

I grab him by the throat, squeezing just enough to make his eyes bulge. "Hampton has nothing but time to think about his mistakes. Soon, you'll have plenty of that too."

We drag him through the service entrance, avoiding the main areas where household members might see, especially Keira. The last thing I need is her getting involved or warning whoever sent these men.

Hampton and Lana are being held in more comfortable conditions than what awaits this man.

"Secure him," I tell Blaise. "I want to know who sent him, who else is involved, and what they know about our operations."

Blaise nods, already preparing the necessary tools.

Ash crosses his arms as he watches Blaise toss our new prisoner in a room. "And if Keira is involved?"

"Then she'll learn exactly what happens to people who betray me. Twice." I turn to leave. "I'm getting my arm bandaged and changing my suit. I'll be back to talk to him. I want to talk to Hampton first, though."

Fifteen minutes later, I return to the basement. I flex my bandaged arm, the wound a reminder of how close we came to losing everything today. Again.

"They're ready for you," Blaise says, appearing at my side like a shadow.

I nod, steeling myself for what comes next. The heavy door creaks open to reveal Hampton and Lana Kean huddled together on a cot in their cell. They've been given basic comforts, clean clothes, decent food, even books, more than they deserve after what they did to my family.

"You look terrible," Hampton says, a ghost of his usual arrogance in his voice.

"Your men failed," I reply coldly. "Just like you."

Lana shrinks back, but Hampton maintains his defiance. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I smile without warmth. "Then you won't mind watching what happens to them."

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

With a nod to my guards, the door to the adjacent room opens. Our captured attacker is secured to a chair, his broken arm hanging uselessly at his side. In my absence, it appears my brothers had to enact some discipline as new bright red blood drips on his face.

Two more bodies lie on the floor, covered with sheets. I pull back the fabric to reveal Carson's lifeless face, a bullet hole centered perfectly between his eyes.

"Recognize your head of security?" I ask Hampton.

The color drains from his face. "Carson was supposed to be in Miami."

"He was supposed to kill me and my brothers. Instead, he's dead. Along with his men."

I move to stand before our living captive, drawing my knife. The polished blade catches the light as I turn it slowly.

"I want you both to watch carefully," I tell the Keans. "Because this is what happens to anyone who thinks they can take what belongs to me."

The man in the chair struggles against his restraints. It's the first sign of fear from him since he barged into my office thinking he could kill me and my brothers. "Mr. Kean, don't let him?—"

I press the knife against his throat, silencing him. "You have one chance to tell me who else is involved. One chance to make this quick."

Fear finally breaks through his bravado. "There are others besides Mr. Kean. Powerful people who don't want the Ifrinns back in control."

"Names," I demand, increasing the pressure.

"I can't—they'll kill my family."

I lean closer, voice dropping to a whisper. "I'll kill them myself if you don't start talking. Right after I finish with you."

The prisoner's confession spills out between gasps and pleas. Names of Hampton's loyal captains, details of safe houses, offshore accounts I hadn't known about. And two families who are providing support until Hampton is freed.

Hampton's face grows increasingly ashen as his empire's secrets are laid bare.

When I've heard enough, I nod to Blaise. He drags our informant away for further questioning, leaving me alone with the Keans.

"You won't get away with this," Hampton snarls, but the fear in his eyes betrays him.

I lean against the wall, studying them. "I already have."

Lana rises suddenly, her composure cracking. "We had a deal! We gave you our daughter!"

"You offered her as a sacrifice," I correct her coldly. "Like she's nothing more than property to be traded."

Hampton joins his wife, desperation making him bold. "We upheld our end of the bargain. Keira agreed to marry you. That was the arrangement for mercy."

"Mercy?" I laugh.

"You promised to spare our lives," Lana insists. "Yet you keep us locked in this... this dungeon."

I push off the wall, moving closer until only inches separate us.

"Let me be clear. Your lives were forfeit the moment you murdered my parents.

The only reason you're still breathing is because I want the world to see the great Hampton Kean brought down.

Imprisoned by the justice system he thought he controlled. "

"We gave you Keira," Hampton repeats, as if that should absolve them of everything.

"You didn't give me anything," I growl. "She chose to save your worthless lives. And every day, I wonder why she bothered."

The truth is, I wonder the same about myself. Why didn't I just put bullets in their heads the moment we took the house? Or have let Ash do it. It would have been cleaner. Simpler.

But not nearly as satisfying as watching them suffer.

I turn my back on the Keans, taking a few steps away before pivoting to face them again.

My patience wears thin with their pathetic attempts to bargain.

"Let me make something perfectly clear. Every breath you take is a mercy you don't

deserve.

Your lives hang by the thinnest thread. One I could snap with a single word. "

Hampton's face contorts with rage, but fear keeps him silent. Lana clutches his arm, her knuckles white.

"The federal charges alone will put you away for decades," I continue. "Tax evasion. Racketeering. Murder. But prison might be the kindest fate awaiting you. There are many families eager to settle old scores once word spreads of your... vulnerability."

"You wouldn't," Lana whispers.

I smile coldly. "I wouldn't have to. Your enemies will find you with or without my help."

Hampton steps forward. "Then kill us and be done with it. Why this charade?"

"Because death would be too quick. Too merciful. I want you to live long enough to lose everything. Your empire. Your reputation. Your freedom. Just like you took everything from my family."

Lana suddenly breaks, tears streaming down her face. "At least spare Keira from your games. She's innocent in all this."

I study her carefully, surprised by this sudden maternal concern.

In all our interactions, the Keans have treated their daughter as nothing more than a bargaining chip.

I remember how she used to talk about how invisible she felt with her family.



How they were so focused on money and status.

Only Ronan got any attention because he was the son.

"Since when do you care what happens to Keira?" I ask. "You offered her up without hesitation to save yourselves."

Something flickers across Hampton's face. A look I can't quite decipher. Guilt? Fear? Something deeper?

"She's our daughter," he says stiffly.

"Your daughter." I sense there's more to their relationship with Keira than I've understood. "What aren't you telling me about her?"

Hampton and Lana exchange a look that sets my teeth on edge.

"We knew about you two," Hampton finally says, his voice oddly resigned. "Did you really think you were being so clever, sneaking around our property? Helping her sneak out to be with you?"

"You knew?"

"Of course we knew," Lana says with a dismissive wave. "A mother always knows when her daughter is in love."

"I could have stopped it, you know," Hampton says with more bravado than he's had since I locked him up.

"Didn't you, though?" I remember Keira telling me he'd put guards on her to keep her from seeing me. From warning me. Was that a lie?

“Not until your father disrespected me by saying Keira wasn’t suitable for you.” Hampton’s face burns with hate. "He wouldn’t allow his precious heir to marry a Kean? He despised me. Thought I was beneath him."

I knew my father wouldn’t have wanted Keira for me, but I’d planned to talk to him. Surely, he’d let me marry her for love. But Hampton took that away from me.

"He saw you for exactly what you are," I spit back. "A treacherous, power-hungry snake who'd betray his closest allies for a chance to climb higher."

"Your father was an arrogant fool," Hampton sneers. "He believed in outdated codes of honor while the world changed around him. I offered him partnership, a true partnership, business and family, and he rejected me."

"So you murdered him?" The rage burns hot in my chest. "You killed my parents, tried to kill all of us because my father wouldn't bow to you?"

Lana steps forward. "It wasn't personal, Phoenix. It was business."

"Business? You burned my family alive. You tried to kill children. My brothers were teenagers!"

"A necessary evil," Hampton says coldly. "Your father left us no choice."

"There's always a choice," I growl. "And you made yours. Now you'll live with the consequences."

“You never could see your father for who he truly was,” Hampton says with frustrated anger.

“I’m the one who pushed for you to be with Keira.

It's your father who refused. He was insulted by the mere suggestion.

Said his son would never marry a Kean. He didn't give a fuck about what you wanted, Phoenix, and I'm the bad guy? "

I realize finally that my father did know about Keira and me.

I hadn't talked to him, but the Keans had, and he'd dismissed her without even asking me about her.

My father, whom I'd idolized, whom I'd spent a decade avenging, had been dismissive of what Keira and I shared. Sure, I knew he wanted to find me a wife from a family that could help expand his business, but surely, he'd have supported my love for Keira.

"That doesn't justify murder," I manage. I pull myself together. "So you got Keira to help you."

Lana's brows furrow. "Help us what?"

"Don't bother." Hampton gives me a look of distaste and pulls his wife back deeper into the room. "He's set in his thinking. Let's just bide our time until..."

"Until what?"

He shrugs. "You kill us or send us to jail." He sits on the cot, tugging Lana to sit next to him. It could be that he's given up, but I don't buy it. He's toying with me. He knows something.

There are voices outside in the hall. Ash pokes his head out and then comes to me. "The wives are back from their outing."

I turn back to the Keans, frustration burning through me. There's more to this story and I'm certain they're still hiding crucial pieces. Just like Keira is hiding something.

"This isn't over," I promise them, already moving toward the door.

"What about Keira? Can we see her?" Lana asks.

I pause at the threshold. Turning back, I fix them with a cold stare. "Don't worry. You'll see her again on our wedding day."

"I could help her with the plans."

I shake my head. "Keira is quite capable of making the plans."

"What about Brigit?" she asks.

The question catches me off guard. In all our confrontations, they've never once mentioned the girl. Why now?

"Your god-daughter? Why the sudden concern?"

Something passes between them, a look loaded with meaning I can't quite decipher. Hampton recovers quickly, his expression smoothing into practiced neutrality.

"She's just a child," he says evenly. "Innocent in all this."

"Like my brothers were innocent?" I counter.

"Phoenix, whatever you think of us, Brigit is precious to this family. To Keira especially."

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

I recall the girl in the kitchen that night, her defiant eyes so reminiscent of someone else's. The way Keira hovers protectively whenever Brigit is mentioned. The strange secrecy surrounding her presence in the house.

"Who is she really?" I ask, the question slipping out before I can stop it.

Hampton's face hardens. "Our god-daughter. Nothing more."

But there's something in his eyes, a flicker of panic, quickly suppressed, that tells me he's lying. And suddenly, I'm certain that Brigit is far more significant than they're admitting.

"We'll see," I say quietly, filing away this reaction for further consideration. "Until the wedding, then."

I climb the stairs from the basement, Hampton's cryptic words about Brigit echoing in my mind. Something about their reaction doesn't sit right. The flash of panic in his eyes, Lana's unusual concern. There's more to the girl's story than a simple god-daughter relationship.

In the main living room, my brothers wait with their wives. The sight of them together, happy, united, sends a pang through my chest I refuse to acknowledge. There's one person missing.

"Where's Keira?"

"She went to her room," Lucy says, her eyes staring at me like a mother who's

disappointed in her child.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

“Would you care if she?—”

“Lucy.” Flint gives her hand a squeeze to stop her, but the amusement in his expression tells me he likes how outspoken his wife is.

She catches herself. “I like her, Phoenix. We all do.”

Jenna and Hannah nod in agreement.

“I won’t be sent to spy on her again.”

“Did you learn anything that would protect the family?” I ask, highlighting family. This isn’t just me I’m looking out for but their husbands as well. I suspect they don’t know yet that we were nearly killed.

"She's not seeing anyone, Phoenix," Hannah says gently. "She never has. Not since you."

I blink, processing her words. "What?"

"She told us everything," Jenna adds. "How you two fell in love that summer. How she thought you died in the fire. How she's spent the last decade pushing away every suitor her parents found."

"Because she never got over you," Lucy finishes.

A strange sensation washes over me. Relief, pure and unexpected, floods through my

veins. The tightness in my chest loosens fractionally. No lover. No betrayal in that sense. Just Keira, waiting all these years for a ghost.

"That's impossible," I say, but the conviction has drained from my voice.

Ash exchanges a look with Blaise. "Is it? You've been looking for evidence of her betrayal since we arrived. Found any?"

I haven't. Not since the night I found her skulking through the house.

"She loved you," Hannah says softly. "Maybe still does, despite everything."

"Well, I don't know about that," Lucy says, disdain still lacing her tone. "But she could have loved you if you hadn't been such?"

"Lucy." Flint interrupts her.

The relief deepens, becoming something dangerously close to hope. I crush it immediately. Even if she wasn't unfaithful, even if she truly loved me then, it doesn't erase what her family did to mine.

"I don't need relationship advice from people who barely know Keira—or me."

Lucy steps forward. "We know enough. We know you're punishing her for crimes she didn't commit."

"You don't know what she did or didn't do," I snap.

"Actually, I do." Lucy meets my glare without flinching. "I've spent my career investigating people, Phoenix. I know when someone's lying. Keira isn't."

Flint puts a protective hand on his wife's shoulder, but she shrugs it off.

"You're so consumed with revenge, you can't see what's right in front of you," Lucy continues, her voice softening. "A woman who never stopped loving you, even when she thought you were dead."

"Lucy," Flint warns, but she ignores him.

"Your anger toward Hampton and Lana is justified.

What they did to your family was unforgivable.

But Keira isn't them." She gestures toward the ceiling, where Keira is presumably in her room.

"You're punishing her for having the wrong parents while forcing her to marry you. Do you even hear how twisted that is?"

The room falls silent, my brothers and their wives watching me warily.

"You think I don't know that?" I finally say, my voice low. "You think I haven't considered the possibility that she was as much a victim as we were?"

"Then why treat her like this?" Lucy presses.

"Because this isn't a romance novel, Lucy. Not everyone gets a happily ever after."

"They could, if you'd let go of your need for vengeance," Jenna says, apparently following Lucy's lead for boldness.

"Some things can't be forgiven," I say, thinking of my parents' bodies, charred



beyond recognition. Of my brothers, traumatized and forced into hiding. Of the decade we lost. "Some wounds don't heal."

"They won't if you keep reopening them," she counters.

I look at her, wondering why she doesn't get it.

"They've never closed, Lucy." I look at my brothers thinking they must feel the same.

And yet, in them I don't see the open wound I live with.

Flint is healed because of Lucy. And Blaise through Jenna.

Even Ash, who I thought was more broken than me after losing our parents and Meghan, he's whole again because of Hannah.

I suppose they'd all say because of love.

I had love once. Only once. With Keira. Lucy seems to think I could have it again. But as brave as I am in a gunfight, I'm not sure I have the courage to hand her the one thing she may have squashed ten years ago. My heart.

KEIRA

I collapse onto the edge of my bed, kicking off the heels that have been pinching my feet all afternoon. For a few hours, I almost felt normal. Shopping with Lucy, Jenna, and Hannah was the closest thing to freedom I've experienced since Phoenix stormed back into my life with vengeance in his eyes.

The women were kind, surprisingly so. They didn't treat me like the enemy, didn't look at me with the same contempt Phoenix does. Even so, I'm not really a part of them and can't believe I ever will be.

I'm a Kean. The name that once gave me privilege now brands me as something to be despised. The daughter of the man who destroyed the Ifrinn family. The blood of traitors runs through my veins and Phoenix won't let anyone forget it, least of all me.

They have real marriages. Real children they love. I have a sham of a life, a groom who can't stand me, and a daughter I can't claim.

I move to my desk where the wedding plans are spread out in meticulous detail. The seating chart for fifty of Boston's most powerful families. The menu cards listing the seven-course dinner. The loyalty pledge ceremony that will precede our vows, Phoenix's way of cementing his return to power.

And somewhere in that carefully orchestrated chaos, Nanny Fiona will slip away with Brigit. The thought makes my chest tighten. I may never see my daughter again.

The house feels eerily quiet tonight. The guards Phoenix assigned to watch me have

changed shifts, and the new one seems less attentive than his predecessor.

Perfect timing to check on Brigit.

I smooth my hair and straighten my blouse, preparing a plausible excuse about needing to discuss flower girl details if anyone questions me. My heart aches knowing these stolen moments with my daughter are numbered. Soon, she'll be gone, whisked away to safety while I remain trapped with Phoenix.

Just as I reach for the doorknob, it turns on its own. I step back quickly, my pulse racing as the door swings open to reveal Phoenix standing in the hallway.

"Going somewhere?" he asks, his voice deceptively casual.

"Just stretching my legs." I should come up with a better excuse. He probably thinks I'm off to see my phantom lover.

He studies me for a moment, then steps inside, closing the door behind him. He looks tired, the hard lines of his face softened slightly by exhaustion. For a fleeting second, I glimpse the boy I once loved beneath the hardened exterior.

"Did you enjoy shopping today?" he asks, moving further into the room.

"As much as one can enjoy shopping for a wedding they never wanted," I reply, then immediately regret the honesty. "The women were kind. Kinder than I expected."

Phoenix's jaw tightens. "They're good women. My brothers are fortunate."

"Yes. They are." And I envy them.

An awkward silence stretches between us. It makes me wonder what my future

sisters-in-law revealed to him.

Feeling surly, I say, "I hope they answered whatever questions you sent them to ask. Did they report back satisfactorily?"

His eyes narrow slightly. "You think I sent them to spy on you?"

"Didn't you?"

Phoenix's expression shifts, becoming unreadable.

He steps closer, hands in his pockets, casual but deliberate.

"Since you know I wanted information, was what they told me true?"

Or did you lie to my brothers' wives?" There's something in his eyes, a vulnerability I haven't seen since he returned.

Almost as if he's hoping I'll confirm what they said.

I move to the window seat as for some reason it feels like a safe space. "What did they tell you?"

"That you never got over me," he says bluntly. "That you chased away suitors for years because you were waiting for me to come back."

Heat rushes to my face. Of all the things I shared with them, of course that's what they reported back. The one that reveals too much of myself to the man who already dominates me.

"Would it make a difference if it were true?" I ask.

He doesn't answer immediately, just watches me with those piercing blue eyes. "I'd like to know if anything between us was real."

The bitterness of the past decade rises in my throat. "Funny, so would I."

His eyes narrow. "You think I didn't care for you?"

I sigh and turn my gaze to look out the window.

"I didn't lie to them. I told them exactly what happened.

I loved you. I thought you were dead. I couldn't bring myself to love anyone else.

"I take a steadying breath and return my attention to him.

"But that doesn't change what's happening now, does it?

It doesn't change what you're doing to my family, or that I'm the target for your revenge. "

His jaw tightens. "You loved me enough to wait, but not enough to warn me about what your family was planning?"

"I didn't know!" God, how exasperating. "I don't know how else to make you understand. I did not know what my father and Ronan were doing." I swallow hard, feeling a decade of hurt and betrayal rising to the surface.

I stand up, feeling too keyed up to sit. My hands clench at my sides as I take a step toward him. "Now you answer me. Did you ever really love me, Phoenix?"

His expression hardens. "How can you ask me that?"

"Because if you really loved me, you'd know I'd never have done the things you accuse me of." I study him, seeing the man I once loved but now wondering if he'd loved me the same. Were his words back then empty promises? After all, he didn't die in the fire and he didn't come back for me. He didn't because he believed I was complicit.

"You claim you loved me so much you would have found a way for us to be together regardless of your father's wishes," I continue, unable to stop now that I've started. "But the moment you thought I betrayed you, you believed it without question. You never once considered that I might be innocent."

Phoenix's jaw tightens, his eyes flashing with something I can't quite read.

"The Phoenix I loved would have known I could never hurt him. He would have known I was locked away, powerless to warn him even if I'd known what was coming."

Phoenix's expression shifts, a mixture of anger and something else, confusion, maybe even a hint of regret.

"What did your parents tell you?" he asks, his voice suddenly quiet. "After the fire. What did they say happened?"

I close my eyes briefly, the memory still painful after all these years.

When I open them again, I force myself to meet his gaze.

"They called me downstairs and told me there had been a fire at your family's estate.

That everyone inside had died." I wish I could retreat from reliving these worst moments of my life.

"And then they told me it was my fault. I guess you have that in common with my parents."

I turn away feeling utterly alone. Phoenix has his brothers and their wives. Even my parents have each other. But who do I have? No one. Nothing.

Phoenix goes still. "Your fault? How?"

I shake my head. I can't tell him about the pregnancy. Not now, not when Brigit's safety hangs in the balance.

"They said they did it because of me. Because of us. I didn't believe them at first. They didn't find your body, so I kept hoping you'd survived somehow. That you'd come for me like you promised."

The pain of those days washes over me again. The endless waiting, the desperate hope that Phoenix had somehow escaped the flames.

"Every day, I waited. For months, I watched for you.

I thought about running away to find you, but they kept me locked up.

Monitored my every move." I look up at him, feeling the sting of tears I refuse to shed.

"I truly believed you were dead. That was the only explanation I could accept for why you never came for me. "

I take a shaky breath, meeting his eyes directly. "But you didn't die. You lived. And you never came back for me. You left me here to face all this alone."

I watch as something shifts in Phoenix's expression. His eyes soften, just slightly, the blue of them less icy than they've been. "I thought about coming for you."

"Then why didn't you?"

Phoenix runs a hand through his dark hair. "Everything was chaos. We barely escaped with our lives. My brothers were traumatized and I guess I was too. We knew immediately who was to blame and that we would be dead too. We had to disappear completely."

He moves to the window, staring out at the darkness beyond. "We had nothing, Keira. No resources, no allies we could trust. Coming for you would have meant exposing ourselves, risking everything."

I stand frozen, absorbing his words. All this time, I'd believed he was gone forever, when he was out there, hiding, surviving.

"And then..." He turns back to me, his expression hardening slightly. "Time passed. Days turned to weeks, then months. We built new lives, new identities. And the longer we were away, the more the resentment grew."

I can see it in his eyes. The slow poison of bitterness that transformed the boy I loved into this hardened man.

"Ten years is a long time to nurse hatred," he continues. "To convince yourself that everyone connected to the Kean name was complicit. To plan how you'd make them all pay."

I resent my parents even more, which seems impossible. But all I can see now are the years Phoenix and I might have had with Brigit if they hadn't been stolen by my parents' ambition and cruelty.



“And so here you are. Mission accomplished. You finally get what you wanted. I hope you appreciate it, Phoenix. Most of us never get close to what we want.”

His eyes narrow. “What is it you want, Keira?”

I laugh bitterly. “I’ve given up wanting anything. What’s the point?” Of course, that’s not completely true. My only dream now is for Brigit to have a safe and happy life away from here.

“You want something. I know you do. Why are you hiding it from me?” His voice is even-keeled, but I know he’s not asking. He now has that air of authority that leaders have.

I don’t say anything.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

“Where were you sneaking away to the other night?”

I laugh again, and he doesn't like it if the flash of anger in his eyes is any indication. “Not to see a lover. Why are you so intent on believing that?” I start to walk away, tired of this game we play.

His jaw tightens as he reaches out to take my arm, preventing me from moving. “Where were you going?”

Incensed, I stare into his blue eyes. “To see Brigit. To make sure she was okay.” There's no reason to hide my intentions that night any longer. He knows she's here. He made her a sandwich, apparently.

He releases me, surprise etched in his expression. “Why hide her? Do you think I'd hurt a child?”

I throw up my hands in exasperation. “The house was invaded, Phoenix. Guns firing. People were dying. Of course I'm going to put her somewhere safe.”

“Right.” He steps back as if he only now realizes the implications of what he did. He takes in a breath. “Brigit. Your parents asked about her. They seemed... unusually concerned for her wellbeing. More so than for yours, actually.”

I force a casual shrug, though my mind is racing. I can only think my parents are trying to figure out a way to use her to save themselves. All the more reason to get her out of here and away from all of them. “She's their god-daughter. They've always been fond of her.”

"Is that all she is?" His eyes narrow slightly. "Just their god-daughter?"

"What else would she be?" I counter, hating the lie, the only real lie I've told him since his return.

Phoenix steps closer. "I find it strange that your parents would express such concern for a child who isn't even theirs while barely asking about their own daughter."

I let out a humorless laugh. "You want me to explain the inner workings of my parents' minds? I can't. You should know that better than anyone."

His expression remains skeptical, and I feel panic rising. I need to divert him, quickly.

"How many times did I tell you how unhappy I was with them? How many nights did I cry to you about their coldness, their control? And if not that, their indifference? I was invisible to them if I wasn't of use to them."

Phoenix's expression softens slightly at the reminder.

"You promised to take me away from them," I say, the memory still painfully vivid. "Do you remember? You said once you finished college, you'd come for me, and we'd build a life together far from both our families."

I see the flicker of recognition in his eyes, the memory hitting home.

"I remember."

"Then you understand why I can't explain their priorities or their concern for Brigit over me. They've never put me first. Not once in my entire life. Hell, they gave me to you in exchange for their lives. And you agreed, not because you want me like you

once did. No, I'm a pawn to you just as I am for them. So who's really betrayed whom here, Phoenix? "

"I suppose we both have reasons to resent the other."

"You think?" I'm so tired of all this.

"I meant what I said before about creating a workable marriage."

"And I'll do what I can. I know my place. My role."

Frustration flickers in his eyes. "I don't mean that." He lets out a breath, his gaze lingering on my face in a way that makes my traitorous heart skip a beat. "Do you think we could ever get back what we had? Not just the arrangement we have now, but what we truly had before. The love."

The question catches me completely off guard. After everything, the humiliation, the accusations, the forced marriage, he's asking if we could rekindle what we once shared?

Is that what he wants? Or is this a ploy? "I don't understand. You've made it clear how you feel about me. About my family."

He steps closer, close enough that I can smell his cologne. "The other night together... Was that just compliance? Or was there something real between us?"

My pulse quickens as I remember the heat of his skin against mine, how for those brief moments, I'd let myself believe we were the people we used to be.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I answer honestly. "One minute, you're treating me like the enemy, the next, you're in my bed. And when it's done, you're

accusing me of being with another man. How am I supposed to know what's real anymore?"

His jaw tightens slightly. "I'm asking what's real for you, Keira."

The question sends a wave of conflicting emotions through me. What's real? The love I never stopped feeling for him, even when I thought he was dead? The hurt and betrayal when he returned only to punish me? The fear I feel every day for Brigit's safety?

"What does it matter what's real for me?" I finally ask. "Is this just another way to punish me? To make me admit I still have feelings for you so you can use them against me?"

Phoenix's expression shifts, something like pain flickering across his features. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"I don't know what to think anymore. You say you want to know if we could get back what we had, but I don't even know if you actually care about me. Or if I'm just a means to an end."

Phoenix's hand rises slowly, hesitantly, before coming to rest against my cheek. His touch is gentle, so at odds with the harshness he's shown since his return. I should pull away. Every rational part of me screams to step back, to protect myself from falling into this again.

But I don't move.

"Keira," he whispers, my name a caress on his lips. His thumb traces the curve of my cheekbone, and I feel myself leaning into his touch, betrayed by my own heart's memory of him.

"Phoenix..." I want to pull away, but my eyes flutter closed as I savor his touch.

"Keira..." His voice is rough with emotion. His lips find mine. Unlike our previous kisses since his return, hungry, angry, punishing, this one is achingly tender. It's the kiss of the boy I fell in love with.

I know I should stop this. There's too much at stake. Brigit, my parents, my own heart. But when his arms wrap around me, pulling me against the solid warmth of his chest, I'm lost.

My fingers tangle in his hair as the kiss deepens, years of longing and grief pouring into this one reckless moment. His hands slide down my back, lifting me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me to the desk.

Papers scatter as he sets me down, his mouth never leaving mine. I pull at his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against mine, to reclaim some piece of what we once had.

My fingers glide over a bandage. I stop to look at it and then him. "You're hurt."

"Some of your father's friends paid a visit." His eyes narrow, studying me.

I feel it then, the doubt he has about me. "You think I sent them?" I release him, wishing he'd step back.

"No. But I wonder if you'd be okay if they'd succeeded."

I close my eyes, hating this world I was born into. "Why do I let this happen?"

"What?"

"Give in to your touch when you think I'm a monster. You had your brothers' sisters

question me, but you don't believe their report. You only believe what you want. That I'm a whore and—" God, I can't go on.

"Keira." He uses the crook of his finger to lift my chin. I want to refuse to look at him, but then again, I don't want him to think I can't stand up to him.

"You're under the mistaken impression that you're the only one who is helpless against the onslaught of past emotions. What we had was real?—"

"Then why ask me?"

"I guess I needed to hear it."

"Yeah, well I could hear it too."

His smile is soft as his gaze drifts to my lips and then back up to my eyes. "It was real. And despite everything, the power of what we had still radiates between us. It's pulling us together even though we both have doubts now. Our situation is different now."

I nod. "So, what do we do?"

"Honestly, I don't know except that in moments like this, I want to give in to it. I think maybe you do too. But if you don't..."

Push him away. Tell him no, you don't want this. But he's right. The desire to feel what we had ten years ago is too powerful to let go of. Despite the pain it will bring. Despite the fact that it's a memory, not real now.

"I do too."

Something like relief flashes in his eyes before he captures my mouth again. His hands push my dress up my thighs, and I let go. I'll regret this later, but for now, I'm going to relive the wonder of us.

We move together with desperate urgency, as if trying to erase the decade that separated us, the betrayals, both real and imagined. For these stolen moments, there is no revenge, no secrets. It's just Phoenix and Keira, finding their way back to each other.

My body remembers him, every touch, every caress. I arch against him as his hands slide beneath my dress, tracing patterns on my skin that make me gasp his name.

There's an urgency between us, a need that transcends the anger and betrayal. But then he slows, his lips against my neck.

"Not here," he growls, lifting me and carrying me to the bed.

He lays me down gently, his eyes never leaving mine as he removes my clothes.

His touch is reverent now, almost apologetic, as if trying to erase every harsh word, every cruel action since his return.

The vulnerability in his gaze undoes me completely.

He's back. The man I've mourned for ten years is here with me now.

Deep down, I know he'll be gone again, so I do what I can to live in this moment. My hands roam his body, rediscovering him. He's broader, more muscular than before, and yet the same.

"Look at me," he commands softly, and I open my eyes to find his face above mine,



his expression raw with emotion. "I want to see you."

I reach up to touch his face, tracing the lines that weren't there before. With our gazes holding, he enters me. Emotion overwhelms me with the sense of rightness, of having what I lost back with me.

"Keira." His voice has the same reverence as his touch as he moves. Slow. Controlled. As if he wants this moment to last forever. I know I do. The more the pressure builds, the more I'm desperate to hold off the end. To make this moment last.

We move together, finding our rhythm as if we'd never been apart. Every thrust brings us closer to what we once were and yet, I know it's a fantasy. We're living in the past. Soon, reality will return. But until then, I hold on to him, move with him.

I think of the words I wish I could say, like how I never stopped loving him. Like how I wish we could have what we had ten years ago, even as I know we'll never have that again.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

### PHOENIX

I push deeper into Keira, watching her face transform with pleasure.

Her gray eyes lock with mine, vulnerable and open in a way I haven't seen since we were younger.

I have no illusions that our lives will be the happily ever after we once planned, but at this moment, I have the final piece I lost ten years ago.

The woman I loved. When this moment is done, that piece will be lost again.

"Keira," I whisper, unable to hold back the emotion in my voice.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders as she moves with me, our bodies remembering a rhythm we perfected years ago. It feels like coming home, even as my mind struggles against the sentiment.

Unlike her, I have been with other women. I haven't loved them. I can't even remember their names. But even with them, Keira was always in my mind. She's not the same. Her tits are rounder, her hips broader. But her skin is still silky soft and sweet to kiss.

"Phoenix," she breathes, and hearing my name on her lips breaks something inside me.

I capture her mouth with mine, kissing her deeply as we move together. For the first

time since my return, this thing between us is raw and honest. I can't stop the wish that it could always be like this.

“Oh, God...” Her body tenses, arches beneath me. She comes apart, crying out my name. I don't want this to end. Not yet. But her pussy grips my dick and I have no choice. My orgasm whips through me like a storm.

We lie tangled together afterward, her head resting on my chest, my fingers tracing patterns on her bare skin. I don't want to leave her bed. I don't want to retreat back into revenge. But that is the reality of our lives.

Oh, sure, we'll share a bed once we're married. We'll have sex. Maybe we'll have children. But I know that this moment is the last time we'll be Phoenix and Keira of ten years ago. I'm happy that we've given ourselves this gift, even as my heart rips at the loss of it again.

I wake with a jolt. For a moment, I'm disoriented. This isn't Keira's room. I'm back in my own bed, alone. For the last couple of nights, I've relived the other night with Keira. My dreams aren't as sweet as the real thing. In fact, they torment me only because I know they aren't real.

Today's the day. My wedding day. We finally are going to have what we planned for ten years ago, but now it's tainted.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed focused on completing the plans that started ten years ago as I watched my house, my life, go up in flames. I stand under the shower spray, letting hot water pound against my shoulders.

But like in my dreams, that last night with Keira haunts my waking moments too. That moment had felt like stepping back in time, before betrayal and vengeance consumed me. For those hours, I remembered what it was like to want something

beyond retribution.

"Fuck," I mutter, lifting my face into the spray of hot water as if that will wash away all the pain I've endured... all the pain I've caused. And again, I wonder, could we get back what we lost?

I dress in a black suit, a crisp white shirt, and a blood-red tie.

The mirror reflects a man I barely recognize anymore.

Polished, dangerous, powerful. But beneath that exterior, doubt creeps in.

Am I making a mistake? Not the marriage itself.

That's necessary for our position in Boston.

But my shifting feelings for Keira complicate everything.

I've spent ten years hardening myself against the Keans, against her. Now I'm questioning all of it.

My phone buzzes with messages from my brothers. Last-minute security details. Confirmation that all the families will attend. Business as usual, even on my wedding day.

I adjust my tie, straightening it unnecessarily. My hands aren't steady, and that infuriates me. Phoenix Ifrinn doesn't get nervous. He doesn't hesitate.

Yet here I stand, caught between the man I've become and the man I once was. Between vengeance and something that feels like hope.

I take a deep breath and reach for my watch, my father's watch, salvaged from the ashes of our old life. The weight of it grounds me, reminds me of why we fought our way back to Boston.

But as I fasten it around my wrist, Keira's face flashes in my mind. Not the defiant woman who threw champagne in my face, but the girl who once looked at me like I made the world turn. Made the sun rise. Like I was everything.

With a last look in the mirror, I tell myself to get my shit together. There's no place for longing or sentiment. It only makes me weak, and today of all days, I need to be strong. Cruel, even.

I join my brothers in my office as the rest of the house is in a whirl of activity. Ash, Flint, and Blaise are already dressed in matching black suits with blood-red pocket squares, a nod to our family's rise from the ashes.

"There he is." Flint raises a glass of whiskey. "The man of the hour."

Ash claps me on the shoulder. "How're you holding up?"

"Fine," I say automatically, accepting the glass Blaise hands me.

Their presence steadies me. These men, my brothers, are why I've done everything I have over the last ten years.

Barely twenty-one, I became the head of the family.

They looked to me for guidance and leadership, and I've done all I can to provide that.

Have I fucked up at times? Yes. But ten years later, here we are.

My brothers are married, fathers, and we're standing in the place that had been ours before Hampton Kean ripped it away.

We fought, bled, and clawed our way back to this moment together.

"To the Ifrinn brothers," Blaise says, raising his glass. "Back where we belong."

We drink, and the whiskey burns a path down my throat.

I should feel triumphant. Today marks our complete return to power.

The loyalty pledge will cement our position in Boston's underworld.

Every family that once turned their backs on us will kneel.

And the marriage will ensure greater stability between Kean factions who accept the new regime.

"The families are arriving," Ash says, checking his phone. "Security's in place."

Flint nods. "I've got men stationed at every entrance. No one's getting in without clearance."

"And the Keans?"

"Ready for their grand appearance. They'll be brought up right before the pledge." Blaise laughs. "Mrs. Kean demanded a different dress and diamond jewelry."

"She deserves a potato sack," Flint says.

"How's Keira?" Ash asks, his expression concerned. Perhaps he's worried I feel like

he did as he married Hannah. Forced into something he didn't want. In the end, it turned out well for him and Hannah. I don't expect that for me and Keira even if it would be nice.

"Fine, as far as I know." The image of Keira's face when I left her bed the other night flashes through my mind. I swear there was hope mingled with wariness. Like she wished for something better but like me knew it wasn't possible. Not with all this violence and betrayal between our families.

"You sure you want to go through with this?" Ash asks quietly, studying my face.  
"The marriage, I mean."

The question catches me off guard. "Why wouldn't I?"

Flint exchanges a look with Blaise. "You've been different lately. With her."

"We've noticed," Blaise adds. "You look at her like..."

"Like what?" I challenge.

"Like you used to," Ash finishes. "Before everything went to hell."

I turn away, staring at the amber liquid in my glass. "It's complicated."

"It doesn't have to be," Flint says. "If you actually care about her?—"

"She's a Kean," I snap, but the words lack conviction.

The truth is, I can imagine a future with Keira now.

A future beyond revenge and power plays.

Something real. But trust is a luxury I can't afford, not when I'm certain she's still hiding something from me. Oh, sure, I believe her when she said she was off to see Brigit that first night. But there's something else going on. Maybe it's not another man, but there's something.

I can feel it in my bones. And when that shoe drops, I'll be glad I've kept my guard up instead of having my heart broken again.

"Listen," I say, meeting each of my brothers' eyes in turn. "I know what I'm doing. This marriage isn't just about Keira or the Keans. It's about our family, about securing what should have been ours all along."

"We've fought too hard to get here," I continue, straightening my shoulders. "Everything we've done, every sacrifice we've made, was to restore the Ifrinn name. To take back what's rightfully ours."

Ash nods, his expression softening. "We know, Phoenix. We're with you."

Looking at my brothers, I'm struck by how much they've endured. They should have had different lives, lives where they didn't have to become warriors before they were men. Where they didn't have to rebuild from ashes.

"You all deserve better than what we got," I say, my voice rough with emotion I rarely allow myself to show. "The lives we should have had were stolen from us. But I promise you this. What we build now will be stronger than what we lost."

Blaise refills our glasses. "To the future of the Ifrinn family."

"To legacy," Flint adds.

"To brotherhood," Ash finishes.



I raise my glass. "To Mom and Dad, and a new beginning."

We drink together, and in that moment, I feel both the glory and the tragedy of our lives. I will lead us forward, not just to reclaim what was lost, but to build something greater.

I lead my brothers into the ballroom. Every family of consequence in Boston stands before me, dressed in their finest, watching with wary respect. Shortly, we'll have a wedding. But first, I need to show them who is boss and how I can be as merciless as Hampton Kean.

I stand near the tarp my men have laid on the fancy marble floor. "Bring them in," I command, my voice echoing across the room.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

The double doors open. Keira enters first, resplendent in ivory, her blonde hair cascading down her back.

Despite everything, my breath catches at the sight of her.

She holds her head high, moving with the grace of a queen rather than a captive.

She's proven again and again that she won't be broken. I admire that about her.

Behind her, my men drag Hampton and Lana Kean forward. They look diminished even in their expensive clothes and jewelry.

"On your knees," I order as they reach the center of the room.

Hampton resists until one of my men forces him down. Lana follows with less struggle, her eyes darting frantically around the room, perhaps searching for allies who no longer exist.

I step forward, power surging through me as I take my place before Boston's underworld elite. This is the moment I've dreamed of for ten years. Hampton Kean on his knees before me, witnessing the restoration of everything he tried to destroy.

Yet as I prepare to speak, an unexpected unease twists in my gut. Keira stands to the side, her expression unreadable, but I feel her eyes on me. Judging. Watching to see what kind of man I truly am.

With a single command, I could end the Keans right here. It would be justice by the

old ways. Blood for blood. The families would understand. They might even expect it.

But as I draw breath to begin my speech, I'm caught between the man I've become and the man I once was. Between vengeance and something else I'm not ready to name.

I scan the faces of Boston's elite gathered before me. Every person in this room now understands the truth. The Ifrinn family has risen from the ashes stronger than ever.

"Today marks a new chapter in our city's history," I announce, my voice carrying to every corner of the ballroom. "The rightful order has been restored."

I gesture toward Keira, who stands tall despite everything. Her beauty is undeniable, even as she regards me with wary eyes.

"In an act of mercy that some might call undeserved, I've chosen to unite our families through marriage rather than eliminate the Kean bloodline entirely. My bride will bear the Ifrinn name, and through her, the sins of her family will be forgiven, though never forgotten."

The crowd murmurs, some nodding in approval at my magnanimity. Others look uncertain, perhaps wondering if I've gone soft. I can't have that.

"But before we proceed with our vows, there's another matter to address." I turn toward the side doors. "Bring them in."

My men drag forward two struggling figures. One is the man who attempted to kill me days ago. The other a co-conspirator ferreted out by Flint and Blaise. Their faces are bruised, their suits torn and bloodied. They're forced to their knees on the tarp.

"These men thought they could preserve Hampton Kean's crumbling empire." I walk toward them slowly, savoring the fear in their eyes. "They believed loyalty to a fallen king would protect them. They were wrong."

I grab one by the hair, forcing him to look up at the assembled families.

"Let this be a lesson to anyone who considers betrayal." Anger pulses through me but I remind myself that this display isn't just about vengeance. It's about establishing order. "The Ifrinn family rewards loyalty and punishes treachery. Always."

Hampton Kean's face has gone ashen as he watches his former soldiers kneel before me. Good. Let him see what his arrogance has wrought.

"These men will face judgment for their actions," I continue, releasing my grip. "As will anyone who stands against us."

I pull my gun and the room falls silent, tension crackling through the air like electricity before a storm.

"For your betrayal of the Ifrinn family, the sentence is death." I press the barrel against the first man's temple. I look at the crowd. "Is there anyone here who thinks this punishment is unjust?"

"Here, here to the Ifrinn return," someone calls out.

The rest of the room nods or chants, "here, here."

The gunshot cracks through the ballroom. The man crumples to the floor, blood pooling beneath him. A collective gasp ripples through the crowd, followed by tense silence.

My hand doesn't shake. My expression doesn't change. But inside, a storm rages. Grief for the boy I was before fire consumed our world, satisfaction that justice is finally being served, and something darker that feels like power.

This man's death won't bring my parents back. It won't erase a decade of exile and struggle. But it sends a message that will echo through Boston's underworld for years to come. The Ifrinn family has returned, and betrayal will not be tolerated.

I turn slightly, my eyes finding Keira. I expect to see disgust or horror on her face. Instead, I see something that cuts deeper. Pain. Not for the dead man at my feet, but pain for me. As if she's watching something precious die before her eyes.

Her gaze holds mine across the blood-spattered floor, and for a moment, I feel exposed. Like she can see past the monster I've become to the man I used to be. The man who loved her. The man who promised to take her away from all this.

I pivot toward the second traitor. His eyes are wide with terror, pleading silently for mercy I have no intention of showing. The message must be absolute. No one betrays the Ifrinn family and lives.

"For your?—"

The ballroom doors burst open with a crash. Heads turn as three of my men drag in a struggling woman and a small girl. My security detail immediately forms a protective circle around me, weapons drawn.

"Boss!" one of my men calls out. "Found these two trying to slip out the service entrance. Had packed bags, passports, the works."

My blood runs cold as I recognize them. Nanny Fiona and Brigit. The little girl's face is streaked with tears, her small body trembling as she clings to her nanny's skirt.

Fiona stands tall despite her obvious fear, chin lifted in defiance.

"Let her go!" Keira's voice cuts through the chaos, raw with panic. She moves toward them, but my men stop her. "She's just a child!"

Keira's facade shatters. The color has drained from her face. Her eyes are wild with a terror I've never seen before, not even when I threatened her parents' lives. This is different. Primal.

"What is the meaning of this?" I motion to block the dead man's body so Brigit doesn't see it and holster my weapon.

One of my men holds up a bag. "Found cash, new identities, travel documents. They were running, Boss."

The crowd murmurs, sensing a new drama unfolding before them. Hampton and Lana Kean exchange a look I can't interpret.

Brigit spots Keira and breaks free from my man's grip, running toward her. "Keira!" She throws herself into Keira's arms.

Keira clutches the child to her chest, her eyes meeting mine over Brigit's head. There's no defiance now, only naked fear and a desperate, silent plea.

I don't know what the fuck is going here, but Keira, once again, has pulled a stunt that puts my strength as a leader into question, and that just won't do.

KEIRA

I was a fool. A complete and utter fool.

How could I think they could sneak out in the confusion of the day? If he had me under guard, he probably had Brigit as well. I underestimated him and now, in one moment of desperate miscalculation, I've put everything at risk. Put Brigit at risk.

"Phoenix, please." I hold my child to me, guilt rising that she has to experience this horror because of my stupidity.

Phoenix's gaze swings toward me, his expression hardening into something unrecognizable. The man I made love to last night is gone. He's now the cold-eyed killer I've come to fear.

I should have known better than to trust the moments of tenderness between us. Should have been more careful with my plans.

Should have, should have, should have.

My mind races through possibilities, excuses, explanations—anything to save my daughter. But what can I possibly say? That I was sending my "god-sister" away for her own protection? That I didn't trust Phoenix not to use her against me?

Maybe I should reveal the truth. Maybe if he knew Brigit was his daughter, he wouldn't hurt her. But what if that knowledge makes things worse? What if he sees her as another Kean to punish?

He turns his gaze back to the man holding Nanny Fiona. "Bring her here."

My body moves before my mind can catch up. I push Brigit behind me as I turn to Phoenix. The look in his cold, detached eyes sends ice through my veins.

"Phoenix, please. Nanny Fiona has nothing to do with any of this. She's loyal to me, not to my parents."

Phoenix's men push Nanny Fiona down until her knees hit the floor. Her face is ashen, but her eyes meet mine with the same steadfast devotion she's shown since coming into my and Brigit's life.

I push Brigit further behind me, my arm stretched back to hold her in place. My fingers grip her small shoulder, feeling her trembling beneath my touch.

"If you want to punish someone, punish me," I plead. I move to the tarp and drop to my knees. "Fiona was just following my orders. She's innocent in all this."

The room falls silent. My parents remain on their knees, and for once, they stay silent. Perhaps they finally understand the consequences of their actions. Perhaps they finally see what their ambition has cost us all.

"Phoenix," I whisper, trying to find any trace of the man I once loved in those hardened eyes. "Please. Take me instead," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Let them go, and I'll do whatever you want. My life for theirs."

My heart pounds so violently, I'm certain everyone can hear it. The faces of Boston's most powerful families blur around me as I focus solely on Phoenix's hardened expression. Somewhere behind me, I hear Brigit whimper, and it takes everything in me not to turn to her.



“Phoenix.” Ash steps up behind him, putting his hand on his shoulder. He leans in, whispering something in his ear.

His jaw tightens as he shrugs off Ash’s hand.

"This isn't about her." I gesture toward Brigit without looking away from him. "She's innocent. She deserves a chance at a life without all this violence and revenge."

“No, you can’t.” Brigit moves toward me, but Blaise stops her.

“Your quarrel is with me and my parents. Not with a child who's done nothing wrong.” Please, God, help me find the words to save Brigit and Nanny Fiona.

“Phoenix.” This time, it’s Blaise who has positioned himself between Brigit and him. “She doesn’t need to watch this.”

I turn to look at Brigit, my heart breaking at the sight of her wide, terrified eyes. Tears stream down her face, her small body trembling uncontrollably.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I say, forcing a calmness into my voice I don't feel. "Look at me, Brigit. Just look at me."

Her eyes find mine, desperate for reassurance I'm not sure I can honestly give. But I have to try. For her.

"I love you. More than anything." Inside, my stomach twists with fear so potent it's like acid burning through me.

I watch Phoenix's face, searching desperately for any sign of mercy.

"Take them back to their rooms," Phoenix orders, his voice emotionless. "Double the

guard. No one enters or leaves without my explicit permission."

Relief floods through me, even as I know this isn't resolved. At least for now, they'll be safe. But the momentary relief evaporates when Phoenix's cold eyes lock with mine.

"I'll deal with you later," he says, each word slicing through my heart.

A guard grips my arm, pulling me to my feet and marching me away. I'm tugged upstairs behind Nanny Fiona and Brigit.

"Please, can we all be in the same room?" I ask the man hauling me upstairs.

"Boss says back to your rooms."

"I want to be with Keira," Brigit cries, trying to break from the guard's grip.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I try to soothe her, although it's quite possible I'm lying to her.

I'm pushed into my room, the door slamming behind me. Something inside me finally breaks. My legs give out and I crumple to the floor, my wedding dress billowing around me. The sobs that come from me are deep and primal.

I've failed her. My beautiful daughter. The one person I swore to protect above all others.

I drag myself to the bathroom and vomit. My hands shake violently as I splash cold water on my face, avoiding my reflection in the mirror. I can't bear to see the woman who put her child in danger.

Back in the bedroom, I sit on the edge of the bed, feeling helpless, hopeless.

A soft knock interrupts my spiraling thoughts. The door opens before I can respond, and Jenna slips inside.

"I was checking the flower arrangements when I heard... commotion," she says hesitantly, closing the door behind her. "I wanted to check if you're okay."

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. "Okay? My fiancé wants to execute me and my daughter."

The words hang between us before I realize what I've admitted. It isn't until Jenna's eyes widen that I realize I've made another error. After ten years of guarding this secret, I've just blurted it out to a virtual stranger.

"Brigit is your daughter?" Jenna whispers, crossing the room to sit beside me.

"Yes. I don't care what happens to my parents.

I don't care about their empire or their power or their money.

I never did. Let Phoenix take it all. Let him destroy everything they built.

I don't care." I look up at Jenna. "I only ever cared about Brigit.

Everything I've done, every humiliation I've endured, every compromise I've made, it's all been for her. To keep her safe. And now..."

My voice breaks as fresh tears come. "Now I've failed her. Phoenix is going to kill her to punish me, and she'll never even know I'm her mother."

Jenna stares at me, her mouth slightly open in shock. I can see the wheels turning behind her eyes as she processes what I've just confessed.

"Phoenix won't harm a child. He won't kill you, either." She's trying to soothe me just like I tried to do with Brigit.

"You don't know that."

She takes my hand. "She doesn't know you're her mother?"

I shake my head. "No one knows except my parents." I wipe furiously at my tears. "My parents forced me to hide it. They were going to marry me off to someone else, make a profitable alliance. They couldn't try to pass me off as a virgin if I were a mother."

She squeezes my hand. "That's why you never married anyone else."

"I couldn't leave her. And I couldn't tell anyone the truth. So I stayed, playing their games, pretending she wasn't mine while loving her more than my own life."

"If you've never been with anyone..." Realization comes to her eyes. "Oh... she's Phoenix's daughter too?"

I grip both her hands with mine. "You can't tell anyone. Not even Blaise. Promise you won't say a word. I don't know what he'll do if he finds out."

"But Phoenix is her father," Jenna says softly. "Don't you think he has a right to know?"

"The Phoenix I knew ten years ago? Yes. But this man?"

" I shake my head vigorously. "You should have seen his face when they brought Nanny Fiona and Brigit in. He's in the middle of proving his dominance. He can't let this pass without risking looking weak.

" Another wave of nausea hits as I think about what he could do.

And I brought this on. This is all my fault.

“How come you didn't tell him when you found out you were pregnant?”

"Before I could tell him, my father discovered my secret.

He locked me in my room, cut off all contact.

A few days later, they told me Phoenix and his family were dead.

" I cover my face with my hands as if that will stop the memories.

“My father threatened to force me to terminate the pregnancy, but I fought them on that. The baby was all I had left of Phoenix. My parents agreed to let me have her and keep her as long as no one knew the truth.”

"That's monstrous," Jenna whispers.

"All these years, they've used Brigit to keep me in line. Every time I threatened to leave, they reminded me that they had legal custody. That I had no rights to my own daughter."

“Maybe now is the time to tell the truth. Whatever Phoenix has become, I don't believe he'd harm Brigit, especially if he knew she was his daughter."

I shake my head, unconvinced. "You didn't know him before. The change in him... He's capable of anything now."

"I've seen how Blaise looks at him when Phoenix goes too far," Jenna insists. "His brothers keep him in check. And you should have seen how protective he was of Hannah when she was hurt."

"That's different. Hannah is family. Brigit is..." I swallow hard. "In his eyes, she's a Kean."

Jenna takes my hands in hers. "Except she's an Ifrinn too."

I pull my hands away and rise from the bed, not needing her support if she's going to betray me.

And of course she will. Her first duty is to Blaise, whose first duty is to Phoenix.

"Are you willing to risk my life... Brigit's life on that?"

He's down there executing men who he feels betrayed him.

What will knowing about Brigit prove except that I've betrayed him?

And being raised as a Kean, he'll see her as being like me and my parents. "My voice is shrill and desperate.

She stands, looking at me with sympathy. "Okay. I promise I won't tell anyone about Brigit." She squeezes my fingers. "But I think you should consider telling Phoenix yourself. When things calm down."

I laugh bitterly. "When will that be? After he's finished destroying everything and

everyone I care about?"

"I know it seems impossible right now," she says. "But the man you loved is still in there somewhere. I've seen glimpses of him." She gives me a hug. "Try to rest. I'll check on Brigit for you."

"Thank you. Please make sure she's okay." I can't imagine how terrified she is. "Tell her I'm okay."

Jenna nods and moves toward the door. "I will." She opens the door, and my world stops. Blaise stands in the doorway. His eyes flick from Jenna to me, then back again.

"How long have you been standing there?" Jenna asks.

"Long enough."

Panic explodes in my chest. I rush to him, dropping to my knees. "Please," I beg, looking up at Blaise. "Please don't tell him. I'll do anything—anything you want. Just don't tell Phoenix about Brigit. She's innocent in all this. She doesn't deserve to be caught in the middle of our families' war."

I look at Jenna's round belly then to him again. "You're going to be a father. What would you do to protect your child?"

My entire body trembles with fear. "Please."

Blaise squats down in front of me. "My brother is not a monster, Keira." He rises, looking at Jenna. "We're expected downstairs."

They head down the hall. Jenna looks over her shoulder back at me. Her face is filled with sympathy and sadness, but that won't save me and Brigit.

For a moment, I wonder if by sheer will I could get Brigit and escape through one of the many hidden passageways. But as my guard repositions himself outside my door, I know that's impossible.

I have to accept that all is lost.



### PHOENIX

I watch as Keira is escorted from the room with Brigit crying for her. They disappear, and I turn to see everyone's eyes on me, waiting to see what I'll do next.

My chest tightens with an unfamiliar panic. What the hell just happened? Why was Keira trying to smuggle the girl out? The questions swirl in my mind, but I can't afford to show weakness. Not now.

I turn back to the remaining man kneeling before me. As he realizes my attention has turned to him, he knows what's coming.

"This is what happens to traitors," I announce, my voice cold and steady. Without hesitation, I pull the trigger. The gunshot reverberates through the room, and the man who tried to kill me this week crumples to the floor. The message is clear to everyone watching. This is the price of betrayal.

I scan the room, meeting the eyes of each family representative. "Let there be no confusion about who runs Boston now. The Ifrinns have returned and reclaimed what's ours."

Hampton shifts on his knees, opening his mouth to speak. I swing my gun toward him, and he freezes.

"One more word," I warn, "and I'll forget the promise I made to your daughter."

Lana's face contorts with rage. "You can't?—"

I press the barrel of my gun against Hampton's forehead, cutting her off mid-sentence. "I can do whatever I want. You and Hampton played with fire when you came after my family."

I lean in closer, my voice dropping to a whisper meant only for them. "The only reason you're still breathing is because of Keira. Remember that before you test my patience again."

I holster my gun and turn to address the assembled families. The room reeks of blood and fear, exactly as I intended. This display wasn't just for the men who betrayed us. It was for everyone who might consider crossing the Ifrinns in the future.

"Now that we've dealt with those unfortunate matters, let's proceed with the loyalty pledge."

My men remove the two dead bodies and tarp, and then one by one, the heads of Boston's most powerful families approach.

They kneel before me, swearing their allegiance to the Ifrinn name.

Each oath feels like another brick in the foundation I'm rebuilding.

My father's legacy, restored through fear, retribution, and blood.

I catch Flint's eye across the room. His face is tight with concern, and when I glance at Ash, I see the same expression. They're worried about how I handled the situation with Keira and the girl. Or more likely, how I will handle the situation. To be honest, I'm not sure. I'll confront Keira for sure.

It's clear, though, that any sort of amicable or tolerable marriage we could have had is impossible. She betrayed me. Again.

Despite the successful proceedings, unease crawls under my skin.

The image of Keira's face as she knelt beside those men, offering herself in exchange for the nanny and the girl, won't leave my mind.

There was something in her eyes, a desperate protectiveness I've never seen before.

Except maybe with my brothers. In my brothers toward their wives.

I shake the thought away. I need to focus. Every family that pledges allegiance strengthens our position. Every man who kneels before me cements our control over Boston. This is what matters now, securing our birthright, protecting my brothers, honoring our parents' memory.

The ceremony finishes, which is the cue to start the wedding. But I need a drink. And I have to decide whether I should talk to Keira beforehand or drag her down and marry her before confronting her.

I nod to my men and tell them to take the Keans back to the basement. "We'll bring them up again when the wedding starts." Then I turn to my guests. "Please enjoy refreshments while we prepare for the wedding."

My servants arrive with drinks, and one mans a bar in the corner. There is some unease in the room.

I hold my hands out in a friendly gesture. "Drink. Celebrate. The Ifrinn family has reclaimed what was stolen from us," I continue, forcing a confident smile. "Today marks not just my wedding, but the start of more peace and prosperity for all of us."

That seems to do it. That and booze. My guests drink and chat.

Flint approaches, clapping me on the shoulder. "Quite the show."

"Necessary," I reply, my jaw tight. "We can't afford to look weak. Not now."

"And what about Keira? The girl? What was that about?" Ash asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know yet. But I intend to find out." I look for Blaise but don't see him. I imagine he's worried the most about what I might do to punish Keira. "Where's Blaise?"

"Jenna was checking flowers but then he couldn't find her. I think he's looking to see where she went," Ash says, grabbing a flute of champagne from a passing tray.

"I'm assuming we're still having a wedding after all that?" Flint asks.

"The wedding proceeds as scheduled," I say firmly. "This alliance is too important." I roll my shoulders, feeling keyed up. "Make sure everyone enjoys themselves. I need a minute."

I step away, finding a quiet corner where I can breathe.

I can't get rid of the image of Keira kneeling, offering herself in place of the nanny and child.

I've seen people beg for their lives before.

I've witnessed men offer money, power, information, anything to save themselves.

But Keira didn't plead for her own life.

She offered it up willingly to protect others.

What could possibly make her risk everything like that?

And why was she trying to smuggle the girl away?

And Brigit's face, the terror in her eyes when my men dragged her in. The way she trembled and cried. Christ, she's just a child. I never meant to frighten her. And fucking hell, she didn't see me kill, did she?

It occurs to me that today's executions are why Keira tried to get Brigit away. Does she think I'd do the same to a child? The thought makes me sick. Is that who I've become in her eyes, a man who would hurt an innocent girl? After everything we once meant to each other?

I think of how Brigit hugged me that night in the kitchen. How she told me I needed to let go of my anger.

I look up to see Blaise returning, Jenna at his side. Her face is flushed, eyes wide with what looks like panic. She's gripping my brother's arm, whispering urgently as they approach. Something's wrong.

"Phoenix," Blaise says, his voice tense.

Jenna steps forward. "Please, just listen before you do anything?—"

Blaise silences her with a gentle squeeze of her hand. "Let me handle this."

I straighten, instantly alert. The way they're acting sets off alarm bells in my head. "What's going on?"

I study my brother's face, searching for clues. His expression is guarded, torn. He's caught between something or someone and I realize it's between me and his wife. He

feels the need to tell me something that Jenna doesn't want him to share.

I guess I'm about to learn where his loyalty lies most. With his blood, his family? Or with the woman he married?

Jenna looks like she's about to cry, and I wonder what the hell she knows that has her so upset. Whatever it is, it's clearly something Blaise now knows too. Something they don't think I'll handle well.

"What the hell is going on?" I demand, my patience wearing thin. The ceremony is minutes away from starting, and I can feel control slipping away. Once again, Keira has turned everything upside down.

Blaise steps closer, lowering his voice. "You need to talk to Keira before the wedding."

"I don't need to do anything," I snap. "She tried to smuggle people out of my house on our wedding day. If anything, she needs to explain herself to me."

"Phoenix," Blaise insists, his tone more urgent than I've heard in years. "Trust me on this. You need to hear what she has to say before you go through with this."

My irritation rises. I've spent weeks planning this day, orchestrating every detail to solidify our return to power. The families have pledged their loyalty. The message has been sent. Everything is falling into place exactly as I designed it.

"Whatever she told you—" I begin.

"It's not what she told me," Blaise interrupts. "It's what I overheard. And it changes everything."

I study his face, searching for any sign that this is some kind of manipulation. But all I see is genuine concern and something else. Something that looks disturbingly like pity.

"Fine," I concede, though every instinct screams against showing weakness. "I'll talk to her. But this wedding is happening, Blaise. We've come too far to back out now."

He nods, though the tension doesn't leave his shoulders. "Just... keep an open mind."

"Handle the guests," I instruct, already turning toward the stairs. "Tell them the ceremony will begin shortly. Make something up if you have to."

"Phoenix," Blaise calls after me. I pause without turning around. "Remember who you were before all this. Before the fire."

What the fuck? Before the fire? The fire changed everything, including me.

I don't respond, just continue up the stairs. Whatever Blaise overheard has shaken him. And now, despite my determination to maintain control, I feel it too. An unsettling sensation that I'm walking toward something that will change everything.

I push open the door to Keira's room without knocking. The sight of her stops me cold. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, still in her wedding dress, but she looks nothing like a bride on her wedding day. Her face is ghostly pale, eyes red-rimmed and haunted. Her hands tremble in her lap. Worse, the light in her eyes has dimmed. It's like she's already dead inside.

Something twists in my chest. This isn't the defiant woman who threw champagne in my face. This is someone broken.

But I won't be manipulated. I can't back down from the importance of today.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I demand, shutting the door behind me. "Trying to smuggle Brigit and her nanny out on our wedding day? Did you really think they wouldn't be caught?"

She doesn't answer, just stares at me with those haunted eyes. The vulnerability in her gaze disturbs me more than any defiance could.

"Why?" I press, anger mingling with something that feels uncomfortably like concern. "What is Brigit to you that you'd risk everything?"

Keira's eyes widen slightly. "What were you told?"

My eyes narrow. Is this the secret? "That I should keep an open mind." Maybe that will make her feel safe to tell me what the fuck is going on.

She takes a deep, shuddering breath, closing her eyes briefly as if gathering courage. When she opens them again, there's a new resolve. "Brigit is my daughter."

She couldn't have hit me harder if she'd taken a sledgehammer to my gut. "Your... daughter?"

"Yes." Her chin lifts slightly. "Not my god-sister. My daughter."

The floor beneath me feels suddenly unstable. Her daughter. Not a god-sister, not a ward, but her child. Her secret.

"Your daughter." It's the pain that she's been with someone else that hits more now than the anger, but I try to hold on to the anger. "All this time, you had a child and never told me?"

"I haven't told anyone...well, except Jenna."



"And the father?" I'm going to hunt that motherfucker down and kill him. "Who's the lucky man who gave you a child while my family burned?"

She stares up at me. For a moment, I wait, but then something shifts. I consider the age of Brigit. Eight? Nine?

Oh, fuck . "It's me. Brigit is mine."

Keira doesn't deny it. She just sits there, tears streaming down her face.

I sink down onto a chair, my legs suddenly unable to hold me. My daughter. I have a daughter. A child who has been living under this roof, who looked at me and told me I needed to be happier.

"What happened? I manage.

"I found out I was pregnant right before the fire. I tried to tell you, but my parents had already cut off all contact between us."

"Why didn't you tell me when I came back?" I ask, feeling like I'm in a netherworld.

"Look at what you've become. You came back with nothing but vengeance in your heart. Would you have believed me? Or would you have thought it was just another Kean trick?"

The truth is, I don't know.

"All this time," I murmur, more to myself than to her. "All this time, I had a daughter."

The magnitude of it overwhelms me. Nine years lost. Nine years I can never get back.

Nine years of her life I missed because of hatred and revenge.

And now what? What kind of father could I possibly be to her? A man who executes people in cold blood? A man consumed by vengeance?

"Does she know?" I ask. "Does Brigit know I'm her father?"

She shakes her head. "No. She doesn't even know I'm her mother." She looks down as if in shame. "It was the deal I struck with my parents. I could only keep her if no one knew she was mine."

I want to march down and fucking kill her parents. But then a new, more unsettling thought comes to mind. If Hampton knew, he'd have confronted my father, demanded that I marry Keira.

"Did my father know?"

Her eyes fill with pain that I'm certain is for me. After everything, her heart still bleeds for me. "If what my father says is true, then yes."

Everything inside me goes numb. I have no doubt that if Hampton knew I got Keira pregnant, he would have used that to his advantage. That means my father knew. He knew Keira was pregnant with my child and never said a word.

I can hardly breathe. "When? When did your father talk to mine?"

She hesitates, almost like she's trying to protect me. "Two days... maybe three before the fire."

Two days my father knew about Keira and never said a word to me. Why?

My world is shaken. The man I'd admired, that I aspired to be, that I've spent ten years fighting to avenge knew Keira was pregnant and said nothing. And Hampton, finding my father's refusal to insist on the marriage, saw it as the last straw of disrespect. He killed us all, or at least tried.

I look up at Keira. "I didn't know. If I'd known?—"

"I know," she says, and in those words I'm reminded what a fucking asshole I am.

She believed in me back then. And I didn't.

I failed her and our child. I failed my parents and my brothers by hiding my love for Keira instead of telling my father upfront.

And he failed me by not telling me when Hampton came to him and told him about the baby.

I don't even know what to say or do. I'm so utterly lost.

KEIRA

I 'd expected anger, maybe even denial, but as I watch Phoenix's face as the truth crashes over him, what I see is a man who's had the rug pulled out from under him.

My heart breaks at what he must be feeling knowing his father had kept the truth from him.

That my father not only killed his family, but the family we could have had all these years.

I'm not sure how to help him except to explain it all. "After the fire, they sent me away. If you'd come back, I wouldn't have been here."

He looks at me, and all I see is a man lost.

"After she was born, I came home with Brigit but as my god-sister.

My parents said if I ever claimed her as my own, they would send her away where I'd never see her again.

So I agreed to their terms. I could keep her close if I pretended she wasn't mine.

But I loved her like a daughter. And every day, I looked at her and saw you.

She was all I had left of you, Phoenix. The only proof that what we had was real. "

I go to him, kneeling in front of where he sits in my chair.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from my father.

I'm sorry I couldn't tell you about our daughter.

I'm sorry for every moment you missed with her.

" I look up at him, hoping he hears my sincerity.

"And I'm sorry that when you came back, I was too afraid to tell you the truth.

I was trying to protect her from more pain—from more violence. That's all I've ever tried to do."

I lower my eyes, unable to bear the storm of emotions crossing Phoenix's face. "I understand why you hate me. I've always understood. Your family was murdered because of me, because we fell in love. Because I got pregnant with your child."

I lift my gaze to his. "Please, Phoenix. Brigit is innocent in all of this. She's just a child. Our child. Don't punish her for what happened between us, for what my father did to your family."

My fingers tighten around his, desperate for him to understand. "You can hate me. You can make me pay for everything my family did. I'll accept whatever punishment you think I deserve. But please, I'm begging you, don't hurt Brigit. Don't make her suffer for sins she had no part in."

Phoenix stares down at me, his expression unreadable. "Is that what you think of me? That I would hurt a child? My own child?"

The disbelief in his voice makes me flinch. "I don't know who you are anymore," I say truthfully. "The Phoenix I loved would never harm a child, but the man who came back..." I trail off, unable to finish.

"You think I would use our daughter against you?" His voice is dangerously quiet.

I force myself to meet his gaze. "You threatened her before you even knew who she was. You said you'd find her to control me. I've spent all these years protecting her from my parents' world. Can you blame me for being afraid you'd use her as leverage? That you might take her away to punish me?"

I swallow hard. "Or worse, that you'd look at her and see nothing but a Kean, nothing but the family that destroyed yours."

I stare at Phoenix, waiting for his rage, his rejection, his judgment. But all I see is vulnerability.

"Keira." Phoenix pushes from the chair, lowering himself to his knees before me. His hands reach for mine, hesitant at first, then gripping them firmly. "I was so consumed with vengeance that I couldn't see beyond anything but my own pain."

A muscle works in his jaw as he struggles with words. "I should have come for you. Should have known you would never betray me, trusted what we had. I just..." He looks down. "I came back to punish you, to make you suffer, thinking the worst of you, and all this time, you were protecting our child."

His thumb gently wipes a tear from my cheek. "I'm sorry, Keira. For everything I've put you through since I came back. For not giving you a chance to explain. For letting my thirst for revenge blind me to the truth."

His forehead drops to rest against mine. "Ten years you carried this burden alone.

Ten years I missed with our daughter." He lifts his head. "God, she must be terrified of me."

I stare at Phoenix, unable to fully process the transformation happening before me. This man who returned with vengeance in his heart now kneels before me, pain in his eyes, speaking words I never thought I'd hear.

"I want to know her, Keira. I want to be her father. I want to make up for all the time I've lost with both of you." His hands tighten around mine. "But I know I haven't earned that right. Not after how I've treated you. Not after the threats, the humiliation, the pain I've caused."

He takes a deep breath. "If you want out of this marriage, I'll understand. I'll let you go—you and Brigit. You can be free of me, of all of this."

My breath catches. Is he offering me freedom? After everything that's happened, after the loyalty pledge, after parading me in front of Boston's underworld as his conquest?

"What?" I whisper, not trusting my ears.

"I won't force you to marry a man you fear. I won't make our daughter grow up watching her mother suffer."

The sincerity in his eyes makes my heart ache. This is the Phoenix I remember, the one who would sacrifice his own happiness for mine.

"But if you stay, I swear to you, Keira, I will spend every day trying to be worthy of you both. I will be the husband you deserved ten years ago. I will be the father Brigit needs."

He cups my face in his hands, his touch gentle.

“You won’t believe this, but I never stopped loving you.

Even when I thought I hated you, even when I was planning my revenge—some part of me still loved you.

" His thumbs brush away my tears. "I buried that love under anger and pain, but it never died.

And now, knowing what you've endured, what you've sacrificed for our daughter...

I love you more than I ever thought possible. "

I stare at Phoenix, his words echoing in my mind. Freedom. He's offering me freedom after everything. But is that what I want? What Brigit needs?

The truth is, I want what Phoenix offered me ten years ago.

For the first time since his return, I feel it’s possible.

But I’m not a naïve eighteen-year-old anymore.

I’ve seen what the last ten years have done to Phoenix.

I’d be a fool to think that in the span of the last few minutes the brutal, vengeful part of him is completely gone.

But I also understand that this moment is more about me and Phoenix and Brigit. Our world is unstable. The Ifrinns, while showing their authority, need to solidify it. I understand that this marriage is a part of that. The stronger Phoenix is, the safer Brigit is.



I stand, needing space to consider the best option for me and Brigit. Phoenix releases my hands, letting me go.

"The families who pledged loyalty today did so because they believe in the union of Ifrinn and Kean. If I walk away now, what happens to that peace?" I move to the window, looking out, thinking about the people who've come to witness not just a wedding, but a shift in power.

"Our marriage gives her legitimacy in this world. It gives her protection. As much as I wanted to shield her from all this, she was born into it. We can't change that."

I turn back to Phoenix. He's standing, watching me, and I see him now with new eyes. Not the boy I loved, not the vengeful man who returned, but something in between. Someone trying to merge the two and find his way as both.

"I'll marry you today," I tell him. "For Brigit. For the stability it brings. For the chance to build something better than what came before us."

I step closer to him, reaching up to hold his face between my palms. "But know this. My trust isn't something you can demand or take. It's something you'll have to earn back, day by day. I loved you once with my whole heart. Part of me never stopped. But love isn't enough without trust."

His hands come up to cover mine. "I understand. And I'll spend the rest of my life earning back what I destroyed."

"We need to talk to Brigit," I say, my voice steadier now. "She must be terrified."

Phoenix nods, a flash of regret crossing his features. "I never meant for her to see that. I didn't know—" He stops himself. "It doesn't matter what I didn't know. She's my daughter, and I scared her."

I nod.

“Do we tell her? Of course we do, but when? Now?” His energy changes. It builds into an excitement. A joy. A lightness I haven't seen since he returned.

“Now is a good time.” The wedding can wait.

Phoenix must think so too as he says, “Let's go.” He offers me his hand.

We walk together to Brigit's room where Phoenix's guards stand outside the door. “You can go,” he tells them. As they walk off, he says, “I won't put guards like that again, Keira, I promise. I won't be like your father.”

I squeeze his hand, hope building in me that everything will work out.

We open the door.

Nanny Fiona jumps up from where she was sitting, ready to protect Brigit. “Is everything alright, Miss Keira?” she asks, her gaze darting suspiciously to Phoenix.

“Everything is fine. I promise. We need to speak with Brigit.” I squeeze Phoenix's hand.

Nanny Fiona's posture remains rigid, protective. “She's still upset from what happened downstairs.”

“I know,” Phoenix says, his voice gentle in a way that surprises me. “That's why we're here.”

When we enter, Brigit shrinks back, her eyes wide with fear as she looks at Phoenix. My heart breaks seeing her afraid of her own father.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I say, sitting on the edge of her bed and reaching out my hand to her. "We need to talk to you about something important." She comes to me, throwing herself in my arms.

Phoenix stands awkwardly at the foot of the bed as Brigit eyes him warily. "I'm sorry I frightened you, Brigit. I owe you and Nanny Fiona an apology."

"Why is he being nice now?" Brigit whispers to me, loud enough for Phoenix to hear. "Is it a trick?"

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:55 am*

“No trick, sweetheart,” I say, smoothing my hand over her hair.

"I've been cruel since I came back. I've been angry and hurtful to people who didn't deserve it." His eyes meet mine briefly before returning to Brigit. "I was so focused on punishing those who hurt me that I became someone I never wanted to be."

“I didn’t hurt you,” Brigit states.

“No. You didn’t.” Phoenix runs a hand through his hair. "What you saw downstairs today... that's not who I want to be anymore. That's not the kind of man I want to be for this family."

The word 'family' hangs in the air between us.

“You told me I should choose to be happy, and that’s what I’m going to do.” He looks at Fiona. "I know you've protected Brigit all these years. I'm grateful for that, more than you know."

Fiona's stern expression softens slightly, though she remains watchful.

Phoenix turns back to Brigit. "I know you don't trust me yet. I haven't given you any reason to. But I promise you, I'm going to try to be better. To be someone worthy of your trust."

Brigit looks at him skeptically, then turns to me, her eyes questioning. "Is he telling the truth?"

I smile at her, letting all my hope and cautious optimism show. "I believe him, sweetheart."

Brigit studies my face, searching for reassurance. Whatever she sees there must satisfy her because she gives a small nod and some of the tension leaves her shoulders.

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. This moment has lived in my imagination for years. Telling my daughter the truth about who she is, who we are to her. I never imagined Phoenix would be by my side when it happened.

"Brigit, sweetheart. There's something important we need to tell you."

Phoenix moves closer, sitting carefully on the other side of the bed. Brigit's eyes dart between us, wary but curious.

"Are you sending me away?" she asks in a small voice. "Is that why you were trying to make me leave with Nanny?"

My heart breaks at her misunderstanding. "No, darling. That's not it at all."

"We won't ever send you away," Phoenix adds softly. "In fact, what we want to tell you is about keeping you close. About being a family."

Brigit's forehead wrinkles in confusion. "But we're not a family. You're marrying Keira, and I'm just their god-daughter."

I reach for her hands, holding them in mine. "That's what we've always told everyone, but it's not the truth." I meet her eyes, my own filling with tears. "The truth is, I'm not your god-sister, Brigit. I'm your mother. Your real mother."

My breath holds, afraid of her reaction. Will she hate me for keeping the truth from her?

Her eyes blink in surprise.

"And Phoenix," I continue, glancing at him, "is your father."

Brigit stares at us, blinking rapidly. "But... but how? You said my parents died."

"That was a story we told to protect you," I explain gently. "When you were born, things were complicated. My parents, your godparents, they made me keep it a secret."

"Why?"

How do I explain? "It's complicated. But I was young, not as strong as I am now. I did what I had to do to keep you with me. Especially since Phoenix was gone. I thought he'd died."

Brigit glances at Phoenix then back to me like she's wondering what he has to do with any of this.

"You see, sweetheart, Phoenix is your father."

Brigit's gaze snaps to his again. "You're really my dad?"

Phoenix nods, emotion making his voice rough. "I am. And I'm so sorry I didn't know about you until today."

A slow smile spreads across Brigit's face, transforming her expression from confusion to joy. "I have real parents? And they're you?"

I nod, relief filling me. "Yes. We're your real parents."

"And now we can be together?" Brigit asks, hope brightening her voice. "Like a real family?"

"Yes," I promise, gathering her into my arms. "We can be a family now. No more secrets. No more pretending."

Brigit throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly before reaching one arm out toward Phoenix, inviting him into our embrace.

I hold Brigit close, still unable to believe that our secret is finally out in the open. When we finally break apart, Phoenix clears his throat, clearly emotional but trying to maintain composure.

"Brigit," he says softly, "Keira and I are supposed to be getting married today. There are a lot of people waiting downstairs."

Brigit's face falls slightly. "Do you have to go now?"

Phoenix shakes his head, surprising me. "Actually, I was thinking that our wedding plans need to change.

" He looks at me, then back to Brigit. "This isn't just about Keira and me anymore.

It's about all three of us becoming a family.

That means you need to be a part of the ceremony.

Would you like that, Brigit? To be part of our wedding? "

Brigit's eyes widen with excitement. "Really? I could be in the wedding?"

"Absolutely."

Brigit practically bounces on the bed. "Can I wear a special dress? Can I stand next to you? Can I do the flowers?"

Phoenix laughs, a genuine laugh that reminds me so much of the boy I fell in love with. "Yes to all of that. In fact, I think you should help us plan how this is going to work."

He turns to Nanny Fiona, who's been watching the scene unfold with tears in her eyes. "Fiona, could you help Brigit get ready? I need to go downstairs and make some arrangements."

Fiona nods, seeming to see Phoenix in a new light as well. "Of course, sir."

Phoenix stands, suddenly transformed into the leader he was born to be, but gentler now, with purpose rather than vengeance guiding his actions. "I'll handle everything downstairs. The ceremony, the guests, my brothers—all of it."

He looks at me, determination in his eyes. "Take your time with Brigit. I'll make sure everything is ready when you are."

As he leaves, I feel a sense of normalcy returning. Not the false normalcy I've lived with, but something real and hopeful. For the first time since Phoenix returned, I feel like we might actually have a chance at happiness.



### PHOENIX

I walk down the hallway with a lightness in my step I haven't felt in a decade.

My mind races through the happiest moments of my life.

Christmas mornings with my brothers when we were kids, the day Keira first whispered "I love you" to me the first time, and now today.

Today, when everything I thought I knew shattered and is rebuilding itself into something better.

I pause at the top of the grand staircase, needing a moment to process it all. I have a daughter. A beautiful, wise little girl who somehow inherited Keira's strength and my stubbornness. How the hell did that happen?

For years, I've been consumed with reclaiming what was taken from my family.

I've been brutal, calculating, focused only on making the Keans pay for what they did.

I thought power would fill the hole their betrayal left in me.

I believed that once I had everything back, the business, the respect, the fear, I'd finally feel whole again.

But standing here now, I realize how wrong I was.

The moment Keira told me about Brigit, our child, something inside me shifted. At first it was pain at what I'd missed. Profound disappointment in my father that he'd take this from me.

But then came hope and the realization that all this time, I've been chasing revenge when I should have been chasing what I really lost. Love. My family. The future I was meant to have with Keira.

I run my hand down my face, feeling the weight of my mistakes. I've wasted so much time on hatred when I could have been loving Keira and our daughter. I could have been building a life with the only woman I've ever truly loved.

I straighten my tie, preparing to face our guests. Today isn't just about showing Boston who's in charge. It's about claiming the happiness that was stolen from us ten years ago.

I take the stairs two at a time, barely containing the energy surging through me.

At the bottom of the staircase, I spot my brothers huddled together outside the ballroom doors.

Flint paces with his hands shoved in his pockets while Blaise leans against the wall, arms crossed.

Ash stands perfectly still, his eyes fixed on me as I approach.

"Is everything okay?" Ash's brow furrows with concern. "What happened with Keira?"

I glance at Blaise realizing he hasn't told them the news, I guess thinking it's mine to tell.

I can't help the smile that breaks across my face. "Everything is perfect. Better than perfect."

Flint's eyes narrow, studying me. "You look... different."

"You're smiling," Blaise points out, as if he's witnessing something unnatural. "Actually smiling. Not that terrifying thing you do before you shoot someone."

I laugh. "I have a daughter."

Their expressions shift from confusion to shock, except, of course, on Blaise.

"Brigit," Ash says, understanding dawning on his face.

I nod, unable to contain my joy. "She's mine. Ours—mine and Keira's. From before... before everything went to hell."

Flint's eyes widen. "You're a father?"

"I am." The words feel right, like I've been waiting my whole life to say them. "And I've wasted enough time already. This wedding isn't just for show anymore. It's real."

My brothers exchange glances, clearly trying to process this transformation.

"Well, damn," Flint finally says, a slow smile spreading across his face.

I turn to Blaise, my mind suddenly racing with all the details that need to be handled. "Blaise, can Jenna help Brigit with some flower arrangements? She needs to be part of this ceremony, and we don't have much time."

Blaise nods, looking surprised but pleased. "Of course. Jenna would love that."

"And tell her..." I hesitate, still getting used to the words. "Tell her it's for my daughter. Our flower girl."

A grin spreads across Blaise's face. "Your daughter. I'm still wrapping my head around that."

"That makes two of us," I say. "Everything's changed in the span of fifteen minutes."

I look at Flint and Ash. "Keira's upstairs getting ready with Brigit. She's prepared for the bridesmaids to join them."

"We'll send them up." Flint shakes his head. "A daughter. I can't believe it."

"Believe it. I can give you the details later. Right now, I want to get married." I know Keira is marrying partly out of duty and protection, but I vow to make sure that it's not long before she's married to me out of love and trust.

"What about Hampton and Lana?" Ash asks, his expression darkening. "They're still in the basement."

I'd almost forgotten about them in the whirlwind of discovering Brigit. The rage that normally accompanies thoughts of the Keans feels distant now.

"Where are we with arranging the arrest?" I turn to Flint. "Are they ready to move on the Keans?"

Flint nods, pulling out his phone. "Just need to make the call. They've been waiting for my signal."

"Do it when the ceremony is over," I say decisively. "Have them picked up, but not here. Have our men take them somewhere discreet for the handoff."

My brothers exchange surprised glances.

"You're not going to make a spectacle of it?" Blaise asks. "I thought that was the whole point. Showing everyone what happens to those who cross us."

I straighten my jacket. "The Keans will face justice through the system. We have enough evidence to put them away for decades."

"Since when did you become so... merciful?" Flint asks, already dialing on his phone.

"Since I realized I've been given a second chance at everything that matters," I answer. "I'm not wasting it on revenge."

I step into the ballroom buzzing with conversation as Boston's elite mingle, glasses of champagne in hand, celebrating what they believe are merely my triumphant return and strategic marriage.

I scan the crowd, noting the heads of every major family in attendance. Some wear genuine smiles, others mask their unease behind polite facades. They've all pledged loyalty today, but many still question my power and authority.

I catch Blaise's eye across the room. He gives me a subtle nod, confirming that everything is ready. The music fades as I make my way to the center of the room, and a hush falls over the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming today," I begin as eyes turn to me. "Ten years ago, I loved Keira Kean with everything I had. We were young, hopeful, planning a future together despite our families' differences."

Members of the crowd look confused or surprised by this revelation. I suppose it's

partly my fault for keeping our relationship a secret.

"What many of you don't know is that our love created something beautiful. A daughter. A daughter that Hampton and Lana Kean hid from everyone after they orchestrated the murder of my parents."

Gasps ripple through the room. I see shock on many faces, some glancing at each other in disbelief.

"The tragedy that befell my family wasn't just about business or power.

It was about hiding the truth." My voice hardens.

"But the blame doesn't rest solely with the Keans.

My own father, Patrick Ifrinn, rejected Keira when he learned of her pregnancy, creating the perfect storm for Hampton's ambition and cruelty. "

I notice my brothers' startled expressions. This is news to them too, that our father played a role in the chain of events that led to his own death.

"Starting right now, I'm not after revenge. I'm reclaiming what was stolen from us. Not just our business or our standing, but our family. Our love. Our future."

I take a deep breath, noting the eyes of every major family in Boston are fixed on me, waiting to see what kind of leader I'll be.

"Today marks a new beginning for all of us," I continue, my voice steady and clear.

"The Ifrinn family is reclaiming its rightful place in Boston, but we're not interested in perpetuating cycles of violence and retribution.

My brothers and I envision a city where business thrives, where families prosper, where we all benefit from stability and peace. "

I scan the room, making eye contact with several family heads.

"For too long, this city has been torn apart by feuds and power grabs. Hampton Kean's leadership was marked by fear and backstabbing and murder. That ends now."

The crowd is utterly silent.

"My commitment to you is this. The Ifrinn family will lead with fairness. We'll reward loyalty and hard work. We'll create opportunities that lift all of us higher than we could reach alone."

I pause, letting my expression harden just enough.

"But make no mistake. While I choose peace today, I will defend it with everything I have. Anyone who threatens what we're building, anyone who endangers my family or this community we're creating, will face consequences swifter and more severe than anything Hampton Kean ever delivered."

My voice drops slightly but carries the weight of power I feel coursing through my veins. "The men who tried to kill me this week learned that lesson. The Keans will learn it after the wedding when they're arrested for their crimes. I won't hesitate to teach it again if necessary."

I straighten my shoulders, softening my expression.

"But that's not the path I want for us. I'd rather we build something lasting together. Something our children can inherit without shame or fear."

The doors at the back of the ballroom open and two of my men escort Hampton and Lana Kean inside. Hampton's jaw is clenched tightly, his eyes burning with hatred. Lana looks around the room nervously, no doubt searching for sympathetic faces among the crowd.

They stand off to the side, not prisoners, exactly, but certainly not honored guests. The message is clear to everyone watching. The Keans have fallen, and the Ifrinns have risen.

Before I can continue, the doors open again. This time, a small figure appears, and my heart nearly stops.



## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:56 am*

Brigit, my daughter, stands framed in the doorway. She's wearing a pale blue dress with a satin ribbon around her waist. Her dark hair has been curled and pinned with tiny flowers. She looks like a princess from a fairy tale, holding a small basket of rose petals.

She takes a tentative step into the ballroom, then, gaining confidence, she begins to scatter petals along the aisle, her face breaking into a radiant smile when she spots me.

When she reaches me, she leans in to whisper, though her "whisper" carries to at least the first three rows. "Aunt Jenna helped me with my flower basket and showed me how to drop the petals. She says I'm a natural."

I glance toward the doorway where Jenna stands watching, her eyes bright with tears. I mouth thank you , overwhelmed with gratitude for how quickly she's embraced Brigit, how she's helping make this moment special for my daughter.

"You're the best flower girl ever," I say to Brigit.

The music shifts, and Jenna, Hannah, and Lucy enter next, looking elegant in their dresses. They take their places opposite my brothers, smiling at me with genuine happiness.

And then, Keira appears.

She's breathtaking in a gown of ivory silk that flows like water around her body.

Her hair falls in soft waves past her shoulders, adorned with tiny white flowers that match the bouquet in her hands.

But it's her eyes that capture me. They're clear and bright, looking directly into mine without fear or resentment for the first time since I returned.

A wave of emotion floods my body, joy so intense it's almost painful, mixed with crushing guilt at how close I came to destroying everything. I nearly lost her again. I nearly lost them both, blinded by a decade of hatred and misunderstanding.

When she reaches me, I take her hand and it almost doesn't feel real. The officiant begins the ceremony, and when it's time for the vows, I interrupt him.

"I'd like to say my own vows."

He nods.

I focus on Keira's face. "Keira. Ten years ago, I made you a promise to take you away from everything that hurt you. I failed you then."

Her eyes glisten with tears, but her gaze never wavers from mine.

"Today, I make you a new promise. I will spend every day making up for the time we lost. I will be the man you fell in love with, not the monster I became. I will protect you and Brigit with everything I have, not just my strength but my heart."

I squeeze her hands gently. "I promise to listen before I judge, to understand before I act. I promise to be worthy of the second chance you've given me. Most of all, I promise to love you, fiercely, completely, honestly, for the rest of our lives."

Keira blinks rapidly, tears spilling onto her cheeks.

“Do you have vows too?” the officiant asks her.

"I didn't know we were doing our own vows, so I didn't prepare anything," she whispers, looking momentarily flustered. "But, I do have something to say."

She takes a steadying breath. "Phoenix, when I thought you were dead, a part of me died too. The only thing that kept me going was our daughter. I never stopped loving you, even when I believed I'd never see you again."

Her voice grows stronger. "I promise to help you heal from the past. I promise to stand beside you, not behind you, as we build our future together. I promise to grow my trust in you again and love you completely and without reservation."

Before the officiant can continue, Brigit steps forward from her place beside Keira.

"I want to say something too!" she announces, looking up at us with determined eyes.

A ripple of affectionate laughter moves through the crowd.

“Of course. You're a part of this too,” the officiant says with amusement in his eyes.

"I promise to be the best daughter ever," she says solemnly. "And I promise to help Daddy not be grumpy anymore, and to help Mommy smile more." She looks between us with perfect seriousness. "And I promise we'll be the happiest family in the whole world."

Then her face breaks into a wide grin. "Now you have to kiss her, Daddy! That's how weddings work!"

I laugh, filled with an unexpected lightness. "You heard her," I tell Keira. "That's how weddings work."

I pull Keira toward me, cradling her face between my hands. Our eyes lock for a breathless moment before I lower my mouth to hers. This kiss is nothing like the angry, possessive ones I forced on her days ago. This is a promise, a beginning, an apology, and a declaration all at once.

I pour everything into it, my regret for the years lost, my gratitude for her strength, my awe at the family she preserved despite impossible odds, and most of all, the love that never truly died, even when buried under years of rage and pain.

Keira melts against me, her hands gripping my lapels as she kisses me back with equal fervor. For the first time since I returned to Boston, I feel truly whole. The broken, vengeful man who stormed into her life days ago is gone, transformed by the truth and by her unwavering courage.

When we finally break apart, the room erupts in applause. Keira's cheeks flush pink, but her eyes shine with happiness as she looks up at me.

I turn to Brigit, who's watching us with a wide smile. I bend down and press a gentle kiss to her cheek.

"Are you happy, Daddy?" she asks, her little hand reaching up to touch my face.

"Daddy." Each time she says it, I feel my heart grow a little bit more.

"Yes, sweetheart," I manage to say past the lump in my throat. "I've never been happier in my entire life."

And it's true. All the power I've reclaimed, all the respect I've demanded from Boston's underworld. None of it compares to this moment, to marrying this magnificent woman and being called "Daddy" by this perfect little girl.

As the celebration swirls around us, I hold Keira and Brigit close, unable to believe this moment is real.

"Are you okay?" Keira whispers, her fingers gently squeezing mine.

"More than okay," I murmur back. "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

And it's true. For the first time in ten years, I feel centered. Complete. The jagged edges of my soul that never quite fit together have finally found their missing pieces in Keira and Brigit.

My brothers approach with their wives, all smiling. I see genuine joy in their eyes, not just for themselves, but for me. They've all found their happiness already, and they've been waiting for me to find mine.

"Uncle Ash!" Brigit calls, still testing out the new titles that have suddenly entered her life. "Did you see me drop the flowers? I did it perfect!"

Ash kneels down to her level. "You were the most beautiful flower girl I've ever seen."

As they chat, I pull Keira closer, resting my forehead against hers.

"I don't deserve this," I whisper. "Any of it."

She cups my face in her hands, her eyes fierce with conviction. "Yes, you do. We all do. We've suffered enough, Phoenix. It's time to be happy."

Looking into her eyes, I make a silent vow.

The empire I've reclaimed, the power I now wield, it will all serve one

purpose—protecting this precious second chance we've been given.

I'll build a world where Brigit grows up safe and loved, where Keira never has to fear again, where my brothers and their families can thrive.

“As long as you're happy, I'm happy,” I tell her.

“Well then, you must be blissfully happy because that's what I am.” She lifts on her toes and gives me a kiss.

For the first time in a decade, I step toward the future with love as my compass rather than revenge. With this woman by my side, I'm invincible.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:56 am*

Keira - Three months later

I rest my chin in my palm, watching Phoenix cut Brigit's grilled cheese into perfect triangles, the way she insists they taste better. It's just us in the kitchen. Most of the house staff and Nanny Fiona have the evening off. Only guards are on duty, and they're mostly outside the house.

"Daddy, you're supposed to dip it like this." Brigit demonstrates her soup-dunking technique with exaggerated precision.

Phoenix's eyes crinkle at the corners. "Forgive me, Princess. I clearly need more practice." He mimics her movements exactly, earning a giggle.

I hide my smile behind my mug of tea. Who would have thought the feared Phoenix Ifrinn would take grilled cheese etiquette so seriously?

"Mama, you're doing it wrong too!" Brigit points accusingly at my untouched sandwich.

"I was distracted watching you two professionals," I admit, dunking my sandwich in the soup and tentatively taking a bite as my stomach is a little unsettled at the moment.

Phoenix catches my eye across the table, and the warmth in his gaze still makes my stomach flutter. He reaches over, his fingers brushing mine. "Your mother's always been a rule-breaker."

"Is that why you love her?" Brigit asks.

Phoenix doesn't hesitate. "One of many reasons."

I squeeze his hand, overcome by how seamlessly he's stepped into fatherhood. Three months ago, I feared he might never accept Brigit as his own. Now they have inside jokes I'm not privy to, and he's involved in every aspect of her life.

"Can we have ice cream after?" Brigit asks, soup dripping down her chin.

"Only if you finish your vegetables," Phoenix answers automatically.

"There aren't any vegetables!" she protests, laughing.

"Then I guess you're getting ice cream." He winks at her, and she beams like he's handed her the world.

When I married Phoenix, I'd hoped for this, but I was cautious in my expectations.

He'd changed so much, hurt me a great deal.

How could I fully trust him? We've been rebuilding trust piece by piece, day by day. So much so that last month, I finally shared my secret. I showed him my stories I'd published under a pen name while trapped in my parents' house. Romance novels, of all things. But they'd made the money I knew I'd need someday to escape. The money I'd handed to Nanny Fiona to save Brigit.

I wasn't sure what to expect. Perhaps anger that I'd hidden my bank accounts. Perhaps being told I didn't need to work anymore. Maybe confusion about why I'd kept something so innocuous hidden.



Instead, Phoenix spent the entire night reading my first novel and telling me he's sure he's the sexy Sebastian with dark hair and blue eyes that I'd written about. He wasn't wrong.

The next day, he brought home a beautiful desk and set it up in what had been my mother's den. "Your office," he called it, as if my writing deserved space in our life.

Two weeks later, I caught him reading my latest manuscript, making notes in the margins, thoughtful questions about character motivations, suggestions for dialogue. The most interesting note was a comment about how men really experienced orgasms.

I kept waiting for him to ask me to hand over the money, but he never did. And when I finally asked, he said it was mine and if he ever fucked up again, which he didn't plan to do, but if he did, I'd have it.

Our life has settled into a calm, loving routine. Brigit hasn't returned to school as Phoenix feels he needs more time to ensure her safety. I suspect he's being overly cautious as no one has made an attempt on him, his brothers, or the house.

So Nanny Fiona continues to homeschool her and we've worked out a few carefully vetted activities such as an art class and martial arts.

"Can Jamie and Emily come over this weekend?" Brigit asks two of her friends from her martial arts class.

"I'll arrange it with their mothers." It seems so normal arranging playdates, but I'd never done it before. Our lives were so sheltered that Brigit didn't have friends until now.

Phoenix's phone rings. "It's Blaise," he says looking at the screen. He tries not to

take business calls during family time, but we know that Jenna is due to have her baby anytime.

“Oh, maybe the baby is here. Do you think so?” Brigit asks, bouncing in her chair.

“Let’s find out.” Phoenix answers the phone. We wait expectantly to learn the news. “How’s mom and baby?”

“She did well, Mama. She had the baby.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Phoenix congratulates his brother and hangs up. “A girl. They’ve named her Nora.”

“Lovely name,” I say, my hand pressing against my stomach. “Do you think it’s a nice name?”

“I like it,” Brigit says. “But I like Elsa better.”

“The ice queen from Frozen ?” Phoenix asks.

“Yep.”

“What if they had a boy?” I ask.

Brigit puts her finger at the corner of her chin as she thinks. “I don’t know. I like Aiden. That’s a boy in my art class.”

Phoenix frowns. “Not a boyfriend, I hope?”

Brigit’s brow furrows. “He’s a boy and my friend... so...”

“Never mind.” Phoenix waves the conversation away. “I’m not ready for this discussion.”

I laugh. “I have a topic of discussion.”

He looks at me. “I’m all ears.”

“It has to do with baby names.”

“I can make a list,” Brigit says.

Phoenix blinks. I see hope and love in his eyes.

“We’ll need it in about seven months.”

“You’re pregnant?” Phoenix almost looks like he can’t believe it’s true.

"A baby?" Brigit squeals, dropping her spoon with a clatter. "I'm going to be a big sister?"

“Yes.”

Without a word, Phoenix rises from his chair and comes around the table, pulling me to my feet and into his arms. "Keira... A baby."

I nod against his chest, relief and joy washing through me. "Are you happy?"

He pulls back just enough to look into my eyes, cupping my face in his hands. "Happy doesn't begin to cover it."

Brigit squeezes between us, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Is it a boy or a

girl? When is it coming? Can I help name it?"

Phoenix laughs, lifting her up so we're all at eye level. "One question at a time, Princess."

Growing up, life wasn't like this. We only ate as a family for business dinners or events. My parents spent little to no time with me.

But things are different now. This child will be born into so much love.

The kind of family I always dreamed of giving Brigit.

This is the moment I know that Phoenix and I will live happily ever after.

The trust is built. The love is deep and pure.

His devotion to me and Brigit, and now this baby, is beyond question.

Later that night, we tuck Brigit into bed. The door has barely clicked shut when his mouth finds mine, hungry and insistent. I melt against him, my body responding instantly to his touch. His hands slide down my back, pulling me flush against him.

"Do you have any idea," he murmurs against my neck, "how much I want you every second of every day?"

I thread my fingers through his hair, tilting my head to give him better access. "Oh?"

"And fucking hell... is it wrong to be turned on by the idea of making you pregnant?"

I laugh. "Men are weird."

“Yes, we are.” He scoops me up and carries me to our bedroom. “Tell me we can still make love.”

“We can still make love.”

He sets me by the bed and kisses me again. But I’m the one feeling frisky. I push him back on the bed and straddle him, undoing his slacks.

“What’s this?” he asks, surprised but happily so.

“I’m turned on too.” I yank his pants and boxer briefs down as he tugs his shirt off. His dick springs loose, thick and long and all mine. I lick my lips.

“Lord have mercy, I know that look.”

I waggle my brows as I shed my clothes. “Do you mind?”

“Fuck no.”

Good, because I want to devour my husband. I want him to be like putty under my ministrations. I don’t tease or hesitate. I take him into my mouth, sucking and licking.

“Ahh... yes... Keira... fuck... so good... so good.” His fingers thread through my hair.

My taking control in sex is a new thing between us. Ten years ago, I didn’t feel confident to lead. But since we married, or maybe it’s pregnancy hormones, I’ve wanted to explore and experiment, and Phoenix has been more than happy to let me.

I continue to slide him in and out of my mouth, using my hand to help, sometimes sliding it down to fondle his sacks.

“Baby... slow it down... I’m gonna come...” He pushes me away and sits up, pulling me to him. I turn in his arms so my back is to him as I straddle his thighs and sit back. He grips his dick, guiding it to my pussy, and I sink over him, taking him in.

“Fuck,” he says on a groan.

I groan too because it feels so good. And it’s not just the physical. There’s so much more. Love. Devotion. Trust. It’s like my soul is a part of him and his is a part of me.

I start to ride him, letting my body take over.

“Yes, baby.” His hands slide up my stomach to my breasts as he fondles them, pinching my nipples. I feel it straight to my pussy, which clenches tighter as I rock over him. “Just like that. God, I love you...”

“Phoenix,” I say on a harsh breath.

“I’m right here, baby... come... ride my cock and come.” His fingers slide between my thighs and rub my clit. Stars explode and pleasure blasts through me.

“Yes... Phoenix... Yes.”

“ Fuck .” He lets out a feral growl as his hips buck up to meet me. We move in this feral dance, our bodies and hearts joined.

My heart still beats wildly even as my orgasm subsides. He lifts me, turns me, and lies with me in the bed. I rest my head on his and a profound sense of peace washes over me.

"What are you thinking about?" Phoenix asks, his hand gently caressing my back.

"How happy I am," I answer truthfully. "How impossible this all seemed a few months ago."

"I'm sorry I?—"

My fingers cover his lips. "No more apologies for the past. We can't go back. Let's look forward, Phoenix. There's so much good to look forward to."

He looks at me with a mixture of awe and reverence that tells me all I need to know about his love for me. "You're all I've ever wanted, Keira. You, Brigit, this new little being... any other little beings we have..."

"Do you mean more children or pets?"

"Can it be both? I have been thinking Brigit needs a pony."

I roll my eyes.

He laughs and gives me a quick kiss. "Whatever life brings, as long as you're with me, it's going to be perfect. My only goal in life is your happiness."

"Well, good job because I'm blissfully happy."

He rolls us both until I'm under him. "Are you ready for more bliss?" He sinks inside me again and immediately, my body responds.

"I'm always ready for more bliss."

This time, he takes things slow. We savor every little touch. Every little kiss. And as we hit the peak and fly together, I know without a doubt that my life will be filled with more love and happiness than I could have ever imagined possible.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:56 am*

### Phoenix - Five Years Later

I lean against the deck railing, beer in hand, watching my family spread across our back yard. The late afternoon sun sparkles over the pool I had built four years ago. The kids splash and shriek with laughter.

Brigit, now fourteen, is growing too fast for my liking. She leads the charge in some elaborate water game she's invented, her dark hair slicked back and her smile, my smile, everyone says, flashing as she directs her cousins.

The scents of charred meat and woodsmoke fill the air as Flint tends the massive grill we installed the same summer the pool went in. He's arguing good-naturedly with Blaise about the proper way to cook a steak while flipping burgers for the kids.

Lucy passes behind them with a platter of corn, swatting Blaise's hand away when he tries to steal a piece. "Five minutes."

These monthly gatherings have become our tradition, all three of my brothers and their families crowded into our back yard, kids running wild, food and drink flowing freely.

Four-year-old Aiden zooms by, chasing after his older sister Brigit with determined little legs, and I scoop him up before he can get too close to the pool without his floaties.

"Where you going, little man?" I ask, settling him on my hip.



He squirms in my arms. "I've got to catch Brigit."

"Put your wings on, Aiden." Brigit brings them to him. "We can swim."

Jenna appears, round with child, setting out a bowl of potato chips.

Keira emerges from the house balancing a pitcher of lemonade and our youngest, one-year-old Dylan, on her hip. The sight of them still stops my heart sometimes.

"Dad! Look what I can do!" Aiden interrupts my thoughts with a shout from the shallow end. I turn to see him preparing for what appears to be an underwater handstand, no easy feat with water wings on.

"I'm watching, buddy," I call back, giving him my full attention as he attempts to submerge.

"I've got a few more things to grab." Keira hands over Dylan to me. He's the spitting image of Keira, same blond hair, same stubborn set to his jaw when he's focused.

My eyes drift back to Brigit to make sure she has eyes on Aiden.

Yesterday, she asked if she could go to the mall with friends next weekend, without adults.

The request shouldn't have knocked me sideways, but it did. Moments like this, I regret missing so much of her life, but Keira is right. I can't think about the pain of the past when there's so much good in the now.

I make my way over to Flint. "You need help? Looks like your wife could use your assistance."

He glances toward Lucy scrambling after two two-year-olds. He hands me the

spatula. "Twins are more than two kids. It's like having a dozen." He goes to help corral his two youngest children, Liam and Kayleigh, both at that terrible twos stage.

"Uncle Phoenix!" Flynn, Flint and Lucy's oldest at five years old, joins me at the grill. "Can I help? My dad says I have the Ifrinn fire touch."

"That's not exactly what I said," Flint mutters, scooping up Liam. "I meant your temper, not grilling."

Lucy laughs, attempting to wipe something sticky off Kayleigh's face. "Like father, like son."

"Hey, I have a great temperament." He waggles his brows suggestively.

"TMI, bro." I shake my head.

Blaise and Jenna's four-year-old daughter hurries toward them. "I found a frog! Can I bring it home?"

"Absolutely not," Jenna says firmly. "Last time you did that, you managed to flood the bathroom."

"That was an accident," Nora insists with an angelic expression that doesn't fool any of us. "I wanted to give it its natural habitat."

"In my bathtub," Jenna reminds her, but she's fighting a smile.

Flynn takes this opportunity to sneak behind his father and dump a cup of ice water down Flint's back. My brother lets out a surprised shout that has all the kids erupting in laughter.

"You're dead meat, kid!" Flint growls playfully, chasing after Flynn who's already

sprinting toward the pool.

“It won’t be long before we’re having to wrestle with more kids,” Jenna says to Blaise.

“Lucky for us, we have a built-in grandma.” Blaise grins.

“How is your mother?” I ask Jenna.

Jenna beams. “She’s doing really well.” Her eyes mist. “I never thought she’d see me married or her grandkids. Thanks to Blaise... to all of you... we have this marvelous life.”

Blaise kisses her temple.

"Uncle Ash is here!" Brigit announces, already climbing out of the pool and wrapping herself in a towel.

I turn to the house to see Hannah and Ash emerge. Hannah’s baby bump is now prominently showing at six months. She’s radiant, laughing as she tries to wrangle their two boys—four-year-old AJ and two-year-old Finn, who bolt down to the pool deck.

“I got ‘em,” Ash says. Of all my brothers, I’m most surprised how he’s found a happy life.

I’d been sure he’d never get over the guilt and pain of losing Meghan.

I suppose some of those feelings remain, but there’s no denying the happiness he’s found with Hannah and their two, almost three, children.

"Sorry we're late," Ash says as he scoops up a kid in each arm like it was nothing.

"Someone insisted on making pie from scratch this morning." He gives Hannah a wink.

"Worth the wait," I reply, setting the final burger on the platter.

"I want to play." AJ squirms in Ash's arms. He sets the boys down and AJ rushes straight to Brigit, who high-fives him. Finn makes a beeline for Liam, and within seconds they're engaged in some elaborate game involving dinosaurs and superheroes.

Looking around at all of us, my brothers and their wives, our children playing together, I feel a completeness I'd have never thought possible during those dark years we were hiding and plotting our comeback.

"That used to be us," I say, nodding to the kids.

For a moment, my brothers look out over the scene. Our children running and laughing without a care in the world. We'd had a happy childhood. Happier than Keira had.

"Dad would be proud of you. Of how you reclaimed his legacy," Ash says.

In some ways, it's a fucking miracle we're here.

None of us were old enough or experienced enough to survive in the world we'd grown up in.

Flint and Blaise, only seventeen, gangly teenagers suddenly thrust into a war they didn't start.

Ash, barely twenty, still carrying the weight of Meghan's death along with our parents'.

And me, twenty-one and suddenly the head of a fallen empire and three brothers looking to me for answers I didn't have.

We survived on hatred for years. Hatred kept us moving, kept us planning, kept us from falling apart completely.

I remember those endless nights mapping out our revenge, teaching my brothers everything our father taught me, watching them harden into weapons when they should have been living normal lives.

Now look at them. Married, happy, raising children who will never know the fear we lived with.

Somehow, we not only got our revenge and reclaimed what was stolen from us, but we also found something none of us expected.

Love. Women who saw past the damage and the darkness, who loved us not despite our broken parts but because of how we fought to piece ourselves back together.

Our business has flourished beyond what even our father achieved.

The Ifrinn name commands respect throughout Boston and beyond, but it's a different kind of respect than what the Keans built. We protect our own, deal fairly, and never forget where we came from. That stability has eased tensions with the other families, which is not to say we didn't have a few skirmishes in the beginning.

The peace we've found still feels fragile sometimes, like I might wake up tomorrow back in that safe house, planning our next move with nothing but rage to fuel me. But then I look at my children, at Keira's smile, at my brothers surrounded by their families, and I know this is real.

This peace wasn't handed to us. We clawed our way here through darkness and pain.

We earned every moment of this happiness, paid for it with scars both visible and hidden.

Sometimes, I still resent my father for his effort to keep me and Keira apart, to hide my child from me.

But another thing Keira has taught me is to not think about the what-ifs or harbor resentment.

My father did what he thought was best. I don't agree with him, but the truth is, all of us go through life trying to do our best. I'm hoping my best is better than his.

That I don't hurt my children as he'd hurt me.

"We all did it," I respond to Ash's comment. "Dad would be proud of all of us."

As I watch my family live and love, I remind myself that what my brothers did in reclaiming what was taken from us isn't what matters most. The most important thing is the family we built.

"You're looking contemplative," Keira says, slipping my arm around her.

"Feeling grateful." I pull her to me for a hug, savoring the feel of her arms around me because I can still remember the time we were apart.

I kiss her temple. "We did it, Keira. We got our happy ending."

Loved Phoenix and Keira?