



Requiem

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: She slipped right through my fingers. In our game, I wonder who is the predator and who the prey? She turned the tables on me. Hunted the hunter. But I won't be caught off guard again. I will find my dark queen and insist she take her place by my side. She can fight our fate all she wants but the truth is I saw it years ago that moment in the woods. She was the other half of my dark soul. Turns out Baby Blue is my Little Red.

Is there hope for damned souls like mine? Do I even deserve hers?

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PROLOGUE

Chloe & Roque

The Present...

The pen taps between my parted lips. How can I describe what we had? How I feel?
Why I can't let it the fuck go?

The words fill my head. I need to get them out. Taking the pen from my mouth I put
it to the page:

You.

I never saw you coming. But your flame-colored locks wrapped around my heart.
Choking it. Owning it.

We both wear crowns of thorns twisted vines of deep-seeded hate slash love.

I finally understand now. How one is the same as the other.

I own your life and you own mine.

How many nights have I dreamed of you little butterfly who morphed into a different
animal all together? You're even more beautiful now. But I damaged you, broke you,
just as you broke me.

Who will win?

The past?

The future?

Or our bloodies and bruised destiny of neve ending circles?

“More poetry? Pining over your lost beloved?”

“Shut up,” Chloe. “I’m shipping you out in the morning.

She sighs, pushing her blonde hair off her anxious face. My heart clenches for a split-second; torn in its decision to send her away.

“I really wish you wouldn’t.” She stares at me with large, sad eyes.

“It’s what’s best for you.”

“When do I get a say in what’s best for me?”

“When you’re eighteen?” I smirk.

“Ass.”

I shrug. “Never denied it. You all packed?”

“Three Louis Vuitton suitcases full of 20k of designer clothes and beauty products... does it help you feel less guilty?”

“I’m not familiar with that emotion.”

“Liar. You’re full of it when you speak ofher.”

“She’s out of my life. Has been for a long time. I’m over it.”

“Now, I’m really calling bullshit.”

Frowning, I stand, lazily walking over to the wet bar to refill my tumbler of scotch.

“Language. I won’t be in Switzerland to save you from bullies.”

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She bites her lip. “Your name would protect me if you adopted me” He chin wobbles. Fuck. I rake my hands through my hair.

“Having my name would be a death sentence. I have enemies, Chloe.”

She shakes her head. “No one could ever beat you. You’re the king. Untouchable.” She looks out into the night skyline over Chicago from my penthouse. “Well... only one person can bring you down.”

“Not if I find her first...,” I mutter under my breath. But she still hears me.

“I knew it. Fine. Send me away but make me a promise, Roque. Find your dark queen, put a ring on it, and make crazy beautiful babies.”

I shake my head, my heart sneezing at the image she creates. I’m allergic to love and commitment ever since my Blue slash Little Red ran. Probably because deep-down my heart knows she’s the only one who can come back to claim it. But Romina never came back. I’ve been in enough tabloids and news stories that she knows how to find me. I never changed Ralph Smith’s cell. I kept the phone filled with our photos, kept every text and voicemail. Johnny would laugh his ass off if he knew what a sentimental lovesick loser she made me.

“Doubtful that will happen. Go to bed. It’s a long flight.”

“I can’t sleep and you know why.”

My hand tightens around my drink. I haven’t told her, but I’ve managed to track

down every creep whose care she was in. Every fucked-up foster home she felt afraid in and did what I do best. Eliminate. Chloe thinks I'm some hero, but Romina saw the truth—I was born a monster. A killer. She saw the darkness in my soul and fooled me into believing she could love me anyway. But who's idea of happily ever after is the villain? The devil? I was a fool for thinking there could ever be redemption for me.

“Do you want me to make you some warm milk?”

“Gross. Can we read more of her journals?”

“I don't have any.”

“But there's so much more to your story to be written.”

“Not as much as there is to your story.”

She turns, a smile finally curving her lips. “And I have you to thank for that.”

“Then go to bed. Tomorrow is the first day of many blank pages to be filled with ink.” I open a drawer in my desk, taking out a wrapped gift box and hand it to her,

Her eyes finally light up as she gingerly takes it from my hands. I watch, pleased as she opens my gift.

“It's perfect.”

In her tiny hands is a handcrafted, journal made from the finest Italian leather and filled with lightly perfumed cream pages. I had it flown from Paris along with a silver and gold pen with diamonds from Tiffany's.

“Only the best for my girl.”

Her throat works. “Roque?”

“Welcome to my fucked-up family, squirt.” My place my drink down and lift the envelope from my desk handing it to her. It only took a few phone calls and fifty grand in cash to a judge but she was mine. It was selfish as fuck and I could’ve had the papers torn in a whim but the way she looks at me like I;m her world shredded me.

“Chloe Salvatore. That sounds totally badass.”

“It does.”

She springs forward, flinging her arms around me. My own throat feels scratchy. Fuck. I breathe deep fighting back tears.Bad ass villains don’t cry. They don’t cry. The words loop on repeat in my mind.

“See? I knew you were a good man. I prayed every night that you would decide to keep me.”

“I’ve never been the answer to anyone’s prayers.”

“Maybe it’s time you change. Use your super villain skills for good. Like saving girls like me.”

“I’ll think about it. Tomorrow’s a big day. You should try to sleep.”

“I think I can now, especially since you’re stuck with me for good. I can’t wait to find Romina. She’s going to be the best mom ever.”

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“What?” I bark. “Don’t you dare go looking for her.”

“Why? Because that’s your job?”

“Maybe,” I grin. I turn to the windows picturing the three of us around a ridiculous Christmas tree as the wind blows drifts of snow outside. My hand fists inside my trouser pocket because I know better. There are no happy endings for men like me. I’ll be lucky if I survive long enough to sure Chloe gets hers through. I’m going to make damn sure that girl gets the world.

A low growl emanates from me. I pull Chloe closer to my side, shooting daggers from my eyes at every high school punk eyeing her. In her new school uniform with knee high socks, she’s cute as a button. But to them she’s a shiny new piece of meat they’d like to sink their teeth into. What the fuck was I thinking sending her to a boarding school in Switzerland?

A smartly dresses woman greets us, “Welcome Mr. Salvatore and of course welcome to Chillmark, Chloe.”

“Thank you.”

Chloe’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes and her hand tightens in mine. Shit. She’s scared and I just send her directly into the wolfpack as more hormone-crazed boys dressed in their impeccably pressed school uniforms give me girl some serious side eye.

“Chloe will have 24/7 bodyguards accompanying her while she’s here.”

“Of course, Mr. Salvatore...”

“What?” Chloe whips her head around, causing her blonde waves to fly out around her. Her blue eyes narrow and I’m already having acid reflux at the stunning beauty she’s become.

“Give us a minute, Miss....?”

“Headmistress Diamandis.”

“Right, thank you.” I turn to Chloe. “You’re a Salvatore now, Chloe. With the name comes certain risks. You know that.”

“Look around, there is nothing but snow-capped mountains leading to valleys. The air’s so fresh. I never knew air could smell so... clean. Where’s the danger?”

“About twenty feet behind you,” I mutter. She glances over her shoulder and gives a cute finger wave to a group of boys gathering on the courtyard. They all grin back. Mother fuckers. “Forget it. We’re leaving. Going back to Chicago. This isn’t the right place for you.”

She bites her lip. “I didn’t want to come. But now that we’re here. I want to give it a try.”

“No.”

She places a hand on my forearm. “You know how I feel about boys and sex. You don’t have to worry, Roque.”

My chest tightens. I feel the nerve under my left eye twitch. “I’ve only been your “father” officially for two days and I’m already having a stroke.”

“Calm down,” she giggles. “I’ll be fine.”

I shake my head as feelings of possession flood through me. Feelings I haven’t felt since Romina. Although these are paternal it still burns.

We walk back to the head mistress who gives us a tour and leaves us outside the girl’s dormitory. I snap my fingers indicating my men to fetch Chloe’s luggage.

We use her fob key to gain access to the building. I prefer stairs to elevators whenever possible for safety reasons and we climb to her room on the fourth floor.

Her hands tremble slightly as she uses the ancient key to turn the lock. Although most of the buildings have modern updates, there’s something about using a heavy key to unlock a door that keeps an old world feel to the place.

“No. No way am I leaving you in this dump.” My fingers pluck an imaginary piece of dust by my cuff links. Chloe rolls her eyes.

“This is a palace compared to the places I’ve lived before you.”

“It’s simply not good enough.” My jaw clenches as I inspect the dark wood floors with a few scrapes and the plain white paint. In one corner is a lonely desk with a few scratched marring the surface. Under the window is a plain metal frame bed.

I unlock my cell and dial my personal valet, Ken. “Mr. Salvatore?”

“Hire an interior designer for Chloe’s dorm room. I’ll text the dimensions with a few pictures. Hire the best. Spare no expense and I want it done in twenty-four hours.”

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“Yes, sir.” I disconnect with a grunt, snap my fingers for my guard to wheel out her suitcases again. “You’ll stay in the hotel with me tonight. I won’t have you sleeping here.”

“You’re being ridiculous. If I’m seen as some pampered princess... the bullying could be intense for me.”

I grab her close. “You are a pampered princess. You’re mine. We’re leaving. No one would dare bully you either or I’ll bury them and their parents.”

“Roque... we talked about this. You’re going to be a good super villain remember?”

“I never agreed to that,” I growl, yanking her hand taking her out of that depressing room.

“I’m re-thinking this whole alpha dad super villain family thing.”

“Too bad. It’s legal. I’m your guardian now and what I say goes.”

She rolls her eyes, “No wonder she ran.”

My blood boils. But I don’t say a word not trusting myself to snap. Snapping at little Chloe is the last thing I ever want to do. The girl is the only bright spot in my dark cavernous heart.

My face is tight as we walk out across the courtyard to the helicopter with the Salvatore logo. That’s right. We didn’t roll up in the stereotypical Range Rover. I

sent a message choosing the chopper. I'm above the so-called elites. IF they fuck with my girl, Chloe I will return with hellfire.

I usher Chloe in the chopper and signal the pilot to start the rotors. With my head set on and aviators blocking the emotions in my eyes—I'm thrown back in time as my gaze collides with hungry appreciative ones, eyeing my golden girl ascending with me into the sky.

I was one of them. Once upon a time. Instead of a golden girl, my queen had bright blue hair. I sigh, sinking against the plush leather seat feeling a headache come on. How can I protect Chloe from horny teen- aged boys while running my empire a world away? I'll double her guards if need be. Little Red had no one to protect her. Even her Uncle knew what I wanted, and knew he couldn't stop me. I've had other lovers over the years. But none quenched the fire, the thirst or made me feel utterly spent. Damn her. I'll continue my search over the world for her. If for no other reason except to get closure.

My hand balls into a fist. As the chopper glides forward, my memories go back to the days and months after she left Jersey. I was broken-hearted, angry, and determined to save her from the wrath of my wife. You see my wife had a bet with the other remaining families from Italy on who could capture her first. They were going to make a sport out of the hunt and torture her. Killing her was at the top of my wife's wish list. I was determined to spare Little Red if for nothing else but to torture her myself. I wanted to hit her back the way I felt sucker punched when my "wife" told me my Baby Blue was the Fiorelli girl. That Little Red was the same woman I had fallen so irrevocably in love with. But my torture would be sexual and she knew it. Hell, I bet she ran because she knew she couldn't handle me. But Red had her pride. She'd rather run from love than ever admit she's a slave to it.

I had almost caught her too. Almost. If only I could change the past, I truly would be the most powerful man in the world. But there's no hope for lost souls like me. The

Pope himself could hold a million Requiem's for me and it wouldn't do any good. My fate was sealed that day in the woods. The day when I almost extinguished the best thing that had ever happened to me...

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ROQUE

1

THE PAST

She looks stunning, a fiery goddess hell-bent on revenge. I held my breath at first as she took my video call. But seeing her glorious titan hair tumbling down her back as sparks shot to the sky from the bonfire, she had burning has me hard as fuck. She was glorious, my Little Red.

“Her lips might be pressed to yours but it’s mine you crave,” she taunts.

Damn her. She’s right. I might have had my wife’s lips pressed to mine, but it was hers I’s kill for. My hand stills on the crystal decanter if whiskey seconds before I hurl it into the fire. It explodes against the back wall of the hearth creating a fireball of flames. I shake my head. That’s us. Her and I. One big ball of fire. How can we love one another without third degree burns?

What was I thinking leaving her in Jersey? I should have never left America. Nothing good ever happened in Palermo. Italy was my past and Blue was my future. I need to find her. Hunt her the way she hunted me. I need to know. I need to know if it was all a lie. Or if what we had was real. But I have a hard time believing she could love me after what I did to her when we were kids.

“I still don’t understand what you crave about that girl. She barely has any tits. Definitely no ass.”

“Just fucking go. Leave already Gabriella. I don’t want you.”

“Really?” She purrs, inching her talon-like nails up my chest. “You fucked me like a god on our wedding night. I couldn’t walk straight for two days.”

“That wasn’t me, you soulless bitch. That was Johnny. I’d never stick my dick in you,” I sneer. “You knew that.”

“I don’t believe you,” she cries, flinging herself in my arms. I pick her up, kick open the backdoor and dump her ass on the wet ground. “Believe it,” I snap, turning my back and locking the door with a click. Fuck her. She can figure out a way out of her own self-created mess. I have a heart thief to catch and not one second to spare for anyone else.

My fingers tap the keys on my laptop. I login to every signal camera blanketing Princeton. But I can’t find Blue. She covered her tracks well. I grin. There’s nothing like the hunt. Catching her is going to be a high like no other. My fingers already itch, yearning to hold her in my arms. The question is what I am going to do with my Little Red when I catch her...

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2

Romina

2018....

“HE’S SO DEAD! ARGH!” My hand grips the handle of the knife. It sings through the air and lands dead smack in the middle of his sexy face. He’s all over the tabloids. His cousin’s wedding to some schoolteacher was hardly newsworthy. But him? Roque Salvatore, mob king extraordinaire dancing the night away with a mystery brunette? That was big news.

He’s a recluse.

Private.

Heavily guarded.

The dark king’s rule is absolute.

“And who in the hell is she?”

My blood heats as I pluck the knife from the board where I pinned up their tabloid pic. His eyes. Those damn mesmerizing, hypnotizing bedroom eyes stare down at the woman in his arms. His face is all angular planes, with a classic Roman nose and full lips for a man. His perfect teeth gleam.

He's a shark.

A demon.

A damn nuisance.

A splinter festering under my skin that I just can't get out.

A man I loathed and loved for a heartbeat. A stupid, foolish moment in time where I deluded myself into thinking he changed.

I was seventeen and he was brutally sexy and dark. Everything a high school girl should run from instead of running to. And yet I still hoped he didn't grow up to be the monster I glimpsed one night a lifetime ago.

"I'm going to destroy you like I always said I would. Right after I make that black heart of yours beat only for me. You'll only look at me like that. Want. Breathe. Live. All for me. Then I'm going to burn your empire to the ground and end your reign."

My hair the color of a burning sunset in autumn flies around me as I use my anger to fuel my plans. On bare feet, wearing black leggings, I'm as swift and graceful as a prima ballerina. My feet are light, but my hits are hard when I make them.

And I'm saving the hardest one for Romeo Roque. While he slowly built up his empire, I've been watching and waiting from a distance making contacts with those who want to see him burn just as much as I do.

"Ugh. I can't believe I kissed him. Let him touch me!" I scream out loud to my empty walls. I check the Internet, seeing more pics of him and some woman named Lucille. So, she has a name. These new photos are from a club. Her bed hair is perfect. Her dreamy eyes give her away. Maybe I'll cut her ass up too if it hurts him even slightly.

Fuck him and his crazy, exotic sea-blue break-your-heart eyes of his.

Slapping my laptop closed, I get busy packing up my few possessions, drop a rent check for six months in the mail and leave the lights of Vegas behind.

I'll live right under his nose. I'll silently stalk my prey and when it's time, I'll move in for the kill. I'm too angry to rush to Chicago. The old me would've done it. Just flown off the handle and booked a ticket. But I'm smarter now. More experienced than the starry-eyes girl thinking I could defy my fallen angel with Blue hair and fake tattoos.

I finally understand what Zio was trying to say when he told me I wasn't ready. The problem with being young is thinking you know better—thinking you're invincible. I won't make that mistake with Roque twice. I'll go LA, make some connections with the Chinese mob. Keep honing my craft and when I'm ready I'm going to burn his entire world down.

I keep telling myself it's only angry tears smarting. I'm over Roque. Have been for years. But what is he doing with an almost legal girl? She's petite, delicate and the hero worship in her eyes makes me crazy sick to my stomach. I used to look at him like that, once. A lifetime ago. And Yet if I close my eyes, it's like time and space cease to exist and I'm still in his arms moving under the covers, soaring to the stars. It makes me sick to think he has some weird fixation for young girls. Some perverted twisted affection for them. And that maybe that's all I was some sick, perverted kick of his. I'll save that little blonde from his evil clutches. No one rescued me. I rescued myself. But that's because I had training and a certain knowledge from birth that he was the enemy.

But I do get a perverted kick out of being so close to him again while he looks around

feeling my stare, knowing something isn't right without being able to put a finger on it. The hair on the back of his neck stands at attention as I duck around a corner just as he whips his head around.

Who knew stalking was so fun? Smiling, I toss my dyed mud brown hair back and scroll through the pics of took of him and the girl on my phone. He paraded her through boutique after boutique buying her thousands in clothes and good. The Louis Vuitton luggage was a bit over the top though. "Where are you taking her? What is she to you?" I ponder staring at the pictures on the screen. The heels of my boots click on pavement heated by the late August sun. I'm in his city, right under his nose, for the second time and just like the first, he doesn't even know it. As I throw my bags in the back of my new Audi, I slam the door hard remembering the night I vowed he wouldn't seduce me again.... The engine revs when I hit the Interstate. My foot is heavy on the gas as I race toward LA as if punishing the road can erase the pain in my past to the night I had fled Jersey...

CHAPTER 3

ROMINA

THE PAST

Tears fall down my cheeks. I don't bother wiping them. How many times have I cried over him? How many times have I let him break me and yet I still haven't learned? "You stupid, foolish girl." I let the tears come, knowing by dawn they'll turn to dust just like the ashes from the fire roaring in front of me. I've let Zio down. He saw this coming. Tried to warn me, but my stupid heart and hormones got in the way.

If I loved a monster what does that make me?

I plop down on a rusted chair while staring up at the night sky. He twists me in knots. I want to be more than a girl who fixates on a man for her whole life. I want my revenge, but I also want to be somebody more. He wins by being the center of my universe. It's time I became the center of my own universe, not him. "I'm kicking your ass to the curb, Roque. When I'm ready I will finish whatever this fucked-up thing was that we started. But on my terms."

Standing, I turn my back to the fire and walk into the small house. Memories of Zio are everywhere. I can't forget all the things he taught me. I have some money in our accounts but not enough to hide or live forever. First thing Monday morning I'll register to take my GED and SAT's. This is a small college town where there's a satellite campus to one of the best state universities. I need to get in, earn a degree and get a real job. One where I can support myself and blend in.

My hands pick up the envelope with the fake birth certificates, passports, and ID's. I out Zio's to the side, picking mine up. I'm no longer Romina, his Blue or the girl from Princeton. Who am I going to be next? Do I even want to be some revolving door? I want to evolve not revolve. I'm sick of hiding and the game. But I can't win. Not like this. Not yet. All it took was a few months of his touch and his fake marriage to topple me. I'm not strong enough yet. Not by a longshot.

Jamie. Jamie Goodwin. American. Boring. Vanilla. Just like Ralph Smith was. I sit at the table, booting up the laptop we had left here. In no time Jamie Goodwin is on Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. Sighing, I open a kitchen drawer, taking out an iPhone and charge it. I download TikTok and sign up Jamie Goodwin. I take it out to the fire and prop it up on an old trash can. I find an old Britney tune, "Stronger" and hot record.

Jamie Goodwin is now TikTok official. I snap some photos of the fire and post to Insta: #letitburn #noregrets.

"I'm too good at this." I shake my head. All of it. The lies. The hiding. The fake personas. If only there was a way to use all these fucked-up skills into a way to make a living. Getting caught by the police is not an option. I wouldn't be able to explain who I am and why I have so many unregistered guns and fake passports. The families would find me. Of that I have no doubt.

Too wound up to sleep, I grab a hooded sweatshirt and the keys to the car with PA plates that we kept in the barn converted to a garage. I grab a charger to my "new phone" and a burner just in case.

"Start you fucker!" My fist pounds the wheel. But the battery's dead. Sighing, I slam the door and grab the keys to the car I drove down here in, parking it close. Popping both hoods, I apply jumper cables. "Yes! You sexy bitch!" I thump the Volvo SUV's side. I can't be too careful in case Roque taps into the closed-circuit cameras and

makes my getaway car. I can't drive it. Not for a long time. Hell, maybe I'll sell it to a chop shop for cash.

I hop into the Volvo and drive with the windows down. I just need to clear my head of the image of that viper's kiss on his mouth. Hell, they're both snakes. But there's still a stupid, foolish part of me that wants to cling to the memory of how he was with me when I was still his Baby Blue and he was my tame black-hearted beast who showed signs he could change.

After driving for thirty minutes to make sure this old battery gets a bit of a charge, I stop at a convenience store for fresh gas. My throats' dry so while the gas pumps, I head inside for a soda and a pack of cigarettes.

"I saw you. You cheating bitch!"

"Stop! Leo! I told you it's not like that with us. He's my bio chem partner!"

"You playin' me Keisha? You get wet for him, K? Like you do me?"

What the fuck? My sneakers pound the pavement as round the corner of the building. Some baller has a girl pinned to the wall. He's breathing down on her face while his hand cups her sex while she struggles. His boys watch from a car with the bass booming. I glance through the glass windows of the store. The clerk is busy cashing someone out. I'm sure they can see what's happening from the screens streaming from the security cameras. No one cares. No one stops to help the girl. People pumping gas look the other way.

I don't hesitate. I come up behind him, kicking my foot between the back of his spread legs.

"FUUCCCCCKK!" He drops cupping his balls. The laces of my sneaker and the top of

my foot got him good.

“You okay?”

The girl looks at me. Wet tears are seconds from falling. Her caramel skin has turned white where his hands had her. There’s some at her throat and her upper arms.

“You’re dead girl.” I whip around. The guy is now on his knees still cupping his balls. “This is between me and my girl. Get your white trash ass out of here.” He reaches for the girl’s ankle. She whimpers in pain as his hands wrap tight. He’s big. Strong. So muscular he could snap her leg like a twig.

“Let her go. Now.”

“Back off bitch. I’ll deal with you next.” He’s about to stand. So, I do what I got to do, by swiftly kicking him under his chin. His head snaps back. Keisha screams and the boys in the car start cursing and getting out. Finally realizing barely five foot me just dropped their boy. I grab her hand, quickly running to my Volvo. “Get in!” I disengage the gas, letting the nozzle hang and peel out.

“Where’s the police station? You’re pressing charges.”

She shakes her head as I press the gas going through a yellow light that turns just as I move under it. “Why?” I can’t turn my head to look at her as I’m busy checking the rearview for their pursuit while trying not to get pulled over for driving like a street racer.

“Because no one believes girls like me. And even if they did, they wouldn’t care.”

My hands jerk the wheel to the right and I enter a maze of residential streets. After a few turns I pull over.

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“What do you mean? We have to try. Guys like him don’t change.”

In her eyes I see myself. How broken I was that day in the woods when something was taken from me, I’d never get back. Her sadness washes over me like a wave. I blow out a deep breath. “I believe you. I saw what he was doing.”

“He didn’t rape me.”

“But he molested you and put his hands on you. There’s already bruising.”

“You think the cops care what happens to an out of town Black girl living on scholarship money?”

I bite my lower lip. “I know what it feels like when no one cares.”

She laughs. “Your skin is paler than snow. I doubt you can relate. No offense.”

“You’re right and wrong. You might think I have some privilege. Maybe I do. But as a woman... I can relate. Girl to girl—I’ve been abused too. Been hit hard.”

I blow out a breath about to reveal a truth to a stranger. “When I was eleven. A teen boy I knew choked me. He put his hands around my throat and squeezed until I couldn’t breathe all the while whispering in my ear how he enjoyed it. I even think he was hard. He eased up at the last moments and gave me CPR, leaving my unconscious body in the woods by a stream. I had no family. And I knew if I reported him, I’d be a dead girl for real. There would be no second escape for me. His family would end me, or they’d hand me off to a home where eviler men would do worse. I

feel you okay?”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know it’s not. But it’s something. Who was that guy, anyway?”

“My boyfriend, Leo.”

“Did he always treat you like that?”

“No. He just acts like that in front of his boys. But he’s never put his hands on my like that before.” Her phone starts lighting up with his name flashing across the screen,

“I can’t go back to my dorm. He’ll find me.”

“Where are you from?”

“Jersey.”

My eyes cut away. I put the SUV in drive and set the nav for my place. “Do you live on campus?”

She nods.

“Fine. Then we’ll go to the campus police.”

She snorts, “They’d lock me up. Leo is here on scholarship too. Basketball. His GPA is shit though and unless he aces his summer semester here, he can’t play next season. Leo’s a big deal at State. They sent him down here to the satellite campus so they could water-down his chem and calc classes and get away with it. I’m a sophomore.

Biochemical engineering major. And so stupid for thinking he was into me. All he was into was getting me to help him do his assignments.”

I turn, facing her in the dark. “If you’re a biochem major that makes you a genius. I don’t even have a high school diploma. I skipped out.”

“What’s your name anyway?”

I don’t even hesitate. “Romina. But I go by Jamie now.”

She nods. “I get that. My aunt’s running from somebody, too. She left her baby daddy and went into a shelter. They helped hide her from that point on so he can’t find her. Can I crash at your place tonight?”

I nod. “Sure.” As we drive in silence, thoughts twist and turn in my mind. I could do that. Hide people. Help them. But I’d need a link to the underworld... the black web... people who can do what Zio’s hookup did for us. Somehow, someday, someday—deep-down in my gut I knew I had found my calling. I was going to help women. Rich women. Poor women. Fat women. Any woman who needed a safe haven from abuse of any kind. I had mad skills and it’s time I harnessed them but first I need a degree and some money.

“Sweet crib.”

“Thanks. It’s a special place. My uncle... he just died and well. It’s the only thing left of him.”

“Shit. That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

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I lead Keisha inside. “I just got here and don’t have much,” I shrug.

She plops on the couch. “It’s a safe place to sleep. That’s all I need.”

I grab two beers from the fridge, handing her one. “How sad is that? In this day and age and we’re all still searching for that...”

“Girl. That shit won’t ever change. Not as long as men rule the world.”

“What if we did instead? What if I could?” My mind started turning.

“Hillary tried. Women are beat for premarital sex on the other side of the world. Some can’t drive or even show their face. You are whack thinking shit will ever change.”

I take a sip of my beer. Maybe I could make a difference. Even if I saved a hundred or just one—it still would be a difference.

She yawns and I nod over to the folded blanket laying on the chest under the window.

“What happened to the guy who choked you out? Did you ever find out?”

I nod. “I did.”

“And?”

My fists ball on their own accord. “I gave him my V-card on a platter with my heart.”

“Girl...,” she clucks, shaking her head.

“I know. Trust me. I thought he had changed. He didn’t recognize me, and I was so stupid for thinking... for believing we were some kind of fucked-up destiny.”

“I can’t hide from Leo forever. He’s going to show up at my dorm or my classes until he confronts me.”

“Let him,” I shrug. “You’ll be ready.”

She arcs an eyebrow. “I doubt that.”

“He won’t mess with you. I have my ways. After coffee tomorrow I’m going to give you a few self-defense tips with a can of mace.”

“Thanks. Good night, Romina. You saved my life tonight. Leo was trying to get me into the car with those guys and I just had an unbelievably bad feeling they were going to take me somewhere and—” she shudders.

“I know. I sensed it too. It’s some fucked-up bullshit. What were you doing down there by yourself anyway?”

“Grabbing a Red Bull. I walked from my dorm. I was working on synthesizing some proteins at the lab but was burning out.”

“You’re like really smart.” I sigh. “I know I can pass my GED, but I want to score high on my SAT’s so maybe I could get accepted to campus. I’m not good at math.”

She shrugs. “I could help you.”

“Is this weird?”

“Not as weird as having the guy you date cup you in an EZ MART parking lot then

threaten you.”

“True. Help yourself to anything in the fridge. I need to get some air.” I walk past the box containing my diary and old laptop, carefully taking it with me as I walk out the backdoor. My one roaring fire is nothing but smoldering ashes. I tap my new phone against my leg. Tati. I swallow another lump in my throat. I lost everybody. Zio, Roque and Tati.

She didn’t deserve how I went out like that. But I know she’s the first person Roque will go after in his search to find me.

Biting my lip, I drop my butt on the stone steps, lifting the lid to my laptop with shaky fingers. I need to quit my old life and accept it’s gone. But Tati was my only friend. I need to make sure she’s okay.

I login to Insta and Snapchat.

What the...? Tati’s relationship with Le Blanc is now Instagram official. I quickly click through ten photos of the two of them each sweeter than the next. Good for her. But the last one I click on stops my heart. It’s a selfie we took the night I first became Blue. She posted it with multiple hashtags: #bringbluehome #missingbff #heartbroken.

Sighing, I push the hair from my crestfallen face, cloaked in guilt for the first time. I can’t post or email. He’ll trace my IP address. I only have three burner phone left in my stash. But Tati deserves to know I’m okay. I take one out, turn it on, placing a sim card in. She might not answer so I text:

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Tati... it's me. I'm fine.

Seconds later the phone rings in my hand.

"Hey."

"Is it really you?"

"Yeah."

"Where the hell are you? I'm so pissed at you. You just up and left. Your house looks like a tomb. Most of your things are still there. You even left dishes in the sink. I thought... you'd been abducted. I filed a police report."

I twist the ends of my shirt and take a deep breath. "I can't stay on long. I just wanted to you to know that you were the best. I'll never forget you, Tati."

"Tell me where you are."

"He has your phone tapped, doesn't he?"

She goes silent for a few beats. "I

Did never betray you. But he says you're in danger."

"Only from him," I retort.

“No. He’s going loco trying to find you. Sebastian said he hacked into every surveillance and Ring door app within a hundred miles.”

“He’s not as good as he thinks he is,” I smirk.

“What happened?”

“He married a mafia princess. Tried to kill me when I was a tween and ripped my heart out...”

She inhales sharply. “I knew there was more than you ever said. I think the two of you are fated.”

“Ill-fated. Whatever. It’s done. Over.”

“not of he has anything to say about it.”

“I have to go. I’ve been on the phone too long already as it is.”

“Do you want me to give him a message?”

My eyes drop to the smoldering ash. “Yeah. How about go fuck yourself?”

“Ah, Little Red. I can’t wait to fuck you instead.” His voice is smooth in my ear, catching me off guard.

“I’m sorry, Romina.”

“You told her my real name?”

“I told her everything.”

“Seb has a way of seducing everything out of the girl.”

“That’s sick! Twisted! Let her go!”

My mind races as I recall all the photos of her looking up at Le Blanc with nothing but sweet adoration.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. I wanted it. Want him. He’s a drug.”

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And what could I say? Because I know what Tati means. Roque's touch did the same to me as Le Blanc's is doing to her.

"Where are you, Red? Dragging this out will only make it worse for you."

"How could it get any worse, Roque?"

He pauses. "Damn, I love the way my name sounds rolling off those lips."

I hate myself. My nipples harden. My pulse is slightly faster. He still has so much control over me and I hate it. I want to knock him off his axis. Make his world tilt and make him burn for me.

"Do you remember... how I moaned it in your ear when you were inside me. Can you still feel the tip of my tongue against your skin, feel my breaths against your neck as you drove into me?"

"Romina." His voice is strained.

"Pretty soon, it'll be another man feeling and hearing all those things. I'm not going to let the ghost of who I thought you were dominate me anymore."

"ROMINA!" This time my name is a roar. "If you let anyone else touch you... I'll kill you both."

My lips turn into a wry smile. "Ah, but you've already killed me before."

Boom. I've successfully slammed an iron door between us, and he knows it. Whatever magical weave of seduction we were spinning ourselves in, I just cut through with the sharpest knife.

"And in the end, I couldn't, and you now know why. There was a thread sewing our souls together, even back then. I felt it. You felt it."

"The only thing I felt was the burn in my throat and the panic when I couldn't breathe."

"Liar. You felt me stealing your soul and getting mine in return."

A shiver runs through me. Something utterly fucked happened in those dark moments between us and what he describes with his words is close to whatever it was.

"Goodbye Roque"

"Romina wait! She's after you. The families know you're alive now. You can't run, but if you do let me be the one to catch you. If it's not me, it'll be them And I promise you, love my punishment will hurt much sweeter than their revenge."

"Like I'm scared of them or your bitch of a wife."

"I might be married to her but it's your face I saw when I said the vows. It was your name I whispered when I promised to cherish forever."

"Are you saying you love me? That you're in love with me? You couldn't even be honest with me about who you were."

"Neither could you. Baby Blue and my Little Red. Do you know what you are? When you mix blue and red—you get purple. The color of royalty. It symbolizes power and

ambition. Be my queen, Romina. Together we can take down all of them and build a new empire.”

I pause, almost seduced by the image he’s weaving. I lift my chin. The only way I’ll ever be his again is if he bows to me. “I’m not interested, because I’m going to personally take you down. I’m the Fiorelli heir and I’m coming for you and any one that’s left of the families that turned their back on mine.”

“Don’t be a little fool. It’ll get you killed.”

“That’s fine. It was only luck that I’m still here anyway.”

“Fuck, little girl. When I catch you—you won’t be able to sit for days. I’m not sure what’s twitching more, my palms or my dick.”

“Probably, your eyelid. Calm down, Roque before you have a stroke. It’ll be a shame if you go out like that before I can cut your heart out and shred it to pieces.”

“You’ve already done that.”

I can listen anymore. He’s breaking me down. Lies. It’s all lies. A murderer mobster like him doesn’t love. It’s obsession. I do believe he’s obsessed with me only because I beat him at his own game. I disconnect, take the sim card out, place it on a rock and stomp it with my foot. I can’t contact Tati again. She’s already brainwashed by Le Blanc’s dick. I can’t trust her to be on my side. Sighing, I go back inside and check on Keisha. She’s fast asleep. At least someone will get some rest in this house tonight.

CHAPTER 4

ROQUE

THE PAST

“She’s going to get herself killed.”

“And that would be all your fault. You better not let that happen or I’ll dismember you myself.”

I shake my head at the angry girl held tight in LeBlanc’s arms. “You’ve got a feisty one.”

“She’s just like her friend.”

“No offense, but no one can compare.”

Tati rolls her eyes. “You’ve got it so bad for her.”

I smile tight. “Maybe.”

“I can’t believe you let Johnny fuck your wife.”

I shrug at Le Blanc. “He practically begged me to. I hate the woman. In fact, if I end up a widower tomorrow it’d suit me just fine.”

I stride over to the limp girl in my friend's arms. "Don't eff with me Tati. I need you to think extremely hard where my girl might have gone."

"I have no clue. I swear."

I nod to Le Blanc. "Make sure she's telling the truth."

He grins. "Don't worry. I will." Then he steps back and grabs Tati's forearms. "On your knees."

"No, please."

"You forget to call me Master," he replies with a wink, bending over to swat her butt.

"That S & M shit doesn't work on me." Her eyebrow lifts.

"No. But my tongue does..."

She shrieks as he hauls her over his shoulder, and I leave with the bitter taste of my own failed romance in my mouth. I had that. What they have and I want it back. I want it all back right mother fucking now. "Where did you go baby girl?" I hop in my car and drive to the house she left behind. Anger radiates off me in waves. Her ghost is everywhere. The smell of her lingers in the air. I've come here a dozen times looking for clues but never found a thing.

My footsteps echo across the lonely hall. On a whim I open the door to the dryer. My heart freezes. Inside are her jeans, one of my T-shirts and the last pair of pink panties I remember sliding down her thighs.

My fist goes straight through the drywall. Shards of plaster and blood from my knuckles fall to my feet.

I had it all and let it slip right through my fingers leaving me feeling like the lyrics to a forlorn eighties love song.

I call Johnny. “Anything?”

“Not a damn thing.”

“I need to find her before they do.”

“Your bride is pissed AF. She just placed a contract out for 500k on your girl. I’ve told my men to stand down. If anyone takes the hit, the Lamatti’s would take their life and their loved one sin return.”

I hang my head. “I owe you.”

“Don’t worry I have a running tally of all the shit you’re gonna owe me.”

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“I bet you do. I’m going back to our compound. Keep me posted.”

“I will.”

I take the contents of the dryer in my arms and walk back out not caring if I’m a sick fuck for sniffing the smell of her detergent, remembering it like some signature perfume.

Back at my lair I deposit my good on my bed and remove the false wall hiding the floor to ceiling safe, guarding my weapons. I have a bride to kill. Other wise how can I marry my one true love? My cousin is keeping tabs on my bride and her brothers. They’re in Manhattan. I’ll have to draw them out. There’s too much surveillance, it’s too populated...

I text Johnny:

Invite my bride for a sex-fest in the Hamptons. Include a dick pic if it’ll help.

Johnny:Only if you let me do her before you do her in.

Me:*** EYEROLLL*** Just do it.

As I’m choosing my weapon of choice he responds.

Johnny:Three days. My house in Sag Harbor.

Me: Don’t worry I’ll be clean.

Johnny:What about her brothers?

Me: I'm handling that shit tonight.

Johnny:They've been at the new club in the Meatpacking district, Nitrious the past two nights...

Me:Perfect.

I call my cousin's. Their sisters owe me a few favors. I'll fly them in, give them a few pills and have them drug my brother-in law's drinks. Death will be too goof for them but serving the Cartel down South... will make them pay while helping me create the friendships I've been trying to make. Payback for forcing me to marry their bitch of a sister will be sweet indeed. I put my plans in motion while pondering what to do with Gabriella. I might have trained for this moment my whole life but the thought of killing a woman still pesters my conscience. Maybe I'll just leave her to Johnny and let him do with her what he wishes... anything but set her free.

CHAPTER 5

ROMINA

THE PAST

Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. Soon, three years went by. True to her word, K helped me pass my GED and ace the SAT's. I got admitted to the same state college and while she went off to the main campus, I preferred to stay hidden in the sleepy town amidst the trees and foliage of my cabin in the woods. Taking fifteen credits kept my mind busy. Only late at night, I miss his touch.

I hooked up with a few guys I met at random parties. But it was of no use. No one could compete with Roque on any level. I guess that's what

happens when your first bad love is with a man like him.

I try not to keep tabs on him too often but whenever I did, I noticed he was in Chicago at the helm of a rumored crime syndicate. No one could prove a thing, but I knew he probably had his hand in everything from national politics to trafficking. Roque always wanted his own kingdom. But then again so do I.

But I'm still not ready. It's not time. I want him to forget my face, how I feel like moving under him and just when the last memory of me fades from the pages in his mind, I'll strike hard and fast, painfully re-inking those lost, forgotten pages.

CHAPTER 6

ROQUE

THE PRESENT

“Roque, please. I-I love you.”

I fling her red-tipped nails from the front of my Armani suit. I don't even respond to her ridiculous statement. Bianca Gordiono doesn't love anyone but herself which is why I let her suck my cock for the last three months. She falls at my feet; large tears roll down her perfectly made up face.

Shit. Maybe she did love me. But that doesn't matter now. Nothing matters now that my men have zeroed in on my girl.

The girl who was always meant to be mine. Blue thought I wouldn't find her. But she thought wrong. Maybe she really thought I'd just let her go and let the past be the past. Six years I've waited, plotted, and made myself king.

“Are you sure?”

“I've run the DNA. Twice before I called, just to be sure.”

“The lock of blue hair? Does it match?”

“Yes. It's the same woman. It's her. The girl you met when you were at Princeton.”

My fists clench. My nostrils flare as I breath in. “Don’t tip her off,” Four words spoken low but laced heavy with the threat my weight carries. I disconnect the call, swiftly calculating my next move.

“They found her? Just let it go, Roque. I never understood what you saw in that broad.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Leave her be. Look what just happened to me. I thought—”, Johnny swallows hard not finishing his sentence.

“I’m not you,” I respond harshly, looking past him at the skyscrapers through the floor to ceiling windows making the walls of my apartment see through. The city below belongs to me. Chicago. When I left Italy, Chicago called to me. My cousins and I ran every fuck who thought they were the hot shit mob out and we made our way in. It was hard, grueling, bloody work but it was worth it. I now have the throne all I need is my queen to rule beside me.

The corners of my mouth lift as her image fills my head. She’s complicated. I knew her at twelve, bedded her at eighteen and now I’m about to meet her at twenty-six. So many years have passed and yet I remember her through them all.

At twelve she was a mixture of childlike sweetness morphing with the young woman her body was changing her into being. Even then she defied me. Tormented me with her sharp words and quick wit.

At seventeen she tried to fool me, by changing both her name and her looks. Fake contacts, dyed hair... trying her hand at being an actress and coming of street. But I saw through all of that. I saw her for who she was. I just didn’t know then what I do now. The girl I left behind and thought about every damn day would grow to be the

same woman I obsessed over since I first saw her at that Frat party eight years ago. She was the first and last women to get close to my heart. She practically took a chainsaw to it. I'd be lying if I said

I pick up my cell and bark out orders to my pilot. I'll be in Vegas by morning and nothing will stop me from making Romina my bride. I never dreamed it would take me this long to find her. But disentangling myself from the Castellione's took longer than expected. And life... it just kept moving on. The more powerful I became the more afraid I was of the fall from my throne. And in my line of work nothing makes you more vulnerable than love.

My jaw clenches as I picture the look in her eyes when I come for her.

Vegas.

She's a fool for hiding there. I'll have her wedded and bedded before sunset tomorrow night and there's not a damn thing she can do to stop what's coming.

She thought she could evade me.

That I wouldn't find her,

But I've searched the world for her.

Twice.

Outrunning me is futile and in about ten hours she's about to find that out.

"Stay here and run things while I'm gone," I order Johnny. He's pissed that he's now my second, but he fucked up. He's lucky I stepped in and intervened, or he'd be at the bottom of the Hudson River in New York with all the other damned souls he sent

there himself.

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She wasn't in Vegas. She cleared out hours to days before I got there. It was her apartment all right. I found handwritten to-do notes in her script in the trash, along with a picture of me and Lucille from my cousin's wedding. I smirk remembering the holes made from the tip of a blade she made in the photo. I still got under Little Red's skin. That knowledge goes to both my heads. I whistle a tune under my breath as I dress in my tux for tonight's charity gala. I might have a rep for being a mafia playboy but my charitable contributions keeps me in the good graces of upper society. Like I give a fuck about that. I know she's still watching me and the more I'm in the press the harder it'll be for Romina to keep her distance. Baiting her out into the light is the next move in our game of chess. Smirking at myself in the mirror one more time, I turn on my heel, snap my cufflinks into place and call my driver.

I'm gonna have fun tonight, even if I'm playing alone.

From the corner of my eye I glimpse a flash of red. Not just any shade. Under the crystal chandeliers it's alive. Crackling like the sparks from a flame.

Ignoring the many manicured hands that try to stop me by resting on my forearm, I stride through the crowd, trying to find my fire.

My fists clench.

Only one woman I know possesses that unforgettable shade of red. I feel so many things for her. They all bleed together, turning me upside-down. Hate turns to love. Love turns to raw obsession.

“Roque!” Gabriella clutches my arm. Her petite frame blocks my path.

“Not now.”

“When?”

“How about never?” I don’t even glance down at her upturned face as I scan the edge of the room for exits. Where did she go?

“Roque...I -I have feelings for you. I thought—”

“You thought wrong. Excuse, me.”

I detach her hand clinging to my sleeve and walk away. Her hurt gasp echoes around us. The elite of Chicago are in attendance tonight and all of them just witnessed me walk away from Gabriella Castellione for the second time. The first was years ago when I left her the night of our wedding to chase someone else. Her family who left me to burn in Palermo finally realized I was a formidable opponent. Marriage to me was the ultimate power grab. Although making Gabby my bride would assure me the unofficial king of Italy, my turf was America now and her...she was nothing compared to the woman I craved by my side. The girl I had wanted has hair the color of a red sun with ends streaking into the sunset. That same someone who now, years later still manages to slip from my grasp.

I feel the heat of Gabby’s wrath at my back. But I don’t care. She might try to make me pay for the public insult, but I’d hit her back harder every time. Afterall, I did learn from the best, her very own uncle no less. I am king, master and commander—the most ruthless enemy you’ll ever meet and every under lord, kingpin, mob boss and cartel leader knows it.

Murmurs slip past me like ghosts and I hunt for the glimpse of perfect that keeps

eluding me.

Lifting my watch to my mouth I press a button that links me to my men's earpieces. "Block the exits, check all the cars. Although I suspect she'll be on foot."

My Romina is like cat woman, with the ability to blend in while being perfectly spectacular. I smirk, shoving through the emergency exit door with the hair ribbon tied around the handle.

It was her.

She left me a trail of breadcrumbs to follow. I finger the ribbon between my fingers, imagining wrapping it around her wrist while I have her pinned beneath me.

I took it from her hair once, almost over two decades ago. I kept it as my token treasure. But my spitfire turned the tables. The hunted became the huntress. I'm her prey as much as she's mine.

This never-ending game of ours is the greatest dance. A courting and foreplay but who knows if the endgame will be a crime of complete passion. My Little Reed wants me dead as much as she wants me as her man.

I took an oath to kill her. She's my one failure. The one life I couldn't snuff out. How can you kill the one thing that makes you feel the most alive? She's the one stain on my soul a thousand Gods could never forgive.

"Romina!" I bellow into the stairwell. "Come and get me." I splay my arms wide. "You know I'm all yours."

But she doesn't show.

With the grace and agility of a world-class athlete I sprint down the stairs without even breaking a sweat in my designer threads. My fists punch the door open. The cold bite of January hits me in the face. It's a quick punch that I barrel right through. "Which way did you go my Little Red?"

I cock my head while the icy air invades my lungs. It's hard to breathe in minus two-degree weather. The wind alone would knock a lesser man to the ground. Chicago in winter is not be fucked with. But neither am I. There's no way she's going to escape this time. She's getting sloppy, overconfident.

"Did you want your kiss at midnight, bella? Is that it?" I taunt, confidently walking into the shadows in the alley behind the grand hotel where tonight's New Year's Eve ball was being held.

My blue eyes focus like lasers on the redhead scrambling around the next corner. The beast in me rises. My prey, my woman is in my sights. Her pace quickens, I'm hot on her heels. I grab her by the elbow, swinging her around to face me.

The roar that emanates from me conveys years of pent up frustration as I stare down into a face that I've never seen. My hands angrily rip the expensive wig from her head. She cries out in pain, but my ruthlessness knows no bounds.

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“Where did you get this,” I grate out, feeling my veins bulge in my neck.

She holds up her hands. “Please. I needed money. She just said to walk through the crowd and go out the emergency exit by the west stairwell.”

“The ribbon?” I grate out.

She shakes her head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” From within my pocket, I clench the hair ribbon in my clenched fist.”

She tries to back away while shaking her head, but I pin her in against the brick wall.

She trembles feeling my iciness, the barren winter where my soul should be, envelop her. “Please, stop. Don’t hurt me.”

I snort and grab her elbow, then lift my wrist to my mouth and order the car to come around. I shove her shivering, pathetic form in the back. She stares wild-eyed at the three-suited men who sit inside.

My crew. My gang of outlaw brothers with eyes as dead as mine wait for my next order. Tony, Johnny, and Vito would take bullets for me. Each of us would die for the other. You can’t buy loyalty like that. Two are my cousins the other a best friend I never thought I’d have. As I scan their stone-cold faces, I briefly wonder how many patrons of this city who have felt this moment. The one of utter terror as they realize they’re going for a drive with the mob. Not just any mob, The Salvatore Syndicate.

My cousins are the king’s men and my rule are absolute and unquestionable. Her

body quakes and trembles, though none of us touch her never mind spare her even a glance.

“To the tunnels,” I command while my eyes search the night. She’s here. So close and yet so untouchable. I bring a closed fist to my lips. When I find Romina there won’t be once speck of her that I won’t own. I’m putting my stamp all over her. Even the far places in her mind where she might try to retreat.

I’ve learned so much on my ascent to the throne. Breaking people down bit by bit is a skill I’ve perfected.

The SUV glides through the city. Reinforcing the tunnels was one of the first things I did. Slowly, day by day my crew found the forgotten, underground pathways Chicago’s first mob used during Prohibition. Hoffa ran his crew down here. Not even the cops know about half of the tunnels.

I hit a wireless remote and like Bruce Wayne, we enter a tunnel through an open door. Down into the dark we drive. Into a cave-like canal of small roads.

By now, the imposter is shrieking. Tony backhands her once to make her shut up. She hadn’t done anything but bait the beast. I raise a napkin to her bloody lip. “Calm down. Only those that interfere with my operation get punished.”

“Why did you take, me then”

“Because I could. Because you are the missing link, I need to find her.”

“God help her.”

“She’ll need it,” I smirk.

The SUV rolls to a stop and I climb out, pulling her by the arm. She's weak and will probably break easy. Bringing her into the literal underworld was all for show. I won't have to break one little bone in her body. Using people's minds against them I've learned is my greatest weapon.

I nod, it's an unspoken cue for Tony and Vito to take the girl and chain her by the throat and wrists to a grate above her head.

The chains are old and covered with dried blood and rust.

"Please! I don't even know her. It was all done over text." Tony grins as he uses an index finger to trace her throat, move sit down her body and to pocket of her coat.

"Bingo." His leather-gloved hand holds out a cell to me.

"Code?"

Through sobs she gives me the six-digit number. I tap them in and scroll through her texts from what's obviously a burner phone. I hit call.

"Did he follow you?"

The sound of her voice takes my breath away. I missed the breathy, sultriness of it laced with such sweet determination.

"I sure did."

Her pause is thick, but she doesn't disconnect.

"The girl is innocent."

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“That’s never stopped me before.”

“Roque—” She warns.

I turn from my men to close my eyes in agony. My name. Spoken from those lips.

“Come to me, Red. Be my queen. We both want it.”

“I’ll see you dead first.”

“Then come kill me so we can breathe the same air before I die. Your face will be the last one I see no matter when it happens. What are you waiting for? Be my queen,” I command.

“I’m my own Queen and you’re about to find that out.”

My SUV explodes behind me. The blast throws Vito off his feet. Ducking from the projectiles of glass and burning metal, I hold the phone to my ear. My Little Red isn’t fucking around. She really does want me dead and gone. It’s too bad I can’t accommodate her. If I left this world, some other man would own her and that simply won’t do.

“I’m still standing, Red.” The violence between us is an aphrodisiac. It’s sick. I’m sick and I made her in my image. The once sweet girl might’ve had a chance if she never crossed my path that day so many years ago. But her fate has been sealed.

“I could’ve killed you and your crew at any moment’s notice.”

“Why didn’t you,” I taunt, huskily. “Because you know no other man will make you feel this way again. If you kill me, your fire will burn out and you know it. Don’t forget I almost caught you once. I have your old journals. The ones you taped inside the duct work inside your apartment. I know how you really feel about me, Red. I can make you feel those things again.”

“Please. Did you really think I’d wait for you? That I haven’t given myself to a dozen men feeling how much it’d slay you every time they pumped their hips into me?”

My snarl of rage bellows through the underground. She’s lying. She better be. “THIS IS WAR ROMINA!”

“You fool, Roque. It always has been.” This time she hangs up, leaving me surrounded by burning pieces of metal reflecting off shards of glass. Like a mirror, all my sins stare back at me as I sit on my knees and wonder where in the hell it all went wrong.

So many times, she was mine and yet I didn’t see it and when I did the choices, I made to keep her only worked against me.

“Is she worth this much trouble?” Johnny stands brushing glass from his suit. Blood trickles from a cut above his eyebrow. Despite, striking the woman, Vito shielded her from the blast.

“You’re free to go.” I release her chains. But she faints, falling back into Vito’s arms.

I meet Johnny’s eyes. “Was your girl worth losing everything for? Your home, your city, your place in the family?”

“Yes.” The one word is laced with so much pain as he drops it. Johnny fell hard for an undercover FBI agent. She brought him down and almost took my syndicate with him. I had her killed. For screwing up Johnny and taking everything away from him.

Even now, over half a year later he still burns for the one who betrayed him. His own family put a hit on him for making such a colossal fuck up.

He suspects I had something to do with her disappearance. But I flat out denied it. Losing his loyalty is one thing I can't afford right now. Besides, one day he will get over her and when he does, he'll thank me. He's a fucking wreck and my protection is the only thing keeping him alive.

I order Vito to take care of the ringer and I walk out of the tunnel past the charred metal still crackling with Johnny by my side.

"You'll need retribution. If anyone finds out she was able to get close enough to detonate your car..."

"I'm not weak."

"She's the one chink in your armor."

"I will make her pay."

"What? With your dick?"

"In every way."

"She's going to be the end of you, The end of all of us."

I give him my death glare but deep down, I know he might be right.