



Savage Poet

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: I'm a bad man. This is my story. The one where I find my redemption. But it's not pretty. My words are full of passion, spilling across pages in bold ink. But I'm warning you, I'm not some unsung hero. I'm dark. Dangerous...deadly. This story catapulted me into international celebrity status. Is it true? Or is it fiction? You decide. But it all did start one day with a girl with flaming hair and smug eyes who met a boy turning into a man. He was filled with so much darkness he wanted to steal all her light... Some say I'm a hero. Others a villain. My nickname is Romeo Roque, but I'm just a Savage Poet. Don't say you weren't warned. Oh yeah and my number one hitman, Johnny, he got screwed over by a woman, too. When he gets his revenge for her breaking his heart... it's pretty savage, too.

Note: This is the entire Salvatore Syndicate Trilogy with bonus chapters and Johnny's story included!

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PALERMO 1999

“Why do I have to go?” I pouted, not wanting to dress up and attend a funeral. I hate funerals. The endless line of black cars. The weeping nonna’s burying their grandsons. Some of them so young they never married.

My father pinched me on the arm. High enough that my sleeve would cover the bruise. I stopped protesting. I was expected to fall in line. I was a disappointment to him since birth when my mother delivered a girl instead of the son he craved.

“Chin up. You’re a Fiorelli. You don’t cry, ever cower and I expect you to stare down men. Look everyone in the eye. Understood?”

“Yes, Papa.”

But I didn’t understand. Not at all. All I knew was my family was powerful and corrupt. That Papa was a bad man and expected me to understand why any of it was important.

Our guards followed us. I hated them all. They were loyal to Papa of course and witnessed how mean he was to me and never helped. Besides, I knew what they did—kill people. Papa and the Salvatore’s were in a fight for Palermo. Guards followed us everywhere; lived with us, ate with us. Papa said he had better connections than “that imposter outfit.” But I was afraid. Papa was getting older, bolder and more reckless. Dragging me to a funeral for a man he “offed” under the

ruse of paying respect was out there even for him. But I had no choice. I was Papa's heir. Girl or not and expected to toe the family line.

As soon as we entered the building, the stench of fragrant flowers started to make me feel sick. Funeral flowers. They masked the scent of death with the perfume from their powerful petals.

"How dare you?" A woman pointed at Papa.

Guns were drawn.

More death was coming. I felt it in the air.

I slowly backed up, keeping my back pressed against a wall until I noticed a door from the corner of my eyes.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

My hands flew up, covering my ears.

I ducked low and ran, opened the door and hid behind long coats.

Screams and shouting. It felt like it went on forever, much like death. Then the quiet came with new smells. Burning metal, blood, and gun smoke. I knew Papa was gone. I just did.

He terrified me but he was also my father. My mother was killed years earlier by them and now I feared Papa walked straight into the same fate. He was too arrogant to think it wouldn't ever happen to him.

A shadow moved under the door. I held my breath.

“Where did she go? Fiorelli’s brat must die with him. We’ll bury them both right next to his wife. Their reign is over and ours will begin. But his line must end with the girl.”

“Check out back. She couldn’t have gone far.”

I waited until the footsteps went away then slowly creaked the coat closet door open. I knew if I stayed, I’d die. They’d find me. It’s what families like mine were good at—the killing—the death.

I crept out from the shadows and toward the carnage. I saw Papa. He was lying in a pool of his own blood. His eyes widened with shock.

Men were everywhere. Out front. Out back. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide.

I backed up, hitting something. Jerking around, my gaze met his. I did what Papa told me. I kept my chin up. I looked him in the eyes. I never showed him my fear.

He stared down at me as if I was dung. Because, to him, I was.

“Do it.” I challenged him. I’d rather this boy with his sea green-bluish gaze and perfectly shaped lips take my life instead of the monsters who’d do much worse to me before taking it.

A lock of his hair fell across his forehead. My eyes never left it. That one single, perfect ebony curl.

He was perfect.

The most perfect monster dressed to the nines with a body transforming from a boy to

a man's.

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“I dare you.” I goaded. Knowing we were trapped in a moment where mere seconds would decide my fate.

“Go.” He nodded to the front door.

“They’ll mow me down with bullets the second I step outside.”

“Chicken?”

He leaned down. His peppermint breath landed on my baby lips. “I’m not afraid of the devil himself. Run, little Fiorelli. Live while you can. One day I’ll come for you. And finish this. It’ll be much sweeter to take your life when you’ll want more to live it. I won’t kill a child. But a woman—there’s much more interesting ways to punish one.”

“Coward,” I breathed. “I bet you’ve never even been with a woman. You’re barely older than me.”

He tucked his gun in his holster and grabbed me by the throat. The door burst opened. “End her, Roque, for family honor.”

He leaned in closer, dragged me back to the coat closet and shut the door. But he flicked on the lights. Maybe he was a pervert who wanted to watch. He wanted to witness the moment he stole my life. Before the dots started to swim and my vision began to fade, all I could see was the gold flecks peppered in with his stunning colored aqua pupils. He whispered words to me about angels and death. He held me close. He was a beautiful monster. He smelled good. His words were hushed

murmurs tickling my hair. Could an angel of death seduce?

Air. I needed air. I clawed his arms, but he wouldn't let go. They say when you die, your life flashes before your eyes. Mine didn't. It was too short. All I saw were all the things I'd never do.

Kiss a boy.

Swim naked in the ocean.

Go to college and get stupid drunk.

All the stupid, little things many take for granted—I'd never do.

Dots clouded my vision. It wouldn't be long now. His aqua eyes darkened as I slipped closer to the darkness. At least all my family was there waiting. I won't be alone.

"I'll see you on the other side, Little Red."

But he won't. This one with his eerie gaze and dark as pitch hair will only go straight to hell and if he dares to even find me and disrupt my peace—I'll cast him down into the pits of hell myself.

I'm not sure if I fainted, died, or maybe a mixture of both.

I awoke sometime later in the woods. He left me by a small stream with a note and one of those funeral flowers tucked into my hand.

Today wasn't your day to die. Live while you can, little one. I'll come for you one day.

My throat was on fire. I knelt by the stream and drank the cold water. It soothed the burn for a bit, but I knew I needed to get out of the woods. The darkness was almost upon me. I refused to let it win. He was darkness... death and somehow, he let me escape its clutches tonight.

I'd do what he said. I'd survive. I'd live. But as I stared up at the stars playing peek-a-boo through the branches on the trees, I vowed he wouldn't find me. I might still be a child, but I know way more about adult stuff than I should. I know how he meant to hurt me.

I followed the stream, my dress shoes crunching over fallen twigs and leaves. It was almost twilight. In the distance I saw lights flickering through the dense forest. When I reached a clearing, I knew exactly where I was. He left me in the woods a few miles from the cemetery.

I stayed hidden in the shadows, sheltered by trees as I followed the road. Shadows would become my friend. And my favorite thing to wear. I was tired, hungry, and hurt. But I never wavered. I knew I had to go home. The Salvatore's weren't looking for a dead girl who rose from the woods.

When I reached the street by my house there were no sleek cars or lights left on. It was dark. Just like my new world. I used the hidden key in the garden and slipped in the back door.

I didn't bother turning on any lights. I didn't need them anymore. Not when I was a girl who blended with the night. I washed my hands and made myself supper. Then I went upstairs and packed a backpack. I knew where Papa had his hidden safe and what the combination was. I emptied it. Took all the money and my passport and birth papers. I stuffed it all in under my stuffed kitty. I grabbed some jeans and boots and put them on. Went back to the kitchen for snacks and then to my father's study. I took his gun.

“Someday, little-man Salvatore... I’ll spill your blood just as you spilledmi famiglia’s.”

With hands shaking with rage and fear, I picked up the old rotary phone on Papa’s desk.

“Zio?”

“Romina? We thought... I had a frantic call from Palermo earlier. I thought... they said you were all gone. That Roque personally killed you himself.”

“No, Zio. I got away.”

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“Where are you, child?”

“Papa’s study.”

He swore in a string of Italian.

“Wait behind the garden shed. Don’t make a sound. I’ll send somebody.”

“...Zio? Are they all gone? My aunt’s and cousin’s?”

“Yes. You and I are the only Fiorelli’s left.”

The Salvatore’s probably forgot about my Zio John. He wasn’t part of the outfit. He was ex-communicated. The truth was Zio was angry that Papa was the number one and Zio never wanted to be number two, so he left one day without a trace. Rumors spread that Papa had him killed for his insolence. But I knew the truth. Papa saved Zio. Helped him hide. Maybe deep-down Papa always knew his days were numbered.

Instead of math problems, Papa always drilled in Zio’s number into my head. He said if an emergency like today ever happened that I should call.

I waited long into the night, by the time the old woman from the café came for me my heart was as frozen as my feet.

“Mrs. Ponchetti?”

She nodded. “Your uncle was my favorite. I used to bounce him on my knee and feed

him cannoli cream. Come child. I'll keep you safe until your uncle can make arrangements to smuggle you out of here."

I followed her out of the dark and into the back of her old VW. She fed me warmed biscuits and hot chocolate in the morning. She explained Zio was working old connections to smuggle me out of Italy to the USA... someplace called Brooklyn.

"Here, it's your Zio." She handed me the phone one day.

"Zio?"

"Little Romina... I can't get you out of the country with your passport. The Salvatore's have eyes and ears everywhere even in customs. You need a new name, I figured I'd let you choose."

I wanted to be strong. Invincible. Something that stood for something but yet still felt like me. I remembered the Greek stories from mythology Mama used to read to me before she too was gunned down by the Salvatores. "Diana. Call me Diana. She was the goddess of the hunt. It will fit who I will be now."

"Diana Palermo. That sounds good and Italian enough."

"Palermo?"

"Yes. So, we never forget where we came from even though the Salvatore's drove us out...Palermo will always be in our blood. I changed my last name to Palermo when I left. I'm working on getting you a new passport and papers. As soon as it's done, I'll send someone for you. I can't come myself in case I'm recognized."

"I'm going to live in America, with you?"

“Yes. You’ll be safe here.”

“Zio? I don’t want to be safe. I want vengeance.”

He breathed deeply into the phone. “So, do I. One day, little one. One day. Until then we will be patient. We will plan, but more importantly, we will train.”

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“ZIO?”

My arms found his waist. I couldn't fit around him but as he lifted me in his arms, I knew I was home. I hadn't seen him since I was five, but I remembered his full beard peppered with gray and his thick hair. He was solid but his age showed in the deep lines around his eyes and face.

“Welcome to New York, bella.”

It had been a long three weeks travelling in hot trunks while hiding; always hiding as I snuck out of Europe for the freedom this country called America always promised to offer.

I looked around with wonder. I heard so much about America. Some good, some bad. But the tall buildings that rose high above the sky, the people, the traffic...I felt as if I could be anybody here. As if I could be a chameleon and make myself into whoever I wanted to be. I wasn't the orphaned girl from a crime family who saw more blood and death than a doctor working in the ER. I was Diana. Solid, strong, and determined.

“When do we start?”

“Your training?”

“Yes.”

“Today.”

“Good,” I nodded.

Zio drove us in his Cadillac from the airport over bridges where I could see all of the New York skyline.

“It’s just like I imagined.”

He grinned. “There’s lots of Italians here. They think I’m from the coast, a fisherman’s son. You are my niece. Your father died in a storm. Your mother ran off with a wealthy man.”

I sat back against the leather seats. “I’m not here for a dream...I’m here to become someone’s nightmare.”

“Did you know he’s next in line to inherit everything? He will be the next Don of his family. They’ve already started grooming him.”

“I know.” I tell Zio in detail what happened at the funeral and how I woke up with a note and a wilted flower in my palm.

When I’m finished the look in his eyes echoes the vengeance making a permanent home in my heart. He stroked the top of my head and held me close. “Someday, little bella, he will pay for not only his sins but the weight of the sins of his entire family.”

“Promise.”

“I swear it to you. The Fiorelli’s might be down but it’s a big mistake to count us out. The future of the entire famiglia, rests on you little one. You have the blood of Roman soldiers in your veins. Your bloodline tells a story of war and vengeance.

Honor and duty. You cannot fail, Romina, when it's your destiny to win.”

Zio's words made me feel invincible. I was a Roman and like my name, will conquer Roque Salvatore. When I'm done with him, he will beg me for mercy, but like my ancestors—I won't give it.

I thrust my balled fists into the pocket of my trousers. I'm only fifteen but I already dress like il sovrano... the ruler of the family. My shoes are handmade from the finest Italian leather and they silently tread on the marble floor as I eavesdropped on my Uncle Franco, eating dinner with the heads of three different crime families.

He pretends otherwise, but I knew my uncle yearned to rule. But I'm my father's eldest living son and it was my turn to reign next. That is if my Zio Franco doesn't off me to take his shot. He and the rest of the made men held council as they drank red wine and boasted about our latest victory. It took a while for all the men to gather while the police and the government condemned the latest blood bath. We even caught the consternation of the Vatican in Rome, so the celebration over winning the war had to wait. But tonight, The Fiorelli's are no more. We drove them out of Palermo and extinguished their flame. Only I knew one tiny candle still burned.

"It's Roque's crown to wear."

"The boy is not ready. His hand not bloodied enough, his dick's never been wet."

"He took care of the Fiorelli girl. He snuffed her out without blinking once. His father would be proud."

Zio Franco's large hand smacked the table. The dishes jumped with a clatter. "I rule until he comes of age. He's not ready. He's full of teenage hormones. He'd make rash decisions that would jeopardize all our businesses."

“Like a mass murder at a funeral gathering? Even our own women and children were hit in the crossfire. It was foolish, the order you gave. We could have held him and his brat while escorting our own out the backdoor. Instead it was mayhem.” The head of the Castellione outfit shook his head and puffed on a cigar.

Through the crack in the door, I watched my uncle shrug. “Collateral damage. Fiorelli killed my wife and my baby on Christmas Eve. If my mistake was passion, so be it. Vengeance was ours.”

“You’ll groom Roque as your brother wanted. I promised your brother his son would wear the crown. I make good on my word.”

“His shoulders aren’t strong enough to support his head. The crown can be heavy, full of thorns and soaked with blood.”

“If you hurt him there will be payback, Franco. Murdering the next-in-line is against our code.”

My uncle laughed. “Hurt him? Roque? The boy is all I’ve got since Fiorelli murderedmi famiglia.”

But I saw it in the glaze in his eyes. The way he balled his fist next to his wine glass. Uncle Franco was no longer family. His lust for power was stronger than blood. He wanted me dead and gone, buried like all the rest. I knew he had a mistress. With me out of the way—he’d start over as the DON with a new wife and baby. I could feel it just as strong as the little Fiorelli’s girl’s heartbeat against the flat of my hand where I held it on her neck before I squeezed.

I saw and heard all I needed.

It was time to plan.

I left and went home, sat in my father's study and moved chess pieces around the board. I still had family...distant relatives of my mother outside of Rome. I'd call on them soon. Ask for support, in return I'd offer my cousins a spot at my table. My mother's family isn't as wealthy. I know her brother always wanted in on my father's business but was shut out. Then, I'd call the one man who could back me until it's my time to rise. None of the made men will back me at fifteen. Not when I have no access to money, no legal adult status or the muscles yet to make them bend to my will. My Uncle will buy them all, promise them more than he can deliver.

I need my own crew. One I can trust to break me just to build me into the perfect killing machine. One that I can use as a new foundation on which to build my own throne.

Constantine.

It had to be him.

He's half-blind. Old as fuck but he trained Papa to be the Don he was. It's a sort of fucked up tradition between our two families. They train us and we wed and bed their women in return, strengthening the alliance by blood. But Papa let it all go to his head. The money. The power. The pussy. Drunk on his own power, he became sloppy and the Fiorelli's got him.

Money, power and a woman is a man's weakness. I'd seen it time and time again with my own eyes. It works to my advantage that I've tasted none of them. I can exercise self-control to make sure none of the three ever bring my downfall.

Except...the girl. The one whose life was in my hands to take...one heartbeat away from stopping.

My fist smacked against the table as I remembered the feel of her silky red hair in my

hands... the way it smelled like innocence and sunshine...how I shook as I held her. I was the one with my hands on her throat and yet she was the one who controlled me.

She's a tween. Probably doesn't even bleed yet and I've got some sick fascination with her. I should've ended it. I'll find her, no doubt still in her Papa's house trying to plot how to live. I let her live an extra day. I can't let her have anymore not when my very place in my own family is being questioned. I will be the head of the Salvatore Syndicate. It's my destiny and no one will take it from me, not even Little Red.

I grabbed thick rope from the cellar and walked into the dusk. The cold winter air burned my throat as I breathed in deep. I shut my eyes wondering if her throat burned like this as my hands closed around it.

Damn that hellish girl.

I couldn't do it and that made me weak. She's a weakness.

In the end, I couldn't take her life...when something in me wanted to own it. As I squeezed and breathed in the honey-scent of her hair and felt her girlish body tremble... it excited me—her—a little girl.

I'm sick.

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I really am my father's son—a total monster. When she fainted, falling limp in my arms, I felt shame at how powerful it felt. I was her master. It was my decision if she lived or died by my hands. She made me feel like a fifteen-year-old god.

That little piece of obstinance was right about one thing—I was a virgin. A demi-god who was almost a man but never knew what it felt like to fuck. She called me out on it, too. When her eyes delved into mine; she tried to suck my soul straight from the center of my being.

Maybe she did.

How the hell else can I explain why I didn't make the final kill that would even the balance? Herfamigliakilled my father, my baby sister, and all my aunt's in a car bomb on Christmas Eve. They were on their way to church. It was supposed to be me and my brothers in that car. But we let them go instead. The engine was running longer, the interior warmer. My fate was to watch in horror four cars back as they burned.

I shook my head.

Her life was mine to take to make things right.

Shame crashes over me. I didn't avenge them. They deserved vengeance.

I nodded to the guards, waving them off as I take off on foot. With the Fiorelli's gone there are no threats...except the one I left to his wine and cigarettes. It's a brisk walk but it cools my heated blood. I'm back to being cold-hearted and calculated, I need to turn into a ruthless man to survive my lot in life. I never craved the crown since it

was always mine to have. But now that it's being threatened, I want it as bad as I want to snap the Fiorelli girl's delicate neck.

Her house was a silent tomb.

No lights.

No flickering candles.

I stepped inside. It was filled with objects of the people turned ghosts who used to have a life within these walls.

She was too smart to have any light on. On silent feet, I moved from room to room. Her father's study was unlocked. My fingers traced her baby-girlish face from the photo perched on his desk.

I lifted it high, smashed the glass and tore her photo from the frame. Like a lovesick fan, I held it tight, tucking it into my pocket.

Obsession. It consumed me. The need to make her pay for her father's sins—that must be why. It was the only logical reason.

“Where are you little butterfly?” I called out softly into the darkness.

With a twisted grin, I climbed the stairs like the big, bad wolf knowing he had his target trapped.

My fingers pushed creaky doors open one by one until I found her room. I knew it was hers. The smell of honey and sunshine came from within.

Moonlight spilled across her pillow—cold and gray like the light of death itself. It

shone down on a crumpled piece of paper, next to it laid a wilted flower.

You won't find me. I'll find you first. Someday when you aren't looking, my face will be the last you see as your blood spills just as my Papa's.

Until then, little-man Salvatore.

P.S. If our roles were reversed. I wouldn't have hesitated. You showed weakness and mercy. Don't expect me to give you any.

My cock stirred.

The little butterfly had claws. She's smart too. But she's wrong if she thinks I'll let her soft mossy eyes and flame colored hair bewitch me twice.

I would get vengeance. Someday just like I promised. When she's legal and her tits ripe. I'd laugh as I ram my steel dick in her and remember her taunt that I didn't know my way around a woman's body. My hands trailed over her cold sheets. Picked up objects around her room before dropping them back in their place. On her dresser, I found a hair ribbon. It was hunter green and still had strands of her hair tangled in it. I held it to my nose. Like the sick predator I was, I inhaled deeply.

My whole body quaked.

Trembled.

Need.

Desire.

Vengeance.

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They all swirled in a storm, brewing inside me.

I pocketed the treasure next to the photo and walked downstairs. Whistling, I shoved off the back step and walked in the shadows toward the local whorehouse. I'd prove that sassy hellion wrong. I'd become a man tonight.

A Salvatore never pays and a whore's legs are always spread for one. I knew our outfit always kept the most beautiful ones on reserve. No other men in Palermo could touch them. Their pussy's were saved for us.

My knuckles rapped twice on the door.

The madam kept her cool when she opened. "Mr. Salvatore. Welcome."

She ushered me inside the opulent mansion where women lounged topless on velvet couches. She snapped her fingers. "Get Giselle."

"Come. Sit." She led me over to a wide chair covered in the same crimson velvet as the couches. She made me a bourbon, neat. I felt like a man as she paraded woman after woman in front of me until she presented the last one.

"This is Giselle. She's a favorite."

I perused the woman. She was beautiful, with long chocolate hair and deep blue eyes. But I didn't want her.

I look up the line.

“Her,” I pointed my finger at the petite redhead. She was young and flat chested. If the madame was surprised by my choice she hid it well.

The redhead came forward and straddled me. I ran my index finger up her stomach. It shook as it reached her pebbled nipple. It took everything I had not to come in my pants as she moved her hand to the seam in my crotch.

She resembled my hellion, but she was much older. She took my hand and led me to a gaudy boudoir.

I didn’t bother with foreplay. She knew what was coming. I drove my steely hips into hers. My hands made their way to her throat. She clawed at me. I whispered honeyed words of devils and angels as I came. My eyes shut tight, as I buried my nose in her hair and pretended, she was someone else a decade from now.

I let go and she rolled from under me wheezing for breath. I felt reborn, energized, and ready to take my place at the head of my family’s table.

I sprung off the bed and started to dress. Opening my wallet, I let a thousand Euros rain on the bed.

“Salvatore men... don’t pay.” Her voice was husky with pain.

“A gift, for you bella.” I smirked as she held the sheet to hide her barely there breasts.

“Don’t hide, bella. These,” I leaned over taking the sheet and letting the back of my knuckles rub over her nipples, “are art.” I realized I took her, but still knew nothing of sex. “Show me? Teach me how to please a woman?” Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Please, bella.”

She nodded. “Choking is fine but wait until you feel me clench around you. Wait

until I'm at the edge of the cliff. I'll soar higher then."

I undressed again.

She pushed me back on the bed and straddled my hips. "Touch me here." She rolled her own nipples. "Like this."

I groaned, feeling my cock harden, wanting more. I bent forward taking the tiny bud into my mouth. She threw her head back and grinded her wet mound on me.

When she lifted her hips, my cock surged up and slipped back in. She showed me the tempo. Slow. Fast.

I came again. This time it was just a sheer release, with no ghost of a girl's eyes haunting me.

I was virile with a lifetime of pent up rage in my teenage body. We went for hours. And I found my favorite position when she gets on all fours and raised her ass up high.

I slid in deep, seeing stars as my dick hits the secret spot all woman have. My whore didn't fake her cries of bliss as I hit it over and over.

I realized missionary is for lovers. And love is a weakness. I vowed never to take a woman that way when there is no need. This position was best anyway. She was satisfied and I felt like a powerful god and the best part—I didn't need her face or lips. Kissing is for passion. Eyes can steal your soul. Both those things are a death sentence for a man-boy like me. Especially if I want to survive to bring my family back to the heights of power.

I left her right before the breaking dawn. The smell of sweaty sex still clung to me as

I snuck back into the family home with evil ruling my heart. In a moment of clarity. It all made sense. What I must do to survive like the little Fiorelli girl.

I grabbed my father's switch blade and crept down the hall to my uncle's chambers. He was snoring. Bottles of wine littered his nightstand and floor. He was in the middle of two women who also were sleeping it off.

I opened the blade and struck hard and fast. His eyes snapped open, but he was already a dead man as the blood gushed from his slit throat onto the satin pillows.

I held his gaze and waited. In his dying eyes, I saw that he knew. He knew why it had to be done. For he was plotting against me. My uncle wanted me buried and gone but instead it would be him, not me.

I turned, walked out and let the hot shower rinse away my sin. But the man I had become remained. I took my first life and lost my virginity in the same long night.

I met my eyes in the mirror. The Fiorelli girl was wrong. I wasn't weak. I had just become a man.

4

“Do I have to?”

“In America, yes. You must go to school.”

I sighed, munched my toast and pretended I wasn't intimidated. I stared down the face of death, escaped its clutches unscathed but the thought of going to the fifth grade in a public school in New York had me petrified.

Since my accent was heavy and my English poor, Zio thought it best to enroll me a year behind for my age. He took me shopping and I was excited to buy jeans and sneakers. Papa always made me wear dresses and fancy shoes that pinched my feet.

He sipped his espresso, eyeing me over the rim. “Look them in the eye. Don't let them see your fear. They will be looking for it.”

“Who? The fifth-graders or the Salvatore's?”

He smiled faintly. “To conquer one, you must conquer the other first.”

“Well, I already conquered Roque Salvatore. These bullies don't stand a chance.”

“No, they don't. I'll pick you up from school. Your training starts today.”

“Martial arts?”

“Fencing. You’re small for your age and much younger than your foe. You must use every weapon you can to your advantage.”

“Like the goddess, Diana. She used bows and arrows.”

“You will, too. All in good time.”

I picked up my backpack and put on a thick puffy coat. I was already feeling much better about my day. I just had to get through school first. Zio walked me the five city blocks over to the school. I stopped, letting the tip of my nose touch against the chain metal fence. Boys inside the concrete school yard were playing some weird game inside a hexagon using a bouncing ball.

“It’s called Ga-ga. You’ll learn. It’s good for your reflexes.”

A few girls jumping rope caught my eye. Hope fluttered through me. I’d never had any real friends. People at my old school either sucked up to me because I was a Fiorelli or feared me because I was one. I couldn’t win. But now I was Diana Palermo, a girl with no past and with a future I could paint any color I wanted.

“Come on, I’ll walk you in.”

“No. I can take it from here.” I lifted my chin high; stared down every curious gaze, and marched right into that building.

“Diana Palermo.” The name dropped from my lips heavy with my accent, but it was spoken like a dare. The secretary nodded her head so hard the glasses perched on the tip of her nose wobbled.

She spoke English so fast I couldn’t understand one word. I thought Italians spoke fast, but she had my nationality beat. She shuffled a pile of papers, found the one she

was searching for and motioned me to follow her out and down the hall.

She walked into an empty classroom and handed the sheet of paper to the teacher writing on the blackboard with chalk. Much to my delight the teacher turned and smiled with her eyes.

“Diana! Benvenuto! Welcome!”

My shoulders sagged with relief. She spoke Italian. Her accent was off, but I understood her and she, me.

She told me to take a seat in the first row. I thought school was going to be okay. But that quickly changed shortly after the bell rang and the class filed in. She turned her back to finish writing on the board and that’s when the first spitball landed in the back of my hair.

Eyes narrowed, I turned to face the sea of smirks behind me. My fingers felt around in my hair for the wadded-up paper and flicked it to the floor. I wiped my hands on my jeans just as another one hit.

These kids were idiots. The worst things they’ve seen on a TV I’d actually witnessed first-hand. I was hoping to make friends. But I guess it was to be war. Little could they know—war is all I’ve ever known.

It was going to be a slaughter.

I chewed the end of my pencil and plotted. I knew it was the big kid in the back with the spiked-up hair and attitude I could smell in the front row. He was going down. I wondered how many boys would fall before I toppled the ultimate prize. They’d all be practice for the main event. But I’d still savor each victory.

I stayed still not even bothering to collect the gathering ickiness sticking in the back of my hair. I held my head high and did my work. Recess was coming soon. I'd show these boys that there's a new boss in town, starting with a swift kick in the nuts and if that wasn't enough, I'd practice my right-hook. The one Zio's been teaching me.

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* * *

Lunchtime was hell. And I thought I left hell back in Palermo. I was wrong. Hell is lunchtime in an elementary school cafeteria. Hundreds of eyes peered at me as I walked in. Then the whispers started. “I heard her parents died in a fire she set...”

“Her uncle is a Pimp.”

“A real one?”

“Yeah.”

“She looks like a freak with that pale skin and that red hair. No Italian looks like that. She’s fake.”

Some spoke in Italian while others were harder to make out. But it was easy to understand no one wanted me here.

Hurriedly, I stumbled in the food line, quickly grabbed whatever was there before finding my way to a table scrunched in between the garbage and an emergency exit.

“Yo! Freak!”

I turned and that was a mistake. A wad of hot mush met me in the face. I swore vehemently in Italian before grabbing a pile of napkins to clean myself.

With a bang, I set my tray down and faced the group of sixth grade boys rolling with

laughter.

Fuck them, I thought. I picked up my own plate of slop and hurled it right in the face of the closest boy to me. Then I jumped on their table and pretended their food was a soccer ball and launched all sorts of shit in their stunned faces. The grand finale was me, hurtling through the air like a Diva from Monday Night Raw as I jumped high, landing on the group of boys trying to flee my ugly scene.

Some fought back.

But I gave as good as I got.

“Bella? Suspension on your first day?”

“I’m sorry, Zio. But I will never be afraid of anyone ever again. Especially not some Brooklyn born Italiano. I’m a true blood. I’m a mafioso queen. How dare they?”

“Ah, bella.” Zio hugged me tight. “You are a tiny tigress. A true survivor. Those boys didn’t know what was coming.”

“But save the fight for Salvatore not the schoolyard, eh?”

“I’ll try, Zio.”

But no one ever fucked with me again. I ruled the school after my first day. They called me Little Italy. I liked it. If they only knew how powerful my bloodline was. My people ruled all their people back in the day on that tiny slice of Mediterranean paradise I’ll always call home. But my secrets needed to stay my secrets until the time and day comes when Romina Fiorelli rises.

5

Chloe sits for a minute when she finishes.

“Are you scared of me? Think less of me?”

She bites her lip. “No. I think more. You saved her. You knew if you didn’t, they would’ve killed her.”

“Don’t give me so much credit. I craved the power. ...and I did kill her. I felt her heart stop beating in my hands and her lungs exhale fighting to find air. When she fell limp in my arms, I rushed her into the back of the limo and pressed my mouth to hers trying to breathe back the life into her that I had just took.”

“See? You keep deluding yourself into thinking you’re the villain, when you really wanted to do the right thing.”

“I’ve never done the right thing. We’re barely into the story.”

“Well, it is kinda gross how you lost your V card to a hooker.”

“Men don’t have V- cards. But you better still have yours,” I warn. “For at least ten more years.”

“Ten?” She squeaks.

“If not more. I’ll cut anyone who tries to get near you, Chloe.”

She swallows hard. “I know. But you don’t need to worry. Sex terrifies me.”

“That’s just because some old fuck tried to take it from you. Did I mention I’m sending you to an all-girls boarding school?”

She rolls her eyes. “What happened next? When did you become this big, bad, mafia king?”

“Are you sure you want to keep going? I’ve never told anyone my complete life story...”

She rests her chin in her hands, “I’ve never heard anything more fascinating. Well, you could’ve left out the sex part. But it’s not like it shocked me much. I saw my first dick when I was six. My birth mom sobered up for a bit just so she could use me to get food stamps and state checks which of course she spent getting high. Anyway, she made extra on the side by giving blowies for twenty bucks. Some nights she had a line.”

“I’ll hunt her down and kill her myself.”

“She already took care of that. My social worker informed me she overdosed a few years ago.”

I shake my head at how she’s so young, but yet so old. Nothing fazes Chloe but things can still frighten her.

“You need to understand. I don’t want you to be afraid of sex, I just don’t want you to have any for a long, long, time. Wait for a man who knows how to make it good.”

“Gross. Are you, Roque Salvatore, seriously turning this into some kind of sex-pep talk? On with the story of your ill-fated love. Wait! Where is she now? Did she marry

someone else? Is that why you're so broody? Pacing the penthouse floors all night?"

"As if I'd ever let another man put a band of gold around her finger."

"Well? What's the deal? Why don't you have the girl?"

"Something got in our way?"

"Something? Someone? Or your big, fat, stupid, ego?"

A wry smile ghosts my lips, "A bit of both. Fine back to my life story... I left Palermo. There was nothing for me there anymore. Despite the easy smiles made over cigars and bourbon, the other families moved in. It was an easy takeover. The remaining syndicates broke up Palermo into three pieces, each of them taking what they wanted. Only the Don of the Castellione's tried to intercede and leave me a small piece of my own empire, but in the end even he rolled. But he did do me one solid. He secured my family's assets and set it aside. Or so I had thought. Little did I know it came with strings... but we'll get to that later. The house was closed, bank accounts secured, and he had me escorted personally to Constantine Castellione.

The man was a mafioso legend.

In Italy he was synonymous to the American's Capone. The man is more evil than ten demons walking through hell and I handpicked him to make me one. Only I wanted to walk the earth. I wanted to die an old man. And that wasn't going to be easy, not when destiny still called me to do more than just dick around in Italy. I always had bigger plans for the future of the Salvatore's. America."

I turn the page of my own journals and start reading how I felt. My past comes hurtling at me like a runaway car.

“It was only me in the back of the limo. So, there was no one to see my white knuckles or lump forming in my throat.

Despite my bravado, I knew I wasn't half as evil as I needed to be. I was a baby villain wearing Pampers compared to what I must become. Constantine was the only person alive who could do it. No matter what he commanded I must obey. If I didn't. I might as well give up and let the hit that was put on me come to pass. I'd never age. Never grow up, never live.”

“That's so heavy. Life in the mob. You were my age?”

“Yes. I was fifteen when I entered Constantine's house and by the time I left him at sixteen, I felt I'd aged six thousand years instead of one.” I pick up my drink and continue reading my own words describing the personal hell I had placed myself in...

6

He wasn't what I expected. But he was a monster. That much was very true. He was old but tyrannical. When the guard ushered me into a study, I couldn't quite make out his face because the room was dark. He sat in a wheelchair by a window. Cloaked in shadows I couldn't see his face until he slowly wheeled himself forward. His right cheek was... flesh. Mangled. Twisted...

"Car bomb. Those fuckers thought they dropped me, but I crawled on burning legs out of the hot metal."

"What brings you to my lair, Little King?"

"I need your help."

He glanced at me and shrugged. "From me? I'm a cripple. What could I possibly offer you?"

"Everything. Don't bullshit me, Constantine. You're a fucking legend. And I need a legend."

"That and a prayer."

"I don't pray."

"No. Men like us don't, do we?"

“It won’t be easy, Little Prince. The remaining families want you dead and gone too. With the Fiorelli’s out of the way and you being the only real Salvatore left...”

“There’s more for them to fight over.”

“And what can we do? Me? Shoot a bazooka from my wheelchair and you with your man boy arms?”

Anger rolled through me like a storm cloud. “I’m hardly a boy.”

“So, I’ve heard. You made your first kill.”

Averting my eyes, I glanced at the crackling fire to his right.

He swore in rapid Italian. “Get out. I can’t help you.”

“I’m not leaving. Do your worst, Constantine. Make me your teenage bitch for all I care. Help me bring back glory. Let me rise as your new king. I’m young, capable, and fully ready to become whatever or whoever you need.”

“Bold words. But greatness requires sacrifice. Get on your knees, look me in the eyes and confess everything. What are you hiding? I am your demon lord. Your dark king. I decide if you live or die. If you get kept or cast out.”

Bowing my head, I kneeled. “I let her live. The Fiorelli girl. I lied. I choked her until she passed out then checked her heartbeat when I pretended to dispose of her body.”

“Pathetic.”

“She was me. I saw myself in her. Defiant. Could give two fucks. She had so much fire. Who was I to take it?”

He said nothing, just wheeled past me to the fire and picked up the poker. The logs crackled and popped as he moved the wood around. I turned my head to stare out at the night beyond the window still kneeling... still waiting.

“FUCK!”

He caught me off guard. The tip of the poker seared my skin. The smell of my own flesh melting filled my nostrils. I felt lightheaded. Weak. But I couldn't vomit or pass out. He'd think I was a pussy and kill me himself. I reached behind to grab the iron and pressed it harder into my back. My teeth bared like a wild animal. Sweat covered my skin. But I pushed the tip of that poker deep until I felt it hit bone.

“Impressive. But you'll have to do better. Find the girl. End her. You must become the Grim Reaper. You must become the monster lurking in the shadows, not a monster wearing diapers.”

“You call this child's play?” I hissed, through clenched teeth.

The metal fell to the floor with a clang. I turned meeting his eyes over my shoulder.

He shrugged. “No. I call this a beautiful beginning. Now strip and get in the hole.”

“I'm not fucking you, old man.”

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His laugh cackled like dried leaves in the wind on all Hollow's Eve. "You might wish that's what I'm asking for when I'm done with you."

He motioned for me to follow him out of the study. "Reggie!" One of the Castellione men came briskly. "Take him to the pit."

I followed numbly. My pain was so severe I'd gone numb. My mind began to separate from my body.

The man led me through the house and out a backdoor to a barn. "Take off your clothes and get in." He lifted a trap door on the barn floor revealing a dark, dank hole.

I did as he said. A monster can't be afraid of the dark, so I got in like I gave zero fucks about my disfigured flesh or new home.

The door banged shut taking all light with it. The deadbolt slid into place. I was buried alive. No air. No light. Nothing but blackness enveloped me. I was in the womb of the earth. She must decide what to do with me. Curled up into a ball, I used my body to heat itself. Somehow sleep came.

I lost all sense of time. Cramped in the hole, I shifted as much as I could to relieve myself.

The smell of my putridness wasn't lost on me. In and out of consciousness, I grasped onto anything to stay sane. Constantine wouldn't break me. I knew if he did, they'd bury me here.

My mind clung to the last pure thing. Her. Little Red with her pale as snow skin, hair on fire, and eyes the color of wet moss on a forest floor. Her hair smelled of honey and roses, her skin felt smooth; untouched. Despite my rancid conditions, I felt myself swell and harden in the dark. For her. The girl I brought to the brink of death only to bring her back. For the girl who's barely a teen. For the woman she'll one day be if I ever find her.

I gripped my shaft, pumping a few times into my hand then pulling from root to tip. She kept me from insanity. I fantasized about being the first man to touch her, kiss her—taste those sweet budding breasts. My hand quickened. I squeezed my eyes shut even though I couldn't see anything anyway. What was left of me was hers—the little spitfire who taunted me to be a man. She knew I wasn't. She saw straight through me while everyone else believed the façade. “Fuck, Little Red,” I muttered hoarsely as I came all over myself in the pit. I was in hell already, there was no use feeling shame for thinking about her this way.

Shaking from the aftershocks of my release, I realized I was burning up. Infection must've set in. I was a dead man either way.

I drifted in and out of consciousness for some time. A loud smack came from the distance. I clung to that sound. Trapped in the dark not wanting to let it go; the need to fight somehow, to survive become stronger despite my weakened state.

Suddenly the trapdoor to the pit swung up.

My scream brought me fully back. I was blind. I couldn't see. The light was too much. I raised my hand blocking it out. I was dragged up and carried somewhere. I felt the pinch of a needle and then nothing... I faded back to black.

* * *

“The Fiorelli girl escaped Italy. Slipped out like a ghost. But if our men don’t find her you will.”

I turned my head from my place on the floor. He saved me. Barley. Constantine had the best doctors cut out my rotting flesh, pump me full of IV’s and antibiotics but he saved me to be his stray pet. I slept on the bare floor. On a threadbare blanket with a dog bed for a pillow. Even through the days and hours when I almost died from hypothermia and infection, I stayed on the floor.

I hide my elation behind my lifeless eyes. My heart still beat but I was still more of a dead man. At least everything inside me felt that way.

He broke me that week in the pit. I lost my humanity. I wanted her to live, just because for some reason it’s important to him that she doesn’t.

He kicked me swiftly in the ribs. The toe of his steel-tipped boot would’ve cracked a rib if it had more power behind it. The bastard could move his legs. That piece of valuable information I wouldn’t forget.

“Get up. Your training begins today.” I followed him to a large bathroom. Hanging up is a custom-made Italian suit. I showered like I’ve never felt hot running water on my skin. I winced when it hits the bandages on my back. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I stopped short at the woman standing inside my room.

She fidgeted nervously. “I’m Camilla. Here to change your bandages.” She was young, slim, and nervous.

I’m a demon spawn. Dead. A dick.

My towel dropped and I walked toward her with my huge erection in front of me. “I have something more urgent that needs attending to.”

I was stuck in the earth and lived on a floor. Seeing her down on her knees sucking my dick reminded me that I was still a king. I might be poor and nobody now, but my legacy still lived.

I smirked as she took the head of me into her mouth, rolling her tongue along my thick rim.

She knew who I was. Wanted me even though I was still more boy than man. “That’s it, bella. Someday you can say you slept with a God. Everyone will know who I am. Roque Salvatore will be a legend.”

She couldn’t respond since my hand had taken her by the back of her head. I pumped my hips into her mouth, coming hard. I smiled. Whistling, I let her dress my wounds after she cleaned herself up.

“What?” I barked as she hovered just inside the door.

She bit her lip. A faint blush stained her cheeks. “Oh that? Sorry, baby, but I’m saving myself for marriage.” I deadpanned and continued getting dressed.

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“Dog? Come with me.” Reggie sauntered in with two others.

“Name’s Roque.”

“You are Dog until you earn the right to have your name back. You betrayed your familia. Didn’t carry out your last order and killed your Uncle. Both offenses are against the code.”

“I can’t take either back.”

“No, but you can be our dog to train, little king.”

Constantine wheeled in, “Dog. Obey your master. You will work off your debt to us. I’m not foolish enough to give you a weapon. You will be our new grim reaper.”

With no other choice, I climbed in a limo between three made men. Two hours later, I’d taken three souls. Over the course of my time with Constantine I added dozens more. And with each death blow I dealt, I vowed two things: The first, Constantine himself would be the last soul I took by my own hand and the second, when I was the head of my Syndicate I’d be done being the Reaper. I’d give that job to someone else. Days blended to weeks and I lost track of time.

When I was almost seventeen, I asked Constantine if my cousins could come train. He smiled that greasy smile of his. They spent ten days in the pit. Vito and Geno wouldn’t look me in the eyes for months. They hated what I made them become. But family pride and basic need made them do it. They were poor and their mother had a dozen mouths to feed. They wanted in the mob for years and now being a part of it

wasn't all money and designer suits. It was hell. Sheer hell.

I promised to make them gods beside me. One night after a particular hellish day, where none of us could sleep, we sat out in the barn on the floor next to the pit smoking a pack between the three of us while hoping our hands would cease to shake.

Constantine.

The Castellione's. They controlled the uglier businesses. A few weeks earlier, we helped move military weapons into Turkey. Warheads, ground to air missiles and the like. Today, a commercial jet was shot down. The faces of the kids who boarded that plane haunted us as we watched the news.

They were too young. Too good.

I thought sacrificing my soul was worth it. But that day it wasn't. The three of us knew it was on us. Those lives lost. Those kids who would never live. It wasn't a simple war between the five families anymore. We were doing global shit and sin and it was too much, even for us.

"We can't go on like this." Vito took a drag. The six months he's spent here has aged him. Fine lines marred his eighteen-year-old face. His brother, Geno was ten months younger than me and he looked like shit too.

"I know. I have a plan."

"It's more than Constantine against us. It's the Castellione crew... the other families... he lied to you Roque. Instead of setting you free all he did was make you a slave for life."

I gritted my teeth. I was cocky and full of arrogance when I swaggered into his lair.

He did fulfill one promise though, I learned everything from the ground up. I listened, watched, and made a million mental notes. He set me up better than I could ever imagined. All I needed was to break free.

“America. We’ll make our move there. When we overtake Chicago, we’ll come back to Italy. They will all pay.”

“How? They’ll kill what’s left of our family.”

A ghost of a smile played with my lips as I exhaled watching the smoke rise up.

“Constantine is an old fool. Too busy sucking his own dick to see what’s been happening right under his nose. I know his safe combination, every bank routing number... all the details to break us free.

We end Reggie and the rest of the men. Slit their throats in their sleep. I’ll snuff out the old bastard. He’s mine. We’ll use his cash and connections to get the fuck out of Italy. Take your Ma and crew, we’ll start fresh in the states. Become Americans. Lose our accents. Get properly educated. The day will come when the Salvatore’s come back and when we do—I’ll slay them all.”

“All the families?”

“Anyone who won’t bend a knee.”

We finished our smokes all the while drunk on thoughts of freedom. We planned and executed. In less than a week it was time.

I dressed in the finest suit he had gifted me, went down to the study and made a fire. I took the poker in my hand, fed it to the flames until the tip was orange with flame. I walked into his room.

I stood over him.

My maleficent presence alone awoke him from slumber. He wasn't surprised. The fucker had the nerve to smile. "Finally, at last. Free me, my son. I want to walk again, even if it's over the hot coals in hell."

Death was too good for him. It was what he yearned for. I dragged him out of bed, wheeled him out into the cold and into the barn.

"Strip." I commanded.

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His hand's shook as he did. Naked, pale and withered, I dumped him from the chair into the hole.

"I succeeded. Don't forget I made you in my image, Roque. I'll live on through you."

I handed the poker to Vito. "Make it burn again."

"As you will,il sovrano." He referred to me as the ruler.

Constantine watched helplessly when Vito came back. "Kneel," I commanded.

"Fuck off."

I jumped into the pit with the poker in hand, the tip of my boot found his ribs. Blood dripped from his mouth shortly after.

One hand moved his legs, contorting them into a kneeling position. Lowering the poker, let the tip graze his right eye. Then his left. Then I wrote my name in cursive all over thin skin on his back.

Disgusted at how he screamed, I spit on him before using the ladder Vito lowered and left the pit.

"You're weak and screamed just like the rest when it comes down to it," I sneered. "Enjoy the slow descent into hell, old man."

"I'll save a spot for you," he rasped before I slammed the door shut and slid the bolt.

“What next?”

I turned to Geno and Vito. “We get the fuck out of Italy. Hide out somewhere. Become someone else.”

Geno and Vito left for the coast to gather my aunt and the rest of her kids. I stayed behind to pilfer what I could—guns, money, art.

I packed it all up.

Then I sat in Constantine’s desk and called a banker in Palermo. “Buongiorno. I’m calling from the Castellione estate in Lake Como. I’d like to inquire about two houses in Palermo. The old Salvatore residence and the Fiorelli’s.”

Silence greets me. “Those houses are both cursed.”

“I know.”

“They sit in ruin. Untouched tombs.”

“Who owns them?”

“The city. No one paid taxes and no one will buy either.”

Thinking quick, I scanned the amount of money in Constantine’s account, offering a quarter of it for both. The man laughed. “You’re a fool. But a rich one.”

He faxed over the paperwork the following morning. I forged Constantine’s name. Then shortly after, forged his name on a new will by delicately using a tracing technique.

Upon his death, all his riches will be left to a variety of charitable foundations.

Both houses will be given to me. An anonymous American-based foundation that was conveniently set up hours earlier now owns both properties. The foundation is a fraud. Just a name on paper, "Little Red Enterprises."

I used Constantine's money to pay off crooked lawyers. The ones my family used for years. They took quick money and asked no questions. Then I set up my new name.

Ralph Smith.

Bland. Utterly American and absolutely a forgettable name. Even if the remaining families came looking, they'd never find me.

Opening the briefcase Vito left, I found the vials of blood and the two teeth that each of my cousin's extracted. Seeing a dentist later would be the least of it.

Finding pliers, I pulled out a lower tooth. It hurt like a bitch, but it was nothing compared to the torture I underwent to become who I was now. Then I collected my things and drove to where they left the car by the side of a back road. I carefully placed my tooth in the front and theirs in the back, splattered our blood and set the car ablaze. It'd look like it was a hit. Us. Constantine. His men. All of it. The families will fight amongst themselves each pointing the finger at one another while I rode off into my dark sunset for a land where I know she lives and breathes.

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“I’m coming, Little Red. I told you I would.” My words were whispers carried on the back of the wind as they traveled through the starry sky and hopefully landed a world a way to where she was.

I’m not in love.

Obsessed or pining.

She’d just become my talisman. My good luck piece; a part of me as much as all of my past.”

I close the journal to take a break, poured myself another drink, and stared out the windows.

“Shortly after we arrived in America we moved to Chicago. More Italians in Chicago. No one paid us any mind, after all the Italian no longer ran here. It was street gangs and crooked politicians that ruled. But not for long. We took college classes at a local community college at the same time I aced my GED. Constantine was a whore for Greek Mythology, Plato, and Aristotle. The Ancient Romans fascinated him. He made me learn Latin. My training was twenty hours a day of sheer hell. My own family paid the best tutors money could buy while I was still their prince. I had over a decade of the best teaching in every known subject matter known to man.

Getting accepted into Princeton was a cake walk. Especially when I paid my way in Aunt Becky style. No one asked questions about my missing year, my lack of formal education, or the fact I wasn’t a varsity NCAA athlete.

My IQ score stood on its own as well as my SAT.

I was a fucking deviant genius, the kind the world only sees every thousand years or so. I was primed to be the living legend I believed I was since birth.”

I stop my trip down memory lane to clear my throat.

Chloe snorts. “Well you definitely have the record for the biggest ego the world’s ever seen. Did you find her right away?”

“No. She found me.”

She burrows into the blanket with wide, excited eyes. “Please tell me she kicks your ass!”

“Open the next journal and find out...”

7

I'd have to sneak out. There's no other way. Zio would have a shitfit if he knew what I had planned. But I've waited almost a decade to see Roque in the flesh. It's not the right time to sever his artery but a death by a thousand cuts is more painful anyway.

I didn't even recognize myself. There's no way Roque could even if he remembered the slightest details about me.

When we moved to New Jersey so I could study my mark, it took a lot of pleading on my part to convince Zio I could control myself to be this physically close to Roque without making a move prematurely. I fooled Zio. Or maybe I fooled myself. When I overheard the cheerleaders in the locker room today brag about getting a coveted invite to the homecoming party at a frat house in Princeton, I knew it was my chance.

I'm stalking Roque as hard as I can without being noticed. I'm a ghost. His ghost from hell who's haunting him. I just haven't come out to boo him yet. But I will. I reached under my mattress and slid out the manila envelope. My hands shook as I pulled out the eight by ten glossies of the man who's had my insides in turmoil for years.

My PI is good. The best. Because she's a woman who people look past. A ghost. Just like me.

He's changed his name to Ralph Smith.

Ralph Smith?!

It's so... American and as sexy as a wet noodle. He's trying to hide who he is. Live a normal life while earning an Ivy league degree. Probably so he can learn how to cheat the tax system even better. Or launder his money into legit businesses. I sit in my sophomore high school class while he sits in his sophomore business class; worlds away still and yet our parallel universes are about to collide.

My finger traced over his strong jaw... lingered over his eyes captured in time as he looked over his shoulder feeling eyes on him but unable to find the source.

"That's right. It's me baby. The girl you left in the woods." I taunted, lifting the corners of my mouth as I stared at my sexy as fuck nemesis. Thanks to my private eye, I knew his schedule, where his frat house was, his sports schedule, with a list of all the college girls who leave his house at two a.m...

My hands clenched, bending the edges of the picture in my hands. It burned me how much blood is on his hands and yet he lives as if he's just some normal frat boy. But he's never been normal. The life we were both born into couldn't be anything further from it.

Zio agreed we should move closer to Roque to keep him close. Watch. Wait. Listen. Learn. But I'm tired of it all. Tonight, I'll be close enough to breathe the same air he does... my heart picked up speed. My nerves were at the cliff's edge. I tried convincing myself it's all hate, but as I stared at his stupidly handsome face—I feared it might be more. And I hated myself for it. Lust and want are a weakness I couldn't afford especially on the man who once held my life in his hands.

Brushing my dark chocolate dyed hair until it fell down my back in waves, I turned checking out my ass in the mirror. I still have a small frame but all the training I've been doing for the last eight years has given me one hell of a Brooklyn ass if I do say so myself. It's high and firm and the one trait I have that's gotten more boys at my high school a swift kick to their balls when a few attempted to brush a finger across a

cheek in the halls.

My dark red matte lipstick was the color of blood; symbolizing what's between us. My eyes were a weird shade of dark brown thanks to the colored contacts disguising my emerald eyes that surely would glitter with hate tonight.

We'll breathe the same air tonight.

I'm the wolf and he's my prey.

Smiling, I tucked my cell and a tracking device into the back pocket of my jeans. Carefully, I hid two small digital transmitter devices inside my sock. He'll never see me coming. I zipped up my hoodie, hiding the skimpy tank top I wore underneath. My tits were still tiny, but there's not much I could do about that.

Zio was asleep in his chair the remote dangled from his hand. My heart hurt just looking at him. Every morning and every night I find myself staring at his chest, praying to see the movement of his breathing. I know he won't be around much longer and even though I'd lost so much in my past, Zio was the only constant in my life. My fists clenched. I needed vengeance soon. I wanted Zio to witness its sweetness. It wouldn't be as fulfilling unless he's here watching my moment of glory as the head of the Salvatore line falls.

Bending to give him a quick kiss on the top of his head, I grabbed the afghan off the couch and draped it over his lap. If I'm lucky, I'll be home before he awakes, and he'll be none the wiser.

Gingerly, I pocketed the fob key to the Explorer sitting on the counter as well as a few twenties from Zio's wallet. My heart beat a million times a minute. This must be what it feels like to be on speed. But my drug is twice as potent.

* * *

“No. No way.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to be seen with you in public with that hair and that sad outfit.”

I rolled my eyes at Tati. “I’m fine.”

“Not to go where we’re going tonight. Princeton is the big leagues... if we get made as high school girls...,” she trailed off shuddering. “I hear one of them is a drug-lord or some shit. Stop rolling your eyes at me.” She smacked my arm.

Tatiana is gorgeous. Like drop-fucking dead. Her mom is Black and her dad, Cuban. I’d never have her pale shade of mocha with the best spray tan on the planet. My cheap drugstore dye job hair would never take a curl to match her natural ones.

“Sit.”

“No.”

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“Yes.” She pushed me down. “Mom’s out having a girl’s night. We can raid her makeup and tools.”

“She’s going to kill you.”

“It’ll be worth it. I’ve always wanted to get some bronzer and my mom’s pro curler on you.” Tati’s mom owns a chic salon in Princeton. She gives Tati some things but her own personal stash of beauty products in her home she’s pretty anal about. “I’ll be right back.”

“Fine.” I sighed, sitting down stubbornly. Maybe she’s right. I want to blend in and I sure as shit do not right now with my \$4.99 dye job and baggy clothes. The cheap drugstore dye was surprisingly the only thing that could hide the vibrant red in my hair. Ever since puberty, it had grown redder and redder. It’s a flame. A symbol of the burning fury deep inside me. But I had to hide it. Mask it. Until it’s time to let it burn.

“I’m going to make you look so damn hot girl, whoever this mystery frat boy you have your eye on is going to drop dead.”

“Good.” I smirked. “Because that’s exactly what I want.”

Tati got to work twirling my hair in a hot iron and left it hanging down in loose waves. She brushed a pale bronzer on my face and painted my lips a pretty shade of dark pink.

“No.” I balked when she held up a pair of false lashes.

“Yesssss.”

“Ugh, fine.” I snapped.

Resigning myself to my fate, I closed my eyes and let Tati work her magic.

“Done.” She uttered in a sing-song voice.

My eyes popped open. She transformed me from a mousy girl in hiding to... someone who can't be missed. My hair was thick with sexy waves. My brown-colored-contact eyes looked wide and sparkly with the expert eye makeup she put on. I could easily pass as a college freshman. “Now your clothes.”

She opened her closet door, taking out a shimmering black tank.

“I have no boobs.”

“They won't care. Boys just want to see some skin. Besides, some guys prefer the petite ballerina body type.”

“Or they prefer curves they can grab onto like yours.”

“Good. Then we'll never have to fight over a guy.”

“As if,” I scoffed. “I've never even had a crush.”

“Never?”

I looked away, feeling my heart pound. My feelings for Roque had changed over the years. He's changed. The man/boy is all man now. The photographs I hired my PI to take are stashed under my mattress. I might look at them every night... His eyes. His

eyes are the same though. Two soul-sucking, heat-searing missiles. I feel them go right through me every time I stare at the pictures.

“Nope. I have better things to focus my time on besides boys.”

“Like training for some Ninja TV show? You might be small, but you are toned as hell, D. I’m jealous.”

Tati’s been calling me D forever. She never thought Diana fit as my name. Little did she know how right she is.

“Don’t be. I train for a purpose other than vanity.”

“Will you ever share these secrets?”

I sighed. “I can’t.”

She sat quietly on her bed. “Did... did someone hurt you D? You know how I mean...,” she trailed off biting her lip.

I shrugged not wanting to cry. If I did, my fake contacts could slide out. Tati still has no clue what I really look like. My persona is almost as much as a farce as Roque pretending to be a frat guy. “It was a long time ago. And it wasn’t sexual but yes someone did hurt me.”

“That doesn’t matter. It still happened, right?”

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I nodded my head and straightened my spine. I couldn't be weak. Not now. Not tonight.

"You are going to entice every guy tonight. Forget the past and live in the moment."

I turned to the mirror, inspecting the sexy image staring back. "I'll never forget the past, Tati. But I do intend to live in the present."

"Good. Because I have the serious hots for someone."

"Who?"

"Sebastian Le Blanc. He's a baller. Hot as fuck and tonight I want to just dance with him."

"Just dance?"

"Maybe kiss. After that..."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. But we don't get separated. That's our deal, right?"

"Yeah. I want to have fun, but I want to be safe. No drinking. We'll pretend to sip though. Is that cool?"

"Absolutely."

In under twenty we rolled up to the outskirts of Princeton. I thought nothing could

compare to the beauty of my homeland, but I was wrong. Everyone in New York thinks New Jersey was nothing but a dump. They lied. Princeton is all the sappy shit you see on TV. People living in America, living perfect lives in perfectly painted houses on expertly manicured lawns with luxury cars parked out front. The homes are spread apart like mini mansions. Frat row is the same with large yards with acres of woods behind them and huge colonials with shutters on either side of the windows. I gently pressed the brake to slow our roll but I'm not stupid enough to park here. There's no way he didn't have the entire block under surveillance.

"D? The party is back there," Tati pointed behind her.

"I know. But I don't want to get blocked in. Besides, a short walk in the cold will help kill my buzz if I get one by accident." My excuse sounded lame as heck, but she went with it.

The campus was sprawling with timeless elegance. The large trees lining the streets were still full of turning leaves. The night air was crisp and filled with excitement. I carefully parked three streets over and got out. I sniffed the air, breathing it in. The front yard was packed. Sparks from a bonfire shot up to the night sky as students gathered in clusters holding red solo cups and danced around the flame.

I lifted my chin. I've never been to a frat party. But if being on the doorstep of death didn't scare me, neither will this. Even if he will be here.

I grabbed my hoodie and put it on.

"At least leave it unzipped."

"I didn't come here looking for love." I shrugged, zipping it up high.

"Then you'll fit right in." She smirked, swinging her hips to the beat dropping from

massive lawn speakers.

Leaves crunched under our feet as we walked forward with our chins lifted high. My senses were on high alert. The bass of the beat competed with the pounding of my heart. He was here. I knew he was. I flicked my hair over my shoulder and flirted with my eyes. I needed to act like just a girl here to party, not a black angel hell bent on revenge.

A few guys eyed us appreciatively as we walked past them and up the few steps onto the wide planked porch and entered the garden of evil. People were everywhere. Tati went in first, winding her way through to the kitchen.

“Hey gorgeous.” A guy wearing a hat backwards grinned at Tati as she brushed past him and filled a cup from the keg on the floor. She passed the foamy beer to me before pouring herself one. Instead of cheap beer, I eyed an unopened bottle of red and uncorked it. No one has messed with it, so I poured a bit into a cup.

“Nothing to say?” He quirked a brow.

“Not to you.”

“Damn, girl. You’re cold.”

“Freezing,” she replied, grabbing me by the elbow and steering me out the backdoor. Another bonfire blazed in the back lawn, its smoke billowed high until it disappeared somewhere beneath the stars. My eyes scanned the yard searching for a set of broad shoulders, raven hair, and laser like bright eyes.

But wasn’t there. At least not yet.

“Hey girl. Haven’t seen you here before.” Tati rolled her eyes at another guy who

tried to make a move on her. I wasn't surprised no one approached me. My small tits and slim frame only appeal to a certain type of guy whom I've yet to meet.

But the guy who came out of the shadows he was attractive if you liked the boxer type. He was beefy, stocky, and walked with a certain type of swagger. His Brooklyn accent and street eyes went right through us. We're busted. I just knew it.

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“Come on. Let’s go.” I grabbed Tati’s hand.

“Not so fast.” The guy stopped us.

“Look. I’m sorry, okay. Just let us go.”

He smiled almost cruelly as I watched his lips twist into a wolfish grin. “Every choice has repercussions. It’s time to face yours.”

“What in the hell is he talking about?” Tati cocked her hip while looking at me. “Is he on oxy? You trippin’?” She turned to face the handsome man. The light from the flames in the fire behind him danced in the dark.

“Nah. But you girls shouldn’t be here. Parties like this can get out of control. The demons that walk in the dark can be unforgiving.”

My eyes snapped to his as I studied his face.

“Holy shit,” I breathed low. I recognized him. Johnny Lamatti, heir to the New York Underworld. We were in big shit if he didn’t lose interest in us.

I yanked Tati to me. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lamatti. It won’t happen again.”

He swung his gaze to my face. I cringed knowing I just made an even bigger mistake.

“You know me?”

“... I grew up in the city.”

He smiled, stalking closer until the tips of his shoes almost touched mine. But I didn't back down. I met his stare. I've faced down a monster worse than him. Although some people might debate who's worse: Roque or Johnny? Back in New York, word on the street was Johnny chopped a man's hands off for shorting his payment to the Lamatti outfit by two hundred bucks. He doesn't fuck around.

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin.

“Damn, little girl you got no meat on your bones. But my friend has weird taste in women. He might like you.”

“I didn't come here for dick.”

Johnny's eyes widened then he threw back his head and laughed. “What did you come here for then?”

I shrugged, “To piss off my old man. I'm a bit rebellious like that.”

“I bet you are. Come on rebel, we have somewhere to be.”

He laid a beefy arm around my shoulders not giving me or Tati a choice as he led us back to the house. I wasn't afraid of Johnny since his eyes were glassy and it was clear he was drunk. While I was a sober, silent killer. One kick to his balls and an elbow to his windpipe would free us. I just needed to find an opening. I slid my hand down to my pocket, feeling the fob key to the Explorer safe. We needed to get out of here. Fast. I'd find some other way to stalk Roque if I couldn't find a good spot to hide my spy devices.

Tati tried to hide her fear behind a fake smile as we reach the base of a back set of

stairs.

“After you,” Johnny gestured.

Tati and I exchanged looks as we reluctantly climbed the stairs. She reached out and held my hand. I squeezed hers back. I’d slay anyone who tried to hurt the only real friend I’d ever had.

“Turn left.”

I flipped my hair and popped a shoulder, shooting Johnny daggers from my eyes.

He smirked, pushing me forward toward a closed door at the end of the hall, and blocked our exit as he fired off a text. Then he took a key from his pocket handing it to me.

“Open the door.”

I gripped the key hard in my hand, held it like a weapon as I prepared to pivot and strike him hard when the door suddenly swung open from the inside.

Tati dropped my hand.

My eyes were on the same level as a pair of hard pecs outlined by the thinnest shirt. The smell of men’s body wash and warm cotton wafted to my nose. He was divine. All light latte colored skin, laughing brown eyes and hair that’s not short or long but just that perfect in the middle. He was also kind. I just knew it. I knew he wouldn’t let Johnny fuck with us. I’d be impressed if I was interested in romance while Tati’s whole demeanor changed.

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“Lamatti what’s up?” The new guy crossed his arms over his massive chest blocking the doorway. Tati and I were sandwiched between the up and coming New York gangster and the hot athlete.

“Nothing. Just some party games. You in?”

“With these two?” Hot athlete looked us both over.

“I’m gathering more.”

He shrugged and moved out of the way and I let out a breath not seeing a bed. Instead the room was filled with books, a couch, and a blazing fire. The only strange thing was a door made of rough wood and iron so large it went from floor to ceiling where it rounded at the top. It was straight from a medieval castle. And out of place.

I took a seat on the couch. “It’s Le Blanc. The baller I was telling you about,” Tati spoke in a hushed whisper as she sat next to me.

“We need to leave. We’re trapped in here.”

“Nah, he won’t mess up his chances of going pro by doing anything illegal at a party. Just stay close.”

I disagreed. I didn’t trust anyone except Zio and I knew shit was about to go down, but couldn’t say much as the door banged open and a group tumbled in. The air around me changed in an instant.

It was him. He waltzed in with his arms around two giggling blondes with boobs a million times bigger than mine and hair the color of straw. Their makeup was on point and so were their designer clothes. It was so cliché I wanted to hurl. Instead, my fists balled so hard my nails bit into my own skin.

Our eyes met.

My heart beat like a war drum.

His brow lifted sardonically, “Is she the best you could find, Johnny?” Before the beefcake mob boss’s son could reply, the door banged open again.

Hot damn.

The man who walked in was almost as terrifying as Roque in a completely different way. This guy... was tall, built, lean but with wide shoulders and eyes that matched the warm whiskey Zio likes to nurse on cold nights.

His eyes gleamed with appreciation as they took me and Tati in. His lips curved wickedly as he winked and sauntered closer. He bowed and his long, tan fingers wrapped around my slim wrist as he tugged me forward. “And what could your name possible be besides... perfect?”

Rolling my eyes, I yanked my arm away. “You’ll have to do better than that to impress me,” I drawled, yawning.

Roque and Johnny burst out laughing. Tati leaned forward, “Go for him. That’s Rafael a.k.a Rafe. His dad practically runs Wall Street.”

“Not impressed,” I shrugged.

“Come on, Let’s go. This party is boring as fuck.”

“Oh sweetheart,” the devil grinned. “You’re wrong. It’s just about to get started.”

Startled that Roque actually spoke to me, I popped a shoulder and nonchalantly focused my eyes directly above his head. I felt his powerful gaze on me. He knew there’s something off about me and I could practically see his mind working, trying to figure out what it could be.

“Are we playing or what?” One of the blondes hanging on his arm asked as she trailed her fingers up his chest.

He grabbed her hand sharply, flinging her off. “Oh, I’m playing tonight, baby girl, just not with you. Out.”

She shrunk away as if slapped, “...but—”

“Out. Now.”

Johnny opened the door. She knew better than to talk back and left. I knew we were trapped in a den full of lions and Tati and I were their next meal. I just had to find a way out.

Johnny slid a bolt across the door. Rafe flicked off the lights. Moonlight and the soft glow from a streetlight filtered through the room. It was on. My heart beat in overdrive. My breath became shallow. I was tense and on alert while also fighting some serious hormones waking up to scream at me that these dudes were a trifecta of sex and sin too good to pass on.

“What kind of game is this?” Tati asked trying to sound confident.

One by one the guys moved chairs into a circle. Rafe dropped an empty bottle in the middle of the wood floor pointed to me and said, “Spin.”

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“Are you kidding me? Frat boys playing spin the bottle? Lame.”

The guys pinned their hard gazes on me. “You came to our party. Broke our rules,” Johnny crossed his arms looking almost bored as he stated our punishment. “Now you must pay to play.”

“This is so stupid...juvenile....,” I muttered. Huffily, I tried to ignore the sweat on my palms as I reached out and flicked my middle finger up before hitting the bottle in protest. Everyone watched it spin and spin, rolling across the floor like a car spinning on black ice... out of control and careening as gravity forced its course of direction.

Fate is cruel and twisted. Just as it always was meant to be for us. The bottle finally halted its momentum and of course could only point in one direction.

His eyes gleamed in the dim light, giving away the truth he tried to hide earlier. He wanted it to be him. Carefully, we assessed each other, mentally sizing one another up in this new game of play.

“Ten minutes.” Johnny announced, taking a long, old-fashioned key out of his pocket. Obviously one that fit into the keyhole lock on the solid wood door across the room.

“Ten? Can he even last that long?” My wit drew quick howls of laughter. But my bravado was all faked. Roque straightened and pointed to the arched wooden door. “Get in and wait.”

I lifted my chin. “I wait for no man. You get in and wait.”

Tension ran thick and hot. I felt it just as strong as I did that day in the woods a lifetime ago, and yet it rushed back as if the two of us never left that moment.

His lips thinned; his jaw clenched—his eyes promised payback. His left cheek ticked as he stared me down. Wordlessly, he cut through the circle, yanking me into his arms. My chin tipped up, despite my every effort not to gaze into the handsome face of the man I loathed. His breath had mint with a hint of the gin and tonic on it. “You shouldn’t have entered the lion’s den tonight high school sweetheart.” His fingers circled my wrists.

I wanted to fight, take out the blade in my back pocket and feel it slide between his ribs, cutting him deep. So deep the pain would never go away.

But I couldn’t.

Not yet.

The pain I wanted him to feel wouldn’t be quick. I wanted my slow burning vengeance to come on slow and build until this man begged for mercy that I’d never give.

I lowered my head and played submissive, desperate to hide the fury simmering under the surface. It was a good thing the closet was dark because I knew my eyes would give me away.

“Good girl,” he muttered huskily as he led me toward the door of doom.

“Tame her!”

“Make sure she has something left for me! I want a taste!” My cheeks heated at the hoots and crude remarks flying at us from all directions.

Did he really think I was going to fuck him? In a closet? I heard these parties could get crazy, but I never really thought I'd ever get myself into a situation like this.

He opened the door. My hands trailed over the thick wood, grabbing it as if I could stop the inevitable. The heavy oak door was at least five inches thick. It swung shut behind me. Then the key was inserted into the lock, the sound of it clicking sealed my fate.

It's always the dark with him. He brings it out in me. And as I stood there waiting for him to make his move, I realized I'm so tired of dwelling in the dark with him. All these years...he's never left me. His presence. His spirit. He permanently left his mark on me and I wished my fate wasn't determined by it. I wished I never went with Papa to the funeral that day.

He stood between the only exit. My only escape.

"I'm into girls." I shrugged in the dark, squared my shoulders with a huge smirk on my face I knew he could feel.

He was silent. His stare heavy. I could barely make out his shape. "I'll still make you scream," he uttered low. His words curled around me like a cloak.

"You get off by hurting women?"

"Sometimes. But you're hardly a woman. You're more girl. Angry and hurting and out tonight trying to prove someone wrong... am I right? So, who is he? A stupid ex-boyfriend who dumped you for the head cheerleader? A step-daddy who thinks he can order you around?" He moved closer as he questioned me and I found myself backing up until I hit a wall.

"None of the above."

Up close, he was one big shadow looming over me. A huge presence you couldn't see only feel. Like the worst nightmare you've had where your trapped by some unseen presence locking you in place.

He pressed closer. Hips met mine. Arms caged me in. My chin was yanked up and warm, determined lips landed on mine. His tongue was surprisingly tentative as it lightly teased past my lips. "Mmm, you taste like sin and wine." He paused before thrusting deeper into my mouth.

I let him kiss me.

Let him think he was winning.

I moaned under his assault of my senses. His hand moved down over my back, lifted my butt flush to his shaft pressed hard against his pants. His hand moved up my front to palm my small breast and he moaned deeply into my mouth. “High school sweetheart, you’ve got a body I could break. So soft. So small. So completely delicate.”

He wanted me. Desired me. Maybe Zio was right. A woman can burn a man, bring him to his knees simply by just being a her.

“Break me, then.” I taunted against his mouth as we panted in the dark. My legs were brought up hard and wrapped around his torso. He dry fucked me into the wall while his teeth scraped along my neck before nipping down on my collarbone.

My hands roved over his shoulders to the back of his head. My nails scraped his neck, drawing blood.

“Fuck,” he hissed, dropping me.

I brought my fingers to my lips. Then kissed him so he could taste the tang of his blood with my kiss.

He answered by pulling back and biting my lip. So, I bit his.

We growled and hissed and kissed like lost, jealous lovers finally reuniting after years of pain and heartache.

It was just a show I was acting in, I kept telling myself as we both became lost in lust. The tang of our blood coated our tongues as we kissed in the dark. He was drowning in me. I'd finally pulled him under, dragging him into the middle of my storm. While his mouth was fused to mine, I struggled to clear my senses enough to remember what I was there for. Running one arm down his back to my ankle hooked around his waist, I reached inside the top of my sock for the bug device and grasped it tightly between two fingers. Then my hand found his back again and ran down his firm ass, dropping the fucker right into the back pocket of his pants.

He grunted with surprise at my bold touch. I kneaded his ass as he kneaded mine.

That's right baby. Burn for me. I thought, although I was the one going up in flames. "I hate you," I breathed, unable to stop the words from spilling past my lips.

He lifted his head a few inches from mine and stroked the back of my head with his hand. His fingers brushed through my hair until his hand settled on the small of my back. "Liar."

"Time's up!" A heavy fist pounded on the door.

I pushed against Roque's chest, feeling his pecs tighten at my touch. "Don't go far," he warned.

I spun on my heels, feeling confident as the door is unlocked and light trickled inside where he had me at his mercy. Or was he at mine? I shook my head, confused and angry that despite my loathing of him at every level, he still made me feel desire. Crazy, sick desire.

"Why would I?" I played, "when I haven't tasted your girl?" I nodded to the blonde behind us, looked at her over my shoulder and winked. Her eyes slayed me, her fists curled, and I just knew if she were to open her palms the telling sign of crescent

marks would mark her skin. She wanted what I just had.

He chuckled low in his throat, his chin dropped on top of my head as he pulled me close and whispered into my hair, “She tastes of desperation. It’s a boring flavor. Nothing like yours.”

“Sit back in the circle.” Johnny ordered.

“She’s done playing.” Roque growled back.

The two men glared at each other. I smirked knowing I won tonight. I practically brought Roque Salvatore to his knees and all it took was ten minutes of mad kissing and groping in the dark.

“House rules, Smith.” I whipped my head at Roque and tried not to scream that he’s a fraud. There’s nothing common about him and yet he chose the most boring, common last name to hide behind.

“I made the rules. I can break them.”

Johnny moved his gaze from Roque to me. “She was that good, eh? You’ve never cared before.”

I gasped as Roque slid his arm around my waist, snagging me from behind pulling me into his body. “She’s mine for the night.”

I was tempted to sag against him. Wishing just for one night I could pretend to just be a normal girl at a party... to let myself get seduced and kissed until the early dawn came and turned me back into the girl I’d become.

“But I want to play.” I taunted, lacing my fingers over his before turning in his

embrace. I raised a hand to his cheek. Slaying him with doe eyes, I stood on my tippy toes tricking him into expecting a kiss. “You didn’t even let me come,” I whined, sounding like valley girl pissed that her daddy chopped her Amex card.

The room erupted with hoots and hollers. Roque’s eyes turned into the killer I knew he was. “Careful. You don’t know who you are playing with.”

“Actually, I do,” I replied smartly, before spinning on my heel and sitting back down on the floor.

The anger radiating off him singed my back. But I didn’t dare peak over my shoulder at him. “Who spins next?” I lifted my cup from the floor where I had left it and try to replace the taste of Roque in my mouth. But the lukewarm wine did nothing to diminish him.

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Roque never returned to the circle. Instead he stood behind me. Almost daring me if I tried to get up and return to the closet with anyone other than him.

Johnny took the bottle next, giving it a quick spin. I held my breath. If it landed on me, my knife was coming out. But the bottle slowed, stopping on the blonde. She practically squealed and hopped into Johnny's lap. Her sloppy kisses covered his mouth.

Roque was right. She was desperate with a capital D, hoping that he'd care her tongue was down his friend's throat.

"Who needs the closet?" Rafe snorted, grabbing the bottle and letting it fly. All eyes were glued to it as it went round and round, stopping squarely at me.

"Oh shit!" Le Blanc uttered as he looked behind me at Roque.

"What about it princess. You in?" Rafe asked, holding out a hand to me.

I lifted my cup, taking a measured sip. "Only if she comes." I nodded to the blonde, hoping to piss Roque off even more. I wanted the man to break in front of his friends... lose one shred of that icy composure of his.

"It's against the rules." Johnny fingered the key in the palm of his hand. "Besides, I like her just where she is." I was too busy watching the spinning bottle to notice the girl's hands in the fly of his pants stroking him openly.

I started to stand when a large hand pushed me back down. "Game's over."

“The hell it is,” Rafe moved forward, jerking me across the circle and into his embrace.

Roque growled and grabbed me by the waist. I was sandwiched between two alpha males and just tried to breathe.

I looped my arms around Rafe’s neck, surprising everyone by gifting him my kiss out in the open, in front of everyone. His mouth opened under mine. He was good but there was no rush of danger as his tongue danced with mine. The hairs on the back of my neck stood. Hot breath moved against my hair, “You will pay for this,” Roque whispered, as his friend kissed my mouth. I heard the door open, then slam so hard the window rattled.

“My turn.” Le Blanc’s huge hand gripped the bottle, but he never let it go. Instead he moved it in a circle, deliberately pointing it at Tati.

“Cheat,” she giggled.

He grinned wickedly and stands holding a hand to her, “You coming?”

“I hope so.”

I rolled my eyes at how pathetic she was. They moved past and Johnny took out his key, inserting it in the lock behind them. He snaked an arm around the blonde and cupped himself ordering her to take care of him. Getting up, I walked to the window disgusted by everyone, even myself.

“Who are you?” Rafe asked, joining me at the window.

“No one.”

“Yeah, right,” he snorted. “No one, wouldn’t get under Ro—Ralph’s skin like that.”

“Ralph?” This time I snorted as I lifted a finger to the glass tracing my finger along the cool pane.

“Are you a freshman?”

“Maybe.”

“Transfer?”

“Perhaps.”

“Don’t be all coy. You know who he is... who Johnny is... who I am.”

“Yeah I do,” I finally lifted my face from the fray below, “total players.”

“Guilty.” He raised his hand, trying to decide if I was just some stupid girl or something more.

Thankfully, his thoughtful gaze on my face was interrupted when three giggly, sorority type girls entered the room with flushed faces and bright eyes.

“He’ll be back. You better stay put and be good,” Rafe warned as he welcomed the fresh meat and sampled them one at a time.

“Can I leave to pee?”

“By all means,” he gestured toward the door. I didn’t waste time leaving. I needed to plant more surveillance. No one was up here. It’s as if there was an unspoken rule that this level was off limits to guests. But as I peered around the corner and down the bannister of the stairs, I spotted a beefy looking goon that definitely looked as if he was a part of the Lamatti crew.

Pretending to be stumbling and looking for a place to go, I tried each doorknob, but all the rooms were locked. I decided to go down the stairs and tapped the goon on the shoulder. “Hey. I need a refill, but I intend on rejoining the game.” I wiggled my brows and pointed behind me. He nodded and I made my way to the kitchen. Any good bit of gossip always goes down in a kitchen. I reached up on my tippy toes, pretending to grab a roll of towels from a top the fridge and dropped my listening device. Then, I ditched my warm wine for a bottle of water. It was time to grab Tati and go while we still could.

In about twenty seconds, I was back up the stairs and entering the den of sin. I shook my head in disgust and crossed the room. Johnny carelessly left the key on the floor and was too busy getting head in a dark corner to notice me taking it and unlocking the closet. “Time’s up.” I knocked twice before opening the door.

“Can’t be...”

“Sorry, Romeo,” I reached past him, practically dragging Tati out. Her shirt was above her armpits, her bra was unhooked, but I didn’t care as I whisked her away from Le Blanc and out the door we were marched into an hour earlier.

“Wh-at? Why D? I don’t want to go.”

“Fix your clothes. We’re out.”

“I was having fun. I didn’t even get a chance to exchange numbers.”

“You exchanged plenty. Let’s go.” I didn’t slow my roll, as I dragged my protesting friend down the stairs, through the crowded room and out the front door.

I feel his searing gaze at my back and walked faster. “Hurry Tati!” I looked back over my shoulder, meeting the thunderous gaze of the man I scorned and left to burn. The dangerous heat in his laser-like gaze and purposeful gait as he moved after us promised sweet retribution.

Thinking fast, I raced around the bonfire straight into the thick smoke the wind made turn and headed back around to the other side of a crowd. Slowing to a walk, I tried to blend in as I dropped to the ground pretending the lace of my shoe was untied. I knew if I moved to the street, he’d make us.

“What the fuck, D?”

“Shut up, Tati. Just shut the fuck up and let me think,” I hissed.

I half crouched, seeing the back of Roque’s wide shoulders as he jogged toward the road, right where I left the Explorer.

Grabbing Tati’s hand, we moved to the back of the house. “Are we staying or going? Make up your mind.”

“Listen Tati. I know you don’t want to hear this, but all those guys are bad news. Dangerous criminals. Their families kill for the sport of it. We don’t want to be on

their radars, trust me.”

“Seb isn’t like that.”

“Seb? I’m saving my eyeroll until after we get out of here.”

“Whatever. Maybe I’ll be the mystery girl he won’t be able to forget although something tells me that’s you, not me for someone else.”

“Le Blanc totally wanted you Tati. That was obvious.”

“Wanting is easy. It’s the keeping that’s hard.”

I didn’t reply. Johnny burst out the backdoor with his cell pressed to his ear. Rafe wasn’t far behind. The two men studied the crowd, searching.

“Shit. We really need to get out of here.”

“Hey.” Tati curled her hand over the bicep of a guy waiting to play cups.

“Hey,” he grinned down at her.

“I’m cold. Can I borrow your coat?” The dude had it off and wrapped around her in seconds. “My friend is cold, too.” His friend offered me his hoodie and I smiled sweetly as I yanked it on.

“Now what?”

“Hair. We need to cover it.”

“That cap is so cute.” She touched the bill facing backward on frat boy’s head. He

takes it off and plops it on hers.

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“Looks cuter on you.”

Now my eyes definitely rolled. The guy was so bombed he had no idea how stupid this whole conversation was.

“Thanks.” Tati tucked her hair into a bun under the cap before she pulled it down low.

“What about me?” I wailed sounding totally annoying and giggly, but they ate it up.

Frat boy number two handed his over. I followed Tati’s lead and hid my hair inside.

“Ooh, I gotta pee so bad! Be right back!” Tati blew a kiss and grabbed her crotch, distracting the two dunces as she walked backward.

“Slow. Walk slowly like we don’t care where we are going.” Luckily, a group of friends were walking the same way. Right under their noses, we made it to the road and I let out a huge breath as we reached the Explorer.

Climbing in, I started the engine and slowly pulled out, all the while checking the rearview.

Tati took off the cap, rolled down the window and chucked it out. “Okay. What the fuck was all that?”

I shook my head. “Destiny. That was destiny.”

“Then why did we run?”

“Because sometimes your destiny isn’t always a good one.”

Tati rolled her eyes. “Ralph Smith was fucking hot, D and totally into you.”

“He’s not Ralph Smith. He’s the devil. And I want no part of him.”

“Yeah you do. You want every part of him.”

I couldn’t answer.

She was right.

I wanted every last little piece of him, tied-up, bloodied and at my mercy. The problem is I might want more before I got him to that point.

8

“Damn, bro. I’ve never seen you lose your shit like that,” Johnny exhaled blowing out rings from his Cuban.

My hands tightened on my lowball as I raised it to my lips, letting the bootleg rum slide through. Courtesy of Johnny’s outfit, the illegal Jamaican rum was of the best quality; stocked in all Manhattan bars bought off the docks not the liquor distributors. It was tax free and smooth but did nothing to quench the rage billowing through me.

“You fucking kissed her.” My eyes cut to Rafe holding a bag of ice to his swelling cheek.

“Why wouldn’t I? We were in the game room. We all agreed if we liked a girl, we’d never bring her in there.”

“I told you it was over. The game. You should have listened.”

He shrugged, “Whatever. Her kiss did nothing for me. I like curvy girls, not the delicate things you like to break.”

A hiss escaped before I could reign it in. Lifting my gaze to the night sky speckled with stars, I shuddered remembering the feel of her in my hands as I touched her in the dark.

Something was brewing between us. Something so strong it blew my mind. She was a storm, raging in my arms as we kissed and touched. She made me feel more alive

than I have in years... I haven't felt such emotions whipping through me like a tornado since that day in the woods when I almost killed the Fiorelli girl.

Ever since that day, I found myself partial to slim, redheads with barely any breasts. I fucked them hard. Sometimes slow, while circling their throats with my palms as I drove into their small bodies on fire for mine.

But none of them seared me with the heat the girl's eyes had.

That was a lifetime ago and yet that sick day shaped my life. That she-devil of a girl's taunt never left me. I almost stole her life and in return she never leaves my mind. Her spirit as it faded bled into me. I brought her back to life only knowing I'd have to take it again.

But this girl tonight. She was fire. The hottest fire that stoked the flames the other girl a lifetime ago lit.

This girl was thin but strong. Surprisingly full of muscles for such a petite frame. Her nipples practically made up her whole breast and my mouth watered knowing all of her would fit into my hot mouth.

I wanted to ram my cock inside that tight, little, piece of ass. Feel her take it all. Hell, if I hadn't lost my head, she wouldn't have gotten away, and I'd be tearing up the night with my high school girl right now.

"I'll find her." Johnny, slapped my back

"It was my fuck up. I've already put my security on it," Rafe chimed in.

I nodded, feeling my throat tighten. "All I wanted was four years to be normal... just a guy in college. But despite the rugby team, the classes, the girls, the whole fucking

scene—none of it ever felt normal... not until tonight...in the closet with her.”

“That’s because normal is fucked to us and the fucked-up to everyone else is our norm.”

“Well said,” Rafe dipped his head to Johnny.

“Fuck. I love you, assholes.”

“Love you too, bro. We’ll find her. She’s local. Only a few high schools around the suburbs. Besides, we have cameras on the streets. Every car, every person would’ve been captured.”

“Did you have the night-vision cam on in the closet?”

“Fuck yeah, I did. I rubbed one out watching you with her.”

I cocked a fist and swung in Johnny’s direction. The bastard was too full of liquor and himself to move.

Downing the rest of my rum, I wound up and let the glass fly into the dying flames of the bonfire. It shattered into shards, they burned. Leaving them behind, I entered the woods nodded to Shane, our head of security as I passed.

I might have a room at the frat house, but I didn’t live there. None of us did. We kept up appearances while living double lives. The walk through the backwoods took five minutes. Slipping out the other side along a back road, I took out my fob key and unlocked my ride. The black Bentley purred as I got behind the wheel and drove north to the quiet gated mansion Johnny, Rafe, and I shared. Inside those walls I could shed Ralph and be Roque. Roque Salvatore, devil, mob ruler, and heir to the Salvatore throne of pain, punishment and mayhem.

Too wired to sleep, I unlocked my office using a retinal scanner and got to work finding out just who my mystery high school sweetheart could be.

I logged into the secure network and started scrolling through the recordings from the cameras hidden under trees or tucked into obscure spots around the frat house.

“There you are,” I eyed the screen appreciatively. The first shot I had of her was when she is walking with her friend through the front yard. At least I knew which direction she came. I picked up my cell and called Johnny’s crew. His father’s men had this whole part of New Jersey under lockdown since Johnny convinced his father that an Ivy League degree would make their business appear more legit when he took over someday.

I had no doubt I’d know who she was soon. My finger traced her face zoomed in close on the screen. If I were a man worth any shred of conscience, I’d let her go. She’s young maybe sixteen or seventeen. But I had a taste for forbidden, beautiful things. And my thirst for this one was growing each second I stared at her face. There was something about her that was so familiar. If I were a romantic, I’d swear I loved her in another life. But love is something I’d never give a woman. No woman will wield the weapon of my own heart against me. I have too much to lose and I’ve only just begun to build the Salvatore empire back to the respect my name deserves.

I finally let out the breath I'd been holding since we left the party, I shut off the engine and let my head fall against the wheel. It was after two in the morning. Tati was too wired to go home so we went to a twenty-four-hour diner and ordered some food. Although, all I did was push my pancakes around and around my plate.

With heated cheeks, I kept replaying my time in the dark with him. My first kiss. Anger came back in spades. I gave him too much of me as it was over the years. All my hate, all my loathing, most of my thoughts and now I gave him that?

“Fuck!” I lifted my head, slapping the wheel. I'd never get my first kiss back, but I'll be damned if he'd be the one to get any more of my firsts.

In my mind's eye—I pictured that smirking devil with the sea-green eyes. The man who consumed me. I wouldn't rest until he's been banished from this earth into the pits of hell itself. If not for what he did to me and my family, just for making me want to feel the things I felt when he touched me.

Zio was still asleep in his chair. I picked up the remote and clicked off the tv. The smell of Roque clung to me. Shaking my head, I entered my bathroom feeling nothing but self-loathing.

How could I let him do this to me again? How does this devil always seem to win?

Undressing quickly, I entered the shower practically scrubbing my skin raw. I needed to get better at this whole male and female thing. I'd been training in the art of

espionage and self-defense, but my flaw was not knowing how to protect my female nature from seduction. I wouldn't let it happen again. I'd need to learn that sex is just sex and not let hormones ever make me weak again.

Turning off the taps, I quickly towel dried and went back to my room to get into bed. It was very late, but sleep was elusive. His brilliant eyes. They're all I saw.

One time. I'll allow myself to give in to what happened just this once and then never again.

My fingers crept into the waist band of my panties. My fingers moved faster and faster. I felt his breath in my hair... his low growl of approval as I let him win—let him conquer me.

“Salvatore!” I gasped, coming in waves of disgust and loathing.

I was hunting him, but I was the one trapped by my very own prey. His laser-like eyes somewhat blue, mostly green always haunted me. No matter where I went. No matter how much time passed, I was still stuck in that moment somewhere between life and death. No matter what, it's always the two of us locked together in the dark. Tonight, was no different.

In some sick way, we might belong together. Me, the girl he practically killed just to be re-born.

“Ugh!” I slammed my fist into the mattress wishing it was his smug face. Disgusted at how much he wins even though he doesn't know I've started playing our game, I bounded out of bed and washed my hands. Steeling, myself, I raised my head and met my own eyes in the mirror. “War. I must become Diana the goddess of war. Romina is the girl he hurt. Diana is the woman who will bring him to his knees...”

With resolve, I turned on my desk lamp and opened my laptop. Since sleep wouldn't come anyway, I might as well start preparing for battle.

* * *

“Again.”

Sweat poured from my brow, threatened to blind me. My muscles screamed to stop. But I raised my fists and jabbed again. My trainer, Carlos was ready and blocked the shot.

Spinning fast, my left leg lifted giving a swift kick at his ankles. He jumped over them and answered with a quick punch to my side.

“Fuck!” I faltered back and he took the opportunity to plow me over, pinning me to the mat. But I squirmed like a snake, lifted my hips and let him feel the softness of my core.

“Diana. Stop.”

Carlos was a professional and since that night in the closet ten days ago, I've been trying to practice my wiles on him. He was only in his mid-twenties though and a ripe young thing like me must feel good to him on some level. Instead of stopping, I wrapped my hands around his neck and let my tongue taste the sweat on his light latte colored skin.

He flinched, vaulted off me and grabbed a towel. “Enough. If you keep this up, I can't train you.” He picked up his water bottle, slammed through the backdoor and let it shake behind him.

“Well shit.” Pushing myself up, I reached for my own towel. Carlos was the best. If

he dumped me, I'll never get better. Pulling my hoodie on, I followed him but gingerly opened the door to the alley.

"I'm sorry."

He spun fast turning to face me. "What the hell is up with you girl?"

I swallowed hard. "A guy."

He snorted. "No shit. But I ain't him. You can't touch me like that. For one it's illegal and I ain't gonna do time again. I chose a different life, you feel me?"

I nodded. "Sorry."

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He grunted, “Whoever this guy is he isn’t worth you, Diana.”

“I know that...” I twisted the ends of my sweatshirt in my hands.

“We’re done for the day. Cut this shit out and I’ll still train you, but we need to regroup. For now, we need to make your mind stronger, we’ll train your brain to fight... ignore the pain, ignore the emotions... in the moment when you face your opponent, you’ll morph into something else.”

“...That’s what I’ve been trying to do. How? How can I get there?”

“Not by doing time like I did. But I can share with you everything I learned when I was on the inside. I had to change in order to survive. You’ve never been in a world like that. Where nothing exists except for the instinct to survive.”

“You don’t know that,” I whispered huskily, remembering the feel of Roque’s hands around my throat.

“The fuck? Who? I want a name. Now!” Carlos’ fists ball.

“It was a long time ago. I was a child.”

“That’s even more reason.”

I swallowed hard. “Thanks for the offer. But I want to take him down myself.”

He studied me intently. “I get that.”

“Good. I’m sorry for being a pain in the ass. But please don’t quit on me, okay?”

“Fine. But no more bullshit. We’re gonna train harder than before mentally and physically.”

I pushed off the brick wall. “Good. I’m ready. Let’s get back to work.” Lifting my chin, I turned around and open the door. He followed me back into the gym and this time when we grappled on the mat I was focused as hell. My mind was blank. All I thought about was how to take down my opponent...searching for weaknesses while trying to get in his head and find his next move before he makes it. The two of us sweat and spun, strained and shook. He might’ve outmatched me in years and weight, but I had heart and grit; enough to make him even wonder what hit him as I popped Carlos with a quick jab to his throat and smiled wickedly as he fell back.

We called it a night and after a quick shower, my heart sunk noticing Zio waiting.

“Zio?”

“Get dressed. Quickly.”

“What’s wrong?”

He checked the locker room again to ensure no one else was here. When he did speak his hiss was low and full of fury. “What have you done? All this time we waited. It was almost perfect.”

“I don’t—”

“Silencio!” His weathered face was full of tension. “The Salvatore’s and The Lamatti’s are all over Princeton. They’ve descended like locusts. My connections have told me they’re looking for two high school girls. One with light skin and cork-

screw curls. The other... small in stature with long brown hair and dark eyes.”

My heart pounded furiously.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? You’re sorry? If they find me...they’ll make the connection to you. We’re both supposed to be dead. The Fiorelli’s aren’t supposed to walk the earth unless they’re ghosts. And for decades we were living, breathing ghosts. You just couldn’t wait until it was time, eh? I trusted you, Romina. I trusted you not to fuck up.”

I hung my head, wrapping the towel closer around my shivering body. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. It’s too late. We must become gypsy’s again and move.”

“No! I like it here!”

“You should’ve thought of that before you crashed his college party. It was reckless and dumb. We’ll be lucky to lay low and escape. They’ve got all the main roads under constant surveillance.”

“So? We live like hermits as it is. No one knows us. Besides. If we leave, they’ll know. If you pull me out of school...they’ll find out and trace us.”

“I know,” he sighed. “It won’t be easy to run this time.”

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“So, what if we stay? What could he possibly want with me? I’m illegal for him to date...surely he won’t want to draw attention?”

“The Salvatore’s pay off more law enforcement people than all the cartels in Mexico. You think he’ll care?”

“Fine. I’ll dye my hair blue, pierce my nose and date someone my own age,” I snap my fingers.

He waved his hand. “No. I’ll take care of it. You get dressed.”

Shame filled me. Zio’s been so much to me and I’ve let him down. I’ve never disobeyed him, or ever done anything that could put us in jeopardy. But I knew I’d made a grave mistake. There might not be any option but to run. My shoulders sagged.

On the way home Zio stopped at a drugstore. Pulling my hoodie low, I bought a box of bright blue hair dye and some bright pink lipstick. Using an app on my phone, I bought more colored contacts this time is deep indigo. Blue hair and blue eyes.

Zio grunted when I told him. “Eat. You need to get fat.”

“Are you serious? I trained hard. I burned too many calories.” He grunted, pulling into a fast food drive through. He ordered a loaded burger and large fries with a super-sized milkshake. “This is child abuse!”

He responded by shoving a handful of warm, salty fries in my mouth.

“Mmm, they are yummy though.”

“Go to your room,” Zio commanded when we got home. I didn’t even talk back. I finished wolfing down the food and opened the blue hair dye. I wished I could call Tati for help, but I knew I needed to keep her at a distance in case she’d already been made. How could I tell her to stay away without telling her why?

I tapped my fingers on the counter and waited while my hair was full of blue dye. Taking out my cell, I called her and hoped she believed the lies about to spill from my mouth.

“Girl? Where are you? Casey is having a party at her place. Her older sister is at Chappa Delta at Princeton...I hear she invited some of the frat guys...”

I smacked my head, leaving a blue handprint on my forehead. “I can’t. I’m grounded. Zio found out about the last party.”

“What? How?”

“He has an anti-theft GPS app on his phone. When he checked his cell the next morning I was busted.”

“Damn your old uncle is smart.”

“I know.”

“Fine. Sneak out. I’ll drive.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. You owe me.”

“For what?”

“Um, ending my night with Le Blanc. I heard he’s going... looking for a certain high school girl.”

“That means...”

“Yes, it does. They’ll all be there. Johnny, Rafe, and Ralph.”

“His name isn’t Ralph.”

“Oh yeah, what is it then?”

“Ass-wipe.”

“Well, ass-wipe has the hots for you. I’m parking down the block. Get your ass out on the roof and jump down. You’ve got two hours.”

“Shit!” I exhaled as she ended the call. Pacing with the blue sudsy dye plastered to my head, I make my way downstairs.

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The only venerable part of my heart was pierced at Zio asleep in front of the TV again. I couldn't do this to him; force him to run again. Not after he saved my ass so many times before. I needed to fix this shit with Roque tonight. I needed to convince him our ten minutes in the closet was just a fluke... that there was nothing special about me—the soon to be blue haired girl just winging it through high school. Now, how to play it? Clingy? Boring? A drunk druggie?

Lost in my thoughts, I tucked the old blanket around Zio.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, gently kissing his cheek as I turned and walked quietly back upstairs then jumped back into the shower to rinse my hair.

But the blue just wasn't enough. Hiding my eyes was my greatest armor. I texted Tati back asking her to bring whatever goodies she can pack quickly. Her mom does more than just regular haircuts and highlights. On the weekends, she often makes extra money working at an underground drag bar. The shit in her arsenal could make any washed-up girl look like a million bucks.

But I didn't want to look like a million tonight. I wanted to look fierce in an almost scary sci-fi kind of way. Roque is old world. He might be young but old school values were ingrained on him. He'd never go for a girl so punk and edgy. I was a surprise who looked hot that night. Tonight, I wouldn't resemble that girl one bit.

I put on a pair of skinny jeans and high-top chucks pairing it with a blue hoodie, soft and faded to the point tiny holes showed through the sleeves.

I snuck back into the kitchen and poured some convection sugar into a sandwich bag

with a few aspirin to make it look like crushed up pills. I almost giggled as I pictured the look on his face if I snorted it in front of him. He was going to lose his mind—and not in a good way. His high-school sweetheart is going to be a badass rebel from hell.

I didn't even need to sneak out via the roof. But I did triple check the alarm and all the deadbolts as I scurried down the block to Tati waiting in her grandfather's old Toyota.

“How did you snake that again?”

“The same way you did the Explorer. Mom's out making money at drag night and grandpa fell asleep at six.”

I shook my head. “I so never want to grow old.”

“You look like...?”

“I know. I want it to be this way.”

She paused taking me in. “Why? Are you scared he'll find out you're a virgin?”

I swallowed hard. “No. Because I'd never give that to him. I... I need him to just go away for Zio's sake. Zio... he dumped Johnny Lamatti's aunt hard. Back in New York, Zio dated her and then dumped her when she wanted more—she went crazy and stalked him. When I was only ten, she tried to have me kidnapped by the Lamatti outfit as payback for her broken ass heart. If Ralph and Johnny find me... they'll find him.

“What? That's crazy? That was years, ago right? Surely Johnny won't give two fucks?”

“Who knows? His aunt’s on her third husband.”

“What happened to the first two?”

“They disappeared. Please Tati, I can’t do this to Zio. He likes it here. I don’t want to move anymore.”

“He’d make you move?”

“He’s already nervous about the Lamatti presence in Princeton over the past week. He barely leaves the house. Maybe he’s just a crazy, old man. But Tati, he’s my old man. You get me? He’s all I got.”

“Yeah, I get that. Okay, here.” She handed me a make-up case, “use the blue lipstick and go heavy on the black eyeliner. He hates street or steampunk.”

“I know.”

“You did your research.”

“You have no idea,” I murmured as I flipped the visor down and got to work. Tati started the engine and pulled out. We arrived at the party in less than fifteen. I had more boring brown lenses in. The twinge of guilt I felt for even faking out my only friend passed, as I asked her to wait for a minute so I could fix my contacts. She didn’t see me take the brown ones out then pop the blue ones in.

I looked electric. I was the blue in flame. I wanted to look ugly but somehow all I did was be pure fire.

“Fuck, D. Your plan might backfire.”

“It could. But it won’t.” I pulled out my baggie.

“D? What the fuck? No. Hell, no.”

“Don’t worry, Tati. Here,” I opened the bag and dipped a finger in the sugar. “It’s baking sugar.”

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“Genius.” We high fived. “Are you ready?”

I popped a shoulder. “Never more.”

Just like the last party we were at; we walked past a few groups as we approached the house. Conversations stopped. Eyes gawked. Something was up. They were waiting for us to show, which meant word spread that Tati and I were some fucked-up sort of guests of honor or some shit.

I felt it; his gaze on me. It was hard and hot, pinning me down and yet I walked closer. Finally, my blue gaze collided with dark eyes that were just as on fire.

He stood silent at the top steps, waiting for me. He knew I’d show. Almost commanded it. But as we were about to reach the steps, I banked left, act bored, and stood in line to grab a beer.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the smug grin trying to appear. His sharp exhale felt like razor blades slicing across my back. I reached into a plastic bucket filled with ice, taking out the first thing my hand grabbed. I popped the top and turned around.

“Oh, hey.” I acted dumb. “Have you seen my friend?” I moved past as if he was just some guy; not one who leaves a lasting impression.

His eyebrow lifted. He didn’t say one word as he inspected me. It’s a test. Am I playing him or was he already played into thinking, dreaming and hoping I was real last time we met?

I shuffled on my feet, letting my free hand nervously fidget with the metal zipper on my hoodie. “I need to find her.”

He blocked my path. “Dude, I need a hit. Soon. I only came here hoping to find one. Hey, wait—your friend Johnny, he’ll hook me up right?” I leaned back on my heels hoping to give him a wide-eyed blue look of innocence. His face was stone. Hard. Cold. But he was pissed. It was evident in the way his jaw clenched and the muscle in his cheek ticked. The way his balled fist made its way to his front pocket.

“Sure.”

Surprised, I went with him as he grabbed my hand and led me inside. He outmaneuvered me again. Called my bluff. My palms sweated. Would I really do this? How far was I willing to take my act? Keeping a clear mind was my number one rule of both offense and defense. We walked past couples grinding, past people playing cups, past all the bullshit. I expected him to go upstairs but instead he opened a basement door. I couldn’t see the bottom step. It was cloaked in muskiness and darkness.

“No.”

“What? How bad do you need your fix?”

I eyed him and the black void below. “Look. I need one okay. But someone fucked me up a while ago and I can’t go down there.”

He processed my words. One hand stroked my cheek. “I’d never let anyone, or anything hurt you.”

Liar.

He tugged me forward, testing me.

I shrunk back. “Never mind. I’ll find some prescription drugs from the bathroom cabinets.”

I moved back only to be tugged forward. “You’re serious, aren’t you.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I challenged.

He shook his head. “Go. Go get your fix.” Disgusted, he dropped my hand only to continue his descent. For a minute, he had me fooled. For seconds, I saw him wanting to protect me from the world. It tempted me. Some small twisted part wanted and wondered still what we could be if our fate wasn’t already written across the pages of some bad fairy tale. The kind where the princesses don’t wake up and the villains always win.

Twisting through the crowd I looked for Tati. She was sitting on a couch next to Le Blanc. He shot me a wink.

“Hey! Don’t let her disappear on me again,” he teased, as he dropped an arm around her shoulders.

The weight of another gaze landed on me. It was Johnny. He assessed me, calculating my risk to him and his boy.

I sat, took out my baggie and snorted sugar up my nose. Closing my eyes, it took everything I had not to sneeze or pee my pants since this was funny as all fuck. I kept my eyes closed and exhaled, as if in relief as I put the baggie back into my hoodie and slowly opened my eyes to his.

I guess he decided to follow me and caught my little performance. I took the glass

from his hand and let the alcohol burn my throat.

“Thanks.” I let the empty glass roll from my hand to the floor.

“Tati, I’m out. You coming?” I moved to stand.

“We just got here.”

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“Yeah we did and it’s boring as fuck.”

“Why don’t we change that?” Johnny taunted.

“Spin the bottle again?” I rolled my eyes. But I was ignored as Johnny and Roque received texts at the same time. Some silent exchange passed between them. It’s hard pretending to be high and getting drunk while secretly observing his every move.

“You wanna handle this now?” Johnny’s eyebrows lifted as his question hung in the air.

Roque gave a curt nod, his eyes narrowed as he tapped out a text and pocketed his phone. His gaze landed on me before lifting to focus on something or someone above my head.

“Ralf?” A soft voice gasped. Her tiny feet crossed the floor and I tried not to size her up as she halted in front of Roque.

She’s me.

Well the B-rated version. She’s petite, fine-boned with hair a deep shade of auburn like mine would be if it wasn’t disguised. Hers hung in loose waves down her back.

Roque’s accepted her soft touch as she leaned up to kiss his cheek. She gasped as he turned his head meeting her mouth instead. He full out kissed the fuck out of her while I watched. His hands held her close before he spun, shielding her body between him and the wall as he devoured her the way he did me.

Jealousy stabbed deep.

I hated him. Wanted to kill him and yet the thought of him feeling passion for anyone who wasn't me was unacceptable.

My cheeks heated as Johnny busted me staring. "See something you want?"

"I sure do," I murmured reaching past him to grab a drink off the low coffee table. He caught my wrist. "Tsk, tsk. No underage drinking on my watch."

"Please," I rolled my eyes. "You've done more illegal things than any of us could do in one lifetime."

"Easy." His fingers tightened on my wrist. Another pair of fingers circled my other wrist, tightening around like a vice. Roque's eyes burned ice-cold as he stared down. The two of them start pulling me toward the door.

"What the fuck? I came here to party," I protested.

"Oh, we're going to party, baby. Party like you've never seen," Roque promised with a sneer. My eyes met the girl he left behind. Her fingers were pressed to her swollen lips and her heart was in her eyes. I knew I wasn't the only one who was caught up in Roque. She clearly was devastated he loved her then dropped her without a backward glance.

"Le Blanc? You coming'?" Johnny barked.

"Fuck no. I've just found my princess." Tati batted her lashes and curled closer to his side. I shook my head pissed as all fuck that the girl I thought was my BFF was just watching me being carted off by two notorious mafia boys and not doing a damn thing to help. I tried not to feel completely crushed, but old wounds open. I've always

been alone; left to fend for myself why should anything be different.

“You’re going to come in very handy, Blue. Do what we tell you and we’ll make sure you get your next hit, okay?” Johnny croons in my ear.

“I don’t sell my body for drugs.”

“No?” Roque asked huskily. “Then, you’re not like any addict I’ve ever met. They’d do anything to experience the high.”

I shrugged, lifting my chin. “I’m not like anyone.”

“No, you aren’t. Are you?” he replied, lifting the tips of my blue hair and twirling them between his fingers before he let it fall as we walked down the front steps toward a huge black on black SUV.

“In.” His hand, pressed into the small of my back. I turned, craning my neck behind me, hoping desperately someone would stop this madness.

But no one did.

Roque slid behind the wheel, Johnny rode shotgun and the doors locked. Despite my attempts to open them they wouldn’t. The bastard laughed, “Child safety locks.”

A sharp rap came from the other side of the heavily tinted window. Roque grinned as Sebastian stood holding Tati tightly in his arms. “Room for two more?” The locks unclickeed and I scrambled deftly opening the door to my left, but Roque was just as fast and caught me. “You’re a feisty one for being so coked up and high, eh?”

His azure eyes were sharp and the corners of his mouth lifted as he stared down into my face bathed in moonlight.

“I see right through you,” his whispered words landed on my lips like the barest caress.

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In my mind's eyes I saw him too. The teen who almost took my life, the man who just held another girl who could pass for the real me; the guy who tried to steal my soul once more that night in the closet. So many emotions, twisted and pulled inside melting into a kaleidoscope of confusion.

“You don’t see jack shit,” I finally spat once my head slightly cleared. His gaze was full of heat and need as it fell to my lips. It lasted only seconds before his mask was firmly back into place. He pulled me forward and I fell into his embrace, plastered against his lean, muscular frame. My eyes squeezed shut as I fought my own body’s desire for my sworn enemy. Damn hormones. They fucked up my plans to bring this devil to his knees.

The backdoor to the SUV opened from behind nudging my butt closer into his hard thighs. “Stop fighting fate, Blue.”

My chin lifted. “That’s what I’ve done my whole life.”

His eyes the color of the ocean at night searched mine looking for the pieces to my puzzle, trying to solve the push and pull between us. His hands on me felt like shackles my body didn’t want to fight but my soul couldn’t forgive his.

His head dipped, his kiss hovered seconds away. My hands pushed against his chest, but it was of no use as his lips captured mine.

He tasted of another. Her lip gloss was overly sweet. Bile rushed up with anger. I ripped my mouth from his. “I don’t do leftovers. I prefer to be the main meal.”

“Putting yourself on my menu?”

“You wish.”

He shrugged. “I’ve already sampled you anyway.”

“And yet you keep craving more.”

His eyes turned black blue. “I want to fucking devour every square inch of you.”

“Too bad,” I shrugged nonchalantly, despite my rapidly racing heart. “I’m not legal.”

His hand slid down my arm, his fingers caressed the inside of my wrist. He felt my pounding pulse and grinned wickedly. “I can still devour you, Blue. There’s more than one way to do that.”

“I’m not some high school fantasy.”

“No. No you are not. You are a fucking hurricane—my personal storm.”

“No. I’m your fucking worst nightmare.”

He threw back his head and laughed. He. Fucking. Laughs. “Blue, my soul is so dark even the Grim Reaper himself shits when I cross his path.”

“What does a sadistic shit like yourself want with a seventeen-year-old anyway?”

“You know what. Go run, Blue. Run, before I decide to take everything from you tonight, just because I can.”

“Define everything? How far will you go?” I raised my brow, challenging him,

wanting to know if he's the same on the inside he was all those years ago. Part of me hopes he's not, because a sliver of me wanted him to have changed so I could have an excuse to run my hands all over him and let him take what might have always been his to have.

His fingers stroked up my arm and circled my throat. It was a devious caress. His thumb found the hollow and pressed hard. His lips descended as he stole my breath both ways. It burned. The stealing of air. I was sucked backward in time. I felt the cool crunch of leaves under my feet as I struggled. Opening my eyes, I blinked finding him aptly staring at every expression moving over my face. Thoughts raced one by one. The first was: All my training was for nothing, because once he puts his hands on me, my mind goes back in space and time. My body is trained to fight but my mind can't break free enough to do it.

Finally, his lips and hand lifted.

"What the fuck was that?" I gasped for air sucking down the crispness of the autumn night.

"Me doing what I do best, Blue. Devouring."

"I don't just want sex from you. Figure that out yet?"

Johnny cleared his throat. My head twisted, meeting his smirking grin, "Enjoying the show, creeper?"

"Immensely. Now get the fuck in the car. We have somewhere to be." Johnny checked the expensive watch on his wrist. Roque shoved me back, pinned me to the seat but took his sweet ass time buckling me in. "I need you in one piece, Blue. Because the pleasure of breaking you apart will only belong to me."

“You already have,” I murmured softly. But he shut the door on my slowly drifting words and rounded the car, sliding into the passenger seat.

“Holy shit.” Tati breathed, as Roque unholstered a gun from apparently his ankle and checked the clip. The sliding of the rack brought back memories of Italy... of the life I left behind but still managed to remember.

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“Easy with that shit. If you fuck up my scholarship or chance to get drafted—”

“Relax, Le Blanc. I’ll buy a friggin’ NBA team and make you my star bitch.” Johnny snorted, peeling around a corner and pressing down on the gas.

“Jesus,” Le Blanc shut his eyes and put a hand to his temple. “I’m sorry I got you mixed up with these two assholes, baby.” He linked his hand with Tati’s.

I leaned over. “Help us get out of this mess, then,” I hissed.

“No can do. You’re his girl. And I might not look like one of the bad guys, but I roll with them.”

“Wannabe.”

He shrugged. “They got my back once and I never forgot it. It’s ride or die with them.”

I shivered. I wasn’t the only one who knew their dark secrets or saw the two devils sitting in front for exactly who they were. They sit side by side, broad shouldered and cocky as fuck driving us into god knows whatever mayhem lies ahead.

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His eyes are dead, locked onto the beady ones begging him for mercy. The man raised his hands and pleaded his case. “It wasn’t me. I called an Uber and crashed at Chief’s place.”

He’s lying. His voice got higher by an octave with every word he spoke. Even now his raised hands shook slightly.

“You knew the rules. No one fucks with anyone on our campus.”

“Your campus? Your fraternity doesn’t rule. We’re all equal.”

“We belong to more than just a frat,” Johnny spits. “We run the whole game, bitch. East Coast and soon West. Our word is law, you feel me?” Johnny’s open hand smacked the guy in the face.

“Fuck you,” he spat. “You’d be nothing without your Daddy spoon feeding you money and power.”

Johnny grinned like the devil himself as he entered the tiny kitchen area of the apartment and came back holding a spoon. “Open up, bitch and take your medicine.”

Tati screamed and buried her head in Sebastian’s arms. But me. I watched wide-eyed and fascinated as Johnny shoved the metal spoon down the guys throat. He gurgled. Gaggled. Wretched and writhed.

Roque watched me watch them.

“What did he do?”

Roque came closer. “He drugged a girl at our party. Took her in the woods and had her half naked with his dick out.”

“Did he—”

“No, he ran. Like a coward when a couple stumbled upon him. But we picked him up on our surveillance. The girl was able to remember his clothing before she blacked out.”

I popped my shoulder and sauntered forward. I’ve spent years training to kick ass. Roque might render me defenseless but this schmuck? Damn he can have every piece of vengeance meant for someone else.

I stopped next to Johnny, placing a hand on his arm. “May I have a turn?”

He cocked his head assessing me. “You think you can do better?”

“I know I can.”

Johnny removed the spoon from the guy’s throat who in turn, immediately vomited as he gasped for breath. Johnny’s shoes were covered but he didn’t even flinch as he held him by the collar of his shirt.

My hands perused the various cutlery.... lingering coolly as I traced the sharp tip of a paring knife. I put it down. It’s too ordinary, too predictable.

“What’s his weakness?” I asked, circling the quivering, angry piece of shit sweating

like the pig he is.

“Play any sports?” He shook his head.

I stepped in close, grabbed his hand and popped each joint one by one, instantly dislocating his fingers. “Good. Because you never will now.”

“Bitch!” He screamed cradling his injured hand. My upper cut took him by surprise; his head snapped back and rolled.

“Damn, Blue. He’s out cold.”

“What a pity, he’s such a lightweight. He deserved to feel more pain.”

Roque’s watchful eyes were on me as I went back to the paring knife. Using scissors to cut his shirt off, I crouched by the bastard’s side and bit my lip. Purposefully, I brought the blade down with pressure, watching the blood come out slow at first, then watched in fascination as I carved words into his chest, branding him forever.

I love dick.

“Nice, Blue,” Johnny, inspected my work.

Roque stood at my side and slipped the bloodied knife from my hands. “God, you’re perfect.” he murmured meeting my eyes. “You enjoyed that? It turned you on? Made you feel alive holding his life in the balance? Getting to choose how far to take things?”

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I looked up from the bloodied chest I created; the piece of disfigured art to meet his hot gaze. Our eyes connected. I felt it again. The oneness. The fucked-up rightness of us connecting. I understood his high. His need for power. The absolute god-like seconds of time when you became a monster stealing life and getting high on the thought that you could.

His nostrils flared. I was caught; mesmerized by the dark promise in his eyes as he advanced, lifted me from the floor and in front of everyone—backed me into the wall and hooked my legs around his hip. “Fuck that was so hot, Blue. Fuck. You make me forget who I need to be and at the same time remind me of what I always was.”

His tongue traced my parted mouth. I gasped as he bit my lip causing my own blood to flow as his tongue lapped it up and swept inside. I clutched his head, helpless to the one soul who always had mine in the palm of his hand.

I could love him.

Do I love him?

Did I recognize the dark one, fated to be mine the way I’d always been his. Maybe our fate was already written. Maybe that’s why he spared me, because he saw it too; knew there was a day yet to come when we’d meet like this... a twisting, bloody heap of need like no other?

“Do you want this?” He pulled back and my heart almost stopped mid-beat as my beast turned vulnerable man as he asked if I could want him? Accept him and his darkness for what it was.

“Leave us.” He commanded. The room emptied except for Johnny.

“You sure. If she talks—”

“She won’t or I’ll personally cut her tongue out and she’d let me.”

Johnny dipped his head and left.

Roque lifted the gun from his holster and handed it to me. “What do you say, Blue? Shall you do the honors or me?”

The gun was heavy in my hand. I raise it pointing it straight into his chest. “I hate how you make me feel. How you’ve turned everything upside down.”

“Do you?” He breathed “Do you hate it? Or hate that you crave it. Desire it. Want it like I want you.”

I mewled as I melted against him, felt his hardness jut into my tummy. Roque took the gun from my hands added a silencer and popped two shots in the guy’s knees.

Roque exhaled almost like it was a release as powerful as coming as he took my hand and walked out.

“Everything good?” Sebastian wondered.

“Everything is perfect,” Roque replied gripping my hand tightly in his. I sickly realized I’m grossly outplayed in his presence. I wanted him, yearned for him—this man-monster of mine. But this whole time I viewed myself as the good one. The light so bright it’d snuff out all evil. And yet tonight, I learned who I really might be—his dark queen destined to rule by his side and carry out judgements of those who would cross our reign.

Silently, we walked back outside. An owl hooted from his perch overhead. The clouds moved past the moon and casted its glow upon the hard planes of my dark one's face.

I got in the SUV and was surprised as Roque squeezed me into the third row next to him and tipped my chin. "Who are you?"

"Lost." I answered honestly. "All this time I thought I was something else, someone else."

"One look and I knew, Blue. Don't worry if you don't know who you are yet, you're still so young. But I do. I know who you are."

"Who might that be?"

"Mine. Inexplicably, undeniably mine and I never thought you existed. That a woman like you could exist for me."

"This is crazy. You... we are crazy. We barely know one another."

"That's a lie if I ever heard one and you know it."

I bit my lip, trying to figure out how this could work. How do I keep the biggest lie of all from spilling between us? Would he love me, desire me more if he knew I was Romina, the girl from his past? Or would he feel bound to finish what family honor demands?

The SUV cuts down familiar streets. Before I knew it we were in Princeton and pulling down the drive that leads to the sprawling mansion where we first met again.

He turns to me. "Stay for a while? I'll drive you home later."

I shrugged not having much choice since we're already here. Sebastian led Tati up to his room. Johnny took a call and cursed in Italian, gripping his cell close to his ear and me...I was led by my dark devil past the room with the paneled closet and into a neat corner with dark wooden furniture.

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“I need a shower. Join me?” He dared holding out a hand, all the while knowing I’d decline. So, I took the devil by his horns and turned the tables. I peeled my shirt off, kicked off my shoes and stripped. My skin was so pale it almost glowed.

“Fuck, Blue,” he hissed through clenched teeth as my tiny breast buds peaked in the moonlight under his lust-filled gaze. “I’m going to make you come so hard.”

I shivered under the heat of his gaze. All of me was willing to take my dark one as it was always meant to be.

His hand gripped mine as I walked closer, he shuddered as my hand landed on his chest and slid down his pecs and abs to boldly cup him between his legs. “Mine. No one else’s.”

“Making demands already?”

I nodded. “As much as you are going to take, you must give to me.”

He studied me then dipped his head. “If you want every last piece of my damned soul; it’s yours.” With that promise, he swept me up in his arms and laid me down on the thick duvet. Caged in his embrace, his head lowered to tease my breast. The whole damn thing fit in his hot mouth. We groaned in unison as his tongue rolled my nipple.

I’ve never been touched like this before. Petted. Stroked.

Desire swept through me, thrusting my body into some kind of fever. Wetness grew

between my legs, joining the heavy need for something more. I knew what it was. I needed him, filling me there, completing me.

He turned his attention to my other breast while his hand moved between my legs. “Baby Blue. So wet. So utterly mine,” His fingers delved through my soaked folds, found the tiny nub begging for his touch and he pressed it hard. I yelped, hips rising off the bed as he circled it and circled it, plucked and rolled it before three fingers plunged deep, stretching my small channel.

His dark head was bent over me as his mouth sucked at my nipples, teeth scraping across them causing pain and pleasure. His fingers moved faster and faster. Fingers fucked me in a rhythm. I’m so close to falling. My body rose up and a deep flutter rolled like a wave deep inside my womb and moved until it ripped and roared, crashing over his hands.

He stopped playing with me and gripped me by the neck, choked the air I needed to breathe as I came. His knee moved, pressed down on my soaked core making it burn more as he pressed into my throat. “Come for me Blue, keep coming. This will make it more intense.”

I hovered, with no air, my body singing for him even as he stole my air. I came and came as my body fought so many dueling sensations.

Finally, almost on the verge of dying in ecstasy he released me.

I gasped deeply just as he freed his cock and stroked himself to the sight of my bruised neck and flushed breasts and soaked pussy.

“Fuck yeah, Blue. You are my queen,” he grunted, coming all over me. “All fucking mine,” he ground out collapsing on top of me and taking my mouth. He stole my air again, but it felt good, like I’d pleased my dark god—delighted him in a way only I

could.

Because it's true. Only I could bring him so much pleasure. I squirmed beneath him, grasped his lowering gaze, focusing on his work of art and brought his head back to mine before he noticed the flame he touched and caressed didn't match the rest. I never dyed my pussy; never thought I'd give him so much of me.

What a mistake. I vowed the first chance I get to wax it completely.

"Feeling shy? Did you like it? You came hard for me didn't you Blue?" His ocean-like eyes searched mine. I nodded. "Good girl. The second you turn eighteen, there won't be one place in you where you won't feel my touch."

I nodded dumbly. Wanting it all. Wanting him. I'm not Diana the strong warrior woman. I'm a slave to him, I'm reduced to need and want. I only aim to please my dark lord.

He left me to shower and I laid, staring at the ceiling, still feeling incomplete. Burying my face in his pillow, I sobbed fat tears of shame. I'll never avenge the Fiorelli's or my dead family by being our enemy's lover. But maybe it's time I just live for the girl I am today. A girl who might be willing to let the past go if it meant having a chance to be loved. Even if it's by the man who has the power to take everything away from me all over again.

He's perfect. Utterly perfect. and more than I could have ever hoped for. Not like I ever thought I'd find someone who'd match me anyway. But somehow, I did. In New Jersey, nonetheless.

She's young though and as the night sky gave way to dawn, my hands curled around the wrought iron rail as I peered out into the darkness giving way to the light. Should I take what's mine or wait? Thoughts pestered me one by one. I've never waited for anything just simply took. I'm not a man ruled by law or religion so why should I? But then the hole she pierced in me lets reason and a speck of good through. Every dark thought I've ever had; every deadly deed is why I should wait.

Maybe she's my chance to get it right. A chance to finally grasp that elusive thing called love.

But I must be careful. My cousins want us to make our mark and go after the remaining families. They agreed to give me this time to just be "Ralph." I convinced them having an Ivy league MBA would make me look more legit while I'd use the education to find loopholes in the system. The mob needed technology, needed real brains to survive the millennium world.

The warm water runs over me, and I let it rinse over my back for a few more minutes before I shut it off and slung a towel around my waist. "Blue? You want to clean up?"

But she's gone. I knew she wouldn't get far with the security cameras and invisible guards, but still it burned that she would just leave and here I was thinking she felt the

electricity between us just as much as I did.

I slipped into some sweatpants, not even bothering with a shirt and padded out on bare feet to find her.

“Blue? Baby, you won’t get far...”

“...I have to go. I can’t stay the night.”

“Your parents?”

“My parents are dead.”

“Mine too.” I reached for her, but she held herself stiffly and played with the frayed edges of her sleeve while her other hand stilled on the doorknob.

“Feeling shy, Baby Blue?”

She evaded my question, “Look I need to go alright. My Uncle is going to flip his shit if he wakes up and finds out I’m not home.”

Something tightened in my gut. She doesn’t belong to me yet. Even the thought of a guardian, an Uncle—some other man having more say over her legally and otherwise makes me want to break shit. Or kill something. Hell, both.

I blew out a breath. “I’ll find your friend and take you both home.”

She nodded barely looking at me. My fists clenched. I had her. I knew she felt this... this... thing between us.

I lifted her chin, caged her with my body, “This thing between us isn’t going to go

away just because you want to ignore it.”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean that I wish...maybe it would.”

“Scared, Baby Blue?”

“Terrified.”

“And here I thought you were some badass, super girl with mystical powers,” I teased while fingering a lock of her blue hair.”

“Oh, I am. I’m just not convinced you’re worthy of all of my awesomeness.”

“I’m definitely not. But I’ll still take it all anyway.”

“I know.”

Her hesitant eyes finally met mine and I did something I never do. This time when my mouth lands, parting hers—I woo the fuck out of her with my kiss. It’s tender. Slow. The seduction my high school girl deserves. I felt the second she gave in to me and her body became soft and pliable.

“Tell me your name. We can do this the easy or hard way, Blue. Up to you.”

“Diana. Diana Palermo.”

“Palermo?”

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She nodded. “My great-grandparents left during WWII for America. They didn’t want to forget their homeland so when they emigrated, they made Palermo their last name.”

Something ugly twisted in my gut. Could she be a test? A trap? Did Constantine’s family finally want vengeance. Did they finally figure out it was me? Or did one of my enemies put her in my path as a way to derail me or test my will?

My hips moved closer. My grip on her chin became a demand. “Who are you?”

“Nobody. Just a girl with no family.”

I snorted, “Oh you are somebody alright. Don’t underestimate me. I’ll love you and break you all the same.” I want this girl something fierce, but was I ready to risk everything I worked toward for her? The scale hasn’t completely tipped her way yet even though momentum is swinging her way.

Her tiny hand rested on my forearms. “I promise the same. I could love you or kill you with the flip of a switch.”

My lips smirked because her answer was so perfect. “Ah, you are Ying to my Yang, Blue.”

She smiled faintly, “You have no idea.”

I don’t know where in the fuck this is heading. All I know is that I’ll do anything to make this magic last before the reality of what and who I need to be awaits after

graduation.

I had Roque drop me at Tati's. I lied and told him it was my house. He'd find me sooner rather than later. But I fucked up again and need to either come clean with Zio about my conflicted feelings or we needed to decide to run. Again.

With a heavy heart, I lifted the corners of the curtain framing Tati's window. An untrained eye wouldn't notice all I saw.

He left security on my ass. There were two men on either ends of the street. One was smoking while nursing a coffee, the other was in an SUV wearing shades despite the fact it was barely dawn.

I let Tati sleep and pulled on a hoodie that I found in her closet. Hopefully, it'd help disguise my blue hair as I snuck out. Zio had been lighting up my phone with texts. I grimaced knowing I was about to break the only man's heart who truly loved me. The one person who knew my complete truth and who championed me through it all.

I pulled up my Uber app and ordered one to pick me up three blocks from here. Sneaking out of Tati's house was easy. None of the hired surveillance noticed me creep out the backdoor and race into the woods.

I hopped into the backseat of the Uber after double checking it was the right car and head home to face the music.

Zio's back was stiff as a board as I walked in. He wouldn't turn to face me. Instead he sipped his black coffee while staring out the kitchen window.

“I’m sorry, Zio.”

“Scusi?”

My head hung with shame. My cheeks flamed as red as my real hair. “I tried to fix what happened.”

“Did you?” He turned to face me.

“I don’t know.”

“Sit,” he commanded before pouring me a coffee and adding a smidge of cream. “Tell me everything Romina. Everything.”

I swallowed hard. “I-I think... he likes me. Really likes me.” Zio studied me hard for a few seconds.

“You foolish girl. A man like Roque Salvatore cares for nothing. Especially a slip of a girl he almost killed decades ago. Did you fuck him,mi amore?”

I shook my head. “Well at least you’re still a virgin. We can use that.”

“I’m not using my body in this war I’m not sure I still want to fight.”

“How easily did the mighty Diana fall, eh? All it took was your first taste of passion. He’s just the first man to awaken the pleasures of the flesh in you. That’s all.”

“It’s not that simple Zio. I’ve told you every detail of us... of him. But unless you know me, you can’t really understand. It’s like our souls twisted together that day, during the massacre. We were both practically kids caught up in some war we were born into. He didn’t want to kill me. I know it.”

Zio raised his head. “And yet he did. He did kill you. The girl you were died that day and you changed. You became someone else, literally.”

“I don’t feel the same need for vengeance anymore, Zio. What if I could win? What if we both win by making him love me? Love us? Doesn’t love trump evil after all?”

“You could try. But heed my warning, that man will never love the way you think he will. Roque Salvatore has been training his whole life for one thing only: To be the most powerful mob king the world has ever seen. You have two choices now: Cut and run or stay and seduce the dark king into letting you be his queen. There are many ways to take a man down. And I love you too much, I’ve cherished you too much to set you on this path, but it seems you’ve already set yourself on it. You could hold his black heart in the palm of your hand and decide if he’s worthy of yours. If he betrays you, break it. You break him and get your revenge. But you’d have to give him all of you. You’d be his lover, his confidant, be everything to him, but the danger is he’d have the power to break you too. Are you willing to risk it all to find out if he can change for you?”

I held my head in my hands, confused. Because I really wasn’t sure. Roque is a tornado; he’d consume all of me I just know it. But the high I get from just breathing his air makes me stupidly want to risk it all.

My phone pings with a text: Get ready Baby Blue, the big, bad, wolf is coming for you.

Me: How did you get my number?

R: I can get anything I want. You are at the top of my list.

Me: ***Eyeroll***

R:So, going to hurt you for that.

Me:***Double eyeroll***

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Zio frowned, muttering in Italian under his breath. With a sinking heart I knew how much I've let him down. But maybe you can change fate? Maybe the Fiorelli's and the Salvatore's don't need to be at war anymore? Maybe just maybe it's our destiny to change all that and start a new era together?

After a long, hot bath, I opened up my laptop and connected to the wireless spy devices I planted the night of the party. When Roque was in the shower, I moved two to his room. I might be a stupid, foolish girl who just got her first taste of passion, but I will be somewhat careful about it.

"...yo! You in there, bro?"

"What?" I hear Roque bark. It sounds like Johnny entered the room. "

"Rafe and I are going into the city tonight. You in or are you going to sit here pining over that high school piece of ass?"

I gasped, as the sound of a fist meeting a face ensued as well as tumbling furniture and grunts. "Don't ever disrespect my girl again."

I closed the app. I'd heard enough. Roque really does care for me. Maybe his soul isn't so lost as we both thought. Maybe there is hope for the dark one after all and that hope is me.

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“That girl has you all jacked up.”

Sweat dripped down my face but I ignored Johnny and lifted the rack of weights above my head, doing five more sets than he did.

“Are you seriously going to a Homecoming dance? At a high school?”

“You’re going with me.”

He shook his head, “Fuck, Roque. You are losing some serious street cred, pining over some steampunk girl.”

“She’s so much more than that.”

“Is She? Talk like this is going to get you in trouble, bro. Your primed to take it all. Game over. Your cousins got Chicago locked down. They took out the Chinese and the Russians. All you have to do after graduating is build that empire man. You and I are going to be unstoppable. I’d never put a hit on you, bro and I know you’ve got my back. Don’t let some voodoo pussy fuck with our plans.”

Brushing past him, I grabbed 75lb dumbbells and worked on some bicep curls. “She’s perfect for me, bro. She’d fit in our world.”

“Nobody fits in our world. Your deluding yourself. Love isn’t in the cards for us. Wake the fuck up, Roque. You already know that.”

I did. But I was a stubborn mother fucker. Too stubborn to listen despite my inner voice screaming I should.

My temples throbbed. “What in the heck was I thinking taking a coding class?” My eyes burned from the glare of my laptop monitor. I’ve been working on this app project for weeks and not getting anywhere.

Roque’s been texting all day trying to get together. But I can’t. As much as I want to run away with my rogue Roque. I still need to be a regular high school girl pulling decent grades.

A sharp tap interrupted me as my fingers hovered over the keyboard. “Diana? There’s someone here for you.”

Zio’s face was flushed. The vein in his temple throbbed. His fists clenched and his eyes were narrowed.

“You let him in?”

“I thought about pulling the Glock from the back of my pants and putting two in his head.”

“Zio...,” I sighed, rolling my eyes.

“Are you sleeping with the enemy, Romina?”

“Not having this conversation with you.” I shut my laptop, fluffed my hair and got pissed that I even did that for Roque. I was fierce. Fierce girls don’t fluff, right? I

passed him at the doorway and whispered, “One: don’t embarrass me. Two: don’t kill my boyfriend and three: don’t blow our cover.”

He studies my teasing face. “He’s changed you... what? Boyfriend!” he practically shrieks, muttering in Italian.

“He has.”

“I don’t like it... don’t trust him.”

But I leave already caught in the gaze at the base of the stairs drawing me down like a moth to a flame.

“Hey,” I squeaked out. He’s dressed. I mean dressed in a full suit. Crisp tie. Shined shoes. He looked every inch of anil sovrano. The ruler.

He frowned as he studied my paler than usual face. “You okay?”

I smiled faintly. “My eyes ache. My head hurts. This coding class I took as an elective is killing me.”

“I can help.”

“I’m tempted but that’s okay. I need to figure things out for myself.”

His lips curved. “I know. I’m even more into you for that.”

I felt Zio at my back like an ominous thundercloud.

“Can I make you an espresso?” I asked Roque in perfect Italian.

“Fuck, I’m so into you,” he exhaled as Zio passed us.

I grinned. “Zio thought I should learn.”

“He taught you?”

“That and just about everything.”

“Hmm,” he stroked his chin. “What happened to your parents again?”

“Car crash. Drunk Driver. Icy roads...,” I broke off. A flash of pain filled my face as all I remember Papa, getting gunned down and the time my mother was shoved in the back of a car never to be seen alive again. He noticed the pain in my eyes and gently caressed the side of my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

Zio banged pots and pans around, muttering in Italian under his breath. “You can’t stay. She needs to eat then do her schoolwork. What do you want with a high school girl anyway, eh?” Zio turned, pointed a chopping knife at Roque before expertly dicing onion for the sauce he was preparing on the stove.

I swear Roque’s eyes which at that moment were the pure aqua blue color found in an ice cap, twinkled as he took in my Uncle puttering around our small kitchen. He dropped into a seat at our table. “This smells like home...”

“Italy?”

Roque nodded, “Palermo.”

My palms sweat. Zio’s cursing became louder as his sauce bubbled over the top of the saucepan. The pulse at my throat beat faster. Did he know? Has he been toying with me this whole time?

I cleared my throat. “What a coincidence?” I smiled a little too wide.

“Maybe it’s just fate, Blue.”

I jumped as a pan got thrown into the sink. Zio turned, in his eyes was all the rage he held onto for two decades. His fists balled. He might have walked away from mob life, but vengeance was in our blood. But unlike me, he wasn’t falling for the enemy.

Roque stood, amused by Zio’s antics at his presence. He slipped off his suit jacket. “Smells... delicious. Maybe I should stay for supper?”

“Stop provoking him,” I hissed, grabbing his hand. Sparks shot between us where we touch. Zio’s eyes narrowed to slits as he took in our linked hands. “Traitor,” he mouthed in Italian.

I pulled Roque into the family room, away from the judging gaze of my uncle. In seconds, I was pinned against the wall. His hands were in my hair. Mine tugged his head to mine. Lips parted. Voices sighed in sweet ecstasy as our mouths met and our souls sung at being in each other’s arms.

I felt him. All of him yearning as he strained against me. I'm a stupid fool because I can't stop wanting him. Me, the stupid girl who this beautiful, fucked-up monster almost killed wants nothing more than to let him destroy me again.,

He reluctantly pulled away. His beautifully sculpted cheekbones were flushed with desire. His eyes glowed with it.

“Fuck, Baby Blue. I'm trying to be the good guy for once, but I don't think I can when it comes to you.”

He seemed almost vulnerable as he looked at me with such heat; such raw intensity that his jaw worked. And I wondered if maybe this man would break for me. He's my first taste of passion and probably my last. I couldn't ever imagine anyone else making my fire burn as long and as hot as he has.

He finally shook his head, stepping back. “I'm needed in New York. I'll be gone a few days.”

In the blink of an eye, he changed from my flushed wanna be lover to every inch a young Don, as he smoothed the fabric of his suit and checked his cuff links.

“Business? With Johnny?”

His eyes darkened, he tipped my chin hard, holding my face firmly in his hand. “Don't ever ask about it. Do you understand?”

“Sure, Ralph.” I dropped his fake name sarcastically.

He laughed, “I'm interviewing for an internship on Wall Street. Rafe hooked me up, Blue. It's nothing more than that.”

“On a Saturday night?”

“Oh, we’re going clubbing first.”

My fists curled as images filled my head of every hussy imaginable running their hands on him. Of him, flirting and laughing and letting them.

“I’d take you but you’re not even an adult yet.”

“Yet you kiss me like I am.”

“True and pretty soon—I’ll do a lot more than that.”

I said nothing as I sagged against the wall and watched him walk out softly shutting the front door as he exited.

My butt slid down the wall. I sunk to the floor. My finger traced my bee stung lips, still swollen from his kiss.

Where did I go from here? Do I come clean and tell him who I am? Do I let myself fall knowing at any second this thing between us could explode?

If he truly has feelings for me, will he hate me? Since the girl he has been falling for, is a complete lie?

My head banged against the wall. He’s a drug I can’t quit. I never could. But instead of breaking my addiction all I’ve done is made it worse.

“Romina?”

“How can you even look at me? How?”

Zio shuffled over, sighing, “Easy. I love you little lioness. I’ll never turn my back on you. Never.”

“But I... love him. I’m falling in love with him.”

“Love is a lie. Love and hate are a coin, bella. Yours has flipped. It won’t take much to flip back again. Things between a man and woman...,” he gestured with his hand... “they can get complicated.”

“I know,” I sighed. “He’s going to New York. Clubbing with his boys.”

“Come. Eat your supper. Finish your schoolwork and go find a party.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Go party. Take pictures with your phone and put it all on that what’s it called Snapchat?”

I rolled my eyes. “Zio you are a genius.”

He nodded. “I still want to hurt that fucker. Go kiss another boy. Dance.”

“Who are you right now?”

He shrugged. “Go. Do it. Otherwise how will you know if it’s him or just your first awakening of desire?”

“Is this the part where you give me a sex talk?”

“Do I need to?”

I shook my head and stood. “No. I’m good. We’re good.” I squeaked, bounding up the stairs. I grabbed my phone off the bed and texted Tati. Zio’s my second father. I hid nothing from him but talking to him about s-e-x with Roque? I’d rather be interrogated by all five families.

Me:Zio ordered me to find a party tonight.

Tati:Seriously? Your uncle is cool AF.

Me:?? Party?

Tati:I’ll text Seb.

Me:Seb?

Tati:Yeah. I think we’re kind of a thing...

The smellsof Zio’s homemade sauce wafted up the stairs. I grabbed my laptop and followed my nose finding a heaping plate of homemade cavatelli with sauce waiting. Zio took a seat opposite me and bowed his head. Together we prayed in Italian then spread our napkins.

We chewed in silence for a few minutes and then he lifted his head. “We need to prepare.”

“For what?”

“For when this thing between you and Roque falls apart.”

My fork paused halfway to my mouth, “Why are you so sure it will.”

“Because I’m an old man with plenty of bad romances in my past. You’re too young and he’s too hot headed. He’s already making moves in Italy. Even if he wasn’t a Salvatore, I wouldn’t want you near him.”

“That’s ironic since I’m the head of the Palermo’s now.”

Zio scoffed, “You? You are the head of nothing. Where’s your army?”

I folded my napkin. "I'll make one."

"When? How?" He gestured.

"In the next chapter of my life. The one after high school. The one if I lose him."

"God help him."

"He'll need more than God's help if he plays me."

"I take it you've forgiven him for what he's done."

I paused with my fork mid-air. "I've thought about that quite a lot. He was born into a dark world like I was. He was the heir, he did what was expected but disobeyed his sovrano. He didn't kill me, Zio. He showed me mercy. How can I not do the same?"

Zio took a deep breath. "I'll never forgive him for slaughtering our family... for almost taking you. It kills me that you feel this love for him."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. At least you've been well trained to take him down if he dares hurt you again."

"Should I tell him... who we are? Who I am?"

"No. Why? The hit on you still lives."

“What?” I croaked, trying not to choke on my pasta.

“The Castellione’s know. Since he’s come so close to us. I made a few calls to old friends. Roque trained and lived under Constantine Castellione for a year. Everyone in the old world believes Roque and his cousins were killed with Constantine in a hit. The families blamed each other. To this day they still bicker about who did it.

I gasped. “He did. He killed and faked his death...”

Zio nodded. “He’s free. Free to become anyone he wants and that is the only reason I didn’t kill him just for looking at you the way I do. Like you’re his whole world.”

My heart filled with hope. Maybe we can be normal after all and break free from the past. If Roque gives up the mob life... he’s free to be with me. We could have a normal life somewhere and leave our inherited lives behind.

“What about Chicago? I heard he was making a play there?”

“He is. But he hasn’t publicly claimed his name yet. He’s running under the name The Three Kings. No one knows the Salvatore heir lives, but us.”

“We can leverage that if it comes to it. But I hope it won’t. I just want to be a normal girl for once on the cusp of her first romance.”

And hopefully my last.

“Eat. Go out. Date. Promise me you won’t limit yourself to one man at seventeen.”

“I won’t.”

Liar.

“Don’t tell him your birthday is next month either”. I sipped my water, breaking eye contact. I already felt himself at war with his need to be a better man. But I’d barely given sex a thought until that night in the closet and now, I’ll admit I think about having it with him a lot. And that makes me totally screwed in more ways than just one.

“They’re dead. The whole family,” I snarled, curling the tips of my fingers into the glossy black and white photos of me and Blue. I had her pressed up against Johnny’s SUV the night I slumped a high school party knowing she’d be there. The night she tried in vain to fool me. But I tasted the sugar in her kiss. Knew the powder was fake. I understood why she did it. My fierce girl on the verge of being all woman was scared of me. Of us. Of how we combust every time we touch. She’s seen the darkness in me and isn’t afraid of it. I see it in her too. The two of us together is a force neither understands.

I don’t care to analyze it. Twist it around and around in my head or overthink it. All I know is Blue is in me. Digging in deep and burrowing somewhere I thought couldn’t exist: a heart. Fucking flowers and all that shit. Poetry. The words that weave around my head when I think of her and how she makes me feel is sheer poetry. Dark as much as light.

“You wanna handle this personally?” My cousin, Vito’s eyes were cold as death as he looked down into the club below.

Johnny set us up in a soundproof room with a floor made of glass. From our vantage point we could peruse the scene below all the while sitting on black velvet couches with cognac and cigars. To anyone looking up, we were just five guys enjoying a Saturday night.

I nodded to Vito then scooped up the pictures, dumping them on the middle of the table I poured my liquor and flicked my lighter.

Blue and I went up in flames.

I smirked as Johnny freaks out. “You cocksucker! The damn alarms are gonna go off and what I don’t need is my club crawling with fire and police!”

“You mean your Daddy’s club?” Rafe mocked.

Johnny jumped on the table. His heavy black shoes tried to stomp the flames, but her and I...we burn. It’s what we did.

“You knew better.” Geno’s eyes were accusatory.

I shrugged. “I did. But I won’t give her up.”

Vito scowled then starts cursing at me in Italian. “We’ve worked so hard building the foundation to our dynasty and you want to go to war over a high school girl? Geno and I... we did the dirty work. And you take all the credit.”

“Are you challenging me?” My chest puffed out. My eyes glittered like hot coals. My cousins better back the fuck up. I made them. Cared for their families. Made sure everyone they left behind were clothed and fed. Some of their sisters are even doctors today because my blood money paid their way.

“The Castellione’s are a problem. They know you live. Know the Salvatore king has a throne in America.”

“So? Let them come.”

“They already did.”

“The pictures?”

“No, Roque. We had a visitor... a messenger...Vince Castellione.”

“That puppet shit? The one with the big ears and buck teeth?” I remembered Vince from the time I lived with Constantine. Vince was such a fucking lapdog. I remembered thinking he’d never make a good Don. The kid was dumb as a box of rocks.

“He wants a meeting. He handed me the pictures...Roque...they know we did the hit on Constantine.”

“Of course, they do,” I smirked, “we lived. Ran off with his estate’s money and have a foothold in Chicago. But the Castellione’s are still over there. They can’t touch us here.”

“It’s not just them. All the old families are pissed. We broke the rules.”

“Fuck the rules. I make them now.”

“With what army? You still have two more years at Princeton. The Castellione’s want to broker a deal. You need to meet with Vince...”

“Don’t lecture me on what I need to do Vito,” I sneered, feeling the walls closing in. I wasn’t ready for this. For my old life to fuck up and invade my new one. Not yet anyway. Especially now when things with Blue...ah fuck... that girl we have places we need to go together, and this shit is complicating things.

“I don’t see a point.”

“There’s a hit out on you and the girl.”

“Pussies,” I muttered, downing my drink and slamming the empty lowball glass down

on the charred photos still smoking.

“Don’t take it lightly. I can spare a few men from here but the five families from Italy? If I fuck with them for you... the wrath of the families here will be on my head. Use your head, Roque. The big one. If the old school mob starts a beef here in the states, everyone will want a say. Even the Lamatti’s.”

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“You’re supposed to be on my side, you fuck.”

“I am.”

Pacing to the corner, I looked down at the Club. The girls. The boys. All the people having a regular Saturday night with no idea of the wars that really go on. Never reported. Never known about. Bodies disappear in our wars. It never touched the real world.

“Fine. Set the meet with the Castellione bitch. Here in New York. Johnny can give us more cover. I don’t want any of them breathing in one lungful of air in Chicago. That air belongs to us and I’m not sharing. If they want a piece... they need to build their own turf. The Chinese have LA locked down. The Irish have Boston. Johnny’s crew, New York. Where the fuck are they going to go?”

“Detroit. I heard Detroit.” Vito lit his cigar.

“Good luck with that. Local gangs got that shit locked up.”

Geno nodded and fired off a text using one of his burner cells. It beeped with a reply two minutes later.

“They’re coming tomorrow night.”

My brows lifted. “Something must be urgent.” Johnny started barking out orders into his phone, setting up a secure place to meet where our backs will be covered.

“Do you want me there?”

“No, Rafe. I don’t need you. Stay clean like you always do.” He nodded and called it a night. I knew if I asked, he’d do it. Take a Glock and have my back. But having a friend on the outside is sometimes more valuable than a loyal thug on the inside.

* * *

“No.”

The word dropped like a bomb from my lips.

Vince Castellione is a short, fat, pug. I can’t even imagine what his sister must look like. And he wants me to marry her?

“You refusing this alliance is an insult. Refusing my sister is a personal insult.”

“I could give two fucks.”

“You will, when we finally finish what should have ended in Palermo.”

“What in the fuck are you talking about?”

“The girl... the Fiorello girl... she still lives. Ending her and you...will be my greatest pleasure.”

He fingered the gun tucked under his belt. Stupid fuck. It might be a while since the pit, but the cold darkness still clings to me. Only Blue chases it away for a while. Something tightened in my gut. Both are mine. Blue and the Fiorelli girl. I don’t question the fierceness of it. Both belong to me. Pieces of them pierced me and stayed.

With my hands fisted deep in the pockets of my impeccable navy suit, I strolled toward him, stopping inches from the fat fuck. His men stiffened. Guns were drawn. I leaned into his face so close; my eyes took in the hundreds of blackheads dotting his nose. “You’re such an ugly little fuck, eh? You couldn’t torture me into fucking your sister. She’s probably just as hideous as you.”

“Maybe,” he drawled trying to be all cocky as fuck. “But she saw the pictures. She wants you to be her prized Italian Stallion.”

I rolled my eyes. The corners of my mouth lifted as I pictured Blue in my mind. I’ve never rolled my eyes before at anyone. I wonder what she’d think?

“I said no.”

“You’ll reconsider.”

“Not likely.”

“The five families have already decided. Take my sister as your wife...bring us into Chicago or we’ll end the last of the families from the Old World. We won’t hesitate. We won’t fail.”

“Like your father’s did? The original circle of five couldn’t stop me. What makes you think you can?”

“They still live. Still remember...my father... he stands by the word he gave yours. But I’m adding a condition. His word isn’t mine to keep. Marry my sister. Unite with us and we can break them all.”

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I stepped away. Eagerness filled his beady, greedy eyes. He needed me. He has the numbers, but I have the brains and capability to make this operation. Maybe I'll do it. Marry the bitch then ditch her. Out her in a pit with her brother....

"If you hurt my sister..."

"You'll what? Kill me?" I almost rolled my eyes but catch myself.

"No. I'll kill the girl. Your girl."

"She's nothing to me. A quick fuck. That's all?"

"No... don't think it's just that. I saw the pictures. You broke the cardinal rule, Salvatore. Or maybe Constantine didn't teach you well enough. I bet she's tight as fuck with that little, bitty body of hers... I have her and the Fiorelli girl. The two girls who are both your weaknesses."

I spun on my heels. My fist connected with his pug nose. Bones crunched Blood splattered then gushed from his nose. His men went berserk. But Johnny had my back.

"Stand down," he ordered. "You're in New York. None of you will leave my jurisdiction alive."

Vince held a bloody rag to his nose. "Twenty-four hours Salvatore. Then the deals off and the hit on you and her is on. My family won't intervene. My father meant to keep his word to yours, but it will be out of his hands. Marriage to Julietta is the only way

out.”

I said nothing, as I walked out with Johnny guarding my back. In the back of the armed SUV we sat in heavy silence. Through the window, the city streets blur as fast as my thoughts.

“What are you going to do?”

My cell cuts the answer forming in my mind. “Geno?”

“They’re here. Trying to infiltrate Chicago. Trying to get people to snitch.”

“Cut anyone’s tongue out who does.”

“They took my sister Carmela. Grabbed her straight from her dorm room in Boston.”

It’s war.

I’ve been a fool for thinking I could pretend to be someone else. A normal college guy having a romance. Going to keggers and playing foolish teenage games.

I forgot who I was for a minute.

“We’ll get her back.”

“Unharmd? If those fucks touch her...”

“I know. We are blood, cousin. We haven’t survived. Killed. Planned to lose.”

I end the call and turn to Johnny. “I need your Boston connections.”

He whistled low. “The favors you owe me are stacking up and your crew is still too light to offer me anything in return.”

“Someday I’ll be the fucking king and you know it. I’ll probably save your ass a thousand times over. You can thank me now.”

He shook his head but made the call. The Castellione’s are fucked. They just didn’t know it yet.

My cell pinged with a text. It was a picture of Carmela. Bound. Gagged, with wide eyes pleading for help. Her bra was soaked with sweat and her hair was wild.

My sister wants an answer.

I typed back... Vegas. Two weeks. Send me a picture of my bride.

He sent a picture of a pig. Covered in mud.

“Maybe he’s serious? He’ll put a veil on one and walk it down on a leash just to humiliate you?”

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“No. I met her once. She was fat. Had a pock-marked face and wore her hair in two fat braids. She smelled of gelato all the time.”

“Maybe she’ll taste sweet then?”

“The only thing sweet will be her spilled blood.”

“On your wedding night?”

I nodded. “I’m taking all of them out. Then I’ll confront the remaining four families when I’m done. Who does that fuck think he is coming after me? Taking my family?”

“You killed Constantine. That man is a mafia legend. He was the best at what he did. Stories of his kills are notorious even in my circles.”

“When I’m done. Everyone will forget him and only speak about me.”

“Damn. I bet they will.”

We continued the drive back to Jersey in silence for a bit. “How did they know? Why did they only find me just now?”

“Modern times, my friend. It’s nearly impossible for anyone to hide. They probably always knew. Hell, you took all the money. Didn’t you put the charity in your name?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Someone slipped. Maybe bragged?”

My eyes cut through the changing scenery. We’ve left concrete behind and the bare trees of almost winter roll by. “Perhaps.”

“What are you going to do about Blue?”

“Keep her.”

“And your bride?”

I shrugged. “It’ll be a farce.”

“That’s a dangerous play. They’ll kill her if they find out.”

“They will try either way.”

“Dump her. End it.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re a fool. He sees it. I saw it weeks ago. You can’t be who you need to be and feel love, brother.”

He’s right. But that wouldn’t stop me from trying.

Johnny’s burner lit up with a text. “Fuck. Now I owe Sean Flannery a favor. He’s closing in on Carmela’s location.”

“Favors rule our world.”

“And lies.”

Drop me at her house.

“You’re so fucked?”

I shook my head, “I don’t plan to lose anything especially the girl.”

16

Whispers followed wherever I went. I was a persona non grata before. The freak with the blue hair and tit-less body. Ever since the Prince of Princeton has been showing up after school practically every day to escort me home, I'm high school royalty. The freak turned princess.

But little did they know I was born to be a queen. My heart did flip-flops in my chest. He's here again. Waiting for me.

"Hi," I smiled, hesitantly. Part of me was still afraid of the intensity between us. So many times, it had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him who I was: The girl from Palermo. The girl who teased him to become a man. Well, he's all man now. His arms came around me as he scanned the area for threats.

His warm lips brushed the top of my head as he opened the passenger door of his SUV and ushered me in.

Instead of taking me to the gym to work out together as we've been doing, he pulled down Main Street and parallel parked in front of a fancy boutique.

"What's this?"

"I'm taking you dress shopping."

My head whipped around. "The fuck you are. I hate dresses and dances."

He smirked. “So, do I. But you are going. Correction we are going to Homecoming.”

“I’m not doing Pretty Woman with you.” My mouth puckered like I’m sucking on a lemon.

He laughed and the sound caught me off guard. Who is this man? High school dances and romance are things that don’t go with Roque Salvatore. Or do they?

Rolling my eyes, I took his outstretched hand and let him lead me into the shop. The bell rung as we entered. A woman brightly called out hello as she rounded the counter and stopped. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes went wide at barley five-foot two me in wedge sneakers holding his hand.

“Can I help you get something for your ah, sister?”

“Yes. My uh, twisted sister needs a dress.” He pulled me flush to his front. My ass cradled his thighs. His index finger dipped down into the front of my shirt between my breastbone in a long, slow, sensual caress. My knees went weak. Hers went dreamy. And I sure as shit knew we were both hot for him. But he’s mine. Only mine. My beautiful fucked up monster only breathed for me. And I for him.

Together, the two fucked-up kingpin kids could find their way together? Right?

I smacked myself in the head for thinking such sappy as shit thoughts. He reduced me from the badass blue-haired girl, to a pathetic love-sick one.

The saleswoman’s eyes glazed over but at the tic in Roque’s jaw she turned and started grabbing dresses.

“No.” I shook my head at the sleeveless sequined thing. “That looks like a leftover from a bad eighties music video.”

“Were you even alive in the eighties?” She snapped under her breath.

Roque’s attention was on the lacey bra and panty sets. I rolled my eyes. “Nope.”

He grinned wickedly. “Yes...”

“Keep dreaming.” I taunted, then turned away as I spotted the most perfect dress. It’s silk or satin and the same color of my hair. Bright Blue.

“That one,” I pointed.

Roque’s laugh tickled the back of my neck. “It’s perfect.” He swept my hair to the side and kissed my nape. My nipples hardened to points under my shirt.

I gasped as his teeth nipped my ear. Maybe I should throw in the bra and panty set after all...

* * *

He held me close as we swayed in the gym. Fairy lights hung in swoops overhead. Who knew a high school dance could be so romantic? My palm pressed against his heart. Thump. Thump. Thump.

My blue hair fell like a curtain as he tipped my chin and kissed me slow and deep in front of the whole school.

I sighed and opened my mouth wider. He tamed my vengeful heart. I wanted to tell him tonight before things went too far between us. I wanted him to want both of us—the girl he threw away and the woman I’m becoming.

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“Fuck, Blue.” He broke from our kiss, his eyes staring intently at me. Lost in the spell between us, I cupped his cheek and whispered, “My birthday was last week.”

“What?” His voice was low and dangerous. “Fucking with me, little girl?” he growled.

“Never.” Liar. You’re fucking with him behind all this...blue hair and fake blue eyes...

Johnny scowled at us from his place behind the punch bowl. Five cheerleaders hung off his biceps; each dying to get fucked by the mini-mob prince-to-be. I rolled my eyes, “wanna get out of here?”

He hissed as I let my tongue slide along my lower lip. “This is a dangerous game, bella. One I won’t let you walk away from.”

“I know.”

He took my hand and nodded over to Johnny. Instead of taking me back to the frat house like I expected, he held my left-hand prisoner in his grasp while he maneuvered the Suburban through the dark autumn night and to the fanciest boutique hotel in Princeton.

“Wow. I guess I was a sure thing, huh?” I swallowed.

He cut the engine. Instead of taking me straight up to a room, he slipped his jacket off and put it on me. “The gardens here are not to be missed. Even in the face of winter.”

Puzzled, I let him lead me through an arbor draped in twinkling lights and dried vines. A maze of stone walls, man-made waterfalls, and arches covered in dried blooms met us.

“This is... beautiful. The dead, dark and dried up blooms are... haunting?” I breathed in the crisp air.

“It’s us. Or at least me. It reminds me of home...of Italy.” He slipped, then caught himself. “I mean where my ancestors were from.”

He led me through stones still covered in wet moss. Dried leaves crunched under our feet as we walked through summer’s graveyard. Dried, dead hydrangea blossoms still danced for the night breeze.

“I did something once. Something that still haunts me. This place reminds me of someone from a day long ago.”

I blinked back tears. “Roque—”

But he cut off my words with a harsh kiss. Taking me in his arms, we danced under the full Harvest Moon—to hooting owls and ghosts either cheering us on or determined to work against us.

Our kisses turned frenzied. He wanted to own me. Consume me. One thing he hadn’t lost is that eerie intensity of his. It’s stronger than before.

When he swept my legs out from under me to carry me to a small gatehouse at the edge of the garden, almost in the woods, I didn’t put up a fight.

He kicked the door open and deposited me onto of a fluffy cream-colored bed. Looking around, the whole mini cottage was just a bedroom with fat white candles,

white furniture and flowers... everything is pure, virginial.

I shivered as he loomed over me.

“My big, bad wolf has come at last,” I teased, opening my arms.

He paused as if my words triggered a memory. His eyes almost glowed in the dark as he unzipped the back of my gown and it slid down.

“Mine,” he growled, not even bothering to undress as his hips straddled mine. His dark head bent down to take one nipple between his two lips. “Delicious,” he groaned, going back and forth.

Electric energy zinged from where his mouth pulled, going straight to my core. Throbbing need had me writhing beneath him. My hands clawed at his back, urging him closer.

He chuckled against my throat, letting a hand stroke down my body. “You want this, bella?”

I nodded, unable to speak as his fingers stroked through my mound. I gasped into his mouth as he parted my flesh, finding the little screaming bud of nerves wanting his touch.

But the attention only makes my need worse. I needed him deep inside of me. I always did. He shed his clothes. I stared wide-eyed at his muscular chest and biceps covered in ink down to his wrist.

“Scared?”

He teased my sopping entrance with the thick head of his shaft. Ran his hands over

my small breasts and down my stomach, to play with me while watching my face.

His teeth grit as he fed his cock to me inch by agonizing inch. “Fuck, Blue. You are so tight.”

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My body yielded. It fucking hurt. It felt like he was tearing me apart.

Finally, he planted firmly inside. All the way. He propped himself up on his elbows and despite the fact that I felt his cock twitching in bliss, he deadpanned, “Now how in the fuck did you know my name? You called me Roque out in the garden. Who? Sent. You?”

His eyes were cold. He was not the teasing, romantic man who just wooed me for weeks. He flipped his switch. The monster was back and there was nowhere to run.

I stammered not knowing what to say. “Johnny called you that.”

He frowned, part of him wanting to believe me.

“Johnny never fucks up.”

“Please...” I moved under him. His dick swelled more inside me, but he refused to move.

“Who are you, Diana Palermo?”

“No one. Just a girl from the woods.”

He was suspicious as he stared down at me. Finally, he eased out and slowly thrust back in. “Fuck. I can’t stop, even if you were sent here to destroy me.”

I knew. Oh, how I knew. I lamented inside my screaming head. I grabbed the side of

his tormented handsome face, “I don’t want to destroy you. I just want to love you.”

He stilled, poised above me. “Me too, bella. Me too. I’ll get my answers later.”

Together we moved as one. It hurt and yet I’ve never felt so much pleasure. He lifted my hip, took my leg and curved it over his hip driving in deeper.

He murmured sweet things against my neck as his lips found the spot behind my ear. Pleasure and pain rolled through me like thunder. It was deep. Intense. The meaty tip of him stretched me with every thrust of his hips.

I bit my lip at the intense pleasure he created when he moved a hand down between us to press hard on my clit as he thrust in and out.

Growling, he grasped both my hands, pinning them above my head and leaned low to fit my entire breast into his mouth. When he stilled, he pulsed deep inside me. It’s a strange sensation to feel him deep inside me on the edge of his release.

“Damn, Blue. I’m not going to last as long as I want.”

His eyes lifted from my breast, “Make my first-time goodIl Sovrano. Make it good for me.”

I don’t know how it was possible. But he hardened even further as he planted deep inside me. His eyes were two pools of ice-blue fire. Can fire melt? Can blue mercury burn so hot that it becomes lava? Me referring to him as the ruler broke him into a frenzied pace of passion.

My thoughts were muddled as he cursed in Italian and thrust into my soaking wet heat.

His large palm gripped my ass, lifting me against him. Every time he thrust deep, his groin brushed my core. He bowed to bite my breast, growling deep in the back of his throat. The man came like a tornado.

I felt his power surge into me.

His hands fell from my ass. He looked down at our joined bodies and thumbed my clit, rubbing it in hard circles.

My eyes rolled back in my head. I came in a series of waves. The whole sweaty, mess of him fell against me.

His heart thumped against mine. He released my hands and I ran them through the thickness of his midnight hair.

Finally, he eased out of me, nostrils flaring at the sight of my virgin blood. The look he gave...it slammed right to my heart and double stamped my soul. I was always his. Everything was always his to take. But I didn't feel weak. For the first time, I fully understood the power I could wield over this king.

"Don't go anywhere," he warned, pressing his index finger against my lips. My tongue darted out to taste it.

"Bad girl," he breathed. "Just wait my little virgin...the things I'm going to do to you."

"Virgin?" My eyebrow rose.

He smirked. "That was barely sex, Blue. You have no idea who you just let into you."

“I do,” I whispered.

He tensed, reminded me I spoke his true name. “I need to take care of this,” he gestures to the condom he took off and tied. It was automatic. Easy. Just like tying your shoes. My hands fisted in the sheets; angry he wasn’t all mine the way I was his. I was tempted to rip off my contacts, strip off all my layers and let him see exactly who I am.

Let him see who had ensnared the beast.

He grabbed my wrist, ripping me from the flimsy sheet and pulled me up with him to the bathroom. He turned on the massive shower and pushed me in. Caging me against the stone wall, his eyes went back to chips of arctic ice as the warm water washed over us. He twirled a lock of soaked blue hair around his fingers. His cock jutted out from beneath his washboard abs. But he braced his hands on the wall above me, letting his pecs almost brush the tips of my breasts while his hips refrained from touching me at all. I knew he wanted me again. I could taste it. But Il Sovranowas back, and the king wanted his answers first.

“Don’t hurt him.”

“Who?”

“My uncle.”

“How?”

“Palermo. I told you my family...”

“Your uncle recognized me? Impossible...”

“I’m his only living relative. He raised me as a daughter... You? A Princeton boy obsessed with me? A high school reject with barely anything? He hates it. Hates you. And...” I swallowed hard, “hates that he knew this night could happen. Would happen eventually.”

Roque’s palms smacked against the tiled wall. Then he gripped my chin so hard, I knew it’d bruise.

“Who sent you? Are you a mole for them? The Castellione’s?”

My brows furrowed. I haven’t heard that name in forever. A lifetime ago.

I splayed a wet hand on his sculpted chest. “As if anyone could fake this...thing we both feel. I didn’t want it. Didn’t want it to be you. But it is.”

His muscles bunched and tensed. His eyes never left mine as he judged. Decided.

“How then?”

“Your eyes. They are unforgettable and according to my uncle, a trade Salvatore trait. A DNA gift from the Gods.”

His eyes hardened, but his lips twitched. “Your uncle didn’t call me a God.”

I shrugged. “No, he didn’t. He said something more like ‘those Salvatore’s have thick heads and believe they are decedents of the Gods...”

“Your uncle... he’s making problems...”

“How? Zio’s an old man. He can barely walk some days when his arthritis flares.”

“I-I’m not just a college student with a bad past, Blue.” I lowered my gaze debating how much to disclose that I knew. He exhaled sharply then pulled me in tight, stroking his hands down my back. “I’d never hurt you, bella. But you must not betray me. Ever. I’ve broken the one rule with you. The one rule that a man like me knows better to break.”

“I won’t betray you if you don’t betray me.” I met his intense stare, giving one just as intense back.

He cursed in Italian and crushed his lips to mine. We clawed at one another. Both our secrets screamed to break free from where we had them locked down. But I don’t break and he... he growled, spinning me against the wall. He opened the glass shower door to flick off the lights.

In the dark, the water fell like rain. There was no window in the bathroom. Steam started to cling in the air. I was trapped in the dark with him again. But this time it was a world of carnal pleasures.

He fell to his knees behind me. I gasped, feeling his breath against my ass. From behind, he spread me, spearing me with his tongue. I garbled nonsense as his teeth scraped against me and his tongue delved deep.

Unable to help myself, I bucked back against him fucking me with his mouth. His laugh tickled. But soon, I lost all ability to think as he took me closer to that sweet edge. It’s not long before I fell over.

In the dark, he does things to me. Unspeakable, wicked things. Things Tati and I

would snicker about when we watched a popular film. But I wasn't snickering now. I was drowning in ecstasy.

I lost track of time. I understood why they called orgasms "the little death." I died in his arms over and over again.

Languid, and limp somewhere near dawn wrapped up in his arms, I finally slept.

When I awoke, I wasn't the same. He had awakened me. Made me come alive for the second time.

Sore and covered in light bruises, I blinked and stretched. I knew the instant I awoke that he wasn't there. The energy is different when he's around. It's palpable.

I winced as I swung my legs over the bed. He wasn't lying when he said he'd take everything from me, and I wasn't lying to myself when I knew I'd let him.

I'm grateful he's gone though as I try to collect myself and put the pieces of myself, I let him rip from me back together.

17

“Honeymoon’s over.”

Breathing out hard, I pinched the bridge of my nose as I paced. “We got your cousin back but took out a few Castellione’s in the process. While you were out living some high school fantasy—they hit back hard. Your warehouses in Chicago were hit. They took some merch.”

“How much merchandise?”

“The pharmaceuticals from China.”

“Fuck.”

While Johnny’s words sank in, I still smell her scent on me. Felt her body under mine. Remembered how she tasted. How our souls touched. I didn’t regret a second of it. I’d never give her up.

“Roque?”

“I’m here.”

“What’s your move?”

“Where is he?”

“Vince... he’s waiting for your response. His message is clear. Merge with them or total war.”

“It was her. Blue. Her uncle is from Palermo. He sent out feelers to old connections.”

“I told you she was trouble. Fuck, Roque. She has caused some serious shit to go down. Kissing that girl was the first of many dominoes to fall. I’ll put an extra rush on my PI to dig up more dirt on her and her family. But so far, he’s got nothing. My gut tells me they’re records are too clean... too untraceable.”

My gut clenched. I spun, spying my girl through the window. She’s exquisite. Naked, she stood brushing the strands of her wet, blue hair. My eyes traveled the curve of her spine, noting every mark my mouth left.

My cock turned to stone.

I’ll never take another. Never love another. Even if she is a mole. It hit me like a thunderbolt. My obsession with the girl is more... it’s the one cursed thing that will make me fall. Love. I’m no longer invincible. She made me weak. But I’ve never felt stronger. I’ll take down the dogs. I put down devil in his own grave and take his place. The five families? They won’t know what hit them when I’m done. Their draconian rule is over. I will take it all. Italy, America, the world. My chest puffed out and I laughed at my own narcissism. It’s her... Blue. She made me feel as if I could own the world.

“Fine. I questioned her last night.”

“With your cock?”

“Johnny...,” my voice lowered ominously. “you’re my friend. My brother, but don’t disrespect my girl.”

“What about your bride?”

“She’s dead five minutes after I say the vows.”

“Only you could lie to God in a church and not even blink.”

I shrugged. “I’ve done worse things.”

“We all have.”

“She’ll forgive me.”

“Blue?” He snorted, “She’s gonna cut your damn balls off. But you can’t tell her. Her uncle has already stuck his nose in our business. We’ve cut off tongues and balls for less.”

“We have. But I won’t tell her because it’ll be a weekend trip. I’ll marry the girl and end her in one fell swoop. Blue will never have to know any of it.”

“You’re too hard-headed to ever take advice but I’m giving it now anyway. Let the girl go. She’s young. Too young. Still in high school and too vulnerable for us to protect while growing your mob.”

He’s right. But I needed to hold on. She’s my new anchor. The only thing keeping me from letting the darkness spread like a disease, consuming what’s left of me. I think of the Fiorelli girl. I needed to find her too. Protect her from the five families and make her understand I’ll never follow through on the order to end her. I’m the new king and what I say goes.

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Blue's mouth parted and I practically heard her gasp as her eyes met mine in the mirror when she noticed me outside the window looking in.

“Roque? You still there?” The phone was pressed to my ear, but I didn't hear him. I was focused on the goddess crossing the floor. She pressed her hand to the glass. I raised mine to the cold pane on the other side. Her nipples were pert and taut. It'll never be enough. A thousand lifetimes with her in my bed could never curb this hunger.

“Forever,” I mouthed as our fingertips met on opposite sides of the glass. Her eyes widened at my pledge. She still doubted me. Still didn't grasp that I was not a man who did anything lightly. But then again, how could she know the true monster I am? She knew next to nothing about my true world and I vowed for now she'd never find out. Johnny was right about some things... Blue she still needs to fly. I'll let her finish high school. She'll go to college in Chicago if she wants. In my town, she'll be safe. But that's years away from the here and now. With many things to be done in-between.

“You are so far gone, bro.”

Lost in our moment, I forgot Johnny was still on the phone. “Set it up. Keep my cousins at home. I'll go alone.”

“That's ballsey as fuck.”

“You'll be my best man, dickhead.”

“Christ. A wedding and a funeral. That’s right up my alley.”

I slipped my phone in my pocket still mesmerized by the siren standing just beyond my reach. She was still naked and waiting. My girl is a wanton. All mine and I’ll kill her if she ever lets another man touch her. Kill him too. Hell, I’ll slaughter anyone who looks at her and wonders what she’s like.

18

“Please tell me you didn’t do it. You didn’t marry Julietta and then kill her?” It’s past four a.m. and we’re both still wide awake.

“I’d know if you’d been married... it would’ve shown up on Google.”

I smile wryly. “Would you? Ralph Smith did get married.”

She gasp, “to Diana Palermo I hope!”

“I wish he had married Diana Palermo... but Ralph Smith was a fool. A fool for love. I’ll never make that mistake ever again.”

“Oh no. This story doesn’t have a happy ending.” She deflates.

“Nothing in life ends happily. You of all people should know that.”

“I refuse to give up believing. Besides, Romina Fiorelli is the love of your life. There’s still time to get the girl. The end of the story isn’t written.”

“... more like a to be continued...”

“So? You married that troll, Juliette?”

“I did.”

“Did Blue cut your balls off?”

“Worse. She cut out my heart.”

Chloe fights a yawn and snuggles deeper into the couch. “We need to find her. Like yesterday.”

“We?” I arch a brow.

“Yep. I’m totally team Roque.”

“Not Romina?”

“I haven’t decided yet. She should have told you who she was. She set a few dominoes in motion herself.”

“I’ve never blamed her. She was young. A teen. I blame myself for being so overcome by the electric current between us to see what was right before my eyes. How could I have been so blind? Not noticed beneath all her layers of careful camouflage was the one girl who was always my destiny?”

“I think you’re both acting like total retards. You love her she loves you... it’s not that complicated.”

“But it is. Love makes everything complicated. Besides, Romina doesn’t love me. Perhaps Blue, did. But that love died before it could even fully blossom.”

“I don’t love her anymore. I only want to destroy and vanquish whatever burns between us for good.”

Chloe rolls her eyes. “Do you even believe your own bullshit? No man, would stay

up all night reliving his old love story unless the story is still alive for him.”

Now I roll my eyes. “Why are girls so hopelessly romantic? If I wasn’t so weak none of this would have ever happened.”

“You’re right. It would have been a great tragedy instead of the greatest love story. Fifteen-year-old you would’ve murdered his soulmate and walked the earth dead inside. Romina is the fire that wakes you up inside.”

“Not her, Blue.” I shake my head. “I loved a girl who never existed. I loved the girl Romina dressed up as using a disguise. How can I ever know if it was all an act or... if it was real at all?”

“Don’t you have all her diaries? Dumbass? She spells it all out for you literally?”

I stalk forward. “Did you just call me a dumbass?” I hiss in my deadliest, I’m going to break you no bullshit voice.

She yawns shaking her head. “Keep going. What happens next?”

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“Things... blew up. Twists happened in our story that I didn’t see coming. Things changed me. I was never the same after. The truth is Chloe, she made me the man I am today. It might’ve started that fateful day in Palermo. But not seeing... by believing I could blend in. Play a pretend role for a while in Princeton... led me here. I’ll never make the same mistake again. I’ll never be a fool for love. Hell, my heart is locked down and vaulted. It’ll never breathe again.”

“It will for her.”

“Romina? Part of me...maybe wishes it would. But she changed after what happened. The girl I loved is gone. That can’t be undone. Besides, after what happened to Johnny... I can’t risk she would only want to get close to me again just to get the revenge she always craved.”

“Back to the story. Ralph Smith marries the troll princess and breaks his Blue’s heart. Did I get that right?”

“Not quite...”

“I can’t read anymore. Too tired. Go to sleep then. There’s no use rehashing what happened.”

“I can’t sleep. I need to know now. You can’t leave me on a cliffhanger.”

“Fine,” I rub the back of the neck and feel my eyes drift the loopy curves of Blue’s handwriting. For when she wrote this it was still Blue. And that’s the major sticking point for me. I loved Blue. A fake persona invented by Romina Fiorelli. That girl who

defied me that day in the woods already got her revenge and she doesn't even realize it. She broke me. Her curse was fulfilled by her own actions and she didn't even realize it. I still love that fierce girl with the Blue hair and mud brown eyes. The girl whose hands shook as she stroked my back. The girl whose breathless kiss promised me she would be mine forever. The girl who gave me all of her in some twisted game of lies.

It crushed me when I found out she wasn't real. I didn't want Blue and Romina to be one in the same.

“When will you be back?” I wrapped my arms around Roque, hugging him from behind. He tensed in my embrace. In front of him, the dawn broke, stretching its rays wide bringing the promise of a new day.

The past few weeks were glorious. Roque’s love is intense. Deep. Powerful. Washing over me every time his eyes glance my way.

But the closer Roque and I got, the more Zio’s been pulling away. He barely looks at me. Every time I try to engage him in conversation he mutters in Italian and complains of being tired. More days than most, when I come home from school, I find Zio asleep in his chair.

“A few days maybe.”

“I wish I could go with you,” I whispered into his back, cringing at the sound of my own lovesick voice.

“Me too, bella.” He lifted my hand to kiss my palm before moving off the edge of my bed.

My eyes lingered on the scars across his back. I felt them the first time we were together, but I didn’t want to ruin the moment by asking. I made the mistake once, of tracing my finger along the jagged, raised edge of one once and Roque hissed, ordering me never to touch them. It hurt. A lot. That he’s still closed off from me, keeping secrets. But then again, I’m keeping the biggest one of all.

“Is it...business?”

He whipped around. “No. Family stuff.”

“I thought your whole family was dead.”

“Not quite. Your uncle doesn’t know everything.”

Neither do you.

I’m hurt he won’t fully let me in.

Something was going on. He didn’t even bother creeping through my window last night. He came through the front door. Zio was asleep anyway but Roque was not to be denied. My bed creaked all night. He took me like a man on a mission. It was rough, tender at times but almost brutal and violent other times. The man acted like he wanted to consume me.

Now he’s distant and cold like the fires that burned through the night never flamed. Bitter ash filled my mouth as he dressed, barely looking at me.

“Don’t lie to me.”

His eyes lifted. “Don’t you have high school in an hour?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Getting dressed? I have a flight to catch.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I grumbled, rolling over and giving him my back. Fuck high school. I needed sleep.

I heard him finish dressing, then the bed dipped as warm lips landed on my bare shoulder. “I’ll be back before you know it. We’ll go out on a real date to Manhattan. The theatre... clubs... whatever.”

“Don’t try to pacify me like I’m a toy. I hate all that shit and you would know that if you knew who I was.”

He laughed as his teeth sink into my flesh just enough to sting. “Fine. I’ll take you out on rounds.”

“Rounds?”

“Yeah... where we enforce our rules and punish people who break them.”

“Hmmm...” I twisted the sheets because honestly the gap between our worlds outside of this room was just too wide and we both knew it.

Suddenly he came close. I remember staring at the shiny tip of his polished shoes as he stood next to my bed. “Look, Blue. You and I are written in the stars. Our fates are sealed. I’m coming back for you...in three days, three years, or thirty. You got me?”

He lifted my chin and I nodded fighting back tears. I never thought I’d choke on despair for him leaving me. I knew it was just business. But something in my gut just didn’t feel right.

“I’ll call you later, okay?”

I nodded and he sighed, bending down to grasp my head and kissed me like a dying man. Our mouths opened and parted over and over again. He stole my breath. We kissed until we couldn’t breathe. Both of us were heaving and angry when we parted. He seemed almost feral as he fought himself not wanting to leave. “No matter what

happens, know you're the only girl I could ever love."

"What does that mean? Why are you really going?" Frustrated, I lunged off the bed and beat my fists against his chest. He caught me in his arms and sighed into my hair, stroking my back as you would a child before finally letting go.

"Three days, okay?"

"Okay."

But it wasn't three days and things would never be okay.

I breathed in deep. It was good to be home despite the fact it felt like I left every piece of me back in the room with the tiny girl with bright blue hair. Vito picked up Johnny and me from the private hanger at O'Hare and it wasn't long before we noticed the dark SUV tailing not far behind,

"They think they can tail me? On our home turf? Fuck that!" Johnny grinned as he checked his clip and slid the wrack.

I crouched down so no one could blow my head off and undid my gun holstered by my ankle. "It's so fucking on!" Vito cut the wheel and we exited the freeway, banging left and right turns as the SUV followed in hot pursuit.

"Get down!" Johnny barked, as he noticed the passenger in the car behind us lower their window and started firing. The first spray of bullets ricocheted off the back glass.

Our SUV's glass was bulletproof, so they lowered and went for or tires. "Turn! They are trying for the tires!" Johnny roared.

Vito turned and hit the gas; the SUV tottered on two wheels I crashed into Johnny throwing all my weight to the opposite side hoping to stop a rollover. When the car tipped back on all four wheels, I lowered the window next to me, aimed for their gas tank and emptied my entire clip.

"Fuck!" Vito roared as the explosion of the car behind us rocked ours. He lost control

and we hit a row of parking meters and cars but kept going. Our tires blew, but we didn't stop. Sirens were wailing all around us.

“We gotta dump out here!”

Vito entered an underground garage. Johnny loaded another clip and shot out the security cameras. I took off my suit coat, ripped off my shirt and dipped the white linen fabric into our own gas tank. Pulling it out halfway, I took out my lighter and lit the fabric as we ran. Our shoes smacked against the pavement as we ran for cover before the blast would blow us off our own feet.

Vito opened the door to the nearest stairwell, and we made it inside just as the friggin' car exploded. The blast sounded like a warplane dropping a bomb.

“That was a bit dramatic,” Johnny drawled.

I shrugged. “We couldn't leave prints.” Then I slid out my burner and texted Geno that we needed a safe pick up and to move to our underground bunker until further notice.

I holstered my gun, ran a hand through my hair and straightened my suit. We rolled out of there like three executives who could give two fucks about the sirens and screaming people.

We walked a few blocks then waited under a nondescript awning. Like clockwork, Geno rolled up to a stop and we got in the car.

“You just killed Vince's top dog. He's pissed AF.”

“Fine. He started this.”

“No, actually you did when you murdered Constantine and cleared out half of the Castellione cash.”

“I’m not done with that family yet. Where’s my bride?”

“Change of plans. Vince wants you in Palermo.”

“Guess that punk has no balls after all. He can’t face me on our turf, so he had to run home to the five families and hide behind their skirts,” I scoffed.

“Fuck it! A trip to the homeland it is. I wanna see this bridezilla of yours anyway.” I pinched the bridge of my nose feeling a massive headache coming on Johnny is such a fucktard sometimes. “Fine. We go to Palermo. It’s my ground zero anyway.”

Johnny grinned like a mother fucker and made the calls to the jet and his crew in New York. We were going and bringing a kick-ass killing crew with us.

I walked in the darkness—something I was used to but hadn’t done for a while. I never had problems seeing in the dark either. Maybe it’s because my eyes glow. Maybe I was born part man, part monster. Hell, I’d believe it.

So many things happened in these walls. So many people that once roamed them were now ghosts themselves.

Everything was just how I had left it.

The dishes were still on the table.

Clothes still hung in closets.

Only the office where I had taken down my uncle was cleaned, although layers of

dust covered everything.

“Ashes to ashes... dust to dust,” I murmured, as my finger ran along with the old books in my father’s study.

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The weight of it all felt heavy. The duty and sense of responsibility I had felt for so many years weighed too much at times. But I was the next in line. So many before me never faltered when it was their turn. I couldn't either. I felt my legacy, my bloodline was the only link left to those who'd shed this earth for the next realm. They died horrible deaths. Especially my aunt, my brothers, my mother... the sense of duty I felt to avenge that never left me. That's what brought me back to Palermo, not the Castellione's. I needed to end the five families forever and be the only Don. The only absolute ruler. It was the only way I could fathom keeping Blue safe.

I imagined, gutting this mausoleum to the studs and building something better with Blue.

My cell chirped. It was Vince. "What?" I barked.

"You're pissing off your bride. Five hundred people are waiting for the groom to make his appearance at the engagement party."

I snorted. "I haven't signed the agreement. My lawyers are still looking it over."

"It's simple. Fuck my sister. Put a baby in her. Unite our families in flesh and blood. We take over."

"Put a bag on your sister's head and I'll consider it."

"Fuck you!"

"No, fuck you!" I snarled, throwing my phone against the room. I lost it. I wanted to

blow them all up. Anything to get back to the life I had weeks ago. The life I deluded myself into believing I could actually have. In a fit of rage, I swept my hands across the bookshelves toppling everything. I didn't want to be Roque Salvatore. I wanted to be Ralph Smith. The guy playing spin the bottle and ten minutes of tongue time in a frat house. A guy who could be whoever the fuck he wanted.

But that was a pipe dream and I knew it. The best I could hope for is settle shit with Vince and be such a cock to Julietta that she wouldn't want me anymore. I left the ghosts lingering in the dark and called Johnny. "I'm on my way."

"Don't. It's a trap."

"This whole life is a trap."

"What are you saying? Don't blow it all now just because you got your first taste of heartache."

"It's not that."

"Like hell, it's not. That damn girl. She's done nothing but fuck everything up since the night you met."

"She has, in the best possible way. I love how she fucks up my world."

"You're so far gone. There's no talking any sense into you."

"Just get there. I need to meet this bitch and dispose of her so I can get back to Blue."

He breathes out hard. "I'm already here and you are in for a surprise."

"How so?"

“I’ll fuck her for you. Just make the room dark. She’ll have no idea.”

I shake my head. “Be my guest. You really fuck anything, wouldn’t you?” Johnny was an animal. But he was the best fucking friend ever and I knew no matter where life would take us, we’d always have each other’s backs.

I continued walking down memory lane literally and figuratively. The Castellione’s had a place in Palermo. It was set high on a hill and constructed the year I left. From my vantage point below, the opulent mansion was lit up. Expensive cars lined the streets.

I stood for a moment.

It felt like a huge moment. I knew once I stepped inside, my life would change forever. Either I’d be trapped in marrying some cunt or I was going to make my biggest hit tonight by detonating the trigger inside my pocket. My cousins still had connections here. When you grow up poor, you make unbreakable bonds. My cousins sent money back here not only to blood relatives. They helped out so many who in turn were willing to help us. The catering company was infiltrated with such people. The whole foundation was rigged with explosives.

Boom. I could end it all right here, right now. But curiosity got the better of me and I walked toward my new, strange destiny.

Time stopped when I opened the doors. I entered through the garden, effortlessly vaulting over an iron fence. The guards knew me by face. Hell, I was infamous.

The crowd hushed. Drinks paused halfway to their lips. The sea parted. And there she was, my bride. She was beautiful and cruel. It was in her face. In her stance. She was me. The female version of me. And suddenly I hated myself. She was exquisitely made for me. The uglier half of my ugly soul. Raven hair swung down her back. Her

eyes were dark, round and large and framed by long lashes. Her breasts were full and ripe and pushed up by the bodice of her glittering gown. Her hourglass shape alone could bring a man to his knees. Hell, Johnny was already there.

She crossed the room to me, and I grinned. She would come to me, her reluctant king. I would not go to my evil queen.

She bowed low at my feet. An involuntary hiss escaped me. Her submissiveness was a carnal aphrodisiac. One I would use against her. Maybe this very night even.

“Rise,” I commanded.

“I’ve waited my whole life for you,” she breathed, pressing her pouty lips against mine. I stiffened and tilted my head away.

“Really? That explains why you reek of desperation.”

Her nails scraped against my skin, threatening to draw blood to match her crimson lips. “Hardly. I’m just a woman who knows what she wants—you. The most powerful Don yet.”

“Me? Hardly. I’m just some scrub living in a frat house.”

She looked me squarely in the eyes, “That’s a joke and we both know it.”

Smirking, I lifted a glass of champagne off a tray and handed one to my bride. “Till death do us part,” I mocked, lifting an eyebrow.

She purred low in her throat as her nails drifted up and down my forearm. “You have no idea... the things I’m going to do to you.”

I swallowed the fizzy drink half wondering if I hadn’t met Blue what kind of match this would be. This devilish woman would surely be the best type of fun, but I’d always sleep with one eye open.

“I’m taken,” I muttered, brushing her hand away.

“By me. I know all about your underage lover.”

“She’s not underage anymore.”

“She’s dead. Face it, the minute you touched her you signed the certificate yourself.”

“You signed yours by summoning me.”

“Hardly. Just wait my dark king, we’ll chat later. Smile!” I looked away and was momentarily blinded by a flash as the Italian paparazzi got in our face.

“Your whole family will pay for this,” I hissed in her ear.

She responded by digging her nails into my arm, like a cat with claws.

Vince walked up to us with a mic, “I’d like to say a few words to congratulate my sister and her intended. This union was destined by our families. As you know we pride ourselves by tradition and living by our words...”

I downed my drink and tuned him the fuck out. I knew what was going on. They wanted to make this as public as possible to try to make sure I didn’t back out or if any of them ended up dead, I’d be the sure fall guy.

Fuck that.

It was going to go down anyway.

“Roque.” Johnny managed to get through the crowd to me.

“What’s up?”

“We have a code Blue. She keeps calling and texting me, bro.”

“My burner is in pieces. I threw it against the wall.”

“I’ll call her later. Just tell her I’m busy.”

“I already did about twenty times.”

I tried to take Johnny’s phone but as I reached for it my bridezilla grabbed both my hands. “We need to talk, upstairs.”

“Not now.”

“Now It’s business.”

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“Text her I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

Twisting through the crowd, I let her think she’d won. I let her lead me up wide marble stairs to an opulent bedroom connected to a study.

“What the fuck?” I muttered as glossy pictures of a stunning redhead were spilled all over a mahogany desk. Blue was there too. I picked up two photos and held them side by side.

“She’s not who you thought she was.”

It hit me like a ton of bricks. Their noses. Their stature. The curve of their cheeks. Blue was... Red?

“See my Don. I’m the one who is perfect for you. She is nothing but a lie. She wormed her way in and poisoned your heart. My poison is out in the open you’ll see it coming.

My world tilts on its axis.

Rage burns fast and hot like a river overflowing after a torrential rain. She made my black heart bleed. Now there was no choice but to go to war.

* * *

My hands lifted the veil. Her eyes glowed with triumph. I was all fucked up inside. Rage billowed around me like a cloud. Most days I wore it, proudly. She got off on it.

Julietta my dark bride loved it. She craved turmoil. I spoke the vows knowing I'd break them. But I've had an unusual relationship with God. I stood in the same church my father and grandfather did, in the same spot they took their mafia brides, I took mine.

It was a union of bloodshed.

"You're mine."

"No one will ever claim that," I warned.

"The vows you speak will say otherwise."

"I won't mean them, and you know it."

To everyone watching, our tilted heads looked romantic. As if we were whispering love words.

"I have a special gift for my new husband... my men have her... their cutting her heart out as we speak. She's gone... accept it and move on."

My heart hammered. Blue. I hated her... loved her... craved her. I wanted to be the one to give punishment. And I already had it all planned. She'd be my slave. My submissive and she'd serve a lifetime sentence.

"Pathetic," she hissed. "How you still drool for her like a dog with a bone. She betrayed you, I saved you and yet you stand here at the altar still hungering for a Fiorelli when you are about to take me as your queen?"

"My queen?" I sneered, "the only way I'm fucking you tonight is if I down a box of Viagra and hallucinogens."

The priest cleared his throat, my bride was trembling with rage, her bare neck was red with it.

I spoke the vows. Said the words, all the while pretending I was gripping the hand of another. Instead of brown eyes, I saw bright blue. Instead of espresso hair, I imagined the screaming shade of the ocean at dawn.

Damn her.

As soon as I could get out of Italy, I was going after her. She kept giving my tail the slip, but that shit was ending as soon as I was stateside. I wanted answers and I'd get them even if I had to wrap my hands around her throat again...even if I had to do more. My fury demanded I do more. All I could think about was fucking her senseless, collaring her like a dog and making her beg for my love.

Romina. Blue. It fucked me up that they were one and the same. Somehow, I got through the cake cutting, the dance... Julietta must've known what was coming but she wasn't afraid. If anything, she acted as if she couldn't wait.

A large hand clamped on my shoulder, I turned finding her brother's pot-mocked face too close. "Fuck my sister over and you're a dead man."

I shook my head. "You're the dead man, Vince. Fuck off." I flung his hand from me and nodded to Johnny.

He downed his drink and smiled. He slipped from the room while I still shook hands with well-wishers.

"I have a surprise for my bride."

Her brows rose. "A thank you for enlightening me about the Fiorelli girl..."

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The Castellione's weren't taking any chances. They knew I was a man unhinged looking for any outlet to unleash my fury. A bodyguard followed us into the bedroom suite in the villa on the opulent Castellione estate. They thought they had me cornered. Little did they know every worker in this place was on my payroll. And I paid more.

"Are you gonna watch?" I turned, taunting the made man.

"Yeah, I got instructions to make sure it's consummated."

"I think I'd know," Julietta laughs, already popping the buttons on her gown.

I slammed the door and faced her. "Eager to get fucked?"

"By you... yes... I've waited forever."

"When did this sick fascination with me begin... exactly?"

"When my father told me, he made a deal with yours. Then I saw you at Constantine's... I watched you with the maid after your... illness."

"My nostrils flared, "You watched? You were there?"

"Of course. Whose idea was it to make you sleep on the floor? Zio Constantine promised me he'd break you for me."

"Strip. Get on all fours and crawl to me, your king." I commanded. My eyes were

hooded, watching as she licked her lips. I pretended to be bored as I calculated all the ways I was going to make this bitch pay.

I left men in Jersey; I knew she lied. Blue was on the run. Julietta did send a cleaning crew but by the time they got there, Blue had already fled. I was itching to get back and find her, but I had to deal with this shit first. Besides, I knew Little Red now Baby Blue could handle herself. Afterall she bested me twice.

She licked her lips, reaching me. I undid my tie and fastened it around her eyes.

“Oh, kinky.”

“Just wait.”

My belt came off next. I walked in a circle around her, finally I let it fly. But I didn’t hit her to get hard. I hit her because I could. Because she deserved it.

She screamed as I whipped that ass. The guards outside went crazy, thumping against the door.

I crouched down low, “Tell them your fine.”

“I’m fine! I like I rough!” She yelled out. “See Roque? Damage me. I’ll take it unlike her...”

I picked her up and dropped her on the bed, flipping her to her stomach. I tied her arms behind her back with her stockings.

She grunted in pain and pleasure. This was one kinky, screwed up bitch. I left her and pressed the button opening the secret panel on the wall. The secret door was one of Constantine’s great secrets. But he got careless in his old age and forgot the dog was

always watching.

Johnny sauntered in. I shook my head at the lust in his eyes. He was already hard and had a hand on his crotch. I opened the drawer and threw a box of condoms at him.

His hand traced her curves like she was the greatest treasure. She sighed and wriggled on the bed as he seduced her the way a man should his bride. She was gonna be pissed as fuck when morning came and she realized who she was in bed with. But I'd be long gone by then and so would she.

I left him to it. All in all, it was a pretty decent wedding night. I used the secret door to enter a tunnel and into a waiting SUV. I had a plane to Jersey to catch and a girl who deserved punishment more than the one I jilted and just left behind. My knee bounced the entire plane ride. I flew the door to the jet open before it stopped taxiing and leapt onto the pavement. "Roque..." I ripped my man out of the driver's seat and climbed in. The engine purred as I raced through the streets. I knew she was gone but I still needed to try.

The Explorer was in the drive.

I cut the engine and slammed the door. The house was silent. Dark. No lights were on. Déjà vu crashed over me. "Here we go again, Red."

My fist crashed through the glass pane next to the door and reached an arm in to unlock the bolt. Sharp pieces of glass drew blood, I didn't feel it. All I felt was her. She lingered in the air. I felt it: her despair mixed with her determination. She cleaned the place out.

So, she'd run again. Already had another hole to hide out in. But she couldn't hide forever especially now that I was on the precipice of being one of the most powerful Don's to ever live.

I climbed the stairs to her room; the door was cracked open. My eyes fell to her bed.

As fucked up as our world was, I grinned. She left a note. Of course, she did. I knew she would.

Next time you'll be the one on your knees for me. I'll watch as I choke the life from your body, steal your breath and let you feel the pain of how much it hurts. The sad thing is you had me. You won. I was utterly drowning in you. Utterly yours. Why Roque? Just why? Your fifteen-year-old self must be so proud. You won this round, but I'll slay you in the next.

It was me this whole time. I was always here. Watching. Waiting. I infiltrated your world, so yes that much was true. But then it all changed. The game turned around on me. I'm coming for you—you beautiful fucked-up monster. My hits will be hard.

Maybe our destiny was always war. I chose love, though. Just know that. What happens next is on you.

Was she serious? Still trying to play me? She had so many opportunities to tell me and she never did. Her note was fisted in my hand as I sat on her bed. The same bed we rolled the sheets in. The same bed, she'd curl up against me and sigh. She was good I'd give her that. But I'd be better. Next time love wouldn't be on the table for either of us. We were too fucked up to believe anymore anyway. I was used to being alone. Used to the numbing darkness. But she changed me. She brought the fire and now she's gone again, leaving me with nothing but the curling smoke the fire always leaves behind.

I sighed, held my head in my hands. She fucking got to me. She's already won. But I'll never give her one more inch. I'll never admit she made my black heart bleed blue.

“Where is he?” I gripped my head in my hands. My world was falling apart and I needed him to reassure me.

He was only supposed to be gone a few days, but his trip to Chicago turned into a trip to Italy.

He lied to me, though. I only knew he was in Palermo because my PI tailed his ass for me. It cost me most of what was left from Papa’s money. But I needed to know just what in the hell was going down.

“Miss Palermo?”

“Yes,” I turned, smiling weakly at the doctor coming toward me. I found Zio slumped over and foaming at the mouth two nights ago. He was rushed into the hospital by ambulance and it’s been a whirlwind of tests ever since. Zio had a massive stroke. He’s in a coma and they don’t know how much damage his brain has. How could I miss this? So many nights the signs were there that he was slowing down and yet I was preoccupied with Roque, too caught up in our love storm to pay much mind and now I might lose Zio.

“I’m sorry. Your Uncle is brain dead. The machines are breathing for him...,” my world faded to black. Tears from my face fell on the tiled hall. I was truly alone now, the last Fiorelli left.

I tried texting Roque, but he still refused to answer. Desperate, I called Tati and asked

her to get Johnny's number from Seb.

"Johnny?" I wiped a hand across my eyes when he picked up. Where were they? It sounded like he was at a party. I heard voices and music and a man on a microphone congratulating someone on their engagement...

"What in the hell is going on where's Roque...?!" But no one replied. The call quickly ended.

I quickly dialed my PI...I was tempted to have her blow her cover just to get him a message to call me.

"Diana..." I pressed my phone to my ear and held a hand over my other one. I could barely hear her over the deafening applause and music.

"Where are you?"

"...Roque's engagement party in Palermo. He's marrying Julietta Castellione."

"What?" Nothing made any sense.

I hung up feeling absolutely gutted. It couldn't be true. He wouldn't do that to me, would he?

With a numb heart, and a hung head I gently pushed open the door to Zio's room. His skin was ashen. The machine breathed for him, but he was gone. I sat next to his bed, picked up his hand and finally let it all out. I sobbed for the girl I was in the woods, for all the years it was just the two of us, and finally I broke down because I let him down. While he was slowly deteriorating, I was burning up with our sworn enemy. One who apparently is betraying me at this very moment.

“I’m sorry, Zio. I swear to you I’ll finish it. I’ll end Roque Salvatore. I’ll stop at nothing to make this right. I am a stupid girl, just like you said. But no more. Never again will I be seduced by the enemy. He hasn’t changed. Not one bit. I know that now.”

I held Zio’s hand until the nurse came in and asked me if I was ready to let him go.

I nodded and watched as my world was ripped away. How could anyone be ready to let someone you love go?

Sometime near dawn, I exited the hospital. I was a walking Zombie. Everything inside of me was dead. I noticed a dark SUV parked a few cars down. So, he was still having me watched but couldn’t be bothered to answer my calls and texts? Fuck that. I walked past the SUV and inside a coffee shop, blindly ordering something just to have an excuse to walk past the car. I saw him looking at me in his rearview. I dropped the cup when I was close and quickly slashed two tires.

It was a numb kind of satisfaction when I peeled out and watched the SUV struggle to tail me. It didn’t matter. They knew where I lived but if I was quick enough, Diana Palermo would disappear.

He wouldn’t find me.

I’d find him.

But I needed space and distance to grieve the loss of Zio and deal with the devastated hole Roque’s betrayal left in my heart. The man decimated me. Broke me down just like he warned he would.

Did he know this whole time? Did Johnny’s crew dig up my past?

I drove back to our tiny house feeling the crushing weight of so much loss. I couldn't breathe in that house.

Quickly, I packed and set plans in motion. Zio did train me very well. It was time to execute our "bug out" plan and disappear for a while. I was eighteen and a legal adult and no one could stop me from leaving.

I left the Explorer in the drive and used the car we kept in the garage under a tarp. An old Volvo wagon would be my getaway car. It was blue and nondescript. I turned back to the house. It was time to say goodbye.

I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't crumble. Instead, I drove south to Pennsylvania. Past farms and fields, past rolling hills until I reached a tiny college town called Altoona. Zio bought a log cabin on an acre here years ago. Paid cash. Before he slowed down, we'd summer up here, slowly stocking it bit by bit in case we ever needed a safe haven.

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Well, that time had come for me. I needed a safe haven. A place to shut the world out for a while so I could heal, lick my wounds and never look back. I'd vanquish Roque Salvatore's name where it was stamped across my heart. I'd burn it out until it's nothing but jagged scars. The scar would always remain, but the love would be gone.

I kept busy, unloading the car. My eyes were dried out from all the crying I did on the way there. I opened a toolbox and popped a floorboard, my hands reached under finding the old metal box. Inside was a new identity. New birth certificate and social security number. Zio was smart and shortly after he took me in we made duplicate fake identities in case we ever needed them. Zio even opened up a bank account here and we slowly established ourselves over the years as summer people. We smiled but kept our distance. Me being here wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

I grabbed some lighter fluid left over from grilling. Took the cover off the charcoal grill and dumped my license, old passport and papers inside. I dumped a quarter of a bottle on Diana Palermo. Dropped a match and watched her burn.

It was cathartic. Cleansing.

I lifted my chin. He wouldn't wreck me a third time. "Roque Salvatore... we might be ill-fated soulmates, but I won't break for you ever again. Next time, you will break for me."

Just as I was about to add my cell into the roaring blaze, it rang.

It was him. My thumb hovered over the phone. Should I swipe? I hesitated but answered.

“Romina.”

My heart hammered. His voice was low, deadly and rubbed across my bruised heart like sandpaper. When he spoke my true name, it cut through me like a knife.

“Roque.”

“I’m coming for you. This time I won’t hesitate to finish what I should’ve...”

“Try,” I scoffed. “But you’re mistaken, I’m the one coming for you.”

He laughed low in his throat and I hated what the sound did to me. I loathed and lusted for this monster and he knew it. But I also know how he burned for me. I’d wield that weapon. Turning on facetime I let him see me standing in the yard.

My hair was still blue but my eyes glittered green. I cried out my contacts and never bothered popping new ones back in.

He held up his hand, displaying a gold band around his finger. “So, it’s true? You married her?”

“I did. I’m more powerful than ever.”

It hurt. I couldn’t breathe, the pain of him being with someone else was too great. He was my enemy, but he was also my lover. It was so hard to separate the two. They were still glued together even though I was trying to tear them apart.

“I never lied to you.” The wind picked up, blowing strands across my tear-stained face. I let him see the moment of me standing vulnerable in the dark. It would be my last confession to him before I called on my years of training and closed the curtain to the high school girl who hoped he and her could be more.

“Ah Romina, you’re so breathtaking when your broken just like I knew you would be. It’s oddly satisfying, knowing I was right. Do you remember that day?”

“How could I ever forget the day I was murdered?”

“I brought you back, bella. My hands stole your life and my breath gave it back. My hands pumped for your heart.”

“You’re sick. Getting off during sex by choking women...”

He shrugged. “It was always you... you made me crazy, wild. You made me high, the scent of hair, your soft skin... taking your life was an aphrodisiac.”

“You sick fuck. I was a kid.”

“Almost a woman and so what? You liked what I did to you. Craved more? Am I right? I still feel you coming all over me, Blue. You like the devil in me. Will always want him.”

“The only thing I want is your head on a pike.”

“Come for me then. Let’s see who’s right.”

“Darling? Where are you? Come back to bed...” He grinned but I sneered, confident it was a set up. A farce of a marriage. No one who knew him would ever call Roque darling.

With a curled lip I challenged, “Kill her. Do it. Show me, my ex-beautiful monster, take from her what you wouldn’t from me.”

His eyebrow rose. “Ah, Romina we were made for each other it’s too bad our souls

got the wrong message. They crossed in the stars somewhere but went into the wrong bodies. If you weren't a Fiorelli..."

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“It wouldn’t matter. Your family killed mine. Zio’s... gone,” I managed to get out without choking.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Are you? That’s rich coming from the man whose entire family slaughtered mine.”

“It was never personal.”

“It is now.”

“I’ve taken all your firsts, bella. And I’m still not done with you.”

“Roque?” A sexy woman came into view. She was everything I’m not. Voluptuous. Sophisticated. But we did share a few things. She had darkness in her and I watched helplessly as she circled his neck with talon like nails and kissed him. I watched their tongues duel. I knew what he was about. He was trying to break me further.

“It won’t work. Your lips might be on hers but it’s mine you want.”

His eyes slayed me through the screen. The darkness in him was about to break free. Goosebumps broke out all over me. If I was smart, I’d end the call and hide under the covers. He was coming for me. I felt it in my bones. He wasn’t done. We weren’t done. Somehow our dark story was just beginning...

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“Wow. I don’t even know what to say,” Chloe finishes, carefully closing Romina’s diary.

I swiped a hand across my face, trying to reign in the trembling. Everytime I remember...think of her... it brings everything to the forefront. That girl twists my insides up like a blender and she fucking knew it. “I might know where she is.”

“What? What are you waiting for?”

“For her to come to me.”

“That makes no sense. No wonder you pace night after night. She’s alive and haunting you.”

“She always did.”

“I see that now. Roque, this story it’s... epic. Twistedly epic.”

“And it’s not over yet.”

“Don’t send me away, please. I need to know how this ends. What happened with Julietta?”

“Johnny never blew my cover. He just up and left. Julietta followed like a lovesick fool. She showed up in Jersey thinking I was her husband, wedded and bedded...

enough about her... that's another story..."

"I hate her."

"So do I little one. So do I. Go to bed. The sun's rising and you've been up all night." Chloe yawns and comes over to give me a hug, "You're totally lovable, Roque. Even when you're bad. Maybe especially when you're bad."

I shook my head at the slim girl in my arms. Her words ignited hope that just maybe a broken monster like me could still be redeemed.