

# HIS RUTHLESS WEAKNESS

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*He runs the city with an iron fist and a cold heart. She was just a girl in the wrong bar at the right time. He didn't just save her; he decided to own her.*

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## Chapter 1: The Cost of a Song

The air in the basement of The Iron Tap was a stagnant cocktail of sour beer and old grease: a scent that Mia felt was permanently etched into her skin. She leaned against the stained wood of the back wall, her fingers curling around a lukewarm plastic cup of beer that she had no intention of drinking. She just needed something to hold: a prop to make her look like she belonged in a place that made her soul feel small.

"What in the world is going on with your boyfriend today?"

Mia nearly jumped out of her skin. Jay, the bartender, was standing so close his breath, smelling of peppermint and something chemical, fanned against her ear. She moved away, her skin crawling. Jay was only in his thirties, but his life was written in the deep, dour lines of his face and a receding hairline that he tried to hide with a grease-stained cap. Everyone knew he dealt more than just drinks in this basement; the jittery way his hands moved told her he was his own best customer.

"He's just getting into it, Jay," Mia lied: the words felt like ash in her mouth.

"He looks like he's having a seizure," Jay snarled, gesturing toward the small, makeshift stage.

Mia looked. Vinnie was bouncing around with a drunken, erratic energy that had nothing to do with rock and roll and everything to do with desperation. He had once been a man of light and talent; back in their small town, his voice had been a promise of a better life. Now, New York had chewed him up and spat him back out as this: a man who had traded his guitar strings for the bottle.

The shame recoiled in her gut as she remembered what she had done to get him this gig. She had let Jay's wandering hands touch her in ways that made her want to scrub her skin with steel wool, all to give Vinnie one more chance. And there he was, strumming a guitar he hadn't tuned, his eyes glazed and vacant.

"I only gave him this slot because of you, Mia," Jay spoke slowly, his jaw rigid. "But I pay for music, not a circus act. If he doesn't pull it together, he's out. For good."

Jay stormed off toward the bar. Mia rushed the stage just as Vinnie's fingers cramped. He let out a frustrated wail, curled onto the floor, and began to sob. It was a pathetic, hollow sound that cut through the low chatter of the few patrons left in the bar.

"Vinnie! Stop, please," Mia whispered, reaching for his arm. She used the sweet, placating tone that had become her survival language. "Everyone is watching. Let's just go home."

"Oh, are you embarrassed?" Vinnie yelled into the microphone, the feedback screeching like a wounded animal. He staggered to his feet, his balance a lost cause. "Are you ashamed of the great Vinnie? You think you're better than me?"

"I don't think that, Vinnie. Please."

"You pity me!" He snatched his arm away with such violent force that his hand caught Mia across the cheek.

The impact sent her stumbling back. The world tilted; the sting on her face was a sharp, hot bloom of pain. Tears sprang to her eyes, not from the blow, but from the sudden, terrifying realization that the man she had followed across the country was officially gone.

"Stay the hell away from me!" Vinnie screamed at the silent room. "I'll show you! I'll show all of you!"

He turned on Mia, his face twisting into a mask of deathly resolve. He didn't see his girlfriend; he saw a target for his failures. He lunged, grabbing a handful of her hair to toss her aside. Mia landed hard on the stage, the air leaving her lungs in a painful wheeze. She closed her eyes, bracing for the fist she knew was coming. She bit her lip, waiting for the darkness.

"I think that's enough."

The voice was a low, resonant baritone: it carried the weight of a command that didn't need to be shouted.

Mia opened her eyes. A man stood between her and Vinnie: a wall of charcoal wool and sheer, unbothered power. He was broad-shouldered, his dark hair falling in precise slants across a forehead that suggested a high intelligence. His left hand was tucked casually into his pocket; his right was wrapped around Vinnie's wrist like an iron shackle.

"Who the hell are you?" Vinnie spat, trying to pull away.

The stranger didn't answer. He simply tightened his grip. Mia watched in disbelief as Vinnie's face went white, his knees buckling until he was forced to the floor in a silent, agonizing surrender.

The man finally released him and turned. When his eyes met hers, Mia forgot how to breathe. They were a piercing light-brown, framed by lashes that seemed too lush for a man so dangerous. His presence was a physical force; it was the kind of authority that made the dingy basement feel as if it were bowing to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Mia could only stare. The mask was off; the world had just changed.

## Chapter 2: The Predator's Hand

Ronnie Buckley hated two things: weaklings who didn't fight and bullies who thought they were kings.

He had been watching the girl since he sat down. She had a muted, amber-eyed beauty that she seemed to be trying to hide behind short bangs and black denim. She looked like an innocent caught in a storm, yet there was a flicker of something resilient in the way she held her beer cup. When the drunk on stage had struck her, Ronnie's heart had hit a rhythm he hadn't felt in years: a cold, focused throb of possession.

"Are you okay?" he asked again.

He reached out his hand. His skin was rough, scarred by a life spent in the trenches of the New York underworld. Mia hesitated; her eyes searched his face as if looking for the catch. When she finally took his hand, the contact sent a jolt of electricity straight to his spine. Her skin was creamy and soft: a devastating contrast to his own.

He pulled her up, adding a fraction of force that brought her stumbling into his chest. For a second, her hand brushed his neck. The scent of her, sweet, like vanilla and rain, hit him with the force of a physical blow. He felt a primal urge to sink his teeth into the curve of her shoulder; he wanted to claim her before the basement air could tarnish her further.

"Vinnie," she whispered, her voice a thin thread of loyalty that Ronnie found offensive.

She broke away from him to check the sobbing heap on the floor. Vinnie pushed her away, scrambling to his feet and fleeing out the door without a backward glance. Ronnie tucked his hands into his pockets, watching the girl, about to chase after him into the hallway.

"You shouldn't have hurt him like that," she said, blocking Ronnie's path. Her hair was mussed, her eyes flashing with a spirited anger that he found intoxicating.

"If I hadn't stepped in, he would have broken your jaw," Ronnie said, his voice dropping into a level, dangerous register. "I'm not the kind of man who watches a bully work."

"It wasn't your business. Now I have to deal with the fallout when I get home."

Ronnie stepped into her space, looming over her until she was forced to look up. "You shouldn't go home to that. A woman like you shouldn't even know a man like that exists."

Silence descended between them: a thick, heavy tension that made the dingy hallway feel claustrophobic. Ronnie knew he should walk away; he had a shipment coming in from the docks and a rival to bury. But his feet were anchored.

"Do you want to grab a drink?" he asked, his tone shifting from a command to an invitation. "Somewhere that doesn't smell like a grave?"

Mia bit her lip, her gaze flickering to the door where Vinnie had vanished, and then back to the man in the tailored suit. The logic of her old life was screaming at her to run; the new, terrifying heat in her chest told her to stay.

"I don't even know your name," she whispered.

"Ronnie," he replied. "And I think you've had enough of the familiar for one night."

He didn't wait for her to agree. He placed a hand on the small of her back, a possessive, guiding weight, and led her toward a door in the back of the bar she hadn't even noticed before.

### Chapter 3: The Room of Shadows

Mia allowed Ronnie to lead her away from the stage: she followed him, her eyes tracing the sturdy, unyielding line of his back. He walked with an assured confidence that suggested he owned every square inch of the earth beneath his polished shoes. She was seduced by the sheer power of his aura. She had never been in the presence of a man who commanded a room by simply existing within it.

He led her into a private room at the far end of the hallway: a space Mia hadn't even known existed in Jay's bar. The air here was different; it was colder, tinged with the scent of expensive tobacco and leather rather than the sour rot of the main floor. The room was drenched in dim, amber lights that gave it a dingy, secretive atmosphere: the kind of place where deals were made in whispers and lives were changed with a handshake.

"Sit down," Ronnie said.

It wasn't a suggestion; it was a barked order that left no room for protest. Mia settled into a velvet chair that felt too soft for the environment. She watched him as he sat opposite her: he crossed his legs and stared at her with an intensity that made her blush. His eyes were appraising; they moved over her with an unabashed desire that made her feel suddenly, strikingly naked.

"What are you called?" he asked.

His voice carried a soft, southern lilt: a rhythmic difference that stood out in the harsh, clipped landscape of New York. He wore his heritage like a second skin; it was too obvious to ignore.

"Mia," she replied.

Ronnie nodded, his lips turning downward in thought. "Mia: I never would have guessed that. It sounds too light for someone with eyes that carry so much weight."

The door opened, and a waiter entered with a tray of wine and beer. Ronnie cleared his phone from the table to make room for the glasses: a subtle, gentlemanly gesture that didn't match the predatory look in his eyes.

"I didn't know Jay had a room like this," Mia said, looking around at the windowless walls.

"There are always parts of ourselves we never show to the world," Ronnie replied, his voice dropping into a cryptic register.

"Is there a part of yourself you're hiding?" Mia asked.

He handed her a glass of beer, his fingers brushing hers. She accepted it because he expected her to: she found herself willing to follow his lead simply to see where it went. She was consumed by a sudden, irrational desire to know him. What drove a man like this? What was buried beneath that gruff, tailored exterior?

"We all have our basements, Mia," he said, deflecting the question with a slow sip of his own drink.

"I'm sure you know I have a boyfriend," she said, the words a desperate attempt to inflate the bubble of safety she felt popping. She

wanted to say something drastic to make him run: to remind herself of the "familiar" life she was supposed to be living.

Ronnie merely leaned forward, his lips curling into a bemused smile. "The singer? I saw him. You're sitting here with me, aren't you? The real question isn't whether I care; it's why you don't seem to."

Mia gulped her drink, the cold liquid doing nothing to soothe the heat of his gaze. He read her with an expert's ease.

"I need a break," she admitted, her voice thickening as she downed a second glass. The alcohol began to crowd her mind, loosening the grip she had on her own secrets. "He wasn't always like this. New York changed him. I wish I hadn't left home for a man who treats my loyalty like a burden."

Ronnie listened with a terrifying seriousness. He didn't interrupt; he simply watched her as the floodgates opened. Mia ranted about the three jobs, the unpaid bills, and the humiliation of managing a man who couldn't even stay sober for a thirty-minute set.

"I'm done with it," she announced, her head feeling heavy. She slammed her glass onto the table, the sound echoing in the small room. "I have to let him go."

"You should have let him go a long time ago," Ronnie murmured.

Mia's head drifted toward the table. The last thing she saw was Ronnie's hand reaching out to catch a tilting glass with a reserved, effortless coolness. She drifted into a blackness that felt, for the first time in years, completely safe.

## Chapter 4: The Silk Ceiling

When Mia awoke, her head was a cacophony of pounding pulses. She opened her eyes to the blinding whiteness of a ceiling that was far too high to belong to her apartment. The vastness of the room made her dizzy. She scrambled off the bed, her feet sinking into a rug that felt like walking on a cloud.

She darted into a bathroom that was a masterpiece of beige marble and silver fixtures. She vomited into the sink, washed her mouth, and stared at herself in the mirror. She looked like a shadow: hair tangled, lipstick gone, her eyes red-rimmed from tears she didn't remember crying.

"Aspirin," she muttered, clutching her forehead.

She walked back into the bedroom, her mind piecing together the sporadic flashes of the previous night: the bar, the blow, and Ronnie Buckley. She was in his house. Such an extravagant display of wealth could only belong to a man who lived by his own rules.

A bell rang softly in the room, making her jump. She went to the door and found a maid holding a silver tray. The woman kept her head bowed as she offered a glass of water, aspirin, and an ice pack.

"Mr. Buckley had to leave early for a meeting," the maid said softly. "But he left this for you."

Mia swallowed the pills and took the note. The handwriting was sharp and aggressive.

*'The domestic staff will look after you. The driver will take you home when you are ready. I had a great time last night. I hope to see you soon.'*

Mia sat on the edge of the massive king-size bed, sipping the water. She noticed then that her clothes were gone; she was wearing an oversized silk t-shirt that clearly belonged to Ronnie. The realization sent a shiver through her. He had changed her. The thought should have made her feel violated, but instead, it felt like a claim: a quiet, possessive act that she couldn't quite bring herself to hate.

She dressed quickly once the maid returned her clothes, then ventured out of the bedroom. The house was a monument to modern power: curving staircases, abstract art that looked like it cost a year's salary, and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over acres of manicured land.

"Who is he?" Mia whispered to the silence.

She walked down the stairs, her jaw dropping at the rows of bookshelves and the expensive, imported furniture. There were no framed pictures of Ronnie: no family, no friends, just the cold, beautiful geometry of his wealth.

When she reached the front door, a nagging voice in her head was screaming a warning. Ronnie Buckley was dangerous; he was territory she did not understand. She told herself she would go back to her old life and forget this glimpse of another world. She would go back to Vinnie, accept his apologies, and sink back into the toxic familiar.

"It was just one night," she told herself as she entered the waiting car.

But as the driver pulled away from the estate, Mia looked back at the house on the hill. She felt a hollow ache in her chest that she knew Vinnie could never fill. She had seen the sun, and now, the shadows of her old life felt colder than ever.

## Chapter 5: The Fragile Peace

Mia was a coward: it was a truth she wore like a second skin. All her life, she had opted for the exit rather than the confrontation. She had run from the bullies in high school; she had run from her parents' disappointment; and now, she was trying to run from the gravitational pull of Ronnie Buckley.

"Where's my breakfast, Mia?"

Vinnie's voice was a rough intrusion into her thoughts. He had just emerged from the bedroom, his eyes bloodshot and his hair a matted nest of failed dreams. It was past mid-afternoon. He was bare-chested, his soft stomach beginning to bulge from a diet of cheap beer and stationary resentment.

"It's past lunch, Vinnie," Mia said, her voice thin.

"So? I'm famished. Get on it."

Mia looked at him: really looked at him. She saw the grease on his skin and the entitled tilt of his head. For five years, she had fueled his fantasies with her own sweat. She had worked three jobs to keep a roof over a man who didn't even know her favorite color.

"Why am I taking this from you?" she asked, the question slipping out before she could catch it.

Vinnie cocked his head, a slow, violent heat rising to his face. "Excuse you?"

"I am so sorry I loved you," Mia said, her resolve finally snapping like an over-tuned string. "I'm sorry I followed you here. I've done nothing but stand by you while you broke me, Vinnie. Your dreams didn't fail because of me; they failed because you stopped trying. I'm done."

Vinnie slammed his fist into the drywall, the plaster cracking with a sickening crunch. Mia shuddered, but she didn't move.

"Done? Bitch, I'm the best thing that ever happened to you," he yelled, his face inches from hers. "You think you're better than me? You think some other man wants your pity?"

"I deserve better than a man who hits me when he's frustrated," Mia said, her voice shaking but her feet planted.

"Who is he?" Vinnie's eyes glinted with a sudden, murderous clarity. "You're leaving me for another man. I know it. Who is he?"

He reached out and slapped her: a hard, stinging blow that sent her spiraling to the floor. Mia didn't cry this time. She scrambled up, her heart a frantic bird in her chest, and fled toward the bathroom. She locked the door just as Vinnie's weight hit the wood from the other side.

"I'm going to kill you!" he screamed, pounding heavy enough to rattle the medicine cabinet.

Mia collapsed into the bathtub, her hands trembling so hard she could barely hold her phone. She didn't call the police; she didn't call her mother. She dialed the only number that felt like a shield.

Ronnie picked up on the second ring. "Mia?"

"He's going to break the door," she sobbed into the receiver. "Ronnie, I'm scared. He's going to kill me."

"Mia, stay where you are." Ronnie's voice was a low, deadly vibration. She heard the sound of a chair scraping back and a door slamming on his end. "Don't hang up. I'm coming."

The first blow of the axe hit the bathroom door, splintering the cheap wood. Mia screamed, curling into a ball as the steel blade bit through the barrier. It was the sound of her old life finally being torn apart.

## Chapter 6: The Architect of Choice

The silence that followed the violence was the scariest part. Mia sat in the bathtub, her ears ringing with the echo of Vinnie's screams and the heavy, rhythmic thud of a body hitting the floor.

"I warned you once, didn't I?"

It was Ronnie's voice: calm, cold, and utterly devoid of mercy.

Mia crawled out of the tub and peeped through the splintered hole in the door. The sight was a picture of brutality. Vinnie was a heap on the floor, his nose shattered and blood pooling on the linoleum. Ronnie stood over him, his suit jacket removed and folded neatly over the arm of a bodyguard who looked like he was carved from granite.

Ronnie didn't look like a savior; he looked like a beast. He kicked Vinnie with so much anger that the sound of breaking ribs was sickeningly clear in the small apartment.

"Ronnie! Please, stop!" Mia cried, throwing open the bathroom door.

She rushed to him, her hands catching his bloody fists. Ronnie didn't look at her. His chest was heaving, his eyes fixed on the man he had just dismantled. He pushed her aside, the gesture gentle but firm: a dismissal that felt like a wall.

"Get away from me, Mia," he said, his voice ragged.

"Ronnie, wait—"

"I can't do this," he interrupted, finally looking at her. The light-brown eyes she had admired were dark with a self-loathing she didn't understand. "Maybe you belong with a man like this. I'm a different kind of monster. Do not call me again."

He turned and walked out, his men following in a silent, disciplined manner. Mia watched him go, the silence of the apartment feeling heavier than the violence that had preceded it.

Two hours later, she found herself in the Buckley Enterprises lobby. She had cleared blood from her face, but the ache in her chest remained. She didn't have an appointment, and the security guards looked at her with a mixture of suspicion and pity.

"I need to see Mr. Buckley," she told the receptionist. "Tell him it's Mia."

Five minutes later, she was ushered into the top-floor office. Ronnie was standing by the window, his back to the room. He had changed his shirt, but the tension in his shoulders was the same.

"You shouldn't be here," he said without turning. "My world is a target, Mia. You're a liability I can't afford to have."

"I forgot my phone at your house," she lied, her voice quivering. "I just wanted to get it back."

Ronnie turned slowly. He walked toward her, his presence closing the distance until she was backed against his mahogany desk. He grabbed her wrist, pulling up the sleeve to reveal a red mark where Vinnie had grabbed her.

"He did this after I left?" Ronnie's voice was a low growl.

"It doesn't matter. I left him, Ronnie. It's over."

"It matters to me," he said, his thumb tracing the bruise with a touch that was almost painful. "But I won't sneak around. I won't share you with the ghosts of your past. You choose right now: you go back to that life, or you step into mine. But if you step in, there is no going back."

Mia looked into his eyes and saw the truth: Ronnie Buckley wasn't offering a romance; he was offering a takeover.

"I choose you," she whispered.

Ronnie didn't smile. He simply leaned in, his lips brushing her ear. "Then prepare yourself, Mia. Because I don't know how to love something without owning it."

## Chapter 7: The Sovereign's Tongue

The transition from office to estate was a blur of tinted glass and high-speed silence. Ronnie didn't speak during the drive; he simply sat with his hand resting on Mia's thigh: a heavy, proprietary weight that told her she was no longer a guest, but a prize.

Once inside the master suite, the air seemed to thicken. Ronnie didn't wait for a lead-in; he didn't offer a drink or a conversation. He moved with a savage urgency, his hands finding the hem of her shirt and pulling it over her head in one fluid motion. He wanted the skin; he wanted the reality of her beneath the silk and denim.

Mia's breath hitched as he pinned her against the mattress. Ronnie was a man of dark appetites: he trailed his tongue from the hollow of her throat down to the swell of her breasts, his teeth grazing her skin just enough to leave a mark. He was marking his territory; he was

erasing the touch of every man who had come before him with a calculated, erotic focus.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured against her skin. The words were a dark compliment.

He took his time, his fingers tracing the curve of her hips before sliding her lace panties down her legs. He held one of her ankles high, his gaze sweeping over her with a hunger that made Mia feel like she was melting into the sheets. He moved lower, his tongue finding her with a mastery that left her gasping. He wasn't just pleasuring her; he was studying her. He wanted to know exactly which movement made her back arch and which pressure made her scream his name.

"Will you cum for me, Mia?" he asked, his voice a low, vibrating command.

She could only nod, her fingers tangling in his dark hair as the waves of heat began to crash over her. Ronnie didn't stop until she was shaking, her body slick with sweat and her voice reduced to a series of broken whimpers.

He didn't give her time to recover. He rose, stripping off his own clothes with a practiced ease that revealed a body built for violence and endurance. He didn't ask; he ordered her onto her knees. Mia obeyed without a second thought: the authority he projected made the surrender feel natural.

Ronnie groaned, his hands tightening in her hair as he thrust into her with a rhythm that was both desperate and controlled. When he finally moved her onto her back and entered her, the connection was a revelation. It wasn't the clumsy, selfish fumbling she had known with Vinnie; it was a takeover.

Ronnie took her with a slow, relentless power that claimed every nerve ending. He wrapped his hand around her neck, not to hurt, but to tether her to him: to ensure that in the moment of her release, the only thing she could feel was him.

"You're mine now," he whispered as they both shattered. "Everything you are belongs to me."

## Chapter 8: The Ghost in the Machine

Mia woke up to a room filled with the pale, blue light of dawn and a bed that felt too large without Ronnie's heat. She wrapped herself in a red silk robe he had left for her; the fabric felt like a second skin, and ventured out of the bedroom.

The estate was silent, but it wasn't empty. She could hear the quiet, disciplined movements of the domestic staff in the distance, but she saw no one. She eventually found Ronnie in his study: a room filled with the scent of old paper and expensive whiskey. He was behind his mahogany desk, his eyes fixed on a series of monitors that showed flickering security feeds and complex data streams.

"Good morning," she said, her voice sounding small in the vast room.

Ronnie looked up, and for a split second, the cold "Fixer" mask slipped. He came around the desk and lifted her into his arms, his hands familiar with the curve of her back. He kissed her with a possessive softness that made her heart ache.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"I did," she whispered. "But Ronnie... I was thinking about Vinnie. He's still out there. He's going to come looking for me."

Ronnie's expression hardened: the silver in his eyes turning to ice. "Vinnie is a ghost, Mia. He doesn't exist anymore. I've had him moved to a facility where he can get the help he needs, or where he can rot. It doesn't matter which. He will never touch you again."

"But the debt—"

"I paid for it," Ronnie interrupted. "I paid the bar, I paid the apartment, and I paid the man. You don't owe anyone anything but me."

The finality of it should have terrified her, but instead, it felt like a burden being lifted. She leaned her head against his shoulder, letting herself believe in the safety he offered.

But as Ronnie held her, his gaze drifted back to the monitors. A new feed had appeared: a grainy shot of a black sedan idling at the edge of his property.

"Twinkie," Ronnie muttered under his breath.

"Who?" Mia asked, looking at the screen.

"A mistake I haven't corrected yet," Ronnie said, his grip on her tightening. "He thinks he's found a weakness. He thinks because I have you, I'm slow."

He pulled away, his face settling into a mask of deathly resolve. He took a burner phone from the desk and dialed a single number.

"Rock? The sedan at the north gate. Take it out. No survivors. I want Twinkie to know that the rules have changed."

Mia watched him, her blood running cold. This was the side of her new life: the violence that funded silk robes and marble bathrooms. It dawned on her then that being Ronnie's weakness didn't make him vulnerable; it made him the most dangerous man in the city.

"Ronnie, please," she said, her hand trembling.

He turned to her, his eyes dark with an obsession that bordered on madness. "I told you, Mia. If you stepped into my world, there was no going back. I will burn this city to the ground to keep you safe. Just make sure you're ready to watch the fire."

## Chapter 9: The Dragon's Shadow

The air in the lobby of Buckley Enterprises was thick with the scent of chemicals and expensive floor wax. Ronnie stood in the center of the marble expanse: a predatory silhouette flanked by men who didn't breathe so much as they waited for the order to kill.

"Well, well, well. Ronnie Buckley. The legend himself."

Twinkie stepped forward, his face a map of scars and cheap tattoos. He was the antithesis of Ronnie: loud, crude, and dressed in a way that screamed for attention. He gestured to the line of gunmen he had brought into the heart of Ronnie's territory.

"I don't have a meeting scheduled with a bottom-feeder today," Ronnie said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. He didn't look at the guns; he looked at Twinkie with a disdain that was more fatal than any bullet.

"I'm not here for a meeting, Ronnie. I'm here for a trade. I know about the girl. I know she's the only thing in this city you haven't put a price tag on."

Ronnie's jaw tightened: the only sign the punch had landed. He stepped into Twinkie's space, ignoring the weapons leveled at his chest. He reached out and grabbed Twinkie's hand, his grip sounding like dry wood snapping.

"Do not ever," Ronnie snarled, "mention her name in this house. You want a war? You've got one. But understand this: when I'm done, there won't be enough of you left to bury."

He broke Twinkie's fingers with a flick of his wrist. The screams echoed through the lobby as Ronnie's men moved like a silent wave, disarming the invaders with a brutal, practiced efficiency.

"Get him out of here," Ronnie barked, turning his back on the mess. "And Rocky? Find out who told him about Mia. I want the leak plugged. Permanently."

He rode the elevator back to the penthouse, his heart hammering against his ribs. He had spent his life building a fortress of solitude, believing that a man with nothing to lose was invincible. Now, he had Mia. He had a heartbeat in his home, and it made him feel like a man standing on a glass floor.

He found her in the library, staring at the city lights. She looked small against the backdrop of the New York skyline: a fragile obsession in a cold stone world.

"They're coming for me, aren't they?" she asked without turning.

"No," Ronnie said, walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "They're coming for me. You're just the bait they think will make me bite."

"I can't live like this, Ronnie. I can't be the reason people die."

"You aren't the reason," he whispered, burying his face in her neck. "You're the only reason I'm still human enough to care if I win."

## Chapter 10: The Final Debt

The end didn't come with a bang; it came with the cold, quiet reality of a telephone ringing in the middle of the night.

Mia sat in the bathtub, the water turning cold around her. The memories of the night before, the heat of Ronnie's touch, the way he had looked at her like she was the only fixed point in a spinning world, felt like a dream she was waking up from.

She heard the shouting in the hallway first. Then, the sound of glass shattering.

She didn't run this time. She climbed out of the tub, wrapped herself in a towel, and entered the bedroom. Vinnie was there. He looked like a ghost: his face a roadmap of Ronnie's violence, his eyes wide and vacant. He wasn't holding an axe this time; he was holding a heavy, black handgun that looked too large for his shaking hands.

"He took everything, Mia," Vinnie sobbed. "My career. My pride. And now he's got you in this... this palace."

"Vinnie, put the gun down," Mia said, her voice eerily calm.

"I can't. He's outside. He's coming for me."

The door burst open. Ronnie entered the room, his eyes instantly locking onto the weapon in Vinnie's hand. He didn't hesitate. He stepped in front of Mia, shielding her with his own body.

"You want me, Vinnie? Here I am," Ronnie said, his voice a soft, hypnotic lure. "Let her go. This is between us."

"You think you're so much better than me?" Vinnie screamed. "You're just a killer in a suit!"

The shot rang out: a deafening crack that seemed to shatter the very air in the room. Mia felt Ronnie jerk, his weight sagging against her.

"No!" she screamed.

The security team swarmed the room a second later, tackling Vinnie to the floor. But Mia didn't see them. She was on the floor, Ronnie's head in her lap. The blood was a deep, dark red against the white silk of the rug.

"Stay with me," she pleaded, her hands pressing against the wound in his shoulder. "Ronnie, please."

He looked up at her, a faint, bloody smile touching his lips. "I told you... I'd burn it all down for you."

"I don't want the fire," she sobbed. "I just want you."

"Then go," he whispered, his voice failing. "The car is waiting. Rocky has the papers. Get out of the city, Mia. Before it swallows you whole."

"I'm not leaving you."

"You have to," he said, a sudden, fierce light in his eyes. "Because if you stay, you become like me. And I won't let that happen. You're my only weakness. Let me keep one thing pure."

He closed his eyes as the paramedics rushed in. Rocky, Ronnie's right-hand man, stepped forward and placed a hand on Mia's shoulder.

"The King gave an order, Mia," Rocky said, his voice thick with a respect she didn't understand. "We have to go. Now."

Mia looked back at Ronnie as they led her away. He looked smaller now: a man who had traded his empire for a single, selfless moment. As she stepped into the night air, the city looked different. The lights weren't stars; they were the eyes of a beast she had barely escaped.

She was free. The debt was paid. But as she drove away from the only man who had ever truly seen her, it became clear to her that some "weaknesses" are the only things worth having.

## **The Story Doesn't Have to End in the Dark**

The sirens are fading, the city is cold, and Mia is alone in the backseat of a car she doesn't own. But the biggest question remains:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AC Benedette is a storyteller who thrives in the space where secrets collide with desire; she crafts tales that explore the complexity of the human heart. With a deep passion for high-stakes narratives, Benedette writes to reveal the truth hidden beneath the masks we wear. Her work explores the balance between the polished exterior of modern life and the raw, unscripted emotions that define us.

When she is not building worlds or mapping out the next twist, she can be found curating the atmosphere for her characters or studying the quiet power of resilience. She believes that every story is a debt we pay to our own imagination; she hopes you enjoyed the story.