

Gangsters
& Roses
Book 1

WICKED ROSES

SIENNE VEGA

WICKED
ROSES

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content warning

Hi readers!

Just wanted to check in with you before you start Salvatore and Delphine's story. I want to make sure you're aware of any potential triggers in this book. Wicked Roses has strong themes of dealing with violent trauma that may be upsetting to some readers. Please see below for a breakdown of topics included:

- Graphic sex and violence/gore
- Graphic depictions/mentions of nonconsensual sexual violence
- Graphic mentions of child abuse
- Brief depictions of mental health struggles

I strongly advise you not to proceed if any of the above topics are upsetting for you. Please take care! <3

This book is not suitable for readers under the age of eighteen.

Also, [Wicked Roses](#) is book 1 in the Gangsters & Roses series, but feel free to check out the prequel, [Forbidden Roses](#), if you'd like a deeper understanding of young Salvatore and Delphine's backstory. Otherwise, I hope you get comfy, grab a snack/drink, and enjoy the read!

Sienna

1. delphine

. . .



“**WE**, the jury, find the defendant, Giorgio Belini, to be guilty of the charge of first-degree murder in the case of Pete Schmidt.”

The courtroom erupts into chaos. The media scrambles to report the breaking news. Pete Schmidt’s family bursts into happy tears and embraces one another. The rest of the audience falls into shocked sidebar conversations. Giorgio Belini rounds on his team of pricey lawyers and unleashes a long, profanity-filled rant.

Mobster threats included.

“You cocksuckers better fix this or I will—or you won’t like my solution!” he barks.

Judge Ortiz slams down his gavel. “Order, order in the court!”

Giorgio Belini refuses to be silenced. He hops up on the defense table, resembling a rat you’d typically see scurrying across the subway floor.

“I ain’t going away! I’ll burn this city down before you lock me up!” Spittle flies from his mouth with each threat he issues. As the bailiffs rush over to subdue him, he uses whatever is within reach to defend himself—an empty glass of

water, a microphone attached to the table, even his shoe at one point. “You’re all gonna be sorry! AND YOU—ADA ADAMS—”

I’ve snapped shut my briefcase and moved to leave the courtroom circus behind. I stop short only when I hear my name, but I don’t turn around.

“YEAH, YOU BITCH!” he screams. “If you think... if you think for one second karma’s not gonna knock on your door... *HA!* You got one ugly storm coming your way, princess!”

The bailiffs grapple him to the floor and slap cuffs on his wrists. The room booms with even more frenzied sounds and movements as the audience gets up for a closer look. Members of the media swarm in, filming every last second of Giorgio Belini being accosted.

I keep walking. My heels strike the vinyl floor as I stride for the double doors. Mrs. Schmidt stumbles into the aisle, tears streaming down her face. She grabs my hand and shakes it profusely, her sobs muffling her words, but I catch bits and pieces like ‘thank you’ and ‘God bless you’.

The giant court room doors swing shut behind me. It’s now that I realize I’m not the only one who exited. Brenda Liang, the newest ADA on staff, jogs trying to keep up with my fast stride. Over-eager and wobblier in heels, she’s shadowing me for a few months before taking on cases of her own.

“You were *amazing!*” she pants, her bob cut falling into her eyes. “Your closing argument and the way you worked the room—chills!”

“I presented the closing argument the way we rehearsed it.”

“And knocked it out of the park! The jury came back from deliberation almost immediately. That Adams reign just won’t let up.”

We pivot around a sharp corner into another corridor. I give a loud snort. “Excuse me, ADA, but did you quote Ms. Robyn Fenty?”

Brenda giggles. “It’s true. You’re not even DA yet, and you’re already the stuff of legends. Who would’ve thought Ernest Adams’s only daughter would be an even bigger courtroom rockstar than him?”

“The flattery gets you nowhere, Liang,” I say, shooting her a slight smirk.

We abandon the courthouse for the Garden House, a lush, atmospheric bistro on the upper west side of Northam. We meet with an ADA friend of mine from my university days. Chadwick Thomas was a real-life Steve Urkel when we grew up in Westoria together. These days he’s more Stefan Urquelle than anything, making gains in the gym and ditching the thick glasses.

His dark eyes twinkle when Brenda and I sit down. “Congratulations, Delphi.”

“Oh, so you heard?”

“Have you checked your news alerts lately? It’s everywhere.”

Brenda nods so hard, her short hair slaps her in the face. “CNN. FOX. MSNBC. BBC—”

“I get the picture.”

“You’ve officially locked down your campaign,” Chadwick says. He folds his arms and grins widely at me. “I

should've known you would be elected district attorney before me.”

“Are we here to eat, or are we here to discuss my career?”

We eventually place our orders with the server. The rest of the Garden House buzzes around us, patrons nibbling on an upscale lunch of mixed greens and other rabbit foods.

Part of Garden House's charm is in its dedication to nature in the most luxurious ways possible, the restaurant resembling a flower garden if grown for the elite. No one really *likes* the food at Garden House. More so *tolerates* it for the trendy reputation and popular clientele. We're here at Chadwick's suggestion.

Our green lunch arrives, and we sit and discuss more about the media coverage for the Belini case. At some point, Brenda excuses herself to the bathroom. Chadwick stops midsentence and watches her walk off. Once he's sure she's gone, he leans closer and raises a brow at me.

“I'm proud of you, Delphi. You've earned nation-wide acclaim. You're on everybody's radar now.”

“A good thing if it means getting more bad guys off the streets.”

He chuckles. “I like to think of them as cockroaches. You squash a few, a lot more come scurrying in their place. But if there's anybody who can make a difference, it's you.”

“I'm not going to stop, so they better get used to it.”

“You have to have that work/life balance, though. You shouldn't neglect other parts of your life either.”

I busy myself with stirring the straw in my pineapple kale juice, hoping this conversation isn't going where I think it's

going. Chadwick and I have a professional work relationship I don't plan on changing anytime soon.

He has other ideas—our moms had once tried to matchmake us with little success. He was interested. I wasn't single at the time nor would I have changed my mind if I were.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks. His velvety voice drips with flirtation. “We should do dinner—just me and you, no Brendas.”

“Busy with the Belini investigation.”

“You got a conviction.”

“One small slice of a larger pie. I want the rest of the family to go down too.”

He barely contains his exasperation, twisting his grimace into a smile. “Let me take you out to Grimaldi's. Every victory deserves a celebration. Even the small ones. Say the word and I'll make a reservation. Seven o' clock.”

“What'd I miss?” Brenda interrupts, approaching our table. She slides into her seat and looks between us. I've never been more relieved to see her. “Were you guys talking about me?”



Mom always told me I am my father's daughter. While she was calm and gentle, Dad is swift and fiery. She was a flowing river bend, where as he is more of an explosive volcanic eruption. My older brother Marcel takes after Mom. I'm Dad.

Delphine Adams, Northam City's Great Black Hope. Following in her father's footsteps; Dad was two years older than me when elected Northam's first Black DA. Now it's my turn as his daughter to be elected Northam's first female DA,

and she's Black. I can see the city officials milking *those* optics for all they're worth.

Several officials congratulate me as Brenda and I return to city hall. They invite me out for drinks, or ask me if I'll be going on vacation soon. I graciously brush them off and beeline straight for my office.

"Maybe they're right," Brenda says, scrolling through her tablet. "We can cancel a few things off your calendar tomorrow."

I frown, kicking off my heels. I refuse to wear them inside my office. "Why would I do that?"

Brenda blinks. "Because... you won the Belini case. You're putting Giorgio away."

"That's why it's no time to slow down now. I won't rest until we get the *rest* of the Belini family off our streets."

"Very audacious project to take on, DA," she teases.

"Liang, I'm not DA just yet. The election hasn't even taken place."

"After today, it's in the bag. But either way, it'll take years to clean up the streets. You're only human—you need vacays like everybody else!"

"Not with Hector Belini and his underboss Frausto still free."

"The Belinis aren't the only crime family in the city. What about the Viscontis?"

"They've been losing prominence in recent years since their last boss died and all the in-fighting erupted."

"And the Mancinos? They've *gained* prominence."

My stomach flips at the sudden mention of the Mancino crime family. I almost stumble over my own stocking-clad feet. It's not a name that should be tossed around without warning.

“What... what about them?”

“You're kidding? If the Belinis don't run Northam, the Mancinos sure do.”

“Bigger fish to fry—they'll come next. The Belinis are my appetizer.”

Brenda slips into talks about the threats being made against our office since the verdict. The mayor's ordered increased security at city hall to ensure nothing life-threatening happens. It's not long before I'm tuning out.

None of these things concern me. If I were scared of criminals, I wouldn't have followed in Dad's footsteps. Being on their radar is par for the course if you're doing your job right. Unlike many in high profile positions in Northam, I can't be bought. I can't be intimidated. They can't make me go away, and they know it. The second you let them get to you is the second you let them dictate your life.

I dismiss Brenda's concerns with a wave of my hand. “Let Hector Belini come after me. It'll give me ammo to prosecute his ass too.”

Brenda giggles. “Can I be you when I grow up? Because life's not fair.”

The afternoon passes with us digging into other charges to bring up against various members of the Belini organization. Half past five, Brenda stands and stretches.

“If I read one more file about the Belinis, I'm going to scream. Probably a sign it's time for me to go have cocktails at

Luxe. Mariette and Carlos are joining me. Coming?”

“Have one for me,” I say without even looking up from my laptop. Brenda gathers her things and wishes me a good night.

It should probably offend me she’s assuming I’ll be here all night, but can I get mad at something so on point? Most evenings, I *do* work late into the night. I’m the last one to leave the building, the cleaning crew long gone.

Some would say it’s sad for a thirty-year-old single woman to focus on nothing but her career in her life. Instead of men and relationships headed toward marriage and kids, I’m holed up in my office, working on case files. But my career goals are finally happening. I don’t have time for men and the headaches they bring.

Most of my relationships have been a disaster in some form or another. I’d play the dedicated girlfriend role only to be caught off guard when the relationship suddenly ran its course. After my last one—a two year long relationship with an investment banker—went up in smoke only weeks after getting engaged, I decided men were a waste of my time.

My career dream of becoming district attorney is so much more important.

I put on some lo-fi ambient music and wind my silky black tresses into an updo. Another office habit of mine. It’s easier to think without heels and your hair brushing your shoulders. I make myself some cappuccino and then stroll through my office sipping and reading case notes.

The view from my office window overlooks sky scrapers, glittering lights, and bustling downtown streets. Many citizens are out and about to enjoy themselves for the night. Other, less law-abiding ones are roaming around too, out on the prowl.

No rest for the wicked. Even less for the good guys who hold them accountable. I can't stop even if I wanted to—the streets of Northam depend on me.

I'm lost in thought, staring out the window, watching the toy-sized cars race down traffic lanes. Footsteps pad behind me, approaching my office door. At this time in the evening, it's typically the cleaning crew.

“Oh, no thank you. You don't need to vacuum tonight—”

The end of my sentence drops off as I peer into the window's glass and catch the reflection behind me. I spin around with the air stalling in my lungs.

It's not the cleaning crew standing in my office doorway. It's a face I haven't seen in person in over ten years—Salvatore Mancino, mafia crime boss... *and* the first love of my life.

2. delphine

. . .



“I HOPE YOU DON’T MIND,” Salvatore says, hands stowed in his pants pockets. “I tried to get on your calendar sooner, but your personal assistant kept hanging up on me.”

“What are you doing here?” I choke out.

Oxygen runs on short supply. When I try for an inhale, my lungs draw on nothing. Dizziness rushes me so swiftly, the room spins. I almost drop my mug of cappuccino, but manage to set it down on my desk instead. My hand busies itself with the rose pendant necklace I wear, a habit of mine whenever caught off guard.

Right now would be a great time to wake from my nightmare. Seconds pass, and it plays on, telling me this is no dream—it’s as real as real gets.

Salvatore Mancino might hold the titles of mafia boss and first boyfriend in my dating catalogue, but his most important title is the last person I’d want to see in the world. Years ago, after our relationship ended, I busied myself with college. I’d gone to Dupont, one of the most prestigious Ivy Leagues in the country. The rigorous course load helped me get over him in time.

When I returned to Northam years later as a young and bright assistant DA, Salvatore had worked his way up the family food chain. He'd carried on his father's brutal legacy, and served as a *caporegime* in the organization (if rumors are to be believed). Luckily, he'd been sent off to a neighboring city, which meant our paths haven't yet crossed. Not directly.

So what's he doing here after all these years? Does this mean he's been reassigned to Northam?

Here's the thing about the mafia; they're good at what they do. Too good.

Nothing has ever stuck against the Mancino family. No charges land. No arrests last. No amount of policing and surveilling pays off. My father had tried tirelessly for decades to take down their kingpin, Lucius Mancino.

He'd never succeeded.

I've lived every day of each passing year with the knowledge in the back of my mind that eventually, I'd be the one to do it—take down the Mancino crime organization. Prosecute Salvatore. Past feelings and relationship aside, my duty to uphold the law comes first.

His very presence in my office shows that time's coming sooner than I thought.

I collect myself. I force a new breath and notch my hands to my hips, hitting him with my cold, prosecutor stare. He will leave my office now, or I'll call security.

“You need to go,” I say. “Leave right now, and... we can pretend this never happened.”

Salvatore removes one hand from his pocket and then reaches for the doorknob. For half a second, it seems he's

listening. He's leaving. Instead, he guides the door to a gentle close, and returns his hand to his pocket.

"It's better if we're not overheard."

"It's better if you're not here. S-Salvatore—*Mr. Mancino*, please leave."

The weight of his stare presses down on me. Salvatore's eyes have always been distinct—an enthralling mix of oceanic blue and green that are easy to get lost in. The longer he stares, the more he resembles an animal in the wild, tracking me like I'm prey to be served up on a silver platter.

I take a step back and bump into my office chair.

"*Now*," I command when he says nothing. I sound anything but authoritative with the way my voice shakes.

Salvatore strolls deeper into the room, stopping on the opposite end of my desk. He's barely blinked, and he hasn't taken his eyes off me. He stares for another long moment, and then rubs a hand over his neatly trimmed beard.

"I'm Mr. Mancino now, am I? So professional when we're so alone."

"That's because you shouldn't be here."

"I wanted to see you."

The words roll off his tongue so effortlessly, so casually, it's like we're chummy friends about to go for a drink. It shouldn't surprise me. Even when we dated, he never understood boundaries. He treats personal relationships the same as his mob ties. The positive is that he's undyingly loyal and protective. But the negative? He expects nothing less than full devotion in return.

For an eighteen-year-old starting university and spreading her wings, it was terrifying.

He and Dad hated each other. I'd been caught in between and couldn't choose. I couldn't deal with Salvatore's controlling ways and the feud he waged with Dad.

As a thirty-year-old woman with a thriving career and endless confidence, it's *still* terrifying. I know Salvatore too well—if he's coming around to see me, he's here for a reason. That reason could be deadly.

I breathe out a deep sigh and then grab the handle of my desk phone. I press the button for the overnight security team. The dial tone beeps in my ear and informs me the extension I'm trying to reach doesn't exist. I swear under my breath and punch in the full seven digit number myself. The recording tells me I'm once again mistaken.

The left side of Salvatore's mouth tips in a half grin. "I wouldn't bother trying to get a hold of security if I were you. They're a little preoccupied."

My stomach sours. "As in you've done something to them?"

"As in," he answers, venturing another step closer, "the line's been disconnected, and they've been tasked with other matters. I needed to talk to you alone, without their interruption."

He walks around the desk, closing the space between us. He eases the phone handle from my grasp and hangs it up. His fingers brush mine and elicit another dizzy spin out of me. I yank my hand away and retreat to the window, adding more of a buffer.

Keep a clear head. Be direct. Be firm.

He's not going away until he says whatever it is he's come to say. Hear him out and then put an end to whatever idea he's about to propose. It's best no one ever finds out he's come here after-hours.

An ADA in bed with the mafia's not a good look in any way, shape, or form. Even the perception we're doing deals under the table will cost me the future election for district attorney.

"You have five minutes," I say, glancing at my delicate rose gold wristwatch.

Salvatore leans against the edge of my desk and folds his arms. Throughout the years I've managed to avoid him at any public events and functions, even in nearby cities like South Valley and in our hometown, Westoria. I've never once run into him on the streets of Northam. For that I've been eternally grateful. But I've seen his photographs circulated in the *Northam Tribune*, and the footage of him sometimes featured on the evening news. I've watched from afar as he's matured into a mafia boss as dangerous as he is handsome.

Nothing compares to seeing him in person. As teens, Salvatore had the bad boy edge most girls fawn over. As a man, he exudes a dark energy that strikes a startling balance between scary and sexy. It's in everything he does as he peers at me with his penetrative blue-green eyes, and lets his lips twist into half a grin. The all-black suit he wears has been fitted to perfection on his lean, athletic frame. I don't need to see him without his shirt off to know he's all toned muscle and washboard abs.

A thickness forms in my throat, making it difficult to swallow. I fight against the lump and pretend it hasn't

suddenly grown hotter in the room. What the hell has gotten into me?

Keep it together.

He scans the length of me, taking his time. More dizzying heat rolls over me. My brown skin flushes, warm to the touch.

Damn it, I hate how his stare affects me even after all these years.

“I like when you dress like this,” he says finally. His gaze lingers on the pencil skirt clinging to my pear-shaped hips before it returns to my face. “You look beautiful—classy but sexy.”

I stammer. “You’re wasting my time. Four minutes are left —”

“Do you remember the summer before you left for school? The drive we took from Northam to Montbec Island? We brought Chip with us.”

“What about it?”

“We stayed at your parent’s beach house. Drank some of your father’s liquor.”

“Salvatore... what does this have to do with anything?” I fold my arms and give him a scolding look. “You didn’t visit my office at 7 p.m. after a decade to reminisce about Montbec Island.”

“Twelve years,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s been almost twelve years. We broke up spring of your freshman year at Dupoint.”

“The point is, it’s been a long time—”

“I’ve always known you’d go on to do great things,” he continues. He glances around my desk. Case files lay open, scattered across the top, but still my desk manages to look prim and neat. The few photo frames sit obediently at the outer edges. My MacBook is sleek and in mint condition.

The rest of the office is no different—clean lines, monochromatic color scheme of grays and blues, and svelte furniture. His presence sullies its perfection. My office, where law and good order prevails, is being tainted by one of the country’s most dangerous criminals.

And yet heat pulses around us. My skin flushes and breathlessness tortures my lungs. I stand speechless as my ex-boyfriend invades my space, and reduces me to feeling like I’m a teenage girl again.

He moves closer, his scent adding fuel to the fire. Its equal parts clean soap and piney aftershave mixed with an earthy masculinity, like he’s been on-the-go, getting his hands dirty. My gaze dips to his hands and I take inventory of the faded scars and scrapes. No fresh bruises or cuts, but they’re rough enough to reveal he still gets a lot of use out of them.

Salvatore has always loved a good fight.

He taps in at an inch over six feet. It makes for a stark difference next to my five feet, three inches. He comes into my space, stopping only with an inch to spare, and reaches up to touch my face. His rough palm skims over my cheek, slow and gentle, as if he’s admiring a priceless piece of art.

Our gaze holds, sucked into each other’s orbit. We’re incapable of pulling away even if someone were to walk in and discover our forbidden truth—many years ago, we used to be lovers.

He studies my mouth with open interest. For a brief second, I'm sure he's about to kiss me—I'm sure about I'm to let him. My body betrays me with a shiver of lust. A deep yearning I wasn't aware exists comes alive. If there's ever been a temptation in the world, it's Salvatore Mancino in the flesh.

I melt into Salvatore's touch like old times, my lips parting. Just one kiss. One taste of the past can't hurt, can it?

As I'm forgetting my sanity, as an ache throbs from my core, the moment ends as quickly as it started. Salvatore drops his hand and takes a step back. I use the opening to move from the spot by the window. More space, more breathing room. I cross over to pretend-study the abstract pieces of art hanging on the wall.

Salvatore tracks me everywhere I go. I can practically feel his gaze admiring every inch of me.

"You're a beautiful, intelligent, one-of-a-kind woman," he tells me, picking up a photo frame on my desk. It's from my graduation at Dupont Law, the last photo I have of my parents and I. A few months later, we lost Mom. He stares at it for a moment in interest. "You being who you are, we need to discuss how we'll handle the future."

"We?" I scoff. "There is no we, Salvatore."

"There will always be a we, Phi," he dismisses. He sets down the photo frame and plunges his hands into his pockets. "This is a courtesy visit to avoid any future... *complications*."

Now it all makes sense. I should've known why he'd show up after so many years. This isn't about our past as lovers; this is about our paths crossing professionally—as in, my position

as assistant district attorney creates a lot of problems for him and his operation.

Clearly, he's back in Northam. He must know I'll soon be after him too.

"I don't do deals with organized crime syndicates. You should know that without even asking." The dizzy, lusty haziness evaporates, and logic and sanity thankfully return. I glare at him as my tongue sharpens, ready to give him a piece of my mind. If there's one thing I excel at, it's a verbal confrontation. "If you think for even a second, I'm going to look the other way, and allow your *family* to wreak havoc on the city, you're sorely mistaken." Hands firm on hips, I lift my chin in a challenge. "I'll do everything within my power to bring you and your cohorts down. You can count on that, Mr. Mancino."

He lets my words linger for a second, and then gives a one-off chuckle. "Another thing I love about you—your ability to cut someone down with that tongue of yours. It does amazing things."

"As much as I've enjoyed your inappropriate comments, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"You're determined to clean up the streets of Northam. It's noble and altruistic. I can respect that," he interrupts. He strolls from behind my desk and stops in the middle of the room. "But it's not practical. You're stepping on a lot of toes, Phi. As much as I love seeing you dominate in the courtroom, it's creating a conflict of interest."

"Is that your tough guy way of saying you're worried I'll bust you?"

He rubs his jaw. “It means, I’m concerned for your safety. You have a future as Northam’s DA—it’s breaking down barriers. But some guys don’t take so kindly to some Black chick locking them up, no matter how nice of an ass she has.”

“Amazing, I always love a misogynistic threat with a side order of racism—”

“It’s not how I feel,” he says, brows raised. “It’s how *they* feel. I’m here to warn you. You need to be careful what affairs you poke your nose into. Brave and empowered as you may feel, I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

Another stretch of silence passes between us. We stare at each other, at an impasse. I can’t figure out if he’s subtly threatening me, or if he’s genuinely concerned. During our relationship, as intense as he was, Salvatore always made me feel safe and protected; even knowing hints of his background, I never once felt afraid of him. He’d never hurt me... would he?

The concern must bleed onto my face, because he takes another step closer. “Phi, you need to listen to me. The streets are talking about the Belini verdict. You need to tread carefully.”

“Please go.” I don’t dignify him with even a glance as I turn my back. “I want you to leave, Salvatore. Right now. No more games.”

He releases his first audible breath. Though I don’t turn around, I know him well enough to guess he’s scrubbing a hand across his jaw again. Still a habit of his after all these years.

“If that’s what you want,” he says finally. He cuts across the office in the direction of the door, and then holds back.

“But here’s my offer: meet me for dinner and drinks tomorrow at Grimaldi’s on Grant Avenue. Does eight o’ clock work for you?”

I give a cynical laugh. “You’re unbelievable, do you know that? You come to my office, you threaten me, and you have the nerve to ask me to dinner?”

“It was no threat. Just a warning from a friend.”

“We’re not friends. We’ll never be... *anything*... again.”

“Eight o’ clock,” he repeats. “I’ll reserve the entire restaurant just for you. All the secrecy you need to protect that reputation. To hide from your father. I’ll be waiting.”

Those are his parting words as the office door drifts shut behind him. I wait until the pad of his footsteps die away before releasing a growl.

“The audacity!” I work off the sudden shot of adrenaline inside me by pacing the length of my office a few times. “I’ll be waiting—who the fuck does he think he is? I can’t believe I almost fell for it.”

I move to the window, chest tight and agitation needling at me. I feel foolish and stupid for even allowing him into my space for as long as I did. Security or no security, I should’ve kicked him out as soon as he showed up!

I glare out the window at Northam’s skyline of bright lights and tall, silhouetted buildings. Several stories below, Salvatore Mancino strolls to the expensive car waiting for him, and drives away.

The streets are talking about the Belini verdict. You need to tread carefully.

“No,” I say to no one but myself, “I don’t need to tread carefully, Salvatore. *You* do.”

3. delphine

. . .



SALT AND PEPA are waiting for me when I walk through the door. Pepa purrs and curls her smoky gray body around my leg as I set down my purse and briefcase. I crouch low and scratch under her chin.

“Hey girl, how was your day? Did you keep Salt in check?”

As if understanding the question, Salt gives a disgruntled meow from his perched position on my built-in wall shelf. Salt’s an American Curl with a fluffy white coat and little bendy ears resembling devil horns—perfect for a mischievous, snooty cat like him.

The moment I pass through the entrance hall of my high-rise apartment, he leaps from the shelf and follows. Pepa’s already trotting at my side, slinking along my ankles. The three of us cut across the wide-open floor plan, where a spacious living room flows into the kitchen and dining area, and then we enter my bedroom.

I keep my apartment as neat and minimalist as my office. Nothing but a clean and natural design palette—beech wood and linen paired with whites and grays and the occasional pops of color. Some plant life and cat posts along with personal touches like candles and books.

Situated in the center of Northam, overlooking the scenic park grounds, the luxury apartment once belonged to Dad and cost a pretty penny.

But it's worth it. Once home, I can stuff the ADA cape in the closet, and truly *unwind*.

I light candles, soak in a lush, soapy bath, and change into my favorite satin chemise and robe. Salt and Pepa still shadow my every step. They're accustomed to my evening routine—lots of spa-like pampering and my guiltiest pleasure: trashy reality TV.

I dim the ceiling lights and settle on my sectional sofa. Pepa parks herself on the cushion beside me. Salt wanders off to nip at one of his trinket toys. I sip from the glass of wine I've poured and flip on the TV to *Housewives of South Valley*.

This is how I like spending my evenings. Something simple. Something as safe and boring as a reality tv show and some wine.

I don't need love or romantic relationships. I don't need men. Hard to believe less than two hours ago, I was a breathless mess over Salvatore Mancino.

For the last time. He's not going to catch me slipping again.

I inhale my next mouthful of wine and erase Salvatore from memory. He doesn't get to bulldoze his way into my life and turn it upside down. He and his friendly warnings can go straight to hell.

The next hour passes with me sipping wine, growing tipsy, and cracking up over the *Housewives of South Valley* episode. Once it ends, I flip off the TV and call it a night. Salt has retreated to his bed while Pepa has made a bed out of my lap. I

stroke her smoky gray fur and then polish off the last of my wine.

In the silence, a loud thump sounds from down the hall. My heart skips a beat, and my gaze cuts over in that direction. It sounds almost like something has been knocked over. I get up off the sectional, clutching my wine glass as I go investigate.

Nothing out of the ordinary. The entrance hall is exactly how I left it—a tall cane plant and built-in shelf wall with neat, tasteful knickknacks. My briefcase sits by the door where I left it earlier. I check the locks, flick off the light, and head for my bedroom.

The noise must've been another resident in the hallway outside. Even the fact that I considered otherwise leaves me with a bad taste in my mouth.

Salvatore Mancino's words have gotten stuck in my head. But it doesn't matter if his thinly veiled threat is true or false. Dad wasn't the type of DA to live his life in fear, and I damn sure won't be either.



The next morning, Brenda and I grab coffee on our work commute. It's been a ritual of ours since we realized Brenda rides the same line as I do into work. We board the subway car as she tells me about a guy she met at a bar. She might be the only woman I know with worse dating luck than me. I half-listen, using the moment to scroll through my email on my iPhone.

“Chet doesn't seem like the relationship type... but he texted me last night asking to come over. Do you think that

means anything?”

“I think it means he wants to get laid.”

“Ugh, really? When will I find a serious guy? Dating in the twenty-first century is like torture.” She bumps her shoulder with mine. “We need to fix you up with someone. Maybe Chadwick. He’s tall and handsome. You’re stylish and beautiful. He’s an ADA in Easton. You’re basically guaranteed to be the DA of Northam—”

“How many times do I need to point out the election isn’t until next year—did you just call me stylish and beautiful?”

“Is that all you got out of what I said? What about Chadwick?”

“What about him?”

We share a laugh as the subway slows to another stop. Some of the passengers crowded inside the car rush to get off while several more push to get on. It’s like watching a live game of Tetris as they maneuver to fit themselves anywhere that’s open, clutching their to-go coffees and belongings.

Most public figures refrain from using the public transportation in Northam due to deterioration and rising crime. Dad hates that I refuse to hire a private driver. If it was too dangerous for him to take the subway as DA ten years ago, it’s too dangerous for his only daughter to do so today.

But I like riding it to and from city hall. It makes me feel like a part of the community I seek to protect.

I’ve never *felt* threatened. Usually there’s a questionable person or two on my car or in the subway terminal, but no one’s ever targeted me because of who I am and my position as ADA. It’s possible I’ve just been lucky.

Brenda's had her purse snatched twice in the past.

We're two stops away from where we get off when a man with a shabby coat and grizzled beard steps on and heads for the space across from us.

Brenda squeezes herself against me and clutches her briefcase tighter on her lap. My gaze flits from her to the man. He's already looking at us, his stare heavy and unblinking.

An odd flutter ripples in my stomach, like I'm about to lose my footing. The subway car's doors roll closed and we're jostling forward again, deeper down the dark underground tunnel.

The way the man's staring, there's recognition in his hard face. He knows who we are—who *I* am.

I tear my gaze from his and pretend to focus on a nearby poster advertising Slice of Italia, a local pizza chain.

So maybe people on the subway *do* recognize me. But even if they do, no one's ever tried anything. I've never felt unsafe.

I shake my head and push the silly thought out of my mind. It's Salvatore's fault I'm overanalyzing every moment. Normally, I wouldn't have cared if some random man in a patchy coat stared me down. I wouldn't be scanning the subway car to check if anyone else is giving me similar death glares. My heart wouldn't be beating faster.

Ever since he turned up in my office last night, I've been hearing his words replay in my head.

The streets are talking about the Belini verdict. You need to tread carefully.

He was trying to scare me. Intimidate me. Work some mafia boss tactic to manipulate me into backing off.

Salvatore's bottom line was protecting his family. He'd do anything to ensure he and his men weren't next on my hit list.

When we reach our stop, Brenda and I pop to our feet and mill toward the closest doors. We pass by the man glaring at us. He tracks us every step, his lips pressed into a tight line.

"What was *his* problem?" Brenda snorts the second we're above ground and breathing fresh air again.

"I don't know," I say, fiddling with my rose necklace. "It seemed personal."

Brenda gasps. "Do you think he works for Belini?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions."

We reach the next intersection and wait for the little walking man to glow on the crosswalk sign. On the other side of the busy street sits the large stately building that's City Hall.

We climb the rising stack of stone steps and enter through the revolving doors for another long day.

Police Commissioner Steven Flynn and Detectives Galecki and Santana wait for me in my office. I shouldn't be surprised—Flynn wanted to meet yesterday. As the main detectives I've worked with in my investigation of the Belini organization, Galecki and Santana had reached out too. I'd declined in order to do more research on my own.

A lanky man with a bushy mustache, Flynn clears his throat and tilts his head at Brenda. It only takes me half a second to catch on.

"Liang, can you give us a moment?"

Brenda looks tempted to pout, though she obliges. Commissioner Flynn waits until the door snaps shut before he drops himself into the chair in front of my desk.

“I’m sure it’s no surprise we’re here, Ms. Adams.”

“None whatsoever, Commissioner. I’m guessing this is about the Belini verdict?”

“Partly, yes. Incredible work you’ve done with the Belini trial. It’s reminiscent of Ernest’s winning streak. He was a force to be reckoned with. The number of criminals he’s put away, and work he’s put into cleaning the streets...” Commissioner Flynn gives an impressed nod of his head, reclining in the seat with his fingers stippled together. “Northam’s sorely needed a DA with his kind of gumption.”

I round the corner of my large desk and take my proper seat. Still unsure of the reason for their visit, I keep my expression neutral. “I hope the Belini verdict is only the beginning.”

“That, I’m sure of,” he says. His eyes crinkle as he shoots me a proud look. “With that said, there’s concern over the takedown of the Belini syndicate.”

I cock a brow. “*Concern?* Care to explain?”

“You know all about the Belini organization and how it works. You know how powerful they are—”

“I know for the past few years, Northam’s had some questionable leadership that’s allowed them to run rampant,” I snap, unable to help myself.

“We’ve busted our asses taking them down!” Galecki blurts out, his heavy brow creased, and aggressive energy rolling off of him. “You might not understand that from your cushy office, ADA.”

“Galecki,” Commissioner Flynn says. The detective falls silent. Flynn redirects his attention to me. “No need for potshots at anyone, Ms. Adams. We’ve done a lot in our effort to dismantle the Belini family.”

“With all due respect, Commissioner, it hasn’t been enough.”

“The solution, is not to run into the situation guns blazing. That’s what surveillance and undercover operations are for. You should be working closely with Galecki and Santana to go about this in a smart and gradual fashion.”

My brow cocks even higher. “Is this about fear of retaliation? You don’t want to rock the boat too much and anger the big bad mafia guys?”

Commissioner Flynn gives a silent chuckle and shake of his head. “Ms. Adams—*Delphine*— you are your father’s daughter.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Meaning, as sharp and brilliant as you may be in the courtroom, you have a black and white view of the world. You might want to think that over,” he says, standing up from the chair. He flattens his hand down his tie and then holds it out for a handshake. “It’s always a pleasure. Please consider what I’ve said. Galecki and Santana are at your service.”

I don’t shake his hand, but I do rise to match his stance. “Thank you for coming by, Commissioner. But if I need life lessons, I’ll call my father.”



The building's almost empty by the time I notice. The last few lights in the offices near mine flick off and our secretary Mariette wishes me good night. I wave her off and return to my desk, barefoot with my hair pinned up by a clip.

With Giorgio Belini going away, I've moved on to the charges brought up against another prominent family member—Michael Frausto, long-time underboss to Hector Belini.

Frausto's no stranger to the Northam DA's office. Like with many high-ranking members in organized crime families, he's elusive when it comes time for charges to stick.

"Not anymore. You're going down," I mutter, brewing fresh tea with my K-cup machine.

I lose myself in my work. More time passes as the cleaning crew comes and goes. The clock strikes 8 p.m., and I pause with my fingers on the keyboard. As much as I want to stay another hour or two, my feet ache and I don't like leaving Salt and Pepa alone too late into the evening; Salt will get in one of his grumpy moods again.

With a sigh, I pack my things and lock up. I run into Erick, one of the security guards on shift as I exit the elevator on the ground floor. He falls into step with me making small talk.

"Always the last up in here," he says, chuckling. He's a stocky man only a few inches taller than me, with naturally kind eyes and dark brown skin. "Do you want one of us to walk you home?"

I smile. "It's just a short walk and subway ride."

"Some weirdos hang around the subway after dark."

"It's only a ten-minute ride. Thank you anyway, Erick."

He holds the door for me as I enter the cool September night. I've slipped out of my heels and into flats regardless of how brief the trip home is. At least I can make it in comfort. I dash across the street when it's clear of traffic, and then hop on the escalator going down.

The subway only has about one fourth the traffic of daylight hours, but Erick is right—a lot of the weirder Northam citizens come out at night. A guy in a dinosaur costume strums on his guitar for spare change. I drop any leftover cash from my lunch hour in his donation cup and rush to make the train before it departs.

I'm one of five people in my car. The others scroll through their phones as the car jostles us through the dark tunnel. I use the time to relax and clear my head.

Until I see the time and think about Salvatore. He'd asked me to meet him at Grimaldi's at eight o'clock. Now that it's half past eight, I can't help picturing him seated at the upscale restaurant waiting for me. He couldn't have been serious thinking I'd go to dinner with him. It was some ploy of his. Probably to sweet talk me over drinks.

Why now? Why after so many years of radio silence? Did the Belini verdict really have him that paranoid he was next on my hit list?

The car brakes for my stop, Northam Park. I rise with my purse and briefcase and start the last leg of my trip home. I'm a five-minute walk from my stop to my high-rise building.

The night casts long and unforgiving shadows along the street. Crime in all parts of Northam is an issue, but my neighborhood's typically safe. My apartment was a gift from Dad when I graduated law school and moved to the city.

Across the street, the park looks empty and foreboding in the dark. The occasional straggler wanders by the grounds.

I stick to the street lamps, my stride fast. My high-rise building emerges at the end of the block. I pick up my pace as a man in a coat and beanie steps out from the front door of another high-rise. He lights up a cigarette and blows smoke, the end of his butt glowing orange against his dark silhouette.

I pretend not to notice him as I pass by. Two more buildings and I'll be home.

He must flick his cigarette to the ground, because it crunches under the weight of his shoe. I don't have to turn around to know he sets off at a distance behind me. I can *feel* his presence trailing several paces away.

My heart pounds in my chest as I speed up. He does too. The faster I walk, the faster *he* walks. His shoes strike the pavement, growing closer with every step he takes.

Panic erupts inside me and I stop pretending altogether. I break out into a jog for my building. He darts after me.

I scream and dig into my purse for my pepper spray. The glass doors leading into my building are only a few feet away. I move to dash up the front steps, but a powerful force latches onto me and yanks me backward.

The man's grabbed a hold of me.

My ankle twists as I struggle to stay on my feet against his pull. I spray the hell out of my canister, spritzing the poisonous particles into the night air.

He only wrenches me harder. I'm dragged farther away from the bottom step of my apartment building.

"No!" I scream. "HELP!"

The encounter gets messy from there. As he tries to jostle me around, I try to fight him off. It's too dark to see much, but I swing my briefcase in the general direction of his face. His features are hidden in the shadows, only his slicked down hair distinct. He dodges my hit and wraps an arm around me, full-on dragging me away. I twist and claw at his grip, hoping to pry him off of me.

I don't know how to fight. Growing up in a wealthy gated suburb like Westoria, I've never needed to.

We disappear struggling into the passageway between my high-rise building and the one next-door. It's a narrow alley mostly used as storage for dumpsters and recyclables.

I grow even more desperate. My briefcase slips from my grasp. I begin doing whatever I can, throwing kicks and punches in every direction. One of my hits lands—an elbow to the gut. For a brief second, I'm free. I've knocked the air out of him and he lets me go.

I spring forward to flee. He's too quick recovering. I'm slammed against the side of the building so hard, I'm blinded by dizziness. The world feels like it's shifting around me way too fast. I don't get a chance to orient myself before I'm knocked down onto the wet pavement. My knee bangs into the gravel and my skin burns as it breaks open.

Everything from my purse to my pepper spray flys out of my grasp and lands in a puddle a few feet away. One of my ballet flats slip off, leaving me half barefoot. The delicate chain of my rose pendant rips from its place around my neck, and scuttles across the ground to join the rest of my fallen things.

Drenched in sweat and shaking, a pained cry bubbles out of me. I'm a flailing fish on dry land.

When I try to lift myself up, he wrenches me back down. The side of my face collides with the gravel on the pavement, sure to bruise. His hands are calloused and invasive. His rough palms scratch my skin as he rolls my pencil skirt over my hips and tears my underwear away. I open my mouth with the metallic taste of blood on my lips.

I cough and spit and attempt to crawl away again. His knee presses into me and holds me down. I'm cemented in place as if by anchor. The pain begins blurring together. One paralyzing throb of terror and hurt.

"Please..." I gasp. "I'll give you the code to my bank card. You can have all the money in the account. Just don't... *argh!*"

"Shut up, bitch."

I'm held down, my face scraping against wet gravel again. I grind my teeth together as I bear the sharp pain. His heavy, coarse hands slide between my legs. Thick fingers paw and poke at me—he feels me up like I'm a piece of meat he's selecting at the market.

My eyes squeeze shut at the sound of hawked spit. The fingers return slick and probing. When I'm entered, it's fast and without an ounce of regard. A feeble whimper escapes me and my body flinches. Any last remnants of air leave my lungs.

His weight presses down on top of me. His minty menthol stench surrounds me and churns my stomach, making me feel even sicker. He grips my hips with one hand, moving inside me. His other he plants on the ground next to mine. It's the only thing I can concentrate on other than the hot breath blowing on the back of my neck and the painful organ invading my body.

His hands.

His rough, calloused, *dirty* hands. His nails chewed and his fingers long. The same ones that fondled me. That he'd spat onto.

He wears a braided silver band around his ring finger with the sapphire crest of the Northam Neptune, the city mascot.

I study it. I focus on it.

Tune out of the moment, grasping at any distraction available.

My thoughts shift to tomorrow. I have a meeting with my star witness in my upcoming case against Frausto. I'm sure Brenda will want to get coffee before work. I'll have to remember to pick up more cat food at the grocery store. I hope Salt and Pepa have behaved themselves—

I'm stirred back to the present by the crass sound of his zipper being tugged up his pants. I'm flush on my stomach on the pavement, my legs bent at odd angles, pebbles cutting into my kneecaps. His feet appear in front of my line of vision. He bends down to grab my purse, digging out my wallet and taking my ID. The purse he dumps on the ground.

My broken rose necklace isn't spared. He snatches that up and stuffs it into his pocket.

Then he turns and he walks away, leaving me where I am, like I'm part of the alleyway.

I don't move for a long time. A strange, surreal numbness settles over me.

Maybe I'm dreaming. I'll wake up any second in bed.

A pathetic, shaky whimper leaves me when seconds pass, and nothing changes.

This is real. This happened.

At some point, I drag myself off the ground. My balance is unsteady, as if I'm drunk. I roll down my skirt and wobble over to collect my discarded purse and briefcase. Both look so pathetic strewn across the cold, grimy floor like any other piece of garbage on a city street.

I don't remember the trek from the building entrance to the eighteenth floor where I live. I don't even remember pulling my keys and unlocking the door.

It seems the next time I blink, I'm wandering through my dark apartment in search of the bathroom. Salt and Pepa rush behind me, curious and loyal at my heels, but I slam the door shut before they can follow. Once inside, bathed by artificial light, I collapse onto the rug and pass out for the night.

4. salvatore

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“WELL, if it ain’t Psycho back in the flesh,” Vito Capaldi says, a big fat grin on his face. Nicknamed Rhino for his intimidating size and permanent mean mug, he rises up from his desk and gives me a rough hug. “Look at you all big and bad! Remember when you were my busboy?”

“This must’ve been an alternate universe. I was never anybody’s busboy. Not even yours.”

He barks out a laugh. “Still the same slick mouth. I heard it got you into plenty of trouble in South Valley.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

I study the gaudy interior of Rhino’s office. It hasn’t changed much over the last decade—cherry-black furniture and cherry-red walls with fur draped wherever you look and the permanent stench of cigar smoke. I’d run Club Nirvana from this office many times, filling in for Rhino whenever he was unavailable.

Now I’ll be in charge for real.

“It’s good it’s going to you, ain’t it? You’re the only guy fit for the job. Your father didn’t want to admit it, but there was nobody else who could replace me. Nirvana’s become way too big for him to squander it on just anybody.”

“Lucius would rather it go down the toilet than give it to me.”

“Don’t say that. He gave it to you, didn’t he?”

I cut him a dubious look. “You and I both know why. He was backed into a corner.”

“You crafty son of a bitch!” Rhino cracks out a gruff laugh and smacks a giant hand to my back. “You’re calling me on my shit, huh? I can’t even be mad—yeah, I heard about it. But word of advice from somebody double your size and your age. You fuck with Lucius, you fuck yourself. Those really the type of problems you want?”

“I can handle him.”

I turn away from Rhino and move to peer out the club’s office window. At night, downtown Northam’s all neon lights against dark silhouettes of skyscrapers. During the day, the deterioration can’t be hidden with shadows and brightly lit illusions. Trash scuttles across the ground as weary people rush off to a long day of work. The drab gray buildings rise up from all directions, trapping us within its loud and hazy, smog-induced prison.

Lucius rules these streets.

The Belinis and Viscontis may battle him on it. Other smaller criminal gangs present in the city, like fractions of the Bratva and Yakuza and the drug cartels might try and defy him on occasion. But he’s invincible. Nobody has been able to stop him.

I’m going to be the one who finally succeeds. The one who finally takes him down.

“I’ll be paying him a visit this afternoon,” I say. “I need to make sure we’re both clear on our deal.”

Rhino blows a breath and trudges over to his desk. “You’re better than me, Psycho. I’m at the age where I don’t give a shit anymore. I just want to retire and lay by the pool all day with some hot bitches in bikinis.”

“Bet some of the bottle girls would be happy to oblige.”

“Ha! We can call it overtime, what d’you think?”

“I think they’ll do anything for the right price. Kind of like Lucius. Except my asking price isn’t in money.”

“You’re playing with fire fucking with him like you are. But I’ll say one thing—you’ve got a hell of a lot of guts. Just *what* do you got on him?”

A grin starts at one corner of my mouth, though I don’t let it go any further. “Something that’ll destroy him for good.”



When I turned eighteen the summer after high school graduation, I waited a week before moving out of Lucius and Stefania’s home. Finally, I could fully enact my revenge plan against assholes like Lucius and Ernest Adams, Delphine’s father, the DA at the time. Nothing else would hold me back.

My plan against Lucius has always been a long game. It’s never been something I could carry out in a short amount of time even if I wanted to. He was a Don heading Northam’s most powerful crime family. I was a young adult barely working my way up the food chain.

But Lucius knows.

He’s suspected what I’m capable of. He didn’t want me being made for that reason.

It was always going to come down to me or him. One of us was going to finish the other off.

Some day.

As I pull into the long, paved driveway, it feels like a twisted homecoming. I'm only here to do what I do best. Cause trouble. Wreak havoc. Make Stefania weep. Make Lucius pop a blood vessel.

Maybe he'll even put his hands on me. Just like old times.

I grin as I hop off my sports bike and stride toward the huge front doors.

"Mr. Salvatore," Florina the head caretaker says when I breeze into the sparkling foyer. Her eyes widen and she scurries after me. "Did Mr. Lucius know you're coming by? He's not to be disturbed—"

"Tell Stefania I'm here," I interrupt, not slowing down. "Tell her I might even stay for dinner."

Florina gasps and I laugh, leaving her frozen on the spot. I turn the corner down the next hall and head straight for the second to last door on the left.

Lucius's office, where he parks himself at his desk, and acts like a hardass for most hours of the day.

I don't knock. I turn the knob and walk right in.

Lucius doesn't notice me at first. He's reclining in his chair, nursing some Johnnie Walker in his meaty palm, a phone pressed to his ear. His fat lips are twisted into a cruel smile as he laughs at whatever news he's being given. The gleam's there too—that sinister shine he gets in his eyes whenever he's being a sick bastard.

I stand and I watch, waiting on him to make the next move.

“You already know. Time to shut it down.” He hacks out another gruff laugh. “Construction’s our monopoly and they didn’t play by my rules. Take care of ‘em—”

His words drop off the second he glances in my direction and lays eyes on me. The smile disappears from his fat lips and his eyes lose their villainous gleam. He hangs up without announcing he is and slams his phone down on the desk.

“You really came.”

“You asked me to, Pop. Just following orders.”

He sips from his scotch. “Where is it?”

“Not here.”

“Then we’ve got nothing to talk over.”

“Yes, we do. How about we ask Stefania? She’d love to chat all about it.”

“Listen, you sack of shit for a son!” he growls, throwing his glass to the floor. It shatters into a hundred pieces, but he couldn’t care less. He’s on his feet and coming around the desk in the next second.

I don’t flinch as he rushes at me like a red-faced bull. I’m still grinning, our gazes on each other. Mine, calm and cool. His, squinted in fury. He comes up close enough to throw a hit, though he holds himself back, snarling and baring his square teeth.

“I should’ve killed you when you were born. I wanted to do it. Six weeks old. You were a little shitting machine. Little shithead is what I used to call you. It made Stef cry, but I didn’t give no fucks about it. I’d come to your crib and look at

your ugly puckered face and I wanted to do it—press a pillow right over you. Suffocate you just like that.”

“Charming story, Pop. Always enjoyable hearing about doing harm to an innocent baby.”

“You were *never* innocent! Demon spawn. From the moment you were born.”

The corner of my mouth quirks even wider. I lean closer. “Demon spawn that’s going to take your empire right from under you.”

“You fucking sack of shit!”

I take a large step back as Lucius swings on me. He tries again, large and slow, missing the landing.

When I was younger, I often let him do what he wanted. Let him beat the shit out of me. Let him smash his smoldering cigar into my skin. Let him crack my head open or point a gun to my head. Even when I was a teenager and could fight back.

Those days are over. My plan’s coming into fruition. There’s nothing he can do.

He knows it.

He’s heaving for air as he reddens and grits his teeth. “Get the fuck out of my house!”

“Not before I say hello to my sweet mother. I think I’ll ask her about that traumatic day.”

Lucius launches himself toward the nearby console table and picks up a bust sculpture of Julius Caesar that he keeps as decoration, and he flings it at my head. Once again, I’m too fast for him, out of the way before the stone cracks into pieces when it collides with the wall behind me.

“Have a good day, Pop,” I taunt on my walk out.

His earsplitting rumble follows me the rest of the way through the house. The staff on shift must hear it, but they pretend otherwise as they decide not to risk his ire. I’m reentering the foyer when Stefania stumbles down the staircase, eyes glossy and hopeful, a large wine glass in her hand. The wine sloshes around with every sloppy step she takes.

She calls out to me and asks if I’m really staying for dinner. Too bad she never cared years ago when she chose to take luxury vacations while her husband beat her son to a pulp on the regular.

“Go to hell.”

I don’t spare her so much as a glance as I let the tall double doors swing shut behind me.

That felt good. Almost as good as making somebody bleed or busting a nut. Two of my favorite feelings in the world.

The street outside their house is as pristine and perfect as it was when I was sixteen and we moved to Westoria. Big houses and the vibe of even bigger egos in the air. Each rich family on the block believes they’re some kind of modern-day royalty. So many years later, nothing’s changed about the suburb. It’s just as fake as ever—dirty on the inside, clean and sparkling on the outside.

My cellphone vibrates in my pocket. I turn my attention from the polished streets around me to the text popping up on my phone screen. Francis “Stitches” Ferro, my right hand in my crew, has texted me.

Ive got a doozy for u

The muscle on the left side of my cheek twitches. I text back telling him to meet me at my place. He replies with the thumbs up emoji.

If Stitches is calling it a doozy, it can't be anything good. He'd been tasked with ensuring the evidence was secured. Somebody must've fucked up.

I slide on my helmet and throw my leg over my sports bike. The engine growls as I rev it up and then I'm off, abandoning Westoria and its artificial perfection.

In no time, speeding on my bike, I cross the bridge and reach Northam.

The big city streets blur the faster I go, weaving in between cars and buildings.

Stitches doesn't make it to my loft until I'm already upstairs waiting on him. Despite his slimmer size, he huffs and puffs his way through the door, clutching his side. Nicknamed Stitches because he's a med school dropout who turned to the mafia, the irony isn't lost on me.

I raise a brow. "What's the matter? Stitch in your side?"

"Ha, ha. Real funny. You laugh but I'm reminded I'm no Olympic athlete anymore."

"Or ever were. What's the doozy, Stitches?"

He hauls himself over to my leather sofa and plops down. Originally, no other *capo* wanted him in their crew—he was kind of an outcast. That was exactly what caught my interest about him. I tend to appreciate when somebody is apart from

the typical. Probably because I'm a brooding asshole myself who hates most people.

I took one look at him and knew he could be an asset in unconventional ways. He's not much in terms of muscle power, which is what most *capos* like in their soldiers, but he's got plenty of brains to make up for it. Even wears the kind of wire-framed, Poindexter glasses you'd expect him to.

By how long he takes to answer me, it's obvious he's stalling.

"Do you want the good news first or the bad news?" he asks after some hesitation.

"If there's bad news then there's no good news."

A slow sigh tumbles out of him. "Well, we've secured the evidence. You don't have to worry about it ever going missing."

I'm confused and I don't refrain from showing it. My head tilts to the side as I peer at him. If he succeeded in ensuring my insurance against Lucius is safe and sound, then what the hell's the problem? That was his biggest task of the day.

"Something unusual's going on," he says. He cuts a glance at me. "Your pet project didn't go to work today."

"Delphine stayed home?"

"That's right. Hasn't left her place all day."

That *is* unusual. Almost no one's more dedicated to their job than she is—with the exception being me. She has rarely, if ever, refrained from turning up at city hall. No stomach bugs or snowy days have ever stopped her. Few vacations taken over the years. It's especially strange coming off the back of a big win like locking up Giorgio Belini.

Last night, Delphine was supposed to join me at Grimaldi's for dinner. I'd slipped Grimaldi a fat check in order for him to shut the restaurant down and reserved it only for us. Delphine never showed. She'd been working late again.

I'd *almost* gone over to her office. Just to be an ass and disturb her.

The shocked, wide-eyed look on her face when she first saw me the other night was priceless.

It's a moment I've saved in my memory banks. She'd looked so good standing in her office, dressed in that hip-hugging pencil skirt with her hair pinned up. She'd been looking out the window without even realizing I was looking at her. I'd taken a liberty or two, invaded her personal space, touched her cheek.

She's lucky I hadn't kissed her. I didn't do what I really wanted to do and bend her over her desk and—

“Why didn't she go to work?” I ask.

Stitches shrugs. “Beats me. But... that's not even the worst part.”

“Stitches, I told you stop stalling. Tell me what the fuck's going on. If you don't, you're about to *need* some stitches.”

“Okay, okay! No need to be so hostile,” he says, straightening his wire-framed glasses. “So you remember Bernardo was supposed to be on shift last night? Well, his son wound up in the emergency room. Some kind of hit and run. His kid was playing catch with some neighborhood kids outside his house and a car hit him and took off. Bernardo had to call Oscar, but there was some, uh, miscommunication.”

A tightness pulls at my chest. “Which means?”

“Nobody was watching her last night.”

Delphine might believe we’ve had nothing to do with each other for twelve years, but that’s far from the case. She has no clue the extent I’ve gone to for her.

An invisible presence in her life.

Some might say it’s not my place. I say it’s a precaution taken by a man protecting his assets. If threats are made against one of those assets, naturally I’m going to take action.

Delphine, by virtue of who she is and our past, fits that description. I don’t like many things. But when I do take interest in something, it’s not done so lightly. I can be obsessive. I can be intrusive. I’ll take risks and test boundaries.

I haven’t dedicated my life to revenge on Lucius for shits and giggles.

It’s for Delphine’s benefit that I keep tabs on her. I assign guys to shadow her. They lurk out of sight, ensuring any threats are taken care of, and that she never suspects a thing. Delphine tends to be too idealistic—she doesn’t understand just how dangerous this city can be even for the average citizen. Let alone someone trying to rock the boat too hard.

She thinks the verdict against Giorgio Belini is a big win, and it is.

But it’s also put a target on her back like never before. Something she still doesn’t grasp even after I paid her a visit the other night.

Stitches’ revelation that nobody was keeping tabs on her makes my hands ball into fists. Bernardo and Oscar are lucky they’re not here right now. Their foolish mistake calls for me to decorate the walls with their blood.

“Find out why,” I say in a low, controlled tone. “Find out why she missed work today and verify nothing’s wrong.”

“But, Psycho, how are we supposed to find out? The girl’s holed up in her apartment—”

“Find. Out. Why.”

The expression on Stitches’ face tells me he’s not looking forward to his new task. He pulls himself up from the sofa and takes his glasses off to wipe them on his shirt.

“I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ve got an old pizza delivery costume in my trunk. I delivered pizzas in med school.”

“Have Bernardo and Oscar report here. We’re going to have a friendly chat.”

“You’re not going to need me to provide any emergency medical services, are you? I flunked for a reason.”

My hard glare is enough to get him moving. He leaves with the promise he’ll send Bernardo and Oscar my way while he pays a visit to Delphine’s apartment.

Whatever it is that’s going on, I’ll get to the bottom of it.

One way or another.

5. delphine

. . .



FOR THE FIFTH time in ten minutes, my phone pings with a new notification. Brenda won't stop calling and texting. I've thrown her off by taking sick leave. It's the first time in over two years, and even then, it was only a day due to a sprained wrist. I'd fallen during my morning jog and spent hours at Northam General. By the time I got out of the ER, the day was half over. I came into work the very next day sporting my cast, and have never taken off since. She and the others aren't used to me not being there.

I'm not used to me not being there.

My work is my life. For the better part of a decade, I've dedicated myself to my law career. I've skipped vacations and forgone family holidays just to spend time digging into case files and over-preparing for trials. I'm the daughter of renowned DA, Ernest Adams.

It's who I am.

But as I lay in a ball on my sofa and the clock strikes noon, I can't bring myself to do what I'm supposed to be doing.

Delphine Adams crushes criminals. She takes them down without mercy, locks them up, and throws away the key. She

makes the streets safer, and she's unapologetic about it. Her reputation hinges on cleaning up Northam.

What would the people think if they find out the truth? How can I protect the city when I can't even protect myself?

I roll off the sofa and pad over to the bathroom like a zombie. Salt and Pepa jump to follow, curious why I'm home in the middle of the day. They're used to my daily twelve-hour work schedule and the constant on-the-go energy I exude. Seeing me trudge around the apartment on lifeless autopilot isn't like me.

I glance in the mirror at my dull reflection. My hair's a tangled, uncombed bird's nest. My face is swollen and bruised. I scrubbed my skin so hard in the shower, I've made myself even more tender and raw.

The minty menthol smell that burned my nostrils as he kicked my legs apart and forced himself inside. It was everywhere, circulating in the steam—threaded in my hair, *seeping* from my pores.

The filthy cigarette stench had latched itself onto me and refused to let go. A cruel, crude reminder of what happened last night.

I had to get it off of me. So I scrubbed a little harder and then when that didn't work, I applied even more pressure. I didn't stop until my skin prickled with pain, but I still kept going until the shower lost its heat and the water turned icy cold.

My hand travels to my neck, where another bruise has developed from my hard fall on the asphalt, and I wince touching the sensitive area. My rose necklace had been torn off during the scuffle and he'd taken it with him when he left.

Nana Rose's necklace symbolized her love with Papa Huxley. He'd gifted it to her as a token of his affection. She wore it proudly for decades even in the years after he passed.

It's been my security blanket since I was thirteen. Now it's gone...

I tear my eyes away from my pitiful reflection and look down. Pepa's wrapping herself around my ankle, mewling softly. She gets needy when she doesn't receive enough attention.

I lead both cats to the kitchen and crank open a can of cat food for them to feed on. It's as I set it down there's a resounding knock on the door.

My body stills, though my heart beats faster in my chest. Slowly, I build up enough nerve to pad over to the door and peek through the peephole. A delivery man stands on the other side, impatiently checking his phone, clutching a pizza box.

When another second goes by and I don't answer, he bangs a particularly hard fist to the door. I jump back in alarm.

"Helloooo!" he calls. "I have an order for this address. Open up and sign the credit card receipt."

I bite down a panicked sob threatening to escape. I didn't order any food. Who is this man and why is he outside my door? Is he my attacker returning to finish me off? What if he's sent goons after me? He knows the apartment I live in; he stole my ID...

I'm unable to move as the mysterious delivery guy knocks several more times before giving up altogether. His footsteps die down the hall. Gone as suddenly as he came.

Frazzled and terrified, I back away from the door and drop down on my sofa. I can't even function. My brain's not

working properly. I'm usually so put-together, yet now I'm so... not. Where do you begin stitching yourself back together when you've been torn apart?

Even the most mundane, common sense things feel laborious and complex.

Anxiety clenches inside my chest, making even breathing difficult. I'm still in some kind of traumatized shock. So much so I'm unlike myself.

The thought of being surrounded by strangers brings back the morbid sense of helplessness from last night.

Not to mention the humiliation. That's what last night was about—*humiliating* me.

He had sought to humble me with physical force; he exerted himself over me in a sadistic, violent act. Now he gets to say he fucked Delphine Adams, Northam's up and coming district attorney superstar, on the dirty ground of some alleyway. His criminal pals will probably fist bump him.

I'll lie.

Make up some story about a mugging on the subway. I fought back and the guy ran off. The cameras happened to miss it. Nobody has to know the truth, the real ugly details.

District attorney is as good as gone if the truth gets out.

The universe must hate me, because my phone rings in my hand. It's Brenda again. I've avoided answering all morning, but if I don't answer at all, she'll grow suspicious. A strangled sigh leaves me as I give in and press the green telephone button on my screen.

"I was beginning to think you weren't alive!" she says the second I answer. "You're never even a minute late, but you

didn't even show up. What do you want to do about the witness for the Frausto case? You were supposed to meet with her today."

"Oh. I mean, I'll... I'll get in touch with her and reschedule."

"And you keep receiving calls from this one guy who says he's a past associate of yours—he sounds kind of sketchy so I've just been hanging up on him."

I make an uninterested humming noise.

Salvatore.

"Is everything okay? You sound out of it."

"Just the flu. I'll be fine in a few days..."

"Delphine Adams staying home for 'just the flu'?" Brenda teases. "That doesn't sound like the sharp prosecutor I know."

"Maybe you don't know me," I snap before I can bite my tongue. "And, Liang, stop calling me. I've taken a sick day, which means common courtesy would be to give me some space. I don't need you blowing up my phone. Make due without me for once."

I can practically *see* Brenda's face fall. "Oh, um, okay... sorry, Ms. Adams. I'll handle everything at the office. Hope you feel better."

I hang up before the guilt eats me any further. Now I'm lashing out at Brenda when she means well. Sure she can be a little pestering and nosy, but I'm practically her mentor. She looks up to me and deserves better.

My face falls into my hands as a headache throbs to life. I'm such a disoriented, sloppy mess. Everything feels so

suddenly outside of my control, like it's happening to me, not me in control *making* it happen. My absolute worst nightmare.

The irony isn't lost on me. I've prosecuted dozens of rape cases. I've met and spoke with many victims over the years, some women just like me—career women who had their whole lives upended after one terrible encounter with a piece of shit like the one who attacked me last night.

I should want to bring him to justice. Every second he's on the streets is another second he's able to assault an unsuspecting woman.

It's what I do. I put criminals away. I make the bad guys pay. Shouldn't I want mine to suffer behind bars?

But the grim truth is that sex crimes rarely end in a conviction. Of the thousands of women raped in Northam every year, fewer than a third are reported to the police. A quarter of those lead to an arrest. Cut that number in half again for the ones that make it to trial. By that point, most victims are so spent and exhausted, they just want the ordeal to be over with.

The worst part is seeing the hope drain from the women's faces every time one of those bastards get off scot-free.

I can't handle a trial. They're traumatic and invasive for the average woman. For me and my public image, it would be hell on earth. The attack politicized during the election season. My entire sexual history put on front street. The deep dive into every other aspect of my personal life. The headlines in the newspaper. The nasty public opinion and inevitable blame game.

My past relationship with Salvatore would be dug up. Dad's legacy would be tarnished. The career I've worked my

entire life for would go up in smoke.

This is my fault. The situation is way too humiliating to bring to light. It's bad enough I'll never forget. I don't need the entire city to know what's happened.

I need to collect myself, handle this matter-of-factly. Make the situation into a list of to-do things and block out all the rest.

That's how you get over these things. I'll need to move to a new apartment, and arrange a private, daily car service to and from work. I'll need to get tested for STDs and pregnancy. Come up with a full-proof story about my absence over the coming days. It's a lot, but the more I think about it, it's what I need—practical distractions.

Tangible things to do to keep myself busy.

Knuckles tap on my door so abruptly, I flinch from the sofa. Salt meows moodily and then retreats into the cave at the top of his cat post. I hold my breath and stare at the door, waiting for the knock to sound again.

It does, the knuckles tapping incessantly. Whoever it is they're not going away.

Oh God, it is him. My attacker. His criminal friends. He's really not giving up. He'll probably force his way inside next...

I rise up off the sofa and approach the door with cautious footsteps. Panic clogs my throat the closer I get. Even the prospect of checking the peephole almost sends me into a spiral.

But before I'm close enough to do so, the voice on the other side of the door speaks. It startles me, familiar from the

very first syllable. From the other side comes Salvatore's smooth, measured voice.

“Open up, Phi. I know you're standing on the other side of that door.”

6. salvatore

. . .



“SALVATORE?” Delphine’s voice wavers from her end of the door.

She’s frightened.

That in itself is enough to ignite my bloodlust. I clench my jaw to hold back the urge to break the face of the asshole who made her this way.

She’s holed herself up in her apartment all day. Stitches’ ploy to get her to open up as a delivery guy failed. Impatient to know what’s wrong, I decided no more games. I’d show up on her doorstep myself.

“Phi, open up.” I tap my knuckles against the door again. “I’m alone. Nobody has to know I’m here.”

Except my security, who will now watch her building around-the-clock for safety reasons.

If she understood the lengths I go to in order to look out for her...

“Phi, I’m not going away. Open the door.”

Or I’ll bust it down just to make sure you’re okay.

There’s another pause before the locks click and the door cracks open. Only a little. Just enough for her to peek through.

“What do you want?”

“Let me in. We’ll talk.”

She gives a shake of her head and then moves to slam shut the door. I’m quicker and stronger, flattening a hand against it, and sticking a foot inside the opening. The push I give is forceful, enough to overpower her attempt to shut it.

A growl emits from her throat, but she doesn’t fight it. She steps back and lets the door fall the rest of the way open. I glide inside, snapping the door shut. I don’t get a good look at her before she’s turning her back to me, folding her arms around herself.

Space.

Just like the other night when I visited her office. She’d run and I’d chase. I’d catch her, and she’d develop this look about her—a flustered sort of uncertainty that’s amusing even after all these years. Some things never change.

The first night we’d met, she’d looked the same way as I invaded her space and made her squirm. A cat-and-mouse game where she evades and I hunt.

“Well? What do you want?” she asks without looking at me.

“I came to check how things are. You didn’t go to work today.”

“Are you spying on me? It’s none of your business if I take personal time.”

She tries to keep up her defiant act with her arms crossed and her tone sharp, but she slips by accident. The same waver sounds again in her voice. Her stance itself, while at first glance seems certain, is too stiff and unnatural. The hoodie she

wears is two sizes too big and her curls lay limp and flattened, like she hasn't cared for them all day.

None of this is like her.

She's acting, putting up a front.

"Phi, look at me. Let me see your face."

She starts shaking her head, but I interrupt her and take a step closer. I'll force her to turn around if it comes down to it.

"Phi," I say, "let me see you."

Seconds pass and nothing happens. Her two cats sit perched on their posts, watching me with open suspicion. The sounds of the city street play from outside the wide windows of her high-rise apartment. I'm willing to wait however long I need to in order to get the truth out of her.

Finally, when she can't stall any more, she releases a slow sigh, and then turns around.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she says quickly. "I was riding the subway last night and some man tried to steal my purse. I fought him off, but as you can see, he got in a couple of hits. I'm okay, I just... I don't want the public to know."

More silence passes between us.

I'm quiet and composed on the outside as we stare at each other, but on the inside, it's another story. I'm fantasizing about the moment I get my hands on the piece of trash who did this to her. He must've thought he could get away with what he did. Putting his hands on the woman who is mine even if she doesn't agree that she is.

I'll break his face. And every other bone in his body. He'll watch himself bleed out as I laugh and play in his blood.

It's been weeks since I've been in a *good* fight. One that's messy. One that's violent and bloody.

But Delphine's lying.

Even as my bloodlust pulses hot in my veins, she's keeping things from me.

Consider me an expert on bruises and other injuries. I've inflicted enough and had enough of them inflicted on me to know what's what.

She's claiming he got some hits in—the bruising and scrape along the side of her face and chin are no regular bruises. They're from colliding with a rough, rocky surface. Likely repeatedly. The baggy hoodie she's wearing is intentional, probably hiding other injuries. She has a slight limp to her gait, though she tries her best to hide it.

Her story doesn't match her injuries.

But it's not even the biggest clue she's lying. Her eyes reveal every word she's told me is a lie. There's an unease in them that's normally not present, like any loud noise or bang will trigger her.

“What happened to him?” I ask in my low, controlled tone. This needs to be handled a certain way or she'll shutdown and kick me out. “Did you call the cops?”

She shakes her head. “It was late and he got away. I told you I don't want the public to know.”

“Which station was this?”

“The one on Fifth and Warring.”

“What did he look like?”

“I didn’t get a good look at him,” she says, tightening her arms around her torso. “It happened so fast. I was more concerned with holding onto my purse.”

“And he just tried to snatch your purse? Nobody else was around?”

“It was almost nine p.m. There wasn’t a lot of people at the station. He tried to grab onto my purse and I put up a fight. He hit me and then took off.”

I take a step closer. She takes one back. “He hit you. He struck you in the face?”

Her eyes take on a glassy effect and she nods as her answer.

Definitely lying. But why?

“I’ll handle it,” I say calmly, sticking a hand in my pocket. “We’ll find the SOB and you won’t have to worry about him.”

“No! No street justice. *No* mafia justice. If those words even belong in the same sentence. They’re an oxymoron. Salvatore, don’t get involved. It happened. It was horrible. I hate that it did, but I want to move on. I *will* move on. I... I just need a couple of days. You wanted me to let you in. I did. Now I need you to promise me you’ll leave it alone, okay? Give me your word.”

“Alright, if that’s what you want. Consider it dropped.”

“Good.”

Delphine’s a smart, capable woman. She’s sure of herself, even from the time we were teenagers. But there’s something fragile about her that ignites the protective streak in me. She’s not in a good place right now, and even if she won’t ever ask for it, I’m here to help.

“Have you been checked out by a doctor?” Before she can turn me down, I withdraw my phone and reach out to my private, on-call physician. “He’ll be by in an hour. Don’t act like you don’t need it. That bruising is serious. Are you *sure* there’s nothing else you’re leaving out?”

“Everything I told you is what happened. I have my own physician. I don’t need yours—”

“It’ll be confidential. Between you and him. I won’t know a thing that goes on. You made me swear I won’t go after the asshole who did this. Now you swear you’ll let my doctor take a look at you.”

Her expression turns wary. “Since when are we making deals?”

“The moment you asked me not to handle this with mafia justice. That’s my price. You getting checked out. Deal?”

She agrees with a begrudging nod. There are many things hanging in the air between us. I know she’s lying. She knows she’s lying. My own lies and half-truths are still well intact, but in my case, it’s for her own good. That’s the difference.

I’m going to find out what happened last night.

Regardless of how calm I might seem, I’m livid on the inside. I’m liable to destroy the first asshole who looks at me sideways on the street—the furious energy that courses through me is powerful enough it doesn’t even matter who he is. My hands ache to clench into fists. I just need to break something.

To make someone bleed.

And then hunt down the piece of shit who hurt Delphine and do so much worse to him. Whoever is responsible will soon discover he made the worst mistake of his life.

“Salvatore,” she says when I head for the door, interrupting my violent thoughts. I glance at her and find the faintest hint of gratitude on her otherwise sad, bruised face. “Thanks. You didn’t have to come by to check on me.”

“Yes, I did.” I stop at the kitchen island and grab a notepad and pen that’s within reach. I scribble my number down, though I already have hers memorized. Yet another thing she doesn’t need to know. “Call me if you need anything. I mean it, Phi. It doesn’t matter what time it is or what you need.”

The second I’m outside her building, standing on the city street many stories below, I look up at her window and make another call.

This one to Stitches.

“I want all security camera footage collected from the subway station on Fifth and Warring between the hours of eight and midnight. I want a sales history of all male passengers who bought a ticket and crossed through that station during that time period. Get our inside guy at the station involved and have him check into any stragglers and panhandlers who normally hang around that area. Tear the city apart if you have to. Just make sure you find him and bring him to me.”



When I blackmailed Lucius into granting my reassignment from South Valley to Northam, I knew I’d need a place to run my operation out of. Club Nirvana was going to officially be mine, but it wasn’t personal enough of a space. I needed somewhere that could solely be focused on my behind-the-scenes work—and far outside of Lucius’s purview.

I bought an old clothing factory in the manufacturing district of the city. The building's an unsightly slab of brick like the rest of the factories in the district, but it's huge with limitless potential. In the span of a couple weeks, it's become the headquarters for my crew.

My private lair. I not only carved out space for a large loft apartment on the top floor, I've established every other need my operation requires.

One of my favorites is the interrogation room.

I walk through the door to the sight of Bernardo and Oscar sitting obediently in their chairs as instructed. The pussies look terrified, their eyes wide with fear and their normally olive complexions a lot paler. They should be.

Somebody fucked up last night. It's Oscar's word against Bernardo's. We'll play a game to find out who's telling the truth and who's not making it out of this room alive.

"No need for me to explain why you're here," I say, pacing in front of them. "One of you screwed up bad. Your stories contradict each other. Which means somebody's lying."

"Psycho," Bernardo says, his voice shaking. "My kid wound up in the ER! I didn't plan that. Every word I'm telling you is the honest to God truth. How long have I known you? I've been in your crew for years!"

"I hope you don't expect leniency, Bernie. Are my ears deceiving me?"

"N-no... that's not what I meant! I mean... I called Oscar. I told him ahead of time!"

"You didn't," Oscar interjects with equal passion. "You told me a whole hour late."

“I did so!”

“You didn’t, you *cazzo* fucker!”

The two go back and forth like children, squabbling among themselves over who is right and wrong. I stand by and let them until agitation pinches the vein in my neck. I walk over to the table in the room pushed up against the wall and open the black briefcase. Inside are the knives I’ve instructed my men to deliver me.

Bernardo and Oscar fall silent the second I hold up my selection, a Balisong with a fine blade that glints in the light.

“We’re going to test who is being truthful and who is lying. Put your hands flat on the table.”

“Psycho... what are you...” Bernardo gulps.

“I said put your hands on the table. I’m not going to tell you a third time. You choose not to and I have my answer.”

Both men slap their hands flat on the table, though not without visible nervousness. Oscar’s hand trembles. Sweat sheens on Bernardo’s pale face, making him appear like he’ll puke any second. I start circling the table at an agonizing pace, each step measured and slow. The Balisong knife I’ve picked up glides between my fingers at an opposite speed—fast and reckless.

Over the years I’ve developed a talent for handling knives. I regularly hone my skills and practice throwing them. It’s a good violent hobby for a guy like me.

This moment is about intimidation, so I twirl the Balisong knife between my fingers as though it’s not sharp and deadly enough to do real harm.

“Bernardo, how is your son holding up?”

“G-good,” he stutters. “He’s doing better. Broken leg.”

“You can’t fake that,” I say.

He nods. “That’s right!”

“Gimme a break, doesn’t mean you didn’t screw me over!” Oscar’s voice trembles with passion as he half raises out of his chair.

“You showed up late. An hour late. In that hour something very bad happened to her.”

“Psycho, why would I purposely set her up? Haven’t I always protected her? I’ve always intercepted any danger that’s come her way.”

“That’s true. You’ve done well intercepting danger to her in the past.”

“And I haven’t?” Bernardo pipes up.

“I’ve been in his crew longer than you!”

“That ain’t got shit to do with anything!”

Oscar hangs halfway out his chair, rage flared on his face. “It means I’m more trustworthy than you—AHHH, FUCK!”

I’m making my rounds, walking in circles, rolling the spine of the knife handle through my fingers. When I reach Oscar, I strike. I’m fast, lodging the knife into the wooden surface of the table—*and* straight through Oscar’s hand resting on it.

He screams in hysterics, jumping up to his feet. He’s unable to go anywhere. His hand’s pinned to the table by the blade of my knife. Blood pools around the deep gash and his cries fill the room. The sound of raw agony.

I withdraw my gun and point it at Bernardo's temple. I cock back the hammer. I'm not messing around.

This is for real. I'll blow his brains out. No hesitation.

"This is the last time I'm asking," I say. "Somebody better confess. Who the fuck set her up?"

Oscar weeps, sweating and shaking. Bernardo rolls his lips together as if he's about to puke.

I step to Oscar and grip the handle of the knife with my free hand. Rather than unsheathing it from the table, I drive it in further. Oscar's knees buckle and he cries out in broken Italian.

"I asked a question!" I shout. My gaze lands on Bernardo even as I torture Oscar. "Who is it? Come clean or somebody's getting a bullet next!"

The door busts open and Stitches trips over himself in his haste to enter. He's wheezing and clutching his side, his glasses low on his sweaty nose.

"I ran..." he puffs out. "I ran here as fast as..."

I'm scowling. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? I'm in the middle of something."

"But... I needed to..." He keels over with his hands at rest on his knees. A couple seconds go by before he's collected enough air in his lungs to go on. "Psycho, it's neither of 'em."

"You need to get real specific in the next ten seconds. Oscar's in agony." I use my gun to gesture to the knife lodged through his hand.

"I did some digging. Somebody was fucking with us. *Somebody* hacked Oscar's phone."

“They what?” Oscar croaks, seconds away from passing out.

“Bernardo called Oscar three times between 7:30 and 8:00 p.m. He left a voice message each time.”

“See!” Bernardo yells. “I told you assholes—I was off to the ER to be with my kid! I told Oscar where and when to pick up my shift.”

“I never got no messages!”

Stitches nudges his wire-framed glasses up his skinny nose. “That’s ‘cuz your service was being interrupted. It was being *hacked* by somebody remotely.”

I pluck the knife from where it’s pinning Oscar’s hand to the table. “Did you not notice your phone acting weird?”

He sobs shaking his head. “I swear... I was playing my favorite app, that one with the ninjas and the fruit and everything... except maybe...”

“What?!” I growl.

“Some weird notification popped up for some app I didn’t recognize.”

“That was the spyware the hacker used,” Stitches explains. “He was on your phone at the same time you were. Probably accessing all your shit, *including* any attempted placed calls.”

A pulse ticks in my jaw, my glare darkening. “They’ve been monitoring us?”

“Looks like it,” Stitches says. “It’s virtually impossible these days to completely eliminate the possibility, but there are safeguards. I can make sure any records and databases we use are upgraded for maximum protection. Our personal devices too.”

“How long has this shit been going on?”

“Hard to say... but that brings me to my next point. I think I’ve got us a lead, Psycho.”

I forget about nauseous Bernardo and weeping Oscar. My undivided attention falls on Stitches as he develops that proud shine in his eyes he gets whenever his brains have paid off. I gesture for him to continue and he practically stumbles over his words getting them out.

“Oscar, how long ago did you buy your phone?”

Oscar cradles his bloody hand, tears streaming down his cheek, as he thinks for a second. “M-maybe a month a-and a half ago?”

“From the Mobile Planet on Second and Charleston?”

He nods, in too much pain to say another word.

Stitches beams at me like we’ve struck gold. “Psycho, the store manager of that Mobile Planet is Ralph Mirra.”

“Is that name supposed to mean something to me?” I ask impatiently.

“Me and our other computer guy ran the only grainy CCTV footage we have of the hit and run. We used some new software and were able to clear the image enough to get a plate number. Guess who owns the car?”

“Ralph Mirra,” I answer.

“And that’s not all,” Stitches says. “We did some digging into his business. Guess which family has been a regular customer of Mirra’s for months now? The same family who just lost a big court case against the DA’s office. Against ADA Adams. One thing’s for sure. The Belinis have been *real* busy plotting and scheming.”

7. delphine

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MOM ALWAYS USED to say every day is a new beginning. It's a chance to start over. For the next week and a half, I get myself in order. I treat the days as a new beginning from what happened, leaving it forgotten in the past.

Soon, the lies I've concocted become the truth. I focus on reintegrating into everyday life. The encounter's left me shaken. I flinch at odd bumps in the night. Unease creeps into my chest when I'm around strangers.

But I tell myself it's in my head. It's self-imagined. I'm okay. I need to behave like I am.

On my first day back to work, I stride out of my high-rise apartment building to a sleek, black town car parked against the curb. I've hired my own driver.

He opens the rear passenger door and greets me good morning.

In the past, I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but now, panic fills up my chest. There's no turning back once I get in this car—I'll have to face the day, be the formidable Delphine Adams the public expects me to be.

My thank you is shaky as I duck into the backseat. The driver pulls away from the curb, joining the rest of traffic.

“I can do this,” I whisper to only myself. I inhale a cleansing breath. “Just focus on the work. You’ll be okay.”

At least I sure hope so.



“ADA Adams!” Brenda screeches the second I strut into the office.

Many of the legal assistants in the main office glance over and then a slow applause starts up.

I crack a smirk. “Nothing to see here. Just back to make more bad guys sweat.”

It earns some laughs from the others. I retreat into my private office with Brenda closely on my tail.

First thing I do is kick off my pumps and set down my briefcase. My lungs fill with an invigorating breath of air. I forgot how much I love being in my element, in my office working on the cases we’re prosecuting. Even better once I get a chance to return to the courtroom.

Brenda watches me hardly able to hold back her smile. “You look well-rested. Cute blouse.”

“The time off did me some good. I need to take sick days more often.”

“I feel sorry for the guys you’ll snatch off the street now. If you were a force before, imagine now that you’ve had real rest. You’re going to look stunning at the charity dinner for Fuel the Child. Have you picked out a dress yet?”

It slipped my mind. I haven’t even started shopping.

“No,” I answer, “hopefully soon.”

“I’m thinking about asking Chet. I’m tired of attending public events solo. Did you take a nasty fall recently?”

“Hmmm?” I’m distracted as I sit behind my desk and log onto my MacBook.

“Your knees. They’re all skinned up.”

Shit.

My pencil skirt’s long enough to hide the scrapes when standing, but sitting’s another story. I forgot to make sure Brenda wouldn’t see them.

I pull the fabric down over my knees, keeping my face neutral. “Oh, that. It’s Pepa. I was getting out the shower and she darted by. Fell right in the tub and banged up my knees.”

“Ouch. First the flu. Then a fall in the tub.”

“Where are we with prepping for the Frausto hearing?”

My change of subject works. Brenda launches into updates about the charges brought up against Michael Frausto, underboss in the Belini organization. She discusses meeting with our star witness for the trial.

A woman by the name of Octavia Doukas was his former mistress. Throughout the course of their tryst, she bore witness to many of Frausto’s indiscretions.

I listen and try hard to stay in step with her, asking the appropriate questions. I’m not as sharp as I used to be. My thoughts begin wandering off the longer she talks.

My lab results are due back today. Last week I had myself tested for STDs and pregnancy. I’m on birth control, but I made sure to take an emergency contraceptive just in case.

I should be in the clear, yet anxiety manifests inside me as a dark, choking toxin. I find it harder to draw in a new breath and swallow against the cottony feeling in my throat. How can I possibly concentrate on work when I could be pregnant? What if I've contracted something? He hadn't worn a condom. He'd finished inside me.

The menthol smell returns, so visceral and sudden it swarms around me. I cough and cover my mouth in disgust.

Brenda frowns. "Umm, Ms. Adams?"

"Sorry... I... I just need... give me a second..." I cough and climb out of my chair. I escape to the window, my intakes of air growing sharper. A gasp leaves me as I begin hyperventilating.

No! Calm down!

"Ms. Adams? Oh my god, are you okay?"

I focus on counting my breaths, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth. Seconds pass before the rapid pounding in my chest slows down and the tightness gripping me subsides.

My cheeks warm. *Of course* I'd have a mini panic attack on my first day returning to work. I stand, still unsure of what to even say.

"Sorry about that. I didn't know it'd be so overwhelming to adjust to our work flow again. I'm fine now. What were you saying about Frausto?"

Brenda stares without blinking. "You seem different. Are you sure it's nothing?"

Even as I tell Brenda I'm sure and we need to get to work, I can tell she knows I'm lying. I have to get better at covering

my tracks; I have to readjust to normal life again. The only way to do that is to put what happened behind me.



The Fuel the Child charity dinner arrives before I know it. I don't bother shopping for a new dress. I throw on a simple black one that's stashed away at the back of my closet. It's not the most fashion forward, but I'm not enthused to be attending. I would've canceled if I hadn't already signed up to give a speech.

Brenda and I ride together using my car service. She never found a date and I'm grateful to have her as a crutch tonight.

"I can't believe Chet turned me down," she rants. "You were right. He's just some player."

The Northam City Bank is hosting the dinner at their headquarters, located in a towering building on Mercer Avenue.

Brenda and I make it two footsteps inside before I'm stopped by retired District Judge Kodjoe. He launches into a congratulatory spiel about my performance during the Giorgio Belini trial. Brenda smartly steals me away by mentioning a fake meeting with the charity event coordinator.

I haven't said a word to her about my sour mood, but she seems to sense it. Apparently, I'm no Academy Award winning actress.

I gratefully accept a flute of champagne from a waiter passing by. If I'm forced to spend the next four hours here, a little tipsiness might loosen me up. The tension in my body refuses to go away otherwise.

I've been so lost in my head, I need the relief.

"You're here for a good time," Brenda says as I polish off my champagne. She's only taken two sips from hers. "Is the future DA trying to turn up?"

"More like survive the night. This isn't my idea of an enjoyable evening."

She frowns. "But you love Fuel the Child."

"I never said I didn't."

My energy already depleted, I don't bother explaining any further. We slip into the banquet room among the other attendees and push our way through. The room is full of the familiar elites from Northam and other neighboring cities. Even a few recognizable juggernauts from other parts of the country.

Many of whom gained their wealth through dirty means, and who I'd love to takedown and protect citizens from. A whole rogue's gallery of potential white-collar criminals.

Another waiter comes to my rescue and offers me more champagne. I thank him as Brenda and I stay on the move. Unfortunately, it's impossible to avoid mingling when everyone keeps stopping you.

Mayor Bernstein corners me next. He's shorter than I am when I'm in heels and he waddles like a penguin, but he's usually cheerful enough, if not a little clueless. I've moved onto my third glass of champagne, slightly unsteady on my feet, but I manage to engage him for a couple minutes.

"Which reminds me," he says with a quick glance around. He drops his volume. "Flynn mentioned he spoke to you about how to move forward now that you've won this first Belini case. Very impressive, by the way."

“Mayor, I hope you’re not about to reiterate what Flynn said. I’m more than capable of remembering.”

He titters out a soft laugh. “You’re extra feisty with the champagne, Delphine. Just consider a more... cautious approach. That is all I ask. I look forward to your speech this evening.”

I watch him waddle off to his next destination in the banquet room. He stops at the table where some of the children from the Fuel the Child charity sit.

To my surprise, Brenda’s mood sours. “I can’t believe he’s lasted as mayor this long.”

“The citizens like what’s familiar. That’s how he keeps getting reelected.”

“He has a lot of nerve being here tonight of all events.”

Brenda excuses herself without another word, disappearing into the crowd. I’m secretly relieved to be left alone. I swap out my empty glass for a fresh one the second another server passes me by. If I’m low-key enough, I can sneak out right after my speech.

The event officially begins with the charity coordinator taking the stage and welcoming everyone. The lights in the cavernous room dim, only the stage lights shining brightly onto him.

I’m toward the back, concealed by the crowd up ahead. Normally, I’d be toward the front with the other elected officials and prominent leadership of the city. They’re probably looking for me. I’m supposed to be giving a speech in a few minutes.

Yet I can’t bring myself to care much. I wander away clutching my champagne, sneaking out of the banquet hall. I

can walk out the building right now and hope no one sees me.

I'll figure out something to tell Brenda and the others tomorrow.

At the last second, I get cold feet and pivot down the opposite hall. I don't know why I keep walking, but it's like my brain's too foggy to decide on a destination, so I walk until I find one. I chug my fourth glass of champagne in a single gulp and ditch the flute on a window ledge.

Other than the occasional glass of wine in the evening, I've never been a big drinker. I've never had a high tolerance, even during my university days. Tonight's no different as the champagne's effects wash over me.

I wander into the stairwell and climb a couple staircases, tipsiness making me unsteady and dazed. Somehow, I find my way to the rooftop, greeted by the chilly autumn air. It sobers me up even if just a little.

I stop at the ledge and stare down at the city traffic below. The steady flow of the cars is hypnotic, their white headlights and red brake lights flashing. For a while, it distracts me, but as seconds go by, the terrifying reality sinks in.

What have I done?

I've shirked my duties. I've missed networking opportunities. I've drank so much my head is spinning. And now I've run off to the rooftop.

How could I let myself be so foolish at such a public event? I have a speech to give!

My face drops into my hands. Inside my chest, my heart drums faster the more panic spreads.

I've fucked up.

Brenda's probably freaking out as my scheduled speech draws near. How obvious was it downstairs that I was drinking too much? Had I slurred or swayed or showed other signs I wasn't myself?

I don't remember doing any of that, but how can I be sure? I can barely stand straight without the ground feeling like it's moving under me.

Tears wet my eyes. I've worked so hard for so many years, and here I am destroying everything because I can't get my shit together. Because I'm letting some attack overtake my life.

Because I can't stop being weak.

People are mugged and assaulted every day all across the city. What happened to me was like the lottery. My number had simply come up.

I'm not pregnant and I didn't contract anything.

I'm fine. Stop crying.

I wipe at my eyes and suck in a shaky breath. The wind blows harder, causing me to sway left and then right. Down below, the toy-sized cars speed race to make the light before it turns red.

I wish I could be like them, running off to who knows where.

So long as it's not here.

But I can't stay on this rooftop forever. Sooner or later I'm going to have to go downstairs and face the others. If I can manage that without another breakdown. What will I say to them when they ask why I've missed my speech?

I have no answer. No real excuse for disappearing.

People expect me to be the Delphine Adams they know.

They *don't* expect this.

The pressure of it squeezes my chest tight, making it harder to breathe. Dread fills my heart thinking about what my stupid mistakes could do to the Adams' reputation. Our family name stands for justice in Northam's eyes.

I'm a public figure. I can't afford to breakdown. I'm a reflection of my father, of our legacy.

The city depends on us. On me.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and inch forward. The building's so high up, I could let go of everything and just tip over the edge right now. Free fall to my escape.

A couple more inches. The tip of my shoe reaches the ledge and the wind gives me another gentle push, making me sway.

Just a little bit more. Just one step away from falling to freedom. Just—

“Phi, what the fuck are you doing!?”

A powerful hand clenches around my arm and jerks me backward. I stumble and fall, my body pressed against a larger, stronger figure. I'm dragged far away from the rooftop ledge and then spun around.

What is Salvatore doing here tonight?

8. salvatore

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“PHI, are you out of your fucking mind?” I growl, snatching her away from the ledge of the Northam City Bank building. “You could’ve fallen over! What are you doing up here?”

I don’t stop until we’re several paces away from the ledge, carrying her over with my arms wrapped around her front. When I release her, she stumbles a few steps. Eyes wide and glassy, she has a dazed look about her. I grab her by the shoulders and give her a light shake.

“Phi, did you hear me? What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m giving a speech. I have to get back downstairs.”

She tries to squirm out of my hold, but I only grip her shoulders tighter.

“Jon,” she says, using her old nickname for me for the first time in twelve years, “let me go.”

“Not until you tell me what’s up. Something’s off about you.”

“The only thing off is that you’re here.” She pushes at my chest, though I still don’t budge. “You’re not supposed to be here! Are you following me? I *can’t* be seen with you!”

It's true that I wasn't invited to tonight's charity dinner. Nobody wants the mafia associated with a goody-goody event for impoverished children like Fuel the Child. At least not so openly. The corrupt officials in Northam are more than fine with visiting my club for illegal gambling and other debauched activities. Where the public is concerned, they just want to pretend they have scruples.

Fine with me.

I can't stand any of them anyway.

I only came tonight to set sight on Delphine. Tonight's the first time in almost three weeks she's left her apartment for anything other than work. She's stopped grocery shopping, stopped her morning runs in the park, even stopped going to lunch and dinner with colleagues and friends.

Now she's drunk. Her words slur and she looks out of it. Alcohol in excess always means something where Delphine is concerned. Not only is she a lightweight, she doesn't like giving up the control sobriety gives you.

Once upon a time, many years ago, she'd wandered into Club Nirvana alongside her high school best friend Ashley Taylor. While Ashley was preoccupied with relationship troubles with her boyfriend, Delphine was seeking an escape from her problems at home. She'd downed tequila shots and had almost gotten herself mixed up with the wrong crowd at the club.

I'd spotted her from the VIP section and knew from the moment I saw her, she was upset. She was acting out. She was eighteen then.

Twelve years later, nothing's changed—except instead of her wandering around drunk at Nirvana, she's wandering this

skyscraper in the same vein.

I grab her hand and pull her toward the door leading inside. “I’m taking you home.”

“My speech...”

“You’re in no shape for any kind of public speaking.”

She tries to wrench her hand from mine, but my grip’s too tight.

Still so soft after all these years.

“What part of I’m not supposed to be seen with you don’t you understand?”

“I’ll have one of my guys sneak you out a side exit. It’ll be discreet.”

She loses any urge to argue as a chilling gust of wind blows through in the few seconds it takes us to walk to the door.

Once inside, I steer her into one of the executive offices on the top floor, flipping on the light switch. She stumbles in her heels, almost tipping over, but I’m fast enough to catch her.

“Oh god. Am I that drunk? I am, aren’t I?” She kicks off her heels and staggers over to the lounge sofa in the large room. Her hands come up to cover her face once she’s plopped down onto one of the sofa cushions. “This is sooo embarrassing.”

“You’ll be fine. I’m having one of my guys confirm we’ll be able to get you out, sight unseen.”

“What will I tell the event coordinator?”

“I’ll handle it. We’ll pass word letting him know you’re not feeling well. You came down with a stomach bug.” I shoot

off a couple texts to Stitches confirming our car is waiting downstairs and that he's sent up one of my men to keep the coast clear.

Delphine has no clue the lengths I go to for her. The lengths I've gone to over the past twelve years just to make sure everything in her world goes as it should.

I've closely monitored every aspect of her existence.

Her college education. Her law career. Her romantic relationships and personal life.

If she ever did find out, I'm sure she'd be pissed with me—I was supposed to stay away.

As I await Stitches' confirmation, I stroll over to the sofa where she sits. Her elbows dig into her thighs as she sits with her face buried in her hands. She's straightened her curls tonight, her sheets of dark hair draped over her shoulders. The urge to reach out and touch her, brush the hair away from her face, strikes me.

What can I say? In my basest element, Delphine's mine. She's always going to *be* mine.

My interest in her might've started off as a means to get to her father, but when I like something, I usually become obsessed. Delphine's no different.

I sit down on the other end of the sofa. "You going to tell me what's up with you?"

"I need to get home and sleep this off. Tomorrow I need to do damage control. The election is next year and I can't screw up my chances at district attorney."

"Stop worrying about becoming DA for one second. Everybody knows it's yours. The guy who's rumored to be

running against you doesn't stand a chance.”

Mostly because I'm planning on leaking the skeletons in his closet to the press the week before the election. It'll give her an extra boost and lock in her victory—again, if Delphine had *any* clue the lengths I go to for her...

“Well?” I prompt when she says nothing. “Is this about the mugging?”

I almost tell her I've dedicated every waking hour over the past couple of weeks to catching the piece of shit. So far, Stitches and the rest of my guys haven't turned up much. No camera footage exists at the station on Fifth and Warring. No eye witnesses. No suspects. No evidence at all indicating what Delphine's told me actually happened.

My men have torn apart the city searching for Ralph Mirra. He's mysteriously vanished, which tells me we're on the right track thinking he had something to do with what went down that night.

At my mention of the mugging, her breathing grows noticeably shallower. I take an inventory of the change in her body language. Her shoulders hunch forward and her left knee bounces. She keeps her hands over her face, revealing she knows if she looks at me, I'll probably figure out whatever it is bothering her.

“Phi, if you think I'm dropping it, you've forgotten who you're dealing with. You're obviously upset.”

She shakes her head and lowers her hands from her face. There's an expression I've seen a thousand times arranged on her features—knit brows and lips pressed together. She's deep-thinking.

“It's not that.”

“Then what?”

Delphine launches herself at me. It’s the last thing a calculated guy like me expects, which says a lot. She throws her arms around me and smashes her lips against mine.

Just like that, she’s in my lap, kissing me hard. I’m so caught off guard, all I do for the first few seconds is process the fact that Delphine’s not only perched in my lap, but her soft heart-shaped lips are pressed to mine in a kiss that’s desperate.

It’s been over a decade and I can still remember in vivid detail the last time I really touched her. I hadn’t known it’d be the last time I’d have her or I probably never would’ve let her leave. I’ve craved her ever since. A craving that’s gone unfulfilled.

Until now.

She’s aggressive about it. She bites my lower lip and runs her hands down my chest before twisting her fingers in my dress shirt. Her hips rock against me and a breathy puff of air leaves her as she puts more effort into her kiss.

I want nothing more than to grab her and return the favor—restate my claim like I’ve been obsessing about for years. Devour her and have her melting in my arms within seconds.

At first, I do. My hands glide over her pear-shaped curves. Our kisses become that much more frenzied and rushed. The fizzy, fruity taste of champagne is all over her tongue. Another sign of how much she’s been drinking.

It’s a vague reminder that she’s drunk and probably wouldn’t be doing this if she were sober.

But I can’t pretend I’m not fucking turned on. My appetite for Delphine has gone unsatisfied for so long, it was a given

I'd be getting hard the instant she climbed into my lap.

Her hands find their way to my crotch. She gropes my growing erection and begins peppering kisses along my jaw.

"I want to feel good. Are you going to help me?" she purrs. "Just this once."

Her slurred plea is enough to pull me from the moment. Even more than the champagne taste of her.

This isn't Phi. Not even happy, flirty, tipsy Phi, which I've experienced once or twice when we dated, and I'd given her a few sips of alcohol (underage, but with me around to look out for her).

This Delphine is different. I was right earlier.

Something's definitely off.

In the worst possible timing, the door to the executive office flies open. Stitches walks through clutching a bottled water and wearing a broad grin. He stops and we fly apart. Delphine almost falls backward off my lap, but I seize hold of her arms and keep her planted where she is.

"Whoops," Stitches says. "I was coming up to tell you the car's waiting outside. Even brought up a bottled water for our intoxicated lady guest. I figured it'd help. But don't mind me. I've walked in on worse. There was the time my father was chopping up some guy who owed him big bucks—talk about an awkward interruption. I didn't know whether to stay and help or go and finish my homework. You know my dad. Messy guy. Blood *everywhere*."

"Francis," I grit out, "not right now. Get the fuck out. We'll be down shortly."

"Yes, Psycho. Should I leave the bottled water?"

“GO!”

He rushes to place the water on a console table against the wall and then he's gone.

Silence persists in his wake. I return my attention to Delphine. She's still in my lap, though her eagerness is gone. She covers her face again, her posture hunching.

“I'm so sorry,” she mumbles. “I just kissed you. I shouldn't have done that.”

“Phi, no more stalling. Tell me what the fuck is wrong.”

So I can fix it. As always.

When she finally meets my gaze, and I get a good up-close look at her, I see it—along her collarbone there's a faint scrape that's been covered up by makeup. It's only started to rub off now that we've been kissing so heavily.

“Phi, what is this?”

I don't wait for her to answer before I rub my thumb along her collarbone.

Sure enough, her brown makeup transfers onto the pad of my thumb and reveals a nasty purple scrape that's still healing. Another injury from her attack. One that must've been concealed by the hoodie she'd been wearing the day I'd gone over to her apartment.

But that's not all—as I grab her by the hips to move her off my lap, I notice something else that's been hidden away. Last time by the yoga pants she wore and tonight by the cocktail dress.

Her knees are scrapped up and bruised. Even now, they're still healing.

Once again, my expertise on injuries comes into play. I've inflicted and sustained enough in my lifetime to know what's what. This level of bruising on her knees tells me she was badly injured on a rough, sharp surface, like gravel. She was on her knees long enough for that rough surface to dig into her skin and create such deep bruises.

"Phi, what the fuck is this?" I growl, my hand pushing up the hem of her dress and exposing her legs. My gaze turns deadly, darkening with the bloodlust that's simmering in my veins at any given time.

Now I know she's been lying to me. She said some guy hit her and tried to run off with her purse at the subway station on Fifth and Warring. She'd never mentioned anything about a fall, or any big scrape on her collarbone. Where did these injuries come from?

On top of the ones she'd had on her face.

She shifts to get off my lap, but I hold her in place. "Jon, I told you. The guy hit me at the station and ran off. I fell. Bruises happen when you do."

Bullshit.

She's unraveling before me even as she tries to lie. Her voice goes quiet and her eyes grow watery. Her brows knit together and she worries her bottom lip, like she's trying so hard to keep whatever it is inside.

I give her a shake. "Phi, I know when you're lying. You weren't mugged at the station, were you?"

Slowly, she shakes her head, her breathing shallow again. "I was just trying to get home after work. I was just a couple buildings away, but there was this guy on a stoop. He followed me and he... he..."

A coldness blows through my lungs. I know what it is before she even utters the words.

My worst fucking nightmare realized.

9. salvatore

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WE SNEAK out of the Fuel the Child charity dinner and go straight to Delphine's apartment. Stitches and the rest of the men I have with me wait outside at different security points around her building while I wander her living room and avoid the accusatory stare of her cats.

The only noise in the apartment comes from the heavy stream of water in the bathroom. As soon as we made it to her place, Delphine said she was going to shower and change. I suspect she wants to use the time to recover from her drunken revelation.

She hasn't looked me in the eye since. We sat in silence the entire drive from the Northam City Bank building to her high-rise apartment.

Probably because she hates me for showing up in her life. She didn't want me anywhere near her, yet I've reappeared anyway. In her view, I'm an inconvenience. A stain on her otherwise perfect life.

Even worse, not only have I shown up again, I've learned a secret she clearly wanted to keep hidden.

I play it cool as I listen to the shower's heavy stream. I walk around her apartment admiring the books on her wall

shelves and making note of other personal touches like the soy candles that smell of lavender and the cat posts situated at strategic spots in the room. An old DVD copy of *Carmen Jones* rests on top of her blue-ray player.

Her vintage cinema favorites haven't changed. Funny, fifteen-year-old her and thirty-year-old her agree on them.

But try as I might to distract myself with the little knickknacks of her personal space, I'm unsuccessful. I'm barely able to concentrate on anything except how badly I want to find the degenerate piece of shit who hurt her.

Delphine's been a target in criminal circles for some time now. As the daughter of hardass District Attorney Ernest Adams, she was already an enemy in the eyes of many, even before she took up a job as an ADA.

Once she started locking away guys off the street? It's been a constant.

My reach is far and wide. I've risen up the Mancino ranks over the last decade, earning enough pull to look after her even from South Valley where my operation was. It's gotten a lot harder in recent months to field the threats and security risks.

I didn't blackmail Lucius for a transfer back to Northam for nothing. I wanted to keep a closer eye on Delphine (among other reasons like my next move to destroy him). Yet the moment there was an oversight and her security was gone, she was attacked.

This tells me it's so much worse than even I thought.

Northam is no stranger to crime. Homicides, rapes, and robberies happen every day and night to countless innocent citizens around the city. Little has been done about it by city officials except the few good ones like Delphine. But while

her attacker could be some random trash off the street, it feels more like a calculated move by a crime family or street gang.

My instinct says one of the latter two. Coincidences don't exist as far as I'm concerned. The man who violated her did so as a warning.

The Belinis.

They must not realize what a grave mistake they've made. Most aren't aware of my past relationship with Delphine. We were never too public and I was a low-level guy at the time. They don't know they've just unleashed a level of vengeance they're not ready for. I've earned my moniker Psycho many times over, but I have no issue proving it again. Blood, violence, and chaos have always been my specialities.

The bathroom door opens and Delphine emerges amid a cloud of steam. She's wearing a bathrobe and her hair's wrapped up in one of those bright headscarves. It seems a hot shower has washed away the tipsiness from earlier. She's noticeably more sober, more the Delphine I'm used to as she pads down the hall toward me.

This is my favorite version of her—stripped down from the nice blouses and heels she wears, not a stitch of make up on, just her in her natural element.

Except my gaze dips to her banged up knees peeking out from below the hem of her bathrobe, and my homicidal urges only intensify.

Some bastard did that to her; he had her on her knees on fucking gravel, to the point it's been two weeks and she's still scraped up. I swallow hard and my nostrils flare releasing a rough breath.

“Feeling better?” I ask, maintaining restraint despite my internal rage.

She nods. “I wasn’t sure if you’d still be out here.”

“You know better than to think I’d leave.”

“Salvatore...” She pauses to shake her head as if in disbelief, struggling over what to say. “I didn’t want to involve you in this—or anyone. I’d just like to put it behind me. For the sake of my career.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t get to decide that. I do. And I want to move on. Your doctor checked me out. I didn’t suffer any serious injuries and I’m not pregnant. The guy got away. I didn’t even get a look at his face and I didn’t have a rape kit performed. I scrubbed away any evidence. These kind of attackers... they’re the least pursued and convicted in the courts.”

“Who said anything about involving the courts?”

She casts me a stern look. “You know better than to suggest street justice to *me* of all people. I’m running for public office next year. I take this to the police and I go through the humiliation of the whole city finding out what happened. It’ll be all over the papers and on the news. I’d rather just focus on my career.”

“You sound like you’re convincing yourself. Not me.”

“Just being realistic. You claim that’s your thing, don’t you? You always used to love to say how idealistic I am.” A small, bitter smile starts at the corners of her lips. “I guess that’s changed about me. The guy got away. He’s never getting caught.”

“You’re still being unrealistic if you think he won’t be. *I’m* going to find him.”

“Salvatore—”

“No,” I interrupt sharply, taking a step toward her, “I’m going to find him, Phi. I’m going to turn over every rock in this city ’til I do. And when he’s found, I’m going to kill him in the most gruesome way possible. I’ll enjoy doing it, and won’t regret it for one second. You can consider this my confession if you decide to prosecute me. I can tell you right now, it’ll be worth it.”

She covers her ears. “You *can’t* tell me these things!”

I ignore her. “Pack your stuff, Phi. You’re not staying here anymore.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’d rather you do so voluntarily,” I say plainly, as though speaking of the latest sports scores. “I’d rather not have to make you. But I will if I have to. It’s not safe for you to be here anymore.”

“Who are you to say? That’s what you still don’t get. You get no say on anything I do, Salvatore.”

“The guy took your ID. You told me yourself. He has your address. He can return to your apartment whenever he wants.”

“I’ll hire security.”

“Not good enough. Pack up. I’ll wait.”

A few seconds pass by where she glares at me and I stand as composed as ever, my face neutral, unfazed by the irritation coming off her in waves. She can hate me if she wants to, but we’re done doing things her way. I’ve tried to respect her space and given her plenty of freedom over the years.

Even if she doesn't know I've always looked out for her.

In light of what's happened, that's over. It's time to tighten up safety measures. Which means there's no safer place for her than with me.

"You can't be serious," she whispers after a moment goes by and I don't budge.

"My place is on the outskirts of the city. Very discreet and heavily guarded. Nobody will know a thing about you staying there."

She shakes her head, her brows knitted. "I can't stay with you. That's insane."

"It's the only option. Pack yourself or my men will pack for you."

"You expect me to just, what, crash at your place? So you can try and control everything I do? So you can try and trick me into being with you again? What part of I don't want anything to do with you don't you understand?"

"This has nothing to do with you and I. This is about safety. For the time being, my place is the safest place for you. Once the threat is eliminated, we'll talk about you finding a new apartment."

"Salvatore..." she trails off.

When I remain silent, her eyes widen, and she accepts that I'm serious. This is happening regardless of how she feels about it. A wary sigh leaves her as she folds her arms and pinches the bridge of her nose.

"You *swear* it'll be discreet? No one in the city will find out?"

"Nobody."

“My cats—”

“Can come with you. Bring anything of yours you want. My men can pack for you if you’d like. Just tell them what.”

“Salvatore,” she groans, “this... this can’t happen. *We* can’t happen.”

“I told you, this has nothing to do with us. This is about safety and nothing more. You can tell people you’re having your apartment renovated. We can hire a company to do so as a cover if you’d like. I won’t encroach on your space. I won’t try and trap you into being with me. I won’t do anything you don’t want except keep you safe. You can’t say it’s not a fair deal when it is.”

Her smoky gray cat—the one I’m guessing is named Pepa—chooses now to hop down from the cat post she’s been perched on and slinks over to Delphine. She wraps her lithe body around her ankle, nuzzling her as if letting her know her opinion on the matter.

Delphine kneels to scoop her up into her arms, scratching the back of her little fluffy head.

I hate cats. I’ve always been a dog person, from my childhood Boxer, Nacho, to my other Boxer, Chip.

But if Salt and Pepa are Delphine’s cats, then I’ll have to learn to make peace with them.

“How long?” she asks.

“However long it takes to find him and eliminate the threat.”

“My work. I have cases set to go to trial.”

“We’ll make it work, Phi. I’m taking care of this. Let me.”

My offer works. She pauses another second before giving a careful, hesitant nod. By the less-than-enthused expression on her face, I can tell she's not fond of the idea. She doesn't want to move into my place.

But I also know she's been too terrified to leave her apartment for anything but work for weeks now. Deep down she knows this is for the best; deep down she knows I'll handle the situation and make her feel safe again.

I've done it for fifteen years now. From the time she was nothing more than a freshman, dealing with an asshole oaf like Brett Gannon and his posse wanting to bully her to the many years I looked out for her without her even knowing it.

It's what I do.

Deep down she senses this.

I help her pack. She doesn't take much. She loads a couple suitcases with clothes and shoes from her closet and fills up a carry-on type bag with other personal items. I'm tasked with gathering Salt and Pepa's stuff, which I do, to Salt's begrudging glare. She joins me by the door rolling her last suitcase. I take over the handle once she's close enough. My men will carry everything down.

"Ready?"

"I'm really doing this," she mutters, shock imbued in her tone. "I'm really staying with you?"

"You are."

"You're really going to find him?"

It's a question I don't expect. Not right now. Not after her protests about law and order and her position as the future DA. Looking into her eyes, I see a tinge of something I haven't

seen out of her in a long time—an edge that I don't think anybody else has ever noticed before. The not-so-good, less-than-perfect side of her I used to teasingly say made her a bad girl.

Her dark side.

The one nobody else knows about but me.

“I am,” I answer. “I told you I will. I'll handle it.”

Relief flickers across her face for the briefest second.

“Thank you.”

10. delphine

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WHEN YOU MOVE in with your ex-boyfriend who happens to be in the mafia, there's bound to be some growing pains. Growing pains I quickly discover within days of staying at Salvatore's large, industrial-sized loft apartment.

It's more like a compound since he owns the building and uses it for his operation. I'm told it's an old clothing factory he bought and renovated to fit his needs. Discreetly located in Northam's manufacturing district, right on the border of the city, there's not many who live in the area. Only trucks and factory workers tend to pass through.

The perfect secluded spot for a mafia boss to establish his operation—*and* for an assistant district attorney hiding out at his home.

As promised, there's a generously-sized guest bedroom ready for me when I arrive. Salt and Pepa immediately set out to explore the space, curiously sneaking off to check if it meets their feline standards.

The room's even decorated in a manner that fits my tastes. Neutral palette with only a pop or two of color. A decent book selection and some candles I'll enjoy lighting. In the center is a bed that's big enough for three people let alone two... let

alone just me. Even a cat post sits in the far corner by the window overlooking the Northam River.

If I didn't know better, I'd think Salvatore somehow, on such short notice, had his employees redecorate *just* for me...

The first growing pain I encounter comes on the first morning of my stay. I've taken the day off, much to Brenda's concern (she texts me nonstop asking if I'm sick again). It's well past eight by the time I wake up, which is rare, considering I'm out of bed by six even on weekends.

In the few short hours I've been at Salvatore's, my bedroom has become a sanctuary. The one space on his property that's mine. Everywhere else is his, meaning I'm liable to run into him at any given moment.

My breath shallows at the thought. It's been so many years, I'm still not sure how to act around him. Our history is complicated and stirs up so many feelings, I don't know what I've gotten myself into. Salvatore says he'll give me my space. This arrangement is purely for safety purposes.

Yet, as I put on a brave face and venture past my bedroom, I discover how impossible it is for this situation to be anything *but* awkward as hell. Salt and Pepa trot at my heels as I move into the kitchen and stumble upon a shirtless Salvatore in sweatpants.

I freeze so abruptly, Salt rams into the back of my slippers. He haughtily goes around me but not before casting me a disgruntled look. I barely notice. I'm too busy staring straight ahead, my cheeks warm and my heart pounding furiously.

Salvatore stands at some ultra-futuristic-looking espresso machine, making himself a cup. His normally slicked dark hair

sticks up in cowlick fashion, and his beard's thicker than just a few hours ago. He clearly hasn't trimmed it for the day yet.

I've spent enough mornings waking up beside him to know what he looks like fresh out of bed.

Time has only made the sight more glorious.

Fully clothed, Salvatore exudes a dark and sexy edge that can be disorienting. Half naked, with square shoulders and a chest carved of battle scars and lean muscle, he's on a whole different level altogether. Tattoos ink his pale skin and the sparse happy trail below his navel points to the distracting—and *large*—dick print in his sweatpants.

Everything about him is all man. All dominance.

I'm feeling hot at the dirty thoughts that enter my mind of their own accord.

His gaze flits up at the same moment I shift to turn away and pretend I never wandered into the kitchen in the first place.

"Morning, Phi." The edges of his mouth lift into a surprised, slanted grin. "It's half past eight. Figured you'd be getting ready for work."

I fold my arms over my chest to give myself something to do. "Normally, I would be. But I called out today."

"You okay? You had a lot of champagne last night."

"Thanks for the reminder."

"Anytime. Espresso?"

"Sure."

My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's developed a tone that sounds way too casual. I'm trying to play it cool when I'm

really a mess. Hopefully Salvatore doesn't notice, though by the gleam in his eyes, I'm sure he suspects. If he'd just put a shirt on!

I decide to lean into the awkward situation.

"Do you always walk around half naked when you have company?"

He glances up at me while pouring my cup. "Says the woman in a short and tiny robe."

I look down at my clothes. "I was wearing this last night!"

"You were. And it was just as short and tiny then as it is now."

My face only grows hotter. "That would be why this might've been a bad idea."

"What would that be?"

"Me, here."

"You think so? Why's that?"

I stand where I am as he comes out from around the kitchen counter carrying two cups of espresso. His walk toward me is slow yet purposeful, agonizing in the few seconds it takes him to reach me. I'm left to do nothing but watch him and his lean-muscled, athletic form close the gap between us.

Less than twelve hours ago my tongue was jammed down his throat! I'd groped his *erection*. Practically begged him to have sex with me.

That was before the heavy elephant in the room. Salvatore knows the truth about my attack.

“Thank you,” I say unsteadily when he hands me my cup. I hurry to swallow some despite its scalding heat and curls of steam. “I’ll get out of your way.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why’s this a bad idea, Phi?”

“You know why.”

He stares, seemingly amused.

My brows draw close. “What are you staring at?”

“Some things haven’t changed. Am I making you uncomfortable?”

My heartbeat answers for me with a resounding *yes*. It’s in the hard thump against my ribcage, though he has no clue. I stand straight, my shoulders aligned, and force myself to swallow another nonchalant sip of my espresso despite the burn on my tongue.

The burn on my *skin*.

Salvatore still draws it out of me with little to no effort. His presence, his mere *proximity* is enough. As we stand opposite each other, the tension feels thick enough to reach out and touch. He must sense it too, even if he acts cool and composed. I catch his gaze almost slipping—he *almost* lets it dip to my mouth once I bring the espresso cup up for another sip.

His jaw sets harder, and I swear I see the actual muscle there twitch.

I inhale a calming breath and tear my eyes away, moving past him, deeper into the large, industrial-sized kitchen.

“No, Salvatore, you’re not making me uncomfortable. I just don’t want to intrude.”

To my horror, he follows me. He comes up from behind as I seek space. I stop by the wide kitchen window and pretend the faraway view of Rose Hill holds my attention. He leans against the kitchen counter, his hands stowed in the pockets of his gray sweatpants.

“This is a big place. There’s plenty of room for both of us.”

“You make a good espresso.” I smirk at him.

“That machine cost eight grand. It better make a decent cup.”

“It’s definitely passable. But I’ve had better.”

Humor flickers in his gaze. “I *am* making you uncomfortable.”

Damn it. He’s right.

“I’m... I’m going to go run some errands.” I move to sneak past him, but he reaches out and stops me. His hand closes around my upper arm and he holds me back before I can make my escape.

“Phi, you never answered my question.”

“Which one would that be?”

I’m held hostage by his stare as he pins me with it. Suddenly, the humor’s gone. Only a seriousness remains, like we’re done with our awkward flirtatious ex banter. *Now*, he means business.

“You okay?” he asks. The combination of his grip on my arm and his surveying stare draw a shivery spark down my spine.

Salvatore's always going to look out for me. It's always going to be a bottom line with him.

I nod. "Starting to be."

He nods too and then lets me go. "Next time, I'll put a shirt on."

Good.

I don't need any sexy, shirtless, mafia ex-boyfriends knocking me off my game when I'm just trying to learn what normal feels like again.



The second growing pain of living with your mafia ex-boyfriend is one I discover later in the week. I return to work after my day off, immersing myself in the case we're putting together against Frausto. Though as hard as I try to focus on work, I'm often drawn to thoughts about what's going on in my personal life right now—my current living situation being one.

Salvatore's loft is large enough for a family of ten let alone the two of us, but that doesn't make it any less... strange.

I've forced myself to grow accustomed to running into him at any given moment. He's taken more care to put on shirts whenever he thinks I might be around. We've shared quick exchanges about meaningless things like the history of the building he purchased and even my cats.

Somehow, it only makes things feel more awkward. More of a reminder that I'm an intruder. He's invited me into his world as a means of protection.

The only positive is that he was correct about it being discreet. So far, nobody knows I'm staying with him.

"Ms. Adams, I know what secret you've been hiding," says Commissioner Flynn, entering my office without notice. He puts a smile on his face as he walks into the room.

I flinch from where I sit at my desk, mixed up in thoughts of Salvatore. "Commissioner... you weren't on my schedule. What secret is it you're referencing?"

"Your apartment! I heard from Rachel it's under renovation."

"Oh... yes. I decided it was time."

Crap. How could I forget the commissioner's ex-wife lives on the floor of my building? She must've heard I had hired a company to do work on my apartment (at the suggestion of Salvatore to cover our tracks). I try and play it off with a polite smile as the commissioner invites himself into a seat opposite my desk.

"I'm sure you didn't come by to discuss my home renovation project. What can I do for you, Commissioner?"

"I wanted to know if you'd given what we discussed last time any more thought."

"Going easy on the Belini's?" I arch a brow.

"I heard you're building quite the case against Hector's right hand, Frausto."

"You've heard correct."

His smile falters underneath his bushy mustache. "That's most likely what Ernest would've done too."

“I hear that often. I’m not sure what that has to do with Frausto—”

“Your father wanted to prosecute Lucius Mancino to the fullest extent of the law,” he interrupts, picking a piece of lint off his navy blue service uniform. He flicks it away as if it’s dirt he wants nothing to do with. “I had to explain to him sometimes over charging is not the best course of action. *Sometimes*, it’s a long game. Not a short one.”

“That’s an interesting anecdote, but has little to do with my case against Michael Frausto.”

“It has everything to do with it, though your lack of experience might make it hard to see it right now.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, irritation prickling me. Men like Commissioner Flynn love making those he sees as inferior *feel* that way. Though we’ve always been cordial, I’m under no delusion he’s an ally.

“I remember when you were just a freshman girl at Westoria Prep. So much time has passed. Now look at you. Youngest district attorney the city’s ever seen.”

“The election is next year, Commissioner.”

“The first female DA the city’s ever seen,” he goes on as if I haven’t said anything. “I’m proud of you, Delphine. So is your father. We want you to do great things. The *city* is putting its faith in you. I’ll see you at the next Fuel the Child event, won’t I?”

I can’t make sense of his cryptic words before he’s standing up and wishing me a good afternoon.

Once he’s gone, I get up from my desk, shut the door, and kick off my heels. I wind my straightened tresses into a quick

updo at the back of my head, clipping it into place, and then I start pacing.

So much happens in a city as massive as Northam, it's overwhelming. I used to think I could handle it, but doubt's trickled in. I'm not in the best frame of mind given what's happened to me. Can I stand my ground against so many conflicting forces?

Between the warring crime families, the city politics behind the scenes, Salvatore's return to my life, and my assault, there aren't enough hours in the day to process it all. A shaky sigh leaves me and I cover my face in my hands.

I want so much to be better. Be myself again. I'm *trying*.

"Knock, knock. Guess who?"

I flinch, startled by the sudden sound. Chadwick Thomas cracked my office door open and poked his head inside without me noticing. He's smiling broadly, expecting an equally delighted smile back. I fake one.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd bring you lunch. Brenda mentioned you've been staying in the past couple weeks."

Yes. Because I've been terrified of going anywhere...

"Oh," I say, my fake smile brightening. "Thanks... but you didn't have to."

"I figured we'd catch up. I brought your favorite from Garden House." He shakes the to-go bag enticingly.

I ignore the fact that he likes the Garden House, I merely tolerate it, and I beckon him inside. Chadwick's probably the most harmless aspect of my life right now. We sit down on the

sofa in my office and unpack the food on my sleek glass coffee table.

“I heard you took time off,” he says, handing me utensils and napkins. “Do anything exciting?”

“Hmm? Oh, no... not really. Just, erm, renovations.”

“Your apartment? What needed to be fixed?”

“Just aesthetics,” I fib. I stuff a forkful of kale into my mouth and rack my brain for a subject change.

“Who’re you staying with?”

“A friend. Can you pass the lemon vinaigrette? You know I like extra on my salad.”

He passes it over, snagging the opening to ask a question I should’ve expected. “I know you’re always saying you’re so busy, Delphi, but what do you think about dinner? It doesn’t have to be Grimaldi’s. I’ll even let you pick.”

“Chadwick—”

“Before you turn me down, just know it’ll be more incentive for me to keep trying. You remember our time at Dupoint Law. You *know* how persistent I am. What’s the worst that can happen?”

I distract myself by pouring a liberal amount of lemon vinaigrette dressing on my kale salad. Chadwick’s telling no lies about his persistence; he’d asked me out many times during our law school days. My answer was always a *no*. He’s always vowed he won’t give up until that changes.

I’ve used up just about every excuse available. If I were in a better headspace, I’d probably be able to think up some more. As it stands, my brain draws a blank. My thoughts shift to *maybe*.

For weeks I've avoided any real social interaction. The Fuel the Child charity dinner was my first and only attempt, and that went disastrously. So bad I'd gotten drunk, wandered to the top of a skyscraper, and almost shoved my hand down my ex-boyfriend's pants.

Would a night out with Chadwick be so bad? It could be a way to ease myself into a semi normal personal life again...

Chadwick's safe. A little annoying, but safe. Boring and predictable. Exactly what I need at an uncertain time like this.

"Tonight?" I ask.

He smiles wider. "How about Ostra? You like seafood, right? Pretty sure I can get us a last-minute reservation."

"Ostra's great."

The second growing pain of living with your mafia ex-boyfriend is that he knows when you go on dates with other men. Something I don't consider until the words leave my mouth and Chadwick winks at me, promising he'll pick me up at seven sharp.

Oops.



I convince Chadwick to meet outside Ostra a few minutes before seven. He sounds disappointed he won't be able to pick me up himself, but then he seems to remember he's fortunate enough I've agreed to go on a date with him in the first place.

When you live with your ex-boyfriend, you can't have your dinner dates showing up on your doorstep—especially when said ex-boyfriend is a mafia boss and you're an assistant district attorney.

That's not to mention the security detail I've been assigned every waking moment that feels a lot more like chaperones than anything.

I sneak out of the loft first chance I get and nab a taxi to the restaurant.

"You look stunning," Chadwick says when he sets eyes on me. His grin is broad and bright enough for a TV commercial advertising toothpaste. He's taken a page out of Dad's book and worn a colorful tie—lavender purple against the well-tailored fit of his slate gray suit. As his hand touches the small of my back to guide me inside, I've never been less attracted to him.

It's a thought I can no longer shake. Going on a date with Chadwick Thomas is like going on a date with Dad. He's the man who my family pictured me with, who Mom once tried to set me up with.

Chadwick has gone far out of his way for our dinner tonight. A standard table at Ostra wasn't enough for him. He's reserved us one of the private dining rooms. The server leads us to our table in the secluded room and announces the wine selections for the evening.

Chadwick cracks a joke about how the last time he dined at Ostra, the tannins in the Zinfandel were too potent. The server humors him with a polite smile and promises that won't be the case this time.

The first thing Chadwick does once we're served our wine and the server has walked off is sample his glass.

"I knew it. They *are* too potent." He sips some more to confirm his suspicions and then gestures to my untouched glass. "What do you think?"

“Oh... err, very potent.”

I barely swallow a sip, though he doesn't seem to notice. He's moved on to telling me about the excellent pan-seared swordfish with mango chutney. He swears it'll be the best meal I've had in days.

Between staring at his bright lavender tie, noticing the tiny checker marks in the pattern, and listening to him insist I take him up on his menu recommendation, I'm ready for the night to be over.

It's nothing personal.

Chadwick is a great guy. On paper, we're a perfect match. He's intelligent, successful, and practical. He would be the ideal type of man to marry and have children with. Together we would be everything our families wanted out of us—an African American power couple to carry on their legacies.

Life would be so much simpler if I were with Chadwick.

But to say there's no chemistry would be an understatement.

The longer he drones on, the more Salvatore creeps into my thoughts. If I were dining with him tonight, the moment would be completely different. We wouldn't be sitting here discussing the tannins in wine and Salvatore wouldn't insist I try the swordfish. He wouldn't give a damn what I ordered. In fact, he'd probably find it sexy if I ordered a huge, bloody steak with whipped potatoes.

There would be no awkward pauses in conversation and I wouldn't feel like I had to be on my best behavior, like if I'm less than perfect I'll be judged. If anything, Salvatore would find it amusing if I wanted to let loose. I wouldn't have to

think carefully about what I do and say. I could be myself, whatever that means in the moment.

“I’m really glad you agreed to come out with me tonight, Delphi,” Chadwick says. He winks at me and picks up his wine glass by the stem. “You have no idea how difficult it’s been finding the right woman, even in a big city like Easton. So many career women, but few you want to take seriously if you know what I mean. It’s why I’ve never given up on you. You’re the whole package. Beautiful, intelligent, well-mannered.”

My left brow arches. “Thank you, but I’m sure those women were great too.”

He chuckles. “I’ve known you how many years? None of them are wifey material like you are.”

“I’d rather you not compare me to them.”

“Delphi, it’s a compliment.”

My breathing shortens as agitation rises up inside me. I push it down and focus on my glass of wine. Chadwick said the tannins were too potent and bitter-tasting, but suddenly, I’m craving the whole glass. I swallow a mouthful and remind myself to stay calm.

Tonight wasn’t supposed to be a serious date; tonight was me dipping my toes in the waters of a social life. I chose Chadwick because he’s safe and predictable. I knew what to expect.

Until I can make it more than a day without the potential for panic to cripple me at any given time, I need this. It’ll ease me into a normal life again.

Our entrées arrive—I wound up ordering the swordfish Chadwick has raved about—and our discussion turns to work.

Chadwick tells me about a case he's handling in Easton that he believes will help him toward his ambitions for district attorney. I halfheartedly listen and offer the occasional one-word inputs.

This dinner feels more like a job interview than a date.

"You have an impressive resume going," he says, his smile proud. "First the Giorgio Belini trial. I'm sure a big win convicting Frausto will be next. Polk can't compete with that. DA will be yours to lose."

I humor him with another urbane smile. "I should hire you as my campaign manager."

"Such a role should be beneath me. But on the bright side, we'd have plenty of time together." He winks and reaches out for a playful touch of my shoulder. "All those late-night campaign events. Sign me up."

Before I can scold him for touching me, I feel the burn of someone's glare from the doorway of our private dining room. I gasp when I glance over and meet his furious, narrowed eyes.

Salvatore stalks toward our table, looking every bit the fearsome, murderous mafia boss he is. His stride is fluid and fast, like a lion in the wild closing in on his prey. I can do nothing but stare in shock, a deep flutter in my stomach.

"Delphine, what are you—" Chadwick knocks over his wine glass by mistake the second he spots Salvatore. The berry-hued liquid spills everywhere, though neither of us move to clean it up.

Yet another growing pain of living with your mafia ex-boyfriend—he's liable to show up at random when you're out to dinner with other men.

II. salvatore

. . .



“MIND IF I JOIN YOU?” My death glare slides from Delphine to Ernest Jr. Though my words may sound like a question, that couldn’t be further from the case—I’m not asking. I’m *telling*.

I snatch hold of a chair at the empty table next to theirs and slam it down in between where Delphine sits across from him.

She mentioned nothing about going out tonight. Earlier in the morning when I’d asked about her plans for after work, she’d said TV with the cats. Yet when I arrived home in the evening to change before heading out for a night managing Nirvana, I found the loft vacant.

Stitches told me all about how Delphine had dolled herself up and snuck out without her security detail. Luckily, he’d caught on quick enough to follow her and report to me where she was going.

Dinner with a so-called “friend”.

Chadwick fucking Thomas with his pocket squares and corny jokes. Son of a tech CEO, he’s a prosecutor in Easton, and the type of guy who’d weep if he got mud on his designer loafers.

The servers at Ostra tried to stop me as I stormed into the private dining room. Two of my men intercepted them with intimidating stares and generous tips.

I came to the door just as Ernest Jr. put his hand on Delphine. He reached out and palmed her shoulder, leaning closer with some over-confident smile pasted on his face. He fucking *winked* at her!

My glare became lethal, the tick in my cheek sharp. He needed to get his hands off her if he liked having two of them.

I won't hesitate to make good on that threat.

Delphine is so shocked to see me, she can't even speak. As I drop into the chair between them, she blinks and stares, completely thrown off guard.

She couldn't have worn a more maddening dress. In true Delphine fashion, it's classy but sexy. A velvety maroon that clings to every curve of her body and hints at her incredible pear-shaped figure. Just a taste. Just enough to draw attention and make the male brain short-circuit.

Her curls are gathered in an updo with a few stray tendrils framing her face, showing off her exquisite neck and shoulders.

Chadwick dabs at the wine he's stupidly spilled. "Salvatore Mancino... what... just what do you think you're doing here?!"

"I heard friends were dining tonight. Yet my invite must've been lost in the mail. Am I not a friend?"

"I'm getting security!" In his indignant haste to run and tattle on me, he knocks over Delphine's glass next. More wine pours over the once-pristine white table cloth. "Damn it! I

don't know what you think you're doing here, Mancino, but you will not be tolerated!"

"Funny you should mention that. There are a few things I won't be tolerating either." My hand seizes hold of the steak knife lying forgotten near his dinner plate. The move is so deft and fast, it's already twirling in my fingers by the time he catches on. He takes a fearful step back, the wine-soaked cloth napkin in his grip.

This couldn't be a more accurate delineation between us and the men we are—I'm playing with a sharp steak knife like a psycho and he's backing away clutching some fancy monogrammed dinner napkin.

"I don't think you should stay much longer," I say calmly. The knife is a blur between my fingers. Chadwick's eyes lose focus trying to follow along. Delphine sits as still and speechless as a statue. "I'm giving you to the count of five, Ernest Jr. One."

"Security!" he shrieks, his voice filling with panic. He doesn't bother even pretending to be tough about the situation; he breaks out in a dash for the door.

The second he crosses the threshold, I'm up, slamming the door shut behind him.

"My men will ensure he's transported home. He should arrive in one piece."

Delphine's shock finally dissolves. She tosses her dinner napkin and jumps to her feet. Anger blooms on her face and flashes in her dark-eyed gaze. She's pissed.

"How could you? You're not even supposed to be around me in a public setting!"

"This isn't public. This is the private dining room."

“You’re unbelievable!” She marches toward the door, her purse in hand.

I side step into her path. “You’re coming back to the loft with me. Dinner is over.”



We fight the entire drive home. It’s one of the loudest, nastiest fights we’ve had. Even my men share glances as they remain silent observers to us trading fiery retorts back and forth. I’ve lost count of the number of times Delphine has called me an asshole. My unapologetic reaction pisses her off even more.

“You had no right!” she yells once we’re inside the loft. She yanks off her heels and loses the four and a half inches she’d gained. Even with them on, she was still a head shorter than me.

My gaze drops as she does, readjusting to her new height. She tries to step around me, but I don’t let her. When she moves to the left, I move to the right. Her step to the right is mine to the left.

“I’m not playing this game with you! Move!”

“We need to discuss ground rules.”

“There are no ground rules—I’m a grown fucking woman! I don’t need your permission to go out at night.”

“You left without my security.”

“It was dinner with a friend! Completely harmless until *you* showed up and acted like a psycho,” she growls.

“You don’t seem to understand the gravity of what could be happening. If you are being targeted like we think, dinner

with a friend isn't so harmless.”

Delphine lifts herself up on tiptoe and jabs a finger into my chest. “You’re going to have to accept me living my life if I’m going to stay here! I’m *not* going to be a scared damsel in distress that needs your protection 24/7. I want to start feeling alive again. Part of that is doing things with friends! And going on dates with men!”

“I thought it was a harmless dinner. Now it’s a date?”

“So what? I could have sex with him and it wouldn’t matter. Why? Because it’s not your call!”

“You’re not having sex with him.”

“You don’t get to decide that. I need to move on with my life. I need to get over what happened.”

“Do it without sleeping with him.”

And anyone else except me.

The last part is left out, though the insinuation hangs in the air. We spend a second challenging each other with our hard stares. Though we’ve fallen silent, the friction between us crackles. We’ve somehow ended up only a few inches apart.

She moves even closer, her light and feminine scent irresistible. Almost enough to make me slip up and lose my composure. She’s so close, so within my reach, it’d be easy to sweep her up into a kiss. Taste her sweet lips that are painted the same dark red as her dress. The same dress I’d like to shred off her with my bare hands.

I resist, biting down hard on my jaw. Her gaze flits over me in the same manner mine has raked over her. She *smirks*.

“Have you forgotten?” she asks, suddenly her voice a silky whisper. “I offered myself to you. The night of the charity

gala. *You turned me down.*”

“You were piss drunk. That wasn’t the right moment.”

“I’m sorry, am I supposed to wait for your approval? I can resume my life when you say so? It doesn’t work that way.”

“My security. They’re to follow you. It doesn’t matter if you’re with Ernest Jr. or any other friend.”

She almost laughs in disbelief, rolling her eyes. “Is that what we’re calling Chadwick?”

“That’s the most polite name I’ll call him. I can tell you the other ones. Most begin or end with ‘ass’.”

“Real mature. Are we in high school again?” She backs away and makes another attempt to step past me, but I grab her arm, keeping her in place. “Jon, let me go.”

“Repeat after me. You’re not to go anywhere without my security.”

“I’ll go wherever I feel like going... with or without your security.”

I wrench her even closer, pulling her up until she’s almost against me. My hard gaze trained on her face, I speak with a calm and measured tone. “My security goes where you go.”

“This is exactly what I knew would happen—you’d try to control things. You can’t help yourself, can you?”

“It’s for your protection.”

“That’s what you always say. You once spied on me and my college roommate ‘for our protection’.”

“I told you that wasn’t me.”

Half of the truth.

The instance Delphine's referencing wasn't me; it was her father framing me. He'd pieced together an elaborate scheme to make me look like the obsessive, possessive, controlling boyfriend he needed me to be. The final nail in the coffin of my dying relationship with Delphine.

But I *had* spied on her in the past. I had sent a guy or two up to Dupont University to check on her. No matter what she says, it really was for her own good—I had to make sure her university was safe and no pervy assholes were trying anything.

Still, Delphine has no clue about that. She thinks the man Daddy Adams hired to pose as a mafia guy outside her college apartment window was mine.

"I'm exhausted," she says. "I don't have the energy to argue. Either let me go to my room, or I'm leaving."

My hand tightens on her arm. "Phi, this isn't up for debate. Somebody attacked you. We don't know what the hell they'll do next. You can hate me and say I'm controlling. That I'm an asshole. I don't give a fuck. But I'm *not* letting you go without security. They can either follow you with your consent or without, but they'll follow you regardless. Your choice."

For a long while, she stands in my grip and stares at me. I can see her mind hard at work, thinking over every word I've said in careful detail. Delphine develops a wrinkle in her nose whenever she does. Another quirk of hers I've memorized from the time she was fifteen.

When her silence stretches on, I know she has no counterargument—she'd present one otherwise. Deep down she knows I'm right. Every last word I've said is true. The security is for her own good.

Finally, she sighs. The sound is soft, like her last breath has deflated from her lungs. The sharp stubbornness on her face melts away. Replacing it is the same look from the night I found out what really happened to her. Pain and anxiety rolled into one.

She's said she's fine, but she's not. She's fighting hard to keep it together only for the cracks to still appear.

"Phi, you don't have to pretend. Maybe for everybody else. But not in front of me."

"I just wanted a night out. I wanted to feel normal again, okay? I wasn't going to have sex with Chadwick... or anyone. You can quit the possessive asshole shtick."

"I might have overreacted."

"Might? You were twirling a steak knife at him! You glared at him like you planned on chopping him up into pieces."

That was definitely a possibility.

"Do whatever you need to do to feel normal. But my security has to be with you."

"The dinner didn't even help," she confesses. "Chadwick is best in small doses. I'm just sick and tired of feeling like everything is out of my hands. Sometimes I want to go out and..." she pauses to shudder out another breath. "I want to go out and find him myself. Maybe it'll give me closure so I can move on."

My hands grip her shoulders. "You're not to go looking for him. I mean it, Phi. We don't know who this guy is. Anybody could be backing him. Let me handle it."

Delphine doesn't need to get her hands dirty. That's what I'm for.

I'll get my hands dirty *and* bloody. It'll be my pleasure.

"Why do you care so much?" she asks. The tables turn; her toffee-brown eyes flick up to mine and my stomach flips. Only she has the ability to make it do that. "We broke up twelve years ago. You were basically relieved for it to be over. You looked like you were going to celebrate at Nirvana the second you left my apartment. Remember the bottle girls?"

"When have I ever let anybody fuck with you? If I didn't let Gannon, you think I'll let anybody else?"

She shakes her head, still in disbelief. "It still doesn't make any sense. Why now?"

Delphine doesn't realize the truth—she's my obsession, and I'm not the kind of guy who gets over those easily.

But these are things I'll never be able to tell her. As far as she knows, I'm a cold, uncaring jerk who left her crying during our breakup.

She grows tired of waiting on me and runs a hand over her curly updo. Her other hand clutches her heels at her side as she announces she's going to her room.

Something unexpected and greedy inside me doesn't want her to go. I've already decided I'm not showing up to the club tonight and I've gotten her light fragrance in my brain after the last five minutes inhaling it, being so close to her.

I want more. I can't go cold turkey again.

"Want to watch a movie?"

She stops short. "Me and you?"

“Don’t sound so suspicious. We used to watch movies all the time. Go get changed and I’ll put it on. I have a feeling you’re going to like this one.”

With a hesitant nod, she agrees, disappearing into the guest bedroom that’s now hers. Five minutes pass before she emerges changed into a Dupont University hoodie and some yoga pants.

I’m at the window pretending like I don’t notice how those tight pants mold to her hips and thighs so well, she might as well not be wearing anything. The thought is almost too much to maintain my composure. Pervy as it may be, my attraction to her isn’t something I can turn off.

My pulse quickens and I force myself to calm down before I get *visibly* excited. It’d be fucking embarrassing on my part. Even worse, it’d make her uncomfortable.

I scrub a hand over my beard and direct a glance at her. “Better?”

“Much better. Those heels were not comfortable.”

“That dress was very... friendly.”

She smirks out of exasperation. “Very friendly, because Ernest Jr., as you so fondly call him, is just a friend.”

“I’m sure he’d be disappointed to hear that.”

I cross the room and tell my smart-activated TV to turn on. I take my seat on the sofa next to her (though a cushion separates us) and make my movie selection. She gasps when the title card flashes on the screen and then whacks me with a throw pillow.

“I didn’t know you were so violent. Is there a reason you just hit me?”

“Carmen Jones! My favorite movie?” she says. “You really think you’re slick!”

“Well... am I?”

“Yes. Always have been.”

“Yet you’ve always been so drawn to me.”

“Oh, is that the situation?” She releases an uncontrolled laugh deep from within. It’s a sound I remember well. Her dark eyes practically glisten as she stares at me from where she sits tucked into the opposite corner of the sofa. “I have a different recollection of events.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right,” she says sharply, like the ADA she is. “I seem to remember *you* pursued *me*. Remember our first date on prom night? The drive-in movie? The garden at Rose Hill? You saying you wanted to kiss me?”

I rub my jaw, a grin almost forming. “Hmmm... I don’t recall.”

“You’re such an ass!” She whacks me again with a pillow and we both descend into laughter.

Mine deep and throaty. Hers bubbling out of her. In a flash it’s like many years ago when we were a lot younger and more carefree.

The movie starts and we fall into silence as we redirect our attention. It’s in this moment it hits me that Delphine has allowed me back into her world.

Sure, we’re in my loft apartment at my compound. I’m the one who brought her here, refusing to take *no* for an answer. But she’s letting down her defenses. She’s no longer addressing me as some stranger.

Mr. Mancino.

I'm back to Salvatore.

Jon.

I'm the guy she's trusting to handle her situation. I'm the guy who's going to set everything right again.

Just like always. Even if Delphine doesn't realize it. I've done it so many times, I've lost count.

At some point, Delphine curls up on the sofa and lays her head down on the same throw pillow she whacked me with. We trade words here and there about the movie and other random topics, like my loft and the charity fundraiser she'll be going to this weekend.

We avoid the heavier stuff. The reason she's staying under my roof in the first place. I figure it helps her to keep things light when only an hour ago she'd been caught up in anger and anxiety.

The movie's not even over when she drifts off. I stay put and watch until the end. The time's half past midnight as I tell my smart-activated TV to turn off and scoop Delphine into my arms. I can't leave her sleeping on the sofa. Her cats have already crept out of her room and given me death glares like felines so often do.

I return her to her room, laying her down in her bed. She doesn't stir. She simply snuggles closer to the pillows and continues dreaming. I stand back and watch for a moment longer. My resolve's never been stronger. My thirst for blood greater.

Tonight might've been an easygoing time watching movies, but I've got work to do.

Vengeance to seek. I won't stop 'til I get my way.

12. salvatore

. . .



COME SUNDAY, many spend their mornings being normal—a slow start with some coffee, the crossword in the *Northam Tribune*, doing chores around the house. I spend mine beating the shit out of guys who need some sense knocked into them.

Ralph Mirra drops his shopping bags and bolts for the nearest exit the second he sets sights on me and Stitches. He knocks over a mother and her small child in doing so, but he doesn't give a fuck. He keeps going like it never happened, sprinting down the walkway lined with shoppers out for an afternoon at the mall. They gasp and rush to get out of his way.

Ralph's got his eyes on the glass elevator up ahead.

Stitches and I linger for an extra moment and watch him.

"You or me?" Stitches asks.

"You go. I'll catch up."

"I always get the crummy end of the deal. Just once I'd like to be the cool guy."

Stitches pockets his wire-framed glasses for safekeeping and then sprints after Ralph. The shoppers have already cleared a direct path leading up to him and the glass elevator's still on the fourth floor.

Ralph panics as soon as he glances over his shoulder and sees Stitches closing in. His legs do a little jig, like when you've got to take a piss really bad, but you're shit out of luck. It wouldn't surprise me one bit if Ralph *does* take a piss.

A coward is as a coward does.

Rather than risk Stitches getting his hands on him, Ralph opts for a stunt that draws everybody's attention. He dashes over to the guardrail on the second story of the Northam City Mall and launches himself over it.

For one freeing second, Ralph Mirra's done it—he's escaped our clutches! He soars through the air, his jacket flapping like wings, before his inevitable downfall. Right into the Halloween display the mall's set up for photo ops for children. He crashes into an inflatable Casper the Ghost with a deafening *pop!*

Stitches isn't worried. He diverts to the other walkway and skips his way down an escalator. By the time Ralph's climbing out from under the suffocating rubber blanket that's Casper's deflated form, Stitches is on the ground floor with him.

Ralph's bleeding from his knee and brow from his action star stunt, but he runs for it anyway. As those two blast off down the mall's front atrium, I stick my hands in my pockets and head in the opposite direction.

We're dealing with no genius here. The moron went the wrong way.

I take the escalator into the parking garage and check the time. My gaze flits up to the signs hanging off the lamp posts in each row.

D6.

Ralph's only half a pace ahead of Stitches by the time he rounds the corner and beelines for his car. He really thinks he might make it. That he's free and clear.

I wait until he's coming up on the driver's side before I step into his path and punch him in the face. My fist collides dead center with his long, crooked nose, and he drops like a sack of potatoes. His nose will probably be even more crooked now.

Not that my knuckles have escaped scathe-free—I've busted them open for the thousandth time.

An automatic high comes over me when I do. It gives me great pleasure; it means I've used my hands to cause damage in some way.

As Ralph lays on the concrete, practically seeing cartoon birds twittering over his head, I step over him with an amused grin.

"All that running for nothing," I say. "Was it worth it, Ralphie?"



An hour later, I sit and sip whiskey in my office at the club, watching Ralph stir.

"Hey, Ralphie. Glad you're awake. Not so glad you thought you could get away."

"Look, I've got no idea what the fuck you want!"

"Yes, you do. You know exactly what this is about. You ran, did you not?"

He's got a cleft in his chin that becomes more pronounced when he grits his teeth. "Or maybe I just know trouble when I see it."

"Flattery will get you nowhere with me, Ralphie. I like trouble."

"If you're gonna break my legs or knock my teeth out, get to it already. I've got nothing you want."

"You sure? You've been getting all mixed up with the law lately."

"This about the kid? It was an accident!"

"Is that why you skipped town for two weeks?"

"People go out of town all the time! I was visiting family. You've got a problem with that? Take it up with my lawyer. I haven't been charged with nothing."

"I expected a better story. Visiting family, were you?"

"That's right! My Aunt Fiona's birthday. Want her number so you can call her?"

"Alright, Ralphie. I believe you." I move over to the sofa and sit down so that I'm opposite him on the recliner. "You're store manager of the Mobile Planet, right?"

"So what?"

"Bet you sell a lot of phones. What's the most you've sold in a day?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

"Here's your chance to brag on your profession and you're sitting here moping like the fat kid chosen last during a dodgeball game. What woman would give up pussy to a man lacking so much confidence?"

“A hundred,” he blurts out, his face reddening. “No, a hundred and fifty!”

“Finally some confidence. You probably have girls all over you wanting cell phones.”

“Maybe... some ladies...”

“There’s one phone in particular I want to ask you about.”

Ralph’s gaze shifts from me to the door. Stitches has returned with the supplies I’ve asked him to pick up. An instant line of sweat shines on Ralphie’s forehead.

I’ve wasted enough of my Sunday on him. I snap my fingers and force his attention back to me.

“A phone purchased at your store belongs to someone I know. Can you guess who?”

“I can’t control what people do with my merchandise!”

“You’d think so. But the situation’s very interesting. A couple weeks ago, you hit one of my men’s kids with your car. That kid had to go to the ER. My guy couldn’t show up for his security shift. Something very bad happened that night; something he could’ve caught before had he not been at that ER.

“Then, we find out the guy who was supposed to replace him had his phone hacked. Guess where we traced it back to? A phone bought at *your* store. It gets worse. After some digging into your sales history, we discovered Giorgio Belini is a customer of yours.”

“So what? I have thousands of customers—”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. Who do you work for, Ralphie?”

“I’m a store manager. I’m my own boss!”

“You must think I’m easily fooled. Is that what you think? I’m a fool?”

He gives off a nervous laugh. “I’d never think that. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Giorgio hired you to do a couple jobs on the side for him. Is that it?”

“I swear on my Aunt Fiona I haven’t had a thing to do with him—”

“Nobody gives a fuck about your Aunt Fiona, Ralphie,” I say bluntly. I taste my whiskey, letting another few seconds pass us by. “We checked your financials. You’ve been struggling. Your house. It’s being foreclosed, right?”

“Money troubles. Who hasn’t had ‘em? I’m... I’m working hard to get on the right track.”

“Except, we found something interesting. Certain deposits into your account.”

“This the part where you try and catch me up? I ain’t talking ‘cuz I ain’t got anything to hide! You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“Some hefty paydays you’ve been receiving from somebody named Volchok. Care to tell me who that is, Ralphie?”

“Fuck off! You’re inventing shit now.”

“This is the last time I’m asking. Think before you answer. You’ll regret not coming clean.”

“I said fuck off! I ain’t involved in nothing. You’ve got the wrong guy.” Ralph clamps shut his mouth in a show of

defiance.

“Suit yourself. Stitches, looks like you get to have some fun today.”

“W-what sort of fun?” Ralph’s gaze flits from me to Stitches as he sets down his medical kit.

“You chose not to answer my questions honestly, Ralphie. Which means now you’ll need to sacrifice something. Think of it as a lesson learned. You do as we say... and maybe you can save the rest of your limbs.”

Ralph screams at the top of his lungs as Stitches comes up from behind and straps down his left arm with a thick leather belt. From inside his medical kit, Stitches withdraws his tools—latex gloves, goggles, a wad of rubber, some towels, and a blunt hacksaw. Last but not least, he shakes a bottle of 800 milligram tablets of Motrin in front of Ralph’s terrified face.

“Brought you a treat. Some pain killers,” Stitches says, grinning. “I’m a civilized guy. I *might* give you one if you say pretty please. Believe me when I say you’ll be grateful after the fact.”

“W-what are you gonna—FUCK NO!” Ralph screeches as Stitches lays the hacksaw down on the coffee table in front of him. “Get that shit away from me! You guys can’t be serious right now... you... you can’t do this!”

“Don’t worry,” I say calmly. “Stitches is the second best qualified med student who flunked out of Northam Medical School. You’re working with the best of the worst. I’m sure he’ll be able to stitch you up good.”

“Passable at least. My name’s not Stitches for nothing.” He replaces his wire-framed glasses with his goggles and lays down the bath towels he’s brought along.

“Use Rhino’s fur rugs. They’re ugly as shit anyway. It’ll give me an excuse to trash them.”

Ralph’s screams fill the room as Stitches takes the hacksaw and presses down firmly against his wrist. Beads of blood surface immediately. Stitches slides the jagged piece of metal back and forth in a hypnotic fashion. I sit back on the leather sofa and watch as I sip the rest of my whiskey.

Stitches does him the courtesy of making it fast. He hacks into Ralph’s wrist with the blade as if we’re at some fucking deli counter in a grocery store. He slices through his flesh, blood leaking from the amputation and staining Rhino’s white fur rugs.

For as long as he can hold on, Ralph screams and shakes, his eyes wide with terror. Eventually, once Stitches makes it to the bone, he passes out. It’s easier that way, allowing for Stitches to finish the job without his hysterics.

Though definitely less entertaining as a spectator. Blood even flecks onto my shoe from where I sit across from the show.

I polish off my whiskey and rise up. Ralph Mirra’s severed hand flops pathetically onto the bloodied rug. I’m almost tempted to pick it up and wave it around for shits and giggles. If the situation weren’t so rage-inducing, I would.

This piece of shit likely works for whoever set Delphine up. I’d kill Ralph right now if I didn’t think there was a chance he might eventually give up and come clean. We need whatever information he’s holding onto. We’ll do whatever it takes to him to retrieve it.

Who’s he working for? And who or *what* is Volchok?

“Have Fabio clean up this mess. You take our new friend Ralphie to our holdover room downstairs. He hasn’t finished helping us out.”

“Psycho?”

I make a noise from my throat in answer. I’m already walking to the door.

“You’ve got blood on your shoe.”

“I know. It looks good, don’t you think?”



From the moment I set foot inside the loft, music fills the place. It’s different than what I’m used to. My loft is almost always silent, even when I’m home. Other than the occasional sports game I catch and movie I watch, I tend to prefer my place as quiet and still as possible.

It’s why I prefer being a loner. I might be a *capo* who leads a crew of men, and the manager of the city’s most popular nightclub, but there’s few better things than absolute solitude. Most people annoy me and I don’t like them in my personal space.

Yet this couldn’t be more different.

The sultry melody thrums through the loft. I follow the sound as if I’m a dumb sailor lost at sea, hearing a siren song play. In a few steps, I reach the hallway and notice the third door down is partially ajar.

Delphine.

I’m careful, keeping my approach as stealthy as possible as I come up on the room and peer inside.

The blood in my veins roars to life. At once it's surging through my body, on a mission straight to my dick. I might be setting the record for the world's fastest hard-on. It wouldn't surprise me—having Delphine under my roof has never been easy. That was the case when I was twenty-one and she stayed over at my apartment the summer we dated, and it's the case as I stumble upon this scene.

The sight that greets me can only be described as torture.

She's folding laundry and dancing to the music.

In that satiny floral-print robe of hers she insists on wearing when she thinks I'm not around.

She picks up a pair of socks and rolls them together, swaying her hips along to the slow beat. Doing laundry has never been sexier.

I almost groan watching the provocative way her body moves. The tiny robe lifts slightly, revealing another inch of her bare thighs. My dick twitches remembering the silky feel of them. How is it possible she's not even trying to be sexy yet I'm hard enough to come just watching her like this?

She begins singing off-key to the lyrics and grabs a pair of her panties from the basket. She's so into the song, she has no clue she isn't alone.

Fuck.

I need to get out of here or she'll look up any second and catch me in the doorway with a giant fucking hard-on, looking like the perverted psycho I am. Normally, I wouldn't give a shit, but Delphine's been through hell the past few weeks. The last thing she needs is to feel uncomfortable under my roof.

I tear myself away from the doorway before she can notice and escape into the most isolated room in the loft.

My home office. I keep it locked at all times because it contains things I'd prefer no one else sees. Weapons. Fast cash. A database of essential info on my enemies. Even information and souvenirs of Delphine I've collected over the years. Stuff I never want her to know about.

The door snicks shut behind me. She'll hear it, but hopefully that's where it ends. It'll tell her I'm home and she'll stop dancing and driving me crazy.

I husk out a breath and run a hand through my slicked hair. Delphine is the only woman who has ever made me need moments like these—a few seconds away in order to compose myself.

The dozens of other women I've fucked might get me hard, but it's nothing like this. Nothing so damn powerful it's like I'm being consumed by the rawest, most primitive urges.

When I've cooled down enough, I turn toward the door, but stop when I notice two bright, judging eyes staring at me from my office chair.

I'd rushed in here and hadn't even noticed Salt was hiding away. I haven't adjusted to Delphine's cats being anywhere in the loft at any time. Salt in particular likes to pop up in the most unexpected places. I have no clue how he got in here. He must've snuck in the last time I opened the door.

He's been here the whole time, watching me deal with the lust I have for his owner.

I stand up straighter and raise a brow at him. "This stays between us."

He blinks and then meows in answer.

"Good cat. You might not be so bad after all."

13. delphine

. . .



“MY DAUGHTER. More beautiful and intelligent every time I see her.” Dad’s smile is restrained if not a little sad. These days it’s the best I can expect out of him given everything. He puts his arms around me and envelops me in a warm hug.

I don’t return to Westoria often, but when I do, it’s to see Dad. Post-retirement, he spends most of his days golfing at the local country club, reading at the library, or attending meetings for the American Bar Association’s Westoria chapter. He prefers to spend as little time as possible at the house. It’s more museum than home since Mom’s passing.

When our hug ends, he stands back and appraises me, head to toe. Pride gleams in his eyes.

We take our seats and the server drifts over to our table with iced water and the menus. Lunch at the Westoria Country Club was his idea.

“How are you, Dad?”

“I just won a round on the green. I’d say pretty damn good all things considered.”

A small smile touches my face. “I don’t know how you’re not tired of golfing by now.”

“Easy. Competitive edge. I’ll never get tired of winning. I beat Steve 40 to 55. He’s not living this one down for a while.”

“You were playing Commissioner Flynn?”

He nods, sipping on his iced water. “We’ve been golfing together since you were hanging up boy band posters in your room. Which reminds me, he mentioned you’re renovating your apartment. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, right. I must’ve forgotten. It’s not major renovations. Just some light aesthetic work. It’s only taking a few weeks,” I say, my face warming up. I clear my throat and reach for my own glass of water to cool down. “Have you ever tried the Mediterranean salad? I wonder if it’s any good.”

“I’ve never had it. I usually stick to the chicken cobb. Where are you staying while the renovations are being done?”

“I’m staying with a friend. It’s just temporary.”

“You can always stay at home with me,” he says, a thread of hope in his tone. “There’s plenty of room.”

“That’s okay, Dad. The daily commute’s too long.”

“I commuted from Westoria to Northam every day for over twenty years. You could hire a driver like I did. It takes the stress off the commute.”

“I prefer to be in the heart of the city. Maybe I’ll go with the pasta primavera. I’m too hungry for just a salad.”

Dad drops the topic, though I don’t miss the flicker of disappointment on his face. Over the past couple of years he’s been upfront about how much he misses Mom.

I miss her too. So much I barely let myself think about it. As I graduated law school, I’d been having doubts about my

career trajectory. Her senseless death is what gave me the final push I needed to follow in Dad's footsteps.

Locking up criminals for a living. The guy who took her life is still on the streets.

Just like the guy who attacked me.

My chest clenches tighter as I reach for my iced water and down a third of it. I can't give up on pursuing justice. Even if I don't pursue it for myself, there are thousands of people out there who have been wronged by criminals in the city. The murderers, robbers, rapists, drug dealers, and the like who prey on the weak to make themselves strong.

The big crime families who suck the city dry until there's nothing left. Families like the Belinis and Viscontis.

The Mancinos.

Salvatore.

"Would you look at that?" Dad interrupts my thoughts, his eyes set on the flat screen TV mounted to the club wall. He wears a grim expression as he shakes his head. "Some things never change. Still up to no good after all these years."

I glance over at the news report on the TV. Footage of Giorgio Belini being hauled off by the bailiffs from the day of his guilty verdict plays. His face appears even redder and nastier on film, his eyes fanatical and spittle flying from his mouth.

If you think for one second karma's not gonna knock on your door... HA! You got one ugly storm coming your way, princess!

My deep unease ripples inside of me and reflects on my face. Dad frowns and asks if I'm alright.

“Fine,” I choke out. “Just thinking.”

“You don’t know how proud of you I was when I watched the highlights from the trial. You are my daughter, Delphi sweetie. Tough and sharp like me.”

“Dad...”

“Big shots like the Belinis will try to intimidate you, but you’re an Adams. You can’t be bought. We’re above it and they hate that about us.”

“I’m just doing my job.”

“First the Belinis. Next you’ll be taking down the Mancinos.” The expression that passes over Dad’s face can only be described as hungry—decades worth of starving for something he’s long been denied. In this case, it’s locking Lucius Mancino behind bars. “Delphi, I never succeeded at bringing them down. But if anyone else is capable, it’s you. You’re my prodigy. My *legacy*.”

“We’re not actively investigating the Mancino syndicate.”

“There’s plenty to go off of. Lucius has only spent the last decade priming his successor. That man will be ten times worse than his father.”

My pulse races, though I’m sitting perfectly still. My ears fill with the heavy beat of my heart as I scramble to come up with something to say. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Dad’s testing the waters right now. He’s trying to figure out how I feel about Salvatore.

Even after all these years, he hasn’t let his grudge go. He never will.

“Criminals belong behind bars,” I say vaguely. “If charges are brought up against him—or anyone else—then I’ll do my

due diligence.”

“You’ll have to be careful. He and his father have a tendency to play dirty. Violent, gutter-level trash.”

“He wouldn’t ever hurt me,” I blurt out.

Dad’s eyes narrow. “What do you call what he did to you when you broke up? He broke your heart, didn’t he? Do you think I forgot how you called your mother and I crying? Delphi honey, the guy *used* you. He knew you were young and gullible and ran circles around you. He tried to turn you against me. Do you know what atrocities he and his family have committed?”

I do. And I’m sleeping under his roof...



It takes time to feel even remotely like myself again at work, but as weeks in October go by, I’m able to find a rhythm. I start by focusing on prepping the most vital witness in the charges against Michael Frausto—his former mistress. Her relationship with him is the centerpiece in our evidence against him.

“Thank you for cooperating, Ms. Doukas,” I say, standing up and shaking Octavia’s hand.

Detectives Santana and Galecki have escorted her into my office. She clutches her purse and glances around as though she expects a big bang to go off at any moment. Detective Santana guides her to one of my chairs so she can take a seat. She declines his offer to grab her some water.

“I’m f-fine... thank you. I’d just like...” she trails off and her brow pinches with worry. “I want this to be over with. I

want to be safe.”

My gaze flicks to the detectives. “I trust you’ve been ensuring Ms. Doukas receives around-the-clock surveillance and security, detectives?”

“She’s been getting the all-star treatment, ADA,” Galecki snaps, folding his arms. “She has a protective detail with her at all times. Frausto—or anyone else in the Belini organization—can’t touch her with a ten-foot pole.”

I offer Ms. Doukas a soft smile. “Does this address your concern? Is there another matter that’s bringing you unease in regard to the situation with Frausto and the Belini family? Please let me know so I can ensure you’re comfortable with proceeding.”

“Well, what about...” Octavia trembles just inhaling and exhaling a breath. She clutches her purse tighter in her lap. “Somebody sent me an email.”

“An email? What sort of email?”

Galecki checks his watch. “She showed us earlier. I had a guy in Cyber Crimes look at it. It was spam.”

“I know Mike, and that was from him,” she says testily.

“What did the message say?” I ask.

Octavia digs around in her purse and withdraws her phone to show me. It’s a quick, one line sentence with a proverb quoted:

Never forget you reap what you sow.

“When we checked the address, it was from a local church,” Galecki explains. “She’s signed up to their daily newsletter.”

“They’ve never sent anything like this before!” Octavia’s eyes brim with tears as she looks down at the message on her phone screen. “He’s going to get me. He’s going to kill me for what I’m doing. I shouldn’t do it—I can’t testify.”

“Ms. Doukas, you’re more than safe,” Detective Santana pipes up. “We’ve offered you relocation if you don’t feel safe in your apartment.”

I grab the box of tissues off my desk and deliver them to her. She’s a shattered mess, trembling and weeping at the prospect of what could happen if Frausto comes for her. It tugs at my heart seeing another victim so terrified of a criminal.

Octavia Doukas might have made a fatal mistake being wined and dined by Michael Frausto, but she’s really just a defenseless woman who found herself mixed up with the Belini family. In a twisted sort of way, we’re similar.

On the night of my assault I was defenseless. Shaken and terrified.

I’m *still* defenseless.

If not for Salvatore’s protection—my own ex-lover in the mafia—I’d still be a panicked, anxiety-riddled mess.

I reach out and pat Octavia’s hand. “You listen to me, Ms. Doukas. Northam PD will protect you and ensure no one harms you. You have nothing to be afraid of. But in order to have a solid case against Michael Frausto, I’m going to need your help. It’s your testimony that is going to be the nail in his coffin. It’s going to be emotionally draining and stressful as we work through the trial, but I’m going to put up a solid case against him. Once he’s convicted, you can start your life over,

and move on from what you've been through. Are you up for the task?"

She gives a small nod. Her watery blue eyes shine with hope. "O-okay. What do you need to know?"



Throughout October, Salvatore and I develop a routine at the loft. It feels curiously familiar to our past. Once upon a time, during the summer before I left for Dupoint, I'd all but moved into his apartment. For weeks we acted like a real couple, spending lazy evenings together, pretending our relationship wasn't forbidden. We'd even take Salvatore's dog Chip for walks around the block.

These days, it's similar, though we're older and Chip has been replaced by two temperamental cats. The routine goes like this:

Salvatore waits on me when I get off from city hall. We decide what we'll be doing for dinner that evening. Some nights we go out to a discreet restaurant—he usually pays a handsome fee in order to get it shut down, allowing us the privacy we need. Other nights we stay in and order delivery or cook ourselves. The nights we cook become some of my favorite. Neither of us are talented in the kitchen, which makes it that much more amusing when we struggle to put together a successful meal.

"Salvatore," I giggle, sipping from my glass of wine, "that chicken is *burnt!*"

"It's not burnt. It's extra crispy."

"With charcoal."

He glares. “You’re one to talk. Didn’t you try and serve overcooked spaghetti?”

“That was how many nights ago?” I roll my eyes, though my cheeks warm. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about. It tasted delicious.”

“Even Salt and Pepa wouldn’t touch it.”

He ducks as I fling a dinner roll at him. It hits him anyway, bouncing off his abdomen before it drops to the kitchen floor and tumbles under the counter. He pins me with a hard, scolding stare that would probably scare most people.

Instead, I giggle again. “What?”

“You going to pick that up?”

“I’m still in my pencil skirt from the day.”

“I know,” he answers, the vague hint of a grin working the corner of his lips. “That’s the idea.”

If my skin was warm before, it burns now. Outside the temperature is chilly, with drizzle predicted throughout the night. Weather forecasters advise citizens to bundle up and crank the heat in their homes. Yet here I am about to break a sweat as though it’s summer time and not the middle of October.

After dinner, our evening usually goes one of two ways. If Salvatore is working a night at the club, he’ll hang around as long as he can before he heads out so late, I’m moments away from getting ready for bed. On nights he’s off, we crash on the sofa with the cats and watch movies.

Salt and Pepa climb up and wedge themselves between us. If I didn’t know any better, it’s out of jealousy.

But Salvatore doesn't take offense. I'm shocked as he attempts to get on their good side. He's even resorted to enticing them with tuna on several occasions. Slowly, but surely, it works.

"I thought you said you weren't a cat person?" I raise both brows.

He shrugs and scratches Salt under his chin. "I'm not. This is a one-time exception."

I smile. He doesn't say it, but he doesn't need to. I get it.

They're my cats. That's why he's making the exception.

Our evenings begin feeling like intimate ones shared by a couple. We try our best to keep things platonic. I wear the baggiest T-shirts and sweatpants whenever we're relaxing on the couch, but that doesn't stop Salvatore from noticing even the subtlest curve hidden underneath. While he tries to be discreet, his blue-green gaze is too piercing—I can *feel* his eyes on me.

I'm hardly any better. Even in the aftermath of my assault, I've never been more sexually frustrated. More desperate to just feel like a normal woman again, unafraid to be touched by a man she desires.

One inhale of Salvatore's personal cologne or brush of his hand and I'm craving him. I've spent more nights lying awake fantasizing about him than I'd ever like to admit. The worst part being that he's often only a few doors down the hall.

But I can't fantasize about my ex-boyfriend forever. I'm going to have to live my life again. Date another man. Attempt some semblance of a healthy, romantic, *sexual* relationship.

Salvatore won't like it, but he'll have to accept my choice. I need to move on with my life. I need to feel in control of it.

“You seem tired,” Salvatore says one evening when I yawn. We’re washing dishes and cleaning up the kitchen after a disastrous attempt at chicken parmesan. He twists off the faucet and wipes down the last dish.

I put away our leftovers we probably won’t be eating inside the fridge. “Sort of. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. I think I’ll skip out on movies tonight if you don’t mind.”

“Busy day?”

“We’re working on the charges against Frausto. It could piss off the Belinis even more.”

The muscle in his jaw tightens, adding another chiseled dimension to his face. “Piss them off all you want, Phi. They come near you, they’re all dead.”

He means every word. But that’s the problem—Salvatore’s protectiveness only makes him feel more like a boyfriend and not an ex.

I inhale a breath, a swarm of butterflies attacking my stomach. From the moment he insisted I move in with him I knew things would be blurred and become increasingly complicated. As I lean against the kitchen island, drawing my long cardigan tighter around myself, I don’t even know what I want or expect.

I enjoy our time together, but it feels wrong. If we don’t stop on this trajectory, we’ll be in too deep. Someone will get hurt.

Probably me.

“What is it?” Salvatore asks, tossing the dish rag onto the towel rack. “I know that look. You’re overthinking.”

It takes effort to keep from smirking. “You know me too well.”

“That happens when you’ve been through a lot together.”

He stops opposite me on the other side of the counter, and though we have a slab of marble between us, he still feels dangerously close. It’d only take him a couple quick strides to reach me. My skin warms and I avoid his gaze, tracing a finger over one of the many veins on the marble countertop.

“You’re right,” I admit. “I’ve been thinking about... us.”

“Care to share?”

I can feel Salvatore’s lean-muscle body tense. He folds his arms over his chest and I try not to become distracted by the curvature of his biceps. I muster up enough bravery to look up again, ignoring the butterflies in my stomach and the heat on my cheeks and every other side effect he draws out of me on mere presence alone.

Just as I’m about to go there—tell him how real this feels and how I’m afraid where that could lead, I chicken out. I can’t do it.

So I come up with something else instead.

Something that’s been vaguely on my mind because of my recent interactions with Octavia Doukas.

“I need your help,” I say, thinking fast. “This Frausto case has me stressed. Seeing how afraid our star witness is has made me realize how I still don’t feel like myself.”

Salvatore’s brows pinch closer. “What are you saying, Phi?”

“I want to learn to defend myself. I want to learn to fight and shoot a gun. Things like that are your specialties. So... so

will you teach me?”

A moment passes where Salvatore considers my request. His head tilts to the side and his swirl of blue and green eyes meet mine without any sign he'll blink or look away anytime soon. Finally, he gives a nod.

“Alright. It might even be good for you.”

14. salvatore

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THERE'S one thing I didn't consider when I agreed to teach Delphine how to defend herself—the constant, close physical contact between us. I could've had one of my men teach her. Stitches, for example, would've been happy to help out, but I'm too selfish and greedy to allow anybody except me to wrap their arms around Delphine.

It shouldn't be sexual. It shouldn't be a moment where I'm turned on, almost enough to get hard as fuck. It's supposed to be purely instructional. It's for her peace of mind.

Yet as we begin another practice session, I'm unable to ignore how good she looks in the sporty ensemble she's wearing. It's tight and form-fitted—her tank top reveals the tantalizing bare skin of her neck, shoulders, and chest, while those sleek yoga pants highlight how phenomenal her ass is.

What can I say? You put Delphine dressed in tight clothing in front of me and I'm *going* to notice. No matter the occasion.

She's got her many zigzag curls pulled up into a big puff at the back of her head to keep them out of the way.

But all I think about is how badly I want to press my lips to her nape and taste her skin.

I shove aside that thought and pretend I'm a civilized guy with an ounce of decorum. I've pushed the furniture in the loft's living room against the walls, opening up the center for us to practice.

Delphine stands in the middle, uncertainty on her face, only slightly more confident than previous sessions. She does great on the basic stuff—forward-facing moves where she has to strike me in the face or knee me in the groin. It's the moment I come up from behind, or even from the side that she's thrown off.

We've been practicing for almost two weeks now. Each time she gets a little better, though the nerves don't seem to be going anywhere.

“Are you ready? We're going to do what we practiced.”

She inhales a rocky breath and then nods. “When are you going to do it?”

“That's part of the element of surprise, Phi.”

I disappear from the room and she puts in her AirPods.

I'm no expert instructor at teaching defensive maneuvers, but I've been fighting as long as I can remember. From the time I was a runt kid and got picked on both at home and at school. The shitheads at school were manageable; as soon as I fought back and went psycho on them, they learned to back off from me. Home was the real challenge; what do you do when a two-hundred-and-seventy-pound bull charges toward you with fists raised, ready to beat the shit out of you?

You have no other choice but to learn to fight. Learn how to defend yourself against what seems like insurmountable odds.

I developed my taste for violence thanks to those early experiences black and blue, spilling my own blood. If there's one thing I've learned about physical confrontations it's that you've got to be ready. You've got to keep your cool and be smart.

Never panic.

Delphine's at a disadvantage should any asshole attack her from behind, but she's naturally a sharp and quick-thinking woman. She's just got to forget the panic and learn to apply that same fast-on-her-feet mindset she has in the courtroom to any altercations on the street.

Not that I ever intend on letting her go without security ever again—but just in case.

Eight minutes have passed before I do it. She's waiting, AirPods in her ears, when I sneak up from behind and entrap her in my arms. My grip's tight and sudden, forcing her body up against mine in a jarring, aggressive fashion. I can't go easy on her; the asshole who attacked her didn't. None of them would.

The moment she's stuck in my arms, she produces a noise that's a mix between a growl and a gasp. She hesitates only a second longer before she seems to remember what I've taught her. She shifts her body to the side and attempts to land an open-palmed strike to my groin.

What she doesn't expect is me blocking her. I anticipate her move and push her hand out of the way with my knee.

As my grip tightens around her middle, the panic takes over. Her breathing turns erratic, the sounds she makes are desperate grunt noises as she twists in my arms, struggling for freedom. I've told her a dozen times this type of struggling

actually makes the situation worse, but the panic is a lot louder than my advice.

I'm about to let her go so we can review where she went wrong when she throws her head back and her skull collides with the lower half of my face. It's an angle that admittedly does enough damage to get me to release her.

Immediate and sharp pain reverberates throughout my jaw and nose. It's as good as any direct punch. I step back and wipe my nose, my fingers stained with blood.

Her eyes widen. "Oh my god, Jon! I'm so sorry! I panicked and I didn't think. I just threw my head back. That's a lot of blood. I'll get you a towel—"

I grab her arm and hold her back. "You think I'm worried about a little blood? Nothing's broken. Calm down. You did good."

"I did?"

"You've got me bleeding, don't you? You fucked me up. What else is that but good?"

The smile that almost touches her lips is surprised. "But that's not what we practiced."

"Sometimes you have to think on your feet. I underestimated you. You proved me wrong—just remember to keep your cool. What have I told you?"

"Search for my opening."

I nod, reaching out with my clean hand to give her shoulder a squeeze. "That's right. I'm proud of you, Phi. Want to go practice firing?"

She nods but then disappears down the hall. "Not before I clean you up!"

I insist I'm fine, though it's useless. She reappears a couple seconds later with a damp face towel and urges me to sit down so she can clean the blood off me and take a look at how damaged my nose is. I've never given a fuck about any injuries I sustain. Both my jaw and nose still throb, but it's manageable.

Out of the dozens of fights I've been in, it's nothing. A small drop in the ocean.

I lean against the armrest of my sofa to even out our height. She dabs the cool, damp towel under my nostrils and then peers at the area to ensure it's not still bleeding.

"Phi, you're being dramatic. I'm fine."

"I want to make sure nothing's damaged."

"I don't give a fuck if it is."

"I do. I *like* your face."

Our eyes meet and something inside me warms up. That same kind of feeling I used to get all the time when Delphine and I were together. She'd throw herself in my arms, inhale my scent, and then pull back to look up at me with those pretty brown eyes of hers. I might've been composed on the outside, but on the inside, a funny warm feeling invaded my chest.

I hadn't ever felt it before. I didn't know what it was.

It's no different now. As neither of us look away, the warmth intensifies. The throbbing pain in my jaw and sting in my nose barely exist. I'm much more interested in how close she's standing, right in front of me. I could pull her into my lap if I wanted to, grab her by the hips and bring her up flush against me.

This close, I can see every last detail about her face. I can study her heart-shaped lips and think about how soft they feel, and notice the small beauty mark she has on her lower cheek that's sometimes covered up by her make up. With such little space between us, I can look into her eyes and tell what color they really are—not just any brown, but a toffee kind of brown that's darker from far away and a shade or two lighter up close, framed by her long lashes.

My hand itches to reach up and cup her face. Bring her lips to mine and kiss her.

If the flushed look about her is any indication, she shares my sentiments.

She inhales a soft yet audible breath before she blinks and then diverts her attention. She grabs my hand and begins cleaning off the blood.

“I'm sorry I hit you,” she says, her voice strained. “You're right. I need to stop panicking. It happens before I can control it. He came from behind. I was on the stairs, but he yanked me backward. I panicked then too. It hits too close to home.”

“Don't be so hard on yourself. You've been picking up everything fast.”

“Salvatore Mancino lying to make me feel better.” Her nose wrinkles and her lips curl into a slight smirk. One I want to kiss away.

“Not lying. I'd tell you if you sucked. You made me bleed, didn't you? Consider it a win. C'mon, we're going to practice at the range.”

I grab her hand and lead her toward the door. We head down to the underground parking garage. Delphine moves as

if to go to one of the cars, but I tug on her hand and steer her toward my sports bike. She hesitates half a step back.

“Your bike?”

“You’ve ridden with me before.”

“A whole decade ago.”

“What’s the difference? I’m more experienced now.” I lift the second helmet off the seat and slip it over her head.

“People will see us. Have you forgotten this is supposed to be discreet?”

“Nobody’s going to see a thing. We’ll have our gear on. Here, put this jacket on. Tell me if it’s too big.”

Once we’re changed and in position on my bike, I check on her one last time from over my shoulder.

“You okay?”

She squeezes me tighter around the middle and I can feel her nod against my back.

We’re darting across the parking garage and onto the city streets within the next minute. The first time I ever took Delphine out for a ride on my sports bike, she practically latched onto me like a damn koala bear to a tree.

I was right in saying there’s no difference between then and now—as I speed down Northam’s manufacturing district, Delphine’s arms clench around my stomach and her body presses against my back. I don’t mind it. If anything, it makes me feel good. It’s a reminder she trusts me enough to give up control.

Something she doesn’t give up easily.

The manufacturing district falls behind us as we venture deeper into the big city. The farther into Northam you go, the more the many skyscrapers loom over you. You go far enough and they almost block out the sky itself.

Saturday midafternoon, everybody's in the streets doing something. Not only does the wind rush our ears, but the sounds of a living, breathing city do too. Everything from the wail of ambulances and the music blasting from apartment windows to construction workers drilling into the ground with their jackhammers (probably employed by Lucius). It all becomes one big, buzzing noise as we speed by on my bike.

I weave us through traffic only for Delphine to squeeze herself even more into me. If anybody around knew the future district attorney was on the back of the bike of a mafia *capo*, it'd be front page news. A real big scandal that'd probably ruin both of us.

That's the thing about Delphine and I. The two of us together has always been wrong in every definition of the word.

It's no surprise it only makes me want her more.

I turn down Eighth, using a shortcut that'll take us to the shooting range owned by an associate of the Mancino family, when I slow down. Me taking this shortcut also serves as a quick check in on the club.

Nirvana's on the corner of the next street, the biggest nightclub in the city. Two floors, spanning half a block, with a rooftop lounge as a bonus. At night, the red and gold lights attract partiers like vultures to a carcass. They just can't help themselves.

During daylight hours, the club's usually empty. Me and my guys use these hours to iron out any business details of the operations we're running. Nobody other than a handful of regulars and associates drop by.

So, *why* is Lucius's car parked outside?

I brake, tension screwing shut my jaw. Delphine shifts behind me as if she's about to question what's going on. I set the kickstand with my boot and then get off the bike.

"Stay here," I say, pulling off my helmet.

"Salvatore..."

I'm walking toward the club doors with my face a cold mask, but my eyes tell the real story—they're narrowed, hostility burning in them.

My fucking club.

Unannounced.

We agreed this was my territory and my territory alone. That was part of the deal when we negotiated the terms.

I shove open the doors and barge inside, ready to raise hell in my own club. My crew knew to wait on me, because I don't make it more than a couple steps in before two of my main soldiers, Omar and Fabio, are at my side.

"Psycho, we couldn't stop him," Omar says. "He came in with a whole crew of guys and went upstairs."

Fabio wipes sweat from his cueball head as he pauses and then says, "He's in your office."

"I want him to get the fuck out. I'll make him if I have to. Keep an eye on Delphine outside."

They both stop at the foot of the stairs as I head up. The pussies practically gulp at my words.

Everybody's terrified of Lucius.

Except me.

I don't give a fuck if he is the Don. He won't be disrespecting me. We had a deal and he's gone back on it—if he keeps it up, I'll unleash his worst nightmare. He'll kill me for it, but it'll be worth it. Just to know I got to humiliate him before I died.

Four of his men stand guard outside the doors to *my* office. They mean mug me, eying me like they're not disposable soldiers and I'm not a *capo* who outranks them. I bet Lucius gave them full permission to be disrespectful dicks. Their mistake if they want to test me.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” I say to the one blocking the door. “I'm only telling you once. Then body parts are coming off. Don't believe me? Try me.”

He returns my glare for half a second before he folds. He steps aside and lets me through.

I enter to Lucius treating my office like his kingly lair. He's got his sausage legs kicked up on my desk, drinking my alcohol, and smoking one of my cigars. His men fill the room, obedient lapdogs posted in every corner. The door swings shut behind me.

Me against the Don and a whole crew of his guys.

It makes no difference to me. We could be alone, or there could be a hundred guys here. Lucius isn't going to win this battle. As much as he'd deny it, we both know I have the upper hand. He hasn't been bowing down to my demands for nothing.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, stopping in the middle of the room.

Lucius puffs on his cigar, a gleam in his beady eyes. “Having a drink and a smoke. Want some?”

“I want you to get the fuck out.”

He croaks out a laugh, smoke clouding around him. “You see how my son talks to me? The disrespect.”

“You want to talk? You want to sit down and have a drink? We can make it a good ol’ time. I can tell them all about how you’ve been keeping a big secret. We can talk about the Mancino family and your claim to the—”

“OUT!” Lucius snaps upright in my desk chair. His cigar dangles precariously from his fat lips, his ears immediately going red. He glares around at his men. “What the fuck did I just say? GET OUT!”

His men share confused glances before they shuffle out of the room in a single file line, like children told it’s their bedtime. I’m grinning by the time the door slams shut and we’re alone. Just as I figured; Lucius would rather *die* than for everybody to know the truth about him.

Heavy silence presses down on the room. Neither of us say a word. I’m amused. Lucius is pissed.

“You piece of shit,” he bleats. The redness from his ears has spread to the rest of his round face. “I want you gone.”

“But what happened to us having a drink, Pop?”

He springs up from the chair, coming around the desk. He stalks toward me as fast and angry as he has so many times in the past—he used to enjoy snatching me up out of nowhere, slamming me into walls and punching me in the gut.

As he closes in on me now, my grin only widens. I welcome whatever he's got for me. If he puts his hands on me, he's fuming. If he pulls out his gun, he's *really* fuming. He could make me another offer or he could tell me more about how he hates my guts.

With Lucius, you never know.

He stops a foot away from me, his pudgy face contorted by loathing. "What's it going to take? How much to get rid of you?"

"Tough luck, Pop. I like it here."

"You think you're going to win? You're going to take my shit from me?"

"I'm your son, aren't I?" I put my hands in my pockets and shrug. "Most fathers are honored when their sons want to be just like them."

"You're not my son. My son wouldn't be trash. That's what you are. What you've always been. I knew from the moment you were born."

"Yeah, because *you* failed. That's what this is about, right? I remind you of everything you're not—"

I expect my words to cut him deep. Instead he eyes me a second longer and then lets out a gruff laugh. He brings his cigar to his lips and puffs on it. He's studying me, the gleam brightening in his beady gaze. The anger that's been driving him in the past couple of minutes fades into amusement.

"I enjoyed it," he says, smoke wafting between us. "Every single time I made you suffer. It was as good as any nut."

My grin slides off my face, my pulse speeding up. I can't control it—the way a chill courses through me—and I fucking

hate it. He notices the subtle shift in my demeanor and he acts on it. His lip curls and he takes a step toward me.

Suddenly, somehow, he's got the upper hand. He holds up his cigar and pretends like he's about to snuff it out on me. Even produces the sickening *sizzle* noise before he barks out a laugh.

“Remember that?” he asks. “Remember the closet? Remember how you'd beg? A fucking pussy for a son.”

I don't know what comes over me. I don't know what's fucking wrong.

It's like I'm trapped, frozen in place. The level of repulsion and rage overwhelms me to such a degree, I can't even act on it. My whole body buzzes, so alive and so dead at the same damn time. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before. I'm present in the moment while also lost in the past.

Seven-years-old and weeping, *pleading* with him for mercy.

Not once did he ever give it.

I'm consumed by my hatred for him—eighteen fucking years in the making. I've plotted and planned. I've dedicated my entire life to making him suffer.

Why even wait another moment? Why not do it right now? Settle it once and for all. Man to man. I can kill him. I can rip him apart and make him beg like he made me beg.

The bloodlust rises up inside me intensely enough it boils over and cancels itself out. It vanishes into nothing and I'm left stuck, still caught up in my head. The irony of me humiliating Lucius only for the tables to turn.

I'm the one who looks stupid as fuck.

Recognition lights up Lucius's eyes. "That's what I thought. Still a coward. A real piece of trash. If you won't leave by choice, then I'll have to do what I've wanted to since the moment you were born. You're *dead*."

I'm in a daze as Lucius turns around and walks off. His laugh follows him on his way out, an invisible presence, growing louder and crueler. The last fucking laugh just like always.

I'd flip out and destroy everything in my office if I wasn't so confused. I never care about what he says—why the hell did it affect me so much now? It's been years since I've let him throw me off like that. I was a *boy* when he used to make me freeze up.

Another moment passes before I'm fully coherent. I snap out of my daze and dart to the window. I've been gone for a while. Has Delphine been okay waiting on me?

I look out in time to watch Lucius and his men file into their cars parked along the curb. Delphine is nowhere in sight.

Fuck!

As if my nerves aren't shot enough already after my strange and unexpected encounter with Lucius. My pulse hasn't even slowed before it's ticking up again. If anything has happened to her since we've stopped at the club—

I turn away from the window, about to rush out of the room. I stop altogether when I realize I don't need to go and search for her.

Delphine stands in the doorway, her helmet at her side, balanced on her hip. In the leather jacket and gloves I've put on her, she looks sexy as hell. I'd be turned on right now if I wasn't still thrown by the recent turn of events.

“You look... upset,” she says slowly. “I saw your father leaving. Is everything okay?”

I slide my fingers into my hair, slicking it back more. “Just a family reunion.”

“And those scrapes on my knees were from falling in the tub.”

Only she could get away with calling me out on my bullshit.

We’re both liars, covering up bad things that have happened to us. Even if she doesn’t press me on mine, she knows this.

And so do I.

I sling my arm around her hips as we fall into step leaving the office. “Looks like we have more in common than you like to think, Phi.”

15. delphine

...



“PLEASE, *take my purse. I’ll give you the code to my bank card. You can have it all. Just please don’t... ahhh!*”

“Shut up, bitch.”

He roughly shoves me into the ground. The side of my face scrapes against the wet gravel. I grind my teeth together as I bear the sharp pain. His heavy, coarse hands slide between my legs. Thick fingers paw and poke at me—he feels me up like I’m a piece of meat he’s selecting at the market.

I might as well be.

The crass sound of hawked spit meets my ears. His fingers return wet and slick, even more probing than before. Bile rises up my throat at the feel of his digits slipping in and out. I clench my eyes shut and will myself to concentrate on anything else.

Any distraction possible.

When he enters me for real, my body flinches of its own accord, bracing for the harmful impact. He weighs down on me, an anchor I can’t escape, pressing me into the cold earth. It feels like time stops altogether. Every drag of his hips as he rams himself deeper is its own eternity.

Forever trapped under him and his brutal assault.

I can do nothing but stare fixedly at his hands. Calloused and dirty. His nails chewed.

On his ring finger is a braided silver band with a sapphire gemstone. The ring that's haunted me ever since—

“Delphine! Delphine, wake up!”

I'm being shaken as the nightmare vanishes. The four walls of Salvatore's guest bedroom return. My eyes pop open to the bleary sight of him in front of me. He's gripping me by the shoulders, giving me a hard shake. His face stands out against the pale blue light from the TV and the deep shadows occupying the rest of the room.

It comes to me at once—I was lying awake late at night, unable to sleep, watching reruns of some sitcom. I must've drifted off at some point. The nightmare felt so real, as though I'd been ripped away from the present and dropped into the past.

Forced to relive the one moment I wish I could forget.

It's not until Salvatore's stopped shaking me that I realize I'm trembling on my own. My body shakes and my clothes are damp. I've been sweating in my sleep. I lick at my dry lips and blink away the last remnants of the nightmare.

I'm awake now. It wasn't real. Not in this moment. I was safely in bed. I was safely in *Salvatore's* loft.

“Phi... you were screaming,” he says, his voice raspy. He smooths a hand along my shoulder. With his other he cups my cheek. His expression is lined with concern, his jaw clenched and his brow furrowed.

Sudden and inexplicable shame washes over me. It's a reflexive, knee-jerk reaction to being caught screaming like a child afraid of monsters under her bed. I must've sounded

ridiculous if I was loud and hysterical enough to wake Salvatore up in a spacious loft like his.

“I’m fine.” I shrug off his touch and turn my cheek. “It was just a bad dream.”

“About what?”

“I don’t remember. I never remember my dreams.”

Lies.

But what other choice do I have? Spill to my ex-boyfriend how I’m so haunted about my attack, I can barely sleep?

I’ve told him enough. I’ve been vulnerable enough. The trauma already feels humiliating on its own, including the fact I’m even forced to live with him. Now I have to tell him in agonizing detail what I was dreaming about?

I don’t want him to know—don’t want *anyone* to know.

“You’re lying,” he says bluntly after a pause. “I know you are, Phi. But if you don’t want to say what it was... I’ll drop it.”

“Excuse me.”

In need of a moment to collect myself, I leap out of bed and shoot for the bathroom. The second the door snicks shut, I exhale the breath I’ve been holding. At no fault of his own, Salvatore has only made me more anxious.

His concern is to be expected. He cares about me, and clearly I’m going through something. It should comfort me, but I can’t help that it only makes me feel that much weaker.

For twelve years, I’ve been fine without him. I moved on from our relationship and the heartbreak. Even, in my own way, began to resent him and how things ended between us.

Within a few short weeks, he's invaded every aspect of my life.

He's become someone I'm forced to rely on. My feelings for him are so complicated, I don't know how I feel about letting him in. No one knows about the ugly side of my life, the less than perfect parts of me.

Only Salvatore has ever seen them. This attack is the ugliest of them all.

"Calm down," I whisper. My heart races and I still feel shaky. "You're fine. You're... you're overreacting."

His knuckles tap against the bathroom door. "Phi. Open up."

"Just a second."

I move to the sink and splash my face with cold water, jolting away the many conflicting feelings bottled up inside me. I roll my head along my shoulders and inhale several deep breaths before I face him.

Salvatore remains unconvinced. His composed yet skeptical expression, complete with a raised brow and his lips pressed into a tight line, reveals he's not buying my act.

"What?"

"You tell me," he says. "You're still shaking. You alright?"

The moment drags on. I have no other choice but to stand in the doorway of the bathroom and stare up at him. His physical proximity becomes too much. I'm already swimming in a sea of foggy-brained confusion. I don't need any more complications making it more difficult to think.

Yet something unbidden stirs inside me. My body responds to his without thought, drawn to his warmth and strength. I

feel myself gravitating toward him, acutely aware of how close we are. We're alone, steeped in the night's silence and shadows. Two past lovers who find it impossible to stay away once we're anywhere near each other.

I want him to go and stay at the same time. All while I simultaneously crave his touch but hate his concern. If he gets frustrated and gives up on me, I wouldn't blame him. How can I when I'm a mess?

I do the only thing I can think of at a time like this. In a moment where I'm wanting to feel better, to feel *good*.

My gaze shifts to his lips and the softest moan hums in my throat as I'm flooded with memories of what they feel like.

His lips on my lips. His lips on every inch of my body.

I've never needed anything more.

The opportunity to forget the bad touches and focus on the good. Salvatore alone has the power to erase the ones I didn't want. He can set my world right again.

I lean up into him and brush my lips against his. His reaction is immediate—his strong hands clamp shut on my waist as if to peel me off, but then he doesn't. He draws me further into him until our bodies fit together. My arms wind around his neck and I seek the heat of his mouth.

Salvatore meets me the rest of the way. He dips down and seals his lips over mine in a kiss that sends a wave of mindless lust rolling through me. It pools in my belly, making me feel hot and dizzy. The floor becomes precariously unsteady as we sway and treat ourselves to a taste of the other.

"Phi, what are you doing?" His voice is warm smoke in the dark, layered with the unmistakable rough edges of his arousal.

“What’s the matter? Let’s just... stop thinking. Remember how you used to fuck me?”

We come together in another deep kiss that causes a ripple effect through my body. I’m needy and desperate for more. For Salvatore to give me what he knows I need. It doesn’t have to mean anything beyond this moment. Things will get too complicated and messy if we involve our feelings. I’ll get hurt again.

This moment can exist on its own. Separate from anything else that’s happened between us.

I sense the spark fading on his end and fist a hand into the front of his T-shirt to convince him to stay. He growls before tearing himself away, like a beast that’s frustrated yet incapable of words.

“You’re upset,” he grits out.

“I told you I’m fine—”

“You’re not thinking straight,” he says. He turns his back on me and heads for the door. “Get some sleep, Phi.”

“Salvatore... Salvatore!” I call to his retreating form.

He leaves me alone in the room. Discontent bubbles up inside me until I can’t stand the feeling. As if I didn’t feel humiliated enough with Salvatore waking me up from my nightmare.

I drop my face into my hands and rattle out a breath. I can’t live like this.



A grisly murder scene isn't how I'm supposed to start off Halloween morning.

I flash my badge at the uniformed cop standing outside Octavia's brownstone. He waves me through the wall of bystanders and press snapping photos and recording footage. Octavia's apartment door is already open with detectives and other members of law enforcement milling in and out. I don't enter the crime scene with half as much swagger as I normally would.

Instead I cross the threshold and linger in the background by the door, digesting everything in front of me.

Octavia met a gruesome end. Blood splatters the walls and carpet. Several pieces of furniture are either broken or turned over. By the entrance to the hallway lays a half dressed, decapitated Octavia, her body bruised and twisted at impossible angles.

A medical examiner crouches beside her, carefully studying the body with latex gloves and a toolkit. Nearby, Detective Galecki speaks to another officer with his usual aggressive energy, his wide brow furrowed and expression dark.

My throat thickens with a lump that feels a lot like cotton. I ignore the musty stench of Octavia's dead body and breathe through my mouth as I move forward.

We'd promised her—I'd told her she would be safe and protected from Frausto.

“Detective, care to tell me how our biggest witness has wound up without her head?”

“You're infamously sharp, ADA. Take a wild guess.”

“You said she had around-the-clock protection! You promised the Northam PD would be surveilling her 24/7. What the hell happened? How could this go so wrong?”

“Did you forget the part where she declined to be moved to a safehouse?” he interrupts, his hands on his waist. He takes another grim peek at her and then heaves out a rough breath. “She said she didn’t want to leave her home. Somebody must’ve gained access to her building some other way. I’ve got a couple uniforms checking it out now. Top to bottom.”

“Too little, too late. The protective detail you provided her wasn’t good enough. There was a failure somewhere.”

“You might want to point the blame elsewhere, ADA. Protocol was followed. She wound up dead anyway. The medical examiner estimates she was attacked over ten hours ago. It looks like she was winding down for the evening when the guy broke into her apartment. Signs of extreme physical trauma. She suffered before she died. The sick fuck used some sort of axe or hacksaw. Neighbors and our detail watching her apartment claim they didn’t hear a thing, so she was likely already dead when he did it... or mostly dead.”

I listen to his statement with almost deaf ears. My gaze has landed on Octavia’s battered body. The yogurt and hazelnut latte I had for breakfast suddenly threatens to rise up in bile form. I’m usually not squeamish, even when visiting crime scenes, but this is different.

I swore to her she’d be safe.

Octavia Doukas was spending a regular evening in the privacy of her home when she’d been beaten to a pulp. She’d been murdered in one of the most inhumane, violent ways.

Galecki comes up behind me.

“Ms. Adams?”

“Hmmm... yes?”

“You’re the prosecutor. What does this mean for the charges against Frausto?”

“The security cameras,” I say, ignoring his question. “Surely, they must’ve caught the intruder coming and going.”

“The ring camera malfunctioned. The footage was lost. I checked myself.”

“I don’t buy it’s gone for good. Send the device to Cade at Cyber Crimes. He’ll be able to recover it.”

Galecki scowls, but doesn’t protest. He has no authority to even if he wanted to.

My mind reeling from the brutal crime scene, I excuse myself in search of some air. I bumble my way out of her brownstone and escape outside to the front steps. Detective Santana stands nearby on a smoke break. His eyes light up in recognition as soon as he sees me, his cigarette dangling between his lips.

“Sorry we called you in so early, ADA,” he says. Crinkle lines bracket his eyes in a way that adds five years to his age. He blows out some smoke. “They struck again. I don’t get how it happened. The detail didn’t notice a thing. Galecki was first on the scene to discover her.”

The menthol stench swirling around him doesn’t help my quest for fresh air. The chemicals make me forget the time and place. Even without the nauseating mint-flavored scent I permanently associate with my attacker, I’ve found it difficult being around any cigarettes. The smell’s too similar, too *haunting*.

“You okay, ADA?” Santana asks, frowning. “You look queasy.”

I nod. “Fine. Just... just sick of this.”

He blows smoke away from me. “That makes two of us. We can’t let this bastard get away with what he’s done.”

My phone rings and cuts his rant short. I excuse myself, frowning at the number on my screen. Not because I don’t recognize the number, but because I do recognize it—my old neighbor, Commissioner Flynn’s ex-wife, Rachel, is calling me.

I haven’t been at my apartment in over a month. What could she possibly want now?”

“Delphine, I’m so glad to hear your voice,” she says the moment I answer. “I’ve been worried about you.”

I glance around the block, double checking no one is eavesdropping. The scene is too hectic for anyone to pay attention to the ADA slipping off for a quick and private phone conversation. Detective Santana has finished his cigarette break and returned inside. The uniformed police officers still guard the brownstone against the nosy and inquisitive news reporters desperate for more info.

“Is everything okay, Rachel?”

“No. It’s not. Your apartment.”

My stomach drops. “What about it?”

“Someone came around last night. He was looking for you. I only know because of my security camera. You remember Steve thought it was a good idea I install one outside my door. I review the footage every day to make sure nobody suspicious comes around.”

“Who was it? The guy looking for me?”

“I’m not sure. But I have the footage. He came late too. Around 10 p.m. He let himself inside your apartment. It took him some effort—he had a whole set of tools with him.”

I feel sick. Sicker than I did inside the gruesome setting of Octavia’s brownstone. I stumble a couple steps toward the side of the building and use it for support.

“Do... do you know what he was doing there?”

“I wish I’d noticed in the moment. I would’ve called Steve and the police! He didn’t even bother locking up. He left the door ajar and... oh, Delphine. It’s not a pretty sight. He *destroyed* your apartment. I can send you the photos and the footage.”

Over the course of the next five minutes, Rachel Flynn does just that. She texts me the photos she took when she wandered over after noticing the door ajar, and she forwards me the security camera footage of the man breaking into my apartment.

I can’t stomach watching it anywhere else but within the safe confines of my office at city hall. I barricade myself inside with the door locked and blinds shut. Chills skim across my skin and down my spine as I watch the man crank a tool of some kind into my lock and force his way inside.

I’ve never seen him before.

The photographs are just as upsetting. Rachel wasn’t exaggerating when she said he destroyed my apartment. I’ve seen homes after a category five hurricane that have looked better. He must’ve been given orders to break every last thing he found.

But who is he and what does he want with me? Could this be yet another terrifying warning from the man who attacked me?



The rest of my afternoon is spent doing two things. The first is following up with Cade in Cyber Crimes about the lost ring camera footage of Octavia Doukas' brownstone.

"I'll see what I can do," Cade says, his fingers flying across his keyboard. "These kinds of malfunctions are usually easy to troubleshoot. And if anybody deleted something off here, I can probably recover that too."

"Do you mind looking into some other footage for me? Someone came by my apartment and broke in. This is confidential. I'd prefer for it to be kept between us."

Cade nods. "Send it to me. Unlike Doukas', if your camera was *actually* working then it's a matter of using facial recognition software to identify the guy."

I thank him for his help and return to my office at city hall. It's where I spend the rest of the afternoon consumed by the second thing—processing the bomb Rachel dropped in my lap.

An unknown man came by my apartment, forced his way inside, and destroyed the place. There didn't seem to be a rhyme or reason for what he was doing other than to wreak havoc. He was sending a message. He wanted me to know he had access to me.

Any time he wants he can come tear apart my world, like he'd done the night of my assault. That's assuming it's the

same man. If Salvatore's correct, and it's a crime family or street gang after me, it could be different men.

This guy could've been ordered to break in. The truth remains so murky it makes my head hurt.

A sigh tumbles out of me. I've avoided it long enough. I promised I'd tell Salvatore if I had information on my attacker. He answers on the second ring, though he sounds distracted.

"Phi," he says, surprise in his tone. "Everything okay?"

I hesitate for a second. "Is this a bad time?"

In the background, Stitches mentions something about a mess that's been made. Salvatore shushes him and then returns to the phone.

"Sort of," he answers vaguely. "But it depends on why you've called. You're not known to reach out in the middle of your workday."

"That's because I'm usually bombarded with case work."

"Phi, what's up?"

I waffle between unloading what I've discovered in the last few hours and waiting until I see him later in the evening. When one second too many passes, I know it's not the right time. Though he hasn't said what he and Stitches are up to, clearly it's important... and possibly deadly.

"I'll tell you later. Over dinner. Want to stay in and cook?"

"You mean *attempt* to cook?"

"We've been getting better."

"Define better."

I hang up with Salvatore and sit, conflicted, in my office chair. I could wait a few hours and tell him about what's

happened at my apartment and the security footage we have of the mystery man—*or* I can be proactive and take control of my life for the first time in weeks.

Frausto has already damaged the case we've been building against him. The Belinis are fighting as dirty as possible against being held accountable for their crimes.

Frustration bubbles up inside me as I log off my laptop for the evening. It's a snap decision. I can make a quick pitstop at my old apartment and check it out myself. Clues might have been left behind pointing to his identity. Maybe even a message intended for me.

If I wait on Salvatore, he won't let me go. He'll insist on sending his men. My security detail will make the same claim. The head of my security today, Fabio, will tell me 'Psycho' wouldn't want me going by my old apartment.

The choice is no one else's but mine to make. I have the firearm I've been carrying since I started training with Salvatore. I'm capable of doing this without a chaperone.

As the building empties and everyone log offs for the evening, discussing their plans for Halloween night, I grab the gym bag I keep in my office. I change into a hoodie, leggings, and sneakers.

There's a back exit in the city hall building that officials and other employees sometimes use in order to escape the media when they're camped outside. I'm using it to sneak off undetected from the security Salvatore has assigned me. They'll never know; city hall and the local police department are two buildings they can't follow me inside of. They're forced to sit outside throughout my workday.

Salvatore is going to be pissed. He'll be livid I've snuck off on my own. We'll certainly fight about it.

But it's the only way I can see the wreckage that's my apartment for myself. Salvatore is busy and won't be home for at least another hour or two.

"Working out tonight?" Brenda asks as we make it to the elevator together.

I humor her with a smile. "Just getting ahead of the curve. The holiday season is coming. I always get greedy on Thanksgiving."

"Me too! Except I hate working out, so I'll just become one with the extra pounds." She laughs, pressing the down button. "Chet and I are meeting up tonight. I'm giving him a second chance."

"Hopefully he's less of a fuckboy this go around."

"He better be! He says he has something important to tell me."

We part on the ground floor. Brenda leaves through the front. I hesitate a second and then turn down the corridor that leads to the rear side of the building. Erick, one of the overnight security guards, wishes me good night. He makes the same offer he did the night of my assault—he can take his break and walk me home.

"I'll be fine, but thank you."

As I enter the breezy night, my heart races. I'm nervous... but strangely excited. This is the first night since my attack I'm on my own after dark.

No Salvatore. None of his security. No Chadwick or Brenda or anyone else.

Just me.

I draw my hoodie up and set off down the side street outside the rear door, my hands buried in my pockets.

At a distance, I look nothing like myself on a normal evening after work. My neat dress clothes are gone. I'm rushing off in sneakers instead of heels or flats. No one on the street recognizes me as I head for the subway.

People dressed in costumes come out in droves. Most are on their way to a Halloween party or nightclub to celebrate the occasion. Others set up camp on sidewalks or in the underground subway station and perform music or live tricks for donations. I walk past a breakdancing Mario and Luigi on the platform and board the subway train traveling to Northam Park, my old stomping grounds.

By the time I arrive, it's begun raining. The droplets are tiny but freezing cold. I pull my hoodie tighter about myself and then journey to my high-rise building. On my way up, I encounter one of my old neighbors. Before she can trap me in tedious small talk about my day I cut in and tell her I'm in a rush.

When I make it to my floor, I slow up at the disturbing sight before me—my door sags against the frame, halfway off its hinges. It's been taped off, presumably by the building super. I had told Rachel not to involve the police. She wasn't exaggerating when she said the guy who broke in damaged my door.

I puff out a difficult breath and then force my legs to move. Inside, the apartment is no better. My belongings lay broken and discarded throughout the open-space, like my own personal junkyard. The curtains have been torn off the rods and glass from my mirrors and vases and candles litter the

floor. My sectional sofa, where I've spent so many evenings curling up to watch *Housewives of South Valley*, has been violently slashed in half.

Tears brim in my eyes when I spot Salt and Pepa's beds shredded. There's something even more disturbing about seeing their things ruined than mine. Whoever is behind this hates me so much he wanted to make my innocent pets suffer, too.

Just to hurt me through them.

Room to room I go, laying witness to the carnage. Finally, I stop in my bedroom. My clothes spill out of the open closet doors.

So far there doesn't seem to be any clues or messages left behind. Just chaos. Just pure, unfiltered *hate*.

I've always known a segment of the population hated my guts—many of them criminals who despise me for what I do—but this is yet another reality check. What happened to me the night of my assault was no fluke. It was no random attack by a faceless stranger who had no clue who I was.

This... this was all intentional.

My hand drifts up to my neck and discovers it naked. My rose necklace is long gone, yet I still reach for it. I still reach for it as if I can return to the past.

Before everything became so fucked up.

I tug off my wet hoodie and set out to right my closet. At least pick up some of the clothes off the floor. Leaving them like this would be like letting him win. I'm standing up with a heap of blouses in my arms when I'm yanked backward. I stumble into a taller, broader frame that holds me in place.

“Just what the fuck do you think you’re doing, Phi?”
Salvatore growls in my ear.

16. salvatore

. . .



“LET GO OF ME!” Delphine screams. She fights against my hold, tugging on my arm banded around her stomach.

I don’t let her go. I clench her tighter, holding her up against me. Delphine being Delphine, she always has to raise hell. Me being me, it’s one of the things I appreciate most about her. Except for times like now, where she frustrates me and makes life twice as hard as it has to be.

When I *do* release her, she wrenches herself away from me. In her rush to do so, she stumbles into the wall of the closet. Anger burns in her gaze as she glares, her chest rising and falling from her heavy, indignant breaths.

It’s a distracting sight. Being out in the rain has left her clothes soaked and sticking to her body like a second skin. Since taking off her wet hoodie, she’s only revealed her even wetter tank top—light gray fabric that’s sheerer the damper it becomes. So sheer it’s giving a preview of the bra she has on. Tiny and black with thin straps and those cups that dip low for optimal cleavage.

If I look closely enough, I can make out the shape of her breasts. I can *see* her nipples poking through. Delicious dark beads I miss having in my mouth.

But as much as I'd like to spend the moment admiring Delphine's tits, I'm pissed and so is she. The way she's looking at me, you'd think I'd threatened to throw Salt and Pepa out the fucking window.

The pulse in my neck throbs harder the more I think about what she's done. Once again, she's disobeyed and gone against our agreement. She snuck off without her assigned security detail. I knew as soon as she called something was wrong. The second she claimed it was nothing and hung up.

Stitches and I were in the middle of disposing of the dismembered pieces of Ralph Mirra's body. Even after losing several limbs, he refused to give up any more info about who he was working for, so we offed him.

I left Stitches to finish the messy job while I tailed Delphine. I followed her the whole way up to her apartment and she hadn't had a single clue.

"You going to calm down now?" I ask, my tone rough. "Or can I expect another temper tantrum?"

"You had no right to follow me... *again!*"

I take a step toward her. "I followed you because you seem to have a problem sticking to our agreement. You have no idea what you could've walked into, do you? Ever think this could've been a trap to lure you here?"

Her brows pinch together. "And if I asked you to take me? You never would've agreed!"

She's right. I would've sent some of my men. That's what they're for—scoping out potentially dangerous situations and handling them when necessary.

"There's no reason for you to be here."

“You don’t get to decide that! I had my Glock on me. I can defend myself.”

“Is that why I easily snuck up on you? I followed you the whole way here, Phi.”

Her full, heart-shaped lips press into a tight line. “I’m not arguing with you about this. I’m leaving. Don’t you *dare* follow me!”

She moves to walk past me, but I grip her shoulder and push her back against the wall. She’s not going anywhere. Certainly not alone. Clearly, she still doesn’t understand the severity of the situation and how wrong it could’ve gone.

“You’re not leaving,” I growl. “Not until you agree to never pull this shit again. I mean it, Phi. This isn’t up for debate.”

“You. Don’t. Get. To. Decide!”

Delphine loses it. A raw scream tears from her throat and she shoves at me with a level of desperation I’ve never seen out of her, trying to force me out of her way. The more immovable I prove to be, the harder she tries, throwing her whole body weight at me.

I catch her in my arms and then I restrain her. I pin her body to the wall, her arms bent on either side of her head, my hands clenched around her wrists to hold them there. A second passes where we’re glaring into each other’s eyes, our bodies pressed into each other, our breaths heavy and ragged against the tinkle of the rain outside.

Jesus Fucking Christ.

I’m hanging on by a thread. I force my eyes to remain on hers and not drop down for an appreciative look at her tits.

They feel agonizingly soft against me. Just as soft as I remember.

We're at an impasse, frustrated by the other. Neither of us are ready to back down.

I get why she's pissed, though I don't agree. She was seeking to regain control by doing something alone. Taking matters into her own hands is therapeutic for her.

That doesn't make it any less dangerous. Or me less enraged she'd take such a dumb risk.

Another moment passes and our erratic breaths calm down. I release her wrists. She drops her arms to her sides and glares at the floor.

"Why couldn't you just... stay away? You swore you would," she says, her voice strained.

I never stayed away. You just thought I did.

"I'll give you your space once we catch whoever attacked you."

"Don't bullshit me. You reappearing in my life has been some power play. That's all you care about. Taking over my life. Pretending to care. Getting to control me again."

I scowl. "None of this is pretend, Phi."

The thread I've been hanging on by is about to snap. I've been a gentleman. I've been respectful. She should count her lucky stars I haven't taken advantage when I easily could've on multiple occasions.

I plant a hand on the wall beside her head and lean closer. My gaze studies her face, the features I know so well—her dark almond-shaped eyes and supple heart-shaped lips and the small, round nose that centers her face. She has a beauty mark

on the lower lefthand side of her jaw. Every last detail comes together to make Delphine the beautiful woman she is.

Mine.

Mine.

MINE.

“What are you doing?” she asks as I loom closer. Her lips part, watching me watch her. “Let me go, Salvatore. I’m done with your mind games.”

“Who says I’m playing mind games?”

She swallows almost audibly. “Whatever... whatever this is, it’s not about us. It’s not about you wanting me. It’s about whatever ulterior motive you have.”

Wrong. Almost everything I do is about you.

I lean in, my body fully trapping hers against the wall, and I don’t bother hiding the fact that my breathing goes ragged. I’m drawing in a deep inhale of her. My head dips low so I can indulge in the pulse point at her neck.

From there I let my lips ghost across her jaw—the little beauty mark I mentioned earlier and have perfectly memorized—and I skim my way up to her ear. She’s gone still, unsure of how to react.

She really doesn’t get it. So smart yet so in denial.

I’ve deprived myself for many years. For over a decade. She has no fucking clue. She has the audacity to be indignant and complain. The *audacity* to exist in my world, in my god damn loft in her tiny robe with her soft brown eyes and softer brown skin, and she doesn’t even realize I’ve wanted her every single moment.

“If you had any idea... how much I want you,” I whisper in her ear. “You couldn’t handle it.”

My eyes close as I savor the scent of her. For twelve long years I had to go without. Just the remnants of her on mementos I had collected from our time together.

Now I have her all to myself. Even with the smell of the rain all over us, I can pick up on the distinct notes of her scent.

Light and feminine in the most intoxicating way.

I’ve jerked off to this scent countless times...

An obsessed psycho like me, I become a dog interacting with his favorite chew toy.

“Salvatore,” she breathes.

“Phi, tell me what you want from me.”

“I’ve told you. I want you to go. I want you to leave me alone.”

“No, you don’t.”

Her hands come to my chest to try and push me off. “Excuse me? You don’t know what I want!”

“I know you better than you know yourself.”

Her fight returns as she shoves at my chest. She shifts her body to try and get around me, but I’m not letting her go anywhere. I grab her arms and our struggle becomes an intense dance of twisting and turning. Her growl and her pants, and my grin as I pin her back against the wall.

She stares up at me in shock, the look in her eyes difficult to read.

Either she’s incredibly turned on or incredibly pissed off. Probably both.

I move in, my grip tight on her wrists. I bend my head and line my mouth up with hers, but I don't kiss her.

As always, I want to hear the words.

“What do you want, Phi? Tell me what you need.”

The next sound to leave her can only be described as an impatient whine. It's a noise that expresses frustration and confusion at the same time, like she's incapable of doing what I ask.

“You know the rules,” I taunt. “You know what I want to hear.”

“Salvatore...” She pauses for a shaky intake of breath, on the tipping point of making up her mind. “I want... I *need* you to make me feel good.”

That's all I was waiting for. I grab her face, filling my large palms with her cheeks, and I plant a deep kiss on her. The second our lips touch, it's a volcanic eruption.

Pent up tension and molten heat exploding all at once.

The air rips from our lungs and we kiss hungrily, like we're each other's last meal. The world is ending tomorrow and there's no time left to waste. It might as well be, the way we're devouring each other.

We begin tearing at clothes and groping body parts.

I wrest Delphine's tank top off and shove down her yoga pants. Her panties are dragged along with them. She gasps and breaks away from my mouth for the briefest second. Shock flits across her face before desire takes over again and she smashes her lips to mine.

If possible, they've gotten even softer than the last time we kissed. Softer than any other lips I've ever felt.

Sweeter, too.

Kissing has always been her thing. She moans and pants as we do, begging for more. My tongue runs across the pouty seam of her lips and teases its way into her mouth. I kiss her like she likes, so passionately she shudders against me.

Meanwhile, I feel her up. I squeeze her breasts in my grip and then I slide my hand between her soft thighs. Her pussy is plump and soaked with her arousal. Wet and hot for me just like always.

Throbbing for me like always. I can feel it against the palm of my hand like a fucking heartbeat. I groan and realize I can't go without for much longer.

Many years ago, I claimed Delphine as mine. Tonight, I'm doing it again.

"You want me to fuck you?" I growl, rubbing her pussy. "You want me to make you feel good?"

"Yes!" she breathes, her eyes clenched shut. Her thighs quake around my hand and her pussy throbs harder the more I play with her. "Yes, Salvatore. Fuck me... please..."

"Are you going to follow the rules? Are you going to behave yourself?"

She moans as I fondle her clit. "Salvatore..."

I bite her neck and slip two fingers into her soaked pussy. "Tell me, Phi. Are you going to be good and obey, or are you going to be bad and make me punish you?"

"Good..." She clutches onto me and shivers, unable to finish her train of thought.

I've never pulled my dick out faster. In a split second I've got it out and I'm stroking myself. My dick is harder than

titanium, twitching in my grasp. It's letting me know how desperate it is to be inside her already.

Delphine jumps onto me and wraps her legs around my waist when I hoist her up. I slide into her almost at the same time. Her tight heat engulfs me, and I groan out a string of curse words.

“Fucking hell, Phi. Your fucking pussy. It's god damn torture. So god damn good,” I swear. My breathing goes ragged and I grit my teeth to maintain some level of control.

She feels so good, it's enough to turn me into a feral beast. Warmth floods through me, burning in my veins. Not even a minute inside her and I can already feel the beginnings of my release. It's tingling at the base of my spine and welling up inside my balls.

How the fuck did I go twelve years without this pussy?

No other one is like it. No other woman is like Delphine.

I cant her hips at an angle that allows for deeper penetration and draw my hips back. I sink back into her, bottoming out to her gasp. She clamps down on my dick and I lose it. My body reacts on its own, listening to my most uncivilized instincts—the urge to fuck the shit out of her.

I begin pumping into her. Hard and unrelenting, my hips jerk into her. My dick forces its way deeper inside her clenching pussy.

Delphine slides up and down the closet wall from the power of my thrusts. Only my hands gripping her hips keep her in place.

Her eyes roll to the ceiling and her teeth catch her bottom lip. She tries to hold in the whimper desperate to be set free. Instead, it sounds like a strangled mewl in her throat. She

tightens her legs around me and presses the heels of her feet into my ass.

Presses my dick *deeper* into her. She wants more. She wants it rough.

I grunt and grant her wish. I drill into her harder until she can't hold in her whimpers anymore. It turns into a full blown, breathless scream. Soon she's delirious, babbling as she tells me how my thick cock feels so good in her little pussy and how she doesn't care who knows she's a naughty slut for me. The kind of language that would make a sailor blush.

It's so fucking hot it only spurs me on.

Her pussy flutters around my dick. She's hot and gushing wet at the same time, teetering on the edge of her orgasm. It's written all over her face.

I hold her up, peeling her off the closet wall, and wrenching her to my mouth for a kiss.

With the wall no longer being used as a prop, it's all on me. I balance her weight in my arms and bounce her on my dick. She clings to me with arms and legs banded around my neck and waist. The feel of her soft body pressed against mine as I slide her up and down on my dick is enough to make me spiral.

I pump into her harder, kissing her harder too. We almost come at the same time—a talent we perfected years ago during our relationship. Our bodies were so in sync we were able to react off the other and let go together.

Turns out, we've never lost that connection.

“Yes! Salvatore... oh fuck!”

With my name on her full lips, Delphine clenches my cock and orgasms. It's the final push needed to knock me over the edge. I tighten my arm around her and piston into her until I've buried myself as deep as I can go in her sweet, soaked pussy. Then I come, flooding her with the evidence she's mine.

The most primal way I can mark her and let her know.

M-I-N-E.

We were so caught up in each other, we didn't talk about protection, or where I was and wasn't allowed to come.

But right now it doesn't matter. Neither of us care as we pant and kiss, still lost in the moment.

Pleasure blasts through me like a violent tidal wave. It surfs down my spine and explodes from my dick and balls. My whole body, right down to my bones, feels like it's buzzing. Stronger than ever and weaker than ever at the same time.

I might as well see fucking shooting stars and spaceships. That's how lost I am and how powerful this orgasm is. I don't think I've ever had one as powerful as this.

When the wave of pleasure passes, I become aware of the fact that I'm squeezing Delphine into me. I might as well be suffocating her with how I'm holding her, crushed up against my chest. I set her down and focus on catching my breath.

She backs up against the wall on wobbly legs. The look on her face is as dazed as I feel.

We're a fucking mess—half dressed in soaked clothes, slicked with sweat, glossed over eyes, barely able to breathe. I slide my fingers through my hair, still damp from the rain, and I buckle my pants.

“Here,” I say, picking up her discarded yoga pants. Her panties I keep. Another trophy for the collection. The first pair in twelve years.

“We just...” she trails off. Her eyes widen, meeting mine.

She looks so damn beautiful like this. Even against the wrecked backdrop of her apartment closet, with her curls wet and not a stitch of make up on, the most beautiful and sexiest woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.

The woman I’m infatuated with, and have been for almost half my life.

“We did,” I say, stepping closer. I pick up the first dry sweater in the pile of her clothes and slide it over her.

“This doesn’t change that you spied on me. That you followed me.”

“The security’s still not up for debate, Phi. But you’re right about why you’re doing what you’re doing.” I pause long enough to stare in amusement as she frowns up at me. She wasn’t expecting me to agree with her. “You want revenge? You want to make the guy who hurt you pay for what he did?”

Slowly, hesitantly, she nods. “I want him to suffer. I want him *dead*. I’ve... I’ve never wanted anything more.”

I cup her cheek and peer into her eyes. The atmosphere around us darkens, leaden with bloodlust that for once isn’t mine alone. She’s serious—she needs closure for what happened to her, and she needs it by causing the same pain and suffering done to her.

I get it more than you know.

“We’re going to get him, Phi,” I say. “Together. That’s the rule. Alright? We do this together.”

The gleam in her eye is one I've seen in rare moments from her; the same gleam I'm not sure anyone else has ever noticed. Nobody's ever seen it in her like I have.

Her bad side.

She nods and whispers, "*Together.*"

17. delphine

. . .



“**WE NEED** to figure out how we’re going to do this,” I say the next morning. I’m perched on one of Salvatore’s kitchen stools. Two mugs of coffee sit on the island counter. One for me. The other for him.

He scratches his head, still half asleep as he pads into the kitchen shirtless, in only his sweatpants. “Phi, I’ve been up for five seconds. I’ve no clue what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“This...” I gesture between us. “You said we’d handle it as a team.”

“I might’ve been speaking out of my ass.”

My right brow ticks up. “As in?”

“Phi, I had just got done getting laid. I wasn’t in the right frame of mind.”

“Is that your way of saying you were telling me what I wanted to hear?”

“It means I probably would’ve agreed to chopping one of my ears off if it meant getting to be inside you.”

Heat flames over my skin, though I hold my ground. “Some things really never do change. I can always count on you to be crass.”

“You call it crass. I call it honesty.” He shrugs and picks up the mug I’ve set out for him. He swallows a couple greedy mouthfuls, his fingers finding his hair. Normally so sleek and slicked back, the cowlick has returned with a vengeance after a night’s sleep. “Look, Phi, you want to make this guy suffer. You want revenge. I told you, I get it.”

“Then why do you treat me like I’m made of glass? I can handle myself.”

“That’s not what I’m doing—”

“I’m going to get revenge regardless of your attempt to stop me.”

A scowl fixes itself onto his face. “It’d be a lot easier if you’d listen.”

“You should know nothing about me is easy... or ever has been.” I abandon my coffee mug on the kitchen island and spin toward the hall leading to my room.

On my way past, Salvatore catches my arm and holds me back. Even after last night, his touch elicits a fresh current of desire through my body. I can still feel him inside me; I can still hear the sounds of our breathless moans to the backdrop of the rain.

This morning I woke up sore, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

Salvatore is a lot of bad things, but his touch has always been good—*wanted*.

After what I’ve been through, it means the world.

“Phi,” he says, easing me back by the arm. “I still don’t know what we’re dealing with. You seem to think this is some guy off the street.”

“You seem to think it’s not. Care to explain why?”

He husks out a deep breath. “I can’t tell you the full story. But I have reason to believe someone was targeting you—a lot happened the night of your attack. The guy who broke into your apartment was probably *hired* to do so. Who have you pissed off lately?”

“I can fill up a book with names. Pissing people off is part of the job as ADA.”

“You know who I’m talking about.”

“The Belinis?”

“I’m looking into it. It’s complicated.” He lets go of my arm and returns to his coffee. “Now will you stand down?”

“No,” I answer. “Salvatore, I don’t care who it is. *I* want to handle it myself.”

He peers at me for a long moment, his sun-in-his-eyes squint returning. “Does that mean you’re not going to ditch my security anymore?”

“Yes.”

“And, should a situation arise where we do find out who it is, you’re not going to try and confront this guy without me?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll wait ’til I look into the guy who broke into your apartment before doing anything?”

“Also yes.”

“What’s the catch?”

“You don’t hide anything from me. I want to know what you know. I want to do it myself.”

His jaw clenches. “I hope you don’t mean what I think you do.”

“I want him to suffer, Salvatore. But I want to be the one who decides how. That’s *my* right.”

He takes so long to give me his answer that I don’t think it’s what I’m hoping for. He chugs the last of his coffee and moves into the kitchen to pour a second cup. I follow him with my eyes, my heart beating fast despite how still I’m standing.

If he doesn’t agree, then I’ll be packing my bags and leaving. As appreciative as I am of his help so far, I can’t let him take over this fight.

It’s bad enough last night we got carried away and lines blurred more than ever.

Another can of worms I’m avoiding addressing—we haven’t discussed what it means. Exes relapse all the time. We’ve been living together for weeks. It was bound to happen.

Yet now that I’ve slept with Salvatore again, I’m not sure I have enough self-control for it to be a fluke. I’ve started craving a second round... and more.

“Salvatore,” I say, refocusing on the matter at hand. “Do we have a deal?”

“I’m guessing you’ll pack your bags if we don’t.”

I smirk. “You know me well.”

“That’s how obsessions tend to work.”

My heart ticks an extra beat. Last night Salvatore made a confession I wasn’t expecting—he alluded to being infatuated with me. Maybe more than I’ve ever comprehended. All I know is his words had diluted my anger and made me want nothing more in the moment than to feel his skin on my skin.

I'd given into him.

"Alright," he says suddenly after a stretch of silence. He reaches for my mug and re-ups me on coffee. "We'll give it a try, Phi. But if you try and sneak off again—"

"You'll what, Jon?" I can't stop myself from challenging him with a wider smirk.

He *laughs*. He rubs his bearded jaw, a gleam in his gaze. I can almost see the thoughts unfolding in his head. I can hear them too—they're not exactly PG.

"You don't want to know. It'll make last night look like a holy afternoon at church." He abandons the kitchen counter and starts for the hallway. "We'll talk more about this tonight over dinner."

Before I can accept his invite, he's gone. I'm left blinking after him. Salvatore just assumed we'll be having dinner together as though we're any other couple.

With a shake of my head, I bring my mug to my lips. "I guess I know what I'm doing tonight."



We decide on pizza. Not my favorite, but neither of us feel like cooking after a long day. Mine was spent reworking the case we're building against Frausto. Salvatore's day remains a mystery as he returns to the loft, but he heads straight to the bathroom for a shower. I catch blood stains on his clothes.

When he emerges from the cloud of hot steam, fresh and clean in sweats and a Henley, we argue over what pizza to order. I contend that pineapple is a perfectly acceptable choice

for a pizza topping while he accuses me of committing a crime.

“Says the man who came home with blood on his pants,” I snort.

“Better than defiling a pizza with pineapple.”

I roll my eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

Salvatore’s deadpan, expressionless face tells me that he is. It earns another disbelieving laugh out of me. I skim over the collection of random pizza ads he had in his kitchen drawer and grab my phone.

“By the way, defiling is a *little* bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Phi, don’t put pineapple on that pizza.”

I challenge him with an amused stare. “Or else what?”

“Do we really want to play that game?” He comes up from behind me and grips my hips. His hold is firm and possessive as he threatens to pull me against him.

I suck in a breath and lose any train of thought.

The number I’ve dialed picks up not even a second later. “Slice of Italia Pizzeria. Always tasty, never greasy. How may I help you?”

My brain is blank. For the first few seconds, I stammer on answering.

Fucking Salvatore.

He hasn’t let go of my hips. He’s pressed himself against me, his lips dangerously close to the spot on my neck that makes me come undone.

I swallow hard. “Err... I’d like a large pizza. Are you able to do half pepperoni, half pineapple—ahhh!”

A squeal leaves me as Salvatore smacks a hand to my ass. I can feel him grinning behind me. His grip on my hips only tightens. He draws my ass toward him until I’m perched on his groin—which is rapidly hardening.

I don’t know how I make it through the rest of the order. Between Salvatore kissing my neck and squeezing my hips and his dick going hard behind me, by the time we hang up, I’m hot and flustered. I spin around and shove at his chest.

“That was cruel and unusual!”

“The punishment fit the crime. I told you no pineapples.” He rasps out a laugh at my death glare and then gestures to Salt and Pepa, who have taken up camp on a shelf of his entertainment console. “What about these two? You didn’t even order them a mini pizza with anchovies.”

It could be a coincidence, but Salt chooses now to meow.

Traitor.

The rest of the evening remains low-key and private. Salvatore updates me on what his crew have discovered on the guy who broke into my apartment.

“Isaac Azeria. Thirty-nine. Divorced. One kid. Construction worker. He has a rap sheet—three prior convictions on robbery and one for sex with a minor.”

“I’ve never heard of that man in my life. What does he want with me?”

“He doesn’t want anything from you—this is what I mean when I say he was hired. Sometimes, crime families hire outside guys to complete a job,” Salvatore explains. “We call

them street guys. Just guys off the street we hire as an extra layer of protection. Makes it harder to trace back to us.”

“Associates.”

“Right. *Associates* if you want to be formal. Azeria was most likely hired by somebody bigger and more powerful looking to cover their ass.”

I blow a wary breath. “Probably Giorgio Belini... or maybe even Frausto. I’ve been building my case against him and he had my star witness murdered.”

“I’m going to handle it.” Salvatore stops there, as if it’s enough to silence my fears.

For the time being I let it.

When night falls, we don’t even bother pretending I’ll be sleeping in my bedroom. He seizes me and plants a deep kiss on my mouth. Within seconds, I’m being tossed onto his bed and then bombarded with more passionate kisses from him.

We’re avoiding the talk. Fine by me. Salvatore, being a man of few words, doesn’t seem keen on it either. He does insist I bring anything I need to his room, like my toothbrush and cleanser.

“Medicine cabinet’s almost empty anyway,” he says, shrugging.

I smirk, my heart beating faster with a dangerous level of fondness.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This couldn’t feel more like the past. I’d moved into his room then, too. Whatever this is between us may only be temporary—much like last time—but it feels good. So good, a real part of me doesn’t want it to end.

I take longer than him preparing for bed. Whereas I have fifteen steps in my nightly routine, he has three tops. He looks up from where he sits on the bed when I emerge from the bathroom with a coy smirk.

He tilts his head to the side and asks, “What’s that look for?”

“I was thinking about before. That summer I practically moved into your place.”

“And defied your father.”

“You gave me the courage to do it,” I say with a light laugh. I plod over in my leggings and long-sleeve shirt, my curls already wrapped up for the night. It’s not the sexiest ensemble, but the fall season has been colder than usual.

The layers don’t deter Salvatore. His gaze rakes over me, pausing on the sleek fit of my leggings and how they hug my hips and thighs, and he pulls me onto the bed as soon as I’m close enough.

He plants a kiss on my jaw, his arms wrapping around me. “You know I used to be waiting for him to break the door down.”

“You’re serious?”

“I expected him to arrive with a SWAT team. They’d come in with guns drawn. Maybe a chopper outside with a spotlight so I couldn’t get away. I’d be handcuffed and taken into the station.”

I laugh and slap a hand to his chest. “You should write for a nighttime drama. I’d watch that episode.”

“Have you met your father? He hated my guts. He didn’t want me tainting his precious baby girl.”

“You’ve done a lot of things to me—most of them I’ve enjoyed and some of them bad, like breaking my heart twice—but *taint* is a stretch.”

“Your father doesn’t have the highest opinion of me.”

I don’t bother correcting him; he’s right. Dad hates Salvatore’s guts. Even after all these years. He may not be after him like he was when he was district attorney, but it’s a grudge he’s never going to let go in his lifetime.

“Lucky for you, I’m a grown woman now and I make my own decisions.”

Salvatore grips my chin and drops a kiss on my lips. “Your father’s opinion still means a lot to you.”

True.

“I’m staying with you right now,” I say. “What he thinks doesn’t matter. He doesn’t even know about... this.”

“Are you going to tell him? About what happened?”

I rattle out a breath and think on it. “No. I don’t want him to know. He’d... he’d raise hell. His reaction would be your reaction, but replace the mafia with the ire of the entire Northam police force. I wouldn’t be surprised if he came out of retirement just to handle the situation.”

“That might be the one time he and I are on the same side—destroying the piece of shit who hurt you.”

“You and he are a lot more alike than you realize.”

Salvatore’s brow furrows in offense. “I wouldn’t go that far. We’re both protective of you. The similarities end there.”

“I used to have a dream where you finally made peace. You guys reached a truce... and we had a family dinner.”

“Phi, that’s never happening. That’s why it was a dream.”

I don’t object as we finish settling in for bed. We dim the lights and slip under the covers, watching TV until we fall asleep. In the back of my mind I’m thinking more about how good it feels to lay beside Salvatore.

And how soon, once we get revenge on my attacker, it’s all going to come to an end.

We’ll be over.

For good.



Judge Ortiz calls an emergency hearing first thing Monday morning. I show up to the courtroom alongside Brenda, prepared to argue against whatever the reason is for the hearing to have been called. Giorgio Belini and his team of lawyers take their seats at the defense table, watching us with interest. Almost arrogance.

Interesting considering they’re on the losing side. I’m guessing they’ve managed to convince Ortiz to delay the sentencing again.

Giorgio Belini can’t take his eyes off me. He follows my every move with an almost fanatical gleam, evoking a flutter of nerves in my stomach. I ignore him and the nerves and concentrate on being as sharp as possible.

“Thank you for joining me here today,” Judge Ortiz says from his towering booth. He speaks in his usual monotone, his half-moon glasses low on his bulbous nose. “This trial has been a harrowing experience for all involved. It has been of particular interest for the public and followed closely by

national media. As the judge presiding over this case, it has been of utmost importance that I ensure a fair and speedy trial for the accused.”

My brows knit as I glance from Judge Ortiz to the defense side. The expressions on the faces of his lawyers read even more arrogant. Belini’s not even looking ahead like the rest of them—he’s still looking right at me.

The nerves inside me deepen, roiling incessantly until I have a stomachache. I tear my attention from the defense table and refocus on Judge Ortiz. At my side, Brenda’s practically hovering in her seat, about to blurt out a question.

“It is without a doubt this is a rare and unique circumstance that may cause a shockwave, but the constitutional rights of the accused must be upheld as much as for any law-abiding citizen. It is with this in mind, that I have carefully reviewed the defense’s motion to appeal, and I have decided to throw out the conviction.”

“What?!” I gasp before I can stop myself. I’m on my feet, approaching the bench without permission. “Your honor, you can’t possibly—he was found guilty on the count of first-degree murder!”

“And it has been revealed that the evidence used to prosecute him was improperly handled by Northam PD,” Judge Ortiz says coldly.

“The evidence placing Giorgio Belini at the scene of Pete Schmidt’s murder was direct! We have security camera footage and eye witness testimony to corroborate what happened.”

“Substantive documentation has been submitted to the court as proof that Northam PD mishandled the evidence in

this case, Ms. Adams. The charges brought against him are barred from any future prosecution regardless of the accused's innocence."

"You've been bought," I say, shock pinging through me. I shake my head. "That's the only explanation. You've been bought like the rest!"

"Ms. Adams, calm yourself, or you will be held in contempt!"

The bailiff inches closer as if ready to restrain me should Ortiz order it. I back off, so thrown by this turn of events, I can't even present another argument. I blink and open my mouth, but no other coherent words come out.

How is this possible!?

Giorgio Belini's grinning ear to ear. I know it before I even glance in his direction.

When I do, he winks at me, holding up his thumb and index finger to imitate a gun. He makes the bang motion like his gun goes off and my pounding heart lodges itself in my throat.

"Your honor, the defendant just made a threatening motion to Ms. Adams!" Brenda cries out, pointing across the room at the defense table. "He just made a visible threat against her!"

Belini's defense team erupts in protests, arguing Brenda misconstrued his gesture, and is interrupting the hearing with irrelevant dramatics.

"Order!" Judge Ortiz shouts, banging his gavel. "I said order!"

But I'm no longer listening. I'm no longer able to even breathe. My stomach churns and I gasp for breath. I'm having

a panic attack. I rush toward the double doors, leaving the courtroom behind.

This feels like some kind of nightmare. Giorgio Belini's about to be released onto the streets and he'll be after me more than ever. If he was behind my assault, then it looks like the worst is yet to come.

18. delphine

. . .



I GO to the only place I can that'll guarantee me some alone time. The sky grays above me as I kneel in front of Mom's grave and let out the frustration and panic that took hold of me in the courthouse. It pours out in the form of an angry, strangled cry, my eyes blurring with tears.

I've never lost my cool in the courtroom like that before. Even when convictions have been overturned, or the defense has won an appeal, I've always managed to stay calm and collected. Dad once told me to never show my hand. Never let the opposition see me sweat.

People will judge me twice as hard. It's vital I stay on my best game.

But like with so many other things as of late, I've failed. My life has continued to run off the rails. I've lost control and become an emotional wreck.

Just when I think I've gotten better, something uproots my world, and throws me off. I'm knocked back to square one.

While Dad's always told me to stay strong, Mom would've told me it's okay. I'm only human.

We all fall down sometimes.

Her voice almost sounds real. Warm with affection and slow with patience, she'd pair it with a smile and stroke of my hair. Even the memory of her doing so calms me down. My lungs inhale their first real breath since the courthouse.

I wipe at my eyes and replace the last bouquet of flowers left on her grave with fresh ones.

“Don't worry,” I whisper. “I'm going to get justice for us.”

... no matter what I have to do.



Salvatore is waiting for me when I walk through the front door of the loft. My dejected mood makes it difficult to even meet his eyes. I plod into the living room in a dazed state, feeling out of sync with myself. My mind is operating separate of my body. I barely remember leaving the cemetery with my security let alone my ride up the elevator and down the hall.

“Phi,” Salvatore says as I pass him by. “You okay? I heard about the conviction being overturned.”

“I'm fine. Judge Ortiz has been bought. I can't say I'm surprised—so has everyone in this corrupt city.”

My voice trembles with each word. I produce a mocking laugh that sounds borderline delirious. It ends with a sputter for air as my breath runs short and my lungs stop working. I swipe at the tears that have chosen the worst time to spring themselves on me; the least they could do was wait until I was alone in my room.

I stumble over myself in my hurry to make it there. My ankle twists in the heels I'm wearing and my arms shoot out to balance myself.

Salvatore comes up from behind, his hand steadying me. He's like a pillar of safety and security without even meaning to be. A part of me desperately yearns to lean into him and let him play that role for me. The one he's so often occupied—my protector.

My savior.

Instead, I push off of him and put distance between us. My heart drums hard in my chest as I plant my elbows on the island counter and drop my face into my hands.

I need a moment. I need... I don't even know anymore.

In just a few short weeks, my once unwavering belief system has come crashing down. I've spent my whole life believing in the rule of law when it means nothing at the end of the day. The city will never heal because those at the top don't want it to; they'd rather profit off of the crime and corruption.

They'd rather line their pockets and turn the other cheek.

I thought I could change things if I fought hard enough. I thought I could make the city safer and a better place. *How* had Dad lasted as long as he did when the system is so incredibly broken?

Maybe I'm not strong enough...

"You're right," Salvatore says, drawing me out of my thoughts. "About Ortiz. About everyone. They've all got a price."

Something about hearing him acknowledge this truth makes me feel *marginally* better. At least I'm not crazy; he can see it too. The way everyone had gawked at me earlier as I yelled at Judge Ortiz made me feel that way.

“I lost my cool today in the courtroom. I yelled. I ran out.”

Salvatore pauses. “I heard about that too.”

“Giorgio knew. You should’ve seen him. The smugness was all over his face. All of their faces.”

“No surprise there. Hector wasn’t going to let his little brother get locked up.”

“He pointed a finger gun at me. Bang, bang.” Another delirious laugh bubbles out of me as I drop my hands from my face and stand up straight. “Maybe you’re right. It was him. They’re going to shoot me next.”

Salvatore wrenches me around. “That’s not something to joke about. They’re not coming anywhere near you. I told you last night I’d handle it. Tomorrow this is going to come to an end. No more games.”

“What are you going to do? Jon, you’re already taking on your father—”

“So what? I can multitask.”

A third laugh escapes me. This one is less cynical and dark. Lighter.

Salvatore picks up on the change. His hand touches the small of my back and he guides me to one of the kitchen stools. “Sit,” he says. “I’ll pour you a glass of wine. You need something to take the edge off.”

I don’t argue him on it. A glass or two is exactly what I need.

“Thanks,” I mumble when he slides a full glass of red wine across the island counter. I chug half of it and let the tart berry-flavor dance across my tongue.

“You hungry? I’m guessing you don’t want to go out and deal with people.”

I shake my head. “Not right now. I’m a mess.”

Salvatore closes the gap between us. His fingers skim across my cheek and curve the shell of my ear, pushing strands of my straightened hair away from my face. His gaze connects with mine, the swirl of deep blue and green making me lose any train of thought.

“You could never be a mess, Phi. They didn’t break you. You’re still in one piece. You’re still here.”

“I... I think I needed to hear that right now.”

We set to making dinner. Tonight it’s pan-seared filet mignon with red wine sauce and roasted potatoes. We naturally slip into complimentary roles as I prep the potatoes and red wine sauce and Salvatore takes on the filet mignon.

Salt and Pepa slink out from their hiding spots in my room and perch themselves on one of the shelves of Salvatore’s entertainment center. In the open floor plan of Salvatore’s large loft, it affords them the perfect vantage point where they can observe us.

“Looks like we have chaperones.” Salvatore opens the pantry and grabs a can of tuna.

I stay put in the kitchen as a slow smirk comes to my face and I watch him make his offering. Salt and Pepa hop down and curiously approach the plate of tuna he sets down. When he returns, he tilts his head at me in question.

“You said you’re not a cat person.”

He shrugs. “They’re not so bad.”

“Let me find out you secretly *like* Salt and Pepa.” I refill our glasses of wine and then gesture to the filets. “You’re up, chef.”

“You’re not getting off so easily.”

I yelp in surprise as Salvatore grabs me and pulls me toward him. We prepare the filets and place them carefully in the heated pan. The kitchen fills with the noise of them sizzling. With the potatoes roasting in the oven, it feels like we might *finally* cook a meal we’d be willing to serve to others.

“We’re getting better,” I say, plucking up my wine glass.

“All it took was almost burning down the kitchen a couple dozen times.”

I choke on my wine. “We weren’t that bad!”

“Phi, we set off the smoke alarm so many times, the factory across the street complained.”

“They did not!”

“Might as well. Every set of dinner rolls you tried to make came out covered in charcoal.” He grins as he picks up his own glass of wine and swallows a mouthful.

“And you wonder why I throw them at you!”

We spend the rest of the time in the kitchen accusing each other of being the worse cook until I’ve forgotten all about the anxiety and frustration that was plaguing me. The wine helps to lighten my mood, loosening the tightness in my body.

“You should take some time off,” Salvatore says. “The holidays are coming up. You have to have personal days saved up.”

My mouth quirks with curiosity. “How would you know?”

“Because I know you. You’re obsessed with your career.”

“Says the guy who ditched school at age seventeen to be trained at his nightclub.”

“It wasn’t my club yet.”

“Point still stands.”

He looks across the counter at me as he uses his knife to expertly slice into his slab of bloody steak. “Me being obsessed with my work doesn’t make you any less obsessed with yours.”

“You know what?” I sip more wine and shake my head. The tipsiness has definitely settled in, making my skin warmer. “You’re right. I *am* obsessed with my career. The same way I was obsessed with earning perfect marks in school. I’m the last person at city hall every night. Even the cleaning crew leaves before me.”

He rips his piece of filet mignon off his fork, chews, then swallows. “The first step is admitting you have a problem.”

“Better late than never. I guess that’s why all my relationships have failed.”

Salvatore is an expert at the non-reaction reaction—his expression stays composed most times no matter what the topic of the conversation is. But in our years of knowing each other, I’ve learned how to decipher the context clues he gives.

The twitch of his cheek and set of his jaw. The subtlest flash in his eyes. Even the inflection in his normally rough, unemotional voice.

When I mention my failed relationships, he’s immediately pissed. His grip on his knife and fork tighten and the muscle in his jaw bounces as he chews on another bite of his steak. I

shouldn't be surprised; he never hid how territorial he was during our relationship. At one point he even threatened my favorite college professor, claiming he was a pervert (he turned out to be right. Professor Parsons *was* often inappropriate with female students. Myself included).

I'm about to change the subject when he finally responds.

"Their loss."

"What about you?"

His left brow slightly rises. "What about me?"

I shrug. "You broke up with me."

"Is that how it went? I'd say it was the other way around. You didn't want to go on your birthday trip."

"Because you were being a possessive ass."

"I'm always an ass. You should've already been used to it."

I open my mouth to counter him and then release a short laugh. He's *teasing* me. I know, because as our gazes meet, there's the faintest curl to the corner of his mouth. If we'd cooked dinner rolls tonight, I'd fling one at him.

"Okay, it was mutual," I say. "But maybe we shouldn't drudge up what happened. It was probably best it ended when it did."

"I'm sure your father celebrated."

"He was relieved, yes."

Salvatore tosses his dinner napkin onto his empty plate and pierces me with another intense stare. "What about the others—your other relationships?"

“I was engaged. That didn’t work out. He broke things off pretty much out of the blue. But I’m grateful he did and didn’t wait long into our engagement... or even worse, into our marriage.”

“He was a prick.”

“You’ve never met him!” I roll my eyes and give off an incredulous laugh.

“I know he was. Probably wore monogrammed pocket squares and did the Sunday crossword puzzle.”

“Yes to the Sunday crossword. No to the pocket squares. He preferred unmonogrammed.”

“That’s so much better,” he says, dripping with sarcasm.

“You’re lucky you cooked a damn good steak and fed me so much wine, or I might be pissed you’re making fun of my love life. You never answered my question earlier. What about you—tell me about the exes.”

“Starts and ends with you,” he says simply. He gets up off the stool and carries our empty plates to the sink.

I slide off my stool and follow. “Wait... you expect me to believe you’ve been single for twelve years?”

“If you’re asking if I’ve been involved with other women, there have been others. No relationships.”

A tinge of curiosity flutters inside me. It shouldn’t surprise me to know Salvatore hasn’t been in any other serious relationships; he was always open about his disdain for them. Why he’d ever made an exception for me, I’m still not sure to this day.

Of course he’d return to his routine of being involved with women for sex only. No strings attached. Zero feelings

involved.

“What? You got quiet,” he says when I don’t respond. He plucks my empty wine glass off the counter and pours some more. “I don’t have the range for a real relationship.”

“Not surprised you didn’t have any... but also, you do so have the range for a relationship. You pretend you don’t but you do.”

I turn my back on him, walking out of the kitchen. After a beat passes, he follows. The mood between us shifts into another one of our cat-and-mouse games, where I go on the run and he catches me.

He tracks me down to the large window along the back wall of the loft. I can feel his presence before he reflects in the glass, looming over me like a dark and menacing vortex about to draw me into itself.

It’s too late the second his hands cup my shoulders from behind and he eases me around. My gaze flicks up to meet the swirl of blues and greens in his. Engrossing enough for me to spend several seconds swimming in them.

Salvatore entertains himself by playing with my hair. He reaches up and twines a few of my straightened stands around his fingers. Almost as though he’s about to pull, and hard, but then he lets go. Slow and purposeful, the pads of his fingers drift along the side of my neck.

He’s standing so close, his touch so intimate, I tune into him. I’m hyperaware of every last move he makes, holding my breath in anticipation of more.

He touches the small divot at the base of my throat where my rose pendant would be. Flush against my chest. Hanging from my neck. Gone after that night.

“You miss it, don’t you?”

I swallow and then nod. “Yes. It’s almost...”

“What, Phi? Tell me.”

“It’s almost like he knew—whoever he was—that taking it away would be a punishment.”

Salvatore spends another moment staring at the hollow of my throat. His expression might as well be cut from steel, no sign of emotion anywhere on his face. But then, just when I think he won’t say anything, he does.

“I’ll get it back.”

Four simple words that make the anxiety recede inside my chest. Four short words that have the power to make me feel closer to someone than I’ve ever felt.

In his own way, it’s a declaration of his feelings, too. Only he would make such a promise. Only he would destroy the city to keep it.

Salvatore said he doesn’t have the range for relationships, but he couldn’t be more wrong. The man he is with me cares more than anyone else in the world—with everything he has.

But that revelation is far too puzzling and terrifying, so I bury it deep. We haven’t even figured out what we’re doing. Who and what we are to each other.

It’s been easier to let our bodies speak. So I do.

I grab the front of his shirt and lift myself to my tallest possible height. Salvatore takes mercy on me and bends his head. Our lips come together in a kiss that blossoms with passion and need. He hoists me up by the ass, his large palms squeezing me, laying claim. We only kiss harder, losing our

breath. Not once do we break away as he moves us through his loft.

My legs are at rest around his waist. My hands clutch his face. My core begins throbbing in unabashed greed.

When we cross the threshold into the bedroom, Salvatore sets me down and dedicates his efforts to undressing me as fast as possible. He can't resist sprinkling in affection. A neck bite here and a tweak of my breast there. He spins me around and smacks my ass. He buries his face in the crook of my neck and I moan feeling his lips on my skin.

Just the spot he knows makes me instantly wet.

Salt and Pepa sit nosily in the doorway. I almost ask them to look away—they don't need to see the X-rated things about to happen to their mom.

Salvatore shucks my dress pants past my curvy hips and thighs and walks me forward to the bed. I'm pushed down and contorted into position with my ass up and my face down. His knee forces my legs apart and his hand fondles my pussy through my panties. A second later, he tears them away. The sound is so sudden and jarring, I lose concept of place and time.

His rough palms scratch my skin as he rolls up my pencil skirt and snatches away my underwear. I try to open my mouth for a scream, but blood sputters out.

I cough and spit and attempt to crawl away, but he presses his knee into me. He holds me down on the wet ground and the gravel bites into me. I flinch at the sound of hawked spit and then feel its sliminess coat my sex. He jams himself inside not more than a few seconds later, taking the last air left in my lungs...

The panic crashes over me like a powerful tsunami. My chest tightens and cold sweat slicks itself onto my skin.

“Stop... STOP!” I scream, jerking and flailing under Salvatore. My fight to free myself is desperate enough that I almost roll off the bed when he gets up.

He catches me by the wrists, his hands clenching around them. “Phi... it’s okay. I stopped. Calm down. Nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

But I’m not convinced. The panic pounds in my heart and I blink as the memory lingers before my eyes.

So real. So visceral.

I don’t realize I’m shaking until Salvatore lets go of my wrists. He doesn’t seem to know how to react. We’re both half naked, his erection a bulge in his jeans. Neither of us speak for a moment that feels agonizingly long.

As my panic subsides and I orient myself, my cold sweaty skin flushes to a warmer temperature—*humiliation* takes over. I ruined a moment because I let the past bleed into the present. I panicked as if Salvatore was hurting me when he was only worshipping me and my body.

I cover my face with my hands and urge myself to breathe.

I’m never going to get better.

19. salvatore

. . .



I **SNATCH** her clothes off the floor and hand them over. “Here, get dressed. I’ll leave the room, alright?”

“It’s not you.”

“I know.”

Her eyes are glassy, anxiety alive on her face. Reluctantly, she takes the clothes I’m handing her, her shoulders stiff and tense.

The woman before me isn’t the one that was here just seconds ago. The sexy, passionate Delphine who’d moaned and shivered under my touch is gone. Replacing her is someone gripped by fear and trauma. A shell of who she really is.

I try to keep the rage from bleeding into my expression. It’s not because of Delphine; it’s because of the situation and the reason behind it.

The bastard who is responsible for this.

It’s been weeks, and I’m no closer to the violent revenge he’s owed. Delphine made me swear I’d let her decide how to handle him—even do it herself—but I can’t say with certainty I won’t renege on my word.

I'm too much of a violent psycho not to indulge in his destruction myself. So many twisted ideas swarm inside my head of the ways I can make him suffer. It'd probably make her sick if I voiced them aloud.

I turn my back on Delphine, unable to hide behind a composed act.

I can't be around her when I'm like this.

I leave her alone to change and recollect herself—and so I can gather my own bearings again.

Salt and Pepa peek out from their hiding spots in the living room. Pepa's nestled between throw pillows on the sofa. Salt watches me from underneath a console table. Both blink at me with a curious air as if they know their mother is upset.

“Don't worry. She's okay. She just needs a moment,” I clarify, moving into the kitchen. I plant my hands on the counter and expel a ragged breath. It hardly relieves the tension wound up in my muscles, but it allows for time to think practically.

I need to focus on making Delphine feel better.

Sometimes in the evenings before bed, she'll drink some tea as she reads a book. The chamomile helps her relax. I set to making her a cup.

It's not much but it might help.

“Phi, you alright?” I stand outside my bedroom and tap my knuckles on the door. Entering unannounced could startle her.

“You can come in. I'm fine.”

She's curled up on my bed in a way that's similar to Pepa out in the living room. Her clothes are in a heap on the end of the bed. Instead, she's slipped on my shirt and nothing else.

My protective streak intensifies knowing she chose to put something of mine on during a moment like this.

I set the tea down on the bedside table. “Figured it might help.”

She sits up and scoots over. When I take the spot next to her, she leans in and rests her head on my shoulder. The anxious energy she’d given off earlier has lessened... slightly. But she’s still upset. Her hand even rests on her chest, absentmindedly touching the spot where her rose pendant used to lay.

“I don’t know why I panicked. It just happened. I was on my knees and then you pushed my legs apart. He ripped my...” She trails off with a sigh, leaving the sentence half completed.

“You can’t help it. You don’t have to explain. I didn’t know or I wouldn’t’ve done that.”

“That’s just it. We were caught up in the moment. I *liked* it—I was so turned on. Then it came out of nowhere. I don’t want this to be my life, Jon. I don’t want to have these reactions whenever I’m trying to live it. Yet it keeps happening.”

I’m careful sliding my arm around her. Being somebody who’s largely detached from most human emotions, it’s difficult giving her what she needs in moments like this. I don’t have the right words or proper solutions. My way is the opposite—no talking about feelings or working to overcome them.

My outlets come in the form of blood and violence. It’s been all I’ve known my whole life.

Lucius taught me with his fists. He beat it into me until fighting became second-nature.

But Delphine is *actually* a good person. She needs a sane, healthy means to heal. Not my fucked up methods like she seems to think. Her killing the guy isn't going to make her feel any better.

As selfish as it is, I don't want her to. She's too good to lower herself like that. I'll do the dirty work. I'll lower myself to the pits of hell if necessary. If it means getting the revenge I've dedicated my life to.

"I'm the last guy to believe in it... but you ever think about therapy? Isn't that what normal people do when they have issues? It might do some good. Give you coping techniques and whatever else they do."

She gives a wry smile. "Salvatore Mancino suggesting therapy. You *must* be worried."

"First time for everything. I don't like seeing you that way, Phi."

"It's crossed my mind. It's confidential and I'm sure I can find a good therapist. But I don't think I can. It's difficult for me to stop being..." She releases a breath that sounds like a struggle on her lungs. "I was always taught to have it together at all times. My parents expected the best. My father stressed I could never slip up. I had to be on my A game every single moment... or I'd be judged twice as hard."

I bite down hard and resist the urge to point out he'd never followed his own rules. Right down to the affair he once had before Mrs. Adams passed away.

Delphine hesitates before glancing at me. "I'm not sure I can stop pretending around anyone else... except you."

“And why’s that?”

“Because you don’t judge me. You see even the stuff I don’t want you to and you accept me. Everybody else has all these expectations of me, like I’m supposed to always be perfect. I don’t know how to drop the mask for anyone else. You’re the only one.”

Maybe coincidences are real. You’re the only one I drop my mask for...

“I just don’t want to feel like I’m held hostage forever,” she goes on. “It’s like this one person has all this power over me. I don’t even know who he is, but no matter how hard I try, I’m back at square one every time. It makes me want to make him suffer. He deserves to know what it’s like. For him to hurt even worse.”

As she vents, I sit in silence and take in her words. I slip into my own head as they practically become my own—the same kind of sentiments that have driven me to do what I’m doing. The mission I set out on years ago when I was a powerless kid trapped in the household from hell.

So many times, even as a boy, I had fantasized about grabbing a kitchen knife in the dead of night. I would sneak into Lucius and Stefania’s room and I’d run the knife straight through his paunch of a belly. I’d make him sputter up his blood until the life drained from him. Until he stared up helplessly at me and begged for mercy.

Then I’d do it. I’d end him with the same cruel smile he’d worn all the times he made me feel helpless.

Destroying Lucius became an obsession of mine. The fixation on the plan I’ve carefully put together. That I’m still carrying out ’til this day.

I've never talked about all the things that happened. The reasons *why* I'm doing what I am. Those have been buried deep inside me. Dark seeds that grew from the time I was a boy until I became the man I am today—a level of pure hatred that's enough to drive anybody insane.

But knowing I'll get the last laugh is what keeps me calm. Just like with Delphine's attacker. So long as I can keep sight on the end goal, I can do what's necessary to get there.

I understand her feelings, yet as my heart rate increases, it's difficult articulating this. I've hidden behind expressing it with my fists for so long, doing so with words seems useless. Seconds pass before I make up my mind.

I'm about to do something I never thought I'd do.

Apparently, this scares even a psycho like me. My chest clenches tight and it feels like my airways constrict.

Delphine should know. If it'll help her... if it'll let her know she's not alone...

"Do you remember the day I broke up with you?" I ask, my voice rough and strained.

Her short laugh is cynical. "Which time?"

"The first time. When I said you lived in a pretend world."

"And you lived in a real one," she finishes.

"You asked me about my father," I say, and then I pause. My fingers bend into tight fists. It's automatic when thinking about him. "You were right. I just couldn't handle admitting it. My father hates me as much as I hate him. He's hated me from the moment I was born."

Her hand flies out and lands on top of my clenched fist. Her face fills with worry and compassion as she sits up

straighter and opens her mouth with what's probably a million different questions.

“Let me finish, Phi.” I stare off at an indiscriminate point in the distance, remembering things I haven't thought about in detail for many years. “Lucius used to say one of his favorite pastimes was making me suffer. He turned it into a sport. What could he do to make me cry, make me *bleed* today?”

“Sometimes, it was simple stuff. Maybe he'd take off his belt and beat me with it. Other times, he liked to make it more exciting for himself. He'd test me—he had this closet he'd lock me inside of. He'd leave me in there for hours. One time, he left me in there for a whole day. Twenty-six hours in total. Just waiting. Just sitting in the dark wondering what he'd do next. The fear was what made it fun to him. Keeping me guessing.”

Delphine's crying. She's listened to my request to let me finish, but tears wet her eyes. She rolls her lips together to keep from making a sound. The pads of her fingers glide over my scarred knuckles in a soothing, sympathetic touch.

I decide to go all the way. I open my clenched fist and turn it over so it's palm side up. For a second we both stare at the inside of my forearm. The network of protruding veins travel up to the edges of my tattoos. Many I got years ago to cover up scars I didn't want to see anymore. The ones I hadn't agreed to being inflicted on me.

I point one out, the pockmarked scar still visible if you look close enough. “This was his cigar. He used to put them out on me if he felt like it.”

Delphine winces. I point out another jagged scar along my arm.

“This was another time he made me play a game. It involved his knife and how long I could go until I tapped out.” I gesture to a few more along my ribcage. “After a certain point, I was sure he’d kill me one day. Once the thrill was gone from all the fucked up shit he was doing to me. Then I knew if he didn’t kill me, I’d kill him. I’d *destroy* him.”

“Your mother...” she drifts off, eyes as wide and horrified as they are tearful.

“What about her? Stefania is in her own world. She drinks when anything real gets to be too much. Guess that’s all the time. He never touches her—never lays a single finger on her—but that’s the point. She might as well be dead to him. He hates her guts. Maybe even more than he hates mine. Her punishment is being his wife. There’s no escape for her. At least I got away.”

“But why? Why does he hate his own wife and son?”

A bitter grin twists onto my face. “We’re a reminder of the ugliest part of him. The worst moment of his life.”

Her brows connect, but she doesn’t ask any more questions. She’s staring at the different scars I’ve accumulated over the years. Some from fights I’ve gotten myself into. Others that are remnants from my childhood with Lucius as a father.

“I get it,” I say. “Phi, I know what it’s like wanting to make somebody pay. Somebody who took advantage and hurt you. I’ve lived and breathed that most of my life. The thirst for revenge can consume you. I know better than anybody.”

She uses the sleeve of my shirt she’s wearing to wipe tears. Her hand slides into mine, our fingers intertwining. I’m not

sure if anything I've said has helped. She almost seems more upset now that she knows what I've been through.

“We're going to get *them* back,” she says finally. She squeezes my hand and meets my eyes. A familiar spark lives in them, dark and determined. “We'll get our revenge. We'll make them suffer. We need this, Jon.”

For the first time in my life, as a reflection of my own dark urges stares back at me, I'm not so sure.

20. salvatore

. . .



THE NEXT MORNING, Pepa takes it upon herself to wake us up. She pounces onto the bed and settles onto my chest, right beside Delphine’s head. My groggy eyes open to her expectant stare. If this were a staring contest, she’d probably win. I blink and reach for my phone.

Minutes after eight.

Delphine’s usually out of bed by six on weekdays. We stayed up late last night, talking for hours. It hadn’t been easy, by the end it was taxing on Delphine, but once we were out, we were *out*. She hadn’t even set her alarm.

“Phi.”

I give her a light shake in my arms. Pepa seems to take this as permission to try and wake her up, too. The attention-starved cat crawls onto Delphine’s shoulder and paws gently at her face.

So this is why I’m not a cat person.

Delphine stirs with a humming noise in her throat. “What time is it?”

“Time for you to wake up... according to Pepa.”

“She’s hungry. I’m usually up by now.”

“Salt probably sent her in here. I’ll handle it.”

I get out of bed and gain a shadow in Pepa as I head into the kitchen. Delphine was right—the gray and white cats were looking for their morning grub. I feed both and then start on coffee for us.

Delphine emerges a few minutes later, the drowsiness still on her face. Her eyes widen at the scene before her. “You fed the cats *and* made coffee?”

“Somebody had to.”

She laughs and accepts the mug I hand her. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. About taking time off. I think I’m going to do it. Take a few weeks for myself. It’ll be Christmas soon and it’s probably best I’m not at work right now. The reversal of the Belini verdict still gets to me.”

“Good. You could use the break.”

“It’ll give me more freedom for our training and finding him.” She cups her mug of coffee and takes a small sip to test out its heat level. “Balancing my work as ADA and our quest for revenge was too much for me. This way I can focus better.”

I listen to Delphine without offering any input. I haven’t made up my mind if I like the idea of her being more involved in my plans for revenge. She’s been careless one too many times in recent weeks. Rare behavior coming from her, but the circumstances have driven her to it. While I get it, and her deep thirst to reclaim control, I have to consider how dangerous it is.

We could be playing with fire.

I leave her in the kitchen drinking coffee with the cats and go change. I grab what I need from my home office, where I

keep a private stash of weapons, cash, secret documents—among my catalogue on Delphine over the years—and make sure the door is locked and secured before I head out.

Today is going to be a violent one. Giorgio hasn't been a free man for twenty-four hours, but that doesn't mean he's not going to be held accountable for his involvement in what's been happening. He has no clue what's about to come his way.



Grimaldi's is world famous for its fine Italian dining. Reservations for a table are booked out months, sometimes years, in advance, depending on the date and time of the year. Niccoló Grimaldi first opened the restaurant on Northam's upper west side when he moved from Italy to America and brought his culinary genius with him.

Everybody agrees, Italian and non-Italian alike, that Grimaldi's prepares some of the most authentic and delicious Italian cuisine out there.

He's also been in bed with the Mancino family for almost a decade. One of our more secret, under-the-table connections.

You can imagine how pleased I am that Grimaldi's agreed to host Giorgio for a celebratory luncheon today. He sent the invite at my behest (unbeknownst to Giorgio). I can't say I blame him—if I'd spent months in jail, I'd probably stuff myself with Grimaldi's, too.

Giorgio arrives with a handful of guys. Grimaldi's shut the place down for him. Once again, at my behest. The less witnesses the better. To Giorgio, it's simply Grimaldi giving him the star treatment. All the privacy and dedicated attention a guy like him could want at a time where he's a lightning rod

for the press; they've been running story after story about his overturned conviction.

He's seated at what Grimaldi considers the VIP table. Right in the corner of the restaurant, normally offering privacy, but far enough away from the exits that a hasty escape is damn near impossible. He drops into his chair, a satisfied smirk on his pasty face, as though he deserves to sit at a table among black-and-white photos of greats like Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. Both of whom once dined at Grimaldi's many years ago.

Giorgio is a hanger-on—his older brother Hector's shorter, rattier, less competent spare in case things ever go south. But nobody really respects Giorgio. Not even his crew.

The guy most likely behind Delphine's attack. He'd threatened her openly yesterday in court.

Grimaldi's staff serves them. The large table is covered with an obscene amount of food. Any Italian dish you'd ever want to eat. Giorgio's not the biggest guy, more skinny-fat munchkin than anything, but he *gorges*. His men too.

They drink like fishes. The restaurant fills up with cigar smoke and the echo of their cocky laughter.

One of the servers checks the locks at the front. The others vacate the premises as directed. Nobody but his crew and mine should be on the property for what's about to happen next.

"You promise," Grimaldi says when he sees me on his way out the back. "Everything returned to its original condition?"

"Spotless. You won't notice a thing out of place."

He nods, satisfied with my reassurance. We've always paid him well. Even Lucius has utilized his services from time to time.

Giorgio is shoveling a forkful of linguine into his mouth the moment we close in. We appear like a cloak of darkness, descending upon the dining room without an opening for them to react. One second, everything's festive and the moment's bright.

The next second, shit couldn't look bleaker. Black as coal.

His fork clatters, slipping from his fingers and hits the table. His mouth stays ajar. If possible, he pales. As it turns out, there's a shade lighter than white—*translucent*.

For their part, his men whip around in their chairs and attempt to defend themselves. It's no use, though. We've got the jump on them, our weapons loaded and ready. If they move one more inch, we'll be putting bullets in their brains.

I walk up to his table and calmly take the empty chair across from his. "Hello, Giorgio. How's lunch?"

His pale face flushes red. "You motherfucking cocksucker —"

"Careful, Giorgio. I'm in no mood for a temper tantrum. I'd love an excuse to blow your face off."

"You wouldn't dare. You wouldn't risk retaliation from our family."

The twitch returns in my left cheek. Damn near invisible. "You sure about that? I don't have much to lose—your family dead or mine. Blood is blood. It's all the same to me."

Giorgio shares a couple glances with his men. Some of them shift in their chairs and a few look like they might lose their lunch if this goes any further. Just moments ago they were deep in their celebration. Now it's clear this is no friendly situation. Death is on the table.

“I’ll keep it short and to the point,” I say. “Have you or have you not been targeting ADA Adams?”

“You mean princess? The one with the nice ass and all that mouth?” He bares his teeth in a nasty grimace.

I nod at Fabio to my left. He squeezes his trigger and shoots the guy next to Giorgio dead. He face plants into his half eaten plate of lasagna. Some of the blood splatters on Giorgio and he jerks in his chair at the sudden action.

“Fuck!” he yells. “You think you’re tough, huh? Gunning us down like this? You think you’ll get your answer?”

My glare turns murderous, my pulse spiking. “You’ll answer if you expect to keep breathing. Have you or have you not been targeting her?”

“This about the overturned verdict? It was easy spooking her. Real fun too.”

“Your last chance to stop playing dumb,” I say slowly, my voice scarily calm. “ADA Adams has been attacked. She’s had her home broken into. You’ve made several open threats to her. Have you been behind what’s happening?”

He reclines in his chair, his mouth lax as though amused. “If I wanted to hurt the chick, I would’ve done it myself. More fun that way. *Capeesh?*”

I spend a second studying him, picking up on the nuances of his behavior. Often you can detect the signs of a liar. Even the most experienced ones have their subtle tells. My instinct tells me Giorgio just might be telling the truth—at least in part. He himself didn’t order any attacks on Delphine. Anyone else in his family is another matter.

But then he *laughs*. He lets out the laugh he’s been holding in and reaches for his drink.

“Anyway, who cares if I did?” he says. “I’ll do whatever the fuck I want to her or anybody else who crosses me. If she keeps trying to throw me behind bars then I just might come after her for real—HOLY MOTHERFUCKING SHIT!”

Giorgio’s screaming as I bound across the table and slash him in the throat. His chair tips over backward and he lands with a thud. I’m over him, pinning him down as blood spurts everywhere, and his panicked eyes meet mine. He opens and shuts his mouth in disbelief, producing a gurgling noise that’s pleasing to my ears.

“I told you I was in no mood.”

I plunge my knife into his throat a second time. He dies gasping and choking on his own blood. It gushes out like a fountain, soaking the front of his clothes. Mine too. I’m covered in it when I stand up and stare down at my work.

The razor-sharp blade has pierced his throat so deeply, I can see inside—the severed veins and tissue that once connected together. The exposed cartilage and ring-like tip of his spinal cord showing through. One of the most morbid sights I’ve ever seen.

Giorgio Belini may not have been the one who had Delphine assaulted, but it sure as hell wasn’t above him to attack her in the future if she pissed him off. He was a loose end, a looming threat so long as she’s a prosecutor. He deserved to die.

“Kill the rest of them,” I say.

My men shoot Giorgio’s crew in a hail of bullets. They drop like crash test dummies. Dead and bleeding out on the floor of the fine dining establishment. I don’t hang around for the aftermath. My guys can take care of it on their own. The

cleaners we've hired will arrive soon to scrub Grimaldi's spotless.

Killing Giorgio will incur Hector's wrath, but it's heat I'm willing to take.

We cover our tracks like no other. I've already set into motion a story about Giorgio and his crew taking a much-needed vacation out of the country. Hector won't catch on for a few weeks.

A few more weeks plus that for him to trace it back to me.

I emerge among the hazy smoke and twitch of dying bodies and head for the exit. But though it's a victory to have eliminated a potential threat to Delphine, I'm no closer to solving who the hell is targeting her.

Which means today's another failure.

21. delphine

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SALVATORE WALKS through the door bloody. It's smeared on the dark wash of his jeans and staining his fair skin. The expression on his face reads as tense and vicious, the swirl of blue and green that make up his eyes several shades darker.

He'd mentioned this morning he had a busy day ahead of him. It must've been code for a violent one.

I've spent most of the day at the loft, relaxing with Salt and Pepa. I read books and practiced some of the maneuvers he's taught me. The only time I left was for a brief jog around the neighborhood—my security detail within the area every step of the way. It was my first run in weeks, and though I wasn't technically alone, it felt nice to be able to do something that was once such a normal part of my day.

I hadn't known how much I needed this time off until I stretched out on Salvatore's couch with a book and spent the rest of the afternoon turning pages.

Last night came to mind even as I read. One moment Salvatore and I had been swept up in a storm of passion, the next I'd been shaken to my core by memories of my assault. He'd understood, but that didn't make the moment any less

frustrating and humiliating. The trauma hangs over my head in constant reminder.

I've waited all day for him to get home.

For the chance to take back my control.

I sit up as he strides through the loft, his current of dark energy a shadow. Whatever it is that's happened today isn't something he wants to talk about. A couple seconds later the shower starts up and its steady *shhhshhhh* sound trails down the hall.

I close my eyes and build my nerve. The flutter in my stomach only intensifies. It's a reaction that's involuntary as I shut off thoughts of what happened last night. I focus on what I want to happen right now.

All the ways I want Salvatore. The dirty things I want to do to him... and the even dirtier things I want him to do to me.

Soon I come alive. My pussy pulsates at the thoughts running through my mind. Nothing is going to stop me this time—no fears, no freeze ups, no flashbacks.

This moment is mine.

I get up off the sofa and head to the bathroom on a beat of confidence. I've never been the seductress type, but with Salvatore, it's easy to assume the role. I can be sexy and uninhibited with him, turn my brain off, and swim in desire.

He's out of the shower by the time I stop in the bathroom doorway. Droplets of water cling to his clean skin as my gaze roves over his magnificent physique—lean muscles and sculpted abs and scars from many battles he's fought over time. Several of which he'd told me about just last night.

His body, an instrument he uses in different ways. For passion and for violence.

My heart pounds in my chest, a breathlessness coming over me. I've never craved a man like I crave Salvatore, so overcome with want and need it can only be described as combustible. It's a spark that quickly burns into the wildest of fire.

He looks up the moment I abandon the doorway and rush forward.

I tug on the towel around his waist and sink to my knees. I take his dick in my grasp, my eyes flicking up to his.

“I want to suck you off.”

It's near impossible to catch Salvatore off-guard. As calculated and observant as he is, he's usually expecting everything at any moment.

But as I slide my hand up and down his length, he's surprised by my brazenness. He wasn't expecting to step out of the shower and have me on my knees. He doesn't stop me though. His gaze heats up, the tightness in his jaw no longer from fury—it's pure carnal lust.

In a few short strokes he's hardening. His dick juts out in mouthwatering fashion, thick and heavy in my grasp. I swallow him with a curl of my tongue. His velvety length reaches the back of my throat, but I don't come up right away. I let him feel the wet-heat of my mouth and throat as saliva pools. Then I glide the flat side of my tongue up his length, hot and slick.

“Shit,” he groans. “Phi. Fuck.”

Short, punctuated words seem to be all he's capable of. His fingers dig into my curls at the back of my head, but he

doesn't push me back down. He's letting me have control, letting me set the pace.

He understands me. This moment. Why I need this.

Knowing this turns me on even more. It makes me want to show him I'm his.

I can be your good girl.

Slowly, he regains enough composure for speech, his voice thick with arousal.

“You look so beautiful, Phi. So damn perfect with my dick down your throat.”

My pussy throbs at his words.

I suck him harder, take him deeper. I moan around him, keeping my eyes on his. Salvatore loves eye contact—to know I'm surrendering to him in every way. We both know this is only the beginning of what's to come; I've started something that won't be finished anytime soon.

It's in his gaze. In the dominant energy that rolls off him as he watches me bob up and down his dick. He's making all sorts of plans to claim me in different ways. Any position he can bend and twist me into.

Salvatore always evens the score.

My fingers encircle his thick shaft and I stroke him some more before taking him full in my mouth again. Things become sloppier from there. I brace my hands on his strong thighs and use him as leverage as I go so deep, I almost choke on his dick. My eyes water and I fight my gag reflex.

He's close.

Heat sears from his dick, twitching in my mouth in warning. His body tenses up, his muscles straining. His fingers remain twined in my curls, firm but still not forceful.

I'm sucking on his head when he comes with a deep, guttural sound. I swallow every drop he spills, savoring the distinct, salty tang of him. Once I've wiped him clean with my tongue, I pull back and look up at him.

My heart beats like it's about to explode inside my chest. I'm still so overcome by my craving for him that I want more. I'm waiting for what's to come next.

He reaches out and thumbs my swollen lips as if deciding. "Get up," he says after a moment. "Take off your leggings."

I obey without question. I'm not wearing any panties, so when the nylon-like fabric slides down my hips and thighs, I'm naked from the waist down.

Hunger flashes in his dark gaze and he fists himself. The urge is too instinctual, too second nature the second he sets sight on my bare pussy. Within seconds, he's hard again, his dick like a steel shaft that will soon give me what I need.

Salvatore lifts me up and sets me down on the edge of the bathroom counter. There's no further preamble as he slips into me. I moan in immediate relief and rest my hands on the counter, my legs wrapping around his waist, inviting him deeper.

He cradles my hips in his arms and slides in and out of me in easy, skillful strokes.

He feels so good, my body sings in praise.

"You don't know what you started," he grunts. "I'm going to fuck you all night."

My eyes flutter close at the threat. There's nothing I want more...



Salvatore keeps to his word. We have sex on and off into the early hours of the morning. We don't stay in one spot. Instead we carry on in various rooms of the loft. His bathroom and the shower. His bed twice. Up against the exposed brick wall in the living room. He goes down on me on the sofa, and in the kitchen we make a mess of things with whip cream we find in his fridge.

It's one of the most pleasurable nights of my life. Not once do I freeze up like last time.

By the end, collapsing in bed as morning light melts the November snow, we're exhausted. We're out for hours, until once again, we're woken up by the cats. Both of them pad into the room, this time in a united front to get us out of bed.

Salvatore's slower moving. I'm springing up as soon as I see the time.

"You took off work, remember?"

I rush into the closet and grab some clothes. "I promised I'd meet my dad downtown for lunch."

"So what? Cancel. Spend the day in bed with me. We can order more pizza... *without* pineapples."

He's teasing, but serious too.

I emerge dressed in a blouse and jeans. "I can't. My dad's been suspicious lately. I'd prefer not to make it worse. Besides, he said he has something important to tell me."

Salvatore holds his tongue on saying much else about Dad, but it's clear he doesn't like the idea of me speeding off to lunch with him. I've accepted they'll never get along and settled for keeping them as far apart as possible. If they exist in different halves of my life then it's *almost* like the hatred doesn't exist at all.

At least that's what I tell myself.

Stitches drives me and drops me off. "I'll park right over there," he says, pointing across the street. "Take your time. Brought a couple comic books to keep me preoccupied."

"You read comics?"

"Whoa. What's with the judgy tone, Miss ADA? Don't you watch those housewife shows where they're always throwing drinks in each other's faces?"

He's got a point.

I smirk and wave goodbye before hurrying into Garden House.

"Sorry I'm late." I smile, dropping into the seat across from Dad. The trendy bistro is as crowded as any other weekday during lunch hour. A server hands us our menus and pours sparkling water into our glasses.

"You're dressed down today. Don't tell me Bernstein really put casual Fridays into place at city hall? He tried for years when I was there."

"Oh. Oh! No... I'm off... as in from work."

Dad's brow wrinkles. "Are you feeling okay, Delphi sweetheart?"

"Just needed some time to myself, so I took a few weeks. There's nothing wrong." I shift my gaze to the menu and study

over the revolting drink selection. I don't know which sounds less appetizing, strained beet juice or a creamy avocado and banana smoothie. I opt to stick with my sparkling water.

"You're disappointed about Belini," Dad says after a long pause. His mouth presses into a tight line. "I've been there. It's rough when you believe you've got them, but they weasel their way out of the charge. I can't tell you how many times it happened with that piece of shit Lucius Mancino."

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"You're going to have to get used to it, sweetheart. Unfortunately, our justice system gets it wrong almost as often as it gets things right. You have to have thick skin as an ADA. Even thicker as a DA. You can't let one lost battle cost you the war."

"Dad," I say sharply, "I said I don't want to talk about it."

He stares in shock, visibly taken aback by my tone. Our server returns to take our order, providing a much needed interruption.

Once we're alone again, we sit in silence and sip our drinks. Around us, the other tables buzz with excitable conversation. I pretend I'm more interested in the glittering gold monogram the Garden House has imprinted on their glasses and silverware. Dad admires the rest of the crowded restaurant before returning his attention onto me.

"Delphi, where's your rose?"

"Hmmm?"

"Nana Rose's necklace—where is it?"

My hand flies up to my neck out of habit. "Oh, I... I took it off."

“You’ve been wearing it every day since you were thirteen,” he says slowly.

“I still do. I just... I’m having it cleaned. I’ll have it back soon.”

Dad lets another awkward moment pass, but I can already sense where we’re headed. Suspicion radiates from him and his furrowed brow and tight lips.

“I’m getting worried about you,” he says. “You haven’t been answering your calls like usual. It took you a whole week just to get back to me about lunch today.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“You just finished telling me you’ve taken time off.”

I draw in an uneven breath. My skin warms. I hate lying to Dad—*mostly* because I’m almost certain he can always tell. Even if he hasn’t always called me out on it. When I look up at him, his mouth has pulled even tighter.

He knows something’s up.

“I suppose now is the time to mention this,” he says carefully. “Your apartment renovation. I’m confused about it. It’s my old bachelor pad. Even slept there many nights when working hard on a case going to trial and I couldn’t make it home to your mother and you kids. The place is in mint condition. Remember how just two years ago you had that inspection done, and it passed with flying colors? What changed?”

A forced smile comes to my face. “I told you it was just for aesthetics.”

“Yes, I remember you saying that. I happened to be in the area the other day, and stopped by. I spoke to Rachel, Flynn’s

ex-wife. She told me about the break-in.”

Crap! Think of something!

“I can’t help but wonder why you wouldn’t tell me?” Dad continues. “In fact, I can’t help but wonder why you’d tell me your apartment was being renovated when it doesn’t look like any work was ever done on it. Certainly not enough to justify moving out for renovations?”

“I... I might have lied. I said it was under renovation, but the truth is, I moved out because I didn’t feel safe there anymore.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? You could’ve come home to stay with me. We could’ve hired you security. Do you know how many years my life was threatened when I was DA? Those mafia thugs think they run the city—”

“I have it under control.”

“You seem shaken even speaking of it. I’m not sure you know what you might be up against, sweetheart.”

“Dad, I said I can handle it,” I snap. “Please take me at my word.”

A sudden calmness settles over him. He unfurls his cloth napkin, his expression slackening. “Of course. I don’t mean to pry. It’s just... I have one more question. If you’re not at the apartment, and you’re not at work, what have you been up to, and who have you been staying with?”

“She’s been staying with me.”

Both Dad and I look up. Brenda beams at us as she stops at our table. Carlos, another colleague of ours, is with her. They must’ve just walked in for lunch. Dad greets them hello and shakes their hands.

“Delphine has been staying at my place,” Brenda fibs brightly. “It’s kind of cramped and I live in Old Northam, so it’s not the newest apartment, but it’s been working out. *Except* for when we both need to get ready in the morning! Two gals, one bathroom!”

Brenda’s melodic laugh lightens the air. Carlos joins in, though he’s obtuse to the lie being told. I mouth thank you to Brenda the second I’m certain Dad isn’t looking. She merely gives the subtlest of winks.

“Well, that sounds like quite the setup,” Dad says. He nods at them. “It’s nice meeting you two. Thank you for doing Delphine such a favor.”

They move on to their table, taking the triumphant moment with them. As soon as we’re alone again, it’s clear Dad didn’t buy a word. He retreats into suspicious silence, sipping from his sparkling water.

We need a change of subject. Desperately.

“You haven’t told me your surprise. I assume that’s why you’re in the city today? You’ve always said it gives you a headache now that you’re retired.”

Dad smooths a hand over his v-neck sweater. “I may have changed my mind. I couldn’t stay away forever.”

“There isn’t much golfing in the city... so it can’t be that.”

“I’ve had enough golfing for now.”

“Well? Then what is it?” I stare in excitement waiting for the big news.

He merely chuckles. “I’m going to leave it a surprise for now. You’ll find out soon enough. Let’s just say... I’ve found a new passion.”

I'm not sure what to think for the rest of our lunch. Dad doesn't bring up the overturned Belini verdict nor does he poke around my personal and professional life again. I'm grateful we've reached a stalemate, though I'm not naive enough to believe this is the end of it.

Knowing Dad and his suspicious nature, it's only the beginning.



“He knows somethings up. My dad,” I say later in the evening. We're standing in our firing lane of the shooting range. Salvatore watches over my shoulder as I demonstrate I can properly load my handgun. “He basically told me he knows the apartment renovation isn't real.”

“I told you we'd need to schedule the company to come by. We've waited too long.”

“That's not all. He finds it suspicious I've taken time off.”

Salvatore steps forward, covering my hand with his. He guides me on reinserting the magazine when I have trouble the first time. In instructor mode, his touch is slow and gentle, yet with a firmness that makes me relent to him.

“He's right. It *is* suspicious,” he says once the magazine is inserted. “You taking time off—you're not known for it. Taking weeks off out of the blue isn't your norm.”

“Brenda showed up and covered for me. I owe her a month's worth of coffees.”

“We have to be careful. Your father has eyes and ears all over the city.”

“You make my dad sound like he’s a mafia boss,” I say. “He’s been retired for seven years now.”

“Still has connections everywhere. Aren’t you the one who told me about how he *golfs* with the police commissioner?”

“He and Flynn are friends.”

“Proving my point, Phi,” Salvatore says, folding his arms over his lean-muscled chest. “Your father has the ability to find stuff out if he really wants to.”

Tension rings through my body as Salvatore steps away and I focus on my gun. My father has always been a point of contention between us. Less so these days due to Dad being in retirement, Salvatore and I being older and more mature, and avoiding the topic altogether most times.

I don’t know who hates the other more. Dad’s face contorts with pure loathing at the mention of the Mancinos, but Salvatore is no slouch when it comes to their feud; the bitterness is as present in his tone now as it was twelve years ago.

I put on my noise-canceling earmuffs and pick up my handgun as the range manager announces the next round starts in sixty seconds. The first target pops up a moment later. My breathing is calm as I take careful aim and squeeze the trigger.

The gun recoils and kicks back in my wrist, but my grip remains steady. The second target that emerges is a cut-out of a sketchy-looking man some fifteen feet away. My reflexes are quicker on the uptake, firing the instant he shows up. The bullet lands center mass as I’ve been instructed on this round.

The following batch of targets are in motion. I manage to keep up as they spring onto the scene out of nowhere. One immediately after the other, they glide across my line of sight.

I hit eight of the ten by the time the buzzard goes off and I'm directed to put down my weapon.

My heart races as I set it on the table and pull off my earmuffs. Shooting always makes adrenaline course through me. I've noticed the same feeling washes over me whenever Salvatore shows me fighting maneuvers.

I'll never admit it to him, but a growing part of me understands the appeal. I *get* why he's always taken pleasure in these things.

It's the rush. Your pulse spiking in your veins.

"You did better than most of the guys in my crew," Salvatore says. He watches as I disassemble the Glock like I was taught.

I release the magazine and open the slide, handling the pieces as if I'm an expert and not a novice. His blue-green gaze tracks my hands with a clench in his jaw. I'm about to question him when he tells me what I should've already guessed.

"Fuck," he groans for my ears only. "Have I told you how sexy it is seeing you handle a gun?"

"You have. Every time you've taken me shooting."

His arm slides possessively along my hip and I feel his breath on the back of my neck. "Just wait 'til we're back in the loft."

"That sounds promising."

"It should. You've been teasing me all night. Time for payback."

Salvatore keeps his word. The moment we make it home, he's picking me up in his arms, and depositing me onto the

sofa. Poor Salt and Pepa whine as they scurry to find hiding places the more layers of our clothes come off.

I ride Salvatore until we're both sweaty and breathless
heaps with entangled limbs.

The perfect end to our evening.

22. salvatore

. . .



WEEKS GO by and my men continue scouring the city in search of Delphine’s attacker. It seems every time we’ve made some progress, we’ve encountered a dead end shortly after. Finding her stolen necklace hasn’t been any easier. Omar has been tasked with visiting every pawn shop and secondhand store in Northam to see if it turns up. He’s even kept a close eye on the city’s black-market exchange in case anybody’s hawking it under the table.

I wanted to have it returned to Delphine by Christmas. It would’ve made her happy. The perfect present for the occasion. I don’t give a damn about holidays—or any other manufactured special occasion—but the day has always been one of her favorites.

The morning of Christmas Eve rolls around, and I’m pondering what last-minute present I can get her that’s comparable when Omar calls. I almost don’t answer. Figuring out Delphine’s present is more important than whatever useless update he has.

“Psycho, I think I’ve found it,” he says the second I reluctantly answer. “The necklace. I’m not sure if it’s the same one, but it looks just like the pics you sent me. The clerk says it’s only been here two days. Somebody sold it for some cash.”

I sit up in my desk chair. “Who?”

“He wouldn’t say. Some store policy.”

“Stay where you are.”

I’m halfway out of the club when I hang up.

Omar waits for me outside the door of the EZ Pawn on Fifth and Warring. It’s not the best neighborhood, with litter on the wet ground and graffiti-tag on the buildings. Panhandlers take notice as I park my bike and get off. One glare from me is enough to ward them off and make them go accost the next person wandering by.

“Where is it?”

“I told the guy to put it on hold. He says it’s vintage. At least third generation. The timeline seems to work out... and it looks a lot like the pictures you gave us to go off of. But they’re selling it for a pretty penny.”

“I don’t give a fuck how much it costs.”

We head into the pawn shop to the stench of stale tobacco and cheap air freshener. Merchandise of all kinds crowds the room. Tacky fur coats hang on racks and a selection of gaudy gold watches glint from behind a glass display case. Random knickknacks like blenders and hardware tools sit on shelves that form aisles throughout the store.

A couple customers browse with curious looks on their faces. Probably doing their last-minute Christmas shopping.

Omar and I cut a direct path to the jewelry counter. A lopsided Santa hat sits on the head of the guy behind the register. He smells so bad, he’s in competition with the tobacco and air freshener stinking up the store—his cologne is

an equally nauseating stench of sweaty ball juice and sour milk. It's bad enough that Omar and I exchange glances.

The man casts us a clueless smile, showing off a gold cap. "How may I help you, gentlemen?"

"You can start by opening a window," I answer. "It smells like shit in here."

He laughs. "You get used to it after a while. We have a cologne and perfume section—any bottle you want for \$5.99. Many, many designer brands. I shop here myself."

"That's not at all surprising. My associate spoke to you a few minutes ago about a rose necklace."

"Ahhh, yes. *The* rose necklace. A very beautiful, very unique piece. I put it aside as promised."

I plant my hands on the glass case as the man turns away and rummages through a private lockbox behind the counter. The jewelry selection at the EZ Pawn varies. Some of the pieces for sale resemble the cheap stuff you'd wear once and turn your skin green. A few others look more legit, though decades older.

Delphine's rose necklace belonged to her grandma. Her grandpa had bought it a long time ago as a gesture of his love. I don't need to know the exact cost to know it was worth a decent amount—*both* sides of Delphine's family come from money.

It makes no sense for her attacker to steal an expensive necklace only to ditch it in some shitty pawn shop.

Unless he didn't take it for the dollar amount; he took it because it meant something.

The man returns with a tray holding the rose pendant in question. He sets it down for our appraisal, smiling so wide he shows off a second gold cap on his molar.

“Is this the one?”

I carefully pick it up for a closer look. The delicate, now-broken chain dangles between my fingers as I hold up the rose pendant to the light. I’m no jewelry expert by any means, but I’ve acquainted myself with Delphine’s throat enough to memorize every last detail of the necklace that used to hang from it.

She never used to take it off.

During our relationship, at times where we enjoyed each other’s body, it was all she had on. Vivid moments I haven’t forgotten in twelve years.

“This is it,” I say. I pin the clerk with a suspicious, narrow-eyed glare. “Who sold it to you?”

“That’s confidential. We don’t reveal our customer details.”

“It doesn’t matter what you consider confidential. We need the name of who sold it to you.”

His gold-toothed smile spreads wider for puzzled laughter. He taps at a policy sign posted at the counter. “It’s confidential, pal. We don’t give away customer details. No exceptions.”

My jaw clenches and my glare darkens. “This is the last time I’m going to ask politely. Everybody here is civilized. Including myself. But I’m afraid you’re not understanding the importance of this situation. You’ll provide me a name or we’ll give you a special Christmas present. One you don’t

want. One far worse than coal. One that involves removing those sweaty balls of yours that stink so much.”

“Whoa! You sick fuck! I’m calling security—”

I snatch the front of his shirt and drag him halfway over the glass counter. He squeals as I bring his greasy face up close to mine, my teeth gritted in a deep scowl.

“You give me the fucking name,” I growl. “You have five seconds or I’m sawing them off with the blade in my pocket. Left or right first?”

Others in the shop gasp and stop what they’re doing to stare at the sudden commotion. Omar holds up his arms in a futile attempt to block off what’s going on.

“Don’t mind us, everybody! Just a skit for social media. They’re rehearsing right now. Keep shopping!”

I don’t give a damn who’s watching. My grip on the guy’s shirt tightens and I watch the beads of sweat leak down the sides of his face. When he still doesn’t respond fast enough, I slam him down against the glass case and withdraw the flip knife in my back pocket.

“Let’s start with the left—”

“OKAY!” he shouts frantically, his cheek pressed into the glass. “Okay, okay... I’ll tell you who it is. Just let me keep my balls, please! The customer info’s in the back.”

“Show me.”

I hold on to his shirt with a tight fist as we walk around the counter and toward the backroom. Minutes later we emerge with piss stains on the clerk’s pants and the customer’s contact info in my possession—as well as Delphine’s necklace.

Isaac Azeria

The same piece of shit who broke into her apartment. He's been eluding us for weeks now. He must've known when he trashed her place we'd be coming for him. He's fallen off the map.

“What now, Psycho?” Omar asks.

“This phone number needs to be traced. It'll give his location. The fucker can't stay in the shadows forever.”



It doesn't take long to track the location of Azeria's phone through the number he left at EZ Pawn. Within the hour I've got an address in the Heinsberg Park area. It's a borough known for crime and gang violence. It's also territory the Mancinos have fought over with the Viscontis. In recent years, as the Viscontis have tumbled from grace, Lucius has moved in on the area and established dominance in the territory.

I ride over myself on my sports bike and Omar tails me in his truck. We're getting to the bottom of whatever the fuck is going on today. If Azeria really is the guy who has harmed Delphine, then no amount of prayers to God can help him.

He's incurred the wrath of a man more savage than the Devil himself.

The GPS location leads us to somewhere different than the home address that had shown up on Azeria's record. We pull up outside a dingy apartment complex. The building seems to lean off-kilter, its brick faded and chipped. Boards cover

several of the windows and a broken down washing machine sits on the front lawn.

“Looks like I’d rather sleep in a dumpster than here,” Omar says.

“Stay alert. This could be some type of ploy.”

The elevator’s broken so we take the stairs. On the third floor there’s a man collapsed against the wall, passed out in his own waste.

Omar makes a sour face. “Yeah, a dumpster would definitely be better.”

We kick down the door marked 3E and barge inside. The studio apartment with peeling wallpaper and bean bags for furniture is empty. Azeria, or anyone else for that matter, isn’t home.

“He must’ve expected us,” I say, glancing around the shithole of an apartment.

“Psycho, take a look. This check.”

I kick a crushed beer can out of the way and move over to where Omar stands by Azeria’s sticky kitchen counter. Seeing the name on the check makes rage crackle through my veins like electricity. I snatch it from Omar’s grasp, nearly tearing the paper.

“Volchok,” I say.

“The same guy who paid off Mirra?”

“Looks like it.”

“Who is he?”

“Somebody who seems to want my attention.”

We leave the dump and return to the shabby street outside. Omar moves to his truck and I grab my helmet off the seat of my bike. Azeria appears at the end of the block, holding a brown paper bag from a local convenience store. His look is distinct enough to recognize at once—beard tangled enough to be a bird’s nest and a forehead large enough to be considered a fivehead (even with the beanie he’s wearing stretched over it). He lurches to a stop, just about tripping over himself when he sees us.

The bag crashes to the ground. Its contents spill out. Azeria spins on his heel and sprints off. I’m faster on the uptake than Omar. My helmet slips out of my grasp as I charge after him. This fucker isn’t getting away from me. Not this time.

He cuts around a sharp corner that leads into an alleyway. Aluminum trash cans bang against the gravelly ground as he knocks them over as he goes. I round the same corner into the alleyway and leap over them no problem. I’m no professional athlete, but I’m in excellent shape and an experienced fighter. I’m fast, calculated, and most importantly, *homicidal*.

Azeria should be fucking terrified right now. His whole existence is over.

At the end of the alleyway, Azeria hops onto the ladder of a fire escape and stumbles up the metal rungs. I’ve closed the distance between us. As he fumbles up the ladder, I grab onto his legs and jerk him backward. I’m almost successful ripping him off.

He holds on just barely, but he does kick me in the chest. He’s on the top rung by the time I’m hoisting myself up onto the bottom one. Huffing out deep breaths, he staggers onto the

fire escape platform connected to the building's window and reaches into his coat.

The ugly Big Foot asshole has a gun. He fires at me. I flatten myself against the ladder, still undeterred. He's a shitty shot. The bullets ricochet off the rungs, chinking the metal. Only the last one hits me—it zips past me and grazes my shoulder.

Azeria's out of bullets and I'm bleeding as I continue lifting myself up. No graze is going to stop me. No amount of blood or pain.

He's dived through the window by the time I make it onto the fire escape. I know even before I climb in after him that we're in some kind of crackhouse-type apartment building. One even worse than the place he lives in. It reeks of trash and piss, and graffiti-tag decorates the walls of what seems to be an abandoned apartment.

The place should be condemned.

I'm barely through the window when a wooden board is swung at me. I duck out of the way, narrowly missing the hunk of wood. Azeria picked it up off the floor and is using it as his weapon since his shitty marksmanship failed him.

He swings again and I jump back. He's not in the best shape, panting desperately for air. He swats the wooden board at me like he's clutching a baseball bat. I block him with my forearm and come in closer for my first hit.

A gut punch that makes him sputter. He coughs and lifts the board overhead to attempt to smash it at a new angle. I grab hold of it and we wrestle for control. My shoulder burns in protest, but the pain during a fight has always been

something I easily tune out—if anything, it's more motivation to keep going.

Fight harder. Fight more brutally. Make the other person hurt even more.

Brute strength is all Azeria knows, because when he presses down and I push up, he's got nothing else to do. He grits his teeth and tightens his grip on the board to jam it down further.

I'm more tactical.

I kick at his shin and force a strained howl out of him. Distracted by the sudden and unexpected pain, he's not ready for my next strike. I let go of the board and uppercut him. My knuckles collide with the brunt of his jaw. He flails backward, thrown off balance. I finish him.

More hits to the face and body until he's knocking into the wall and then dropping to the floor. I climb on top of him, my Balisong knife flipping out for some play time.

“You thought you could escape? You thought I wasn't going to hunt you down?” I pant, jamming the knife into his broad chest. Nowhere that will kill him. The moment is more about torture. I have enough experience with both to know when and where to hurt someone and to what degree.

Azeria's going to live... for the next few hours. Once I've had my fun—and interrogated him to the fullest extent—he'll be disposed of like the rest.

When he doesn't answer quick enough for my liking, I slash his shoulder next. Sweat pours out of him profusely as his teeth gnash and he tips his head back to keep from crying out.

“You know what the fuck you did,” I say. “You signed your death warrant and didn’t even know it.”

To my surprise, just when I’m expecting a whimper of pain, he bursts into crazed laughter. He throws his head back and barks out some shaky laughs.

I growl in answer and stab him in the chest again. “Keep laughing. I can fuck you up all day.”

He finally cries out when I stab him a fourth time, though the amused glint still shines in his eyes. This guy is batshit crazy. That, or he’s delirious. Either way, this is only a teaser of what’s to come. My bloodlust is nowhere near quenched.

“We’ll see if you’re laughing when I’m through with you,” I say, gripping bloody fingers into the front of his coat. I raise his torso up so his face is forced to come close. “You’ve got no idea what you’re in for. Bet you didn’t know fucking with her is fucking with me, did you?”

23. delphine

. . .



“WHO GOES for a run in the cold?” Stitches asks, blowing heat into his hands. “No offense, Miss ADA, but you’re off your rocker.”

I crack my neck and roll my head on my shoulders. “The cold air feels good when you’re running.”

Stitches blinks at me from behind his wire-framed glasses. “Yep. It’s official. Psycho’s girl is as psycho as he is.”

“Stop it,” I laugh. “You should try it. Come for a run with me sometime.”

“I’ll tail you in my car, heat on full blast. How’s that?”

I leave him on the sidewalk as I finish out my stretches. Tomorrow is Christmas, and I don’t plan on exercising much until *after* the New Year. I’ve made Salvatore promise he’ll take a few days off with me. Memories of our last winter holiday come to mind—the last real moments we’d been together before breaking up.

As ridiculous as it sounds, it’d be nice to experience another holiday like that, where we were cozy and bundled up inside his apartment, enjoying the break from the outside world.

I plug my ears with my AirPods and then I'm off. I set a steady pace, occasionally checking my smart watch. I'm on track to run a twelve-minute mile. Not the best, but I've been mostly out of practice for weeks now.

The park resembles a winter wonderland with the snowfall from last night. It's turned everything around me white, from the tree tops to the grass. Thankfully, the running trail has been kept free of snow.

The winter sunlight shines pale and anemic, but invigorating just the same.

Few are out at the park given it's Christmas Eve. I encounter the occasional fellow runner and speed walker. A few others walk their dogs or head off to a coffee and bagel shop. A stop *I* might make too, once I'm through.

Up ahead the running trail curves along the perimeter of the park. I check behind me and see Stitches tailing me in his car. He's got the window down despite the bitter cold, as if it helps him keep a better watch over me. When our eyes meet, he winks.

I stay on the route I'm on, tracking my pace every so often. It's as I'm glancing up from my smart watch that I see a man jogging toward me out the corner of my eye.

My heart flips with enough panic I almost react by striking him. I've practiced the maneuvers Salvatore has taught me so many times, I'm more than prepared to defend myself. I slow up, ready to launch into my first move until I recognize the familiar face.

Chadwick looks out of place on a runner's trail—his large form lumbers toward me puffing out cold air, his expression miserable. He's wearing a beanie pulled down to his brows,

his attire so new I half expect to see an uncut price tag. Matching jacket and jogger pants, his shoes unscuffed and without a speck of dirt on them. I wouldn't be surprised if he took a detour to a luxury shop and purchased the ensemble *just* for this moment.

Though he's in incredible shape, it's clear he's not much for running. Especially not outdoors. He's more the private indoor gym type.

"Delphi!" he pants as he falls into step with me.

"Hey! Get away from her!" Stitches shouts, honking his horn. He moves to park, presumably so he can get out and *make* Chadwick leave me alone.

I twist my torso and wave at him to signal it's okay. "I know him! Work colleague!"

Stitches's eyes narrow, his glare still suspicious. He doesn't trust Chadwick as far as he could throw him, but he refrains from interfering any further, trailing closely behind us.

I shoot Chadwick a disgruntled glare of my own. "Are you watching me? How'd you find me? *Why* are you here?"

"Geez, Delphi, is there a reason you're being so hostile? Am I not allowed to talk to you anymore? Is *he* going to come up and accost me again?"

He's referencing Salvatore—and the night weeks ago when I'd finally gone on a date with him, just to have Salvatore show up and cut it short.

"I'm not getting in the middle of it," I puff out, my breath freezing in front of me. I pick up my pace in hopes I'll tire Chadwick out and he'll give up. Unfortunately, his strides are longer than mine, which means he doesn't have to push as hard to keep in sync with me.

“You haven’t returned my calls.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Brenda told me you’ve taken five weeks off work.”

“So what? I don’t owe you an explanation, Chadwick. I’m guessing she also told you how to find me?”

He nods. “She said you run on Saturday mornings around this time. I figured you’d do it at Northam City Park—don’t be mad at her. She didn’t know you’re ignoring me. You didn’t tell her about our date, did you?”

“Why would I? It was *one* dinner.”

“We’re supposed to be friends.”

“I can’t talk right now! You’re throwing off my pacing.” I glance down at my smart watch and notice my numbers have shifted.

Chadwick gulps down more air, though he sticks by my side. “I wouldn’t have to chase you down on running trails if you answered my calls. How about lunch? We can talk—”

“I’m not interested,” I interrupt curtly.

It may come across as rude, but I’ve done enough tiptoeing around Chadwick’s feelings.

“You’re seeing him again, aren’t you? Mancino.”

I stop altogether, turning to face him. “Chadwick, this is the last time I’m addressing the subject. None of what I do is any of your concern. I’m not interested in you in that way. I’m sorry I went out to dinner with you—I probably shouldn’t have. But I’m *not* interested, okay? My lack of interest in you has nothing to do with him.”

“But you *are* seeing him again?” He massages his side as if to get rid of a stitch. Disappointment drips from his voice and the breathless expression on his face. “Is that what you’ve been doing with your off time?”

My smart watch interrupts me before I can answer. I’ve received a text from Cade, my friend in the Cyber Crimes department.

Did some more digging on what happened w/ Doukas. BIG discovery. Are u able to meet at city hall? Let me know as soon as u can.

“What is it?” Chadwick asks, watching me. “What’s wrong?”

I ignore him for a second as I look over my shoulder. Stitches has parked and is getting out of his car. Judging by his scowl and fast walk toward us he’s had enough of Chadwick following me around. He’s probably decided Salvatore would want him to cut off the interaction.

“I need to go by city hall,” I say. “I was having Cade look into something for me.”

“Alright, pal, time for you to scram!” Stitches yells. He’s in full mafia tough guy mode as he marches up, which for Stitches isn’t very intimidating, but Chadwick’s easily frazzled. He jabs a finger in his chest and walks him backward. “You’ve had enough time to chat. The lady’s trying to run. Get lost!”

Chadwick’s eyes bulge and he holds up his hands. “Don’t hurt me! Wait, are you one of *his* guys? Delphine, are you

crazy? You have his men following you?”

“Chadwick, leave!” I snap impatiently. I round on Stitches.
“Can you take me by city hall?”

“Sure thing, Miss ADA. Hop in.”

Stitches guides me toward his car, but not without throwing one last disgruntled glare at Chadwick. We leave him standing in the middle of the park trail gawking after us. Knowing Chadwick, he won’t stay away for long. Three years of attending law school with him taught me this.

We drive off. Stitches waits for a couple blocks to pass before he asks about him.

“Ex-boyfriend?”

“More like... a guy who won’t take a hint.”

“I bet you get a lot of that. No wonder Psycho’s kept such a close eye.”

I’m pulled from my thoughts about Cade and whatever important discovery he’s made. “Hmm? What do you mean he’s kept a close eye?”

“Oh,” Stitches says, flashing me a sheepish smile, “I mean... you know, with you staying at the loft. He’s been very worried about you.”

We’re pulling up to city hall within the next minute, leaving little time to process what Stitches says about Salvatore and his ‘close eye’. City hall and the police department are the only two places in Northam where Salvatore’s security can’t follow me.

Stitches parks by the curb outside the historic building, takes one look at the dark windows, and then meets my gaze in the rear-view mirror.

“I should come in with you.”

“You can’t. It’s city hall.”

“Nobody’s here.”

“Cade is meeting me. You come in with me and our cover is blown.”

“Oh. Right. He works the Cyber Crimes unit.”

“He does. Which means...”

“He’d love to rat us out to his cop friends and take down a guy like me or Psycho.”

“He has an update on Octavia Doukas’s death.”

“Make it quick. And keep your cell on you. If you’re not down in fifteen minutes, I’m coming up. City hall or no city hall,” Stitches says sternly. “I’ll say I got lost and thought it was the ice cream parlor.”

I smirk at him in goodbye, but don’t bother dignifying him with a response. As much as I’ve been looking forward to moving past this current chapter in my life, I’ve grown a little fond of some of Salvatore’s crew. Being a loner type by nature, Salvatore has said he’s selective of the men he welcomes into his inner circle. The more time I spend around guys like Stitches, I can see why he chose who he has.

The huge building looms above me as I climb up the many cascading stone steps. Upon reaching the doors, I scan my badge and slip inside.

With it being a Saturday morning, no one is around. The entire building is deserted and silent. Not even security works on the weekends. I ride the elevator up to my floor and then head down the hall toward my office.

The light's already on and the door's open. I slow up until I'm close enough to peer inside.

Nobody here.

It's not until I cross the threshold that the door slams shut behind me. Someone was standing behind it. Someone who then presses something hard into my spine.

"Thanks for joining me, ADA," Detective Galecki says from behind me. "Kept me waiting a few extra minutes, but I forgive you."

24. delphine

. . .



“WHAT ARE YOU DOING,
DETECTIVE?”

I ask slowly. My heart punches at my ribcage, beating painfully hard. Yet, somehow, I manage to keep calm. I manage to keep my voice even. “Put the gun down.”

Galecki digs it into my spine. “Don’t think I will. Why don’t you drop your purse at your feet and then stand up straight with your arms in the air. No funny business.”

Damn it.

Since I’ve begun firearm training with Salvatore, I’ve started carrying myself. Just an extra precaution and layer of protection in case I ever need it.

Right now would be one of those times...

My Glock lies securely inside my purse as Galecki gives me the order to put it down. A resigned sigh leaves me and I do as I’m told. Carefully, with slow and stiff movements, I bend to set my purse on the office floor. He keeps the gun on me as he punts my purse halfway across the room.

“Your phone in there?” he asks.

When I take a second too long answering, he shoves me from behind. I stumble half a step forward.

“I asked you a question,” he says. “Your phone in there? Stay still—I’m gonna search you just in case.”

The gun returns to its place at the dip in my spine. I wince at the feel of it. His free hand is on me at once. It travels all over me, sliding up and down my body. I’m still wearing my workout clothes, the fabric thin even with my hoodie, not as protective as I’d like.

His rough and invasive touch feels like a violation. On my hips. My chest. Between my legs. He’s giving me a police pat down.

My eyes clench shut so not to panic at the unwanted touches. I focus on breathing instead.

When he’s satisfied, he gives me another hard shove forward. “Go sit down on the sofa. Keep your arms up. You lower them or make any sudden movements, I’m firing. Understand?”

I nod, my voice stuck in my throat, and pad over to the sofa. I’m trying to figure out what to even do in a situation like this—never did I imagine I’d be held hostage at gun point in my office by a Northam City police officer. The situation is so strange and confusing, I can’t begin to make sense of what the hell is happening.

“Where’s Cade?” I ask finally, my tone restrained.

“Don’t worry about Cade. I took care of him. He *hacked* my shit. He won’t be doing that again—or much else. You put him up to it, didn’t you?”

My brows knit. “I asked him to look into Doukas’ ring camera. But I’m guessing you didn’t want that. You didn’t like

whatever it is he found.”

“You’re too nosy. Even for an ADA. I knew I had to get rid of you as soon as you kept insisting something was up with the security footage of Doukas’ brownstone. Then you took all that time off. You didn’t think I would just let you come across my secret, did you?” he asks with a casual wave of his handgun. “But you’re a hard one to get rid of. Do you always have private security following you everywhere?”

“You sent the text from Cade’s phone to lure me here because—”

“I knew your security doesn’t follow you inside city hall. Funny thing about that security of yours. I recognize a few of the guys. Is there a reason why they happen to be guys I’ve brought in on charges in the past? All guys under the employment of the Mancino crime organization?” Galecki uses the barrel of the gun to scratch at his scruffy beard as if in deep thought. “Am I right in saying the ADA—future district attorney of Northam if the election goes your way—is in bed with the mob?”

A sense of dizzying shock rolls over me. I feel lightheaded at the mere accusation, though I don’t let it show on my face. I simply blink at him, taking a page from Salvatore’s book. My expression remains blank with no signs of emotion.

“Are you projecting, Detective?” I ask, my arms aching as I hold them midair. “It sounds like you’re hiding a lot more than I am. What secret were you trying to cover up?”

Galecki’s phone rings and he shushes me with a jerking motion of his gun. I sit still and watch him as he answers the call and explains to whoever is on the other line that he’s handling what he calls “a loose end”.

Apparently, I'm that loose end he doesn't want to leave unhandled.

My gaze darts to my purse, strewn across the floor on the other side of the office. If only there was some way of getting to it quickly enough to grab my gun. If only there was some way Galecki could become distracted long enough for me to use my phone to call for help.

Stitches said he'd come up in fifteen minutes if I didn't make it down.

I have no reference of time around me, but it usually takes me about five minutes just to make it to my office. All I have to do is last the next ten.

“Wait, what?” Galecki says, the phone pressed to his ear. The lines in his face crease even more as he casts me a look. “*She's* his girl? Is that why his guys go wherever she goes? So what if I take her out? He said nobody go after her? You don't know what I know about this bitch—she's not gonna leave us alone. You know how she picked and picked and picked at Giorgio 'til she had charges.”

I'm on edge listening to him and the other person on the phone discuss my fate. Whoever he's speaking to seems to want Galecki to leave me alone. Galecki couldn't disagree more. They end the phone call without resolving the matter.

He pockets his phone. “I'm being told not to fuck with you. Your *boyfriend* promised he'd raise hell if we do. My boss doesn't want that kind of trouble right now.”

“Which boss would that be? Frausto? Or is it Hector?”

He chuckles. “See, there you go proving my point. You're too stubborn for your own good, ADA. Pick, pick, pick. That's all you do.”

“So you’re a dirty cop,” I say. “You’ve been working on the inside for the Belinis. You were scheduling the security detail for Doukas. You were the first detective on the scene of her murder. You radioed it in. The evidence we had against Giorgio? You tampered with it. You told his lawyers. They motioned to have it thrown out. Judge Ortiz listened. Probably for an extra payday.”

“That’s right. I couldn’t have him or Frausto going away—it’d be *my* ass on the line.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself. You’ve betrayed your oath. You swore to protect this city against crime!”

“Says the chick who’s getting fucked down by a mafia boss,” he says, laughing. He aims the gun at me as if about to shoot. “Excuse me if I don’t take your moral lectures seriously, ADA. I’m just trying to cover my ass is all. I fell into a lot of debt in gambling rings. The Belinis bailed me out on the condition I’d do some insider favors for them.”

Panic rises up my chest, filling me to the point I can feel another mini attack coming. I urge myself to calm down and remain as composed as possible. Even as he casually points his gun at me.

Keep him talking. Ask more questions. Just hang on.

“So was it you?” I ask. “You attacked me that night outside my apartment? You had Azeria break into my place a few weeks after? It happened the same night as Doukas’ murder.”

Galecki’s bushy brows connect. “What the fuck are you talking about? Attack you when? I *just* told you I haven’t been able to get anywhere near you off duty.”

“My rapist—”

“I didn’t rape nobody!” he interjects loudly. “And who the fuck is Azeria? Are you crazy? This is about the Belini organization. This is about getting you off their back. Off *my* back.”

I’m not so sure I believe him. At this point, I don’t know what to think. Regardless of what the truth is, I just need to hold on. Stitches must be growing impatient. Hopefully, he’ll come up to check on me like he did when he made Chadwick leave earlier.

“Get up,” Galecki says suddenly. “We’ve wasted enough time. You’re coming with me. I’ve got to get rid of you. Boss says I shouldn’t... but his boss is my boss too. And I’m not trying to piss him off when you bring up new charges. He’ll be grateful in the end.”

“What... you don’t have to do this...”

“No, actually, I really, really have to. I ain’t getting beat to a pulp like the other insiders who failed, and I ain’t going away to prison. The only way to cover my ass is to off you. Problem solved. I’ll make it real convincing. Sort of like Doukas. Perk of being a police officer. I said get up!”

He snatches me off the sofa by the upper arm. I twist to resist his hold, but he’s serious. He’s about to haul me off somewhere. He’s about to finish me off.

I steady my breath and prepare myself to do what I must do to survive. I can’t let him take me away. I’m going to have to fight tooth and nail.

No matter what, I won’t give up. He’s going to have to kill me on the spot. Right inside my office at city hall, because I’m *not* leaving with him.

I wait for my opening. As he walks me toward the door, I catch him off guard. I jam my elbow into his ribs as hard as I can, and then grab his arm holding the gun. He stumbles trying to retain control of it, the barrel pointed up at the ceiling. We're wrestling for it when I knee him in the groin and thrust the base of my palm into his face.

"ARGH!" he screams at the combo hits. He drops the gun, falling back against the wall. Our fast-moving feet kick it by mistake.

It tumbles several feet away, out of reach. I scurry for it.

"Not so fast!"

As I dive for the gun, Galecki dives for me. We crash down on the ground. Both of us land on our stomachs. My arm outstretched in front of me. Him clutching my legs. He drags me away from the gun, crawling up my body to pin me down.

I scream. I let my voice ring through the air of the empty government building in hopes somebody somewhere has come by on a day off to check their emails. Maybe a cleaning crew passing through to vacuum and wipe down toilets. Stitches, who said he'd come up if I took too long.

Just hang on... just a little bit longer... just hang on...

I struggle against Galecki as he holds me down with his body weight. He's breathless and dripping sweat, releasing guttural sounds of pain.

"Stop fucking screaming!" He backhands me across the face. His hand clinches shut on my throat. "Oh, so you're one of those. You *want* me to rough you up. Is that what that rape talk was about?"

I'm reeling from the hard hit. The pain prickles across my cheek. It'll most likely bruise in the coming hours. But I don't

give him the satisfaction of knowing how deeply it hurts. As the dizziness clears, my gaze refocuses on him, as fearless as I can make it.

“You’re going to have to kill me here!” I spit out. My voice sounds more hoarse the tighter he throttles me. “I’m not going to make it easy on you. You’re going to have to take me out with a fight.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Do you really think you’re going to murder an ADA in cold blood in her office and get away with it?”

His face twists with rage, his second hand joining his first on my throat. “I told you to shut the fuck up! It doesn’t matter—if I’ve got to choke you out right here on the floor. I’ll figure something out.”

My throat burns as he chokes the life out of me. I claw at his hands and then his face. Salvatore’s advice was to go for the eyes. If someone ever had me pinned like this, he said to concentrate on gouging their eyes out. No one can withstand that level of torment. They’ll be forced to release you.

As the air leaves my lungs, I focus on digging my fingers into his eyeballs. Galecki howls in pain and lets go of my throat. His hands fly up to cover mine and pry them away from his face. I only sink my nails in deeper.

“YOU BITCH!” he screams in agony. “You fucking bitch, you’re dead now—”

One moment, Galecki’s on top of me, wresting my hands from his eyes. The next moment, there’s a subdued bang that’s both dignified and violent. He’s slumping sideways off of me and his heavy hands that were clenched shut around my wrists are gone.

I gasp for my first breath in what feels like a lifetime.

“Miss ADA!” Stitches jogs over with his pistol in hand, the silencer attached to the barrel. He kneels beside me and helps me sit up, his wire-framed glasses low on his nose. “I told you fifteen minutes. Sixteen minutes, and this is what I find? That’s not Cade.”

“No,” I cough. My throat aches so much I can barely speak. “That’s Detective Galecki.”

Stitches spares him a look. “He’s dirty?”

I nod.

“Well, good news for us. Nobody will miss him. We’ll dispose of him and spin a story.”

I’m still trying to catch my breath as I force more air into my lungs. Galecki lays a couple feet off. His body is twisted, his face buried in the carpet. Blood mats in his dark hair from the bullet lodged in the back of his head.

“Wait ’til Psycho hears about this,” Stitches laments. “He’s not gonna be happy.”

25. salvatore

. . .



I RETURN to Nirvana wearing Azeria's blood like some morbid fashion statement. He's not dead—yet. That'll come later. For now he's suffering in agony while I bask in the aftereffects of my high. It felt amazing making him bleed.

Crazed laughter and all.

It's started snowing again, a real Christmas Eve cliché. Tiny flakes dust the city streets, resembling spilled sugar from the club windows.

Stitches waits for me the instant I set foot inside my office. He's wringing his hands with a smile that's supposed to be pleasant but looks painful on his face. I stop dead. I know this look all too well.

“What is it now, Francis?”

“You might want to clean up first, Psycho.”

“I might want to add your blood to the blood on my clothes if you don't quit stalling. What's that look for?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “Well... remember how I was taking Delphine out for a morning jog?”

“Francis,” I growl, in attack mode at once. I stalk toward him. “Tell me nothing went wrong and that Phi's safe and

unharmmed.”

“Uh, some of that’s true. She’s safe now, and she’s *mostly* unharmmed. A few bruises here and there, but—”

“What the fuck happened!?” It’s not often I raise my voice. I tend to prefer more of a lethal yet collected approach. That goes out the window the second I realize something bad happened.

Stitches backs up to create more space between us and launches into a hurried explanation of what went down. Delphine’s morning jog was fine until she was asked to meet the guy from Cyber Crimes at city hall. Some piece of trash dirty cop showed up instead and tried to kill her. Luckily, Stitches interrupted just in time and put a bullet in his skull.

“You think it’s all connected?” Stitches asks. “She said he had no clue about her assault.”

“I’ll find out tonight when I make Azeria cry like a little bitch.”

Stitches grins. “You sure you don’t need any help? I’m riding a high after the cop. We dumped him in a vat of sulfuric acid. Skin melted right off. Don’t worry, I took Delphine to the loft first.”

“Go check in with Omar. See if he needs any help getting things situated with Azeria. We won’t have him for long.”

A fist beats against my door. Fabio speaks on the other end. “Psycho, you’ve got a visitor.”

My eyes meet Stitches, who shrugs. Who would be visiting me this late in the afternoon on Christmas fucking Eve?

I stride over to the door and yank it open. “What kind of visitor?”

“Of the nemesis variety,” Fabio says. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “I tried to tell him we were closed, but he insisted on ordering a mint julep.”

My glare hardens into pure rage. Fabio quickly steps out of the way, pressing himself up against the wall in the hallway.

I’m fast changing out of my bloodied clothes and then heading down to the ground floor. Nearly a decade has passed since the last time Daddy Adams and I were in the same city much less the same room.

When Delphine and I were dating, he’d opened up a full investigation into Nirvana. For two years we’d been under his careful microscope until the few charges he did draw up were dismissed by a judge we paid off. Lucius reassigned me to South Valley not long after, and the DA retired without accomplishing his major goal—putting the Mancinos behind bars.

By that time, Delphine and I were long over. The rivalry between me and him reached a stalemate. He’s stayed out of my way in his retirement and I was too busy in South Valley to be in his. But now—

“Hello, DA,” I say, stopping at his table. Nothing is warm and welcoming about my greeting. My face is an eerie blank slate, my tone rough. “We’re closed. Which means I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Right now, or you will be escorted out.”

The former DA relaxes into his booth, a mirthful shine reflecting in his almost-black eyes. Over the years he hasn’t aged much—some graying along his hairline and hints of crows-feet crinkling around his eyes. He’s still the same smug asshole I’ve hated from the moment I met him.

“I’m retired, Mancino. As you already know.”

“You’d think that’d mean you’d stop coming by to harass my club. Just couldn’t help yourself, is that right?”

He chuckles in the middle of a sip from his mint julep. “You call stopping by for a drink harassment?”

“From you, yes. Cut the shit, DA. Why’re you here?”

“I was in the area. I figured now was as good a time as any to pay you a visit. There’s a matter I’d like to discuss.” The corners of his mouth curl the more he watches me with open humor. When only my hostile silence answers him, he goes on. “Care to explain why my daughter has been living with you?”

Of course.

Delphine had mentioned he’d been growing suspicious. Her apartment being wrecked was probably the last straw. He wouldn’t let something like that go easily.

Either way, I give no reaction. Just a careless shrug, my arms crossed.

“Your daughter is a grown woman, DA. She’s capable of making her own decisions. Do you disagree?”

“For the last time, I’m not the DA, and of course I agree. My daughter is an intelligent, classy woman. She’ll never allow herself to be used by you for long. She didn’t back then and she won’t now. Mark my words.”

“You came all the way to Nirvana just to tell me that? You must be *real* worried, DA.”

He glowers, his drawn lips tight at my continued use of his former title. “I wanted to give you an early Christmas present.”

“That’s nice of you. Here I was thinking you hated my guts.”

“I *do* hate your guts, Mancino.” His laugh is rich and dense. Obviously perfected over time. Probably uses it often whenever he’s with his wealthy pals playing golf. He smooths one of his large hands down his woolly argyle sweater. “Soon you’ll be dealing with me a lot more often. It’ll be just like old times.”

“I couldn’t give less of a shit.”

His lips twist into a grin. “You will. I’ve been passive for too long. I see now that’s been a mistake. You think you’ll run the city just like your criminal father. You think you’ll manipulate my daughter again like before. All that comes to an end soon enough.”

“Guess that means I better enjoy every part of her for the holidays.”

“Holidays which will soon be over. Delphine will be moving into her own place very soon. You see, she’s only just beginning her career. She’ll be the most successful DA this city has ever seen. She won’t mar her career and lifelong dream with a black stain like you. You’ll be discarded.”

“We’ll see about that.” He has about a minute left before I break the glass he drinks out of and jam one of the shards into his jugular. Delphine’s father or not. He doesn’t get to stroll into my club and threaten me. We’re on my turf. *I* make the rules.

If I want to turn his head into a dartboard, I’ll do just that—throw a knife at him. I’ll land one in his eye and we’ll see if he’s still so fucking cocky.

He must sense my impending rage. He gets up from his table with his wallet in hand. “Twelve years and you haven’t learned a thing. Still a step behind.”

“You’re going to frame me like you did last time? Twelve years and I would’ve hoped you’d gotten more creative.”

“No framing necessary, Mancino. This will be all your own doing. Wait and see. Tomorrow morning. Merry Christmas.”

He turns and walks out the door. His laugh carries as he does, the sound of stuck up, arrogant bastards who think they shit golden bricks. He needs to be humbled.

A throaty growl leaves me as I knock his half full mint julep to the floor. The glass shatters into jagged pieces in every direction.

The next time he shows his face around my club, he’s not leaving alive.

She won’t mar her career and lifelong dream with a black stain like you. You’ll be discarded...

Another angry growl grumbles out of me. I clench my hand into a fist and punch a hole in the wall behind the booth he was sitting in. My knuckles split open and blood oozes out, but I don’t give a fuck. I do it again a couple more times until the hole is crater-sized and my hand is drenched in my own blood.

He’s not coming out on top. Not this time. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn’t.

But the question is, what’s this plan he’s set into motion?



Delphine isn't shaken up like I expect her to be. Detective Galecki came seconds away from killing her, but she seems more relieved than anything that he's gone.

Stitches and some others planted careful evidence to lead authorities into believing he fled the country. Clues like his apartment being in a state of disarray. His passport and suitcase missing. Vague emails he sent his father about being in neck-deep with the Belinis. Bank records of a flight to Costa Rica. Even airline employees we paid off to swear they saw him boarding said flight.

Meanwhile, Galecki's body was swallowed up by sulfuric acid. He's not only been outed as a dirty cop, but we've made him pay for his involvement sabotaging Delphine. His attempt to kill her.

Delphine thanks me. She wraps her arms around me and kisses my jaw. I hug her in return and debate if I should involve her in what's about to happen next. The fact that she's turning the other cheek to the murder of a cop is alarming enough. I didn't tell her about the visit her father paid me, but Azeria could hold the key to everything that's been happening to her.

What's about to go down in the interrogation room of my compound might be a point of no return.

I promised her I'd let her do it. She could torture and kill the guy who hurt her however she wanted. Finally make him pay for what he did to her.

Giorgio's dead and there's a chance Azeria didn't assault her, but both were clearly targeting her in some way—or so it seems.

Regardless, the scenario has morphed into a dark, morbid fantasy of mine, though it conflicts me. The woman I'm infatuated with at my side as we do something so twisted together—we take a life. It'll solidify us in a way. The strength of our bond and how deeply she trusts me.

We'd share this forever. No matter what her father thinks.

I draw back from our hug with my hands on her hips. “Phi, I've got something else to tell you. We found Azeria.”

She gasps. “How? Where was he?”

“Long story. But the short of it is tonight's the night. He won't live past dawn. You don't have to be involved. You don't even have to see him. I can handle everything. Let you know once he's gone. I'm going to force a confession out of him before it's over.”

“You're going to kill Azeria.”

Suddenly, she looks dazed. Her eyes glaze over and her lips part. I brush curls behind her ear and frame her face in my hands.

Maybe my dark fantasy is just that. A fantasy. It's not good for her.

“It's alright, Phi,” I say. “You can stay here in the loft. Relax with the cats. Watch a movie. *I'll* handle it.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. I can practically see her heart pounding inside her chest. Even just the mention seems to overwhelm her, like she needs to hold on to something or she'll collapse.

“It's not your thing. Let me do the dirty work. It's what I'm for, alright?”

“No, I want to do it,” she says finally. “I want to confront him. I need this. It’ll be closure.”

“You can leave at any time. You don’t have to do anything. He’s dying regardless of who does it.”

She nods. “I’m ready.”



Azeria is chained up. Straps are fastened to his ankles, tethering him to the floor, and forcing him to keep his legs shoulder-width apart. His arms dangle limply above his head, secured by handcuffs and a chain cemented to the ceiling. Anytime he shifts too much, the chains clink and clank.

Some of my men already roughed him up earlier. That’s after I had stabbed him a couple times.

When Delphine and I enter the interrogation room, he’s bloody and bruised. She staggers to a stop at the sight of him. I place a hand to the small of her back and am seconds away from telling her she can go. With a deep inhale, she draws enough nerve to continue, walking deeper into the dimly lit room.

Azeria tracks us with his bloodshot eyes. His body sways in place, the chains clanking.

I establish some ground rules. “This is how it’s going to go. You will answer whatever questions we have. You will come clean about all the grimy shit you’ve pulled. You will show some fucking respect and deference. And maybe... maybe I’ll end it a few minutes quicker. Understand?”

He bares his teeth for a bloody smile.

Yeah, this fucker is crazy as hell.

I deck him hard in the jaw. His head rolls onto his left shoulder at the force of the hit. For a couple seconds he's seeing stars, blinking and staring at us spacey-eyed. I step back and turn to Delphine.

She's in control. She decides how this goes.

"Whatever you want," I say. "I have weapons. Different tools. Devices that will make him feel more excruciating pain than he's ever felt in his life. *Or* you don't have to do anything to him—you can say your peace and I'll do the rest."

She hasn't taken her eyes off Azeria. She stares beyond me at the chained-up guy who broke into her apartment, who had her necklace, and who could've assaulted her that night in the alleyway.

Inhaling a shuddering breath, Delphine walks around me and starts straight for him. I almost hold her back out of an instinctual sense of protectiveness. Even if Azeria's chained up, I don't like the idea of her being too close to him. He shouldn't be breathing the same air as she is.

"Did you do it?" she asks. "Did you attack me that night?"

His smile remains. His silence too.

Delphine steps closer. "Answer me! Did you rape me?!"

Azeria chortles, his chains clanging from the force of his laugh. Still, he says nothing. He makes a phlegmy hawking sound and then spits blood at her feet.

Rage pulses through me and I step forward. Delphine gets to him first. She surprises us both when she backhands him like a bitch.

The slap echoes in the closed off room, bouncing off the walls. I pause midstep. Azeria's head snaps to the side.

Delphine smirks in satisfaction at the imprint tinging across his swollen cheek. I hadn't expected her smack to be so hard. Neither did Azeria judging by the way he eyeballs her afterward.

It's the first real crack he's shown. He stares at her like he's insulted she'd dare hit him. As if his hands were free, he'd return the strike twice as hard. That alone makes me almost give into the rage I'm holding back.

"If you don't want to talk, I will," she says. "Who hired you to break into my apartment? We have you on camera. Why? Why did you do it?"

Azeria's smile inches onto his bloodied lips again. He rasps out his first words I've heard from him. "You've no clue."

"No clue, what? Who hired you? The Belinis? The Viscontis? Or are you just some sick pervert who was working on his own?"

The more frustrated Delphine becomes, the more he uses it against her. He breaks out into another ring of crazed laughter.

I don't expect Delphine to explode the way she does. She takes half a step back as if she's about to remove herself from the situation and then she strikes. She punches Azeria in the face.

It's a good punch. It lands dead center on his nose. She wound up enough power that it does some damage. Azeria grunts and blood leaks from his nostril.

"You've no clue what you've gotten yourself into," he spits through his laughter. "Turn back now or you'll be sorry."

"Sorry for what!?" Delphine yells. She smacks him across the face. "Answer my questions!"

“Never.”

“You’ll answer or you’ll suffer,” I bark from behind her. I select one of the knives from the table of toys. “You can play big and bad, but we’ll see if that tune changes when body parts start coming off.”

Delphine calms down. She steps closer and grabs his bloody chin to force his attention. “You’re clearly not a man of means. You were found living in some squalid apartment. No money or power of your own. You’re just a lackey. Somebody’s lapdog who they send out to commit crimes for them—you’re the *fall* guy. The fall guy is always expendable.”

He bares his teeth at Delphine like he’s about to snap or growl at her.

“You’re expendable,” she repeats, a cruel edge to her voice. “Whoever you work for doesn’t give enough of a shit about you to rescue you. He’s left you to die. To be tortured and maimed before you die. Before you die a disfigured, lonely, pathetic, sack of shit. Why even bother protecting whoever it is? You’re lower than scum to them.”

His eyes bore into hers even from where he dangles in his chains. “You think you’re so smart, don’t you?”

“Certainly smarter than you.”

“So smart you still wound up on the dirty ground begging for mercy.”

“That’s true,” she says coolly, “but now it’s your turn. Now you’re going to be the one who’s begging for mercy—and it’s me who you’ll be begging like a little bitch.”

Pride beats inside my chest watching Delphine handle him. It’s a testament to how far she’s come from the woman who had locked herself up in her apartment and whose voice

trembled when I stopped by to check on her so many weeks ago.

“I’m a bitch?” he spits out. He follows with a coarse laugh. “No, sweetheart. You’re still the bitch. Stupid, fragile, pathetic. You’re weak. Kill me tonight—do whatever the fuck you want to me—but that’s not the fact of the matter. You won’t last very much longer. You can count on it.”

For a second time, I’m darting forward to discipline Azeria myself. Delphine interjects, proving she wants to do it. Her first punch and smack were warm ups—she shuts Azeria up with another punch and another after that.

She throws out several combos. Each one hard and precise, landing on Azeria’s bruised face and his limp body. Her breaths become ragged as she attacks him like he’s an inanimate punching bag. She punches him in the gut and then smashes a fist into his throat. She knees his crotch several times.

I watch in the background, unsure if I should be turned on or concerned at the monster I’ve created.

At one point she spins and kicks him in the gut. Where the hell did she learn that?

She mentioned she wanted the time off work to train some more. I hadn’t expected her to perfect so many maneuvers. Then again, she always puts her all in everything she does—why would it be any different when learning to fight and defend herself?

Minutes go by and Delphine beats the shit out of him. The room fills with the sounds of her strikes, her heavy breaths, and Azeria’s groans of pain. When she does step back far

enough to admire the damage she's done, the expression on her dewy face is borderline *euphoric*.

Almost the same face she makes when she climaxes.

Even I'm thrown. I didn't expect her to... enjoy the moment so much. Though I understand why she would. It feels good to make a dirtbag human suffer. For weeks Delphine has been on edge looking to regain some semblance of control.

This must feel like the ultimate form of taking it back.

Azeria's half conscious. His head bows against his chest and blood leaks from his mouth and nose. The night's only getting started. He's in for a gruesome final few hours.

"Phi," I say, putting a hand to her shoulder, "you alright?"

She draws another deep breath. "He didn't do it."

I raise a brow. "Am I hearing that correctly? Didn't do what?"

"My assault."

"Phi, you just beat the shit out of the guy."

"It wasn't him. His hands. His hair. His smell. I remember all of it." She spends the next few seconds catching more of her breath and looking down at her own hands. Normally so soft and delicate-looking, they almost resemble mine—bloodied and cut up. "But he's involved. He knows who did. And if he won't tell us who, then he deserves to suffer. He deserves to *die*."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. It sounds wrong. So wrong falling from her lips that I question if I'm misunderstanding. Since I've known her, Delphine has

believed strongly in the justice system. In *preserving* it at all costs.

Now here she is advocating for Azeria to suffer, to *die*, when she knows he wasn't the one who attacked her. The situation has morphed into playing judge, jury, and executioner for his other crimes. Guilt by association.

She must read my mind. She looks up at me from over her shoulder. "He deserves whatever happens. He's earned it. We set him free, he won't stop. His boss won't. They'll be coming for us anyway—why let him live after what he's done to me?"

Everything she says is true, but it makes it no less surprising coming from her. I push that aside and turn my attention to the battered and beaten man chained to my ceiling. Then I direct my gaze to the many weapons and devices on the table, waiting for their use.

We can really make him suffer, drag what we can out of him as he screams in agony.

"Are you doing it, or am I?"

26. salvatore

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WE'RE high off the moment when we return to the loft. Delphine runs her hands over her head of tight curls and turns to me with her lips parted in shock. A dark gleam shines in her eyes, leftover from our time in the interrogation room. The energy rolling off of her is charged and unpredictable. At any moment she might break into laughter or a panic over what we've done.

I toss my keys on the kitchen counter and shuck off my leather jacket. I approach her as she stands in the open space of the living room, looking like she expects to wake from a dream.

“You okay?”

“He's gone,” she says, her pretty brown eyes widening. She blinks and looks up at me, riding a strange line between innocence and sinfulness. “Jon, we did it. He's *gone*.”

I neglect to bring up she admitted Azeria wasn't the guy. But Azeria was no innocent man. Neither was Giorgio. They had participated in what she's been through in some capacity. If it makes her feel better that they're gone, who am I to say otherwise?

Good riddance. Two less dipshits walking the earth.

Delphine walks into my arms with a giddy wave washing over her. She rises up on tiptoe to press a fervent kiss on my lips. Her laughter interrupts it a second later. I hold on to her by the hips as she draws back slightly and looks up at me like I'm some sort of hero in a storybook.

I've never felt more like a fucking knight-in-shining-armor. Might as well be one.

The sick and twisted version, where we just got finished taking out a man together. Currently, his body is being pulverized into mush we'll feed to some stray dogs.

"You helped me through this," Delphine murmurs. She loops her arms around my neck and goes in a second time.

I dip her, returning her affection tenfold. More excitable laughter bubbles out of her, but I don't let it stop us. My tongue distracts her tongue with light flicks. In a split second those giggles turn into throaty moans. Her fingers slide up the underside of my hair and she hangs onto me as though afraid she'll sink through the floor.

"Salvatore."

My name sounds as a purr on her lips. Salt and Pepa would be proud. They probably are, from wherever they lurk in the loft. Their owner sounds just like them. I bite back my own laugh.

Delphine really *is* riding a high. She's in the fucking mood. Which means I'm more than happy to reciprocate. I spin her around fast, her curls bouncing along with her. Dizzy but obedient, she braces her smaller body against my larger frame. An immovable pillar to rest on as I force little breaths of air from her shuddering lungs.

I snake an arm over her hips. My hand slips into her jeans, under her panties, past the silky intimate skin of her mons pubis. Heat meets me as I palm her. I drag my fingertips across her pussy, testing her arousal.

Wet.

Moist and hot, slick to the touch.

Her hips buck *into* my touch. She purrs again. Softer yet whinier, like she's already reached her limit. She's not here for any teasing.

“Are you being bad, Phi?” I growl, clenching her by the hip. “Or are you going to behave yourself so I can reward this sweet pussy?”

“I'll behave,” she breathes, her head at rest against my shoulder. “I'll do whatever you want. Just make me feel good.”

I grin. I can see her reflection in the loft window—the dark gleam's still alive in her gaze and her lips are fuller in a pout.

Delphine Rose Adams. My beautiful obsession I don't know how I went twelve years without. I can't go another second without.

I steer her toward the bedroom. My arms swathed around her hips, me behind her. On our way, she begins undressing herself.

Fuckkk.

She's sexier than I can stand. She pulls off her T-shirt and unsnaps her bra. Her fingers work at the button and zipper of her jeans. I help her once we cross the finish line into the bedroom. I wrestle her denim jeans down the swell of her ass.

The sight is hot as hell—the plump curve of her ass popping out from the tight constraints of her jeans. I suck in a hard breath and slap my hand to one of her cheeks. Her smooth brown flesh fucking *jiggles*.

Enough to lock me under a trance.

I drop to my knees like a man possessed and press my face into her round ass. I shower it with kisses and bite into the supple skin. Delphine yelps and falls forward, planting her hands on the bed, half bent over before me.

Just the position I love her in. Bent over, her bare ass in my face. I peel her panties off and tongue her sweet, soaked pussy from behind. My palms fill up with her ass cheeks and I spread them apart as I eat her out. The feminine musky scent of her, the delicious taste of her, the slippery soft feel of her pussy—all of it awakens a feral beast inside me.

The primordial need dormant at any given time. The compulsion to fuck Delphine until every inch of her body belongs to me.

A rush of blood floods my cock. As if I wasn't already as hard as humanly possible. It's almost an uncomfortable hardness, heavy and impatient in my boxers.

I flick my tongue to her swollen clit and run it along her pussy lips, stroking into her. Barely able to handle the sensations I'm inflicting on her, she moans and twists fingers into the comforter. Her pussy glistens by the time I'm done with her. A few more licks and flicks, she'd be creaming right on my tongue.

But I'm not ready to make her come just yet.

I stand up and get rid of the rest of my clothes. The way she's presented to me, on her knees, ass in the air, I could

spear right into her. Sink deep into her tight pussy and pound away.

I decide against it. Doggy can be tricky for Delphine. Though we've occasionally done it, one wrong move can trigger her at any moment. I can tell it's not her favorite and still sets her slightly on edge.

This is about her pleasure as much as it's about mine. Tonight was a milestone for us. A victory we accomplished together. I'm proud of her and she deserves a reward.

Besides, I want to see her beautiful face light up as her body spasms and she comes. I move onto the bed to join her and issue my next order.

"Phi, sit up and face me. Let me see you."

I prop myself against the headboard and motion with my index finger for her to come over. Surprise flickers in her gaze as she listens. She crawls toward me and then plants herself in my lap. I greet her with a hot kiss, my hands sliding up to palm her breasts.

"Phi," I groan, kissing her cheek and then throat. "I said I want to see you. Lean back and show me yourself."

She releases another whine noise. Her eyes close. Her brows knit. She tilts her head back and braces her arms behind her. Her legs drape either side of me. The position she's sitting in, her torso and lower half of her body resembles a teardrop—her knees bent and her rounded ass peeking out from the underside of her thighs. Both block my view of what I *really* want to see.

I grab her knees and guide them apart. "Heaven is between these thighs. Did you know that, Phi? Spread for me. I want to see its beauty."

She opens up for me at my command. The folds and pink inside of her pussy have never looked more like a rose in fucking bloom.

I grab her by the side of her neck and draw her mouth to mine for another deep kiss.

“Good girl,” I say. “I love it when you behave yourself. Come fuck yourself on my cock. Fill yourself up so I can feel your tight pussy squeezing me.”

There’s no hiding from each other in this position. Our bodies aligned, Delphine perches in my lap and wraps her soft hand around my hard length. We both hold our breath in anticipation, watching the erotic sight of her guiding my cock into her.

I’m enveloped in her heat. I’m suffocated by the tight, pulsing clench of her. My cock pushes in deep and makes her sexy, curvy body tremble. Her pert tits bounce and her ribs poke out at the desperate breath she finally inhales. Her eyes meet mine and we move in sync.

Delphine undulating her hips. My hands gripping her thighs. My cock filling her up.

We kiss and moan. We fall into some kind of hypnosis where we’re no longer thinking. Our bodies are in control as I buck into her and she welcomes me deeper.

Some would say this is lovemaking. I’ve always hated the term—I don’t love anybody. An infatuation from a violent psycho isn’t love. But I suppose if I was ever capable of it... Delphine would be who I did.

Whatever I feel for this woman is beyond anything I understand. I just know she belongs with me. *To me.*

It's some inclination to keep her and make her mine. Something protective and warm but with a darker undercurrent where I see her as a beautiful rose to pluck the petals from. If I'm not careful I'll ruin her, like I do everything else.

But for now, in the moment, we're riding a high. Celebrating the victory the night's been.

She feels so impossibly good, there's no words to vocalize it.

Except for the hoarse grunts reverberating from my chest. I hold her close and fuck into her as she rocks against me. Pleasure unfolds on her features—a glow on her caramel complexion and a sharp gasp at a particularly deep stroke.

I press my forehead against hers, our gazes connected, and I tell her how good she is at taking my cock.

Delphine likes praise. She wants to know how crazy and fucked up she makes me. How she's my good girl. Probably born from her constant desire to please her parents. Daddy Adams most of all. She wants to know she's earned her god damn A grade.

“So good, Phi. Squeeze my cock with that sweet pussy.”

She moans and does as I ask. Her slick, tight walls knead my dick on command. She squeezes me until I swear and fuck into her even harder. Our fingers intertwine and I help her as her steady rocking matches my energy. Soon she's *bouncing* on me.

Fucking herself on my cock, so lost she closes her eyes and throws her head back.

I marvel at the sight. Her breasts bouncing. Her hips crashing down. Her thighs astride me. Pleasure rolls through her and she screams out when it becomes too much. I bring

our joined hands to my lips and kiss her bruised, bloodied knuckles.

It feels right in the moment as I witness her coming undone on my dick. Some kind of dark pledge we're one. I can feel her orgasm as it ripples through her and her pussy pulsates.

I flip her over, laying her down in the same motion I reenter her. Delphine moans, her eyes still closed, and draws her knees up to her chest. She's offering herself up to me. Letting me pour my aggression into the last moments before I join her.

My thrusts turn erratic and forceful. The beast finally free.

I pump into her, picking up the pace. Sweat slicks my skin and the muscles in my body cord and twitch. Under me she keens, half pleased, half exhausted. I'm unleashing the extent of my urges on her.

I fuck Delphine until I wear her out. Until the last ounce of my stamina is gone and the wet heat of her pussy finally wins. I grab her face and make her look me in the eye, my cock buried to the hilt, and then I come.

We spend a while unable to move. The Christmas lights outside my bedroom window twinkle. Sirens and car doors slamming shut sound louder in the absence of my headboard banging against the wall.

Delphine regains enough strength to roll over and snuggle closer. Being who she is she wants to cuddle. I let her. The only woman I'd ever do it with.

"That was... amazing," she purrs. She rests her chin on my chest and peers at me with those pretty brown eyes of hers. "Tonight feels like a dark honeymoon."

I raise a brow. “A *dark honeymoon*?”

“Some kind of twisted version of it. We were celebrating a union.”

“A fucked up union... where we took a life.”

“That’s why I said dark. But he deserved it?”

The way she ends her sentence it’s as though regret threatens to overtake her. I run my fingers over her damp curls, brushing them away from her face.

“Phi, he more than deserved it. Both Azeria and Giorgio. If you ever came after Giorgio again, he wasn’t going to stop. He was going to put a hit out on you. He basically confirmed it himself. And Azeria, he was a wild card. We still don’t know who he worked for. There’s no telling what he was capable of. We got them before they got us.”

She nods, but I’m not so convinced her guilty conscience is gone. Before I can press further, she changes the subject back to our presumed *dark honeymoon*.

“It’s funny because this is really what I’d imagine it’d be like with you.”

“What?”

“A honeymoon. It’s as close as you’d get.”

I stare at her. “Are you trying to say I’m not marriage material?”

“Isn’t that what you’ve said? Remember when you told me you wouldn’t live past thirty?”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“I’m surprised,” she teases. When she notices the serious expression on my face she leans up and kisses my jaw. “Jon,

I'm messing around. You can't be a grump. It's Christmas Eve."

"You say Christmas Eve like that changes anything."

But really my mind is on what Delphine said—she wasn't lying. I had once told her I didn't see myself living long. Even now, I don't suspect I'll last more than another year. Lucius will kill me once I exact my revenge.

Death and the morbid idea of dying have always been things I'm more than fine with. I was a boy and at peace about it.

Life is meaningless and I hate almost all people. Revenge has been the only meaning my life has held, but what comes after if I do succeed? What would I do with myself once I made Lucius pay *if* I happened to survive?

It's been easier imagining myself dying at the end.

No wonder Delphine can't comprehend me on a honeymoon. She can't see me as the type of man who would get married, because I've never seen myself that way. A guy like me can never fit into her life plan.

And Delphine is all about life plans.

She's growing sleepy curled up against me. Her breaths soften and she's nestled close like a lazy cat. Once again, she proves pets are like their owners (or vice versa). For tonight, she's in my bed, she's mine, but how much longer will this last?

Delphine is better. She's overcoming her trauma more by the day. Soon she won't need my protection anymore—not to the extent of the past few months, forced to live under my roof. She'll want to move on, get her own place, and return to her life's plan.

In a few months she'll be running for district attorney.

She won't mar her career and lifelong dream with a black stain like you. You'll be discarded...

As much as I hate to admit it, Daddy Adams was right. She'll be leaving soon. Moving on to the next chapter of her life.

I'll be back to lurking in the shadows, a silent and observant presence in her life.

I grab her hand and slip my fingers between hers. Her hands are too soft and delicate for the kind of bruises marring them. They're nothing but a reflection of what I've done and how I've influenced her.

These bruises... they have to be a one-time thing. Not something that can turn into a regular occurrence.

When we were in the interrogation room, I'd fantasized about the possibility Delphine could become as bloodthirsty as me. We could bond over violence and revenge. Seeing the bruises now makes me realize I can't allow it.

My body will bear the bruises for us both, in whatever situation where it's necessary. Delphine should remain unmarked. Scar free.

She'll need to be when she finally moves on...

27. delphine

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SNOW FLURRIES outside the loft windows come Christmas morning. The wind soughs and the sun is nowhere to be found. I'm lying in Salvatore's bed and he's kissing his way down my body.

He kisses me like time is running out and I'll vanish into thin air, peppering dozens of small kisses all over me.

My neck and breasts and then my stomach and thighs. He slides my satin nightie off inch by inch as he goes, taking his time. I writhe and moan underneath him, overwhelmed by the searing heat his lips leave behind.

Heat that burns me up despite the cold world outside.

He ends on my lips, wrapping me up in his arms. I've never felt so... adored. In his own way, Salvatore makes me feel like the most special woman in the world. To him, I am.

He draws back on his knees, the morning light illuminating his sculpted face and intense blue-green eyes. He stares down at me as though he's in the middle of an internal debate how best to devour me. In what way he next wants to take me and make me his.

"Open your legs, Phi."

I obey immediately, parting my thighs wide for him.

There's something about his direct, bossy commands that make me wet on demand. It's the same tone he uses when ordering his men around except with a rough, aroused edge to it.

A grunt of approval rumbles from deep in his chest. He pushes down his boxers and fists himself as if unable to resist.

“Look at that sweet little pussy. It's just begging to be fucked. Is that what you want, Phi? You want me to fuck your sweet little pussy 'til you come?”

The moan I give can only be described as whiny. I reach between my thighs and play with myself. Both for his viewing pleasure, but also because I'm beyond turned on and impatient. I need some kind of relief, even if it's by my own touch. Salvatore is fast at stopping me—his large hand snaps shut on my wrist and he pries my hand away from my pussy, pinning it above my head.

“I didn't say you could touch yourself, Phi. This pussy is mine to pleasure. Don't you agree?”

I whine some more, though my lips curl slightly, into a small, naughty smile. Salvatore likes when I get this way—a little bratty, a little needy. He grins back, amused by how he's made me so hot and desperate, I'm writhing in place. He comes in close and teases more slow kisses along my neck.

His fingers find my pussy, at first his touch soft, and then rougher. He pinches my folds in his strong grip and makes me whimper. His lips pressed into my skin, he tells me how much he wants to feel my tight pussy on his big dick.

“But are you going to behave yourself?” he asks, dropping another kiss on my collarbone.

“Yes!”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please!” I beg. “Please, Jon. I’ll behave like a good girl.”

“That’s what I like to hear. *My good girl.*” He kisses me, soft and tender on the tip of my shoulder, positioning himself at my entrance. “Only for me, Phi. Nobody else gets to have you like this. I’ll fucking kill whoever tries.”

My pussy throbs harder. Something dark and twisted inside me is so aroused by his words that I moan and squeeze my breast. I part my legs even wider, as far as they can possibly go. Anything to make room for him and his dick. He’s settled between my splayed thighs, the heat and hardness from his length unbearable before he’s even inside me—he’s brushing himself up against the soft insides of my thighs and the slippery folds of my pussy.

I pant in anticipation.

I need to be fucked so badly.

Yes, again.

Never enough.

Salvatore grants my wish. He slides into me, filling me up with his fat dick.

The moment shifts at once. Its sweet, affectionate beginnings, among distant snow flurries and Christmas lights, vanishes. It crackles into the hot intensity of an electrical storm. All frenetic energy and charged passion and nothing else.

Salvatore’s strokes are deep and spine-tingling. His hands slip under me and grip my ass, wrenching me toward him at the same time his hips snap forward. I wrap my legs around

him and cross my ankles behind his back, urging him even deeper.

As deep as he can possibly go. Every last inch of him.

Our mouths meet halfway, our kisses untamed and wild. Wet and warm as we tease with our tongues and moan at how good it feels.

It's the only sound I'm capable of—an incoherent mix of pants for air and groans of pleasure.

In this moment, I know nothing *but* pleasure. The pleasurable sensations Salvatore and his deep strokes malign me with until I'm dewy and delirious. I'm clenching hard around his dick as the thousands of sensitive nerve-endings in my pussy tingle. They radiate through the rest of my body.

So close. Soooo close.

Salvatore echoes the sentiments. His voice is rough and raw, his lips by my ear. "So fucking sexy. So fucking beautiful as you take all this dick."

His praise unlocks a long-hidden part of me. It's a desire I buried years ago, so far in the past I forgot it existed in the first place. My desire to give in to him and be his good girl. No one makes me feel this way, unapologetically wanton, so easily unraveled like he does. No one can make me cry happy tears as I beg for more of his cock.

He rolls his hips, stroking deeper, and my mouth drops open at how impossibly full I feel. My head tips back, no longer able to withstand the level of pleasure he's inflicting on my body. I erupt not even a second later.

A rush of tingles flow through me like an electric current.

My eyes flutter shut and I seize up, practically levitating.

Salvatore drives into me. He grabs a fistful of my curls and slams his body into mine. My poor overstimulated pussy quivers and then grips him. He buries his face in the crook of my neck and groans out all the ways I turn him on.

All the ways he wants to make me come. He does just that in the next second—he pulls out at the last possible second and comes on my stomach.

I sit up and suck him off, wiping his dick clean of our shared essence. He groans again and grabs my face to bring me in for a hot, intimate kiss.

“I’ll never get enough,” he tells me. He bites my neck and strokes himself. “Feel my cock. Feel how hard I already am. Who makes me this way, Phi?”

“I do,” I say in a breathless whisper. I do as he asks, curling my fingers around the generous width of his dick and running my hands up and down his length.

He growls and pushes me down into the pillows. He plants another deep kiss on my lips as I jerk him off, feeling him harden under my touch.

“Roll over. Put your ass up.”

His next throaty command makes my pussy tingle anew. I hurry to do as he’s requested, barely on my stomach before he’s spearing into me. He’s smacking a dominant hand to my ass and pounding into me. Even harder than before. More animalistic and carnal.

I squeal and bury my face in the pillow. He keeps me planted there, holding me down with a firm hand between my shoulder blades.

His dick hits me at such an angle, the intense pressure builds into its own kind of pleasure. He’s bottoming out inside

me and still I clench around him. My pussy pulsates and he grunts as he picks up the pace.

The wet sounds we produce bounce off the walls, evidence of the mess we've made of each other. We're two bodies in perfect sync with each other, riding the same pulse of carnal passion. Hot, sweaty, alive.

Salvatore smacks my ass and I grind back against him, asking for more. The sharp thwack makes my cheeky flesh ripple. The burn it leaves behind feels just as good as his dick deep in my pussy. A different kind of pleasure.

It sends me careening into my second orgasm. I'm so overcome, I go momentarily numb.

Except for the high.

I shudder and bite the pillow, riding out the rest of Salvatore's hard strokes. I've become whole, so sated and full, I can't want for anything else. I can do nothing else but savor the tiny aftershocks pinging through me right down to the tips of my toes.

For the second time, Salvatore withdraws already coming. His seed splatters my ass and the back of my thighs. It gets on the sheets.

Truly a mess.

He drags me down with him. We hit the pillows, a sweaty mess, barely able to breathe. He waits a few seconds to regain composure before he speaks.

"Guess Christmas Day is also laundry day."

I snort out a laugh. "Whose fault is that?"

"*Yours*," he answers. He wraps an arm around my hips and grins. "You're the one who scolded me last night for coming in

—”

“Salvatore!”

He laughs and pulls me tighter against him. “Kidding, Phi. I’m just happy you’re in my bed. I’ll come wherever the fuck you want me to come.”

We’re playing around as I shove at his chest and he draws me closer when my phone buzzes. The screen lights up with Dad’s name from where it rests on the nightstand.

Salvatore raises an amused brow. “Right on cue. He must have some kind of sensor for when we’re together.”

“Stop it.” Though I give him the scantest smirk, I can’t deny the allegation. Dad *is* that inexhaustible.

“Sorry, Phi. Just can’t help thinking how pissed he’d be if he knew about all the X-Rated things I were doing to his daughter. The asshole part of me thinks it’s fucking hilarious considering he hates my guts.”

Men and their never-ending egos.

I roll my eyes and slide off the bed with my phone in hand. On my way out the room, I grab my robe and search for a part of the loft that’s Salvatore-free.

“Hello? Dad.” I step into the bathroom, ignoring the disgruntled glare from Salt perched on the hamper.

“Delphi sweetie, you sound out of breath. Everything alright?”

My cheeks flush. “Yes, uh, just got back from a run. Merry Christmas!”

“You’re running on Christmas morning? It’s freezing out.”

“Dad, did you call to lecture me about my exercise routine, or to wish me a Merry Christmas?”

“Actually, I called to check if you’re near a TV. Today’s the day.”

“Your surprise?”

“That’s right.”

It’s only as he answers I pick up on all the noise behind him—deafening whoops and hollers. The excited cheers of dozens of people.

“Dad,” I say slowly as I walk into the living room and turn on the TV. “Where are you?”

“Watch for yourself, Delphi honey. This New Year is going to be our year. The Adams’ will leave more of a lasting mark on this city than we ever dreamed.”

With that, he hangs up, the dial tone droning in my ears. I watch wide-eyed and open-mouthed as the field reporter from Chanel Nine News welcomes viewers to a special campaign event on Christmas Day.

“As you can see, it’s a full house! Hundreds of Northam citizens have turned up even on Christmas morning to celebrate the joyous occasion,” she speaks into the camera. The wind whips a few strands of blonde hair in her face, but she shakes it away. “Ernest Adams is expected to take the stage to make his official announcement. Needless to say, it should be an interesting election season.”

My heart almost stops beating in my chest as the words scrawl across the screen:

Retired District Attorney Ernest Adams Announces his Campaign for City Mayor

I'm so shocked, I barely register the pad of footsteps behind me. Salvatore's put on some sweats and left the bedroom. He stops at my side, sliding fingers through his messy, normally slicked hair.

“Did you start on the coffee? What's that look for?”

I blink out of my daze. “My father... he's running for mayor.”

28. delphine

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SALVATORE IS CONSIDERABLY LESS

surprised than I am by Dad's announcement. We brew some coffee and settle on the sofa as the news coverage plays the highlights from the holiday campaign event.

"Out of retirement to run for mayor. Unsurprising," he says. "This gives him even more authority than when he was DA."

"But why now? He's been spending the last few years *golfing*. How do you go from that to running for mayor?" I distract myself with a gulp of coffee. The heat from the cup curls up at me in comforting tendrils. I need all the comfort I can get. "It just doesn't make sense. By the end of his DA career, he was so burned out. And when my mom passed away..."

Salvatore shrugs and preoccupies himself with dangling a mouse trinket in front of Salt. "Maybe he got bored of golfing. He needed the time to recoup and now that he has, he's decided he wants to be in the spotlight again."

Suspicion draws one of my brows higher than the other. "You're awfully calm about this."

“Your father doesn’t faze me, Phi. Not like he thinks he does.”

Salvatore’s words feel so cryptic, I almost ask him what he’s talking about. As far as I know, they’ve stayed far away from each other. The last time they were in the same room was twelve years ago when Salvatore and I dated my freshman year at Dupoint.

Since I’ve started staying in Salvatore’s loft, we’ve hardly discussed Dad. The topic is typically a sore one for us. We get along better when we ignore it entirely. Still, none of what’s happening makes sense.

When we recently had lunch at Garden House, he’d told me he had a new *passion*. He’s never once expressed an interest in politics beyond his district attorney campaigns. What would change that now after so many years?

Mom’s death... maybe I’m not the only one who feels powerless?

“No more talk about campaigns,” Salvatore says suddenly. He tells his SmartTV to turn on a Christmas movie. The cool female voice asks him which one would he like to watch. “Surprise me.”

My busy thoughts fade away as I smirk and tease him about secretly being a fan. He denies it, claiming he only does these things when around me. I’m not so convinced.

We spend the rest of the morning watching Christmas movies. I succeed in convincing Salvatore to watch the charming chick flick *The Holiday* with Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet. In revenge, he forces me to sit through the first *Die Hard*.

We exchange gifts. I can barely contain the excitement bubbling out of me as I hand him a gift bag and wait for him to open his present. His favorite leather motorcycle jacket has been looking extra worn as of late. I snuck a peak at his measurements and had one custom made for him.

His gaze flicks up from the tailored motorcycle jacket in his hands to my face. Many would still consider his expression a controlled one, but I know Salvatore too well to think so—his brows rise and lips twitch in gratitude. He *likes* it!

He pulls me into him and kisses me. “I’ll get a lot of wear out of this. Thanks.”

I’m up next. Salvatore makes me close my eyes. I sit still on the sofa and do as he says. He shifts behind me and I hold my breath. His fingertips whisper across my skin, brushing my neck and shoulders. The touch is so soft and intimate, completely heightened by my lack of sight, I shudder.

He presses his lips to the side of my neck and says, “Open your eyes.”

He’s holding out a hand mirror in front of us, showing me my reflection. I gasp, my hands flying up to my mouth.

“Salvatore—my rose pendant! How?!”

He eases my head to the side so he can plant a full kiss on my lips. “I told you I’d get it back. Searched high and low. Everywhere in the city. Azeria pawned it. It was broken, but I had a jeweler associate of mine who does good work take a look at it.”

Emotion wells up inside me until I throw myself onto him, arms wrapping around his neck. I bury my face into his chest and indulge in the warmth of his body heat. His solid frame that’s always there to support me. His arms circle around me

in return. We don't let go for so long that Pepa purrs and nudges at my hip.

Salvatore's returned me my most cherished possession—Nana Rose's necklace that she gifted me before she passed. The necklace has been repaired like new, as beautiful and delicate as ever. Wearing it again for even just a few minutes uplifts my spirits.

Happiness fills my heart, overwhelming me to the point I can hardly speak. Once again, Salvatore has proven he'll do whatever is necessary to set my world right. Every moment since my necklace was torn from my throat and stolen from me has been wrong. It's been torture for me, as though I've no longer been myself.

With the rose pendant returned to me, I am.

He gets me.

I can't keep my hands off him. My thank you comes in another enthusiastic round of sex. I ride Salvatore until we're both shattering from powerful orgasms that make us see stars.

The rest of the holiday is spent like this—relaxing in his loft as we make Christmas our own.



“You should sleep in,” Salvatore says, kissing my cheek. “Enjoy your last few days before you return to work.”

I smile from where I lay in bed, propped up by pillows, Pepa beside me. “Maybe. You know I start getting restless if I laze around too long. I should go for a run.”

“Nobody runs the day after Christmas, Phi. You've got this whole loft to yourself. Relax and enjoy it.”

“That sounds like an invitation to redecorate.”

My suggestion earns a look of foreboding from him. The loft is still his man cave, all leather furniture and blank walls of exposed brick. Salvatore lives like he’s moving out at any moment. Few personal touches and signs that it’s his place. *Hotels* are more homey. If the clean, musky scent of his aftershave didn’t linger in the air I’d question if he lived here at all.

He’s always been like this—his apartment at Sky Tower so many years ago had been the same. Even for a minimalist like me.

Salvatore kisses me again, opting for my lips this time. “New rule. No redecorating.”

“A houseplant and candle or two wouldn’t kill you.”

“You’ve known me for half your life, Phi. You know I don’t like living things.”

“I’m a living thing.”

“I’ve made an exception for you—*and* your cats.”

Pepa nestles deeper into my side as if she understands she’s included.

Salvatore orders me to relax one last time before he leaves. I’ve insisted he spend the day with me, but he says he has urgent matters he has to handle at the club.

Once I’m alone, I decide rather than stay in bed, I’ll move into the living room. I put on a rerun of *Housewives of South Valley* and pad into the kitchen wearing one of Salvatore’s button-down shirts. It falls halfway down my thighs and the sleeves are so long I have to roll them up, but it smells just like him.

Something tells me he'll like the surprise of me wearing it when he gets home.

My headful of thick curls are pinned up in a head wrap. I'll use the morning to deep condition since I'll be spending the day in the loft. For as much as Salvatore bitches about 'living things' and 'redecorating', he's let me invade his bathroom cabinets. Most of what's in them belong to me—hair and skincare products.

We haven't talked about what's going to happen when I eventually move out... or where we stand once I return to the real world. So far, we've managed to exist in an alternate reality in a lot of ways. We haven't discussed the future or how we'll possibly reconcile our polar opposite careers.

It's no surprise we've avoided it.

Reality often shows us how doomed we are. Though we have strong feelings for each other, he's a mafia crime boss. I'm an assistant district attorney. We couldn't be more ill-fated. The election is happening next year. How can I possibly run for district attorney when my mafia boyfriend is one of the most dangerous criminals in the city?

Yet, I don't know how I'll choose.

My stomach roils whenever I think about it. I calm myself with another sip of espresso.

The lazy vibe in Salvatore's loft comes to an abrupt end. Thunderous footsteps rumble in the hall outside, reminiscent of a stampede. I'm barely registering the sudden commotion when the front door flings open and a group of men file inside.

I scream and drop the mug in my hands. It crashes to the ground and breaks into jagged pieces of ceramic.

Only one face in the group is recognizable.

“Stitches, what the fuck!?” I yell. My arms wrap around myself as I become awkwardly aware of the fact that I’m half-dressed.

His eyes widen from behind his wire-framed glasses and he trips over himself trying to make it to me. He stands in front of me in some attempt to shield me from their view.

“So sorry! I couldn’t stop them!”

The men have descended upon Salvatore’s loft in a full-blown siege. They sweep through the place, overturning drawers and wrenching shelves off the wall. One asshole grabs a knife and thrusts it into the center of the leather sofa, splitting its cushions in half.

“Hey!” I scream, anger heating up my skin. I forget about my clothes situation and stomp over to confront him. “Stop destroying his stuff—who are you and what are you doing here? This is breaking and entering and destruction of private property!”

Yes, I’m ready to go into lawyer mode in nothing but Salvatore’s shirt and my panties. Though it’s clear these guys aren’t law enforcement.

The guy ignores me, pulling out the stuffing inside the sofa. I growl and take another step toward him. Stitches intervenes by putting himself between us.

“You can’t do nothing—there’s no stopping it. We have to stand down.”

“What do you mean? Care to explain this madness!?” I gesture around at the live destruction taking place all around us.

Some of the men have migrated into other parts of the loft. They’re in the kitchen throwing silverware to the floor and in

the bedrooms rummaging through whatever is within reach. I hear Salt and Pepa's indignant shrieks as they dive for hiding spots.

Stitches sighs and takes off his glasses to wipe them on his shirt. "These are Lucius's men. They're here to search Psycho's place top to bottom."

My next heartbeat is a punch to the chest. "Lucius? As in —"

"His father, the Don," he finishes for me. He grimaces, his brow lined with sweat. "He's not too happy with Psycho right now. We should've seen this coming."

"Seen what coming? A gang of men randomly showing up one morning to destroy his loft?"

"I can't explain right now. But... but Psycho... he's got something Lucius wants."

"WHERE IS IT?" A squat, muscular, bulldog of a man barks at Stitches. He snatches him by the front of his shirt and slams him into the wall behind us. He doesn't care that he bangs Stitches' head against the brick. "Where the fuck is he hiding it, huh? It's not even here, is it?"

"You're asking the wrong guy! Haven't got a clue!"

The wannabe bulldog punches Stitches in the face, cracking his glasses. "Make sure you tell Psycho the Boss ain't stopping 'til he turns it over."

Just as quickly as they rained down on the loft, they're rushing out. In their wake they leave the loft in disarray. Almost everything Salvatore owns has been destroyed. I haven't been to the bedroom that's mine, but I suspect my belongings aren't much better.

I walk up to the broken lamp they've knocked to the floor and carefully pick it up.

“Stitches, tell me what’s going on, and tell me now.”

“I told you. Psycho has something Lucius wants.”

“You know where it is, don’t you? Whatever it is. You were lying.”

“He’d never keep it here.” Stitches shrugs and squints at his cracked glasses. “Can’t believe he fucked up my eyes. This is my only pair.”

I wander the rest of the loft in disbelief. It really does look like a stampede of wild animals passed through. They even destroyed the electronics—the TVs are smashed in and Salvatore’s laptop has been snapped in half.

“My phone,” I gasp, digging it out from under my overturned luggage.

They threw it on the bed and emptied out anything inside. That must’ve been after some asshole crushed my phone.

I call Salvatore, but it goes directly to his voice mail.

“Jon, pick up! This is important. Some men came by and destroyed the loft. They were sent by your father.”

A beep noise sounds and the automated voice comes on to tell me I’ve run out of time to record my message. I swear under my breath and move into Salvatore’s bedroom—the bedroom we basically share since we’ve blurred lines.

It hasn’t been spared. Distress twinges inside my chest at the sight of the torn up bedding. The jerks even destroyed Salt and Pepa’s cat posts. I pick up the fallen cat posts and set to cleaning up the rest of the room.

There's not much I can do on my own except grab broken things off the floor. Salvatore's going to need to completely refurbish everything. I make it to the closet, gathering the heaps of clothes off the floor. They've snapped almost every hanger.

Eventually, as I move through the loft cleaning up as much as I can, I make my way into a room Salvatore usually keeps locked—his home office.

His father's men broke the door down.

If any room looks like it's been accosted by savages, it's this room. They must've suspected he'd keep whatever they were looking for inside. Every stick of furniture is snapped in half. They've stolen whatever was inside a lockbox, its door hanging open. Next to it is a knocked over filing cabinet.

I bend down and pick up the mess strewn across the floor. When they yanked drawers out from his desk and filing cabinet, the contents inside spilled out. Most of it are documents I don't read closely (the less details I know on Salvatore's business dealings, the better). I move to set the thick stacks of papers on the broken hunk of wood once known as Salvatore's desk. A few pages slip out from the middle and float back to the ground.

My hand freezes as I go to pick them up.

Business documents aren't the only thing in the stack. Photographs skid across the floor, standing out among the other sheets of paper.

It's nothing I'd think twice about until I recognize the faces *in* the photos.

Mine.

Mom and Dad.

My entire graduating class from Dupoint Law.

I study the photos with a frown and mounting sense of disbelief. What are these and how did Salvatore get them?

I'm no photography expert, but these were taken by a long-range camera. Someone watching from afar and snapping photos. The last time I spoke to Salvatore, I was almost nineteen and still in my freshman year at college.

I didn't graduate from law school for several more years. He'd become a ghost in my life by that point; someone who no longer existed in my world... or so I thought. If we were no longer on speaking terms, what is he doing with photographs of my graduation?

Since he's returned to Northam, he's kept the details of our twelve years apart vague. He's refrained from talking much about the large gap in time, though the more I think about it, he's seemed surprisingly familiar with me and my life.

Does that mean he was... all this time...

I snatch up more of the fallen documents and rifle through them. The breath in my lungs hitches as I gasp at what I find.

My whole life laid out before me.

29. salvatore

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FOR THE SECOND time in weeks, Lucius has tested me. First, he dared enter Club Nirvana and kick up his feet in my office, smoking my cigars and drinking my liquor. He'd had his men posted in the room like the place was his and not mine.

Now, he's gone too far. He had the audacity to bulldoze his way into my private compound and tear up the place. His guys destroyed everything inside the loft, searching high and low for the one thing he wants most—his kryptonite that I'm in possession of.

He's refused to play by the rules and abide by the agreed upon terms.

I guess this means we're at war with each other. If he steps any more out of line, I'll unleash the kryptonite for the masses to see. It'll be his worst fucking nightmare, and I'll win regardless of what happens to me afterward.

There's nothing Lucius values more than his big, fat ego. Than his precious formidable reputation. If everybody knew the truth about our family—the twisted truth about him—it'd obliterate him in every sense of the word. He'd become a joke. A *laughing stock* in Northam's criminal world.

The tires on my Mustang screech as I slam on the brakes outside his house in Westoria. I know he's home because the light glows in the window that's his office. Probably celebrating his victory from earlier where his guys got to tear apart my loft, terrify Delphine, and break Stitches' glasses.

Florina, the head caretaker, doesn't even bother trying to stop me. She opens with a startled expression on her chubby-cheeked face and then steps aside to let me blow past her. I develop tunnel vision as I storm down the halls with pure rage pulsing through my body. The surroundings don't matter nor do they register.

I might as well be seeing red.

I wrench his office door open and charge inside without warning.

Lucius isn't half as surprised as last time. He's kicking back on his sofa, a drink cradled in his meaty hand, his paunch of a belly hanging over the front of his pants. He's on speaker phone discussing some construction contracts. His beady eyes shine at the sight of me, an ugly smirk twisting onto his lips.

"I'll have to call you back, Armen. I've got a special visitor." He ends the call, but doesn't make any effort to get up. Comfortably reclined on the sofa, he studies me with a condescending level of interest. I'm not worth any of his time and effort. "I expected you sooner. You took longer than I thought."

"You think you're fooling me? You don't pull off the casual and indifferent act like you think you do. No need to pretend, Pop. Must be frustrating to get outsmarted by your son... *again*."

He gives a lazy swirl of his drink. “You’ve never outsmarted anybody a day in your life.”

“Except you. You thought that stunt would pay off? You could bulldoze into my loft and find it? You *really* thought I’d have it at my home?” I cross my arms over my chest and let the same smart aleck grin he’s always hated spread onto my face. “Do better, Pop. You had your men turn my place upside down, and for what? A couple pieces of broken furniture I’ll replace within the day.”

“It’s no matter. That’s what you don’t understand—you don’t faze me. You’re insignificant and always have been,” he says, sipping more of his amber liquid. “You think I’m worried? If I really wanted, I’d take it right from you. I’d kill you in cold blood. Squash you like the nasty *scarafaggio* you are.”

“Then do it,” I challenge, my grin cocky and lopsided. “Crush me, Pop. Take it back. I dare you.”

“I call the shots. I run this city. Everybody knows it. We do things on my timeline. I’ll destroy you when I want. When you bore me. Just like I always have.”

“You don’t run shit. The stunt you pulled is going to cost you. My price just went up.”

He throws his head back with a laugh. “What else is new but the *scarafaggio* wants to demand more? Let me clue you in on a little secret. Kitchen’s closed. No more talks.”

Once he chugs the last of his drink, he gets his lazy ass up off the sofa, and moves to the minibar for a refill. The room fills with the sound of ice chinking glass and liquid flowing from his decanter. Lucius might claim he’s had enough, but so have I.

Something inside me snaps.

He needs to know he crossed a fucking line and I won't tolerate it.

Particularly when he brings our feud around Delphine. Today he and his men did.

I shoot forward and knock the decanter and glass out of his hands. Both shatter into a hundred serrated pieces on the floor. My fingers twine in the fabric of his shirt and I slam him against the nearest wall like he weighs nothing instead of two-hundred-and-seventy pounds of fat.

But it's not enough—I clench my hand around his thick neck and squeeze.

It's the most aggressive I've ever gotten with him. For the briefest second, surprise flickers in his beady gaze.

“You're right. No more talking,” I growl. “You think you can intimidate me like you do all the others. Guess what, Pop? I can't be pushed into backing down. I'm going to make your life a living hell like I promised I would. Whether I'm dead or alive, it doesn't matter once everybody knows all about you. That'll be my revenge from beyond the grave.”

He grins even as I throttle him. “You have one thing right. You're dead. The clock's running out. It's just a matter of when I want it to happen.”

I choke him harder. My teeth grind together. The strength in my body surges into this single effort of mine—choking out my father. Every ounce I possess goes into it, knuckles whitening and muscles burning. Lucius's skin tinges into a deep plum shade, sweat on his brow. He sputters for air and paws at my hands to no avail.

His evil beady eyes, once so shiny with malice, bubble like a frog's. That's basically what he is right now. A frog being boiled alive.

It brings me great pleasure to see him like this. I could kill him right now. I could murder him and end our lifelong feud if I really wanted to. Walk away like nothing happened.

As I crush Lucius' windpipe and feel his throat work against my tight grip, I know it's not what I want. The only way I want Lucius to go out is through total and utter humiliation, like I've planned since I was a teenager.

I want to expose him first. Humiliate him. Make him feel like a joke to everybody who once feared him.

Revenge for the shit he's put me through my whole life.

I let go of him and step back, adrenaline crackling through me like an electric current. "I'm going to finish you off, Pop. But not like this. You don't get to go in privacy and with your reputation intact. You don't deserve it."

He's dropped down to one knee, his hands fussing at his neckline. I've choked him hard enough that he'll bruise. He can barely breathe even after I let go, practically hacking up his lung. His voice is hoarse when he speaks. "This is war. Remember my words. You will be sorry. You *will* beg me to end your life like the trash you are when I'm done with you. I will destroy everything about you."

"Maybe," I say, backing away. I leave him kneeling as he desperately loosens the neckline of his shirt. "So long as I take you down with me, I don't give a shit."



Delphine sits in the middle of the wreckage. While I was out visiting Lucius, I had several of my men keeping a closer eye than usual on the compound. Lucius knew what he was doing coming by in the middle of the day when half of my guys were otherwise occupied.

Stitches told me all about what happened—they broke into my loft on such short notice, Delphine had been wandering around in nothing but one of my shirts. They'd shoved her out of the way. They'd punched Stitches and broken his glasses.

Just walking through the front door and seeing the damage they've done boils my blood all over again.

I clench my jaw and stride over to where Delphine sits on the sunken-in sofa. Right away I can tell she's upset. A deep frown is etched onto her face and her gaze is stuck on the living room window. I take my seat next to her, slipping an arm around her shoulders, and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"It'll never happen again," I say. "I'm putting in more security measures. Recruiting some more men. Switching up the shifts so we have more balance during the day. They're never going to come by here again... and if they do, I'll take them out myself."

"Your father sent them?" she asks.

"He was searching for something I have that he wants."

"They tore up everything. Salt and Pepa are terrified. They're hiding in the hamper and won't come out."

My jaw only clenches harder. "It shouldn't've happened. My piece of shit father knew to come by when I wasn't here. But you and the cats weren't supposed to be involved. Whatever they damaged, I'll replace. Tell me what will make you feel better."

“I’m not sure...”

A couple seconds go by. I study Delphine and pick up on a difference of behavior. It’s more than being shaken by Lucius’s men storming in and wrecking the loft. Her brows are drawn together and the slight wrinkle in her nose tells me she’s thinking. When she spoke, she did so in a flat tone, her stare distant.

Something else is wrong. Something I’m unaware of.

“Phi, what else happened?”

“These past few months have been some of the most confusing of my life,” she says, sighing. “I haven’t felt like myself in a long time. I haven’t been... thinking like myself.”

I stare at her. “What are you trying to say?”

“There have been things I normally would have questioned,” she says, her brows knitting closer. Her bottom lip catches between her teeth. “You’ve really helped me through this period. I’m not sure how I would’ve fared without you. I don’t think I would’ve managed long. I was falling apart before you stepped in.”

I still don’t have a clue where she’s going with this, but I can sense the sullen mood. Whatever she has to say probably isn’t what I want to hear. Lucius’ men busting into the loft and destroying everything might’ve been a step too far for her—the moment had to be alarming. It’s probably left her feeling unsafe.

But then I notice her fiddling with her rose necklace, and it still seems like something else.

Did her father call her up and convince her to leave? She’s been talking to him more these past few days.

“Something Stitches said the other day stuck out to me.”

“Care to share what?”

Her eyes flick up to mine. Pretty brown eyes that have a slight golden tint this close up. Normally, I’d be enjoying looking into them, but it’s different when there’s a questioning gleam staring back at me.

“I ran into Chadwick at the park. Chadwick being Chadwick had a hard time understanding I wasn’t interested. Stitches told me it’s something I must experience often—men asking me out. He said it’s no wonder you’ve kept a close eye on me.”

“He meant these past few months have been concerning.”

“Is that what he meant? Are you sure?”

“What else would he mean? You seem to be asking a question with a specific answer in mind, Phi. Cut the bullshit and tell me what’s this about?”

“I’m not bullshitting anything, Jon. You asked what’s on my mind. I’m telling you. His comment came back to me today. It made me realize I’ve overlooked things. You’ve reappeared so suddenly into my life, I should’ve found it odd you were so familiar with me.”

“That tends to happen when you’ve been with someone. Time may have passed, but I still know you. I can read you better than anybody else.”

“You knew I don’t take time off work. How would you know that?”

It clicks where this is going—the how and why she’d be bringing this up now. One glance around my loft is enough to

cause a headache. Lucius' men destroyed it top to bottom. Every last room has been torn apart.

She went into my office.

“I know you. I know how obsessed you are with your career. You've been that way since you were a teenager. You were the same about school.”

“You didn't seem surprised about my mother passing away.”

“You forget she was a well-known dancer, wife of the former DA? I heard about it. It was on the news *and* in the paper when she was murdered.”

“When I told you about my engagement, you said my fiancé was a prick. You were so sure about it. Like you knew who he was.”

I shrug. “I think all the men you date are pricks by default.”

“You have an answer for everything, don't you? Then can you explain what these photos are?”

She brandishes a handful of them. Different ones from different points in time. Her law school graduation. Her giving a speech at a charity gala. Her on the steps of city hall. Photographs I had taken of her by whomever was her security detail in the moment.

There's hundreds more in a folder on my laptop. On my phone.

I've done nothing nefarious with them. They were for my own records. The only connection I had to her in these many years we've been apart. I've tracked her every moment for

safety purposes, but also for selfish reasons too. These photos became trophies, like my collection of her panties.

I collected them *because* she's the only living, breathing human I give a damn about. Since I was banished from her life, it was the only way I could satisfy my obsessive urges.

But Delphine doesn't see the situation that way. She sees them more as signs I'm controlling. I don't deny I am where she's concerned. I'm territorial and intrusive. I have to be when the world keeps us apart. She belongs to me, and my infatuation won't let me lose sight of that.

"Can you?" she presses when a moment passes and I say nothing. "Jon, what is this? Have you been spying on me all this time? You've been... you've been keeping tabs on me *for years?*"

I stare at the top photo in the stack for a couple more seconds—the photo of her giving a speech in a sparkling evening gown, beautiful and glowing—and I decide how I want to play this. I can either come clean or come up with a fake explanation.

What use is there lying? Denying what's the truth?

I've never pretended to be anything but the violent, obsessive psycho I am. Delphine has fallen for the man I am, even if she doesn't realize what she's gotten herself into half the time.

"Stitches was right," I say plainly. "I've been keeping an eye on you. Making sure you're okay. Following what you're up to. But it was for your benefit too. I've kept you safe."

Delphine makes a sound of disgust and jumps up from the sofa. "I can't believe you! You really expect me to believe this is for my own good? Are you that twisted in the head?!"

Yes...

“Do you not understand how... how disturbing this is?” she asks, shaking the photos. “Salvatore, you’ve been *stalking* me for years!”

“I was making sure you were okay.”

A sardonic laugh bubbles out of her. “Is that what you told yourself? Is that how you justified it? I thought you had matured. But you’re still the same control freak you’ve always been—you’ve just gotten better at hiding it!”

“It’s not what I’ve told myself. It’s the truth! I’ve been looking out for you.”

“Who says I needed you to? You had no right to make that decision for me!”

I stand up from the sofa as a rush of anger hits me, igniting my temper. “It was well within my right if it meant protecting you. You have no clue the level of danger you’ve been in—the number of threats waged against you. Threats *I* intercepted for years! You strut around the city thinking you’re tough shit. Ever wonder why you’re so untouchable?”

“I’ve never wanted to be affiliated with the mafia! Yet you’ve been providing me protection for years? Do you understand the violation of trust? Of privacy?” she shouts, pacing up and down the living room. “What else have you been spying on? Are there cameras in my home? Have you and your men been watching me when I’m alone?”

“Seriously? Phi, I’ve never had anything installed inside your home. Do you think I’d want my guys to see you in those kind of private moments?”

“I don’t know. You tell me! You’ve had them watching every other move I make, like some fucked up stalker reality

TV show!”

“Will you calm down? Will you try to see it from my perspective? You told me you didn’t want to see me anymore. If I kept in touch, your father would’ve continued trying his damndest to keep us apart. I’d fight him back. Then we’d be in the same situation that made us break up. I kept my word—I stayed away from you.”

She stares at me with alarm, her expression tight. “You really think you were justified. You don’t see anything wrong?”

“I was looking out for you,” I repeat. “I’m never apologizing for that.”

“Including sabotaging my relationships?” By the sharp tone she uses, she knows she’s right. She’s used it a thousand times in the courtroom. “You’ve been interfering, haven’t you? Just like you did with Chadwick that night. For years I’ve wondered what has gone wrong in my relationships—why every boyfriend always breaks up with me when I could’ve sworn things were okay. My fiancé *dumped* me out of the blue. It was you, wasn’t it? It’s always been you.”

A deep breath leaves me as I plug my hands in my pockets. When she puts it like that, it *does* sound fucked up. But I never explicitly stated they had to leave her; I merely made them a huge monetary offer to do so. The choice was ultimately up to them. Every last one took the payout.

None of them really loved her. They didn’t deserve her.

“I might’ve made them a deal. It was up to them, Phi. They chose to accept the money.”

Tears water her eyes and she releases a breathless sob. “I can’t believe you’d do that to me. Garrett... my fiancé...”

“He took the cash the fastest. He abandoned you for a million dollars. Some fiancé.”

“Am I supposed to thank you?”

The disgust on her face is cause for concern. Delphine’s never looked at me as though my very existence repulses her.

Until now.

Maybe I finally went too far.

She wanders over to the wall as if sick and needing it for leverage. “How could you?” she repeats, so stunned she can barely speak. “How could you do that to me? We were supposed to get *married*.”

“He wasn’t right for you.”

“He dumped me. No explanation. All this time I wondered if it was me. If there was something I was doing wrong. Do you know how that made me feel?”

“I saved you heartache,” I explain, taking a step toward her. “You would’ve been in a loveless marriage—the same ones we saw all around us in Westoria. Is that what you wanted? Some preppy, smug asshole like him who thinks he shits gold bricks? Designer fucking boat shoes and polo matches on Sundays. He would’ve cheated on you a few years down the line with some ditzy secretary at his bank and broke your heart. You would’ve wound up divorced.”

“Are you a fortune teller now? You didn’t even know him!”

“I knew enough. I ran a thorough background check on him. He cheated on every girlfriend he’s ever been with. He wasn’t right for you.”

“No one is, right? That’s what it comes down to. No one except you.”

That’s because you’re mine.

Since telling her that would only make her angrier, I resort to repeating myself.

“He wasn’t right for you.”

“He was a normal man! A man I could marry and have kids with.”

“You didn’t even love him.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do. I know because you never looked at him like you look at—” I cut myself off.

A cold smile curls onto her face as she stands pressed up against the brick wall. “Like who, Jon? Like you? You think I’m in love with you? I could *never* love a man like you! You’re not the kind of man who can ever be normal. A husband and a father. Someone to build a life with. That’s not you. You don’t have it in you.”

Her remark wipes out my temper. The frustration and defensiveness heating me up vanishes. I’m left oddly cool and detached, like somebody’s flipped a switch inside me. The reality is she’s never spoken truer words. I’m not a normal man. I’m a psycho. I’m not somebody to build a life with. I’m violent and obsessive. I don’t fit her perfect life plan.

Never have. Never will.

We’re fundamentally wrong for each other. No matter how hard we pretend otherwise. No matter how infatuated with her I am.

I'm too fucked up for her.

Delphine is a fantasy I've latched on to. The fantasy I could be with a good-hearted, beautiful, intelligent woman like any other regular guy. Like I was somehow deserving of that.

In reality, it's unattainable.

I've never understood my draw to her until this moment. She was the woman I couldn't have. So I wanted her. So I fought to have her.

She was never meant to be mine to begin with.

It's better this way.

Now I can take out Lucius how I was meant to take him out—I can die like I've always known I would. Nothing holding me back. No regrets that I was leaving behind some amazing woman who was mine and wanted to be with me. Nobody giving a fuck what I do or what happens to me.

A long, drawn-out moment of silence stretches on between us. I'm accepting my revelation while she seems to be weighed down by guilt.

“Salvatore...” she says quietly. “I didn't mean to make it seem you're... not good enough. I just think... we shouldn't be together.”

“No, Phi. You're right. You're too good for me. I'm fucked up and that's not changing. It's who I am. You should be out there with the Chadwicks and Garretts of the world. I've been selfish. I've refused to let you go. But I'll do that. For real this time.”

She blinks, her eyes glassy. “I don't like how you're shutting down right now. It scares me.”

“You should leave. I’ll replace whatever’s been destroyed. Let Francis know and I’ll arrange a deposit. We can do it offhand so I don’t have to see you.”

“Salvatore...”

“I’ll arrange a hotel for you. Francis will drive you. You can stay there until you find an apartment. I’ll cut the security details. No more of my men watching you. We can both move on. You’ll be free of me.”

I turn away and walk out the room, leaving her in stunned silence. I don’t regret what’s happening. I’m forcing myself to see the big picture. The big picture is, regardless of how I feel about her, Delphine is a distraction.

The same way I’m a distraction for her.

It’s best we both wake from this dream that’s been our time together. She can return to her world. And I’ll return to mine.

30. delphine

. . .



I'M ALONE when the ball drops on New Year's Eve. I've checked in at the Northam Plaza and spent the evening in one of the complimentary bathrobes, ordering room service, and guzzling down champagne. By the time midnight strikes, I'm tipsy and forlorn, clutching my refilled glass as I watch the televised celebrations across the city.

Half of Northam is out to ring in the New Year. The local news shows footage of the mammoth-sized crowd gathered in Northam Square and different bars from every part of the city filled with patrons in sparkly party hats searching for someone to kiss at midnight.

"I'm outside the most popular club in the city—and maybe the state—Club Nirvana," the field reporter says with an excited smile. She gestures to the lines behind her wrapping around the block. "As you can see, eager party-goers can't wait to be let inside the famous club. Ma'am, how long have you been waiting?"

She holds the microphone up to two college-aged girls shivering in party dresses that are as short as they are tight. They answer in unison, revealing they've been waiting over an hour.

“There you have it,” the reporter says. “Nirvana is the place to be on a night like this! Back to you, Jerry. Hopefully you’re a lot warmer in the studio than we are out here.”

I change the channel before the segment can return to Jerry chuckling at the anchor desk. I’m in no mood to see live footage of Club Nirvana... or any of the other happy celebrations happening around the city.

It’s nothing but torture. Usually, I’d at least have Salt and Pepa to keep me company, but Brenda’s watching them until I find somewhere more permanent to live.

I get up from the comfy armchair I’ve parked myself in and pad over to the balcony. My flute of champagne goes where I go. The cool winter wind brushes against me and draws goosebumps onto my skin. I pull the terry-cloth robe tighter and come up to the banister.

The view is spectacular. *Romantic* even, if I weren’t alone.

The dark silhouette of skyscrapers offsets the fireworks shimmering in the inky sky. Music plays and people cheer from the streets. Everyone can’t wait for the New Year.

I couldn’t feel more differently. I bring the flute of champagne to my lips as thoughts of the past few months occupy my mind. Many of them thoughts of Salvatore.

The *third* time we’ve tried and I’ve wound up with an aching heart. Surveying the metropolis surrounding me, I can’t help wondering where in this big city he is right now.

Is he home at his loft in his compound? Is he spending the night at Nirvana? The bash the club hosts every year goes on until the dawn. I half consider texting him to find out before tamping down on the urge and swilling more champagne.

I'm giving myself tonight. This one night to mourn what can never be between us. Come tomorrow morning, as the sun rises on the first day of the new year, I'll leave it in the past. I won't let myself look back.

But, for now, a hollow feeling has taken over. Bottomless heartbreak that's familiar from the last time we went our separate ways. It's the cruel realization that even if I'd like for things to be different, we're never going to work out. The real world and circumstances of who we are and where we're from will always break us up. One way or another. That's what it always leads back to. After three attempts, how can we possibly believe otherwise?

Even more depressing is the truth in Salvatore's words—everything he had to say about my exes *was* true. I was too pissed to admit it in the moment, but he was right. None of them were worth staying with. Most of them legacy types from families similar to mine. Any marriage would've been more of a business contract than out of genuine love.

Garrett had been the best of the worst. We had been... lukewarm at most. We looked good together and got along well enough that I could swallow the idea of a future with him. Marriage and children and successful careers. We'd become one of the power couples in the city, attending galas and other special events with our equally esteemed friends.

We had no passion and little connection outside of our lifestyles. Sex with him was mechanical. It was *scheduled*.

When he proposed and I said *yes*, deep in my heart, I knew I wasn't in love with him.

But Salvatore...

I swallow the last of the champagne, forcing myself not to finish the thought.

It doesn't matter what I feel, because I'm going to have to move on.

My only regret is that I hurt him. I regret what I told him. That he could never be a normal man. That he was basically incapable of love.

I could never love a man like you. You're not the kind of man who can ever be normal.

Salvatore had looked at me differently, as though I'd succeeded in the impossible. I had pierced the deep, unfeeling armor he wears every moment of his life, and I had hurt him. He didn't show it like most people would, but I saw the shift immediately. His jaw pulled tighter and his expression hardened even more than usual. The subtle warmth he possessed when around me—only me—had vanished.

He'd spoken to me like a stranger.

I've been the one person he believed cared about him and I've crushed him. Is it possible to be sorry for something you've said but also be pissed at that same person you said it to?

He still invaded my privacy. He violated my trust. He kept a huge secret from me for over a decade and even sabotaged my relationships. I believe him when he says it was for my safety, but that doesn't change the fact that it was also done for selfish reasons.

Salvatore believes I'm his. His territorial tendencies come out in full force wherever I'm concerned.

His infatuation. An obsession.

Twelve years he's lurked in the shadows of my life, watching, interfering where he deemed necessary.

It's not healthy. It... *scares* me to know the lengths he's willing to go to.

Just for me.

When the biting wind becomes too much, I leave the balcony and head back inside the hotel room. At some point between polishing off the last of the champagne bottle, indulging in a large slice of cheesecake, and flipping through more TV channels, I fall asleep. My dreams feel heavy and blank at the same time. Black nothingness yet filled with broken hearted longing.

If I do dream, I don't remember.

I wake the next morning to my hotel phone ringing. I fell asleep on the wrong end of the bed with the TV remote in hand and no comforter covering me for warmth. The room feels like an icebox as I shiver and clutch my robe together so I can answer.

"Delphi sweetheart, I was getting worried," Dad says. "I've called three times. I was about to have the bellboy come up to check on you."

I yawn and glance at the time. "Nothing's wrong. Just sleeping."

"You've had an exhausting last few weeks. It's best you take these next couple days to get your affairs in order before you return to work."

"My affairs?"

"You can't stay in a hotel forever. You can't return to your old apartment. Get dressed and come down to the lobby. We'll

go apartment hunting.”

“Oh.”

I let a moment of pause go by. Dad is only worried about me because of the break-in. I haven't helped matters when I told him I was afraid of going back. In typical overprotective Dad fashion, he sees it as his duty to make sure I have somewhere new to live that's safe and up to standard.

He's not wrong.

Now that I'm no longer living with Salvatore, I *do* need to find a place.

“I'll be down in a few minutes.”

Dad stands in the middle of the marble lobby of the Northam Plaza. His eyes light up at the sight of me and he presses a fatherly kiss on my brow like always.

“I hope you don't mind. I've booked us a real estate agent to show us some properties in Centennial Village,” he says as we slide into the backseat of his town car. “It's where many other well-off professionals reside. Nicely maintained area and safe, with the lowest crime rates in the city. The neighborhood of my old apartment has grown worse in recent years. I should've realized it wasn't a good place for you. No wonder you've been staying with Brenda for months now.”

“Hmmm?” I'm only half listening.

He raises a brow. “Your apartment. My old apartment. You stopped staying there. You've been staying with Brenda.”

“Right. Yeah, it was nice of her to let me, but I'm ready for my own place.”

“Centennial is the way to go. Our agent, Barb, has a list of places she thinks you might like.”

Dad prattles on the entire car ride. I focus my attention on the window, staring out at the sunlit streets. As cold as temperatures were yesterday, the sun has decided to peek out and say hello for the first day of the year.

A new beginning.

For both the city and for me.

I've enrolled in therapy. I figure it's time I find a healthier outlet for my trauma that doesn't include murderous plots for revenge with my mafia boss ex-boyfriend.

If I'm going to be running for district attorney this year, I can't afford any forays into the crime world. No association with anyone less than clean. No slip ups and no mistakes. Nothing but the mask of perfection.

As always.

I *have* to make myself believe again. I have to rediscover faith in my position and the system I'll be a part of. It still won't be easy. Men like the one who assaulted me and others like the murderer who took Mom's life are still free among the five million people in the city. But I have to try to make a change. I can leave my dark encounter behind me and work toward bettering myself and Northam.

We drive by Club Nirvana and I spot Salvatore's sports bike parked along the curb. My mind jumps to the memories we made riding through the city streets. I'd felt so safe, yet so alive. Many of my happiest moments in life involve our time together. Both old and new. Teenage and adult. Past and present.

My hand touches my rose pendant thinking about them.

"You'll feel like yourself again soon, Delphi," Dad says sagely. Almost as if reading my thoughts. He comforts me

with a squeeze of my shoulder. “Whatever you’ve been going through, you can move on from it. You’re on the verge of finally achieving your dream. You play your cards right, you’ll be DA by the end of the year. That’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” I trail off.

“Don’t ever let anything—or *anyone*—hold you back from greatness. It’s what our family is destined for. We’ll be running this city in no time. Mayor and district attorney.”

I should feel motivated, inspired by Dad’s words. Instead I feel off. I sense something wrong with the direction I’m heading in. With the vision Dad has of the future. A premonition I can’t shake but will have to learn to forget. I glance one last time at Club Nirvana and Salvatore’s sports bike before forcing myself to look away.

It’s how things have to be.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Thank you for reading *Wicked Roses*! I would really appreciate it if you’d take a quick second to drop me a review on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#).

Turn the next few pages to learn more about the sequel, [Twisted Roses](#)! The darker, sexier, even more twisted continuation of where Salvatore and Delphine’s story is headed next. I can’t wait to share with you guys! <3

wicked roses playlist



Salvatore:

1. Clubbed to Death - Rob Dougan
2. Summer Overture - Clint Mansell
3. Something in the Way - Nirvana
4. Pray for Rain - Massive Attack
5. Hurt - Nine Inch Nails

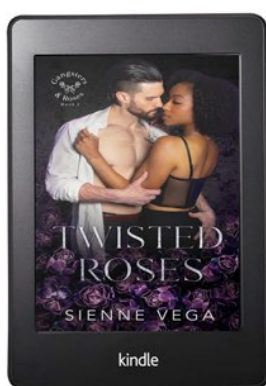
Delphine:

1. Salvatore - Lana Del Rey
2. Mary Magdalene - FKA Twigs
3. Fuck with Myself - Banks
4. Spice - Ravyn Lenae
5. Back to Black - Beyoncé and André 3000

Listen to [Salvatore's](#) and [Delphine's](#) playlists on Spotify!

**coming soon: twisted
roses**

Releases January 5th, 2023



I was supposed to let him go.

I thought I could handle it. I thought I could walk away.

Every moment I'm tempted to give into my addiction.

So dark. So delicious.

So dangerous that someone threatens to expose my secret.

And reveal the forbidden truth I've tried to hide.

If they succeed, it'll ruin me forever.

She can try, but she'll never escape me.

The woman I'm obsessed with thinks she can run.

What she doesn't realize is I'll always catch her.

She belongs by my side as I seek out my revenge.

On my father. On her father. On the world.

I'll tear it apart if I have to ... so long as it's us in the end.

But the web of lies might be more twisted than even I imagine.

[PREORDER NOW](#)

Or turn the page for a sneak peek of the first 2 chapters!

chapter 1 - delphine



“You’ve been making remarkable progress, Delphine,” Alicia Keeney says. She studies me from where she sits poised in her cushy armchair, her legs crossed at the ankles. The late-afternoon sunlight lances through the blinds and makes her bright eyes more crystalline. More piercing.

I aim a gracious smile at the therapist. “Thank you. These sessions have been an enormous help. For the first time in a while, I feel hopeful for the future.”

“That’s always encouraging to hear. Have you been writing in your dream journal? Even the bad ones?”

My smile falters for the briefest second before I blink and catch myself. “Yes, every morning. No bad ones in recent weeks.”

“Good, good. You’re making strides toward healing. Though you should remember, we all have a misstep or two along the way. No survivor’s journey is a straight line. How about we pick up from here next Wednesday? Same time?”

I leave Alicia Keeney’s office without looking back. The early evening rush has started—cars clog up the streets and people beeline for the subway. Potent smells like garlic and pepper waft out of apartment windows as dinner is cooked and

served. Above distant skyscrapers the sky tinges gold and the sun sets. My favorite time of the day.

Next to nighttime.

I can be alone—I can be whoever I want. I leave the narrow street Doctor Keeney’s office is located on and move toward the subway. In the past I would’ve been headed home to Salt and Pepa and my new apartment in Centennial Village.

Lately, I’ve picked up a new hobby. I grab the subway on the next street over and settle into a seat in the corner of my car. I’ll be riding it a while. Right out of Northam and into a neighboring city. Tonight I’ve chosen Easton.

By the time I return home, it’ll be past midnight. Possibly a couple hours later than that. Most of the city will be asleep. Except those out for a good time ... or a bad time.

I should know. I’m one of them.



The stop I get off on is called Shadwell. It’s not a particularly safe part of the city. As I depart the subway car and step onto the platform, a man in tattered clothes lurches by, more lifeless than the undead. Dark circles and vacant eyes, pimples and reddened skin, he’s high out of his mind, as he wanders the station.

I pull my blazer tighter and stride forward, ignoring the open leers from a few constructor workers nearby. I nab the first taxi available on the street outside. My driver nods at the address I show him on my phone and then cranks up the radio on the dash.

Easton is a lot like Northam in several ways—big buildings, headache-inducing noise, crowded streets and no sign of a leafy tree or plantlife for miles.

My driver drops me off outside the address I've requested and then speeds off once I've sent the payment through. I check my watch.

Surprisingly, I'm *early*.

Over the next hour, I head up to the studio apartment, set down my expensive briefcase from my long day at city hall, and shed the layers of my ADA costume—my silky blouse, tailored blazer, and sleek pencil skirt are hung up. I shower and put on a very different kind of costume. Where as my daytime attire was professional and designer, the slinky dress I put on cost about twenty bucks at some fashion boutique in the mall.

A smokey eye, red lip, and spritz of perfume later, I'm almost ready to go. The last touch is the wig I'm wearing tonight—sleek and dark with bluntly cut bangs. I leave the closet-sized studio apartment without any idea when I'll come back; I'm only ever on-the-go when I stop by and use the space for some quick privacy.

I take the subway a second time, riding *deeper* into the city. Another thing Easton has in common with Northam. The later in the night you travel on the subway, the stranger the people around you get. I ignore a couple groping each other in the seats next to mine, my attention focused on my phone.

I'm staring at a live map of the city on an app that's proven to be handy. It's divided up into a grid, labels for everything from what building is where and what the street they're located on. My only interest is in a blinking red dot that's on the move.

Friday night by ten p.m., like clockwork. He never fails.

I get off at the next stop and walk to the same street as the blinking red dot. Vale Street is a narrow strip of seedy bars and clubs where many in Easton go for a night of excess. No limits. No boundaries. No care in the world.

Some say Vale Street is an even better party scene than Club Nirvana in Northam.

I check the map app on my phone. The red dot has gone inside Two-Twelve, an underground dance club known for its drug activities. He's predictable enough that I've figured out his pattern. He likes Two-Twelve on Friday nights because it's when most female college students from Easton University go clubbing.

The underground club is noisy, hot and loud. I squeeze myself between strangers and search the many faces around me. Because Two-Twelve is underground, the service on my iPhone drops off. The app freezes, no longer providing any updated movements of the red dot. I slide my phone into my wristlet and focus on observing my surroundings.

The dance floor takes up the most room, bright strobe lights passing over every few seconds. A turntable sits several feet above, where the DJs for the night hype up the crowd and mix the party music being played. Go-go dancers whip their hair and gyrate nearby in platformed cages, their sparkly bralet tops and thigh high boots their uniform. Together, the crowd and the music are so loud, the sound feels brutal enough to bust your eardrums.

I scan the dance floor and then move on to other parts of the dark club.

At last, I spot him. The red dot I've been staring at all evening. Predictably, he's by the bar counter, chatting up a redhead whose face I can't see. I should've known he'd fish around the bar first before trying his luck on the dance floor. It's his MO.

I lurk in the background, a silent observer.

Another woman, this one with tan skin and wavy hair, wanders over to retrieve the redhead. At first it seems she protests—with him piling on, trying to insert himself between the women—but then she relents and lets her friend take her away.

Perfect timing.

I spend a quick second collecting myself, putting on an invisible mask, before I strut over. When I reach the bar counter, I don't make eye contact. I don't acknowledge his presence at all. I lean against the counter and wiggle my fingers at the bartender as if too polite to outright call him over.

Already I can feel his attention shift to me. He plays silent observer himself as the bartender finally moves over and asks me what I want to drink.

I bite my lip and give him an uncertain smile. "What do you recommend?"

The bartender almost rolls his eyes—I'm sure he's dealt with plenty of clueless young women throughout his time that my fake cutesy behavior doesn't charm him. He's swamped at the counter with a dozen other patrons trying to place their order.

But I don't care about pissing off the bartender. My bashful, lip-bitten smile does what I'd hope it would.

The Red Dot cuts in. “Try a Tequila Sunrise. They’re delicious and not too strong to get you drunk off your ass.”

My gaze swings over to him. My small, shy smile remains. “I’ve never had one of those before. What’s in it beside tequila?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s good. Trust me.” He turns to the bartender, holding out a twenty. “We’ll have two.”

“Oh, you don’t need to buy me a drink. Here.” I start digging around in my wristlet.

He waves a dismissive hand. “It’s no big deal. I can afford to buy an extra drink or two. Besides, how much would it suck if I recommended you a drink and you didn’t like it? At least it’s for free.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“Nothing wrong with a unique perspective.”

A soft laugh falls from my lips. It’s as orchestrated and insincere as my lip-bitten smile, but it serves its purpose. He rests his arm on the counter and leans closer, invading my space. Around us the music beats on and club-goers eagerly writhe trying to keep up.

His interest is unmistakable as a few seconds go by and he holds my gaze.

He has a swimmer’s build, trim and lean with long arms and long legs. His dirty blond hair is messy and tousled, though not by chance. He must’ve used a whole can of mousse to style it that way. As we stare at each other, he shifts even closer, his lips twisting into half a grin.

“Where are your friends?”

I look away. “I’m actually here alone.”

“By yourself at a club like this? Brave. I like it.”

“I’m not from around here. But I wanted a fun night out.”

His twisted grin spreads, his eyes gleaming. “Fortunately for you, I can show you one.”

The bartender returns with our drinks, sliding them across the counter. We take hold of them and turn away from the bar.

“I’m Quinn. What’s your name?”

“Sasha,” I answer. I accept his hand when he reaches out to give it a gentle shake.

“Okay, Sasha-from-not-around-here. Let’s go somewhere private where we can talk. Get to know each other.”

I smile as he guides me by the small of my back. “I’d love that.”

chapter 2 - delphine



Quinn drains the last of his tequila sunrise. When he notices I'm only taking a tiny sip of mine, he tips up the bottom of the glass, forcing me to swallow a larger mouthful. In the ten minutes since we've sat down in a booth on the outskirts of the dance floor, he's grown more brazen. More insistent and touchy.

His hand lands on my thigh under the table. "You said you're in med school?"

"That's right. Up in Lunbury."

"Nice. Very impressive. I'm surprised you'd come out alone. You sure you don't have some crazy boyfriend with a raging temper?"

I humor him with yet another smile. "Just me."

"How about another drink?"

Quinn doesn't wait for my answer. He gets up, making me promise I'll stay put, and goes off to order us more drinks. The club is so crowded, other club-goers partially block him from view. I crane my neck and slide to the other side of the booth to keep sight of him.

When he believes no one is looking, he dumps a powdery substance into one of the drinks he's ordered—my drink.

Sentophyl.

Nicknamed Cherry on the street, the party drug is known to make people lose all inhibitions, even control of their bodies. For better or for worse.

Give someone a high enough dosage, and you've rendered them paralyzed, though their feelings are not. The smallest sensation is magnified times a hundred. Most who choose to take the drug as party favors love how it makes them feel during sexual encounters. Those who have the drug forced upon them don't realize what's happening until it's too late and they can no longer do something as simple as walk in a straight line.

Quinn McGuire's modus operandi.

He regularly makes the rounds in Easton's club circuit, hopping from club to club. Usually on Friday nights. Sometimes Saturdays. Always a new, unsuspecting young woman. Always feeding her drinks and slipping Cherry as a party favor into their drinks. Always covering his tracks the morning after.

If Quinn has his way, tonight will be no different.

He returns clutching our drinks. I thank him by scooting closer and flirtatiously running a finger along his jaw. He's more than eager playing along. His arm slips around my hips and he pulls me toward him in the booth. We're now so close our bodies touch.

I thread my fingers into his stylized hair and kiss him. He takes it as a cue to pull me into him. Within seconds his tongues sloppily pushing into my mouth. He's distracted enough that he doesn't notice what my free hand is doing.

I slide his drink toward me and my drink toward him. By the time we separate, the glint that's been in his gaze since the moment he spotted me is only shining brighter. He gestures to our tequila sunrises and mentions finishing them.

“Maybe we can go somewhere after,” he says. “My place is only a few blocks away.”

“I have to be up early tomorrow. I have a train to catch.”

“An hour or two for a nightcap.” He strokes my cheek. Despite his best efforts to hold it together, the cracks in his facade split him down the middle, like a beast shedding his former skin. His aura darkens, his swimmer's body pressing me into the cushions of the booth, more than encroaching my space—my space is now his space.

Because, as far as he's concerned, I'm his now, too. For the next few hours.

We leave Two-Twelve behind. Me protesting and asking him to slow down. It's difficult walking so fast in heels after two drinks. He merely grins and tugs me along, ignoring my protests, walking even faster.

It's spring, but the nights are often still miserable. Wet and chilly. Fog rolls through and blurs the streets in its thick haze. I shiver as the mist touches my bare arms and shoulders. We might as well have ventured into another dimension.

When we emerge from the blanket of fog, we're a couple blocks down. Vale Street is just a memory. Quinn leads us to a building that's a pharmacy on the first floor and small apartments on the second and third.

We fly up the flights of stairs so fast, it almost feels like falling upward. Quinn couldn't be more excited to be on his turf—for me to be locked in his apartment with him.

It's not lost on me the danger I'm putting myself in. Though I've planned meticulously for a night like tonight, I'm not naive enough to believe I'm invincible. There's no short supply of things that can go wrong.

Quinn McGuire could do what the others just like him couldn't—he could outplay me.

But if I don't believe in myself, who will? I'm more tactical. I'm sharper than he is. I'm *ready*.

The door slams shut behind us. He wastes no time. In a flash he's smashing his lips against mine, his arms wrapped tightly around me. He's walking me backward, deeper into his modest-sized apartment. We don't even make it to his bedroom. To him, the couch is good enough.

He pushes me down and reattacks with more sloppy, aggressive kisses. I turn my head to the side, my hands pushing at his chest.

“Quinn, please slow down.”

“Shhh. Stop talking. Go with the flow.” He grabs one of my wrists and pins it to the sofa cushion. He wedges his knee between my legs to force them apart. His free hand begins roaming, sliding along my curves until he reaches the hem of my dress.

“Quinn, I said slow down.”

“And I said stop talking.” He eases back enough that I can see it plain in his face—the menace that he's been trying desperately to keep a hold on. His eyes peer into mine, cold and reproachful. His jaw tenses as he's quick to anger.

Those cracks in the facade have split into a wide open chasm. No more pretenses and no more pretend. He's lured me into his lair. The real Quinn McGuire can reveal himself.

He moves to plant more wet kisses all over me.

The party favor is taking longer than I anticipated to hit him. He's larger and weighs more than his victims; the same dosage won't hit him as quickly. Quinn typically has his victims so blitzed out of their minds by this point, they can barely object. If they do, he merely holds them down like he's doing to me, and presses on anyway.

Eight women and counting. I won't be his ninth.

It'll be the opposite. He's going to suffer for what he's done.

When he comes close for more kisses, I snap up and headbutt him dead center in his face. His hands fly up to his nose and his eyes water. A pained howl rumbles from him, the hit so hard and jarring, he's thrown off for a second.

I use it to my advantage. My arms free, I throw up my elbow and strike him again. A second direct strike to his face. I buck my hips and throw him forward until he's tumbling over me and toward the sofa armrest. Then I'm rolling out from under him and onto my feet. He's finally on the uptake, twisting around to launch himself at me. I anticipate the move, easily dodging him.

"You fucking bitch, you knocked my tooth loose!"

He spins around and tries again—he charges at me like a bull bounding toward a matador with a red cape. I shift to move out of the way a second time, but he seizes hold of my arm and swings me against the wall. My body collides with it with enough force I'll probably wake up with bruises on my torso tomorrow.

But I don't panic. I don't lose my cool. I wait for my next opening. It comes as he raises his fist to strike me in the face. I

hold up both arms to block his hit and then knee him in the groin. I follow up with kicking out his shin. He drops to the floor with a loud thud. His eyes wide and his face painted red with his own blood, he hasn't learned his lesson.

He still seems to think he can win. I'm a couple steps ahead of him, grabbing my wristlet and digging inside.

He pushes himself onto his feet, slightly woozier than only a couple seconds ago. Either my hits have disoriented him or the party favor he drank in his tequila sunrise is *finally* doing its job. Possibly even a combination of both.

He throws himself at me. I'm too quick for him. Once again, I'm moving out of the way. Until he cheats and throws a lamp at my head. I duck only for him to crash into me and slam me into the wall. We drop to the floor and he uses sheer brute strength to keep me under him.

"You should be knocked the fuck out right now," he spits. His grin spreads and reveals blood staining his teeth and gums too. He doesn't seem to notice how his words slur. His eyes loses focus, his pupils darkening. The drug really is taking affect. He presses down on me with his body weight to rub his dominance in. "It's okay ... it'll be hotter this way. I'll knock you out myself."

He raises his arm and backhands me and then clenches a powerful hand around my throat. He's not going to get any further. I've already reached into my wristlet and grabbed my syringe of Sentophyl. My emergency escape hatch of sorts.

When consumed orally, Sentophyl takes up to an hour to work. When injected directly into someone, it works instantly.

As he squeezes my throat, I jam the syringe into his thigh. He growls and hits me again.

“What the fuck did you just ... did you ...” he slurs. He sways on top of me before tipping sideways, landing hard on his shoulder and side.

I slide myself out from under him and roll him over onto his back. His eyes go vacant and his mouth hangs open, bloody drool leaking out. He isn't a pretty sight with the deep bruise on his nose and gash on his chin.

Injuries I caused him.

He stares up at me, dazed and speechless, incapable of doing anything. He's lost total control of his body. Just like the women he's brutalized.

Desperate gurgle noises leave him as he struggles to speak.

I smirk at him. “What's the matter, Quinn? Didn't you say to stop talking?”

He gurgles in answer, putting forth maximum effort to speak to no avail. Even a singular word proves impossible. His tongue lolls at the back of his throat and he begins choking on his own spittle.

I spend a few victorious seconds watching him before I move on. The moment isn't about ego or gloating about my success. It's about making him suffer for the crimes he's committed. The legal system failed to do so, so why shouldn't I take matters into my own hands?

“Good night, Quinn,” I say sweetly. I knock him out cold and begin setting the scene the authorities will find sometime in the future.

Quinn McGuire's tragic overdose.



I'm riding a high the entire trip back into Northam. It's the dead of night, the subway terminals almost empty. At one point, I'm the only passenger on my subway car. I barely notice, my serene smile touching my lips. I've changed out of my club attire and into a comfy hoodie and leggings (spare clothes I make sure to keep in my extra apartment in Easton). The subway train lurches to a halt at the Centennial Village stop.

I pop to my feet and exit, stepping onto the platform. Silence echoes around the terminal except for the whoosh from the subway and the advertisements playing on the monitors hanging throughout the station.

The streets aren't much better. Centennial is one of the nicest neighborhoods in Northam. Most residents work during the workweek and are home by eleven or twelve at the latest. I walk the streets with my hands in my hoodie pockets. The lamp posts above cast a halo of light around me, so persistent it feels like the only other life force around.

That, and the distant buzz in more active parts of the city.

I make it to my building in no time, riding the elevator up to my floor. I'll be sleeping soundly tonight. Doctor Keeney would approve in theory (until she found out why). I'm engaging in a hobby that decompresses me and gives me joy.

It brings me *solace*. Each and every time I emerge, I'm comforted with the knowledge I've put one more sick predator out of his misery. The methods might be unconventional, and it might be extremely risky and dangerous, but I've gotten results. I've made a difference; something I've always wanted to do for the community.

The guy who assaulted me is still out there. I'll probably never catch him. It no longer matters anymore—knowing I'm

catching other men just like him is just as rewarding.

I sleep easier. No more nightmares.

I unlock the door to my apartment and immediately stop. Pepa waits for me, sitting right by the door, her eyes bright even in the dark. She meows and paws at my foot. I look up from her and into the shadows. Where's Salt?

He wouldn't be far out of reach if Pepa is by the door. They're a packaged deal.

I drop my bag on the credenza against the wall and venture deeper into the dark apartment without flipping on a light. I don't need to when I know exactly what to expect. As I pad down the hall and reach the living room, I stop.

I'm not alone. There's a man sitting in the chair by the tall window, engulfed by deep shadows. Salt sits obediently in his lap as he strokes him.

"Hello, Salvatore."

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bonus scene

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about the author



Sienne has a thing for dark and brooding alphas and the women who love them. She enjoys writing stories where lines are blurred, and the romance is dark and delicious. In her spare time, she unwinds with a nice glass of wine and Netflix binge.