

1999

Chapter 1

The police officer jiggled the key to handcuffs, opening the lock. *The clinking of the metal echoed throughout the cemetery grounds, disturbing its serenity.* Enormous *maples* offered a light sway of rustling leaves from high above. The canopy of green seemed to provide shelter for the rows of dotted headstones blanketing *the* ground. The mid-morning sun cascaded *into* slivers of light down to the sea of green earth. Thankfully, *this* tranquil *environment* guided the *officer* to a more *docile* mood.

Julie Valin 1/21/10 12:53 PM  
**Deleted:** All that could be heard was clinking metal echoing within the silence and serenity of the cemetery grounds....Maples...along ...from above filtered ...the...austerity for ...departed guided him in ...submissive ... [1]

Briskly, the man rubbed *at* the cutting irritation *on* his wrists, and glanced into the distance where he would *begin* his walk to *say a* customary *last* goodbye.

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“Don’t try anything asshole, we have backup *stationed all* around the grounds. It wouldn’t behoove you to *do* anything stupid,” the police officer noted before the man even started toward the funeral procession.

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With a calculating look up from his wrists, the man set his eyes into the officer’s. *He held the* defying stare *until* the *officer* tensed a hand close to his holster. “Tell me, who the fuck actually uses that word?”

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The officer’s expression strained as he replied, puzzled, “*What* word?”

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“Behoove, *And* you’re *the one* calling me an asshole.”

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The officer cleared his throat, fully aware that the threat hadn’t affected the man in the least.

Slowly, the man walked away, shaking his head at the policeman’s idiotic attempt *at* intimidation. *At this moment*, he had no energy to battle others, especially with the painful ache along his right side. *Any small* movements *or* the simple task of taking a breath caused further discomfort. *He wasn’t about to add more pain on top of everything else.*

Julie Valin 1/21/10 12:53 PM  
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He just wanted things to be over and done with. Funerals were so fucking overrated. He arrived at the chair that was reserved *especially* for him. He sat down *next to* his brother and his

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brother's family. He gave a contiguous glance at his brother's wife. *She returned a gentle smile* before he abruptly looked away *at* the casket.

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*He* couldn't believe that someone he loved was just inside *those* beautifully handcrafted walls of cedar. He cleared his throat repulsing the emotion he would never let show. She was gone and with it the only love he'd ever felt.

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His brother leaned over and spoke, "We'll take care of your alibi."

*He* shot his brother a look of disbelief. *He* didn't want to talk about that. *Jesus*, he was at a fucking funeral. *Anger began to push its way through, masking any other possible feelings that usually surface when dealing with a death.*

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He slowly leaned *into* his brother's ear *and murmured fuck you*. *His* brother raised an apologetic and consoling hand to his shoulder. *He shot another glare at his brother and then* down to the hand that rested at the crest of his *suit jacket*.

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"Don't," he spit out, and his brother withdrew *his* hand that was meant to soothe. *What was Cal doing; trying to make him feel better?* *He* knew the gesture wasn't sincere, *so dismissing it, he turned his attention to the* chosen few *who were* gathered *there for the one he loved so dearly*. His eyes drifted from the casket to *the various faces of the people*. Immediately, those faces caught his stare and turned away *as if he were to blame*.

Julie Valin 1/21/10 12:53 PM

**Deleted:** the ... The man ... and focused on why he and a ... here today... strangers that had remained friends with the one he loved so dearly and now was dead... from his ... The man knew the truth. He'd done it and regret was just a judge and jury away. Yes, he'd deserve everything that would justifiably come and more. She had trusted him and loved him. What he gave her in life was now returned with death. Now, no promises to make things better would ever be reassured or any apologizes accepted. Within him, regret wasn't even an option. ... [10]

Throughout the Catholic priest's final prayer, *he* simply stared as if emotion was foreign and feelings completely untouched. He *wasn't* available to attend her memorial service the day before. He knew the eulogy given that day would have been from her closest friends. They would tell of her charm, radiance and her love of life that emanated so naturally from *her*. There were no bars that held her to this world and as *he* glanced up at the vivid sky of blue, the first handful of dirt was tossed into the grave, *sealing that fate*. The soil fell, landing on the casket *and triggering a flinch from deep inside him*. That last rite sent any emotion further into the pit of his soul. It was done.

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The crowd dispersed *while he sent* a careful glance around the area. He needed to remember the faces that his wife had once loved before starting his walk back to the police officer. Several cops stood *in* close *proximity* at adjacent headstones anticipating his attempt *to* escape, but it *wasn't going to* happen. He *gave* his word to *the* one officer who allowed him to come. Sure it was illegal as hell, but Nick *assumed* that the detective saw something deeper *in* his concealed

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grief. That emotion was never exposed, but somehow *he felt that the officer* recognized the signs of it, no matter how far it was buried. Even though that officer wasn't the one to personally escort him here—giving the excuse that funerals were depressing—his favor would never be forgotten.

With handcuffs in hand, the police officer met him half-way *as he* turned willingly with his hands behind his back to be cuffed for a final time before going back to the 69<sup>th</sup> Police Precinct in Brooklyn. The door was opened and he ducked his head low as he was guided into the backseat of the unmarked police cruiser. Life *as he knew it* was over for him.

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**Deleted:** he hated funerals and they just depressed him. Now the man would gladly agree. That favor would not be forgotten and the man would owe him until the day he died.

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Two years later

## Chapter 2

“So, Matt, what’s the fuckin’ problem now?” he calmly asked, but his irritation was just on the surface. He closed the door behind him.

“Nicky, we got a problem and I deem it to be major or I wouldn’t have called.”

Unperturbed, Nick lit a cigarette and wondered what the real importance was. He sucked in a heavy drag filling his lungs. When he got Matt’s imperative call, Nick’s gun had already been put away for the night and his feet finally kicked up *on* his back porch chair. It had been two years since his wife was gone and all emotions *were* exhausted. Tonight he had no desire in answering his cell phone, but the job was all that was left to focus on. Unfortunately, he had answered and here he was.

“Okay, Matt what is your *deeming*, fucking problem?”

Matt gestured a wave for Nick to go first. Nick walked through a foyer and moved towards a small room. It could have been a family room or perhaps even a dining area. Nick couldn’t be sure. All he knew was that the small, cramped and cluttered house was a dump and Nick was certain that Matt was dealing with *piddly* shit or he wouldn’t be here or anywhere near this part of town.

Nick turned and backed up. “Matt, I want the truth here.”

“Yeah, Nicky, ask me. *You* know my word’s good,” Matt cautiously spoke.

*Nick knew this was true or else* Matt would have to answer to Cal, but Nick noticed a slight hesitation in *his* voice *almost like* he was hiding something. “What the fuck are you doin’ in this neighborhood? Did Cal send you on this errand?”

“Well Nicky, actually...” Matt started before a reach at his throat clamped tightly. The force slammed Matt back against *the* wall and held *him there* with a grip that pressed both sides of his larynx and kept him motionless.

Matt’s eyes widened not at the shock that Nick was onto him, but the exacting pressure that *could* and *would* instantly kill him.

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*Despite his hands around his neck,* Matt had *been getting* bad vibes from Nicky Serranto, *lately. It seemed* Serranto didn't like him, but then again Serranto didn't care for too many. *It didn't really bother him, though,* because *the* feeling was mutual. Even though *Nicky was* the boss' brother *and* the most proficient member of the Serranto Family, there *was* always a fine line with *their* working relationship. Of course, Matt always understood *the rule* about maintaining professionalism, but from the very start it irritated him that *the line had been so sharply* drawn by Nicky Serranto. Matt *now* needed someone to clean up his mess and unfortunately Nicky was the *only* man to do it. He now realized *in Nick's tight grip* around his throat that *perhaps* his decision *was* a big risk, *if not even a flat-out* mistake.

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Matt expelled garbled words that pressed determination to keep breathing.  
Lately...gotten.....most likely ... It was all kosher...that ...quite ...was...had ...been the...that ...since ...just happened to be...one, Serranto ...just ...with the hand gripped tightly...had been ... and ...worse, a l[... [13]

*"Matt, I know Cal didn't send you and if you're doing shit on the side, I'm not having any part of it."*

"Okay...ohhh kokay...Nicky, *Come* on...let me..." Immediately, he was released and slid down the wall, his legs weakened in an endeavor to stand.

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"Talk, Matt."

"I fucked up, *I was just supposed* to talk to the guy, but fucked up," he stated, afraid to move.

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"How exactly?" Nick sternly asked.

Matt knew the answer would have to be good. "I picked up the second guy that was in the alley."

"Back up, Matt," Nick demanded, "*Start* from the beginning."

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"The guy that I was directed to talk to was in the alley, Benny-Z was meeting someone. We followed Benny-Z for a couple of blocks and we should have waited until he came back out..."

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"What were your orders, Matt?" Nick *insisted* dryly.

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"Talk to him and give him a date to show with the money."

"How much did he owe?"

"A couple hundred," he said trying to stifle his nervous tone.

Through his lips, Nick blew out an irritated breath. "You're screwin' with a guy that owes Cal *only a couple hundred?*"

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“Yeah, it was stupid that we even picked him up...along with the other,” he mentioned drifting *his* words to the bona fide problem. Matt held his neck trying to massage the tightness from his throat, *his hand jingering there* in anticipation of another hasty strike.

“Hell, Matt, remember what I told you? Do exactly as Cal orders and you will stay alive, don’t, and you *will have* just pissed your life away.”

“I know Nicky that’s why I called you, *We* seriously need help, before Riley does something stupid.”

“You mean to tell me that Riley’s pushing his weight around as we speak?” Nick massaged the back of his neck before he stepped closer to Matt. As if the question was no longer important and his mind already made up, Nick drew his hand back and flung it, smacking Matt solidly against *his* face. The backhand cued Matt’s knees to give slightly. Another swift contact hurled *him* back against the wall where his body hit *firmly*. Matt’s knees buckled, steadily slipping down along the wall. *He* didn’t bother to get back up.

Nick left him in the hallway, brushing off any concern. *He* was sick of Matt’s carelessness and disrespect of orders. He was dangerous, but not in the way Nick could be. Matt was thoughtless *in* his hasty decisions *regarding* any human life, decent or otherwise. Nick glanced back to Matt’s muffled curse that was *clearly* meant for him.

Evidently, Matt didn’t realize just how close he came to *nudging* Nick to that edge that *could ultimately bring him to* his end. Nick pushed through the door.

Nick took a look around the *dark room* where a single bulb cast light down on two men confined in chairs. Riley hadn’t heard him come in, since he was too busy pounding one man with an uncontrollable fist. Riley’s willpower wasn’t any better than Matt’s, *and on top of that he had a* lack of conscience. The man’s face was bloodied and the other’s *wasn’t* any better. Duct tape secured both men’s mouths, hands and legs. Their hands were fixed onto the arms of the chairs while their legs to chairs legs, confined in the same manner. Riley’s simple technique, although primitive, was quite effective.

Nick’s eyes darkened before he swiftly moved *to grab* Riley from behind. He flung him backwards *to* the floor. At once, Riley’s feet struggled to stand up against the storming threat.

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Unperturbed, Nick pursued shoving him back several more times until he finally landed sprawled out along the floor. Riley pushed back up in anger towards his surprise opposition until he finally came to fully recognize the perpetrator.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Nick asked.

“I was just...” Nick kicked his ribs before he could finish. There was a muted moan that came from Riley’s lungs. A hand went out, but it clearly wasn’t in offer to help Riley up. Nick sought the weapons that he knew would be confiscated. Details were one thing that Nick regarded and gave a strong priority. He was always careful to never leave evidence that would possibly link the night back to a crime. Riley handed him a gun and one switchblade. The gun was gripped with a handkerchief in his hand. Nick tucked the weapon into his belted waist and shoved the handkerchief back into his breast pocket. The knife went into his pocket for him to get rid of later. The gun would be more of a problem.

With that minor detail taken care of, Nick swiftly yanked Riley back up onto his feet. Nick prodded him with an intimidating finger to his chest. “Tomorrow we will have a long chat about this little mess up.” Abruptly, Riley was thrust back to the floor. Nick muttered low through gritted teeth, “Now you and your partner take a  fucking hike or there won’t be any more talk ‘cause I will personally take care of you two, here and now.”

Without haste, Riley scurried backwards on his hands and knees crawling to the outside room where Nick had left Matt.

Nick lit a cigarette and counted to ten just before he heard the door shut on five. He took another drag becoming aware that he needed to quit smoking.

Nick didn’t want to turn around, because he knew what he would see. He already caught a quick glimpse of the two men that Matt and Riley had worked over. Nick figured the men assumed he was here to finish what the other two started. Fortunately for them, Nick wasn't in the mood tonight to deal with them.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and leisurely walked over to the secured men. Sure enough, fear plagued one man, but the other strangely didn't seem bothered. There was a familiarity about the one who seemed resilient to fear. Where did Nick know him from?

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His first concern was to take care of yet another mess from Cal's hired help. His brother had no idea that he signed on bungling clowns that didn't possess the finesse to follow through with simple fucking orders.

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"Gentlemen, I believe there has been some sort of misunderstanding here. Could someone let me know if there was a loan of a couple hundred dollars that is required in repayment?" Nick asked, hoping one man would gladly acknowledge the debt because he was tired and didn't want to further the already bloodied questioning.

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One man shook his head frantically.

Good, short and sweet. Nick held his cigarette up pointing to the man who answered. "Excellent. So I will need the money, in say, a couple days?" Nick looked at him and the man's eyes stated that it was impossible. Nick rubbed a thumb above his brow deliberating. He'd give him more time. "Okay, I'm going to make this easy, Let's say two weeks."

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The man, who Nick now pinpointed as Benny-Z, frantically nodded in agreement and Nick scratched his temple in serious thought. It wasn't about Cal not actually receiving his money, but the familiarity of the man who sat expressionless next to him. Nick walked over to Benny-Z knowing full well he most likely wouldn't pay the whole amount when it came time to pay. But what the heck, it gave him job security. Nick reached in his pocket and flipped out the switchblade he confiscated. Benny-Z cringed as Nick's hand lowered to slice the tape from around his wrists. His hands rose to frantically pull at the tape on his mouth, but the tape was too fixed, Nick pushed Benny-Z back into the seat and raised a finger to his own lips in insistence for him to calm down. In terror, Benny-Z didn't move. His eyes widened as they followed Nick's knife as it made its way to the side of his cheek. The blade's sharp edge lay to skin as Nick slid it underneath and jerked it swiftly upwards, severing the tape. Firmly, Nick ripped it away from his skin and repeated the reminder of paying the money back. Benny-Z nodded intermittently, but didn't move until Nick nodded upwards for him to get the hell out. The blade was flipped closed and Nick slipped it into his suit jacket.

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Unconsciously, his hand swiped down along his face in deliberation. Matt was correct when he said he'd screwed up. It wasn't just merely picking up Benny-Z along with

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another, but as Nick turned to the *familiar* face, it was only then that Nick was certain of Matt and Riley's lousy and careless indiscretion.

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While Nick had taken the time to cut the tape from the Benny-Z's mouth, *he glimpsed* over his shoulder just one more time and the man's identity *had* finally registered. *His* hair was a little longer, but *his* eyes were a dead give away. Nick learned a long time ago that eyes *can hold a* man's soul.

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Nick stepped away, trying to *plan* on a simple out. He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, *pac*ing once more before he stopped in front of the man who was having a hard time following his movements.

"Detective, what a small world we live in," Nick mentioned, knowing *the detective* also recognized him. Once again, Nick pulled out his knife and flipped open the blade. Nick tugged lightly at the material of his slacks enabling him to bend down eye-level with the detective. Again, fear didn't materialize, *in the man*. He had to admire the detective for his courage or maybe it was stupidity, either way Nick still owed him for what he did two years ago. He cut the tape from his legs. The man's legs inched moving his feet forward. Maybe it was relief from the obvious discomfort or a readiness to take Nick down. Their eyes never left one another as Nick rose to cut the tape from the detective's mouth. The tape was sliced allowing Nick to pull it off so the man could speak. Purely for insurance reasons, the tape around his wrists remained where it was.

"Serranto." A smirk was the only expression *the detective could deliver*.

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"Yep, it's me," he sarcastically voiced.

Piercing eyes sent Nick a hard glare. "So how *ya*' gonna explain this one to your boss, Serranto?"

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Nick rubbed his jaw wondering the same thing, but wouldn't admit it. "Don't work for anyone...what makes you think I do." He played coy not giving the detective any fuel to throw on the fire, *a fire that could* eventually blaze like a wildfire and reduce him to nothing more than ashes.

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"I know you do, *Your* brother rules you. You don't have a life, Serranto, but you know that, don't you."

Nick's eyes flared in irritation.

“You can kill me now or you can go and tell your boss how the big bad cop got away. But I figure you ain’t daring enough to go up against your brother.”

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“Shut the fuck up,” Nick snapped back. Very rarely did Nick lose his composure if at all, but somehow what the detective was saying was just a little too close to his Achilles. Nick snapped his wrist, flipping the knife back in place. He stuffed it in his pocket, feeling he didn’t need the knife’s temptation in his hand, particularly with *his* rising irritation.

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“You’re a pawn in his little game Serranto, and like I said, you have no life.” The detective gave a weighty exhale that told Nick he was in more distress and pain than he let on. Unfortunately, Riley’s former blows hadn’t deterred the detective’s bold words.

“I dare you to walk away from the crime family, *especially when you know* someone killed your wife and it wasn’t you.”

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*Walk away?* If things were *only* that simple, *But* the detective’s words somehow rang true. Someone *had* killed his wife and Nick wanted to know who that someone was. *Did this detective actually think he could save Nicky Serranto’s soul by advising him to walk away?* Already, one person had tried *that tactic*, and that clearly *didn’t* work.

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Nick glanced down at the floor and then back to the cop whose face trickled red. He snuffed out a breath of air wondering why in the world *a cop* would put himself through the agonizing risk *of getting involved in an ineffective street battle*. “So, humor me would you, *Tell me why you do this?*” Nick asked.

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“What, try to arrest bastards like you?”

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“Yeah, if that’s the way you see it.” Nick had to agree with the detective. He was a bastard and knew that *better than anyone*.

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As if drained, the detective gradually lifted his chin from his dazed look at the floor. “Probably do it for the same reason you do,” the detective replied, centering his sight once more on Nick.

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Nick thought, *not likely*, as he stamped out his cigarette on the wooden floorboards.

“Think so, huh?” Nick mentioned. *Presently just what was his actual motivation in doing what he did?* He was in his thirties and fed up with being Cal’s bitch-boy. *He* rubbed his jaw, dissecting the detective’s statement.

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*But in actuality*, Nick was well aware of the reason he did what he did. After his wife's death, *his job was the one thing* he *had in his life to focus on* and *it* was all he ever *knew*. For as long as Nick could remember, he *was* perpetually placed in *a position of* protection *in the family business*. Nick knew nothing else. *If there* was a hostile engagement *or* threatening situation, *Nick was the man to handle it*. It was easy and *came naturally to him*. Nick turned to the detective's words.

"Sure, *pissed off at the world, right?*"

Nick looked at him, disbelieving *his admission and surprised that he sensed that Nick was in the same place*. "Okay, you got me on that one," Nick derisively retorted. *But although he might have* agreed, he wasn't submitting to any *of it*.

"So what's the decision, Serranto?"

Nick rubbed his neck in contemplation. Silently, the detective waited as if he was a pawn in some chess game. Unfortunately, it was Nick's move.

Nick gradually looked up with a pointing glare to the man who clearly wasn't having a good night, but oddly his insight of Nick was *right on track*.

Once more, Nick reached to his breast pocket and took out the switchblade. The detective stiffened and pressed back in his seat while instinctively clutching his fingers *on the arm of the chair*. Nick held up his hands in a gesture of truce. The tape was cut along his wrists before the detective pulled his arms free of the excess tape. The detective finally appeared to relax when Nick offered him a handkerchief.

"You did me a favor once, and I *haven't forgotten*. I might be *a* bastard, but I never forget," Nick explained, observing the detective blot the handkerchief at the corner of his eye where blood had seeped in. *The detective's* head angled in question and tried to remember the so-called favor that Serranto mentioned.

For several moments, he didn't speak. "So great, Serranto you remember," the detective replied mockingly as if in some sweet reminiscence.

"That I do detective and that's why we're even," Nick stated and *nodded* his head towards the door for him to leave.

"Even?" The detective rose perplexed, but kept himself alert and aware that he hadn't made it out the door yet.

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“Yeah, so next time you feel a need to catch us bastards, watch your back, because I won’t be there to save your ass.” Nick held out the detective’s gun. The detective took it and tucked it *into* a concealed holster at his back.

“You’re just a sweetheart, Serranto,” he sarcastically retorted before turning away. The detective hesitated and turned back around in thought, “*For* what *it’s* worth, Serranto, *my* wife and kids would have thanked you.”

“Whatever detective, *Now* get the fuck out of here before this bastard changes his mind.”

The detective leaned against the doorframe. “Listen, if you ever need to talk about certain things, you know where to find me,” *he* offered, feeling he was thinning that luck that brought him out alive.

A stern look to the detective said that Nick had heard his offer. He didn’t say a word as the detective headed out the door, shutting it behind him.

Nick slid into one of the chairs thinking about what the detective truly meant by talking about things. He knew perfectly well what those *certain* things were and what he would want to discuss. The only *thing that* the Brooklyn cops and surely the FBI and ATF, *were interested in* was his brother and the Serranto Family’s financial dealings, *and* “assets.” Fortunately, *this was Cal’s arena, and the one area in the business* that Nick *always made* a point to stay away from. As for being arbitrator for the Serranto Family, well, Nick couldn’t deny it and *was always* in the thick of it. He was no more than what was described by the detective, *as* a “lackey” for his brother. Cal paid him and that was as simple as things got, but strangely now Cal’s’ pay included much more than Nick *wanted* and *came* with a job consideration that had *become* much more complicated. Yeah, Nick was too old to jump through hoops any longer.

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