

Untitled

Anonymous

Chapter 1: Empty Pedestral

Smoke curled from my cigarette as I stared at the void where Byzantine emperors once sat. The Golden Throne's pedestal hadn't changed in three years—same black velvet shroud, same brass plaque tarnished by the breath of gawkers. I flicked ash onto the Kensington Museum's marble floor. Let the docents tut.

"Miss Sinclair." Gus's wheeze preceded him around the Corinthian column. His flashlight trembled in rheumatic hands. "We close in ten."

I didn't turn. The dagger of his knowledge—that he'd been on duty that night too—pressed between my shoulder blades. "You ever hear anything else? About the theft?"

His throat rattled. "Administration said not to talk."

"But you want to." I caught his reflection in the glass case behind me. The dumb guilt in his bloodshot eyes.

He shuffled closer, reeking of Ben-Gay and rye. "Basement door's been...whispering. Last Tuesday." A cough shook his hunched frame. "Like someone dragging chains."

My pulse leapt. *Uncle Arthur's ghost*, the superstitious part of me whispered. The part that still saw his bloated face in the East River whenever I closed my eyes.

I crushed the cigarette under my oxford. “Tell me where.”

The grand staircase creaked. Gus melted into shadows as a pair of interns descended, their laughter too bright for the tomb-quiet halls.

“Miss Sinclair!” Fletcher’s voice carried the edge of a man who’d shouted down riots. “My office. Now.”

The *New York Star* newsroom swam in honeyed light and sweat. Teletype machines clattered like vengeful spirits. Fletcher stood at his cracked leather desk, ink bleeding through the society page draft in his fist.

“Beaumont’s gala.” He thrust the paper at me. “Tonight. Whitefields Estate.”

I leaned against the doorframe. “You’re giving me glitter and hors d’oeuvres?”

“Charles Beaumont’s importing ‘art benefactors’ from Marseille.” His index finger stabbed the guest list—a who’s who of bankers and bootleggers. “Word is the Moretti crew’s laundering through his gallery.”

The name hit like a gut punch. *Moretti*. The same family who’d paid a certain security guard to look the other way in ’26. The guard whose body they pulled from the river six days later.

“I need sources, not society drivels.”

Fletcher’s laugh smelled of bourbon and bronchitis. “Kid, drivels pays your rent.” He tossed me a press pass. “Be there by eight. And Viv?” His gaze softened a fracture. “Don’t pick fights with waiters.”

My apartment greeted me with mildew and silence. I shrugged off my suspenders, the cotton sticking to my skin. The icebox yielded

half a grapefruit and a bottle of Bathtub Ring gin. I drank straight from the neck.

Three years. Three years since the headlines crucified Arthur Sinclair as the Kensington Mole. Since I'd found the farewell note hidden in my copy of *The Great Gatsby*—*They made me do it, Vivvie. Forgive me.*

The Remington waited on the desk, its keys gleaming like rotten teeth. I fed in a fresh sheet.

The carriage jerked.

A slip of onionskin paper fluttered to the floor.

Ice flooded my veins.

DON'T LOOK

The typed words blurred. I sank into the armchair, springs biting my thighs. My name curled at the bottom in familiar, spidery cursive—Arthur's handwriting.

But that wasn't possible.

The gin rose bitter in my throat as I angled the page toward the light. A single phrase glowed beneath his signature, written in lemon juice—his old trick for passing me notes during church sermons.

The Throne isn't lost—it's currency.

Outside, the El train screamed.

Chapter 2: Whiskey and Razorblades

The Oasis stank of bad decisions. I ducked through the butcher shop's hanging beef carcasses, their bloody hooks glinting like accusation fingers. A false wall groaned open behind the liverwurst display. Blue smoke slapped me first—cheap cigars and the sweet rot of bootleg gin. Then came the sawdust tang of spilled blood.

Rex Donovan sat in the back booth, nursing rye from a jar labeled *Pig's Feet*. His shoulders swallowed the space, a mountain gone to seed. He didn't look up as I slid in. "You're late."

"And you're a cliché." I snatched his drink, the liquor burning like a struck match. "What's so urgent a girl has to skip her beauty sleep?"

His thumb jabbed toward the bar. Sammy Delgado polished glasses with a rag that'd never seen soap. The serpent tattoo on his neck rippled. "Your new boyfriend's been nosing around all week," Rex grunted. "Asking who runs the art beat at the *Star*."

**"Who" asked?"

Rex's flask sneaked from his coat. I caught the glint of nickel plating. "Some greaseball in a sharkskin suit. Enzo Moretti's favorite lapdog." He tossed a matchbook onto the table. Waterfront address scribbled on the back. "Delancey Street. It's a knife magnet."

I pocketed the matches. "Come with me. Split the scoop."

“I don’t file reports for Fletcher’s fishwrap.” His laugh rattled loose change. “You been tailed?”

“Only by ghosts.”

He leaned in. Whiskey and Sen-Sen overwhelmed the speakeasy stench. “Your uncle wasn’t no thief, Viv. But digging up that coffin gets you two things—a bullet or a body bag.”

The door to the butcher shop creaked open. Cold air razored through the haze. Rex stiffened. “Back exit. Now.”

Rain needled my neck as I stumbled into the alley. Garbage festered in puddles. My fingers found the Derringer in my garter just as a voice purred through the downpour. “Running from shadows, doll?”

Vito Romano leaned against a brick wall, flicking a silver dollar across his knuckles. His suit clung too well, sharp enough to draw blood. I stepped back. “Who’s paying you to lurk in the dark? Moretti?”

The coin froze midair. “You say his name like it’s a curse. Could be we’re on the same side.”

“Do thieves have sides now?”

His laugh hummed against wet skin. “We’ve got better wardrobes than cops.” He pushed off the wall. Rain sluiced down his jaw. My throat tightened.

“Let’s trade.” He blocked my path. Heat radiated through his soaked shirt. “You tell me why Kensington’s pet project died with your uncle. I tell you why his corpse floats in every speakeasy confession.”

I spat at his wingtip. “Only corpse here’s yours if you don’t move.”

He reached for my collar. Calluses snagged the silk. “You’ve got—” His thumb brushed my pulse point. “Lint.”

The slap echoed. His head snapped sideways, but the grin stayed. “Attagirl.”

We stood chest to chest, breath tangling. His sandalwood cologne warred with the alley’s decay. Thunder cannonballed overhead. He pressed the silver dollar into my palm. “For the subway, *principessa*. Looks like you’ll need it.”

My drenched clothes clung like a second skin. Rex’s matchbook dissolved in my hand as I stared at the boarded-up tenement. The Delancey Street address bled ink. Above me, a gargoyle vomited rainwater.

Inside my apartment, I peeled off my stockings. The telegram slithered from my coat pocket.

Dear Miss Sinclair—

Urban Renewal Comm. records enclosed. Follow the tracks.

—A Friend

The ledger page fluttered to the floor—seven grand diverted from “Public Works” to “Art Preservation LLC” last month. Serial numbers from Kensington’s vault.

I poured a bath of gin. Drank half. The other half stung my split knuckles. Through the steam, Vito’s smirk haunted the mirror.

Currency.

Arthur’s lemon-juice ghost whispered as I sank beneath the surface.

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Chapter 3: The Art of Disappearing

Delancey Street hunted corpses. I counted twelve moldering mattresses in the tenement’s foyer, springs curled like fossilized ribcages. The address from Rex’s matchbook leered in peeling gilt numbers above a door boarded with nails rusted to sepia tears. My flashlight beam sliced through grime-coated air. Blood spatter clung to the walls, old as sin.

“Nowhere to go but down,” I whispered to Arthur’s ghost. He’d preferred attics.

The coal chute crouched behind a cairn of firebricks, its iron hinges shrieking betrayal. I slid into the void, knees scraping through a century of soot. My blouse caught on a nail, tearing free with the sound of a violinist’s last breath.

Greenish light flickered below.

The tunnels stank of wet earth and ozone. Narrow-gauge tracks gleamed under bare bulbs strung like witchlights. I pressed against a sweating brick pillar as voices echoed.

“...Thursday’s shipment,” growled a sandpapered baritone. “Throne goes to the docks, same as the Rembrandt.”

A younger voice: “Who’s moving it?”

“Same bastards who shut Lowell’s trap permanent.” Ragged laughter. “Boss don’t care if we sail it or sink it, long as the mayor gets paid.”

Mayor: My pulse thrummed. The flashlight slipped in my clammy grip.

A distant train horn drowned their retreating footsteps. Silence rushed in, thick as clotting blood. My beam trembled over tracks, then caught on something pale.

A hand.

The subway worker lay sprawled like a broken marionette, left arm twisted behind him, right fist clenched. I pried open his rigor-mortis fingers. A slip of paper—*Grand Central. Thursday, 11:15 PM. Track B-12.*

His throat grinned sideways.

Gin surged up my own. I retched into the coal dust.

“I’ve been threatened by better,” I lied.

CHAPTER 2: WHISKEY AND RAZORBLADES

Fletcher's pencil snapped. Gold whiskey trembled on his mustache. "They mentioned your uncle. Said if I didn't bury this story, they'd send Arthur a playmate."

The *Star's* newsroom buzzed behind us, telewriters clattering like distant artillery.

"You're off the case." His ink-stained fingers drummed a Morse code of fear.

I slapped the train schedule on his desk. Blood smeared the page. "Tell that to the corpse in the tunnels."

He didn't look up. "Funeral's Friday. Bring lilies."

Rain lashed the library's leaded windows. Eleanor Brooks emerged from the stacks, a cameo brooch pinned at her throat like a preserved scar.

"Tunnels, you say?" She unrolled a yellowed map, her voice as dry as the parchment. "Built for coal in '58. Retrofitted during Prohibition." Her nail traced a spiderweb beneath Fifth Avenue. "Smugglers use them to bypass checkpoints."

I pointed to Delancey Street. "Where does this spur lead?"

"Docks." She folded the map with surgical precision. "But you didn't hear that from me."

My apartment reeked of betrayal. I tossed the schedule onto the desk, poured two fingers of bathtub gin, and froze.

Shadows moved.

"Late for a social call, isn't it?" My Derringer found the darkness.

Vito stepped into the jaundiced glow of my desk lamp. Rain glistened on his shoulders. "You missed the memo, doll. Warrens are Moretti turf."

“What’s the penalty for trespassing these days?”

He plucked the glass from my hand, swallowed the gin in one motion. “Depends. You hoping for a spanking or a bullet?”

Sandalwood cut through the mildew. Closer now.

“You’re tracking mud on my last clean rug.”

He stepped over the stain. “That corpse in the tunnels? He worked for *my* crew. You’re costing me money.”

“Send me a bill.”

His fingers brushed the silver streak in my hair. “Or a wreath?”

The kiss landed like a sucker punch—hot, brutal, gone before I could bite.

He was at the door when I threw the glass. It shattered against the jamb.

“You taste like secrets,” he said, and vanished into the stairwell.

The train schedule glowed under my lamp. 11:15 PM. Compartment B-12.

Arthur’s pocket watch ticked on my wrist. I lit a cigarette with hands that wouldn’t steady.

Somewhere below, the third-floor neighbor’s radio crooned: “...*the golden chair, the golden chair, the gangster’s sweet affair...*”

I traced the dead man’s bloodstains. Gus the night guard had mentioned strange noises in the museum basement.

Coal chutes. Corpses. Compartments.

The typewriter keys laughed under my fingers.

Chapter 4: Society’s Sharp Edges

Lydia Fitzgerald's ice-blond head tilted like a diamond-encrusted pistol. "Your pearls are weeping," she said. Her own necklace glowed with the fat, lazy luster of old money. I resisted the urge to touch the dime-store strand clinging to my throat. *Mother's last gift.* The emerald satin of my dress itched where the Derringer pressed against my thigh.

Ballroom heat pressed down like a sweaty palm. Crystal chandeliers dripped light onto the gossip-flushed faces of Manhattan's merciless elite. A jazz quartet saxophonist hit a note that slithered between my ribs. Lydia's smile stayed frozen as she handed me a champagne coupe. "Cousin. Do try not to spit in the oysters."

I sipped the bubbles. "Thoughtful of you to lend me a family tree, considering mine's been chainsawed."

Her laugh was the sound of ice cracking over dark water. "Harold Kensington's watching us from the mezzanine. Try to look ornamental, Vivian. Men like him prefer their weapons sheathed."

Across the room, the mayor stood flanked by thick-necked aides. His gaze moved over the crowd like a scalpel. I wondered if he still smelled of his mistress's blood.

"Ah. The sacrificial lamb approaches." Lydia flicked her fan toward Freddie Winslow, who swayed toward us wearing a cravat askew and a monocle fogged with gin.

"Lydia!" He swept into a bow that nearly toppled him. "Warn a man before parading Medusa at him." The monocle squinted at me. "Who's this stark vision?"

"My cousin. Fresh from finishing school in Boston."

"Does it *finish* them so deliciously there?" Freddie's grin revealed a smear of caviar on his incisor. I let my gloved hand brush his as I took another champagne flute from a passing tray. "Enchanted, Mr.—?"

"Winslow. Freddie to those I don't sue." His breath reeked of lemon gin and the anchovy canapés circling on silver platters.

“Boston, eh? Far too Puritan for my tastes. Give me a speakeasy skirt any day.”

I pressed closer, the rhinestones on my garter biting into skin. “But doesn’t sin lose its *spice* without risk?”

His laugh sprayed spittle. Lydia murmured something about powdering her nose and melted into the crowd.

“You’re talking to a man who once bet his inheritance on a cockroach race in Havana.” Freddie’s hand found my waist. “Risk is my middle name.”

“I heard it was Mortimer.”

He hiccuped. “Ghastly, isn’t it? Mother’s idea—rhymer with ‘Winslow.’ As if poetry might trick God into sparing me the family chin.” His fingers pinched my hip. “Let’s christen it in the gardens. Mortimer F. Winslow, defiler of unknown cousins.”

The piano launched into “Ain’t Misbehavin’.” I let my cheek graze his. “I prefer my corruption subtler, Freddie. A whisper in the coat check. A key slid under a door.”

He stiffened. *Too bold*. But then his throat bobbed. “Kensington’s pet project. A train to *nowhere*. All that clatter, all that *coal*...” His laugh curdled. “Though the mayor does love a scenic route.”

The music crescendoed. I slipped my hand into his jacket pocket. Cold brass teeth bit my palm.

“Viv!” Rex’s voice echoed from three years ago, our first pick-pocket lesson in a Coney Island crowd. *Watch the eyes. The hands are just the dance.*

Freddie’s head lolled against my shoulder. “You know who built those rails? *Corpses*.”

I tucked the key into my glove. “Darling, you’re leaking metaphors.”

“Vivian.” The growl came from behind me. Vito’s hand closed on my elbow, his grip a handcuff. “There’s a cab waiting.” His tuxedo

smelled of gun oil and gardenias.

I twisted free. “How kind. Tell it I’ll pine from afar.”

He stepped closer, heat radiating through the bespoke wool. “Moretti’s boys just clocked you. The dumb one’s got a knife. The smart one’s got a *Priest* badge.”

The crowd parted. Two bull-necked men muscled through the sea of sequins. The brass knuckles on the taller one’s hand glinted.

Vito yanked me into a servant’s passage. A door slammed. Darkness swallowed us, the linen closet air thick with starch and mothballs. His forearm pressed across my collarbone as footsteps thudded past.

“Hiding me from your boss or your conscience?” I hissed.

His breath warmed the shell of my ear. “You’re playing with fire, doll.”

I jammed the Derringer under his ribcage. “You’re in the splash zone.”

His teeth flashed in the sliver of light from under the door. “You think I’d kiss you if I planned to let Moretti carve you up?”

My pulse roared. “I think your lips would flirt with hell if it bought you a better suit.”

Wood splintered outside. Enzo Moretti’s voice, rasping in Italian.

Vito’s palm slid to the small of my back. “When I open the door, run for the kitchens.” Sandalwood and sweat. “And Viv?” His lips brushed my temple. “Next time you steal from a mark, check if his pockets are *wired*.”

He shoved me into the corridor just as Moretti turned the corner. The key in my glove burned like a live round.

Lydia materialized by the grand staircase, her smile a shard of glass. “Exit’s past the ice swan. Try not to track blood on the Persian.”

The train key's teeth bit into my palm, whispering promise. *B-12*.

Chapter 4: Society's Sharp Edges

The ballroom stank of gardenias and greed. Crystal chandeliers dripped light onto acres of sequined spite, each gown costlier than a tenement's yearly rent. I adjusted my borrowed pearls—paste replicas that chafed like the lie they were—and wove through champagne tides. Lydia Fitzgerald awaited me by the grand piano, her ice-blond chignon sharp enough to slit throats.

“Darling!” She air-kissed my cheek, her breath sweet with vermouth. “You simply must try the *canapés*. The *pâté* is *divine*—I hear they liquored up the geese before slaughter.” Her fingernails bit into my wrist as she leaned closer. “Second button's loose on your glove. Amateurs always miss the details.”

The piano launched into a jaunty Cole Porter. A waiter glided past; I snagged two coupes of champagne. “How'd you know I'd come?”

Lydia's smile was a scalpel. “Because your press pass tears crookedly, dear. The *Star* doesn't starch its collars.” She sipped, leaving a crimson half-moon on the glass. “Also, Fletcher owes me a favor. Something involving a Senator's *indiscretion* and a *borzoi*.”

A marble-columned mirror caught our reflection: we could've been sisters, if despair were a shade of lipstick. She saw me notice. “The Mayor's wife had that installed. She likes to watch her guests stab backs mid-waltz.”

I deposited my empty flute on a passing tray. “Why help me?”

“Kensington called my father's suicide a ‘tax dodge’ at the Darby Ball.” Her thumb grazed the cameo at her throat—real, unlike mine. “Now. Three o'clock. Freddie Winslow's about to disgrace himself by the potted ivy.”

Freddie swayed like a metronome set to *disaster*. Monocle fogged,

ascot askew, he clutched a magnum of Dom Pérignon like a newborn. “Vivi! Vivace! *Vixen!*” Champagne sloshed onto my T-straps as he engulfed me. “Heard you’re hunting ghosts! Did’ya know the mayor’s got a *pet*? Choo-choos to *nowhere*, fulla’ *art* or some rot!”

I steadied him. “Slow down, Freddie. Which nowhere?”

“Whitefields!” He hiccuped. “But the throne’s not there. Lost luggage. Or legs? Leggy legs—” His gaze snagged on a waiter’s tight trousers. I yanked his chin back.

“When’s the next train?”

“Thursday.” His hand found my waist. “Ride with me, Viv. I’ll show you the *compartments*—”

The chandelier dimmed. Across the room, Enzo Moretti’s pock-marked face glowed in match-light as he lit a cigar. Two gorillas in tuxedos flanked him, necks thicker than their skulls.

Vito materialized at my elbow. “You’re lost, doll. Kitten’s pen’s upstairs.” He gripped my arm, silk sleeve sliding over taut muscle.

Freddie sneered. “Piss off, greaseball.”

Vito headbutted him. Freddie folded into the ivy, snoring.

The closet smelled of mothballs and murder. Vito shoved me inside, one palm clamped over my mouth. His thumb brushed my lower lip. “Yell and I’ll gag you proper.”

Shoes clattered past the door. “...check the terrace,” snarled a voice like gravel in a meat grinder. “Boss wants the snoop gutted.”

Vito’s body pinned mine against brooms. Sandalwood and gunpowder. Heat radiated through his shirt. My Derby hat tilted, veil catching on his stubble.

“You’re stupid in lace.” His breath scorched my ear. “That dress hides a wire?”

I kneed his thigh. He grunted, trapping my leg between his. “What’s Moretti’s stake in Kensington’s train?”

A chuckle vibrated through me. “You’re playing with fire, doll.”

Outside, Enzo’s thugs argued over Freddie’s prone form. “...wake him. The Eel wants names.”

Vito’s teeth grazed my earlobe. Not gentle. “Stick to society pages.”

“Or what? You’ll *spank* me?”

“Tempting.” He leaned back just enough for light to slit his smirk. “But first, apologize for this—”

Footsteps retreated. He released me like a thief dropping a hot watch. I lunged for the door.

He blocked it. “You owe me.”

“Tell your boss to send a bill.”

“He don’t deal in cash. Only favors.” His finger hooked my pearls. “I’ll collect.”

The snap echoed like a gunshot. Pearls rained between us.

“Fakes.” He crushed one under his wingtip. “But you knew that.”

Freddie snored in a bergère chair, monocle cracked. I knelt, pretending to adjust his shoe. “Poor lamb,” I cooed to the gawking dowagers. “The bubbles went straight to his head.”

My fingers slid into his breast pocket. Brass bit my palm: a key, teeth gleaming. *B-12*.

The mirror showed me Lydia at the bar, waving a handkerchief in mock distress. Behind her reflection, Vito watched me through the crowd—a wolf in a Tommy gun tuxedo.

He raised his empty champagne flute. *To the game*.

I palmed the key. Somewhere, a train whistled.

Chapter 5: Compartment B-12

The train groaned like a dying beast as we slipped past the tenements of Queens. Vito's shoulder pressed against mine in the narrow compartment, our breaths fogging the window. Outside, the moonlit marshes blurred into a smear of oil and shadows. He'd traded his tuxedo for a rumpled newsboy's cap and workman's denim, but the sandalwood scent still clung to him—a dissonant note in the stench of coal smoke and stale sweat.

"You're staring, doll." He didn't look up from cleaning his switchblade. The steel caught the overhead bulb's jaundiced light.

"Admiring your restraint. I expected more complaining about riding coach." I adjusted the kerchief hiding my hair. The stolen porter's uniform chafed at my thighs.

"Sweetheart, I grew up hauling fish on the Fulton line. This?" His blade snapped shut. "This is the Ritz."

The key burned against my breastbone, strung on a chain with my mother's locket. *B-12*. Freddie's drunken sneer flashed in my memory—*corpses built those rails*. The conductor's voice barked down the corridor. "Glen Cove, next stop! Glen Cove!"

Vito rose, the muscles in his back flexing under thin cotton. "Clock's ticking."

The first-class car loomed ahead, its mahogany paneling and stained glass doors a mockery of the cattle-car stench we'd escaped. I pressed against the shuddering wall as a white-jacketed steward passed, his tray of champagne flutes trembling. Vito's hand closed over mine.

"Wrong move, detective." His thumb traced the notch in my palm where the Derringer's grip had worn a callus. "Nerves?"

I jerked free. "Anticipation. Ever stabbed a man in a smoking jacket?"

Compartment B-12's lock clicked like a broken jaw. The air inside was tomb-cold, stale with the reek of Cuban cigars and betrayal. Velvet drapes choked the windows. Vito struck a match, the flare illuminating crates stamped *FRAGILE—MUSEUM TRANSPORT*.

"Jackpot," I whispered.

He pried open a lid. Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* stared up at us, the apostles' faces warped in a forger's imperfect hand. "Kensington's been busy."

I sifted through shipping manifests. "Boston, Philly, Chicago... He's replacing every stolen piece with fakes." A love letter fluttered to the floor, the mayor's crest embossed on creamy stationery.

My dearest Celeste—

Vito snatched it up. "Christ. The mistress has better penmanship than my sister's priest."

A floorboard creaked in the corridor. We froze. Inspector Burns' Scottish brogue sliced through the door. "—absurd notion, but His Honor insists we check every compartment—"

Vito killed the match. Darkness swallowed us whole. His hand found my waist, yanking me into the slender gap between a crate and the wall. My back pressed against his chest, his heartbeat a frantic counter-rhythm to the clattering rails.

The doorknob turned.

"Easy," he breathed into my hair. His palm slid over my mouth. I bit down hard enough to taste copper.

Burns' flashlight beam swept the crates. "Bloody waste of time," he muttered. The door sighed shut.

Vito released me. "You fight like a feral cat."

"You smell like a distillery." I wiped his blood from my lips. "We need those letters."

"We need to *survive*." He gripped my wrist as I reached for the

crate. “Kensington’s got half the force on his payroll. You think Burns won’t put a bullet in your spine for a pension boost?”

The train lurched. My uncle’s suicide note crinkled in my brassiere—*Forgive me, Viv. The truth is uglier than you know.* I’d carried it for three years, its edges fraying like my resolve.

“My uncle wrote that he failed.” The words tasted of gin and grave dirt. “But he didn’t. He found the ledger, the shipping routes. They drove a bullet through his reputation instead of his skull.”

Vito stilled. Outside, a crossing bell clanged.

“You want confession?” His laugh was bitter as burnt coffee. “I drive trucks full of morphine to Hell’s Kitchen clinics. Take cut from widows’ rent money. Last month, I broke a dockworker’s knees for skimming \$10.” He caught my chin, forcing my gaze. “But every cent goes to Rosa’s design school fund. Every. Damn. Cent.”

The raw edge in his voice undid me. I reached up, straightening his crooked tie. “You’re a terrible liar, Romano.”

His hand trapped mine against his chest. “And you’re a worse judge of character, Sinclair.”

The train shrieked into a tunnel. Blackness swallowed us. His lips grazed my cheekbone, then the corner of my mouth—a question, not a demand. The crate shifted.

We fell.

He twisted mid-air, taking the brunt of the impact. My hips slotted against his as we sprawled across cold hardwood. His thumb brushed the silver streak in my hair. “Still playing hero?” I rasped.

“Still dodging answers?”

The train erupted into light. We froze—my palms on his shoulders, his fingers digging into my hips. Somewhere, a child laughed. A woman’s stockinged leg brushed our compartment door.

Vito's grin was all teeth. "You gonna kiss me or solve the case, detective?"

The brakes screamed. Glass shattered. A fist pounded the door. "Police! Open up!"

He rolled us sideways as bullets splintered the wood. "Time to go."

We leapt onto the coupling platform, wind clawing at our clothes. The marsh stretched below, hungry and endless. Vito's hand found mine.

"Jump when I say!"

"Go to hell!"

"Already on fire, doll." He pulled me against him. "Now."

We fell through smoke and stars, the tracks rising to meet us.

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Chapter 6: Gilded Deception

The tires of the stolen Packard spit gravel as we skidded up the Whitefields drive. Vito killed the headlights, plunging us into the amber glow of mansion windows. Somewhere beyond the rose hedges, a jazz trumpet sliced through the humidity. "You look ridiculous," he said, adjusting his bowtie in the rearview mirror.

I tightened the rhinestone garter around my thigh, the Derringer's weight a cold kiss. "Says the man who smells like a bordello pillow." The sandalwood cologne he'd splashed on at a gas station made my teeth ache.

He smirked, fingers brushing the dagger-shaped tie pin. "Just play rich, doll. And try not to stab anyone before dessert."

The grand foyer was a cataract of champagne and chiffon. A butler dripped sweat onto our forged invitation. "Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni Moretti," he announced. Vito's grip on my waist tightened.

Charles Beaumont held court beneath a chandelier, his laughter too sharp, too frequent. The Golden Throne loomed behind him on

a dais—a Byzantine monstrosity of twisted gold, its arms ashen with fingerprints. Lapis lazuli eyes in the carved lions watched me. *Uncle Arthur dusted you every Tuesday.*

“Champagne?” A waiter thrust a coupe into my hand. The bubbles stank of pear syrup and lies.

Vito’s lips grazed my ear. “East terrace in ten. Romano’s going to case the—”

“Vivian!” Lydia Fitzgerald materialized in a cloud of gardenias, her ice-blond marcelle waves flawless. “Darling, you simply must try the caviar.” She hooked her arm through mine, nails digging crescents into flesh. “It’s *divine*.”

The powder room door clicked shut. Lydia spun me, her cameo brooch catching the sconce light. “They’re moving it tonight. The Throne.” She pressed a cocktail napkin into my palm. Smudged lipstick bled through the linen: *STOP THE TRAIN*. “Midnight. Track nine.”

“Why tell me?”

Her laugh was a shard of crystal. “Because Kensington fucked my sister. Because Beaumont’s a pig who licks his fingers at supper.” She paused, a tremor fracturing her poise. “Because I’m tired of being wallpaper.”

The door burst open. Vito leaned against the jamb, a cigarette dangling. “Mrs. Moretti. They’re serving soufflé.”

We found Beaumont in the rose garden, his tuxedo jacket slung over Mayor Kensington’s shoulders. “—can’t delay the shipment!” The mayor’s cufflinks—onyx with diamond studs—glinted as he jabbed Beaumont’s chest. “That throne buys ten blocks of votes!”

Beaumont swatted him off. “And my neck if the forgery’s spotted. Celeste cracked under pressure. The lapis is all wrong.”

Vito stiffened. His hand crept toward his waistband. I caught his wrist. “Not here.”

The orchestra struck up “Ain’t Misbehavin’.” He pulled me onto the parquet, his thigh sliding between mine as we joined the swaying mass. “You’re shaking, detective.”

“Adrenaline.” Lie. His palm burned through the satin at my lower back. “We need to find the train schedules.”

His fingers crept lower. “We need to not die.”

I brought my heel down on his instep. He chuckled into my hair. “Always a fight with you.”

We escaped to the terrace. The Long Island Sound hissed against the rocks below. Vito lit two cigarettes, passing me one. Our fingers brushed. “Rosa graduates next spring,” he said abruptly. “Top of her class. Wants to design hats. Ridiculous, no?”

I exhaled a plume of smoke. It hung between us like a specter. “You’ll miss the bullets and backstabbing.”

“I’ll miss the view.” His gaze dropped to my mouth.

The cigarette trembled. I stabbed it out on the balustrade, crimson lipstick bleeding into the filter. “We have a train to catch.”

A gunshot cracked inside. Then another. Screams swallowed the jazz.

Vito shoved me against the stone wall as guests stampeded past. “Stay close.”

But I was already running toward the library. Toward the body sprawled on the marble—Beaumont’s vacant eyes reflecting the Golden Throne’s stolen glory. The pearl-handled dagger in his back still quivered.

Mayor Kensington’s voice boomed through the chaos. “A tragedy! *A theft!*” His cuff gleamed in the blood pooling around the corpse.

I turned. Vito was gone.

Chapter 7: Blood on the Marble

Beaumont's blood looked black in the chandelier light. It seeped across the library's checkerboard marble, swallowing the fallen pearls from his wife's snapped necklace. The dagger's hilt jutted from between his shoulder blades like the fin of some grotesque fish. I crouched, my satin train soaking crimson. *Six feet from the Golden Throne*, I noted bitterly. *He died admiring his own damnation.*

"Everyone *out!*" Mayor Kensington boomed, herding guests with outstretched arms. His cufflink—onyx with a diamond chip—winked at me from the edge of the blood pool. The same one that had glinted in the rose garden. My fingers twitched toward it.

"Don't." Vito materialized behind me, breath hot on my nape. "They're coming."

"Who's they?"

The answer came in Italian curses and splintering wood. Enzo Moretti's men flooded the room, their Thompsons sweeping the shelves. I glimpsed Freddie Winslow's blond pompadour bobbing toward the service entrance, his monocle shattering under a thug's brogue.

Vito yanked me behind a floor-to-ceiling tapestry of Persephone's abduction. His hands found the hidden latch in the wainscoting. The panel swung inward, exhaling a damp, fungal breath. "Move."

We crammed into the passage as bullets chewed the tapestry. The darkness swallowed us whole.

"You knew about this," I hissed, feeling along slimy bricks. Somewhere above, a woman screamed about fainting couches.

"Knew the tunnels connected. Not about the—"

A rat skittered over my shoe. I stifled a yelp against his shoulder. His suit jacket smelled of gunpowder and the bergamot hair tonic Rosa made him use.

"Christ, Viv." His palm found the dip of my waist. "Breathe."

We inched forward. My hip brushed a rusted pipe. Somewhere ahead, water dripped like a ticking clock. The passage narrowed until we shuffled sideways, chest to chest. His heartbeat thrummed against mine—too fast, too human.

“Why’d you run *toward* the body?” His whisper grazed my temple.

“Same reason you followed.”

A pause. His thumb stroked my ribcage. I told myself it was to steady me.

Shoes clattered in the library. A flashlight beam licked the gap in the panel. Enzo’s graveled snarl echoed: “Find the bitch reporter. And the *traditore*.”

Vito went rigid. *Traitor*. The word pooled between us, acidic.

We didn’t speak again for thirteen minutes. I counted. His pulse slowed to match mine.

The tunnel spilled us into a wine cellar. Rows of dusty burgundy bottles glinted in the light filtering through a grate. I collapsed onto a cask, my dress crackling with dried blood. “Kensington’s cufflink was in the blood. He framed my uncle. Now Beaumont.”

Vito paced, rolling that damned silver dollar across his knuckles. “We need proof.”

“I *saw*—”

“Seeing ain’t knowing.” He halted, shadows hollowing his cheeks. “I got Enzo’s ledger. Shows payments to the Mayor. Buried in my sister’s hope chest.”

The admission hung between us, raw as a nerve. I stood. “Then we get it. Now.”

He caught my wrist. “They’ll be watching her.”

“So we’re supposed to—”

His mouth crushed mine.

It wasn't gentle. It was a collision of panic and pent-up want, teeth and spit and the copper tang of blood. His fingers speared my hair, tilting my head back. I bit his lip. He groaned, dragging me flush against him until the Derringer dug into his thigh.

A bottle shattered upstairs. We broke apart, gasping.

"Don't start something you'll regret," he rasped, echoing my own words from the train.

I wiped his lipstick smear with my thumb. "Too late."

Shouts echoed through the grate. Vito peered up, his profile all dagger-sharp angles. "They're searching cars. We go through the gardens."

I hesitated. "Your sister—"

"You're the one they'll shoot on sight." He shrugged off his jacket, draping it over my gore-streaked dress. "Try to look like a mourning mistress."

The secret door creaked open. Moonlight and gunfire awaited.

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Chapter 8: The Forger's Lament

The jazz club throbbed like a fresh bruise. Saxophone wails slithered through the sweat-slick air, tangling with the clink of ice in gin glasses. A Negro trumpeter in a moth-eaten tuxedo played a funeral dirge off-key, his notes bending under the weight of the room's vices. We found Celeste Moreau in a back booth, her mismatched eyes glazed over a half-finished canvas. The Golden Throne glared back at us in tempura and guilt.

"He made me sign them *Kensington*," she slurred, swirling absinthe in a cracked coupe glass. Her brush trembled over the throne's gilded armrest, duplicity distilled into brushstrokes. "Said forgeries fund progress. Lies fund *empires*."

Vito lit a cigarette, the match flaring in his cupped hands. "Where's the ledger?"

Celeste laughed, a sound like breaking glass. She pointed her brush at the mural behind the bar—a garish Eden where a snake coiled around the Mayor’s neck. “Check the apple.”

The shot came as I prised the false fruit from the mural’s grasp. Plaster dust rained down as Enzo’s men kicked in the service door. Celeste stood, arms spread like a martyr, her smock blooming red. The ledger slid from her hand into the sawdust as she fell.

“Run!” Vito tackled me behind the bar. Bullets shredded the absinthe bottles, raining emerald shards and bitter liquor. He shoved the ledger into my chest. “Stay low.”

We crawled through a river of broken glass and blood. The trumpeter kept playing.

They chased us through Harlem’s honeycombed alleys, past fishmongers hosing off sidewalks and children dodging shadows. Vito’s grip on my wrist turned to a vise. A bullet kissed his bicep, tearing fabric and flesh. He didn’t flinch.

“Here.” He shouldered open a flophouse door reeking of mildew and opium. Room 3B had a mattress bleeding horsehair and a sink crusted with rust. He collapsed onto the floor, rolling up his sleeve with his teeth. The wound wept crimson.

“Let me.” I tore a strip from my slip. His skin burned under my palms.

He watched me work, jaw tight. “You’re shaking.”

“Adrenaline.” My fingers skimmed the scar on his jaw, the one he’d gotten at seventeen. His breath hitched.

The ledger lay between us, its pages stained with Celeste’s final brushstrokes. Mayor Kensington’s transactions glared in indigo ink—\$50,000 for a Titian forgery, \$200,000 for the Throne’s replication. Vito’s free hand found my knee.

“This ends it,” I said, more to myself than him.

“Nothing ends.” His thumb traced my inner thigh. “Just changes hands.”

I leaned in. His mouth was a hair’s breadth from mine when he caught my chin. “Don’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll want more.” His gaze dropped to my split lip, the one he’d bitten in the wine cellar. “And you’re not the settling type.”

Rain lashed the window. Somewhere below, a dog howled. I finished bandaging his arm, my knuckles brushing the coarse hair on his chest. He stood abruptly, buttoning his shirt with fumbling fingers.

“We’ll take the ledger to Fletcher at dawn,” he said, staring at the door like it might burst open.

“And then?”

He pocketed the silver dollar, its surface smeared with Celeste’s blood. “Try not to get shot.”

Chapter 9: The Mole in the Mirror

The stench of mildew clung to the ledger pages like a guilty secret. I spread them across Fletcher's desk beneath the newsroom's jaundiced light, the Mayor's forged invoices overlapping with mugshots of dead informants. "Kensington's been funneling city funds through the museum's restoration fund," I said, tracing a column of numbers with my chewed nail. "Every 'donation' paid for another forgery. Every forgery bought another councilman."

Fletcher didn't look up from his typewriter. "You're late."

"Vito took a bullet."

His fingers froze mid-sentence. The *Star's* presses groaned below us like a living thing. "How bad?"

"Flesh wound. He's at Delgado's getting stitched with gin and a dirty needle." I jabbed at a ledger entry dated June 12th. "This is the proof. Kensington ordered the Golden Throne heist to replace it with a fake. My uncle caught them mid-swap—"

"And they framed him." Fletcher finally met my gaze, his bifocals reflecting the single dangling bulb. "I know."

Ice slid down my spine. "What?"

He opened his top drawer. A cameo brooch gleamed against the felt lining—Eleanor Brooks' brooch. The one she'd worn when

helping me map the tunnels. “She came by last night,” he said, voice graveled with something worse than anger. “Told me to burn your notes unless I wanted Sammy’s nieces to wind up in the East River.”

The newsroom tilted. I gripped the desk edge. “You’re lying.”

“She’s Kensington’s eyes in the stacks,” Fletcher said. “Has been since ’24.” He tossed a surveillance photo onto the ledger—Eleanor in a cloche hat, handing an envelope to a man in a councilman’s pin-striped suit. “Follow the money, Viv. It always leads back to someone you—”

I was already running.

The tunnels breathed.

Damp air hissed through cracks in the brickwork as I followed Eleanor’s trail of lavender perfume. My flashlight beam carved shaky circles through the gloom. She’d left a breadcrumb trail even a child could follow—a hairpin at the coal chute entrance, a glove by the junction where tracks branched toward the docks.

“I know you’re there, Vivian.” Her voice echoed off the curved walls. I rounded a corner to find her standing before a rusted vault door, the cameo brooch winking at her throat. “Such a shame. You had the makings of a decent researcher.”

I leveled my Derringer. “Was it the money? Or did Kensington promise to stock your precious library with first editions?”

“He promised not to burn it down.” She pressed a palm to the vault wheel. “The Throne’s inside. Along with some... personal effects.”

The door screeched open. Gold gleamed in the darkness—the Byzantine throne, its garnet eyes judging me from the shadows. But it was the object on the seat that stole my breath: Uncle Arthur’s pocket watch, its cracked face frozen at 2:17 AM. The hour he’d jumped.

“They let him keep it when they fired him,” Eleanor said. “A kindness, I thought.”

My finger tightened on the trigger. “You helped them destroy him.”

“I preserved history.” She stepped closer, perfume cloying as embalming fluid. “Every empire needs martyrs. Every martyr needs a—”

The shot rang out before I realized I’d fired.

Eleanor staggered, clutching her shoulder. Blood seeped through her cardigan as she laughed. “Oh, *cherie*. You still think bullets solve anything.”

She yanked a rusted lever.

The world exploded.

Brick dust rained from the ceiling as the tunnel convulsed. I lunged for the Throne, grabbing the pocket watch as beams splintered around us. Eleanor sprinted toward a mine cart parked on the tracks, her gray bun unraveling.

“Vivian!”

Vito’s voice cut through the cacophony. He leapt over a collapsing support beam, face streaked with soot and fury. “The whole sector’s coming down!”

I tackled Eleanor as she tried to climb into the cart. We hit the tracks hard, her nails raking my cheek. The Throne toppled, one golden arm snapping off as a beam crushed it.

“Let go, you stupid girl!” Eleanor clawed at my hands.

“You don’t get to run.” I twisted, pinning her beneath me as the ceiling buckled. “Not from this.”

Vito hauled us both into the cart. The tracks screamed beneath us as he cranked the acceleration lever. We hurtled into darkness just

as the vault collapsed, the Throne's final scream of twisting metal swallowed by the void.

Silence.

The cart ground to a halt in a pocket of untouched tunnel. Water dripped. Someone moaned. Me.

Vito's arms locked around me, our breath mingling in the scant inch between lips. Blood trickled from his temple. I didn't remember grabbing his lapels.

"Still alive?" he rasped.

"Disappointed?"

His laugh vibrated through me. "You wish."

Eleanor stirred at our feet, cursing in Italian. Vito pressed his forehead to mine, his pulse wild against my skin. For one reckless moment, I thought he'd kiss me—or I'd kiss him. Then the flashlight flickered, revealing the carnage around us.

The Throne was gone.

But in my palm, the pocket watch ticked.

Chapter 10: A Throne of Lies

City Hall's marble corridors smelled of lemon polish and lies. My heels clicked a war drum rhythm as I stormed toward the Mayor's office, Vito's footsteps a shadow behind me. The pocket watch burned through my coat pocket, its resurrected ticking a metronome of rage. *Two-fucking-seventeen AM.*

Kensington's secretary lunged from her desk, pearls swinging. "Miss Sinclair, you can't—"

I kicked the oak door open.

Mayor Harold Kensington stood framed by Fifth Avenue's skyline, pouring brandy into crystal glasses like he'd been expecting us. "Vivian. Mr. Romano." He gestured to the leather chairs. "Drink? It's a '17 Armagnac."

Vito's hand flexed near his holster. "Where's Enzo?"

"Chasing greener pastures, I'm told." The Mayor sipped his brandy, gaze sliding to me. "You look well, considering the tunnels'... instability."

I slammed the pocket watch on his desk. The cracked face glared up at him. "Confess. Or I'll print how you turned the Kensington into a laundromat for murderers."

He smiled—slow, reptilian. "You think truth matters here?" A

painting swung open behind him, revealing a steel vault. Inside, stacked canvases gleamed: Van Goghs, Rembrandts, all stamped *Art Preservation LLC*. “The *real* currency, Miss Sinclair. Not gold. Not guns. *Perception*.”

Vito stepped closer. “You framed her uncle. Strung up a dead man to hide your shit.”

“Arthur Sinclair was a means to an end.” Kensington refilled his glass, the brandy catching fire in the afternoon light. “Men like him exist to be spent. As do you.”

I lunged across the desk, gripping his silk tie. His breath soured with decay. “You’re finished. Fletcher’s running the story tonight.”

He laughed. “And who’ll believe a morphine-addled hack and a gangster’s whore?”

Vito’s fist connected with his jaw. The Mayor sprawled against the vault, blood threading his silver stubble. “You forgot ‘pissed-off.’” Vito growled.

The *Star*’s presses roared like caged beasts. Fletcher fed them my article page by page, the headlines screaming: *MAYOR’S ART SCHEME EXPOSED! GOLDEN THRONE HEIST SOLVED!* I watched through the newsroom window, inky fingerprints staining the glass. *Uncle Arthur’s name cleared*. The thought should’ve tasted sweet. It felt like ash.

Vito leaned against the doorframe, silhouette carved from shadow. “They’ll arrest him?”

“They’ll try.” Fletcher wiped his hands on a rag, the presses shaking the floor beneath us. “But men like Kensington... they’ve always got a rat hole.”

A copyboy sprinted in, face flushed. “Boss! Cops just found his car abandoned near the docks. Empty.”

The victory curdled.

Vito's phone rang. He paled, fingers whitening around the receiver. "Rosa?"

Silence. Then a voice slick as oil: "You owe me a throne, *fratello*." Enzo.

Vito's gun hit the floor.

Rain sheeted against the *Star*'s windows as Vito paced, a caged animal in a ruined suit. "He'll kill her," he said for the tenth time.

I gripped his shoulders, forcing him still. "We'll find her."

He laughed—a raw, shattered sound. "You don't find Enzo. He finds you." His hands rose to frame my face, callouses catching on my jaw. "Take her. If I don't come back. Take her somewhere with... with trees."

"Vito—"

His mouth crushed mine.

The kiss tasted of blood and ink and reckless want, his fingers threading through my hair as the presses thundered below. I bit his lip, scoring vengeance and promise into flesh. He groaned, pulling me flush against him until the Derringer dug into my ribs.

Fletcher cleared his throat.

We broke apart, breath ragged. Vito pressed his forehead to mine, eyes closed. "Keep her safe," he whispered.

Then he was gone, swallowed by the storm.

Chapter 11: The Last Train

Rain blurred the docks into a charcoal smear. I sprinted past rotting fish crates, the *Star*'s extra edition crumpled in my fist—*MAYOR FLEES!*—the ink bleeding into a Rorschach scream. Somewhere in this labyrinth of cranes and cargo holds, Enzo Moretti waited with Rosa and a loaded Colt. Somewhere, Vito walked into a trap wearing my lipstick like a war paint.

The tunnels. They'd use the tunnels.

I ducked into a rusted maintenance shed, kicked aside a nest of rats, and wrenched open the hatch. The coal chute swallowed me whole.

Electric bulbs buzzed in the tunnels, their jaundiced light catching the rails' steel teeth. I followed the tracks, lungs burning, until I heard them—Rosa's muffled sobs, Enzo's nasal sneer.

"Family's a weakness, *fratello*."

I crouched behind a support beam. Enzo had Vito on his knees, a pistol pressed to Rosa's temple. Her wrists were bound with piano wire, blood trickling down her fingers. Vito's face was a mask of rage and ruin.

"Let her go," he growled. "The Throne's gone. Kensington's fin-

ished.”

Enzo laughed. “But *you’re* not.” He gestured to a mine cart loaded with crates. “Still got one shipment to catch. Say goodbye, *in-namorato*.”

I moved.

The derringer’s crack echoed through the tunnel. Enzo’s shoulder exploded. He reeled, firing wild. Vito tackled Rosa to the ground as bullets sparked the rails.

“Viv!” Vito’s voice raw. “The train—!”

I turned. Headlights speared the darkness. The art train—Kensington’s last desperate gamble—thundered toward us, its engine belching smoke. The Golden Throne glinted through a cargo door, bathed in hellfire red.

Rosa screamed. Enzo lurched for the controls.

Chaos.

Vito shoved Rosa into my arms. “Take her! Go!”

“No—”

He kissed me, hard and fleeting. “*Stop that fucking train.*”

Enzo’s laughter chased me as I ran, Rosa’s weight sagging against my side. The tracks trembled. Twenty carriages. Ten. Five.

I found the lever—rusted, ancient. Threw my body against it.

The switch groaned. The train swayed. For a heartbeat, the Golden Throne hovered midair, suspended in a halo of embers. Then the world tore itself apart.

Metal screamed. Flumes vomited fire. The throne melted into a golden scar, its rubies popping like bloodshot eyes. Enzo’s final curse dissolved in the inferno.

I found Vito in the ashes.

He limped from the smoke, shirtless and bleeding, his skin painted in soot and blisters. *Alive. Alive.* Rosa collapsed into his arms, weeping.

We didn't speak. Didn't need to. The three of us staggered into the downpour, the harbor swallowing Kensington's empire one ember at a time.

My apartment smelled of gunpowder and wet wool. Vito stood at the window, watching dawn bruise the sky. Rosa slept on my Murphy bed, bandaged fingers curled like a child's.

He turned. Our eyes met.

No more lies. No more ghosts.

I crossed the room. He yanked me against him, his mouth hot and hungry. We fell onto the floor, a tangle of teeth and trembling flesh. His hands mapped my scars; my nails scored his back. No tenderness—just a frenzied affirmation of survival. When he finally sheathed himself inside me, we both cried out, not from pleasure, but relief. *Alive. Alive. Alive.*

After, we lay tangled in silk sheets, the city's sirens our lullaby. He traced my silver streak. "I'm taking Rosa to Albany. Fresh start."

I kissed his collarbone. "Come back."

He didn't promise. But when he slipped out at dawn, he left his silver dollar on my pillow.

Chapter 12: City of Ghosts

The *Star*'s presses rolled all night. By dawn, newsboys hawked my uncle's vindication on every street corner. I stood at the foot of the Kensington Museum's steps, watching tourists gawk at the *Golden Throne: Stolen No More!* exhibit through sooty glass. The relic's molten remains sat twisted behind velvet ropes, a Rorschach of greed. Someone had left a bouquet of white lilies on Arthur Sinclair's reinstated plaque. The card read: *For the man who never got to see the sunrise*. I crushed it in my fist.

Fletcher found me in the morgue of dead headlines, pouring bourbon into my coffee. "Pulitzer's calling," he said, tossing the wire report on my desk. His ink-stained thumb left a smudge over the word *integrity*.

"They should've given it to Arthur."

He lit a Camel, the match flaring in his cupped palm. "Dead men don't cash checks, Viv. Take the win."

I took the medal anyway. Let them drape it around my neck at some gilded luncheon. Let the mayor's empty chair haunt the dais. Kensington's trial started next week, but the city had already moved on—another scandal, another corpse.

Vito came to me in dreams. The taste of his skin, the salt-and-gunpowder grit of him. But when I woke, the sheets held only the

musk of loneliness and a silver dollar gleaming on the pillow. He'd been gone a month.

Rosa's postcard arrived on a Tuesday. *Albany smells like rain and second chances*, she'd written. No return address. I tacked it to the wall beside Arthur's suicide note, now framed in absolution.

Grand Central Station swallowed me whole. Steam hissed from the 20th Century Limited, perfuming the air with coal and ambition. I spotted him leaning against Gate 17, a leather suitcase at his feet. He'd shaved. It made him look younger, softer—a man who could belong to sidewalks and sunlit kitchens instead of smoke-choked tunnels.

"You're late," I said.

Vito smirked, rolling the silver dollar over his knuckles. "Had to buy Rosa a box of chocolates. She thinks you're a bad influence."

"Smart kid."

The station announcer's voice boomed. *Final call for Chicago*. Passengers surged around us, a river of hats and hope. Vito's gaze flickered to the platform.

"You could come," he said, too casual.

"And do what? Knit socks while you play house?"

He stepped closer. Sandalwood and sweat. "You'd suck at knitting."

The kiss was a live wire—desperate and sweet and over too soon. His thumb brushed the silver streak in my hair. "I'll be back," he murmured against my lips.

"Liar."

He pressed the coin into my palm. "Hold onto this. I'll want it when I return."

CHAPTER 12: CITY OF GHOSTS

I watched him board the train, his silhouette sharp against the grimy window. He didn't wave. Neither did I.

That night, I wrote the last line of Arthur's story. The Remington's keys clacked like a heartbeat: *Sometimes justice is a quiet thing. A cleared name. A train whistle in the dark. A city learning to forget.*

I left the Pulitzer medal on Fletcher's desk with a bottle of rye. Let the next hungry reporter carve their name into the wood.

The apartment held ghosts. The dent in the floor where Vito's fist had landed during an argument. The whiskey stain on the rug from the night we didn't bother with glasses. I opened the window, let the El's rattle shake the dust from my bones.

Under my pillow, the silver dollar winked in the moonlight.

Come back.

Somewhere beyond the city's glow, a train whistle answered.
