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English

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### An Eye for an Eye is What You Taught Me

**Time: 12:20 AM, June 1st 2019**

Love Dance and Feel by Sunnery James and a few other people who I have never heard of blasts through my apartment, the music so loud I can finally drown out the noise. No more New York City Traffic, no more ambulances or police sirens. Just me, this bottle, and the music. The strobe lights throughout my house are synchronized with the beat. I almost fall down trying to climb on top of my kitchen table, it is a little hard to see through the alcohol and ignore the blood still on my hands. I need to just let go and forget about my night. I know they will never be back, I will never get to see them again. I will never get to ask my mother for advice, the sweet emotions of having your father walk you down the aisle. The music fades and S&M by Rihanna starts blasting through the apartment. I scream at the top of my lungs each lyric and do my best not to fall while I dance my heart out as if there was an audience, ignoring the bloodstains on the floor across the room. I look in disappointment at the empty bottle of Chardonnay in my hands. *Whatever, I have more.* I walk over to the bar and pass the human-sized bloodstains, closing my eyes, but all I can see is my mother and father in my arms as they talk to me dying. *Shake it off, let it go. Hmm, what do I want now?* I see the bottle of Don Julio 1942 that my parents gave me for my 21st birthday last month and I figured it would only be fitting to open that. I walk back over to the kitchen in time to scream the last couple of lyrics of S&M before the song ends. I

don't care what I have to do tonight, I will do whatever it takes to get the sound of gunshots out of my head, the image of my dead parents, the feeling of betrayal and anger as I saw my doorman rushing the robbers out of the lobby and send them off into a van. Bang, bang. Two for you, but I only sent off one bang for them tonight. I can't take back my actions and what I did to get revenge for my parents, but I know it wasn't enough. I want to drown out the thoughts of what I know I will have to do. An eye for an eye is what you taught me, so an eye for an eye I guess. Maybe a little more.

I hear the ding of the elevator, a shock runs through my body sending a chill down my spine, turning my legs numb, but I don't stop dancing. I know they didn't come back to kill me, whoever killed my parents is smarter than that to come when the majority of the NYPD are downstairs. I don't open my eyes until I hear his voice. My love. I can hear the slight crack in his voice as he calls out my name -"Nicole!" Tears run down my face, furthering the mascara lines, but the expression stays the same. When I open my eyes I can see the fear in Ash's eyes, the concern, the sadness, the shock. He scans my body, he notices the blood all over my body fitting white dress he loves, as I continue to dance my heart out. I never wanted him to see this side of me, he knew I was crazy, but I don't think he knows how broken I am. I look at him seductively when he slowly walks closer to me. He looks so scared, but the alcohol is only letting me focus on how attractive he is dressed up with his light eyes and muscular build. He had flowers for our date night that I completely forgot about until this moment. I think what scared him more was not the fact I was dancing to music, drinking straight from the bottle, covered in blood, but the P320 X FIVE Legion on the floor with bloodstains on the handle that clearly came from my hands.

“Hi baby! I’m sorry I missed date night.” I shouted trying to compete with the music.

“What the fuck happened... Why are you covered in blood? Get down from there.”

I stumbled down off of the kitchen counter, I could tell the blood was bothering him so I took off my dress. Tears still rolling down my face, mascara now down to my chest. I slowly walk towards him and he just stands there looking at me. With every step I can see him tense up, having to remind himself that I am not a threat, but also seeing the love in his eyes and I can tell all he wants to do is hold me. He really is the love of my life. I hope I don’t scare him away. I can’t afford to lose him too.

“My parents are dead. My doorman is dead. People have no idea what is coming for them.”

**Time: 2 AM, June 1st 2019**

The warm water wraps around my body as Ash places me in the bath. My screams and cries echo throughout the bathroom, bouncing off the marble walls and mirror cabinets. Ash takes off his clothes and sits behind me wrapping his arms around my hyperventilating body, his strong embrace is the only place I feel safe. He is the only person around now that feels like home.

He is a strong man, he has had to deal with so much throughout his life too. His dad left at a very young age because he fell in love with another woman, leaving him to be the man of the house with his mother and younger sister, but he never quite understood the responsibility that came with until he was much older. It was hard for his family because they were in and out of the projects throughout his high school years. Ash told me it was hard for his mother to find a job

because the places she had experience in wouldn't hire her, and she was convinced that it had to do with the fact she was black. This was really surprising to me because New York is such a diverse and accepting place that I haven't heard or seen much of this. Ash's main escape was his art. He would spend every night lost in the paint, his camera, or his sketchbook. He is extremely artistic. He won a scholarship to the Studio Art program at NYU - that's where we met.

He kisses my shoulder and squeezes me tightly. The hyperventilating slowly fades away and so do my emotions. All I can feel is the warm water, his body wrapped around me and everything else just turns into nothing. *The little voice in my head saying over and over again: What the fuck happened tonight.* He washes the blood off my body, my hands still slightly stained, rinses my wavy jet black hair massaging my head, and wipes the makeup off my blank face. He gets out of the bath, drying himself off, and then picks me up and practically swaddles me like a baby in the towel. Suddenly, I feel this weird feeling bubble up inside and I can't help but burst into laughter. Ash looks at me confused, while I try to stop laughing which clearly isn't working, and then laughs with me. I am laughing so hard that I am practically wheezing.

"Why are you laughing?" He says between laughs.

"What the hell is going on!" Is all I can reply.

"You are clearly losing it" He says putting his head against mine and gives me a kiss.

"When was the last time I wasn't losing it?" I say back jokingly.

"Good point baby." We just laid there on the floor uncontrollably laughing.

"Okay, let's get some sleep if possible and then we can deal with everything tomorrow or whenever you are ready." He picks me up and carries me into my bedroom. My dark grey sheets feel so soft and comfortable against my skin. He climbs in next to me and wraps his arm around

my waist and pulls me in close. I close my eyes and all I can only see is them, laying there gasping for air while they speak their final words to their only daughter. One thing stood out though:

“Everything you would ever need is in the safe. Everything will make sense, we love you.”

My eyes open wide. Wait...I forgot about the safe.

**Time: 10 AM, June 3rd 2019**

Yesterday was a blur, I could barely get out of bed. I can't tell what was worse, the raging headache or the pit feeling in my stomach and the ache in my heart. Ash acted like my caregiver for the day and brought me food and water, taking my half eaten plate back to the kitchen, just to give me more food a few hours later knowing it will just end up down the drain. Today is different though, I woke up without a headache, no pit feeling in my stomach or my heart. All I could feel was numbness with a bubbling sense of determination. All I could think about yesterday was the damn safety, I just couldn't move.

Only one step out of the bedroom and I can tell something feels off. There is a certain odor of chemicals and cleaning supplies that fills up my nose in the worst way; it burns and makes my eyes water.

“Babe, what did you do? Why does it smell like bleach?” I clearly wasn't thinking straight, it took me a second to understand.

“The Chief of the NYPD sent cleaners this morning. He said he took care of it and not to worry about offering to pay him back. He sends his condolences and said to give him a call when

you are ready to talk about the murder.” He looks at me with his wide blue-ish green eyes, probably in shock that I am even out of bed. I walk towards him in the kitchen and put my arms around him. He gives me a kiss on the forehead and asks how I am feeling.

“I am actually good this morning.” That was a lie, but I'm just going to tell him what he wants to hear. His eyes scan me, the crease in between his brows rests after a second. His deep breath of relief washes over me as he lets me go.

“That’s good baby, I'm happy you feel better. I was going to go see my mother today, she is wondering how you are feeling especially since the whole city knows about the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Andronikos... I think the Chief covered up your little incident, there is no lobby footage of the murder even though it happened right underneath the main camera. The public thinks it was the robbers; I mean how else would they get into your apartment, right?”

The side eye sip with his coffee made me twist inside. Did my own love judge me for my actions? Was he slightly afraid of me, or was he confused why the Chief possibly wiped any evidence from the lobby footage? Little does he know a hard drive with my “incident” as he likes to call it is playing hide and seek in a tiny box with a bow sitting in the corner of my safe. I’m sorry baby, I still have my little secrets.

He finishes his coffee while I sit down and eat the food leftover on the stove, still churning from the flow of chemicals that rushes through my nose with every breath. By the time I am done with the leftover scramble, Ash is fully dressed and gives me a kiss goodbye. My spine straightens with the ding of the elevator, his shoes squeak as he walks in leaving my chemical infested marble floor, and my ears twitch at the sound of the gears rotating into motion as the metal box moves him closer to the ground. I jump out of my seat almost slipping on my

floor as I run to my room. I throw on my black leggings, my “don’t be sad” oversized hoodie, put on my favorite black beanie over my messy hair, and my fuzzy slippers. I grab my sunglasses, *as if that ever helped people as a disguise*, just in case I decide to go out. I have a feeling I will want fresh air at some point. I call for the elevator, walk in on arrival, slip my key into the lock that guards my parents apartment and press the button for PHB.

It is time to figure out what is in that safe.

**Time: 12 PM, June 3rd 2019**

The high pitched beep of each button made my hands shake as I sharply stared at the longing keypad in front of my eyes. Just walking into their apartment there was a cold chill. What once used to be a place constantly filled with warmth, there was only hollow darkness. The only sense of life was Dike (*th-ee-k-ee*), who somehow escaped my mind with all the chaos. I forgot my parents wanted to watch her for the week. Her constant perky ears were now flopped to the side of her head as she crouched and crawled closer to me whining as I called her name. With one sniff of my scent she came to life as I ran my fingers through her white fur and she attacked me with licks. Memories of my parents taking me to a breeder in Greece and surprising me with a newborn greek shepherd pup flashed before my eyes as if I was being hit by a bullet train at full speed. I named her Dike after the Greek goddess of justice. Crazy to think that was two years ago.

Dike rested her head on my shoulder, ears twitching to the sound of every button. I never dared to go through my parents belongings until this moment, my parents were always so transparent with me it never flagged a warning in my subconscious mind that they could be

entirely different people to the outside world, or maybe even a secret one. The four green lights above the ten letter keypad flashes multiple times with a click, one single pull and I was in. I wrinkled up the post-it that carried the password to the safe my mother told me right before she died. It still had leftover blood stains from my hands. To my surprise, nothing out of the ordinary was in the safe, my mothers priceless jewelry, bags of cash, bank information, passports, all the usual items you would expect. Why would they tell me to look in the safe, that everything would make sense if I looked in the safe. That after all these years and the training they put me through would now add up to this. They said in the worst case scenario, I was their weapon. Their last words ring on repeat in my head like a bell that struck twelve. The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. I was expecting, more like hoping, to just open the safe and see answers. But nothing ever is exactly what we hope for.

Dike softly whines as I disappointingly start to stand up off of my parents closet floor. The numbness challenged by disappointment and rage, a tear finds its way down my cheek. I walk towards the kitchen, pull out a chair at the counter, and rest my head on my arm staring blankly at the wall. Dike starts barking at me, and I notice the clock in the kitchen stating 1 o'clock. Time for her to be fed. I hear the machine that timely feeds Dike whire out of the wall and precisely pour a specific amount of dog food into her bowl. My Bampás (*dad*) was a very smart man, he invented the timely dog feeder that could disappear into the wall because he kept forgetting to feed Dike whenever he would watch her for me.

Wait a minute... something that is there, but not visible. My father's voice shone through my memory like a guardian angel, "Not everything is what it seems. Remember Nicole, think outside the box. Don't give up on something just because it is not an easy answer, think of every



possible solution, no matter how crazy it might seem. What's the harm in testing it?" My father could easily fool a person, but he would never be able to fool me. Even if I don't pick up on it at first, I will always figure it out, no matter what.

I slam my body to the ground and swing open the safe. I check every nook and cranny of that safe; I pull every item out, I pull out every shelf, nothing in that safe was left unchecked. No secret walls, nothing but a key found hidden within a locket my mother had with a picture of me as a baby and as an adult. The words "think outside the box" ring through my head. I grab a flashlight and scan the entire back of the safe. Nothing. I sit on the floor, my mind running in circles at the endless possibilities this key could unlock. My parents were never simple, there always had to be a hunt. I scan the entire closet floor, but once again, nothing. No loose wood panel or baseboard. I lay there on the floor of my parents closet surrounded by what could have easily been a million dollars in cash, and millions worth of jewelry. Surrounded by my parents ridiculously expensive taste in fashion, the stacked boxes from designer shopping sprees, and the crystal chandelier shining back at me, the more I begin to sink into a state of confusion and rage. Where does this little key that clearly holds the answers belong?

I roll over onto my side, feeling my rage bubble inside and slowly turn into a panic attack. I think Dike can sense it because she runs in and nudges her way in between my arms. I can barely feel the tears that run down my face, my eyes are glossy as I stare at the bags on the shelf. I squint trying to see clearer. With every squint something doesn't add up. The wall behind it becomes a different shade of white, and I can't tell if it is actually a different shade, or if my mascara is seeping into my eyes. No... that is not my mascara. I wipe my face on my hoodie and step closer to the boxes, praying that this is what I have been searching for. I hit all the boxes to

the floor, scaring Dike out of the closet. I run my fingers down the wall, pushing to find a loose panel. I hit the corner where I noticed the color difference between the two walls, and I can not only feel, but hear the hollow opening behind the panel. Like I said, my father was very smart, he would have made sure that even with all of these over the top clues to find this space that only very specific people could open it. I pressed every inch of the panel, wondering if there was a button on site that could initiate its opening. Not one thing that was clearly visible. Feeling defeated I rest my whole hand on the panel and rest my head against my arm looking at Dike in the doorway.

“I don’t know what to do, Dike, I feel like I will never understand, and I will never know the truth.” Dike looks at me, and then looks past my head at the wall and starts barking.

I look up, and to my surprise the panel starts glowing around my hand. Oh Bampás, you never cease to amaze me and your intelligence. The panel flashes green after scanning my hand and slides down, exposing a medium size box with a little lock. The perfect fit for the key in my hand. I grab the box and stare at it while I walk into the living room. I set the box down on my lap and use the little key I found, look at it, and take a deep breath as I unlock the box.

**Time: 3 PM, June 3rd 2019**

Pictures scatter the living room floor, journals left open on the table, a single page from a letter dangles from my hand as I lay motionless on their navy blue sofa. More mascara lines run down the side of my face as I blankly stare at the ceiling. I don’t know how to process all this information at once, I just need a moment to take it all in.

When I opened the box, the first thing I saw was a letter with my name on it. I slowly peeled back the seal of their initials and exposed the elegant handwriting of my father. Just seeing my name at the top of the page felt like my heart was being pulled out of my chest:

“Dear Nicole,

Ever since the day you were born we prayed that this day would never arrive. More so that you would be old enough to understand why...Why we were taken from you so soon and how we ever ended up here in the first place. Everything to go along with our story is stored here within this box - it is our proof if you have a hard time believing it.

Before you were born, your mother and I would travel back and forth between New York and Greece. As you know, you had extended family in Philadelphia, but you have never met them because they were murdered - I'm sorry my little warrior that we only ever told you the bedtime story version of our family history: My cousin was involved with a lot of criminal activity, boosting his fortune, and his connection with the Philadelphia Greek Mafia. He would travel between Philadelphia and New York on business trips, and would come and visit your mother and I quite often. Not only would he visit us, but he would also introduce us to many well known people within his world. We all became good friends, close enough for them to talk business together in front of me, and your mother to regularly spend time with their wives. Your mother and I knew who these people were, what they were capable of, what they were involved in; the smartest thing to do was to play along. Thankfully, we were never asked for anything much but trust. Trust for their secrets, or if they ever needed anything they themselves could not acquire. Nothing more.

Your mother and I were in New York the month before you were born when we got a phone call from my cousin's brother in Greece and heard the news. While your mother shed two tears down her rosy cheeks, I could not. None of it came as a surprise. In the world our family lives in, the Grim Reaper could have knocked on our door instead, but rather took my cousin and his family - He was not an innocent man, but his family did not need to pay the price as well. A day later an envelope showed up in our mail, completely blank on the outside. Your mother walked into my office, slammed a note on my desk and slapped pictures right on top of the letter, demanding we go back to Greece as soon as possible. Within a week we were gone, nothing left behind. As you can see in the pictures I left for you, they sent us the gruesome bloodbath imagery of my cousins murder along with his wife and kids with a note that read 'Don't make the same mistakes he did.' It turned out he was running his own little scheme against the mob.

Ever since that day I knew we would always have to look over our shoulder. I never told you any of this because it is not the type of fear you would want to inflict on your only child. Your mother and I have taught you everything we know, prepared you as much as we could for this unknowing day. You are our little warrior, our little weapon.

There are many people you cannot trust, but one person you can always trust is the Chief. He will be your helping hand, no matter what, but not another soul is truly trustworthy.

Don't lose sight of the prize, don't let your emotions and your anger control you, and don't forget... An eye for an eye.

Love forever and always,

Bampás kai Mamá'' (*dad and mom*)

I sat up and stared at the pictures that decorate their living room floor. Exactly what they said, a gruesome bloodbath. What bothered me was not the pictures themselves, I don't find them disturbing even if they are my own blood. What bothers me is the thought that my parents could have had it worse than a gun. I bend over and start to collect the pictures, memorizing the smiling faces of my potential threats. I scan through the journal, each page a summary of who every person is, what role they play in the Mafia, and a cut out copy of their face from the pictures. They also had a page for the chief, explaining their relationship with him and what things he could specifically help me with. I close the journal, place all the items back in the box and lock it. I wiped the excess tears off my face even though I could barely feel it. My body and mind just practically shut down; everything is in shock and consumed by a blanket of numbness but conflicted with a sharp gut wrenching pain. A chill runs down my spine as I take a deep breath in and squeeze the edge of the couch, hunched over the box in my lap. It feels like gravity keeps pushing me down, but I snap back to reality at the sound of my phone ringing.

Unknown caller.

The last thing I need to see is an unknown caller pop up on my screen. I hesitantly press accept and put the phone up to my ear.

"Hello?"

"I'm at Village Taverna by Union Square. Meet me here within the next 30 minutes."

**Time: 5 PM, June 3rd 2019**

Dike walks closely to me as we walk down the street. Faint memories of laughter float around me as I get closer and closer to my family's favorite greek restaurant. My mind and my

eyes are playing tricks on me as if I am back in the moment of those memories. My mother sneaking a piece of meat to Dike under the table as we all burst into laughter, her reaching for her glass of white wine, taking a sip leaving the mark of her red lipstick. That was her signature, red lipstick. The red lipstick accentuated her full luscious lips. You could tell my dad was madly in love with her by the way he would look at her, moving his chair closer, tucking her sleek jet black hair behind her ear, running the front of his finger down the side of her perfectly chiseled face to grab her by her chin and pull her face towards him for a kiss. Their smiles and her little giggle said it all. They were the type of couple you saw, first thinking they were still in their early twenties because they seriously didn't age - most people thought my mother and father were my siblings - but mostly that they were the type of couple you would aspire to be with someone someday. The true love we all crave for, the type of love that is romanticized on the screen but rarely found in the real world.

Every tear that runs down my face, furthering my blindness, is a different memory that we made at the restaurant. I had to stop in my tracks, startling Dike causing her to make a high pitch noise that I could tell confused the strangers passing. I wanted to scream, I wanted everyone to know my pain. Any pain that I have ever suppressed is all creeping up on me, scratching and crawling up the walls of my throat. I don't know what air is at the moment. All I know is that it feels like I was emotionally thrown into the deepest darkest parts of the ocean, to the point where the emotional torture of drowning in my own mind started to feel physical. I don't know how they expected me to stay strong, but I know I have to. My subconscious is fighting every demon and trying to keep me focused, but also creating new ones every second.

I take a deep breath in to compose myself and remember that no matter what sense of defeat runs through my body, no matter how much I want to burn everything to the ground, shut everything off, go on a killing spree to make other people feel my pain, or crawl into a cave and just die myself; I know I have to remain focused because I promised.

A wave of warmth rushed over us as we walked into the restaurant, the smells of freshly made food and spices rushed through my nose. I pulled down my hoodie, removing my sunglasses and beanie, exposing my once vibrant blue eyes and tan rosy cheeked complexion that was now dull and lifeless. All eyes were on me as I walked past the kitchen towards the back of the room. Every staff member, every cook, even the owner, came up to me and gave me a hug to pay their respects. We knew everyone in that restaurant, they were like family to us.

I almost didn't recognize the Chief sitting in the back corner of the restaurant. It felt very strange to see him in something other than his uniform. He wore dark navy jeans with a fitted white polo shirt and white sneakers. I could tell he was trying to dress a certain way to feel younger. We made eye contact as I walked closer and he stood up out of his chair to shake my hand. I still can't pinpoint why my parents had not properly introduced us before, it makes it hard for me to trust him in the way my parents said I could. We sit down and Dike lies on the ground close to my feet, a waiter brings her some meat and water. They probably like her more than me here, I'm assuming that's why they let her inside.

"Hello Nicole, It is nice to finally meet you in person. Thank you for coming here on such short notice...I thought it would be nice to talk in a place that feels familiar for you during this painful time." I could see in his eyes and tone of voice that he was sincere, he clearly felt bad for me. I got the worst of it all losing my parents, but he also lost friends.

“I am sorry if it is a painful time for you as well, by the looks of it you were clearly close with my parents if they told me I should trust you more than anyone. That is not something lightly stated by them.” I take a sip of my water without breaking eye contact with the Chief. I can see the realization spread across his face like a wildfire.

“I didn’t expect you to find the box so quickly. Your father said you would, but I thought you would be consumed by grief much longer.”

“My grief continues to consume me every minute since my parents died in my arms, but my anger is starting to become far greater than my grief. I will never be able to fully grieve until I get my revenge or figure out who knew so much about our lives. I just want to know how they knew everything, even up to the point where they stood before they died. If my father really did tell you about me then you would know that.” I know I continue to surprise him with my bold choice of words. I don’t really give a shit who I am talking to at the moment. If he wants to help me he should know my truth, what is going through my head.

“Well... yes, he did warn me about your emotional outbursts -” My eyebrow twitched at the words. I don’t like being told that I have anger issues or “emotional outbursts” as my dad would always say.

“- and that an eye for an eye is what he taught you. So it goes without question you would want to get some sort of revenge, more than what you have already done.” I smirk and slightly giggle, that once again surprises him.

“Do you think I didn’t know that you were the one who killed your doorman? The murders were done by two different guns. I’m just wondering if you wiped the camera completely or if you are the type to collect souvenirs.”



“No, I assumed you would figure that out eventually Chief, I am just laughing at the fact you think my dead doorman is part of what would be considered revenge. He was just a small piece of the puzzle.” He stared at me for a moment. Even Dike could feel the tension in the air and whined a little.

“Nicole, I apologize if anything I have said has offended you. I only want to help you. Your parents made a great impact on my life and helped me in ways I will forever be grateful. I feel like the only way I could ever repay them is to be there for you now that they are gone.” He reaches into his pocket and hands me a small black hard drive.

“I know you do not trust me yet Nicole, trust is not something that comes easily in your family, I understand that. I am hoping that this will help build our trust. Here you will find everything I know about your parents' incident. This is everything that the police have on it.” He reaches in his pocket again and pulls out another hard drive, except this one is red.

“On this hard drive it expands the information found inside that little journal your parents left you. I have clearly stated who is off limits, more so than what your parents warned you about. I know you might want to burn everything to the ground, but I will not have a mob war erupt in my city. Not only that, but you will meet the same fate as your parents if you are exposed and caught by anyone considered off limits.”

“You think I couldn't handle myself?” He takes a deep breath in and lets out a very big sigh.

“Nicole, I know you are a very skilled young woman. More than I probably know. But your father and mother even told me themselves that you would get yourself killed if you got

involved with one of the people on that list. I clearly cannot control all of your actions, but I have to at least try and warn you.”

I could tell that he actually meant what he was saying. This wasn't some show he was putting on, this wasn't some sort of set up. I know my parents told me I could trust him, but I am still skeptical. Maybe these hard drives and seeing how much is on them will change my mind, but I appreciate the fact that he is trying. He was definitely right about one thing though. You can't control me.

“Thank you Chief, I appreciate it.”

“Please let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.”

“Of course.”

We stood up and surprisingly I hugged him goodbye. His embrace felt comforting in the sense that I could briefly connect with someone who shared the same admiration for my parents. I walked by everyone again saying goodbye and that I would see them soon, Dike stopped by them for goodbye pets too.

The Chief and I said one final goodbye and we went our separate ways.

### **Time: 3 PM, June 6th 2019**

Three days ago is when the Chief gave me the hard drives. He was telling the truth. One drive held the files of my parents murder, the other was information about the mob. As soon as I got home and made sure Ash was nowhere to be seen, I opened the file of my parents murder. Pictures of their dead bodies, the bullet casings, and any other evidence flashed across the screen of my computer. My stomach turned at the reminding sight of their flushed blank faces, my

mothers red lipstick smeared, her jet black hair lying in a pool of her blood, both of their vibrant blue eyes now a faded grey. You can see in the picture that they were holding hands when they passed, they took the meaning 'til death do us part' to a whole other level.

I watched the video of the doorman over and over again, skipping back and forth between the part where I shot him and where he talks to the murderers right before they see me come down a few moments later. Honestly I laughed every time I saw him fall to the ground. I tried to look for any clues, comparing their body types to anyone on the list that was off limits, so far no matches thankfully. I printed any picture that was on the red hard drive and stuck them all over my bedroom wall, sitting back on the edge of my bed, my mind spiraling at the thought of every possible case leading to a dead end. I pick off darts and ninja stars that are stuck into the dartboard on the other side of the room and start throwing them at the faces of the Mob bosses that decorated my wall, hitting the center of their foreheads every time. This is the only way I would ever have a chance to kill them, all within my mind, only as pictures on my walls. As I throw the last ninja star, I stop and glare at the red dots and sharp edges that cover my room feeling hopeless and stuck. I scream at the top of my lungs and punch a hole in the wall, bruising my knuckles - *Shit. I hope Ash doesn't ask about that.*

I grab every ninja star and dart but as I grab the last dart - I notice something in the background of the image with the top Mob boss. Behind the boss, now with a hole in his head left from the dart, two men, wearing all black, dressed exactly like the men running away in the lobby video, one slightly taller than the other, stood with another person whose back faced the camera. I can't tell if I recognize that person whose back is towards the camera, I feel like I do, but that's not the point. The faces of these two potential murderers are now ingrained in my

mind. I have to figure out if they sent off the two gunshots that continue to play on repeat in my subconscious mind.

I run to my bed and pick up my phone, pressing the Chiefs contact information and impatiently wait for him to pick my call. I can hear him sigh as he picks up the phone.

“Hello Nicole... I’m assuming you figured something out if you are calling me. What do you need.”

“I need the information you have on some people, specifically their address.”

**Time: 6:30 PM, June 7th 2019**

I sit a block away from the house of one of the guys that the Chief sent me, scanning over and over at the information on one Marco Russo. Marco Russo was the taller man in the picture I noticed, his partner, Stefano, had no last name and no address on his record; both had plenty of charges like assault, murder, and overall connection to The Mob - every time they got their bail paid off and put on probation. But Mr. Marco Russo here was the only one with an address in his record. I have been here for a few hours, he came home about 10 minutes ago, but by the way he seemed rushed I could tell he would be leaving soon. Sure enough as soon as I close my computer and lift up my binoculars, he steps out the door and gets into his 1978 all black Lincoln town car. I put my fathers Ford GT (I took the keys from their apartment) in drive and followed him, looking at the tracking device I placed under his car while he was inside by pretending to be a runner in the neighborhood. I followed him all the way to Chelsea where he parked outside of the Dream hotel. I parked my car down 17th street off of 9th avenue, right around the corner. I put on my black hoodie and shades and walked into the lobby. Right when I walked in the door I

noticed him waiting on the lobby couches, I quickly went into the Natura Cafe that connected to the lobby floor and ordered some food. I haven't eaten in hours and I have no idea how long he will be waiting for someone. After about 10 minutes, and me stuffing my face into an order of fries, I saw Stefano enter the lobby out of the corner of my eye. He just stood there, like a statue, scanning the lobby, thankfully not scanning the cafe. Marco walked up to him and shook his hand as he patted his back and smiled. I heard him say to Stefano laughing, "Man, why are you always so serious? Come on, let's go get a drink at the bar as we wait." Wait for who tho?

The bar was just as crowded as you would expect, it made it easier to blend in even though I was the least dressed person in here. They took shot after shot, I was absolutely amazed by these two assholes tolerance level. Stefano still kinda looked like a statue. Suddenly any laughs or playfulness disappeared from Marco's face as he tapped Stefano's shoulder, motioning at the entrance to the bar. I saw a man in blue plaid pants with a white polo shirt and hat walk up to them and shake their hands. It was the man that looked extremely familiar from behind and he looked even more like someone I knew in person, but right as I could have gotten a good look at him, a bitch stood in front of me and blocked my view. I took off my glasses and glared at the woman and sternly told her to move. She let out a scoff saying "fine asshole" as she grabbed onto her man's arm. I slowly put on my glasses, still staring down at the woman as she walked away with her boyfriend. By the time I looked back over at the people who must have killed my parents, they all were ordering a drink. I saw Stefano reach into his pocket and pull out an envelope, the man with his back turned, opened it and checked the cash that was inside. He placed the envelope in his backpack that he brought with him and zipped it. Marco with a killer expression looked at him and motioned to his pocket. I was impressed how quickly Marcos'

expressions could go from harmless to blood cold killer within a second. The man reached into his pocket and started texting someone - I could tell his hands were kind of shaking like he was nervous. He stopped texting and put his phone back in his pocket.

My body clenched as I felt a buzz from my phone that lay next to me at that exact moment, and when I looked at the screen shining bright in this darkened room I saw the contact of the last person I would want to get a text from right now.

It was Ash's contact, labeled "Baby" with a black and red heart.

It read: Hey baby, I'm sorry I haven't texted you a lot today. I think I am going to stay with my mom tonight. She is going through a hard patch and asked me to stay with her. Are you staying home tonight?

I prayed in every language that I knew that when I responded I would not see this man reach into his pocket. I responded saying: Hey baby, sounds good please give your mom a hug for me, I hope she is doing okay. Yes, Dike and I are home tonight. I love you!

A tear ran down my face as I pressed send.

Marco and Stephano looked at the man's pocket as my message was sent. Any prayer I just said was not heard. As the man reached into his pocket for his phone he turned his body to lean on the bar counter next to Stefano, my heart was officially ripped out of my chest. Ash's light eyes stared at the screen of his phone, and I saw his lips mouth the words "She is home", taking a deep breath as he looked back at my parents' killers. Marco's once killer expression returned to a harmless friendly smile and he patted Ash's back. They grabbed the shots lined up on the bar counter and continued to laugh and talk.

I sat there in the dark corner of this bar, unable to even lift a finger. I couldn't process what was happening. The love of my life was involved in the murder of my parents. The person who we brought into our lives, who I have been with for all these years, who my parents considered as a son. No tears could run down my face, I couldn't hear anything but the screams of the demons trapped in my mind, whose only desire in this moment would be to take control over me. I manage to stand up, but forget how to normally walk without shaking as I exit the bar and make my way to my car. I unlock the door and get in. As soon as the car door closes my body starts convulsing as I try to breathe again. I dig my nails into my chest right over my heart - I can't even feel it, can't even feel my own heart beating as I am hunched over trying to catch my breath over the screams. I grabbed my throat and let out one final scream so loud people passing by looked through the car door to see what the commotion was. All they saw was a crazy lady staring blankly at the ceiling with mascara lines streaming down the side of her face.

I thought I had felt pain before, I thought that the pain and trauma of my parents murder would be the worst I would have to endure. I was never expecting this to top it.

My mind races at the thought of what just happened, repeatedly replaying the moment I saw Ash reach into his pocket and turn exposing his face. The cash handed to him, him putting it into his bag... Was this all because of the money? If he was tight on cash why wouldn't he come to me or my family? He must have been threatened, especially with who he was dealing with. Honestly, I could care less what his reasons were, what excuses he would say if I confronted him. I don't want to know the full truth. It will be easier for me to stick with the story I have already made up in my mind.

Tears continue to run down my face as I look in the mirror at my bloodshot red eyes.

*What am I going to do now?* I put on my glasses again, start the car and go back to my apartment.

The elevator humming fills my ears as it catapults me up to PHA, dinging upon arrival and opens into my apartment. I start to walk over towards Dike laying on the living room floor, only to faint and land on the cold marble floor.

**Time: 12 PM, June 8th 2019**

You think you know the people closest to you, but the truth is you will never know everything. Everyone has their secrets, everyone has something hidden behind a locked door down a hallway that gradually gets harder to see as you go deeper into that person's mind. You only know a person based on how far they take you down that hallway, and only a few will end up right outside that door. But the only one to step foot on the other side of that door is the one who holds the key.

Whenever I got hurt in the past, and if anyone ever asked me on a scale of 1 to 10 how bad it hurt - emotionally or physically - no matter how bad it did hurt, I never said 10. Part of me already knew that I hadn't experienced true pain yet and that I should save that 10. That double digit number will be served on a shiny silver platter soon enough. I was a fool in my childhood to ever think some things could have been considered a 10.

I walk over to my window, pick up the phone and press on the contact information button labeled "Baby" with a black and red heart.



“Come to my house around 8 tomorrow. Wear the outfit you would have worn the night my parents died and we missed date night. I have a surprise, I love you.”

Tears ran down my face as I hung up the phone and stared longingly at the city that used to bring me joy, but now only provides me pain.

**Time: 6 PM, June 9th 2019**

The flower arrangements arrive and are placed sparsely around my living room. Our favorite flowers, red roses. I grab every type of candle holder that I own, the tall black stands that hold about 4 or 5 candles were a nice accent to the flowers. I laid rose petals down on the marble floor, starting at the elevator trailing towards my new maroon colored carpet, and sprinkled a few on my white couch. I place the most expensive bottle of white wine I own in a wine chiller bucket on my glass coffee table. I know I am going to need that after tonight.

Water and soap run down my body as I wash my hair, I stand there motionless in the shower, living in the moment pretending that the past two weeks were erased in time. I wrap my body in my robe and dry my hair. My long wavy jet black hair felt so soft as I ran my fingers through it to fluff at the roots. I made my eyes a smoky black, used long eyelashes and black eyeliner, making my vibrant fierce blue eyes pop. I stared longingly at my mothers red lipstick on my vanity counter that I took from their apartment before lining my lips and putting it on. All I could see was my mother when I looked in the mirror with the red lipstick. The same white dress I wore the night of my parents murder hung neatly on the rack in my closet. I took off the plastic wrap left by the dry cleaners; the dress looked as if I didn't hold my dying parents in my arms. I slipped on black Louboutin pumps and my mothers jewelry, only I still couldn't find her

ring which went missing a few days before their murder. I walked out to the living room, lit the candles, poured a glass of the chilled wine, walked over to the red swivel chair placed near the couch that had a straight shot of the elevator, and waited.

The ding of the elevator exactly at 8 o'clock stopped my heart. It dropped to the center of the earth as I saw him walk out of the elevator, dressed in his black pants and button down shirt that was unbuttoned at the top, chain exposed. He wore that outfit just like I told him to. He looked around the room, jaw dropped, and started giggling like a kid in a candy store.

“Baby! What is all of this!” his eyes sparkle as he looks at me and walks closer. I smirk as our eyes lock.

“Remember the first night you came over to my apartment? I had made dinner for us and we drank wine while talking and looking at each other. Later on we ended up here in the living room dancing and looking out over central park and the city lights.” I set my glass down on the little table next to me and stood up, walking slowly towards him.

“Do you remember that baby?” He licks his lips as he looks at me walking closer to him.

“Of course I do baby, that was the night I fell in love with you.” That hit me like a blackened arrow straight through my chest

“Then you remember that was the night we found our song...” I grab the remote that rested on my coffee table next to the wine bucket and press play... “We slowly danced to this song and as you held me in your arms, I knew I would fall in love with you.”

Best Part ft. Daniel Caesar by H.E.R. starts playing on my speakers like an angel descending from heaven.

“It was the best night of my life.” he softly says.

His touch makes me flinch as he grabs my waist, pulls me in close, and I wrap my hands around his neck. His beautiful eyes are staring so deeply into mine as we start swaying to the music. He brushes his hand up the side of my dress, giving me butterflies, making his way to my hand and grabbing it. Lip syncing the words all I can focus on are his full soft lips and the little grin he gives me. I allow myself to melt into this moment in time, to be here in the moment with the backstabbing love of my life. He continues to hold me and sway as we smile and giggle softly. I let go of his hand to wrap my arms around his head again and then grab his face for a kiss. He presses his body against mine and holds me tightly, I pull away only to go back in for another kiss. As the song is coming to an end, he smiles, grabs my hand and spins me. Just like he did the first time. I close my eyes and squeeze them. I really don't want the song to end, I wish I could just relive this over and over again, no one else except you and I right here.

But he had to go and fuck it all up. Oh my sweet baby, why did you have to ruin it for us?

We stare into each other's eyes and he passionately grabs my face. While he kisses me for one last time, I grab the knife hidden under my dress that was attached to my thigh and plunge it straight into his heart. I felt the jolt of his body against mine and he let out a gasp. He looks at me with a tear slowly falling down the side of his face, and I can see the realization ignite in his eyes.

“Nicole...” I let out a scream and pushed the knife further into his chest, falling forward with him onto the floor. As Ash gasps for a breath of air I rip the knife out of his heart and throw it on the floor. He clutches his chest as he bleeds out, breath shaking and raspy, I must have hit his lung too. I grab his legs and drag him closer towards the window, the blood smears across my floor. I sit down next to him, lift his head onto my lap, start running my bloody fingers through

his hair and grab his hand with the other. We stare into each other's eyes more intensely than ever before.

“You figured it out, didn't you?” He whispers with a strained laugh.

“Baby you have always underestimated me” I whispered back, a tear rolling down my face.

“You really were the love of my life too you know, I'm sorry.” He tried his best to say that strongly between breaths.

“That is why I will never be able to understand why you betrayed me. I don't want to hear what you have to say for yourself, nothing could justify your actions. I'm sure I have figured out the story anyways.” I could tell my words were hitting him sharper than the knife, but what I said was the truth. This would have been his fate anyways, no matter how much I ever loved him.

“My heart will always belong to you Ash, I will see you again one day.” I continued to run my hands through his hair as I gave him a kiss on the forehead and my tears fell on his face. His lips start to turn a dull pink, the warmth of his face starts to fade. As he let out his last breath, he said my name very faintly, one last tear finding its way out of the corner of his eye, dropping on my dress.

“I love you”

An eye for an eye is what my father taught me, but what should feel more like revenge was just more undiscovered pain. Not only did I lose my parents, but I learned that the love of my life betrayed me and was behind it, so I killed him. He was the shadow that secretly plunged a knife into my heart, but I dragged him into the light and returned the favor.

I blankly stared into the eyes of my deceased lover, the color in his eyes slowly fading. I place my hand over his heart, and squeeze his chest, but as I do so I notice a square object in his pocket. I take my bloody hand off of his chest and reach into his pocket, only to reveal a red engagement ring box. I burst out into laughter as my body goes numb and I drop the box. My laughter is just covering the tears that so badly want to forever stream down my rosy cheeks. *Well this is just fucking great.* I start to hyperventilate as I open the box, exposing my mothers missing ring. If only they knew Ash's true intentions with this family. We were all blinded by love stronger than the love he had for us.

I place the box on my glass table, pick up Ash's head off of my lap, and set it gently on the floor. My shoes almost slip walking past the pool of blood towards the kitchen, wash the fresh blood off my hands, and grab the pack of cigarettes I bought today and hid in a kitchen drawer. I'm not a smoker, but I do make exceptions. I call out to Dike, who was sleeping in my room the whole time, and she comes running down the hall, startled when discovering Ash's corpse on the living room floor. I whistle and point at the couch, she jumps up and sits down without giving me a questioning whine. I grab my wine glass, pour the rest of the bottle into the glass and sit down next to Dike, placing the pack of cigarettes and a lighter next to the box.

My mothers ring shines in the waving candle lights. I pick up the box and pull out the ring, noticing an engraving on the inner band - "May your love be as strong as ours". I smile reading the note my mother left me on her ring, completely engulfed in the flames of numbness and pain. I slip her ring on my finger, right where it should have been placed and toss the box across the room.

Trust in me by Etta James fills the room over the speakers. I grab the pack of cigarettes and take one out, lighting it and inhaling. I blow out the smoke along with my sorrow. Resting the cigarette in my mouth, I grab my wine glass and cross my legs as I lean back. Dike rests her head in my lap letting out a deep breath, I run my fingers through the fur on her head and tell her everything is going to be okay. Dog on my lap, wine glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, I look at the love of my life's corpse on my living room floor and then the illuminated city that stares back at me.

A final tear falls down my face as I take a sip of the wine and then a puff of the cigarette, exhaling and whispering one single number...“10.”