

PAST TENSE

A DeLuca and Moretti Novel



Stephanie O'Neil

FREE SAMPLE · FIRST TWO CHAPTERS

PAST TENSE

A DeLuca and Moretti Novel – Book One

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CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, can someone give me a hand?” Lead Homicide Detective DeLuca yelled.

“Sorry, DeLuca. I’ve got somewhere better to be,” Detective O’Shaunly turned with a smirk and pretended to walk away.

“Come on, O’Shaunly. This mud isn’t like a nice warm spa treatment. It’s freezing, and now it’s starting to harden. Come on. Pull me out.”

“Alright, boss. I was messing with you. Can you promise not to shoot me when you’re out?” He grabbed her and was surprised at how cold the mud was. Even covered in it, he liked the way her hand felt in his.

“I’ll think about it,” DeLuca said. “Just give me a good pull, and I’ll do the rest.” Her heels made it hard to get her footing, but she was determined to get out of the mud hole, mostly on her own. She would never live this down.

“You know, if you guys had hauled ass over here, I probably wouldn’t have ended up in this mess.”

“Yeah, it was convenient for us to go off-roading in the middle of nowhere and to boot in the middle of the night.” O’Shaunly rolled his eyes. “Even if we were here sooner, you probably would have ended up in the hole anyway,” he muttered.

“Heard that,” DeLuca said over her shoulder. “By the way, stop staring.”

“Never, boss.” he felt his cheeks get hot.

On her way back to her H₃ Hummer, she walked past the squad car where the perp was being detained. She glanced in, and a chill danced over her body. He was staring straight into her eyes.

Thomas Pillger. Thirty-four years old. He looked every bit like a serial killer.

Not in a scary, filthy, dirty-looking kind of guy like some might imagine. He was almost, in a weird way, handsome. He was well-kept, tall, with dark, nicely groomed hair and a nice build. He waved at her through the window, and she noticed his hands looked soft and gentle.

He was not what you would expect a wacko to look like. His eyes gave him away, though. They were deep green. Beautiful, except there seemed to be no life behind them. Just dark and cold emptiness. Another chill swept over her, thinking about the things those eyes had seen. She held his gaze while she walked. He blinked and turned away.

She won. She always did.

Captain Larkson was waiting for her at her driver's side door. “That was one stupid move you pulled, DeLuca. It would help if you didn't go chasing murderers in the middle of the night and the middle of nowhere on your own. You know what kinds of things that guy is capable of. You're lucky O'Shaunly found you.”

“Yes, sir. I had a good feeling he would be there and couldn't just wait and let him slip away again.”

“Other than seriously needing a shower, you seem fine. You did catch him, so I'll let this one... slide,”

Larkson chuckled at himself and walked back to his car.

Laughter and applause erupted around her. She hadn't realized she had an audience. Surely, they were eavesdropping on her getting scolded by the captain.

"Hey. Let's go grab a beer and a burger to celebrate," someone called from the back of the crowd.

"Moretti," DeLuca said.

She could feel her cheeks getting hot out of anger. She wouldn't admit there might have been a little excitement too.

Why do I have butterflies? Grow up, DeLuca, she thought to herself. She must have been spacing off because she was startled when she looked over, and he was right beside her.

"I'll have to pass. Thanks." She turned away so he wouldn't see her flushed face. She kept herself busy by grabbing the wet wipes from her glove compartment. She could feel him staring at her backside.

"Come on, DeLuca. You just got one of St. Louis' most wanted. You got a serial killer off the streets. You should celebrate. What? Are you still mad at me? I apologized."

"I'm not exactly dressed to go out," she said, gesturing to her mud-covered body. He took too much time looking, but with her skintight pants, it looked like mud was all she had on. She started shivering. He took off his favorite leather jacket and draped it over her shoulders. *Like old times,* he thought.

"Thanks," she said

"At least let me drive you home."

“I can drive her home,” O’Shaunly said as he jogged over. “We have some things to go over before we file paperwork.”

DeLuca glanced over towards the car with Pillger, but the flashing blue and reds were blinding in the darkness. She thought for a minute, wrinkling her nose and nibbling the dry skin off the bottom of her lip.

“You know, I’ll let Moretti drive me. You have your car here, and paperwork can wait until morning,” she said against her better judgment. It seemed to be her theme for the night. “Thanks anyway, O’Shaunly.”

“You bet, boss. See you in the morning.” He tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He walked with his shoulders slumped.

“Treat my baby nice, Moretti.” DeLuca slid into the passenger seat.

Moretti rolled his eyes and adjusted the mirrors. He started slow and easy and then stepped on it. Mud went flying.

“Hey. Easy. Now you owe me a carwash,” DeLuca snapped.

“You let me drive you home so you could bitch at me the whole way?”

“Just drive,” DeLuca said.

The drive back to her apartment at 6th North was uncomfortably quiet. She looked out her window the entire time, and Moretti did what he was told and just drove. Neither knew what to say when they pulled up to her parking space.

“How do you manage to hold onto this spot? Not too far from the door, under a tree to help keep it cool in the sun and protect it from hail. It’s perfect, like you.”

“Oh, you know. I pretty much get whatever I want around here.”

“Because you’re a cop?”

“Because I’m hot.” She winked.” Thanks for driving me home. Listen, I’m sorry I snapped at you. It’s been a long night.”

“I understand. I had it coming anyway.” He walked her to the elevator. “I’ll have the front desk call me a cab.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You went out of your way to drive me home. You can at least come up with me.”

Standing by her door, DeLuca had butterflies in her stomach again. She fumbled for her keys in her pocket while getting them into the keyhole.

“Do you need a hand?” Moretti asked. DeLuca reluctantly handed him the key. She hated needing help, but she needed sleep.

“You can grab a beer while you wait for your taxi. You know where the phone is. I’m going to jump in the shower quickly. Should be out before you leave.”

He glanced around the room, looking for the phone. He found it on the end stand next to her sofa. He remembered the things they had done in her apartment, which gave him butterflies. He grabbed two beers from the fridge but didn’t call a cab.

DeLuca felt a little nervous having him in her apartment. Not in the wrong way. More like a girl getting to hang out with her crush for the first time. She took deep breaths to keep the red from creeping into her cheeks.

“Do you have a ride on the way?” DeLuca walked towards him with her hair in a towel and her baby blue

bathrobe tied loosely around her waist.

“Not yet. I thought we could talk first.”

“So, you didn’t show up just to congratulate me?” she asked sarcastically. She sat down on the couch next to him. He handed her a beer, and they clinked them together.

“I just wanted to apologize. That other woman, the stupid things I did, they weren’t worth it. Nobody would ever be worth it.”

“Listen, I was upset, but it was a long time ago. We had a lot of fun, but you were always away, and I was always busy. Neither of us knew what we wanted. It’s okay, but thanks anyway.”

There was an awkward silence. There were a few uncomfortable glances at each other, and suddenly it was like a magnet was drawing their bodies closer to one another. It was an unseen force that neither could fight or even wanted to fight. Their bodies needed each other.

DeLuca hated that she couldn’t control herself around him, but it had been so long since she had been with him, or anyone else for that matter. She just went with it. The butterflies in their stomachs were racing so quickly that they felt they might lift off the sofa.

The world around them spun and then disappeared altogether. Before they knew it, they were knee to knee. DeLuca stood up in front of him, ready to call it off, but instead, she sat to straddle his lap.

They came chest to chest, forehead to forehead, and then lip to lip.

DeLuca made one more meager attempt to end it. “You’d better call that cab,” she said, pulling her lips

from his, their foreheads still touching.

“I’ve missed you,” Moretti panted. His hands slowly and gently slid down her shoulder blades and settled on the small of her back. He paused. DeLuca wanted him to make the next move. He could feel it in the air and all over his body.

He caressed the back of her neck. Her skin was soft. A few strands of her long brown hair made it out from under the towel. He undid the towel and let the rest of her damp hair fall around her face, over her shoulders, and down her back. He looked into her blue eyes and gently pulled her in for another kiss. He paused for a split second to lean back and take in the gorgeous view that was DeLuca. She did the same, and he couldn’t stand it anymore.

He fumbled to undo the rest of her robe. She reached for his belt, his button, and his zipper. She lifted his shirt off his head of full black hair, revealing the most fantastic body she’d ever seen. Their clothes fell to the floor, and it wasn’t long before they were tangled in a heap of sweat glistened limbs.

Moretti and DeLuca were lying on the living room floor with the sun shining through the windows. DeLuca just realized the curtains were open, and she hoped nobody got an X-rated show. She glanced at the clock. It was six-thirty in the morning. They hadn’t had much sleep, but DeLuca would take Moretti over rest any day. She smiled at his undressed body and pressed herself up against him.

“Good morning,” he said, laying his hand on her hip. His eyes were still closed. He didn’t have to see her body to love it.

“Mm,” she moaned. “Perfect morning.”

“Always with you by my side.”

DeLuca sat up. “I don’t want to ruin the moment or make this awkward, but what does this mean? It is what it is, or something more?” Before he could answer, her phone rang. She groaned as she reached for it.

“DeLuca here.”

Moretti got up and walked across the room to get dressed. She had to turn away. She could hardly concentrate while Moretti stood there naked.

“Yes, Captain, I’m here. Uh-huh. Yes, sir. 122 Olive St. Got it. There isn’t much traffic at this hour. I can make it in about twenty minutes. Thank you, sir.” DeLuca hung up.

“Hey, I’ve gotta go. It seems I have a date with a dead body.”

Moretti walked her to her car. “So. Can I call you later? I want to finish our conversation.”

“I’ll call you. You never know how long things will take.”

He opened her door. She leaned in and kissed his cheek. He wanted more but didn’t push it. He closed the door and watched her drive off. He was startled when his phone rang out with the song Bad Boys. Luckily, DeLuca hadn’t heard that. She always gave him hell for having such a cliché ringtone. It brought a smile to his face.

“Moretti here. 122 Olive St. Sure. I’ve got to catch a cab, but I’ll be there.

It was a nice neighborhood. A lovely area in general. It was family-friendly, with plenty of shops, farmer’s

markets, and museums for adults and children alike. She was going to a lovely loft-style apartment and wondered how there could be a homicide in such a quiet community. Her job never ceased to surprise her.

When she got there, the yellow crime scene tape was blocking off one of the elevators in the lobby. Carol Catsburg, the medical examiner, knelt beside the body of a late twenty-something Caucasian male. She slowly and methodically raised the man's hands one at a time, looking for any signs of a struggle, DeLuca assumed. She'd seen Carol do the same thing at every crime scene.

DeLuca caught sight of a ring on his right pinky. White gold with four small diamonds in the center. One of the diamonds reflected light into her eye, and she got a chill. It looked familiar. She shook it off. She probably bumped into him on the street before.

DeLuca stopped near the front desk to get a good view of the scene. When she looked around, she noticed her partner, Detective O'Shaunly, seemed to be missing. She proceeded to the elevator. Without looking up, Carol gave her the rundown.

"Our vic is twenty-eight-year-old Joshua Stanton. O'Shaunly found his wallet on him. Cash, credit cards, and ID all there."

"So, he wasn't robbed," DeLuca said.

"Your other half is upstairs talking to the victim's wife."

"Cause of death?"

"I'll have to get him back to the lab to be certain, but from my initial observation, Mr. Stanton seems to have died from blunt force trauma to the base of his head.

I'm going to say he was unconscious or dead before he hit the floor. There were no obvious signs he put up a fight."

"Time of death window?"

"Won't know until I can process him, sorry."

"Thanks, Carol. I'm heading up to meet with the wife. Call me as soon as you know anything."

When DeLuca got to the apartment, the door was closed, but she could hear a woman sobbing. She lightly tapped the door with her knuckles and then went in. She thought this apartment certainly did not fit in with cozy the surrounding area.

It was filled with modern pieces of art. Very jagged looking and somewhat menacing. Small, square, chrome, and glass tables stood on either end of a white sofa. A matching but larger table was placed in front of the couch. The décor seemed very harsh, with several square shapes and pointed edges. The whole place was white and chrome or stainless steel. Nothing was inviting about it. It was the opposite of DeLuca's place.

Its only warmth came from the sun shining through an impressive picture window that spanned about twenty feet from the dining room on the left into the living room behind the sofa.

DeLuca found the victim's wife sitting on the far-left side of the sofa, sobbing into her hands. She looked so delicate. Long curly blonde hair draped over her shoulders. She was very petite. Her face seemed sweet. She didn't fit the décor. She was much too soft around the edges. DeLuca glanced around, but O'Shaunly was nowhere to be found once again.

“Mrs. Stanton. I’m Detective DeLuca. I’m very sorry for your loss, but I’ll need to speak with you.” “Yes. Of course, Detective. Your partner told me you’d be here. Please come in.”

“And he is...?”

“Just getting her a glass of water,” O’Shaunly said as he rounded the corner from the kitchen. “You look a little tired, DeLuca,” he whispered as he passed by. “Long night?” She knew where he was going and said nothing. Sometimes silence speaks louder than words. He got the hint.

DeLuca sat on an uncomfortable white leather chair facing Mrs. Stanton. She leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. Ready to listen, not judge. This always made grieving families seem more at ease.

Meanwhile, O’Shaunly stood behind the chair, hands in his pockets and stone-faced. She didn’t like it. It made him seem less compassionate towards the victim’s wife. No matter how much DeLuca spoke to him about it, it was always his style.

“Mrs. Stanton,” DeLuca started.

“Please, call me Charlotte.”

“Charlotte, do you know of anyone who might have wanted to hurt your husband?”

“No. Not at all. He was kind to everyone. He didn’t make enemies, only friends.” DeLuca thought she heard O’Shaunly chuckle under his breath, which was usually the standard response.

“What about people he worked with?” he chimed in.

“Oh goodness, no. He was just a sculptor, an artist. He created all the pieces you see hear.”

“I think I’ve seen similar pieces around town. Did he contract to make artwork for companies or the city?”

“Yes. He just signed a contract to produce two or three pieces for the St. Louis Children’s Hospital.”

“I’ll need the names and contact information for whoever hired him,” DeLuca said.

“If you don’t mind me saying so, his work doesn’t seem child-friendly,” O’Shaunly said.

Charlotte laughed. “No, none of this does, but he had a soft side, Detective.”

“Charlotte, when was the last time you saw your husband?” DeLuca interjected.

“Last night around one in the morning. We were in bed, and he had trouble sleeping. He said he would work off some energy in the building’s gym.”

“Nothing seemed out of the ordinary? Was this normal for him?”

“No, but the hospital was a big job, and he was nervous, stressed out about getting everything perfect. I didn’t push him. I said okay, told him I loved him, and went to sleep. Our front desk clerk found him this morning and called it in. I never thought in a million years that someone would mur...” she trailed off and started to sob again.

DeLuca turned to O’Shaunly. “I’ll need you to check security cameras for the entire building. “Charlotte,” she said, “where is the gym located?”

“In the basement. You can only take the elevator to the lobby, and then you must take the stairs the rest of the way down.”

“Make sure you get footage from every square inch of this place, O’Shaunly,” DeLuca said.

He made a note of it in his notepad. "Every. Square. Inch," he said as he wrote. He accentuated the period at the end with a large tap on the pad. "Got it," he said as he flipped the pad closed and shoved his pen in the spiral binding.

Why would he overreact like that? DeLuca thought.

She was anxious to get away from him. He was a little harsher than usual, and she didn't like him poking around in her business.

Mrs. Stanton walked them to the door. "I'm sorry I don't have any information that will help."

"Thank you for speaking with us. You were quite helpful. We will contact the Children's hospital, and we will keep you up to date on where we are in the investigation. Please call me if you think of anything else."

"Of course, Detective."

The Stanton's door closed behind DeLuca and O'Shaunly, and they made their way to the stairwell.

"So, how was your night? Sleep okay?" O'Shaunly asked.

"Fine. Good," she said. "Why don't you head over to security and get those tapes? I'll meet you back at the precinct." They both reached for the door handle, and their hands grazed one another. O'Shaunly didn't pull away. "Thanks, but I've got it," DeLuca said. She pulled the door open and came face to face with DEA Agent Alfonzo Moretti.

CHAPTER TWO

“So, Moretti,” O’Shaunly said, “tell us why you, a DEA Agent, have shown up at our scenes twice in a row now?”

“Well, I’ll say last night wasn’t police business.” He gave DeLuca a wink. “Second, today is work. We were keeping an eye on your guy Stanton. I have been for about a year now. It seems he was involved in a drug ring we busted up a while back, but we couldn’t pin him with anything. We haven’t heard anything about him in a long time until now.”

“Pull up a chair, Moretti. We’ll be working this one together,” DeLuca said. “O’Shaunly, did you get the footage from the apartment building?” she said while staring at her whiteboard. It was stark. DeLuca looked over at him when he didn’t answer. He was too busy giving Moretti a nasty stare-down. “O’Shaunly,” she snapped.

“Uh, yeah.” he gathered himself and shuffled through a bunch of paperwork and manila folders scattered over his desk. He picked up a larger inner office envelope. Moretti reached for it, but he handed it to DeLuca.

“Thanks. Did you get a chance to go over any of it?”

“Just a little bit of it before I got a call from Carol. She wants us to head over to the ME’s building. Says she’s found something.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? This could be important, O’Shaunly.”

“I just got the call before you walked in with him.” He glared at Moretti again.

DeLuca rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. “Listen, whatever you two have against each other, you have to put it aside. We’ve got a murder case to solve.” She emphasized murder. “I’ll finish going over the video tonight. Find anything so far?”

“Not without a TOD to go by. I had to start at the beginning of the tapes for the day. I sat through about twenty minutes of nothing before the ME called.”

“We do know that he was killed late evening, early morning. His wife said he was in bed with her for a while. You could start there,” Moretti said.

“Right...” O’Shaunly fumbled for something to come back with. “I just wanted to go back and see if there was anything out of the ordinary that day. See if anyone was casing the place.”

DeLuca just nodded and then stood to head over to see Carol. The boys followed her.

“You have something for me, Carol?”

“What the heck took you so long?”

“Long story,” DeLuca said, glancing back at Moretti and O’Shaunly. “Anyway...?”

“Time of death is between one and three in the morning. There were no obvious signs of struggle and nothing when I got a better look. It looks like someone snuck up on him. Caught him by surprise. As I suspected, he took a fatal blow to the back of the neck. It left a bruise the size of a fist. There was an impression of an object, most likely a ring.” she said,

pointing to a darker area at the edge of the bruise. It looked like a large band with four little circles in the center. "Maybe a pinky ring? The perp must have been a bit taller to get the angle needed to deliver this blow. That's what I've got so far. I'm going to go over clothing and whatnot. You know, look for fibers... the usual."

"Thanks, Carol. Call me..."

"Yeah, yeah. When I know more. Got it, Detective." After the boys left the room, she said, "DeLuca, would it kill you to call me for a drink sometime? Seems we have some catching up to do." she nodded to Moretti and O'Shaunly. "Besides, I get tired of not having any company of the living verity."

"I'll call you when I know more." DeLuca left with a, *what's a girl to do* shrug and a wink.

"It's already noon. I feel like the morning just flew by," O'Shaunly said, standing outside the ME's building.

"Yeah, and we don't have much to go on so far," DeLuca said. "We need less distraction and more forward momentum."

"How about we go through what we've got over lunch. I'm starving. We didn't have time for breakfast," Moretti boasted.

O'Shaunly shot Moretti a nasty look. "Hey, DeLuca. How about we hit up Devin's Grill?"

"Sounds great. Good idea," DeLuca chirped.

"Great." O'Shaunly seemed a little more upbeat.

That seemed to brighten his spirits. It's the little things, she thought.

They sat at a square table on the patio of the popular Devin's Grill. It was busy, but they got priority seating and service. O'Shaunly sat with his back to the fence that separated the patio from the sidewalk and congested street. DeLuca sat with her chair pulled to the corner of the table opposite him by the patio entrance to the restaurant. Moretti pulled his over to match hers, so they met at the corner. Moretti could see O'Shaunly thought it was too close, but he didn't care. There was one person Moretti was there to please, and it sure as hell wasn't him. DeLuca could feel the tension building, so she scooted her chair over. She wanted to keep things professional. There was no sense in getting the guys all riled up when there was work to do.

DeLuca's usual waiter came out to take their order. Moretti said, "You want to usual?" DeLuca looked over at O'Shaunly to see him getting red-faced and then to Moretti to tell him to cool it silently.

"Mm, I think I'll need a sec. O'Shaunly, what are you having?"

"I'll have the Three Cheese Panini with fries and a water."

"I'll have my usual," Moretti said and handed the menu back to the waiter. "You're up, Nics... DeLuca," he corrected himself.

"I'll have my usual too, Rob," she said, smiling up at the waiter. She handed him her menu and then decided to get down to business. "Okay. So far, we know he seemed to be into more than just sculpting based on what you told us, Moretti."

“We know he was killed between one and three in the morning by a blow to the back of the head. It left an imprint of what seems to be a ring. Carol is emailing me the picture for reference,” O’Shaunly said.

“Also, Stanton was five feet eight, so we know that his killer was taller than that. He was either getting on or off the elevator in the lobby. We’ll have to watch the videos to confirm,” Moretti added, glancing over at O’Shaunly.

“Either our perp lives there, knows someone who does, or has special access since you have to be buzzed in. Or I guess he could have snuck in with someone else,” DeLuca said.

“I feel like we missed something with the wife. Maybe I should go talk to her again,” O’Shaunly said.

“Was she part of the drug ring investigation, Moretti?” DeLuca asked. “Do you feel like she has anything to do with this?”

“She is new to the picture. Wasn’t around a year ago, as far as we knew.”

“Okay. O’Shaunly, head back up there. You know what to ask her. When and how they met, get all their friends’ names, where she works, and her associate’s information. I need you to get a list of everyone in the building too. Call Stanton’s hospital contacts. Find out if he belonged to any clubs, things like that. See what comes up.”

O’Shaunly barely touched his lunch, but DeLuca and Moretti finished their burgers and side salads. DeLuca got lite dressing and diet soda so she wouldn’t feel too guilty about the greasy burger she always managed to finish.

After lunch, O'Shaunly drove back over to talk to the wife. DeLuca wanted to go over the security footage but not at the precinct. Too many distractions there. Moretti rode with DeLuca back to her place.

"Don't think I don't know what's going on with you and O'Shaunly."

"O'Shaunly? Oh. O'Shaunly."

"Yeah. This is an investigation. I don't have to tell you that. It's important. Let's keep the cockfighting out of it. He has a thing for me. I don't need you rubbing it in that I'm not interested. I can handle myself."

"Okay. Okay. So... how long have you two worked together?"

He's been with the 9th for a couple of years, but we've only been partners for six months. Sometimes, he can have a rough personality, but he's a good detective."

"I don't like him much."

"Oh really? I couldn't tell."

"You wanna take a little break when we get there?" Moretti winked at DeLuca.

"As much fun as that sounds... no. We have actual work to do."

"Hey, slow down. There's an accident up in front of the credit union."

"Yeah. It doesn't look too serious. A fender bender, maybe. Just enough to back up traffic."

They pulled up behind a little orange two-door coupe with a slightly crunched front bumper and a small black pick-up with its back bumper dented in a bit. DeLuca got out, walked up to the orange area, and asked the driver if they needed help.

“No. I’m okay,” the driver said. She walked up to check on the driver of the truck and got the same response.

“Alright then. You’ve got traffic backed up, so if you’re both good, I’ll need you to pull off to the side and exchange your information there instead of in the middle of the road,” she said to both drivers. She got back in her car and waited for them to start moving.

Vehicles were starting to honk behind her. Traffic in the left lane was backed up, too, so she couldn’t go anywhere. She was getting irritated, so she stuck her head out the window to tell them to chill when she saw someone running up from behind—completely clothed in black and carrying a gun.

“Hey. SLPD. Stop right there,” DeLuca yelled. He didn’t stop, and she was even more surprised when he came to her car door and pointed a gun in her face.

“Don’t make any stupid moves, cop,” an eerie voice said. Whoever it was, was altering their voice. It sounded digital. DeLuca couldn’t tell if it was a male or female. She guessed male based on the person’s height and slightly muscular build behind the gun.

“Give me the envelope DeLuca,” the perp said.

“What envelope?”

He was getting agitated and nearly screamed, “The tapes. Now.”

She reached down between her seat and the middle console acting like she was reaching for the envelope, but it was her gun on her hip she was after. He must have seen right through it because he jerked her car door open, leaned over her, grabbed the envelope, and took off. Moretti was already after him.

“10-31. We’ve got a 10-32—officer on foot pursuit. Requesting backup,” DeLuca radioed in.

“Copy. What’s your 20?” a female voice came over the radio.

“3600 block Forest Park Avenue. Headed west.”

“Personnel in the area. Description of the suspect?”

“All black clothing and back mask. Most likely male. About six foot one inches, slightly muscular build, blue eyes,” DeLuca said, easily remembering the eyes staring at her from behind the mask.

“Copy that.”

DeLuca couldn’t let Moretti have all the fun. She holstered her gun and took off after him and the gunman.

“Police. Get out of the way,” she hollered, sprinting past concerned onlookers, bumping into some, and shoving others out of the way as they got out of their cars to see what was going on.

She saw the tail end of Moretti’s jacket flash around the corner of the Liberty Annex Restaurant, headed north onto Spring Avenue. She picked up the pace. She was about to round the corner when the heel of her shoe caught in a crack in the sidewalk, sending her to her hands and knees. A jolt of pain radiated through her knees and the palms of her hands.

She shook it off and got to her feet and was about to continue the pursuit when a black four-door Ford Taurus from eastbound traffic made a quick left-hand turn, cutting across the intersection, and came to a screeching halt in front of her. It stopped at an angle, so the nose of the car was sticking out over the

sidewalk, and the back end was blocking northbound traffic. She was blocked in.

“Move, move, move!” she yelled. They didn’t move. DeLuca peered in quickly and saw men all in black with ski masks covering their faces. She drew back her jacket at the hip and pulled her gun from the holster.

“Freeze. Don’t move.” Before she knew it, the passenger door opened, and a large man reached out and grabbed her around the waist, trying to pull her into the car. Her training kicked in. She took a deep breath and quickly assessed the situation. Her arms and her gun were pinned to her sides. Her mouth was free, but Moretti would already be too far away to hear her. Yelling would waste precious seconds anyway.

She still had her gun. She stopped squirming, and in a tiny silent movement, she pointed it at his leg and readied her finger on the trigger. He must have noticed it because he released her gun hand and brought a fist down on her arm just above the elbow. A groan escaped her mouth. Another jolt of pain went through yet another part of her body.

Her gun dropped out of her hand. She didn’t waste a second. She used what little momentum she had from being bent over and brought the back of her head up as hard as she could. She hit him square in the chin and then kneed him in the groin. Now it was his turn to moan in pain. He doubled over and let go of DeLuca. She used her high heel and stomped on his left foot and then delivered a right hook to his masked face.

This gave her a second to grab for her gun. She looked to the ground, but it wasn’t by her foot where it had dropped seconds before. She spotted it about ten

feet to her right and made a dash for it. It took all three seconds, but by the time she grabbed it and turned around, the car door slammed shut, and they sped off. She finally heard sirens, but it was too late. They were gone.

She pulled out her phone and dialed Moretti. Before she got a word out, his voice filled her ear.

“Bad news. I lost him.”

“Meet me back at my car. I’ve got news for you too.”

Back at the station, DeLuca gave another description of the three perpetrators and the car they got away in. “A black Ford Taurus. I didn’t get the plate.” she was disappointed in herself.

“It’s not your fault. We’ll find it.” Moretti patted her on the back.

“They know my name. Know I’m a cop. What in the world is going on? Whatever is on that tape must be something else.” She looked at all the faces staring at her. Everyone had gathered around her. Sitting at desktops or standing in a circle around her desk. All eyes and ears were on her, listening to her story.

“Where’s O’Shaunly?” DeLuca asked when she realized he wasn’t one of them.

“Some partner,” Moretti grumbled under his breath.

“He was still with the wife, last I heard,” Larkson said as he stepped forward.

“Right. I forgot I sent him over there.” DeLuca rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. They were still sore from being scraped on the sidewalk. Both knees were bruised, and her elbow was bruised and sore from taking a fist to it. Her head ached, too.

“We’ve got surveillance on your building. Why don’t you head home for the day? I’ll get O’Shaunly up to date on the latest when he gets in. Let him do some digging. You two need to rest to come back tomorrow with fresh minds.”

“Captain. I’m fine. I wasn’t hurt. It’s only two in the afternoon. I’ll shower, clear my head, and then come right back.”

“For the whole night, DeLuca. That’s an order. Now go,” Larkson said.

“Yes, sir,” she said, frustrated. She grabbed her leather jacket off the back of her chair, flung it over her shoulder, and headed for the door. Moretti tagged along behind her.

They stood side by side outside of the precinct. Just staring at nothing. It was a warm day. About seventy-three degrees, but DeLuca wrapped her arms around herself. She shivered when she thought about the events of the day. That creepy voice. The mystery man who knew her name. A stranger who seemed to know all about her, yet she knew nothing about him.

“Let me stay with you tonight. I’d feel more comfortable if you weren’t alone,” Moretti said.

“Larkson has detail on me. I’ll be fine. I’m not really in the mood for any funny business tonight,” DeLuca said. “I’ll call you later, maybe.” She turned and walked to her car. Moretti watched her get in and drive away for the second time that day. He was hurt that she thought all he wanted was to sleep with her.

He’d thought they were serious the first time they dated, but he went and screwed that up by messing around on her. Not one of his proudest moments. He

knew he was stupid to do it and regretted it immediately. He'd only thought of her since then. It haunted him, and it seemed that it would continue to haunt him. Reap what you sew and what not.

DeLuca was sitting on her sofa, trying to go over what had gone down earlier in her head, but she couldn't concentrate. All she could think about was Moretti. She felt terrible for leaving him hanging. She thought she could use the company. She picked up her phone and dialed his cell. It rang several times. She was about to hang up when his out-of-breath voice got on the line. "Hello?" he panted.

"Uh, hey. It's DeLuca. I thought you could use some company, but you sound... busy. I'll let you go."

"No, no, no. Sorry. I was in the shower. I heard the phone ring and hurried to get it. I was hoping it would be you. I didn't want to miss you."

"I wanted to apologize for earlier. Maybe I can bring some pizza and beer to make up for it."

"How about I provide the beer. You bring yourself and the pizza. I'll be one happy man with my three favorite things tonight."

"See you soon," she said, smiling from ear to ear. She bet he could hear it in her voice. She hung up and left to get the pizza she had already taken the liberty of ordering—Moretti's favorite, Hawaiian, and her favorite, taco.

As she got in her car to drive away, she noticed her detail quietly get in their cruiser and start to follow her at a respectful but safe distance. She began to have second thoughts about going to his place. People, her co-workers, would most likely be able to figure out

that they were seeing each other. Was the risk worth the reward? She made up her mind and continued.

Moretti paced his apartment, waiting for DeLuca. He felt nervous and didn't quite know what to do with himself. He changed out of his towel into a pair of red silk boxers. *No. Better not give her the wrong idea.* He thought. He added a grey t-shirt and decided casual was the way to go. He lost the boxers and pulled on a pair of grey pajama pants. *Better.* He thought, nodding his head in agreement with himself.

Moretti opened the door to see DeLuca standing there with two pizza boxes. One in each hand. He took notice that she had come in her pajamas. Baby blue plaid pants and a baby blue long-sleeved tee. He could see the outline of her bra underneath. She looked as amazing as ever.

"Delivery," she said, holding up the boxes to her nose to smell the scent of her favorite comfort food. "You can pay me with a kiss," she said, turning her cheek to him. He obliged, took the boxes, and motioned her to come in.

"Where can I put this?" she swung a black and blue backpack off her shoulder.

He assumed it was toiletries and tomorrow's attire. "In our room."

"Our room?" she repeated.

He chuckled and turned so she wouldn't see him turn red. He hoped she would catch that but wasn't sure what her reaction would be. "Uh hu," he said.

"Our room it is then." She opened the door and threw the bag on their bed."

An hour later, DeLuca and Moretti were still sitting at the breakfast bar. They had all but finished off both pizzas and were lost in conversation, reminiscing about old times.

“Speaking of old times. Does our room mean this is more than just a fling?”

“Listen, I knew I felt differently about you the day you kicked my ass in that sparing session. It just took me a lot of screw-ups to realize that...” he trailed off, gathering the courage to say what she desperately wanted him to say.

“That what?”

He looked her straight in the eye, took a deep breath, and held it. He let it out in a whoosh and said, “I’m glad you’re giving me a second chance. I think this is- we are right- I feel like it could go somewhere.” DeLuca sat quietly for a second. That wasn’t what she hoped to hear, but it was a start.

“I think so too.”

Laying on their bed in a pile of tangled clothes and sheets, they held each other. It felt familiar and comfortable yet exciting and new. It was quiet, each thinking their own thoughts and staring at the ceiling fan that rotated on high. It blew cool air on their glistening faces.

“I’m conflicted about this case.”

“About the masked men? How do they know you?”

“That and, how did they know I had the tapes? How did they know where we would be? It was all planned very well. They had to be watching us. There is something else. I brushed it off at first, but it kept nagging at me. I can’t shake it.”

“Spill it. What’s bothering you?”

“Our vic. When I first saw him, I got a feeling I had seen him on the street, maybe. There was something familiar about him, but I just can’t put my finger on it.” She rolled over to face him, propping her head up her hand. She brushed her free hand down his cheek. “I don’t have a single answer. I can’t stand it.”

“Well, let’s go over what I know about him from the previous investigation. Maybe that will shake something loose.”

“What do you have?” She leaned closer to his face, ready to listen.

They sat in bed wrapped in sheets. DeLuca took notes on a yellow legal pad with a too expensive pen as Moretti told her what he knew in between bites of cold pizza.

DeLuca looked up to see a rogue piece of cheese hanging from his chin. She giggled, leaned over, and wiped it away with the side of her index finger. Moretti reached out and grabbed her hand as she was pulling away. He gently kissed her hand and then licked the cheese clean off her finger with a wink.

“So, you suspected him of being involved in the drug ring, right? Why didn’t you arrest him?”

“We couldn’t find anything on him. He knew a few of the ring members, but there was never solid evidence against him. We ran credit cards and banking checks and talked with everyone we could find who knew him, you know, the whole deal, and we didn’t find a single thing on him. He seemed clean.”

“And once the others were arrested, no one gave him up?”

“Nope. So, we decided to lay low and keep an eye out, just in case there was more to it than we initially found. It’s been quiet until yesterday.”

“Maybe it’s unrelated. A coincidence. He had a habit of running with the wrong people. Who says it’s not an entirely different group of losers?”

“Always a possibility. I want to think it’s related so I can keep working with you.” He leaned over and kissed her, then tossed his phone to the foot of the bed. He reached over and pulled DeLuca close to him. She rolled on top of him, pushed him down into his pillow, glanced to her left to make sure the curtains were closed, and went to work.

KEEP READING

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