

Chapter One

The reflection in the 4x mirror was a familiar one. This time, it was a circular blue and yellow bruise high on Delphine D'Abruzzo's cheekbone. She sighed, picked up her makeup palette, swirled a small brush through peach-colored cream, and dabbed it sparingly on the bluish part of the bruise. Next came a speckle of lavender on the yellowish areas, followed by a neutral concealer that she blended skillfully until the mark virtually disappeared. After years of trial and error, she was a total pro at the color wheel.

After six years of marriage, you'd think she'd have gotten better at predicting Mitch's moods and triggers. Thankfully, this bruise was a lot smaller than most.

Her cell phone rang. Delphine glanced down, briefly considered ignoring it, then answered anyway--she knew delaying the inevitable only made things worse.

"I had to leave early," Mitch said, skipping any greeting.

"I noticed," Delphine replied flatly.

"Yeah, well, I had business to take care of. I left some extra money on the kitchen counter. It's poker night."

"I hadn't forgotten," Delphine said.

"Okay, well, I gotta go. Don't forget stuff for the crab dip," Mitch added.

She dropped her phone on the bathroom counter a little too hard, then picked up her pale pink lip gloss and swiped it across her bottom lip. She hadn't expected an apology for last night's debacle. He never apologized. Eventually he would just show up with some kind of peace offering.

Delphine picked up the envelope of cash that had been keeping her company while she got ready. Stuffing the money into her purse she took one last look in the mirror before heading out.

When Delphine pulled into the driveway with the groceries, she was disappointed to see Mitch's truck already parked there. She'd been hoping to have some time to herself to mentally prepare before his drug buddies descended.

"Hey Mitch," she called as he appeared at the back door, "can you help me with the groceries and beer?"

Mitch walked over with a big smile, slapped her on the ass, and said, "Sure baby," before easily grabbing the three cases of beer and walking back to the house.

Delphine's forced smile faded. He was always in such a good mood on poker days that the evening would be almost tolerable. Almost. She followed him through the back door and into the kitchen, trying to seem upbeat and nonchalant at the same time. She watched Mitch hoist the cartons of beer onto the counter and start loading them into the fridge.

Delphine began unpacking the groceries, and tried not to flinch as he came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist.

"I've got some new guys coming over tonight," he murmured into her ear. "I want you to look your best, baby."

"Who?" Delphine asked.

"Just a couple of newbies we're training up at the company." He kissed her neck.

Delphine knew what that meant: more strangers in her house, no doubt casing the silverware for future reference. No matter, she only had to tough it out for a few more months. A year's worth of savings should be enough to start a new life somewhere far from San Diego.

Delphine turned to face her husband. "Not to worry. I'll be on my best behavior, and I'll wear that new top you got me."

If Mitch caught the pointed reference to his recent "sorry" gift, he didn't show it. He grabbed a beer and walked out of the kitchen, "I'll be in the den."

A couple of hours later, Delphine stood before the mirror, adding the final touches to her makeup. She double-checked that the most recent bruise was expertly concealed, then swept on blush and finished with a matte peach lipstick.

Studying her reflection, Delphine thought she was looking old before her time. She had just turned thirty, and yet the faint lines around her eyes seemed deeper every day, and the ever-present circles made her look perpetually tired.

Delphine never considered herself to be a great beauty, although most people would disagree. She had a mane of dark, glossy hair that fell in natural waves past her shoulders. The near-blackness of it made her pale, almost baby-blue eyes stand out with an ethereal, almost magical quality.

But perhaps Delphine's best feature was her flawless, creamy complexion.

Her mom had preached the benefits of sunscreen while Delphine was barely a teenager, and she had followed the advice with military precision. She rarely sported even a light tan--unusual for a California girl--and never left the house without a liberal dose of high SPF.

Delphine turned to look at herself in the full-length mirror of her walk-in closet. Having been blessed with a high metabolism, she had a slim, but curvy figure. Frowning, Delphine pulled at the neckline of her top, trying to pull more of the fabric across her 32D boobs. She was quite positive Mitch had not intended to buy something this provocative. With his jealous streak, he probably wouldn't like her wearing it in a roomful of men. Delphine was about to reach for something more conservative when she heard the doorbell ring.

"Del!" Mitch bellowed from downstairs. "Get your ass down here! Some of the guys are here already."

"Jesus," she muttered. There was no time to change, because God forbid he had to do anything as menial as opening his own front door.

Delphine hurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She turned the first corner and ran straight into Julian. He grabbed her by the shoulders and steadied her.

"Whoa, Del! You just about ran me over." He smiled.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," she said, stepping back a pace.

"It's okay," he replied. "Nice to see you."

"Hi, Julian," Delphine replied quietly, glancing around to see if anyone had noticed.

Looking up through lowered lashes, Delphine found herself gazing into dark, hazel eyes flecked with gold. They reminded her of the eyes of an arctic fox that Delphine had once seen on a

National Geographic cover. Julian's thick, black hair was swept back from his forehead except for one stray lock that had fallen over his right eyebrow. She suddenly had the urge to reach up and push it back into place. She couldn't help it--she was staring.

“Del, the guys need drinks,” Mitch barked in her ear.

She snapped back to reality, gave Julian a small smile, and moved past him into the kitchen.

The doorbell rang a few more times. Mitch finally played gracious host instead of leaving everything to Delphine. He didn't bother introducing the new trainees, but he made sure to holler at her when another round of drinks or more food was needed.

“Hey, Mitch?” one of the new guys called. “Is it true you were in the Majors?”

The room went quiet. Most everyone knew the story about Mitch's near-miss with an MLB career. In high school, he was so good at 'the great American pastime' that he got a full-ride scholarship to university where he continued to excel. He moved rapidly through the ranks and up into AAA. The “Big Show” was next.

“Almost,” Mitch said. He held his thumb and forefinger a hair apart. “Came this close to the show.”

“What happened?” The trainee asked, clearly unaware this was a bit of a sore subject.

Mitch took a swig of whiskey. “In training camp, some retarded ball boy left a bat lying around. I tripped, busted my knee up. That was all she wrote.”

Delphine held her breath and waited for Mitch to lose his shit on the new guy. Instead, he took another sip.

“Good thing too. I'm making shit tons of money without having to set foot in Cleveland.”

“Or Detroit,” someone in the group added.

“Yeah, or fucking Detroit,” Mitch muttered.

The whole room erupted in laughter and Delphine carried on with her hostess duties.

Cigar smoke hung thick in the air as she refilled glasses, ears straining for useful scraps of conversation among the chatter. Several months ago, Delphine discovered the value of active listening during her rounds. Most snippets were useless, but every now and then she gleaned real tidbits. Poker nights had become her only safe way to piece together the scope of Mitch's drug operations.

There was always a group of guys standing around waiting for their turn at the poker table.

Delphine spotted Julian standing in the corner talking with Marcus Tanner and Celsius Clu—two of Mitch's most trusted enforcers who always seemed to travel as a pair.

One night she overheard them telling Mitch about a beating they'd given to one of their distributors. The distributor claimed he'd been ambushed while delivering product to his dealers in San Diego and that half his supply had been taken. Of course, nobody believed him because who would go to all the trouble of setting up an ambush and only take half the product? He ended up with a broken leg, broken collarbone, and broken nose for trying to cheat Mitch. He escaped worse only because Mitch had known him since kindergarten. For all his brutality, Mitch could still be sentimental when it suited him.

Marcus was tall and handsome, a Texan with a stylish Van Dyke beard whose looks always reminded Delphine of Denzel Washington in *Training Day*. He was smart, and brutally clinical when it came to carrying out his duties. He was single, and the only thing Delphine could sense from a personal nature, is that he was an animal lover; something they had in common.

To Delphine, Marcus stood out as someone who was a bit of an oxymoron. On one hand, he was apparently a surgeon when it came to doling out barbarous punishment to Mitch's subordinates, but then he'd volunteer to walk dogs at the shelter on his time off.

Celsius was Marcus's shorter, solidly built Latino counterpart. He was born in Mexico and brought to San Diego by his mother when he was still a small child. Whatever he lacked in height, Celsius more than made up for with spotless manners and impeccable taste in quiet, luxury clothing. From what Delphine had pieced together, he was a weapons expert, though not the brains of any operation.

The three men stopped talking when Delphine approached. In the background, poker chips clattered as they hit the table, and Mitch yelled, "I call! Now show me what you got!"

"Anything I can get for you?" Delphine asked quietly.

Julian smiled at her, "I can help myself, but thanks for asking."

Delphine managed to smile back. "Marcus? Celsius?"

"I would kill for some more of that crab dip, missus," Marcus replied.

"I wouldn't mind a beer, if it isn't too much trouble," Celsius chimed in.

Delphine nodded, and started towards the kitchen.

"I'll give you a hand," Julian offered, leaving the group to follow her.

Nobody noticed Mitch staring after them as Delphine and Julian left the room.

Once they were in the kitchen, Delphine turned quickly, then lowered her eyes. "You don't have to help. I can manage."

“I know you can,” Julian said softly. “I just wanted to see if you’re okay,”

“What do you mean? Of course I’m okay,” Delphine answered, a little crisply--worried Mitch might catch them talking.

Julian took a step closer, and looked into her eyes before his gaze drifted to her cheek. “I think you may want to go and touch up your make-up,” he said softly, before picking up a tray of crab dip and crackers, and leaving.

“Shit!” Delphine exclaimed under her breath before running up the stairs to touch up the bruise. She suspected that all of Mitch’s men knew how he treated her, but still, she didn’t want to incur his wrath by being blatantly obvious about it.

At 2:45 a.m. the party broke up after the last pot was claimed, and Delphine was about to start the process of cleaning up. Getting up for work in the morning was going to be brutal, she thought, but Mitch hated it when the kitchen was messy.

Mitch sauntered into the kitchen and put one arm on either side of Delphine as she leaned against the counter, effectively pinning her to the spot. She said nothing, but secretly hoped that whatever he had in mind wouldn’t take too long. Mitch reached up with one hand and softly rubbed her bottom lip with his thumb.

“You have the most gorgeous lips, baby,” he purred. “I wanted to tell you how much I like this color of lipstick you have on.”

Delphine opened her mouth to say thank you. Out of the corner of her eye she saw his fist coming.

The punch snapped her head to the side. Her body pitched against the counter's edge. She tried to grab the smooth granite but only swept several glasses off the surface. They shattered around her as she hit the floor. Her head felt like it was exploding at her temple. Vision darkened; bright shooting stars burst everywhere. She was vaguely aware of Mitch standing over her, gesticulating wildly.

“You fucking slut!” he screamed. “I saw you flashing your tits at everyone! What? You thought I wouldn’t notice? And what the fuck were you doing in here with Julian?”

Delphine could only lay on the tile floor while Mitch stood over her and raged. Dazed from the blow to her temple, she only managed a weakly whispered, “I’m sorry” in the general direction of the floor.

Mitch kicked her in the leg before spewing “You’d better be fucking sorry. Clean up this mess, I’m going to bed.” Mitch spun on his heel and left the kitchen.

Delphine didn’t move. She couldn’t. The pain in her head was overwhelming, and she was sure she was concussed. If only she’d changed the damn top when she’d had the chance. Being late to the party surely wouldn’t have ended like this. It was undeniable, two nights in a row meant Mitch’s attacks were escalating.

Eventually, Delphine was able to push herself into a sitting position. Her vision had mostly returned, but for the first time she felt a little trickle of blood near her temple. Not bothering to wipe it away, she just sat and stared at the shards of broken glass scattered everywhere. *Must have caught those on the way down*, she thought darkly.

Pushing herself carefully to her knees, avoiding as much broken glass as she could, Delphine decided she couldn’t wait the whole year to save enough. She needed to get out now--and she

wouldn't simply disappear quietly. Come hell or high water, she was going to have vengeance on her asshole of a husband.