

LBRIS

We know
books



PHANTOM

H. D. CARLTON

PROLOGUE

“What’s your name?” I ask again breathlessly.

“Ronaldo.”

“Do you want to hurt me, Ronaldo?”

“Never,” he answers. “I only want to cherish you, Genevieve.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I know everything about you. Just as I know you will love me, too.”

CHAPTER 1

THE PHANTOM

March 18, 1944

This will be the third man I've whacked today, and I've run out of patience for their useless begging.

Typically, I leave this job to the enforcers in the Salvatore family, but ending a man's life offers a release unlike any other vice. Cigarettes, whiskey, birds—none of them have the same effect.

It's their damn talking that threatens the peace I find after making a heart stop.

"No, no, wait! Let me explain!" the kid pleads, his nasally voice cracking from terror. It's past midnight. The biting air and thick fog have

settled around us on the Aurora Bridge.

His desperation gets the best of him, and he attempts to land a blow on my left side. The kid is stupid to think I'm not used to men attempting to take advantage of my disability. I slap his fist away easily, then pop him in the nose for daring to try.

Blood spurts from his nostrils, and while he groans and mutters insults beneath his breath, I loop ropes around his ankles and tie them into a tight knot. Sweat and grease mat his overgrown hair to his forehead, and motor oil stains his navy-blue coveralls, now joined by the blood pouring from his nose. By trade, he's a mechanic, but his interests have always been in the Mafia. His mother had ties to a family in New York City, but she refused to raise him in the family business. He's a cugine. For the past few months, he's strived to be made and has pledged his loyalty to the Salvatores.

A pledge he failed to keep.

Which is why I've tied cinder blocks to his feet. If anyone discovers his body, they'll find a bullet through his mouth—a clear message of his crime.

"You're a rat, Worm. You were feeding information to the Baldellis," I remind him dryly. Angelo nicknamed him for his pinched facial features and grating voice. Not sure what his real name is, but I'm sure his obituary in the *Seattle Times* Sunday newspaper will confirm it, assuming he's ever found.

The media will recognize the message and know his death resulted from organized crime. And the public will undoubtedly look at the Salvatores.

Angelo has owned Seattle for the last two decades and been declared the *capo di tutti i capi*. He's allowed other families to conduct business in Seattle with his permission and, of course, with the understanding that he'll receive a cut of their profits.

However, five years ago, Don Manny Baldelli found an issue with that. He claimed his great-grandfather migrated from Sicily to Seattle first, making him the rightful owner of the city. After which, word got out that Manny was withholding Angelo's tribute and dealing guns under the table. Since then, war has broken out, and men are getting burned left and right. Families are choosing sides, and to this day, several bodyguards surround Angelo at any given hour.

It's a dangerous time, and none of us walk the streets without checking over our shoulders.

"You're givin' me a bum rap!" Worm insists vehemently. "I ain't no rat, Ronnie; you know me! The Baldellis forced me in that car, but I didn't tell them nothin'. Please, you have to believe me!"

One of our crew, Lloyd, spotted him getting into a Baldelli car two nights ago, and it just so happens Worm showed up in an expensive suit yesterday with a brand-new Rolex on his wrist. The timing wasn't a coincidence, and the kid made it obvious that the rival family had paid him off.

"Don't call me Ronnie," I clip.

It's the only response I bother to give him. There isn't any point in arguing with the kid—he's already marked. If I'm not the one to ice him, one of Angelo's enforcers will.

Worm opens his mouth again, preparing to plead his case some more, but I take the opportunity to shove my revolver in his mouth and pull the trigger. A car passes, but rather than slowing, they hit the gas.

I make quick work of removing the Rolex from his wrist and stuffing the piece in my pocket. Later, I'll return it to the Baldellis to let them know their investment has been wasted.

Next, I slump Worm over the railing and lift the cement blocks, tossing them over. His body careens over the edge and into the canal, the following splash echoing in the night air.

Finally. Some goddamn peace and quiet.

I roll my neck, relieving the tension gathered in my shoulders. Not only is their begging useless but quite bothersome, too.

Heading back toward my car parked on the other side of the bridge, I whistle the tune to “Just One More Chance” by Bing Crosby.



March 18, 1944

“The numbskull got sauced and lost three hundred dollars to Tommy, but did that stop him from playing another round? Of course not! Now, he owes Tommy five hundred.”

It’s late in the morning, and I’m on my way to report back to Angelo about completing Worm’s contract last night, when Santino’s words catch my attention, his voice ringing out from the family room in Angelo’s estate. Quickly, I detour in his direction, tucking the rucksack with Worm’s bloody Rolex inside in the inner-breast pocket of my trench coat. I take it upon myself to stay informed when it concerns the family. Tommy and Santino are Angelo’s cousins, so if someone owes Tommy money, that means they owe Angelo money.

I round the corner and lean against the doorframe, catching Santino’s attention. He’s sitting on the sofa next to his mother, Kay, who is scoffing at the sap who’s now indebted to the Salvatores. And for quite a bit of money, at that.

“Who’s this guy you’re talkin’ about?” I ask, folding my arms over my chest.

Santino’s only seventeen, and while he’s invested in the family business, he’s also a blabbermouth. Today, it’s a good thing. But one day,

it might get him iced.

If he even comes home from the war after he’s drafted in a few months, that is.

“Name’s John Parsons. He and his detective friend, Frank Williams, been comin’ to the lounge for the past few months. He had the funds at first, but the dip keeps tryin’ to get his money back and can’t pay no more. Tommy challenged them to a game of poker last night, and John couldn’t seem to help himself.”

I raise a brow, surprised Angelo’s cousin was gambling with Frank.

He’s one of the leading homicide detectives in Seattle and is typically the one working on the cases that have resulted from the war between the Mafia families.

He’s also firmly in Angelo’s pocket and is very well-acquainted with the two of us, unbeknownst to John.

“Tommy gambled with the fuzz?”

Santino grins. “No one’s ever called him a genius, Ronnie.”

I’m tempted to bark at him for calling me Ronnie, but learning about this Parsons fella is more important than arguing with a kid about my damn name. I’ve smacked every male member of this family upside the head for calling me that, and every single one suffers from short-term memory loss.

I’ve always hated it. Reminds me of my father, who bore the same name, and even still, it hurts to think about him.

Angelo’s father called me by it as a young boy, and it lived on through his son. The rest of the family follows his lead, despite my misgivings.

“John Parsons,” I state, bringing his attention back to the matter at hand. “Who is he?”

Santino shrugs. “Don’t know. All I know is he didn’t pay Tommy a dime. Promised he’d come up with the money later, but I think we all know how that goes.”

"You know anything else about him?" I question.

"Just that he owns Parsons Manor down by the Sound. He kept goin' on about it while he was draining a bottle of whiskey," Santino responds, annoyance in his tone. "Fella wouldn't shut up."

I push off the doorframe and head back toward the front door of Angelo's estate. I'll report to Angelo later.

"Hey, Ronnie, if you're gonna whack him, let me come, yeah?" he calls after me.

"Santino," Kay admonishes.

I don't bother responding. If I wanted one of Angelo's crew to handle anyone for me, I sure as hell wouldn't enlist a kid to do it.

Soon enough, he'll get plenty of experience pulling a trigger, and he's better off pointing that gun toward a Nazi than someone like John Parsons.

Santino's got bigger things to focus on than the organization. He's got a war to worry about.



March 18, 1944

Parsons Manor is unlike anything I've ever seen before. If it were in downtown Seattle, it'd stick out like a sore thumb.

With the black siding and gargoyles poised on top of the roof, it looks like it came straight out of the *Dracula* film. Houses like these just don't exist in this city, yet here I stand.

Tucking my hands in my trench coat pockets, I stroll through the front yard. An array of colorful flowers bloom in front of the black-painted porch, making the house look like a gloomy storm cloud among

a bright rainbow.

It's an interesting house, and it only strengthens my curiosity about who John Parsons is and why the hell he's residing in a home like this.

My question is answered a moment later when movement in the large bay window catches my eye. A tall, curvy woman sits down in a chair directly in front of the glass. Instantly, I'm riveted by the sight of her. Red stains her full lips, and her black tresses are curled to perfection. She wears a canary-yellow dress, the sleeves drooping down the sides of her arms, the fabric clinging to her curved waist.

My heart stills, like God himself froze time as I watch her peer down at something in her lap. One side of her mouth curls upward the slightest bit. By the way she angles her head and moves her arm, she appears to be writing.

I'm entirely smitten by her, and though there's no way for me to know, I'm confident she is the mastermind behind Parsons Manor.

Hypnotized, I drift toward her, my mind vacuumed into a trance that it can't seem to find its way out of.

I'm not only riveted by her.

I'm possessed by a need to have her.

And she *must* be mine.

As if she heard my internal proclamation, her head lifts, and her gaze locks onto me. It feels like a bolt of lightning strikes through me where I stand. Her mouth parts, shock rounding her eyes at the corners, and though it appears like fear is sinking its claws into her, she's no less vexing.

I came here to learn who John Parsons is, and the only thing I know is that he comes home to the most beautiful woman alive.

And he doesn't deserve it one damn bit.

Her hand drifts over her heart, a chunky gold pen woven through her fingers.

What is she writing? And will she write about me?

I'd love nothing more than to be consumed by her words, no matter how they greet me. Whether it's through those red-stained lips or from her delicate hands. I want to know every facet of her, every centimeter of her—mind, body, and soul.

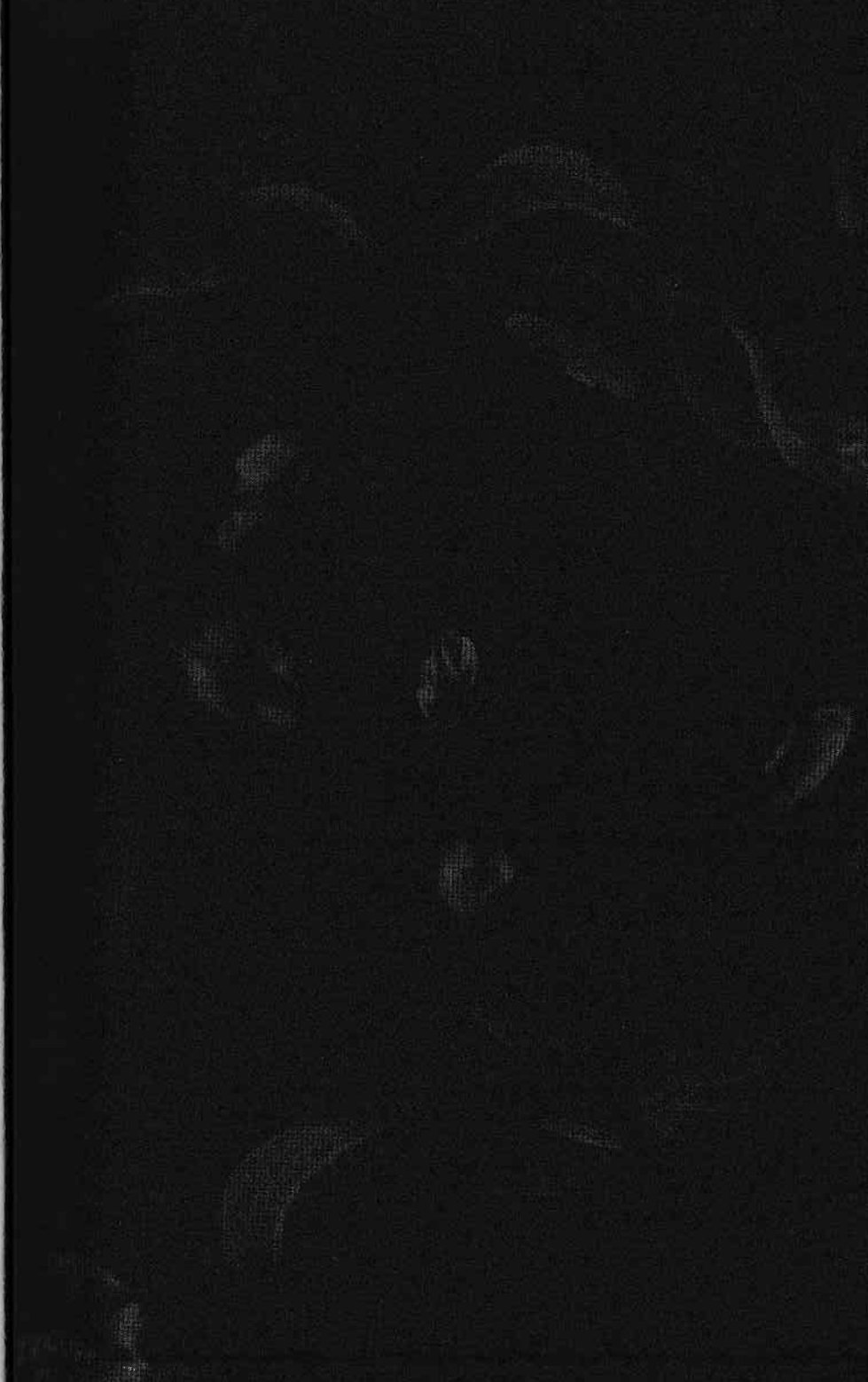
Chest tight, my movement mirrors hers, and my hand drifts over my heart where it clenches almost painfully. It takes monumental effort to draw my gaze away from hers. To take a step away, then turn and slowly retreat down her extensive gravel driveway. The trek to my car parked on the street takes several long minutes, yet I don't remember a single second of it.

She plagues my mind, infecting it like a parasite and overriding any autonomy over myself. My free will is indebted to her, and without her, I am nothing.

I shut the door to my Cadillac and can only sit there and mourn the life of John Parsons's wife.

She will never be the same, as I am not.

Her husband has unintentionally dragged her into a world where she doesn't belong. Yet it is I who will never let her leave.



CHAPTER 2

THE RAVEN

March 19, 1944

Five men have perished in this house.
Some days, I wonder if I'll meet my own tragic end here, too.
I'm sure my husband will be the culprit. With the stress he's
causing me, my heart is destined to give out.

We have no money.

And no other friends or family we can lean on.

We have nothing, and we are alone in our nothingness.

Teardrops stain the piece of paper on my lap from the debt collectors
that proves just how little we have left.