

Worth Dying For

Special Edition



Trin Denise



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Have you ever asked yourself, “Is this worth dying for?” FBI Special Agent Rheyne Sorento must answer that question when she gets the assignment of her life and how she answers, may very well put her in the ground. When three key government informants connected to the Massino crime family turn up dead, all signs point to an internal leak and FBI Deputy Director Kyle Edwards decides to take action. He creates a new covert operation dubbed, Pandora’s Box. His plan is simple: Find the mole and bring down the mob.

With the death of her lover three years earlier, still fresh in her mind, Rheyne jumps at the opportunity to join Pandora’s Box and the chance to escape the painful memories of what used to be.

Using friendship and deceit, Rheyne soon finds herself deeply immersed in the family of Anthony ‘Big Tony’ Castrucci, the man slated to become the next Under Boss. Over the course of several months, a rising body count and countless hours of mind numbing surveillance, Rheyne jeopardizes the mission, her life, and those of her team when she unexpectedly falls in love with Caroline, the mobsters all too beautiful and very straight daughter. If Rheyne thinks things cannot get much worse, she is sadly mistaken when the mole releases her identity, setting Big Tony on a path of destruction like none the bureau has ever known, a path that in the end will produce the unlikeliest hero.



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Second Edition

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Cover Art by Claire Chilton

Editor: Janet Brooks

Structural Editor: Claire Chilton

Dedication



I dedicate this book to all the women who have finally found the woman who is worth dying for.
For those who haven't found her yet, I have faith that you will.

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Chapter 1



Using the cover of darkness, several figures dressed in black moved stealthily around the perimeter of the building. At first glance and to the outside world, the warehouse nestled between groups of smaller buildings conveyed the outward appearance of years of neglect and abandonment. Located just a short distance from Pier 38 along San Francisco Bay, the Danco Steel warehouse provided the perfect location for the covert activities going on inside the building.

Special Agent Carl Stevens took his position next to the entrance door. He inhaled deeply and waited for the last members of his team to take their places atop the four-story roof. He was tired of this. After thirty years of service with the FBI, he should have been the one sitting in a posh cozy office in Washington. He should have been the one directing the raids, not running them. Since the implementation of affirmative action, he had seen agents of color and sexual orientation promoted over him. His time of service and dedication meant nothing to the suits in Washington. Instead, here he was again, running another piss-ant raid. He tried to look on the bright side.

Reputed Mob Boss Capo Anthony *Big Tony* Castrucci owned the warehouse, and his foot soldier, Johnny Scala, had been the one to provide the tip leading to tonight's raid.

Johnny, a long-time FBI informant, had relayed a message to his handler that Castrucci was expecting an important shipment tonight. Johnny didn't know what was coming, but he knew it

was big, and depending on what they found, it might just be enough to get Stevens his promotion. As far as he was concerned, it would be a promotion long overdue.



Inside the warehouse, a flurry of activity was taking place as several heavily armed men unloaded wooden crates of Florida oranges from the back of a tractor-trailer. Nearby, two forklift drivers took turns stacking the crates along the wall closest to Eugene Vega and Johnny. Each man, with a crowbar in hand began prying off the lids. Johnny pushed the straw packing material over to the side, revealing a stack of new military-issued AK 47 rifles.

Eugene carefully removed a military concussion grenade and turned it over in his hand. He held it up for Johnny to see. “Isn’t this the prettiest little baby you ever saw?” he asked.

“Yeah and be careful with it. If that pretty little baby goes off in here, you’ll blow us to smithereens.”

Eugene chuckled and tossed the grenade back into the crate. He turned toward a group of workers standing near the tractor-trailer. “Get the rest of these crates opened and repacked. We’re already behind the deadline, and they go out on the boat tonight no matter what!” he yelled loud enough for everyone in the warehouse to hear.



Outside the building, Stevens raised his hand to the tiny microphone attached to his headgear. He nodded at the agent standing opposite him as he spoke into the microphone. “On my mark: one, two, three, mark!” On his command, the agents on the ground and roof simultaneously launched their bodies through the windows and doors, sending wood and glass flying.

“FBI, Freeze!” Stevens yelled from a crouched position just inside the door.

In a flash, the warehouse erupted in an ear-splitting hailstorm of gunfire. Stevens dove for cover behind a stack of skids. He glanced to his left and saw the agent closest to him stagger, drop to his knees, and fall forward onto the concrete floor.

Stevens flattened himself against the floor and crawled over to the agent. He reached out and grabbed the agent by the wrists. In a half-crouched position, he gave one big tug, and pulled the agent safely behind a stack of oil drums.

He peered around the drum before hurrying back to his original position. He leaned back against the crates and took a deep breath. Using his sleeve, he angrily wiped off the sweat running down his face. He peered around the crate and fired off several rounds, striking two workers.

A glance at the agent told him that it was not good. He forced his mind to focus and made his way to the far side of the skids so he could look out into the warehouse. Through the haze of smoke, he saw Eugene reach into a crate and pull out a grenade. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger—striking Eugene just below the ear.

Eugene stumbled; his body fell forward, covering the crate. He raised his head, turning slightly to look at Stevens. He smiled and pulled the pin.

“Ah, shit!” Stevens yelled as the pin hit the floor. Instinctively, he turned and lunged forward, covering the wounded agent’s body with his own.

He glanced up just as the grenade tore through Eugene’s body like paper, instantly igniting the contents of the crate and those next to it in rapid succession.

“Retreat, retreat,” Stevens yelled into the microphone, though doubtful anyone could hear him through the roaring sound. He slid his arms under the agent’s shoulders and pulled him through the open door just as the side interior wall exploded.

Stevens looked around the parking lot, now littered with chunks of wood and glass. He dropped his head as another explosion blew out the back wall near the dock doors. Through the drone, he could hear the pinging sounds of ammunition igniting inside the building. He wrapped his fingers around the outer edges of the agent’s Kevlar vest and tugged with all his might. His leg muscles strained with each step as he drug the dead weight across the parking lot. Just to his right and less than two feet away, a piece of leg, torn off at the knee with its shoe intact, landed on the ground with a thud. He turned his head to keep from hurling on the spot.

He glanced back at the building, now engulfed in flames. Large billows of smoke poured into the sky, effectively casting an eerie glow over the parking lot and he knew there would be very little to salvage from the building. *It’s a total loss*, he thought as he continued dragging the agent to safety. All around him, the scene was utter chaos. Charred bodies littered the ground and those who were lucky enough to survive the explosions scrambled to get out of the way of falling debris. He involuntarily gagged when he spotted the owner of the missing leg.

Off in the distance, the sound of thumping grew increasingly loud. Stevens looked up to see a helicopter come into view. It circled above the parking lot, its spotlight making large sweeps over the pavement. The pilot swung around and hovered above a group of workers standing with their arms behind their backs, their wrists in handcuffs.

Stevens cradled the agent’s head in his lap and looked at the nametag affixed to the front of his vest. “Ah, Jesus; Rollins, hang in there buddy. You hear me? Where’s a medic? Damn it, get a medic over here now!” he yelled, half sobbing. He removed Rollins’ headgear and knew instantly that he was gone by the fixed position of his eyes. He used his thumb and forefinger to pull down the agent’s eyelids.

Stevens got to his feet, jerked his headgear off, and slammed it to the ground. He looked around the parking lot. He shook his head in disgust. It never ceased to amaze him how quickly reporters arrived on scene. Half the time, they were there before the ambulance. He watched them set up their equipment as fast as they could. He knew each one wanted to be the first with the latest breaking story and it made him sick.

His attention turned to a young woman talking with a uniformed officer. She was dressed in a skirt that was too short for his taste. They turned and looked at Stevens and then she, along with her camera operator, started across the parking lot toward him.

“Agent Stevens, can you confirm that an anonymous tip led to the raid on this warehouse tonight?” she asked, cramming the microphone in his face.

“No comment.”

Undeterred by his brusqueness, she asked, “Is it also true that this building is tied to Mob Boss Anthony Castrucci?”

“I said no comment,” he snarled and brushed her aside with his arm. He walked over to two uniformed officers chatting next to one of the news vans and stopped in front of them. “Do you two think you can get these God damn reporters back behind the lines?” He clenched his fists so tight that his nails were digging into his palms.

Chapter 2



Johnny Scala sat with his hands tied behind his back, his body shaking uncontrollably against the rickety wooden chair. He looked around the dingy, windowless room, and tried to remember how long he had been there. It could have been as short as one hour or as long as ten hours. He couldn't remember.

Sonny Valachi grabbed Johnny's hair. He snapped his head back, causing Johnny to groan unconsciously.

Johnny's eyes darted fearfully back and forth between the two men. It had been a few weeks since the warehouse explosion, and he had made a grave mistake in thinking he was in the clear. He couldn't have been more wrong, and he knew there was no way out. He was going to die—period! It was the La Cosa Nostra way of life. He broke the number one rule. He broke Omerta—the vow of silence.

Big Tony knelt down in front of him. He reached up and patted Johnny on the cheek. His voice was low, controlled, and tinged with the slightest Italian accent. "What's the most important thing to me, Johnny? I'll tell ya. It's loyalty. Fucking loyalty." He stood upright. His six-foot-two-inch frame towered over Johnny.

"I . . . I am loyal to you, Mr. Castrucci," Johnny said, his voice quivering with fear.

With well-manicured hands, Big Tony slid his hands down the front of his tailored jacket. He clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. "I treated you like my own son and this is how you repay me?"

"I swear, Mr. Castrucci, I would never betray you," Johnny protested as tears ran down his bloody cheeks.

Sonny leaned against the wall and laced his arms across his chest. He tried to remember how many times he had seen grown men cry and beg for their lives. *Too many times to count*, he thought as he watched Big Tony pace back and forth in front of Johnny.

Big Tony stopped and leaned forward. He brought his face within an inch of Johnny's. "Don't lie to me, you little cocksucker!" he yelled in Italian, all niceties gone.

With a move quicker than Sonny thought possible, Big Tony slammed his fist into Johnny's mouth. The impact sent blood spewing against the wall.

Johnny coughed and spit his front tooth out. His head dropped against his chest, his eyes closing as he drifted in and out of consciousness. He wished he could do it all over again. He thought about that night four weeks ago and remembered how he felt standing in the warehouse with Eugene. He had been on edge. He shouldn't have done it. If only he could take it all back.

Big Tony's voice snapped him from his thoughts. "What do we do with rats? Huh, Johnny, what do we do?" he calmly asked. It was a question that Johnny undeniably knew the answer too.

Sonny, unable to control himself, doubled over with laughter. He pointed at Johnny's crotch. "The little shithead pissed his pants." He continued to laugh as the dark spot spread rapidly across the front of Johnny's jeans.

"I need to know what else you told them, Johnny."

Johnny shook his head vehemently back and forth. "I swear, I didn't tell 'em anything."

Big Tony ran his fingers through his hair. He looked at Johnny. It was crucial that he know just how much damage had been done. He smiled. “That’s not what I heard, Johnny. I heard you had plenty to say. I want the fucking truth. If you tell me everything, I’ll think about giving you a pass. I’m not promising anything, but I just might be inclined to cut you a break, but that solely depends on how truthful you are.” He watched Johnny’s facial expression begin to change. He almost had him.

“Please, Mr. Castrucci, please!” he begged. “I only told about the shipment at Danco. That’s all, I swear!”

Big Tony looked at Johnny with dark, cold, and unfeeling eyes. He took a couple steps back, turned and nodded to Sonny before turning back to Johnny. “Thank you, Johnny,” he said casually.

Sonny pushed away from the wall and walked over to Johnny.

Johnny sobbed loudly as he watched Sonny reach inside his jacket pocket, remove a semiautomatic, and then slowly screw on a silencer.

Very calmly and without any emotion whatsoever, Sonny pulled the trigger. The gun made a swoosh sound as the bullet—along with pieces of Johnny’s brain—exploded out the side of his head. With the same calmness, Sonny pulled a knife from his pocket and clicked the blade in place. He pried Johnny’s mouth open and pulled out his tongue. With a flick of his wrist, he sliced it off. He pulled Johnny’s shirt pocket open and dropped it in.

Chapter 3



A knock on the door caused FBI Assistant Deputy Director Kyle Edwards to look up from the stack of papers on his desk.

“Come in,” he said and closed the cover on the top file.

Ron Astor pushed the door open. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I have the documents you asked for.”

“No bother at all. Please have a seat,” Edwards said, motioning toward the chair. He took the folder from Ron’s hand and laid it down on the desk.

“How are you doing, Ron?”

“Some days are better than others.”

“How’s Lynn?”

Ron shook his head. “Not too good. Six months, maybe a year at the most.”

“I’m so sorry, Ron. If there’s anything I can do, just let me know,” Edwards said with sincerity.

“Thank you. I appreciate it more than you know.”

Edwards looked at him thoughtfully. “Are you sure that you want to be included in this? Because if not—”

Ron held his hand up to stop him. “Really, Kyle, I’m fine and yes, I’m sure. Right now, this job is the only thing helping me keep my sanity.”

Edwards nodded and opened the folder. “Okay, Ron. I won’t ask again, but I do have one other question I’d like your opinion on.”

“Sure.”

“What do you think about Agent Sorento? Do you think I made the right decision?”

“I think she’s the perfect candidate for this assignment,” Ron answered without hesitation.

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that, because I think she is, too.” Edwards glanced down at the papers in the folder. “Is there anything in here I should be worried about?”

Ron shook his head. “Not really. I did an extensive check on their bank accounts, credit ratings, past job reviews, just like you asked, and anything else I could find. They’re all clean. The only thing worth noting is Artie’s wife, Alice. She’s an alcoholic, which I’m sure you already know.”

Edwards nodded. “Yeah, I’ve heard the rumors.” He leaned back in the chair and laced his hands behind his head. “Do you think it’s enough to scrap him?”

Ron shook his head. “Maybe Artie needs his job as much I do right now.”

“All right, but keep an eye on his situation and let me know if you change your mind about him.”

“I will.”

“Okay, how about our other matter?”

“I finally received the corresponding data tied to the informants and let me tell you, we have tons. It won’t be an easy task.”

Edwards massaged the sides of his temples with his index fingers. “What’s your plan of action?” he asked.

“I’ve written a new program to search for a common link between the men.”

“And how long will it take before you have answers?”

“Days, maybe weeks,” Ron answered.

Edwards frowned. “That long?”

Ron nodded. “Like I said, we have tons of data. Most of the informants have been on our payroll for years.” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs at the ankle. “I hope you don’t mind, but I expanded our initial blueprint a little.”

“How so?” Edwards asked, his eyebrows rising slightly.

“I decided to include suspicious deaths as part of the equation. So far, I have four accidentals spanning two decades. Each one had been an informant with the bureau at one time or another. Two died as a result of a car accident, one from electrocution, and the other from a home invasion gone bad.”

“Okay, Ron. I don’t care how small it appears. You keep me posted on anything relevant you find.”

“You got it,” Ron said as he stood to leave.

Edwards glanced at his watch. “I’ll see you in twenty.”

As soon as Ron left, Edwards jerked off his tie and tossed it on top of the paper-strewn desk. Normally, he didn’t drink while on duty, but decided to make an exception. He grabbed a beer from the small fridge and twisted off the cap. He walked over to the window and took a long swig. He looked out onto Pennsylvania Avenue and his thoughts turned to the meeting he would be having in twenty minutes.

He was determined not to lose a member of his team on this operation. The Director had given him full control, allowing him to handpick each member of his team. He should be excited to get the chance to nail Castrucci, to put a huge dent in the armor of the Mafia operating in the California region. Bringing down Massino's family would no doubt cause a ripple effect on the New York bunch. However, for some reason he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in his gut. He had learned to trust his gut early on in the first days of his illustrious career with the FBI, and so far, it had served him well.

He had applied for a job with the bureau and to his delight was accepted at the tender age of twenty-two, and he was one of the first African-American men to graduate from the academy. Now, at the age of fifty-five, he had been with the bureau for thirty-two years.

He was promoted to Executive Assistant Deputy Director three years ago and was now in charge of the Organized Crime Division. Normally, someone in his position wouldn't be directly involved in an undercover assignment, but this case was different. He knew all the players, and the possibility of an internal leak made his decision that much easier. He was confident it wasn't any of the members he picked for this operation, and that's why he chose them.

He glanced at the personnel folders on his desk and sat down in the leather chair, propped his feet up on the desk, took another swig of beer, and opened the top folder. On the inside flap, a paperclip held a photo of Rheyne.

She stood five-foot-nine with black, shoulder-length hair, piercing grey eyes, and mocha-colored skin. He laughed out loud as he thought of the words often used to describe her by men in the department—probably a couple of women, too. 'She's built like a brick shit house' pretty much summed it up. He never understood where the expression came from and reasoned that a brick shit house was superior to a wooden one.

He admitted to himself that Rheyne's looks had played a small part in him choosing her for this assignment, but it wasn't the only factor. She was Italian and spoke the language fluently, which was an added benefit, but more importantly, her record within the bureau spoke for itself. Over the past fifteen years, she had received several commendations for her work in the field, including one for bravery when she took a bullet in the leg while shielding a child with her body during a pornography sting.

With all that factored in, the recommendation by Special Agent Laura Forrest had more than cemented his decision and an easy one it had been. He knew that both women were lesbians and didn't care. As a black man in a white man's world, he had dealt with discrimination in one form or another all his life, and he would be damned if he would tolerate it by anyone under his command.

He grabbed another beer from the fridge and tossed the cap in the wastebasket. Ah, Forrest, what a firecracker—what she lacked in size, she more than made up for with heart and attitude. After graduating from the academy, she had been assigned to the Forensic Unit in Quantico, Virginia and reported directly to him. That was over twenty years ago.

In addition to her duties at Quantico, she was also responsible for the FBI recruiting at the local colleges. To this day, every person she recruited had excelled and prospered in the bureau. Over the years, they had become very good friends. Edwards trusted her judgment, but more importantly, he trusted her with his life.

He picked up the next folder and opened it. He looked at the photo of Special Agent Carl Stevens and laughed. Stevens looked just like Herman Munster. The resemblance was so uncanny they could have been brothers.

Stevens had been with the bureau as long as Edwards had. They were in the same graduating class, their wives were friends, and their children attended the same schools. He felt bad for Stevens when he was promoted over him but Stevens took it like a man—took it in stride. He reminded Edwards of a duck when it came to dealing with life—he just let everything roll off his back without giving it another thought. It was a trait that he had always admired about Stevens and secretly wished that he himself could let things go as easily.

Stevens was also a good friend, and he knew he could always count on him. He had chosen Stevens for this assignment because no one in the bureau, next to the Deputy Director, knew more about the Mob and its inner workings than Stevens did.

He pushed the folder aside, picked up the next one, and flipped open the cover. Arthur Janson was an odd sort, to say the least and he laughed as he looked at the picture of Artie, and the signature red and white bow tie the bespectacled little man wore. He wondered how many times Artie had been beaten up in school.

He was your typical nerd—complete with pocket protector but Artie was a good agent. He had been with the bureau for almost as long as he and Stevens and spent most of his career in counter-terrorism, with the last two years in drugs. He thought about what Ron had said earlier regarding Alice and hoped that Artie would be all right.

He picked up the last folder and glanced at Ron's photo. The man had been through a lot in the past year and a half. He didn't know how Ron was getting through it all and wondered how he himself would deal with the news if he were told his wife; Tess had less than a year to live. He shuddered at the thought.

Like everyone else on the team, Ron joined the bureau right after college. He started his career in Civil Rights where he worked for almost ten years before transferring to Investigative Support to become the Sr. Programmer. Besides Edwards, Ron was the only African-American on the team. If anyone could find the leak and a possible common denominator between the deaths of the bureau's informants, it was Ron.

He glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed. He knew Tess would be waiting up for him when he got home, just as she always did. He thought about his wife for a moment and smiled. They had an anniversary coming up next month—it would be thirty-five years on the fourteenth. As far as he was concerned, Tess was the most amazing woman on the planet. She knew what the life of an active FBI agent entailed and not once had she ever made demands on his time or questioned his loyalty to the bureau. No matter how late or how long his job kept him away, she was always there waiting, always loving him. He glanced at the clock again and realized it was almost time for the meeting. He grabbed his tie off the desk and headed out the door.



Artie Janson stepped out of the conference room and walked briskly down the hallway. He hit the men's bathroom door, knocking it into the wall with a bang. He jerked his cell phone off his belt and walked into the open area lined with urinals and looked around. He listened for sounds coming from the stalls. Confident he was alone; he hit the redial button and waited for the voice to answer on the other end.

“Damn it to hell, Alice! What've I told you about calling me on the job?” he yelled. “I don't care what your reason is. You don't call me at work.” He brought his foot back and kicked one of the bathroom stall doors. “Are you drunk? Of course, you are. Why I would think otherwise is beyond me. You're going to put us in the poor house. Do you hear me? Do you hear me, Alice?”

The hard expression on his face softened. “Now don’t cry. You know I hate it when you cry. I’ll be home in a couple hours. We can talk then, okay?” He slammed the lid shut on the phone and clipped it back on his belt. He looked up with a startled expression when Stevens stepped out of the last stall. “I’m sorry, Carl. I thought I was alone,” he said with a nervous laugh.

Stevens walked over to the sink and washed his hands. “It’s all right, Artie, no big deal,” he said as he ripped a towel off the roll.

Artie leaned against the sink and shook his head.

“Are you okay?” Stevens asked.

Artie continued to shake his head. “It’s Alice. I don’t know what to do about her.”

“What’ya mean?”

“Come on. You heard the conversation. I just don’t know how much more I can take.”

Stevens laid his hand on Artie’s shoulder, giving him an affectionate squeeze. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I don’t think so, but thanks.”

“Are you sure?”

Artie nodded. “Just do me a favor and please keep this to yourself. I don’t want Edwards or the others knowing about my problems.”

Stevens looked at him thoughtfully. “Artie, we’ve been friends for how long—fifteen, twenty years?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Then you should know by now that I won’t say anything to anyone. Your business is just that—yours.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

Stevens opened the bathroom door. “Come on now, we don’t wanna be late.”



Edwards glanced around the room. His eyes stopped at the two empty seats. “Does anyone know where—” Before he could finish, the door opened and Stevens, followed by Artie, walked into the room. Edwards gave them a disapproving look. “It’s nice of you two to grace us with your presence.”

“Sorry, bathroom emergency,” Stevens said and sat down in the seat next to Laura. Artie took the seat opposite Rheyne.

“I assume everyone knows each other?” Edwards asked. Without waiting for an answer, he flipped off the lights. “Then let’s get down to business.”

It took several minutes for Rheyne’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. She looked at the photos up on the screen positioned near the far end of the room and felt excitement racing through her veins. Her heart was pounding so hard in her chest, she was sure the others in the room could hear it. She still couldn’t believe she was sitting with her new team in the Strategic Information Operations Center command room, commonly referred to as Sigh-ock.

She turned her attention to the next image on screen. They were looking at a detailed outline of the Massino Crime Family tree. The tree had so many branch shoot-offs, it took up the entire length of the document. Sitting at the top of the tree was the big boss himself, Carlos Massino, followed by the name and title of every known member of his family.

Edwards cleared his throat and displayed a picture of Johnny Scala on the screen. “Until last week, Johnny Scala had been a Castrucci foot soldier.”

He used a handheld remote to bring up two more photos. The first showed a car with the trunk lid open, the second showed a close up view inside the trunk where Johnny Scala laid dead, his body curled in the fetal position, his hands tied behind his back.

“As you can see, his body was discovered in the trunk of his car in the Danco Steel parking lot.” He paused to take a drink of water. “He took a bullet to the head, and the coroner found his tongue in his pocket. Normally, we would chalk this one up to the mob cleansing one of its own. However, Mr. Scala had been one of our top informants for the past sixteen months.”

He brought up two more photos. The first looked very similar to Scala, the bullet riddled body also in the trunk of a car. The second one showed police officers pulling a body from the water. The man’s face was beyond hideous; his body was badly decomposed, bloated, and unrecognizable. “These two were also ours. Scala’s the third informant to turn up dead in the last nine months.”

Stevens shifted in his seat and turned to look at Edwards. “Maybe it’s just coincidence.”

“I don’t think so,” Edwards said, shaking his head.

“You think we have a leak, don’t you?” Laura asked the question everyone was thinking.

Edwards thought for a moment before answering. “Yes, I do. It seems like the only logical explanation.” He brought up several more photos in succession. They showed different views of a large funeral gathered outside a Catholic Church.

Rheyne recognized some of the faces.

“What you’re looking at is surveillance photos taken two weeks ago at the current Under Boss, Salvatore Anastasia’s funeral.” The next photo was of Carlos Massino himself. He looked regal in his grey, custom-tailored suit. He appeared to be around sixty-year’s old, give or take a few, with slicked back white hair. He had Mob written all over him, and ironically, he reminded Rheyne of her grandfather.

“The man you’re looking at is Mafia Don Carlos, head of the Massino crime family. He was a no-show at Anastasia’s funeral and that has me deeply concerned.”

“Are you worried about who the next Under Boss will be?” Rheyne asked, puzzled by his statement.

Edwards took a seat by the projector and laced his fingers on top of his head. “We’re pretty sure we know who the next Under Boss will be. I’m concerned about the backlash that’s sure to come because Massino chose not to attend the funeral.”

Rheyne shook her head. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Stevens nodded in agreement with Edwards. He turned in his seat to look at Rheyne. “According to the La Cosa Nostra code, his lack of attendance showed the ultimate disrespect toward his Under Boss, and word on the street says Massino’s right-hand man, Roberto Failla, is getting the nod for the position over Castrucci.”

Edwards looked at Rheyne. “What’s strange is that Massino gave no explanation for not being at the funeral, and from our experience, we know when a boss does not attend a funeral, he’s afraid of one or two things: the first being a fear of arrest, the second being a fear of death. Massino had neither.”

Stevens leaned back in his seat. “Our sources in L.A. are reporting that several members of his family, including some on the Commission, are upset and want something done about it. The same source also stated Massino is highly irritated with the rash of killings within the family, especially on Castrucci’s crew. Castrucci, on the other hand, is making matters worse by rationalizing the deaths. He says he’s keeping peace within the rank and file.”

Laura made a disgusted sound in her throat. “What a freaking joke. Killing for peace is like fucking for chastity,” she blurted out.

Rheyne busted out laughing, and so did everyone else in the room.

“Laura, I must admit, I’ve never heard anyone put it so elegantly,” Artie said between fits of laughter.

“I’m glad I could amuse you all, but I’m dead serious. I mean, just think about. Look at the Middle East for example, and all the senseless killings that go on there every single day. They kill in the name of peace, and every one of us in this room knows it will never happen.” Laura’s expression was stern and it brought the seriousness of it all into perspective.

“You’re right, Laura. It’ll never happen, at least not in our lifetime,” Edwards agreed. He took a sip of water and looked back at the screen. “Okay, back to the business at hand.” He brought up the next photo, showing four men standing outside Bella’s Café in downtown Los Angeles. Carlos Massino and Anthony Castrucci were standing to the left with Salvatore Anastasia and Roberto Failla to the right. They reeked of power and money, dressed in dark, tailored suits accented with flashy jewelry.

If Rheyne had to describe them, she would say that Anastasia reminded her of Fred Thompson, the actor-turned-Senator from the TV show *Law and Order*. Roberto was the total opposite: bald, short, stocky, and somewhat nerdy-looking with military-issued black-rimmed glasses.

Big Tony, however, was the dapper Don. He towered over the other men. Immaculately dressed in a dark blue pinstripe suit, he was quite handsome in a rugged sort of way. All of the men looked like your average Joe’s, but appearances could be deceiving and in this case, they were deadly.

Edwards continued to describe the men in the picture. “As you can see, the man standing between Massino and Anastasia is Capo, Anthony *Big Tony* Castrucci. For the last seven years, Anastasia had been Castrucci’s mentor.” He stopped to take a drink of water before continuing. “It was expected that Castrucci would automatically become the new Under Boss when Anastasia died, but we now know that isn’t going to happen. The man standing on his right is Roberto Failla. He *will* be the next Under Boss.” He paused to look at the papers in front of him. “Right now, our biggest concern is with Castrucci. He’s fueling a very large fire within the family and he’s made it very clear that he’s not going to stand idly by while they shut him out. We think he’s planning to assassinate Massino and Failla for control.”

“Doesn’t he need the approval from the Commission to carry it out?” Rheyne asked.

“We think he’s already begun seeking it,” Edwards said as he brought up another photo of two men standing outside Anastasia’s funeral. The man on the left was anything but handsome. His thick black moustache and goatee did very little to hide the deep pockmarks etched in his face. Edwards used a laser pointer to identify the men, starting with the goateed man.

“This is Jay *Marbles* Farino, Castrucci’s hitman. Farino is definitely not the smartest guy on the planet, and ignorantly leaves his calling card with the bodies, a single marble. We think he’s responsible for more than twenty hits, but we can’t prove it. Standing next to him is Sonny *Pretty Boy* Valachi, Castrucci’s trusted right-hand man. He currently oversees several different crews of soldiers working in the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles. Some of their business is legit, some not.”

He brought up several more photos showing aerial shots of a very large and lavish estate.

Stevens let out a loud cat whistle. “Who says crime doesn’t pay?”

The large sand-colored mansion was surrounded by large, black, wrought iron fencing that stretched out toward the ocean and ended with a fabulous view overlooking the bay. It was breathtaking, if you could ignore the heavily armed men patrolling the grounds.

The house was approximately two-hundred feet across at the front with a large covered entryway porch leading to the edge of the circular driveway. The grounds in the front of the house and surrounding areas were completely covered with lush flowers of every kind imaginable.

Rheyna surmised that the upkeep for the landscaping alone probably cost more than she made in a year. The front part of the house was deceiving, and from the driveway, it appeared to be a single story ranch, but halfway toward the back, the building raised another two floors.

This meant that the overall size of the house was three stories high. The rear of the house was unbelievable. Set in a horseshoe design, the ends stretched out across a large cement patio. Each side was identical, with balconies leading out from the upstairs windows. Directly in the middle, the house recessed into the shape of a Greek Coliseum.

Rheyna looked at the photo, thinking it reminded her of something she had seen before. She thought for a moment and then it dawned on her—the back of the house looked just like the front of the White House. It was identical, right down to the last detail.

At the edge of the patio, knee-high concrete pillar railings separated it from the large L-shaped in-ground pool. The pool was something to behold all by itself. Standing at least fifteen feet tall and covering the entire small part of the ‘L’ was a gorgeous waterfall constructed from large slate-shaped rocks. Sitting to the right and less than forty feet away, was a small guesthouse.

Edwards continued to talk as he walked around the table. He laid a manila folder down in front of Rheyna. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen, that brings us to Operation Pandora’s Box.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down between Laura and Rheyna. “You five, me, and the Deputy Director will be the only ones with access to this information.” He shuffled through the paperwork in front of him and handed a set of documents to the other agents. “We’ve decided to change directions and go directly after Castrucci. He’s not as smart as Massino, and we’re hoping that his arrogance will turn out to be his Achilles heel.”

He brought up another photo. This one was of two women. Both had blonde hair and blue eyes. The older woman was attractive, but the younger one was insanely gorgeous. “The one on the left is Terasa, Castrucci’s wife. The other is their only child, Caroline,” Edwards said as he walked over and flipped on the light switch.

It took a few seconds for Rheyna’s eyes to adjust, but it didn’t seem to faze Edwards a bit.

“Rheyna, how’re your photography skills?” he asked.

The question caught her totally off guard. “Uh ... a little rusty, I haven’t done much since college.”

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. “Well, you’d better brush up. In two weeks, you will be the photographer shooting the family portrait at the Castrucci estate. While there, I want you to observe the inside of the house and the grounds. The one thing we’ve never been able to do is get inside. If you get a chance to plant wires, do it. More importantly, I want you to use whatever means you deem necessary to help bring this son of a bitch down.”

Rheyna knew from past stings that the estate was guarded around the clock. Castrucci constantly had men doing electronic sweeps in the house and on the phone lines. Getting into Fort Knox just might be easier.

Edwards looked directly at Rheyne. "From the Intel we've gathered so far, Castrucci's nephew Rico, and Massino's granddaughter, Melinda Belotti, are planning their wedding at the estate. This in and of itself is not a big deal, except the informant indicated that the wedding is just a smoke screen for a meeting of the Commission." He glanced around the room as he continued to speak. "As you are all aware, there hasn't been a full Commission meeting since the one in Staten Island in 1984. What I'm hoping, Rheyne is that they like you and your work well enough to consider hiring you for the photo job."

"When do I leave?" Rheyne asked.

"Tomorrow morning at six and Laura will leave tomorrow evening. The rest of us, except for Ron, will be there by the end of the week."

He nodded toward the folder in her hands. "All the information you need is in there, along with photos of the main players. Commit it to memory and when you're satisfied, destroy the file. From here on out, your only contact will be with Laura or me." He looked around the room and smiled, showing a full set of straight, white teeth. "All right then. If everything goes as planned, starting tonight, and as far as the Massino crime family is concerned, Rheyne Sorento does not exist."



The sheet bobbed up and down in rapid succession. Big Tony closed his eyes and leaned against the headboard. He moaned, his body shaking from the orgasm.

"Jesus, Charlene. You ... are so damned good at that."

He held up the sheet and peered down at the woman between his legs.

She sighed heavily and laid her head on his stomach.

"Come here, sweetheart," he said, stroking her long, bleached blonde hair with his hand.

She raised her head to look at him and then crawled out from under the sheet. She climbed over his legs and flopped down next to him on the bed.

"Hand me my cigar, honey."

Charlene picked up the half-smoked butt from the ashtray and handed it to him before grabbing a cigarette of her own and lighting it.

He watched her oversized tits rise and fall as she took a deep drag from the cigarette. With her head tilted back, she blew the large plume of smoke toward the ceiling. She laid the cigarette in the ashtray and reached down to pick her purse up from the floor. She unzipped a side pocket and pulled out a tube of lipstick and a small compact. She snapped open the lid and smeared the bright cherry red cream across her lips.

"Why you need that shit for?" he asked.

She grabbed a wad of gum stuck to the nightstand and tossed it in her mouth. Her lips slowly turned upward into a broad smile. "Because you rubbed it all off," she answered, sliding her hand under the covers to stroke him.

He grabbed her hand to stop the motion. "No more, Charlene. I need to get going."

The smile left Charlene's face. "Ah Tony, you just got here."

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and turned to look at her. "I got places to go, people to see," he said.

She slid up behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She laid her head on his shoulder. "But I haven't seen you for over two weeks."

He disentangled her arms. “Stop whining. You know I don’t like it when you whine.” He picked up his trousers and pulled them over his legs. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and get me something to drink?”

She reluctantly got out of the bed and threw a robe on while he continued to get dressed. “Uh, Tony, I got something I been meanin’ ta tell ya,” she said with a nervous laugh as she poured him a glass of scotch.

He came over and took the drink from her hand. “Yeah, well, what is it?” He watched her pour herself a glass of orange juice. “What the hell you drinking juice for? You on the wagon again?” he asked, half smirking.

“That’s what I been meanin’ ta talk to ya about.”

“Well, spit it out. I don’t have all damn night.”

“Um ... um, I don’t know how to say this.”

“Just fucking say it already,” he said impatiently.

Charlene took two steps back, and bumped into a chair. “I’m ... I’m pregnant,” she mumbled.

“You’re what?”

“I’m pregnant, two months pregnant, to be exact.”

“You stupid fucking bitch!” he yelled. He looked at the glass in his hand and then slung it against the wall, shattering it to pieces. He turned and grabbed Charlene by the shoulders and shook her. “How could you be so stupid?” he yelled, his voice shaking with rage.

“Please, Tony. It’s not like that,” Charlene protested.

“Please, Tony. It’s not like that,” he mocked. Without warning, his arm shot out, and the back of his hand made a cracking sound as it connected with Charlene’s face.

She screamed and fell back in the chair. “I ... I want to keep the baby!” she yelled back at him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He took a menacing step toward her and brought his hand up to strike her again. She put her hands up in front of her face to block the blow. “Like hell you are. You’re gonna get rid of it. That’s what you’re gonna do.”

“But Tony, it’s a living, breathing being growin’ inside me. Can’t I keep it?” she pleaded.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if it’s the King of Egypt.” He grabbed her hair and yanked her effortlessly out of the chair. He brought his face within an inch of hers. “You listen to me, Charlene, and you listen real well, because I’m only gonna say it once. You get rid of this thing, or ... I’ll get rid of you!” he snarled, flinging her back down in the chair.

He grabbed his coat off the back of the sofa and jerked the front door open. “I meant what I said, Charlene,” he said over his shoulder and then slammed the door shut behind him.



Sonny looked up from the magazine as the back limo door opened. Big Tony slid in the seat across from him.

“You all right, Tony?” he asked, frowning.

“Just take care of her and do it soon,” Big Tony answered, slamming the door shut with enough force to rock the car.



Rheyne opened the refrigerator door and looked inside. “What do you want to drink?” she yelled.

“I’ll have a beer,” Laura yelled back from the bathroom down the hall.

Rheyne grabbed two bottles, twisted off the caps, and tossed them in the wastebasket next to the stove. She looked at the assignment folder lying on the counter and felt a twinge of excitement. Although she knew the assignment could be dangerous, maybe even deadly, she was so looking forward to it.

The thought of getting out of Washington and moving to a new location was a welcoming thought. For the past three years, she had been safely coasting through life, not really living, and this assignment was her chance to start over.

She went into the bedroom and changed into an old pair of sweat pants before grabbing the folder and brown bag filled with cheeseburgers and fries off the counter. She laid the folder on the coffee table and unwrapped one of the burgers. She didn’t realize how hungry she was until she sunk her teeth into it.

As she ate, she looked around the room. Her thoughts turned to Jenny, and how she had traded in the efficiency apartment for the little white house and picket fence. Well not exactly—the house was actually a two-story yellow row house in the 1700 block of Seaton Street near DuPont Circle and the picket fence was only twelve inches tall, and six feet long, counting all four sides. Jenny had used it to enclose a tiny flower garden she had planted in the backyard. Overall, the house was quite small, considering its hefty price tag. Hell, you could fit the whole house inside the Castrucci garage with room to spare.

The decision to purchase it was made six months after the two of them had met, and Jenny had been the love of her life for twelve wonderful years. They were introduced after Jenny had helped Stacie organize a gay fundraiser.

Stacie was Laura’s better half, and the two of them had secretly conspired to fix Rheyne up with Jenny at their annual barbecue. She and Jenny had hit it off immediately, went on their first date shortly thereafter, and were inseparable from that day forward. She laughed aloud as she thought about lesbian dating etiquette. First date was dinner; second date was picking up the U-haul truck.

She lost Jenny to breast cancer three years ago. By the time they discovered the cancer, Jenny was already in the final stage of the disease. She would never forget the day Jenny died; it was the most excruciating pain she had ever felt in her life, and a part of her died that day as well.

She remembered it as if it were yesterday. Jenny had laid her hand on Rheyne’s cheek and said, “I know this will be hard for you, Rheyne, but I want you to promise me you won’t give up on love. Promise me that you will be open to loving someone else. You are the most wonderful woman I’ve ever known, and it’d be a shame for someone else to not know what I have known for all these years.”

Rheyne didn’t know who was crying harder—her or Jenny. With tears running down her cheeks, she had promised. She laid her head across Jenny’s stomach. Jenny had stroked her hair and told her how much she loved her. She told Rheyne that everything would be all right, and then she was gone.

That was three long, hard years ago. After Jenny’s funeral, Rheyne was so devastated she completely lost track of time. The next six months were and still are a haze. She went through life on autopilot. She had taken the obligatory three-day leave of absence for bereavement.

Laura had suggested she take a few weeks, or even a month off. She couldn't do it—she needed to work. It was her only solace. It offered her a temporary reprieve from her thoughts, and it kept her out of the house—Jenny's house and hers.

She was not sure what would have happened if it hadn't been for Laura and Stacie. They each took turns stopping by to look in on her. They made sure she was eating properly and getting enough sleep, but mostly, they stopped by to be her friend. She knew she made Jenny a promise that day and sometimes, she felt guilty because she didn't keep it. She tried at first, went out on a couple of dates, and finally gave up when she realized she was looking for Jenny in those women. It wasn't fair to them or her.

She looked around the room, at the pictures on the wall, and all she saw was Jenny. She hadn't changed anything in the house since Jenny died. Her clothes were still on the hangers in the closet, just as she left them. She also stopped sleeping in their bed. It was just too painful, so eventually, she moved her things into the spare bedroom. On most nights, she slept on the couch, finding comfort in the small consolation of having something familiar up against her back.

Laura dropped down on the couch beside her. "I can't believe you started without me," she said, the sound of her voice jarring Rheyna from her thoughts.

"Huh?"

"Dinner," Laura said as she took a sandwich from the bag.

"Oh, that. Sorry. I guess I'm a little preoccupied."

Laura dipped a fry in a blob of ketchup. "I have no idea why," she teased.

Rheyna finished her sandwich and went over to the fireplace. She busied herself with igniting the logs while Laura continued eating. She stared at the fire, mesmerized by the multicolored flames shooting up toward the flue, each fighting, and straining to drink the last bit of oxygen in the air. She personally thought that curling up on the couch with a book by Karin Kallmaker in front of a roaring fire was the ultimate in relaxation.

When Laura finished eating, Rheyna cleared the trash off the table and opened the folder. "Okay, let's see what we have here," she said and spread the contents out. She put the documents in one pile, photos in another, and the miscellaneous items off to the side.

Taped to the inside cover was a set of keys to her new home, along with a white envelope. She removed the keys and envelope, and laid them to the side. She picked up the set of photos and glanced through them before handing them to Laura. The photos were exact duplicates of the ones they had seen earlier.

Laura looked at the photo of Salvatore Anastasia's funeral and shook her head. "It must have been really bad."

"What?"

Laura tossed the photo down on the table. "The reason Massino skipped the funeral," she answered.

"Yeah, I'd like to know his reasons myself."

"Maybe you'll get a chance to find out."

Laura picked up the photo of Terasa and Caroline and shook her head. "She's just too God damned hot. Women who look that good should be illegal. If I were a few years younger, I'd—"

Rheyna laughed. "If you were younger, you'd what? You're happily married and you're not supposed to have thoughts like that."

"I'm not dead, you know, and I can still dream, whether I'm married or not."

Rheyne laughed at the expression on Laura's face and then snatched the picture out of her hand. She looked at the photo. She was instantly captivated by Caroline's eyes. "I wonder if there's such a thing as being too attractive."

"I don't know. I'm sure it has its perks, especially when you have brains and money to boot. I think I read somewhere that she's a doctor. She have her own practice yet?" Laura asked, reaching across the table to grab several sheets from the stack.

Rheyne rummaged through the documents she set off to the side. She pulled out the one with Caroline's information. "It says she graduated nine months ago and opened her own clinic one month later." For some reason, Caroline being a veterinarian didn't surprise her in the least. If anything, it made Caroline more attractive, if that was even possible.

"Okay, how you wanna do this? Do you want me to just go down the line and explain the terms, or would you just rather read them yourself?" Laura asked.

Rheyne looked at the document in her hand. "I'm pretty comfortable with most of them, but I think you giving me a verbal refresher will be good."

"Okay, next question. You want technical or laymen's terms?"

"I'll take laymen's terms for five hundred, Alex," Rheyne said in a deep voice.

"Very funny," Laura chuckled.

"Funny 'ha ha,' or funny 'queer'?" Rheyne asked.

Laura shoved her, almost knocking her off the couch. "You're not right, but since you asked, funny 'queer'."

"Lay it on me, teach," Rheyne said, pulling herself upright.

"Okay, here is the simplest explanation I can give you. You can sum up the entire organization's hierarchy by comparing it to a corporate business and the United Nations. The Boss, which would be Massino, is the CEO. Next is the Under Boss, who we think will be Failla, and he's the President or Assistant CEO. The Consigliere, that would be Valachi, is the In-House Counsel. The Capo, which would be Castrucci, is the Manager. The Soldiers and Associates are the worker bees—these guys are the nobodies, drug dealers, loan sharks, etc.—and the Picciotto, referred to lovingly as a hitman, is Farino, who we all know as Human Resources," she said with a laugh.

"As for the world famous Commission, they're like the United Nations, with each crime family boss equaling a foreign country. Is that simple enough for you?" she asked as she stood to stretch her legs.

Rheyne nodded. "I think that sums it up pretty well."

"Good. I'm gonna get another beer; you want one?"

"Yeah," Rheyne said as she picked up several documents and glanced through them. She skimmed over the detailed reports and tossed them into a pile.

Laura came back with two beers. She twisted off the caps and handed a bottle to Rheyne.

"Thank you," Rheyne said without taking her eyes off the photos.

Laura was silent as she watched Rheyne systematically go through each one and commit the faces to memory. After several minutes, Rheyne tossed everything into a neat pile.

Laura walked over to the fireplace. She bent down and picked up a piece of wood from the brass log holder, pulled back the fire screen, and tossed it in. She turned to look at Rheyne. "I wish I had that gift of yours."

Rheyne leaned back on the couch and took a long drink from the bottle. "Trust me when I say having a photographic memory isn't all it's cracked up to be. More times than not, you remember things you'd just as soon forget."

Laura eyed her without commenting. There was no need. She knew exactly what Rheyne meant. She sat down on the couch, and laid her hand on Rheyne's knee. "How are you doing?"

Rheyne looked at her. "You know, Laura, I've always known that La Cosa Nostra was run like a well-oiled machine, but—"

"I'm not talking about the mob, Rheyne." For emphasis, she poked Rheyne in the chest with her finger. "I want to know how you are doing and I want the truth and—"

"I'm fine, Laura." Rheyne laughed at the expression on Laura's face. "Why do you always do that?" she asked.

"Do what?" Laura asked, her right eye narrowing, her left eyebrow shooting upward.

Rheyne pointed at Laura's eyes. "That eyebrow thingy you do."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, whatever, and you don't need to worry about me so much."

"I always worry about you, and if I didn't care so much, it wouldn't matter—now would it?"

"I know you do, and I love you for it, but believe me when I say I'm fine. To tell you the truth, I'm actually looking forward to a change of scenery." Rheyne reached over and pulled the envelope out from beneath the keys. She raised the flap and pulled out the contents. She looked at the copy of her new California driver's license. "This isn't too bad. At least they let me keep my first name, and I'm only twenty-eight."

Laura snorted. "In your dreams, you're twenty-eight. How old are you, anyway?"

Rheyne tossed her the driver's license. "Thirty-five and holding with a birthday coming up in May, smart ass."

Laura did a mock salute and curled her upper lip, doing her best Elvis impersonation and said, "Thank'ya, thank'ya very much. I'll be here all week."

Rheyne shook her head and laughed. "You're just not right. That's all there is to it."

Laura glanced at the driver's license. "That's not too bad, considering what name they could've given you. What's left?" she asked.

Rheyne skimmed through the other documents. "A college transcript from Oklahoma University for a B.A.S. in Photography and a Chequotah, Oklahoma police report showing that I was arrested as a juvenile for petty theft and vandalism." Rheyne felt the color drain from her face.

Laura must have seen it, too. "What is it? What's wrong?" Laura asked, taking the papers from Rheyne's hand. She looked at the documents and shook her head. "You know these aren't real," she said, throwing her arms around Rheyne's shoulders.

"I know, but it's still a little unnerving." Rheyne gathered up all the documents and photos. "I think I've seen enough," she said and walked over to the fireplace. She knelt down on one knee, slid open the screen and tossed all the items into the fire. It didn't take long for the dancing flames to turn the papers into a pile of ashes. She thought about her parents and decided to give them a call before she left on her flight.

"I can't believe how late it is," Laura said as the cuckoo bird above the mantle signaled that it was midnight.

Rheyne closed the fire screen and turned to look at her. "I know, and I still have to pack."

Laura stood and brushed off her slacks. "And I have to go home and break the news to Stacie. I have a feeling she's not going to be too happy with me."

"If I know Stacie, she'll be up waiting for you and she'll handle it just fine," Rheyne said as she walked Laura to the door. "Thank you, and be safe driving home," she said, leaning forward to hug Laura.

“You’re welcome, and I will. You have a safe flight and I’ll talk to you sometime tomorrow night.”

Rheyne watched her back out of the driveway. She stood there looking out the window for a good fifteen minutes before heading upstairs. Her thoughts turned to Anthony Castrucci, and she unconsciously shivered. She pushed the uneasy feeling out of her mind, thinking she would try to get a couple hours’ sleep before packing her clothes.



Laura locked the door and turned off the lamp on the end table. She tiptoed down the hall to the bedroom. She tossed her coat across the back of a chair and unbuttoned her blouse.

“Hey, baby, I was hoping you’d still be up.”

Stacie sat up and stretched her arms over her head. She tried to stifle a yawn. “You know I have trouble sleeping without you next to me.”

Laura pulled a t-shirt over her head and hopped on the bed beside her. “About that—you may have to get used to it for awhile.”

Stacie frowned. “You have a new assignment, don’t you?”

Laura nodded. “I leave tomorrow afternoon.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I’m not sure. It could be a couple weeks, or it could be a couple months. It all depends on how long the operation drags out.”

Stacie wrapped her arms around the top of her knees and laid her head against them. “I don’t want you to go.”

Laura reached over and pulled Stacie down on top of her. “Oh, sweetheart. I don’t want you to be sad.” Laura ran her fingers through the long red curls flowing down Stacie’s back. “I’ll come home every couple of weeks for a night or two, if I can manage the time. I promise.”

“Is it dangerous?” Stacie managed to ask as Laura began trailing kisses along the side of her neck.

“You know—”

“I know you can’t talk about your cases,” Stacie interrupted. “I just want to know if you’ll be in any danger. You know how I tend to worry.”

“Yes, it could be dangerous,” Laura answered honestly.

Stacie’s body tensed. She held Laura at arm’s length to look her directly in the eyes.

“Sweetheart, I’ll be there in a support position only.” Laura squeezed her arms tight around Stacie’s waist. “The real danger will be with Rheyne.”

Stacie rolled over and leaned on her elbow. “Rheyne’s on this assignment, too?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry honey, but I can’t give you any more details.”

“I hate this part of your job.”

“I know you do and I hate this part myself.”

“Can you at least tell me where you’ll be?”

“I’ll be in California.”

“You tell Rheyne I said to be careful.”

“I will. Now, come over here,” Laura said, pulling Stacie down beside her. “I might not get to see you for awhile,” she said, and then her mouth hungrily claimed Stacie’s soft lips. Laura slowly made her way down to Stacie’s breast. Stacie shivered as Laura’s tongue made circling motions around her nipple before consuming it in her mouth.

“Don’t think ... think this makes up for you leaving,” Stacie managed to say, her breath catching in her throat.

“No, but it’s a good start,” she whispered against Stacie’s skin. Laura slowly made her way down her lover’s body. God, *how I love the smell, the taste of this woman*, she thought as she kissed the inside of Stacie’s thigh. She rubbed her cheek over the small tuft of hair, savoring the scent. Stacie moaned as Laura’s tongue gently licked along the sides of her clitoris.

Stacie gripped the sheets with both hands. “You’re slowly killing me, you know?”

“Am I?” Laura moaned as she explored the soft wetness now surrounding her fingers. Stacie’s hips began to move against her fingers with slow, deliberate thrusts.

“Oh, God,” Stacey groaned as Laura’s soft, hot mouth paralyzed her. Without thought, her legs spread wider. Laura could feel Stacie growing harder with each tantalizing lick. She tightened her arms around Stacie’s legs and drank in her lover’s sweetness. Stacie reached down and ran her fingers through Laura’s hair, holding her close as she began to climax, her back arching, her body shaking to the core.

Stacie fell back on the bed breathless, her chest heaving up and down until finally she pushed Laura away. “No more, baby, no more.”

Laura laid her head against Stacie’s wet belly and tried to calm her own uneven heartbeat. Like an aftershock, she felt Stacie’s hips raise slightly, thrust forward and tighten before finally relaxing. She clamped her own legs together in an attempt to quiet the overwhelming ache settling in her groin.

After a few minutes, Stacie sat up and leaned forward. She reached down and grabbed the top of Laura’s t-shirt. With one fluid motion, she pulled it over Laura’s head and tossed it on the floor. “Jesus, Laura, I’m thinking you should go away more often.”

Laura’s voice was husky with desire. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to reciprocate.” Stacie didn’t wait for an answer and pulled Laura up to straddle her face.

“I’m not sure you need to touch—” A guttural sound escaped from Laura’s lips as Stacie’s warm fingers held her open. She held her breath for what she knew was coming next. She fell forward, grabbing the headboard for support.

“You’re so wet and hard,” Stacie murmured as she rubbed her lips over Laura’s swollen clit. Laura moaned as Stacie took her fully in her mouth. Her hips moved back and forth, encouraging Stacie to suck harder with each thrust.

“Yes, yes, oh, God,” Laura panted as Stacie’s fingers massaged her opening. “Please, baby,” she begged.

“Not yet,” Stacie whispered as her mouth and fingers continued the tease.

“I can’t take much more.”

“Sure, you can,” Stacie groaned, sliding her fingers through the wetness, and then she entered her.

Laura began a rocking motion with her hips against Stacie’s fingers. “More, baby, please give me more,” she cried out. “Harder, harder, oh yes, harder, yes!” Laura moaned, her back stiffening, her body shaking with orgasm before finally collapsing against the headboard in exhaustion.