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**END  
GAME**

CAPITAL INTRIGUE | BOOK 1

CAPITAL INTRIGUE • 1

# ***END GAME***

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# CHAPTER ONE

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**“I think they might** be keeping dead bodies in their condo!”

Bailey Ryan sat beside her friends in an Arlington, Virginia, diner and took a big bite of salad as Layla Karam continued to tell her animated story.

“Bailey, Viv, I’m telling you.” Layla lifted her hands. “I have to find a new place to live. My neighbors are insane. I’m not joking about the dead bodies.”

Bailey laughed at her friend’s ridiculous accusation.

Vivian Steele’s hazel eyes glistened with excitement. “Dead bodies would be Bailey’s territory. She’s the hotshot FBI agent.”

Bailey shook her head. “I don’t think anyone has ever called me a hotshot.”

Vivian laughed. “In law school they just called you the gunner.”

Bailey placed a hand on her chest. “No way. Layla was the gunner.”

“Lies. All lies.” Layla grinned as she twisted her long black hair around her finger. “We have to decide if we’re going to the five-year reunion.”

“It’ll depend on my schedule,” Viv said. “Things are crazy at work right now.” She looked down at her smartwatch. “That’s why we’re eating dinner at ten p.m.” To the outside world, Viv and Layla both worked for the State Department, but though Viv was a lawyer for State, in reality Layla actually worked as an analyst at the CIA. Only a very tight circle of people knew the truth about Layla’s career. She and Viv were currently working on a joint project that called for some overnight assignments. “I think I’d like to go to the reunion—but only if we *all* go.”

“Georgetown Law reunions are supposed to be fancy affairs,” Layla said.

Bailey groaned. “Just what I need. We’ve stayed in touch with the people we actually liked. I’m not interested in schmoozing with anyone else.”

“It’s DC—everyone has an angle to play,” Vivian said.

Bailey understood that point all too well. Even in her career at the FBI, she had to deal with internal and external politics and power plays. She just wanted to do her job and solve crimes.

She’d just taken the last bite of her salad when her cell phone rang. “Sorry, ladies, I have to get this.”

“We know the drill,” Viv said.

They all had high-pressure jobs that called on them ’round the clock. It was another reason they got along so well. There was never any guilt over having to deal with work issues. Just the opposite—they were all very supportive of each other and stepped up to the plate to be there. To Bailey, these women were her family.

Bailey stood and answered her phone. “Agent Ryan.”

“We’ve got one,” Connor said. “Meet you at the DC morgue.”

“See you soon.” She had a no-nonsense but strong relationship with Special Agent Remy Connor. Known to everyone as

Connor, he was five years her senior. They had grown very close, and he was like the big brother she'd never had.

She walked back over to her friends. "Sorry, I've got to run."

"An actual dead body this time?" Viv asked.

Bailey nodded. "Yeah."

"We should be getting to work too." Viv looked at Layla. "We're working some late nights these days. I don't think I'm cut out for the night shift. At least this assignment will be over soon."

"You'll have me there for moral support." Layla smiled.

Bailey's heart warmed watching her friends. "Be good. I'll catch up with you two later." She never asked questions about their work but understood they were working on an important project.

She exited the restaurant and got on the Metro. Then she hopped off at L'Enfant Plaza and made the short walk to the DC medical examiner's office. As an agent in the Criminal Investigative Division working out of the DC field office, her days and nights were often filled with things most people would rather avoid, but she did important, fulfilling work. Much more fulfilling than taking a traditional lawyer gig at a huge firm. Although she'd had a ton of offers to do so.

Having a law degree gave her a unique perspective many of her colleagues didn't have. Most of the agents who did have JDs had chosen to work in other divisions at the FBI. Not her. She thrived on the challenges that came with working violent crimes.

No stranger to the medical examiner's office, she flashed her badge at the security guard and made her way to Connor, who stood in the lobby.

"Thanks for waiting on me, or is it that you didn't want to visit the body alone?" She enjoyed giving Connor a hard time, but he always took it in stride.

He smiled. “You know I’m a team player.”

“So what have we got?” They started walking down the hallway to the elevator that would take them to the basement morgue.

His blue eyes met hers. “DC police called us in because this is the second murder in three days with a similar MO. The first murder was in Arlington, but this victim was killed in Foggy Bottom. Arlington and DC police stay in close communication, and they put two and two together.”

The elevator dinged, and they exited to see Jessie—or Doc Phillips, as she was known—as the coroner on duty. She was one of Bailey’s favorite people to work with.

The short, gray-haired woman greeted them both warmly. “Good evening, agents. I’m glad you’re here.”

They followed her into the morgue, and Bailey was ready to jump in. “Connor tells me the victim is similar to one from just three days ago?”

“That’s correct. I got the autopsy report from the Arlington ME’s office. The prior victim is Michael Rogers. And while I can’t say with certainty, there is a striking resemblance in what was done to the two bodies.”

Doc Phillips removed the sheet covering the new victim lying on the table. The first thing that struck Bailey was the man’s ultrastrong physique. Given his size and muscle tone, this made the crime all the more perplexing.

“Do you notice his build?” she said. “For someone to get the drop on him, he must have really been caught by surprise.”

Connor nodded. “I’m not an expert, but from the angles of the cuts it looks like someone came up on him from behind and maybe caught him off guard.” He ran his hand through his short blond hair. “Am I right, Doc?”

“You’re right that the wounds were inflicted from behind.” The ME pointed toward the body. “As you can see, there are

multiple stab wounds. I can tell you they are in the same direction and depth as Rogers's." She walked over to her desk and picked up some papers. "Take a look for yourself. This is the report for Rogers."

Bailey and Connor both took a few moments to study the report.

"So we're possibly looking at the same killer," Bailey said flatly. "Only three days in between, same MO. No cooling-off period. This could be the makings of a spree case."

"It is my opinion that this could be the same killer, but for the rest of it, I'll leave the investigating up to the FBI." Doc Phillips looked away.

Something was up. "What are you not telling us, Doc?" Bailey asked.

Doc Phillips shifted her weight from side to side. "Well, it might not be *just* the FBI."

"What do you mean?" Connor asked.

Doc looked at him. "We ran his prints, and the results came back a bit ago."

"Who is he?" Bailey asked.

"I know exactly who he is," a deep male voice said behind her.

Bailey turned and saw a tall black-haired man standing in the doorway. He sucked all the air out of the room with his commanding presence. "And who are you?" she asked.

"Special Agent Marco Agostini, NCIS." He walked toward them.

That explained Doc's behavior. They wouldn't be working this case alone. "And that must mean he's one of yours?"

Marco's dark eyes locked on to hers. "That's need to know."

Marco eyed the blonde wearing the dark FBI jacket with skepticism. There was no way he was letting the FBI take the lead on this case.

“You’ll have to do a lot better than that, Agent Agostini,” the blonde said. “We *do* have a need to know.”

The ME took a few steps back. “I’m going to get some coffee while you all sort this out. I’ll be back in a few.” She quickly exited, obviously not wanting to get involved in a turf war, and he couldn’t blame her.

“And who are you?” Marco asked.

“FBI Special Agent Bailey Ryan, and this is Supervisory Special Agent Remy Connor.”

Marco stood firm. “I know you’re just trying to do your job, but so am I. NCIS is taking this case.”

Bailey’s bright green eyes narrowed. “We both got called down here. You know you can’t waltz in and act like you own the investigation. This is the second murder of its type in less than a week. For all we know, this could be a serial killer, and then FBI has to be involved.”

Marco thought he heard Agent Connor let out a little laugh. He tried to size up the two of them. Given their titles, Bailey was the junior of the two but not by a whole lot. Regardless, he had to protect his case. “I’ll say it again, ma’am. NCIS is taking charge here.”

“I haven’t gotten that direction from my boss.” She turned to her partner. “Have you, Connor?”

“Nope. Why don’t I make a few calls and see if we can get some clarity on the situation?” Connor stepped outside the room with his phone to his ear.

Marco took a moment to study Bailey Ryan. She had straight blond hair that almost hit her shoulders. Her sun-kissed skin was probably a sign that she spent a lot of time outdoors. Above aver-

age height, but still stood below his six-one frame. He figured he should take the high road and try not to agitate the situation any further. “Agent Ryan, I have only the utmost respect for the FBI.”

“You sure have an interesting way of showing it,” she shot back. “What happened to the directive that we should all work together for the common good?”

She had him there. “That’s true, but there are still possible security issues present. I just want to be buttoned up here, and we can’t afford to take any chances.”

Bailey crossed her arms. “If you’re worried about security clearances, I worked a joint operation with FBI counterintelligence a few months ago. I have top secret SCI clearance. So that shouldn’t be an issue.”

He appreciated her zeal, but he wasn’t going to give in—it didn’t matter that she seemed more than competent. In truth, he didn’t have a leg to stand on with the security clearance argument. He was just trying to stall and hopefully get a grip on this situation ASAP.

Bailey stepped toward him. “As far as I can tell, this crime happened while the victim was off duty.”

“You know that doesn’t preclude NCIS from taking the lead. He’s still one of us. That means this is our case to run if we want it.”

Bailey placed her hands on her hips but didn’t say anything. Probably because she knew he was right. NCIS routinely took the lead in felony cases involving a Navy servicemember. Yes, they had to work with other agencies all the time, but he would like NCIS to be at the helm on this one. Everything about this scenario felt wrong to him.

His phone rang, and he looked down to see who it was. “Sorry, ma’am. This is my boss, and I need to take this.”

Bailey smiled. “All right.”

She was probably smiling because if the NCIS director was calling right now, that couldn't be good. "This is Agostini."

"Agostini, it's Director Mercer."

"Yes, ma'am. How can I help you?" He dreaded her response.

"You're at the ME's office, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." He swallowed hard, waiting for her orders.

"I know we talked about this being an exclusive NCIS operation, but we have to play nice in the sandbox. I've gotten some pressure from my colleagues at the FBI, and they want in on this too, given the possibility that we might have a serial or spree killer on the loose and the first victim was a civilian. So this is how it's going to go. We work the case jointly, but for now NCIS is still lead."

"Why do you say 'for now,' ma'am?" He feared he already knew.

"Because you know things could change at any minute. But you need to work *with* the FBI and not against them. Am I clear, Agent Agostini?"

There was only one answer. "Crystal, ma'am."

"Agostini, I have a bad feeling about this. Get to the bottom of what's going on here ASAP."

"Roger that, ma'am." As he hung up, he saw that Connor had joined Bailey and they were huddled up talking in the corner of the room. No doubt they'd just received the exact same message from their leadership. Now he had to welcome them in. It wasn't the first time in his career he'd eaten crow, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

He walked over to where the agents stood. He expected Bailey to rub it in, but she didn't say a word. "I'm guessing you talked to your boss too. My directive is that this is a joint investigation with NCIS taking lead. Is that your understanding?" He looked at Bailey and then Connor.

“Yes,” Bailey said. “But given our resource constraints, you’re going to be stuck with me. Connor will be monitoring the case but not working the day to day. We’re spread very thin, as I assume you are at NCIS as well.”

“Yeah, it’s the reality these days for all of us. More budget cuts and hiring freezes, but the bad guys never let up.” Marco prepared himself to be spending a lot more time with Bailey. He wasn’t blind to the fact that she was attractive, but he also put his job first—always. That was probably why he was thirty-one and still single. “Then I guess we need to get to it. We should head to NCIS headquarters and bring in some others on my team to assist. In the meantime, I can get you up to speed on the second victim—Petty Officer First Class Sean Battle.”

“What’s really going on here? Why all the intense focus on a petty officer?” Bailey asked.

Marco took a deep breath. “Because this one was special. He was a Navy SEAL.”