

BACKLASH

CAPITAL INTRIGUE | BOOK 2

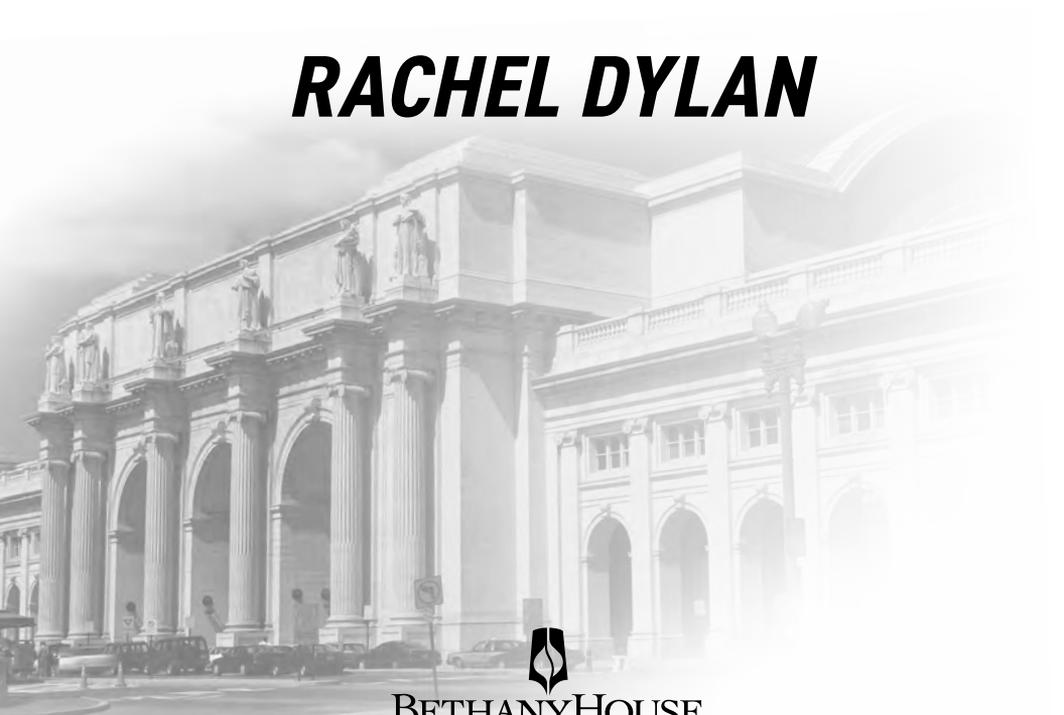
RACHEL DYLAN

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ATLANTA JUSTICE SERIES

CAPITAL INTRIGUE • 2

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RACHEL DYLAN



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To Daddy.

You're the reason I can write books filled with faith
and demonstrating the amazing love of God.

I miss you so much, but the gift of faith
and love you gave me will live
in my heart forever.

CHAPTER ONE

The incessant knocking on her condo door made Layla Karam grumble as she threw off the covers. She had no idea who would be so insistent—especially at two in the morning. Over five years at the CIA had made her cautious, so she grabbed her gun from the nightstand and went to the door, ready for anything.

She looked through the peephole and let out a sigh of relief, then disarmed the alarm system to let in DEA Agent Cassandra Ruiz.

“Cass, what’s going on?”

Cass’s dark brown eyes were bloodshot, and she was shaking. “I should’ve shot him.”

“Shot who?” The dread Layla had felt when she first heard the knocking returned.

“A man was in my house. I hesitated instead of pulling the trigger, and he got away.”

“Have you called the police?”

Cass shook her head. “No, because I think it might be connected to our DEA op.”

How could that be possible? “Come sit down, and let’s go through this.”

Layla led Cass into the living room and sat down with her on the couch. She’d never seen Cass frazzled, but right now the agent was a mess.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Layla said. “Tell me the entire story. Take your time.”

Cass took a deep breath. “I worked late. When I got home, I immediately noticed that someone had been rummaging through my house. Things were strewn everywhere. He was definitely looking for something. As I was surveying the damage, a man jumped me from behind. I was able to fight him off. I fired a warning shot, and he started running. I could’ve taken him out, but I didn’t.”

“Did you recognize him?” Layla had shaken off the cobwebs of sleep and was now fully awake.

“No.” Cass’s hands shook as she clasped them in front of her. “But he had Mejía tattoos on his arms.”

The Mejía cartel was the most dangerous and brutal cartel in Honduras. The DEA had recently performed an operation in Honduras, and Layla had been brought on to the team to give her more field experience—something the Agency was pushing her hard on. “There’s no way that could be a coincidence.”

“Exactly. I’m sorry to barge in on you in the middle of the night, but since you’re only a few minutes away, I thought I needed to warn you ASAP in case he decided to head here.”

“You did the right thing. Have you noticed anything before tonight? Anything out of the ordinary?” Layla had, but

she didn't think this was the time to bring it up. Cass was agitated enough, given her harrowing night.

"No. It's been business as usual since we got back state-side. Everyone at the DEA was satisfied with the outcome, even if we didn't get all the way to the top of the cartel."

"I assume you don't bring work materials home?" Layla had to put that out there.

"You know I don't. That would be against all security protocols."

"Could you have been mistaken about the tattoo? Could he have just been a thief?"

"None of my jewelry was taken."

"Electronics?" Layla questioned.

"He did take my tablet, but there won't be anything work related on it. But I'm pretty certain about the tattoo."

"We got a boatload of cash from the op. Maybe he thought you might have some of it."

Cass groaned. "If he was looking for confiscated money, then he had to think I'm a dirty agent."

Layla lifted her hands. "I'm just throwing out possibilities. I'm not saying that about you. But I'm wondering whether the cartel could have a reason to *think* that."

"I'm sorry, I'm just on edge. But no, I play by the book." Cass's voice became steadier.

Layla didn't know Cass *that* well, but she didn't have any reason to suspect she was playing both sides. Although, Layla had heard rumors that the DEA had their fair share of dirty agents. "Have you reported it to the DEA?"

"Not yet, but I will. I wanted to make sure you were safe first. I sent a quick text to Zane and Diaz to warn them, too, just in case."

Zane and Diaz were the other two members of the DEA

team Layla had been assigned to. “Whatever you need from me, just say the word.”

“Can I crash on your couch for a few hours? I’d rather not go home until light.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” Cass paused. “I can’t help but think trouble followed us home from Honduras.”



Layla had woken early the next morning to find a kind note from Cass. She must have left right at the crack of dawn. They’d exchanged a couple of texts, and Cass had said she would call DEA, which Layla felt was the right move.

Now Layla weaved quickly through the Saturday crowd that had gathered for the fall street festival in Old Town Alexandria. Maybe she was being paranoid, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being followed. *Again.*

She’d kept that fact to herself last night. Cass had already seemed way too unsteady. But Layla wondered if there was something going on involving their joint mission. Could her suspected tail be connected to Cass’s thief?

She glanced over her shoulder and didn’t see anyone, but she kept moving as briskly as she could without running. Had working at the CIA made her this jumpy?

When she finally saw the smiling face of one of her best friends, Vivian Steele, she let out a breath.

“Why are you so flushed?” Viv asked.

“Walk with me.” Layla grabbed her friend’s arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel like I have a tail.”

Viv frowned. “Are you working right now?”

Layla shook her head. “It could be that I’m just on edge, but all my instincts are telling me otherwise.”

Viv was one of the few people who knew that Layla worked at the Agency. To the rest of the world, Layla was a State Department analyst.

Viv touched her shoulder. “I trust your instincts completely. Do you want to get out of here?”

Layla shook her head again. “There’s no reason to be silly about this.”

“Do you think you’re under some type of surveillance?” Viv’s hazel eyes widened.

Layla couldn’t say for sure. “I don’t know.”

“Have you noticed anything before today?”

That was the thing. She had. “Lately I’ve felt like someone is watching me, but I haven’t been able to substantiate that concern. And then, when I got off the Metro and started walking over, I thought I might have a tail.”

Viv stopped and looked around for a minute, her eyes scanning the crowded streets. “I don’t notice anything out of the ordinary, but it’s pretty packed down here today.”

Layla sighed. “I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. Let’s eat. Izzy wanted to join us, too, but she’ll be a little late. She said to go ahead and order hers.” If their schedules allowed, they met for lunch each Saturday at their favorite restaurant, the Old Town Grille. They’d met Izzy Cole, an NCIS agent, a few months ago and had welcomed her into their friend group.

“You know you never have to apologize to me,” Viv said. “Given the nature of what you do, you have every right to be concerned. Have you told anyone at work about this?”

“No.” And she wouldn’t. She was going to hold this tight to the vest. Viv only knew a piece of what Layla worked on

because they'd been on a task force together, but there was a lot that Viv was in the dark about.

They entered Old Town Grille and met Ginny, the friendly hostess who greeted them every week. The short, older brunette smiled at them. "Girls, I'm so sorry. I know your favorite table is in the back right by the window, but a group of tourists came in, and they were insistent that they sit at that table. I've got you a great table on the other side of the restaurant, if that's okay?"

Viv gave Ginny a warm smile. "Of course. We understand that you can't hold our table for us. We'll have a great time regardless."

"That's right," Layla added. "You all are extra busy today."

Ginny led them to a table on the left side of the restaurant. "That's because we have the festival traffic, but I won't complain about being busy. I assume you don't need menus, but let me know if you want them."

Layla laughed. "You're right. We're way too predictable for menus."

"I'll send your server over."

Once they had placed their orders, Viv looked right at Layla. "I know you too well. Something is definitely up. Are you going to tell me what's really going on?"

"That's the thing, Viv. I don't know. I really don't. All I have is this sinking suspicion that someone is following me."

"I guess this goes without saying, but could it be connected to whatever you're working on right now?"

Layla had been asking herself the same thing. "I'm not sure."

"You can't talk to me about details, but is there anything you can share?"

Layla considered her options. Viv worked as an attorney

at the State Department, and the two of them had worked together before on highly sensitive classified projects. She knew she could trust Viv with her life, so she decided to open up in a high-level way. “I worked with DEA on a mission last month. One of the DEA agents came to see me in the middle of the night. A man had ransacked her house.”

Viv twirled her straw in her soda. “So there could be a connection between someone watching you and what happened to her?”

Layla nodded. “Yeah. Or it’s completely possible that I’m just being paranoid, or that there are two separate things going on.”

“You need to be careful.” Viv’s tone had turned serious.

“I will, I promise, but let’s stop talking about it and enjoy lunch. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Viv shifted in her seat. “Then is it safe to bring up the reunion and your last-minute excuse not to go?”

This topic was almost worse than the other. “My excuse was legit. I really did have a work emergency come up yesterday.”

“Well, once you bailed, Bailey and I decided not to go either.”

“You shouldn’t have let me stop you.”

Viv leaned forward. “You might have dodged the reunion, but that still doesn’t resolve the larger issues you have with Hunter.”

Layla groaned at her ex’s name.

“Maybe it would be good to talk to him and finally get some closure.”

“Closure,” Layla muttered. “How much closure can you get from the love of your life cheating on you?” Her heart had been shattered into a million little pieces her third year

of law school when she'd found out Hunter McCoy had been unfaithful.

"It's not just that he cheated on you. It's how it all went down."

"Are you talking about the fact that he chose a college girl who couldn't have been more different than me? Or the fact that he told me right in the midst of my interviews for the Agency?"

"Both," Viv said flatly. "I can still hear the pain in your voice over five years later. Facing him is just what you need to be able to move on. You can't pine over him forever. It's time to open yourself to new possibilities. It's been long enough."

If only Layla had been convinced that Hunter was *the one*. She'd asked God so many times why. Why had she been so wrong? And how could Hunter have been so cruel? "I understand what you're saying, but dealing with feelings isn't always a rational exercise."

Viv patted her hand. "I'll be by your side. You don't have to go through this alone. You know that Bailey and I will always be there for you."

"Speaking of Bailey, she and Marco have been inseparable lately. I think they might be in it for the long haul."

Viv laughed. "That's an interesting way of putting it."

Layla was thrilled that Bailey had found someone. Even if it meant they now had to share her with Marco. Their friendship was strong enough for anything.

"Thanks for helping me take my mind off things," Layla said. "Even if it was by bringing up an equally difficult topic." She laughed.

"Anything for you." Viv smiled.

They'd been through a lot together, and Viv had become

like a sister to Layla. “Enough about me. How was your week?”

Before Viv could answer, a loud explosion rocked the restaurant, throwing Layla backward onto the ground. She took a deep breath as the air filled with acrid smoke, and then her world went black.