

CAPITAL INTRIGUE | BOOK 3

POWER PLAY

RACHEL
DYLAN

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ATLANTA JUSTICE SERIES

CAPITAL INTRIGUE • 3

POWER PLAY

RACHEL DYLAN



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To Mama.

Thank you for always being my biggest fan.

I'm so glad that I get to share these stories with you.

I love you so much.

CHAPTER ONE

It's going to be a long night. Vivian Steele checked her glossy pink lipstick one final time before exiting the ladies' room and entering into the shark tank—otherwise known as a diplomatic dinner in the Washington, DC, area. But this wasn't just any dinner. This was the premiere annual summer event hosted in a chic five-star hotel in northern Virginia, attended by a who's who of diplomats from around the world.

Vivian's boss had insisted she attend. She worked in the Office of the Legal Adviser at the State Department, and as a lawyer for State for six years, she'd seen and experienced a lot. But nothing made her palms sweat more than swanky DC power-player events. She felt completely out of her league as she glanced down at her knee-length black cocktail dress. Frills and bling were so not her. She'd gone for a more classic look and had no problem blending in with the crowd.

She let out a sigh of relief when she saw Layla Karam McCoy walking over to her. Her best friend hadn't stopped

beaming since her wedding. Wearing a long, sparkling gown, Layla was the definition of elegance.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t think they let spies into this event,” Viv joked in a hushed tone.

Layla groaned. “I wish I weren’t here, but I’m the Agency rep for the dinner. My boss bailed at the last minute and told me I had to suffer through this, especially since I have my State Department cover.”

Viv moved in closer to her friend. “How many of these so-called diplomats here do you think are actually part of the intelligence community?”

Layla glanced around the room. “Probably ten percent. Maybe more.”

Viv had quickly learned that intelligence agents often used diplomatic covers, and other countries worked similarly. Layla’s cover was as a State Department analyst.

“Hey.” Layla grabbed Viv’s elbow. “Who is that hunk of muscle with the dark hair giving you the eye?”

“Who are you talking about?” Viv asked.

“Give it a second and then look at your two o’clock by the hors d’oeuvres table.”

Viv waited a couple of beats, then glanced that direction. Layla hadn’t been exaggerating. The guy in question stood well over six feet tall. He had dark wavy hair and was built. Very built. “I have no clue who that is.”

Layla laughed. “Well, it seems to me that he wants to know who *you* are.”

“It’s just your imagination.” Viv sighed. “Marriage has made you a complete softie and an active little cupid.” Layla desperately wanted Viv to find someone, but the match-making had not been going well.

“I’m not going to stop trying.” Layla smiled warmly.

Viv stole one more glance at the mystery man. “Well, as far as that guy goes, it seems like he’s on high alert in general, not just about me. He has military written all over him.”

Layla gave her hand a squeeze. “Yeah, but I *know* what I saw.”

A chime sounded, indicating it was time to take their seats. Unfortunately, there was assigned seating, so Viv wasn’t able to sit beside Layla.

“Let’s connect after,” Layla said. “Or if you need to see me during, just text, and I’ll rescue you from your tablemates.”

“Will do.” Viv made her way to her table. Her friendship with Layla was one of the constants in her life that she was forever grateful for.

Viv did her duty and made small talk at her table, which included diplomatic representatives from a variety of countries—thankfully all of whom could speak English. Unlike Layla, Viv did not have a vast array of language skills—her only other language was Spanish, and she wasn’t even fluent.

She was about to take another bite of her bland roasted chicken when a loud shriek sounded behind her. Instinctively, she jumped up out of her chair as chaos built around her, and her pulse picked up to a quick beat.

As screams continued to bellow throughout the room, she ran over to the table where the commotion was occurring and saw the Egyptian ambassador to the United States lying motionless on the floor. Her stomach dropped. She knew this ambassador—Ali Zidan was a strong US ally and friend.

A man was hovering over Ambassador Zidan, about to administer CPR, when Zidan’s security entourage appeared and swarmed over him. Viv was no medical expert—she only had basic CPR training—but it looked to her that no amount of CPR was going to change the situation.

The Egyptian ambassador was dead.

An arm pulled her backward, and she tried to break free from the strong grip. She whipped around. “Let me go.”

“You should back up, ma’am.”

She looked up into the big brown eyes of the mystery man from before. “And you are?”

“Jacob Cruz, supervisory special agent of diplomatic security.”

Ah. “Did you see what happened?”

He moved a step closer to her. “Wait a minute. It’s my turn to ask who you are.”

There was no reason to stonewall him. “I’m Vivian Steele. I’m an attorney with State.”

He frowned. It must have been the word *attorney* that turned his expression sour. She’d seen it before. “Please step back, ma’am.”

Viv noticed he hadn’t answered her question about what he’d seen, but given the upheaval in the room, she let it go and did as she was told. She looked around and spotted Layla with her cell to her ear, no doubt phoning in to the CIA what had just happened.

The microphone screeched, and then the evening’s emcee began speaking. “Everyone, if you could, please return to your seats in an orderly fashion. We have a medical emergency, and we need to be able to render assistance. If everyone would please return to their seats quickly and calmly. I repeat, please return to your seats so a medical emergency can be handled.” The announcement was then repeated in a couple of other languages and appeared to calm some nerves, as most people were obeying the direction.

Viv watched the ambassador’s body being taken out on a stretcher. She didn’t specifically support the Bureau of Near

Eastern Affairs, but her legal work touched every region, so she knew Zidan's death was going to have a major ripple effect. He stood strongly against the anti-democratic forces in Egypt. His death would be a huge loss.

She checked her phone to make sure no one had texted or called. Her tablemates were abuzz about the ambassador, spouting theories. Some said he must have had a heart attack, while others noted that he was an avid chain smoker. Viv kept quiet. She didn't really have anything to add, and the last thing she wanted to do was speculate. A man had just died, but it wasn't long before those around her started drinking and eating again. *What a crazy world we live in.*

By the time dessert was served, Viv had a raging headache, but she knew she couldn't excuse herself just yet. She took a bite of the strawberry cheesecake and a sip of coffee and tried to figure out what her next move should be and how she could extricate herself from the after-dinner mingling. People had already started to abandon their desserts in favor of cocktails and were milling around, probably anxious to get away from their assigned tablemates after the past two hours.

She noticed Penelope King, the US ambassador to Belgium, standing close by, talking to the ambassador from Turkey. Penelope waved, and Viv started to walk in that direction. As she approached, she noticed that the color had drained out of Penelope's face.

"Ambassador King, are you feeling okay?"

"Viv . . ." Penelope took a step toward her and grabbed Viv's arms as she collapsed to the ground, almost pulling Viv down with her.

Viv squatted at the ambassador's side as Penelope started convulsing. "Help! Help!" she screamed as loudly as she

could. A deep feeling of dread washed over her. What if the food was poisoned? What if they were all going to die?

“What’s wrong with her?” the Turkish ambassador asked. “She was completely fine a minute ago.”

“I don’t know.” Viv’s voice shook as she tried to make sure Penelope still had a pulse.

The Turkish ambassador took a step back, and the next few minutes were a whirlwind as EMT personnel rushed in. Since Viv was right there, they asked what she had seen, and she recounted it to them before moving out of the way to let them work. She knew Penelope. Not extremely well, but seeing her lying there on the ground, pale and shaking, was shocking. Her body was clearly being ravaged by something. This was no heart attack. The ambassador was in her forties, an avid runner, and in great shape.

“You again.”

Viv turned to see Jacob Cruz scowling at her.

“It’s just like a lawyer to go chasing trouble.”

She’d heard enough lawyer jokes and put-downs for a lifetime, and she didn’t have it in her to hold back right now. “SSA Cruz, if I were you, I’d be a lot more worried about whether you have an entire room of diplomats at risk than about me being a lawyer. Aren’t you in charge of security here?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, and we’ll be doing a full investigation. Including the fact that you were one of the last people near the ambassador before she fell ill.”

“You can’t think that I had anything to do with this!” She was so angry her voice cracked.

Jacob crossed his arms and glared at her.

She put her hands on her hips, feeling like she might explode. “I suggest you *stop* harassing me and *start* doing your job.”

She feared what else she might say, so she walked away, not giving him time to respond. She needed to find Layla ASAP. Yes, the Egyptian ambassador probably had a heart attack, but now with Penelope's collapse, Viv had a lot of questions. This was something far more sinister. And she wasn't sure whether the terror was over or just beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

Jacob had been up all night after the diplomatic dinner on Saturday, so he'd taken a catnap before this meeting, like those he'd learned to take as a SEAL during his ten-year military career.

He'd been the lead agent on security for the event and had obviously failed. His boss had reamed him out good, and he deserved every word of it. But how could he have protected against an attack like this? Assuming there was an attack. He'd played through the sequence of events over and over in his head. They'd run countless scenarios on security for the event, gaming out all types of threats, but nothing like what had happened. This one had truly come out of left field.

Jacob still thought there was a good chance the Egyptian ambassador actually did have a heart attack and that the only real target had been Penelope King, but they were going to have to do a lot more work to come to that conclusion officially.

That was why he'd been called in on Sunday afternoon for a meeting at the State Department. He wasn't sure who would be there. All he knew was that he had to be. No questions asked.

He hadn't been in the job but six months, and this wasn't exactly going to be a great résumé builder for him. He shouldn't even be in this job. He should still be out in the field, running ops with his SEAL team.

But that wasn't possible.

Jacob walked into a secure room at State known as the SCIF and was met by a sea of faces.

"Good, Jacob, you're here." His boss, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security Sherman Oaks, nodded at him.

Jacob had thought he was close to being on time, but obviously being one minute late was really late for this crew. And this crew included some big players, including the newly minted director of the FBI, Lang Phillips. Phillips was known as a no-nonsense, tough-as-nails guy who'd risen through the ranks.

As Jacob surveyed the room, he recognized another face—this one belonging to the persistent but attractive lawyer from last night. Her hazel eyes narrowed when she saw him looking at her. She clearly hadn't forgotten him either.

"Thank y'all for coming." Lang Phillips stood up. He had a full head of silver hair and a deep southern drawl, as he hailed from Tennessee. "So everyone is on the same page here, I wanted to update you on the latest. Ambassador Ali Zidan was pronounced dead when he arrived at the hospital last night. We are operating under the assumption that Zidan suffered a heart attack, but we can't be sure, given the attack on our own ambassador."

Sherman Oaks cleared his throat. "And unfortunately,

just before I came in, I had a discussion with our Egyptian friends. They are refusing an autopsy of Zidan on religious grounds. It's not something we can push, given the religious implications. We may be in the dark as far as the exact COD for Ambassador Zidan."

Lang nodded. "Before we go any further, it makes sense to let everyone know that we have formed a special joint task force to investigate exactly what happened last night at the diplomatic dinner. Under my direction, we're bringing together resources from the FBI, State, and the intelligence community to deal with this crisis. Look around. You're in this room because you are the task force. We'll liaise with the CIA as appropriate. We should do introductions because not everyone knows one another."

Sherman cleared his throat. "For those who don't know me, I'm Sherman Oaks, assistant secretary for diplomatic security. Others from State should go ahead and introduce themselves."

Jacob waited to see who would speak up first.

A petite dark-haired woman began. "I'm Rania Assad from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. I work the Egypt desk, so that's why I'm here."

The lawyer Jacob had met last night looked around before starting. He guessed she was about five foot six, and today her light brown hair, which she had worn down at the dinner, was pulled up in a severe lawyer-type bun. "I'm Vivian Steele. I'm a State attorney. I support the Office of the Legal Adviser."

Lang jumped in. "I know some of you may wonder why we have a lawyer on the task force, but Vivian's role will be critical. We've got a lot of balls in the air here, and we want to make sure we're covered from a legal perspective. Also,

Vivian happens to have been at the dinner and was first on the scene to help Ambassador King, so we think having her on the team will be invaluable.”

The jury was still out on whether Vivian Steele would be friend or foe. Jacob’s natural inclination was not to trust anyone, and Vivian had somehow found herself deeply intertwined in this mess.

A tall, dark-haired man with glasses took the floor. “I’m Cody Rico. I’m the rep for the Office of European Affairs.”

Silence hung for a moment, and Jacob realized he was the last person affiliated with the State Department. “I’m SSA Jacob Cruz with the Diplomatic Security Service.”

“Those are our State reps,” Lang said. “Let’s move on to the FBI.”

A woman with long, curly red hair and bright green eyes spoke up. “I’m SSA Delaney O’Sullivan.”

“And I’m Delaney’s partner, Special Agent Weston Lee,” the younger, blond-haired man said.

Jacob sized up the twentysomething agent. He wondered how they were all going to work together.

“All right,” Lang said. “Listen up. Staying put in the building, running ops from State, will be Rania and Cody. Everyone should be filtering relevant info and intel back to them, and they will start our war room. For field teams, SSA O’Sullivan will be working with Agent Lee. Vivian, you’ll work with SSA Cruz.”

Jacob couldn’t help but feel like he was getting the baby-sitting assignment here as punishment because he had been in charge of security for the dinner. He wanted to be where the action was, and he had a good idea that Vivian was more of a desk jockey—as she should be. Lawyers weren’t trained to be field agents.

Lang leaned forward. “We need multiple sets of eyes on all of this, and we can’t afford to make any more mistakes. We’ve got the Egyptians breathing down our necks to make sure we can give their government confidence there was no foul play. And we have one of our own fighting for her life in the hospital. Until this case is closed, this is your only and top priority. Understood?”

A murmur of affirmations spread throughout the room.

Lang stood. “All right. Break into your teams and get to work.”

The group dispersed, but Jacob didn’t immediately move, instead waiting for Vivian to come to him. He had no clue how he was going to handle this.

“Well, looks like you’re stuck with me.” Vivian sat down beside him.

“It does, doesn’t it, Vivian.”

“Please just call me Viv.”

“I can do that.” *Viv* seemed to suit her more anyway.

She turned to face him. “We need to set some ground rules.”

Her take-charge attitude was amusing.

Her eyes widened. “Why are you smiling? Do you not realize how serious this situation is? The Egyptian ambassador is dead, and our ambassador is lying in the hospital and could die at any moment.”

He didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. “I wasn’t smiling at the underlying situation. It’s just funny that you think you can give me orders.”

She shook her head. “We’re a team. And we’re not in the same chain of command, which means neither of us should be trying to pull rank.” She paused. “Speaking of rank, you were military, weren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Viv bit her bottom lip. “Special ops?”

Now he was really amused. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Ranger? SEAL?”

“SEAL, ma’am.”

“Can you speak more than two words?”

“Maybe.” He could tell that he’d already found his way under her skin, and that was how he wanted it. He had to keep her off-kilter. Maybe she’d come to her senses and realize that fieldwork wasn’t for her, and he could get a legit partner.

She crossed her arms. “What’s your problem with me? I’ve met a lot of people who didn’t like lawyers—even hated them—but you’ve got something extra special going on here, and we need to air it out if we’re going to be productive. You don’t even know me. Not even a little. What’s the deal?”

He let out a breath. “I don’t have anything against you personally. I’m just not used to teaming up with lawyers. That’s not how I roll.”

She laughed. “Well, it is now.”

“To be honest, whenever lawyers got involved in operations, things never went well. That’s just my experience.”

She reached out and touched his shoulder, causing him to flinch. “I will give this my all. I know it’s unorthodox, but this investigation is really important. I can’t help that I was right there in the middle of all the action. I’ll work as hard as I can to get to the bottom of this.”

He moved away from her. “And I’ll give it my all, too, but I can’t have you slowing me down. You got that?” He expected her to bite back, but she didn’t.

“Yes, sir.”

He held back another laugh.

“Let’s get down to business. We need to assume that Ambassador Zidan’s death wasn’t caused by a heart attack and that whatever killed him is also what hurt Penelope.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you mean Ambassador King?”

She tucked a stray hair that had fallen out of the bun behind her ear. “Yes, sorry. I knew her. I mean, I know her.”

This was the first time he had seen her frazzled. “She might pull through.”

Viv hung her head. “Yeah, it’s possible, but I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“How well do you know the ambassador?”

“We aren’t super close, but I worked with her on a project a few years ago, and we became friendly. She’s a mover and a shaker.”

“What’s your theory on what happened?” he asked.

“I think they were poisoned. And as long as Ambassador King is alive, her life is still in danger. I assume you’ve put extra security at the hospital.”

“Of course. She’s locked down tight.” That was the first thing he’d done last night when she was en route to the hospital.

“Good. Because I fear this is far from over, and someone might come back to finish the job.”