

STORMS OF CHANGE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

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I hope you're not leaving the party yet," Lorenzo Brassi murmured, his eyes glittering dangerously as he gripped Ricarda Pareto's arm far harder than necessary. With a thin smile that from a distance might have been mistaken as friendly, he pulled her into one of the hallways leading off the grand central foyer in her father's Brookline mansion.

"Let me go, Enzo." Rica kept her voice low and her expression carefully blank, refusing to let him see the pain caused by his fingers digging into the soft flesh above her elbow. She needed to tilt her head only the slightest bit to look into his flat, dark eyes, secretly pleased as she always was to remind him by this gesture that he was only a few inches taller than her own five-eight. Among the many men in her family, her cousin was one of the shortest. The fact that her height bothered him made up for *her* irritation when people thought them siblings on first meeting because of their similar black hair and eyes and sculpted Sicilian features. "I have an early appointment tomorrow for the closing on the new house."

"Ah, yes. Your little hideaway." He leaned close, his breath redolent of whiskey and cigars. "Do you really think you can get away so easily?"

"A twenty-five-minute plane ride is hardly an escape." Rica knew he meant more than just her early departure from her father's birthday party, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of explaining why she

wanted to move to the small Cape Cod village. She was aware of guests passing through the foyer only yards away and did not want family business, or family tensions, put on display. She tried to step around him but he blocked her with his body. Her arm throbbed beneath his fingers.

“*Don* Pareto hasn’t opened the last of his gifts,” Enzo said. “It’s fitting that you remain by his side until the celebration is over.”

“My father and I don’t need you to mediate our relationship,” Rica said sharply, wrenching her arm from his grasp, not caring about the bruise that would result. When she heard footsteps in the hallway behind her and realized someone, probably one of the guards, was approaching, she smiled brightly and took advantage of the opportunity to walk quickly away. As she heard Enzo greet the newcomer, she hastened around another corner and slid open the heavy walnut doors to her father’s study. As she closed them behind her, she muttered vehemently, “Bastard.”

The study occupied the entire length of one wing and was furnished with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, heavy masculine leather sofas and chairs, and thick Oriental carpets on the dark wood floors. The only light at the moment came from a single Tiffany lamp that stood on an antique table in front of wide French windows. The view beyond was of the circular drive and fountain in front of the mansion. At just after midnight on Saturday night, with her father’s sixtieth birthday celebration in full swing, the fountain was illuminated with spotlights, with sheets of sparkling water cascading over carved marble statuary, and the drive was filled with Bentleys, Mercedeses, and the occasional Lamborghini. The muted lighting and the smell of rich leather and old books were a soothing respite to the noise of the well-wishers, sycophants, and enemies disguised as friends.

Rica leaned her head back against the door, her arms behind her, both hands still clasping the doorknob, and closed her eyes. How she hated these events, being forced to socialize with her father’s business associates, most of whom looked at her as if she were for sale—just another of her father’s *objets d’art* on display for their entertainment. Of course, they never allowed *him* to see their thinly veiled expressions of lust and greed. It was even more trying to behave civilly toward Enzo. She shivered, still feeling the steel of his fingers bite into her skin and the proprietary way his eyes moved over her body as if she were naked.

“Bastard,” Rica repeated.

“Forgive me,” someone said from the shadows at the opposite end of the room. “I apologize, Ms. Pareto, for intruding on your solitude.”

Rica flinched inwardly, but gave no outward sign of alarm. She had been carefully schooled from childhood to keep her emotions under check. She turned her head slowly, unsure whether her unexpected company was male or female. The outline of a slender figure in dark trousers and pale shirt did not immediately answer the question for her. She was certain, however, that she had never heard that voice before. She would have remembered the rich, silky tones that rolled like honey over her skin. “What are you doing in here?”

“One of your father’s...assistants...told me I could make a private call in here,” the woman lied effortlessly. She pocketed the wafer-thin listening device she had been about to attach to the rear surface of Alfonse Pareto’s computer console, where the electronic activity from the other equipment would help conceal it during a cursory sweep of the room for bugs. She stepped forward into the light and extended her hand. “Carter Wayne, Ms. Pareto.”

“I’m afraid you were misinformed,” Rica said coolly as she perfunctorily shook the surprisingly broad, smooth hand. “This is my father’s private study.”

“Then I must apologize again.” Carter cursed inwardly at the rotten timing. She’d been certain that all the partygoers would be in the ballroom while *Don Pareto* accepted their homage and their gifts.

Rica said nothing, hiding her suspicions as she studied the stranger. A lifetime of growing up in her father’s house had taught her that nothing was ever as it appeared on the surface, and oftentimes those closest to you could do the most harm. Up close it was evident that what she had taken for a slender build was actually a sleekly muscular body, judging by the slight pull of the dark charcoal trousers over taut thighs and the stretch of pale linen over arms and shoulders too prominent to be fashionably feminine. She did not see any evidence of a gun, and she was good at recognizing the telltale bulge of a concealed holster or the uneven weight of a revolver in a five-hundred-dollar purse. Taking in the thick chestnut hair that fell almost haphazardly to her collar and the calm, hazel eyes that gazed back at her, apparently unperturbed by her perusal, Rica was quite certain that she had never seen this woman before. This was not the kind of woman that her father’s friends brought to social events, which meant that she must be a business associate.

And that was unfortunate, because she was very attractive. “Did you finish your call?”

“I did,” Carter lied again, indicating the cell phone cradled in the palm of her left hand. Actually she’d been about to call her contact to check the audio relay in the microphone when Rica had surprised her by coming into the room. The last time she’d seen the Pareto heiress, she’d been fending off the advances of yet another guest. It wasn’t hard to understand why, either. Rica elevated the little black dress that every beautiful woman seemed to have in her closet for evening affairs such as this far beyond the realm of *haute couture*. Thin black straps barely broke the elegant lines of her toned shoulders, the neckline slashed down between small, shapely breasts, and the rest of the black silk sheath clung to lithe curves like rain streaming down a windowpane. Small-boned but not delicate, her body beckoned the sweep of a palm and the brush of lips. Realizing that Rica was waiting for her to elaborate, Carter forced the image from her mind. “I was just on my way out when you came in. I take it you were trying to escape someone’s unwanted company, and now I’ve foisted mine upon you.”

“Hardly escaping,” Rica said, moving a few feet away to put distance between them. There was nothing threatening about the stranger—in fact, just the opposite. Her quiet, intense gaze and unusual directness were unexpectedly appealing. “Just looking for a few minutes of peace and quiet.” She regarded Carter thoughtfully. “What is it that you do for my father?”

Carter laughed. “What makes you think I do anything at all for him? I could be someone’s date.”

“Somehow, I don’t think so.” Rica smiled, although her eyes remained wary. “The men here tend to have women who look a little... softer... than you on their arms. And that was meant as a compliment, by the way.”

“Thank you. I’ll take it as such.” Carter was unable to decide if Alfonse Pareto’s daughter was flirting with her or not. Intelligence indicated she was a lesbian, but now was not the time to overplay her interest, not when she’d been found in slightly suspect circumstances. “You’re right, I’m here by invitation of mutual associates. I’m an attorney, but most of my dealings involve brokering imports for several large companies.”

Drugs, Rica thought, surprised by the quick surge of disappointment. Why should she care what Carter Wayne’s particular illegal activity

might be? She was part of the world Rica inhabited by circumstances of birth, not choice, but a world she understood well. Rica walked to the door, pulled it open, and gestured to the hall. “You should return to the party.”

It was not a suggestion.

“Of course.” Carter stepped past her, careful that their bodies did not touch. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Pareto.”

Rica did not answer but watched until Carter had disappeared before following her down the hall. When she reached the foyer she turned in the opposite direction, away from the revelry. She ignored the faint racing of her pulse as she collected her coat and purse, nodded to the guard at the door, and left the celebration behind. Carter Wayne was undeniably attractive, but like almost everyone else in the house, she was not to be trusted.



Two hours later, Carter completed a circuitous route through the quiet Brookline streets and pulled her black Explorer into the parking lot of one of the few convenience stores in the neighborhood. She stopped next to a dark panel van and watched the rearview mirror for a full minute to see if any vehicles followed her into the lot. After checking out the few cars parked in the well-lit area toward the front of the building, she was satisfied that she had not been followed from Pareto’s. She got out and rapped on the side of the van.

The door immediately slid open and she climbed inside. Two men and one woman waited in the cramped quarters, surrounded by electronic surveillance equipment. The older of the men wore pressed chinos, a polo shirt with the Massachusetts State Police logo on the breast pocket, and a thin headset coiled around his neck.

“Since I’m not getting anything over the wire,” her partner, Kevin Shaughnessy, said, “I’m guessing you didn’t get it planted.”

“Ricarda Pareto walked in on me about two seconds too soon,” Carter said, squatting down so her head wouldn’t bump the ceiling. “That wasn’t the way we were supposed to meet.”

Marilyn Allen, a sharp-faced blonde wearing the regulation FBI navy suit and a perpetual frown, grunted in displeasure. “Jesus, it’s taken us six months to get you in there. All we need now is for you to blow your cover. Or worse, Vincent Rizzo’s.”

Carter bit back a sarcastic remark, refraining from pointing out that none of the regional FBI agents, including Allen and her partner Bill Toome, had the skill to work undercover, and they never would have gotten *this* far inside without her. Carter, like every other state and local law-enforcement agent, believed that federal agents were nothing but glorified accountants, good for gathering information but a liability in the field. But it was the age of détente when everyone at least paid lip service to working together, and she kept her opinions to herself.

Kevin, in his usual implacable manner, ignored the grumblings of Allen and Toome. “What about Rizzo? Is he holding up all right?”

“He’s wasn’t happy about bringing me right inside the family, but, considering his other choice is jail, he’s managing.” Carter rubbed the back of her neck, belatedly realizing that she was far more tense than she’d realized. Tonight had been the first time that Rizzo, a trusted, high-ranking Pareto captain and a very reluctant FBI informant, had actually tied himself to her in public. He had introduced her as a business associate, thereby guaranteeing her legitimacy in the eyes of the organized crime members and sealing his own demise if her cover was ever blown.

“That’s good, because he’s been acting a little nervous,” Allen said with obvious relief. “We want to get him wired before he panics. That will save us months of trying to infiltrate the organization one operative at a time.”

“If you put a wire on him, you’re signing his death warrant,” Carter said. “Sooner or later someone will pick up on it and you’ll find him in pieces in the bay.”

“As long as it’s later, that might save the taxpayers some money,” Toome, Allen’s fellow FBI agent, muttered.

“Let’s call it a night,” Kevin said quickly. “We’ll meet tomorrow morning with the whole team and go over what we’ve got.” He glanced at Carter. “I think the daughter will be the key to at least one big question—how Pareto’s hiding the money trail. She’s perfectly situated to move big bucks through those art galleries of hers. She’s got to know where it’s coming from.”

“And from what we’ve heard,” Allen said, not bothering to hide the disdain in her voice, “you should be just her type, Wayne.”

Carter stared at her. They hadn’t worked together all that long, but Allen had taken an obvious and immediate dislike to her and didn’t bother to hide it. *Guess the FBI hasn’t heard the directive on détente.*

“Maybe it’s not such a bad thing she saw you tonight,” Toome offered into the breach. “She might trust you more—you know, since only the upper-level players got invited.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Carter said as she pushed the door open and stepped out into the dark. There was no point in telling them that the one thing she had *not* seen in Ricarda Pareto’s eyes had been trust. For an instant she’d thought she’d detected appreciation, perhaps even a little bit of interest, but that had quickly been eclipsed by suspicion. And oddly, something that had resembled disappointment. It wasn’t at all what she had expected from the woman who stood to inherit one of the largest organized crime machines on the East Coast.

As Carter drove toward her apartment in Cambridge, she contemplated the goal of the joint state police, DEA, and FBI task force that she had been part of for almost a year—to shut down one of the major drug portals on the Northeastern Seaboard. With the amount of cocaine and heroin being run through the Port of Boston, the Justice Department estimated that millions of dollars were being laundered and carefully siphoned into the operations of the Pareto family annually. Dozens of agents from almost as many branches of law enforcement were working on the project—tracking cargo ship and truck manifests, money trails, and street-level drug distribution patterns. *Her* assignment was much more up close and personal. She was going to have to seduce Ricarda Pareto, or at least convince the crime boss’s daughter that that was her intention. Having met Rica, Carter didn’t think that feigning attraction to her would be too hard a task. What might be difficult was remembering that it was all strictly an act.