

Jack Bertolino's early morning shower gave up the ghost long before he swiped his long-term pass to gain entry to the Staten Island Ferry. Once he landed in the City, he headed for Tango 23's base of operations. There he picked up his NYPD plain-wrap sedan. The ninety-degree temperature, wetted by ninety-five degree humidity, made a mockery of the air conditioner in the Ford Crown Vic as it crawled through commuter traffic headed for LaGuardia. The air was thick, the stench of exhaust on the Grand Central Parkway overwhelmed as Jack dodged a pothole, rattled into the airport parking lot and came to an engine-clicking stop next to DEA agent Kenny Ortega's government issue.

The joint narcotics task force case was in its sixth month. Jack had agreed to meet a few old friends and a new confidential informant who had arrived from Miami via Colombia. This CI claimed to be able to provide entry into the inner workings of Manuel Alvarez's illicit drug operation.

Alvarez, a notorious Colombian trafficker, had been on Jack's radar for more than a year. Alvarez was responsible for importing a thousand keys of cocaine into Miami on a monthly basis, and the poison was dripping into New York City. Jack wanted Alvarez's head on a pike.

At thirty-eight, Jack was already a lieutenant, the boss of the narco-rangers called Tango 23. His crew had great success shutting down drug and money-laundering cells in the five boroughs, piling millions of dollars of the cartel's money into the city's coffers.

Jack was a handsome, unpretentious man with thick dark hair he wore brushed back. Creases on his striking face were a roadmap of years exposed to the elements doing undercover narcotics work on the streets of New York City.

As he stepped out of the car, a hot gust of wind blew grit into Jack's eyes and mouth. It also blasted the long hair of a young woman exiting the passenger side of Ortega's vehicle, obscuring her face. The deafening sound of a wide-body jet thundered overhead as Jack spit and wiped his stinging eyes.

The woman hand-combed strands of blonde away from her face. When Jack's vision cleared, he was momentarily stopped in his tracks. The woman was drop-dead gorgeous.

He nodded to Sal Traina, a member of the Tango group, and shook the hand of Mia Ferrero as Ortega made the introductions. Mia, an ex-Miss Colombia, was the confidential informant.

Kenny Ortega, the Miami-based DEA agent, was Jack's partner on the drug task force.

Nick Aprea, a detective from the LAPD narcotics division, had flown in from Los Angeles, where a large quantity of the illicit drugs ended up. He ducked low as he slid out of the back seat, wearing a black leather jacket in the New York heat, and led with a wolfish grin as he proffered a hand the size of a baseball glove. "Jack, good to be back in business." Aprea was tall, hard, and took life as it came. He had arrived with serious skin in the game. A few years back, his partner had been gut-shot in an Alvarez-Delgado operation. Nick had put fifteen hundred keys of coke on the table, and his partner had been put in an early grave. When Jack invited him to the party, Nick jumped at the chance to deliver some retribution.

Mia signed on to the joint operation between the NYPD, Miami DEA, and LAPD to infiltrate Manuel Alvarez's operation and help put away a heavy hitter for the Colombian cartel. She was a proven commodity, already wealthy from delivering large quantities of cocaine and cash to the United States government's coffers in their ongoing war on drugs. The Feds had a formula in place for paying informants. The bigger the

bust, the larger the payoff. A nice way to fatten your wallet, an easy way to die.

Mia started playing Jack—who had a reputation of being a straight arrow—from the moment she touched down at LaGuardia Airport. She'd been summoned for a meeting downtown, organized to get a feel for the principals, define the case, and plan a strategy.

It was time to roll. Sal was sitting in the passenger seat of Jack's car when Mia rapped on the window. Sal slid out, and Mia stepped in seconds before Jack pulled out of the lot.

"I hope you don't mind. It was so crowded in the other car," she said.

Jack wasn't thrilled. "It's okay," he said, always careful when spending time with a CI. First of all, rules and parameters of the relationship had to be set in place, until the informant was proven trustworthy. Too many things could go wrong. Jack was career building and didn't need any bullshit slowing him down. He had a line in the sand when dealing with informants, and although he always treated them with respect, sharing his personal life was a nonstarter.

Mia started talking rapid fire. Her English was lightly accented but flawless, and Jack chalked her excited banter to nerves.

"I wasn't supposed to fly first class, but I used my frequent-flyer miles, and thank God because the plane was full, and I was in the air for so many hours. Should I call you Jack or Mr.

Bertolino?"

"Lieutenant works."

"Oh, very formal. It's so hot in here," Mia play-whined, and undid the second button on her blouse as she turned to face Jack. "Are you a by-the-numbers kind of guy?"

"Something like that."

"I know a lot of Italians in Medellín. Not a formal one in the mix. Very sexy though, Italians in general, don't you think?"

—

Jack kept his eyes trained on the traffic. "Never given it much thought."

"Oh, I have. Very much so."

Jack wasn't going there. He hoped Mia would lose herself in the approaching view of the New York skyline and stop talking. Instead, she seemed content to stare at Jack who was growing increasingly uncomfortable, but didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with a woman who could break his case wide open.

"And the police in general, what do they call it? Mucho testosterone. You can't hide it, Jack—I mean, Lieutenant." Mia's smile was sly, and Jack kept his eyes on the road, not wanting the conversation to get out of hand.

"Your nose," she said knowingly, "that must have hurt."

Jack had a bump on his otherwise straight Roman nose. It was a gift from a crack dealer named Trey, who he traded punches with outside the Red Hook projects in Brooklyn. Trey went to jail, and Jack had a reminder every morning when he shaved to keep his right fist higher and jab with his left.

"Do you like sex on the beach?" Jack hoped she was talking about the cocktail and didn't respond. "What about sex in the car?" Mia said and ran a manicured nail down his thigh. "I love giving blow jobs, I mean, giving oral sex."

Jack shot a look in the rearview mirror, tried to remain stoic, but he was getting hot under the collar. He was doing sixty and Kenny Ortega's car was tight on his bumper. Jack glanced in the rearview again, and saw the men in the trailing car laughing.

He'd had enough. He signaled and pulled the wheel hard to the right, sending Mia sliding against the passenger door. As horns around him started blaring, he skidded to a tire-screaming stop on the shoulder of the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway. He was followed by Ortega, Nick, and a few other smirking detectives in the second car.

Jack knew he'd been set up. He picked up the radio and raised Ortega. "Get this woman out of my car."

Mia feigned being hurt. "Is it something I said?" Over the intercom, Ortega and his crew were howling. Mia jumped out of Jack's car, her

face split into a sultry grin, and she winked. "Just having some fun, Lieutenant."

Jack was the only one on the crew not laughing. He pulled back into traffic, riding solo, and dialed his home number.

Jeanine answered on the second ring. "Are you all right, Jack?"

"Huh?"

"An afternoon call. It's usually bad news."

"Oh, no, not today. Just wanted to hear your voice."

"Hmmm, okay... Good." Jeannine could read Jack's mood and wasn't buying it.

Jack started to relax, the earth rotating back on its axis. "Actually, I just made a pickup at LaGuardia, had a moment."

"Okay. Are you going to make it home for dinner?"

"Don't wait on me. We have a TAC meeting, breaking in a new informant. You know how that goes."

Jeannine knew all too well what that meant. And Jack was hit with the familiar chill on the other end of the line. "Okay, Jack. Your son's asking what happened to his father."

"Tell him I miss him."

"Tell him yourself, Jack," Jeannine said quietly before hanging up the phone.

Jack stifled his growing anger, fully aware that he was an absentee father. From his point of view, he was building a secure life for his family, and they all had to make sacrifices. It was a team effort. He knew he was being defensive, but he also knew what it took to rise through the ranks of the NYPD.

Jack snapped out of it when Kenny beeped his horn and rocketed past in the fast lane. He rolled his eyes, slightly amused as Mia, sitting in the back seat, nailed him with a look that was purely X-rated.

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