

# HONOR RECLAIMED

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Thursday, September 13, 2001*

Secret Service Agent Cameron Roberts opened her eyes in the one place she had never expected to awaken—on the second floor of the White House in a 200-year-old bed. A Thomas Sheraton original. And curled up naked beside her was the daughter of the president of the United States. Blair Powell's cheek was pillowed against Cam's breast, her breath soft and warm, caressing Cam's skin with the to-and-fro cadence of sleep. Cam cradled Blair with one arm curved around her shoulders, her fingertips gently smoothing the bare skin of Blair's upper arm in long slow strokes.

The room was dark, the heavy drapes pulled closed over the floor-to-ceiling leaded-glass windows on the far side of the spacious room. She judged it was probably not yet five and still dark outside. The house seemed utterly quiet, although she knew that at the far end of the hall the president slept and that one floor below, the halls would be teeming with Secret Service agents and members of the Metropolitan Police division who patrolled the White House grounds. While the first family was in the private quarters on the second and third floors, the Secret Service did not physically guard them. But as soon as they left that sanctuary and stepped into the public areas, sensors located in every hallway and room tracked their movements and the Secret Service agents assigned to each family member resumed their surveillance.

She was one of those Secret Service agents, and the family member she was charged to protect was lying in her arms. A year ago she would have denied even the possibility of such an occurrence, but that was

before she had been reassigned from the investigative arm of the Secret Service to the protective division, and had reluctantly accepted the responsibility of safeguarding Blair Powell. Now, Blair was central to her life, and although protecting her remained her solemn duty, it was also the critical focus of her days. The urgency and importance of that charge had always been clear to her, but never more so than in the last forty-eight hours when terror had struck the nation in the form of multiple hijacked commercial airliners that had been turned into enormous airborne missiles. A simultaneous, near-successful assault on Blair within the confines of her own heavily fortified Manhattan home merely underscored the first daughter's terrible vulnerability with devastating precision. Unconsciously, Cam tightened her grip on her sleeping lover.

"It's all right," Blair murmured, stroking her palm up the center of Cam's abdomen to her chest. "I'm right here."

Cam rested her cheek against the top of Blair's head and covered Blair's hand with her own, pressing the warm fingers to her breast. "How can you know what I'm thinking when you're asleep?"

Blair laughed softly. "I can sense you when you switch into protective mode. Your whole body feels like you're ready to throw yourself in front of me, even when we're lying in bed."

"Sorry."

"You don't need to be. In a crazy kind of way, I like it." Blair pressed a kiss to the side of Cam's breast. "At least, I like closing my eyes and feeling totally safe. I don't like the idea of you protecting me with your body for real."

"I know."

No other words were needed. Because Cam had put herself between Blair and danger more than once, and the first time had nearly cost her life. Blair's guilt over that event had almost kept them apart, and they still lived with an uneasy truce regarding Cam's role as Blair's personal security chief—a position that at any moment could force Cam to sacrifice her own life for Blair's. And now, in the aftermath of tragedy, that possibility had escalated a thousandfold.

"I can't believe it really happened," Blair whispered. "God. All those innocent people."

"No," Cam replied, her voice thick with fatigue and sorrow. "Neither can I." She sighed. "I guess it's more fair to say I don't *want* to believe it. But I *am* lying here with you in the official presidential

residence, and only something as catastrophic as a direct assault on you—Christ, on the heart of the nation—could have brought that about.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it, that it took something like that to bring us together under my father’s roof.” Blair rubbed her cheek against Cam’s breast, seeking comfort. “Love wasn’t enough, but the death of thousands was. Now the fact that you and I are lovers is of no interest to anyone.”

“It doesn’t matter to anyone *today*,” Cam said with a trace of bitterness, “but in a week or a month, it will. When the media frenzy over this has wound down some, then your personal life will be headline news again.”

Blair raised up on an elbow and struggled to see Cam’s face in the dim light. She was unused to hearing frustration and anger in her lover’s voice and knew even without being able to make out Cam’s chiseled features that her dark gray eyes would be nearly black with pain. It was rare for Cam to be unable to hide her anguish. She always dealt with reality, no matter how difficult, with a cool head and a steady hand. But then, they, like every other citizen of the United States, had been deeply shocked by the events of September 11. Their mad flight to safety from New York City and the subsequent evacuation to DC had left them little time to deal with the aftermath.

Cam had lost one agent in the assault on Blair’s apartment, her second in command—Mac Phillips—had been critically wounded, and another agent under her command had actually been part of the assassination attempt. Blair had often seen Cam assume responsibility for things over which she had no control. It was one of the things that Blair loved best about her as well as one of the things that frustrated her to no end. She ached knowing that Cam was blaming herself now, and suffering.

“What happened in New York wasn’t your fault.”

“Blair,” Cam said gently. Wordlessly, she kissed her. She wanted to point out that one of *her* team members had come within a heartbeat of shooting Blair, but she didn’t want to resurrect that terrifying memory in Blair’s consciousness when it was still so fresh. She knew that the horror of that moment was not over for either of them, but for now, they had to deal with more immediate concerns. If there had been one traitor on her team, there might be others. And it was far from clear that the nation itself was safe, that another attack wasn’t imminent. She and every member of the law enforcement community had to be concerned

with one thing, and one thing only—ensuring that the nation and those critical to its survival were safe. Her official part in that was to protect Blair. Her private obligation was to track down those responsible for the attempt on her lover’s life. “You’re going to need to stay here for a while.”

It was Blair’s turn to stiffen. “I don’t live here. My home is in New York City. My place is with you.”

“Your safety is what matters, and this is the safest place in the world for you right now.”

“And where will you be, Cam? Where will *you* be while I’m sequestered here, with someone watching my movements twenty-four hours a day? When will we have time to be together? Where will we have the privacy to touch?” Blair hadn’t raised her voice, but her tone was rough with fury. “Is that what you want? For us to be separated?”

Cam slid her fingers beneath the thick blond hair at the nape of Blair’s neck and massaged the taut muscles on either side of her spine. Her voice was quiet, calm, because she knew that Blair’s anger was born of pain. “You know I don’t want that. I love you. I want to lie down with you every night and open my eyes with you beside me every morning. I want that more than anything in my life.”

“Oh Cam,” Blair sighed, resting her forehead against her lover’s. “I’m sorry. It’s just the last thing I want right now is for you to... disappear.”

“Jesus, I wouldn’t.” In a swift lift of her hips, Cam rolled them both over until Blair was beneath her, their legs entwined. She levered her body above Blair’s on her bent arms and lowered her head to kiss her. She had meant only to reassure her, but the first touch of Blair’s lips to hers sent a shock of need coursing through her. A kaleidoscope of images skittered across her mind—Foster with his automatic pointed at Blair’s heart, a fusillade of bullets streaming around her and Blair in the alley behind Blair’s building, Parker and Mac lying in crimson pools of their own blood. *They came so close to killing you. Jesus, I almost lost you.*

Cam moaned, an agony of loss in the quiet sound, and pressed her body hard against Blair’s, her tongue thrusting deep inside Blair’s mouth. She needed her, needed to feel Blair’s heart beating in her every cell.

Blair felt the call of Cam’s passion, and her blood fired hot in an instant. She was always ready for Cam—ready to hold her, take her, give

herself to her—ready to answer whatever need arose between them. It had always been that way, since the first moment they'd touched. For the last two days they had run for their lives, uncertain of when or from where the next assault might come. She had seen agents—not just her guards, but her friends—shot and killed. She'd seen her lover struck yet again by a bullet that had been meant for her. The sudden reality of all she might have lost swept over her, and she drove her hands into Cam's hair, clenching her fists in the thick dark locks as she arched into Cam's body, desperate to obliterate any barrier between them. A moan that might have been a cry caught in her throat and ended on a gasp as Cam drove a hand between their bodies, between her legs, and inside her. She wrenched her head away from the kiss.

“Oh God.” She clamped her fingers hard around Cam's wrist to still her motion. “Stop. You'll make me come.”

“Yes.” Cam's voice was rough, hard, but her hand was gentle as she pushed deeper, then stroked. “Yes. Yes.”

Had Blair wanted to wait, she couldn't have, because the unexpected force of her lover's desire had already broken her control, and her body surged toward the first peak. But she had no desire to hold anything back. Cam's need was her need; Cam's passion, her own. They gave and took, called and answered, with nothing between them but the whisper of skin on skin. They were as close as they had ever been, as joined as they ever could be.

When she came, Blair pressed her face to Cam's neck, her open lips against the heartbeat in Cam's throat. Her cry of release was one of wonder and surrender, and for long moments after, she felt Cam still deep within her. “I love you,” she finally murmured.

“I love you. Jesus,” Cam groaned, “I love you.”

“Cam?”

“Hmm?” Cam lay full-length along Blair's body, fingers still gently enclosed by the warm, faintly pulsing muscles inside her. She never wanted to move. When they were like this, so intimately connected, she forgot everything that haunted her. There was no danger, no threat of loss, no loneliness. All she knew was the rightness of being with this one woman. She sighed and rested her cheek against Blair's shoulder.

“We just made love in the White House.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Cam stiffened. “Jesus.” She raised her head and squinted in the gray light that stole around the edges of the window drapes. She could just make out the laughter in Blair's blue eyes. “I

think we may have committed a state offense.”

“Several.”

Cam shifted her hips and pressed her pelvis lightly against the hand she still cupped between Blair thighs. “Wanna do it again?”

Blair’s lids fluttered at the sudden pressure deep inside. Her laughter fled on a soft moan. “Oh yes.”

“Let’s try it a little slower this time.” Cam eased away enough to bring her mouth to Blair’s breast, where she lightly circled one small, tight nipple with her tongue.

“Why?” Blair curled her fingers on the back of Cam’s neck and forced her lover’s mouth harder against her breast. “I’ve never minded fast.”

Cam bit slowly as she began the soft slide of her fingers through Blair’s slick heat. “I know, but I want—”

The bedside phone rang, and they both froze. A second later when Cam started to withdraw, Blair murmured, “Wait,” and stretched an arm out toward the phone.

“Blair,” Cam said urgently, “it might be your father. You can’t talk to him with us...like this.”

Blair found the receiver and pressed it to her chest to muffle her words. “Why not?”

Carefully, Cam pulled away. In a tight whisper, she said, “Because. It’s against protocol.”

“Oh, Commander. I do love you.” Blair brought the phone to her mouth. “Yes?” She glanced at Cam and raised an eyebrow. “Hi, Dad... Uh-huh, she’s right here.”

Cam groaned.

“Yes. All right...What time?... We’ll be there.”

Blair returned the phone to the bedside table and rolled back against Cam’s body. She pressed close, wrapping both arms around Cam’s neck. “You have twenty minutes to finish what you just started.”

“And then what?”

“We have a meeting with the president.”

“Christ. Talk about performance anxiety.”

“Then don’t talk.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Paula, sweetie,” Renée Savard whispered, gently tracing her fingertips over the smooth skin of the woman sleeping beside her. The sky had lightened just enough to paint the surprisingly youthful face of her lover with the soft, pale colors of dawn. At just after five, there was no sound in the hallway outside their hotel room, and they could have been anywhere in the world, just the two of them, alone with all that mattered within the circle of their embrace. For one wild moment, she wished she never had to leave that room. That she didn’t have to return to the site of a horror so unimaginable that the mind rebelled and the heart was torn asunder. For the first time in her life, she wished that she weren’t an FBI agent, that she hadn’t sworn to stand for what was good and right and just. What she wanted was to close her eyes and lose herself in the sweet solace of this new love. She leaned down and kissed the corner of Paula Stark’s mouth. “It’s time.”

Without opening her eyes, Stark replied, “Did you sleep?”

*No. Because I knew what I would dream about.* Renée pressed close against Stark’s back, hoping that the warmth would penetrate the cold that had overtaken her days before and which she feared might never thaw. She rubbed her cheek against Stark’s shoulder and then kissed the angle of her jaw. “I have to go.”

“I know.”

Renée caught her breath at the sight of a single tear escaping from beneath Stark’s long dark lashes. “Oh no, sweetie. Honey. Don’t.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...I keep remembering how I felt when I heard that the South Tower collapsed. I knew you were there. I thought that you had been killed.” Stark turned onto her back and opened her eyes.

Their normally vibrant brown was dull with fatigue and the remnants of a fear that she could not banish. Her voice cracked with the effort of holding back more tears. “It was as if this huge pit opened up in me and swallowed...everything. My heart and my soul just...died. After that, I was still walking around...doing my job, but there was nothing inside.”

Renée caught her lower lip between her teeth to stop the trembling. Her ocean blue eyes swam with tears she feared to shed lest they never stop. “I know. I *do* know. I felt the same horrible emptiness when I heard there’d been an assault on the Aerie and that there were agents down.” She closed her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. She couldn’t. The memory was a physical pain. “I know you’re never far from Blair. All I could think was that I’d lost you.” She opened her eyes, met Paula’s, and managed a weak smile. “The last thing in the world I want right now is to let you out of my sight.”

“Maybe we can just stay here. Order room service. Unplug the phone. Hold each other for a year or so.” Stark searched Renée’s face, her eyes clouded with a mixture of hope and sadness.

Solemnly, Renée nodded. “It sounds perfect to me. Except you have a duty to Blair, and I have one to the thousands who were murdered on Tuesday.”

“I know we can’t just turn our backs on all of that, but sometimes it just...it feels like we’re always saying goodbye.”

Stark turned away, but not before Renée caught the glimmer of despair that eclipsed her normally exuberant expression. She slid down in bed until they were face-to-face and their bodies touched. With an arm around Stark, she circled her palm down the center of Stark’s back as she kissed her. She kissed her until the memory of terror and the heartbreak of unimaginable loss faded to a faint scream in the recesses of her consciousness. Then she drew away. “We’ll never say goodbye, okay? We’ll just say ‘until soon.’ Because no matter where I am or what I’m doing, you’re always in my heart, in my mind. Always, Paula. I love you.”

“I’m not usually like this,” Stark murmured, struggling to keep her voice even. “I’m tougher than this.”

“Oh, I know.” Renée’s voice was gentle. “It was that tough Secret Service agent I fell in love with the very first day we met.” She kissed

Paula again, her lips moving with tender insistence over Stark's full, generous mouth. "The one who made it very clear I was on *her* territory and not altogether welcome."

"Well," Stark said, grasping Renée's shoulder and pushing her flat on her back. The bullet wound in her upper arm throbbed, but she didn't care. She needed Renée. Just Renée. She followed her over and caught both of Renée's wrists in her hands, pinning her to the bed. "You're on my territory now too. And *very* welcome."

"And just how do you intend to stake your claim?" Renée's blue eyes were suddenly filled with questions.

Stark stopped halfway to the next kiss and searched her lover's face. The last two days had changed everything. A month ago they had talked about a three-week trial of living together. Just to see how it worked out, as if they had all the time in the world. And maybe they still did. And maybe Renée would walk out the door in thirty minutes and never come back. "Maybe we should start with you moving the rest of your stuff into my apartment."

"Maybe." There was a note of uncharacteristic uncertainty in Renée's voice. "I don't know what's going to happen when I get back to Manhattan. There was no real organization up there after...after the Towers. Every available agent was activated, but most of us weren't even working with our regular squads. We were just thrown into it. I got pulled off the Tower investigation almost immediately and sent up to the Aerie because of the attack on Blair. Then, eight hours later, I was reassigned to one of the counterterrorism units and back at Ground Zero. I might not even *be* in New York City after today."

"You have to live somewhere." Stark placed a quick kiss on Renée's mouth. She smiled, but her dark eyes were serious. "It doesn't matter where you're stationed, you still need a place to call home."

"I need...a little time." Renée brushed her fingers over Stark's cheek, then kissed her to soften her words. "It's not about loving you. It's just...these last few days. Sometimes I feel...numb. And then, suddenly, it's like every nerve is screaming." She laughed shakily. "I'm a bit of a mess."

"You were right there, honey. You were *in* the South Tower. I can't even imagine how bad that must have been." Stark eased back onto her side and drew Renée into her arms. "And then you worked for two days

straight in the middle of all that horror. It's no wonder things feel off."

"I just don't want to start our life together when I'm not sure I can be totally there."

Stark's stomach went queasy, but she managed to keep her expression calm. The very thought of Renée going away, leaving her somehow, not loving her, was terrifying. She made the monumental effort to concentrate on what was happening for Renée and to set aside her own fear. Still, she barely managed to hide her hurt. "I love you. We don't have to decide anything right away."

Renée pressed her face to the curve of Stark's neck. She couldn't see the clock, but she could hear it ticking in her mind. Their time was almost up. She wanted to be close, she wanted to make love, and yet inside, she felt so cold. "Would you mind very much just holding me? Is that all right?"

"It's more than all right." Stark kissed her forehead and held her tightly. "It's everything."



The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president's national security adviser exited the president's private dining room just as Blair and Cam walked down the hall. Both men nodded to Blair and ignored Cam as they passed. Secret Service agents were no more than background noise in the normal day-to-day life of the first family and were rarely acknowledged as individuals.

Blair knocked and, at the sound of a deep male voice calling *Come in*, pushed the heavy walnut door open and entered. Her father sat alone at a white-linen-covered table in the center of the room with a cup of coffee by his right hand and a half-finished omelet on a china plate pushed to one side. A stack of documents rested in front of him.

"Hi, Dad."

Andrew Powell, a trim and vigorous fifty-year-old with thick blond hair a shade darker than Blair's, was already dressed for the day in a white shirt and dark trousers. When he removed his reading glasses and smiled at Blair, his cobalt blue eyes were only faintly shadowed with fatigue. He showed no other outward signs of stress. "Hi, honey. Cam."

“Sir,” Cam replied. She was always just a bit startled to see the strong resemblance between her lover and the president of the United States. Automatically, she stopped a few feet inside the door, in the position she would ordinarily take when guarding Blair in a social situation. Far enough away to afford privacy, but close enough to intercept an assailant or interpose her own body between Blair’s and any source of danger.

Blair stopped and turned back with a soft smile. She extended her hand. “Cameron. Let’s sit down with my father.”

Cam glanced at the president.

“There’s plenty of coffee,” Andrew Powell said, gesturing to the silver carafe. “You two could probably use some.” He glanced at his watch. “I have thirty minutes before I’m due in the operations room, and we have some things to talk about.”

Cam and Blair took seats on the opposite side of the table and helped themselves to coffee. Then they waited.

“Blair,” he said, “everything all right?”

Blair lifted a shoulder. What could she say? *I’ve been assaulted and nearly killed. My lover’s been shot. Some lunatics have massacred thousands of people blocks from where I live. The world has gone crazy and I just want to be left alone.* “I’m okay, Dad.”

The president studied her a moment longer, then nodded slightly and looked at Cam. “I’ve been briefed by the directors of both the Secret Service and the FBI about what happened at Blair’s on Tuesday morning. I’d like your report.”

“I apologize, sir. I haven’t had a chance to prepare that yet.”

Powell shook his head. “I’m not interested in paperwork. I want your opinion. I want to know what you think happened—and I want to know how and why it’s possible that someone nearly assassinated my daughter in her own apartment.”

“Dad,” Blair said quietly. “Cam isn’t respons—”

Both Cam and the president spoke at once.

“I am—”

“She is—”

The president held up a hand. “There’s a difference between being responsible and being at fault.” He smiled at Blair. “I have no doubt that Cam guarded you better than anyone else could have. What I need

to know now is whether it's going to happen again." He swung his gaze back to Cam. "And how to prevent it."

Cam nodded gravely. "I agree. I don't have enough information yet to give you a complete report, Mr. President, but I can tell you that four heavily armed men with a knowledge of both the layout of Blair's apartment building and the placement of our agents carried out a well-timed and well-conceived assault." Her eyes never wavered from his. "I can also tell you that at least one of the Secret Service agents on Blair's personal security team was involved."

"Just one?"

"I don't know that, sir. But I intend to find out."

"Gut feeling?"

"He acted alone. The probability of two rogue agents assigned simultaneously to Blair's team is not impossible, but extremely unlikely. My feeling is that Foster is the key, and that's where our investigation needs to start."

"Our investigation?" The president's tone was mild but his gaze was intensely focused on Cam's face.

"I'm not leaving this to anyone else, sir. I spent twelve years in the investigative division of the Secret Service. I know how to uncover and infiltrate clandestine organizations."

Blair turned in her seat and stared at Cam. "And just when did you decide this?"

Cam shifted her attention to her lover. "It wasn't something that needed to be decided. The minute they came through that door, it was done."

For a millisecond, Blair closed her eyes, then snapped them open; her blue eyes were on fire. "You're not doing this. We have the entire FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency, and I don't know what all else to do this kind of thing. It's not going to be *you*."

"Sir. You tell her."

"What?" Blair snapped. She looked at her father, her body rigid. "*What?*"

"Honey," Powell said gently. "As your father, you are my number one priority. But the number one priority of the country right now, and therefore *my* number one priority as president, is to find out what happened in Manhattan on September 11, to bring those responsible to justice, and to ensure that it never happens again. Yes, a team will be appointed to investigate the assault on you. Good people. Dedicated

people.” He sighed. “But there’s going to be pressure from all fronts to deal with the terrorist threat, and that’s going to overshadow every other agenda. I need someone leading the investigative team who won’t be sidetracked by politics—or anything else.”

“Not my lover.” Blair’s voice was as hard and cold as ice. Her hands trembled and she kept them out of sight beneath the table. “Because I know Cameron. She’ll find out who’s behind it, and she’ll go after them, and this might be the time that she doesn’t win.” She turned to Cam. “I don’t want you to do this.”

Cam’s eyes were tender, her voice gentle. “Blair. It’s the only way to be sure you’re safe.”

“It’s the right decision,” Andrew Powell added.

“I don’t care about what’s right,” Blair shouted. “I am sick to death of hearing about what’s right, about duty, and responsibility, and fucking *justice*. I’m tired of giving up everything that matters to me because of someone else’s—” Her voice broke and she looked away, covering her eyes with a trembling hand.

“Hey.” Cam slid her chair closer to Blair and wrapped an arm around her shaking shoulders. She brought her mouth close to Blair’s ear. “It’s all right. The last two days have been hell. We all need a chance to get our bearings again.” She kissed Blair’s temple. “It’s all right.”

Blair pressed her face to Cam’s neck, her arm going around Cam’s waist underneath her blazer. “I’m sorry. When they were shooting at us, when you and Paula were in front of me and all the bullets—I kept seeing you that morning on the sidewalk in front of my apartment building. I kept seeing the blood and then...then you stopped breathing. Oh God, Cam. You stopped breathing.”

“Sweetheart, it’s all right. It’s all right.” Even as she held Blair protectively, her expression grew fierce at the memory of the sick terror she’d felt not knowing if the bullets that passed her by had found their target in her lover’s body. She cut her gaze to the president’s and said with her eyes what she did not want to say aloud. Not now. Not when Blair was still so raw and the terrifying events of September 11 still so painfully vivid. *No one is going to hurt her. I’m going to be sure of that.*

He nodded, knowing that she did not blame him for sparing no one, not even her, to secure Blair’s well-being. Knowing instinctively, too, that she would not allow anyone else that sacred charge. She would

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die for his daughter, not out of duty, but out of love. “Blair, honey. Let’s all take a little while to think about it.”

Blair shifted her head on Cam’s shoulder and met her father’s gaze across the table. “It’s already decided. The two of you—you didn’t even need to have this discussion because somehow you both already knew what you were going to do. Sometimes I really hate how alike the two of you are.” She sighed and straightened. “And I love both of you for it too. So...how exactly is this going to work? Because I’m part of this too.”