

HONOR GUARDS

by
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CHAPTER ONE

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The hotelier at the small *pensione* on Rue Segulier looked up from her newspaper as the door opened to admit two strangers. It was well after midnight—not a usual time for new guests to arrive—but she was used to the unusual in St-Germain, the *arrondissement* of Paris long known for its artists, philosophers, trendsetters, and, in recent years, for its tourists. The customs and proclivities of that latter group were often unfathomable, but she had grown used to hiding her rare feelings of surprise or dismay regarding the habits of guests. Nevertheless, this evening, her curiosity was immediately piqued.

Two women in formal evening clothes approached across the expanse of thick carpet. Two far from ordinary women, even for the Left Bank. One was an astonishingly beautiful blond in a shoulder-baring, midnight blue evening dress and matching sequined wrap—very *haute couture*. Her thick, golden hair was caught back at the nape of her neck and her makeup, subtly and expertly applied, merely enhanced the natural beauty of her large, deep blue eyes and upswept cheekbones. Her mouth was full and lush, as if meant for kissing, or laughter. She was laughing at the moment, the fingers of her right hand curled possessively around the arm of her escort.

That woman, too, was captivating, but in an entirely different way. Slightly taller than her blond companion, she wore a fitted evening jacket and black tuxedo trousers. She was dark where the other was light—not just in coloring, but in the undeniable aura of intensity she projected. Jet-black hair curled just over the edge of her collar in the back, while in the front a wild, unruly wave apparently

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defied taming as it slashed across her forehead. Her eyes, even from across the room, were dark and penetrating. Whereas the blond carried herself with the agility and grace of a dancer, this sharper, leaner woman glided with the muscular ease of a jungle predator. Each, in fact, projected an air of animal vitality and strength, and together, they were an astonishingly attractive couple.

And a couple they most certainly are. The way they move with one rhythm, the way their bodies just barely touch but are so clearly united—oh yes, they're together.

“*Bonsoir*. May I help you?”

“We’d like a room, if you please,” United States Secret Service agent Cameron Roberts said in perfect French. She glanced at her companion and smiled. “Something private, with a view.”

“I believe I have something for you,” the clerk replied with a wisp of a smile. She turned and collected a key from a series of wooden pigeonholes behind her. The service in this small hotel, whose decor spoke of more genteel times, was still handled personally as opposed to by computer. There was an air of intimacy in the small foyer, which was replete with ornate wood furnishings and muted chandeliers. “You will be able to see Notre Dame from your balcony. We can also have breakfast sent up if you ring the front desk in the morning.”

Cam glanced at her lover with a raised eyebrow as she withdrew her wallet. “Okay?”

Blair Powell shifted until her hip gently rested against Cam’s thigh and placed a palm on her lower back. Although they spent nearly all of their waking hours together, they were rarely free to touch. Now she relished each small contact. “Perfect.”

They had never spent the night alone together before—not *truly* alone, when there had been no one outside the door or someone, somewhere, on duty monitoring their location. They had been lovers for more than half a year and had awakened with each other less than half a dozen times. This night, in this tiny *pensione* in this city of lovers, they were for the first time able to simply be lovers.

“Here you are.” The clerk handed a key across the counter to Cam, who filled out the short information card that accompanied it. “The second floor.”

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“Thank you,” Cam and Blair said simultaneously before turning away, hand in hand.

Renee Savard was asleep when the knock sounded on her hotel room door. Rolling over carefully, anxious not to injure her still-healing left shoulder, she peered at the bedside clock. 2:12 a.m.

Coming almost instantly awake after years of having been trained to jump from deep sleep into immediate action, the FBI agent rose rapidly and reached for her robe from a nearby chair. She pulled it on carefully. The gunshot wound to her left shoulder was healing well, and although she had been advised to keep the joint at rest as much as possible, she had eschewed the confining support of the immobilizer after the minimum allowable time. Not only was it difficult to dress while wearing it, she felt helpless and vulnerable with only one functioning arm. A little pain was worth being able to defend herself if the need arose.

A few seconds later, she peered through the security view-hole and then, smiling broadly, quickly released the lock and opened the door. “What are you doing here? I thought you had the duty tonight.”

Paula Stark stood in the hotel hallway, flushing faintly but unable to hide her pleasure. She was still in the dark jacket and pants she had worn while on duty as the lead Secret Service agent on Blair Powell’s team. Her weapon was secured in the hip holster clipped on the right side of her waistband. Shrugging, she extended her hand, offering a small bouquet of red roses and white baby’s breath.

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

Charmed, Renee leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb and slowly surveyed the dark-haired, muscular young agent, appreciating as always her clear-eyed, wholesome appearance. “I didn’t expect to see you for a while. After all, *I’m* on leave, but you’re here on assignment.”

“Is it okay? I mean...I know it’s la—”

“Mmm. It’s great.” Renee held out her hand for the flowers, which she lifted to her nose, smiling once again. Then she turned

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aside and gestured to her room. "Come in."

Stark stepped inside the hotel room, her heart fluttering madly. Courtship was something new to her, as was any kind of relationship—and a relationship with a woman hadn't even been on the horizon for her a year ago. But the day that Renee Savard had been assigned to temporary duty on Blair Powell's security team, all that had changed.

In the midst of the manhunt for a deadly stalker who had threatened Blair's life and nearly cost the commander hers, Stark had discovered how very much she wanted this one particular woman. They had come very close to consummating their relationship little more than a week before.

"I can't believe you just volunteered to work another night. What is that—three in a row?" Renee definitely had a threatening look in her eyes as she crossed the living room to stand in front of Stark.

"Two—well, two and a half, I guess, but I didn't volunteer for last night," Stark said quickly in self-defense.

"Getting stood up two nights straight could seriously bruise my ego, you know."

"Well, it's kind of a tricky situation since the commander and Egr—uh, Blair—are trying not to be too obvious about spending time alone together," Stark began seriously. "It's easier if I—"

"Paula, shut up." Then Renee effectively implemented the order by pressing her mouth to Stark's.

Stark's small cry of surprise gave way to a soft moan as Renee's tongue moved gently over her lips, then into her mouth. In surrender, she just closed her eyes and let the warmth and softness of the caress move through her until every cell tingled. When the kiss ended, Stark opened her eyes, amazed to find she couldn't focus. Her head was spinning too much.

"That was awfully nice," she managed, her voice slightly unsteady. The apartment suddenly felt extremely warm, too.

Renee rested her palm against Stark's cheek, then gently swept the dark hair back from her temple with trembling fingers. "Yes, it was. And there's a lot more where that came from."

"There's no quota or anything, is there?" Stark brushed her

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lips over the fingertips stroking her face.

“None at all.” Renee’s voice was husky and low. “In fact, I believe there’s an endless supply.”

“That’s good, because I’m going to want a lot.”

“Starting now?”

“What about your sister?” Stark rested both hands on Renee’s waist and stepped closer until their thighs touched. She was happy to find that Renee was a bit unsteady, too.

“She’s a cop—seven to seven. And she won’t bother us if we’re...asleep...when she comes in.”

“Yeah—now would be good, then.” Stark was a little worried that her legs weren’t going to move if they waited much longer, because they were beginning to shake all on their own.

“Sure?” There was nothing teasing in Renee’s tone now, only a gentle question, full of patience and tenderness and sweet longing.

“I want to make love with you so much,” Stark confessed, her body vibrating with urgency. “I’ve wanted to touch you for what feels like forever.”

Renee drew in a sharp breath. “I can’t wait.”

Stark slipped one arm around her waist. Just before she kissed her, she whispered, “Then let’s not.”

In the bedroom, Renee reached down to unbuckle the strap securing her arm across her chest. Her hand was shaking.

“Need help?” Stark’s throat was dry, her voice husky.

Smiling shyly, Renee nodded. “I think so.”

Stark stepped closer and carefully began to remove the restraining support. “Is this safe to do?”

“Which part?”

There was something in Renee’s tone that brought Stark’s head up sharply. She searched the depths of Renee’s blue eyes. “Is there something wrong?”

“I’m nervous,” Renee confessed. “I...I don’t know why.”

“Second thoughts?” Stark tried to keep her voice steady. Nervous? Try terrified.

“You’re special,” Renee whispered, her fingers feather-light on Stark’s face. “I want...oh God...this will sound silly. I almost want to wait until we know where this is going.”

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“You mean besides bed?”

Renee nodded wordlessly once more.

“It doesn’t sound silly.” Touched, and in some ways relieved, Stark lightly clasped Renee’s waist. Her body was ready, and she thought her heart was, too. But there would only ever be one first time for them. “It sounds...really nice.” She took a shuddering breath. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“You don’t?”

Stark grinned weakly. “Well, yeah...I mind...but I don’t mind. You know?”

“Mmm.” Renee kissed her lingeringly. “Yeah. I know.”

Even though they’d *both* pulled back, Stark worried that Renee would change her mind altogether about being with her. Still, she wanted their lovemaking to be about more than just the physical pleasure of it. She’d experienced that wild thrill for a few frantic hours one night with Blair Powell, and as wonderful and memorable as that encounter had been, she hoped for much more with Renee Savard. Although she didn’t know exactly what kind of sign she was waiting for, she sensed that waiting was the right thing to do. And for Paula Stark, doing the right thing was everything. So—she’d take it slow even if it meant they never got past the kissing stage. *And I die from lack of oxygen and terminally swollen body parts.*

“You still haven’t told me what you’re doing here,” Renee said as she picked up one of the plastic hotel glasses and started toward the bathroom for water.

“The commander gave us the rest of the shift off,” Stark replied as she followed into the adjoining room. “I know it’s late, but it’s so beautiful outside, and I thought...maybe you’d like to go for a walk.”

“A walk?” Renee turned, tilting her head, an odd expression on her face. “You show up in the middle of the night and ask me if I want to take a *walk*?”

Uncertain, but determined to push ahead, Stark nodded solemnly. “I guess I probably should have called—”

Quickly, Renee closed the distance between them and put her arms around Stark’s neck, stopping her next words with a kiss.

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After she'd indulged herself in the softness of Stark's mouth and assuaged some of the hunger that always rose when she imagined how Stark's powerful body would feel against hers, she lifted her mouth away and laughed softly. "I think it's wonderful. Let me get dressed."

"How's your arm?" Stark inquired when she could catch her breath. It always took her off guard when Renee kissed her—or touched her in any way, for that matter. She spent a large part of every day thinking about touching her and being touched in return.

"Better."

"Need any help?" Stark asked, disingenuously.

Renee raised a brow. "Are you trustworthy?"

"Ah..." Stark shrugged and grinned. "On my better days. Sort of."

"Are you all right?" Renee asked softly, watching Paula's expression turn inward. She stroked her fingers down the broad cheek to the sturdy jaw and then across the surprisingly full lower lip. "You're so beautiful."

Stark blushed hotly and ducked her head. "No," she said, her voice husky, "you're beautiful. I'm just...serviceable."

"Serviceable, hmm?" Renee laughed, drawing her hand down the center of Stark's chest, indulging herself in the urge to touch her. "We'll see about that eventually, won't we?"

Stark lifted her eyes to Renee's and saw the same wanting there that she knew must be in her own. "I guess we will. Eventually."

Renee backed away, because to do anything else would have meant going forward. There'd been other women, but nothing serious for a long time, and the recent flings had rarely been anything other than brief mutual diversions. First the FBI Academy and then the demands of building a career within the competitive, old-boy network of the Bureau had consumed not only all her time, but also all her energy. She hadn't realized how deeply she had longed for some human connection, beyond just the physical, until Paula had come along with her unvarnished honesty and tender compassion. Now, as much as she ached to have Paula in her arms, in her bed, she wanted to wait until she was sure it would be more than another momentary respite from loneliness. For as tortuous as

delaying sometimes was, she treasured the sweet anticipation.

“Sit down,” Renee said softly. “I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

Obediently, Stark pulled out one of the small chairs by the tiny table that occupied the space in front of the windows.

“So Egret is all tucked in for the night then?” Renee asked casually as she pulled jeans and a clean blouse from her closet. Egret was Blair Powell’s code name and the one most of the agents used when referring to her.

“Uh-huh.” Stark hesitated, still reluctant to discuss her protectee, even with the woman who was as much a part of the team as any of the Secret Service agents who guarded Blair on a daily basis. Renee had nearly been killed thwarting a plan to kill the president’s daughter. Stark’s silence wasn’t a matter of distrust, merely one of long habit.

“Paula?” Renee glanced up as she carefully worked a sleeve up her injured arm. “Something wrong?”

Stark averted her gaze from the expanse of skin revealed as Renee leaned over to slip into her jeans. Renee had left her blouse unbuttoned and her breasts were barely covered. Her coffee-colored skin, smooth and tight, invited a caress. “Uh...”

Head down, her voice curious, Renee repeated, “Problem?”

“No. No problem.” Shaking the fog from her brain, Stark hurried on. “The commander is with her. They’re just...taking some personal time.”

Renee buttoned her blouse and tucked it into her jeans, still favoring her left arm. “Really? That’s something of a breach in protocol, isn’t it?”

Uncomfortable, Stark shrugged. “Yes and no. We escorted them most of the way to their destination, and the commander is with her.”

“Sounds like they’re playing hooky to me.” Renee stepped into her loafers. “And I say good for them. They’ve both been through hell the last six months, and they certainly deserve some time alone just to enjoy each other.”

She crossed the room to Paula and held out her hand. “And so do we. Come on, let’s go for a walk in this gorgeous city.”

In one motion, Stark stood and slid an arm around Renee’s waist. Leaning close, she kissed her softly. The kiss didn’t end

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until she had traced the inner surface of Renee's lips not once, but several times. Drawing back, breathless, Stark nodded. "Yes. Let's do that."

As if by design, both Cam and Blair stopped outside the door to 213 and turned to each other. Cam lifted a hand and stroked the backs of her fingers over Blair's cheek.

"I love you."

Blair tilted her head and kissed Cam lingeringly before tightening her hold on her lover's hand. "I love you."

Cam unlocked the door and together they crossed the threshold. Blair turned and slid the security chain home, then glided forward into the moonlit room and threaded her arms around her lover's neck, resting her cheek against Cam's chest. In a voice filled with wonder, she murmured, "I can't believe we're really here. If you only knew how many times I've dreamed of this."

"I know." With her arms around Blair's waist, Cam drew her gently closer and rested her cheek against the top of Blair's head. "Me too."

"I wish..." Blair sighed, knowing that wishing would only bring disappointment. She was who she was, and that would follow her for the rest of her days. She was the only child of the president of the United States. Even after her father left office, the privilege and burden of that reality would remain. Eventually her notoriety, she knew, would fade, but that was a long time in the future. It was her father's first term in office and there would very likely be a second. She was going to be in the public eye—or in the eye of the hurricane—for years to come. "Sorry. I promised myself I'd work on not tilting at windmills."

"You did?" Cam's voice rose with a combination of incredulity and laughter.

"Cut it out." Blair jokingly slapped a palm against Cam's chest, then rested her head on Cam's shoulder. "Well, since we had that talk with my father and he's been so great about our relationship, it seemed that the least I could do was stop being so angry at him for something he can't help."

"I'm glad." If Blair was less angry at the restrictions her

high-profile existence demanded, it would make Cam's job as her security chief much easier. Much more importantly, though, it would make Blair's life a happier—and far safer—one. Ultimately, that was all Cam cared about. "Does that mean that you're going to stop trying to lose your security detail on a regular basis?"

"I've never tried to lose you," Blair murmured as she pressed her lips to the undersurface of Cam's jaw. She rocked her hips suggestively against the lean form as she kissed her way to the corner of Cam's mouth. "I just never seem to be able to get you all to myself."

"You've got me now," Cam whispered, her lips to Blair's forehead. She reached with one hand to release the clasp at Blair's nape and pocketed the heavy gold jewelry. Slipping the same hand beneath Blair's hair, she threaded her fingers through the thick wild tresses, loving the way their heavy softness filled her palm. She loved everything about the way Blair felt. "I love you."

Blair didn't think she would ever grow tired of hearing those words. It wasn't something she had ever anticipated or even consciously desired. She had spent most of her adult life avoiding commitments and entanglements, preferring to preserve her anonymity in the only sphere in which she could—her private life. She managed that by routinely misdirecting her security team and slipping away to engage in anonymous liaisons that left her emotionally untouched. Although she hadn't consciously sought to put herself at risk, her actions had placed her in danger more than once. Nevertheless, she'd thought herself independent and content, if not particularly happy. All that had changed the morning Commander Cameron Roberts had walked into her penthouse and informed her that the game had new rules. Cam's rules.

"I still can't believe what you've done to me." *Made me want you so much, need you so much. When I never thought I would.* Shaking her head, Blair leaned back in the circle of her lover's arms and searched the dark eyes that held her own. "I don't know how you managed to get me at such a disadvantage, Commander."

"Oh?" Cam slid the zipper down the back of Blair's dress and inched her hand inside to caress smooth, warm flesh. Her fingers drifted over the hollow at the base of Blair's spine and then lower, over the gentle swell of firm muscle. Her stomach tightened as

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it always did when she touched Blair. Arousal followed fast on wonder, and need coiled in her depths. “God, I want you.”

“Cam,” Blair murmured, unfastening the studs on Cam’s dress shirt and carefully placing each small, silver-encased pearl in Cam’s pocket. She tugged the starched white shirt free of the waistband of the tailored silk trousers and parted the fabric to expose flesh. With a sigh, she pressed her palm to the center of her lover’s chest, then drew her nails down the middle of her body, smiling in satisfaction as she felt Cam twitch. “I love to make you want me.”

“You don’t have to try.” Cam’s voice was hoarse with desire. With trembling hands, she carefully drew the gown from Blair’s sculpted shoulders and released it to pool in midnight folds around their feet. Blair’s breasts were bare, her only remaining garments a black satin thong and the thin lace garter belt that held the silk against her thighs. Cam’s head reeled as blood rushed into the pit of her stomach and surged between her thighs. Groaning, she ran both hands down Blair’s back to cup her buttocks and pull her close. “I’ve missed you.”

“Three days of smiling at strangers and making polite conversation while all I wanted was to be alone with you...” Blair pushed her hands beneath Cam’s shirt and claimed her breasts, hot skin against hot skin, “just about killed me.”

“How do you think I felt?” Cam’s breath came in quick gasps as her nipples tensed beneath Blair’s teasing fingers. With trembling hands, she released the garter belt and brushed silk down silken skin. “Watching everyone watching you. All the men and more than a few of the women.”

And as hands stroked fevered flesh, their lips met for the first time since they’d entered the room. While they explored and reclaimed each other with deep hungry kisses, they opened buttons and slid zippers and whisked the last barriers of clothing to the floor, kicking off shoes until they both stood naked, cleaving to each other.

“Take me to bed,” Blair urged, her hips thrusting insistently.

“Yes. Yes.” The room was small and the bed only a few feet away. Without even thinking about it, Cam curved her arm behind Blair’s legs, lifted, and carried her to the bed. In the next instant she lowered herself upon Blair’s body, groaning at the first full contact.

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“Oh, yes—I’ve missed you.”

Blair arched to meet the weight of her lover descending, and their legs entwined, bringing heat to heat.

“Oh God.”

“You feel so good.”

“I want you so much.”

“I love you.”

While the moonlight silvered around them and the world faded, they lingered and teased and demanded and took until they shivered on the edge of abandon.

“Cam,” Blair breathed as the passion rose up from her depths at last, seizing her soul as it obliterated reason. “Oh, Cam.”

“I love you,” Cam whispered when she felt the orgasm take her lover, felt the blood surge and the muscles clench around her fingers, and felt the frantic beat of their two hearts joining. She closed her eyes and slowly stroked, deeper each time, drawing forth the last drop of her lover’s desire. With Blair crying out and then crying softly in her arms, Cam surrendered to her own release with a sigh of gratitude and wonder.

For the first time, for a few stolen hours, they were free to be only two women in love.