

HONOR UNDER SIEGE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Monday, October 8

Blair Powell walked along the ocean's edge just after dawn, watching the sky segue through a palette of colors she had yet to capture on canvas. Thankfully, she wasn't a landscape artist, because she feared she would be doomed to an eternity of frustration and disappointment. Her life held more than enough challenge as it was, especially now, less than a month after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. Less than a month after four men she'd never met had tried to kill her.

Sliding her hands into the pockets of her dark navy windbreaker, Blair sheltered in the shadow of a tall, windswept dune and let the cold sea breeze and the force of nature's power drive the lingering melancholy away. Crisp, salty air filled her chest, and for an instant, she felt only the promise of a new season and the inner contentment of being in love. Despite the horror of the last month, she'd just spent one of the best weeks she could remember in seclusion on Whitley Island. At least two Secret Service agents followed her everywhere she went on the remote, sparsely populated island off the coast of Massachusetts, but she was out of the public eye and nearly alone with her lover. She cherished this rare privacy and feared that pleasure was about to change.

As much as she loved the island, she couldn't just disappear. And after the events of the last few weeks, she discovered to her surprise that she didn't want to. All her life she'd sought anonymity. Being her father's daughter had forced upon her a notoriety she had not chosen, and she had done all she could to escape the constraints it imposed. Yet sometime in the last year, that wild, furious need to break away had all but vanished. She wondered how much that sea change was due to the woman who walked toward her in the gathering sunlight.

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Secret Service agent Cameron Roberts, Blair's one time chief of security and now her lover, was a few inches taller, dark-haired, lean and handsome. Her jaw was a little broader, her nose a little stronger, and the hollows below her cheekbones a little deeper than the dictates of classic beauty demanded, but what Blair saw when she looked at her went beyond beauty. She saw strength and passion, and above all, honor.

"You're supposed to be in bed," she chided as Cam approached.
Recovering.

Cam grinned. "Bed was cold."

"It's a hell of a lot colder out here." Blair wrapped her arms around Cam's neck and kissed her, ruffling the short, almost wavy black hair that ended just above her collar. The almost casual brush of mouth on mouth turned unexpectedly more fervent. She stroked her tongue along the inside of Cam's lip, and delved deeper for an instant before leaning back. "Whew. Just got warmer."

"Let's see if we can get it up to August." Cam slid one arm around Blair's waist and underneath her jacket. She stroked Blair's back and nuzzled her neck. "Although, we probably shouldn't tamper with Greg and Hara's body temperatures quite so much."

Blair jerked and pushed away. "God, I can't believe I forgot about them. I *never* forget about them." She peered over her shoulder toward the dunes where two of her first team security agents stood with their hands at their sides, facing out toward the ocean as if she and Cam were not there. Of course, they had seen everything while continuously scanning the length of beach, the water, and the air.

"I'd say that little lapse is a very good sign." Cam brushed a strand of damp blond hair away from Blair's cheek and resisted the urge to kiss her again. Blair's deep blue eyes were shadow free, a rare occurrence, and even though she'd been up before dawn, she'd slept through the night. That, too, was unusual since the armed assault on Blair in her penthouse apartment. Cam loved to see Blair so relaxed and secure that she forgot she was being watched. She wished she could keep that from ever changing.

"When your eyes go from gray to black like that," Blair murmured, "I know you're thinking serious thoughts."

Cam shook her head. "No." She tugged Blair against her side and

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started to walk, keeping her arm around Blair's waist. "Just thinking I love you."

"That sounds serious." Blair slipped her hand into the back pocket of Cam's jeans and squeezed her ass. "In fact, we should probably do something about it ASAP."

"Okay."

Blair laughed. "You're too easy."

"I thought you liked me that way."

Blair caught Cam's hands and turned to walk backwards, swinging their joined arms lazily between them. The wind whipped her hair around her face, and her cheeks burned with the cold. She felt wonderful. "I like you every way you come, Commander. Hard and fast, slow and easy. Any way at all."

"Jesus, Blair. Have a heart." Cam tilted her head in the direction of the agents who followed along the invisible perimeter of their protection zone. "They can't hear us, but they'll have a hard time pretending not to notice if I throw you down on the beach."

"I thought you had better control than that," Blair teased.

"So did I," Cam muttered darkly. Everything she'd thought she'd known about herself had abruptly changed slightly less than a year before when she'd been assigned to protect the first daughter of the United States. Cam had fallen in love with her the first instant she'd seen her, her blond hair damp from the shower, her sapphire eyes sparking with anger, her sensual body blatantly seductive. Blair hadn't wanted protection, and she'd done everything she possibly could to avoid the constraints of twenty-four hour a day observation. She'd been wild and willful, a beautiful feral creature who defied taming. Cam had fought her desire, but ultimately, she had surrendered to her heart. "You changed all that."

"Funny," Blair said, returning to Cam's side and snuggling against her again. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

"I love you."

"I love you." Blair kissed the edge of Cam's jaw. "Your throat sounds better. Does it still hurt?"

"No," Cam said quickly. Her voice still became hoarse when she talked for more than a few minutes, and swallowing was an exercise in masochism. But she didn't want to remind Blair of the injuries

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she'd sustained during an armed confrontation that she'd promised she wouldn't take part in.

Abruptly, Blair stopped walking and stepped slightly away. "Why do we constantly have to cover old ground? You know I can always tell when you're trying to protect me from something."

Cam winced. "Sorry. You're right. I need more practice at disclosure."

"Apparently." Blair sighed. "I suppose we both do. It's just that the very things I love about you make me crazy, too."

"Ditto." Cam laughed and then started to cough. It hurt, and she couldn't hide it. The finger marks on her throat had faded, but the bruising inside persisted. "Damn. The cold air is getting to me."

"I *told* you not to come out here," Blair snapped. "Damn it, Cameron." She hated it when Cam hurt. She hated feeling helpless under any circumstances, but it was worse when it was Cam and she couldn't do anything. She picked up her pace. "Let's get you inside. I'll make some tea or something."

"Tea?" Cam rasped, trying desperately not to laugh again.

Blair's glower could not hide her smile. "Well, something."

They climbed through the dunes toward the multi-level glass and wood house where they'd been staying for the past few weeks, the two Secret Service agents keeping pace behind them. Blair stiffened at the sight of a woman hurrying down to meet them.

"Hi, Paula," she greeted her new chief of security. Paula Stark was an athletic, dark haired, dark-eyed woman close to her own age. She had proven herself capable of protecting Blair in dire circumstances more than once, and Blair trusted her. More than that, she cared for her. That kind of affection probably wasn't wise; she was not supposed to form personal attachments to her security agents. But Blair never did anything simply because it was prudent. She spent more time with the four members of her first team than she did with anyone else in her life, and she couldn't help but care about them. Just the same, she preferred not to see Paula right now. It could only mean one thing. Her brief respite had come to an end. "What's up?"

"Your father wants to talk to you." Paula nodded to Cam. "Commander."

"Chief," Cam said. Technically, she wasn't the commander anymore, since she'd been replaced as Blair's chief of security by

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Stark, but she couldn't seem to get any of the agents to stop calling her that. She wanted to ask if there was a problem, but she was trying to be respectful of Stark's new position. Security chiefs were circumspect by nature and rarely shared any more information than necessary with anyone, including the protectees and their families. *Especially* with the protectees and their families. Part of a security agent's job was to make the lives of those they guarded seem as normal as possible under the most abnormal of circumstances.

"Is my father all right?" Blair asked as they reached the rear deck of the house.

"I have no reason to think otherwise," Stark said in her official voice. "Lucinda Washburn put the call through. She said there was no urgency, but the president would like to speak to you at your earliest convenience."

Blair rolled her eyes. *At your earliest convenience* was Lucinda-speak for call immediately. Lucinda Washburn was President Andrew Powell's chief of staff, as well as his lifelong friend and adviser. No one was closer to him, not even Blair. Lucinda had helped him win the governorship of Massachusetts, the vice presidency, and finally the presidency. She was an astute politician and managed far more than the day-to-day workings of the White House staff. If someone wanted the ear of the president, they needed to court Lucinda Washburn first.

"Lucinda wants something." Blair glanced at Cam, who smiled ruefully. Lucinda did not make social calls. She also was not the president's secretary, which meant that she probably had an agenda of her own. "Give me a few minutes to have a cup of coffee, Paula, and then I'll call her back."

"I'll be in the command center." Paula kept her voice neutral and her face expressionless. The makeshift command center was actually part of the first floor of the smaller guest house that sat partway between the main house and the beach. Her scaled-down security team stayed there when they were off shift. Right now there were only three other agents with her—Greg Wozinski, Patrice Hara, and Felicia Davis. There was also one other inhabitant, her FBI agent lover Renée Savard, who was recuperating from a bullet wound. She and Cam had sustained their injuries during the same action. "Please call me when you're ready, and I'll scramble a line for you."

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Blair halted with her hand on the handle of the back door and regarded Paula quizzically. “Is something wrong?”

“No ma’am.”

“Am I supposed to guess why you suddenly sound like an android?”

Paula smiled. “Sorry. I was asleep when the call came in and I haven’t had time to recharge my batteries. I’m running on auxiliary backup packs.”

“Ha ha. Come inside and have some coffee, then.”

Paula checked in with a quick glance at Cam, who signaled for her to follow them into the house.

“I’m going to grab a quick shower,” Cam said, heading in the direction of the staircase leading to the second floor. “Be right down.”

Blair led Paula through to the kitchen, while Patrice Hara took up a position just inside the rear door and Greg Wozinski walked through to the front of the house. “How’s Renée doing?” she asked casually as she began to assemble the morning coffee.

“Restless.” Paula settled into a chair at the rectangular oak table in the center of the room.

“Tell me about it.” Blair turned on the automatic coffee pot, put a kettle of water on for tea, and sat down next to her. “Renée is just like Cam—neither of them is happy unless they’re working.” She touched Paula’s wrist lightly. “You should understand that. You’re all the same, really.”

There had been a time when the slightest touch from Blair would have made Paula blush. She could not believe that eight months had passed since the few ill-advised hours she’d spent in the intimate company of the first daughter. The lapse was one of a potentially career destroying magnitude, and although she regretted her irresponsible behavior, she did not regret the private moments they had shared. Now, it seemed like the interlude had taken place in another lifetime, when she had been another woman. In the few scant months since then, she’d seen Cameron Roberts almost die, Blair narrowly escape assassination, and the nation that the entire world had considered unassailable become the victim of terrorism. She didn’t blush.

“I do understand. But the doctor said she needed another few days before she could start walking, and the inactivity is wearing on her.”

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Blair knew the problem was more than just inactivity. Renée, along with many of the New York based FBI and Secret Service field agents, had been in the World Trade Center at the time the towers had been hit. She'd seen the devastation and horror firsthand. "It's going to take some time, Paula. She'll heal."

Paula's eyes revealed what she couldn't say. Wouldn't say, out of respect for her lover's privacy. "I know."

"She has the one thing she needs most of all," Blair said gently. "You."

"Oh, man," Paula said softly. "I hope that's enough." She wished she could feel certain, but she feared that something in Renée's soul had been irreparably broken and neither time nor love would heal it.

Blair stood. "Trust me, it is." She set a mug of tea at an empty place for Cam. "I think right now the people we care about might be all that matter."

"I...uh...how are *you* doing?" Paula asked as Blair poured their coffees.

Everyone knew how private Blair was, and it wasn't really her place to ask personal questions. But since September 11, the world as they knew it was gone and some of the old rules no longer seemed to apply. Paula understood the necessity for viewing the subjects she protected as critically valuable individuals, while at the same time avoiding any kind of personal involvement, even friendship. But they'd all been through so much together that the usual professional detachment seemed impossible, especially when Blair had been the object of a nearly successful assassination attempt in her own heavily-fortified home. What was once considered inconceivable now fell within the realm of the probable. It could happen again, and Paula had to see that it didn't.

"Sometimes I still can't believe that any of it really happened," Blair said quietly.

"I know." Paula took a deep breath. She was still trying to understand her new role as Blair's security chief and what the boundaries were. Most of the time when she wasn't certain, she followed her heart. That probably wasn't the way the commander did things, but she would never be the commander. "We weren't prepared for what happened in the Aerie, but we will be now. They failed, which just shows you how

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good your security was, even against the unexpected. Now it will be even better because we know the game has changed.”

The game has changed.

Blair suppressed a shudder. Yes, the rules of engagement had definitely changed, and she was an unwilling player in a game where the stakes were higher than she'd ever imagined. She glanced toward the door as Cam walked in. Her black hair was wet and slicked back, making the sharp planes of her face stand out even more. Even in a loose black T-shirt and blue jeans, her body looked taut and fighting ready. Blair could tell from the set of her jaw that she'd heard the last part of the conversation; she had that intense, hard expression she always got when the subject of Blair's vulnerability came up.

“I'm not worried.” Blair said, “We have the winning team.”

Cam leaned down and brushed a kiss over her cheek, then regarded the tea with a raised eyebrow. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” Blair said with exaggerated seriousness. “And there's honey on the counter. Put some in. It will help your throat.”

“I think coffee will do fine.”

“Cameron.” Blair's eyes glittered dangerously.

“But tea is probably better,” Cam amended as she retrieved the jar of honey.

Paula watched the exchange with apparent interest, then looked quickly away as Cam gave her a pointed stare. She rose without finishing her coffee. “I'll be in the command center.”

“Wait, Paula.” Blair kept her gaze on Cam, thinking how much she loved going to sleep with her every night and waking up with her in the morning and having her around during the day. Just being with her. Not being guarded by her, not being worried over. Just being in her company. But this week had been an anomaly, and they both knew it. Softly, she said, “Ready?”

Cam nodded.

“Paula,” Blair said. “I think we better make that call.”