

# LOVE & HONOR

*by*  
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## CHAPTER ONE

Fresh from the shower, Cameron Roberts walked naked across the carpeted living room to the bar. The floor-to-ceiling windows in her top-floor apartment afforded an unimpeded view of the night skyline of Washington, DC. The view was breathtaking.

She poured an inch of single malt scotch into a heavy crystal rock glass and leaned against the bar that edged one side of the room, staring at the city lights mingling with the midnight stars. There had been a time when this vision of piercing beauty had lost the power to move her—a time beyond loss when she had been convinced that nothing would ever stir her soul again. She had been wrong.

After drawing a gray silk robe from the back of a barstool, she slipped it on and then reached for the phone. She dialed a number from memory and waited expectantly for the only voice she had wanted to hear all day.

“Hello?”

Cam smiled. “How’s San Francisco?”

A quick intake of breath, and then a throaty laugh. “How bad can it be? It’s the city of beautiful men and handsome women. And it’s August, so the sun shines more than it rains.”

“Sounds pretty perfect.”

“It is.” Blair Powell sat down on the edge of the bed and glanced out the window of the guest room in a multilevel glass-and-cedar house tucked into a niche on the slope of Russian Hill. Visible over the tops of trees and rooftops, the expanse of San Francisco Bay below reflected the colors of the setting sun. It was achingly beautiful, and she wished her caller were by her side to share it. Her voice husky with emotions still new enough to be

frightening, she added, “Almost.”

“Almost?” Cam sipped her scotch, imagining deep blue eyes and wild golden curls. She edged a hip onto the arm of the leather sofa and watched the night. It was odd how a vista she had seen a thousand times suddenly made her long for company, when for so many months it had barely registered in her consciousness. She knew what had changed, and it hadn’t been intended. Or wise. “Problem?”

“Mmm. I can’t find a date to the reception.”

“Ah...” Cam sighed. “I might not be able to help you there. I’m sorry.”

“Really?” Blair teased, trying to hide her disappointment. They hadn’t made any definite plans, but she’d hoped. “What’s happening back there?”

“The usual bureaucratic maneuvering—too many opinions, too many section chiefs, too many people worried about their political careers.” She drained the scotch, set the glass gently down on a carved stone coaster on the end table, and forced a lighter note into her voice. “Like I said, nothing out of the ordinary for the Hill.”

“So this debriefing thing is likely to be a few more days?”

“I think so. Today was just the blow-by-blow review of events. The who was where, when, and did what analysis.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow it will get interesting.” *Tomorrow will be the day someone gets hung.*

“You don’t sound too worried.” *But there’s something—you’re hiding something.*

“No, I’m not. Is everything all right there? Has the press caught up to you?”

“It’s fine,” Blair hastened to assure her. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Who’s at the house?” She’d reviewed the details with Mac Phillips, her communications coordinator, earlier in the evening when she’d gotten a break between meetings, but being separated from her team made her uneasy. The tumultuous events of the last few weeks had left her on edge and had only served to remind her that anyone could get through the best-designed protection if they

really wanted. It was not a thought she could tolerate, especially not when it concerned Blair.

“Stark is in the bedroom across the hall, and Davis is downstairs playing cards with Marcea and an extraordinarily handsome silver-haired gentleman with a devastating Italian accent.”

“That would be Giancarlo.” Cam laughed, picturing her mother entertaining a houseful of artists, foreign visitors, and Secret Service agents. “Sounds like it’s all under control.”

“Mac knows what he’s doing, Cam. You don’t need to worry.”

“I’m not worried about a thing.” Cam was glad that Blair couldn’t see her face. The president’s daughter seemed to be able to read the truth in her expression, when all anyone else ever saw was her neutral game face.

“You sound tired.”

“I’m fine,” Cam responded automatically. In truth, she still had a ferocious headache left over from the concussion she had sustained in an explosion two nights before, and she hadn’t had much sleep since she’d left Blair Powell’s bed the previous afternoon. Spending the entire day explaining how two federal agents under her command had ended up in the intensive care unit hadn’t helped the pounding.

*U.S. Treasury Assistant Director Stewart Carlisle closed the door behind him and regarded the first daughter’s Secret Service crew chief expressionlessly. “You okay?”*

*“Bumps and bruises. Nothing serious.” Cam sat in the chair on the right side of the head of the table where she knew Carlisle, her immediate supervisor, would be seated during the upcoming debriefing and after-action report. The FBI would take the other end while representatives from the National Security Council and the president’s personal security adviser filled in the more or less neutral territory between. At the moment, she and Carlisle were the only two people in the room, but that would change in fifteen minutes when the others arrived to discuss the assassination attempt on the president’s only child.*

*“If you’re not ready for this, Roberts, tell me now.”*

## RADCLYFFE

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*"I'm fine, sir." He didn't need to know about the intermittent double vision or the persistent nausea or the dizziness.*

*He blew out a breath and took the chair at the end of the table. "Okay, run it down for me. How did things get so goddamned fucked up?"*

*"How do things ever get fucked up?" Cam rubbed the bridge of her nose and shook some of the tension out of her shoulders. "The guy was good, a professional—he was familiar with protocol; he anticipated what we would do; he knew where we would deploy. He was always a little ahead of us the whole time. He got by us."*

*"Why didn't you know about him?"*

*"Because I wasn't in the loop! None of us were—you know that. The FBI task force shut us out." She paused, clamped down on the anger. She'd known Stewart Carlisle for more than a dozen years. She liked him—she respected him as much as she respected any bureaucrat—but they weren't exactly on the same team. He was an administrator, and by definition, he had to play Beltway politics. He knew very well that she and her team had been kept in the dark about threats to Blair Powell's life, because he had agreed to the information blackout. Reluctantly, maybe, but he'd known. However unwillingly, he'd endangered the life of the woman she was charged to protect, and she'd never trust him completely again.*

*Shrugging, she said more quietly, "Interdepartmental intelligence broke down—nothing out of the ordinary there, either. Someone should have picked up on his identity months ago, before he ever got close. We were lucky to get away with only the casualties we sustained."*

*"I can't put that in a report to the security director."*

*"You asked me what happened. That's what happened—we got our asses kicked."*

*Carlisle stared at the ceiling. "Give me an assessment of your team."*

*"High marks all around." Cam sat up straight, her eyes suddenly sharp and intense. "There are no fall guys on my detail, sir. If somebody swings for this, it will be me."*

*"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."*

“Cam?” Blair repeated. “You there?”

Cam jumped, disoriented for a second. “What? Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“What aren’t you telling me? Are you in trouble back there?” Blair stood up and reached under the bed for her suitcase. Something was wrong. Cameron Roberts did not lose focus. Not like this. Blair struggled not to panic, but the memory of the way Cam had looked after the blast was too fresh in her mind. “I can get the midnight flight back to DC—”

“No.” Agitated, Cam rose abruptly and swayed with a sudden rush of light-headedness. Swearing under her breath, she was forced to sit down before she could continue. “For starters, I shouldn’t even be discussing this with you.”

“Don’t start quoting protocol to me, Roberts.” Blair dropped the suitcase. The thud echoed hollowly in the still air. *Not now; not after what we’ve all just been through.*

“Plus,” Cam continued, smiling faintly as she imagined the fire leaping in Blair’s eyes, “this is not the sort of thing you can be involved in. You need to stay above all of this—”

“I’m sorry? Above what—*life?*” The room suddenly felt cold; the sunset no longer seemed quite so welcoming. *When will you start seeing me as your lover first, and the president’s daughter second?*

“You aren’t supposed to know anything about the details of your security.”

“Jesus, Cam. How can you say that now?” Blair crossed rapidly to the window, trying to imagine Cam in her apartment, needing more than her voice. *I’ve never even been there. She knows everything about me, and I know practically nothing about her.*

“You can’t be seen as concerned about it—or about me,” Cam said gently. “It will raise flags.”

“Raise flags? Do you really think I care?” But even as she said it, Blair knew that she *had* to care. Leaning her shoulder against the window frame, she watched the sun die over the bay. It was hard to believe that only a little over a day had passed since they’d awakened together after enduring a nightmare. Cam and two of her agents had nearly been killed stopping a madman—a madman who

## RADCLYFE

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had fixated on Blair, a madman who had been willing to kill if he couldn't possess her.

*Blair lay naked beside her lover, one arm thrown across Cam's abdomen as she slept. For a few moments, she simply luxuriated in the feel of her, liking the quiet sense of belonging. When Cam stirred, Blair pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder, tasting the light tang of salt. Quietly, she asked, "Are we free now?"*

*"Yes."*

*But Blair knew that wasn't quite true. For her, freedom was relative—she would still need twenty-four hour a day protection—from the media, from overzealous admirers, and, in a world made increasingly smaller by global terrorism, from the nameless, faceless individuals who hoped to weaken their political enemies through personal attacks and intimidation. As long as she was the first daughter, and probably longer, she would need security. And security was an intrusion.*

*"I'd prefer that you not scare the hell out of me again for a while," Blair remarked after another kiss. I was terrified last night that you had been killed. I can't go through it again.*

*Cam brushed a kiss into silky blond hair. "I have no intention of scaring you again at any time. I know it's hard to believe at the moment, but these situations are extremely rare. I hope you'll be able to believe that someday."*

*"You're not resigning, are you?"*

*"I don't want to," Cam replied gently. She tightened her grip and held Blair closer. "It's what I do, Blair, and it feels right to me. It lets me be with you more than I would be able to under any other circumstances. I don't want to see you for a night every couple of months. Not for the next six years."*

*Blair tried hard to put her fear aside and listen. She couldn't deny the reality of the situation, because if Cam were not part of her security detail, it would be almost impossible for them to be together. Even with her as the security chief, it would still be difficult for them to have a personal life, but that was not a new challenge for Blair. She'd been working outside the system, in that regard, all her life. She sighed.*

*"I don't know if it will work, but I'm willing to try."*

*"If it doesn't work, I'll do whatever I have to do," Cam assured her. "I love you."*

*I'll do whatever I have to do.* The words still echoed in Blair's mind, but she knew very well that Cam might not have a choice. She certainly couldn't resign, or even ask for a transfer, until the recent events in New York City were resolved. "Don't forget, I *know* the people lying in the intensive care unit back in Manhattan. And in case you hadn't noticed, I have pretty strong feelings about you, too."

Not for the first time, Cam reminded herself why personal relationships between Secret Service agents and protectees were forbidden. It wasn't exactly illegal, but it was an unwritten law throughout the Agency. And blatantly violating it could get you posted to a backwater embassy pretty fast. She heard the frustration in Blair's voice. *This is not going well.*

She wasn't worried about her career, but she was worried about fallout tarnishing Blair and her father. Her headache suddenly ratcheted up a notch, and she spoke sharply without thinking.

"This is Agency business, Blair. You're the president's daughter, for Christ's sake. It would be partisanship of the worst order for you to get involved. If it came out, it could damage him politically—even if catapulting your private life all over the front page didn't."

"I've been managing my private life and protecting my father's career for a long time without your help."

The silence that followed on the line sounded ominous even to Cam, three thousand miles away. She took a deep breath, blinked back the pain, and regrouped. "I'm sorry. I only meant—"

"I understand what you meant, Commander." Blair's tone was icy. "I know very well who I am to the public and how to behave in the political arena. I was under the mistaken impression that we were discussing something private. Something between *us*."

"Look, I—"

"There's no need for you to explain. Is there anything else?"

"I should speak with Mac." Cam rubbed her eyes wearily.

"I suggest you try him at the hotel. I'm sure you have the number."

## RADCLYFE

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“Yes.”

“Good night then, Commander.”

“Good night,” Cam said softly, but she was already listening to a dial tone. She set the receiver carefully in its cradle and leaned back on the sofa. Lifting a remote from the end table, she shut off the room lights and closed her eyes, knowing she wouldn’t sleep.



Methodically, Blair stripped off her sweatpants, lifted her jeans from the back of a nearby chair, and stepped into them—all in under thirty seconds after dropping her cell phone onto the bed. It took even less time than that to finish dressing, and after pulling on a favorite hooded black sweatshirt with NYU stenciled on the left chest, she turned toward the door. As an afterthought, she put the phone in the front pocket. Even furious, she could not ignore the ingrained habits of half a lifetime and was too well trained to be foolish.

In the hall, Paula Stark, a young, dark-haired Secret Service agent—fresh-faced and with a hint of muscle under her dark suit—was leaning against the opposite wall, watching Blair’s bedroom. She straightened quickly, momentarily surprised, when Blair stepped out of her room. The two women stared at one another, the silence deepening as the seconds passed.

“I’m going for a walk,” Blair said at last.

“I’ll notify Mac,” Stark replied without inflection in her voice. She slipped her phone off her belt and flipped open the cover all in one practiced motion of her wrist. To her complete and utter shock, Blair Powell stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Don’t. Please. I just want to walk. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t go alone,” Stark responded emphatically, forgetting to appear impassive. She was still working on that. “Besides, the commander—”

“Isn’t here, is she?” Blair retorted sharply, turning away before the agent could see the hurt in her eyes. *They might get to watch my life, but I’ll be damned if they’ll know what I feel.*

“Well, it’s not like she won’t know—Hey!”

Blair walked rapidly away down the hall, Stark close on her heels.

“Please—Ms. Powell, just let me call the cars.”

“If you want to come along—fine. But just you.” She started down the back stairs and would be outside, free, in a few seconds. “If you so much as lift your wrist to key that mike, I’ll be gone.”

Stark had no choice but to follow. She knew the president’s daughter well enough by now to know that arguing would not work. She also knew that if provoked, Blair was perfectly capable of giving all of them the slip and disappearing. It had happened before, and that was a worse threat to her safety than going out with only one agent as protection. *Oh man, Mac is going to kill me. Thank God the commander is in DC.*

It was just after nine p.m., and the sky was clear, nearly cloudless except for wisps here and there that glowed silver with reflected light from the full moon. In a city famous for romance, on a night made for lovers, Blair was lonely.

Starting down the steep, twisting wooden stairs that led from the rear of Marcea Casells’s house to Lombard Street at a pace too fast for the terrain, especially in the near dark, she steadfastly ignored the ache. She hadn’t been aware of loneliness for a very long time, and on the rare occasions when she had, she’d known just what to do about it. A few hours lost in the arms of an attractive stranger, anonymous pleasures at no cost to anyone, had served her well until Cameron Roberts had come along less than a year ago and changed everything.

“Like I even asked her to.”

“I’m sorry?” Stark was struggling to stay within touching distance of the president’s daughter without actually touching her.

“Nothing.”

They reached the street and wended their way down the sharply curving road in the general direction of the bay. When it became apparent that Stark wasn’t going to do anything except dog her steps, Blair relaxed infinitesimally.

“What are you doing here, anyway? I though you were off for a while.”

Stark blushed, grateful that her companion couldn’t see it. The question caught her off guard—she hadn’t realized that Blair

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Powell, code name Egret, gave any thought to the schedule of her security team. Although Stark was the lead agent in Egret's personal security detail and spent hours with her every day under every imaginable circumstance, they had not had a personal conversation in months. Not since the night over six months before when they'd spent a number of frantic hours together in bed. *Well, I was pretty frantic. And come to think of it, we didn't do much talking even then.*

"Couldn't stay away?" Blair probed. She still couldn't quite figure out why these people were willing to risk their lives for a person to whom they worked so hard to appear invisible. Although she knew all the agents on her detail by name, she knew very little personally about most of them. They rarely looked directly at her because they were too busy looking everywhere else. If she stripped naked in front of them, they wouldn't blink. She grinned to herself—well, Stark would. But that was because the agent hadn't mastered the game face yet. *And besides, I wouldn't do that to her.*

"After everyone left for the airport last night, I felt useless," Stark confessed, stepping slightly to the right of Blair so that she could get between her and the traffic side of the sidewalk.

"You need to get a life, Stark," Blair commented, not unkindly.

"After what happened, I just...I don't know. I just wanted to be here."

Blair caught her breath, because she understood. All of them—the whole team—had been through hell together, and although they were strangers in many ways, they were also bonded by shared victory—and by shared loss. Despite understanding, she was amazed that Stark could admit it. "Don't you ever worry about saying things like that? It will ruin your macho image."

"Macho?" Stark laughed, then stopped at the corner of Hyde and Beach, unobtrusively blocking Blair's body from the intersection while glancing up and down the street. Thankfully, it was a weeknight and not many tourists were about. They crossed, heading steadily downhill toward the water. "As long as the commander trusts me, I'm not too worried about my image."

"It matters that much to you—what she thinks?"

“Of course,” Stark replied, clearly surprised. “I mean—she’s... well, she’s what we all want to be.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Blair’s tone was sharp, but it wasn’t anger. It was pain. *Can’t you see what it costs her?*

Stark fell silent, and she and Blair walked on rapidly, eventually turning left onto Jefferson until they reached the beach. Blair threaded her way with Stark by her side down stone stairs to the sand and finally sat, knees drawn up, watching the moonlight play across the waves.

“How’s Renee?” Blair’s voice was low and pensive. She drew the fine white sand through her fingers, letting the grains fall in a steady stream by her side.

“She’s okay,” Stark replied hesitantly, still unsure how to talk to the woman she spent more time with than anyone else in her life. “She pretty much kicked me out of the hospital this morning, which is why I decided to fly out here in the afternoon. Catch up to you all.”

“Why did she chase you off? Were you hovering?”

“Uh...well, maybe. Some.”

*Stark shifted in the stiff vinyl-cushioned chair, peering at her watch in the semi-darkness. Ten after five. In the morning. She’d slept all the previous afternoon after the commander had declared the entire first team off duty. As soon as she’d awakened, she’d come to the hospital, found Savard too sedated to talk, and had decided to sit for a while in case the FBI agent woke up. That had been at eight p.m.*

*She stretched and leaned closer to the bed, peering at the injured woman. In the dim light from the hall, Renee’s usually deep-coffee toned skin seemed pale, almost lifeless. Heart racing, Stark quickly reached for the hand that lay on the covers, folding it into her own. It was warm. She closed her eyes, drew a shaky breath, and rubbed her cheek against the backs of the long, slender fingers.*

*“Hey,” Renee said quietly, closing her hand weakly around Stark’s.*

*Stark jumped. “Hey. You’re awake.”*

*“Kind of. Is there any water?”*

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*“Yeah—right here. Wait a minute.” Stark hurriedly poured tepid water from a green plastic pitcher into a Styrofoam cup and fumbled the paper off a straw. Carefully, she tilted the cup and placed the straw between the other woman’s lips. “Here you go.”*

*After a few swallows, Renee dropped her head back against the pillows. “Thanks.”*

*“Should I call a nurse? Do you need something for the... pain?”*

*“No—not yet. Talk to me a little.” Renee’s voice was faint but her eyes seemed clear.*

*“Okay. Sure.”*

*“What happened?”*

*Stark’s heart thudded with anxiety again, because she’d already told her the story the day before. That was probably normal. Right?*

*Patiently, she recounted the tale from the beginning, leaving out the parts about the blood. And how fucking scared she’d been, kneeling by Renee’s side with both hands pressed to her shoulder and the blood that just kept coming.*

*“Paula?”*

*“Huh?” Stark responded too loudly, jumping again.*

*“Have you had any sleep?”*

*“Yeah—lots.”*

*“You seem...spooked.”*

*“No. I’m fine.”*

*“Good.” Renee closed her eyes.*

*After a few minutes of watching Renee’s chest steadily rise and fall, Stark figured she had fallen asleep. Gently, she disentangled her fingers and laid the slumbering woman’s hand down on the covers. When she looked up, Renee was watching her.*

*“Are you leaving?” Renee’s voice was just audible.*

*“Not if you don’t want me to.”*

*“I want you to.”*

*“Oh.” Stark looked away, swallowed.*

*“Paula.”*

*“Huh?”*

*“Look at me.”*

*Slowly, Stark brought her gaze to Renee's. The room had lightened enough to see the brilliant blue of them, and she couldn't help but smile.*

*Renee smiled back. "I'm going to get well...soon as I can."*

*"I know that," Stark said quickly.*

*"No—really. And you can't sit here worrying while I do."*

*"I'm not worr—"*

*"Go back to work if you don't want to take time off. Call me every day."*

*"Every day, huh?" Stark grinned. "Morning or night?"*

*"Either."*

*"Both?"*

*"If you like."*

*Stark's voice was husky when she replied. "Oh, I like."*

*"Hovering. Yeah, pretty much," Stark finally admitted with a faint laugh. "Yep."*

*Blair turned her head in time to catch the smile that even the darkness couldn't hide. *Aha! Our young Stark has a crush. I wonder—**

*The phone on Stark's belt trilled, breaking the silence, and they both started in surprise.*

*"Don't answer it," Blair said quickly.*

*Stark shook her head, her hand already opening the phone. "I have to."*

*When she heard the familiar deep voice, she was very glad she had.*