

WORD OF HONOR

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Thursday

I'm going to kill whoever is pounding on the ceiling downstairs," Blair Powell muttered, stretching across the naked body of her lover to squint at the alarm clock. "It's five fifteen. I'm not just going to kill them, I'm going to dismember them."

"Baby, hang on for a minute." Cameron Roberts pulled Blair down against her chest and stroked her back. Threading her fingers through Blair's tousled, curly blond hair, she kissed her. She bypassed the playful first-of-the-day *good morning, I love you* kisses and moved right along to the deep, possessive *you belong to me* kisses that would distract Blair from the activities going on in the command center below them.

"Mmm." Blair relaxed on top of Cam and fit her hips to the hollow of Cam's pelvis. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

Cam chuckled and skimmed her hands up and down Blair's back, ending at her firm backside. She massaged Blair's ass and kissed her again. When Blair gasped and tipped her head back, Cam trailed the tip of her tongue down Blair's neck to the base of her throat. "If you don't know by now, I've been doing something wrong for almost a year."

"I know you think this will buy whoever's down there a few more minutes of safety."

"Is it working?"

"What do you think?" Blair braced her arms on either side of Cam's shoulders and watched Cam's face as she slowly rocked between her legs. In mid-November, dawn was still an hour away, and she had

only the glow of the streetlights bordering Gramercy Park to see by, but it didn't matter. She would have known Cam's scent, her touch, the carved angles and planes of her face in total darkness. Her heart beat to the rhythm of Cam's heart, and she knew with quiet and unrepentant certainty that were Cam's heart to stop beating, hers would too. Cam's heart beat quickly now, strong and full, as Cam lifted her hips to meet Blair's. Cam's jaw tightened and her dark eyes focused with fierce intensity on Blair's face.

"I think you've started something you're going to have to finish," Cam said.

Blair smiled, her breath coming faster as she felt the teasing anticipation swirl in the pit of her stomach. "Oh really?"

Cam reached between them and cradled Blair's breast. She rubbed the pad of her thumb over Blair's nipple until Blair caught her lower lip between her teeth and moaned softly. "Yes, really."

"If you keep doing that," Blair murmured, leaning down to lick Cam's lower lip, "I'm going to *finish* first." She closed her eyes and bore down harder with each rolling thrust, letting the pleasure Cam was igniting in her nipple flame the excitement between her legs. So easy, so easy to let everything go, to lose herself for just a few minutes in Cam. "God, that feels good."

A loud thumping filled the room and the bed vibrated, the legs rattling against the polished wood planks.

Blair's eyes snapped open. "What the—"

"Ignore them," Cam ordered, covering Blair's other breast. Rapidly, she squeezed and released her nipples. "Weren't you just about to—"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I'm going to come," Blair whispered, her lips parted in pleasure.

"That's what I thought." Cam drank in the sight of Blair trembling above her, the muscles in her neck standing out in sharp relief as she climbed toward climax.

"Oh that's...Cam, I'm..." Blair whimpered softly and shuddered into orgasm.

Cam caught her as she slumped down and cradled her face against the curve of her neck. She kissed Blair's forehead as Blair snuggled

into her and sighed contentedly. “The alarm doesn’t go off until six. Go back to sleep.”

“What about you?” Blair said drowsily.

“You can join me in the shower.”

Blair murmured something that sounded like *goody* and dropped off.

Cam sifted Blair’s hair through her fingers and watched the patterns of light flicker on the ceiling as sunlight penetrated the fall sky. The sound of hammering and the occasional screech of nails pulling free from wood filtered up from the floor below. The renovations on the command center used by the Secret Service agents who guarded Blair should be finished in a day or so. The same morning as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, four heavily armed men had invaded Blair’s penthouse apartment in a building bordering Manhattan’s Gramercy Park and nearly succeeded in killing her. Blair’s loft—code-named the Aerie—had largely escaped damage during the assault, but her Secret Service operations center one floor down had taken heavy fire. Blair hadn’t been able to return to Manhattan until just a few days ago when her protection detail could resume on-site monitoring as well as coordinate the security for her day-to-day activities. In addition to personal protection, her eight-person security team coordinated advance reconnaissance for her many public appearances and assessed the myriad reports compiled daily by the National Intelligence Program from sixteen or so intelligence organizations.

Unfortunately, although the command center was functional, some construction remained to be finished, and Blair’s tolerance for noise and disruption was wearing thin. Everyone’s patience, not just Blair’s, was honed to the bone. The lives of the men and women who provided vital security for the first daughter, as well as those who had been assigned to Cam’s special OHS counterterrorism team, had been irrevocably altered on the morning of September 11. For those who dedicated their lives to preserving the security of the nation and its most important representatives, the desperate search for answers and the heightened pressure to prevent further tragedy were a constant strain.

Cam considered her new team—the best of the best—culled from other security agencies when the Office of Homeland Security was hastily put together and she was named a deputy director. Renée Savard,

former FBI; Felicia Davis, former Secret Service; Ricky Sanchez, her newest recruit from the ATF; and one other, a deep CIA operative who might still be the target of a domestic terrorism cell and those in power who aided them. All highly trained, all seasoned agents. None of them were sleeping well. All of them struggled with guilt over their inability to foresee or prevent the terrible events of that fateful Tuesday in September. And now they lived with the unspoken fear that it could happen again unless they did something.

Two months after the attacks, the nation remained at red alert and Blair's security status at Priority One. Blair was never without a security detail, not even when she was home. The only reason there wasn't an agent in her apartment at that moment was because Cam had been Blair's security chief for most of the previous year and could stand in for an agent when necessary. Still, Blair chafed at the restrictions, and as much as Cam understood and sympathized with her lover's reluctance to have her freedom so severely restricted, she wholeheartedly embraced the necessity of safeguarding the president's daughter. Blair was not just the president's only child, she was an important public figure in her own right. She often represented the White House at public functions and acted as an international diplomat in her father's stead. She was a symbol of the United States, and as such, her security was nearly as critical as the president's.

Cam shifted carefully and tightened her hold on the woman who slumbered in her arms. Blair had already been a target of a sniper's bullet and the skillfully orchestrated full-on tactical assault that had nearly succeeded in assassinating her in her own home. Cam had been in charge of Blair's security detail then, and she would never forgive herself for allowing the infiltration of her team by a traitor who nearly managed to gun down her lover. She'd been cleared of any dereliction of duty, but no report exonerating her from responsibility for the assault could assuage the knowledge that she had failed. She could not afford to fail again. None of them could.

"You're not sleeping," Blair said, smoothing her palm over Cam's chest. "And you're not relaxed. Your heart is pounding like you're running a marathon."

"That's what instant replays of the good parts do to me," Cam replied lightly.

“Cameron.”

Cam sighed. “Sorry. I don’t know why I haven’t figured out that you can read my mind.”

“I can’t read your mind. But I know what your body’s telling me. What are you worrying about?”

“Nothing.” Cam kissed Blair before she could protest. “I mean it. I was just thinking.”

“And…” Blair leaned up on an elbow and traced a finger along the edge of Cam’s jaw. “Don’t make me pull it out of you, Cam. That will only piss me off.”

“Being back here—it’s hard not to think about what happened.”

Blair caressed Cam’s face. “I suppose it would be foolish of me to think you’re ever going to forgive yourself.”

“It’s not about forgiveness,” Cam said. “I need to understand what went wrong, so it doesn’t happen again.”

“I get that part,” Blair said. “But I also know you’re blaming yourself.”

Cam laughed sharply. “Since I was in charge, that seems appropriate.”

“See? You’re starting to piss me off.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Cam ran her hands through Blair’s hair and cradled her face in her palms. She traced her thumbs over the arch of Blair’s cheekbones. “I love you. It doesn’t matter to me who your father is or what claim the world has on you. You’re the woman I love, and that means I need to keep you safe.”

“Oh, Cam.” Blair kissed her softly, then shook her head. “I love you for exactly the things about you that drive me crazy.”

Cam grinned. “I think that works in my favor.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Is it time for that shower?”

Blair bit Cam gently on the chin. “You think if you cloud my brain with sex I’ll forget that you’re beating yourself up over something that wasn’t your fault?”

“I know you won’t let me get away with feeling guilty for long.” Cam wrapped her arms around Blair and turned them over in bed until she was lying on top of her. “I know you love me and you want to protect me.”

“That seems silly, doesn’t it,” Blair said. “Me protecting you.”

“No, not at all.” Cam rested her forehead against Blair’s. “It makes me feel safe. The only place in the world I feel safe is with you.”

“Don’t make me cry, Cam.” Blair’s voice was hoarse and her hand trembled as she ran her fingers through Cam’s thick dark hair. “You’ve been hurt too—almost killed more than once. I can’t stop seeing every single bruise and scar, even when I close my eyes.”

“Blair, baby,” Cam said soothingly.

“No. Don’t tell me about facts and figures and how it’s a one in a million thing you’ll ever be hurt again.” Blair’s smile softened the harsh edge to her words. “I understand the risks. It’s a new world now, and I know there’s no looking back. I understand that we all have to do what we can to make it a safe one.”

Cam was quiet a long moment. “I was thinking one of the first things we need to do is get married.”

Blair laughed, some of the heaviness in her heart lifting. “Well, I’m glad that’s on your agenda, because we have a date to do just that in just about ten days.”



Diane Bleeker bolted upright in the center of the king-sized bed in her Upper East Side condo overlooking Central Park. The space beside her was empty, and with a gasp, she threw back the covers and swung her legs to the floor. She was nude except for a pale peach camisole, and she shivered although the apartment was warm. She grasped a navy silk robe from the bottom of the bed and pulled it on as she rushed down the darkened hall. She didn’t bother turning on lights. The early gray light filtering through the double glass doors from the living room balcony was enough for what she needed to see. Valerie.

Heart sinking, she surveyed the empty living room before yanking open the closet next to the front door. Valerie’s coat was there, but the last time Valerie had vanished in the middle of the night, she had taken nothing with her.

“Diane, I’m here.”

“Oh!” Diane clutched her robe closed and spun around. Valerie stepped inside from the balcony and closed the doors behind her. She

wore an oversized cotton shirt closed with a few buttons between her breasts. Her legs were bare. “God, darling, you must be freezing.”

“I’m fine,” Valerie said.

When she gripped Diane’s shoulders carefully and kissed her, her hands were cold but her lips were invitingly warm. “I can’t seem to stop frightening you. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t frighten me.” Diane rubbed Valerie’s forearms, wishing that she could warm the cold place inside her. She’d never been more aware that love was not always enough, and she alternated between feeling angry and helpless. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Just restless.” Valerie forced a smile, which she expected Diane could see right through. In the four weeks since she had almost been killed by the same fanatical “patriot” who had tried to assassinate Blair, she’d been haunted not by the near-death experience, but by the fifteen years of her life she had blindly devoted to an organization she could no longer trust. Recruited into the Company right out of high school, she had assumed an identity that had been painstakingly created for her, and over the years she had been many people. So many people that she wasn’t certain there was anything of *her* left at all. When she awakened in the night from her never quite sleeping state to find Diane slumbering innocently beside her, she was tormented with the absolute certainty that she did not deserve this woman’s trust or her love. Cameron Roberts might have orchestrated both her death in an explosion in the Atlantic as well as her subsequent rebirth as an OHS agent, but that didn’t mean the Company hadn’t targeted her for elimination. Even someone as powerful as Cameron Roberts could not protect her from a shot in the dark on a deserted street or an ice pick slipped between her ribs in a crowded subway. In some part of her mind, she had always expected death to come that way, swiftly and unexpectedly. She didn’t fear her own death, but she was terrified that her mere presence in Diane’s life placed her in harm’s way.

“If you tell me what’s wrong, I can help you,” Diane said quietly.

Valerie caressed Diane’s cheek and kissed her again. “I’m not certain I should be here. It might be better if I stayed in a hotel for a while.”

“Because?”

“Someone may be looking for me.”

Diane drew a shaky breath. "Someone may be trying to kill you."

"Diane," Valerie said gently.

"There's no point pretending otherwise. I know you might still be in danger." Diane took Valerie's hand. "Come back to bed."

"I can't. I need to get ready for the briefing."

"I keep forgetting how ridiculously early you people start your day." Diane forced a note of levity into her voice. "Then come into the kitchen while I make coffee."

Valerie followed her, and in comfortable silence they ground coffee, filled the coffeepot, and took down cups while waiting for the coffee to brew. She had never shared such simple domestic moments with anyone in her life. She had never lived with anyone, never had a long-term relationship, never been in love. She had loved another woman, one woman, and loved her still, but not with the consuming need that she felt for Diane.

Valerie leaned back against the counter and Diane put her arms around her waist.

"You told me that Cam hasn't been able to uncover any evidence that the Company or anyone else is looking for you," Diane said. "You said the cover story of you being killed in the boat explosion would be enough. Especially with your handler gone."

"All of that is probably true. Henry was the link between me and whoever he reported to up the company food chain, and with him dead and the cover story Cam put out about my death, I might just be a line item on someone's tally sheet." Valerie knew the hole in the argument was that her handler might have given her identity away, but she wasn't going to frighten Diane over things she couldn't change. "So with everyone in the intelligence community focused on finding who was behind 9/11, I'm probably not on anyone's to-do list."

"But you don't believe it?"

Valerie looked away.

"I know it's hard for you to trust me—"

"No," Valerie said immediately. "I do trust you. It's just that—*listen* to yourself. You're standing in your kitchen talking about handlers and targets and cover stories." Frustrated and angry, hating the weakness that kept her in Diane's life when she knew, she *knew*, it was wrong, Valerie plunged a hand through her short, thick red-blond curls. She'd cut her hair, she'd changed the color, she was wearing green contact

lenses to cover her blue irises—another new identity, another new history. But at heart, she remained a cipher, even to herself. “Is this really what you want in your life?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Diane snapped. “Because I’m tired of answering it.” She gave Valerie a small shake and forced her to meet her gaze. “I love you,” she said with slow emphasis on each word. “What part of that don’t you understand?”

“Any of it.” Valerie closed her eyes and pulled Diane close. They were very nearly the same height, and she rested her cheek against Diane’s. The scent of Diane’s perfume lingered ever so faintly along her hairline. She’d gone to sleep countless nights dreaming of that fragrance. “I don’t have a clue why you love me.”

“Well, I’m tired of telling you.” Diane kissed Valerie’s mouth, then moved to her neck. “So I’ll have to work harder at showing you. Come back to bed. The coffee will keep.”

Valerie laughed softly and abandoned good judgment, letting Diane tease her into surrendering, for the moment.



A stocky young redhead sipped coffee from a tall paper cup as he stood at the window of his rental unit watching Blair Powell’s building. Directly across the gated park that occupied a square city block, the lights came on in Blair Powell’s loft. Shadows flickered behind the drawn curtains of what must be the bedroom. To the casual observer on the street, her windows appeared to be like all the others in the building, but he knew they were constructed of bulletproof glass. The doorman who stood inside the double doors in a topcoat and uniform was also a private security agent. A Secret Service agent would be stationed behind the desk. Secret Service Agent Cynthia Parker had been at that post when his brothers-in-arms had burst through those doors a little over two months before, firing automatic weapons. According to intelligence reports, the female Secret Service agent had killed one of his compatriots before she’d been gunned down. They had expected casualties upon entry, and one death was excellent. They *hadn’t* anticipated that Cameron Roberts would fire on her own agent without a moment’s hesitation. They had always planned for Secret Service Agent Foster to die during the assault, but not before he had

assassinated Blair Powell. They had underestimated Cameron Roberts not once, but twice. That could not happen again.

His cell phone rang, and without taking his eyes off the first daughter's bedroom, he answered it.

"Yes sir?"

"Good morning, Colonel," General Thomas Jefferson Matheson said cheerily. "Enjoying the view?"

"Yes sir, very much, sir."

"I'm happy to report you'll have the afternoon off."

Colonel Jonathan Perry frowned. "I'm not due to be relieved until eighteen hundred hours, sir."

"I've been advised that our bird will be flying this afternoon. We'll pick her up when she lands."

"Sir, I would prefer to follow her my—"

"Patience, Colonel," Matheson said, his deep baritone oddly soothing, "our time is very nearly at hand. I have something special planned for you."

"Yes sir, whatever you say, sir."

"You might use the time off to buy some new winter clothing. It's cold in Colorado this time of year."

"Yes sir," Perry said with a slow smile. "I'll do that."