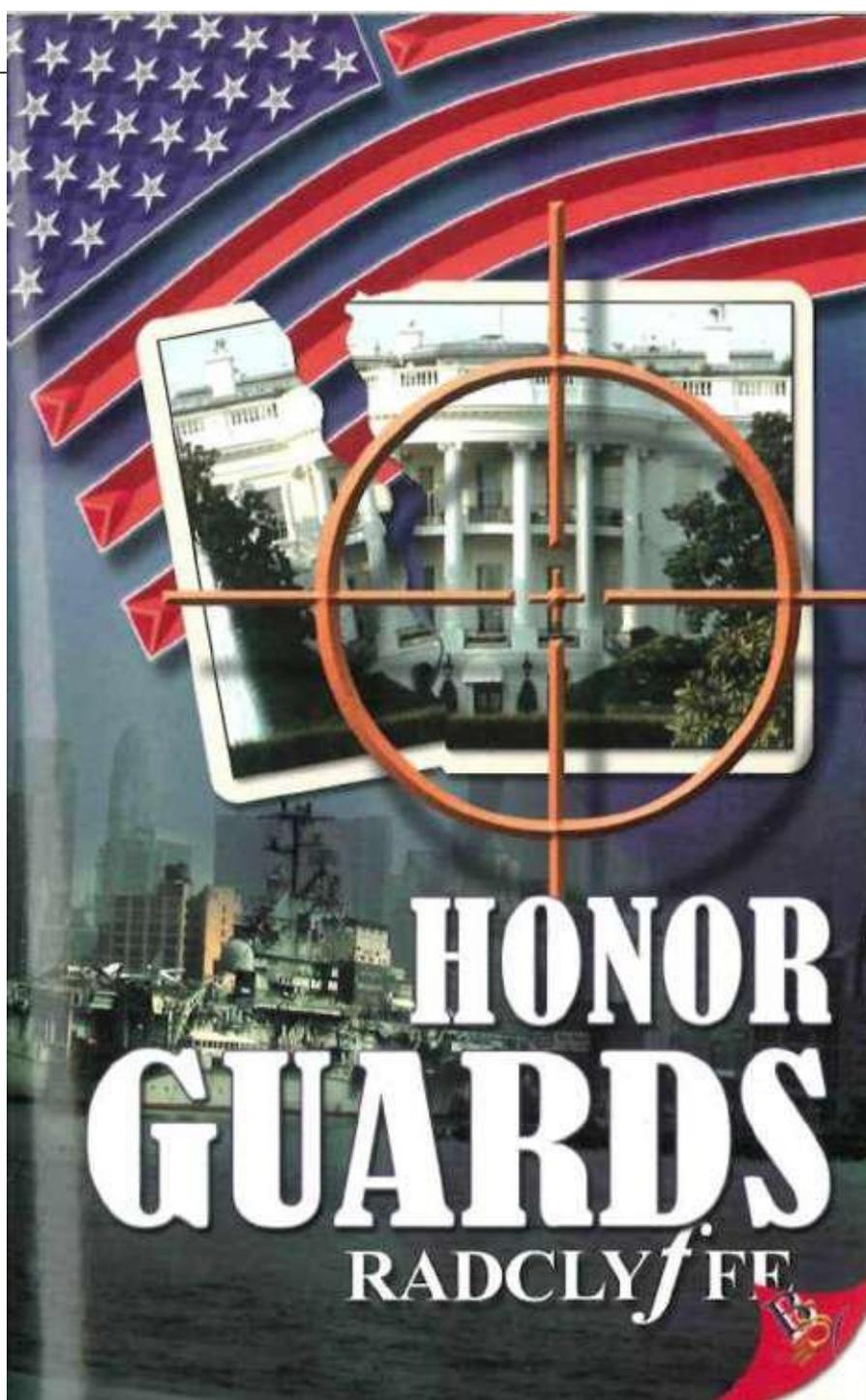




HONOR GUARDS

RADCLYFE



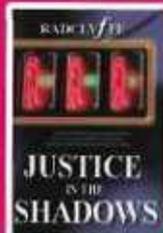
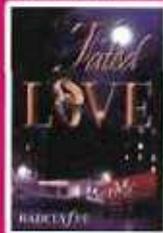


Radclyffe, author of sixteen lesbian romances, is the recipient of the 2004 Alice B. Award for a career "distinguished by consistently well-written, realistic, and inspirational novels."

In addition to traditional romances, her novels include the Justice series — a romance/police procedural series — and the three previous books in the Honor series.

When not writing lesbian-themed fiction, she's reading it, writing about it, or searching for the perfect image to photograph for the next book cover.

A practicing surgeon as well as full-time author, she lives in Philadelphia, Pa., with her partner, Lee.



"As usual, Radclyffe delivers an engaging tale of Secret Service agent Cameron Roberts and her lover/protector, First Daughter Blair Powell. *Honor Guards*, the latest installment in the Honor series, takes place in the days just before 9/11 and effectively uses the countdown as more than just an ominous backdrop — understated and deftly woven into the story, the coming disaster becomes almost an unseen but tangible presence that shapes the entire narrative. Powerful characters, engrossing plot, and intelligent writing — *Honor Guards* is a non-stop page-turner that ranks among the very best of Radclyffe's remarkable oeuvre."

CAMERON ABBOTT — author of *To The Edge and An Inexpressible State of Grace*

When you're the president's daughter and the closest thing the country has to a first lady, your life is never really your own. When you're the woman charged to guard the first daughter, and you also happen to be her lover, every moment of every day is filled with challenges — and a mistake could cost you everything.

Unbeknownst to either Blair Powell or Secret Service Agent Cameron Roberts, the two lovers are at the center of a conspiracy that will rock the world when a net of violence and death draws down upon them and the nation. In a journey that begins on the streets of Paris's Left Bank and culminates in a wild flight for their lives, the president's daughter and those who are sworn to protect her wage a desperate struggle for survival.



Honor Guards

by

RADCLYFFE

INTRODUCTION

I wrote *Above All, Honor* as an action/romance novel, and as the series has evolved, it has developed into the story of relationships in a world that is dangerous and often deadly. Because much of the story is set in Manhattan and one of the main characters is the daughter of the president of the United States, it seemed integral to the continuing saga to deal with the events of September 11, 2001.

I agonized over the appropriate time to write about this topic in a work of fiction. Certainly, there was

never be a time when the horrific events of that day are forgotten or when the anguish of all who live through it is assuaged. At some point, the events that occur during our lives become part of the history of the world. Whether we experience those events firsthand or via images and other records, the tragedy never lessens, nor do the memories dim. This book is meant to be neither an explanation nor a resolution of events that are beyond comprehension.

The timeline of 9/11 contained in the book is accurate and based upon *Report From Ground Zero* by Dennis Smith (Viking Press, 2002); *Last Man Down* by Richard Piccioto and Daniel Paisner (Berkley Publishing Group, 2002); *Inside 9-11: What Really Happened*, by the reporters, writers, and editors of *Der Spiegel* magazine (St. Martin's Press, 2002); and *One Nation: America Remembers September 11, 2001* by *Life* magazine (Little, Brown, 2001).

This was a difficult book to write, to beta read, and to edit due to the intersecting plotlines and the oftentimes difficult subject matter. I am indebted to a superb group of readers and proofreaders: Athos, Denise, Diane, Eva, JB, Laney, Paula, Robyn, Sue, and Tomboy, and to Stacia Seaman, my excellent editor, for their outstanding work and tireless support.

Sheri's covers always speak for themselves far more eloquently than I can, but once again she has found the perfect visual representation of the story. Thanks also to Linda Callaghan for donating the image of the White House.

Somehow Lee finds a way to be supportive, cheerful, and patient even when I am not (which is especially true at the beginning, middle, and end of a new work). For that and all the possibilities she brings to my life, I am beyond grateful. *Amo te.*

Radclyffe, 2004

Dedication

To the Victims of 9/11

CHAPTER ONE

16 August 2001

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 the latter group were often unfathomable, but she had grown used to hiding her rare feelings of surprise and 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 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."

"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—"

"Mrnm. It's great." Renee held out her hand for the flowers, which she lifted to her nose, smiling once again. Then she turned 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 lip 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 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; 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...that will sound silly I almost want to wait until we know where this is going. "

"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 Power 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 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 hot 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.

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 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 rilled 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 even anticipated or even consciously desired. She had spent most of her adult life avoiding commitment 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 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 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 sliders, 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.

"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 Blaire 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.

CHAPTER TWO

0313 16Aug01

Query RedDog: Do you read?

RedDog: roger team leader

Do you have target in range?

RedDog: negative... target off radar

FIND HER. Operation Hydra is active.

Awaiting strike date RedDog: roger. Will advise when target secured

"I'd ask you to come up," Renee said as she and Stark stood on the sidewalk outside her hotel. "But it's four thirty in the morning and at this point, our choices for what comes next don't include much beyond going to bed."

"That's okay," Stark said softly, reaching out to touch Renee's fingers. "I had a great time. There's something about walking around in a city while it sleeps, especially one as beautiful as this, that makes me feel as if I'm in the middle of a wonderful dream. Being with you tonight was like having that dream come true."

Renee's lips parted in surprise as she caught her breath. Her voice was husky when she spoke. "How come all the training to make you such a tough Secret Service agent hasn't beaten that tenderness out of you?"

Stark shrugged, a wry grin lifting one corner of her mouth. "They tried pretty hard, but it just seems to be something I can't get rid of."

"Thank God."

"I'm not sure it's a good thing," Stark amended, her voice troubled. "I'm supposed to be able to put my feelings aside to do the job right."

"Oh, no, honey, Renee protested gently. "I know that's the party line—no emotional attachment with the protectees. No personal investment. But I say that when you stop caring is when you'll go careless." Boldly, Renee took Stark's hand and pulled her from beneath the small awning into the deep shadows of the building. She framed Stark's face and kissed her tenderly. "You're just right, on *and* on the job. I hope you never change."

Swallowing audibly, Stark lightly clasped Renee's waist. "I can safely say nothing's going to change the way I feel about you."

Renee rested her forehead against Stark's, savoring the simple pleasure of the moment before kissing her again. "Promise?"

"Promise." Stark sighed. "And you don't have to worry about whether to ask me up or not, because I say no anyway."

"You would? Just like that?" Renee's tone was a mixture of surprise and consternation. As much as she was enjoying their slow courtship, part of her hoped that the waiting was at least a little bit uncomfortable for Stark as it was for her. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"Oh, believe me, I'm suffering greatly." Stark laughed and caught Renee's hand, swinging their joined arms gently. "But that's not what I meant. There's something I...uh...need to do."

"At this hour?" Renee tilted her head, narrowing her gaze as she studied Stark astutely. "Let me guess Secret Service Agent Stark is still on duty."

"Yeah." Sheepishly, Stark nodded. "Something like that."

God, it would be so easy to fall totally head over heels in love with you. I really do need to slow down. Renee reluctantly released Stark's hand and gave her a playful shove. "All right then, go. Go. Cad tomorrow when you get a break."

"Okay. Thanks." Stark started to turn away, and then—as if in afterthought—swiveled swiftly back, pulled Renee to her, and kissed her resoundingly. When she lifted her mouth away, she had to struggle for enough air to speak. "Sleep,..well."

Renee, her lips tingling and her heart racing, stared after Stark as she strode purposefully away. *Oh, will. If I can ever get my body to quiet down.*

Half an hour later, Stark slowly approached a nondescript black sedan parked at the intersection of Rue Segulier and Rue de Savoie. A lone figure, cast in shadow, occupied the front seat of the vehicle. Before Stark could reach out to tap on the door, the window rolled soundlessly down. Leaning an arm against the top of the car, Stark peered inside. "Hey. Want some coffee?"

The face of the striking African American woman who regarded her with a raised brow could easily have graced the cover of any fashion magazine. Felicia Davis nodded, smiling a Mona Lisa smile. "Now why aren't I surprised to see you?"

"I could say the same thing." Stark grinned. "How long have you been here?"

"Since about 0230."

"Do they know?"

"No, and I'd prefer that they don't." Davis lifted a shoulder gracefully. Even the shapeless windbreaker she wore couldn't detract from her natural elegance. "I think it was the commander's intention f

them to be alone."

"There's a café open around the corner. Espresso?"

"Make it a double. And bless you." Felicia rolled the window back up as Stark turned to head down the street. Throughout the conversation, she'd kept one eye on the entrance to the *pensione* where Commander Cameron Roberts and Blair Powell were spending the night. She understood why they wanted to be alone, and she had no desire to dispel that illusion of privacy. On the other hand, it was her responsibility to see that no harm came to the first daughter. She'd do what she could to see that that happened while respecting both her commander's and Egret's wishes.

A moment later, Stark returned, and Felicia unlocked the doors. Stark slid into the passenger seat, closed the door, and handed the thimble-sized cardboard container of coffee to the other agent. "Does Mac know you're here?"

Felicia sipped her espresso silently and then, after a moment, turned her head and regarded Stark thoughtfully. "No."

"I just thought..you know...that maybe you had checked in with him," Stark stumbled. *Jesus, Paul, could you be any less smooth.* She knew, or at least she *assumed*— -as did most of the rest of the team—that Felicia Davis and Mac Phillips, the team's communication coordinator and second in command, were romantically involved. The two agents were both very private, but they *had* been known to date. "I figured he sent you."

"I was in the command center when Fielding checked in after the commander dismissed the night shift. He said that you and he had escorted them to this location. He seemed only too happy to get the rest of the night off." Her tone suggested that she did not approve of his approach to his duty, but she didn't comment further. She was a relatively new member of the team, and she'd been brought in from the technical division for her computer skills. Not being a regular member of the protective branch made her a bit of an outsider. To some.

Stark flushed. "I probably should've stayed here."

"I wasn't being critical." Felicia's quiet tone supported her words. "I trust the commander's judgment and I don't think she would have done anything to put Egret at risk, I'm here because that's what makes me comfortable."

"Me too, I guess. Look, is it okay if I keep you company?"

"Fine. I expect that the commander will check in with the comm center first thing in the morning. We should probably be off-site before an official team arrives."

"Yeah," Stark mused, sipping her coffee. "What time do you figure?"

"Knowing the commander? She'll call Mac at 0700."

"So estimating half an hour for Mac to put the first shift on-site, we should leave here at 0715." Stark contemplated going back for more coffee and baguettes. "I don't feel like starting the day with the commander pissed at me."

~~Felicia sighed and stretched her long legs beneath the cramped dash. "I don't think she would be. But I'd like them to think that their night was exactly what they wanted it to be."~~

Surprised, Stark studied the woman beside her. Felicia was a difficult person to figure. She rarely mentioned anything personal, and she often appeared aloof and distant. Like so many high-powered computer experts, she seemed to be more comfortable with data and machines. Clearly, however, she understood the critical matters of the human heart.

"Yeah," Stark murmured, thinking of her recent stroll hand in hand with Renee on the Champ de Mars and how precious those moments had been. "Now and then it's good to dream."

The combination of a warm breeze carrying the scents of freshly baked bread and coffee, the distant hum of traffic, and voices wafting up from the street below woke Cam. She turned on her side toward the open French doors and opened her eyes to the pink-purple haze of dawn. It wasn't the otherworldly burst of color that made her heart race, however. Blair, wearing only Cam's tuxedo shirt, stood framed on the threshold to the tiny balcony with its ornate wrought-iron railing. Her expression was pensive as she gazed toward the Seine.

Lying still, Cam took advantage of the very rare opportunity to study Blair in repose. So often, the time together was spent at briefings, traveling to or from the first daughter's many official or private functions, or in the company of other members of the team. Being alone with Blair, especially in quietude, was a rare treasure. As was so often the case, the gift was fleeting.

Blair turned her head and looked back into the room, a soft smile curving her lips as her eyes met Cam's. "I thought I felt you wake up."

"I'm surprised I didn't feel you leave the bed," Cam said quietly, stretching beneath the rumpled sheets. Her body felt unusually relaxed, almost loose. That was another rare occurrence, and Cam recognized the lassitude as the aftereffect of their lovemaking and the pleasure of sleeping with Blair in her arms. "I think you might just have worn me out."

"Really?" Blair's smile widened and she arched one blond brow. "I'm not sure that bodes well for our future, Commander. I tend to be a more than a once-a-week kind of girl."

"I shouldn't worry, Ms. Powell." Throwing back the light coverings and swinging her legs to the floor, Cam chuckled. She glanced around and spied her trousers. "I have remarkable powers of recovery."

"I know," Blair murmured, watching appreciatively as Cam stepped into her pants. Naked from the waist up, she was beautiful—all tight muscles beneath smooth skin and seething with sensuality. Feeling the familiar urgency that just the sight of her lover instilled, Blair's eyes traveled to the irregular scar above Cam's left breast and the long incision that extended from just below her breast around her side to her back. The once bright red ridges were pale pink now, but no matter how faded they might eventually become, Blair would always see them. Just as she would always see Cam lying on the sidewalk in front of her apartment building, bleeding to death from the bullet meant for Blair. *Thank God you're so strong. What would I do...*

Wondering at the odd tone in Blair's voice, Cam zipped her trousers and met her lover's eyes. Quickly,

she crossed to her, slid both arms around Blair's waist from behind, and pressed her chest to Blair's back. She nuzzled her face in Blair's hair and kissed the edge of her ear. "Don't."

Resting her weight against Cam's body, Blair folded her arms over Cam's to hold her closer. "Don't what?"

"Don't remember. It's over." Cam kissed the sensitive spot just below Blair's ear. "Let it go, baby."

It should have bothered Blair, that subtle command, but it didn't. The tenderness ablated any edge the words might have carried. Indolently, she stretched back an arm and thrust her fingers into Cam's hair. "No one has ever been able to read my mind before."

"No one has ever loved you the way I do."

"I don't want to live without you."

Cam drew a swift breath, shocked by the statement. It wasn't that she doubted Blair's feelings for her, but she had never expected to occupy a place of such pivotal importance in this particular woman's life. Blair was nothing if not strong and independent— so much so that sometimes she drove Cam to distraction. Theirs had been a stormy beginning, and even now they locked horns on practically a daily basis, usually disagreeing over how much security Blair required. Professionally they had *begun* to learn to compromise. Personally, they had barely defined their present, let alone their future.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you," Cam murmured, her mouth against Blair's neck. "I'll do anything possible to make that happen."

"I wish we could live together."

Cam closed her eyes and held Blair closer. She had trained herself from childhood not to want things she couldn't have. Blair had been the first woman to make her break that rule, and still, she tried not to want more than what they had. The wistful tone in Blair's voice washed that resolve away in a single heartbeat. "We will."

"You know that's not possible."

"Not today," Cam turned Blair to face her, but kept her within the circle of her arms, "and not tomorrow. But it will happen, I promise."

"Is that what you want?" Blair's blue eyes searched gray.

Cam's gaze never faltered. "With all my heart."

"I'm sorry. God." Blair sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what has gotten hold of me. Maybe it's being here with you. I went to school here..." She shrugged and smiled wryly. "It wasn't a great time."

"How so?"

I was lonely. I was lost. I wanted what we have now, but I was afraid it would never happen.

Blair pushed aside the melancholy with a shrug. "My father was the vice president then, and I was bit of a handful for all concerned, I guess."

"I can just imagine." Cam kissed her lightly on the lips. "I don't envy your security chief."

"Which one?" Blair laughed. "The position was practically a revolving door. They'd do anything to get out of it."

"I thought that's the way I would feel too," Cam confessed. "I *did* feel that way when I first got the assignment. I don't feel that way now. Even if I weren't in love with you, I would want this job."

Curious and surprised, Blair cocked her head. "Why?"

"Because it's essential to the security of the country."

Blair's eyes widened. "You really believe that?"

"Absolutely. And so does every member of my team." Cam leaned her shoulders back against the door frame, cradling Blair in her arms, as they both looked toward the Cathedral of Notre Dame. "The currency of power today isn't arms, it's terror—and that is much subtler and much more difficult to defend against. If something were to happen to you..."

"Nothing will," Blair stated emphatically, hearing the worry in Cam's voice. She caught Cam's hand and slid it inside the shirt, pressing her lover's fingers to her breast.

Softly, Cam groaned. "You don't honestly expect me to think now, do you?"

"Mmm," Blair sighed. "I just love to have your hands on me."

Cam rested her cheek against Blair's hair and breathed in her scent. "If you were used as a political marker against your father, there's no way he would be able to resist the influence. He'd either have to submit to whatever demands were made or step down. Either way, we would all lose."

"I didn't really appreciate that before—not the way I do now," Blair admitted. "I'll try, darling. I really will."

"I know." Cam cradled the softness of Blair's breast in her palm, lightly brushing the tender skin against the taut nipple. This woman was critically important to a nation constantly at war, even if those struggles were not acknowledged in the media. But even more, she was beyond precious to Cam—her heart, to her very life. "I promised you once, that first day, that I would try to make this situation tolerable for you. I still will, as much as I can. I love you."

Blair shifted until her mouth met Cam's. Against her lover's lips, she murmured, "God, I love you too."

"We have an hour or so before I need to call Mac," Cam whispered.

"They offered us breakfast in bed." Blair pushed Cam back into the room and shrugged out of the shirt. "Hungry?"

Cam ran a hand slowly down the center of her abdomen, watching Blair follow her movements. She flicked open the button on her pants and drew the zipper down. "Yes."

CHAPTER THREE

Her eyes closed, Cam was alive with sensation—with the rich tangle of Blair's hair sifting between her fingers, with the warmth of Blair's mouth firing her already heated skin, and with the tenderness of Blair's lips drawing her ever closer to the edge of surrender. Rising from her distant reaches, the first whisper of orgasm curled in the pit of her stomach and danced like tendrils of flame along her spine. Her skin tingled, the muscles in her thighs trembled, and her hips lifted in silent supplication, entreating her lover to take more.

"It's so good," Cam whispered in wonder. Moaning softly, Blair stroked a hand down the center of Cam's stomach, feeling the muscles tighten in preparation for the final thrust toward completion. It was always at this moment, when the pure and simple beauty was about to blossom beneath her hands and flower against her lips, that the breath stilled in her chest and the blood thundered in her ears. Cam's cell phone rang.

Cam groaned, the pleasure transformed to agony. Blair lifted her mouth.

"Don't answer it."

But Cam was already rolling onto her side and reaching for her phone on the bedside table. Desperately, she fought back the urgency clamoring for escape like a wild thing in her depths and struggled to clear her head. Hoarsely, she rasped, "Roberts."

Breathing heavily, Blair pushed away, flopped onto her back, and stared at the ceiling. She fisted one hand in the sheet and drew it over them both. *All we wanted was a few goddamned hours!*

She'd allowed herself to forget everything except being with Cam for those few hours, and now the idyll was over. She pushed her hand through her hair and wrestled with the fury. *It's no one's fault. Not Cam's. Not whoever's on the other end of that line. No one's. It just is.*

At another time, in another place, she would already have been out of bed and pulling on her clothes. If she'd cared at all about the woman she'd been about to pleasure, she would have vented her rage on whoever was close by—herself, her temporary lover, or, on occasion, her friends. But now, she was alone with the woman she loved, and there was nowhere for the anger to go except inward. If she allowed *that*, it would destroy even the memory of the few hours of peace she'd found in Cam's arms.

Cam closed the phone, set it down, and turned back to Blair. "I'm sorry—"

"No," Blair quickly rejoined, shifting to face her lover. "No, it's all right." Drawing Cam near with one hand behind her head, she put her mouth to Cam's and gently kissed her while sliding the other hand between Cam's thighs. She smiled against her lover's lips as she heard the deep groan. "You're still throbbing."

"I'm still ready to...God, don't stop..." Cam's vision blurred as Blair stroked her.

"Never," Blair whispered, watching Cam's eyes glaze. When Cam threw back her head, neck arched

and body quivering, Blair pushed her onto her back and thrust into her in one long, deep stroke, taking her over, taking her. "I'll never stop...never, never..."

"Ahh...God." Cam sighed when she could catch her breath. She wrapped limp arms around Blair's shoulders and pressed her lips to her lover's damp temple. "Great timing."

"Me or the phone?" Blair asked lazily.

"What phone?"

Blair dipped her head and kissed the base of Cam's throat. "I love you, but what have you done with the commander?"

Cam stroked Blair's back and sighed. "That was Mac."

"I figured. He's the only one with balls big enough to call us when you've taken us off-line." Blair mentally steeled herself. "What is it?"

"Eric Mitchell didn't give us the two weeks he promised."

"He filed the story." Blair's voice rang hollow. It had been almost a week since she and Cam had met with the reporter, but she remembered every word of their half-hour interview.

Cam answered the intercom, listened for a moment, and said, "Send him up. " She settled the phone carefully back into its cradle and turned to Blair. "Ready? "

Blair nodded. Silently, she extended her hand and immediately felt anchored when Cam's fingers clasped hers. She leaned forward and kissed Cam fleetingly. "I'm fine. "

While Cam went to open the door for their visitor, Blair walked to the wide windows on the opposite side of Cam's living room and looked out over DC. They'd chosen to meet with the reporter in Cam's apartment rather than at the White House. This was not an official meeting; this was intensely personal. A clandestine photo of her and Cam had appeared in newspapers across the country not long before. The image was just blurry enough to obscure Cam's identity, but the fact that they had been captured in an intimate moment was abundantly clear.

Speculation was rampant within the media as to the specifics of Blair's "love affair, " and various "confidential sources" put her in the arms of mafia kingpins, movie stars, and even members of her father's cabinet. Ordinarily, she would have brushed it off and allowed the rumors to die away, eclipsed by the next natural disaster or national emergency. But her relationship with Cam was not going to go away; in fact, she hoped that it would become even more central to her life. And if that was the case, they could not live in secrecy any longer.

In an attempt to forestall rumors and to control the dissemination of misinformation, she had decided, with her father's blessing, to reveal the nature of her sexual identity as well as her romantic relationship with Cam. She had chosen a reporter who was also the husband of a college friend, hoping that old loyalties would translate into some degree of discretion. At the sound of Cam's deep voice at the door, Blair turned, determined and resolute.

"Ms. Powell," Eric Mitchell, a tall, thin, balding thirty-year-old, said as he approached with an outstretched hand. "I'm honored to be of service."

Blair shook his hand, rinding his unwavering pale blue gaze somewhat comforting. She indicated a nearby chair and then took Cam's hand and sat with her on the facing sofa.

"I'd like to make a statement, " Blair said calmly. "I'm happy for you to include any of my comments in your article, but I would ask that you discuss the timing with both the White House chief of staff, Lucinda Washburn, and the White House press secretary so that they can be prepared with a response."

Mitchell removed a slim notebook and a ballpoint pen from his inside jacket pocket. He flipped open the cover and smoothed down a blank page. Looking up, he regarded the first daughter. "I don't need the White House's permission to file a story, Ms. Powell. "

Cam made a soft noise that verged on a growl.

Blair squeezed her lover's hand and smiled coolly. "I'm well aware of that, Mr, Mitchell, I was only asking as a courtesy. Considering the circumstances."

"I understand, and I'll do my best. "

"Ms. Powell is scheduled to perform state duties, including meeting with the president of France and the ministers of health of several European nations in Paris next week, " Cam said pointedly. "While she's out of the country, it's imperative that we not be faced with the heightened media attention that the story is likely to generate."

"I appreciate the burden of public scrutiny, Ms. Powell." Again, Mitchell nodded, looking expectant. The look went from Cam to Blair. "I'll do my best to work with my editors and the White House on a mutually acceptable release date."

"Thank you," Blair replied, believing in his sincerity while at the same time knowing only too well how difficult it was to control anything in the bright glare of Washington's spotlights. She looked once at Cam, who returned her gaze with a smile and a squeeze of her fingers. The steady assurance in Cam's eyes and the solid comfort of her shoidder pressed to Blair's were all she needed.

Turning her attention back to the reporter, who waited silently, she said clearly and quietly, "I wish to make a public statement regarding my private life. Due to the unique circumstances of my family's visibility, I felt it important that I clarify certain issues raised by the recent photo of myself and my lover, who happens to be another woman."

The reporter's expression did not change. He held Blair's gaze comfortably. "Does your father know?"

"Yes."

"Does he approve? "

Blair's expression was glacial, but entirely composed. "That's a question best presented to my father, although I should think there are matters of much greater importance for you and the rest of the news"

media to focus on."

"That may be, but it's a question that everyone will want to have answered."

Blair hesitated, wondering where to draw the line between the personal and the public, especially where her father was concerned. "My father is aware of my sexual orientation and is supportive."

"And the woman in the photograph is your current lover? "

"Yes." . . . Cam leaned forward. "I'm the other person in the photograph."

For the first time, Mitchell's composure faltered and his eyebrows rose in surprise. "You are the head of Ms. Powell's security team, are you not, Agent Roberts?"

"That's correct. " Cam eyed him flatly. "But I'm here today as Ms. Powell's lover. "

"Are your superiors aware of your relationship? " He kept his eyes on them, but he was writing furiously.

"Not yet. But I expect to advise them within the next twenty-four hours,"

"Do you expect to be dismissed? "

Blair stiffened.

"I don't know, " Cam answered calmly.

Mitchell turned his attention back to Blair. "Does your father know about Agent Roberts as well?"

"Yes."

"How long has he known? "

"That is of no relevance," Cam interjected swiftly. There was a definite edge to her tone now.

"Do you expect to continue your relationship after this public announcement, especially in light of your unusual professional relationship?"

"Yes, " both women said emphatically.

From that point, the interview had proceeded much as Blair had expected, with the usual questions about when she had first become aware of her sexual orientation, the details of previous liaisons, and suppositions as to the effect of the announcement on her father's reelection campaign. Most of the questions she refused to answer because there were some things no one had the right to know. She also refused to speculate on the position of the White House. It had not been a pleasant discussion, but it wasn't nearly as difficult as she imagined it would have been had Cam not been with her.

After much debate and chest thumping from the West Wing in the days after the interview, consensus had been reached as to when to release the story. Mitchell and his editors argued that the

was a strong likelihood of a leak from the Hill and that some other newspaper might break the story. They wanted to file immediately. Lucinda Washburn claimed that would put Blair at undue risk while abroad. Eventually, all parties had compromised on a delay of two weeks, which would enable Blair and her security team to be back in the U.S. when the news came out.

"God." Blair sighed. Going public about something so very personal had been a difficult decision—one that she'd avoided making all of her adult life. If she hadn't fallen in love with Cam, she might never have willingly disclosed the information. "That's not good news."

"I'm sorry, baby." Cam pushed up in the bed, her back against the headboard, Blair still in her arms. "We need to get back to base so Mac can bring me up to speed. I have to get a sense of where this is headed."

"We won't have to cut the trip short, will we?"

Cam was silent.

"Damn it, Cam! I will not allow public opinion to dictate my life." Blair *did* get out of bed then and paced angrily, unmindful of her nakedness, around the small room.

"Blair" Cam said softly. When her lover failed to acknowledge her, she tried again, slightly louder. "Blair."

Blair stopped at the foot of the bed long enough to fix Cam with a steely glare before she resumed stalking the ten feet between the door and window.

"It's not public opinion that I care about," Cam went on in a level voice. She hadn't moved, but remained propped up against the pillows, the sheet drawn to her waist. "We don't really have enough people of our own for any kind of crowd control, but I can draft extra security from the French if necessary."

"I know that tone of voice, Roberts," Blair said sharply, halting abruptly and turning to face Cam with her hands on her hips and eyes flashing. "You've got your *command* voice on, which means that my love has just left, I hate it when you do that."

"I know." Sighing, Cam pushed the sheets aside and climbed from the bed in search of her pants for the second time that morning. She pulled them on and then stuffed her hands into her pockets while edging a hip against the small night table to give Blair more room to continue her pacing. "There has been a resurgence of right-wing dissidence throughout Europe in the last five years, and France is once again the center of activity."

"You think someone's going to try to shoot me because I'm a lesbian?"

Every minute of every day, Cam lived with the knowledge that someone, somewhere, might try to harm the woman she loved for reasons that would be unfathomable to any sane individual. But assassins were not sane, and fanatics needed very little rational motive to carry out acts of terrorism. "I have to consider that a possibility, yes. And that means that I have to reassess our vulnerability in light of this new development. It's part of what I do."

Blair walked to the table and picked up Cam's cell phone.

Cam regarded her quizzically.

"I have to call Felicia."

"Any particular reason?"

"I need clothes." Blair punched in the number to command central and snapped, "Get me Davis at the number." Then she sat down on the edge of the bed and put the phone beside her.

Curious, Cam asked, "Why Felicia? Stark's your lead agent."

Smiling despite herself, Blair shook her head. "It's a girl thing. You wouldn't understand."

"Probably not." Grinning, Cam sat down beside her and reached for her hand. With the other, she pulled the sheet across the bed and wrapped it around Blair's body. "The view is spectacular, but you're going to get cold."

"Not while I'm this pissed off" Blair muttered, but she allowed Cam to cover her.

"Do you understand my concerns?"

"Yes." Blair entwined her ringers with Cam's. "But I don't like it. I'm scheduled for a tour of the breast cancer center at Institut Gustave-Roussy this afternoon. I was hoping that I would have a few hours for myself in the morning to sketch in the Tuileries gardens."

"All of that may still be possible. Let me just get the updates on recent cell activity in the Paris environs and a look at what's breaking on the newswires." Cam lifted Blair's hand to her lips and kissed her fingers. "Just give me an hour or so to brief with the team and then we'll discuss the day's itinerary."

Blair turned her head and studied her lover's face. Cam's dark eyes were tender and warm. "You never used to ask."

"I know." Cam brushed the backs of Blair's fingers against her own cheek, needing the contact. "But that was before I fell in love with you."

"Do you think the longer we're together, the more rope I'll be able to get from you?"

"I don't think so," Cam said musingly, her eyes dancing. "I think you've gotten just about as much as I intend to give."

Blair shifted closer, threaded an arm around Cam's waist, and rested her head on Cam's shoulder. "I'm very persuasive."

Wrapping her in an embrace, Cam pressed her lips to Blair's forehead. "Mmm. Believe me, I *know*."

At that moment, the phone rang and Blair snatched it up, "Blair Powell...Felicia?...I need a

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