

Above All,
HONOR
2004 EDITION

by
RADCLYFFE



2004

CHAPTER ONE

“I don’t want this assignment.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“This isn’t even my area.” Her voice was deep and forceful, and, at the moment, riding the razor edge of control. Her eyes were winter gray, deadly cold. “I’m an investigator, not a goddamned baby-sitter.”

“You’ve been selected by the security council. They think you’re the best one to head up the detail.” Assistant Director Stewart Carlisle regarded her impassively. He’d expected this reaction. She was a seasoned field agent with more than a decade’s experience, and, despite recent events, a highly effective one. She’d be in line for an assistant director’s position if she ever learned to play the game. That thought almost made him smile. *Not very likely.*

“With all due respect, *sir*, I *am* a senior agent. I should have some say regarding my assignments.”

She was right; they both knew it. He studied the tall, trim, dark-haired agent silently. She was thinner than the last time he had seen her, and there was a new hardness in her dark eyes. She stared at him in thinly disguised challenge, anger simmering very near the surface. The folder on his desk held her service record, and he knew every word by heart. It was flawless, exemplary in every way. It told the crucial facts, and none of the story. No one had ever known the whole story, and now they never would. Because she wasn’t talking, and no one really wanted her to. What everyone wanted was to get on with business as usual, and it was his job to see that that happened.

“The directive was clear,” Carlisle said flatly. “The decision is not negotiable.”

“Any rookie could do it,” she seethed through clenched teeth. *You’re wrong. But I expect you’ll discover that soon enough.*

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“Is this some kind of punishment?” She was skirting the edge of insubordination. She knew it, and she didn’t care. There wasn’t a thing anyone could do to her that could hurt her any longer. Except maybe bury her in a bullshit detail like this. She needed a field assignment—something that would consume her energy, something that would exhaust her mind, something that would obliterate her memories. “A little late for that, don’t you think?”

“Most people would consider this a top post.”

“Not the people on my side of the street.” Her laugh was brittle. “Is it the injury? Do they think I’m not fit for *real* duty?”

“Are you?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been released from rehab. I’ve passed the mandatory psych eval.” Her leg still wasn’t quite right, she couldn’t sleep, and most of the time all she felt was empty, but he didn’t need to know that. “I’m ready.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. You start tomorrow. I suggest you review the available reports from the current commander before you leave for New York.”

“Damn it, Stewart. You know I don’t deserve this!”

“This has nothing to do with you, Agent. That will be all.”

When she turned away, stiff with rage, he felt a wave of sympathy. She *did* deserve more from them than an assignment that to her could only seem like a demotion. He had no doubt she would give her best; she always did. What he wondered was where she would put her anger.



“Booth seven is free,” the firearms supervisor informed her.

She nodded and grabbed a pair of protective ear muffers as she walked through the small office to the long corridor that opened into the individual firing stations. She wore a gray T-shirt and navy sweatpants from her two-hour workout at the gym, and the back of her shirt was still wet with sweat. The small bag she carried held her service automatic and ammunition. She looked neither right nor left as she strode rapidly toward the narrow glass enclosure.

There was a row of buttons that allowed her to set the target type and distance. She began with a medium-range standard human

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form and fired off a clip at an easy pace, alternating between clusters in the mid-torso and head. As she rhythmically squeezed the trigger, her mind slowly emptied of emotion until all she felt was the recoil of her weapon and the measured beat of her heart. When her anger over an assignment that she had no desire to undertake and couldn't avoid slowly abated, she moved the target fifty feet farther away. Accuracy demanded even greater concentration, and as she began to fire in faster, tighter bursts, the ever-present vestiges of longing and loss gradually faded.

By the time she had moved the smallest target to its farthest distance, she felt absolutely nothing.



Fresh from the shower, she walked naked across the carpeted living room to the bar. Her apartment was on the top floor, and the floor-to-ceiling windows were uncovered, exposing the night skyline of Washington, D.C. The view was breathtaking. She poured an inch of single malt Scotch into a heavy crystal rock glass and leaned against the bar, staring at the city lights mingling with the stars. There had been a time when this vision had moved her with its piercing beauty. There had been many nights when she had allowed the tensions of the day to drift away into that great expanse of flickering light, feeling the world settle back into some kind of order. It was often the last thing she saw before she slipped into bed, but then she hadn't been alone.

Now when she looked out the window, she saw the past reflected back at her. Unchangeable, immutable, unforgiving. She had no desire to contemplate what she couldn't undo. She had no desire to think at all. Not tonight. She glanced at the clock. Soon she wouldn't have to.

She reached for the gray silk robe from the back of a chair when a knock sounded at the door. She had a flight to New York in five hours, and a meeting with her new team at 8:00. She still needed to review the dossier that had been delivered by courier that evening. She didn't have much time, and she knew she wouldn't sleep.

She glanced at the clock again as she crossed to the door. It was 1:00 a.m. Her visitor was punctual; she always was. She opened the door to admit a woman in her mid-thirties, expensively dressed in a beige linen suit, a silk shirt open to expose the swell of her breasts, and low-heeled, soft tan boots. Casually elegant. The woman greeted her with a familiar smile, brushing her blond hair back with a long elegant hand. "Hello."

"Hi." As she closed the door, she asked, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"That depends," the blond replied as she slipped her jacket off and laid it carefully across the back of a leather couch that faced the windows. "Are you in the mood for talking tonight?"

"I don't have much time."

"Then I'll have that drink another night," her guest replied softly. With a knowing gaze, she assessed the faint circles beneath normally clear gray eyes and noted the tightness along the sculpted jaw. "Sit down in front of the windows."

Wordlessly, the woman in gray dimmed the lights as she moved around to the sofa and sat as directed. The room was in near darkness now except for the shadows etched in the moonlight. She might have been one of them as she sipped her Scotch and watched the stars revolve overhead. She had been here before, in the still of the night, but not quite like this. Never quite so detached, so singularly isolated despite the warmth of the body just barely perceptible between her thighs. She was distantly aware of the gentle tug that loosened the belt at her waist and the soft parting of the silk that covered her. At the first light touch of fingers against her skin, she shivered involuntarily.

Eventually the teasing strokes over her taut abdomen and along her inner thighs became firmer, more insistent, demanding her attention. When the press of palms high on the inside of her legs bid her open, she arched toward the woman kneeling before her in the dark, tightening almost painfully as warm lips encircled her. Slow, practiced caresses of a velvet smooth tongue swept every image from her consciousness, eclipsing thought with near-agonizing pleasure. A groan escaped her as she dropped her head back against the couch, allowing the slowly building pressure to take her outside herself, beyond thought, past memory. The

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pounding of her heart grew loud in her ears as her breath came in short gasps, almost sobs. Eyes closed, she struggled to contain the exquisite, piercing ache centered in her clitoris, and failed. When the explosion began, ripping at her control, she slipped one hand into the soft blond hair, moaning deep in her throat. Trembling, helpless, for a few moments she was mercifully unaware.



She walked the blond to the door and picked up a sealed envelope that rested on the table just inside the foyer. She handed it to her visitor, who took it wordlessly and slipped it into her purse.

“I’ll be away for a while. I don’t know how long.”

“Will I see you again?”

“I don’t know.”

The blond studied the tall, handsome stranger she had met countless times in the dark hours of the night—in this room, in elegant hotel suites—in rooms that might be anywhere, or nowhere at all. She knew virtually nothing of the other woman’s life, except what she gleaned from the confessions of her body. She knew the hard, lean muscles and the angry red scar on her thigh that was healing now, faded over the months since they had met. She knew the soft, sensitive places that left her gasping when touched. She wondered whose name the stranger called out when she came into the silence. She had never tried to find out, and she did not want to know now. Strangely, it was something else she wanted altogether. If this was to be their last meeting, she wanted to leave something of herself.

Breaking every rule, the blond said softly, “My name is Claire.”

“Claire,” the dark-eyed stranger whispered, the expression in her intense gaze unfathomable as she leaned close and kissed her for the first time. It was a brief, tender meeting of lips that spoke a greeting, or perhaps a goodbye. Then, breaking every rule, she said, “My name is Cameron.”

When the door closed, leaving them to their separate lives, with their silent secrets, the lingering memory of that kiss was all that remained between them.

CHAPTER TWO

At 6:00 a.m., United States Secret Service Agent Cameron Roberts boarded a small jet bound for New York City. She wore her ID badge clipped to the breast pocket of her charcoal gabardine suit. She carried an overnight bag with a change of clothes and her computer. The rest of her belongings would follow on a separate flight and would be delivered to her new apartment in the Gramercy Park Hotel later that day by some member of her team. After four hours of deep sleep, undisturbed by dreams, she felt fresh and ready to work. That she didn't like her assignment was now a moot point and no longer concerned her. She had a job to do, and that was all that mattered.

The flight was only partially full. It was Saturday morning, and only a few government employees were traveling. She took a seat across the aisle from a burly blond man with a badge that proclaimed "FBI" in bold letters. She saw him study her own badge as she sat down. Female agents were no longer rare, but she still drew attention. She was used to it.

"Investigative division?" he questioned, referring to one of the two arms of the Secret Service, as the plane taxied down the runway.

She nearly said yes, then stopped herself quickly. For twelve years that had been true, but not any longer. With a shake of her head, she replied, "Protective."

"Anybody important?" he asked curiously.

"Aren't they all?"

He couldn't tell if she was joking, so he stifled a laugh. *And they say FBI agents are humorless. Jesus.*

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She opened her laptop computer, subtly angling the screen away from him. He took the hint and opened a newspaper as she entered her password.

She entered the link to the USSS personnel division and brought up the bios on her new team. Nothing out of the ordinary. Four men and two women in addition to herself, most with more than five years experience in the field. All college educated, as were almost all agents except the rare few who came through military channels or some other unusual route. All had advanced emergency medical training, as had she, and all were expert marksman. Two of the men and one woman were married; there were one Hispanic and one African-American agent. She fixed a name to each face and exited the site.

Entering another protected password, she brought up the encrypted file she had downloaded the previous night.

Field Report, Fri 12/26/00, 21:30
Submitted by USSS Agent in Charge Daniel
Ryan

Subject: Blair Allison Powell
DOB: 12/31/1975
Residence: 310 Gramercy Park, PH New York
City, 10021
Phone: (212) 295-0566
Marital Status: Single
Occupation: Artist
Business address: NA

Code Name: Egret

Physical Description: WF, 5'8", 120 lbs.
Hair: Blond
Eyes: Blue.
Distinguishing marks: 2 cm scar right
eyebrow, 3 cm tattoo right posterior
shoulder (purple and blue labyris)

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Education: Dana Hill School, Wellesley, Mass
Choate Rosemary Prep, Wallingford, Conn
Paris Institute of Fine Arts

Medical Conditions: None
Allergies: None

Business Agent: Diane Bleeker
Romantic: Current - unverified
Last known: classified, FYEO file
Significant relationships: (SEE ATTACHED REPORTS)
Summary: Standard twenty-four-hour, rotating shift surveillance. Subject schedule fluid, frequently unverifiable.
Communication link: Team commander only per subject request. On-person com-links-refused.

The file was bare-bones minimum, and Cam wondered what her predecessor wasn't willing to commit to hard copy. She'd find out soon enough. He was meeting her at the airport for a debriefing.

She sipped her coffee and slipped the thin folder that held the "Eyes Only" report on Egret's last known lover from her briefcase. She read it carefully, her expression betraying nothing. According to this, until eighteen months ago, the president's daughter had been having an affair with the wife of the French ambassador. For obvious reasons, knowledge of the relationship had been kept under deep cover, although rumors had floated in the security community for years about the sexual leanings of Blair Powell. Cam had heard them and, because it had nothing to do with her, dismissed them. Apparently, the rumors were a bit more than conjecture, and now she could no longer ignore them. Part of her job was to see that the details of the first daughter's personal life remained private and that to the rest of the world, rumors remained just that. Her task would be doubly hard if the subject refused to cooperate.

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And if I'm reading between the lines of the field report correctly, the last commander found the president's daughter far from obliging.

She wondered briefly if *her* appointment as commander of the security detail assigned to Ms. Powell hadn't been due to her own sexual preferences. It wasn't a matter of record, of course, but no one really believed that anyone in the government's employ had any secrets. She had been careful, but certainly not paranoid, about her personal life. After the events of a year ago, she doubted there was much her superiors didn't know. Speculation was futile, and pointless. She knew for certain she didn't care.

She fed the file recounting the details of Blair Powell's love-life into the shredder at the front of the plane as she exited.



"Sorry to transition on the run," Daniel Ryan remarked as they settled into a booth in the airport cafeteria. "I have to catch a flight out at 0800."

"No problem," Cam replied neutrally. She didn't know Ryan. She knew almost no one in the protective branch of the service, which might be either a blessing or a curse. She'd have fewer contacts if she needed behind-the-scenes assistance, but she'd also have less history with those above and below her. She'd been given this command, or more correctly, been forced to take it, and she intended to run it the way she saw fit. She'd owe no one, and that was just the way she liked it.

"Mac Phillips is the second in command and will basically be your aide, unless you decide you want someone else. He's a good communications man. He has the apartment building plans, evac routes, and hospital info ready to review with you as soon as you arrive. Your NYPD liaison is Captain Stacy Landers; she's Hostage Rescue. She usually interfaces with the police patrol division commander, Lieutenant Chuck Thayer, if Egret is traveling to some public function. Both good people. Otherwise, we cover her internally. Rotating shifts, eight-hour tours, with a primary agent assigned to her who is free to float if there's some unscheduled event."

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“Uh-huh,” Cam said casually. Everything he was telling her could have easily been relayed by anyone on the team. She was waiting for him to get to the point of this private meeting.

He watched her watching him. Her rep was that she was a real straight arrow. A by-the-book agent. She’d have to be to get this post. She certainly looked the part. Her thick dark hair was perfectly trimmed, neat around her ears, collar length in back; her suit was without a wrinkle and subtly tailored to her tight, trim build; she didn’t display a hint of nerves or anything else, assessing him with intense, piercing gray eyes. The bio he’d been given showed she’d been advancing rapidly through the investigative unit. Why she’d been reassigned to the protective division was anybody’s guess. Beyond that scant information, she was a cipher. He couldn’t find anyone who had inside knowledge about her, and no one had heard even a whisper that she was anything other than an obsessively dedicated agent. He met her gaze and made a decision.

“Can we talk off the record here?”

“Go ahead,” Cam responded. *It’s about time.*

“Every day for the last six months I woke up wondering who I had pissed off to get this assignment,” he said with a shake of his head. “Egret is practically impossible to protect because she doesn’t want us around. She’s been under some kind of protective watch since she was a kid, and she knows the ropes. She’s a goddamned expert at misleading us, evading us, and generally humiliating us when it comes to surveillance. She’s like Jekyll and Hyde.”

He rubbed his face and made an effort to keep his voice even. “At public functions, she’s fine—cooperative, even friendly. Privately, she does everything she can to make our job hell. She refuses to discuss her schedule with anyone except the team commander. Congratulations—now that’s you.”

His tone implied that was a dubious honor. Cam said nothing.

“Then,” he continued darkly, “she changes plans without telling anyone. We almost never have time to adjust vehicle placement or equipment, so we’re forced to shadow her on foot—which in New York City is a nightmare. She absolutely refuses to wear a microphone or any other tracking device, even on direct

instruction from the president.” He handed her two photographs. “Then there’s this.”

She studied the shots side by side. The first was a standard color publicity photo like dozens she’d seen of the president’s daughter. The close-up depicted Blair Powell at the opening of the Reagan Building the previous year. As usual, she looked poised and confident. Her blond hair was swept back from her face, held with a silver clasp at the base of her neck. Her make-up was understated and flawless, serving only to accentuate the natural elegance of her sculpted face and clear, smooth skin. Her designer dress highlighted her sleek form, complementing both her athleticism and her subtle softness. She was, in a word, beautiful.

The second photo was a candid taken when the subject was unaware. It was grainy, suggesting it had been shot from a long-range unit through a telephoto lens. The details, however, were clear. The woman in the photo was exiting an apartment building, location unknown, and had been caught as she ran down the stairs to the street. She wore tight faded jeans and a white cotton tank top, short enough to expose an expanse of tight midriff. Her breasts, firm and well shaped, were clearly evident beneath the thin material and just as clearly unencumbered by a brassiere. The clothes displayed her long legs, sleek torso, and toned limbs with brazen explicitness. Her collar-length blond hair hung free around her face, mildly curly, looking as if she had simply run her hands through it in lieu of a comb. She wore no make-up and didn’t look like she needed any. Even in the still photo, she exuded an energy that was palpable. She projected the sensuality of a jungle cat and looked about as dangerous. Upon casual observation, she bore almost no resemblance to the contained, refined woman in the first shot.

Cam handed him the photographs silently. It was his show.

“No one in the general public recognizes her like that, and sometimes it even takes us a minute or two. In that time, she can disappear into a crowd, walk into a restaurant unnoticed, or get into a cab without a fuss. That’s why it’s so easy for her to lose us. No one points a finger at her or runs after her trying to get an autograph.”

“But you and your operatives still know what she looks like,” Cam pointed out. “You can find her.” That was obvious, and she wondered when he would get to the real issue.

He nodded agreement. “Sure we can. Most of the time. The problem is, we need to protect her privacy as well as her reputation.” He ignored the slight lift in Cam’s eyebrow at that line of bullshit. Blair Powell *had* no privacy. And they both knew it was the *president’s* image they needed to keep untarnished. Any scandal regarding his daughter reflected on his parenting skills, and ultimately on his character. It wasn’t necessarily a make-or-break issue, but every bit of bad press or acrimonious debate affected public opinion. Political fortunes had turned on less.

Blowing out a breath, he cut to the chase. “She’s a lesbian. In certain situations, if we call attention to her, that’s going to get out. She knows it, and she uses it.”

“How so?”

“She frequents some of the gay bars. It’s hard for me to put agents in there, even when they’re undercover. I never know when she’s going to duck into one. Plus, I don’t exactly want to announce to everyone in the place that Blair Powell just walked in. She picks up women—women we have absolutely no way of identifying in the moment. We have no way to know where they might go, no way to put agents in place in advance. We are constantly running in second place hoping to God she doesn’t get herself into trouble before we can get there.”

“Is she promiscuous?” Cam asked evenly.

“She does better with women than I ever did,” he remarked in frustration. “She doesn’t have a steady girlfriend. I wish to hell she did. Then maybe we could keep track of her. She doesn’t exactly sleep around, but she doesn’t go long without sex either.”

“What are you trying to tell me here, Agent Ryan?” Cam asked, tired of skirting the edges of the issue. “In addition to the fact that we have an uncooperative, high-profile subject with a very problematic lifestyle?”

“She’s an angry animal in a cage, and you’re the new zookeeper. She’s been trying to escape for years, and when she does, someone is going to get hurt.”

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Cam inclined her head in agreement. It was a career breaker, and she could see why Ryan was glad to get out. If she had the luxury of empathizing with the first daughter, she would have felt deeply for her predicament. Blair Powell had lived with constant surveillance since her father had been elected vice president for two terms, and prior to that, when he had been governor of New York. Now that he was a newly seated president, she had at least three more years of even closer monitoring. She was a prisoner in all but name, and Cam doubted anyone could tolerate that for long. The political pressure to hide her sexuality surely made it even worse. But Blair Powell's happiness was not her responsibility, and she couldn't waste time or objectivity worrying about it.

"Someone may indeed get hurt," she responded. "I intend to see that it's not her."

