

Private Agenda

PROLOGUE

Squinting against the March afternoon sun, Reese Whittaker crossed the cream carpeting and took a seat on the flowered sofa. *Relax. Now.* Softening her posture, she pressed her ramrod straight back against the stuffed pillows and tried to smooth the grimace of her lips into something less alarming. It didn't help to see the picture on the wall of herself at twelve, with a ten-year-old Riley sporting the high and tight marine haircut. Her throat closed. It wasn't right that everything should look so normal, as if her beloved baby brother might come home from work any minute.

Forcing her gaze away from the picture, she allowed herself a few moments of self-pity. The last year of her

life had been pure hell and it wasn't over yet. She'd married Nick and gotten pregnant. She, who had never even played with dolls, had discovered a maternal streak a mile wide. She'd even talked the legendary Nick Whittaker into quitting the CIA with her to make sure the baby would have a real, story book family, something neither of them had ever had. Then everything fell apart.

Catching sight of her fisted hands, Reese opened them slowly and flexed, staring at the clever hands that went with the body and brains she'd used to build her own legend with the marines and the CIA. This body that had also won her field, track, and martial arts awards, had failed to hold on to one precious little baby. And in the midst of the most personal battle of her life, Nick Whittaker had proven that he didn't really love or understand her at all by accepting one last assignment while she fought to keep their child growing inside her.

In the background, she heard Riley's wife Carol calling little Candace. By the time the child reached the living room, Reese had a smile pasted on.

"Aunty Ree!" Six-year-old Candace climbed onto Reese's lap to kiss her cheek. "I missed you Aunty Ree."

"I missed you too, sugar." She hugged the child's small body close to hers.

Her niece regarded her with large, golden-brown eyes full of innocence. "Aunty Ree, have you seen my daddy?"

"No, Candy." Forcing the words from a throat so tight she could barely breathe, Reese almost shook with the effort it took to keep the knowledge out of her facial expression. Somehow she managed to swallow.

Riley had been providing his Special Operations anti-terrorism and security expertise to the embassy in Rwanda. It had been bombed two days ago. His body had not been among the charred remains, so she'd been holding on to hope while the government investigated. That hope waned as time went on. Soon, someone from the agency would be telling Carol he was missing in action and presumed dead.

Reese smoothed one of Candy's chocolate braids. Today she'd heard a rumor that the CIA knew who was responsible for the bombing, but was holding back on an arrest for other reasons. She meant to get to the bottom of that rumor and shake things up, even if it meant going back to work for the CIA. In the name of justice, someone was going to pay for what had happened to her brother.

CHAPTER ONE

In a deep funk after completing her 'team' requalifications, Reese sat at her CIA desk trying to plan her next move. She'd suffered from gestational hypertension and preeclampsia during her six-month pregnancy, which caused her precious daughter Nicole to be stillborn and left her childless and forty pounds heavier. With her crash diet and training program, she'd narrowly met the agency weight requirement, but in typical fashion she'd aced the physical test. Flaherty, her section chief, had been glad to get one of his best agents back.

Both feet rested on the gray desk as she stared at her monitor and tapped a finger on the desk. One week in the office after eight months away and except for Nick's absence, it was like she'd never left. With Flaherty in Washington, she set up her office and got reacquainted with the team. She also checked open agency and source files for information on the Rwandan embassy bombing, piecing

together the evidence and confirming some rumors. Riley's body was still missing, but presumed burned to ash.

In a weak moment she'd even analyzed agency files against the info Flaherty had given her two days ago when he sent an extraction team to rescue Nick and the missionaries from the Colombian rebel camp where they'd been imprisoned. She found nothing new. That bothered her. There should have been an update from the extraction team.

Her restless fingers closed on a pencil, moving up and down yellow-painted wood. The moment she'd held little Nicole's body in the hospital, knowing that her beautiful baby would never open her eyes, still haunted her. The pencil snapped in her fingers. Dammit, Nick should have been there. Or did it bother to her more that it had been one of the few times in her life that her strength had failed her?

Leaning over, she tossed the broken pencil into the trash. She expelled her pent-up breath on a sigh. She was mad at Nick and she'd had to file papers to divorce him for not being the husband she thought he should be, but she didn't want anything to happen to him. Lord help her, he didn't even know about Nicole.

A message popped up on her screen in large red letters: MISSION BRIEFING AT 1400 HOURS. Flaherty was back. Swinging her legs off the desk, she stood, shut off the laptop, and retrieved her PDA. Then she headed for the briefing room.

The mere thought of a new mission usually got her juices flowing, but this time she had too many other things on her mind. Gritting her teeth and rotating her shoulders, Reese tried to loosen up. Whatever this mission was, she didn't want it, especially now that she had a name and a face for the SOB who provided the weapons and explosives for the Rwandan embassy bombing. If Nick was in the hands of the extraction team, going after her brother's killer topped her list. The *reality* was that refusing a mission was not an option and being back with the CIA meant doing the assignments they gave her.

With each step of her boots up the black and gold marble corridor, four gritty years of training kicked in. She'd already begun the mental preparation for the upcoming mission. This time she knew she could only depend on the job and herself.

Stepping into Briefing Room Two, Reese blinked against the bright lights mounted in the ceiling tiles.

In a rumpled gray suit and a Superman tie, Evan Flaherty stood in a corner, loading CDs into the media system. The brilliant light failed to flatter his thick, brownish-blond hair or his fair complexion. Steel-gray eyes lit up at the sight of her, his mouth forming a smile beneath his bushy moustache. "Welcome back, Reese. You look good."

"Surprised?" she asked, thinking about the weight she'd been carrying when she'd gone out on maternity leave. Built tall and solid, she would never be skinny, but she was a size twelve again.

She'd kept the bigger breasts pregnancy brought her and skipped cutting the chocolate brown curls that now hung close to her shoulders. With no foundation on her toffee colored skin, she'd used eyebrow pencil and liner on her golden brown eyes, and added a rich wine colored lipstick to her full lips. Now she felt like the lethal beauty Nick had nicknamed her.

Flaherty shook his head. "No, I'm not surprised, but you still deserve the compliment."

Nodding, she acknowledged the praise, "You look the same." Placing her Pocket PC on one of the modular gray

desks, she switched on its media panel and computer and made an attempt at small talk. "How's Rita?"

His smile widened and his eyes softened the way they always did when he talked about his wife. "Anxious to go on vacation to New Zealand, but I'd just as soon go somewhere tropical and closer."

The corners of Reese's mouth lifted in amusement. She could just imagine Flaherty and his red-haired wife enjoying themselves in Florida. It looked something like the last vacation she'd taken with Nick. The memories made her body tingle.

Straightening her back and rubbing her hands together, she made the smile disappear. She had to quit thinking about Nick. He'd made his choice and it wasn't her. Reese bit her lip. "Coffee?" she mumbled, determined to think of something else.

"On the sideboard." Flaherty gave her one long, knowing look and then went back to loading the mission data.

Reese straightened her shoulders. The man saw too much. Working together for four years, they'd formed a relationship that had served them well. She'd begun with different partners, but once Flaherty paired her with Nick,

they'd become his miracle team. Flaherty had always held up his end, even when it wasn't politically correct.

Flaherty closed the media panel and joined her at the sideboard. "You've had some tough breaks. I know that work is the best thing for you right now, but are you sure you're up to this?"

Pouring coffee into a foam cup and stirring in artificial sweetener, Reese Whittaker bristled at the question. "What is this, Evan? You guys don't pay agents to sit around the office."

"You are one of our best agents, but a lot has happened," Flaherty said, justifying himself, "I have to know that you're fit for duty."

"I'm fine. What's the latest on Nick?" she asked, suppressing a quick flash of pain to seize the opportunity. "He should have been out by now."

Flaherty answered in even tones, his eyes assessing her. "We're still working on getting him out, but the situation has improved drastically. I'm expecting for something to break any minute."

Reese felt relief wash over her. Flaherty talked in general and Nick wasn't totally free yet, but he would be.

She lifted the steaming cup to her lips with both hands, willing them to be steady.

"When they check in," Flaherty added. "I could arrange for you to talk to him for a few minutes."

Her throat tightened at the thought. Strung out alone on the naked edge of grief and depression, she'd finally realized that Nick was married to his job and the thrills it provided. She'd filed for divorce to close that chapter of her life. Now that she was thinking more rationally, she wasn't about to let Nick talk her out of it. But he had been looking forward to Nicole's birth. She would have to tell him about the baby. Gulping down hot coffee, she let it free her throat. "Thank you, Evan. I'd appreciate that"

Gray eyes gleaming approval, Evan slung one arm around her shoulders in an awkward hug."

Lifting her head, she spoke confidently, "I've got my edge back and I'm fit for duty. Let's talk about the mission."