

# THE WAYWARD ASSASSIN

by Susan Ouelette

## EXCERPT

### CHAPTER ONE

*CIA Headquarters, August 16, 2004*

Maggie Jenkins strode across the parking lot to the sidewalk that led her past the “Bubble,” the CIA’s white, dome-shaped auditorium. Just ahead, she paused at the bronze statue of Nathan Hale, the first American to be executed for spying for his country. A half dozen quarters lay scattered at his feet, left there by superstitious CIA employees hoping to garner good luck before deploying overseas. She fished around in her purse for a quarter, which she placed carefully atop Hale’s left shoe.

In just a few minutes, Maggie would learn whether her six-month deployment to the US embassy in Moscow had been approved. Even though Warner Thompson, the CIA’s deputy director for operations, had advocated on her behalf, there were several others, including an Agency psychiatrist and a team of polygraphers who were not convinced that she should be stationed overseas. She’s not ready yet, the shrink had opined, as if she were a piece of fruit not quite ripe enough for picking.

“Wish me luck,” she said to the statue as she turned for the entrance ahead. The CIA’s headquarters comprised two main buildings, both seven stories high, which were linked together by bright hallways with large windows overlooking a grassy courtyard. Maggie worked in the original headquarters building (OHB), which had been built some forty years earlier during the height of the Cold War. From the outside, OHB was a concrete monstrosity with no aesthetically redeeming value, at least in Maggie’s opinion. It reminded her of Soviet architecture—heavy on the concrete, light on the beauty.

And other than the expansive marbled foyer and the posh seventh-floor executive offices, OHB’s interior also was nothing to write home about. Every floor between the first and the seventh looked exactly the same—drab, hushed, windowless hallways lined with vault doors. Behind those heavily fortified doors sat rows of cubicles, a few conference rooms, and cramped offices here and there for mid-level managers.

Maggie pulled open the heavy glass entry door and ducked into a pristine lobby gleaming with white marble-clad walls. Ahead, the Agency's bright blue logo covered a massive swath of the gray-and-white checked granite floor. To the right stood the Memorial Wall, which was emblazoned with black stars honoring dozens of Agency officers who'd perished in the line of duty. Maggie stopped and bit down on her lip.

The wall was an awesome, solemn reminder of lives given in the defense of freedom. Every time she walked past it, the sharp points of the eighty-fourth star—Steve's star—ripped another gash in her heart. He'd been working under cover, so no outside friends or relatives had been invited to the ceremony. Warner had sat with her, stoic, as she clutched his hand and stared at the parade of speakers, not hearing a word they said.

She turned her gaze from the wall, slid her badge through the security turnstile, and offered a polite hello to the officer manning the front desk. She bypassed the elevator that she took every day to the fourth floor and made a beeline for the spacious employee cafeteria. In the far corner sat Warner Thompson, nose buried in the Washington Post.

"Morning," she offered.

Warner rattled the paper and folded it lengthwise. "Coffee?" He pushed a Styrofoam cup across the quartz tabletop and smiled at her. His full head of hair had grayed considerably since last year, but it worked on him, enhancing his gray-flecked eyes and tanned complexion.

"Thanks." Maggie sat.

"You ready?"

"I guess." She sipped the coffee, still piping hot and perfectly sweetened. Warner knew her well. "What do you think they'll say?"

"There's no reason they should deny you the posting."

"The psychiatrist thinks I'm obsessed with Zara."

"He has a point." Warner leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I told you not to bring her up in your evaluation sessions. If she's still alive, we'll find her, Maggie. I promise."

"There's no 'if' about it." She waited until a man with a breakfast tray settled at a nearby table, then lowered her voice. "I saw her fleeing the farmhouse in Georgia. Who do they think set fire to the place after I escaped with Peter?"

Warner winced, obviously uncomfortable with the reminder of Peter, his former case officer, the one who'd been intimately involved in the murder of Steve, another case officer, and his protégé, nine short months ago. That Steve also had been Maggie's fiancé made saying what he had to say all

the more difficult. “The point is, the Agency needs to think that you’ve moved on from what happened in Georgia before they send you to such a sensitive overseas posting.”

“Moved on? Warner—”

He raised a hand to stop her. They’d had this discussion dozens of times since the previous November. Maggie had made it perfectly clear that there was no moving on, no closure, as people said these days, until she found Zara. “You know what I mean. You have to toe the party line and say you believe that everyone involved in Steve’s murder is dead. Period.”

“I still don’t understand why they won’t at least consider the possibility that Zara got away.”

Warner rubbed his forehead. “Because the Agency wants this to go away. A star operations officer was murdered by a terrorist and the terrorist is dead. It’s a simple, straightforward narrative. They don’t want the press finding out that another Agency employee and a senior US congressman were involved in Steve’s death. Everything is about the war on terror, Maggie. If the media found out that CIA and elected officials were mixed up with terrorists, there would be hell to pay.”

Maggie quoted the Biblical phrase inscribed on a wall in the CIA’s lobby. “The truth shall make you free.” She snorted. “The truth, unless it’s too embarrassing?”

Warner exhaled and shifted in his seat. “Both of us are lucky that the FBI investigation didn’t uncover . . . everything.”

He was right, of course. Last year, Maggie had destroyed classified documents and withheld other evidence from the FBI to protect them both. And Warner had been entangled, albeit unwittingly, with a Russian who had ties to both Zara and the congressman. Had the FBI known any of this, neither of them would be CIA employees today.

Maggie waved to a coworker who stared from the nearby coffee station. Warner didn’t frequent the employee cafeteria, so his appearance was sure to raise eyebrows. She’d grown accustomed to sidelong glances inside the Agency’s walls. Everyone recognized her. The media had splashed her face all over television and the internet after Congressman Carvelli’s death. There were some who whispered about her using her fiancé’s death to advance her career. Fortunately, they were in the minority. Most who knew about her role in uncovering the terrorist plot considered her a hero, a designation she refused to embrace. Her actions may have saved thousands of lives, but her motivation had been personal—to clear Steve’s name.

He was no traitor, and she’d proven it.

Maggie glanced at her watch. “We’d better go.”

Warner nodded. They grabbed their coffees and headed for the elevator bank. “Remember, you believe Zara died in the fire at the farmhouse,” Warner reminded her on the way up to the fourth floor.

“That’s what I told the shrink last session, but then he talked to the polygraph people.” Since leaving the House Intelligence Committee to return to the CIA earlier this year, she’d endured three marathon polygraph sessions. Every time, the stupid machine registered deception in her response to questions about whether she intended to violate government policies for her own benefit. “Now he thinks I’m up to something.”

Warner shrugged. “Aren’t you?”

Maggie laughed despite herself. “Always.”