

THE
WAYWARD
ASSASSIN

• A NOVEL •

Susan Ouellette

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• A N O V E L •

SUSAN OUELLETTE



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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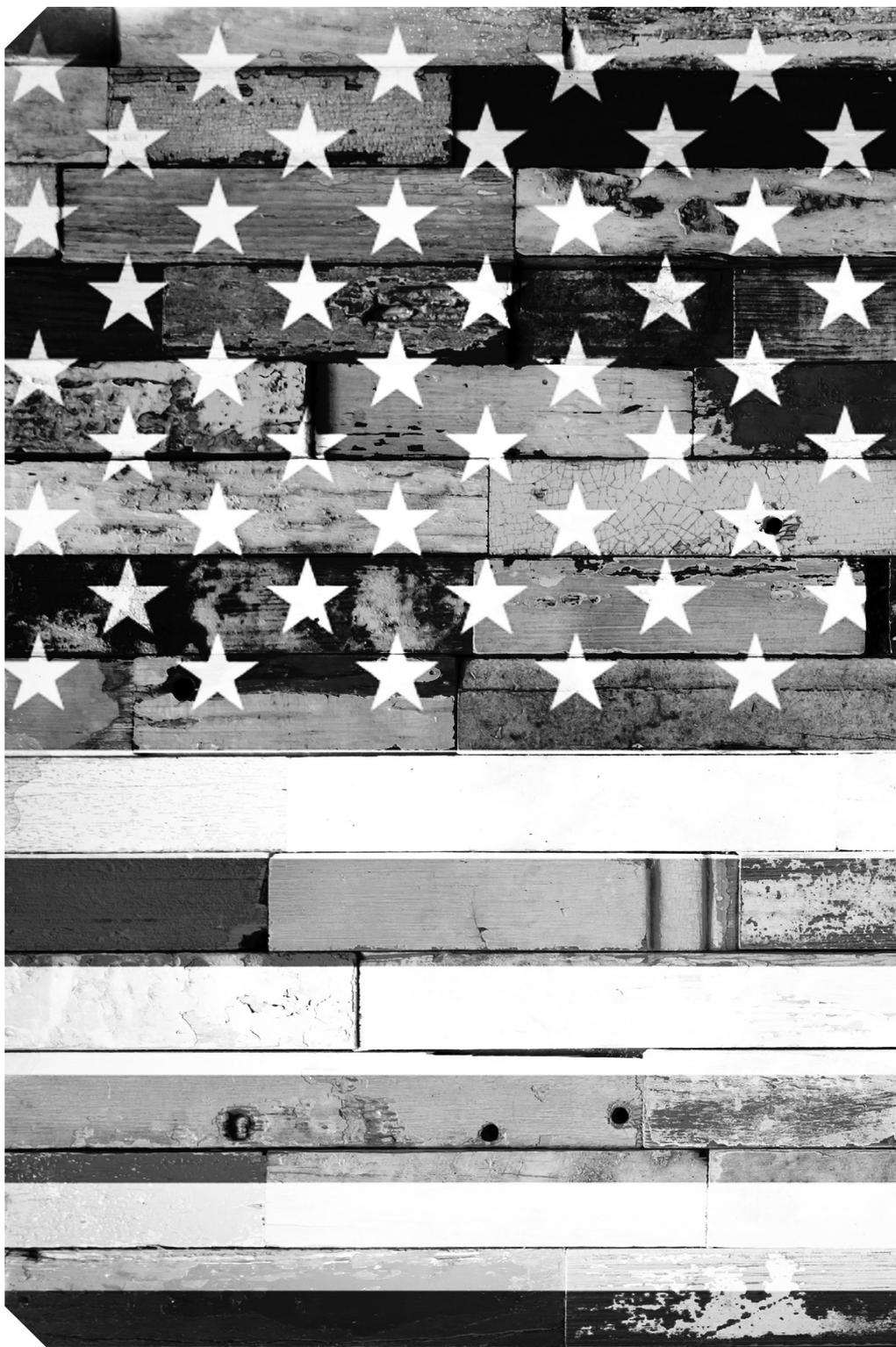
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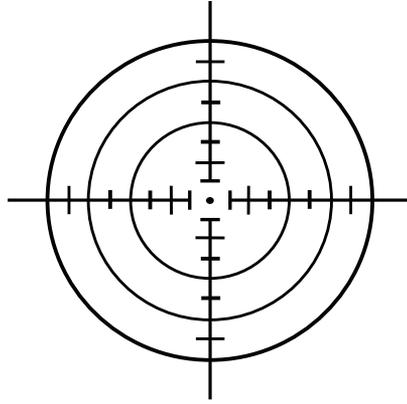
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*For Dan.
For giving me the time, space, and encouragement
to keep on going.*

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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.

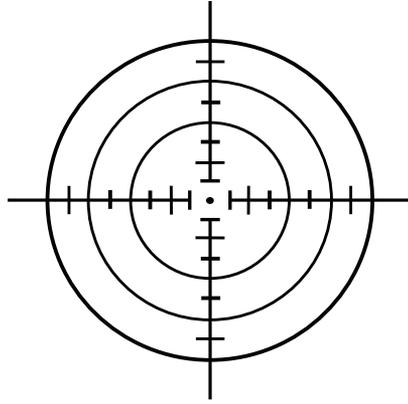
“Remember, you believe Zara died in the fire at the farmhouse,” Warner reminded her on the way up to the fourth floor.

“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.”



CHAPTER TWO

Vladikavkaz, Republic of North Ossetia,
Russia, August 16, 2004

After the man left her alone in the mosque's office, the young woman tugged off her emerald-green hijab and shook out her raven hair. Initially, he'd refused her request to use the computer, but once he realized she was connected to Imran, he'd relented. Even though he wasn't a Chechen himself, it was clear that he knew better than to cross such a powerful man.

She logged into the joint email account Imran had set up for them and checked the draft folder. There were two messages waiting. Undoubtedly, he'd be annoyed that she hadn't responded sooner, but it hadn't been safe for her to travel for several days. Reports of Russian patrols had kept her even further underground.

The first message confirmed that the operation was on as scheduled. The second gave her an address and the name of the target. She pushed back in the chair and exhaled. The likelihood of her surviving this wasn't great. Imran had to know that. If she was going to die a *shahida* during this operation, why had he agreed to an even bolder operation next month, an operation she had devised and was supposed to lead?

She started to respond to the second email but quickly deleted it. Replying broke protocol. Instead, she was to respond via a new draft email in the same folder.

I was unable to travel for several days. Thank you for the information. I will check back once a week for the next two weeks for further instructions. If we can speak on the phone, I'd like to discuss the second operation.

She clicked out of the email account, navigated to the history tab, and deleted the file just as the man returned.

"Your hijab," he gasped.

She stood, tossed her hair, and eyed him from head to foot.

"You must wear the hijab in the mosque."

She draped the silky fabric over her head, wrapped it around her neck, then across her face, covering all but her eyes. As she passed by the man, she brushed against him and leaned in close. "I saw how you looked at me. You'd like to see even more, wouldn't you?"

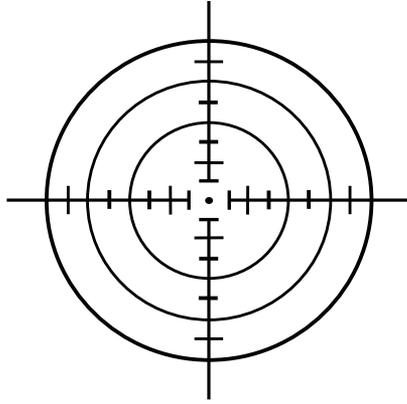
The man stammered and backed away. "Go . . . please go."

She never used the same computer twice, but she was tempted to return next week in tight jeans and a low-cut blouse. Touching a finger to his lips, she smiled as said, "No one has to know."

THE WAYWARD ASSASSIN

With that, she turned and walked down the hall, through the lobby, and out into the warmth of an August afternoon. Inside the Skoda, she pulled off the head covering and tossed it in the backseat. Imran had warned her about making an impression on people. She was supposed to fly under the radar, but men were so easy to play that she couldn't help herself.

Powering up the car, she set off for the drive back to the safe house.



CHAPTER THREE

CIA Headquarters, August 16, 2004

The elevator door rattled open, depositing Maggie and Warner into a nondescript hall with off-white walls and a gray-speckled tile floor. Fluorescent lighting above lent an institutionalized feel to their surroundings. Thick metal doors with keypads above the handles lined both sides of the hallway. Black placards with room numbers were the only markers to guide visitors to their destination. They stopped in front of the third door on the right. Maggie keyed in the combination, waited for the click, and pushed open the door.

The sound of clacking keyboards rose from behind cubicle walls. Ahead was the main conference room for the Office of

Russian and European Analysis. Maggie went in first. At the head of the large, oblong table sat her boss, Jim Carpenter. A middle-aged man whose soft midsection betrayed a fondness for pastries and too little time for exercise, he had been Maggie's boss when she worked at the Agency before she accepted a role with the House Intelligence Committee several years earlier. He was smart, dedicated to knowing everything he could about the former Soviet Union, but his frumpy appearance and academic demeanor ensured that he would toil away in middle management for the next twenty years. To Carpenter's right, Dr. Hansen, the Agency psychiatrist who'd been assigned to her, peered over bifocal rims. Next to him sat a younger woman, midthirties, mousy brown hair pulled back in a severe bun. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Good morning, Maggie. Warner, I didn't know you'd be joining us." Jim Carpenter flashed a forced smile as Warner entered the room.

Maggie's stomach tightened. Carpenter wasn't good at hiding his emotions. She sat and folded and unfolded her hands.

"Maggie, there's no question you are the most qualified applicant for the analyst position in Moscow," her boss began. "I think it would be an excellent opportunity for you to immerse yourself in Russian culture and language and to help the embassy with some rather delicate upcoming negotiations and terrorism concerns."

A smile spread across her face. She straightened in the chair.

"However," said Dr. Hansen, "we continue to have concerns about your readiness to live and work in Moscow."

The smile vanished. The shrink was the definition of a wet blanket.

"You remember Ms. Smith, the chief of our polygraph group?"

Maggie squinted at the dour woman. That's where she'd seen her. Two polygraphs ago, she'd come into the testing room to explain that shouting at the polygraph administrator was not going to get her through the test more quickly. The polygrapher had been coming at her with the same question asked in a dozen different ways for over an hour. She'd finally snapped.

"If I may," Warner said, "what are your concerns?"

"Ms. Jenkins claims to be over the trauma of last year." Dr. Hansen studied a notebook on the table in front of him. "And while I have seen improvements, her polygraph results are problematic."

"Polygraphs, in general, are problematic," Warner replied. "People with a conscience, like Maggie, tend to have the most difficult time passing the CIA's polygraph exam."

It was true. When she first applied to work at the Agency, she'd been sent to see a different CIA psychiatrist after her polygraph indicated deception. The doctor, a lovely older gentleman took one look at her file and said, "You're Catholic. You feel guilty about everything. Don't let the bastards mess with you." He'd sent her back to the polygraph room, and sure enough, she passed the exam and reported to CIA orientation the next week.

"She had difficulty answering questions about the shooting of Congressman Carvelli, isn't that right, Ms. Smith?" Dr. Hansen cocked his head and eyed Maggie.

"She did—"

"Surely, you've reviewed the FBI's summary report fully exonerating Maggie in the congressman's death." Warner pulled a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

"Ms. Jenkins fired the gun multiple times. It was excessive force, in my professional opinion," protested Dr. Hansen.

"You've got to be kidding me." Maggie seethed.

“It was self-defense.” Warner waved the sheet of paper. “You have a problem with that, take it up with the FBI.”

The first full day in the hospital after the congressman’s death had been a nightmare. FBI agents cuffed her to the hospital bed as if she were a flight risk and questioned her for hours after her shoulder surgery. Eventually, she called the nurse for more pain killers and pretended to pass out. Once the ballistics report came back, proving that Carvelli had shot Warner and her first, the FBI withdrew their agents and sent in terrorist specialists to hear what Maggie knew about the looming al-Qaeda attack.

Ms. Smith interrupted her thoughts. “Mr. Thompson, with all due respect, Ms. Jenkins continues to show deception on one other area of the test.”

Maggie settled her gaze on Smith. They’d been over this so many times already. “You think I’m going to go rogue because last year I took it upon myself to solve my fiancé’s murder.”

“Your polygraph results—” persisted Ms. Smith.

“With all due respect, Ms. Smith,” Warner intoned, “last year, Maggie uncovered a major terrorist threat. She literally helped save thousands of lives. Probably more. That experience wasn’t without trauma.”

Maggie had only recently convinced Dr. Hansen that she was over the trauma. She gave Warner a little warning kick to the ankle.

He flinched but continued. “Your relentless questions about whether Maggie is pursuing her own agenda rather than that of the US government naturally would cause a physiological reaction. A spike in blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate. Am I right?”

Ms. Smith pursed her lips.

Dr. Hansen frowned. “Well, yes, that’s the usual response to stress.”

Maggie locked eyes with Jim Carpenter. He nodded and raised his eyebrows. “Nobody knows Maggie better than Warner does,” offered Carpenter. “And personally, I think she’s ready for this deployment.”

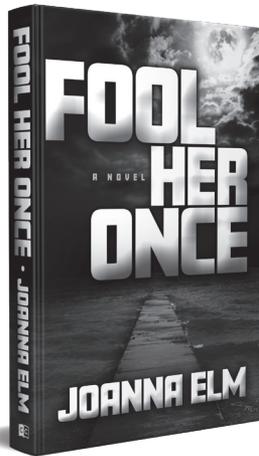
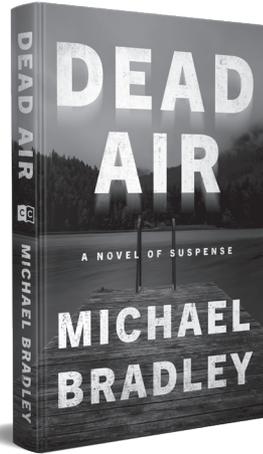
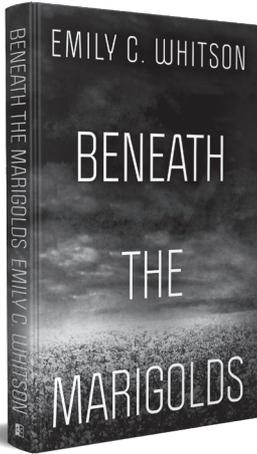
Hansen and Smith exchanged glances.

“Our concerns about Maggie remain and will be noted in the official record.”

Maggie concentrated on not rolling her eyes.

“That settles it, then,” her boss said with a grin. “Maggie, you’re off to Moscow.”

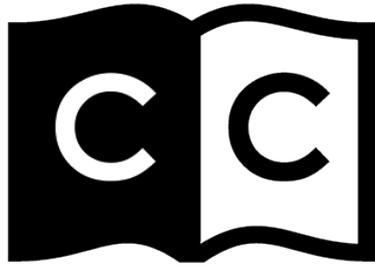
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THEY UNDERESTIMATED HER ONCE. NOW THEY FACE THE CONSEQUENCES.

Although told to stand down now that the Chechen rebel who killed her fiancé is dead, CIA analyst Maggie Jenkins believes otherwise and goes rogue to track down the assassin. Soon it becomes clear that failure to find Zara will have repercussions far beyond the personal, as Maggie uncovers plans for a horrific attack on innocent Americans. Zara is the new face of terrorism—someone who doesn't fit the profile, who can slip undetected from attack to attack, and who's intent on pursuing a personal vendetta at any cost.

Chasing Zara from Russia, to the war-torn streets of Chechnya, to London, and finally, to the suburbs of Washington, DC, Maggie risks her life to stop a deadly plot.

Susan Ouellette's Wayward series follows intelligence analyst Maggie Jenkins on a perilous mission from Russia to England to the US to defuse a new terrorist threat.



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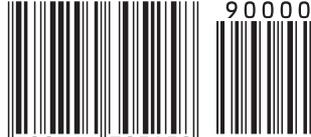
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