

THE AMBASSADOR'S WIFE

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PROLOGUE

The lenses on his sunglasses fogged up as soon as he stepped from the cooled to perfection air of the car into the heat and humidity of the jungle. He paused to wipe his glasses clean noticing as he did the languid, lazy air, even the birds too hot to take flight. A trickle of sweat ran along the back of his neck. He loosened his tie and tugged at his collar, but it did nothing to alleviate the soupy miasma that hovered out here over the countryside.

Bangkok had been hot, make no mistake, but at least there he had air-conditioning and ice-cold drinks to ease the misery. Out here in the middle of nowhere, there were none of Bangkok's luxuries, although really they were necessities—electricity, running water, paved roads—all required for a civilized life. But none available out here. Even the trees offered no relief, and instead served as a backdrop for the veil of mist that seemed suspended from the branches.

The man blinked away the sweat that clouded his vision and looked around. A small circle—all men, and all in suits—stood with their eyes planted firmly on the poor soul who was busy with a crowbar and hammer trying to pry open a heavy

wooden crate. The worker wore a tee-shirt and khakis, his feet in plastic sandals. He worked smoothly, only the fine sheen of sweat that coated his face and saturated his shirt, proof that he too, was feeling the effects of the sweltering sun.

The heat was unforgiving and unrelenting—no breeze to lessen the impact. The man took an envelope from his pocket and began to fan himself, the flimsy waft of sodden air not much relief. Jesus, why the hell were suits required for this sort of thing anyway? He stuffed the envelope back into his pocket, slipped his arms from his jacket, and exhaled noisily. The other men followed—throwing off jackets and loosening ties. They barely noticed as he leaned closer to the box and swatted away the flurry of flies and insects that had seemed to gather to watch.

He leaned in for a closer look, but the workman still hadn't been able to loosen the nails that held the crate locked up tight. The worker paused to wipe away the beads of sweat that ran along his forehead. And then he restarted, all eyes trained on him once again. Suddenly, a crack sounded—the unmistakable sound of splitting wood. The heat forgotten, the men moved in closer.

The worker pried open a corner with his crowbar and as a small gap opened in the crate, the putrid scent of rot spiraled out and burned the eyes of the onlookers. In unison, they stepped back as countless flies and insects swarmed in. The worker pulled and banged and finally ripped one long board away, and then another.

The men leaned in and heaved a collective gasp.

“The ambassador’s wife,” one said, his voice almost a whisper.

CHAPTER ONE

Ambassador? I remember thinking. *Ambassador's wife?*
How was that even possible?

The truth of it was, I was invisible by the time I met John Fielding, the kind of invisible that happens to a woman of a certain age when she fades into the background of life. Women will know what I mean—if you don't have children in tow or a man on your arm, it's as though you don't exist at all. And though I detested that invisibility, I would come to crave it in the months ahead.

But I didn't know that then. I knew only that I was ordinary. There was almost nothing remarkable about me—at five feet five, I was of average height, and at one hundred and twenty-five pounds, I was of average weight. I might describe my hair as light brown with flecks of gold, but if I was honest, it was probably a mousy brown. My eyes, though, labeled *brown* on my driver's license, were really a kind of golden honeyed brown. I had creamy skin that never needed makeup, full lips that might have been plumped artificially but weren't, and a nose so pert, I seemed always to be smiling.

I suppose my tendency to see myself as ordinary came from

my mother who named me Nora Rose, a name that conjures up an older, maybe hunched woman well past her prime. My last name was Buckbee which only added to the cringeworthiness of my name. *Nora Rose Buckbee*. Can you even imagine?

I attended a local junior college where I was promised a stepping stone to an exciting legal career. The ad showed a young woman dressed in a tight skirt and Jimmy Choos running up the stairs to a courthouse, files and binders in hand—and really, who wouldn't have believed the sky was the limit? That bit of questionable education led to my job as an administrative assistant, a fancy term for a secretary who's expected to do more than the other secretaries, but for less money, at a law firm in Boston. Among the lawyers all jockeying for recognition and position among their peers, I wasn't even on their radar beyond the messages I passed or the briefs and depositions I copied and filed. It was where my invisibility first became apparent.

Is it any wonder I fell for George? The love of my life, I used to call him, though he wasn't—I just liked the way it sounded. George was a car salesman, the tritest of clichés, and a devilishly handsome charmer who had only to flash a smile and women would fall at his feet. But, at least for the first year or two of our five together, he was as smitten with me as I was with him. Until the day, prodded by my best friend and roommate, Kelly, I gave him the age-old ultimatum: Marry me or else. George took the 'or else,' and I was back on the market at thirty-two, and I'd been there ever since.

Bars were out. I hated the crush of people and preferred to stay at home and watch reruns of *The Bachelor*. Online dating? I was too lazy to make the effort and too fussy to take the chance. But I hadn't lost all hope, and I hadn't really given up on men either. At thirty-five, I was younger than both Jennifer Aniston and Angelina Jolie, and my honey brown eyes sparkled with the right eyeliner. And thirty-five wasn't hopelessly over

the hill, just perilously close. I could, after all, still have babies though that window was narrowing by the minute.

My parents, who'd just celebrated forty-four years of wedded bliss, still wished the same for me. It had worked out for my older sister, Susie, who already had seventeen years of marriage and four children under her belt. So, there I was, looking for something, someone, to help me shake off a lifetime of ordinary. I considered changing jobs, but where could I go where I wouldn't have to start at the bottom, a place I was still trying to work my way out of? I considered going back to school but the thought of studying and taking exams again seemed like a giant leap backwards. As for my apartment, Kelly and I had another six months on our lease, and I had a limited—make that zero—budget for exotic travel and adventure.

And then, my mother called. "Nicole's getting married, dear. Isn't she the last of your group?"

I held my breath and counted to ten. I knew she just wanted me to be happy, but she made it feel like a contest, and I was in last place. "Actually, Mom, Kelly and I are both still single."

"Oh, that's right. Well, maybe you'll meet someone nice at the wedding."

I made a face and sighed. Every man at the wedding would be married, gay, or divorced and angry. No thanks. "Hmm," I murmured to avoid an argument.

"All right then, sweetheart. I'll call you Sunday."

I hung up the phone and had a good, long look in the mirror. There had to be something I could do aside from buying a dress for yet another friend's wedding. I unclipped my hair and let it fall to my shoulders. I could start with that—my hair. I knew that no matter what I did, no matter how badly it might turn out, it would eventually grow out. There was a kind of security in that, so I took the plunge, and the following Saturday I sat in the salon chair, my fingers gripping the

armrest, while the colorist painted on the sunny hue. She covered my head in foil and then plastic wrap and set a timer. I'd taken slightly less care with the last meal I'd cooked, and nervously, I chewed on my nails and calculated the cost of a wig.

Once she'd finally rinsed, trimmed and styled me, she spun my chair around so I could get a good look at myself under the harsh fluorescent lights. I held my breath, opened my eyes, and... miracle of miracles, I looked good. Actually, I looked better than good. I couldn't help but smile. I exhaled loudly. The blood supply returned to my poor stiff fingers as I ran them through my hair. I was meant to be a blonde. At least that's what the hairdresser said, and I knew she was right.

"Reese Witherspoon," she proclaimed. "That's who you look like." She tucked a stray strand behind my ear.

"I kind of do, don't I?" I said hesitantly, remembering my mother's warning about pretty girls. "Those girls have nothing else on their minds. And you can't spend a lifetime looking into mirrors." But I was new to this kind of pretty, and buoyed by my sexy new look, I stopped at Macy's on the way home and bought the perfect little black dress that hugged me in all the right places. And, despite my mother's admonitions, I smiled at my own reflection—Reese Witherspoon, look out.