

Sunlight peeked into the room and crept slowly across the floor, bathing ornate furnishings and marble colonnades in orange warmth. A lone man snored quietly, tangled in bedsheets.

He stirred. Consciousness returned slowly at first, his mind in a fog until his involuntary stretches sparked painful protest from battered limbs. Reality set in. His stomach tightened and his pulse quickened. Dread settled over him.

Tomorrow had become today. If everything went according to plan, it would be his last day on Earth.

The man rubbed his eyes and groaned. He would have pleaded with the gods and the fates, but he considered them to be fabrications of weak and frightened minds. He would have pleaded with *them*, but he had vowed never again to beg or grovel. He was a different man now, and it wouldn't have done any good. They were immovable. They would offer no mercy.

He turned and faced the window, squinting into the painful dawn light. A strained breath burned his chest. Perspiration formed on his brow. His mind reeled, tumbling between denial, defiance, and fear.

He thought of his brief but devastating affiliation with the US Central Intelligence Agency. It was easy to blame them. They were

more than blameworthy, but he couldn't lay it all at their feet. He and the Agency had conspired together to lay waste to his life and many others.

Katrin floated into his mind's eye and his breath hitched. He imagined her the way she'd looked the last time he saw her, the last time he would *ever* see her: white silk draped lazily over provocative curves, long blonde hair falling over delicate shoulders, fierce blue eyes ablaze with betrayal and anger. Those eyes haunted and convicted him.

Guilt seized him with a vice grip as his mind traced the path that had brought them all to the brink. A wrong never to be righted. A sacrifice she would never know or understand.

His life for hers.

The phone on the nightstand bleated. He jerked with alarm. *Mother of God, it's already starting.* He stared at the phone, willing his wits to return, willing fortitude and backbone and courage.

"Hello," he said, his voice far less unsteady than his gut.

"James Hayward?"

"Yes," he lied. How many years had it taken for him to master himself, to finally inhabit his own skin? And now, on the last day of his life, the last man to speak to him wouldn't even use his real name.

"You are ordered to proceed," the male voice said in an American accent. "Do not deviate. You are now and will remain under surveillance until termination."

*Termination . . . how artfully apropos,* Hayward thought. Anger flashed, but he let it pass. "I understand."

"You are instructed to infiltrate and retrieve the item in one hour." The man didn't wait for a response. Hayward heard a click and the hum of an open circuit.

Hayward replaced the receiver, stood on trembling legs, and let the bedsheets fall at his feet. He walked slowly to the shower and started the water. He felt the shower's soothing calm and the sensation sparked a pang of regret. Death really seemed to put life into perspective, he mused with an idle detachment that seemed

inappropriately irreverent. But what the hell was an appropriately reverent thought to entertain in a circumstance like this?

He turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and stood before the mirror. His mid-life paunch was gone, replaced by muscular contours. His stooped, apologetic posture was also gone, replaced by a confident, capable stance. Hair once stringy and long was now close-cropped, and a wastrel's padded jawline had given way to the carved hardness of an operator. But the biggest change was in the eyes. They were clear, hard, purposeful, understanding.

But none of that would do him any good today. Today wasn't for clarity or hardness or purpose. It wasn't for action, for striving, for victory. Today was for atonement.

"Fine mess you've made," Hayward said. It sounded small and inane, a waste of breath, a waste of time.

*Breath and time.* Suddenly his most precious commodities.

He dressed in yesterday's clothes. He left his 9mm Smith & Wesson under the pillow and his little Ruger .380 on the nightstand. He wouldn't need either of them and they might complicate things. Their comforting heft might plant seeds of revolt, might entice him to do something foolish or prevent him from doing what had to be done.

On top of the ornate dresser sat a hotel room key card and the keys to a rented car. He ignored them and palmed an ID badge, covered in Chinese characters and adorned by a photograph of a Westerner's face. He slipped the ID card into his pocket and left the room.

Hayward strode out of the hotel and into the morning sun, its smothering warmth already settling heavily over the towering bustle of Singapore, and reached into his pocket to retrieve a cell phone. He texted a memorized message to a number he'd come to know and despise, one last bit of sick humor at his own expense: "The end begins."

Nine and a half thousand miles away, a phone buzzed, interrupting a memorial service at St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC.

Special Agent Samantha Jameson, Chief of Homeland Security's Counterespionage Division, turned toward the disturbance. One row ahead and two people to the right, a middle-aged man of medium height and medium build reached into his pocket to silence his phone. Prominent chin, aquiline nose, hair a mix of brown and gray with a circular bald spot that made him look like a monk. Sam scowled at the man's lack of telephone etiquette but her annoyance was short-lived. Her mind was otherwise occupied.

Her gaze returned to the casket. It was made of polished aluminum with stainless steel rails for the pallbearers' hands. It was beautiful, simple, and elegant. And small. No larger than four feet long. Not nearly big enough for an adult. The sight of its awful, devastating smallness caused a lump to choke Sam's throat.

The aggrieved sat in silence in the first row, smothered and bowed by pain, mere feet away from the tiny body inside the coffin. Sam watched them in their agony. Her heart broke for them all over again.

Next to the casket, a picture of five-year-old Sarah Beth McCulley

stood atop a simple memorial display. Blonde curls, bright, beautiful eyes, enormous smile, all innocence and cuteness and goodness and *joie de vivre*. The wrongness of it stabbed Sam in the chest.

Sam was tall and athletic, but she sat with her shoulders hunched and her back bowed, reeling from sleepless nights and days spent in sorrow and worry. Her face was beautiful and striking, framed by fire-red hair, but dark rings encircled her eyes. Their piercing energy had faded, and fatigue and remorse clouded her features. Her own devastation haunted her, stole her breath, settled in her stomach like a stone, as it had countless times over the past four days. The words assaulted her from within: *This is my fault, and everyone here knows it.*

A pipe organ thrust out a dirge and Sam jumped at the sound. Mourners sang with weak voices. The dead girl's family sat in numb stillness. Bile rose in her throat as Sam struggled not to fall once again into the abyss that had swallowed her over and over since the little girl's death. *My doing. My failure. My fault.*

The priest's smooth, melodic tones clashed with the raw, tragic sorrow of the occasion. He spoke with contrived certainty about things eternal and unknowable, aiming at comfort but leaving only emptiness and loss as the echoes faded into the old cathedral.

Sam's mind lost its grip on the moment. She slipped back into pained recollection. A gray winter day. Littlefield Park in Arlington, Virginia. The squawk and static of tactical transmissions in her earpiece. The news that Tariq Ezzat was approaching. A dozen factors to weigh: a public space with civilians nearby, but her team had worked long and hard for weeks to gain the opportunity to move against Ezzat and his network of terrorists, to extract the intel she knew he must be holding in his head. She recalled the tension and weight in her gut as she spoke into her transmitter: "Take him."

The scene played out for the thousandth time in her mind. She was powerless to stop it, doomed to witness the tragedy over and over again. Ezzat's sudden sprint. The blur of the man's hand. The bark of his gun firing.

Elizabeth McCulley's scream.

Sarah Beth McCulley's still, lifeless form, slumped in a widening pool of crimson.

Tears fell from Sam's eyes and her shoulders shook. The church's organ started again, snapping her awareness back to the present, dredging up more muted singing from the congregants, and then it was over.

Frank McCulley steadied his wife, small and frail and wrecked, and the two made their way to the back of the church. They walked slowly, hollowed eyes cast in the distance, faces pale and haggard.

Sam followed their progress. The evidence of their suffering weighed heavily on her heart as they drew nearer. She held her breath.

Frank's head turned and his eyes met Sam's. His face changed. Grief and misery gave way to deep, seething anger.

Air escaped Sam's lungs, but she couldn't draw a breath to replace it. Her body seized and she couldn't move.

McCulley glared at her. Then he turned away in disgust, tightened the grip on his wife's arm, and they walked slowly out of the church.

Sam's eyes burned with tears. She rose, unsteady, and walked on wooden legs to the exit, mumbling apologies as she moved against the flow of mourners.

A cold drizzle seized her as she stepped outside. Frosty wind from the Potomac chilled her to the bone, leaving her open and vulnerable in her grief and guilt. Her car was parked a block away, downwind, but Sam stepped into the teeth of the cold breeze, west along H Street, a few hundred yards from the White House. The icy wind assailed her but she felt the rightness of this small suffering, punishing herself for the devastation her decision had wrought.

One miscalculation. One mistake. That was all it took.

That was all it *ever* took.

She rounded the corner, barely noticing as she brushed against a passerby, a medium-sized man in a black suit with an aquiline nose, a prominent chin, and a monk-like bald spot. It didn't register that

she'd seen the same man just moments before, seated one pew ahead and two people to the right of her, fidgeting to turn off his buzzing cell phone.

And she didn't notice the small object he slipped into her coat pocket as they passed.

Sam walked slowly with the flow of foot traffic, lost in her thoughts. A cold drizzle settled over the city and she hunched her shoulders against the chill, but she kept moving. She had no destination. She was propelled only by a desire not to stop, as if stopping would allow everything to catch up with her again and crush her beneath its weight.

At some point, she became aware of her intention to walk to her meeting with Evan Kent, the director of Homeland Security. Kent was three or four levels above her in the gargantuan bureaucracy, and an entire world away in terms of his priorities. He was a political animal. Sam was an operator who caught spies. The animosity and mistrust was deep and endemic.

Meetings with the director were rarely routine, and this one promised to be especially inauspicious. He would place her on administrative leave, of course, pending the outcome of the formal investigation into the events of the preceding week, up to and including the death of Sarah Beth McCulley, five-year-old daughter of Frank McCulley, longtime chief of staff to Senator Oren Stanley.

Sam thought of resigning her position as the chief of the counterespionage branch, but she knew Kent would never have it. He



would reserve the right to discipline her publicly, for the sake of the department, and he could only do that if she remained on the payroll. She might still offer her resignation, not because it might prove a properly politic gesture under the circumstances, but because she genuinely wondered whether she remained fit for duty in the aftermath of the girl's death.

She had, without a doubt, misread the circumstances. As Agent in Charge, it had been her call to make, and she had followed her gut. She'd turned the details over and over in her mind a thousand times since the incident, looked at the circumstances from every angle she could imagine, but she still couldn't convince herself that she'd have chosen any differently if she had it to do all over again.

Which was why she wondered if she could ever be trusted again.

Her instincts had rarely been wrong over her relatively long and reasonably distinguished career. She'd won more battles than she lost, caught far more spies and traitors and hit men than she'd let slip through her fingers, but her luck had clearly run out.

She had made mistakes before, sometimes lethal ones. It went with the territory. Sometimes she lost sleep and sometimes not. But nothing like this. This was a disaster. It had turned her life upside down in the blink of an eye. And it had destroyed the life of a beautiful little girl whose father worked for a powerful US senator. Being responsible for someone's death was no picnic, but Sarah Beth McCulley's death had amounted to a personal apocalypse.

Sam waited at a crosswalk for the light to change, her mind numb with exhaustion and grief. Her eyes rested on a short, chubby man in an ill-fitting suit across the street. His extra-large jacket fell at unusual angles in certain places and his gaze lingered on her for a moment before resuming his rendition of the ubiquitous DC scowl. At first Sam didn't notice these things because she wasn't thinking operationally, which was a clear violation of her favorite survival rule: *always think operationally*. But her instincts took over and it became clear to her a moment later: the man was carrying a concealed weapon, and he was watching her. The hairs on the back of her neck

rose, but the light changed, the man walked on, and Sam's mind resumed its self-flagellation.

She trudged south and east, navigating subconsciously while her mind and gut gnawed on each other, lost in her own fog. Homeland was not a small place, full as it was of roughly a billion bureaucrats to Sam's reckoning, but she was surprised to look up at some point and find herself at its massive front door. She had evidently not taken conscious notice as the city blocks disappeared under her feet.

A surge of adrenaline hit her veins. *Time to face the Man.*

She opened the door to the lobby and was met by a mass of humanity queued up in front of some sort of scanner, waiting for their daily dose of dehumanization. She looked at her watch and cursed. She was going to be late. "What the hell is going on?" she muttered under her breath. It was shift change, but Sam had never seen so many people in the DHS lobby at six in the evening.

"New scanner," someone replied to Sam's mumbled question. "Picks up unauthorized electronics. Supposed to stop cyber-attacks."

"Jesus H," Sam huffed. Undoubtedly part of the knee-jerk response to the previous year's economic terrorism incident. The government never learned, and they'd spent trillions closing the barn door in the twelve months since the horse left.

Sam pulled out her cell phone and called Director Kent's office with her apologies. The secretary was sympathetic and sweet, which was out of character. *She knows I'm about to be slaughtered*, Sam thought with a grimace.

She noticed a voicemail from Brock and her heart leapt. She listened to his message. Air Force Colonel Brock James, keeper of her flame and her live-in consort of four amazing years, was stuck halfway around the globe helping Uncle Sam double down on all the ill-advised oil bets.

She hadn't seen him for three months. Their all-too-brief conversations had grown strained. He was damn near superhuman, but the strain of loving someone in her line of work was starting to show. He was tired of wondering whether she would survive her next

investigation and tired of playing second-fiddle to her insane work schedule.

They had talked about marriage, maybe even kids, though Sam thought they were both a little long in the tooth. She had been pondering a career change for quite some time—years, in fact, but for some reason she just couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger. Her job at Homeland filled some need of hers that she couldn't readily identify, and she had a hard time getting Brock to understand. His tone on the subject had become angrier and more strident over the course of his most recent deployment to the Middle East, so they now avoided the subject in what amounted to an uneasy and unspoken truce.

Sam melted a little at the sound of Brock's voice, but she couldn't make out many of the words over the hisses, pops, and clicks in the message. She didn't know where he was exactly, but it sounded like a perfect hellhole.

Her eyes moistened. *A hug would do wonders*, she thought, but it was evidently too much to ask of the federal government. Brock's emergency leave request had been denied. He was stuck in some godforsaken desert somewhere full of goats and extremists, foreign and domestic, which left her to deal with the fallout from Sarah Beth McCulley's death by herself.

Sam's turn at the scanner came. She tossed her cell phone, badge, and keys into the tray, placed her coat and shoes on the conveyor belt, and did her best not to scowl at the lumpy security guard as he waved her forward.

A buzzer sounded.

"Ma'am, do you happen to be carrying any unauthorized electronics on you? Music player, non-government cell phone, beeper, garage door opener?"

Sam shook her head.

"Do you have any unauthorized electronics in your personal effects?"

"If so, it's news to me," Sam said, glancing toward a growing crowd

of technicians huddled around the conveyor belt beyond the scanner, all of whom seemed enthralled by her raincoat.

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“Is your question rhetorical?”

The guard’s tone became decidedly officious. “This way, ma’am.” He motioned for her to step out of line.

“I don’t have time for this,” Sam muttered.

A technician left the scrum of security people huddled around Sam’s coat and approached her. He held up his thumb and forefinger, displaying a small object clasped between them. “Do you recognize this?”

Sam squinted at his hand. “I’m no expert, but it appears to be a fabric button.”

“This object tripped our unauthorized electronics scan,” the security guard said.

“Congratulations. I’m sure we’re all much safer now,” Sam said.

“It was in your coat pocket, ma’am.”

“I don’t recognize it.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to confiscate the item, ma’am.”

“Knock yourself out.”

“I’ll have to ask you for some information as well.”

“Are you sure your new scanner isn’t malfunctioning?” she asked.

She could tell by the look on the security guard’s face that he *wasn’t* sure about the new machine, but he was duty-bound to follow procedure. Sam sighed and played along. Nearly two decades in federal service had taught her that some things couldn’t be fought.

The guard wanted her name, address, duty title, supervisor, office phone, personal phone, whereabouts during the last twenty-four hours . . . Sam felt like she was applying for a mortgage or taking a lie-detector test.

Thirty minutes later, her heart rate not yet recovered, she walked into Homeland Security Director Evan Kent’s office. It was a familiar place, as Sam had been there before. Once, in fact, a lengthy and deadly investigation had culminated in a tense showdown in the director’s office. She had apprehended the traitor and criminal at

gunpoint. He was tried, convicted, and executed, but not by a jury of his peers. The man was handed over to the Central Intelligence Agency, who took care of things on their own terms.

The furniture had been replaced and the carpet redone, but the view of the DC skyline was as impressive as she remembered. The office was even larger than she recollected. Evan Kent rose from his desk, extended his hand, and put a sad smile on his face. He was tall, gaunt, hunched, gray, and wrinkled. "Thank you for coming, Sam," he said, his voice low and gravelly from years of DC schmoozing over cigarettes and scotch.

Sam nodded but didn't speak. What was there to say?

Kent gestured toward a sitting area situated between his desk and a large conference table. Four chairs upholstered in soft blue leather surrounded a low coffee table. Sam sat in the nearest chair and crossed her legs in front of her. She still wore her funeral attire. The drizzle had pasted her hair to her head. The tears had smeared her makeup even though it was supposed to be waterproof. She imagined she looked like hell, but she wasn't in any mood to fuss over her appearance for Evan Kent's sake.

Kent took the adjacent chair. *Right out of the management handbook. Don't deliver bad news across a table. Position yourself on a diagonal to the victim to reduce the odds of a confrontation.* He got right to business. "It was admirable of you to attend Sarah Beth McCulley's memorial," he said.

*Admirable?* Sam didn't know what to make of that comment. What else would anyone in her shoes have done? In what universe would it have been okay to miss the girl's funeral?

Her confusion must have been evident. "I just mean that it must have been...uncomfortable for you," Kent said. "Under the circumstances, I mean."

Sam eyed him for a long moment. Was he goading her? Or was he just socially inept? "It wasn't pleasant," she said, working to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

Kent's eyes were intense and blue, but shrouded behind an unruly brow. "Nobody is here to second-guess you," he said.

A weary smile crossed Sam's lips. "Mr. Kent," she said, "there's no need to patronize me. I've been in this business a long time and I know how this works."

Kent sized her up. If he was embarrassed to have been caught in a lie, his features didn't show it in the least. "In that case," he said, "we should just get right to it."

Kent nodded to someone standing behind Sam. She hadn't heard anyone else enter the office, so she was surprised to see Homeland's chief legal counsel, Hamilton Essex, appear from behind her shoulder. Essex handed her a glossy blue file folder with the Homeland logo emblazoned on its cover. He also handed her a Montblanc pen. *Nice touch, douchebag*, she thought.

Sam signed the suspension paperwork without reading it. She dropped it on the coffee table along with the lawyer's overpriced pen and rose to her feet.

"Don't you want a copy?" Essex asked.

Sam shook her head. "Drop one in the mail."

"As of now you are on unpaid administrative leave," Essex said. His voice had a grating, condescending quality that made Sam fantasize about breaking his nose.

"So I gathered," Sam said.

Essex was unfazed. "Please exit the facility without delay," he went on. "You'll be summoned for questioning in the matter under investigation. Please make yourself available, but do not return to the premises until asked to do so. Please don't leave the district until you've been cleared to do so. Do you have any questions at this time?"

Sam shook her head. She didn't look at the lawyer. Instead, she looked at Evan Kent. The director kept his seat and held her gaze.

"Anything else?" Sam asked.

Kent shook his head and raised an arm toward the exit.

Sam held herself together all the way to the women's room on the executive floor. There, she locked herself in a stall, buried her face in her hands, and cried.

Sam let the tears flow until there were no more. She heard a couple of women enter the bathroom at some point, but they must have heard her sobs and elected to do their business elsewhere. Sam had the marble-and-chrome monstrosity of a water closet to herself.

When the flow of tears stopped, she righted herself, straightened her dress, and walked to the sink. She cupped her hands beneath the ornate faucet and splashed cold water on her face. Only then did she venture a look in the mirror.

“Balls,” she said, pulling at the purple pouches beneath her eyes. “You don’t look a day over ninety-two.” She took a few more minutes to compose herself before she left the bathroom.

Against the director’s orders, which had been to vacate the premises without delay, Sam stopped by her office on the fourth floor to pick up a few items. She’d be damned if she was going to let a bunch of slack-jawed desk jockeys paw through her things, especially her investigative notes.

She looked around her office and sighed. She’d spent far too many hours in this room over the past decade. Stacks of paper littered her desk. A University of Maryland diploma hung on the

wall, crooked as always. It didn't matter how many times she righted the damn thing.

Her eyes gravitated to a framed photo of Brock. He wore a green flight suit and he had one foot on the ladder of his F-16. The photo was easily five years old, but there was something about the look in his eye that kept her from replacing it with a newer one. *God damn, I love that man*, she thought with a lonely sigh.

Sam took a last look around the office. There was no telling when she would be back. There was no guarantee she would *ever* be back, depending on how Homeland's inquisition went. Would she miss it? Would moving on really leave as big a void in her life as she'd feared? Had she been foolish to dig in her heels with Brock over her career? No answers came, and she didn't have much energy to search for them.

She turned to leave and smacked into a stocky, muscled man. "Dammit, Dan, you scared the hell out of me."

"Nice to see you too, boss," Dan Gable said with a smile. "This place is dead without you."

Sam managed a weak smile as her deputy released his embrace. Dan was built like a bowling ball, except made of muscle. He stood half a head shorter than Sam, but twice as wide. He had thick shoulders, thick arms, and thick fingers, which were murder on a computer keyboard. Dan had worked for Sam before either of them knew heads from tails. He had saved her life countless times, and he had once kept her alive for ten minutes after her heart stopped. Dan was one of the good guys and Sam loved him like a brother.

"I'm not exactly sparkling company these days," she said. "You're definitely better off without me sulking around."

"Debatable," Dan said, "but a little work might take your mind off things."

Sam shook her head. "Not an option. I'm officially *persona non-grata*."

Dan frowned. "Suspended?" Sam nodded. "Bastards," he said.

"I don't think they had any choice in the matter. It would have been bad enough if she were a random girl off the street, but the



daughter of a senate chief of staff? I'm lucky I'm not chained to a stake."

Dan grimaced and nodded. "Things definitely could have turned out better."

The silence grew awkward. "What are you still doing here?" Sam finally asked, suddenly cognizant of the time. "Shouldn't you be home by now?"

Dan shrugged. "Tying up some loose ends."

"You should stop hiding from your wife." Sam said with a halfhearted punch to his arm.

"You should mind your own business," Dan retorted with a sheepish smile. "Besides, things are much better at home now that I've hidden all the knives."

"Good thinking."

"Actually, I was on my way out when I got a call from the security people downstairs. Somehow my name ended up on their technical consult list."

"Your nerdy reputation precedes you," Sam said absently, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

Dan chuckled. "The call was legit, though. Some idiot tried to smuggle a listening device into the building."

"No way," Sam said, looking around her office with a frown, searching for her coat. "Nobody's that stupid."

"Somebody evidently *is* that stupid. Went to a lot of trouble, too. The bug was fancy and expensive."

Sam grunted, not listening, still searching for her coat, but then quickly realized that it had been confiscated by security. She stopped. "What did you say?"

"I feel less valued when you don't listen to me," Dan said, faking a hurt expression.

"Seriously. About the bug."

"High-end," Dan said. "Pricey and tough to get. Made to look like a coat button."

"Oh shit," Sam said. "We may have a problem."

Sam explained the kerfuffle at the security checkpoint. Dan listened with a troubled expression on his face.

“That’s not good,” he said when Sam had finished. “Any idea who it might have been?”

Sam shook her head. “I was at the memorial, then I walked around in the rain for a couple of hours. I probably crossed paths with a thousand people.”

Dan nodded. “We need to get Mace involved. I don’t want this to add to your troubles.”

Mace McLane was Sam’s immediate boss. He ran Homeland’s covert operations directorate. His employees included spies, counter-spies, and, increasingly, a horde of computer-savvy millennials battling evil one byte at a time. McLane had been in the job a couple of years, which was something of a record. Both of his predecessors had wound up dead.

Sam had deep-seated authority issues in general, but Mace McLane had won her trust by leaving her alone to do her job and by backing her up when she needed it. He was more politician than operator, but he was smart enough to know his limitations and he made it a point to stay out of his people’s way. McLane worked hard and rarely left the office before nine or ten in the evening. He was also a nice guy, rare in Sam’s experience for someone in his position.

Sam and Dan marched up to McLane’s office, which was a hundred paces and a million miles from Homeland Director Evan Kent’s lair. McLane’s office featured a full-length window with a similar view to the director’s, but it was sparsely appointed. There were dusty photos of two grown kids with families of their own, but there didn’t appear to be a woman in McLane’s life and he didn’t wear a wedding ring. Maybe that was related to the hours he kept.

“God, Sam, you look like hell,” McLane said. He stood and walked around from behind his desk and wrapped his arms around her.

“Thanks,” Sam said. “Same to you.”

“Are you taking care of yourself?”

“Somebody has to,” Sam said.

McLane let a small laugh escape. “No argument there. Lord

knows I've tried, but when the White House calls with their panties in a wad . . ."

Sam nodded. She understood the physics all too well: shit gathered momentum as it rolled downhill.

McLane nodded toward the listening device perched on his desk. Evidently security had delivered it to him shortly after it was discovered. The device was small, the size of a button, with a smooth black surface. "Old friends or new ones?" he asked.

Sam shook her head and shrugged. "I thought it was just the new scanner malfunctioning. The whiz kids are sure it's really a bug?"

"Sure as sunrise," McLane said.

Sam shook her head. "Could have been anybody. My head's not really in the game right now."

"Understandable," McLane said. "We'll let Dan loose on it, see what he can sniff out."

"That's what I'd do," Sam said. "In the meantime, if it's all right with everyone here, I'm going to go home. It's maybe the worst week on record, and I need some sleep."

McLane nodded. "I'll call security and make sure you're not hassled on the way out."

Sam left the Homeland building and caught a cab. It was half past seven in the evening. It seemed like eons ago that she had left her house to attend Sarah Beth McCulley's funeral. Her eyes burned, and her stomach growled in discontent. She'd barely eaten anything in the days since the incident. Her muscles were weak and she looked forward to a hot shower and a long night's sleep.

She took the cab all the way to her house in Alexandria, not bothering to fetch her car. It was still parked near the church where the girl's memorial service took place earlier in the day. She didn't want the reminder.

She had the vague sense that the cabbie was eyeballing her in the rearview mirror, but she didn't much care. Her disregard was resigned, not reckless. She didn't have the energy for operational alertness, despite the poignant reminder of the need for continuous

vigilance that someone had dropped into her pocket earlier in the day.

Her tired mind churned. Who might have been responsible for the listening device? What did they possibly hope to gain? Sarah Beth McCulley's death had made national headlines. Sam wasn't yet mentioned by name, but it wouldn't take much insight into the Tariq Ezzat incident to make the connection. As was Homeland protocol in such cases, she was suspended and off the investigation. Anyone eavesdropping on Sam would be disappointed by what they heard: lots of tears and very little interesting conversation.

To boot, Ezzat hadn't survived the encounter. Milliseconds after Ezzat fired the fatal bullet that struck Sarah Beth McCulley, Sam's team opened fire on him. He died before the ambulance arrived. His secrets died with him and the investigation—dubbed the “Doberman case” by the Homeland team after a pair of stone dog statues standing guard at the entrance to one of the criminal organization's safe houses—stalled completely.

She still couldn't believe how violent things had turned. Before that day in the park, the case had been little more than a somewhat routine terror financing investigation. Ezzat was a mid-level guy in a loose affiliation of petty criminals who sent a portion of their illegal proceeds overseas to fund jihad. She had trouble wrapping her mind around the tragic turn of events.

The cab pulled up to her Alexandria brownstone. She paid the driver and headed up the walkway. A noise grabbed her attention. The neighbor kid futzing with his car again, one of those cheap imports tricked out with shiny rims and an exhaust pipe the size of a storm culvert. It sounded like the world's largest swarm of houseflies. Her jaw clenched. That little bastard had woken her up at least a dozen times over the past few months, zipping around the neighborhood, revving the engine to an ear-splitting whine.

She shook her head, put the key in the lock, keyed the alarm code, dropped her bag and coat on the entryway floor, kicked off her shoes, and sank into an easy chair in her living room.

The big, empty house made big, empty sounds. She had invested

wisely over the years and had rewarded herself with the mortgage-free acquisition of much more house than she needed. Brock came into her life around the same time and before she knew it, they were picking out colors and finishes and appliances for an extensive remodel. Brock's touch was in every corner of the place, and spending time at home while he was stuck halfway around the globe was a source of both comfort and unease. She loved him but hated missing him.

She dialed a lengthy series of numbers on her phone and heard the hiss of static and the clicks and clunks of half a dozen relays as her phone tried to connect to the one in Brock's quarters on the other side of the planet. Brock's location was classified, and the call routing was electronically laundered to keep his location secret. The call failed, which was not unusual. Four out of every five attempts to reach Brock over the past several months had ended in frustration. As much as she wanted to hear his voice, Sam didn't have the energy to try again. She dropped the phone in her lap and stared at the wall.

*Did I shut the front door?* She couldn't remember. Groaning, she rose from the chair and padded to the entryway. The door was closed and locked, but she had forgotten to reset the alarm. She kept the perimeter sensors activated while at home as an added safety precaution. Catching spies was a dangerous business and their home had been compromised by armed intruders in the recent past.

She typed in the code, listened for the two-toned beep, scrolled absently through the primitive event log on the display, and froze. *Could that be right?* She pecked at a few more buttons on the alarm control, making sure she wasn't reading it wrong.

The log showed she had armed the home's internal motion detectors when she left for the memorial service at 2:21 p.m. It also showed that she had disarmed them when she returned home just moments before.

But this didn't make any sense at all:

SAM NEVER SCHEDULED alarm maintenance while she wasn't home. *Ever*. Best way in the world for a counterespionage agent to wind up dead. It was just too easy for someone to plant a "backdoor" that allowed an intruder to bypass the alarm or otherwise manipulate the system. She always insisted on watching the alarm maintenance guy herself, and always insisted that the security company send the same guy each time, whom she tipped handsomely. And she always asked Dan Gable to look over the alarm's logs afterwards to be doubly sure.

But there it was, plain as day. Less than an hour after she left for the memorial, someone had accessed the maintenance function in the system.

*Oh, shit.* Had someone let themselves in? Were they still in her house?

Sam quickly grabbed the .45 Kimber handgun from her purse and released the safety. Her heart pounded as she searched slowly throughout the house, turning on the lights as she methodically cleared each room. She found no sign that anyone had been here. Once confident the house was secure, she called her alarm company. No record of any maintenance, scheduled or otherwise.

"It's right here on the display," Sam protested. "At nine minutes after three in the afternoon."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. The system has absolutely no record of any maintenance on your alarm today."

"You're looking at the right account?"

The man on the phone re-verified Sam's information with a note of exasperation in his voice. "I can confirm that our system shows no record of any maintenance activity today," he summarized.

"Then why does the alarm think otherwise?" Sam asked.

"I would hesitate to speculate, ma'am. All I know is that your system passes all our remote checks, and all the sensors are operating. But we can send a service technician out first thing in the morning, just to be sure."

Sam agreed and ended the call. She stood in her kitchen with her

gun in hand. *It could just be a glitch or a software bug*, she thought. Computers were awesome, except when they weren't. And it was usually impossible to tell from the outside when a computer system was telling you a bald-faced lie. But one thing would tell her for sure if something wasn't right.

She walked down to her basement, gun still drawn. She felt behind the bookcase at the far end of the space, clicked a latch, and swung open the false wall to reveal the vault door behind it.

She never referred to the space as her "panic room," but that was the idea behind it. When the shit hit the fan, she could lock herself inside the vaulted room and survive for weeks on end, if needed. It held water, food, guns, passports, cash, and other necessities, and featured a well-appointed living space. She and Brock had used the room during several crises over the years, including once when a bomb detonated in their front yard.

The room also had another feature: all the closed-circuit video cameras in the house piped their video feeds to a ridiculously large hard drive on an encrypted computer in the vault. The system had saved Brock's life several years ago by providing her with a close-up snapshot of the gargantuan goon who had shot and kidnapped him. She hoped the video feed would provide a little peace of mind about the alarm anomaly.

But it didn't. The hard drive was still in place, the computer worked just fine, and she watched footage of herself leaving the house at around two-thirty in the afternoon. But half an hour after that, everything went blank. Someone had broken into her system and erased the video.