

Chapter One

[i]

The core of Security Services had huddled deep below the surface of the earth for so many years that when it finally emerged into daylight, many of its executives said they felt like inmates on parole from prison. *Free at last! Free at last!* Elizabeth Weatherall repeated the words like a mantra as she transferred eyes-only materials from her private vault to the mobile safe in which such materials had to be shipped. The move felt like liberation from a confinement she'd long given up hope of escaping. Not that the Rock had been cramped: having originally been designed to hold the most significant portion of the executive population for the duration of a nuclear-attack or biological-warfare crisis, the mountain base provided an embarrassment of space they had never come close to filling. But her consciousness of one hundred thousand people working inside a single structure had, over the years, grown oppressive. And security concerns at the Rock differed from those typical of quartering in DC. One worried less about breaches from without than about violations of compartmentalization within—less about the opposition's efforts and more about the internecine infighting endemic in Security. The Rock had proven to be a hotter rumor factory than an HQ scattered widely over DC and its suburbs.

Elizabeth's headset chimed.

"He wants you at your quote 'earliest convenience,'" Jacquelyn said.

No doubt Sedgewick wanted her to pack his private safe for him. He, of course, had nothing in it he'd want to conceal from her; whereas she couldn't entrust her safe to anyone, least of all Jacquelyn. The pecking order did not replicate downwards with any substantial degree of equivalence.



Elizabeth locked both safes and crossed the hall. Entering his office, she saw at once that Sedgewick had his private vault open and the mobile parked nearby. *And* he held a cup of coffee in his hand, a good sign at four in the afternoon. Perhaps the end of the war did not mean the collapse of his interest in Security.

He glanced up from the sheaf of flimsies balanced on his knee. “Pack my safe for me, will you Weatherall?”

Elizabeth went to the far wall and started shifting files into the mobile safe.

“I had lunch with Goodwin today,” he said.

She had reminded him of the appointment and arranged the chopper to Denver herself. “Anything interesting?” She squatted to reach the bottom shelves.

Sedgewick laid the flimsies on the sofa beside him. “You remember the tentative studies we had done, extrapolating postwar conditions?”

“Mmm... Bennett coordinated that project, didn’t she?”

“It’s more than time now to get moving on putting the taskforce’s recommendations into effect. The propaganda effort will be as critical as the economic recovery program. Between us, Goodwin and I have arranged for Bennett to act as Security’s liaison for the project, along with Com & Tran’s Welkin. They’ve worked well together in the past.”

Quite a plum for Allison. It was a position functionally close to the sub-deputy director level, even if it lacked the title—as it probably wouldn’t were the position going to a male. “Bennett’s an excellent choice for the job.” Elizabeth dumped an armload of files into the mobile safe. “She’s demonstrated considerable ability over the last seven years.” She paused to look at Sedgewick.

“I thought you’d be pleased,” he said dryly. “She’s your protégée, after all.”

Elizabeth turned back to the safe and pulled out a long cardboard box weighing perhaps twenty-five pounds.

“But Ambrose...that’s another matter,” he said. “I doubt he’d even want the honor of being your boy.”

Elizabeth snorted. Chase Ambrose, the little ass, was a fool, but a well-connected and wily one. Somehow he’d managed to work himself up the ladder—starting out as Stevens’s chief assistant and leapfrog-



ging over Stevens to the position of supervising all domestic security branches, forming one of a triad—with Allison and Elizabeth—running the domestic side of things during the war, allowing Sedgewick to ignore everything but foreign operations. They could have done without Ambrose, but Elizabeth hadn't wanted to deal with the kind of imbroglia Ambrose had the connections to stir up against her. She'd figured she'd let one of the directors or deputies take him out. Only none of them had... And scuttlebutt had it that Stevens now feared Ambrose would be moving someone of his own into Stevens's directorship of ODS.

"Is Ambrose anyone's boy?" Elizabeth said. She glanced over her shoulder with an arch look to accompany her flippant query.

To her surprise, Sedgewick smiled. And Elizabeth prepared herself for something nasty.

"Perhaps he might be my boy." Sedgewick drawled the words, as though savoring the taste of them on his tongue.

Elizabeth shifted her body around and locked eyes with him. "You have something particular in mind?"

His eyes glittered. "I thought I'd try him out as Deputy Chief. See how he comes along."

Heat rose into her neck and face as a wave of rage surged through her body. Sedgewick had let the position of Deputy Chief lie vacant since his accession to Chief.

"Thought it might be a good idea to groom a successor. You better than anyone else can appreciate why." Those damned glinting eyes, watching her, fairly invited her to lose control.

Elizabeth swallowed. She tried to think before speaking. She could appreciate why, yes. He had some gall so casually referring to his breakdown, his drinking, his dereliction of responsibility at a time of acute crisis. After everything she'd done for him and Security, he would pass her over for that pig? It was incredible. With calculation, she challenged his proposal on the grounds most removed from her personal interest in the matter: "You might cram this down the throats of the domestic branches—you never much cared for their opinions, anyway—but you must expect flak from Company people."

"I'm only talking about trying it out, Weatherall. Part of that includes seeing how he makes out with Company people. Naturally



the position demands someone suited for dealing with the Company.” Never had there been a Chief who hadn’t been a Company man. And Ambrose had started out in ODS, the absolute bottom of the barrel within Security’s complex of branches and agencies.

Elizabeth said: “I’m the person best suited for that job. As *you*, Sedgewick, can appreciate better than anybody else.”

He nodded. “Oh, I agree. There’s no question of *that*. You’ve demonstrated more than adequately your capacity for handling the job of Chief. Barring the problem of dealing with the Cabinet, of course.”

“That problem would be solved by official recognition of the position,” Elizabeth said evenly. “And you could make that acceptable to them, if you...ah...*groomed* me for the job.”

“Yes, I could see that happening. It would be difficult, but not beyond my powers.”

Her throat tightened. Damn him! Sitting there, admitting bare-faced that she was best suited for the job and that her holding it was not outside the realm of the possible. After several tense seconds she said, “Then why? Why Ambrose? Why not me if you’re suddenly so hot for a Deputy Chief?”

His face defaulted into its usual mask of apathetic stillness, and his eyes grew so cold and dull they might be taken for a corpse’s but for their occasional blinking. “That long cardboard box, Weatherall. Take it out of the mobile safe and open it.”

Was this a dismissal of the subject? Or did the box have something to do with this outrage? She bent, slid it off the shelf, and set it on the end of the long conference table a yard away. When she lifted the flap and pulled up the lid, her breath caught in her throat. She turned and stared at him. How had he gotten it? *How?*

There was only one possibility. It had to have been Allison. Damn her, had she no sense of loyalty? “How?” she asked him. “When?”

“Surely you must have known I’d pursue it, Weatherall. I knew you’d have kept records. Though I never dreamed you’d make verbatim transcripts.” A shiver snaked up her spine. “I’ve been thinking for years of how best to avenge Zeldin and punish you for disobeying my orders. What is it you want most in the world, I asked myself again and again. You’re so ambitious, Weatherall. So damned ambitious. It was staring me in the face all those years, and I didn’t see it. It never



occurred to me you'd not be satisfied with behind-the-scenes power. But of course, watching you as I have, I did eventually see it. And you do so despise Ambrose." He smiled, letting his teeth show.

"To avenge Zeldin," Elizabeth said numbly. "I don't understand. What I did... was for you."

He hurled his coffee cup, and it smashed into the table only inches from the cardboard box. Shocked, Elizabeth stared at him. He hadn't had such a violent episode in years.

"I came to see you just after Zeldin's capture. You remember, Weatherall?"

That was the last time he'd indulged in uncontrolled violence. She said, "Yes, of course. We discussed what I intended to do with Zeldin."

"I specifically told you that I didn't want her lobotomized. You disregarded that order. You claim to have done that for *me*? Leaving her so anguished she couldn't bear to go on living? I made myself clear to you, Weatherall, and you disregarded my wishes for your own purposes. How amazingly cool of you to discuss those purposes with Zeldin herself. It's all in the transcripts."

Zeldin, yet again Zeldin, this time reaching out from the grave. Still that woman had her hooks in him. "She was perfectly fine when she left the Rock," Elizabeth said. "Note that she didn't kill herself the first chance she got. No, it was after a week of you that she—"

"Shut up!"

Elizabeth recoiled from the fury blazing in his face. "Don't think you can get out of this one, my bitch! Perhaps I should give you Wedgewood's job! Because by god, Weatherall, you have the mind and soul of a torturer. You could teach him a thing or two, couldn't you. With your instincts and talents you'd soon leave him far behind!"

Elizabeth's stomach heaved. With shaking hands she jammed the box into the mobile safe and resumed transferring materials from one safe to the other at speed. Given his history with Zeldin, he had an incredible nerve. Just what was it that had happened between him and her that last week, anyway? Enough to drive Zeldin over the edge. She'd promised Zeldin he wouldn't... Elizabeth whirled and stared into his furious face. "You couldn't leave her alone, could you," she



said. “I told her, because it never occurred to me it could be any other way, that you’d keep your hands off—”

“Get the fuck out of here!” His voice rose in pitch, and he fairly screamed at her. “Get out, now! Send someone else to finish packing! I want you out of my sight, bitch!”

“With pleasure.” Elizabeth spoke softly and wrenched her mouth into a teeth-baring smile. “With the greatest pleasure imaginable.” She strode to the door, aware he was barely restraining himself from physically attacking her. Her tight, grim smile widened as she thought of how the knowledge that she could take him physically if he started anything must be leashing his most violent impulses.

Small satisfaction, though, considering what he had just done to her. Chase Ambrose. Christ. The bastard was right: he’d gotten at her in the worst way possible. And all because of Zeldin. Always with him it was Zeldin. And probably would be until he himself bit the dust.

Which, considering Ambrose’s promotion, had better not be any time soon.

[ii]

Celia was finishing ordering the month’s rations just as Elena arrived home. Judging by the droop of her mother’s shoulders, it must have been a bad day at the hospital.

Her mother detoured to the desk to drop a kiss on Celia’s cheek. “Any luck?” she asked, gesturing at the form on the screen.

“Sorry, Mama. Another month of only tubefood. Going through channels, there’s no way we can get anything fresh.”

Elena squeezed Celia’s shoulders and began kneading them—probably, Celia thought, because she’d noticed they were rock-hard with tension. Elena sighed. “Even though I know better, I’d been hoping that with the war over...”

Celia pressed her thumb on the signature plate and logged out. No one in their house—not Celia, not Elena, not Luis Salgado—could risk a black-market transaction. ODS would use the slightest pretext to jail them, and they all agreed that the rare occasions on which they managed the elaborate efforts necessary for eluding their watchdogs could not be wasted on a small thing like food that was not needed for survival.



Elena moved to the window and looked out. “There’s a new one out there, Cee. For you, it must be. A Latina this time.”

Celia got up from the terminal. “Really? I’ve had white females, and males of every shade, but never a Latina. What, are they getting desperate, recruiting Latinas?”

Elena left the window and sank onto the sofa-bed. “Maybe they recruited her just for you, Cee.” Her smile was sour. “After you lost them that day in the market.”

Celia laughed with pleasure at the memory of outsmarting that particular watchdog. “Never did see *him* again,” Celia said. “Think they transferred him to another case, or fired him?”

“Probably transferred him to guard duty in one of those desert prisons.” Elena sighed—the second time in only a few minutes, Celia noticed. Which wasn’t like her. “Would you get your old mother a bottle of water, Cee? I’m parched.”

Celia pushed through the beaded curtain into the kitchen-alcove and grabbed one of the half-liter bottles lined up on the shelf above the microwave. “Poor *mamacita*,” she said, stepping back into the living room. “What you need is a day off. And now that the war’s over...” She handed her mother the bottle.

Elena broke the seal on the bottle. “Now that the war’s over we’ll have hundreds of the physically wounded and emotionally damaged overflowing every medical facility in the country. I’m not expecting big changes for the next year at least, Cee.” She lifted the bottle to her mouth and drank down several large swallows at once.

“They’ve officially lifted martial law,” Celia said. “That changes the situation—legally, anyway. I’m going to be spending every working second of the next few weeks procuring and serving writs of habeas corpus. Those jerks will have to do it by the book—at least superficially—now. Or we’ll have them in court so fast their heads will spin.”

Elena shook her head. “Oh Cee. Haven’t you learned anything yet? You forget, don’t you. Ten years ago—”

“Ten years ago we were free to come and go as we pleased without trailing watchdogs,” Celia said. “Ten years ago there were no economic refugee- or prison-camps. Ten years ago ODS had to have evidence to keep people in jail. Ten years ago—”



“Ten years ago,” Elena in turn interrupted, “judges let ODS do as it damned well pleased.”

Celia stared at her mother. “There’s a big difference between then and the last few years, Mama. And you know it.”

Elena shrugged. “We’ll see whether things change that much.” She lifted the bottle to her lips. “We’ll see.” It really *had* been a bad day, Celia thought. Her mother prided herself on being an “optimistic realist.”

Celia slipped on her coat and picked up her attaché case. “Well I’m off,” she said.

Elena, as usual, did not ask her destination. The less she knew about Celia’s doings, the safer they would all be should anything “happen.” Besides, *they* might be monitoring their conversation. “Will you be late, Cee?”

“Maybe ten or eleven. I’m hoping to be given dinner.” Celia grinned. “And I don’t mean tubefood. Most service-techs eat better than we do, Mama, did you know that?”

Elena leaned forward and set the empty bottle on the coffee table. “I’ll probably be asleep by the time you get in. Try not to wake me.”

Celia bent and kissed her mother’s forehead. “Nighty-night, Mama. Sleep well.”

Celia opened the front door. Yes, there she was, leaning against the adobe wall surrounding the executive property across the street. Celia sauntered down to the street. “*Buenos dias*,” she called.

The woman stepped forward, out of shadow into sunlight, and Celia saw that the watchdog was even younger than she’d thought.

“I hope you’re up to a brisk walk downtown?” Celia said facetiously. “Public transportation’s not too frequent between Banker’s Hill and downtown. They tell you I do a lot of walking?”

The girl’s lips tightened.

Celia shrugged. “Just thought I’d warn you. Well, I’m off!” She turned on her heel and took off down the road at a good clip. Down down down the hill they’d wind, she and her watchdog. She herself free, her watchdog bound to follow where she led. Thinking this was an interesting way of looking at their relationship, Celia fantasized initiating a discussion with the woman about it. It might even be amusing.



[iii]

“Sit down, Allison.” Elizabeth spoke in a superior-to-subordinate tone she had used to Allison at most three times in Allison’s life. Allison’s gaze darted to Elizabeth’s face; cautiously, she advanced to the desk and took the chair Elizabeth indicated.

Elizabeth resisted the urge to rise. She knew that if she left the confines of her chair she might lose control. She wanted to shake Allison. (Or worse.) She gripped the leather arms of her chair and drew a deep breath. “You must have expected this to happen long before now,” she said. “Were you surprised when nothing immediately came of your treachery?”

Allison paled. “What are you talking about, Elizabeth? I’m as loyal as you are. Whatever it is that I’ve done, it wasn’t intentionally treacherous!”

“You know damned well that’s not what I’m talking about. But then perhaps you place such a low premium on loyalty to *me* that you don’t consider such treachery betrayal at all?”

Allison’s eyes flared. “I’ve always been loyal to you. For that at least you can’t fault me. I may not measure up to your standards and expectations in other ways, but when it comes to loyalty—” She visibly swallowed before going on. “Tell me what you’re talking about, Elizabeth. Please.”

What kind of fool did Allison take her for? “Today I learned in the most unpleasant way conceivable that you gave Sedgewick the Zeldin transcripts,” Elizabeth said flatly. “After everything we went through when you first blackmailed me with them—”

“I didn’t give Sedgewick the transcripts! And it’s not fair for you to say I blackmailed you. Somebody had to protect Anne—”

“*Protect* her? But don’t think that by dragging in past history you’ll evade the issue now. Sedgewick has those transcripts, Allison. It’s that simple. I saw them, and he made me see that he does.”

Allison leaned forward. “He didn’t get them from me! I give you my word, Elizabeth. I shredded the copy I had long ago. And I haven’t touched those data files since!”

After everything she had done for Allison... Elizabeth pushed away the old memories, of holding Allison as a baby, of teaching



six-year-old Allison to ski, of talking to teenaged Allison about her education, of bringing grown-up Allison into the Company... No. She wouldn't let herself be swayed by sentiment this time. Always she excused Allison everything, telling herself that she must simply accept Allison's ambivalence toward her. "Your *word*, Allison?" she said, disgusted that Allison thought she could play her.

Allison's eyes filled with tears. "Did Sedgewick explicitly say I'd given him the transcripts?"

Elizabeth shoved her chair back from the desk. "He didn't have to. There's no other way he could have gotten them."

"Thank you for your trust." Allison's mouth scrunched up in defensive, resentful childishness. "You're willing to believe the worst of me by drawing conclusions from one piece of information. You didn't even bother to ask Sedgewick how he got the transcripts. You just assumed I'd given them to him. Is that right?"

Elizabeth stared at her. The silence pounded in the air between them. Elizabeth lifted her hand to her ear and tapped five on her headset.

Sedgewick's voice snapped in her ear.

"How did you get the transcripts, Sedgewick?"

There was a pause. He said, curtly, "You think I don't know your system for hiding electronic files, Weatherall? After all these years?"

"You found them yourself?"

"I suspected their existence, so I looked for them. And naturally found them." After another pause, he said, "Was there anything else you wanted, Weatherall?"

"No, Sedgewick. Nothing else." She tapped the disconnect button and looked across the desk at Allison. "I'm sorry for that, Allison. It was unforgivable of me to accuse you without grounds."

"Unforgivable to think the worst of me right off." Allison's eyes shimmered. "Much less accuse me. And now I find my word means nothing to you, either. I don't know what I've done to deserve this, Elizabeth."

Damn. Allison was going to cry. And *she* was forced to stay on this side of the desk helplessly watching her do it, too. She hated the ease with which Allison was hurt; she hated Allison's vulnerability... And of course any move she made to comfort her would only give Allison another pretext for rejecting her. Elizabeth looked away from



Allison's tears. "I know you won't forgive me," she said, pressing her fingers into the arms of her chair. "So I won't belabor my apology. But let me instead give you some good news."

Allison sat up straighter in her chair. "Of course I forgive you," she said stiffly.

Elizabeth let that pass. "It's been decided that you're to coordinate a major public education project for postwar adjustment. You'll be working as our liaison with Com & Tran. With Welkin. It's a wonderful position, Allison, and will give you substantial power. Naturally there'll be a significant salary increase with it."

Allison looked crestfallen.

"What is it?" Elizabeth said. "What's the matter?" Anyone else in her situation would be crowing with triumph. Could it be that Allison had been entertaining wild expectations of something better?

Allison stared down at her hands in her lap. "I'd hoped that after the war I'd be transferred back to Europe," she said in a very low voice.

"Back to Europe?" *What the fuck?* "Doing *what?*" Did Allison think she could jump into the upper echelons of the Western Europe desk the way the men sometimes did?

Allison shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose maybe I thought I could have my old job back, or something like it."

Elizabeth was incredulous. "You'd settle for your old job now? Wouldn't you be bored out of your mind—besides being wasted? My god, Allison, you've been operating at the highest levels of Security, and you talk about going back to being a drudgery operations officer?"

Allison bit her lip. "I suppose that sounds stupid to you."

Elizabeth thought. Then, "What about Anne? You couldn't take her to Europe, you know. Not on the kind of salary you'd draw doing that work again."

Allison looked startled. Ah, yes, that had gotten her. Where her precious service-tech was concerned she could always be reached. "I hadn't thought of that. Anyway, I expect you're right about my being bored and wasted. Considering the mess everything's in, I really should be doing the things I'm specially skilled to do." She half-smiled. "This project will be a challenge. You think I can handle it?"

Elizabeth said, "It wouldn't have been offered to you if I didn't think you could." And that was true. She could have vetoed Allison's



being given the position. Likely one of the reasons Sedgewick was giving this job to Allison was in order to keep steady what he had deliberately shaken up with his attack via Ambrose. Give with one hand, take away with the other. Telling her she's still on the team while he's breaking her bones: classic Sedgewick.

"I suppose you're nearly packed?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes. I'm a bit worried, though, about finding a decent place to live in DC. Anne will probably be returning to the place she lived before—if it's still around. You at least have some certainty about your place being intact."

All those repairs that had had to be made after the Civil War—Military having deliberately wasted the place, precisely because it was hers—had been completed long ago. "You needn't worry, Allison. On your salary you'll find something. At any rate, you are welcome to stay with me, as you like." Not that Allison would ever do *that*. Not voluntarily.

"Thank you. Was there anything else, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth sighed. "No, Allison. Nothing else."

Allison rose to her feet. "Then I'll get back to my packing."

Elizabeth watched her go out the door. As always after such encounters, she felt the sinking weight of failure press against her heart. Her relations with Allison would always be a burden, ever tormenting her.

Elizabeth glanced at her watch, got up, and went back to the packing of the mobile safe. Only the two bottom shelves of her private vault remained to be transferred to the mobile. She opened both and crouching, swiftly moved the files on the next-to-the-bottom shelf of the vault to the mobile. Then she started on the bottom shelf. Pulling out the files at the front of the shelf, she transferred them without even looking at them. When her hands reached for the rest of the stuff on the shelf, they encountered objects obviously not files. Frowning, she pulled some of the objects forward. She stared at the leather book, the satchel, and the box of miscellaneous objects—and remembered: she had stowed everything to do with Zeldin on this bottom shelf. She hadn't wanted to think about what to do with it after Zeldin's death and yet had not been able to dispose of it once and for all.

Elizabeth sat back on her heels. Damn Sedgewick for dredging it all up again. One part of him lived permanently, obsessively in the



past, in a ghost world she could not begin to imagine much less inhabit. She should simply throw all this stuff out now. There was no point in hanging onto it.

She lifted the lid of the cardboard box and stared at the rich red silk within. She had retrieved this gown of *jouissance* silk from the island for obscure reasons she hadn't understood then and certainly couldn't grasp now. Though she fingered the silk, she averted her eyes from the leather book lying inches from her foot. *You have the mind and soul of a torturer*. He was wrong, completely wrong. He believed what he wanted to believe. In that leather book... The story Zeldin told in that book incriminated him. Not that he'd see it that way. As for her own relations with Zeldin... the silk told its own story, too. No, she would keep it all. If he forced her to she would use these things against him. She must retain the power to vindicate herself.

Her throat tight, Elizabeth packed the remnants of Zeldin into the mobile safe. Zeldin had been her worst failure of all. In the end, Zeldin had won—against her, and against Sedgewick. And Zeldin was still raining destruction on them, seven years later, the bitch.

Elizabeth closed the mobile safe. Jacquelyn's girl could pack the rest of the office under Jacquelyn's supervision. Thank god they were leaving the Rock. She had so often felt as though she would suffocate from the lack of fresh air and sunlight. It would be the most blessed relief.

[iv]

Celia put her finger to her lips and took from her attaché case the pad she carried for such occasions. She wrote in block letters:

IF YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY NOT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION, WRITE IT. I'M PROBABLY HOT.

She watched Emily Madden's face as the latter read the warning, and when Madden nodded, was satisfied the executive understood.

Madden reached into her shoulder bag and held out her hand. In her palm lay a small brass instrument dotted with a glowing green light. A jammer, Celia decided—of a fancier than average design. Madden said, "We'll be all right in here."

Celia glanced into the mirror at the reflection of the door. "Not for long. My watchdog will be in anytime now."



“Then let’s make this brief. The story is we’ve hit it off chatting upstairs by the bank of display terminals where we met. I invite you to dinner at my club—that’s what we’re doing now. You accept. Our cover is that I think you’re a legal scholar whose work might interest me. And so on.”

Celia said, “I’m not the one who needs to worry. It’s you who will be tainted by contact with me.”

Madden slipped the jammer back into her bag. “Unimportant. My club is on Twenty-Eighth Street—on the east side of the park. Shall we meet there, or do you need transportation?”

Celia thought. “No, I can get myself there.” It would give her an excuse to make a stop along the way to see—or fail to see—a client who hadn’t checked in when he should have. “What time?”

Madden took the pad from Celia and scribbled an address on it. “Any time around eight would be fine. I’ll tell them to expect you. If you get there before I do, have a drink. You’ll find it an easy, relaxing atmosphere.”

Celia doubted that: an executive club was one of the last places she’d expect to be comfortable or relaxed.

The door opened. The watchdog came in, walked past them, and shut herself into a stall.

“So I’ll see you then,” Celia said. She listened to the watchdog begin to pee.

“It’s been a pleasure talking to you,” Madden said, going out the door ahead of Celia. Celia looked ironically over her shoulder as she left the restroom. Dare she try to get away while the watchdog was taking a piss? But surely they had relief for her stashed nearby. And if they had some kind of tracer planted on her... Celia hurried up the stairs to street level. They could have done anything to her two of the times she’d been jailed and they’d drugged her. She thought again of her mother’s plan for CT-scanning her entire body. Every time they’d discussed it, they had discarded the idea; people on the run needing medical attention, people just out of the hands of the butchers and suffering untreated fractures and other injuries, had first call on such cheating. Always, always it was a matter of priorities. They lived their lives in a permanent state of triage.



She'd have to set off for Golden Hills now or she'd never make it to that executive club in time. Accessing the only surviving child of the most powerful man in the county? Incredible. And to find her carrying a jammer (but then someone in her position might do that as a matter of course), to find her "simpatico" as the Movement labeled the "interested" professionals and executives... She had hoped to be given dinner. But at an executive club? And her clothing all worn and patched. She was embarrassed to wear such clothes to court; going into a place full of executive women would be even worse.

Celia glanced over her shoulder as she crossed the street. Yes, there she was, poor lost soul, trudging dutifully behind, talking into her sleeve, giving them everything she could glean from that meeting in the library. It was a dog's life for ODS flunkies. But did *they* know that? Celia turned and waved. The smile died on her lips as she noticed the long gray van pass. A chill ran over her; angrily she accelerated her pace. Let the flunky suffer the agony of blisters and leg cramps. Celia had no pity for those who sold out. A woman like her should know better than to work for butchers.

Celia pressed on. Doubtless, the man she was going looking for would be gone without a trace; he would have gotten word to her otherwise. That was, after all, the point of checking in. So. Though the war was over, there would be one last disappeared client to seek out. The thought of all the forms and legwork and investigative tasks weighed on her, especially when she knew the hardest part would come later, when she found him in a hospital—or was shown his remains.

Celia shifted the attaché case to her other hand. Maybe this executive would be useful. Maybe things would change, now that the war was over. It couldn't go on like this forever, could it? Up, up the hill Celia Espin, she urged herself as she began the ascent. One foot in front of the other, just keep on moving. That's all you can do.

But Celia was tired. She had been trudging uphill for six years now and was seemingly getting nowhere. Was hers the task of Sisyphus? No! *That's the wrong story!* She squared her shoulders and marched forward. Martial law had been rescinded; everything would change. And then the world would be sane again, as it had been before the aliens had wreaked their terrible havoc.

