

*25 August. CIA Headquarters, McLean, VA. 0830 hours.*

The line at her turnstile crawls forward. She fights the urge to switch, figuring as soon as she does, the new line will slow to a halt. Tory Pierce has no time for downtime. It's too much like running in place when you could be out there, surmounting new challenges, forging new paths into the unknown.

She inhales deeply. She's always thought the air inside the Agency's cavernous main lobby had a special smell, the smell of courage. It's where she feels closest to her dad, as if his spirit still hovered around a certain star engraved on the marble wall behind her. That star and his name in the Book of Honor testify to the ultimate sacrifice he made for his country—the Agency's take on her father's disappearance, not exactly hers.

Finally. Her turn. She sticks her ID on the scanner. The metal arms open, ushering her into the real CIA.

High heels click on the marble floor, as the bureaucratic hordes flow past clutching briefcases. Tory falls in with the crowd heading toward the elevators. Inside, she swipes her badge across the number seven then fades to the back as the car fills. Six floors later she is the sole passenger. The doors part to reveal two large gentlemen in identical grey suits and striped ties stationed on either side of the corridor. They flash her mechanical smiles as she emerges. Very few people are allowed on the power floor for the Directorate of Intelligence. You either worked here, or you got here by invitation only. If you were crazy enough to show up otherwise, you were escorted back into the elevator by these two well-dressed bouncers, a notation appeared in your file, and you might as well resign from the Agency effective now.

Maud Olson is married to the Agency. Her first choice would have been Tory's father, but his choice was to console himself with dangerous special assignments instead of remarriage after her mother died. Tory wound up at her grandparents', then boarding school, then Princeton. All along she's been pretty much left to figure things out on her own. That's usually meant noting her weaknesses, and managing, if not to eliminate them, at least to hide them from public view.

Maud's "professional guidance" has always felt a little oppressive, like carrying a balance on your credit card. And Maud's promotion last year to the top slot in the DI has made the situation worse, straining mutual politeness to the limit.

The grey corridor is bleak: no art on the walls, no windows, only grey doors, numberless and nameless. The thudding rhythm of Tory's flat-heeled shoes helps steady her mind. She knows why she's been summoned, and she's determined to stay calm, professional. Outside Maud's office, she forces a deep breath. She is three minutes early. She brushes the sleeves of her jacket, straightens her skirt. Maud's elegance can make you feel like a ruffled incompetent.

She slips a hand into the outside compartment of her briefcase, pulls out a carved stone the size of her thumb, gives it a squeeze, and drops it into her jacket pocket. It's her only link to a lost time, to the one person whom she'd thought it safe to trust.

She once more presents the badge around her neck to a scanner on the wall. The door clicks open.

