

THE STRATEGIST

A GRISHAM AND SULLIVAN NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

SAFEKEEPING

Her hand trembled as she tore the flash disk from its plastic casing and inserted it into her computer. She had spent most of the night compiling the nearly nine hundred files she would need to transfer, so she anticipated the actual upload process would be relatively painless. Still, she worried that something could go wrong. A file could be missed, the disk could be corrupted, men in black suits and sunglasses could show up at her front door in search of answers she wasn't the least bit prepared to give.

But she knew that was merely the paranoia working over her already fragile mind. Every file had been accounted for. The disk was brand new, so the chances of corruption were minimal. And as far as she knew, men in black suits were little more than figments of Hollywood's imagination. She smiled at the thought of Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones chasing aliens, but the sense of dread that inspired her actions remained.

Once the document transfer began, her nerves slowly settled. Watching each file make the split second journey from her computer's hard drive to the disk, she couldn't help but marvel at the sheer amount of information that could be stored on such a tiny, portable device. Data that was once only accessible on a mainframe computer the size of a broom closet could now fit comfortably inside her pocket, but unlike a mainframe, the files on that pocket-sized device could potentially be accessed by anyone in the world, provided it was not adequately safeguarded.

Her disk would need safeguarding that went far beyond adequate. Some would undoubtedly consider her methods extreme. Given what could happen should its contents ever become public domain, she still wondered if it would be enough.

For now, it would have to be.

In a perfect world, there would come a time when the information was no longer relevant and could be discarded before it was ever seen. The world she inhabited was far from perfect, however, which meant that an outcome other than the one she routinely saw in her nightmares was not very likely.

The transfer took half an hour to complete. She spent much of that time thinking about what was to come. The last twenty-four hours had been tense. The next twenty-four would offer no let up. She had already arranged to take tomorrow off – no easy feat when your employer is one of the most powerful law firms in the western United States and you're smack dab in the middle of defending the region's largest grocery chain against a multi-million dollar lawsuit. But she needed the time if she was going to accomplish everything she needed to.

She would begin the day by making two very important trips. The first would ensure the safekeeping of the disk. The second would bring the arrival of the one person in the world she could completely trust with it. In her circle of influence, trust was not an easy thing to come by.

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Actually, it was non-existent. The exception to that rule was coming back into her life tomorrow morning after nearly eight years away.

The thought of having Camille home made her heart dance with anticipation, but the prospect of ever having to reveal the contents of that disk to anyone, let alone her best friend in the world, made her empty stomach feel queasy.

When the transfer was finally complete, the flash disk held 397 Excel spreadsheets, 473 Word documents, 22 PowerPoint slideshows, and one very important movie file. After performing one last sweep to ensure that she had gathered all the necessary data, she proceeded to wipe the entire contents of her computer's hard drive – every picture, every password, every temporary file – until the tropical sunset on her desktop was replaced by a blue screen and the error message: *0xc000000f boot section failed*.

A \$2500 laptop killed with just three mouse clicks.

Once she shut down the now useless computer, she sealed the disk in an envelope. A note that she had spent a significant portion of the night writing went inside a second envelope. She buried both deep inside her handbag.

After some quality time with her kids – two Dalmatians named George and Gracie – she armed her security system, turned off the lights, and prayed that tonight would finally bring restful sleep. As she had done every night for the past week, she looked through the foyer window before going upstairs. She had no good reason to suspect that she would see anything out there that she wasn't supposed to, and so far she hadn't.

But she knew better than to think it could stay that way forever, given her knowledge and her willingness to share it with the entire world if she had to.

Yet Julia Leeds continued to hope, despite what everything in her heart told her to the contrary, that she would never have to.

CHAPTER 2

THE WILDERNESS

As the red beacon lights of the Reagan National Airport control tower became visible through the dark morning haze, Camille Grisham knew with every fabric of her being that she had seen the last of Washington D.C. The finality of it felt all-too-sudden, even though she had spent the last six weeks methodically tying up every loose end of her former life. Her resignation from the Bureau had long since been tendered and accepted. Her small but exceedingly comfortable Georgetown condo had already been sold. Her goodbyes, painful and traumatic as they were, had already been said. Camille had developed many close relationships during her eight and a half years here; relationships she assumed would last forever. But as countless poems, love songs, and funerals of fallen comrades have consistently reminded her, nothing lasts forever.

She had been so thorough in severing her connections to this city it was almost as if she were never here. *Never here*. She couldn't help but dwell on the words, and the variety of ways her life would be different if they were really true. *Never here. Never ever...*

Struggling to pull herself out of the dense wilderness of her own thoughts, Camille looked up to see her taxi pulling into the nearly deserted American Airlines terminal. Next to the curb, a group of shivering skycaps stood in a tight circle, warming themselves with steaming coffee and jovial conversation. The oldest of the crew, a gray-haired, genteel-looking man who could have easily passed for Camille's own grandfather, spotted their arrival first. Before the others even knew what was happening, the cagey veteran tossed his coffee aside and swooped down on the taxi with the fervor of a starving vulture eying helpless prey – or the day's first tip.

He opened the door before Camille had a chance to collect herself, greeting her with the first genuinely warm smile that she had seen in days.

"Mornin' young lady," he said in a deep, gravelly voice. "Early bird gets the worm, eh?"

It wasn't early for her; she hadn't slept all night.

"That's what they say," Camille replied, trying unsuccessfully to return his smile.

The skycap winked as he took two large suitcases out of the trunk and loaded them onto a gurney. The taxi driver, who had been quiet for most of their trip, then turned an expectant eye to her. Camille glanced at the meter and gave him the necessary cash, making sure to include a generous tip as thanks for allowing her to begin this historically stressful day in relative silence.

"Thank you very much, madam," the driver said as he pocketed his well-earned bounty. "And safe travels." He spoke with a clipped Caribbean accent that Camille found airy and quite pleasant. She wished now that they had spoken more.

With a nod of gratitude, she collected her remaining bags and stepped out into the icy morning air.

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“Should I check that one too?” the skycap asked in reference to the FBI Academy duffle bag Camille had draped over her shoulder.

“I’m keeping this one,” she answered, pulling the bag close to her chest. The response was based more on reflex than necessity.

Whenever she traveled as an agent, this was the one bag she never let leave her side; its contents too valuable to risk being left in the clumsy hands of airport baggage handlers. Confidential case files, criminal profiles she had spent months compiling, and the back-up Glock nine-millimeter she never dared leave behind were regular items in that duffle.

Today it contained nothing more valuable than a couple of magazines, her iPod, and a travel pillow. Civilians aren’t allowed access to case files, criminal profiles, or government-issued nine-millimeters. Civilians don’t have much need for duffle bags with FBI embroidering on them either, and *civilian* was all that Camille Grisham could call herself now.

It was the first time she had been able to make such an admission to herself.

I’m a pedestrian; an average Jane; a certified wash-out.

She wanted nothing more than to scream at the top of her lungs as she lamented everything that fate and her own weakness had taken from her - her career, her identity, her self-worth. But no such release would come. Something inside the hard-as-nails, Quantico-trained, Special Agent-In-Charge-of-Ridding-the-World-of-Everything-Evil-and-Impure Grisham would not allow it.

Instead, she locked the thought away in that dark place reserved for memories too painful to breathe surface air. Until recently, Camille had been unaware that such a place even existed. Now she was forced to access it with alarming regularity. She wasn’t sure there would be any space left for yet another memory she was desperate to forget. Thankfully there was. How long she could manage to keep those memories buried remained to be seen.

For now, it gave her enough clarity of mind to focus on the new and completely unknown life that was now only a few hours away.

Camille’s decision to leave the FBI was one of the easiest she had ever made. There was no deliberation; no weighing of the pros and cons. All it took was one look at the vacant eyes of a nine-year-old girl named Natalie Sheridan – a girl who would live the rest of her long life without a father – to conclude that she was no longer fit to wear the shield.

During the funeral service for fellow agent and good friend Andrew Sheridan, Camille was nearly overwhelmed by the support from his grief-stricken family.

“This wasn’t your fault, Camille. Please know that,” Agent Sheridan’s wife declared as she choked back tears.

Camille nodded, choked back tears of her own, and for a brief moment actually allowed herself to believe Stacey Sheridan’s words. Then she looked at Natalie, that sweet little girl whose smile could light up a stadium, and saw nothing but extinguished light. In an instant she knew that Stacey could not have been more wrong. She drafted her resignation letter that night.

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The difficult decision for Camille came afterward. She could stay in D.C. where reminders of a failed life would haunt her for as long as she lived, or she could move as far away from the city and every bad memory that lingered in it as fast as she could.

On the surface, the move was a no-brainer. Aside from being the place she called home, Denver could not have been further removed from the chaos that was Washington D.C. There would be no demons to confront; no guilt to fend off.

But Camille couldn't help but fixate on the very real possibility of a return home filled with questions, accusations, and overly rehearsed smiles intended to mask the quiet disappointment that everyone associated with her most certainly felt.

She wondered if it was too late to change her destination. *'I'd like a one-way ticket to the most remote corner of the earth,'* she envisioned telling the ticket clerk. *'I don't have any baggage to check, except what I'm already carrying in my heart.'*

Resigning herself to the fact that such a detour was impossible, Camille tried to set her sights on what was next. Even though she had yet to come up with anything approaching a definitive course, she figured that as long as it didn't involve serial killer profiles, interrogation rooms, or yellow crime scene tape, she would eventually be okay.

Or would she?

What does someone do when the only thing they have ever defined themselves as suddenly ceases to exist? Do they cease to exist? Bachelor's degrees in criminology and psychology, Sigma Cum Laude honors, the youngest field agent in the Behavioral Analysis Unit. Did those things even happen? If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it...

This is not the time to get philosophical, Camille. Pull it together!

The wilderness, it seemed, was getting more difficult to navigate. If this kept up, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to pull herself out next time.

On this occasion, she had the bright face of the friendly skycap to see her through. Both of Camille's grandfathers died before she was four. Though her memories of them were dim, days like this reminded her of just how much she missed having one around. She thought the man standing before her would make a fine surrogate.

"Must be one important trip to get you out on a God awful morning like this," the skycap said as he wheeled her luggage cart to the check-in station.

"It is," Camille answered, breathing in the last bit of frigid D.C. air that she ever expected to take. "I'm going home."

Into the great unknown.