

"I SAID STOP, GODDAMMIT!" Sara yelled as she continued running - the sound of her boots rapidly pounding the concrete beneath her mixing with that of her increasingly heavy breathing. Ahead of her, the young, lanky, dark-haired man continued to maintain his lead over his pursuer - his long hair swishing wildly behind his neck. People walking along the sidewalk in the afternoon sun quickly moved to one side or another, avoiding the chase that was unfolding before them. *Little fucker's fast*, she begrudgingly observed in her mind, *even if he ain't that smart.*

"CP (Command Post) to Denton," the male voice of the retrieval team leader called over the earpiece molecularly bonded behind her ear. "Drone is tracking. We have you on video. What's your status?"

Sara reached her left hand up, pressed on the small device and pantingly replied, "On foot, in pursuit of target! Northbound on Monarch, approaching West 45th Street!"

"Copy that," the voice returned. "Norfolk PD units are moving parallel to your location on Hampton Boulevard. Redirecting to intercept at 45th and Monarch."

Sara quickly filed away the notification in the recesses of her memory as she struggled to maintain the maddeningly fast pace her target had set. Despite her best efforts to try and get her target out of the ramen shop behind her peacefully, he had managed to cause just enough chaos in the shop to catch Sara by surprise, getting a head start on the chase. Though she had not lost any more ground than she had when she began chasing the man, she had also not gained any. *Just my luck*, Sara grumbled in her thoughts. *Not only is this little bastard a cyber-criminal, but he also runs like a goddamn track star!*

Judging from the pace her target was maintaining, Sara knew it would be a minute or so before they reached the intersection. Though she strived to maintain as close to peak physical condition as possible, Sara could feel a slight burning in her lungs from the sprinting pace she was trying to sustain - something she was not accustomed to. She, however, did not have time to think on that as her target suddenly produced a pistol from his front side, swung his right arm behind him as he ran and fired off a shot - hitting a dark-skinned elderly man in his shoulder and sending him spinning, falling to the ground with an agonizing scream. The sound sent the people around her into a panic, causing them to scurry in every direction. The chaos forced Sara to either dodge or just outright shove people out of her way, making her lose ground

momentarily. By the time she had a clear path of pursuit, Sara's target had increased the gap between them by a few more meters.

"Shots fired!" Sara screamed as she slapped the earpiece behind her left ear. "Shots fired!" She felt a surge of adrenaline in her as she resumed her chase - anger giving her a burst of energy that helped her close some of the distance between her and the target. As she ran, she slapped her earpiece again and shouted, "Civilian down! I repeat, civilian down on Monarch!" Drawing her sidearm, she continued her relentless chase with renewed determination.

Above and to the left, Sara could hear the telltale sounds of multiple, small, high-speed rotors from the surveillance drone that had been tracking the foot pursuit as it came in closer, presumably to mark the location of the injured civilian she had called out. Up ahead, past her long-haired target, she could see three cruisers from Norfolk PD set up in a blocking formation, cutting off road access to 45th Street. At that same moment, Sara noticed her target shove up his left sleeve, revealing a forearm-mounted device from underneath his slightly oversized white jacket. Before she had time to register what was happening, Sara felt a shock where her earpiece was adhered, causing her to screech in pain as she dropped to her knees and fell forward. She also felt the device fall from her burning, tingling skin where her earpiece had just been a moment before. Through the pain, she heard the descending drone crash to the ground and roll until it slid to a stop on the street. Seconds later, she heard the sounds of explosions not far from where she fell, forcing her to go flat on her stomach, cover her ears and open her mouth to try and counter the noise and pressure. An intense wave of air and heat from the shockwave of all three vehicles exploding simultaneously washed over her.

Sara quickly rose to her feet after the shockwave passed and saw debris from the explosion embedded by the explosive force of the blast into surrounding structures and vehicles. And, even in people. Though she had witnessed scenes of destruction before, the sight still struck a chord in her mind and heart.

Fuck! Sara surprisedly thought. A "shocker!" *Son of a bitch had a "shocker!"*

Her eyes darted around the cacophonous scene and caught sight of her fleeing target as he had increased the distance once more and broke left on to 45th Street. Another adrenal burst energized Sara as she began running after her target once more. She brought her left arm up behind her ear, only to be reminded of the slightly singed skin there, as well as the fact that she was without her earpiece. She silently cursed as she ran and fumbled to retrieve her BadgeComp from her gun belt. By the time she turned left on 45th, she reopened the comms channel and, as she continued running, yelled, "CP, this is Denton! Target triggered a portable

EMP device! Multiple civilians down on Monarch! PD Cruisers destroyed and officers down at 45th and Monarch! Still in pursuit!"

Thank God BadgeComps are EMP shielded, Sara mentally noted as she replaced the device on her gun belt. Ahead of her, cars were swerving and crashing into one another and into nearby buildings as her target shot off four more rounds wildly. Though fueled by anger over his blatant disregard for the lives around him, Sara was only able to maintain the considerable distance between her and the target. Nevertheless, she doggedly pursued what was now clearly a danger to public safety - to say the least.

As Sara kept running, the burning sensation in her lungs had intensified as a result of the exertion. Still, she kept the fugitive in sight, determined to bring an end to the reign of madness he had created in his continued flight from justice.

Sara watched as her escapee ducked into a nearby building on the other side of 45th and Hampton. Her heart immediately sank when she saw the name holographically emblazoned across the large windows arced along the top of the building over the entrance: Old Dominion University Child Study Center.

God, no! She screamed in her head. *Not kids, for Christ's sakes!*

Sara heard several more gunshots as she ran up to the entrance of the Child Center, followed almost immediately by the sight of both adults and children running out from inside the building. Some adults scooped up children in their arms - the children themselves not being more than either five or six years old. A young Hispanic woman turned back after clearing the entrance and screamed frantically. "HELP!!!" she wailed, her voice laced with fear and desperation. "SOMEBODY HELP!!!"

Panting, Sara produced her BadgeComp once more as she ran up on the frightened woman in a white blouse and black pants. Swiping her credentials on screen, Sara called out, "U.S. Marshals! Where is he?!"

The woman frantically pointed in the direction of the second floor and, almost to the point of hysteria, replied, "Up there! He just came in and started shooting everywhere!"

"Is there anyone else left in the building?!" Sara firmly demanded of the woman. "Think!"

The young woman forced herself to concentrate, though still on the verge of breakdown, and replied, "I don't know! I don't think...Oh God! The Speech Lab! I didn't see Roger or Manuel come out of the Speech Lab!"

Another shot rang out, causing people in the vicinity to scream and run in panic, and causing the scared women to let out a brief scream before Sara grabbed hold of the woman with her free hand, forced the woman to look her in the eye, and commanded, "Listen! Help get these people out of here and get off the streets, immediately! I'll get help here ASAP!" She slapped the woman's arm and yelled, "GO!!"

Sara turned her attention back to the front of the building and moved carefully and quickly up to one of the cylindrical concrete pillars, weapon drawn in ready position. She called on her BadgeComp, "Denton to CP! Target is inside the Old Dominion University Child Study Center, second floor! Possible hostage situation! Get Norfolk PD to cordon off a one kilometer area around the center!"

"Affirmative, Denton," the male team lead's voice replied. "Norfolk PD has received reports of gunfire at your location. Units are en route to cordon off the area. SWAT has been dispatched to your location."

"Negative!" Denton growled into her BadgeComp. "Keep SWAT back! I say again, he is armed and may have a hostage or hostages!"

"Acknowledged, Deputy," the team lead replied with formality and firmness. "Your orders are to stand by and wait for SWAT to arrive to handle the situation. Acknowledge?"

Sara stared at her device for a moment, weighing the situation in her mind. In her gut, she knew SWAT would most likely make things even worse, despite their reputation for being a "life-saving unit." Yet, she knew that she had never dealt with a hostage situation before in all of her time in the service, and never encountered one in her six months in the Marshals - leading her to believe that she may be out of her depth. That belief was quickly dispelled as she shook her head slightly. *Screw that!* she thought to herself with utter conviction. *First time for everything. He's not gonna hurt a kid, not if I can help it!*

"Acknowledge, Denton!" the team lead's voice demanded.

Sara simply shut the device off and slotted it back in her belt as she brought her other hand up to her readied sidearm. Peering around the pillar to her left, a first glance showed no one in the lobby area. Deciding the risk was acceptable, Sara held out her weapon as she stepped up to the door, sweeping her sidearm and keeping vigilant for any surprises from the lobby beyond the glass doors of the entrance. Seeing how the doors did not slide open as she approached, she surmised that the building must have some sort of basic security lock out protocol in place. Once more, Sara pulled out her BadgeComp and quickly opened up the security functions, calling up a general lock override application used by the Marshals and other

law enforcement agencies for emergencies such as the one she faced. Once the app was active she held up her device to the area of the door's motion sensors above. To her relief, the doors internal sensors picked up on the app's signal and overrode the lock, making the doors slide apart and grant her passage inside.

Moving quickly inside in a tactical crouch/walk, Sara made her way inside past the reception area, searching for the emergency stairs - as she knew the lifts would most likely be disabled. After less than a minute of searching, she found what she was looking for and pressed herself against the stairwell access door. Pressing in with her left side, the door slowly opened up as she aimed her pistol in the open crack, seeing no immediate signs of danger. She opened the door wider and slid inside, making her way carefully up the stairwell and checking overhead and around corners as she moved up. Her determination and adrenaline had somehow willed her to get her breathing under control from her sustained sprint, though her heart still beat quickly from the tension of the unfolding events.

As she reached the second floor, she stood up and peered through the small, reinforced glass window. To her right, she saw the main corridor end in a solid wall. To her left, the corridor continued on. Crouching down under the small window, Sara pushed the door open slowly with her left shoulder, using the door as a makeshift shield as she peered around the side. She saw no signs of her young, dark-haired fugitive/assailant. She risked entering the corridor and performed a buttonhook maneuver around the door, almost throwing herself on the wall on the left side of the corridor. She stayed in her crouch/walk as she held her weapon at the ready and moved forward with caution - years of honed combat-ready senses on high alert.

Almost immediately, she heard the nearby sound of a child crying in pure fear, followed by a voice angrily yelling, "SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!" The yelling only made the child's crying barely subside to a loud, frightened whimper. She had faced numerous combat encounters in her time, but never once had she faced a situation where a child, and a very young child she surmised from the other children she saw moments before, was in danger. Sara's emotions threatened to get the better of her in the moment as she heard the sounds of emotional anguish from the innocent soul down the corridor. *No!* She screamed internally. *Keep cool, Sara! You can't afford to lose it now! For the kid's sake, at least!* Pushing down the rising fear and anger, Sara pressed on.

It was easy enough to follow the sounds of distress until she finally came upon a door on her left with an LCD display band above, displaying the words "SPEECH DEVELOPMENT." As

she pressed her back lightly on the wall to the left of the door, the crying of the young child had resumed, interspersed with the desperate pleas of "I WANT MY MOMMY!", threatening to tear down the emotional control Sara was struggling to maintain. *Hang in there, kid!* Her mind screamed, as if she thought the child would hear. *Manuel, is it? Help's almost there!*

"I SAID SHUT THE FUCK UP, YA FUCKIN' BRAT!!" her target screamed at the child, causing the child to cry even harder - tearing even harder at Sara's heart strings.

"Please!" Sara heard another male voice plead weakly and desperately. "Just don't hurt him, please! He's just a child!"

"THEN YOU SHUT HIM UP" her fugitive yelled to the man, "OR I'LL DO IT FOR YOU! DON'T THINK I WON'T!"

Sara could hear the raw anger and desperation in her target's words and tone, leaving no doubt that he might actually carry through on his threat. With this new assertion, Sara quietly ejected the magazine holding stunner ammunition from her sidearm and silently inserted live rounds into her pistol - the internal mechanism auto-chambering the first round. She took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, put her gun back in ready position and spoke firmly through the door.

"Thomas Bodicker!" Sara called out with a calm, authoritative tone. "Sara Denton, U.S. Marshals! Drop your weapon and release your hostages, now!"

"GET BACK!" came the immediate reply from Bodicker, followed by a loud gunshot - punching a hole through the alumiplast door. Sara remained focused and unfazed as she held her pistol at the ready. She could hear little Manuel's cries temporarily turn to hysterical screaming, followed by Bodicker declaring, "GET THE FUCK BACK, OR I'LL KILL THE KID!"

"I can't do that," she replied, calmly, "and you know it! You've got nowhere to go! No one needs to die! Just put your gun down and let your hostages go, and we can end this with no one else getting hurt!"

"I SAID GET BACK!" Bodicker frantically yelled. "I WILL KILL THIS KID! I SWEAR TO GOD!"

"I believe you!" Sara calmly called back. *Trust me, you bastard!* She internally cursed. *I believe you!* "I don't want anyone getting hurt! Not even you!" She let the words hang in the air, the sounds of the screaming and the silent response from Bodicker conveying the gravity of the situation she was dealing with. "I'm going to count to three, and then I'm coming in! I won't shoot as long as you don't do anything stupid." Her only response was the continued wailing of young Manuel from the other side of the door - nails on the chalkboard of her soul. Sara reached her left arm across the door and hovered her fingers over the door control panel as she spoke.

"One," she counted, slowly and evenly - fingers hovering steadily over the panel.

"Two.....three!"

Sara's fingers made contact with the panel, making the door slide left into the wall and granting her access. She took three quick, small steps in - sidearm held out and braced with both hands - and assessed the scene before here. The room was adorned much like one would expect to see in a preschool education setting - brightly colored, puzzle piece-shaped and interlocked foam pieces covering dull, dark, and flat carpet, stylized drawings of people and animals projected and animated in a playful and lighthearted fashion by way of the built-in optiscreens in the walls, and various preschool level words with phonetic pronunciations displayed at regular intervals.

On the opposite wall was Bodicker - a wild expression in his gaunt features and clean shaven face, holding the young boy named Manuel in his left arm up to his chest level while his right arm pointed an automatic pistol against the crying child's temple. To Sara's right was a middle aged looking man with salt and pepper hair and a barrel chest, dressed in a blue polo style shirt and tan khaki pants, holding a bleeding wound on his left shoulder from what she assumed was a gunshot wound. Seeing the amount of blood on the floor by the man, whom she assumed was the "Roger" the other woman had mentioned earlier, Sara could tell he had lost a good amount of blood, but had managed to get the bleeding under control from the pressure of the man's blood-soaked right hand. "Sweet Jesus," Sara caught herself whispering in utter disbelief and disgust at the scene.

"That's far enough!" Bodicker yelled at Sara, pressing the gun tighter against the child's temple, causing him to only cry more hysterically. "Drop your gun or I'll do him right here and now! I'm not playing here!"

Once again, feelings of apprehension mixed with anger began to rise from the pit of Sara's being at the fact that this man had escalated things as far as he had. A strong desire to put a bullet straight through her target's head came to the forefront of her thoughts as she began to calculate her aim to do just that. *You son of a bitch!* She angrily thought. *I should drop you right now for damn near killing all those people and those cops - and then holding a kid at gunpoint!* Her reason intervened as she knew that a child's life was at stake, making her keep her weapon trained on Bodicker, but not wanting to kill him. *Not unless you give me a reason,* she internally amended.

Sara looked at Manuel's tear and snot soaked face, his wailing a testament to the overwhelming and life-altering fear he was experiencing, as Bodicker threateningly clutched him.

Sara kept her expression even as she looked little Manuel in the eye and, as reassuringly as possible, said to him, "Manuel, look at me!" Though still crying profusely, Manuel locked eyes with Sara through his flood of tears as Sara added, "It's okay. I'm one of the good guys. I'll get you out of this. I promise."

"Back the fuck off," Bodicker screamed. "NOW!"

"Thomas," Sara replied, her hands even as she kept her sidearm trained on Bodicker, "let me lay things out for you. As it was when I saw you back at the ramen shop, you were only looking at maybe another three to five years for escaping federal custody. Now, you're looking at possession and use of illegally obtained military weaponry with that 'shocker' you used, three counts of destruction of government property with those three cruisers you blew up, and at least half a dozen counts of assault with intent with those cops and the civilians you injured! Assuming none of them die, you are most likely looking at doing hard time on Io for the next 30 years!"

Bodicker kept his gun held at Manuel's head as he breathed heavily, wild eyes locked on Sara's as she spoke the hard truth of his situation. "You hurt or kill that kid, and I guarantee you'll get what inmates like to refer to as the 'Big Bitch' - life without parole! Now, if you let him go, you can avoid that. I'll even put in a good word that you spared his life. They might go easier on you." *Please be stupid enough to believe that!* Sara internally hoped and prayed.

"Bullshit!" Bodicker yelled back as Manuel continued to whimper and cry in his arm, with "Roger" weakly moaning against the wall. "You'll kill me the second I let this brat go!"

"No I won't" sorry said plainly, maintaining eye contact without a single blink. "You've got my word on that." Sara let a beat pass before she added, with the utmost level of conviction, "You also have my word that if you kill him...I WILL kill you!"

Bodicker's expression shifted from one of wild desperation to one of frightened realization, the hard conviction of Sara's words sinking into his conscious mind. The hand that held his gun began to falter slightly, causing Sara to tense her hands around her weapon - ready to fire if need be. Panting from fear, Bodicker began to bring his gun away from Manuel slowly, arcing outward away from the traumatized child. Sara kept her eyes focused on Bodicker's movements as she prompted, "Good. Now, drop the gun and let the kid go. Now!"

Sara watched as the gun arm continued to arc, sweeping slowly in Sara's general direction. As she watched, she saw an almost imperceptible twitch in Bodicker's wrist - a twitch that she recognized from her service days.

Don't do it! Sara screamed in her thoughts.

Her recognition and instincts proved correct as Bodicker snapped his wrist and pointed the gun at Sara - his intention unmistakable. Sara reacted, despite the presence of a child, aimed and squeezed off a round from her weapon - striking Bodicker on target in his right shoulder. He yelled in agony as the gun dropped from his right hand. His grip on Manuel was lost as he instinctively dropped the child and brought his left arm to his shoulder and dropped to his knees. Manuel ran to the cover of the desk along the right wall, disappearing behind the solid front cover, his wailing having resumed from the report of Sara's gunshot.

Seeing that Manuel was out of immediate danger, Sara's anger of the endangerment of a child's life rose to the surface as she furiously closed the distance between her and Bodicker, landing a solid downward punch with her right fist as he fell unconscious to the floor. Yet, her anger compelled her to deliver more punishment, as she pressed on Bodicker's chest and landed a succession of angry blows on her target's face - raging fury taking over her reason. It was only when she finally registered the fact that Manuel had come out from behind the desk and was crying as he watched Sara deliver her form of punishment on the man that she stopped. Holding her right fist up, she turned to look at the small, terrified child whose face was now nothing more than a collection of tears, mucous, and emotions ranging from sadness to fear to unbridled hysteria.

Sara's expression went from rage to shock as she saw the child's face. Shock at what she was doing and what this child - a child who would carry the memory of this day for the rest of his life - was witnessing. The sight of his tear-soaked visage stayed her hand as she unclenched her fist, blinking rapidly as she unclenched her teeth and brought her heavy breathing under control. She loosened her fist and lowered her hand as she looked back to Bodicker - his face bloodied and his nose broken from the force of her blows. Closing her eyes, she took in a shuddering breath and let it out in a slow, deliberate exhale. *No, she thought as her sense of calm returned. That poor kid's seen too much already. Don't add fuel to the fire.*

Fighting back tears of her own, Sara squinted and activated her BadgeComp. "CP, this is Denton. Target has been neutralized. Paramedics to my GPS for target and for civilian presence. Prepping target for medical transport." She deactivated the comm function before the team lead - who she knew would not have good things to say - could respond. Sara produced the resistor cuffs from her belt and cuffed her fugitive by the wrists in front of his torso. Once done, she turned to the man named Roger leaning against the adjoining wall and moved to tend to him, asking, "Is there a First Aid kit handy?"

Roger nodded as he indicated one of the deep drawers in his desk. He stopped Sara in mid stride as he said, "I can get to it. Take care of Manuel."

Sara looked once more to the young boy, still whimpering as he wrung his hands with tears soaking his face. As she stepped towards him, he recoiled in fear. She held out her arms as she knelt down to his level, not advancing any further. Sara's voice took on a soft register as she tried to comfort the boy.

"It's okay, Manuel," Sara spoke softly to the frightened boy. "It's gonna be all right. Like I said, I'm one of the good guys." She reached to her belt and produced her BadgeComp again, bringing up her credentials with the Marshals emblem and holding it out for Manuel to see. "There," she said, keeping her voice calm and soft. "See? I'm a Marshal. I'm a good guy. That man can't hurt you now. I stopped him." She slowly replaced the BadgeComp on her belt and held her arms wide once more, saying to Manuel, "I promised I'd get you out of this. It's gonna be okay."

Manuel finally broke down and walked over to Sara slowly, eventually leaning his head against her shoulder. Sara slowly wrapped her arms around his back and the back of his head, holding him softly as he continued to whimper and cry. She stroked the back of his head and rubbed reassuring circles on his back as she whispered, "It's okay, Manuel. You're gonna be okay. I promise."

Will he, though? Sara questioned in her mind. *Will he really ever be okay again after today?* The doubt was just enough to make a crack in her emotional control as she felt tears form in her eyes. She blinked hard against the waterfalls that threatened to fall from her eyes as she focused on just continuing to reassure the small life she held in her arms.

"I promise," Sara whispered once more. "You'll be all right."

Sara walked out the front door of the building with Manuel in her arms, holding him in a reassuring hug as his small form had given into emotional exhaustion from the seemingly endless well of tears he had shed. Ahead of her, the man named Roger was wheeled out on a gurney - his wound having been tended to more properly by the medtechs flanking him. A medtech and a man of roughly the same age as Sara with blonde hair and brown eyes, wearing a tactical vest bearing an LCD Marshals badge on the left breast with name Klein beneath, approached her as she exited. The medtech gently took Manuel from Sara and carted him off to a nearby ambulance, while Klein began to forcibly take Sara's right arm in anger. She reacted with near lightning speed, despite her exhaustingly harrowing encounter, and slapped the hand

away. Pointing a finger in the man's face, her expression quickly turned to anger as she uttered, "Don't you ever presume to touch me like that again! Just don't!"

Klein, who was Sara's team lead, stepped back with a look of both mild fear and indignation as Sara lowered her hand - her stare feeling like a laser boring through and out the back of his head. He regained his composure as he indicated away from the assembled mass of police and medtechs and seethed, "Get over here!" He turned and started to walk quickly away, not waiting for Sara's reply. Resigned to the fact that she was about to be chewed out for what she felt was nonsense, Sara lazily followed.

As Sara approached Klein, he angrily stated, "You disobeyed a direct order, Denton! You were told to stand by and wait for SWAT to arrive! Do you realize you may have very well gotten that child killed with that little stunt you pulled?! DO YOU?!"

Sara's face went completely deadpan as she heard the words fly from Klein's mouth. *You sanctimonious prick*, she internally cursed. *How dare you?* "And you think SWAT could have done any better, given the circumstances?" Klein started to respond, but Sara cut him off as she continued, "One small window in the room, from which no sniper outside could get a clean shot on him if they wanted to. Only one point of entry through the front door, so that if anyone tried to move in, he'd probably have some warning. And, not to mention," she said as she leaned in towards him, "you didn't see him. You didn't see the look in his eyes - pure desperation. He was willing to do anything and everything, from the moment that foot pursuit began, to keep from going back to prison - even though he was only serving a year for hacking some corporate prick's computer. The 'shocker' he used proved that!" Sara stood up straighter as she took a step closer to Klein and added, "Believe me. I saw it! You didn't!"

"Really?" Klein replied with disbelief. "And I suppose you've seen this so-called 'look' before?"

"Yes," Sara replied, without a hint of hesitation or deception in her voice.

Klein's arrogant smirk faded quickly as he saw Sara's expression remain unblinkingly even. "Yes, well," Klein managed after clearing his throat, "I'll be sure to include your 'expert insight' when I make my report."

"You do that," Sara replied in an alarmingly neutral tone. "In the meantime, I'm going to go prepare my after action report." She condescendingly added, "With your permission, of course."

"Just go," Klein said, finally.

As Sara turned to leave, she turned back and asked, "By the way - what kind of casualties are we looking at from all that?"

Klein's expression became more somber as he stated, "No fatalities, thank God. We are looking at one gunshot wound - not counting Bodicker's, multiple shrapnel type injuries from random debris, and all of the Norfolk PD officers suffered burns ranging from first to third degree. One of them even had a fourth degree burn, all the way down to his right tibia."

Sara closed her eyes, lowered her head slightly and shook it. "Dammit," she quietly seethed through her teeth. Raising her head, she nodded and finally said, "Good that there was nobody killed."

"Yes," Klein simply replied - a hint of contempt in his eyes as he looked at Sara. Finally, he broke the awkward silence and said, "Well, you'd better get to your report. You're dismissed."

Dismissed, Sara laughingly repeated in her mind. How mighty civil of you.

Sara outwardly gave a mock salute as she walked away from Klein, not letting him see her contempt for his apparent arrogance. As she walked, she reflexively reached up behind her left ear and scratched at the itchy singe spot - immediately regretting doing so as she winced at the contact on the sensitive flesh. She walked the rest of the way back to the ramen shop where she attempted to apprehend Bodicker and retrieved her car - a modest, black, two-door hatchback. As she flopped into the driver's seat and shut the door, she stayed quiet for a moment, letting the silence try and bring some solace from the pandemonium she had just endured. All it did, however, was bring back the image of a frightened, four-year old Hispanic boy that she knew would never be the same after today. A boy who was close to losing his life, to be saved by a woman who almost took it upon herself to mete out death in the eyes of an innocent soul.

How could you be fucking stupid, Sara?! She screamingly chided in her mind. How?!

The thought, and the emotions associated with it, made Sara slam her palm against the steering wheel several times before she gathered her faculties once again - going through a quick breathing exercise before she slotted her BadgeComp in the receptacle on the dashboard, started the car and proceeded to drive back to her hotel. By way of a bar.

Sara sat at the bar of the small, lightly occupied and rustic establishment Sara had come upon on Colley Avenue, known simply as "The Bird," staring at what was supposed to be a single malt scotch - but tasted more like corn whiskey watered down with weak Perrier - as she nursed it quietly, barely having let a drop pass her lips in the last hour. Braving another sip, she set it back down with a little more force than she meant to, a slight grimace flashing across her features.

"Bad day, huh?" came the voice of the short-haired woman behind the bar.

Sara almost didn't catch that the woman was addressing her until she raised her head up at the voice to find the woman's hazel eyes (one of them lazy) staring back at her, a wry smirk on her face. Shaking her head clear from the emotional haze, she looked back down at her drink and absently replied, "You could say that."

The bartender was a woman looking to be in her early fifties with slightly graying, pixie-cut auburn hair, and wearing a black t-shirt that did very little to hide the size of her chest and faded blue jeans. Seeing the demeanor of her one and only patron at the bar, she stepped over and asked, "Wanna talk about it?"

Sara met her eyes again and just shook her head lightly as she replied, "Nah. You don't need me dumping my problems on you."

"Haven't you heard?" the woman half jokingly asked. "Don't you know that all bartenders are just unlicensed therapists that just happen to serve alcohol?"

Sara could not help but smile slightly and chuckle at the woman's attempt at levity. "So I've heard," Sara returned. "Still, I figure you get enough of that crap from most customers during the day. I'm not about to add insult to injury."

The woman nodded slowly and asked, "So what? You're just gonna sit there and stare at a drink that I know is more water than Scotch?"

The admission made Sara look at her with a somewhat puzzled and accusatory look as she questioningly replied, "So, you knew you were serving me watered-down crap?"

The woman held up her hands and said, "Hey, take it up with the owner. He only saves the good stuff for whenever his fake-ass friends roll into town. I don't like it anymore than you do, but hey - a girl's gotta eat, right?"

Sara opened her mouth to object, then immediately thought better of it as she could see the haggard look of working for WAY too many years in what was otherwise a pretty face. Finally, Sara just nodded as she swirled her drink some more and said, "Gotcha."

An awkward silence hung uncomfortably between the two of them before the auburn-haired woman asked, "So...wanna talk about it? And before you say no, think of it this way. How can you impose on me if I'm the one asking, right?"

Sara eyed the persistent woman for a moment before realizing that she was not going to get out of the situation easily. She sighed and said, "All right, I'll bite. By the way - what's your name? I'd like to know who I'm about to bore to death."

"Suzanna," the woman replied. "Pleasure."

Sara chortled and said, "You may not think so after a few minutes. Anyway, yeah. You could say that I had a rough day at work."

"Okay," Suzanna replied with a small nod. "I can maybe relate. What do you do for a living?"

I'm an Army Ranger executed for a crime I didn't commit, Sara thought, sardonically, and got brought back as a Deputy Marshal to bring down the same people I used to run with - wondering if I made the right choice to stay with the Marshals or not. Outwardly, Sara replied, "Let's just say I'm in law enforcement, and we tracked down a bad boy here in town who broke out of prison."

"Ahh," Suzanna replied with a slow nod. "Gotcha. Would that have anything to do with what I saw on the news about a shootout at Old Dominion?"

"That's the one," Sara returned. "Guy did not want to go back, and just made things worse for himself - and for everyone around him."

"I had heard there were injuries," Suzanna said as she leaned on one elbow. "No mention of deaths, though."

Nodding reassuringly, Sara said, "That's true, thank God." She trailed off as she started to add, "Still..."

Suzanna's brows furrowed at Sara's sudden reluctance. Leaning on both elbows, she gently prodded, "What happened?"

You shouldn't be saying all this, Sara warned in her mind. She looked in Suzanna's eyes - hazel orbs that conveyed a rugged resilience and a sense of confiding all at once - and told herself, What the hell? She asked, right?

Taking a steady breath, and a sip of her watered down drink, Sara looked at Suzanna and said, "I chased him down and cornered him in this children's center. There was one staff member and one little kid still in the building, even after he scared everyone else out with gunfire. When I got to where he was..." Sara paused for a moment to gather herself, then continued, "he had that little kid - a four year old Hispanic boy - at gunpoint."

"Shiiit," Suzanna whispered with light astonishment. "Did you manage to save the kid?"

"Yeah," Sara instantly returned. "The boy's okay. And, I managed to take the guy down and get him in custody. But, once the boy was clear of him," Sara gulped, holding up her thumb and index finger mere centimeters apart from each other as she said, "I came this close to beating the ever-loving shit out of him for everything he did - especially to that boy." Her hand fell on the bar top as she added, "The only thing that stopped me was that I saw that boy watching,

tears and snot all over his face. Then, I figured that the kid was already fucked up for life from everything that happened. I didn't need to make it worse." Sara pushed away what was left of what passed for a drink and rested her hands on the bar.

"I see," Suzanna said as she gathered up the glass and emptied out in the sink behind the bar. She looked back up at Sara and said, "But, you did save that boy. He'll be all right."

Sara scoffed and said, "Physically, at any rate. Mentally? Emotionally? That's a-whole-nother game. That boy is probably gonna need lifelong therapy because of everything." Sara rubbed her right temple before adding, "Because of me."

Suzanna stepped back over, placing a hand on top of Sara's, and told her, "You're only looking at the raisins, sweetie."

The odd choice of words caught Sara off guard as her expression turned to puzzlement. "Excuse me?" she responded, quizzically.

Suzanna patted Sara's hand before removing it, then asked her, "Tell me something. You like chocolate chips, right?"

"Yaaaaah," Sara replied carefully - her expression still puzzled. "What has that got to -"

Suzanna held up a hand and asked, "Do you like raisins?"

Sara shook her head with a look of puzzled disbelief and answered, "I've got nothing against them, but they're not my first choice, no. Exactly where are you going with this?"

"Just stay with me here," Suzanna replied, patting Sara's arm once again, giving it a squeeze that time. "Now, some people will find a single raisin in a bag of chocolate chips and only focus on that one little dried grape - totally ignoring all that wonderful chocolate - and think it's ruined. You, my dear girl, are only looking at how messed up that little boy might be - the one raisin in this case. While it is a legitimate concern, you're overlooking the fact that you saved his life, brought down the guy who was holding him at gunpoint, and probably saved God knows how many lives, or kept so many more people out of harm's way because of what you did - all that wonderful chocolate. See what I mean now?"

Sara's brows were still knitted together as she processed the confectionary metaphor relayed to her by the auburn-haired bartender. Slowly, her facial features relaxed as she smiled thinly and nodded. "I see what you're saying," Sara finally said after a moment.

"Good," Suzanna told Sara. "And besides, I've learned that kids can be surprisingly resilient sometimes. If he does need to be in therapy, then I'm sure his family will see to it, and he will eventually learn to deal with what happened. But, he may surprise you, and be tougher up here," she emphasized her point by tapping Sara's forehead gently, "than you think."

Sara absorbed the wizened words of the barkeep, knowing that what Suzanna said had merit - though she still had lingering doubts about what the future held for little Manuel.

"Maybe," Sara conceded. "I guess time will tell." After a beat, Sara looked at Suzanna and inquired, "By the way, are you always so touchy-feely with your customers?"

"Why?" Suzanna returned with playful defensiveness. "Does it bother you?"

Sara looked into Suzanna's eyes once more, taking note of the fact that this woman - though probably at least twenty years her senior - had a rugged attractiveness about her. *Has she been hitting on me all this time?* She pondered.

"No," Sara answered with honesty that surprised even herself. "Not necessarily."

"Then what's the problem?" Suzanna asked bluntly. Her expression changed as she realized her assumption might have been wrong as she began to ask, "Unless you're not into - "

"It's not that," Sara answered with a quick shake of her head. "I'm flattered, really. And, you seem like a pretty nice and cool woman. It's just...well, with my line of work, the fact that I could have to travel at a moment's notice..."

"Hey," Suzanna said with an even, reassuring voice, "it's okay. It's not like I'm wanting to register for good china or anything. But...everyone could use a friend. Right?"

Sara found herself smiling thinly, though warmly at Suzanna's suggestion and replied, "True. Friends are always a good thing."

"Good," Suzanna said, smiling back at Sara. "Glad you agree." Grabbing two shot glasses, she poured each of them a straight shot of Crown Royal from the bottle, sliding one in front of Sara.

"Won't your boss get pissed about this?" Sara said with joking concern, indicating the glass before her.

"Let him," Suzanna replied - no hint of hesitation or guilt in her voice. "He can kiss my pale, white ass if it bothers him." She raised her glass up to Sara and said, "To new friends."

Sara chuckled at Suzanna's bold dismissal of her employer's wrath and raised her glass. "To new friends," she echoed. Their glasses touched lightly, after which both women downed their shots in one gulp - slamming their glasses on the bar simultaneously, and sharing a quick laugh between them. Sara started to reach for her personal optiphone to pay the tab as she asked, "What's the damages?"

"On the house this time, sweetie," Suzanna said plainly. She stopped Sara just as she was about to protest and said, "No arguments. Besides, it's just this one time. Okay?"

Sure it is, Sara thought, sarcastically. "Fine," Sara said resignedly, taking her hand from her phone. "But I'm paying full price next time."

"Bet your sweet ass you are," Suzanna said, winking and smiling at Sara. "Before you go though, go ahead and take out your optiphone."

Sara did as Suzanna asked as she produced her personal optiphone from her inside jacket pocket. Suzanna tapped her own to Sara's as both devices dinged in the affirmative. Looking at the small holoscreen, Sara read, "New Contact Added," followed by Suzanna's number. "Didn't want to forget that, now did you?"

"Perish the thought," Sara said with a wide smile. She held out her hand as she rose from her stool, took Suzanna's rugged, yet warm hand in hers and said, "Thanks, Suzanna."

"For what?" Suzanna asked.

"Wanting to hear me out," Sara replied, shaking Suzanna's hand one last time before gently letting it slide from her own.

"Hey," Suzanna said with a shrug, "it's what I do. You be careful heading back home, all right?"

"Will do," Sara said with a quick nod. She raised her hand in a parting gesture, then stepped out into the late afternoon sun. *Probably shouldn't have had that drink,* Sara told herself, *but oh well. Nothing a breath strip won't cover up.*

Her BadgeComp signalled an incoming call at that moment. She reached back, brought the screen out of standby, and saw that it was Burrows calling from HQ. Sara stepped away from the door and around the corner to her left to attempt some privacy for the call before she finally accepted it. The built in holographic projector brought the three-dimensional face of Director Colton Burrows - her boss, patron and mentor - to life as his eyes locked on to hers.

"Sara," Burrows greeted her evenly. "I got Klein's report on your handling of the arrest and retrieval of Thomas Bodicker. He says you jeopardized the entire effort by trying to do it yourself at the ODU Child Center."

"No surprise there, sir," Sara said with a hint of exhaustion in her voice.

"I put a lot of faith in your abilities," Burrows continued, "when I convinced Klein to let you take point in the apprehension of Bodicker once the team had tracked him down - because I was convinced that your plan to get him to come in quietly had merit. Instead, I'm reading about civilians getting shot, police cruisers getting blown up, and a kid being taken hostage. What happened?"

"Short version?" Sara said, trying to fight the exhaustion that was setting in. "We dropped the ball and underestimated just how much Bodicker didn't want to go back. The profile the Feds had come up with on him was way off base. They thought that because he was just a low grade cyber-criminal that he wouldn't put up a fight - that he would get complacent and sloppy, and that we could take him easy. We all believed it, even me." Sara sighed and continued, "Well, the fact that he was armed, opened fire on civilians, and used a 'shocker' to blow up three police cruisers proved that he was A) more resourceful than the Feds gave him credit for initially, and B) a hell of a lot more paranoid and desperate."

"Wait," Burrows interrupted, a look of concern etched in his features. "He had a 'shocker'?"

"Yes, sir," Sara replied, plainly. Seeing the look on Burrows face, Sara asked, "I'm guessing Klein neglected to mention that in his report?"

"Seems so," Burrows returned with a hint of disdain. "Are you sure it was a 'shocker' he used?"

"I used one a time or two back in the service," Sara replied with immediate certainty. "Considering that I saw a device on his forearm, and considering the fact that all three cruisers blew up like they did, there's no doubt. I noted all of this in my report, sir. You should have gotten it by now."

"I'll look for it," Burrows said. "You know how transmission lag can be sometimes. As to the matter of your handling of the hostage situation, Klein says that you responded the way you did because of your assertion that Bodicker had a 'look of desperation in his eyes.' For the record, I'm more than pleased that the child and the man in the room were brought out alive, and that Bodicker was taken down alive as well, though injured. My question is why did you not use stunner ammo?"

"Because he was holding a four year old child in his arm sir," Sara replied matter-of-factly. "20,000 volts is a lot, even for an adult. But, at least with an adult, barring any major health issues, it would just render them immobile and unconscious. However, considering that he had a child, I felt that much current passing into him by way of Bodicker might be too much for a child's system to handle - possibly killing him. Therefore, I made a judgement call to use live ammo and trusted in my marksmanship abilities to bring him down if need be. I would have preferred if he had surrendered his weapon, but he pointed it at me and..."

"Say no more," Burrows replied, cutting Sara off. "I've heard all I need to know. Sounds like you acted accordingly as the situation dictated. I'll still review your report of the situation

once I receive it, but I can already say that your actions would appear justified under the circumstances."

"Thank you, sir," Sara returned, gratefully. She could feel her body's tension release with Burrow's words.

"Pack it up and head home," Burrows ordered Sara. "As much as I would like to tell you to take a day when you get back, I've got a new assignment for you when you get back. Meet me in the main conference room at 0900 tomorrow morning. I'll brief you on the details then."

Great, Sara internally grumbled. *No rest for the weary. Story of my life.* "You got it, sir," Sara answered with practiced, though tired professionalism. "0900."

Burrows simply nodded, then added, "Off the record, you did a hell of a job - all things considered."

Sara forced a thin smile as she said, "Appreciate that, sir. See you tomorrow." She terminated the call, letting herself slump against the brick wall behind her.

A second or so later, Sara watched as a portly man with thinning brown hair under a trucker's cap, a red flannel shirt and dirty white t-shirt almost bumped into her as he stormed past her and ducked into the nearby alley to her left with a black garbage bag. She could hear him drop the bag into a dumpster, then watched as he emerged a moment later, almost running into her again as he passed by her in the same rush as before. Out of some sense of morbid curiosity, she followed a step or two behind the man and watched as he got into his red utility truck - a vehicle that had certainly seen better days from the scratches and dents in the chassis, as well as the numerous small swaths of paint that had flecked away from neglect. On the rear fender of the car near the bar-coded license plate was an actual bumper sticker - an uncommon sight in that day and age, though not unheard of. Sara's face wrinkled when she read the rather grim message that was printed on it: "KILL 'EM ALL! LET GOD SORT 'EM OUT!"

Well, Sara's mind sarcastically said, aren't you just a ray of sunshine, triple-dipped in psycho!

Sara's ears picked up on a sound from the alley the man was just in. She could not identify what it was, but it was enough for her to walk back to the alley to find its point of origin. As she got closer, the sound repeated several times - a short, almost faint and high-pitched sound that came in steady spurts, guiding her towards its source. It led her to the dumpster in the alley. Looking inside, she saw a number of garbage bags filled to capacity, as well as a myriad of discarded food and product waste. She caught sight of the small garbage bag the flannel man had discarded as well - and saw it move. The sound that had guided Sara there

resounded again - sharp and short, and sounding of distress. Reaching into the dumpster, Sara retrieved the small bag as its contents wriggled lightly. The sound went off again, with Sara recognizing it then as the distressed mewling of a small cat! Carefully, Sara opened the bag and revealed the contents, immediately shocked and saddened at what she saw. Inside, a small, calico kitten had been stuffed in and discarded. Its mostly white fur, slightly dirty from apparent neglect, was splotched with patches of black and brown, with a sort of furry black and brown hood shrouding its vibrant blue eyes - much like the woman's who had just rescued it. The small feline continued to meow in its shrill manner, its small yet bold voice sending chills straight to Sara's soul.

"Oh my God!" Sara gasped, holding the small life literally in the palm of her hands. Tears almost immediately formed in her eyes at the sight of the tiny, innocent feline - discarded like unwanted refuse by a man who obviously had no soul. Her sadness turned to anger as she gently cupped the kitten in her hand and held it close, storming with purpose to the truck carrying the monster who committed the horrible act. She arrived at the street where the truck was parked, screaming out, "Hey! Hey! HEY!" Her voice went unanswered as she watched the man and his truck pull out into the street with a lurch and drove away with barely any regard for the other drivers on the street. She had been so upset that she did not even think to scan his plate's bar code with her BadgeComp before he sped off. Yet, she would never forget the man's face, and most assuredly not his hateful bumper sticker. As she stood there fuming, the sound of her new feline charge brought her back to the moment. She looked once more into the tiny creature's eyes as she held it close to her chest, shushing the poor innocent animal soothingly as its meowing lessened. Sara looked in the direction that the truck had departed, as if trying to will the vehicle and its heartless occupant back to face her. She began walking towards her car, looking up to the sky as she reached to open the passenger door. "God," she said skyward, "if there is any true justice in this world?" She opened the door, gently set her new feline friend in the passenger seat, closed the door, then added as she looked back up, "Please. PLEASE, let me run into that asshole some day."