



**JOHN SANDFORD**

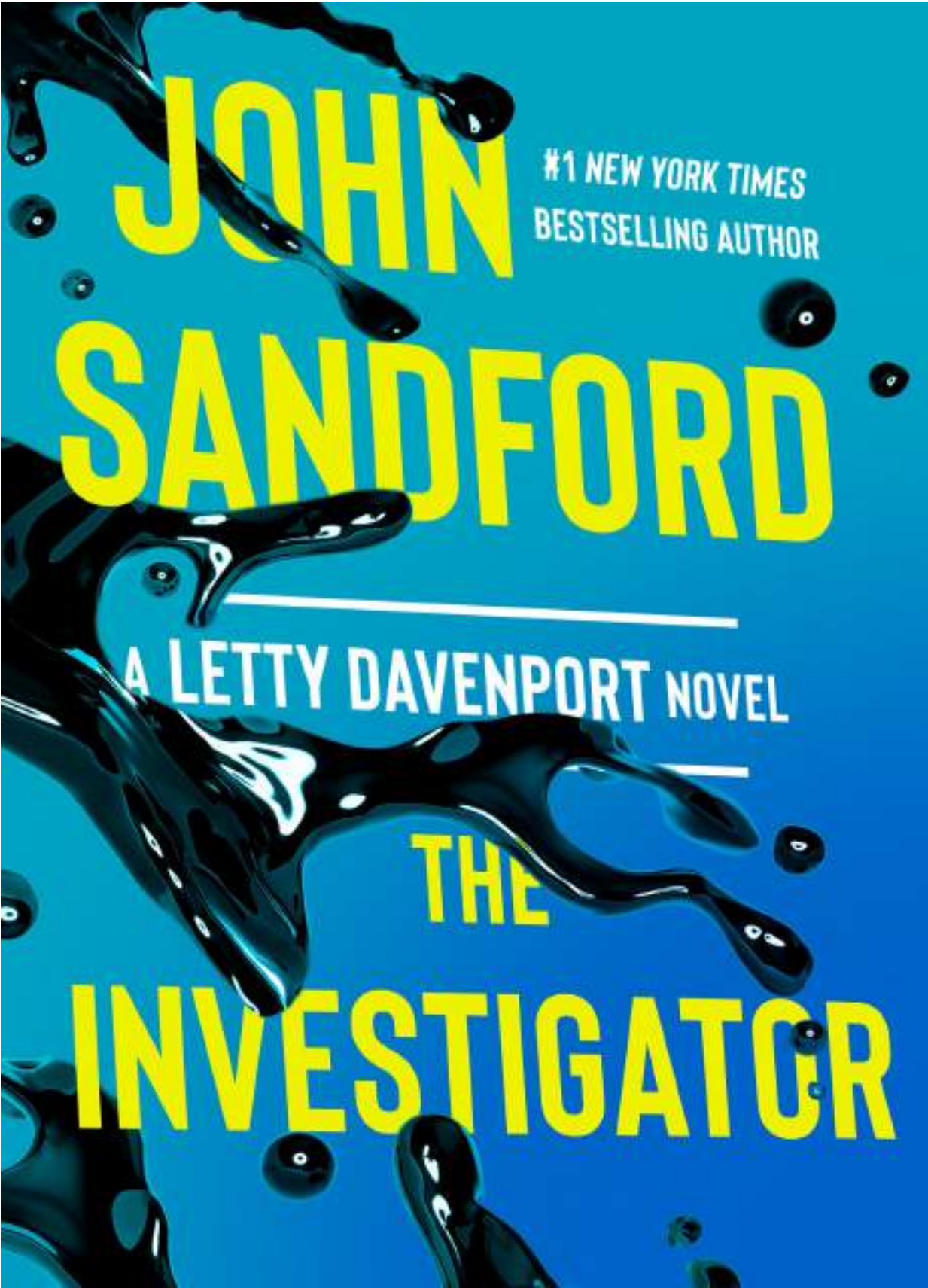
#1 NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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A LETTY DAVENPORT NOVEL

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**THE  
INVESTIGATOR**



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#1 NEW YORK TIMES  
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**SANDFORD**

A LETTY DAVENPORT NOVEL

**THE**

**INVESTIGATOR**

**ALSO BY JOHN SANDFORD**

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*Phantom Prey*

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**JOHN  
SANDFORD**

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**THE**

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**INVESTIGATOR**

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

**PUTNAM**

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*Publishers Since 1838*

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sandford, John, 1944 February 23– author.

Title: The investigator / John Sandford.

Description: New York : G. P. Putnam's Sons, [2022] | Series: A Letty Davenport novel | Identifiers: LCCN 2021052176 (print) | LCCN 2021052177 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593328682 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593328699 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3569.A516 I56 2022 (print) | LCC PS3569.A516 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20211104

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021052176>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021052177>

Cover design: Tal Goretsky

Cover image: Wacomka / Shutterstock

Book design by Tiffany Estreicher, adapted for ebook by Maggie Hunt

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# CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Also by John Sandford](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)



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# ONE

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**B**ackside of an old brick-and-stucco building on the edge of downtown Tallahassee, Florida, ten o'clock on a muggy evening in early September, a couple weeks before the autumn equinox. The cleaning crew had left, rattling their equipment carts and trash bins across the blacktop to their vans. A few people remained in the building; two cars sat in the parking lot, and there were lighted offices on the second and third floors.

A young woman with crystalline blue eyes and a short brown ponytail sat behind a ragged boxwood hedge, her back against the building's concrete foundation, a rucksack between her knees. Dressed in black jeans, a black long-sleeved blouse, with a reversible red-black jacket, black side out, she was no more than an undifferentiated dark lump behind the hedge. She could turn the jacket to the red side, if needed, so she wouldn't appear so obviously camouflaged for the night. A noisome mosquito buzzed her face, looking for an opening; to her left, a vent pooped vaguely fecal odors out of the building.

Piece by piece, one distraction at a time, the young woman cleared her mind; no more odors, no more bugs. She'd hunted for food as a child and she'd learned that a predator created a vibration that other animals could sense. She'd been in every sense a predator, but if she'd put her back against a tree and cleared her mind, the vibration would fade, she'd become part of the landscape, and the prey animals would go back to whatever they were doing before she arrived. She'd had rabbits hop within six feet of her, unalarmed before they died.

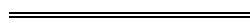
Now, with an empty mind, she'd gone from being a lump to invisible.

The woman was wearing one thin leather glove, and the fingers of that hand were wrapped in hundred-pound test monofilament fishing line. The other end of the transparent line was tied to the loop handle of the building's back door. She waited patiently, unmoving, in the dappled moonlight that filtered through the Chickasaw plum trees on the edge of the parking lot.

At ten minutes after ten, the lights went out in the third-floor office and the young woman brought her mind back to the world, shouldered her pack, and took a switchblade from her hip pocket. Two minutes after that, a middle-aged woman carrying a heavy lawyer's briefcase pushed through the back door, looked both ways, then scurried out to a compact BMW. The building's door, on an automatic door-closer hinge, swung shut behind her. As it was about to lock, the young woman put pressure on the fishing line and held it. The door appeared to be closed, but hadn't latched.

When the departing BMW turned the corner, the young woman eased out from behind the hedge, listening, watching, keeping a steady pressure on the fishing line. She walked to the door, pulled it open, blocked it for a second with a foot, and used the blade to cut the fishing line off the door handle.

She slipped inside, balling the fishing line in her gloved hand, pressed the back of the knife blade against her leg to close it, dropped it into her pocket. Adrenaline beginning to kick in, heart rate picking up.



THE TARGET OFFICE had been vacant since six o'clock. The young woman turned left, to the fire stairs, and ran rapidly upward on silent, soft-cushioned athletic soles. At the fifth and top floor, she listened for a moment behind the fire door, then opened the door and checked the hallway. The only light came from street-side windows. She hurried down the hall to 504, removed her jacket, and took the battery-powered lock rake from her pack.

She couldn't use the rake on the outer door, because that door had a good security lock, and she would have been standing beneath a light where she couldn't be sure she was unobserved.

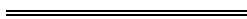
This lock was not very good—there was nothing obviously valuable inside except some well-used office equipment. She wrapped the rake in her jacket and pulled the trigger. The pick made a chattering noise, muffled by the jacket. The young woman kept pressure on the rake, felt the lock begin to give, and then turn. She pushed the door open and stepped inside, closed the door, and sat on the floor, listening.

She heard nothing but the creaks and cracks of an aging building, and the low hum of the air-conditioning. Satisfied that she was alone and hadn't raised an alarm, she opened the pack, took out a headlamp, and pulled the elastic bands over her head, centering the light on her forehead. She'd already set it on the lowest power, but she didn't need it yet. She stood and looked around, threw the fishing line in an empty wastebasket.

There was enough light from the office equipment's power LEDs that she could make out a dozen metal desks with standard office chairs, a computer with each desk. Lots of paper on the desks, cardboard boxes stacked in one corner, three corkboards marching down the interior walls, hung with notices, posters, the odd cartoon. She walked down to the left end of the room, to a private office with a closed door. The door was locked, but the rake opened it and she went inside.

Another messy space, more stacks of paper. A big faux-walnut desk, a long library-style table, five metal filing cabinets, a metal side table against the desk, holding a Dell computer and a keyboard. The windows were covered with Venetian blinds, partly open. She closed them, then walked across the room, a thin nylon carpet underfoot, sat in the office chair behind the desk, turned on the headlamp, and pulled out the desk's unused typing tray. There, written on a piece of notepaper taped to the tray, she found the password for the computer, as her informant had promised.

She brought the computer up and began opening files.



THE YOUNG WOMAN left the building at six-thirty in the morning, now wearing her jacket red side out, the dawn light filtering through the plum trees as she walked beneath them. Her rental car was a half-block away. She put the backpack in the trunk and transferred the lock rake, switchblade, and a short steel crowbar, which she hadn't needed, to a FedEx box already labeled and paid for. The pack still held the file folder of printer paper that she'd taken out of the office. She drove carefully to a FedEx curbside station and dropped in the box of burglary tools. It would arrive back at her Arlington, Virginia, apartment in three days, when she would be there to accept it.

That done, she drove back to the DoubleTree hotel where she was staying, put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, changed into yoga pants and a tank top, put on a sleeping mask, and crawled into bed.

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THAT AFTERNOON, she parked a block from Annette Hart's house, and waited. At five-thirty, Roscoe Anthem pulled up to the curb. He honked once and Hart trotted out of the house, smiling, piled into the car, gave Anthem a peck on the cheek, and they rolled out to I-10, then three and a half hours west to Mobile, Alabama.

Because while you *can* sin in Tallahassee, in many different ways, it was much more fun where the casinos were bigger and your friends were less likely to see you rollin' them bones.

The blue-eyed young woman stayed with them all the way, well back, always behind other cars, shifting lanes from time to time. And she was with them in the casino, at the craps tables, at the blackjack tables, at the slots, always behind a screen of other patrons, talking on her cell phone and pushing the camera button.

Only to be interrupted by a nerdy young card player who eased up behind her to touch her hip and whisper, "You know what? You *really* overclock my processor."

Made her laugh, but she blew him off anyway.

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MONDAY MORNING, the Washington, D.C., office of Senator Christopher Colles (R-Florida), door closed. Colles and his much-hated executive assistant, Claudia Welp, perched on visitor's chairs, looking across a coffee table at the young woman. Welp pitched her voice down. "Wait: you *broke into* the office?"

"It wasn't exactly a break-in, since it's *Senator Colles's* office and you told me to go there and retrieve some of *his* information," the young woman said.

"I didn't mean for you to break in, for God's sakes," Welp said. "I sent you down there to talk to that secretary."

"But to get to the heart of the matter, did you find anything?" Colles asked.

"Yes. The information you got from Messalina Brown is correct," the young woman said. "Anthem and Hart have stolen about three hundred and forty thousand dollars in campaign funds. I believe they've blown most of it in a casino in Mobile, Alabama. In their defense, they're having a *really* good time."

Colles: "What!"

Welp: "Even so, I'm not sure that justifies breaking into . . ."

"Shut up, Welp," Colles said. "How'd they do it?"

"I wrote a full report yesterday, after I got back to D.C. I've attached the relevant documents and a couple of photographs of the happy couple at Harrah's Gulf Coast casino on Friday night. It's here." She took a file out of her backpack and passed it to Colles.

Welp: "Even if it proves to be true, you've far transgressed . . ."

"Doesn't matter what you believe," Letty Davenport interrupted. "I quit. You guys bore the crap outta me."

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## TWO

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Letty worked in what its denizens called the bullpen, an open room of low-ranking senatorial assistants and researchers, each with his or her own desk and filing cabinet, surrounded by a hip-high fabric cubicle wall. Most of the staffers were either recent Ivy League graduates or smart state school grads, getting close to power.

As a graduate of a heavyweight West Coast university, with a master's degree in something useful, combined with her cool reserve and the way she dressed, Letty was different. She was smart, hard-nosed and hard-bodied, lean, muscled like a dancer, and occasionally displayed a sharp, dry wit.

The young women in the bullpen noticed that her clothes carried fashionable labels, while tending toward the dark and functional, if not quite military. Her jewelry was sparse but notable, and always gold. One of the Ivy Leaguers excessively admired a chain bracelet set with a single, uncut green stone, and asked if she could try it on.

Letty was amenable. After the other woman had tried and returned the bracelet, and Letty had gone, a friend asked the Ivy Leaguer, "Well, what did you find out?"

"Harry Winston."

"Really."

"Honest to God," the Ivy Leaguer said. "That stone is a raw fucking uncut emerald, like Belperron used. We could mug her, sell the bracelet, and buy a Benz. Maybe two Benzes."

"*You* could mug her. I've seen her working out, so I'll pass on that."

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WHEN LETTY FINISHED briefing Colles and Welp on the Tallahassee situation, she left them studying the purloined spreadsheets, dropped her letter of resignation on Welp's desk—two weeks' notice—and walked down to the bullpen. An hour later, Welp called and said, "Get up here. Senator Colles wants to speak with you."

When she walked back into the senator's reception area, Colles, Welp, and a legislative assistant named Leslie Born were huddled in a nook under a portrait of Colles shaking hands with the elder George Bush. They were arguing about something in low but angry tones; maybe the missing money. Colles saw Letty and snapped, "Get in my office. I'll be there in a minute."

Letty went into Colles's private office and sprawled sideways in one of the comfortable leather club chairs, her legs draped over a well-padded arm. And why not? What was he going to do, fire her?

Colles came in five minutes later, slammed his door. "I apologize for snapping at you out there," he said.

"You should. You were pretty goddamn impolite," Letty said, dropping her feet to the floor.

"You're right, I was. Because you're not the problem. Let me tell you, sweet pea: don't ever get yourself elected to the Senate," Colles said, as he settled behind his desk. He was a tall man, big whitened teeth, ruddy face, carefully groomed gray hair. "There are more numb-nuts around here than in the Florida state legislature, which, believe me, was a whole passel of numb-nuts."

"What do you want?" Letty asked.

Colles smiled at the abruptness. "We bore you. Okay. We bore *me*, most of the time. I used to be this really, really rich real estate developer down in Palm Beach County. Pretty young women would *insist* that I pat them on the ass and I was happy to do it. If I patted anyone on the ass in this place, my face would be on CNN at eight, nine, and ten o'clock, looking like a troll who lives under a bridge and eats children."

“You could probably get away with patting Welp on the ass,” Letty suggested.

Colles faked a shudder. “Anyway, I got your letter of resignation. I put it in the shredder.”

“I still quit,” Letty said, sitting forward. “I don’t hold it against you, Senator Colles. You’re not a bad guy, for a Republican. I’m in the wrong spot. I realized that a month ago and decided to give it another month before I resigned. The month is up.”

“What? Tallahassee scared you?”

“Tallahassee was the best assignment I’ve had since I’ve been here,” she said. “If it was all Tallahassees, I might have decided to stick around.”

“Now we’re getting someplace,” Colles said. He did a 360-degree twirl in his office chair, and when he came back around, he said, “The Tallahassee thing was . . . impressive. If you’d been caught by the Tallahassee cops, I might have had to fire you. But you weren’t. I can use somebody with your talents.”

“Doing what? Burglaries?”

“As chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I’ve made it my business to oversee DHS operations. There are a couple dozen of what I think of as mission-critical problems that they have to deal with, at any given time. I’m very often unhappy with the results.”

“I . . .”

“Shut up for a minute, I’m talking,” Colles said. “DHS investigators deal with all kinds of problems, security problems, some of them serious. Like, why can’t we protect our nuclear power plants from intruders? We had a guy down in Florida walk into . . . never mind. Anyway, these guys, these investigators, basically do paperwork and interviews. Too often, paperwork and interviews don’t get the job done. When there’s a problem, the local bureaucrats cover up and lie. They’re very good at that. That might even be their primary skill set.”

“Okay.”



“Now,” Colles said. “Have you been here long enough to know what a department’s inspector general does?”

“More or less.”

“An inspector general basically inquires into a department’s failures,” Colles said. He steepled his fingers and began to sound like a particularly boring econ lecturer. “They may look into complaints from whistle-blowers or, if it gets in the news, they can look at obvious fuckups. Like why Puerto Rico never got its Hurricane Maria aid from FEMA, outside some rolls of paper towels. They can also examine situations where a necessary investigation simply doesn’t produce . . . the needed results. We know there’s a problem, but the DHS investigators come up dry. Or they hang the wrong people, the bureaucratically approved scapegoats.”

“That’s unhelpful,” Letty said. She restlessly twisted a gold ring. She was bored, she wanted to move.

“It is. Of course, it’s fairly routine in governmental matters. People get hurt all the time, I can’t help that,” Colles said. “My concern is, the big problems don’t get solved. I’ve personally spoken with several of these DHS investigators, about their investigations. Actually, I didn’t just speak to them, I interrogated them in classified subcommittee meetings. They are serious, concerned people for the most part.

“What they aren’t, too often, is real good investigators,” Colles continued. “Or, let me say, researchers. They go somewhere with a list of questions, and ask the questions, and record the answers, but they don’t poke around. They don’t sneak. They don’t break into offices. What would really help over there is a smart researcher, somebody who knew about money and finance and crowbars and lockpicks and so on. You do. You have a master’s degree in economics and a bunch of courses in finance, and graduated with distinction from one of the best universities in the country. Which is why I hired you.”

“And because my dad asked you for a favor,” Letty said. She was paying attention now: she could smell an offer on the way.

“He didn’t press me on it. He really didn’t. Lucas said, ‘I want to draw your attention to an opportunity.’ I looked into it, and here you are,” Colles

said. "If you were only what your college transcript recorded, I'd probably let you go now. But you're more than that, aren't you?"

Letty shrugged. "Spit it out. The offer, whatever it is."

Colles laughed this time. "I can get you a little tiny office, a closet, really, downstairs. It has a safe, but no window. I think the last guy was put in there because of body-odor issues. I can also get you a government ID from the Homeland Security IG's office. You wouldn't be working for the IG, though. You'd still be working for me, as a liaison with Homeland. You'd go places with an investigator, but we'd call you a 'researcher.' You may sometimes need to do the kind of research you did in Tallahassee."

"That could be dangerous," Letty said. "I could get hurt. Tallahassee was simple. Even then, if I'd run into the wrong cop . . ."

"There could be some . . . dangers, I guess. The IG's investigators, the special agents, can carry sidearms for personal protection. I made some inquiries, the blunt-force definition of 'inquiries,' and the IG's office has agreed that they could issue you a carry permit. Of course, you'd have to demonstrate proficiency before you'd get the permit. I know about your background, from talking to your father, so I'm sure you'd be okay. I know you've thought about the Army, or the CIA, but I can promise you, you'd be as bored in either place as you are in this office. Those are the most ossified bureaucracies in the world. The job I'm talking about, I can almost guarantee won't bore you."

"I . . ." Did he say a *carry permit*?

"I'll stick you out in the wind," Colles added.

"I've already resigned," Letty said.

"And I put the letter through the shredder," Colles said. "You want to quit, you'll have to send me another one. You shouldn't do that. Try this new arrangement. I think it could work out for both of us."

She nibbled on her lower lip, then said, "I'll give it another month, Senator Colles. We can talk again, then."

"Listen, call me Chris," Colles said. "When we're in private, anyway. You're a pretty woman. Makes me feel almost human again, talking to you."

“If I get my gun and you pat me on the ass, I’ll shoot you,” Letty said.  
“Fair enough,” Colles said.

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WITH THE CHANGE in her assignment, neither Colles nor Welp had anything more for her to do that day, except give her the key to the basement closet she’d use as an office. She went down to check it out, and while it *was* bigger than an ordinary closet, it wasn’t bigger than, say, a luxury California Closet. The concrete walls were painted a vague pearl-like color, in paint that had begun to flake. The room contained a metal government desk that might have been left over from World War II, a two-drawer locking file cabinet with keys in the top drawer, a broken-down three-wheel chair that squeaked when she pushed it, and a safe buried in a concrete wall. The safe stood open, with nothing in it but a sheet of paper that contained the combination for the old-fashioned mechanical dial. The room did smell faintly of body odor, so Colles may have been correct about the previous occupant.

A busy Sunday would clean it up, she decided. A bucket full of water, a mop, sponges, and some all-surface cleaner. She’d bring in a desk lamp and a cart for her computer, perhaps an imitation oriental carpet for the concrete floor, a powerful LED light for the overhead fixture. She could get a new chair from Office Depot. She would need a coat tree, or a way to sink coat hooks into the concrete wall.

It would do, for now.

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WHEN SHE FINISHED her survey of her new office, she rode the Metro under the Potomac to Arlington. The day had started out gloomy and cool, and by the time she got home, a light mist had moved in, just enough to freshen her face as she walked to her apartment complex.

She changed into a sports bra and briefs, pulled on a tissue-weight rain suit with a hood, and went for a four-mile run on Four Mile Run Trail.

Halfway along, she diverted into a wooded park, walked to a silent, isolated depression in the trees. She often visited the place on her daily runs, and sat down on a flagstone.

There was noise, of course; there was always noise around the capital—trucks, cars, trains, planes, endless chatter from people going about their politics. The woods muffled the sounds and blended them, homogenized them, and when she closed her eyes, the odors were natural, rural, earthy, and wet. In five minutes, her workday had slipped away, the personalities, the paperwork, the social tensions. In another five, she was a child again, with only one imperative: stay alive.

Another five, even that was gone. She sat for twenty minutes, unmoving, until a drip of water, falling off a leaf, tagged her nose and brought her back to the world. She sighed and stood up, brushed off the seat of her pants, and made her way back through the trees. She'd never decided *what she was* when she came out of the trees and back to life. Not exactly relaxed, not exactly focused, not exactly clear-minded, or emptied, or any of the other yoga catchwords.

Where she had gone, there was nothing at all.

She was a piece of the rock, a piece of a tree, a ripple in the creek.

There, but not Letty.



TWO DAYS LATER:

The DHS agent was a sunburned overmuscled hulk who dressed in khaki-colored canvas shirts and cargo pants and boots, even in the warm Virginia summer, topped with a camo baseball hat with a black-and-white American flag on the front panel. He had close-cut dark hair, green eyes, a two-day stubble, a thick neck, and rough sunburned hands. He yanked open the Range Rover's door and climbed in, as Letty got in the passenger side.

He looked over at her, pre-exasperated, as he put the truck in gear. "I don't know what I did to deserve this, but I'll tell you what, sweetheart," he