Silent Code by Jessie Clark

Chapter 1 – First Strike

The shrill wail of alarms tears through the air, splitting my thoughts like shrapnel. I'm already running. Past the clatter of rushed footsteps, past panicked interns clutching coffee and confusion, past the echo of shouted protocols no one is listening to. The East Wing's emergency lights strobe red-white-red across pale walls. My boots pound against marble, each step echoing like a countdown. It's the same rhythm I've felt storming compounds, clearing rooms—only this time, the battlefield is home turf, and the enemy is faceless.

Every screen I pass is dead or glitching—pixelated with static, words replaced by jagged slashes of code. The Secret Service comms channel in my earpiece is a mess of overlapping commands and cut-off warnings.

"System override initiated—standby for lockdown—executive order—"

No one knows what the hell is going on.

I reach the intersection of corridors near the Situation Room, my breath tight, fists clenched. I take cover behind a doorway and scan, eyes trained for threats—movement, anomalies, anyone acting out of step. It's instinct. Years of muscle memory forged in battle zones, not bureaucratic hallways. But right now, this place feels more dangerous than a war zone.

A door up ahead bangs open. Two aides burst out, faces pale, voices low but frantic.

"They've already locked Treasury."

"Stage Two—if they don't back down, we execute."

I freeze. My hand inches toward the concealed pistol under my blazer. But I don't draw. Not yet.

One of them glances over their shoulder. I duck back. My heart hammers against my ribs—not out of fear, but from the surge of adrenaline that always comes when something isn't right. Those words—Stage Two—aren't part of any drill I've ever trained for.

They vanish around the corner, and I move. Fast. Controlled. I don't trust anyone right now, not even my own unit. The pattern of the breach—the system collapses, the timing, the vague whispers—I've seen something like this before. Not here. Overseas.

My fingers itch to find a terminal. Any system still partially live. If I can just get a glimpse of what's behind the breach...

But even as I move, the thought lodges like a splinter in the back of my mind—what if this breach didn't come from the outside? What if the danger isn't some foreign actor but someone I've stood beside in the security line, trained with, trusted? The idea churns in my gut like poison. Betrayal from within is worse than any external threat because it means you never saw it coming.

I round a corner and spot a maintenance access station hidden in an alcove. It's half-shielded by a janitor's cart. The screen flickers with corrupted files, but the command line interface pulses faintly. Still breathing. Good.

I jack in using my admin override key.

Let's see what they're hiding.

The terminal resists me at first—keystrokes lag, the OS struggling against corrupted code like a swimmer drowning in molasses. But I push through, fingers dancing in rhythm with old instincts. The override kicks in. I'm in.

A cascade of files flashes past the screen, most of them gibberish. Strings of random characters. System failures. But then—there it is. An encrypted message, sitting like a tumor in the center of the mainframe.

I isolate the file. It's labeled with a single word: Heirloom.

My gut clenches.

The message is locked behind military-grade encryption, but the metadata is what gets my attention. Timestamped less than ten minutes ago. Originated from inside the building. Destination? Unknown. That's not standard. That's someone going out of their way to vanish.

I crack the first layer and pause. The content is simple. Chilling.

"Comply or be erased. Step down. Countdown initiated."

To anyone else, it might read like political posturing. But I know better. 'Erased' doesn't mean removal—it means elimination. In the field, it was the last word whispered before a drone strike. Before a name was wiped from every system and their body from every map. It's not just a threat. It's a kill order with a time stamp.

No name. No demands beyond resignation. Just a threat. But the subtext screams escalation. Whoever sent this isn't just trying to shake the tree. They want to burn it to the roots.

And they're inside.

I pull back, scan the surrounding logs. The sender's IP is masked through a chain of proxies, but not perfectly. One node stands out—an internal relay usually reserved for executive comms.

No one outside should even know it exists.

"Jesus," I whisper.