CODE BREAKER

By Carl J. England

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Chapter One

Easter Egg

Wednesday morning.

Holly’s eyes snapped open. She was a light sleeper, easily awakened by the slightest sound. Her husband, Mark, was breathing noisily, but at least he was not snoring. She was used to his breathing; that wasn’t what had aroused her. She could hear the faint tick-tick-tick of the cuckoo clock in the living room, but apart from the clock and Mark’s breath, there were no other sounds. She closed her eyes against the darkness, hoping to resume her slumber, when she heard the slam of a car door, and then another. Holly fumbled for her phone on the nightstand and swept her finger across the screen, causing the device to illuminate, displaying the time—1:22 AM.

Holly shook her husband. “There’s somebody in our driveway,” she whispered loudly.

Mark replied, “Gronkp,” and rolled over onto his side.

She shook him even harder. “Wake up!”

“I’m not snoring.”

Another shake. “There’s somebody outside!”

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Mark was immediately alert. He was at the window pulling the blinds aside when there was a knock on the front door. He could see the car in the drive, but this window didn’t allow him to see the person or persons on his porch. There was no clock in the bedroom—the light would keep Holly awake.

“What time is it?” he yawned.

“It’s one-thirty. Can you see who it is?”

Mark groped in the dark until he located the sweatpants he had removed before going to bed. He had the pants on and was still trying to get a shirt over his head when the knock was repeated, this time louder. “Hold on! I’m coming!” he shouted toward the living room.

As Mark passed their gas fireplace he grabbed a decorative fire poker. He knew that it wasn’t much of a weapon, but the weight of the heavy brass handle shored up his courage. He stopped with his hand on the deadbolt and his eye glued to the peephole. “Who is it?” he shouted.

From the other side of the door a man answered, “Mr. Hill, this is Agent Waters, and with me is Agent Patterson—AFOSI. We need to talk to you.” The man held identification in front of the peephole. “Can we come in?”

As Mark turned the latch he felt a knot form in his stomach. It had been seven years since he had left the air force, but the old paranoia came rushing back. His mind raced as it had so many times during his three years in the military. Any time a superior had wanted to talk to him, he had done a mental search for any action that might be considered a breach of security. This time was no different from so many others; he could think of nothing that could have attracted these OSI agents. But there they were standing on the other side of his front door.

There *was* that other thing that had happened while he was in the air force. He had been assured that his military past would remain in the past, but it still gave him nightmares. Holly suffered even more than he did.

Mark opened the door and the two agents stepped inside. “You want to tell me what this is all about?” Mark asked.

Agent Waters answered. “Sorry, but we can’t answer that. We need you to come with us.”

Mark crossed his arms. “I haven’t done anything. I’m not going anywhere. Do you have a warrant?” He still could not think of a reason why these agents wanted to talk to him. His bank account had not shown any unusual activity. He had not been in contact with any foreign nationals. Though it was true that his company sold machines in other countries, he was just a programmer; he never had any contact with the customers.

One nagging thought did surface, as it had so many times since he started writing security into his code. Was it *technically* legal for him to be writing the security software? While it was true that he had learned to write encryption algorithms while working for the NSA, he had never included any code that could not be developed using only the information that was available to the general public—if they knew where to look. Still he worried. Had he crossed the line somewhere?

Agent Waters shook his head. “No, we don’t have a warrant, but we can have one in about twenty minutes. Judge Davis won’t like us waking him up at this time of night, though. You can come with us now or you can wait another twenty minutes. The downside to waiting is that we get to piss off a local judge, and he might remember this night if you ever have to appear in his courtroom. It makes no difference to me. How about you?” He turned to face Agent Patterson.

Agent Patterson shrugged. “I don’t care. Of course, we could just let the judge sleep. Under the Homeland Security Act we don’t *really* need a warrant.”

The knot tightened in Mark’s stomach. If they could take him into custody by invoking the Homeland Security Act, then his situation was indeed serious. Of course it was entirely possible that they were bluffing—trying to scare him. But even if they were just bluffing, his fear was real. “Hang on,” he said. “Let me change into some jeans and get my shoes.”

Both agents nodded.

Mark returned to his bedroom; his wife was standing just inside the door. Holly whispered tersely, “What’s going on?”

Mark replied, “I really don’t know. Got to be some kind of misunderstanding. I’m going to go with them and straighten it out.”

Holly reached for the poker that was still in Mark’s hand. “Grab the other poker and we’ll hit them over the head. I think we should run.”

Mark snatched the poker back from his wife and tossed it onto the bed. “There’s no need to run. I promise you that it’s nothing. I’ll just go with them and take care of it. Try and get back to sleep.” He knew that Holly would not sleep.

“How long will you be gone?” Her voice betrayed the panic that was building.

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours, I don’t think.”

“Do I need to call a lawyer?”

“No, I’m sure I can straighten this out.”

What he didn’t say was that he didn’t think a lawyer would be of any use. It wasn’t unusual for the alphabet government agencies to ignore the legal system. When he had been part of the alphabet soup, he had totally believed that some unconstitutional operations were necessary for the security of the nation. But with two AFOSI agents standing in his living room, protection within the legal system would have been more than welcome.

Mark also worried about Holly. The time that they had spent together in the air force had left her far too fragile. He could only imagine the terror that she must be experiencing because he was being spirited away by these agents. Mark told himself that she was stronger now—much stronger than she had been seven years ago. But despite the advances she had made since leaving the military, she remained fragile.

Mark was directed to sit in the rear of the sedan; the two agents sat in the front with Agent Patterson behind the wheel. Agent Waters reached back, palm held upward. “Cell phone,” he demanded.

Mark relinquished his only tie to his home and his wife—and possibly safety. He feared that he might be falling into a rabbit hole from which there would be no escape. “Where are we going?”

Patterson looked over at Waters. Waters shrugged. Patterson turned back to face the highway and answered, “Medina.”

“Medina—as in San Antonio?” asked Mark.

“Know the place?” Patterson was doing all the talking now.

“Yeah, I know the place. That’s a two hour flight. I’ve got to go to work in the morning.”

“I wouldn’t bet on you getting to work tomorrow. And it’s about four hours away. We’re taking a C-130 out of Dobbins.”

“C-130? Cargo plane? Props?”

“Yeah, but with passenger seats. Turbo-prop.”

“Why Medina?” Mark asked, even though he could probably guess the reason for their destination.

Patterson grunted, “We’re just supposed to deliver you to Medina. We didn’t ask any questions.”

Mark fell silent. He knew it would be useless to question the agents further. He had spent three years in the alphabet soup. Information was always on a need to knowbasis. Regardless of security clearance, one was never privy to any information that was not necessary for the completion of the mission. Asking too many questions would attract the wrong kind of attention. Then you could end up in the back seat of a black sedan with two AFOSI agents refusing to answer your questions.

It was nearly three o’clock when the three boarded a plane and began the flight west. There are few people who can close their eyes and sleep when faced with great anxiety. Fortunately, Mark was one of those few. He made himself as comfortable as possible in his seat and shut his eyes. He temporarily tuned-out his concerns and slept until the plane touched down on the Kelly side of Lackland Air Force Base.

When Patterson shook him awake, Mark’s sleepy brain was reluctant to grasp where he was and why he was there, but reality finally snapped into sharp focus. “Shit,” Mark breathed, barely audible.

There was another black sedan waiting for them near the tarmac. Fifteen minutes later they were driving between the bunkers on Medina Air Base. A little over one hundred grass covered hills dotted an area roughly four thousand by five thousand feet. From the air the bunkers would be difficult to recognize as buildings, but at ground level one could easily see the reinforced concrete facades that were the only entrances to those bunkers. The camouflaged mounds were nearly identical from the outside. Most were armories filled with weapons, but a few belonged to the alphabet agencies.

*Oh shit*! Mark thought as they stopped in front of one of the bunkers. There was nothing to identify to whom this particular bunker belonged, but the thought of going inside frightened him to the core. He had been inside one of the weapons bunkers before—there had been nothing to fear then—but he had heard stories about the alphabet bunkers. Inside one of those bunkers constitutional law was suspended; human rights could not be allowed to stand in the way of national security.

Mark continued to search his soul for any possible transgressions, but he could think of nothing that he had done wrong. His thoughts kept returning to the security software that he had written, but he was certain that he had not compromised any national secrets by writing that program. He had set aside everything that he had learned about cryptography while in the military. He had researched the subject online, and in books and magazines that were readily available to anyone who wished to do the research. There *was* a level of encryption that was an entire magnitude above what he had created as a civilian. He had been unable to find any references to that encryption technique, so he had not even been tempted to include it in any of his programs. He had based his algorithms solely on publicly available information, but had he used his prior knowledge to direct his research and, if he had, would that constitute a breach of security?

Mark really didn’t want to go inside that bunker. If the people there decided that he had done anything to threaten the national security, he would probably be a very old man before he next saw the light of day. There are no set prison terms for those who reveal sensitive information. One who does so, whether it is intentional or unintentional, remains behind bars until every document and every piece of equipment that he had access to have been declassified. One of the projects that Mark had worked on in the military was scheduled for a declassification review in 2069. That was just a review—there were no guarantees that the project would be declassified even then.

Once inside the bunker, Mark was led down two flights of stairs. Each hollow footstep on the stairway sounded like the slamming of a cell door. Knowing that he was being taken underground increased Mark’s anxiety. He wanted to race back up the stairs and into the sunlight, but he knew that any attempt at escape would be incredibly stupid—and totally outside the realm of possibility.

The agents who accompanied him were unlikely to be pencil pushers. Mark had no doubt that either one of them could easily incapacitate him without bothering to draw a weapon. Mark had belonged to the NSA, but the NSA is actually two separate entities. There are the bad boy agents that kill armed men with their bare hands. The bad boys operate totally outside the constitution and answer to no one except the Agency. They are funded almost entirely by grey money. (Does anyone really believe that the government pays $400 for toilet seats?)

The other part of the NSA consists of cryptologists, programmers, and eavesdroppers—people who spend their entire military lives like bats inside buildings with no windows, or they may be secreted away inside a closet near a consulate. If a base is overrun they are the first to be evacuated, provided that they have completed the destruction of all the sensitive documents and equipment. If evacuation is not possible then they become a liability and are expendable. Mark had not been one of the bad boys, and entertained no delusion that he might overpower two armed OSI agents.

In a hallway, Patterson opened the door to a conference room and motioned for Mark to enter. Once Mark was inside, the two agents turned and walked away. There was a large table surrounded by a dozen chairs in the center of the room. On that table were a single note pad and a pen. Other than Mark, there was no one in the room—and the door had been left open. Mark struggled with the urge to bolt through the open doorway, but finally took a seat.

Mark could think of any number of reasons why he had been left unguarded with only an open door between him and apparent freedom, but there were only three that were really plausible.

1) He was supposed to escape. The entire event had been staged to ensure that he

continued to be properly paranoid.

2) He was perceived to be a security risk and, if he were shot trying to escape, that

risk would be eliminated.

3) They knew that he would sit there and stare at the open door, becoming more

and more rattled with each passing minute.

Mark assumed that option number three was the most likely, and so he sat and stared at the door, becoming more and more rattled. He sat there for the better part of an hour, and was near screaming when two men in very dark suits walked through the door. One of the men slid the “UNOCCUPIED” sign from its holder on the outside of the door, flipped it over, and slid it back into place. The sign now read “CONFERENCE IN SESSION.” He closed the door softly and engaged the deadbolt. Now Mark wished more than ever that he had made his escape while the door was still open.

Introductions were not made, so Mark silently dubbed the men Mutt and Jeff*.* Dark suits and very conservative haircuts—it was obvious that these men belonged to one of the alphabet organizations, but there was no hint as to which one. They sat at the table facing Mark. Mutt picked up the pad and pen and began writing.

They sat in silence for about fifteen minutes before Mutt finally spoke. “We found your Easter egg.”

That sent Mark’s mind racing down a path that it had not previously taken. Lots of programmers hide little snippets of code in their programs. Easter eggs can be as simple as the inclusion of the programmer’s name, or as elaborate as a video game hidden inside the program. Mark had been hiding his name in his code almost as long as he had been programming, but he could not remember a single instance when he had included an Easter egg in software he had written for the military.

Mark feared the worst. If they had located one of his Easter eggs, then they must have been examining code that he had written since leaving the air force. Much of his code was simple industrial software that would be of no interest to these individuals, but his security software might be another matter. If it could somehow be proven that he had used classified information to develop his code, Mark could be in big trouble. He could probably argue that there was nothing in his software that was not already available to the public, but would he have found those documents if he hadn’t already known what he was looking for? Without knowing what program Mutt was referring to, Mark had no idea what these agents actually knew; he remained silent.

More notes, and then Mutt reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew what at first appeared to be a cell phone. He pressed buttons and a panel slid aside revealing a large video screen. On the screen was displayed several rungs of ladder logic, a type of code common to industrial machinery. Mark recognized the code and knew that it was his, but he still didn’t know where it had come from. That little bit of code was in dozens of his programs.

Jeff pointed at the screen. “Recognize that?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it before.”

“What does it do?”

“It looks like it is part of the variables initialization routine. What it actually does is write my name to another location in the data.”

“And you wrote this code?”

“Yes.” Mark nodded. There was no doubt that the agents already knew that the Easter egg contained his name. Mark was certain that this was the trail that had led to him. “Could I see more of the program?” he asked.

Mutt pointed the remote at the screen, and then hesitated. “Why?”

“A lot of my programs contain that particular bit of code. Most of the programs where I work have it. Most of the other programmers use my initialization routine without realizing that my Easter egg is in there. The Easter egg is mine—the program may not be.”

Mutt clicked the remote and Mark’s heart sank. “Do you recognize this?”

“Yeah,” Mark replied. “It’s the encryption routine we use to protect our software.”

“You wrote it?”

“Yeah, that’s my code.” Mark swallowed hard, even though his mouth was dry. “But there is nothing there that isn’t freely available to the public.”

Mutt sat on the edge of the table. “Whether or not it was legal for you to write this code is something that we might need to discuss later. But right now we are just gathering facts.”

“Yes, I wrote that code,” Mark reaffirmed.

“It’s good—military grade. But then, you used to write code for the military, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. But the code I wrote for the military was two orders of magnitude more secure than this. I didn’t include anything that isn’t publicly available.”

“But you looked for the more secure encryption, didn’t you?”

“Okay, I looked. I didn’t find anything so I didn’t use it.”

Jeff said, “I would have looked, wouldn’t you?”

Mutt grunted. Then he said, “You know, we had a hell of a time extracting this program. You work for a packaging manufacturer; why do you need so much security?”

“Security is cheap. The Chinese ignore patents and copyrights. If they crack our security they will be cranking out machines just like ours in a less than a month. And they will sell them for half of what we can make them for.”

Mutt clicked the remote and the screen was filled with hex code. “Is this your data?”

“Don’t know. Could be. Let’s see.... L-A-T-Space-2-9-Period-3-8-5-0-6-7-Space-L-O-N-Space-Minus-9-8—”

Mutt clicked and the screen went blank. “We know what it says. Is that your data?”

“It’s ASCII. Looks like everything on that screen is ASCII. No, I didn’t generate that data.”

“Then how did it end up getting encrypted by your security software?”

“All of the programmers at the factory have access to the encryption program. Customers specify what they need the machine to do, and we generate a data list that will set the proper software switches in the ladder logic. They tell us what text they want displayed during the packaging process, and we add that to the data list. Anything special that they want the machine to do that isn’t included in our standard model has to be coded, then that too is added to the data. When everything is coded, the data is encrypted and transferred to the machine. It might sound complicated, but there are at least a dozen people at the factory that do it every day.”

Mutt clicked the screen back on. Displayed in bold letters was a single word:

TEMPEST

He pointed the clicker at Mark. “What does this word mean to you?”

Mark was sweating now. “Well, it’s an unclassified term that deals with radiation of—”

“Yeah, we know the textbook definition. What does it mean to you?”

“I never use the word when I’m talking on the telephone. I never type it while I’m on the Internet. It’s one of those key words like *bomb* that government computers watch out for. Hell, I don’t *ever* use that word.”

“Then why was that the password that locked the data on one of your machines?”

“I would never use that for a password,” Mark said.

Mutt clicked again and the screen was filled with what appeared to be random letters and symbols. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Mark counted thirty-two characters. “It looks like a password key. Each machine has a unique key assigned to it. We have a database that pairs the keys with the machine serial number. If that is what it is, then they are just random characters.”

“Yeah, that was the other password on the machine. Awfully secure for a packaging machine.”

“Did I mention the Chinese? We assign a thirty-two character password key and use that to encrypt our data. The customer supplies their own password. The customer uses that password to limit access to the maintenance screens. We use their password as the key for a second pass encryption.”

Jeff said, “Military grade encryption. After we extracted your security software it took over a week to crack the encryption.”

Mark’s mouth felt like it was filled with cotton; he tried swallowing but the cotton remained. “It’s good encryption, but everything in it is public knowledge.” The two agents waited in silence. Finally Mark asked, “May I ask what was in the encrypted data?”

“No, you may not,” Jeff answered. “But you can tell us who else at your facility might use the word Tempest*.*”

Mark shook his head. “I never use the word—never. There used to be a video game named Tempest. And it can mean a storm. It was a play by Shakespeare. Anybody might use it.” But as he uttered the words he knew that the agents weren’t buying his explanation. The use of that word was extremely rare in civilian conversation, but it was very common among members of one of the alphabet organizations. For it to be used as a password in a military grade encryption algorithm was no coincidence. Since Mark was the only programmer at the factory who had experience with military encryption, he was the obvious suspect—he was the suspect, and he didn’t even know what crime had been committed. “This isn’t about the encryption routines, is it? This is all about what is being encrypted?”

Jeff looked over at Mutt. Mutt nodded with a grunt. Jeff answered, “Yeah, it’s all about the data. Classified data being shipped overseas in one of your machines. Classified data encrypted by your military grade program. Classified data encrypted by a program that may have been created using classified information.”

Mark looked pleadingly at Mutt, and then at Jeff. He said in a small voice, “I didn’t put that data on there, I swear.”

Mutt placed a sheet of paper and a pen in front of Mark. “Write a statement to that effect. Sign and date it.”

Mark wrote:

I swear that I have not included any classified data in any machines designed for civilian use. If classified data exists on any of these machines, it was put there by someone other than myself. Also any encryption of classified data on these machines was performed by someone other than myself.

Mark signed the sheet and handed it to Mutt. “Good enough?” he asked.

“Okay,” Mutt said. “Raise your right hand and repeat: I swear, under penalty of perjury....”

“I swear, under penalty of perjury....”

“...that this written statement is true and correct.”

“...that this written statement is true and correct.”

“Executed on this date, three August, two thousand sixteen.”

“Executed on this date, three August, two thousand sixteen.”

“You can put your hand down. Tell us a little about how you came to work for Nova Packaging Group.”

Mark was sure that these two already knew all there was to know, but he indulged them anyway. “I spent three years in the air force. When I got out, first I took a teaching job at the local tech school. At that time the biggest industry in my hometown was Ranger Corporation. They made home appliances like washing machines and stoves and water heaters, et cetera. Anyway, they needed technical training for their maintenance department, and Center Tech needed an instructor.

“That job only lasted about a year. Bob Ranger, the founder of Ranger Corp., had a heart attack and his family sold off the company, leaving about eighty-five percent of Hirt, Georgia without jobs. I got caught in the first round of layoffs from the tech school. A couple of months later, NPG—that’s what everybody calls Nova Packaging Group—bought the building and began hiring. I’ve been with them ever since.”

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “You had three years in the air force. You enlisted for four, but you didn’t stay the entire four years. Why not?”

“Well, some shit happened and I decided that I didn’t want to be in the air force anymore.”

“Some shit? You mean classified shit?”

“Yeah. Classified shit.”

“Involving Sgt. John Erwin?”

Mark clamped his mouth shut, but his eyes showed the panic that clenched his heart.

“This doesn’t involve Sgt. Erwin. At present he is still *missing*.” Mutt’s fingers made quotation marks in the air. “That’s why you left the air force?”

“Yeah. But like I said, I figured that I could get back into civilian clothes and get a good paying job in the electronics field. I was pretty lucky, because Central Tech was desperately looking for someone to teach programming. I was an instructor in the air force, so I had experience teaching. I knew absolutely nothing about industrial automation, but I hit the books hard and managed to get the job. Everything was good until Ranger closed and the school downsized. So when I was given the opportunity to be a manager at a small business, I took the job. Unfortunately that position fell far short of what I had expected in civilian life. The pay was lousy, and managers were expected to flip burgers just like the rest of the employees. The job was paying the bills, but that was about all.

“Then I saw Nova’s ad for a job programming robots, so I sent them my resume. I said that I had been a programmer in the military, but I didn’t tell them what kind of programming I had done. I also told them that I was currently working as a manager, but I didn’t mention the burgers. When I got the job, it really wasn’t what I expected. I’ve been reading Asimov since I was a kid, and I expected the robots to walk around on two feet. I expected them to talk. I expected them to obey my voice commands. I expected them to *think.* I was really disappointed when I found out that industrial robots are just machines that only do what they are programmed to do. But I liked the job anyway. I’ve worked my way up to Senior Programmer in Charge of Security. That about covers it, I guess. So what happens now?”

Mutt passed the sworn statement to Jeff, who glanced at it briefly and said, “If you didn’t put that data on the machine, who did?”

“I honestly don’t know. It would have to be someone who has access to the password database.”

Mutt slid another sheet of paper in front of Mark. “What are their names?”

Mark had risen when making his sworn statement; he returned to his seat and began writing. When he finished he had a list of six programmers, four engineers, and three members of management who had access to the database. Three of the names had question marks next to them. He pointed to the marks. “I’m not sure about those last names.”

Mutt pointed to the bottom of the list. “We need a *complete* list of suspects. Your name goes on the list too.”

Obediently Mark added his own name and slid the sheet back to Mutt. “That’s everybody. Nobody else has access to the password database.”

“What about ex-employees?”

“We’ve only had one programmer leave since we started using this security program. That was a little over a year ago. There is a tag on the machine showing the manufacture date. Do you know the date on the tag?”

Mutt clicked the remote and a picture of the tag was displayed. Mark said, “That’s a CPK5000U. Brand new machine. We only started building them this past February. That one was made in June. The ex-employee couldn’t possibly have access to the password.”

Mutt pointed to the list. “Anyone here have any radical political views?”

“Nobody talks politics at the factory. We’re all geeks. Most of the people on that list live in Marshmallow Land. I would almost bet that half of them don’t even know who the president is.”

Jeff sat down facing Mark. “Mr. Hill, are you a patriot?”

With a sense of dreadful déjà vu, Mark nodded emphatically. “Yeah.” That question awakened dark memories that Mark would rather leave sleeping.

“Then we need you to help us find out who the spy is in your organization.”

“How do I do that? I’m no spy. I don’t have any idea how to catch a spy.”

“Talk to the other employees. Watch for any unusual data being put on the machines. You can stay at the factory after everyone else leaves, can’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s not unusual for a programmer to work all night trying to find a bug in their software.”

“Then work some late nights. And pay attention to who else is working late. While you’re doing that, we’ll be running background checks on these people. If you think of anyone else that should be on this list, let us know.” He handed Mark a business card. “Anything suspicious, call us. I don’t care how trivial it may be. If it seems just a little bit suspicious, call us.”

Mark looked at both sides of the card. It was blank with the exception of a phone number. “When I call, who do I ask for?”

“You don’t ask for anybody. One of us will be on the other end of the line. We’ll be in touch.”

The ordeal was evidently over. The video screen went blank. The door was unlocked. Agents Mutt and Jeff exited, leaving Mark wondering if he were free to go. He sat there staring at the open door.

When he had almost mustered the courage necessary to jump up and bolt, Agent Patterson appeared in the doorway. “Ready to go?” he asked.

“Where are we going?”

“Home.” Patterson returned Mark’s phone. “Call your wife and let her know that you’re okay. She has already been briefed not to ask you any questions about why you’re here. And you’re not to discuss it with her or anyone else.”

“You shouldn’t have talked to her without me being there.” Mark prayed that Holly hadn’t been asked if she were a patriot. She was not ready to hear *that* question again.

“It was necessary,” Patterson muttered.

Holly answered on the second ring. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I won’t be home for a few more hours, though.”

“But you *are* coming home? Do I need to pack? Do we need to run? I’ve already got a few things packed. You’re coming home now?”

“Yeah, I’m coming home. But it will be a few hours.”

“Thank God. Two more government men showed up right after you left. They told me that you should be home before tomorrow. You can’t know how much they scared me. They wouldn’t tell me what they think you may have done. Every time I asked any questions they always said ‘Classified.’ I’ve been so scared that I’d never see you again. Are you sure you’re all right? Are you sure that you’re coming home? I don’t know how many times I grabbed the car keys and started to run. I have to keep telling myself that you’re coming home. You *are* coming home?”

“I’m all right. And I’m coming home. But I need you to call my boss—”

“I’ve already done that. They told me to. They told me to say that you were sick and that you wouldn’t be in today. Then they told me that I couldn’t tell anybody about them taking you away. They said that it was a matter of national security. They told me that...hell, they told me that I can’t even ask you where you are. I don’t like this. I’m scared.”

“It’s all right. They’re investigating something; they won’t let me tell you what it is. I’m not involved, but I can’t tell anyone what’s going on. It would compromise their investigation.”

“Screw their investigation. We haven’t done anything wrong. We *never* did anything wrong. Why the hell can’t they just leave us alone?”

“Everything’s okay. I’m in Texas now.” That got a frown from Patterson, but Mark didn’t care. “That’s why it will take me a few hours to get home. Stay put; don’t think about running. When I get home everything will go back to normal. This is over.”

“Promise me you’re coming home.”

“I promise. Look, I need to get off the phone now. And I promise that I’ll be home in a few hours. Okay?”

“Okay. But hurry.”

“A few more hours. Love you. Bye.”

“Love you. Bye.”

Mark stuffed the phone in his shirt pocket. “Can we go?”

Agent Patterson nodded and started for the door. Agent Waters was waiting for them in the car. When they were moving, Patterson turned to face Mark. “You must have had all the right answers.”

“Huh?”

“Not everybody gets to go home after going in there. I guess you’re one of the lucky ones.”

“Yeah...lucky.” Mark wasn’t sure if he were really all that lucky. Now he was expected to spy on his co-workers. If he couldn’t turn up anything, would he be able to convince the nameless men that he was innocent?

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Holly saw the black sedan stop in front of their house. Every car that had passed during the past several hours had prompted her to peek through the blinds. This time she was relieved to see Mark step out of the sedan. He was home at last. Even though he had promised that he was coming home, a kernel of doubt had remained until she actually saw him walking up the drive. She wanted to rush out and grab Mark and hold him close. But the black sedan had not moved on, and she remained hidden behind the closed blinds.

When the door opened, Holly grabbed Mark’s arm and pulled him inside. With the door closed and locked, she peered through the blinds again; the sedan was gone. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine. They just wanted to ask me some questions.”

“Did they torture you?”

Mark laughed. “You’ve been watching too many spy movies. Of course they didn’t torture me.” But his laugh sounded hollow. They both knew that these people would not hesitate to use torture if they thought it necessary.

“What do they want? Have we done something wrong?”

“We’ve done nothing wrong, but I can’t tell you what they want. It’s classified. I’m sorry.” The word classified rolled off Mark’s tongue as easily as it had when he was in the military. It simply meant don’t ask questions—it’s none of your business. He didn’t like using that word with Holly, the only person on the entire planet that he knew that he could trust. He felt guilty using the word that could place a wall of doubt and distrust between them—a wall that would have to stand, for now.

Holly wrapped her arms around her husband. “Thank God you’re safe. I was so worried. It *is* over, isn’t it?”

Mark returned the embrace. It felt good to be home. He wanted to confide in Holly, but his old paranoia froze the words before he could speak them. “On the phone you said that two other agents came here. How long did they stay?”

“They were here for three or four hours. They searched the house. They wouldn’t say what they were looking for. I asked them if they had a warrant and they said that they didn’t need one. They said that you had given them permission to search the house. Why the hell did you tell them that they could search our house? It took everything I had to keep from running.”

“I didn’t give them permission. If they wanted to search the house, they should have waited until I came home. They shouldn’t have run over you like that.”

“I was afraid that we *had* done something wrong and that they were going to find evidence they could use against us. If you didn’t give them permission, can we report them?”

“Forget it. We can’t fight those people. It’s over,” he lied. “Let’s just forget about it. I’ll take you out to eat tonight, and we will just pretend that this never happened.”

“I‘m not really hungry.”

“But I am.”

“What do you want? I can fix you something.”

“I want Olive Garden. I want a salad smothered with cheese. I want cheese ravioli. I want bread sticks. Surely you can think of something you can eat there.”

“I’m not dressed for Olive Garden.”

“You look fine. Get your shoes. I’m hungry.”

In the car Holly asked, “Are you sure that everything is alright?”

Mark replied, “Everything’s fine. It’s over. Let’s forget it. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

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Mark swallowed a bite of his bread stick. “Were you in the same room with those agents while they were searching the place?”

“I thought you said that you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Were they ever out of your sight?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t have watched them both if I had wanted to. They split up and searched everywhere. They even took the vent covers off. You said that it was over. Why do you suddenly want to talk about it again?”

“They may have bugged the house.”

Holly put her fork down. “Oh shit. They’re watching us. We’re here because they were listening to us. You didn’t want them to know that we’re running.”

“We’re not running. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but *they* made me that way. Until I’m sure that the house is clean, we’re not going to talk about this anywhere inside our house—or our cars.”

“How can you tell if the house is bugged?”

“I can get some hardware that can sniff them out. But I won’t order it on my home computer. They may be watching our Internet traffic.”

“They were looking on your computer. That’s why I thought you had given them permission to search the house. They had your password.”

“I didn’t give it to them. But those guys don’t need passwords. They probably copied the hard drive. But there’s nothing incriminating on it.”

“How much trouble are we in?”

*Screw them*, Mark thought, and told Holly the entire story.