

THE WAYWARD SPY

• A NOVEL •



Susan Ouellette

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SPY



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*For Elaine Ash,
a superb freelance editor and friend.*

*Had you not persuaded me to dust off this manuscript,
I wouldn't be a published author today.
Your vision and persistence brought this story to life.*

For that, I'm eternally grateful.

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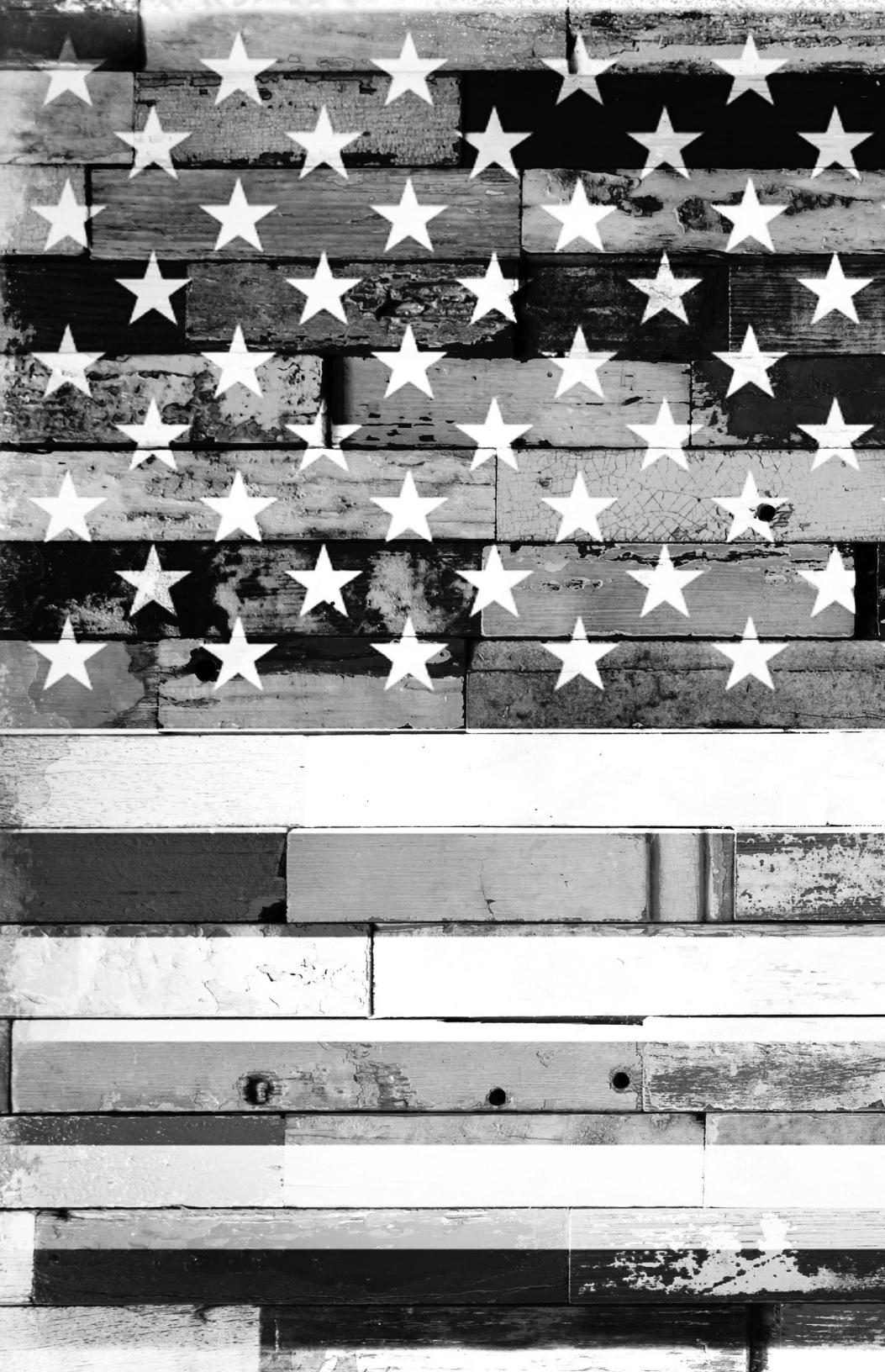


Tbilisi is the capital of the country of Georgia.

To the north lies Russia.

To the south lie Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

This birthplace of Joseph Stalin has suffered periodic eruptions of unrest, corruption and Russian meddling since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.





PROLOGUE

Tbilisi, Georgia

The assassin slid the gray canvas bag onto an empty chair to the right. With a final glance at the men seated at the adjacent table, their backs to her, she exited the café's sun-drenched atrium. Her client had wanted something more dramatic, like a car bomb. But with such short notice, she'd been forced to improvise with the materials on hand. The client wouldn't care. Dead was dead.

After crossing the busy street, she looked over her shoulder. The targets were standing, shaking hands. She was supposed to be further away before dialing the pre-programmed number, but she had to act before they separated.

Slipping a hand into her purse, she pulled out the cell phone and hit the number three. The atrium, a glass-enclosed outdoor dining area at the popular café, exploded into a million tiny shards. A chair flew through the air, landing on the sidewalk in front of the building. Car alarms wailed. Then people.

The American, partially pinned under a mangled metal table, lay still, bleeding profusely from what remained of his right thigh. The other man was motionless, face down on the sidewalk. Crowds gathered on the street as the acrid smoke from the bomb began to dissipate.

When sirens sounded in the distance, the assassin slipped away from the panicked crowd. Under ordinary circumstances, heads turned at the sight of her lithe body, high cheekbones, and striking, olive-colored eyes. Today, she was shrouded in a shabby overcoat, oversized wool hat, and dark sunglasses. The get-up made her feel detached from herself, as if someone else had executed the attack.

The woman turned into the alley where she'd parked hours before. She removed the sunglasses and pulled the cap from her head, unleashing a thick mane of lush, black hair. With a final glance behind her, she smiled. By all measures, it had been a successful morning.



CHAPTER ONE

House Permanent Select Committee
on Intelligence, U.S. Capitol Building
November 2003

Maggie Jenkins hurried across the stone pavers outside the east front of the U.S. Capitol Building. The autumn wind was especially biting before sunrise. She ducked into an arched entryway to the left of towering marble stairs, tugged open the heavy wooden door, and slipped inside just before a sudden gust slammed it shut behind her. She glanced left at a plaque honoring two Capitol Hill police officers who'd been gunned down by a madman in that very spot five years earlier. Until the chaos of September 11, 2001, she couldn't have imagined a more horrific day on the Hill.

“Morning, miss.”

The officer's greeting pulled her back to the present.
"Morning."

She plopped her Kate Spade satchel on the x-ray machine's conveyer belt and passed through the metal detector.

The officer's attention turned to the machine's video screen.
"ID, please."

Maggie fished her badge from the pocket of her black trench coat. Getting to work so early meant that it was going to be a long day, but working regular nine-to-five hours hadn't been an option for months. There'd been one major national security episode after another this year—from the U.S. invasion of Iraq to the ongoing manhunt for Saddam Hussein. And besides, the longer she stayed at work, the less time she spent at home. Alone and missing Steve. Three months left on his overseas tour. It felt more like three years.

The officer nodded as Maggie snatched her purse and headed for the Crypt. She paused, savoring the silence in the dimly-lit cavernous room. Soon enough, ringing phones, humming computers, and whirring copy machines would replace the hush.

Her heels clicked across the smooth stone floor as she made her way to the elevator on the far left. Every now and then, wandering tourists would mistake this elevator for a public one. They'd soon discover that it had a sole destination—a rather unremarkable hallway in the attic of the Capitol Building.

Inside the car, Maggie repeatedly punched the up button. A minute later, the old doors groaned open, depositing her forty feet from the entrance to the House Intelligence Committee office. She mumbled a greeting to the night guard, who buzzed her through the main door.

The hearing room directly ahead was dark; she opted for the lit corridor that wound its way around the backside of the windowless

space. Uninspiring framed prints of the nation's capital dotted the tan, soundproof, textured walls.

A little further up the hall, her boss Frank Reynolds ducked into his office, shutting the door behind him. *Odd.* He usually wasn't in before 8 a.m. She shrugged and turned into the second office on the left, a small space with worn, government-issue gray carpeting and walls painted to match.

Maggie hung her coat and purse on the coat rack in the corner, slid into her chair, and fired up the Compaq desktop computer. She grabbed a pad of paper and wrote out her to-do list.

- *Finish chairman's briefing book for today's hearing*
- *Ask Agency for latest intel on Putin*
- *Call mom—wedding dress fitting moved to Dec. 4th*



The computer screen brightened from black to green. She logged in, opened the briefing document, and picked up where she'd left off last Friday.

“Could I speak with you a minute?”

She glanced up, then returned her gaze to the monitor. “You're here early, Frank. What's up?”

“Maggie . . .”

She was racing against a deadline. “Can it wait a bit? Have to finish this.” The Committee's chairman needed the briefing book ASAP.

“Maggie,” repeated Frank. She saved the document and swiveled in her chair. “Sorry—” She paused, startled by the sudden appearance of another man next to him. The CIA's Deputy Director of Operations.

“Warner?” She glanced at the day planner on her desk. Had she forgotten an important meeting?

“Can we talk?” Warner Thompson approached her desk.

He was the CIA’s spymaster, a powerful man whose calendar was filled with urgent matters of national security. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in Langley?”

“We need to talk.”

She stood, her thighs pressed against the edge of the desk. Warner looked like he hadn’t slept. She stared back at him, suddenly aware how odd it was that her fiancé’s boss was in her office. “Is everything okay?” A sudden weakness swept over her.

Warner closed his eyes for a moment, as if to collect himself. “I don’t know how to say this.”

“Say what?” she said as she backed against the chair and sank into it.

Maggie’s thoughts occupied two opposing camps engaged in battle. The side that fought hardest was the one insisting Steve was fine. Of course he was. He wasn’t in Iraq. Or Afghanistan. He wasn’t dodging mortar attacks and suicide bombers. Steve was a spy, a silent soldier, fighting the country’s enemies in the shadows, where it was safer. But then there was the other side. The one that knew. She just knew.

Warner knelt beside her. “I’m so, so sorry.” His voice cracked. “I came right over as soon as I got the call.”

Maggie closed her eyes.

A supersonic slideshow of images flashed through her mind. Steve on his motorcycle. His lopsided grin. The day he proposed. Her wedding dress. News footage of soldiers’ flag-draped caskets. The Memorial Wall at CIA Headquarters. All those stars for the CIA’s dead.

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Not Steve. Not star. Not dead. “It’s a mistake.” She shook her head. “Maybe he’s out with an asset and can’t report in.” Words tumbled from her mouth. “You know how Steve gets when he’s in the middle of something big.”

“No, Maggie, it’s not . . . I’m so sorry.”

She looked at Frank. He glanced away.

She fixed her eyes on Warner’s. “What are you saying?”

He cleared his throat. “There was an explosion at a café in Tbilisi. We don’t know if Steve was the intended target. It could’ve been mistaken identity or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He took Maggie’s hands in his. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Who’s we?”

“What?”

She freed her hands and clasped them together. “You said, ‘We don’t know if Steve was the intended target.’ Who’s we?”

“The Tbilisi station chief and I.”

Her insides constricted, as if a seizure and a heart attack had joined forces against her. “So, the station chief thinks someone killed Steve?” The question sounded absurd. These kinds of things happened to *other* people.

Warner nodded and rubbed his face with trembling hands. “They have his body at the embassy. There was nothing they could do. It was too late.”

Maggie heard a moan. When the moan turned into a wail, she realized it was coming from inside of her.



CHAPTER TWO

The ringing telephone startled Maggie from a fitful nap. Her gaze flitted around, taking in the bedside clock. For a second, she thought she'd slept through the wake. She ignored the phone, rolled onto her side, and stared at the empty half of the bed. Steve's side. Her fingers traced the outline of his pillow, the spot where he'd last kissed her before leaving for his 4 a.m. flight to Tbilisi. "I'll be back. I promise, Maggie," he'd whispered.

For the last eight months, it had been just her in the house, yet she'd never felt truly alone. There'd been calls from Steve. She'd occupied herself working long hours and taking marathon runs on the trail. All helped fill the temporary emptiness until his return.

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Now, the emptiness was endless. There was no one, nothing to look forward to, nothing to fill the void.

Kate, her friend from their CIA days together, had offered to stay over for a couple of nights, but then something came up with her husband. Her best friend from college couldn't make the trip from Boston—she was overdue with her second baby. Old high school friends left sympathetic voicemails, but never called back. Everyone was busy. They were married, having babies, leading normal lives. And when you couldn't tell your girlfriends anything true about your future husband, it was much easier to withdraw, to protect Steve, to keep his secrets secret. Other than Kate, none of her friends had a clue what he actually did for a living.

Her head was pounding. She didn't need a mirror to tell her what days of sobbing had done to her face. Her right hand found the damp facecloth on the floor beside the bed. Five minutes of cool moisture probably wouldn't help much, but it was better than nothing. And she had to pull herself together before her parents flew into town.

Her stomach was in turmoil at the thought of seeing Steve's body. The funeral home had assured her that his face was in good condition, and that no one would be able to see the destruction the bomb had wrought on the rest of his body. Maggie let out a guttural scream and threw the facecloth across the room. It landed with an unsatisfying splat against the wall.

Downstairs, the doorbell chimed.

Maggie groaned and dragged herself from the bed. She tugged the black dress from the hanger and slid it over a silk slip and a pair of black stockings.

“Shoes . . . where are my shoes?” The doorbell chimed again as she rifled through a jumble of high heels on the closet floor.

“Just a second,” she muttered, abandoning the shoes and scampering downstairs.

When she opened the front door, bitter wind greeted her with a slap. Maggie squinted up at her visitor. “You look exhausted, Warner.”

Warner shook sleet from an umbrella and wiped his polished wingtips on the sodden welcome mat. “And I feel like hell.” His gray-flecked eyes searched her face. “How are you?”

She shivered against the cold. “Hell pretty much sums it up.”

“Look, I . . . can we talk for a few minutes?”

Her throat tightened. “Of course. Come in.” She was due at the funeral home in an hour. “I have a few minutes.” Maggie ushered him into the living room. The soft sage-colored walls felt naked, cold. Assorted frames stood stacked in the corner waiting to be rehung. Their formal engagement photo lay atop the pile. A light film of dust muted her fiery hair and his bright eyes. Steve was supposed to hang the pictures. That was the deal—if she painted the walls, he’d put it all back together when he came home.

In the kitchen, she swallowed the lump in her throat and turned to Warner. “Coffee?” she offered. “We have time. I was going to pick my parents up at Dulles, but their flight was delayed. Snow. So, they’ll take a cab directly to the funeral home,” she rambled, certain if she stopped talking, she’d collapse in a heap. “They’ll be landing soon.”

“I’ll send a car.”

“I should be the one—”

Warner raised his hand. “No. Consider it done.”

“Okay.” She turned toward the stove. “How about that coffee? Or tea? Herbal? Decaf?” The burner clicked and hissed under the copper kettle.

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“Save yourself the trouble. I’m fine.” He stared out the window into the darkness. “I have some new information about Steve. It’s . . .”

“It’s what?”

Warner shook his head. “It can wait.”

“What can wait? You obviously came over here to tell me . . . something.”

She fought to keep from shouting.

“This isn’t the best time to talk about it, but I don’t want you to hear it from someone else first.”

“Hear what?” She hugged her arms around her waist. The fern nestled in the bay window reached out to her, still clinging to life. It was Steve’s. All the plants were. Whenever he was overseas, they suffered greatly from her benign neglect.

“Well,” he cleared his throat, turning toward her, the pain in his face hardening. “Our people on the ground in Georgia say that Steve was meeting an asset at the café when the bomb went off.”

“And?” Maggie snatched pearl earrings off the counter, fumbling to put them on. “That’s exactly what you told me three days ago.”

“I know,” Warner conceded. “But now we have another source confirming the original report.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

She rubbed her forehead and stared at him.

“I don’t know, Maggie. None of this makes sense. Steve’s tradecraft was exemplary. Normally, he’d never meet an asset in a public place, especially not a Chechen.”

A Chechen? She knew Chechnya well from her time as a CIA analyst. A Russian province that bordered Georgia to the northeast,

it was home to both radical Muslim terrorists and innocent civilians decimated by two recent wars with Russia.

As far as Maggie knew, Steve's mission was to cultivate ties with Georgia's intelligence agencies and recruit Russian spies who strutted around Georgia as if they owned the place. "Since when has he recruited Chechens?"

Warner pulled a stool up to the granite island. He sat, smoothing the pleat in his crisp, black pants. "That's not really important. It's this new information that has me worried." He folded and unfolded his hands, finally placing them on the counter. "It may be a very serious matter."

Maggie flinched. "What?"

"Steve may have been selling information to Russia . . ."

She stared. Steve was an Eagle Scout, honest to a fault. And he was the most loyal man she'd ever met.

"At this point, it's still just a rumor from this new, unvetted source." Warner shook his head. "But this is Steve we're talking about. He wouldn't get involved with the Russians, not without authorization. I don't know why—"

"Is it true?" she interrupted, her voice barely a whisper.

Warner's brow creased. "I'm not sure."

Maggie's skin burned as if she'd been shocked. "Why won't you tell me who your source is?"

"I told you I can't reveal that. Not even to you." He straightened himself on the stool. "There will be a thorough investigation, and, of course, I will keep you informed of any developments."

His suddenly impersonal tone startled her. "What exactly are you saying, Warner? That I'm supposed to wait for some bureaucrats to decide whether my fiancé was a traitor or not?" She shook her head. "No. You will not shut me out of this process. Clear me into

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whatever classified programs you have to. I want . . . no, I need to be part of the investigation.”

“Even if I could, you’re too emotionally involved to handle—”

“Emotionally involved? Really?” Her voice rose over the screech of the kettle. “We were supposed to get married! In April, in case you forgot.” She choked on a sob. “There has to be something else going on here. There has to be!”

Warner stood and reached around her to shut off the burner. “I’m in this with you, Maggie. Whatever it takes. We’ll find the truth. We will find who killed Steve.”

The kettle’s whistle gave a final, dying gasp, and the house fell silent for a moment.

Warner checked his watch. “I’m headed to the funeral home. Let me drive you.”

“No, I’m okay.” She felt gutted, as if her core had been ripped out.

“You shouldn’t have to do this alone.” He touched her lightly on the arm.

She placed her hand over his and lingered for a moment before pulling away. He was right, she shouldn’t be alone, but she was. Because Steve was dead. “I’m . . . no, it’ll be fine. I promise not to do anything stupid. No motorcycle.”

They smiled.

“That was crazy, Maggie.”

“Yeah, Steve was pretty freaked out.” He and Warner had been working late one Friday night when she decided to bring them Chinese takeout.

“The look on his face when you pulled up on his precious motorcycle . . .” Warner laughed.

“I know. He . . .” She shook her head. “I wish I’d had a camera.” Fresh tears sprang to her eyes.

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“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . . please let me drive you to the wake.”

She waved a hand at him. “No, really, it’s okay. I promise.”

Warner nodded. “I’ll show myself out then.” He locked eyes with her. “See you in a bit.” He smiled weakly, then left her alone in the middle of the kitchen.

Forcing herself to move, she shuffled into the powder room. The mirror above the sink painted an unflattering picture. Mascara trails lined the puffy skin under her eyes, and angry blotches jostled for space between the freckles on her cheeks. Her hand trembling, she smoothed on more makeup, a mask to cover the pain. Her hair was frizzing from the incessant drizzle and accompanying cold fog outside. She didn’t care. “I don’t think I can do this,” she said to her grim reflection.

Back in the kitchen, it took only a minute to down three healthy shots of vodka. It was Steve’s vodka, from Russia. He would understand.

Warmth flowed through her. *That’s better.* Maybe she could do it after all. She could stand up and tell the world that Steve was no traitor. That he hadn’t betrayed her. She straightened her dress, ready, she thought, for the worst night of her life. As she reached for her purse, the phone rang again. There was no one she wanted to talk to, but what if her mom had been trying to reach her? She was the only one who regularly called her home phone.

“Miss Jenkins?” His accent was thick.

“Yes?”

“I’m a friend, from overseas. I want to extend my condolences about your fiancé. We never meant for it to end up this way.”

The pounding in her ears made it impossible not to shout.
“Who is this?”

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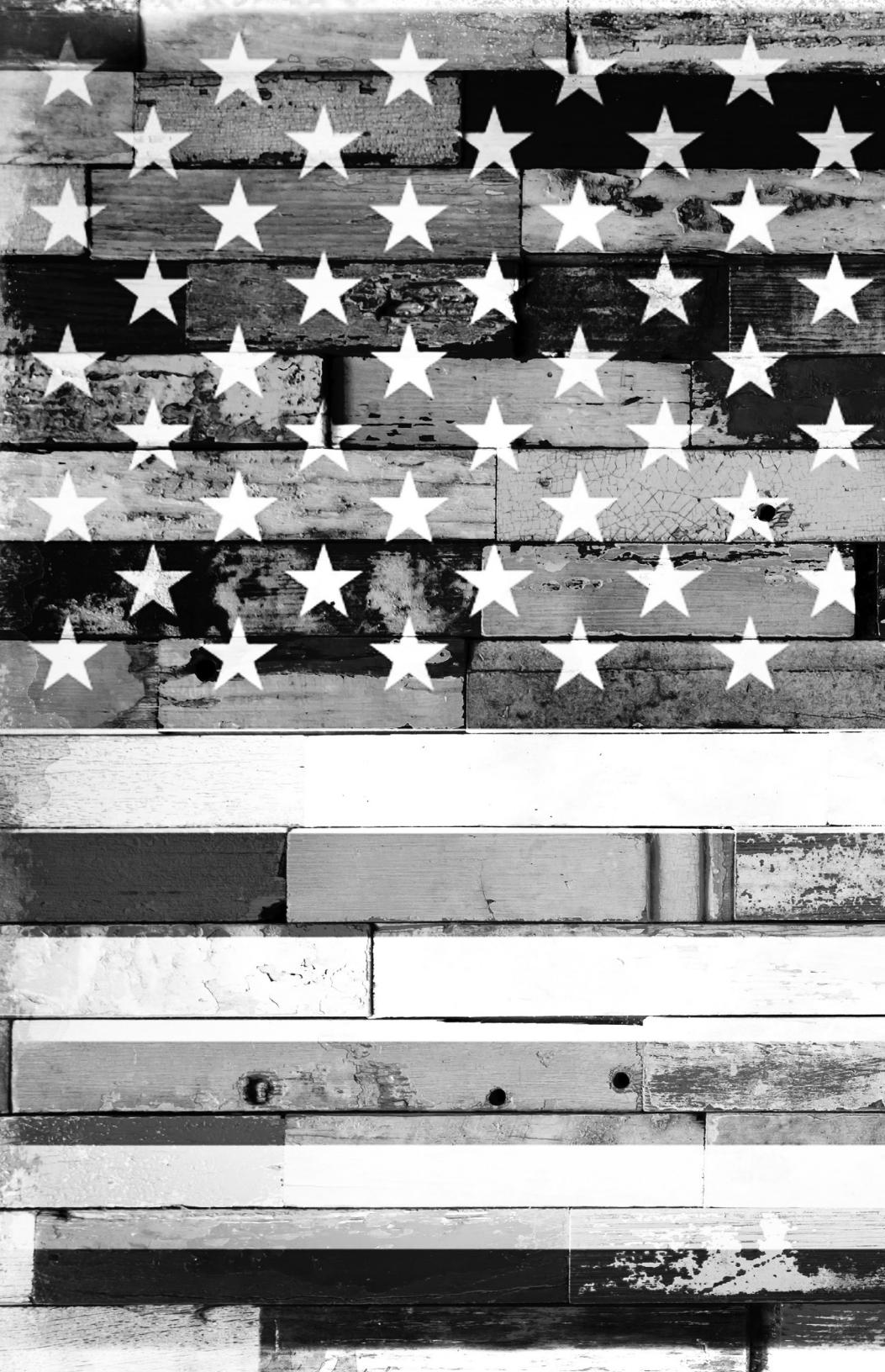
“Steve was of great assistance to us. We want to repay him for his efforts in whatever way we can.”

Maggie steadied herself against the refrigerator door. “Who is this?” she repeated

“There will be rumors. We will deny every one of them, help you keep his memory clean. He was a good man.” The caller paused. “And Miss Jenkins, you may call me Ivan Nik—” The name garbled into a word salad.

“Who? What name did you—”

Too late, the line went dead.





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THE TERRORIST THREAT HAS CHANGED. THE CONSEQUENCES HAVEN'T.

When her fiancé, a CIA operative accused of treason, is killed overseas, intelligence analyst Maggie Jenkins smells cover-up and sets out to clear his name. Maggie disobeys direct orders and travels to Tbilisi, Georgia, to follow a trail littered with secrets and lies, corruption and deceit, risking her own life to expose the terrorist threat at the intersection where the Russian Mafia, Chechen rebels, Al Qaeda and . . . US government officials meet.

From the halls of power in Washington, D.C. to the political chaos of the former Soviet Union, Maggie must confront players from the intelligence, political, and criminal worlds who will do anything to stop her. How far will Maggie go to uncover the truth?

"Susan Ouellette has written a well-crafted page-turner that benefits not only from her imagination and way with words—but from her experience. She has walked the halls of the House Intelligence Committee and the CIA and knows those institutions as very few novelists do."

—Dr. Mark M. Lowenthal, Former CIA Assistant Director for Analysis; Former Staff Director, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence



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