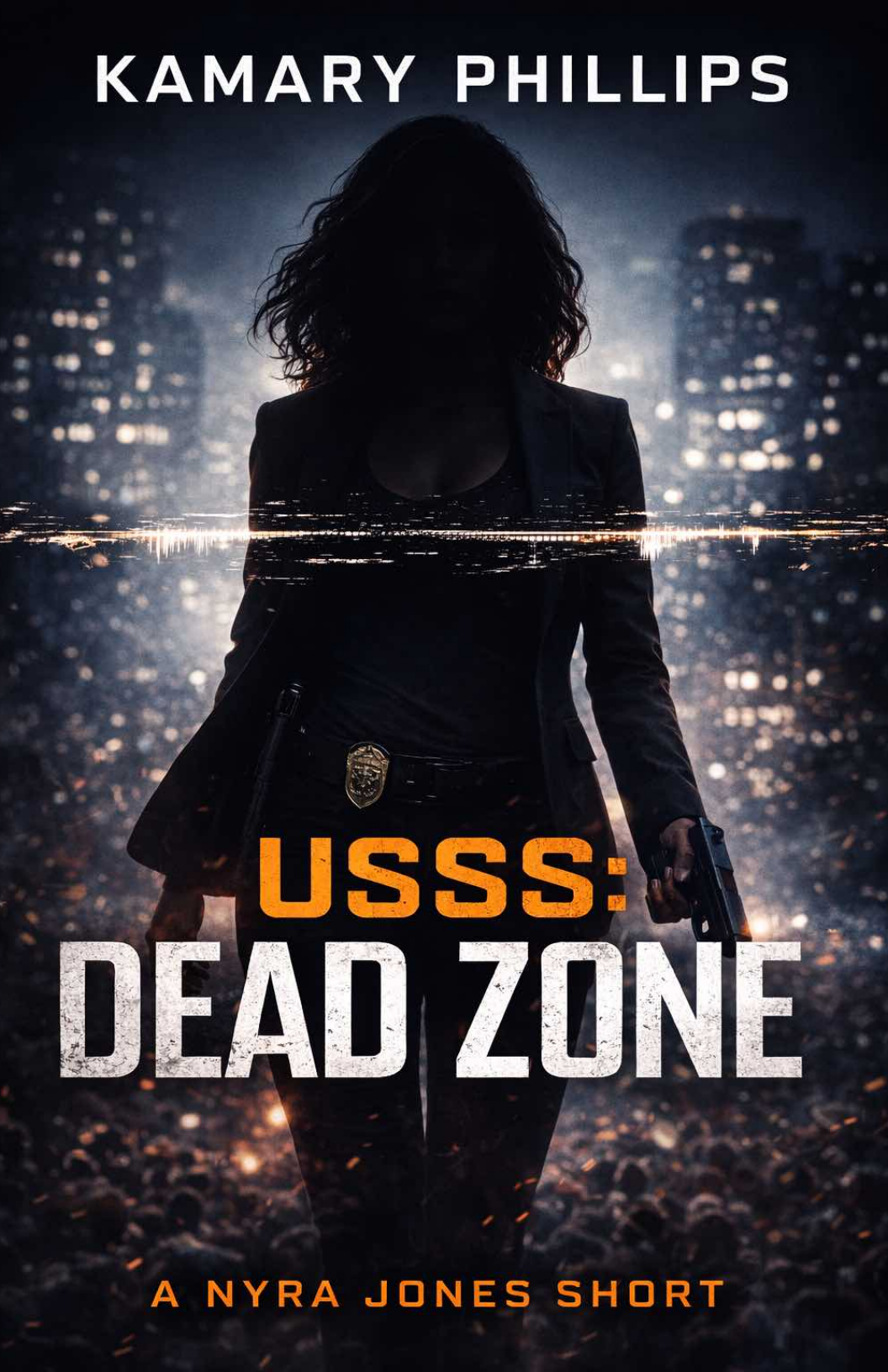
KAMARY PHILLIPS



USSS: DEAD ZONE

A NYRA JONES SHORT

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KAMARY PHILLIPS

Imprint
USSS: Dead Zone
A Miles Long Short

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Original stories. Owned worlds.

For those who operate in the dark-
And live with what never comes to light.
For the ones who know that surviving
Isn't always the same as living.

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PROLOGUE

Night Orders

Nyra wakes before the alarm.

She always does.

It's not discipline. It's habit—the kind that settles into your nervous system when you spend years learning that stillness is temporary and silence usually means something's about to move.

There's a body next to her.

Warm. Male. Asleep, or pretending to be.

She doesn't open her eyes right away. Just listens. The faint hum of the city outside. The low, careful breathing beside her. A hand rests on her hip like it belongs there, like it hasn't already overstayed its welcome.

She smiles faintly.

Nyra shifts just enough to break the contact.

The hand withdraws.

Good instincts, she thinks. At least he learned something.

The mattress dips as he sits up. She keeps her eyes closed, lets the moment stretch. There's the soft sound of clothes being gathered—not rushed, but cautious. The quiet choreography of someone who knows this isn't a morning-after situation.

She opens one eye as he reaches for his shoes.

"You don't have to sneak," she says.

He freezes. Then exhales.

"You were asleep."

Nyra rolls onto her back, studies him openly now. Late thirties, maybe. Fit but not vain. Someone who carries himself like he's competent at something dangerous but doesn't talk about it at brunch.

"Sleeping," she corrects. "Different skill set."

He smiles despite himself. "You always wake up like that?"

"Only when I need to," she replies.

He hesitates. "Last night was—"

"Fun," Nyra finishes. "Efficient. Not a mistake."

That seems to help him. He nods, relief flickering across his face.

"I've got an early briefing," he says.

"So do I."

He raises an eyebrow. "You never said what you do."

Nyra reaches over, plucks his phone off the nightstand, and hands it to him screen-down.

"And now you're not asking," she says.

Another smile. This one sharper.

He leans down, brushes a kiss near her temple—close enough to be intimate, far enough to respect the boundary.

"Good luck today," he says.

Nyra watches him leave without asking where he's going.

When the door clicks shut, she sits up.

The room is sparse. Clean. No personal photos. No tells. A pistol rests in the drawer beside the bed, exactly where she left it. Her badge sits on the dresser, face-down, like it's sleeping too.

Nyra swings her legs over the edge of the bed and stretches, muscles loose, mind already tightening.

Sex isn't escape for her.

It's calibration.

She showers quickly, methodically, steam cutting through the last of sleep. Dresses in layers that mean nothing until they're needed. Checks her phone.
No missed calls.
No warnings.
Then the alert comes through.
Detail briefing advanced.
Time change.
Full readiness required.
Nyra stares at the screen for a long beat.
So that's how today wants to start.
She holsters up, slips her jacket on, and takes one last look at the bed—sheets rumpled, heat already fading.
Whatever softness existed there is gone now.
Good.
Nyra Jones doesn't bring her whole self to work.
She brings what the job requires.
And today, judging by the early call and the quiet in her bones, it's going to require everything.
She steps out into the morning, door locking behind her.
By nightfall, someone will be dead.
She just doesn't know who yet.

1

Dead Zone

The first shot comes from the left.

Nyra Jones registers it before she hears it—pressure shift, crowd ripple, the instinctive flinch of bodies that don't yet know why they're moving. Her hand is already on her weapon when the sound catches up, a sharp crack swallowed by the canyon of downtown glass.

"Contact left!" someone shouts.

Nyra doesn't look.

She's already moving.

The motorcade is mid-turn, a bad place to be if things go loud. Too slow to disappear, too fast to stop clean. The principal's vehicle is second in line—exactly where it shouldn't be if someone planned this right.

Nyra steps into the street, weapon up, body angled, eyes scanning windows and rooftops like she's counting heartbeats instead of floors.

"Driver, push!" she barks into her mic. "Push now!"

The second shot hits something metal. Sparks jump. A scream breaks loose behind her.

Nyra fires once—controlled, not panicked—toward a shadow that shouldn't be there. She doesn't wait to see if she connected. That's not how you survive this job.

"Where the hell is counter?" she snaps.

Static answers her.

Not dead air. Worse.

Broken signal.

Her HUD flickers. The comm line drops, reconnects, drops again.
Nyra's stomach tightens.
"Say again, Command," she says. "You're cutting in and out."
Nothing.
The crowd surges now—phones up, bodies pressing, chaos blooming the way it always does when people realize history might be happening nearby.
Nyra pivots, backing toward the principal's vehicle, gun steady, brain cold.
Dead zone.
Not geographical. Not technical.
Operational.
Somewhere between jurisdictions. Between authorizations. Between the moment when someone should be telling her what's happening—and the moment when nobody is.
She clocks movement at street level. Too coordinated to be panic. Too sloppy to be professional.
"Reynolds," she says into her mic. "Talk to me."
A beat.
Then: "I'm here," his voice cuts in, distorted but real. "You seeing this?"
"I'm seeing enough," Nyra replies. "Where's intel?"
"Delayed."
Of course it is.
Nyra fires again, this time deliberately. The figure drops. The crowd screams louder.
The principal's door opens.
"Get back inside!" Nyra shouts, spinning, arm outstretched.
She slams the door shut herself and signals the driver with two sharp motions.
Move. Now.

The vehicle lurches forward. The rest of the motorcade scrambles to follow, formation breaking and reforming in real time.

Nyra jogs alongside for half a block before ducking into the trailing vehicle, breath steady, adrenaline tight but contained. Her earpiece crackles back to life.

“Threat neutralized,” someone says—too late, too clean.

Nyra stares straight ahead.

“That wasn’t the threat,” she says quietly.

“Agent Jones—”

“That wasn’t why this went loud,” she repeats. “Run the matrix again.”

A pause. Longer than it should be.

“We’re… having trouble aligning sources,” the voice finally admits.

Nyra exhales through her nose.

Dead zone.

She leans back against the seat, weapon still in hand, eyes tracking reflections in the glass. The city slides past like nothing happened. Like this was just another afternoon.

But Nyra knows better.

Someone wanted confusion.

Someone wanted delay.

Someone wanted her operating without a net.

And whoever they are—they just learned something important.

So did she.

Nyra Jones closes her eyes for half a second, then opens them.

“After-action at my desk,” she says. “Full access.”

There’s hesitation on the line.

“Agent—”

“Do it,” she says. “Or I will.”
The line goes quiet.
Nyra looks out at the city again, pulse finally slowing.
She didn’t fail the mission.
She didn’t miss the shot.
But she stepped into a space where rules don’t protect you—and silence decides outcomes.
Whatever this was, it wasn’t random.
And it sure as hell wasn’t over.

2

After-Action Lies

The room smells like burnt coffee and recycled air.

Nyra clocks that before she clocks the faces.

After-action briefings are designed to feel neutral. Beige walls. Frosted glass. Chairs that don't squeak. Nothing sharp enough to distract from the story that's about to be agreed upon.

Agreed upon—not necessarily true.

"Walk us through it," Reynolds says, already halfway into the chair at the head of the table. He doesn't look tired. That bothers her more than if he did.

Nyra stays standing.

"First shot came from elevated left," she says. "Unconfirmed shooter. Crowd density high. Counter didn't respond on time."

Maya Torres flips a page on her tablet. Too fast.

"Counter did respond," Maya says. "There was a delay in your feed, Agent Jones. We have logs."

Nyra turns her head just enough to look at her.

"Show me," she says.

Maya hesitates. Not long. But long enough.

Ruth Keller's voice cuts in through the speaker, calm but tight. "There was a signal degradation at 14:06. Not a total loss. Just enough to scramble priority channels."

Nyra nods. "Dead zone."

Reynolds frowns. "We don't use that term."

"I do," Nyra says. "Because that's what it was."

Silence settles. It's the wrong kind—the kind that waits to see who blinks first.
Reynolds clears his throat. "You neutralized a suspect."
"Yes."
"Ballistics are pending."
"Then don't call him a suspect yet," Nyra says. "Call him a variable."
Maya's jaw tightens. "You fired without confirmation."
Nyra finally sits. Slow. Deliberate. "I fired because he didn't belong where he was standing and he moved when the first shot didn't land."
"That's not protocol."
"No," Nyra agrees. "That's judgment."
Reynolds raises a hand. "Enough. The principal is safe. That's what matters."
Nyra studies him. "That's what matters now."
Ruth's voice returns. "I've been cross-checking the threat matrix. There's interference. Requests that should've auto-cleared didn't."
"From where?" Nyra asks.
Another pause.
"Multiple sources," Ruth says carefully. "Inter-agency."
Nyra exhales through her nose. There it is.
Dead zones don't happen by accident. They happen when too many people touch the same wire and pretend they didn't feel the shock.
Reynolds stands. "We're done here. We'll finalize the report and move on."
Nyra doesn't move.
"With respect," she says, "that report is already lying."
Reynolds' eyes harden. "Careful."
"About what?" Nyra asks. "The facts or the optics?"

Maya closes her tablet. “You’re implying coordination without evidence.”
Nyra leans back, folds her arms. “I’m implying intent.
Evidence comes later.”
“That’s not how this works.”
Nyra smiles faintly. “It is when it already did.”
The room goes quiet again. This time, nobody rushes to fill it.
Reynolds finally speaks. “Stand down, Agent Jones.”
Nyra rises. “I will. After I pull everything tied to that delay.”
“You don’t have clearance.”
She meets his gaze. “Then stop me.”
He doesn’t.
She leaves the room with the distinct sense that she’s just crossed an invisible line—one that won’t be mentioned in any report.
Her phone vibrates as she steps into the corridor.
Unknown number.
She stops, thumb hovering, then pockets it without looking.
Keeps walking. Lets whoever it is sit with the silence for once.
The hallway smells like disinfectant and bad decisions.
Somewhere behind her, a door closes. Somewhere ahead, someone is already rewriting what just happened.
Nyra rounds the corner, slows only when she’s out of sight, and finally checks the screen.
No missed calls.
No follow-ups.
Just one draft message, unsent.
She deletes it without reading.
Dead zones don’t announce themselves. They don’t threaten. They don’t posture. They let you do the work and then decide whether to close around you.

Nyra adjusts her jacket, straightens her posture, and keeps moving.
If today was a test, she passed.
The question now wasn't who set it up.
It was what they expected her to do next.
And whether they'd planned for the fact that she doesn't stay where she's placed.

3

Pressure Test

Nyra doesn't go home.

That's the rule after a compromised operation: don't return to places that expect you to be something else. She takes the long way instead—two trains, a walk, a bar that doesn't ask questions because it doesn't care enough to remember faces.

The stool is cold. She likes that.

"Whiskey," she says. "Neat."

The bartender nods, pours without comment, slides the glass over like he's done this before with people who don't linger.

Nyra doesn't drink it right away. She lets the smell rise, lets her pulse settle into something deliberate.

Pressure tests don't start in briefing rooms. They start after—when adrenaline drains and instinct takes over.

Someone watched her today.

Not surveillance. Evaluation.

She takes a sip. Burn first. Then calm. Exactly as expected.

Her phone sits face-down on the bar. If it rings, she wants to feel it before she sees it. Order matters.

"You look like you had a day," a voice says to her right.

Nyra doesn't turn. "I look like I paid cash."

A short laugh. Male. Controlled.

"Fair," he says. "You waiting on someone?"

"No," Nyra replies. "I'm avoiding them."

That earns a pause. She finally glances over.

He’s attractive in a way that won’t age badly. No obvious tells. Hands steady. Eyes alert but not predatory. Someone who knows where exits are without advertising it.
Not the point—but not nothing.
“Long day?” he asks.
“Ended early,” she says.
He nods. “Those are worse.”
She takes another sip, slower this time. The edge in her chest tightens, then settles. Focus replaces fatigue.
Her phone vibrates.
Once.
She doesn’t touch it.
The man notices anyway. Of course he does.
“You gonna check that?” he asks.
“In a minute,” Nyra says. “If it deserves me.”
That makes him smile. Just a little.
She lets the silence stretch. Lets him decide whether to fill it.
He doesn’t.
Good.
The phone vibrates again. Same cadence. Insistent.
Nyra flips it over.
Unknown number.
No message. Just a missed call.
She stands, drains the glass in one smooth motion, and leaves cash on the bar.
The man watches her rise. “Guess you found who you were avoiding.”
“Yeah,” she says. “Turns out they’re persistent.”
He opens his mouth—maybe to ask for her number, maybe to offer his. It doesn’t matter.
She’s already walking away.

Outside, the city hums—warm, careless, pretending nothing sharp is moving underneath it.
Nyra answers the call.
“Agent Jones,” a voice says. Neutral. Professional. No warmth, no apology.
“You’re calling my personal number,” she replies.
“Yes.”
“Then say something worth it.”
A pause. Calculated.
“Today wasn’t about the principal,” the voice says. “You know that now.”
“I knew it then,” Nyra says. “That’s why everyone’s uncomfortable.”
Another pause.
“You operated effectively without guidance,” the voice continues. “We needed to see if you would.”
Nyra stops walking.
“So you watched,” she says.
“That wasn’t the test.”
“Then what was?”
Whether you’d wait for permission…
or start moving on your own.”
Nyra’s expression doesn’t change.
“You should stop calling me,” she says. “I don’t like being assessed.”
“We’ll be in touch.”
“No,” Nyra corrects. “You’ll be watching. If you’re smart.”
The line goes dead.
She stands there a moment longer, letting the city noise rush back in, feeling the familiar internal click as something locks into place.

This isn’t about a single delay.
It isn’t about one bad op.
It’s about whether she’s still just an agent—
or whether she’s becoming a problem.
Nyra tucks the phone away and keeps walking.
If someone wants to test her limits, they picked the wrong quiet day.
Because now she’s paying attention.
And she doesn’t miss twice.

4

Dead Drop

The assignment comes in wrapped like a favor.

Nyra clocks that immediately.

It's too clean. Too polite. A midday brief pushed to her secure tablet with the kind of language that pretends nothing went wrong yesterday. No raised flags. No sharp edges. Just procedure.

Protective advance. Low profile. Short window.

She reads it once. Then again slower.

The location is wrong.

Not dangerous—off. The kind of place you pick when you want coverage without scrutiny. Public enough to justify bodies. Quiet enough to blur accountability.

Nyra forwards the brief to Ruth Keller with one line:

Run it sideways.

Ruth responds thirty seconds later.

Already did. Don't like it.

Nyra smiles faintly and keeps walking.

She doesn't head to the garage. She takes the stairs instead, phone in hand, jacket half-on, moving like she's late to something harmless. Somewhere between floors three and four, she pulls the dead handset from her pocket—the one she keeps for when she doesn't want timestamps.

No signal. No record.

She makes the call anyway.

It rings once.

Then answers.

“You’re fast,” the voice says. Different from last night. Older. Calmer. Used to being obeyed.
“You’re sloppy,” Nyra replies. “This assignment is dressed like a favor and smells like a leash.”
A pause. Not surprised. Amused.
“Stand down, Agent Jones.”
Nyra keeps descending. “I will. After I know who wrote it.”
“That’s above your clearance.”
“Then you should’ve sent someone else.”
Silence stretches. She hits the landing and stops.
“This isn’t personal,” the voice says.
Nyra exhales. “That’s usually when it is.”
The call disconnects.
Nyra doesn’t bother putting the phone away. She drops it into the stairwell trash like it never existed and keeps moving.
By the time she reaches the street, Ruth’s second message is waiting on her secure line.
Matrix cross-check flagged an old vendor. Shells on shells. Name popped twice. Buried deep. Roman L—
The message cuts off.
Nyra stops mid-step.
There it is.
Not a name yet. Not officially. Just the echo of something she remembers from a different life—different briefings, different stakes. A man who never stood in the room but always shaped it.
She types back:
Send nothing else. Walk away.
A beat.
Copy. Be careful.
Nyra slips the phone into her pocket and heads for the garage.

She takes her own car.
No lights. No siren. No witness trail.
The drop location is a small plaza that pretends it's decorative. Benches. Water feature. A bronze plaque no one reads. The kind of place that cameras love because nothing ever happens there.
Nyra parks across the street and watches.
Seven minutes pass.
Then a man sits on the bench.
Mid-forties. Nondescript. Jacket zipped too high for the weather. He doesn't look around. Doesn't check his phone. Doesn't fidget.
Professional.
Nyra crosses the street like she belongs there, heels measured, posture relaxed. She sits at the far end of the bench, just close enough.
"Wrong spot," she says quietly.
The man doesn't turn his head. "You weren't invited."
Nyra smiles. "Funny. I got the assignment."
A breath. Controlled.
"They're testing you," he says. "Seeing how much noise you make."
Nyra leans back, crosses her legs. "And you?"
"I'm here to see if you listen."
She glances at him now. "To who?"
His eyes finally meet hers. Sharp. Assessing.
"To history," he says.
Nyra stands.
"That's not an answer," she says. "And I don't sit for lectures."
She walks away without waiting to see if he follows.
He doesn't.
That's the point.

Back in her car, Nyra starts the engine and lets it idle.
Three things are now undeniable:
The assignment was bait.
Someone is measuring her independence.
Roman Lynch is no longer a closed file—just a patient one.
Nyra pulls into traffic, calm settling over her like armor.
They wanted to see if she'd wait.
They wanted to see if she'd ask permission.
Instead, she moved.
Instead, she listened—and ignored.
Jane Bond doesn't explode rooms.
She walks through them, takes what she needs, and leaves everyone else wondering what just shifted.
And something has.
Nyra Jones isn't being recruited.
She's being activated.

5

Contact Front

The first thing Nyra does is pull her people in close.

Not a meeting. Not a briefing. A check-in that pretends it's routine.

Reynolds answers on the second ring. Of course he does.

"You taking the assignment?" he asks, like the answer isn't already written into the tone of her voice.

"I'm staging," Nyra says. "Low visibility. I want Parker driving."

A beat. "That's not what the brief—"

"—calls for," Nyra finishes. "I know. That's why I want him."

Silence. Then a breath.

"Done," Reynolds says. "You get one deviation."

Nyra ends the call before he can regret it.

Cole Parker's text comes in next.

You driving or riding?

She smiles.

Driving. Bring the boring car.

Always do.

Ruth Keller joins on comms ten minutes later, voice steady but tuned sharp.

"I'm seeing movement around the plaza," Ruth says. "Not obvious. Not clean. Looks like a probe."

"Who owns the cameras?" Nyra asks.

"That's the problem," Ruth replies. "Nobody wants to admit they do."

Nyra adjusts her jacket, checks her weapon, and steps into the garage where Parker's already waiting—engine off, eyes up, posture loose but ready.

"You got that look," he says.

"I always have that look," Nyra replies. "Today it's earned."

They roll out without lights, slipping into traffic like a rumor. Nyra watches reflections more than roads, reading the city the way she was trained to—what's normal, what's off, what's trying too hard.

Maya Torres cuts in on the secure channel.

"Just got pinged by DHS," she says. "They're suddenly very interested in your location."

Nyra exhales. "Of course they are."

"Do you want me to slow them down?"

"Yes," Nyra says. "And lie creatively."

A pause. Then: "Copy."

The plaza comes into view.

Same benches. Same water feature. Same nothing-happening energy.

Too clean.

Parker circles once, slow, casual.

"There," he says. "Second-story window. No curtains. No reflection."

Nyra clocks it. "That's our eye."

Her phone buzzes. Secure line.

Ruth's voice tightens. "Nyra—signals are degrading again. Smaller radius this time."

"Dead zone," Nyra says. "Localized."

Parker's grip tightens on the wheel. "That's new."

"No," Nyra replies. "That's deliberate."

The first shot cracks before anyone finishes the sentence.

Glass shatters. Not near them—behind. A distraction shot.

Nyra's door is already open.
"Parker, peel south," she snaps. "Reynolds, lock down the perimeter. Maya, kill external feeds now."
She's moving before confirmation comes back, weapon up, body low, eyes hunting the second shooter she knows is there.
This isn't an ambush.
It's a test run.
Someone wants to see:
who reacts
who hesitates
who breaks formation
Nyra fires once—controlled, precise—toward a muzzle flash that flickers and disappears.
"Contact right!" Parker shouts over comms.
"I see him," Nyra says. "He's not ours."
That's when she knows.
This isn't a hit.
This isn't protection.
This is pressure—applied just hard enough to watch the seams.
Sirens bloom in the distance. Too fast. Too coordinated.
Reynolds' voice cuts in. "Jones, fall back!"
Nyra doesn't argue.
She moves—clean, fast—back into the car as Parker punches the accelerator. They vanish into traffic as the plaza fills with uniforms who arrived exactly when they were supposed to.
Nyra watches the rearview, jaw set, pulse steady.
"They weren't trying to kill anyone," Parker says.
"No," Nyra agrees. "They were counting."
Ruth's voice comes back, low and unsettled. "Nyra… someone just accessed my system. Read-only. Left no trace."

Nyra leans back, eyes forward.
Roman doesn’t send soldiers anymore.
He sends questions.
And today, her team answered them.
Nyra keys the mic.
“Alright,” she says calmly. “Now we stop reacting.”
She looks at Parker, then at the city sliding past.
“Now we make it expensive.”

6

Soft Target

Ruth Keller notices the difference before anyone says anything.

It's not the system—that's still clean.

Not the logs—they still reconcile.

It's the pace.

Requests that used to clear in seconds now stall just long enough to feel intentional. Permissions loop back on themselves. Data packets hesitate like they're waiting for approval that never comes.

Someone is standing on the hose.

Ruth doesn't flag it right away. That's instinct, not fear. You don't scream when you're being tested—you measure.

She's halfway through a backdoor trace when her phone rings.

Not secure.

Not masked.

A normal number.

She lets it ring twice before answering.

"Ruth Keller."

"Ms. Keller," a man says. Polite. Calm. The voice of someone who has never needed to raise it. "I'm calling regarding a discrepancy in your federal clearance file."

Her stomach tightens. Just a little.

"I haven't been notified of any issues," she says.

"That's why I'm calling," the man replies. "We like to resolve things informally when possible."

Ruth swivels her chair, eyes on the glass wall of her office. Reflections everywhere. No one listening. That doesn't help.
"What discrepancy?" she asks.
"A travel overlap," he says. "Two years ago. Berlin. A conference you attended while technically assigned to a domestic desk."
"That was approved."
"Verbally," the man says. "Paperwork is… ambiguous."
There it is.
Ruth exhales slowly. "If this is about Agent Jones—"
"This isn't about anyone in particular," the man cuts in gently. "It's about patterns. Associations. Risk."
Ruth's fingers curl against the desk.
"Are you threatening me?" she asks.
A soft chuckle. "No, Ms. Keller. Threats are crude. I'm offering you an opportunity to be sensible."
She glances at her monitor. A notification blinks—access denied.
Her pulse jumps.
"You'll notice," the man continues, "that some of your systems may feel… sluggish today. Temporary. Correctable."
Ruth closes her eyes for half a second.
"What do you want?" she asks.
"Distance," he says. "Silence. For now."
The line goes dead.
Ruth stares at the phone, then at her screen. Three more access denials stack quietly in the corner.
She doesn't panic.
She documents everything—offline. Old habit. She writes the number down by hand, then shreds the paper and memorizes it anyway.

Then she stands, grabs her jacket, and leaves her office without logging out.

Nyra is in the garage when Ruth finds her, leaning against Parker's car, arms folded, expression unreadable.

"You get leaned on," Nyra says. Not a question.

Ruth nods once. "Phone call. Clearance bullshit. Berlin."

Nyra's jaw tightens. "They touched your access."

"Lightly," Ruth says. "They wanted me to notice."

Nyra pushes off the car. "They want me to react."

"Are you going to?" Ruth asks.

Nyra meets her eyes. "No."

That surprises Ruth.

Nyra continues, voice calm. "I'm going to adjust."

Parker glances between them. "Adjust how?"

Nyra keys her mic. "Reynolds. They're squeezing Keller."

Static. Then: "I figured."

"Good," Nyra says. "Because I'm pulling her off visible ops."

Ruth stiffens. "Nyra—"

"I need you intact," Nyra says. "Not brave. Not defiant. Intact."

Ruth studies her, then nods. "Then I want something."

"Name it."

"Permission to keep digging," Ruth says. "Quietly. Where they're not looking."

Nyra smiles. Sharp. Proud.

"Granted," she says. "Off-books. You report only to me."

Ruth exhales, some of the tension bleeding off.

"Then they picked the wrong person," she says.

Nyra looks out at the concrete, the shadows, the cars coming and going like nothing matters.

"They always do," she replies. "Once."

She straightens, decision made.

"They leaned on you," Nyra says. "That means we're close."

Parker opens the driver's door. "What's next?"
Nyra steps into the car, eyes forward.
"Now," she says, "we see who else bends."

7

Counterweight

Nyra changes clothes.

Not because she needs to—but because she wants the room to recalibrate when she walks into it.

Black jacket. Tailored. No insignia. The kind of outfit that says authority without permission. Hair down tonight—not careless, just intentional. A subtle shift. Enough to make people reassess their footing.

She enters the bullpen without announcing herself.

Maya Torres notices first. Of course she does.

“You look… off-duty,” Maya says, eyes flicking up and down just once. Professional, but curious.

Nyra smiles. Slow. Controlled. “I’m never off-duty.”

Reynolds clears his throat from the glass office. “Jones. In here.”

Nyra walks in like she owns the door.

Reynolds doesn’t invite her to sit. She doesn’t wait.

“You’re getting heat,” he says. “Internal. Quiet.”

“Good,” Nyra replies. “Means they’re nervous.”

Reynolds watches her for a beat. “You’re enjoying this.”

“No,” Nyra says. “I’m counting.”

He leans forward. “Cassian Trude asked about you today.”

There it is.

Nyra tilts her head. “That’s interesting.”

“He wanted to know who you’re loyal to.”

Nyra lets a small laugh slip. Not amused—dangerous.

“That’s a stupid question,” she says. “I don’t work for people.”

Reynolds exhales. “You’re making waves.”
Nyra steps closer. Lowers her voice. “You’re letting them.”
Silence stretches between them—charged now. Not hostile. Intimate in the way only power struggles can be.
Reynolds finally says, “Maya’s being approached.”
Nyra’s eyes flick, sharp. “How?”
“Softly. Career stuff. Future stuff.”
Nyra nods once. “She hasn’t folded.”
“Not yet.”
Nyra straightens. Decision made.

Maya finds Nyra on the roof an hour later.
City lights spill across the concrete like spilled secrets. Wind lifts Nyra’s hair, frames her face. Maya hesitates—just for a second—before stepping closer.
“You wanted to see me?” Maya asks.
Nyra doesn’t turn right away. “They talk to you yet?”
Maya swallows. “Yes.”
“Did you answer?”
“Not really.”
Nyra turns now. Studies her. Measures the micro-tension in her shoulders, the slight over-control in her posture.
“Do you want to?” Nyra asks.
Maya blinks. “What?”
“Do you want what they’re offering?” Nyra says. “Fast-track. Clean slate. Distance from me.”
Maya exhales. “It’s tempting.”
Nyra steps closer. Not crowding. Inviting.
“Say it again,” Nyra says softly.
Maya meets her gaze. “It’s tempting.”
Nyra nods. “Good. Then you’re honest.”
Maya frowns. “That’s… good?”

“Yes,” Nyra says. “Because dishonest people fold quietly. Honest ones make choices.”
Maya hesitates. “What if I don’t choose you?”
Nyra smiles. Not offended. Not threatened.
“Then I’ll protect you anyway,” she says. “Because that’s the job.”
That lands harder than any threat.
Maya laughs under her breath. “You’re unbelievable.”
Nyra leans in just enough to lower the temperature between them.
“I know,” she says. “That’s why they’re scared.”
Maya straightens. “What do you need from me?”
Nyra turns back toward the city. “I need you to listen. Take their meetings. Smile. Let them think they’re winning.”
Maya’s eyes widen. “You want me to pretend to fold.”
“I want you to gather,” Nyra corrects. “They lean. We counterweight.”
Maya nods slowly. “And when they figure it out?”
Nyra’s smile returns. Sharp as a blade.
“They won’t,” she says. “They’re too busy watching me.”
Maya looks at her—really looks.
“You’re dangerous,” she says.
Nyra’s voice drops. “Only to people who underestimate women who don’t ask permission.”
Below them, the city keeps breathing. Traffic flows. Windows glow.
The machine hums.
Nyra steps away from the edge, already moving.
“Welcome to the game,” she says. “Now let’s see who else thinks they’re in control.”

8

False Yield

Maya doesn't wait long to take the meeting.

That's the trick—hesitation reads as resistance. Speed reads as interest.

She schedules it during lunch, off-campus, neutral café, all glass and white noise. Nyra doesn't join her. That would poison the well. Instead, Nyra watches the ripples from a distance—Ruth ghosting metadata, Parker idling three blocks away, Reynolds pretending not to know what's happening.

Cassian Trude arrives exactly on time.

Polished. Relaxed. Suit that costs more than it needs to. The kind of man who never raises his voice because people lean in anyway.

"Ms. Torres," Cassian says, smiling like this is a favor he's doing for her. "Thank you for coming."

Maya mirrors the smile. "You said it was informal."

"It is," Cassian replies. "That's why we're not at the office."

They sit. Coffee arrives. Cassian doesn't touch his.

"I'll be direct," he says. "You're talented. You're also attached to someone drawing attention she doesn't need."

Maya tilts her head. "Agent Jones?"

Cassian nods. "She's… effective. But effectiveness isn't always aligned with longevity."

Maya lets that hang. "You're offering me longevity."

"I'm offering you insulation," Cassian says. "Distance. A path that doesn't involve collateral."

Maya hesitates—just enough. Not too much.

“And if I don’t take it?” she asks.
Cassian smiles. “Then nothing happens. That’s the beauty of choice.”
Across town, Nyra watches a live transcript scroll across Ruth’s secure display.
“Pretty,” Nyra mutters. “He always sounds reasonable.”
Ruth nods. “He’s framing you as the variable.”
“Good,” Nyra says. “Let him.”
Back at the café, Cassian slides a folder across the table. Thin. Tasteful. Almost empty.
“Think about it,” he says. “No pressure.”
Maya doesn’t open it. She doesn’t push it back either.
“I will,” she says.
Cassian stands, satisfied. “You should know—this conversation never happened.”
Maya smiles. “Of course.”
He leaves.
The moment he’s gone, Maya exhales and taps her earpiece once.
Nyra’s voice comes in low. “You did great.”
“I hate him,” Maya says.
Nyra smiles. “That’s how you know it’s working.”
Ruth cuts in. “Heads up—Cassian just made a call. Encrypted. Short.”
“Who to?” Nyra asks.
Ruth’s fingers fly. “Shell relay… offshore… wait—”
She stops.
Nyra’s jaw tightens. “Say it.”
“Roman-adjacent infrastructure,” Ruth says. “Old channels. Dormant until now.”
Nyra leans back, eyes closing for half a second.
So that’s the move.

Cassian doesn’t pull the trigger. He opens the door.
Nyra keys her mic. “Parker.”
“Yeah.”
“Shift position. We’re not in defense anymore.”
Parker grins, unseen. “About time.”
Nyra opens her eyes.
They leaned.
She countered.
Now the board is awake.
“Alright,” she says calmly. “Let’s see who flinches first.”

9

Break Glass

It goes loud the way real things do.
Not with a warning. Not with drama.
With a mistake.
Ruth hears it first—an anomaly that doesn't belong, a permissions spike that pretends to be routine. Someone pings a node they shouldn't even know exists. It's subtle. It's arrogant.
"Nyra," Ruth says, already rerouting. "They just tripped a legacy sensor."
Nyra doesn't ask where. She's already moving. "Who?"
"Can't tell yet," Ruth replies. "But it's not Cassian's style."
Nyra keys the mic. "Parker—stage."
The response is immediate. "Already rolling."
Maya cuts in from the café, breath controlled. "Cassian's assistant just canceled my follow-up. No reason given."
Nyra smiles. "Because they just lost patience."
She takes the stairs two at a time. Jacket on. Weapon checked. The building hums like nothing's wrong, which means everything is.
Ruth's voice tightens. "Multiple pings now. They're brute-forcing. Sloppy."
"That's bait," Nyra says. "They want us chasing ghosts."
"Or they want us watching the wrong door," Maya adds.
Nyra stops at the landing. "Exactly."
She changes direction.

The service garage opens into a narrow alley—trash bins, steam, echo. Parker's car slides in like it was summoned, engine low, lights dead.

"Where to?" Parker asks.

Nyra's eyes track the street. "The place no one should touch."

Ruth inhales. "Nyra—if they hit that node—"

"They go from pressure to provocation," Nyra finishes. "Which means we answer."

They move.

Traffic parts the way it does for people who look like they belong. Parker drives smooth, fast enough to matter, slow enough not to advertise. Sirens bloom somewhere else—on purpose.

Ruth's feed lights up. "Contact. Physical. Three. No insignia."

Nyra leans forward. "Describe."

"Two mobile. One static. Weapons concealed."

"Roman," Nyra says softly. "He sends questions first."

The car brakes hard.

Nyra's door is open before it stops.

"Parker—contain the perimeter. Maya—kill the chatter."

"Copy," Maya says. "Feeds dropping now."

Nyra moves through steam and shadow, weapon up, senses narrowed. The static hum in her ear spikes—localized interference. Dead zone, tight radius.

There.

A man pivots too late.

Nyra fires once. Center mass. Controlled. He drops like a sentence ending.

The second man runs. Bad choice.

Parker's engine roars, blocks the exit. Tires scream. The runner stumbles.

Nyra's on him in seconds, knee down, weapon trained.

“Who sent you?” she asks.
He laughs. Shaky. Brave in the wrong way. “You already know.”
She fires. The laugh stops.
Silence rushes in, loud as gunfire.
Ruth exhales. “Nyra… someone just pulled the node. Hard.”
“Too late,” Nyra says. “We’re already here.”
Sirens rise—closer now. Real ones. The kind that come when things have crossed the line.
Nyra steps back into the car. Parker’s already moving.
“Casualties?” Maya asks.
“Two,” Nyra replies. “Answers pending.”
Ruth’s voice steadies. “They wanted escalation.”
Nyra watches the city slide past, jaw set, pulse even. “They got visibility instead.”
A beat.
“Roman won’t like this,” Maya says.
Nyra smiles—small, lethal. “Good.”
She keys the mic one last time. “All units—reset. We don’t hide.”
The car disappears into traffic.
They didn’t just go loud.
They broke the glass.
And now everyone knows where the sound came from.

10
Dead Zone

She realizes it too late.
That's the thing she'll remember — not the sound, not the smoke, not the report that will later be sanitized into language that absolves everyone. The realization comes afterward, when the sequence finishes running in her head and an alternate branch appears that hadn't been visible in real time.
A five-second window.
A different call.
One step sooner.
He would've lived.
Nyra doesn't stop walking when the thought lands. She doesn't slow down, doesn't turn back, doesn't look for witnesses to share it with. The moment passes through her the way everything does now — acknowledged, cataloged, shelved.
The operation is already closing around her.
Voices come through the comms again, cleaner now. Systems reassert themselves. Authority returns like it always does, pretending it was never gone.
"Unavoidable casualty," someone says later, not to her, but near her. Close enough to count.
Nyra signs nothing. She lets the machinery do what it's built to do: explain death until it sounds like weather.
By the time she's alone again, the dead zone has shifted. It hasn't vanished — just changed hands. She can feel it, the

way you feel pressure change in your ears before anyone says altitude.
She has leverage now.
She also has a name she won't use again.
That's the trade.
She showers longer than necessary. Hot enough to sting. Long enough to erase the day without thinking about it. She dresses in clothes that don't mean anything and leaves the room without checking her phone.
The bar is forgettable. That's why she chose it.
She doesn't flirt. She doesn't wait. She selects.
He's younger than her, nervous in a way that reads as useful. He follows because she's already decided, because confidence at that volume doesn't invite questions. When she touches his wrist, it's not gentle, but it's clear.
Consent is understood. Everything else is logistics.
In the room, she doesn't talk about the day. She doesn't talk at all.
She lets sensation drown out sequence, weight replace memory, movement interrupt the loop trying to restart in her head. Control is easier when it's physical. Simpler. Quieter.
When it's over, she doesn't linger.
She dresses, checks the time, leaves cash he didn't ask for, and walks out while he's still catching up to the moment. By the time the door closes, he's already becoming indistinct.
Nyra steps into the night and feels nothing in particular.
Tomorrow, she'll brief Miles. Not everything. Just enough.
The board has moved. He'll sense it. He always does.
She starts walking, already resetting, already operational again — carrying a dead man, a blind spot, and a truth that will never be spoken.
The city keeps breathing.

So does she.

END



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamary Phillips is a writer, producer, and storyteller whose work spans fiction, audio, and screen-based narratives. His writing often explores power, loyalty, identity, and the moral fractures that emerge inside institutions meant to protect.

He is the founder of **Audible Publishers**, an independent imprint dedicated to original, creator-owned stories designed for cross-media adaptation. *USSS: Dead Zone* is part of an ongoing narrative universe developed under the USSS: Secret Service banner.

Phillips lives and works between Baltimore and the Carolina coast.