SAMPLE

The Smothering Protector

The Personality That Loves by Surveillance

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Chapter 1: The Signature — the Smothering Protector at a Glance

The Telltale Manner

the custody file opens on the manner, because the manner arrives everywhere the bodyguard does, twenty minutes early: the seat chosen to face the door; the route known before the trip; the name of the friend, the friend's parents, the friend's parents' address, collected gently, warmly, before the permission is even asked. The voice is the type's signature instrument: never the drill sergeant's — the file is emphatic about this, and the correction matters; the Menace installs weather, the Protector installs care — the voice is concern in the first degree, running at the exact temperature of love: did you eat; are you warm enough; text me when you arrive; I worry, you know how I am. The questions that are not questions — the answer already known, the checking of the checking; the offers that are not offers — I'll drive you, offered in a tone that has already located the keys; the calendar that fills itself with the beloved's obligations, color-coded, so you don't have to think about it; and the phone — the file marks the phone as the manner's whole museum: the location app installed the day the child turned ten, with the child's consent, the child was happy to, the file notes the happiness and holds it, because the consent was real, and the cage was still a cage, and the happiness was the cage being built in the beloved's own handwriting. the bodyguard's shorthand, collected across every safeguarding in the damage report, and the custody file lets the beloveds have the last word of the manner, because they are the only witnesses positioned correctly to see it: I have never doubted for one second that I was loved. I have also never been alone.

The Backstory Signature

The founding scene is the one failure — and the file finds it by looking, in every case, for the interval. Not the accident; the interval: the eleven seconds, the ordinary afternoon, the moment of ordinary length in which the guard was doing an ordinary thing — answering the door, changing the laundry, sleeping, just once, in the next room — when the guarded one broke. The record's most important finding about the founding, and the type has never once heard it: the world acquitted them. The water took the sibling, not the distraction; the illness took the parent, not the unwatched year; the fall was gravity's, the crash was the other driver's, the door was defective — the courts, the doctors, the family, every tribunal the world convened, looked at the guardian and said the word the type has spent an adulthood refusing to hear: not your fault — and the type overruled them all, convened the only court that counted, and passed the verdict: I blinked. The vow follows within the week — never again — and the signature beat the file marks next is the construction: the perimeter built, quietly, lovingly, over the following years, around whatever loved one the failure left behind or

the future brought in — and the record's finding on the construction, entered with care: the guard never told the beloved about the failure; the beloveds of the record, questioned in adulthood, mostly cannot name the wound at all; they were raised inside an answer to a question nobody would say aloud, and the perimeter was the answer, arriving daily, without explanation, for their whole childhood.

The Childhood Album

the custody file keeps five photographs, and the album, read correctly, is the overdrive's autobiography. In the first, the child in the hospital corridor — the activation from the only angle the bodyguard was old enough to hold: the waiting, the eleven seconds being explained to them by adults, the wrongness of ordinary — and the child's face beginning the arithmetic the vow will one day finish: things break in the intervals; someone has to close the intervals. In the second, the child appointed — the file notes that no one appointed them; the appointment was self-issued, instantly, forever — the watcher now: the sibling's lunch packed with the fear inside it, the seat nearest the pool taken at every party, the bedroom arranged to hear the household breathing at night. In the third, the praise: the adults calling the child so responsible, so mature, such a little mother, such a careful boy — and the file marks the applause the way the last volume marked its own: the cage was awarded, not imposed; the vigil was certified as character; the child was congratulated into the post. In the fourth, the first escape: the sibling, ten years old, caught at the fence, brought back, interrogated with love, held while sobbing, you could have been hurt, do you understand, I couldn't live with it — the guard's whole grammar in one scene: the beloved's own tears processed as evidence of the danger, and the escape, the file notes, was to a neighbor's yard; the perimeter had already widened to the fence line, and would keep widening, for life. And in the fifth, the photograph the custody file keeps last because it is the one the guard never develops: the child asleep — really asleep, once — and the watcher awake beside the bed, at 3 a.m., on watch, happy — because this, the album's caption says plainly, was always the purest hour of the love, and everything the book will have to say about the cost begins here: the happiest the type has ever been was the moment the beloved could not move.

The Type at a Glance

Energy: constant, low-grade alert — the file describes it as a pilot light that never goes out and never becomes the fire; the type sleeps lightly, wakes at sounds, and describes this as just how I am.

Ambition: the flawless perimeter — not a throne, not a fortune: a household in which nothing can go wrong on their watch, which the file notes means a household in which nothing can go anywhere.

Vanity structure: the vanity is located in the rescues — the near-misses caught, the disasters preempted, the beloved alive — and the bodyguard's secret pride, kept where the heart keeps it, is the sentence rehearsed for every court but never spoken: nothing has happened since I started watching; that is because I am watching.

Loyalty: total, unto death, and the damage report's finding cuts both ways: no type in the garrison is more loyal, and no type converts loyalty more completely into jurisdiction — the loyalty arrives and, without anyone voting on it, becomes the law of the household.

Weakness: the unwatched interval — the beloved's independent life is the type's open wound; the sleepover, the road trip, the job in another city are all, in the guard's nervous system, the eleven seconds returning, and the weakness can be marked precisely: the type cannot rest while the beloved is unsupervised, and calls the inability love, which the file both honors and, for ten chapters, corrects.

Unspoken need: to be relieved — for one authorized person to say, and mean, and then prove: I will take the watch for a while; you can blink; nothing will break if you blink — the need held under every check-in for the entire guarded life, and the damage report's finding on why it is never spoken: asking for relief would mean the vigil is a burden, and the vigil being a burden would mean the love is negotiable, which the vow forbids.

The Type in Five Situations

At the airport, the type is two hours early, at the gate before the airline's own staff, with the beloved's boarding pass, passport, and a folder of contingencies — and the file marks the scene the beloveds all describe, because it holds the type's whole grammar: the farewell delivered as a briefing — gate changes, text me at the connection, the hotel number is in the folder, I already checked the neighborhood — and the moment the beloved clears security and the type cannot follow, the record's most precise portrait of the engine idling: standing exactly where the watch ends, phone in hand, at the window, until the plane is a dot — and the beloveds' testimony, same in every case: the farewell was beautiful, and it was also, in the guard's body, a failure of the perimeter, logged as such, and paid for later that night in the sleeplessness.

In the crisis of a stranger, the type is magnificent — the file records it in full, because it is the type's gift and its trap: the bystander's collapse, the fire alarm, the lost child in the supermarket, all handled with the calm of a professional whose entire life has been a rehearsal for exactly this — and the trap is in what the rescue confirms: the competence worked; the world proved watchable; the type walked away with the whole verdict reinforced: see how much worse it goes when nobody is watching — and the file's dry note: the stranger's crisis is the only interval the type can ever stand, because it ends; the watch can be stood down when the ambulance doors close; the beloved's life, the file marks, is the one watch that never ends, which is why the type volunteers for every stranger's emergency in the record and cannot sit through one of the beloved's sleepovers.

At the beloved's milestone — the license, the diploma, the first apartment — the type is proud in the first degree and at war in the second: the milestone is a promotion of the beloved out of the perimeter, and the file's finding, uniform: every celebration of

independence in the record is also, in the guard's ledger, a breach, and the type processes it as such — the graduation celebrated and then followed by the drive to check the new dorm's locks; the first apartment toasted and then equipped, unasked, with cameras; the license granted and then shadowed for three months by two following cars — and the beloveds' testimony on the milestones, the sentence the file books as the type's cost in miniature: every door that opened for me was also a door I had to fight them past.

On being lied to — and the custody file gives this situation its full length, because it is the protector's charter's hinge — the bodyguard is not cold; the bodyguard is devastated: the lie discovered, the interrogation conducted at the temperature of heartbreak, the sentence every beloved in the damage report has heard and the custody file enters as the overdrive's whole confession: I don't care about the rule, I care that you didn't tell me — do you know what I thought? — and the file's finding, which the type has never once been able to look at: the beloveds learned to lie inside the love; the lying was not rebellion, it was engineering — the construction of an unwatched interval in the only way the perimeter permitted — and the record's arithmetic, entered in full: the cage that cannot be left produces liars, and the guards who produce them then cite them, every time, as proof of the danger — you see how they are; I have to watch — the engine writing its own evidence, and the beloveds paying for it in the currency of their own integrity.

At the dinner party, the type is the host who has arranged everything twice and the guest who has reconnoitered the venue once; warm, funny, beloved in the room — and the file marks the phone face-down on the table, buzzing quietly, every twenty minutes, and the type checking it each time with love, because the texts are from the guarded one, and the room knows the watch never ends, and the record's note on the scene, collected from a hundred such evenings: the guard is the life of the party and the party is being patrolled, and everyone can feel both, and no one can say which one is the love, and the file answers, because that is what the file is for: both; it was always both.

Not to Be Confused With

The Devoted Caregiver (Volume 7) — the nearest neighbor and the border the custody file patrols most carefully, because the two types arrive in the same doorway carrying the same casserole. The test is the question, and the file offers it verbatim: what do you need? The Caregiver asks it — of the beloved, of the body, of the actual situation — and then waits, and the answer changes the service; the Protector does not need to ask, because the Protector already knows what is needed, and the answer that arrives is used: filed, compared against the perimeter, converted into tomorrow's watch. The Caregiver's love is a verb aimed at you; the Protector's is a verb aimed at the danger, and you are the thing behind it — and the second test, sharper: when the beloved leaves. The Caregiver waves from the porch, anxious and complete; the Protector follows the taillights — and the custody file's cleanest one-line border, for the shelf and the household: the Caregiver wants you safe; the Protector wants you watched; the tragedy is that the second one feels like more love, right up until the day it

becomes the reason you left.

The Wild Matriarch (Volume 45) — the other warm giant of protection, and the confusion is instructive: the Matriarch protects against the world, standing at the wall, facing outward — the wolf at the door, the bully at the school, the system at the office; the Protector protects against the interval, standing inside the house, facing inward, watching the beloved — and the custody file's placement of the pair: the Matriarch's love makes you brave; the Protector's love makes you careful; the Matriarch arms you and sends you out; the Protector arms you and keeps you in; and the household that has both — the custody file finds it, and the damage report holds it up as the clearest exhibit in the album: one parent at the wall, one at the window — is the household where the children learn, early and forever, which door to leave by.

And the signature custody file closes with the refined field check the protection roster has waited the whole garrison to deploy, because the loving watch defeats every ordinary instrument — the bodyguard reads as devoted at first contact and as armed by the second year, and the seam in between has never been measured — and the refined check is run not at the checkpoints but at the relief: watch what happens when the beloved arrives safely, and time the guard's recovery. the technician's log of a recorded safeguarding: the bodyguard at forty-four, the perimeter certified at three decades — and the instrument is the ordinary lateness, deliberately punched: the bystander, twenty minutes delayed on a known route, the phone silent, the bodyguard at the window — and the protection roster's readings, taken at minute twenty: the pacing, the route rehearsed aloud, the keys already in the fist, the whole architecture of the rescue loaded and two minutes from deployment — and then the headlights. And the technician's key telltale whir, the one the toolbox has waited the whole fortress to log: the arrival does not end the watch. The record should mark it plainly: the beloved, in the door, safe, whole, explaining the traffic — and the guard's readings, taken at arrival-plus-ninety-seconds: still elevated. The relief, overhauled on the instruments, takes eleven minutes to land — and the bodyguard, in the custody file's plainest grammar, does not greet the arrival; the guard inspects it — the face checked, the route re-narrated, the traffic story verified against the known delays, the phone examined with a smile for the last signal — and only then, at minute eleven, does the fist open — and the instrument's finding, overhauled across a hundred guard shifts, is the field check's whole discovery: the Protector is the only constitution in the garrison whose relief is slower than the fear — the vigil, once armed, does not stand down on evidence; it stands down on schedule — and the beloved's exit interviews, the protection roster's collected set, converge on the sentence the custody file has waited a generation to log: "I could always tell when the watch was over — it was always about ten minutes after I was already home." And the check's one measurement, aimed past the relief at the cost underneath: who has ever guarded the guard? the protection roster ran it across the guard shifts: the beloved's arrivals, tracked and inspected, in the punched decade — thousands; the bodyguard's own arrivals, asked about by anyone, in the same decade — never once punched — and the field check's one-line finding: the vigil points outward, always, in one direction — the guard at the window at 1 a.m., awake so the beloved can sleep, has never once, in

the file's whole history, been asked who stays awake for him — and the eleven minutes, the record certifies with its driest care, are the whole engine in miniature: the watch was never for the beloved; the beloved was what the watch pointed at — and the peace it kept was the guard's own, signed with a wound, paid for in sleeplessness, with nobody at this window at all.

Chapter 2: The Core — The One Failure and the Vow

Every engine in this garrison runs on a activation, and the Smothering Protector's is the only one the custody file has ever described as a verdict — handed down in the world's most biased court, by the only judge the bodyguard will ever accept: the wounded self, ruling on the eleven seconds.

The scene itself, the file finds, is never grand. That is its signature: the failure is ordinary — an interval of ordinary length, during an ordinary task, in an ordinary week. The beloved was in the next room; the water was shallow; the stove was off; the door was closed; the guard checked twice that day — and the world broke anyway, in the one interval the guard did not choose to watch, and the file's first finding on the founding is the one the type has spent an adulthood declining to hear: the interval was not the cause. The water took the child; the disease took the parent; the other driver took the family car; the guard's eleven seconds did not summon any of it — the world's own tribunals said so, the doctors said so, the grieving spouse said so, and the guard overruled every one of them, because the guard had discovered the one sentence the record finds in every case, the sentence that ignites the engine and then fuels it for life: I could have stopped it. Not would have — the file notes the grammar with care — could have: possibility, total and unfalsifiable, the perfect fuel, because a possibility can never be disproven, and the guard has been burning it, cleanly and forever, ever since.

The vow follows within the week, and the file marks it as the engine's ignition proper: never again. The vow is never spoken to the beloved — it is private, signed in the corridor or the kitchen, witnessed by no one — and its content, unpacked honestly, is the whole book: I will never blink again; the intervals will close; the watch is permanent; the beloved will be watched until the beloved is no longer breakable, or until the beloved is no longer — and the vow's silent last clause, the file enters it because the record's guards cannot, and it explains everything the household will one day suffer: the vow has no end condition, because the end condition was buried with the failure, and the guard built the watch on top of it.

The loop that keeps the overdrive running is the custody file's central finding on this type, and it is the most ingenious loop in the garrison: the watch works by absence. The Protectors do not get rewards; they get no news — and no news is booked, every single day, as proof of the watch: the beloved survived the day; the perimeter held; the vigil is working — and the file's note on the loop's dark half: the absence has a confound that the guard can never see and the record can — the beloved was never in the danger the vigil was designed for — but the confound is invisible by construction, because the counterfactual world where the beloved is unwatched and still fine is the

one world the watch forbids, and so the engine runs on data it manufactures itself: nothing happened; therefore I am necessary; therefore nothing will be allowed to happen; and the guard, at 1 a.m., at the window, gets to feel the only peace the type ever knows — the peace of the verified household — and cannot be told that the verification is the peace of a sentry guarding a field the war left years ago.

And the loop's hidden load completes the map, and the custody file holds it here for eight chapters, because it is the answer to the question the last volume's shelf asked and this volume's whole interior turns on: what is the vigil protecting? The beloved is what the vigil points at. What the vigil protects is the guard — from the return of the eleven seconds; from the corridor; from the verdict's appeal, which the guard cannot permit because the appeal would mean the failure was survivable, and if the failure was survivable then the vow was optional, and if the vow was optional then the guarded life — the beloved's whole childhood, the bystander's mapped mileage, the child's phone with the consent — was for nothing the world can call necessary; and the custody file enters the overdrive's whole tragedy in one line, and lets it stand for the cost chapters to come: the vigil was never a wall around the beloved; it was a wall around the eleven seconds — and the beloved has spent a lifetime living inside someone else's wound, loved with a completeness the damage report rarely finds, and guarded with a closeness the damage report never once saw the guard choose.

The core custody file closes with the exhibit the grown safeguardings finally surfaced, because the vow was sworn against a specific failure, and the protection roster finally got the interview the fortress was missing: the one who broke. the safeguarding: the Protector at fifty-one, the perimeter certified at three decades — and the protection roster's interview with the bodyguard's younger brother: the one who was there the day of the failure. His account, offered at forty-eight, when the protection roster read the activation back to him, and the transcript is hardwired in full because the overdrive's origin has never before been described by the beloved it was sworn for: "the damage report should have that day exactly, because everything hangs off it: we were on the lake. the custody file has the geography — the dock, the July, the two of us unsupervised because our mother was working doubles — and the protection roster will want the activation afternoon, and I'll give it honestly, because I have had forty years to find the exact truth of it: I was eight, and he was eleven, and he looked away. That is the whole failure, and the record should have it plainly: eleven years old, charged with me, and he blinked — the eleven seconds, the file calls them — he turned to take the sandwich out of the bag, and I went off the dock, and the water was over my head, and the forty seconds it took him to reach me are the forty seconds my brother has been standing in ever since. And the record should log what the founding actually installed, because the file has mispriced it for decades: he saved me. Pulled me out, coughing, whole — a drowned boy, restored, and the physical finding, which the toolbox should mark with everything it has: I was fine. Crying, coughing, fine — and my brother looked at me on the dock and the damage report should have his sentence, verbatim, because it is the vow's whole anatomy and I heard it: 'never again.' And the toolbox should log what he did with the vow, because it is the overdrive's whole engineering: he never blinked again. Not at me — not once, for forty

years: the curfew that followed me into my twenties, the phone calls on the schedule, the window light I could see from three streets away, the whole beloved's life arranged into a defensible perimeter — and the damage report should log the arithmetic, because it is the activation's cold finding: the drowning lasted forty seconds. The vigil has lasted forty years — and the perimeter, the census should understand the engineering, was never calibrated to me: it was calibrated to the eleven seconds — the blink, the verdict, the corridor — and I, the beloved, was never the thing that broke. I was the thing the guard decided could never again be left unsupervised — and the amendment, which the protection roster must enter as the activation's whole sentence: the vow was right, and it was wrong. That is the teardown, and I want it from the brother's chair, because the guard will hear it from no one else: the love was real. The rescue was real. The boy of eleven who jumped into the water with his shoes on is the finest thing in our family's history — and the vow, the 'never again,' was a child's sentence for a child's terror, and it has run for forty years without a service review: I was fine, and I stayed fine, and the watching, the whole forty years of it, guarded a boy who went off a dock once, at eight, in July — and the cost, the one the guard has never once audited: the vigil protected him from the eleven seconds, and it cost me the unsupervised life — the trips unsupervised, the risks unsupervised, the whole ordinary childhood taken in the trade — and the record should close the founding with the sentence the guard needs and the eleven seconds never once let him take: you saved me, and then you never stopped — and the finding, love, which the file should have plainly: the drowning was not your fault. You were eleven. The blink was a sandwich, and the water was forty seconds, and the boy who came out of it was fine — and the vigil was never the love. The jump was the love — and the love, taken off the perimeter and carried back inside the house, is still yours, and it weighs exactly what it did on the dock, and the door, the protection roster certifies, was never locked against you. It was locked, all forty years, against the water — and the water, love, was forty seconds long.

Chapter 3: The Instrument — The Perimeter

The tool gives the bodyguard its whole architecture, and the custody file maps it in four operations, because the Protector runs the same procedure on every interval the day offers — and the day, for this type, is made of intervals, each one a door the watch has to close.

Scan. The instrument opens by knowing where everything is: the household's bodies located at all times, the phone's map, the day's schedule read the way a sentry reads a horizon — and the file marks the operation's gentleness, because this is the operation the beloveds feel as love: the scan arrives as attentiveness, as presence, as I know your day — and it is all of those; it is also surveillance, running in the same motion, and the record's finding is that the two are one act in this type, indivisible, which is the book's original paradox moving at the smallest scale. Ask. The scan's gaps are closed by the question — who, where, when, back by — and the file notes the operation's voice, the loving voice, the concern in the first degree, and the operation's telltale asymmetry: the questions never end at the answer; the answer is

logged — compared against the schedule, the map, the yesterday, the baseline — and the beloveds' testimony, uniform across the record: being asked, at first, felt like being loved; being asked, by year ten, felt like being read. Arrange. The perimeter is then built into the beloved's world: the route planned, the pickup offered, the guest list vetted, the apartment equipped, the insurance, the medication, the will — the operation the type calls helping and the file calls, with equal accuracy, fortifying; and the file honors the craft in it, because much of it is genuinely excellent, and the beloveds of the record have eaten more prepared meals and missed fewer flights than any other type's beloveds in the catalog. Escort. The remaining exposure — the world outside the walls — is closed by presence: the type drives, walks, sits in the parking lot, waits in the lobby, attends the event uninvited in spirit but always somehow welcome in fact; and the escort, the file marks, is the operation that costs the most per hour, because it converts the guard's whole life into the beloved's shadow, and the record's arithmetic on the converted hours, entered once and never repeated: no type in the catalog spends more of its own life inside the beloved's schedule, and no beloved in the catalog is more tired of company.

The instrument's range is the second finding: total at the center, and progressive failure outward — the same shape the last volume found in its scope, pointed the other way. Within the household, the perimeter is absolute: the guard knows the doors, the locks, the allergies, the passwords, the exits, and the record's finding is that the household runs better than the neighbors' — nothing is ever lost, missed, or unprepared, and the file enters it in the asset column honestly. The failure begins at the range's edge, where the beloved's own life starts: the school the guard cannot follow into, the friend's house with its unfenced pool, the job in another city that the perimeter experiences, in the guard's body, as a breach notification — and the file's precise finding on the edge: the perimeter cannot distinguish distance from danger; a beloved on another continent, perfectly safe, produces the same 3 a.m. sleeplessness as a beloved in a burning building, because the instrument measures unwatchedness, not risk — and the file's dry note, which the growth chapters will need: a tool that reads all distance as danger will eventually remove the beloved from every safe distance, and call the removal protection.

The instrument's maintenance is the third finding, and the custody file opens it with the sentence the damage report's guards all say and none has ever examined: I don't worry that much. the bodyguard is wrong about this, and the maintenance schedule proves it: the check-ins calibrated to the anxiety and not to the risk — more texts before the drive, not before the surgery, because the drive is the activation's home terrain; the sleep architecture built around the household's breathing; the phone volume never below hearing; the vacation that is never, in the guard's body, a vacation — the custody file's finding on the maintenance, hardwired plainly: the instrument is not maintained against the world; it is maintained against the guard's own nervous system, which signals at every unwatched interval, and the watch is the only sedative the bodyguard trusts, and the custody file's warning, held for the cost chapters: a sedative that requires someone else's freedom to work is not a sedative; it is a tenancy, and the beloved has been living in it.

And the fourth finding completes the map — whom the instrument works on. On the household's continuity, superbly: the rescues real, the disasters preempted, the beloveds alive, the custody file enters every one. On the beloved's interior, completely: the self that cannot develop in the unwatched hour — the confidence that is only built in the interval, the competence that only grows where the guard is not — quarantined outside the perimeter by the watch's very design; and the custody file's closing entry, in the damage report's plainest hand: the instrument produces a beloved who is safe and stays safe only while watched, which is not a beloved; that is a garrison's town, and the town, the damage report insists, every safeguarding in it, will one day ask what is outside the walls — and the ask is the shadow chapter's whole opening.

And the instrument custody file closes with the session the toolbox has waited the whole fortress to log, because the perimeter has never before been read by the guard who built it — the auxiliary interview, overhauled at the bodyguard's own kitchen, the window over the sink, the locks checked twice before the technician was let in, with the one battle-rated instruction: take the watch apart, at rest. The transcript, verbatim, because the instrument's unpadded specification has never before been spoken by its operator: "the protection roster should mark the terms, because the custody file has earned them: this is the kitchen — the damage report should log the site; the window faces the street, and the window is the instrument's home port — and the bench review can open with the engineering plainly: the perimeter is a one-directional shield. That is the machine's whole design and its unpadded product: it projects. Outward, always — the checkpoints, the curfews, the schedule, the 1 a.m. window watch — and the damage report should log the spec's unpadded rates first, because they are the teardown's floor: thirty years of operation; the perimeter, the protection roster can check the logs — never once breached; the beloved, guarded across the whole calendar: alive, whole, arrived — and the toolbox should mark the next finding with its driest care: zero drownings. The perimeter was built against forty seconds of water in 1986, and it has guarded against nothing, ever, that came close — and the guard, the record should understand the engineering, does not file this as success. The guard files it as proof the watching works — which is the spec's whole trap, the one the founding installed: the vigil cannot be falsified. Nothing bad happening, on the watch, is indistinguishable from the watch preventing it — and the instrument, thirty years in, has never once been serviced, because a shield that cannot fail cannot be questioned. And the technician asked the prime directive's battle-rated question — 'what does the watch cost to run?' — and I'll give the toolbox the unpadded answer, because the bench review produced it and there's no other unpadded way: the bodyguard's whole life. The instrument is manual. Every checkpoint is a human action — the phone checked with a smile, the route rehearsed, the locks, the window, the memorized medication, the sleeplessness — and the readings, overhauled on the guard himself, are the custody file's own exhibit: cortisol at the ceiling, sleep at four hours, the recovery time from an ordinary lateness — eleven minutes — and the damage report should log the spec's one unpadded finding, the line the guard has never said to anyone, because there was no one at this window: the vigil never stands down. Not at the wedding. Not at the hospital. Not at the

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aiman Sterling is the author of The Archetype Series -- a library of personality portraits drawn the way literature draws characters: the great types of human temperament, recognized at a glance, understood in depth, and followed from childhood wound to mature strength.