

DESERT DARK

Sonja Stone

Holiday House / New York

Copyright © 2016 by Sonja Stone

All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and bound in December 2015 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stone, Sonja, author.

Title: Desert dark / by Sonja Stone.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2016] | Summary:

Sixteen-year-old Nadia Riley enrolls at a prestigious boarding school, but finds Desert Mountain Academy a training ground for undercover CIA agents, so Nadia undergoes a punishing regimen of elite physical training, foreign diplomacy and target practice, but then a double agent is reported on campus . . . and Nadia is the number one suspect.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015022317 | ISBN 9780823435623 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Boarding schools—Fiction. | Undercover

operations—Fiction. | Spies—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S755 De 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at

<http://lccn.loc.gov/2015022317>

To Morgan and Elizabeth

1 NADIA RILEY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11

Before she formulates a plausible lie, shots explode into the canyon. Splintered limestone sprays like shrapnel. Nadia drops behind a boulder.

Noah must have found us. She scans the walls for movement.

Another shot. Alan screams. He's down.

Nadia bolts across the riverbed. "Help me with him!" Damon rushes to her side. They drag Alan toward the cliff face.

She pulls her Beretta. "Alan, stop crying! It's a tranquilizer dart. It doesn't hurt that much." *What a baby. You didn't hear me screaming when I got shot.*

"No—look!" he shouts.

She turns back. Blood seeps through his torn pant leg. *Of course it wasn't a dart. Tranq guns are silent.* "Damon, on point." Nadia holsters her gun, applies pressure to the wound.

"Is it bad?" Alan's panicked eyes search her face. He grabs her shirt. "Answer me!"

"I need you to calm down." She forces a confident tone. "You're fine. It's just a scratch."

"Where is Jack?" Alan yells. "I need Jack!"

"I'm right here." Jack climbs down from an overhanging ledge. "Those shots weren't from Noah's team." He pushes Nadia's hands

away, wipes the blood with a square of cotton. "It's grazed, not deep at all. Wrap it up," he orders Nadia. "We need to move."

Her eyes meet Jack's. A sick fear crawls through her like fire ants on a dead coyote. She knows what he's thinking, because she's thinking the same thing.

Someone messed up. That bullet was meant for me.

THREE MONTHS EARLIER

2 NADIA TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

As requested, Nadia Riley waited for her calculus teacher in his classroom after the final bell. By the time Mr. Milligan arrived, she'd finished her chemistry homework and was halfway through history. He dropped a packet of papers on her desk: the extra-credit assignment she'd completed during lunch. A dark red zero covered her name.

"My answers were wrong?" Nadia asked. "I double-checked my work."

Milligan leaned on the edge of his desk. "I can't give you credit for this. I specifically instructed your class not to use online resources."

"I know. I didn't."

"That simply isn't possible. This was meant to be a month-long project. There's no way you finished it in one day without outside help."

One hour, actually, but that's nitpicking. "Mr. Milligan, I promise you: I solved the puzzle on my own."

"Nadia, cheating is a serious offense."

"I completely agree. I didn't cheat."

"You're telling me you finished this *by yourself* in one day?"

"Yes."

"How? How did you find the answers so quickly?"

"I don't know. I'm really good at puzzles. I've been doing them since I was a kid," she said. Milligan raised an eyebrow. "Do you have another one? I'll show you."

"All right." He pulled a worksheet from his briefcase. "Let's see what you've got."

Nadia took the paper. Mr. Milligan circled behind the desk, watching over her shoulder. She instantly recognized the formula. The problem looked like an algebraic equation, but she knew a Vigenère cipher when she saw one. "Give me a minute." She stared at the equation, calculating in her head.

"If you can't do it, just say so." He reached for the page.

Nadia slapped her hand onto the paper, pinning it to the desk. "I can do it." This particular code, designed to disguise letter frequencies, had been around for three centuries. *If I can't solve this, I deserve to be expelled.* She scribbled the final steps. "Earthworm," she said. "The answer is earthworm." She held up the worksheet.

Milligan took the paper from her hand and moved slowly toward his desk. "This is remarkable," he mumbled. "How . . . ?"

"It's your basic polyalphabetic cipher based on letter substitution. I solved for X, used modular arithmetic and found the remaining letters." She stood and grabbed her bag.

His eyes didn't leave the page. "It took me an entire semester at graduate school to solve this equation."

"Oh." Nadia heaved her backpack onto her shoulder. "Please don't feel bad. I really have been doing these all my life. It's kind of a hobby."

"And I was a *math* major."

Enough about me. "Mr. Milligan?"

"With a minor in engineering!"

"Mr. Milligan?"

"What?" Milligan looked up.

"Can I go?"

"Oh, yes. My apologies. You'll receive full credit for the assignment."

"Thank you." Nadia didn't care about the extra credit. But

being called a cheater? She earned her grades; she didn't steal them.

"Listen," Mr. Milligan began, "have you considered supplementing your education at the university level? Or maybe joining the math club?"

She nodded, pretending to consider. *Yeah, I'm gonna join the math club. Why not? I'm already a social pariah.* "That's an idea." Nadia glanced at the clock above the door. "Can we talk about it another time? I should probably get going." On the bright side, he'd grilled her long enough that she wouldn't run into anyone on the way to her locker.

"Of course." He looked back to her worksheet. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

"See you then." Nadia stepped into the empty hallway: wide and exposed, with hideous fluorescent lights. Metal boxes lined the walls like rows of vertical coffins. To spare herself the misery of running into her ex-boyfriend between classes, she loaded her backpack every morning and carried all of her textbooks until the end of the day. Her locker was right beside his, and three down from her ex-best friend's.

They'd become exes on the same day.

She rounded the corner and saw a flash of dirty blond against the grey metal. Her chest tightened. Matthew looked up before she could turn back. Nadia continued at a casual pace.

"Hey, Judas," she said. "Where's Delilah?"

"Those are two different stories." He leaned against her locker, blocking access. "We need to talk."

"No, we don't." She stopped in front of him. "We are no longer dating, so I don't have to pretend to be interested in your opinion. Move."

Matthew pursed his lips. "Don't be like that. I'm sorry about Hannah's party." He didn't look sorry at all. "I didn't tell her to throw you out."

"Nice to know your minions have your back, huh?"

"Paige says you won't take her calls."

"Why would I?" Nadia dropped her bag. It hit the floor with a solid thud. She kicked it against the metal wall and imagined it was Matthew's head.

"So you're just gonna ignore us for the rest of your life? Not even you can pull that off."

"I'm pretty sure I can."

"We didn't mean for this to happen."

Her eyes rolled away from Matthew's gaze.

"Paige really misses you."

Like I care? She studied the Exit sign over the stairs.

"This is so stupid."

Nadia glared at him. "I trusted you."

"It was an accident."

"An accident?" she scoffed. "How does that work?"

"Quit being stubborn."

"No, I'm really curious. You saw each other at the mall and some invisible force magnetically pulled you together?"

"People don't want to choose between you and Paige, but they will."

"Or maybe you were at the movies? And suddenly your clothes just *fell off*. I've heard of that phenomenon. Happens all the time."

"She's lived here her whole life. You've been here two years. Who do you think they're gonna pick?"

"You might want to see a doctor. That could get embarrassing."

"You know as well as I do, if you and Paige make up you'll be back in with everyone else."

Nadia narrowed her eyes. "What's with the sudden interest in my social standing?"

"It's not just about you. Paige is devastated."

"Fortunately, she has you to console her. Lucky girl. Now get off my locker."

"I'm not moving until you agree to talk to her. She's outside."

Nadia took a deep breath and leaned toward Matthew. She stopped an inch from his face, and spoke slowly, enunciating each word. "If you do not move, I will forcibly move you."

Matthew hesitated a second before leaning to the right.

"Good call." Nadia opened the lock.

"Look, it's been two weeks. I understand if you can't forgive me, but you guys were like sisters. And she's been miserable *for days*." He dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

"How inconvenient for you. Let's recap: first you hook up with my best friend. Then you tell everyone about it—well, everyone but me. Next, your jackass cousin kicks me out of her house in the middle of a party." She felt the heat rising up her neck, over her cheeks, through her scalp. Thinking about the party made her sick to her stomach.

Nadia shouldn't have gone to Hannah's house. She'd wanted to show her face, like she didn't care about Matthew and Paige. In retrospect, she was sure everyone knew she wasn't invited. No one would go with her. They all had "pre-party plans." They didn't want to align themselves with the loser, show up with an uninvited guest. Two years of her life, and she was still an outsider. She took another breath.

"I really didn't know she would do that," Matthew said.

"Whatever."

"Paige and I wanted to tell you sooner. But we didn't want to hurt you."

"Obviously."

"Knock it off."

"*You* knock it off. You're with Paige and that's fine. I don't care." It wasn't fine. Nadia loved Matthew and Paige knew it. The whole school knew it. It was one thing to lose her boyfriend to some random girl, but to her best friend? She couldn't be more humiliated. "But leave me alone. I'm not interested in a friendship with either of you."

Nadia slammed her locker and walked toward the front door, praying he wouldn't follow.

"You're just mad because you hate to lose."

"Not much of a loss," she called over her shoulder. But it was.

A horrific loss. Not just Matthew; her friendship with Paige had been the center of Nadia's life. And now she felt a constant void.

Nadia pushed through the double doors into the humid afternoon. She used to look forward to the short walk home. Paige had joined her almost every day. They'd do homework together and Paige would stay until dinnertime. *I miss her so much.*

Nadia clamped her lips together and lowered her head. *Don't you dare cry.* The sidewalk blurred as she wiped at her tears.

3 DREW ANDERSON

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7

Drew Anderson had just finished her second agonizing day of classes at Desert Mountain Academy. Now she was headed into town to treat herself to a pedicure. Her new roommate, Libby Bishop, had declined Drew's invitation to the salon. Instead, she had insisted on meeting the other members of their study group at the library to quiz each other about some random war that took place a thousand years ago.

She could already tell this would be a tough year. Academically she'd be fine, but her roommate was kind of—oh, what was the word—*fastidious*. Libby followed Drew around their bedroom, cleaning up after her with disinfecting wipes. She tried to do it when Drew wasn't looking, but Drew had already caught her. Twice.

Who alphabetizes their medicine chest? Drew shook her head.

But her obsessive-compulsive roommate wasn't even the most interesting thing so far. A rendezvous she'd witnessed last night won the grand prize. It was so unusual, in fact, that Drew took the time to write about it in her diary at two o'clock in the morning. Of course, she never named names. She would not lose another friend that way.

She turned off Scottsdale Road into a shopping plaza that

advertised Fiona's Nail Salon and Desert Moon Books. She'd get her toes done, then grab a cinnamon latte at the coffee shop that would inevitably be tucked into the back of the bookstore.

Inside, she checked in with Fiona and selected a polish. Drew carried a magazine in her purse just in case, but the store gossip was much more interesting than "How to Tone Your Tummy by Spring." A half hour later, toes freshly painted, she slipped into flip-flops and padded next door for her latte dessert.

She spent too much time flipping through celebrity glossies; it was dark by the time she left the bookstore. Drew crossed the dimly lit parking lot quickly, now wishing she'd found a closer spot. As she approached the car, she saw someone leaning on the passenger-side door. Her breath quickened. She slowed her pace as she peered through the darkness, trying to see the man's face.

"Good evening, Drew," he said, and she immediately recognized his voice.

"You scared me." She laughed, relieved. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you. Can we go somewhere private?"

"Sure." Drew was always up for some juicy gossip, and what else could this be? She unlocked the doors and climbed into the car. She drove toward school, north on Scottsdale Road.

With the lights of town behind them, her passenger requested she pull over into one of the many trailhead parking lots along the road. She consented, and left the car idling after she'd put it in park.

"What's up?" Drew asked.

"You saw me last night."

She hesitated for a second and then nodded.

"What did you see?"

She tried to look confused. "Nothing."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"No."

"Not even your roommate?" He stared at her intently.

She shook her head. "You're not the only one who snuck out. I broke the rules too. I'm fairly certain Libby wouldn't approve."

"What were you doing, lurking around?"

"I wasn't lurking. I was *stealing*, but I wasn't lurking. I helped myself to a little mint chocolate chip, that's all."

"At one o'clock in the morning?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. I couldn't sleep. I like ice cream. And you? What were you doing?"

Her accuser sighed and lowered his car window. The hot night air filled the cabin.

"Who was that guy you were with?" she asked, trying to draw out his story. After a moment, "Okay, it's none of my business." *Maybe it was a romantic encounter.* Drew actually knew the other guy; she'd recognized him. *That would be highly inappropriate.*

"Are you sure you kept quiet?"

"I already answered that. Are we done here?" Drew stepped on the brake and grabbed the gearshift.

"What is that?" The passenger pointed out the driver's side window, squinting through the darkness.

Drew turned toward her window. "Where?"

And the last thing she heard—besides the gunshot—was, "Oh, my mistake."

4 NADIA

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

The only acceptable thing in Nadia's life was that today was Friday, which meant an entire weekend without having to look at Matthew's face. Sweet, luxurious freedom.

Her friends still averted their eyes when they passed in the hall. She couldn't find a lab partner in chemistry, so her teacher had assigned one. He was a sigher. "Can you pass me that beaker?" *Sigh.* "Did you fill out the lab report?" *Sigh.* "Look out—your solution is on fire." *Sigh.* It was exhausting.

A week ago she'd smartened up and downloaded a playlist to her phone, so at least she could listen to music on the way home. Then she could pretend not to notice Matthew and Paige as they drove by. But when her father found out, she'd been forced to endure a twenty-minute lecture on the importance of "situational awareness."

"Nadia, your personal safety is at risk. A young woman walking down the street, unaware of her surroundings—it's irresponsible. When you leave this house, you need to pay attention. Who do you see? What are they doing? Do you hear footsteps behind you? Open your eyes and your ears."

Her father's occupation repeatedly compelled him to thwart Nadia's attempts to act like a normal teenager. He was a professor of criminology; he understood the dark side of human nature.

She rounded the corner to her house and, as if she'd conjured

him with her thoughts, saw her father's Camry in the drive. *Is he checking up on me?* Nadia yanked out the earbuds and shoved them into her bag. *That's not really his style.* But he never left work early and wasn't due home for hours.

Maybe we're moving again. She climbed the front steps. *That would rock.*

Inside, Nadia dropped her bag on the bench in the foyer and kicked off her sneakers. She slammed the front door, announcing her arrival.

"Nadia?" her mom called. "We're in here."

"Dad, what are you doing home?" Nadia yelled as she crossed the living room. She pushed through the kitchen door and grinned at her father. "Did you get fired?"

He stood with his back to the sink. The sun filtered through the window, creating a halo around his coppery brown hair. Beneath his closely cropped beard he suppressed a smile. He'd removed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his oxford. He seemed relaxed, which meant he'd been home for a while.

Nadia had her father's blue-green eyes and her mother's dark, wavy hair, though Nadia's had more curl toward the ends. Her complexion, a fusion of her parents' Irish and Lebanese, was a light olive that she thought looked sallow most of the time; too dark to be fair and too light to be dark.

"Good for you," Nadia continued. "You finally told your boss to take this job and—"

"Sweetheart," her mother said, nodding toward the kitchen table.

Nadia turned around and noticed a fourth person in the room. Her face burned as she said, "Oh, we have company." She glanced at her dad. "A little heads-up would've been nice. I was joking, by the way. My father would never tell off his boss. You're not his boss, are you? I'm kidding—I know him. Great guy." *Stop talking.*

"You must be Nadia." The man smiled and extended his hand. He stood a foot taller than her, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. He had silver hair and wore a dark suit, well-tailored, with

a knife-like crease in the pants. "My name is Marcus Sloan. I work as a recruiting agent for Desert Mountain Academy outside Phoenix, Arizona. Your father was just showing me your trophy collection." He gestured to the case along the wall. "Very impressive."

"Sorry. He does that."

"I can see why. The Mid-Atlantic Championship? Nicely done. I don't meet many students with a competitive interest in cryptography."

"Competitive? Nadia?" Her dad laughed. "Not our girl."

Nadia narrowed her eyes at her father's sarcasm. "So I'm a little driven." She turned to their guest. "Cryptograms are just a small piece of the competition. Once the clues are decoded, it's more of a scavenger hunt. Anyone could do it."

"Yes, I'm familiar with the Smithsonian's annual Cipher Search Competition. You're the youngest winner in history. I've been looking forward to meeting you," Mr. Sloan said. "Which brings me to why I'm here. An opening has become available and I'd like to offer you a position as a first-year student."

"First year?" Nadia shook her head. "I'm a junior."

"We run an intensive two-year program for juniors and seniors. The curriculum focuses on ingenuity and problem-solving, so we provide a project-based, hands-on learning environment. As I've explained to your parents, tuition, room and board is paid for in full by the United States Government."

"But I didn't even apply."

"Why don't we sit down, and I'll explain." Mr. Sloan pushed his coffee to the side and folded his hands on the table. "Our school was founded to serve the country's most academically elite. Our primary goal is to remain competitive with up-and-coming nations, like China, who now place a great deal of emphasis on education. It's a government-sponsored private school, so we don't accept applications. We recruit students based on their overall grade point average, among other things."

Nadia looked down. "I don't have the highest GPA in my class." Matthew did, which annoyed her. She came in second place. Again.

"Do you remember the standardized tests administered at the end of your sophomore year?"

"Sure. We take them every May." She loved standardized tests.

"We have a series of eighty benchmark questions scattered throughout the exam. Those questions weigh more heavily on our decision to recruit than GPA. The average student answers ten, maybe fifteen of those questions accurately. The students we recruit get about sixty of them."

"How many did I get?"

Mr. Sloan paused and glanced at her father. He cleared his throat and answered, "All of them."

Nadia smiled. Matthew would be furious if he heard that. He made everything a competition. "So what were the questions?"

"A variety of problems involving spatial ability, abstract thinking, pattern recognition, moral judgment." His cool eyes flitted between Nadia and her dad. She had the feeling his response was deliberately evasive. "Based on your answers, we believe you fit a certain profile that we value at Desert Mountain. I'm sure you'll need to discuss this with your parents. I've shown them our website. I encourage you to peruse the site as well."

"The campus is certainly beautiful," Mr. Riley said.

"Thank you. We're very proud of it."

"School started weeks ago. Why are you inviting me now?" Nadia asked.

"Sadly, one of our students passed away. She was in a car accident."

"Oh, her poor parents," Nadia's mom said.

"Yes, it's a terrible tragedy. We are all still feeling the loss. But unfortunately, with such a small student body, we need to keep each position filled."

"How many students are enrolled?" Nadia asked.

"The Academy has fifty juniors and thirty seniors. We have a few students transfer out every year. Not everyone is suited to the program. Because of the heat, the Academy starts a little later in the year than East Coast schools, so you've only missed four days

of classes. Your roommate will catch you up in no time. I fly back tomorrow, and I'll need your decision by then. If you decide to join us, we'll arrange your travel. Due to the challenging nature of our curriculum, you would have to transfer immediately."

He turned to her parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Riley, thank you for seeing me. Your daughter would be a fine addition to our school. I'm staying at the Bridgeport Hotel in Arlington. Please call me with any questions." He placed his business card on the table as he stood. "You should know that our graduates have first pick of all the Ivy League schools."

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Sloan. We'll be in touch." Nadia's dad escorted their guest to the door.

And there it was. A lifeline. Her way out.

No more avoiding her locker, no more heart palpitations every time the phone rang—*is it Matthew? Paige?*—no worries about junior prom. Everyone was already talking about Homecoming. If Matthew had broken up with her for any other reason she still could've gone to the dance. She would've gone with Paige, shown up in a killer dress and spent the evening deliberately ignoring him.

When her dad returned to the kitchen Nadia asked, "Did he just show up?"

"He called yesterday. We were expecting him," he said.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"We didn't see the need until we'd discussed it."

"But I can go, right?"

"I think it's a terrible idea," her mom said. "You're sixteen years old! And you haven't even looked at the school."

"Zaida, honey, we need to talk about this. I've done some research. This is a phenomenal school. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Nadia's father said.

"It's very sudden." Her mom crossed her arms over her chest. "Nadia, do you even want to go? And miss your junior year?"

"Well, let's see, I simultaneously lost my boyfriend and my best friend. I was recently humiliated in front of the entire junior

class. I spend my lunch period in the biology lab with the *mice* so I don't have to eat alone in the cafeteria. What am I clinging to, Mother?"

"There's no need for sarcasm."

Shut up or you'll blow it. Nadia took a breath. "You're right—I apologize. But it sounds like a perfect fit. Hands-on study? That's right up my alley." She'd never imagined boarding school. Her family was solidly middle class: two cars, a yearly vacation. They certainly couldn't afford private school. "And if it doesn't work out, I can always transfer back, right?" *Whatever it takes, I'll make it work.*

"You hate moving! You throw a fit every time you have to change schools!"

"That should give you some indication of how desperate I am."

"Well, I'm sorry. You can't go."

"Mom," Nadia pleaded.

"It's out of the question." She strode from the room.

Tears burned Nadia's eyes. "Dad, *please,*" she whispered.

"I'll talk to her. She worries about you, that's all. She's your mother. It's her job." He lowered his voice. "I think she'll come around." He hugged her and left the room.

Nadia stood alone in the kitchen and felt a flicker of something she hadn't felt in weeks.

Hope.

5 LIBBY BISHOP

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Libby Bishop stood at her bathroom counter and rearranged the flowers in the glass vase for the third time that hour. She had placed clear marbles in the bottom for texture, chosen lilies for their strong fragrance and added enough greenery to make the white flowers pop. When she was satisfied with the new arrangement, she cleaned the pollen off the marble counter with a sanitizing wipe, reapplied her lipstick and turned to the bedroom.

She wanted everything to be perfect for her new roommate. Her momma had told her many times you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and with her daddy's high profile, she'd had plenty of practice. That's why she always introduced herself as Libby and not by her full name, Liberty. That's also why she loathed her Southern drawl. She knew what people thought when they heard it: at best, they'd think her uneducated and prissy; at worst, racist. She didn't miss that part of Georgia one bit.

Her room, now half-vacant, was exceedingly tidy. Drew's belongings had been cleared away immediately. The whole thing was awful to think about, and Libby couldn't bear to dwell on the details. Plus, it wasn't as though she'd lost a close friend. Drew was distant; Libby never felt that special connection. Despite living together all summer they'd scarcely gotten to know each

other. But it was unsettling all the same. Especially since Libby had been invited along that night. If she wasn't such a conscientious student, she might've been in the car too.

Well, maybe *conscientious* wasn't the right word. Libby simply did not consider spontaneity a virtue. She much preferred a plan.

To cheer her up, her momma had encouraged her to redecorate her room, make a fresh start. And her momma was an expert at new beginnings.

Libby had chosen deep earth tones for the duvet and arranged the coordinating boudoir pillows just so. She'd dressed the windows from floor to ceiling in chocolate brown silk with the slightest sheen, and filled the space between the twin beds with a soft white wool shag. She considered making Nadia's bed up with the extra set of linens she'd purchased, but she didn't want to seem pushy.

Libby settled into her desk chair. She peeked inside the top drawer, making sure the false bottom she'd installed was properly secured. The only plus to living alone was the guarantee of privacy. *Let's hope my new roommate isn't as nosy as the last one.* Satisfied her secrets were safe, Libby closed the drawer, smoothed her skirt and flipped open her political science textbook. She had no intentions of reading right now but she didn't want to seem as though she was sitting around waiting for Nadia Riley to arrive, which she was. It made her uncomfortable, being at loose ends like this. No schedule, no plan. She looked at the clock on her nightstand. Just after noon. *It'll be hours before she gets here.*

Libby went back to the bathroom to recheck the flowers. *And I'm so glad I did. Look at this one! It's like a raccoon's been gnawing on the petals.* She lifted the wastepaper basket to the vase and carefully removed the offending stem. She wiped the counter again and returned to her desk.

I probably should'a washed my hands while I was up.

Libby slid her fingers under her thighs and frowned. *You don't*

have to. Those wipes are clean. They've got bleach in 'em. Doesn't get any cleaner than bleach. Just don't think about it.

To distract herself, she read the titles on her bookshelf out loud. *"The Making of a Navy Seal, Unarmed Combat, Diplomacy in a Terrorist World—oh, for heaven's sake,"* she said, as she rushed to the bathroom to wash her hands.

6 NADIA

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Two days after Marcus Sloan's visit, Nadia flew into Phoenix. She hadn't told anyone about the Academy. Her mom would call the front office tomorrow, let them know about the transfer. Word would get out that she'd been recruited to a boarding school in Arizona. Matthew would be sick with envy. Paige would wonder if he was jealous because they chose Nadia over him, or if he was sulking because he missed her.

She tried to ignore the flash of sadness. This was probably the most exciting thing that'd ever happened to her. She wanted to share it with someone.

Knock it off. Don't let them ruin this.

Nadia followed the other passengers to baggage claim. A man stood to the side, holding a sign printed with her name. He eyed the women, moving from one to the next, until his gaze settled on Nadia.

"That's me." She smiled and pointed to the sign.

He didn't return her smile. "May I see your ID?"

"Oh, sure." Nadia dug through her carry-on and offered her passport.

The driver studied her picture. "What is your mother's maiden name?"

"Azar."

"And your recruiter?"

"Mr. Sloan?"

"The name of the hotel where he stayed?"

"Um, the Bridgeport? In Arlington, I think."

Apparently satisfied, he returned her ID and smiled. "Welcome to Phoenix."

Nadia laughed. "Do you get many impostors?"

"Let's get your bags."

A blast of searing heat assaulted her as they left the terminal. They drove north, leaving the beige city behind, into the rocky foothills of a low mountain range. Dusty stretches of desert replaced shopping malls; gated communities faded into thick stands of sage-green cacti.

Nadia's stomach hurt. *It's like any other new school. I'll be fine. I always am.* She sighed and rested her head on the seat-back. *But what if I'm not? What if no one likes me?*

Keep whining, Nadia, and no one will.

After an hour, the driver turned onto a winding dirt road, barely wide enough for the car. Ahead, a massive sand-colored wall stretched across their path, extending in both directions. A security booth policed the iron gate that blocked the road.

An armed guard stepped forward. He scanned the driver's eyes with a laser gun and nodded them through.

Nadia's stomach tightened. "What was that?"

"A retinal scan."

"They don't know you by sight?"

"The dean of students likes to keep track." The gate closed behind them.

Inside the wall, it was another world—a literal oasis in the desert. Against the backdrop of vermilion mountains, eight buildings formed a semicircle around a lush carpet of grass. The lawn sloped gently toward her; the driveway ran along the bottom of the hill at the base of the half-circle. Flower beds packed with purple and white pansies lined the concrete path curving along campus.

"Dean Wolfe is expecting you." The driver pulled to the building on the far right. An etched stone marker read *Hopi Hall*. He nodded toward a slender woman waiting on the steps. "That's his assistant, Ms. McGill. She'll take you from here."

Ms. McGill smiled. Freckles covered her crisp features. "We're glad you could come." She handed Nadia a bottled water. "Drink this. It's a hundred and eight today."

"Thank you so much." Nadia chugged the icy water. The afternoon sun filtered through the palm trees over her head and danced across the jute-colored wall. The flickering light made her head swim. "I think I was a little dehydrated."

Inside, Ms. McGill's heels clicked along the travertine. She led Nadia to a sitting room at the end of the hall. "I'll get your uniforms. You're about five-three?" Nadia nodded. "Have a seat. Dean Wolfe will be with you shortly."

"Thank you." Nadia stepped into the cool, dark room. A bank of windows covered the far wall. To her left the mountains erupted like crumpled paper; to the right, the distant city nestled in the saddle of the valley. Glass-covered bookshelves lined the walls, like soldiers standing at attention. A brass nameplate bolted to the heavy door in front of her read Thadius Wolfe.

Nadia sank back into an oversized chair, then changed her mind and sat forward, embarrassed her feet didn't quite reach the floor when she reclined. She sat awkwardly erect on the edge of her seat, ankles crossed. She waited.

And waited.

Finally, the door opened. "Miss Riley? I'm Dean Wolfe." His smooth voice resonated through the room.

"It's nice to meet you." Nadia stood to shake his hand.

Thadius Wolfe, attractive in a distinguished sort of way, had deep-set eyes and dark hair streaked with grey. His huge frame filled the doorway. He looked powerful, and not just physically. "Please, come in."

Indigo drapes largely concealed the window behind his desk; a matching oriental rug covered the floor. A small lamp with a

sunset-orange glass globe cast a tiny pond of light onto a file labeled Riley, Nadia.

She sat in one of the two wingback chairs, hands in her lap. The soft leather whispered as Dean Wolfe reclined into the other navy chair.

"Mr. Sloan explained that you're replacing another student, so you understand classes have started for the semester." The Dean plucked a speck of lint from his pant leg and dropped it on the rug.

"Yes. I was sorry to hear about the accident."

"It's a horrible thing, losing such a young person." He paused for a moment, then cleared his throat. "You'll need to relinquish your cell phone at this time."

Nadia raised her eyebrows as he continued. "Communications between students and the outer community are restricted. If you need to telephone your parents, your dormitory assistant will make arrangements."

She nodded. "I guess my bags are in my room?"

"Security is checking them. They will be delivered when they're done."

"Glad I left my contraband at home," Nadia joked.

He didn't smile. "You are required to wear a uniform on campus at all times with the exception of Saturdays and Sundays. All classes are mandatory. You train in jujutsu three days a week. In addition, first-year students are required to complete basic strength training five days a week. There are *no* casual Fridays."

"Dean Wolfe, Director Vincent is on line one." Ms. McGill's voice sounded over the telephone's intercom.

"Excuse me."

Nadia stood. "Should I wait outside?"

"No, no. Sit." He picked up the phone. "This is Thadius Wolfe. No, sir, not at the moment. Yes, we shipped everything to her parents. As a matter of fact," he glanced at Nadia, "she's here with me now. Yes sir. I'll speak to you then." He hung up. "Where were we?"

"No casual Fridays."

"Right. Laundry is delivered weekly to your room. Do you have any questions?"

She almost asked about room service, but he hadn't seemed to enjoy her first joke. She shook her head.

"You've been assigned to a standard team: four juniors, a senior advisor. Your success at Desert Mountain is largely determined by your ability to function as a group. I cannot overstate the importance of team unity. You eat together, you work together, you train together. Do you understand?"

Nadia smiled. "Not a problem. I love working with others," she lied.

"Ms. McGill will introduce you to your roommate, Libby Bishop."

"Sounds great."

Dean Wolfe presented Nadia with her class schedule. "We have one more item of business, then you're free to go."

"Okay." She glanced at the paper. *Psychology, Political Science, Diplomacy . . . Arabic? Seriously?*

"It's time to meet the psychiatrist."

7 JACK FELKIN

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Jack Felkin sat on the second-story patio outside the Navajo Building and looked across campus. The misters attached to the overhead beams did little to cool the air. He wiped the sweat from his neck and glanced at his roommate's notebook.

That figures. Noah was drawing a caricature of the kid at the next table. "Don't you have anything better to do?" Jack asked.

Noah grinned. "What's better than this?"

"It's a real comfort knowing guys like you will be in charge of our Nation's security."

"You know what your problem is? You take yourself too seriously."

"Great. And now you sound like my mother." She claimed he buried himself in his studies to avoid real life. Sure, he'd always been a committed student, perhaps to a fault. But there were so many books to read, languages he should learn.

"Don't worry about me," Noah assured Jack. "I'll get my work done. Hey, I've been meaning to ask you, is Libby seeing anyone?"

Jack shook his head. He and Noah were seniors, and both had been chosen as team leaders. He didn't understand Noah's willingness to waste study time in pointless pursuits: sketching, speculating about girls. More annoying than his slacker attitude was the fact that Noah's inattention to academics didn't seem to

affect his GPA. He and Jack were still neck and neck. "Stay away from her. I don't want you poisoning the well."

"Don't be like that."

"I'm not kidding," Jack said.

"I think we'd be really good together."

Jack did his best to block out Noah's voice. Something had happened Friday afternoon, right on the heels of Drew's death, and it had nagged at him all weekend.

"The poor girl just lost her roommate," Noah said.

Jack and a group of classmates had been leaving Improvised Munitions. In the hallway around the corner, two of his professors had stood talking. He'd caught bits of the conversation: something about a double agent on campus. They obviously hadn't known the students were there.

"I should console her," Noah continued.

"Seriously," Jack said. "Don't mess with my team." *What if it's true?* The idea of a threat to the school troubled him—Desert Mountain meant everything to Jack.

"Afraid she'll figure out I'm better than you?"

Jack smiled. "I'm concerned about team cohesion, not that she'll suddenly lose all sense of reality."

Jack's grandfather had been a war hero, and he'd instilled in Jack an intense loyalty to the United States. As an extension, he felt intrinsically indebted to the Academy and, more specifically, the dean of students.

As if on cue, Dean Wolfe turned up the sidewalk from Hopi Hall. Jack straightened in his seat. He peered over the balcony, watching. Someone followed—a girl he didn't know. *We don't get a lot of visitors.*

"Why don't you ever go out?" Noah asked. "Girls call for you all the time."

"I'm busy," Jack said. Dean Wolfe escorted his guest toward the library. She rushed to keep up, leaning into the hill as she followed. A lock of hair slipped from her bun and fell along her face.

“What are you looking at?” Noah twisted around in his chair.
“Who’s she?”

“How should I know?”

Wolfe stopped in front of the library. He pointed toward the patio—toward Jack—and the girl looked up. Her full lips parted slightly as the loose curl blew across her cheek.

“Wow,” said Noah. “Not bad, huh?”

Jack’s breath quickened. He leaned back in his seat so his face was out of sight.

No. Not bad at all.