

# **DARK DIVIDE**

**Sonja Stone**

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*To Jude, for valor  
To Kaitlyn, for honor  
To Morgan, for strength*

*And to Hannah Duncan,  
for tenacity, eloquence,  
fairness, and justice*



# 1 NADIA RILEY

## THURSDAY, MARCH 2

Minutes before committing her third felony of the semester, Nadia enters the lobby of the Scottsdale Ritz-Carlton and immediately turns right, following the predetermined route down the marbled hall. She lowers her chin as she passes reception to avoid the sightline of the cameras mounted above the desk.

At the bank of elevators, she waits for a vacant car. As she's reaching for the button to the seventh floor, an elderly man in a dark suit catches the door. Nadia stalls as he makes his selection.

He presses eleven, then turns to her. "And for you, miss?"

"Twelve, please," she says.

Thirty seconds later on the twelfth floor, Nadia exits the elevator and walks silently toward the stairs. She pushes through the heavy door, then jogs down five flights to the seventh floor.

Before leaving the stairwell, she leans against the wall to catch her breath. Her stomach feels like a snarled fishing line, though her nerves have nothing to do with the mission. She sighs and pulls open the door.

Around the corner at room 760, Nadia slides her keycard into the lock. The lock flashes red and beeps twice. She tries again—still no luck. The third time she slows, carefully inserting the card. A single beep chimes as the light on the lock flashes green. She cracks the door.

“Housekeeping,” she softly calls. No one answers, so she slips through.

Inside the room a thick duvet covers the king-size bed. A chocolate rests on each pillow. A small toiletries kit sits on the dresser, a metal briefcase on the bed, a half-empty suitcase opened on the valet stand.

*Clever details.* Whoever staged the mission did a nice job lending authenticity with the personal items.

Nadia retrieves the memory card from her purse. Her op-specs instructed that she hide the tiny device in the target’s possessions, preferably somewhere he’ll never look.

She moves to the suitcase on the valet. Running her fingers over the fabric lining reveals the perfect spot—between the plastic back and the metal support bar. She unzips the silk, wedges the storage card into place, and reseals the zipper. The knot in her stomach loosens slightly.

Back at the door, Nadia checks the peephole. A man with a shaved head walks toward her room from the direction of the elevators.

She steps away and taps her ear, bringing her comms to life. “Boy Scout, traffic in the hall. I’ll be down in ten.”

Jack’s voice resonates in her ear. “Copy that. See you soon.”

A moment later she leans in for another look, but the peephole’s gone dark—something obstructs her view. It takes her a second to realize someone’s at the door.

A keycard slides into the lock. Her heart flies to her throat as the door beeps twice—red light.

*Bathroom, shower, under the bed.* The options race through her mind.

The plastic card slides into the lock again, then a single beep. The knob turns. He’s coming in.

*Closet.*

Nadia slips inside and pulls the slatted doors closed. She holds her breath as he enters the room, then curses herself for not throwing the deadbolt.

A *thunk* as he moves the briefcase from the bed onto the dresser.

Her eyes widen as she strains to hear over the pounding of her heart. She runs through possible scenarios: she's in this man's room; he came home earlier than expected. But it's a mock mission—she assumed the school booked a room just for this exercise, that the suitcase and toiletries kit were props. Why would they have her break into a civilian's room and plant something in his luggage?

The ironing board hanging in the closet presses painfully against her back. As she shifts her weight, the board brushes the wall. She freezes.

The scent of his cologne hits her a second before his shadow darkens the door. His hand reaches for the knob. He opens the closet.

His face registers surprise, then . . . what? Recognition?

Six feet, shaved head, broad shoulders, slightly crooked nose. Pale skin, light eyes—blue, maybe. Black t-shirt, jeans, sneakers. Late twenties, muscular, handsome.

Totally normal.

Except for the gun pointing at her heart.





SIX WEEKS EARLIER



# 2 NADIA

## SUNDAY, JANUARY 15

Nadia Riley lowered the car window as her chauffeur pulled up to the gatehouse outside the block wall surrounding Desert Mountain Academy. An armed guard stepped forward with a clipboard and a retinal scanner. After verifying the driver's ocular print, the guard waved them through the iron gates.

After a wintry month-long break in Virginia, the lush grounds were a welcome sight.

Eight buildings were arranged in a semicircle around the outskirts of a sloping lawn, which stretched to the edges of the impenetrable wall encircling campus. Flowerbeds packed with violet and yellow pansies ran along the horseshoe-shaped sidewalk in front of the buildings. Hopi Hall, home to the administrative offices, stood at the lower right of the hill.

Her driver followed the single paved road into the parking lot at the far side of the building, where he drew to a stop.

Nadia took a deep breath as she stepped from the black sedan. Lemon blossoms scented the temperate air with a sweet perfume, and the afternoon sun filtered through the palm trees and danced across the wide stone steps leading to the entrance of Hopi Hall.

"I'll drop your bags at security," her driver said. "We'll deliver them to your room after they've been searched. If you're ready to relinquish your cell phone, I can take that, too."

"Oh, right." Nadia fished through her bag. Desert Mountain Academy allowed minimal unsupervised communication with the outside world. Cell phones were forbidden, the hall phones were tapped, laptops were subject to search and tracking, and—above all else—students were strictly prohibited from discussing the true nature of the Academy with anyone—parents included. Recruits who didn't last were treated to a week-long "deprogramming session" before returning to the outside world. Nadia wasn't sure what that entailed, but was fairly certain she didn't want to find out. "Let me just text my mom so she knows I'm here."

A few seconds later, Nadia powered down her phone and handed it over.

"Looks like she's ready for you." He gestured toward the steps of Hopi Hall as Ms. McGill, the dean's assistant, pushed through the massive wooden doors.

"Miss Riley, welcome back." Ms. McGill hurried down the steps.

"Thank you," Nadia said. "How was your holiday?"

"The dean of students wants to see you right away."

*I guess that's enough small talk.* "Right, we have a new dean."

"Of course we have a new dean. You nearly killed the last one." Ms. McGill gave her a closed-lipped smile.

Nadia frowned. Was that supposed to be a joke?

Ms. McGill continued. "Her name is Dean Shepard, and she's quite eager to meet the young woman who saved our school."

"That seems like an overstatement," Nadia said, trailing the assistant up the stairs.

"Don't be modest; you're a hero. Enjoy the celebrity while you can." Ms. McGill pulled open the carved wooden door. "Because it never lasts."

Nadia paused briefly inside the foyer as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She ran a hand over her dark, wavy hair, then followed Ms. McGill down the tiled hall.

The dean's sitting room looked untouched, precisely as it had last semester. A pair of leather chairs sat near the unlit fireplace. Behind her, glass-covered bookshelves lined the wall like sentries.

Across the room, the floor-to-ceiling windows revealed distant Phoenix nestled in the valley to the right, and to the left, low mountains covered with rust-colored rock and sage-green cacti.

"Go ahead." Ms. McGill gestured to the closed door on their right. "I'll confirm that your uniforms have been delivered to your room."

Nadia cleared her throat and stepped forward. The brass nameplate bolted to the door no longer read THADIUS WOLFE. Instead, printed in strong block letters, was SOPHIE SHEPARD. Nadia knocked. A moment later the door opened.

Dean Shepard's red hair, styled in a pixie cut, flattered her delicate features. She wore a cream-colored skirt and matching blazer, tailored to precision for her petite frame.

"Nadia, welcome back. I'm Dean Shepard. Let me be the first to say thank you for all you've done for Desert Mountain Academy. Won't you please sit?"

"It's nice to meet you." Nadia moved into the middle of the room and immediately regretted it. She stiffened, her eyes sweeping from corner to corner. The office had been completely redecorated in a Southwestern theme: a large, rustic desk, brown leather chairs for guests, a deep red rug with textured waves of wheat and gold. Automatic shades for the window, enough to block the light but not the view.

The corner to her right: that's where she'd found Jack's body. In front of the desk: that's where she'd stabbed Dean Wolfe. Between the guest chairs: that's where her heart had stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Dean Shepard asked.

"It's just... the last time I was in this office, I got shot."

"Well, let's see how the conversation goes." Dean Shepard smiled and gestured to the chairs. "Hopefully, it won't come to that."

Nadia laughed and picked the chair on the left. Dean Shepard returned to her seat on the far side of the desk.

"I understand you had an exciting first semester," the dean said. "Naturally I've been briefed, but can you tell me your version of the events that transpired?"

"My version?" Now her back was to the open door. Was it too late to switch seats?

"Everyone filters life through their own experience."

"I guess so." Nadia took a deep breath. "Basically, the CIA had intel that a new recruit—one of the juniors here—was a double agent, but that's all they knew. The double turned out to be Damon Moore, one of my teammates." Pause. "Do you mind if I close the door? It feels a bit drafty."

"Not at all."

Nadia shut the door. "Where was I?"

"Double agent."

"Right." She sat back down, the image of Damon filling her mind. His broad shoulders, his dark brown skin. His beautiful smile and unwavering gaze. He had, at one point, been one of her best friends. Or so she'd thought. "He was working for an organization called the Nighthawks, and he tried to frame me as the double. His on-campus handler was Professor Hayden, our political science teacher. Dean Wolfe was also a Nighthawk. I figured it out, Dean Wolfe shot me, and I stabbed him with a poisoned pen. I think that's about it."

"Why did you confront Dean Wolfe?"

"I didn't have a choice. He was holding my team leader hostage." Referring to Jack Felkin as her team leader felt a little dishonest—a lie of omission. But he wasn't her boyfriend, either, and she wasn't about to launch into the whole we're-thinking-about-trying-a-relationship thing.

"Your actions were quite impressive for a first-year recruit."

Nadia shifted in the chair. "I didn't really think it through."

"You have good instincts."

*Or I'm reckless and impulsive.* "Thank you."

Dean Shepard sat back in her chair. "Well, I'm here this semester serving as the interim administrator as a favor to Director Vincent." The head of the CIA. "Normally, I run the postgraduate CIA training program at The Farm near Williamsburg, Virginia. I'm sure you've heard of it; it's not a black-ops site."

"I have. So you're a former agent?"

"Officer, technically. And current, not former."

"That's incredible," Nadia said. "What a great opportunity for us."

"I'm glad you feel that way. I'll be implementing several new programs this semester. I think you'll find the new curriculum both challenging and exhilarating."

"I look forward to it," Nadia said.

"Will you be checking your shoulder bag with security, or would you like me to inspect it at this time?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Nadia lifted her small carry-on from the floor. "I didn't even think about it." She handed it across the desk.

Shepard remained seated as she opened the main compartment of the leather purse. "A scarf, magazine, notepad and pen, motion sickness bracelets—that's unfortunate." She glanced at Nadia. "Passport, wallet, lip gloss. No cell phone?"

"Already turned it in."

"Excellent." The dean swept her hand through the large side pocket before handing the bag back. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"I don't think so."

"In that case, check in with Dr. Cameron before going to your dorm."

Nadia sighed. "Of course." Visiting the psychiatrist was not her favorite task, especially when she wanted to catch up with her friends.

Dean Shepard rose from her chair. "It was lovely to meet you. Don't hesitate to drop by should anything arise."

"Thank you," Nadia said, moving toward the door.

"Oh, I almost forgot." The dean opened a desk drawer and pulled out a postcard. "This came for you a few days ago. I'm sure you're aware that security scans all incoming mail for chemical and biological weapons." She smiled. "It's clean."

Nadia took the card from Dean Shepard's outstretched hand. The picture on the front featured an illustrated map of the

Hawaiian Islands. Scribbled on the back, across from her name and the address of Desert Mountain Academy, was a single word: *Aloha*. She checked the postmark: Honolulu, Hawaii, five days ago.

"It's a little on the nose," Shepard said. "But a lovely gesture."

"You read my mail?" Nadia joked.

"I couldn't help myself. I *am* a spy."



# 3 DAMON MOORE

## SUNDAY, JANUARY 15

Twelve hours before his ex-classmates were scheduled to return to Phoenix for their second semester, Damon Moore stood motionless on a squalid street corner in Las Vegas, Nevada. A cold rain drizzled onto his shaved head. He pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt, keeping his eyes trained on the third story window of the apartment building across the street, where a yellow light seeped around the makeshift curtain and out into the night. Occasionally, the occupant's shadow darkened the fabric.

At 0212, the window blackened. Damon double-checked the security cameras pointing toward the parking lot, kept his head low, and adjusted his gait as he crossed the courtyard. The lock on the front door of the dingy building was already broken. After a quick look up the deserted street, he stepped over the puke on the front steps and went inside.

The lobby smelled like mildew and cat piss. He took the scuffed stairs two at a time, up eight flights to apartment 843. Silence behind the paper-thin walls indicated his victim wasn't walking around. Damon picked the lock and went inside. He heard the shower running, the spray of the water as it hit the plastic curtain. In the dim light of the living room he eased himself between the single reclining chair and the upturned plastic crate that served as the TV stand.

Damon pulled on his leather gloves and crossed into the kitchen. He checked the drawers, grabbed the only chef's knife, and stuck it in the freezer. Inside the fridge he found a block of cheese, a loaf of bread, a container of leftover chicken wings, and the remainder of a six-pack of generic cola. He grabbed two cans, opened one, pushed a dirty plate across the shabby kitchen table and sat down, his back to the wall. The joints of the cheap wooden chair creaked under his muscular frame.

He didn't like the taste of the off-brand cola, but he was thirsty. Probably nervous about the upcoming conversation, what he might find out. And he wasn't about to risk catching a staph infection by drinking tap water out of one of the filthy glasses littering the counter. He silently drummed his fingers across his thigh and waited.

A few minutes later his ex-handler—and former professor of political science at Desert Mountain Academy—emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. Hayden was halfway across the tiny kitchen before he noticed Damon. His body tensed.

"What's up, professor?" Damon extended the second can. "Have a drink with me."

Hayden didn't move.

Damon set the can on the table. "Come on. Sit down."

"Look, I—I was ordered to kill you. It was you or me." He moved toward the drawer where Damon had found the knife.

"Yeah, I get that. It's not personal."

Hayden opened the drawer.

"Really?" asked Damon. "You think I'm that careless? Seriously, sit down."

Hayden sat. His hand visibly shook as he fumbled to open his drink. "I didn't want to eliminate you. I always liked you. I think you know that."

*Yeah, right.* "Absolutely." Damon popped the top of Hayden's cola and passed it back to him. "We had a definite rapport. In any case: you shot at me, you missed. No harm done, right?" Damon smiled. "That's not why I'm here."

"Why are you wearing gloves?"

"It's cold out. I'll take them off if it makes you feel better." Damon removed his gloves and folded his hands in his lap. *Guess I'm done with my drink.*

Hayden's face registered relief. "Then why are you here?"

"Roberts has something that belongs to me. I'm trying to get it back." Agent Roberts, the head of the rogue organization known as the Nighthawks—and the man who ruined Damon's life—had gone into hiding. It was time to flush him out. "I need the locations of his safe houses."

"I don't know where Roberts is. And I hope to God he doesn't know where I am." Hayden took a long drink.

"That's not what I asked you," Damon said.

Hayden shook his head. "I have a handful of addresses, same as you. I don't have any information you don't already know."

Damon sighed and looked down. He felt the anger building in his chest, elevating his body temperature and blood pressure. He clenched his jaw and took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. After a second, he locked eyes with Hayden. "Where is my mother?"

"What are you talking about?"

"After your botched assassination attempt, I thought it prudent to get the hell out of town. By the time I got back to Baltimore, Roberts had taken my mother. Burned down her house. He said we could make a trade, me for her, but I haven't heard from him. It's been *weeks*. Think very carefully: where would he take her?"

Hayden shrugged. "He has a storage unit outside of Phoenix...."

Damon had found the storage unit over a week ago. It'd already been cleared out. Completely empty, except for a single thumb drive, hidden in the glass globe of the light fixture. Roberts' guys must've missed it.

The drive contained two folders. The first, which he'd easily cracked open, held a handful of old, mostly redacted case files,

both the Nighthawks' and the CIA's. As fascinating as the intel had been, nothing indicated where he might find his mother. He hadn't yet accessed the second folder, heavily encrypted and labeled EYES ONLY, which probably contained classified CIA files that Roberts had stolen when he quit the Agency.

Damon shook his head. "It was empty."

"Have you tried tracking down his old associates?"

"What do you think I'm doing here?" Damon asked.

"How'd you find me, anyway?"

Damon ignored the question. Hayden was careless. He knew enough to put on light disguise before he left the apartment, but he never changed his gait. The way a person walked was as unique as a fingerprint, and Damon had easily located him after hacking into the national CCTV surveillance system database. Every traffic light with a camera, every convenience store with digital security... they all fed into one place. Big Brother was *always* watching. You just had to know where to look. "Why haven't I heard from him?"

"I couldn't say. The only thing I know for sure about Agent Roberts is this: he wants Project Genesis. That's his endgame."

Project Genesis. The reason the Nighthawks recruited Damon in the first place.

Roberts had explained Project Genesis to Damon, probably about two years ago. Genesis was a covert operation, an advanced weapons system currently in development at the CIA, which had been in the making for over two decades. Once completed, it would forever change the arena of war. Basically it served as a GPS for DNA, capable of locating anyone on the planet—provided the Genesis user had a speck of the target's genetic material and access to the millions of sensors being deployed and systemized worldwide. The DNA—a flake of skin, a tiny hair—was entered into the system, analyzed, and the genetic code uploaded to a satellite. The satellite then communicated with the sensors to track the host within a half-mile radius. From that point, a deployed missile would eliminate the target.

If Roberts got his hands on Project Genesis, he'd become the world's deadliest assassin. He'd be able to handpick his enemies and eliminate them one by one, from thousands of miles away.

Damon shook his head. "What does any of that have to do with me? Why would he be holding my mom?"

"Again, I couldn't say."

Anger flashed back through Damon's chest.

Hayden must've seen it on his face, because he held up his hands and said, "Wait a second—just calm down. I might have a lead."

"Talk fast," Damon said.

"You know the bombing last month at that research lab in Northern Virginia?" He paused and Damon nodded. "That's where Genesis is being developed. I'll bet Roberts was behind it."

"Behind the bombing? If he wants the technology so badly, why would he destroy it by blowing up the lab?"

"Not destroy it, steal it. I think it was a break-in."

"Why do you say that?"

"It happened late at night, minimal loss of life, minimal property damage. If he'd wanted to blow up the entire lab, he could've. And if it had been terrorism, it would've happened in the middle of the day at a heavily staffed building, not at a sparsely populated research lab. Project Genesis is well guarded. Even on a fully staffed day, I bet not more than ten people are allowed access to that room."

"Did he succeed? Does Roberts have Genesis?" Damon asked.

"How would I know? As you can see," Hayden gestured around the worn kitchen, "I'm out of the loop. But I'm guessing not, or one of us would already be dead."

*That's a good point.* Damon rubbed his forehead. "How does this information help me?"

Hayden shrugged. "Maybe you look into Project Genesis?"

"What for?"

"Bargaining chip?"

"Are you proposing that I steal Genesis from a heavily guarded

lab that the entire Nighthawks organization, with their unlimited funds and myriad resources, may or may not have found impenetrable? That's your suggestion?" Damon shook his head in frustration. How was this idiot still alive? "You know what, I don't care about Genesis. I don't care about Roberts, or you, or the Nighthawks or the CIA—I just want to find my mom."

"I don't know anything about your mother."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Roberts doesn't confide in anyone." Hayden finished his drink and crushed the can, throwing it in the general direction of the sink.

"That's too bad." Damon sighed and put on his gloves. He pulled the 9mm from under his jacket and pointed it across the table. "Because that makes you useless to me."

# 4 NADIA

## SUNDAY, JANUARY 15

Nadia shoved the postcard in her bag as she closed Dean Shepard's door. She heard the whistling before she located its source: a boy her age, standing on a low stack of books with both hands pressed against the wall of windows. He stopped midtune as he noticed her. His sapphire eyes locked onto hers, and he broke into a wide smile, revealing a dimple. Medium height, blond styled hair, broad shoulders with a slim, muscular build. He wore a light-blue fitted tee, a pair of dark jeans, and cowboy boots.

"Hello, love," he said with a crisp British accent.

She returned his smile. "How's it going?"

"Absolutely fantastic. Except I've been summoned to the headmaster's." His voice dropped as he spoke from the side of his mouth. "That never ends well, am I right?" He hopped off the books and gestured toward the window. "You're probably wondering what I'm up to. Curiosity, mostly. Doesn't open, in case you're interested."

Nadia liked him immediately. "Your accent is perfect. Do you do any others?"

"I'm afraid it's the real deal. I'm called Simon." He extended his hand as he walked toward her. "I'm new here. Sort of on exchange from MI-6's training program."

"Nadia." She shook his hand. "Welcome to the Academy."

"Thanks. I actually arrived last week. I came a bit early as it was a particularly good time for me to leave London, if you know what I mean." Simon winked.

Nadia couldn't imagine what that meant. "Sure," she said, nodding along.

"Apparently, I'm replacing some bloke called Damon. I saw his picture." Simon whistled. "The fit ones are always a bit dodgy, am I right?"

She laughed. "I never really thought about it, but I guess so. You're on Jack Felkin's team?"

"That's right."

"That makes us teammates."

"Well that's brilliant. What good luck running into you. I've already met your roommate, the lovely Libby. I think you'll both find I'm quite handy."

"I suspect that's true," Nadia said, glancing toward the window. Simon followed her gaze and smiled.

She gestured to the hallway. "I'm on my way to Dr. Cameron's, so I've got to run, but it was really nice meeting you."

"The pleasure is mine," he said. "By the by, we're meeting in the student lounge a bit later for takeaway. You'll be there, right?"

"Takeaway?"

"Pizza," Simon said.

"Sounds great. I'll see you there."

"Looking forward to it."

Down the hall, Nadia pushed through the door of the administration building into the warm sun. In front of the lemon trees lining the wall, a small fleet of black Avalons waited in the parking lot. Though recruits weren't allowed their own cars on campus, the school-owned vehicles were available for occasional student use.

At the bottom of the steps she turned right, away from the massive iron gates leading off campus, and followed the sidewalk up the hill. She passed the junior and senior classrooms before reaching the library, a modern glass-and-steel structure near the top of the hill. Beyond that, at the crest, loomed the Navajo



Building, a stone fortress that held the student lounge on the first floor, and the dining hall and outdoor patio on the second.

Across the lawn on the far side of the campus, a flurry of students moved in and out of the dormitories. The girls' dorm, directly across from the library, was closest to the dining hall, followed by the Japanese-style dojo, and at the bottom of the hill, the boys' dorm.

Nadia turned toward the library. A walkway lined with olive trees meandered along the right side of the building. She stepped onto the narrow path and walked under the canopy of gnarled branches and silvery leaves toward the psychiatrist's office.

Inside, Nadia crossed the narrow waiting room and knocked on Dr. Cameron's open door. "Am I interrupting?"

"Nadia, welcome back. Not at all. I've been expecting you. Please, make yourself comfortable." He gestured to the single, cushioned folding chair at the center of the barren room, then grabbed a yellow legal pad and pushed his office door closed. He rolled his leather chair to her side of the desk. Their knees were three feet apart. Nothing between them.

She'd never really noticed that the office door was the *only* exit in the small room. Nadia glanced at the air vent directly over her head. She could easily fit through, but she'd done a little research over break and discovered that crawling through air ducts wasn't actually a viable plan, despite what she'd been led to believe in movies. The thin layer of drywall under the aluminum vent would never hold her weight.

"You seem distracted. Is everything all right?" Dr. Cameron asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Nadia tried to measure the paces between her chair and the door.

"Nadia." Dr. Cameron leaned forward. "What's going on?"

"Do you want to know something interesting?"

"Certainly."

Nadia pointed to the floor space between them. "This never used to bother me. You know, the empty space between people."

"And now?"

"I find I'm much more comfortable with a good, solid piece of furniture between me and whoever I'm speaking to."

Dr. Cameron didn't offer to move.

"I guess because of what happened with Dean Wolfe," she said.

"Why don't you tell me about that?" He settled back into his seat.

"We've been over it. Is it necessary to reevaluate the entire event?"

"I'd like to hear your thoughts now that you've had some time to process; some distance from the trauma."

Nadia leaned forward and rested her elbows on her thighs. "The whole thing seems surreal. Like it happened to someone else." She cleared her throat. "The memory seems dulled. Not vivid. The only real difference in my life is my attitude—my sense of...not personal space, exactly. But I find myself looking for escape routes, not sitting with my back to the door, stuff like that."

Dr. Cameron chuckled.

"Is this funny?"

"Not funny, ironic. Dean Wolfe taught you an extremely valuable lesson, one that generally takes years to learn. The things you've mentioned, the reactions you're having, will only serve to make you a better operative. If you continue on to the college-level program—which I strongly urge you to consider—you'll take several classes solely dedicated to increasing your awareness of the environment. Constant vigilance of your surroundings, beyond knowing the number of exits in a room or how many feet to the nearest door. By the time you leave that program, you'll know if a physical threat is present simply by the hunch of a person's shoulders."

She raised an eyebrow. "So being shot was a gift."

"Yes, given the circumstances and the outcome, I would say so."

"Then lucky me." They sat in silence for a few moments. Nadia studied her fingernails, waiting for the psychiatrist's next probe.

"Are you concerned about the Nighthawks seeking retribution?" he asked.

Nadia didn't look up. She wasn't about to confess that three times during the holiday break she could've sworn she'd spotted Damon. Most recently at the Kennedy Center, where she and her parents had attended the ballet. She'd chased his ghost down the stairs, through the lobby, and ended up outside in the courtyard, shivering in her heels and gown, completely alone. She'd been seeing things.

She shook her head. "I'm of no use to them anymore. The only reason I was targeted was because they were trying to frame me as the traitor. Everyone knows it was Damon, so... no, I'm not." After a beat she asked, "Any word on Hayden or Wolfe?"

"Wolfe is still in a coma. He's at a long-term care facility in Tucson. Hayden's whereabouts are unknown."

Nadia hesitated. "And Damon?"

Cameron paused. "We haven't located him yet. But on that subject, what *about* Damon?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's still at large. Are you concerned?"

Nadia shook her head. "I'm actually not worried about Damon at all."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"If he was going to kill me, I'd already be dead. He was *supposed* to kill me, right? And here I am. I don't think he could do it. He and I were pretty close."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Of course not. This is conjecture. If I'd heard from him, don't you think I would've reported it?"

"I don't know. You just told me how close the two of you were."

"Not so close that I'd commit treason."

Dr. Cameron scribbled a few notes onto his legal pad. "Have you set any personal goals for yourself this semester?"

"I'd love to not get shot."

Dr. Cameron laughed. "Sure, that seems reasonable. Is there anything else you'd care to discuss while you're here?"

"I think I'm all set."

He handed her a clipboard thick with psych tests. "In that case, please take a few minutes and fill these out."

Nadia sighed as she flipped through the pages. The usual tests: multiple choice, short answer, fill-in-the-blanks, true or false. *Love is overrated; I enjoy manipulating other people's feelings; It's okay to steal if you need the item.* "Have there always been so many?"

"You may complete the paperwork in the waiting room. As always, my door is open should anything arise. I'll see you soon." Dr. Cameron stood.

"Thanks," Nadia said as she crossed the room. "I can't wait."

# 5 SIMON HAWTHORNE

## SUNDAY, JANUARY 15

The moment Nadia left the dean's sitting room, Simon Hawthorne plopped into an oversized leather chair and propped his feet up on the coffee table. He checked his watch, sighed loudly, and dropped his head back against the headrest, staring in frustration at the ceiling, which, incidentally, he found devoid of security cameras.

Given his questionable ethics, he'd visited loads of headmasters, but it was never an activity he enjoyed. At this juncture in his life, each hour spent with the principal was wasted time. He had things to do, people to cheat, places to go.

*Speaking of places to go...* A week earlier, before checking in at the Academy, Simon had visited the quaint little town of Cave Creek, where he'd had the foresight to secure a postal box for himself. This was a lesson learnt the hard way, after his previous headmaster had confiscated the kilo of aluminum powder that Simon had ordered online. Simon hadn't actually intended to blow anything up, but he firmly believed in planning for all contingencies, which is why he'd ordered the components necessary for the assembly of an improvised explosive device in the first place. The headmaster, however, hadn't been impressed with Simon's preparedness, and had immediately placed him on probation.

Currently, Simon was expecting a package from an old mate back

home—nothing special, only a few odds and ends. He wasn't privy to a school-issued vehicle, as his driver's license wasn't entirely valid, so he'd need to make nice with someone who could drive. Perhaps his new roommate, Alan Cohen. A bit peculiar, that one.

When Simon could wait no longer, he crossed the room and rapped on Dean Shepard's closed door. "Simon Hawthorne, madam," he called. "Reporting as instructed."

"Yes, come in," she answered. As he entered, she continued. "I apologize, I forgot you were waiting. Please, have a seat."

Simon resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he settled into one of her wingback leather chairs. He remained silent as she lifted a thick folder from her desk. Reports, assessments, charges filed, written reprimands. Simon had perused the file before. It made for entertaining reading.

"Do you know what this is?" Shepard asked.

"I haven't a clue," Simon lied.

"It's your file," she said. "MI-6 was good enough to forward it after they kicked you out."

"Technically, I wasn't *kicked out* so much as encouraged to pursue an alternate—"

Shepard opened the file. "Petty theft, cheating, identification forgery—"

"I only added a few years to my age, and strictly for the purposes of obtaining a rental car. Rest assured, I made no attempt to purchase liquor."

"Breaking and entering, hacking, kidnapping."

"That last charge was completely unfounded. Stealing a rival mascot should not qualify as kidnapping, especially when it's a hound that I showered with affection. I vehemently object—"

"Renting a flat in the headmaster's name to host parties," she continued.

Simon quietly laughed. "That was brilliant. It took him *months* to figure it out."

The look she shot silenced him immediately.

"I beg your pardon." He cleared his throat. "In retrospect, it's not as funny as I remember."

"Shutting down London's CCTV surveillance system 'just to see if I could.'"

"Did you know that London has one camera to every eleven people? If that's not a violation of privacy, I don't know what is."

Dean Shepard closed the file and dropped it onto her desk. "Do you know why you were invited to Desert Mountain?"

Simon flashed what he hoped was a winning smile. "My magnetic charm and boyish good looks?"

"I'll take that as a 'no.' Let me explain why we agreed to accept you into our program."

"Yes, madam." Simon straightened in his seat. The truth was, he didn't know. He'd assumed some arrangement between the CIA and MI-6: we'll take your derelicts if you take ours. Or maybe his mum had written it into her contract, knowing perfectly well that her son often colored outside the lines, as it were.

Shepard's eyes locked onto his. "As I'm sure you're aware, your mother placed a condition on the acceptance of her last assignment. That condition was that you be admitted to the MI-6 training program. When you were dismissed, the headmaster found your mother unreachable."

Simon remained neutral as Shepard spoke. He'd known his mum was in trouble. She'd missed her last three check-ins. MI-6 refused to send an extraction team; her supervisor had a list of "plausible explanations" as to why she'd failed to make contact. But Simon knew.

"The agency reported her status as Missing in Action," Shepard said.

He'd deliberately gotten himself booted from the MI-6 program, knowing his mum would be forced to return home.

"After several weeks of searching, well... you know."

That's when they'd changed her status to KIA. Killed in Action.

"Which brings us to why you're here. Your mother was a loyal friend to our agency. Decades ago, at great peril to her own life, she assisted the CIA in the exfiltration and relocation of a Syrian asset. The mission was highly controversial, and she saved not only the life of the asset, but also the life of the CIA officer most closely involved. When he found out your mother had gone missing, he checked up on you."

Simon's ears perked up.

Shepard continued. "Your difficulties at the MI-6 training program likely should've deterred him, but apparently his loyalty, like your mother's, runs deep. He insisted that you be admitted to Desert Mountain Academy."

This was him. The one Simon had been looking for. It had to be. He forced an even tone of voice. "May I ask the name of my generous benefactor?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I've only heard his code name."  
*That's a start*, thought Simon.

"Which, unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to share. But I know this." The dean held up her right index finger. "This is what that relationship buys you."

"A finger?"

"A semester. *One* semester."

"Ah. That makes more sense."

"I fully expect that your shenanigans are well in the past."

"Worry not," Simon said. "I'd sell out my own mum to stay out of trouble. You know..." He leaned forward. "If she weren't already dead."

Dean Shepard looked down at her lap, then back up at Simon. "We were all very sorry to learn about her death."

*Presumed death.*

"As I mentioned, she was a great friend to the Agency. And while I sympathize with your loss, I want to be sure we understand each other."

He nodded. "Madam, I'm grateful for the opportunity you've provided." He'd actually been presented with two options: Desert



Mountain Academy or the United States Military Academy at West Point, but even with the military revoking its Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, Simon didn't imagine he and the Army were a smart match. Furthermore, at West Point he wouldn't stand a chance of success.

Not with his mission.

This was exactly where he needed to be.

# 6 NADIA

## SUNDAY, JANUARY 15

An hour and a half later, Nadia finished the psychological questionnaires. She left the clipboard with Dr. Cameron and headed back down the path, through the shady tunnel of trees. As she reached the sidewalk leading up the hill, someone shouted her name.

She turned, searching for the voice. On the second-story patio outside the dining hall, Jack leaned over the railing and waved. Her stomach flipped as she saw him, and an uncontrollable smile spread across her face. They'd texted every day and talked on the phone a few times, but she hadn't seen him in over a month. And he looked *amazing*.

He wore a fitted white button-down, sleeves rolled to the elbows, jeans, boots. His dark hair, cropped in a military style, set off his sun-kissed olive skin. He cupped his mouth and shouted, "Wait there."

He disappeared from view, reappearing a minute later along the side of the Navajo Building. Weeks of missing him—his arms around her, his lips on hers—evaporated as he quickly closed the distance between them.

Before she could speak, he picked her up and spun her around. Nadia laughed. "Put me down."

He did, then held her at arms' length while his caramel eyes studied her face. "Hi," he said, smiling. "How are you?"

"I'm good," she said, completely unable to remove the ridiculous grin from her face. "How was Zurich?"

"Incredible," he said. "Except that my father was there."

"Well, it was his wedding. How's your new stepmother?"

"Almost old enough to drink."

"You're *kidding*," she said.

"She's twenty-five."

Nadia laughed again. "Oh, that's brutal."

"You have no idea. It's so good to see you."

"You too." They stood in awkward silence for a moment, both trying to contain their grins, until Nadia asked, "Walk me to my dorm?"

"Of course. So, how's Dr. Cameron?"

She tore her eyes away from his face as they started across the lawn. "The usual. Probing, invasive, low-key threatening." She'd meant it as a joke, but it was a fairly accurate assessment. "Have you met the new dean?"

"Only in passing." He glanced at his watch. "Our sit-down is in twenty. She's briefing all team leaders this afternoon. You?"

"Just before I saw Cameron."

"What did you think?"

"I like her. She normally runs The Farm in Virginia, so she trains actual CIA officers. I guess that makes her qualified to supervise a bunch of recruits."

"She's active CIA, not an administrator?"

"Yeah, why? Is that bad?"

"No, it's just..." Jack frowned. "To be honest, I'm a little worried about next year. I need the dean's recommendation to advance to the college-level training program at Langley. I don't expect an easy pass, but her status as an active officer sets the bar really high. And with Wolfe gone, I feel like I'm starting from scratch, you know? I spent three semesters winning *him* over."

"I don't think you need to worry. Your record is impeccable. Plus, her position might be helpful. Since she runs the postgraduate program, her recommendation probably carries a lot more weight than Wolfe's, right?"

He nodded. "That's actually a really good point. I just hope we hit it off. Otherwise, I'm out of options."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Money for college. My dad—" Jack shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Here we are."

As they reached her dorm a light breeze picked up, and the soft desert grasses flanking the entrance blew like purple smoke. The architecture of the dorms, with their smooth, adobe-styled exteriors and exposed wooden beams, was Southwestern classic. Discrete modern upgrades—unique to the Academy—included bulletproof glass in the lobby, security cameras in the hallways, and an emergency lockdown button in the resident assistant's room.

Nadia reached for the door handle. "Thanks for the escort."

"Hang on a second." Jack took her arm and led her off the path. He lowered his voice as a few students trickled down the sidewalk. "Over break we talked about giving us another try. Do you want to go out this weekend? Dinner and a movie?"

Nadia hesitated as a flutter passed through her chest. She glanced down the hill toward the guard station. Historically, their timing hadn't been great.

"Before you decide there's something I need to say." He took a deep breath and waited until the students walking by were out of earshot. "There are times in life when we ignore what we know to be true. When we refuse to listen to our gut—to our heart. Last semester, when I investigated you as the double agent, that was one of those times." He took her hands in his. "I will spend every day of this semester proving to you that I have faith in you—that I have faith in us. That is, if you'll let me." He paused and glanced at the ground. "That sounded a lot less melodramatic in my head."

Nadia laughed, flattered by his words. "No, it was perfect." *Just do it—take a chance.* "Yes, of course I'll go out with you. You didn't even need the sales pitch."

He nodded. "So I made that ridiculous speech for nothing?"

"It wasn't for nothing." Her cheeks flushed as she moved back onto the sidewalk.

Jack's hand rested on the door. Nadia leaned against the glass. He moved toward her, tucking a stray curl behind her ear with his free hand.

She had the feeling he was about to kiss her when a group of senior girls emerged from their hallway and entered the lobby. Jack opened the door for them.

As they passed by, Nadia sighed. "I should go. If I don't unpack in the next twenty minutes, Libby won't be able to sleep tonight."

"Okay. I'll see you guys in a little while. But Saturday night, it's just me and you."

"Sounds great."

He smiled at her as he backed away. "And thank you for giving us another chance. I promise it'll be different this time."