

It's time, Vera. We can't do this without some insight. I have to talk to my sister."

"But how can you do that? Leonid will not allow it."

As so many have to this point, her response makes me laugh.

"Not that sister, Vera."

"You have another?"

"Yes. The woman you saw watching me – the one who rushed out of the bar. She's my sister. My twin sister."

"I do not understand. Your twin?"

"This," I turn to face her, and at the same time point at my face, "isn't mine."

Silently, and with a strange look in her eyes, she reaches out and gently touches my cheek, then slowly moves her fingers along my jaw line. After some brief contemplation, she comments.

"It is too perfect... how..."

"It's a very long and confusing story Vera, but I promise to explain when all this is over. If we are to have the upper hand with Tarasov, I have to talk to her."

She quickly falls back into the moment, forcing aside the apparent confusion that is engulfing her.

"Your twin sister is a spy as well?" she asks.

"Actually," I reply, forcing myself not to laugh, "she's the CIA's Director of Intelligence."

SOLUTION
SQUARED
RECALCULATION

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As this is a sequel to *Solution Squared*, hopefully, you're reading them in order, and don't miss any of the one-liners, or backstory. If you just happened to pick this one up, started reading, I have a suggestion...

STOP AND GO READ THE FIRST ONE! 😊

enjoy!
Mike

“...and that so long as we avoid accepting as true what is not so, and always preserve the right order of deduction of one thing from another, there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end, or too well hidden to be discovered.”

*René Descartes
French Philosopher
1596 – 1650*

eight years later



1



I remember... stepping through the door and onto the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

I remember... being grabbed from behind.

I remember... turning to find two really big guys behind me.

I remember... turning to look at Daria and seeing her collapsing into the arms of another guy.

I remember... being stabbed in the lower back.

I remember... being in the back seat of a car going really fast.

And... I remember the strong stench of alcohol and cigarettes.



2



I'm dreaming... I must be...

I'm on a plane... a small plane... going somewhere...

My head is lying against a window, and as I look out it through still blurry eyes, I see water – lots of water.

We are close to the water – maybe just a few feet above it. I know I'm drugged, so the few feet, must be more.

I move my head, and feel someone grab my arm... it's a guy... the same guy who grabbed me... back in Rabat. He's got a syringe... and he's sticking it into my arm... I try to move it... but it just lays there. I hear moaning behind me... but I can't move my head enough to look.

I hear voices... guys talking.

It's in front of me... I try to make my eyes focus. It's all blurry... That's right... I remember... I'm dreaming...

I try to make myself listen to the voices... Russian voices...

Yes... that's it... they're speaking Russian...

I catch a few words... 'Daria', and 'money'...

Now... the dream is fading...



3



“Mrs. Whitman, there are some guys from the DoD here to see you. They don’t have an appointment,” I hear from the intercom on my desk.

“Okay, Angie, I have a minute – go ahead and send them in.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Two seconds later, my office door opens and in walks Mikey and my brother. They stand quietly and wait until my secretary closes the door behind them.

“Good morning, Sis,” Rhyan says, looking rather perplexed.

“So, Court, whose birthday...” Mike starts, but is interrupted when the door again opens.

The second I see Howard standing there, I damn near faint.

“Hello, Courtney,” he says, closing the door behind him. “Seems I’m not the only one invited to this party.”

It’s been slightly more than five years since I’ve seen or spoken to Howard. Two years after we ‘lost’ Whitney, he chose to retire and has since been working in the private sector. I figure seeing me is too hard for him, because to him, to his eyes, I *am* my sister.

Hazards of being ‘identical’.

Now, his apparent ‘scheduled’ presence, along with Rhyan and Mikey ‘turning up’, raises all kinds of red flags. When the door to my office opens a third time, without a knock, ‘the other shoe drops’ as they say, and there stands Alice Williamson – Director, Central Intelligence.

“Absolutely no calls, visitors, or interruptions of any kind, until I tell you otherwise,” she says to my secretary, who is standing behind her.

"Yes ma'am!" Angie replies, closing the door.

Alice walks directly over to my desk, hands me a stack of photos that are in her left hand, then turns and takes a seat in one of the chairs across from my desk.

"Those were taken approximately one week ago."

The photos are in color and were taken with a wide lens, close up. All are of the same two females – dark tans, very black hair, toned bodies, and expensively dressed. There's one of them getting out of a black Benz limo, and one of them coming out of what appears to be a high-end department store, one of them in an upscale restaurant. All total there are nine photographs. The last image is of them exiting what appears to be a large office building.

"Okay, so who are they?" I ask, laying the photos on my desk.

Without answering my question, she leans forward and hands me a second stack.

"Those were taken three hours ago."

I'm holding three 8x10, high-resolution, color photos. They are very grainy and the first two are a bit out of focus – telling me they were taken by hand, from a distance, with a long lens, and in a hurry. It appears I'm looking at the process of a female being abducted, by at least three males, and those doing the abducting aren't being at all careful about their task. In the second photo, there's what appears to be blood visible on the woman's forehead.

The last one, makes me zone out the moment I look at it. I *know* my heart rate increases, and I even stop breathing.

"Courtney?" someone says – I have no idea who.

As I sit motionless, slowly running out of oxygen, my eyes locked to the photograph in my hands, I somehow know what's happening...

Even with the subtle changes, and as weird as it will sound, I *definitely* recognize the face, and because I know who it is, I know where this conversation is going as well.

Alice is apparently expecting just this reaction.

"Yes, Courtney, it's her – as difficult as that is going to be for you to understand."

Her voice snaps me out of my momentary daze, and my lungs finally force my brain to acknowledge that I need oxygen. I suck in a huge breath, concentrating on the photograph to the exclusion of all else. Poor quality and graininess aside, I'm definitely holding a photograph of *Daria Ladenko* – a recent photograph.

My heart now racing, I silently stare at the photo, realizing that if my sister survived that ‘explosion’ – by whatever bizarre means – her nemesis must have survived it too.

Then another revelation – the covert message Whitney left at the daycare center, years ago, was very well planned. Either Alice has perfected her acting techniques or, based on what’s currently happening, she actually doesn’t know what Whitney did. Either, I know, is quite possible.

“Courtney?” Alice prompts me.

“Uh, Alice... I’m seriously confused here. She’s dead, unless like me, she has an identical twin.” I know I have to play this off, lest I give away what my sister did.

Alice again leans forward, handing me another photograph. It was taken in a manner to allow for clear identification – as if the photographer carefully stabilized the camera against something. Even though it was taken from a distance and with a long lens, the face is in almost perfect focus. It’s a second female, putting up a decent fight as she too, is being forced into a car. Although she doesn’t look like my sister physically, I somehow know it is. Perhaps it’s the bright red ponytail, held in place with a yellow scrunchie. I have to consciously force myself not to laugh – it’s without a doubt, her favorite alias – *Alexandra Jaeger*.

Howard steps up behind me and looks over my shoulder, at the photograph in my hands. When I glance up at him, and see the look on his face, I know he recognizes the disguise, but his confusion is quite apparent.

“You’ve been out of circulation for a long time, Howard, but this has a huge bearing on you which is why I asked you to come.”

In a single heartbeat – based on what Alice said, and the photo he’s still staring at over my shoulder – Howard’s proverbial light bulb goes on.

“*Holy shit, Alice!* You staged it? The whole damn thing was staged?” he blurts out as he takes the photo from me.

Once a spy, forever a spy – as Whitney always liked to say. Apparently, ‘spy blood’ definitely still flows through Howard’s veins – retired or not – and in true spy fashion, his first comment is about the ‘op’ rather than the fact the only woman he ever truly loved, is still alive.

Mike walks over to my desk, picks up the rest of the photos, and now has Rhyan looking over his shoulder at them as well. Mikey too catches on, the moment he recognizes Daria.

“*No fucking way!*”

“Yes, Sergeant Major, there is a way. She is, and always was,” Alice replies to Mike’s outburst, “*our asset.*” When she finishes the sentence, she’s looking right at me.

The moment she says it, I understand, and again, my heart rate increases. In a single moment of absolute clarity, the ‘why’ of what my sister has apparently done, makes perfect sense.

Fourteen years earlier, Alice used us – the entire detail – as a means to get Daria clear of the Russians, without getting her killed. I flash back to Alice’s comment in Howard’s office on the day we first started planning the operation – *‘The catch to all this is, I won’t give up any of our assets to do it. I’ve made that clear to the Director.’*

She couldn’t lose any assets because that would cause a situation in need of an explanation – something those in power, don’t like to do. Alice always planned to ‘kill’ Daria, in order to retrieve her. Our little operation in Istanbul – the one that made Daria ‘public’ – gave her the perfect means to pull it off. And, at some point during the process, knowing she would probably never get another opportunity so perfect, Alice offered my crazy-ass sister the chance to play in Daria’s world – the one of ultra-deep cover, black operations. The type only God knows about. Whitney is the type of spy that only comes along once in a career – or in Alice’s case, twice. She had Daria. If she could somehow recruit Whitney, and team them up...

I have to block the thought, and force back the smile I know is about to break on my face. Last thing I need is Alice asking me questions I don’t want to answer.

Knowing Whitney like I do, if Alice made an even slightly enticing offer, no way would my sister have been able to turn her down. From the day we started our little ‘adventure’, deep in my heart I always had a bizarre, but intense feeling, that of the two of us, my sister would become the ultimate ‘spy’.

Alice also knew that recruiting Whitney in the middle of the Crete operation would give her an ace in the hole – someone on both teams.

How damn convenient was that?

Yes, Alice Williamson is scarily efficient at her profession.

“Oh... my... God...” I mumble, giving Alice reason to believe I realize who the female in the second photo is.

“Yes, Courtney, it’s her. They’ve been together since Crete. And, if you choose to do what I’m about to ask you to do,” she turns and looks at Rhyan and Mike, “ask all four of you to do – I will give you a full accounting.”

I let go, and the tears come. In my head, I flash back to the daycare center, and know that all of this is about to finally come to an end. My sister is going to have to go back to being just Whitney. She won't have a choice. This – *whatever this is* – is going to end up being the ultimate 'compromise'.

"And yes, Howard, it was staged. It was necessary. I couldn't afford to lose her to the Russians after you," Alice says, pointing right at me, "pulled her into the open in Istanbul. Turning them into a team just seemed to be the natural progression. You should all know this – *she chose to do it*. All I did was make an offer."

She stops talking for a moment, as if waiting for a response. When none of us says anything, she continues.

"Once you see what they've managed to accomplish over the course of the last decade, I can only hope you will understand."

Finally, Rhyan speaks up.

"Okay, so am I the only one in the dark here? *They?* Who are these people?"

"It's hard to explain, Senior Chief..." Alice says, just before I stop her.

"Alice, please... give me some time. I need to talk to him, and to these guys also," I say, pointing at Howard and Mike.

"Fair enough. My office in thirty minutes, and plan to be there for a while. You two," she says, pointing at Mike and my brother, "are for the time being, TDY to this office. You can call your Commanders and verify if you like."

She stands up, turns, and disappears out the door.

I take the photos from Mike, pull one from the pile, lay it on the desk in front of my brother, and then spin it around, orienting it so that he can see it.

"That," I say, tapping on the female face in the photograph, "is Daria Ladenko, employee of the Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, killed in a gun battle on Crete, almost fifteen years ago."

"This is about Whitney's death?" Rhyan asks.

"Brace yourself, Rhyan," Michael says, putting a hand on his shoulder, as he watches Howard hand me the photo of Whitney, which I lay on top of the first photo.

"And that," I look right into my brother's eyes, tapping on the face in the second photo, "is our goddamned sister – you know, *the dead one?*"

Although my little brother was never one for being emotional, the look on his face is priceless and I will never forget it. When I

turn and look again at Howard, for a second I wonder if he's going to lose it. I stand up, step around my desk, and wrap an arm around him. We stand silently watching, as my little brother picks up the photo, and carefully examines it. After a couple of seconds of quiet contemplation, and without looking at us he says, "Doesn't much look like her, but she's definitely behaving like my sister would – being a general pain in the ass."

Mike, Howard, and I, laugh at the same time.

"Are you okay with this, Rhyan?" I ask, stepping over, and taking one of his hands.

He shrugs, then after a few more seconds of thought, lifts his head, and looks right at me.

"Nothing the two of you ever got into surprised me, Sis – why start now?" he replies, a devious little smirk covering his face. "But, actually seeing her, after thinking she was dead for almost fifteen years – that's going to be, well, seriously weird."

I allow myself to relax, and silently thank God for making my younger brother, the awesome man he's become.

"I couldn't have phrased it any better, Rhyan," Howard adds, laughing.

"Let's go talk to Alice, shall we?" I ask.

"Yeah," Howard replies, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I can hardly wait to hear the rest of *this* fucking story."

Each of them starts toward the door, but Mike hesitates. When I pass him, he reaches out, tugs on my sleeve, and when I stop, he leans over, and at barely an audible whisper, says, "I bet you never expected it to end like this, did ya, Court?"

As weird as this will sound, when I turn to look at him, that same sinister little smirk is on his face – the same one he had eight years ago, at the daycare center, when Misty described the woman who drew on my daughter's hand, and gave her the Sharpie.

"*Kiss my ass, Michael!*" I whisper back, as I turn to follow the others out the door and into the hall.

All the way to Alice's office, I'm forcing back the tears.





“They’re *deep cover*. No one except the last Director, Melinda Aston, and me, know about them. They’ve been doing things – things that we can’t legally do ourselves.”

“Black Ops?” Howard asks, as he thumbs through one of the many volumes – all of which are stamped ‘TS/SCI/ISOP’ in bright red letters – of data stacked on Alice’s desk.

“Among other little tasks,” Alice replies.

“So... my ‘*dead*’ sister spent the last decade killing people for the CIA?” Rhyan asks.

“Yes, she has,” Alice replies, in a cold, calculated voice. “She and Daria have terminated at least twelve high profile targets that *your bosses* said they couldn’t legally take care of. The DoD came to us on a number of targets.”

“Imad al Din Qaderi and Abdul-Aziz Barad,” Mike says, looking right at Williamson.

“Among others,” she replies in the same cold, impassive voice.

“My sister is an *assassin*?”

“Yes, Courtney, that’s part of what she’s done for us. But the two of them have done far more than ‘kill some people’ – so don’t isolate their existence to only that.”

“*No shit!*” Howard suddenly blurts out as he’s reading, causing us to turn and look over at him.

“The incident on the Zaliv America,” he says, looking right at Alice.

“Yes. Based on some very good intelligence, but unbeknownst to the Russians, Daria and Whitney were placed onboard, and the hijacking never occurred. To this day, no one has identified the

people who thwarted the attempt," she replies. "Whitney and Daria also 'acquired' enough info during the operation, that they were able to selectively remove a number of ranking individuals from 'Al Mueed' after the fact. You should recall that, for the most part, their organization completely collapsed shortly after that incident."

"Shit," I reply, still turning pages in the thick folder on my lap. "The CIA has certainly gotten their money's worth out of my sister."

"Yes, we have, which is why I want them back – alive. We owe them. Both of them. I'm not going to let it end like this. I'm officially making it your," her eyes lock to mine, "responsibility to recover them. If anyone can be compelled to complete such a task, it will be the four of you."

"Where did it happen?"

"Outside a hotel in Rabat. And, to complicate things further, we have no damn idea why they were there."

"They weren't on assignment?" Howard asks.

"No. They were working a project at the compound in Marsá al Burayqah, with Melinda..."

"*The compound?* The same one that..."

"Yes, Courtney, *that* compound. Well, *our* compound actually. We also managed to 'appropriate' a certain Greek shipping line amid the chaos that followed the operation on Crete. The Greek government, however, still doesn't realize we have our hands in it."

"Who the hell has been running all this?"

"That isn't important right now. Getting Daria and Whitney back is. As I was saying, they were at the compound and when Melinda went looking for them the following morning, they were gone. After she did some investigating, she discovered they flew to Rabat in the middle of the night, for reasons unknown."

"Okay, the big question. Who has them?" Michael asks.

"The answer is, we don't know."

"Okay," I stand and face the others in the room, "let's go get my screwy sister and her 'partner' away from the bad guys, shall we?"

"Where do you want Melinda?" Alice asks.

"It stands to reason we can't function freely in Libya, so..."

"Melinda is mobile, and can set up wherever you want her."

"Tell her to call me in an hour, in my office. I need to research something before we start this. I assume someone in Signals knows what's going on?"

“Yes, and they know you have Level Five access now. On this one, Courtney, anything I know, you know.”

Howard’s surprise at Alice’s comment is not only visibly apparent, but also instantaneous – only because, unlike Mike and Rhyan, he understands what it means.

Five minutes later, I’m once again, standing in a secure room in the basement of CIA headquarters, staring at giant wall monitors.

Déjà vu... for sure.



5

●—————●

“Okay, I’m here. What are your other two wishes?”

While Mike, Rhyan, and Howard turn immediately toward the voice, I know exactly who it is. When I too turn around, I find Miss Cassandra Cartwright grinning at me.

“CASSIE! Holy shit!” I blurt out. Then, as if we’re a couple of high school kids seeing each other after a long summer vacation, I run across the room and throw my arms around her.

Cassie is now Station Chief at the Istanbul embassy. When Carl retired five years earlier, as the most senior agent remaining, Cassie stepped right into the job. Even though we talk occasionally, and swap email constantly, I haven’t actually seen her since she became Station Chief.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Rumor has it you’re about to ‘start some shit’ as they say. I figure you can probably use someone who’s good with a handgun,” she replies, referring to our ‘loading dock’ incident years ago.

“Yeah, well, I tend to use people who *‘don’t fucking miss’*.”

“I definitely qualify – *I never miss, Courtney*,” she replies with a wink.

I hug her second time and whisper, “It’s really good to see you again, Cass.”

With a smile, she takes a step back. “Willie wants in too, if you need him. He’s in ‘hot standby’ back in Turkey, and can be anywhere we want him in a couple of hours. Melissa says to tell you ‘HEY’, that she still has your sunglasses, and that she isn’t giving them back. And of course she too, is ready to play, if you need her.”

“Do you guys even know what’s going on?” I ask, glancing at Howard.

"Doesn't matter, Court. We're all in, regardless. If it's important enough to draw Courtney Whitman out from behind a desk and back into the field..."

I hear snickering behind me.

"Yeah, yeah..." I give Cassie a dirty look. "But there is one thing I need to do real quick. Wait here."

I turn, walk into one of the empty offices, close the door, and pick up a phone.

Seconds later, Alice Williamson is on the line.

"Whatever it takes, Courtney. Period. Any questions that come from anyone higher up than me, I will deal with – understood? I owe your sister something – a debt of sorts, and now is my chance to make good on it. If anyone asks you for authorization for anything from this point forward, use the authorization GAIA."

I laugh – I can't help it.

"Gaia – as in the Mother of the Titans?"

"Yes. It's a nickname they gave me on the Hill after I took over the Agency. Anyone who might have reason to question anything you do, will recognize it."

"And personnel use is at my discretion?"

"Absolutely. Whoever you need, wherever they are."

"And funding? How are we going to explain that?"

"Think back for a moment, Courtney, and I bet you can answer that one yourself," she replies, letting the thought hang.

It takes a few seconds, but I eventually grasp her meaning.

"*Oh crap!* You still have that?" I blurt out.

"Actually, Melinda and Whitney turned it into about six times the original amount. One of your sister's hidden talents, seems to be 'investments'."

I do some quick mental math, and then damn near faint.

"*My God, Alice!* Do you know what that works out to?"

I hear her laugh.

"Yes, Courtney, I do. It's been the single source of funding for everything the three of them have been doing for the last fourteen years. I was being *literal* when I told you *no one* knows about them. *Not even this country's current Commander in Chief.* We – the three of them and myself – have been operating in the 'black' all along. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am, I guess I do."

"Just get them back, Courtney. That's the single thing that will make my tenure as Director of this organization matter."

"I have one more question."

"And that is?"

"My parents. Although they will accept all the secrecy, I would like to give them some kind of a reason, when I ask them to take care of my kids."

"More importantly, you want to tell them your sister is still alive..." I hear the muffled laugh at the end of her comment. "Do whatever you have to, but do it quickly."

"Yes ma'am. I'll make sure everything goes across your desk. I'll talk to you again soon. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, and good luck as well!"

I hang up the phone and stand a moment, thinking. She's being too congenial... too agreeable. Basically, Alice is making this way too easy. The thing is, Alice Williamson is *never* easy – *everyone* who's ever worked with, or for her, knows that. My mind is already analyzing, as I reach out and open the door next to me, making everyone in the Signals room turn to look at me. I walk over to the table where I laid the photographs Alice gave me, pull two of them out, then walk directly over to Cassie, who is now sitting with Rhyan and Mike, staring at one of the wall monitors.

"Look familiar?" I hand her the photo of Daria.

"*FUCK!* That's not possible!" She looks up at me, confusion covering her face. "Courtney, *we saw her die!* For God's sake, we were there. No one could have survived it."

I hand her the second photo, which shows the face of the other female as she's trying to fight off two guys.

"Care to guess who that," I tap on the face, "is?"

She too, recognizes the disguise, and for a second I think she may actually faint.

"Jeezzz, Courtney..." she mumbles, still staring at the photo. "Seriously... it doesn't even look like her."

"That's the 'shit' you just volunteered to get into, Cass. We're going to retrieve them, and at this point, we don't even know who has them. Your career has moved so far past this kind of crap, that you – and you too," I point at Howard, "are going to have to decide just how far into this screwed up mess you are willing to get. We – all of us standing here – know that based on the history of the situation, at some point, there will inevitably be gunplay."

Howard laughs, shakes his head, then flips me off, making both my brother and Mike break up laughing.

"I was getting shot at when your *mother* was a rookie," Howard says, looking me right in the eyes. "And you damn well know it wasn't the bullets that made me retire, Courtney."

"I know Howard, I know."

"Howard's 'universal sign language' pretty much covers it for me too," Cassie blurts out, trying to lighten things up again.

"Okay then. I need to make another call. Howard, you and Cass can get with Keith," I point at a guy sitting at the largest console in the room, "and get every intercept they have from Morocco in the last seventy-two hours. You two," I turn and point at Rhyan and Mike, "need to get your stuff ready to deploy. We're going to Spain."

"We're ready, Sis. I mean come on, what do we do for a living?" my smart-ass little brother responds.

"Well, you guys need to go by military aircraft – based solely on all your damn toys. Get to the terminal at Langley and I will make sure you're on the next aircraft to Morón. Once I know where we will be, I'll get word to you. Okay?"

"We're gone. See you on the other side, Sis," Rhyan responds.

"*Slowly*, Courtney – plan carefully. Think..." Mike says, gently tapping on my forehead. "Got it?"

"I promise, Mikey, I promise," I reply, smiling at him.

He knows my adrenaline levels are completely out of control, and once again, he's looking out for me. I know I have to move quickly, yet very, very, carefully.

Seconds later they're gone. The moment the door closes, I reach down and pick up the nearest phone. I need help – from one very specific person.

