

*It takes him about three heartbeats to go running past me, realizing I'm there when he's three strides down the hall. As he slides to a stop and spins around, I step out of the doorway and turn to face him.*

*"You aren't looking for me, now are you?"*

*The absurd amount of adrenaline flowing through me, forces my brain to switch to the 'smart assed' Whitney. I simply can't help it.*

*"Конечно ищу, вы, нахалка!" (Of course I am, you insolent female) he replies, testing me perhaps.*

*"Well, I suppose I am a bit on the 'insolent' side, but let's discuss the issues at hand. And let's do it in English – my Russian still needs work."*

*"As you wish. I want the 'item' that Elena has given you."*

*He takes a step toward me, and I know I can't allow him to get any closer. Distance – Howard, and the Marines who trained us, always emphasized that until you are mentally ready, keep distance between you and your opponent.*

*"I can hear just fine from where you are – let's keep the distance, shall we?"*

*He stops and continues staring at me, a rather sinister grin covering his face.*

*"Now, assuming I actually have an 'item' – and I'm not saying I do – what in God's name makes you think I'm simply going to hand it over to you?"*

*Again, the smartass. So much for playing dumb, I suppose. I'm definitely in it up to my ass now.*

*"Well now, Miss Nelson, you certainly are bold for one who is on her first assignment. If you choose to defy me, I suppose I will be forced to take it from you – which I should point out, will not be a pleasant experience."*

*"Okay, now that I'm scared..."*

SOLUTION  
SQUARED

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*Mike*

Main Entry: **so-lu-tion**

Pronunciation: sə'lüşhən *also* səl'yü-

Function: *noun*

Inflected Form(s): **-s**

Etymology: Middle English, from Middle French, from Latin *solution-*, *solutio* act of loosening, solving, from *solutus* (past participle of *solvere* to loosen, solve, dissolve) + *-ion-*, *-io -ion*

**1 b** : an answer to or means of answering a problem : a clearing up : **EXPLANATION, DENOUEMENT <your solution to the problem>** c : (1) : a set of values of the variables of an equation that satisfies the equation

Main Entry: **square**

Pronunciation: 'skwa(a)](ə)r, -we], ]ə

Function: *verb*

Inflected Form(s): **-ed/-ing/-s**

Etymology: Middle English *squaren*, modification (influenced by Middle French *esquarre* square) of Middle French *escarrer* to square, from (assumed) Vulgar Latin *exquadrare* -- *transitive verb*

**3 a** : to multiply (a number or **quantity**) by itself : **RAISE TO THE SECOND POWER...**

*Quoted From:*

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged.*

Merriam-Webster, 2002

<http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>

*“There is no such thing as chance; and what seems to us merest accident, springs from the deepest source of destiny.”*

*Friedrich Schiller  
German Poet and Philosopher  
1759 – 1805*

# 1



## Right Now

Inside an abandoned warehouse on a shadowy side street, near the docks, in the Bolshoy Kuyalnik industrial area, northeast of Odessa

Set off in a dark corner, in the back of the building

2:25 AM local time

A man walks across a dirty, dimly lit room, inside what appears to be some kind of an industrial building, full of old machinery. In the middle of the room under a bright light is a figure secured to an old wooden chair with plastic 'tie wraps'. In a far corner are silhouettes of men – two or three. They are shrouded in darkness and cigarette smoke, are speaking in low tones, and in Russian.

As the man approaches the figure in the chair, he pulls from his coat what appears to be a gun of some kind. With a sinister laugh, he reaches down and in one quick motion, jerks off the tape that is covering her mouth.

He squats down directly in front of her, and as he stares at her bare chest, he spits on the floor, then with a sickening laugh says, "You American women all have such nice tits – what a shame it is that it will be necessary to ruin this pair." He reaches out with the 'gun' and jabs each of the female's breasts once, then stands up and takes a step back. He turns to the men seated in shadows and when one of them nods, he turns back to the woman and levels the 'gun' directly at her...



Six hours earlier, I was dressed to kill, sitting in an upscale coffee shop in one of the nicer neighborhoods of Istanbul, waiting

for Whitney to call and tell me she marked our contact. Once she did, it would be a simple operation to get her out of the country.

Then, disaster struck.

Now I find myself stripped to my panties and tie-wrapped to an old wooden chair, facing what I have to believe is my inevitable and immediate demise.

I've always known it could come to this – not that I ever gave it much thought. Dying is probably the biggest of the pitfalls of our profession. So far, I've managed to avoid the inevitable. I find myself wondering just how much this is going to hurt...



The man begins laughing as he pulls the trigger on the 'gun' – but instead of a loud report, as one would expect from a handgun, there is only a muffled 'pfffft' as the two electrodes are expelled from the dual barrels of the Taser. The two tiny needles with their wires attached strike the girl in the stomach, one just below each of her breasts, penetrating a half inch into her skin.



“Scheiße!”

“If you find that uncomfortable, stupid woman, wait until I really begin to use this thing,” the man says.

Then, I hear a different male voice from the shadows behind my antagonist.

“We can avoid this entire ordeal, Miss *‘Jaeger’*,” the voice says, as he casually tosses my passport onto the table in front of him, “if you will just answer my questions – honestly.”

I immediately notice his Russian accent.

“Ich verstehe nicht – ich spreche kein Englisch,” (I don't understand – I don't speak English) I reply, knowing they aren't buying any of my act.

Without any warning, my tormentor pulls the trigger on the Taser, and my entire body begins to convulse. It seems as if every muscle in my body is burning – uncontrollably. I feel my heart rate double and my eyes begin to water. I mentally focus every ounce of willpower I can find to suppress the scream that is trying to force its way free of my mouth. Even breathing is quickly becoming difficult – I close my now tear-filled eyes and try to concentrate.

The nasty guy just stands there laughing.

“Wir wissen beide, dass Ihr Pass gefälscht ist – aber immerhin, eine gute Fälschung. Sie werden mir jetzt sagen, was Sie mit



Vladlena Karasova zu tun haben und wo Sie vorhaben, sie zu treffen." (We both know that your passport is a fake – although a good one. You will tell me what business you have with Vladlena Karasova and where you intend to meet her) comes from a different voice at the back of the room. It sounds somehow familiar.

The nasty guy walks over, stops next to me, and starts playing with my hair. I keep my eyes closed and pray that it will all end quickly. Strangely, the concept of dying doesn't seem to scare me. I suck in a huge breath, and allow the tears to continue.

"Ich weiß nicht, wer Vladlena Karasova ist – ich schwöre es! Warum tun Sie mir das an?" (I don't know who Vladlena Karasova is – I swear! Why are you doing this to me?)

I feel the Taser being pressed against my left cheek, and at the same time feel a hand fondling my left breast. Suddenly two of the fingers on my breast squeeze my nipple so hard that the pain takes my breath away. Again, however, I force myself not to utter a sound.

"The next shock will be considerably longer than the first one, Miss...?" comes from the back of the room. "At least tell me your true name – as a starting point?"

"Ich heiße Alexandra Jaeger – genau so, wie es in meinem Pass steht. Ich sage Ihnen die Wahrheit!" (My name is Alexandra Jaeger – just as it says on my passport. I am telling you the truth!)

I hear the nasty guy laugh, and open my eyes just in time to see him discharge the Taser – again.

This time, I do scream – as loud as I ever have in my entire twenty-four years of life, and I cry – almost hysterically. I could never have imagined that the human body could endure this kind of pain and yet remain conscious.

Fortunately, my antagonist doesn't realize my pain threshold is quite low. The moment he fires the Taser the third time, I slip into unconsciousness, even before I can scream again.

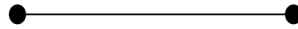
As my mind begins to drift, I fill it with thoughts and visions of my parents, and my brother and sister. As my world goes dark, I hear a voice asking 'How the hell did this happen? What went wrong? How did I end up in a warehouse in Ukraine, about to face my impending death, alone?'

Interesting question don't you think?

Let's see if I can explain...



# 2



## The Beginning

“Damn it Whitney! You and your sister are going to drive me totally nuts, I swear to God,” my mother says as she sits down across from me. She never curses, so I know I’m in trouble – again. Well, for the most part ‘never’ – my sister and I always seem to be able to get her to. As pissed off as she is at the moment, I’m not about to point out that she is once again, talking to the wrong one of us.

You see, we’re twins – identical twins. Identical to the point that no one, save one guy, can tell us apart unless we want them to. Not our parents, our younger brother, or our grandfather. *No one.*

At the moment, ‘no one’ includes the school principal, who just came into the room.

“I would say ‘good morning’, Mrs. Bergstrom, but as you might have already determined, my morning thus far has been anything but good. As smart as these two are, one would think they’d know when to quit – but alas, that’s not the case.”

“I told you to read my report you dork. They’d never have figured it out if you’d just read the report.”

“Shut the hell up, Courtney. Don’t dig yourself in any further than you already are young lady,” my mother says in reply to my sister’s outburst.

“Mom, I’m Courtney,” I offer, hoping it doesn’t piss her off any more.

“Well crap! Whichever one you are, shut the hell up. Don’t say another damn word! *Either of you!*”

Man, is she pissed!

“The one who was supposed to be in the library studying during third period, was in an American History class, while at the same time the one who was supposed to be in the History class, was under the south bleachers on the football field, with one James McDermott.”

And so goes our youth – trading places, and seeing just how much trouble we can get into. Although Whitney is usually – or perhaps *always* – the instigator, I never seem to tell her ‘no’.

We are closer than any other two people on this earth. We spend time learning each other’s habits and idiosyncrasies so well that, unless we want you to, you’ll never have any idea which of us you’re talking to. If one of us develops a twitch or habit that might give her away, the other notices it, and begins to mimic it almost immediately.

The older we get, the more difficult it is to identify us.

This ‘created confusion’ applies to and works on everyone – except Mikey. No matter what we do, he always knows which of us he’s talking to. It’s actually rather spooky.

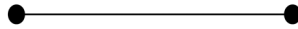
Mikey, is one Michael Osborne. My single best friend. It’s as if he and I share a soul. I am 94 days, 13 hours, and 9 minutes older than he is – something I point out to him, constantly.

Anyhow, just as he and I have, our mothers too, grew up together. Vicki is the closest thing Whitney and I have to an Aunt, and we love her to death. While everyone else calls him Michael, I’m the only one who gets away with ‘Mikey’.

More than once in my life I’ve found myself wondering if perhaps I’m destined to marry him.



# 3



By the time we make it to college, we have the ‘masquerade’ thing down to a science. At times, we even confuse ourselves.

However, unbeknownst to us, we are apparently being very closely scrutinized by some very powerful, and perhaps scary, people, who it seems, are impressed with our acting abilities.

While mom and dad do their persuasive best to get us to go to different schools, we eventually win the battle, and end up at MIT in Cambridge, together. We do concede to not taking any of the same classes at the same time.

And yes, we continue being obnoxious. For the first part of our freshman year, we take to wearing different colored scrunchies in our hair – so our classmates can tell us apart. But, we soon grow bored with that, and the scrunchies disappear. It’s far more entertaining to confuse people.

The few close friends we make, eventually give up trying to tell us apart, and simply settled for asking which one they’re talking to. They say it’s easier.

So... ‘college life’. Although we do have to apply ourselves when necessary, education has never really difficult for either of us – probably because of genetics. As bad as it will sound, our freshman and sophomore years are thirty percent studying, and seventy percent partying, sex (okay, so we aren’t even close to angels), and generally causing trouble.

While we both have rather healthy sexual appetites, we have far different reasons for doing it. I tend to do it for the intimacy – I love physical contact, more so if it’s with someone I care about. I find falling asleep, completely naked, with my head on a guy’s chest, almost as satisfying as sex itself. Almost.

I always make it perfectly clear that I don't do 'wham, bam, thank you ma'am', or the infamous 'one-night hook-up'. Although I'm not necessarily looking for any mad, passionate, 'I love you's', I'm damn sure not a 'piece of ass' either.

Whitney is a whole different story. My sister, in her infinite wisdom, sees sex as a means to an end.

Now don't misunderstand – she isn't sleeping with everyone and anyone, but is actually quite picky where guys are concerned. The thing is, if you're one of the few fortunate (or as in many instances, unfortunate) guys to find themselves in the heat of passion with my sister, you can damn sure bet she's up to something – or has something to gain by doing it. To her, sex is nothing more than a natural, primal act – *that feels really good*. And yes, she has a 'reputation' of sorts.

I become numb to her behavior after a while – so much so, that while attending yet another frat party (frat boys and parties – what can one say?) I sit quietly and, to the total amazement of the girl sitting next to me, watch Whitney, feigning serious intoxication, allow herself to be led up a set of stairs.

"OH MY GOD! Aren't you going to go stop them? You do know what they are going to do, right?" the girl blurts out.

I let out a muffled laugh, and shake my head side to side, to indicate I'm not going to interfere.

"Yeah, well... I'm more worried about *them*, than I am about her – trust me," is my response, as I slowly sip my drink.

She walks away shaking her head, thoroughly confused. A few minutes after my sister disappears from sight, I leave with a friend – I have no desire to be around when shit hits the fan.

You see, I know my sister is up to something. For starters, in all of the twenty-one years we've been on earth, I've *never* known my sister to get 'drunk'.

Her devious little plan apparently works to perfection. Seems a certain snooty sorority girl found my sister in her boyfriend's bed the next morning.

Yes, my sister has a penchant for complicating *our* lives.

A good friend catches me on the way to my first class the following morning, and explains all the drama.

"The story I heard is, she got a text message from him – from *his* phone even – around 6:30 this morning, saying he was sick and would she come over to the house and take care of him. When she

got there, she found him sound asleep, naked, and snuggled up against your sister – who was also naked! Can you believe it?”

I laugh so hard, I almost cry. Yeah, right – ‘drunk’.

Although I have no idea what prompted it, I’m certain that what happened, is retribution of some kind. God knows my sister loves to get even.



At the beginning of our senior year, my sister decides we need to take being each other, a step further. That ‘step’ leads into our bedrooms. At first, I freak out and ask if she has completely lost her mind! However, over time, I have to admit, I begin to find the idea not only a bit intriguing, but rather arousing as well. One mind – two bodies.

Can it be done? Can we sleep with each other’s boyfriends without them figuring it out? The only way to know for certain is to try it.

After a lot of contemplation, and me talking myself out of it at least five times, I finally concede, and we test our theory – using Whitney’s unsuspecting new boyfriend.

This is probably the very first true test of what I will eventually become – a cold, calculating, efficient tool of the U.S. Government. I’m about to take something that should be very personal and intimate, and turn it into an experiment. I’m right there, about to call it all off, and confess to Wiley what’s really going on, and then I feel him press himself against me. That’s all it takes – the primal part of me wins out. The fact he’s my sister’s ‘boyfriend’, becomes totally irrelevant.

Whitney is oh so right about one thing – sex with Wiley *is* incredible.



We never do tell Wiley what we did. Whitney is afraid it would hurt his feelings, and he’s too decent a guy for that. I never do sleep with him again – even though I probably could have, and Whitney wouldn’t have cared. She continues to date him, but at the end of the semester, he graduates and we never see him again.

We do learn from this experience, that we can easily be each other with little or no effort – apparently in *any* situation. We eventually try the same experiment on a guy I’m dating, and needless to say, Whitney pulls it off without a hitch. We are in fact, *identical* – in every sense of the word.



Our final 'sexcapade' at college is, in a roundabout manner, what brought me to be tied to a chair, in a warehouse in Ukraine, attached to the business end of a Taser.

It's meant as a joke, and it again involves my sister and me sleeping with the same guy - without his knowledge. It's just another of our childish antics, which again comes off without a hitch. As far as I know, no one ever does tell him what we did.

However, one 'witness' finds it very interesting, and reports the entire incident to her 'superiors'. The people 'watching' us - the kind of people most of us don't even realize exist - have at this point, compiled a rather extensive 'file' on my sister and me, and have come to the realization that perhaps our talents for confusion and misdirection, can enhance what it is they do.

You see, *spies are everywhere...*



# 4



As it turns out, Natalie Coombs, one of the girls on our floor, isn't actually a college junior – although she easily looks young enough to be. She has in fact, been detailed to watch us – meaning Whitney and me.

A week after we do our 'cap and gown' thing, we discover who she really is, when she walks into a coffee shop about a mile from campus, and sits down at our table.

"Hey guys!"

Natalie, a quiet and unassuming junior, who lives on our floor, is dressed to kill. Since we met her over a year ago, she's always been a 'sweats and sneakers' kinda girl – basically the definition of a 'girl nerd'. My sister and I immediately exchange a 'what's up with this?' glance.

"What's the deal, Nat? Job interview or just a really hot date?" Whitney asks, referring to her amazing, over the top appearance.

"Interesting question," she replies. "Now, which one of you asked it?"

We laugh, and watch as she takes a seat.

"Whitney did," I reply.

"Well, it's more of a recruitment thing, than an interview. But, I'm not the one being recruited."

She lets the comment hang, and waits for a response. When the waiter walks up, she orders a latté and biscotti without missing a beat.

"And that means?"

"The people I work for want to talk to the two of you, about a job – assuming of course you're interested."



We sit in silence for a few seconds – staring at each other. Then it hits me. Her demeanor has changed, and she isn't the same giddy little college kid we've always known her to be. She is in fact, *someone else* – someone with perfect makeup, perfect hair, and the outfit she's wearing is definitely designer. I also notice the Rolex on her wrist, and the diamonds studs in her ears.

Nope. *Definitely not* a college sophomore.

I laugh.

“Man, I can't believe we missed this one. All this time, and I know I had no clue.”

“Me either,” chimes in my sister. “When she turned up in the middle of the year, and managed to get into a room on a full floor, I suppose that should have been a clue, huh?”

Natalie laughs this time.

When the waiter returns with Natalie's coffee, I think it freaks him out when we get really quiet, and watch him set the stuff down on the table. Instead of waiting for her to pay him, he lays the bill on the table and quickly walks off.

“I guess,” I reply, still smiling. “So, what was it? The whole ‘playing each other’ thing, or the ‘switching guys’ thing?”

“A combination of both, actually. The thing with Steve kinda cinched it up,” she says with a laugh. “But, to be honest, we've been watching since you were sophomores. I was detailed last year, so we'd have someone involved when you graduated.”

Whitney laughs and says “Damn! She knows about Steve, and wasn't even there when we did it.”

“Yeah, shows we aren't as smart – or as tricky – as we thought.”

“In truth, ladies, my bosses believe you are far smarter than you ever let on. They believe the two of you can do some... ‘interesting’ things for your country,” Natalie says, as she carefully sips her coffee. “Again, assuming you're interested.”

“Although we've spent years thinking our mother's belief we were ‘being watched’ is a crock of shit, you do realize she's going to have the mother of all fucking hissy fits when she finds out about this conversation?” Whitney asks.

Again I laugh – rather loudly. I can't help it. For the first time in as long as I can remember, my sister makes a legitimate use of her toilet mouth!

“That's an understatement,” I mumble, looking right at Natalie. “So, is ‘Natalie’ even your real name? You guys all have fake names, don't you?”

“Yes, Natalie is my real name – although I do have a few last names,” she replies, a little smirk covering her face.

“And, I bet you aren’t twenty either, are you?” Whitney asks.

“I was... once. I’m actually twenty-nine. I suppose one could say I made out in the ‘looks’ department. And, as you can see, they put my youthful appearance to good use.”

“Can I guess who ‘they’ are?” I ask.

“Well, based on your sister’s comment about your mother, I’d say you know exactly who ‘they’ are.”

Whitney and I turn and look directly at each other, at the exact same moment, thinking the exact same thing. We don’t have to say anything, we simply know. Natalie immediately notices our strange facial expressions, and has a comment.

“Damn, that’s so freaky,” she says, again sipping her coffee.

“Yeah, we know. Hazards of being one person in two bodies” Whitney replies.

I turn back to face Natalie, and with a big grin ask, “So, when is this meeting?”



Because we’re ‘fresh graduates’, we really don’t have any commitments at this point – other than some half-hearted job hunting. So, when Natalie asks if we want to ‘take a ride’, we laugh and say “Sure, why not?”

Forty minutes later, we’re on a small private jet, taxiing toward Runway 9 at Logan International – and yes, we’re both pretty much freaked out. Once the plane is airborne, Natalie explains we’re headed for Langley, Virginia, which again, freaks us out. We know what’s in Langley – hell, Mom use to work there. We sit and silently stare at each other, for most of the flight.

Slightly more than an hour later, we land at DC National. How close we are to ‘home’ sinks in the moment the tires touch down. Again, we turn to look at each other. For the first time that I can remember, my younger sister actually looks nervous.

“Are we sure?” she asks, as the plane slows to a roll, and taxis toward a hanger at the far end of the airport.

My sister has never been unsure of anything, up to this point. She’s always been the bold one – always ‘knew’ or had an answer for most everything. The strangeness of it all is compounded by the fact that, for the first time in my life, *I’m absolutely certain* of something. This is my path. Whether Whitney is to travel it with me, I have no idea. I do know that my destiny lies at the other end

of it. I can only hope in my heart that my sister will come along for the ride.

I glance at Whitney, stick out my tongue, and smile. It takes her a second, but she does smile back, and I think, even relaxes.



It takes less than two hours to sign our lives away – and I never hesitate. Courtney and Whitney Bergstrom are now employees of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Boy is mom going to be pissed off!

