

**SYCAMORE BLUFF (excerpt)****Copyright © Jude Hardin****CHAPTER ONE**

“How does it feel to be dead?” The Director asked.

“Lousy,” Diana said, speaking to him from the surveillance van on an encrypted cell phone. He was in Washington, and she was in Florida, and neither of them sounded very happy at the moment.

“I put you through this little training exercise to see if your skills had been affected by the incident last month. I hate to say it, but it seems to me you’ve lost a step or two.”

Last month, Diana had been forced to kill a fellow operative, a member of her own team. It was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Now, after several weeks on administrative leave, she’d failed to survive a mock chase scenario where she’d been pursued by four enemy agents with automatic rifles. Normally, she could have aced the exercise blindfolded.

“I’ll do better next time,” Diana said. “Just give me another chance.”

“It’s been several weeks, but you obviously haven’t been able to get it out of your head yet.”

“I’m over it. Trust me.”

“I trust you, Di. But what happened last month would have taken its toll on any of us. It messes with your head in a thousand different ways, and the counseling sessions can only go so far. It’s going to take time. That’s what you need to realize now. You haven’t rebounded to a hundred percent yet, and there’s no point in pretending that you have.”

“I need to work,” Diana said. “This is what I do. I can’t go back on leave. I’ll go nuts. Do you know how many episodes of *Law and Order* I’ve watched over the past few weeks?”

“I’m taking you off the CIAO assignment,” The Director said.

“That’s not fair. You can’t do that. I’ve put too much work into it. You can’t just hand it all over to another agent now.”

CIAO. The Citizens’ Initiative Against Oppression, a homegrown terrorist group Diana had been following for over a year.

“I have something else for you,” The Director said. “Another job. You don’t have to go back on leave if you don’t want to.”

Diana tried to curb her anger. Losing her cool now would only feed into The Director’s current negative assessment of her. She had to be careful. She needed to pick her battles wisely, or he might put her on a desk assignment for a year or more, maybe even permanently. She’d seen it happen with other operatives, and she didn’t want it to happen to her. She needed to be out in the field doing things. She would go stir crazy behind a desk.

And maybe The Director had a point. Maybe the incident last month *had* affected her performance. She didn’t feel as though it had, but maybe it had affected her on a subconscious level. That was what the counselor kept digging at, but so far the sessions had proved fruitless.

“I really don’t think it’s fair for you to take me off the CIAO assignment,” she said. “But of course I’ll do whatever you want me to do. What kind of job did you have in mind?”

“There’s a town in Indiana called Sycamore Bluff. Population six hundred and twelve. Officially, it doesn’t exist. You won’t find it on any maps. There are no roads in or out, and three sides of the perimeter are guarded by an eight-foot electric fence topped with razor ribbon. The fourth side is guarded by a stand of very old sycamore trees, and a rock cliff with a hundred foot drop to a dry creek bed. Hence the name Sycamore Bluff. The face of the cliff is concave, impossible to climb up or rappel down. Anyone sent there is transported via helicopter, and all of the town’s food and water and other supplies are shipped in that way as well. The residents can communicate with each other, through a closed system of cell phone antennas, but they’re not allowed to make contact with the outside world.”

“Sounds like a prison,” Di said.

“It’s not a prison. It’s a social experiment. Everyone who lives there does so voluntarily, although at the outset they agreed to stay there for six years. It’s a microcosm, if you will, sort of like Biosphere Two, only it’s not totally enclosed, and they don’t grow vegetables or anything. This phase of the experiment is due to end March first, by the way.”

In the history of the United States, Diana knew of only one secret government town, and that one had been part of the Manhattan Project. The fact there was another one piqued her interest greatly.

“A social experiment,” she said. “Who set this experiment up?”

“NASA, working in conjunction with the United States Air Force. I’ll give you a full briefing before you go in. If, that is, you agree to go in.”

“So what’s the purpose of this experiment? Why are these volunteers contracted to stay there for six years? Why would anyone agree to that kind of isolation for that length of time?”

“The purpose is simple,” The Director said. “To see if a society, given a limited setting and a strict set of rules, can evolve into something close to a true democracy. There is no mayor in Sycamore Bluff, no hierarchy of citizenship, no police force, no law enforcement of any kind. The people there have jobs to keep them busy, and various forms of entertainment to help them relax. They don’t get paychecks per se, but all of their needs are taken care of. It’s a study on human behavior, and NASA hopes the results will be useful for future generations interested in space colonization. Specifically, colonization on the planet Mars.”

“Sounds like science fiction,” Di said.

“So did smart phones thirty years ago.”

“Good point. You said something about *this phase* of the experiment. What did you mean by that?”

“Some of the military guys jokingly refer to Sycamore Bluff as the six-six-six experiment. The participants were initially required to stay in an underground bunker for six months, to simulate the time it would take to travel to Mars in a spaceship. Then, after their six year period in the town, they’ll go underground for six more months to simulate the trip back to Earth. Six months to get there, a six year stay, and then six months to get home.”

“So it’s really a total of seven years,” Diana said. “That’s quite a commitment.”

“Believe me, they’re being well compensated for it. *If* they hang in for the duration. If someone decides to bail out at any time—and a few have—they lose the entire paycheck they would have gotten if they had stayed. It’s the old carrot-dangling-from-the-end-of-a-stick trick, only the participants who go the distance will be rewarded with the carrot in the end.”

“It must be quite a carrot to keep them motivated for seven years. And are there more towns like this? In the United States?”

“There are,” The Director said. “Quite a few, actually, each performing a different type of experiment. But Sycamore Bluff is the only one The Circle has any interest in. At the moment, anyway.”

“And why does The Circle have any interest in Sycamore Bluff?” Diana asked.

“I’ll tell you that when we meet in person. Are you interested?”

“I’m intrigued, I’ll say that. If I go in there, I won’t be required to stay for any certain length of time, like the other residents, will I?”

“Of course not. Once your mission is complete, a helicopter will come and fly you and your partner out of there.”

“Partner?”

Diana didn’t like the sound of that. She preferred working alone. Especially after what had happened last month.

“That’s another thing,” The Director said. “We need to send in a team to work undercover. A man and woman who can pass for husband and wife. All the residents of Sycamore Bluff are heterosexual couples without children.”

“I don’t know,” Diana said. “Have you selected someone for the other half of the team yet?”

“No, but we’ll need to do that right away. Unfortunately, we’re shorthanded after what happened with Henry Parker, and all the full-time male operatives are busy with other assignments at the moment. I thought maybe you could choose a partner yourself, one of your freelancers. Any ideas?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “I think I know just the guy.”

## CHAPTER TWO

The sign out front said Nicholas Colt's Conservatory of Music. It was a very nice sign, and Colt had paid a lot of money for it. Unlike most things in his life these days, it was constant, and it was good. He never got tired of looking at it.

He'd parked by the mailbox and had gone inside a few minutes ago, and now he was sitting on a stool behind the counter changing the strings on a 1967 Gibson Les Paul electric guitar. It was 2:51 p.m. on a Saturday, and Colt was expecting his first student of the day to walk in any minute.

As he worked on getting the guitar's D string in tune, he felt a tingle between the fourth and fifth toes of his left foot. There was a microchip embedded under the skin there, along with a red tattoo the size of a pencil eraser. The tattoo, a mark that identified him as a freelance operative for the ultra-secret government organization known as The Circle, could only be seen under a special light composed of a secret band of frequencies. The tingling meant he was

supposed to call a certain number with the encrypted cell phone he'd been given. He was supposed to call as soon as possible, without hesitation, no matter what.

He set the guitar on the counter, walked over to the wall safe, and dialed in the combination. The phone was in the left rear corner of the hollow space, plugged into a dedicated electrical outlet that kept the battery fully charged at all times. Colt picked it up and turned it on and punched in the number. He'd committed it to memory months ago, but this was the first time he'd had to use it. He heard a series of clicks, and then the voice of a very pleasant female robot instructed him to enter his account number followed by the pound sign.

He entered the account number, which he had also committed to memory months ago, and a few seconds later another female voice—not quite as pleasant, but at least human—said, “Wild Canary.”

Colt knew the voice. It was Diana Dawkins. *Wild Canary* was her code name.

Colt responded with his own: “Bullfrog,” he said.

A pause, and then, “Hello, Nicholas. How are you?”

“Not too bad, I guess. Under the circumstances.”

The circumstances had thrown Colt into one of the darkest mental states he'd ever experienced. His wife had been in the hospital, completely unconscious, for almost seven months now. A gunshot wound had left her in a coma, and on top of everything else she was pregnant.

Brittney, Colt's adopted daughter, was doing well in the fall semester of her junior year at the University of Florida, and his guitar teaching studio was thriving. But without Juliet, he couldn't find the joy in any of it. His and Juliet's baby would be delivered soon, and then he would be forced to make the most difficult decision anyone could ever make: to keep his wife on life support, or to pull the plug and let her go.

“How is she?” Diana asked.

“The same,” Colt said. “No change. The doctors say there’s still some brain activity, but they’re not sure how much.”

“And the baby?”

“The baby’s perfect. It’s a boy. I haven’t decided on a name yet, but he’s perfect. He’s the one ray of light in this whole miserable situation.”

“I’m so sorry you’re having to deal with all that, but I have something that might take your mind off it for a while.”

“I can’t help you right now, Diana. I just can’t.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she said. “I need you. Remember our arrangement? Of course you do. And I’ve been monitoring your bank accounts. You’re almost out of money. You need me just as much as I need you.”

Colt felt like hanging up. How could she possibly expect him to go out and play secret agent while his pregnant wife lay in critical condition? Juliet had a feeding tube, and a urinary catheter, and she had to be turned every two hours to prevent skin ulcers. Physical therapists came to her room and performed range of motion exercises several times a day to prevent muscle contractures. She required constant care. Juliet would probably never wake up, and it was partially Colt’s fault. In fact, it was partially *Diana’s* fault as well. If there were any justice in the world, The Circle would be paying half the bills. Or all of them.

“I’m doing all right,” Colt said, responding to Diana’s statement regarding his financial situation. “I have almost forty students now.”

“You’re paying your regular bills. I know that. But the medical expenses are astronomical, and Juliet’s insurance isn’t covering all of it. And, you’re going to have a baby to care for soon. You probably don’t even realize how expensive that’s going to be.”

Colt didn’t like it that she knew so much about his personal business. She’d recruited him into the organization, and had paid him a large sum of money to help thwart an assassination attempt on the president, with the agreement that he would be available for other assignments from time to time. It seemed like a reasonable arrangement, until life got in the way.

“Why me?” Colt said. “Why can’t you find someone else?”

“Because I can’t. All of the other experienced operatives are on assignments elsewhere. All but one, but I can’t use her on this job. It’s imperative that my partner be a man.”

Colt knew it was futile to argue with her. He’d agreed to work with her on the previous job, and he’d taken the money, and now The Circle pretty much owned him. For the rest of his life. Operatives who refused assignments had a nasty habit of disappearing.

“How much money are we talking about?” Colt asked.

“Same deal as last time. But there might be a bonus involved with this job. I can’t promise anything, but if things work out, I might be able to get you another hundred K.”

“Hold on,” Colt said. “My student just walked in.”

“Make it quick.”

Colt set the phone on the counter. He told his fourteen-year-old student, and the student’s father, that the lesson for today, and maybe for the next week or two, would have to be canceled. He said he would contact them as soon as he was able to resume the weekly sessions. He apologized, and encouraged the young man to practice on his own for now. After they left, he wrote a quick note and taped it on the front door, explaining the situation to his other students.

He hoped none of them would try to find another instructor in the meantime, but he couldn't really blame them if they did.

Colt picked up the phone. "I'm back," he said. "So tell me about the job."

"Meet me at the safe house in three hours. Six o'clock, no later. Pack for cold weather."

"Should I pack a gun?"

"No. The Circle will provide us with weapons. Lock everything up at your studio and your house, because you won't be going back home for a while."

She hung up. Colt turned the lights off and locked the door. He took one last look at the sign out front as he climbed into his 1996 GMC Jimmy and headed for the hospital to visit his wife.