



The Moving Deception

Book four of the Nimbus series

By C. P. Spencer

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To Bob, with deep appreciation for his support.

Prologue

SOUTHERN SUDAN, 1985

Lieutenant Abdul Kamal strode toward the dusty tent, breaking his fast-moving pace to slip under the angled canopy that covered its entrance. The foul stench wafting from inside made him recoil in disgust.

He cautiously sniffed the air and recognized the scent as belonging to the fermented canned herring Sweden sent to Africa for humanitarian purposes. The provisions had made their way to the rebel camp instead of to the displaced persons internment camp they were meant for, and Abdul suspected that had been done on purpose due to the complexity of their consumption. The surströmming was supposed to be opened underwater to minimize the pungently rotten odor, but he had observed the savages at the camp didn't care about details such as those.

Probably smells better to them than their own bodies do.

It was well past midnight, but Abdul could see by the lantern's light burning inside the tent that two men were moving around.

Why the hell weren't they asleep?

He scuffed the dirt with the front of his boot.

What difference does it make if they're awake? It's not like it's the first time I've looked into startled eyes as I do what I'm about to do.

Abdul pulled a pistol from a holster on his belt and turned his face away from the tent. He took a deep breath of clean air, then whipped back around and pulled the tent flap open. As soon as the flap opened to reveal the startled looks of the two men inside, he fired his pistol at the inhabitants.

He hit the first man between the eyes, and the man's dead body flew backwards onto a filthy pallet that was serving as a bed. The other man, he'd hit in the neck. It was a fatal wound, but the man clung to life long enough for his mouth to move with what Abdul presumed was a silent curse on his own life.

"I don't believe in that," he hissed in the man's native Dinka language. Crouching over the dying man, he stuck his pistol barrel into his open mouth and pulled the trigger.

The open can of surströmming had been turned over, its liquid mixing with the blood seeping out of the new hole he'd opened in the man. Abdul toed the man's body away from the toxic swill. He wasn't done with the body yet, and the less stinky it was, the better.

He grabbed a hand-woven rope from the floor and tied it around the body's wrists. He then dragged the other man's body over and tied his wrists in the same manner, leaving a slack line of rope between the men. He wrapped the loose line across his chest and under his arms, then exited the tent with the two bodies dragging behind him.

With minimal effort, since both bodies were very slender, he dragged the two bodies to the metal quonset hut that had been set up on the perimeter of the camp.

"Leave those outside," a voice called out. "I don't want their stench in here."

Abdul dropped the rope and entered the hut alone.

The Caucasian man lounging on a camp chair inside had closely cropped dark hair, and in spite of the time of night, was wearing a pair of sunglasses. The man had unbuttoned his beige-colored uniform shirt to the waist, and the drink he held in his hand was resting lightly on his stomach. His mouth hitched up into an aggressive smile, and he gestured to a picture hanging on the wall.

"One of the men drew it for me. I think it's a good likeness. I particularly like the depiction of me as the messiah."

Abdul chuckled at his commander's amusement. He and the commander had been friends since childhood, and for the last

fifteen years, Abdul had been the “messiah’s” second-in-command.

“They call you father behind your back. You have their trust, Griffen.”

“Yes, I do, don’t I? Never underestimate the importance of how hard men who worship you will fight for you.”

Griffen de Jong rose from the camp chair, buttoned his shirt to the neck, and set the now-empty drinking glass on the desk’s top. “Wake whatever men slept through your nighttime punishment, gather up the remainder who are probably huddled somewhere in fear from the sound of the shots, then get all of them to the mess. Assign two of the men to bring those bodies with them. I want them to carry their own dead. They should see what happens when they choose to rebel against their father.”

“Alright,” Abdul replied.

“Oh, and take that with you,” Griffen pointed to a weapon leaning against the wall as he pulled the jacket to his uniform off a hook sticking out of the wall.

“The transfer’s been made?” Abdul asked.

Griffen nodded as he buttoned the jacket up to his neck. “Yes, the money came late yesterday. Fifty million United States Dollars. In thanks for our excellent services to the government.”

“Won’t they think it’s strange that we disappeared immediately after they paid us to break up the conflict from the inside?”

Griffen laughed dismissively. “The Sudanese government’s war against the rebels is well on the way, so they got what they wanted on that front. The war should keep them busy for years to come, and the fact that you and I have failed to break the rebels from the inside will not be obvious for quite some time. The rebels will win eventually, of course, and by then who will be left to care about us?”

“Always thinking ahead,” Abdul paused, then hissed through his teeth. “That the government has fifty million cash so readily available is why the people hate them so much.”

“One of many reasons, my friend, a small one of many. Now go get the men.”

Abdul grabbed the weapon from its place on the floor and left the hut to wake and collect the sleepy rebels of the camp. Each man looked confused at first, until they passed the bodies outside the commander’s hut, then they looked alarmed and started chatting with one another in whispered tones. Abdul crooked his finger at two of the men bringing up the rear of the group, who reluctantly came to stand in front of him.

“Bring those to the mess with you,” he commanded, pointing at the bodies.

“Yes, sir,” they answered simultaneously. They untied the rope, then grabbed one dead man each under their arms and heaved them up over their own shoulders.

Once the men of the camp were gathered inside the other metal quonset hut that served as the mess, Abdul made a head count.

All were present.

Griffen walked to the front of the hut, then theatrically turned and faced the group.

“Men, you sit in front of me because you have families and land that you are fighting for. I didn’t ask you to join the rebel effort to overthrow the oppressive government that you hate. *You* asked *me* to help you. And I have. Which is why it is so upsetting that two men, these two men, members of the Dinka people who have lost so much, have betrayed us. Because I am your father, I have delivered the punishment required to fit the crime. I have gathered you here to pray for the strength to resist any and all temptations you may encounter that could take you away from our purpose. I leave you now to pray for yourselves.”

The men dropped their heads and began whispering to themselves. Whether in prayer for their dead brethren, themselves, or both, was of no consequence.

Griffen jerked his head in Abdul’s direction as he passed on his way to the door. Midway through the doorway, he stopped and turned halfway back to look at his friend. Abdul responded with a barely perceptible single nod, and Griffen exited, leaving the door open.

With the men of the camp’s heads still facing down and their backs to the door, Abdul prepared the weapon entirely unobserved.

Seconds later, a stream of fire shot out of the powerful flamethrower, engulfing the men and the inside of the metal hut in a ball of fire. Abdul darted out the open door, and Griffen threw a metal bar across it so the men would be trapped inside.

It wasn't long before the intensity of the screaming died to silence as the flames ran out of fuel and the men’s bodies were rendered to ash.

Griffen and Abdul lit cigarettes and silently smoked the filterless sticks to their fingertips before grounding them out in the dirt. Abdul swept the door’s locking bar away to enter and inspect the results. They’d expected to feel some resistance in opening

the door, having assumed bodies would be piled up after trying to get out, but the door swung easily inward with no obstructions.

“That’s odd, they’re all in a pile together in the middle. I’d have thought they’d claw at the walls, and we’d have some along the perimeter. Certainly at the door. Very strange. Of course, if they knew anything at all about survival, they wouldn’t need us, right, Abby?” Griffen asked with detachment.

Abdul bore a considering expression on his face, but didn’t comment about the smoldering pile. “Now what?”

“Now, I take this uniform off for the last time,” Griffen said as he quickly undressed, throwing the well-medaled jacket on top of the ash pile. “Light that up.”

Abdul complied. They watched as the jacket and medals melted into the pile.

“Should anyone come looking, they will assume poor Commander Griffen de Jong had been trapped inside along with the others. What a terrible tragedy, no?”

Abdul was about to ask about his own uniform, and had he turned to question his friend and leader, he would have seen the pistol pointing at his back of his head. As it was, Abdul never saw his fate.

“Sorry, my excellent friend, but where I’m going, I don’t need you to come,” Griffen whispered to Abdul’s prone figure, where it had conveniently fallen right on top of the pile. Whistling, Griffen picked up the flame thrower, targeted Abdul’s body, and watched as his once-valued friend burned. When the mess was close to flaming out, Griffen tossed the weapon onto the smoldering pyre.

He was in his own hut, gathering a few of his things when the explosion that would erase all that had happened rang out. Griffen glanced out of the window at the massive fireball that was now swirling up from the smoke-filled air. He smiled broadly, unable to hide his pleasure with the successful result of his plan.

The deafening noise of the blast delighted Griffen, but also blocked the sound of frantic footsteps. Their erratic clomping faded to silence as the escapee fled further away from the wreckage that was once a rebel camp.

1

PRESENT TIME

“Nick’s here early,” Claudine Moreau remarked with surprise.

Mark Trent smiled wryly as he pulled his 1964 silver Aston Martin DB5 into a parking spot next to Nick Sherpa’s dark blue Corvette. Nick had opined more than once that Mark’s vintage vehicle choice was because Mark secretly wanted to be Ian Fleming’s super spy character, James Bond. Mark had reminded Nick that he was, in fact, just that—a fucking secret agent—so the ridiculous comment wasn’t the clever tease Nick thought it was.

Mark had a few choice thoughts about Nick’s choice of car and what it might imply about *his* character, but kept those to himself. “Callie’s an early riser. Nick hates it, but I suspect he’s finally just given in.”

“Men do when they’re in love,” Dina said, leaning over to kiss Mark on the cheek. He turned his head and met her lips instead.

“You devil, you hijacked my cheeky peck.”

“I’m not one to let a good opportunity pass,” he responded.

He was using a joking tone when he said it, but Mark meant it quite seriously. They had, at first, been mere work colleagues.

Mark had been instantly attracted to the French beauty, with her long, dark hair, big blue eyes, her lilting accent, and her background as an acrobat which made all her moves very elegant. Still reeling from a relationship that had ended badly, he'd pushed the unwelcome attraction away, writing her off as a beautiful flirt, a bit of fluff, and ultimately convincing himself there was *nothing more to see here*.

It wasn't long before he found himself admiring her intelligence and the physically impressive skills that she was able to bring to their work. The admiration bothered him more than the physical attraction, so he'd attempted to double down on his resistance.

Unfortunately, for Mark and his attempts to ignore her, Dina had other ideas.

Attracted to his rapier-sharp intelligence and dark, almost brooding manner, as well as the way his unwavering confidence in himself presented itself not like ego, but rather a balm of stillness and safety, she decided she had met her match. She liked to say she wore his defenses down, but according to him, he simply accepted he really had no defenses at all when it came to her.

Dina reached over and ruffled his hair. Mark styled his medium-brown locks in an almost old-fashioned neatness that made his medium-brown eyes, medium height, and general looks become unnoticed and unmemorable. Which was a great thing for an undercover operative who wanted to go unnoticed. However, when mussed, the ordinary looks took on a rakishly attractive edge that Dina enjoyed quite a lot.

"I love it when you're ruffled," she purred.

Mark rolled his eyes, but left his hair where she'd placed it as they weren't on a job at the moment.

"Ah *merde*, my earring just fell out," Dina said as she started patting herself down and mumbling complaints while looking for it.

"Need help?"

"No, just don't move."

As Dina searched the car, Mark glanced up at the six-story building that held their offices. Nimbus Services, LLC was, on the surface, a legitimately functioning cloud-based backup services company, of which both Mark and Dina were officers.

At least their business cards said so.

In reality, Nimbus was an independently funded black operations agency. Its small, eight-person team worked a wide

swathe of cases worldwide that threatened the safety and well-being of the human race as a whole.

One of their best tools in the fight against the evils men perpetrated, and one that let the team stay so small, was the data backup services they offered to actual paying clients through their Nimbus protection product. The concept was simple—the customer attached a Nimbus piece of hardware to their network to automatically transmit their data to the cloud. The device setup took less than five minutes, and the customers enjoyed the peace of mind that their data was being securely backed up for later retrieval.

What the customer wasn't aware of, however, was that the device was collecting every bit of their data, including their private stuff. Mark had been shocked to discover that the Nimbus mini NSA, as he liked to call it, tirelessly transmitted all the customer's texts, VoIP calls, emails, and keystrokes that came from all the systems, including their cellular phones and tablets, that were attached to the network where the device was in use. The transmitted data stream travelled directly, and invisibly, straight onto the Nimbus servers on the first two floors of the building he and Dina were about to enter.

Further hidden from the customer was the innovative AI-based software that operated on the internal Nimbus' servers where all this collected data was forever stored. The software's sole purpose was to search for specific patterns and anomalies that indicated malfeasance of all types within the customer data it received.

The software worked blindingly fast—its data evaluation was measured in microseconds, whereas a team of a thousand men and women would take years to complete the same task. Not only was it incredibly good at what it did, but it also let the Nimbus team stay far under the radar better than any of the other black ops teams or organizations because it was doing many aspects of their investigations behind the scenes in a way an investigator could never do without triggering alarms along the way. A phantom genius in the machine, so to speak.

The system had been developed by the Nimbus' resident geek, Charles Zitmore, known to his colleagues as The Zit due to his fondness for wearing unclean, obnoxious clothing and his generally uncouth demeanor. He was a genius of unmatched ability within the computing world, but in terms of regular life, as most people would understand it, he was a disaster.

"Got it!" Dina announced, reinstalling the earring to the lobe she had knocked it out of. "You can feel free to move now."

They exited the car and made their way toward the revolving front door of the office.

“Check it out, The Zit’s SUV isn’t in his spot again. *The battle axe*,” Dina said dramatically, “must be visiting again.”

Mark made an exaggerated gagging motion.

Dina chuckled. “We’ll know for sure if he comes sporting new black and blue spots.”

Dina wasn’t wrong in her observation as The Zit’s new girlfriend, whom he’d met on a cruise the Nimbus team had taken together as a vacation, was physically beating him up and leaving the evidence behind in the form of visible bruising after they’d been together. Strangely enough, The Zit seemed to like it, but then again, Mark didn’t think he’d had enough experience with a partner to know if it was an actual preference versus desperation to be with someone no matter the cost.

Mark glanced up at the sixth floor where The Zit worked and usually resided in full time. The windows were blacked out, but even if they hadn’t been there’d be no daylight coming in since The Zit had so much crap stacked up against all the walls it was like a tomb up there.

Unfortunately for the resident nerd, David had banned his new girlfriend from entering their secure offices, so The Zit was forced to stay at a rental property when she was in town. Which explained the missing SUV.

“Come to think of it, she could *actually* be trying to kill him,” Mark muttered.

Mark didn’t know how The Zit had made it through life without someone strangling him to death after only interacting with him for a mere five minutes, let alone how someone sleeping with him resisted the urge.

“You’d think with all that brain power, he’d be able to neaten up some,” Dina sighed. “At least he has his uses, as long as you aren’t downwind of him, that is.”

Mark grunted.

The Zit had been brought into the team by David Endicott, who had planned, developed, recruited, and managed the Nimbus team. The Zit’s entry into the team had been an interesting one. He had solved a puzzle the NSA had posted on the dark web designed to mine for particular kinds of talent. As far as Mark knew, the Zit was the only person to have ever solved that particular puzzle. Before the NSA could recruit the absolute cream of the nerd crop that Mark knew they’d have given their eye teeth to get, David had swooped in and snatched him from under their noses.

That wasn't a surprise because David was a genius when it came to the operations of the intelligence community, and had been in a very high position at one of the government agencies before leaving it to found Nimbus.

Mark himself had, in fact, been one of David's top agents at the original Agency, but the two had had a personal falling out over a mission that had gone totally septic. Unknown to Mark, David had left the Agency at the same time that Mark did, and even for the same reason, but even had he known, he wouldn't have cared.

At least their last mission together had been able to be wrapped up before they split up.

Then fate had intervened. Mark's sister, Amy, had been murdered in mysterious circumstances that made it clear the messy, but concluded mission hadn't been concluded after all. Against everything inside of Mark to resist any future involvement with David, solving his sister's murder had required Mark to come back and seek the man's help.

Mark had only intended to work with David that final time, but that one mission had turned into several more missions. To both men's deep relief, they had managed to repair their fractured personal relationship, and Mark now expected he'd be with David until they both retired from undercover operations for good.

Of course, it helped that working independently through Nimbus, they had no interfering oversight to contend with, and The Zit's clever way of redirecting funds from their targets meant that the group's funding was nearly unlimited. Taking the ill-gotten gains from the bad guys in order to fund the fight against other bad guys felt like tremendous justice to Mark.

Mark pulled a key fob out of his pocket that was specially configured to open the door to their building, but it slipped out of his dry fingers and dropped to the ground. As he and Dina both bent to pick it back up, the revolving front door started to spin open, seemingly on its own.

"Nick's here early," Nathan Brookman remarked, sliding his own fob back into his pocket.

Mark picked his fob off the ground and smiled at the six-foot-eight-inch African American man. Nathan was a former Navy SEAL, as well as David's main mission control planner. Over the last year, Nathan had become not only a trusted colleague but a friend as well.

"Callie's an early riser," Mark said as the three members of the team went through the door.

“Bet he hates that, but I suppose he’s given into her since he’s fallen head over heels for her,” Nathan answered, his dark eyes smiling as much as his mouth.

“We just had the *exact* same conversation,” Dina said, putting her hands on her hips and looking between the men.

“Better not be exactly the same, don’t you be kissing him like you did me,” Mark teased.

“Ah damn, you’re no fun,” Nathan made an exaggerated frown.

“As if I could reach your face, you skyscraper,” Dina replied as they stepped into the lobby elevator.

This time, it was Mark that used his fob to open it, since the elevator had no buttons and was also accessed via the same fob.

Dina started laughing again. “You know something, it’s not the only thing that’s the same this morning, you two have almost identical suits on.”

Mark and Nathan looked down at themselves and then at each other. Both men dressed sharply in custom-made three-piece suits—Mark simply because he liked it, Nathan because his size meant dressing off the rack wasn’t an option. Today, both men were wearing dark blue suits with narrow grey pinstripes and grey vests, identical medium blue dress shirts—naturally with French cuffs—paired with dark blue silk ties.

“My tailor said this thing was one of a kind, that lying son of a bitch,” Nathan complained. “Looks better on me, of course.”

“Yeah, I’m not touching that one,” Dina said as the elevator doors opened onto the main floor of the Nimbus offices.

2

“Daar oorkant, nog een,” Solomon Bok whispered in Afrikaans to his companion. “Apologies, Dirk, I keep forgetting you’re just learning Afrikaans. There’s another one over there,” he said as he pointed a long, dark-skinned finger with a pinkish tip toward a copse of trees.

Dirk Chasten turned his head toward where the older, dark-skinned, white-haired tracker was pointing. Dangling limply from a large branch on one of the trees was the unmistakable body of a leopard, its impossibly long tail hanging straight down and looking like a thick snake.

“Oh no, I hope that’s not Jabari. She’s pregnant with her second,” Dirk responded, adjusting his binoculars to focus on the big cat. “It’s definitely a female, no balls. Don’t see any blood, and the hide is intact, so it isn’t poachers. Damn, she’s definitely not moving.”

Dirk brushed a lock of strawberry-blonde hair back from where it had fallen into his eye as he dropped the binoculars down to his chest. The hank of hair flopped right back into its former position, and this time Dirk ruthlessly jammed it back behind his ear. He was at the tipping point of letting it grow long

enough to pull it back in a man bun, or shaving it back off as it had been when he'd arrived at the reserve three months prior.

Solomon dropped his head and prayed quietly. "Let's go to her."

He climbed back into the passenger side of the safari jeep, while Dirk hopped up to the driver's side.

"Go slowly," Solomon instructed. "It's 15:00 and most animals will be resting, but with the recent deaths, they may be agitated and run in front of the jeep. I don't want to add to the losses by hitting one."

"Understood. That's two cheetahs this morning, two yesterday, and the four zebras on Monday. Did you get an update from the vet on Delize?"

"She passed last night," Solomon said quietly.

"Shit. So now we add a giraffe to the mix. Does the vet have any idea as to what's going on?"

"Nothing conclusive at this time."

Dirk was thoughtful as he rolled the jeep slowly along the hard-packed desert ground. "How'd you spot her so far away?"

Solomon would normally have laughed and boasted in a good-natured way about his animal tracking skills to his fair-skinned, red-haired Scottish colleague, but there was no room for the normal levity today. And certainly not after what was turning out to be a very bad week.

"It's not only my job, but a way of life, really. I was raised well to recognize the signs by my grandfather and the Zulus we lived among. There's very little I miss, no matter how far away..." Solomon answered, looking up to the sky.

Dirk waited for the man to say more, but he stayed silent.

When Dirk had interviewed with the reserve's owner about a job, he'd been working as a *gillie*, or wilderness guide, in his native Isle of Skye. The reserve's owner had found him through his excellent reviews on the web and explained that he was looking to expand his staff to include a small group of natives from countries where many visitors to the reserve were from. *A little familiarity that felt like home helped put everyone at ease*, the owner'd explained. Dirk had jumped at the exciting chance, and he and two American women had joined the team at the same time.

After much training about the area and the danger of the animals there vs those at home, he'd been partnered with the reserve's main tracker. They'd been working together exclusively as a team for the last three weeks, and while Solomon was friendly, he'd shared startling little about his personal life. Dirk

didn't want to press it if the man was truly a private sort of chap, but at the same time, he sensed there was an interesting story being held in reserve.

They were almost to the tree where the leopard was when Solomon spoke again. "Back into the clearing between those rocks there on the right, we can get her into the jeep easier that way."

"Very well," Dirk answered, disappointed that the tantalizing nugget of personal information the tracker had just shared was just that—a nugget.

Solomon jumped down from the jeep and gripped the handrail with both hands, his knuckles displaying tension from the hard grip. He met Dirk's eyes with an oddly direct gaze. "The Zulus taught me like I am planning on teaching you. And if we have any animals remaining on this reserve after we determine what is responsible for killing them, you will be able to increase your viewing distance as well. You Scottish are more likely to spot a buck kilometers away in the woods rather than a cat, but with me as your tutor, you'll learn. And I am sorry for us to spot this cat as we have just done."

Dirk smiled tightly, flattered that he'd evidently passed some sort of test with the tracker, but now wasn't the time to express any sort of excitement.

The two men made their way under the branch from which the leopard was dangling. The animal had evidently expired mid-climb, and the only thing holding her in that position was her front left paw, which had been caught in a deep notch between two of the branches.

"It's not Jabari, it's Ada, her daughter. Help me get her down from here," Solomon requested.

Thankfully, Ada hadn't made it high up in the tree, so the two men were able to lift her off the branch without climbing.

"God, she's heavy," Dirk remarked.

"She's a healthy, fully grown female. Such a waste. She's still flexible, so it's a recent passing, just like Delize," Solomon stated.

Something furry and hard dropped down onto Dirk's head from the branch above, causing him to yelp in surprise. He managed not to drop his end of Ada, though a rivulet of wet draped down the side of his neck.

"Something just hit me," Dirk said.

"Cape hare," Solomon said, looking back over his shoulder and down at the ground where the animal had landed after bouncing off Dirk's head. "Ada must have killed it. Once we get her in the jeep, I'll return for the hare."

The two men placed the leopard very carefully in the back of the jeep. They did this out of respect for the beauty of the animal and also so as not to damage her in case it hampered the vet from finding clues about her demise. Solomon returned with the hare a moment later, placing it as carefully next to the leopard.

Dirk slid back behind the wheel and tissueed off the blood from the hare with a towel from the glove compartment. "Brandon's going to be very upset."

"Immeasurably so," Solomon agreed. "We've lost animals to natural processes before, but we've not seen anything like this before."

3

Nimbus' office manager, Thelma Morrison, who everyone thought was a hundred years old if she was a day, and who turned out to *be* a hundred years old in reality, was sitting at her desk, smoking a cigarette with an extremely long ash hanging off it.

The small in-stature, gray-haired woman's chain-smoking habit was so incessant that a special filtration system had to be installed in the office to clear out the smoke as fast as she made it. Every once in a while, the vent system failed, and they all got dosed with a foul cloud. However, Thelma was an invaluable asset to the team and was adored by all, and at her age and propensity for a short retort in reply to what she felt was nonsense, no one was going to suggest it might be better for her to cease with the habit.

And really, Thelma wasn't wrong when she declared her smoking was the least dangerous activity with which the team got involved.

"Bumble Bee, Scarecrow, Dina honey, good morning," Thelma sang out, using the nicknames she had given them. "I just talked

to Maddie, and she and the babies are doing just wonderfully. She said she's coming by to visit later on today."

Maddie Allen, now Trent, had been with the Nimbus team performing deep mission research since its formation. She had recently retired from the team to be a full-time, stay-at-home mother after marrying Mark's brother, Andrew.

"Did she say how Drew's been handling the sleepless nights?" Nathan asked.

"Really well, apparently. Maddie said the university gave him a semester sabbatical that they are very grateful for," Thelma answered.

Drew was a tenured professor of economics at one of D.C.'s well-known universities. Coincidentally, the same university ran a highly secret program targeting potential government agent recruits. The program was designed to determine the abilities of future operatives, but more importantly, to drum out those who weren't up to the job.

Mark had been a temporary professor, teaching in the secret program when he first left the Agency. His primary brief had been to teach the necessary skills future agents would need. Much to Mark's distress, however, he learned over and over with each new class of hopefuls that the future of the craft was in grave jeopardy. He had come to the conclusion that most of the students in the program didn't have what it took to be in the field, and teaching skills to those who couldn't understand, let alone hone them, was an absolute waste.

It was an unhappy realization, but Mark couldn't deny it. The upshot was he estimated he had saved the lives of at least a hundred individuals by recommending they drop out of the course, though he doubted those who had failed out thanked him for it.

Of course, all the students *loved* his brother. Mark wasn't sure if it was Drew's unbelievably good blond-haired California surfer looks, or his upbeat personality. It was most likely a combination of both.

Interestingly, even though Drew had his position at the university, back then he hadn't known *exactly* what Mark had been up to there. He did now. While he wasn't actually a member of the Nimbus team, he'd been fully briefed by Mark and Maddie—it simply made conversation with his wife and brother easier. And the help he occasionally provided from a catering standpoint during the long, off-hours meetings, as Drew was a tremendously talented chef in his spare time, wasn't too shabby either.

Drew quite enjoyed the fact that he'd once cooked dinner for the President of the United States, but since the dinner occurred at David's house in secret, he had kept that point of pride to himself.

Nathan pointed at Thelma. "Now, don't you be hogging her and the kiddos' time. You best make sure she and the babies have time to come back to my office."

Thelma made a tscking sound. "Bumble Bee, she wouldn't miss you for the world. Plus, she's gonna want to check in with BJ, so you may end up being a papa nanny for the afternoon."

"I'm up for that," Nathan replied. "I'm so glad Maddie found her happiness."

The team as a whole was delighted for Maddie, but at the same time, missed having her good-natured personality around the office. The cheerful blonde always looked on the bright side of things in spite of all she'd seen to the contrary, and Mark had thought it was a good thing to have someone on the team be a hopeful sort of individual who thought there was a good future worth fighting for. He supposed now that Maddie was gone, Dina would be the most likely candidate for a hopeful personality replacement. But that wasn't saying much, as Dina, though cheerful on the surface, was still extremely jaded.

"BJ in yet? I need to get her fantasy football picks before ten this morning," Nathan asked.

"Nope, but she and Carlos should be in within the hour."

Losing Maddie's skills in research would have been even more impactful to the Nimbus team than losing her positive personality, but before retiring, Maddie'd been replaced by the sharply intelligent and street-wise former Washington D.C. police detective Beulah Jane Carter, who'd taken over her tasks. Much to the team's relief, she'd far exceeded the competency David had expected when he'd recruited her for the job.

Known as BJ to all, including those who made the mistake of using her first, dreaded name one time only, she had been brought into the team after another casualty of Mark's first mission with Nimbus, police detective Carlos Santos, had also been brought on board.

As Dina, Nathan, and Thelma continued to talk about Maddie and Mark's niece and nephew, Mark turned his thoughts away from BJ to those of Carlos.

Carlos had lost his entire family as a result of a madman's diabolical actions in Mexico. Floundering and depressed with little left to live for, Mark had offered the clever detective a job with him and David. Not only had the offer given Carlos a new will to live, it also returned him to a place where he had spent much of his

happy childhood and years beyond, including his graduation from American University.

Coming full circle, Carlos had said. Over far too many drinks one long night, Carlos had poured his story out to Mark. Mark knew Maddie had been helping the detective deal with what had happened to him, and was surprised Carlos wanted to dredge up the ugly truths of it to him, but Carlos said he had the feeling that he should tell Mark as well.

Carlos had explained that D.C. was where he had begun his career as a police officer, and where he had moved quickly through the ranks to become a highly respected homicide detective. He had loved it, both the job and the area. And then, just as things were looking like he'd be a shoe-in for climbing the greasy pole on the way to the chief's chair, he had to move back to Mexico to care for his beloved, and aging, parents.

It was supposed to be a temporary move, but caring for his father once his mother died became complicated, and time dragged on. Carlos said he'd completely given in to his new role as caregiver because of his deep love for his father, but all the while, he'd had to trample his disappointment in living in a place he had little connection with. In his last act to cut the cord with the city he loved so much, he resigned from the D.C. police force and began working as a homicide detective in his father's local Mexican town. Then he met what he thought was the woman of his dreams, got married, and had two lovely children, a boy and a girl. It was a good life, Carlos had explained, but he'd confessed it wasn't everything he'd ever dreamed of.

Then, to Carlos's eternal shame and eternally buried guilt, in the middle of an internal crisis about his life and his growing dissatisfaction with his wife Margareta's selfishness, she and the children were gone. They'd been the collateral damage of a test run by a madman who believed that using a small town in Mexico to distribute a poison that would be released worldwide if the small-scale test was successful was a brilliant idea. Mark and the team had seen to it that the worldwide release wasn't successful, but the damage to Carlos's life had already been done.

Mark also knew Carlos thought some of his draw to come back to D.C. wasn't just the prospect of the job or returning to the area he loved so much. It might, *just might*, have been influenced by the idea that he'd meet up with former police colleague BJ, whom he'd once had a light flirtation with on the job.

Street-wise BJ, with her short, dark hair and fast mouth, complemented Carlos' conventionally handsome and more quietly spoken personality. Interestingly for their differences, the

two thought the same way—like the detectives they once were. Working together had taken its natural course, and they had recently moved in together.

Carlos said BJ was his true partner in every way one needed to be satisfied with a mate.

Like Mark felt about Dina. Odd how it had taken the worst events in both men's lives to bring them to their best.

Thelma liked to say that most organizations referred to their employees as family, but that was actually true in the case of Nimbus the way team members were pairing off like they were.

Not least of which was Nick Sherpa, another colleague and agent, who just happened to be David Endicott's nephew. Like the rest of them, Nick had recently begun a relationship with David's goddaughter, and his childhood friend Callie Dawson, who was a Secret Service agent on detail with the current President of the United States.

David had confided in Dina that he was hoping Nick and Callie would decide to have children someday so he could turn himself into the best grandfather that ever lived. Plus he wanted to see what a baby from cute Callie with her short spiky hair, and adorable nephew with his untamable spiky short hair would look like; he figured he or she would be adorable.

Mark agreed with David on this, but thought if the baby turned out to look more like David, the baby's great-uncle, then things would be even more interesting. David looked like he came straight off a ranch in Texas. He was tall, gray-haired, wrinkled, and rangy. All David was missing was the Western clothing, along with a giant Stetson, though Mark doubted the man had ever worn such a costume, even as a little kid at Halloween.

It would be even more amusing if the baby came out *sounding* like his great-uncle. David hailed from elegant, old Boston money stock, and had the affected Boston Brahman accent to match.

The only one left of the young'uns, as Thelma called the active team operatives, not to have paired up with a mate was Nathan. He was still grieving for the loss of his wife, Loretta, who'd died from cancer several years ago. Thelma kept telling everyone Nathan was finally ready to move on but just didn't know it yet. She was confident it would happen before she shuffled off this mortal coil, and had, in fact, made a betting pool with Dina, BJ, and Maddie as to when the anticipated event would happen. Thelma had her chips in for sometime in the next few months.

“Are you busy first thing this morning?” Thelma asked Dina. “I was going to ask you to do a final run-through the office to make sure nothing that can hurt the little ones is lying around.”

“I’ll handle the kid-proofing before I get started. I’m so excited, the babies are *wonderful*,” Dina drawled, clutching her chest in a motion of happy sincerity that wasn’t lost on Mark, who’d caught the emotion in her voice. “You know, Addison and Adelaide are growing so fast. Mark and I just saw them the other night and I swear they grew a whole foot since the last time we were there, wouldn’t you say, love?”

Mark grunted his agreement. He knew Dina liked children and wanted them someday, but in his head, the someday was a nebulous time in the future. Looking at her expression and the breathy way she talked about his niece and nephew, he got the feeling that event wasn’t as far off as he’d originally figured.

Dina continued excitedly. “Oh, and I’m pretty sure they’re gonna be a handful. Six months old, and I swear they’re both showing signs of plotting something dastardly together already.”

“You think they’re gonna call both of them Addie and confuse everyone?” the aforementioned Nick said as he joined the group, leaning against Thelma’s desk in a relaxed pose. The younger man’s perpetually messy light brown hair was sticking straight up on the top of his head higher than usual, which meant he’d skipped a couple of haircuts recently.

“Those are family names,” Mark barked.

“Doesn’t change the nickname potential,” Nick responded. He was eating, or rather stuffing a breakfast sandwich into his mouth, as though he hadn’t had a meal in years.

“Don’t you go dropping crumbs on my desk,” Thelma instructed.

“If I do, I’ll be Hoovering them up with my mouth. I don’t intend to let any of this honey-drizzled chicken biscuit go to waste.” Nick finished his sandwich and came around to the drawer Thelma had that contained snacks. He pulled out a package of coconut macadamia cookies and started going to town on the goodies.

“What the bejesus is wrong with you, Nick?” Thelma asked.

“Callie’s got us on some bat-shit crazy no-sugar diet, and at this point, I’d eat my own arm if I thought I’d suck some sweet out of it.”

Dina and Thelma rolled their eyes.

Just then, Señor Jefe, the comically enormous iguana that had once pledged its loyalty to Carlos and had, in fact, come with him from Mexico along with the two bulging pieces of luggage,

clambered out from under Thelma's desk. He strolled across each person's feet, slithering his tongue out and wrapping his long tail around their legs, obviously giving each human a reptilian hug. After all had been properly greeted in turn, he returned to his bed under Thelma's desk, but only settled once Thelma hand-fed him a bit of fruit she kept in a small fridge within easy reach of her desk.

Thelma and the creature had a difficult beginning, with Thelma being terrified of the reptile until one day, she gave up and gave in to his strange levels of affection. Now, Señor Jefe lived with her at her home, and here at the office, he lounged on a specialty bed she had purchased for the beast. The iguana had become bonded so strongly to Thelma that he'd taken to following at her heels like a devoted puppy everywhere she went. Carlos was somewhat insulted that the creature had switched loyalties, but the iguana's devotion to Thelma was so beautifully absolute that Carlos couldn't complain.

"Give me back those cookies before you eat all of them," Thelma directed with her hand held out.

Nick pulled the package closer to his chest.

"Look, I'll order a dessert pizza for you at lunch if you give those to me right now," Thelma cajoled.

Nick reluctantly handed the cookie package to Thelma, who snatched it from his hands with a hard tug. Most people her age would not have been able to move that fast, and people not used to seeing her in action would be surprised at it.

"Now you go make coffees for all of us and leave me be," Thelma said with a jovial tone.

"Alright, Mommy, I know my place around here," Nick said as he slid off Thelma's desk and headed for his office, where the custom-built coffee maker with its own filtered water supply line was located in a bottom drawer of his desk. Nick hated anyone touching the appliance, but everyone loved the coffee from it, so he had essentially become the highest-paid barista in the history of the world.

The elevator doors opened again, and BJ stepped out. "Hey, ho," she greeted to everyone's nods.

"Hey, honey, Carlos get the TV fixed?" Thelma whispered with a gleam in her expression.

Dina cocked her head to the side in curiosity.

BJ grinned and answered Dina's unspoken question. "He was irritating me up the wazoo the other night, so I programmed the bedroom remote to the TV in the den, and every time he tried to turn on the game, I switched it to the infomercial shopping channel. He never guessed a thing."

Nathan let out a whoop of laughter, which evidently hurt his bad back as he gripped it suddenly while wincing.

“Careful there, Bumble Bee,” Thelma warned.

“I just need to get into my ortho chair. I’ll be in my office if you need me, and don’t forget about Maddie.”

“You need a hand?” Dina asked, worried.

“Actually, that’d be great. Sorry to ask,” Nathan mumbled, embarrassed. Recently, his previously broken back, the one that busted him out of the SEALs and onto a desk, had been acting up worse than ever. His doctor said it was time for surgery. He told him that a new technique had been developed with lasers that was “minimally invasive” and was most surely in his cards, but Nathan had been putting it off because, frankly, it scared the shit out of him.

Mark and Dina each stood on either side of Nathan, and with his arms wrapped across their shoulders, limped him to his office.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten I’m handling the baby-proofing,” Dina said, craning her head back to look into Thelma’s office then darting back inside to the main office space.

Suddenly, Carlos came bolting off the elevator, out of breath, his creamy brown skin flushed bright red. In spite of the comical color, he was still a handsome man, as long as he didn’t re-grow that ridiculously oversized mustache he’d once sported. No one told him to his face that he’d looked like one of the Marx Brothers with it, but if it ever made a re-appearance, BJ vowed to Dina that she’d handle *that shit before the badger took up residence again*.

“I just got a God damn flat tire *again*,” Carlos complained.

“Where do you drive that thing?” Thelma asked.

“I’m gonna find out right now! BJ keeps taking the car to God knows where, so it’s definitely her fault.”

“Good luck with that,” Thelma mumbled.

“Oh, by the way, good morning,” Carlos said as he darted through the main office door to head for BJ’s office.

“Yeah, good morning,” Thelma answered at the closing door. She shook her head and lit a new cigarette off the last one. “Señor Jefe,” she said, leaning down to talk to the iguana, “be glad you’re not in a relationship with anyone but your loving mommy.”