

## Angel of Deception

By: Shannon Langel

The grappling hook landed perfectly on the mansion wall. A firm tug assured me that it wasn't going anywhere. As swiftly as possible, we climbed our way to the top. My mother and I had spent the last few nights watching and learning the routines of everyone within the mansion. It was time for the changing of the guards, which meant this wall would be unprotected long enough for us to sneak inside. They were fools and assumed that this side of the mansion couldn't be breached because of the razor-sharp mountainous terrain behind it. For the most part they were right. No one was crazy enough to attempt it... no one except for us.

The wind howled in my ears and the gust nearly made me lose my grip. My mother was already at the top and I assumed she would be impatiently waiting on me. After a few moments of struggling to keep my footing, I finally reached the top and hoisted myself over. It was just as Mom had suspected, the guards weren't back yet and probably wouldn't be for a few moments.

My mother's open palm collided with the back of my head. It was one of her lovely ways of getting my attention. I either made a mistake or had done something that she didn't approve of.

"Ouch, what was that for?"

"You need to move quicker, Ana. If you are going to be successful at recon missions you need to get in fast, find the intel and get the heck out of dodge."

"You know," I said, knowing full well there would be another slap to the head, "We could accomplish all that a lot faster if you'd stop lecturing me."

Sure enough, my mother's hand collided against the back of my head.

"This is exactly why you should have stayed back at headquarters. You aren't ready yet. You're lucky my phone has no service out here or else I'd have tied you to a tree down there and called someone to pick you up."

My mother, Isabella Ward, is the top spy for the United States Intel of Critical Evidence Unit also known as I.C.E. It's basically an Area 51 style organization. As far as the world knows, we don't exist. Anyone in this life style was born and raised into it. We are trained from a young age the necessities of completing successful recon missions. This involves collecting any information we can on the "bad guy" without being captured. All collected information is reported back to

headquarters where it can be analyzed and then the proper teams are sent in to stop the illegal activities. We are also taught first aid and survival techniques along with knowledge of all the latest technology, weapons and combat skills.

On a child's eighteenth birthday they are sent out on their first recon mission. The mission is to collect vital intel on dangerous underground organizations that need to be shut down for the safety of the country. The test is basically a do or die situation; If you pass then you graduate and start your career, but if you fail, a serum is injected into your blood stream. Once it is injected, it wipes the person's memory clean to the point they have no idea who they were before. The person is then given a civilian identity and told that they are an orphan. There is no room for error in our line of work.

My eighteenth birthday is a month away, but I'm the top of my class. I wanted to prove to them that I didn't need to wait any longer and that I could handle any challenge. I overheard my mother receiving her next mission. They always assign her what would seem to be impossible missions. My mother always came back a hero of sorts. It was hearing this new mission that I decided I'd wanted to prove I'm just as good as her. When she left for the mission I trailed her.

"Not ready yet? Need I remind you that I was able to pursue the world's greatest spy? That would be you, mother. Oh, did I

mention that was also without you even realizing I was on your tail? I mean, seriously, I'm pretty darn awesome to have accomplished that."

Isabella curled her lip and shook her head.

"Anastasia, at this rate your ego will be the death of us. Now, we need to get moving before the guards return. Remember, be quiet, stealth is key here, we get the intel and leave before anyone knows we are here. Is that understood?"

I nodded that I understood and we began making our way down the corridors taking every precaution to stay hidden in the shadows. Our mission was to find Donovan Bradford's office and bedroom. We were to plant bugs in each of the rooms which would allow headquarters to listen in. We were also instructed to get photo copies of any paperwork that showed his smuggling operations whereabouts.

According to my mother, Donovan Bradford ran a smuggling operation which involved, the trade of illegal technology, weapons and drugs to foreign countries. The intel that we are collecting is the necessary information to shut his ring down once and for all.

My mother halted her steps, signaled for me to stop as well and then pulled out a paper from her brown satchel. The paper was a blueprint of the mansion and according to it we were only a few feet away from what we guessed was Donovan's office. Once

she was confident of where we were heading she rolled it up and placed it back into the satchel.

"Alright, Ana, here's the plan."

I was about to argue with her, but what she said next shocked me.

"Since you seem to believe you are ready for this, I want you to enter the room. See if you can find any information that might be useful. A ledger, agenda book, transaction logs. Also, you'll need to plant this device somewhere it won't be found. This little bug will allow us to listen in on his conversations."

"What about you?"

"Turn on your ear piece. I'll be out here to let you know if there is any sign of trouble."

I flipped the switch to turn on my ear piece and then as quiet as a mouse I entered into Donovan's office. There were heads of wild animals mounted on the wall. Donovan was clearly a trophy hunter and being the animal lover that I am, it made my blood boil. There was a giant safe in the far-right corner of the room, a Persian area rug on the center of the floor and behind that stood an old English oak desk. The desk had stacks of papers and books on top of it.

I reached into my satchel and pulled out my camera. I began sifting through the paperwork and taking photos of anything I

thought would be useful. There was a list of upcoming meetings which listed times and locations. There were also initials scribbled beside it which I assumed would be the potential buyers. I took a few more photos and then began planting the bug under the desk.

"Ana, you need to hurry. We have company coming."

"10-4."

"You need to get out of there, now."

I heard the panic in my mother's voice and finished up what I was doing. I was just about to crawl out from under the desk when the door creaked open. I quickly ducked back under and instantly felt trapped like a rat in a cage. Heavy footsteps approached towards the desk. He spoke to someone in Russian on his cell phone. It sounded like he was discussing where the next drop off point should be. As he paced around the room I began glancing around for anything I could utilize as a weapon to fight my way out of the situation. He hung up the phone and his steps grew louder as he walked towards my hiding spot. My heart pounded in my chest and I found myself holding my breath for fear it would give me away. A pair of shiny black boots stood before me and I watched as the figure pulled out the chair and was about to sit down. He didn't sit though because right then there was a bunch of commotion coming from outside in the corridor. He left the room to see what was happening. I,

however, instantly knew what was going on. My mother's motherly instincts had kicked in and she was out there trying to protect me by putting herself at risk.

Once I knew it was clear I crawled out from under the desk and sprinted to the door. I peeked through the crack in the door and watched as my mother was being taken away by three men. Her eyes met mine and I remembered she still had a headset in.

"Don't worry, mom. I'm going to get you out of this."

She shook her head as if to say no, but I had to help her get out of this. The guards were double her size and looked as if they could out match her in a fight. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed me. One of the guards had her by the arms and jerked her around the corner. I followed and made sure to stay out of sight. They took her down a flight of stairs to the next level of the mansion. Once I knew they were out of ear shot, I quickly made my way down the stairs after them. We passed what felt like a million doors, but they finally found the room they were looking for and took my mother inside. The door slammed shut behind them and it took everything inside of me not to go charging in after her.

For my mother's sake I needed to be smart and have a plan before I went barging in. The only problem was I didn't have any clue where we currently were in the building or what was on the other side of that door. This also made it hard to come up with

an exit strategy. One of us getting caught on this mission wasn't on my mind when I followed my mother here. I wasn't equipped to handle this situation.

About thirty minutes had passed since they had entered the room and I still hadn't come up with a plan. Suddenly there were voices talking inside the headpiece. My mother must have managed to flip the switch in order for me to hear what was happening.

"Don't worry," a man with a Russian accent said, "she'll talk soon enough."

"Good, I want to know who she is. You think you can get away with sneaking into my house and not get caught?"

I could hear my mother hacking up saliva in her throat and she spit on the man that was speaking to her.

"You are a very foolish woman."

A thunderous crash came through the headset along with what sounded like my mother grunting in pain. Then there was nothing but static. My hands curled up into fist and my body burned with the rage that now welled up inside of me. The door to the room opened. A tall and muscular man walked out of the room. He had jet black hair and dark brown eyes. He was dressed in a business suit and I recognized it was the man who almost caught me in the office. This was Donovan Bradford. I was hidden behind a statue in the hall and he walked right by me. He was clueless to my existence. I could have easily ended him right there, but if the

guards heard they would surely kill my mother. I watched as Donovan went down the hall towards the stairs. A few seconds later the two guards came out of the room. They were carrying my mother's lifeless body with them.

For a moment the world stood still. The sight of her limp body being taken away was enough to bring me to my knees. I fought back the tears and let my rage along with the years of training take hold. I pounced on the first guard before he even knew what hit him. He was more than double my size, but size meant nothing to me now. It was all about the speed and the accuracy of the attack. With one swift blow I had knocked him out and turned to find the second guard had dropped my mother's body and was quickly approaching me. He was just about to strike a blow when something hit him from behind. He collapsed on the ground and standing before me was my mother. I ran into her arms like I was a five-year-old child who just woke up from a nightmare.

"Mom."

She pulled me away from her and wiped the tears from my face. I didn't even realize that I had been crying until then.

"Did you succeed in planting the bug in the office and getting copies of the documents?"

I went to speak, but couldn't so I nodded instead.

"Did you find his bedroom and plant the second bug?"

I shook my head no this time. She looked disappointed and a flash of rage even crossed her face. She had let them capture her in order to buy me more time to finish the mission. By following after her I had failed to do what needed to be done. The number one rule to this job is to put emotional attachments to the side and finish the task at hand, no matter what. I failed in my duty by letting my feelings for my mother hinder the mission.

"Alright, well we need to get out of here and at least get the photos you took to headquarters. Ana, are you with me?"

I nodded again and we made our way out of the mansion as quickly as we possibly could. It wouldn't be long until Donovan was aware of what exactly went down here today and possibly moved his entire operation elsewhere.

Once out of the mansion, we made our way carefully back down the mountain. It took us about an hour to make the journey back down. We didn't say a word to each other the whole way. I wanted to apologize for what I had done, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

At the base of the mountain was a wooded area with a winding dirt road. We had left our vehicles hidden here deep in the woods. Before I got inside my car my mother grabbed a hold of my arm and turned me around to embrace me in a hug. The warmth of her embrace was comforting.

"I love you, Ana."

My mother rarely said this unless something was wrong. She would have to report what happened today back to headquarters which meant I would have to face the board of directors and explain myself. This wasn't what I had imagined the day ending like and suddenly I didn't feel as confident in my abilities.

"I love you too."

Suddenly there was a sharp pain and burning sensation in my shoulder. My mother backed away from me with the empty syringe in her hand. It was the memory serum. I stared at her in disbelief as my vision began to blur and my head started to throb.

"Mom, what have you done?"

"I'm sorry, Ana. You were reckless for following me and you might have jeopardized this entire mission because of it. I don't want to do this, but if I don't then they will."

I tried to speak, but nothing would come out. My heart was racing, my head throbbed and I was dizzy.

"At least this way I get to be with you. I'll be here when you open your eyes for the first time to your new life."

The world began to spin as the waves of emotions crossed through my mind. They say your life passes before your eyes when you die. It's the same for when your memory is wiped. I took one last look at the woman who brought me into this world. The woman

who kissed my wounds when I was a child and cared for me when I was sick. The woman who taught me almost everything I knew and I aspired to be like her. I took that last look and then everything went dark.

"Goodbye, Ana."

My head was pounding when I woke up and my body ached as if I had been hit by a car. There was a woman sitting beside me on the ground staring at me with concern.

"Ugh, where am I?"

"You don't remember?"

I shook my head and instantly regretted it because it made the pain worse.

"Well, you are lucky I pulled up when I did. I came here to go hiking and saw you fall trying to climb that mountain. You have a concussion, but should be okay. What's your name dear?"

"I... I can't remember."

"That's okay, my name is Dr. Isabella Ward. I know a place that can help you to remember who you are. Shall we?"

She helped me get to my feet and into her car. We drove to a facility with the words I.C.E. etched onto the glass window. A few people waved to us as we walked through the lobby.

"Hi Jake, I found this young lady out by the mountains. It appears she has lost her memory from falling. She must have hit

her head on some rocks. Can you assist with finding out who she is?"

Jake had a sympathetic look flash across his face.

"I see. I'm sorry to hear this. Sounds like you were lucky to have the good Doc find you when she did. Don't worry though, we will find out who you are and make sure you are taken care of."

I placed my finger on the pad sitting on the countertop. The machine lit up green as it took a copy of my finger print which Jake then ran through their database. After about twenty minutes he informed me that my name was Victoria Anastasia Stone. I'm 17 years old and I am an orphan who has been in foster care since the day I was born.

I don't know what I would have done without the help of Dr. Ward and Jake. I still don't remember anything from before the accident. Dr. Ward insisted that it was to be expected from the fall and not to worry. She tried to comfort me by reminding me; even if my memory didn't return I could now enjoy a fresh new start at life. It sounded like a great idea.