

Excerpt from **Code Name: Dodger**

I sat beside my parents' graves all afternoon, all evening, the sun setting, darkness falling. Beams from the half moon pierced the foliage and broke my trance.

Sitting back, I surveyed their final resting place. With these two mounds, I buried my two pasts. I brushed the dirt from my palms and stood.

"I'll join you someday, Mom and Dad. But it won't be soon."

"Sooner than you think, Justin."

I jumped and turned in surprise. I spied a man lurking in the shadows of an elm. I couldn't see his face, but his raspy voice I knew too well.

"Pharaoh!"

I thought I'd shouted his name, but all that came from me was a whisper.

Out of the shadows, he stepped toward me.

Then I saw his face, disfigured from the explosion. I gasped in horror. His left eye was swollen shut in blue black, puffed and wrinkled skin. A scar creased his left cheek and pulled his lips down into a lopsided frown. His left hand, injured from a bullet, hung in a sling. Then I saw the Glock pistol leveled at me from his right hand.

I froze, unable to move, to think, to breathe.

"How did you—"

"Survive? Didn't you ever read about trap doors and secret passageways in your little spy books, boy?" He limped forward. "Or do you mean, how did I find you? Quite simple really, where else would you go? Typical, stupid little teen."

He edged closer. I glanced right and left, looking for a place to run, to hide.

“Oh, no, *Artful Dodger*, you can’t dodge me now. And no one’s around to hear your screams. But don’t worry. I’m going to give you what you dearly want most. I’m going to send you to see your parents.”

“N-no.” I backed away. I bumped into Mom’s headstone.

“*Chiyaa!*” A roundhouse kick struck my face and knocked me backward over the grave marker.

The kick stunned me, but training took over. I somersaulted backward and stood. Another blow sent me tumbling to the ground. I don’t know whether it had been from a fist or a foot, but it bloodied my nose.

I lay on my hands and knees, unable to escape. I closed my lips tight and breathed through my nostrils like a winded horse.

He grabbed the back of my belt, lifted, and threw me head first into Dad’s gravestone. Streaks of light darted about my eyes. I fell to the ground, panting. Dirt and blood mixed on my tongue and filled my nostrils. I choked and coughed. Grit crunched between my teeth.

“Good bye, Justin.”

I heard two quick clicks, the unique sound of a silencer locking into place.

“Your country is grateful for your service.”

I craned my stiff neck around. My left eye was swollen shut, like his. My whole sight was bathed in red, from the blood vessels swelled up inside my eyeball. His blurry figure towered over me, lit in small patches of moonbeam. His one eye, open wide in rage, stared down, round and aglow like a second moon.

I rolled onto my back.

He cocked the pistol and leveled it at me. “As we like to say in the spy busines . . .” His uneven frown twisted into an insane grimace. “None of this . . .” He raised the pistol high above his head, then, ever so slowly, lowered it down, down to take careful aim at my skull. “*Ever happened.*”

My muscles went limp.

I closed my eyes.