



FEY ACADEMY  
FOR SPIES

# AVALON TOWER

C.N. CRAWFORD  
ALEX RIVERS



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## PROLOGUE



Alix glances at the top floor of an apartment building, staring at the couple shagging against the window. Even from here, she can see the pleasure on the man's face, his breath misting the glass.

That would be an infinitely better way to spend the day than the mission she has planned. She can imagine Agent Rein holding her like that, gripping her as he kisses her throat.

But it will never happen. Love is strictly forbidden for the spies of Avalon Tower. The problem is, banning desire doesn't douse the heat. If anything, it fuels it. Sometimes, Alix thinks all the Avalon spies are unsatisfied, obsessed, lost in fantasies. Today, especially, her head isn't in the game—even though Fey soldiers probably lurk all around this place, waiting to run their swords through agents like her.

*Distraction is death*, she reminds herself.

She turns away, scanning the street for signs of her Fey enemies. She doesn't see anything amiss. In fact, it all looks perfectly calm, picturesque and quaint. Wrought iron balconies overhang the cobbled alley. Here, in the south of France, the scent of lavender mingles with the brine of the sea. The streets of this coastal town are ancient, stony, labyrinthine. At the bottom of the sloping road, wisps of fog curl over the Mediterranean. A café overlooks the sea—Café de la Forêt Enchantée. The meeting point is by the back door.

She peers out across the outdoor tables, where a pretty woman with raven hair is eating cake and flirting with a waiter. Alix feels a pang of

jealousy. For normal women—those who aren't spies trying to save the world—love is always a possibility.

*Focus, Alix.*

Still a picture of serenity around her. No sign of the Fey soldiers. But no sign of Rein, either.

A church bell tolls, making her heart skip a beat. Rein should be here. He's usually early.

She takes a slow, calming breath. She's always thinking of him, which is exactly why love is forbidden in the first place. It takes your mind off the mission and leads to stupid decisions. She's never told him how she feels, how she seems to always be looking for him. Every time she sees a reflection, she checks the glass to see if *he's* behind her, hoping to see his boyish smile instead of looking out for the enemy. Whenever she walks into the dining hall at Avalon Tower, she scans the room for his slender form. She's always coming up with excuses to get close to him, but she can never quite tell if he feels the same about her.

The clouds slide over the sun, and she feels a chill. She should stay at the beach, alert for any sign of the Fey, those terrifying soldiers in royal blue. But she's not going to leave here without Rein. He's late for the rendezvous, and her mind spins in a million horrible directions.

Pulse racing, she climbs back up the hill. Her skin tingles with the hum of the veil emanating from the streets nearby, the misty barrier that separates this world from that of the Fey. In theory, it's a boundary that keeps them on one side and humans on the other, but it's not that simple. For one thing, you can never be sure exactly where the veil is. Sure, the Fey control it, but sometimes, it seems to have a mind of its own. The magical boundary roams a bit, shifting its location ever so slightly. It's a hungry thing, and if it consumes you, you die. Every few weeks, it leaves a curious tourist dead on the winding streets of southern France. Alix is one of the few people alive who can actually control it, who can stop it from killing those passing through.

Casually, she checks her watch, and dread skitters up her spine. Rein was supposed to be here six minutes ago. He's *never* late, especially not for an exfiltration operation. The fugitives should be just beyond the veil by now. She feels like she can hardly breathe.

Spies are taught to suppress emotion, to maintain complete control of themselves, even when danger lurks in the shadows of every alley. But now,

Alix feels her training fail as the terrifying possibilities race through her mind. What if he was slaughtered already? What if the veil shifted location and killed him? She'd lose her mind if anything happened to Rein, if she never got to see his brown eyes again or had the chance to wrap her arms around him.

She grits her teeth so hard that she nearly bites her tongue. *Get it together.*

She masks her feelings with a wistful smile as she crosses the road to the gold- and salmon-colored shops on the opposite side. She pretends to look in the windows at the madeleines and croissants, the slices of cake. Anyone watching her would think she's just a hungry tourist on vacation, a cute blonde in a sundress.

Fog drifts across the street.

Eleven minutes late now. Alix's blood roars. Something is *definitely* wrong. She starts to march back to Café de la Fôret Enchantée.

At last, she hears the whistle that is their signal, and she heaves a sigh of relief. It's coming from behind her. Did she miss him somehow?

The signal is coming from a narrow lane, and Alix hurries over to it.

She turns the corner, and the world tilts beneath her feet. Now, she's face-to-face with a towering Fey. Silver hair flows down his back, and he wears the dark blue velvet of a Fey soldier. There's something about his eerie stillness, about the sharpness of his gaze that sends fear ringing through Alix's bones. It's the metallic sheen in his green eyes that's so disorienting, otherworldly. His lip curls, exposing one of his sharpened canines.

Alix reads nothing in his eyes except loathing.

*We've been compromised.* Alix's heart slams, and she turns to run.

But her path is blocked by a second Fey soldier, and Alix is caught between them. She reaches for her dagger, but it's too late.

A blade plunges into Alix's stomach, and pain rushes through her. Her training takes over, and she tries to pull her dagger, to dodge, to parry, to run, but her limbs don't obey her for some reason. She falls to her knees.

Strange. Her wound doesn't hurt that much. She hardly feels it at all.

Thoughts of Rein flicker through her mind as she bleeds onto the stones.

## CHAPTER 1



*Seven minutes earlier.*

I breathe in the scent of the ocean, a fragrance tinged with cypress, and sip my coffee. It's hot for early spring, and it almost looks like steam is rising from the sea. From my spot at Café de la Forêt Enchantée, I see the cloud of shimmering mist shearing across the landscape.

My vacation has been heaven so far. The breeze rushes off the water and leaves a faint taste of salt on my lips. This place is good for my asthma, I think.

The atmosphere in the south of France feels different than California. Here, the light is soft, honeyed, not the glaring, overwhelming harshness of the LA sun.

Nearby, the magical veil rises to the sky like a wall of fog. It's eerie and undeniably beautiful. It moves sometimes, but I'm at a safe distance here. Just beyond the tables of the outdoor café, waves crash over the white rocks. This might just be my favorite place in the world.

I manifested this trip with positive thoughts and vision boards. Also, many hours of minimum-wage labor and eating cereal for dinner instead of going out to bars. This two-week vacation is my destiny.

Sure, I feel a twinge of guilt at leaving Mom behind, but there's no way I could pay for us both. And it *would* be better to have my friend Leila with me, but she's scared of going anywhere near the Fey border. She thinks they might still leap out of the veil and murder you at any moment, even if the



guidebooks from our bookshop and the U.S. State Department *clearly* say it's safe.

I pick up a sprig of lavender from the vase on the table and inhale.

I'm still enjoying the lovely scent when a dark-haired waiter slides a slice of a blackberry cake onto the lace tablecloth before me. "Bon appétit."

I definitely ordered the *lavender* cake, but cake is cake. "Thank you."

As I take a bite, the fruity flavor bursts on my tongue. This slice costs the equivalent of three hours of work at the bookshop, but I try not to think about it. Fifteen years ago, the war made prices soar, and they never went down again. Luxuries like cake are stupidly expensive. *Vacation*, I remind myself.

Another bite. The sugary, tart flavors coat my tongue. Mom would be horrified. *So many carbs, darling*. She lives on vodka and boiled eggs.

The waiter watches me take a bite and smiles. With his bright blue eyes and square jaw, he reminds me of someone, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

"Is delicious, yes?" he asks. He must have pegged me as a tourist because he's speaking in heavily accented English.

I nod. "C'est délicieux."

His shoulders relax as he shifts to French himself. "I'm glad. Are you here on holiday?" He wears a flat cap over wavy brown hair.

"I arrived a week ago. Only one week left." My chest clenches at the realization that my trip is already half over. For five years, I've looked forward to this, but I can't spend the other half of my vacation mourning the end of it, can I? "I wish I could stay."

Sure, it's a teensy bit lonely having my birthday cake at a table for one, but it's probably better than what I'd be doing at home.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

"The U.S. west coast. LA."

"LA, as in Hollywood? Are you an actress? A model?" He lowers his eyelashes, then looks up again. "Your hair is very striking. So unusually dark."

Is he flirting with me? "Thank you. No, I'm not an actress."

I glance at the veil again. I can't seem to keep my gaze off it. What's happening on the other side?

"Have you seen any?" I turn to him and whisper, "Fey."

He blanches. It's almost like saying the word out loud sends a ripple of terror across the café, and for a moment, I regret it.

I catch the brief tightening of the muscles around his mouth until he softens them into a smile. He shrugs. "Sometimes, they patrol the border on our side. But most of the south of France remains independent. We're safe here, and there's nothing to worry about. King Auberon has no interest in claiming more of France than he already has."

*That's* what I told Leila. Except I'd sounded convincing, and when he says it, it sounds distinctly rehearsed. What is he *not* saying?

What I do know is this: fifteen years ago, the Fey invaded France. When it first happened, the world was stunned. Until that point, no one even knew they existed. And then, suddenly, they were marching through Paris, commanding the boulevards. Their dragons circled above the Eiffel Tower. The Fey were beautiful, otherworldly, seductive...

Lethally violent and hell-bent on conquest.

The French military fought back and managed to keep some of the south free and under human control. Unoccupied. It's supposed to be safe.

But as the clouds slide over the sun, I feel the atmosphere suddenly grow tense around me. It's hard to put my finger on it, but there's something sharp and grim in the air now, replacing the soft ambience.

I glance at the waiter, who still lingers by my table.

Maybe there *is* more danger here than the tourist boards are willing to admit. Maybe Leila had a point.

The night before, as I ate bouillabaisse in a restaurant by the sea, I overheard a man arguing with his wife, telling her that an anti-Fey resistance was fighting King Auberon. A magical cold war that played out behind the scenes, one with spies and secret missions. He made it sound like these spies had legendary skills, that they could kill a Fey in two seconds flat with their bare hands. That a highly skilled, elite force was our only hope if we wanted to stop the evil king from taking the rest of France.

His wife called him an idiot and told him to stop talking.

But there's a tension here that makes me want to know more...

I flutter my eyelashes. "Have you heard anything about the secret resistance?" I whisper.

The waiter smiles, a dimple in one cheek. "Ah, that." His smile is patronizing, and he rolls his eyes theatrically. "Rumors only. How would they fight the Fey in their lands? You cannot cross the veil into the Fey

realm, and even if you did, the Fey would spot you as a human instantly. And anyway, they have magic. We don't. I really doubt such a resistance exists."

I glance at the veil again. Misty shades of faint violet and green twist and spiral, plunging into the ocean and rising up to dissipate in the clouds.

If cell phones still worked, I'd be snapping photos like crazy. But electronics fizzled out with the arrival of the Fey. For whatever reason, Fey magic destroyed our most modern technology.

The waiter sighs wistfully. "The veil is beautiful, isn't it? Is that what you came here to see?"

Something about this waiter makes me uneasy, but I'm not sure what it is. He reminds me of someone I hate, but that's a completely irrational reason to dislike someone. "I did want to see the veil," I admit, "but also, I used to come to France, years after the Fey invasion. Starting when I was fifteen, my mom would take me here. We stayed at a château in Bordeaux during the summers."

He flashes me a smile. "I've been. Amazing vineyards, of course. Shame that we lost half of them to the occupation."

My stomach tightens as I remember those summer vacations. Our days were spent with my mom drinking all the wine in the vineyard. Then, when she was properly wasted, she'd urge me to flirt with rich French guys who "could do a lot for me." I remember she was so loud and drunk one night—

*Oh.* That's why he looks familiar. He resembles the dark-haired, aristocratic demi-Fey who broke my heart when I was a teenager. What a great example of a memory that should have stayed repressed.

The waiter is nearly as handsome as that demi-Fey, but not quite. Humans rarely have the shocking, heartbreaking beauty of the Fey.

I stare at him over the rim of my coffee cup. "What's your name?"

"Jules." He seems to think this is an invitation, and he pulls out the chair across from me. He stares at me dreamily across the table. "And yours?"

"Nia."

"I'm finishing my shift soon." This is clearly suggestive. But what does Jules have in mind, exactly? Maybe he wants to whisk me off to a beautiful hidden bookstore full of rare volumes. Or maybe he wants a quick fumble in a hotel room, in which case the answer is no.

I take another bite of the cake, tasting the confiture, and dab at my lips with the napkin. I still haven't satisfied my curiosity, so I lean forward and whisper, "What do you think it's like now? In the occupied regions? In Fey France?"

His eyes dart furtively to the left, then the right. He leans forward on his elbows and quietly says, "I try not to think about it. I hear things I wish I could forget." He keeps his blue eyes locked on me, as if suggesting I should do the same.

I wait for him to go on. When he doesn't, I ask, "What sort of things?"

"I see them coming through here, sometimes," he says. "Fugitives."

I stare at him. This *definitely* wasn't in the tourist guidebooks. "What fugitives?"

"The Fey king, Auberon, hunts anyone who doesn't support him. He accuses scores of people of treason and slaughters them. I think he particularly hates the demi-Fey. He suspects them of disloyalty, and he demands complete fealty. The police here are supposed to report any demi-Fey they see escaping. Otherwise, Auberon might invade the rest of France." He straightens. "I mean, he won't. He knows he can't win. Even if electronics don't work, we have guns and iron bullets. And we help to keep things under control. We protect what we have."

A shiver runs over my skin. "I see. And how do you do that?"

"We report any fugitives we see. No one is allowed to help them. It keeps the status quo intact." He opens his hands and shrugs again. "What can we do? We have to keep the peace. We can only enjoy life and keep things the way they are."

A tendril of guilt twines through me, and I try to push it away.

"Is there a special reason for your vacation?" he asks.

"It's my twenty-sixth birthday."

He grins. "Well, Nia, we must celebrate. Has it been a good birthday so far?"

Church bells toll, and the sound echoes across the stones and out to the sea. The air grows colder, grayer. "Probably one of the best. Definitely far from the worst."

My worst birthday was when I was fifteen, back in LA. Mom promised to throw a huge party. This was when we still lived in a house in Laurel Canyon with gorgeous views of the city, and it felt like my one chance to impress the rich girls from my school. But she started drinking champagne

early and fell through a glass table while the DJ was playing an ABBA song. She kept laughing hysterically as she bled all over the hardwood floors.

The girls from school never spoke to me again.

Oh, good. Another memory that should have stayed under the surface. I muster a smile.

Jules turns to look behind him, and I realize that a cold hush has fallen over the outdoor café. The sea no longer sparkles. It's churning under a gray sky.

Then my gaze flits to a pair of Fey marching over the white rocks. Actual, real-life, terrifying Fey, the kind that slaughter people for being disloyal.

Fear flutters through my chest.

I've never seen full-blooded Fey before. I find myself staring at their towering, godlike physiques. But it's the eerie, otherworldly way they walk that holds my attention. With every graceful movement they make, my mind screams that danger lurks between me and the roiling sea, a primal fear that dances up the nape of my neck and makes it hard to breathe.

They look so out of place here—warriors from another time, draped in dark cloaks that seem to suck up the light around them. Long hair flows down their backs, silver and black, and their bright eyes send alarm bells ringing through me. Not to mention the *swords*.

My mind flicks back to the stories of what happened when they first invaded Breton. The burned homes, the corpses left in their wake...

One of them glances at me, bright emerald eyes with a metallic sheen. He looks *lethal*. My stomach flips. I'm not even doing anything wrong. I'm a tourist, legally here on vacation, but I suddenly feel like I'm about to die.

My pulse races as I look down at the cake again, trying to go unnoticed. I stare at it, gripping my fork.

When I look up again, the two Fey are gone, and I exhale slowly. Around me, the café conversation resumes.

Jules turns back to me, frowning. "It's unusual to see the Fey patrol here. They must be looking for someone. A fugitive, perhaps. A demi-Fey." He narrows his eyes at me. "The demi-Fey are very beautiful. Like you." He stares at me, his eyes narrowing. His words linger in the air. "And they don't *always* have pointed ears, you know. You said you are from America?"



I can feel his suspicion, and a shiver runs down my spine. Suddenly, I desperately want to get away from this guy.

“America, yes.” I clear my throat. “Do you have a phone here I can use?”

With a clenched jaw, Jules points inside. “It’s by the back entrance.”

I drop some money on the table and stand. Head down, I cross into the café. There’s a back door, I think, in case I need to run out of here.

Am I being paranoid that the waiter suspected me? Or was Leila right about coming here? I’m not sure which idea I dread more—the actual danger I could be in or the gloating *I told you so* I’d get from her.

I find the phone by a door that looks out onto a side street. Like most phones these days, it’s a refurbished antique, the only kind that still works. It’s beautiful, really, with a copper body and ivory handset. I pick it up and put it to my ear, blinking at the loud ringtone. I dial my mother’s number, turning the old rotary dial, then wait as the line crackles.

There’s a metallic tang in the air that sets my teeth on edge. I close my eyes and inhale.

“Hello?” My mom’s voice sounds strange, distorted by wires and distance.

“Hi, Mom! It’s me.” I try to control my wavering voice.

“Nia,” she says heavily. “I’m glad you finally decided to call.”

“I called three days ago,” I remind her brightly.

“It’s been at least a week.”

“Okay.” There’s no point in arguing. “How are you doing?”

“I’m broke again. And my feet are *aching*.”

“Soak them in a plastic tub of water, Mom. Just make sure to turn the water off before it overflows.” I listen distractedly to her as I stare outside. “Don’t leave the water running unless you’re there.”

She’s overflowed the sink so many times.

“Well, I can’t remember everything when it’s just me on my own.”

“Please try to eat well,” I say. “I left out tons of healthy groceries for you.”

Something catches my eye outside. There’s an alleyway across from this café, and a bright crimson smear streaks across the ground. What *is* that?

“It’s my birthday,” I say, trying to focus. “You were in labor for ten hours, remember?”

It’s her favorite thing to say on my birthday.

“*Today?* Nia, you keep getting older.” She makes it sound like an accusation.

“Well, it’s better than the alternative, right?”

I’m staring at that bright streak of red, but my view is blocked by a group of tourists who walk by, dressed in costumes like the Fey—sheer materials in rich colors, burgundy and chartreuse. One of them drops a bit of jewelry—a blue crystal pendant—but the woman doesn’t seem to notice.

“My little Nia, all grown up,” Mom is saying. “You know, I was already doing modeling jobs when I was—”

“Fourteen. You’re still so pretty, Mom.” I tap on the glass to try to get the woman’s attention, but she doesn’t seem to hear me. She keeps walking, and her beautiful blue jewel gleams on the sidewalk.

A heavy sigh from Mom. “Well, I have crow’s feet now.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t look a day over nineteen. Mom, I have to go. I’ll call you soon.”

“You’d better. Because you *left* me here, all by my—”

I hang up and push out the back door of the café. I pick up the jewel from the sidewalk and glance at it. It’s beautiful, otherworldly, and it gleams in the sunlight.

“Excusez-moi!” I call out.

The woman turns around, and I hurry closer to the group, smiling. “You dropped this,” I say in French.

But as I look closer at them, my smile starts to fade. They’re not wearing costumes, I realize. They are actual *Fey*, and some of them have delicately pointed ears.

Or more likely, they’re demi-Fey. Are they fugitives? Their gossamer clothes are ripped and dirty.

My pulse races. The Fey soldiers aren’t far from here. Did Jules say they’d be slaughtered on the spot? Or dragged back across the veil?

They aren’t wearing shoes, and the fear in their expressions is clear. It’s the same look that Mom gets after too much coke. One of them even looks like her, with dark hair and gaunt cheeks. A blonde woman staggers next to her, hugging herself. Her eyes look haunted, too.

If someone like Jules catches them, he’ll send them straight to their deaths.

One of them is just a bony little boy with haunted eyes and emaciated cheeks.

*Children need looking after.* The thought screams in my mind.

I glance back to that alleyway. With sickening clarity, I can now see that crimson smear of blood brushed over the stone—as if someone had dragged a dead body backward. My stomach turns. What’s going on here?

I quickly hand the jewel over to the woman. “You dropped this.”

She grabs my arm. “Alix? Rein?” Her accent is one I don’t recognize.

I stare at her in confusion. “No, that’s not me. I’m sorry.”

I glance past her. A woman is leaning out of her doorway, glaring at us. She wears a pinched expression. “Who are you?” the woman barks in French. She’s glaring directly at me. Now *I’m* under suspicion.

Am *I* about to be turned in? Am I about to be a blood smear on the pavement?

Fear drags its claws though my chest. Leila was right.