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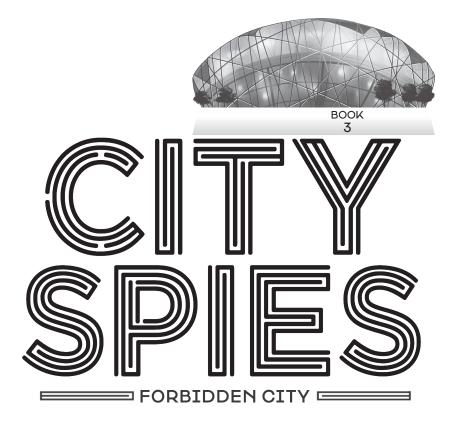
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# BY JAMES PONTI

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# FOR COURTNEY AND GRAYSON

# MARCH 5, 2022

# CONGRATULATIONS ON MAKING OUR FAMILY BIGGER AND BETTER. I LOVE YOU MORE THAN WORDS CAN EVER EXPRESS.

# Image: Second state Image: Second state Billionaires' Row

### IT WAS DARK, AND AS PARIS LOOKED OUT

at the traffic, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the window. There was nothing remarkable about his face. No feature or quirk someone would notice or remember. He'd been born in Rwanda, grew up in Paris, lived in Scotland, and was now in London. And in each of those locations, he'd learned to blend in and disappear. This was an important quality because Paris wasn't just a schoolboy. He was also a spy. Blending in was essential.

1

Unlike spies in movies, whose modes of transportation ranged from jet packs and mini-submarines to bulletproof Aston Martins tricked out with rocket launchers, he was headed to his latest mission on a city bus. The number seventy to South Kensington to be precise. That was the problem with being undercover *and* underage you always needed somebody else to give you a ride.

"This is pathetic," he said, turning to Kat, who was sitting next to him. "Absolutely pathetic."

"What is?" she asked.

He looked around to make sure no one was listening and then leaned in to whisper, "We're about to break into one of the most expensive homes in London to steal a priceless work of art, and our getaway car is a bright red double-decker bus that does a max speed of five kilometers an hour."

Kat laughed, which only frustrated him.

"First of all, we're not *stealing* it, we're *returning* it," she answered in an equally hushed tone. "Or have you forgotten about the little treasure that's been sewn into the lining of your jacket? Second, once you've put it back, why would anyone bother to chase us? Logic dictates that our *getaway* vehicle is irrelevant."

He nodded reluctantly and admitted, "Okay . . . you may have a point there."

"Of course I do," she replied. "Your problem is that you think being a spy is like being in an action movie."

"It's not?"

"No. It's like eating in the lunch hall at school."

"How do you figure that?" Paris asked.

"You pretend you belong and hope nobody notices you while you figure things out," she said. "Not to mention there's a decent chance the food's been poisoned."

He chuckled and saw that they were nearing their stop at Notting Hill Gate. "Finally, this is us."

He stood up to leave, but she stayed put, blocking his way.

"I'm not moving until you say it," she said firmly.

Paris was the alpha, which meant he was in charge now that they were in the field. It also meant he was the one who was supposed to say the phrase that officially started the mission. It was as much a good-luck ritual as it was an operational command.

"Here?" he replied. "On the bus?"

"Don't knock the bus," she said. "James Bond was named after one just like this." "What do you mean?"

"When Ian Fleming was writing the first Bond book, he lived out in Kent and had to ride the bus back and forth to London," she explained.

"And?" he replied, not getting the connection.

"The bus from Kent to Victoria was number double oh seven."

"You're joking," he said.

"No. That's where he got the name. And if the bus is good enough for Ian and James, it's good enough for you and me."

"Well, if you put it that way." He flashed a sly smile and said, "This operation is hot. We are a go."

Paris and Kat were part of the City Spies, an experimental team of five undercover agents, aged twelve to fifteen, who MI6 used when they had a mission in which adult agents would stand out. In this instance, they were about to crash the sweet sixteen party of a London socialite named Tabitha Banks.

The British Secret Intelligence Service wasn't really interested in the birthday girl, but they were fascinated by her father. Reginald Banks was a multibillionaire whose business dealings sometimes involved nefarious underworld characters and shadowy figures from for-

eign intelligence agencies. MI6 desperately needed to get an agent into his home, and this party offered a rare opportunity to access the highly secure mansion located on Kensington Palace Gardens, one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the world.

"Testing comms, one, two, three," Paris said as they walked away from the bus stop. "Can you hear me?"

He was using a covert communication device that looked like an everyday earbud to speak with team members monitoring the situation from a nearby safe house.

"Roger that, we hear you loud and clear," replied Mother, the MI6 agent in charge of the team.

"How about me?" asked Kat, testing her comms device.

"Perfect," Mother replied. "We are ready to rock and roll. We've got Brooklyn on the computer, and Sydney is . . ." There was a pause as Mother turned to Sydney. "What exactly are you doing?"

She gave him a look as if the answer were obvious. "I'm standing by just in case," she replied.

"We have Sydney standing by . . . just in case," Mother continued. "Although, technically, she's pacing more than standing."

"Relax, Syd," Paris said confidently. "We've got this."

"She's not pacing because she's worried about the mission," Brooklyn pointed out. "She's pacing because she's jealous that she's not the one doing it."

This brought a round of laughs, and Sydney didn't even bother to disagree. She always wanted to be the alpha and hated it when she missed out on the action.

"Just remember that I'm here if you need me," she offered. "Ready and willing."

"Good to know," said Paris.

"We've almost reached the guard gate at the end of the street," Kat said. "Any last words of wisdom?"

"Yes," answered Mother, who cleared his throat and paused dramatically before saying, "*This mission is fraught, so don't get caught.*"

He liked to use rhyming couplets, nicknamed Motherisms, to remind the team of important elements of spycraft. This one left Kat and Paris completely uninspired.

"Seriously?" Kat replied.

"Is that the best you've got?" asked Paris.

"Well, I could've pointed out that if you get caught, it will not only involve the Metropolitan Police, but quite likely the prime minister, the head of MI6, the foreign secretary, the French ambassador, and the president of Nepal," said Mother. "But I didn't want to overwhelm

you, and it's exceedingly difficult to make all that rhyme."

"Fair points all," said Paris.

"Oh, there is one more thing, Paris," interjected Brooklyn.

"What's that?" he replied.

"Try to remember that your microphone is very sensitive," she said.

"Okay, but why am I remembering that?"

"Because it will blow out our headsets if you squeal too loudly when KB5 take the stage," she said, eliciting more laughter.

"You are so very funny," Paris replied. "Trust me, if I scream, it will be because I'm in musical agony. Although, calling what they do *music* is an offense to everyone from Beethoven to the Beatles."

KB5 was a British boy band whose heartthrob members had their pictures plastered on bedroom walls around the globe. Despite Paris's opinion of their musical ability, they regularly performed in sold-out arenas bursting with screaming fans. Tonight, however, they were playing a private concert for Tabitha's birthday. This was an advantage of having Reginald Banks for a father. Not only was he one of the richest people in the

United Kingdom, but he also created KB5 and owned the record label that produced their albums.

"I like their music," Sydney offered. "It's not too late if you want to swap roles."

"I would gladly do so," said Paris, "if only Australia had built their embassy on Kensington Palace Gardens."

Nicknamed Billionaires' Row, Kensington Palace Gardens was home to business tycoons, royal family members, foreign embassies, and the residences of several ambassadors. It was a half-mile long and protected at both ends by guard gates with armed police officers. For any outsiders who still didn't get the hint, there were even signs that read NO PHOTOGRAPHY.

Sir Reg, as he was known in the tabloids, couldn't just hold a concert in his backyard without the approval of his very powerful and extremely private neighbors. So, he'd come up with a brilliant solution and opened up the celebration to all the young people who lived on the street. Since no parent wanted to face the wrath of a furious teen or tween who'd missed out on the party of the decade, permission was granted.

Invitations were also extended to the children of embassy workers, which is when MI6 saw an opportunity.

As good fortune would have it, Kensington Palace Gardens was home to the ambassador of France and the embassy of Nepal, Paris and Kat's home countries. Some favors were called in and their names were added to the guest list.

For Paris, this meant swapping identities yet again, something he'd done countless times during his five years with MI6. As he approached the guardhouse, he flipped a mental switch and became someone else, like an actor stepping onto the stage in a West End play. Until the curtain fell on this little drama, he'd be Antoine Tremblay, the fifteen-year-old son of the second secretary for cultural affairs.

"Which embassy?" asked a guard.

"France," replied Paris.

The guard motioned him to a row of tables marked with flags representing the different countries. Here, the young guests were screened to make sure no overzealous KB5 fans were able to sneak into the party. Paris went to the table with the French tricolor and smiled at the man dressed in a sharp black suit.

"Invitation and identification," said the man.

Paris handed him two flawless forgeries: an officiallooking invitation to the party, complete with a security hologram, and a French diplomatic ID for Antoine Tremblay.

"Bonsoir, Antoine," the man said, slipping into French to test him. "Ça va?"

"Oui, ça va bien," Paris replied naturally.

The guard checked his name off a list on a clipboard. "Comment vous aimez KB Cinq?" asked the guard

to see if he was excited about seeing KB5.

One of the keys to being undercover was not lying when it wasn't necessary. The more honest you were about specific things, the more believable you were overall. So rather than pretending to be excited about a boy band he detested, Paris answered truthfully. "*Disons, j'aime beaucoup mieux le gâteau d'anniversaire*." Let's just say I'm more excited about the birthday cake.

The man laughed and handed him a red wristband. "Put this on now and don't take it off until you leave for the night."

"Merci beaucoup," replied Paris.

At a nearby table, Kat answered similar questions in a mix of Nepali and English.

Unlike the other kids who eagerly hurried toward the party, Paris and Kat took their time as they walked down the street. They'd been trained to study the land-

scape surrounding any mission and make mental notes of key details like the locations of security cameras and the fact that one of the streetlights was out. They looked for escape routes and potential hiding places. They also marveled at the mansions.

"Wow!" Paris said when they reached the one belonging to Sir Reg. "It looks even bigger than I imagined. The pictures don't do it justice."

"No kidding," said Kat. "You're going to need GPS just to find your way around in there."

The two of them had studied everything they could about the house, including photographs, blueprints, and video from a BBC show about London's finest estates. The building was three stories tall and a showcase of Italian Renaissance architecture with thirty-eight rooms, including an indoor swimming pool, a home cinema, and a gymnasium.

It was also home to museum-quality art. There was a large Picasso that hung in the entryway, a pair of Van Gogh sketches in the living room, a Rodin statue in the garden, and an ornate Fabergé egg, known as the "*Pearl* of *Russia*," that sat on the mantel above the fireplace in Sir Reg's private office.

Or at least that's what he thought.

In reality, it was a high-quality fake that contained a tiny hidden microphone British Intelligence had used to eavesdrop on his business meetings for nearly three years. The actual Fabergé egg—worth nearly five million pounds—was currently nestled inside a secret pocket sewn into Paris's jacket.

The *Pearl of Russia* was one of fifty jeweled eggs handcrafted over a period of three decades for Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II. Each year they'd given them as Easter presents to their wives and mothers. Paris's assignment was to sneak the real egg back into the office and replace it before the fake was exposed. This was necessary because Sir Reg had recently announced that he was loaning it to a museum in Moscow, where it would no doubt be examined by experts who would uncover the microphone. MI6 couldn't let that happen.

"We've arrived," Paris announced to the others in the safe house.

"How are the access points?" asked Mother.

"The walkway gate is manned by staff directing everyone to go around the house to the party in back," answered Paris. "But the gate for the driveway is wide open. The tour bus and equipment trucks for KB5 have blocked it so it can't shut."

"What about the house?" asked Mother.

"Two guards at each door," said Kat. "Judging by the holster bulges underneath their jackets, I'd say they're all armed."

"If there was only one per door, you might be able to pull off a diversion and distract the guard long enough to slip in," said Mother. "But with two, the main floor is a no-go. That means you'll need to enter the house through the alternate route."

Paris and Kat both turned their attention to the roof.

"Looks like someone's going to be playing Santa Claus," said Kat.

Paris gave her a raised eyebrow and replied, "Ho, ho, ho."



# PARIS WAS THE ONE WHO'D THOUGHT OF using the chimney.

A month earlier, they were trying to figure out how to get into the office when they came across a magazine profile of Reginald Banks. In one of the photos, the *Pearl of Russia* was visible in the background, sitting on the mantel of a large stone fireplace.

"Look how big that fireplace is," Paris said. "It's huge. That means there should be an equally huge chimney that connects from the roof to the office. Why don't I just slide down like Father Christmas?"

"Not in a million years" was Mother's emphatic response. "Chimneys are way too dangerous. Eight million things could go wrong and most of them involve your untimely death." Then he thought about it for a moment and smiled. "Although, the roof is a promising lead."

And so Operation Kris Kringle was born.

Rather than having Paris use the chimney, it was decided he would take advantage of the rooftop helipad that also had been featured in the magazine article. Next to it was a door that led into the house. To access the door without setting off any alarms, the team needed to hack into the home's state-of-the-art security system—no easy task. Then, once he reached the office, Paris would only be able to enter if he could convince the biometric screening device that he was Reginald Banks. That meant before Paris climbed up to the roof, he had to find Sir Reg and steal his identity. Or at least a copy of his thumbprint.

"Where are you, Reg?" Paris whispered to himself as he scanned the faces of the partygoers. There were at least two hundred people already there, and the celebration was in full swing. A DJ on the stage was mixing

multilingual pop songs to create a nonstop international groove while tented catering stations offered fusion cuisine blending cultures such as Korean beef tacos, Siberian pasta, Chinese barbecue pulled pork sliders, and Thai curry mac and cheese.

The music and food were all in keeping with the party's theme, "Around the World." Not coincidentally, this was also the name of KB5's soon-to-be-released album. Although he'd never admit it publicly, part of the reason Sir Reg invited the children of the embassy workers was so his publicity team could get pictures showing how popular KB5 was with fans across the globe.

One of the keys to his financial success was that he saw business opportunities in everything, even his own daughter's birthday.

"There he is," Kat said, nodding toward a man with flowing reddish-blond hair and a scruffy mustache and beard. His outfit—black jeans, T-shirt, and limitededition sneakers—looked casual but cost a fortune. He greeted guests and happily posed for pictures, flashing the same media-savvy smile that could be found in countless newspapers and magazines.

"He looks more like a bass player than a billionaire," said Paris.

"I think that's the goal," said Kat. "Maybe you can get a selfie with him."

"That's brilliant," he replied. "If Reg takes the picture, then I'll have his thumbprint on my phone."

"Remember that little rhyme about not getting caught?" Mother interjected. "I think posing for a photograph with the person we're spying on would count as pushing our luck."

Paris and Kat both laughed. "We're just messing with you," he said. "I know the drill. Blend in and disappear. Make sure no one notices me. That's my specialty. I'll have his thumbprint in no time and remain completely anonymous while I'm doing it."

"That's nice and all," Brooklyn chimed in. "But it won't matter if I can't access the internal video security system."

"Give us a second, will you?" Kat replied, peeved. "We just got here."

"Sorry," Brooklyn apologized. "I don't mean to be pushy. It's just that I need as much time as I can get on this one. It's been a struggle."

"I understand," said Kat. "I'm on it."

Brooklyn was an amazing hacker, but after a week of relentless effort, she hadn't been able to access Sir Reg's

system. According to her, it had "a ridiculously intense firewall with hyperparanoid levels of encryption." Since she couldn't hack it from the outside, she was hoping she could from within. To do that, she needed to trick KB5's stage crew into giving her a hand.

"All right," Kat said. "I'm in a good position to see the mixing board. It's set up in the middle of the lawn, facing the stage. I'll get in close and send you some pictures."

"Thank you," Brooklyn replied. "Try to get one that shows the manufacturer's logo so I can pull up the specs."

The mixing board was the centerpiece to the plan. It was a large electronic console filled with rows of buttons, knobs, sliders, and dials that controlled everything from the volume levels of the musicians and singers to the sound quality of the different instruments.

The key was that it was always set up in the audience, so the person operating it could properly hear how the band sounded in the crowd. This meant that Kat could get close to it. Hopefully, close enough to attach a tiny transmitter that connected to Brooklyn's computer. This was important because the mixer was also linked to the rest of the equipment by Wi-Fi. If it used the same network as the home security system, Brooklyn thought she might be able to piggyback on it and sneak in through a back door.

A man, dressed all in black, operated the board and was known as the "front-of-house mixer." It was his job to make sure KB5 sounded perfect. He was adjusting some dials when Kat covertly snapped three photos and texted them to the team in the safe house.

"Got 'em," Brooklyn said as she pulled the images up on her computer. "Perfect shot of the logo, Kat. That's a Digico Quantum Seven," she said as she did a quick search and pulled up a diagram of the console. "There is a USB port on the left-hand side."

"I guess that means it's time to turn on the charm," Kat said wryly.

This was part joke and part self-realization. Kat much preferred solving math problems to talking to people. Especially strangers. But she had to distract the sound engineer long enough for her to plug the transmitter into the USB port. The fact that he was wearing a thick set of noise-canceling headphones didn't help. He didn't even hear her the first two times she tried to get his attention. Finally, she tentatively tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned to see her, pulled the headset off one ear, and said, "Yes?"

This was her one chance to talk fast and engage him

in conversation. It was where she needed to be charming and interesting. The best she could do was "Hi."

Her voice was so soft, it could barely be heard over the music the DJ was playing. Back in the safe house, Brooklyn and Sydney shared a worried look.

"Hi," he said curtly. As much as Kat hated social interactions, sound engineers hated having their work interrupted by fans of the band even more. "If you're looking for the inside scoop on KB5, I can't really help you. The lads are nice, but I don't hang out with them or know any juicy gossip."

"No . . . I'm . . . not really . . ." She paused and let out a frustrated sigh as all seemed lost. Then, out of nowhere, "Do you like the Quantum Seven?" she asked, referring to the mixing board.

The man gave her a curious look. "You're interested in audio mixers?"

"A lot more than I am in boy bands," she replied.

He gave her a raised eyebrow and asked, "What is it you like about it?"

"What don't I like?" she said, stalling.

Back in the safe house, Brooklyn quickly read off some statistics. "Huge channel count. Awesome processing power."

"The channel count is huge," Kat said, trying to sound like she knew what that meant. "And it has awesome processing power."

"Not only that," the man said enthusiastically, "but the clarity of the vocals is incredible, no matter the frequency range."

He started to rave about the equipment, and she listened and nodded while he did. When he gestured to the right side of the console, she deftly plugged Brooklyn's transmitter into the USB port.

"Way to go, Kat!" Brooklyn said when the signal reached her at the safe house. Within moments she pulled up the Wi-Fi and located the devices that were on it. Among them was the home security system. "I am in and you are free to get out of there."

"That was brilliant!" Sydney added proudly.

Kat lingered for a moment and listened to the man a little more before saying, "Thanks. I better let you get back to work."

Meanwhile, Brooklyn's fingers danced across the keyboard in a flurry as she started accessing the security system.

While she was hacking, Paris was stalking. He carefully followed Sir Reg around the party, studying the

billionaire as he greeted people and posed for pictures.

"That's odd," Paris said.

"What is?" asked Mother.

"Three times now, Sir Reg has accepted presents for his daughter."

"What's odd about that?" asked Sydney. "It's her birthday party, isn't it?"

"It is," Paris replied. "But he can't carry them because he's shaking hands, so he has to pass them to an assistant who's following him around. And she keeps carrying them, even though there's a giant table where everyone else is putting gifts. Why not put them there?"

Inside the safe house, Mother tried to picture the scene. "These are being given to him by kids at the party?"

"No, adults," said Paris. "I think they're all staffers from the embassies."

"Why are there staffers there?" asked Mother. "I thought only their children were invited."

"Yes," Paris answered. "But alongside the tables of food, there are also tables set up with displays about the embassies in the neighborhood. It's all part of the 'Around the World' theme."

"Which countries?" asked Mother, his curiosity growing.

"Which countries have tables?" asked Paris.

"No," answered Mother. "Which countries gave him presents?"

Paris ran through them in his head and looked back at the displays. "Russia . . . and India . . . for sure," he answered. "And I think the other one was either Saudi Arabia or Romania."

As he was talking, Paris saw Sir Reg whisper something to his assistant, who nodded and took the presents away.

"And now the presents are on the move," he continued. "Instead of putting them on the table, the woman's carrying them into the house."

Mother thought about this for a moment. "If they're gifts from the embassies, he might not want his daughter to open them in front of the other guests," he said. "You always run the risk of one country being insulted or embarrassed if their present isn't as nice as another's."

"The good news is that Reg has stopped walking around for a moment," said Paris. "That means it's time for me to get to work." Reg got a drink and joined Tabitha and some others standing around a table in a roped-off VIP section near the stage. To enter this area, guests needed a blue wristband, not red like the one Paris had. But that wasn't a problem. He simply slipped into one of the half dozen photo booths that had been set up for the party. Here guests could have their pictures taken in front of international backgrounds featuring landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or the Golden Gate Bridge.

Paris didn't want a picture; he just needed privacy for a quick change. It was a tight fit, but he'd practiced in a closet back at their HQ on the FARM. He held on to his cuffs and pulled his jacket up over his head so that when he pulled his arms out, it turned inside out. An MI6 tailor had made it reversible so now he had a perfect match for the ones worn by the catering staff. When he slipped it on, his cover instantly changed from guest to busboy. Another mental switch was flipped. It was time for a new character to take the stage.

He grabbed an empty tray from a dessert table featuring French pastries and started cleaning up after people. All the while, he kept a close eye on the VIP section, and when he saw Sir Reg finish his drink and place it on a table, Paris swept right in and picked it up.

"Got it," he told the others once he'd walked away. "There's a big fat thumbprint right on his glass. Perfect to lift and copy."

"What about the selfie?" joked Sydney. "Did you get that too?"

"No," answered Paris. "I was totally invisible. At a party like this, who's going to notice a busboy?"

Paris was right about that. With all the excitement, no one in the VIP section had even registered his existence. He simply blended into the background, nothing memorable about him. But as to total invisibility, that wasn't completely true.

What he hadn't realized was that all the photo booths had been set to take pictures automatically. One was snapped of him while he was doing his quick change. He didn't see the flash because his arms and jacket blocked his view.

In the picture, his face was mostly obscured, but it was still a visual record that he was at the party. And it sat in a tray at the photo booth, waiting for a time when someone might suddenly find him important enough to care about.



### WHILE THEY WERE PLANNING THE MISSION,

Mother handed Paris a photograph of the side of Reginald Banks's mansion and asked, "Can you climb this?"

"Easily," Paris answered as he studied the picture. "With the bricks, the chimney, the drainpipe, and the trellis, there are a lot of hand- and footholds. It'll be no problem to get up to the roof."

"That's good," Mother replied. "But do you think you can do it in twenty-one seconds?"

"Hmm," Paris said, thinking it over. "That's not a lot of time."

"Unfortunately, it's all you're going to get," answered Mother.

"Why's that?"

"Because that's how long it takes to sing 'Happy Birthday.' At least when I timed myself. Hopefully, KB5 doesn't sing it any faster. If they do, that would be bad."

"You've lost me," Paris said. "What do the two have to do with each other?"

"To get permission to hold the concert at his house, Reginald Banks had to give his neighbors and the Westminster council a schedule detailing, among other things, any lighting and noise variations," Mother explained. "They take this very seriously. At a celebration for the London Olympics, Bruce Springsteen and Paul McCartney held a concert right next door in Hyde Park, and when they went past their curfew, the council pulled the plug, literally. Their mics went dead while they were onstage performing. If they'll do that to the Boss and a Beatle, then . . ."

Paris waved his hands to stop him. "Still lost," he

said. "Let's get to the part where this has something to do with me climbing up the side of the house?"

"Right, right," Mother said as he handed him the rundown of the concert. "I've highlighted the key item."

Paris started reading aloud from the schedule. "KB5 will sing "Happy Birthday" to Tabitha onstage. While they do, all the lights will be turned off except for a spotlight on them as they perform."

"That means no one can see you for twenty-one seconds," Mother said. "Is that enough time?"

Paris studied the picture and thought about it carefully before answering, "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," Paris said confidently.

He truly was confident when he said it, but a few weeks later, as the moment was rapidly approaching, that certainty began to fade. In person, the house seemed taller and the challenge more forbidding. He didn't want to think about what would happen if the lights came back on while he was still dangling off the wall. Luckily, he didn't have much time to worry.

"Showtime," Brooklyn said from her seat in the safe house. "The cake's in place and KB5 are making their way to the stage." She knew this because in addition to

hacking into the security system, she'd also tapped into the radio frequency the crew was using for their walkietalkies.

Still dressed as a busboy, Paris was at the side of the house, loading dirty dishes onto a rack in a catering truck. He'd already used special tape to lift Sir Reg's print off a glass and scan it into a nifty little gadget designed by MI6. The device, a miniature 3-D printer, produced a rubbery cap that duplicated the print and fit directly onto Paris's thumb.

"If I can have everyone's attention," Sir Reg said as he took a microphone at the center of the stage, his daughter standing alongside him. "It's a pleasure to welcome you to our home as we celebrate this very special event my lovely Tabitha's sixteenth birthday." He paused for a moment while the guests clapped. "Normally, this is when Tab's mum, my ex-wife, sings to her. But since she's currently performing an exclusive engagement in Las Vegas, I found someone else to handle the duties."

Right on cue, KB5 came onstage, pushing a giant birthday cake. The guests squealed in delight, and Sir Reg had to stop talking for a moment because it was too loud for him to be heard. The five band members smiled, waved, and flashed their signature pouty looks

as they posed with Tabitha next to the cake. She basked in the glory while lights pulsed throughout the crowd as hundreds of phones snapped photos.

With all eyes on the stage, Paris moved over to the wall and studied it, trying to map out in his mind an image of the quickest and most secure route to the roof. Kat stood close by, acting as a lookout. When she was sure that no one was near, she said, "All clear."

Paris reached up to grab hold of a brick, and he put his foot on the edge of a planter so that he was ready to spring into action, like a sprinter getting into position before a race.

On the stage, Sir Reg prompted the crowd. "So, if you'll join us . . ."

Everything went dark, and a spotlight focused on KB5 as they began to sing. Paris started climbing and got off to a great start. He quickly cleared the first floor but ran into a problem when he jammed his thumb on a second-story windowsill.

"Oww," he groaned, recoiling as pain radiated through his hand.

"You okay?" asked Mother.

Paris didn't answer. Instead, he gritted his teeth

and continued clambering up the wall. By the time he reached the third floor, he'd lost the mental image and could no longer envision the path he'd planned to take. This meant he'd have to feel his way from here on out. Meanwhile, the song reached its final line.

"I might not make it in time," he admitted as he strained to reach the trellis.

In the safe house, Mother and Sydney held their breath while Brooklyn pulled up the concert's lighting grid on her computer. She'd accessed it earlier, just in case there came a time to take control and cause a blackout.

"If we need to, I can cut everything," she said.

"Don't unless I tell you," said Paris.

Luckily, one of the boys in the band started to ham it up for the audience, and the song stretched to nearly thirty seconds. Paris managed to grab on to the trellis, and although it slid down a few inches, it held. When the lights came back on and Tabitha went to cut the cake, there was no sign of him on the wall.

Kat nervously checked to make sure he hadn't fallen to the ground.

"Everything okay?" Mother asked quietly.

There was an extended delay before Paris responded

with a weak but relieved "Well, that was close." He was flat on his back, lying on the roof. There were some scrapes on his hands and face, but he was safe and out of sight. "Give me a second to catch my breath."

"Okay, but just a second," Brooklyn said, taking charge.

For this phase of the mission, she was in the driver's seat. There were three computer monitors set up in front of her, and on them she could see all the elements of the home's security system. These included the closed-circuit camera feeds, which allowed her to keep track of activity inside the mansion.

"Right now there's no one on the top two floors, so you should be good to go," she told Paris. "I've unlocked the door to the helipad and turned off the alarm."

"All right," Paris said with a pained grunt as he pulled his jammed thumb back into place. He flexed it a couple times to test it. "Ready to go."

From the back lawn he could hear the start of KB5's concert, their music drowning out any noise he made as he stealthily moved across the roof. "Never thought I'd be happy to hear them," he said.

"You know you love it," Sydney joked.

"Tell me before you open the door," Brooklyn said. "I have to freeze the cameras."

"Roger that," answered Paris.

There was only a sliver of moon, which had helped when Paris needed darkness but now made it difficult for him to find his way on the roof. The helipad was slightly elevated, and once he reached it, he was able to follow the edge around to the door. It opened onto a flight of stairs that descended into the house.

"All clear," he said as he reached for the doorknob. "I'm ready."

"Remember, once I hit freeze, I'm totally blind," Brooklyn reminded him. "The longer you take, the more dangerous it becomes."

"Yeah, I kind of put that together," he said, trying to make light of the concern.

"Okay, in three-two-one," Brooklyn replied as she pressed a button that froze all the camera feeds from the top floor. "Good luck."

Since the hallways and rooms were empty at the moment, they would continue to appear that way on the monitors in the guardhouse even as Paris moved through them.

He quietly opened the door and went down the stairs into what Sir Reg had referred to as his "toy room" during the BBC tour of the home. Electric guitars autographed by rock stars were mounted on the wall, a snooker table sat in the center of the room, and there was a cabinet with antique chess sets.

The love of chess was a passion Paris shared with the billionaire, who was a grandmaster and such a fan of the game that he'd named his company Caïssa, after the Greek mythological character known as "the goddess of chess." Even the black and white tiles on the floor looked like a massive chessboard.

Paris had memorized the layout of the house and knew exactly where to go. He cracked the door open and peeked out to make sure no one was there. Then he rushed down the hall, moving on his toes and the balls of his feet just as he'd learned in the dance classes Mother insisted the team take in order to learn body control and graceful movement.

He passed three rooms before he reached the office and the door with the biometric scanner. His thumb had started to swell from when he jammed it, and it throbbed as he forced the rubber cap over it. It was painful, but it worked, and the door unlocked with a click.

"I'm in the office," Paris whispered into his comms device, prompting sighs of relief from everyone in the safe house.

There were no cameras or windows in this room. There wasn't even a computer. Those invited snooping eyes and ears, and Reg wanted to make sure no one knew his business. He was paranoid about getting spied upon, but not so much that it occurred to him to have his Fabergé egg reexamined after purchasing it at auction. He'd been so delighted to acquire the *Pearl of Russia* that he rushed right in and placed it on his mantel.

It was the perfect addition to an office designed to intimidate and impress anybody who came to negotiate. Along with works of art, there was a wall covered floor to ceiling with photographs of Reg with world leaders and celebrities, and another that featured framed magazine covers, honors, and recognitions he'd received.

Paris ignored them and moved straight to the massive fireplace, so large that it took up almost an entire wall. He pulled the authentic *Pearl of Russia* out of the secret pocket in his jacket and was about to put it in its rightful place when something caught his eye. "The presents," he said.

"What?" asked Brooklyn.

"The presents that the embassy people handed to Sir Reg. Now they're sitting on his desk."

Brooklyn let out an exasperated sigh and said, "Would you forget about those presents and hurry up?"

"Okay, okay," he said. "I'm doing it."

He returned his focus to the eggs and swapped them, putting the fake one into his pocket. While he was doing that, Kat chimed in from the party.

"Just so you guys know, right after they cut the cake, Sir Reg went back to the house," she said. "You see him, right?"

Brooklyn scanned the feeds on the monitors.

"No," she said. "I don't see him anywhere. Are you sure he went inside?"

"Positive," Kat replied.

It took a second until it dawned on Brooklyn. "The cameras are frozen," she said in a panic.

She hit a button and the third-floor security feed came back to life. That's where they saw Reg striding down the hall, heading straight for the office.

"The egg's been switched and I'm leaving the office," Paris informed them.

"No!" Brooklyn, Sydney, and Mother all answered in unison.

"Why?" asked Paris. "What's wrong?"

"Reg is coming your way," answered Brooklyn. "He'll be there in seconds."

"What do I do?" Paris asked desperately.

In the safe house, they could only watch the screen as Reginald Banks put his thumb on the scanner, opened the door to his office, and walked inside.



EVERYONE IN THE SAFE HOUSE WAS IN full panic mode as Sir Reg stepped into the office. Since the room wasn't part of the security feed, they couldn't see what was happening, but one thing gave them hope: They didn't hear any confrontation. There wasn't the clatter and crash of a scuffle. Sir Reg didn't shout, "Who are you?" or "What are you doing here?" All that came over the comms was the sound of Paris taking shallow, nervous breaths.

"I know you can't talk," Mother whispered. "But if

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you're safe at the moment, tap your microphone two times to let us know you're okay."

They listened intently as two soft thumps came over the speaker.

"That's good," Mother said in a calming tone. "We'll stop talking so you can focus on the situation, but if you need us to get involved, just say . . ."

He tried to think of a safety word when Sydney blurted out, "Apple Jack." It was a code from a recent mission and the first thing that came to mind.

"Perfect," Mother said. "If you need us, just say, 'Apple Jack."

Paris responded with two more taps on his microphone to signify that he understood.

Inside the office, Reginald Banks was completely unaware that there was an intruder. He was in an excellent mood because the party was going perfectly, his daughter was thrilled, and he'd received three presents so exciting he couldn't wait to open them. His impatience had reached the point that he'd slipped out of the concert to take a quick peek.

Less than six feet away, Paris tried to remain motionless inside the fireplace. There was just enough room for him to hide if he hunched over and pressed his back

against the side of the firebox. He wasn't completely invisible, but it was the best he could do.

It helped that Sir Reg's attention was focused on the presents. He beamed as he opened the first one, a box that contained a top secret dossier from the FSB, the Russian equivalent of MI6 and the CIA. He flipped through the pages, delighted by what was inside. The other two packages also held intelligence files, one from the RAW—India's Research and Analysis Wing and the other from the GIP—Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Presidency.

Getting his hands on three sets of "eyes only/no copy" files was proof that Sir Reg wielded enormous power. Double agents on his secret payroll had smuggled them out of their nations' most secure intelligence facilities and through their embassies in London. Tabitha's celebration had provided the perfect cover so that they could visit his house and hand them over without attracting attention. After all, who would question three gift-wrapped packages among so many at his daughter's birthday?

*"Happy birthday to me,"* he sang to himself, gleefully drawing out the notes as he placed the files in a stack on his desk.

It took everything Paris had to stay quiet and still.