



MISSION MANHATTAN

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5

CITY SPIES

MISSION MANHATTAN

BY JAMES PONTI

ALADDIN

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
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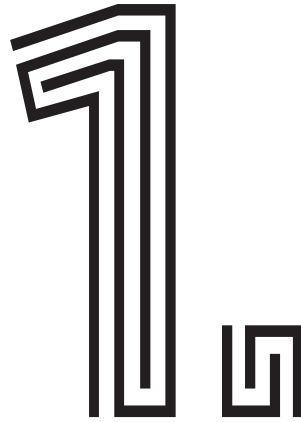
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**FOR ROSE BROCK:
BOOK LOVER, RINGLEADER,
WONDER TWIN**



The Swarm

SPY MISSIONS WERE NOTHING LIKE SPY movies. All Cairo had to do was look in a mirror to see that. He was about to go undercover for the first time, and rather than a tuxedo or finely tailored suit, he was wearing a bumblebee costume. It was a padded onesie over a pair of black tights and was very much *not* tailored.

“This thing’s giving me a wedgie,” he complained, tugging at the seat of his costume.

“It was the best we could do on such short notice,”

replied Paris, who wore a matching outfit and was smearing black and yellow greasepaint on his face. “When it comes to spycraft, the bottom line is that comfort takes a backseat to blending in.”

“Maybe so,” Cairo replied. “But right now, my backseat and bottom line are blending in with my underwear.”

Paris laughed. It was a good sign that Cairo was able to joke right before his first official mission. Most people would’ve been too nervous. “Welcome to MI6,” he said. “It’s oh so glamorous.”

They were in Venice, Italy, because the Secret Intelligence Service had gotten word of a potential threat at a global warming demonstration scheduled for St. Mark’s Square. The event was organized by a group of teenage environmental activists known as the Swarm, whose members dressed accordingly at protest rallies.

“You ready?” Paris asked once he’d finished putting on his makeup.

Cairo nodded, gave his costume one final tug, and said, “Let’s get buzzing.”

This was their first time in Venice, and it would’ve been easy for them to get lost because the city was spread across more than one hundred small islands, but

they had help navigating its baffling blend of bridges and alleyways. As they stepped out of their safe house, they heard a loud buzzing that sounded as though a massive swarm of bees was overtaking the city.

“What’s that noise?” Cairo asked.

“Vuvuzelas,” answered Paris.

“You mean those plastic horns fans play at soccer matches?”

“The Swarm uses them whenever they march to a rally,” Paris explained. “All we have to do is listen and follow.”

“Helpful,” Cairo said. “*Annoying*, but helpful.”

As they tried to catch up with the Swarm, the rest of the team was getting ready in St. Mark’s Square, which the Italians called *Piazza San Marco*. Sydney and Brooklyn were stationed near the security gates through which all the protesters had to pass, while Rio and Monty were backstage, keeping an eye on the speakers scheduled to talk at the rally.

Kat was the alpha, which meant she’d call the shots once the mission got underway. She was positioned on the observation deck atop the bell tower overlooking the square. Four hundred years earlier, this was where Galileo looked to the heavens with his newly invented

telescope and discovered order in the universe. Now it was where a fourteen-year-old spy looked across a sea of demonstrators, hoping to figure out which ones were a threat to the others.

“Testing comms, one, two, three,” she said into the microphone hidden in her jacket collar. “Can everyone hear me?”

“Roger that,” replied Sydney.

“Loud and clear,” Brooklyn added.

“All good,” said Monty.

“Good for me too,” answered Rio.

Kat waited a moment before prodding, “Paris, Cairo, are you in range?”

“You’ll have to speak up,” Cairo said, trying to be heard over the noise around them. “It’s pretty loud over here.”

He and Paris had just joined up with dozens of protesters dressed as bees who were making a ruckus as they paraded through the city. In addition to blaring vuvuzelas, some of them pounded drums, while others chanted, “Be-a-triz! Be-a-triz!” in honor of their leader.

“We’re on the Rialto Bridge crossing the Grand Canal,” Paris said, raising his voice. “We should reach St. Mark’s in about ten minutes.”

“What about you, Mother?” Kat said. “I know you can’t answer directly, but if you can hear us, let us know by asking someone a question.”

Mother was one of the two adult agents who oversaw the team. MI6 had managed to place him inside Venice’s state-of-the-art Control Room. This was the highly secretive—and somewhat controversial—location where local authorities used a web of sensors, CCTV cameras, and mobile-phone trackers to monitor every person visiting the city. It would’ve caused an uproar if the Italians found out a British agent was running a mission from here, so Mother couldn’t be overheard communicating directly with the others. Instead, he turned to a nearby police officer and asked, “*Dov’è il bagno?*”

“Seriously?” Sydney said with a laugh. “That’s the best you could come up with?”

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Kat asked.

“Yes,” answered Sydney. “It means ‘Where’s the bathroom?’”

“True, but it also means that the comms are set and everyone’s in position,” Kat said. “And *that* means ‘This operation is hot. We are a go!’”

This was the phrase the alpha said to launch every mission for the City Spies, an experimental team of six

covert agents, aged eleven to sixteen, who British Secret Intelligence Service sent on assignments where adults would stand out.

“Chills,” Brooklyn replied. “Every. Single. Time.”

Shy and awkward by nature, Kat had come into her own as the alpha on some recent high-value missions. She’d been surprised by how much she’d enjoyed the role. “We are underway, and the rally is set to start in twenty-three minutes,” she said, taking charge. “That means open eyes and open minds. This is not a typical assignment.”

“And by that, are you referring to the part where we’ve been told to look for zombies?” Rio replied.

There were snickers on the comms.

“Not just zombies,” Kat replied. “I’ll settle for vampires, flesh-eaters, or any undead creatures you may come across. We’re casting a wide net here.”

And that was the problem with the mission. They didn’t really know what they were looking for.

Five days earlier, MI6 had intercepted a partial message sent between criminal syndicates in Kazakhstan and Turkey that discussed an attack in St. Mark’s to be carried out on this date by . . . *the walking dead*.

That was literally what it had said.

British analysts probably wouldn't have paid much attention to it if it weren't for the fact that the protest was happening at the same time that world leaders would be in Venice for the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which was being held across the Giudecca Canal on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

The threat sounded like a joke but couldn't be ignored.

"*The walking dead?*" Mother had asked when the team was given the assignment by his superior. "Are you being serious? What does that even mean?"

"There are several possibilities," responded Tru, one of only a handful of high-ranking officials at the Secret Intelligence Service who even knew that the City Spies existed. "It's either a code, a message that's been garbled in translation from Kazakh to Turkish to English, or the first sign of the zombie apocalypse. Whichever one, we're going to need someone there to keep an eye on things."

The City Spies were chosen to be that "someone" for two main reasons. First, because the rally was sponsored for and by young people, it was easy for them to blend in. Second, the team's official cover was that they were all on student fellowships with the Foundation for Atmospheric Research and Monitoring, a weather research center in Scotland that was actually the headquarters for a covert

MI6 operation. The FARM, as it was known, was active in promoting climate-change awareness, which is how Monty and Rio were able to get backstage with the speakers.

“*Você está nervosa?*” Rio asked Beatriz Santos, the sixteen-year-old activist who was scheduled to give the main address at the rally.

She smiled, pleasantly surprised to hear someone speak in her native language.

“*Um pouco,*” she replied, admitting that she was a bit nervous. “*Você é brasileiro?*”

“*Eu sou carioca,*” he replied, which meant that he was from Rio de Janeiro.

Her eyes lit up and she beamed. “*Eu também sou!*” she said. *So am I.*

Although Kat was the alpha, Rio had the most important assignment. He was supposed to get close to Beatriz and watch over her since she was the most likely target of any attack. For him, this was huge, not only because it was rare for him to get such an important responsibility but also because he was a massive fan of hers. He had to fight feeling starstruck as they talked.

“Rafael,” he said, introducing himself with his cover name. “But you can call me Rafa.”

“I’m Beatriz,” she replied.

He laughed. “Yeah, I think I heard that somewhere.”

The chants of “Be-a-triz! Be-a-triz!” were ringing through the crowd, and she gave an embarrassed cringe.

“That must feel incredible,” he said. “People just cheering your name.”

“It’s good for the cause,” she replied. “But I don’t like the attention.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised. “That’s too bad, because you sure get a lot of it.”

In just over two years, Beatriz had gone from unknown concerned teenager to world-famous environmental activist. What started as a one-person protest outside the Brazilian National Congress had grown into a global organization with members in ninety-seven countries. Officially, she was the director of the International Student Coalition to Protect Rainforests, but among her ardent supporters, she was simply known as Queen Bea, which is why they called themselves the Swarm.

“Still,” Rio continued, “you shouldn’t feel nervous about talking to a crowd that loves you so much.”

“I’m not too worried about the speech in the piazza,” she said. “But there are people across the water who do not love me so much. It’s important that I don’t make

any mistakes that might give them an excuse to ignore what I have to say.”

After her speech Beatriz was scheduled to take the five-minute boat ride across the lagoon to San Giorgio Maggiore so she could address the world leaders at the UN conference. It would be an intimidating audience that included the US president and the British prime minister.

“How do you keep calm when you have to speak to a group like that?” Rio asked her.

“I think of the bees,” Beatriz said.

“The ones who dress up and chant your name?”

“No,” she replied. “The ones who pollinate a third of the food we eat. They are essential to feeding the world. Thinking about them reminds me that even if you are very small, you can still be very important.”

Rio flashed a charmer’s smile and said, “*Você vai fazer fantástico.*” *You’ll do fantastic.*

She held up both hands with her fingers crossed.

Meanwhile, the crowd continued to fill the piazza.

“In case the incredibly loud buzzing didn’t give it away, the Swarm just arrived at security gate number one,” Sydney informed the others.

Fences had been erected so that anyone entering the square had to pass through a series of metal detectors

and magnetometers, as well as get patted down by officers in black jackets that read POLIZIA on the back.

“I can even see our busy little bees,” Sydney added once she spotted Paris and Cairo enter the pat-down area. “Bumble One and Bumble Two.”

“Make sure to get photos of them both,” Kat said.

“To document the mission?” Brooklyn asked.

“No, for future blackmail opportunities.”

“Gotta love Kat,” Sydney said as she snapped some pictures. “Always thinking ahead.”

“You’re all hilarious,” Paris responded. “Besides, compared to the others, I think we look pretty good.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Sydney said. “But you may be mistaking this for our mission in Egypt.”

“Why do you say that?” Paris asked, confused.

“Because you’re swimming in ‘da Nile,” she joked, eliciting more laughter on the comms.

“You walked right into that one,” Rio said.

“All right, that’s enough,” Monty said, laughing with them. “Loose is good, but this mission is important. We need to focus.” Monty was the other adult with the team. She was the director of FARM and was backstage gathered with the parents and advisors who’d accompanied the speakers.

“All kidding aside, I’m wondering if more of us should’ve worn costumes,” Brooklyn said. “We would’ve blended in better.”

“Why’s that?” asked Monty.

“So many people are wearing them,” she responded. “In addition to all the bumblebees, there are people dressed as endangered animals, environmental superheroes, and even some with giant papier-mâché heads of the world leaders. It looks like Halloween at security gate two. Right now, the police are trying to figure out how to deal with two creepy bird-people pushing a giant globe.”

“What’s the problem with it?” Sydney asked.

“It’s too big to fit through the metal detectors,” she replied.

“What do *creepy bird-people* even look like?” Cairo asked.

“They’re wearing black cloaks, black hats, motorcycle boots, and white masks with big round eyes and long beaks.”

“Those aren’t bird-people,” Paris said. “They’re plague doctors.”

“What?” asked Brooklyn.

“In the Middle Ages, doctors wore outfits like that

when they treated patients who had the plague,” Paris said. “They packed the beak with herbs and flowers to counteract the smell, which is what they thought carried the disease.”

“They may not be birds, but the masks are still super creepy,” Brooklyn responded.

“That’s what people in the Middle Ages thought too,” Paris answered. “They freaked out when they saw one of the doctors arrive in their neighborhood because it meant someone nearby had the plague and was sure to die. It was like a real-life grim reaper.”

There was a beat, then Kat said, “The walking dead!”



Plague Doctors

VENICE HAD A LONG HISTORY WITH MASKS dating back to the Middle Ages. They first appeared at the city's annual Carnival celebration, but for centuries they were worn throughout much of the year by Venetians wishing to hide their true identities. This tradition helped establish the floating city's mystique as a haven for secrecy and deception.

In modern times, masks had become a popular souvenir of a trip to Venice, and tourists flocked to local shops looking to purchase one. A popular, if unsettling, design

was called the *medico della peste*, or “plague doctor.” It was not only worn for Carnival, but for hundreds of years, it was also a fixture in the Italian theater. Audiences knew that if a character came onstage wearing the mask, death was imminent.

Now the City Spies had to worry if the same was true at the climate protest.

“What’s going on?” Kat asked. “I don’t have a good angle of the gate from up here.”

“It looks like the police are signaling them to leave the globe behind, and the plague doctors won’t do it,” Brooklyn said. “It’s brought the line to a complete standstill.”

The globe in question was about five feet wide and had been decorated so that it looked as if Earth was on fire. The two people dressed as plague doctors were pushing it on a flatbed with wheels, but it was too big to pass through the security equipment.

Brooklyn moved closer so that she could hear what they were saying.

“The police officers are barking orders at them in Italian, and they’re responding in a language I don’t recognize,” she relayed to the others. “Sounds Eastern European, but I’m not sure.”

“I thought we were looking for zombies,” Cairo said.

“The message just said ‘walking dead,’” Kat replied.

“That could apply to them, too.”

“Then what about people carrying tombstones?” he asked.

“Which people?” Kat said.

“Some of the bumblebees are carrying cardboard tombstones that have things written on them like ‘Rest in Peace, Oceans’ or ‘Killed by Pollution,’” he said. “I don’t know if that’s the same as ‘walking dead’ or not.”

“Okay, now we’ve got actual zombies,” Sydney said before anyone could respond. “I mean, not *actual* undead beings, but people actually dressed as zombies.”

“Where are they?” asked Paris.

“They’re coming through gate number one.”

Just in front of Sydney, a group of people wearing zombie makeup was going through the metal detectors.

“How many of them are there?” Monty asked.

“Seven,” Sydney answered. “And there’s no delay. They’re walking right through.”

“And now the plague doctors are too,” added Brooklyn.

“How?” asked Kat. “I thought the globe wouldn’t fit.”

“The police sent them through and are using a hand wand to scan the globe,” Brooklyn explained. “It looks like they’re going to wheel it around and give it to them inside the fence.”

In the Control Room, Mother moved closer to a wall filled with monitors displaying closed-circuit camera feeds from throughout the city. He zeroed in on the one that showed the security gate where the police officer was scanning the globe and pointed at it.

“Excuse me, but do you see this?” Mother said to one of the police officers watching the monitors. “That wand’s designed to read through clothes, not solid objects. Something could be hidden inside that globe.”

The officer grumbled at Mother in Italian and waved for him to get out of the way. A police captain approached and said, “You are here as an observer, so please, step back. We know what we’re doing.”

“But that globe could be a serious problem—”

“Either step back or leave,” said the captain.

Mother acted peeved, but he hadn’t really expected them to listen to him. He just wanted to make sure the others heard what he was thinking.

“Don’t worry, Mother, we’re on it,” Kat assured him.

In no time they’d gone from no suspects to three

different groups of them, but Kat kept her cool. She had an innate ability to see order in chaos, which was why she'd been assigned to the bell tower. She looked down at the mass of people in the square and saw what she always saw—math. In this instance it was in the form of numbers, vectors, and probabilities.

“We’re going to switch some assignments,” she instructed the team. “Sydney, you follow the globe.”

“Shouldn’t I stay with the zombies?”

“No, because if something’s hidden inside that thing, it could be a bomb, and you’re our bomb expert,” Kat explained.

“Right,” Sydney said as she started snaking through the crowd to get to the other side of the piazza.

“Paris, can you see the zombies from where you are?” Kat asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Then you go with them,” Kat said. “Cairo, stay with the Swarm and keep an eye on the ones with the headstones. Brooklyn, you’re going to have to leave the security gate and follow the plague doctors.”

“What makes you think I need help?” Sydney asked. “There are seven zombies but only two doctors. If anyone needs help, it’s Paris.”

“Except you’re not on the doctors,” Kat replied.

“But I thought you just told me—”

“I told you to follow the *globe*,” Kat interrupted. “If there’s a bomb, at some point they’re going to leave it. Brooklyn will follow them to see where they go, and you’ll stay with it.”

“That makes sense,” Sydney said.

“Mother, Monty, if you disagree, this is a good time for you to speak up,” Kat said.

“No disagreement from me,” Monty said. “Mother, cough twice if you think the plan’s solid.”

Mother coughed twice, and it gave Kat a boost of confidence to know that she was doing well. She was just about to say something else when the bell in the tower started tolling so loudly, she had to cover her ears.

It was noon, time for the rally to begin.

The first two speakers were a fifteen-year-old oceans activist from Fiji and a Ugandan high schooler who led tree-planting campaigns. While they gave their speeches, the crowd was still settling in, and the City Spies were trying to keep a close eye on their potential suspects.

“What’s up with the zombies?” Kat asked.

“They’re about five meters back from the left side of the stage,” Paris said. “Nothing suspicious so far.”

“Same with the bees,” Cairo said. “No unusual activity, although one of the tombstone guys keeps checking his phone.”

“That could be suspicious or could just be a regular teenager,” Monty said. “Hard to tell the difference.”

“How close are you to him?” Kat asked.

“I’m about six or seven people away,” Cairo answered.

“Try to get closer so you can see what’s so interesting about his screen,” instructed Kat.

“Roger that.”

“Nice use of ‘Roger that’ by the newbie,” Sydney teased good-naturedly. “Glad to see you’re getting comfortable in the role.”

Cairo, who was still fighting the wedgie, replied, “At the moment, nothing about me feels comfortable, but thanks.”

“The plague doctors won’t stop moving,” Brooklyn informed the others. “They seem much more interested in pictures than politics.”

“What do you mean by that?” Paris asked.

“Instead of listening to the speeches, they’re taking selfies with people who want to pose with them in front of the burning globe,” she explained. “It seems like it’s nothing more than a photo prop.”

“I’ve been watching them from up here,” Kat said. “They’ve almost done a complete lap of the piazza.”

“I think they’re finally stopping by the waterfront,” Sydney said. “It’s the perfect backdrop. Brooklyn’s right. They’re less ‘want to save the world’ and more ‘wannabe influencers.’”

“You two should pose for pictures with them,” Kat said. “It would give you an excuse to get close.”

“Good idea,” Brooklyn replied.

The next speaker was Benedetta Fiore, a local eighteen-year-old who was greeted with cheers when she took the microphone. Rio and Beatriz were watching from backstage, and she leaned over to him.

“Benedetta’s amazing,” she said. “She and her father built a solar-powered boat that uses absolutely no fuel. It’s a new prototype, but it could completely revolutionize transportation in Venice. You’ll see. It’s brilliant.”

“What do you mean, *I’ll see*?” Rio asked.

“After my speech, we’re going to take their boat to San Giorgio Maggiore so I can address the UN conference.”

“We?”

“All of us,” Beatriz replied. “I want the speakers and other young people backstage to ride over with me. You

wouldn't abandon a fellow Carioca in her moment of need, would you?"

He wasn't sure if he was agreeing for the mission, for the chance to see some of the most powerful people on earth, or just because the most charismatic person he'd ever met had asked him.

"Of course not."

"Excelente!"

On the stage Benedetta was firing up the crowd with a passionate appeal, switching between Italian and English as she talked about how her hometown of Venice was threatened by climate change.

"We are a city of islands," she said. "And as the tides rise, our beloved city disappears."

By the time Sydney and Brooklyn made their way to the globe to "pose" for pictures, it had been overrun by a mob of people taking a group photo. They were right along the water's edge and blocking the main walkway, which made the police unhappy.

An officer came over and instructed everyone to move along. The protesters complained, but soon the group dispersed, and the doctors wheeled the globe out of the way.

"Wait a second," Sydney said, suddenly alarmed.

“Where’d the third plague doctor come from?”

There were now three people in costume pushing the globe.

“Are you sure?” Kat said.

“I’m not the math student you are, Kat, but I can count to three.”

“I mean, are you sure there were only two before?”

“Positive,” Brooklyn said, chiming in. “I took pictures of them at the security gate, and we’ve been following them since we got here.”

“Maybe the other one was already inside the piazza,” Cairo suggested.

“Maybe,” Sydney said, unconvinced. “But we were watching both gates all morning, and neither of us saw one.”

“Oh my goodness!” Paris exclaimed. “I know what happened.”

“What?” asked Sydney.

“He was inside, all right. He was hiding inside the globe.”



The Piazza

FOR NEARLY A THOUSAND YEARS, PIAZZA San Marco had been the most famous landmark in one of the most famous cities in the world. Home to a palace, a basilica, and a bell tower, this was where Marco Polo left to explore the world, Napoleon arrived to proclaim victory, and Galileo opened a window into the universe. And now it was where a sixteen-year-old girl from Brazil took the stage near two marble columns that once marked the site of public executions.

“Be-a-triz! Be-a-triz!” chanted the crowd as vuvuzelas trumpeted her arrival.

“Please quiet down,” she said, smiling. “I need to save my voice for later when I talk to the grown-ups across the lagoon.”

This brought an even bigger cheer from the crowd, and Beatriz laughed.

Kat, meanwhile, was trying to figure out the best next steps.

“Paris, Cairo, are any of your people acting suspicious?” she asked.

“No,” Paris said. “My zombies are just cheering like the rest of the crowd.”

“Same with the bees,” Cairo replied. “They’re going wild for their queen, and it looks like the guy on the phone is just posting pictures of the rally on social media.”

“Then I think you should both go help Brooklyn and Sydney,” Kat said. “The combination of the globe and the sudden arrival of a third plague doctor makes that the most likely threat.”

“On my way,” Paris replied.

“Me too,” added Cairo.

“How are things backstage?” Kat asked.

“The only problem here is that the speeches are running behind schedule,” Monty answered.

“Why’s that a problem?” Paris asked.

“Beatriz’s chaperone is worried that she’ll be late for her speech at the UN conference,” Monty answered. “But everything else is—Wait a second. What’s going on at the front of the stage?”

Someone in a blue hoodie jumped up onto the stage and was charging toward Beatriz. Rio rushed out to protect her, but two security guards beat him to it and stopped the intruder, who turned out to be a ten-year-old supporter.

“It’s okay, you can let her through,” Beatriz said. “What do you have there?” she asked the girl.

“*Una corona per la regina*,” the girl said in Italian. *A crown for the queen.*

Beatriz smiled at the girl and leaned over so that the girl could put the plastic tiara on her head. The crowd ate this up and cheered more.

“*Grazie mille*,” she said to the girl. Then she looked to the crowd. “But please, no one else come onstage. I cannot stress how important it is for us to be on our best behavior. We have to protest peacefully. Some people would

love it if we lost control and rioted, because then they could disregard what we're saying. They are constantly looking for one misstep so that they can characterize us as something we're not."

When Rio returned backstage, Monty came over to him and whispered, "Very heroic."

He gave her an embarrassed smile.

"She's really something, isn't she?" Monty asked.

"Yes, she is!" Rio answered more enthusiastically than he intended. Then he tried to downplay it and said, "Very accomplished for someone her age."

"So are you, by the way," Monty said with a wink.

At the microphone Beatriz resumed her speech. "I was just talking to a new friend, and he asked me how I keep from getting nervous when I speak in front of crowds. I told him that I think about bees and how even though they're small, they're still important."

"That's me," Rio said to Monty, happily surprised that Beatriz had just referred to him as a friend. "She said that to me."

"But there's something to remember about bees," Beatriz continued, her voice rising dramatically. "They can make honey, but they can also sting. And when they swarm together, they are impossible to ignore."

As if on cue, the vuvuzelas started playing, turning the piazza into a massive buzzing hive.

“She’s really good at this,” Kat marveled. “It’s no wonder she’s a star.”

Once Paris and Cairo reached Sydney and Brooklyn, they approached the globe and studied the plague doctors, who stood side by side and seemed more interested in looking over their shoulders at the police than paying attention to Beatriz.

“I bet the one on the left is the one who was inside the globe,” Cairo said.

“Why?” Sydney asked, confused.

“Because he’s the smallest,” Cairo answered. “It would make sense that he’d be the one who got inside.”

Sydney was impressed. “That’s a good point.”

“I’m going to shoot some video,” Brooklyn said as she discreetly pulled out her phone and held it waist-high so that what she was doing wasn’t obvious.

Just then, the doctor in the middle got a phone call. It only lasted ten seconds, and as soon as it was over, he turned to the others, and they started walking away.

“They’re on the move,” Paris said.

“All of them?” Kat asked.

“Yes,” Sydney answered. “They’re headed toward the exit.”

“They’re not running, but they’re moving with purpose,” Paris added.

“Sydney, Brooklyn, you check for a bomb,” Kat said. “Paris, Cairo, you follow the doctors!”

“Got it,” they replied as they hurried into action.

“I can get to the microphone and warn the crowd,” Rio offered.

“No,” Monty said. “That would cause panic. We don’t even know for sure that there’s anything inside it.”

“We’ll know in about fifteen seconds,” Sydney said as she and Brooklyn reached the globe. Its exterior was aluminum and wrapped with a vinyl graphic of the burning globe. “There’s got to be some sort of hatch to get in.”

“Here,” Brooklyn said as she found it on the rear of the globe. “Right by Australia.”

Sydney laughed. “It’s almost like they were expecting me. Don’t open it yet. It could be booby-trapped.”

She got down on her hands and knees so that she could examine it closely. The door was square, about twenty inches on each side. Even though it was shut,

there was a slight gap along the edge that let her peek in.

“There aren’t any wires on the hatch, so I’m going to look inside,” she said as she opened it carefully.

“What do you see?” Kat asked as the others waited nervously.

“There’s no bomb,” Sydney said.

“That’s a relief,” Kat replied.

“Not really,” Sydney said. “Because there was one.”

“How can you tell?” Brooklyn asked.

“There’s a Hexomax wrapper.” Sydney was careful not to touch it because it could be crime-scene evidence, but she took a picture. “That’s French plastic explosive. There’s also a small oxygen tank, in case he started running out of air, and an unused blasting cap. My guess is that he finished building the bomb in here once they were inside the piazza.”

“But they left the blasting cap?” Kat asked. “Wouldn’t that make it useless?”

“Probably a spare, in case something went wrong with the first one.”

“Why would they build it here and not beforehand?” Brooklyn asked.

“It’s simple enough to put it together,” Sydney said.

“So if you do it here, you eliminate the chance of it going off accidentally before you’re ready.”

“And if he built it in the globe, that means it’s somewhere in the piazza,” Kat said.

“Yes, but where?” asked Sydney.



La Bomba

THERE WAS A BOMB IN PIAZZA SAN Marco.

Maybe.

After Sydney and Brooklyn retraced the path the plague doctors took while pushing the globe, they weren't so sure anymore.

"I don't get it," Sydney said. "There's not a single place where they could have hidden it. No trash can, mailbox, backpack, anything."

"We double-checked everywhere they went," Brooklyn

said. "Even the manhole covers have been welded shut."

"But you still think there's a bomb?" Kat asked.

"Yes," Sydney answered unconvincingly. "I mean, I saw the blasting cap and the plastic explosive wrapper. There's no other use for them."

"If there's an 'if,' an 'and,' or a 'but,' the best advice is to trust your gut," Kat said, reciting a Motherism, one of the rhyming couplets Mother used to help them remember the tenets of spycraft. "If you think there's a bomb, there probably is one. Why don't you two split up and expand your search area?"

"Did they get close to the stage?" Monty asked.

"Not that we saw," Sydney answered. "But we didn't have eyes on the third plague doctor, so we can't be sure."

"Rio and I can search back here," Monty said. "It would make sense for them to target Beatriz and the speakers."

"On it," Rio said as he started to nonchalantly poke around the backstage area.

CAMPO SAN ZACCARIA

Paris and Cairo hurried across a stone bridge and walked along a crowded alley that ran between open-air restaurants, a fruit market, and a souvenir shop. The plague

doctors were ahead of them, and the boys had to weave through packs of tourists as they tried to keep up.

“Paris, Cairo, how are you doing?” Kat asked.

“Okay, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“That bumblebee costumes are not ideal for covert surveillance,” Paris said. “If they notice us, we’ll be burned.”

“I understand, but you can’t lose them,” Kat said. “If the bomb’s not in the piazza, they may lead you to it.”

“Roger that,” Paris responded.

Unlike the urgent nature of the search being carried out in St. Mark’s, Paris and Cairo had to be cautious and methodical. This was hard not only because of how they were dressed but also because it was Cairo’s first time trying to tail anybody.

“We’ve got to stay back,” Paris said as they reached an open doorway that framed the alley. “Act like regular tourists and watch them for any change in pace or direction. Most importantly, don’t let them notice you or make any eye contact.”

“Okay,” Cairo said. “I’ll do my best.”

“Mother, I don’t know what you can see in the Control Room, but we’re entering an area called Campo San

Zaccaria,” Paris said, reading from a sign. “We’re about forty meters behind the three of them.”

Mother coughed twice to let him know he received the message and then started looking for them on the monitors. There weren’t any CCTV cameras at the location, but he found it on a map, which at least gave him an idea of where they were. He went to step closer to the monitors but noticed the police captain watching him, so he stayed put.

The alley at Campo San Zaccaria opened onto a small tourist-filled square dominated by a church with an imposing white facade that stood six stories tall.

“They’re going inside,” Cairo said as the doctors entered through a pair of large wooden doors. “Do we follow?”

“Let’s give them a moment to make sure they’re not using it as a switchback.”

“What’s that?”

“When you go into a building and then come right back out so you can see who’s entering,” Paris said. “It’s a great way to check if someone’s following you.”

PIAZZA SAN MARCO

At the rally Sydney and Brooklyn still hadn’t found the bomb as Beatriz reached the end of her speech. The

activist spoke with the confidence and authority of an experienced political campaigner, but, wearing jeans and a fleece, she looked like a typical teenager.

“I want to leave you with a promise before I go speak at the conference,” she intoned from the stage. “The temperature is rising. The oceans are rising. But the young people of the world are rising too. We are rising to our feet as we demand action from our leaders. I will carry your voices with me, and I promise that I will rise to the occasion.”

Her delivery was electrifying, and the crowd erupted into cheers. Beatriz paused for a moment and let their enthusiasm sweep over her. She wanted to be fully energized before addressing the politicians at the conference.

“*Estupenda!*” Rio said to her as she came off the stage. *Stupendous!*

“*Muito obrigado,*” she said. *Thank you very much.*

The other speakers came to greet her, but she was first intercepted by a lean man with silver hair and wire-framed glasses. This was Dr. Alberto Ferreira, a renowned Brazilian botanist and a mentor for Beatriz. He was her official chaperone from the Brazilian Ministry of Science.

“How was I?” she asked.

“Your speech was great,” he said. Then he checked