



spy school

*BRITISH
INVASION*

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STUART GIBBS

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*BRITISH
INVASION*

A spy school NOVEL

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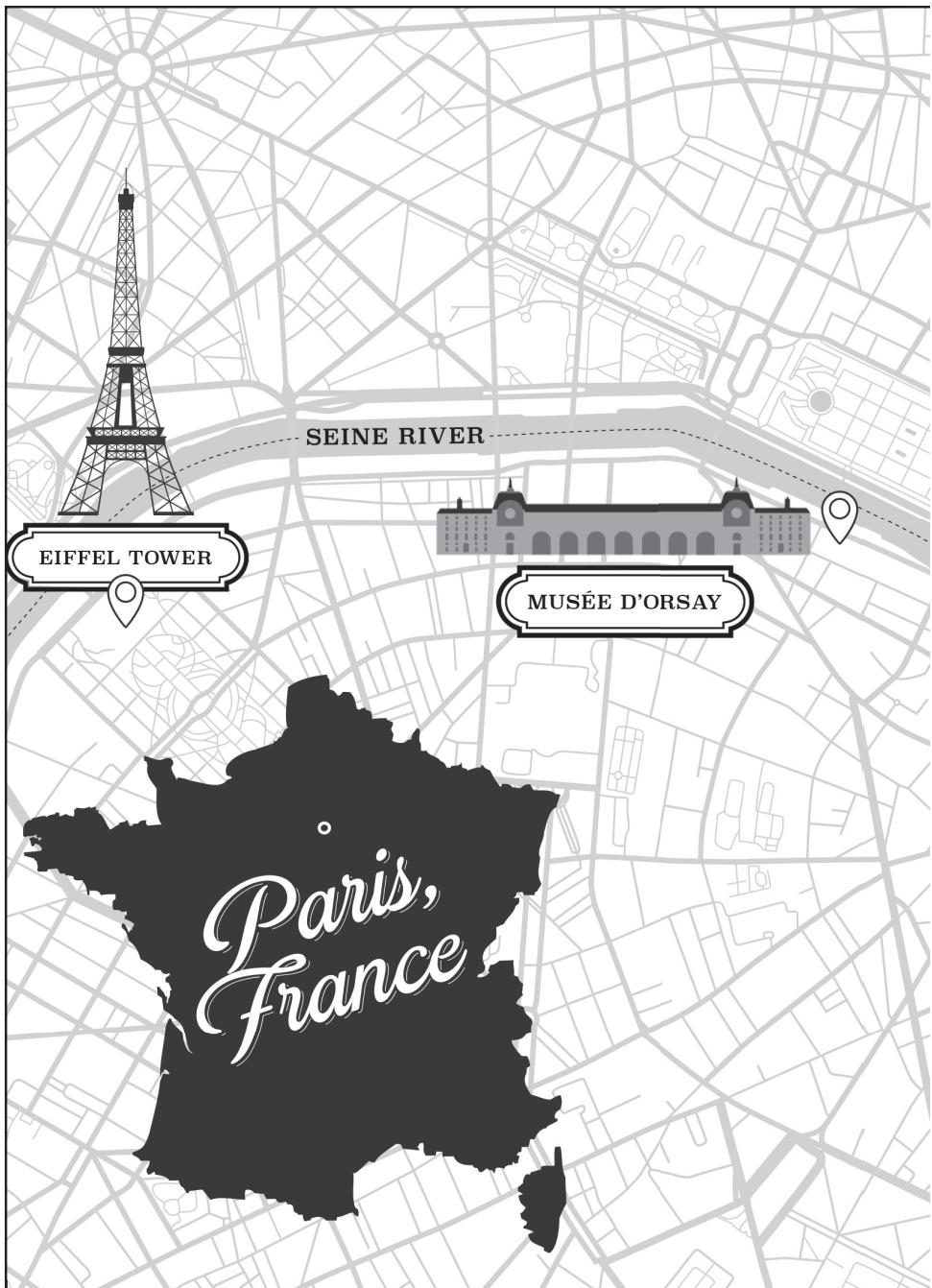
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In memory of my uncle Alvin and my cousin Andy,
who always looked out for me









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*BRITISH
INVASION*

To: All Members of Operation Screaming Vengeance
From: [REDACTED]

Just a reminder that Screaming Vengeance is getting underway at 1200 hours today.

To reiterate what is at stake here:

We have a chance to take down SPYDER once and for all. This is the best opportunity we have ever had to bring this evil organization to its knees and finally end their wicked plans to cause worldwide chaos and mayhem once and for all.

However, this mission will certainly be dangerous. SPYDER is probably aware that we are coming for them and will do whatever they can to stop us. Which probably involves death. We're not dealing with the Boy Scouts here.

We will be going it alone. Since SPYDER has already corrupted untold numbers of agents at the CIA, we cannot trust anyone at our own agency. However, there are still hundreds of good CIA agents (we just don't know who they are), and they won't look kindly upon a rogue mission. Should anything go wrong—and I'm not going to sugarcoat the truth here; there's a very good chance that will happen—the CIA will disavow your status as agents-in-training.

Given this, I do not expect you to make your decision lightly. If you do not show up at 1200 hours to participate in the mission, I will understand. I won't be pleased with your cowardice, but that is your decision to make.

The meeting will take place in the penthouse suite at Aquarius, which I have commandeered from SPYDER. The elevators are secured, so when you arrive, call me on the intercom and give the password "Golden Eagle."

A light lunch will be served.



INTERROGATION

Aquarius Family Resort and Spa

Quintana Roo, Mexico

March 30

1300 hours

The key to defeating SPYDER, the most dangerous
consortium of evildoers on earth, sat in the middle of the
dining room table of the penthouse suite.

It was an actual key, as well as a metaphorical one. A small, old-fashioned silver key, like the kind that would open a jewelry box. There was a tiny 1206 stamped on it.

Until that very morning, SPYDER had been plotting to melt half of Antarctica with several hundred tons of illegally obtained nuclear weapons and flood every coastal city on

earth. Luckily, my friends from spy school and I had thwarted them. But while we had captured ten members of the organization, the leaders had managed to escape. Still, thanks to our actions, SPYDER was almost bankrupt, the leaders were on the run, and we had it on good authority that the key could help us finally defeat them once and for all.

The only problem was we had no idea how to do that.

Which was why I had been tasked with grilling Murray Hill about it. We were seated across from each other at the dining room table, wearing garish T-shirts and Bermuda shorts that we had bought at the resort gift shop. The outfits we had been wearing previously were soiled with mud and sweat, and all the rest of our clothes had sunk in a lake when our plane had crashed into it a few days earlier. Unfortunately, the resort gift shop had been our only option for new outfits.

“What does the key open?” I asked Murray, trying to sound as professional as possible.

“A lock, obviously,” he replied. “It’s a key. Duh.”

“I know that. I meant *which* lock?”

“Oh. Sorry. You should have been more specific.” Murray grinned broadly, then said, “I don’t know.”

I fought the urge to leap across the table and forcibly wipe that grin off Murray’s face. Despite having been at the Academy of Espionage for a little more than a year, I wasn’t

very skilled at physical combat, but I was pretty sure that I could defeat Murray. Murray wasn't much of a fighter either. Like me, his strength was his brains.

At fourteen, Murray was only a year older than me, but he had already been a part of several devious plots with SPYDER. He had originally been a spy school student like me, lasting only a year before SPYDER corrupted him with the lure of easy money and power. Over the next fourteen months, he had become my nemesis, cropping up in one evil plan after another. However, SPYDER had recently betrayed him, trying to kill him along with me on our flight to Mexico. Now he wanted to destroy them; he was the one who had brought the key to our attention in the first place.

Unfortunately, Murray wasn't the slightest bit trustworthy. Despite how upset he was at SPYDER for double-crossing him, he had double-crossed me plenty of times. I was quite sure that no matter how much he claimed to want to bring SPYDER down, he was really only looking out for himself. He had spent the last few hours negotiating his own freedom in exchange for helping us—and now he appeared to have no actual help to give.

In the seat beside me, Zoe Zibbell tensed in anger. A fellow second-year student like myself—and one of my closest friends at the academy—she had even less patience for Murray

than I did. “There must be two billion locks in the world,” she said. “And you’re telling us you don’t have any idea which one this key opens?”

“Nope,” Murray said pleasantly. “But Joshua Hallal probably does. After all, it was *his* key.”

“Joshua is unconscious,” I reminded Murray.

“I’m sure he’ll come around sooner or later. It’s not like he’s in a coma or anything,” Murray said, then thought to ask, “Is he?”

I looked to Zoe, unsure what the answer to this was myself. She shrugged in return.

Joshua Hallal was currently in the infirmary at the Aquarius Family Resort and Spa, a sprawling beachside hotel complex on the eastern edge of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. At seventeen, he was even more devious and evil than Murray and had thus been the youngest member of SPYDER’s elite leadership. Like Murray, he had also started as a spy school student before switching sides; unlike Murray, he had been an extremely good spy school student, regarded as one of the best in his class. His defection had been a great shock. Unfortunately for Joshua, being evil hadn’t been as lucrative as he’d hoped—due to my friends and me thwarting SPYDER’s evil schemes—and it had taken a serious toll on his body; in a previous battle with us, Joshua had lost an arm, a leg, and an eye. His limbs had been replaced with

extremely high-tech robotic versions, while the missing eye was covered with a patch, all of which left him looking like a cyborg pirate.

Things had gotten even worse for Joshua that morning. The other leaders of SPYDER had left him behind when they fled, and in the process of attacking us, Joshua had fallen into a very large sinkhole and shattered his remaining arm and leg. The resulting pain had been so severe that he had lost consciousness, and he had remained that way through the ensuing hours while he had been rescued and doctors had placed his remaining limbs in casts.

Cyrus Hale, the expert spy who was our mission leader, was standing guard over Joshua in the infirmary, ready to interrogate him the moment he woke up.

“All right,” I said to Murray. “Let’s forget about what the key opens for now. This morning you said you would explain how to defeat SPYDER with it. So why don’t you do that?”

“Do you mind if we order something to eat first?” Murray asked. “I’m famished.”

“You’re not getting anything to eat until you talk,” Zoe said, with surprising menace for a girl who was less than five feet tall. Zoe didn’t look dangerous, but she had excelled in her self-defense classes lately.

“Starving people is torture,” Murray told her. “And torture is against the Geneva convention.”

“You’re not starving,” Zoe informed him. “It’s been ten minutes since you last ate. You cleaned out the entire mini-bar!”

“I get hungry when I’m stressed,” Murray replied. “And turning in evidence on an organization like SPYDER is extremely stressful. They’ll want me dead for this.”

“They already want you dead,” I told him.

“Oh. Right. Maybe *that’s* why I’m so stressed.” Murray searched the folds of his shirt, as though hoping to find an overlooked morsel of food in them. To my surprise—and his delight—he did. “Hey! Look at this! A rogue Skittle!” He popped it in his mouth.

For most of the time I had known him, Murray had the least healthy eating habits of anyone I had ever met. More than half of his diet had been bacon. However, over the previous month, he had been incarcerated at spy school and forced to eat nothing but health food, and he had become impressively lean and fit as a result. That had all gone out the window since our arrival in Mexico. Murray had quickly reverted back to his old diet. In the last hour alone, he had eaten at least a pound of Skittles, fourteen other assorted candy bars, six bags of chips, eight cans of soda, and a plate of leftover room service nachos. Even though the nachos were at least two days old and the cheese on them had congealed so badly it appeared to be bulletproof.

Thus Murray's recently toned body was decaying at a startling rate. His posture was slumped, he had sprouted a second chin, and his belly now bulged pregnantly.

"Come on, Murray," I said. "The sooner you open up, the sooner you can eat. We'll order anything you want from room service. I hear their BLT is incredible." I waved a room service menu tauntingly in front of his eyes.

This was a lie of my own. The resort wasn't about to send any room service at all to the penthouse suite. The management was very angry at us for destroying a good portion of the penthouse and the resort's water park while in pursuit of the SPYDER agents and was demanding several million dollars in damages and unpaid bills. Cyrus Hale had argued that the resort itself was at fault for renting out its penthouse to an evil organization in the first place and that he had half a mind to arrest the entire management team. That hadn't gone over very well, and now the Mexican police were trying to sort everything out. In the meantime, all room service and maid service had been canceled.

But Murray didn't know that. So he cracked. "Okay," he said. "But you have to understand, I only have a guess as to what the key does. I'm not one hundred percent sure."

"Spill it," Zoe said.

"As I'm sure you know, SPYDER is a tricky organization to work for," Murray explained. "There's no honor among

thieves, and everyone is always worried about someone else stabbing them in the back. Literally. Even Mr. E, the head of the whole shebang, is worried about it. That's why he keeps his identity such a secret. Almost no one there has ever even seen him. I certainly haven't."

"The members of SPYDER don't even know who their own boss is?" I asked, incredulous.

"Nope. He always wears a mask—if he shows up for the meetings at all. Most of the time, he talks to us on the phone—and when he does that, he uses a voice modulator. No one knows squat about the guy: who he is, where he lives, where he came from . . . with one exception." Murray leaned across the table, excited by his own story. "There were always rumors that Joshua Hallal had figured this stuff out—that he had the real skinny on Mr. E—and that he was using it as leverage in the organization."

"You mean he was blackmailing his own boss?" Zoe asked.

"In a sense. If you think about it, it does explain some things. Like how someone as young as Joshua got to be in charge of so much. Yeah, he was evil and all, but there are people who were a lot more evil than him who didn't get promoted nearly as fast. Like the one guy who tried to blow up his own friend in an attempt to assassinate the president of the United States *and* get control of the entire US nuclear arsenal."

“That was you,” I said.

“I know!” Murray exclaimed. “That was exceptionally evil! You think Joshua Hallal could have come up with something that exquisitely wicked? No way. So did *I* get a promotion for it? No. I got a price on my head.”

“I’m also not your friend,” I pointed out.

“You were once.” Murray checked the folds of his shirt, hoping to find more escaped Skittles, but came up dry. “Anyhow, point is, everyone at SPYDER figured Joshua must have some serious dirt on Mr. E. Now, if *I* had access to that kind of information, I’d put it somewhere safe. Somewhere I knew Mr. E wouldn’t be able to find it—and yet somewhere others could still access it with my permission. And then I’d set up some sort of fail-safe system. Like a computer program that will disseminate the information unless I enter a code every day. Then I’d say to Mr. E, ‘If you ever kill me, then I’ll fail to enter that code. And when that happens, e-mails will go out to the heads of every spy and law enforcement agency on earth, directing them to the exact location where I’ve stored all the info on you, and within twenty-four hours, you and your entire organization will be destroyed.’”

“So you think that’s what Joshua set up?” Zoe asked. “You think this key provides access to all the information we need to bring SPYDER down?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I think.” Murray was a

consummate liar, but because of this I had a very good sense of when he was telling the truth. He appeared to be doing that now.

Even so, I wanted confirmation. I leaned close to Zoe and whispered, “What do you think?”

“I think this is legit,” she whispered back. Her big round eyes were alive with excitement.

She had showered after our slog through the jungle in pursuit of Joshua Hallal that morning. In our close proximity, she smelled wonderfully of lemon verbena hotel shampoo.

The thought occurred to me—as it had quite often lately—that Zoe was much more attractive than I had realized. I pulled away from her quickly, before I did anything awkward, and then realized that pulling away from her quickly was awkward itself. “We should tell the others,” I said.

“Why don’t you do that?” Zoe picked the silver key up off the table and scrutinized it closely. “Maybe I can find some clues as to where this goes.” She then shifted her gaze to Murray. “Plus, I’m not letting this weasel out of my sight.”

“You can just admit you have a crush on me,” Murray taunted. “You don’t have to make excuses.”

“Ick.” Zoe looked physically ill at the thought of having a crush on Murray. “It’s because I don’t trust you, you slimeball.”

I got up and left the dining room, heading through the

penthouse suite in search of the rest of my team.

There were only seven of us on Operation Screaming Vengeance, and four of us hadn't even graduated from spy school yet. It was a woefully small force to be going up against an organization like SPYDER, which was so powerful and secretive, we really didn't even know how big it was. And yet we had little choice: SPYDER had turned so many agents inside the CIA, we couldn't trust our own agency anymore.

Despite this, at least one of the spies-to-be on our team was as talented and gifted as any adult in the CIA. Erica Hale was only two years older than me, but she was a legacy in the spy game: Her family could trace its lineage back all the way to Nathan Hale in the American Revolution, and her grandfather was Cyrus, the man in charge of our operation. Cyrus had been training Erica to be a spy since she was a toddler, and she had excelled under his tutelage. If Erica hadn't been my partner on all our missions, I would have died several times over.

So I went to see her first. Partly this was because I trusted her the most, and partly it was because I wanted to impress her with what I had learned from Murray. Erica and I had a complicated relationship; I knew she liked me, but she had been taught from an early age that friendships were liabilities in the spy game. And thus, romances were simply a very bad idea. I was trying to convince her that friendships could be

assets—and that romance might be even better—with mixed results. In the midst of a mission, Erica tended to be as business oriented and emotionless as a filing cabinet, but I desperately wanted affirmation from her anyhow.

Erica was a few doors down from the dining room, in the master bedroom, interrogating another spy my age.

This was Ashley Sparks, a SPYDER agent-in-training. Ashley had once been a promising young gymnast for the United States, but after missing the cut for the Olympic team by a hundredth of a point (and a questionable call by a judge) she had turned to evil. Ashley had a habit of combining two words into one, like “swawesome” (sweet plus awesome) or “jidiot” (jerk plus idiot)—which was the one she used to describe me and my team the most.

“I’m not telling you jidiots anything,” I heard her say through the bedroom door. “I don’t care what you do to me.”

“Really?” Erica responded. “Let’s put that to the test.”

I figured Erica was bluffing, but I wasn’t completely sure, so I hurriedly entered the room without knocking.

Ashley was seated in a chair with her wrists bound behind her back. She wore her usual outfit, a spangled gymnastics leotard, and had on glittery eye shadow. Except for the scowl on her face, she didn’t look like someone who worked for the most evil organization on earth.

Erica stood before her, wearing her usual outfit as well, a

sleek and stylish black unitard with a white utility belt. She was holding a small blowtorch.

“Erica!” I exclaimed. “We’re not supposed to torture the prisoners.”

Erica frowned at me like I had just told her Christmas had been canceled. “She just said she didn’t care what I do to her.”

“I think that was a figure of speech.” I turned to Ashley and said, “Hi.” Even though she was evil, it seemed like the polite thing to do.

“Get bent, ferd,” Ashley said.

I looked to Erica, confused. “Failure plus nerd?”

“Freak plus nerd, you jidiot,” Ashley said.

“Watch the attitude,” Erica warned her, “or I’ll charbroil your kneecaps.”

“There’s no torturing!” I said again. “It’s against the law.”

“We’re in Mexico, not America,” Erica pointed out. “US law doesn’t apply here.” She stepped toward Ashley and fired up the blowtorch. A lick of blue flame burst from the tip.

Ashley’s bravado faded slightly. Beads of sweat formed on her upper lip.

“I know what the key does!” I said quickly, before Erica could fricassee any parts of Ashley’s body. “You don’t have to use that!”

Erica flipped off the blowtorch, looking disappointed.

We stepped to the side, and I relayed what Murray had told me. As I spoke, her annoyance faded and she became more and more intrigued.

“Very interesting,” she said when I was done. “Of course, we still need to know where the key goes.”

“Joshua’s the one who would know that. Maybe we should check in with your grandfather.”

“Good idea.” Erica set the blowtorch down and looked to Ashley. “We’re not done here,” she warned, then led me out of the bedroom.

“You were only bluffing with that, right?” I asked, once we were out of range for Ashley to hear us.

“You think she’d hesitate to use that if the tables were turned?” Erica asked.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said.

“You didn’t answer mine, either.”

I frowned, unsure what I believed Ashley would do. She and I had once been friends, back when I had been sent to infiltrate SPYDER’s evil spy school. When Ashley learned I was working for the good guys, she felt I’d betrayed her, and she’d hated me ever since.

We passed another bedroom. Inside, I could hear another interrogation going on. Mike Brezinski, my closest friend from growing up and the newest recruit to spy school, was trying to get information from Warren Reeves, the newest

recruit to SPYDER. Warren had defected from spy school, where he had been exceptional at camouflage and minimally talented at everything else.

“Stop playing dumb with me,” Mike warned. “Tell me everything you know about the leaders of SPYDER.”

“I don’t know anything,” Warren said defiantly. “Ask anyone. My mind is completely empty.” It took a moment for what he’d said to sink in. “Wait a minute. That’s not what I meant. . . .”

We passed two more bedrooms, the doors of which had been hastily modified so that they could be locked from the outside, turning the rooms into makeshift prison cells. Paul Lee and Vladimir Gorsky, two of the world’s most successful illegal arms dealers, were in those rooms. No one had gotten around to interrogating either of them yet.

“Did Ashley give you any information about the leaders of SPYDER?” I asked.

Erica shook her head. “She says she never met them.”

“But she and Warren went to their yacht and were there for hours. . . .”

“The leaders were on a different deck. Ashley and Warren weren’t allowed to access it. They only communicated through written notes, which were all burned afterward. Mr. E doesn’t communicate electronically. No e-mail. No texts. No cell phone calls. So all messages are completely untraceable.”

We passed through the kitchen, which had taken a beating. Erica had fought off four of SPYDER's henchmen in it a few nights before, using every appliance at her disposal. Erica was a formidable opponent. Most of the pans had skull-size dents in them, and a waffle iron was still embedded in the wall.

Three of the henchmen were now out on the deck, bound to patio chairs; the fourth, Dane Brammage, the biggest and most dangerous, was also in the infirmary. He had suffered a severe concussion when a waterslide had collapsed on his head while he was pursuing us earlier that morning.

Erica's parents were in charge of questioning the henchmen. However, that's not what they appeared to be doing.

Erica's father (and Cyrus's son) was Alexander Hale, who until recently had been regarded as one of the finest spies at the CIA. Then it had been revealed that his entire career was built on lies. Alexander was really only good at two things: making himself sound good and taking credit for other people's work. Despite lacking competence, though, he still meant well and tried his best.

Erica's mother was Catherine Hale, who would have been regarded as one of the finest spies at Britain's MI6, except for the fact that almost no one on earth knew she was actually a spy. She was that good. Most people thought she was simply an exceptionally enthusiastic museum curator—including Alexander Hale, until that very morning.

The Hales had been divorced for a few years, but Alexander had still been very upset to discover that his wife had been lying to him about what she did for their entire lives—even though, as a fellow spy, he should have been lying to her about what he did as well. He hadn't been able to let go of this all morning.

"I can't believe you weren't honest with me!" he exclaimed. Alexander was wearing a bespoke three-piece suit, and he would have looked impressive in it anywhere but the tropics. In the scorching heat and humidity, he was soaked in sweat.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Alexander," Catherine said. Even though she was obviously exasperated, her melodious British accent made her sound happy and cheerful. "When were you ever honest with me?"

"That was different!" Alexander protested. "When I lied to you, it was for the good of the United States."

"Well, when I lied to you, it was for the sake of England."

"That's not as important as lying for the United States. America is more important than England."

Catherine wheeled on Alexander, fire in her eyes. "Do not make this argument about which country is better," she warned. "If you do, I will crush you."

The three henchmen looked to Erica and me helplessly. It appeared that they would have all been happier being

tortured than listening to Alexander and Catherine bicker any longer.

Erica didn't seem to want to hear it anymore either, because she quickly interrupted. "Ben got some information about what the key goes to."

Catherine and Alexander turned to her, looking embarrassed about being caught in midargument. Catherine's anger immediately dissipated. "That's wonderful, Benjamin!" she trilled. "What did you learn?"

Before I could launch into the explanation again, Erica's phone sounded an alarm. Erica immediately grew worried—which was of great concern to me, because Erica almost *never* looked worried. Anything that could shake her was most likely extremely bad news.

"That's Grandpa's emergency signal!" she exclaimed, then spun on her heel and raced back the way we had come. I followed her, as did Catherine. Alexander attempted to follow us, but he first tried to dramatically slap a clip of ammunition into his gun and dropped it. The bullets scattered all over the rooftop patio, and Alexander promptly slipped on them and landed flat on his back, groaning in pain.

The Hale women and I left him behind. After several missions with Alexander, I knew we were probably better off without him. We raced back through the penthouse suite, then down the emergency staircase. Erica and Catherine

were both in exceptionally good shape. It took everything I had to keep up, while neither of them seemed the slightest bit out of breath.

The whole way, Erica kept trying to call her grandfather, but there was no answer. This worried Erica more, which made me worried as well.

We finally reached the ground floor and charged out of the stairwell and into the main building at the resort. The infirmary was a small room just off the lobby. There wasn't much to it: two examination tables, a closet full of medication, and a few chairs. The doctors at the resort mostly treated minor tourist issues like sunburn and traveler's gastrointestinal distress.

The Hales and I froze in shock at the sight that greeted us.

A great struggle had obviously taken place. The furniture had all been overturned and broken. The pharmacy had been looted. Three people lay unconscious on the floor: the doctor, a nurse—and Cyrus Hale. Cyrus's phone was clutched in his hand. Sending the alarm code to Erica had probably been his last act before passing out.

Joshua Hallal and Dane Brammage were gone.