

CHAPTER ONE

JACK FENTON STOOD STRUCK DUMB, HIS EYES

wide and staring, refusing to believe what he was looking at. *They'd changed it. When had they done that? Why?*

He hurried to the door and leant in for a closer look. The old padlock was gone, replaced by a sophisticated key-code. The numbers glowed, mocking him, daring him to try them out. *Step right up, step right up*, they said. *See if Lady Luck's smiling. Give it a shot, you never know. . .* But he *did* know. It was his job to know stuff like that. Even if it only needed a four-digit code, that meant ten thousand possible combinations.

Ten. Thousand.

He sighed, and deep in the pit of his stomach, Jack felt a twinge of self-doubt. Three months of planning wasted. How had he overlooked something

so simple? He cursed himself for not giving the place a final check the night before, but how was he supposed to guess something like this? And he still came back to the same question: why had they changed the lock? It made no sense.

He swore under his breath. Now he'd have to –

'What are you doing?' a deep voice boomed.

Jack wheeled round.

Standing further down the alleyway was a security guard.

Where had he come from?

Jack didn't bother to make a run for it. He knew a three-metre-high wall blocked the other end of the alley. The only way out of there was through a locked door or past the security guard.

Brilliant.

The guard's right hand moved to his hip. In the darkness, Jack couldn't tell if he was reaching for a torch or a radio.

'You gonna answer me?' the guard said. 'What are you doing 'ere?'

Jack's mind raced. Should he make up a story? Say something that would get him out of this mess? Perhaps he could distract the guard long enough –
Jack shook himself.

No. Stick to the plan. Always stick to the plan.

The guard unclipped something from his belt.

Jack squinted. Was that . . . a gun?

The guard moved into the light and Jack took an involuntary step back.

Yep, a gun. *Definitely* a gun.

The guard planted his feet shoulder-width apart, gripped the pistol with both hands and pointed it at what Jack could only assume was his head.

Jack's eyes widened in disbelief. The guy was going to shoot a fifteen-year-old boy? *Seriously?*

This was London not Afghanistan. What was he doing with a gun anyway? He was just a security guard.

'Move away from the door,' the guard demanded in a voice that sounded like it was straight out of a film, 'and walk towards me. *Slowly.*'

Jack raised his hands and took a step forward. 'Now would be good,' he breathed through the corner of his mouth into the wireless headset. 'Plan B. In your own time, Charlie.'

As if on cue, a hooded figure dressed all in black sprinted up the alleyway and slid to a halt behind the guard, who started to turn. But he was too slow – there was a sudden crack as Charlie jabbed a stun gun into his side.

The guard went rigid as electricity coursed through his body.

Jack winced. *That had to hurt.*

Charlie pulled the stun gun from the guard's side and, for a moment, neither of them moved.

The guard's arms hung limp. His eyes were vacant and glazed. The pistol slipped from his fingers and clattered to the tarmac.

Charlie kicked the gun away and jabbed him again, this time in the belly. Another crack of electricity sent the guard sprawling backwards. He smacked his head on the concrete and fell unconscious.

Charlie pulled off her hood and lowered the bandana from her nose and mouth. She had long dark hair tied in a ponytail and her bright jade eyes almost glowed in the darkness.

She looked down at the unconscious guard. 'Tough one, wasn't he?'

'Is he dead?'

Charlie knelt down and felt the guard's neck for a pulse. 'Nah, he's alive.'

Eyeing the homemade stun gun in Charlie's hand, Jack made a mental note not to get on the wrong side of her.

Ever.

She was a couple of months younger than he was, and the toughest girl he'd ever met, probably the toughest street kid in London.

Yep, it was good to have her on your side.

Charlie slipped the stun gun into her jacket's inside pocket, grabbed the guard under the arms and looked at Jack. 'Help me with him then.'

Jack ran over, took his legs, and – with a lot of effort – they half carried, half dragged his lifeless form behind a skip and out of sight.

Jack straightened and let out a breath. 'Thank God for Plan B.'

'Yeah, about that,' Charlie glanced around. 'Why are we on Plan B already? A little early to give up on Plan A, don't ya think?'

Jack pointed at the door. 'See for yourself.'

The two of them hurried over.

Charlie examined the keypad, a slight crease furrowing her brow. 'Why did they change it?'

'Exactly what I was wondering.' Jack looked up. The building's first couple of floors were empty. Insurance brokers and telesales companies occupied the rest, and they had individual security on each floor, so no reason to change anything. Besides, what was there to nick?

Charlie unclipped a long hip bag from her thigh, set it on the ground and rummaged inside. Finally, she found what she was looking for – a black box eight centimetres on each side with a digital readout.

With a small screwdriver, Charlie unfastened the front of the keypad, exposing the circuitry behind. ‘Hold this.’ She handed Jack the black box and unrolled two wires: one red, one grey. She fixed the grey one to the case of the keypad and held the other ready. The concentration on her face was intense. Her lips moved silently as her eyes followed the paths of the circuit.

Jack stayed as still as possible, hardly breathing, not wanting to break her concentration. If Charlie couldn’t get them out of this mess then – well, they were in deep trouble.

Finally, Charlie touched the red wire to a terminal inside. ‘Hit the button.’

Jack pressed the trigger on the top of the box and the display sprang to life. Numbers scrolled. He glanced around. They were still alone in the alley, but the sooner they got inside, the better.

He looked back at the readout. The numbers moved in a blur, almost too quickly to see. Ten

thousand combinations, right there. He was about to ask how long it would take when there was a click.

Charlie grabbed the handle, pushed and the door swung open.

Jack squinted as fluorescent light spilled into the alleyway, casting their shadows on the opposite wall. 'You're amazing,' he said, handing the box back to her.

Charlie dropped it into her bag and strode into the building. 'I know.'

Jack smiled as he followed her inside.



On the rooftop, twenty storeys up, they lay flat on their backs, catching their breath.

After a few moments, Jack turned to Charlie. 'Ready?' She nodded. 'OK, let's do this.'

They rolled on to their fronts and peered over the wall. From their vantage point, they had a clear view of the entire south face of the Millbarn building.

Jack took out a pair of mini binoculars from his pocket and surveyed the street below. It was late and most people had already gone home, which meant their target would be easy to spot.

Jack lowered the binoculars and watched Charlie as she removed a small tripod from her hip bag and

set it up. Then she carefully slid out two black telescopic tubes – each five centimetres in diameter, and extending to sixty centimetres long. With infinite care, Charlie then screwed the ends together – making one long tube – and clipped it to the top of the tripod. Last, she connected a bunch of wires to the back.

Jack took out a netbook from his own hip bag, turned it on and slid it over to her. Charlie connected the other end of the wires to the USB ports and ran a quick diagnostic. The optics inside the tube were aligned and calibrated.

It had taken her months to build the sophisticated telescope and, as always, she'd done a brilliant job. The camera itself – a high-resolution CCD – had cost them a fortune, but it was money well spent.

Well, at least Jack hoped so.

An image of the building opposite sprang up on the netbook's display. Charlie used the trackpad and arrow keys to zoom in on the tenth floor, far-right corner.

The light was on in the office. At that moment, as far as Jack could tell, the room was empty. There were several blind spots, so he had no way to be sure.

They could see the back of an LCD monitor sitting on a desk, and the edge of a keyboard underneath. A Lowry painting hung on the far wall, its stick figures walking towards a factory with tall chimneys that billowed smoke into a darkened sky. Jack wondered if it was a fake, but knowing their target, it was the real thing.

Underneath the painting was a shelf, and on the shelf was a chrome vase filled with dried flowers.

Good. Nothing had moved since their recon.

'Ready?' Charlie said.

Jack nodded and held his breath. This was the most dangerous part of the mission and presented the greatest chance of them drawing attention to themselves.

Charlie hit the Enter key.

A green laser beam shot from the end of the customised telescope and hit the chrome vase in the office. The light scanned up and down, each pass taking three seconds. The returned measurement data from the laser scrolled down the left side of the netbook display and, after an agonising ten passes, the laser shut down.

Scan complete, the netbook declared.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. The second part of the plan had gone without a hitch. They now had the exact dimensions of the vase.

He looked at his watch: eight twenty. Which meant they had ten minutes to wait. He pressed a finger to his ear and spoke quietly into the mic of his headset. 'Obi, everything good?'

'It's *Commander Obi*,' came the reply.

Charlie snickered.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Not that again.'

Obi was back at their headquarters, monitoring all the CCTV cameras in the area. He continued, 'I think my title should be *Mission Commander*. Just saying.'

'You're a year younger than us,' Jack said. 'You can't be Commander.' Charlie was still giggling. Jack shot her an exasperated look and said to Obi, 'Just tell me if everything is OK.'

'Running hot,' came the confident reply. There was a short pause, then Obi said, 'We'll talk about it when you get back. *Commander Obi*, out.'

Jack let out a controlled breath. He'd gone over it a thousand times with all of them – if they messed about, they'd get caught. That simple.

Annoyed, he refocused his binoculars on the building opposite.

The office at the centre of their attention was owned by Millbarn Associates, a group of accountants that worked for large corporate companies. Millbarn had an impressive list of clients but what they were unaware of was that their star employee – fifty-three-year-old Richard Hardy – was a crook.

Hardy's gift was the movement of money. Illegal money. Leaving no trail.

Well, almost no trail.

Jack had read an anonymous message on one of the internet hacking forums, which in turn led him to find the electronic footprints. The path of dirty money was faint but that's what had guided them to this moment. *This* rooftop.

Richard Hardy's most important client was a man called Benito Del Sarto and Jack's probing had revealed that – on the surface – Del Sarto was a successful businessman with his fingers in many pies, ranging from oil to clothing imports.

But that wasn't all. Del Sarto was also one of the country's biggest arms traffickers. He supplied sixty per cent of the UK's illegal weapons. Jack's eyes had almost popped from his skull when he'd

discovered that nugget of information. But guns weren't Jack's main concern right now – it was something else that he wanted from Del Sarto.

All he and Charlie had to do was get Hardy's user-name and password.

Jack and the others had spent months planning, following people, checking out the local area. He'd thought of every possible eventuality in excruciating detail. That was *his* gift. His curse.

'Jack,' Charlie hissed, breaking his thoughts.

He pressed the binoculars back to his eyes and returned his attention to the street below. Next to the building's entrance was a ten-year-old street kid. Her clothes were torn and dirty. She wore a tatty coat with the hood up, a blue scarf and woollen gloves. She hugged herself and rocked from side to side, trying to keep warm.

Occasionally she'd hold out her hands to passers-by, but they didn't even bother to glance in her direction. They knew she was there. Of course they did. They always knew. They'd learnt to block people like her out. The homeless. The destitute.

Jack looked at Charlie.

She had her own pair of pocket binoculars pressed to her eyes. 'Oh, no.'

'What?' Jack said.

Charlie pointed. 'He's early.'

Jack's stomach knotted, and he hoped Slink would be ready in time. He looked back at the street and watched their target march to the Millbarn building.

Richard Hardy had short brown hair and was clean-shaven. He wore a black tailored suit and a red silk tie. On his wrist was a Rolex President watch, eighteen-carat gold, encrusted with thirty carats of diamonds. Lastly, Jack's eyes moved to Richard's shoes. Tanino Crisci. Bespoke. Black leather. Expensive.

Rich git.

Hardy walked with his nose in the air. Even his stride was arrogant.

He was a few metres away from the entrance when the homeless girl stepped in front of him. She said something and held out her gloved hands. Hardy flinched and tried to walk around her but the girl mirrored his move, blocking his path. Large pleading eyes. Hands still outstretched.

Hardy huffed his annoyance, obviously realising the girl wasn't going to go away. He reluctantly fished in his pocket, pulled out a coin and tossed it into the girl's waiting hands.

Her eyes lit up and she beamed at him.

Hardy hurried past her and pushed through the glass doors without a backward glance.

Jack refocused his binocular sights on the girl as she ran down the street and then stopped in a narrow alleyway opposite. She held the coin in her gloved fingers, as if it were a precious artefact. With her other hand, she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out an object that looked something like a calculator.

The girl pressed a button and a white band of light appeared above the narrow display. She waved the device over the coin a few times, then looked directly up at Jack and Charlie. 'Got it?' her small voice asked in Jack's earpiece.

Charlie set to work, and a few clicks later the image of the coin appeared on the netbook screen. 'Applying filters.' The picture changed colour, went from positive to negative, and the unmistakable lines of Richard Hardy's fingerprint emerged. Charlie grinned and said into her mic, 'Got it. Good job.'

The girl, Wren, beamed up at them. 'Thanks.'

'Go to the meeting point like we said, OK?'

'OK.' Wren turned and skipped down the alleyway, disappearing into the darkness.

Jack scanned the building opposite with the binoculars. 'Phase three,' he muttered. A full sixty seconds passed but there was no sign of him. 'Where is he? We're running out of time.' Jack looked at Charlie and she shrugged. 'Obi, patch us in to Slink.'

A sudden blast of deafening noise made Jack cry out in pain. Dubstep blasted his eardrums and he cupped his hand over the microphone, '*Slink.*' The music dropped a few decibels and he heard Slink's distinctive chuckle. Slink loved dubstep – something Jack would never understand. The screech, grind and whistles made no sense, didn't even resemble real music. Perhaps you just had to be twelve years old to get it. 'Where are you?' Jack asked.

'Almost there.' Slink's voice didn't even sound out of breath.

Jack moved the binoculars up the facade of the Millbarn building, and a few floors from the top he spotted him.

Slink was dressed all in black and, legs and arms spread wide, he shimmied up the window frames like a spider. He was at least sixty metres off the ground and holding on by nothing more than his fingertips and the grip of his shoes. After a

heart-stopping couple of minutes, Slink finally grabbed the ledge at the top of the building, and hauled himself on to the roof.

Jack let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding. 'You need to hurry, Slink. Hardy is early.'

Slink looked around for a second. 'Terrific.' He crouched low and – like a bullet – darted across the rooftop. He sprang over a protruding air vent, vaulted a low wall and slid to a stop in front of a door.

He pulled a flat wallet from his pocket and unzipped it. Inside was a selection of picks. He removed two and set to work on the door's lock.

Jack lowered the binoculars. 'Where's Hardy?' he asked Obi. There was no reply. 'Obi?'

'In the lift.'

'How long before he reaches his office?'

There was another short pause. 'Hmm, I'd say two minutes tops.'

Jack put his hand over his microphone and looked at Charlie. 'Is that long enough?'

She peered through her binoculars at the opposite roof. 'How are you doing, Slink?'

Slink grunted. 'It won't work.' He was raking the

lock with one of the picks while using a torsion wrench to apply pressure.

'You can do it,' Charlie said. 'Just like I showed you, remember?'

'I can't – It won't –' There was a snapping sound. 'No. It broke.'

'There's a spare in the case,' Charlie said, her voice strained but trying to keep calm.

'Sixty seconds.'

Slink fumbled another pick from the case and started raking the lock again.

Jack felt his chest tighten, but he knew his anxiety must be mild compared to what Slink was feeling right at that moment. If he failed to get that door open . . . *Game Over*.

'No, no, no.'

'Stop,' Charlie said.

'What?'

'I said stop, Slink.'

Jack lowered the binoculars and stared at her. 'What are you doing?' Time was almost out.

Charlie ignored him. 'Slink, just trust me.'

Obi said, 'Thirty seconds.'

Jack swore under his breath and raised the binoculars.

Beads of sweat stood out from Slink's forehead. He pulled the pick from the lock, stepped back and wiped his brow with a sleeve.

'Close your eyes,' Charlie said. 'Deep breaths.'

Jack heard Slink pull in a lungful of air. And another. Without thinking, Jack breathed with him.

'Hardy's twenty seconds out,' Obi said. 'What are you guys doing?'

'Zip it, Obi,' Charlie hissed. 'You're not helping.' She composed herself. 'Ready, Slink?'

Slink opened his eyes, stepped to the door and slid the picks into the lock.

'Fifteen seconds.'

Jack heard the click in his ear as the lock released.

Slink threw open the door, reached into his back pocket, pulled out a u-shaped device and hurried inside.

'Ten . . . Five . . .'

Slink said, '*Done.*'

Charlie grinned and slid the netbook to Jack.

A window popped up and a stream of numbers scrolled down the screen. The device Slink had just planted in the network control box was tapping directly into the building's computers. Anything they

did now, the system would think was coming from Hardy's computer.

Slink couldn't have put it there any earlier because when the system detected a drop in network signal it automatically called the engineer. Leaving it to the last minute bought them time. They had twenty minutes to get what they wanted before the engineer arrived, found out what was going on, and the alarms sounded.

Jack switched to the live video feed of Hardy's office. Sure enough, Richard Hardy entered and sat at his desk, facing the window. He had a pompous expression and Jack wanted to see it wiped off his smug face.

When Charlie had explained how the hardware worked, Jack was not only amazed by her knowledge, but by the fact that she could build such a device.

In order to see Richard Hardy's computer screen – which faced away from the window – Charlie had built a custom telescope. It captured precise laser measurements of the chrome vase and combined these with a high-resolution image of the reflection from the vase. Together they created a flat picture of the room, as though they'd placed a mirror behind Richard Hardy.

Charlie adjusted the telescope, zooming in as far as the optics would allow. Jack let out a breath as the software compensated with no errors. They now had a clear view of the keyboard and monitor over Hardy's shoulder. Everything they needed.

A login screen appeared on Hardy's computer display and Jack hit the Record button. Hardy first typed his username and then his password. Last, he pressed his finger on a biometric scanner.

Jack stopped the recording and played it back. The telescope had captured every keystroke. He pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and connected it to the netbook. In another window, he brought up the same screen Hardy was now using and mimicked the keystrokes.

Username: **BLUE STRIKE**. Password: **DOLLAR**.

A new box popped up.

Biometric authentication required.

A cursor blinked.

Jack grabbed the image of Hardy's fingerprint and copied it across.

Authorised.

Jack waited, his own finger hovering over the Enter key. He had to be patient.

After what seemed an eternity, Hardy finally logged off and left the office.

'Thanks for all your help, idiot,' Jack muttered, and he set to work. The bank account page flashed up and he looked at the balance: two million, three hundred thousand.

The money would've only been in the account a few days but that was an eternity because Jack needed less than a minute. He clicked the transactions tab, entered sort codes, account numbers, and left the reference name field blank.

He smiled when it was time to type in the amounts to transfer: one million and then fifty thousand. He was about to hit the Enter key when Charlie grabbed the netbook from him.

'We can't take that much, Jack. It's greedy.' She retyped the amount as one million and one thousand pounds, and hit the Proceed button before Jack had time to argue with her.

The browser returned to the main account page and they rechecked the balance. Hardy and his friend Del Sarto were now over a million pounds lighter.

Jack disconnected the phone, removed the SIM card, snapped it in half, and tossed the pieces off the roof.

Charlie took apart the telescope and put everything back in her hip bag.

For a second, they stared at each other. They'd done it. All the planning had paid off. Another job completed.

Jack cupped his hand over the microphone. 'Slink, get yourself out of there.'

'Already halfway home,' came the reply.

'Er, guys?' Obi's voice sounded anxious.

'What?' Jack said.

'We got a problem. Transferring it now.'

An image filled the netbook screen and it showed a live CCTV view of the alleyway below. A second security guard had found the first and was helping him to his feet. After a hurried conversation, the first guard located his gun and they both ran into the building.

'Oh, great,' Jack said, folding the netbook and sliding it into his hip bag.

Charlie said to Jack, 'Any other exits?' He shook his head. She glanced behind them. 'Only one way then.'

Jack groaned. 'I ever tell you I'm scared of heights?'

'Hey,' Charlie said, clipping her hip bag to her belt, 'it was your idea, remember?' She actually looked excited by the prospect of what was to come.

'Yeah,' Jack said, finding the strap on his own bag and fixing it securely to his leg, 'but I only agreed to do it as a last resort.'

The door to the roof burst open.

'I'd say that's exactly what this is.' Charlie turned, sprinted across the rooftop, and propelled herself off the edge of the building.

The security guards stood motionless, eyes wide, jaws slack.

After a moment, they regained their senses and pointed their guns at Jack.

'Don't you move, kid.'

Without allowing himself time to think, Jack turned and ran as fast as he could.

Deafening shots rang out but it was too late – he leapt on to the ledge of the building and launched himself into nothing but open air.

CHAPTER TWO

A COUPLE OF SECONDS OF FREE FALL WAS NOT enough time to offer a prayer to any God that might be listening. Jack pulled the ripcord and a sudden jolt snapped his head back.

He looked up and was relieved to see the black parachute had deployed with no problems.

Once he'd overcome the immediate relief of still being alive, Jack gripped the steering toggles and looked for Charlie. The cold wind stung his eyes and blurred his vision but he heard her unmistakable squeals of delight coming from the left.

Jack pulled on the toggles and turned in the same direction. He saw Charlie's silhouette glide between the buildings and he followed her through.

Ahead, Jack spotted the park. Judging by their flight path and factoring in the wind, their angle of descent was good – they'd land smack in the centre.

Well, hopefully a gentle touchdown and not so much of a *smack*.

Sirens pierced the night and Jack strained his neck round in time to see the flashing blue lights of several police cars converging behind them. He shouted after Charlie but she didn't hear.

A gust of wind caught Jack's parachute and sent him flying right, heading straight for the side of a building, his reflection growing ever larger.

He let out a shout of panic and yanked on the toggles as hard as he could. At the last split second the parachute swung away, brushing the side of the building, the fabric sliding over the glass. After a few more terrifying seconds, Jack managed to regain control but now he was way off course.

He looked back at the fast-approaching cop cars. They were right behind him now and catching up.

Jack spun to face the front again and gauged the distance from the edge of the park to the landing zone to be around thirty or so metres. The police cars would have to stop at the entrance and go in on foot. He made a quick calculation. That meant they had around sixty seconds to gather their chutes and escape.

Jack tried his headset.

Charlie didn't answer.

He wanted to warn her that they had to be quick, but he needn't have bothered because she kept glancing back, obviously aware the police were on to them too.

She glided over the surrounding tree line of the park and vanished.

Jack raised his legs but it wasn't enough, and his foot snagged a branch. He spun helplessly below the parachute, the cords wrapping around one another. There was a loud snapping sound that made his heart almost stop. Luckily, it was a branch and not his leg.

His jeans caught on another branch and he fell forward, breaking free of the tree but now spiralling out of control. He hit the ground hard, sending a bolt of pain through his knees, up his thighs and into his spine.

Jack rolled to lessen the impact but the damage was already done.

The parachute canopy landed over him and everything went dark.

Breathing heavily, Jack squeezed his eyes shut and fought the urge to cry out in pain. At least he'd made it to the ground alive.

A few seconds later, he heard the screech of tyres as the police cars stopped at the main entrance.

Jack struggled to free his legs but they hurt like mad and were wrapped in the lines. Defeated, he lay back and wondered if Charlie had got away.

He'd just closed his eyes again when he felt something tugging on the parachute cords. There was a tearing sound and the canopy above his head ripped open.

Bleary-eyed, he squinted into the moonlight. 'Charlie? What are you doing?'

'I'm not leaving you.' The glint of a blade flashed as she sliced through the ropes and canopy.

Jack heard the police shouting and tried to shove Charlie off him. 'Go. Get out of here.'

'Shut up,' Charlie snapped. More slicing, and she released his legs.

Jack shrugged out of the harness and Charlie pulled him to his feet. He winced. His legs still hurt but at least they were working. Nothing broken.

Torch beams bounced all around them, flashing as they moved through the trees.

Charlie grabbed Jack's hand and they hurried to the boathouse by the lake. They ducked behind a low wall just as three police officers ran past.

'They're here somewhere,' one of them said, already sounding out of breath.

Jack and Charlie kept still as they waited for them to pass. When he was sure they were far enough away, Jack peered over the wall.

The manhole cover was fifteen metres from them.

Fifteen metres.

They'd never make it.

His eyes darted around the park, searching for another way out. The police had every exit covered and they were now spreading out and systematically searching the grounds.

Trapped.

Jack ducked behind the wall and tried to clear his head, but the pain in his legs kept distracting him. He massaged the muscles and closed his eyes.

'Jack?' Charlie whispered.

'I'm thinking.' In his mind's eye, he imagined the park from above: the railings around the outside, the three entrances, the cop cars and their probable locations, and their goal – the manhole cover. But how to get to it without being seen?

Jack thought about making a run for it but the night was clear, the moon out, not a chance. Especially with his stiff legs. No, what they needed was a

distraction. Something that would at least let Charlie escape.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, he had it.

His eyes snapped open and he looked at Charlie. 'Give me your bag.'

Charlie unclipped the hip bag from her belt and slid it over to him. He unzipped it, rummaged inside and pulled out the telescope. He glanced at Charlie. 'Sorry about this.' He started to unscrew the end.

'Hey,' Charlie hissed, 'what are you doing?'

'Relax. I won't break it.' Though, he couldn't guarantee that. Jack removed the cap and carefully slid out the camera and laser assembly.

He'd watched Charlie build this and knew exactly what he wanted. He unclipped the laser and its battery pack, then he slipped the telescope into the bag and handed it back to Charlie.

Keeping low, Jack peered over the wall. There were four cops to his right, a few metres away. Ahead was an open lawn area, and beyond that was a bench in front of some bushes. That would have to do.

Jack rested the laser on top of the wall and switched it on. He aimed the beam through the slats of the bench and into the bushes.

The green light illuminated the leaves.

Jack glanced at the four cops. They hadn't spotted it yet, so he wagged the light left and right until it finally got their attention. He saw one of the officers point, put a finger to his lips and gesture for them to split up.

Good. They thought it was something glowing in the bushes and not being beamed from a distance away.

The cops moved slowly towards the bushes.

They were as dumb as cats.

Charlie grinned.

When he gauged the police were far enough away, Jack turned off the laser. 'Let's go.'

Charlie helped Jack over the wall and they jogged to the manhole cover.

Jack knelt and heaved it open.

Charlie climbed down the metal ladder inside and Jack followed her. Below, he lowered the cover silently back into place, and dropped beside Charlie as she flicked on her torch. They were now standing in a large brick sewer tunnel. On either side was a narrow walkway.

Jack unclipped his own torch from his belt and switched it on. 'Come on,' he said, wanting to put as

much distance between them and the cops as possible. He was sure they'd be scratching their heads for hours wondering where Jack and Charlie had gone.

As they walked, the only sound came from the soft squelch under their feet. The smell didn't bother either of them any more – they were used to it.

They reached an intersection and went right. Two more lights sparkled in the distance. Jack whistled their code: three musical notes – one short and low, one high, the last a long mid-tone.

The three rapid high chirps in reply signified friends ahead, and Slink and Wren's faces appeared through the gloom.

Wren looked somewhere between anxious and excited. She rocked from side to side, wringing her hands.

'You OK?' Charlie asked her. Wren nodded. Charlie ruffled her blonde locks. 'You were brilliant.'

Wren smiled.

'Let's get out of here,' Jack said. The sooner they were home, the quicker he could rest his screaming muscles and check for any further damage.

'Wait.' Charlie handed Jack her bag and strode off down the right-hand tunnel.

Jack called after her, 'Where are you going?'

'Food.'

'Thank God,' Slink said. 'Obi's been driving me crazy.'

'He's been driving us all crazy,' Jack said, as they headed down the left-hand tunnel with Wren trotting after them.



Twenty minutes later, they were in the tube network standing on Badbury platform – an abandoned underground train station. Paint and plaster peeled off the ceiling in large chunks. The main flight of stairs had disintegrated. Now all that remained were the slots in the wall where the steps had once been.

Dirty tiles covered the rest of the walls, overlaid with faded posters from the nineteen-fifties. Some advertised films that Jack had never heard of, like *Too Many Crooks*, *The Horse's Mouth* and *Some Like It Hot*. Even though Jack had never seen any of the films, he recognised the star of the last one – Marilyn Monroe.

A low rumble signified the approach of a train. It was unlikely anyone would spot them in the dark

but there was still a chance the driver might. They hid behind the pillars and Wren cupped her hands over her ears as the deafening clatter echoed off the walls.

Wind whipped through the tunnel, stirring up rubbish and bringing a warm breeze that stank of oil. The wheels crackled and sparked on the tracks, the bright flashes of light sending strange shadows bouncing around them.

Jack caught glimpses of the passengers as they hurtled by: businessmen and women reading newspapers, students wearing headphones, mothers trying to control their unruly children. They were people with normal, boring lives, unaware Jack and the others existed, oblivious to the hidden world just metres away from them.

Once the train had passed, and it was safe again, Jack, Slink and Wren crossed the tracks. On the other side of the platform was a rusty metal door and its hinges groaned as Slink swung it open.

Beyond the door they walked down a narrow service corridor. When they reached the end, Slink slid back the concertina grille to a wooden lift and stepped inside.

Jack knew it was at least a hundred years old. It

was full of woodworm and so rotten it seemed as though it could fall apart with the slightest touch.

Wren looked uneasily at the lift, then back to Jack. 'Can we go the other way?'

'Not from here.'

She was right though. It didn't look strong enough to carry one of them, let alone three. But Jack and Charlie had checked it out and deemed it to be good enough for them to use. It had a strong metal frame at least.

Wren hadn't come this way before and Jack tried his best to reassure her. 'It's safe, I promise.'

After a few more seconds of hesitation, Wren took a deep breath and got in, cautiously testing the stability of the floor with each step. Finally inside, she gripped Jack's arm. 'Are you definitely sure this thing's safe?'

'*Definitely,*' Jack said with complete conviction, as though the lift was state-of-the-art, with not even the slightest chance of failure. Charlie would've been proud – his lying was getting better.

Slink pulled the grille door across and hit a large green button on the wall.

The lift shuddered violently as it dropped down the shaft.

Wren redoubled her grip on Jack's arm. She was making him nervous now.

They descended for several uneasy minutes and Wren let out a sigh of relief when the lift stopped at the bottom with a reassuring thud.

Slink opened the grille and they followed him out.

A brick archway marked the entrance to the next tunnel and they strode off along it. The air was cold and damp. The sounds of their footfall and dripping water echoed off the stone walls. Dim cone-shaped lights hung from the ceiling, projecting small round spots on the cobbled floor.

At the end they came to a heavy steel door. Paint flaked off its surface and revealed dark golden rust on bare metal. Slink grabbed the large handle and pushed it open. Jack gestured for Wren to go next and the three of them went inside.

They now stood in a narrow room with another door at the far end. This always reminded Jack of an airlock, like they had on spaceships. The red light of a security camera blinked from the top right-hand corner. Slink waved at it and typed a code into a keypad on the wall. The far door slid aside with a hiss of air.

The room beyond was a vast space with brick pillars holding up the ceiling. Apparently, this place had been a secret bunker during the Second World War. It had its own diesel generators and air ventilation to the surface.

The main bunker was divided into four areas. On the right, there was a kitchen with breakfast bar, large American-style fridge, and electric cooker. They even had a sink with running water. Charlie tried to follow the plumbing back to its source once, but had eventually given up. As far as she could tell, it joined with the mains somewhere.

Next to the kitchen was the dining area. Charlie insisted they all sit and eat there at least once a week.

On the left-hand side of the bunker – opposite the kitchen – was the lounge. It had a large LCD TV they'd found dumped, and a DVD player Charlie had rescued from a skip and repaired. Two sofas faced each other and, scattered around the floor, were several beanbags.

Above the TV, stencilled on the wall in foot-high letters were the words *URBAN OUTLAWS* – the name Slink had given their ragtag group. They lived in the city, and tried to get up to no good whenever possible. So, Urban Outlaws kind of fitted somehow.

Next to the lounge was the games area with arcade machines, and opposite that, in the top-right corner of the bunker, was the 'Obi Zone' – a mess of cables and computers. In the middle of the chaos was a modified dentist's chair surrounded by LCD monitors mounted on brackets. Each display showed CCTV images from around London.

Sitting in the chair was Obi himself, a kid so fat that he spilled over the sides. 'Hey.' He looked at each of them in turn. 'Did you get food?'

'No.'

Obi's shoulders slumped.

Unlike the others, Obi's mum and dad had owned some kind of advertising company and were rich. *Very* rich. Well, that was up until their plane crashed. Their bodies were never found.

Obi's uncle became his guardian, took over the family business, and made Obi's life a living nightmare. Eventually, he forced Obi out of the mansion and sent him to the children's home where Jack and Charlie were staying.

At first, he'd been picked on by the other kids because of his size, but Jack and Charlie quickly helped put a stop to that.

Slink headed to the kitchen. 'Want a drink, Jack?'

‘Sure.’ Jack dropped on to one of the sofas with a huge sigh and rubbed his bruised legs.

‘What about you, Wren?’ Slink asked her as she sat at the breakfast bar. ‘We got lemonade.’

Wren nodded and smiled. She was the latest addition to the group. Charlie had found her one night, curled up in a pile of blankets outside a homeless shelter.

Jack had thought that was ironic.

Charlie said Wren had looked like a little bird in a nest. Also, Wren’s real name was Jenny, and Charlie loved anything to do with the Beatles because her dad had played their music all the time. So, Charlie had named her after Paul McCartney’s song ‘Jenny Wren’.

Wren looked up. ‘Why do they call you Obi?’

Obi sat up in his chair. ‘It’s from *Star Wars* – Obi-Wan Kenobi.’ He lifted his chin. ‘Obi-Wan was a Jedi master, like me.’

Slink tossed a can of lemonade to Wren and one to Jack. ‘That’s not why you’re called Obi. It’s short for, “Oh, be quiet, you idiot”.’

Obi reached down by his chair, grabbed an empty can and threw it at Slink. Laughing, Slink cartwheeled out of the way and dived over the sofa in a graceful arc.

Obi grabbed another projectile but stopped, obviously realising it was useless to try to hit the ninja-like spider monkey. He tossed the can away and looked at the screens.

He'd hacked into the CCTV of the building Jack and Charlie were at earlier and was now watching the security guards checking the keypad lock.

Jack flicked on the TV and turned to the news channel.

'It won't be on there that quick,' Obi said. He was probably right. It would take days for their latest adventure to filter to the news network, if at all. 'How much was it?'

'One million,' Jack said.

'Yeah, I know that. I meant how much did we get?'

Jack braced himself. 'A thousand.'

'*What?*' Obi exclaimed. 'That's all?'

Jack nodded, but Charlie was right. They couldn't be too greedy. It was plenty until their next job. The only problem was Jack had no idea what their next job would be. He was the brains behind the group. They each had their own specialties and his was supposed to be the planning.

Jack sat bolt upright. Obi was wrong, the news had spread fast. *Really fast*. They'd done the job less

than an hour ago, and there it was. 'Guys.' He fumbled for the remote and increased the volume.

A female reporter stood in front of a children's hospital. '... is the third such mysterious donation in the last six months.' She brushed a strand of hair from her face. 'The amount donated this time was almost double that of the last – a million pounds.'

Jack glanced at the others and they grinned back at him.

The reporter continued, 'As with the others, the gift was made by an anonymous source. Authorities and the charities involved are at a loss as to who is behind these generous donations.' She bent towards the camera and offered a mischievous smile. 'But long may they continue.' She straightened up. 'This is Susan Cross, BBC News, outside Great Ormond Street Hospital, London.'

'Generous is right,' Obi said, sounding a little disgruntled that they hadn't kept more back for themselves.

'Who's getting the next "donation"?' Slink said.

Jack shrugged. They'd started small, a few quid here and there, but now they were finally in the big time. Able to make a real difference to people's lives. Of course, the news reporters had

only recently noticed the donations – the last three – because they were so big. Jack grinned to himself as he muted the TV again.

One of the Urban Outlaws' mottoes was, 'Take only what others need.' They took money from bad guys and gave it to people who needed it more. Seized the financial assets of arms dealers, thugs, gangsters, and gave it to hospitals, charities and carers. They didn't think of it as stealing, more like 'moving funds'. Spreading wealth round a little bit. No harm in that, right?

Slink had once said they were like a modern-day Robin Hood and his Merry Men, but Jack didn't think anyone would write stories about them. Besides, green tights weren't his thing.

The door opened and Charlie walked in, carrying several bags of shopping. Obi's eyes lit up as she heaved them on to the dining room table. Wren jumped to her feet and started to help her unpack.

'Your turn next,' Charlie said to Jack with a pained expression. 'I hate carrying all this stuff back here.'

'We could get it delivered.'

'Yeah?' Charlie raised an eyebrow at him. 'You think "secret underground lair beneath London" would be on their GPS?'

Jack shrugged. 'Worth a shot.'

Obi huffed impatiently. Charlie handed him a salad. He held it up with a look of disgust. 'What's this?'

'Don't start,' Charlie said. 'You need to –'

'Need to what?'

'It's just –'

'Just what?'

'We've been through this, Obi.' Charlie gave him a stern look. 'Just eat it.'

Obi fell silent.

Charlie knew exactly how to handle him, and Jack admired that about her. They were all like brothers and sisters. They'd been through so much together. With Wren, the Urban Outlaws' headcount had increased to five, which meant that the thousand pounds they'd just acquired wasn't going to last as long as usual.

Jack had to think of another target – and soon, so he could plan.

Charlie tossed him a sandwich and sat on the sofa opposite. 'What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing.' How did she always see through him?

Charlie cocked an eyebrow. 'Spill it.'

'We nearly got caught this time.'

'So?'

‘I should’ve planned it better.’

Now it was Jack on the receiving end of one of Charlie’s stern expressions. ‘It was perfect, Jack. Your plans always work.’

‘It was *not* perfect.’ Jack forced himself to keep control of his annoyance. ‘Those cops nearly had us.’ He looked over at Wren and Slink who were now sitting at the dining table together.

Slink was helping her with a maths assignment. As Wren wasn’t going to school any more, Charlie had insisted that they take it in turns to teach her all they knew.

Jack sighed. In a parallel universe, they could almost be a normal family.

‘Jack?’

He looked back at Charlie and lowered his voice. ‘It’s just that if anything happened to them –’

Charlie snorted.

‘What?’

‘Listen to yourself. Soon you’ll be demanding a pipe and slippers.’

Jack scowled at her. ‘We have responsibilities now.’

Charlie rolled her eyes. ‘No we don’t. Look around you, Jack. We live in a secret bunker. We can do what

we like, when we like.’ She pointed to the far corner of the room. ‘We’ve even got a pinball machine.’

Jack smiled. That was one of their best finds. They’d had to move it a few metres at a time, keeping an eye out for cops on neighbourhood patrol. So much hassle, but it had *so* been worth it.

‘Lighten up,’ Charlie said. She sat back and bit into her sandwich.

Jack watched over Charlie’s shoulder as Obi used a mechanical grabber to go through one of the bags of shopping she’d left on the table. Slink and Wren were too engrossed in what they were doing to notice him. First, he pulled out a bag of apples. Disgusted with his catch, he set the apples down and dived in for another try. This time he was rewarded with a bag of jam doughnuts. He smacked his lips and tore the paper open.

Jack looked back at Charlie. She was right. He did need to lighten up.

‘So,’ Charlie said, ‘what’s our next target?’

Yeah, Jack thought, *that small problem*. ‘I don’t know yet.’

‘I got one,’ Obi said through a mouth full of doughnut. Charlie turned round but Obi managed to swallow it and hide the bag before she realised.

'You've got a target?' she said, dubious.

Slink looked up from the maths textbook. 'Is it another one of your crazy plans that involve raiding a supermarket?'

'No,' Obi snapped.

'What then?'

Obi hesitated for a moment, looked around at them all, then said, 'Proteus.'