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Blackout

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Peter Jay Black

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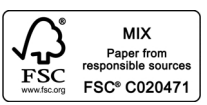
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CHAPTER ONE

JACK FENTON SAT ON THE PAVEMENT NEXT TO Charlie. He shivered and pulled a dirty blanket up to his neck.

They were opposite an apartment block near Hyde Park, London. On the ground floor, through a set of glass doors, they could make out a concierge sitting behind a desk, reading a magazine.

There was a clock on the wall above his head and its second hand seemed to be moving way too fast.

'They're an hour late,' Jack whispered into the microphone on his headset. 'If they're any later, we'll have to –'

'Relax,' a voice said in his ear. 'It'll be fine.' Obi was back at their headquarters, surrounded by sophisticated computers that could tap into CCTV systems around London.

'What if they don't deliver it?'

'They will.'

Jack sighed. This was a special mission they were doing for Obi and they couldn't let him down. Obi used to live in the apartment building, so he was the right person to guide them through the next half an hour or so, but Jack felt uneasy about it. He was used to being in control. 'What if they deliver it to the wrong place?' he said.

'They won't.'

'How do you know?' Jack glanced at Charlie. 'Wait, you do realise we have no way to –'

Charlie's bright green eyes widened and she pointed at a delivery van as it turned into the road.

Jack let out a breath. 'Thank God.'

'Told you so,' Obi said. 'Get ready.'

The van stopped in front of the apartment block's entrance and the driver hopped out. He walked to the back of the van, whistling as he went, and threw open the doors.

Charlie unzipped her backpack and took out a device shaped like a satellite dish, only this was a lot smaller. It was one of her homemade gadgets – a directional microphone, able to pick up the faintest whisper from a hundred metres away. She connected it to her headset so they could all hear.

Jack pressed a pair of mini binoculars to his eyes.

With a lot of grunts and moans, the delivery guy loaded a box on to a set of sack trucks and wheeled it to the glass doors.

He pressed the buzzer.

The concierge lowered his magazine.

The delivery driver nodded at the box.

After a few more seconds' hesitation, the concierge typed a code into a keypad on his desk.

Jack closed his eyes and listened to the tones the keypad made in his headset. When he opened them again, the delivery driver was wheeling the box across the foyer.

'Did you get it?' Obi said.

'Yeah,' Jack whispered, keeping his attention on the building opposite.

The concierge stepped around the desk, scratching his head.

Charlie adjusted the directional microphone and his voice came through their earpieces.

'Bit late for a delivery, isn't it?'

'Last one of the day,' the delivery driver said.

'Who's it for?' the concierge asked.

The delivery driver set the box down and checked

the details on his mobile computer. 'Paul McCartney.' He held it out for the concierge to sign.

The concierge's eyebrows rose. '*The* Paul McCartney?' he said. 'The guy from the Beatles?'

The delivery driver shrugged. 'I dunno.'

Jack looked at Charlie and rolled his eyes, while Obi sniggered in their ears.

The concierge crossed his arms. 'There's no one here with that name. You'll have to take it back.'

'Not likely,' the delivery driver said. 'The address is right. See for yourself.'

The concierge didn't move.

'Look, mate. Just sign it, please? If no one claims it in the next few days, you can call the number at the bottom of the form and we'll pick it up again. It's Friday night, I gotta get home to the missus. She'll throw a fit if I'm not back before eight. Last time she –'

'All right, all right,' the concierge snapped. 'Give it here.'

The delivery driver thrust the mobile computer at him.

The concierge signed the screen and handed it back.

The delivery driver winked. 'Cheers,' he said, and marched to the door.

The concierge walked behind the desk and entered the security code into the keypad. To Jack's ears, it sounded like musical notes. The door lock clicked open and the delivery driver left the building.

Jack watched him drive off, then he refocused on the concierge – he was back to reading his magazine.

So far, so good.

'OK,' Obi said. 'It's time.'

There was a scratching sound.

The concierge glanced up for a moment, then continued reading.

There was another scratching sound.

The concierge put his magazine down and listened.

There it was again.

He stood up and walked around his desk, following the sound, turning his head left and right, trying to locate where the noise was coming from. He paused for a moment, then bent down with his ear to the box.

The scratching sound was coming from inside.

The concierge continued to listen, unaware a tube had now slid out of a hole in the side of the box and was pointed directly at him.

A small blast of gas hit him square in the face and he straightened up with a look of surprise. He staggered sideways and gripped the edge of the desk for support. He swayed there for a moment, then stepped behind it and picked up the phone's receiver.

He began to dial.

Jack's stomach tightened. 'No, no, no.'

But the concierge stopped dialling and his eyes lost their focus. He rocked backwards and collapsed in the chair. The phone slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor.

The concierge gave a final jerk and fell unconscious.

Jack stared at Charlie. 'What was that gas stuff?'

She grinned. 'Best you don't know.'

'We'll have to use that again sometime.' Jack focused the binoculars at the box as the tip of a penknife blade poked out and, from the inside, someone cut open the tape securing the flaps.

The blade retracted and, after a few seconds, a head with blonde flowing curls popped out and looked around.

Wren was only ten – five years younger than Jack and Charlie – and the smallest of the Urban Outlaws.

Hence she'd been the ideal one to use for this part of the mission.

'Let's go,' Jack said, getting to his feet.

Charlie stood and slid the directional microphone back into her hard-shell backpack.

Jack adjusted the camera on his shoulder. 'Image good?' he asked Obi.

'Yep. I can see everything.'

Jack glanced up and down the road. 'CCTV?'

'No one's watching.'

Jack and Charlie hurried to the front door of the apartment building.

Wren smiled and waved at them.

Charlie waved back.

'Get a move on, guys,' Obi said. 'Someone might come.'

Wren climbed out of the box and walked behind the desk.

Jack closed his eyes and remembered the precise sounds the keypad had made. 'The code is: two, seven, seven, eight . . . three, five, five.'

Wren typed in the numbers, the door buzzed and the lock disengaged.

Jack pushed it open and gestured Charlie through.

'That was clever,' she said.

'I know.'

Charlie cocked an eyebrow at him. 'Captain Modest.'

They smiled at each other as they marched across the foyer.

'Good job,' Charlie whispered to Wren.

Wren rubbed her neck. 'I thought I was never gonna get out.'

Charlie ruffled her hair. 'You were brilliant.' She turned away and whispered into her mic, 'Obi, you said the lift's down this hallway, right?'

'Yep.'

Charlie looked at Jack. 'See you there.'

He nodded.

Charlie and Wren jogged around the corner and disappeared from view.

Jack opened the door behind the desk, grabbed the back of the chair and wheeled the unconscious man through.

The room beyond was a few metres square. Against the back wall was a small table with a kettle. To the left was a door with a *WC* sign.

Jack tipped the concierge's head back and checked his breathing. Fortunately, it was steady and strong.

Satisfied he'd be OK, Jack slipped back through the door and closed it behind him. He peered around the foyer – no one was there – so he hurried down the hallway and into the lift with Charlie and Wren.

Charlie had the button panel open, exposing a mess of wires and circuitry. She had clipped a small black box with a digital readout to several of the wires behind the panel and numbers scrolled down the screen. Now and again Charlie would press a button on the device.

She glanced at Jack. 'This is taking longer than I thought.'

The lift was locked with a keypad. If they wanted to go to a specific floor, they had to hit that floor number and type in the corresponding code.

They didn't know the code to the penthouse, which Obi said was changed weekly. Charlie's code extractor would find it for them. The only problem was, it was random. She had no control over the order in which codes for each floor would come up.

'What ones have you got so far?' Jack asked her.

'Seven, one, two, six and nine.' Charlie took a breath. 'None of them close to the top floor.'

Jack's stomach tightened. Without the code, they wouldn't be going any further.

'Why can't we go up the stairs?' Wren said.

'The cameras in the stairwell are on an isolated security system,' Obi said. 'They're connected to a computer on the ninth floor.'

'We couldn't have turned them off at the concierge's desk?'

'No. He only monitors the cameras. He has no control over the main system.'

Jack and Obi had spent a long time trying to work out how to get past the cameras. There was just no way to reach the computer on the ninth floor and shut down the security system. The only other way to turn off the cameras was to use the override panels in each of the apartments. But breaking into one of them was too risky – they had no way of knowing if people were home or not.

If Jack, Charlie and Wren went up the stairs, the software would detect movement and call the security company. They would then phone the concierge, and if he didn't answer, the cops would be there in minutes.

Jack couldn't help but be impressed with the building's internal security and had to admit that he liked the challenge it posed. It was almost as if it was daring them to defeat it.

'Come on,' Charlie said through tight lips. The code extractor in her hand beeped and a series of six numbers appeared on the glowing display. Charlie hit a button to save it.

Jack looked at her. 'Penthouse?'

She shook her head. 'That was the code for the third floor.'

Jack had a funny feeling the Penthouse would be the last number the device cracked, but after another minute, it beeped again.

'Got it.' Charlie reached around the panel and hit the button to the top floor.

The doors closed and the lift started its ascent.

Jack ran through the plan. They had to get to the penthouse, bypass the alarm system and find the –

Suddenly, the lights went out and the lift came to a jarring halt.

Wren gasped.

Jack unclipped a torch from his belt and flicked it on.

'What's happened?' Obi asked.

'We're in trouble,' Charlie said. 'The lift's lost power.'

'It's not just the lift,' Obi said. 'There's random blackouts all over London.'

Charlie looked at Jack, her eyes wide. 'The virus?'

He nodded and a feeling of dread washed over him.

The virus was a sophisticated piece of software with the potential to cripple any computer. It was their fault it had escaped to the internet, and now it was taking down power stations around London. If they didn't get to it soon – Jack shuddered at the thought of how much damage the virus could do.

They had to get this mission over with as quickly as possible, get back to the bunker and work out a way to stop the virus. But first . . .

He shone his torch at the ceiling.

For a few seconds, Jack imagined crawling on to the roof of the lift.

The building was twelve storeys high and they had no climbing gear. Besides, as far as Jack knew, the shaft didn't have a ladder, and even if it did, that was one risky climb.

His stomach knotted. He hated heights.

'We're between floors,' Charlie said, reading his mind.

Jack let out a slow breath and shone the torch back up at the ceiling again.

Nothing else for it.

There were nine panels and the middle one had a latch. He looked at Wren. 'Think you could unlock that for us?'

She looked up. 'Yeah.' She seemed relieved at the prospect of getting out of the confined space, even if it was going to be dangerous.

Jack cupped his hands into a stirrup for Wren to put her foot in and he lifted her up. 'Mind the shoulder cam.' He grabbed her legs, keeping Wren steady while she fumbled for the latch.

After a moment, there was a click and the centre panel swung down. Jack lifted Wren higher. She grabbed the edge of the hatch and crawled on to the roof of the lift.

Charlie was next through the hatch and once her feet had disappeared, Jack climbed up on to the handrail and sprang up, his fingers gripping the frame.

Slink would've been proud of that move.

With effort, Jack managed to haul himself on to the roof of the lift with the others.

He got to his feet and shone his torch upwards. The lift shaft stretched above them, reminding him of the tunnels beneath the city. Except this went straight up.

Jack considered waiting to see if the power would come back on, but that could be minutes or hours.

The torch beam moved to a set of doors just above their heads.

Jack slipped off his backpack and pulled out a stubby metal bar. He reached up, jammed the bar into the crack and tried to lever the doors apart.

The bar slipped free and he staggered back.

He tried again, but he still couldn't get good leverage on the doors.

When Jack failed for the third time, he swore loudly and turned to Charlie. 'Any ideas?'

She looked up and, after a moment she said, 'Do you think you could give me a boost to that?' She pointed at a flat box on the wall halfway up the fourth-floor doors.

'I think so,' Jack said. 'What is it?'

'It's the control mechanism. When the lift reaches that level, both sets of doors open. It's directly connected to the door motors and I think I might be able to do something with it.' She glanced at him. 'With a bit of luck.'

'You know what you're doing though, right?'

Charlie shrugged. 'Not so much.'

'Brilliant.'

'Of course I do, idiot.' Charlie smiled, slipped off her backpack, took out the code extractor and opened the back of it. She removed the battery and tore out a couple of wires. She placed them between her teeth and nodded at Jack.

Jack leant against the wall of the lift shaft and made a stirrup again with his hands.

Charlie put her foot in and he lifted her up.

'Guys?' Obi said in their ears. 'What's happening?'

'Trying to solve a problem,' Jack said, doing his best to hold Charlie steady.

She pulled a screwdriver from her hip bag, undid the cover to the door controls and looked inside. After a moment, she reached in and connected the battery. There was a small spark and the doors to the lift shaft opened a few millimetres. She did it again and they opened another five millimetres or so.

'All right,' Charlie whispered. 'That's the best I can do without mains power.'

Jack lowered her back down. He reached up again and jammed the bar into the gap in the doors. This time he got a better grip – he managed, with effort, to open them wide enough to get through.

Jack clawed at the bottom edge of the door

and hauled himself up. He shone his torch left and right, checking no one was around, then hoisted himself over the lip and slid on his belly into the corridor.

Next, Jack spun around and held out his hands. Charlie lifted Wren up to him and he pulled her through.

Wren leapt to her feet and pressed her back against the wall, her eyes scanning left and right, straining into the darkness as she kept a lookout.

Jack turned back to help Charlie, but she was already sliding out next to him.

She stood up and dusted herself off. 'Stairs?'

Jack shone his torch to the left. 'This way,' he whispered.

They silently crept along the corridor, listening for even the faintest sound.

At the end of the hallway, Jack opened the door to the stairwell. 'We need to move fast,' he whispered.

If the cameras came back on, they'd be in trouble.

How long would it take for the security computer to boot back up?

Jack ushered Charlie and Wren through and the

three of them raced up the stairs as fast as they could, only stopping when they reached the door to the penthouse.

Catching his breath, Jack wondered how much time they had to make up. Speaking of which – 'Obi,' he said into his microphone. 'How long do we have before the night shift starts and the next concierge gets here?'

'Fifteen minutes.'

'*What*?' Jack looked at Charlie. 'We don't have enough time.'

'Yes, we do.' It took Charlie under a minute to pick the lock and open the door. 'See?'

'Wait,' Wren whispered. 'How do we know the apartment's empty?'

'He's out for the evening,' Obi said in their ears. 'The Royal Opera House. Won't be back for another couple of hours at least.'

Jack peered in to the penthouse hallway. With the power off, at least they didn't have to bother about the alarm.

The three of them hurried inside.

Charlie stopped at the security box on the wall and cut the main wires. 'Just in case the power comes back,' she whispered.

Jack nodded and followed Wren through a set of doors.

The lounge was minimalist with stark white walls and two black leather sofas facing each other. Apart from that, there was no other furniture. Not even a TV.

'What happened?' Obi said.

'What do you mean?' Jack said, adjusting his shoulder cam and shining his torch around the room.

'What's my uncle done to this place? It used to be really homely. Where's the grandfather clock?'

Obi's mum and dad used to own the penthouse – along with a mansion or two – and, when his parents died, Obi's uncle had made off with everything. Obi and his sister didn't get a penny and that was something the Outlaws were going to change with this mission.

'Which way is it?' Jack asked.

'The door to the right,' Obi said.

Charlie joined them as they marched across the lounge and through the door.

They were now standing in a room filled with books. It seemed every available shelf was crammed full and the floor was covered with stacks of

volumes. In the middle of the chaos was a leather, high-backed Oxford chair. A small side table was next to it with a multicoloured glass lamp.

The contrast to the rest of the neat, minimalist apartment was striking.

'That's more like it,' Obi said. 'He obviously hasn't touched this room. Looks exactly the same as it always did.'

'Doesn't seem as though he ever comes in here.' Jack's eyes flitted around the shelves, looking for cameras, then he aimed the beam of his torch at the far end of the room. On the wall, under a brass picture light, hung a dark oil painting. It was a portrait of a man in an old military uniform. Jack paused for a moment, soaking up every brushstroke. He adjusted his shoulder cam. 'Are you seeing this? Who is it?'

'That's my great-great-grandad,' Obi said. 'He was a captain in the navy.'

Jack took a few steps forward and his headset crackled. 'Obi?' He stepped back to the door. 'Obi?'

There was no answer.

Jack looked at Charlie.

'Obi,' she said into her own headset, 'can you hear us?'

Still no answer.

'It must have something to do with the blackouts,' Charlie said.

Wasting no more time, Jack, Charlie and Wren picked their way between stacks of books and stood in front of the painting.

Charlie pressed a button on the side of the frame and swung it away from the wall. Buried in the plaster behind was a large safe, its electronic keypad lit up in green.

'How's that got power?' Jack said.

'It can run on its own backup battery for months.' Charlie slipped a screwdriver from her pocket and undid the keypad panel.

The safe would lock itself down permanently if they messed the next part up.

Charlie looked at Jack. 'This is going to take both of us,' she reminded him. 'Remember to keep an even pressure.'

Jack put the torch in his mouth and together they carefully lifted the panel's bottom edge away from the safe to allow Wren to peer underneath.

'Is it?' Charlie asked her.

'Oh, yes,' Wren said.

'Like we discussed?'

Wren nodded. 'Yep.'

With her free hand, Charlie reached into her hip bag and passed Wren a set of wire cutters.

Wren slid the cutters under the panel. 'Which wire did you say it was?'

'The blue one,' Charlie said.

'Oh.'

'Why?'

'They're both blue.'

'*What*?' Charlie peered behind the keypad. 'That's just brilliant.'

Making sure he didn't move the panel any further from the safe, Jack looked behind too and could see the anti-tamper contact switch. If they lifted the panel any further, the circuit would break and the safe would lock itself down. Wren was right though – both wires leading to it were blue. Charlie had thought one would be red.

Jack straightened up and looked at her. 'Ideas?'

Charlie sighed. 'Nope.'

'Awesome.' That meant there was a fifty per cent chance Wren would cut the right wire, and a fifty per cent chance she'd cut the wrong one. He looked at her. 'You pick.'

Wren looked shocked. 'Serious?'

'We've come this far.' Jack scanned the room again, looking for any hidden security he hadn't spotted. Still not seeing any, he turned back to Wren and nodded. 'Do it.'

Wren swallowed and reached behind the keypad. 'Cutting.'

Jack closed his eyes and held his breath.

There was a snipping sound.

For a full five seconds no one moved.

'It's OK,' Wren said.

Jack opened his eyes and saw she was now smiling. He grinned back at her.

Charlie quickly lifted away the keypad panel. Next, she took out a portable soldering iron from her hip bag, flicked it on and started working on the circuit board inside.

She joined several wires, removed a few components and then soldered a microswitch.

Jack wondered how much time they had left, but Obi still wasn't responding to their calls.

Charlie finally turned off the soldering iron and checked her work. She had to get this right the first time. No room for mistakes. She looked at Jack. 'Do *you* want to do it?'

'No thanks,' Jack said. 'It's all yours.'

Charlie took a breath and hit the microswitch.

The safe's lock clicked.

All three of them let out an anxious breath.

'Nice one.' Jack opened the safe, shone the torch inside and stared for a moment.

'What's wrong?' Charlie said.

Jack stepped aside. 'See for yourself.'

Charlie's eyes widened as she looked into the safe. 'I don't believe it.'

'What?' Wren stood on tiptoe. 'Wait, where is it?'

The safe was empty.

'Let's get out of here,' Jack muttered.

They hurried from the reading room and back into the lounge just as the lights flickered on in the buildings outside.

The three of them froze.

'That's all we need,' Jack said.

'Guys,' came Obi's urgent hiss in their ears. 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' Jack said.

'I've been trying to get hold of you.'

'Power cuts.'

'I know,' Obi said. 'I've had to reroute the signal through another mast. Anyway, never mind that, the night concierge has just turned up for his shift.'

Jack looked at the clock on the wall – thanks to all the delays they were seriously behind schedule. They should've been long gone by now.

They ran back down the hallway and Charlie went to step into the stairwell, but Jack held her back. 'No,' he said. 'The cameras will be on too.'

'What are we going to do then?'

Jack turned from her. 'Obi, what's happening?'

'The night concierge is looking for the other one. He's going into the back room.'

Jack grabbed the door handle and waited.

A few seconds later, Obi said, 'He's found him. Looks like he's calling the police.'

There was nothing else for it. Jack glanced at Charlie and Wren. 'Ready to run?'

They both nodded.

'Hoods,' he said.

The three of them pulled up their hoods and adjusted the bandanas over their noses and mouths, hiding their faces from the cameras.

Jack opened the door and ushered them out. As soon as the three of them stepped into the stairwell, the alarm sounded.

Jack cupped a hand over his ear, trying to block

the noise. 'Obi?' he shouted. 'Can we get out on the ground floor?'

'No,' Obi said. 'No way for you to slip past unseen.'

Charlie looked at Jack. 'Plan B?'

'Great,' Jack said with a feeling of dread. 'This just keeps getting better.' He pressed a finger to his ear again. 'Slink, we can't make it back to the ground floor. Exit's blocked.' He looked up the stairs. 'Meet us up there as quick as you can.' Jack motioned for Charlie and Wren to hurry up.

He always hated Plan B.