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opening extract from

Spy Girl: The Dark Side of Midnight

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DARK CLOUDS WERE MASSING ON THE HORIZON. THE RIDER GLANCED UP, AND SWORE UNDER HIS BREATH. HE KNEW EXACTLY WHAT IT MEANT: A STORM WAS COMING. NOT A GOOD OMEN. For this was Antarctica, the remotest place on earth, a white wilderness where temperatures could drop to below minus fifty-four degrees. The rider rechecked his coordinates, then jumped onto the Snokat. He had to hurry. There was not much time.

Deep in their snow hole, the two men waited, listening to the unending silence. Exhausted, huddled together for

warmth, they had not moved, nor eaten, for days. Only a thin fragile thread of hope was keeping them alive. Nearby, a third man was curled in his sleeping bag. He looked contentedly asleep. But his two companions knew better: this was a sleep from which he would never awake. A few hours earlier, the man had finally succumbed to frostbite and the mind-numbing cold. Now he was dead. And over in the corner, a big, black body bag lay against the wall of the snow hole, its zip ominously pulled up.

The rider halted. He drew out his thermal imager, held it up and made a quick three-hundred-and-sixty degree scan of the horizon. Satisfied, he continued going forward, the Snokat skimming easily over the powdery white surface. He knew he was racing against time. And time was running out. Fast. The faint whine of the vehicle penetrated the icy prison walls of the snow hole. The two men sat up and exchanged disbelieving glances. Could it be? Or were exhaustion and cold making them hallucinate? The sound continued, got louder. Summoning up the very last of their carefully hoarded strength, they slowly and painfully began to tunnel their way out.

The rider waited. He watched the two men hatching from their frozen cocoon like a pair of grotesque insects. He saw them help each other to stand shakily upright, brushing snow from their purple, encrusted faces. He waited until they had both turned to face him, their snow-blinded eyes bright with joy and welcome. Then he drew

out the sub-automatic, lifted it to his shoulder and fired two shots.

The Snokat bounced over the surface, leaping ice crevasses, racing ahead of the fast-approaching storm. Tied to its rear, the black body bag stood out sharply against the endless white of the polar landscape. The rider crouched low, pushing the machine to its limit.

Behind him, two bodies lay crumpled on the ground, their blood petalling the snow with crimson.

The first flakes began to fall.

JAZMIN DAWSON STOOD IN THE OFFICE DOORWAY, DOUBLE-CHECKING THE LUNCH ORDER ON HER FINGERS.

"A TUNA MELT ON RYE," SHE REPEATED, "TWO LEMON COKES, TWO Danish and a cream-cheese bagel."

"And whatever you want for yourself," Assia Dawson added, glancing up.

"Okay, I got all that," Jazmin said. "Catch you in ten." She spun round, her mass of dark curly hair whipping over her shoulders, and bounded energetically out of the room.

Assia smiled proudly after her daughter, then looked across the desk at her deputy and shook her head. "When did she grow up? And how come I missed it?" she asked disbelievingly.

"Hey, that's how it is nowadays," Hally Skinner consoled her. "I've got a niece just like it. Fourteen going

on I don't know what. Turn your back and, suddenly, they're no longer kids. You better believe it! Uh-huh!"

"I guess you're right," Assia sighed reflectively. "Only somehow, my daughter just seems to have got there very quickly."

"Isn't that the truth," Hally agreed. "But at least you know you did a fine job."

Did I? Assia thought silently. Did I really? Her brow furrowed. Since her husband had died, when Jazmin was only six, Assia had been forced to work full-time to support them both. Over the years, this had resulted in so many broken promises, she thought regretfully. So many nights working back late. So many childminders. So little quality time. And now, seemingly overnight, her child had metamorphosed into a young woman. Right under her nose. A young woman whom she was beginning to realize that she barely knew.

Meanwhile, out in the hot, summertime city street, Jazmin waited in the lunch-line, clutching her purse and trying to pretend that she spent every midday queuing to buy her lunch, exactly like the adults around her. Her mind started drifting. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be just another faceless employee, like so many thousands of others working in the big city. Returning at night to her city penthouse, where her rich, handsome boyfriend would be waiting for her.

From this, it was only a short mental hop to her

favourite daydream: the one in which she starred as her alter ego Jaz Dawson, secret agent and crime fighter. Jaz Dawson was *hot*. She was everything her creator wasn't: tall, kick-ass gorgeous, with straight blonde hair and a peachy-clear complexion. She also looked good in skin-hugging Lycra and she didn't have a serious snack habit. Jazmin's left hand stole down to her imaginary utility belt, where her imaginary gun was clipped. She tightened her stance. She was poised, taut and ready to spring into action. She was coiled steel, invincible. She was...

"Hey, little girlie, you buying lunch or taking a nap?"

Jazmin came to with a start. Somehow, she'd reached the head of the line without realizing it. Oh pig! She must have mentally wandered off again. Stammering and fumbling her words, she blurted out the lunch order, embarrassed by the shop owner's pitying smile and his heightist comment, and also by the ripple of laughter behind her back. Feeling herself getting smaller and hotter, she collected her order, paid for it and stumbled out of the shop. Uh! Get a grip, she told herself severely. Or maybe next Take Your Daughter To Work Day, her mum'd choose to Leave Her At Home instead.

When Jazmin got back to the office, she discovered that her mum's desk was empty.

Hally nodded towards the far door. "She's taking a meeting with the boss," she said.

"Oh." Jazmin pulled a face. She placed the brown bag

and cans of drink on the desk. Her spirits sank. A meeting with the boss could only mean one thing. Her mum was probably going to be sent on another assignment. She slumped into her chair, shoulders sagging despondently.

"Hey, girl." Hally reached across for her lunch. "Don't look so down. Maybe it'll be good news – a pay rise. A long weekend. She could get lucky. Who knows?"

"Yeah, right."

"You want to hang out with me? I'm going to eat up on the roof terrace."

"Okay." Jazmin brightened. She got up and followed Hally out of the office.

It was peaceful on the roof terrace. The city lay stretched out below, a shimmering mirage in the heat of the midday sun, its sounds backgrounded to white noise. Jazmin leaned on the parapet and gazed across the familiar London skyline. The precinct where her mum worked was located in the main inner-city commercial area. She could see glass-topped malls and high-rise offices, their multi-faceted sides glittering like jewels in the bright sun. Dwarfed beneath them, she saw the London Eye slowly revolving, the white dome of St. Pauls. And in the distance the scribble of the river, a silver ribbon of movement touching the big city lightly on its way to a far-off sea.

This is my city, Jazmin thought. She'd been born here and had grown up in one of its many suburbs. She felt her

heart swell with pride. Right now, in all the world, there was nowhere else she'd rather be.

"Nice view?" Hally said, as if she could read Jazmin's thoughts. She leaned her elbows on the wall and turned towards Jazmin, a serious expression on her face. "Hard to believe that people down there are getting beaten up, robbed and murdered even as we speak, isn't it?"

"Oh...I..." Jazmin stuttered.

"Sorry, didn't mean to upset you. I was only kidding, right?" Hally grinned. She put on a funny mock-official voice and intoned solemnly: "Crime figures are down fifteen per cent throughout the city. Murders and robberies: ten per cent. Street felony: two per cent. The number of carjacks has fallen by five per cent over the last six months." Hally paused, then whistled under her breath, her eyes widening in fake horror. "Hey girl, if we carry on being this good, the city could be crime-free in a couple of years and me and your mum'd be out of a job." She shot Jazmin a crafty look. "You couldn't see your way to doing a little littering on your way home, could you? Keep us fine upstanding crime officers in employment."

Jazmin smiled. Hally's sense of fun was infectious. But beneath the kidding, she also knew that there was more to the job Hally and her mum did than merely chasing kids for dropping litter. A lot more. The precinct where they worked was the London headquarters of GID – the Global Intelligence Department. Hally and her mum were

members of ISA – the International Security Agency. It was their job to identify and then track down individuals, groups and organizations that were engaged in criminal activities that threatened global security.

It was a tough job, Jazmin knew that too. Dangerous even. And every time her mum had a meeting with her boss, it meant that something had come up, and her mum was being sent out on another assignment. Trouble was, lurking at the back of Jazmin's mind was always the terrible thought that, one day, her mum would be given an assignment from which she might not come back.

When Jazmin returned to the office, she found her mum seated at her workstation again. She was studying a document file, while absent-mindedly nibbling at her sandwich.

"Good lunch, hon?" she asked, without looking up.

"Uh-huh."

"Sorry I wasn't around. Listen, I thought you might like to back up some files for me this afternoon. You can use the machine in reception. How about it?"

Aha, Jazmin thought. Backing up files. Right. The old, familiar get-her-out-of-the-office-for-a-while task. It looked like her mum wanted to talk to Hally about something important. Assia handed Jazmin the access code. "Take as long as you like," she smiled, flipping the document cover over so that Jazmin couldn't read it.

Sure, Jazmin thought, pulling a wry face. You'd like

that, wouldn't you? She walked slowly out of the office, stood on the landing for a while, then doubled back and peeked in. Uh-huh. She was quite right. Her mum and Hally were sitting close together, heads bent over the file. They were talking in low voices. Their faces were serious and grave.

Jazmin took the elevator to the ground floor. Why couldn't her mother have a different job? she grumbled to herself. She sighed. Okay, she was incredibly proud of her mum – Jaz Dawson, her imaginary, crime-fighting secret agent alter ego was partly based upon her. But sometimes, Jazmin thought, she'd give anything for a mum who worked in an ordinary, boring, unadventurous, nine-to-five office job. Even if that meant the world was a little less safe as a consequence.

AT 6.30 P.M., ASSIA AND JAZMIN WALKED TO THE TRAIN STATION TOGETHER. THE PLATFORM WAS CROWDED WITH GREY-FACED, TIRED CITY WORKERS RETURNING HOME AFTER A HARD DAY. EVERYONE stood in silent rows, waiting for the superspeed silver bullet commuter express to pull in.

Assia eyed her daughter carefully.

"So, have you had a nice day?" she asked.

"Yeah, great. The best."

"Good. I'm really sorry I had to pass on lunch."

Jazmin shrugged. "Hey, I know how it is," she said

lightly, "when the big boss calls, you have to drop everything...don't you?" She cut her mum a lightning glance and waited to see if anything significant was about to be said.

"That's right," Assia smiled. She'd already started to work out what she had to say to Jazmin. She looked down at her daughter, at her stubborn chin and unruly dark curls, and sighed gently. Over the years, Agent Assia Dawson had diced with death and danger so often it was almost routine. So why was her heart sinking at the prospect of talking to her own daughter? It was plain crazy!

The silver train snaked into the platform, swooshing to a halt. The doors slid open and the tired crowd surged forward. Jazmin ducked under arms and wriggled around bodies until she managed to secure a precious seat.

"Swap you halfway," she said, grinning cheekily up at her mum.

Assia nodded absent-mindedly. She bent down and placed her laptop bag by Jazmin's feet.

"And how about a carryout for dinner?" Jazmin went on. "Save you cooking after your stressful day."

"Sure, whatever you want, hon," Assia agreed automatically, her brain still mindstacking their future conversation.

Jazmin smiled. This was easy.

"Sushi?" she asked innocently. They rarely ate sushi – her mum always said it was far too expensive.

"That'd be nice."

Jazmin stopped smiling. This was maybe too easy.

"Do you fancy some vintage champagne?" she suggested slyly, testing the water to see just how far she could push things.

"If you like."

"And we could hire a band to play to us while we eat?"

"Uh-huh."

Jazmin's expression changed, hardened. She frowned and glanced up quickly. Her mum was staring out of the window with a faraway expression on her face. Her body was swaying to the rocking rhythm of the train. Her lips were slightly parted. It was quite obvious that she was in another world. She hadn't been listening to a single word her daughter had said.

Jazmin pulled a face. She knew her mum. She recognized the signs. Whenever she went all preoccupied and distant on her like this, it always meant that something was going to happen. Something that her mum didn't want to tell her about. Which automatically meant that it was something that Jazmin wasn't going to like. She folded her arms and stared gloomily into space. All of a sudden, she was not looking forward to getting home.