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opening extract from

# Spy Girl: Out of the Shadows

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**THE SHINY BIG MERCEDES SPED DOWN THE AVENUE DES CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES. IT TURNED INTO THE PLACE DE LA CONCORDE. THE SMALL BLACK ATV FOLLOWED IT, MAINTAINING A DISCREET THREE-CAR** distance. Autumn sunlight danced on the river Seine as the two cars crossed over the Pont de la Concorde.

"He's heading for St-Germain-des-Près!" Field Agent Stash McGregor said excitedly. His partner Suki Smith gripped the wheel of the ATV. Her eyes narrowed as she focused on the road ahead.

The Mercedes began overtaking the cars streaming

along the Boulevard Saint Germain. Even by Parisian standards, this was totally unacceptable behaviour. Horns blasted, voices were raised and fists waved out of windows.

"Stay with him!" Stash exclaimed.

Suki edged the ATV out, weaving it skilfully through the traffic.

"Watch out – he's making a left turn!" Stash warned, as the Mercedes suddenly swerved off the busy main road, and into a quiet side street. Gritting her teeth, Suki spun the wheel and followed, trying to keep up with the much faster quarry.

At the edge of the pavement, an old man stood waiting. He wiped his coffee-stained moustache on the sleeve of his soft check shirt. Under his arm, he carried a wooden box of chess pieces. He was just about to cross over when the Mercedes shot into view.

The old guy stepped back, muttering angrily. The car sped by. For a few seconds, however, he had locked eyes with the man sitting in the back seat. He stared down the street at the receding car. The colour drained from his face, leaving it as grey as the locks of hair that straggled limply over his collar. Slowly, as if in a daze, he stepped off the kerb, just as the black ATV slammed round the corner. There was a cry, a squeal of brakes, followed by a dull thud. Then silence.

The Mercedes sped on towards the Luxembourg

quarter. The driver checked his rear-view mirror, then half-turned in his seat. He spoke in Russian to the rear passenger, "*On ot nas ushol, boss.*"

"Yes, we have lost them," the man agreed. His eyes glittered. "But it looks like we have just found someone else," he added softly. And he smiled, showing two rows of gleaming white teeth.

**FOR MUCH OF HER LIFE, JAZMIN DAWSON'S PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS WERE SIMPLE: SHE WANTED TO BE A SECRET AGENT AND A CRIME FIGHTER; SHE WANTED TO WEAR A SEXY OUTFIT AND** carry a cool weapon. And right now, she had a further ambition: she wanted to be taller.

Jazmin stood in front of the bathroom mirror, brush in one hand, styling wax in the other. This had better work, she told herself grimly. She was so fed up with being teased because of her height. Or rather, her lack of it. She spent some time waxing and backcombing and pinning up her shoulder-length, curly brown hair. Then she surveyed herself in the mirror once more. Uh-huh. That was better. At least now she had tall hair.

Jazmin returned to her room, walking awkwardly as she tried to prevent her hair from obeying gravity and heading shoulder-wards. She really *really* hated being small. "Petite", her mum Assia called her. Yeah, right. That was the polite way of describing it. There were plenty of other

ways. Jazmin knew many of them only too well, thanks to a certain gang of girls at her school who were experts in verbal knifeage, and who really needed to get a life and stop ruining other people's. Petite sucked. It was totally un-fun. She scrunched up her face in an expression of disgust. Her mum had no idea how the real world worked, she thought to herself sadly. In the real world, tall girls got to have their pick of everything. The vertically challenged merely got picked on.

Migrating to the kitchen, Jazmin helped herself to cereal while reading the note her mum had left propped up against the milk carton: *Working late – will bring pizza.* Her mum always brought pizza when she was working late. It was kind of a bribe, the subtext of which ran: "I got your favourite food, so in return, please don't moan at me." Jazmin sighed. Her mum had been working late quite a bit recently, and Jazmin was beginning to go off pizza.

Not that she was complaining, she reminded herself. She understood how important her mum's work was. And she was proud of her. Not many girls had a mother who was a Senior Field Agent for the ISA – the International Security Agency, a branch of the Global Intelligence Department. A mother who went on special assignments all over the world, some of which involved working undercover and carrying weaponry.

Jazmin drank some juice and tried to pretend to herself that she didn't have to go to the learning centre today.

She hated the learning centre. Nobody liked her there. The facilitators didn't like her, because she daydreamed her way through their lessons and never completed her homework assignments on time. The other girls didn't like her, because however hard she tried to blend (and to be truthful, she didn't try *that* hard) she was different. She wasn't a them-clone. At the learning centre, she was the outsider. An edge girl; she didn't fit in.

To put off the evil moment of her departure, Jazmin allowed herself to slide into her favourite daydream, which featured her imaginary alter-ego Jaz Dawson, secret agent and kick-ass gorgeous crime fighter. Eyes narrowing, she mentally checked out her well-stocked utility belt: gun, cartridge case, cuffs, pepper spray, taser and assorted knives (for medical emergencies only). Dressed in black lycra (with pink side-stripes), she visualized herself engaging in awesome martial arts stunts, while single handedly saving the world from evil and total annihilation.

Eventually, however, she could put off the moment no longer. Reluctantly dragging herself away from her gun-toting imaginary self and back into the real world, she got up from her chair and slowly went to locate her coat. Then she made her way to the ground floor.

Jazmin opened the door and stepped out. Straight into a large puddle. Eugh. She stared down at her shoes. They were soaked. How come she hadn't bothered to look out of the window and notice it was raining? She checked her

watch. Unh – mental head slap! She was going to be late. And there was no time now to go back and change her footwear. And she had forgotten to bring her umbrella too.

Jazmin set off down the road at a brisk run. It was raining so hard that the drops were probably having to queue. Her perfectly styled hair was rapidly turning into a soggy bird's nest, and her feet were making little squelchy sounds with each step.

Oh boy, another perfect day in Paradise, she thought ruefully.

**THE OLD MAN OPENED HIS EYES. HE WAS LYING ON HIS BACK, IN A BED. IT WAS NOT HIS OWN BED. AT THE FOOT OF THE BED, A YOUNG WOMAN IN A BLACK T-SHIRT WAS SITTING ON A BLUE PLASTIC** chair. She wore a khaki combat vest and green cargo pants. Her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail and she looked like she probably worked out in her spare time. He cut his eyes at her. The young woman was neat-featured, pretty. He grinned. "Zut! I must've died and gone to heaven," he joked.

The young woman raised her eyebrows. "I don't think so," she said, her lips curving into the ghost of a smile.

"No? So where am I then?"

"The British Hospital in Levallois, *Monsieur Brun*."

The old guy's eyes widened. "*Merde!* Who's paying?"

"We are."

He regarded her suspiciously. "Eh – we are?" he repeated.

"Uh-huh."

"How come?"

"We assume you don't have private health insurance."

"And 'we' would be...?"

"My partner and I." The young woman leaned forward, an expression of concern upon her face. "Do you remember what happened to you, *monsieur*?"

His eyes vague and unfocused, the old man trawled through his memory. "I was crossing the road," he said. "There was a big Mercedes and I...and then there was another car and..." He cut the young woman a sharp sideways glance. "You were driving the other car. You ran into me!" he said indignantly.

Suki bent her head in acknowledgement of the accusation. "I'm so sorry, *monsieur*," she said. "You stepped straight off the kerb without looking. Thank goodness you weren't really badly hurt. All you're suffering from is mild concussion and some bruising to your left side from where you fell in the road."

The old man lifted the crisp white sheets and peered down at his body. "Well, would you believe it?" he murmured wonderingly. "And there I was thinking..." He broke off, looked up at her, "And my chess pieces?"

"Are all here in your locker, quite safe," the young woman reassured him.

He sighed resignedly. There was a brief silence. Then he said, "Always the same, you youngsters. Why d'you drive so fast?"

"I don't usually," Suki said. "We just happened to be on a pursuit."

He glanced at her. "Cops?"

"In a way," Suki said obscurely.

"Who were you after?"

Suki didn't reply. He gave her a narrow-eyed look. "The Mercedes?" he said, and when Suki still failed to respond, he remarked quietly, "The man in the back, it was Nikolai Arkady, wasn't it?"

Suki stared at him in disbelief. "How do you know that?"

"I saw him."

Suki frowned, "I mean, how do you know Nikolai Arkady?"

He shrugged, eyeing her speculatively, as if working her out, deciding whether he could trust her or not.

Puzzled, Suki shook her head. "I don't understand. You're just a—"

"Stupid old Frenchman who can't manage to cross a road without getting knocked over," the old man finished her sentence for her. "Yes, right, I am *now*. And my name is Jean Brun, like it says on my ID card." He paused. Again his expression changed, becoming withdrawn and remote, as if he were going through some immense inner struggle. Suki sat still, silently watching him. Minutes passed. At

length, he seemed to reach a decision. "But once upon a time, there was a then," he said quietly. "And *then*, my name was Ivan Kirilovitch, and I worked at the Arkadia Clinic with that man's father, Boris Arkady."

Suki's mouth dropped open; her eyes widened in shock. "But you can't be," she gasped. "I've seen the FSB report. Dr. Kirilovitch is dead. He died in a horrific car accident ten years ago!"

There was a long pause. Neither of them moved. The room fell so quiet you could hear the air-conditioning humming. So quiet you could almost hear their hearts beating.

Then the old man looked up at Suki, and his eyes were suddenly steady and glass-clear.

"Yes, well, maybe you shouldn't believe everything you read," he said quietly.

**"Dr. Ivan Kirilovitch!" exclaimed the head of the London branch of the ISA. "After all this time." He glanced down at the information on his desk. "We are sure it really *is* him,** aren't we?"

Agent Assia Dawson nodded. "His statement checks out. Besides, he knows too much about the day-to-day working routines of the Arkadia Clinic to have made it up. And the hospital has run a DNA test on him, and his DNA matches that of Dr. Kirilovitch," she told him.

"Ivan Kirilovitch. Of all the people to run over, in all the capital cities of the world." The head of the ISA shook his head in disbelief. "What would you bet the odds are on that happening? A billion to one?"

"I've looked through the files again. They never actually reported finding a body," Assia observed. "The Russian authorities just automatically presumed that he had died in that burned-out car. There was no coroner's inquest."

Her boss eye-rolled. "Yes, that'd be right – useless lot! The FSB couldn't find their bums with both hands and a map!" he scoffed. "So Kirilovitch is still alive. Amazing! And we pick him up off a Paris street. Exactly as our people are investigating what Boris Arkady got up to at his clinic. Talk about a lucky break!"

"It certainly is extraordinarily lucky," Assia agreed.

"Do we know any details about what he's been doing all this time?"

Assia shook her head. "He's not saying much," she said.

The head of the ISA grinned delightedly. "Nevertheless. Ivan Kirilovitch! Quite a feather in our cap, eh? Great stuff. His testimony could be the breakthrough we need right now." He stabbed his index finger excitedly at the pile of documentation on his desk. "Kirilovitch was there – he was actually working at the clinic as a surgeon. Unless he was completely blind, he must have known what was going on. He must have seen something." He glanced across the desk at Assia. "You're

looking worried, Agent Dawson. Do we have a problem?"

Assia nodded slowly. She sucked in air. "Possibly. As you know, under normal circumstances, we'd set up a small debriefing team in Paris and question Dr. Kirilovitch there on the spot. Only we can't do that, because it appears that he won't agree to it."

The head of the ISA leaned across the desk. "Why not?"

"Kirilovitch says Nikolai might possibly have recognized him. He isn't sure. They only saw each other for a few seconds. But he says that he'll only talk to us on one condition: that we relocate him somewhere else. Out of France, preferably. Suki says he's absolutely adamant about it. She thinks he's afraid Nikolai could come looking for him. Because of what happened in the past."

The head of the ISA nodded. "I understand." He glanced down at the report lying on his desk. "Kirilovitch has vital information; we can't afford for anything to happen to him." He paused for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. Then he went on, "Right, this is how we're going to play it: we'll offer Kirilovitch witness protection and find somewhere safe where we can debrief him."

"I think that's a good plan," Assia agreed. "As a precaution, I've already asked Suki and Stash to keep a watch on him until he leaves hospital. Just in case."

The head of the ISA nodded. "Sound thinking. As soon as he's discharged, we'll find a place for him to stay. Any suggestions where he could go?"

Assia pursed her lips. "Well," she said slowly and thoughtfully, "it's tricky, I can see that." The head of the ISA watched her closely. Then suddenly her expression changed, her face brightened. "Actually, sir, now I come to think of it, I believe I know where we *could* put him."

The head of the ISA nodded. "Well done, Agent Dawson. I knew I could rely on you to come up with a satisfactory solution. I'll deal with the necessary paperwork and leave all the other details up to you." He shook his head in disbelief. "You know, I still can't get my head around it: the man is killed in a road accident in Russia, then resurfaces ten years later in Paris, living under a false name."

Assia nodded. "There's certainly a story there."

The head of the ISA shot her a swift glance. "Arkady and Kirilovitch," he said slowly. "What do you reckon? Something must've gone terribly wrong."

Assia nodded again. "I think there might well be a lot more to this than meets the eye," she said thoughtfully.

The head of the ISA raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I'm absolutely convinced that there's more," he said happily. "And I'm relying on you to find out exactly what it is."

**SOME TIME LATER, IN A SNACK BAR ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN, JAZMIN TOOK A BIG BITE OF HER CARAMEL-CHOC-CHUNK COOKIE AND TRIED TO THINK POSITIVE THOUGHTS. HEY, SHE TOLD HERSELF**

brightly, today had been A Good Day. She had learned lots of Interesting Stuff which, although she couldn't actually recall any of it right now would, at some time in the future, stand her in Good Stead and make her a Better Person.

And the reason she was currently sitting in Cookies-4-U all on her own was her choice, right, and definitely not because everybody that she knew had been invited over to Honi Delacy's house for a pampering session. Followed by takeout and a scary movie.

Jazmin broke a chunk off her second cookie (triple-nut-choc-chip). She was not going to get Hamlety about this, she thought. She reminded herself that she and Honi Delacy had never got on from day one. She repeated to herself that this was not her fault. So people thought she was weird: that was their problem. She reassured herself that most of the girls in her class were so shallow they made a puddle on the pavement look deep. And finally, she reasoned that if she was up for a bit of pampering, she could go home, play ambient music, light a few scented candles and run herself a nice, big, bubbly bath.

She had options. She did not need to be with other people to have fun.

Jazmin scarfed down the last bit of cookie and got up. After all, it wasn't even as if she'd ever been Miss Social Queen to begin with, she told herself firmly. As she had frequently been told over the years: she wore the wrong clothes, said the wrong things, was the wrong height and

spent far too much time daydreaming, or with her nose stuck in a stupid book. Misconception followed her around like a dopey spaniel. But so what? Life moved on. Deal with it. She picked up her bag and headed out into the no-sun no-fun November afternoon. She had books to drop off at the public library on her way home. Places to go, things to do.

She set off determinedly across town.

The library, a big modern glass and steel building, was located on the ground floor of the shopping and leisure complex. Jazmin dumped her books on the counter and headed for the fiction area. According to Honi Delacy, the public library was the haunt of loners, überboffs and no-lifers. Hey, maybe that's why I always feel so right at home here, she thought, letting her bravado slip temporarily.

Jazmin selected a couple of the latest crime thrillers. Her favourite kind of fiction. She took them over to the issue point. Eventually, when she was old enough to set up her business as a secret agent and crime fighter, she thought to herself, fumbling for her card, she wouldn't need any training. She'd have learned it all already from books. She swiped her card and was just returning it to her purse, when someone behind her cleared their throat. Then tapped her lightly on the shoulder. Then said: "Er...hi there, how're you doing?"

Dropping her card on the floor, Jazmin spun round. There was a boy standing right behind her in the queue.

He was holding a couple of books and was smiling in a friendly fashion. Frowning, Jazmin stared at him. Then her face cleared. She recognized him. He was in some of her classes at the learning centre. "I'm good," she said.

"We go to the same learning centre," the boy went on, as if he'd read her mind. He placed his books next to hers on the counter, then bent down and retrieved her card from the floor. "I've been going there since the end of last term. My family moved to London from Bristol in June. You've just started at the centre recently, haven't you?"

For a fleeting moment, Jazmin considered explaining to the boy how actually, she'd been a student there for the last four and a half years, only she'd been away in Prague for a couple of months over the summer helping her mum on an assignment. Then she changed her mind. What was the point? Her life was complicated enough. If this boy thought she was new in town, fine. She might as well go along with it.

"I've seen you a couple of times hanging around on your own," the boy continued, swiping his card. "It's hard making friends in a new place, isn't it?" he said, looking at her sympathetically. Jazmin observed that he had very nice hazel-coloured eyes behind his titanium-framed glasses, and that even if he wasn't Mr. Totally-Lunchable, he was still quite good-looking in a Clark Kenty sort of way.

"Sorry, I don't know your name," the boy said. "It's...?"

"Jazmin. Jazmin Dawson."

"Right. Hi, Jazmin. And you've checked out some books as well." The boy peered over her shoulder. "Whoa – they look a bit fierce," he laughed.

Grimacing, Jazmin began stuffing the books into her bag. "They're for my mum," she improvised quickly, "she likes reading that sort of stuff. You know how they are."

The boy nodded. Squinting sideways, Jazmin read the titles of the books he had chosen: *A History of Mathematics* and *Introduction to Advanced Maths*. Oh boy.

"Wait up, I'll walk with you," the boy said, tucking his books under one arm. "Oh – sorry, my name's Zeb. Zeb Stone," he said, holding the door open politely for her.

Jazmin and Zeb walked together through the shopping arcade. Zeb, who was much taller than she was, strode on quickly, which meant that Jazmin, who was used to dawdling and window-shopping, was forced to take extra steps to keep up. "So Zeb," she puffed, remembering Rule One of the Successful Girl's Guide to Dateville (Ask Him Questions About Himself), "umm...you're like...into maths?"

The boy's eyes gleamed. "Oh definitely," he replied emphatically.

Jazmin cast about frantically for something clever and mathsy to say. Fortunately, Zeb didn't appear to notice her inability to come up with anything. "Recently, I've been looking into Zeno's paradoxes," he went on enthusiastically.

Jazmin felt bits of her brain suddenly going fluffy. "Yeah?"

"And Aristotle's refutations of course. It's incredible the way something dating right back to 1000BC can still be so relevant to us today, isn't it?"

"Mmm. Right."

"I mean, our whole understanding of the concept of infinity is based on these Greek guys and what they came up with. Amazing, isn't it!"

"Amazing."

They left the shopping complex and crossed the road together. Zeb went on talking happily about the neo-Pythagoreans and mean proportionals, and Jazmin went on pretending that she understood what he was saying and agreed with every word, while secretly wondering how anybody could be so incredibly boring. Even her teeth were falling asleep. Eventually, after a long, snooze-making, one-sided discussion about the distinction between number and magnitude, Zeb unexpectedly asked: "So how about you, Jazmin? Do you like maths?"

"Oh. Me? Err, yeah, it's okay."

"What sort of maths do you like?"

"I'm into calculating things, I guess," Jazmin bluffed, thinking back to her clothes shopping trip the previous weekend, and her futile attempt to stick to a budget.

"That's great," Zeb exclaimed enthusiastically. "Do you know, I've never met a girl who was interested in maths

before? All the girls I know are only interested in clothes and shopping. Maybe we could work together? I've done quite a bit of vector analysis."

"Yeah? Wow. Impressive."

They walked on in silence for a bit. Then Zeb cleared his throat and said: "So...um, tell me all about you."

Jazmin did a face scrunch. She always found personal questions difficult to answer. Talking about herself didn't come naturally. Anyway, what was there to tell? She was fourteen and nine months. 1.57 metres tall. Could lose a little weight, but couldn't get it together. Curly shoulder-length brown hair. Blue-green eyes. A healthy disregard for authority. An unhealthy dependence upon cookies, chocolate and crime fiction. The jury was out on her social life. That was it, really. Briefly, Jazmin toyed with the idea of casually dropping in a few details from the exciting, fast-paced life of her crime-fighting alter-ego Jaz Dawson, just to make herself sound a bit more interesting, but decided on second thoughts to resist the temptation, so there followed a long and uncomfortable pause while she groped frantically for something to say, and Zeb waited patiently for her to say it. Finally, she took a deep breath and announced: "Uh – I can juggle."

Zeb raised his eyebrows and looked surprised. Clearly he'd expected something a little higher up the intellectual scale than circus skills. "Oh really? Err, that's unusual. How come?" he asked politely.

"Someone taught me," Jazmin said, then paused. Her eyes flicked away from Zeb.

Suddenly, to her horror, she felt her throat thicken, tears pooling in her eyes. She hadn't realized how much it hurt to think of Tonda Palach, the Czech student she had met over the summer. He had been her first real boyfriend, but the relationship had come to a dramatic and tragic end. The scars on her heart still hadn't healed. The pause continued, becoming more and more awkward. Then, to Jazmin's relief, they reached the apartment block where she lived. "Okay, this is me," she said, turning to face Zeb. "Thanks for the company."

"No problem. Hope your mum enjoys the books."

"What books? Oh yeah, right. I'm sure she will." Jazmin gave him a little finger wave. "See you around," she said, hurrying quickly up the front steps and into the building.

She got the lift to the third floor and let herself into the apartment. Dumping her bag in the hallway, she went to fix herself a snack. So, all things considered, it had been an interesting afternoon, she thought. She had a pile of good books to read, and she'd met a new boy, albeit a rather studious one. No relationships though, she told herself firmly. She'd already seen that movie, and she hated the ending. Though it all went to prove that you never knew who you were going to run into in a library.

In the kitchen, Jazmin hacked a loaf of bread into alarmingly uneven slices and slapped butter thickly onto

them, while letting her mind continue to run on Zeb Stone. He was quite nice-looking, she decided, even if he was a bit geeky. And perhaps the maths fixation was just some nervous social thing. Maybe over time, he'd normalize out. She opened an overhead cupboard and rummaged inside for a jar of something suitably gooey to put on the bread.

Jazmin made herself a peanut-butter-and-chocolate-spread sandwich with marshmallow sprinkles, and carried it and her bag up to her room, where she arranged her homework book neatly on her desk. She always went through this little ritual every afternoon in the hope that one day it might inspire her to do some actual work. So far, it hadn't.

While she munched her sandwich, she checked her micro. There were no messages. No texts, no chat, no gossip, no scandal. Zip. Zilch. Nothing. Was she surprised? Not really. Jazmin pulled a face. A long, homeworkful evening stretched ahead of her. Time to initiate phase two, she thought. A candlelit, foam-filled bath. With suitably soothing music. And then to follow, perhaps some TV, while she waited for her mum and her pizza to arrive. And hey, she could always do her homework later, couldn't she?

She went to run the water for her bath.