SWIFT AND HAWK
CYBERSPIES

LOGAN MACX



WALKER
BOOKS

For K, O, R, S, W – who kept on asking about it.

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EMERGENCY EXIT

Caleb Quinn had never expected to use the emergency exit plan. He went to his bedroom door, listening hard. The voices coming from downstairs belonged to his mum and a woman he did not recognize with a faintly Eastern European accent. He couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but it was sounding less and less friendly. Something strange was happening.

He had just got back from school in the centre of London, cycling along the Thames Path to his house in Nine Elms. It was the first week of the autumn term. After calling hello to his mum, who was working on her laptop in the kitchen, he'd run upstairs to dump his bag and grab a couple of things. His idea for the evening had been simple: have some dinner, then head outside to his high-tech computer lab, which was on a barge moored nearby at Nine Elms Pier. There he could spend a few hours working on a big content

update for *Terrorform*, the sci-fi action-adventure video game that he had programmed himself.

The voices rose. Caleb decided to find out what was going on. He took out the Flex, a superpowerful computer handset that he had designed and built over the past few months; he'd been putting together devices like this since before he could talk. To a casual observer, the Flex looked like a pretty standard smartphone. But it was much more than that. Caleb had made it from an ultra-tough, flexible material that could be bent or folded into any shape. It had an operating system that was more advanced than anything you could buy, with a unique range of special applications and functions. These were activated by coded, single-word commands. He murmured one of them now.

"Phantom. Mum's laptop."

The Phantom app sent the Flex's eyes and ears elsewhere. A view of the kitchen appeared instantly on its screen, ripped from the camera on his mum's open computer. He backed away from his door and sat down on his bed to take a look.

Harper Quinn was leaning against a counter. She was a senior CIA agent, originally from California, stationed at the American embassy just down the road from where they lived. She was dressed in a pale grey business suit, cut to conceal her sidearm, with a dark blue shirt beneath. Her red-brown hair was pulled

back into a ponytail and her arms were crossed. She was wearing the no-nonsense expression that – Caleb had noticed – she used on colleagues even more often than she used on him.

Across the room from Harper was a very tall woman – at least six foot two, Caleb guessed. Her hair was an angular orange wedge, shaved at the sides, that blazed brightly in the kitchen's lights. She was dressed like a biker in a black leather jacket, jeans and heavy boots. A silver ring glinted in her eyebrow.

Two men were also visible. One, a huge, bull-like figure, was in the passageway that led to the front door, blocking it off completely. His back was turned, his shaved head almost brushing against the ceiling. The other one, small and skinny by comparison, was standing just behind the orange-haired woman. He had a short lime-green Mohawk and squinty, weasel eyes that flicked this way and that as if seeking some sly advantage. Both were dressed in a similar style to the woman, who was clearly their boss.

Caleb studied these visitors closely. It wasn't all *that* unusual for his mum to have evening meetings with colleagues and others whom she described as "contacts". But the intelligence people who came to the house were usually more ... well, more intelligent-looking. He eased up the volume.

"So," Harper was saying sceptically, "have I got this right? You're telling me that you have important

information … but I have to come with you to get it?"

The orange-haired woman gave her a humourless smile. "That is correct," she replied. "We have the information you requested, Agent Quinn. But more than this. Somethingw should see for yourself. Please, come."

Harper was shaking her head. "Our contact is based on strict secrecy, Ms Szabo. You were instructed to use the designated drop in Brussels. You shouldn't be in London at all. You certainly shouldn't be at this house. I have no idea how—"

"My information concerns Xavier Torrent. And yes, you have to see for yourself."

Caleb shifted, leaning a little nearer to the Flex's screen. Xavier Torrent. He knew that name, he was sure of it – although he couldn't say exactly where he had heard it before.

Clearly, his mother knew it too. She was impressed, excited even, but he could tell that she was trying hard not to show it. "All right," she said. "Sure. We can work something out. Meet me at exit four of Vauxhall Tube Station in thirty minutes. Then we can—"

"No." The orange-haired woman – Szabo – put a hand on her hip. "No, you must come with us now. We have an opportunity. Also – it is for your own safety." She paused. "And you must bring your son. Xavier Torrent will know that we have made contact. We act now or we lose the chance. It would be

safer – for you and your son – if we all go together."

There was a long moment of silence. The weaselly man stuck a finger in his ear and started wiggling it about, as though there was something stuck inside. Caleb stared at the image of his mum. She didn't move or speak.

"You're wasting time, Agent Quinn." Szabo took a step forward, her leather jacket falling open to reveal a gun of her own, tucked away in a shoulder holster. "Go and get the boy. Then we can all leave."

"He's away tonight," Harper replied, speaking very clearly. Caleb could have sworn that she glanced over towards the laptop, as if she knew that he was listening in. "He's staying at his friend's house. Brian Beasley."

Caleb caught his breath. Brian Beasley ... did not exist.

Whoa. He passed his hand through his hair. Brian Beasley was a codeword – a secret instruction from his mum, a name that they had come up with together. "*If you ever hear me say 'Brian Beasley'*," she had told him, her face suddenly serious, "*then you get the hell away. Don't worry about me, I'm trained for this stuff. But you get away. Go back to school. Wait for me to call.*"

Caleb had promised that he would. Ever since his dad had died a couple of years earlier, he'd grown more and more used to his mum's secretive espionage activities. One time, not long after Christmas, the two

of them had gone away to Edinburgh for a weekend. On the first evening, Harper had got a priority call from the Agency; Caleb had to leave her at their hotel and travel alone across the unfamiliar city to the US Consulate General. But they'd never had to use this particular codeword before. There had never been any trouble actually *in their house*. His earlier hunch was right: this was an emergency.

Szabo was sharper than she seemed. She had realized what had happened. In one movement, she crossed the kitchen and took Harper's gun from inside her jacket. There could no longer be any doubt – this was an abduction.

"He's here," she snapped. "Pyke, go upstairs. Get him."

Reluctantly, the Mohawked man took the finger from his ear. "But she just said—"

"Idiot! That was code! Go and get the boy!"

Caleb was already out of his chair, pulling on a black hoodie. He folded the Flex into his back pocket and grabbed a crumpled ten-pound note from the desk – all the money he had in the world. Then he crept out through his bedroom door.

The emergency exit plan involved him leaving the house via the bathroom window. The bathroom was on the other side of the wide landing, however, and he could already hear Pyke tramping up the stairs. Damn. There was no way he'd be able to get over

there in time. Making a split-second decision, he swerved into his mum's bedroom and rolled down under her bed.

But Pyke, of course, had no idea where he should be looking. To Caleb's horror, the weaselly, Mohawked man passed straight by his room and barged into his mum's, banging the door back as he did so.

Caleb bit the inside of his cheek and tried not to breathe. The slightest sound and he would be caught. The smell of stale cigarettes and beer wafted through the room. He watched a pair of battered motorcycle boots walk slowly around the bed, treading dirt into his mother's pale blue carpet.

Pyke was clearly in the habit of talking to himself. "The kid ain't gonna be in 'ere, is he? This is the mother's room. Or else my eyes deceive me – which never happens, Pykey, my friend. Oh, 'allo – what's this, then? *Very* nice picture…"

The thug had stopped by the side of the bed. Caleb could have reached out and undone his frayed laces. He turned his face away and tried to edge backwards.

"This must be the lad we're after." Pyke snorted. "Looks like a right cheeky little scumbag. Nothing a few days with the boss wouldn't put right, eh?"

Caleb could hear his mother at the foot of the stairs. "I've told you, Szabo," she was saying firmly, "he's not here. You can search all you like."

Szabo was ignoring her, though. "Krall," she said to

the huge man, "go and see what that moron is up to."

Pyke dropped what he was holding onto the floor and stood on it, cracking the glass. Caleb flinched. It was a framed photograph, taken about a year earlier: Caleb was sitting proudly on the prow of his barge, his auburn hair a little shorter than it was now, grinning in the sunshine.

Krall's heavy footsteps mounted the staircase. Pyke hurried back around the bed, as if he was afraid of the man coming up.

"He's not in 'ere," he said, going out onto the landing. "This is his mum's room."

Krall grunted. The two of them seemed to be looking around, deciding where to search next. Caleb took a breath, trying not to inhale a lungful of carpet fluff. He was going to need a distraction. He slid the Flex from his pocket.

The Quinns lived in a small converted warehouse, set back a short distance from the river. When they'd moved in, the CIA had installed a top-grade internal security system, fitted as standard in the homes of high-ranking personnel. The software that controlled it was hack-proof – or so they thought.

"Spider Monkey," Caleb whispered.

This was the all-purpose hacking app that he'd programmed into the Flex. In less than ten seconds, Spider Monkey had bypassed three supposedly unbreakable passwords, giving Caleb full and invisible

access to the security system. He crawled from under the bed and rose to a crouch.

Out on the landing, the two thugs had split up – Pyke heading towards Harper's office, while Krall heaved into Caleb's bedroom. He had the horrible feeling that Pyke was actually the more friendly of the two agents; Krall moved and sounded like some kind of prehistoric monster. Caleb held his breath and waited until he was sure that both men were through their respective doorways. Then he sneaked as quickly as he could across the landing.

He made it to the bathroom just as a volley of swear words erupted from the office, along with the sound of several boxes falling off a shelf. Pyke must have opened the junk cupboard where his mum kept all her old case files. He was throwing stuff onto the floor, kicking at it wildly – and twisting back towards the landing as he did so. In a couple of seconds, he would be out and searching the bathroom.

It was now or never. Caleb pulled up the hacked security system and tapped the box marked LOCKDOWN: DOORS.

Immediately, reinforced steel panels slammed across every doorway, slicing out from inside the frames. An alarm started up – an ear-splitting electronic shriek that tore through the entire house.

Caleb went to the bathroom window, slid up the pane and stepped out onto the kitchen roof. The fresh

air was a relief. In the dips of sound, he could just about hear Pyke and Krall, banging their fists on the panels and calling down to their orange-haired boss.

Balancing carefully, Caleb walked along the edge of the roof, pausing to peer in through the skylight. Szabo was going over to the base of the stairs, Harper's semiautomatic pistol in her hand. She began yelling up at Krall and Pyke, trying to make herself heard over the deafening racket.

Harper hadn't moved from the kitchen counter. Caleb knew that she could have easily taken this chance to disarm Szabo – to turn the tables. But she had stayed where she was. As he watched, she took out her phone, made a series of quick movements with her forefinger, then put it away again.

The alarm stopped, the steel security panels retracting as rapidly as they'd slid out. An instant later the Flex buzzed. A message from his mum.

Nicely done. Get to school. Find Professor Clay. X.

A tiny icon next to the message thread told Caleb that she'd deactivated her phone.

"False alarm," he heard Harper say, through the glass of the skylight. "One of your guys must have triggered it. Can we put a stop to this, Szabo? I told you – the boy isn't here. We're wasting time. I'll come with you. Let's go."

Caleb read the message again. He realized what was happening: his mum was going to let them take her,

to see what she could find out and give him a chance to escape. He gazed up at the sky for a few seconds. It was a clear, deep blue, tinted to the west with the first traces of dusk. He had a mission: get back to school and find Professor Clay. She would know what to do.

Caleb went to a special computing and technology school called the ARC Institute – which stood for AI, Robotics, Cybertech, three of its main areas of study. The ARC was based in a tall, gleaming, ultra-modern tower block, just a few streets away from St Paul's Cathedral. Getting there from Nine Elms took about twenty-five minutes on a bike – although Caleb's record was twenty-one. Professor Tilda Clay was the ARC's deputy headteacher. She lived in the tower and looked after the ARC's forty or so boarders from around the world. She would be in charge of the whole place now that the school day was over. Clay was a world-famous cybersecurity expert who was known to have close links with several intelligence agencies, and so it made complete sense that Caleb's mum had told him to go and find her. But, still, he didn't exactly relish the prospect – Clay had a well-earned reputation for being the strictest teacher at the ARC. She could be severe. Caleb had already got a couple of detentions for things that were totally not his fault. In all honesty, he was a little bit scared of her.

Caleb climbed down a trellis into their backyard and let himself out onto the path behind, which ran

alongside the river. Crouching in the shadows, he eased himself up to the corner so that he could look towards the street.

A black van was parked on the cobbles at the front of the house. Another thug was standing by its back doors, alert for any sign of the police. These were serious people. Caleb hoped his mum knew what she was doing.

He stole away from the corner as quietly as he could and set off along the path. Light from the late-afternoon sun shimmered on the surface of the water. The Thames could look so different day to day, even hour by hour: sometimes sparkling, sometimes dull and brown, as if it were alive and had moods of its own. A short distance along the bank he stopped where a gangway led up to Nine Elms Pier. He glanced around, then took out his key, unlocked the white gate and stepped onto the pontoon. Upstream was Battersea Power Station, its four giant chimneys stark against the horizon.

At the end of the marina was an old Dutch barge, painted dark green and blue with some faded floral patterning on the side panels. The portholes were all covered by blackout blinds, and a compact, state-of-the-art satellite dish had been mounted on one corner of the roof. On the barge's prow, written in a scroll in elaborate letters, was *Queen Jane, Approximately*. It had been converted by Caleb's English father, Patrick,

who'd named it after his favourite song. He'd been a pioneering computer scientist – a specialist in medical AI. The *Queen Jane* had been his laboratory before he fell ill. Now it was Caleb's HQ and the place he loved most in the world. He touched an icon on the Flex's screen that put the barge into maximum-security mode, which made it impossible to break into without drawing some major attention to yourself.

Caleb's bike was stored in a little sheltered rack next to the water. He took it out, quickly wheeled it back to the gate, then rode onto the riverside path and began pedalling downstream. That summer, he'd won a medal at the London BMX School Games. He was fast – but he seldom went at race speed in the city. This trip was different, though, and soon he was absolutely flying – around the modern tower precincts, around the MI6 building, under Lambeth Bridge, past the Houses of Parliament opposite. The way narrowed just before the London Eye and he had to swerve around a large crowd of pedestrians. A few minutes later he was spearing across Blackfriars Bridge, riding towards St Paul's and the ARC.

Caleb's mind buzzed with questions. What was going on? Who were these people, with their leather jackets and luminous haircuts? Why had they taken his mum? And what was Clay going to do about it?

We'd love to hear what you thought of



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