

The Mission

By: Naomi Falk

I was losing him. I jumped over a fruit basket that he had knocked over and continued the chase. The crowd was getting thicker, but it was my fault for chasing him right into the farmer's market. I weaved in and out of the various booths. Someone shoved a pineapple in my face, but I pushed it away. Finally, I caught a glimpse of the man's hands. He was holding something small and round.

The bomb.

I looked at my watch. Two minutes and twenty-three seconds. That wasn't a lot of time. Maybe if I could corner him...

I looked around and noticed that he was running towards the end of the farmer's market.

*Perfect.*

I sped after him as we both exited the crowd. My heart was pounding like *it* was the bomb about to go off.

One minute and fourteen seconds.

*Ok, time to panic.*

The man was still a good 10 feet ahead of me. Suddenly, he threw the bomb to the side. It rolled and came to a stop under a rock. The man kept running in the opposite direction. I paused and considered. Defusing the bomb was the most important goal. I could always catch the guy later.

I ran over to the rock and knelt down to grab the bomb. Except something was off. Black paint smeared onto my hands, revealing a pinkish orange color underneath. I wiped the rest of the paint off.

It was a bath bomb, still wrapped in plastic.

I stood up and looked around frantically. The guy that I was chasing had completely disappeared. Just then, an explosion boomed from over in the farmer's market.

The bomb.

As smoke and debris started to fill the air, I felt something press against the back of my head.

I sighed and looked at my watch. I watched as the last ten seconds counted down. As soon as the timer got to zero, all of my surroundings disappeared. I was now in a room with all black walls and yellow lines making a grid. The simulation chamber.

I turned around and faced my instructor, who was pointing a gun at me.

"You're dead," he said. He lowered his gun and held out his hand for the bath bomb. I tossed it to him.

"That wasn't fair," I said. "The guy was literally wearing all black and running away with a bomb in his hand."

"Did it ever occur to you that he was a decoy?" my instructor asked. He had pulled a clipboard out of his briefcase and was now making notes on it. He didn't look very happy.

"Well, if I had had more time to observe--" I started.

"You don't get more time, Miss Piper! This is what you've been learning, all semester! You get less than a second. And since you've failed this final exam, I have no choice but to recommend that you switch to the Research Track," my instructor said.

"No, Dr. Perkins, please! Today was just...an off day. I want to stay on the Mission Track," I said.

Dr. Perkins lowered his clipboard. "Listen, Piper. You're a good student. And you come from a long line of good spies. You get one retake on the final. But if you fail again, I'll be

forced to formally recommend that you switch to Research,” he said. He held out the paper he was writing on, which was my report.

“Don’t worry,” I said, taking it from his hand. “I won’t.”

I stormed into my dorm room and slammed the door behind me. Genesis, my roommate, was sitting at her desk, and the loud noise caused her to jump in her seat.

“Geez, Piper. At least *try* to be stealthy sometimes,” she said.

I flopped down on my bed and didn’t respond. I was not in the mood for a Genesis Critique.

“So you failed the test. At least you get another chance!” Genesis said.

I sat up in my bed. “How did you know--nevermind. I get it, ‘we’re spies, we know everything.’”

“No, you dropped your report on the ground. And you can stop being so defensive. Everyone’s only trying to help you--”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Except it wasn’t just one knock, it was a series of complicated rhythms that sounded more like a drum solo at a rock concert.

“*Oh my--*Flynn, just come in!” Genesis yelled over the knocks.

The knocking abruptly stopped and Flynn strode in looking absolutely calm.

“Sup guys?” he said. He plopped down in the swivel chair at my desk and pushed himself backwards across the room, coming to a stop between mine and Genesis’ beds.

“You *both* could learn a thing or two about entering a room quietly,” Genesis muttered.

Flynn shrugged. “That’s never really been my thing.” He reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out a strand of licorice and began chewing on it loudly.

“Ok, are you here for a reason or are you just being annoying?” Genesis said, closing her textbook.

“Why can’t it be both?” Flynn asked.

Genesis turned to look at me. I was still sitting on my bed, contemplating whether or not I could strangle Flynn with his own licorice.

“Remind me why we’re friends with him again?” Genesis asked.

“I’m not really sure,” I said.

Flynn’s pockets looked really full. If he had at least six strands...

“Oh come on, guys! Without me, you two would know *nothing* about each other! You’re both so...serious,” Flynn said, swallowing the last of his licorice.

“Thanks,” Genesis and I said at the same time.

“That wasn’t a compliment,” Flynn said, “and serious won’t help you if you’re predictable.”

“Hey! Don’t say the ‘P’ word!” Genesis said, gesturing not-so-subtly to me with her head. I pretended not to notice.

“What, ‘predictable?’” Flynn asked.

“Stop saying it!” Genesis exclaimed.

“Guys, it’s fine. I’m not offended,” I said, picking a piece of lint off of my jacket.

“Oh so *now* you don’t get defensive,” Genesis said. She put her textbook back into one of her desk drawers. Clearly, Flynn and I had distracted her beyond the point of return.

“Well, Flynn did beat me in “Rock, Paper, Scissors” 15 times in a row last week,” I said.

“That had to be more than just luck.”

I looked over at Flynn, expecting to see his triumphant grin, but instead he was just looking at me with a thoughtful expression.

“You know what your problem is,” he said finally, wagging his licorice stick at me. “You’re too surface-level. You never go deep.”

I scoffed. “I can be *deep*.”

“Ok. Staring contest. Go,” Flynn said.

“Wait, now?” I asked.

“Yes. Now.”

Flynn swiveled around in his chair so that he was facing me on my bed. I sat up and crossed my legs and stared back at him. He looked completely...calm. His eyes were relaxed and he was still chewing his licorice, contemplatively. Meanwhile, my eyes were starting to ache.

“So,” Flynn said, “what’s your last name?”

“I thought this was a staring contest, not an interrogation,” I said. My eyes were starting to water, but I didn’t look away.

“See? Told you--surface level,” Flynn said, shrugging.

“We’re not supposed to know anything about each other’s families,” I said. “It’s a safety risk, remember?”

“Safety risk, shmafety risk,” Flynn said. “We’re your *friends*! Besides, how could we even betray you? We go to the same school! We’re on the same team!”

I didn’t respond for a second. Instead, I kept staring into Flynn’s eyes. Maybe he was right. He’d basically been annoying me ever since my first day at the Academy. I guess somewhere along the way we became friends. If I had to trust anyone...

“Stone,” I said.

Flynn choked. “What?”

“Stone. My last name is Stone,” I repeated.

“Stone, like, the Stone Academy for Espionage?” Flynn asked.

“Yes.”

“Where we go to school?”

“Yes.”

“Like, the building we’re in right now? Here, sitting in your dorm room?”

“Yes.”

Flynn was right. Telling people stuff was fun. Both he and Genesis were staring at me, jaws dropped.

“Also, you blinked,” I added.

“Piper, you shouldn’t have told us that!” Genesis exclaimed. “Do you realize how many enemies you probably have?”

It was true. My family was infamous among the spy community. It was why the Academy was in an untraceable location, and why no one here was allowed to know anything about each other. Every spy has an arch nemesis. That’s just common knowledge.

“Relax, Gen. As long as you’re not gonna turn evil, I think we’re safe,” Flynn joked.

“First of all, never call me that again, *Fly*. Second, you can never be too careful,” Genesis pointed out.

“First of all, *please* always call me that,” Flynn begged. “Also, careful is my middle name!”

Genesis rolled her eyes. “Sure it is. Anyway, I have to study and you two lovebirds are making that impossible, so see ya.” She got up and swung her backpack over her shoulder as she opened the door.

Flynn and I spoke at the same time.

“We are *not* lovebirds!”

“You don’t *have* to study.”

Genesis just smiled as she closed the door on us.

“So, how does it feel to lose?” I asked playfully. I looked over at Flynn, expecting some kind of witty retort, but he wasn’t even looking at me. He was staring at the door with a strange expression on his face.

“Hm?” he asked, looking back over at me. “Sorry, you know what? I just realized that I have a meeting with Professor Penman. You know how he gets when we’re late. Anyway, study up for your final! You’ll do great.”

He jumped up from the swivel chair and darted out of the room. I watched the empty chair spin in circles, not unlike my thoughts.

“*Psst.*”

I turned over in my bed and pulled the covers back over my head.

“*PSST.*”

Someone was shaking my shoulders. Groggily, I sat up and pulled the covers off of my face. Standing there was Flynn, staring at me.

“Oh, it’s just you,” I mumbled. I glanced outside. It was dark. I pulled the charger out of my cell phone and checked the time.

“Flynn, why are you here at...2:30 in the morning?” I asked. I glanced over at Genesis’ bed. It was empty. I rubbed my eyes as everything started coming more into focus. That’s when I noticed Flynn’s hands. They were zip-tied together.

“What--”

“Piper, I’m sorry, it’s all my fault--” Flynn started. Then, someone from behind him grabbed my shoulder and forced a burlap sack over my head.

“What the--hey! Stop it!” I yelled as I tried to squirm out of the person’s grip. But they had already secured the sack over my head and zip-tied my wrists together.

“The less you struggle, the easier this will be,” the person said. I recognized that voice.

“Genesis?” I asked.

“The one and only,” she said. “Now move.”

She grabbed my wrists and yanked me off of my bed. Then she started to pull me across the room. I tried to dig in my heels, but she was too strong. Finally, I gave up and walked with her.

“So...are you kidnapping us?” I asked after we had been walking for a few minutes. I was still in my pajamas, and I didn’t have any shoes on.

“Wow, with an observation like that, you just might graduate from the Academy after all!” Genesis exclaimed sarcastically as we came to a halt. My feet scraped against the concrete.

So far, Flynn hadn’t said a word. I heard a car pull up in front of us. Genesis opened the door and pushed me and Flynn into the backseat. I flopped sideways on the cold leather.

The car drive was silent. Every once in a while, the driver would make a sharp turn that would cause me to almost roll off of the seat. Finally, the car lurched and came to a stop.

I managed to twist myself around and sit up tentatively. I heard the door open, and Genesis grabbed my wrists again. She pulled me and Flynn out of the car and started dragging us forward. I felt the wind ruffle through my pajama pants.

*Where are we?*

Genesis continued to pull us along. We entered a very echoey building. I could hear the clacks of Genesis' heels bouncing off of the walls as we walked. I listened for other footfalls, but I didn't hear anything.

We were alone.

Suddenly, Genesis shoved me to the side. I fell onto the floor, which was smooth and cold. Then, Genesis' hands were on my head, untying the sack. When she pulled it off me, I had to blink a few times to let my eyes adjust.

We were in a small, all-white room with no windows and one bright, flickering fluorescent light on the ceiling. A surveillance camera was set up in the corner. I sat up and looked at Genesis standing over me.

"Well I hope you're happy," I said, finally. "If you're trying to get to my dad, he won't come to rescue me. It's too much of a risk."

"Oh I am happy. I know your father won't come to you. But you can tell me where he is. And if you don't," she shoved Flynn down to the ground next to me, "I kill him."

She walked briskly out the door and slammed it behind her. There was a small hatch near the top of the door. Genesis opened it and looked through. I could only see her eyes.

"Look at that: two lovebirds, trapped in a cage!" she laughed as she let go of the hatch and it slammed shut.

I was still sitting on the ground. I looked over at Flynn, expecting to see him also on the ground. Instead, he was already standing, massaging his wrists. His zip-tie was broken on the ground.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“Oh you know, Kidnapping 101,” Flynn joked, laughing nervously.

I stood up and held out my wrists. Flynn grabbed the zip tie, and in one swift motion he yanked it down. It broke and came right off. Then, he walked over to the wall and sank down to the ground. He picked at his shoelace. I walked over and sat against the wall next to him. He looked over at me.

“I’m sorry, this is all my fault,” he said. “Just go ahead and give me--”

“Hey, this is *not* your fault,” I said.

“Yes, it is,” Flynn said. “*I’m* the one who forced you to say your last name. *I’m* the one who followed Genesis after she left. *I’m* the one who overheard her plan and tried to stop her. But instead I got you kidnapped. Genesis is right. I’m expendable.”

He went back to staring at the ground.

My thoughts were spinning in circles. All of this, the kidnapping, Genesis’ threats, and for what? My *family*? I couldn’t let Flynn die just because of my last name.

“Hey,” I said, “look at me. I’m not going to let her hurt you. We’ll find another way out of here.”

Flynn looked up at me and smiled half-heartedly.

I don’t know what it was. Maybe it was because I had never seen Flynn so defeated, or maybe it was because it was three in the morning and I was delirious from lack of sleep.

Whatever the reason, I felt a sudden surge of confidence. If Flynn wasn't going to get us out of here, then it was up to me.

I looked around. The room was completely empty, except for the sacks and the broken zip ties on the ground. I looked at Flynn. He was still wearing his outfit from yesterday, and the fumes coming off of him were *not* pleasant.

I scooted back a little bit. Then I noticed something red dangling from out of his pocket.

"Wait. Do you still have licorice in your pocket?" I asked.

Flynn looked at me strangely and then reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of red licorice.

"Uh, always," Flynn said, as if it were obvious. He mindlessly bit off the end of one of the strands.

A plan began to form in my head.

*She doesn't want me or Flynn. She wants my dad. She needs me alive.*

"How many strands?" I asked.

Flynn looked at his hands. "Um...six?" he guessed.

I smiled. *Perfect.*

"I have a plan."

"I feel like an idiot."

"That's because you *are* an idiot. Now hold still." I finished tying all of the licorice together to make one long strand. Then, I wrapped it around Flynn's neck.

"Perfect!" I exclaimed.

"You seem like you're enjoying this," Flynn remarked.

I just shrugged and smiled. “Ready for your debut performance?” I asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Are you sure this will work?” he asked.

I glanced up at the camera. “Let’s find out.”

I grabbed both ends of the giant licorice strand and put them around Flynn’s neck, like I was trying to choke him. I pulled at it to make it look realistic.

“You’re so *stupid!*” I yelled. “I can’t believe you got us trapped here!”

“Me? *You’re* the one who blurted out your last name like it was nothing!” Flynn shot back. He ducked under the licorice rope and grabbed it out of my hands.

I stumbled backwards. Flynn then wrapped the rope around my neck and pretended to choke me.

“If it wasn’t for you and your stupid family, I wouldn’t even be in this mess!” Flynn yelled, pulling the licorice closer to my neck. I gagged.

“Flynn, stop! I can’t breathe!” I gasped. I fell to the ground, and Flynn fell with me, still pulling at the licorice around my neck.

Just then, the door swung open.

“Stop! I need her alive!” Genesis yelled as she burst into the room.

Without missing a beat, Flynn and I both jumped up and pinned Genesis to the ground. I grabbed the sack and pulled it over her head, and Flynn tied it shut with the licorice.

“Hey! Get off me!” Genesis shouted.

“As you wish,” Flynn said.

He and I got up and bolted out of the room. We ran through the hallways until we saw doors that led outside. We sped down the steps of the building and booked it down the sidewalk,

making as many turns as we could. Finally, my legs gave out and I stopped to take a breath. Flynn stopped next to me.

“You know,” he said, panting, “after Dr. Perkins hears about this, you’ll get into the mission track for sure.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I looked behind me at the building we were running from.

“Let’s just get back to the Academy,” I said.

A week later, I was sitting in a chair outside Dr. Perkins’ office, my final exam report in my hands. Just then, the door opened, and Dr. Perkins stepped out.

“Come on in, Piper,” he said.

I got up and followed him into his office. He sat behind his desk and motioned to a chair on the other side. I sat down. Dr. Perkins started typing on his computer.

“Now, Miss Piper, let’s see about getting your makeup exam scheduled--”

“Actually, that’s not why I’m here,” I interrupted. “I want to switch to the Research Track.”

Dr. Perkins stopped typing and looked over at me. “Oh? Why the sudden change? You’ve proven that you can perform well under pressure.”

I looked down at my feet. “After we escaped, I realized something. If I had done even a little bit of research about Genesis, or taken time to observe what was going on, I could have stopped everything from happening in the first place. That’s what I want to learn how to do. Protect people, so that they’re never in any danger in the first place,” I said.

I handed my final exam report back to Dr. Perkins. He took it and looked at me curiously.

“You realize that you risk losing a very promising career,” he said.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a strand of red licorice.

“Yes. But there are some things that I can’t afford to lose.”