

"I've heard about this ship!" Mike exclaimed. "It's the biggest cruise ship ever constructed!"

"That's correct," Deputy Kapoor agreed, looking pleased by Mike's knowledge. "It's the first of a line of mega-cruisers being built by a Chinese conglomerate in Beijing. The *Emperor* launched last winter and has been cruising in the South Pacific, but it is currently en route to the Caribbean. Its last port of call, ten days ago, was in Hawaii, and it will be making some stops in Central America before passing through the Panama Canal."

"I assume one of those stops is Nicaragua," Erica deduced.

"Yes. Our agents on the ground have learned that Murray Hill plans to board that ship in the port of Corinto tomorrow morning."

"Why?" Alexander asked.

"We have no idea," Deputy Kapoor admitted. "Which is why we are sending all of you to Nicaragua. You'll be boarding that ship in Corinto tomorrow as well."

"We get to go on the *Emperor of the Seas*?" Mike exclaimed. "Awesome! It's supposed to be the most amazing ship ever built! There's a bunch of swimming pools and miniature golf and a ropes course and a rock wall and a water park!" He excitedly pointed to a photograph from the top deck of the ship: a spaghetti tangle of waterslides that dumped into a large pool.

It looked like a whole lot of fun.

Deputy Kapoor gave Mike a sharp look. "The purpose is for you to be investigating Murray Hill, not going on waterslides."

"Do you want us to blend in and look like normal tourists?" Mike asked.

"Of course."

"Well, normal tourists go on waterslides."

Deputy Kapoor frowned. "I suppose you have a point."

"Are you sure this is prudent?" Catherine asked her, then looked to Mike, Erica, and me. "I know that you children have served your country well and faced considerable danger on several other missions. But you're still... well, *children*. Michael, you're only in your first year of training here. And Benjamin, your instructors still won't let you carry a firearm for fear that you'll accidentally shoot yourself with it."

I didn't take offense at this. I was in no hurry to carry a firearm for the exact same reason. And while I had been proud to serve my country on those missions, I hadn't been a big fan of

the “considerable danger” portions of them.

It was only four weeks since I had thwarted the last enemy plot, in which I had nearly been blown to pieces—along with a significant chunk of Washington, DC. That had landed me in the hospital for a few days with some cracked ribs. They had healed, but I was still supposed to be taking it easy.

Deputy Kapoor said, “The Agency is not taking this decision lightly. However, we have our reasons for activating the children. First, they have faced Murray Hill many times and are familiar with his behavior.” She turned to me. “In fact, Agent Ripley, you probably understand Murray Hill better than anyone else at this agency.”

“That’s right,” Mike said supportively. “You probably know what Murray’s thinking before *he* knows what he’s thinking.”

I started to deny this, as Murray Hill had hoodwinked me plenty of times, but Deputy Kapoor continued talking before I could. “Secondly, this cruise ship has been designed for *families*. It turns out, there are many places on the ship where adults aren’t even allowed to go, such as the teen clubs. And Murray is a teenager—albeit an extremely unscrupulous one. If he ventures into any of these adult-free areas, we need agents who can follow him without causing alarm.”

“Good thinking,” Alexander Hale said. “Only... don’t you think it will look suspicious for the children to be traveling alone?”

Deputy Kapoor gave him a stern look, indicating she was disappointed that he hadn’t grasped the nature of the mission yet. “They won’t be alone. They’ll be posing as part of a family. With *you*. You and Catherine will pose as the parents, while Erica, Mike, and Ben will pretend to be your children. Er, well, Erica won’t be pretending, as she actually *is* your child. But the boys will be posing as your sons.”

“We get to be brothers?” Mike asked, thrilled. “Best mission ever!”

“But we don’t look alike,” I pointed out. “And we don’t look like the Hales, either.”

“You’re adopted,” Deputy Kapoor replied. “Which also explains how you can be so close in age.”

“This is so cool!” Mike exclaimed. “I always wanted a brother!”

“You *have* a brother,” I reminded him.

“A *good* brother,” he corrected. “One who doesn’t pin me down and fart on my head.”