

June 28th, 2028

Thud! The wood beside Jack's ear splintered as the carbon blade dug into the old willow tree next to him. In a split second, Jack swiveled, crouched, and launched himself across the lane like a mountain lion bounding after its prey. Pinning the assailant to the ground in an instant, he realized the intruder was not only laughing, but his sister. "If I was a bad guy, you didn't think I'd miss from this range, did you?" Jack's sister Sarah laughed as her brother unpinned her from the ground, and a smile crept over his face. "Happy birthday," she said. "I thought I'd surprise you."

June 2000

Thud! Jack stood frozen as the rubber knife bounced off the plywood sheet behind him. "Jack, Sarah! What's that noise?" shouted their mother. He and his sister laughed and sprinted up the stairs for breakfast.

Jack and Sarah weren't always spies. They used to be somewhat normal siblings, with what might pass as somewhat normal lives. Today, Jack's fortieth birthday, they had been instructed to meet at 13 Victoria Road. It was a massive, old home with tall, clay-shingled, clapboard turrets stretching up into the sky and an expansive, old-fashioned porch sprawling across the entire front of the mansion. Wooden porch swings dangled from chains and rocked gently in the sweet-smelling breeze, scented by the surrounding old-growth lilac and magnolia bushes. The long lane leading to the house was lined with large willow trees; their branches swayed smoothly, calming one's nerves with only a glance. These massive centurions were actually part of the sophisticated security system guarding the route to this remote, hidden fortress near Greenville, Ohio. This was Quotient HQ. It looked nothing like the headquarters of a global intelligence organization.

The facial recognition cameras at the perimeter of the property had lowered its many hidden defenses, allowing Jack and Sarah to stroll casually up the long lane after Sarah's surprise birthday greeting. But Sarah knew this pleasing respite would be short-lived. *They wouldn't call us both here unless something big was happening.*

"Who'd have thought we'd turn out to be actual spies," said

Sarah, her mischievous smile of her childhood making an encore performance.

"I'm not surprised you're a spy. You were never afraid of anything. Me, on the other hand, is a shocker," replied Jack, remembering the many times he negotiated away a situation his little sister had led them into.

Sarah was the type to run into a burning building without hesitation, and, in fact, had done so when she was in high school to save her friend Kat. Jack would at least dial 911 before following his sister into danger. He admired his sister's fearlessness and boundless joy, but also worried the stakes were now higher.

The surveillance micro-drone hovering nearby monitored the two happy siblings as they ambled down the lane. On the side of the house were two old-fashioned cellar doors angled off the ground. After they each hummed a quick tune and smiled for the hidden cameras, the vault-like locks on the doors were released. Jack swung open one of the heavy, tempered steel doors, and Sarah the other. They climbed the rickety steps into the old brick and moss-lined cellar, where they tapped the top of an old paint can with a rhythmic sequence, causing the set of shelves to slide sideways, revealing a short hallway. Two sets of automatic, reinforced sliding doors later, and they walked into the bowels of Quotient. *Get Smart*, thought Jack, smiling as he passed through the doors.

None of Quotient was on the grid. It was powered by its own solar farm and digitally connected by a low earth orbit (LEO) satellite network. Nor was it on the organization charts of the world governments. It was a highly secretive, fully independent spy agency. Other than a few world leaders and some government spy agencies, few knew of its existence. Even less knew how it was able to do what it could do.

So, on Jack's fortieth birthday, he and Sarah entered Quotient HQ to begin a mission like no other.

Let the mission begin.