

J.B. MANAS

*HE COULD SEE
EVERYONE'S PAST
BUT HIS OWN*

**THE
MIRROR
MAN**

The Mirror Man

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Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

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First Edition, August 2022

Advanced Reading Copy

Published by Somerton Press | Philadelphia, PA

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J.B. MANAS



SOMERTON
P R E S S

CHAPTER 1

JUST LIKE CARY GRANT

Philadelphia — Nine Years Later

Julian Black was in his element, his headset drowning out the real world while he roamed the virtual streets of Paris looking for his target. Spread seamlessly across the three large computer monitors on his desk was the most beautifully rendered 3D version of the hilltop village of Montmartre he'd ever seen—not that he'd ever been there. He wandered among the countless artist tables, cafés, and street merchants at Place Du Tertre, marveling at how real it all seemed—the sights and sounds of the bustling, open-air, village square he only knew from watching *An American in Paris* a dozen times. Despite his aching desire to peruse the colorful canvases and study the chalkboard menus, he had to remind himself he wasn't just playing tourist. After all, he had a job to do. Here, he wasn't Julian; he was Jericho Stone, part of a covert group of

international operatives hunting down Bergeron Krupp, assassin supreme, believed to be targeting the visiting British Prime Minister. According to today's Stealth Invaders file, Krupp was spotted in the Montmartre area, possibly to meet up with one of his associates.

"I have him cornered," said the familiar female voice through his headset. "He's heading into Sacré-Coeur."

Natalya Bush was a fellow operative and former KGB agent, but he knew her as Cassie from New Jersey. About the only thing she had in common with her alter ego Natalya was that they were both twenty-seven. He had even less in common with Jericho Stone. But none of that mattered *in world*.

He raced toward the famous Sacré-Coeur Basilica at the summit of the butte Montmartre, the highest point in the city and a stone's throw from Place du Tertre. In front of the cathedral was a sprawling observation area where tourists would gather for magnificent views of Paris. From what he'd read, even more spectacular views could be seen from the dome at the top of Sacré-Coeur. He got to the basilica just in time to see Natalya chasing Krupp into the building and followed them inside through the large bronze doors on the left. When he got inside, he scanned the area. They were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are you?" he said.

"Chasing him up the stairs," said Natalya. "They're in the back left of the building."

He headed to the left and saw the signs pointing to the Dome. He darted up the narrow, dark, spiral staircase which seemed to go on forever. If this were real life he'd be out of breath by now. Every so often he'd see them up ahead, and then they'd disappear around another spiral.

When he finally emerged from the staircase, he tried not to be distracted by the spectacular views of Paris from what was

quite a dizzying height. He moved around the observation area until he saw Krupp wrestling with Natalya behind one of the stone pillars that lined the observation area. As he got closer, he could see Krupp was trying to push her over the edge. Fortunately, Krupp hadn't spotted him. He took aim with his rangefinder, trying to make sure he hit Krupp and not Natalya.

With a single shot, he hit his mark. Krupp staggered and fell between the pillars and over the edge, plummeting about 300 feet—landing just in front of the majestic cathedral.

No sooner did Krupp hit the ground than Julian started receiving direct messages from all over the place, congratulating him for winning one for the team. A congratulatory message came on the monitor to the team from the Section Chief. Then, just as he expected, the call from Cassie came in on the headset. He closed the game and pressed the answer button.

“You do know he was luring you up there, right?” he said.

“Of course, I know. That doesn't make it a bad idea.”

“You're lucky I was there.”

“You always are,” she said. “Except in person.”

“Listen, about that, Cass. Something came up and I couldn't make it.”

“If you don't want to meet in person, just say it. I just thought it would be nice. We've been playing for what, three years now?”

“It's not that, it's just I have so much going on.”

“Your book? You've been working on the same book the whole time I've known you. A break for one night wouldn't hurt. Are you sure you aren't married?”

He laughed and leaned back in his gaming chair, looking around the spare bedroom that doubles as his office, where he'd spent most of his life.

“No,” he said. “I'm not married.”

“No girlfriend?”

“No girlfriend.”

“Then why so mysterious?”

Just then, he thought he heard his mother calling him. He lifted the right earphone off his ear.

“Julian!” yelled his mother from the doorway. “Dinner’s been ready for a half hour.”

“Give me a minute,” he replied.

“Okay,” said Cassie. “Who’s the girl?”

“It’s... the maid,” he said.

“The maid? She talks to you like she’s your mother.”

“No, definitely not my mother,” he said. “And not my wife.”

“But she makes you dinner.”

“She’s one of those maids that cook,” he said. “Listen, Cass, can I call you in an hour?”

“Will you promise to meet me soon?”

“I promise,” he said.

After he hung up and opened his door, his mother was still standing in the hallway.

“The maid?” she said. “Seriously?”

“I didn’t want to tell her I’m thirty-five and live with my mother. What would she think?”

“She’d think you were a good catch.”

He followed her downstairs to the kitchen. The big screen TV in the family room was playing Hitchcock’s *To Catch a Thief*. He’d always loved that one. While *North by Northwest* was probably his favorite film overall, Cary Grant was never more debonair than in his role as retired jewel thief, John “The Cat” Robie. And the breathtaking vistas of the French Riviera were spectacular. Julian took a seat at the kitchen table, from which he still had a good view of the screen. On the TV at the moment was the scene where Grant, as Robie, meets Grace Kelly and her mother in the iconic Carlton Cannes hotel for the first time. They’re having drinks in the casino, and Grace

Kelly, as American oil heiress Frances Stevens, is giving him the cold shoulder.

“I love how she practically ignores him and then shocks him by kissing him in the hallway just after,” he said. “Completely unpredictable.”

“I made spaghetti and turkey meatballs,” said his mother, putting the plate down in front of him. “You may need to warm it up.”

He stabbed a meatball with his fork and took a bite. “It’s perfect,” he said. He loved the way she included fresh basil and parsley.

“I think you should meet that girl.”

He put down his fork as she meandered back to the counter and placed the dirty pots in the sink.

“You know I can’t.”

“You’re in a prison of your own making,” she said, scrubbing the spaghetti pot. “You’ll never be like Cary Grant if you don’t leave the house.”

“I’ll never be like Cary Grant anyway, so I’m already ahead of the game.”

“Don’t say that,” she said. “You’re thin. You have a full head of brown hair. A nice, friendly face.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t qualify me.”

“Either way, you should find your own Grace Kelly.”

“Well, I can’t go woo Grace Kelly, can I? Because all I have to do is accidentally touch her hand and I’ll see some horrifying memory of hers. Maybe some trauma at the convent she grew up in, or some casting couch nightmare. It’s like a potluck of humiliation.”

“Julian, not everyone has traumatic memories.” She grabbed her plate of spaghetti off the counter and took a seat opposite him.

“So, I should play Russian Roulette?” he said.

“Wear gloves. You do anyway when you go to the store.”

“Oh, that’ll look real nice on a date. I’ll look like a serial killer. I may as well bring duct tape and a shovel.”

“Funny. I’m just saying, this isn’t a life.”

“Mother, I’m perfectly fine staying here, watching old movies with you. I can work on my book. When I’m bored, I play *Stealth Invaders* with Cassie.”

“And you get less sun than a potato. Look at the TV.” She pointed toward the screen.

He turned his head and watched as Cary Grant and Grace Kelly greeted each other in the lobby, both quite the fashion icons—he in a gray blazer with a crisp, white shirt, black cravat, and tan slacks, and she in a black swimsuit, wide-brim white hat, and a white coverup that could double as a fancy dress.

“That’s quite a hat,” he said.

“I mean Cary Grant. He has a nice tan. He lives a life. He goes out.”

Julian twirled spaghetti onto his fork. “Okay, I’ll buy some tanning spray.”

Just then, a break for donation pledges interrupted the broadcast.

“Is this on public television?” he said.

“Looks like it. I’ll change the channel during the break. The six o’clock news is on. Besides, I donated last month.”

She got up to grab the remote and switched the TV to the local news.

“... road rage killing,” said the blonde-haired anchorwoman. A photo of a pretty, young black woman was overlaid on the screen.

“Monica Hilson,” she continued, “age thirty-five, a social worker at Sunny Ridge Nursing Home in Yardley, was shot and killed in a road rage incident on Roosevelt Boulevard this afternoon in Northeast Philadelphia. Police have not yet tracked down the shooter. Hilson’s daughters, ages sixteen and

seven, were in the car when it happened. Eric Hilson, the victim's husband, is asking the public's help to find the shooter."

A clearly distraught, thin black man with glasses and a gray turtleneck appeared on the screen. The reporter's hand and microphone could be seen below his face, capturing his every word. Two young girls clung to his side in tears, a teenager and a younger child.

"Monica didn't deserve this," the man said, his voice cracking. "She loved her children so much. She never said a bad word about anyone, never raised her voice. All she did her entire life was care for people. Please, if you have any information that could lead to catching this man, please help us. No child should ever have to witness something like this."

Julian heard his words, but the whole time, he was focused on the little girl's face. The poor kid was in a daze, but he could see the inner pain in her watery eyes. Even without seeing her memories, he felt an incredibly strong connection with this child. He envisioned himself at her age and could feel the emotions of seeing something so terrifying and unexplainable, as if he were experiencing it himself. It felt like a bad memory. For a moment, he envisioned someone shooting his mother, and the hairs on his arms stood up.

The man finished talking. Julian was zoned out, so he didn't hear the rest of it. Then the anchorwoman flashed up a phone number on the screen for people to call with any information.

Julian started scribbling down the number, just as his mother switched the channel back to the movie.

"Wait, leave i—"

"You know, they shouldn't call it the news," said his mother. "They should call it the bad news."

"I was going to call," he said. The pledge drive was still in progress on the TV.

“And tell them what? You never even leave the house.”

He could feel his blood boiling at the thought of those two young girls suffering because some probably drunk or stoned rage-monster couldn't hold his temper.

“I may be able to help,” he said.

His mother had a confused look on her face.

“How?”

“The girls are young. They're easier for me to read. One of them may have seen something. If they did, it'll be fresh in their minds.”

“Are you sure you're willing to do that?”

He looked down at their two plates of spaghetti, both barely touched.

“Of course I'm not sure.”

“I'm just saying, it means letting people know about your gift. Once it's out, it's out.”

He thought about the consequences. His life would surely change if more people knew about his abilities. But if he stayed silent, this pond scum of a man would get away scot-free, possibly to attack someone else. And that poor family would never find justice. Nor peace.

He nodded his head to acknowledge he heard his mother's warning.

Just then, the film came back on. Cary Grant, John Robie the “Cat,” picked up a note left for him in the lobby. The camera zoomed in on the note, which said, *‘Robie, you've already used up 8 of your 9 lives. Don't gamble your last one.’* Julian felt goosebumps at the timing. An omen perhaps?

No, he knew in the pit of his gut what he needed to do.

He stood up from the table.

“I'm going,” he said.

“Where?” His mother looked dumbfounded.

“The police station.”

“Take my car,” she said.

“I have my bike. It’s not far, and you know how I am about driving.”

He went to the hall closet and grabbed a pair of white, full-fingered cycling gloves and put them on. At least they looked somewhat sporty and would meet his needs. He grabbed a light hoodie and headed to the garage to get his bike, a white 7-speed Schwinn Wayfarer.

He rode about a block down the street and then started thinking about what he’d say when he got there. Then he began thinking of what would happen if he were even able to convince the police his talent was real. Of course, to him, it wasn’t a talent at all, but a curse—a ball and chain he wore like Marley’s ghost from *A Christmas Carol*. He learned to live with it, but it was far easier without seeing people regularly—people who’d have a million questions and wonder why he wasn’t able to touch anyone. Typically, he had a ready-made excuse—that he had a skin disorder—but in this case, he’d be disclosing everything. He could end up becoming some big phenomenon, news at 11—a real freak show.

Suddenly, he found it hard to breathe. His legs were aching, too, and he felt like he was peddling through water. He could feel his heart beating through his chest, as the trees and sidewalk started shifting and spinning. He stopped the bike and held his head down, closing his eyes. He remembered a trick his therapist taught him. He breathed in for four seconds, held his breath for four seconds, breathed out for four seconds, and then held his breath for four seconds. Then he repeated the exercise.

He was beginning to calm down. But he came to a decision. He couldn’t do this.

He rode back home, put the bike back in the garage, and entered the front door.

“That was quick,” said his mother. “Did you forget something?”

He peeled the gloves off and plopped down on the white L-shaped sofa in the family room, feeling defeated.

“You were right,” he said. “I couldn’t do it.”

“I never said you couldn’t do it,” she said, sitting next to him. “And I’d never say that to you. What I said was... ‘Are you willing to do it?’ That’s something you have to think about.”

On the TV, Cary Grant was swimming away from a jetty toward the Carlton Cannes hotel. Then he was back in the hotel, planning his next move. It seemed pretty clear he wasn’t obeying the warning note.

Julian lowered his head and shook it in frustration. Or maybe it was shame. The more he thought about it, perhaps the time had come to take a gamble. Two young girls and their broken-hearted father were depending on it, though they didn’t know it yet. Somehow, he had to try to help, whatever the cost. And if it meant an inconvenience to him, or a little bit of ridicule, well... he’d have to figure that out, too. The bigger trick would be getting the police to believe him.