



## *Chapter 1*

**W**onder who it'll be?

Accessing the left lens on my special glasses, I re-scan the dozen young faces I've memorized, then close the file and peek out of the helicopter window.

Below, the megayacht churns a frothy trail in the blue Baltic Sea.

An abduction is planned but it won't succeed. Not on my watch. If, I mean *when*, I excel on this nine day solo, Headquarters—HQ—should select me for more missions like this... Maybe even early promotion!

Airport duty if not... My ears sag. Others having fun, while I sniff souvenirs and dirty underwear? Uh uh. Stuck beside a

desk analyzing stuff? Yuk. Busted from the K9 Spy Service? No way. Promotion hinges on excellence.

It'll be tricky maintaining cover on board with the Squad, an elite security team. Story is, Third Officer's returning from holiday with a new puppy. Me!

After stowing the spyglasses in my collar pouch, I turn to the nice gentleman across from me. Third Officer's dressed in a crisp uniform, smelling of curry and sandalwood soap.

Deputy Director seems to think we'll work well together. After my last courses, he called me to HQ for evaluation...

"Agent May, you were best in class in agility and second in memory."

"I was?" *Wow.*

"Affirmative. Plus you adapted to rapidly changing scenarios in Ambush Avoidance and Evasion, outmaneuvering several experienced agents. You're a natural."

"Thank you. I survived puppyhood by dodging my evil owner." I shook off the thought. "So my next mission will have action potential?"

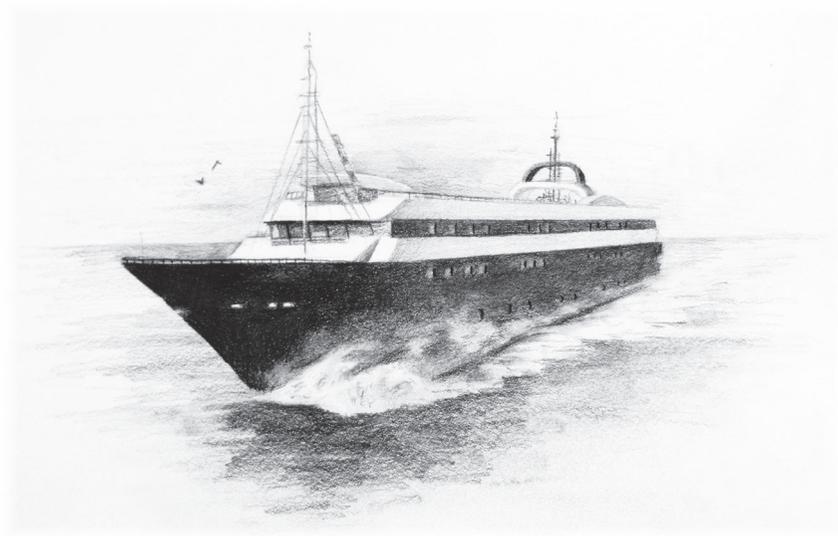
Watching me closely he said, "Affirmative. You're assigned to a private cruise."

"Sir?"

"It isn't spas and buffets, Agent. You must stop an abduction. Recent intercepts and on-the-ground intel reveal definite patterns. Chatter volume from several networks has spiked. It's unclear who's behind the scheme, or where it'll transpire. It is imminent and the likely target is a Mastermind delegate."

“Who?”

“Details are in the classified dossier downloading to your spyglasses shortly. You leave tonight for the Baltic region. Agent May, you will thwart this vile plan, working incognito alongside security. It’ll be risky.”



“Field missions are my favorite. Thank you, Sir.”

He nodded. “Third Officer of *Seeker of the Seas* is your contact. Refine your observation skills, especially noting creature behavior. Return successful and we’ll discuss promotion—”

*Click.* Third Officer accesses my communication unit.

I shake off memories and take a deep breath. Time to assume character. “Yes, Master?”

He says, “I’m pleased to have the K9 Service aboard, though I’ve never worked with small dogs. You are well-prepared, Agent May?”

I yip, “New puppy at the ready, Sir! I adore adventure!”

He reaches to pat my head. “We shall get along fine. Incidentally, I’ve synchronized your collar codes to access all spaces aboard as needed.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

When the helicopter engine speed changes, I leap into his lap (keeping in character) and press nose-to-window to observe our landing.

Refurbished from her Soviet Navy Exploration days, *Seeker* now sails as a luxury charter with all the latest upgrades. But scanning the spectacular ship I wonder, how do you secure yachts? They’re open to attack from above, beside or even below.

After the door opens, Third Officer sets me down. *Sniff sniff*. Roasted Chicken. Gorgeous weather. Luxury travel in Northern Europe. Twelve fascinating kids competing in the first Mastermind contest... Nine days? Pawsome.

Okay, starting now. Mission focus, no abduction.

*Seeker’s* long as a football field, gleaming white with marine blue accents and smooth teakwood under paw, colorful flags of many countries flapping in the brisk September breeze. Tomorrow morning she’ll dock in Stockholm, alongside other megayachts. I’m told some owners are quite secretive so I’m to report persons or items of interest to Edgrr, my HQ contact.

I follow Third Officer, dodging uniformed people on their own missions. All appear to know their purpose, and everyone speaks along the way. A maintenance man says, “Excellent to

see you again, Sir. Lovely puppy.” A smiling stewardess says, “Pleased you’re aboard, lil’ Miss Schnauzer.”

I prance, and hear her laugh.

Hey, there’s the banner! “Welcome 1st Annual Mastermind Delegates.” I race ahead.

Entering Reception I find a mixed pack of four Malinois and Shepherds standing in formation under a shimmery chandelier. Then they notice my small self. This’ll be fun!

I act all goofy, greeting each member puppy-style. They maintain position. Impressive.

Suddenly all four snap a salute as Third Officer appears, so I scamper near him then sit, lolling my tongue for extra effect.

Third Officer shakes his head. “Alpha, you’ve met my new puppy.”

The sturdy Shepherd nods but his eyes drill into me. I avoid his gaze and yawn.

My master smiles as he paces. “At ease gentlemen. Thank you for your service at this prestigious event. I am Third Officer, head of ship security. I’m fluent in several languages, including Critter.

“On this cruise, some of the brightest young people in the world will compete for a year’s internship at The Institute plus eight tickets to the Nobel Prize ceremony, and, to kickstart their own project, €100,000 cash.”

Wawzah. That’s enough to buy land and a house in Tennessee. And they’re only ten and eleven in human years.

“These delegates hail from a dozen countries and all walks of life: children of regular citizens to diplomats. Several have personal security. However, contest organizers determined bodyguards aboard could prove distracting therefore they may rendezvous only in port.”

Third Officer stops to face them. “The Squad was hired as extra protection, augmenting our top-of-the-line security system.”

“Sir, yes Sir,” they bark.

He continues. “Delegates arrive tomorrow morning. As you know, OpSec alerted us about an abduction attempt so there’s much to do, starting with deck sweeps.”

I scan the muscular Squad members and woof, “Master? Aren’t they security?”

“May. It’s a *security* sweep.”

“OHHhhh.” I’m jet-lagged or yeah... Puppy-mode. “What’ll you sweep for?”

Third Officer explains. “Explosives such as TNT, RDX, Nitrates, Chlorates. Narcotics. Other contraband. Unauthorized personnel. Potential hazards to guest or crew.”

My expression says surprise, I hope. I knew that much already.

“Squad Leader Alpha. May is with you while I attend my duties. She won’t cause trouble, right May?” Third Officer gives me a stern look.

I jump up, wiggling my nub. “Me? Cause trouble? Oh no, Master, not me.”