

***SEARCH AND  
RESCUE***

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**PENTAGON ESCAPE**

**ALEX LONDON**

**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

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# ***MIKEY: 8:15 A.M.***

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My visitor's badge is red and shiny and says they can shoot me if they want to.

Okay, technically it says that if I wander off without my escort or am found in a restricted area of the Pentagon, they can arrest me. But when you're wearing what is basically a bright red poster on a chain around your neck that tells everyone where you aren't supposed to be, you don't think too deeply about the details. You think about the guys with guns guarding this place.

It's weird that my dad works here. He's such a nerd.

It's even weirder that he's bringing me to work today.

And it's the weirdest thing of all that his employer—the United States Department of Defense—is saying that if I leave my dad's side without permission, they can arrest me.

I never thought the government would get involved

in my dad's parenting, but I guess they have been for a while, since the court gave him sole custody of me. It's for the best, I know, and my dad's a good guy, but he's not exactly Mr. Warm-and-Fuzzy, and he's not as fun as Mom. He is responsible though. He never lets me go to school without lunch money or my homework. And he is not in jail, which gives him another advantage over Mom.

Yeah, I've got that kind of sad story, but it's not all bad.

Like, aside from the threat of lethal force, it's pretty cool that I get to come in to my dad's office today. He's a civilian contractor at the Pentagon, the United States military's headquarters, which means he's not *in* the military, but he's employed *by* the military and works alongside the sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines who also work in the Pentagon. Also accountants. There are a lot of accountants.

Within the military, he works for the Defense Intelligence Agency, which is, like, top-secret nerd stuff. Which, again, makes sense because my dad is 100 percent a nerd. His favorite joke: "You know how I keep track of all the terrible Dad jokes I tell? In a *Dada-base!*"

I've heard that a hundred times and I groan every single time.

At work, however, he doesn't tell bad Dad jokes. His boss is a general, with stars on his uniform and everything. Only one star, but that's enough stars for everyone he meets in the halls to call him sir.

When we get to my dad's department inside the DIA's offices on the first floor of the Pentagon, there's a big buzz-cut guy in a Marine Corps uniform waiting outside his cubicle for a meeting. My dad shakes his hand and I give the guy a salute.

"Morning, sir," I tell him.

"Don't call me sir, son." He points to the three chevron insignia on his sleeve. "I work for a living."

"Sorry," I mumble, and he laughs and shakes my hand.

"Sergeant Guinsler," he introduces himself, then looks to my dad. "I miss a Bring Your Kid to Work Day memo?"

"No, Sergeant," my dad tells him. "Mikey here has to do a report for school on an American landmark, and his teacher gave him permission to come in today for research."

"Landmark, huh?" Sergeant Guinsler says. "You

know, I was assigned to the Pentagon early on in my career to give tours to VIPs. I'd be happy to show your son around real quick if you want to get settled before our meeting?"

My dad looks relieved. He works in this huge building but knows next to nothing about it. He's a computer guy and spends most of his time staring at a screen and testing lines of code for bugs. I know it's important work, because everyone says the 2000s are gonna be the era when "the battlefield goes digital," but it seems pretty dull to me. Also, the US isn't at war, so, like, what battlefield?

He works on something called Secure Communications Development Operations, which he sometimes calls SCDO, but most of the time he calls it *skidoo*, like the snowmobile I rode on vacation one time.

The snowmobile was way more fun than my dad's job is. He once tried to tell me about network security protocols and I nearly died of boredom. I wonder if that's what he's really working on here, a weapon that can kill the enemy through intense and sustained boredom.

I'm really excited by the idea someone else will give me this tour of the Pentagon. I bet Sergeant Guinsler has way better stories.

“Thank you,” my dad tells him. Sergeant Guinsler laughs.

“I should thank you,” he says. “This gets me out of the morning Program and Budget meeting. This guy right here is my personal hero.” He claps my dad on the shoulder and we all laugh, though I’m not sure what’s so funny.

The closest my dad ever got to doing something actually heroic was last year, when he had to debug a thousand computers for Y2K, which I didn’t really understand, but it had everyone freaked out that if the computers didn’t get fixed the world was gonna, like, end. My dad did something to make sure that nuclear submarine commanders could still talk to the commanders in this building if they needed to, without accidentally starting World War Three. World War Three didn’t start, so I guess he did his job well.

Now he does something that he says he’s not even allowed to talk about, but it still looks the same to me. A glowing screen, fingers tapping on keys, and a lot of coffee. A young man in uniform sits at another desk tapping keys on his computer and then waves toward my dad, calling him over.

He checks the clock on the wall. Eight fifteen. He

turns to Sergeant Guinsler. “We’re not till nine, right?”

“Right,” confirms Sergeant Guinsler. “I’ll get Mikey back in time.”

My dad goes to talk to the young man, who has some question about whatever he’s studying on his screen. It’s funny that this guy and Sergeant Guinsler are both in the military, because he’s a skinny geek in glasses, who’s probably spent more time playing first-person shooter games than actually shooting a gun. Sergeant Guinsler doesn’t look like he’s ever played a video game in his life, but he has probably shot a lot of guns. Then again, he works in this computer-nerd office, so maybe looks can be deceiving.

“What do you say, Mikey?” he asks me. “Wanna get the real story of this place?”

“I’d love that, sir . . . I mean, er, Sarge.” I grin and he grins back. I can’t help but like the guy.

He notices me picking at the tight tie knotted around my neck. I’m dressed up for the office visit. “You wanna lose the necklace?” he jokes, and I nod eagerly. My dad thought it’d be good for me to wear a tie, but I feel like it’s choking me. I yank it off and Sergeant Guinsler puts out his hand for it. Then he whistles.

“Hey, Dave!” My dad turns. “Heads up!” He tosses the balled-up tie to my dad, who looks puzzled but sticks it in his pocket. “Now we’re ready, yes?” Sergeant Guinsler smiles.

“Yes, Sergeant!” I say in my best pretend boot camp voice, which makes him chuckle. “Should we start back there?”

I point to the heavy doors that lead to the secure room, called a SCIF, which stands for Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility. The military loves acronyms. It feels like they have acronyms for everything: SCIF. SCDO. Even MRE, which stands for Meal, Ready to Eat, and is the food that soldiers often have to eat in the field. It’s freeze-dried and vacuum sealed and famously gross. Sergeant Guinsler makes a face like I’d just offered him one.

“Sorry, kiddo,” he says. “Can’t take you in there. You don’t have clearance. An alarm will go off if you even cross that threshold.”

“How?”

“There’s an RFID chip in your visitor’s badge,” he says. “Radio-frequency identification.”

Since my dad’s office does top-secret work, I guess it makes sense that I’m not allowed in the secure room,

just in the rows and rows and rows of cubicles outside. It kind of reminds me of those mazes they use to do experiments on mice. Except the cubicles are all in neat rows with aisles between them, so it'd be just about the easiest maze in the world to solve, even for a mouse.

The Pentagon itself, however, is like a giant mouse maze.

My dad's office is 1C535, which means it's on the first floor of what they call C-Ring, near Corridor Five, so that's where Sergeant Guinsler starts my tour, in the hallways outside my dad's office.

SCDO is a small part of the Defense Intelligence Agency, which is a massive network of spies and soldiers and civilians all over the world. The offices at the Pentagon are just a tiny part of the agency, and no one person really knows everything they do. Most of this office is for budgeting and personnel and planning stuff. Not, like, James Bond-type action. Just because they're a super-top-secret organization inside an already top-secret organization doesn't mean what they do is exciting. Mostly it looks like they write reports, share reports, and have meetings about those reports. All that reporting keeps them pretty busy. No one pays me or Sergeant Guinsler much attention at all.

All over the place, people hustle this way and that, doing everything from planning wars to planning lunches. There are entire departments that do nothing but organize travel for other departments that do nothing but organize seminars about the work still other departments do deciding what equipment to buy for still more departments in the massive military machine. Most of what the thousands of people who work here every day do is pretty dull, in fact.

“Upward of twenty thousand people work in the Pentagon,” Sergeant Guinsler tells me in his tour guide voice. “Although today, there are fewer people because of a construction and modernization project. You’ll notice the scaffolding in the hall between Corridors Four and Five. They’re upgrading a lot in this old place. You picked an auspicious day to be here. You know what *auspicious* means?”

“I’m in seventh grade,” I tell him.

“That’s not what I asked,” he replies.

“I didn’t think I’d be getting a vocabulary quiz today, Sergeant,” I answer. “But *auspicious* means ‘favorable or suggesting good luck.’”

“Very good. Do you know *why* today is an auspicious day?”

It's my turn to grin. The sergeant is testing me to see if he has to do, like, a baby's tour of the Pentagon or if I know enough already that he can tell me the more interesting things.

"Well, today is September 11, 2001," I say. "And the groundbreaking for the Pentagon occurred exactly sixty years ago today, on September 11, 1941. This is an anniversary of the building's construction."

"Yes, sir." He claps me on the back, hard.

I do my best not to flinch. I want to show him I'm tough as well as smart. "Thanks," I say. "But don't call me sir! I work for a living!"

This makes him laugh for real—not just, like, a polite laugh—and I know then we'll get along just fine during this tour. It's an auspicious day for my school report research indeed.