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Math Detectives Max & Mia: The Prime Conspiracy

Global Spy Missions & Advanced Problem Solving

for Ages 12-15

Code-Breaking, Cryptography, Data Analysis &
Real-World Math Adventures

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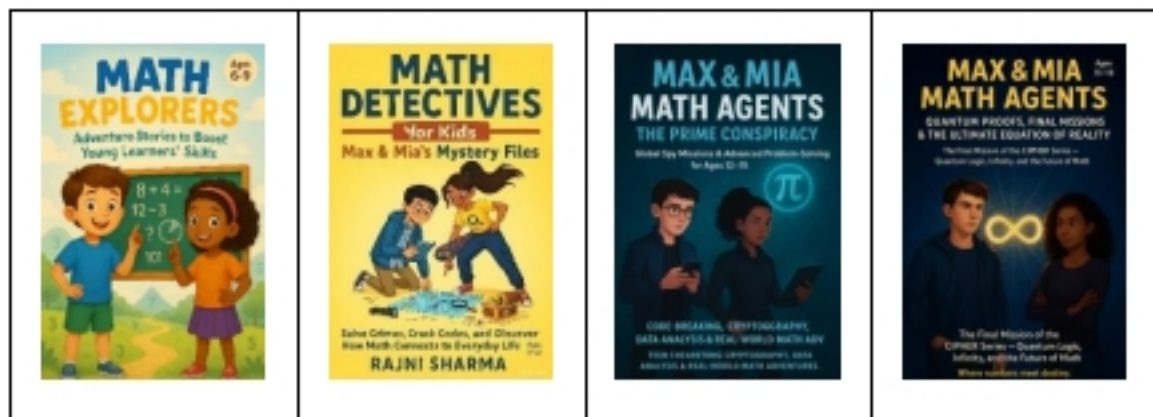
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Our Max and Mia's Math Adventure Book Series



SERIES PREMISE

THREE YEARS LATER...

Max Chen and Mia Rodriguez are now 15 years old. By the end of this case file, they'll be 16—and facing their greatest challenge yet. After solving nine cases at Lincoln Middle School and earning a reputation as "The Math Detectives," they've been secretly recruited by **CIPHER** (Covert Intelligence & Problem-solving Headquarters for Emergency Response)—an international agency that uses mathematical analysis to prevent global crises.

Their handler: **Agent Diana Cross**, former cryptographer, now coordinator of CIPHER's Youth Analytics Division. She saw their case files and realized something crucial: kids think differently than adults. They spot patterns trained agents miss. They ask questions no one else thinks to ask.

The Mission: A shadow organization called **The Prime Order** is using advanced mathematics to orchestrate crimes that look like accidents, coincidences, or system glitches. Only someone who truly understands math can see the patterns and stop them.

The Catch: Max and Mia must maintain their normal high school lives while secretly traveling the globe on missions. Their parents think they're in an "Advanced STEM Leadership Program." Their friends can't know. And every case is more dangerous than the last.

Their Team:

- **Max Chen** (15) - Lead analyst, code-breaker, the one who sees patterns in chaos
- **Mia Rodriguez** (15) - Field operative, quick thinker, master of improvisation
- **Aaron Chang** (16) - Tech specialist, their reformed hacker from the locker case
- **Brittany Zhang** (16) - Data visualization expert, pattern recognition genius
- **Agent Diana Cross** (38) - CIPHER handler, former NSA cryptographer
- **VERA** (AI system) - Voice-Enhanced Reconnaissance Assistant, their digital support

Their Motto: *"The numbers don't lie—but people do. We find the truth."*

BOOK'S LIFELINE



Humble request to donate your time and leave a review on amazon and enhance book's lifeline

About the Author

Rajni Sharma is a writer, designer, and educator who brings numbers to life through imagination and storytelling. Her *Max & Mia Math Agents* series turns math into an adventure—showing kids how patterns, logic, and curiosity shape the world around them. With a deep love for creativity and learning, Rajni inspires young readers to think critically, explore fearlessly, and discover the magic hidden in everyday math.

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CHAPTER 1: THE CIPHERED BLACKOUT

Part 1: When the Lights Go Out

Two weeks after the New York blackout. The city that never sleeps... went dark at 9:47 PM on a Friday.

Max Chen was hunched over his calculus homework when every light in his Manhattan apartment flickered once, twice, then died. His laptop screen glowed in the sudden darkness—five seconds of battery-powered illumination before it too gave up.

"Max?" His mom's voice drifted from the kitchen. "Did we blow a fuse?"

Max moved to the window. Eighteen floors below, New York City had vanished. No streetlights. No billboards. No glowing windows in the buildings across the street. Just darkness, stretching in every direction like someone had thrown a blanket over the entire island.

"Mom," Max said quietly, "I don't think it's just us."

His phone buzzed. A text from Mia Rodriguez: *You seeing this?*

Before he could respond, a second message appeared—this one from a number he'd memorized but never saved: *CIPHER emergency protocol. Stand by for extraction. Agent Cross.*

Max's heart rate spiked. Three years. Three years since he and Mia had solved their last case at Lincoln Middle School and thought their detective days were over. Three years since Agent Diana Cross had appeared in their principal's office with an offer that sounded like something from a movie: "We need young minds. People who see patterns others miss. Would you be interested in solving problems that actually matter?"

They'd said yes, obviously. Who wouldn't? But the training had been grueling—cryptography, data analysis, field protocols. And then... nothing.

Radio silence for six months. Max had started to wonder if CIPHER had forgotten about them.

Apparently not.

His phone rang. "Mia?"

"Tell me you got the message too." She sounded breathless, excited. "Tell me this is actually happening."

"Extraction protocol," Max confirmed, already pulling on his shoes. "Where are you?"

"Queens. My mom thinks I'm sleeping over at Christina's house." A pause. "Max, the whole city is dark. I'm on the roof. I can't see lights anywhere."

"Eight million people," Max murmured, his analytical brain already working. "Hospitals, traffic lights, subway systems—"

"CIPHER wouldn't call us for a normal blackout."

"No," Max agreed. "They wouldn't."

Twenty minutes later, a black SUV with tinted windows pulled up outside Max's building. The driver didn't speak, just nodded once before pulling into traffic—or what would have been traffic if the dead stoplights hadn't turned every intersection into chaos. Horns blared. People shouted. Emergency sirens wailed in the distance.

They picked up Mia in Queens. She threw herself into the backseat, her dark hair pulled into a practical ponytail, her backpack clinking with what Max suspected were entirely unauthorized tools.

"Any idea what we're walking into?" she asked.

"Something that requires two fifteen-year-olds in the middle of a city-wide blackout."

"So basically Tuesday for us."

Max almost smiled. He'd missed this—missed her particular brand of controlled chaos. "Mia, we haven't had a case in six months."

"Details." She grinned. "Come on, admit it. You've been dying of boredom."

He had been. Sophomore year at Manhattan STEM Academy was challenging, sure, but it wasn't *this*. It wasn't real.

The SUV descended into an underground parking structure Max didn't recognize. They went down three levels below the sub-basement, past security checkpoints that required retinal scans, until finally the vehicle stopped in front of an elevator with no buttons.

"Welcome to CIPHER," a calm voice said as the elevator doors opened.

They descended.

Part 2: The Command Centre

The CIPHER operations center looked like something between a NASA control room and a tech startup. Massive screens covered three walls, displaying maps, data streams, and what appeared to be live security footage from around the city. Two dozen analysts worked at standing desks, their faces illuminated by laptop screens. The air hummed with focused intensity.

Agent Diana Cross stood at the center, speaking rapid-fire into a headset. She was forty-ish, with silver-streaked dark hair pulled back severely, and the kind of presence that made people instinctively straighten their posture. When she saw Max and Mia, she held up one finger—*wait*—then wrapped up her conversation.

"Status on the backup generators? Good. Keep the hospitals priority one." She pulled off the headset. "Max. Mia. Thank you for coming."

"Did we have a choice?" Mia asked.

"No." Cross almost smiled. "But I appreciate the illusion of free will. Follow me."

She led them to a smaller conference room. The lights were on here—CIPHER clearly had its own power source—and a massive screen dominated one wall. Aaron Chang and Brittany Zhang were already there, looking equally confused and excited.

Aaron had grown in the three years since their last case together—he was sixteen now, taller, with perpetually messy black hair and the kind of confidence that came from being one of the best hackers under eighteen. Brittany wore glasses with thick frames and had dozens of colored pens clipped to her jacket pockets. Max knew she could visualize data patterns in ways that seemed almost supernatural.

"The gang's back together," Aaron said. "Anyone else feel like we're in a spy movie?"

"Focus," Cross said, not unkindly. She clicked a remote. The screen filled with a map of Manhattan. "At 9:47 PM, New York City's power grid experienced what Con Edison is calling a 'catastrophic cyber-attack.' Eight million people without electricity. Hospitals are on backup generators. The subway system is dead. Traffic lights are out. Emergency services are overwhelmed."

"Cyber-attack?" Max leaned forward. "But there's no ransom demand?"

"Correct. No contact from the attackers. No demands. Just..." Cross clicked again. A message appeared on screen, white text on black background:

23-8-5-14 / 20-8-5 / 16-18-9-13-5 / 6-1-12-12-19

Mia frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it. Left on the mayor's computer. No other trace of the intruders."

Max stared at the numbers. His brain was already working, sorting, analyzing. "It's a code."

"Obviously," Brittany muttered, pulling out a notebook. "Question is what kind."

"We have forty-eight hours," Cross continued, "before the attackers—whoever they are—escalate. Intelligence suggests the next target will be the emergency 911 system. If that goes down during a city-wide blackout..." She didn't finish. She didn't need to.

Aaron whistled low. "That's a lot of pressure for our first real mission."

"This isn't your first mission," Cross corrected. "You've been training for six months. You've passed every simulation. You know how to work as a team." She looked at each of them in turn. "CIPHER doesn't draft teenagers lightly. We brought you in because you see things others miss. You ask questions adults forget to ask. You solve problems in ways that textbooks don't teach."

"No pressure though," Mia muttered.

Cross smiled slightly. "Massive pressure. But I believe you can handle it." She moved toward the door. "I'm needed in the main operations center. You have full access to CIPHER resources: VERA, our databases, secure communications. Find out what this message means. Find out who sent it. And find out how to stop them before they kill this city."

The door closed behind her.

Four teenagers stared at a screen full of numbers.

"So," Aaron said finally. "Anyone want to order pizza?"

Part 3: Breaking the Code

Max pulled out a whiteboard marker—CIPHER had thoughtfully included a massive whiteboard on one wall—and wrote the numbers:

23-8-5-14 / 20-8-5 / 16-18-9-13-5 / 6-1-12-12-19

"Okay," he said. "Let's think about this systematically. What do we know?"

Mia kicked her feet up on the table. "It's numbers. Groups separated by slashes and dashes."

"The highest number is 23," Brittany observed, already sketching something in her notebook. "The lowest is 1. And there are four groups."

"Four groups like four words?" Aaron suggested. He was already typing on his laptop. "Could be coordinates. Or dates. Or—"

"The alphabet," Max said suddenly.

Everyone looked at him.

"There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. The highest number here is twenty-three. What if..." He wrote quickly:

A=1, B=2, C=3... Z=26

"A substitution cipher," Brittany breathed. "Max, that's brilliant."

"It's obvious," Max said, but he was already converting. "23 is W. 8 is H. 5 is E. 14 is N."

He wrote: W-H-E-N

Mia jumped up. "Next group! 20-8-5. That's T-H-E."

Max's hand flew across the whiteboard:

23-8-5-14 = WHEN 20-8-5 = THE 16-18-9-13-5 = PRIME 6-1-12-12-19 = FALLS

They stared at the message.

WHEN THE PRIME FALLS

"That's..." Aaron trailed off. "Ominous."

"It's also incomplete," Max said. "It's not a question or a statement. It's a fragment."

"VERA," Brittany called out. "Search for references to 'when the prime falls' in recent communications."

A pleasant female voice filled the room—CIPHER's AI system. "Searching. No direct matches in the last ninety days. However, the phrase 'The Prime' appears in seventeen classified intelligence reports related to suspected international criminal activity."

Max's pulse quickened. "Show us."

The screen filled with redacted documents. Different agencies, different countries, all mentioning the same phrase: *The Prime Order*.

"It's an organization," Mia said. "That's what we're dealing with."

"A shadow organization," Aaron read from the screen, "suspected of orchestrating financially motivated cyber crimes with no clear political agenda. Intelligence agencies have been tracking them for two years. No confirmed members. No known leadership structure. They communicate through mathematical ciphers."

"Mathematical ciphers." Max felt pieces clicking into place. "That's why CIPHER called us."

Brittany was scribbling furiously. "But why leave such a simple code? This is basic substitution—any cryptographer could break it in minutes."

"Maybe that's the point," Mia said slowly. "Maybe they *wanted* us to break it."

Max nodded. "A message that says 'we're here, we're watching, and we're smart enough to shut down New York City.'"

"Cocky," Aaron muttered.

"Or confident," Max corrected. He turned back to the whiteboard. "But there's something else. This isn't just substitution. Look at the pattern." He wrote quickly:

A=1, B=2, C=3...

Simple substitution

Then:

W=23... but W is also the 23rd letter

H=8... also the 8th letter

"It's direct substitution," Brittany said. "A equals one, B equals two. Position in the alphabet."

"Which means it's really easy to decode," Mia added. "But what if there's a *second* layer?"

Max felt electricity run through him. "What if this is a Caesar cipher?"

Aaron looked up. "Like Julius Caesar? That Roman guy?"

"Exactly like that Roman guy." Max was pacing now, the way he always did when his brain was running hot. "A Caesar cipher shifts every letter by a fixed number. If A normally equals one, but you shift by three, then A equals four. D equals one. You rotate the alphabet."

He drew quickly:

Normal: A B C D E F...

Shift by 3: D E F G H I...

"So WHEN THE PRIME FALLS might actually be a shifted message," Brittany said. "We need to unshift it."

"But we don't know the shift value," Mia pointed out.

Max grinned. "Yes we do. Think about what organization we're dealing with. What did VERA call them?"

"The Prime Order," Aaron said slowly. "Oh. *Oh*."

"The shift is a prime number," Max finished. "It has to be. That's their signature."

Brittany was already working. "Prime numbers: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13... We need to try each one."

"VERA," Max called. "Run the decoded message through Caesar cipher shifts using only prime numbers. Show us all results."

The AI processed instantly. The screen filled with options:

```
SHIFT 2: YJGP VJG RTKÓG HCNNU
SHIFT 3: ZKHQ WKH SULPH IDOOV
SHIFT 5: BMJS YMJ UWTNJ KFQQX
SHIFT 7: DOLS AOL YVPUL MHSSZ
SHIFT 11: HTPS ETL CFWPQ QLWWD
SHIFT 13: JVRU GVN EGZRU SNYYB
```

"Most of those are gibberish," Aaron said.

Max studied each line. "Wait. Shift by three. ZKHQ WKH SULPH IDOOV. Those aren't English words, but..." He grabbed the marker again.

"You're shifting backwards," Mia realized. "The message was already encoded. We need to shift the *original numbers* backwards by a prime, then convert to letters."

"Exactly." Max worked quickly. "If the original message was shifted *forward* by a prime number, we need to shift backward to decode it. Let's try thirteen."

He calculated:

$$23-13 = 10 = J$$

$$8-13 = -5... \text{no, wait. Modular arithmetic.}$$

"It wraps around," Brittany said. "Like a clock. Twenty-six letters, so we use mod 26."

Max nodded, recalculating:

$$(23-13) \bmod 26 = 10 = J$$

$$(8-13) \bmod 26 = 21 = U$$

$$(5-13) \bmod 26 = 18 = R$$

$$(14-13) \bmod 26 = 1 = A$$

He wrote: JURA

"That's not a word," Aaron said.

"Wait." Mia was leaning over Max's shoulder. "What if we shift forward? Add thirteen instead of subtract?"

Max's hands were already moving:

$$(23+13) \bmod 26 = 36 \bmod 26 = 10 = J$$

"No, that gives the same..." He stopped. "Wait. We decoded it to letters first. WHEN THE PRIME FALLS. What if we shift those *letters* by thirteen?"

He wrote out the alphabet twice, the second one shifted by thirteen:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
 N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C D E F G H I J K L M

Then he converted WHEN THE PRIME FALLS:

W -> J

H -> U

E -> R

N -> A

JURA GUR CEVZR SNYYF

"Still not English," Aaron said, deflating.

Max stared at the whiteboard. Something was right here. He could feel it. The pattern was there, he just needed to—

"ROT13," Brittany whispered.

Everyone looked at her.

"It's called ROT13. Rotate by thirteen. It's a special Caesar cipher because if you rotate by thirteen twice, you get back to the original message. It's symmetric." She grabbed another marker and wrote:

"If we encoded with ROT13, we decode with ROT13. They're the same operation."

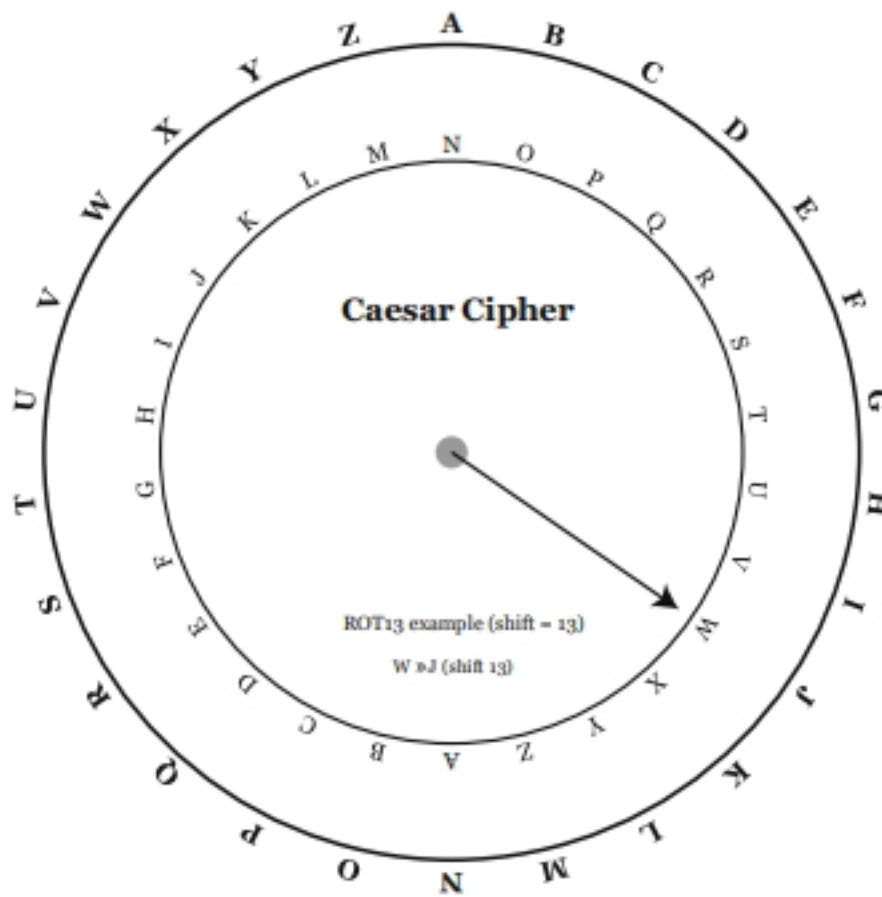


Figure 1: Caesar Cipher Shift Wheel — Outer ring: original alphabet; Inner ring: letters shifted by 13 (ROT13).

Max felt like he'd been struck by lightning. "The alphabet has twenty-six letters. Thirteen is half of twenty-six. If you shift by thirteen, then shift by thirteen again..."

"You've rotated through the full alphabet," Mia finished.

Max grabbed his original decoding: **WHEN THE PRIME FALLS**

He applied ROT13:

W (+13) = J

H (+13) = U

E (+13) = R

N (+13) = A

T (+13) = G

H (+13) = U

E (+13) = R

P (+13) = C

R (+13) = E

I (+13) = V

M (+13) = Z

E (+13) = R

F (+13) = S

A (+13) = N

L (+13) = Y

L (+13) = Y

S (+13) = F

He wrote the final message on the whiteboard:

JURA GUR CEVZR SNYYF

"That's still—" Aaron began.

"No wait," Mia interrupted.

What if we need to shift BACKWARD? The message was encoded by shifting forward, so we reverse it." Max nodded. "ROT13 is special—it's its own inverse. Shift by 13 in either direction and you get the same result." He took the original numbers and converted them to letters first: 23=W, 8=H, 5=E, 14=N → WHEN 20=T, 8=H, 5=E → THE 16=P, 18=R, 9=I, 13=M, 5=E → PRIME 6=F, 1=A, 12=L, 12=L, 19=S → FALLS WHEN THE PRIME FALLS "That's it," Max said. "That's the message. **WHEN THE PRIME FALLS**. The Prime must refer to Prime Power Solutions—the power company."

"It's a threat," he said quietly. "Or a timer."

"The prime falls," Mia repeated. "The prime minister? A prime target? What falls?"

"Not what," Brittany said. She'd pulled up something on her laptop. "Who. Look at this." She projected it to the main screen.

It was a news article: **Prime Power Solutions Named NYC Grid Security Contractor.**

"Prime Power," Max read. "They run the city's electrical infrastructure. And tonight..."

"The prime fell," Mia finished. "The power grid went down. This wasn't a threat about what's coming. It was a *signature* for what just happened."

Aaron leaned back. "So we solved the code. WHEN THE PRIME FALLS meant when the power company fails. They knocked out the grid and left their calling card." He paused. "But Agent Cross said they're going to escalate. The 911 system is next."

Max nodded slowly. "This was a demonstration. They proved they could do it. The real question is—"

"Why?" Brittany finished.

The room fell silent.

"VERA," Max said. "Pull up everything we have on Prime Power Solutions. Employees, contractors, recent security audits. And cross-reference with any intelligence on The Prime Order."

"Processing," the AI responded.

Mia was pacing now. "If they wanted ransom, they'd have asked. If they wanted chaos, they'd have hit more than one city. If they wanted terror, they'd have released a statement. So what do they want?"

"Attention," Max said. "They want someone to know how smart they are."

"They want CIPHER to know," Brittany corrected. "This message was left for people who could decode it. For people who understand mathematics."

"They know we exist," Mia said.

Max felt cold. "This was a test. They wanted to see if we'd respond. If we'd figure it out."

"VERA, status on that search?"

"Cross-referencing complete. Prime Power Solutions employed 847 people as of last month. Forty-three employees have joined in the last six months. Twelve have backgrounds that cannot be fully verified."

"Twelve suspects," Aaron said. "Still a lot."

"Narrow it down," Max instructed. "Who has access to the main control systems? Who could execute a cyber-attack from the inside?"

"Eight individuals match those parameters."

"Show us their files."

Eight faces appeared on screen. Max scanned them quickly—middle-aged technicians, young IT specialists, veteran engineers. Nothing obviously suspicious.

Then his eyes caught on one profile.

**Name: Dr. Marcus Holloway Position: Chief
Cybersecurity Officer Hire Date: Four months ago**

"Him," Max said. "Pull up his full file."

Dr. Holloway's resume was impressive: PhD in computer science from MIT, fifteen years at various tech companies, glowing references. But something was off.

"His employment history has a gap," Brittany noticed. "Two years, right before he joined Prime Power. No explanation."

"People don't usually leave gaps in their resumes," Mia said. "Not at that level."

"VERA, do we have any intelligence on Marcus Holloway prior to four months ago?"

"Searching... Yes. Facial recognition match from Interpol database. Marcus Holloway is flagged in a three-year-old investigation into cryptocurrency fraud. No charges filed. Investigation closed due to lack of evidence."

Max felt pieces connecting. "Cryptocurrency. That's digital money. It requires serious encryption knowledge."

"And The Prime Order uses mathematical ciphers," Aaron added.

"It's circumstantial," Mia warned. "Not proof."

Max nodded. "But it's a lead. VERA, where is Marcus Holloway right now?"

"GPS data from Prime Power employee tracking shows Dr. Holloway is currently at the main control facility in Queens. The backup security center."

"The place where someone could manually control the entire grid," Brittany said.

"And potentially the emergency services system," Max finished.

They looked at each other.

"We need to tell Agent Cross," Aaron said.

"We will," Max agreed. "But first, we need more proof. Mia—"

"I'm already packing," she said, grabbing her backpack. "Someone needs to get inside that facility."

"Not someone," Max corrected. "You and me. Aaron, you're our tech support. Brittany, I need you coordinating data. Can you—"

"Already setting up the tactical display," Brittany said, her fingers flying across her keyboard.

Max turned to the screen, to the map of Queens, to the blinking dot that represented their suspect.

Forty-eight hours to save the 911 system.
Twelve hours since the blackout.

And somewhere in a control room, a man who understood modular arithmetic was planning his next move.

"VERA," Max said. "Tell Agent Cross we have a lead. And tell her we're going into the field."

"Message sent. Agent Cross responds: 'Stay safe. Make me proud.'"

Mia grinned. "You heard the woman. Let's go catch a cybercriminal."

Part 4: The Blackmail Connection

The Prime Power backup facility looked like any other industrial building in Queens—gray concrete, minimal windows, security cameras at every corner. At 2:17 AM, with the city still dark, it was the only structure for blocks with lights blazing.

"How exactly are we getting in?" Mia whispered. They were crouched behind a delivery truck across the street, watching guards patrol the perimeter.

Max held up a tablet displaying a security schematic Aaron had pulled from the building's networked systems. "Service entrance on the east side. According to the employee database, there's a shift change at 2:30. We have a thirteen-minute window when the door access logs reset."

"Thirteen minutes. Prime number."

"I noticed."

"You think Holloway programmed that?"

"I think someone with a sense of humor about mathematics programmed it." Max checked his watch. "Aaron, you reading us?"

Through their earpieces: "Crystal clear. I've looped the security cameras on the east entrance. You'll be ghosts for exactly twelve minutes."

"Why twelve?" Mia asked.

"Because I'm not as clever as the prime number guy. Go."

They moved fast and low, keeping to shadows. The service entrance was unmarked—just a metal door with a card reader. Max pulled out a white CIPHER access card that Agent Cross had given them. "This should work. It's programmed to mimic any employee badge."

"Should work?"

"Ninety-seven percent confidence."

"And the other three percent?"

"Alarms, guards, potential arrest."

"Love those odds." Mia grinned. She was in her element—the unknown, the risk, the moment before everything either worked perfectly or exploded spectacularly.

Max swiped the card.

The reader blinked green. The lock clicked open.

"Ninety-seven percent," Mia whispered. "Show-off."

Inside, the facility hummed with activity. Technicians hurried past, focused on tablets and urgent conversations about grid sectors and power restoration timelines. No one looked twice at two teenagers in dark clothes—everyone was too busy dealing with the crisis.

"Brittany," Max whispered. "We're in. Where's Holloway?"

Through the earpiece: "Third floor, northeast corner. Main security control room. But Max... there's something you need to see. I've been analyzing his computer access logs. He's been locked out of his own systems."

Max and Mia exchanged glances. "What?"

"Someone changed his credentials two hours before the blackout. His password, his security clearance, everything. He's been trying to log back in all night."

They found a stairwell, climbing quickly. "So either he's innocent and someone framed him," Mia said, "or he's guilty and his accomplice double-crossed him."

"Or he's covering his tracks by making it look like he was locked out," Max added.

Third floor. The security control room had windows overlooking the main operations floor. Inside, they could see Dr. Marcus Holloway—fiftyish, gray hair, expensive suit now rumpled and stained with coffee. He was shouting at his computer screen.

"We can't hear him," Mia whispered.

"VERA," Max said quietly. "Can you access the control room's audio?"

"Accessing." A pause. Then Holloway's voice filled their earpieces, tinny but clear:

"—don't care what your protocols say! I need administrator access NOW! The entire grid is down and you're telling me I need to submit a form?"

"Sounds stressed," Aaron commented.

"Sounds guilty," Mia countered.

Max watched through the window. Holloway was pacing now, running his hands through his hair. The body language wasn't right. Max had studied behavioral analysis in training—micro-expressions, stress indicators, deception patterns. Holloway looked panicked. Desperate.

Not triumphant.

"He didn't do it," Max said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Look at him. Really look. If he orchestrated the blackout, if he left that cipher for us to find, would he be here? Would he be frantically trying to fix it?"

"Unless that's the act," Mia pointed out.

"Maybe." Max pulled up Holloway's file again on his tablet. "Brittany, you said there was a gap in his employment history. What happened two years ago?"

"According to the Interpol file... his daughter was kidnapped."

Max froze. "What?"

"Emily Holloway, age thirteen. Taken from her school in Boston. Three-day ordeal. FBI handled it. She was returned safely, but the kidnappers were never caught. It was connected to the cryptocurrency fraud investigation—they thought Holloway had hidden millions, and someone wanted it."

"Did he have millions?"

"No evidence was ever found. The case went cold."

Max's brain was racing, connecting dots. "Pull up a timeline. When was the kidnapping exactly?"

"September 17th, three years ago."

"And when did the cryptocurrency investigation close?"

"November of that same year. Wait..." Brittany's voice changed. "Max, the investigation closed the day after a massive cryptocurrency transfer was detected leaving Holloway's accounts. Forty-seven million dollars. Untraceable."

Mia whistled low. "He paid them."

"He paid someone," Max corrected. "The question is who." He zoomed in on Holloway through the window. The man had stopped pacing. He was staring at his phone, his face pale.

"Aaron, can you access Holloway's phone?"

"That's... super illegal."

"We're CIPHER. We have a mandate."

"Fair point. Accessing." Keyboard sounds. "Got it. He's received three text messages in the last hour. All from unknown numbers. Displaying now."

The messages appeared on Max's tablet:

Message 1 (11:43 PM): You did well. The grid is down.

Message 2 (12:15 AM): Phase one complete. Await further instructions.

Message 3 (2:03 AM): Your daughter's school has excellent security. Would be a shame if something happened.

Max felt ice in his veins. "He's being blackmailed."

"They're threatening his daughter again," Brittany said quietly.

Mia was already moving toward the control room door. "We need to talk to him."

"Wait." Max grabbed her arm. "If we spook him, he might run. Or warn whoever's controlling him. We need to be smart about this."

"So what's the plan?"

Max thought fast. "VERA, can you send a message to Holloway's phone that appears to come from the same unknown number?"

"Yes, but it will be traceable back to CIPHER if anyone analyzes the routing."

"Do it anyway. Send this: 'New contact protocol. Exit through south door. Instructions waiting.'"

"Message sent."

Through the window, they watched Holloway's phone buzz. He read it, his expression shifting from fear to confusion to desperate hope. He grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"He's moving," Aaron warned.

"We follow," Max said. "Stay back. Let him think he's meeting his blackmailers."

They shadowed Holloway through the facility, down two flights of stairs, through a maintenance corridor. The south exit led to an alley—empty at this hour, lit by a single flickering streetlight.

Holloway stood in the alley, checking his phone repeatedly.

Max and Mia stepped out of the shadows.

"Dr. Holloway," Max said calmly. "We need to talk."

Holloway spun around, his hand going to something in his jacket pocket. "Who are you? If you've hurt Emily—"

"We're not here to hurt anyone," Mia said, hands up in a peaceful gesture. "We're with CIPHER. We know you're being blackmailed."

The fight went out of Holloway. His shoulders sagged. "You're kids."

"We're analysts," Max corrected. "And we can help you. But we need to know everything. Starting with who has your daughter."

Holloway looked between them—two fifteen-year-olds in a dark alley, asking him to trust them with his daughter's life. "Why should I believe you can help? The FBI couldn't stop them three years ago. They found Emily, but they never caught the people who took her."

"Because three years ago, they weren't looking for The Prime Order," Max said.

Holloway's face went white. "How do you know that name?"

"The same way we decoded the message they left on the mayor's computer. The same way we tracked the blackout to this facility. The same way we know they changed your passwords two hours before the attack." Max stepped closer. "You didn't shut down the grid. But you helped them do it. They have leverage on you."

"My daughter," Holloway whispered. "They sent me photos. Emily leaving school. Emily at soccer practice. Emily in her bedroom." His voice cracked. "They said if I didn't cooperate, if I didn't install their malware on the power grid systems, they'd take her again. And this time..."

"This time they wouldn't return her," Mia finished gently.

Holloway nodded, unable to speak.

Max pulled out his tablet. "When did they first contact you?"

"Four months ago. Right after I started at Prime Power. They knew everything about me—my history, the kidnapping, where Emily lives now with her mother. They said they'd been watching us for years."

"And they wanted access to the power grid."

"Not just access. They wanted me to build a backdoor into the entire system. Something that would let them shut it down remotely, whenever they wanted, without leaving traces." Holloway's hands were shaking. "I didn't want to. God, I didn't want to. But they sent me a video of Emily. Just five seconds. Her walking to school. And then a message: 'We can reach her anytime.'"

"So you built the backdoor," Max said.

"I built it. And tonight, they activated it. Shut down the whole city." Holloway looked at them desperately. "I never wanted this. I'm not a criminal. I'm a father trying to protect his child."

Mia exchanged a look with Max. This was bigger than they'd thought. The Prime Order wasn't just sophisticated—they were patient. They'd been planning this for years.

"The messages you received tonight," Max said. "They mentioned phase one. What's phase two?"