

# CODEBREAKER

JAY MARTEL



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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**Please note that this book contains  
depictions of gun violence  
and death.**

## A NOTE TO THE READER

There are two ways to read this book. The first is to read it as you would any other novel, straight through from beginning to end, learning the solutions to the codes as Mia decrypts them. But if you'd like to try your hand at cryptography, pause your reading anytime you encounter this symbol:



At this point in the story, you'll have all the information you need to break the code yourself. Once you think you've solved it, resume your reading at the point where you left off and see if your wits are a match for Mia's.

48 HOURS AGO

"Arthur Zimmermann," he said, "checking in."

Just four words. Simple ones, at that. But with them, he crossed the Rubicon.

The lobby of the Hay-Adams Hotel was bustling and warm, all arches, wood columns, and gold light. On the way in, he'd squeezed past a pair of lobbyists in tailored suits, their heads buried in their phones. He'd kept his head buried, too, because there were cameras in this lobby. There were eyes in this lobby.

And he was not Arthur Zimmermann.

He forced his head up and made himself meet the eyes of the woman behind the check-in desk. He gave her the best smile he could manage.

"We have you in room forty, the Federal Suite," said the woman.

"Is that a good room?" he asked before he could stop himself.

She smiled. "It is."

He fought back the urge to adjust his glasses. To tug at his dress shirt, or button and then unbutton his blazer.

"I'm interviewing for a clerkship with the Supreme Court," he said. "I was told you can tell a lot about your chances by the room they book you in." Lies. All of them.

The woman behind the desk leaned forward to whisper and wink. "It's our finest room, Mr. Zimmermann. So don't blow it."

They shared the polite laugh of strangers. He took the key card, waving away her offer to have someone bring up his luggage. "Just this," he said, hoisting his empty suitcase.

He didn't relax when the elevator doors slid shut. Or when they opened on an empty fourth-floor hallway. Not even when the swipe of his key card caused the lock on room forty's door to whirl, a green light flashing on the display. He didn't relax until the door clicked closed behind him. And he only relaxed then because he was new to this.

He kept the lights off and the curtains drawn as he moved to the sitting area and took off his blazer, spreading it open on the sofa in front of him. He knelt, reaching into the breast pocket and removing a leather pouch. Inside, a Cohiba cigar sat snug, and he tugged it free. His fingernails found the edge of the paper and pulled, tobacco spilling. He swept it all away, revealing a small metal tube, which he brushed clean.

His eyes now adjusted to the dark, he stood and found his way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. There was no window in here, so it was safe to turn on the lights. He did so, wincing at the white glare bouncing off the subway tile, stainless steel, and porcelain. The bathroom was small and sterile: a toilet,

sink, and, at the far end of the narrow room, a bathtub. Even the shower curtain was blindingly white. He moved to the sink and turned on the hot tap water, removed a towel from the rack, and spread it open on the counter next to the basin. He studied his reflection in the mirror, telling himself to be patient. Once the fog of steam crept up the glass to cover his face, he pried the cap off the metal tube. Pulled the brittle piece of paper free and placed it on the open towel. He straightened, watching the paper unfurl and flatten as it pulled moisture from the humid air. He was following orders, even if he didn't understand them.

Encryption and encipherment had gone digital, growing exponentially more complex in the process. Wars were now fought by unmanned drones and hackers in Russian server farms. Everything was on computers now. Yet he'd put his life on the line over a cipher written in ink more than 150 years ago.

No, this was a code. It was so hard to remember the difference. But a cipher encrypted individual letters. A code encrypted words or phrases. This was a code. He was, like, 90 percent sure.

Whatever it was, he had work to do. He lifted the lid off the toilet tank and fished a hand inside the cold water, removing the small metal safe he knew would be there. It was custom-built, the welds crude and unfinished. Affixed to the lid was a combination letter lock, nine dials with twelve letters on each. Nearly eighty million possible combinations. There was a pin inserted across the length of the dial, meaning the lock was open and the combination unset. That was his job. Lifting the lid of the safe, he found a clear plastic bag, the kind museums used to transport priceless documents. He slid the encrypted page into the protective sleeve and sealed it tight, setting it in the safe. Then he

removed a slip of paper taped to the underside of the lid. This one was smaller, the texture like crepe or flash paper. It was meant to be burned after reading.

On it was the combination: a random string of nine letters. He was to align the dials to it, pull the pin from the lock, and rescramble the dials. Burn the slip of paper, then return the box to the tank. It was simple. Easy.

Too easy, as it turned out.

He froze. His breathing grew shallow as adrenaline tingled out from his chest to sizzle down his limbs. He turned the water off and listened. And though he heard nothing, he knew:

He was not alone.

There'd been a change in the room—a tensing and a bracing. He turned to the shower curtain.

It exploded out toward him, enveloping him. The dark shadow behind the curtain was a blur of frantic movements. Limbs pinwheeling and scrabbling, striking. He fell back, his skull cracking against the porcelain toilet bowl. The world went for a swim, and he had time for one final thought before it all went black:

*This is what you get for playing spy.*



## CHAPTER 1

Mia came home for the last time just after 9 P.M.

She'd spent the day summer-job hunting, handing résumés to coffee shop supervisors and bookstore managers all over Falls Church and DC. Nothing had been secured, but the odds were in her favor, even in this terrible economy. She had good grades, solid references, and plenty of interesting life experience. She expected to be socking away money soon.

Mia slid her key into the lock and opened the back door, guessing at what she'd find: A dark kitchen and a plastic-wrapped plate of leftovers waiting for her in the fridge. Her mother on the couch working on her latest article, or maybe out in the shed making more pendant necklaces or hoop earrings—the latest in her endless craft-centered hobbies. Her father in his study, working late again, but popping out to give her a hug and ask about her day. She still had plenty of time before college—an entire senior year plus summers on either side. But

this was the kind of thing she'd already begun to miss, a sort of pre-nostalgia, making her long for things that were right in front of her.

Except, as she stepped inside, a different scene greeted her. The kitchen lights were on, her parents seated across from each other at the small breakfast table. They turned in near-perfect unison, glowing smiles spreading across their faces. But the stiffness in their spines, the way her father's hands gripped the edges of the table—it all told Mia that something was wrong.

"Hi, sweetheart," her mother said, a small quaver in her voice. "How was it?"

"How was what?" Mia asked.

There was a pause, and Mia watched her mother's eyes flick to her father's. Unsure. "Whatever it is you were doing," she said, her smile forced.

"Job hunting," Mia said, kicking off her shoes.

"That's right. Any luck?"

"Mia," her father said, with more bite in his voice than she was used to. "I have something for you." He slid aside a stack of folders—some of the work he'd been bringing home every night these past few months—revealing a small wooden puzzle box, which he passed to her. "Sorry I didn't have time to stain it."

The wood was rough and unfinished. A combination lock hung from a hasp screwed to the lid. She tugged it, unable to resist. But no, her father never forgot to secure a lock. He had, however, forgotten to put any real craftsmanship into the puzzle box. Which was more than disappointing—it was unsettling. All the puzzles he had designed, dozens of them across the years, were meticulously made. Her father had created her first birthday scavenger hunt the year she'd turned five, and they had since become

an annual tradition. She'd celebrated her fourteenth birthday by racing across London, learning England's bloody history while cracking her father's codes. She'd spent her eleventh birthday in Paris, using what little French she knew to crack the clues he'd left for her among the masterpieces at the Musée d'Orsay. This year—her seventeenth birthday—would make it thirteen birthday scavenger hunts over a dozen cities. These past eleven months they'd spent in Virginia were creeping up on their family record for the longest time planted in one place. And what her life had gained in stability it seemed to have lost in magic.

"Is this—" she began.

"Step one of many," he said, interrupting.

"My birthday's not for three weeks."

"Thought you might like a head start."

"Good idea, Hamilton," her mother said.

Mia examined the symbols carved into the top of the puzzle box. It looked fairly simple. She'd have it solved in thirty minutes, not three weeks. It had to be a diversion. Something shiny to distract her from what was happening here. She set the box on the table. They wouldn't get rid of her that easily.

"Thanks, Dad," she said. "Looks like fun."

She went to the fridge then, opening it and peering inside. No plate of leftovers. Another tinge of unease. She grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry.

"Aren't you gonna tell me I'm spoiling my dinner?" she said, tossing the comment over her shoulder. When there was no laughter, no response at all, she turned back to find them sitting, silent, staring at her. Her father's hand drummed lightly on the stack of mail next to his phone, which sat in the center of the table.

And then she saw it.

The informational packet on top of the stack of mail, stamped with the seal of Boston University. The school had beaten Mia in delivering the news.

Mia plucked it from under her father's hand. "I guess we need to talk about this?"

Her mother sighed, leaning back in her chair.

"Mia," her father said, "you don't—"

"No, I do." Mia slid into the chair between them. "I do, Dad. I've thought about it a lot. I love history. I really do. And I love how much you love teaching it. This isn't me choosing between you or Mom; it's me choosing what I'm really good at. And I just think I'm going to have more opportunities with journalism. So that means BU. I know Harvard is what you wanted, Dad. But this is what I want."

Her father smiled. His lips were pinched and thin, pressed together so tight they turned white. "Then I'm good," he said. "If you're happy, I'm good."

Mia saw tears in her father's eyes, and she reached for his hand, squeezing it. Yes, she'd been worried her father might be disappointed. But she hadn't expected a reaction like this.

"Dad, I haven't made a decision yet. I'm just getting information. I didn't know it mattered this much to you."

"No, that's not . . . I'm just very proud of you."

Mia's mother leaned over the table then, picking up the puzzle box and placing it back in front of Mia. Confused, Mia looked to her mother.

"Sure you don't want to get started?" her mother said, still smiling like it hurt to do so. "Looks like a tough one."

"Tougher than it looks, that's for sure, Grace," her father said, letting go of Mia's hand.

And now her parents were staring at each other again. That same rigid stiffness back in their spines. Calling each other *Hamilton* and *Grace* rather than any number of pet names they used interchangeably. No, something was wrong. Her parents rarely got angry, and even more seldom fought, but it had happened often enough for Mia to develop that sixth sense kids get. The ability to anticipate tension from their posture. To know when it was time to escape to her bedroom and a pair of headphones. Now was one of those times.

Maybe this argument wasn't about her choice of major but about what it had sparked between her parents. The first pangs of empty-nest syndrome setting in. A realization that, in little over a year, it would be just the two of them. A few more years with her father locked in his study or her mother glued to her laptop as she raced to make deadlines, and then what her father called the "long, slow death of retirement." Still, whatever that prospective student packet from BU had set off between them, she wanted no part of it. She picked up the puzzle box and stood, more than happy now to escape to her bedroom.

On the way, she trailed a fingertip across the frames that lined one wall of the back hallway. It was a habit of hers, a way to reconnect to the cities across the globe that, at one point or another, had all been home. Taken as a whole, it was a hanging scrapbook: her mother's career in frames. Photos of exotic cities and pages from national magazines covered nearly every inch of wall space. Her mother had been a freelance journalist all of Mia's life, able to translate her father's endless new academic

postings into award-winning features about political unrest and social injustice. Mia saw her father as brilliant but her mother as heroic. Her mother's smile in those photographs and the power of her words on the page had been an unfair advantage.

If her father was looking for the reason Mia was choosing her mother's path over his, he needed to look no further than the hallway wall.

## CHAPTER 2

By the time Mia had settled in her desk chair with the box in front of her, the tension between her parents had spread to her. There would be no real joy in solving this particular puzzle, given what was happening in the other room. And that was too bad, because breaking codes was Mia's favorite thing. She'd always preferred puzzles over parties. Solitude over socializing.

Except, maybe that wasn't totally true. Alone in her room, she could be honest with herself and admit that she could no longer remember which came first: the loneliness or her preference for it.

Mia adjusted her lamp and put on her headphones, tugged a hand through her wavy brown hair. She kept it shoulder-length, shorter than her mother's, since she'd never much cared for the daily maintenance. She'd inherited much of her mother's looks—full lips, gold-flecked eyes, and thick brows—but not enough of her confidence or cool indifference. It mattered to Mia that

her parents were happy. It mattered that they thought she made smart, sound decisions. So, she was finding it difficult to let the conversation in the kitchen go. Still, Mia couldn't control how her parents reacted to the decisions she made. It was *her* life. Next fall she'd be in college. Out on her own. She'd get a tattoo if she wanted. Vote for the Green Party. They'd have to figure out how to deal with it. In the meantime, there was a puzzle to solve.

Mia fished her leather journal out of her backpack. Purchased years ago at a small shop in Paris's Latin Quarter, it had become an extension of her. Always in arm's reach, it was less a diary and more an external hard drive. Mia filled it with historical details about famous codes and their creators, decryption keys too complicated to memorize, and even a few codes of her own design. This journal was where she worked things out. Where she solved problems. And each year, after she filled all the pages, she pulled the small, white book free of the leather cover and replaced it with a new, blank book. Nearly a decade's worth of them were lined up now on her shelf, black ink shining against white spines. Holding not just information, but memories. Her life.

Mia flipped to a fresh, blank page and got to work. On the desk before her was the puzzle box—a rough wood rectangle with four symbols carved into the top:

7 0 f 8

A combination lock with four letter dials secured the lid to the base. Mia turned the box over in her hands. Covering the



bottom was a beautiful carving of some type of plant or flower. She ran an appreciative hand over the dozens of minute grooves, calmed by the effort her father had put into this piece of the puzzle. Maybe things weren't so different, after all.

She searched her memory, but she didn't recognize the plant pictured in the carving. Since this was one of her father's creations, her mind leapt immediately to the Voynich manuscript, one of the world's most famous encrypted documents, written on vellum sometime in the fifteenth century. Filled with an incomprehensible script as well as detailed drawings of imaginary flowers and plants, it had resisted every attempt at decipherment. Only a single copy existed, and it was currently one of Yale Library's most prized possessions. She flipped the box over and spun the letter dials to spell out *YALE*. Tugged on the lock. No luck. Which, to be fair, made sense.

Her father, the formidable Hamilton Hayes, solved the crossword each morning before the coffee finished brewing. He'd quite literally written the book on codes. He'd spent the past twenty years teaching the history of clandestine communication all around the globe. His expertise was what had landed him his professor job at Georgetown. It was why they'd finally spent almost an entire year in one place. The puzzles he built for her birthday scavenger hunts involved complex encryption systems with multiple layers, so she'd never crack something he'd created on her first, random guess.

Mia turned the box back over and studied the four symbols carved into the top. She felt certain she'd seen them before. She leaned back in her chair, her gaze drifting up to her bookshelf. Above the white spines of her journals was a long row of books. There were hundreds of codes detailed in their thousands of

pages—the entire human history of clandestine communication bound in thick leather volumes. It was an impressive, comprehensive collection that her father had helped her build. The answer to the puzzle was, no doubt, in one of these books. But where to begin? She turned the box over and over in her hands, thinking. And then, an idea struck her.

She pulled out her phone and snapped a picture of the carving, adjusting the exposure level until the details stood out. She uploaded the photo to a reverse-image website, hoping the carving was accurate enough to produce a result. It produced *dozens*. All identifying the plant her father had carved in the bottom of the box.

A Scottish thistle. The national flower of Scotland.

Mia leapt from her seat, the thrill of a solution racing through her. She loved this feeling. It was like drinking a glass of ice water on an empty stomach, how the sensation blossomed inside. She pulled down a book from the shelf—*The Babington Plot*, by one of her father's colleagues. She flipped the pages quickly, knowing exactly what she was looking for.

Anthony Babington had been a loyalist to Mary, Queen of Scots, and had believed her to be the rightful heir to the British Crown claimed by Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth, fearing Mary had plans to overthrow her, imprisoned her for nearly two decades in castles and manors across England. In time, Elizabeth's fears came true, as Mary conspired with Anthony Babington on a plot to escape Elizabeth's custody and help lead a coup that would give her the Crown.

Mary and Babington had communicated with each other through a series of coded messages using a nomenclator—a simple encryption where letters of the alphabet are substituted with

a fixed set of numbers and symbols. The nomenclator had ultimately been defeated by a process known as frequency analysis, where how often a number or symbol appears in a coded message is matched to how often a letter of the alphabet appears in the English language. The nomenclator used by Mary and Babington was broken, and the pair were executed for their crimes. But the incident had been etched into the history books. The code was preserved, retained, and reprinted. And she had a copy of it in her hands:

a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p q r s t u x y z  
 σ + ^ # α □ 0 ∞ 1 8 n 7 ϕ ψ Σ m f Δ δ c 7 8 9



"Too easy," she said, bringing the book back to her desk. Her fingers scanned the cipher. Her eyes darted between the book and the symbols carved into the top of the puzzle box, her parents' silent fight in the other room long forgotten. In moments, the decryption was done.

7 σ f 8

Became:

**M A R Y**

Mia spun the last dial. The Y slipped into place and the lock sprung open, swaying from the copper hasp. Inside lay a keychain stamped with the Harvard seal, and Mia felt another

twinge of guilt. Under it, a small scrap of paper. She reached for it, her pulse quickening:

*The minute you were born.*

That was easy: 2:53 P.M. But now what? She had the next clue; should she go back out and interrupt their argument? Or would she have to wait three whole weeks until her actual birthday to continue the scavenger hunt? Would he really make her wait that long to get her present? Which was a car. Had to be a car. He'd given her a keychain. She took off her headphones and turned the keychain over again and again in her fingers, nervous. Giddy. Happy.

That is, until the doorbell rang.

It was too late for someone to be dropping by. Mia peered out the blinds of her bedroom window and saw a black SUV parked on the street in front of their house. It was large and tanklike, so big that it partially obscured Mia's view of Mrs. Bradford's house across the street. Spotlit under a streetlamp, the SUV looked serious. Official. The kind of vehicle Mia had spied crisscrossing the streets near Capitol Hill. It looked wholly out of place in their wooded, sleepy section of Falls Church, twenty minutes outside of DC.

Mia slipped the scrap of paper into her pocket and clicked off her light, snapping her bedroom back into darkness. She could hear her parents' voices coming from the living room, her father's raised loud enough for Mia to make out two words that sounded like a command.

*Say nothing.*

Mia made for her bedroom door. But when she gripped the

doorknob, a shiver raced through her and she hesitated. That shiver froze her in place, and as soon as she was still, as soon as the charged darkness and the heavy silence enveloped her, she felt certain she shouldn't take another step. That she should run to the window and scream for help.

But Mia just couldn't resist an unsolved mystery. So, she braced herself and stepped out into the hallway.

## CHAPTER 3

Her parents were seated in a pair of armchairs, which flanked the large window that dominated one wall of the living room. A bald man in a crisp black suit sat across from them on the couch, leaning forward, hands clasped. Police maybe? Or a politician? Certainly, a man who worked somewhere with a seal set into a marble floor. His body seemed all angles and edges, all tension and pressure. He flexed his fingers and Mia winced at the small popping sound they made.

Again, Mia felt the urge to run. But she couldn't leave her parents alone with this strange man.

"Mom? Dad?" Mia said, stepping into the living room.

"Cracked it already?" her father asked, his smile forced.

"Is everything okay?"

"Mia," the man on the couch said. "Why don't you come join us?"

Her own name had never given her goose bumps before, but it sounded liquid, poisonous in his mouth. Was he here for her? Had she done something wrong?

"Here," the man said, patting the spot beside him. "Sit next to me."

Mia looked from the man to her parents. Neither said a thing. But the lack of color in their cheeks told her all she needed to know. Her gaze returned to the bald man, who tapped the cushion again.

"It's not a request," he said.

Mia felt her throat constrict. Her breathing was too quick, too shallow. She went to the couch and sat down next to the man, who gave her knee a sharp, discomforting pat. She glanced at her parents, and they offered twin, tight smiles.

It was only then that Mia noticed the other two men. They were back in the kitchen, silently searching cabinets and drawers. They had on blue surgical gloves and moved with a slow, methodical precision. Thoroughly examining every nook and cranny, and then returning things to exactly as they were. One of them slid a drawer shut and turned, frustrated.

"Nothing," he said. "Move to the bedrooms?"

"What do you say, Hamilton?" the bald man said. "How about we skip that step, and you just tell me where it is?"

Mia looked to her father, confused. "Dad? What's going on?"

"Your father took something we would like back," the bald man said. Casual. Like it wasn't a big deal. But the SUV and the suits and the searching all said otherwise.

"You're accusing me?" her father said.

"Where is it?"

"I don't have it."

The bald man studied Mia's father for a moment, then nodded toward the hallway. The other two men disappeared down it.

Mia's thoughts spun like tumblers on a lock, frantically searching for the right combination. But nothing made sense. Her father was an educator, something these men clearly weren't. What could he have possibly taken that would result in this? Some artifact? Some important piece of history that he'd just, what, stolen? No. That was impossible. Her father wouldn't even steal the neighbor's Wi-Fi.

The man turned to her. And as though he could read her mind, he asked, "Do you know why I'm here, Mia?"

"Leave her out of it," her father said. And something in his voice had changed. Hamilton Hayes wasn't tall. Wasn't strong. He wore black, thick-framed glasses and kept his salt-and-pepper hair swept back off his forehead. He liked sweaters. Slippers. But something about him in that moment melted Mia's insides. It was as though he were growing. Stretching and swelling. His pale skin flushed red. The floor under Mia turned to sand as everything she knew began to erode.

"What do they think you took, Dad?" Mia asked.

"I didn't take anything."

"He's lying, Mia," the man said. "Though, that's nothing new, is it, Hamilton?"

"I'm calling this in," her father said, getting to his feet.

"Sit down."

"No. This isn't right." Her father moved fast, hurrying to the mantel, sweeping up his phone and dialing. But the man was faster. He drew a handgun. Cocked the hammer. To Mia, it was the sound of something breaking.



"Put the phone down," the man said.

Mia's father lowered the phone and turned. And it was as though he'd become a stranger. There was something cold and foreign in his eyes. Mia sank back deeper into the couch, afraid of both men now.

"You son of a bitch," her father said.

"Hamilton—" Mia's mother began.

"Grace, do not!" her father shouted.

Mia looked to her mother, seated across from her. She smiled back at Mia reassuringly. But her chest heaved with the same too-shallow breath that was inside Mia. "It's okay," her mother lied. "It's all going to be okay."

Something banged back in her parents' bedroom. Everyone jumped, eyes darting toward the sound.

Everyone except her father.

He leapt forward, tackling the bald man up and over the back of the couch. An instant later, there was a sharp crack, like a thunderclap. Mia screamed as the bullet ripped past her, stuffing exploding out of the couch cushion and drifting down like snow. She heard a struggle, then a crunching blow, and her father was back on his feet, the man's gun in his hand.

"Grace, get Mia out of here," her father said.

When her mother didn't respond, Mia turned to her. And screamed again.

Her mother's hands were clasped at her waist, a bloom of blood on her white shirt, seeping through clenched fingers. She slumped against the arm of the chair, clutching the bullet wound in her stomach.