

**WELCOME
TO
CONFUSION**



ALAN BERKSHIRE



AUTHOR'S BIO

ORIGINALLY FROM THE UK, NOW RESIDENT IN THE USA, HAVING RECEIVED HIS AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP IN JUNE 2023.

ALAN BERKSHIRE, A BORN GYPSY, HAS TRAVELLED A GREAT DEAL OF THE WORLD, NOW DIVIDING HIS TIME BETWEEN AUSTIN, TEXAS AND MONTERREY, MEXICO. HE HAS A GREAT LOVE FOR BOOKS, MOVIES, AND ALL THINGS WILD. HE'S A LIFELONG PAGAN WHICH IS REFLECTED A GREAT DEAL IN HIS ART. (SEE ALANBERKSHIRE.COM)

HE HAS WRITTEN ALL HIS LIFE, MAINLY FOR HIS OWN EDIFICATION, AND IS NOW PROUD TO SHOW THE RAMBLINGS OF HIS DARKEST MIND TO THE WORLD. (SEE THE JUNGLE SERIES) HE ENJOYS WRITING IN VARIOUS GENRES, DYSTOPIAN, HORROR, SCI-FI, EPIC FANTASY, AND YOUNG ADULT.

HE HAS A GREAT ZEST FOR LIFE AND IS WORKING HARD TO WALK TALL IN THE HALLS OF LITERATURE AND TO ONE DAY BRING THE PERFECT VILLAIN TO LIFE.

WELCOME TO CONFUSION

A YOUNG ADULT HORROR NOVEL

by

ALAN BERKSHIRE

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DEDICATION

"Dreamers and writers have superpowers too..."

Chapter One

ENCOUNTER

Sleeping in a cardboard box with nothing but the clothes on your back and an old threadbare blanket for warmth wasn't easy. The blanket had been tossed away, left over a decrepit old armchair close to the perimeter fence. It was filthy and rumpled, but any port in a storm. It offered added warmth, but not enough. The knack was to keep still; the impossibility was the hard concrete you were using as a mattress, despite the five layers of cardboard between your soft body and the unyielding stone. Ade Burton shifted, trying to roll himself tighter into the corner of the huge box; the blanket sliding on the tan-coloured cardboard.

"Dammit!" he swore, slipping off balance onto his back.

The blanket pulled away from him, exposing his already shivering body to the chilly October air within his makeshift shelter. Burton didn't even know what he was doing in London, let alone sleeping in a cardboard box! It seemed, as they say, a good idea at the time. It had been the worst six weeks of his life. Manchester had been bad enough, jobless, with no money, but at least it was home.

Home... he sighed. Since he had been in London, he had been forced to sell two pairs of Levi's, his iPod and the signet ring his mother had given him on his eighteenth

birthday. That had gutted him the most. She had worked hard to save for that ring. He could still see her face when she gave it to him, so happy, shining as he tore open the tiny, gift-wrapped box. She never seemed to smile anymore.

Of course, his father wasn't pleased with her gift. "Waste of money," he had said. Money he could have spent down the pub more like. His father had done nothing to help his mother with household chores and raising his son, not even giving her housekeeping, never had. Lazy, always full of excuses. Never holding down a job for more than a couple of months.

It was Mum who held them together. She was the one who worked, as well as maintained their small flat. What did Dad ever do? Nothing, except spend time with his friends, drinking, gambling, bemoaning his lot.

Seeing his mum work so hard just to have his father fritter it away was too much for Ade. He'd lost count of the arguments he and his father had had until finally Ade had to leave, urged on by his mother. Looking back, Ade realized she could see where the situation was going and feared for her son. His father might be lazy, feign a bad back, but he was a big man...

So ...reluctantly, he left.

London, especially the East End, was hell. Burton had spent the first few weeks in London, south of the river, in Deptford. Deptford High Street was a market stretching from Evelyn Street all the way to Deptford Broadway at the foot of

Blackheath Hill in Greenwich. The market was only open on the weekends and Wednesdays. The pickings were slim, jobs even more scarce. He'd crossed the river from Deptford in Southeast London to Hackney, East London ten days after arriving in the "Smoke," hoping for better opportunities in the multitude of markets in the area.

No chance.

Whitechapel, Bethnal Green, Hackney, colder than the frozen north where icebergs sailed the frigid seas. In Deptford, he had friends. Newly made, true, and they were no better off than him; except London was their stomping ground. They knew the ropes, vagrants, older than his twenty years, jobless, homeless, hopeless.

He had learned a few things about living rough in the wilderness of the urban jungle. Such as building a "flop" out of cardboard boxes, and making a fire in large tin cans, or metal buckets for warmth through the night. Open fires weren't a good idea in cardboard houses. And of course, it was always a good idea to collect wood before it poured down with rain.

Burton shivered. It had stopped raining about an hour ago; the cardboard roof prevented him from getting wet... so far. He'd had enough, though. London wasn't for him. It was a cold, heartless place full of faceless, uncaring people, defaming the myth that the streets were paved with gold. Tomorrow he was heading back north before winter set in proper and froze his black hide to the London pavement.

Another good morning's begging would give him enough to go home by train, which he would do as late as possible tomorrow; that way he'd have a roof over his head for the night, or, at least, most of it. He wondered what his mum would have to say about his return. Burton guessed she wouldn't be happy. He knew exactly what his father would say in the same condescending tone he always used and would continue to say every chance he got. It couldn't be helped.

Plumping up the battered blue rucksack he was using as a pillow, Burton stared at the darkening patches of damp slowly creeping across the roof of his "house." If it rained again, he didn't rate his chances of continued dryness. Grey, murky light was filtering past the sheet of cardboard across the "doorway," heralding the start of another dull day. His last in London, or so he thought.

Burton half smiled to himself, his left incisor gleaming like liquid gold in the gloom. More than once, he'd considered selling the tooth just to last a few more days on the streets with a relatively full belly and money in his pocket. He was glad he hadn't.

He would never have the money to replace the tooth, and he was pretty sure the NHS wouldn't foot the bill for cosmetic dental work.

At first, the low voices didn't register. It was the faint thump of hasty footsteps vibrating into his back that alerted Burton. He glanced towards the entrance of his shelter, as if he could see straight through to the wasteland beyond. He sensed, rather than saw, the sudden activity outside, his instincts telling him to stay motionless and

let whatever was happening pass him by. The “flop” was pretty well disguised; it wouldn’t be noticed in the early light. But then, Burton reasoned, if something bad was going down, he’d rather see it coming than get a nasty surprise. Throwing off the blanket, he slid to the makeshift door, peering through the little chink. He couldn’t see a thing.

The confining box suddenly became claustrophobic. Burton imagined half a dozen thugs sneaking up on him, getting ready to charge, ripping his little home to pieces. He didn’t stop to think why anyone would want to rob a relatively penniless black man down on his luck. (Well, except for the eighteen pounds seventy-two pence stashed in his right shoe.) But then, they couldn’t have known about that. Of course, there was still his gold tooth. If he had stopped to think about it at all, he would have realized it was highly unlikely anyone knew he was even in the well-disguised box!

He was taking no chances. He felt like a sitting duck inside the shelter, which suddenly felt more like a prison than a refuge; better to be out in the open where he’d be able to run for it if necessary. Easing aside the “door,” Burton peered cautiously out. The half-fallen brick wall in front of the flop obscured his view, making him feel even more vulnerable.

Expecting to feel hands grabbing him at any moment, he slipped out of the box, crouching near the end of the broken wall. He shivered in the early morning air, pretty sure it wasn't just the cold air that had given him the shakes.

There was no evidence of anyone near him. A thin line of white slashed the eastern horizon, silhouetting a church spire, nailing it to the pale blue morning sky. Feeling a little safer in the lee of the wall, Burton peered around. The wasteland was well overgrown; scrub bushes sprouted everywhere, giving any would-be assailant plenty of cover.

That's it, Ade, he thought sourly to himself. *Look on the bright side.*

A flicker of movement to Burton's right caught his eye.

Three figures, keeping low, flitted from shadow to shadow; their course would bring them close to Burton's position, but then one of them broke away to the left and was lost from sight. From the way they moved, Burton could tell they were young. They looked about the same age as him, or maybe a little younger. Two were male, the third a girl judging by the long, white hair streaming out behind her as she ran.

Suddenly another figure appeared from behind a half-demolished wall to the right of the fleeing couple, nothing more than a black shape, but Burton clearly saw the rifle held in black-gloved hands! He'd seen enough American action movies in his time to recognize an automatic weapon. For all that, the weapon looked odd—bulky—the barrel looked oversized, the bore large in diameter.

One of the running figures, the male, veered off, charging the armed man. The automatic rifle was thrown up; a swift aim was taken.

There was a low pop, then a second. The sound was strangely muted, sounding nothing like a gunshot. The gunman jerked with the recoil, the dawn's light flashing off his gleaming black helmet. Throwing himself aside, the running figure rolled, then came to his feet fluidly without breaking his stride.

The sniper was startled, and tried to bring the gun to bear, but wasn't fast enough. The two men collided, both hitting the stony ground hard. They scabbled in the dirt, low grunts cutting the silence. Only one of the two men stood up, breathing heavily, peering around like a trapped animal. Oddly, he was wearing sunglasses, incongruous in the morning's gloom. He hurried after his fleeing companion.

"What the...?" Burton gasped.

The wasteland was suddenly alive with moving shapes, darting from bush to tree, derelict wall to mound of earth.

Burton, transfixed by the speed of events, watched the two running people drawing closer to where he was hiding. He could now plainly see they were a man and a woman. Low pops sounded all around them, plumes of dirt flew at their pounding feet, and ricochets sang off the concrete; the sound was dull, not the whine he had heard in a dozen Western movies.

Another armed man stepped from behind a tree, aiming at the running man. Burton didn't have a clue what was happening. He couldn't believe there was a gun battle being fought in the middle of London, albeit very one-sided. Nor could he idly watch as an unarmed man was gunned down in cold blood. Half afraid of being shot himself, Burton popped up from behind the wall.

"Watch out!" Burton's warning echoed around the vast, open space.

The man and woman threw themselves flat as the gunman fired. Burton heard him curse. The couple scrambled to their feet as the gunman continued to shoot, forcing them to separate—the man to the left, the woman turned right, towards Burton. Her hair, gleaming white in the early morning light, streamed out behind her like a scintillating banner. Burton rubbed his eyes in disbelief. She seemed to be wavering; her outline shimmered, almost disappearing. For a wild moment, he thought she'd literally vanished!

The gunman by the tree lowered his rifle to his hip, firing in short, savage bursts. The air was filled with a sound like popping corn. The woman cried out in pain. Burton looked. The ground between him and the woman was fairly level, free from obstruction, no piles of rubble, no bushes, but he could no longer see her!

Apparently nor could the gunman who swiveled aiming at the man running pell-mell for the perimeter fence. Without thinking Burton snatched up a length of wood and breaking cover rushed at the startled gunman, who began to turn back as

Burton swung his makeshift club, hard and low. Air whooshed inside the helmet as the man doubled over, the club breaking across his stomach. The rifle clattered away as the leather-clad man dropped to his hands and knees. Burton kicked him in the side, spinning him over, leaving him gasping for air.

Dropping the shattered club, Burton ran towards the last place he had last seen the woman, frantically searching for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. Burton's head snapped left and right.

She has to be here somewhere, he reasoned. But where?

Falling bricks made Burton whirl around; a grinning, tanned face framed in corn-yellow hair was suddenly in front of him, making him blink in surprise. The second running man. He barely had time to register the perfect white teeth and the bright blue eyes when the air shimmered around the man, his outline wavering as if he were surrounded by a heat haze.

Burton screamed, hurriedly backing away from the slavering monstrosity looming over him, appearing out of nowhere. Fetid breath belched from the gaping maw filled with yellowed, razor-sharp fangs. Red eyes glared insanely, promising a very painful and bloody death. The huge beast's matted fur was mottled dark brown and sickly greys, crawling alive with creeping things. Again, Burton's ears rang as the brute roared; waves of stinking air washed over him, making him gag. Massive

muscles bunched and coiled beneath the filthy, lice-ridden coat as the creature lunged to attack.

The huge taloned paw lashed out, slashing at Burton's throat. The desperate man threw himself backwards, barely avoiding the needle-like claws. The back of his legs caught the remains of a low wall. Arms windmilling for balance, he pitched over. The scream was knocked out of his lungs as he landed flat on his back. Sharp stones gouged his back through his denim jacket; lights burst before his eyes. There was a moment's respite before a loud crack shook the ground beneath him. The world tipped over and he slipped down farther as all support fell away underneath him.

Landing on his shoulder, pain flared, then flared again as a pile of bricks tumbled down on top of him with a clatter, enveloping him in a cloud of choking dust. The slide seemed endless as Burton twisted and fell, bricks and sharp jags ripping at him. Finally, he came to a stop on his knees amidst a cloud of dust and falling bricks. He attempted to rise when something struck him hard on the back of the head. A bright orange light flamed, and then everything went black.



Chapter Two

STRINGER

"Oh, man," Burton groaned, afraid to move, blinking in the bright sunlight pouring down from the large hole above him. Tears streamed from his tightly squeezed eyes, cutting vivid swaths through the dust that coated his face, stinging the myriad abrasions and cuts like boiling acid. He hurt all over. He knew it would be worse if he tried to get up, but it hurt just lying there.

"Oh, Jeez! Oh, Jeez! Oh, Jeez!" he groaned like a mantra as he raised his arms. Bricks clattered about him; dust rose, making him retch.

Coughing made him hurt worse, which made him cough even more. He found himself on a bizarre merry-go-round of agony. Giving vent to the biggest groan yet, Burton sat up. Mistake! The world whirled around him; he thought he was going to vomit.

For long minutes, he sat amidst the debris, his pounding head down on his bruised chest, unwilling to subject himself to any more torture. It hurt to think, so he avoided even that simple task, content to sit in the unseasonable sunshine and suffer. Some minutes passed before Burton had sufficient strength, or inclination, to move. Raising his head on a creaking neck, he discovered he was in some sort of basement or cellar. Bricks and masonry pooled about his legs. Ten feet above him loomed the

broken wall he had tumbled over when he had been attacked by ... whatever. His dazed mind couldn't dwell on the circumstances right now.

Biting back yet another groan, Burton struggled to his knees, progressing shakily to his feet. Brick dust billowed as he heaved free of the debris; he stifled the urge to cough. Failing, he inwardly groaned as the pain throbbed through his entire wracked body.

Gingerly, he touched the back of his head; his fingers came away dirty and wet.

"Great," he mumbled, wiping the blood on his filthy jeans.

Swaying unsteadily, vision blurring, he sought a way out of his subterranean torture chamber. There was no easy way. He had to go straight up the pile of loose rubble in front of him; he doubted if he had the strength. Ten feet suddenly looked like a thousand.

Ten minutes later, gasping for breath, soaked in sweat, Burton clambered over the wall that had pitched him into this very painful nightmare. His stomach churned, acid burned at the back of his throat. Before he could stop it, he leaned over the hole and left a little memento in the basement he had just vacated. Wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his jean jacket, leaving grit in his mouth, Burton tried to assess the situation. He couldn't get his head around it. He figured it was about midday; the sun was almost directly above him in a cloudless, blue sky. That meant he had been down there for hours, six or seven at least.

He didn't want to stay there anymore. His mouth felt like the inside of a donkey's hind leg. He needed a drink, preferably something hot and sweet. Tea. There was a café nearby; he'd seen it last night as he had reconnoitered for a place to crash. Man, did he ever pick the wrong place! His career as a vagrant wasn't going so well.

No time to dwell on that. He had to get to the café, get something inside his growling stomach. Think about things later. Painfully, Burton stood up, his knees popping like Christmas crackers. He shuffled in a shambling walk, only instinct guiding him to the broken fence which served as an entrance to the waste ground he had so dumbly chosen as a safe place to lay his weary head. Burton was vaguely aware it would be wiser to take some money out of his shoe before he got onto the street. He wasn't sure he could accomplish such a complicated task as taking his shoe off, extracting some money, and replacing his shoe this side of the millennium.

Surprisingly, he managed it.

The café, so close the previous night, seemed a million miles away today. He was more than glad to walk, reasonably straight, through the rickety door into the steamy warmth. There were only two or three patrons inside the dingy café. Seating himself gingerly near the counter, Burton ordered a large mug of tea. Even in his present disorientated mental state, Burton was aware of the attention he was getting. He looked up into the unshaven face of the café's proprietor.

"You okay, mate?"

Burton watched the cigarette jig up and down in the man's mouth as he spoke, wondering if the balding man with the greasy, stained apron was even aware it was illegal to smoke inside public buildings like cafés, even one as crappy as this one.

"Yeah," he croaked. "Slight accident." He beamed what he hoped was an embarrassed smile, but was, in fact, a painful grimace.

"You ought to go to the hospital. That's a nasty cut you got there," the owner advised.

Burton nodded. "As soon as I've drunk this." He cradled the mug of strong tea in his bruised and bloody fingers.

The café owner shrugged and went back behind the counter, satisfied he had done his good deed for the day as he tended the greasy bacon and runny eggs sizzling on a none-too-hygienic hotplate.

Smelling the frying food, Burton fought the urge to throw up again. The tea revived him.

Someone slipped into the chair opposite. Burton didn't have the strength to look up.

"You look in a bad way, you okay?" asked a voice. A man.

Slowly Burton raised his head. The man was middle-aged; Asian, maybe Arabic, Burton wasn't sure. He regarded Burton with liquid black eyes filled with concern, and something else.

"I'm fine." Burton turned his attention back to his tea. A warning bell sounded above the clamour already filling his head.

"There's blood all down your back, and your head's still bleeding. You ought to get to a doctor," the man said kindly.

Burton was feeling a little woozy. The sweetness of the tea was starting to make him feel sick.

"I think you may be right," he agreed.

"Would you like me to take you? My car's outside."

Burton was about to accept the offer when he felt a warm hand slip over his own.

"No, it's okay," he said, extricating his hand. "Thanks anyway."

He was halfway back to the waste ground before he knew it. A fresh breeze had sprung up; it went a long way to clearing his befuddled head.

Christ, he thought. Is all of London inhabited by predators always on the hunt for the down and outs and the vulnerable?

Burton looked at the bloodied paper napkins he had taken from the café. The bleeding from his head wasn't slowing. He folded the tissues again and pressed them back against the wound, wincing at the pain. He'd go back to the waste ground, retrieve his bag, and get to a hospital. Once they had tended to him, it was on a train and home. You could stick London.

The waste ground looked deserted, with no indication of the early morning dramatics. Burton carefully picked his way across the rough ground, passing the place where he had clubbed the black-clad gunman to the ground, the length of wood lying where he had dropped it. For a second, he looked at the makeshift weapon. Something didn't look right, but his aching head and the sight of his camp drove the thought from his head.

"Ah, Jeez."

He felt himself sag when he saw the ruin of old wood and cardboard. Someone had already been here and wrecked the place; the flop had been leveled.

"Kids," Burton said bitterly.

He peered about, looking for his rucksack. The small blue bag was nowhere to be seen. Goodbye razor, goodbye toothbrush, goodbye spare t-shirt. Not much to show for a man of the world, but a lot when your only option was to have nothing.

The sudden rush of movement caught Burton completely off-guard. The air burst from his lungs as someone rammed into him; knocking him clean off his feet. They crashed amongst the ruins of the flop, sliding on the slippery cardboard.

"Where is she?" The proximity made the voice loud in his ears.

Burton's arm was wrenched savagely up his back; his face mashed against the slick cardboard.

"I won't ask you again," snarled the voice. "Where's Kelly?"

Out of desperation more than anything, Burton twisted in the iron-hard grip. He felt it slip. The cardboard under them was making it difficult for either of them to maintain balance. With a grunt, he heaved again, throwing his attacker off. Burton rolled clear, his head swimming.

“Hold it! Hold it!” he yelled, raising his arms, hands outstretched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about; you’ve got the wrong man.”

“The hell I have. I saw you running towards her, and then you both disappeared,” snarled the young man.

“I fell down a hole.” Burton recognized the man from this morning. “Look at me! Look!” He held out the bloodied tissues. “Yeah, I saw her fall. I went to help, but I couldn’t find her. Then someone—something—attacked me and I fell into a cellar. I only woke up about an hour ago.”

The man’s shoulders slumped, his face crumbling.

“Shit,” he moaned, dropping onto a lump of masonry, his head in his hands.

He was young, no more than eighteen. Slim, blond, wearing a white t-shirt under a brown leather jacket, blue jeans, and white trainers.

Burton sat down on a piece of crumpled cardboard; the movement hurt his head.

“That’s all right,” he said sarcastically. “No need to apologize.” He began dabbing his head again.

The distraught man regarded him; his eyes lost behind the sunglasses he seemed to continually wear.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I see now that you were only trying to help."

"No problem," Burton replied, a little more amenable now. "But what was going on? Who were those men shooting at you? And why?"

"Long story." The man smiled wanly.

"I got all the time in the world," Burton said, extending a bloodied hand.

"Burton, Ade Burton. Now, d'you want to tell me about it?"

"Nick Stringer," the young man answered. "And believe me, you don't want to know. It's best if you keep as far away from me as possible. These people don't care who they hurt."

"That much was obvious this morning," Burton agreed. "But why? What did they want?"

"Look," said Stringer, getting up. "You tried to help, thanks. But you don't want to get mixed up in this. Hell, I shouldn't even be out here."

Before Burton could ask why, a brick beside him suddenly exploded with a dull thump. He stared at it blankly.

"Move!" yelled Stringer, throwing himself over the low wall.

A second bullet ricocheted near Burton's foot, galvanizing him into action.

Trying to ignore the roiling sickness welling up in his throat, he followed Stringer over

the wall. Together they scrambled to their feet and ran, zigzag, for the fence surrounding the wasteland.

Nearing the hole in the fence, Stringer stumbled, going to his knees with a grunt. Burton grabbed his arm, hauling him back to his feet. In his haste, Stringer lost his sunglasses. He grabbed for them desperately. Burton gasped when he saw the man's eyes. They were black, entirely black; no whites were visible at all. Stringer thrust his glasses back onto his nose and raced away. Stunned, Burton followed.

Once they were on the street, the going was easier. Stringer paused at the corner, breathing heavily.

"Gotta keep going, don't give 'em a chance to get ahead of us," he gasped. "Best we get away from the immediate area before Harry shows up."

Stringer raced off again, leaving Burton looking back the way they had come. There didn't seem to be anyone following. Stringer was getting farther away as Burton began to run after him. His stomach was lurching, clenching as he ran, threatening to disgorge its contents at any minute. He was running and he didn't know why. He had just reacted to the urgency in Stringer's voice. All the while, one thought rolled through his bewildered mind.

Harry? he thought. Who the hell is Harry?

Chapter Three

CONFUSION

"Wait! WAIT!" Burton grabbed Stringer by the shoulder and dragged him around.

They regarded each other, panting.

"This is crazy. Why are we running?" gasped Burton, still feeling nauseous.

"We have to keep on the move. It's safer that way 'til we can get under cover."

"But no-one's following us!"

"That depends on where you're looking," Stringer said, wiping his hand across his mouth; he needed a drink. "Armed men in black leather and helmets might look a bit conspicuous running along a city street, don't you think? But who'd notice a motorbike...?"

"Motorbikes? What motorbikes?" Burton said, looking up and down the empty street. Burton suddenly felt very vulnerable.

"Don't worry, there's no-one behind us, I've been looking for both of us," said Stringer.

Somehow Burton wasn't comforted. "Just who are these guys?"

"I've no idea," Stringer said. "We call them MIBs."

Burton looked suitably puzzled.

"Men in black," Stringer explained.

"Oh, very Will Smith," Burton said wryly. "We?"

"There are others, friends. You'll meet them soon. Ready to go on? You look like hell."

"Cheers, good to see I can rely on you for encouragement. So, where are we going?"

"Not far," Stringer said, moving off. "We'll be safe soon."

*

"Down there?" Burton said incredulously.

"It's the quickest and safest way," Stringer explained, lifting the manhole cover.

"But ... the sewers?"

"Look, Burton, we haven't time for debate. The MIBs could be on us at any minute. Besides, they have other ways of tracking us." Stringer looked anxiously up at the surrounding rooftops. "We have to get off the streets."

They had been running for over ten minutes, Stringer in the lead twisting and turning through a dozen streets, losing them in the back alleys until, finally, they came to this narrow byway. Burton had no idea where he was. At their feet was a black manhole cover.

Burton eyed it dubiously.

“Stay or come with me,” Stringer said as he clambered into the manhole. “Your choice; just replace the cover when you decide!”

With a defeated shake of his head, Burton followed.

*

“Oh, this is great,” complained Burton, tramping along the narrow stone walkway behind Stringer. He felt his feet sliding on something disgusting, and the smell! “Nice decor, early gross, isn’t it?” he said, shaking something off his hand after stupidly putting it against the wall.

“For God’s sake! Stop moaning, we’ll be clear of it in a while,” Stringer said in the near darkness.

“What then? A tour around the local rubbish tip? Or toilets I have known?”

Stringer shot Burton a scathing look, but said nothing.

They came to a sheet of galvanized tin fixed to the tunnel wall. If Stringer hadn’t touched it, Burton would have walked right past. The metal squealed on the grubby tiles as Stringer pushed it aside, revealing darkness beyond. With a flick of his head, Stringer nodded Burton through; he quickly followed, carefully replacing the tin sheet. Taking the lead, Stringer led them deeper into the dark tunnel.

“Watch out for the rubble just there,” he warned.

Burton could barely see his hand in front of his face, let alone rubble on the floor. “Where?” he found himself whispering.

“Just by your left foot.”

Burton looked down at his feet; blackness pooled about his ankles. He moved his foot slightly and encountered some loose bricks, but he couldn't see them. He looked up at the vague shape that was Stringer moving confidently through the darkness. Puzzled, Burton followed.

Dim light glowed ahead. Burton was aware they were no longer in the tunnels, but in a square corridor with heavy pipes running the length of the ceiling. The walls were brick, the floor rough concrete. He had been so disorientated by the darkness he hadn't even noticed the change. The sparse light was a relief, as the darkness had started to become oppressive. His head was throbbing; he badly needed to rest. He noticed Stringer putting his sunglasses back on, in the gloom he hadn't seen him remove them. Once more, he wondered how he could possibly see where he was going in the dark tunnels.

They were suddenly out of the corridor, opening out into a larger room or hall. Burton sensed movement in the darkness.

“Stringer...?” a querulous voice floated out of the gloom.

“It's okay, relax,” Stringer assured the voice. “It's me, Nick. I've got someone with me!” he suddenly called out, startling Burton.

Several figures detached themselves from the shadows. Teenagers, kids, anywhere from twelve to twenty years old. They looked like frightened animals, edgy

and nervous. Moody sullen eyes regarded Burton, faces unsmiling. They were dirty, but not filthy. Their clothes looked a little ragged and had seen better days. They looked relieved to see Stringer.

Burton tried to smile at them reassuringly, but he felt hot and his mouth was dry. He tried to wet his lips; his tongue felt thick and gummy. He was vaguely aware of Stringer turning to him, a look of consternation spreading over his face. The room spun as Burton's legs turned to rubber, pitching him forward, unaware of the arms preventing his headlong plunge...

*

Stringer's was the first face he saw when he woke, staring at him with worry written all over his pale face, the ever-present sunglasses shielding his eyes.

"You know how to scare people," he said, a ghost of a smile playing on his thin lips.

Burton tried to speak, but his mouth felt as if it were full of cotton. Stringer hurriedly produced a glass of water and helped Burton to drink.

"Not too much. Drink it slowly," he warned.

The water was as cool as liquid silver sliding down Burton's parched throat; he smacked his lips as Stringer withdrew the glass.

"Thanks," he croaked.

"I didn't think..." Stringer began. "I should have realized how bad you were, the blood ..."

"It's okay." Burton tried to smile, but his face hurt, and so did his head. "Where am I?"

"In Confusion, at least, that's what we call it. A temporary home," Stringer said. "How do you feel? You've nearly slept the clock round."

Burton shifted, trying to ease the nagging pain in his lower back. He was already propped up by a mountain of pillows, lying on a mattress in the weirdest room he'd ever been in. The walls seemed to be made from slats of wood and cardboard; the bed he was in was low, nearly to the floor. Stringer was sitting on a wooden box beside him. In the corner on an upturned metal bucket, a Davy Lamp burned, casting a lurid glow about the tiny room.

"Confusion? What sort of name is that? What is this place? Cardboard city?"

"Not exactly," Stringer answered. "You hungry? Want some soup?"

Burton realized he was starving.

"Yeah, that'd be good." He lay back into the pillows. "With half a ton of aspirin, if you've got them," he added wryly.

Minutes later, Burton sensed Stringer back at his bedside; the smell of rich, meaty soup reached his nostrils, flooding his mouth with juices.

"That smells great..."

He stopped short when he saw the girl kneeling by the bedside, the soup in her hands. She smiled broadly at him, her green eyes, behind wire-rimmed glasses, sparkled.

"Glad to see you're awake at last," she said, her voice softly accented.

"Who...?"

"Mina, Mina Crimmi. How's the head?"

"Aching."

"No aspirin, I'm afraid. Not for a while, anyway. I need to see how you are."

"What're you? A nurse?"

"I'm *your* nurse, at least for the time being. Come on, eat this while it's still hot."

Burton allowed her to spoon-feed him, hardly taking his eyes off her. If his staring bothered her, she didn't show it.

She was slim, dressed in jeans and a light blue t-shirt, making her look a little tomboyish. Her face was narrow, pretty; with a full mouth and high cheekbones accentuated by a thin nose. Her hair was a profusion of glistening black curls hanging to her shoulders. Yet there was a haunted look to her, around the eyes, etched into the corners of her mouth.

"You can put your eyes back in now. You're done."

Burton realized he had finished the soup. "Sorry, I didn't..."

"No worries." Mina smiled. "You feel better now?" Her hand was cool on his forehead.

Burton nodded.

"Good," Stringer said over Mina's shoulder.

"That's a matter of opinion," said a new voice.

A young man, blond and tan, appeared at Mina's other shoulder. He regarded Burton with an arrogant curl on his mouth. Burton thought he looked familiar. Then he remembered he had seen him just before the wolf creature attacked him! Burton went to speak, but was cut short by an irate voice.

"If you can't say something nice, keep quiet Dec." A third man stood at the foot of the bed, his flaming red hair bright in the dim light. His heavily freckled face was set in a frown, echoing in his eyes of pale blue. "I'm Gary, you know Nick and Mina. That, over there, is Declan."

"Dec," cut in Declan.

Gary ignored him and the obvious friction between them. "When you're better, we need to talk," Gary continued.

"About what?" queried Burton.

"When you're feeling better," Gary repeated.

"Whatever you say," Burton said non-committally.

"Fine, later," Gary walked abruptly away with a startled Burton looking after him.

He glanced at Mina.

"You'll get used to him," she said. "Anything else you need?"

"Away out of this madhouse?" ventured Burton.

She smiled indulgently. "Spring for two tickets and I'll come with you.

Meanwhile... welcome to Confusion."



Chapter Four

MINA

Burton didn't think he'd be able to sleep anymore, but he did. For how long he couldn't say. Time meant nothing in this weird subterranean world. He awoke refreshed, though still aching. His face felt tight. So did the back of his head; he touched it with tentative fingers, encountering bandages. Thankfully, his headache was no more than a dull throb.

Voices, low and heated, reached his ears, echoing off the dirty brick walls. Grimacing, Burton pushed the covers off and managed to stand up. For a second, the little room span as dizziness washed over him. It quickly passed, helped by the concrete cold and gritty on the soles of his bare feet. Wrapping the sheet around his nakedness, he went to investigate.

Bending almost double, Burton passed through the tiny opening that served as a door to the room and found himself in a large chamber composed entirely of brickwork that curved up to form the ceiling. Shadows danced just beyond the archway fronting the chamber, which let out into a wide passageway.

"You shouldn't have brought him here. We know nothing about him."

"I had no choice. The MIBs were right on our tails. Besides, he tried to help Kelly."

Burton recognized Stringer's voice.

"You can't know that." This came from Dec.

"I can," Mina said. "And you *can't* trust me."

Declan didn't seem to have an answer to this.

"So, what do we know?" said Gary.

The four of them looked blankly at each other.

Nick shrugged. "Nothing, as Dec said."

"Then why don't you ask me?" Burton stepped into the light. "I'm happy to tell you whatever you want to know."

They all looked guilty at Burton's sudden appearance, except for Mina, who immediately got up.

"You ought to be in bed," she said, taking his arm and leading him to a wooden crate by a glowing brazier.

"No offense meant," Gary said. "But we are in a ... peculiar situation. Trusting strangers is a little hard."

"What is all this?" Burton said, taking in his surroundings. "Some sort of underground commune, or what?"

What Burton had mistaken for a corridor was actually a huge basement illuminated mostly by paraffin lamps and candles. Here and there were electric lights; the power siphoned off God alone knew from where. Two dozen ghostly faces were seated around the red glowing brazier, all teenagers or younger. Mina was beside him,

Gary on the other side, opposite were Nick and Declan. To his left was a petite girl, painfully thin and pale. Burton couldn't remember if he'd seen her before.

"That's Sue Crossley," Mina whispered in his ear. "We call her Mouse."

Burton looked at Mina sharply. He had the strangest feeling that the green-eyed girl had somehow known exactly what he was thinking.

"Nick Stringer, Declan McIntire, and Gary English," she finished the formal introductions.

"Nice to meet you," Burton said dryly. "So, now's someone going to answer my question? Why're you living down here like rats? What is this place?"

"It's not our choice," Gary said. "But necessity. You've seen what's happening. We can't risk being on the streets for too long."

"You mean those men on the waste ground, shooting at you?" said Burton. "But why? Who are those... those men?"

"Well, go on, tell him," Dec said, lounging back against a wall. "He's here now, a marked man, like the rest of us. He ought to know the full score."

Gary scowled at him. "Why don't you just keep quiet for a change?"

"He's right," Mina said. "It's not Ade's fault he's been pulled into this."

"Hold it! Hold it! Am I invisible, or what? I'm sitting here, y'know? Stop talking around me and start talking to me," Burton snapped angrily.

"Woooo, touchy," Dec jibed.

This time Mina glared, and Dec fell silent.

"For reasons we don't yet understand," Mina said to Burton, "the MIBs have an interest in us. Several of our people have disappeared. We think they were abducted by the MIBs."

"Well, that's simple enough," Burton said sarcastically. "Your sort of everyday occurrence. I don't know why I didn't see that from the start."

"See, I told you he wouldn't go for it," Dec said. "Street smart y'see."

"Look," Gary said stiffly. "It's not really your problem. We're sorry you got involved, and we thank you for trying to help, but the best advice I can give you is, as soon as you're fit enough, get out. Get as far away from us as you possibly can."

"Stick to your original plan, go home to Manchester," Mina added.

There it was again, thought Burton, looking at Mina. *Knowing what I was thinking...*

"How did you know I was going home?" Burton asked, surprised. "And how did you know 'home' is Manchester?"

Declan opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it when Mina looked at him.

"You were delirious. You said a lot of stuff," she answered.

She was convincing, but Burton didn't believe her. There was more to this than met the eye. Burton mentally shrugged; he'd already decided he was going as soon as he was able to stand up without the room whirling around him.

"I think you ought to go back to bed," Mina said. "You're still looking a bit peaked. I'll get you some tea."

Stringer was immediately at his elbow, helping Burton back to the alcove made from cardboard and wooden pallets. Once he had slipped back into bed, Stringer left him just as Mina returned with a steaming cup of tea. She handed it to him and turned to go.

"No, wait, sit with me for a while, huh?"

Mina hesitated and then sat on the low wooden box. For long seconds Burton sipped his tea, saying nothing. Finally, he cupped the mug in his hands and rested it on his stomach.

"What are you doing down here, Mina? I mean, really?"

She looked a little uncomfortable; indecision clouded her eyes.

"There are reasons, too many to go into," she said slowly, obviously picking her words carefully. "Not least Kelly. We must get her back, if only for Nick's sake."

"You think these men took her?" asked Burton. "But why was she taken? I keep asking what these men want, but everyone keeps avoiding the question."

"That's because we don't know."

Burton looked skeptical.

"Truly," Mina said.

"You mean they're after *all* of you?"

"Yes, at one time or another. We sort of drifted together, you know, like attracting like."

"What does that mean? 'Like attracting like?' How long's this been going on for?"

"Eighteen months, nearly two years."

"WHAT?" Burton was incredulous, nearly spilling the tea. "What about your families? Or the police? Surely you went to them for help?"

"Ade, Gary was right. This really doesn't concern you; you shouldn't get involved. Get better and go home."

Burton took another sip of his tea. "Crimmi. That's not English."

Mina smiled, thankful for the change of direction. "Italian, my father's side."

"But the accent's not Italian."

Her smile broadened. "That's a little more mundane, I'm afraid. Lancashire."

"I wasn't sure," Burton admitted.

"It's more noticeable when I get excited. What about you?"

"I never get excited." Burton grinned.

Mina gave him a look.

"Manchester, as you well know," he said, more soberly.

"So, what are you doing in London?"

"A bad attempt of getting away from Manchester. It was a mistake coming here in the first place." He fingered his bandaged head. "A big mistake. Problem is, there's nothing much at home either."

"At least it's home."

"Yeah, I guess there's that. And you, are you going home? Or do you live in London now?"

"No, I came down here for a job, but it fell through. I guess I will go home when things are settled here."

"Things?"

Mina frowned.

"Sorry," Burton quickly apologized. "Part of the 'Big Secret,' huh?"

Mina's face softened; sadness shadowed her eyes, making them a deep green. "I know it's hard to understand, but it really is for the best, believe me. As Declan said, you may already be marked for helping us."

"It's no big deal."

"You may think so. Others might not. It got you noticed."

"What it got me was a crack on the head," Burton said ruefully.

Mina laughed, a soft tinkling sound that was quickly swallowed in the vastness of the cellar. Burton looked out through the open door of the makeshift sick room.

Shadows danced everywhere to the silent music of the candle flames. The braziers cast a hellish glow where the meager electric light couldn't reach.

"This is so weird," he said.

"Yeah," Mina agreed.

Burton sensed a deeper meaning to the simple reply. "How many of you are there down here?"

Mina looked into the shadows, mentally counting. "About thirty."

"All teenagers?"

Mina nodded.

"Jesus, Mina, why don't you...?" The question died on his lips as Mina's expression became wary.

"Sorry, touching on the 'Big Secret' again. No, it's all right. Maybe it's best if we keep it on a need-to-know basis."

"We're not criminals or runaways. We're just caught up in a bizarre situation..."

"That's probably an understatement, but there's no need to explain," Burton said, taking her hand. It felt cold. "Need to know basis, remember?"

*

The bandages came off the next day, though Burton couldn't tell day from night in the cellar. The wound was healing well. Mina, it turned out, really was a nurse,

halfway through her training, when the “Big Secret” struck. She had done a good job of stitching the cut.

Burton sat sipping a cup of coffee, watching the activity in the basement. Small groups of teenagers spoke in quiet whispers; others lay listlessly on makeshift beds. Some sat in solitary silence, gazing into the vast reaches of their own troubled minds. The air was thick with expectancy within the shadowy half-world of these strange teenagers. But what were they expecting? What could be so bad that they were forced to take refuge beneath the streets of East London like rats in a sewer? Burton wasn't sure if he really wanted to know. Unfortunately, he was blessed, or cursed, depending on your perspective with an innate sense of curiosity, which meant questions constantly nagged at him.

Something else niggled at the back of his mind that he couldn't quite get right in his head. Burton got the distinct impression that these weren't ordinary teenagers, living in a basement aside. It wasn't anything he could put his finger on, just a gut feeling. What had Mina said? “Like attracts like.” What had she meant by that?

Burton put his cup down. Whatever it was it didn't concern him. They'd made that much crystal clear. Another day or two and he'd be on his way, no regrets. He paused. Well, maybe one. He looked over to where Mina sat with a group of youngsters talking quietly.

Putting his hands carefully behind his head, Burton stared into the flame of the candle by his bedside. If things had been different, maybe there might have been a chance for him and Mina. They weren't so different; they even came from the same part of the country. Well, almost. Burton knew they would have been good together.

He felt himself drifting off as tiredness washed over him. He settled back into the pillows as his eyelids grew heavy, the vision of Mina's face hovering before him in the gloom.

Chapter Five

ATTACK

Dreams became reality when he saw Mina's face before him creased with concern. He blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"Quickly, we have to leave," she whispered urgently.

"What?" Burton said, befuddled.

"Hurry, get dressed." Mina slipped away.

Still half-asleep, Burton clambered into the borrowed clothes Gary had given him, a white t-shirt and a dark blue tracksuit. He went to find Mina, finding her standing in a huddle with the others.

"How close?" Gary was asking.

"Close," Mina replied.

"This is Nick's fault," Dec said angrily. "Bringing a 'straight' here, they must have been spotted and followed, just waiting to get us all together." He glared at Burton, his hostility a palpable thing.

"Don't start, Dec!" Gary snapped. "It's no one's fault. It was only a matter of time before they found us. We all knew that. Most of the others have already got out, but we're going to need a diversion."

Burton was suddenly aware the basement was empty; most of the makeshift cubicles had been dismantled, candles, torches, everything, gone. They were the only six left: Mina, Dec, Gary, Nick, Mouse, and himself.

"Dec?" Gary asked.

"Oh, wonderful." Dec threw up his hands. "Nick brings in a 'straight', and I have to knock myself out getting us out of a jam."

"Can you do it?" Gary persisted, ignoring the whining.

"Yeah, I can do it, but not for long."

"You won't have to. Let's go."

"What's going on?" Burton asked as Stringer hurried past him.

"Trouble, we gotta go."

Mina touched his arm, silently urging him to follow Stringer. Gary, and then Sue, passed him, heading into the darkness of the basement.

"Where are we going?" Burton asked, keeping pace with Mina.

"Not far," Mina answered. "Just do as we do. You'll be all right."

"Yeah... right," Burton said skeptically.

He realized Dec had remained behind. Burton looked back. Dec's blond hair picked him out in the gloom, standing stiff-legged by the opening Stringer had brought him in by. Burton slowed. Dec's posture looked odd, rigid. He seemed to be staring straight into the darkness, his head slightly bowed.

"Ade, come on," Mina called softly.

"What's he doing?" Burton asked, nodding towards Dec.

"What he does best. Now, come on. There's not much time."

Burton allowed her to pull him on; his eyes still fixed on Dec. The entrance seemed to be shimmering, the gap closing. New bricks appeared where a moment ago there was nothing. Mina pulled insistently on his arm. Reluctantly, wanting to see what Dec was doing, Burton followed her into a corridor hidden deep in the shadows. Dull thumps vibrated through the concrete floor. Faint, flat pops reached his ears, followed by shouts and cries of pain accompanied by ricochets.

"Are they explosions?" wondered Burton.

"They've found some of the others," cursed Gary. "They're trying to seal the other exits."

"Can't think of them now. Keep going," panted Mina.

They seemed to run for miles, turning this way and that through dark corridors. Passing through a rusty door that squealed mightily on corroded hinges, the smell of sewers suddenly became overwhelming. The light became better, but not much. At least Burton had some idea of where he was putting his feet. His legs were beginning to ache as he followed Mina along the narrow walkway; his strength had not yet fully been restored. Sue Crossley ran in front of her, then Gary with Nick leading, running as sure-footedly in the gloom as if he were out on an early morning jog. How the hell he

could see anything with those sunglasses on puzzled Burton. They didn't seem to bother Nick. Gary called a halt in a grubby recess in the tiled wall. They gathered around him like conspirators in the gunpowder plot.

"We'll give Dec a few minutes to catch up."

"I'll go back a little way, see if I can see him," said Nick, slipping away.

"Not too far," Gary warned.

"You okay?" Mina asked Burton.

He regarded her stonily. "I would be if I knew what the hell was going on."

"MIBs, they found us. It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"I gathered that much," Burton said. "But guns and explosives against a bunch of teenagers? That doesn't make sense. What's really going on, Mina?"

She looked troubled, glancing at Gary, who just shrugged.

"Running is our only option," said Gary.

"No, it isn't," said Burton. "Go to the police. Tell them what's going on. Let them help you."

"You don't understand," said Mina. "We would be jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."

"Why?" Burton said exasperatedly. "I don't get it! What makes you people so special that you have to hide in the sewers from armed men? What the hell do they want?"

"Ade, it's better if you don't know. When we get out of here, you really should leave. Do as Gary says. Get away from us as far and fast as you can."

"Sooner or later, there's going to be no place to run. What then? If London's so dangerous, why don't you all just leave, lose yourselves in the countryside or some other big city?"

"Because they'll always find us. One way or the other, they always do. One at a time, or all together, it makes no difference. At least by sticking together, we have some chance of staying alive 'til we find out who's behind it all."

"What, running like rats in a maze? You're kidding yourselves. They're using guns, Mina!" Burton said.

"They're not real guns, they use rubber bullets, not live rounds," said Gary. "Designed to stun, and believe me, they bloody hurt."

"And that makes it all right?" Burton said sulphurously.

"No, it doesn't," returned Gary. "But as Mina says, going to the police will solve nothing. We'd be swapping one problem for another. We don't know who these men are, or what they want exactly. What if the police are a part of it? Or some other government agency? We'd be playing straight into their hands."

"What? Can you hear yourself? I think you've seen too many Stallone films. Jesus, talk about paranoia?"

Gary shot Mina a glance and then regarded Burton. Anger crackled within his violet-blue eyes. "Does this feel like paranoia? Running, hiding? We've lived this nightmare for nearly two years. We've lost loved ones and friends. We know what we're doing. We haven't a choice.

"Like it or not, we're on our own 'til we can find someone we can trust and can really help us."

"And I don't like it," Burton retorted.

"That's fine," Gary returned. "As soon as we're clear, you can be on your way."

"Fine," said Burton. "The sooner the better."

"That's enough!" Mina snapped. "Haven't we enough problems without fighting amongst ourselves?" She paused; her head suddenly cocked to one side. "Nick's coming back."

Seconds later, Nick was kneeling beside them. "Someone's coming down the tunnel. I think it's Dec, but I couldn't be sure."

Gary frowned. "Okay, we'll go on. Nick, you bring up the rear, keep an eye open for Dec. As soon as we get out into the open, we'll wait for him."

Nodding briefly Nick disappeared back into the tunnel.

Gary led them out of the recess; hurrying along the walkway until they reached a metal ladder, the rungs fixed directly to the tiled wall. Above, in the gloom, was a manhole cover. Without hesitation, Gary shimmied up the ladder, grunting as he

heaved the manhole cover aside. The grey light of early morning poured into the narrow opening, making them squint.

Sue scampered up the ladder, followed by Mina and then Burton. The air was welcomingly fresh and chilly after the stuffy confines of the sewers. They were in a cul-de-sac. Where? Burton couldn't even guess. They all crouched by the open manhole cover, peering anxiously into the darkness, except for Sue, who had taken up a position at the corner that gave way onto a main road. There was very little traffic this early in the morning.

Mina smiled bleakly at Burton, nodding towards the far wall. She and Burton retreated from the opening in the ground, and Gary.

"I'm sorry about that," Mina whispered. "He doesn't mean to get angry; we've been through a lot."

"He seems to be angry all the time," said Burton. "Especially towards Dec."

"Dec has a way of rubbing people the wrong way," she said. "Gary's particularly susceptible."

Burton looked at her. A sudden wash of feeling flowed over him. There was something about this strange girl that attracted him and raised unexpected emotions. He wanted to say something, convince her to get out of this nightmare, but he knew she wouldn't go for it. She was loyal to her friends, fiercely loyal, which he respected, and he was a comparative stranger. If he had friends, he'd be loyal, too.

"I just wish we could do something other than running," Burton said. "I meant it when I said you'll run out of places sooner than later."

"I know. But for the moment, there's nothing else we can do, believe me."

The watery sun slanted down into the cul-de-sac, offering meagre warmth. A deep, rich red colour glowed in Mina's hair that Burton hadn't noticed before, like bronze in an inky sea. It brought out the green of her eyes and the redness of her mouth. Once again Burton felt the unexpected flood of feeling course through him. She smiled; Burton felt an electric tingle flitter over his skin, bunching it into gooseflesh. It was uncanny. For a brief moment, he knew Mina had the same feelings!

Suddenly, Mina looked over to Gary; she went over to the manhole cover and peered in.

"They're coming," she said.

Chapter Six

SURPRISES

Gary lay on his front; his arms extended into the inky blackness of the open manhole.

"I've got him, I've got him," he grunted.

There was no room to help. Burton watched as Gary hauled Declan from the sewer, pushed from behind by Nick. Together, they struggled the limp man from the hole. Nick sprang from the manhole, grabbing Dec under the armpits and dragging him clear as Gary replaced the manhole cover.

"What the...?" Burton gasped as Nick laid Dec out at the foot of the wall in the pale sunshine.

Dec was as limp as a rag doll, his head lolling on his thin neck, his dark-ringed eyes closed, and their lids blue and bruised. Only ... it wasn't Dec!

The young man slumped at the foot of the wall was shorter than Dec, with hair a dirty blond colour, clinging in lank strands to a narrow skull. Gone was the tanned, handsome face, replaced by a pallid, thin countenance, heavily pockmarked with acne, bright red eruptions covering the sallow cheeks and forehead. He was painfully thin, making his clothes seem about two sizes too big for his skeletal frame. If it hadn't been for the three-quarter length coat and tight black trousers Burton wouldn't have connected this stranger to Dec at all.

"That's... that's not Dec!"

Nick's head snapped around, regarding Burton in surprise. Mina grabbed his arm and pulled him around.

"Yes, it is," she said.

"Whoa, wait a minute! I know what Dec looks like, and that isn't him!"

"No, you don't know what he looks like. Believe me, that's Declan McIntire."

"Then who the hell was that back there, with the mile-wide smile and the bright white teeth, the Mediterranean tan? It certainly wasn't that character over..."

The smell of hot metal made Burton pause. He turned. Gary was hunched over, kneeling by the closed manhole cover, which glowed a dull red. Stepping past Mina, Burton gaped.

"Don't touch it, it's hot!" Gary warned, suddenly rising to his feet.

Burton could feel the heat radiating from the metal.

"How did you do that?" he gasped, looking at Gary. "Just who *are* you people?"

"There's no time to explain," Mina said. "Please, you'll just have to trust us. I'll explain later."

"Mina, Harry's going to track us easy now we're in the open." Gary indicated the manhole cover welded shut at his feet. "That's not going to hold them for long."

"So, what now?" said Mina.

"There's only one place left," Gary said grimly.

"Oh, Gary, not there," Mina moaned.

"We've no choice." He turned to Stringer. "Nick, how's Dec?"

Dec was slumped against the foot of the wall, Stringer kneeling beside him.

"He'll be okay. I'll help him."

"Okay, let's go."

"Not me," Burton said, taking a step back and raising his hands. "I don't know what's going on here, but I want no part of it. I'm out."

"You can't do that, not now," Gary said. "Harry'll know you were with us. He'll find you. You have to stay."

"No, I don't," protested Burton. "Whoever this 'Harry' is, if he comes near me, he'll get more than he bargained for. I'm heading back to Manchester, just as fast as I can go," said Burton.

"Ade, Gary's right," Mina said softly, touching his arm. "You must come with us, at least until we're sure we've lost Harry and the MIBs. Please, I'll do my best to explain all this later."

Burton hesitated, his feelings conflicting with his instincts. He shook his head angrily. "I've got to be crazy, but okay, let's go." He grabbed Gary's arm, his dark eyes hard. "But I'm telling you, I want some answers, and soon!"

"You'll get your answers," croaked Dec, tiredly getting to his feet. "But you ain't going to like them."

A coughing fit wracked Dec's body as Stringer held him upright. Dec swiped the spittle from his chin with the sleeve of his coat.

They were on Vallance Road about a mile and a half from St. Clarence's Hospital. Gary swiftly led them through various backstreets, none of which Burton recognized despite his weeks of roaming the area. Eventually, they came out of an alley, crossed into a large residential estate, and stopped on the corner of Globe Road.

"We need to split up. We're too conspicuous running through the streets altogether. We'll meet at the cemetery in about thirty minutes, okay?"

"Cemetery? What cemetery?" Burton asked; he knew there were few cemeteries in the area.

"The one behind the hospital," Gary informed him.

"That doesn't make sense, we've just come from there," said Burton.

"True, and they won't expect us to double back. By the time they get out of the sewers, we'll be safe. Harry won't be able to find us at the cemetery," explained Gary.

"Why not? I thought you said he could find us anywhere," said Burton.

"Normally that'd be right," Mina interjected. "But Harry has a morbid fear of cemeteries. That fear blocks his psi-tracking ability."

"His what?"

Gary huffed in exasperation. "Look, we'll explain later. Right now we've got to get off the streets. Dec, you okay?"

The thin-faced man nodded. He was still pasty white, a sheen of perspiration on his face. Burton couldn't get over the odd change.

"Dec, you and Nick come with me. Sue, you go with Ade and Mina. Keep to the back streets through to Mile End; come in via Brokesley Street. We'll go south, through Southern Grove. Okay? Thirty minutes max, don't hang around," directed Gary.

Mina allowed Gary and company a few minutes before leading Burton and Sue through more backstreets. Burton knew they were heading east, though he didn't know any of the streets they traversed. Suddenly they came out by Mile End Hospital. Without hesitation, Mina led them across the road into the college grounds.

It was still early; the clock on the nearby church read six thirty-five. There was some activity on the streets, but not much. Within the hour, that would change. The roads would be jammed as the early morning rush hour began. The pavements would be crowded with people bustling towards the tube stations and buses, headed for work. They came to a halt by some steel gates. The immediate area beyond the narrow steel bars was deserted. Mina eyed the corner beyond the gates about thirty yards away. The gate was heavily padlocked, surmounted by a row of vicious spikes set on a rotating bar, impossible to climb over.

"Mouse?" Mina said to Sue.

The diminutive girl nodded, then slipped easily between the bars. Burton gasped. Slim as she was, Sue wasn't *that* slim! Yet she had passed through the bars as if they weren't there! He glanced at Mina, who just shrugged.

"Yeah, I know," he muttered. "Later."

Sue crouched by the corner, darting quick looks beyond. Satisfied, she hurried back to the gate, passing her hands through the bars. Burton looked blank.

"Take her hands," Mina instructed.

Confused, Burton took the offered hands. Immediately a weird feeling swept through his body. He suddenly felt loose, his body sagged, no longer able to support itself. His legs turned to jelly and began folding beneath him.

Mina stepped behind Burton and pushed on his back as Mouse simultaneously pulled. Grunting in surprise, Burton began to slide through the impossible gap between the bars. For a brief second, his arms elongated, like rubber bands, then he was through the bars, dropping to his knees with a gasp, rolling onto his back when his arms wouldn't support him.

Mouse let his hands go as Burton moaned. His body trembled, beginning to solidify, the strange weakness fading. He watched in fascinated awe as Mouse took Mina's hands and stepped back. Mina seemed to flow through the bars, her body soft, like wax. Once through, Mouse let her hands go, Mina took a second, breathing heavily, then she knelt beside Burton, still prone on the ground.

"It's okay," she said, helping Burton to sit up. "It takes a few seconds to normalize."

Burton took a deep breath, feeling the strength returning to his limbs, shakily he got to his feet.

"You okay?" asked Mouse.

Burton looked at her frankly. "I don't know what you just did," he said, his voice trembling. "But please, don't do it again."

St. Clarence's Hospital was very close, just across the four-lane Bow Road.

"We have to be careful; we don't know who might be watching," Mina said.

"There's nothing we can do about that," Sue replied. "If we're quick enough, we ought to be able to get across unseen."

"Maybe, but let me try something first," Mina said.

Mouse looked troubled. "Is that a good idea?"

"Trust me." Mina smiled. "Keep watch."

"What are you going to do?" Burton asked, picking up on Sue's concern.

"Nothing to worry about. Just help Sue keep watch," Mina said, stepping back to the wall.

Mina composed herself, her back straight, head up. Closing her eyes, her fingers rested lightly at her temples. Burton felt a tingle ripple over his skin as Mina's

eyes flickered wildly behind her rimless glasses; tiny beads of perspiration burst onto her forehead and upper lip.

“Now what?” he breathed quietly to himself.

A few seconds passed; Mina sagged back against the wall, her face pale.

“It’s clear,” she gasped.

Burton took her arm; he could feel the heat emanating through her windcheater jacket.

“What did you do?”

“Made sure we were safe.” Mina smiled wanly; her normally sparkling eyes were dulled. “Come on, we have to go.”

“Yeah, obviously,” Burton answered, shaking his head, totally bewildered.

The three of them experienced several minutes of panic as they came out onto Bow Road. To their left, behind an ancient red brick wall, squatted a Victorian building constructed of the same red bricks. St. Clarence’s Hospital had been defunct since 2005, when the larger London Hospital took over the community’s medical needs. Directly opposite was Brokesley Street. The cemetery was only a few hundred yards away, across the main road and down Brokesley Street. The main road was busy, busier than they anticipated. Burton felt oddly exposed.

“Well?” Burton asked, as they crouched in the bushes on the edge of the residential estate.

"We run for it," Mina said.

"Of course we do," Burton said dryly.

Mina and Sue crossed together; Burton followed a minute later, hurrying after the girls who were about halfway down Brookesley Street.

At the bottom of the street, there was a row of black spike railings, about chest high. An open space, twenty yards across, lay beyond these, ending in a profusion of bushes. Burton saw rows of tombstones littering the open ground; they were old and broken, many of them leaning drunkenly.

"Oh great," Burton breathed.

Mina winked at him.

The cemetery looked derelict.

Chapter Seven

REVELATIONS

Derelict was an understatement.

Turning left at the bottom of the street, Burton followed Mina and Sue along the alley, named Hamlet's Way. The black railings ran the length of the alley bordering the cemetery. A small gate hung open; the girls had already entered. The rich smell of rotting undergrowth hung in the air, excited by the night's rainfall. The unkempt pathway was no more than a sandy, muddy track, dotted by puddles reflecting the pale blue sky and watery sunlight.

All around encroaching foliage lent a pervasive air to the graveyard; the near dereliction of the graves didn't help. Brambles swarmed over monoliths and tombstones alike; family names obscured by moss and lichens, clinging tenaciously to the rotting stone. Many of the monuments lay broken in the teeming undergrowth, so many shattered lives buried under a carpet of rampant vegetation.

Glancing at the date on a towering monument, like a miniature church steeple planted on one corner of a large plot, Burton saw it was erected in 1863. It was one of the few distinguishable dates he was able to read. Many had worn away, victims to age and the relentless weather. The undergrowth was so bad in places that no definite outlines of tombs or graves could be discerned. Always a fan of old horror flicks, Burton couldn't help thinking, had it still been in existence, the Hammer House of

Horror would have a field day in here. Mina and Sue were waiting for him at a junction of two pathways. Behind them, the bushes and undergrowth gave way to a small open space. "Lawn" would be too optimistic a description for the grassy area.

"Nice place," Burton said wryly.

Mina shrugged. "It serves its purpose."

Burton nearly laughed at that. "Whose? Yours? Or theirs?" He nodded towards the crumbling tombstones.

"You know what I mean," Mina answered. "Come on, through here."

She led him towards a small building farther up the path. The building was oddly incongruous in the leafy surroundings of the cemetery. Brick built with a façade of cream-coloured tiles, it reminded Burton of a public convenience, the sharp reek of stale urine enhancing the notion. The walls of the place were full of graffiti, lending more evidence to the graveyard's long disuse. The building was some sort of shelter; grimy wooden benches were fixed to the walls; empty wine and beer bottles littered the floor.

"Lovely," Burton remarked, wrinkling his nose against the smell.

"It won't be for long," Mina assured him.

"You're right there," Burton retorted. "I'm still wondering what the hell I'm doing here?"

The sound of footsteps made him turn, suddenly afraid. He relaxed when Gary and the others trotted into the shelter.

"Any problems?"

Mina shook her head negatively.

"That's a matter of opinion," Burton put in. "Love the accommodations."

"It won't be..." Gary began.

"Yeah, Mina's said," Burton cut him short. "So, now what?"

"We wait. We'll rest up, get something to eat, and plan our next step."

"Not before you tell me what all this is about, and who you people are."

"We will explain, I promise," Gary said. "But first, I need you to do one more thing for us."

Burton's chin dropped onto his chest. "Jesus, you got some front."

"No tricks, honest. We're going to have to spend the day here, and we need food and something to drink. None of us can leave the cemetery. Harry'll pick up on us in a second. But you can. Anything he gets from you will be confused. By the time he figures it out, you'll be back and safe."

They all looked at Burton, who sighed heavily.

"I haven't a clue what you're on about, except now I'm an errand boy. Things just keep getting better and better..."

*

"Well, well, well. I thought you'd be long gone, black boy," Dec said as Burton came into the shelter carrying three heavy bags of shopping. One of the bags was filled entirely with milk, something Gary had asked for in particular.

"You don't know how close I came," Burton replied, ignoring the racist remark. "And unless someone starts talking, I'm gone for sure."

"No loss." Dec smirked. "We don't need you, anyway."

Burton plonked the bags down, glaring at Dec. "Fine by me, pal." Burton turned on his heel.

"Wait! Dec, why don't you just keep your mouth shut!" snapped Mina angrily, catching hold of Burton's arm. "Don't go, Ade. He isn't speaking for all of us. Really."

Their eyes met. Again, Burton felt the unspoken *frisson* crackle between them.

"Stay," Mina said softly. Their eyes locked for long moments.

Burton shook his head resignedly. "Only because I'm hungry," he said.

They sat about the shelter munching on ham or cheese sandwiches and drinking milk. Burton listened in stunned silence as Mina related the events and circumstances that had thrown the little band together. Her voice was low and quiet, but he heard every word. They all did.

"None of us know exactly why we are the way we are. Perhaps a biologist or geneticist would be able to explain it. We can't. All we know is that we have these special gifts.

“Though we’re different, we’re not unique. There are hundreds of SGPs in the world. Specially Gifted People, SGs for short,” explained Mina. “Some of them have benign abilities. Perhaps they can hold their breaths for inordinate amounts of time, or they can stand intense cold or heat with no ill effect. Some don’t even realize they have these abilities, just taking them for granted as part of their genetic makeup.

“Others, like us, have more apparent gifts. We can cause physical manifestations of our abilities at will. We’re relatively few, though we still number in the hundreds.”

“You mean you’re not human.”

“We’re as human as you are, except for nature playing a little genetic joke on us.”

“What about your families? Are they like you?”

Mina looked away; her eyes glimmered wetly.

“Mina?”

“That is the other thing that ties us together,” Gary said. “The majority of us are orphans. We have no family.”

“We think that our parents’ unique genetic combinations made us what we are,” Nick put in. “We also think that some of their ... deaths were not accidental or natural.”

“Except for Sue’s parents, and Gary’s, all our parents died within six years of our births. Gary’s father died three years ago under suspicious circumstances, though the police didn’t seem to think so.”

"Which is why you're so set against contacting them again?" observed Burton.

Nick nodded.

"And you think that the deaths of your parents and the reason you are being hunted is because of these special abilities?"

"It's a distinct possibility, though we can't be absolutely sure," Mina said. "From a very early age, we instinctively hid our abilities from the outside world, for obvious reasons. Yet someone, somehow, knew of our existence. It is inconceivable that whoever is behind this would know about all of us, one or two, maybe, but not all."

"But they do." It was more of a statement than a question.

They all nodded.

"Then we were drawn to London, which is when we started to realize that we were being manipulated, herded. Some of our number began to disappear. We thought they had left, gone home, 'til the MIBs appeared on the scene. In the early days, some of us were badly injured, those that resisted. They too disappeared."

"And you've no idea who's behind it all?"

"None," Gary said. "Or how they even know who we are."

"Oh, come on," sneered Dec. "You've told him practically everything. Why stop there? Tell him about Harry. Let the 'straight' know it all."

Burton glanced at Dec, lounging arrogantly against the wall, spite gleaming in his colourless, grey eyes.

“Harry? He’s been mentioned several times, and you all seem scared of him. Just who is this guy? A spook or something?”

Dec laughed harshly. “Not a bad description, eh, Mina? You want to tell your friend who Harry is? Or shall I?”

“Dec,” warned Gary.

The tension within the shelter rose a couple of notches.

Mina sighed heavily. Burton looked at her; he thought she looked somehow ... ashamed. She found it difficult to look Burton in the eyes, focusing on her slim hands fidgeting in her lap.

“He’s my brother,” she said quietly.

“Your *twin* brother,” added Dec viciously.

Chapter Eight

RETURN

The silence hung like a palpable thing within the shelter. Burton was at a loss for words. Gary stood beside Mina, placing a comforting arm around her slim shoulders.

"You obviously realise that our abilities set us apart from normal people," he began. "Dec," he almost spat out the name, "can create illusions, though normally he has to have some sort of previous eye contact with his subject to get the best results."

"Which explains the wolf-creature that attacked me on the waste ground and the blond, tanned guy I thought was Dec."

"One of my better illusions," Dec said proudly. "I use it all the time."

"The wolf or your pseudo image?" Burton said.

Dec scowled but said nothing.

"And you can weld metal with your bare hands," Burton continued.

"It's a little more subtle than that," Gary explained. "More precisely, I can generate intense heat, channeled through my hands. Though, with a great deal of concentration, I can utilise my entire body, but that tends to have a detrimental effect on my clothes."

"Nick can see in the dark," Burton said, looking at Stringer.

"More than that," Nick corrected. "I can see in *completed* darkness. I can also see great distances with a little effort."

"And the sunglasses?" queried Burton.

"Two reasons," Nick said. "Even dim light hurts my eyes..."

"...and because your eyes are totally black," Burton finished for him. "I saw them when your glasses slipped."

"Sue is able to make her entire skeletal frame malleable, enabling her to squeeze through even the tiniest of gaps, even to the point of elongating her body, which is why she's nicknamed Mouse. She can also temporarily transfer her power to others..."

"Yeah, I've had a taste of that," Burton said distastefully. "Not to be recommended."

Mouse blushed.

Burton winked at her. "No worries, it's all good. And Mina...?"

Gary was about to answer when Mina gently touched his hand. He nodded and sat down.

"I'm an empath," she began.

"You read minds?" Burton ventured.

"Not exactly. I sense, feel, other people's emotions and from that I am able to divine what they are thinking, even at great distances."

"Which is why you can 'sense' Harry?" said Burton.

Mina looked out over the little plot of grassland struggling for existence amongst the choking undergrowth. The cemetery was deathly quiet; only the distant rumble of traffic on Bow Road broke the silence.

“Harry has the same ability, except, somehow, he’s managed to take it one step further. He’s able to instill terrible feelings in people, turning their own bad feelings against them. Then he feeds on their fear, making himself stronger, augmenting his power. He leaves his victims depleted, afraid at a fundamental level, destroying their self-confidence, their self-esteem, and probably creating lifelong mental issues.

“This augmentation causes a terrible side effect. It’s comparable to using narcotics. The more Harry ‘fed’ off people’s emotions, the more he needed to feed. It’s turned him into a monster, a sort of emotional vampire.”

“Is it not possible that Harry is the one behind all this?” Burton asked.

“No, he hasn’t the brains for it, or the finance,” said Mina.

“Then why is he working against you, his own sister?”

“The sixty-four thousand dollar question,” Dec cut in.

This time, no one rebuked him.

“We’re not sure,” Mina said. “About two and a half years ago, Harry disappeared. Not long after, things began to happen to the rest of us.

“I was drawn to East London, as we all were. More than that, we were drawn to each other. None of us knows how or why. We compared stories that turned out to be

horribly similar. Then came the MIBs." Mina looked almost desperate, pain filling her eyes. "You have to realise we didn't understand the danger 'til several SGs disappeared. As I said earlier, we'd thought they'd moved on. 'Til one night a group of us was attacked.

"I should have seen it coming, my instincts warned me, but I stupidly didn't associate the feelings 'til it was too late."

"Feelings?"

"Yeah, I can 'sense' when Harry was near. I always could. Unfortunately, it works both ways. It was only by accident that I found that hiding below the hospital in Confusion threw Harry off, just as graveyards do."

"But why? What's so special about Confusion?" asked Burton.

"It's only conjecture, but the theory seems to hold water," Gary said. "Mina found her own empathic abilities were impaired when we were near St. Clarence's Hospital. We managed to get beneath the hospital, into the basement. Mina had great difficulty shutting out the flood of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her."

Mina picked up the narrative.

"St. Clarence's had a large psychiatric wing, which is still partially used even though the general hospital is shut down. I believe the unbridled emotions of its inmates create a sort of static, emotional-psychic interference, if you will, blocking my ability."

"And therefore, blocking Harry's," concluded Burton.

"Yes," agreed Mina. "Hence, why we call it Confusion."

"So, how did he manage to find us there?"

"A process of elimination," Nick answered. "Mina and I talked about it. When I took you there, I was worried, very worried about Kelly. My emotions would have been like a beacon. Harry would have picked up on that like a bee to honey. As soon as we entered Confusion, he would have lost the 'signal.' All he had to do was cruise the area 'til he discovered the source of the interference, and bingo!"

"Wonderful," said Burton. "That means we're not really safe here, either."

"We are, for the time being," Mina said. "Another side effect of Harry's augmented power is that using his ability as he does weakens him tremendously, he has to rest. Whilst he's resting, so can we."

"For how long?" asked Burton.

"Depends," Mina answered. "Though here I have the slight advantage. Harry's fear of cemeteries makes him subconsciously avoid this area. He's afraid to probe. I'm not. I'll feel him coming long before he 'feels' us."

"Okay, I think I understand everything so far," Burton said. "What I don't understand is why you stay here. Why not just get out of London altogether and leave this insanity behind you?"

“Hah!” Dec exclaimed, leaping up dramatically. “Now we come to the nub of the mystery!” He strutted around the shelter like a detective in some Agatha Christie novel, about to reveal the murderer. “You shouldn’t be asking why we ‘don’t’ leave London. Rather, you should be asking why we ‘can’t’ leave. And I’ll tell you, because of the psionic shield surrounding the area, all two square miles of it.”

“The what?” Burton asked.

“A psionic shield,” Gary explained, scowling at Dec’s melodramatics. “It’s some sort of neural device especially tuned to SGs. At least, that’s the theory. The closer we get to it, the more painful it becomes.”

“When we first detected it, there were several attempts to break through the psi-shield. Stephen, an SG with incredible strength, figured he could break out, that his ability would allow him to break out.” Gary turned away, swiping at his eyes. His voice hitched as he continued.

“He almost made it, but the shield was too strong. Stephen collapsed, in terrible pain, writhing in agony on the ground.”

Mina put a comforting hand on Gary’s shoulder. He looked at her, smiling wanly.

“It’s okay,” he said, turning to Burton. “I had to watch my best friend die in the street. None of us could reach him. The shield held us back. A passer-by found him, he called for an ambulance, the police. Stephen was taken away, another unexplained homeless casualty.”

"Sweet Jesus," gasped Burton. "I'm sorry."

"It happened," said Gary sadly.

"Where does this shield come from? Do you know? Is it still operational?" asked Burton.

"It's still there," said Nick. "Mina tried to localise it once, find its point of origin, but had no luck. It seems to come from everywhere, and nowhere."

"So, who's behind it? Harry?"

"No," Mina said immediately. "As I said, he hasn't the brains or the imagination. But I think he is working for whoever is pulling the strings."

No one said anything for several seconds. Silence hung heavily over the small group.

"I don't think I can take this in," Burton said, getting up.

"Where are you going?" asked Gary.

"For a walk, I need to clear my head."

"Don't go outside the cemetery," warned Gary.

Burton absently waved a hand and walked out into the watery sunlight.

*

"Some story, huh?"

Burton looked up to find Mina standing in front of him. "That's an understatement," he said bitterly.

Mina sat on the bench beside him. "I told you, you didn't want to know," she said softly. "You should have listened to me."

"Bit late now, isn't it? I've seen it with my own eyes, and I still find it hard to believe. How can you stand to live like this?"

"We haven't a choice," Mina returned. "But you have. Get out Ade; get out before it's too late," she pleaded.

He looked at her, his face softening. "I think it might be too late for me as well," he said.

"No!" Mina got up abruptly. "Don't even think about it! We can't allow it!"

"What makes you think we have any say in the matter? You, especially, should know that."

Mina tried to walk away, but Burton caught her by the arm and spun her around. Her face was troubled; conflict raged in her turbulent eyes.

"This is all wrong," she moaned. "It mustn't happen."

Gently, Burton took her in his arms, resting Mina's head on his shoulder. His fingers delved into the soft profusion of her hair, gently stroking the nape of her neck.

"You don't need to be an empath to know it's already too late," he whispered.

As they held each other in the fading sunlight, neither of them noticed the shadowy figure watching from the bushes. Rage and jealousy seared the grey, colourless eyes as Burton held Mina close, comforting her.

*

"I don't think Harry disappeared two years ago; I think he was kidnapped," Mina said.

"By whoever's behind all this?" Burton queried.

"Yes. I think they did something to him, tortured him or something, and made him do what they wanted."

"How would 'they' know he was an empath? And why didn't they take you as well?"

"Because Harry's a show-off, an extrovert, he loved to surprise people with his little tricks. Of course, he never did anything too big, just enough to delight and bewilder his audience. I tended to be more discreet.

"He'd do 'impossible' tricks—guess their parents' names, or tell them about their pets—small stuff, nothing too ambitious. At parties, in the pub, anywhere there were more than two people. My brother loves the limelight."

"And then someone really began to take notice, kidnapping him to find out more."

"I think so..." Mina sighed. "That's how I think this whole mess started."

They were sitting together on the little plot of grass beyond the shelter. The last of the day's sun was just edging them into shadow; a slight chill was in the air. They

shared a soft drink, passing the colourful red can back and forth. Mina leaned into Burton's shoulder, finding comfort in the closeness.

"So, what now?" asked Burton.

"I don't know," Mina said miserably; she couldn't meet his eyes. "Carry on like we have been, I suppose. Except now there's another complication."

"Thanks." Burton laughed. "I've never been called a complication before!"

"It's no laughing matter, Ade. This is serious. There's no telling what might happen. I can't run the risk of being distracted. The others depend on me to keep them safe, their early warning system."

"You have to live Mina. You can't wrap yourself up in a shell forever, regardless of circumstances. Who knows? Maybe I'll be good for you and the others."

Before Mina had a chance to answer, Nick Stringer called for them to come back into the shelter. Reluctantly they got up. They were surprised to see the others packing up their gear.

"Time to move," Gary informed them.

"Where to?" Burton said.

Gary knotted the plastic bag of bread and milk; letting it hang from his crooked fingers.

"Confusion," he said.

Chapter Nine

BETRAYED

"Are you nuts?" Burton nearly exploded. "How can we go back there? They'll be waiting for us!"

"I don't think so," Gary argued. "It's the last place they'll expect us to be."

"But you said Harry will sense, or rather 'not sense' us and come straight for us," said Burton.

"Harry's in no position to do anything. If past experience is anything to go by, Harry would've spent the whole day trying to locate us. He'll be exhausted, making it safe for us to move."

"You're gambling," Burton warned.

"No, we're not. Mina?"

"Gary's right, Ade. Harry's too vain to let us slip through his fingers so soon after locating us. He'll have been using every ounce of his ability to find us. We've got at least eighteen hours before he can try again."

"What about this vampire thing he does. Can't he use that?" asked Burton.

"No. Paradoxically, he won't have the strength. Rest is his only recourse for the moment."

"Okay, I think you're crazy, but let's go." Burton picked up one of the bags.

They split into two's: Burton and Mina, Dec and Sue, Gary and Nick. There would be a lot of activity in the hospital at this time of day. Shift's ending, new ones starting, visitors, the general public using the hospital as a shortcut through to Bow Road. They planned to enter through various routes, making their way down to the basement as quickly as possible. The main building was only minutes away from them; they could be in Confusion within fifteen minutes at most.

*

Walking through the early evening sunshine with Mina was a welcome pleasure. She strode along, head held high, her slim hips swinging easily. He loped along beside her, matching her stride.

"Hey, slow down, there's no hurry," said Burton.

Mina glanced at him, smiled, and slowed her step. "Sorry."

"That's better," Burton said, slipping his hand into hers. "Let's try to look natural, two friends, out for a stroll, enjoying the evening."

"In the grounds of a hospital?"

"Stranger things have been known," Burton replied. "Star-crossed lovers do many peculiar things."

"Is that what we are?" Mina smiled at his absurdity. "Star-crossed?"

"It's better than being cross-eyed." Burton laughed. He looked at her seriously.

"It's easy, being with you."

Mina quickly looked away; tears stung her eyes. "Don't."

"Are we going to ignore the obvious?" Burton said. "It's not going to go away."

"We have to Ade. At least, for now," Mina replied.

"Like that's going to work," he huffed. "The attraction between us was almost instant. We both felt it."

"Maybe so, but with all that's going on, we can't just think of ourselves."

"If we don't, who will?" Burton said. "We have to grab what we can, when we can, and I want to grab you with both hands."

"And just pretend our present situation isn't happening? I can't do that. This has been going on for too long, Ade. The constant stress, moving from place to place in a never-ending circle. You should leave while you can."

"Never going to happen," Burton said emphatically. "We're in this together, for good or bad. You just have to get used to the idea."

They walked on in silence, Mina's heart heavy and aching within her chest. *This shouldn't be happening*, she thought as they headed for the hospital.

They had no problems going through the main hospital. Mina led them down to the basement, through a couple of doors into the bowels of the building. All too soon, in Burton's opinion, they reached Confusion.

Gary and Nick were already there. Mina sensed that Sue and Dec weren't far behind. They jerry-built a couple of alcoves. Mattresses were produced from dark corners. During the construction, four or five other SGs appeared, apparently reaching the same conclusions about Harry as Gary.

Burton sat on a mattress, rubbing his cheeks and chin. His whiskers were rough under his questing fingers. Mina came over to him.

"You okay?"

"I could do with a shave and a bit of a wash and brush up," Burton said ruefully.

Mina stroked his face. "Mmmm, I'm sure we can work something out."

She slipped from the alcove, returning a few minutes later with a bowl of water and some soap; a dark blue towel was slung over one shoulder.

"The water's not very hot, they've only just started boiling for coffee. I've got this as well."

She tossed him a disposable razor, followed by the towel.

"Great, at least I'll be able to feel human again."

*

Burton dabbed his face dry, making sure all the soap was gone.

"My, aren't we a pretty boy, then?" Mina laughed, standing behind him, peering at his reflection in the small mirror hanging from a nail.

“Smell nice too.” Burton grinned, indicating the bar of soap by the bowl of used water.

Mina took his hand. “Come on, we can go one better,” she urged; her eyes were vivid in the gloom. “Bring your towel.”

Puzzled, Burton allowed Mina to lead him by the hand down a short corridor and up some concrete stairs. The metal door at the top of the stairs opened easily at Mina’s touch. Bright artificial light illuminated the narrow corridor beyond. Mina quickly took them down to another corridor, through a small room and into a larger one. She flicked on the light.

They were standing in a changing room. Two rows of benches ran down the centre of the floor, backed by metal frames equipped with hooks. The floor and walls were tiled in white. Along the back wall stood a row of dark green lockers.

“Look,” Mina said conspiratorially.

She hauled aside a pink plastic curtain revealing a small shower room; four shower heads lined the upper part of the wall. Leaning in, she twisted one of the taps.

“Hot water,” she said gleefully. “It’s where the boiler room staff change when their shifts finish.” She grinned at him. “The next shift doesn’t start ‘til seven in the morning, so we’ve plenty of time. So ... who’s first, you or me?”

“It’s your find. You get to go first,” Burton said. “Just don’t use all the hot water!”

Mina winked at him and began to strip. Burton respectfully turned his back.

"Come on," encouraged Mina. "There's plenty of room for two!"

Burton hesitated, then quickly disrobed. He didn't see the pained expression that crossed Mina's face.

*

Mina sat alone on the mattress in the corner of the makeshift alcove; her knees under her chin, her arms wrapped around her legs. Eyes closed, her cheeks wet with recent tears, she felt like dying.

"Mina?" Gary appeared at the entrance to the makeshift cubicle.

Mina looked away, her dark hair falling across her miserable face.

"Did you do it?" Gary asked quietly.

She didn't answer.

"It's for the best, Mina. You know that it is," Gary said.

"Do I?" Mina said, her voice thick with emotion. She could feel her heart breaking. "Then why do I feel as if I have betrayed him?" she said bitterly.

Chapter Ten

SPITE

The early evening sunshine was pleasant, comfortable. The gentle breeze coming off the River Thames was refreshing, affording the people meandering around Canary Wharf the opportunity to shuck their coats and heavy pullovers the recent weather had made a necessity. Couples walked arm in arm, work colleagues laughed and joked about their respective days, all heading home or to the local pub or wine bar to unwind and to wait until London's dreaded rush hour traffic died down.

No one took any notice of the shabbily dressed young boy walking dejectedly down Tiller Road towards the river, dressed in a dirty white t-shirt, torn blue jeans, and a three-quarter length coat that had seen better days and looked at least two sizes too big for his sparse frame. His thin face was an eruption of acne barely concealed by the shoulder-length dirty-blond hair; he looked pale with colourless, grey eyes, wearing what seemed to be a permanent scowl.

Crossing Westferry Road he made his way past St. John Dougal's Gardens to the river wall where he turned left and followed the river east, stopping only when he reached the Wharfside Wine Bar which stretched out over the river on reinforced concrete pylons sunk into the riverbed. The bar was packed with early evening patrons chatting and drinking. The enticing smell of prawns and other seafood being sautéed in garlic butter wafted in the air.

Declan McIntire hadn't come here intentionally; it took him a few seconds to realize where he was. Truth be told, he didn't care. He had just wanted to get away from Confusion ... and Mina. She had betrayed him, he thought darkly. They had something, something special. She had always been so friendly towards him. NO! It was more than friendship; he knew it was. They had gotten so close lately.

Then he had to waltz his black arse in and spoil everything. And Mina had fallen for his smarmy smile and smooth lies. It was all wrong. He had no right! Leaning heavily on the rough stone of the river wall, Dec glared down at the dark water flowing below, reflecting his own black mood.

He will pay. The thought slid through his mind like a venomous snake. I will make him pay, make him leave, show Mina exactly who he really is.

Dec turned his back to the wall, looking up at the evening sky. The world had gone crazy... Everything tipped on its head... Jesus.

He was looking at the small group of revelers sitting at the table on the deck overlooking the river without realising, especially the petite dark-haired woman with tight curly hair. For a moment, she reminded Dec of Mina. She was dressed in a dark skirt and light blue blouse, watching as her companions were chatting. The expression on her pretty face made it obvious she wasn't really interested in the conversation, though. The other three people, two men and a blonde woman, seemed to be having a great time laughing and drinking their wine.

Somehow their happiness jagged Dec. Why should they be happy when he was so miserable? It wasn't fair...

His mood grew even darker as he glared at the dark-haired woman...

*

Melanie Maxwell sipped at her Pinot Noir without really tasting it. Sitting back in her seat, she listened half-heartedly as Paul Brayson related an amusing anecdote from a recent party they had attended. She had heard the same anecdote at least three times during the last week. Paul seemed to never tire of telling the same story over and over again wherever they went. She sighed. Well, at least Graham and Heather hadn't heard it before. She looked around the wine bar. It was very popular despite only being opened a few months ago. The food was great, though limited, and the wine was excellent, pricy, but excellent.

Melanie noticed a good-looking man by the river wall. His corn-yellow hair gleamed in the fading sunlight, his handsome, tanned face highlighting even, white teeth as he smiled at her, obvious desire gleaming in his deep blue eyes. Melanie was mildly shocked that he was being so brazen. It didn't prevent her from smiling back, tipping her head slightly in acknowledgement.

His smile broadened as he winked at her.

She felt an electric tingle steal over her arms as he continued to stare, his gaze seeming to look straight through her, full of forbidden promises. She tried to look away and found she couldn't. His eyes were mesmerizing.

Melanie felt Paul's hand slip over her wrist, barely taking notice. Then his grip tightened, getting harder. She looked at him and discovered him looking at her, his face like thunder. His grip tightened even more, hurting her.

"Paul," she said in a half whisper. "Let me go, you're hurting me."

He leaned closer.

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"What?" she answered in surprise.

"I saw you, eyeing up the men. You're shameless."

Melanie tried to pull her wrist free. "Let me go," she said through clenched teeth.

She was puzzled why Heather and Graham didn't say anything about Paul's unreasonable behavior. They seemed lost in their conversation, totally unaware of the minor drama being played out just across the table from them.

"You're supposed to be with me," Paul continued in a harsh whisper. "Not acting like some little slut."

Melanie was shocked. For a split second, she was speechless, then without conscious thought, her free hand flashed out and slapped Paul around the face hard.

"How dare you!" she cried as he released her wrist, recoiling back.

Melanie got to her feet, the chair falling over with a clatter.

"Bitch!" Paul snarled.

Melanie reeled as the flat of his hand struck her left cheek, making her head snap around. She gasped, her hand flew to her reddening cheek, tears welling up in her eyes. Then she lunged at him, her fingernails raking like claws. He grabbed her wrists easily holding her at bay. Melanie was screaming angrily, her face burning both from the slap and the public humiliation.

For several seconds, they both stood, struggling together. Tears flowed down Melanie's cheeks as she tried to gouge out his eyes with her crimson nails, frustrated by his greater strength.

Then she felt hands on her, pulling her back. Paul released her and Melanie found Heather's arms wrapped around her, a look of shocked concern written all over her face.

"Mel! Mel! Stop!" Heather said, holding her tight. "What's gotten into you?"

Melanie stepped away, looking in confusion at her friend. "Didn't you see? Didn't you hear?" she blurted. "He grabbed my arm. He was hurting me. He called me a slut."

Heather shot a glance at the stunned Paul.

"Melanie, I didn't say anything," he said in a surprised, quiet voice.

"You did!" Melanie said, her voice raising. "You called me shameless, a slut. You wouldn't let me go."

Heather put a comforting hand on Melanie's arm. Melanie looked at her in confusion.

"Melanie, Paul didn't say anything. He didn't move," she said. "You just suddenly started screaming at him, then you attacked him... He didn't do anything."

The entire wine bar had fallen quiet as Melanie looked at her friends one by one in utter bewilderment. Looking at her wrist, she expected to see some sort of bruise. There was no sign. It didn't even hurt in the slightest even though Paul had gripped her so tightly. Hadn't he? She wanted the earth to open up and swallow her whole.

"It was real..." she murmured. "It was..."

The look on their faces told her it wasn't.

Everyone was looking at her as if she were a crazy woman. Raising her fingertips to her mouth in disbelief, Melanie looked at the sea of faces staring at her, at Paul and Graham. Over Heather's shoulder, she looked for the handsome young man by the river wall, mortified he would have seen everything, for some reason afraid of what he might think of her. Disappointment mixed with her humiliation.

There was no sign of him.

Chapter Eleven

ARGUMENTS

Declan chuckled spitefully to himself as he made his way down into Confusion. *People are so easy to manipulate, to control, they are just dumb*, he thought contemptuously. He felt good. His little game at the wine bar had lifted his spirits, made his miserable day a little better. He passed through the door that led into the main chamber. a young girl, maybe fourteen years old, was sitting on a box just inside the door. She sort of smiled at him as he passed, self-consciously pulling her dark brown hair down about her ears, which were overly large. She watched Dec walk past, her brown eyes reflecting envy at the tanned, good-looking youth. She wished she was better looking, as confident as he was. Then the other children at school wouldn't tease her so much, call her horrid names like "Dumbo" or "Monkey Ears." Hayley sighed, looking around her grim surroundings. Right now, she thought, school didn't seem so bad.

Dec breezed past several others quietly talking together or reading, he spied Mina and Gary at the farther end of the main corridor. As he approached, he could see Mina wasn't happy. It looked as if Gary and her were having words.

"Hey, what's going on? Who died?" he said cheerily.

Mina gave him a sour look. "Don't start, Dec. I'm not in the mood for your bullshit today."

She turned away, but not before Dec noticed her tear-stained face. He looked around and realized Burton was nowhere to be seen. Inwardly his heart leapt for joy.

"No Burton?" he said with a grin.

"Dec," warned Gary.

"What? I can't ask a simple question?" Dec replied with feigned innocence.

"You have to keep pushing, don't you? Playing your stupid games," Mina said, suddenly turning on Dec.

"Whoa!" he said, stepping back and raising his hands. "It's not my fault lover boy up and quit. I warned you about letting him in."

"He didn't quit!" Mina snapped.

"Then where is he? I don't see him." Dec said, making a big show of looking around.

"Dec, let it go," said Gary. "He's gone. That's all there is to it. Now leave it alone."

"Gone, but gone where? We still don't know who he is or where he came from. He could be talking to the MIBs right now for all we know," said Dec. "Good riddance is what I say. He was never one of us, anyway."

"What does that mean? 'One of us?' What are we, Dec? You think we're special, better than everyone else? Don't you get it? We're the freaks, the outsiders..."

"You might think you're a freak, but I don't," spat Dec. "Burton didn't belong here; he had no right being with you... You deserve more than that loser."

Mina, who had turned away and was looking down the corridor, suddenly stiffened. Slowly, she turned around, her green eyes almost glowing behind her rimless glasses.

"You really want to go there?" she said, her voice a whisper. "You really want to talk about 'losers?'"

"Mina, he's just mouthing off... Forget it," Gary said, stepping between them.

"No, it's all right Gary," said Dec. "This has been a long time coming. It's about time we cleared the air."

"What are you talking about?" Gary asked, puzzled.

"Me and Mina, we need to put our cards on the table..."

Gary looked at Mina, whose expression was equally shocked.

"You and me...?" Mina said. "There is no 'you and me.' You're as delusional as your illusions."

"There could have been if Burton hadn't shown up!" protested Dec.

"What?" Mina was speechless.

"Dec, I think you should go for another walk," said Gary. "You've definitely got your wires crossed here, mate."

"No," Dec said adamantly. "We were getting close; you know we were."

Mina shook her head in disbelief. "I don't need this," she said and began to walk away.

"You can't walk away from this, Mina. It won't go away, and nor will I!" exclaimed Dec. "Not like Burton! As soon as things get messy, he runs like a rabbit. He was no good! You don't need him! *WE* don't need him!"

Mina turned, her face wet with tears, creased with a mixture of pain and anger.

"Mina! No!" yelled Gary.

Dec staggered as if struck by some unseen blow. Grunting, he dropped to one knee, clutching at his head. Mina loomed over him, her mouth a thin white line, her eyes blank, just showing the whites, her head tipped slightly to one side.

"Mina! STOP!" yelled Gary, rushing forward and grabbing her arms. "Stop!"

Nick Stringer exited from the adjacent alcove, roused by all the shouting, closely followed by Mouse. In an instant, Mouse saw what was happening and hurried to Mina, pulling her around and mildly shaking her.

"Mina, stop. You're hurting him! Stop!"

Nick and Gary went to Dec, helping him to his feet as he shook the bright lights out of his head.

"I swear," said Nick. "That mouth of yours will get you into serious trouble one day."

Dec pulled his arm free of Nick's supporting grip, his face twisted in anger.

"Sod off..." he grated and, glaring at Mina, stomped off.

Mina stepped back; her hand flew to her mouth in horror. "What have I done?" she breathed, looking after Dec. "Dec..."

Gary stepped in front of her. "Let him go, Mina... He needs to calm down..."

"But I could have..." began Mina.

"You didn't," Gary said firmly. "Not that he didn't deserve it."

"Mina, come on, sit down. You're as white as a sheet," said Mouse, guiding her to a nearby chair.

Stringer was calming the others, unsettled by the altercation, down. Haley tugged at the hem of his leather jacket.

"Haley?" Stringer said, bending his knee.

"I was by the door..." Haley said. "I can hear people coming... A lot of people."

Stringer squashed the sudden surge of alarm looking down the corridor towards the entrance.

"Okay, Haley, it's nothing to worry about. Go with the others," Stringer said, getting to his feet. "Mouse!"

Sue Crossley looked over as she seated Mina in one of the camp chairs.

"Mouse, do you think you could take the children out for a walk?" Stringer said, his voice unnaturally even.

Sue immediately caught the tone. Without hurrying, she called the children to her.

"Come on, it's a lovely evening," she said cheerily. "Who's for getting out of this stuffy place?"

Mina got up from the chair, looking between Stringer and Mouse. Gary looked towards the door, consternation written all over his face.

"It's Harry," Mina suddenly said. "And he's not alone!"

"Damn!" said Gary. "So soon?"

"It's my fault! I got so wound up by Dec I didn't sense Harry. He's in the tunnels!" Mina moaned.

"No time to worry about that now!" snapped Gary. "Out! All of you!"

The time for pretense was past. Mouse herded the small group of teenagers to the southern exit of Confusion.

Heading for the main door, Gary saw Dec slumped dejectedly in a dark corner of his cubicle.

"Dec! Out! Harry's here!"

Dec didn't move. Gary didn't have time to argue. Reaching the door, he gripped the edges of the metal frame. Within seconds, smoke rose from beneath his glowing hands, getting brighter. He changed the position of his hands, the metal of the door

glowing hotly. Something thumped on the other side of the door. He could hear shouting voices.

There was no time to do more. He ran.

Mina held back, going to Dec's cubicle where she found him lying on his mattress sullenly looking into space.

"Dec, I'm sorry..." she began.

The hammering on the iron door became louder.

"We need to go..."

He refused to look at her.

"Dec..."

The door burst open, crashing noisily back against the brick wall, the metal clanging like a stricken bell. Mina caught a glimpse of several figures crowding the doorway.

"Dammit, Dec!" she cursed, grabbing his arm and trying to haul him bodily from the mattress.

Dec shrugged her off. Mina staggered, tripping over a wooden box doubling as a makeshift table. With a cry, she fell. Her head struck the concrete corner of the wall, and the lights went out...

Chapter Twelve

CASUALTY

Burton gasped in surprise, disorientation making him momentarily dizzy. He staggered, holding onto a nearby bench quickly recovering himself. He looked around, totally bewildered. People were rushing about him, some pushing trolleys laden with suitcases, some carrying rucksacks or bags. Others, businessmen, carried briefcases. High above him, destination boards rolled; letters flickered; times were displayed.

“Euston,” he said dumbly, recognizing the train station from when he first arrived in London.

But ... how? His last recollection was dressing after having a shower. Mina came to him. She was smiling, her wet hair glistening under the fluorescent lights of the shower room. He thought he detected pain in her beautiful green eyes as she looked at him intently. That had been ... when? Burton looked around for a clock. Six-thirty p.m. The evening rush hour. He suddenly realized he clutched something in his hand. A train ticket to Manchester. He blinked, trying to understand. He knew he had bought the ticket. He knew he had got on a tube at Mile End Station, the Central Line, changing onto the Northern Line at Tottenham Court Road. He *knew* it but didn't *remember* it!

“What the hell...?” he muttered, bewildered.

A terrible thought entered his confused mind, a thought he didn't want to even contemplate. She wouldn't...

Mina. She had done it. Somehow, using her special ability, she had made him leave, get on a tube, and buy a ticket for home. *But why?* he thought. There was something between them, wasn't there? He hadn't imagined it. They loved one another. The shower. Didn't that mean anything? Something?

The way she had clung to him, held him, kissed him. No! No one could have faked that! It had been real, *was* real! Burton couldn't believe it. Why had she sent him away? He suddenly screwed the ticket up, went to throw it away, then paused, hovering between hurt and anger. What's the point? Maybe he just ought to go. That's what she wanted. Looking blankly at the passers-by, Burton struggled with the inner conflict. Is that what *he* wanted? To get away from the madness that seemed to surround her and her friends. Go back to sanity. To Manchester. Something screamed inside him.

She had betrayed him, used him. Even as he thought it, Burton knew that wasn't true. Then why send him away? The danger? The MIBs? That didn't make sense. Surely, she knew he'd come back if that was all she was afraid of? There had to be more. He was filled with hesitation and confusion. A part of him said go, the other wanted to go back.

Why had she used her ability on him? *WHY?*

Harry!

The answer hit him like a sledgehammer. She was afraid Harry would connect to him, drag him deeper into this mess and he would never be free, like them. She had sent him away, to clear London before Harry, or anyone, could know about him. Burton's heart was like a lump of lead in his chest. She had *meant* to send him away because of the danger.

Oh, Mina. Burton hung his head, an ache at the back of his eyes.

It hadn't worked. Whatever effect Mina had used on him had broken. Burton frowned. No, that wasn't right. Something had *made* it break. Deliberately.

An echo resounded deep in his mind. Burton struggled to bring it to the surface.

A name.

HIS NAME!

That was it! Someone had called him. Burton looked about, scanning the passing faces; he recognised no one. He was still looking when he clearly heard his name again, only weaker this time, barely a whisper. Mina's voice! Mina's voice in his head.

<*Ade...*>

Burton was running for the station's exit before the train ticket even touched the ground.

*

Burton slowed as he approached St. Clarence's Hospital. A running man was too conspicuous; he daren't allow himself to be noticed. Praying he looked normal as he strode through the main gate, heading for the main building. Cautiously making his way down into the basement, he paused by the door leading down into Confusion. Everything seemed normal, whatever that meant. He eased open the door. There was a little light down in the darkness. Fighting the urge to hurry, Burton began to descend the steps, pausing again at the bottom to allow his eyes to adjust to the gloom.

The place seemed to be deserted. He could see nothing, hear nothing. He resisted the urge to call out with great difficulty. Moving quietly, Burton made his way across the floor, alert for danger. The place was as silent as the grave; the only light was one or two low-burning candles, spluttering in forgotten corners.

Near the alcove where he had slept, Burton stopped. Newspaper lay strewn over the floor, dark splotches marring a full-page advert. He knelt, dabbing a finger into one of the larger spots; it came away sticky. Blood. His throat tightened. Where was everybody? Where was Mina? What had happened here? Whatever it was, had occurred in the last few hours. Too many questions, no answers.

Burton snatched up a length of pipe as a faint scraping reached his ears. He crouched, eyes raking the darkness. A figure lurched out of the shadows near a pile of broken bricks. Burton tensed, raising the pipe.

"Ade...?"

The metal pipe clattered to the floor as Burton caught Mina just in time. Carefully he lowered her limp body to the ground, catching his breath as he saw one side of her face was dark with blood; her hair was full of it, clinging wetly to her skull.

“Sweet Jesus,” he moaned.

Picking her up, Burton gently laid Mina on one of the mattresses, propping her head on a pillow. He needed hot water and bandages. Where on earth was he going to find them down here? He was underneath a hospital and there’s not even a Band-Aid! He should have paid more attention when Mina had tended his wounds before, made sure he knew where the medical supplies were. Even a first aid kit would do. He had to calm down; think, *THINK!*

She was breathing easily, if a little shallow. He couldn’t tell her colour. There was too much blood and not enough light. Perhaps he should carry her up to the hospital. Did it have an Accident and Emergency Department? Burton didn’t know. He remembered Gary or Stringer had told him the hospital was no longer active. If there wasn’t an emergency room, they’d be able to get an ambulance to another hospital. All this rattled through his frantic brain in about two seconds, panic bubbling just below. Decided, he leaned to pick her up.

“Just let her lie,” ordered a voice.

Burton froze.

“Very slowly, move away from her. Keep your hands where we can see them.”

Three MIBs surrounded him—one in front, two flanking. All were armed with weird-looking automatic rifles.

“She’s hurt. She needs help,” Burton said, holding his arms wide, hands plainly open.

“Move!” ordered the MIB in front of him, gesturing with his weapon.

“She’s hurt!” Burton yelled.

The sudden burst of gunfire popped loudly in the basement; rubber bullets ricocheted off the wall three feet above Burton’s head with harsh, dull thuds. Brick chips showered him. He took a quick half-dozen steps away from Mina, his heart pounding.

“Better,” said the shooter. “Now, get out of here. We only want her.”

“Now wait a minute...” began Burton.

The MIB levelled his gun at him. Burton fell quiet, his mouth suddenly dry. Light from one of the candles glimmered impassively on the silvered visor of the MIB’s black helmet.

“I suggest you leave now, before I change my mind,” he said coldly.

“Ade...”

A tingle, like an electric charge, rippled through Burton. Groggily, Mina was sitting up, her head in one hand.

“Uh, uh,” warned the MIB as Burton stepped towards her.

"She needs me."

"Not today, black boy." The gunman took a meaningful step forward.

Burton started. The man's racist language rang a bell, a faint echo in the back of his mind. He looked at Mina, then at the MIB, trying to gauge whether the man would actually shoot him. In his heart, there wasn't a doubt.

"Just let me make sure she's all right," he pleaded.

"Ade, who are you talking to?" Mina raised her head, swaying slightly.

"It's okay Mina, just stay where you are," Burton assured her, nervously watching the black-clad men.

Mina sounded puzzled. "Who's with you?"

Burton frowned. Couldn't she see they were surrounded?

"Mina, are you all right? Can you see me?" Burton asked, puzzled.

"Of course I can see you," she said, a little peeved. "But not who's with you."

A warning jangled in Burton's head. "Mina, the MIBs..."

Mina was alert now; on her knees, looking straight at him, her eyes clear, looking around the dim chamber.

"There's no one here Ade; just you and me..." She paused. "No, wait..." Mina raised a tentative finger to her left temple.

Burton gasped as the three MIBs seemed to waver, become transparent, and then they just winked out of existence!

"What the hell...?" gasped Burton.

"Dec?" called Mina, looking into the shadows.

Bricks rattled in the darkness as a dark shape detached from the gloom, struggling up a pile of rubble. Burton got a quick glimpse of Declan's pale features before he disappeared over the ridge of debris, heading for the nearest exit. Then the truth hit him.

"You son of a!" Burton started after the fleeing man.

He should have known! The way the MIBs had ignored Mina, the way he had been spoken to, the fact they were going to let him go. Fool! *Fool!*

"Ade..." Mina was on her feet, swaying dangerously.

Burton caught her in his arms as she passed out again. He glared after the fleeing Declan, then at Mina's ashen face.

He had to get her to a hospital.



Chapter Thirteen

HARRY

Patience was never one of Burton's virtues. His patience under stress was as rare as butterfly droppings. He paced the corridors between the waiting area and Mina's room like an expectant father. She had looked so pale, her eyes, black-ringed, bruised, lying limply in his arms as he carried her out of Confusion, so ... lifeless. Her breathing so shallow as to be almost imperceptible, he had to practically scream at the porter to call for an ambulance. The stupid idiot had dithered, waffling on about 'his job.' If he hadn't had Mina in his arms, Burton would have smacked him one.

Thinking about it, he couldn't blame the porter for his reaction. Had he been in his right mind, Burton would have realized the picture he made, dirty, disheveled, shirt torn, blood-stained, with an equally bleeding and bedraggled girl in his arms. It never entered his head. All he could see was Mina, bloody, deathly white and fear clutched his heart in a steel-cold grip.

The ambulance was mercifully quick. A short dash along Mile End Road and Mina was taken into the Accident and Emergency Unit at Whitechapel. Now he waited, restless, frightened. Pacing.

There had been so much blood. Burton tried not to dwell on it, but somehow his mind wouldn't let it go, insisting on returning to every lurid detail. The gash at the back of her head looked serious. Her hair had been matted; the back of her shirt soaked.

What the hell had happened in Confusion? Where were the others? And why had Dec tried to drive him away? So many questions. Burton couldn't be bothered by them now, even though they niggled at him incessantly. His main concern, his *only* concern, was Mina. She had to be all right, just had to!

"Mr. Burton?"

He nearly jumped out of his skin as the nurse gently touched his elbow. "Ms. Crimmi is asking for you."

"She's all right?"

"As well as can be expected," the nurse answered kindly. "You won't have long; we're going to transfer her to an observation ward in a few minutes."

*

Mina looked as white as the pillow on which she lay. Bandages swathed her head, wisps of black hair poking out at the edges. Her eyes were closed, the lids purple, dark, sooty smudges below them. Even her normally ruby lips were pale, pinched.

Burton eased the door closed, padding quietly to the bedside.

"I'm not asleep." Mina's eyes fluttered open.

Burton felt the tension drain out of him, making him sort of smile.

"You scared me half to death. How do you feel?"

“Better than you look.” Mina attempted to smile as well. She didn’t make it; her mouth didn’t seem to have the strength. “Even without my glasses, I can see you’re a mess.”

Burton finally realized the state he was in.

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. “You’re the important one. Are you up to talking?”

“You want to know what happened?”

“If you’re able.”

Mina closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts. She remained still for so long Burton thought she had fallen asleep.

“It was just after you left...” She glanced at him briefly, colour rising in her cheeks. Burton nodded, his expression telling her he understood. Mina continued, closing her eyes, “Before I had a chance to really sense him, Harry was there, with about a dozen MIBs. They wanted us to surrender.

“Stringer got everyone out as Gary tried to seal the door. It was forced open, but by then only Dec and I remained. Dec threw up some sort of illusion. I’m not sure. I fell, hit my head. When I woke up, you were there...”

“Where are the others?” Burton asked.

“I don’t know. Gary would have made sure they were safe.”

“What I don’t understand is why Dec tried to drive me away?”

Mina looked at him. "I don't know that either. We'd been arguing. That's why I was distracted and didn't sense Harry until it was too late. If Haley hadn't heard them coming and warned us, it might have been a different story."

"That still doesn't explain what Dec did," said Burton. He sighed, brushing Mina's cheek lightly with his fingers. Her smile was washed out, tired as she pushed against his caress.

"Let's not worry about it now," he said softly. "You just concentrate on getting better."

"Mr. Burton?" The nurse was standing in the doorway. "We'll be moving Ms. Crimmi now."

"Sure." Burton got up. "I'll be close. As soon as you're settled, I'll come and see you."

"You'd better," said Mina, this time she did manage to smile.

*

Trying to strip wash in a hospital bathroom wasn't easy. After stripping to the waist and splashing warm water over his face and chest, Burton dried himself with handfuls of paper towels; not an ideal method. The towels turned to mushy wads, literally falling to pieces in his hands. His t-shirt wasn't so bad; the tracksuit top just needed dusting. There was a darker patch against the dark blue on the left breast and

arm. Mina's blood. Burton rubbed at it futilely with the paper towels. Dressed again, he felt a little better. Looking reasonably presentable, he went to find Mina.

The hospital was old, with narrow high-ceilinged corridors, and dark green linoleum floors that squeaked under the soles of his trainers. The paintwork was cream and bilious green, hardly a matching, or comforting, colour scheme. There was not much mid-morning activity as Burton crossed the stairwell, which housed the ancient, wrought iron elevator, with its black concertina gates. The lift shaft was encased in black wire mesh, affording some safety to those using the stairs as the lift car, a rattling, creaking affair, trundled up and down between the various floors. There was a small bank of modern elevators situated behind the old lift, better suited to the hustle and bustle of a busy hospital.

Burton passed into the corridor that led to Mina's ward. He noticed a tall, thin man leaning languorously against the wall near a window, his thin arms folded over an equally thin chest. The man was deathly pale, his jet-black hair hung in oiled ringlets around his shoulders. He regarded Burton with a sardonic smirk on his full lips.

Burton was taken aback by the man's striking appearance; his pallor accentuated by his brilliant white shirt and black, skintight trousers tucked into black calf-length boots. A tingle rippled through Burton. He slowed, looking back at the man, who smiled at him mockingly, revealing perfect white teeth. It was the eyes, the intense green, the haunted look, set in dark, deep sockets.

Mina's eyes!

And Burton knew.

Harry!

Recognition brought fear. If Harry was here, MIBs wouldn't be far behind.

Burton hesitated, unsure what to do. A man carrying a large tin box walked by, a bright yellow sticker on the lid proclaiming it to be "Bio-Hazardous Material." There were one or two white-coated lab technicians flitting in and out of various rooms along the corridor. Other than that, the floor was deserted.

Mina!

"Don't worry, Mr. Burton, she's quite safe. Or may I call you Ade?" His voice was soft, dark like liquid jet.

Burton was across the intervening gap in two strides, his hands bunching the front of Harry's shirt, pushing him back against the wall. Harry looked mildly alarmed, and then he grinned.

"What are you doing here, you...?"

Something flashed in Burton's mind. He staggered back, brilliance filled his vision.

"Tut, tut," Harry said, straightening his shirt. "No hands."

Burton rubbed the brightness out of his eyes; dizziness disorientated him. With a grimace, he lunged at Harry again.

"Don't," Harry warned; a dangerous flicker in his livid eyes halted Burton. "Don't make me hurt you."

Burton stopped, knowing the threat was very real.

"What do you want?"

Harry visibly relaxed, the tension draining out of his slim body. "That's better. Violence is so uncouth, don't you think?" He smiled again, artlessly.

"Listen, you smug—" Burton bit the expletive off as a nurse walked past; she cast them a curious glance. Burton waited until she had passed out of earshot.

"You've got about three seconds to tell me what you're doing here before I wring your scrawny neck."

Harry frowned. "There's just no talking to some people," he affected, pouting. "If you must know, I've come to see my sister."

Harry pushed away from the wall, moving with an easy grace that reminded Burton of a ballerina. He scowled.

"You and who else?" snarled Burton, looking up and down the empty hallway.

Harry looked hurt. "I'm on my own." Then he added slyly, "For the moment."

*

Mina was clearly agitated as Burton, closely followed by her brother, entered the ward. She was arguing with a nurse, needing her to do something for her. When she saw them, fear crossed her face.

"Hello, Mina," Harry said silkily; he bent and kissed her forehead. "So good to see you're on the mend."

Mina glanced at Burton.

"He was in the hall; I think he's alone."

Harry smiled at the nurse as she took her leave.

"Of course I'm alone. I don't need an escort just to visit my dear sister in the hospital."

"What do you want, Harry? Where are my friends?" Mina asked, keeping her voice low.

"How would I know?" he answered innocently. "Really Mina, I don't know why you trouble yourself with those... those vagrants. You should be with me, where you belong."

Mina glared at him.

"And as for this person," Harry continued, flicking a distasteful glance at Burton. "God alone knows what you're doing with a 'straight.'"

"Don't you dare criticize me!" Mina hissed. "What you're doing is wrong, and you know it. There's no way you can justify the suffering you've caused. Where's *your* loyalty? You're my brother, for Heaven's sake!"

"That's right," Harry retaliated. "I *am* your brother. So, what're you doing with that bunch of misfits, placing them before your own flesh and blood? What do you care

about them? About him?" Harry's eyes narrowed, catching the sudden *frision* between Burton and his sister. Slowly, he rose up to his full height, a sneer widening his mouth.

"Well, well, well," he crooned. "Young love, how sweet."

Burton stepped towards Harry; fists clenched.

Something in Harry's attitude warned Mina. He was up to something! Harry was sly, devious. He always had been ever since they were children. He would never go the direct route to achieve his aims, not when he could use subterfuge. He delighted in tricking people, deceiving them into thinking he held their best interests at heart. Harry was only concerned with Harry, his own well-being, first and foremost.

Whilst Harry was distracted with Ade, she probed his mind before he was able to protect himself. She reeled from the mental chaos she encountered. Focusing, Mina filtered through the morass of disturbing thoughts, seeking, seeking, and finding.

She gasped, falling back onto her pillows a split second before Harry's mental defenses snapped shut.

"Mina!" Burton touched her arm, her face. She felt cold, her skin clammy with sweat.

"That was naughty," Harry said, standing on the opposite side of the bed. "You're not playing fair. That's not like you, Mina."

Suddenly Mina's eyes flew wildly open, startling Burton. She gasped, her head lifting from the pillow, looking wildly around, finding Burton.

“Ade, the MIBs.” She swallowed hard. “They’re coming!”



Chapter Fourteen

Reunion

Burton made a grab for Harry, but as fast as he was, Harry was faster. He danced lithely out of reach. Something popped in Burton's ears, and he lost balance, falling across the bed. Before Harry could retaliate further, Mina sent her own mental "charge" into Harry's mind. Without a sound, her brother sank to the floor.

Everything happened within seconds. No one noticed. It was a busy ward, it was only a matter of time before they were discovered.

"Ade, snap out of it! Come on, wake up!" Mina shook him desperately.

Groggily, Burton heaved himself to his feet, groaning and shaking his head, which felt as if it were full of cotton.

"The curtains, quick!" Mina urged.

His head still swimming, Burton pulled the curtains around the bed; the nurse at the desk looked at him questioningly.

"Bedpan," Burton mouthed at her, and pulled the curtains entirely around the bed.

"Get his clothes off," Mina said, throwing back the bedclothes.

"Are you sure you can do this?" he asked, pulling off Harry's boots.

"We don't have a choice," Mina replied, removing the shirt.

As Mina finished dressing, Burton bundled Harry's unconscious body into the bed and pulled the cover up high. His hair was so similar to Mina's it might give them precious minutes before anyone realized Mina was gone.

"How long will he be out?"

"Not long enough," Mina said wryly. "But he won't be able to track us for a while. That should give us some added time. Come on!"

Not bothering to draw the curtains, they walked quickly out of the ward. The nurse at the desk didn't even give them a second glance. Burton made sure to keep between Mina and the nurse. Once outside, they hurried.

"They're here," Mina said as they headed for the stairs.

"Backway," Burton said, leading Mina to the farther corridor.

They began to run, receiving curious glances from passers-by. They ignored them. Burton was glad they had only been on the first floor, one more flight to go and they would be out. As they turned the corner, Burton caught a brief glimpse of a man dressed in black before crashing into him. With a yell, they both tumbled down the wooden stairs, Burton ending up on top as they sprawled on the lower landing. Mina's scream echoed in the stairwell.

"Ade!"

The man in the dark suit was as surprised as Burton as they tumbled to the floor. Burton staggered to his feet; the man remained on the floor, dazed.

"You okay?" Mina asked as Burton leaned on the wall for support.

"Yeah, yeah..." he said, shaking the stars from his befuddled head. He glanced down at the man, who began to stir. "Sorry..."

Burton stepped over him, took Mina's hand, and hurried on down the stairs. They slowed to a walk as they exited the hospital. There wasn't any sign of pursuit.

"Jeez..." Burton paused for a moment.

"What?" Mina asked, concern edging her voice as she saw the shocked expression on Ade's face.

"I thought we'd had it back there, that guy I ran into..."

"You thought it was an MIB?"

Burton smiled wanly. "Scared the shit out of me..."

"We need to keep moving," Mina said. "Come on."

"You're not going to get far on foot in your condition," Burton pointed out, quietly alarmed at how pale she looked.

"We haven't got a choice..." Mina managed a brave smile.

The sudden noise of an approaching motorbike startled them both. They only relaxed when they saw an ordinary courier pull up to the kerbside.

"Sweet Jesus! I'm gonna have a heart attack if this keeps up!" muttered Burton as he watched the biker switch off the engine, take a package from a side panier, and enter the hospital.

He couldn't believe their luck! The biker had left the keys in the ignition!

"Not luck..." Mina said weakly, sweat sheened her pale face.

Quickly Burton helped her onto the motorcycle's pillion.

"Shit!"

"Now what?" Mina asked.

"No helmets." Burton pointed out. "If the police spot us, they'll stop us for sure."

"They've got to catch us first," Mina said. "Besides, I'd never get a helmet on over this lot." Indicating her heavily bandaged head. "Come on, let's just go."

*

Throwing caution to the wind, Burton gunned the powerful engine and tore up towards Mile End Road via a series of back streets. He intended to head out a little way and find somewhere they could rest and think things through. Mina clung to him tightly, her head pressed hard into the space between his shoulder blades; shielding herself from most of the wind as they roared through the East End streets.

They had barely gone a mile when Mina started to pound him on the back.

"No! No! Stop! We can't go through the shield! Stop!"

Burton brought the motorcycle about, heading back down towards the Isle of Dogs. Mina relaxed. For nearly an hour, they circled, meticulously avoiding the psionic shield and miraculously going unnoticed by the police. Eventually, Burton brought the bike to a stop near Mile End Park, at the top of Burdett Road. They parked the bike behind a rubbish skip and entered the park.

"This is no good, Mina. We need a plan. We just can't ride around all day; our luck will run out sooner or later."

Mina, pale and looking haunted, agreed.

"Are you okay?" Burton said, as Mina sagged against a lamppost. "I've been so busy worrying about getting caught I'd forgotten you were hurt. Here, let's sit down on this bench."

There weren't many in the park, a few mothers pushing strollers out for an early evening walk, and some school children using the park as a shortcut home. No one took any notice of two teenagers sitting on a park bench.

"I'm okay, really," Mina said gamely. "Just a little woozy, that's all."

"That clinches it," Burton said. "We've got to find a safe place to hide, and quick. Isn't there somewhere Gary and the others would go at a time like this?"

Mina sat back on the bench, regarding him with dull eyes.

"You make us sound as if we're some sort of elite team. We're not. We're just a bunch of kids, thrown together by circumstance. We don't know how to plan for something like this."

"Not 'just' kids, Mina. You've got a God-given talent; you're special. Use that talent, see if you can get any 'sense' of where the others might be."

Mina looked at him worriedly.

"I know it's hard. You're tired and hurting, but we've nothing else," Burton said softly. "Just try."

She sighed heavily.

"Let's move into those trees where it's more secluded, then I'll try."

Burton watched as Mina composed herself, sitting straight-backed under a tree, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow. She looked so pale, so vulnerable. He had to look away, secretly wishing they had just kept riding the motorcycle north, always north, until they reached Manchester. No matter how impossible it might be, he'd find a job, a good job, and a place to live away from this insanity, away from London, from Harry. Except he knew it wouldn't—couldn't—happen, not yet. Mina was trapped here along with all the others, and she wouldn't abandon them even if she could. Until they solved this riddle, no one was going anywhere.

But he was patient, he could wait. It wouldn't be easy, nothing worthwhile ever was. But they could do it, together. He knew they could. They just needed the chance.

Mina groaned; she swayed, holding her head, tumbling over onto the grass. Burton was beside her in an instant, sitting her upright, supporting her in his arms.

"Mina, Mina, are you all right?"

"Yeah." Her voice sounded so tired. "They're close," she added with difficulty.

"That way." Her shakily pointing finger indicated east. Burton frowned.

"Are you sure?"

Mina couldn't speak; she barely had the strength to nod.

"Jesus," Burton said apprehensively. "Surely not."

*

Mina slept right there, under the tree, warmed by the late afternoon sun slanting through the almost leafless branches. Burton cradled her in his arms, content to let her rest. It gave him time to sort out his troubled thoughts. St. Clarence's lay east, barely three-quarters of a mile away. It was madness to think Gary would go back there! What was he thinking? Burton had complete faith in Mina's strange ability; he knew she wasn't wrong, even though this time he hoped she was.

*

Two hours later, Mina stirred in his arms.

"Heck of a time for a nap." He smiled as her eyes flickered open.

She was momentarily alarmed, relaxing as she realized where she was.

"How long did I sleep?"

Burton told her.

"Are you able to walk?"

She nodded.

Together, they headed for the park entrance, hand in hand. Leaving the motorcycle, they made their way down the Mile End Road.

"This is ridiculous," Burton complained. "All we're doing is going around in circles, like a dog chasing its tail."

"That's the way it is," Mina replied. "It's been that way for months."

"Doesn't mean to say I have to like it," growled Burton.

Getting into the hospital basement was becoming second nature to Burton. It seemed easier each time he did it. They discovered the place was totally deserted.

"Are you sure they're here? It's not some sort of residual feeling, is it?" asked Burton, peering into the nearest alcove. It was empty.

"No, it's too strong. They're definitely here." Mina frowned.

"What is it?" asked Burton.

"I'm not sure." Mina's frown deepened. "It's just ... they're here, but it feels ... different."

"How do you mean, 'different?' They're either here or they're not."

Mina shook her head impatiently.

"I know you're hurting, but try to focus." Burton laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Centre on just one of them, Gary."

Mina tried, her expression a mask of concentration. Her eyes popped open in surprise. "They're underneath us," she said.

Burton scanned the floor, eventually finding a manhole cover. Expecting the worst, he heaved it up and was rewarded by a dark hole; nothing else, especially no bad smell.

"Ladies before gentlemen." He grinned at Mina.

"I don't think so," Mina returned.

"Feminist," Burton snorted, sitting on the edge of the open manhole.

His questing foot found an iron rung of a ladder embedded in the wall.

"Just don't step on my head as you come down," he grumbled. "And don't forget to pull the cover back on!"

They descended a short distance into a corridor. Ambient light from some unseen source within the tunnel gave adequate light.

"What is this place?" Mina asked.

"I've no idea," Burton said. "Which way?"

Before Mina could answer, someone stepped out of the shadows, startling them. Burton stepped in front of Mina protectively.

"You two make enough noise to wake the dead," Gary English said.

Chapter Fifteen

DISCOVERY

"It makes perfect sense," Burton said heatedly.

"Absolutely not," Gary returned; equally as heated.

"This doesn't make sense. Mina and I have done nothing but get pushed from pillar to post all day. It can't go on. Running isn't the answer, fighting back is."

"And who do we fight? The men in black? It may have escaped your notice, but they're armed, and they're not averse to using their guns," argued Gary.

"They're just a symptom. We need to find the root cause," returned Burton.

"We?" Gary said caustically.

Burton's jaw tightened. "I'm in this as much as any of you. I've confronted Harry. He knows me now and believe me, he's not a happy bunny."

"Even if what you say is right, there's no way we can do anything about it. How do we even begin to discover who's behind it all?"

"By not running around like chickens with their heads cut off!" Burton said emphatically. "Mina zapped Harry pretty good. It knocked him out; he's out of it for now. We can use that to our advantage."

"If Harry is as egomaniacal as you say, then it's a cinch he tried to find us after we left him embarrassingly naked at the hospital. Which must mean he'd be totally exhausted by now and would need to rest. Where else would he go to rest except

somewhere where he would feel totally safe?" Judging by their eager expressions, Burton knew he had them hooked. "Besides," he continued, "there's something 'off' about this whole thing, apart from the obvious..."

"What do you mean?" Gary asked.

"I don't know," Burton confessed. "Something ... I can't put my finger on just yet."

Gary scowled at Burton's vagueness and then continued his previous argument, "How do we find out where Harry's gone to ground? Even in his weakened state, he'd 'sense' any one of us in an instant."

"You maybe, but not me," Burton said. "As far as Harry is concerned, I'm still a wild card. Hopefully, he hasn't got my full measure yet. If Mina can locate him, I can follow him."

"What if Mina can't locate him?" said Gary.

"She can," Burton said confidently. "Don't forget, they're brother and sister, *twins*. Traditionally, twins have a telepathic rapport between them. Mina and Harry's gifts make that rapport even stronger."

"Maybe the question should have been what if she does find him, what then?" said Gary.

Burton shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

*

They were sitting in a small utility room deep below the hospital. Various gauges for the hospital's central heating system and other utilities adorned the walls, fixed to huge wooden boards which, in turn, were fixed to the walls. Mina lay napping in one corner; a blanket draped over her. Her face was in repose, having regained a lot of her colour, though dark circles still ringed her eyes. The bandages swathing her head had been reduced, making her more comfortable.

Only Gary and Sue Crossley had made it back. Of Nick Stringer and Declan there was no sign. There was no cause to worry. Gary had instilled caution in all of them, maybe a little too much, always preaching, "Better safe than sorry." Burton constantly glanced towards the entrance to the underground refuge, his dark eyes hooded. He hadn't mentioned Dec's little deception. He had his own plans concerning that.

Sitting patiently beside Mina's bed, Burton was happy to let her sleep, momentarily lost in his own thoughts. She had been through a lot over the last couple of days; they all had. His mind dwelled on locating Harry, fighting down the myriad concerns that flooded his mind, finally deciding that things were liable to get a lot worse before they got better.

*

"No, it's too dangerous. Harry might sense you; he'd have you before you could blink," Mina said, nursing the cup of tea Burton had brought her on awakening.

"I don't think so," Burton argued. "And you know it. Look at us, Mina, we're spiraling, going down a little more each day. We can't go on like this. We have to find a way to put an end to this on our own terms. It's the only way we can get our lives back. We have to find out who Harry is working for, what they want, where they're based..."

"And then what?" Mina asked.

"Find a way to end this or gather enough evidence to bring to the police," said Burton.

"That's not good," protested Mina. "What if they find out about us, discover what we can do? We'd become lab rats, jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."

"Maybe," conceded Burton. "Or we run out of places to run. Time's not on our side."

Mina didn't like it, yet she knew Burton was right. Reluctantly she agreed to locate Harry. It wouldn't take much, just a touch, feather-light. The rest would be up to Burton, another prospect Mina didn't relish.

*

He'd never felt so conspicuous in all his life, a black man, sitting on a flash motorbike, worth thousands, in the middle of the East End of London. No leathers, no helmet, looking like hell. Yeah, right. Blend into the scenery. He had washed and brushed up as best as he could, wearing a clean sweatshirt loaned to him by Gary, which was a lot better than the bloodstained and dirty t-shirt he had been wearing for

the last three days. But he still stuck out like a duck in a chicken coop. Burton waited close to where he had left the motorcycle. Thankfully, he hadn't thrown the keys away, which had been his first impulse. He was honestly surprised to find the bike remained untouched where he had hidden it by the rubbish skip. *Another first in the East End*, he thought wryly.

He had left Mina with the others, sitting quietly in her cubicle, cross-legged on her bed, eyes closed as she composed herself. As soon as she located her brother, she would let Burton know, telepathically. He still had a little difficulty taking Mina's abilities on board. *Great trick if you could do it*, he thought wryly.

Feeling vulnerable, Burton moved away from the bike, lounging as casually as he could by an old pub that had been taken over, appropriately enough, by a motorcycle dispatch company, or so the crudely painted sign decorating the grim black façade informed him. Judging by the boarded-up doors and windows, the company had gone bust.

He thought about Mina's and Gary's failing arguments. They knew he was right, but they still searched for alternatives where there were none. The MIBs were mercenaries, thugs for hire. As fantastic and melodramatic as that sounded, it was the truth. They cost money; so did their motorcycles, weapons, and equipment. Someone had to be paying for it, someone big, someone wealthy. Burton ruled out some clandestine government organization; their actions had been too overt. Ditto some

foreign agency. Besides, it all seemed a little over the top, too “Hollywood.” This was homegrown. Domestic.

It was all so far-fetched, incredible, with discernible motive. But then, the things he had witnessed over the last few days were equally incredible. They had to have answers. But wasn't that what he was doing, stuck out here like a sitting duck? Finding out?

Ade, why don't you just paint a real big target on your chest and have done? he muttered to himself.

Then he knew where Harry was. There was no voice in his head, no tingling, just instant, precise knowledge. He was sitting in the rear of a black saloon car moving slowly east along East India Dock Road in the early evening rush hour. Burton ran for the bike, started it, and headed down Burdett Road. Harry's chauffeur-driven vehicle was just approaching the bottom end. Without knowing how he knew, Burton recognized the car immediately even though he had never seen it before: sleek, shining black, dark tinted windows.

Stopping in a bus lay-by, strictly for the use of, Burton watched the car sitting at the traffic lights, its right indicator flashing. It intended to go onto the Isle of Dogs, which posed a quandary. The lights were about to change, giving Harry's car the right of way. Burton would be stranded here on the wrong side of the lights. If he went across the junction now, Harry would see him, especially as he had no masking helmet.

Whilst he dithered, the lights changed. Burton cursed. The traffic was too heavy to risk jumping the lights.

He watched helplessly as Harry's car cruised down West India Dock Road. Luckily the road was straight, making it possible to keep the car in sight, but if it turned off... Burton couldn't risk it. Taking advantage of a slight break in traffic, he gunned the powerful motorbike and shot across the junction amid blaring car horns and screeching tyres. One car swerved to avoid a collision as Burton leaned the bike over and around. With his heart in his mouth, he cleared the junction and tore after the receding car.

Harry's car turned onto Westferry Road, going deeper into the Isle of Dogs. Burton kept a respectful distance. They went under Westferry Circus, taking the first turning off the roundabout into Marsh Wall. Burton didn't see the police car pull out of behind him. It wasn't until the blue light flashed in his side mirror and the siren shrilled that he realized the danger. Cursing, Burton glanced behind. The policeman in the passenger seat waved him over to the kerb.

Harry's car was two hundred yards ahead, indicating left. Burton twisted the bike's throttle wide open and tore off down Marsh Wall; the police siren wailed louder as it gave chase. The police car, an Austin Metro, was no match for the powerful Triumph motorcycle. Within seconds, Burton left it behind. He took a left, then a right, then two more lefts. Straight ahead was Westferry Road again. He roared onto the

road; confident the police car had already passed it by. He wasn't wrong. Turning right, he rode back up to where Harry's car had turned left. There was an automatic bar gate leading into an underground car park beneath an impressive building of bronzed glass.

Burton dumped the bike behind a wall, this time leaving the keys, and walked casually past the bronze building. It rose above him at least ten, maybe twelve floors. The place was a fortress, discreet, unassuming, but a fortress, nevertheless. Beyond the bar gate leading into the basement, there was a steel mesh barrier, floor to ceiling rising and falling as vehicles entered or left, all vehicles were identified by two security guards stationed in a small cubicle beyond the steel mesh gate, aided by cameras, which were everywhere. Burton imagined a control room somewhere within the heart of the building, dozens of monitors, manned by uniformed guards, watching the myriad screens like hawks.

He found a café just down the road from the bronze building aptly named The Sound Bytes Café. There were several computers lined up on coffee bars fixed to the walls. As people ate their lunches or drank cappuccinos, or fancy herb teas, they played or worked on computers. As Burton waited for his order, he watched a blue-suited man, no more than twenty years old, skip through screen after screen, taking in the multitude of data being displayed. Back home in Manchester, he hadn't had time

for laptops or game consoles. He didn't have the money for them. Here they were everywhere! He couldn't even afford a cheap throwaway mobile phone.

Burton shook his head; technology was taking over the world. *What next?* he thought as he left.

Sipping coffee from a polystyrene cup, Burton casually walked past the bronze building to the front entrance. The entire twelve-storied façade of the building was glass, gleaming like deep red gold in the late afternoon sun, reflecting the heavy clouds rolling in across the Thames that looped around the island.

It was impossible to see what lay behind the glass, especially in the reception area. Only when the automatic doors swished open was Burton allowed an all too brief glimpse. He got an impression of sterility, spartan reception desk, plain, brushed steel walls with chrome and glass everywhere, harsh neon lighting adding to the cold austerity of the room. Burton shook his head. A fortress. The company name above the chromed and glass portico declared that Hi-Tech Motivation occupied the building. No other company name was apparent.

Never heard of 'em, Burton said to himself, finishing his coffee.

He threw the empty cup into a nearby bin and headed back towards East India Dock Road. Passing a telephone kiosk, he had a sudden idea. The kiosk stank of stale urine and the telephone directory had definitely seen better days, its pages crumpled and torn. He rifled through the directory, or more accurately what was left of it,

frowning when he couldn't find any listing for Hi-Tech Motivation. He looked back towards the building. All that opulence and wealth, so high profile, but no telephone listing? Burton's alarm bells, tinkling at the back of his mind until now, rang stridently.

Chapter Sixteen

SEARCHES

Declan McIntire yelled in surprise. One second, he was talking to Gary English, the next he was grabbed from behind and hurled against the wall, his head cracking painfully against the dirty brickwork. There was a brief, terrifying glimpse of Ade Burton's dark face, twisted in anger, his black eyes blazing like ebony fire. His gold tooth sparkled in the lamplight as his lips drew back in a feral snarl. Then pain exploded on Declan's jaw, snapping his head back, cracking it against the stone wall a second time.

"You..." Such was his rage Burton couldn't articulate.

He dragged Declan off the wall; his fist cocked for another blow.

"Whoa! Hold it! Let him go!" Gary English hauled the enraged Burton away, taking the front of Declan's shirt with him.

Burton struggled to get back to the cringing man. Gary shoved him back, standing between them like a referee. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"Ask him!" Burton spat, throwing the remains of Declan's shirt at him.

Dec swiped blood from his mouth and nose, glaring at Burton, a mixture of anger and fear. "It was a mistake! I didn't know it was you!"

"Bullshit!" Burton yelled. "You knew!"

He lunged again at the cowering man. Suddenly flames leapt up in front of him, the fierce heat forcing him back. His conscious mind told him it was only an illusion, thrown up by the frightened Declan, but he couldn't help reacting to what his senses told him.

"Stop it! Both of you." Now Gary was angry.

The flames died.

Tension, as tight as piano wire, sang like a palpable thing in the tiny stone room. Dec clung to the wall like a trapped animal, his colourless, grey eyes wide and afraid. Spittle gathered in the corners of his working mouth, turning the blood there a frothing pink. Burton itched to get at him, break his scrawny neck, but Gary stood between them, immovable as a rock.

"Will someone tell me what this is all about?"

In a few curt sentences, Burton explained. Gary just listened, turning to Dec as he finished.

"Well?"

"I told you, it was a mistake," Dec answered sullenly. "I thought Mina was in trouble."

"Then why use MIBs to try and scare me off?" demanded Burton, calmer now.

"Mina was semi-conscious, but she knew who I was."

"Mina doesn't only see with her eyes," Dec returned.

Burton bit off his reply, looking around. "Where is Mina?"

"Here, Ade."

She was sitting in the corner, unnoticed. Burton knelt beside her.

"You okay?"

"Better, now you're back."

Burton lowered his voice so the others wouldn't overhear. "Why didn't you tell them about Dec?"

"No point," she answered. "He really didn't mean any harm."

Burton went to answer, but Mina touched his lips with her fingers.

"Trust me," she whispered.

Taking her fingers from his mouth, Burton kissed them. "Whatever you say," he said and kissed her forehead.

"There's something else..." Mina said. "Nick hasn't come back. Gary thinks he's gone after Kelly by himself. He must have gotten caught."

"Shit..." Burton said softly. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as we can be, it's been hours. Why else would he not come back?" Mina answered.

Frowning, Burton stood up, facing Gary. "Does the name Hi-Tech Motivation mean anything to you?"

Sue, Gary, and the still sullen Dec looked at one another blankly.

"Nothing," Gary answered for them. "Should it?"

Burton quickly narrated the afternoon's events. "I don't know who these people are, but the building looked prestigious, though there wasn't any signage, nothing to indicate exactly what their business might be. The car Harry was in was a high-end luxury limousine. I checked the phone book. They're unlisted," he finished.

"Maybe they're a new company," Sue Crossley ventured. "Or maybe the directory was out of date."

"I don't think so. The building had a sort of ... stability about it. Y'know what I mean? Like the company and building belonged together and from the little I was able to see, I think they occupy the entire building."

"So how do we find out exactly what Hi-Tech Motivation does?" Gary said.

"It'd help if we knew what sort of business they were in," agreed Burton. "At least then we'd have a direction to follow."

"It sounds electronic to me," said Sue. "Computers, maybe?"

"Or engineering?" added Gary.

Burton thought about it for a moment. "No, I think Sue may be right. The place had a sterile, futuristic look about it; a lot of automata, doors, barriers, cameras. Just the sort of image a computer company would like to project."

"Or the whole place might just be a front for something more clandestine, dirtier," Declan said from the corner. He was wiping his face with a handkerchief,

dabbing at his nose. "Going there might play right into their hands. Once we were on the island, we'd be trapped."

Their shocked expressions made it obvious that no one had thought of this nasty possibility.

"A trap?" Gary said.

"I don't buy it," Burton disagreed. "It doesn't make sense. If they wanted you on the island, why don't they just use the shield, force you there?"

"That's a point," Sue said.

No one said anything for several seconds, trying to unravel this new piece of the puzzle.

"We're wasting time trying to find solutions to unanswerable questions" Burton said. "We need to take things one step at a time. First, we find out all we can about Hi-Tech. Any suggestions?"

"If we had a mobile phone, it might help," Sue said.

"Not a lot a chance of that," snorted Dec. "It's all contracts and monthly bills; you need a home address for that."

Everyone looked back at Sue; her pale cheeks coloured with the sudden attention.

"Or a laptop," she added.

"To do what?" Gary asked.

"The Internet," Sue explained. "If Hi-Tech is a computer-based company, they're bound to have a website on the net."

"Great," Dec snorted. "None of us have mobiles, so you suggest we get a computer. From where, The Pound Store?"

"No," Burton said, his face glowing with excitement. "At the Sound Bytes Café!"

*

They stood in the overhang of a portico opposite the Hi-Tech Motivation building. Mina surveyed the façade; the bronze glass had turned a muddy brown in the fading light, sombre, gleaming, ominous.

"It gives me the chills," Mina said, shuddering and unconsciously moving closer to Burton. He put a protective arm around her trembling shoulders.

"It's faceless, like whoever's behind all this. A coincidence, you think?"

"Maybe," Mina answered.

"D'you still want to go through with this?" Burton asked. "You really don't have to."

"A double-pronged attack, that's what you said. Sue on the Internet, me with my empathy."

"But if you think it's too dangerous... We're taking a chance that Harry is still incapacitated, if he senses you..."

Mina took his hand, squeezing it warmly. "We'll run like the devil at the first hint of trouble."

Burton wasn't reassured, but he knew there was no other way to sort this mess out. Sue Crossley, Gary, and Dec had gone to the café that, luckily, was one of the few that remained open into the evening. He and Mina had come here with the express purpose of using her empathic ability to "scan" the Hi-Tech building to see what they could find. Composing herself, Mina closed her eyes whilst Burton kept watch.

For long minutes she stood there, her eyelids flickering, the colour draining alarmingly from her face. Burton feared that using her abilities would weaken Mina further. She had been through so much; this was an unnecessary burden to add to her already heavy load.

She hadn't recovered properly from the blow to her head. The bandages she still wore were disguised under a blue silk scarf, which highlighted her startling green eyes. But there was no disguising the suffering she was enduring, regardless of her brave face.

The minutes ticked by.

Marsh Wall was beginning to get busier as various offices turned out for the evening rush home; eager white-collar workers headed for tubes, buses, and train, the same eagerness that allowed Burton and Mina to go unnoticed. The few who did notice merely gave a passing glance at the two teenagers as they hurried on their way.

Mina gasped, her eyes snapping open. Burton held her, supporting her limply sagging body. He enfolded her into his arms like a lover's embrace until she was sufficiently able to stand on her own two feet.

"You okay?" he asked worriedly.

She was as white as ashes, clammy sweat plastering a few wisps of hair jutting from beneath the scarf to her forehead in wet strands.

"Mina?"

"I'm okay, give me a minute," she said heavily.

Burton held her close; her wildly pounding heart thumped against his chest. She clung to him, breathing hard, the breath rasping in her throat. Slowly, but surely, her breathing evened out as her strength gradually returned.

"Whew!" she said wanly. "I wouldn't like to do that too often." She smiled at Burton's expression. "Don't look so worried. I'm okay."

"What did you sense? Is Harry there?"

"He's there," Mina confirmed. "I couldn't sense anyone else, though there was something..."

"What? Could you tell?"

"No, not really. It was muffled, like it was shielded."

"Shielded?" Burton frowned. "Why shielded?"

“Because it felt ... unnatural, y’know, as if someone was deliberately preventing any form of intrusion, physical or mental. I encountered black spots, like little pockets of nothing. I couldn’t get beyond them.”

“How could they know? Unless...”

“Harry,” Mina finished for him.

“But why?” Burton looked at the gleaming building. “Why would anyone *want* to protect themselves so thoroughly from a bunch of teenagers? It doesn’t make sense.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. Let’s hope the others had better luck.”

“Ade, you don’t understand. I sensed Harry, but no one else. Not Kelly or Nick. No one! There’s no other SGs in the building.”

Chapter Seventeen

HTM

"Nothing," Sue said, uncharacteristically angry. "HTM was listed, and it is a computer software manufacturer. But there was no Internet address, list of directors, or who even owns the company." Her voice was filled with disappointment. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. It was a good idea," Mina said. "And after what I discovered, I can't say I'm really surprised. It seems everywhere we turn, we run into a brick wall."

Traffic rumbled by on Mile End Road; the noise dampened by the line of trees separating it from Mile End Park as they sat in a small group in the lengthening shadows, the grass chill and damp in the early evening air.

"Harry was out cold," Mina continued. "Ade was right on that score. But I couldn't find out much else. It's obvious that whoever is in that building doesn't want any unsolicited visitors, of any description. And I'm worried about Nick and Kelly. If they're not in that building, where are they?"

"Maybe they are being kept in one of those blind spots you encountered?" suggested Sue.

"It's a possibility..." Mina said doubtfully.

Burton leaned against the base of a tree, dejected like everyone else. "There's only one thing left to do," he suddenly said.

They looked at him.

"Go in and ask."

The collective stunned expressions would have been funny under any other circumstances.

"Are you kidding?" gasped Gary.

"Why not?" Burton said simply. "I could go in there as a student researching a project. Happens all the time."

"Yeah, but not when there's a resident empath in the employ of a faceless kidnapper on the premises," Mina said.

"You've already said Harry's out of the picture for a while. I ought to be able to pass as a student, no trouble."

They all looked at one another.

"It's so stupid it might work," Gary said.

"No," Mina said emphatically. "No more unnecessary risk-taking."

"Where's the danger? The worst that can happen is that they'll throw me out on my ear," Burton said.

"You know that's not true," argued Mina. "If you're recognised who knows what will happen?"

"Recognised by who? I'm just a college student gathering research for a project. At the first sign of trouble, I'll run like the devil, okay?" Burton paraphrased their earlier conversation, winking at Mina, who scowled at him.

“Very funny,” Mina scowled, not in the least amused.

“Look, I won’t be going beyond the reception desk. I doubt if I’ll even get that far!

What else can we do? We need answers.”

No one had an answer.

“It’s settled then,” Burton said, getting up.

*

He was really getting fed up walking up and down this same stretch of road. He passed the big hotel on the left, the employment agency on his right; they were beginning to seem like old friends. Passing underneath the Docklands Light Railway, he came out by the HTM building. Shadows pooled about the lower part of the structure, like the purple robes of a proud queen; sunlight glinted on the crown.

It was the end of the working day, almost five p.m. Mina had questioned the timing, Burton thought it was just a delaying tactic; she was worried. He had said what better time for a student just getting out of college? The time frame fit. Reluctantly Mina conceded.

Burton didn’t slacken his pace. Armed with a notebook and pen, purchased at a newsagent on the corner of Burdett Road, he boldly walked under the portico up to the automatic doors that swished open as he approached.

Trying to look as casual as possible, he sauntered up to the reception desk situated three-quarters of the way across the cavernous foyer. The air was

considerably warmer in here, and faintly scented; the low hum of air conditioners served as muted background noise.

Burton's trainers squeaked a little on the grey and white marble floor; his reflection came back at him from dozens of polished surfaces. The foyer was high-ceilinged, almost an atrium. Long, tubular lights were suspended through the centre on chromed chains. To his right, Burton saw more chrome on the stairs, spiraling upwards. The banister panels were frosted glass, as were the stairs themselves, intricately patterned. Non-slip carpet, dark grey, was fitted to each riser individually.

A tall, blonde woman regarded Burton coolly as he approached the sumptuous reception desk. Attractive, early thirties, her hair was styled about her lightly made-up face, highlighted by her dark blue serge suit.

Burton beamed his best "I hope you can help me" smile.

"Hi, I wonder if I might take a moment of your time," he began. "My name's Burton. I'm working on a project at college about computers and their usage in modern business. Would it be possible to talk to someone who could give me their views on the current climate within the industry?"

The receptionist blinked at him; quickly she regained her composure.

"I don't think so. I'm afraid we have no facility for such ... inquiries."

“Oh.” Burton’s face fell. “It doesn’t have to be an executive or anything. Anyone with some knowledge of current affairs and software will do. The office boy?” he grinned.

Despite her iciness, the receptionist smiled too. “Not even an office boy,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Burton shrugged. “Sure, I understand.” He turned to go, his plan quickly flushing down the toilet. “Perhaps you could answer a few questions for me?” he asked in a last-ditch effort.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“They’re nothing incriminating,” Burton pushed. “Just basic information, like, how long has Hi-Tech Motivation been trading? How many employees are there? Who owns the company? That sort of thing.”

He looked at her expectantly.

“Ms. Gallows, is there a problem?”

A black-suited man stepped out of one of the elevators situated to the left of the desk. He strode across the marble towards them; a two-way radio clutched in his left hand. Burton turned to face him.

The man was well groomed; crisp, white shirt, wine red tie, neatly knotted. His dark hair was short, parted on the left, his tanned face clean-shaven. He regarded Burton impassively; even though he addressed the receptionist.

"No, Mr. King. This gentleman is..."

Burton glanced at the woman, then back at the newcomer. "A student," he said. "I'm doing a project on computers and just wondered if it was possible to get some insight from someone at HTM"

"Is that so?" Mr. King said easily, giving Burton the once over, his cool, grey eyes taking in every detail at a glance. "What sort of information?"

Burton repeated what he had told the receptionist. "Of course, if it's an imposition, I'll understand."

"No, it's all right," said King, smiling. "I'm sure we can give you something that might help you. Hi-Tech Motivation is always eager to help the cause of further education, especially in our own field." He indicated the bank of elevators. "Come on, I'll give you the two-penny tour."

Burton's smile faltered briefly. He hadn't counted on leaving the reception area. For a brief second, he hesitated, thinking to make his excuses and leave, but then he realised it was too late to back out now.

Refixing the smile back on his face, he followed the security manager towards the bank of elevators.

"So," King said as they ascended to the first floor in the gleaming elevator. "Where do you hope your studies will take you?"

“Programming,” Burton said, looking at the silver and bronze mirrors surrounding them. The effect was quite disconcerting, seeing so many figures when there were only two of them in the car.

“Commendable, but possibly redundant. You realise that?”

The elevator slowed to a smooth stop, the doors slid open with a quiet hiss and they exited, Burton preceding. They turned left into a long, thickly carpeted corridor.

“Redundant?” echoed Burton.

They passed doors of brushed steel at regular intervals. Burton noticed swipe card terminals at every one.

“Of course,” King said. “With Artificial Intelligence computers becoming so sophisticated, it won’t be long before they are self-programmable, audio as opposed to the old-fashioned keyboard.”

“Sure,” Burton agreed, not sure what the hell he was talking about. “But they’ll still need someone to do the talking.”

King gave a small, derogatory laugh. “Any idiot will be able to do that.”

Burton couldn’t help feeling patronised by this soft-spoken, well-dressed man.

“How long has Hi-Tech been trading?” he asked, eager to change the subject.

“About five years. On the island, that is. We were originally located in the city.”

“Why the move?” asked Burton.

“Finance. We were offered a good deal if we relocated here.”

"HTM owns the building, then?"

"It does now," King said emphatically.

"And who owns HTM?"

Burton felt his heart begin to pound as he asked the question, praying he wasn't going too far.

"Peter Fontayne the Second," King answered without hesitation. "An American. Ah, here we are."

King stopped by a door identical to all the other doors along the corridor. He produced a swish card and ran it through the terminal. The door slid back.

As Burton entered the room, he recalled the control room he had imagined earlier, uniformed men sitting at rows of surveillance monitors. The room was his imaginings made real.

"This," King said expansively, "is what you might call the nerve centre of the building, or maybe its heart. From here, we can monitor everything within the confines of the building, the car park, and the road."

As he spoke, King flicked several switches, changing the scene on the monitor before him with every click.

"This might interest you," he said.

The screen flickered. Burton's heart leapt into his mouth as he saw the building opposite on the screen; the date in the corner was today's, the time, 1610. The two people clearly depicted in living colour were Mina and himself.

King flicked the switch again. Burton saw himself in the same place, drinking a cup of coffee. The time, 1420. Another flick of the switch revealed five figures this time, timed at only a few minutes ago.

"Perhaps," King said calmly, "you'd care to explain your exceptional interest in this building?"

Chapter Eighteen

FONTAYNE

Burton stared at the accusing monitor; his mind raced. "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh?" King arched an eyebrow. "And what does it look like?"

"We're students, that's all, out on a research and fact-finding expedition in the East End. Y'know, computers, dispatch companies, property development, that sort of thing."

"Where's your student card?"

Burton gave a nervous laugh, not altogether feigned. "I barely remembered to bring my notebook and pen, let alone my card. I'm always forgetting the blessed thing; ask anyone at the college."

"And what college is that?"

"Queen Mary's," Burton replied, having no idea what-so-ever if there was such a college. He prayed King didn't know either.

"If I were to telephone them, they'd verify your story?"

"Without a doubt," Burton answered instantly. "Ask for Mr. Walters, he'll vouch for me," he embellished.

King eyed him, trying to work out if Burton was bluffing or not.

“Look. If there’s a problem, I’ll just leave. I only wanted information; I didn’t mean to cause you any trouble.”

King was still suspicious. “That might be a good idea,” the security man said finally. He picked up a small, coloured brochure lying on a nearby desk. “You can have this. It’s not much, but it’ll give you some idea about HTM. There’s a little of our history there.”

“Thanks,” Burton said, taking the pamphlet.

King regarded him sternly. “It may be wise not to come visiting again. I don’t think we can be of any further assistance to you. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Burton said, putting the pamphlet in his notebook. “Thanks for your time. I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” King said. “I’ll show you out.”

*

King watched as Burton strode down the pathway as if he didn’t have a care in the world. The security man only half believed him, but figured the worst his erstwhile visitor could have been up to was some student prank.

“Who was that, Mr. King?”

King turned, mildly surprised to see a young boy standing beside him. He hadn’t heard him approach. King gave a slight involuntary shudder; it was uncanny how the

boy could do that time and again. The boy always made him feel uncomfortable, put him on edge. King wasn't sure why.

"Hello, Peter. He was a student, asking for information for a college course," answered King as he watched Burton pass out of sight.

"A student?"

"Yes, I gave him some promotional stuff and sent him on his way."

King found it mildly irritating to have to answer to a fifteen-year-old boy, regardless that he was the boss's son. Peter Fontayne the Third was a creepy kid. He always seemed to be there when you least expected him to be. Always formally dressed in pressed slacks and shirt, or a made-to-measure three-piece suit. The boy just wasn't like other kids. It was as if he had grown up too fast, missed his childhood, though he gave the impression it was no real loss. His mother had died ten years ago, leaving his father, a brilliant businessman and entrepreneur, to bring up his son on his own. Unfortunately, Fontayne Senior was clueless when it came to children.

He was a good-looking boy, stocky, maybe a little undersized for his age at 4' 10". He insisted on wearing his dark brown hair long, sometimes draped over his shoulders in shining profusion or tied with a black velvet ribbon. His brown eyes, almost black, were so dark. They had an intense quality to them that always gave the appearance of seriousness about the boy.

"Have you informed my father of this visit?" he asked.

"I haven't. I intended to make my report later," replied King.

"Don't bother, I'm on my way up to see him now. I'll let him know."

Soundlessly the boy strode over to the bank of elevators, taking the private one reserved only for his father and himself, to the penthouse. King visibly relaxed as the doors swished closed.

"Definitely a creepy kid," he muttered.

*

"I swear," Burton said. "I let loose the biggest sigh of relief when I got out of there! Jeez! I thought I'd been caught for sure."

"It was a stupid idea in the first place, if you ask me," snorted Dec.

"No one *is* asking you," Gary said, turning back to Burton. "So, what d'you think?"

"I don't know. Whoever designed the security in there certainly has a siege mentality; they could see a fly coming a mile away. But I didn't see anything else unusual."

"You wouldn't, would you?" Dec said, undeterred by Gary's admonishments.

"They're unlikely to show anything incriminating, are they?"

"Maybe not," Burton reluctantly agreed. "That's not the point. Everything *looked* normal. It doesn't mean to say everything *was* normal, does it?"

"That depends," Dec persisted. "It's all a matter of perspective; you see what people want you to see. Trust me, I know."

Burton regarded Dec. He didn't like the little worm, trusted him less, but he had a point. The thought disconcerted him.

*

Peter Fontayne the Third padded into the darkened room like a prowling fox, silent, alert, confident. What little light there was, came from concealed fixtures in the ceiling illuminating a large bed against the farther wall and a lumpish shape sprawled beneath the duvet. Silently the boy approached the bed, looming over the sleeping man, a contemptuous sneer on his young mouth.

With total disregard, he snapped on the bedside lamp, flooding the room with light. The man in the bed abruptly sat up, shock registering on his thin, wasted face; dark rings shadowed his bright green eyes.

"What the...?" Harry spluttered; he convulsively covered his eyes.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?" Peter said sweetly.

Harry, eyes watering, glared at him. "What's going on? What time is it?"

"I haven't a clue," said the boy, sitting in an armchair by the bed, prissily arranging the crease in his immaculate trousers. "Time you were awake, I guess." There was just a trace of an American accent in his voice.

Harry snatched the watch from his bedside table. "I've only been asleep for three hours! Why'd you wake me up?"

The amiable expression dropped from Peter's face. "Because I wanted to," he snarled.

Harry suddenly became wary, immediately sensing something was wrong.

"Whilst you've been stinking in that pit, we've had a visitor—Burton. I want to know how he managed to slip past you." Peter's eyes glittered dangerously.

Harry licked his dry lips nervously. "I've been searching for them all afternoon, Peter. I'm exhausted. I have to rest sometime."

"It seems every time you rest, they manage to pull off some little coup. Have you noticed that? Two square miles, all the time in the world, and you still can't find them, despite the little ... augmentation to your abilities." The boy leaned back in the armchair, slowly shaking his head. "I wonder why I give you houseroom."

"Because you know that, ultimately, I *will* find them," Harry dared.

Peter's glance flickered snake-like. Harry couldn't help the cold shiver that rippled up his spine.

"I'd like to find them this side of the next millennia, if that's okay with you," the boy said in a low, tight voice. "Without any more nasty little surprises like this afternoon."

"So why didn't you put your men onto them? Burton would have led them straight to the rest of them."

Peter smiled, bemused, not deigning to tell Harry he had already done exactly that.

"That's your problem," he said spitefully. "You think we are both stupid."

*

"So how can you tell from a picture?" Burton said, looking at the brochure King had given him.

"I don't know," Mina answered. "I just... *know*."

Burton looked again at the three-by-three-inch photograph of the middle-aged man depicted on the pamphlet's cover. Distinguished, well-groomed grey hair, soft brown eyes, and a confident smile on a lightly tanned, handsome face. "Peter Fontayne the Second" was labelled underneath.

"You're sure?" Burton said.

Mina looked exasperated. "Of course, I'm sure. Whoever is behind all this, it's not him."

Burton slapped the pamphlet against his thigh in frustration, leaning heavily against the tree trunk. He and Mina were in the park, in the same place they had gathered earlier. The others sat about them quietly. Darkness was nearly complete as night fell; soon they would have to find shelter for the night.

"Then who is behind it all?" Burton asked generally, expecting no answer.

"What's Harry doing at the HTM Building? And where are the rest of the SGs?"

“Well, I don’t know about the others,” a voice floated out of the shadows, “but me and Kelly are right here!”



Chapter Nineteen

SET-UP

They crowded around them with a million questions. Hands slapped backs; hugs were exchanged, cries of delight, and disbelief. Everybody spoke at once, a confusing melee of voices.

Burton hung back, allowing them time to wear out their welcome, so to speak. He was glad Nick was back with them, and that he had succeeded in finding Kelly.

Finally, the greetings came to an end and the proper questions began.

“How did I find you? Easy! I followed him!” Nick said, throwing a friendly arm around Burton’s shoulders. “There he was, as bold as brass, strolling down Marsh Wall. Me and Kelly just tagged along.”

Kelly stepped up to Burton; her deep brown eyes regarded him seriously.

“I never got the chance to thank you for what you did,” she said, hand extended.

Burton took it; it felt soft and warm.

“I didn’t exactly do a lot,” he said.

It was the first time he had had a good look at her. Burton could see she was younger than he had first thought, sixteen, seventeen at most. Elfin faced, framed by luxuriant light brown hair, streaked with natural white, hanging to the small of her back. Only, it was not exactly light brown. It shimmered, rainbow-coloured, like oil on

water everytime Kelly turned and caught the light. Her almond-shaped eyes smiled at him.

“You did enough. If you hadn’t distracted the MIB, I could have been shot, instead of just being caught.”

“Hardly a knight in shining armour though, eh?” Burton grinned.

Kelly’s smile broadened. “You’ll do for me,” she said.

“You still haven’t told us how you managed to escape,” Gary said. “From what Ade’s told us, the place was as secure as the Bank of England.”

“Luck mainly, I guess,” Nick said. “And Kelly.”

Kelly took up the story.

“Getting out of my room was fairly easy. I managed to break the light that was protected by wire mesh. Once the room was in semi-darkness, I simply stood in the corner and faded.”

“You what?” Burton asked.

“This,” Kelly replied.

She stepped beneath an overhanging branch, cloaking herself in shadow. Her outline shimmered, her hair shone, and then she just vanished!

“Whoa!” Burton gasped.

Kelly laughed delightedly, stepping back into view.

"I can blend perfectly with my surroundings, effectively becoming invisible. Knowing that my room must have had hidden cameras, it was only a matter of time before someone came looking.

"Within minutes, two men came to investigate. I thought there was going to be a problem as one of them stayed by the door whilst the other searched for me. Luckily, he stood far enough away from the door for me to slip through.

"It took me nearly two very nerve-wracking hours to find Nick, dodging guards, cameras, and God knows what else."

"How did you know Nick was there?" Mina asked.

"I overheard two guards talking when they brought me a meal. 'Some kid with the weird eyes,' they said. It could only have been Nick."

"Hey, watch who you're calling weird!" Nick protested.

Winking at him, Kelly resumed her story.

"I knew he'd never be able to get out of there by himself, so I thought I'd give him a helping hand..."

Nick made a face at her.

"The problem was all the doors seemed to be automatic, as well as being secured."

"What were the doors made of?" Burton asked.

"Metal, steel I think."

"The same as the HTM building," he commented.

"How did you get a security card? You never did tell me," asked Nick.

"You don't want to know," Kelly answered coyly.

"I do now!" retorted Nick.

"Well, if you must know, I followed one of the guards into a toilet. I intended to knock him out if I could, but luckily he took his jacket off before going into a cubicle."

"Tacky." Nick grimaced.

Kelly coloured scarlet. "Next time I'll leave you there! Anyway," she turned back to the group, "I stole his swish card and got Mr. Ungrateful there, out.

"I took him to an electrical cupboard I had discovered earlier, and we smashed everything in sight. Alarms went off all over the place, and the main lighting went out.

"We discovered we were on the eighth or ninth floor of a tower block. The only way to go was down."

Here, Nick took up the story.

"I led the way down, using the card as we went. We managed to get to the ground floor without being detected. The strange thing was there didn't seem to be any sort of commotion on the lower floors. Everything seemed normal, no alarms, no one searching for us.

"We were tempted to walk straight out the front door, but decided to play it safe. We found our way into the basement and found access to the sewers.

“Following them, we got out the first chance we got, ending up at the farther end of Marsh Wall. That’s when we saw Ade and, hey presto!”

Leaning against a tree, Burton frowned. Darkness was settling around them like a witch’s black robes; a breeze sighed through the branches. He felt uneasy, suddenly very vulnerable.

“So, you really don’t know what building you were in? Still, you were lucky to get out,” Gary said.

“Too lucky.” Burton appeared beside Mina. “I saw that place. I was in the control room. A mouse couldn’t get out without them knowing.”

“We were quieter than mice,” Nick assured him.

“Mina, can you sense anyone near us, any ... danger?” Burton was loath to use the word.

“I can try,” Mina said, concern glowing in her green eyes. “What is it, Ade? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Something doesn’t feel right. It all seems too easy,” he replied tightly. “Can you do it?”

Mina nodded.

As she stood in the lea of a tree, Nick moved to the edge of the small parkland copse. Slipping off his sunglasses, he peered into the gathering darkness. The others waited tensely.

"Ade, there's people out there. Close, very close," Mina said, her voice wavering in shock.

"I see them," said Nick, hurrying to the other side of the trees. "We're surrounded!"

"I knew it!" Burton cursed. "Your escape was a set-up!"

"We'd better split up and make a run for it," Dec said nervously looking around.

"No!" Burton turned to Gary. "That's all you ever do, split up, run."

"What are we supposed to do?" Gary returned.

"Earlier, Mina said you were just a bunch of kids. You know nothing about fighting. I say, it's about time you learned. Fight back!" Burton said earnestly.

"Against guns?" Mina asked.

"You don't need guns! You're different. *Bea* team; work together."

Uncertainty hung between them like an invisible wall.

"If we're going to do something, I suggest we do it now," Nick whispered urgently. "They're getting awful close."

Almost in one mind, they fell back amongst the trees, picking up fallen branches, stones, anything that would serve as a makeshift weapon.

"Okay," Gary whispered as they huddled together, "we move out towards Confusion, Nick, you and Kelly lead. Keep together, keep low, move fast, watch each other's back, and for God's sake, be careful!"

Burton automatically dropped in beside Mina. She smiled at him bleakly.

"It's gonna be all right," he whispered encouragingly.

They moved out in a single line, guided by Nick's uncanny vision and hidden by the falling dusk. They were among the three leather-clad men before the MIBs realised, taking them completely by surprise. Seeming to appear out of thin air, Kelly tripped one as Nick rushed forward and clouted him across the back of his unprotected neck with a hefty branch. The man went down like a sack of flour. Gary, crouching low behind a bush, lashed out quick as a snake at the second MIB, catching the man low with a well-aimed kick. The man rolled, came up on one knee, the weird automatic rifle levelled at Gary, who grabbed the barrel with both hands. His hands glowed brightly, and the man cried out in pain, snatching his hands away from the hot metal. Quickly Gary reversed the weapon, and using it like a club, felled the man in a swinging blow to his helmeted head.

Dec surprised a third MIB by simply rising up out of the darkness in front of the startled man, who saw a huge, snarling werewolf looming over him, jaws gaping, saliva drooling. He screamed as Dec held his gaze, lashing out with a rock, connecting solidly with the side of the man's helmeted head, staggering him. Dec followed through with a fist. The MIB tumbled to the ground, senseless.

Then they ran. Not in a disordered panic, not every which way, but together, silently, alert. Burton glanced back; a worried expression still etched on his face. They were clear within minutes, and Burton relaxed, but he was still troubled.

The remaining pursuers hadn't even realized the birds had flown the coop, taking care of three of the foxes in the process!

Chapter Twenty

GAMES

The music was as sweet to the ear as ground sugar to the tongue, filling the cavernous room with emotionally charged strains attained only by long hours of practice and a deep feeling for the music. Peter Fontayne the Third had neither. Though he played like a virtuoso, his slim fingers dancing over the violin frets, the bow caressing the strings, he merely mimicked that which he had heard only once. The room was acoustically perfect for the delicate purity emanating from the violin; the music flowed. Sighing heavily, Peter brought the piece to an end, taking the instrument from beneath his chin and standing motionless as the last dying notes faded away.

His stocky figure was reflected in the huge window that dominated the east wall, dark against the night. East London sprawled out below across the sparkling ribbon that was the River Thames. A thousand lights, warmly glowing in the blackness, filled the night, twinning their brightness in the serpentine strand of water.

“Of course...” he suddenly said. “The piece actually requires three strings. But played solo, I think it still retains a certain charm, don’t you?”

Harry Crimmi stirred himself on the leather sofa; the only piece of furniture contained within the massive room.

“Yeah, it was okay, I guess,” he answered, totally bored.

Peter cocked a well-shaped eyebrow at him as he returned the violin and bow back to its stand.

"Just 'Okay?'" he said. "I swear, Harry, you're nothing but a Philistine."

Harry scowled.

Walking the length of the glass wall, Peter leisurely adjusted his cuffs beneath his immaculately fitted, dark blue Armani suit; the silk seemed to whisper as he moved. His black patent leather shoes gleamed. He looked older than fifteen.

Man, Harry thought. He is older, by about forty years!

"But I wouldn't expect you to appreciate the aesthetics of Pachelbel," Peter continued. "You barely rise above your own basic lusts."

Harry eyed the boy's back, so contemptuously turned to him. How he'd love to shove the smug little brat through his own penthouse window. Watch his perfectly clothed body flop end over end on the way down, smashing itself to a bloody ruin on the pavement far below. He knew he wouldn't do it; he was too weak; too afraid. What if he made a mistake...? But still... It was a nice thought.

The boy was peeved, very peeved. His snide provocation was his effete way of working out his rage, or, as Peter continually referred to it, his slight irritations. Mina and the others had escaped Mile End Park. They had unexpectedly fought back, which had caught Peter by surprise. The boy scowled briefly; he didn't like being caught unaware. What really galled him was that his carefully laid plans had come to nothing,

the orchestrated escape of Stringer and the girl, the discreet tail, the dispatching of the "hired help," only to have them slip away. *All* of them!

"I don't know why you just don't round the whole bunch of them up and have done," Harry said, sitting up. "Stop playing games. They're running out of places to hide, bring them in, end it all once and for all."

Peter remained facing the window; his hands clasped behind his back. "I'm not ready for that yet," he said.

"Then why bother keeping tabs on them? Why send men out after them? It doesn't make sense."

The boy was suddenly in front of the startled Harry, his eyes blazing. "Because it pleases me!" he hissed. "Because I want to. What other reason do I need?"

"I... I don't know," stammered Harry.

"That's right. You *don't* know." Peter straightened his jacket, turning back to the window. "You think I want them dead, don't you?" he suddenly asked.

"Don't you?" Harry asked.

The boy shook his head slowly, as if he were indulging a naïve child. "Harry, Harry, Harry," he sighed. "All that power in your head, and you haven't got a clue, have you?"

Harry felt his cheek's colour angrily. "Perhaps if you let me in on your plans, I wouldn't have to constantly blunder around in the dark. What the hell *do* you want them for?"

Slowly Peter turned; his face expressionless, his eyes glittered dangerously. Harry swallowed hard. Even though he stood a foot taller than the boy and probably weighed twice as much, he knew he wasn't a match for Peter. Three months ago, as he wandered idly around the lower floors, Harry came across the building's private gymnasium. The boy was in there with three very capable-looking martial arts trainers; all four of them were dressed in those crazy white suits.

The three men surrounded Peter, who looked very small and frail by comparison. Harry watched what he initially thought was a training exercise, and then he saw the men attack in earnest. Within seconds, two of them were unconscious; the third was left nursing a broken leg. For one insane second, Harry thought it had been a set-up, that Peter had seen him and wanted to impress him, but it was real, even though what he had just witnessed wasn't possible! It was when Harry saw the blood, the shattered bone poking obscenely through the ruptured flesh. Sick to the stomach, he realized the incredible truth. His respect and fear of the boy, rocketed by about a thousand percent that day, and here he was, provoking the little bastard!

"Relax," Peter said, reading the obvious fear on Harry's face. "You're safe."

*

Reluctant as he was to admit it, Peter knew Harry was right. He was playing games. Alone, he'd had time to think, to consider his next move. Languidly, he made his next move on the virtual screen, watching the monitor as his unseen opponent answered his gambit.

"Predictable," Peter said, bored. "Mate in four."

He broke the Internet connection without bothering to end the chess game. Was there nothing, or no one, capable of giving him an adequate challenge? Must it always be this easy?

He studied the second screen. "Mate in three," he muttered. A third monitor glowed. "Same," he said. A fourth monitor. A fifth, it was all the same. He thought that playing chess, even multiple games on the net would prove a suitable diversion for him. It had not. Disgusted, he broke the Internet connections. Broodingly he sat back in his chair, laying his head against the cushioned rest, his fingers steeped under his chin. Computers, music, art, languages, math, quantum mechanics, calculus, the list was endless. At first, it had been a hunger, a thirst for knowledge, as necessary as oxygen. Growing, expanding, becoming an unstoppable monster, the more he learned, the more he *had* to learn.

Only "learn" wasn't exactly the right term. He didn't learn. He understood, intuitively, naturally; on some subconscious level that he didn't quite comprehend ... yet ... And which, conversely, was now his Holy Grail, the need to know why he was what

he was. He'd study, then he just knew. Any subject, *EVERY* subject. The knowledge itself wasn't a problem. He soaked it up like a sponge, retaining every iota of it. It had frightened him at first when he was very young. Who wouldn't have been afraid? What did a six-year-old know? A normal six-year-old.

It wasn't long before he realized that his learning ability wasn't normal, whatever normal was. It brought unwelcome attention until he learned to hide it. That was the hardest part, acting as if he didn't know the answer to the most basic questions, barely stopping himself from correcting his tutors when they misquoted or misinformed about certain facts. Knowledge brought a hard price. Loneliness. At first, he hadn't minded. He had been too busy "learning," except at times like this. What good is knowledge when you have no peers to share it with?

He didn't remember his mother, who had died when he was five, leaving him an orphan. She was too busy being a socialite, jetting all over the "in" places with her so-called friends, leaving him to be raised by an endless stream of nannies. An orphan, at least, with the amount of time his father spent with him over the last ten years, he might as well have been. His mother's death, from cancer, had hit his father hard. Peter Fontayne the Second had never been the same after seeing the slow, painful wasting away of his darling wife. His father had been quoted as saying, "It wasn't dying; it was a blasphemy."

When finally, thankfully, Katharine Fontayne died, so did a part of her husband. He plunged himself into work, concentrating on building a huge computer empire that swept over America, and then Europe. He forgot he had a son. Peter Fontayne the Third was cared for by nannies, taught by tutors. All came to wonder at, and then fear, the child's precociousness; his learning ability was almost preternatural. Instinctively he knew secrecy was a necessity, especially when his physical abilities began to manifest themselves. Like his mental abilities, his body grew strong, though without the pronounced musculature normally associated with strength.

He was a great deal stronger than he looked. His body had the ability to adapt, harden, which made sports like martial arts a breeze. Again, except when training, the ability had to be downplayed to satisfy curious eyes. But then something else happened, something both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. It was as if he were a caterpillar fighting its way out of a cocoon to emerge, spreading its wings like a magnificent butterfly... He evolved; his abilities manifested on an entirely different level, a much higher level.

Even now he hadn't fully realized the full potential of his new abilities. He was still testing them, reaching out to unbelievable limits, and still they grew... He was ten years old. It was then he asked for, and received, a very powerful computer with a full range of software. Within a year, he was writing his own unique, and private,

programs. He had the computer doing things other programmers could only dream of.

He secretly studied the world's stock markets, properties, banking, and consumables. Even at that early stage, a glimmer of a plan was surfacing in his incredible mind. He accessed his father's company records, his holdings. He was mildly surprised by his father's achievements. Though, he noticed several areas where there was room for improvement in production, costing, and efficiency.

Peter knew that one day the company would be his. That would be a day to remember. The business world wouldn't know what hit it, especially the computer sector.

But that was for the future. He had more immediate concerns.

Getting up, he impatiently paced the dimly lit room filled eerily with glowing computer screens. He looked at the machines; he both loved and hated them. They were functional, capable of intricate tasks and complicated programs. One of the Twenty-first century's greatest innovative achievements. Unthinking, unfeeling, yet they had purpose, whether the machines were aware of it or not. Who was to say that at some future date, artificial intelligence wouldn't become a reality? Computers that were sentient, free-thinking. What would they be able to accomplish then?

Peter smiled thinly. They would still be slaves, menials, but menials with a purpose, self-knowledge. Something he didn't possess, no matter how hard he sought

it. He didn't know what made him what he was, what gave him his special abilities. That irked him. All other knowledge was potentially at his fingertips, except the origins of his strange powers.

When he discovered there were others like him, he couldn't believe it. It started with Harry Crimmi, and then a whole plethora of possibilities opened up. Ways of discovering who, or what, he was. Finally, a chance to know...

Chapter Twenty-One

HISTORY

The telephone trilled, the secure number. Peter picked it up.

“Yes?” He knew his voice would be distorted to the caller, electronically altered to sound like his father

“Sir, the security suite is ready.”

Peter paused, mainly for effect. “Thank you. I’ll be there shortly. Clear the room.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Peter smiled and replaced the receiver.

*

The boy looked out into the darkness. A fine rain had begun to fall; silver droplets tracked down the window. Peter’s thoughts drifted back to Harry.

Harry.

Harry was a fool. He didn’t even begin to realise his own potential; none of them did. Every one of the specially gifted people he had encountered, to whatever degree they possessed a special ability, chose to bury the knowledge, ignore the possibilities, refusing to accept their powers, let alone use them. What wonders they could perform if only they would just let go and release the full potential of their natural abilities? Making them grow to the very limits. Peter realized a long time ago, by using one’s abilities, the abilities grew exponentially. In some instances, it didn’t matter where the

ability was essentially benign. In other, more prevalent or practical abilities, the potential was enormous.

His own abilities were growing daily, mentally and physically. Harry thought he was just a spoilt rich kid, out for some petty revenge. How narrow-minded could you get? What had he said about the SGs? He wanted them dead? Peter gave a humourless laugh. He didn't want them dead; he wanted to study them, know them, and understand where these abilities originated from. He wanted to *know!*

The understanding eluded him. Despite his awesome mental capacity and intuitiveness, he was unable to penetrate the mystery. After interrogating dozens of specially gifted people, instigating myriad tests, probing them in every conceivable manner, he was no nearer to solving the riddle. He had taken tissue and blood samples, studied their histories. All for nothing. His appropriation of the SGs was minor in the beginning. They protested, were even afraid in some instances but a few hundred pounds soon quieted their objections. Later, after he had shown Harry how, their minds were cleared of any memory of the experience and they were released none the wiser.

He could do so much, learning more every day, but he couldn't tear aside the veil that blinded his understanding, his "knowing." It frustrated him, it galled him; and worst of all, it obsessed him. Untold finances, unlimited resources, and manpower all availed him nothing; he was going nowhere.

Even though he was only fifteen, he was basically financially independent; thanks to various false bank accounts set up months ago through a very intricate maze of identities; all totally untraceable. Everything had been so easy.

Accounts, stocks, big cash transactions, no one any the wiser. Harry had been right in that context. It had been a game, diversions, something to occupy him for a few days, doing it just to see if it could be done. Like everything else, it soon became boring, even though it still made him smile to think that no one had the faintest idea what he had accomplished, never suspecting that a boy his age could have created his own financial empire and research division right under their very noses.

The day he saw Harry Crimmi performing “mind-tricks” at Covent Garden changed Peter’s life forever, even though “discovering” Harry had both been a blessing and a curse. Peter immediately saw that here, at last, was a challenge worthy of his growing talents. He had instinctively known there was more to Harry’s “tricks” than mere deception. He was “mind-reading” for real. Peter immediately had Harry followed, watched around the clock whilst he planned his next move.

And then there was Jonas Stagg, a discredited bio-geneticist. Peter had already decided that the answers he sought might be buried in the genetic make-up of the SGs and finding Jonas Stagg whilst trawling the internet seemed fortuitous. As Peter read Stagg’s chequered history, a plan was already forming in his mind. Stagg proved to be the perfect choice for the work Peter had in mind, providing there was enough

monetary consideration to assuage any scruples that might arise. Stagg, it seemed, was a very bitter and cynical man, believing the scientific community had treated him badly, disrespecting what they considered dubious research into pre-natal subliminal teaching. After being directly responsible for causing at least five miscarriages, he was stripped of his license and totally ostracized by the scientific community. It was only pure luck that prevented him from being prosecuted, having had the women—who were handsomely paid—sign waivers absolving Stagg from any responsibility in his “trials.”

Peter never had any personal contact with the people he manipulated. Everything was done by telephone or text; all traces deleted seconds after contact had been made by a simple application of his own design; no trace, no electronic footprint.

Everybody believed they were acting under orders from his father, all sworn to a non-disclosure agreement, top secret...

All the testing, blood work, DNA was done by unsuspecting personnel specifically employed for the task under the management of Stagg. Together they had created a small but well-equipped biology division stationed in a little used area on the top floor in a quiet section of the HTM Building, part of Peter’s private suite for the sole purpose of studying the SGs, but for all intents and purposes, nothing out of the ordinary had yet been discovered in their genetic make-up, which was annoying, frustrating and surprising all at once.

Finding Harry Crimmi made all the things Peter had done to date suddenly fall into place, almost as if he had known all along events would come to this momentous climax. The bank accounts, the personal security systems installed on the top three floors of the HTM building, where he and his father had apartments. It all made sense.

Peter smiled to himself.

James King, his father's security chief, wasn't even aware a secondary security system had been installed! Some security chief, but then you couldn't blame the poor man. After all, he *had* been dealing with the boss's son.

The boy laughed quietly; his sombre mood momentarily rose.

Once he had Harry in his sights, Peter had realized he would need further help, "professional" help, men to help track down and apprehend SGs for examination. That proved easier said than done. That sort of information wasn't freely available on the internet unless you knew where to look on the so-called "Dark Web." That minor exercise was proving to be very frustrating, until one of King's own men gave him the vital lead he so needed. Peter engaged the man, Marshall, in conversation after hearing him talk about some ex-army friends who were finding life on Civvy Street hard. Once names were named Peter had no trouble locating them.

Once again, no physical contact was made; everything was done through intermediaries, mainly Stagg. Money up front, balance on delivery. It wasn't long before the mercenary leader, Nichols, was on a massive retainer, which circumvented

any potentially awkward questions. Nichols, like Stagg, believed life had handed him a raw deal, specifically the British Army. Twenty years, rising to the rank of Sargeant Major, then retirement from the army brought home a terrible truth. Once again a civilian, Nichols discovered there was no work, which meant no money, which led to the rapid depletion of what meagre savings he had. Then he discovered he got no support from social services, no benefits, and ended up on the streets, homeless. A common plight experienced by many ex-servicemen. Nichols was not pleased. Then he got an offer of work, no questions asked. Nichols didn't care. As long as a paycheck was deposited in his bank account every month, he was happy.

Like Stagg, Nichols always believed he was working for Fontayne Senior. There was no reason to alleviate either of them of the notion. Imagine, Peter often thought, both men would freak out if they knew their boss was younger than Stagg's own son! A son, Peter discovered when researching Stagg's background, that hadn't seen his father since his first birthday.

"Sounds familiar," Peter remembered commenting at the time.

That was two years ago, and what had he learned since then? Nothing! Peter's own special ability failed him only in this context. It didn't seem to work on people like himself or SGs. Why? He just didn't know.

He had no trouble "sensing" other gifted people, but that's as far as it went. It wasn't enough. He wanted, needed, to know *why* he and they were so special. Even

Harry, after a little “persuasion,” couldn’t break through another SG’s mental barriers. He could sense them more acutely than Peter, even at great distances, but nothing else.

Herding the more specially gifted of them together in a controlled area seemed to be the natural progression and yet another problem to be solved. The means to accomplish this were yet to be devised. It was in seeking out the source of the SGs’ varying abilities, which had continued to intrigue him, that an answer was inadvertently found.

He discovered that a high percentage of these “powers” were neural-based, manifesting themselves on a physical level. The uncharted regions of the brain somehow made these fantastic abilities fact. His experiments with microwaves revealed that a certain frequency stimulated an SG’s particular brain pattern, patterns that were unlike any found in “normal” humans. “Normal humans.” Peter hated that expression. It always reminded him of those terrible B movies of the fifties they always seemed to show on late-night television.

But it was an apt description.

The microwaves didn’t harm the SGs, but had the peculiar effect of attracting them to its source, like moths to a flame. Using his own transmitter, he had been able to piggyback, undetected, on commercial airwaves nationwide. It wasn’t long before Harry began sensing several Specially Gifted People in the immediate area. Peter then

activated a second, more sinister, version of the microwave. Like the first, this frequency wouldn't kill, but it did induce unbearable pain to any SGP who entered the generated field. Unfortunately, it was impossible to narrow the field down below two square miles. But it sufficed. It kept the SGs local, making Nichols's job a lot easier.

Peter paused by a glowing wall of VDU screens; thousands of stars seemed to be flowing through the monitors, the endless tracklessness of cyberspace.

The only common denominator he had found in almost every SG was the reluctance to use their powers. This stemmed from the fact that using their abilities often left them in an unpleasant, weakened state. Harry had been one of the few exceptions which, perversely, had been his downfall. Peter had shown him how to use his power; enhance it beyond his wildest dreams, to exploit it. Harry had taken to it like a duck to water, even though using his enhanced ability drained him to the point of collapse.

It hadn't helped Peter in his search for the truth, for the knowledge he so desperately wanted. He gazed into the screen, unseeing.

"One way or the other, I'll find out," he muttered. "Damned if I don't"

He glanced at his Rolex. The Security Suite beckoned.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DECISIONS

James King watched as Peter Fontayne the Third entered the elevator on the fifteenth floor of the HTM Building. He snatched up the telephone, stabbing the pre-dial button to the boy's mobile phone; a familiar voice answered his inquiry.

"Peter?"

"Yes, Mr. King, what can I do for you?"

"May I ask why you are still awake at this time of the morning? It's almost 2 a.m. Does your father know you are still roaming about the building?"

King heard the long, exaggerated sigh on the other end of the line.

"I'm a little restless tonight, Mr. King. I thought a breath of fresh air would help me sleep. So I thought I would go to the roof of the penthouse. You have no need to worry; I will return shortly."

"All the same, Peter, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be still up so late, especially without informing me. Your father has entrusted the building's security to me, which includes all personnel. I'm afraid you are not excepted from the brief."

"I'm sorry, Mr. King. Of course, you are right. I should have let you know; I apologise. But, as I said, I shall return shortly. I thank you for your concern and your diligence."

The line went dead.

"Blast!" King cursed quietly to himself. "Little shit!"

He hated it when the little brat did this, which, he realized, was becoming more and more frequent. King's finger hovered over the telephone's dialing pad hesitantly. He ought to inform the boy's father. King replaced the receiver, remembering the last time this situation arose. Peter had caused such a fuss, accused him of spying on him. Fontayne Senior hadn't been too impressed with all the hullabaloo over a relatively minor incident. *Minor, until the kid goes missing*, King thought sourly.

He'd give Peter forty-five minutes. If he wasn't back in his rooms by then, he'd call and insist he return immediately. Failing that, he'd call the boss, only this time he'd be ready to duck.

*

The automatic door swished closed, the lock quietly engaging as Peter entered the dim room, which was mainly illuminated by a wall composed entirely of VDU screens like the ones in his rooms, only these were not for playing games. His slim fingers danced over the keyboards. The scenes on the screens changed continually, showing various areas of the East End of London, the rain-soaked streets mainly empty of people and devoid of all but a smattering of traffic. Peter brought up the afternoon's logs, but they didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. There was no sign of Harry's sister and her friends. They seemed to have disappeared for the moment after the botched attempt to capture them in Mile End Park.

Peter's mobile phone vibrated in the side pocket of his jacket. Taking it out, he saw Stagg's name on the tiny screen. Sighing heavily Peter depressed the "call" button.

"Yes."

"We've got a problem," Stagg said without preamble.

"Really?" Peter said calmly. "And what problem is that?"

"McAvey's in police custody."

"So? Get a replacement. That's what I pay you for, isn't it?"

Peter could feel Stagg's expression harden down the phone line.

"Manpower's not the problem. McAvey is. He had a weapon on him. The police investigated and McAvey's records come to light."

Peter sat back in his seat, making Stagg wait for an answer. "Can he be traced back to us?" Peter finally asked.

"To me perhaps, though it's tenuous. He worked as an orderly at the same hospital I interned."

"What about the other man, Garland?"

Peter heard rustling as Stagg shifted uneasily.

"He's still in hospital. The police got to him before we could get him out of the park."

"He's been connected to McAvey?"

"They were found together in the park. Once they go through his records, then a definite connection will be made. They're lifelong friends."

"Well, that's unfortunate," Peter mused. "But not necessarily a forgone conclusion. What have the police got? Two injured men, a fracas in the park, a minor dispute between friends. The gun was found on McAvey, Garland simply didn't know about it. End of story."

"Sir, I don't need to tell you, it wasn't just any gun, it was one of ours."

Stagg waited.

"It won't be a problem," Peter said. "The weapon is just a glorified pop gun, to all intents and purposes a toy."

"I think the police will see it more than just a toy, Sir. It's a sophisticated piece of equipment."

"You don't need to remind me of that, Stagg. I invented it," Peter said sharply.

"Yes, Sir," Stagg said quickly.

"Just deal with it, Stagg," Peter said dismissively.

"What about the kids? Do we finish it, or what?"

Peter paused. The McAvey incident was the last in a long line of annoying setbacks. Things were getting a little messy. He thought he'd have the answers by now; it wasn't working out that way. Perhaps it never would.

Further, it wouldn't take the two he let escape from the HTM Building long to discover where they had been held captive. How they'd use the information was impossible to say. It could be dangerous, especially now the police were involved. He would lose nothing but time if he brought this little episode to a close. Besides, there were many more fish in the sea, as they say. He'd wait a few months and begin again with new SGs. He'd be able to get a new perspective on the situation; see things afresh. That's what it was all about; was it not? Put out the old; bring in the new. All is change.

The only minor problem was Harry's ability to wipe memories didn't work on the more powerful SGs, which meant they would have to be rounded up and subjected to Stagg's drug-induced therapy. Not a problem.

"Find them," he said. "And finish it."

*

"Did you see him, downed like a sack of shit!" laughed Dec gleefully. "We went through them like a hot knife through butter. We creamed them!"

"No, we didn't," Burton snapped.

Dec's face fell. "Trust you to throw cold water on it..." he said sourly.

"You don't get it, do you?" Burton got up off the gritty floor, dusting down his jeans with short, sharp slaps of his hands. "None of this makes sense, the running, the hiding, the confrontations... None of it feels right."

"What are you talking about?" Gary said as the excited group fell quiet at Burton's sudden outburst.

"This whole mess," Burton continued. "From the moment I met you lot, I've had a constant nagging at the back of my head, and it's been growing ever since."

"Ade..." Mina was looking worried.

"It's all wrong Mina... When I first saw Nick and Kelly, they were being shot at by MIBs... I saw Nick and Kelly clearly. I even had a brief glimpse of Declan, but not the MIBs. They looked blurry, indistinct. I thought it was because I had just woken up, or maybe even stress..."

"But you attacked one of them..." said Nick.

"You're right, I picked up a large stick and broke it across the guy's stomach, but after I went back to collect my things, I saw the very same stick... But it wasn't broken."

"Maybe you made a mistake, it was a different stick," ventured Kelly.

"That's what I thought ... at first," agreed Burton. "But then me and Nick were chased by MIBs. Nick said they were right behind us..."

"They were," confirmed Nick.

"But I didn't see them. I've never seen them, not really," Burton said.

"We just did, all of us, in the park," cut in Dec. "I hit one, knocked him out."

"I saw him do it," Gary added.

"So did I," Burton said. "You punched him full in the face and he went down, despite wearing a crash helmet..."

"So?" Dec said, puzzled.

"Look at your hands..." Burton said. "Look at them, no bruises, no scrapes, and no broken skin... Do your knuckles even hurt? They should."

Dec flexed his fingers, made a fist, realizing Burton was right.

"And in the sewers, as we evacuated, there were gunshots, screams... But is anyone missing? Hurt, injured? Did anyone actually see the MIBs in the tunnels?"

They all looked at each other, but no one spoke.

Then Mina said, "But I sensed them..."

"No," Burton disagreed. "You sensed *something*, we all just assumed it was the MIBs."

"I don't get it. What are you saying?" Sue asked.

"I'm not sure, I'm still trying to work it out in my head... But it seems to me that whoever's behind this is just playing with us, pushing us from one place to another, somehow. I get the feeling that they could have scooped us all up whenever they felt like it."

"Some of us have already been taken, like Kelly and Nick..."

"Sure, but one at a time, two at most. Why would they do that? They have got us penned in. And those that have been 'taken,' d'you think they're dead, still being held?"

"We've never seen them since," Sue said.

"Have you stopped to think that they may have been placed outside the psionic shield? If it keeps SGs in, it's bound to keep them out as well."

"Son of a bitch..." Gary swore as they all began to realise the sense of what Burton was saying.

"So what do we do?" asked Kelly.

Burton looked at Mina and shrugged. "I agree with Mina. I don't think Peter Fontayne the Second has anything to do with this. He may well be in the dark as much as we are. But I do think the threat originates from the HTM Building."

"And...?" queried Gary.

"We need to get in there, find out what's going on, and see if we can end it," said Burton.

"Are you nuts?" exclaimed Dec. "Fighting them in the open is one thing, but inside their own building? No fucking way?"

"It's the only way," argued Burton. "It would be great if we could all just walk away, but we can't. All this started when Harry disappeared. Maybe he was kidnapped, I don't know. But someone in that building saw Harry for what he truly was. No doubt Harry confirmed their suspicions, telling them about the rest of you."

"But Harry didn't know all of us back then, just Mina," Nick said.

“He didn’t need to. It was enough that there were two like him. It’s a short step to suppose if there are two, why not five, ten, a hundred? Harry was persuaded by whatever means to help find more SGs. Time did the rest.”

“So why do they want us? Why keep us penned up in one area, like you say? What possible use is that to anyone?” Sue asked.

“That’s the big question...” Burton replied. “And maybe that’s the problem. Perhaps the amount of SGs was more than anticipated, a gross miscalculation. Maybe once you were all brought together, the numbers couldn’t be controlled, excess to requirements.

“I don’t understand all the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores.’ I just know I’m tired of running around like a rat in a cage. We need answers.”

“I’ll repeat my earlier question, how can seven of us take on a secured building full of armed men?” asked Dec.

“I don’t think they are armed, not in the conventional sense, nor do I think the building is any more secure than any other office building,” Burton said.

“Why?” asked Kelly.

“You saw for yourself when you and Nick slipped out of there. Didn’t you say everything seemed normal, no sign of any security alert?”

Kelly nodded.

"Maybe that's because it /is a normal office building and we're overthinking it and making it seem more sinister than it actually is."

"How's that possible taking into consideration what we've all been through these last months?" Gary said.

"I've no idea," Burton replied truthfully. "Nothing about this seems possible, or even likely, but here we are."

"It could be that there are two separate agencies working in that building, both oblivious to the other. The security guy, King, didn't seem too worried about me seeing their control room. Maybe he isn't aware of what's going on."

"You can't know that!" protested Dec.

"True, but it's the only thing that's beginning to make sense, and I'm willing to gamble that I'm right. The question is, are you?"

"You really want to do this?" Nick asked.

"Now wait a minute!" began Dec, rising to his feet.

"Shut up!" snapped Gary, turning back to Burton. "Well?"

"It's not down to me; truth is, I can walk away anytime I choose, but for Mina. I say 'why not?' Working as a team and with a little luck, we might be able to sort this out once and for all. Even if we only manage to sabotage the psionic shield, it'll give us all a chance to clear out of the area."

"I presume you have a plan?" Nick said.

"Other than get in, do the deed, and get out? No, not really." Burton grinned.

"Wonderful." Nick shook his head despairingly. "Good plan."

"It's not as bad as it sounds," persisted Burton. "Nick, you're our eyes, Kelly, you're our scout and Sue can be our burglar..."

"Do I look like a hobbit?" Sue retorted.

Smiling, Burton continued, "Mina is our forward vanguard. Me, Gary, and Dec will be the assault team."

"You speak for yourself," Dec objected. "Me? I don't want any part of it..."

"Do you think you have a choice?" asked Burton. "Sooner or later you're all going to have to face this thing."



Chapter Twenty-Three

ASSAULT

Mina found Burton sitting alone farther down the tunnel, idly throwing bits of gravel at an old tin can. He wasn't really trying and most of the stones missed, clicking against the wall and floor, sounding like the skittering claws of rats.

She sat down beside him.

"You certainly stirred them up."

"No, I just told them what they already knew," Burton replied, throwing the last of the gravel at the rusted can. Rats' claws clattered in the darkness.

Mina took his arm, sliding closer and resting her head on his shoulder.

"They're just not used to direct action. They've spent most of their lives hiding who they really are, always afraid that people would find out what they can do, not knowing who to trust, who to talk to, never being able to be themselves."

"But, in hiding, haven't you achieved the same result? The face you show everybody isn't really you. It's a mask, a pretense."

"Exactly. Though any interaction we had with our peers was real, it wasn't all pretense. Sometimes it just gets a little confusing."

"Confusing? Jeez, Mina. I'm as confused as a chameleon in a packet of M&M's..."
Burton sighed. "I just want it to stop."

Mina smiled. "It will. We'll find out what's going on and then it'll all be over."

"You think they'll go for it?" Burton asked.

Mina's laugh was like crystal light in the darkness. "Probably... They'll 'um' and 'ah' for a while, but they'll come around. They want it to end just as much as we do. Though I honestly don't know what a bunch of teenagers can hope to achieve."

"I dunno... It's better than doing nothing." Burton frowned. "There's still something bugging me..." He shifted to a more comfortable position. "You wanna tell me what the deal is with Dec? Why did he try and drive me away?"

Mina turned away, her cheeks slightly flushed with embarrassment. "It's nothing. He's basically harmless, but he sort of has a crush on me. I guess he felt threatened by you."

"Well, he got that right."

"I straightened him out, Ade, he won't do anything like that again." Mina looked at Burton, concern clouding her eyes. "What about you? Are you okay?"

Burton smiled wanly. "Yeah... I'm fine. You gotta laugh. I came to London looking for a better future, or at least a decent job. But it's the same everywhere, no jobs, slums, boredom breeding senseless crime and violence. To think, I couldn't wait to get away from Manchester."

"And now?"

"I'd give anything to be back there, as long as you were with me."

"And you think I won't be?" Mina smiled.

Footsteps echoed down the tunnel and Gary appeared out of the gloom.

“Okay, we’re decided,” he said, “It’s your idea, you tell us what you want us to do...”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Burton said, taken aback. “Having the idea and helping you see it through is one thing...”

“Uh, uh,” Gary said. “Your idea, you lead. You’re better qualified than any of us. You know the streets, we don’t.”

Burton looked to Mina for support. She shrugged, winking at him.

“Lovely,” he groaned.

*

They gathered in a conspiratorial huddle as Burton outlined the vaguest of plans.

“We haven’t a choice...” he explained. “We have only a rough idea of the layout of the building’s interior. We know Kelly was held on the upper floors and it follows that whatever generates the psionic shield will also be on the upper floors or on the roof.

“That must be our main objective. At least with the shield disabled we’ll be able to scatter, get out of the area even if we don’t discover the who and why of what’s going on.” He looked at all their faces. “Any questions?”

“Do you really think we can do this?” asked Sue.

"I think your abilities give us an enormous advantage," Burton said. "They won't be expecting that. They'll see us as teenagers and totally underestimate us."

"Or they'll just kick our arse," said Dec sourly.

"That too," replied Burton. "But at least we're doing something."

No one else had anything to say.

"Okay, I figure we have three hours until dawn..."

"What? We're going now?" Kelly asked incredulously.

"Why not? It's the last thing they'll be expecting." Burton grinned. "Unless there's something else you'd rather do?"

"I could think of a few things," Kelly returned.

"If we wait 'til tomorrow, we'll have to contend with Harry. As it is, there is no guarantee he's still out of the picture," pointed out Burton.

"Well, we wouldn't want things to be too easy, would we?" Dec said sourly.

*

"Dec! Move it! You're lagging."

"I'll be right there," Dec called back.

He watched as Gary moved out of sight down the tunnel. Quickly he slipped back into the utility room, going straight to a row of meters on the wall. His questing hand found the cloth-covered bundle behind the nearest one; carefully Dec drew it

out. Unwrapping the bundle, Dec used the oiled cloth to wipe over the gun, his eyes feral in the darkness.

“Maybe this will even the odds a little.” He smiled thinly, slipping the weapon into the waistband at the back of his jeans.

“Dec!”

“All right, all right, I’m coming!” Making sure his jacket covered the gun, Dec hurried after the others.

*

A fine rain was falling as Burton called a halt. They gathered in the shelter of the Docklands Light Railway overpass, to the south of the HTM building, now cognizant of the security cameras surrounding the bronze-coloured building. Their route had been necessarily circuitous as Canary Wharf and Westferry Circus were secured areas due to recent bomb threats that seemed to be plaguing the city lately. The seven of them would have been too conspicuous at this time of the morning.

“We have to assume there are cameras all around the building’s perimeter, as well as those covering the front,” Burton said, using his hand to wipe the clinging moisture from his face. “That’s going to make approaching it difficult.”

“Why not go into the sewers?” asked Nick.

“We don’t know them that well in this area. We can’t afford to get lost.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Gary.

"Create a diversion. Nick and Kelly came out from behind the building. That's the way we go in, so the diversion has to be out here."

"Who's going to do it?" asked Kelly.

"You are," Burton replied.

"Now, hold on..." Nick protested.

"No, Ade's right," Kelly said, holding up a placating hand. "I'm perfect for the job."

"Nick, you can show us the way in. Kelly, you can join us later. Oh, and Kelly..."

The girl looked at him expectantly.

"Make it good."

Nick wasn't happy, but saw the sense in Burton's choice. After a quick word of assurance with Kelly, he led the group through the darkest shadows. Kelly watched them go, feeling a little apprehensive. When they were out of sight, she hurried towards Marsh Wall, totally confident the cameras wouldn't be able to see her. Her only problem now was how to create a suitable diversion?

*

They watched from the shadows as Sue Crossley slipped like an eel through the impossible gap between the wire mesh gate and the steel fence post. Her slim body seemed to flow like melted wax, passing the obstacle as if it wasn't there. It was an eerie sight, unreal.

The only visible camera was above the small back door. Careful to keep out of its periphery, Sue checked the area. It was clear. She signaled for them to come.

Gary led. A heavy steel padlock secured the gate. He took it in his hands; his face set with concentration. Within seconds, thin wisps of smoke curled out through his fingers. A smell, not unlike hot solder, only a hundred times worse, filled the air. Gary yanked down. The lock fell from his hands, landing with a molten plop at his feet.

"Don't touch the gate," he warned, kicking it open.

They hurried through.

A dingy bulb illuminated the rear door, covered in wire mesh, situated just above the camera. Burton leaned against the wall as Gary clambered onto his shoulders.

"Man, you ever thought of going on a diet?" Burton grunted.

"Shut up." Gary grinned, reaching for the bulb.

There was a sudden pop, and the light went out. Gary dropped lightly to the ground.

"Sue's turn," he said, helping the girl onto Burton's shoulders.

Once she was balanced, she slapped a hand over the camera lens. Gary stepped up to the door, pressing his right hand against the lock. Metal sizzled as he pushed his fingers straight through the door.

Hauling the door open, he gestured for the others to go through; he quickly followed. Sue leapt from Burton's shoulders into Gary's waiting arms. Burton quickly followed her as Gary shut the door behind him. Using two fingers, he spot-welded the door to the frame, making sure it would stay shut.

"Now," said Burton, "comes the hard part."

Chapter Twenty-Four

CAPTURE

Kelly eyed the front of the bank.

Well, she said to herself, a girl's got to start somewhere.

She had picked up some large pieces of rubble from a road works excavation along Marsh Wall. Hefting a large chunk, she hurled it at the gleaming plate window.

The noise was glorious! The shattered glass had barely crashed to the cobbled ground fronting the building when Kelly heaved two more pieces of masonry. Two more windows burst apart, the sparkling shards joining the cacophony of the crystalline overture. Before the noise died entirely, it was joined by the strident clanging of alarm bells, echoing the length of Marsh Wall.

Grinning, Kelly turned and ran pell-mell back towards the HTM Building, three hundred yards away. The clamour split the night, but it wasn't enough. Security at HTM was cocooned in their own little world, closeted away from outside interference. The disturbance Kelly had caused would only hold their attention for a few minutes. She needed something more direct.

*

"Where to?" asked Gary.

"Straight up," Burton's voice floated out of the darkness.

"These stairs only go to the main foyer, one floor up. We must pass through a short corridor to access the fire stairs which lead to the higher floors," Nick said.

"Okay, you lead," Burton replied.

Seconds later, they crouched behind the door leading into the foyer. It was locked. Gary moved past Nick. Using his index finger, he burned through the lock, and then easing the door open a crack, he peered through. The foyer was quiet. Two guards sat by the reception desk; a third was just crossing the floor.

Quietly Gary pushed the door too.

"What's keeping Kelly?" he hissed.

"Give her time," Nick hissed back.

The sound of bells faintly reached their ears. Gary opened the door again. The guard crossing the floor detoured towards the main doors; one of the guards at the desk joined him. The third guard, now alerted by the clanging bells, stayed by the desk, making it impossible for them to move without being seen.

*

The taxi was like a gift from heaven. The driver had stopped, got out of the driver's seat, and was gawking down Marsh Wall. The clanging bells were strident, deafening. Bert Jameson scratched his head, his flat cap clutched in his fingers. The noise was coming from the bank he had just passed. He was looking, but he couldn't see anything untoward. Then something crashed into him, sending him sprawling

onto the hard concrete of the road where he lay momentarily stunned. Kelly leapt into the cab. Thankfully the engine was still running. Whipping it into first gear, she floored the accelerator. The diesel engine rumbled as the vehicle shot forward. The taxi seemed to be going at a snail's pace.

Crunching up through the gears, Kelly tried to force more speed out of the lumbering cab, steering straight for the front of the HTM Building. The taxi bounced erratically over the kerb, careering over the sidewalk. Throwing open the door, Kelly leapt for the flowerbeds fronting the building. Thankfully they were well kept; the earth was soft, cushioning her fall, though that didn't stop her from grazing her arm as she rolled onto the concrete beyond.

Kelly ducked, covering her head as the taxi ploughed into one of the portico's supporting pillars. Tortured metal screeched; the windshield exploded; the engine roared. The apex-peaked roof of the portico lurched, tearing itself free from the building's façade. Concrete cracked; wood splintered; glass shattered. This time, Kelly got the building security's full attention.

*

"What the...! Look out!" Ken Soule leapt away from the main doors.

The foyer suddenly filled with noise, crashing glass, tearing metal, and screaming engines. Andy Marchant gawked as the taxi came to a juddering halt, mere inches from the plate glass doors. The doors swished open and shut convulsively.

"Hell's bells! Look at that!" he turned to the security guard by the desk. "Martin, get hold of King. Get him down here, fast!"

*

"Now!" Nick said urgently.

Like wraiths, they slipped out from hiding whilst all eyes were on the front doors. Swiftly they passed through to the fire door and the stairs beyond. No one spotted them.

"Okay," said Burton. "Let's go."

They moved up the stairwell in silence. Nick led, then Sue, Gary, Dec, Mina, and Burton last. They passed several doors with numbers indicating the floors. At seven, they stopped and rested. Nick moved up two more flights; Sue descended two flights whilst Dec kept his ear close to the door.

Burton couldn't shake the growing unease creeping into his bones. This was too easy. A nagging fear began to grow inside him like a cancer, dark, all-enveloping, like a lead weight in his gut. Mina sensed his nervousness.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Burton confessed. "Something..."

They continued to climb, slower now. Nick and Sue maintained their positions; Dec and Gary took turns watching the landing doors for errant building employees.

"We were held on the next floor," Nick said as they turned onto the next landing. He crouched at the head of the stairs, waiting. "I think it's the penthouse."

"Do you remember the layout?" asked Burton.

"Some, Kelly would know it better if she were here."

Nick took the lead, Burton dropping in behind him. As he reached the final door, Burton stopped him.

"This is all wrong," he said in a low, urgent voice. "How could we get so far past their security without being spotted? It doesn't make sense."

"A fine time to start getting cold feet," Dec said.

They stood on the landing, unsure what to do.

"Cold feet don't come into it," snapped Burton. "This just doesn't feel right."

"Look, all we've got to do is go through that door, make a quick search of the floor, and get out. We don't have to hang about for anything," Nick said.

"Don't you see!" Burton persisted. "With everything that's happened, don't you think we're having it a little bit too easy? Where are the MIBs? All these cameras, and we're just walking in? No! They know we're here, as sure as eggs."

Now they were really worried. Nervous glances passed between them.

"I think we ought to get out of here, and fast!" Dec suggested, looking about fearfully, almost as if he expected giant men in black leather to come bursting through the walls.

"No, it's too late for that," Burton said. "This thing's been bothering me all day. We can't go back. So, let's get it done. But, for God's sake, be careful. Act first, ask questions later."

"Wait!" Sue caught his arm. "Exactly what are we going to do?"

"Look for anything that looks like a transmitter, it will probably be housed in some sort of equipment room," Burton answered. "Whoever finds it, call the rest of us. We just need to put it out of commission for a day or two, so we can clear the island."

"Good plan," Nick said sourly.

"Let's just find that generator and smash the damn thing to bits," Gary said grimly. "We'll take the rest as it comes."

They all nodded assent. Burton took hold of the door handle, looking at them. "Ready?"

He pulled the door open, and they hurried through.

*

Peter Fontayne the Third watched as they entered into the thickly carpeted corridor. The black man, Burton, directed three of them to the right. He took the other two left. The boy shook his head.

"What do they think they're doing?" he murmured, picking up his mobile telephone.

He speed-dialed a number.

“Stagg? I think I have just made your job easier. There’s six of them in my penthouse right this minute. Would you care to deal with the situation? I’ll send down my private elevator to my personal entrance. Ten minutes? Thank you, so much.”

Smiling, Peter returned to the monitor.

*

Burton, Mina, and Sue searched several rooms. They were lavishly, yet tastefully, furnished. At the end of the final corridor they halted, Burton looking more worried than ever.

“This doesn’t make sense. Where’s security?”

Mina had begun to feel the same disquiet. “Let’s head for the roof.”

*

Stagg exited the labs with four of his men in tow. He was looking worried, doing his best to make sure his men didn’t see his ever-growing doubts about this ever-increasing cluster fuck.

“I don’t like this,” one of his men, Hedges, echoed his secret thoughts. “Coming here is a mistake.”

“They’re kids,” Stagg replied. “We’ll be in, grab them, and out before anyone notices.”

“But why here? Why not in the open where it’s less conspicuous?”

“Because this is where they are,” Stagg said, irritation edging his voice. “Let’s just get it done without the bitching, if that’s all right with you.”

Like black ghosts, the five men headed for the waiting elevator.

*

James King couldn’t describe the relief he felt when he saw Peter Fontayne Senior’s dark grey Daimler pull into the private parking area in front of the HTM Building. Too much was happening too fast; it was slipping out of his control, things that were somehow connected to Pete Junior. King smiled thinly to himself. Peter would have a fit if he ever heard anyone call him that. Regardless, maybe Fontayne Senior would be able to deal with the situation. King went out to meet him, picking his way through the ruin that was once the portico of the HTM building, wincing as he felt glass and grit crackle underfoot.

The taxicab had been removed and much of the damage made as safe as possible. The cab driver had been at a loss to explain how his cab had sped off on its own and ended up veering into the building’s façade. King had told him to make a claim to his insurance and the whole situation would be sorted out at a later date. Jameson had been less than happy with the loss of his immediate income. King’s comment, “Not my problem,” perhaps somewhat unsympathetic, put an end to the discussion.

The roof of the portico, though leaning alarmingly, was solid enough. At this very moment, a construction repair company was, hopefully, winging its way to make the repairs more permanent, though King doubted the repairs would be completed anytime soon, an opinion shared by Peter Fontayne the Second, if his expression on surveying the damage was anything to go on.

*

They couldn't find a way onto the roof. Burton stood at a four-way junction, looking down each of the well-furnished corridors in turn.

"We can't be on the top floor," he suddenly said.

"But we reached the top of the stairs," said Mina.

"*Those stairs, yes.* There must be more leading to the upper floor and the roof."

"Where? We've searched almost every room."

"Except the farthest end of this corridor, there were two locked doors we couldn't get into."

"You think that's the way up?" Sue asked.

"Has to be. There's no other way," Burton answered. "Let's go."

*

Peter Fontayne the Third smiled smugly to himself.

"Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly," he murmured.

He watched as Burton, Mina, and Sue ran towards the secured door leading to the upper floors. Peter tripped a switch, on the floor below a door unlocked automatically.

*

Burton was surprised when the door opened at his touch. "I know it was locked," he said quietly.

He pushed the door wide. Shadows danced within.

"Mina?" he queried.

"I'm not sure. There's too much activity in the building..."

"Doesn't anyone ever sleep around here?" Burton grumbled, cautiously entering through the door.

"Not so's you'd notice," said a harsh voice.

Hands reached out of the darkness, grabbed him, and threw Burton against the farther wall of the stairwell. He dropped to the floor, stunned. The others froze, shocked by the sudden turn of events. A light snapped on in the room, revealing a group of black-clad men within.

"In!" ordered Stagg from behind the protective wall of Hedges and his men.

Chapter Twenty-Five

MORE REVELATIONS

The room was huge, opulently furnished with several chrome and leather armchairs and two of the longest sofas Burton had ever seen. A massive chrome and gilt mirror dominated the room, making it look bigger than it already was. Burton wasn't surprised to see Gary, Nick, and Dec sitting on one of the sofas, an armed guard dressed in a black suit and tie looming over them. They looked at each other; no one spoke.

Dawn wasn't far away, an hour, maybe two. The city beyond the large window was dark against the night sky. Lights, like vagrant stars, glittered here and there.

"Sit," Stagg ordered, indicating the other sofa.

Burton, Mina, and Sue obeyed.

There were four other men in the room; Stagg's men, standing impassively, odd-looking pistols similar to the automatic rifles in design held at their sides.

Shit... thought Burton. *Do they really think we're that dangerous?*

Stagg surveyed the room. "No contact?" he asked Hedges.

Hedges shook his head almost imperceptibly. Stagg frowned.

"Do not be concerned, Mr. Stagg. I am never far away," said a disembodied voice.

Everyone in the room looked around, thinking someone had entered. They hadn't. Burton realized the room was wired for sound.

"I see you have been successful in your mission," Peter's distorted voice continued. "Six out of seven isn't bad."

"Six out of seven? What d'you mean?" queried Stagg.

"One of our little escapees, the girl with the colourful hair, isn't here, though I observe her partner is."

"Only these six entered the building," Stagg said.

"Possibly. The question now is what to do with them?"

*

"You're sure?" Fontayne Senior asked King.

"No, Sir," King answered truthfully. "Not a hundred percent. But Peter has been acting very strangely lately, and there have been personnel entering and leaving the premises who do not seem to be on the personnel lists."

"They must be friends of Peter's," Fontayne said, looking at the elevator's indicator lights. They were just passing the third floor.

"No, Sir," King said.

"You seem certain," Fontayne remarked.

"If you'd seen them, Sir, so would you be, and there's tonight's events... I'm not sure the damage to the building's façade was completely accidental."

"Meaning what?" Fontayne queried.

"I don't know exactly," King said. "It's the last in a long list of things, none of which have given me a satisfactory explanation."

Fontayne nodded, watching as the fourth-floor light blinked on, then off.

*

"Allowing them to come here was a mistake," Stagg said to the air. "Too many loose ends."

"That isn't my problem, Mr. Stagg. That's what I pay you for. I would suggest you do whatever it is you have to do and let us continue with our ... project."

"You want me to finish it here?" Even Stagg's normal iron control wavered somewhat. "D'you know what you're saying?"

The implications of what his mysterious employer had suggested didn't particularly bother Stagg; it was doing the deed on his own doorstep that bothered him. All the charades, blacked-out cars, and distorted voices couldn't avert suspicion when you had the problem of removing six unwilling people undetected from an office in the middle of London's Docklands. There would be the inevitable backlash once they started talking.

"Just do what you normally do." The disembodied voice sounded indifferent, bored even, and eager to put an end to the night's events. "Just drug them and dump them."

“Just like that?” Stagg said. “Drug them and put them outside the ion field, free to tell anyone who wants to listen what’s going on here?”

“And what’s going on, Mr. Stagg? Who is going to believe such a fantastic story? A story I am sure they will not be eager to tell considering their ... ‘special’ circumstance.”

*

It was disconcerting being spoken about as if you weren’t there. Burton looked at Gary; desperation showed in the returned look. They had to do something, but what? He regretted not having a better plan in mind, realising how stupid it had been to bulldoze their way into the place without a specific aim other than to knock out some sort of transmitter that might not even be in the building. What had Stagg called it, an ion field? At least they had gotten that part right. Slightly different name, but what the hell...

There were five men, including Stagg, five against six. There must be something they could do! Burton looked about the room as if there was some way out of the predicament he had failed to see. There was none. He noticed Dec staring intently at a large portrait of a woman hanging behind an ornate desk at the other end of the room. The woman was young, maybe early thirties, dark-haired, striking eyes, beautiful. Dec seemed captivated by her. Burton could just see the brass nameplate beneath the painting. Katharine Fontayne.

"It was a mistake bringing them here," Stagg said. "It was asking for trouble, regardless of your wealth. Getting them out of here won't be easy. The front of the building is a bloody mess. Security would have called the police. They'll want to check any vehicle seen leaving the building."

"I don't care about the details, Mr. Stagg. I just want an end to this farce. They have outlived their usefulness, and they'll be a lot less trouble when they're gone."

For some time, Stagg had begun to suspect that Fontayne was beyond being a mere eccentric, even to go so far as to say he was slightly mad. All his wealth, his industrial power, had gone to the man's head.

Why he wanted these kids at all in the first place was something Stagg had never questioned, all the tests, studies, experiments... He had broken the law ten ways to Sunday which also didn't bother him, but so far, he had been under the radar. The present situation was something entirely different; this could cost him dearly, not least his liberty. Prison did not appeal to him. No amount of money was worth that.

"I'll do as you ask, but not here. We'll take them out, find somewhere more ... appropriate, less conspicuous. It will be easier if they walk out rather than carrying their unconscious bodies. We'll take them across the river..." His tone of voice brooked no argument. He didn't get any.

Nodding to Hedges, Stagg prepared to take Burton and company out of the building.

"We'll take them two at a time, through the underground carpark. The security cameras will be inoperative for a while, but make sure no one else sees you."

Hedges nodded, turning back to Burton and company.

"Let's not make this difficult," he warned, looking at each of them in turn. "I may not *want* to compromise myself in this building, but make no mistake, you force me to, and I won't think twice."

The six friends looked worriedly at one another. It looked as if their time had run out.

*

"You can't let him take Mina."

Peter Fontayne the Third just managed to switch off the microphone before Harry had spoken.

"What are you doing in here? This room is private," the boy snapped, swiveling around in his chair to face Harry.

"I don't care about the others, but that madman isn't going to take Mina. Tell him to leave her behind."

"What do you care? You've got what you wanted, more power than you thought possible. Why should you worry about what happens to them? Besides, you heard, he's just going to get them across the river and leave them there."

"I don't care about the others, but Mina's my sister; I'm not going to allow you to treat her like all the rest."

"You have no say in the matter," Peter said, smiling arrogantly. "I say what happens and what doesn't. Now, get out, before I really do lose my temper and throw you in with them."

"Tell Stagg to let Mina go," Harry repeated.

"I don't think so," Peter answered. He missed the dangerous gleam in Harry's haunted eyes.

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. Let her go." Harry's voice dropped to a sibilant whisper, more ominous than any shout.

Peter finally sensed Harry's dangerous mood. A faint tingle of fear crept up his spine. Physically, he knew he was by far Harry's superior. But was he fast enough to stop Harry before he used his mental abilities?

"Harry," Peter said, his voice and demeanour suddenly oily smooth. "This is only the beginning. Who knows what else I can teach you, show you? We can develop our powers together. But in order to do so, we both have to make sacrifices. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

Harry trembled, his dark eyes wild and staring as he bored into the boy's mind.

He was lying!

Harry knew, as he always knew. With an inarticulate yell, he lunged for Peter who, taken completely by surprise, was too slow to defend against the sudden attack.

Harry hauled Peter from the chair, hoisting him off the floor with ease. Still yelling, he hurled the terrified boy at the huge one-way mirror. The crashing glass mingled with Peter's scream as he plunged through the pane, landing in a sparkling shower of razor-sharp shards, narrowly missing the marble coffee table.

The room froze as the tumbling figure landed heavily in their midst. Two of Hedge's men produced guns from concealed shoulder holsters. Stagg gaped in surprise as the tinkling of glass subsided.

"What the...?" he gasped as Peter sat up, shaking the daze from his head.

The boy's immaculate clothes were torn, cuts lacerated his face and hands; blood trickled from a particularly nasty cut on his left cheek. Tension filled the room like a palpable thing. One of Hedge's men, Ronson, nearest to Peter, was close to panic. There had been too much weirdness happening for his liking; he'd wanted out for some time. He was armed with a real gun, not one of the stupid toy guns they had been issued with. He knew there was going to be a time like this when the games would turn serious. Perhaps now was a good time to leave. His nerves were frayed, making him jumpy, edgy. He had to get out of there.

Covering the general area with his weapon, Ronson sidestepped towards the door.

"Don't anybody move, just stand still!" he yelled.

"Ronson, stay where you are!" ordered Hedges, keeping his eyes on Peter.

"Not this time. I'm out of here," Ronson said. His eyes were wide, desperate.

Mina edged away from him as he passed. Catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, Ronson swung the gun around, pointing it at her, inches from Mina's face. Horrified, she stared down the weapon's bore.

"No!" a voice cracked out of the air.

Suddenly the heavy crystal ashtray on the coffee table rose up into the air of its own volition and swept towards Ronson. Before he could react, the gun was smashed from his hands, making him howl in pain. His cry was cut short as the ashtray clipped him sharply on the right temple. Ronson dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, unconscious.

Ronson's gun literally fell into Peter's lap. The boy staggered to his feet, the gun waving wildly in his hands. Immediately, Hedges trained his own weapon on the panicking boy.

"Drop it! Drop it now!" he ordered.

Fear washed over Peter; he felt his control of the situation rapidly slipping away. He was suddenly exposed, out in the open, and he didn't like it. The gun was heavy, too big for his hands. He turned to face Hedges, intending to do what, not even Peter knew. The gun went off, jerking in his hand. The report was loud in the tense silence.

Mina screamed, crashing backwards onto the sofa. She rolled to the floor and lay deathly still.

Chapter Twenty-Six

CONCLUSIONS

"Mina!"

Burton was off the sofa in an instant, kneeling by Mina. The dark, deep red stain on the carpet widened beneath her, her black hair covering the deathly pallor of her features.

Almost as soon as Burton moved, so did Gary, lunging for the nearest of the guards. Dec rose to his feet, his entire body rigid with shock, glaring wildly down at Mina, his mouth working wordlessly. Nick and Sue acted together, rushing the third guard.

Another gunshot cracked, freezing everyone in their places. Hedges lowered his smoking weapon; his face impassive, anger blazed in his eyes.

"No one moves," he ordered; his gun swept across them smoothly covering the entire room.

The crunching of glass made him turn. Harry stepped through the ruined mirror, oblivious to the gun, insensate to the tension in the room. He stared at his sister lying so motionless, so ... still.

Ignoring Hedges, he pushed past Burton and fell to his knees by Mina. Gently he eased her from the floor, cradling her in his arms. A low keening filled the room. With a jolt, Burton realized it issued from Harry.

“Kill them! Kill them!” Peter suddenly shrieked.

Despite his abilities, both physical and mental, Peter was terrified. He had been plunged into the midst of chaos, losing the superiority of anonymity, his preferred state, and his control of the situation. Regardless of his abilities, he was still only a fifteen-year-old boy, used to being in a safe, protected bubble of his own making, like a larva in a cocoon, inexperienced with real life, shocked by the violence into which he now found all about him.

Hedges looked at him, ignoring his hysterical commands. Ronson slowly began to stir, reminding Hedges of his peculiar assault.

“Whoever you are, however you did it, show yourself,” he said. Hedges emphasised the order by cocking his weapon, aiming directly at Nick and Sue. “You’ve got five seconds.”

Hedges gasped as Kelly appeared with a shimmer of colour beside Mina and Harry.

“Get with the others,” Hedges ordered. He began to think Ronson was right; this was all too weird.

Stagg watched the proceedings from the sidelines, and things began to fall into place. The blood tests, tissue samples, DNA comparisons. He always knew they were genetic experiments, but he surmised they were preliminaries to some sort of drug trial. But this? These youngsters ... And the young Peter Fontayne...?

"Oh my God..." Stagg breathed as the full truth of the situation crashed into his incredulous mind. Was it possible? Had he been taking orders from a fifteen-year-old the entire time?

"What the devil is going on here?" roared a voice from the doorway.

Hedges whirled, keeping his gun levelled at the two men standing in the open portal. Immediately the mercenary recognised Peter Fontayne the Second and James King, peering incredulously over his shoulder.

Seeing the two men only confirmed Stagg's incredible revelation. Somehow, someway, the boy had been his employer, not Fontayne Senior. As incredible as it was Stagg had been duped! He turned to Hedges.

"Get Ronson on his feet. We're getting out of here."

Hedges motioned Fontayne and King into the room with sharp jerks of his pistol.

"I asked a question," Fontayne demanded, ignoring the threat. "Who are you? What's going on here?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Stagg said dryly. "Now, let's not get heroic. I and my men are leaving; it would be a good idea if you kept out of the way, right?"

"Now hold on..." began King, stepping forward.

"It's okay, let them go," Fontayne Senior said, putting a restraining hand on the security man's shoulder.

"Good choice," Stagg said. He nodded to his men, and they all quickly vacated the room. Stagg stopped by the open door, looking back at Peter standing wide-eyed by the shattered mirror. The scientist went to say something, thought better of it, turned, and hurried after his men.

"I'll alert security," King said, heading for the telephone.

"No, call the police instead. They'll never get off the island," said Fontayne. "Make sure you inform them that the men are armed and dangerous."

Fontayne Senior looked at all the occupants of the room in turn, finally settling on his son.

"Would someone like to explain exactly what *is* going on here?" he said.

*

Ignoring him, Burton dropped to his knees by Mina. Gently he prised her out of Harry's arms, his fingers searching for a pulse in her neck. His stomach flopped when he felt nothing. He put his ear to her lax mouth. Desperately Burton looked up at the others.

His voice a whisper. "She's not breathing!"

"No..." The word was drawn out, low, filled with horror as Dec stared down at Mina's lifeless body, his fingers buried in the lank strands of his hair. Spittle gathered at the corners of his working mouth; tears trickled his cheeks.

"Mina!" he moaned.

Slowly Dec turned, gazing up at the portrait of Katherine Fontayne. No thought ran through his stricken mind as he beheld her serene countenance, the soft lines of her face, her shining golden hair... As he stared at the portrait, a single thought filled his tormented mind. The only person he ever cared about lay not ten feet away in a pool of darkening blood, taken from him—No! *RIPPED* from him—for no reason, it didn't make sense... Why? What was this hell he had been thrown into? What they had all been thrown into for so long? Then, from some dark recess of his mind, realization began to edge the corners of the darkness. The woman's face was familiar. He knew that face...

Dec's whole attitude visibly changed. He became preternaturally still, frozen in a hunched position that somehow exuded evil; a sly curve twisted his lips.

"Dec?" queried Gary.

Dec didn't answer; his gaze falling on Peter Fontayne the Third, cowering in the corner, his young, cherubic face wet with tears, terror shining in his watering eyes. Declan's mouth widened into a broader grin, leering, possessed. His narrowed eyes flickered between the portrait and the boy. The family resemblance was striking.

"Keep away from me." Peter's voice quavered as Declan took a slow step towards him.

"You did this." Declan's voice was icy, cold, flat. "You."

Their eyes locked; bonded by an invisible chain that no one could see, no one could break. Dec's face became a mask of concentration; his brow furrowed; madness shone in his expression.

Peter gasped, trying to back away from the young man towering over him, but he was trapped in the corner with nowhere to go. His hands extended before him, as if he were trying to fend off something terrible, something that reduced him to a trembling, white-faced mass of twitching arms and quivering lips.

His mother was suddenly there, smiling benignly down at him, her smooth, soft hand reaching out, urging him to come to her. For an instant, Peter nearly went, but then he saw her skin rippling. Drool slipped from the corner of her mouth in a thin silver line, running down her once delicate chin that now hung slackly.

Her entire body seemed to possess an alien life all its own; lumps and bumps writhed within her flesh; blue veins pulsed in her face and arms. Her hair, her beautiful hair, dried before his eyes, became lank, brittle, falling out in great clumps, leaving raw sores all over her scalp. Her pulsating skin began to crack, a dark ichor oozing from the horrific fissures erupting all over the corrupted flesh. The cracks widened, gobs of

dark, infected meat began to melt away from her body, revealing the bleached white bone beneath.

It was then that Peter began screaming...

*

"Dec!" yelled Gary over the boy's terrified screams. "Dec, stop! For God's sake! Stop!"

Dec stopped. He regarded Gary with a satisfied smile that chilled the blood.

"I've stopped," he announced proudly, then went and stood by Mina.

*

"Someone call an ambulance!" Burton shouted. "Now!"

James King grabbed for the telephone.

Harry looked up at Burton, once again holding Mina in his arms. Sorrow and an infinite sadness filled Harry's strange eyes. For an instant, Burton felt for the man, felt his pain, his anguish.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered.

He leaned over Mina, his long, oiled ringlets covering her face. Burton was touched; tears stung his eyes. Behind him, Kelly wept in Nick's arms. Sue covered her mouth with her hand, turning away, stifling her own sobs.

Peter Fontayne Senior rushed to his son. Grabbing the boy's shoulders, he shook him. There was no recognition in the boy's wild eyes. His screams had subsided into low, animal whimpers. Horrified and confused, Fontayne Senior looked at Gary.

"What *is* going on here? What have you done to my son? Who *are* you people?"

No one answered. Slowly Burton got to his feet; he felt empty; numb; unsure what to do.

What had it all been for? All the running, hiding. He had failed Mina, the others, himself. And why? Burton wanted to scream, vent his rage, his helpless, pointless rage, on anything, anyone. Instead, he hung his head, defeated.

A low moan broke the silence. At first, Burton didn't register the sound. Only Sue gasping made him look around. A tingle crackled across his skin. Mina! She moaned again. Her fingers fluttered beneath Harry's crouching, hugging body. Mina was alive! Burton rushed to her side, just as her eyes flickered open. She was confused, pale, oh so pale, but she was alive.

"Harry?" Mina croaked. "Harry?"

Burton touched Harry's shoulder; silently he toppled over onto his side. Shocked, Burton saw the serene, almost happy expression on Harry's dead face. The troubled lines were gone, as were the dark rings around his eyes. He was at peace, contented in his last, selfless act.

Mina rose to a sitting position. The ghastly wound in her chest had stopped bleeding. Incredibly, it had already begun to heal! She gently touched Harry's calm face. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Oh, Harry," she moaned.

"Mina? What...?" The question died in Burton's throat as he realized the truth.

"Oh, man," he breathed.

Harry had used his vampiric power in reverse; instead of draining the life-giving energy from Mina, he had given his to her; brought her back from the brink of death, at the cost of his own life.

Burton rested his hand on Mina's shoulder as she wept for her lost twin; he couldn't help his own tears.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" demanded Fontayne Senior.



EPILOGUE

Mina moved closer to Burton, squeezing his hand as the train pulled out of Euston Station. Burton winked at her, smiling broadly. They needed no words to say what they both felt in their hearts. They were going home, to a better life, a better future.

For the last two weeks they, and all the others, had been guests of Peter Fontayne the Second, staying in a hotel near the Hi-Tech Motivation building. Mina had fully recovered, thanks to Harry's last, unselfish act. Stagg and his mercenaries had been caught, just as they attempted to leave the island, as Fontayne Senior had predicted. But all charges against them were dropped. To prosecute would only bring to light the bizarre circumstances of their employment and their employer. Fontayne Senior was adamant that wouldn't happen.

Fontayne Senior had known all along about Peter's forays into the world of finance; he had been proud of him for his precociousness. He had never dreamed of the full extent of his son's capabilities or of the horror he had perpetrated on the many innocents for which the boy had paid a terrible price.

Fontayne had begged Declan to reverse whatever it was he had done to Peter, but Dec was equally adamant. He wouldn't, couldn't, undo Peter's coma-like catatonia. The boy would have to do it for himself, if he could.

Declan had been the only one to decline Fontayne's hospitality. He had left that night, just walked out of the HTM building into the dawn and they hadn't seen him since. Fontayne got his explanations and finally discovered what had been going on, and was suitably horrified.

"Is it over?" Mina asked quietly.

"It's over," Burton assured her firmly.

"He was like us, like me. Peter," Mina said.

"No, he wasn't. He had the power, but not the experience. It overwhelmed him. I guess it was better now than later," Burton answered grimly.

"What if he recovers from...? What if?" She was reluctant to use the words.

"I don't know. Maybe he never will. His father has money. Maybe it'll do him some good. I doubt it."

Fontayne Senior had wanted to recompense them all financially; make the rest of their lives comfortable. They had all refused, but Fontayne insisted they accept five hundred pounds each, just to get them wherever they needed to go. Realising the need, the generous offer was accepted.

They had met, one last time down in Confusion. So much was clear now. The MIBs hadn't been real, just boogeymen to scare them. Nichols and his men were just ex-army, the illusion superimposed over them. That's why Burton never could really

see them. He wasn't susceptible to the illusion but was still blinded to the men underneath.

Confusion seemed somehow different. Perhaps it was because their situation was no longer a threat. The place almost seemed like home now, but it wasn't.

After a lot of hugging and not a few tears, they finally separated, going their own way but promising to keep in touch. Burton and Mina hoped they would. Only the future would tell.

Now all they wanted was to go home, and they were going.

Home.

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