

CHAPTER 1

I'm not afraid of spiders or snakes.

I'm not afraid of graveyards at night.

I'm not afraid of deep, dark water.

I'm not afraid of ghost stories or horror movies.

And stations? I make myself get on a train every day.

But I am afraid of the Brotherhood.

Normally you can see them – you know who they are, with their scarlet-checked clothes. They stand out. But today, as people hurry through the sleet to Central Station under umbrellas and raincoats and scarves, I can't tell the difference between us and them.

I keep watch through the slanting snow, because how can you face a danger you can't see? A person who looks

like any other person, but who secretly wants to kill you and everyone like you? I don't know why I'm thinking like this now, when I have to make this journey to school every day. What would the odds be, for me to be caught up in another bomb at Central Station?

Slowly the crowd funnels into the station. I look up at the sign looming over the door: *One City, Two Ways*. That's not how it is, though. Everyone knows this is a divided city. Under the cover of the doorway, umbrellas swish down and people pull rain hoods off and unzip coats. Now I can see everyone for who they are. Ordinary citizens, dressed in the usual dark clothes we all wear these days. And the Brotherhood. Dotted through the crowd in their signature check.

I edge into the station just as three Brotherhood boys are pushing their way out. One boy crashes into me, his hands fending me off. For a second his dark eyes stare into my face. Then he says something sideways to his friend. They all laugh. What did Grandma used to say? *Never make eye contact with a Hood, K. It's like dealing with an angry dog – if you turn away, it won't attack you.* So I turn away.

'Do not abandon your luggage at any time. If you see unattended baggage, move aside and alert staff . . .' I hate these announcements, I think as I shuffle into the station along with everyone else. They make me jittery. Steeling myself, I head towards the lifts that take us down to the tunnels.

Deep underground, the platform's already crowded, and a man elbows in front of me as he struggles to get two huge suitcases closer to the edge so he can be first on the train. Someone jumps on my foot, and I wince. It's a

little boy pulling on his dad's hand. He's looped the strap of his backpack over his forehead like a headband. That makes me smile.

It's then that I see the bag on the bench, brown paper with string handles. As soon as I notice it I look around for the owner. It's habit. But I can't see who it belongs to. That means it's alone – 'unattended'. And the more I look at it, the less it seems like just a bag. Who left it there? The Brotherhood boys upstairs flash into my mind. Should I pick up the phone on the wall and report it?

As I move towards the phone, the little boy points at the bench. 'Daddy!' he calls. 'The cakes!'

His dad turns, still holding his son's hand, and darts across to the bench. He grabs the bag and as his eyes meet mine for a second he half-smiles sheepishly. I hear someone tut.

Warm wind heralds the train, which rushes out of the tunnel and comes to a screeching halt: 'Mind the gap. Move right down inside the carriages . . .' The doors swoosh open, and the man with the suitcases starts heaving them on. I wait behind the boy and his father. The train's packed, like it always is at morning rush hour.

I could wait for the next one, but then I'll be late for school.

I put one foot on board.

A bone-shattering, chest-crushing bang lifts me into the air.

And everything slips away.

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When I open my eyes I can't see or hear a thing. There's just a heavy, ringing silence and a terrible smell, a fearful smell, that hits the back of my nose. Smoke and something else underneath. I start coughing and my hand flies up to cover my face but hits a rough surface right in front of me. A wall? Where am I? I feel the panic rising, then stop myself. *Stay still. Take little breaths.* I feel something trickling down my face. Blood?

What happened . . . ? There was a noise, a blast, and I fell . . . Don't know where I am, but I have to get out . . . Get out, K!

I struggle to my feet, but there's no room to stand. Something solid's above me, forcing me to crouch. I try to move back, but there's no space there either. I reach up and touch a sort of metal ceiling, bulging in towards the rough wall in front of me, or is it not a wall . . . is it . . . is it the platform? I reach above me, and there's a gap. *Mind the gap . . .* That's when I realize: *I'm under the train.* At any moment it could tip over and crush me. Metal slides against the back of my hand. It's moving!

Now I'm panicking and screaming, screaming for help – I know I am, except I still can't hear or see in the darkness. My hands scabble at the wall, at the platform edge, reaching up from underneath the train. There's smoke in my eyes, in my throat . . . The smell's in my mouth . . . Please . . . I can't move, I can't breathe. Every mouthful of air now is a choking cough, bringing poison, not oxygen, into my body, and all at once I see it clearly:

I'm going to die.

Then a hand clasps mine. A warm, soft, human hand. Strong and safe.

I feel my own hand close round it. I am never letting go.

Another hand reaches down and clamps itself round my other wrist, and little by little I am lifted up, up, squeezing through the gap and on to the platform.

I fall forward, my face smacking against the concrete. My mouth suddenly fills with blood and ash, dust mingling with iron, choking me. My eyes are streaming in the grey smoke.

Whoever lifted me out is still holding me, hoisting me to my feet. A man. I still can't hear anything, just the blood thumping in my ears. I clutch at his clothes but can't hold on: he's wearing something hard and slippery. Dim light now, and I can see the train is right in front of me, the doors buckled over the gap where I was thrown. That's what was moving above me. And there's the man with the two suitcases. But he's lying half in and half out of the carriage. His eyes are closed and his mouth is moving. There's a figure kneeling next to him. They're holding hands.

My head starts to spin and my legs go, and suddenly I'm being picked up and carried away. The smoke's fading, the smell too. The train never even left. It's still waiting at the platform but with blasted doors and twisted metal. We're climbing stairs, I think. *Yes, you can't use a lift in a fire. I should try to walk, I think, and struggle to get my feet down, but that makes us both fall, hard, on to the steps.*

Sound slams into my head: 'Evacuate the station. Move calmly to the nearest exit. Evacuate the station. Move calmly . . .' The ringing isn't in my head. It's the station alarm.

I start to cough again, choking coughs that I can't control, and my rescuer leans in to me, patting my back. He looks young, but he's got a scarf tied round his mouth and nose, so only his eyes are visible. His chest is rising and falling because he's struggling to breathe too. I want to ask him about the suitcase man, but I still can't talk, can't think.

His arm tightens round me and we begin climbing again. One, two. I cling on to the pocket of his jacket. *Leather: that's why it's so hard to hold on to.* Five, six. It takes a long time. Ten, eleven . . . I lose count. And all the time, the alarm's ringing and the disembodied voice is shouting: 'Evacuate the station. Move calmly to the nearest exit . . .'

That's what we're doing, *moving calmly*, his arm around me, my arm round him, two strangers clambering to safety. I almost faint again, but I hear his voice near my ear: 'Not far now. Stay with me.'

And then there's daylight ahead, the grey light of winter gleaming through the glass roof of the station. I make my legs walk up the last few steps, and fall on to my knees, racked by a coughing fit that tears through my ribcage. Other noises rush into my ears: sirens from outside the station, shouting and screaming and running feet . . .

When I stop coughing he gets me to my feet, puts his arm round my waist and walks me across to a bench under the display board. He helps me sit and crouches in front of me, taking the scarf from his mouth. Under his sandy hair his face is streaked with sweat and ash. His grey eyes are level with mine and I can't look away. No one has

ever looked at me so kindly. Not since Grandma.

‘Thank you . . .’ I cough out.

‘You OK?’ He takes a bottle of water from a woman who has come up to us, and unscrews the lid, passing it to me.

I nod, even though we can both see I’m not. ‘What about the man with the suitcases?’ It’s all I can think about – his moving lips, the figure kneeling next to him holding his hand.

The grey-eyed man gets up and sits heavily beside me. Then he shakes his head. ‘I think you’re the last one to walk out. I was going to leave, but then I saw your hand come up from under the train.’

I take a sip of water, but it doesn’t wash away the taste of smoke and blood. Now I start to notice what’s around me: police and paramedics and rows of stretchers. People are huddled in groups – some in dark clothes and some in Brotherhood red. From their grimy faces and hair they must have been on the platform too. Smoke drifts up the staircase from the tunnels below. There’s an ache in my chest.

‘What happened?’ I ask. ‘Was it a bomb?’

‘An explosion,’ he says carefully. ‘It’s too early to say what caused it. Listen,’ he pauses, ‘if you’re OK you should go to the cafe across the square. They’re setting up a first-aid post there so the paramedics can use the station for the badly injured and the fatalities.’

Fatalities. He’s matter-of-fact. What about the suitcase man – is he no longer a person, just a fatality? I can’t make sense of it so I just stand up. The grey-eyed man takes hold

of my elbow.

‘I’m fine,’ I say too quickly. ‘Really. Thanks.’ But what I’m thinking, illogically, is: *All I want to do is stay with you.* He makes me feel safe.

‘Well, in that case, I’d better go.’ He looks across to the police cordon.

Of course. He’s obviously with the emergency services. ‘You’re a policeman?’

He looks back at me. ‘What?’ Then he nods. ‘Oh yes, a policeman. That’s right.’

He touches my shoulder and his grey eyes seem to smile at me, as if we’ve always known each other. ‘Take care.’

‘Thank you,’ I say. It’s not enough for someone who’s just saved your life, not nearly enough, but he just nods again and turns away as if he’s used to it.

I should’ve said a better thank you, I think as I stumble to the exit. I didn’t even ask his name. Without him, I would still be wedged in the gap between the train and the platform, surrounded by crushing metal and stone, breathing the terrible smoke, the smell I can still taste in my mouth. Or maybe not breathing at all. I turn to look for him, but he’s gone.

The little boy from the platform is there, though. He’s standing very still, his arms hanging stiffly at his sides. He hasn’t got his backpack round his forehead any more. I look around for his dad, but just then a policewoman comes and crouches in front of him. She says something close to his ear, because it’s even noisier out here with the sirens shrilling, then she takes his hand and leads him

away. I see his face, running with ash and tears, and even from here I can make out the word he's crying, over and over: 'Daddy.'

I have to get out.

Outside, the freezing wind feels good against my face. For a moment I lift my head and look up at the dark Old City towers with the Brotherhood Meeting Hall spire looming up the hill behind the square. I close my eyes and open my mouth, letting the sleet run in. The main road outside the station is closed except for police cars and ambulances, but in front of me the square is full of people running towards the station or just standing, staring.

I walk slowly across the square, head down against the driving sleet, forcing myself towards Fred's Cafe. After a few steps I look back at the station. There's a tendril of smoke twisting from the entrance – how does it form such a graceful curve? If I was painting it, I'd let the smoke and cloud merge together, make those tiny dots of movement opaque. Pastels? Or maybe charcoal, black and dense. Like the smoke from a crematorium. I give myself a shake. How can I even think of my drawing now?

It's steamy and warm in Fred's Cafe, my cafe, where I go every morning before getting on the train. It's packed but someone immediately comes over with a blanket. I don't know why, but I'm still shaking. I sit down in a corner so no one notices me. There's a television above the counter. Scrolling across the bottom of the screen are the words, **BREAKING NEWS . . . SUSPECTED BOMB AT CENTRAL STATION . . .**

I feel the shock, like a fist, deep under my ribs. I knew it. That was what I felt, as I walked towards the station. I was afraid and I didn't know why. The group of Brotherhood boys in the entrance flicker into my mind. Is the Strife starting up all over again? What about the Reconciliation process?

Fred brings me a mug of tea. 'Sugar, for the shock,' he says. 'You're hurt, K. Were you there?'

I wipe my face and my fingers come away red. 'I'm fine,' I say, but I know he's not convinced.

'Someone will clean that up for you in a minute,' he says.

I pick up the mug, but my hand is trembling so much that I have to hide it under the table. And the TV subtitles keep on rolling. . . . BROTHERHOOD BOMB . . . My teeth are chattering . . . CASUALTIES AT CENTRAL STATION . . . I clutch my mug and stare at the screen.

I think of the Brotherhood boy who collided with me in the station doorway. I want to run back and catch hold of him, make him tell me if it was him who did this, make him look at the people on stretchers in the station. Make him look that little boy in the eye.

How can you face a danger you can't see? A person who looks like any other person, but who secretly wants to kill you and everyone like you?

I turn my face towards the wall. I can't cry here, in the crowded cafe.

Fred strides back to the counter. 'Hoods,' he says, knocking the TV off at the switch. 'They'd kill us all if they could.'