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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Catalyst

Written by Helena Coggan

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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# THE CATALYST

Helena Coggan



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*This book is for Catherine.*

*Catherine, you are far braver, far kinder and far cleverer than me, and as such you will most likely end up doing something wonderful with your life. So consider this dedication a down payment. When you're curing cancer or implementing world peace and people start asking you, wide-eyed, what your secret is, I would like you to smile ruefully, and tell them it was really down to your annoying older sister all along. In some unspecified but extremely crucial way.*

*You're welcome.*

# PROLOGUE
## The Veilbreak

The first they knew of it was the crack in the sky.

It stretched across the sun, cutting swathes of light from the city streets – a great, black, jagged mouth, from the eastern horizon to the westernmost clouds. Through it came darkness, spilling shadows into the streetlights. It was only just twilight on the Meridian. In more easterly parts of the world, darker and deeper into night, it was as if a thousand stars had suddenly gone out.

In London, drowsily turning from the early touches of nightfall, a few seconds passed before it was felt. Streams of traffic slowed, clogging the arteries of the city. People got out of their cars; they were astonished, frightened, confused. The crack in the sky loomed above them, captured in a million grainy phone-shoots. London sparkled with camera flashes.

That was when the storm began.

Paul Folbright, assistant electrician in the Ichor labs, was one of the first on the balcony in their godforsaken corner of North London. He had been one of the opportunists: he'd managed to prise a promotion off Richard Ichor before the old man retired from the project, leaving it to his son. Andrew Ichor was a genius, certainly, and arrogant enough with it, especially for someone who

didn't even have a driving licence yet. A lot of people who worked with him, including Folbright, found him deeply creepy. He was always one step ahead of you in your own thought processes, and, partly because of this, he always got what he wanted – apart from, recently, project funding: the powers that be had been disappointed with the lack of results from the Veilbreak initiative. And disappointment wasn't a money-spinner.

Andrew Ichor, however, had something big planned.

The whole department had been waiting for this day for four years. In those four years, there had been exactly seventeen failed launches. Of those launches, fourteen had taken place under Richard Ichor. Andrew was more careful, slower. That was what scared most of his colleagues. Andrew was dedicated to – you could even say obsessed with – the Veilbreak project. And when someone that clever was that focused on anything, as one of Folbright's retired colleagues used to say, you were only biding your time until a lot of you-know-what hit the fan.

That evening, many of the staff in the Ichor labs had taken the day off. Among those who'd stayed, Folbright and his superior Davina Anthony were two of the few who could consider themselves high up in the food chain. This, they knew, was their last chance. If this launch went wrong, then they could kiss their careers goodbye. Folbright hadn't slept in days.

It went wrong, all right, but not in the way anyone expected.

Andrew Ichor rushed onto the balcony, pushing people out of the way to get to the very edge. He leaned over,

staring up at the sky, and then leaned back in shock, his eyes wide. Then he turned to his astonished and scared staff, and started to jump up and down like a child, punching the air.

'I told you!' he screamed; he was ecstatic, triumphant. 'I *told* them I could do it!'

Behind him, out of nowhere, a hundred thousand lightning bolts suddenly stood, bright white, blind-white, against the soft purple of the thickening night. London reeled from the shock of it as buildings and trees exploded into flame, buses and cars were hit where they stood, and black scorch marks were etched into the landscape as if an angry five-year-old had slashed a pencil mark across a drawing. Almost immediately came the thunder – a hard, deafening wall of sound that rolled across the city, smashing windows and glasses, drowning out the screaming. Folbright was on his knees with his hands over his ears. Andrew Ichor had his hands pressed to his face, staring through his fingers at the sky and laughing with joy.

The noise receded. Invisible to the naked eye, but still very much there, a huge wave of energy had seeped through the dimensional break, disrupting the climate enough to create a cloudless storm.

And then.

Although no one in the Ichor labs knew it at the time, the energy generated by the break manifested as electricity. Every single electronic device around the world was immediately shorted out. Smartphones died in an explosion of sparks in people's hands. The electrified rails on city

metros were suddenly dead, sending transportation grinding to a messy halt. London, New York, Shanghai were plunged into sudden darkness. In it, the explosions of the Ichor labs' computers were a blinding fireworks display.

Folbright stared, aghast, as four years of his life went up in flames.

Andrew Ichor wasn't looking at the computers. He was staring down at London, darkened and dead but for the small patches of fire glittering here and there among the buildings. He was paler now; the laughter had slid off his face. He had one hand on the railing of the balcony to hold himself steady. His knuckles were white and the hand was shaking.

'What the—' he whispered.

There was silence, but for the sound of distant screaming.

Then it came.

It was as if the sky rippled, like a heat mirage, or the air over a fire. The still evening air twisted into a strong breeze, pulling papers off desks and sending them sweeping over the floor. People stood up shakily, looking around to see what was happing.

Then, with a shock like a gunshot, someone on the balcony started to scream.

Folbright whirled. Davina was on her knees with her hands over her ears, shrieking as if in agony. Everyone looked around for the threat, but there was nothing.

'Get it off!' she screamed. 'Get it off me, get it out of my head!'

A couple of people took out their phones and tried to dial 999 on useless bits of plastic before remembering that was what they were, and that even if they had worked, the emergency services would be in little better shape than them.

'Help me!' Davina shrieked. 'Help me, help—'

Her voice choked off and she doubled over. Behind her, someone else fell to their knees, coughing hard. People began to drop. A few screamed, like Davina had done.

Folbright looked desperately to Andrew, but he was merely standing, frozen in panic, watching as his department fell.

Then, suddenly, Davina opened her mouth.

She said nothing, but from her mouth shone a beam of bright light, as if she'd swallowed a torch. The light came from under her skin, her eyelids, from her nostrils, under her fingernails. It grew brighter and brighter, until she was a huddle of light, too bright to look at. One by one, each person who'd dropped began to shine as if they were burning from the inside. Folbright stumbled back, cringing, staring through his fingers, not daring to blink.

There was a pause where the survivors still stood, stunned and terrified, and then six people dropped at once. Visible, almost tangible blackness reached from them, swallowed them; they became hulks of shadow.

And then suddenly, everything stopped. The lights went out; the shadows receded. Folbright sighed shakily, not sure whether or not to be relieved. He knelt beside Davina.

'Come on, Davina. It's okay now, you're fine. You can . . . can get . . .'

His voice, faint as it had been, trailed off. Davina gave one, last, trembling sigh, rolled over, and did not move again. Folbright stared at her.

'No,' he said. 'No.'

People began to get to their feet around him. Some, however, remained lying on the floor like Davina, quite clearly dead. Those on their feet seemed unsteady, unsure of their motor functions. Their jaws hung open in confusion. Their eyes were an unnaturally bright, cold green, varying in strength and depth from person to person, and that was terrifying enough, but not what he was really afraid of. The few that had dropped with the darkness, standing now, had irises stained black. They seemed even less steady on their feet than the green-eyed ones; they stared blankly around, stumbling blindly, grasping at empty air. Everything about them seemed *wrong*, and, from the looks on their slack faces, they knew it.

Folbright took a step back.

One green-eyed woman, whom Folbright had worked with on the funding portfolio, stuck out her hand towards a stack of papers on her own desk. They exploded into the air as if they had been hit with a child's toy vacuum gun.

'What the hell?' Andrew Ichor whispered.

All around the room, objects were exploding into flame, flying, moving, without anyone going anywhere near them. Folbright stared at them.

*But this isn't real*, he thought dimly. *I mean, this can't seriously be—*

It hit him from behind, grabbing his mind and locking

his thoughts into place. For a second he forgot his own name and who he was and the world he lived in and reality dissolved into confusion and the image of a cold desert wasteland and the thought of the crack in a deep red, starless sky, and being sucked towards it and the enveloping, crushing darkness and a wind rushing him towards a tiny, shattering city and this man, shining with life . . .

*But the Angels,* he thought, and the thoughts were both alien and completely his own. *The Angels. Where are they? Where am I? I have to fight—*

But he was trapped inside a strange body in a world that was not his own and he was kneeling on the floor with his body burning and confused, flickering thoughts of a war inside his head. The memories mixed, jarred together, fixed into a single person with a single soul in a single body and he stood up.

He was Paul Taylor Folbright. He had an ex-wife and a girlfriend and a five-year-old son. He had a steady job and a midlife crisis. He was also a . . . a *something* from the world that Andrew Ichor had just opened up. He had a vague image of a battlefield, but nothing else any more.

Except the knowledge that he must fight.

Fight? He wasn't a fighter. Who was he supposed to fight?

The memories were draining away from him.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. He tried to throw them off without moving, to move them back with his new black eyes, but nothing happened and their grip intensified and he moved with sudden strength and his

fist made contact with something hard and someone cried out and the grip was gone.

He turned to Andrew Ichor. He could see them now. Tiny shreds of light and darkness plunged through the sky like meteorites, targeting people with unerring accuracy. Where they hit, the people were consumed with blinding light or shivering, curling darkness as the two souls fused. When all of the people were taken, the few otherworldly souls remaining hung in the air, frustrated.

Then, as one, they turned to Andrew, standing cold and terrified against the wall.

Behind him, London burned.

*There is no scale on which one can measure the First War of Angels.*

*It allows for no true comparison, because against it all previous wars are reduced to scuffles and street-fights. No casualty figures can truly encompass the level of devastation it caused. The human mind cannot comprehend numbers so unnaturally, astronomically, obscenely large.*

*Statistics, then, are useless, but then so too are case studies – because however bad any one person had it, you can be fairly sure that someone, somewhere, had it worse.*

*The only scale by which it can really be understood is when one puts it beside the Second War of Angels; but even that is flawed. The outbreak of the Second War was more devastating than the First if only because, for twelve long years before it, the world had enjoyed what seemed like unbroken and unbreakable peace.*

*No one quite knows why, late in the Eighteenth Year of Angels, that peace was shattered so spectacularly. The origins of that conflict may forever remain hidden in the mists of time.*

*Well, not entirely. There is one person still living who knows the whole story of how the Second War began – but, unfortunately, she isn't talking.*

*Not to your correspondent, anyway.*

From the introduction to *A History of the Angelic Wars*, by Amy Terrian (published in the Fifty-First Year of Angels)

# The Eighteenth Year of Angels

# CHAPTER 1

It was a chilly evening in February, and a girl was walking alone beside the river.

She did not appear, in and of herself, to be a particularly remarkable girl. She was a few weeks past her fifteenth birthday, and the usual trappings of twenty-first-century adolescence seemed to have passed her by. She had no piercings or highlights or designer clothing. She wore jeans and a T-shirt that showed the scar in the crook of her elbow where she had once been shot, and her dark hair was tied up into a ponytail that brushed the small of her back. She had a narrow face and a long, sharp nose, which, when compounded by her gangly height and slim frame, gave the impression of extreme thinness; her skin seemed almost unnaturally pale, and her olive-green eyes darted from one crowded city shop to another as if scanning for danger.

If you were really looking, and no one was, you might have noticed that her back was oddly straight and her steps strangely clipped: she had the gait and the posture of a soldier, although she was far too young to have served in the last War. Apart from that, though, there were only two remotely unusual things about this girl. One was her name, Rosalyn Elmsworth, although the significance of

that had yet to become common knowledge on the streets. And the other was where she was going.

Her destination, like her, looked deceptively innocent. Rain-streaked and shiny, it huddled in a side street off the newly completed high road by Westminster station. Dwarfed by the skyline, its windows were tinted and the only person visible to the average passer-by was a bored-looking receptionist with a computer that looked like it dated back to the reconstruction of the Internet. The only thing that might have distinguished it as out of the ordinary was the black seal of Government, standing out bleakly on the whitewashed wall.

On a normal day, this being Westminster, the building would not have attracted any undue attention.

The picketers were the first sign Rose got that this was not going to be a normal day.

There were only about fifty of them. Had they been troublesome or violent, the Department would have been able to take them down with ease and without any casualties. As it stood, though, mere bigotry was not adequate excuse for arrest, so the Department remained stubbornly silent behind its tinted windows. Stubborn silence, however, was not the method the protesters had chosen to voice their grievances. Rose stopped just round the corner, out of sight, to listen. A high, reedy male voice rose above the roar of the crowd. They had started up an elementary call-and-response chant.

'What do we want?' cried the reedy voice.

'Ashkind out of our schools!'

'When do we want it?'

'Now!'

And round again. Rose sighed and leaned her head against the wall. She knew who these people were. This was not going to be a fun ten minutes.

She took a deep breath, and stepped out from round the corner into the street.

For a second, she almost thought they hadn't noticed her, and that she might just get away with it. They carried on chanting, oblivious to the solitary, dark-haired girl watching them from the corner, waving their signs. Many of them bore the winged-door logo of the Gospel campaign group, and the rather unimaginative slogan *Stop corrupting our children*. Like Rose, they all had green eyes, some ringed with an unhealthy, bleached-looking white – the unmistakable sign of Test failures, the Leeched, whose Gifts had been forcibly removed. Minimal danger, then. Rose took a tentative step towards them.

The reedy-voiced man, who was standing on a make-shift podium, yelling his chant, turned to the part of the crowd that he had not been facing and saw her. His voice trailed off. Everyone else followed his eyes. Within ten seconds, Rose had the attention of what she was quite prepared to believe was the entirety of the Gospel.

She sighed.

'Hello, Mr Greenlow,' she said. 'Would you at all mind letting me through?'

Stephen Greenlow jumped off his podium and started walking towards her, hands outstretched. Rose stood her ground.

'Rosalyn, Rosalyn!' he said, in what sounded for all the

world like a friendly tone of voice. 'How are you? How's your schoolwork going?'

'I have a few days off before my Test, sir.'

'Oh, call me Stephen, please,' he said warmly. He reached out to shake her hand, but she snatched hers back quickly. His eyes narrowed.

'Let me through, please, sir,' she said quietly.

He ignored her and turned to the crowd. 'This, my friends, is no less than David Elmsworth's daughter!'

The crowd, unsure what was expected of them, made a hesitant sort of noise; not quite a cheer, but not a heckle either. Even in these circles, the name of David Elmsworth was well known, and not for good reasons.

'Tell me, Rosalyn,' he said, 'what do you think about the practice of contaminating spaces for pure Gifted children with Ashkind presence?'

'I think it sounds a lot like integration, sir, and as such is laudable.'

'Only to those who want to hear that.'

'Mr Greenlow, if the only people who hear your messages are those who want to, you are going to have a very small congregation.'

This one was definitely a boo. Stephen Greenlow's smile remained fixed, but a little of the warmth had vanished from it now.

'Join us, Rosalyn.'

'No.'

'You're Gifted, you would have fought the Ashkind during the War.'

'And that would have been a good thing, yes? Me,

fighting non-magicals? One-on-one? That would have been fair?'

His face darkened. 'It would have been a necessary evil.'

'But evil nonetheless. And then, in this hypothesis, I would presumably have accepted the Great Truce when it came, as your bunch of ragtag extremists has never done.'

His eyes narrowed. 'You would have your future children attend school with Ashkind?'

'Indeed, as you did yours. I've met your eldest, and he doesn't seem to have been damaged from it. Now let me through.'

Something not entirely friendly crossed his face when she mentioned Aaron. Seeing it, she tried to move forward, but at his signal the rest of the Gospel moved to block her.

'Let her through, Stephen.'

They turned as one to see the man standing in the doorway of the Department. Rose sighed in relief. He was wearing plainclothes, but his regulation shotgun was in his belt. The Gospel eyed it nervously.

'I said let her through,' Rose's father said. 'I won't warn you again.'

Stephen Greenlow glared at David. 'This is a peaceful protest. You have no jurisdiction over our activities.'

'Of course not, but should you attempt to impede my daughter's entrance to this building by forcible means, it would cease to be a peaceful protest and I would have to react accordingly.'

They stared at each other for a few seconds until Stephen Greenlow clicked his fingers and the Gospel campaigners parted to let Rose through.

David nodded with mocking amusement.

'You have them well trained.'

'Don't push it, Elmsworth.'

'I wouldn't dream of it. Come on, Rose.'

She walked through the razor-sharp gazes of the campaigners towards him. Only when she had stepped through the doorway and the doors had closed behind them did she breathe properly.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a finger to stop her, listening. A few seconds passed before Greenlow's shout of 'What do we want?' rang out again. David closed his eyes and leaned against the door.

'Thanks,' she told him.

'No problem. Sorry I took so long. We were so hell-bent on ignoring them that we didn't realise you were here.'

'We?'

'James is up there.'

She nodded. 'You emailed?'

'Yes. There's been a murder.'

'An interesting one?'

'Very.'

'Don't-discuss-in-the-lobby very?'

'Exactly.' He nodded to the lifts. 'Shall we?'

'I'd be honoured.'

They moved towards the security entrances, but a sharp female voice stopped them.

'Uh-uh. Security procedures, remember?'

Rose turned to the receptionist exasperatedly.

'Emily, you know perfectly well who I am.'

'Rules are rules.'

Rose sighed and moved towards the desk.

'State your identity and purpose,' Emily said brightly.

'Rosalyn Daniela Elmsworth. Here on duty. Well, not duty, but . . . you know. Whatever you call what I'm doing. Volunteering?'

David laughed from behind her. 'Your altruism is unparalleled.'

The receptionist entered her name into the computer and clicked twice. Rose looked up into the camera in the wall and touched two fingers to her forehead in a gentle salute. She knew who would be watching.

'No,' Emily said, 'I'm afraid you only have second-degree security clearance. This department is responding to an emergency, and so is closed to all but those with first-degree security clearance. Your identity will need to be confirmed by one such person before you may enter.'

Rose looked at the receptionist incredulously.

'Come on, Emily. You know who I am. I'm allowed to be here.'

'What *I* know doesn't matter. Your identity—'

'Oh, wave her through, Emily,' David said tiredly.

'Major Elmsworth, correct protocol—'

'—is not high on my list of priorities at the moment. Someone is dead, and I really don't have time for this. Wave her through.'

She looked him up and down, paused, and pressed the

button to open the barriers. 'Just this once,' she called after them weakly. They ignored her.

Rose contained herself for the minute it took for the lift to arrive and the doors to close, and then she started to speak, tried to voice the half-a-dozen questions rocketing around inside her head. Her father, however, turned to her quickly, cutting her short.

'Questioning has been delegated to the nearest available operative to the suspect. Did you or did you not contribute in any way to the circumstances that led to the unlawful death of Private Thomas Argent of the Third Royal Battalion?'

'Am I a suspect?'

'Everyone's a suspect with murders, Rose. You know how this works.'

Rose was slightly taken aback. She caught sight of her reflection in the mirrors and wiped her face clear of expression.

'I swear before the powers that be that these accusations bear no truth or relation to myself and my thoughts, intentions or actions. If this be untrue let me face the wrath of the Angels.'

Her father nodded approvingly. 'Good. You're learning.'

The lift pinged to a stop and they got out. Rose's father pushed his way out first, absent-minded; she rolled her eyes, and followed him.

His full title was Major David Jonathan Elmsworth of the Department for the Maintenance of Public Order and the Protection of Justice. She had never heard anyone call him that, though, because he hadn't needed to be

introduced in about thirteen years. Everyone – *everyone* – knew who he was. It wasn't just his appearance, although that was distinctive enough: unintentionally messy brown hair, the olive-green eyes of a powerful Gifted, and the constant look his dark stubble gave him of having not quite shaved *enough* that morning.

It was his reputation: ever-present, as bright as it was dark, clinging to him like smoke.

David Elmsworth was one of the good guys. Being a good guy meant capturing and imprisoning the bad guys by whatever means necessary, and while this was messy and often brutal, David was very, very skilled at it. He had been made the effective – though not official – Head of the Department at the age of twenty-seven. Now, at thirty-five, the very mention of his name was enough to relocate a gang to another, more lawless, city.

Rose loved him inexpressibly for it.

'So who was Argent?' she asked him, hurrying past the windows and the grey skyline. Raindrops had started to slash themselves across the glass.

'Grunt, essentially.' He took a right turn; Rose followed him. 'Used to be pretty high-rank, then went and ruined it all by getting drunk and picking a fight with a man in his posting who'd dumped his sister. Got thrown out and was starting to work his way back up again. Late twenties. No partner – broke up with his boyfriend a few months back, didn't stay in contact. The way I heard it, the boyfriend probably wouldn't care if he lived or died anyway. The sister might be a bit more of a problem.'

'Circumstances of death?'

'The killer broke into his flat. And I mean *broke* into it. Door off its hinges, half his stuff smashed. Obviously whoever killed him came in with the intention of killing him. Which means . . .' He indicated for her to continue.

'Which means it was planned, which means the killer had a grudge against him, which means the victim probably knew the killer personally. What happened to the bloke he picked a fight with?'

David grimaced. 'Not in any condition to rejoin the army.'

'Makes it more likely. What did Argent work in?'

'The details are still classified. Nothing that would be unanimously carried by an ethics committee.'

'Personal acquaintance, then. What kind of soul was he fused with?'

'High-class Gifted originally, but he was Leeched.'

'Method of death?'

David looked at her, still moving. They turned into a dimly lit corridor lined with metal doors. 'That . . . is sensitive information, Rose.'

'Who just said that correct protocol was not high on their list of priorities at the moment?'

'That was waving someone known to the organisation through security. This is giving secrets to a possibly volatile element.'

She laughed. 'Don't talk to *me* about "possibly volatile elements".'

Her father looked at her.

'Sorry.'

Silence for a few yards. Rose tried again.

'Method of death?'

'I can't tell you. I am, for once, following regulations and not telling you. That should be enough information in itself.'

Rose looked at him, perplexed. And then it hit her and she stopped dead. Her father took a few steps before realising that she wasn't with him any more, stopped and turned to her, eyebrows raised.

'No.' she told him.

'Apparently, yes.'

'How?' Rose demanded. 'How the *hell* could you know that?'

'There was no weapon found at the crime scene. Half of the objects broken were a good six feet away from either footprints or blood. There's only one explanation for it: the killer used magic to kill his victim. Which means . . .' David sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. 'Which means somewhere in this ridiculously large city is an unregistered, dangerous and powerful killer armed with magic.'

Rose's heart, having missed a beat a few seconds ago, was thundering at double-speed now to make up for it. Despite herself, she grinned. 'I'm not surprised they called you in. Who else have they got on this?'

'Everyone. This is big, Rose.'

'Oh, I know.'

David gestured for her to keep walking, and she followed him round a corner and left, towards the largest door, a grey bulk of reinforced steel and bulletproof glass. The Department had applied for the grant for the door after

the father of a man killed in a struggle during an arrest for manslaughter got through the lax security with an AK47. The door had been built in record time. The people in here were precious, but they made a lot of enemies.

David walked up to the door and pressed in his code. A red light opened up above the keypad and scanned him.

'State your identity and purpose,' a male voice said, far more firmly than Emily had done. It wasn't a bluff. Rose knew that anyone whose identification was not affirmed to the satisfaction of the scanner was not long for this world. This was one of the few buildings in the city allowed to use magic in its security arrangements. Her father had never told her the exact fate that would befall an intruder, and Rose had no wish to know.

'Major David Elmsworth,' David said clearly. 'Staff. Here with daughter.'

The red light blinked and turned to Rose, who likewise confirmed her identity.

'Thank you,' the male voice said, and the red light shut off. The door swung open.

'David!' someone yelled. The room was full of computers and the mingling clicks of typing. Old posters lined the back walls. There were no windows; the ceiling was filled with pipes and strip lighting. Being in this office was always slightly disconcerting. As what the Department did was so central to the safety of London, only the magically Gifted, whose loyalties were in no doubt, worked here. This meant that the office was a sea of swirling, blinking green eyes, from the faintest turquoise to deep emerald.

Most of the people were glued to their screens, quiet. In one corner, however, people were rushing about from one computer to another, throwing instructions and obscenities at each other. Rose had learnt most of her swear words in this place.

In this corner was the man who had called her father's name. James Andreas had been discharged from military service and brought here after David noticed how well he coped under pressure, in a case where an agent had gone rogue. James had been the one whose head the rogue had held the gun to. One of the bullets from that gun was now in James's torso, preventing him from working in the army ever again, but now he had a successful career in one of the more exciting departments. He always said, perfectly cheerfully, that it was a price he would pay any day. He was seventeen years old – barely an adult – with a smile as bright as his red hair, and an addiction to adrenaline that meant he was always the first to venture out into the crossfire with a very large gun and no bulletproof vest. Rose had been with her father in this department for as long as she could remember, and she knew every type. People like James never lasted more than three years, and James had worked here for two. Rose hoped he would survive his expiry date. She liked him.

David and Rose hurried over to him. James was bending over a computer screen, scratching the back of his neck and muttering under his breath.

'Did the Gospel hold you up?'

'Tried to recruit me,' said Rose.

'What did they want this time?'

'Educational segregation.' David knelt down and peered under James's desk, looking for a pen. 'I nearly had to pull rank on Stephen Greenlow. Just wait and they'll go away, they always do. What have we got here?'

'Just got the autopsy back on Argent. As expected. Lacerations down the right side of the body, shallow but painful: probably from a broken object. Blow to the back of the head, because he was thrown against the wall – that's where we found him. Killed with a clean hit to the chest.'

'What from?' David asked sharply.

James grimaced. 'That's the problem. There wasn't a bullet, or any blood from that wound. He was killed by a blow that crushed his ribs and his lungs. No damage to the heart or spine, no bullet holes, no stab wounds. So the killer must have used pure magic. If you want to look at his body, though, you'll have to be quick. His cremation's scheduled for tomorrow.'

Rose asked the obvious question.

'Have we got anything on the killer's identity?'

'No. Of course, with the way our luck's going, we never expected to have anything. It's, what, seven o'clock now? Argent was killed about three hours ago. Neighbours heard shouts, crashes. They thought it was an argument. The girl who lived next to him was listening. She'd heard a lot of stuff when he and his boyfriend broke up, and she was scared, 'cause Argent was a violent bloke. But then the noise stopped, and the girl had only heard one person leaving. And, of course, she couldn't hear anyone moving. So she called the police. Took them half an hour

to get there, and by the time they did the trail was cold. We've only got Argent's footprints. The killer made sure not to leave any tracks in the blood.'

'What've we got on Argent's missions when he was high up in the army?' David asked, sorting through James's desk for a piece of scrap paper.

James sighed. 'We've applied to get the information, but it has to go through a few thousand layers of management first, which is going to take a while. Argent was pretty good. He was in – are we allowed to call it black ops?'

'This place is CCTVed,' Rose said quietly. 'I'd be careful.'

'Fine. He was in covert operations, then, and he was good enough to get posted a lot, which is only going to make our job easier, because he'll have made a lot of enemies. He passed his Test when he was fifteen, so he had his powers registered and was allowed to keep them. They removed his powers when he was kicked out, and of course that's permanent.'

'But there can't be many people in the general population registered with magic who had an incentive to kill *and* who knew Argent. That's got to be a pretty narrow category.'

David laughed bitterly, still looking through the desk. It always amazed Rose how many pieces of paper people thought it necessary to have at any one time.

'Wide enough. He'll have Gifted friends, family, enemies, exes, colleagues, old classmates, people he beat up in bars, the loved ones of those he killed when he was

a soldier. . .' He had found a pen by now and was scribbling while he spoke. 'It's certainly better than the, what, four million registered Gifted in London we were working with before, but it's not enough to go and start making arrests.'

'So what have we got on this guy?' Rose asked. 'Charges, I mean. What would he go down for?'

James sucked in a breath through his teeth. 'Where do we start? Escape from lawful custody, for one thing. Then, obviously, murder, breaking and entering, illegal use of magic—'

'Illegal arena of magic use,' David reminded him, without looking up. 'Let's assume he didn't ask Argent if he could use magic in his home. It would have destroyed his element of surprise somewhat.'

'All right, fine, "illegal arena", and . . . well, that's death, easily.'

*Death*. Firing squad, lethal injection, electric chair, the snap of a neck in darkness. It was a very short word to mean so much.

'Elmsworth, get over here!'

The shout came from their right. Both David and Rose looked up automatically. Connor Terrian, one of the Department's more manic but unfortunately senior staff – head of the clean-up teams that swooped in after unfortunate incidents, and, irritatingly, two military ranks higher up than David – was staring at the bank of screens that showed the security cameras in the lobby. As they walked over, he swore under his breath.

'You brought your kid, then,' he said shortly. Before

David or Rose could answer, he said, 'Good. Here's a use for her. We've got incoming.'

'Who is it?' David asked, searching the screens.

'Well, good news is, the Gospel have finally decided to give up and go away.'

'And the bad?'

'Argent's sister has found us,' Terrian admitted exasperatedly. 'We cleaned up the flat, but when he didn't answer the phone she called the police. She's that kind of girl, apparently. Your kid can go down there and calm her down. We can put her in for therapy, have her talk to one of the counsellors, who can show her that he died of a heart attack. That's the line you should go with,' he said to Rose, not looking at her. 'If she knows too much and starts getting too loud, you know what to do. Though I hope that doesn't happen. We'd have to do a full mental rewrite. That'd take a lot of manpower, and I don't want this spreading. We don't need a panic.'

'Do we have any data on her?' Rose asked. She, as always, was trying very hard not to get annoyed with Terrian. This rarely worked, but it was good to put in the effort. It wasn't the fact that she'd known him for eight years and he still didn't refer to her by name, but that he treated her father as a rookie rather than the best agent in the department.

James had a new data file on his computer. Rose hurried gratefully over to him. 'Sylvia Argent,' he said. 'Ashkind. Thirty-one years old. Boyfriend died about four months ago – road accident, non-suspicious, nothing we'd have on record. Pregnant, with his kid as far as we know. She

worshipped her brother like a god, especially after he beat up her ex a couple of years ago. She's not gonna give up easily on this.'

'Don't worry,' said Rose grimly. 'I've had practice. This is pretty much the only thing I can do here. I haven't exactly got much to get wrong.'

James swivelled round in his chair to look at her. 'Yeah . . .' he said thoughtfully. 'You've got your Test tomorrow, haven't you?'

Rose grimaced in affirmation, pulling on her coat.

'I can't tell you what's coming,' James said gently. 'But I can tell you that you're better at any of this than any pre-Test teenager I've ever met. And after your training – well, when you need a job, I'm definitely an unbiased source who'd be willing to give you a reference.'

Rose stared at him for a few seconds, searching his face for a joke, and then broke into a wide grin. 'Thanks, James.'

'Thank me after I've done something. You've got to defuse this one first.' He nodded towards Sylvia Argent's data file.

'Wish me luck.'

'You don't need it.' Rose gave her father a last glance – he was arguing earnestly with Terrian about something – and then walked out of the door.

She took the stairs down to the staff entrance on the ground floor, on the other side of the building to the lobby. One of the people upstairs had unlocked the door for her. Rose nodded in thanks to the security camera above it and walked through into the room beyond.

She was in the office that belonged to Emily and Pippa, the other secretary, who was on maternity leave. There were two dead-looking computers, several coffee mugs and a glass panel in the door, through which Rose could see a tall, heavily pregnant woman with long auburn hair and grey eyes shouting furiously at Emily, tears running down her cheeks.

Rose bent down to Emily's computer, opened up the messaging account and typed in a short message to the computer in the lobby.

*I've been sent down to neutralise her. Just go with it*

After a few seconds, she got an affirmation back. Rose straightened up and strode towards the door, slamming it open and genuinely making Emily jump.

'You're off duty now,' Rose told her, straight-faced.

'But—'

'This place is watched, woman, haven't you noticed? We saw how deliberately unhelpful you were being to this poor lady. You are off duty! Probably permanently! Get out!'

Emily jumped up, doing a slightly too convincing impression of fear, and scurried back through the door, closing it behind her. Rose knew she would probably use this as an excuse to take the rest of the day off. At the moment, she really didn't care.

Rose turned to Sylvia, who looked half-astonished, half-frightened.

'I'm so sorry. She's been misbehaving for a long time; this was just one step too far. I'm Rose. How can I help you?'

'I'm Sylvia,' the woman said, tearily. Rose noticed that she held one hand protectively over her bloated stomach. 'Sylvia Argent. Where's my brother?'

'Who's your brother?'

Sylvia, still crying, gave her all the information on Argent that Rose already had. Rose stood there calmly and nodded at the right times, very glad that Sylvia was distraught enough not to wonder why a teenager was on staff at a major government department. When Sylvia appeared to have finished, Rose said gently, 'When did you last see him?'

'Last week.' Sylvia sniffed. 'We met up for lunch . . . and today, when he didn't answer his phone, I went to his flat, and he wasn't there and half his stuff was gone, and . . . and . . .' She burst into tears. Rose gave her a gentle hug, feeling the press of the baby against her ribs. Sylvia was a good two inches shorter than her.

'What happened?' Rose prompted. Sylvia tried to speak, and burst into tears again. Rose grimaced at the camera.

'. . . and there was blood on the carpet!' Sylvia managed.

Rose froze. She closed her eyes and opened them again. So much for Terrian's clean-up operation.

'I'm sorry?' Rose pulled back to look into Sylvia's red, tear-tracked face. She looked entirely serious. Not that she wouldn't be, but the claim had taken Rose aback to such an extent that she had to check for alternatives.

'Blood! Tom's blood, on the carpet!'

'Let me check this.' Rose hurried over to the computer. 'This could be serious.'

Officially, this building was the centre of London's law and order, after Scotland Yard had been destroyed in the War. All deaths would be reported back to it. Therefore they should have Argent on file.

Rose sent James a message.

*I hope you're following this. I need a file on Argent that says he died of a stroke, or anything else non-suspicious that would produce blood. Quickly*

While waiting for the reply, she pretended to be typing while watching Sylvia covertly. The Ashkind woman was crying quietly in a corner, holding her stomach, trying to sing to her baby. Rose felt sorry for her. She'd lost her brother, and would probably never find out the truth.

She thought of Greenlow. *Necessary evil*.

The slight ping of the computer announced James's message.

*Can't do that. Argent's death is under investigation, any files on him can't be created or changed. Sorry, you're on your own*

Rose stared at the screen as if stricken – it didn't take much acting – and then looked up apologetically at Sylvia, who had raised her head eagerly at the noise of the computer.

'Yes? What is it? Do you know what's happened to Tom?'

'I'm sorry,' Rose said gently. 'Your brother's in hospital. He was in a fight; he has a severe head injury. The file just came in now.'

'But . . . the girl before you checked in Chelsea and Westminster. He wasn't there. She said.'

Mentally, Rose swore.

'She must have made a mistake,' she said calmly. 'I know Emily. She's not very observant.'

'But she showed me the file! The military personnel in the hospital! He wasn't there!'

'I—'

'You're lying to me!'

It was an accusatory shout, sure of itself, firm and angry. In her three or four years calming down distraught relatives for the Department, Rose had had this shouted at her many times. It was a proportionally small number, for which Rose was proud, but nevertheless, once someone was determined that you were lying to them, it never went well from there.

'Sylvia, please. I know you're distressed, but you don't need to jump to—'

'I knew it!' she shrieked. 'I knew bad things happened here! I warned him! Tom worked here once, and he . . . he said that . . . there were things that happened, things he'd done . . . that no one should ever know about . . . and he went and told someone – and now . . . you've done something to him . . . you killed him, you killed Tom—'

She collapsed into tears. Rose tried to move towards her, but Sylvia backed away, stumbled and fell onto the purple sofa next to the glass wall.

'Stay away from me!' she shouted, sobbing.

She was nearly lying down; that made it easier. Rose stepped up closer to her, one hand stretched out towards Sylvia in a gesture of peace, and in a sudden, smooth movement grabbed the woman's wrist, flipped it over and

slid the needle into her vein. The amount of practice she'd had over the years meant that she didn't even have to look. Sylvia screamed, long and loud, and Rose pushed down the plunger with her thumb and let the other woman wrench her hand away. Sylvia cried out, sleep already clouding her eyes.

'What have you done to me? *What have you done to me?*'

'It's just a mild sedative,' Rose told her, wishing it was as easy to inject reassurance into her voice as it was to put sleep into Sylvia's veins. 'It won't harm your baby, don't worry.'

'I—'

Sylvia fell back against the sofa. Easier, much easier. It made Rose anxious when they were standing up. Once, a man had sustained concussion when the sedative had taken effect that way. Rose didn't want any harm to come to Sylvia. This process was all for her own good.

Sylvia's breathing slowed and she was silent. Rose stepped forward tentatively. Her eyes were closed, her face was relaxed and she slept calmly. Rose checked her pulse, which seemed steady enough. Looking up, she saw her father, Terrian, and Laura, a motherly woman in her fifties who headed the Department's memory-altering sessions, hurrying towards her.

'Dammit,' Laura muttered, kneeling by Sylvia and turning her head to examine her. 'This one'll take a lot of convincing.'

Rose was glaring at Terrian, shaking.

'Blood,' she whispered. To her surprise, she felt a tear

on her cheek. She wiped it away furiously. 'Blood on the carpet – how the *hell* could you have missed that?'

Terrian stared at her, outraged.

'Rose,' David said warningly.

'That woman,' Rose said, ignoring him and pointing at Sylvia behind her, 'is going to spend the next few weeks in the memory rewrite wards. You know what the after-effects are. After that much suggestion therapy she won't be able to think for herself for weeks. She'll be apathetic. Emotionless. And she's going to have a baby! What happens to her kid when she's like that? You've just upped her chances of post-natal depression by about fifty per cent – or, if it doesn't work, she'll spend the rest of her life wondering what happened to her brother, and all because you and your incompetent mess of a clean-up team missed a massive bloodstain – a *bloodstain* – on the carpet!'

'How dare you?' Terrian growled. 'I am a colonel of the British Government, and you haven't even taken your Test yet, you are *nobody* – how dare you insult me?'

'It doesn't matter how old *I* am,' Rose snapped angrily, her voice shaking, 'it's *your* competence that's in question here!'

'*Rose,*' David said sharply. 'Connor, she has a point. Rose, so does he. Don't talk to an officer like that.'

Rose shut up. Beside them, Laura was whispering to the unconscious Sylvia. She took a capped syringe of thick, white memory serum from her pocket and slowly injected it into Sylvia's arm. This would be enough to wipe the events of the last few hours from her mind and

allow Laura's team to implant suggestions there. They would tell her that her brother had been posted to a peacekeeping mission, somewhere far away. They would tell her not to come back here asking questions. They would tell her everything was going to be fine. And, Rose thought bitterly, they would be lying.

'She should be fine,' Laura said loudly before Terrian could shout anything at Rose. 'We'll do everything we can to minimise the eff—'

Pain expanded to fill Rose's head and it was upon her, and suddenly her wits and her memory deserted her and she was left stranded in a small metal room with no windows, flailing and screaming, and something inside her head was growing and growling and pushing its way through into her mind, forcing her own thoughts down into compliance, and she was falling, falling, and she stumbled back. And then her hand found a wall that shouldn't have been there and she was jerked back to the Department, breathing hard. She looked around. Everyone was staring at her.

She glanced down at her watch. That would be the forty-eight-hour mark.

'Are you okay?' Laura asked her anxiously.

'Yeah,' Rose muttered. 'Headache.'

Her father caught her eye. The sight of him nearly triggered it again, but she bit her lip and focused.

'You need to get home,' David said to her quietly. 'Get some rest. You've got a long day tomorrow.'

She nodded, but she didn't meet his eyes.