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The Mentor

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Extract

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1

Paul Aston slammed the phone down and kicked back in his chair. 'Shit, shit, shit,' he muttered under his breath. What was her problem? So he was working late. News flash: long hours came with the territory. She already knew that, so why was she acting like it was a big surprise? The phone went and he tried to ignore it. Probably Laura ringing back to tell him to go to hell. Conditioning got the better of him and he snatched it up, said a cautious hello.

'Hey, Paul.'

'Thank God, a friendly voice.' Georgina Strauss was most definitely a friend first and a work colleague second, and that was unusual; in this business you tended to cultivate contacts rather than make friends. They'd gone through the Intelligence Officer's New Entry Course together, the IONEC in MI6 speak. MI6 loved its acronyms, as Aston had quickly discovered. When he first started it had been like learning a new language.

'Look, Paul, got to be quick. A bomb's gone off in Leicester Square tube.'

'Shit,' he breathed into the mouthpiece. He checked his watch. The middle of rush hour. 'How many dead?'

'No idea. Too fucking many.'

'What happened?'

'Our guess is that it was a suicide bomber. They marched onto the platform and blew themselves to bits.'

'Jesus.'

'Didn't I say it was only a matter of time before something like this happened again? For once I hate always being right. So what about all those lessons that were supposed to have been learnt after 7/7, eh?' She sighed and Aston could imagine her sitting there shaking her head. 'This is so fucked up, Paul.'

'Fucked up . . . that doesn't even begin to cover it.'

'You owe me,' George said, and then she was gone.

Aston hung up and took the Batphone from his shirt pocket. The Batphone was always on, always charged; he wasn't allowed to go anywhere without it. Before he could flick it open, it started vibrating and chirping. He didn't need to check the caller ID. Only one person had this number.

Mac jumped straight in without so much as a hello. A barrage of questions to make sure he'd

heard the news, testing him out on the whats and wheres, and then he let rip.

'Okay, so what the fuck are you sitting there with your thumb jammed up your arse for?'

'You caught me on the way out the door.'

'I hope you're not trying to bullshit me.'

'No, sir.'

A snort that could have meant anything, then: 'I want you there straightaway. I want to know everything that's happening. You got that? Everything.'

Aston made a face at the mobile. 'Yes, sir.'

'And Aston.'

'Yes.'

'Don't use the journalist alias.'

Aston hit the street running; by the time he'd jogged over Vauxhall Bridge his shirt was soaked through with sweat. The evening was humid, the air heavy and moist. He stopped on the other side of the river to catch his breath and glanced back at MI6's HQ. The elaborate architectural style had more than a touch of the Middle East about it; it was easy to see why the media had christened it Babylon-on-Thames. The cost of the building had run into nine figures and from the outside it wasn't apparent where the money had gone. It was the things you didn't see that cost the money. The elaborate anti-bugging devices, the bombproof walls, the triple glazing. The fact that five floors of the building were hidden beneath ground level.

The city was in chaos. All tube services had

been suspended, so everyone had headed to the surface to get a cab or a bus. The roads were gridlocked and the air was alive with sirens, horns, arguments. Everywhere Aston looked he saw panic and confusion. Nobody had a clue what was going on. The PM had been assassinated, Buckingham Palace had been nuked . . . the mutterings Aston heard as he headed for Leicester Square ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. He stopped running, sweat trickling down his back. If he ran to Leicester Square in this heat he'd have a stroke. There had to be a better way.

The cyclist was dressed in a suit and the crash helmet made it look like he had a metallic blue alien skull grafted onto his head. He was riding along the gutter, squeezing between the kerb and a convertible BMW. The driver had killed the engine, resigned to being there for the long haul, fingers tapping anxiously on the steering wheel as he listened to a news bulletin. The cyclist drew level. Aston grabbed his arm and pulled him from the bike, sent him tumbling to the ground. He picked up the bike, jumped on and charged along the pavement, shouting at people to get out of his way.

He'd just passed the National Portrait Gallery when he saw his first survivor. The girl was in her mid-twenties and covered from head to toe in dust, as if frosted with grey icing sugar. She was sitting on the kerb with her knees hugged tight against her chest, rocking back and forth, focusing

on nothing. Aston cycled on, passing more survivors. All of them had the same dead eyes, that same thousand yard stare. Some were crying, some were injured. They were cut and bruised, confused. Blood stained their faces, their clothes. An icy feeling settled in Aston's stomach as he realised these were the lucky ones.

Then he heard the screams. Cries of anguish mingled with cries of pain, a full-on symphony of suffering that got louder the closer he got. He wanted to block his ears, wanted to turn around and ride as fast as he could in the opposite direction, anything to get away from that terrible noise. Instead, he let his training kick in. From here on he was Detective Inspector Stuart Bromley. One of the Met's finest. There was no way DI Bromley, hardened by years of seeing the worst humanity could dream up, would run away. Aston got off the bike, propped it up against a lamppost, brushed the creases from his clothes. Handling the fear was easier when you were pretending to be someone else.

He turned a corner and stepped into a living nightmare. All the usual suspects were there. Cops, firemen and paramedics were beavering away on one side of the hastily erected barriers. Journalists, TV reporters, photographers, cameramen and rubberneckers were trapped on the other side. It was like stepping onto a movie set . . . except this was no Hollywood fantasy. His senses overloaded, slamming into the red. Colours, sounds and smells

seemed sharper, more defined. Vehicle engines revving, orders being barked out, the screams and cries of the injured, red and blue lights throbbing on top of ambulances and police cars like a migraine, the excited voyeuristic murmur of the crowd, that dirty London smell coated with a thin layer of puke and cinders.

Aston pushed through the crowd, moving as if he owned the place. He almost smiled when a couple of the more seasoned hacks started firing questions at him. *No comment*, he fired back. That was the thing with cover. As long as you believed – really believed – you could fool almost anyone.

A PC manning the barrier stopped him, told him he couldn't come through. Aston didn't say a word. He drew himself up to his full height, pulled out his ID, flipped it open and thrust it an inch from the PC's nose. Indignity personified. There was no way the ID wouldn't pass inspection. Central Facilities had got it from the same place the Met got theirs. The PC muttered an apology, shifted the barrier and let him through. The media was still trapped on the other side. Mac had been right. The journalist alias wouldn't have got him very far. He turned away from the barrier and marched towards the station entrance, dust kicking up from the heels of his shoes.

2

An old man wearing a neck brace was strapped to the gurney, a bright red blanket covering his body. His wrinkled face was twisted with pain, grime and blood filling the age worn crevices, ivory hair streaked black and crimson. He was calling out a name, over and over – 'Helena, Helena, Helena!' – his voice surprisingly strong considering his condition. There was the hint of an accent, something Mediterranean. Was Helena one of the dead? The paramedics pushed on three and the wheels folded away as the gurney slid inside the ambulance. They jumped in behind, pulled the door shut. The ambulance shot forward, siren wailing, and within seconds another had rolled up to take its place. Two paramedics were already waiting at the kerb with the next victim.

Aston did a quick 360 degrees. For the moment this was the medics' show; the survivors took priority and everything else could wait. The police were nothing more than glorified security guards;

there to keep the newshounds at bay, to keep the peace. The DI Bromley alias had got him this far but it wouldn't take him much further. The only people going in and out of the station were paramedics and firefighters. He did another surreptitious 360 degrees, looking for the angle. There was always an angle. Aston made a mental note of where the PCs were. Uniformed police didn't worry him: easy to spot, easy to bullshit. CID was a different story. Detectives were born with the curiosity gene and the last thing he needed was to find himself answering a load of awkward questions.

A huddle of suited detectives had set up shop by a news stand opposite the station entrance. They were acting big and talking animatedly, hands emphasising the more important points. Aston walked off in the opposite direction, putting some distance between them, all the time looking for that angle. Another ambulance screamed past, siren wailing. It pulled into the middle of the road to go around the line of fire engines parked at the kerb, the driver thumping at the horn and scattering a couple of firemen out the way. Aston stopped, watched for a second. All the action was centred around the lead fire engine; nobody was paying any attention to the one at the back.

Walking as though he was born to be there, Aston passed the firemen, passed the first three engines. He stopped level with the last one, glanced back at the firefighters. They were all looking the

other way, paying no attention to him. He pulled the door open and jumped up into the cab. Had to be quick. No telling how much time he had. There was a ton of gear in the cab: bright yellow helmets, face masks, bulky jackets, axes, respiration equipment, all the good stuff he'd need to pull this one off. Heart pounding, Aston grabbed one of the jackets, pulled it on. A little long in the arm but it would do. He pulled on a pair of trousers, found some boots, took a torch from the shelf and stuffed it into the deep jacket pocket. A sound outside. He stopped dead, listening; said a quick prayer that whoever was out there would stay out there. The scratch of a match, a long, deep inhalation, an even longer sigh. Aston twisted his head so he could see into the tall side mirror. The boy was no older than nineteen, tall and gangly like a baby giraffe. The uniform looked all wrong on him. It was too big, as though he still had some growing to do before it fit properly. The boy had taken off his helmet and placed it by his feet. Head pitched down, staring at the floor, he brought a cigarette to his lips, fighting to keep his hand still. And then he threw up, vomit splattering his boots. Jesus, was it really that bad down there?

Aston timed his departure with the second bout of retching. While the boy was busy losing his lunch, he quietly let himself out the other side, climbing down onto the pavement and gently pushing the door closed behind him. He put on the helmet, glanced in the side mirror to check he

looked the part. Almost, but not quite. He bent down and scooped up some dirt from the gutter, smeared it on his face. Walking was tricky to begin with, but he soon got the hang of it. Now he knew why firefighters walked with that macho swagger; it was the bulky trousers that did it. A deep breath as he drew level with the lead fire engine, praying he wouldn't be challenged. His luck held. Everyone was too busy with their own problems. Confidence growing, he headed for the station entrance, passing a couple of policemen who didn't even give him a second look. Like Mac said, pulling off a disguise was all about getting into someone else's shoes; getting under their skin.

The station foyer had been turned into a triage ward, dozens upon dozens of stretchers covering the cold, hard floor. Halogen lamps flooded the area with their sterile glare, generators thud-thud-thudding in the background. Aston looked around in disbelief. It was like something from the First World War. Doctors in bloodstained butcher's coats flitted from patient to patient, assessing each one, categorising them, making life and death decisions in the blink of an eye. They worked on the ones with the best chance of survival; those who didn't make the grade were quickly stretchered away to make room for those who did. Nurses flitted around like some rare breed of ivory butterfly, settling down momentarily to fit an IV, to give an injection or a painkiller, to offer some words of comfort. They worked efficiently, their movements

economical and precise, their fear hidden behind training and procedure. The sounds and smells from outside were more intense in here, as though reality had been ratcheted up another couple of notches. The noise worked into Aston's brain, shredding synapses, putting his teeth on edge. Screams echoed off the tiles, the volume creeping past ten. Underpinning this was a lower pitched rumble that was somehow worse – *moans groans crying voices pleading for help whispering voices begging for an escape from the pain please please please anything to take the pain away* – a bass counterpoint to the hideous melody. The stink was worse than the noise. The stench of shit and puke dominated, stealing what little oxygen there was from the heavy air. There was another smell too, a clean smell that seemed completely out of place: the antiseptic aroma of hospitals. The combination made Aston want to throw up. It was all too much, all too real. The hopeless cases had been moved next to the ticket booth, where a priest in a grey cassock was trying to provide comfort to people past hearing or caring. He was clutching his crucifix so tightly his knuckles were shining. His salt and pepper hair, usually so neat for Mass, was standing on end, a nervous hand pushing it in all directions. Aston watched the priest kneel beside a stretcher. It was difficult to tell if the victim was male or female, young or old. The face was ruined: ugly, moist and black. The priest's lips moved, mouthing incantations in Latin. Dead words in a

dead language for someone who would never see another sunrise. He crossed himself then leant over and closed the corpse's eyes. A look of disgust spread across his face and he frantically wiped his hand across the front of his neat grey cassock, leaving a nasty dark smear. He jumped to his feet, visibly shaken, spun around to see if anyone had noticed. Aston looked away quickly, leaving the priest alone with his embarrassment, and as he turned he caught sight of the body bags. They were piled up in a dark corner, hidden in the shadows. There had to be a couple of dozen of them. Probably more. And this was just the start.

'Jesus Christ,' Aston whispered to himself. He'd expected it to be bad, but nowhere near this bad.

Feeling shaky, he headed for the escalators, his lunch sitting heavily. He took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself. Three of the ticket barriers had been ripped out and dumped to one side, creating a thoroughfare between the makeshift ward and the platforms below. Aston moved aside to let a couple of medics through. He couldn't help looking at the stretcher as they passed. Car crash curiosity. Aston didn't fancy the woman's chances. He turned a corner and almost collided with a firefighter.

'Watch where the fuck you're going!' The explosive consonants of someone used to barking out orders; a tone of voice Aston knew only too well. He looked up, saw a Viking masquerading as a firefighter; the sooty black marks on his face could

have been painted on by a make-up artist. The man glaring down at him was hitting fifty, well over six foot with a perfectly trimmed ginger moustache. Aston muttered an apology, all the time telling himself that he was meant to be here, praying his cover wasn't going to be blown, not when he was this close. He had the uniform – and most people didn't look any further than that – all he had to do was keep his cool. Mac would throw a shit-fit if he screwed up now. And Mac was a damn sight scarier than this guy.

'Who the hell are you?' The firefighter gave Aston the once over, moustache twitching.

'Paul Hester.' It was the first name that came into his head.

'Haven't seen you before.'

'I'm based in Watford,' Aston said. 'Brought in to help out.'

'One of Blackie's boys.'

'That's right.'

Aston didn't have a clue who Blackie was, but if the Viking wanted to believe he was one of Blackie's boys then that was fine with him. There was a long silence, long enough for Aston to think the Viking was testing him and he'd just screwed up big time, then: 'Okay Hester, some of the lads are clearing a cave-in on one of the exit tunnels for the westbound platform of the Piccadilly Line. They could do with an extra pair of hands. Do you think you can find them okay or do you want me to draw a map?'

'I'll find them,' Aston said.

'Good lad.' The Viking marched off through the barriers and Aston breathed a sigh of relief. That had been way too close for comfort.

He reached the long escalator and stared down into the depths. The bottom was there somewhere, hidden in the gloom. Light bulbs had been strung up along one side, their weak glow reaching for the far wall and not quite making it. He chose the escalator nearest the bulbs, picking his way carefully from step to step, moving through alternating patches of light and shadow, his heart hammering in his chest. He half expected the escalator to suddenly burst into life, calliope music huffing and puffing through the gloom and multicoloured lights flashing luridly, like something from a fairground House of Horrors.

The further down he went, the hotter and stuffier it got. Aston unzipped the bulky coat, wafted it a couple of times, but it made no difference. He sucked in a long, whistling, asthmatic breath, grabbing what little oxygen he could. How the hell did firefighters deal with this day in and day out? Maybe it was one of those things you became acclimatised to.

At the bottom of the escalator, he pulled out the industrial-sized torch, clicked it on. There was even less air here and Aston fought back the panic, stomped it down with rationality. Walking through the tunnels was a surreal experience; the darkness made them unrecognisable. The occasional advert

would catch in the torch beam – a book, a movie, a London attraction not to be missed – glimpses of the familiar, but, for the most part, the landscape was completely alien. Every now and again a face would come at him out of the dark. Paramedics mainly, stretchering the injured and the dead to the surface. Aston jumped each time it happened. Although he knew differently, it felt like he was the only person inhabiting this strange universe.

Half a dozen firemen were working on the cave-in, using their hands to remove the rubble piece by piece. They worked in silence to conserve energy; they worked methodically in case they came across a survivor trapped in a debris cave; they worked carefully, the possibility of another collapse hanging over them like the sword of Damocles. A halogen lamp had been set up, its beam bouncing off the blockage. Muddy water from a burst main sluiced around Aston's feet. He followed the lead of the nearest firefighter, the two of them working side by side. They made a pile of rubble behind them, the larger chunks they carried together. Within no time Aston was drenched in sweat. It trickled down his forehead, into his eyes, blinding him. Every five minutes or so one of the firefighters would shout for everyone to stop. Another would use an infra-red scanner to probe the debris and everyone would hold their breath, praying for a miracle.

The sight of the doll's leg poking out from the rubble broke Aston's heart; somehow it brought

home the full horror of what had happened here. The people who'd died today had been innocents, none more so than the children. Sweating and groaning, he'd hefted a large slab out the way, and there it was, a glimpse of dirty pink cotton. Aston dropped to his knees, his lungs suddenly packed with ice despite the heavy heat down here. He knew what he was seeing, but the rational part of his brain wouldn't let him admit the truth. Do that and he'd have to get out, start running and keep going until he reached the surface. It wasn't that he was weak, it was just that sometimes you needed a little denial to keep you functioning. Aston concentrated on his breathing, forcing the hot, filthy air into his chest, melting the ice – in, out, in, out – then he went to work. With the utmost care he excavated the doll, working in silence, totally absorbed by the task. He had no awareness of anything going on around him. The sounds of the firefighters working, their harsh breathing and tense shouted whispers, the coldness of the water, the sharp stab of the halogens, none of this registered. Down on his hands and knees he dug into the rubble, dirt and grime grinding into his baby-soft skin; his hands were conditioned to the smoothness of plastic, telephones and computer keyboards, not the grim reality of manual labour. The sharp grit got onto his skin, into his skin, under his skin, abrasive right down to the bone. He looked at his hands, and barely recognised them. They were pruned

from the water and the damp dirt, black as a miner's. There was red mixed in there, too. Blood. He couldn't feel any pain, couldn't see any cuts; his hands were numb, the injuries belonging to someone else. Aston began digging again, carefully, reverentially. Through the dirt and sweat he saw the pink Babygro with *Mummy's Little Princess* on the front. Saw the mangled bloody face. He lifted the doll out, knowing that once upon a time she had been alive – breathing, laughing and loving – but unable to admit this to himself. Not yet. Not ever. So, even though the limbs felt like they were made from jelly rather than plastic, he told himself again it was just a doll, and although he knew differently he kept telling himself it was a doll, only a doll, because that was the one thing keeping him sane right now, the one thing keeping him from falling apart. But denial could only carry you so far, and Aston could feel reality creeping in. He tried to push it back, but it was too late. Fingers moving as though they had a mind of their own, he reached out and fussed her hair, stroked her cheek. Flesh instead of plastic. No point lying to himself anymore. The full horror crashed in on him all at once and he was powerless to stop the flood. He was a lone figure holding his hands up to pacify the raging torrent; there one moment, and then washed away and destroyed the next.

Aston cradled the baby in his arms, the tiny broken face resting gently against his chest, and moved deeper into the tunnel, away from the

harsh halogen glare. Still holding her tight to his chest, he slid down a wall. Then the tears came and he wept. He knew that from this moment on nothing would ever be the same.