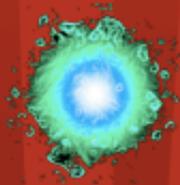


The
**SUPER
TWINNS**



TOBY RUSSELL

For Anaïs

Chapter 1

On the tenth of July 2007, at precisely two twenty-two a.m., a small sphere of light materialised quite unexpectedly outside a closed bedroom window at the edge of a picturesque village in northern Oxfordshire, some few miles east of Banbury. It hovered there unnoticed for a second or two, before drifting serenely through glass and drawn curtains—breaking and ruffling nothing—to bathe in turquoise glow the darkened room beyond.

It hovered happily in mid-air for a while. Perhaps it was surveying the scene. Perhaps it was generating dramatic tension.

The two colours of its strange turquoise then began to separate in slow, spiralling movements. After roughly twelve seconds, one blue and one green spark-ball hovered mere inches above two slumbering, blond-haired boys. Successfully separated, and after a further moment of poised inactivity, each spark then produced from itself a focussed glim of honey-thick light, which it unreeled downwards, as if fishing for something. The limbs of light were aimed directly at the closed eyes below, but, at a distance of exactly a little less than one hair's breadth from the boys' lashes, the tendrils ceased their treachery descent.

Another dramatic pause followed. One could have cut the atmosphere with a knife.

Then, at each of the tendrils' tips, sprouted the smallest of pear-shaped pads. These completed, the remaining fraction of a millimetre was covered so that, at long last, contact between the intelligent spark-being and two human specimens of planet earth was made.

It had been a very, very long journey. Whatever that might mean.

Not preceded by a sigh—although the highly sensitive might claim to have felt one—and still sustaining the perfect timing, the sparks caused their pear-tipped limbs to strum lightly back and forth across the boys' eyelashes. It was that tiny tickling, that mute eyelash-music, which caused the twins to stir.

Did they giggle? I'm not sure, but, as if excited by what they had done, the sparks hastily retracted their dangling appendages and moved a few inches higher, perhaps putting themselves out of harm's way.

The twins roused and rubbed at their eyes. Quickly awake, they glared at each other across the small room, but seeing each was innocent of waking the other up, glanced towards the ceiling to look for the source of the tickling.

"Do you see—"

"—what I see?"

They rubbed their eyes again, this time to confirm what they were seeing was real. The sparks did not disappear.

"Fireflies aren't coloured like that, are they?" asked Charlie.

Ben shook his head.

As the twins watched, the sparks shot towards one another and merged into a larger, turquoise spark, which then split to form two eye-shaped globes. The floating eyes somehow blinked a couple of times, as if adjusting to their new situation, then swivelled left and right, seeming to take in both Charlie and Ben.

By now the twins were too stunned to speak. Being ripped from deep sleep into an unfolding scene of mesmerising oddity would be enough to strike dumb the most unstoppable of chatterboxes, so two shy thirteen year old boys were hardly going to fare any better. Mercilessly though, the train of mesmerising events continued. Charlie and Ben watched agog as a smooth head took shape around the glowing eyes, and when that was finished—no nose, ears nor mouth though—remained transfixed as a thin neck, a long torso, two arms without hands, a pair of hips, and two footless, noodly legs grew magically under it. Dumbstruck, Ben and Charlie could barely blink, could not even form the idea they might perhaps be dreaming all this. In fact, for the moment, they could respond in but one way—stare.

The astonishing, beautiful, otherworldly creature seemed to be enjoying the moment, despite its audience's state of system-freeze.

Was it savouring the humans' awe at its magnificent presence? Most likely.

"That was quite something, eh?" it said in an unpractised, emotionless voice.

When it spoke, the constantly swirling blues and greens that filled its strangely translucent body, seemed to solidify and soften and pulse with each emitted syllable.

The alien's 'skin' was transparent. You could see through to its insides, where those breathtaking colours floated and pulsed in somehow infinite, space-like blackness, but, counter-intuitively, you could not see right through to what lay behind it. The creature was solid, and yet, somehow, not quite all there.

"Yes, that's right. I am an alien." It raised its head a notch, looking almost kingly. There was evidence of a jutting chin.

Of course, there was absolutely no question, this was by far the most incredible thing that had ever happened to the twins, ever, and probably the most incredible thing that had ever happened to anyone, anywhere, ever. But something about the alien's oddly human vanity put the boys at ease. Cell by cell, and while the regal being patiently awaited some kind of response, the twins started to relax. Charlie was the first to speak.

"Where do you come from?"

"A very, very long way away. Whatever that means."

"Is it like a planet or something?"

"Yes. To be specific."

"What's it called?"

"Sorry, I cannot make the right noises in your clumsy language."

There was a pause. The three beings regarded each other. Ben, who had yet to join the conversation verbally, started smiling.

"Do you think I look cool?" asked the alien suddenly, its voice as indifferent as time. The twins nodded. "That's good. I think you look cool too. I like your hair on top. Neat and messy. Furry animals are not cool. It's very funny." Because it had no mouth, the words sounded evenly from the creature's entire body, as if it were

a loud speaker.

Charlie and Ben looked at each other, and pushed their hands through their neat and messy blond mops. Each knew perfectly what the other was thinking.

“So,” continued the alien, “this is going well, eh? We are having a nice inter-galactic, cross-species chat. Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Ha ha. But that is not why I travelled so far.”

The gangly being slowly raised its thin, handless arms. Towards the end of each wavy appendage sprouted like pliable water what looked to be a colourless girdle. After a few seconds the process was complete.

“Charlie and Ben Rhodes, you have been chosen from a human population of over six and a half billion to participate in an experiment being conducted on your species. You are to be given these belts which will grant you eight powers. Each power can be deployed by depressing its button on the belt. Only one power can function at a time. Depressing a second button activates its corresponding power and deactivates whatever power was previously active. To deactivate all powers, depress the active power’s button. Now please put on the belts.”

Having just recently recovered a little equilibrium, Charlie and Ben were once again plunged into deepest wonderment. There was no way on Earth they could mull over or question what they had just heard, so obeyed, on automatic pilot, the instruction they had received. With empty heads they climbed out of their beds to stand beside their new friend from outer space.

Charlie first, but quickly followed by Ben, reached out for the water-coloured belts hanging from the alien’s arms. To the touch, the items felt like rubber air, or chewy water, or tough thought, something impossible at any rate. But the aberrancy of the material did not frighten the twins. In fact, making contact with something so unknown, so incredible, actually encouraged them. They lifted the belts up off the alien’s outstretched limbs, and found them to be weightless, utterly weightless. You only knew you were holding

them by the sensation of that impossible material against your skin.

It was summer, so neither twin was wearing his pyjama top. Not stopping to realise they didn't know how to put on their new toys, nor caring they were featureless—no clasps, no buckles—the twins, after glancing excitedly at one another, simply wrapped the broad girdles around their midriffs, then watched in further amazement as the belts did the rest, fluidly completing the encircling unaided, melding seamlessly without noise or fuss. Then, alarmingly, the belts completely disappeared.

For a moment there was nothing to see. Charlie and Ben stared at their bellies with their arms raised from their sides, wondering what had happened to the belts, but then, as if responding to the twins' large intake of breath—they had for a long while not dared to breathe—eight buttons glittered to life.

“Bloody Nora!” whispered Charlie and Ben as one.

There were two rows of four circular buttons running along either side of their stomach's centre, each positioned more or less on a muscle. They were a shifting, swirling, silvery-turquoise, but also very much part of the skin in which they seemed embedded, and out of which they protruded. They were also identical. Just as it struck the twins that they had no way of telling what each button did, precisely that information was somehow made known to them. From the viewer's perspective, the eight powers were arranged as follows: the top right button enabled flight; top left speed; second row right was strength; next to that intelligence; third row right rendered the belt's wearer *totally* impervious to pain, injury, damage etc.; third row left turned the wearer invisible; bottom right activated phasing (that is, the ability to walk through solid objects); and finally, the bottom left button was for underwater breathing.

“Bloody Nora!” whispered the twins again, as one.

They looked up at each other, both on the verge of suggesting they try out one of the buttons, neither sure which to press first, both too excited to think straight, but before they could begin their

discussion the alien spoke again.

“The belt has been designed so that you never have to think about where each button is located. You just know. Therefore you will never press the wrong button by mistake. The belt is part of you, part of your being. Other people cannot see it or the buttons. If you want to remove the belt press all eight buttons at the same time. That is all. Oh, one last thing: have fun, but be careful... You are being watched.”

From the bottom of its footless legs up, the alien began to disappear. The twins observed the reverse of the creature’s earlier materialising with considerably less amazement than before; each now wore, or rather was now attached to, a belt which made him unimaginably powerful. The alien could have disappeared in a yet more spectacular fashion and the twins would hardly have cared. They wanted to try out their belts. Almost impatiently, but with respect and politeness holding them in their places, they waited for the slow (very slow, actually) process to complete. Finally, hovering in the air between them were the blue and green sparks they had seen upon waking. Those two spots of coloured light re-ravelled to become a cloud-like ball of turquoise, which illuminated the room once again. Then, at last, it regally swept through the closed curtains and away. Charlie and Ben were alone once more.

Within a heartbeat, excitement roared through them like a hurricane of fireworks. Words were not enough. After a quick and radiant look at each other, they started jumping around the room, whooping and shouting for joy. Then they remembered their foster parents and hastily brought their jubilations under control. Too late: they heard heavy footsteps coming their way.

The door opened and the bald head of a late-middle aged man peered in. The room was dark, but he could make out his adopted children occupying the floor between their empty beds. Parenting was quite new to him, so he thought carefully before speaking.

“Erm ... if this is normal behaviour for thirteen year old twins, I’m not sure I like it.” He stepped into the room, eager to appear

relaxed. "You see, Charlie and Ben, old people like your ... like your mother and father ... we need our sleep, you see. Yes ... and I think young people do too. I think... What do you two gentlemen say to going back to bed right now, and staying asleep all the way through to morning? The night passes quicker that way. How about it?"

The twins didn't hesitate. "Sorry, Dad," they chimed, and climbed obediently back into their beds.

Mr Holloway was satisfied. "Good lads," he said, then went back to his bed.

As soon as they heard their foster-father's footsteps cease, Charlie whispered: "We'll wait a few minutes till he falls asleep, and then try something out."

But Ben didn't want to wait another second. He had had an idea.

Chapter 2

The day Charlie and Ben were collected by Mr and Mrs Holloway, and driven to their new home on Well Lane, the atmosphere in the car had been tense. The twins had been in that clean, emerald green BMW, with its smooth electric windows and 6-CD changer, a couple times before, enjoyed its expensive gadgets, thrilled to the reassuring hum of its efficient power, but this time was different. The few things the twins owned—some tatty clothes and old toys—were in the car boot, not back at the foster home awaiting their return. It was as if their entire lives were sealed with them in that car, headed somewhere new and unknown.

It was a Friday afternoon in late June, bright blue and sunny, but despite the relaxed weather the twins were nervous, as were Mr and Mrs Holloway. No one sitting in that car really knew what to expect from the future they had together agreed to set in motion. Driving along those steep and windy roads, it suddenly counted for nothing that the times they had already spent together—to see if they would ‘click’ as a new family—had gone well. The drive to their new home was a very different affair to a short afternoon’s trip to some forest-ringed field for a picnic. This was no longer a test, and, with a little luck, would last forever.

But the tension in Mr Holloway’s deep green BMW was a small price to pay for finally leaving Daisy Fields Orphanage. Dr Greene, the foster home’s director, had told Charlie and Ben over and over again, how lucky they were to have been adopted at thirteen years of age, especially seeing as they were male twins, and especially seeing as they were rowdies and troublemakers.

They were neither rowdies nor troublemakers, not that anyone ever believed them. It was just that they were repeatedly implicated and intricately *into* trouble. They certainly never planned anything naughty, things kept on working out that way. And of course, it didn’t help that the other kids at the home blamed Charlie and Ben for almost every bad thing that happened: every

stolen pen, every missing piece of clothing, every broken window pane, every fight ... all were pinned on them somehow. And it helped even less that the 'carers' there (that's what they called themselves) never believed anything Charlie and Ben said.

There were always fights at the Daisy Fields Orphanage, despite its pretty-sounding name. Unfortunately, these fights almost always involved the twins, probably because they were little, probably because they were twins. They had been born small, and had so far stayed small. And being identical twins, not to mention having neither mother nor father to speak of, meant they were best friends of the closest sort imaginable, always there for one another, always ready to help, indeed, even prepared to die for one another. But being so close, and looking so very similar, made the other children jealous of them. To the other children in the orphanage, it was as if Charlie and Ben were their own little family, a cosy little family no one else could be a member of, a family all foster home children, no matter what the older, more cynical and jaded ones might tell you, want to have.

Consequently, and despite being friendly by nature, the twins were not popular. Consequently, Charlie and Ben did not take away any fond memories of their time at Daisy Fields.

So even though it felt strange being driven to a new home where they would have to call a man and woman they hardly knew 'Dad' and 'Mum', they were happy to have finally left that rotten orphanage behind them. And when they were shown around their new house, which was neat and tidy, and had obviously never known the high, wild energies of young boys, they were as polite as they had been trained to be, and listened carefully to everything they were told, remembering particularly that the oak, glass fronted cabinet in the drawing room was very valuable, that they were not to play with it, or with anything it housed, under any circumstances, whatsoever.

As they stood there quietly looking at it and its contents, how could Charlie and Ben have possibly imagined they were destined,

in two short weeks, to destroy it beyond all hope of repair, but that its complete destruction would not, at least when seen from a broad, cosmic point of view, be their fault? How could they have known that the first thing of significance they were to do with their belts, was to blow up their foster parents' most precious item of furniture? And how could they possibly have known, this silly little accident would initiate a decision which would haunt their lives forever?

And now that we have those questions behind us, I'm sure you want to get back to the action I so rudely interrupted half a chapter ago.

As Charlie watched, awaiting his brother's nodded agreement to his suggestion they wait a minute or two before trying out their belts, Ben, grinning broadly, and obviously in no mood to wait, stood up on his bed, pressed on one of his stomach muscles, then started to disappear down into his mattress, just as if he were being swallowed by quick sand. Charlie cottoned on immediately, thinking it a great idea. He clambered to his feet and depressed his own phase button, just as the top of his brother's giggling head sank under the pale blue sheets.

Phasing is weird. You can actually feel the different substances as they pass through you, a sensation not unlike wind blowing through your hair. The obvious difference is that phasing through things is slower and more evenly paced than a whipping wind, not to mention that it happens to every inch of you, all the way down to the marrow in your bones. It is as if your entire body were breathing things in, then breathing them out of the other side in an unbroken stream.

Just like his brother, Charlie could not help but giggle. The combination of excitement—the belts really worked!—and the tickling sensations of having a thin sheet, part of a pillow, a spongy mattress, some rough carpet, wooden floor boards and a ceiling phase through him, was too much. It was the weirdest, strangest, most mind-numbing thing he had ever done.

But phasing was not entirely without its problems either. The first fright came when his mouth, still giggling, sank into the mattress. For one terrifying moment, Charlie found it impossible to breathe. His mirth came to a sudden stop as a visceral panic flashed through him, until, a few seconds later, his mouth met the clear air under his bed. He immediately sucked in a huge lungful, held it, then screwed his eyes tightly shut for the duration of his head's passage through the bedroom floor.

As soon as he felt his head was in the clear, he opened his eyes again and resumed his breathing. But, after a mere fraction of a second of enjoying his face's freedom, he noticed two very strange things. The first happened to be the second curious quality of phasing. Now that his head had at last breathed itself free of the drawing room ceiling, there was nothing solid between him and the floor below. However, Charlie realised with a start he was floating in the air, or rather, that he was drifting very slowly downwards *through* the air towards the floor. But he had no time to think about how that could be, because the other strange thing was the sight of his twin brother, entangled—if that is the right word—in the glass fronted, oak cabinet their foster parents had told them never to touch. It was full of delicate looking plates and saucers and cups, each of which was incalculably valuable.

It looked like Ben was trying to speak—he was certainly staring pleadingly at Charlie—but because the lower half of his face was phased inside an expensive looking plate, Charlie could not understand what his twin was trying to say. It also happened that one of Ben's legs was sticking out at an angle from the cabinet's lower doors, its bare foot already phased through the carpet, already out of sight, making it look as if the cabinet had suddenly grown a human limb, in blue and white striped pyjamas.

Ben's lips, protruding oddly from the decorated china of that especially expensive looking plate, were making funny little movements, rather like fish lips peeking out from a solid white pond. They were also, along with the rest of him, steadily slipping

downwards. Ben was still phasing, sinking down into the foundations of the house, down—Charlie supposed in alarm—into the wormy, beetly soil below! When would he stop? Could he stop?

“Ben!” whispered Charlie in fright, not sure if his brother could hear him, suddenly worried he was about to lose him forever. But his fear, as quick as electricity, caused an idea to light up inside him, and before he could mull it over even a little, he mouthed it to Ben’s disappearing eyes.

“Press Impervious!”

To make his mouthed command as clear as possible to Ben, Charlie exaggeratedly pressed his own impervious button, and promptly crashed to the floor with a dull thump. Had not his worried concentration been on his sinking brother, he would have noticed that his fall had not hurt him in the least, even though his right elbow had just slammed against the edge of a thick teak coffee table. Indeed, he never had time to marvel at how undamaged he was, because one heartbeat after he had regained his balance in a crouched position between the table and the sofa, there was an almighty explosion.

Right in front of his eyes, the highly valuable item, along with a good portion of the floor beneath it, exploded into a million glittering pieces, twinkling in the moonlight that shone into the room through the curtainless windows. Charlie flinched and threw up his arms to protect himself, completely forgetting he could not be hurt at all. Shards of glass and wood and porcelain bounced harmlessly off him. Half a second later, the explosion was over, and the rain of debris came to a stop. Not knowing what to expect, Charlie lowered his arms and looked up to see what had happened.

There, hunched in the crater left behind by the explosion, Ben, like Charlie, was starting to uncurl himself from the defensive, frightened posture he had assumed at the devastatingly loud, bomb-like noise. He glanced over at Charlie sheepishly.

“This isn’t ... too ... bad,” he said desperately, surveying the

devastation around him in mounting panic, although a large part of him was relieved to still be alive.

But there was no chance to discuss or analyse the situation any deeper than Ben's short, over-hopeful assessment, nor to work out what to do, because the next noise the twins heard was the rapid rumbling of two quite large, late middle-aged people running, top speed, down the stairs. Charlie and Ben looked at each other once, knew what the other was thinking, and pressed their invisibility buttons. A split second after they had disappeared from one another's sight, their foster parents burst in.

Mr and Mrs Holloway took two steps into the living room and came to a dead stop. With a shaking hand, Mrs Holloway reached beside her and turned on the lights.

"What the...?" Mr Holloway could hardly believe his eyes.

"A bomb?" offered Mrs Holloway uncertainly. "But who would want to bomb our cabinet?"

The walls and ceiling of their living room, as well as the upholstery of their sofas and armchairs, were all studded with shards of glass and china. There were broken bits of glass, china and wood, as well as a light smattering of concrete dust and rubble, all over the carpet. It really did look like a bomb had exploded their glass fronted oak cabinet.

Then Mr Holloway remembered the twins. "Charlie and Ben!" he whispered urgently, staring at his wife.

Mrs Holloway responded silently with a startled, fearful look, turned on her heel, and ran back up the stairs. For the few seconds Mr Holloway felt himself to be alone in the room, he simply rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head in continuing disbelief. It didn't make any sense. Who would want to bomb their oak cabinet?

"They're GONE!!" came a scream from upstairs, shrilly jolting Mr Holloway from his troubled thoughts. After a little shudder, he turned and followed the source of his wife's scream up the stairs, fearful of what he would find.

The twins were alone again. Simultaneously, they depressed their invisibility buttons, appearing in front of each other with the exact same expression of worry on their faces.

“Now what?” asked Ben, climbing out of the rubble-strewn crater he had created. “How are we going to get out of this one?”

“We run,” said Charlie simply. He then walked over to his brother and placed his hand on his brother’s shoulder. “We go on the run.”

Chapter 3

Charlie's instructions might not always be good ones, they might not always work out the way anticipated, but were mostly clear, and gave the twins direction and focus when needed. His latest was most definitely understandable, and of course gave them a direction, albeit one which took them out of their pretty new home and into the uncertain night. The trouble was, Ben wasn't at all sure he liked the sound of it. He preferred ideas like: trying to brew Spiderman's web-slinging solution from egg white, flour, melted bubble gum and glue; or inventing time travel; or building a rocket to take them to the furthest reaches of the galaxy; or designing a lift that went up and down *and* left and right. He couldn't quite recall one as dramatic, nor even as simple, as his brother's latest brain-wave to just run away. Forever. And Ben, sort of, you know, *quite* liked his foster parents, actually, so there was that ...

Charlie could read Ben's face like a book. He knew he had to say something convincing if he wanted his brother to sign up to life on the road. To the sounds of their foster parents calling out their names and running around frantically upstairs, Charlie quickly built his case.

"The belts work!" he whispered hotly. "It's not like we'd be in any danger or anything."

"CHAARLIEEEE! BEN!! Are you hurt!?! Hellooo!!?"

Charlie counted their recent successes off on his fingers. "We've already been invisible and impervious, and phased through ... through ... well, just about everything there is!"

Sounds of heavy-footed, panicked running from room to room...

"Every button we press works! Life on our own'll be easy! What is there to worry about when you can do anything! We can fly, and we'll be as strong as anything, and we can ..."

Sounds of two adults running downstairs, then unbolting and opening the front door. "BEN! CHARLIEEEE! Where are you!?"

Pausing for a fraction of a second, Charlie shared another brain-wave with his brother. “We can work it all out much quicker if we just press our Intelligence buttons. C’mon Ben, let’s see what these puppies can do.”

Charlie pressed his Intelligence button. As soon as he had done so, a number of things became clear to him in rapid succession. The first was that they could indeed, as he had just suggested, survive very easily on their own, equipped with belts of such stupendous power. The powers of Flight, Phase and Invisibility alone would be enough to get them anywhere they wanted—with careful planning *completely* unnoticed—, for example, into restaurants and supermarkets for food, hotels and houses for rest.

Next, the strange details of phasing the twins had just experienced suddenly made sense. Phasing not only worked through solid objects like beds, floors and cabinets, where of course there was nothing to breathe, but also through gaseous matter like air, making floating possible. A further realisation informed Charlie—and all this was occurring to him far faster than you can possibly read or think it—that a person in phase mode could actually swim through the air, as well as through walls and ceilings etc., provided he or she made enough of an effort with his arms and legs. Put simply, when phasing, it is as if everything were made of water, albeit water that actually went right through you, as if you were a sponge. Following on from this deduction, it was clear that you could ‘run-swim’ upwards through the air—though painfully slowly—to get, for example, into the upper floors of a house without having to use the stairs. Should you want to do such a thing. Or the reverse of that, come to think of it.

The final realisation he had, was that his foster parents were about to decide to call the police—in less than two minutes he reckoned—as soon as they had checked all the rooms, got over their shock and come sufficiently to their senses. But before he could communicate any of this to his brother, Ben, still frightened by the destruction he had wrought, pressed his own Intelligence

button.

Charlie watched Ben's eyes closely, as, behind them, Ben's brain burst into turbo, and raced through all the thoughts, he guessed, Charlie himself had just had. Half a second later, Charlie got the reaction he was hoping for.

"Let's go," whispered Ben, and gestured towards the rear of the house. They didn't need to discuss for a second why the back garden was the wiser escape route.

Just then, they heard the noise of the door to the adjoining room being opened, so waited a few seconds while their foster parents briefly searched that room—still calling out their names in frightened voices—then began.

The twins strode to the wall adjoining the dining room. In unison, they pressed their phase buttons. Limbs straining furiously, they phased through the wall to the next room—the dining room—made sure their feet were not 'underground', pressed Impervious, and leaned quietly against the wall they had just phased through.

Mr and Mrs Holloway had almost completed their search of the rambling house. Charlie and Ben stood still and silent for half a minute or so, to give their foster parents enough time to check the back garden and finally conclude the twins were gone, that all there was left to do was call the police, then resumed their escape.

As quietly as they could, the twins crept to the windows overlooking the back garden, peeked out into the moon-shadowed night, saw no one, pressed their Phase buttons, and pumped through to the outside world. Once outside and clearly above all solid matter, they pressed their Invisibility buttons. They waited again, just to be extra-sure no one was around, or about to burst into the garden.

So far, it had been an interesting night. In the space of a few short minutes they had been tickled from sleep by a glowing blue-green alien, who had had neither hands nor feet and but one facial feature; entrusted with a pair of belts which seemed to be made of solid air, a pair of belts which empowered their wearers with eight

incredible abilities, and became an invisible part of you when worn. They had promptly tried them out, and in so doing had accidentally exploded their foster parents' favourite antique cabinet along with all its contents, as well as some of the living room floor. And then, as if that wasn't quite enough already, they had chosen a life on the run, homeless and free. What on earth would happen next?

What were they going to do now? They were dressed in nothing but pyjama bottoms. They weren't even wearing slippers, let alone sensible shoes. Thankfully though, being July, it was a warm night, and as luck would have it, cloudless. At least they weren't going to freeze to death. Not yet anyway.

Charlie grinned, and pressed his Impervious button. "This is going to be sooo cool!" he whispered, his eyes widening. "We're totally free! Set for life! No more worries about anything!" He stepped away from the house and looked at his brother, eager Ben join in with his bubbling excitement at the fun-filled future he saw stretched out in front of them.

"Er, Ben mate, do us a favour and make yourself visible, there's a good lad!"

Ben said nothing. He wanted to know what to do next, that is, that very minute, and then what they were going to do after that, and after that too. It was he, after all, who had exploded the cabinet. It was therefore his fault they were in the garden in the dead of night dressed only in blue and white striped cotton pyjama bottoms, homeless, shoeless, topless, bedless ... He his Intelligence button again. Half a second later he was armed with a list of suggestions, which he promptly rattled off to his brother at a rate of knots.

"We need clothes, food and shelter. The safest thing would be to get the first two from the same place. It minimises the risks. That makes Marks & Spencer the perfect choice. The one in Banbury where Mr Holloway bought us these pyjamas is nearest. They have food there too, although all those fresh packed sandwiches and

wraps might have been thrown away already, or put into cooler storage for the night. And we know how to get there too. It's not far from here in that direction," he pointed over Charlie's shoulder. "We can fly there in no time at all. As for finding two empty beds in the same room in a secure house, that will just have to be trial and error. We can phase in and out of houses until we find one that meets our needs. I think that sort of pattern will probably shape our—"

Charlie burst out laughing, rudely cutting Ben off in his prime. But Ben's reactions were lightning fast. His hand shot out and covered his brother's mouth in a flash, smothering his laughter before it could really get going.

"Keep quiet," whispered Ben quickly, "we need to keep our powers secret, as well as our being on the run. Being on the run at thirteen years of age attracts attention, and being this powerful is dangerous. People are not going to like it. They'll find it scary. We're going to have to travel incognito. And stay that way, actually." Ben thoughts were springing up left, right and centre, like corn popping in a hot pan.

Charlie batted Ben's hand from his mouth. "You don't know what you sound like," he said, stepping back from his fast talking sibling. "Like a robot or something, or a computer... It sounds weird."

"We have to be careful," Ben repeated, trying to speak more slowly, but secretly enjoying the crystal clear thrill of super-intelligence.

"Whatever," retorted Charlie, keen to begin their adventure. He looked up into the night sky, feeling fearless, took a dramatic step away from his brother and pressed his Flight button.

"Let's ride!" he commanded, throwing his fist dramatically to the starry sky above. But then, still very much with both feet on the ground and staring studiously at his belly: "Er... How does this one ... work?"

He didn't know how to make himself fly, even though he knew the belt's other functions had all worked straight away. He

continued studying the silvery buttons adorning his stomach muscles, as if they would answer his question, but of course it was Ben, still in intelligence-mode, who obliged.

“You activate flight with a deliberate act of consciousness,” he said matter-of-factly, before pressing his own Flight button and taking off at speed, up into the night air.

“Wait for me!” called Charlie, who, having just about understood his brother’s instruction, shot after his identical twin, who was already making his way to Marks & Spencer, as the twin flies.

Well, if phasing was the weirdest thing the twins had ever experienced, flying was by far the most wonderful, the most exhilarating, the most beautiful. Out from the ink-deep shadow of their foster parents’ house, lit only by the glowing half-moon, watching bluish gardens, streets and fields roll by beneath them, with an attentive audience of stars glittering above, Charlie and Ben experienced feelings of freedom and joy we can only struggle to imagine. To fly unassisted is a dream almost all humans share, a wish most of us would dearly like fulfilled, but to us it will never happen. They were actually doing it, it was really happening to them, but was so amazing, so fantastical, so preposterous, that even as it was happening, they could hardly believe it themselves.

With a mere effort of will, Charlie—by this point in seventh-heaven—accelerated and caught up with Ben. After flashing his brother an excited smile, and no longer able to contain himself, he then unleashed a long, loud shout of unbridled joy. Such animal utterances are notoriously difficult to spell, looking sillier on the page than they sound in real life, but, at risk of sullyng the divine, Charlie’s went something like this:

“Woooooooh-hooooaaa-wwrraaaaah!!”

“Spot oooooooooon!” bellowed Ben.

Spontaneously, they began to swoop and dive, to turn looping somersaults, to chase one another through the air like young swifts in late summer. It was indescribable fun, quite impossible to appreciate unless you too happen to have played chase while flying

around in a star-studded, moonlit sky. Dreams do not come close.

“Impervious!” commanded Charlie.

Before Ben could process Charlie’s latest suggestion, his brother, whom he had been at that moment about to catch, tumbled down and away from him like a stone, screaming with a prickly mix of terror and excitement. The effect was dizzying, bringing home with a sharp slap just how high they had flown. Their aerial antics had taken them a few hundred metres upwards, so the ground was a long way down. Trees, hedges and fields were as small as when you look out of a plane window a little after take-off. And Charlie, the only family Ben had, was plummeting through that frightening height straight towards a thicket of trees, which stood at the border of two large fields.

Ben’s stomach flipped inside-out in shock. He dived after Charlie with the immediate thought of saving him—it looked for all the world as if he were falling to his death! In the next instant however, Ben realised what a cool—if extremely daring—idea his brother had had, and, with a large flutter of fear, depressed his own Impervious button.

Gravity grabbed hold of him and hurled him after his twin with break-neck force. It was a terrifying sensation. The difference between being in control of where you are going and how you get there, and hurtling straight downwards like a nine stone bullet with flailing limbs, was enormous. Within a second, Ben was screaming with the same mix of terror and excitement as his brother. Not only that—he had to fight, with everything he had, the need—the desperate, fearful, almost overwhelming need—to reactivate flight.

The wind roared in his ears, the sounds of his screaming intermingled with his brother’s in the rushing air. The ground raced towards him at such speed that his descent made no real sense, being too fast to properly process. Everything, while sharply focussed, was somehow a blur. Ben’s finger ached to press the flight button, and as Charlie crashed through the treetops, and the

dark trees swallowed him without a trace, and when Ben's screaming died in his throat because he could no longer hear Charlie's, his fear at last got the better of him. He tried to reactivate Flight. But he could not move his arm accurately enough—the rushing wind made it flap too wildly. Then it was too late; whatever fate had just befallen Charlie was about to befall Ben. He closed his eyes and fought to pull in his limbs, as panic claimed him.

A detonation of leaves, then a battery of thumping, as gnarled branches struck Ben on his head, his legs, his arms, his ribs, his face. His body snapped in a wild, jolting tangle this way and that, as he pin-balled his way down through the trees, folding and unfolding as chance collisions willed it. He kept his eyes tightly shut, expecting at every passing moment the loud arrival of bright pain, but there came none. And then, with a deep wallop, it was over. He was at last on the ground, opening his eyes and breathing in some of the dirt and dust his landing had just kicked up. He felt completely unharmed.

The first thing he could make out was Charlie standing over him, a vague silhouette amongst the lightless trees, his hands on his hips.

“How totally, totally cool WAS THAT!!”

Watched by Charlie, Ben got to his feet, checking for any signs of pain or damage, but he was fine. He could not identify a single scratch, nor even the tiniest bruise, could not detect the faintest ache. Indeed, the only evidence he had just fallen hundreds of feet, crashed through a clump of trees and thumped hard into the ground, was that he clearly remembered having done so. That and the mud now stuck to his back. (However, in his excitement he had failed to notice that his pyjama-bottoms had been ripped to shreds). So, more slowly than his brother—who already seemed completely at ease with the experience, as if he needed no time whatsoever to digest the event—Ben recovered his senses and began to thrill to what had just taken place. Being impervious

really was very, very cool. If not, cooler.

“YEAH! That was so wicked! This is the stuff, man! This is the ... You can’t even ...”

But the coursing adrenalin had just reached Ben’s brain, flushing out all words. Suddenly he was wildly excited, out of control. As the first ripples of laughter fluttered to life in his stomach, he swung a fist at his brother’s shadowed face, connecting squarely with his nose. But he felt only that contact had occurred, not the expected throb of pain in the connecting knuckles. He knew the punch had been good though—he saw Charlie’s head rock sharply back.

“You punch like a girl!” shouted Charlie, before recovering his balance and throwing himself, rugby-tackle style, at his identical twin.

The next instant they were on the ground, a multi-jointed bundle of fists, elbows and knees, punching, kneeling, scratching, hair-pulling and laughing, all with equal vigour.

“I’ve got an idea,” mumbled Charlie after a while, prising himself free of his brother’s fierce grip. “Stop a second, don’t hit me...”

He got to his feet. Ben followed suit.

“I’m gonna press my Strength button, but you stay impervious, okay?”

Ben nodded.

“Was that a nod? I can’t see...”

“Yup,” said Ben. “I’m ready.”

“Right then, get a load of this!”

In one fluid movement, Charlie pressed his Strength button, stepped forward, bent down, grabbed his brother’s left ankle and yanked him by it bodily into the air. Ben was as easy to lift as a rag-doll, but as floppy too—his head thumped into Charlie’s thigh as he flipped upside down.

“Ow!” shouted Charlie, no longer in Impervious mode. “That hurt! Right then... Pick the bones out of THIS!”

He planted his feet more firmly on the ground, and then began to

swing his brother around his head, as easily as had Ben been a lasso. Of course this meant smashing Ben's head into the boughs of one or two trees, but it was the trees which came off worse. Then, preparing things for what he really had in mind, he tilted the angle of the circle he was swinging his brother through, and hurled him with all his strength—all his super-strength—skywards, straight through the thick canopy of branches, twigs and leaves over their heads.

Had it not been for those branches, twigs and leaves, Ben would have been tossed clear out of the county, such was the force behind Charlie's throw. As it was, Ben was slowed down by having to break through several thick branches on his way out of the copse's canopy, so only attained a height of about one hundred feet before starting to fall back to earth. As he started to fall, he had an idea of his own.

Charlie raced out of the copse to see where Ben would land. Though it was night, the moon lit things up just enough for Charlie to be able to locate his brother. Or so he thought. He would have been able to locate him, had his brother actually been polite enough to land somewhere.

"Bloody Nora!" muttered Charlie, scratching his head. "That must have been some throw."

Had he thrown his brother over the horizon?

He looked all around, but could see no sign of Ben anywhere. And then it struck him. Ben must have pressed his Flight button. Charlie quickly looked up to scan the skies, fully expecting to see his brother hovering a few feet above his head, grinning like an idiotic angel. But there too, there was no sign of his far-flung twin.

What had happened? For a moment he couldn't make any sense of it. Had Ben fallen somewhere, then immediately pressed his Invisibility button? Wouldn't Charlie have been able to make out a cloud of dust in that case? Was Ben in fact creeping up on him this very minute, hoping to give him the fright of his life? A sudden shudder ran over Charlie's body, as the powerful feeling that Ben

was somewhere near took hold of him. His senses prickled. As quickly as he could, he depressed his Impervious button, fearing impact at any moment.

“IMPERVIOUS!”

Charlie turned one hundred and eighty degrees to face the source of the cry, and saw Ben speeding over the tops of the trees, arms stretched forwards, fists bunched, his blonde-mop waving madly in the wind of his flying, heading straight for him. He had just enough time for one short wince before Ben crashed in to him, double punching him in the chest, flattening him. It was an impressive move.

Charlie climbed to his feet to the sound of Ben’s laughter.

“Nice one, Ben,” he said, dusting himself down.

That was when he noticed for the first time that his pyjama bottoms were ruined. One glance over at his brother informed him Ben’s were too. Fortunately, their white y-fronts were still intact, so they weren’t completely exposed, but it was still embarrassing nevertheless.

“I think we’d better get on to Marks & Spencer’s,” said Charlie, pointing at Ben’s barely covered legs.

“I see what you mean,” said Ben, looking down at his own tatty pyjama bottoms. “Er ... which way was it again?”

Chapter 4

When a horse is very afraid, its eyes roll back in its skull, exposing wide sickles of blood-marbled, grey-white eyeball. It was this nightmarish image that roused Phil Shaw from a deep slumber, the sounds of disturbed whinnying having injected the vision into his dream.

Something was wrong with the horses. In all his long years of running the riding school, Phil Shaw had never heard noises like it, and he had worked with horses since his childhood. As he climbed out of his bed, blurry eyed, dizzy with fatigue, trying unsuccessfully to make out the time, the first thought he had was that a wolf was prowling the stables—the horses sounded that scared. As he pulled on his trousers and buttoned up his shirt—still a little wobbly on his feet—the frightening, yet more reasonable idea that a rabid fox might be on the loose, popped into his groggy head. It roused him like a dose of salts. He didn't even bother putting on his shoes. He ran out of the house in high alarm, heading straight for the stables.

What he saw when he reached the flagstone courtyard the stables ringed, was not at all what he had expected, and though it was in some ways less worrying than a rabid fox, the scene would haunt his sleep for the rest of his days. As fate would have it, because he had no shoes on, his approach was not heard by the young, blond-haired boys he saw 'at play' with two of his horses. Shaw was so shocked by what he saw, he ducked behind a stable wall and watched, wide-eyed, as an oddly harmless, yet profoundly upsetting spectacle played out before him.

Shortly before sunrise, an hour or so after the causes of his future nightmares had taken their leave of his horses, Phil Shaw was losing his patience with the police officer who had been doing his best to record the strange events into the little black notebook he was holding.

"I'm sorry to have to keep going over this, sir, but your account

of the disturbance does stretch the imagination a little.” The policeman had just caught sight of the complainant’s face, and could tell the man was getting angry. “I want to make sure I have this absolutely correct. When you say ‘flying twins’, you’re talking about two human boys, between ten and thirteen years old, who flew off like birds—”

“NOT like birds. They just rose into the air as if they were on strings. There was no flapping!”

“No flapping,” repeated the policeman slowly, as he wrote the two words down in his notebook. He was tired, and hadn’t been paying as close attention as he should have been, but the man’s story lacked any credibility. He was obviously a nutcase. “And were there any strings, sir? Or some other form of assistance? Humans can’t actually fly unassisted ... you know ...”

“No strings I could see,” sighed Phil Shaw. “I can’t work out what they would have been tied to anyway... There’s nothing up there but sky.” Without looking up, he waved an arm above his head.

“And you’re positive the boys flew away, sir? Remember that it was dark and you had just woken up. And that you were scared.”

“Well the whole thing is so ... so ... incomprehensible ... I almost doubt it myself, but you can’t mistake something like that. What do young boys do that isn’t flying, but looks exactly like rising up into the air and then, just, flying away? I can’t think of any other explanation for it, and believe me, I am really trying to... Besides, it wasn’t only that they flew that was so disturbing, so ... impossible.”

“That’s right. You said...” the policeman leafed lazily through his notepad with a sigh of his own, ‘they were impervious to damage’ And later: ‘One of them got trampled by Chestnut good and proper, but acted like he was being tickled by a playful parent. When he stood up again he didn’t have a mark on him.’ Would you care to expand on that, sir?”

“I would not.”

“Please, sir. I don’t want to have to force a urine sample out of you ... er, if you know what I mean.”

And so it went on. At last the police officer was satisfied he had recorded the complainant’s story accurately, and, after stopping for a coffee and roll at a roadside café, returned to Banbury Police Station to type it up. But his shift finished before his report was complete, so he headed home for some needed sleep. When he came back for the night shift later that same day, however, events had developed to such an extent, his thinking on the case was flipped abruptly on its head.

The incident at Shaw’s Riding School would simply have been added to the quickly growing file on the most explosive and far reaching investigation Banbury Police had ever conducted, were it not for one little detail. PC Webb would have dutifully performed his role had his attention not been caught by one innocuous fact. One otherwise tedious, humdrum little detail, without which the outcome of this tale might have been very, very different.

*

Later that day, Mr and Mrs Holloway watched on in alarm as their front room was combed over by a four-man team of young forensics experts, none of who were friendly, none of who wanted a cup of tea. The poor couple were forbidden access to their room until further notice. It was the scene of a crime and as such did not, at least until the police were finished with it, belong to them. An ugly black and yellow striped tape gated the doorway. And they had only just been allowed back into their home after finally receiving the ‘all clear’ from the bomb squad. This after having endured seemingly endless hours of questioning at the police station by the police, two rude women from Social Services, and Dr Greene, the head of Daisy Fields Orphanage. Later that evening, after the forensics team had called it a day, the door to the room would be padlocked shut. A chunky metal mechanism had already been screwed crudely into the beautiful wood of the door and its frame. All in all, it had been a terrible day.

No one had said so directly, but all the people who had questioned them had implied Mr and Mrs Holloway were at best useless, at worst murderers. They had had two young boys in their care for a little over two weeks, and then, in one night, 'lost' them both, and somehow exploded a large item of furniture. Their protestations of innocence were greeted with stony faces.

But no one could prove a thing, no one could explain one single element of what had happened. The most likely explanation—kidnapping—had been ruled out. No signs of break-in, no note, no contact made, and the Holloways were not rich enough to make it worth the risk. The whole thing was an awful mess, and there was still no sign of the boys anywhere in Oxfordshire. The worst of it was the police had assumed the twins had not run away, because all of their possessions were still in their bedroom, their toothbrushes still in their bathroom. In their eyes, Charlie and Ben had therefore either been murdered, or something yet more sinister. The alert would soon be given in the neighbouring counties.

That the forensics team would find no evidence of any explosive material of any kind anywhere in the house, would only make matters worse for the Holloways. It is a horrible thing to be in the heart of a frightening mystery the relevant authorities cannot even begin to explain. Spontaneously combusting humans are one thing, spontaneously, violently exploding cabinets quite another. Add to that losing two vulnerable boys without a trace, who had been in your nervous care for but a short while, with no signs of struggle or break-in to be found... Well, it was a testing time for them, to say the least. It certainly was not how they had imagined their lives as parents would be.

But even a forensics team does not find everything, not even a crucial piece of evidence. Although, had any of the experts noticed the small blue-green ball of light in the upper left-hand corner of the room, he would first have rubbed his eyes in doubt, and then looked again, concentrating a little harder. But by then the ball

would have disappeared. Besides, no one who had seen it would have been able to link it to anything that had happened, nor to recognise it was mightily pleased with itself, and with how wonderfully well things were developing. They would simply have put it down to stress or fatigue, and forgotten all about it.

The only thing Mr and Mrs Holloway had to go on, was the unusual—in fact, in their short lives as parents, unique—loud and rumbustious night-time behaviour the twins had woken them with shortly before the cabinet had exploded, shortly before their children had disappeared. Was that in some way linked to Charlie's and Ben's mysterious vanishing act? Could it just be a coincidence? Had the twins exploded the cabinet? And if so, how, and why?

They could not begin to answer a single one of their questions.

Chapter 5

It was past midday when Ben finally woke up. He was beside his brother in a large double bed, in the main bedroom of a house they had discovered to be empty using a mixture of Phase and Flight. They had been lucky; it was only the third house they had inspected.

Getting their stolen clothes out of Marks & Spencer on the other hand, had not gone as smoothly. The enormous fun they had had on their first night of true freedom had gone straight to their heads. What with the thrill of being all alone in a large department store, porking out on crisps and taking any clothes they fancied, they had not thought to use their Intelligence buttons, and so had left behind clues they had been there. Then, when it had finally dawned on them they were tired, they made their way back to the warehouse, stolen goods in hand, and pressed their Phase buttons.

Straight away the items they had been holding had slipped through their fingers—literally—and fallen to the floor. While in Phase mode, holding things, as well as picking them up again, was impossible. Not only was the otherwise simple act of grabbing the item impossible, but you also had to ‘tread water’ by pumping your legs frantically up and down, so as not to sink through the floor. Try that while bending to pick something up! Phasing, it seemed, had two significant limitations: you had to work extremely hard to get anywhere, and only what you were wearing phased with you.

The solution to the problem of how to get their new clothes out of Marks & Spencer was of course obvious. They didn’t even have to press their Intelligence buttons to work it out. Wearing multiple pairs of socks and pants, two pairs of jeans and three t-shirts each, Charlie and Ben phased through the loading-bay door, then flew off in search of a bed for the night, or for the day, as it turned out. The birds were already singing and the sun had started to rise.

Ben was the first to open his eyes, groggy and unsure where he was. Before he could make sense of his surroundings, events from

the previous night returned to him in fragments. There were horses kicking and whinnying in a moonlit courtyard, hooves clacking on flagstones; flight over fields far below; a terrifying fall at break-neck speed; zooming low over treetops like Superman; munching happily on salt and vinegar crisps; an explosion of wood, china and glass; and a strange alien creature with no hands and feet handing him ... the belt!

He lifted the covers and looked at his tummy. The buttons were still there, glittering their hypnotic silvery-turquoise up at him. No part of last night had been a dream!

A glorious rush of excitement flooded through him. He looked across at Charlie, who still slumbered on. With a mischievous giggle, Ben depressed his flight button and rose into the air above the bed, rolled over so he was facing downwards, then drifted slightly to the right to hover directly above his brother.

It's a funny thing being identical twins. Other people can't tell you apart, but you know who you are. For example, when you look at your twin you don't think: 'wow, he looks so much like me!'; or 'is that me or him I'm looking at?' Actually, you don't think anything much at all. You're just looking at your brother or sister, whose face you know so well. And that's about it. It's other people who make such a big deal of it, who draw your attention to it the whole time.

From our point of view, with Ben hovering horizontally above his identical twin, it was a pretty weird looking scene, as if a blond-haired boy were gazing down into a magical lake, where his reflection was somehow asleep in bed. But that was not Ben's impression of it at all. He was just looking down at his brother, wondering whether he should act on the wicked idea he had just had. Of course, a blond-haired boy hovering in mid air above a bed is already weird enough, but that's not the point. The point is, what's weird for one person is normal for another, and it's an important one.

Anyway, Ben had decided to go ahead with his Saliva-Alarm, and

to this end was sucking as much spit out of his cheeks as he could. As soon as he had collected enough, he opened his lips to let a clear thread trickle slowly out, watching with growing excitement as it headed for his brother's face. His guess it would land on Charlie's nose was spot on.

At first there was no reaction from his sibling. Ben's saliva landed on the curl of Charlie's right nostril, pooled there for a moment, then trickled down towards the corner of his mouth, without causing so much as a twitch. But then, as saliva-tip touched lip's edge, there was movement. Charlie's lip curled, Elvis-style, his body shuddered (also Elvis-style), then his hand shot out from under the covers to scratch furiously at the itch (not Elvis-style).

The first thing Charlie saw was Ben floating above him, his shaggy mop of thick blond hair dangling downwards, and a thin rope of saliva looping from his brother's mouth down onto his own nose. Ben immediately burst out laughing, thereby flicking the last of the saliva out from his mouth, to flop, wetly, coldly, across Charlie's face and thickly tangled hair. Charlie released a heart-felt cry of disgust, rubbed convulsively at his face with his shoulder, then lunged for his brother.

Ben was too quick. He sped towards the ceiling, staying horizontal, failed to slow down in time. He thumped the back of his head against the ceiling, which cracked. Little bits of white plaster rained down from the cranium shaped divot Ben's skull had just created, sprinkling over Charlie and the double bed directly below.

"Ow!" shouted Ben, rubbing the back of his head.

"Ha!" shouted Charlie, but curled up like a frightened hedgehog as his brother came hurtling towards him. "Hey!"

Charlie had forgotten he and Ben had, for reasons of safety, slept in Impervious mode, just in case something funny happened, so when Ben crashed into him, all knees and elbows, he felt no pain. He quickly shoved his brother off him, grabbed the duvet, and with it rubbed his face and hair as clean as he could.

This called for revenge. Not for any particular moral reason, but because, well, being woken by a wet rope of your brother's smelly spit was disgusting! Pressing his Strength button, Charlie rolled over and grabbed one of Ben's legs just below the knee. Suspecting what was about to happen, Ben quickly depressed his impervious button and wrapped his head in his arms, as he felt himself tossed through the air like an unwanted Action Man. There was an explosion of plasterboard and brick, then Ben landed with a thud on the carpet of an adjoining room. Another bedroom it turned out; he was sprawled beside an empty, single bed. The air was full of brick dust, the floor and furniture peppered with small bits of rubble and a fine, pinkish powder. It was a familiar looking mess. He started laughing, but felt guilty too, like he was in big trouble.

"Oops," said Charlie, now standing at the ragged new hole with a nervous smile stretching his lips.

"Yeah, that Strength button's a bit too strong. This is someone's home Charlie, I saw photos downstairs. When they get back, they're gonna—"

"They're gonna find us gone, is what," interrupted Charlie with an irritated wave of his hand, not liking to dwell on the damage he had done to someone's home. "Let's get going, I fancy a MacDonald's!"

The idea appealed to Ben greatly. They quickly gathered their things and shoved them into a light brown leather bag they noticed on top of a wardrobe. After checking the coast was clear, they left through the front door, invisible. However, the bag they were carrying was visible. It seemed, had you been watching from, say, a neighbour's window, to have magically opened the door on its own, then floated, in a bumpy, swingy kind of way, diagonally across the small garden to a sandy, narrow path, where it turned left to pause in the shade of a large oak. Had your hearing been exceptionally good, you would have heard half a minute or so of eager chattering, then seen two boys materialise out of thin air and float serenely up into the branches of the tree. After a further thirty

seconds you would have seen them fly at speed directly up into the summer sky and out of your sight.

The blue-green ball of light was watching—not that Charlie and Ben noticed—and understood everything it saw. It thought the whole thing was excellently funny, highly entertaining. From its point of view things were going very well. The twins, as it had hoped, were putting on a fine show. Human beings were most certainly the universe’s coolest creatures.

So, around five minutes later, Charlie and Ben were standing outside the MacDonald’s they had seen while searching for a bed for the night. Having hidden their stolen bag with its stolen goods in a dusty old skip nearby, they were now, when invisible, completely undetectable. They didn’t have any money, so, after a quick burst of Intelligence, had come up with the following, brilliant plan:

Walk in behind a normal customer so no one would be disturbed by a door suddenly and mysteriously opening of its own accord;

As silently as possible, traverse the restaurant right up to the counter, then stop;

Determine where area of least activity was, use same as Crossing Point (CP);

Climb over the counter at CP, minding to keep out of way of staff;

Side over to burgers, wait for best moment, grab some; and, finally

Run.

Yes, believe it or not, they worked out that little ripper while in Intelligence mode. I imagine their plan sounds stupid to you—even though you are most likely not in Intelligence mode—but you see, there’s this funny thing about intelligence; it isn’t always used to plan out the most sensible idea. Desire often gets in the way. Charlie and Ben badly wanted a MacDonald’s, and were very hungry. While super-intelligent, they had quickly realised there were far safer ways of getting food, but had decided to take the

risk, because, well, was the risk really that great? Weren't they the most powerful human beings on Earth? In the universe? Charlie certainly thought so, although that alien might be a worthy opponent; if it had made belts like these as give-aways, what else did it have up its sleeve? Assuming it had sleeves. And where was its willy, come to think of it? Or had it been a girl?

Anyway, a couple of worries had emerged from their brief session in Intelligence mode, namely, that the police would be looking for them, would have photographs of them from their foster parents, and that they had left behind evidence of stealing in Marks and Spencer, so perhaps some caution would be sensible. No point inviting unnecessary danger into your life. Staying out of sight was no bother when you could turn yourself invisible, and would help ensure their lives would not be interfered with. Which meant more fun. Which was what it was all about, really.

They made it into the restaurant behind a man dressed in a dark grey suit. Keeping in touch with one another with the softest whispers, they found a quiet spot at the counter, from where they could watch the comings and goings of people buying burgers. There were only two cashiers, teenagers both, one girl, one boy, so there would be plenty of space for the twins on the other side of the counter. With a whispered "Now!" from Charlie, first Ben, then his brother, softly hopped their arses onto the counter, slid across it and down to the other side.

No one seemed to notice their existence.

It was approaching mid-afternoon on a Monday, so the fast-food restaurant was quite empty. The lack of bustle behind the counter meant it was easy for the twins to sidle over to the burger-bay without bumping into to anyone, and yet the very stillness that allowed them their ease of movement, somehow made them feel conspicuous, vulnerable, exposed, even though they were as inconspicuous as the air itself. It was about to take an act of will they had not conceived of in their planning, to reach out their invisible hands and steal the food they so badly wanted.

They had agreed during their planning that, in order to coordinate their actions by the burgers silently, they would hold hands. Charlie was to take the lead, and would give three downward jerks with his to indicate the moment for grabbing had come.

The moment came.

Ben was nervous. His hands were sweating. It was intimidating standing there behind the tills, next to the burgers in a MacDonald's restaurant, about to steal in broad daylight, people all around.

Please don't think Ben a coward. Think of it like this: when you're standing somewhere, maybe at a bus stop, looking across the street, how much of yourself do you see? Hardly anything, right? So if you were invisible while standing at that bus stop, it wouldn't be that obvious to you that you were, would it.

So when Charlie yanked on Ben's hand three times, Ben couldn't go through with it. Suddenly, the whole thing felt terribly wrong.

"Wait!" he whispered.

But too loud. Both teenage employees looked round to see who had just spoken. In fright, Ben looked at the girl, who, he noticed himself noticing, was extraordinarily pretty.

She was looking straight at him! Could she see him?

Ben almost opened his mouth again, almost said "Sorry Miss, I didn't mean to," but somehow kept it shut. Maybe it was Charlie urgently squeezing his hand.

She was looking right into his eyes with an odd expression on her face, a look of knowing someone was there, strange and otherworldly, somehow somewhere else, but at the same time, how could that be? There was no one there! And yet a deeper part of her being was absolutely sure she was looking at someone, she just didn't quite know it with her brain.

The teenage boy had already returned his attention to the restaurant, convinced he had been mistaken, but Ben and the girl were still staring at each other, as if leaning out from separate

universes, as if straining to be heard, as if saying “Who are you?” But at last it was too much, and Ben had to leave. He still had his brother’s hand in his, so pulled him towards the part of the counter they had just crossed. He leaned to where he guessed Charlie’s ear would be and whispered: “I can’t do it. Let’s go.” Then he released Charlie’s hand, leapt over the counter as smoothly as he could, and ran out.

Charlie anxiously watched the glass door swing open by itself, then swing shut, and knew his brother had left him. He looked desperately around to see what people would do, if anyone would shout an alarm or call the police, but no one did anything. They just carried on eating as if nothing had happened. Then, both cashiers walked round to the cooking area at the back, talking in hot whispers about something or other. Charlie was suddenly alone behind the counter.

Without daring to think twice, he ran over to the burgers, grabbed two Big Macs, put them down on the counter, jumped over it, picked them up again, and ran.

When Charlie ran though, people noticed—he made more noise than Ben, smacking his new stolen trainers down loudly on the clean MacDonald’s floor-tiles. But what the five or six eating customers saw were two floating, bobbing-around Big Mac boxes heading for the door, not a young, blond-haired thief. So while it was certainly an amazing sight, they did not think something foul was afoot. Why would they? Invisibility is impossible, everybody knows that! So they thought it was a trick, part of a commercial maybe, and looked around for cameras. After the door had opened—from their point of view by itself—and swung shut again, one customer actually clapped. A few bewildered shrugs later everyone returned to their meal, excited they had been part of an up-coming TV commercial, and looked forward to seeing themselves in it.

Outside on the street, for the first time in his short life, Charlie felt keenly alone; Ben was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 6

"I'm telling you, there was someone there!"

"No, Claire. I am not blind. There is no such thing as ghosts. There was no one there." Ian moved his hands in mock sign-language, and mouthed, very carefully, each word he spoke, as if talking to a deaf person.

Claire rolled her eyes at his mockery. "I was looking right into someone's eyes. I was. He was a boy, maybe thirteen. No way a ghost ... funny coloured eyes, frightened ..." Claire drifted off into her own thoughts.

"You're weird," said Ian. "W E I R D."

"SHOOOOOOOOP!"

"Gotta go, there's a customer! COMING!"

Ian went off to serve whoever was waiting at the tills, leaving Claire standing by the deep fat fryers, one of which started beeping shrilly. The staff in the kitchen were all looking at her.

"Your burgers are burning," she said, and turned to head for the staff room.

"Them is fries, Claire!"

"Whatever."

Five minutes later, five minutes of trying to piece together the components of an unseen face, Claire watched Ian walk in and tell her there was a young kid at the tills asking for a girl with wavy brown hair.

"What!?"

"At the tills right now, asking for you I reckon. Never seen him before in my life. He's acting all nervous."

"What's he look like?"

"Little, maybe twelve or something. You know, like an annoying little kid. So are you coming or what?"

Claire got up and followed Ian back to the tills. As soon as the boy came into view she stopped walking and her breath caught in her throat. Goose-bumps prickled to life from scalp to foot. It was

the face she had 'felt' just five minutes ago. Somehow she recognised it. She recognised it as well as she would her own brother's, and yet at the same time, knew she had never laid eyes on it.

The boy saw her and waved her over. Whatever it was he wanted, it appeared to be urgent. As if no longer in control of her own will she obeyed the young, blond-haired creature, and crossed the remaining distance between them.

"You've got to come," he said after a nervous silence, and nodded his head back towards the entrance.

"OK," said Claire passively, uncertainly, still empty-headed. She turned to Ian, not sure what she was about to say. "Cover for me?"

Ian was starting to get suspicious. "Are you having me on? 'Cos there ain't no way I'm covering your whole shift!"

Claire simply nodded that she had understood, then walked through the gated swing-hatch into the restaurant. The boy was already at the door, holding it open impatiently. She followed him out of MacDonald's, right along the high street for a way, and then over the wide crossing towards the group of trees near the Welcome Inn. Her legs were weak and her heart was pounding. When she saw another identical looking boy waiting there beside a battered old skip, staring at her intently, she almost stumbled to her knees in shock.

"This is my brother, Ben," said the first boy, pointing at the other one, "Ben Rhodes. I'm Charlie." He stabbed a finger defiantly at his chest, but would not raise his eyes to hers.

Claire was staring at Ben now and knew he was the one she had "seen" in MacDonald's by the burger-bay. It was a feeling unlike any other she had known.

"You're his twin," she heard herself say. "Identical." Her voice sounded flat and uninterested. The tone did not reflect her emotional state at all. She could only wait passively for some sense to be made of the swirling confusion that was engulfing her, drowning her out. What happened next did not help at all.

Ben, who had been standing with his hands behind his back, suddenly brought them round to reveal two Big Mac cartons.

“Sorry miss,” he said, looking at her earnestly, “but we was hungry. You can have them back. We didn’t spit on them or anything, didn’t even open the lids. You can still eat them. Or sell them.”

Claire started to feel frightened. She could muster no thoughts that might help her understand why fear, of all things, was the first clear feeling to have emerged from her confusion, nor to slow its rapid spread, so when she spoke next, her voice quavered and rose dramatically in pitch and speed.

“Would someone please tell me what’s going on!”

But there was no answer. She watched helplessly as Ben turned to his brother, his face shifting into a burning plea for help. As one, the twins moved towards each other, then began whispering frantically. Claire could not make out a single word until Charlie shouted:

“We can’t tell her! We just can’t!”

Then Ben seemed to wrench himself from his brother’s presence before walking right up to Claire. He thrust the two Big Mac cartons into her midriff, looking directly into her eyes with hot familiarity. Powerless to resist, Claire took the cartons. They were still warm.

“We can do things!” he whispered suddenly, as if making a confession, then turned sharply round to look at his brother, seeming to fear a reprisal. None came. He looked at her again one last time before turning and walking off at pace. Caught off guard by his brother’s unannounced departure, Charlie dived clumsily into the skip, grabbed a brown leather bag that must have been hidden there earlier, and ran after Ben.

Claire watched silently as the two boys receded from her, their blond heads bobbing up and down together in perfect synchrony. Just before she was about to turn around, Ben rocked his head back and shouted loudly into the blue sky:

“You’re really pretty!”

To the sounds of boyish giggles, shocked to the point of numbness, Claire returned to the MacDonald’s restaurant that was her place of work. She walked past Ian without a word, aware of his eyes following her closely, went straight back into the staff room and sat down.

She put the Big Mac cartons on the white plastic table. She stared at them and began to think. As she started fitting the pieces of the puzzle together, the picture that emerged only brought her fear more firmly to the surface.

They had stolen the food because they were hungry. She and Ian had been right there as it had taken place, had been alerted by a noise, looked right at them, and yet seen nothing.

We can do things! What had he meant? Invisibility? How could they have taken those burgers out of the shop and not be noticed by a single person? Impossible!

Of course it’s impossible! They obviously just bought the two Big Macs from the next nearest MacDonald’s, came here, made her think she and Ian had heard someone speak, then ... somehow ... got her to believe an invisible blond-haired boy was staring at her, before then... No! Impossible!

As if slapping her hand across her mouth, Claire clamped down on her thoughts as hard as she could, got up and went back to the tills, where Ian seemed to be eagerly awaiting her return. She looked at her oldest friend with what she believed at that moment was the most relaxed and casual of glances, but something failed, and her mouth betrayed her.

“Ben has the most beautiful eyes.”

It was then she realised they were turquoise.

*

“It’s not like they’d have missed ‘em, it’s not like the belts feed us, it’s not like we’re not human animals any more! It’s not as if I’m not the hungriest boy ALIVE!”

Ben stopped walking. He was hungry too. They had been

walking without knowing where they were headed for a few minutes, elated after the strangely exciting encounter with a pretty girl. Ben in particular felt, for the first time since running away, the thrill of true freedom. He felt grown-up, in control, powerful, beyond harm. He had decided on a course of action and followed it through—he was becoming a man. At last the uncertainty and worry that had been buzzing quietly at the back of his mind had evaporated. He wanted to do stuff, try stuff out, anything, everything.

“We haven’t pressed our Speed buttons yet!”

He flashed his brother a big smile, pressed his Speed button and dashed off through a gap in the hedgerow beside them so fast, Charlie barely noticed him go. In fact, were it not for the puff of dust Ben’s running off left behind, Charlie would have thought Ben had pressed the Invisibility button by mistake.

“Bloody Nora!” said Charlie, forgetting his hunger for the second time that day, again because of Ben. He pressed his own Speed button, and the whole world slowed to a virtual standstill.

He stepped across to look into the field, and saw Ben running there at what looked like normal speed, although he had, in that very short time, already covered a great distance, maybe four hundred metres. But then Charlie’s head was turned by the now ultra-deep rumbling sound of the car that had been approaching. He watched in amazement as it crept passed him at a rate not unlike honey being poured from a jar.

Inside were a driver and a passenger—a mother and son he guessed. The young boy’s mouth was opening in a weird, camel-like way, taking shape oh-so-slowly, forming some unreadable word as the car trickled by. He walked over to the passenger window and knocked on it, wondering if something was wrong, and noticed that his hair started behaving as if it were in a strong wind, a strong wind blowing slowly. His t-shirt too was now clinging to his body in little, heaving undulations, rippling slovenly across him at a snail’s pace.

Mother and son reacted to his knock in the same, disturbing way. Charlie, walking slowly along beside the car now, looking through the passenger window, couldn't understand their behaviour until it was too late. The woman and boy started turning their heads towards him, their eyes widening. As they turned, their faces changed from lazy-looking relaxed, to terror, so slowly it was creepy. Then he began to hear the screams that were leaving those two sluggishly opening mouths. They were deep, muffled rumbles, and the emotion the monstrous, heavy noises carried with them seemed all the more horrible for it, nightmarish and demented. Suddenly, Charlie was frightened too.

Almost imperceptibly, the car started drifting away from him, perhaps even getting a little faster (it was hard to tell). Soon it had reached the middle of the road, and soon after that crossed the middle, only to straighten out, as if planning to carry on in the wrong lane. Charlie, growing more frightened by the second (or millisecond, to be precise), looked up from the passenger window and down the road, to where another very slow moving car, mere meters away, was trundling along towards them, growling deeply. It was then he finally made sense of what was happening.

Charlie had to act, or the two cars would surely crash. He couldn't estimate the speeds they were travelling, but could imagine people would die and there would be lots of blood. He decided to dash round to the front of the car, get into a stopping position—hands on the car's bonnet, feet firmly planted on the tarmac—then press his Strength button, hoping he would be strong enough to stop it, hoping too the other car, the one headed their way, would be able to drive around them. He looked up again to gauge more accurately the distance still between them, only to notice the oncoming vehicle was a police car. This salient fact made it seem somehow closer.

This was a really serious situation, and now the police were involved. Oddly, it seemed like he had all the time in the world, time in which to have second thoughts, to worry his plan would go

wrong, to worry it was a stupid idea, but, too frightened to work out any alternative, it was this or nothing: act, or watch people get crushed to death in vivid slow motion.

He sprang forward, skipped around the car's front, planted his hands against its front grill, noticed he was still carrying the brown leather bag, put his feet in the best positions for grip and strength, but then, for a few moments, just let the car push him slowly backwards across the tarmac as he gathered courage for the final phase.

To his rear, the deep growl of the approaching car grew slowly louder, accompanied now by the beginnings of some other noise, brassy, angry, insistent. Under his hands he could feel the thick, rumbling strength of the engine that was inexorably pushing him down the road. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and pressed his Strength button.

In a great flash of noise, the normal sounds of roaring engines exploded back to life, as the car's true speed ripped through Charlie's body like a scream. In panic, he pushed at the car with all his might, certain it was running him over, forgetting completely his plan to slow it down as gently as he could. Of course, no longer just a meek, thirteen year old boy, Charlie flung the car upwards and away, but was himself hurled backwards into the verge by the speed he had been travelling. With the help of his superhuman strength, he was able to twist and protect himself enough to survive unharmed his collision with the grass verge and bushes running along it.

A car horn was blasting. Then the sound of metal meeting road crunched through the air. Glass shattered. There was human screaming, tires screeching, Charlie tumbling to a standstill amongst bushes, the leather bag spinning off towards a tree, then a hissing silence.

After a moment of waiting for pain and feeling none, he got up and looked at the scene of the crash. The car he had tried to rescue was on its roof, its windscreen gone, roof buckled, its occupants

dangling in their seat-belts like lifeless puppets. The second car had come to a stop a little further down the road, having luckily hit nothing. Other cars were coming to a halt on both sides of the road. The police car's driver's door opened and an officer stepped out.

Charlie ran towards the upside-down car, his belly a jumble of dread and fragile hope. He had to crawl on his knees to get to the two hanging people, but ignored the policeman's shouted command that he back away. He didn't realise it, but he was mumbling four words over and over:

"I'll get you out I'll get you out I'll get you out ..."

Unaware of any risk to himself, Charlie pushed forwards and reached into the car through the broken windscreen to get hold of the woman's seat-belt. Her hair was fair and long, and lay across the car's ceiling, a messy, mousy pool. With one arm around her shoulders, he ripped the belt from its mooring somewhere above him at the bottom of the driver's seat, and lifted her gently down and away. Then the little boy started screaming again, still trapped. As Charlie laid the woman carefully on the road her eyes flickered open.

"I'll get your son I'm getting your son he's all right I'll get your son you hold on I'll get him I'm strong enough strong enough ..."

He looked up at the policeman, who was staring at him agog, frozen to inactivity by what he was witnessing, then turned back to the upturned car. As before, Charlie reached in to grab the seat-belt with one hand, held the boy with his free arm, then tore the belt from its buckle, whispering "I'll get you out" over and over like a mantra.

Something about Charlie's strength calmed the little boy, who clung on to him for dear life when he finally flopped free. Charlie carried the boy out of the wrecked car and over to his mother, then placed him gently into the woman's open and outstretched arms. There appeared to be no injuries.

"Sorry so sorry I'm sorry I didn't mean it it was an accident an

accident ...”

The policeman had come to his senses. He walked up to Charlie and put a warm hand on his shoulder. Charlie stopped chattering.

“Young man, you need to explain what just happened.”

Charlie looked at the officer wondering which button to press next. He didn’t want to fight the policeman—he was strong enough to accidentally kill him—but he did want to run away—badly. And then he remembered Ben. Where was Ben!?

When your identical twin suddenly thinks of you, and when that happens after some intense event—like a car crash for example—usually you’ve been thinking of him or her too. Ben had reached the other side of the field and wondered where Charlie was. Still in speed mode, he had spent a quiet moment or two marvelling at the wings of a bumble bee as it flew slowly and lazily past him—he could see everything in rich detail—when it was suddenly clear to him that Charlie was in danger. Without taking any time to think out the best strategy, Ben pressed his Flight button, and sped back to Charlie as fast as he could. That was of course the slower alternative to just running back in Speed mode, but it seemed faster to Ben. In Speed mode, the whole world seems painfully slowed down, so it seems that you’re slow too.

So, at the moment Charlie thought of Ben, it just so happened that Ben was already flying above his brother, looking down at the terrible mess on the road, trying to make sense of what had happened. Having heard the screeching rubber, the horrible noises of a car crash, the screams, the blaring car horn, Ben had feared the worst. As soon as it was clear to him his brother was in trouble with the police, Ben called out Charlie’s name in panic.

Everyone on the ground looked up at the source of the sound and froze. There, hovering in mid-air above them, was—so it seemed—the very boy who had just caused the car accident, and pulled the mother and child out from the tangled belly of the newly wrecked car. Mother, child, policeman and everyone else in that now growing collection were all stupefied, unable to make head or tale

of the matter, but Charlie, already immune to such odd sights, was relieved. He pressed his Flight button at once, flew up to his brother, and hugged him ferociously. He then looked back down at the staring faces below, apologised one last time, then flew off, quickly followed by his anxious looking brother.

So far it had been one hell of a day, and the twins hadn't had a bite to eat for almost twenty four hours. The little blue-green ball of light had caught everything and was growing confident he would win major acclaim back home. The process had only just started, but he already had mountains of invaluable material.

Chapter 7

“CRAAAAAAIG!!!!!!!!!!”

Craig put down the carton of milk he had been about to put in the fridge, and bounded heavily upstairs at the sound of his wife’s scream. One look at the dusty rubble, at the giant hole in the wall adjoining their daughter’s room, was all he needed. He paced quickly to the phone on the bedside table and called the police.

Private Constable John Webb was driving to nowhere in particular when his police radio crackled to life. Although distracted, the fact that his shift had barely begun and yet already there was action, was no surprise. In fact, he had been expecting it. As he had arrived for work that evening, the shift officer’s briefing was about one subject only: superhuman twins. An officer by the name of Tim Moriarty, who should have gone home hours earlier, was still at that late hour available to give a first hand account of two twelve to thirteen year old boys he had witnessed “flying away.” One of them had, prior to flying off, thrown a Ford Focus clear through the air, before pulling the mother and child out from the wreckage, having snapped both their seat-belts with a seemingly effortless yank.

There had also been an highly unusual break-in at Banbury Marks & Spencer. Staff had discovered empty crisp packets, two pairs of badly torn, blue and white striped cotton pyjama bottoms, as well as the empty packaging for two packs of briefs and two packs of socks on the floor in the warehouse by the big loading-bay doors. A hastily conducted stock-check revealed the following as missing: six pairs of underwear and socks; four pairs of blue jeans; two pairs of trainers; and six t-shirts, all sizes 9-11 yrs, as were, coincidentally, the ripped up pyjama bottoms, which were also Marks and Spencer’s issue. Most strange of all, no security camera had recorded anything that night. The tapes were blank.

PC Webb had been all ears, but kept to himself the real, surprising reason the incident so captivated him. It was that little

detail, the supposedly irrelevant piece of information no one seemed to want to consider: according to Phil Shaw earlier that morning, the twins had been wearing torn up, blue and white striped, cotton pyjama bottoms.

Forget that Phil Shaw had indeed been telling the whole truth, and that the trespass at the riding school, break-in at Marks & Spencer, and the car-throwing incidents were obviously connected—it was too massive a coincidence for them not to be—forget the stunned buzz of excitement at the station, forget career opportunity and proper protocol, John Webb was touched at a human level by the image of the ripped pyjamas in a way he would not have dared to admit. While the other officers could only see the pizzaz and bizarre, Webb could keenly imagine two little boys, two young twins, for some reason on the run and way out of their depth.

Then a photograph had been produced of identical, blond-haired, blue/green-eyed boys, grinning playfully, freckled cheek to freckled cheek, into the camera that had taken it. They had been reported missing by their foster-parents in the small hours of the morning. A wooden cabinet had mysteriously exploded in their home on Well Lane, Alkerton, just prior to their disappearance. Forensics had found nothing that could have caused such a powerful explosion.

The teenagers in the photograph were recently adopted orphans, Charlie and Ben Rhodes, and had been with their new parents for a few short weeks. Their foster-parents, Robert and Molly Holloway, had been extensively interviewed, but seemed to know nothing. That the missing twins were the superhuman twins was the working assumption, but there was not yet enough evidence to draw a firm conclusion. However, Moriarty was positive it was the missing Alkerton twins he had seen flying off north towards the M40 from the A4260. One of them had even called the other “Charlie.”

Officers were informed across this and neighbouring counties.

Scotland Yard were involved too, having dispatched the forensics team earlier that day, and were being kept up to date. A high ranking officer from MI5 by the name of Graham Steiner was to be seconded to Banbury for the foreseeable future, and would arrive tomorrow to assume full operational command. Caution was strongly advised. The twins were to be brought in for questioning as soon as possible as a matter of the highest priority. They were not to be harmed. Nothing of this was to make it to the press.

And strange things beget strange things it seems: blindly obeying an impulse he did not question and only darkly understood, before heading off into the night, John Webb wrote up the Shaw's Riding School report so that it did not include that humdrum, important detail, and made no mention of impervious, flying children. He even rewrote the relevant sections in his notepad. He filed it away as an unsolvable, unremarkable case of trespassing. Webb knew he was breaking the law, but knew too the twins needed someone helping them from the inside. If he didn't help them, who would?

So now there was a break-in at Avery Court, Banbury. Webb wasn't very near, but since the address was close to the burgled Marks and Spencer, he had to get there first. He grabbed the radio as fast as he could and informed Control he was on his way.

As with the Marks and Spencer burglary, the details of the break-in at 17 Avery Court were unusual to say the least. First of all, there were no signs of any break-in, forgetting for a moment the bedroom wall—you had to be inside the house to do that. The bed looked like it had been slept in. As far as the owners could tell, nothing had been taken. There was a spherical dent in the ceiling above the bed. The front-door (with a deadbolt lock) had been unlocked, and the heavy slip-bolt moved from its locked position, a feat possible only from the inside, considering the absence of damage to the door.

John Webb took everything the middle-aged couple said very seriously. They had come back from a two week holiday in Majorca, and landed that night in Heathrow. Their daughter was

staying with friends in London for the whole summer before beginning university there at the end of September. They had no pets, so no neighbour had needed to have a key. They had called their daughter and confirmed she still had hers. The spare was still in its brown envelope in a kitchen drawer. They showed it to Webb.

He wrote down every detail in his black notebook. He promised to look into the case with the utmost diligence, and asked, very earnestly, that they stay in contact with him directly. No, regrettably, he did not have any ideas as to what the explanation could be, but hoped time and effort would yield answers. While an unsettling experience for them, they could at least console themselves that nothing of value had been stolen, and should their insurance company not want to cover the costs of repairing the damaged wall, they should contact him immediately. With that, he bade the couple goodnight and walked back out into the darkness, unaware another surprise was awaiting him in the blacker shadows of a young oak.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to startle,” whispered a female voice from the bark of the tree.

“Hello?” Webb peered into the tree’s impenetrable shadows.

“I saw something today, but who’d believe me?” A small, stooped shape separated tottering from the oak’s thick bough to make its careful way toward the much taller police officer, whose posture now suggested tight readiness for battle. He relaxed when the shape revealed itself to be an old woman in a nightgown and shawl.

She walked to within a foot of John Webb then stopped. From the light of the street lamps he could see the expression on her face —apologetic, worried, but also oddly intense. It stopped him from speaking, from taking control of the situation as his training demanded. Consequently, she was the next to speak.

“I’ve no children, so who’d believe me? But here you are and I thought to myself you look like an honest young man. I heard a loud crash from next door short before two. I sit up there,” she

pointed at a window next to the house John had just visited, “and watch the world, this little bit of it anyways, and today I saw a brown leather bag float along ...” She stopped talking, afraid of what she had just said.

“Go on,” said the tall policeman.

“... float along towards the path, like someone was carrying it. It was bobbing along. I just watched, not knowing what to think— whoever saw its like?—and then the bag stopped, under this here tree. Two little boys appeared, of a sudden, thick messes of unbrushed blond hair, twins for sure, one carrying the bag, and just flew up into the tree.” She stopped again, her face apologetic, seeking support.

“Go on.”

“A little later, a few seconds maybe, they appeared at the top of the tree and flew up, shot straight up into the sky. And now you’re here, listening to me.”

Webb put a hand on the woman’s shoulder. It felt knobbly and thin. “Thank you for telling me this, it was brave of you.” He continued looking at her in the faint yellow lamplight, as a growing sense of danger spread thickly through him. “I believe every word, but please, please promise me you’ll tell no one else your story.”

The woman nodded. “Are they angels, d’you think?”

“I hope not, ma’am,” said Webb, and turned towards his car as a clear plan suddenly took shape in his head.

There had been no explicit instruction not to go to the Holloways. No one had said not to talk to them. Perhaps it was time he did. Knowing police procedure, it was not hard for him to deduce they would be fully in the dark as to the facts, and if he wanted to help, rules he had sworn to obey would have to be broken. In fact, he had just become convinced his best course of action was a drastic one, more drastic by far than filing a falsified report. He radioed the controller and told him he would report on the break-in in a couple of hours time back at the station, offering initially only the barest outline. He then said he was not feeling

well, and would be back in a couple of hours to clock off.

Half an hour later he was knocking on the Holloways' front door on Well Lane, Alkerton. It was a few minutes past midnight.

Robert and Molly Holloway were awake in bed, lying stiffly side by side, staring silently at the white ceiling. They had talked over the day's details a thousand times, but still could make no sense of a single thing that had happened. It was interminable. So when the knock came, despite the unusually late hour, it was greeted with relief. They both leapt out of bed and ran downstairs to open the door, both secretly hoping a pair of little blond-haired boys would be standing there, wiping their shoes on the door mat and asking for forgiveness. The sight of a young but dour policeman was a sore disappointment, and his first words only added to their confusion.

"I'm not here as a policeman, I'm here to forge a short term alliance. My name is John Webb."

Robert Holloway saw something in the young man's face he trusted, and asked him to come in. Besides, it looked like the officer had something important to get off his chest.

Chapter 8

The twins had been discussing the situation for some time, but it had so far proved impossible to settle on a course of action.

After the car crash and the shock of being seen by a policeman, they had flown north as fast as they could, as high as they dared. They reached an altitude which rendered the cars below a little smaller than matchboxes, but no higher, figuring that would be enough to make them look like birds to anyone who happened to be searching the skies. They were unable to decide how effective radar would be at discovering two boys in an infinitely large sky, but imagined that if they went too high, they might be more easily detected. Did the police even have radar? Would they call in the army? The Royal Air Force? All issues certainly worth worrying about, as was being hit by low-flying aeroplanes, although you could probably hear them in time to zip out of the way. That, or activate Impervious mode.

Anyway, a short while after fleeing the scene of the crime, they crossed paths with a motorway which ribboned its way north-west. The flashing glitters of sunlight reflecting from car roofs and windshields were somehow alarming, so Charlie and Ben veered off north-eastwards, which seemed from that height to take them away from more obvious signs of civilisation. A little later though, Charlie's hunger started getting the better of him again. His thirst was becoming urgent.

"Ben! BEN! We're gonna have to drink sometime! I say we land in a field near some town, go Intelligent, and figure out the safest plan we can think of. Waddya say?"

"We've gotta get further away first. There's gonna be cops searching all over now we've been seen flying, and you went and chucked that car on its roof. Aren't you even thinking about what that means?" Ben looked across at his brother angrily, tapping at his temple. "Or do you want to get caught? 'Cos that'd really be game over that would."

“But we can’t just fly forever. I mean we’re miles away already. I can’t hardly see that motorway any more, and look, there’s nothing here but fields and trees ...”

Ben looked around. Charlie was right—they appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, although there was a road to their right which seemed to lead to a small town in the distance, a mile or so away. And it was true, just flying and flying wasn’t going to help. Eventually they had to eat and drink. Better work out a good plan while they still had the strength to act on it. He calmed down.

“Okay, okay, you is right young man, you is right. See those buildings up ahead?” Charlie nodded. “We’ll land before we get to them and work out how to get us some grub. I don’t know about you, but I’m bloody starving!”

“Now you’re talking. I just hope there’s somewhere there that’s got food. Can’t really tell from here what those buildings are. Could all be deserted.”

Charlie’s worries were unfounded. They were the spread out buildings of a little hamlet called Williamscot, where normal people lived in normal houses which had kitchens and fridges and food and drink. As they approached the hamlet, they saw a grass tennis court where—they could just about make out—a game of doubles was under way. To their right, were what looked like the large outbuildings of a farmyard. Separating a sloped, empty field from these two areas of potential danger were thick welts of burgeoning treetops, perfect cover for their approach. As surreptitiously as they could, they floated down to the ground behind what looked to be the thickest batch of trees. Immediately they had landed, they depressed their Intelligence buttons.

As you have already seen, Intelligence is a strange tool in the hands of the young and inexperienced, especially when those wielding it are almost totally unused to it. Neither Charlie nor Ben, because of their hunger and thirst, were able to get their minds onto the task at hand. No sooner had they pressed their buttons than they both began to see how much trouble they were in, and

how hard it would now be to have any kind of a normal life. Being super-intelligent in this kind of circumstance was like having a nagging, worried adult in your head, mercilessly listing your problems.

One exploded cabinet plus invaluable contents, one Marks and Spencer theft, one broken wall, an aborted MacDonald's heist, one tossed car, one episode of flying in full view of a policeman and other witnesses, all while being on the run at the age of thirteen. Taken together this spelled: Big Heap o' Trouble.

They looked at each other, but didn't know quite what to say. Meanwhile, their minds ticked on relentlessly.

The police and all relevant authorities would do everything in their power to catch them. They would arrest them, handcuff them, take them into custody, force them to explain how they could fly and throw cars and rip out seat belts and explode cabinets. They would never let them go. If they got caught that would be it, forever. In order not to get caught and arrested they would have to fight off everybody for the rest of their lives, or stay out of sight of everybody for the rest of their lives.

For how long could the twins do either of those things?

What on Earth should they do?

If only they could be impervious and strong at the same time, or fly while invisible! That would help. But short of finding the alien belt-designer somewhere or other in the universe, this was not a possibility. As one they sat down on the grassy hill.

"Are you thinking ..."

"... what I'm thinking?"

They nodded at each other sadly, then pressed their Impervious buttons, needing some peace and quiet from their own thoughts. It was impossible to calm down with all that chatter-think going on.

"First we'll just get calm ..."

"... then plan out our next move. Yeah ..."

Charlie and Ben hugged their knees in silence.

A minute passed.

“Speed’s amazing, isn’t it? I mean, I was creeping beside a car that was probably doing like sixty or something! And then the people in the car start screaming. Man it was weird! Their mouths chewing open in slow motion and their eyeballs moving round to look at me at the window like ... like ...” Charlie rolled his eyeballs towards Ben while contorting his face as slowly as he could, emitting a deep, bull-like bellow, but Ben, although laughing, cut him off.

“Shut up Charlie, you stupid old cow! We’ve got to stay quiet, stay out of people’s eyes and ears.” But Ben had already been infected by his brother’s excited recollection. “I can’t believe you actually threw a whole car through the air! That is the stuff right there, people gonna be talking about that one for years. Oh yes!”

“It was real scary though. When I pressed my Strength button it was like a bomb going off! Everything happened so fast ... I just pushed out my arms and next thing I know I’m flying back into the side of the road. Then the car was on its roof rocking up and down, wheels still turning, and I got those people out of it.” He looked at Ben. “Wonder if I’ll be on the news tomorrow ...”

“Doubt it. Police’ll probably try and keep it all quiet, ask that woman and them others not to talk about it, you know, like when they kept us quiet at the Home whenever inspectors came. Wonder what they would’ve done if we ever talked ...”

“Probably right. Probably no one will ever know. Except us and them.

“Reckon we can get away with it, Ben?”

“Dunno. But I think I wanna try, you know? I’d rather give it a go than just give in.”

“Too bloody right young man, too bloody well right. And I’ll tell you something else absolutely free of charge: I is starving! Parched too. I feel like I haven’t had a drink since I were a young lad!”

“My good sir you just said the truest words ever said!” Ben offered Charlie his hand, and the twins shook on their new resolution to keep going.

Things were getting scary, but scarier still was the thought of handing themselves in. Bad as their situation was, especially when harshly lit by the bright light of super-intelligence, having no idea how horrible it would be in police custody, yet able to imagine the worst and having a deep mistrust of authorities and institutions, giving up seemed about the worst thing they could do. Besides, they had lived their entire lives as outsiders. Now they were outsiders with super-powers who were on the run from the law. Which actually sounded pretty cool when put it like that.

Reluctant to switch back into Intelligence mode, the twins started to work out a simple way of stealing food from somewhere in the little one road village, without being seen or heard.

First, they would conduct an invisible reconnaissance of each house, peering through windows to find an empty kitchen, and take the first one they found that looked absolutely safe. They would hold hands the whole time so as to reduce to a minimum the need for talking, and only talk when it was clear no one was near enough to hear. Then, Ben would stay on the outside to keep invisible guard, as Charlie phased into the selected kitchen and switched to Speed mode. Should anyone turn up, Ben would rap on the window three times, and Charlie would turn invisible until the coast cleared. Should Charlie hear footsteps inside the house, he would likewise turn invisible until it was safe to continue.

But the more they thought about it, the trickier it got. How would they get the booty out of the kitchen? Phasing was not an option—you can't wear food and Ben didn't like the idea of lapping up Charlie's regurgitated pickings—so it was a toss up between taking turns, or Charlie carrying the goods out of the kitchen while invisible.

Taking turns quickly proved to be the weaker alternative. Far better would be to find enough food and drink for a few days, otherwise they would have to return—looking at it long term—two or three times daily, thereby increasing the risk of getting caught. However, they needed to have luck enough to stumble upon a

kitchen that had lots of ready to eat grub as well as bottles of water or juice—they could hardly take the cooker and cold tap with them, not to mention pots and pans. Besides, they had no clue about cooking.

So, assuming they got lucky, how would they make the live decision about when to leave the kitchen, when the person in the kitchen doing the stealing would not be able to see the invisible person on guard outside who had half the necessary information? Without walkie-talkies they could only communicate with raps on the window. Three meant danger, that they had settled on already. If Charlie rapped on the window to attract Ben's attention and say he was ready to leave, that would be two. Then Ben would confirm it was safe to leave the kitchen with an echo of two knocks, or that the coast was not clear with three. When the coast cleared, two raps would signify the right time had come. Should the kitchen prove unstocked or barren, that would be discussed outside, and the next kitchen sought.

Then they remembered their brown leather bag. It was gone, and with it their spare clothes and an easy way of carrying lots of food. Charlie cast his mind back and remembered it flying from his grip after he had tossed the car away in panic. Obviously there was no retrieving it now, which meant a bag of some kind would also have to be found. The simple task of eating and drinking while on the run was, in fact, proving to be a difficult one, but they felt confident their plan would at least keep them from being detected. That was very important.

So off they went, heading up the hill and through the copse, holding a line that kept them amongst the trees for as long as possible, a line that, as they remembered it from their view of the hamlet from above, led to what had looked like a garden. The first house they would explore sat at the top of that garden and, as luck would have it, turned out to be a bed and breakfast.

Invisible now, they emerged silently from between the trees and took a short moment to look for other humans. From their left they

could hear the sounds of people playing tennis, but the court was hidden from view by some shrubbery and trees. Seeing no one else around, nor cats, nor dogs, they began to walk towards the house, which was quite large, old looking, and made of three separate buildings, the last of which, seen from right to left, had been built at ninety degrees to the other two, giving the construction an L shape. The door to this part of the building was open. Charlie pulled on Ben's hand, forcing him to a stop.

"Look, that door's open," he whispered. "We'll check it out first."

"Nice one," whispered Ben.

It was a pretty garden with a well looked after lawn. There were plenty of little windows studding each of the complex's walls, but no sign of human activity behind any of them. The whole thing was quiet and seemed empty. Perhaps their luck was about to turn, perhaps this was going to go well at the first attempt. Both twins had the feeling they were approaching something like a pub or a restaurant, but the lack of any hubbub made this seem somehow unlikely. Never having once been in a B&B they were unable to correctly guess the building's function, but that hardly mattered. When they peered through the open doorway they discovered it opened onto a kitchen, a large kitchen with a large white fridge and, best of all, no people anywhere. They could hardly believe their eyes.

"Not bad," whispered Ben.

"Nice," whispered Charlie.

They looked around again, saw no one anywhere, so decided it was as good a time as any.

"Better get started," said Ben.

"I'll do it invisible, no need to phase in there. I may as well just walk in, check it out, and do the deed as I am. What d'you think?"

"All right. If someone comes, I'll just step in and whisper "stop", then, when it's safe again, say "go". Otherwise I'll be right here, standing beside the door. Oh yeah, don't forget to find a bag."

It was weird talking to each other while invisible, listening to

words that seemed to come from nowhere, and, considering their hearts were by now beating at quite a rate, it took Charlie a couple of seconds to let go of his brother's hand and find the courage to begin.

"Right, I'm going," he said at last. He let go and stepped into the surprisingly cool kitchen.

Immediately he felt alone, just as he had done upon running out of MacDonald's about an hour earlier. The kitchen's silence that before had seemed so helpful to their cause, now seemed deathly and garish. But his hunger and thirst were more powerful than his fear, and he quickly set about the task at hand.

Bags, he thought to himself, where do people keep bags?

He walked over to the sink and opened the cupboard doors beneath it. There was a brown swing-bin with a white lid, a bunch of cleaning things and, amazingly, a pile of neatly folded up plastic bags. Controlling his excitement, he carefully reached in and grabbed a handful, trying his best not to be unnerved by the fact that he could not see his own hand and arm. Needing both hands free, he then shoved the three or four bags he had grabbed between his stomach and trouser-waist, and noticed the portion of the bags stuck under his trousers turned invisible. He pulled his t-shirt over the remainder, which likewise turned invisible. Cool, he thought, must tell Ben about that. Might come in handy. Then he started looking for food. The big white fridge was the obvious place to start.

As the heavy door opened and the light sprang on, Charlie's mouth actually started to water. It was so packed to the brim with all sorts of food he didn't know where to begin. There were about four-fifths of a lemon-meringue pie in a dark blue dish, packets of chicken wings and drumsticks, sliced ham and salami, various cheeses, jars of jam, of chutney and mayonnaise and Ben's voice saying:

"STOP!"

in a fierce whisper.

Charlie froze. He turned round to face the door and forced his senses to listen for what was coming. There they were; footsteps crunching on gravel, getting louder, definitely coming his way. He barely remembered the fridge door was still open, but managed to close it just as a white haired woman walked into the kitchen and headed straight for him.

The fridge was five or six paces from the kitchen door. At the last possible moment Charlie stepped to one side as the woman reached out, grabbed the door handle and opened the fridge. It bumped Charlie's right hip, making a light, muffled thump.

"Eh?" said the old woman, and peered round the edge of the fridge door to see what had happened.

Charlie placed his left foot, very quietly, one pace to his left, tilted his weight over onto it, then lifted his right into the air and towards his left as the woman swung the door open again, this time missing Charlie entirely.

"Strange, I could've sworn..."

But the woman just shrugged, reached into the fridge, pulled out a bottle of orange juice, closed the door and walked off in the direction she had come. Charlie was alone again, this time enjoying the feeling with an intensity of relief he had never known. A few seconds later he heard Ben's voice again.

"Go."

He wasted no more time with niceties. He pulled a bag from his trouser-waist and threw anything into it that was ready to eat and would not make a big mess: cooked chicken, sliced meats, a few packets of cheese, a jar of strawberry jam, and some raw carrots, then put the bag on the floor. Into the next bag, he placed one bottle each of orange juice, apple juice, water and lemonade and put that on the floor. Two bags full. He closed the fridge and looked around himself again, thinking bread would be a good idea. There, by a toaster near the sink was an enormous, yellow bread bin. He walked over to it and pulled out a cloth bag full of buns, as well as the untouched loaf that lay beneath them, dropped them

into the third and last bag and left the kitchen, not wanting to push his luck any further than necessary.

Outside in the hot sunshine again, no sooner had he whispered his brother's name than he felt a pair of hands on his wrist, spidering their way down to take the bag full of bottles from him. Then he felt his brother's hand in his, heard Ben's eager "Let's go!" and they were jogging across the manicured lawn, not caring to look behind them, not caring about anything except making it back into the trees where they would feel safe again.

Less than a minute later, they were there in the cool, shaded copse. Nervous laughter started to bubble from them uncontrollably.

"Speed?" suggested Ben between giggles.

"OK, but let's press together," answered Charlie.

"All right ... One, two, three, GO!"

They pressed their buttons together and hurried off back through the length of the copse until they emerged, mere seconds later, back on the same sloped field they had planned their attack, as breathless as if they had just run a marathon. Without having to say anything, they both put their bags on the floor, pressed their Impervious buttons, and stared at each other, grinning wildly, amazed at what they had just done, amazed it had been a success. There was no noise of pursuit, no reason to believe anyone had seen them.

"Let's eat!" cried Charlie.

They set to it with the happy abandon of puppies.

Chapter 9

“Before I start in earnest, I’d like to say two things. The first is that this is just about the most beautiful house I have ever seen.”

“Thank you. It’s a family heirloom, so to speak.”

John Webb looked up from the hot cup of tea he was nursing, to smile at Mr Holloway, whom he was beginning to like. The pair were in their early fifties, elegant looking, and yet obviously under enormous stress. “You must be very proud.

“The second thing I want to mention is that you are going to find it hard believing what I am about to tell you. I hardly believe it myself, but learned during my training that, initially at least, it’s the evidence that counts, not the explanation.” He watched the Holloways shift anxiously in their seats. “I trained and worked for MI5, but decided very quickly, in a matter of months, to become a policeman instead. I’m telling you this so you’ll realise I have some understanding of how things are going to develop from here on in.

“Charlie and Ben are alive, but in real danger. Something has happened to them. They have somehow acquired special abilities such as flight and superhuman strength. It is now a matter of the utmost priority for the authorities that they are caught and hidden away from public view. This is a national security issue, akin to a UFO landing, and will be pursued with every instrument the state has at its disposal—I wouldn’t be surprised if the Americans had been informed. A man by the name of Graham Steiner will take over the case tomorrow. He’ll relocate to Banbury to be in the thick of it, which is where he likes it. He’s a hard man, in the truest sense of that expression. I know him well enough to know he’ll stop at nothing.”

The concerned expressions had disappeared from the Holloways’ faces, which now looked blankly incredulous. Alongside the good news that Charlie and Ben were alive was information they did not know how to handle. John pushed on.

“I can’t explain any of this, but can at least present you with the

supporting evidence. The first piece is that a cabinet exploded in your home, by all accounts spontaneously. No explosive material has been found. Second, that Phil Shaw, of Shaw's Riding School a few miles east of here, contacted the police at Banbury this morning—" he looked at his watch "—correction, yesterday morning at around three a.m. I was dispatched to the scene and took down his account of events. At the time I didn't believe a word: two boys, identical twins, shaggy blond hair, impervious to damage, playing with—and badly spooking—two of his horses, before flying off into the night. They were wearing torn up blue and white striped pyjama bottoms, and nothing else." Molly Holloway reached over and took her husband's hand in hers. "I wrote him off as an alcoholic, and clocked off before writing it up. Next, I arrived for work a couple of hours ago to hear about two further events.

"A break-in and theft at Marks & Spencer, Banbury, reported at around six a.m. yesterday. Missing are four pairs of jeans, six t-shirts, six pairs of pants and socks, and two pairs of trainers. Empty packets of salt and vinegar crisps were found, as were a pair of ripped up, blue and white striped pyjama bottoms. Not one sign of a break-in, and not one security camera recorded a thing. All the tapes are blank, as if scrubbed clean.

"To the second event. Tim Moriarty, a colleague of mine, was still at the station when I arrived for my shift. He reported seeing a young boy walking beside a car that was travelling at approximately sixty miles per hour, terrifying the driver into veering into the right lane, before suddenly reappearing at the front of the car and throwing it through the air, apparently to prevent a collision. It landed on its roof as the young boy was hurled into the hedgerow at the side of the road, and Moriarty skidded to a stop. Seconds later the young boy ran from the hedgerow, crawled under the bonnet of the tossed car, reached through the shattered windshield, ripped the driver's seatbelt from its mooring and effortlessly carried the driver, a woman twice his

size, to safety, before returning to repeat the act and rescue the only passenger, the driver's son. Moriarty was able to control his amazement enough to approach the heroic lad, and ask him to explain what had happened. At that moment the name "Charlie" was shouted from above. Everyone looked up to see the hero's identical twin hovering in the air above them, whereupon the hero and villain of the scene flew up to join his twin, from where he apologised to the assembled crowd. Then they both flew off, northwards. Moriarty is convinced the twins are Charlie and Ben Rhodes, photos of who we have at the station. I am likewise convinced. Finally, recovered from the scene was a brown leather bag containing some of the items stolen from Marks & Spencer yesterday morning."

Robert and Molly Holloway could not respond in the short silence that followed, before the sound of a mobile phone ringing interrupted everyone's thoughts. It took Webb a couple of seconds to realise it was his. He fumbled the jangling device out from his trousers' pocket.

"Yes?"

He listened for a while without speaking, and looked alternately at his hosts sitting opposite him at the kitchen table. "Thanks for letting me know. As soon as I have any further information I'll be in touch. Goodnight." He hung up, put his mobile back in his pocket and smiled strangely at his untouched cup of tea.

"That call brings me neatly to the last part of my story. I filed a falsified report this evening, and in so doing have knowingly broken the law. No one other than me—and now you—knows how the Phil Shaw incident is linked to the others. I reported it as a harmless case of trespassing. I will do the exact same thing when I get back to the station after leaving you, with regards yet another incident, the most recent.

"Before I came here, I was investigating a break-in in Banbury. A married couple returned from holiday a few hours ago to find their bed slept in and their bedroom wall broken through. I saw it

myself—it's a huge hole. That was the woman on the phone just now, informing me her husband's brown leather bag is missing. Aside from a dent in the ceiling above their bed and the smashed wall, which adjoins their daughter's bedroom, not the outside world, there is no other damage. That is, there are, as at Marks & Spencer, no signs of break-in. None. An impossibility—I checked the locks and windows myself.

“When I left their home an old lady—their neighbour—was outside waiting for me in the shadows of a tree. She told me she had that afternoon seen a brown leather bag floating out from her neighbour's house towards a large oak, where it stopped, and hung in mid-air for a moment. Then two identical looking boys appeared, one of them carrying the bag, before flying up into the tree. Seconds later they both emerged from the treetop to shoot off up into the sky and out of her sight.”

John Webb paused and tried to gauge how his long presentation had affected his hosts. They looked incapable of a response.

“Mr and Mrs Holloway, it doesn't get any bigger than this. Do you have any questions?”

By now Mr Holloway had one arm around his wife's shoulders, and his other hand around hers on the table. It was Mrs Holloway who spoke first.

“Why are you telling us all this?” Her voice was tight and nervous.

Webb sighed deeply; it was this question he had feared the most. “They're just little boys and they're in trouble. Something extraordinary has happened to them, and now they can do extraordinary things, but that does not in any way mean they're now no longer little boys.” He looked up into Robert Holloway's eyes. “The organs of state can only see the national security issues this represents, not the human, flesh and blood boys at the centre of it. I, on the other hand, can only see the boys.”

Robert Holloway was touched by the policeman's obvious sincerity. “Are you married, Mr Webb?”

“No.”

“Do you have children yourself?”

“No, I don’t. I had a brother once, a twin. It was my fault he died. We were twelve years old.”

“Oh God.” Molly Holloway now had her hand on her mouth and had started to cry at a premonition something terrible was going to happen.

John Webb looked at her and smiled. “The hardest thing in all this is to accept what is happening. Tomorrow, gentlemen from MI5 will arrive and look the house over. They will bug every room and tap the phone line too. It’s why I’m here now, at this late hour, to beat them to you, and keep myself from suspicion. You’re going to be under close surveillance. Somehow, you have to act normally, by which I mean that you do not know what I have told you—they certainly won’t be keeping you informed. You must tell no one I have been here. I’m going to try and get to the boys before anyone else and then ... well, take it from there, I guess.” He scratched the skin of his throat. “I have to try.”

John Webb pulled his black notebook from his breast pocket, neatly tore a page from it, placed it on his hat which was lying on the table beside his cup of tea, and wrote something down. “This is my mobile phone number. I’m going to need all the help I can get, so I need you to stay in touch with me, from a neighbour’s phone would be best, or a phone box in some other village, though that would be too risky perhaps. Mrs Holloway, you should start making regular visits to a neighbour, so that there’s no change in behaviour for the surveillance team to detect. Inform me as quickly as you can of any developments. Is there anything you can tell me right now, anything that might be of help?”

Mr and Mrs Holloway looked at each other.

“We hardly know them. They were with us for such a short time ...”

Mr Holloway interrupted his wife. “What makes you so sure the authorities are a danger to the boys?”

“If they weren’t your children, and you were facing this set of circumstances, what would you do, Mr Holloway. What would be more important to you: two recent adoptees or national security?” He waited for his rhetorical question to sink in, then continued. “It’s not that the state has evil intent, or that they will shoot first and ask questions second, but there will indeed be guns, as well as uncertainty, fear and a bucketful of unknowns. If I can get to the boys first, I can convince them to hand themselves in and take the steam—the risk—out of the situation. I can only do that acting privately, and that’s your best chance of a return to some kind of normalcy after all this is done. Will you help me?”

Mr Holloway nodded, despite his inability to take on board all that had purportedly transpired since the twins had disappeared. The evidence was strong, if incomprehensible, and there was no reason he could see to believe John Webb was insane or an attention seeker. “The thing we keep coming back to—and we have reported this to the police already—is the twins’ strange behaviour immediately prior to the explosion. Molly and I were already deep asleep when we were awoken by shouts of jubilation and joy from the twins’ room—it was about half past two in the morning. I went to quiet them down and found them both out of bed looking excited and sheepish. Something had happened—looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight—but I just told them to pipe down and go back to sleep. If only I had asked ... Anyway, about a minute or so after I got back into bed there was an almighty explosion. We ran downstairs to a scene of utter devastation. Molly then ran back upstairs to check on Charlie and Ben, but they were gone, vanished. Not a trace to be found. We always suspected their strange behaviour was connected to the explosion, but couldn’t understand how. Maybe they were given something? Discovered something? Something they could do? It all seems so impossible.”

“Half past two fits with the other times. Something happened to them then, I think that’s a safe assumption. It can’t be that they have had these powers all their lives and kept them secret till now,

only to go on a sudden and unprompted rampage. To predict where they might go next, we have to understand their motives, what has happened, how they are reacting to their situation. My only guess is they're like boys with new, very shiny toys. Phil Shaw said they were laughing wildly as the horses were trampling on them, bucking them off and so on. Put simply, they were having fun, which flows on nicely from how you saw them before the explosion, Mr Holloway."

"They exploded the cabinet! We had gone to extra lengths to tell them of its value, you see, on their first day with us, when we showed them around." Mrs Holloway was looking sadly at her husband, but Webb knew her words were for him. "We never thought they were the types to be so wilfully destructive, despite their sad history and what Dr Greene warned us of."

"Dr Greene?"

"He heads Daisy Fields Orphanage, always described the twins as trouble makers, but Molly and I had other ideas—Greene seemed so jaded. Ironic, really..."

"It's more likely to have been an accident," Webb interrupted.

"How do you mean?" Mrs Holloway was hungry to hear anything that might restore her faith in her vanished foster-sons.

"Well," continued Webb, "if it's true they had first acquired their powers only yesterday morning at around half past two, it would also be safe to assume they are not yet expert in wielding them."

"That could be," said Mrs Holloway, warmed slightly by the idea of the twin's innocence in all this. She had only been a mother for two weeks, and so could not feel that unbending, blind loyalty so natural to mothers, but dearly wanted to.

Webb continued. "They exploded the cabinet accidentally ... somehow ... which frightened them, and they ran. Seeing as they were with you for only two weeks, this house can hardly be thought of as their home, the place where they feel most safe, beautiful as it is."

"That makes some sense," said Mr Holloway, "supposing for a

moment that anything in this sorry affair ever can! If Charlie and Ben have indeed run away, the pattern of events since then certainly fits that idea. Besides, the only home they have is each other. Running away would appeal to them, if anyone, I'm sure. And of course it's summer." He couldn't bring himself to add now that they have super-powers, even though the thought popped into his mind.

"Wouldn't they want to go back to the Orphanage?" asked Webb. "For food and shelter ... they must know it like the backs of their hands. How far is it from here?"

"About 50 miles, off the 419 in Swindon. I'll get you the address." Robert Holloway got up from the table and left the kitchen.

"This is all rather strange, Mr Webb. I'm having trouble believing it. Flying children tossing cars onto their roofs ..."

"Don't try to understand it, at least not yet. Right now the objective—our joint objective I hope—is to find Ben and Charlie before something goes badly wrong. The evidence, though fantastical, is consistent and strong. We have witnesses independently corroborating each other, as well as physical evidence, all taking place in a short space of time. To not treat such evidence seriously would be to hamper, severely, our chances of finding your children."

"Forgive me, Mr Webb, but you seem rather too intelligent for a Private Constable." Mrs Holloway smiled for the first time since the discussion began.

"Ha ha, thank you—I think. I do believe in the police force though, and the little positive things a good PC can do, but yes, I stand out a bit down at the station."

Robert Holloway returned carrying a piece of paper. It was a photocopy of a letter from Daisy Fields Orphanage, bearing in the header the address and telephone number. He handed it to Webb before resuming his place next to his wife.

"You know, I was just thinking, while I fetched the letter, how strange—and I don't mean the obvious here—how benumbing it is

to have only minutes ago been completely in the dark as to what happened to Ben and Charlie, then suddenly to be confronted with a pile of information that explains some things but throws so much more into question, that you almost want a return to the darkness.” He looked alternately at his wife and guest, apparently hoping for confirmation.

“Your wife was just saying the same thing, Mr Holloway, though in fewer words.”

“That’s my Molly! Always keeping it simple.” Mr Holloway smiled proudly at his wife.

“I don’t know about that,” she said, returning the smile.

“I told her not to try and understand how things are as they are, but to work with the evidence as openly as possible, let it do the talking, so to speak. To do otherwise would be a waste of energy and time. And speaking of time, I ought to press on. I’m going back to the station to call in sick. They know about my twin brother of course, so I can make it sound plausible that recent events have unsettled me...” Webb had to swallow down on an emotion he could not let surface, before carrying on. “I’m going to be acting privately, so as not to be constrained by group-think and red tape and so on. I’ll be faster and more effective that way.” He stood up from the table and reached for his hat, then noticed he had not touched his tea. “Sorry, looks lovely ...” He pointed at the cup before looking up again at his hosts. “So ...”

Mr and Mrs Holloway stood and led John Webb to the front door.

“Thank you for risking this, Mr Webb. Despite the strangeness of what you’ve told us, you are the first human contact we have had since this began. We’re very grateful to you.”

“I only hope my decision will prove to be a wise one. Goodnight to you both.”

The Holloways stood in the doorway and watched John Webb walk down the faint grass path and away to his car, parked out of sight elsewhere. Then, after a searching and worried look into each

other's eyes, they closed their front door and retreated into their beautiful house.

Chapter 10

For the first time in what seemed like ages, Charlie and Ben felt great. Their stomachs were full, their mouths and throats lubricated, and the sun was shining warmly down. Without watches, they had to guess at the time by the sun's position in the sky, and settled on somewhere between three and four in the afternoon. They were lying on their backs on the grass, their feet pointing downhill, a mess of bread crumbs, tipped over bottles, and empty food packaging strewn around them.

Charlie belched contentedly. "So, now what? The world's ours, all of it, so we can do whatever we sodding well want." At that particular moment however, he wanted to do little more than put his hands behind his head and watch clouds drift by.

Ben had other things on his mind. "You know, I was thinking about that woman in the car you threw. You think she's all right?"

"Course she is! There wasn't any blood or anything. Can't remember even seeing a bruise."

"What about her car?"

"She looked rich. Probably just buy a new one. Maybe it was already old anyway."

Ben rolled onto his side and looked across at his brother. "And then I was thinking about that Claire in MacDonald's. She was nice. How old d'you think she is?"

"I dunno, maybe eighteen. Are you gonna ask her out, or what?" Charlie smiled broadly, but kept his eyes on the sky directly above him.

"No! I'm just thinking about her—"

"'Cos you're like way too young. She's already grown up and everything so there's no way she hasn't got a boyfriend, if that's what you're thinking about, about kissing and tits and mucky stuff."

Ben flopped onto his back. "I gots the kit, and it got togs on already—"

“A little under-developed mate! I’ve seen your kit!”

“My main man’s coming along nicely, thank you very much! Be done in no time.” Charlie patted his crotch affectionately, as if it were a loaf of bread baking in an oven. “Besides, we’ll be fourteen in a few weeks, so that’ll be like, almost men already!”

Charlie leapt to his feet. “I feel like a man right now, a man no other man can be!” He struck a superhero pose; hands on hips, chest puffed out, eyes fixed heroically on the challenging future, jaw a veritable rock-face of indomitable determination. “Charlie Rhodes!” he boomed. “He can fly, throw cars, run like lightning and Lots More Besides.” He looked furtively at his brother, but Ben was rolling his eyes, and didn’t look at all impressed.

“If you’re looking for a name, Charlie, I got the best one for you right here: Supermouth!”

Charlie put on a deep-voiced, American accent: “Charlie Rhodes —a.k.a Supermouth—he can fly, throw cars, run like lightning—”

“—and shoot his gob off like no one else on the whole bloody planet!” Ben jumped to his feet and punched his brother in the mouth, well aware they were both still in Impervious mode.

“Is that the best you’ve got, little boy? Don’t you know I can survive a nuclear bomb exploding in my very own butt!?” Charlie grinned patronisingly at his brother, disdainful as a king, slowly slapping his now stuck out behind.

“Pick the knuckles out of this!” Ben pressed his Strength button and hit Charlie with everything he had. The impact was clean and full, and sent Supermouth sailing through the air in a long arc. He landed with a dusty but inaudible thump some fifty meters down the hill.

Charlie had to shout at the top of his voice to make himself heard, and even then Ben could only just make out what his brother was going on about. “DIDN’T EVEN FEEL IT YOU TWIG-ARMED PANSY! PREPARE TO MEET THY DOOM!” He pressed his Flight button and rose slowly into the air, dramatically raising his arms in a casual arc till his hands met above his head.

Ben pressed his Impervious button and watched his brother's ominous, although rather slow, approach.

But the expected flying punch was not delivered. Instead, Charlie flew directly above Ben, feet down, hovered there a moment for effect, and then 'jumped' up and down on his brother's head, with his arms folded calmly across his chest.

"Mess with the best, this is what you get, you worthless MEEKLING!"

"I'm afraid," said Ben flatly, looking dead ahead and enjoying the sweeping view, "very afraid..." He picked at his teeth distractedly. "This is a nice spot, by the way. You might want to settle down a bit and enjoy it."

Charlie carried on administering his punishment, unfazed by his brother's equanimity.

Suddenly Ben's face looked excited. "Ooh, ooh! I'm just having another thought—and it's a good one too! Don't stop jumping up and down on my head, I think it's helping..."

"We could do good, you know, like superheroes do! Fight crime, rescue people from burning buildings, that line of work. Of course..! we'll call ourselves The Super Twins!" Ben stepped out from under Charlie's ineffectual jumping, grabbed his ankle and yanked him downwards. "What d'you think?" The idea really excited him.

Drifting slowly to the ground like a deflating balloon, Charlie put his hand on his chin and feigned deep thoughtfulness. "You do good ... I do bad! Ha ha ha ha ha! I shall be your enemy, the super villain, Doctor Bad ... no, that's not any—"

"I'm serious Charlie! All we've done since we got these belts is run away, break stuff, and eat bread and chicken wings. Stolen bread and chicken wings. Hardly impressive."

"Ben, Ben, you're not thinking right!" Charlie patted his brother's forehead patronisingly. "We're having fun right now, here, where we are. At looong last! We got no one telling us what to do and when to do it!"

“And so what if we broke some things—we’re learning. I’m not going to make those same mistakes again, and I know you won’t. Don’t you see!? We’ve learned how to use Impervious mode, that Speed is like, TOO fast, and to stay out of sight. We’re getting better and better, not worse and worse.

“Don’t you remember what we were thinking about in Intelligence just now!? ‘Cos I do, and I didn’t like it. We’ve got to stay out of people’s way, find somewhere to live, like a base or something, or a Batcave, somewhere we’ll be safe, somewhere that’s ours.”

“That’s it, a Batcave! Superheroes have Batcaves, and they keep their identities secret too. They wear masks so no one knows how to find them. C’mon Charlie, it’s got to be worth a try! What else can we do anyway? Punch each other for the rest of our lives just ‘cos it doesn’t hurt? Hide in a muddy cave, sneak out at night to steal food and never watch any TV again, or go to the movies, or meet girls!? Is that what you want?”

“How can we be superheroes Ben? We’d be the only ones around—there is only us! Even if we were wearing the best masks in the world, who else could it possibly be? That cop saw us flying in the air, saw our faces! We’ve run away from home, Mr and Mrs Holloway will have let the police have pictures of us... Masks would be stupid and pointless. Anyway, who ever did us any good?”

“Mr and Mrs Holloway did.” Ben turned his back on his brother and sat down, then started angrily plucking up fistfuls of grass.

Charlie looked at his brother and knew he had to do something to win him back. Straight away he had an idea. “I tell you what would be good though. Getting our own back on The Skull.”

Ben twisted round to look up at his twin. “What’s that?”

“I said: We should go back to Crazy Fields Saucepan Lid and settle up business with The Skull.”

“Too risky, the police’ll be sitting there waiting for us.” Secretly though, Ben wanted to be convinced. The idea of beating up The

Skull, of getting him back for everything he had done to them, was very appealing.

“We could check it out invisible, and at night to be doubly-mubbly safe. We could easily work out some way of getting in with no one seeing us. We catch a bus to Swindon, one that isn’t full, get on invisible and don’t talk the whole way there. No one would know a thing, and it’d be free too. It’s not that far away, never even took an hour in Mr Holloway’s car. We could be there before nightfall, Ben!”

The more Ben thought about it, the better the idea seemed. “We could do that indeed, that’s a thing we could very well do, yes sir yes sir!” Then Ben remembered something and his face lit up. “But what about this... Do you remember that abandoned house we played in that time, boarded up windows, mouldy walls and floors? That could be our hideout, our Batcave! We wouldn’t have to do good every day, but if we wanted to, if we were bored, then ... why not?”

“That, young man, is the finest idea you is ever having had, and what’s more ... I likes it plenty! That house was well cool, man. What was the name of the street again?”

“Churchill Road. But we don’t know what bus to take from here all the way to Swindon, nor where to catch it from. We’re sitting in an empty field, Charlie, I don’t think there’s gonna be a bus to Swindon turning up here any time soon.”

“Well, we’re just gonna have to ask then, aren’t we!” Charlie was up for action again, buoyant and enthused. In such a mood he could only imagine things going to plan, and ideas popped up in his head like popcorn in a pan. “I just had another idea! We don’t have to be afraid of Intelligence mode! If we give ourselves a specific task, a specific problem to solve, it’ll work for us, not against us.”

“We tried that in MacDonald’s, and look what happened.”

“Yeah, you chickened out. If you’d ‘ve stayed chill it wudda been easy street—but we can learn from that mistake too, you know? Anyway, we know we’re in deep trouble, right?” Ben didn’t

respond. "Right!?"

Ben nodded.

"And we also know we have to stay out of sight, right?"

Ben nodded a second time.

"But we want to have fun and do stuff, not live hidden away in a forest somewhere, never taking no risks, never meeting no girls, never going –"

"Just get on with it would you!"

"Sorry, you're right ... stop wasting time Charlie. So, I go into Intelligence mode and order my brain to come up with the best ways of staying out of trouble. You know, give it a clear and direct instruction. Can't go wrong, can it!"

Ben shrugged, hiding his excitement. That Charlie was showing the courage and willingness to dip down so soon into the cold waters of super-intelligence—not even hinting his sibling should do it—was a relief. And the whole idea of a hideout, of a base, made comforting sense, made the future seem hopeful again. He just didn't want Charlie getting too full of himself. He nodded again, crisply, indicating Charlie could go ahead with his plan.

So Charlie Rhodes took a deep breath and pressed his Intelligence button. Two seconds and a few rapid blinks later he pressed Impervious. He was smiling.

"Right then, here it all is. We get hold of black clothes and black balaclavas, so that when we fly at night we'll be as good as invisible. That takes care of getting around without being noticed while being able to see each other. Black face paint would be good too, but I couldn't think where to get it from, except maybe make-up at Boots or something.

"Being in a city is definitely safer than out here in open country, where we stick out like sore thumbs. If we keep on stealing food from the same little village houses it'll quickly get noticed and make people suspicious. Not only that, but it'd probably be too hard to find somewhere to stay, to make into our base. Which city then? Well, we know Swindon better than any other town, so,

yeah, that abandoned house—or another one—would suit us fine, long as we can stay warm when it gets cold. In a city there's plenty of food around, plenty of different places to steal from, and it's easier to disappear too. When we have a hideout, we'll have somewhere to run to when we get into trouble, and invisible we can't be followed! No one'll be able to find us, but we can find each other again easy, if we get separated. As for TV and games, we'll just go to the movies invisible, and nick the stuff we want. Don't sound too bad a life to me, and that lot's just for starters! So what d'you think, Ben?"

Ben's face had already melted from its forced frown to a broad smile. He lept to his feet. "You impervious?" he asked, pressing his Strength button.

"Yeah?", said Charlie suspiciously, taking a step back.

"No reason," answered Ben, but stepped quickly forward and bear-hugged his brother as hard as he could. Had Charlie not been impervious, Ben would have broken his brother's arms, ribs and spine like dried twigs, so fiercely did he hug him. After a brief moment Ben relaxed his grip and stepped back. "Just didn't want to kill you, that's all." He looked suddenly embarrassed and looked at his shoes. "Anyway, how are we gonna get back to Banbury without being noticed?"

Charlie straightened out his hug-rumpled t-shirt. "On Speed my good friend, on Speed."

"Eh? Won't that make us stand out like beacons?"

"I don't think so. Think about it: I was slowly walking beside a car that was doing between sixty and seventy miles an hour. When you ran off through that field I could hardly see you, you were that fast. I reckon running at top speed we must be doing, like, four hundred fifty miles an hour, more more likely! We'd be like blurs! Watch this."

Charlie pressed his Speed button and ran off down the field as fast as he could. From Ben's point of view it was if his brother had disappeared, especially as Charlie's departure had kicked up a

great cloud of dust and peppered Ben with mud and stones. But then, a second or so later, his arms and legs flailing madly, Charlie was hurtling through the air like a rag doll yanked by a jet plane. He travelled in a frantic arc, landing far away in a wild, skidding tumble of limbs, almost too small to see. Ben depressed his Speed button and sprinted after his brother, hoping everything was all right.

But it was hard work. From his point of view, it was taking him as long to cross the very large field as were he running at his 'normal' top speed, even though he was running at well over four hundred miles per hour. In fact the distance proved too great to cover in a sprint, and he had to slow down. It took Ben what felt like minutes to reach Charlie, whereas from Charlie's point of view it had taken Ben mere milliseconds. When Ben finally reached his brother's side, he was so out of breath he could hardly talk.

"What ..." <puff> "... the hell ..." <puff> "... was that!?" he managed, after pressing his Impervious button again.

"You will notice, my good sir, that I am not, as are yourself, out of breath. The trick is a simple one. You reach top speed, jump as high as you can, then press Impervious for a safe and comfy landing. Would you care to try, me Lud?" Charlie stopped shaking mud and grass out of his hair to bow deeply and theatrically.

"Cool, but give me a second to catch my breath," said Ben, before hearing what sounded like police sirens in the distance. He straightened up from his hunched position, and looked in the direction of the noise.

"Do you hear –"

"– what I hear?" said the twins.

It was indeed sirens, and it sounded like the high pitched wailing was coming from many more than one police car.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Ben urgently, his energy fully returned in a flash-flood of adrenalin.

"Hold up there, keep cool! We can't see them, so they can't see us. Let's just hold still a minute and see what happens, eh?"

Ben looked at Charlie and relaxed, calmed by his brother's calmness, "Good thinking, but we'll be safer invisible." Ben pressed his Invisibility button, quickly followed by Charlie.

"Good thinking," echoed Charlie, who was feeling nicely in control and safely out of harm's way, thanks to the success of his disciplined turn in Intelligence mode. "The last thing we want is to run off in any old direction before we know what the danger is. The cops must be on that road we saw, the one that goes through the village. We can't be seen down here, so we've got time to work out the best plan. Question is, are they here because of us, or for something else?"

"Us for certain. I mean, what else has happened to make them put their sirens on? It's been dead quiet since we got here. Maybe that old woman went back to the kitchen and noticed all that missing stuff, called the police, and they came running, thinking it could be the Flying Twins, or whatever they call us. Maybe they have their sirens on to scare us out of hiding or something." Ben suddenly realised how wise his brother's wait-and-see decision had been. "Nice one Charlie!" He turned to give his brother a congratulatory pat on the shoulder, but couldn't see him. "Oh yeah, I forgot."

"Forgot what?" Charlie couldn't see that Ben had turned to look at him.

"I was just gonna ... Doesn't matter. Hold on, is that a helicopter!?"

Charlie strained his ears and began searching the skies. "Bloody hell, it is! Look!"

"Where?"

"There, back where we came from!"

"Shit!" Ben could see it too, black against the blue sky, dipped forwards like an angry wasp and heading straight for them. "Good job we're invisible!"

The police sirens stopped their wailing, probably having arrived at their destination, but the sound of the helicopter got louder and

louder until it shot over the twins' heads in a scream of rotary blades and engine-whine, racing towards the village Charlie and Ben had just plundered. There it stopped, swung round in the air, then began its descent to some landing spot the twins could not make out.

"I think we'd better get going," said Charlie, who didn't want to wait for the police to start snooping around and find the rubbish he and his brother had left, still there by the copse at the top of the hill. "It's time to get this speed-jumping thing down, now, while we're still out of sight, and the cops are busy asking questions. You do one like I did, I'll follow, then we'll do it together."

Ben agreed. "Okay, let's do it." He pressed his Speed button, and, as before, the world slowed to a fascinating crawl, the intense sound of the helicopter now a slow, thumping bass drum. But there was no time to get lost in the wonders of super-speed; it was time to escape.

He studied the terrain immediately ahead of him. A few yards away there was hedgerow separating them from the next field, which was itself encircled by other fields and yet more hedgerow, all the way up to what looked like another village deep in the distance. He estimated he could comfortably reach top speed before making it to the hedge, despite a slight incline in that direction.

Off he ran, hoping keenly he would get his timing right and not hit the tough-looking hedge. At the last moment, just as he had reached his top speed, Ben leapt for all he was worth, then pressed his Impervious button.

Speed ripped through him like an electric shock. The contrast between running at what seemed normal speed, then racing through the air at roughly four hundred and fifty miles per hour, was enormous. The ground zipped beneath him as he rose to the zenith of his arc, wind pummelled him, flapped his limbs like flags in a hurricane, twisted his body round and round in a scattered confusion of sky and earth until, finally, he hit the ground and

skid-tumbled a further fifty meters before coming to a dusty stop.

As he stood up, grinning broadly, and started to dust himself down, he saw Charlie hurtling through the air towards him, hit the ground in the usual chaotic manner and come to a stop in a strange mess of giggling limbs a few meters away. The untangling heap began to speak.

“You know, I think I’m getting to like this one even better than all the other stuff we’ve done! What d’you think, Benny Boy?”

“I can’t get my head round how ... how ... massive ... ly ... bigly ... HUGE that was! How did that alien even make this stuff!? Impossible ... impossible! Not good for the clothes though.” Ben pointed at his brother with raised eyebrows.

Charlie looked himself over. “Oh not a-bloody-gain! These threads is brand new, man!”

His t-shirt and jeans were still—just about—holding together, but would need to be replaced as soon as possible. They certainly wouldn’t survive another high-speed tumble like that one. In fact, if they didn’t want to attract immediate and unwanted attention when asking questions about bus stops and timetables while butt-naked, they had to rethink their mode of locomotion.

“So,” said Ben breezily, scanning the terrain ahead of them, “we can hardly ask people about buses if our clothes get any worse than this. How are we going get to Banbury from here? Or should we risk stealing new clothes before finding the bus stop?”

“You know what Ben? I think I’m on a roll here—in more ways than one, ha ha. Did you notice that river back there?”

“You saw a river!?” Ben turned round and looked back disbelievingly. “I couldn’t make out a thing!” But Charlie was right; there was a muddy looking river not one hundred meters away. Ben smiled, quickly on to his brother’s train of thought. “It’s the only button we haven’t used yet!” He glanced excitedly at Charlie. “Do you think the river flows into Banbury? We should be sure.”

“I know it does. I remember seeing it when we flew away from

the car crash. It even goes under that motorway. The only thing I'm not sure about is how we'll know we're in Banbury, but we don't even know how it works yet. Come on!"

At times like this, it was as if the twins were reading each other's minds. Had you been with them, you would have had a hard time keeping up. They had gone from dejected to fighting fit in the twinkling of an eye, thanks to some well-timed food and drink, and a more sensible attitude to intelligence. Suddenly the world seemed exciting instead of threatening, supportive instead of deadly, and Charlie and Ben were buzzing in its glow. As one they depressed their Speed buttons and zapped down to the river. Unsure exactly what to expect, but totally confident it would work, they pressed their Underwater Breathing buttons and leapt into the slow moving, moss-green waters.

It was as if nothing had happened except a jump and a soft landing. There was no sense of water, no splash, no coldness, no murk, no current tugging or pushing at them.

"Eh?" they said. "Nothing happened!"

After a quick look around though, they noticed they were indeed on the bottom of the river. Their feet were standing on top of the silt without having disturbed it, and they could see as clearly as if the water were air. The only signs they were underwater was the waving motion of the river weeds and the bobbing presence of a few fish, seemingly hanging in mid-air. Then something else struck them.

"We can talk!", and

"No bubbles come out!"

They put their hands to their mouths in wonder, could feel no breath escaping. It made no sense whatsoever, yet there they were, obviously underwater, as free in their movements and abilities as were they on solid ground, in good, clean air.

"Right then," said Charlie, smiling widely at Ben with a happy shrug, "Banbury's that way." He pointed the way they were facing. "Let's go."

The town was two to three miles away from where they stood, on the floor of that canal. It took them about ninety minutes to get there, taking their time, feeling unhurried and safe, enjoying like tourists the strangeness of that fishy, river-weedy world.

On their underwater journey they discovered, upon poking their heads above the water now and then to see where they were, that they were not at all wet. When they determined they were at last in Banbury, they climbed from the water as dry and clean as old bones—not counting of course the encrusted mud from their earlier speed-tumbling which had not been washed off. It was shortly after five o'clock.

Charlie and Ben had chosen as their exit point—more out of necessity than choice—a closed lock they would have had to phase through, had they wanted to go any further underwater. But seeing as it was clear they had reached Banbury, and that they would not find the bus stop on the floor of the canal, they decided it was time to continue their quest on dry land.

Still standing on the canal's bed they looked around for any signs of danger. They saw tall buildings to their left, and to their right a moored barge on which there seemed no activity. As far as they could tell, it was safe to emerge from the water. But a passer-by they had not seen walking along the broad quayside far from the water's edge—an old man with his equally old Alsatian—noticed Charlie climbing out of the canal. He would have called for help, but the boy seemed completely dry and calm. He stopped walking and watched.

It wasn't easy for Charlie and Ben, because the water was quite a way down from the edge of the quay. Charlie had had to stand on his brother's shoulders to pull himself out of the canal, then reach back down to pull his brother out (easy with Strength mode active). The man observing the twins' efforts was caught between running over to help and simply staring in amazement. In the end, the strangeness of the events unfolding before his eyes rooted him to the spot, but when the twins finally noticed his presence, he

suddenly found the strength to speak.

“Er, are you two all right?”

Charlie answered. “Why thank you very much my good sir, we most certainly are. Oh and it was a lovely, watery walk, wasn’t it brother?” He turned to Ben smiling like a chat-show host.

“Why yes it was brother, most informing if you ask me, and good for the health too. But my good man,” Ben turned to the somewhat confused pensioner, “informing as it was, we were not able to discover the whereabouts of the bus stop to Ye Olde Swindon Towne. Might you be able to help us on that point?”

The old man blinked. “Bridge Street,” he answered, too bemused to think of any response other than the one required. “Follow the canal down that way. It’s the second main bridge along, not including that little one right there.” He pointed out a little bridge just after a curve in the canal, but when he looked back at the twins, they were gone. All that was left was the sound of boyish giggling. There was no response to his few uncertain and tentative “Hellos?”, so with a deep frown and troubled scratching at his bald head, he carried on his way, and put the unusual experience down to his advanced years.

When Charlie and Ben turned onto Bridge Road from the canal path, they realised they had come right back to the place where they had handed over those stolen burgers to Claire. There was the dirty skip just beyond the bushy trees. Charlie whispered teasingly that they were near Ben’s girlfriend, but Ben didn’t respond. Seeing as they were both invisible, there was no way Charlie could see Ben’s face had gone red, so Ben could keep his feelings to himself. Normally impossible in front of your identical twin.

A little later they found the bus stop, and read from the timetable that the National Express bus would be along at twenty past six. An invisible peak at a young woman’s watch told them it was coming up to half past five. They only had an hour to wait, an hour, however, that was not without its surprise. At ten past six Ben noticed Claire walking towards them in tight black jeans and a

loose red t-shirt.

Her prettiness was a jolt that locked his eyes on hers. Then suddenly her vacant gaze focussed and found his, and as before Ben was aware that she could see him, even though he was invisible. It was as if they were bound. This time though, Claire reacted differently; she screwed up her face and wrenched her gaze from Ben's, sped up and walked past the bus stop staring resolutely ahead.

If Charlie noticed what had happened, he didn't mention it. Ben decided to keep the incident to himself.

Chapter 11

“Skull ... Skull!” As gently as he could, Brian Paddock tried to rouse Rob Denham from his famously deep slumber. But his urgent whispers and gentle prods had no effect. He paused to weigh again the seriousness of the situation, against the possible risks to his good self, should The Skull think the surprise return of the twins un-newsworthy.

Brian was almost always the first of the boys awake, and had shared a room with Charlie and Ben Rhodes before they had been adopted. For over two weeks he had therefore had the room to himself, so had been alarmed, upon waking, to see a human shaped lump in the bed opposite him. Ditto the other bed. After overcoming his fear he had tiptoed over to see who—or what—it was, and had got the shock of his life: Charlie Rhodes was fast asleep in his old bed! And there in the room’s remaining bed was Ben Rhodes, the other twin, the quieter one, also sleeping peacefully.

They were back, it was big, and Rob Denham, also known as The Skull, would surely want to know.

Proud he had discovered the twins’ presence without himself being discovered, he had hurried off to wake The Skull with the news, but had experienced his usual attack of self-doubt upon entering the monster’s chamber—what if he had been mistaken? The question unsettled him, but after a short moment of mental paralysis he had shaken the question from his head with an internal “Nah! How could I be wrong about something like that?”, and proceeded as planned. Nevertheless, his first attempt to rouse the sleeping beast, described above, proved too weak. He upped the ante.

“SKULL!” he yelled into Rob Denham’s ear, and slapped him hard on the shoulder to make extra sure.

It worked. The woken behemoth lurched from the rumplings of sheets and blanket with a mumbled bellow, then immediately

sought out the source of the disruption to normal business. It turned out to be Pony.

“Pony! What the fuck are you doing!?” The Skull’s voice was quite high pitched considering his size and age, and had a lazy calm the other boys at Daisy Fields Orphanage found intimidating (the girls found it creepy). Even angry his voice hardly changed, so punishment from The Skull in the form of fists, knees and boots, was often a very painful surprise.

Pony leapt back in alarm, spitting out his news as quickly as he could. “The Twits are back, Skull! The Twits is asleep in their beds like they never left!”

The Skull blinked, rubbed his face, then let his large hands flop back onto the bed like discarded cuts of pork. He stared into the middle distance for a second or two, then returned his casual gaze to Pony. “You mean Charlie and Ben?”

Pony nodded.

“Charlie and Ben Rhodes what was here all their lives? Them Twits?”

“Yeah, they’re back in my room right now. I saw them with my own eyes!”

The Skull rose from his bed and stretched to his full height, a good head and shoulders above Brian Paddock—whom The Skull had given the nickname Pony—yawned, scratched at his crotch through his saggy, grey-white y-fronts, and spoke again. “Let’s go ‘ave a butchers then.” He sounded neither here nor there about it.

Pony led the way down the long corridor to the last room on the left and opened the door as quietly as he could. With a finger to his lips, he indicated to The Skull that they should sneak up on the Twits, then entered. The Skull acquiesced, and followed on noiseless tiptoes.

Pony had been right: there they both were, sleeping peacefully, his favourite victims. Actually, had he been honest about it, The Skull would have had to admit he had missed having The Twits around. They had this feisty way of refusing to be bowed by his

beatings and bullyings, of sticking up for one another, of somehow always seeming happy, which he secretly respected. But it was also that very buoyant happiness that got to him, their unshakeable friendship, their strong family bond. And though nowadays he resolutely turned aside all thoughts on the subject, he knew deep down he was never going to experience what they had. He was too big, too ugly, too scary.

He lifted Charlie Rhodes bodily out of the bed he had been in, and breathed into his favourite victim's watchful face. That the victim was fully clothed and relaxed did not register on Rob Denham, but then, The Skull was not known for his smarts.

Charlie's eyes had blinked open as soon as The Skull had curled his hands under his armpits. He looked confident, as if he had been expecting the intrusion.

"You haven't brushed your teeth, Rob," said Charlie, using The Skull's first name in a shocking breach of protocol. Pony went weak at the knees. "Use this," added Charlie, before accurately spitting a spray of saliva onto The Skull's slightly ajar lips.

The Skull reacted by hurling Charlie over the bed and onto the floor, but in doing so quickly discovered he was not—as events up to that second should have suggested—in command of the situation.

The way Charlie flew through the air was wrong, troubling, lifeless. The twin made no effort to correct his flight, to minimise the danger of injury, to protect himself in any way whatsoever, so landed awkwardly on his left shoulder, with his left arm twisted painfully back. His cheek smacked hard against the floor boards. He lay there as if dead.

At the moment of impact, there was a blur from Ben's bed, but neither Pony nor The Skull could make out what had happened. Next millisecond, Ben, also fully dressed, was standing beside Pony.

"Why don't you go get the others, Pony. There's a fight brewing!" he whispered sharply, right into Brian Paddock's ear.

Something was very wrong and it frightened Brian. He watched Charlie climb to his feet glowing with a confidence he had never seen in him before. Then his fear got the better of him and he ran.

*

Due to a sleepless night, John Webb was in no mood for dealing with a recalcitrant secretary, and lacked the robust and easy charm so useful when dealing with unimaginative, pretty, heavily made-up types. The dully attractive woman refused point blank to allow him any further, on the simple and irrefutable grounds that Webb had no appointment. But it turned out that luck was on Webb's side.

Just as he was about to give up and turn away, the sound of hastily approaching footsteps sounded from the corridor at his back. The little office Webb was waiting in, was so shaped that standing at the secretary's desk put you right by the door. All Webb had to do was lean back to see who was hurrying their way.

"Dr Greene! Dr Greene!" a boy of about thirteen started shouting, running at top speed across the dull, brown floorboards towards Webb's outstretched head.

The boy was thin and nervous looking, and had obviously just woken up; he was wearing pyjamas and his hair was a greasy, wiry mess. He dashed past Webb without seeming to notice him, and at about that same moment the door to Dr Thomas Greene's office opened to let a short, rotund, yet strong looking man into the secretary's now full office.

"Well Paddock, what's so important now?" asked Dr Greene, not taking his hairy hand from the brass door knob.

"Sorry sir but there's a fight brewing. And it's the twins. They're back."

"The Rhodes twins?" Dr Greene frowned severely, suspecting a prank, but the stranger in his office seemed to take the news seriously.

"Show me," he said, as if he were in charge.

Brian Paddock looked up at the brown haired man and trusted

his face instantly, even though it was gaunt and unshaven. "This way," he said, and turned to leave, relieved he had been listened to.

"Not so fast young man," said Dr Greene, taking his hand from the door knob and stepping fully into the room. The doctor waited for his door to swing closed behind him before proceeding, unmoved by the sight of Brian Paddock hopping from foot to foot in anxiety. "Dr Greene," he said, extending his hand to the stranger who had just tried to take control. "And you are?"

"Richard Sale, a friend of the Holloways. I promised them I'd come and talk to you, attest to their good characters. But right now I think we ought to follow this young man here." Webb put his hand on Paddock's shoulder. "It looks like the twins have come back."

"Of course, but you wait here," said Dr Greene, looking stern.

"I'm coming too. I promised Robert and Molly I'd do everything I could." Webb's voice was measured, and carried an easy authority.

There was a tense moment as Dr Greene tried to stare his way into Richard Sales' thoughts. He could detect nothing other than an understandable eagerness to get going, and seeing as there was little time to discuss the matter, acquiesced. "Go ahead then Paddock, you lead the way." He nodded at Sale to indicate he could follow along.

So Webb followed the superintendent and little greasy haired orphan down the poorly lit corridor through a pair of large swing doors, right up two floors on a wide staircase, then right again through another pair of swing doors, down a slightly better lit corridor and into the last room on the left. The sound of a boy sobbing forced Webb to muscle his way to the front, fearful of what he would find.

There the twins were, as Paddock had promised, but the fight they appeared to be the causes of was a particularly disturbing one. A large boy dressed only in y-fronts, sobbing as if recently bereaved, was punching and punching the upturned face of a much

shorter, blond haired boy, who was giggling and urging his tormentor on, teasing him constantly. They were both standing, the victim—if that is what he was—with his back to a wall, as the larger boy, in front of him and with legs astride for leverage, pounded away. Webb recognised the blond haired boy as one of the Rhodes twins, but could not say whether Charlie or Ben.

Fluttering around the semi-naked bully was a moving blur the shape of a boy, recognisably blond on top, dressed in maroon trousers of some kind, and dark blue top. This colourful blur stopped every now and again, apparently to slap the almost naked boy on various parts of his back and shoulders. At each slap the bully sobbed out more loudly and tried to swat the source of the stings, but it was quicker than a fly in darting out of reach. Webb assumed the fast moving blur was the other twin.

“Charlie and Ben Rhodes, stop this now!”

Webb’s barked words had the desired effect; the three boys stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him, the blur becoming solid for the first time. The big boy and the twin standing against the wall spoke simultaneously, the one sounding desperate, the other irritated.

“Help me!” : “Why didn’t you warn me, Ben?”

*

Charlie gave Ben an admonishing look, pressed his strength button and pushed The Skull across the room. It was not a full strength push, but was nevertheless hard enough to cause damage. Rob Denham was sent hurtling backwards so fast he could not stay upright. He crashed loudly to the ground, his head, left leg and right arm making ugly smacking noises as they variously cracked into the floor. When he came to a stop he started to scream in pain, clutching at his right arm. Charlie’s face looked cold and angry.

“Dr Greene, get those boys out of here and call an ambulance. I’ll deal with the twins.” Dr Greene gave Webb a searching look, but did as instructed.

Pony ran off as Dr Greene helped The Skull to his feet, The

Skull nursing what looked like a broken arm, his stuttering screams cut into by the jolts of pain his efforts to walk caused. The twins regarded Webb warily as the hobbling pair left, and carried on watching him as he closed the door. All the while Webb held his right arm stretched out towards the twins, hand open and up as if stopping them from crossing a road. He never took his attention off them.

“Who are you then?” asked Charlie in a sullen voice, now looking fixedly at his feet.

Webb didn't answer, knowing he needed to take control of the conversation right away. “Dr Greene will call the police now, you know that, right?”

The twins didn't respond, not even with a movement.

“The police would need about twenty minutes to get here in normal circumstances, but these aren't normal circumstances. I reckon you've got about five minutes. In about five minutes this place will be surrounded.”

Charlie shrugged and shifted on his feet threateningly. “So?” He would not look Webb in the eyes.

“Charlie, let's go eh? The Skull won't forget this in a hurry. We got our own back double style and then some. Come on...” Ben looked agitated, so Webb turned his attention to him.

“You're Ben, aren't you?” Ben looked at Webb, his face taut with worry, but said nothing. “You and Charlie are in serious trouble, way beyond a simple telling off. What you've started here is a completely different game to anything you might have played before. You're a threat to the state, you see, and so the state has to stop you. If you stop now and hand yourselves in, no one needs to die. I don't know or care how you do –”

Charlie suddenly thumped both elbows backwards into the wall he was leaning against, detonating out a large hole to the outside world. “Shut up, tosser! Shut UP!” he shouted. “You never even answered my question!” He turned to his brother. “Come on Ben, let's get out of here.”

After a strangely pleading look at Webb, Ben hurried over to join Charlie, who pushed at the bricks around the hole, making it big enough for them to escape through. Next thing Webb knew, the twins had flown out of it. He recovered quickly enough from the shock of seeing two boys fly out of a hole in a wall to run over and watch them land safely on the ground two stories below. Then they disappeared.

Webb shook his head in disbelief, but knew he needed to disappear too. He didn't want the police to find him, and ask him a few awkward questions, like who he was and what he was doing at Daisy Fields.

He ran back into the corridor and shouted out Paddock's name, believing the boy to be his one chance of getting any information that might help him locate the twins before the police did. To his great relief he saw the boy's face poking out worriedly from behind a door further along the hall. Pulling his wallet from his hip pocket, Webb jogged over to the anxious orphan.

"Here, take this." He handed Paddock his card. "Call me on the mobile if you can think of anything, anything that will help me help Charlie and Ben. And please, don't tell the police first. Please."

Paddock looked at the man he thought was called Richard Sale and trusted him. With a little nod he took the card and retreated back into the room.

"Wait! Is there a back door out of this place?"

"Yes," answered Pony through the not quite closed door, "but it's locked till later." Then he pulled the door firmly to.

"Shit," whispered Webb, and ran back the way he had come.

When he got to the staircase he looked down to see if Dr Greene and the injured boy were still on it. They were not, and as he could hear no signs of them he decided to run out of the building as fast as he could, hoping the doctor's powers of description were not good enough to help the police identify Webb as one of their own.

He climbed into his car out of breath, and drove off to the sounds of approaching sirens. As he sped away, two things were playing

on his mind: the way Ben had so pointedly touched his stomach with his index finger before flying off; and a blue-green ball of what looked like light floating down after Charlie and Ben as they had flown to the ground. He had no idea what either meant.

Chapter 12

After fleeing Daisy Fields Orphanage, Ben and Charlie easily found the old abandoned house they had once played in, but were in low spirits.

The ride on the bus the night before had taken many hours, not one, the bus for some reason going first to Heathrow Airport, where it had waited what seemed ages before heading off again. At Heathrow, despite the long wait, only one new passenger had boarded. She had, as luck would have it, selected Charlie and Ben's seats. They had had to move quickly as the tanned woman in brightly coloured clothing had swivelled her plump behind in their direction. The odd noises the twins had made scrabbling frantically over their seat-backs had alarmed her, and she had called the driver's attention to it. But the driver could find nothing wrong and the matter was dropped. It was the only moment of excitement on an otherwise tedious journey.

By the time they had arrived in Swindon, it had been dark for an hour or two. Their clothes were of course still muddy and tatty, so the first thing they had done was find a clothes shop—a trendier one than Marks and Spencer called Ripped Torn—and picked out the darkest trousers and tops they could identify. As you may know, picking out black from other dark colours is not easy when there's little light to assist you, so the twins' selections were not as accurate as they might have been. Charlie came off best, choosing a pair of dark green army trousers and a black, hooded top, while Ben's deep maroon jeans and a dark blue hooded top would prove look a bit striking in daylight. Charlie had had to change his shoes as well, his Marks and Spencer pair having been damaged in his confrontation with that fast moving Ford Focus. Ben's were fine, so he kept them, believing stealing justified only when necessary.

In their new night-camouflage they had flown straight to the Orphanage—stopping only once to dump their old clothing into a randomly chosen bin—and once there sped straight to the kitchen

to eat. Stomachs nicely filled with milk and cereals, they had then returned to their old room to find their beds unoccupied.

It had been strange hovering in the dark above Brian Paddock, watching him slumbering and twitching in his dreams as he always had done, being 'home' again, being so different to the boys they were before, the dark now an ocean around them, full of hidden intent, quietly plotting some unknowable future. Once in bed sleep had not come easily, and the little which had come proved troubled and shallow.

Then their revenge had not gone as planned. The arrival of Dr Greene and the strange man accompanying him had upset the twins in different ways, with Charlie angry and Ben unnerved. Ben wished more deeply than before they would be able to start doing some good deeds soon.

So there they were, invisible, not talking but still holding hands, standing in front of the grotty, boarded up house they had played in a year or so before, the house they were going to turn into their home. The graffiti covered building seemed to look down at them sadly, disappointed with its lot in life, and with its little visitors.

"Let's go round back," whispered Charlie.

The side and back of the house were still as they remembered them, ringed by a wide alleyway whose high concrete wall they had had to clamber on to peer over when checking the coast was clear. At the back, the alley continued uninterrupted around the row of houses—there were seven terraced together—to what looked like a delivery company, where trucks and vans awaiting jobs were parked in a wide driveway. As before, there was no one around, and the only growing thing was a thick bush covering the most of the downstairs window.

Staying invisible, Charlie and Ben walked up to the flaky, dusty back door, no longer needing to squeeze through the narrow kitchen window to their left, which they had discovered open on their first visit.

"Ready?" asked Charlie. His voice sounded excited.

“Yup,” answered Ben, as a strange idea occurred to him. “This is our first real home,” he said, letting Charlie in on the thought. He found it more disturbing than warming.

Charlie found it funny, and laughed. “Well then, my darling, let us begin our new life together.”

The first act of their new life together was to let go of each other’s hands, and press their Phase buttons. They pumped their way through the back door, making very sure their feet were above the ground once on the other side, then pressed Impervious. They landed softly on the bare concrete of the broken up kitchen—broken up by them a year earlier.

It was hot and heavy inside, airless, the smell of stale urine stronger than before. The boarded-up darkness fed the smell, intensified it, was a watchful and sinister presence you could not ignore.

“So, let’s check it out,” said Charlie, trying to sound breezy, and turned to his left to push the latch on the kitchen window to.

They had agreed on their way over that Ben would search upstairs and Charlie downstairs, so as to get used to doing things separately. It was high time, reasoned Charlie, they do some operations solo—some things would definitely work better that way. Feeling pretty sure the house was empty anyway, it was as good a place to start as any.

So Ben went upstairs. He tried to stay as quiet as possible, not liking one bit the broody silence, the darkness, the foul smells. A year ago it had been thrilling and dangerous to be there, this time the mouldy place was to be their new home, the place they slept and ate in, washed in, woke in. Actually being there was a very different affair to fondly reminiscing about being there while sitting on a hillside in warm sunshine. But he resolutely carried on as planned, and carefully explored each of the upstairs rooms in turn.

There were two big rooms—bedrooms he guessed—a smaller room, and a bathroom and a toilet, although the bathroom had

nothing in it except a rectangular shape on the floor where a bath must once have stood, with an assortment of pipes and electric wiring sticking out of the walls. The toilet stank like it had never worked and would never work. The stench was strong enough to make him retch.

Confident the upstairs was free of danger—if somewhat unsavoury—he pressed his Flight button and flew back down to join his brother. Charlie was already waiting for him by the front door.

“Nothing down here. How about you?”, he asked.

“All clear,” answered Ben. “Bloody horrible though.”

“Rubbish matey! We just gotta get some stuff, clean it up a bit, make it ours, know what I mean? We don’t need anything fancy, just a room or two’ll do, and seeing as both of us can’t cook, we don’t even have to touch the kitchen.”

“What about taking a dump, and brushing our teeth, toilet paper, washing!? You didn’t see the upstairs bit. It still stinks like old piss, but way worse now!”

“No problemo,” grinned Charlie, and pressed his Intelligence button. The customary two seconds elapsed, accompanied by a little rapid eye movement, after which he pressed his Impervious button with an imperious swish of his arm, then proceeded with his report.

“Benny Boy, you is gonna love this! There’s so much I don’t even know where to start. Er ... disguise! We’re too easy to identify, so we should dye our hair different colours and get different hair cuts, maybe I’ll get a skinhead and you keep yours moppy but dye it black, you know? We’ve gotta look different, not like twins, but just as a just-in-case—we’re gonna be out of sight mostly. Oh, and get a new set of clothes too—we’ve been seen in these already. Then we need a map of Swindon so we can work out the best routes to the nearest, easiest-to-rob shops, for food and water and everything. We’ve got to know it like the backs of our hands, so no matter where we are, we know the best way back. Aaaaand ... We

clean up some of the house, like I just said, choose a couple of rooms for ourselves and make 'em up nice and cosy. Upstairs is best, 'cos then we can let some light and air in without being seen." Charlie pointed towards the back of the house. "Over that way there's just empty space, remember? No one's out there to see us, so we'll live at the back where we won't have to creep around in the dark. It'll be wicked! Then we gotta get books on stuff like plumbing and electricity and how to fix stuff up so it all works here again. We can nick all the bigger things we need at night, like a sink! Make this place how we want it. Exactly how we want it, Ben!

"I am so bloody up for this! I know you are!"

Ben was so enthused he completely forgot his fear of Intelligence. The idea of cleaning the place up, putting in a sink, knowing Swindon like the back of his hand etc., filled him with hope the future needn't be miserable. He grinned at his brother to let him know how he felt, then pressed his own Intelligence button. He had had a few worries of his own he felt he could now resolve, without having to confront his fears.

Two rapid blinks later he pressed Impervious again and was himself ready to report. "I was thinking about dogs, you know? Police dogs, I mean. It won't matter that we're invisible if they use dogs to follow us 'cos they use their noses. If we ever have to run away from dogs, head for the river at speed and then go the rest of the way underwater. And we should get a watch each so that we can organise stuff better, you know, synchronise. Good eh?" Ben beamed proudly at his brother.

"Nice one Ben! I'm telling you guv, with these belts on, we is invincible!" Charlie patted his stomach regally with both hands. "So, let's choose a room!"

They both pelted upstairs and ran through the nearest door, which led into the room to the left of the staircase. In it were two boarded up, south-facing windows, the floor, four bare walls, and ceiling with lone cable dangling forlornly from its centre. In

buoyant mood once more, the twins were again in sync, needing to exchange only the slightest of looks to know what the other was thinking. They ran to their respective window—Charlie left, Ben right—pressed their Strength buttons, tore the heavy chipboard panels from the windows and hurled them to the floor with a perfectly synchronised flourish.

After the reverberating crash and cloud of kicked-up dust had settled, Ben, looking at the discarded wood, and feeling inventive, suggested: “One of them would make a nice table top, don’t you think?”

“No,” answered Charlie.

For some reason the twins found their little exchange funny. They started to giggle, then laugh, then fed on each other’s laughter till their laughing was so hard they could no longer stand. They sank slowly to the dusty floor where they writhed about for what felt like minutes, until that gasping absence of breath which follows helpless laughter finally extinguished their mirth.

The room was now filled with sunshine, had become through this simple change a new place, a place they could like, a place they could call their own. Ben’s spirits, lifted by the prospect of having somewhere safe and clean to live, maybe even for a long time, was now elated. He got to his feet and went to the window nearest him. Charlie went to the other, and they both stared out south, across Swindon, happily silent for a while.

“It’s gonna be good here, Charlie, I can feel it,” said Ben at last, smiling broadly. He was now far from the depressed mood brought on by Webb’s earnest warning at Daisy Fields, and could imagine, for the first time, life on the run working, being good, being viable.

“I know,” agreed Charlie. “I know. Look how far you have to go to see any people. There’s nothing out there for miles!”

For the first time in their short lives, Charlie and Ben had a place they felt was truly theirs, something over which they had full control, a place where they were in charge. Of course, they had not paid for it, and no one had said they could move in, but for

orphans—that is, for people unloved for unknown reasons by one or both parents, people forgotten by society, taught by uncaring professionals—such details were largely irrelevant. The place they had selected for themselves had belonged to no one, and now, by their decree, it belonged to them. In their eyes there was no harm in that.

They were gazing out across an abandoned looking expanse of ugly concrete, which led to some uninhabited buildings and empty car parks. No one was going to be able see them in the back rooms of their new home—unless a helicopter was flown low past the windows while the twins were standing at them. As long as they were careful about leaving and arriving, made sure no one saw them anywhere near the house, they would be all right, they could begin to make a life for themselves. Maybe their mistakes would be forgotten by the police, maybe in time Charlie and Ben Rhodes would just be forgotten, and could start anew, as people with no past and nothing to fear from the future.

In a blur of frenetic activity, the twins spent the next few hours deciding what to steal (buckets, mops, detergents, taps, blankets, pillows, sheets etc.), invisibly finding the right shops, and sprinting back and forth in Speed mode, collecting what they needed. The problem of getting the stolen goods into the house without breaking down the back door—they had no key and wanted to leave no obvious evidence the house had been broken into—they solved by pulling off a wooden board from the side of the large downstairs window obscured by the overgrown bush, and using that window as their door.

It proved to be a fun and productive day. They learned a lot about the basics of house maintenance. They discovered the lever which turned the mains water back on; that the flush in the toilet's cistern was easily repaired; that cleaning was far more enjoyable under your own leadership than when others are making you do it; and that, wonder of wonders, in the downstairs hall near the front door, there was a coin-operated meter for the house's electricity. All

they needed was a fifty pence piece, which Charlie successfully stole from a till in a nearby newsagents. They pushed the coin through the slot, broke open the black plastic box into which it fell, and reinserted it again and again until the meter was loaded for hours of use. But what did they own that needed electricity? Nothing.

A quick discussion followed, which led to the agreement they steal a brand new radio/CD player, complete with box, cable and plug. Ben was up next (they had decided theft of little items was safer done solo), so joggled off, invisible, to the nearest Dixon's. After a short time avoiding customers and wondering what the best device might be, he settled for a shiny little thing that cost almost three hundred pounds. The thought of stealing such an expensive item made him sweat with fear, but they were criminals now and had no other choice. That was how their new life was, the life they had chosen. As soon as the way out of the shop was clear, he pressed his Speed button, grabbed the box, and sprinted home.

In awe, the twins carefully retrieved the shiny new item from its pretty packaging, connected the speakers, and plugged in the power cable. It worked straight away! Charlie and Ben Rhodes had their very own electricity, by their very own invention and ingenuity (or so it seemed), and it was a wonderful, LED-blinking, cool sound-making, CD-tray-ejecting moment. They programmed in all the radio stations that sounded good, listened for a while, laughing, talking and singing along, then noticed their hunger. Minutes later, Charlie returned burdened with bags of crisps, sweets and other delights.

Later on, they began discussing how they might steal a fridge, thinking it would be cool to have cans of coke and fanta and other goodies ready to hand. With a little time and good planning they would soon have a fully operational house, minus a kitchen of course.

In their new bedroom that night, lying on piles of soft blankets, surrounded by packets of crisps and sweets (plus a few pieces of

loose fruit Ben had later acquired), their shiny, new mini-hifi blinking and gently serenading them in the dark, their heads on clean smelling, fluffy white pillows, they chatted themselves down into an easy sleep.

Chapter 13

Most frustrating of all to Graham Steiner was the unexpected appearance of the mysterious Richard Sale at Daisy Fields Orphanage at the exact same time the twins had turned up. The pompous Dr Greene was certain he had never seen the man before, and the Holloways had never heard of him—even though Mr Sale had known their first names, and claimed to be acting on their behalf. None of the children at the orphanage were any help either.

The description Steiner had to work with—dark hair, maybe brown eyes, medium build, late twenties/early thirties, neutral English accent, tired looking, unshaven—narrowed his search down to about ten million people. Richard Sale was a worrying detail Steiner could for the moment find no home for. Was he from MI6, from the CIA perhaps, SAS, KGB? Was that his real name? No one seemed to know anything about the man. Like it or not, it looked for all the world like a rogue element had entered into the fray, for whatever reason—as if this case did not have enough of the unknown and unpredictable in it already! Grudgingly, he had put it on the back burner until further evidence turned up.

One thing he was certain of however, was that Charlie and Ben Rhodes were hiding somewhere in Swindon—it was the only place they knew—and had therefore moved his base of operations to Swindon police station shortly after arriving at Banbury. He had only had time to interview the Holloways, review the two cases on file at Banbury, as well as debrief Officer Moriarty, before news of the Daisy Fields Orphanage incident had come in.

Four hours later, he was in a small office in Swindon Police station, and could at last get down to business. Knowing the twins would need to steal food and drink to stay alive, he had placed two-man teams in all the major Swindon supermarkets, inside and out, and also had other two-man teams walking random streets. Something was bound to show up sooner or later. He had to hope for now the twins wouldn't cause major loss of life, and draw

attention to themselves that way. Boys with toys were one thing, boys with powers of flight, super-strength and super-speed quite another.

But that led to the other thing he felt quite sure about; the twins were smart. This was in fact the only element of the whole case that gave him any hope. Apart from a few slip-ups, Charlie and Ben Rhodes were lying low, doing their damndest to stay out of sight. He respected them for that. Had they wanted to make a serious bang, Steiner felt sure it would have been heard right across the country. That there had been only a few containable incidents thus far, meant it would probably stay that way until the twins, confident that the system they had set up was working, grew bored in their comfort, and took a risk too far. When that happened, Graham Steiner would be there waiting for them.

Wednesday, both to Steiner's relief and disappointment, proved to be uneventful after the excitement at the orphanage had subsided. He turned his attention to perusing all cases of break-in and theft reported in Banbury over the last forty-eight hours, regardless how innocent seeming.

*

John Webb spent what was left of Wednesday morning in and out of a troubled and light sleep, his mind beset by unanswerable questions. Why had Ben so pointedly pressed his stomach before flying out of the room? How had the twins disappeared? Could they turn invisible too? Had Webb really seen a bluish ball of light? Was that strange light the source of the twins' power? If so, what was it? A will-o-the-wisp?

But he was falling into the trap he had so deliberately told the Holloways to avoid. There was no earthly way he could understand what made the twins super-powered, and yet it was exactly that futile effort which was depriving him of much needed rest. With a self-disgusted grunt he shook his head empty, went to his kitchen and drank a creamy hot chocolate. To add to the soporific effects of his drink, he listened some tedious

parliamentary debate on the economy. When he could take no more of the politicians' childish bickering, he went back to bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Six hours later he awoke from his old nightmare with a shout. As he fought to calm his panicked breathing, he realised he had not had that dream for years. Ironic that it should return now, right after he had used his painful past as an excuse to take indefinite sick leave. The last thing he needed was to walk that emotional labyrinth again.

Even in his dreams he could never rescue his brother, could do no differently what he had done fifteen years ago. At that bus stop by the chip shop, one hot June Wednesday after school, he had argued with James, and his temper had got the better of him. Was it a murderous rage which lurked inside him, one he must forever police? He hardly knew what to think of it any more; it had been discussed to absurdity and back too many times, and to no discernible use. All Webb knew, was it was he, and no one else, who had pushed his brother in front of the oncoming bus. He wanted to believe he was not evil, but how could he ever be sure? He knew of no one else who had killed their own twin brother on purpose.

But he could not allow himself to slip back into that inner torture now, not when he had a chance, however slim, to make some kind of amends. Best make every effort to focus on the task at hand and keep the past where it belonged.

It was almost seven o'clock in the evening, and he was hungry. In no mood for cooking, he showered, shaved, got dressed, then went out for a kebab. Just after he had taken his first bite, his mobile rang. At first he could not work out who was calling, although the number seemed familiar. Then he recognised it; it was the area-code for Alkerton. Molly Holloway must be calling from one of her neighbour's phones. He gulped down his mouthful as fast as he could, and answered.

"Hello?"

“Hello, it’s Molly. Is that you?”

She was obviously being extremely careful, avoiding using his name. “Yes Mrs Holloway, it’s me. Has anything happened?”

“Oh, well, more or less the things you said. Mr Steiner is in charge now. He seems very professional. His men have been all over the house already, doing this and that, you know, very discreetly. You hardly hear them at their work. But he mentioned another ... incident ... ?” She left the words hanging, not wanting to be too detailed.

“Yes, I can confirm your sons are alive and well, and capable of all the things I told you about.”

“That is good to hear.” Her voice almost broke over the simple words.

Webb carried on, able to imagine how hungry for news Mrs Holloway must have been. “I was able to make contact with another boy at the orphanage. I think he trusts me. With a little luck, he’ll contact me with information that leads me to Charlie and Ben. When I was with them, before they escaped, I was able to tell them how serious the situation is. I think it got through to Ben. He seemed to want to help, but Charlie ... he’s angry ... and in charge, so they ran.”

“Yes, that makes sense. And, um, was it possible to follow at all?”

“No. They flew to the ground, then just ... disappeared. I’m not sure what that means, whether they can go invisible, or teleport, or if it’s some other power.”

There was a short pause before Molly continued. “No one tells us anything really, although Mr Steiner has grudgingly put an end to the nonsense that we’re somehow responsible. I hate to think what they would have done with us had the boys not shown themselves. He said he would relocate to Swindon. He has an instinct the twins will stay in the town they know, rather than risk anything new.”

“Yes, I suppose he’s right. Thank you for letting me know, Mrs Holloway. I’m glad to hear you sounding stronger.”

“Thank you, too, for being so ... so honest. Without you I’m not

sure how I could bare it.” Her voice started to break again, so she stopped for a moment, to regain her composure. “Well anyway, I suppose I’ve taken enough of your time, and I’d better be going too. So ... good luck then.” She hung up without giving Webb a chance to wish her well.

There was, deep down, a good measure of doubt in Webb, and Mrs Holloway’s aching need for comfort and reassurance had brought it to the surface. His chosen course of action was likely to destroy his career as a police officer, and was not without other, more significant risks. He knew very well the team Steiner put together would shoot at the first sign of trouble, and knew too his presence in the hunt was a factor that could upset things, that he was an element Steiner could not control. But he had felt the agony of loss first hand, and learned through it that some matters went beyond mere protocol, beyond human laws, demanded from us a different type of commitment, a more profound attention. John Webb knew he was compelled by his history to try, that no argument, internal or otherwise, could shake that conviction from his marrow. But the fearful quaver in Molly Holloway’s voice had touched him more deeply than was safe.

He pushed his unfinished kebab aside, unable to take another bite.

*

Thursday brought with it a change of weather. The unbroken blue of the past three days was completely obscured by an endless sea of shapeless grey, which, trying hard to rain, managed only a few scattered drops. Having forgotten to steal watches, and with no visible sun to guide them, the twins could not tell the time, but casually reckoned it to be mid-morning. They were feeling on top form.

“You know,” said Charlie, as they both brushed their teeth at one of their many blue plastic buckets, “we should start trying to sleep through the day and do stuff at night, when there’s less people about, like vampires do it. So I was thinking we could nick a TV, a

DVD player and a bunch of films, and stay awake tonight as long as we can. Maybe get some pizza too.”

“Cool,” said Ben, feeling quite cool himself, quite grown-up. Independence was something he could get used to. Definitely.

“So today we take it easy, chill out, watch movies, half-inch a few CDs, you know the score.” Charlie put his toothbrush back into his mouth and resumed brushing. Life was as sweet as a nut. Soon, he thought, he would be shaving and going to night clubs, soon he would be decked out in the finest clothes superpowers could steal, using fake names, charming the ladies, living it up fat-style.

“Cool,” said Ben again, entertaining more or less the same thoughts as his brother. Although, in Ben’s head, there was but one single lady. She had a name, a pretty face, chestnut coloured hair, deep brown eyes, and he was looking forward to seeing her again, as soon as he could sneak away.

First order of business though was hair dye for Ben, and seeing as Ben was the one who had to suffer the indignity of using such a girly item, of doing such a girly thing to his hair, Charlie went to get the necessary things from Boots. Able to use the cargo-sized pockets of his new army trousers to carry the box of hair dye, he also stole an electric hair-clipper (which he stuffed under his tucked in top), then, homeward bound, made a detour into a nice smelling bakers, from which he stole a warm, fresh loaf for their breakfast.

After breakfast they dyed Ben’s hair. The cold water from the sole tap they had so far installed was very unpleasant, running across Ben’s scalp in icy rivulets. The experience made Ben resolve to get some kind of a water-heater, as well as a shower or a bath, whichever was easier to steal and install.

Charlie did not find it as easy as the simple sounding instructions promised, working the syrupy, pearl-coloured goo through his brother’s thick blond hair, and managed to make quite a mess. By the time he had finished—having worked his way through the entire contents of the bottle—the ammonia-smelling liquid had

stained parts of his arms and face, as well as much of Ben's forehead, neck and upper back. He spent the suggested thirty minutes waiting-time scrubbing them both clean, but water alone seemed to have no effect. After rinsing the dye out of Ben's hair and drying it fuzzy with a towel, Charlie took one look at his brother and burst out laughing.

Charlie's somewhat unsupportive reaction was not what Ben wanted to hear. Surmising his new look was not an improvement on his former handsome self, he quickly informed his brother he would be back shortly and dashed off to steal a mirror. He returned seconds later and unpacked the steel-framed shaving mirror from its box.

"Bloody Nora!" he shouted. "What have you done to me!? I look like a chimpanzee!"

"That, or a chumpanzee!" laughed Charlie.

But Ben got his revenge. He gave Charlie a crew cut with the buzzing electric hair-clipper, and enjoyed every second of it. When he was finished the difference was dramatic, and he had his turn laughing as Charlie mourned the loss of his locks. They stared at themselves and each other for a long time, getting used to the new them. It was as if they were no longer twins, as if they no longer knew the person they had known all their lives. It took some getting used to.

After they had recovered from the shock, they started to discuss —both of them in Intelligence mode—how to steal a television.

"Speed is out the question," said Ben. "TVs are heavy and I want a big one. You can't run carrying something as big and bulky as a TV, but you might be able to fly with one. What if we test how much weight we can carry in Flight mode? Then we'd have an idea if that would work."

"Good suggestion, but it rules out stealing one from a shop full of people, which in turn means stealing from a house, one of course where the occupants are at the time of the theft elsewhere. If we go that route we have to make it look like an ordinary break-in, leave

behind signs of damage and so on. The police know about us now, that we have superpowers, so we'd best not leave behind any clues anywhere that we're in Swindon, mysterious break-ins they can't explain and such like, even though they probably figure we're here. No point helping the enemy, eh! And the house we take the TV from should be as far away from our base as possible."

"Agreed. But if we fly the TV home, how do we stay out of sight?"

"Good point. How about in the clouds?"

"Excellent, Charles. What's their altitude? How quickly can we disappear into them? Once in them, how would we find our way home?"

"Superlative questions, Benjamin. Short answer for you: With a compass. We choose some place on the map where it looks like there's lots of houses, measure the distance from here, work out the direction, say north-west or whatever, take compass and watches with us, time the journey, bingo!" Charlie snapped his fingers crisply.

"That would work," said Ben. "So we need two watches, two compasses should we get separated, and I think a big bag, big and strong enough to carry the TV, so that we can carry it together. We don't want to drop it from out of the clouds onto some poor unsuspecting blighter on the streets below. It would kill them!"

"Agreed. But where do we get such a big bag from?"

"How about we make one out of sheets, two to make it doubly-mubbly strong. That would do it. Oh, I could just giggle I'm so excited!"

"Don't be silly."

And so it came to pass. Ben ran off and came back with two identical digital watches and a pair of stainless steel compasses. They pored over their map of Swindon, pointing this way and that as they established north, south, east and west, and where the best place to steal a television might be. They refined their plan too, deciding to take their map with them, figuring Swindon would

look like a map from above. After two minutes of flight they would emerge from the clouds to gauge the distance they had travelled and establish their current position, then repeat that procedure at two minute intervals. That would give them a pretty accurate idea of how long to fly on the return journey.

Then they tested the weight they could carry in Flight mode. Reasoning they each weighed more than even the largest of television sets, Charlie tried to fly carrying Ben. It was no problem, but was a strain on his muscles similar to carrying him around on foot. So to avoid unnecessary discomfort they constructed their sheet-bag with handles made from two large towels, which they threaded through holes they made in each of the sheets' corners, and tied the towels' ends to form large, looped handles. With the towels' bulky knots positioned underneath the doubled-up sheets, they slipped the loops over their heads so that the towel-handles ran across their backs and down under their armpits. To test their sheet-bag they flew their mini-hifi around the room. It seemed to be a very secure system, as long as they flew close enough to one another to lend the sheets a bag-like shape.

Off they set, confident they had covered all possible angles. Their house was situated in the lower half of Swindon, roughly in the centre, so they had decided to head north-east, which gave them the best chance of finding a residential area far away from their home base. To be as sure as possible no one would see them flying up into the cloud cover, they first flew up onto the roof of their house to watch the street below for passers-by. They didn't have to wait long—Churchill Road was quiet. One single car slowly hummed by, then the street was empty of life. Checking behind them just to make extra sure they wouldn't be seen, they shot up into the clouds as fast as they could.

Once the ground below had become fully obscured by the mists of cloud, they checked their watches, waited until it was exactly 12:55:00, then flew off north-east. At 12:57:00 they descended, damp and cold, to see where they were, but couldn't work it out.

The streets and houses below did not seem to correspond to the portion of the map they thought they must be over—there was too much detail below them, colours and roofs and cars and trees, whereas the map was flat and featureless. Ben had an idea.

“If I sit on your back then press Intelligence, I’ll be able to figure it out for sure.”

“Nice one,” said Charlie, moving his body to a more horizontal position, “climb on.”

So Ben drifted on to Charlie’s back and sat there as if he were on a horse, then pressed his Intelligence button. Charlie grunted as he adjusted to his brother’s sudden weight, then handed him the map, which was getting damp too. The first thing that occurred to Ben was that water was not good for televisions—the drizzly mist of the clouds would work its way into every part and break the TV before they got the chance to enjoy it, rendering their whole mission pointless. He pressed his flight button again to take his weight off Charlie. The problem needed discussing before they carried on.

“Charlie, I just thought of something. If we carry the TV all the way home through these clouds, it’s gonna get drenched. We’re gonna have to wrap it up in plastic bags or something, otherwise, it’ll break.”

“Gotta love that Intelligence stuff! Now, get back on board and find out where we are on the map.”

Intelligent Ben easily worked out how the map represented what they saw below them, and pointed it out to Charlie, who could only agree. It was 12:59:13. They waited until it was exactly thirteen then carried on. At 13:27 they peeked out of the clouds for the last time, and decided they had reached what looked like a good spot to begin their hunt for the television. It had taken them, after subtracting their reconnaissance-pauses, twenty-two minutes of flight in a north-easterly direction. It would therefore take them a little more than that in a south-westerly direction to get back home, allowing for the extra weight they would be carrying.

After checking that no one was looking up at the sky at that moment, they descended to the largest roof they could see, on a quiet street their map called Chives Way.

Chives Way seemed likely to produce the sort of house which would contain a nice, big, flat-screen TV; even from above the houses looked modern and neat. They landed on a large grey roof, which covered all three units of a triplex, the furthest left of a row of three similar buildings. To the immediate left and right of those were further pairings of duplexes and triplexes, although with terracotta-orange coloured roofs. For want of a better idea, they decided to examine the three greys first, then move on to the three oranges to the right afterwards (should they need to).

Charlie, still holding the sheet-bag and map, stayed on the roof to keep guard, while Ben flew around the upper storey windows to check for any signs of life. He saw no one, and flew back up to tell Charlie. Next, Charlie flew down into one of the gardens at the back, then invisibly peered through the windows of all the downstairs rooms. Nobody. He flew up to Ben, and reported that the coast was clear. They should start with the left-most home though—it had the coolest looking TV.

They were about to commit a robbery, about to break into someone's home and steal their television. Standing at the back of the left-hand house, the twins started to feel nervous. They knew from their recent shop-lifting adventures that flat-screen TVs could cost over one thousand pounds, the really big ones much more than that. What they were about to do felt suddenly very different to shop-lifting.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Ben, turning to face his invisible brother.

“Yeah,” answered Charlie, although he did not sound very convinced. “You know, even if we're goody-two-shoes from now on, then they catch us ... that's it, game over and thanks for playing. We're wanted outlaws already. We chose to go the outlaw road. So it's that, or hand ourselves in. Anyway, we've been over

this. I thought we were sorted.”

But Charlie was convincing himself as much as Ben. It’s not easy being the one making all the decisions all the time—which is how Charlie saw himself—but he knew, instinctively, that a leader has to stick to his plans. Sometimes that was hard to do. Sometimes he had to talk himself round too.

Ben agreed with Charlie’s reasoning, and suddenly regretted so obviously pushing his Flight button in front of that man at the orphanage, and was ashamed of the part of him that wanted things to go back to normal. Since moving into Churchill Road, he really wanted to build a life, their own life, he was truly excited by the new sense of independence and maturity that came with that process. But doing bad things again and again disagreed with him, made him feel sick. Besides, this was somebody’s own home. Homes were special.

“This is the last time we steal from a home, okay? After this it’s shops only. They can afford it.”

Charlie agreed with an “Okay”, secretly thankful Ben had made his feelings known. Stealing was what outlaws do, true, but there was a big difference between nicking wee nibbles from large heaps of piled-high food (and a few other assorted items) in shiny shops, and relieving someone’s home of its most valuable property. Being orphans, their ignorance of all things domestic added mightily to the magic of that domain.

The best way into the house was through the double-glazed patio doors that led into the living room, the very room where the large, black flat-screen was waiting for them. Charlie phased through, unlocked the door and let his brother in, who was carrying the big sheet-bag and couldn’t phase with it. Then they went into Speed mode and got down to business.

As Charlie busied himself with the television, pulling its many wires free from their ports in the wall and surrounding electronic devices, Ben ran to the kitchen to look for some adhesive tape and plastic bags. A couple of seconds later, as they were both busily

sticking together the many plastic bags Ben had found, arguing in quick whispers about the best way to protect the wonderful piece of equipment from the wet clouds they would soon fly it through, a terrible noise, like the deep, mournful wail of a dying beast, swelled into the air. They jumped up in shock and looked at each other fearfully, not sure what to make of the sound. Then Charlie remembered that the noise of the car he had thrown had sounded deep and slow when he was in Speed mode.

“Press Impervious,” he said to Ben, hurriedly pressing his own Impervious button.

It was the telephone. Ben and Charlie waited wordlessly, motionlessly, not sure what to do. It was as if they suddenly had company, as if the person calling had caught them red handed, and was going to ask them what the hell they were doing there. And then, after the phone had rung six or seven times, the answer machine started up. It was a young woman and man speaking together, sounding like they were having fun.

“Hi, it’s us, but we’re not here to take your call. If you think we like you, and you want us to call you back, then leave a message after the beep. But be warned: should your message be dull, or babbling, we shall judge it harshly!” Then the couple laughed in a comic, sinister manner, which was followed promptly by the promised beep.

The twins instantly recognised the person leaving his message as the man from the recording. “Janice, it’s me, are you there?” Pause. “Hellooo oh my sexy one!? Where for art thou?” Pause. “Not there? Oh well, I wonder if this message will pass muster when we listen to it tonight, ha ha. Anyway, I just wanted to ORDER you to wear that sexy underwear again, and lie waiting for me on the bed. I’ll be home about five, feeling horny! See you real sooooooooooon!” Then he hung up.

“She should be here!?” said Ben in alarm, trying to get his head working. His heart was beating with a horrible ferocity, but he couldn’t move, couldn’t think.

Charlie was in the same state, but staring at the rumpled mess of stuck-together bags they had just been working on. The idea that Janice might turn up at any moment froze him in terror. Maybe she had just gone to the shops, or maybe she was across the road chatting with a friend.

“Got to think,” he said to himself, trying to work out how to get moving, what to do next, whether to run away or finish the job. “Got to think, think ...”

Ben looked over at his brother and recognised he was in distress. Then, suddenly and seemingly from nowhere, Ben became calmer and more clear-headed than he had ever been. He knew exactly what to do. At that moment he felt too, as if for the first time, how deeply he loved Charlie, and that he could help. He reached out his hand and put it comfortably on his brother’s shoulder, and smiled.

“We can finish this in Speed mode, easy. Follow my lead.”

The look on Ben’s face was a sun that quickly dispersed the clouded fog of Charlie’s fear. Charlie smiled in relief as he pressed his Speed button with Ben, and they set to the fiddly task of protecting the TV from the rain. Under Ben’s clear instructions the twins were able to securely wrap their booty from the coming water hazard. It took almost an entire roll of adhesive tape and seventeen plastic bags to build the crazy quilt they wrapped the TV in, but they got it done, and even remembered to include the remote control. Then, they carefully placed the heavy bundle in the sheet-bag, hoisted it back over their shoulders, and walked out of the living room and into the garden. Thanks to Ben’s state of almost divine calm, they even remembered to create—by kicking through the patio-door window in Impervious mode, then re-locking the lock—the signs of break-in that would force the police to conclude a simple, ordinary, non-super-powered crime had taken place.

Even the loud and jarring sounds of breaking glass could not shock the twins from their relaxed state. Checking briefly left and right to see if anyone was watching them, they flew up onto the

roof. Looking down from that higher vantage point one last time before flying up into the cloud cover above, they noticed a young lady drive a clean, black car onto the parking space directly below. Janice had returned. They listened quietly to the sounds of the car door opening and closing, a jangle of keys, waited until the front door too had been opened and closed, then shot up into the clouds.

It was 13:32:16. The entire burglary had taken roughly five minutes, including the selection of the best house. With a warming sense of a job well done, Charlie and Ben established which way was south-west, waited until 13:33:00, then began their homeward flight. In approximately twenty-two minutes they would be back.

You will, discerning reader, want to know what caused the oh so helpful transformation of Ben's panic into a state of sublime calm and effortless leadership. Of course it was our old friend, the blue-green ball of light, who felt his study of humanity—through the actions of the Rhodes twins—needed a small nudge in a particular direction, a direction more amenable to making that study more intense, more vibrant, more eye-catching, more worthy of note. Tailing his subjects back to their ramshackle home, he was more certain than ever that he was onto a winner, but vowed, in the interests of integrity and truth, never to intervene again.

Chapter 14

Every call to Swindon Police now had to be passed on to Graham Steiner, no matter its apparent severity. At 13:42 on the 13th of July 2007, some twenty-two hours after he had set up base there, report of a rapid-fire burglary caught his attention. A woman by the name of Janice Springfield had been out of her house for only fifteen minutes, in which time her flat-screen TV had been neatly stolen. Aside from a broken window there was no other damage, nor did anything else appear to be missing. There was also, strangely, a used roll of adhesive tape found on the carpet in the middle of her living room floor, in amongst the shards of glass from a shattered patio door. Mrs Springfield was certain it was her adhesive tape.

It could of course have been nothing other than a particularly lucky and well directed theft, but Steiner's instincts told him otherwise. It seemed too random and risky to be a targeted robbery—why would professional thieves pick out a house recently left by its owner to steal just one TV in an uncertain fifteen minute time frame, and in the middle of the day? It didn't make sense. This one he had to check out personally.

Forty minutes later he was at the crime scene interviewing Mr and Mrs Springfield. Aside from the adhesive tape and stolen flat screen, Mrs Springfield had in the intervening minutes been able to discover that all of her plastic bags were missing from under the kitchen sink. One of Steiner's team interrupted to say the few prints left on the carpet were from small sized shoes, most probably from two young boys—two different types of tread were clearly visible.

The strangeness of the burglary left him in no doubt that the Rhodes twins were responsible. From the evidence in front of him, and knowing the twins could fly, Steiner concluded they had flown from somewhere to Chives Way, probably—for reasons of easy reconnaissance—first landing on the roof to check the coast was

clear. After determining there was no way onto the roof from inside the house, Steiner ordered a fire engine come as soon as possible. But a subsequent inspection by his men of the roof yielded nothing further. Had any footprints been left they would have been washed away by the rain. No matter, he had enough evidence for his own satisfaction. He thanked the worried couple for their time and returned to his office.

Two bright and very helpful facts could be deduced from this recent Rhodes escape. The twins had set up home somewhere in Swindon, and they had electricity. Finding them now should be a snap.

*

By the time Webb managed to force himself to pick up his kebab again, it was already cold, and he had been through the grinder.

Getting himself back to the state where he again wanted to eat had not been easy. That he had not left the kebab house, but instead stayed put, was perhaps the thing that frightened him more than anything else. He had not run home, because the idea of being surrounded by his loneliness terrified him. He had stayed put in his cheap chair in that cheap and tacky fast food restaurant as he fought back the rising panic, because he knew the cold isolation of his own home would have made it worse.

When Darius, the Iranian owner of the restaurant, had looked over from behind the counter, and asked if something was wrong with Banbury's finest kebab, Webb had only managed a brusque shake of his head, an odd grimace, and a theatrical patting of his stomach to convey the problem was his, and would pass. Darius had nodded and smiled in understanding, but his face had shown clear signs of concern.

As Webb sat there, drawing on his experience of other battles with the familiar, but always terrible waves of fear and revulsion, the new realisation—that his own house was not his home, and therefore that he had no home—almost overwhelmed him. The only thing which stopped him from collapsing into hysterical tears

in full public view was his hardened attitude to these emotional blips he periodically had to endure. John Webb had known for a long time that these things pass, that afterwards life is still there, just as it was before, not at all interested in you or your troubles.

So he knew not to listen to his doubts, to the siren arguments that emerged almost magically from the cold swirl of fear to tell him he was wrong, that he had made a big mistake, that he was not in command of his reason. Webb had clung to the still face he presented to the world, as he would cling to a tree, and waited stubbornly for the storm to pass. And it had passed, taking with it twenty minutes of his life, and all the heat from his kebab.

Then, half way through his chill and gluey meal, Webb suddenly burst out laughing. Actually, the whole thing was incredibly funny, if you thought about it. There he was, a competent, intelligent, over-trained and over-qualified, yet humble, police officer, eating for his breakfast a cold kebab at close to eight pm on a Wednesday in early July, after having navigated a small emotional crisis, while secretly and illegally on the trail of super-powered, orphaned twins! You couldn't make it up!

Webb noticed Darius glancing his way again at the sound of his manic laughter, another worried smile stretching his lips, but this time he was in sufficient command of himself to respond verbally.

"I'm fine, Darius, really. I've had a couple of pretty weird days and ... well, first they went to my stomach, and now they seem to have hit my funny bone. I'm fine, I'm fine. Attend to your other customers." Webb casually waved away the kebab man's concerns with his hand, and returned to his breakfast.

As he took another bite, he realised with genuine relief the unexpected laughter had cleared his head. At last the useless white noise of his emotions had receded fully, and he could think again. Steiner's hunch that the twins would stay in Swindon made sense, so it made sense for Webb to be there too. He had to plant himself close to the action, shack up in some anonymous B&B from where he could await a phone call from Brian Paddock, or some news

from the Holloways, and get to wherever he needed to be in minutes.

So what would Steiner be doing? What did he have to go on? What would Webb do if he were in Steiner's shoes? Interview Moriarty and the Holloways certainly, and learn first hand that they were telling the truth as they understood it. He would have inspected the exploded cabinet and the small crater in the floor, and perused the report of the Marks and Spencer burglary. He would not know about the Phil Shaw incident, nor the Avery Court break-in. Webb was most likely still ahead of the curve, indeed he had even seen the twins in action.

But Avery Court was a worry. The couple would be unable to prove to the insurance company's satisfaction that a break-in had occurred, since there were no signs of the house having been broken into. Would they specifically seek Webb's help, as he had asked, or would they pester the police at Banbury? If they did that, Webb's lies would be exposed and he would be in trouble more quickly than he wanted.

That sobering thought led to another: for lack of helpful leads Steiner would comb through every incident which had been reported at Banbury since the twins' disappearance, and might find Webb's sparse reports suspicious. Should his suspicion be enough to seek an interview with Webb about the two cases, he would discover Webb had taken sick leave, claiming emotional upset because of the earlier loss of his twin brother. That would be enough to connect Webb to Richard Sale, which in turn would be enough to get him arrested.

He had to disappear.

With the last bite of kebab still in his mouth, Webb hurried from Darius' and made for the nearest cash point machine. He withdrew the maximum amount allowed him—five hundred pounds—then jogged back to his flat. Moments later he emerged carrying a bag stuffed full with clothes and other essentials, climbed into his car and drove to Swindon as fast as he could.

*

It was a good looking television, no doubt about it. But as Charlie and Ben stood admiring it, arms folded across their chests, they could still feel, blaring through their bodies, the garish noise of the police sirens they had heard while transporting their stolen goods home. They had been sure the police cars were racing to Chives Way, sure too all that sound and furious bluster were honing in on them, hunting them down. Obviously, the unnatural calm that had transformed their failing theft into a successful one, had evaporated.

“We’re not going to do that again, right?” asked Ben.

“No way! Already agreed,” said Charlie. “But that woman will get a new one, and they’ll be able to fix their door. It’s not too bad. We didn’t hurt no one.”

“Do you think they’ll know it was us?”

“Nah,” answered Charlie, knowing without having to ask that his brother meant the police, “how could they?”

“I don’t know! But I don’t know, do I? So how could—”

“What!? You don’t know but you don’t know? What’s that supposed to mean?” Charlie turned angrily to his brother unfolding his arms from his chest.

“I’m not a cop, am I! I mean, we don’t know what they do, so we can’t know if they can find out. We can’t know!” Ben was angry too, tired of Charlie’s empty assurances, his refusal to think things through.

“Oh say that now! Say that NOW! That’s just exactly the right moment, isn’t it! Hey, maybe we shouldn’t steal it after all. Maybe it’s not a good idea, after all! Now where’s that fucking Turn-Back-Time button again? I really think we need it!” Charlie waved his hands up and down over his stomach, and aimed a stupid, bug-eyed face at Ben.

“Fuck off Charlie!” Ben pushed his brother in the chest with both hands, sending him a few paces backwards. “You’re the one who said this’d be easy, not me.”

“So what! You agreed, didn’t you!?” shouted Charlie, and pushed back hard.

A fight erupted, but with both twins in Impervious mode, no harm could be done. They kicked and punched and kneed each other with vicious abandon, until at last they were out of breath, and wanted no more. When they were done, they were both lying on the floor with their backs to each other. The fight had gone no way to extinguishing their hot feelings of recrimination.

Ben wanted out, wanted to see someone else, someone who understood him. For the first time in his life, he believed his brother was not that person, and could never be. And for the first time, he had secrets he could not tell Charlie: sometimes he wanted to hand himself in, badly; he had shown that man at Daisy Fields how their belts worked; he wanted to kiss Claire from MacDonald’s; he wanted to go home and give the belts back, have a mum and a dad again. Ben had these secret yearnings, but knew Charlie did not share them.

Charlie wanted to make everything right, but didn’t know how. He was their father, their family’s Fierce Protector, and as such could not afford to make any mistake. For as long as he could remember, they had only had each other. No one else had ever cared for them—no one, not even their own real mum! Being on the run was the only thing that made sense, there was no other choice. They had to make it work. With their belts and enough belief and optimism they could do it, he knew it. They just had to stay together. He turned to Ben determined to cheer him up, but Ben was already climbing to his feet and his face said: don’t touch.

“I’m going out.” Ben’s voice was cold and distant, in a way Charlie had never heard.

“Where?” Charlie felt frightened, as if he were about to be abandoned and could do nothing to stop it.

“Out. Don’t worry, I’ll come back.”

“When?”

“Later ... soon ... I dunno. Later.”

“We’ve got watches now. Just give me a time.”

But Ben was already at the window, checking that the coast was clear. He pressed his Phase button, told Charlie not to follow him, and left.

Charlie was alone. He curled up in a ball on the floor, and started to cry.

About half an hour later, Ben was standing outside MacDonald’s in Banbury, invisibly watching Claire at work at her till. He had not needed Super Intelligence to figure out how to get to Banbury; his mood of angry determination had the exhilarating side-effect of freeing his thinking from worry and clutter. So with the usual mixture of Invisibility and Speed, he had borrowed then perused a road atlas of Britain, found a road that led directly from Swindon to Banbury, returned the atlas to its shelf, then brazenly asked directions to the A361. He fearlessly knew that no one in Swindon had heard about the Super Twins—he was alone anyway, and did not look like his former self. That the stains from Charlie’s botched dyeing job attracted strange looks did not bother him either; Ben had a mission, and would see it through to the end.

His watch told him the journey had taken a little over twenty minutes, but it had felt like an eternity, like four gruelling marathons, and been a sap-destroying mixture of Speed-jogging, Speed-walking and low-level flying over the endless fields that accompanied the winding A361. The only positive was that it was no longer raining.

In his hunger and thirst, he had passed many tempting roadside cafés, but, determined to do only good, had stolen nothing, wanting to be worthy of Claire’s love. By the time he’d reached Banbury, he was so hungry and parched he didn’t know what he wanted more—to talk to Claire or eat and drink. But his suffering seemed justified to him, Right and Good, as if he were being punished for all the bad things he had done. He resolved to suffer on, to stay pure and go to Claire before taking care of his baser needs.

Claire looked even prettier than she had two days ago, if that were possible. She smiled at the customers she served, but Ben could see she didn't really like them, that they didn't mean anything to her, and yet, now that he was there, so close to her vivid prettiness, he almost lacked the strength to go through with it, despite the bond he knew they shared. Strangely though, it was Ben's weakness and fatigue that gave him the strength he needed to carry out the final stage of his plan, lending him a floating, light-headed detachment from his fear of rejection. Without checking if anyone was close by, he pressed his Impervious button—failing to notice his hunger and thirst did not thereby disappear—and walked into Claire's MacDonald's.

Claire suddenly felt anxious, as if a soft, invisible hand had stroked the back of her neck. She stiffened, and craned her head around the two-person queue to see if anything had changed. She saw a young boy walking towards her—recognised instantly that it was Ben Rhodes despite his newly dyed black hair—and wanted to run. But she could not. Something stronger made her stand still and wait. The man at the front of the queue was saying something.

"I can't help you any more," she answered, her eyes fixed on Ben. "This till is closed." Ignoring the groans of complaint she stepped to her left and saw Ben falter, seemingly as a consequence of her movement. Then he carried on. He looked weak, exhausted even, a lost little boy alone in the world, splattered with flecks of mud. Her heart went out to him so strongly, her shocked paralysis vanished. She turned to the burger bay and grabbed a Big Mac. When she returned to the counter Ben was waiting for her.

"This is for you," she said.

He looked weakly at the golden-brown box, but did not reach for it.

"Don't worry, sweetie, I'll pay for it." She had never called anyone "sweetie" in her life, and always hated it when her mother used the term.

"Hey!" The man at the front of the queue had seen enough. "You

can't just forget us and serve your brother you know! You *have* got a job to do, in case you hadn't noticed!"

Ben flinched, not wanting to cause any trouble, and took a step back, but Claire gave the man such a pathetic and pleading look, the next words from his mouth were an apology. Then Claire's boss strode into the till area to see what was going on.

"Is there a problem, Claire?" He looked irritated. She wasn't the most reliable member of his staff.

"Sorry, Mr Reynolds, I can't explain it, but I have to have a break right now. Right now. I can't explain it. I'll pay for the Big Mac –"

"Could I have a drink too?" Ben's voice hardly made it out of his throat, so thirsty was he.

"What was that, sweetheart?"

"Drink?" managed Ben.

"Of course, of course. Coke?" Ben nodded. "Coming up!" Claire rushed off and filled a large cup with coke.

In the embarrassed silence her sudden absence left in its wake, Mr Reynolds stared hard at Ben, not sure what to make of the boy, his forehead stained a dark, blotchy grey, his oddly black hair and blond eyebrows, his fever-bright eyes innocent and knowing. A second or two later though, his sense of duty had got the upper hand. He turned his attention to the waiting customer. "Sorry about this, sir," he said politely, stepping up to the till, "what's it to be?"

As the formerly annoyed customer placed his order, Claire handed Ben the coke she had poured, and joined him on the other side of the counter. "Shall we go outside?" she asked. Ben nodded again, then burped loudly. He had already finished half of his coke.

"Excuse me," he said, blushing. Claire didn't seem to mind.

For Ben, Claire's unconditional support and gentle concern were angelic, divine. It need hardly be pointed out he had never had an experience like it. Even Mrs Holloway's welcomed maternal affections had seemed conditional, hesitant, conflicted. Claire just

gave, and was beautiful too, and her eyes looked into his and saw him, saw Benjamin Rhodes, made him feel proud of himself. As he followed Claire out of the restaurant, he fell head-over-heels in love with her.

Claire led him to a secluded bench she knew would be dry, protected from the day's earlier drizzle by a thick canopy of leaves in a little park on the other side of the canal. No one was around. She sat down and patted the space beside her, indicating Ben join her. He needed no second invitation. She took the coke he handed her, and watched as he devoured the burger she had bought him. When he was finished he thanked her with a bright smile, and she marvelled again at the colour of his eyes.

"Where's your brother," she asked, as he gulped down the rest of his coke.

"At home," was his simple reply. His voice sounded guarded, so Claire did not press the matter.

The flood of relief that accompanied the food and drink, that had been unleashed by Claire's loving attentions, shrank back at the mention of Charlie, a touched snail retreating into its shell. Ben looked across at Claire, aching to tell her all that had happened, but could speak no word. It was as if Charlie were suddenly with them, conjured to their side by Claire's innocent question.

Claire could read Ben like a book. Over the last two days she had thought of little else, even having dreamed of him twice. Consequently, that they were sitting together on a bench—out of the blue, so to speak—did not really surprise her, despite the disturbing nature of events that had led to it. It felt natural to be with him, like they were siblings, but at the same time, the many questions she had been unable to answer, that had troubled her so deeply, were still there, clamouring to be voiced. The struggle she saw in Ben's face brought one to her lips.

"You said you could do things. What did you mean? What things?" The question, put calmly enough, sent her heart racing.

Ben smiled again—she could not have asked a better question.

"We can fly," he said simply, as if there were more. "Watch."

Claire could hardly breathe. She dimly perceived she had believed him, even though she could not really think. She watched mutely as he pressed his stomach with his index finger, then rose effortlessly into the air, slowly unfolding from his sitting position, as he drew away from her, upwards. He reached his hands down to her. She took them in hers, forced to unquestioning obedience by the magnitude of what she was witnessing. Slowly, Ben pulled her up from the bench until she was standing, then she was on tiptoes, then she was in the air.

"Put me down," she whispered, "Please. I'm scared."

Ben let his proud smile slip, hurt that he had hurt her. He didn't understand, but did as she requested without questioning it. Claire sat back down on the bench, hunched, head turned from him. He sat next to her again, tense, aware a magic had vanished, clueless as to what to do next. A second or two later Claire turned her face to him again.

"What else?" she asked, looking at him from the tight round of her back and shoulders, palpably afraid, but also grimly resolute.

As before Ben pressed his stomach, but this time he disappeared from her sight. "Now I'm invisible," said Ben's voice, but stiffly, with no pride, no excitement.

"Oh my God!" said Claire, part laugh, part whisper, part exclamation.

Ben pressed his Impervious button again, his expression now mirroring Claire's frowning anxiety. She was looking at his stomach. Moving her hand tentatively towards it, she asked: "Why do you touch your tummy every time?"

Ben lifted his top. "We're wearing belts. You can't see it, but I can, the buttons anyway. They're sort of silvery. There's eight: four here, four here." He put down his top and looked at Claire again. "An alien gave us them. He said it was an experiment on our species."

"Alien?" Claire stood up in alarm, looking angry and afraid.

“What? What’s wrong? I thought you’d understand! Shall I give it back? I’ll throw it away if you tell me. I don’t know what to do!” Ben stood up and reached out to Claire, but she stepped back from him.

“I can’t,” she said, as her face began to collapse. She wanted to help, could even sense, underneath her growing fear, the strong connection to Ben that had carried her this deep into his life. But she felt like a wild animal in mortal danger, as if hunted by a ravenous wolf she could not see, but was close by, panting to attack.

“I can’t,” she said again as her tears began to flow, then ran for her life.

Chapter 15

Charlie sobbed for ten full minutes. The effort of it left him feeling blank. When at last he uncurled from the ball-like shape he had huddled himself into, his stomach felt as empty as his heart. He got up from the floor and looked at the television they had yet to even plug in, wondering dully if they would ever watch it. It stood there in front of him, not bothered by anything, and provocatively glistened its clean, black shine into the air.

“You can sod off for a start, you ... shiny ... shit!” said Charlie, and walked out of the room he and Ben had recently designated their Fun Room.

Standing in the quiet corridor he didn't know where to go. He blinked, suddenly afraid he would start crying again, then ran a few steps towards the bedroom and away from his tears, but stopped, not wanting to go in. From nowhere, he was angry enough to kill. He pressed his Strength button, ready to smash the house to bits, and then the street, and then everything else. He pulled back his fist and punched it through the wall to their room, blasting a loud crack of dust and rubble to the floor. But he instantly felt bad about it, able to picture Ben's disappointment at the mess.

Seeing Ben's face in his mind's eye calmed him. He carefully pulled his arm from the wall and realised, in a flash of certainty, that Ben had gone to see Claire. He had feared all sorts of possible destinations, and Claire had of course been one of them, but this time he was certain of it, and for some reason it didn't seem such a big deal. Ben was a growing boy, Claire was a good looking girl; it was a perfectly understandable thing! Charlie laughed at the thought of Ben and Claire kissing and holding hands, then walked into the bedroom, thinking to turn on the radio.

But his hunger caused a loud and prolonged rumble in his stomach as he bent towards the on-button, so he straightened up to ponder what he might like to eat. The answer was as obvious as it

was predictable. Fifteen minutes later he was tucking into his still hot Big Mac meal, enjoying every bite. He was in heaven.

Stealing the meal had been great fun. Instead of collecting, individually, the burger, chips and drink from their various homes behind the tills, he had waited invisibly at the counter until some customer had ordered what Charlie himself wanted, then simply snatched the freshly packed bag from that unsuspecting customer's hand.

The looks on people's faces! Gawking fish unable to speak as a brown MacDonald's bag floated slowly away from them. How he had managed to stop himself from moaning like a ghost to spook them further he didn't know!

The only negative was that the Big Mac had squashed up a bit inside its box, due to Charlie's extreme acceleration from zero to some very high speed in the blink of an eye. No matter, it tasted just as good. At least the coke hadn't gone everywhere! They sure had good lids at MacDonald's.

The radio was on and Charlie was happily humming along to some song, munching on a fry, when it occurred to him that he could get things ready on his own, make everything nice instead of just waiting around, so that when Ben came back—he would be back for sure—they could watch some films together, like they had planned. All he needed was a DVD player and some DVDs. It would take hardly any time at all for him to gather the stuff.

And that was what he did, even thinking only of Ben's happiness when he chose the DVDs: all three Spiderman movies, Superman Returns, and the X-Men Trilogy too. It was funny, but Ben running off to see his girlfriend, which at first had been so painful, now seemed to Charlie the best thing that could have happened. Connecting the cables he felt a new buzzing thrill of family oneness with his absent brother. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, he thought, it's true. Dr Greene had always said that, when he explained how dangerous it was for orphans to fantasise about biological parents who would most likely never return. But Charlie

had given up thinking about his mother long ago, so had thought Dr Greene a fool. Maybe he had been right after all, just pointed the argument at the wrong people.

Then the moment came to turn everything on, but Charlie hesitated. Should he wait for Ben to join him? He looked at his watch: 15:23—Ben had been gone for well over an hour. Charlie started to calculate how long it would take Ben to get to Banbury, but quickly gave up. He switched to Intelligence mode, but there wasn't enough information for him to make the necessary calculations: which roads had Ben followed, if indeed he had followed a road? How far away was Banbury as the crow flies? How long would he need for kissing and hand-holding? How would he get back to Swindon? Charlie could answer none of his own questions, so switched back to Impervious. Not knowing what to think, he switched the stolen equipment on, certain at least that Ben was having fun.

Half an hour through X-Men Origins, Ben phased through the window and collapsed to the floor without a word. Charlie rushed over to him. He looked terrible; gaunt and pale as a corpse, as though he had gone for weeks without food.

“Ben! What’s wrong? What happened!?” Charlie couldn’t make sense of it. His brother looked to be hovering at the grim edge of death.

But Ben could not talk. He looked weakly at Charlie while struggling to make a gesture with his hand that he needed a drink. Charlie understood immediately. He pressed Speed and dashed to the next room to fetch a bottle of water.

Ben proved too weak to hold the bottle, so Charlie—again in Impervious mode—had to cradle his brother’s head with one arm, while carefully tilting the bottle to Ben’s lips with the other. As Ben drank, slowly at first, but with growing vigour as the water replenished him, Charlie started crying. Ben sat up, now strong enough for that, and, with a searching look, took the bottle from his brother’s hand.

Charlie roughly wiped the tears from his face with his sleeve. "So, what's kissing like then?" he asked, his voice cracked with emotion.

"Don't know, didn't find out."

The sight of Charlie crying warmed Ben deeply. Claire's frightened, selfish reaction to his honesty, to his open plea for help, had thrown him back on that chill ground his heart had known before, before Mr and Mrs Holloway had said they liked him, and brought to a close the days when Charlie and Daisy Fields had been his whole world. Only this time the chill had been desolating. This time he had seen even Charlie as a stranger, believed he could no longer rely on his own twin brother for warmth. Then Claire had forced all hope from him with her frowned rejection. The icy fear that no one understood him—not Claire, not Charlie—had clutched at his hands and whispered in his ear the whole way back to Swindon, almost killing him. But it melted like snow in the simple light of his brother's tears.

"Chucky Boy," said Ben with a weak grin, "girls ain't all they is cracked up to be. Got any grub?"

Charlie sped off again, already laughing from relief, happy to be doing anything for Ben, and found a pair of bananas on the floor of their bedroom. He raced them back to his brother, who gobbled them down eagerly.

"You look like a monkey, with your black hair and blotchy grey forehead." Charlie meant it affectionately, was grinning from ear to ear, and Ben could see it. He made monkey movements with his hands under his armpits.

"Bloody lovely. Best bananas I ever ate!" He meant it too. "Is that X-Men?" He pointed at the TV.

"Yup, first one. Look what I got while you were off snogging that girl."

"I wasn't snogging her!"

"Yeah, right. So why you look like you've had the life sucked out of you then?" Charlie had got up from his pillow-chair and

grabbed the pile of DVDs from the floor beside him. “Check it out.” He proudly handed the stack to his brother.

“Wicked,” said Ben, throwing the second banana skin behind him. “You done good Chuck, you done good. Supposin’ you go ahead and fix me up one of them chairs you done made yourself ...” Ben drawled, pointing pistol-style at Charlie’s pillows with a cowboy-like wink.

“Coming right up, Benny Boy!” It seemed like years since Ben had called him ‘Chuck’ and ‘Chucky boy’, even though it had been little more than a week. The terms of affection soothed him like a balm, proof things had returned to how they were before; brothers as best friends, having fun, fooling around. He fetched Ben’s pillows and propped one against the wall beside his, and put the second on the floor as the seat.

Ben hobbled over and sank with a groan of pain onto the sweet, white, puffed L of softness his brother had prepared, then turned his attention to the film. Three minutes later he had sunk into the deepest sleep imaginable.

Charlie noticed right away and smiled, the sight of his peacefully slumbering twin for some unknown reason making him feel good. He pressed his Strength button, gently lifted his brother up—taking care to grab onto Ben’s pillows at the same time—and carried him to bed. Alone again in front of the TV, Charlie quickly decided he would rather be with Ben. Indeed, the prospect of sleep was suddenly impossible to resist. He turned everything off, and, without even thinking of brushing his teeth, went to bed.

The Super Twins slept for seven hours, hours in which all sorts of things were happening around them; plans, movements, decisions and delays, all inexorably proceeding towards an as yet indeterminate future. Charlie and Ben slept through it all, twinned by their DNA and a new, deep relief at the unexpressed, unrecognised sense their time was drawing to a close.

They awoke simultaneously, and checked their watches: 22:54.

“Cool, I feel like a vampire,” said Charlie, stretching pleausrably

into a yawn.

“They woke just before midnight, hungry for blood!” said Ben, wanting to be dramatic. “Tell you what though, I am bloody hungry. Didn’t you say something about a pizza?”

Ben was right, but it felt somehow like another Charlie who had made that suggestion some years ago. No matter, it was still a good one. “Pizza for breakfast at midnight? I can do that. I’m chill. But how do you nick a pizza? Not as easy as MacDonald’s you know.”

“Why don’t we order from a phone box, have them send it to some nearby address where we’ll be waiting, then Speed-nick the pizzas right out of the hands of the bloke delivering them? All we’d need is a coin for the call, and a menu to know what to order!”

Charlie scrunched up his face, struggling to keep up. “Er, are you in Intelligence mode, Ben?”

Ben blinked. “No, Impervious.” It surprised him too. “Hey! Not bad. Maybe the powers slowly seep into you or something. That’d be well cool!”

It was an exciting idea. Charlie tried to fly with the usual act of will, even though he too was in Impervious mode. Disappointingly, nothing happened. “I dunno,” he said, deflated by the failure of his first experiment, “maybe you’re just brainy.”

Ben tapped at his watch. “Maybe, but we should be getting started. Take-aways don’t stay open forever.”

They sped around Swindon looking for Pizza Hut, not trusting any place they had never heard of. Being a balmy July evening, the door into the branch they eventually found was jammed open, making the twins’ task that bit easier. As agreed, Charlie pinched a twenty pence piece from the till, while Ben pilfered a menu from the counter. They met by a nearby phone box.

(In case you think the twins would be noticed switching from invisibility to high speed, remember please that in Speed mode the world slows down to a snail’s pace. The trick to snatching a coin from a till, for example, is to wait until the very last moment, when the cashier’s attention has left the till upon slamming the drawer

shut. Right then—the timing has to be pretty good I grant you—you switch to Speed mode. The slamming till drawer slows down massively, making it easy to reach in your hand and retrieve the coin of your choice. The total time taken, therefore, to take the coin and sprint from the shop would be far less than a second. If anyone saw anything, it would be a blur, which they would be forced to dismiss, finding no explanation for it. Taking something like a menu would of course be far easier.)

Charlie's experience with the Big Mac made him wonder what would happen to pizzas at high speed. He described his squished burger to Ben, and they agreed the pizzas would suffer more than a small burger from being propelled from nothing to over four hundred and fifty miles an hour in the blink of an eye. The ingenious solution, hit upon without help from super-intelligence, was to first take the pizzas while invisible, then, while accelerating away in Speed mode, to turn the pizzas vertical and hold them against their chest, thereby also getting around the problem of super-fast winds on a large, flat, rectangular box.

And so, roughly twenty minutes after placing their order, did it (almost) come to pass. As Charlie had enjoyed his earlier experience at MacDonald's, so Ben enjoyed freaking out the pizza delivery boy, who swore and cursed wildly before fleeing in terror at the sight of the floating pizza box, even abandoning his little moped, which carried on puttering to itself by the kerb, unperturbed. Unexpectedly alone on the street they had chosen for their fake pizza-delivery address, the twins—tempted by, but not stealing the moped—decided simply to fly the pizzas home, and not risk squishing them at all. All in all a very successful operation.

(Discerning reader, I hope you are not too puzzled by the twins' sudden slide into recklessness, though I would understand if you were. I have touched on the reason already, but want to bring it to your attention more clearly. The twins' belief the police sirens—heard on their way home with stolen flat screen TV—were hunting them, that fear added to the intensity of the theft itself, profoundly

disturbed them. Then Ben's sharp observation that they—the twins—couldn't be sure they had left behind no clues, was the pin that finally popped Charlie's reality-defying optimism once and for all. That Ben then chose to share the hidden content of his heart with a virtual stranger—which had never happened before—was clear indication to them both of the seriousness of their predicament, the enormous strain they were under. But all this was nothing they wanted to discuss; the attendant feelings were too hot, too complex, too big. Besides, they really didn't need to. They were identical twins. They just knew that they both knew. Their paradise of freedom and fun could not last forever, no matter what Charlie said. Best relax and enjoy it while they could.)

At about three thirty next morning, stomachs deliciously stretched with pizza, they had finished watching the first two Spiderman movies, but didn't want to progress to the third. In fact they didn't feel like watching TV any more.

"Wanna do good?" asked Ben suddenly. It seemed like the right moment.

"Yeah, why not. Better than lying around here, I suppose." Not wanting to reveal how appealing the idea was, Charlie feigned casual disinterest. In truth, he welcomed the opportunity to assuage some of his guilt.

"Okay then, let's go. We've got dark clothes, it's night, so we'll fly around looking for people that need our help." Ben got to his feet and headed towards the window. Charlie grabbed their map of Swindon, tucked into his trousers, and followed his brother, who was phasing through the glass.

Moments later, The Super Twins were crouched on the roof of their Batcave, surveying the street below. Above them, Thursday's clouds had not dispersed, indeed they had become more shapely, more dramatic, more baleful than the flat, featureless grey of their daytime selves. Weakly lit by the dirty yellow light of Swindon's street lamps, the sky was a fitting backdrop for the Twins' new purpose, their grim determination to go forwards into the future, to

take the fight to life and not lie huddled in their room, meekly awaiting the inevitable. Tightening their hoods around their young faces, they took off into the night.

In the dead hours of Friday the 14th July 2007, two hooded youths flew over the grubby roof tops of Swindon in search of good deeds to be done. The various homeless people they spied, asleep under blankets, or sheets of soggy looking cardboard, looking from above like crumpled piles of discarded rags on the hard pavements below, were the first beneficiaries of The Super Twins' new and fine intent. Some awoke unknowing to a bounty of crisps, canned drinks, pre-packed sandwiches and bags of sweets, others were awake enough to witness first hand the little hooded angels at work, coming and going at impossibly high speeds, chatting, giggling, carefully depositing their gifts. The miracle workers, obviously twins, answered no questions, sought no gratitude, and when finished flew off quietly into the dark. Among the homeless of Swindon, that Friday the 14th gave birth to the legend of The Super Twins, or The Twin Angels, or even The Hooded Twins—depending on the tramp you asked—a legend of which Charlie and Ben would never hear a word.

Shortly before dawn, the horizon smudged with the sun's imminent arrival, Charlie and Ben decided to head home. They touched down on a wide, well lit street to get their bearings. Charlie pulled the map out of his pocket as Ben sped off to read the nearby road sign. As they studied the map together—referring to Ben's compass to establish which way to fly home—they heard angry shouts coming from somewhere behind them. It sounded like a fight. One look at each other was enough. They hurriedly put away their things and ran towards the altercation.

Half way along a narrow side street, three silhouetted figures were laying, fist and boot, into a fourth, who was making little effort to defend himself. Charlie and Ben were both in Impervious mode, their default setting, so the flash of a steel blade catching the street light did not alarm them.

“What seems to be the problem, gentlemen?” called Ben, slowing to a walk.

“Anything we can do to help?” asked Charlie, pacing calmly beside his brother. Both twins had their hands in the pockets of their hooded tops, their hoods were still up and tied fast around their grinning faces.

Four heads turned their way. The victim sank to the ground with a faint whimper.

“Kids!?” shouted the assailant with the knife, sounding relieved. “Fuck off back home the pair o’ yooz, unless you want your blood on the street!” He pointed his knife at the twins, turning it in the air threateningly. There appeared to be no blood on it.

Ben pressed his Speed button and flashed towards the man with the knife. In a thrilling rush of adrenalin, he snatched the glinting weapon right out of his enemy’s hands, so quickly, the staring face could not even begin to register anything having happened. The man’s eyes stayed dumbly fixed on the place Ben had been a fraction of a second earlier, stupidly looking at nothing. Smiling broadly, Ben then pressed Strength, and wafted the knife in front of his opponent’s nose.

“Lost something?” he asked casually. Then, with a swipe of his other arm, Ben sent his opponent clattering into the other, now equally dumb-struck thugs.

As the three men collapsed to the floor in a groaning heap of struggling limbs, Charlie arrived beside Ben.

“The thing about bullies,” he said, kicking a protruding leg, “the thing about bullies, is that everyone hates them. Everyone!” He kicked another leg, then pressed his Strength button. “If you apes think strength is so cool, that makes me and my brother the coolest people alive!” He bent down and hoisted the nearest person to him high above his head. “SEE!” he shouted above his victim’s screams to be put down, “LOOK HOW COOL I AM!” He looked menacingly up into the man’s face. “You look frightened, mate. Worried I might kill you?” He tossed him effortlessly high into the

air then caught him again. "Fun, ain't it! Me scaring you to death is *fun!*" Charlie spat out the word as if it were a bitter poison. "And I can do it, 'coz I'm strongest!"

The other two thugs clambered to their feet in fear of their lives, only to be knocked down again by their friend, whom Charlie had just hurled into them. The three disentangled themselves from each other, thumping and kicking in their panic to get away, like wildebeest scrabbling up a slick riverbank from crocodiles thrashing the water behind them. They ran off into the dark.

"Run away, children, run away home like the chicken shits you are!" shouted Charlie at their hastily retreating backs. "If me and my brother ever catch you again, you'll be in real trouble!"

Satisfied the immediate danger was over, Charlie and Ben then turned their attention to the man still lying on the floor by the wall.

"Are you all right?" asked Ben, bending over him, his hand stretched out uncertainly, worried at what the injuries might be.

"I've survived plenty worse than this, boys," came the somewhat muffled answer. With a few grunts and wincing, the rumpled form unfolded itself, and began climbing to its feet. A thick drop of blood fell from its large face like a tear. "I couldn't help noticing you two got some special abilities," it said, upright at last.

Neither Charlie nor Ben made any comment. They studied the man quietly, as he studied them with a soft looking smile.

He was tall and bulky, with thin, straggly hair tied back in a lank pony tail. His nose and left eyebrow were bleeding slightly, which he suddenly noticed for the first time. He wiped his nose with his fist, studied the smeared blood on the back of his hand with an indifferent shrug, then retrieved a clean white handkerchief from his baggy orange trousers, which he dabbed gently at his eyebrow. The amount of blood he saw there did not appear to alarm him either.

"No worries there, by the looks of it," he said with a strangely evasive smile. "Better check out the old bones, eh?" He patted at his ribs, hips, legs and arms as if searching for a wallet, grinning

alternately at the twins. "Clean bill of health! I live to be beaten up another day!"

"My name's Beeg." He extended a large, fleshy hand to Charlie.

"Beeg?" echoed Charlie, shaking Beeg's hand.

"Beeg," answered the man, now shaking Ben's hand. "So, what are your names?"

Ben and Charlie told him their names.

Beeg contemplated the twins for another moment, coming quickly to some satisfactory conclusion. "Ben has a stained forehead, Charlie doesn't. Otherwise, you guys look to be identical twins." The twins nodded.

"I've got a crew-cut though," said Charlie, and tapped at his hooded head. Beeg raised his eyebrows, and nodded at Charlie to acknowledge he had heard.

"What was all that about?" asked Ben, nodding his hooded head in the direction the thugs had disappeared.

"Oh ... humans," sighed Beeg, as if this simple answer explained everything. He dusted his white, shirt-like jacket down, trying in vain to get the muddy flecks off it. The lilac vest he wore underneath it appeared clean, if unironed.

Beeg's laid-back attitude to the event was refreshing, and the twins, without really thinking about it, found themselves comfortable in the big man's relaxed company. "So," he said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his baggy trousers, "what else can you do then?" He sounded only mildly interested, which made the twins trust him.

They looked at each other, grinned, then disappeared.

"We're invisible," they said.

"Wow," said Beeg, "that's pretty cool."

Charlie and Ben reappeared, then took off into the air to hover a little above their new friend's head. "We can fly too!"

"Handy," said Beeg, now rubbing his chin and beginning to look impressed. "Flight, speed, strength, invisibility, that's some cocktail. I notice you keep touching your tummies though. What's

that about?"

The twins pressed their Impervious buttons and fell gracefully to the ground.

"We're wearing belts," explained Ben, "but you can't see them, so we can't show them. They've got buttons, and we press the buttons." He couldn't believe how different Beeg's reaction to all this was, compared to Claire's. Being able to share their secret with a stranger was a great relief, to do so with his brother at his side, trusting and relaxed, was like an absolution. It was as if the world liked them at last, as if they were finally welcome to stay on the planet that housed them. He grinned at Charlie. "Let's show Beeg Impervious!"

Charlie mirrored Ben's grin, then pressed his Strength button. "Ready, Ben?" he asked.

Ben nodded.

Charlie grabbed Ben around the waist with both hands, tossed him into the air, caught him by the ankle, then proceeded to smash his brother back and forth into the paving stones in front of and behind him. It looked like a Tom and Jerry cartoon, only a thousand times more shocking.

"Jesus H. Christ!" shouted Beeg, making a panicked movement forwards, arms out to help.

"When you're in Impervious mode," explained Charlie reassuringly, smashing his brother front and back into the ground, "nothing can hurt you." Then he stopped the demonstration, and put Ben back on his feet.

"See, not a scratch! I don't even feel dizzy," smiled Ben, pulling his rumpled top straight again.

"Bloody hell! That scared the living shit out of me!" Beeg shuddered and rubbed at his face with his hands. "Ow!" he yelled. "My eye!" His eye started to bleed again, having just started to congeal. Frowning, he pulled his hanky from his pocket, dabbed away the trickle of blood, then forced a smile back onto his features. "So, you guys get a visit from the US military? That's

some pretty impressive hardware you got there. Not even Tesla could've come up with that!" He put his hanky back in his pocket.

Charlie and Ben looked at each other.

"Tezla? Is that a planet? An alien gave us the belts. Said we were part of some experiment. D'you think it came from Tezla?" asked Ben.

"Nikolai Tesla was a Croatian inventor," explained Beeg, "the greatest genius of all time. But he's dead now, so those belt's of yours ... Alien? Are you sure it was an alien? What did it look like?"

"Like watery colours, blues and greens..." began Charlie ...

"with no hands or feet, no nose, no mouth, could turn into a little ball of light ..." continued Ben ...

"and flew away through our window. Definitely an alien," finished Charlie.

"Definitely," added Ben. They both looked at Beeg expectantly.

"Definitely," agreed Beeg with an evasive smile. "I don't think any American soldier, four star general or otherwise, could have pulled off a gig like that." Beeg patted his stomach. "Anyway, what's for breakfast? I'm cooking."

"Cooking?" said the twins.

"Yeah. You know, kinda like a 'thank you' for saving my bacon, so to speak. We'll go back to your place, you guys rustle up some grub, and I'll cook us a little feast. Come on, let's get going."

Charlie and Ben looked at each other, not really warming to the idea.

"Our kitchen's a bit ..." said Ben ...

"rubbish," finished Charlie.

"No matter," said Beeg, "I'm very inventive! So, how long you two been on the run then?"

Chapter 16

Webb parked his car shortly after nine o'clock, on the evening of Wednesday the 12th July, somewhere in the outskirts of Swindon, grabbed his bag from the passenger seat, then headed into town on foot. Forty minutes later, he found an anonymous looking bed and breakfast and booked himself in under another false name. Too agitated to read alone in his poky room, or watch TV in a room full of strangers, he decided to walk the streets to pass time. Sleep would be impossible for many hours yet.

Swindon was an ugly town Webb had never liked, but that Wednesday evening its lack of aesthetic appeal was far from his thoughts. His mind spun in a tight, unbreakable loop around the sight of Charlie and Ben Rhodes flying elegantly to the ground below, then disappearing. And then he remembered what that old woman had seen at Avery Court, and stopped dead in his tracks. Of course Charlie and Ben could turn invisible! There was no other possible explanation, and in this case the evidence was so clear, not giving it his attention would be folly. His belated realisation begged the obvious and troubling question: how do you find two boys who can turn invisible at will? Hard enough in a house, completely impossible in a sprawling town like Swindon.

The path he had taken suddenly seemed laughably hard, and yet he had placed his feet so firmly on it there was no going back. Feeling like an idiot ever to have embarked upon this course, he knew he had to keep on trying, no matter what his chances of success. All he had to comfort him was the certain knowledge he would make no attempt to neutralise the twins. For what it was worth, he knew he was on Charlie and Ben's side.

He tried to turn his attention to any positives. As far as he could tell he had two things on Steiner: the first was that he knew the twins could turn invisible, the second was Brian Paddock's trust. Webb didn't believe in God, but was prepared to pray for Paddock to deliver information that might lead him to the twins, before MI5

got to them. If that faint hope didn't materialise, Webb would be left blindly searching the streets of Swindon in the dumb hope he'd bump into them by chance alone.

And then it struck him; thermal imaging! Should Paddock lead him to the twins, Webb would be able to see them with the help of a thermal imaging camera. Of course, its usefulness would depend on them choosing to evade capture by means of invisibility and not some other power, and that he had also managed to sneak up on them somehow, but, should circumstances favour him, such a camera could give him some sort of an edge, some chance of a grip on proceedings, however slight. It might be enough to buy him a little more time to convince Charlie and Ben to call it a day, to convince them they were not beyond capture. Webb knew full well he had failed badly at his first attempt, but hoped, with a gentler appeal—certainly with less emphasis on frightening them into obedience—he would be able to bring them around.

Disproportionately buoyed by his slightly improved prospects of success, Webb returned to the bed and breakfast, confident he would now be able to distract himself with his book until morning.

*

Beeg and the twins stood in the beaten up kitchen of 72, Churchill Road, Beeg with his arms folded across his chest, Charlie and Ben watching him guiltily, hoping there was something he could do. The idea of someone cooking them breakfast had a powerful appeal they did not understand, especially as they were not particularly hungry. Around them, the broken cupboards hanging tenuously from the walls, their doors hanging limply open from one partially functional hinge or the other, offered little hope, and even less in the way of crockery.

With a dramatic sigh, Beeg approached the fat-stained cooker, which Ben and Charlie had, a year earlier, failed to destroy, it being metal and heavy. Behind it on the wall to its left, was a broad red switch in the off position. Beeg flicked it on, and its little, red, oblong light lit up.

“It’s life, Jim,” said Beeg, “but not as we know it.” Bending low, he then inspected the row of heat-plate dials, and turned one on full. With his hand over the corresponding plate, he turned to face the twins. His mouth stretched to a smile. “Whoever the idiots were who smashed this place up, at least they forgot to get to this little beauty! Breakfast, gentlemen, will be hot and lovely.”

It was coming up to six thirty. It had taken them roughly fifty minutes to walk back home, but the time had passed quickly. Beeg made conversation easy, had answered all of the twins’ questions honestly, and spoken to them as if they were adults. Charlie and Ben already liked him immensely. So far they had learned he had no home; that he hated capitalists, whatever they were; that most people were nice and fed you when you did stuff for them, like fix washing machines or light switches and such like; that he had been travelling for decades across Europe, door to door, day to day, mostly hitching, sometimes on trains, once in his own car (which he had given away); that he spoke a few languages, at least well enough to get by; and that it was a pretty good life, all things considered. Winters were hard of course, but he knew someone on the coast with a boat who always took him over the channel at the end of September every year, so that Beeg could head south to Greece where it was warmer. The only thing he wouldn’t divulge was his real name.

Charlie and Ben had never really thought about the whole world as an open place you could travel across for free. To them—orphans all their lives—the freedom to go where you like when you like was a luxury that belonged exclusively to the rich. Suddenly, having listened to Beeg, it seemed like the easiest thing. With their belts, the twins could have an even easier time of it than Beeg had, and he was far and away the happiest person they had ever met!

What a roller-coaster time they had had of things since putting on the belts. Yet again, for what seemed like the umpteenth time, they had reassessed their future prospects, this time seeing a big, blue-sky life that was demonstrably doable. They had met someone who

had been on the run forever, who could give them a few tips, teach them how to fix washing machines, stuff like that. Why bother staying in Swindon when you had the whole world to choose from! They could go anywhere ... China, America, Australia... The police could hardly follow them that far.

Beeg had agreed, but said police and military the world over would want to get their hands on those belts, and would work together to do so. On hearing that the twins were already fugitives anyway—he had been particularly interested in the stranger who had found them at Daisy Fields—he thought it best they leave the country as soon as possible, find somewhere to stay, another squat like 72, Churchill Road for example, and do nothing conspicuous for a few months. He had pegged them as orphans right off the bat. As orphans the whole world was their home, not some little house somewhere, so being on the run was natural. Lying low wouldn't be easy though, but it was their best chance of getting the police off their trail. And now that the twins had turned the water and electrics on, their hideout would be easy to find. He reckoned Charlie and Ben had less than a week before some administrator at the water board noticed something wrong, and sent the police round. It was a sobering thought.

Beeg turned off the heat-plate. "So, now we need to get some stuff." He rubbed his large hands together enthusiastically. "Frying pan and a little pot for beans, a kettle, some paper plates, knives, forks and spoons, three cups, bacon, eggs, beans, sausages, mushrooms, tomatoes, tea bags, milk, sugar, bread and butter. So, what do you reckon my little geniuses? How quick can you get all them together?"

"About as soon as the shops open: 24hr garages don't sell pots and pans" answered Charlie. "We've got about an hour and a half to wait, but me and Ben ain't hungry, so, that's okay. We could watch a film." He looked up at Beeg with a hopeful smile.

"Boys, films are capitalist propaganda. You don't want to be watching them. But, seeing as you guys aren't hungry yet, I got

something a gazillion times better than that Hollywood crap. It's right here in my cleverly concealed belt-bag." Beeg reached round behind him, his strangely evasive smile lazily stretching his mouth, fiddled around under his white shirt-like jacket for a moment, then produced with a flourish a clear plastic bag rolled tight by an elastic band, full of what look like broken up, dark green leaf-bits. "You ever smoke?" he asked nonchalantly.

Charlie and Ben slowly shook their heads, their eyes shining, wide with curiosity.

"Well, today is your lucky day. This shit right here," Beeg tapped the bag reverentially with his large index finger, "is the dog's gonads. Why don't you guys lead me to the happy room of your choice..."

The twins glanced at each other with a tight giggle, shrugged their shoulders in nervous compliance, then led Beeg out of the kitchen and up the stairs. They hesitated at the top, unsure whether the bedroom or Fun Room would be better. Ben turned to Charlie. "Fun Room?" he said.

Charlie nodded and walked in. Ben and Beeg followed.

"Nice TV," said Beeg, surveying the otherwise grim room. "Got any music? Gotta have music..."

"We've got a radio," answered Charlie, "will that do?"

"Perfect." Beeg sat down cross legged on the floor with his back against the wall between the windows, and pulled the empty pizza box towards him. Carefully removing the elastic band from the bag, he looked up at Charlie. "If you fetch that radio in here, I know the perfect station for what we are about to receive." He returned his attention to his fiddly task.

Ben sat down opposite Beeg while Charlie fetched the radio, and watched as Beeg retrieved a small oblong of thin white cardboard, a packet of Rizzla cigarette papers, and a green cigarette lighter from the plastic bag. Charlie returned to set up the radio in the intense silence, then sat down beside his brother. Beeg turned his attention to the shiny radio, but quickly assessed he wouldn't be

able to operate it.

“Can one of you tune this thing to 106.2, please? I don’t know how to work modern stuff. I’m a dial and knob man. Digital doesn’t do it for me.” His statement seemed to give him an idea. “I need that on a t-shirt!” he said, then laughed heartily at his own joke. The twins didn’t get it.

As Beeg’s laughter faded, Charlie got up and tuned the radio to Beeg’s suggested station, then frowned as weird, ethnic sounding music poured from the little speakers.

“What’s this then?” he asked.

“Real music,” answered Beeg matter of factly, his voice making it clear there was to be no discussion on the matter. Charlie shrugged and retook his place beside his brother.

As soon as he was settled, Beeg began. “First, you need a roach,” he said, and aimed a brief smile at his rapt two-man audience. Slowly and deliberately, he tore the white oblong of cardboard in half, rolled one of the halves into a small, tight tube, which he then placed carefully on the pizza box, and dropped the remaining half back into the plastic bag. Next, he pulled a thin, white sheet of cigarette paper from the small orange Rizzla packet, and laid it flat on a clean patch of pizza box. “Now for the magic ...” he said, and pinched little clumps of the dried, broken leaves out of the bag, sprinkling them evenly, load by load, onto the waiting cigarette paper. “Make sure you leave a little space up top for the twist. So ... to the tricky bit ...” He raised the paper with its jittery load up to his mouth as carefully as were it a mercury-switch bomb, pushed the side of paper nearest his mouth gently over the sprinkled green leaf-bits—and so out of the way of his approaching tongue—then lightly licked the paper’s other side left to right. Then, in a quick and sure movement of fingers and thumbs, rolled and pressed the thing into a small, sad looking cigarette. Finally, he twisted one side closed, tilted the thing towards the now closed side, and inserted the roach into the still open end.

Beeg raised the finished article high above his head, as if a

sceptre or magic sword. “Boys, meet your first joint. Only your virginity is more important.” He caught sight of their anxious faces. “Don’t worry, I know it’s your first time ... we’ll go easy on you. This is strong stuff—a couple of tokes ought to be enough for first timers.”

“Tokes?” asked Charlie.

“Yeah, you know, puffs, intakes of smoke, lungfuls, inhalations, that sort of thing.” Smiling fondly, Beeg plopped the joint between his lips, picked up the lighter, and lit the twist. As it flared its brief flame, Beeg sucked a few times until the tip was a glowing red, then took the joint from his mouth.

Nothing happened. Beeg carried on looking at Charlie and Ben with a strange, underwater look, then, as if from nowhere, white smoke started drifting noiselessly from both of Beeg’s wide nostrils. As soon as the thick, slow exhaust had trickled out to nothing, Beeg’s face broke into a sunny smile, the first genuine smile the twins had seen on him. “Oh yeah!” he said, slow and deep. He leaned forward and handed the joint to Ben, who reached out and took it, uncertainly, between his thumb and index finger. He looked at it, wondering if he should go ahead.

“Now listen to me, Ben,” said Beeg severely, trying to win his student’s full attention, “don’t soak the roach with saliva, only suck in a small lungful to start with, and hold it in a while, before letting it out, otherwise it’s a waste. Go on, you’ll be amazed how it makes you feel.”

Ben looked across at Charlie and gave an excited, if somewhat hesitant, smile. Charlie was looking at him expectantly, glad he wasn’t the first one, and nodded his head towards his brother in gleeful encouragement. Not sure if he should alter his grip on the joint—maybe it should have rested coolly between his index and middle fingers—Ben puckered his lips and raised the scraggly, smoking, crooked white twig to his mouth, tightened his lips around it gently—trying hard not to salivate—and sucked a surprisingly warm cloud of smoke into his mouth. As it flowed

down his throat and into his lungs, he was relieved to feel it cause no pain. He gave Charlie a wide-eyed 'thumbs up' sign, then burst into a fit of smoke-belching coughs, his face switching from pride at a job well done to confused shock, with no intermediate stages.

"No! No! Hold it in, man, hold it in. That stuff's like gold!"

Ben shot a glance at Beeg, ashamed he had got it wrong, still holding the joint delicately upright, trying desperately not to damage it as hot coughs racked his body and would not stop. Charlie was in fits of laughter to his left. "Now you," coughed Ben, controlling his body just enough to reach out the joint towards his brother, who was an arms length to his left.

Charlie's laughter dried up as quickly as it had begun. He eyed the joint suspiciously and made no movement to take it.

"Now come on, Charlie," said Beeg, "that's not the way here. You got to step up to the plate and put hairs on your chest, you know?" Beeg started laughing again, but again the twins couldn't work out why.

"Hey," said Ben suddenly, his coughing less intense now, "I feel tingly!"

Beeg smiled affectionately at him, nodding his proud approval, then turned to Charlie again. "Well?" he said.

Charlie realised he could not hold himself apart from proceedings, so took the joint from his brother's hand. In a quick motion, as if jumping into an icy lake, Charlie put the thing to his lips and sucked in a large lungful of smoke. He clamped down on himself with all his might, even gripped his nostrils together with his free hand, expecting an explosive pressure to follow. Consequently, when the first burning wave came, it did nothing more than puff out his cheeks and eyes, making him look like a shocked bull frog. As Ben burst out laughing, the heat in Charlie's lungs flared into a fiery tickling, which quickly consumed him. A second later he coughed out all the inhaled smoke in a fit just as intense as his brother's.

"Bravely done, Charlie, bravely done," said Beeg. He crawled

over and took back the joint from his shuddering neophyte.

Like a tap being turned off, Ben suddenly stopped laughing. "Hey! This music's not half bad. I think I like it," he said, nodding approvingly. His announcement was both stunned realisation and boast, as if he had made it through some unseen barrier, and now understood the world a little more deeply. He rolled back into his sitting position and stared out of the window at the billowing grey clouds, letting the waves of music wash over him, an impossibly delicate and unending fabric.

Charlie, his eyes watering profusely, stared at Ben from within the racking efforts of his coughing, not sure what to make of his brother's claim. Ben's face seemed robbed of all intelligence, and yet, oddly, thoughtful too. Charlie frowned, and wanted to ask Beeg what was going on, but couldn't stop coughing. Then the tingling his brother had mentioned tickled its way through his limbs to settle in his fingertips, and his coughing petered out. The tingling was very pleasant. He tried to work out if his coughs could be fashioned into words, placed in paper cups and sent drifting towards Beeg on the river of undulating music, but realised they hadn't got any paper cups. "We haven't got any cups," he announced, then started laughing. He found the simple fact incredibly funny.

"Here you go mate," said Beeg, handing the joint back to Ben. "Let this be your last toke though, you guys seem pretty sensitive. I don't wanna spoil your first time."

Ben dragged his focus back from the clouds to the joint being offered to him, and took it with a contented smile. He noticed Charlie laughing, curled up on his side, a shuddering ball of feet, knees, elbows and hands, and felt relaxed, gently certain the world was their oyster, a place of infinite wonder and endless adventure. He took his second toke into his lungs and held it down for a good three seconds, before coughing it out as before. This time though, in his eyes already an expert, his lungs accustomed to the effects of smoke, Ben's coughing was a controlled, polite affair; perfunctory,

functional and quickly over. He handed the joint to Charlie. "You're up again, Chucky boy!"

Charlie uncurled from his laughter and took the joint, inhaled his second amount, held it well, coughed out the smoke and handed the joint back to Beeg. "Cool music," he said, as Beeg retrieved his joint with a watery smile.

Time seemed to be passing at some other speed now, faster, maybe slower, or had it stopped for them altogether? The twins couldn't tell. The music was in the air like a weaving scent; physically, palpably there. Its motions, rippings and loops had become time, and they were in it as surely as—no, more surely—than they were in the room. Charlie and Ben could have stayed like that forever.

*

Webb's mobile rang at 07:08 on Friday morning. Clambering out of deep sleep, he fumbled it into his hand from the bedside table, and focussed his attention on the number. His pulse accelerated dramatically when he saw the Swindon area code. Could it be Paddock? With his heart in his mouth he answered.

"Hello?" said Webb, unwilling to mention his name.

"Why did you say your name was Richard Sale?" It was a young boy's voice, hurt, guarded.

"Is that Brian Paddock?" asked Webb, unable to believe his ears.

"If you tell me your name, I'll tell you mine."

"John Webb. My real name is John Webb. I gave a false name because ..." He paused, not sure how to explain the reasons to a young boy. "... because I had to. I know Charlie and Ben are in danger, and want to help them before it's too late. If people know who I am, they can stop me from doing that. So, now you know my name. Why don't you tell me yours?" Of course, Webb now knew he was talking to Brian, but needed to regain the trust he seemed to have lost.

"Cool! Are you SAS or MI5 or something? Like 007 working rogue-style, undercover?" The boy suddenly sounded enthused,

delighted he had guessed right, and was involved in something mysterious and huge.

Webb didn't want to disappoint, but needed Paddock on his side. He gave a diplomatic answer. "Something a little bit like that, yes. But tell me, Brian, can you help me get to the twins before the bad guys get there?"

"Maybe," now he sounded coy, but carried on. "Last night I remembered one time last year I couldn't sleep, and I heard the Twits—sorry, Charlie and Ben—talking about some empty house they broke up on Churchill Road, and I thought maybe it's still empty, that maybe they went there to hide. Coz they know it, you know?"

Webb had already picked up his thermal imaging camera and was studying it excitedly. "Brian, you have my eternal gratitude. Did they mention a number, by any chance?"

"No, just the road."

"Doesn't matter, probably aren't too many empty houses on Churchill Road. It's a good lead, Brian, you've given me back my hope. Thank you." Webb hung up and got dressed. He raced to the breakfast room, and asked the owner to call him a taxi. With a little luck, Webb would be confronting the Rhodes twins in a few minutes time. With a little bit more luck, he would find the right things to say.

*

Steiner had to wait until Friday morning to get his answer. The database that could furnish him with a list of abandoned houses in Swindon, which he would then pass on to the power generating company for cross-referencing, was down for an upgrade due to finish at around seven thirty. So, at 07:15:00 precisely, Steiner called his contact in Swindon Borough Council's IT department, but got no answer. Irritated by the delay, he called his contact at the power company, already under strict instructions to be there at such an ungodly hour, to remind him—brusquely—of the importance of the task, and said he would be faxing the list

through in a few minutes, then hung up.

Steiner was sure this cross-referencing would yield the twins' hideout. Somewhere in an abandoned squat in Swindon—kids as smart as the Rhodes twins wouldn't risk shacking up in a temporarily unoccupied house—the electricity had been recently turned on, on Wednesday or Thursday of this week to be precise. With a little luck, only one address would turn up, the twins would be there, and Steiner would stop them before they did any serious damage. He certainly wasn't taking any chances. With a helicopter on hot standby, plus marksmen and a battalion of squad cars, there was no way Charlie and Ben Rhodes could escape.

*

Some songs later, Ben suddenly said: "I have to forgive Claire," and looked furtively at his brother as if he had just confessed some terrible wrongdoing. Charlie just stared back at him with an expression of dulled contentment.

"Who's Claire?" asked Beeg.

"A girl we met," said Ben, turning his head slowly towards his new friend. "She's so pretty but didn't like our powers. I showed them to her, some of them. She ran away crying and I was angry but now I think I should forgive her." He blinked at Beeg. "How come our belts don't freak you out?"

Beeg leaned forwards, a greyed radiance animating his features. "Ah, now, that is a big question! You see, I know a lot of things most people never even get to hear about. The US military've got hardware that would make your hair stand on end ... well ... maybe not your hair any more, seeing as, like ... Anyway, you get my drift. I'll give you an example. They conducted this top, above top actually, secret experiment in the late forties—with help from their newly stolen Nazi scientists—on this big navy ship called The Philadelphia, using energy harmonics—Tesla's genius for you—to levitate the ship right out of the sea. It went wrong though, and the ship jumped in time to the far future. When it came back, some of the crew were buried up to their waist in the hull, right in the

metal, screaming in agony, poor sods. Some say the US military perfected the technique, and can time travel now, today, whatever that means, you know? Who knows, but they've got a bunch of stuff they don't want us plebs knowing about. There's information and disinformation and lies and propaganda and mostly you never know for certain, but why go to all that trouble if there was nothing to hide, you follow me? But yeah, I was excited to see you guys in action, for sure, just didn't freak me out. Seeing it first hand is like confirmation of the stuff I know, but I pretty much knew aliens are visiting us, you know? Sooo ...” Beeg drifted off into a non-committal sigh-smile, and rocked gently back to lean against the wall, politely indifferent once more.

“Cool, time travel!” whispered Charlie, just loud enough to be heard above the music. “I thought that was impossible.” He gave Ben a sheepish look, remembering yesterday's fight. “But then I never thought you could go invisible neither, so now... If I could, I'd go back and see Mum, find out what she looks like, and why ... she ... You know what I mean?” He shifted uncomfortably, having said more than he had expected to.

Neither of the twins had spoken of their mother for years, having been well trained by Dr Greene not to dwell on potentially damaging fantasies. So even under the loosening effects of the hashish, Ben was surprised to hear her mentioned, and looked intensely into his brother's eyes. He saw a bottomless, formless sorrow, an echo, or the source perhaps, of the anger and frustration that had driven him to Claire. Suddenly it was as clear as sunlight; this aching had been in both of them from the very beginning, like blood in their veins. Because they couldn't do anything about it, they had just ignored it. It was the way things were. The less you thought about it, the better. But that didn't make it go away ... nothing could do that.

Only, anything seemed possible now. Everything they had been told by the carers at Daisy Fields was wrong, a huge lie designed to hold them back. The world was big and open, full of nice people

and thousands of different places just waiting to be explored. Maybe there was some way of finding their mother. Maybe she wanted to be found! "We should find her," he said simply, unthinkingly, surprised at himself for having said something so revolutionary out loud. But the words made him feel embarrassed, and he glanced over at Beeg, hoping to find encouragement.

Beeg just shrugged. "It's nobody's life but yours. You do with it as you wish."

Charlie suddenly hid his eyes in the nook of his right arm and bowed his head to his chest. He was motionless for a moment, fixed in that troubled position, but then a strange noise escaped him; a harsh sob, part anger, part sorrow, part fear. Ben crawled over to him and rested his hand reassuringly on his brother's back, not sure what else to do. The contact was like an electric connection. His brother's keen feelings surged into him in a feathery flash. Tears spilled from his eyes in the upwelling that followed, and Ben found he too had to hide his face in his arm.

Charlie grabbed at his brother's hand, needing more contact, something to hold. He was losing his fight to stay in control. Further horrible noises escaped; ugly sobs, weak, simpering whines, as he fought harder to hold the threatening flood at bay, until, in a mighty cascade, a crashing down of all locked gates, he hurled his arms around his brother and wept.

Ben's resistance was washed away. In less than a second he was drowned in a torrent of emotion that had neither logic nor contour, no clearer source than 'within', and, seemingly, no end. As Charlie clung to him, he clung to Charlie, and out of them both flowed years of trapped doubts, uncertainties, suspicions, and self-loathings. And then bear arms were around them, heavy and strong, and Beeg's big voice saying "this is good" over and over. After some time, the energies subsided and the twins slipped from each other's grasp, their faces slick with tears and effort. Beeg quietly withdrew to his portion of the wall, between the two dusty windows.

Outside the clouds did not part, no blue sky peeped through, no sunlight cut into the room. But there was a sense of dew on grass, of early morning, of blinking awake after a long, deep sleep. The music was still playing, sounding roughly like before, but now irritated even Beeg, who reached across and turned it down.

“I bet your mum has blond hair and green eyes,” he said.

Neither Charlie nor Ben responded. For a long while they all sat in their new silence, staring blankly into their empty thoughts, and waited. Minutes passed.

“Yeah,” said Charlie at last, “we should look for her.” He looked over at Ben. “I wouldn’t know where to start though...”

“They’d probably have records at your orphanage,” said Beeg. The twins looked at him eagerly. “With your belts you could get in and find them. You’d have to plan it out, but ... yeah, that’s where I’d start.” He gave them his non-committal smile as encouragement.

“Probably in Greeney’s office, then” said Ben. Charlie nodded, frightened now by how easy it suddenly seemed to find their real mother. It was as if she were with them in the house, in another room, waiting to be called.

There was a sound, like a creaking on the stairs. It was small, but it went through them like a shock. Without thinking, Charlie and Ben pressed their Invisibility buttons. Beeg stood up and so did the twins, too scared to sit still.

“Don’t move a muscle,” he whispered. “Let me take care of this.” He moved out of the room, as if creeping up on a bird.

“Who are you?” Beeg’s voice, tense for the first time since they had known it, came into the room like a sudden drop in temperature. Somebody had broken into the twins’ hideout! Charlie and Ben backed up to their respective walls, as if that would make them more invisible.

Chapter 17

The open window at the back of the house had given him hope, but Webb was disappointed to see the beaten-up face of a fifty-something man staring down at him from the top of the stairs. The thick smell of hashish smoke and gentle ethnic music suggested he had been led by Paddock to the wrong address, to a squat the boys at Daisy Fields all knew about. Was Paddock covering for the twins, or just playing with him? Downstairs had revealed nothing other than that electricity was running—the cooker’s mains switch was on. It gave him an idea.

“Inspection. You got electricity, but this place has no registered occupant.” He carried on up the stairs towards the big hippy, who took a step back.

“You don’t look like an inspector,” he said. Webb ignored him.

At the top of the stairs Webb came to a stop, and looked around. To his immediate left were two doors, one to a bathroom which contained some number of blue buckets and cleaning materials, the other led to a small toilet. Diagonally to his left was a bedroom, in which he could see rumpled bedding for two. To his right were two doors, one closed, one open. From the open door came the smell of hashish and the weird music, but apart from an empty pizza box and a remote control lying on the floor, looked otherwise empty.

“So,” said the hippy, “what are we going to do about this?” He sounded nervous.

Webb ignored him. He was starting to suspect something strange was going on. Why would a homeless hippy want a modern looking remote control? He raised his camera, turned it on, and kept an eye on the small square display as he walked into the room to his right.

There was a boy in the room! Standing beside the huge flat screen TV! Webb tried to keep his breathing under control as the blurry reds and oranges in a boy’s shape flooded him with adrenalin. He had to buy some time, work out how to talk the

twins round, assuming the other one was here too.

“So, how did you get your hands on this stuff?” he asked, trying to keep his voice neutral, trying to keep the hippy on the back foot.

The hippy sat on the floor between the room’s two windows, feigning calm, but there was something shifty about him. “None of your business,” he said defiantly, an uncertain smile contorting his features.

Webb took in the rest of the room with his camera, making sure to hide the display from the boy—either Ben or Charlie, he couldn’t tell—who still stood motionlessly to his right. To the growing sounds of an approaching helicopter, he saw what he was looking for. Webb was standing between two invisible boys, both of them motionless, obviously convinced they could not be seen. He had found them! But just as he was figuring out something to say that wouldn’t frighten them off, the noise of the helicopter grew so loud it had to be very nearby indeed.

The hippy stood up and looked out of the window. Webb’s attention followed the noise too, and they both saw a black helicopter swoop into view, its main door open, some masked man with a long, high-tech rifle crouching in its belly, pointing the weapon directly at them.

Before they had any chance to react, the sound of splintering wood ripped their heads back to the hall. There was an explosion of noise; shouting, running, barked orders. People were storming up the stairs. Suddenly, before either Webb or the hippy could think what to do, masked men dressed in black had swarmed into the room, and were shouting at them to get on the floor, aiming guns at their heads.

The hippy obeyed instantly, but Webb needed to calm things down. “Wait!” he shouted, but no one was listening.

The thermal imaging camera was grabbed from his hand. Someone shouted out in alarm as Webb was thumped to the ground by a hard blow to the backs of his knees. There was a shot. Then straight away another. Webb tried to raise his head to see

what was going on, but a gloved hand crushed it into the floor boards. He heard the sound of a boy's scream as his hands were cuffed behind his back and someone shouted out a shocked command:

“He's going through the west wall! He's going right through the fucking wall!”

Chapter 18

Something terrible had happened to Charlie but Ben could only flee.

He had no thought, no idea. There was only terror wrapped around a certainty at which he dared not look.

Screaming, he emerged from the side of the building, the powerful noise of helicopter blades pounding the air to gusting winds all around him. Something sped through his head, then through his neck. *Bullets*, he thought, hardly able to recognise they had done no damage.

As if to protect himself, Ben pressed Impervious and fell to the ground like a stone. Bullets bounced off him, punching him this way and that. More masked men ran towards him, shouting, firing guns. Impervious was hopeless; he would not be able to escape. He pressed Phase again as three or four gloved hands grabbed at him, through him, then Ben pumped through the alley-wall and away.

His heart was a rage of beating, a wild, impossible fluttering of panic, but he kept on pumping. He heard men scrabbling up the wall, their hard boots landing on the concrete behind him, more shouting, but he pumped hard and made it to the wall of the adjoining house and through. A second later he was in someone's front room. A woman's face screamed, as she leapt from her sofa and ran.

Ben pressed Speed and sprinted out of the room. At the house's front door he paused, listening for the helicopter. It was overhead, sending pulses of deep, air-buckling thuds through the building's walls, but it was impossible to tell where exactly it was. Confident he could open and close the door before the anyone could react, he poked his head outside and scanned the skies. Unable to see the helicopter, he assumed it had not yet made it over the roof and ran, leaving the door open behind him.

He ran for his life. The harrowing noises receded until he was gone from the horror, from the danger. Without thinking of a

destination his running took him to the river. He pressed Underwater Breathing and jumped in.

Ben Rhodes stood on the floor of the River Ray in a thick fog of fear, unable to move. He knew something he did not want to know. It was there, one little thought away, but he did not want to go there. Where should he go? Why?

Charlie ...

No one could find him on the floor of the river but that did not help.

Charlie was ...

He knew it. It was there like a pain about to happen. There had been a shot. A man had aimed his gun where Charlie must have been and fired. And fired again. What did that camera see?

And then he had screamed out the shock of a thing he suddenly knew, something horrible that was suddenly inside him from nowhere, deadly cold, he had hurled it from himself like a hideous bug discovered on the back of his hand. And run. He had run away from it to the river to hide, but it was still there.

Charlie was dead.

Ben Rhodes stood alone on the floor of the River Ray and screamed the certainty real. Pain—horrible, white pain, blinding and everywhere—rushed in and he was completely alone. The scream emptied his lungs. He gasped in air in a great gulp and pressed Flight, needing to flee again.

As the dirty river water rushed to claim him, he flew up and away, away from the truth, his hair a rain of tears, but the truth flew with him. Higher he flew, through thick wastes of cloud into blue and higher still, but the pain stayed with him. He pressed Impervious, wanting to feel nothing, but as he fell back to earth the pain just grew brighter, uglier.

He crashed through the roof of a house, coming to a dusty, thumping stop on the ribbed floor of a dirty attic. Lying sprawled on itchy, yellow loft insulation, the pain grew still. He screamed again, hopelessly desperate, and pressed Phase. He sank through

the floor, hoping the pain would seep from him. Of course it did not. Ben could not get away.

Now he was in someone's empty bedroom, floating downwards through the air. He pressed Intelligence, thinking he might figure out a way back to how it was before, and landed with a little bounce on a strange bed. But his thoughts were a sickening scramble of panicked analysis leading nowhere, and raw pain awaited each mad thought-train at every turn, still, cold, and infinite.

He pressed Strength—no change. Invisibility—no change. Speed—nothing.

It was over.

He was alone.

He pressed Speed again, thereby deactivating the belt. For the first time in almost five days he was without real power, the belt inactive, helping him in no way, and yet it made no discernible difference to the pain, to who he was, to what he was. He was Benjamin Rhodes, a boy whose twin brother had just been shot dead by a man in a mask.

There was nothing he could do to change it.

Chapter 19

After some time in that agony—seconds or hours, he could hardly tell—Ben calmed. He looked to his right, sensing a presence. There, standing lightly on the floor beside the bed, was the alien, beside it a taller alien, their blues and greens pulsing together like synchronised heart beats. They were watching him. Somehow Ben could feel their care inside him, working some magic. He sat up and swung his legs over the bed's edge.

“Ben Rhodes,” emitted the taller one, “my child has something to say.”

But Ben held up his hand to stop them. Something had just become very clear. “No,” he said, “I don't want this any more.” He pulled off his still wet top, then depressed all eight of the belt's buttons. The belt materialised from his skin like a welt of gelatinous sweat, unclasped itself, and slumped from his waist like a dead snake. Ben picked it up and handed it to the smaller alien. “I don't want it.”

The smaller alien took the belt, which somehow disappeared.

“I cannot make amends,” it said, “I cannot restore what is gone. I have wronged you.” There was a short silence, then it moved towards Ben and touched his head with the rounded tip of its tendril-like arm. Ben felt—so clearly it made him gasp—a profound and sincere regret flow into him, a loving embrace, a communion unlike anything he had ever known. Tears came to his eyes and rolled heavily down his cheeks, but the strange calmness remained, a cool balm over the burning heat of his pain.

“You are deeply wounded,” said the taller alien. “We will help you heal for all the years that process needs. We are making all the broken things whole, returning what was taken, making people forget so your life can proceed from today. Some of us are already at work on this task.”

“Is there death?” asked Ben suddenly.

It was as if the taller alien smiled. “There is death,” it said.

“Can you bring Charlie back?”

After a pause, the smaller alien answered. “No, such things cannot be undone.”

Ben remembered clearly the night he and Charlie had received the belts, how the alien’s voice had been so monotone, so flat. This time he could hear a music hidden underneath the flat surface of its words, of its speaking. There was something beautiful there, compassionate and humane. Ben’s tears flowed more freely, brought on by that deeper sound, but the calm, the calm that was a silky bandage over the open wound of his loss, stayed strong. He could feel the healing at work.

“Close your eyes,” said the taller alien.

Ben did as he was told. A moment later there was a voice in his head, in his whole body. A sensation of lifting, of flight, accompanied it. It said: “Charlie will be there for you when you summon him. He is a part of you still, and will be until you die. But we will make it so the world will have no record of him, except for you, your mother, Robert and Molly Holloway, and the one who tried to save you; John Webb. John Webb needs you to forgive him, needs your help. It was his camera that located Charlie for the man that shot him. He will be coming to you soon.”

Ben felt his body heave in sorrow, a great motion he could not control, but the calm remained, and, to his surprise, his mind suddenly held an image of Claire in tears, turning from him in fear. “And Claire at MacDonald’s.” He actually spoke the words. “Please. She must remember too.”

“As you wish,” said the voice. “We will bring Charlie’s body back to our planet, to remind us forever of you and your world, to keep our two species joined.”

Ben knew the message was over and opened his eyes. He was in the sky and could see the Earth globed and glittering beneath him. Although he could no longer see them, he knew the aliens were in some way at his side. There was a rush downwards. Somehow he knew where he was being taken and his heart fluttered in nervous

anticipation. Suddenly he was standing at someone's front door. The number 22 was on it, two shining brass twos. He closed his eyes again, and called on his brother for support.

In an instant, Charlie was there, standing in the open space of Ben's mind, with a playful smile lighting his freckled face.

"Ready?" asked Ben.

"You betcha, Benny Boy!"

Ben rang the doorbell.

A few moments later a woman opened the door. She had thick, messy blond hair and light freckles around her nose. One of her eyes was blue, the other green. Ben could see she knew deep in her bones who he was, but that did not alter his greeting. It was as if he had prepared it all his life.

"Hello Mum," he said. "I'm Ben Rhodes."