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opening extract from

Knife Edge

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one. Jude

'Oh, come on, Jude. My feet are killing me,' Morgan moaned.

'Tough!' I said from one of the two single beds in our hotel room. 'And keep watching out the window. We don't want any surprises.'

'I've been watching the traffic for the last three hours.'

'And you've got an hour to go, so shut up complaining,' I ordered. He was getting on my nerves and no mistake.

Morgan sighed and moved the dark-brown curtain slightly so he could continue to look past it to the street below. He took another swig from his can of lager, which had to be lukewarm by now – he'd been holding it for the last hour at least. I scowled at his back before turning my attention to the remote control in my hand and the telly in front of me. Five minutes of flicking later, I hadn't found a single thing worth watching. So much for that then. There was bugger all of any use on, so I plumped for some inane soap which required minimum brain power to follow. Which was just as well, because my mind, as always, was on other things.

Like Andrew Dorn.

He was my immediate priority now. He was the

General's second-in-command, but if the information we'd been given was correct – and each passing hour convinced me that it was – he was also a traitor. It was thanks to him that our kidnap of Sephy Hadley had gone so spectacularly wrong. Thanks to his betrayal of us, every member of my assigned Liberation Militia cell had been killed or captured – all except Morgan and me. The General didn't know it but Andrew Dorn was working hand-in-hand with the Cross authorities, particularly with Kamal Hadley, the Cross MP who loathed us noughts and everything we stood for. That's why we'd decided to kidnap his daughter, Sephy. Not just as a political statement, but to hit Kamal Hadley where it'd really hurt. But the whole operation had gone pear-shaped.

Thanks to Andrew Dorn.

And I had no idea where he was or how to get to him.

The thought of a man like that so high up on the Liberation Militia ladder – well, it made my stomach turn over. How many others had he betrayed? How many other men and women had worn a tie of rope all thanks to him? How I yearned to get hold of him. I wouldn't need long. Three seconds with Mr Dorn would be more than enough for what I had in mind. We in the L.M. needed to do something, anything to put the heart back into our organization. Since my brother Callum's death nothing had gone right. The police had cracked down on us hard and offered huge cash rewards to anyone giving them information which would lead to the capture and conviction of any one of us. The media called us ruthless terrorists. We're not. We're just fighting for what's right. Being born a nought shouldn't automatically

slam shut myriad doors before you've even drawn your first breath. Being a nought shouldn't automatically make you a second-class citizen. What was it about our lighter skins that made the darker Crosses so afraid of us? So we're fighting for what's right. But that's not how the authorities saw it. It was open season on the Liberation Militia. No reasonable betrayal declined. And no doubt there was a nice little bonus to be had if they could hang us into the bargain.

We in the L.M. officially became the hunted whilst still trying to do a little hunting of our own. But the Cross authorities had made a big mistake killing my brother. Now Callum was a martyr and martyrs were far more dangerous. So many noughts had demanded reprisals for what they had done to Callum – and not just members of the Liberation Militia either. Not that I cared anything about that. Every night before I went to sleep, and every morning as soon as I woke up, I promised my brother that I'd make sure those responsible for his death would suffer. Every one of them.

But with all the Liberation Militia cells nationwide scattered to the four winds and desperately fighting for survival, it was hard to rest long enough to come up with some kind of long-term strategy. Long-term living had taken a back seat to short-term survival. Take that business with the so-called nought terrorist being shot dead at the station. A prime example of how the police were cracking down – hard. Our L.M. fighter didn't stand a chance. The police obviously had a new policy – shoot first and have a cup of tea afterwards. So here we were – Morgan and me – cooling our heels in a cheapish,

three-storey hotel in a semi-dodgy area, but an area at least where we had friends. Morgan stirred his just-add-hot-water dinner in a plastic pot, still muttering under his breath. I ignored him. Sometimes he was hard work. More than once since our aborted kidnap attempt of Persephone Hadley, I had to remind myself that we were supposed to be friends. Mind you, living from shabby room to room, always on the move, always on the run, was enough to make anyone edgy.

But we'd finally been given another assignment. After months of almost total silence, we were being let back in from the cold. And our orders were to book into room fourteen and wait. So here we were, booked in for two days now and still waiting. I turned to pick up my newspaper from the bedside table, even though I'd already read it.

'We've got company,' Morgan said from his position beside the window.

He didn't need to say it twice.

'How many?'

'Two . . . no, three cars.'

If they could muster three police cars at the front of the hotel, no doubt there'd be more than one round the back.

'How did they know we were here?' Morgan asked, running to grab his holdall.

'Let's worry about that later when we're out of here,' I told him. *If* we got out of here . . . I grabbed my rucksack off my single bed and headed out behind Morgan.

We ran along the corridor to the fire exit. When I stayed in hotels and B&Bs, I always made sure that I was only a few rooms away from a fire exit for exactly this

reason. Although we'd been told which room to occupy, luckily it was only three rooms away from the fire exit. Had we been set up? If so, why weren't we put further along the corridor where it'd be harder to escape? And why wait till we'd been in the hotel for two days to tell the police? Unless it'd been hoped that we'd relax and get careless. More of Andrew Dorn's handiwork? Morgan yanked open the fire exit door and leapt down the first set of concrete stairs, with me right behind him.

I pulled at Morgan's shirt and put a finger over my lips. Morgan froze. Beneath us came the unmistakable sound of footsteps, more than one pair, charging up to meet us. Every contingency covered. One of my questions was answered. I pointed upwards. Morgan and I turned and ran up the fire exit stairs instead of down, fast but silent. We raced up the stairs to the second floor.

Now what? Morgan was responsible for ensuring we had a contingency plan for every place we went. Time to see if he could plan worth a damn.

'Follow me,' Morgan hissed.

I had nothing else planned for the evening so I legged it after him. We sprinted along the corridor. Morgan came to a halt before room twenty-five. He banged on the door whilst I watched up and down the corridor, my hand already on the gun in my jacket pocket. It felt like ice beneath my fingertips, cold and hard. And reassuring. Whatever else happened, the hangman's noose would never kiss my throat.

The door opened almost immediately. Morgan raced inside, followed only a moment later by me. I shut the

door and immediately stood to one side of it with my back against the wall. It wasn't unknown for the police to gun down an innocent door without warning, and tough luck if you were standing behind it. A muscled, middle-aged Cross man, with a moustache and short-cut hair, stood in the middle of the room watching us. He'd had sense enough to move out of the way when Morgan burst into his room. I put my ear to the door and listened. I couldn't hear anyone running, or walking for that matter, but I knew better than to let my guard down.

'They've gone to our room on the first floor,' I turned to whisper to Morgan. He nodded, but I was surprised to see that he didn't have his gun out. The Cross man was still watching us, but he didn't look scared. His expression didn't even make it to anxious.

'We've got to get out of here,' I said.

'Chauffeur and secretary?' asked the Cross.

'That OK with you, Chief?' Morgan asked me.

Scrutinizing the Cross in the room with us, I nodded. So this Cross was here to help us, was he? I didn't know his name and I didn't want to know it – but it was just as well Morgan had set up a backup plan. Chauffeur and secretary was one of the standards. The only trouble was, with the hotel being surrounded, I wasn't sure if it'd even work.

'I'm Dylan Hoyle,' said the Cross. He held out his hand. I didn't take it. Morgan started to until I glared at him, then his hand fell to his side. Dylan looked from Morgan to me and shrugged.

'I just thought—' Dylan began.

'You thought wrong,' I interrupted harshly.

'Fair enough,' Dylan shrugged again. 'You've both worked for me for the last eighteen months. Your false papers are in my jacket pocket.' He took out the papers and handed them to us. 'You'd both better get a move on. We've got less than five minutes before they start checking every room in the hotel. Try to make yourselves look as much like the photos on the fake IDs as possible.'

'Do we stand a chance?' asked Morgan.

'Only if you do what I say,' said Dylan, adding as he turned to me, '*Exactly* what I say. There are clothes in the wardrobe. You'd better get them on. Wigs and glasses are in the bathroom.'

Morgan and I were in a Cross's hands. Not a place I wanted to be, but we had no choice. Dylan Hoyle was a Cross. I didn't trust him, or any of them. And if he so much as twitched out of place, he wouldn't get the chance to do it twice.

two. Sephy

I held you in my arms, waiting to feel something. Anything. And I waited. And I waited. And nothing came. No pleasure. No pain. No joy. No anguish. No love. No hate. Nothing. I looked down into your dark-blue eyes, blue as an evening ocean and your eyes

swallowed me up, as if you were waiting for me to . . . recognize you. I can't explain it any other way. But I didn't know you. I looked at you and you were a stranger. And I felt so guilty, because I still felt the same way about you as I did when you were inside me. I'd still trade all my tomorrows with you for one slice of yesterday with Callum. And that's not the way I'm supposed to feel. So that's what I'm made of now. Regrets and pure, unadulterated guilt.

'Why don't you see if she'll feed?' asked Nurse Fashoda with a smile.

I didn't want to but she was watching me. And I didn't want her to guess what I was really feeling. New mothers aren't supposed to feel *nothing*.

'Do you have any bottles?' I asked doubtfully.

'That's not this hospital's policy. We don't provide bottles for babies unless there's a good medical reason and even then it has to be OK'd by a doctor,' Nurse Fashoda informed me, adding with slight disdain, 'Besides, bottles are for rich women so that they can hand their babies over to a nanny before they've had their first poo.'

The nurse regarded me pointedly as she spoke. Well, apart from the bit about being a woman and being rich, she'd got it absolutely right. At eighteen I felt nothing like a woman. Just the opposite. I was a frightened girl running barefoot on a knife edge.

'So how am I meant to feed her then?' I asked.

'Use what women fed their babies with long before bottles were invented,' said Nurse Fashoda, pointing to my breasts.

She wasn't joking either. I looked back down into your

eyes, Callie, and you were still watching me. I wondered why you weren't crying. Babies cry all the time, don't they? So why didn't you? After a deep breath, I pulled down one side of my nightgown, too tired now to be embarrassed by Nurse Fashoda's presence and too heart-sick to care anyway. I tried to raise you up in my arms so that you'd be at the right level to feed. But you wouldn't latch on. I tried to turn your head towards my breast. 'Sephy, you're not screwing in a light bulb,' admonished Nurse Fashoda. 'Don't swivel her head like that. She's not a plastic doll. Turn her gently.'

'If I'm doing such a bad job, why don't you do it instead?' I said with belligerence.

'Because it doesn't work that way,' the nurse answered.

And as I looked at Nurse Fashoda, I realized in that moment just how much I didn't know about you, Callie, or any baby. You weren't some nameless, faceless abstract *thing* any more. You weren't a romantic ideal or some stick to beat my dad with. You're a real person. Someone who had to rely on me for everything.

And God, I've never felt so scared.

I looked down at you again and it hit me. Hard. And kept coming. Into my heart and straight out the other side. Callie Rose. You were . . . you are my daughter. My own flesh and blood. Half me, half Callum and one hundred per cent yourself. Not a doll or a symbol or an idea, but a real, new person with a new life.

And totally my responsibility.

Tears trickled down my cheeks. I tentatively smiled at you and even though my vision was a bit blurred, I'd swear you smiled back at me. Just a little smile, but that

was all it took. I tried again, turning you gently in my arms until your face was towards my breast. You latched on to me this time and immediately began to feed. It's just as well you knew what you were doing because I didn't have a clue. I watched you then because I couldn't tear my gaze away. I watched you feed with your eyes closed and one fist balled up and resting against my skin. I could smell you, smell us. I felt you take more from me than just milk. And with each breath we both took, the last nine months faded away into long ago and far away. But you didn't feed for very long. A couple of minutes, that's all.

'Try switching her to your other breast,' said Nurse Fashoda.

So I did, moving you round awkwardly like you were made of bone china. But you didn't want to feed any more. You lay on my chest, your eyes still closed, and just like that you went to sleep. And I closed my eyes and leaned back against the pillows behind me and tried to follow your lead. I felt rather than saw Nurse Fashoda try to pick you up. My eyes opened immediately, my arms wrapped around you instinctively.

'What're you doing?'

'I'm just going to put your baby in the cot at the foot of your bed. You've had a long labour and it's time for you to rest. You'll be no good to your daughter if you're dog-tired,' said Nurse Fashoda.

'Can't she sleep on my chest?'

'Our beds are too narrow. If she fell off, she'd hit the floor,' said Nurse Fashoda. 'You'll have to wait till you're at home in your emperor-sized bed before you can do that.'

I studied Nurse Fashoda, wondering at the antagonism in her voice.

'I wasn't criticizing,' I said.

'Look around,' Nurse Fashoda said. 'This is meant to be a community hospital but we don't get half the equipment or staff that a Cross hospital gets. Not too many Cross patients want to set foot in Mercy Hospital.'

'I'm here, aren't I?'

'Yes, but you're the only Cross in the maternity ward. And when you leave, you'll move back into your fancy house in your fancy neighbourhood and after a long, hot shower we'll all be forgotten.'

And just like that, I'd been assessed and judged. Nurse Fashoda didn't know the first thing about me but she'd taken one look at my face and now she reckoned she knew my whole life history – what had gone before and what was yet to come. I didn't tell her that the bed in my flat was narrower than the one I was now lying on. I didn't explain that my bedroom, bathroom and kitchen combined were about the size of this labour room I was in. No matter how much talking I did, Nurse Fashoda would never hear me. She'd only ever hear what she wanted to hear, what she already 'knew' to be true. I knew her type.

Besides, I was too weary to argue with her. I watched her settle you down in your cot and the moment you were covered with the white, cotton blanket, I closed my eyes. But the instant Nurse Fashoda left the room, my eyes opened. I scrambled up onto my knees to look at you. I touched your cheek. I stroked your short, dark-brown hair. I couldn't take my eyes off you. Even when tears blurred my vision, I didn't take my eyes off you.