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opening extract from

Darkside

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Prologue

Ricky Thomas wished that he had never got out of bed. He wished that his mum hadn't bothered to wake him up early that morning, and that he'd missed the coach. His class went racing through the subway passage, screaming and whooping like some savage prehistoric tribe. One of the bigger lads shoved past Ricky, smacking him in the face with his bag. Ricky stumbled and stepped into a puddle, sending a stream of cold water splashing up his trouser leg. The boy turned round and grinned.

"Watch your step, fat boy!" he crowed.

Perfect. This day was getting better and better.

Up ahead, the passage curved away from him. The shouts and squeals of the schoolchildren ricocheted off the walls, filling the subway with raucous noise. A small platoon of teachers struggled to subdue their rowdy pupils. Men in suits carrying briefcases hurried past in the opposite direction, tutting as they tried to pick their way through the chaos. The air was heavy with the smell of sweat and urine.

Ricky had heard stories that homeless people sometimes slept in places like these. He couldn't imagine how unpleasant that experience would be. Hanging back from the others, he dabbed at the puddle-stain with a tissue, but only succeeded in turning the tissue black. Ricky stuffed it back into his pocket and thought wistfully of his bed.

The subway ended in a set of steep steps, and the class stamped out into the early-autumn morning. Ricky shivered and drew the hood of his jacket tighter around his face. The sky was grey and swollen with rain. It was bitingly cold. They were standing on the edge of a vast square, cut off from the rest of the world by broad, busy lanes of traffic. Despite the early hour, there was already a scattering of tourists milling around the huge fountains. Pigeons scratched at the ground. On top of a column far above everyone's head, a statue gazed solemnly out over the streets and rooftops of London, as stark and lonely as a lighthouse.

Mr Watkins, a balding history teacher with a harassed expression etched permanently on to his face, clapped his hands together and addressed the group. "Right, listen up. Listen! We have arrived at Trafalgar Square. Now follow me, and for heaven's sake don't go wandering off anywhere. Darren? That goes for you too." Behind his back, a boy aimed a wild kick at a pigeon. It fluttered away a few feet, and then resumed pecking at something on the pavement.

The group trudged dispiritedly towards a small statue of a man named Henry Havelock, and Mr Watkins began reciting facts and figures about some rebellion that had

happened in some other country years and years ago. Ricky let the dates wash over him, and stared up at Havelock's grim, unblinking face. He wondered what sort of person you had to be to fight in battle, to risk your life and to kill people. Normally Ricky wouldn't harm a fly, but occasionally a splinter of rage pricked his insides, rage against the children who picked on him, and against the teachers who ignored him. Whenever he got that fierce look in his eyes his mum would sigh, and said he'd inherited his dad's temper. Ricky wouldn't know: he had never met him.

A particularly inquisitive pigeon had pecked too close to Darren again. This time Mr Watkins spotted him lashing out. "And what do you think you're doing?" he roared. "Come to the front here where I can see you! If you're going to act like a child, I'm going to treat you like one!"

Taking advantage of the commotion, Ricky slipped away from the rest of the class and headed for the opposite side of the square. He knew that Mr Watkins would be shouting for some time, so he might as well sit down. He walked past a fountain on his left-hand side and trailed a hand through its icy pool. The wind had wrested control of the jets of water, and the spray, instead of going straight up in the air, flew crazily to one side like an old man's comb-over. Ricky skirted around the wet patch on the pavement and found a bench by the wall. From here he reckoned he could keep an eye on the other pupils, and rejoin them before they left the square.

Ricky's stomach rumbled angrily. He'd already polished off the sandwiches his mum had made for him on the way down. The girls sitting behind him had sniggered and whispered to each other at seeing him rooting about in his bag, but Ricky didn't care. He was used to being laughed at. It almost didn't bother him any more. Surprisingly, an old chocolate bar had escaped his attention and was lying at the bottom of his bag. He brushed a bit of fluff from the wrapper and took a contented bite.

Mr Watkins was having trouble keeping everyone together. On the other side of the square, a gaggle of girls squealed as a fountain splashed them, while two boys were attempting to clamber up one of the bronze lions that slumbered at the base of Nelson's Column. Kevin and Janice, a couple from Ricky's class, walked hand-in-hand past his bench looking for somewhere more private. They didn't notice him. Watching everyone disperse, Ricky wondered why the teachers had bothered to bring them here.

It had started to spit with rain, and the wind whistled in his ears, carrying with it a strong scent of women's perfume. He was going to get soaked. Ricky's skin prickled slightly with alarm, and he had the sudden sensation that someone was looking back at him. Had one of the teachers spotted him? He hurriedly scanned around the square. To his left there was a group of foreign students, jabbering at each other in a language he didn't understand, and then a street sweeper in a fluorescent jacket, and then a young

Japanese couple taking photographs of each other, and then. . .

Ricky stopped. In the midst of the crowd there was a tall, shadowy figure, his head and shoulders towering far above everyone else like a dark skyscraper. His hair was slicked down and he was dressed in a black suit and waistcoat that gave him the appearance of an undertaker. There was no expression on his face, but one thing was clear: he was staring directly at Ricky. As they made eye contact Ricky felt dizzy, and all the crowds and the cars and the buildings around him began to melt away, to be replaced by a swirling, suffocating darkness. With an effort he tore his gaze away from the man, and looked down at his feet, trying to catch his breath. When he brought his head back up, the man was still staring at him.

In the distance, the remnants of the class still listening to Mr Watkins had moved away from the statue of Henry Havelock, and were now clustered around Nelson's Column. Ricky gathered up his things and began walking in their direction. The tall man saw him go, and stepped forward after him. Without looking up, the foreign students moved out of the way to form a path, as if they could feel his presence but could not see him. Ricky started to walk a little faster.

The undertaker moved slowly and with great deliberation. He appeared to be in no hurry. A grin of reptilian anticipation had spread across his face. There seemed to be a faint blur around him, a smudge of grey,

and people stepped out of his way like sleepwalkers. Who was this guy? What did he want with him?

Ricky glanced over his shoulder, and the man nodded in the direction of the column. He followed his gaze. Another undertaker. Small and sharp-faced, this man, dressed in an identical black suit, had stepped in between Ricky and the rest of his class. He was completely bald, and a long, narrow nose dominated his face. Unlike his companion, this undertaker couldn't stop moving, bouncing on his heels with excitement as he muttered to himself. Seeing the boy heading towards him, he pointed at him and slowly drew a finger across his throat, as if he was slicing it with a knife.

Ricky shouted over to the rest of his class, "Mr Watkins! Over here! Help!" His voice was swallowed up by the wind and the crashing fountains. As the two men advanced upon him from either side, he tugged the sleeve of a man in an anorak standing next to him – "Hey Mister! Mister!" – but the man didn't even look round. It was as if Ricky was invisible. This couldn't be happening to him. Maybe he hadn't left his bed after all, and this was all one horrible nightmare. His heart was pounding in his chest, and tears of fear stung his eyes.

No one was going to help him here; he had to move. Ricky made for the top-left corner of the square, where there was a broad flight of stone steps offering an escape route out. As he skipped up the steps, he knocked into the young Japanese couple that had been taking photographs

nearby. He apologized over his shoulder, but they didn't even react. At the top of the stairs, Ricky turned right. The two undertakers were side-by-side now, following him up the steps. The smaller man hopped from one foot to the other, impatient at his taller companion's slow, deliberate gait.

Ricky looked left at the big, grand building looming ominously over him. Banners advertising some sort of art exhibition flapped in the wind. In front of him stood an old church, its spire standing proudly upright against the skyline. Surely he would be safe in there, if he could just make it inside. The green man faded away on the pedestrian sign, just as, behind him, the smaller man cackled and strained forward. Ricky jabbed the button on the traffic lights, but the cars swept past him. They were only a few paces behind him now. There was nothing for it. . .

Ricky darted across the road, narrowly avoiding a car that beeped with fury. He scampered triumphantly up to the church. A painted sign on the side of the building declared that it was the church of St-Martins-in-the-Field. Risking a glance back, Ricky saw that his two pursuers were still waiting on the other side of the road. The smaller man was jittery with anger, but the taller man merely grinned. Ricky shuddered and ran through the church doors.

Inside it was blissfully quiet. The wind and the rain and the traffic were reduced to a soft hum. Ricky pushed his

hood down and went forward, gazing upward at the ornate roof. The pews were empty, except for a young woman sitting in the front row. She was dressed in a long crimson dress and hat, and her head was bowed in prayer. As Ricky shuffled into the row behind her, he caught sight of a couple of strands of dyed fluorescent orange hair escaping from the bottom of her hat.

The pew creaked as he sat down, and she turned round at the noise. Though there was not a drop of colour in her pale face, she was beautiful. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Hello," she said gravely.

"Uh . . . hi." He paused. "Are you OK?"

She smiled, and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'll be OK. Thank you for asking."

"S'all right."

Despite her sadness, her voice was light and melodious. Ricky scratched his head, unsure of what to do. The woman patted the seat next to her affectionately and he moved around next to her. He was dimly aware that the sweet scent he had smelled in the square had returned.

"So why are you here?" she asked gently. "You look unhappy, just like me."

Behind him, the wind slammed a door shut, and Ricky whirled round. There was no one there. He was being stupid. He had to calm down. "Yeah . . . I'm all right now. Just some people picking on me."

The woman sighed. "People can be so mean to each other."

Ricky shifted uncomfortably in the wooden seat. "Can I ask you a question?" he said finally.

"Of course, my dear."

"Why were you crying when I came in?"

She sighed softly. "It's complicated."

"You don't have to tell me. . ."

"No. It's fine. It's just that I get upset when I have to take one of the little ones."

Back in the square, Mr Watkins was looking forward to getting out of the blasted rain and having a cup of tea, but there was a problem with the headcount.

"No, we're definitely one short. I've counted twice."

Mr Watkins sighed. There was always one.

"We saw Ricky Thomas going out of the square," someone piped up.

The teacher looked around. That was just great. The boy could be anywhere. Why did they have to do this to him? He cupped his hands together. "Ricky!" he shouted.

Outside the church of St-Martins-in-the-Field, a group of people were getting into a black van with "Humble & Skeet Undertakings" painted on to the side. One of them looked very unsteady on his feet, and had to be helped into the van. An extremely tall man folded himself carefully into the driver's seat, and the vehicle moved away. High above them all, Lord Nelson maintained his silent, impassive vigil.

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They were building down by the banks of the Thames, and the air shook with the rumble of diggers and the insistent drumbeat of drills. Men in hard hats and fluorescent jackets tramped around on the sand, shouting at each other through cupped hands. Spindly cranes poked up on the horizon like drinking straws. At the moment the site looked like a battlefield, scarred with holes and rubble, but in a few months, a year maybe, there would be another huge building reaching proudly up towards the heavens. It was as if the city had decided that there was no room for it to spread on the ground, and was now trying to construct a new civilization way up in the sky.

Jonathan Starling leant on the rails and watched the men as they worked, his jacket shivering in the breeze. He was a gangly fourteen-year-old with unruly brown hair that shot off in unexpected directions. His grey eyes had a haunted tint to them, and every movement he made said *leave me alone*. Concealed beneath his jacket, his school uniform

was a size too small for him, and clung awkwardly to his body.

That was how a stranger might have described him, but if you had asked the people who knew Jonathan what he looked like, they would have struggled for a reply. They might have instinctively frowned or shrugged, but he just wasn't the sort of person other people took much notice of. (Then again, if you had asked Jonathan what he looked like, he wouldn't have been able to answer either. He hadn't looked in a mirror for years.)

This ability to escape attention – to disappear from sight – had come in handy down the years. It had allowed him to slip out of school without the hassle of parental notes and the suspicious inquisitions of his teachers. Instead he slipped through the front gates like a ghost, and was gone. When he should have been dozing through a chemistry lesson, or half-heartedly dragging his mud-splattered legs round the sports field, he wandered the streets of London, in search of something different. He explored the winding alleyways of Soho, picked his way through the tangled mossy graves at Highgate Cemetery, while up by Alexandra Palace he looked down on the sprawling ants' nest that was his city.

Jonathan didn't always get away with it. There were truant officers and policemen combing the streets, and particularly observant teachers who noticed his empty chair in class. From time to time he would find himself in the headmistress's office, sitting quietly as she shook her head

sadly and gave him encouraging speeches. He had been suspended several times, and was now on his last warning. At least he never got into any trouble at home for it. The school had tried to bring his dad in on several occasions, and Jonathan was always careful that they received a convincing – but negative – reply. He sometimes told them that his dad was too ill to attend; and sometimes, at least, that was true.

That day the prospect of double maths had seemed too much to cope with, and Jonathan had slipped out of the school's back gate during lunch. As he was crossing London Bridge, the gleaming superstructures of Canary Wharf had caught his eye. He caught a tube train on the Jubilee Line and headed down there, making sure not to catch anyone's eye as they rattled along the Underground. By the time he had arrived it was mid-afternoon, and there were dark smudges at the edge of the cold, bright autumn sky. The broad streets and squares were still busy with people hurrying from one place to another. They kept their heads down, as if cowed by the monstrous glass buildings that reared up on all sides.

In the distance, Jonathan made out the familiar silhouette of a policeman walking down the access road towards him. It was time to move. If they started asking questions, you were done for. Trying to look as casual as possible, he walked away from the rail and headed back between two buildings towards the centre of the Wharf. The policeman shouted something at him but he pretended

not to hear. As soon as he was round the corner, he broke out into a run.

Jonathan might not have been broken any records on the athletic track, but in a chase through London streets he was untouchable. He zigzagged past office workers and shoppers, cutting through a small green park where people were ice-skating across a makeshift rink. They twirled and flowed in graceful arcs as Jonathan hared past them. He heard the policeman shout again, but it was a long way back and he was losing ground all the time. Jonathan ignored the entrance to a vast shopping centre, preferring to stick to the open spaces. Shopping centres had CCTV cameras and store detectives, and were always on the lookout for kids nicking stuff. He was safer out here.

He crossed a couple of streets and found himself in a small square. A fountain tossed soothing splashes of water into the air. In the corner a small kiosk was selling coffee and snacks. The roads around the square were quiet, and there was a sense of stillness about the place that reassured Jonathan. Glancing around, he could see that he had lost the policeman. He was safe for now. He settled down on a marbled wall and caught his breath.

On one side of the square three massive buildings soared high above him, standing shoulder to shoulder beneath the clouds. The largest one was in the middle, and at its summit a light flashed on and off to warn low-flying planes of its presence. Just craning his neck up to see it made Jonathan feel small and insignificant. He wondered

what it most be like to work on the top floor, to spend every day looking down on the rest of the world.

It was then that the woman caught his eye. She was jauntily crossing the square, clad in a pinstripe suit and tapping an umbrella on the ground as she went. A bowler hat was perched elegantly on one side of her head, allowing a cascade of fluorescent pink hair to fall away. Although no one else seemed to have noticed her, there was something about the woman that mesmerized Jonathan, and made it very difficult to take his eyes off her. She saw him watching her, and gave him a broad grin. Changing direction mid-stride, she began to head towards him, sending a ripple of sensation down Jonathan's skin that was as unsettling as it was unexplainable.

At the same time, the policeman entered the square from the other side, huffing and puffing and red-faced from his exertions. Jonathan got up slowly and began to edge away towards the exit. Seeing his pursuer, the woman winked at Jonathan and put a finger over her lips. She then approached the policeman, and began to ask him a long-winded question. Jonathan didn't need a second invitation – he turned and ran. Whoever that woman was, she had done him a big favour.

He was nearing the tube station when his phone began ringing in his pocket, making him jump. He fumbled around for it and checked the caller display. It was Mrs Elwood – their next-door neighbour, and his dad's only friend. That could only mean one thing. Bad news.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jonathan. It's me. Look . . . your dad's fallen ill again. They've taken him to the hospital. I'm going to drive there now. Are you still at school? I'll pick you up on the way."

Jonathan looked around. Rows and rows of windows stared blankly back at him. "No, it's all right. I'm on my way home," he said.