

CHRISTOPHER EDGE



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For Alex





"The true object of all human life is play."

G. K. Chesterton



1

This is The Escape.

It looks just how I imagined it would look: a neon blade of a building rising above the dark windowless warehouses that surround it. LED lights shimmer across its mirrored surfaces as I approach, catching my reflection in a kaleidoscope of colour.

I'm buzzing with excitement. This is my reward for working so hard: an evening of adventure at The Escape.

That's if I can find my way in.

I'm not sure at first if this is part of the game. I skirt round the edge of the building, searching for the entrance, but

all I can see is an endless wall of glass. It's as though whoever designed this building forgot to put in a front door, which is a bit of a problem if you want to pay them a visit. Maybe that's why they called it The Escape – because it's so hard to find the way out.

Then I spot it. Halfway along the wall, what I thought was a reflection is actually a revolving door, the sleek panels that are wrapped round the rest of the building bulging gently outwards in a smooth curve of glass. I come to a halt in front of this door, my mirror image reflected in stereo. Stepping forward, I push against the right-hand panel, eager to get the game started at last.

It doesn't move. The door's locked.

Looking up, I see the black ball of a camera lens staring down from the ceiling, a red dot at its centre. Someone's watching me.

I give a friendly wave to the camera.

"It's me – Ami Oswald," I say with a hopeful smile on my face. "I'm here to play."

There's a moment of silence as I wait for an answer. Then the revolving door clicks as the lock is released. This first test passed, I push against the panel again and, as the door swings, I step inside

The Escape.

The air feels instantly cooler, the low humming sound of the traffic outside replaced by a hushed silence as the revolving door closes behind me. I'm in some kind of lobby, a large circular space that looks like the bridge of a spaceship. The curved walls ripple with the same soothing patterns of colour that shimmered across the outside, while the lobby is lit by concentric circles of lights that shine down from the ceiling. There's a round reception desk in the middle of this space, its surface gleaming with the same bright whiteness that covers the floor. It looks like you could fit a thousand people in here, but, as I look around, there's only me.

I step towards the reception desk, hearing the sharp rap of my footsteps echoing back across the empty lobby. I thought there'd be somebody here to greet me, but as I reach the desk, the only thing I can see is a name badge left waiting for me.

AMI

Picking it up, I pin the badge to my top. At least they've spelled my name right – Ami with an "i" not a "y".

When he made the booking, Dad said that this

place was home to the ultimate escape room. Some people call them escape games or locked-room adventures, but the way they work is always the same. A team of players is locked in a room together to solve the clues and puzzles they find before time runs out. I like solving puzzles, so Dad reckoned a trip here would be the perfect gift for me. But it looks like I'll be playing alone.

"Hello."

The greeting makes me jump halfway out of my skin.

I turn to see a girl standing right beside me. Her eyes are hidden behind shocking pink sunglasses, but the smile on her face beams even more brightly than they do. Dark braids fall loosely round her shoulders, a handful of freckles dotted across her dark brown skin. She's wearing a cap-sleeved T-shirt with a vintage games console on the front, black-and-white checked trousers and neon-green trainers. This girl looks seriously cool.

"Do you work here?" I ask.

Removing her sunglasses, the girl shakes her head and points to the name badge on her T-shirt.

"I'm Adjoa," she says with a smile. "I'm here to play the game – just like you."

I smile back at Adjoa; her enthusiasm is infectious. Inside, I feel the same surge of excitement that I felt when I first laid eyes on The Escape. Maybe this is going to be fun after all.

"So where are the others?" Adjoa asks, raising a quizzical eyebrow. "I thought we were meant to be a team."

As if in reply, we hear the whirr of the revolving door and turn to see two boys entering the lobby. They look about the same age as me – the same age as Adjoa too now she's taken off her sunglasses – but apart from that I can't help noticing how different they seem.

The first boy moves quickly, his short blond hair turning ash-white beneath the lights as he strides purposefully towards us. His restless eyes dart from side to side.

"So this is the place?" he asks, his voice echoing across the cavernous space. "Doesn't look like much to me."

With his black zip top and running trousers, he looks like he's heading for the gym, although this is probably a wise choice of outfit. As well as solving puzzles and clues, escape rooms can sometimes make you sweat a bit too, with physical challenges

to beat. You might find yourself dodging past tripwire traps or crawling through a laser maze. It all depends on the theme of the game you play.

Across the lobby, the second boy is still standing just inside the door, looking around in wide-eyed wonder. With his baggy grey jumper and khaki cords, *he* doesn't look ready for any kind of physical challenge. Not unless we're going to be escaping from the fashion police. But my eyes are drawn to the Rubik's cube that he's holding, his long fingers absent-mindedly twisting its squares. Intrigued, I watch as the colourful patterns flickering across the faces of the cube echo those still shimmering across the walls.

The first boy swaggers to a halt at the desk.

"Hi," I start to say, but the boy just ignores me, reaching across to pick up two more badges that I hadn't noticed before. Pinning one that says OSCAR to his zip top, he looks back over his shoulder.

"Hey!" he calls out to the boy still dawdling at the door. "Are you Ibrahim?"

Glancing across at the sound of Oscar's shout, the second boy nods. His dark scraggly hair is swept back from his face and his angular features shift into

a pensive frown. "That's me."

Ibrahim hurries to join us, the cube still click-clacking in his hands. Oscar holds out the badge with IBRAHIM printed across the front.

"Thanks," Ibrahim says as he sets his Rubik's cube down on the reception desk, the puzzle now solved with each face showing a single colour. Taking his name badge, he smiles shyly at the rest of us. "Are you all here for the game too?"

"Welcome to the team!" Adjoa says brightly, turning the full beam of her smile in Ibrahim's direction. "Do you think we should call ourselves the Awesome Foursome or maybe the Fantastic Four? We need to pick a name that'll look good on top of the leader board."

"We don't need a stupid team name to win this game," Oscar sneers, but then a new voice chips in with a suggestion.

"How about the Five Mind?"

Turning round in surprise, I see a girl standing on the other side of the reception desk. She doesn't look much older than me – twelve or thirteen maybe. Her straight black hair is cut into a sharp bob, dark eyes shining from beneath her fringe. It takes me a moment to work out what she's called as

her name badge is lost among all the others covering her denim jacket. Then I spot it, nestled next to the smiley faces, superhero symbols and CND signs.

MIN

"I mean, if this game really is as tough as people say it is," the girl continues, "we're going to have to put our heads together to win."

There's a silent pause as we all try to work out where she's come from. Shifting patterns of colour flicker across the curved walls. The only door into this place is the one we all walked through and I didn't see Min come in.

"I like it," Adjoa says, breaking the silence. "It's a pun, isn't it? Like a hive mind where people share their intelligence? There are five of us and if we all work together then we'll be five times as smart."

Min nods her head. "Maybe even smarter," she says. "What do you think, Ami?"

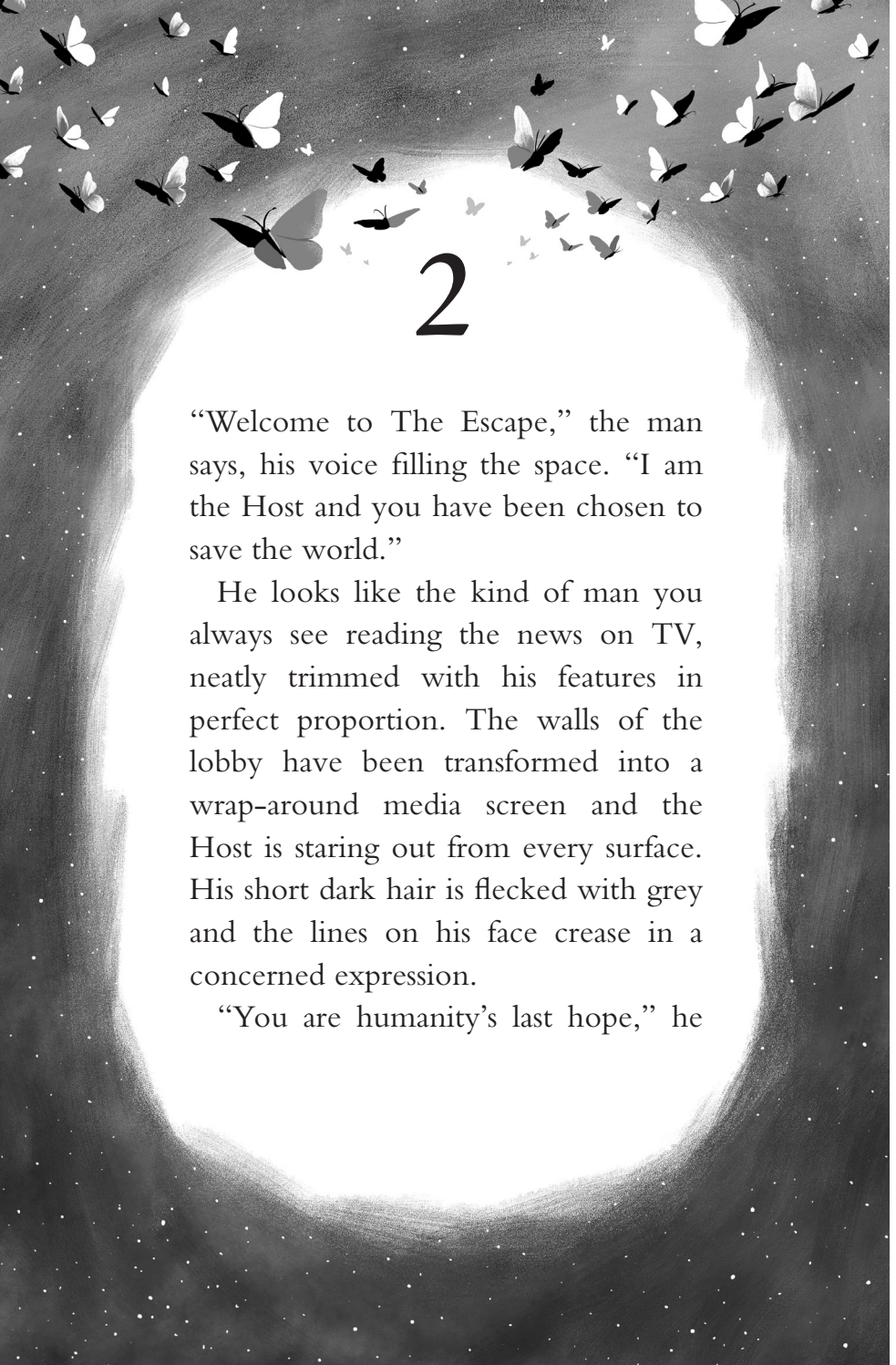
I glance around the lobby, wanting to make sure that nobody else is hiding out of sight. There are no more name badges waiting to be collected. Standing beneath the bright lights, Adjoa, Oscar, Ibrahim and Min stare back at me. It looks like this is my team.

"Sounds good to me," I agree. "But when's the game going to start?"

And then the lights go out and the shimmering colours that encircle the walls dissolve in a burst of static. For a second I feel a flicker of fear but then this is swept away by an onrushing excitement as the face of a man appears there instead.

It's starting.

Game on.



2

"Welcome to The Escape," the man says, his voice filling the space. "I am the Host and you have been chosen to save the world."

He looks like the kind of man you always see reading the news on TV, neatly trimmed with his features in perfect proportion. The walls of the lobby have been transformed into a wrap-around media screen and the Host is staring out from every surface. His short dark hair is flecked with grey and the lines on his face crease in a concerned expression.

"You are humanity's last hope," he continues. "I can only pray that you will succeed where we have failed."

He's making it sound like the end of the world, but I can't stop myself from smiling. This is how these escape games always begin – the game master setting up the story and explaining what you need to do to win. This might be breaking into a bank vault to steal a priceless treasure or searching a scientific laboratory to discover a secret formula. Every escape room has its own unique mission. And now he's going to tell us what *we* need to do to save the world…

I glance around at the others, their faces lit by the light from the screen. Ibrahim peers intently at the Host, his head tilted slightly to one side, while next to him Oscar stands with his arms folded across his chest. Catching my gaze, Adjoa flashes me an excited smile and then nods in Min's direction. I look across to see that Min's pulled out a notebook from somewhere and is scribbling furiously as the Host continues to speak.

"We need you to find the Answer."

I can hear the capital letter in his voice as a news ticker starts to scroll across the bottom of the screen.

Find the Answer. Save the world. Find the Answer.

Save the world. Find the Answer. Save the world. Find the Answer.

"All you need to succeed is hidden inside The Escape. The puzzles that you find and the challenges you face might seem impossible at first, but for you nothing is impossible. Look around carefully. Everything is part of the game. Use your mind to find the Answer. It's what we need to save the world."

Min looks up from her notebook. "If you want us to find the Answer," she says, "don't you need to tell us what the question is?"

I thought this was a pre-recorded video, but the Host pauses, his gaze turning in Min's direction.

"We have so many questions," he replies, shaking his head sadly. "And there are more asked of us each day. Burning questions, billion-dollar questions, but it's all now just a question of time. The clock is ticking – the countdown has begun."

Staring out from the screen, the Host's flint-grey eyes seem to fix on to mine.

"Find the Answer," he says. "Find the Answer before it's too late."

I don't know what he means. He's talking in riddles, but I'm supposed to be good at solving

those. Before I can get my brain into gear, I hear Oscar pipe up.

"Find the Answer, save the world, bada bing bada boom." He snaps his fingers with a click that echoes around the room. "So what are we waiting for?"

There's a grinding metallic sound and the face of the Host starts to split into two. I hear Adjoa gasp in surprise as the screens that circle the walls slide apart to reveal an open door. This must be the way in to the first of the escape rooms – the place where this game really begins.

Beyond the door, the room is in total darkness, but Oscar is already striding into it. The curved walls of the lobby now shimmer with colour again, the scrolling shapes of arrows showing which way to go.

"I will be monitoring your every move," the Host says, his disembodied voice floating free as Ibrahim, Adjoa and Min quickly follow in Oscar's footsteps. "The path you take through The Escape will lead you closer to me. Take nothing for granted. Question everything. The Answer might be found in the most unexpected of places."

I hurry to catch up with the others, heading for