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opening extract from

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written by

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SOPHIE McKENZIE

THE MEDUSA PROJECT

THE HOSTAGE

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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Fourteen years ago, scientist William Fox implanted four babies with the Medusa gene – a gene for psychic abilities. Now dead, his experiment left a legacy: four teenagers – Nico, Ketty, Ed and William's own daughter, Dylan – who have each developed their own distinct and special skill.

Brought together by government agent, Geri Paterson, the four make up the Medusa Project – a secret, government-funded, crime-fighting force. They live under the protection of William's brother, Fergus Fox, at Fox's North London boarding school – Fox Academy – where both their abilities and role as psychic agents are secret.



1: Lex

Like I didn't have enough problems?

Nico and I were in a car, on the way to our first proper mission as the Medusa Project. We'd been trained, we'd been briefed and we'd been told why our mission was important. So why was I feeling as chewed up as the inside of my trainers after a long, sweaty run?

'Hey, babe,' Nico murmured. 'What's the matter?'

I shook my head. I'm not good at explaining stuff at the best of times, which this definitely wasn't. Anyway, Nico's totally sorted about his psychic ability. So are the others. It's just me . . .

I have visions of future events which – I know – *sounds* like it should be interesting. The trouble is, I can't control when these glimpses into the future are going to happen or what I'm going to see. My ability's completely random. And yet there I was – off on a mission that was built around *my* psychic powers.

'Are you scared about getting hurt?' Nico lowered his

voice so our driver wouldn't hear. 'Because you don't need to be . . . I'll make sure you're okay.' He smiled that chocolate-eyed, half-cheeky, half-sexy smile of his.

I smiled back, it was impossible not to. My boyfriend is the fittest thing on two legs – not that I'd tell him so.

'Thanks, you macho bighead, but I can look after myself.'

Nico's grin deepened. 'So what's up?'

'Nothing, I'm fine.' I turned away and looked out of the window. I knew if I explained my anxieties to Nico he'd just tell me I was being silly – that my abilities were as valid and useful as everyone else's. But suppose I didn't have a vision later? Suppose I never had one again? It had been nearly two weeks since I'd had my first – and only – proper precognitive experience.

Geri Paterson – she heads up the Medusa Project – had tried all sorts to bring another vision on, from getting me to focus on pictures of random strangers to sending me into a state of deep relaxation.

Nothing, so far, had worked.

The streets outside were dark, the damp pavements glistening with the rain that had fallen earlier. We were speeding through a maze of back streets somewhere in central London. Our brief was to slip inside the offices of Fostergames, a computer games software company, and hope that the surroundings prompted a vision in me. Why Geri thought that standing in the middle of an office would help me see into the future, I had no idea.

I closed my eyes, remembering what she'd said about the mission.

Two days ago the Ministry of Defence's computer firewall was breached. The hacker had access to top secret and highly valuable information. We don't yet know what he saw or why he wants it. We suspect the hacker is Damian Foster, the owner of Fostergames – but there's no proof. Hopefully, your visions will lead us to the truth.

My stomach clenched into a knot. I felt for my phone in my pocket. Right then I'd have given anything to have been able to call my older brother.

Apart from Nico, Lex is the only person in the world I can truly rely on. Our parents work abroad, so I've spent most of my life since I was eleven in boarding schools. And, until last year, Lex was always there with me, helping with everything from homework to homesickness. He's so cool. Even when he left school last summer, just before I started at Fox, he still called me all the time. Right now, I really wanted to talk to him. But Lex had been busy for the past few weeks with a new job, a new flat and a new girlfriend. I hadn't even had a chance to tell him about the Medusa gene thing. After all, it's not exactly the sort of thing you blurt out over the phone, is it?

'We're here.' Nico's voice drew me back to the present. He squeezed my hand. 'Don't worry. You'll have a vision, babe.'

I stared at him. How had he known what I was worrying about?

He raised his eyebrows. 'Busted,' he whispered. 'I know you better than you think.'

God, Nico's *so* gorgeous – not just his dark eyes and high cheekbones – but this way he has of looking at you from under his fringe that makes you think he's laughing and wanting to kiss you all at the same time.

Feeling my face flush red, I got out of the car. The driver was a skinny blonde woman called Maria. Geri had brought her in to help train the four of us in basic attack and defence skills. We were getting pretty good.

'Fostergames is two doors down,' Maria said quietly, handing Nico a headset. 'Mobiles switched off?'

Nico and I nodded. Suddenly the atmosphere tensed up. This was it. Nico hooked the headset round his ear.

'Right, you know the floor plan of the building,' Maria said briskly. 'Get to the Fostergames offices on the second floor. Get in. Get to work. Get out. Any problems, speak into that.' She pointed to the mouthpiece of Nico's headset. 'If you run into a security guard, you've got two minutes to get out under your own steam. After that, I'm coming in. And be discreet, Nico. You're here purely to support Ketty. Don't use your telekinesis where there are witnesses . . .'

'Yes, ma'am.' Nico shook his fringe out of his eyes and grinned.

How could he be so calm about what we were about to do? I was shaking like a leaf as we walked to the Fostergames offices. When Geri first briefed us about this mission I'd assumed all four of us would be involved at every stage, but then she'd gone on to say how she didn't want us barging into Foster's office mobhanded . . . that the point of this

initial investigation was for me to have a vision, with Nico along as a sort of bodyguard.

No pressure, then.

It was dark now and the streets were fairly empty. I stared into the Fostergames lobby. It was smart, with a lush red carpet and a smooth pale wood reception desk in the corner. A glass vase full of huge red roses stood on top of the desk. A bald security guard sat behind it, flicking through a magazine. I fixed my gaze on the row of CCTV monitors beside him. We were clearly visible on one of the screens – standing outside the front door.

'Ready?' Nico winked at me.

'Yes.' The word came out as a whisper.

Nico held up his hand to the glass door. I watched him closely. I'd only seen him use his telekinesis properly once before – and as I'd been falling down a cliff at the time, I hadn't been able to see exactly what he did.

Nico made a slight twisting motion with his hand. Seconds later the vase on the reception desk tipped over. Water splashed onto all the CCTV monitors and into the keyboards beneath. The glass vase rolled across the counter top and smashed out of sight. The security guard spun round, cursing.

'Go on,' Nico muttered.

As if on cue, the security guard bent down, disappearing behind the desk. A second later, all the monitors went black as he switched them off.

Nico twisted the door handle and silently opened the outer door. I crept through after him as he opened the inner

door. Holding my breath, I followed Nico across the soft carpet of the lobby. The guard was still out of sight behind the reception desk, presumably still dealing with the water-logged electronics.

We scurried silently to the shelter of the corridor and along, to the stairs at the end. The whole journey from the door had taken just a few seconds. The security guard hadn't noticed a thing.

As we crept up the stairs, Nico whispered, 'Well, that was easy. The CCTV'll be off for ages.'

'Don't get cocky,' I whispered back. 'Maria wants us out of here in ten minutes.'

Nico rolled his eyes. 'Through here.' We'd reached the second floor now. Nico was pointing at a door marked *Fostergames,* which led to an open-plan office.

He pressed his finger against the headset in his ear. 'Maria's telling me to shut up and let you get a feel for the place. Man . . .' he covered the mouthpiece with his hand, 'man . . . she's bossy.'

Nodding vaguely, I went through to the office. Desks were shoved together in groups of sixes and eights – and, like the rest of the building, lit by bright overhead lights. Most of the desks were fairly messy, covered in papers and files, each one with a computer terminal. Geri's instructions rang in my ears.

Once you're inside the office, stop for a few seconds at each desk. Allow yourself to get a feel for the place.

'Why should getting a feel for the place bring on a vision?' I murmured under my breath.

'I know,' Nico whispered, covering his mouthpiece again. 'It would make more sense if Geri had told you to go to Foster's office and wait for a vision vibe there. *He's* the one they think did the hacking.'

I nodded. Undercover agents had already secretly broken into Fostergames and searched Foster's computer, finding nothing. Foster himself was under surveillance. I'd seen a picture of him, but didn't know much about the man.

I wandered from desk to desk, stopping at each one, as instructed. When I'd had a vision before it had started with a sweet smell and flashing lights.

There was no sign of either of those now.

'Anything?'

'Nope.'

Nico sighed. He held out his hand and teleported a stapler, a memory stick and a white board marker into the air. I watched the objects twirl over our heads and thought about the way Nico had knocked over that vase earlier. My visions were useless in comparison with his power to move objects without touching them. Why couldn't I have some practical, useful ability like telekinesis too?

I wandered to another desk and gazed at its contents. Then another. Still nothing.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside.

I froze. Nico landed the objects he'd been teleporting, grabbed my hand and tugged me behind the nearest desk. Heart pounding, I crouched down as the door opened. The security guard we'd seen earlier peered into the room. My

heart was beating so loudly now, I thought he would hear it. Had Nico's telekinesis somehow attracted his attention? No, the guard was just gazing around, not looking for anything in particular. This was just a routine inspection of the kind Geri had warned us about. The guard looked round, then withdrew. As his footsteps faded away, Nico let out his breath in a sharp sigh.

'That was close,' he whispered.

I nodded. Nico turned away frowning . . . pressing his finger against the earpiece of his headset again. 'What . . .? Okay . . . okay,' he muttered into the mouthpiece. He turned back to me, making a face. 'Maria says our ten minutes are nearly up. We have to get out of here before the security guard finishes looking round upstairs.'

I stood up. 'Fine.' I wandered round a few more desks. *God*, this was hopeless. How embarrassing to have to go back and admit I'd failed. I stood at the next desk. What had Geri said?

Take a moment at each desk. You don't know what will spark off a vision.

I gazed at the contents of the next desk – a few neatly piled papers . . . a pot of pens . . . a tiny teddy propped up against the PC. Then the next . . . this one was messier, with Post-it notes scattered across the desk and a large tube of handcream shoved in a corner beside a stapler and a hole punch.

Nico pointed to a sign pinned to one of the screens that divided the desk. The notice read:

Fostergames Co is a Paper Minimising Environment.

Please minimise your usage. Only print essential items.

Across this someone had scrawled: *Please minimise your arse.*

I attempted a smile, then looked at the next desk. Another fairly messy one, with a couple of car mags visible under a huge sheaf of papers. A photograph had been Blu-tacked to the side of the computer screen. I stared at it, my stomach suddenly falling away from me.

My brother Lex was in the photo, his arm around a girl I didn't know with a snub nose and short, reddish hair.

I couldn't believe it. What was a picture of Lex doing here? I glanced at the rest of the desk . . . the car mags were exactly the sort of thing Lex would own. And then I saw the tiny, blond-haired troll, perched on the edge of the in-tray.

I'd won it at a funfair we'd been to last year. I'd been so pleased with myself and Lex had hugged me and I'd laughed and said the troll looked like him with his long, surfer-dude hair and I'd written *LW*, Lex's initials, on the troll's feet and given it to him and Lex's face had scrunched up in that gap-toothed, crooked smile of his.

I reached out and picked up the tiny troll. Hands shaking I turned it over. There, on the base, was the *LW.* Faded, but distinct.

'Ketty?' Nico whispered at my side.

I hardly heard him. Lights flashed in front of my eyes. A sweet, heavy smell filled my nostrils. It was happening again. A vision.

Rain. Stone. Leaves and ivy. Rain on my face. I'm behind a

large stone, hiding. Lex is just in front of me, but he doesn't know I'm there. He's holding a small silver device. A splash of rain on metal. He hands the device to another man whose face I can't see. The man speaks. 'This has the recording . . .' – his voice is low, fading as the rain gets harder, then returning – '. . . the MoD data?' And Lex says: 'Yes, it's the only copy.' I shiver, watching . . . hiding . . . rain on my face . . .

I snapped out of the vision.

'Ketty?' Nico's anxious face zoomed into focus. 'Man, what happened? Was that a vision? You, like, just zoned out for about ten seconds and now you're white as . . .' He grabbed my arm. 'Come on, we have to get out of here.'

I stared at him blankly, unable to take anything in. Nico pulled me towards him. We were so close that I could hear Maria's voice through Nico's earpiece. She was telling Nico to get me out of the building. I felt sick. Nico pulled me, stumbling, to the door.

My head spun as we raced down the stairs and past the now deserted reception desk. Nico glanced at me anxiously, then focused on the front door. We'd been warned that if the security guard went on his rounds, he would lock the outer glass door. Maria must have been hissing in Nico's ear again, because he was muttering into his mouthpiece.

He held up his hands and the door lock clicked open. I was vaguely aware of how impressive this was – a week ago there was no way Nico could have used his telekinesis on a lock – but my mind was still all-focused on what I'd just seen.

As we ran out, onto the pavement, the reality sank in. I'd had a vision of Lex handing someone a recording to do with the MoD data. Which meant my *brother* – not Foster, the boss of Fostergames, but my wonderful older brother – must be the hacker Geri had briefed us about!

And *I* was part of the crime-fighting force supposed to catch and stop him.