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1 MARCH

306 days to go . . .

Underground train line
Liberty Square

8:22 pm

There was rumbling and shaking all around, as swirling, molten shapes rushed in on me. I couldn't move. Something, somewhere, was hurting.

The train, horribly distorted, had loomed ahead, ready to destroy me. I thought I was going to be minced on the tracks. In a matter of seconds . . .

Was I dreaming or was this real?

My whole body seemed immobilised, held down, but where was the train? Where was the bloody impact? Was I already dead?

I'd heard about people looking down from above, watching their dead or dying bodies below on the operating table or in a car accident. But I felt as though I'd been dragged down, *beneath* it all.

either side of me. Across to my right, I could see a huge metal wheel, the kind that locks and seals off gas and water pipes. Above that, there were four long pipes that ran the length of the wall and then disappeared up a dark shaft. I seemed to be in some sort of landing station in a pump room.

I was lying low, just above the floor, and my body was wrapped up tightly in an old, grey army blanket. How did I get here? I couldn't shake the cloudiness from my head to figure out what had happened, how I'd escaped the impact of the train and why I was tucked away in this dank, dark place.

My head fell back in despair. I thought I must have been caught again, and that this was some kind of dungeon. Vulkan Sligo and his lying little spy girl, Winter, had caught up with me. I'd escaped the train somehow, but I'd been recaptured and shoved in this prison.

My mind flashed back to how my foot, trapped in the heavy gumboot I'd taken from the zoo, wouldn't budge from the tracks. I was stuck there, facing an oncoming train . . . The last thing I could remember thinking was that the screeching brakes would never pull the train up in time.

I realised, as the train was bearing down on

I *must* have been dreaming . . . even though I pulled my body with all my strength, my movements were crushingly slow, just like in a nightmare.

What was happening?

8:30 pm

My eyes flew open. I was lying down flat on my back.

There was no train. There was no railway line! The train that was going to crush me beneath its screaming bulk had completely vanished, along with the train tracks and the gloomy, blue-lit tunnel! How long had I been passed out here?

I was in a small, dark space, filled with looming shapes and angles. I struggled to sit up but my panic worsened when I felt that something tight was pinning me down. I tried to kick, but the movement hurt like hell.

My leg! What about the gash on my leg? Surely I'd lost too much blood?

It suddenly felt like that moment up on the tracks had been hours ago . . . What had happened? I shook my head, trying to regain my senses, before looking around again. A dim, caged light on the cement ceiling above where I lay revealed several shafts running away on

inhaling hard. I was alive and that had to be a good thing. But how I'd escaped being trapped on the railway line . . . I had no idea.

My memory was slowly becoming clearer. The ground beneath me, the metallic mesh that my foot was jammed against, had somehow given way. I'd fallen through the hole, but then someone was there and had caught me. I was in the stranger's arms, just below the tracks, as the hideous sound of the train passed right over both of us.

9:01 pm

'Who's there?' I tried to ask, suddenly aware of a shuffling sound nearby. But my voice came out as a hoarse croak. I struggled as I sat back up again to look around.

A movement against the wall opposite me caught my eye. 'Who's there?!' I repeated, my voice tentative, afraid of who I was about to meet.

I couldn't make out his face in the dim light, but could see that whoever the thin figure was, he seemed to be wearing an oversized dark-green suit and a tie.

The gangly figure slowly approached and I braced myself. He appeared to be very stooped, with fair, straggly hair and huge eyes, wide like a possum's.

me, that I would never see my family again. I would die, never knowing the mystery of the Ormond Singularity. There was a loud shriek . . . and then, just before impact, the whole world seemed to open up and I'd fallen into a gaping blackness. I felt the terrifying sensation of falling into some dark space beneath my body, as if the earth had opened up and swallowed me.

A shocking thought suddenly struck me. Maybe I *hadn't* escaped the train. Maybe both my legs were gone and I was regaining consciousness in some overcrowded prison hospital. Horrified, I finally ripped off the grey blanket that was holding me down.

I nearly passed out with relief. Both of my legs were still there!

I wiggled my toes and cringed at the pain of this simple movement. I sat up and looked closer and saw that the gash on my leg had been cleaned and covered with a semi-transparent dressing. Through it I could count seven neat stitches!

Someone had stitched the gash on my leg *and* tucked me up tightly in this blanket! Sligo wouldn't have done that for me. But who had? It didn't make sense.

The pain in my leg throbbed into my consciousness. I forced myself to breathe deeply,

have helped you . . .'

'Drain covers?' I asked, thinking again of the metallic mesh on the tracks that was near my trapped foot.

He nodded vigorously and a piece of his wispy fair hair flew up like a cockatoo's comb.

'All the underground railways have huge drains under them,' he explained, 'big, big tanks—otherwise the rainfall from the city above that doesn't get caught by the drainage systems would gush down and flood the lines. That's why all along the tracks you'll find drainage openings. The stormwater is stored in tanks below, and when they're full they're pumped out into the city drains.'

The man paused and peered up at me again, as if he were checking I was listening to him.

'I heard you running along the line,' he continued. 'You stumbled, pushing that big guy off the tracks, then I saw that you'd become stuck. There wasn't much time, but I was able to yank down the drain cover from beneath you . . . and then down you came after it. I caught you and here you are.'

He grinned, looking very pleased with himself. 'Right now, we're in one of the connecting tunnels that link up all the drainage tanks. They only inspect them every few months. The rest of the

'Did you do this?' I asked him, pointing to my stitched leg.

'I certainly did,' he said, unrolling a wrapped-up piece of fabric to reveal a range of shiny medical instruments in a line. 'Would you like anything else done while I have my tools out? Some minor surgery? I've got everything here. You've got no idea what people leave on trains. No idea. I've got a whole library on microsurgery back home if you'd like anything taken off or re-attached?'

'No,' I said hastily, cautiously drawing my injured leg away from him. 'Thank you for what you've done. For helping me.'

I ran my hands through my hair and exhaled, hoping like crazy that this unusual guy was on my side. 'I remember,' I said, 'falling beneath the tracks just before the train reached me . . . and being caught.'

The skinny man chuckled. 'Like falling into the fiery pits of hell?' He softly brushed some dust and dirt away that had just fallen on his array of surgical instruments before carefully rolling them back up in the cloth. 'I could see you were in a spot of bother,' he said. 'You were very lucky that your foot was jammed against one of the drain covers. A couple of metres further south or north and I don't think I could

you there.'

'Sorry, take me where?' I wasn't too sure I wanted to go anywhere with this guy.

He ignored my question. 'At the moment it's too dangerous to use the tunnels, just in case the bluecoats are still hanging around.'

I understood that.

'It was a close call. They were crawling everywhere looking for you. They thought they were coming to scrape you off the track.'

Scrape you off the track.

His words really hit me. Shock smacked home. My heart thumped against my ribs and my breath came again in big panting sobs. I fell back, slumped now against the wall. I'd had such a narrow escape, but I was alive, thanks to this strange little guy in the suit.

'How long have I been down here?' I asked.

'You've been out to it for a while,' he said. 'Been asleep all day.'

I felt relieved, knowing that Red Singlet was long gone for the time being, but then I was tormented by thoughts of Winter Frey. She'd set me up, I told myself. She made up something, just to trick me and find out where I was. I wasn't sure if I'd seen a passenger in the back of the black Subaru—my focus had been on the guy jumping out of the car, coming for me—but

time they're free and open to traffic—me, that is.'

'And no-one saw us?' I asked anxiously. He shook his head vigorously again. This time I saw a small cloud of dust shake up in a soft shaft of light. 'I owe my life to you,' I said, tearing up with relief, hardly believing what had happened. 'If you hadn't got me down here, I'd be like my shredded boot up there—all over the tracks, only in more and messier pieces.'

'Now, now, don't get too carried away. I didn't want you squashed all over the tracks just up there. Didn't want fuss and bother and police and a rescue team with their great big generator lights, and ambulance people, and all that,' he said. 'Didn't want the bluecoats coming too close to that particular drainage tank—some of the shafts that lead off it,' he said, 'lead straight to my home. Didn't want that.'

'Bluecoats?' I asked.

'The blue coats. The railway cops,' he explained. 'They wear blue like the regular cops. They were all over the place looking for you.'

OK, so he's gotta know who I am, I thought to myself. Surely.

'One of those tunnels leads right to my home,' he said pointing up into the dark. 'Two of them do, actually, if you count the one with the rockfall blocking it. Normally, that's the way I'd take

drawings were still safe in my backpack. I'd escaped again and was free to keep working on the dangerous mystery of the Ormonds. The DMO.

'I can't be caught by him, or anyone like him,' I said. 'Or by the cops, of any sort. I've gotta get away from here—if I'm caught, it's the end of everything.'

'That makes two of us,' said the man, chuckling. '*I* can't afford to be caught, either. That's why we're both hidden down here!'

I was a bit unnerved that this guy had only helped me to keep his secret lair safe. Still, I owed him big time. But being saved from the train wasn't going to be much use to me if the authorities were going to find me.

'What if they come down the tunnel to where we are now?' I asked.

'That's why we are about to move on,' he said. 'They've been searching the other drains all day and they mustn't find us here.'

'Where can we go?' I asked.

'Do you think you can walk?'

'I'll give it a go,' I said, carefully getting to my feet and trying some weight on my injured leg. It felt a little wobbly, but good enough.

'Good man. Grab your things and we'll be on our way.'

Red Singlet had appeared within seconds of her phone call to me, and he *almost* got me and the contents of my backpack.

My backpack! I suddenly panicked, sitting up, realising I didn't have it.

'It's OK,' my new friend said. 'If you're looking for your bag, it's there, against the wall.'

My eyes followed the direction of his pointed finger, and I spotted a mound near the opening of one of the shafts. I sank back with relief.

'What are those drawings all about?' he asked. 'Hope you don't mind me looking at them.'

'As long as they're all still there,' I said. 'They're really important drawings my dad did before he died.'

'And what did you think you were doing,' he asked, 'running along the railway line like that? Looking for death, too?' His possum eyes narrowed. 'You weren't looking for lost property, were you?'

'Lost property? I was running for my life. There are people chasing me.'

'Yes, yes,' he said nodding. 'I saw that big guy coming after you. Hardly fair. I know what that's like.'

My heart rate was returning to something like normal. Winter aside, I started to feel pretty damn good. I'd dealt with Sligo's thug and the

11:38 pm

The light brightened and I realised that it was the pale night sky I could see high above me.

I made it to the top of the shaft and cautiously stuck my head out and looked around. The shaft had opened up into a dusty, weed-filled yard. Another caged light about twenty metres away shone near the opening of another huge tunnel, its mouth covered by iron gates. It reminded me of the opening above the ocean I was nearly washed through in the stormfloods not long ago.

My leg was aching pretty badly but I tried to ignore it and concentrate on my surroundings and getting my bearings. Some distance away was a collection of run-down buildings against a stone cliff face, a couple of old train carriages

11:07 pm

The man in the suit pushed me aside. ‘Me first. You follow,’ he ordered. ‘There are iron pins wedged into the stonework, all the way up the shaft. Some of them are badly rusted and loose, so pay attention to what I do—I think I remember which ones they are.’

I hoped so too. I watched as he started climbing, testing each iron spike for hold before putting all his weight on it. He was a bit like a spider, slender and slight—a daddy-long-legs scaling a wall.

‘Where exactly are we going?’ I asked again.

‘Back to my place,’ he said. ‘Up this shaft.’ He pointed to the dark opening of the shaft in the roof of the pump station.

It was probably a good idea to lie low with this guy for a while, I thought, even though I didn’t really have a clue where he was leading me. I quickly began following him up into the shaft, watching intently for the safe spikes he’d used to prop himself up, before grabbing them myself. My backpack kept getting in the way, catching on the toeholds higher up, making it just that little bit more difficult. I tried as best I could to ignore the pain in my stitched leg as I battled my way up. Even though I was helped by the light that increased the higher we climbed up the shaft, I was still falling behind and in danger of losing the mysterious man ahead.

He was almost at the top of the shaft, and I hoped he’d wait for me. I didn’t know where I was going to come out—for all I knew I could have been walking straight out into the steel embrace of the police and railway officials. I kept climbing, bullying the backpack behind me, my one bare foot bruised and painful with every step I took.

eyes in his thin face flashing with enthusiasm.

'Come on!'

This guy was a lunatic!

Now in the cold yard light I could see that his suit was very shabby; his tie looked like something out of Gabbi's dress-up box, his jacket was worn and slipping, too big, off his shoulders, while the arms crept up, too short at the wrists. If he was as crazy as he looked, he might want to slam me inside a filing cabinet too.

I crawled out of the shaft, my swollen ankle hurting like hell, the stitches in my gashed leg pulling painfully on my skin. Dragging my backpack over my shoulder, I carefully got to my feet.

A wailing siren nearby made me drop to the ground and almost back down the shaft again. I remained crouched until the cop car had passed. Time to go. I couldn't hang around with a guy in a cabinet. I couldn't hang around at all! The cops were coming and I had to get away. My legs felt shaky and painful but my system was pumped with nervous excitement, edgy and raring to go.

Somehow, I would have to make it through the yards and onto the road without being seen. I dropped down again as yet another police car whizzed past outside the fence.

'What are you doing?' my companion called. 'Come on! Get over here! You can hide here!'

and ancient rusting engine parts, train wheels and axles.

The guy in the suit had disappeared.

I couldn't help a brief moment of disappointment rushing through me as I realised I was alone again. He must have had second thoughts and deserted me, before I'd even learned his name.

I couldn't really blame him. He'd already done so much; it was up to me now. I should have been used to being alone. I'd have to find my way out of the old railway yards and somehow get back to a safe place.

11:40 pm

It was the middle of the night and from where I was, the streets around the yards seemed deserted.

Still half out of the shaft, I turned to look around again for a sign of my companion.

Over at the cliff face, not far from the largest building, I was drawn to three old grey filing cabinets, each almost as tall as a man. They stood there like empty, abandoned wardrobes.

Then I heard his voice.

'Come on my boy! Over here!'

From the filing cabinet in the middle, the man in the suit beckoned to me. He was standing squashed inside it, head bowed a little to fit in,

noise alerted me. About one hundred metres away, a group of railway police were approaching, flashing their torches ahead of them. They were searching the buildings and it was only a matter of minutes before they'd reach us.

'Look!' commanded the thin guy. He pressed against the back of the filing cabinet and somehow it opened behind him like a door. He disappeared through the opening, and the cabinet wall snapped back into position.

I stood staring again at an empty filing cabinet!

Astonished, I watched as the back of it opened up again and he reappeared. It was just like a secret door you'd see in movies!

'Don't just stand there! Come on through!'

I scrambled to my feet then did exactly as he had, pushing against the back panel. I felt it give behind me. I pushed backwards, squeezing through while the false cabinet wall snapped right back into position.

I was in another world! Behind the filing cabinet was a stone cellar and I looked around in wonder, trying to work out how the guy in the suit had done this. He must have replaced the original back wall of the filing cabinet with a spring-loaded version so that it opened backwards and then snapped shut again. Then he

Sure, I thought. Standing in a cupboard in full view—a great way to hide. He was nuts!

'Thanks again, for everything, but I've gotta go,' I called. I was about to start crawling towards the cover of the old buildings when I saw something that made me doubt my own sanity.

I blinked in disbelief.

The man in the suit disappeared into the filing cabinet! And I mean disappeared into it! Swallowed up! I swear one moment he was standing, squashed in there, next moment—gone!

I stared, trying to work out where he'd suddenly disappeared to when another police car, siren blaring, lights flashing, whizzed by on the road, just beyond the rusty wire fence. It was fast followed by another, and another. They'd sent out the cavalry and I knew who they were hunting.

If ever a guy needed to disappear into a filing cabinet this was the moment.

I ducked down as the wailing sirens tore through the air, and scurried like a crab towards the spot where my companion had vanished.

'Hey!' I called. 'Where are you? Where did you go?'

As I spoke, he suddenly reappeared, once more framed by the cabinet. It was like a magician's trick! Before I could work it out, a nearby

must have placed the refitted cabinet up against a pre-existing doorway so that it hid the entrance to the cellar in which I now found myself!

Yet, from outside, it just looked like one of three discarded pieces of office furniture quietly rusting away.

He extended a thin arm from his tattered, short jacket sleeve. ‘Welcome,’ he said with a lively handshake, ‘to the world of The Reprobate!’