

PROLOGUE

We rode to war in a taxi-cab. Dash found it in Fettle Lane, near the old greengrocer. We'd gone there looking for food. We were fierce hungry and would have taken anything on offer but the hostiles had got there first. The place was destroyed. The till was thrown through the front window, the shelves were ripped off the walls. Our feet crunched on glass, and everything reeked of smoke from someone lighting a fire in the back room.

They'd stripped it bare before they'd done the damage—not a tin of beans, not a bottle of water, not a crust of bread. We were scrabbling around in the rubble when Dash yelled and we all charged outside.

The cab was one of those big black hulks—beetles, we called them. This one had a smashed back window, a



door torn off, blood spattered across the windscreen and a broken fuel cell: dead, by the looks of it. Bad news for us, because without wheels we were stuck in the city, easy prey for the hostiles. So Dash and Jono had this argument about whether the fuel cell was fixable and I said couldn't they just try for half an hour and see? And, surprise, Dash stuck her head under the bonnet and fixed it in twenty minutes flat, while Jono muttered and shrugged and the rest of us watched up and down the lane and chewed our fingernails.

When Dash yelled 'Done!' we all piled in and took to the road. We didn't think we were riding to war, of course. Who in their right mind goes to war with an eight-year-old kid in tow? No. We thought we were getting out.



CHAPTER 01

Two weeks earlier...

ISIS came recruiting on Victory Day. Two agents from the Internal Security and Intelligence Services were standing in the shadows at the back of the chapel when we all trooped in for morning prayer. The sun was barely up and we were fasting, but for once we weren't grumbling. You didn't grumble when ISIS came to call.

We passed these agents, a man and a woman, on the way in. Tall. Fit as. Head to toe in black. And sharp, from their razored hair to their battle boots. Alike as peas in a pod, as bullets in a belt.

We were craning our necks to look at them and whispering to each other, and Dr Stapleton had to rap on the lectern (which meant trouble down the line) to launch us into the city anthem: 'God bless these ancient city walls and all who dwell herein...'

God hadn't been doing a great job of it recently, and ISIS had to make up for that. So here they were at school, Tornmoor Academy, recruiting for their labs and their surveillance ops: they wanted smart, so every year they checked out the top senior grades in physics, mathematics and computing, and in scripture study because they wanted dedicated too. This year we were it, the senior year, ISIS agents-in-waiting.

Dr Stapleton read out the Victory Day message from the General. It was the same message every year: *Never forget, never forgive. The invasion of our city will be repelled. The massacre of our people will be avenged. We will not rest until Southside is reclaimed.* And the punchline: *Remember, always, God Is On Our Side. Victory Is In Sight.*

I don't think anyone actually believed the victory being in sight bit anymore. Not when the latest news upriver was of five brave, stupid church workers who'd ventured over the river into Southside to bring aid or something to the heathens, and who now swung from Westwall Bridge, turning slowly above the water. We'd seen the grainy pictures in the *City News*. We'd listened to broadcasts of attempts to retrieve the bodies and heard the hail of sniper fire that greeted rescuers every time. Meanwhile, downriver, hostiles had hacked into the flood protection system just in time for a storm surge to meet a high autumn tide and drown Morstone Flats. Hundreds killed, they said. Thousands homeless.

So, no. No one believed that victory was at hand.

Stapleton droned to a halt and Dash was called up to read something from Scripture about battles and bloody vengeance. I wondered what the agents saw when they looked at her. An ideal recruit for sure: tall and sporty, she'd take you on at anything and play hard; blue-black eyes with a seriously sharp brain behind them; thick fair hair clipped close; a way of standing with her neck and shoulders held straight and fine; and this way of lifting her chin when she was on shaky or dearly held ground. Which is what she did as she finished the Scripture reading, as if to say, *Go on, disagree—I dare you*. But I couldn't, because I hadn't heard a word of it.

Dash and I had battled each other for top spot in our year all the way up from junior school. She beat me at applied physics and engineering—she could take anything apart and put it back together better than it was before. I beat her at mathematics and programming. Mostly it was a close-run thing either way. Which meant everyone expected us to be together. And we were. Which was also fine.

We prayed some more. We sang. But mostly we thought about being chosen for ISIS, because that was the prize we'd worked for from day one. Those who missed out would be sent for compulsory service in the army, the factories or the farms—a grim, boring slog, and long. If you didn't have family to find you a different job, or claim

they needed you at home, you could be stuck for years.

But the chosen ones were in for the ride of their lives. ISIS was the brains behind the war. Its agents worked in hi-tech, often high-risk, operations in surveillance, cryptography and forensics dedicated to outwitting and defeating the hostiles. What better way to avenge the people we were now about to honour.

The thirty students chosen this year to commemorate their murdered loved ones were stepping forward under Stapleton's ferret eye. Everyone was on extreme best behaviour now, standing straight and serious and repeating the response after each name: *We will remember them. God bless the city.* In twelve years at Tornmoor I'd never once been up there to speak my parents' names. They'd been killed in a bomb blast when I was a little kid. Not being chosen year after year didn't bother me, and, to be honest, I didn't remember their first names, exactly, which was why, maybe, I'd never been chosen. But *Stais, Mr and Mrs*, that would have been okay.

We filed out of the chapel's dark, ancient spaces into the bright auditorium where Dr Gorton was practically having a seizure trying to get us organised. He scurried up and down the stairs beside our rows, muttering and gibbering, 'Are we ready? Are We Ready?' He stopped beside Lou, who'd unwisely picked an aisle seat. 'Hendry! Is that gum? You are chewing gum. Few are called,

Hendry. Fewer are chosen. You will never be one of them. Get Rid Of It.' Slap, slap, slap on the back of Lou's pricey haircut. Lou ducked, winked at me and grinned. He had no intention of being chosen for anything other than an easy life in the soft bed of family trust funds and parental doting. But I was a scholarship kid. A few brain cells were all that lay between two futures for me: working with the most brilliant minds around to win the war, and being sent upriver to batter hostiles into submission with a life expectancy I wouldn't like to speculate about. This was my chance. I intended to grab it.

'Senior Year, stand!' said Gorton. 'And forward!' Forty of us marched down to the floor of the auditorium.

Stapleton, who was having a good day, front and centre in everything, gave his annual lecture about what a great moment this was. He wittered on for so long that when the ISIS guy finally had his chance at the podium he didn't bother with introductions or niceties, he just cut straight to it.

'Make no mistake about why I am here. We are in a fight for our lives, against an enemy with no soul. Everything your parents and grandparents built in this city, everything they fought for, is at stake. This enemy craves our land, our homes, our livelihoods, our way of life. They crave our annihilation. Those of you chosen today will join the fight: together we will drive them into the desert. It will be challenging, even for the best of you. You will be

expected to give everything of yourselves, and more. But have no doubt: we will win this war.'

He flicked on his notebook. The Tornmoor senior year held its collective breath.

'When your name is called, come forward. Form a line in front of the stage.

'Ashleigh Bannister, outstanding in physics and engineering.' Dash beamed at me and strode forward.

'Stephanie Domaine, outstanding in organic chemistry, applied mathematics and scripture.

'Christof Freklin, outstanding in genetics and scripture.'

And on he went: Steve, Alistair, Jono (which drew an audible but unrepeatable crack from Lou), Ellis, Gaby (nods of approval all round), Mark, Jenna.

'That's all. God bless the city.'

That's all. My brain jammed on *all*. That couldn't be all. He was supposed to say, *Nikolai Stais, outstanding in...* I didn't care what, as long as he said my name. But instead he was nodding to Gorton and Stapleton. He was clicking off his notebook. He was saying something to his new charges. I couldn't hear what because my heart was pounding in my ears. Then he was walking towards the door and my classmates were marching behind him, already squaring their shoulders and walking taller. Some of them turned around to look at me, but the female agent said something and they turned away and then they

were gone. The door slid shut with me standing on the wrong, wrong side of it.

Lou was saying, 'No, hell no! That can't be right.'

Gorton said, 'Hendry, be quiet. Stais, sit down.' Everyone else was heading back to their seats and I was still standing, gawping at the door.

'But what about Nik?' said Lou, loud enough for the entire auditorium to hear.

'You heard me,' said Gorton. 'Be quiet! Stais! Don't make me tell you again.'

And that was that. A key moment, maybe *the* key moment in my life, gone. You can't apply for ISIS. They choose you. Or not. I went back to my seat, heart still pounding. The whole auditorium had got too bright and hot. Lou was muttering furiously beside me but I didn't hear a word.

People steered clear of me for the rest of the day, the way they do when you're deep in it and no one knows what to say. Or maybe they do know what to say but they don't want to say it when you're around to hear.

We all landed back together in the dining hall that night: Lou and Bella, Fyffe and Jono, Dash and me. The lock-down siren had sounded so we were on generator power. The hall was the same vintage as the chapel, and gen-power made the place feel like a draughty old warehouse, all dark corners and dusty stores where the walls

were lined with portraits in thick cracked paint, forgotten by their owners. The gargoyles grinned and screamed silently from up in the gloom. Everyone's face was shadowed, everyone's voice muted, as though turning down the lights turned down the volume as well. But at least gen-power made it hard to see what we were eating.

Dash was bright and buzzy, but trying not to show it. Jono just sat, pleased with himself and the world, and didn't say shit. Fyffe pushed her bowl of stew away and tried to change the unspoken subject. 'That's *so* disgusting! Whatever happened to real bread and butter? And roast potatoes, remember roast potatoes?' She looked around at us but she got nothing—just some nodding and mumbling. She crushed her cracker and pushed a finger through the crumbs.

We looked at the watery custard and pseudo-fruit something that was supposed to be dessert and everybody passed, except Jono, who'd eat anything that wasn't actually moving. Another silence arrived, so I said to Dash, 'When do you start, then?'

'Straightaway. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow!' Bella peered over her horn-rims. 'That's some hurry they're in.'

Dash nodded. 'Well, it's escalating isn't it. You heard the man. I know we're supposed to think the army's on top of it all, but ISIS knows the real score. They need everyone they can get.'

‘Yes they do.’ Lou looked around at everyone, but no one looked back. ‘So, if they’re desperate, why’d they pass on Nik?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ I said.

‘Sure it doesn’t.’

‘Maybe there’ll be a second round,’ said Fyffe. ‘You know. Later in the year.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Lou. ‘Because Nik really needs that chance to improve his grades, doesn’t he?’

Jono woke up. ‘Don’t take it out on Fy. It’s not her fault.’

‘It’s someone’s fault,’ said Lou.

Fyffe and Lou Hendry—and Sol, their little brother—were as close to family as I had. Their parents had a house out in the country: a huge place, sprawling like you wouldn’t believe, with about twenty-six bathrooms and a front lawn the size of a football field and you had to travel for about a day and a half just to get down the driveway. They were the Hendrys of Hendry fuel cell fame—wealth-on-wheels, literally, since their cells powered all our vehicles and more besides. We’d had a normal enough start, Lou and me: rich kid wants assignment done, tries to beat not-rich kid into doing it for him. That didn’t work, but bribery did. His hampers from home were mind-boggling, packed with chocolates and biscuits and fudge and apples and plums and you-name-it, turning up fresh and frequent every term. Fyffe arrived in school a year

later and was so primly shocked by this arrangement that she shamed Lou into inviting me home. I'd been going home with them for holidays ever since.

I pushed my chair back. 'I got work to do. I'll see you later.' I tried to smile at Dash, and escaped. Crowds parted for me like I was Moses walking the Red Sea. They closed behind me though, whispering, like crowds do. I lay on my bed and went over it again. I'd stayed behind in Gorton's class that afternoon, but he took one look at me and held up a hand. 'Don't ask, Stais. It's not for me to say.'

'But, sir...'

'What did I just say?'

'Did you know?'

'Did I know what?'

'That they wouldn't take me.'

'Of course not.'

But you know, Dr G, you're avoiding my eye. I don't believe you.