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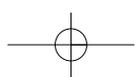
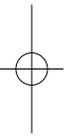
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Part One

The Hermes Project



1

Rachel

It was a Saturday afternoon in early July and I was looking forward to the highlight of my week – the hour or so when Theo and I met online and everything else dropped away.

I'd just been to a martial arts display at the old scout hall past the docks. Not the sort of thing that happens often in Roslinnon – or the sort of thing I go to on an average Saturday – but I'd really enjoyed the moves in the show, recognising quite a few of the basic techniques from the self-defence lessons I'd been having.

Most of the audience was male and much older than me. I'd caught a couple of guys staring at me during the interval and, what with that and the way the hall stank like the boys' changing room at school, it was a relief to be heading outside.

As I left the scout hall, I saw the two men who'd been staring at me earlier standing on the pavement. They were watching everybody leave. For a second I wondered if they

were looking for me . . . waiting for me. Then I shook myself – told myself not to be paranoid.

It was drizzling with rain, so I pulled my hood up and headed for the internet café on the high street where I was going to message Theo. Rather than walk past the two men, I decided to take a slightly longer way round – nothing major, just a couple of extra streets, but it would bring me out at the top of the high street: a busy road where I knew I'd feel safe.

As I started walking, the rain got heavier. I sighed.

When the British government and the FBI had picked the port town of Roslinnon in Scotland as the location for my new life, they obviously hadn't known it was officially the rainiest place in the British Isles – not to mention a rubbish place to be young. Or at least I hoped they hadn't. Sometimes it felt like I was being punished for who I was.

Who I *am*. A clone of my dead sister.

Theo's a clone too. That's why we'd been hidden away and given new identities. Because there were people determined to find us – and kill us.

I checked the time. Four forty-five p.m. I had quarter of an hour before I was due online and, even going the long way round, it was only going to take a few minutes to reach the internet café. I decided to shelter from the rain.

Huddled in a doorway, I felt for the silver chain round my neck. The chain's special . . . my way of feeling closer to

Theo. I thought about what I was going to tell him this week. It was nine months since we'd seen each other, and yet our online conversations were more real to me now than my everyday life. Nobody knew that I was still in touch with Theo – I hadn't told a single person: not the agent who was our contact under the government protection programme; not Mum and Dad; not even the counsellor I'd been given to help me 'adjust' to my new life.

The government officials all thought we'd be safer if we didn't make contact with each other. There's this organisation called RAGE – the Righteous Army against Genetic Engineering. They don't think genetic copies of human beings – clones – should be allowed to exist. They think they're immoral. *We're* immoral. Then there's Elijah – the man who cloned us. He reckons he 'owns' us – that he's entitled to do what he likes with us.

The threat was real, so Theo and I didn't take unnecessary risks when we talked. I mean, I didn't even know exactly where Theo lived and I never asked

Across the street I caught sight of a girl from school and waved. Mhairi's sort of a friend, though we're not really close. I'm not that close to anyone at Roslinnon Academy, to be honest. It's better that way . . . you never know who you can trust.

Mhairi waved back at me, then pointed to the pale, anxious, plump woman beside her and made a face.

I nodded to show I understood. Mhairi's mum was a total nightmare . . . nearly as bad as mine. Still, at least Mhairi

didn't have to put up with her mum berating her for not wanting to learn golf, or going on and on about how common everyone in Roslinnon was.

Emerging from my shelter, I walked on. I didn't know this area of town that well but from what people said it was kind of rough. The rain was pounding down now – and this was July. It was supposed to be summer! I tugged my hood further round my face and bent my head. The pavement was a dirty grey – shining in the rain.

I trudged into an alley, trying to avoid the puddles. Suddenly a large pair of Timberland boots appeared in front of me. I looked up. One of the men who'd been staring at me during the martial arts show – early twenties, with close-cropped red hair and a smashed-in nose – was blocking my way out of the alley.

'Hello, hen,' he said, a nasty smile creeping around his mouth.

'Hi.' I tried to step past him, but he put out his arm. My throat tightened.

'I saw you at the martial arts display just now,' he said. 'I was impressed. There's not many pretty girls go places like that, eh?'

Heart beating fast, I turned away.

The other man from the show, the one with dark, shaggy hair, was right behind me.

I was trapped in the alley.

'Hey, McRae,' the dark-haired guy sniggered. 'Shall we see if this wee girl is up for some action?'

‘Get lost,’ I said, but I could feel myself beginning to shake.

Both men moved closer. I clenched my fists and pressed my feet into the ground, breathing deep into my guts to calm myself, like Lewis had taught me when we were preparing to rescue Theo last year.

‘Come on now, hen,’ the dark-haired guy cooed in a silly voice. ‘We just want you to show us what you’ve got.’

The first man – McRae – laughed. ‘Aye.’ He reached out for my arm, pulling me round to face him.

Something snapped inside me.

‘Piss off.’ I stared at McRae – right into his mean little eyes – then strode past him.

He grabbed me. Pulled me back.

I fisted my hand and punched, putting my whole weight behind the throw. The blow landed on McRae’s shoulder, sending him reeling, doubled over with pain and shock.

I glared at the other man. His mouth fell open. I turned and sped away, out of the alley. I raced on, going over the route to the high street in my head. Left. Left. Then a long stretch before the right turn onto the high street. I’d come out further up from the internet café than I’d been planning – but who cared.

The sound of pounding feet echoed behind me. I glanced over my shoulder.

Damn. The two men were hot on my tail – vicious looks on their faces.

I ran faster. Took my two left turns. I was holding them off – but not getting away.

Almost at the high street now, I pushed myself on. The men were so close behind me I could hear them breathing as they ran. For a sick second I wondered if they were RAGE operatives, sent after me on purpose.

I darted down one final short road, then onto the high street. I raced into the first shop I came to – a charity clothes place. I ducked behind a large rail of overcoats. They smelled of dead men's sweat.

I glanced over the top of the rail. The two men had stopped outside the shop but they weren't looking inside. They were laughing, like hassling me had been the best game ever.

Figs.

As I watched, they sauntered off, swaggering down the street like they owned it. I shook my head. Well, at least they were just stupid men, not people from RAGE.

It was a few minutes to five now . . . nearly time to speak to Theo. The internet café was just up the road. I moved away from the rail of overcoats, tugged my hood off my face and headed towards the door. Outside, a boy in a wheelchair propelled himself past the window.

I froze.

The boy was olive-skinned with short, dark hair and a square jaw. He looked older than I remembered him, but otherwise it was the same face I'd been remembering and seeing in my dreams for the last nine months.

No way.

It *couldn't* be him.



What was he doing here? What was he doing in a wheelchair?

I stared as the boy wheeled himself along the street. I knew that profile as well as I knew my own.

It was Theo.

