

Ursula Poznanski

# Layers

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## Chapter 1

He was still half asleep, but he sensed quite clearly that the air he could feel on his face was not the wind. Too warm, too foul-smelling.

Breath.

Dorian banished the last remnants of the dream he'd been having, rolled over and opened his eyes. Before he could make out who it was that was bending over him, he felt a hand grab him by the hair.

"Give me the rucksack."

It was Emil. Shit. His usual patch was over by the old phone booths, the warmest spot in the whole subway. Dorian had deliberately avoided that corner and bedded down in the alcove between the bakery and the escalator, but Emil had still found him.

"There's hardly anything in my rucksack. Just a bottle of water and a jumper. No money."

Emil pulled the bag out from under Dorian's head so fast he almost banged his head on the hard concrete. "I'll see for myself." He pulled out the jumper and tossed it carelessly aside. That was no surprise – there was no way it would have fitted him with that beer belly of his. Next the half-full plastic bottle went rolling across the floor, and then Emil tipped the rucksack upside down. A few cent coins fell out, and a hat, and Dorian's pocket knife.

"Well well well!" Grinning, Emil pocketed the knife, and with his other hand grabbed Dorian by the collar. "Empty your pockets."

"No way." Dorian was fully awake now and he wasn't going to take the loss of his pocket knife lying down. It was the only tool he possessed and it had a tin opener on it, which he couldn't do without. "Give me my knife back and I'll bring you something to drink tonight." That, surely, was an offer Emil couldn't refuse. Every time he opened his mouth you could still smell the red wine he must have knocked back yesterday. Red wine, onions and unbrushed teeth.

But Emil laughed and shook his head so that his greasy, chin-length hair flew out around his face. "Forget it." He pulled Dorian to his feet. His hand rooted around in the left back pocket of Dorian's jeans and emerged with a crumpled five euro note.

"Aha. No money, eh?" He gave Dorian a shove to the chest that sent him stumbling against the nearest wall.

But Dorian was awake now, and anger flared up inside him at this fat, stinking bastard who'd overpowered him in his sleep. It took all his self-control not to let it show. Without looking at Emil, he stuffed his blanket and bottle of water back into his rucksack and put it on his back. Only then did he square up to his opponent. Two of Emil's friends had joined them by this time, grinning as they watched the drama play out. *What the hell*, thought Dorian.

"I want my knife back. And my money."

For a moment Emil looked taken aback, then he laughed and slapped his thigh. "You better piss off, you little bastard, before I take the rest of your shit off you and shove it up your –"

That was as far as he got. Dorian had launched himself at him, knocking him off balance so that he fell to the ground. He planted a knee on Emil's chest and rested his entire weight on it.

That hurt, as he knew from experience.

"Are you..." Emil gasped for breath, unable to get another word out. He didn't even put up a fight as Dorian retrieved his knife and the five euro note. Emil had more money in his pockets, but Dorian didn't touch that. So far he'd managed to get by without stealing. He didn't intend to start now.

Laughter in the background. Emil's mates clearly had no intention of rushing to their friend's aid.

"You're going to regret this," grunted Emil as soon as he could breathe again. "You have no idea how much you're going to regret this."

The mere thought of having had physical contact with Emil suddenly disgusted Dorian so deeply that he wanted to shake himself like a dog. He did not reply but headed for the exit, keen to swap the wan light of the neon lamps for the first grey of the new morning.

His third supermarket of the day. Dorian walked round the outside of the building unhurriedly, hands buried deep in his trouser pockets. A keen wind swept around the corner. No doubt about it, it was getting colder every day – he was going to have to get himself a decent jacket from somewhere.

There were the rubbish bins. He glanced over his shoulder before opening the first one. There was nobody watching.

And nothing to eat either, unfortunately. The smell that greeted him as he opened the bin was disgusting. He let the lid fall shut and turned to the next one.

Fruit. Overripe bananas and bruised apples. He reached for the nicest-looking ones and stowed them in his rucksack. Which, upon closer inspection, was in urgent need of another wash. Dorian had made it one of his top priorities to appear clean at all times – even if you lived on the street, he thought, you shouldn't make it obvious that you did. As long as people saw him as a normal teenager they wouldn't make life difficult for him.

And he wouldn't get thrown out of places.

He sauntered up to the sliding glass doors of the supermarket close behind a woman and her whining child, who was trying in vain to wriggle free of her hand. His goal was the deli counter. The plates of free samples, to be precise.

A new kind of salami, rolled up and skewered on cocktail sticks, and the cubes of Gouda a few feet further on. Dorian never took more than two or three free samples – rule number one was not to draw attention to himself. It felt good to be inconspicuous.

Despite his caution, however, one of the shop assistants behind the counter addressed him. “Nice, isn't it? Would you like me to wrap some up for you?”

He shook his head. “No thanks. But I'll definitely recommend it to my mum.” Winning smile. *My dead mum.*

The shop assistant smiled back, cut a slice of ham from the joint in the sausage slicer and handed it to him across the counter.

“Try this one – it's got rosemary in. Another one for your mum, maybe?”

Dorian tasted the ham, raised his eyebrows appreciatively and bid the shop assistant goodbye.

He'd better avoid this supermarket for the next few weeks – he didn't want to be recognised. He didn't want anyone asking him questions. Or starting to wonder who this teenager was who always just wandered around the shop without buying anything.

He had enough supplies for today, anyway. Some fruit, three stale pastries, a dented tin of pre-cooked goulash. Which he'd have to eat cold, but what the hell.

It was just after ten o' clock. Dorian set off for the town park, which was about half an hour away. Half an hour of something to do, at least. He'd find somewhere to sit down in his favourite spot by the duck pond, and then...

Then the day would start to feel long. Like every other day he spent on the street. With no purpose, and no familiar faces. Everyone complained about having too little time, but it was far worse to feel like you were

drowning in an excess of time. Dorian knew that now. Time felt never-ending when you had nothing to do.

It would have been easier if he'd had a goal to work towards. But the only thing he really wanted was never to have to see his father again. That would be something, if he could manage it. Everything else seemed out of reach at the moment. Qualifications, a roof over his head – to get those he'd have had to go back. And he would rather drown himself in the duck pond than do that.

The park bench by the old chestnut tree was empty, and warm from the sun. Dorian sat down and closed his eyes.

The thought of having to spend the coming night anywhere near Emil was far from appealing. But the corners of the other underground stations offered a lot less protection. And the company was even worse: junkies, thugs, gangs of youths. Compared to them, Emil was a pleasant companion – at least he wasn't the type to drive a butterfly knife into your stomach.

Or was it time for another night in the emergency shelter? The idea was tempting: a proper shower at last, instead of makeshift washes in the sinks of public toilets. But you weren't allowed to stay there more than five nights a month and Dorian thought it was more sensible to save up those nights for when it was really rainy and windy.

Perhaps it was time to try another city. He didn't have enough money for a train or coach ticket and he wouldn't beg unless it was absolutely necessary – but perhaps he could hitchhike?

He rubbed his face with both hands until his skin felt hot. No. What he needed wasn't a new city but a new goal. Something to work towards. He'd only just turned seventeen and he was well on his way to a career as a homeless man. He had wanted to be a lawyer. His grades had been good, for God's sake, and under normal circumstances he would never have left school.

Was it possible to go to school if you were of no fixed abode?

Perhaps. But not without money – if only for textbooks, exercise books, stationery. He'd have to see if he could get some support. From the state or a charity or something. Anyone. As long as it wasn't his father.

He – his father – must have reported Dorian missing shortly after he'd disappeared, because a social worker at the emergency shelter had recognised him and offered to take him home. After Dorian had refused several times the social worker had left him in peace.

Dorian stayed in the park for a good five hours. Fished newspapers and magazines out of bins and read them from cover to cover. Yearned to read a book again, any book. But nobody ever threw books away.

Not until a thick layer of pale grey cloud obscured the sun and a cold wind ruffled the surface of the duck pond did Dorian get up from his bench. If it did rain, he decided, he'd spend the night in the emergency shelter.

In the meantime he trawled the clothing banks in the surrounding area. The flaps on the containers made it impossible to get at what was inside, but when they were full people tended to just leave stuff on the ground next to them rather than take it all home again. And the sooner Dorian could get his hands on a winter coat the better.

But his search was fruitless. Only one of the containers had bags next to it – two drawstring bin bags both full of Babygros and little pink dresses in nursery school sizes. Nothing remotely useful.

He wandered through the pedestrian zone as dusk fell, waiting for the street lamps to flicker into life. Soon the weather would turn colder, windier, more autumnal. Dorian couldn't even imagine what he was going to do when the first snow fell. He looked down at his trainers. It was time to find a solution.

The weather stayed dry and Dorian sighed inwardly as he relinquished the comforting prospect of a night in the emergency shelter. Maybe tomorrow. For tonight he'd stick with the same underground station as last night, but find himself a different spot. A few times he'd slept near the exit that led to the park – it was draughty there, but at least that meant guys like Emil usually kept their distance.

Dorian waited till it was nearly eleven o' clock – by that time the crowds of people streaming through the station had usually thinned out, at least on a normal weekday like today.

*Not long now*, he told himself, inspecting the floor for remnants of chewing gum or worse. This 'alcove' could scarcely be described as such, but at least he'd have a wall behind him as he slept and two pillars in front, which would go some way towards shielding him from view.

And the night wind as a companion. It was already blowing dry leaves from the park into the subway. Dorian put on his extra jumper and wrapped himself in his blanket. He kept the knife in his hand this time, just in case.

With nothing inside it but the water bottle the rucksack made a pretty meagre pillow, but what the hell. He'd be able to get a few hours' sleep, dog-tired as he was.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds filling the underground tunnels. Clacking footsteps. Shuffling footsteps. Male and female voices mingled in laughter. The hum of the ventilation system... and through it all, the wind.

Dorian hadn't realised he'd fallen asleep but he was very aware of something having woken him up: a headache, stretching from one temple to the other, and somebody touching his chin.

No – not somebody. Something. The floor was getting wet. Had it started raining after all?

Groggily, he put a hand to his face to wipe the water off. Only it wasn't water.

Too warm.

Too sticky.

And the smell...

His eyes opened slowly, as if against his will. Saw something red trickling towards them in the pallid glow of the neon lamps.

Dorian's body reacted before his mind had fully grasped that the liquid running towards him was blood. He recoiled, making his head ache twice as hard, and scrambled to his feet, heart hammering.

Blood. And beyond it, a shadow – a body, lying twisted on the ground, barely two feet away from Dorian.

Emil? Was that Emil?

It was his ugly patterned cardigan, at any rate, and it was his chin-length hair stirring in the wind.

Frantically, almost panic-stricken, Dorian wiped his sleeve across his face where it had got... wet. Everything in him was crying out to get away, to run, and fast, but the moment he stood up he felt so dizzy he had to steady himself with one hand on the nearest pillar. And whoever had done this to Emil might still be nearby. Just around the corner, perhaps, by the escalator.

The ground swayed, and through the roaring in his ears Dorian heard what sounded like a voice, but he barely noticed it because he had caught sight of something that commanded all his attention. It was lying there in the middle of all that wet redness and it looked terrifyingly familiar.

His pocket knife, the blade flipped open.

But... it made no sense! Dorian breathed deeply, trying to quell his ever-increasing nausea. He was unable to piece together what could have happened. He'd been sound asleep.

*Yes – with the knife in his hand.*

Slowly, reluctantly, he approached Emil, who was lying face down in front of him. He might still be breathing. If he was, Dorian would fetch help as fast as he could.

As soon as he could.

His head throbbed painfully to the beat of his racing heart.

The lake of blood seemed to have come from a wound on Emil's neck, but Dorian would have had to turn him over to be sure. The mere thought of it constricted his throat so that he could hardly breathe.

No – he would go to the nearest police station, crawl there if necessary. Although... he'd better retrieve his knife from the pool of blood first. And throw it away somewhere.

But he felt as though he'd turned to stone. He couldn't move, no matter how hard he tried – like in one of those dreams where your body suddenly stops doing what you want it to.

And then a long dark shadow fell across Emil and the pool of blood.

At last Dorian's body responded – he managed to turn his head, expecting to see either the killer or someone from the police. *It would have been better, much better, he thought, to have called them myself instead of being caught like this...*

Standing behind him, however, was not a policeman but a young man with dark hair, hands clapped to his mouth, staring wide-eyed at Emil.

*Last chance, thought Dorian. Run away, quick, and hope the guy didn't see your face.* But again, his body refused to cooperate. After two steps Dorian was forced to stop and rest his hands on his knees to keep himself from toppling over.

"It was self-defence." The man's voice trembled a little, but not overly. "I saw him attack you just now and I ran to get help, but there was nobody there and I'd left my phone in the car –" He ran a hand through his hair and his eyes slid from Emil to Dorian. "I didn't see how it happened, but I'm sure it was self-defence."

"No." Dorian started to shake his head, but the first movement almost brought tears of pain to his eyes. "I didn't do anything. I was just asleep, and when I woke up..."

The stranger gave an understanding smile. "Are you on drugs?"

"Me? No! I've never taken drugs."

"But you drink?"

"No." What was all this about? Ah, of course – the man wanted to keep him talking till the police got there. Dorian took three steps backwards. He

was going to run now, even if it made his head explode – but the man lifted his hand in a way that made him pause once more.

“Wait,” he said quietly. “I might be able to help you, you know. I’m not here purely by coincidence – I work for an organisation that takes in young homeless people and...”

The world swam before Dorian’s eyes – he felt his knees give way, and somebody grabbed him under the armpits.

“Might he have hit you in the head, do you think? Do you feel sick? You’ve probably got concussion.”

That sounded plausible. But Dorian didn’t remember a fight. All he’d done was lay down to sleep in this alcove. He was sure of it, completely sure.

“You want to help me?” he said, with an effort. “Hide me?” Over the last few months mistrust had become one of his dominant characteristics. Why was this guy still standing here? Any other passer-by would long since have rushed off to report Dorian for murder.

If the man really was a social worker or something, he’d probably try and get Dorian to turn himself in of his own volition. *And I would, if I could be sure I’d actually done it.*

“You don’t have to trust me,” said the stranger, his face deeply earnest. “But I can tell you that we will take care of you. In our organisation we almost all know what it’s like to have to live on the streets. Many remember nights when they suddenly found themselves with a knife or a shard of glass pressed to their throats. Till they coughed up everything they’d managed to scrape together begging.”

Dorian’s headache was making it incredibly difficult to think. “I can’t just go,” whispered Dorian, “and leave Emil lying here. He might...”

“He might still be alive, you mean?” The young man sighed deeply. “I’m afraid there’s no point deluding ourselves. Look how much blood there is. I’m happy to go with you to the police, but first perhaps you should try and remember what happened.” His eyes flicked sideways. “Otherwise the odds will be stacked against you. In court, as well.”

A noise interrupted their conversation. Until now the subway had been deserted but now footsteps could be heard a little way away, echoing off the walls. Coming closer.

Dorian made his decision. He overcame his pain and nausea, bent down – almost blacking out again as he did so – and picked the pocket knife out of the pool of blood with his fingertips. “Fine. I’ll come with you. To the police or wherever, I don’t care. But will you tell me your name first?”

This time the man smiled so warmly that his eyes crinkled up at the corners. "Of course. My name is Nicolas Korte, but at Bornheim's villa everyone calls me Nico."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 4

Before he even set foot in the room, Dorian knew what was about to happen. He was going to meet Bornheim, the man who owned the villa and gave homeless young people a place to live.

The idea of coming face to face with Bornheim after having heard so much about him made Dorian nervous. He was keen to make a good impression. After this interview he would be allocated a colour, after all. And if that colour was black, then...

He slowly pushed open the door and found himself in an office the size of a ballroom. It was a good twenty metres from where he stood to the enormous desk by the window. The man sitting behind it could be seen only in silhouette against the light. Tall, thin, very straight shoulders.

He stood up and beckoned Dorian closer. Shook his hand and motioned to the leather chair across the desk from him. "Welcome. I'm Raoul Bornheim, and I'm very glad you're one of us now. Please, take a seat."

Dorian silently obeyed, studying Bornheim's face as discreetly as he could. He looked to be in his mid-fifties. Friendly eyes. Light-grey hair. Light-grey beard and moustache.

*I'm very glad you're one of us now.* The words echoed in Dorian's head. They made it sound like he'd joined a club. Was that a good sign? Did it mean Bornheim was going to let him stay at the villa? In spite of Emil? In spite of everything?

Dorian assumed he knew all about what had happened. Nico must have told his boss the full story.

"I hope you like it here. You haven't been with us very long but I imagine you've seen enough to get a first impression."

Dorian cleared his throat. He mustn't sound uncertain, and definitely not guilty. "Of course I like it here. Very much, in fact. I haven't been this happy in a long time."

“I’m glad.” Bornheim rested his elbows on the table and steeped his fingers under his chin. “I hope you are making the most of the opportunities on offer here. That is extremely important to me. I have invested a great deal of time and planning in this institute, because I believe that you all have the potential to achieve anything you want. You are all young and intelligent – otherwise you would have turned either to alcohol or to drugs out there on the streets.”

He paused, head tilted slightly to one side. He was obviously waiting for Dorian to say something.

“I really am grateful for this opportunity.” The words were out before he’d had chance to analyse them. Did they sound smarmy? He hoped not. “I’ll definitely make the most of it. To the best of my ability.”

“I’m sure you will.” Bornheim was smiling now. “You will learn a lot here. I think you show great promise. If I’m right, and if you are willing, there are all sorts of things you could do later on. You might go on to work in one of my companies, for example, if I think you have the right skills for the job. Nico, for example – you’ve met him already...”

Dorian nodded hesitantly. Was Bornheim about to bring up what had happened to Emil?

“I brought Nico in off the streets too – he was one of the first. He was younger than you are now and pretty difficult to tame. Looking at him today it’s hard to believe. He speaks four languages, he’s technologically gifted, and he will probably be my successor one day.”

He leant forward slightly. “All of those opportunities are open to you too. If you don’t disappoint me. I like to employ people I know well, with all their strengths and weaknesses.”

There was a warmth in Bornheim’s voice that made Dorian relax, almost instinctively. He leant back in his chair and wondered whether he should bring up Emil’s murder himself. As proof of his honesty.

No. Not now. If Bornheim wanted to know more, he would ask him.

“Our community is something special,” Bornheim continued. “Everybody here knows what it means to have nothing, or even less than nothing. As long as you are here you will never want for food, clothes or warmth. And all we ask in return is that you do your best. Decide what you want out of life.” He paused for a moment. “And do your bit. We have big plans, and we need each and every person here to pull together.”

Dorian hadn’t expected Bornheim to place a hand on his, and when it happened his first instinct was to pull away, but he thought that would be impolite and left his hand where it was. Especially since Bornheim’s touch

didn't have any weird connotations. Instead it seemed to signify that Dorian really was part of the community now. And there was something fatherly about the gesture, too. Something Dorian had often longed to feel from somebody else. What Bornheim said next made that impression even stronger.

"I trust you, though I know you might find that difficult to believe. Nico has spoken to me about you – he told me what happened to you. You don't need to worry. You're safe here."

*What happened to me?* He couldn't help it. The urge to set the record straight could be suppressed no longer. "To be honest, I don't know what happened," said Dorian, his hand still clasped in Bornheim's. "But I think you should know that I may have ki–"

"Your openness does you credit," Bornheim cut in. "I hope you never lose it. And I completely understand that you can't yet let go of what happened, even though it probably wasn't your fault." He looked thoughtfully at Dorian. "Still, we'll dye your hair before you go out with the others. Just to be on the safe side – in case anyone has given the police a description of you." He squeezed Dorian's hand again, then let it go. "Do you have any other questions? Any worries I can set your mind at ease about?"

"I don't know." Dorian lowered his gaze, staring at the table top. Should he say something about the colours? Ask not to be one of the ones in black? If they even existed – Melvin himself hadn't been sure that they did.

"OK." Bornheim picked up a pen and made a few quick notes on the pad beside him. "You're bound to have some questions in the not-too-distant future. And I guarantee you won't always understand everything that goes on here, and sometimes that's for the best. If you do have any questions, come to me or Nico. I can't promise you you'll always get an answer, but we won't lie to you. And if you go out walking, please stay close to the villa."

"Yes. Thank you." God, he sounded feeble. He was never normally at such a loss for words. "I'd just like to say again how happy I am to be here. And that I will try my best. With everything." Brilliant. Now he not only sounded like an arse-licker, but a mentally deficient arse-licker to boot.

This didn't seem to bother Bornheim in the slightest. "Good attitude. I'm a businessman, you know? I appreciate it when the people around me work hard. I have no worries on that score where you're concerned. You're articulate, you conduct yourself well – you're already halfway there."

Dorian gave what he hoped was a confident smile. Tried to add something to the conversation that went beyond *Yes, thank you* and *I don't know*. "I've always wanted to be a lawyer."

Bornheim raised his eyebrows approvingly. “Well, that sounds like an excellent plan. Ambitious. I like that. One of the most important professions, if you choose to dedicate yourself to helping the less fortunate.” He nodded and stood up. “I suggest you rest for another week. Then you’ll be glad to get back out there again. The streets are a much nicer place when you know you’ve got somewhere warm to come back to.”

At the door Dorian was again met by the pale boy, whose name turned out to be Jasper and who was about to accompany him back to the classroom when Dorian paused briefly by the stairs.

“I’ll be back in a minute, OK? I just have to nip back to my room quickly.”

He ran along the corridor, already feeling for the key in his trouser pocket. First the bedroom door. Then the wardrobe door.

Five T-shirts, three polo shirts, three sweatshirts. Neatly folded and laid edge to edge. All the same vivid shade of green.

The most beautiful colour he could ever have imagined. Everything was OK, and for the first time in years Dorian was completely happy with his situation. He wasn’t being sent away to join the special cases, the former delinquents and drug addicts: he was going to be allowed to stay in the villa, he was going to see Stella again, and Bornheim – if he was to be believed – was going to hide him from the police. It was all so much better than he’d feared... apart from the moments when Emil intruded on his thoughts. For Emil nothing would ever be better again.

He got changed before lunch, happy to think that at last he would no longer be only person in the dining room wearing grey.

When Stella arrived after dark and sat down next to him again, Dorian felt so invincible that he put his arm around her. This time he’d be able to take it if she pushed him away. If she turned her back on him. Went and sat somewhere else.

But she didn’t. Far from it.

## Chapter 12

“His name is Philipp Regener and this is what he looks like.”

Dorian took the photo. A dark-haired man in his mid-thirties, with a narrow face and close-set eyes.

“Do exactly what you did before. But if anything, be even more careful this time. He can be a bit prickly.” Again Bertold handed Dorian a small box. “We’ll meet over there in the shopping centre car park. Wait on the first level underground by the pay and display machine, OK?”

“Yes.” Dorian noted with relief that his reply hadn’t sounded as grudging as he’d feared. These handover jobs were stressful, and each was awkward in its own way. The more he thought about it, the more he agreed with Nico: everything would be simpler if he at least knew what it was he was delivering. On the other hand, Stella had been right: it was pretty cheeky to start making demands considering what an easy life Dorian had led the past few weeks. And by and large the job was harmless.

It was windy that day. Dorian pulled his red coat tighter over the top of his jacket as he crossed the road and approached the address he’d been given. This time it was a large office building, the headquarters of a mobile phone company.

Dorian marched straight inside and past the concierge, expecting the man to stop him. It had to happen one of these days. But he was on the phone and didn’t even look up.

As if fate was trying to make things particularly easy for him, Dorian even found a placard by the lift showing what was located on each floor. The executive offices, for example, were on Floor 12.

Thus far he’d never had to deliver anything to a subordinate, only to people at management level, people in high-up positions. So the twelfth floor sounded like exactly what he was looking for.

While he waited for the lift to come Dorian looked around. He thought again how lucky he was that the entrance to the building wasn’t more strictly monitored. The only person here was the concierge on the phone.

As if the thought had jinxed his luck, Dorian promptly encountered an unexpected obstacle: the lift would only go up if you held a company ID card against a reader inside it.

He pondered. Twelve floors was a lot, but it was manageable. Rather than stand around here for ages until he did end up drawing attention to himself, he decided to try the stairs.

By the time he reached the eighth floor Dorian already felt like stopping for a rest, but he also wanted to get this thing over and done with as quickly as possible. He brushed aside the thought that the climb would all have been for nothing if Regener happened to be out of the office.

No. It would work out. It always had before.

When he reached the twelfth floor he paused for a moment before stepping out of the stairwell and into the office corridors. He pulled open the heavy door and turned left. Then he walked to the end of the corridor and turned right, checking the name plates on each of the doors. So far, a systematic approach had always been the best strategy.

There was somebody coming towards him. That wasn't unusual, but this time it presented Dorian with an unforeseen difficulty. The man striding hurriedly towards him was Philipp Regener. No doubt about it.

Dorian didn't have much time to think. He would either have to avoid Regener or intercept him. But for the job he had to do, only one of those two options was open to him – and it was by far the less appealing one. What the hell. At least this way Dorian could get it over and done with quickly.

He stepped out in front of the man and proffered him the box, arms outstretched.

“This is the second delivery.”

Regener's reaction was as bewildering as it was alarming. He stopped dead, and then backed away a few steps. He looked all around him as if afraid somebody might have seen him recoil. When he spoke, his voice was low and panicky. “I won't be a part of it. I don't want it, do you understand?” He straightened his glasses and stared at Dorian as if seeing him properly for the first time. “The first one is enough and as far as I'm concerned you can have that back as well. But I'm not going to do what you're asking. It could cost me my job.”

Dorian hadn't been expecting this. Not when everything had always gone so smoothly up to now. He was already opening his mouth to say something placatory when he remembered his instructions: say only this one sentence.

So he said nothing, casting about silently and desperately for a way to defuse the situation.

“You know nothing about it, do you?” The man moved closer to Dorian, who drew back almost instinctively. “What did you do to them, that they'd want to inflict something like this on you? If I were you I'd run for it. As fast

as you can. You have no idea what –” He broke off. Shook his head. Turned away.

Dorian was still holding the box in both hands. He hadn't reckoned with a reaction like this and he would have dearly loved to ask what the hell Regener was talking about. But he wasn't allowed to and anyway, he got the impression the man wasn't in a fit state to offer much in the way of an explanation. He looked completely unhinged. *That they'd want to inflict something like this on you* – what did he mean by that? At the moment it looked more like Regener was about to start on Dorian, judging by the way he was now bearing down on him.

“I'm getting out of this, right now – I haven't committed to anything. I'll be glad when they switch themselves off, as I'm sure they will do soon, won't they?” He laughed. “You should thank me, lad.” He blinked at Dorian. “Dorian. Say thank you and then run, as fast as your legs will take you. Run. Hide.”

He knew his name. How? This time it was Dorian who backed away, the box now clutched tightly to his chest. What the hell was going on here?

“Tell me who sent you.” Regener was slowly starting to regain his composure. “Give me a name and I'll try and help us both, but be quick.”

He stopped barely an arm's length away from Dorian, who was on the point of making a run for it just as Regener had advised him to. “A name!” shouted the man. “They want to kill you, do you understand?”

He was bonkers, no doubt about it, but still Dorian's blood ran cold. Who wanted to kill him? Bornheim and his colleagues? Never – this was bullshit...

“I never should have got mixed up in this.” Regener grabbed Dorian by the arm so hard it hurt. “I'm calling the police – perhaps that'll make you a bit more talkative. We'll come clean, tell them what we know, and then we'll see.”

The word 'police' jolted Dorian out of his trance. He wrenched himself free of Regener's grip, turned on his heel and ran back to the stairwell. He raced down the stairs, flight after flight. The blood roared in his ears and he concentrated on not tripping over, hoping desperately that he would be quick enough.

Where had Regener got the crazy idea that someone wanted to kill him? And how did he know his name?

It had been almost creepy. *You should thank me, lad*, he'd said at first. Only after that had he said *Dorian*. As if someone had whispered it in his ear.

*I'll be glad when they switch themselves off.* They? Who did he mean by 'they'?

The concierge was already waiting by the door at the bottom of the stairs, evidently alerted by Regener, but he couldn't withstand Dorian's momentum. They collided briefly and then Dorian ran on, towards the revolving door. There were sure to be cameras in this foyer but what the hell – he had to get out of here, fast.

He sprinted along the road without checking whether he was going in the right direction. He could always look for the shopping centre later – for now, the most important thing was to put some distance between himself and this office building.

*Say thank you and then run, as fast as your legs will take you.* The words echoed in his mind.

He turned into the first side street he came to, dodged around an old lady on crutches and sped past a gang of construction workers on a break. Was that the sound of approaching sirens, or was he imagining things?

Eventually he stopped, clutching his side as he looked around.

At least he knew where he was. Months of living on the street meant he now knew every nook and cranny of the city. If he kept going left from where he was now he'd end up back at the shopping centre.

He went on, more slowly now. If it really had been police sirens he'd heard a few minutes ago they'd gone quiet now. Hopefully a good sign.

Twenty minutes later Dorian entered the multi-storey, feeling as though he were leaving all his fear and uneasiness outside in the daylight. Bertold would be there waiting for him – Dorian had made a huge detour this time, there was no way he was going to be first at the meeting point. The moment he closed the van door behind him he was going to ask Bertold what all this was about. Why Regener had flipped out like that, what he was so afraid of. Where he'd got the idea that somebody wanted to kill Dorian.

He was intrigued to see what Bertold would say.

First level underground, by the pay and display machine. He scanned the rows of parked cars, but the dark grey van was nowhere to be seen.

Strange, he thought. He did a bigger lap, looking out for new cars entering the car park, and ended up back by the pay and display machine.

No Bertold – nowhere on the entire level. He must have been held up.

Dorian leant against the wall, trying to stay in the shadows as much as possible. If it took too long somebody was eventually going to notice him loitering here.

He tried to look busy, and realised as he did so that he was still holding the box. The box that had inspired such horror in Regener.

Dorian shook the container gingerly. Nothing, not a sound. Instead, the memory of Regener's words returned with vivid clarity: *Tell me who sent you. Give me a name and I'll try and help us both, but be quick.* And then that other thing he'd said: *I'll be glad when they switch themselves off.*

He'd said 'they', just like Lang.

Dorian tried to think who or what 'they' could refer to. Torches? No, bullshit. But maybe... watches? Or something to do with a bomb?

No, nothing seemed to fit. And anyway, Bertold had assured Dorian that what he was delivering wasn't anything illegal.

His stomach rumbled as he brought the box close to his face and sniffed at it. He suddenly started thinking about the methods used by the mafia – severed body parts and suchlike. Fingers or ears would have fitted inside the box. That would explain why Regener had been so agitated.

No. Rubbish. What on earth had given Dorian an idea like that?

*Tell me who sent you.*

The words echoed through his brain. And the more they did so, the more Dorian wondered whether he really knew who had.

Twenty minutes later Bertold still hadn't arrived and Dorian was starting to feel increasingly helpless. What should he do? He couldn't call anyone, he couldn't go wandering around the city looking for the van and he didn't know how to get back to the villa without help.

What a bloody mess.

Or had he misunderstood Bertold? Had he actually said the second level underground, not the first? That was quite possible. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Dorian ran down the steps so quickly he almost missed his footing. There were far fewer cars on this level. Dorian could see at a glance that Bertold's van was not among them.

Why was everything going wrong today?

He sat down on the ground by the stairs, ready to jump to his feet if anybody should come. Turned the box over and over in his hands, lost in thought. It was fused shut with a plastic seal; if he broke it, everyone would know he'd looked at the box's contents.

He ran his fingers over its surface. It was dark blue, almost black. No. It would definitely be a mistake to open it – how would he explain it later? By

saying he'd felt curious? Or pissed off that Bertold hadn't turned up at the meeting point?

At least the fact that the grey van still wasn't here showed that even Bertold made mistakes. He wasn't omniscient. Though it was still a mystery to Dorian how, on all of their previous jobs, Bertold had always known exactly when Dorian had finished a delivery.

It was obviously different this time. Unless...

A new thought occurred to Dorian, and he swallowed hard. Could it be that the reason Bertold hadn't shown up was because the box had not actually been handed over to Regener? That Dorian wasn't going to be taken back to the villa until he'd done what he'd been asked to do?

Dorian tried to resist this idea, but it seemed more and more plausible with every minute that passed. He ran back up the stairs, stood by the pay and display machine, searched frantically for the dark grey van... in vain. He ran on, into the shopping centre – perhaps Bertold had parked outside for some reason and was waiting here by the shops.

Another dead end.

Two hours later Dorian had completely given up hope. It looked as though Bertold really wasn't going to come until he was alerted, somehow, that the job had been completed to his satisfaction. Perhaps the recipients of the gifts phoned him up? On a number they found inside the box?

Should Dorian really go back? Risk getting caught by the police? He wouldn't make it past the concierge a second time, that was for sure. But how dangerous could it be just to wait outside the building, at a safe distance?

He'd have to give it a try – he had no other choice.

It was now coming up to three o' clock in the afternoon. Businesspeople didn't tend to leave their offices before about five or six. Dorian hoped not, anyway.

Slowly and very reluctantly he made his way back to the building he'd fled a few hours earlier. Diagonally across from it stood an old phone box. It didn't look as though it still worked, but it was perfect for hiding behind. Dorian leaned against it and fixed his gaze on the entrance to the building. No police anywhere – that was good. As soon as Regener came out he'd go over to him, shove the box into his hands or his jacket pocket and then run, as fast as he could.

Time crept by slowly. Dorian watched it – he had a good view of a clock mounted above the entrance to a nearby building. Red numbers which, as dusk fell, seemed to shine brighter the darker it became.

The bulk of his attention was focused on the revolving door of the mobile phone company's offices. But he couldn't help losing concentration from time to time and letting his mind wander. Whenever he realised he was doing it he immediately forced himself to focus on the door again. But Regener did not appear.

Instead, he saw the concierge emerge from the building with a cigarette in his mouth and a lighter in his hand. Before he'd even lit the cigarette he caught sight of Dorian, who had reacted too late, far too late. He immediately turned away, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the concierge go scurrying back inside the building.

Whether he was calling company security or the police, it was all the same to Dorian. His mission had failed, and he had to get out of there. If they caught him they'd take the box away from him, and Dorian was sure Bertold would prefer him to take the gift somewhere safe than be forced to throw it in front of a car.

Without stopping to think he set off at a run, reaching the nearest underground station in less than five minutes, and boarded a train to the city centre. Perhaps he could intercept Bertold when he came to pick up the leafleters from their posts.

But it was clearly too late. There was no sign of anyone from the villa anywhere – not at the equestrian statue, not at the shopping arcade, not in any of the places Dorian knew.

He'd have to stay in the city tonight – there was no way he'd be able to find his way back to the mansion on his own. Even if Dorian had known roughly what direction it was in, from the outskirts of city onwards he'd be completely reliant on guesswork. It would only be possible (if at all) in daylight. And by now there was hardly any of that left.

He trudged down the street, noticing with every step how exhausted he was. How much he missed Stella.

And he wondered where he should spend the night. There was no way in hell he was going back to the underground station where Nico had found him. He could barely suppress the thought of Emil's dead body as it was; going back to the place where the bloodstains might still be dark upon the ground was more than Dorian could bear.

But it was cold – sleeping in the park wasn't a good idea either. Dorian didn't dare go to the emergency shelter – if he was wanted by the police, the social workers at the shelter must surely have recognised his face in the papers by now. They'd turn him in for sure.

There was only one place he could think of, and he was just going to have to hope it wasn't already occupied. A covered walkway by the river, where the ground was warm because the exhaust ducts from the underground passed right underneath it. He'd slept there once before and managed to get some rest.

Though that was back when he'd still had a blanket.

## Chapter 13

The lights in the windows of the office block were reflected in the midnight-black water. Dorian made his way slowly down the steps to the quayside. For the first time in hours, his mood lifted a little. The spot he'd been hoping for was free and there was nobody around to make trouble. Not yet, anyway.

He sat down on the ground and pulled his coat tighter around him. It would be OK – he probably wasn't going to sleep particularly well but he would make it through the night, possibly even without getting ill.

The box in his hand felt cold too by now, and its surface glinted almost like the river. Apart from the clothes on his back it was the only thing Dorian currently possessed.

Regener had stared at it as if it contained all the evil in the world.

What if there was something illegal inside the box? Something disgusting? Something terrifying?

Dorian's fingers played with the plastic seal, not for the first time that day. But this was the first time they had fastened around the tab you had to pull to break the seal.

*I think you have a right to know exactly what it is you're doing. What your work entails,* Nico had said.

Perhaps the contents of the box would help Dorian out of the predicament he was in. True, Bertold had forbidden him to open the box under any circumstances. But Nico would understand Dorian's decision, and he, after all, was Bornheim's successor – Bertold was just his chauffeur.

Dorian might about to make a big mistake. Opening the box was an irreversible step, and if Bornheim really wasn't OK with it, Dorian might never be allowed back to the villa again.

Hang on a minute... what if this was the very reason Melvin had disappeared, and that other boy, Max? What if they'd been told to deliver

promotional gifts too and they'd failed, just like Dorian had today? In that case they might be roaming around the city too, trying to find their way back to the villa.

Was a single mistake enough to get you thrown out? Had Dorian ruined his chances of returning to the villa so quickly? Or did you have to make another, more serious mistake afterwards? Like opening the box, for example?

Perhaps, however, it was the exact opposite – perhaps you had to open the box in order to be rescued. Perhaps a signal got sent to Bertold when somebody broke the seal...

Dorian had no idea how or even whether that was possible, but if it was then at least there was still a chance of finding Bertold. He'd open the box and run back to the shopping centre, even though the multi-storey itself would be closed by now. If Bertold set off straightaway they'd get there about the same time.

If not... it was going to be a long, cold night.

He turned the box over. There was the tab you had to pull to remove the seal strip. The strip ran all the way round the box, set into its hard plastic, like on a shrink-wrapped pack of chewing gum. Once it was open it was open, irrevocably.

Dorian looked out across the river, then back at the thing in his hands. Sitting here thinking wasn't going to get him anywhere. And it was clear he wouldn't get a wink of sleep all night unless he knew what exactly it was he was carrying around with him.

He hooked his index finger into the ring-pull tab. Pulled.

The seal strip came away slowly and not without a great deal of effort. Centimetre by centimetre. Anybody opening this box had to be doing it on purpose – it would never happen by accident or through clumsiness.

It took Dorian almost a minute to remove the seal. He set it down beside him and looked at the box for a few seconds. Then he opened it.

He wasn't entirely sure what he'd been expecting. Over the past few weeks he'd pictured a whole host of things: a scroll tied with a red ribbon, a silver letter opener, a set of expensive ballpoint pens, a valuable-looking watch...

But at no point had he ever imagined these.

So this was what 'they' were.

A pair of glasses.

The lenses were fairly large, the arms dark and wide. Why was Bornheim sending glasses to his clients?

Dorian looked inside the box for an accompanying letter or at least an advertising leaflet saying 'Insight. Clarity. Vision' or something like that – but found nothing of the sort.

He carefully lifted the glasses out of the box.

They – *they!* – were quite heavy. And definitely not sunglasses. The arms forked where they met the lenses and stuck out a little way into the wearer's field of vision.

As a promotional gift it was very unusual, but the whole strategy with the unannounced visits didn't seem to fit with it somehow. In fact, none of this seemed to fit together. Regener's reaction to the box, for example. *I won't be a part of it*, he'd said. A part of what exactly?

Dorian unfolded the arms of the glasses and heard them lock into place with a low click. Was that normal? He didn't wear glasses, but he didn't remember ever hearing his father's glasses make that noise, or any of his long or short-sighted school friends'.

Warily he lifted the glasses into the light of the street lamp beside him. Something flashed across the lenses. This was no ordinary pair of glasses. *I'll be glad when they switch themselves off*, Regener had said. Dorian had only heard of one sort of glasses that could be switched on and off. OK. Soon he'd know for certain.

He cast around for a target and settled on the mirrored bank building on the other side of the river. He looked at it for a moment, then put the glasses on.

A second later he heard himself let out a cry, and wrenched the glasses off his face.

*A mistake – it must have been a mistake.*

There was the façade of the bank, in its night lighting. Some of the windows were lit up to form an illuminated rectangle.

There was no longer any trace of the word which, just moments ago, had taken up the whole of the width of the building. But that didn't mean it wasn't still there, though Dorian fervently hoped it wasn't. There was nothing for it – he had to know for sure. He shut his eyes tight for a moment, opened them again, and put the glasses back on.

MURDERER.

Fluorescent green letters in the middle of the illuminated rectangle. Metres high.