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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Down Station**

Written by Simon Morden

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# DOWN STATION

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VICTOR GOLLANCZ  
LONDON

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*For G, who hates this sort of thing*

If you want a map, you must draw it  
yourself and keep it secret.

# 1

Mary looked at the watches in the window with an emotion that swung like a metronome between wonder and envy. They were beautiful, glittering bright with polished metal and inset jewels, and they were so very expensive. They shone like the sun, and they belonged on her skinny wrist. The work that had gone into just that one with the silver-steel bevel and the three separate dials must have been incredible, and no matter how many hours she worked, however hard she saved, she'd never be able to afford it in her lifetime.

The price tag was almost incomprehensibly high, as if whoever had written it out in fine, precise figures, had daydreamed away and added too many zeros. It had to be a joke; an obscene joke, even, aimed right at her. She wasn't laughing.

A hand came out from behind the display to snag the stand. As the watches retreated, Mary could see into the shop beyond. Tall glass cabinets with black velvet squares that showed off the clarity and colour of the gems, the coolness of the platinum, the warmth of the gold. Blond wood on the floor. Rich red on the walls. Lights. Lights everywhere.

She was about to turn away into the night when she accidentally caught the eye of the woman dismantling the window display.

For a moment, the immaculately made-up face, powdered and shadowed and lipsticked, froze, taking in Mary's scruffy Puffa jacket and scraped-back coils of black hair, her dark eyes and the acne scars on her cheeks.

And for a moment, rather than scorn or derision, a slight, secret smile and a rise of an artificially arched eyebrow. Neither of them could possibly afford to shop there. Then she turned her head – a voice, calling from somewhere unseen – and she hurried away towards the back room.

Mary imagined the clacking the woman's stiletto heels would make on the floor, the soft smell of a floral perfume, the whisper of material as stockings brushed against a tight pencil skirt. She imagined the woman's boss, paying her a pittance and using her beauty to sell beautiful things.

Her fingers, buried deep in the pockets of her jacket, curled involuntarily into fists. A brick wouldn't break these windows, thick and laminated. And even if it did, and she grabbed a watch in the second before the alarms went off and the street behind her filled with blue flashing lights, and somehow she avoided immediate capture – what would she do with it? She couldn't possibly wear it, and fencing it would leave her with, at best, a few quid in her pocket because the property would be red hot.

She'd be better off lifting something with a plastic strap from a display in a department store. More her style. More in keeping with her budget.

However: she had faithfully promised the magistrate she wouldn't do that again, because she had a job now, and was taking responsibility for her life, just as her solicitor and her probation officer had told her to say. It was a promise that, to everyone's surprise, including hers, she'd kept for nine weeks now, along with the job they'd got her.

She hadn't had to take it. She could have told them to stick it – except that everyone was expecting her to, and that, perversely had made her jut her chin and say she'd do it. It had probably

been the deciding factor in keeping her out of Holloway.

Mary turned from the window and the dazzling reflections of light. The street, though busy with black taxis and red buses, late-night theatre goers and rich kids, seemed dark and mean. It didn't help that the sky was so low: bulbous clouds descended almost to the rooftops, pregnant with rain, turning the harsh sodium glare a deeper red.

From away over Richmond, the first growl of thunder reached Leicester Square. For a moment, the sound stilled every other noise. People looked up, realised they were unprepared for a downpour, and contemplated their choices.

By the time Mary finished her shift, it would be morning and the storm would have blown over. She'd walk all the way back, tired and dirty, to her hostel along the freshly washed pavements. But still, inexplicably, despite everything, free. Not exactly free: she had regular meetings with her probation officer, a wispy thing called Anna who didn't seem at all afraid of her, and then there was her Anger Management course, which wasn't a surprise in the slightest, and her supervisor at work who would rat her out in an instant if she didn't turn up on the dot.

But free all the same. There were compensations to working for the Underground. The other – aside from not being banged up for twenty-three hours a day, or whatever the current regime demanded – was the people she worked with.

It was like clocking in with the United Nations every day, but she was a London girl and fine with that, though some of the accents were difficult – not just at first, either. Supervisor aside, and he really was a prime piece of shit, the rest of the crew didn't seem to mind her past, or her future for that matter. All that counted was whether she pulled her weight in the now.

She lugged her heavy bag across the road against the flow of traffic, towards the tube entrance. Another low boom echoed from the west, and the waverers decided against stopping for that last drink, heading for the stairs too.



When they pushed past her, running and talking too loudly for the confines of the concourse, she had her mouth open and an insult balanced on the tip of her tongue.

She checked herself, as she'd been taught: her breathing was fast and shallow, and inside she felt the cold rush of rage. Those that worked with her had lots of fancy names for it, but none of the labels meant anything to her, except a single off-hand comment that she seized on. The Red Queen was the one she recognised and owned: the terrible desire to give orders, to be obeyed, was deep inside her. Yet she knew she'd never be in charge of anything, let alone be a queen.

She counted to ten, and hoisted her bag back on to her shoulder. By then, they were gone, voices muffled in the depths. They were jerks. They probably hadn't even seen her. She was better than to rise at their carelessness. She took a deep breath, and carried on.

She had a pass: a proper pass that she'd had to sign for, that carried her photo – God, she hated it because it made her look like this weird child-thing – that allowed her to access almost everywhere and everything. Losing it would mean instant dismissal. Losing it and not telling anyone she'd lost it would be enough to land her inside. They may as well have printed her details on a gold brick instead of a laminated piece of plastic, for all they went on about 'the integrity of the system'.

The ticket hall was all but empty. A couple of stragglers tripped down the stairs from another entrance, stumbling and looking back the way they'd come, then hurried on to the barriers, wallets already out and in hand.

She followed them, touching in on the pad. The gates banged back, and she twisted to get her bag through.

Then it was the long ride down the escalator, down to the deep levels where it was hot and humid, and ever-so-slightly foetid. The advertising panels flickered their wares at her, five-second looped images, discordant and bright: enough to catch her

attention and slam a message into her eyes, but not enough to seduce or explain.

One was for a holiday. How long was it since she'd had a holiday? They'd had day-trips from the home that had been, to quote one of the staff, a logistical nightmare. One of the other members of staff had said it was more like herding cats. It had been Southend, usually, and Eastbourne once.

That'd been a disaster. The M3 had locked solid, and they'd barely had time to eat fish and chips in some formica-countered sea-side shed before piling back in the minibus for the trip home. Eight teenagers with a broad spectrum of emotional and educational problems, four carers. It was a wonder that any of them made it back alive.

Again, the five-second image: a white beach and blue sea, and a lone woman, just about in a bikini, lithe and tanned and happy, running into the waves. Visit Greece, it said.

Mary didn't have a passport. She didn't even know if she had the documents to get a passport. She knew she'd need a birth certificate, and if one existed for her, she'd never seen it.

She imagined it, for a moment. That she was the woman. That the white sand was hot under her feet and between her toes. That the water was clear and bright and broke like diamonds as the wave hit her shins.

She stumbled off the end of the escalator, nearly falling in the process.

It was a dream. A pipe-dream. The woman in the jeweller's would one day meet a rich man who liked her enough to take her on holiday to Greece. And good for her. Nothing wrong in that. If she had the opportunity, she should grasp at it with both hands, and get out while she still could.

Mary took the stairs down to the westbound platform of the Piccadilly line. The last train was still ten minutes away. She was early.

There was nowhere to change. Literally, nowhere. Whatever

she was going to do, she had to do it here on the platform, amongst the drunks and the stoners. She could wait, but then it was always a rush to get kitted out, Mr Nicholls with his clipboard chivvying and tapping and looking at his watch.

So she walked down to the far end of the platform, right to where the jumpers usually positioned themselves for their one final step across the ill-minded gap, and dropped her bag to the ground.

The CCTV could see her, so she turned her back as she shucked her jacket. All she was wearing underneath was a thin tan vest that was a shade lighter than her skin. It got hot, working in the tunnels, and the first day, against all advice, she'd made the mistake of wearing a T-shirt and a pair of sweat pants.

She'd cooked, and she wasn't going to do that again.

From inside her bag, she dragged her thick orange boilersuit. Ironically, it made her look like she was on a chain gang, or she was one of those Guantanamo inmates. She shook it out, kicked off her shoes, and quickly dragged her jeans down to her ankles.

The rumbling she felt through her feet told her that a train was due. Probably eastbound on Piccadilly, as it was too solid a hit to be the nearby Northern line.

Someone wolf-whistled. She ignored them, and sat on the platform, on the boiler suit, to pull her jeans free.

With a few practised moves, she had the bright orange suit up to her waist. Left arm, right arm, and she was covered up, the zip-up front open to her navel but nothing showing.

She had a pair of heavy work boots in the bag too, steel capped, solid, thick rubber soles. She stepped into them and crouched as she laced them up. Now she looked down the platform, at the men where the whistle had come from, and studied their gelled hair and sharply ironed shirts. They could have been anything during the day – brickie, office drone, city trader – but here, at night, together and full of drink, they were all the same.

Now she had the uniform on, the oversized sexless boiler

suit and the big brown boots, perhaps she was a less of a catch, though she knew it wasn't the catching that mattered. For men like that, it was about the chase, a quick fumbling conquest, and move on.

She tied her unruly curls up in a red bandanna and piled her discarded clothes into her bag.

Five minutes until the last train.

The platform should have been filling up, but it was still sparse. She perched herself on one of the inadequate seats to wait, feeling the distant passing of other trains reverberate in her bones.

There should have been others of her shift down on the platform by now. She couldn't explain their absence. She chewed at her already gnawed fingers, hunched over.

The overhead sign ticked down the seconds and the minutes.

And suddenly they were all there, walking in a loud phalanx out of one of the connecting corridors and into her sight.

The meeting. She'd forgotten the meeting.

Her sudden relief was replaced by burning panic. She jumped up as if hearing a shot and took a step forward to explain to the clip-board wielding Nicholls. But what should she say? Some flannel about being late because of ... what? She hadn't been late. She'd just forgotten. Tell him that she'd blown the meeting off as a waste of her time? She was supposed to be avoiding the snark and triggers for confrontation.

She'd have to apologise. God, she hated doing that, especially to little weasel-faced Nicholls and his stupid ratty moustache. Mama was with him, matching him stride for stride, rolling her body like a ship at sea. If Mama was there, it'd be fine.

It was Mama who called to her first.

'Mary! Where've you been, child? Mr Nicholls,' and the way she said 'Mr Nicholls' always managed to convey just how much she'd like to scrape him off the underside of her shoe, 'Mr Nicholls was worried about you.'

‘Sorry. Sorry. I was here in plenty of time, and I was just used to the routine.’ Mary raised her gaze for a moment, and looked at the reflections of the overhead lights in Nicholls’ black-rimmed glasses. ‘I missed the meeting and I’m sorry.’

Nicholls stopped in front of her and consulted his clipboard. ‘Mary. All staff are required to attend such meetings as management see necessary to facilitate the smooth running—’

He was interrupted by an almighty boom, like someone slamming a heavy steel door. It echoed forever along the tunnel.

When it had faded, he clicked his biro and started again. ‘All staff—’

‘Oh, let’s not worry about that now, Mr Nicholls. Mary’s a good girl and a good worker.’ Mama was in full flow. ‘She’s fine and strong, and she was here early. She’s always on time and never misses a day. She’s one of the best on this team and she said she was sorry and I can tell her what we all talked about while we work, which is what we’re not doing now.’ She turned to the rest of the shift and shooed them into action with her thick fingers. ‘Come on, people. We’re keeping Mr Nicholls waiting.’

Nicholls might have the clipboard, but Mama seemed to run the show.

As the others put their bags down and started on suiting up, the last train was called. It seemed to settle matters, and Nicholls found it necessary to consult the top sheet of the sheaf of paper he had in front of him.

‘Get changed, Noreen,’ was all he said, and went to the locked telephone box on the wall.

Mama waited until their supervisor was otherwise occupied, then took Mary by the elbow.

‘What d’you want to do something stupid like that for, girl? You know he’s just itching for the chance to report you.’

‘I forgot, all right?’

‘Well, don’t you go forgetting again.’ Then she added. ‘Help Mama into her finery, girl.’

Mama was short, but wide, and wore nothing under her boiler suit but a pair of hefty knickers and a bra with more cross-bracing than Tower Bridge. Her wide legs filled the trousers, and she held in the rolls of chocolate-coloured flesh while Mary zipped her up.

‘You’re okay, girl. But you got to pay more attention. Doesn’t matter if you do the job nine times out of ten. Folk like Nicholls, he’s watching for that one time you don’t.’

A waft of hot, steamy air presaged the arrival of the tube train. It rattled and squeaked into view, and the carriages flashed by. Then it slowed, and the blur of windows resolved into discrete images of people mostly standing, even though there were plenty of empty seats.

They looked nervous. Some of them wanted to get off, and did so quickly the moment the doors opened, jumping the gap and hurrying quietly away. Those getting on were frowning, glancing behind them, hesitating before boarding.

The buzzer sounded, the voice intoned. The red lights at the rear of the train receded into the black tunnel, grew faint, winked out. The flurry of litter stopped wafting on the track bed, and was still.

Mama took a pair of cotton gloves from the cleaning cart, and a black bag. She passed them to Mary, then helped herself.

‘Aren’t you supposed to be telling me what Mr Nicholls was saying?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing worth wasting your time on, or mine, either. Now you stay out of trouble, girl.’

‘Yes, Mama.’ Mary pulled on her gloves and flexed her fingers, watching the woman dole out supplies and advice to the rest of the shift. Most of them were women, none of them British except Nicholls, and he didn’t really count as part of the team. He didn’t do any of the work, just looked occasionally at his watch when he thought they were behind time and cracked the whip a little harder.

The three little tunnel lights winked from white to red. The rails were no longer live, and it was time to get to work.

She wasn't the first to lower herself down into the suicide pit, the deep gap between the running rails, but there was plenty of debris for her to pick up. Scraps of paper, sweet wrappers, more copies of the bloody *Metro* than she could count, buttons, coins domestic and foreign, articles of clothing – the baby socks and shoes she could understand, but the items belonging to adults? Seriously? – empty wallets thrown in by pickpockets, phones dropped by tourists, plastic bags, tin cans, bottles, pairs of glasses, and the thing that had freaked her out at the start but no longer bothered her: hair.

Teased out of passengers' heads by the whirlwind of passing trains, it formed spidery clumps, not just at the stations, but deep into the tunnels where it had to be picked out from the rocky ballast, by hand, by people like her.

Earrings weren't uncommon. Mainly paste with plated fittings, but occasionally something of worth turned up. And rings. Mary often wondered about those. Had they been lost from a cold hand, much lamented and impossible to replace. Or had they been torn off in anger and thrown under the train in an evocation of sympathetic magic that would have the ring-giver similarly cast under the wheels of an oncoming train? It wasn't called a suicide pit because it saved lives; rather, the concrete trough was there because it made it easier to retrieve the broken, scattered bodies afterwards.

They were supposed to turn the expensive stuff – notes, wallets and purses, lost travel cards, jewellery – over to Nicholls. He was, in turn, supposed to log it all and transfer everything to Lost Property in Baker Street. They were each supposed to watch everyone else and make sure the rules stuck. It was a lot of supposing. Mary knew at least a couple of her shift were in the habit of diverting the most saleable items inside their boiler suits. It was risky, but they thought it a perk of the job.

She didn't do that. She couldn't do that. She had to keep her nose clean. She was getting almost nine quid an hour which, when fences were offering somewhere between five and ten pence in the pound, was pretty good money. Some of it was going on paying off her past fines, but it wasn't like she had many outgoings.

But she didn't feel like she was going straight. She still had the same urges as before, to take what she wanted and lash out at those who pissed her off. The fear of what would happen if she gave in kept her partly in check, and recently, some little bit of pride flickered in her heart, sparked from God knew where.

She'd cleared her immediate area, and ducked under the middle rail to collect the debris from the far side of the tracks. Though the power was off, she was still reluctant to touch the rail, despite her rubber-soled boots. Her bin bag started to fill.

The tunnel echoed again to a growl of deep, distant violence. As she looked up, so did everyone else. She caught Mama's eye, and the women stared at each other until Mama shrugged.

'Rail replacement near Hyde Park,' said Nicholls from the platform, tapping at his clipboard. 'Come on, we haven't got all night. Back to work.'



## 2

The sparks from the angle grinder were intense and alive, as captivating as a firework. The noise was incredible, though; a singing wail that cut through skin and bone as much as it did the ear defenders that Dalip was wearing. He held on to them, in case they fell off and he became deaf. Outside in the marshalling yards, it was just about bearable. Inside the tunnels, conversation was reduced to simple signs and anticipation.

The bullet-headed man lifted the grinder from the broken rail and inspected his cut with a practised eye. He nodded with satisfaction and put the machine aside, holding it easily in one hand where Dalip struggled to use two.

He pulled his own ear defenders off and shoved them down around his neck. He mimed for Dalip to do the same.

*See?* The man who'd been introduced as Stanislav gestured to the rail, expecting Dalip to bend down and appreciate the skill involved. Dalip dutifully did so, admiring the thin bright slice taken out of the rail. When he straightened up, Stanislav mimed, *Now we lift the failed section and take it away.*

He bent down and scooped up two long metal bars, each with a hook at one end. He passed one to Dalip, and started to twist free the metal keys that held the rail to the sleepers. The top half

of his boilersuit was tied around his waist, and his bare arms, slick with grease and sweat, bulged with muscle as he leant into each action. He made it look easy when it was anything but.

The track was replaced when it was necessary – and the keys had been forced into place by big men with big hammers. Releasing the rail again was a matter of leverage and technique, and Dalip had neither, relying instead on brute force that was too often beyond his meagre strength.

They were supposed to work as a team, each side of the rail, and match the other's movements. Stanislav watched the young man struggle and clench his teeth, swinging on his iron bar like it was a piece of gym equipment, before shaking his head and resting a gauntleted hand on the lever. He leaned close and shouted over the din.

'No. Use whole body. Lean out, arms straight, turn from shoulders.' He demonstrated and the key turned smoothly. 'You see. We are tool users, yes? Not brutes. Now you try.'

Dalip did his best to emulate Stanislav's technique, but he jerked at it. The older man frowned, and started to step in.

'No. No, I'll try again.' Dalip could feel the effort, the strain in his forehead where it was tight against his turban. This time, smoothly and cleanly, the bar an extension of his arms.

The key turned, and he felt the rail rise. He grew giddy with delight.

'Very good. Now the other fifteen.'

His smile slipped. This was what it was always like. An achievement made, a skill acquired, an exam passed: always a stepping stone to the next goal, and never a moment to bask in the joy of simply succeeding. And Stanislav was just another man in the role of teacher, to be respected and learned from.

Dalip nodded, and applied himself to the next key. It came out more easily. Perhaps it was easier, perhaps it was the looser rail. Perhaps he was doing it right, but that didn't matter, because there would be another thing along soon enough that he

couldn't do, and would have to be taught, there in the dark and the dirt and the noise.

The rail was finally free. Eight men, stripped to the waist, carried it away with pairs of giant pincers, and brought a new one, whole and gleaming under the yellow lights. They lowered it into place with brief, shouted commands and started to knock it in, fixing it back to the sleepers with rhythmic blows of their lump hammers.

Dalip watched them and envied their nonchalant expertise. Oh, it wasn't like he was going to spend his life fixing broken rails – he was going on to make trains that floated above, rather than ran on, rails – and this was just a placement, the first of many, to give him some idea of what engineering was supposed to achieve at the sharp end. How the whole infrastructure of the Underground – tunnels, trains, ventilation, pumps, stations, even the movement of people from above to below and back again – had been designed and built.

There was so much to learn, he despaired sometimes.

Stanislav carried the first part of the rail welder to the site of the join, dumped it by the side of the track and jerked his head to indicate that Dalip should follow him.

He did so, obediently, like he did everything else asked of him. There was a shovel, an oxyacetylene torch, the gas tanks to go with it, and a reaction vessel with an outside so burnt it looked like a cinder. Bags of dust. Wet sand to seal the casting. All of it needed to be moved.

It was hot enough in the tunnel already. It was the hardest work Dalip had ever done, and he was barely an hour through. The thermite reaction they were setting up would fill the tunnel with acrid smoke and thick yellow flames, making the harsh conditions worse, and yet these men, hard-muscled and terse, laboured in it day after day. He couldn't cope. He'd faint and fail. He didn't belong there.

And whether Stanislav had spotted the panic in the boy's eyes

and realised he needed reassurance, or whether it was simply well-timed: he clapped Dalip on the back of his orange boiler-suit, hard enough to rock Dalip on his feet, and gave him the thumbs-up.

It was enough to steady his nerves. He was here to learn, not to be humiliated.

The whole tunnel shook as if struck. Dust hazed the air, and the lights flickered. The whole work crew stopped in mid-swing. 'What—'

Stansilav put an oil-smearred finger to his lips, and listened to the noises with wary attention.

They were a long way under London, and there should have been nothing else down with them but other tunnels. If something had happened above, on the surface, it would have had to have been immense to reach them. A bomb? A building falling down? An aircraft crashing? All three?

There was nothing to compare with the initial concussion, though a low groan of pressure creaked through the walls.

Their supervisor walked along the rail bed, making sure he was seen, exchanging words with his crew. No one else moved.

Along the tunnel wall were two bare wires running parallel to its length, suspended on clips at about head height. The supervisor clipped the terminals of his phone to the wires and pressed the call button.

He pressed the earpiece against the side of his head, and waited.

When he had to press the button again, there was a collective shifting of posture, of gently laying down the tools they were still holding, getting ready to move in whichever direction they had to go, and quickly.

He pressed the button for a third time, and stood, head bowed, praying for an answer.

When none came, he swiftly unclipped the phone and pointed east.

‘We’re evacuating. Green Park. Go.’

Everyone else had trained for this. Dalip had had an hour’s talk. Stanislav took a handful of Dalip’s boilersuit at the shoulder and didn’t let go.

‘With me. We walk. Watch your feet.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘We do not know.’ Stanislav half-shoved, half-dragged Dalip in the direction of Green Park. ‘That is why we are leaving. If it is nothing, we will come back and carry on. If it is something, we can find out what it is. If it is a bad thing, better we are not here, between stations.’

It started off as a low rumble which slowly reached a crescendo, and then it faded away again. Rather than Stanislav holding Dalip up, there was a mutual bracing of each other against the shaking ground.

‘Is that a bad thing?’ asked Dalip.

Stanislav gave a thin-lipped smile. ‘Not good.’

Everyone quickened their pace.

‘Does this happen often?’

‘No.’

‘Are you going to let go of me?’

‘No.’

The lights winked out, and it was utterly black for a moment. Torches were already in people’s hands, and bright blue beams cut through the dusty air like searchlights. Dalip stumbled, and was held up long enough to find his feet again on the rocky ballast. Stanislav swept his torch across the tunnel roof and floor.

‘Get yours and put it on. Put your hand through the strap and tighten it to your wrist.’

Men were walking past them in pairs, keeping an eye on each other, making sure no one was left behind.

Dalip fumbled his torch on, and fitted it around his hand as he’d been told, still with Stanislav maintaining a death-grip on his boilersuit.

‘Okay?’

Dalip nodded, realised that he couldn’t be seen, so mumbled, ‘Yes.’

‘Stay with me. Whatever happens, stay with me.’

They moved back up through the column of men and as they turned the slight corner, the green emergency lights on the platform of Green Park came into view.

Dalip remembered to breathe again. He was soaked with sweat, his face slippery, his first attempt at a beard prickling with the heat. Less of a dream, more of a nightmare, but at least the station was ahead. As was a fiery red glow in the distance, beyond the sickly light of the platform, where the tunnel headed east under the centre of the city.

He started to pull back even as Stanislav propelled him on. But he knew that he didn’t want to get closer. The red was thickening, growing more real, like looking into the heart of a furnace. He twisted and struggled.

Stanislav picked him up, one handed, and slammed him against the tunnel wall.

‘What?’ he roared, ‘Do you want to die down here? Do not fight me, boy. Do not ever fight me.’

Dalip tried to push the man away, the torch around his wrist dancing as he slapped at Stanislav’s chest.

‘We don’t want to go that way!’ he finally managed, just as Green Park’s lights failed with a sigh.

It wasn’t dark, though. Everything was suffused with red, and as the rest of the work crew reached the edge of the station, the first one burst into flame. His boilersuit caught with spontaneous ignition, starting at the front, rolling around him in a sheet until he was a candlewick, stumbling and tripping, arms holding the fire aloft. And another.

Bulbs popped, tiles cracked, plastic melted, metal warped and started to drip.

Stanislav’s clothing was smoking. So was his own.

Now they were going west again, and they ran with no pretence at calm. The air was thick, alive with shadow and rippling with heat, the soles of their boots sizzling on the ballast, the rails cracking like whips as they expanded.

There was a ramp up, like the ones that led to platforms, except that they hadn't gone as far back as Hyde Park. Dalip lifted his torch and saw a brick wall, and that the wall had a door, and that the door had twisted out of its frame and was open just a crack.

He had no idea where he was, just that the infernal heat was behind him and the incredible noises were ahead of him. He turned aside and ran at the door, digging his fingers into the gap and pulling against the warped wood that seared the flesh from his hands even as he brought his foot up to gain leverage against the wall.

Stanislav used his own savage strength, and hinges squealed in protest. The door resisted, then gave, spilling them both to the baking ground. The older man was up first. He took Dalip's collar and dragged him through the doorway, throwing him on to his back in the tiny room.

The red heat outside grew and grew. The paint on the door began to blister. Stanislav pulled his sleeves over his hands, gripped the door handle firmly, and bellowed his defiance.

The door banged against the jambs, and still the paint bloomed and puckered. Dalip thought he was going to die there, watching the door burst into flame, waiting for the wall of heat to ride over him, his clothes igniting, his hair turning to brief, bright lights and his turban a fiery crown. He would wear the same silent expression of sudden, violent death as the rest of the work crew had done, his mouth making momentarily a hollow circle before his flesh scorched and his muscles grew rictus tight.

He scabbled back as far as he could go, until he realised he was against another door, and it was cold metal.

He leapt up, pulled the handle. The door opened easily and

cleanly. It was dark on the other side, but that didn't matter for the moment.

'In here,' he said, just as the paint blisters burst with blue fire. Stanislav pushed past, and Dalip closed the door smartly behind him.

Stanislav slumped against the wall and coughed until he vomited, turning his head at the last moment to splatter the ground with acid bile.

Dalip's eyes burned from the fumes and the heat. His throat was raw, his head hurt, his skin was sore and he couldn't stop shaking.

The others had died, right in front of him, lighting up and lurching around on the rail track until they fell. He felt his own stomach tighten, and he tried to swallow, but he was parched.

'Where are we?' he managed. He fumbled for his torch and tried to make sense of the discordant images he was seeing. Two more doors. A series of grey cases and switching gear, also grey.

'Down Street.' Stanislav wiped his mouth with his hand. 'Disused station.'

'We must have gone past it the first time.' Dalip tried the door in the long wall; all that lay beyond was a rusted bath tub, no taps.

'There is no one here. No one to get help from. That is why we went to Green Park.'

'The others. They're—'

'Dead. Yes.' Stanislav pulled himself upright on the painted switch-gear. 'You saw them. They could not have lived. We must work hard not to join them.'

Dalip scrubbed at his eyes, which felt like they were full of grit. Work hard, the bullet-headed East European had said. He knew how to do that. He'd done nothing but, even though it was a different sort of work to this. He recognised that he should be curled in a little ball in the corner somewhere, mind numb, but instead, despite being out of breath, in pain, half-roasted, barely



able to see or speak, he was unnaturally calm. Presumably, the shock would hit later, when he was back home, sitting at the kitchen table with his mum and dad and a cup of tea.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘Can we get out of here?’ He put the back of his hand on the door they’d come through, and jerked it away. Too hot.

‘I believe so. We must find the exit.’ Stanislav shone his torch at the remaining door, opened it and peered through.

The next room was dominated by a tall case, also spray-painted in the same grey colour. Beyond that, another door, a narrow corridor, and suddenly the space opened out. Their torch beams picked out a broad junction, and an arrow on the wall – a modern one, with a stylised symbol of a running figure heading through an opening. When they investigated, they found stairs going up.

‘Up is good, right?’ Dalip stood at the bottom of the steps: at the top, the corridor appeared to turn to go back over the tracks.

‘Up is the only way, whether it is good or not. Come.’

Stanislav walked carefully up the broad stairs, torch beam scanning ahead. Dense white smoke curled in the curved roof space and reached tendrils down towards them. He crouched to keep his head out of the worst of it, and Dalip ducked down, too.

The portion of the corridor that bridged the rail track below was melting. The floor seethed and swam, and the tiles that had clung to the walls throughout the Blitz were spalling off, cracking and falling into the slurry below.

‘That way is out. It may take our weight, it may not. It may kill us anyway.’ Stanislav spat on to the ground, and it hissed. ‘Who goes first?’

Dalip wanted to nominate himself. The bridge wasn’t going to last. If he didn’t go now, he’d not do it at all.

‘Together.’

They ran through the molten bitumen, side by side, sending up splashes of black liquid. Their thick overalls helped protect them from the worst, even though the distance was something