



PROLOGUE

Through the hollow darkness of a winter's night, a man was running.

"It's all right, darling," he murmured to the tiny baby bundled in his arms. "Not much further now." Snow fell all around them making dizzying patterns in the air; the going underfoot was slushy and the man's feet were cold. His mind flashed with quick, sharp thoughts, made painful by anxiety. What had they done with his wife? How long did he have before they came looking for him? Would he have time to get the baby to safety? One thought was so urgent that it drowned out all the others: *she'll only be two worlds away – will it be enough?*

His thoughts were shattered as a sudden cry split the air, loud and shrill – a call of triumph. It came from behind the running man, from the far end of the street.

He stopped, peering over his shoulder through the lacework made by the snow. *Lights*. Indistinct figures moved against the night, muffled tightly in scarves and hats, and another voice shouted. A face, pale in the darkness, turned in his direction.

The man spun round and began to run once more. The tram wires overhead seemed to hum despite the lateness of the hour and he hopped across the tracks as he made a desperate dash across the road, landing heavily on the pavement at the far side. He paused long enough to catch his breath, feeling his heart hammer, and then he was off again.

Through it all the baby – his daughter – slept, as though she were tucked safely in the nursery he and his wife had prepared for her, when things were different.

Seconds later he came to a slithering halt outside a tall narrow building on a street corner that faced a wide bridge over a streetlight-speckled river. It loomed into the night sky like a pale cathedral, its roof lost in the darkness. He gazed up, hoping he had the right place. Quickly he settled his child into the crook of one arm while he pulled an object smaller than his palm from a pocket with his other hand. He adjusted its face, listening for the *click*, and then rubbed his thumb across the object's surface. A void opened at its centre, the barest *whir* giving away the complex mechanism that powered it. He raised the object

to his eye, peering through the void, and looked at the building again.

He saw the differences straightaway – shutters closed where they had been open, a flowering window box where there shouldn't be – and his throat tightened. He glanced up, reading the words above the doorway. In this world, at this time, the building was an insurance company headquarters, but he had to hope that what he'd seen was true and that somewhere else it bore a different name. *A place where she'll be safe*, he thought. *A home*.

He kneeled, the snow trickling through his thin trousers, and laid his daughter down as gently as he could in the alcove of the building's front door. He checked one last time that the envelope thick with banknotes was securely tucked into her blankets, and he placed the object in beside it, making sure it was hidden from view. Then he kissed the baby's warm forehead. He sobbed, the pain of losing her so soon after his wife almost too much to bear, before gritting his teeth and getting to his feet. He turned his back on his baby and stepped out into the haze of the street lights, snow pattering on his suddenly empty arms.

"I'm here!" he roared, his tears hot. "Come on then! What are you waiting for?" The man strode into the middle of the road as the snow flowed around him, glancing down the shadows of the street he'd just come from where

dark-clothed figures lurked. They were closing on him, not bothering to hurry now. They had no need.

The man faced them down, his chest heaving, his throat aching and sore. Slowly they circled him, as though mocking everything he had lost.

Finally he clenched his fists and ran straight for them. The sound of their truncheons raining down on his head and back made the baby's eyes pop open in shock. She opened her tiny mouth to cry, but between taking in a breath and letting it out again she vanished without a trace.