

C L A S S

HEROES

A CLASS

APART



STEPHEN HENNING

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Prologue

Sunday 12 June

Samantha Blake sat up in her hospital bed. She tried to read the article about her on the 24/7 Interactive News website, but her eyes kept flicking nervously to the door of her private room. Nobody was there.

The article had been updated only five minutes ago. It was chilling and surreal to read about the events that she was experiencing – as they were actually happening. The text flowed across the screen of her phone.

Breaking News – School Bus Bombing – Were Twins Targeted?

Fears that teenage twins were targeted in terror attack, amid reports of SECOND strike in victims' hospital!

Sam could feel her heart thumping and her pulse quickening as she read the piece. Targeted? Really? Her and James? They must be the twins referred to, as there hadn't been any others on the coach. Surely the bombing hadn't been an attack on them? It was stupid! Who would want to target them?

Sam looked around nervously. The report claimed there been an attack on the hospital. Within the isolation of these four walls, she had heard nothing, seen nothing. She was alone, but she could almost imagine an assassin in the bathroom, or a bomb under her bed. She had no way of being sure, because she could not move from the bed or leave the room. She wished her brother, James, was here.

Eight days ago it had been their 14th birthday. They'd had a big party with all their school friends. Many of them were no longer alive.

Now she lay in this hospital bed, cold, alone, scared and hungry.

She scrolled further down the page. There was another video report, but this one was from three hours ago.

Mystery Death Dive at Bomb Survivors' Hospital

Bosses refuse to confirm whether a teenage boy has fallen out of 36th-storey window at Brent Valley General

Sam watched the video, her heart in her mouth. The reporter was standing outside the hospital, pointing at fragments of glass on the ground and a broken window at the top of the huge building. The reporter said that eyewitnesses had claimed that a body had come through the window, although the whereabouts of the body was unknown and unexplained.

Three hours ago, James had told her he was heading up to the 36th floor. That was the last she had heard from him. Could it have been James who had fallen out of the window?

Sam jumped in fright. Through the glass panels in her door, she saw a shape. A figure in the corridor. She couldn't see who it was. Friend or enemy?

Samantha Blake shrank down into her bed. Even with the amazing things that she could do, she had reason to be fearful.

The door opened, and Sam breathed a sigh of relief. It was a friend. Everything was ok.

And then all of a sudden, it wasn't...

Chapter 1 – Combustive

Tuesday 7 June

Brian Hacker closed his eyes while the coach was stopped at the traffic lights, and tried to shut out the noise. He'd been a coach driver for 23 years and on most days he loved his job.

Brian was driving a coach party of 30 children, two teachers and two parents from South Ealing Comprehensive School in West London. They had been on a day trip to St Paul's Cathedral and the Imperial War Museum.

There were shrieks, giggles, mobile ringtones, and competing perfume and aerosol sprays circulating around the coach, all of which served to exacerbate the agony of his pounding head and sandpaper throat. Flu. The symptoms had started yesterday.

Brian opened his eyes to see the lights were green, as three drivers behind him started leaning on their horns. He inched the coach forward. They'd successfully navigated the Hangar Lane gyratory and were probably no more than 30 minutes from the school. It would almost certainly be another two hours before he could get home, kiss his wife, say "hi" to the boys, and collapse into bed. He looked at the large digital clock at the front of the coach.

It read 19:17.

Towards the back of the coach, Samantha Blake closed her eyes and tried to blot out the noise. Two sources of noise really. One was Emma Venton, the nastiest piece of work in the school by some distance, and her faithful lapdog Anika Ali. Both were sitting on the back seat, periodically throwing paper missiles at Sam's head and texting unpleasant messages to her mobile. 'Freak', 'stick insect' and 'twiglet' were the nicer parts of the messages.

The second source, more benign but no less annoying, was Philip Randerson. He was sitting on the seat in front of hers, propped up on his knees and facing her over the back of the

chair. In one hand he was holding a book, *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* by HG Wells.

Philip was intense. You never quite knew what he was thinking, or what he was on about, or indeed what planet he was on half the time. He was nice enough, but very hard work. He was amazingly intelligent. The cleverest pupil in the year, probably in the school. So why couldn't he work out how annoying he was?

Sam was trying her best to be polite. She never wanted to be one of life's Emma Ventons or her chavette entourage, but she couldn't help but feel that by being nice to Philip, she had somehow been penalised. As though she had left a door ajar, and Philip was eagerly trying to push his foot into the opening. His obscure conversational topics and his habit of doggedly flogging a line of argument to the death made him very wearing. Fifteen minutes ago, he had asked Sam what type of boys she found attractive. Foolishly, and despite knowing exactly what was coming, she had replied:

"Well, he has to be nice, and have a good sense of humour. Um, kind, nice looking..."

"You put 'good sense of humour' and 'kind' ahead of looks," pounced Philip. "Why do girls always say that when really it's 'looks' every time?"

Sam had spiritedly played along in the argument, although she found her mind wandering. Philip was a mouth breather, she noticed. She wanted to tell him to close his mouth and breathe through his nose, but worried that it might offend him. Or worse, it might prompt another line of argument. He was called 'gormless' a lot. She wanted to suggest that his fair hair, in the classic pudding-basin style, might benefit from a slightly more fashionable cut. He was called some unpleasant names about that too. But she couldn't bring herself to say anything that might upset him. She knew all too well what it felt like to be on the receiving end of bullying.

Sam's best friend, Nina Palmer, had tired of the conversation 14 minutes ago. She had been brushing her shiny black hair and studying the results with her make-up mirror. She hadn't paid much attention to the conversation but Philip was getting on her nerves.

“Oh, why don’t you just tell her that you fancy her?!” she snapped.

Philip was momentarily derailed.

“It’s so obvious. That’s why you keep asking her what boys she fancies, and why you keep taking the mickey out of her, and going on and on with your stupid arguments!”

Philip got right back onto the rails.

“I think you’ll find that if I fancied her, it would be more logical for me to tell her I fancied her, and maybe buy her flowers in the traditional way.”

“Well then why don’t you, instead of dribbling over her all day?” Nina snapped, and returned to reading her magazine.

“Well perhaps you fancy her, Nina. You’re always hanging out with Sam. You’re together in classes, in the playground, and on the bus. And you’re wearing that top.”

The top that Philip was referring to was an unofficial school sweater. Very unofficial. Essentially it was just the standard South Ealing Comprehensive School navy-blue sweater, with the school emblem on it. But the current trend among the older girls was to have the sweater altered to include the school name as the acronym S.E.C.S, and with the words ‘South Ealing girls know good’ just before it. Funnily enough, it wasn’t an item that they wore when they got home. The trend was now filtering down to the lower years, much to the consternation of parents and teachers.

“You should get one as well, Sam. You’re like lovers,” said Philip.

“They’re like freaks!” called out Emma Venton from the back seat.

Nina Palmer flushed. She didn’t fancy Sam, but she did have a bit of a thing for Sam’s brother James. But she couldn’t really say anything to her best friend.

She stood up and shouted back at Emma Venton.

“You wearing your mum’s perfume again, Venton? Or did we just go past a pub?”

Emma Venton glowered.

Closer to the front of the coach James Blake, Samantha’s twin brother, removed his earphones and paused the track on his phone’s music player. The mobile was brand new. It had been

his and Sam's 14th birthday on Saturday, and they'd been given identical smartphones as a present from their mum and dad.

James had his hat pulled down over his eyes, his feet were resting on the seat in front and he had been lost in thought trying to work out the guitar riffs that he was listening to. But something tugged at his subconscious. He had a tingling feeling that his sister needed him. People had always told him that he must share a special connection with Sam.

They often finished each other's sentences, independently picked out identical presents for people and generally seemed to know what the other was thinking. He had read that this was not an uncommon ability in twins, although privately he thought that given how much time they had spent together it was not surprising that their outlook on life was similar and their tastes the same. Nevertheless, he had often accurately sensed when his sister needed him and she, too, always seemed to know when he needed her.

James sat up, removed his hat and ran a hand through his fair hair. James and Sam were unmistakable as brother and sister. They shared the same wide mouth and flawless skin. James was a little sensitive to this fact; he wondered if it meant he didn't look masculine enough. It irked him that he couldn't grow enough stubble to give him a more rugged look, as his baby-soft skin often led to him being called 'pretty boy' on the football pitch. And that was just by his own team.

James looked back down the bus to see Emma Venton kneeling on the back seat, with Anika Ali sitting next to her. Anika was tearing out sheets of paper from another girl's set of Imperial War Museum worksheets, screwing them up, and handing them to Emma. Emma was then throwing them at Sam. Most of them were missing their target, but he still felt a stab of anger as he looked at his sister's kind face.

Samantha was strong, she was witty and she could hold her own against a bully like Emma, but she never showed any inclination to fight back. James kept telling Sam she should confront Emma – face her down, show her that she was not to be messed with. Sam, probably to her credit, just said that Emma wasn't worth it.

Emma Venton had never hurt Sam; all the bullying was done from a distance and usually via a phone or the internet. But

that wasn't because Emma shied away from physical bullying. She was perfectly willing and able to hurt other girls, and some boys, quite badly just for the hell of it, if she thought she could. James was worried that maybe Emma was testing Sam, trying to gauge whether she could take her on in a fight.

James had often told Sam that he thought Emma was jealous of her. Emma Venton was a lot plainer looking than Sam. Not ugly – well, not physically ugly. But she had a hardness to her that somehow made her look a lot older than 14. Watching Emma and Anika now, James wondered if maybe he should make a pre-emptive strike himself; just some kind of warning shot, to let them know his sister wasn't to be messed with.

“Slaaaaaags!” yelled Emma Venton at Sam and Nina, accompanied by the nervous shrieks and giggles of Anika.

Feeling his blood boil, James was about to mount a punitive expedition to the back of the coach when Mr Stark, the History teacher, stood up and bellowed at Emma to sit properly in her seat and behave. Which, temporarily and reluctantly, she did. Mr Stark sat back down next to Mrs Cutts, the PE teacher, and muttered something under his breath to his colleague.

James sunk back into his seat, equally reluctantly and seething with frustration. He had been looking for an opportunity to put Emma Venton in her place and get her off his sister's back, but often what had stopped him was the fact that Emma was a girl, and seriously what was he going to do? He could give her a mouthful, but that was it. What could he threaten her with? He would never lay a finger on a girl, not even one as vicious as Emma Venton.

James had seen Emma hit other boys, and it was clear from the sound of the punch and the reaction of the boy that she packed quite a wallop. But, so far, none of the boys could quite bring themselves to retaliate. Emma knew this and played on it. She caught James's eye from the back of the bus. She'd seen his slight movement before Mr Stark had stood up behind him. She gave James a can't-touch-me smile. James made a rude gesture in return, which prompted some sarcastic “Oooo-oooooh”s from Emma and Anika.

James seethed.

Brian Hacker sighed as he caught a glimpse of the Venton girl in his rear-view mirror. A bad one that. Sad how every class seemed to have a rotten egg, although it had been a while since he'd seen one that rotten. He cast a quick look at the clock: 19:28. It had been a long day. He had arrived at South Ealing Comprehensive's playground nearly 12 hours ago. Still, only another 20 minutes to the school and maybe an hour and a half till he was back in his sick bed. Unfortunately though, he had another 6am start tomorrow and it had been made clear to him by his boss that he would be doing that job, even if he was dying!

Brian guided the coach forward another few precious metres. Then something caught his eye. Was he dreaming? He squinted and leaned forward in his seat. If that wasn't the damndest thing he had ever seen. On the roof of one of the big houses along Hangar Lane, there was a girl. He blinked as the low evening sun made his eyes water. But there was no mistake. A young girl, no more than 16 years old, was sitting on the apex of the roof, with her legs swinging over the edge. What was she playing at, the stupid little fool? She could kill herself.

The driver of the car behind bibbed his horn again. Brian Hacker looked angrily in the mirror, then at the road ahead. He inched forward into the available space.

The girl on the roof looked down at the coach. She could see the disbelieving expression on the driver's face. She considered giving him a little wave. She was enjoying this game. She had an excellent view of the road ahead. Traffic was still moving slowly, thanks to the wrecked car that had been carelessly left at the side of the road. Now who would do a thing like that? The coach would pass it in about five minutes. She stood up, totally unfazed by her dizzying distance from the ground. She had the grace, posture and physique of a gymnast. She wore black lycra running trousers and a black sweat top.

She looked at the next house along the road. There was a distance of about ten metres in length and three metres in height between the roof she was standing on and the roof of the next house. She sprinted along the roof, jumped, somersaulted in the air, and landed steadily on the adjacent building. She had reached the higher ground with ease.

Brian Hacker stopped the coach nose-to-bumper with the car in front. He looked up at the rooftop again. The girl was gone. The sun was in his eyes, annoyingly. Should he ring the police? Or had he just imagined it?

Sam's phone buzzed again, but this time it wasn't another Venton vent of venom. It was Mum, saying that she hoped they had both enjoyed their day, and that she was preparing chicken pie for dinner. Sam looked down the bus at James. He was looking back at her. They'd received the same text. Sam smiled and felt a warm wave of homely love wash through her, tempered by a slight stab of guilt. Mum was worried about her and was trying gently to help. Sam thought about getting home. Instead of having dinner, she just wanted to have a shower and go to bed. She hoped Mum wouldn't be too cross or upset.

"I saw you on Comic Relief the other night, Blake," shouted out Emma Venton.

"You pretend that you think you are not attractive," continued Philip Randerson, "when, in reality, you know that you are attractive. But by acting like you believe you are not, you end up gathering more attention."

"Shut your face!" came another voice from somewhere else on the bus.

A hundred conversations seemed to be reaching Sam's ears all at once.

"Everyone just keep the noise down," bellowed Mr Stark.

"I hope you snap in half Blake, you freak," shouted out Emma Venton, half standing on the back seat now, reminding Sam of a monkey in a cage, about to fling excrement at passing tourists. "I hope you die looking at a McDonalds, and your family feed you to the birds!"

That was it! James stood up, blood pumping in his ears, his vision slightly hazy with rage. He was up to his full height of five foot seven. He barely heard Mr Stark call out to him to sit down. He could only see the eyes of Emma Venton. Those eyes changed from surprise, to triumph, to a momentary fear as she saw the intent in James's face. Maybe, finally, she had gone too

far? Her mouth curled to display grim defiance. She clenched her fists.

James didn't know what he was going to do. He still didn't think he could hit Emma Venton, but he might at least grab the phone out of her hand and destroy the tool that sent poison to his sister's mobile. He was eight steps away. Seven steps away. He caught his sister's eye and noted that she looked worried – worried about him.

Brian Hacker narrowed his eyebrows as he saw James Blake, a likeable, polite and decent lad, marching to the back of the bus. The teachers would have their hands full now. He hoped his own boys hadn't been in any trouble at school today.

Those thoughts were quickly forgotten when he saw that some idiot had abandoned a car on the double yellow line further down the road. Even from here he could see that the car wheels were bent out at an awkward angle, the back window was smashed and there was an 'Authorities Aware' sticker across the boot. Why hadn't it been towed away? So that had been the cause of the slow-moving traffic. He would have to pull out into the oncoming traffic to get around it. What on earth were the police doing, leaving it there?

James was two paces away from Emma Venton now – she had both feet planted on the back seat, ready to meet him, brandishing her sharp nails and signalling her intent to slash at his face. She looked feral, crouched on the seat like a cornered animal. She didn't take her eyes off her challenger, hoping to intimidate him. James prepared to block the initial slash and fend off the second blow, which would then unbalance Emma. Then he'd grab the mobile from where she had left it on the seat between her feet, and before she had a chance to recover, he would throw it out of the window and under the wheels of a passing car.

Emma Venton picked her moment as James Blake came grimly and steadfastly towards her, his face set and his eyes strangely cold, like the Terminator. She would cut his stupid face. She prepared to take her swipe.

Brian Hacker pulled the coach smoothly around the obstructing car. He had his eyes firmly on the road and had judged his approach perfectly. They would pass the car and be back on their own side of the road before the approaching lorry was anywhere near them. He changed down the gear and turned the steering wheel.

For a second, Brian Hacker caught another glimpse of the girl on the rooftop, now on top of another house nearby. This time she seemed to be waving at him. He switched his eyes back to the road. The coach was now level with the broken down vehicle.

That was when the car exploded.

Everything happened at once. The blast ripped through the front of the coach, with the large vehicle effectively absorbing the entire force of the eruption. Glass crashed inwards. The coach's passenger-side wheels left the ground and the vehicle pitched over and began to slide across the road. There were screams and a terrifying noise of metal grinding against tarmac. A hundred car and burglar alarms rippled out from the epicentre of the blast.

The car driver behind the coach was no longer leaning on his horn, but swerving on to the pavement. He ended up crashing into the gardens of the block of flats that were at the side of the road, and instantly had a face full of air bag. A succession of drivers behind him slammed on their brakes and found themselves rear-ending the car in front.

The driver of the oncoming lorry pulled at his steering wheel and jabbed his brakes, and the huge vehicle started skidding forwards towards the upturned coach.

Only barely alive, the last thing Brian Hacker saw was a flash of fast-moving metal bearing down upon him. He tried one last attempt to free himself from his seat.

The screech of the lorry's tyres suddenly gave way to another sickening crunch as the cab impacted against the lower bodywork of the front of the coach, smashing out the remaining windows.

There were few pedestrians on the roadside by Hangar Lane, but those who were close by ran for their lives.

Inside the coach, the world was red, orange and black. Several of the passengers had been killed instantly by the blast

and many others had been knocked unconscious. Through his blurred vision, James Blake just saw a mass of limbs as he was thrown first towards the front of the coach, then sideways, and then he was upside down.

James caught sight of his sister screaming out in pain, pinned to the upturned roof of the bus, one of her legs twisted at a horrible angle. He was conscious for only six seconds more. In those seconds, he felt a cold sensation in his neck and his back as glass embedded itself in his body. He cried out from the pain, which was far worse than anything he had ever known. His head bashed into the armrest of a nearby seat, and someone else fell on top of him. He had to get out, but he couldn't! He felt a terrible rage and tried summoning up every bit of strength he had to break free but it was useless. Then he had a brief glimpse of a bloodstained, wild face, which he thought was Philip Randerson's, before they connected heads and James blacked out.

Samantha was still conscious but she could not feel her legs. There was a large piece of twisted metal embedded in her right thigh. It had pierced her blue school skirt, which itself was now soaked in her blood. She couldn't even see her other leg. She screamed, but was drowned out by the sound of another explosion which this time seemed to come from the back of the bus. It was deafeningly loud, and already it had become impossible to see more than an arm's length in front of her as the coach was filling up with smoke. She choked, and scrambled desperately to get clear of whatever was pinning her down. As the coach had fallen on its side the only daylight coming in was from above, where the passenger-side windows were now facing the evening sky. Sam tried reaching as high as she could but was suddenly hit by another shower of glass and a ball of flames. She could barely see, and it was painful to even breathe. She made one last effort to try and remove the large shard of metal that was embedded in her leg, but it was impossible. She blacked out.

On a nearby rooftop, with a grandstand view of the suffering and devastation, the girl sat filming the event below using her mobile phone. She smiled as she heard the screams, the cries

and the pitiful whinnying of the dying. She stopped filming and attached the video file to a message which read:

‘Daddy. Aren’t you lucky to have such an efficient daughter? Love Lolly.’

The girl called Lolly sent the message. She zipped the phone up in the pocket of her black running top and brushed herself down. It was time to go. She took a running jump, crossing the gulf to the next house, and grabbed hold of a windowsill. She hung from the ledge for a few seconds. She then descended, swinging from one handhold to the next like she was performing a gymnastic display, until she landed elegantly on the ground. She smartened her jacket again, brushed back a wisp of her long brown hair from her forehead, and walked calmly onto the street.

Sam briefly came to. She thought she must have been jolted awake by the pain of the metal shard being removed from her thigh. She felt a strange sensation in her body. She couldn’t identify it but, weirdly, it reminded her of the time when she was eight years old and ate a chilli thinking it was a sweet.

She still could not see properly because of the smoke. She was coughing and retching. Then it felt as though strong arms were lifting her out of the wreckage. Suddenly the heat from the flames gave way to the cool summer air, and she thought she was floating above the burning coach. Next thing she knew, she was being laid gently down on cold concrete. A hand tenderly brushed her hair back and then was gone.

Or maybe she had dreamed that bit?

The coach had set off at 07:03 from South Ealing Comprehensive School, with 30 children aged 13 and 14, two teachers, two parents and a driver. At 19:38, the burning wreckage of the coach lay across both carriageways of Hangar Lane in West London, less than five miles from the school.

Brian Hacker would not be returning home to his wife and children. Mrs Cutts the PE teacher, Mr Stark the History teacher, Tom Harrad, Simon Elburn, and Suzi Twyford, who were all sitting near the front of the bus, were killed instantly.

Four others died within the following two minutes.

It would be several days before James Blake would realise how lucky he was that he had marched angrily to the back of the coach.

It would be some considerable time before the long-term consequences of the blast would be realised.

The anger, bitterness and grief at the senseless loss of loved ones by families, friends, classmates and a community would last a lifetime.

Chapter 2 – Awakenings

Friday 10 June

Samantha Blake opened her puffy, painful eyes, saw her mum and dad's faces looking down worriedly at her and wondered what was going on.

Like all the victims of the car bomb, she had been rushed to Brent Valley General Hospital.

Sam had no idea where she was; she felt sick and drowsy, and at the edge of her consciousness she was aware of a pain in her stomach and legs. Mum looked as though she'd been crying for a week. Dad was looking at her with haunted eyes like somehow he'd let her down.

She saw her mum lean closer and felt her own hand being stroked gently. It was comforting. Sam saw another movement in the corner of her eye as a woman in a white coat came closer. Sam fell asleep again.

Sam dreamed the strangest, most vivid of dreams. She dreamed she was in her bedroom at home. She was sitting up in bed, wearing her pyjamas, and looking out of the window. Her mum was standing by the bedroom door, wishing her goodnight and turning the light out. But she wasn't looking at her mum. She was staring out of the window.

The room itself seemed to be moving, as if it were driving down the road like a car. She was looking at the streets, houses and cars that the room was overtaking. The room was taking her to school for an exam. She could see the school in the distance. Then the school suddenly exploded and a ball of flame slowly but steadily rolled down the road towards her.

She saw her brother James tumbling through the air in slow motion. He froze for a few seconds in front of the window, looking in at her and reaching out his hand. Philip Randerson floated up to the window and pushed James aside. He started knocking on the glass and, although Sam could not hear what he was saying, she could see he was mouthing "Let me in". Then the fireball caught up with them. James and Philip were

engulfed in the fire and a second later it came crashing through the window.

Sam woke up in the hospital bed and found she could not move. She could hear screaming and was half aware that the sound came from her. She was soaked in sweat, it was pitch black and she was scared. Nurses rushed around her and she felt the cool, soothing hand of a girl who seemed not that much older than Sam herself. She was pretty, she was smiling and she stroked Sam's forehead. She spoke, but Sam didn't really know what she was saying. Seconds later and Sam had drifted back to sleep.

Saturday 11 June

Brent Valley General was one of the tallest hospitals in the world. Built in 1976, it stood 150 metres and 36 storeys tall – taller than the Guy's Hospital tower in Southwark and only 94 metres shorter than One Canada Tower at Canary Wharf. It was a rather ugly slab of a building that somehow looked like it was trying to muscle in on nature and take its place in the sky. It stood incongruously within the relatively low-rise skyline of West London, dwarfing all the office blocks, apartments and shops that surrounded it. The majesty of its supreme height was offset by the ugly aesthetics of its 1970s' origins. Any grandeur it might have had when it was new had long since been tarnished by time and the British weather.

PC O'Brien of the Metropolitan Police trudged up and down the long corridor on floor 16 of the hospital. He was not happy. Twenty or so survivors had been brought in from that coach bomb, and the guv' wanted an eye kept on all of them. All very well, but why didn't they put them in one big ward, rather than scattered around the building?

The whole operation was stupid, in O'Brien's opinion. They'd been doing this for days now. The poor kids had been caught in a terrorist bombing. Horrible, but it wasn't as though the terrorists had deliberately targeted them, was it? That wasn't the way it worked. These things were always random. The terrorists weren't likely to come strolling in here to try again. Although O'Brien wished they would, so he could personally beat the living daylight out of the sick–

“Excuse me,” said a well-spoken, confident young voice from behind him, startling him out of his fantasy.

PC O’Brien turned around. There was a tall, prim and pretty young girl standing behind him. She looked like she was about 16. She had long black hair, swept back in a ponytail, and she was dressed in a smart green school uniform, which suggested to O’Brien one of the expensive private schools. However, he raised a disapproving eyebrow when he saw the length of her skirt. There was no way he would allow his daughter to go anywhere in something that short.

“Yes, Miss?”

“There seems to be some sort of fight in the next corridor,” said the girl helpfully. There was something slightly mocking in the girl’s cat-like blue eyes that O’Brien found unnerving. The way she delivered the line, so cool and confidently, made O’Brien think she had made it up.

“What?” he asked.

The girl nodded enthusiastically.

“One of the doctors was being attacked.” She pointed down the corridor. “Quite badly,” she added.

‘Perhaps the guv’ was right,’ thought O’Brien. He had no choice but to investigate, and he sprinted off in the direction the girl was pointing. Heaven help her if she was lying.

Lolly smiled to herself. She had made up the story about the fight, but she wanted the policeman out of the way. She walked in the opposite direction along the corridor to room seven – Samantha Blake’s room. She strode in. It was a private room, with an adjoining bathroom. The girl was asleep. She looked battered and bruised. Both legs were in plaster.

Lolly approached the girl and peered closer. The girl was pretty, Lolly would concede that. Although not as pretty as herself.

Was she worth the effort that Daddy had gone to? There were some minor bruises on the girl’s face. They seemed to be healing nicely, but the girl was definitely in a bad way. Time to find out if Daddy was right.

She took ‘the gadget’ from her green blazer pocket. It was a small black device, the same size as a mobile phone. Daddy had a poncey name for it but, to her, it was just ‘the gadget’.

Technology didn't really interest Lolly, but she knew it had its uses.

She plucked out a small transparent bag from her other pocket and removed a perspex slide and a razor blade. She made a small cut on Samantha's arm, near her elbow. No one would notice another injury among all the others. Sam immediately started bleeding and started to stir slightly. Lolly quickly rubbed the perspex slide onto the blood and placed the slide into a slot at the back of the black device. She checked Sam. The girl wasn't properly awake and had no idea what was going on. Probably the medication. Lolly looked at the small cut she had made on the girl's arm. It had already stopped bleeding.

Lolly pressed the ON button on the gadget. A screen on the front lit up. A progress bar started running across the screen. The screen changed quickly to report *Analysis complete*, then *Range 60–80%*. Lolly was impressed. The brother, James, had tested with the same result. Daddy was absolutely right, as usual. She placed the items back in her pocket.

Lolly then walked round to the other side of the bed and looked in Sam's locker. She found her mobile phone. Lolly picked out a small USB stick from her pocket and attached it to the phone. Instantly, specialised spy software started installing itself on the mobile. The whole process took less than a minute.

"Get well soon, Samantha," said Lolly, replacing the phone and putting the USB stick back in her pocket. "I'll be seeing you again when you're better."

She turned to leave, but heard voices in the corridor. The name 'Sam' was used. The girl in the bed started stirring. Quickly, Lolly hid in the private bathroom.

Roger and Yvonne Blake were delighted to find their daughter opening her eyes and looking around her as they entered the room. It was a hot, glorious summer's day and Yvonne Blake couldn't help but reflect on how her children should be outside playing with their friends.

"Oh Sam!" Her mum could not hold back and she rushed forward to give her daughter the biggest and yet gentlest cuddle that she could. Her dad came and kissed her on the forehead and took her hand in his.

“Sweetheart, we’re so relieved,” he said, his voice nearly failing him. His daughter looked smaller, younger, so vulnerable, but she had colour back in her cheeks. He stroked her beautiful blonde hair, now matted with sweat and falling lankly over her face. She looked bewildered.

“How are you feeling, poppet?” her mum asked.

“I feel hungry,” said Sam, without really thinking. And she was. She was ravenous. Yvonne exchanged glances with Roger, who raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Yvonne helped prop her daughter up in bed. She had noticed how Sam had been looking a little thinner every day and, in her opinion, Sam had precious little weight to lose.

“Your mother has been bringing food in every day, just on the off-chance you woke up,” said Roger Blake. “She’s been giving it to the nurses. And some of them really don’t need any more fattening up. They should build these hospitals with bigger corridors.”

“Roger!” snapped Yvonne Blake.

“Sorry luv.”

Sam smiled weakly. Ordinarily her dad’s cringey, un-PC comments and loud voice would make her want to curl up and die. Now she couldn’t be more grateful to hear his terrible jokes and she just wanted to uncurl and live happily ever after with them.

Yvonne Blake reached into a freezer bag that she’d been carrying and produced a quiche, stored in tupperware, and already cut up. She trundled the food tray over to Sam’s bed, took the quiche out of the tupperware and put it on a plate.

“Perhaps I should wash this up in the bathroom,” she wondered, holding the tupperware.

In the bathroom, Lolly tensed up. She would kill the girl’s parents if she had to. She could hear footsteps approaching. Lolly stayed hidden behind the door.

“Just put it in your bag, babe,” said Roger, firmly. “Wash it up when we get home.”

The footsteps receded. Lolly relaxed slightly. There was a small window set into the wall to her left. An escape route if she needed it, but for the time being she wanted to stay and listen.

Sam ate with growing confidence and had soon finished her plate. Food had never tasted so good! She took a moment to collect her senses and look around her. She had cards, flowers, some of her running trophies from her bedroom at home and sitting on top of her bedside locker was her teddy bear Johnny – which was a bit embarrassing.

“What happened?” she asked finally, and then as her thoughts cleared a little further, she looked momentarily panicked.

“Where’s James?”

Her mother moved a little closer to reassure her.

“James is fine, sweetheart. He’s in a ward on the floor above. He’s been awake for two days and he’s already out of bed. He broke an arm and his collarbone. But you’re both fine and you’re going to be ok.” Her mother was crying a little now, but her voice stayed strong.

“How did I get here?” Sam asked shakily. “There was a noise... we were on the coach, was it a bomb? What about Nina? Where’s Nina?”

Her father sat down in the chair next to her.

“Yes, sweetheart. There was a car bomb. It blew up just as your coach went past. Some... people were killed. I’m so sorry. But Nina is fine, she’s fine. She was released from hospital yesterday afternoon. Her parents have taken her to stay with grandparents in India.”

Roger looked into his daughter’s eyes to see what effect his words were having. Sam just felt numb. She heard the words but they didn’t seem to mean anything. People killed? Surely not people on the coach? Not her friends? Mrs Cutts and Mr Stark? The nice driver Mr Hacker, who knew her mum and who always asked her how she was getting on in her athletics competitions? Emma Venton?

“Can I see James?” she asked. Her father looked at her mother and then nodded.

“He’s been in to see you. He sat with you yesterday, reading his guitar magazine out to you until the nurses made him go

back to his ward. He said it would make you wake up to tell him to shut up.”

Sam laughed, and Roger’s heart leaped to see his daughter’s face come to life. The laughter turned to a convulsion of coughing and she had to hold her ribs.

“You’ve taken a heck of a knock, sweetheart,” he said, as he stroked her arm. “Just take it easy. Be a while before you’re back on the running track. But you’ll get there.”

Yvonne Blake threw her husband a look but said nothing. There was a knock on the door and a woman in a white coat came in, with an air of brisk efficiency.

“As you can see she’s doing very well,” the woman said, without seeming to direct the comment at anyone in particular. She picked up Sam’s medical chart from the end of the bed and gave Sam a warm smile.

“Morning, Doctor,” said Yvonne Blake. “How is she doing?”

There was a brief silence as the doctor studied the chart.

“Remarkably well,” she murmured. She looked at Sam again. “Hello Samantha, I’m Dr Okocha. I hadn’t expected you to be awake. How are you feeling?”

“All right, I think,” muttered Sam, looking a little bewildered again.

“I’m very pleased with your progress Samantha.” She looked closer at Sam’s face. “You’re in no danger, although you have two broken legs, broken ribs and burns on your stomach and chest. There was damage to your lungs but they healed very quickly. The swelling and the bruising on your face has mostly gone.” She sounded quite surprised, thought Roger. Dr Okocha carefully looked at the bandages around Sam’s stomach.

“We’re going to give you some X-rays tomorrow, and we’ll also take a proper look under the dressings to see how things are coming along. But so far you’ve been healing very well. A bit like your brother. You must be a very healthy family. Did you give them a lot of greens when they were younger?” She smiled at Yvonne, who smiled gratefully back.

“What about her burns?” asked Roger.

“We’ll have a better idea about that when we change the bandages. The only other concerns I have at the moment are her

weight and her temperature. She seems to have lost quite a lot of weight since she was brought in.”

Roger and Yvonne nodded but didn't really know what to say.

“Well,” said Roger, clearing his throat and hearing his voice sound slightly awkward. “She's had her lunch today.”

“Oh, it's nothing to worry about,” Dr Okocha reassured them.

“What about her temperature?” asked Roger.

Dr Okocha looked at Sam and nodded thoughtfully. She produced a thermometer and took Sam's temperature again. It read 39.8 degrees Celsius.

“She's very hot at the moment. In fact, she should be feverish with that kind of reading. Do you feel hot, Sam?”

Sam shook her head. Her mother put her hand on her daughter's forehead. She felt cool.

“We'll keep monitoring it,” Dr Okocha promised. “Do you have any questions Samantha?”

Sam realised she had only been half listening to her medical report. She had been thinking about the itch on her left leg inside the plaster cast. She looked up, realising she had just been asked another question.

“What time is dinner? I'm hungry.”

In the bathroom, Lolly had heard enough. It sounded like everything was on course. There was no more to do for some time now. Besides, all this talk of food was making her ravenous. She decided to take her leave. She opened the bathroom window, jumped up on to the sink, slid her legs through the gap and the rest of her body followed gracefully.

“What was that?” asked Sam. Everyone had heard a noise from the bathroom.

Roger Blake went to investigate. The room was empty. The small window was open. He shrugged, and came back into the room.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said, uneasily.

James Blake was on Uxbridge Ward on the 17th floor, one level up from his sister's room. Seven of his other classmates were on the same ward, all with a variety of injuries which ranged considerably in severity.

James had been dozing fitfully for the past two hours and was awoken by the sound of raised voices. It took him nearly a minute to work out where he was. He could feel a pain in his left arm and his collarbone as he shifted his position slightly. He'd been having a strange dream, which he now couldn't remember. Something about the accident.

James's whole body felt weird. He tried to ignore the feeling. His phone was in his right hand, where presumably he'd been holding it when he fell asleep. He looked at the screen. It read 14:11. Visiting time. His parents would be in soon. They would have stopped in at Sam's room first to see if she had woken up yet. He hoped today would be the day that she did. These last few days had felt very strange indeed. In their whole life he and Sam had not spent more than one week apart and even in that time they had been able to either talk or text each other. Seeing Sam in her hospital bed, immobile and silent, not knowing what she was thinking, made him feel very... lonely. Yes, that was it; for the first time in his life he felt vulnerable and isolated.

He winced as a shrill voice pierced through the background noises that he'd become accustomed to in the hospital. In the bed next to him was Philip Randerson. Philip was in a very bad way. He'd suffered severe head injuries, two broken legs and goodness knows what else. He was in a coma and on life support. James did not really know Philip, but he felt a strange attachment to him. A literal attachment, according to the doctor. Apparently when the ambulances had arrived at the blast scene he had been lying on top of Philip, both of them covered in blood. He had no memory of this, but it sounded gross. Because of their burns, part of his skin had actually been stuck to Philip's and the doctors had had to separate them. James felt sick at the thought of it. He looked at his own right shoulder. There were bandages on it to cover the burns, but it didn't hurt.

Philip's parents stood around his bed. James had never met Mr and Mrs Randerson before yesterday, but they weren't easily forgotten. Mr Randerson was tall, thin, grey and silently

authoritative. Mrs Randerson was shorter than James, thinner than her husband, with a voice like a knife. James felt that they seemed strangely out of time. Like they should be Philip's grandparents, rather than his parents.

Dr Soames, as far as James could work out, was the main doctor in charge of all the patients on the ward. James had seen more doctors than he could count in the last couple of days but he was fairly sure Dr Soames was the boss man, the head honcho, the doc-meister general. It had amused James the way that all the nurses seemed to fancy the white coat off Dr Soames. In fairness, Soames seemed cool. James had no idea how old he was, probably about the same age as his dad. Forty-something? But he had a reassuring manner, never seemed flustered, always appeared to be in control and when he spoke he used a hushed tone that made you listen harder and give every word your full attention.

James was intrigued to see if Dr Soames had met his match in Mrs Randerson, because she was totally going for it.

"We're just going around in a big circle, Mr Soames," she said, in a way that made James think she was banging out each syllable with a hammer and chisel.

"Philip should be in a private room. The standard of care that he is receiving here is not acceptable. It took three days just to be able to speak to you to find out how he is. How are we supposed to know what to do, or what to think?"

"Mrs Randerson, I do understand your concern. Philip's injuries are very serious and he is being given priority treatment. But, as I'm sure you will appreciate, this is an exceptional emergency. The hospital's facilities have been stretched by the severity of this incident. There are no private rooms available and Philip is receiving round-the-clock care."

"You seem unable to answer a simple question, Doctor. What we want to know is, will Philip wake up, and is he brain damaged?"

"We simply cannot say whether Philip's injuries will result in permanent brain injury," began Dr Soames.

"Then can't you operate on him to make him better?" Mrs Randerson cut in.

"And I do feel you should move him to a private room to aid him in his recovery," added Mr Randerson.

Poor Philip. James wondered if he could hear the furore around his bed. James had sat by Philip's bed yesterday and tried talking to him, to see if he would wake up. He didn't really know what to say because he had barely spoken to Philip before, despite being in his class. He had found Philip a bit odd, but basically harmless. He had felt sorry for him on occasion as he'd often seen Philip being picked on, usually by Emma Venton.

Tuning back into the argument, it didn't seem to be going well for either side.

"You're absolutely right about one thing, Mr Soames."

James was amused by the deliberate use of "mister" rather than "doctor".

"This is an extraordinary incident," continued Mrs Randerson, "and I'm sure you are aware that the eyes of the world are on this hospital right now. We have had many reporters telephoning the house over the last few days and, although I have not spoken to any of them so far because I have been too upset, I may decide that the British public, and people around the world, have a right to know how my son is being cared for. I suspect that the board of this NHS trust will not be pleased with you if I reveal that conditions in this hospital are practically third world."

Dr Soames visibly bristled, but he was still a long way from losing control.

"I can see that you have an itch that needs to be scratched, Mrs Randerson," he said, coolly. "I'm sure the hospital can help you stop itching."

The Randersons looked nonplussed.

James smiled, and felt the phone buzz in his hand. They weren't supposed to have mobile phones on the ward, but so far no one had stopped him using it. He had received a text message – from his sister! It said: 'I bet u caused all this! :-)'

James smiled. She was awake! Thank goodness. He'd never doubted she would be ok, but it was a relief to hear from her. He would go and see her soon. He replied:

'Already told m and d that it was u. Damage comin out of ur pocket money!'

He got a reply quickly.

'They've been in to see me. On way 2 u now. I hear my room better than urs LOL'

He texted back.

‘Weirdy girl :-)’

‘Freakoid!’ came back the instant reply.

Another text came through. This one from his best mate Steve.

‘Is ok mate. Am lookin after ur xbox while ur in hospital.’

James laughed, but before he could reply, another one came through.

‘And I got ur bike. And I dragged ur wallet clear from the coach. Stay as long as u need to in hospital.’

James chuckled. He really wanted to see Steve and just have a laugh. He replied:

‘ur dead sunshine.’

No sooner had James sent the text than his mum literally bounded onto the ward.

‘She’s awake! She’s awake! We’ve just been to see her!’ She kissed James on the forehead. His dad came in seconds later.

‘Hello, Son. How are you feeling?’

James grinned. ‘I’m ok Dad. Sam just texted me.’

His parents groaned.

‘You two and those phones,’ said Roger. ‘I thought twins were supposed to be telepathic. If you were it might save us a fortune in mobile bills!’

Dr Soames, grateful for the distraction, walked over to James’s bed and picked up his chart.

‘Good afternoon Mrs Blake, Mr Blake,’ he murmured. ‘You’ll be delighted to know James is making excellent progress. Quite excellent.’ Dr Soames seemed to be inspecting the chart closely, as though he was dubious of the veracity of the information.

It was like watching a repeat of Dr Okocha with Sam, thought Roger Blake.

‘Yes,’ murmured Dr Soames. ‘Remarkable. Tell me James, how are you feeling today?’

James thought for a second. The pain in his arm and collarbone had pretty much disappeared, although he did still have a strange, sickening sensation sweeping his body, which he put down to his medication. But there was also another feeling.

‘I feel hungry,’ he said. ‘What time is dinner?’

Lolly had felt no fear, hanging from the window outside Sam's bathroom, 16 floors up. She had used the smallest of handholds to manoeuvre from window to window until she found another one that was open. She slipped into another private bathroom. It was identical to Sam's. She then strode through the bedroom, much to the surprise of the old lady in the bed, and out into the corridor. She paused to straighten her blazer and skirt. It was important to look smart at all times.

"Excuse me, Miss!" said a stern voice from behind her. PC O'Brien was marching down the corridor. He didn't look happy at being tricked. A bit of bad luck running into him again, but fun nonetheless. Lolly ignored him and pushed her way through the doors leading to the stairwell. PC O'Brien ran after her.

Lolly braced herself and placed a hand on the stair rail. It was finally time to leave. But the Blakes would be hearing from her again – very soon.

She looked over her shoulder. PC O'Brien was looking at her through the glass of the big wooden doors that separated the stairwell from the corridor. She winked, gripped the stair rail with both hands and sprung over the top of it. PC O'Brien rushed through the doors and looked over the rail, down at the endless twisting, turning flights of stairs. The girl was dropping down the dizzying gap, using the various rails and handholds like an Olympic gymnast to aid her descent. Within a few seconds she had dropped out of sight.

I hope you enjoyed the opening chapters of Class Heroes #1: A Class Apart. If you did and you want to carry on reading, please visit the Amazon page and buy the book.

Thanks

*Stephen Henning
Author*

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