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The Messengers

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TWO

The door of the hut was still open, but he was bent over his work now, the magnifying glass pulled down over one eye. I stood back from the entrance for a moment and took in the tiny heater and the round mirror which reflected the sea, the swaying masts of the boats by the beach and the dark shape of me. There was a postcard rack behind his chair, and a hand-painted postcard on his desk, but he wasn't painting. He was studying it. From the angle I was at, I couldn't see the detail.

He must have noticed my shadow because he looked up, his free eye still closed. I imagined how I must have seemed to him through the magnifying glass: warped and blurred and massive.

"You're back," he said. He had a faded accent. Scottish or Irish. "I thought you might be."

"Did you?" I said. "Maybe in your mind, this kind of hovel is a girl magnet." I tended to lash out a bit when nervous.

He shrugged and I was surprised to see that I'd upset him. He turned back to the postcard and muttered something.

"Anyway, I was just passing and I saw your postcards," I said. That was a lie, and the look on his face told me that he knew as much. "Do you paint them?"

"Some of them."

"Can I buy one to send to my mum?"

"Sure. Anything on the rack is fifty p."

Without stepping into the hut, I eyed the postcards on the rack. They were just the usual rubbish. Seafront scenes, beach huts, pictures of Princess Di, cartoons of vicars ogling women with big boobs.

"I wanted one of the hand-painted ones."

He sighed and took off the magnifying glass. "I don't think you do."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter. We'll get to that later."

His manner was businesslike, as if it was just inevitable that our conversation would continue.

"Who said anything about later," I said. I stepped away from the door and looked down the path, but there was nobody about. The sea fizzed as it dragged over the stones. I stared out on the endless darkness. You didn't get that sort of dark stretch back home.

"I've seen you around," he said.

"I doubt it. I've only been here a week."

"Please yourself."

"I generally do. What, you think you're a mystic? Some sort of fortune-teller?"

"I'm not a mystic," he said.

“Not in that tracksuit you’re not. Is that supposed to be retro?”

He laughed. “No. I probably bought it the first time it was fashionable. I just wear it to work in. It helps me to create a distance from what I have to do. It’s why I come here. Different place, different clothes. It’s not the kind of work you want to take home with you.”

“It all sounds a bit serious for selling postcards.”

“I’m talking about my real work.”

There was a look about him when he said that – somewhere between frightened and lethal.

“What am I doing here?” I said, under my breath.

“You couldn’t help it.”

He stood up out of his chair. He was long and tight as a guitar string. Turning over the postcard on his desk, he wrote something on the back in pencil. “Do you really want to see one of the hand-painted postcards?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said, glancing at the card. “Not if you’ve written your number on it.”

He smiled for a moment, then suddenly stopped. “I don’t need to. You’ll be back. Listen, you go past Friston Street, don’t you, on your way home? Will you post this for me? It’s very important.”

“You’re not clever,” I said. “I’d have to walk past Friston Street to get anywhere.”

“Fine. But will you post it?”

He gave me the postcard. I didn’t look at it. “Why should I?” I said.

“How are you feeling?” he said, ignoring my question. “After this morning? Eh? Drained, I bet. It drains you, doesn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You had an attack, didn’t you? This morning? A blackout. I can tell, because you’re just getting your colour back. What did you draw, afterwards?”

I shook my head and turned to go. “Bugger off, you freak,” I said.

“My name’s Peter Kennedy,” he said. “Pete.”

“Bugger off, *Pete*,” I said.

I began to walk away, and then I turned back. He was standing in the doorway of the hut, all the light spilling out around him. “I’m Frances Clayton,” I said. I don’t know what came over me.

“OK,” he said, “I’ll probably speak to you tomorrow.”

“What makes you think that?” I said.

“You’ll need to talk,” he said, and pulled the door shut.

Friston Street was long and quiet. The blossom petals had fallen to rot on the pavement, and the houses looked pale orange in the streetlight. I stopped beneath one of those streetlights and examined the postcard. I shuddered, but I didn’t know why.

He was a talented painter, that much was clear. It was so lifelike I had to check that the people in it weren’t moving. There was nothing particularly interesting about the subject of the postcard, but the detail – for something so small – was astonishing, and I knew now why he’d been using that little magnifying glass to study it. This was the scene:

A street, with grand white houses on either side.

The sea, at the end of the street.

A thin woman carrying a big box across the road.

A man looking out of the open second-floor window of one of the houses.

A traffic warden studying a white van.

A blue car, parked at a strange angle behind one of the nice black streetlamps they had on those old Helmstown roads.

A weird, uncanny feeling came over me. I felt sick looking at the painting, but I figured that was what happened when you studied something so small. I'd had a long day.

On the back of the postcard, there was no message, just a name and address, in Peter Kennedy's surprisingly neat handwriting: *Mr Samuel Richard Newman, Flat 3, 14 Friston Street, Helmstown, HM4 4TN*. Nothing else.

Suddenly, I wanted the thing out of my hands, so I ran up to the door of number 14, dropped it through the letterbox, and carried on down Friston Street, thinking of Peter Kennedy.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and I spun round, gasping. It was Max.

"Bloody hell, Maxi! Don't creep up on people like that."

"I thought you'd gone home ages ago," he said.

"No, I ... I just went for a bit of a stroll."

"Are you OK?" he asked. People kept asking me that, because of my blackouts and the mess back home. The truth was, I felt like I was coping fine. But I didn't know what was coming, did I?