

# **FOSTERS AND FIRE**

## **DON'T MIX**

CHAPTER 1

**MAX SEGREDO** stood by the curb and watched his house burn.

It gave off a cheery light, the crackling flames casting sunset yellows and cherry reds onto the manicured trees and tidy homes nearby. Sparks sizzled and popped like New Year's Eve fireworks. Clouds of gray billowed gracefully up into the night sky, and the homey smell of wood smoke filled the air.

But Max suspected that the house's owners didn't fully appreciate the beauty of it all.

Fifteen feet away on the lawn, Mr. Bumburger bellowed into his cell phone, his neck wattle jiggling. "I don't care how late it is. You get your bum over here right now and take this boy away!" As another crew of firemen rushed up to the house, dragging thick hoses, Mr. and Mrs. Bumburger



turned in unison to glare at Max. Bottom-heavy and block-headed, they resembled a pair of angry Russian nesting dolls.

Max decided this probably wasn't the best time to share that observation with them.

"No excuses!" Mr. Bumburger snarled into the phone. "I refuse to let this . . . this . . . *pyromaniac* spend another night with my family."

Rubbish, thought Max, fingers seeking the smooth weight of the gold-plated lighter in his pocket. They always invent some bogus reason. But his resentment felt dull-edged. He'd been through this sort of scene too many times.

Mr. Bumburger listened for a moment, and in the changing light, his pouchy face looked like that of deeply peeved cane toad. "No, that's *your* problem!" Ending the call, he jabbed the button with enough force to crush a flimsier phone.

Max hugged his arms and hunched his shoulders against the chill. Rain soon, he could smell it. True, he could dig his jacket out of the duffel bag at his feet, but really, what would be the point? He decided to make a game of seeing how long he could last before having to don his coat.

It wasn't much of a game, but it helped pass the time.

The red-faced Mr. Bumburger stuffed the cell phone into his pocket and strode across the lawn to where Max stood, well apart from the couple and their twin daughters.

"You'll pay for this, boy," he growled.

“Pay for what?”

Mr. Bumburger waved a hand at the merrily burning house. “All of this. You’ll pay, by thunder.”

Max frowned. “Leaving aside *why*, what would I pay *with*?” he asked. “My many stock market investments? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a kid.”

“That’s enough of your smart mouth.” The toad-faced man planted his fists on his hips and glared down at Max, round belly thrusting forward like an angry beach ball. “I’ll make certain Mr. Darny sends you straight to juvenile hall!”

“Juvie?” Max shivered, but he tilted his chin up defiantly. “For what?”

“Burning my house down, you little freak.”

Max gaped. “But I didn’t do it.”

“Oh, really? Then pray tell, who did?”

“Do I look like Sherlock Holmes? I don’t know!” Max said hotly. “But it’s not my fault.”

“Lies, lies, lies—that’s all I’ve heard since you moved in.” Mr. Bumburger gestured to where his wife stood with her hands on their daughters’ shoulders. “And to think I let a creepy child like you endanger my little angels.”

The angels, a pair of blond, perfect, eight-year-old brats, stuck out their tongues at Max.

“Look . . . *Dað*,” said Max, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, “I didn’t set the fire. You’ve got to believe me.”

The man’s face slammed shut like a prison gate. “That’s

*Mr. Bumburger* to you. You're not my foster child anymore. Not my problem."

"But, Mr. Bumburger—"

"It's pronounced *Bum-ber-zhay!* How often must I tell you?"

As often as it still gets a rise out of you, thought Max. But his heart wasn't in it.

"Stand right there while you wait for Mr. Darny. Don't move. Don't speak. Don't burn anything else down. And don't approach my family again, or I shall call the police." He stomped across the lawn, stumbling over fire hoses.

Max gritted his teeth and turned his back on the fire. Even after living in seven different homes, rejection still stung. But he shouldn't have been surprised. After all, Blame the Foster Kid was a game he'd seen played many times, and foster parents like the Bumburgers were masters at it.

He wouldn't miss them, with their fussy rules and their obnoxious daughters, their way of stashing him with a crusty old babysitter while the family went on expensive vacations. Max squeezed his eyes tight. The smoke was making them water.

What had really started the fire? The brats? One of his foster father's cigars? Their sinister cat, Mr. Waddles? He'd probably never know.

When he opened his eyes, the glint of light on glass captured his attention. A long black car was parked half a block

away, just beyond the streetlights' glow. Two dark shapes sat in the front seat, and one of them was holding something reflective up to his eyes. Binoculars, maybe? A video camera?

Max squinted, trying to make it out.

From the other direction, a siren wailed its *wee-oooh-wee-oooh*, and a white police car drove into view, coming to a stop behind a fire truck.

The long black car pulled away from the curb. Light flashed again on whatever its passenger held as the vehicle U-turned down the wide street, drifting into the night. Max watched it go. Probably just some freaks who like to watch fires, he thought.

The chilly breeze knifed through his thin cotton T-shirt, and Max shivered again. Now his game changed to: *Can I wait until Mr. Darny arrives before I put on my jacket?* But it still wasn't much of a game.

Bundled in thick housecoats and robes, the neighbors stood on their lawns, watching the blaze with so-glad-it's-not-my-house fascination. Max hadn't even had time to learn their names. But they looked like nice enough folks, for a bunch of normals. A pity he'd never fit into their world.

Hoses blasted the fire from several angles. It seemed to Max that the firefighters had gained the upper hand. Sure, the second story would have to be rebuilt, but at least the blaze wouldn't spread. Damage would be limited to one house and one boy's life.

Max glanced at the Bumpurgers and grimaced. It wasn't that he'd thought they were Foster Parents of the Year—not by a long shot. It wasn't that he'd hoped to be adopted—honestly, who would *volunteer* to change their last name to Bumpurger?

It was just that they blamed him for a fire he didn't set. And *that* was deeply unfair.

Mr. and Mrs. Bumpurger glowered back at him. An almost palpable wave of anger and loathing rolled across the lawn from his soon-to-be ex-foster parents. Great. Max could picture the glowing recommendation letter they'd write: *It was so hard for us to say good-bye to Max. We'll miss his friendly sarcasm and superior fire-starting skills.*

Then a sobering thought struck him. What if Mr. Darny actually listened to the beach-ball-bellied Bumpurgers? What if, instead of another foster placement, Max drew a stretch in juvie? Juvenile hall made the worst foster home look like a lark in the park with unicorns and ice cream.

Max had seen the boys who came out of juvie. Hard boys; mean-eyed boys. Gang material.

That wasn't the future Max pictured for himself. He bit his lip and scrutinized the street, watching for Mr. Darny's car.

Could this night possibly get any worse?

*Spit, spat, spatter.* Cold droplets landed on his face and bare arms. Max raised his face to the sky. Thunder rumbled, and

suddenly it was as if someone had turned on the sprinklers up above.

Rain. Just bloody perfect.

Max sighed. He squatted and dug through his duffel bag for his jacket.

All things considered, this wouldn't have been his first pick for the best way to spend his thirteenth birthday.

# **NO SMOKING, NO GUNPLAY**

**THE CAB RIDE** with Mr. Eugene V. Darny was every bit as delightful as Max had expected it would be.

“How *could* you?” the toast-brown, pear-shaped case-worker said for the fifth time. “After we talked and talked about your, er, pyromaniac tendencies and sent you to that expensive counselor?”

Max rolled his eyes. “Am I speaking Norwegian or something? I. Didn’t. Do it. Understand?”

Darny huffed and tut-tutted and wobbled his head. As the cab forged onward through the rain, he yammered and jabbered, his pencil-thin mustache looking for all the world like a caterpillar doing calisthenics. But Max was far more interested in their destination than in rehashing an argument he couldn’t win.

“Where are we going?” he broke in at last.

“Eh?” The caseworker stopped in mid-gripe. “Oh. I, er, found a sort of group home for you. More than you deserve? I’ll say. And you’d better not mess this one up, boy, or it’s juvenile hall for certain.” He wagged a finger.

Max bit back a reply. He crossed his arms and settled deeper into the seat. At least he wasn’t bound for juvie. That was something.

The rain had forced all but the hardiest of drivers from the roads. A few stranded pedestrians huddled under the awnings of all-night curry shops, and the tube stations stood deserted. Before long, the cab turned into a neighborhood of shabby redbrick homes and down-at-the-heels businesses, like Bangers & Sprods and Guido’s House of Olives. Max had a hard time imagining their customers.

Halfway down one anonymous block, they pulled to the curb. Max leaned forward to inspect the nearest house.

“Out, out,” said Mr. Darny, elbowing him. “I haven’t got all night.”

Max stepped onto the sidewalk, lugging his duffel bag. Torrents of rainwater sluiced off of his straight black hair, flowed down his jacket, and soaked his black high-tops. He couldn’t have gotten much wetter by standing directly under a shower nozzle.

Darny reached a soft, pudgy hand over the seat back. “That’s half,” he told the driver. “You’ll get the rest if you’re still here when I finish my business.”



Unfurling a purple penguin-themed umbrella, the caseworker stepped onto the sidewalk and closed the door on the driver's outraged squawk.

"Come, boy. Let's get you situated."

Max thought Mr. Darny sounded like a penguin with a head cold. But it didn't pay to tell your caseworker that. "Can't wait," he muttered.

Across the street, a long black car drifted past. Max wouldn't have sworn it was the same vehicle he'd seen at the fire, but he wouldn't have sworn it *wasn't*, either. The vehicle glided down the road, engine purring. Max slung his duffel bag over his shoulder.

Passing through a wrought-iron gate, Mr. Darny splashed into a puddle with a muffled curse and waddled up the short walkway. He even walks like a penguin, Max thought, trailing after. The grimy brick building was nearly identical to the other grimy brick buildings on the street—identical but for a few small details.

Max's sharp eyes took in the massive satellite dish squatting on the roof, the wicked-looking spikes and barbed wire decorating the rooftop edges, the barred windows, and the discreet cameras watching the street and walkway.

"Cheerful place," he said. "Who's their decorator, Martha Paranoid?"

"Hush." The caseworker climbed three short steps and rapped a claw knocker against a tarnished brass plate. *Bam, bam, bam!*

A faded, weather-beaten sign hung above the door. Max frowned at it. “‘Merry Sunshine Orphanage’? I thought orphanages were extinct.”

“Yes, well, apparently, you don’t know everything. What a surprise.” Mr. Darny straightened his tie and fussed with his overcoat.

Max surveyed the soot-stained windowsills, the bricks in need of a serious scrubbing, and the suspicious face peering through an upstairs window. On the whole, he found the entire place very *un*-merry sunshiny.

“Mr. Darny . . .” he began.

“Not now.” The caseworker pounded the knocker more forcefully. At last, a tiny barred porthole opened, and a gray eye peered through bulletproof glass.

“Shove off,” a man’s voice growled. “We’re closed.”

“Oh, uh”—Darny bobbed his head nervously—“special delivery for the director. I called ahead.”

“Well, nobody told me,” said the owner of the gray eye. The porthole closed with a thunk.

“Bother,” the caseworker muttered. He hesitantly raised his hand to the knocker again.

A woman’s voice rang from behind the door. Max couldn’t make out the words, but the tone was unmistakable—that of a battlefield general issuing orders. By her tone, an invasion of Poland was just around the corner.

With a buzz and a click, the door swung open.

Buttery golden light spilled into the night, making the



raindrops sparkle like Christmas tinsel. Framed by the doorway, a lean woman in black stood ruler-straight, one fist planted on her hip. Her face was ageless and Asian. She could've been anywhere from thirty-five to sixty-five, but her scowl warned foolish visitors against asking.

"Well?" she demanded of Darny.

The caseworker looked like he'd swallowed a spiny frog. "Miz Director, er, Annie . . . I, er, the boy . . ." He gestured limply behind him.

Max climbed the steps and extended his hand. He'd learned that it paid to be polite with authority figures—at least at the start.

"I'm Max Segredo."

"Segredo?" The woman's eyes widened briefly. She didn't shake, and Max noticed that her right hand held a sleek gray pistol.

"Nice arsenal," he said nervously.

The woman in black scanned the sidewalk. "Salesmen very pesky." Her accent was heavy and foreign, but nothing Max recognized.

Mr. Darny cleared his throat and got a grip on himself. "Max, this is er, Hantai Annie Wong. The orphanage director."

Max stuffed his hand into his pocket. "Charmed."

The woman grunted. "Get inside. It's wet." Her bright, birdlike eyes surveyed the street as she ushered the pair

MERRY SUNSHINE  
ORPHANAGE



over the threshold. They stepped into a ten-foot-long space watched over by two cameras above a second door. That door's narrow observation window was reinforced with wire.

"Expecting an invasion?" said Max, before he could help himself. Mr. Darny elbowed him.

"You never know," the director said darkly. She snapped her fingers and pointed at the coatrack. "Jackets."

Max and Darny hung up their coats. The inner door opened with another buzz and a click, and there stood the fellow who, presumably, had told them to shove off—a bear-shaped white man with a bristly crew cut and a face as round and crusty-looking as a steak-and-kidney pie. He held the door and stepped aside without a word.

Max edged past him into the entryway. The contrast with the house's facade couldn't have been more dramatic.

He found himself in a cozy, softly lit, semicircular space, with several doorways branching off to the left and right. The dark wood floor gleamed like a con man's smile; the antique rugs were spotless. Dead ahead, a flight of mauve-carpeted stairs curled up and out of view. The wallpaper sported a fleur-de-lis pattern in pale violet that must've been all the rage back when everyone wore powdered wigs.

Above a door to the left, another surveillance camera watched it all.

*"Oi, koi,"* said Hantai Annie. "Come."

She marched toward the nearest right-hand door, which

bore the word OFFICE on a brass nameplate. On the wall beside it, a framed needlepoint sampler displayed the motto: FAMILY IS WHERE YOU FIND IT.

Yeah, right, thought Max. Family is what you're assigned to. He hoped this wasn't one of those *Today is the first day of the rest of your ruddy life* type of homes.

Bear Man lumbered past and opened the door for them. The office looked homey and neat, boasting the usual assortment of desk, chairs, bookshelves, filing cabinet, and couch. Two samurai warrior masks hung on the wall, like the comedy-and-tragedy masks displayed at theaters. But both faces were scowling. Not a paper was out of place, and a mug of tea on a coaster sent wisps of steam curling toward the ceiling.

"Sit!" The director indicated the overstuffed sofa.

Mr. Darny perched on the edge of a cushion, briefcase atop his knees. Max sank into the couch with a faint soggy squish.

"So." Hantai Annie laid her pistol on the desk. Her ebony eyes bored into Max's hazel ones.

"So," said Max, tapping a sneakered foot.

He knew the drill. Whether they came on sweet as cinnamon or tough as buffalo jerky, they all wanted to know two things: Who is this kid, and will he fit in?

Unconsciously, Max slipped a hand into his pocket for his lucky stone, the chunk of obsidian he'd found at the beach that last sunny day with his mother, so many years before.



He rubbed its smooth sides, fingered the sharp edge. Then he leaned back against the velvety cushions and tried to act as if he popped into orphanages during thunderstorms every night of the week.

All that betrayed him were his shallow breathing and a certain tightness around the mouth. He was glad no one could see the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Darny coughed nervously. "It's, er, all here, Director." He fiddled with his briefcase, withdrew a folder, and handed Hantai Annie a sheaf of papers.

She scanned the top sheet and studied Max's face. "Mixed race? What mix? You not Japanese, not Chinese."

This, too, was part of the drill. They took in his almond-shaped eyes, golden-brown skin, and features that blended East and West, and asked, *What are you?* Like he was some kind of strange new bug.

Max ran his thumb over the stone. "My mum was Thai. My dad . . ." He shrugged. "Some white guy. He ran off and died when I was little."

Hantai Annie read farther down the sheet. "*Simon Segredo?*" She exchanged a glance with Bear Man, who stood near the door. Something passed between them, something secret.

"What?" said Max.

"Nothing," said the director. "Now, why has one boy lived in seven different foster homes?"

"Variety is the spice of life," Max heard himself saying. Darny winced.

"You think I stupid?" the director snapped.

"Of course not," said Mr. Darny.

"You think, this lady no talk proper English, so she *baka*?" Hantai Annie thumped her chest. "*Hontou wa*, I speak seven languages, I have master's degree."

"I believe it," said Max, thinking, I'll have to watch my step with this one.

"I learn English last," she grumbled. "Crazy language." Her gaze bore into Max. "So tell me truth. Why so many fosters?"

Max sat up straighter. "It's not my fault."

Mr. Darny blanched and tried on a halfhearted smile. It fit him about as well as bunny slippers on a bullfrog.

"*Oshiero*," said Hantai Annie. "Tell me."

The caseworker dropped his gaze to the file. "Well, his, er, first three fosters died."

"How?" asked the director, eyes on Max. He gulped.

"Let's see . . ." said Darny. "Devoured by crocodiles . . . executed by Gurlukh warlords, and . . . popped off in an accident involving a bathtub, a radio, and a yo-yo."

"Again, not my fault," said Max.

Hantai Annie pursed her lips. "And the rest?"

Mr. Darny grimaced. "They, um, released the lad for . . . er, starting fires or stealing. But he's learned his lesson, mum.



No trouble here.” He shot Max a warning look.

“Fires? Stealing?” the director mused, her face cold. “You know what I say?”

Darny gripped his briefcase protectively.

Here it comes, thought Max. He wondered dully whether he could get into one of the better juvie gangs, and what their initiation would be like.

Hantai Annie held his gaze. “Learn to control fire,” she said at last. “And if you stealing, don’t get caught.”

Max couldn’t help gaping.

“Okay,” she told the caseworker. “We take him on trial basis.” Hantai Annie signed a form and thrust it at Mr. Darny. “Styx,” she told Bear Man, “pay Darny. Bag goes in Room Five.”

“Yes, Director.”

Max did his best to hide his enormous relief. Could this Merry Sunshine Orphanage truly be a different sort of group home from the ones he’d known?

Styx lifted Max’s duffel like a sack full of feathers, then shambled to the door. Mr. Darny’s face split into a smile so oily you could’ve fried chips on it. He hopped to his feet and followed Styx, saying, “Thanks, mum. Knew you’d like him, I did. You’re a first-rate judge of, er, character. Tip-top!”

The door clicked shut behind them. Hantai Annie studied Max carefully, as if memorizing him for a test on thirteen-year-old boys who appeared out of the night.

“Three rules at Merry Sunshine,” she said. “No smoking. No unsupervised gunplay—”

“Gunplay?”

“And loyalty above all. You promise to obey?”

Max shrugged. “Sure.”

“For now, this your family. Act like it.”

Max nodded, but he honestly had no idea what she meant.

Up in his new room, gentle snores issued from two of the beds. Roommates. A thatch of blond hair stuck up from one lump of bedclothes, and a bare foot dangled from the other. Max yawned. He’d sort things out with them tomorrow. His duffel bag leaned against the third bed. In the dim blue glow of a night-light he undid the clasps and rummaged inside, pulling out a rolled-up T-shirt. He gently laid it down and unfurled it.

Nestled in its folds was a framed 3 x 5 photo of a smiling Asian woman. Max transferred his lucky stone from his pocket to the nightstand and stood the photo beside it. Flicking his lighter on with a practiced thumb, he held it to illuminate the image. Tenderly, he traced the woman’s cheek with a finger.

*Good night, Mum.*

Then he reached into the bag for some dry socks and frowned. Out came a stiff square of card paper. Odd.

Max eyed his roommates, but both seemed truly asleep.





He angled the note and held it closer to the night light. The scrawled message read:

UKQN BWPDAN EO WHERA

It wasn't English. It didn't look like any language spoken by actual human beings. But an odd awareness tickled his brain. A familiar pattern lurked beneath the letters, waiting to burst to the surface like a shark from the depths.

A coded message, then. And something told him it wasn't just *Welcome to Merry Sunshine, old bean*.

Max shivered as a chill fluttered up his spine. What have I landed in this time? he wondered.

# CAESAR'S CODE REVEALS ALL

CHAPTER 3

**MAX COULDN'T BREATHE.** It was back—his old nightmare of suffocating in a tight space. Panic gripped him. Struggling up from the dark well of dreams, he felt like a great weight was crushing all the air from his lungs.

As things turned out, it was.

A beefy-looking girl with wild red hair sat astride his chest, trapping him under the covers.

“Who sent you?” she demanded. This redheaded troll leaned down into his face, treating Max to a close-up of beady blue eyes and a truly impressive demonstration of morning breath.

“Get . . . off, you . . . daft cow,” Max wheezed in a pitiful whisper.

“Who sent you here to spy on us?” Beefy Red thwacked his nose with a finger. It stung. “Answer, you dimwat!”



Max's arms were tightly pinioned. In desperation, he tried thrashing his body to buck the deranged girl off. No luck. Someone else held his legs.

Max went wild. But no matter how he twisted, Beefy Red and her unseen partner kept him pinned. He began to feel light-headed. His lungs screamed for air.

"I said, talk, you little beggar," the girl sneered.

Max's unprintable reply came out in a faint hiss. He could make no sound.

A snide voice drawled, "Uh, Nikki, he can't answer you."

"'Course he can." She glared down at Max.

"Not if he can't breathe," said the voice.

"Oh," said Nikki. She shifted her weight just enough for Max to draw a gasping breath. He coughed.

"Now," the girl said, "who sent you, slant-eyed spy? China? North Korea?"

"Wee Willie Winkie and his dancing aardvark," said Max. Her flushed face went slack in confusion. "Huh?"

"My caseworker, you moron. How else does a kid land in an orphanage?"

The girl's eyes narrowed, and she drew back a fist. "You little . . ."

"Nikki," the other voice said, in warning.

She glanced over her shoulder and vaulted off the bed in a flash.

"What's all this, then?" a new voice rumbled.

As Max rolled onto his side, sucking in a lungful of sweet air, he noticed Bear Man from last night—Styx, was it?—filling the doorway.

“We were just welcoming the new kid,” drawled Nikki’s companion, a scrawny, pale boy with silky brown hair and a face like a weasel. “Right, um . . . ?” He looked over at Max.

“Max,” said Max, coolly.

“Is that so?” asked Styx. “They welcoming you?”

Max sat up. At a glance, he read the situation: Weasel Boy looking worried; Nikki beside him, glaring the message, *Tell and you die*. Max had passed through enough group homes to know the score—nothing was lower than a squealer, and half the time the staff didn’t believe you anyway.

“Yeah,” said Max. “Welcomed with open arms.” *And closed fists*, he added silently.

The burly man sized up the scene with shrewd eyes. “Bloody heartwarming. Class starts in four minutes. Bigger off.”

With a last warning glance at Max, Weasel Boy and Nikki edged past Styx and out the door.

“Class?” said Max.

“Morning Warm-ups. Room Three.” When Max didn’t move, Styx flung a towel at him. “Chop-chop. The director hates tardiness.”

Max located a bathroom across the hall and splashed water on his face, considering his options. He only had to



survive this loony bin long enough to avoid juvie and be placed with another family—hopefully one better than the Bumburgers. Then, in two or three years he could go to court, get emancipated, and live on his own at last.

He met his eyes in the mirror. Just stay cool, he told his reflection.

While slipping into jeans and a fresh T-shirt, he took stock of his new room. Three beds occupied the chamber, each with its own nightstand and cobalt-blue footlocker. The other two beds were immaculately made up. No sports banners or rappers' photos decorated the tan walls; no boy-type messes cluttered the floor.

Beside the door, a seriously old-timey poster showed a burning boat sinking into a blue sea. LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS, it read.

Charming, thought Max. Just the thing to make an orphan feel at home.

He could already tell this wasn't an ordinary orphanage; he just didn't know what flavor of weird it was. On impulse, he grabbed the coded message from the nightstand and stuffed it into his pocket. He hurried down the stairs and into the entryway.

Six numberless doors faced him. Which was Room Three?

Hearing a noise behind one of them, he turned the knob and stepped into the room.

Dead ahead, a lithe young woman with loads of glossy

blue-black hair was whipping her arms down in front of her. *Fwip-fwip*. Her huge brown eyes widened. Two objects left her hands—glittering knives headed straight for him!

No time to think.

Max ducked.

*Thunk!* One blade stuck in the door frame, a hairsbreadth away. The other sailed past, embedding itself in the baseboard of the opposite wall.

“Witless, brainless boy!” cried the woman.

“Me? You’re the one throwing knives at doors.”

She glared. “Never *ever* enter without knocking,” she trilled in a musical, Indian accent. “Not in this school. And certainly not these days.”

“Sorry,” Max said, only a touch sarcastically. He noticed that the room had a conspicuous lack of other students. “Uh, Morning Warm-ups?”

The Indian woman pointed left with another wicked-looking knife. “Next door.” As Max turned to go, she added, “You know, having a famous father doesn’t make you special. You’ll have to work even harder than the rest.”

Max spun around. “You knew my father?” Hope quickened his heart. Simon Segredo had left when Max was so young, he couldn’t even recall the man’s face. If this woman could tell him . . . “What was he—”

The knife thrower jerked her chin. “Go!”

“But I—”



"It's not my place to say more. Now, hurry! Your class is beginning." When Max stepped out into the entry hall still dazed, the woman added, "And close the bloody door!"

Max did so, and immediately another knife thunked against it. He stepped over to the next door, rapped twice, and swung it open.

A lean body sheathed in charcoal spandex paced before a group of about fifteen kids who stood at attention on thin rubber mats. "You late!" Hantai Annie Wong snapped at Max.

"Yeah, well, nobody mentioned a class last night. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She reached down beside a rack of sports balls, produced a rolled-up mat, and tossed it to him. "Be on time."

Max found an open stretch of floor and unfurled his mat. He stood on it, copying the other orphans.

"Class, this is Max Segredo," said the director. "Introductions later. Now, forward bend!"

The students raised their arms high and bowed forward, folding at the waist. On his way down, Max noticed a deeply tanned older boy in a red tracksuit standing behind Annie, balancing a spinning basketball on his finger.

"Plant hands; jump your feet back!" barked the director.

Max imitated the student next to him, a wiry-haired girl with skin like pale chocolate milk. When she noticed him watching, she hissed, "Eyes front!"

“Oh, come on,” he whispered. “How else am I—”

*Bam!* Something hard smacked Max right between the shoulder blades and bounced away.

He jumped to his feet, fists ready. “Hey! Who did that?”

Red Tracksuit Guy lifted a soccer ball off the rack, an exaggerated expression of innocence on his features.

“You dead, Max Segredo,” said Hantai Annie.

“What? You’re loony. Just tell me who hit me.”

Someone gasped. The director picked up a volleyball, her face impassive. “Object of game is, don’t get hit. When do you let your guard down?” she asked the class.

“Never!” came the answer.

“Take your position,” she told Max.

“You—” A smart remark trembled on Max’s lips, waiting to be said. He bit it back and remembered the threat of juvie. Just stay cool, he reminded himself. His fists unclenched. “Okay. I’ll play your little game.”

In triangle pose, a soccer ball smacked him in the belly. “Dead!” called Hantai Annie.

In crane pose, a volleyball bopped him in the bum. “Dead again!”

In seated twist, he got hit not once, but twice. “Dead, dead, you *so* dead,” sang the director. She seemed to take an unhealthy delight in killing people.

Max clenched his jaw and put up with it. If the rest of the orphans could bear this stoically, he could too. Looking



around, he noticed he wasn't the only one on the casualty list; nearly everyone had been hit at least once.

Class continued for what felt like hours, with stretches and thumps and a few muttered curses. By the end of it, Max's T-shirt was soaked through with sweat.

Hantai Annie clapped her hands. "Breakfast now. *Iooge!*"

The students rolled up their mats and stored them on a shelf. The wiry-haired girl reached past Max to add hers to the stack.

"Weirdest P.E. class ever," Max muttered to her.

"Really?" She cocked her head and surveyed him with an amused smirk. "You need to get out more often."

Wrecking yards and parrot sanctuaries were peaceful, quiet places compared to the orphanage dining room. All the kids from class, plus a few older ones, shouted, chattered, joked, and clattered plates. Rich smells of cooked meat filled the air, and Styx hustled back and forth from kitchen to table, bearing platters of eggs, bangers, and bacon, as well as baskets of muffins and tureens of porridge.

Max's belly grumbled. This orphanage beat *Oliver Twist's* all hollow.

A shaggy black-and-brown dog the size of a Shetland pony sat by the long table, watching every bite, ropes of drool dangling from its mouth. When Max passed by, it growled, rumbling like a distant avalanche.

"Nice puppy," Max muttered.

He loaded his plate with food and found an empty seat a little apart from the rest. Curious glances came his way, but Max needed space to think.

Why had that redheaded psycho, Nikki, attacked him? And what about his father? Why had the knife thrower called him famous?

Max barely recalled his dad, except for the faintest memory of ticklish kisses from a mustachioed mouth and the citrusy scent of aftershave. Details on the man were scarcer than snowflakes in July. *He left when you were young, he died soon after* was all Max had been able to glean.

He shifted in his seat and heard the crinkle of the coded message in his pocket. Had one of these kids slipped it to him? The orphans ranged from eight to eighteen and spanned a spectrum of skin tones from mahogany to ivory. Why would one of these strangers write him a note?

“Ease up, mon!” The voice in his ear startled Max. An athletic, teak-skinned boy with a downy mustache and a wraparound smile had claimed the seat beside him.

“Sorry?” said Max.

“You look like your life is full of botheration,” said the teen, in a lilting Caribbean accent. He seemed a few years older than Max. “I’m Tremaine,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Max,” said Max, shaking it. “I’m fine. New place, that’s all.”

“Oi, Rashid!” Tremaine called to Red Tracksuit Guy.



“Muffin me!” At the table’s other end, the solemn-faced boy reared back and hurled the baked treat, and Tremaine snatched it from the air with a spectacular grab. “So, did Nikki Knucks give you her bug-in-a-rug greeting?”

“How did you know?”

“Cho!” Tremaine chuckled as he broke the muffin in half. “Don’t let it vex you, Maxwell. She does it to everyone—everyone she thinks she can push around.”

“And here I thought I was special.”

A heavy hand clapped his shoulder. “Right then, new kid,” rumbled a deep voice.

“Ah, Mr. Styx,” said Max, turning.

“No mister, just Styx,” said the bearlike man. He jerked a thumb at the wiry-haired girl, who stood next to him, watching the room. “Director says stick close to this one. She’ll show you the ropes.”

The girl nodded at Max. “Cinnabar Jones.”

“Max Segredo.”

Cinnabar smirked. “So I gathered.”

Styx thumped Max’s shoulder with a hand like an anvil. “Right, then. I’m off to the salt mines.” He lumbered away.

“You won’t get assigned any chores until tomorrow,” said Cinnabar, in a bored tone. “Drop your plate on the dirty stack and follow me.”

“What’s the rush?” said Max, eyeing his half-eaten sausage. But then he noticed most of the other orphans were

finishing their meals and heading out the door. "Where are we going?"

"Maths and Puzzles. We can't be late."

He caught her arm. "Uh, think maybe you guys need to lighten up a bit? Classwork isn't a matter of life and death."

She stared at his hand until he released her. Then, for the first time, she looked straight at him. Up close, her eyes were luminous and golden.

"How do you know it isn't?" said Cinnabar.

A hodgepodge of mismatched chairs jammed the stuffy third-floor room. Built-in bookcases stretched from floor to ceiling, packed with enough musty old volumes to start a dust lovers' lending library. A pair of barred windows strained some weak daylight into the place, and the heat was cranked up so high it felt like noon in Cameroon.

Max claimed a hard wooden chair beside Cinnabar and eyed the stiff-backed older woman scribbling on a chalkboard.

"That's Madame Chiffre," said Cinnabar.

The woman turned, her bladelike nose parting the air like the prow of a great ship. Her clothes were simple and elegant: cream-colored slacks, dove-gray sweater, and a crimson scarf. Thick glasses magnified her watery green eyes. Her face was as pale as a blank page.

Madame Chiffre clapped her hands twice, and the orphans' chatter subsided.



“Eh, *bon*. Today, let us review ze Caesar cipher.”

“Awww.” The disappointed groan came from Nikki Knucks, who slouched on a love seat across the room with her weasel-faced friend. “Again?”

“A problem, *mademoiselle*?”

Nikki crossed her arms. “We already covered this. It’s a substitution cipher where one letter takes the place of another, and blah, blah, blah.”

“Then let us make things interesting,” said the teacher. “First person to decode a message wins . . . one day free of chores.” The students clapped enthusiastically, but Max’s mind was elsewhere.

*A substitution code?* The mental tickle he’d felt at seeing last night’s note grew stronger. Foster Parents #2, the Quinns, had been crazy about word games and puzzles, forcing Max to play along with them. Something about this reminded him of those days . . . but what?

Madame Chiffre called on Cinnabar to encode a message in the Caesar cipher. While the girl wrote on the chalkboard, the teacher explained the system. “Each letter in ze plaintext eez replaced by a letter some certain number of positions down ze alphabet. *Par exemple*, in a one-letter shift, ze *A* becomes what?”

“A *B*,” said Nikki in a bored singsong.

“Correct, *mademoiselle*. It eez a *B* in ze coded text.”

Max frowned. He pulled the note from his pocket and

doodled on it with a pencil stub. The teacher's description had shaken something loose in his mind.

*UKQN BWP DAN EO WHERA . . .* It wasn't a simple two-letter shift, where the *As* became *Cs*. Nor a three . . . What if it was a four-letter shift? The *U* became *Y*, the *K* became *O*. . . .

The sounds of the room faded into white noise as he scribbled away. Letters seemed to swirl before his eyes like a flock of starlings, and then all at once they formed a pattern.

Max blinked. He glanced up to clear his vision and saw Cinnabar's message shining through her code, clear as a copper penny in a reflecting pool.

"It says, *Where did my sister go?*" he blurted.

Cinnabar's mouth fell open in a perfect O. The other kids, halfway through their own decoding, turned to gawk.

"He cheated!" snapped Nikki. "She told him."

"I did not," said Cinnabar.

But Max didn't notice. He gazed down at his message and slumped in his seat, utterly and completely gobsmacked.

"What is it?" asked a stocky blond boy in the next row.

Max just stared. His message contained only four little words. But those four words were enough to rattle his world. The note read:

**YOUR FATHER IS ALIVE.**

