

11.32 PM – Holestrom Manor.

“Officer, look at me . . . what happened in there?” Phillip looks to his kids forcing a smile when in fact all they can see is blind panic. “For the love of God, officer, what happened? Where’s your partner? Who did you call?”

His family waits outside in the cold winter night huddled around each other beneath the wrapping of their duvets. From their bright yellow cocoon of bedding they eagerly watch their father Phillip question the wide-eyed, white faced police officer who sits against his police car. The blue and red lights twirl endlessly, blotting Holestrom Manor along with the long gravel drive framed with birch trees whispering to each other in the biting breeze.

“G-Gerry.”

“Gerry, he was the other police officer. Is he hurt?”

“She took him . . .” The officer’s eyes widen further.

“Daddy please come back.” Phillip’s oldest daughter Sarah calls out to her father lifting the bedding letting out the warmth.

“In a minute honey, I need to see if . . .” Phillip stops. Light pours from the slats in the window, getting brighter flowing up the driveway in a brilliant white light drowning out the blue and red flashes of police safety. The light reaches its climax and a scream is heard, Phillip, his family and the officer sitting beside his car freeze. Not by choice, but by the lack of natural instincts telling us ‘fight or flight.’ When our evolutionary survival reflexes shut down we have nothing left to do except wait for it to be over. Very occasionally something happens that is so beyond our comprehension and is so far beyond our realms of belief that our mind and body do the only thing they can, which is nothing.

11:38 PM – 2 Miles South of Holestrom Manor.

Two blacked out people carriers followed by a coach drive north, averaging around fifty miles an hour.

Spilt between the two people carriers are six agents from COVEN, inside the dimly lit vehicles the six agents have an earpiece and micro camera attached to the black-rimmed glasses. Closing in on the para-site, all agents are silent as their intelligence personnel riding in the coach behind is briefing them. Every agent that goes into the field has a call sign and his is CoG.

Sandwiched between the coach and the leading people carrier is the Alpha team consisting of agents Mercy, Rodent and Charmer. Mercy is very proud of her call sign as it strikes an uneasiness in the unwilling foes that cross her path. Her talent is an acute form of telekinesis, which she performed with enthusiasm to the medical staff examining her potential during the initial COVEN mental and physical testing. She insisted that when each doctor could take no more of her ‘performance,’ they must beg for “Mercy.” All four doctors had left the room within two minutes and thirteen seconds. Her superiors looked no further for her call sign.

Rodent is not as keen on his call sign. The same group of expert doctors that Mercy had enjoyed playing with were astounded at the intensity of Rodent’s senses, whether it was his perfect sight that could count the hairs on a man’s head from thirty feet or the sense of smell so finely tuned he can detect and trace nearly any scent he’s given. His sense of hearing was the talent that made him one of the most useful counter-agents that has ever existed.

Rodent also knew that his physical features didn’t help with his call sign as he has black eyes that either stared at one place for too long or dart around as if every object in every room had to be seen in detail. It was down to his long and pointed nose that sat above his thin lips in an everlasting frown that really made the call sign stick.

CoG's fast and excited voice came through on all of the earpieces. "No previous investigation into this place so it's a first for us. We've been called in because Councilman Phillip Barlow has connections with top brass and a favour for them will surely only do us a good turn.

"The Councilman contacted local authorities at ten thirty two reporting that his children were screaming about a 'Woman in White' and blood stains in the house. Officer Gerry Dobson is missing after investigating the scene. Any questions thus far?" Silence hung over the earpieces with only the distant sound of the engines working away in the background.

CoG jumped at the silence in order to carry on his briefing. "Ok, Alpha team have the drop on this with Beta running perimeter and back up. Charmer?" In the seat next to Mercy sits Charmer, his call sign is a huge understatement as his talents range far beyond the capacity of most, if not all of the other team members put together. The bosses however, decided that he would be best served using only his baser talents so as not to attract too much unwanted attention. His long dark hair hangs over his face and black rimmed issued glasses as a smile creeps onto his perfectly white marble face. At the mention of his name his ice blue eyes shoot open with anticipation even though he knows what his role for the evening will be.

"I imagine I have the pleasure of consorting amongst the horror stricken victims, yes?" His voice flows with an air of aristocracy as each word is pronounced, as only the Queen would approve.

"That's right Charmer, what would we do without you?"

"Probably drown in harassment and property damage lawsuits."

11:42 PM – Holestrom Manor.

Phillip's anger forces him to grab the collar of the officer with both hands; he wrenches him up so their faces are within a few inches from each other.

“Tell me what’s happening!”

The officer's eyes glaze and stare off into the darkness of the night, beginning to flicker around their sockets and eventually focus on Phillip with an alarming and intense gaze.

Phillip tries again to get through to him now he seems to be awake.

“Tell me! What’s in there? Where’s the other Officer?”

“Gone.”

“What? Where’s he gone?”

“She’s taken him, the light.” Without blinking, tears begin to roll down the officer's face.

“Gerry’s gone.”

“Gone, what? Is he dead?”

“He’s . . .” The officer couldn't manage any other words and lost his focus with Phillip repeating the same word every couple of seconds. “He’s . . .” Phillip sees the officer in shock and knows he won't be able to get anything out of him. His children stare at him with as much fear as he feels himself but doesn't show. The wind picks up lifting the hairs on his neck stand on end. At the far end of the drive, headlights spill past the stonewalls, breaking through the open gates and steadying themselves as they rise along the gravel.

11:46 PM – Holestrom Manor.

Two anonymous people carriers and a coach stop at the top of the driveway next to the police car. Both of the doors open and Beta team begin a perimeter check of the grounds,

Alpha team approach the house with the exception of Charmer who is with the unresponsive officer and terrified family.

CoG calls in over their headsets, “Okay Alphas, once you’ve swept the exterior let’s have Mercy and Rodent entering through the front. Sound off once you’re in position.” Charmer holds his gaze with the officer sitting on the ground. Talking so quietly that only the officer can hear what is being said, he nods in a hypnotic state and begins to speak in a voice just as quiet as Charmer’s. A minute later Charmer breaks his gaze from the officer and steps away from him to speak privately over his headset. Phillip’s impatience gets the better of him as he turns to speak to Charmer. His little girl whimpers at him as he steps out from under the blanket, letting the cold air bite at her under her pyjamas. Charmer swiftly turns to face Phillip, their eyes meeting and Phillip freezes in much the same way the officer did, but he does not hold the same tranquil look upon his face. Phillip is frozen with fear, as Charmer simply raises his finger to his lips and quietly whispers, “Hush.” Giving no other instruction he turns from Phillip who slips back under the blanket with his family hugging them tighter than they have ever known before.

Charmer looks down the long driveway leading up to the front of the Manor where he can make out Rodent, Mercy and the Manor standing before them hiding its secrets, yet hinting at the inevitable with its lifeless appearance. “This is Charmer requesting Alpha team.” Charmer can see by the state of the family and by what the officer has told him that there is something disturbed in the Manor. Disturbed and angry enough to attack officer Macklin’s partner and scare him to despair.

“Charmer this is CoG, Alpha team are all ears.”

“After speaking with officer Macklin I can confidently state that we are dealing with a level four Ethereal at the very least.”

“Any last minute advice before we start the initial interior sweep?” Rodent speaks up before Charmer can continue.

“I believe that Mercy should envelop everything and anything she can. In the event that the Ethereal should attempt to contact you in any way, she would then be aware of any intention immediately.”

“You heard the man.” Rodent replied. “Do we have a ‘Go’ Cog?”

“You’re all up on visuals and audio. That’s a ‘Go’ from me.” Replied CoG.

Charmer watches Rodent checking his revolver at the large oak doors whilst Mercy flexes her fingers into fists and then stretches them out straight again both readying their weapons. For the first time in a long time he is nervous, but he knows that he is here for a job, just like the rest of the team. “That’s a ‘Go’ from Charmer.”

11:53 PM – Ground Floor of Holestrom Manor.

Mercy and Rodent step and they both feel the drop in temperature. It is colder inside the Manor than out and they both know what that means. It means that whatever Ghost or Ethereal is occupying the Manor is an angry, vengeful one with an attitude.

“Feels like Hell has frozen over in here.” Rodent jokes.

“Reminds me of your wife’s place.” Mercy fires back, pleased at the chance to have a dig at Rodent. She tries the light switch as they are standing in darkness with only the moons glow lighting them from the open door. Nothing.

“Ex-wife, Mercy. Ex-wife.” He corrects her. Rodent sniffs at the air around them. “The bulbs have been burnt out.” He takes one last sniff in the air from left to right, as an expert might if he were trying to decipher the individual odours of an ancient wine. “They’ve all blown.”

“If there’s no light, then I’ve got no visual. Mercy can you switch on your headset beam?”
CoG’s voice pours in through the headset.

“Sure thing, I don’t mind making myself a target so you can see what attacks me as I get torn in half!” Mercy usually sounded sarcastic whenever she spoke, but she always managed to outdo herself when she was working.

She switches on the beams that are built into the sides of her black-rimmed glasses. The beam only illuminates the exact spot where Mercy is looking and where CoG is watching, via the micro camera and live feed to the coaches various computer screens and recording equipment.

Rodent gives out a murmur of laughter at Mercy’s sarcasm and the fact that she has to use the beam. He would never have to use the beam due to his heightened vision. Mercy turns to him and looks him in the face shining the beam right into his eyes.

“Something funny Rodent?”

“No, no. Not at all, just enjoying the company s’ all.” With a smile still on his face he steps around Mercy and looks up at the long wooden staircase waiting for his eyes to adjust back to the darkness.

“That better be all.” Mercy spits out as she turns back to face the hallway ahead of her.

“CoG this is Rodent, are you receiving?” Rodent’s voice turns professional as he speaks over the headset; much like he always does when he knows what he says will be recorded and transcribed for future use for the company’s files.

“Loud and clear Rodent. You find anything?”

“Not yet, the power’s out all over the Manor and Mercy’s about to sweep the ground floor whilst I move to the first floor. You’ll hear from whoever finds something first.”

“Be on your guard, thermals are showing cold spots in every room.”

Rodent takes the first few steps up the staircase as carefully as he can. Each step is accompanied by a slow creaking that could be the Manor groaning in pain. Suddenly an iron grip grabs Rodent's ankle holding him where he stands, his revolver glides in the air pointing at the hand. His eyes flicker along the wrist, up the arm to Mercy's face smiling at him from between the banisters.

“What, you didn't see me coming? Maybe you do need the beam on.” With her usual hint of sarcasm she says

“Yeah, like I need a bull's-eye on my forehead.” Rodent frees his ankle from Mercy's grip and takes the next step up as Mercy whispers after him. “Bet you twenty quid I catch a glimpse first.”

Without taking his eyes from the top of the staircase he whispers back to her. “You're on.” With that they disappear into the darkness of the Manor to search for Officer Dobson and what ever it is that has taken him.

11:57 PM – Holestrom Manor.

After listening to Charmer explain that they are in safe hands and that everything that can be done is being done, the Barlow's become more relaxed and easier to handle. Charmer crouches down so that the little girl, Sarah, is at his eye level. He whispers in the same soft tone he used on the officer “You have nothing to fear. Your daddy is here to protect you.” She looks up at her father who is smiling back at her with confidence. “Your daddy told me that you saw some markings around the door frames in the house, is that right?”

“Yeah.” Sarah turns her head into her father's side to hide from the memory.

“It's ok; you can tell me what you saw. I'm here to help.”

“They didn’t make any sense and they were all around my door. They were all around Daddy’s study as well.”

“Did you recognise the markings?” Sarah shakes her head gentle from side to side. “Is there anything else you can tell me?” Her face turns down to the floor, Charmer thinks she is embarrassed but when he lifts her chin so that she is looking into his eyes once again, he can see that it is fear that has stayed her tongue. Charmer looks her deep in the eye and tells her once again that she no longer has anything to fear and that she can help if she knows anything else.

“The markings on the doors, it’s in blood.” She says as a tear rolls over her cheek.

11:58 PM – First Floor of Holestrom Manor.

Rodent steps out onto the wooden floor in the unnatural silence, only to hear his own footsteps and the sound of his heart pounding against his chest. Glancing up and down the corridor he feels the gradual decrease in temperature as the hairs on his arms and his neck rise in warning.

“CoG this is Rodent, come in.”

“Copy Rodent, go ahead.”

“I’m getting a substantial drop in temperature up here. You got anything on the thermals?” Growing in the base of his spine and rippling up to his shoulder blades a shiver escapes him.

“Just the usual, Charmer wants you in the little girl’s room to see if we can get any spiked readings?”

With a sigh Rodent shakes off his reluctance to move and treads very cautiously down the corridor. With each step he takes, his grip tightens on the revolver whilst his eyes flicker over every nook, cranny and shadow.

The door has a picture blue tacked on, written on it is ‘Sarah’s room KEEP OUT!’ Rodent reaches forward with the barrel of his revolver to open the door, but before it makes contact with the door he stops. A faint light glimmers underneath getting stronger with each pulse. Under his breath he whispers into his head set hoping that CoG will pick him up. “CoG, it’s here. In the girls room, please advise.” Frozen into a statue, Rodent waits for his orders from CoG. The few seconds that pass become the most painful and nerve racking he has ever known, and he has known his fair share.

“CoG here, proceed with extreme caution and report once you have obtained contact.” Even though he knows the protocol and is half expecting to make contact first, it never gets any easier when those few words are spoken. ‘Proceed with extreme caution.’

Reaching out with the tip of his revolver he prods the door open. Dimly lit by a white glow emanating from a woman sitting on the end of the bed facing away from him he sees her long dark hair falling over the back of her white cotton dress and in the few seconds it takes for Rodent’s eyes to adjust to the pulsing glow he realises that her hair is dripping wet, as is the dress.

Seeing everything that Rodent can through the micro camera on the black-rimmed glasses, CoG reminds him of his next course of action.

“Make contact Rodent.”

“Copy that.” He whispers as he builds up his courage. In a louder and what he hopes is a more confident voice Rodent speaks “I’m here to help . . . can you hear me? What’s your name?”

The Woman in White doesn’t answer, but sobs into her hands. Carefully Rodent steps further into the room hugging the wall as much as he can. His eyes never leave the woman as

his feet slide over toys and clothes left on the floor. Swallowing his fear he tries again to make contact.

“I can help if you tell me how.” The woman pulls her hands to her chest and Rodent sees that she is holding an old rag doll. “Is that yours? The doll I mean.” The woman stops sobbing and turns her head at an unnatural angle to look up to Rodent standing at the other side of the room. Her mouth moves as if she is speaking, but no words leave her lips. From what Rodent can make out, she is repeating the same words over and over. As he watches her dark red lips trying to make her words into sounds he slows his breathing and tunes all of his heightened senses to any sound she might make.

His heart drops as he looks into this woman’s face. Whatever she has done or whatever has happened to her, the pain she is in is more than any one soul should ever have to endure. The Woman in White turns her face down to look at the rag doll in her hands. The moment she looks away from Rodent her words begin to take on a glimmer of sound. Rodent tries to encourage her to speak once more.

“It’s OK, I’m here to listen to whatever you have to say.” Not quite sure whether she has heard him he moves in a little closer taking a knee whilst he lights a cigarette. He hopes the woman might respond to the flame in some way but she keeps staring at her rag doll.

Taking in his first long drag of smoke he notices marks on the rag doll before he can blow out the smoke to see if it will travel through the Woman in White or be forced around her ethereal form. The rag doll’s arms are torn around its joints on the wrists and elbows with red stains at each tear. Rodent hears her words clearly for the first time. “I’m sorry my darling, I’m sorry.” Rodent gets to his feet and takes a step back as his eyes widen with shock and revulsion. The woman begins to lift the rag doll up in front of her face as thick red blood begins to trickle down her arms from the wounds opening at her wrists to the elbow. The

sobbing turns into cries, leaving two bloodied hand prints on the bedding as she lifts herself off she speaks. “I’m sorry my darling, I’m sorry. I’m so, so, sorry!”

12:02 PM – Ground Floor of Holestrom Manor.

The glass on the study door flares off redirected light from Mercy’s headset as she looks through the warped glass of the half open door. Stepping into the room she feels a further drop in temperature, which reinforces her natural instinct, which has always been to keep her guard up. In Mercy’s case her guard is her consciousness flowing out around the room and enveloping everything it touches. If anything were to move it would alert her instantly, she can then mentally capture another object in the room and use it to her advantage as a projectile weapon.

Her consciousness reaches the four corners of the room sensing no imminent danger, although something is off in a big way. She knows that if she is going to investigate the parasite thoroughly she needs more light, and the well-stocked open fire is just the type of light she can use. Bending down she grabs the box of matches from the hearth and she takes a quick glance behind her. It’s times like these when she regrets making stupid bets about who sees what first.

She strikes a match on the side of the box and as it bursts into flame, she twists her other hand over the lit match holding the flame with her mind and flicks out her fingers at the logs in the fireplace. The logs are consumed in the fluid-like fire within seconds and a moment after that, when Mercy pulls herself to her feet, the fire burns, helping to illuminate the room and allowing Mercy to shut off the beams on her head set.

Glancing around she sees a desk by the double window with various papers on it all kept in neat piles. Opposite is an old oak bookcase with every shelf filled by various books on

court proceedings, taxation conduct and everything that Mercy couldn't *'give a rat's ass about'*. Something grabs her attention and doesn't let go, in the ice cold room with the warm flickering glow Mercy sees smudges up the spines of the books. They look dark and shapeless in the low flames of the fire, but as she reaches the bookcase she clicks her beam back on. "CoG this is Mercy, are you reading me?"

"CoG here."

"Are you seeing this?"

"I'm seeing something, but it's not coming back as clear as I'd like." Mercy looks back at the first two smudges on the books illuminating them with the beams.

"I'm talking about the handprints!" She shouts as she points at the smeared books.

"Is that blood?" CoG answers back in half panic half confusion.

"No its paint, of course its blood! Has Rodent seen anything like this?"

"He's in the little girl's room making contact."

"Now?" She spits out her words in surprise. "I've got to get up there." She runs out of the study turning sharply to the staircase. "Rodent? Rodent?" She clears the first three stairs with an adrenaline-fuelled leap. "No, no, no, why is his headset offline!"

12:11 PM – First Floor of Holestrom Manor.

Mercy lands at the top of the stairs with a thud, turning to the little girl's room she picks up her speed again as she sends out her consciousness directly into the room ahead and becomes alerted to Rodent who has a different texture to inanimate and ethereal objects. By the time Mercy is at the bedroom door her consciousness has covered the room leaving the glaring ethereal object in the centre until last.

Pulling up short just inside the doorway she sees the Woman in White for the first time, she holds out her arms with her wrists forward to Mercy and Rodent, thick blood pouring from her torn flesh, as her skin becomes paler and paler.

Mercy makes the impulsive decision to envelop the Woman in White in case anything should happen and for the first time in a long time she feels resistance on her extended consciousness. The Woman in White is aware of what she is trying to do, but what's more worrying to Mercy is that the Woman in White is pushing back.

The instant Mercy touches the Woman in White with her consciousness; she and Rodent are thrown against the walls of the bedroom with a crushing impact. Instead of bouncing off the walls and landing on the ground they are pinned to the pannels they hit, unable to break or wriggle free.

“What the hell did you do?” Rodent manages to force out a few words to Mercy. With a turn of her head the Woman in White's glow begins to gradually increase as she looks directly into Rodent's eyes.

“What did I do? I came to save you, that's what I did!”

“Wasn't I enough for you?” The Woman in White whispers to Rodent. Mercy ignores her words and carries on increasing in volume and anger as she speaks, not caring if the ethereal can hear. “I saw the bloodied hand prints in the study. She's after unfaithful men. Like Phillip Barlow, she's here to punish him.”

“So why the rag doll?” Rodent asks as it grabs his attention and helps take his eyes away from the dripping blood.

“I think she's trying to protect the children somehow! Either that or kill them to take away the shame.”

“You came up with all that?” The Woman in White lets out a scream so piercing in pitch that it blurs Rodent and Mercy’s vision, leaving the inevitable ringing sensation in their ears. Pinned to the wall Mercy tries to build up enough mental strength to perform any type of attack as Rodent constantly wriggles his fingers and hands trying to break himself free. The Woman in White turns to Rodent and glides across the floor towards him, she holds the rag doll close to her chest and in the same whispering voice as before she begins to talk.

“Wasn’t I enough for you?” Her hand glides over Rodent’s face and then settles back on the rag doll. “I’m going to show you what you’ve been missing.” Finishing her sentence she closes her eyes for a second and Rodent lets out a roar full of pain. Mercy shouts over to Rodent unsure of what’s happening. “Rodent what’s she doing?”

“She’s breaking my fingers.” Screaming out again in pain as Mercy hears the snap this time round. “Do something!”

Mercy’s mind races across the possible actions and reactions looking for the best solution, none of them end well for Rodent, but she knows she has to do something. Pulling down a deep breath she drags her consciousness from the room, on her breath out she fires it across the landing, down the stairs and into the study where she encompasses all the flames from the fire. Rodent screams again as another of his fingers break and the snap echoes around the room, forcing Mercy’s next breath in to pull her consciousness back up the stairs across the landing and into the bedroom within a split second.

The entire room lights up like a bonfire, the Woman in White pulls away and for a moment she loses her grip on them both who drop from the wall, crashing loudly to the ground with an accompanying scream from Rodent. He turns to Mercy and spits out his words as loud as he can over the growing hum of energy and light as the Woman in White steadies herself still clutching the rag doll to her chest.

“Burn the doll, it has the same wounds on its arms and it’s her connection to the Manor.”

Mercy smiles for the first time that night and without hesitation she throws everything she can at the rag doll in the Woman in White’s arms. The doll, turning black, begins to smoulder, as does the Woman in White, it then bursts into flames. For a moment the rag doll burns normally while screams echo from all four walls. The rag doll combusts, raging into a brilliant white light consuming the Woman in White, turning her into ash and screams.

12:27 PM – Front Porch of Holestrom Manor.

Rodent and Mercy sit side by side on the porch looking out over the long pebble driveway towards the Barlow family as Charmer assures them that everything has been taken care of. Rodent attempts to slip his tied up broken fingers into his jacket pocket to pull out his cigarettes, but stops with a short sharp intake of breath as the pain shoots through his hand. Mercy takes pity on him and shoves her hand into his pocket pulling out his cigarettes and lighter. She smiles, taking one out and putting it between her own lips to light as she nods towards Phillip Barlow hugging his wife and says “Must be nice to have fiends in high places.” She passes the cigarette to Rodent who takes it with his good hand and immediately takes down a long hard drag. Blowing the smoke through his nose he smiles.

“Don’t you owe me twenty quid?” Mercy’s eyes widen.

“You son of a ...”