



LIFERS

M.A. GRIFFIN

Chicken House
SCHOLASTIC INC. | NEW YORK

Copyright © 2017 by Martin Griffin

All rights reserved. Published by Chicken House, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, CHICKEN HOUSE, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2016 by Chicken House, 2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-06553-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2017

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll



It must have been quiet for him to hear the rattling.

That's what the noise first seemed to be: a sound like the clatter of dice in a plastic cup.

It was coming from the darkness at the far end of Back Half Moon Street. Preston pushed himself upright against a rusting garbage can and peered into the gloom. Now it was a stuttering *chit-chit* sound, something about it immediately wrong.

It made the space between Preston's shoulder blades go cold, his back straighten, and his stomach tighten.

Preston realized his legs were struggling for strength. It was hard to see what might be down there—it was two a.m. and ink black. Above him the outline of a fire escape. At his feet, a blown can skittered. The alley curved left and he made his way toward the bend. The building stopped a few paces ahead of him and a space with a high metal railing around it emerged from deep shadow. Sirens wailed somewhere in the distance but faded into silence.

Chitter-chit-chit.

Preston felt panic rising in his chest. *Christ. A beast at the end of the alley.* Fighting his fear, he edged forward and peered beyond the fencing. Over the railings was a drop and beyond that a sunken garden, high-walled, spread out around the back of the main building. The windows were shuttered and dark. There were a couple of low outbuildings—both painted white—and a security barrier and office, lights out. Down in the sunken area, a black Lexus was parked.

He'd never seen this place before.

Fourteen years tracing the shape of his city, Manchester, and he'd never followed the left-hand curve of Back Half Moon. But why would you? Thousands of commuters, bankers, buskers, and shoppers would pass by the mouth of the alley every day without ever thinking anything of interest lay beyond.

He'd never night-walked before, either.

Everything was different at night, like turning over a stone and seeing something weird and alien underneath. Watching something that was usually ignored, usually . . . unwatched.

The sound; the *chitter-chit* sound was still down there in the dark somewhere. Preston studied the alleyway ahead of him, letting the memory of Alice brighten the darkness, only to remember she was gone. It had been over forty-eight hours since she'd disappeared, and it was all his fault. He *had* to find her.

Preston gave the buildings beyond the high fence a final furtive check. Then he shinned up and over it, lowering himself down the other side. It's what Alice would have done—he felt sure of it.

The sunken garden was farther down than he had thought. He let himself drop and landed in a crouch. He looked up. Over

ten feet to the top of the fence; he wouldn't be getting out the way he'd come in. He spent a moment praying he wasn't permanently trapped on the wrong side with a terrible creature.

His eyes adjusted to the gloom. There was the Lexus, three empty parking spaces around it. There were clipped hedges, a pool, and an urn, as well as steel planters with elegantly shaped trees in them. There were lights inlaid along the paths, half-lit, like eyes. This wasn't a house. It was corporate. The windows were for offices, or labs, Preston thought. *What is this place—pharmaceuticals?* He made his way forward. The sound was louder.

The back of the building was four stories of white paint and steel, windows of mirrored glass. On the top floor, a light was on—a surprise in the early hours of a Monday morning—and Preston could see the silhouette of piled files, papers, and a glowing desk lamp bent over as if in prayer. Someone was up there, working late. Small polished signs studded the outside of the building at shoulder height, like those brass plaques beside the doors of lawyers' offices. As he drew closer he saw each displayed an acronym—M.I.S.T.

His heart gave a jump. *Mist*. He'd seen that in Alice's notebook.

She'd been here.

The sound, eerie and unnerving, was getting louder. Preston padded down a gravel path, rain falling, the green fans of uplit garden ferns glistening. He turned back to take another look around.

Then he saw it.

A flight of sunken steps dropped to a doorway set at cellar level, a steel fire door with one of those bars across it that made

it look like it was for escape only. The door was propped open, and inside was dark, but it wasn't inside that Preston was looking at.

Preston was looking at the kid in the goggles.

Two steps up from the door, hunched in a crouch on his heels, was a boy dressed in black. It was his teeth Preston could hear, clattering in his mouth. He was suffering some sort of fit, shuddering there in the fetal position as if a current was being fed through him. His feet shifted and jerked in a way that looked as if some invisible force was needling him from all sides and he was recoiling from a thousand fearsome pinpricks. His chin was pressed against his chest.

Preston dropped to a crouch and felt his blood ice up. He didn't doubt for a second he was seeing something unnatural. This wasn't some sort of epileptic fit; it was something more controlled. Then there was the sound coming from the kid's mouth, the machine-gun rhythm of his teeth. The sound he'd heard in the alley.

Preston staggered backward, half running until he felt himself thump against the perimeter of the sunken garden. He lost his footing and sat down hard. He wanted to look away, but he found he couldn't; he had to watch as the kid twisted and shuddered.

It was slowing now. A moment later, he was still, curled up on his side. His teeth had stopped. Preston tried to swallow, but his throat had filled with sand. His heart felt close to bursting. *Had the kid passed out? Or have I just watched someone die?*

The fire door clanged in its frame, making an empty steel echo. It had stopped raining, Preston realized. He put his face in his hands for a moment, shook his head clear, and looked at the

kid again. He remembered reading that insomniacs often suffered hallucinations.

That was it, he thought—he was going mad. Some kind of reaction to everything that had happened. First Mum leaving. Dad losing it. Now Alice going missing.

He pressed his palms into the gravel at his feet and felt the sharp stones sting his skin. It didn't feel like a dream or some sort of nervous breakdown. The kid—probably dead, Preston guessed—was still there, curled up like a newborn. Preston rose to standing, using the wall for balance, testing his legs. A wave of sickness climbed his body, then faded. He waited for a moment, then he made his way forward, his sneakers crunching on the gravel. His pace slowed as he reached the top of the steps leading down to the fire door, clammy fear running a finger down his back. The boy didn't seem to be breathing.

He looked weird. His final fit had thrown the goggles from his face. Preston checked the building. The light was still on in the top-floor office, but no one was watching. He stooped and picked the goggles up. They were still warm from the kid's skin. They were like no goggles he'd ever seen before, the lenses enlarged to the size of saucers. Preston wasn't about to hold them to his face—a crazy kind of terror prevented him—but if he had, they'd have covered most of his forehead and both cheeks, almost reaching his top lip. The frames were made of something odd: black and soft and pliable but not rubber. And the lenses were weirdly thick and heavy. When Preston gingerly held them up, it was clear they were close to impossible to see through, the kind of things you might imagine an astronomer wearing to stare into the boiling

heart of a star. He dropped them on the steps next to the curled-up boy, suddenly desperate to be away and clear of the building, back down Half Moon and out onto the Deansgate main road, where there were bars and bookstores and fast-food places and maybe some people at a taxi stand being normal. He should check if the kid was breathing, he knew he should. But the boy and the goggles were horrible.

Preston made his way back to the perimeter wall. "I'm not going mad," he said in a whisper, wiping his palms against his jeans. The clouds broke for a moment and the moon appeared. This was better. The world, which had slipped its axis and gone lunatic for a moment, seemed normal again. He was in an empty parking lot with a black Lexus in it, not on another planet. "I'm not going mad." He leaned against the cool brickwork and wiped the rain from his face with the sleeve of his coat. "I'm not going mad," said Preston one last time, just to be clear.

And that was when he heard the voice.

"Kid."

It was a cracked voice, deep and urgent, and it was coming from somewhere in the darkness above him. Preston looked, trying to trace it.

"Kid," it said again, and this time the voice had softened, as if it was taking pity. Preston realized he had a hand across his mouth to stop himself screaming with fear. His heart was bucking so hard he felt it was about to punch him open.

Then a face appeared at the railings above him: a man with shoulder-length hair and a dark military cap. He was up and over

the fence swiftly and dropped to join Preston, wincing as he straightened up.

He too was dressed in black: close-fitting shirt and cargo pants, heavy boots, big gloves with padded silver fingers, a bag strapped diagonally across his chest. His face was deeply lined and his rough skin dusted in gray stubble. He was well over forty, Preston figured—but broad and strong. He scowled. “This is no place for a schoolkid,” the man said. He had a scratchy northern accent. “You need to go.”

Preston was too taken aback to answer.

The man regarded him carefully. He seemed troubled. He looked across to the open fire door, the small bundle of darkness that was the boy, and checked the light in the high office window, his face tight. He tore back a Velcro panel in the left arm of his jacket and pulled out a little radio.

“We have a situation here,” he said into it. There was the crunch of static and chopped-up garble. The man struck his radio sharply with an open gloved hand and swore. “Say again,” he said. He didn’t talk like a cop, Preston thought; there was a scruffy roughness about him. Security guards didn’t look like this either—they were usually even beefier guys with bad tattoos and beer on their breath.

His radio fizzed again and this time the man heard whatever answer he’d been expecting. “Exactly,” he said, and turned to Preston, pocketing the radio once more.

“Whatever you’ve seen, kid—I’m going to need you to forget it.”

Preston found himself stammering. “What? I haven’t seen anything.”

The man regarded him, one eyebrow raised. “You sure?”

Preston nodded, a little too eagerly, he knew. “Seriously.” It sounded as hollow as a homework excuse. “I’ve not seen anything. I was looking for a friend.” That bit, at least, was true. “I was following her. I thought she’d come down here.”

The man nodded. “Well. You’ll need to be getting home.” And then he held out a palm, as if to shake. “Here,” he said. It seemed an odd gesture, a stranger in a black bodysuit in a city-center parking lot with an outstretched glove. Why did Preston take it? He didn’t know. Pressure. Fear. Stupidity. The handshake was firm and the man released a little smile of—what—relief? Something stung Preston in the center of the hand, like a wasp between their palms. He winced.

“Sorry, kid.” The man shrugged. Then he said, “Sleep tight.”

Preston examined his palm. There was a little bead of blood there. His head swam and for a mad moment he thought his hand had a little eye in its center like the one in Alice’s notebook. But it didn’t; he was just bleeding. “I haven’t slept yet,” he said absently. “Not since Alice.”

Then Preston found his jaw didn’t work anymore. His perspective tipped and he fell over, conscious that the man was still watching him even as he felt the gravel against his cheek. He tried to say something and it came out a garbled grunt, like the radio. He felt himself cough. Then his eyes shut themselves and he slept.