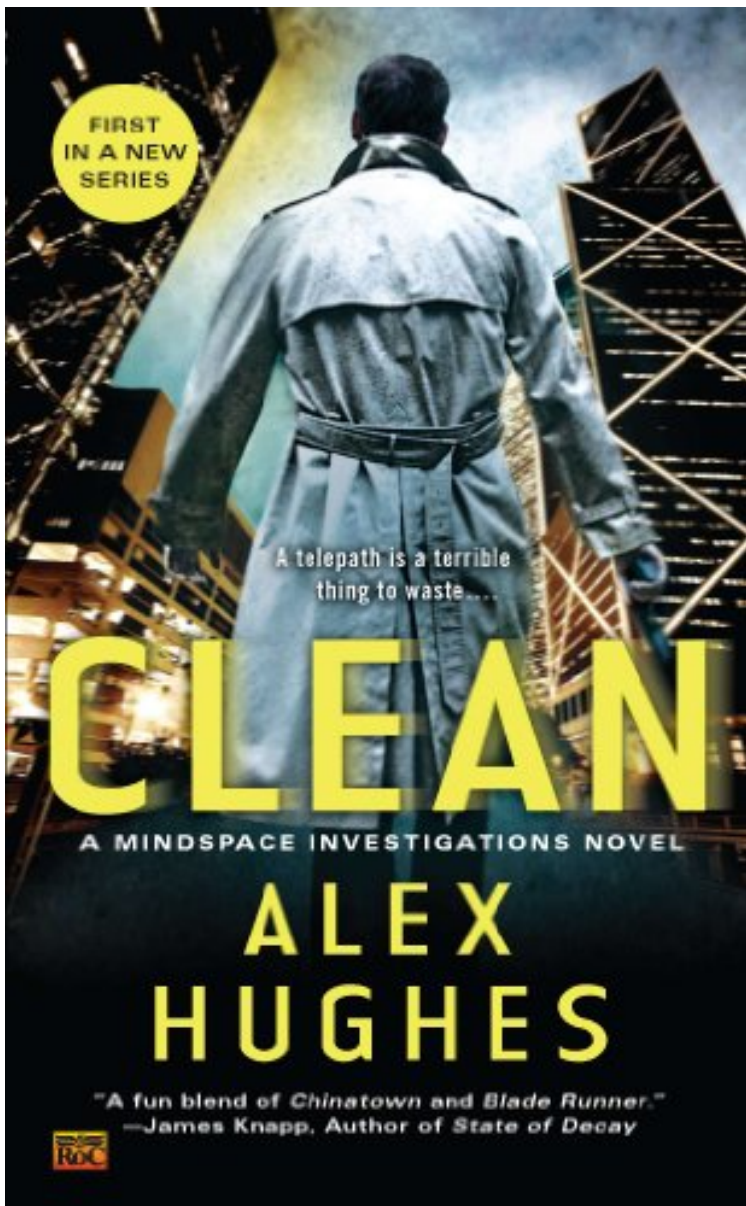


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Clean: A Mindspace Investigations Novel



Par Alex Hughes
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA RUTHLESS KILLEROUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MINDI used to work for the Telepaths Guild before they kicked me out for a drug habit that wasnt entirely my fault. Now I work for the cops, helping Homicide Detective Isabella Cherabino put killers behind bars.My ability to get inside the twisted minds of suspects makes me the best interrogator in the department. But the normals keep me on a short leash. When the Tech Wars ripped the world apart, the Guild stepped up to save it. But they had to get scary to do itreal scary.Now the cops dont trust the telepaths, the Guild doesnt trust me, a serial killer is stalking the cityand Im aching for a fix. But I need to solve this case. Fast. Ive just had a vision of the future:

Im the next to die. Extrait CHAPTER ONE My first interview of the night was Esperanza Mensalez Mr, a thirtysomething woman dressed in a pink pressed suit I suspected cost more than my last paycheck. Not that Id seen the paycheck, but that was the kind of impression she gave off, like she had too much money to cope. She was here as a suspect in the death of her husband. A uniformed officer escorted me, todays babysitter to make sure I didnt break any laws while interrogating. He took a menacing position at the back of the room and glared at the woman like she was his worst enemy exactly what I wanted. I entered, carrying my props: an oldfashioned ream of paper and two sharpened pencils. From the tape theyd given me, Id pegged Esperanza as a control freak. So I threw the paper down crooked, spilling it everywhere, adding the pencils so they rolled along the table, then slouched back in the chair. I grabbed one of the pencils just before it hit the floor and started tapping it on the table. Tap, tappitytap. Tappitytap, tap, tap. Just for fun, I altered the pattern every now and then to keep it grating on her nerves. I stared at Esperanza for a long time while the pencil tapped against the table. Since Lieutenant Paulsen had exiled me to the interview rooms again, Id be here three hours or more with nowhere else to go; I thought about that hard, knowing some of it would leak into my face. After ten minutes, her hand shot out and flattened mine against the table, stopping the pencil. Stop, she said. Just stop. Once her hand touched mine, I had what I needed. Im required by law in this situation to tell you Im a Level Eight telepath. Her hand shot back immediately. She wiped it against her skirt by reflex, as if shed touched something slimy. The cold mask shed worn had transformed into a look of abject horror. YouIm also required by law to tell you that skintokin physical contact increases my ability to read your mind. Under certain conditions, it can be hazardous to your health and mental wellbeing, so for most people its considered wise to avoid all physical contact with telepaths. I quoted the standard writeup the Guild gave the public. In reality, touch was only dangerous when the telepath wasnt expecting it, and Id figured her to do just what she had. So Id blocked as a precaution. Any normal could have told you all she was thinking about was the tapping anyway. She started to say something, but I cut her off. Im very impressed, Esperanza. Its Mrs. Mensalez Mr, she said evenly, steel in her voice. Id hit a nerve. I slouched back in the chair and started tapping the pencil again, staring at her patiently. Id noticed in the previous interviewers tape that the more he attacked her on a point of her story, the more shed get cold and professional. So Id back up, let her own fears work on her a bit. See what would happen. She couldnt take the silence long. You cant possibly I can feel how much you hated him, I stated calmly, in the tone of voice youd use to start a long story. But the hyphen on your name was worth what, four hundred thousand ROCs? Eighteen million, Esperanza corrected, her eyes narrowing. The house alone was worth, what? Maybe two? Three point eight. She preened. It was a masterful plan. You must have set it up two years in advance. More maybe. My tone was admiring, flattering. Four, she sniffed. The idiot never even saw it coming. I got in three more questions with answers before her brain caught up. Suddenly, her eyes widened as she realized what shed said, and the ugliness in her soul came out like a plague. I want a lawyer, Mrs. Mensalez Mr said. Now. I pulled out a pack of blue cigarettes and lit up, breathing in the nicotine a little desperately. I was on the smoking porch, an old slab of cracked concrete with a little awning behind the main bulk of DeKalb County Police Department Headquarters, where the shadow of the fourstory building cooled down the air a few degrees at this time of day. In August in Atlanta, when the heat flattened you like the arms of a heavyweight boxer, youd take whatever relief you could get. As I stood, sweat already beginning to gather in a pool at the top of my shoulder blades, I tried to retrieve my sanity from wherever Id left it last. I wanted Satin, a drug, a habit, a poison the fantasy Id denied myself for three long years. It would have been six if I hadnt fallen off the wagon twice. If it had been six, would this be easier? As my hands shook with a need for something I couldnt have, I thought, It has to get easier. I couldnt have that rush, that stark perfection, not today. Not today. My hands shook and my brain cramped while I took another desperate drag of nicotine, looking out over the grimy courtyard and the old steel building behind it, watching the drizzly rain migrate more pollution into the soil. I struggled to focus, to remember the cops behind me. There was a reason I worked for them. On my better days, I knew theyd keep me on the wagon or die trying. Never mind the hostility. Never mind that I had to keep up a steady supply of rabbits to pull out of the hat just to earn my place. When the Telepaths Guild kicked me out, I had all the tests, all the ratings, all the gold stars a man could get. Level Eight, seventyeight P, I was a stronger telepath than most of the elite, and could predict the future correctly better than three times out of four. Still could, at least when the precog felt like working, but it hadnt in months. Lately I was starting to run out of rabbits, not good for my relationship with the cops.

Speaking of . . . Behind me, the heavy door creaked open, and I greeted the mind behind me. Cherabino. Detective Isabella Cherabino was a thirtysomething brunette, stacked, pretty, a workaholic, and

perpetually in a bad mood. We would have been partners if we had been equals, but we weren't. I was her pet cobra, maybe, or the monkey with the cymbals that followed her around. If a monkey could solve crimes in Mindspace, or pull rabbits out of hats and interview suspects, if the monkey was a dumb guy who annoyed her at regular intervals, that's maybe what I was to her. Maybe. On a good day. On the porch, her nose wrinkled at the smell of the cigarettes. I don't understand why you like it out here. It's miserable. I shrugged. It's scenic. It was also deserted, at least ten feet from anybody's thoughts in Mindspace. Stressed-out cops, suspects freaking out about interrogations, hostile criminals . . . Let's just say the mental surroundings reeked. Even the heat was a break. I heard about the confession. Do too many of those and they won't ever let you out of the interview room again. She looked at me critically. If you're feeling twitchy again, I can wait while you call Swartz. I snuffed out the cigarette under my shoe, ignoring the comment. I didn't want to talk about my craving to my sponsor right now. I could feel Cherabino's tension and a hint of purpose probably a new case but she got testy when I jumped ahead. What can I do for you? I asked her. You've heard about the murders? The serial thing, right? Her jaw tightened. Captain says we don't say serial. Try to keep it quiet. Hope the papers don't put it together. She was obviously not a fan of this plan, but Cherabino could toe the line when she had to. She was thinking loudly, and I didn't bother shutting her out. Six bodies? Really? Six bodies in two months, it's a serial. Doesn't matter what they call it. If they can link them, she returned. We aren't publicizing cause of death, and the victims aren't related any way I can see. Might take them some time, and in the meantime we have a shot at solving it. Her we meant her, the team, and me . . . specifically. Why me? I asked. She frowned at me. Oops, jumping ahead again. Have to watch that. We're stuck. As I suppose you already know. I was hoping you'd do the Mindspace thing and get me a lead. Or two. Two would be nice. I thought about another cigarette and gave it up as a lost cause. She was going to ask me to leave now. I didn't think I had any other priority interviews scheduled this afternoon. I rubbed my jaw, thinking, and along the way realized I hadn't shaved . . . since yesterday morning, felt like. Maybe a little longer. Have to take care of that soon. You listening? she spat. I blinked. Yeah, just let me get my stuff and check in with Paulsen. It took her a minute to realize she hadn't asked me to leave yet and that I'd read it straight off her mind. She stared and seriously considered slapping the hell out of me. Stay out of my head, damn it! I've told you before. I stepped back, and she stalked off. Great, now I'd made Cherabino mad at me, and I knew better. I sighed, wishing for another cigarette, and fought down guilt. At least now I wasn't craving my poison so bad.

Distraction was a great trick, one of the first ones they teach you in the program. If I was going to see a crime scene, there would be plenty more distraction even if it was stuff I'd rather not see. I patted down my pockets, made sure I had everything, the lighter and pack where they were supposed to be, and rolled my sleeves back down. I didn't advertise the scars on my arms, not for any reason, and if long sleeves in August were the price I had to pay, so be it. I held on to the car door with a whiteknuckled grip, and took deep breaths. Cherabino had hit the flyer antigrav in the middle of the ground street highly illegal risen up two stories within the span of a second with no warning, and was now flipping off the BMW who'd had the temerity to get in her way. She merged into the correct sky lane, narrowly missing the floating marker. Below, a police-sponsored sign on the old Decatur train station's roof reminded commuters: FLY SAFE AND IN YOUR LANE. Not that there was irony or anything. Cherabino turned on the siren for no good reason and forced herself into the air traffic over East College Avenue. She got too close to the air stream from the bullet train on the railroad tracks below and the flyer dipped alarmingly. I swallowed bile but she recovered, muttering obscenities. I thought about reminding her about the new fuel/flight restrictions for the department, but her mental cursing got louder. I took a breath and blocked her out, giving her the privacy she'd demanded. It was a lot harder than it should have been. Her driving regained a measure of sanity as she leveled off and set the altimeter to auto. I looked down as the shadow of the police cruiser fell on the dirty redbrick buildings and the stream of groundcars below. It was lunchtime congestion, the yuppies out for quick carnivorous lunches fighting with the secondshift blue collars already late for work in the factories to the east. I decided to risk talking. You said there were six victims? That's right. She adjusted a mirror, gave a suspicious look to the driver minding his own business behind her, then glanced back at me. In order: thirtysomething male Hispanic, an old white woman, a young black one, Indian scientist fortysomething, and the two Asian teenagers from last week. I can't see they have anything in common other than the way they were dumped and trust me, we've looked. You look worried, I said. She sighed. He's escalating, to have another this quickly. And I need a break in the case. Badly. You don't know it's a he, I said. Do you? You kidding? It's always a man with a group like this. Women take murder a lot more personally. She had a point, but I replied, Nobody says it can't be a group. Don't be a smartass, Cherabino said without malice. Garden roofs and

skyboard advertisements dotted the tops of the otherwise grimy ancient buildings below as we crossed west into the East Atlanta borough. God knows we need a break in this case, yesterday. Captain got a phone call from the mayor Tuesday. he wants this solved, before the papers start splashing serial across the front page. Something like that could be bad for business. Not like a normal murder or anything. Yeah. She blew out a long line of air. These are anything but normal. I could feel a line of worry coming from her, and I blocked harder. A flash of an upcoming date next week came through I frowned. What were we talking about again? Oh yeah. Whats so different about these? I asked. Other than the hodgepodge of victims. Her lips pursed. Everything. Theres no obvious cause of death. No weapon marks, no fresh wounds, tox screens clean. If the bodies hadnt been dumped, we probably would have assumed stroke, maybe even for the teenagers. Theres just no reason why they should I suppressed a yell as Cherabino grounded too quickly on Hosea Williams Street not dangerous, not illegal, but scary as hell without a warning. She glanced back over at me disapprovingly as if her driving was my fault. The fact I cant connect the victims is starting to piss me off. No serial Ive ever heard about picks random victims off the street this different they always have a type.

They work the type. Every briefing in the world says they work a type. I thought we werent saying serial. Multiple, then. Whatever. Cherabino took a turn. Now the buildings on either side were three stories tall with cracking facades and battered brick, making the small street claustrophobic. She pulled into a weedgrown rocksandgrass field labeled PARKING and cut off the car. I let go of my grip on the handle. Cherabino turned to look at me, tension in her brown eyes. You okay? I knew she was referring to earlier, on the porch, the craving that still sat in the back of my head like an unwelcome neighbor. She could smell it when I got twitchy, after five years of working together on and off, and shed taken the last dive off the wagon very personally. I looked at her, backlit by the sun like an angel, a grumpy beautiful angel. A lock of hair had escaped from her bun and lay across the soft curve of her cheek. I suppressed a sudden urge to tuck it behind her ear. I was supposed to keep my hands and mind to myself. Even if I wanted more sometimes. Okay? Her voice cracked like a whip, bringing me back. I coughed and sat back. Im fine. Probably Id say that if I was lit on fire and covered in supercancer, but that was beside the point. Um, crime scene? Yeah. She opened the car door and let the heat in. Time to go to work. I got out of the car, the strength of the heat and the sun nearly knocking me over. I put on a pair of cheap sunglasses and hurried after Cherabino, who was moving toward a nearby alley. Judging by the wind blowing a certain smell our way, our body was in that direction. Something shed said earlier was bothering me, and I fished it out of memory. Why a stroke? I asked. I thought you said they had nothing in common. She glanced back, nose scrunched up against the smell. They dont. Just the brain damage. Thats what a stroke is, Cherabino. She shook her head, her face growing cold as she prepared herself for the scene ahead. Not if its specific. All the victims have damage in exactly the same spot. I stopped walking. It took her a minute to realize Id fallen behind a minute before she was yelling at me to hurry the hell up. This was not good, I thought, as I complied. This was very not good. The alley was long and skinny, two painfully hot brick walls behind the abandoned shell of a Thai restaurant. There was an empty dumpster at one end, coated with the smell of old garbage, a smell that mixed in bad ways with the reek of threedayold decaying body in the heat. I told myself I never had to eat Thai again if I didnt throw up. No vomiting in front of the cops. I was a consultant, not a cop, and theyd never let me live it down. Three forensic techs filled the alley with careful thoughts while they took samples of every conceivable surface and mark. Two more detectives and a couple of beat cops were here, murmuring among themselves, angry at their helplessness to catch this guy. They deferred to Cherabino but gave me hostile looks. Myself, I was standing maybe six feet away, near the mouth of the alley, trying to take in the scene. Cherabino came up behind me with an electronic notebook. She was one of maybe six detectives in the department authorized to carry them, since she helped out with Electronic Crimes. She had to pass a background check to do it, and the notebook didnt even have a transmitter. Police data within spitting distance of a transmitter was just asking for trouble even those of us too young to remember the Tech Wars could agree to that. You about ready? Cherabino asked. I noted the lab techs. Any physical evidence to link the cases to this point? She sighed. Not yet. Were waiting on the lab for a few generic fibers, a couple of footprints, piddly stuff. Im not holding my breath. The labs backed up again, huh? Yeah. Since the mayor called, maybe well get bumped up in the queue. But I dont think theres anything there to find. I took a moment to dip my toe into Mindspace, see what I was facing. We need to clear out the alley, I told her. Why? She looked up from her notes. Because. Cherabino sighed and tucked her notebook under her arm. She moved away from the wall, took a deep breath somehow, without gagging and yelled at the crimescene techs. Everybody out! She dealt with the murmuring, the threats, and the complaining without batting an eye. I

stayed against the wall, out of the way, until she gestured me forward. Impatiently, I moved to the center of the scene, six inches from the dead body. The smell was almost overwhelming; the only reason anyone had found the body, after all, was the smell leaking into a shop three doors down. I fought down bile at my first look; the face was swollen horribly and covered in maggots. The thing had emptied its bowels, as dead bodies tend to do, which only made the smell and the insect issue worse. I made myself change my pronoun, after taking a closer look at the clothes. He. He had been out three days in the worst of the heat and pollution, at the height of the summer, I told myself. He couldn't help this. His clothes had originally been clean, well kept; he'd been wearing pricey workout gear, new shoes, with a short haircut. Probably athletic, considering the attire, but hard to tell for sure. His dark complexion was still obvious if you could get your brain to focus past the flies. Black man, like one of the others, I thought. Couldn't tell the age, but not a kid and not old. I wanted my poison, but my mind wasn't kaleidoscoping, my hands weren't shaking, and I had control over my stomach mostly. I had to hold back a gag as the wind changed. I was okay. Time to work. May I? I asked Cherabino. She allowed me reluctantly to use her as an anchor when I went deep enough into Mindspace to need one. I guess, she said, and braced herself, holding out the hand I needed as the anchor. She blanked her mind so forcefully I knew she was hiding something. It took a real effort not to find out what it was, not to pull it from her mind. I didn't need her cooperation. I was strong enough and well trained enough that she probably wouldn't even know. But she was off limits, and doing me a favor. I'd respect her and leave it alone. She made some scathing comment I ignored as I eased all the way down into Mindspace, until I felt the vibration of the minds of the forensic techs who had just left. I should have had her clear them out earlier; two of the men had been excited about a strip club they'd seen last night, and ethereal images of the dancers marred the surface of the space, mixed with the intense anger and frustration coming from the cops. The rest of my senses faded away, grayed out until Mindspace was all I could perceive. My link with Cherabino trailed up into reality behind me like a long, flat, yellow extension cord, yellow where no yellow should ever be. I could not see in this space, but I knew its depths and its shallows in the back of my head, a picture made by vibrations like a bat echoing through the night, a world complete without light. The alley was full of emotion ghosts, layer upon layer of shifting vapors left by excited minds on their way to something else. The walls were porous here, and I could feel the very faint ghosts of harried restaurant workers through the bricks, while outside insects swarmed with flittery hive minds over the rotting food in the dumpster. The dancers the techs had created leaped around imaginary poles, fading already. A few old junkie spikes dotted the walls, most from cigarettes or heroin, the occasional street cocktail. None were very recent, and none had the cloudcut feel of a highgrade Satin boost. In the center of the alley there was a cold void, both expected and unusual. From the body itself I felt only absence, something I expected since his mind would have gone on to . . . wherever minds went when they died. But the void was still there. Three days after the death, it was still there. Something was off. The victim died here, in the alley, I said, and in the back of my mind felt Cherabino making note of it. Most of the other bodies were killed offsite, she said, as if from a hundred miles away. Any idea how it was done? I walked out carefully and tested the area around the void. Fear permeated the space, and with it the stench of death so terrifying, anyone with any trace of Ability would know something bad happened here. I gulped down bile. This was probably why the victim hadn't been robbed; no one with any Ability or any sense at all was going to get this close. The techs all had to be deaf as doornails. I tried to put it into words: He knew he was going to die, was dying already, no details on how. He was terrified it's pretty bad. Very bad. But . . . I took a closer look. Something was wrong, the ghost of his mind almost . . . patchy. Disappearing in places, strong in others. His ghost is wavering in and out like a bad radio station, even now. I've never seen anything like this before. I combed the area carefully, looking for the traces of the killer. I found him, his mind separate from the victims. He was worried, scared, disgusted . . . but not angry. He also felt familiar, like a song just out of reach. I had no idea where I knew him from. There was also another man, farther down the alley, this presence so faint it could mean nothing at all. Both men were telepaths, I thought, which was bad news. Anyone who could feel a man's mind die while he killed him went at least a little insane. To do it outside a war or a threat to your family, to do it without any pressing reason at all . . . A chill came over me. I didn't think I'd like these guys. Not at all. One last look at the void, running my notthere fingers around the cold edge, trying to see if I could get any more information about cause of death, about the killer's intentions or how he did it. I tried to pick that vaguely familiar trace out of the middle of a haystack of violence, sharp fear and urgent, dull pain, desperation. Decade-old instincts were all that saved me, and I pulled back desperately. The world stopped. Then I was back in the alley, heart pounding a million miles per hour.

Cherabino looked at me quizzically, as if shed felt the edges of my panic. Im okay, I told her, trying to be convincing, working on breathing deeply to slow down my heart. What had just happened? The back of my head said . . . something bad. I thought through it. That feeling, like Id just escaped Falling In. Which was impossible. Nobody Fell In three days after a death. Telepaths died occasionally from that sort of thing; there had been cases where, if you knew a dying person well, if you were connected to him at the time, you could be pulled in after him. Almost happened to me once, when my then-girlfriends mother had died faster than anyone expected. We had both almost been sucked in to . . . wherever minds went when you died. We had barely pulled each other out. But even then, death was gone from the room a few seconds later. I wouldnt have been able to Fall In if Id tried. I needed another look dumb as hell, but what I needed. I opened myself back up to Mindspace, slowly, slowly, sinking back in all the way, to the depths, too deep to see anything but vibrations. I approached the edges of the void, slowly, slowly, so carefully it hurt to move. There, overlapping the edge of the void was something, like the tiny chip in a wineglass you noticed more with your fingers than with your eyes an aberration. Small, not exciting. But it could crack our case. If the killer or killers had really used Ability, there should have been, well, a smear, where theyd walked away, taking the edges of the death with them for a few steps before it dissipated. But the smear wasnt there. Instead, the Mindspace puckered. Just a little pucker. And it was good to have a certified Guild education, because I knew what that meant. Now I only had to explain it to Cherabino.

Revue de presse A fun blend of Chinatown and Blade Runner. James Knapp, author of State of Decay [A] tightly-written futuristic detective story set in an alternate Atlanta This crisp debut marks Hughes as a writer to watch. Publishers Weekly