



**SIMON
FOX**

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crow*



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1

NOW

I can steal time.

The most I can take at the moment is fifteen seconds, which is not a lot. Grandmother took almost three minutes once and she told me she's done more, but I never saw it. And when she was tired, which was more and more often, or pretending not to be sad, which was pretty much always, she struggled to get to half that.

She says there are stories of someone who can take all the time in the world, but how can that be right? She said it when she was trying to get me to concentrate, when she was urging me to focus. As if all I had to do was understand what was possible to make it happen. It sounded unbelievable but when she said it there was a kind of memory in her eyes and something about her look that made me think maybe it was more than just a wild story.

And we didn't need all the time in the world, did we? We just needed enough to get to England. To fight and crash and tear our way to England where Dad said we would be safe. I hoped a few seconds might be enough to keep the two of us from getting caught but I guess I was wrong. We started with everything and I ended with nothing. On a beach in the dark; cold

wet and empty.

I should have practised more. Because every second is precious. And I never took enough.

2

AFTER

He grabs my collar and hauls me up the beach. There is anger in his grip and fear on his face, reflected yellow in the strange lamps that light the seafront path. He half runs and now he lets go, but I don't stop. Stones shift under my feet and my wet jeans rub hard against my legs but I don't slow down. We reach the tarmac and he swerves to the right, twisting briefly to check I am still there.

“Keep up,” he says. But he doesn't need to.

I turn, briefly, as we hurry forward. Blue lights flash into the black sky and shouts rebound against the crash of the waves, behind the sounds of our hard breathing and the slap of our feet against the road. We run with the cliff to our left. Out in front is a deserted cafe, then a pool of light as the path turns up and away from the sea. There is a metal barrier to stop cyclists, then a pub car park, deserted except for a van and two large waste bins

And three police cars parked in a line like crooked teeth.

Ronnie lurches towards the cliff, gripping my arm and hauling me into some scrubby bushes hidden by the shadow. He curses, hard, under his breath then lies still, panting. I lie next to him, under the rough leaves,

close enough to feel the heat of his body, staring up into the light. He takes a phone out his pocket and makes a call, whispering quickly to whoever answers.

“They’re everywhere. Did you get out? How many were taken?”

He freezes as two policemen walk quickly past us back to the beach. Then he lies still.

“How many?” I whisper.

“You speak English?” He sounds surprised.

“Yeah. How many?”

“All of them,” he says.

I feel the wave of fear rushing through me. Ice burns in my stomach. Panic fills my mind.

“What do we do?”

“We get out of here.”

“What about my dad?” I whisper.

“We get out of here,” he says again. “Then we find out.”

We watch the policemen disappear into the blur of the lights under the cliff then turn back to the way ahead.

“OK. When I say run, we run,” Ronnie says. “As fast as you can. Past the cars then up that road. There is a church. Turn left and look for a black BMW. A friend

of mine is waiting and will drive us away.”

“Is that your plan?” I ask.

He nods then braces himself to move. I put my hand on his arm to stop him.

“That’s a terrible plan,” I hiss. “You want to get caught?”

He stares at me, surprise and a hint of anger in his eyes. I feel his body tense again as he readies himself to run, but I lean across and push him down flat.

“What do you know about getting caught?” he hisses. “You are just a foreign kid to them. It’s all good if they catch you. I am a man. I have a life here. It’s different for me.”

“So what?” I whisper. “I’ll come up with a plan that isn’t terrible. Just let me think.”

I calm my breathing and still my thoughts like she showed me. I concentrate on doing nothing, filling my mind with my own image, lying still in the undergrowth. I am doing nothing while the world turns around me. I am locked in place.

I creep forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios. Somewhere, a phone goes off, but I ignore it and crawl to the edge of the light. And then I burst

out, running as fast as I can, like the winds of hell are on my back. I make it to the cars before the police react, then I swerve to the left. A woman officer stares at me, then yells, and all the heads turn at once. I duck to the left, swerving round with my hand on a car bonnet, pushing shut the car door before the man can get out. I accelerate into the street Ronnie showed me, ignoring the shouts, ignoring the threats, ignoring the burning in my muscles as I tear up the road.

Until a man crashes into my legs and we tumble over. I try to scramble free but he has me tight. Another officer arrives and yanks my hands hard behind my back. I feel metal round my wrists then they haul me to my feet.

I roll on to my back and stare into the darkness. “We can’t do it your way,” I hiss. “It won’t work.”

Ronnie is nervous. He wants to run, but it is the wrong thing to do. “Trust me,” I say. “The police will have you in less than fifteen seconds. Wait here,” I insist. “They may go in a minute.”

They won’t go in a minute, but it is what I need to say to stop him running. I look again at the cars. There were two officers in the car on the left, another

behind it and the last two standing between the cars. So there is more space to the right. I calm myself again and concentrate, waiting until my heart is still. I am locked in place.

I creep forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios. Somewhere, a phone goes off, but I ignore it and crawl to the edge of the light. And then I burst out, running as fast as I can, like the winds of hell are on my back. I make it to the cars before the police react, then swerve to the right. A woman officer turns, moving instinctively but then hesitating, because her view is blocked by the other cars. Then she yells and all the heads turn at once. I race round the right-hand car, leaning on the bonnet, then accelerating away. I hear the slam of a door from the other side, then shouts behind me and footsteps as they give chase. Then the burst of an engine.

I turn into the street Ronnie showed me, forcing my body faster as I see the church up ahead. I turn left as a car pulls alongside me, blue light spilling over the street as its tyres screech. I see the BMW parked ahead.

The police car slews across the road in front of me. I swerve but can't avoid it, rolling up over the bonnet

then hitting the ground hard. The door opens and I see a dark uniform as it crashes down on top of me, rolling me over and yanking my hands hard behind my back. I feel metal round my wrists then they haul me to my feet.

I roll over again and stare out in front. Ronnie hisses at me. "You move too much," he says. "Keep still."

I glare at him and think about going on my own but I need this guy for now. "OK," I say. "Here's what we do. We creep forward on the right-hand side until I say, then we run, as fast as we can. I will be behind you but don't slow down."

He looks at me like I'm insulting him. "That is just as terrible as my plan," he says. "We do it—"

But I grab his shoulder to interrupt him. "WAIT!" I hiss. "Turn your phone off!"

Panic fills his eyes and he yanks his phone up and flicks it to silent just as it starts buzzing.

"How did you—?" he starts, but I ignore him.

"We do my plan," I say. "Let's go."

I am gone before he can argue, creeping forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios, crawling right up to the edge of the light. I push Ronnie in front of me, then count down – three, two,

one – and we burst out, running as fast as we can, like the winds of hell are on our back. We make it to the cars before the police move, then swerve to the right. A woman officer turns, moving instinctively but then hesitating, because her view is blocked by the other cars. Then she yells and all the heads turn at once. We race round the right-hand car, Ronnie leans on the bonnet, then accelerates away. I charge at the blue bin by the pub wall and pull on its handle with all my might. It comes away and crashes down behind the car, but I don't slow down. I hear the slam of a door from the other side, then shouts behind me and footsteps as they give chase. Then the burst of an engine, followed by a crunch as the police car reverses into the bin.

I turn into the road behind Ronnie, forcing my body faster as I see him turn at the church up ahead. I see the BMW doors open and I dive into the back. The wheels spin and the car pulls away, slowing only as we pass the police car looking for two pedestrians. I tip my head back against the headrest and gasp the cold English air in relief.

The journey is over.

3

BEFORE

It's a victory I need to win. For the underdog against the forces of oppression. I stare at her with a face as innocent as water.

She stares at me with an expression of tranquility and love.

We take deep breaths and wonder how to destroy the other within the rules of classroom engagement. Eyes lock, plans are made and battle lines drawn. I will never surrender.

OK, maybe "forces of oppression" is a bit harsh because I know she cares about us really. And she does help me a lot with my languages, which are the only subjects I'm any good at, but on a bad day she can be pretty oppressive. Like if you forget your homework or if you're just having a bit of a chat at the back of the class when she's talking. And we all need victories, don't we?

She moves first.

"No, that isn't what I was going to say, Aleksander," she lies. "Now, who can tell me the English word for 'fa—'"

"Factory," I say.

Her eyes narrow. She can't decide if she actually said it or not. Davos, who sits next to me, can't either.

He raises his eyebrows at me but I don't move. If I could look more helpful I'd be a library.

She gives that one to me. "Yes, that's right," she says. One-all. "What about the English for 'z—'"

"Spare parts," I say.

Somebody behind me giggles in the way that only thirteen-year-olds can. I hear the word "cheating" whispered, but I can't be, can I? I just have that strange knowledge of what's coming the moment before it arrives, like I always have. Two-one to me.

She smiles. Time to be careful.

"Last one," she says. "Who knows the English word for..." She hesitates, deliberately. We smile at each other. She opens her mouth again. "Zat—"

"Detention," I say quickly. The girls at the back all laugh together. Davos is staring at me, wondering what's going on. Three-one and game, I'm thinking.

"Very good, Aleksander," she says. "Detention it is. See me at the end of the lesson."

How can I win if she can change the rules?

"I don't know how you do it, Alex," she says, but she is smiling as she picks up her notes and puts them into her case.

“My dad worked for three years in England, miss,” I say.

“Yes, I know why your English is good, but I still don’t know how you do it. You have a gift for languages almost like you know what people will say before they say it!” She perches on the edge of her desk and takes off her glasses. “I’m going to miss these lessons.”

For a moment I don’t understand what she is saying until I feel that lurch in my stomach.

“Are you leaving?”

“You didn’t already know?” she says in mock surprise. She rubs her glasses on a cloth and sighs. “We’re leaving the country,” she says. “Going back to America. I don’t feel safe like I used to.”

“I’m sorry, miss,” I say, and I guess I really am. For a moment I wonder if I have done something to drive her away, but I don’t know what it could be. I guess leaving is just what people do.

“Do I really need to do detention?” I ask. “It’s just that I’ve got football practice.”

She looks out of the window for a moment, at the grey clouds filling up the sky, then shakes her head.

“I will miss you, Aleksander,” she says. “Take care of yourself, won’t you? And promise me you’ll give your

next teacher a chance.”

I promise, and I just know she is going to try and hug me, so I step out of the way slightly. Then I am halfway out of the door before she wipes the shine away from her eyes. I've got games to play and goals to score and a bike that needs racing and trees to climb and a river and hills and woods and a whole world to tear apart then put back together so I will be fine.

But she is gone within a week.

The new kids start arriving a week after that. A new headmistress to replace old Levan, although maybe he wasn't that old. English lessons stop and we start Mandarin. The girl, Mariam, who held my hand once on a trip to the caves, leaves without saying goodbye. I work hard because I have a strange feeling that I need to. Summer turns into autumn.

A boy I don't recognise at school calls me a name. The others laugh. Then it's a shove in the playground, hard into my shoulder, as I'm playing football. Too deliberate for me to get out of the way, knocking me off balance so I go flying. I scream foul, but they play on. I can still see the tackles coming but they are

harder to avoid. I score the most goals by far, but I lose my place in the team.

Time goes by and now I have a nickname. I tell Dad and he looks up sharply. I don't mention it again.

One Wednesday morning, another kid is pulled out of the crowd. He is younger than me, but I know him because he came to the house with his dad once. He stands in the middle of a circle of noise, mud on his shirt, fear in his brown eyes. For a moment I think about walking away, but I don't. I yell at them to stop and now I am next to him. A girl shouts something about us all being the same, but I've hardly ever met this boy next to me. Someone else throws something. A sandwich hits his face. I sense something coming and I move, then spin round to see my friend Davos looking on, red-faced. I raise my fists, then the teacher comes.

Davos sits next to me the next day and I tell him to go to hell. The day after that I am moved to the back. I have more room to spread my books out.

Dad has to come and see the headmistress. He waits while her assistant brings her some tea, then nods

when she says she doesn't have long. I have been fighting. It is not acceptable behaviour. I have been unruly and disturbing the other kids. If he wants me to do well in the new system he must control me. Where is my mother? Well, perhaps that was to be expected. As is bad behaviour, but she will not tolerate it at her school.

I watch Dad's fingers resting on his knees. They pinch the fabric of his trousers tight, so that the white shows in his knuckles. He hardly speaks. He doesn't ask any questions.

He doesn't ask me any questions on the way home either. I start to tell him that it wasn't my fault but he just says I need to get used to things being difficult. We get in and he speaks to Grandmother briefly. In low tones that I can't hear. Then he goes out and Grandmother comes in. She brushes my hair away from my eyes with her fingers and tells me not to worry. She says Dad is doing his best but things are tough at the moment. I know things are happening but nobody really explains what they are. And I don't want to make it worse so I stay as quiet as I can.

A boy in the class below is not at school. There

are gaps in the form lines. Someone has scrawled something on the school wall and we are made to line up until someone admits to it. Feeling passionate about something does not justify any behaviour, the headmistress says. The guilty must come forward, but nobody does. Very well. She will assume it was the children with the most disruptive records, and if it isn't fair, we should learn to have respect for authority. Five of us are given a bucket and a brush and an afternoon.

But we would never use those words.

I am hurt this time. Too bad to hide. I see the blows coming, but there are too many to dodge and when they win a fight at last, they make it count. The cold seeps into my body as I lie on the ground and stare at the railway tracks where they threw my phone. I can't tell Dad I've lost it. And it just keeps ringing.

I can't run easily because my leg is dead but the trains go so fast. The red stones crunch under my shoes. The icy ground is hard as I stumble.

I run down the bank straining my ears for the sound of...

But it is only a glimpse. I run down the bank and

almost cry out as I jump and land hard, grabbing the phone, then forcing myself away. The train doesn't come.

"Yes, I'm fine," I tell my dad. "I'll be back soon. I had to do something before coming home."

At night I listen as Dad and Grandmother argue. "His gift is starting to come through," she says, but this seems to make things worse.

Dad growls. "There are bigger things than him at the moment," he says. "There are more important things than stupid tricks. Don't you realise the risks I am taking? We just need to keep our heads down and stay out of trouble."

I will stay out of trouble, I say to the frost on the windowpane.

I will do everything you ask me to.

Dad comes home early. "They are reorganising things and there will be fewer shifts," he says. "Of course, it's only temporary – there's always work at the post office. Yes, I know that's what I said before but it is different now. Of course it's nothing to do with the school," he snaps.

He tells me he's sorry and reaches out to put his hand on my shoulder for a moment. Then he goes out.

I sit with my back against the bedroom door. If I am still I can hear the low voices. "Maybe it's time to go," he says, and I feel the ice freeze inside me. Then I breathe again.

"This is our home," she says. "And things must get better. It's a different world now. Internet, pictures, stories. People must know, and they will put it right, won't they?"

But he doesn't answer.

Our retired neighbours are arrested. Their son gets drunk and tears up the police station. Guns are drawn, then fired. A funeral is not permitted and they don't come back. The house remains empty.

Dad calls me in and tells me to sit down. "Do you know what's happening in our country, Alex?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I hear what people say."

He nods. "Our home isn't what it was," he says. "There is a war that the world doesn't know about and we don't know how to win."

“What should we do?”

“We fight, in the best way we can,” he says. “Does that frighten you?”

I nod. “But you once said you can’t be brave unless you are scared.”

He smiles for a moment. “You were always brave,” he says. “That was something.” He leans forward in his chair so it feels like we are close together. “I may have to leave soon,” he says. “If I do, I want you to look after your grandmother.”

I hesitate as the words seem to enter my body like a knife. He frowns and waits for an answer. “I can fight,” I say.

“You are a child,” he says, “and this isn’t a war for the brave, it’s a war for the clever. Because we are up against an enemy who won’t let us tell anyone what is happening.” He shakes his head. “If I go, I need you to stay here with your grandmother.”

“Will you come back?”

“Of course,” he says, and the conversation is over.

But I know this isn’t true. Because I’ve heard it before.