

DEAD LOCK



**SIMON
FOX**

*nosy
crow*



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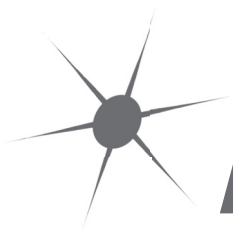


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For Joe Wicks, Tony Blackburn and
Kevin Feige. For keeping me going when
times were tough.

– **S.F**



MONDAY

9.24 p.m.

Monday night is race night.

No delays, no postponements, no excuses. Just me and him and who can open whatever's on the table first. Boy against man. And I hate losing.

It had started when I was just messing around with Dad's police-issue handcuffs. It had been stupid really, but I was bored and I'd wanted to see if I could close them and still squeeze my hand out. I'd kind of folded my palm over into my fingers and pulled hard to get free. It had hurt a bit, but I didn't care. Then I'd clicked them a tiny bit tighter and tried again. Then a tiny bit more...

And then I was stuck.

Dad had half looked up from the TV. "You need the key," he said.

I didn't want to give in, but I was going to rip my hand off if I didn't. "Where is it?" I asked.

He looked at me then sighed. "I lost it ages ago," he

said. He was staring at me like he didn't know how I was going to react but I was just confused.

"You must have it," I said. "Don't you need it?"

And then he kind of looked proud of himself and didn't say anything, but I could see the slight smile on the corner of his lips and I wanted to know why.

"What?" I said. "I'm stuck. You need to get me out."

But Dad just shook his head. He got up slowly and walked over to the table where I was sitting. Part of me was thinking that he was checking to see if I'd done any homework, and I didn't want to get into a row, but the other part of me wanted to get the stupid cuff off my wrist so I sat still while he leaned across and flicked over a few pages of the science textbook that I hadn't even looked at. Then he picked up the other end of the cuffs.

"Stuck with homework or stuck with these?"

"Both," I said. "Now, are you going to let me out or what?"

I could feel the frustration starting to grow in my chest because he was taking too long, and I thought about the exercises the counsellor had given me but why the hell should I do them when he still had that half-smile on his face and was nodding his head like

some old wise monk or something.

“I wonder if this is the solution,” he said, and leaned forward, slamming the open cuff on to the leg of the table where it meets the top. I was stuck there and he was laughing, which was crazy because I couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed.

I tried to grab his arm, but he swerved out of the way and my hand jerked hard against the cuffs, which made him laugh even more. Then I was laughing too, even though I wanted to be angry.

Dad had this big grin on his face and he told me that when I finished my homework he would let me out.

I told him to stop being annoying and he told me to tell my face to stop being annoying, which was possibly the most annoying thing he could have said but all I could do was kind of laugh and moan and shout out in frustration.

“Come on, Dad. Give me the key!”

There was a pause and he looked at me like he was wondering whether to stop because the laughter had been good and if he carried on it could all go wrong.

“I told you. I lost it,” he said.

“So how will you get me out when I’ve done my homework?”

He looked around him. The table was pushed back, trapping the two chairs we didn’t use against the old sideboard. It was covered in stuff he hadn’t got around to sorting, even though it had been ages now, and he moved some of it around before he pulled out a pile of papers held together with a large paperclip.

“With this,” he said, and he took the paperclip off the papers and held it up for me to see.

I stared at it then I looked at the lock on the cuffs. “How?” I said.

He smiled. “Do your homework and I’ll show you.”

But that didn’t feel fair and now he’d gone too far and something must’ve flashed in my eyes because he knew it too. Because I’d been sitting there for ages and I didn’t want to do my stupid homework and I could feel the fire in my mind and the pressure in my shoulders and I wondered if I pulled and kicked and stamped and ripped I could just smash this stupid table to pieces. I wanted to swear at him and break and tear my wrist from my arm then scream until the whole world stopped, because he shouldn’t be doing this, should he? He should be making things easy so I

could slide through the day and go to bed then slide through the next one until at some point the future would happen and everything would be fine again.

Except there was a tear in his eye and suddenly I thought, *Please don't cry in front of me*, because hearing it was bad but seeing it was more than I could handle and he was just holding that paperclip like it had all the answers.

He reached out with it and then put it on the table, holding my eyes with his for a long time. He kind of smiled at me and maybe I smiled back, I don't know, but he went and sat back down and I picked it up.

And that's how it all started.

Because I didn't give up. It took me an hour but I didn't give up. My wrist hurt, my fingers were sore and I definitely didn't do any more homework, but I didn't give up. And I got the cuffs off.

Dad had gone to sleep on the sofa again. He knew watching me would just wreck it, so he ignored me and watched the telly until he nodded off, and in a strange way I got this mad buzz from opening them without him seeing. I was about to wake him up, but then I had a better idea.

I tidied up as quietly as I could, packing up my books,

clearing away the dinner things into the dishwasher and straightening things for tomorrow. Then I went back into the living room and turned off the TV.

Dad jerked as he woke up. There was panic in his eyes and it shot through me but then he saw where he was and calmed down. It took him a moment to remember what had been happening but then he looked at me and smiled.

“You got them off then?” he said.

I nodded and smiled back as I put the paperclip down on top of the TV, just out of his reach, then pointed at the cuffs that now fixed his wrist firmly to the radiator behind him.

“Your turn,” I said.

Then I turned off the light and went up to bed.

The next week he said, “I thought you might want to see this.”

It was just a dumb padlock, but it was one that one of his crooks had tried to open but couldn't. He showed me what to do and we both tried and then I could open that too. Then when we had our counselling, Theresa didn't look quite so timid and said whatever we were doing was doing good, so keep it up.

“Really?” he asked, and I listened outside the door so I could hear her response.

“Yes, really,” she said.

So we did.

Monday night became race night.

Homework waits; I don’t cook and I’m just buzzing. I set up the table before he gets home, with the old brown cloth, the pot of grease and the timer. And my set of tools.

“Because that’s fair,” I say. “You get to choose the lock; I should choose the tools.”

He shrugs and grins and laughs and says OK, so the pale-blue leather case of seventy-year-old dentist tools I found at a car boot sale sits on the table between us. But I’m still not sure they’ll be enough, because who knows what he’s brought for us to open.

He holds out his hands and says I should trust him not to cheat, but it’s all about cheating, isn’t it, and he’s got that smile on his face. I say I’ve got to have something on my side, so he says how about we both choose one thing that’s modern to go with it and I can choose first. *Fine*, I think. *We’ll do that*. Except the first night it’s a couple of simple three-coil padlocks. Should be easy, right, so I grin at him and

take the two-millimetre wire and put it on my side of the table. He grins back and picks up the head torch.

Then he turns off the light.

Dad brings home all sorts of stuff. I don't know where he gets most of it. From work or a junk shop or maybe from one of the engineers the prevention team uses. Then we race. I used to get the feeling he was letting me win but when I surprise him by springing open an early Victorian Webley in less than a minute, he looks at me with a strange expression like pride and shock at the same time.

"You really are an alien," he says. "Almost six feet at thirteen and breaking safes in fifty-five seconds. I thought your mum loved *Star Wars* a bit too much." He stares at me for a long time before slapping his hands suddenly on his knees and getting up to grab another beer from the fridge. "Go on then," he says. "Do it again, only slower this time so I can see."

The very best race nights are the ones where we try and try and try, but we just can't get the thing open. That's when the time flies, and I find myself leaning over the table holding the torch, trying to angle the magnets while Dad eases the mechanism,

slowly and silently, patient like you can't believe, both of us holding our breath, waiting for the tiny whisper of magic.

Click.

The lock is open so it's time to tidy up because it's school tomorrow and he has to iron his shirt for work and he'll probably be gone when I get up and make sure I get some washing powder when I shop and hurry, hurry, hurry because the race is done and it's way past time for bed.

But those are the nights when I can't sleep and I know it's the same for him.

I sit at the top of the stairs like I used to; when they would laugh or argue or make plans or talk about me. When I would stare at that photo of them on the wall and listen to the tick of the clock, leaning on the banister and trying not to fall asleep. Except now the clock doesn't tick and the only sound is Dad padding around until eventually I hear the click of the light switch and the slight creak of the living-room door. Then I hold my breath and creep back to my room, slipping into bed just in time to see the handle turn and Dad's face appear at the door.

"Good one tonight," he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “I didn’t think we were going to do it.”

Dad leans against the door frame. He is still in the darkness, outlined in the light from the landing.

“We can always do it,” he says, “if we keep trying. We’ve just got to keep changing the angles and find a way. If one of us can’t do it, the other one will.”

He straightens up then reaches for the door handle. “You sleeping all right these days?”

I nod, although I don’t know if he can see. “Better,” I say, and he smiles.

“Me too,” he says. “Goodnight, Archie. Love you.”

He closes the door and I lie there in the darkness, thinking of cogs, wheels and the magic sound of locks opening. I think about Mum and I think about Dad and I try to remember what it was like before we had race night but it is hard, so then I try to guess what we’re going to have next time and then I think about what I am going to practise and I wonder if Dad is planning too.

But then this week’s race night comes and Dad doesn’t come home. He doesn’t call and he doesn’t even send a message. And I have a horrible feeling that something is terribly wrong.