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Opening extract from **Every Second Counts**

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England is in the grip of recession and extremist groups are on the rise. After a bomb last year devastated both their families, Charlie and Nat were recruited into the secret English Freedom Army (EFA) as part of an active cell designed to take a stand against terrorism.

Since then they have learned that the EFA is a terrorist organisation itself. Secretly led by the charismatic politician, Roman Riley, the EFA's real aim is to commit acts of violence and blame others for causing them, thus encouraging the general public to believe the current government is not in control – and to turn to Riley's Future Party for a political solution to the chaos.

Riley – through cell leader, Taylor – has recently conned Nat and Charlie into taking part in kidnapping and terrorism and they are now on the run from both the EFA and the police.

Part one

Excommunication

*(n. rejection by means of act of banishing
or denouncing someone)*

Nat

I held up my hand to show Charlie she needed to wait. She gave me a swift nod. I moved, silently, across the grass. The safe house we were heading for was a flat in an abandoned building set apart from the rest of the road.

I crossed the wasteland, feeling exposed. It was early evening on a warm spring day and still light. Anyone looking out of the concrete apartment block would have seen me, but as far as I could make out no one *was* looking. I reached the cover of a single tree and ducked behind it. I glanced over at where Charlie was waiting a few metres away, on the opposite side of the wasteland. She was dressed, like I was, in jeans and a T-shirt. We'd left our large, bulky packs behind a nearby rubbish bin and probably looked like a couple of teenagers on their way to some meet-up with their mates.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Charlie met my gaze. Even at this distance I could see the focus and intensity in her dark, slanting eyes. She had cropped her long, curly hair close to her skull, hoping to be less recognisable on the run. It wasn't the prettiest of styles but it made Charlie's face more beautiful than ever.

At least I thought so.

There was nothing now between me, still hiding behind my tree, and the building over the road. I glanced up and down. Nobody was about. It was time to make our move. I pointed at the ground-floor flat and Charlie gave another nod. She was ready. I ran, reaching the house in three long strides, and ducked down beside the wall. Charlie crouched low on the other side of the front door. She signalled she was going to take a look inside. I nodded, then inched my way to the edge of my own window, ready to risk peering in.

This was the third safe house we'd attempted to access – both the others had been empty. It was also the last on our list. If we didn't find people from the resistance inside, I had no idea what we would do.

I crawled into position, steadying myself ready to stand up and look in through the window. I was about to move, when Charlie let out a muffled squeak. As I spun around, a hand grabbed my arm. I opened my mouth to yell, but a cloth bag was shoved over my head, then pressed tight over my lips. I gasped for breath, trying to pull my arm free, lashing out at whoever was holding me.

A second later my legs were kicked from under me. I fell to the concrete, yelping with pain.

'Charlie?' I gasped. Fear consumed me. Over the past few weeks our focus had been on survival, not feelings. But mine were still as strong as ever.

'I'm here.' Charlie sounded strong. I straightened up. I couldn't tell if she was able to see me or not but, if she was, I

didn't want her last memory of me to be me cowering like a baby.

‘Keep still and shut up,’ a voice ordered.

The point of a knife pierced through my T-shirt, a sharp pain against my ribs.

Charlie

I tried to punch and kick, but the hands holding me down were too strong. Fury boiled up inside me but the cloth bag over my head was pressed tight against my mouth and all that came out was a muffled yell.

‘Calm down,’ snarled a male voice.

Where was Nat? Was he okay? How could this have happened? Nat and I were always so careful – after a month on the run we had learned how to slip in and out of the derelict houses where we took shelter without drawing attention to ourselves. And yet we’d been captured approaching this safe house as if we were a couple of idiots with no combat or stealth training whatsoever.

Nat yelled out, a single pain-filled cry. Then silence.

Was he alright? The idea that he might be hurt – or worse – sent ice through my blood. Still pressing the cloth bag against my mouth, the man holding me propelled me inside the house. Our footsteps pattered across the tiled floor. I couldn’t hear anyone else. Where was Nat?

Through another door. The air was cooler here. I was shoved into a chair. I tried to get up, but rough hands pushed me down.

‘Stay still or I’ll cut you,’ the man hissed.

I froze. A second later my hands were forced together in my lap and bound with tape. I kept very still, trying to conserve my energy and listening hard for signs that Nat was nearby. I could hear nothing. I forced myself to focus. I needed to channel all my efforts into getting Nat and myself free.

‘Right.’ The cloth bag was yanked off my head and a bright light shone in my eyes.

I blinked, turning my face away from the glare. I was in a small room with twin beds and a chest of drawers.

‘Look at me,’ the man demanded. The light lowered and I looked up. A young guy – not much older than I was – stood in front of me. He had fine, fair hair and delicate features. Despite the hard edge to his voice I could see in his eyes that he was terrified. I remembered something Taylor, my old EFA trainer, had once said: *A big part of success in any fight lies in the ability to use your opponent’s weaknesses against them. Assess, plan, act.*

He might have lied to us and used us, but Taylor had been right about that. The knowledge that my captor was scared gave me a huge advantage. I stared into his eyes, my courage building.

‘What are you doing here?’ the man snapped, but now that I was watching him, I could hear the slight quaver in his voice. Suddenly, I was certain I could disarm him. I just needed to get rid of the tape around my wrist. Keeping my eyes fixed on his, I felt for the edge of the tape. *There.*

‘Answer me.’ The man held up the knife. But his hands were shaking.

‘No.’ As I spoke, I ripped the tape off my wrist and lunged for his arm. With a single blow I knocked the knife out of his hand. It clattered to the floor.

I raced over and snatched it up. Then I spun around and held the knife towards him.

The man stared at me, his mouth gaping. I met his gaze.

‘Where’s the boy I was with?’ I demanded. ‘Is he alright?’

The man held up his hands. I could see in his eyes he believed I would use the knife. ‘He’s fine, he’s with Julius.’

I pointed to the door. ‘Take me to him,’ I demanded. ‘*Now.*’

Nat

The bag was pulled off my head and I was pushed backwards against the sofa behind me. I sat down with a jolt. I was in a living room: sofas, TV, chipped wooden sideboard. The man who had shoved me in here looked nothing like I'd expected. For a start, he was young – but bald and wearing a suit and glasses. His manner was meek, almost apologetic, as he sat down on the couch opposite me, his weapon his hand.

‘You’re Nat Holloway and the girl is Charlie Stockwell, aren’t you?’ he asked, laying the blade on the seat beside him. I glanced at it – it wasn’t a knife after all, just a vegetable peeler. ‘What are you doing here? Does Riley know we’re here?’

I stared at him. Man, he was scared. *Really* scared.

‘Please, Nat,’ the man went on. ‘Lennox and I need to know.’

‘Is Lennox the guy with Charlie?’ I demanded, rising to my feet. ‘Is she okay?’

‘She’ll be fine,’ the man said. ‘Lennox won’t hurt her. Er, I’m Julius Prebert. We just need to know why you’re here.’

Whoever this guy was, he was definitely no solider. I knew from my training with Taylor that the art of interrogation lay in

trying not to give away too much with your questions and that the art of intimidation lay in being hard and unemotional. This man was failing on both counts. Which gave me the edge.

I was pretty sure I was physically stronger than him too. But hopefully this didn't need to come to a fight. I headed for the door, determined to find Charlie.

‘Wait, Nat.’

‘You’re in the resistance, aren’t you?’ I asked.

Julius nodded. ‘Parveen Patel told you about us, didn’t she?’

Before I could respond, the door flew open. A second man – Lennox, presumably, stumbled inside, closely followed by Charlie, her eyes blazing. She was wielding a knife. She must have taken it off Lennox.

Julius gasped in horror. He sprang to his feet.

‘Are you okay?’ Charlie and I spoke together.

‘I’m fine,’ I said.

She gave a swift nod. ‘Me too.’

‘Please don’t hurt us,’ Julius stammered.

‘Shut up, Julius,’ Lennox snapped.

I assessed Lennox quickly. He was younger than the bald guy, barely older than Charlie and I, and much tougher looking. But under the bravado I could see he was trembling too.

I held up my hands. ‘Nobody’s going to get hurt. We just want to talk.’ I glanced at Charlie. Reluctantly she lowered the knife. ‘Julius and Lennox are in the resistance,’ I said to her. ‘They’re the people we’ve been looking for – the ones Parveen told us about.’

As I said Parveen's name, Julius and Lennox glanced at each other. Julius had mentioned her earlier too. I frowned. If Par had told them about us, why were they so suspicious?

'Why did you attack us?' Charlie demanded, vocalising my own thoughts. She advanced on Julius. 'If you're in the resistance against Riley, why did you put bags over our heads and force us inside?'

'Because we thought you might be Riley's spies,' Julius said quickly, his voice quavering.

'They *are* Riley's spies,' Lennox snapped. '*She* kidnapped the Mayor of London's son. And *he* set off a bomb at the Houses of Parliament. They did that for that scum, Riley.'

'No,' I said. 'You've got this all wrong. We were *set up* by Riley. He conned us into joining the English Freedom Army, which he said only existed to stop terrorists, then he manipulated us *into* becoming terrorists. I didn't *know* I was carrying a bomb under Parliament and Charlie was *ordered* to kidnap Aaron Latimer.'

'That's right,' Charlie added. 'I thought I was protecting Aaron.'

'The bottom line,' I said, trying to keep my voice even, 'is that Parveen trusted us enough to give us this address, so you should trust us too.' I pointed to the window. 'We're here alone and unarmed. Is that really how Riley would have dealt with you if he knew you were here?'

Julius nodded. I could see he was persuaded, but Lennox still looked suspicious.

‘This could be a double bluff,’ he argued. ‘You could both secretly be working for Riley.’

‘No, don’t you get it?’ Charlie snapped. ‘Riley was behind the Canal St Market bomb which killed my mother.’ For a split second, her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them angrily away. ‘The same bomb left Nat’s brother in a coma. There’s no way we would do *anything* for that man.’

‘You mentioned Parveen Patel earlier,’ I said. ‘She obviously told you about us, just like she told us about you. She gave us the addresses of three safe houses a couple of weeks ago. We’ve been working our way through them, looking for the resistance, ever since. Surely it isn’t a surprise that we’re here?’

There was a long pause, then Julius sighed. ‘It isn’t,’ he said.

‘Then why all the noise?’ Charlie demanded.

‘Because,’ Lennox snapped, ‘Parveen has disappeared.’