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Opening extract from

Survivor

Written by

Tom Hoyle

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SURVIVOR

One mysterious death on the Ultimate Bushcraft adventure holiday is tragic, but a second, then a third is suspicious . . . But who can you trust when everyone around you is a suspect? As numbers dwindle, the chances of survival plummet. Staying alive has never seemed so guilty.

Nobody is safe . . .

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CHAPTER 1
(NEARLY A YEAR BEFORE): THE FIRST PART OF GEORGE FLEET'S STATEMENT

I'll tell the story from the beginning. Right from the very start.

Yes, I'll be honest. I don't tell lies – at least not unless I really *have* to. I'll just say it as it was.

None of it would have happened if I hadn't missed a bus.

I arrived just in time to see the red lights of the number 6 slip away into the distance. When the next one arrived, I headed upstairs to avoid a gang of boys I didn't recognize. I sat halfway down on the right to avoid empty lager cans near the front. Isn't it weird? After everything, I still remember little things like rolling lager cans.

So, you see, I was more or less level with the window of the flat when the bus stopped to pick up some passengers by the war memorial.

I had glanced at the football scores on my phone and was about to text Louis – who is still my best friend – when I realized that the cloudy red light in the flat's window wasn't a reflection of the setting sun, but flames. I saw

smoke creeping out from under the eaves of the roof.

I said, 'That building's on fire!' It was more to myself at the time, but even when I shouted people looked away, thinking I was crazy. They didn't even check to see if there were flames. People don't see danger when it's right in front of their noses.

As I stared at the flat, the net curtain moved and a hand slammed against the windowpane.

Afterwards, when I heard my voice on the emergency-services recording, I was amazed at how calm I sounded. My voice still had that low boom that I hate, but I basically sounded cool and in control. Not that I can remember making the call or advising them to send an ambulance and *at least three fire engines*. Everyone said that it was remarkable, that bit about the three fire engines – they seemed to think it was stranger than what I actually *did*. I suppose I imagined three fire engines blocking the road. Everyone laughed when they found out that I'd said *excuse me* to the people on the bus's stairs as I pushed past. 'Excuse me, but that building's on fire.'

I didn't ever really *decide* to help; it just happened, like I was sliding down a slope, unable to stop myself.

There was a bit in the newspaper about how I left my rucksack with the driver and asked an old guy to stop the

traffic. If I left my rucksack with the driver, I must have already decided to go inside the building. But I wasn't thinking. I was just pulled towards the flat as though a magnet was drawing me on.

'Fire – up there!' I hollered.

A man shouted at me while I pounded on the door. 'What the hell are you doing, lad?'

'Fire!' I pointed up at the window, still calm, just *urgent*. 'There's someone up there!' I didn't panic, even then. I sort of saw myself from the outside, like I was an actor, like I couldn't be hurt, not badly hurt, anyway.

All of a sudden, everyone seemed to grasp that there was a disaster happening. A big guy, white T-shirt stretched over muscles, was passing at *exactly* the right moment. He shoved his shoulder against the door twice, there was a crack and a snap and it splintered open. Swirling smoke crept towards us, like fingers reaching for the fresh air. Sorry for the metaphor – or simile – whatever – I know that this isn't an essay for an English lesson – but I really saw it like that at the time. Fingers. I thought of horror-movie fingers.

'Open the window!' people shouted. 'Break the glass and jump down!' others yelled. At the time, no one was sure why the woman didn't open the window properly,

but later we knew that she couldn't, that it had been painted shut. The words 'she's got a kid' filled the street and my brain. Flecks of glass showered down on us and there was a desperate high-pitched scream – a nails-down-the-blackboard screech – followed by coughing and spluttering.

The big guy who'd knocked the door down raced into the building first.

I went in after him. I had thought before about doing heroic things, but they never involved dashing into a burning building. I had imagined sword fights, light-sabre battles (I feel embarrassed writing that), flying an aeroplane into a war zone, standing up to bullies against improbable odds (yet I avoided those boys at the back of the bus: some hero!), but I didn't think of any of this when I went in.

I went in because . . . I suppose I would have felt bad if I hadn't. I went in because it was automatic. Because I heard them say 'she's got a kid'. I didn't think that I was only a kid myself; I was fifteen at the time. I'm only sixteen now, of course, though it feels like longer than a year since it happened. *Much longer*.

'Where do you think you're going?' someone shouted behind me. 'Stop being an idiot!'

The big guy had stormed ahead and was standing next

to the young panicking woman when I followed him into the flat. He was trying to drag her away from the window, but she fought against him, slapping and screaming, determined to keep her baby next to the small pane she'd managed to smash – and what little fresh air there was.

'Jump down!' I heard from outside. 'We'll catch you!' A large group had gathered below and were ready to catch anyone who fell. They didn't understand about the window. You see – people outside, looking in, don't always understand.

The room was hot. It was skin-reddeningly hot – only just bearable, and flames were leaping up from the sofa and running up the wall. But it's the smoke that kills, they said; the firemen told us later that flames are there as a warning for the smoke.

Unable to get close to the window, I was surrounded by the fumes and held my breath.

The big guy was the true hero. He smashed the rest of the glass then pulled the baby from his mother. 'No,' she gasped and coughed, 'don't throw him – he'll die.' She still fought to stay in the man's way despite her confusion. 'Give him back,' she mumbled.

I took the baby off him. The kid was heavier than I expected, and not moving. I ran off immediately,

crouching down to avoid the worst of the smoke, breath held, baby pressed to my chest, while behind me his mother still fought the other guy, delirious with panic and confusion and the effects of the fumes.

It was, of course, water that saved my life. Not the water from hoses, those were still six or seven minutes away, but a lifetime of swimming, breath-holding competitions and diving off piers and rocks. I held my breath throughout as the poisonous smoke surrounded me.

And so I became a hero. 'Saint George to the Rescue' was the headline on the front page of the local paper, and similar puns on my name were made in the national press. I was on the TV. I had saved a baby's life. The big guy had saved both mother and baby, but he got second billing.

Imagine being responsible for saving someone's life. But it was just chance – the bus stopped, I looked out of the window, someone tough was passing. But without these chances the first of a terrible series of dominoes would not have fallen. And I wonder, right now, whether it might actually have been better for me not to have saved that kid's life at all.

[Here ends the first part of George Fleet's statement]

THE OTHER CHAPTER 1 (SAID IN THE HOUR BEFORE): HIM

Shut up! Now it's MY turn to speak. If you know what's good for you, you'll listen.

Just you and me. At **THE END** of the story.

You know that this is not a happy ending. No. Not happy FOR YOU at all.

But you deserve an unhappy ending.

And they all lived unhappily ever after. Because that's what they **DESERVED**.

THE END

I've done quite a bit, haven't I?

Haven't I?

Quite a few have

DIED.

They **deserved** it.

Bastards.

Useless bastards.

Mostly useless. Mostly bastards. One or the other, anyway.

And all of it is your fault.

TIME FOR JUSTICE.

DING DONG.

JUSTICE CALLING.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

I always knew he was a bad person: that's what you're thinking. I can see it on your pretty – your pretty pathetic – face.

Who are you kidding? You don't know me. You don't know *anything*.

You don't know WHO I am or WHAT I am or what I DID.

You don't understand because you are so wrapped up in your own life, so far up your own arse that you don't know anything about anyone. Least of all me.

But now you know that it was *me*.

Yeah. Yeah. It was **ME**!

Oh I'm so sorry! Please let me cry about it. Please help me.

No. I'm not sorry. They deserved it.

And are you so different to me anyway?

That's why I really hate people like you. You do what you can for yourself, and would kill for your own family, which means for YOURSELF. It's all about **you**.

We're all in it for ourselves.

We're all animals. I'm just freer. I'm the animal that

roams where it wants and kills when it wants. The KING of the jungle.

Who doesn't like winning? And what's killing? It's the ultimate victory. No one persecutes the lion because he kills. I'm the LION. Even the cute little robin kills worms. Stick that on your Christmas cards: THIS ANIMAL IS A KILLER.

You think I'm *evil*. But that's a LIE. *Evil* doesn't mean anything. It just means that I'm different to you. Freer (I love that word, free, free, FREE); more free than you.

Now that we have some time, let me tell you about the first person I did in. *Are you sitting comfortably?*

It was JUSTICE, this one. *Once upon a time* there was a boy who came into class. He had hair like yours. But that's just a coincidence.

Anyway, you're distracting me. You shouldn't do that. If you do it again, I'll hurt you.

In the beginning there was a boy. He came in when he shouldn't have, into the class, and started smiling and showing off and sapping my energy. He was like a parasite, living off us, feeding on us, just so that HE could laugh and FORCE others to laugh – which was MY job. So it was JUSTICE what I did.

I suppose you want to know how I did it.

Easier than A, B, C.

Miss Rogers, Miss Rogers – that's me speaking, very sweetly – *he just stepped out, Miss Rogers. Into the road, Miss Rogers.*

And we were free of him. Free of the bastard cuckoo who had invaded the nest.

I hated him.

But there's one name I hate more.

GEORGE. GEORGE FLEET.

I remember that first moment I saw GEORGE in the airport. Pathetic.

I think I should stop and let you think about all of this. I'm suddenly a bit tired. You're making me tired. But *I'm not finished yet.*

I'LL BE BACK.

And stop looking at me like that. I DON'T LIKE IT.