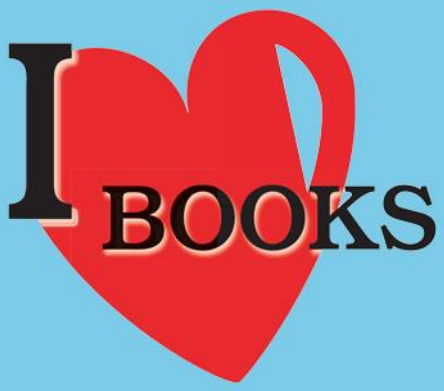


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Opening extract from

The Crystal Run

Written by

Shelia O'Flanagan

Published by

Hodder Children's Books an imprint of Hachette Children's Group

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Hodder Children's Books

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A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in Goudy by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

ISBN 978-1-444-92705-4 (HB)
ISBN 978-1-444-92706-1 (EXPORT)



The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.

Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London, EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk



1

The two boys were at the corner of the street. They were standing close to each other, not talking, just watching. They were both dressed the same, in grey trousers and blue hoodies. The grey trousers were part of the school uniform but the blue hoodies were their own. The boys were tall and broad and muscular. They looked like they played sports, or worked out. They looked older than the boys in Year 9.

Joe Hunter didn't look older than anyone else in his school year, and he didn't look like he worked out. He knew that even if he spent hours in the gym he never would. He was lean and gangly, all arms and legs. He wasn't good at sports. He was also slightly hard of hearing. Which meant that guys like Greg Nolte and Niall Keller saw him as a bit of a target.

Joe didn't want to be a target. He liked to steer clear of trouble. So when he saw Niall and Greg ahead of him, he crossed the road. He felt a bit of a wimp doing it. But it was the best option.

He readjusted his headphones as he passed them on the

opposite side of the street. Joe didn't wear earbuds because of his hearing problems. The trouble was that he struggled with softly spoken words or hearing people who were more than a couple of metres away. He needed sounds to be close and clear. Usually he got on all right but occasionally it was a bit of a struggle. He wore invisible hearing aids to make things easier.

He was closer to Greg and Niall now. They'd stepped out from the wall and were looking at him speculatively. Joe glanced around. The road was a quiet one, a short cut home from the school which circled some waste land and disused buildings. There was nobody else on the street. He gritted his teeth and kept walking.

'Hunter!' Greg called to him. 'Nice headphones, man.'

Joe slid the headphones from his ears so that they were around his neck.

'I said nice headphones, Hunter,' repeated Greg as he and Niall crossed the road. 'Jeez, what's the point in you having good cans if you can't hear anything?'

'I can hear,' said Joe.

'So why didn't you say something?'

Joe shrugged.

'Hand them over,' said Niall.

'What?' Joe looked at him warily.

'You mean pardon.' Niall laughed and so did Greg. The two of them slapped each other on the back as though they were each the funniest people they'd ever met.

'Hand them over,' said Greg.

'Why?'

'I want to try them.' Greg took his iPod out of his pocket.

Joe weighed up his options. There was no way Greg would give them back. But there was no chance they were going to let him walk by either. Joe looked around again. The road was still deserted.

'C'mon,' said Greg. 'Hand them over.'

'No,' said Joe.

'I'm warning you, Hunter.'

Joe didn't know what to do. It wasn't worth getting into a fight over the headphones. But his dad would be furious if he found out that they'd been taken from him. They were expensive.

'Give me a break,' he said. 'They were a present from my dad.'

'Where'd he get them?' asked Greg. 'I thought your dad was out of work.'

'Part time,' said Joe. Maybe if they thought he had no money, that the family were down on their luck, they'd back off. 'Everyone's on shorter hours. Money's a bit tight.'

'Yet he wasted it on buying you these.' Greg shook his head. 'And it's a waste cos everyone knows that if you can hear at all, you listen to crap.'

'Give them over,' said Niall.

'No,' said Joe again.

As he spoke, Niall lunged towards him but Joe, without even thinking about it, twisted away from him and began to run.

'Hey!' yelled Greg. 'Get back here, you moron!'

Joe ran faster. He wasn't a speedy runner but he had longer legs than either Greg or Niall. The thing would be to try

to make up a bit of distance in front of them. But he wasn't sure he could do it. He ran down the road and then turned sharply left, hoping to shake them off even though he knew it was impossible. Worse than impossible, he realised with some horror, because he'd chosen Taylor's Lane to run through and it seemed to be blocked at one end. It shouldn't be. He knew that it joined the road he'd just left with another one which snaked around the disused buildings. He'd been down this lane hundreds of times before and it had never been blocked. He wasn't entirely sure what was at the end of it. It seemed like a wall of shimmering metal right across the gap where the road should be.

Was it a solid object? If it was, perhaps he could climb it. If it wasn't, then there was no question that Niall and Greg would catch up with him and beat him up. If it really was solid metal it would be shiny and slippery and difficult to climb. But it was the only means of getting away. He could hear them shouting behind him. They hadn't missed him turning into the laneway. They were catching up.

He ran faster, putting on a spurt so that he would have some energy behind him when he launched himself at the shining wall. He kept his eyes firmly on it as he got closer and closer and then he leaped as high and as hard as he could, his fingers totally extended as he reached for the top.

A jolt of electricity surged through him and he was dazzled by a brilliant white light. He felt his body slam into the wall. And then, almost in slow motion, he began to fall.



2

His head ached. That was the first thing. So did his back. His arms too. Joe couldn't remember anything after hitting the wall. He didn't know if Greg and Niall had caught up with him. If they'd taken his headphones. If they'd given him a beating at the same time.

He tried to open his eyes but, right now, they were gummed shut, as though he'd been asleep for a long time. Maybe he had. Maybe he'd been beaten up so badly that he'd been knocked unconscious. Or maybe he'd been momentarily stunned by slamming up against the wall, and even now Greg and Niall were standing over him and about to begin the going over that he was sure they wanted to give him. He swallowed hard. He rubbed his eyes and they flickered open. He was afraid that he'd see them looking down at him, ready to stamp on him or kick him. But they weren't there. Not yet anyway.

He took a deep breath. No point lying here like a fool waiting for them. Better to do something. And if he wasn't flat

out in the laneway, better to know if he was in hospital and how hurt he might be.

The light was very bright. So bright that initially Joe thought that he was actually on an operating table. That he was being put back together after whatever had happened and that he'd woken up in the middle of it. Which, he thought, was going to be very painful. But there were no voices and he couldn't make out any people around him. Plus, he realised, he wasn't on any kind of table or bed or chair. He was lying on the ground. Yet it wasn't the muddy ground of the laneway. It was a smooth, tiled surface, slightly warm to the touch.

Joe blinked a few times and then pulled himself into a seated position. He was sitting on the floor of a long covered passageway. The tiles were mosaic in vivid shades of green and white. The walls were covered in the same mosaics, but these were multicoloured and formed a variety of patterns which Joe eventually realised were depictions of bizarre animals along with unrecognisable symbols. There were tigers with wings, birds with huge, serrated beaks and creatures he couldn't even begin to identify. As he studied them the animals seemed to shimmer and move, and the symbols pulsate. He rubbed the back of his neck, squeezed his eyes closed, then opened them again. He looked along the passageway which led from a closed arched door at one end to an open space at the other. He wasn't sure what was outside – from where he sat it seemed to be a type of courtyard. There were more doors off the passageway, and large urns filled with enormous multicoloured flowers either side of them.

Where the hell am I? wondered Joe. And how did I get here?

He moved his head cautiously from side to side. The ache was beginning to disappear as was his slightly blurry vision. He stretched out his arms and legs, then got to his feet cautiously. Despite his aching body he seemed to be in one piece. He picked up his headphones which had somehow slipped from his neck and ended up a little further along the passageway. He felt in the pocket of his trousers for his smartphone and took it out. He looked at the screen. He'd charged it before leaving the house that morning so it still had an almost full battery. What it didn't have, though, was a signal. Not even a faint one.

Joe began to walk slowly along the passageway. His steps seemed bouncier than usual, as though his body somehow weighed less. It was a strange sensation. He looked around him, half expecting Greg and Niall to appear and demand his headphones again, but he was completely alone. It was a relief to have escaped them, he admitted to himself, but where exactly had he escaped to? He examined the intricate designs on the walls but they gave him no clues.

He was still confused and disoriented when he reached the courtyard. It was about half the size of a football pitch, partially covered by a tiled roof which was supported by slender pillars. Like the walls and the passageway floor, they were covered in mosaic tiles. This time, they were shimmering white. A rectangular pond, with clear water, ran almost the length of the courtyard. There was a fountain at each end of the pond, although neither of them was working, so the water in the pond was perfectly calm, without a single ripple. In the centre was a flat, round stone with a hole in the centre. It was supported out

of the water by sculptures of the winged tigers he'd seen in the mosaic tiles. These were undoubtedly some kind of mythical creatures from a story he couldn't properly remember. The ground around the fountains and the pond was filled with small, coloured pebbles which glistened and sparkled beneath the warm sun. And that, Joe realised, as he looked upwards was another thing. The sun was shining brightly but there was also something else in the sky – a wide ribbon of light that arched across it. Joe had never seen anything like it before. It was like a pure white rainbow.

It was so hot that he didn't need his maroon jumper. He took it off and at the same time undid the top button of his white school shirt. He left the jumper draped over the side of one of the urns of flowers that surrounded the courtyard. There was a strong scent from the flowers, somewhere between sweet and citrus. It was a pleasant smell, although Joe didn't recognise it.

He walked slowly around the courtyard, in the shade of the tiled roof. He could see that there were doors leading into the building that surrounded it, but all of them were closed. He tried to open them one by one, but they were all locked too. The windows were shuttered, which made him think the building was deserted. He sat down on a stone seat and rubbed the back of his head. He still had no idea where he was. Or how he was going to get home.



3

When the noise came, it frightened him so much that he leapt up from the stone seat. It was the sound of a bell. Not a tinkling, cheery bell, but a loud, thunderous tolling bell. It rang three times and then stopped. Out of the corner of his eye Joe saw one of the doors at the end of the courtyard begin to open slowly. He ducked down behind one of the huge tubs of flowers.

A tall woman (taller and thinner than any woman he'd ever seen before) walked out of the door. Her hair was blue-grey and pulled high on to her head. Her face was long and narrow and her eyes were a piercing blue. She wore a full-length silver dress which caught the light of the sun. She was followed by a boy and a girl, both of whom seemed to be about the same age as Joe. They were dressed identically, in shimmering green tunics over cropped green trousers and flat black trainers. The boy's dark hair reached his shoulders and was pulled back into a narrow plait, held in place by a green ribbon. The girl's hair was much longer, blond, and also held back with a green

ribbon, although in her case her plait was a far more complicated style. The woman stood at one end of the rectangular pond, the boy and girl either side of her, their palms pressed together as though they were about to say a prayer. Then the bell tolled again and a group of four boys and four girls, all of a similar age, walked through the door and lined up on the opposite side of the pond to Joe. He crouched down even lower behind the ceramic pot as he looked at them. They wore the same tunics, ribbons and trainers, only in white.

The tall woman raised her arms above her head and began to chant in a language Joe didn't understand.

The group of eight knelt by the water. They bowed their heads towards it. Then seven of them stood up and turned around so that they were facing away from the pond.

The woman stopped chanting and clapped her hands.

Another door opened and four men walked out. They were dressed entirely in black and carried short black canes in their hands. They stood beside the fountains in pairs. Then they pressed on the engraving on each fountain. There was a whooshing sound and an arc of water spurted from each one. Only it wasn't water, Joe realised. It seemed to be a translucent wave of energy, because bright lines of blue and green flickered up and down its length like a force field. The men pressed another engraving on each fountain. The wave flattened out, so that it was like a sheet over the pond, stretching further so that it also covered most of the courtyard. Then a final press of the engraving and objects appeared on top of the force field itself. At first they were transparent but after a few minutes they seemed to solidify. A beam. A wall. A climbing net. Shining

silver balls and then more beams, this time spinning. Joe realised that it was an obstacle course.

A final object appeared at the end of the pond. It was a huge square with large blue dots making a circular pattern in the middle of it like a clock face.

The girl who had remained kneeling now stood up and walked to the opposite end of the pond. She removed her white tunic and trousers and placed them neatly on the ground. Underneath, she was wearing a white one-piece suit. The bell rang again, once. The girl ran towards the first object in the obstacle course, which was the beam. As she began to cross it, Joe saw that the dots were turning red. He guessed she was being timed.

The girl was quick. She hardly touched the surface of the beam as she ran across it. Then she climbed the net with ease. She skimmed the silver balls, scrambled beneath more netting, ran across the spinning beams and then threw herself at the wall. But even though she was tall she couldn't reach the top. And she couldn't find anything to grasp to pull herself higher. She tried jumping, but she couldn't get enough height in the jump. She pressed her hands to the wall, pushing it as though she was trying to find a hidden hand hold. But it was too smooth.

More and more dots on the square were turning red as she tried and tried to climb the wall. Eventually they were all red and the assault course suddenly disappeared, leaving her standing on the force field. She stayed there for a moment, a beaten expression on her face.

'*Doza*,' said the tall, thin woman.

The girl took a deep breath, then bowed slowly and walked to the woman. She stood in front of her. The woman removed the white ribbon from her hair and handed her a black one which the girl used to tie back her hair again. She bowed once more and rejoined the group, standing at the end of the line and looking in the same direction as them, away from the obstacle course.

The next person in the row stepped forward. A boy this time. His hair was short but he wore his white ribbon around his forehead. It made him look tougher, harder. His bow to the tall, thin woman was short and quick. Then the men in the black tunics pressed the buttons on the fountains and the obstacle course appeared again. The dots on the timer were reset and the boy took a deep breath before beginning the course. But as he ran across the beam he lost his balance. He wobbled for a moment, trying to regain it, before he fell. A siren sounded, the obstacle course faded, and he stood up, a grim expression on his face. The tall, thin woman waited until he approached her, then exchanged his white ribbon for a black one, just as she'd done with the girl.

Each person in the line tried to complete the obstacle course. One by one they failed, had their white ribbons exchanged for black ones and rejoined the line, their backs to the course.

The final attempt was made by the smallest of them, a girl, and Joe didn't rate her chances very highly. No matter how good she might be over the beams and the netting, she'd never conquer the wall. He watched as she bowed to the thin woman and then started her run at the obstacle course. She was quicker than the others and lighter on her feet. She barely touched

the obstacles as she crossed them. Then, as she approached the beams, she slowed down. Her hands went to her hair and she undid the white ribbon, twisting it around her wrist as her unbound hair cascaded down her back in dark waves. She hesitated for a moment then ran at the beams. But instead of sprinting across them as the others had done, she cartwheeled over them. As she reached the last spinning beam, she used its own motion to throw herself at the wall. At the same time she threw the ribbon, which caught the tiny spikes at the top of it. She used the ribbon as a rope to pull herself to the top where she stood precariously, gripping it with her toes.

There were still twelve blue dots on the square when she jumped from the wall and landed on a small circle. She pushed the button on a pole beside the circle and the obstacle course disappeared.

The bell rang. The seven others turned around. The tall, thin woman waited until the girl had walked back to her then placed her hands on her head.

'*Yisha*,' she said, then stepped back.

The boy and the girl in green stood in front of her and lightly touched their foreheads against hers. They stood to one side while the men in black surrounded the others and marched them back inside the building. A few moments later they returned.

The boy and the girl bowed to them and walked to the far end of the courtyard where they opened a door and went inside.

The girl knelt down again, her head almost touching the ground while the men pressed the engravings on the fountains again. The force field vanished. Then, out of the slab in the

centre of the pond, rose a long, gleaming pole. It was like a thin spire shining in the sunlight. It reached about the height of a three-storey building. As Joe watched, spikes emerged about a quarter of the way up the pole, leading to a small platform near the top.

The four men stood beside it. The girl walked to them. Then one man made a cradle with his hands which she used to step on to his shoulders. She could just about reach the bottom spikes. As she took hold of them the man pushed her higher so that she was able to pull herself upwards. Joe watched anxiously as she managed to get a firm hold of the higher spikes and then curl her body so that her feet rested on the lower ones. She started to climb the pole.

When she got to the platform she stepped on to it. Then the men raised the black canes and cracked them like whips. As they cracked for the third time, black ribbons streamed upwards and wrapped themselves around the girl, pinning her tightly to the shining spire. The bell rang again. More spikes began to appear on the spire. These were longer and thinner and seemed to pass right through it. Joe realised, with a mounting sense of horror, that when they reached the girl they would impale her.

The blue dots on the square began to turn red. There were a lot more dots this time, so she clearly had more time to free herself before she was killed by one of the spikes. But it wasn't going to be easy. She was already straining against the ribbons with little effect, although her expression was calm and determined.

The men pressed a final engraving on the fountain opposite.

Jets of water shot towards the girl. She twisted and turned to avoid them, as they, in turn, changed speed and direction. Hard as it would have been to free herself before, it was twice as difficult now.

The men and the tall woman all bowed towards her. Then they filed out of the courtyard leaving her alone.

Except for Joe.