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Extract from Tony Blair, *A Journey*, Cornerstone, 2011

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The first rule in politics is that there are no rules.

Tony Blair, *A Journey*

CHAPTER ONE

The Palace of Westminster

Theo Duncan stopped abruptly on his doorstep. He looked along Downing Street to the car his dad was taking him to school in. He had assumed it would be discreet, a non-descript estate, like the one his mum always took when she went out. Instead there was a sleek Jaguar with blue lights and a professional driver waiting for him. Andy, his dad's personal protection officer, waited by the car for them. It was anything but inconspicuous.

'Thought you'd like to arrive in style,' his dad said with a smile, as he followed Theo out of Number Ten, Downing Street.

As soon as his dad appeared, cameras flashed and clicked at them from the other side of the street.

Theo's dad tutted. There was the shadow of a deep frown on his face. It was gone as swiftly as it had appeared.

'Get in the car, Theo.' He fixed his features into a look of friendly professionalism and strode off to meet the reporters.

Theo hurried along the pavement. The palace-like fortress

of the Foreign Office overshadowed the pavement from across the street. It was off-white and dirt-smudged, like clean laundry left out to dry in the rain. Forlorn and forgotten. Wrought-iron gates topped by a crown on a spike barred the entrance archways.

Theo ducked his head into the back seat of the Jaguar and perched uneasily with his backpack on his lap, anxious not to mark the cream leather upholstery. He never thought he would miss his dad's ancient Ford Focus, with its dodgy air conditioning that was hot in summer and cold in winter, and the annoying whining noise it made whenever it reversed. But Theo was starting to see the value of keeping something that was broken. In the Ford Focus, he had never worried about marking the seats – they were stained already.

They still had their old car. But it was sitting unused on the road outside their old house.

Nothing had been the same since his dad had become Prime Minister two years before.

After a few moments, Theo looked through the back window to see what was taking his dad so long. He was still speaking to the assembled journalists, who were hanging on his every word. His long black coat flapped in the wind. He was so tall, he seemed to loom over them, like a lecturer addressing his students. He waved once and closed the wave with his signature move – a clenched fist. Theo had once seen a newspaper article that compared the move to that of an orchestra conductor. Now whenever he saw it, he couldn't help imagining his dad manically waving his arms around his head. Much like that time his sister Harry got a wasp in her hair. He smiled at the memory.

Andy got in the front passenger side. Theo's dad swept into the back next to him with a flurry of wind and jostling briefcase.

'Ready?' his dad said with enthusiasm.

Theo nodded and tried to smile, but he suspected it looked more like a grimace. He was thinking about what his dad might do when they arrived. His stomach started to twist.

His class was going on a school trip to the Houses of Parliament. When his dad had found out about it, he had leapt at the opportunity to take Theo to work with him. Theo had been counting down the days to the trip with mounting anxiety. He pictured them arriving – his dad waving, his whole class staring – and thought again about just how bad an idea this was.

As their car pulled out of the Downing Street gates, past the police officers guarding the entrance and right onto Whitehall, Theo wished his dad had agreed to let him walk there on his own. It wasn't even that far.

'Are you looking forward to your tour?' his dad asked.

'Yup,' Theo said, nodding while he studied the view from his window. He glimpsed the steel spokes of the London Eye, before it slid out of sight behind an amber-brick Georgian townhouse.

'You'll be able to tell all your classmates that you were christened in the chapel,' his dad said, furiously typing on his phone.

Theo's stomach shrivelled. He wanted to bring that up about as much as he wanted to break into an impromptu breakdance in front of his classmates. He imagined it would get about the same reaction. An unimpressed silence. And

then the sniggers and outright laughter – at him.

'I wonder if you'll visit it.'

'I dunno, Dad. We're probably just going to see the main bits.'

'The "main bits"?' His dad looked up. "'I dunno"! I brought you up to speak properly, Theo. I hope you're not going to talk to your teacher like that. You know what everything is called – the House of Commons, the House of Lords and—'

'The Strangers' Bar?' Theo interrupted.

His dad put his phone down in his lap. 'You can't mention things like that. You're not supposed to talk about bars at your age. And you know that we can't afford to make any—'

'Mistakes. Yes, I know.' Theo turned back to the view. They were waiting at the traffic lights leading on to Parliament Square.

His dad's phone rang and he sighed as he answered it.

'Yes?'

Theo stared up at Big Ben's clock tower. It looked like the evil, twisted version of a fairy tale castle, with metal spikes thrusting into the sky.

'What all of it?' his dad said into his phone. 'No CCTV in the whole palace? Oh for goodness' sake. What about in the Commons, is the live feed working? Well that's something at least.'

His dad fiddled with the clasp on his Red Box, clipping and unclipping it. The Red Box was a red leather briefcase that contained secret government papers only his dad was meant to see. Theo used to plot ways to look at what was inside it. When he had finally managed to sneak a peek, it

had turned out to be full of papers with endless fractions and ratios, and paragraphs of text as long as whole pages. He had never bothered to look again.

'No of course we can't, we have to go ahead with everything as planned. The whips have finally got a majority for this vote, postponing it would be a disaster. Besides, what would we say to the press – admit that the whole system has gone down? It's better if no one knows it's not working. At least then it's a deterrent.'

Theo's ears pricked up at the mention of the whips. They were MPs who worked for his dad. It was their job to make sure every MP voted with the government in debates in parliament. He had always liked their name, it made him think of whipping people into shape. He hadn't thought their name had anything to do with actual whips – just one of the many weird quirks of government – until his dad told him they kept a real whip in their office. It was a mystery to Theo how they persuaded over three hundred people to all vote the same way. His dad had said, very vague and offhand, that they were persuasive people. Persuasive how? Theo wondered.

The car stopped at the gated entrance of the Houses of Parliament as his dad hung up the phone.

'Bloody builders. I knew something would go wrong. I don't know what they expect me to do about it.' He stared at his dark phone screen as though it might have the answer. On his little finger, a gold ring embossed with their family coat of arms – a hawk in flight, over a naval crown – glinted up at Theo.

Theo's heart didn't sink, so much as nosedive to the floor, like one of his baby sister's toy cars when she

dropped them in the bath.

He had thought he might get a ring of his own for his last birthday. But it had come and gone the year before without the ring making an appearance. Now his fifteenth birthday was only two months away and he didn't have any hope of being given it this time.

It was a family tradition. It was supposed to be a reward for an act of particular bravery – the family motto was Justice through Valour. His dad had been given his by his father on his thirteenth birthday after he shot a stag on the family estate. Theo had only tried shooting on his grandpa's land in Scotland once. He had been so terrified that he might actually hurt an animal that he deliberately shot off in the wrong direction. His dad had taken the shotgun from him with a grim expression and never given it back.

The year before Theo had thought he might get the ring because he had been doing particularly well in school – he had got full marks in every spelling test for months. But when his birthday passed and no ring had arrived, he had started to accept what he had suspected deep down for some time: that passing spelling tests was not worthy of the reward. His dad didn't think he deserved it. He must be doing something wrong; he just didn't know what.

The car pulled through the gates into the Houses of Parliament courtyard and came to a stop.

'Ready, champ?' his dad said with a smile.

Theo supressed a gurgle of anxiety and opened the car door.