

SIMON
FOX



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1

NOW

I can steal time.

The most I can take at the moment is fifteen seconds, which is not a lot. Grandmother took almost three minutes once and she told me she's done more, but I never saw it. And when she was tired, which was more and more often, or pretending not to be sad, which was pretty much always, she struggled to get to half that.

She says there are stories of someone who can take all the time in the world, but how can that be right? She said it when she was trying to get me to concentrate, when she was urging me to focus. As if all I had to do was understand what was possible to make it happen. It sounded unbelievable but when she said it there was a kind of memory in her eyes and something about her look that made me think maybe it was more than just a wild story.

And we didn't need all the time in the world, did we? We just needed enough to get to England. To fight and crash and tear our way to England where Dad said we would be safe. I hoped a few seconds might be enough to keep the two of us from getting caught but I guess I was wrong. We started with everything and I ended with nothing. On a beach in the dark; cold

wet and empty.

I should have practised more. Because every second is precious. And I never took enough.

2

AFTER

He grabs my collar and hauls me up the beach. There is anger in his grip and fear on his face, reflected yellow in the strange lamps that light the seafront path. He half runs and now he lets go, but I don't stop. Stones shift under my feet and my wet jeans rub hard against my legs but I don't slow down. We reach the tarmac and he swerves to the right, twisting briefly to check I am still there.

"Keep up," he says. But he doesn't need to.

I turn, briefly, as we hurry forward. Blue lights flash into the black sky and shouts rebound against the crash of the waves, behind the sounds of our hard breathing and the slap of our feet against the road. We run with the cliff to our left. Out in front is a deserted cafe, then a pool of light as the path turns up and away from the sea. There is a metal barrier to stop cyclists, then a pub car park, deserted except for a van and two large waste bins

And three police cars parked in a line like crooked teeth.

Ronnie lurches towards the cliff, gripping my arm and hauling me into some scrubby bushes hidden by the shadow. He curses, hard, under his breath then lies still, panting. I lie next to him, under the rough leaves,

close enough to feel the heat of his body, staring up into the light. He takes a phone out his pocket and makes a call, whispering quickly to whoever answers.

"They're everywhere. Did you get out? How many were taken?"

He freezes as two policemen walk quickly past us back to the beach. Then he lies still.

"How many?" I whisper.

"You speak English?" He sounds surprised.

"Yeah. How many?"

"All of them," he says.

I feel the wave of fear rushing through me. Ice burns in my stomach. Panic fills my mind.

"What do we do?"

"We get out of here."

"What about my dad?" I whisper.

"We get out of here," he says again. "Then we find out."

We watch the policemen disappear into the blur of the lights under the cliff then turn back to the way ahead.

"OK. When I say run, we run," Ronnie says. "As fast as you can. Past the cars then up that road. There is a church. Turn left and look for a black BMW. A friend

of mine is waiting and will drive us away."

"Is that your plan?" I ask.

He nods then braces himself to move. I put my hand on his arm to stop him.

"That's a terrible plan," I hiss. "You want to get caught?"

He stares at me, surprise and a hint of anger in his eyes. I feel his body tense again as he readies himself to run, but I lean across and push him down flat.

"What do you know about getting caught?" he hisses. "You are just a foreign kid to them. It's all good if they catch you. I am a man. I have a life here. It's different for me."

"So what?" I whisper. "I'll come up with a plan that isn't terrible. Just let me think."

I calm my breathing and still my thoughts like she showed me. I concentrate on doing nothing, filling my mind with my own image, lying still in the undergrowth. I am doing nothing while the world turns around me. I am locked in place.

I creep forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios. Somewhere, a phone goes off, but I ignore it and crawl to the edge of the light. And then I burst

out, running as fast as I can, like the winds of hell are on my back. I make it to the cars before the police react, then I swerve to the left. A woman officer stares at me, then yells, and all the heads turn at once. I duck to the left, swerving round with my hand on a car bonnet, pushing shut the car door before the man can get out. I accelerate into the street Ronnie showed me, ignoring the shouts, ignoring the threats, ignoring the burning in my muscles as I tear up the road.

Until a man crashes into my legs and we tumble over. I try to scramble free but he has me tight. Another officer arrives and yanks my hands hard behind my back. I feel metal round my wrists then they haul me to my feet.

I roll on to my back and stare into the darkness. "We can't do it your way," I hiss. "It won't work."

Ronnie is nervous. He wants to run, but it is the wrong thing to do. "Trust me," I say. "The police will have you in less than fifteen seconds. Wait here," I insist. "They may go in a minute."

They won't go in a minute, but it is what I need to say to stop him running. I look again at the cars. There were two officers in the car on the left, another

behind it and the last two standing between the cars. So there is more space to the right. I calm myself again and concentrate, waiting until my heart is still. I am locked in place.

I creep forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios. Somewhere, a phone goes off, but I ignore it and crawl to the edge of the light. And then I burst out, running as fast as I can, like the winds of hell are on my back. I make it to the cars before the police react, then swerve to the right. A woman officer turns, moving instinctively but then hesitating, because her view is blocked by the other cars. Then she yells and all the heads turn at once. I race round the right-hand car, leaning on the bonnet, then accelerating away. I hear the slam of a door from the other side, then shouts behind me and footsteps as they give chase. Then the burst of an engine.

I turn into the street Ronnie showed me, forcing my body faster as I see the church up ahead. I turn left as a car pulls alongside me, blue light spilling over the street as its tyres screech. I see the BMW parked ahead.

The police car slews across the road in front of me. I swerve but can't avoid it, rolling up over the bonnet

then hitting the ground hard. The door opens and I see a dark uniform as it crashes down on top of me, rolling me over and yanking my hands hard behind my back. I feel metal round my wrists then they haul me to my feet.

I roll over again and stare out in front. Ronnie hisses at me. "You move too much," he says. "Keep still."

I glare at him and think about going on my own but I need this guy for now. "OK," I say. "Here's what we do. We creep forward on the right-hand side until I say, then we run, as fast as we can. I will be behind you but don't slow down."

He looks at me like I'm insulting him. "That is just as terrible as my plan," he says. "We do it—"

But I grab his shoulder to interrupt him. "WAIT!" I hiss. "Turn your phone off!"

Panic fills his eyes and he yanks his phone up and flicks it to silent just as it starts buzzing.

"How did you—?" he starts, but I ignore him.

"We do my plan," I say. "Let's go."

I am gone before he can argue, creeping forward until I can hear voices and the buzz of radios, crawling right up to the edge of the light. I push Ronnie in front of me, then count down – three, two,

one – and we burst out, running as fast as we can, like the winds of hell are on our back. We make it to the cars before the police move, then swerve to the right. A woman officer turns, moving instinctively but then hesitating, because her view is blocked by the other cars. Then she yells and all the heads turn at once. We race round the right-hand car, Ronnie leans on the bonnet, then accelerates away. I charge at the blue bin by the pub wall and pull on its handle with all my might. It comes away and crashes down behind the car, but I don't slow down. I hear the slam of a door from the other side, then shouts behind me and footsteps as they give chase. Then the burst of an engine, followed by a crunch as the police car reverses into the bin.

I turn into the road behind Ronnie, forcing my body faster as I see him turn at the church up ahead. I see the BMW doors open and I dive into the back. The wheels spin and the car pulls away, slowing only as we pass the police car looking for two pedestrians. I tip my head back against the headrest and gasp the cold English air in relief.

The journey is over.