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Opening extract from

Blood Ties

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Published by

Simon and Schuster

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Part One

London

1

Theo

I could see him waiting for me outside the steel school gates.

Roy.

He was leaning against a lamppost, his arms folded. From the second-floor window behind my desk I couldn't make out the expression on his face. But the way he was slumped against that lamppost suggested he was bored.

Good. Bored was good. If Roy was bored, he wouldn't be suspecting anything.

'Hey, Theo,' Jake hissed.

I turned away from the window. The last lesson of the day was almost over. History. Something to do with the Second World War. I wasn't really paying attention.

'Twenty seconds until Operation "Liberate Theo" commences,' Jake whispered. His eyes were fixed on the stopwatch function on his phone – he'd synchronised it with the school bell earlier.

I rolled my eyes, pretending I was way too cool to be excited. But the truth was my heart was pumping like it

might burst. This was my first serious attempt to escape from Roy. I mean, I'd tried – and failed – to run away from him before. But this was the first time I'd planned out an actual escape route.

'Fifteen . . . fourteen . . . thirteen . . .' Jake said under his breath.

I glanced towards the front of the classroom.

'Eleven . . . ten . . .'

The teacher was writing on the white board.

'Eight . . . seven . . . six . . .'

My books were already in my bag. I picked it up off the floor and slid it silently onto my back.

'Three . . . two . . . one.'

The school bell cut through the squeaking of the white-board pen.

I leaped to my feet.

'You are go. Repeat. You are go.' Jake's voice rose above the commotion that filled the room.

I stormed towards the door. Wrenched it open. Sped down the corridor. Other doors were opening. Other classes spilling out. I pounded down the stairs. Down, down to the ground floor. A huge group of Year Sevens and Eights were jostling and shoving their way across the entrance hall.

But I was bigger.

Faster.

Stronger.

The younger boys shrank away as I barged through, my eyes on the fire door at the end of the corridor.

I reached it. Shoved it open. Burst into the tiny courtyard at the back of the school – a patch of concrete surrounded on three sides by the school building and on the fourth by a high brick wall. I raced towards the large tree next to the wall. As I ran, I glanced over my shoulder. No one was following me. I looked up at the windows overlooking the courtyard. No one was watching me.

I reached the tree. Jake and I had dragged a school chair outside at break and stashed it behind the trunk. I hauled it out and climbed up, steadying myself as the chair wobbled on the uneven tarmac. The nearest branch still looked a long way up. I bent my knees. Jumped. *Yes.* My hands gripped the branch. My arm muscles tensed, straining to hold my weight. I swung for a moment, the bark cutting into my palms. *Do it.* Using all the strength in my arms and shoulders I hauled myself up. Up. I gritted my teeth. Hooked one elbow over the branch. Then the other. I was scrabbling up with my legs now. Locking a knee over. Kneeling up. Reaching for the branch above. *Yes.*

I stood up, panting, catching my breath.

The air was cold, despite the sunshine. A gust of wind blew my fringe across my eyes. Mum's always nagging me to get it cut. It *is* sometimes a bit irritating. Still. Her being annoyed about it is worth any amount of irritation.

I took a deep breath and pushed the hair off my face. I gripped the branch above me more tightly. Hauled myself up again. *Jesus.* Even a few months ago, there was no way I could have done this. Back then my escape attempts

depended on distraction techniques. But now I was tall enough and strong enough to overcome any physical obstacle. Well, that's how it felt. That's how *I* felt.

Powerful. Unbeatable. Invincible.

I'm Theo Glassman. I need no one.

I scrambled up and up. It got easier as I climbed, the branches closer together. Soon I was level with the top of the wall. I looked down. My stomach tightened. The ground was a long way beneath me – maybe four or five metres. I edged across the branch until I reached the wall.

'Oy! You there! Boy!' The voice was deep and male. One of the teachers. Shouting from a school window.

Crap. I didn't have much time. If whoever that was realised it was me out here, he'd be straight down to tell Roy. I stepped onto the wall, carefully avoiding the spiky shards of glass poking up at intervals along its surface.

'GET DOWN FROM THERE!' the teacher yelled.

My plan exactly.

The wall was three brick widths across – enough room for me to stand on both feet and turn right round. I'm good at balancing, and I don't mind heights. But this was way high. I held tightly onto the branches above my head as I shuffled round. The grassy park on the other side of the wall was littered with heaps of blown leaves – all reds and browns. A long way down. *Don't think about it.*

I jumped. *Whoosh.* Through the air. Through the leaves. *Wham.* The impact jarred all the way up my legs. I fell over onto my side, breathing heavily for a second. Then I pushed

myself up. Tested my legs. They were fine. I was fine. *Yes*, I'd done it.

I'd escaped from Roy. I'd escaped from my bodyguard.

I smiled to myself as I started running across the grass. My plan was to head for the nearby high street, meet Jake in Starbucks and go to the cinema.

Maybe that sounds weird to you. That I'd risk getting detention, falling out of a tree, cutting myself open on glass and the rest of it, just to hang out in the high street for a bit and catch a movie.

All I can say is: you'd understand if you lived my life.

2

Rachel

'See you later, then, Rachel.'

'Bye, Dad.' I switched off the call and turned my key in the front door. As I shut it behind me my phone beeped. *No.* School had only ended ten minutes ago and I was getting hate texts already. That was quick, even for Jemima Robertson. I hesitated, then pulled the mobile out of my bag. 1 MESSAGE RECEIVED. I switched it off.

I couldn't bring myself to read the text. Not yet.

'Is that you, Rachel?' Mum's sickly, cloying perfume wafted out into the hall. I sighed. Mum was usually home when I got back from school. She doesn't work, you see. She dabbles. A bit of painting. A few adult education classes. The gym. Tennis lessons. And a lot of manicuring, body-wrapping and spa days out.

I trudged across the hall, hoping I could make it up to my room without her seeing me. I reached the bottom step of the stairs just as she click-clacked out of the kitchen.

'Hiya, Rachel darling.' That's Mum's signature sound.

Cooing and soothing and totally fake. A sweetie wrapper round an arsenic lollipop.

'How was your day, darling? Mine was frightful. Giovanni completely messed up my hair. I swear he'd taken so much charlie last night his hands were shaking too much to hold the scissors straight.'

There. Now you have my mum. Her hairdresser's a junkie from Harlow with a fake Italian name. And she thinks it's cool to use outdated drug slang.

Oh yes. And she's botoxed up to her eyebrows. Above them in fact. I guess it's because she's so much older than other mothers. She was forty-seven when she had me. I'm not kidding.

That was fifteen years ago.

'Hi, Mum.' I carried on stomping up the stairs.

'Darling, don't slouch.' I could hear her trit-trotting back to the kitchen.

I went upstairs and lay on my bed. The day circled round and round in my head. I had a system. A way of grading each day. And today had been bad. It looked something like this:

Fat comments: five. (The worst was Jemima Robertson saying my arse looked like two satellite dishes side by side, when we changed for gym.)

Stupidity comments: three. (Including one from my maths teacher, who told me off for misunderstanding our homework. I still don't get it. I mean, why would two kids, taking half-metre strides every three seconds, across a thirty-four-metre

wood in the middle of the night, be doing that? Isn't 'why' more interesting than how long it would take them?)

Ugliness comments: six and a half. (Several mentions of the spot on my nose, at least two references to how I was too ugly for any boy to want to snog me at next month's school disco, and Jemima, again, pointing out very loudly that my hair is skank. Which it is. She's right. Still.

The half was some guy on my way home making a comment about my legs. I didn't understand what he said, but it didn't sound very nice.)

A grand total of fourteen and a half. Any day with a score over ten is a bad day. Still, at least no one hit me or stole money from me today. That happens sometimes. Not that often, I guess. Maybe once or twice a week.

But, hey, I'm used to it. Don't think I'm complaining. That's just my life.

Mum rapped at the door. She stepped inside without waiting for me to say anything.

'Sweetie, don't lie on the bed in your school uni. The skirt pleats will get creased.'

My school uniform is a green tartan pleated skirt and a tan polyester blouse. You've never seen anything more hideous in your life.

Except my body inside it, according to Jemima Robertson.

'Sweetie.' Mum's voice was insistent now.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

'Piano lesson in half an hour. And it's chicken salad for tea.'

'Great.' I tried to smile. It was easier not to resist.

Mum sighed. 'I wish you'd show a bit more interest, sweetie. Especially in the piano. You know how good you could be if you tried.'

I froze. That was another way in which I graded the days. By the number of mentions of Rebecca.

We were building up to today's first.

'What d'you mean, Mum?' I said in this fake cheerful voice. I knew perfectly well what she meant. And I didn't want to hear her say it. But somehow I couldn't stop myself.

'You know, darling,' Mum cooed. 'Rebecca took Grade Six with distinction when *she* was in Year Ten. It's a shame for you not to make the best of your talents too.'

Suddenly I wanted to cry.

'Right.' I stood up. 'I'd better get changed then.'

Mum nodded and backed out of the door.

Tears leaked down my face as I changed into jeans and a loose top. Fat, shapeless, nothing clothes for a fat, shapeless, nothing person.

I didn't want to do *anything* Rebecca did. But how could I avoid it? Rebecca had done *everything*. Worse. Rebecca had done it all brilliantly.

She died before I was born. A road accident when she was sixteen. There were pictures of her all over the house. Pictures of her winning school prizes for everything. Pictures of her horse-riding and swimming and coming first in piano competitions. And pictures of her looking like a model in pretty dresses with slim legs and her hair swept stylishly off her face.

Rebecca. My sister. I used to look just like her when I was younger.

I don't any more.

But Rebecca's still here. Haunting me. Taunting me.

The doorbell rang. My piano teacher – on time as always. I could hear Mum's heels tapping smartly across the hall. The door opening.

'Rachel, sweetie. Miss Vykovski's here.'

I caught sight of my phone, lying innocently on my bed.

Maybe I should look at the message now. Whatever it said, I'd have the piano lesson to distract me.

Heart thumping, I opened the text.

I stared at it, not quite taking it in.

Well, I wasn't expecting *that.*

3

Theo

I reached the high street and slowed to a stroll.

Roy wasn't the first. I'd had a bodyguard ever since I could remember. Always there, following me wherever I went.

The weird thing was, I had no idea *why* I had a bodyguard.

I stopped to look at the latest MP3 phones in Dixons' window. I really wanted one. But there was no chance. You see, we weren't rich. I mean, yes, somehow Mum found the money to pay for Roy. And I went to this private boys' school with a posh uniform and everything. But we lived in a tiny house with all worn-out furniture. I didn't even have a mobile.

'You don't need one,' Mum always said. 'You've got a bodyguard.'

Right.

Still no sign of Roy as I sauntered up to Starbucks. I peered through the glass door. There was Jake. *Oh crap*. He was chatting to a group of girls at the counter. My heart sank. What was the matter with him? I mean, don't get me wrong. Girls are fine. Girls are great, in fact. But recently Jake had

got completely obsessed with them. Not girls in magazines or on the internet – everyone's obsessed with *them*. But real girls. Girls our age.

Trouble was, Jake acted all weird when he was around them, like he was trying to impress them or something.

He came across like a complete idiot.

I hesitated, my hand on the door. The last thing I wanted was for Jake to haul me over and start mouthing off about my climbing over the school wall. He'd exaggerate the whole thing. Make out I was some kind of action hero. And then I'd end up looking as much of a prat as he did.

'Gotcha.' A huge fist gripped my shoulder. Spun me round. Slammed me against the door. My heart pounded. I looked up.

Roy's purple, snarling face loomed over me.

He grabbed my arm and dragged me over to the car. It was clearly taking every ounce of self-restraint he had not to punch me.

'Wait till your mother hears about this. You little . . .' He swore loudly, calling me pretty much the worst thing you can call someone.

'She's not going to want to hear *that*.' I grinned.

I was guessing that appearing unbothered about being caught would wind Roy up more than if I got angry. Anyway, after the initial shock, I realised I *wasn't* that bothered. I mean, I was disappointed he'd caught me so quickly. And I *had* been looking forward to seeing a movie. But I was also relieved that I hadn't had to go inside Starbucks and deal with Jake on the pull.

And I'd got away. Roy knew it as well as I did. If I'd gone straight to the tube instead of dawdling on the high street, Roy would never have found me.

He called Mum from the car. Told her what had happened. She was waiting by the front door when we got back.

'What the hell is the matter with you?' she shouted. 'You could have been hurt or killed.'

I watched Roy disappear into his room. He had, like, a bedsit in our house – with his own kitchen area and bathroom. I hated that. He took up half the downstairs.

'Theodore?' Mum dragged me into our tiny living room and slammed the door. 'What has got into you?'

I focused on her. Mum's small – the top of her head only comes up to my chest. But don't let that fool you. She's fierce, my mum. Got a hardcore temper.

'Are you listening to me, Theodore?'

I grunted. I hate her calling me Theodore. I mean, okay, it's my name. It's just so poncey. But she refuses to go with Theo. Just like she refuses to let me do anything.

'Theodore.' Mum held up her thumb and forefinger so they were almost touching. 'So help me, I am this close to grounding you for the rest of the year.'

I met her eyes. 'Whatever,' I said.

'Theodore.' Mum shook her head so furiously that her pointy, silver earrings stabbed at her neck. 'Promise you'll never run away from Roy again. He'll resign if you do.'

'Good.' I shoved my hands in my pockets.

'For goodness' sake.' Mum crossed the room to the kitchen

area in the corner and pulled open the fridge. 'Roy is here for your protection. Why won't you grow up and accept that?'

'If you want me to act like a grown-up then treat me like one,' I snapped. 'Tell me what it is I need protecting from?'

Mum groaned. 'Not this again.' She took a bottle of wine out of the fridge and uncorked it. 'I can't tell you. You just have to accept that you—'

'No.' This hot rage filled my head. 'It's not fair,' I shouted. 'I can't do any—'

'Do not raise your voice at me!' Mum shrieked.

We glared at each other. Then Mum took a wine glass out of the cupboard above her head and set it on the counter. 'I'm getting a migraine,' she said. 'I can feel it.'

'Right.' I rolled my eyes. Mum was always getting migraines.

Mum slammed her hand down on the counter next to the wine glass. 'That's enough, Theodore. There's clearly only one punishment that you're going to take seriously. From now on Roy comes into school with you and waits outside the classroom during every lesson.'

'No,' I gasped. No way could I handle Roy following me everywhere I went at school. I'd have even less freedom than I had now.

'You can't do that, Mum.'

Mum's lips narrowed into a line. 'Watch me,' she said. 'I'm going to speak to school tomorrow morning and insist.'

Fury surged up from the depths of my being. Less than an hour ago I'd climbed a huge tree, scaled a glass-strewn wall

and risked a massive jump onto the ground. I'd been powerful. Unbeatable. Invincible.

'No!' I yelled. I strode right up to Mum so my face was centimetres from hers. 'NO.'

Mum started. And for a moment, for one tiny moment, I saw fear in her eyes.

The feeling of power I'd had earlier on, climbing the tree, flooded back. 'I don't need Roy. I can look after myself,' I yelled. 'You're just imagining there's a threat.'

'No,' Mum gasped. 'No, Theodore. I'm not.'

I suddenly saw how badly she needed me to believe what she was saying. I drew myself up. I *was* powerful. I could do whatever I liked, whenever, wherever and however I wanted.

I turned and strode out of the room. I ran up to my room, went straight to my desk and took out the fifty quid I'd saved up. I tore off my school jacket and tie and grabbed a jumper from a pile of clothes on the floor. I headed to the door as Mum appeared in the doorway.

She put her arm out. 'What are you doing?'

'Leaving.' I pushed the arm out of my way, then raced down the stairs, my heart pounding.

'No. Theodore.' I could hear the panic rising in Mum's voice. Then she yelled out: 'ROY.'

He shot out into the hall so quickly that I knew he must have been listening. This made me even more furious. How dare he be here. How dare he interfere in my life.

'Get out of my way,' I yelled.

Roy shook his head.

I barged past him. He blocked me with his shoulder. I ducked, tried to dart round his other side.

He grabbed my arm and pushed me back. 'You sodding little brat.'

Something snapped inside my head, like a firework exploding. Before I could even think, my hand was a fist and my fist was driving forward, hard, into Roy's face.

Contact. My hand stung. My whole arm jarred with the pain of it. Roy staggered backwards, clutching his jaw. His eyes widened. And then he grabbed me round my throat and pinned me against the wall.

Blood pounded in my ears. All I could see was Roy's furious face. All I could hear was my own voice, spitting out swearwords.

And then, dimly, I became aware of Mum shouting beside us.

'Stop it, stop it.'

Roy let go of my throat. He stepped back, panting. Mum moved across and whispered furiously in his ear.

I bent over, my breath all jagged. My hands were shaking. A door slammed. I looked up. Roy had disappeared back into his own room.

Mum stared at me. Again, I could see the fear in her eyes.

I took a step to the front door. The powerful feeling surged through me. Nothing could stop me leaving now. Not Mum. Not Roy.

Nothing.

I reached out for the door handle. Twisted it. Pulled open the door. I looked over my shoulder. 'Bye, Mum.'

'Please, Theodore.' Her eyes filled with tears.

When I was younger this would've really got to me. Back then all I wanted was to look after her. To do what my dad would've done if he'd been alive. But now . . . now I was sick of her trying to manipulate me.

I turned back to the front door. I had a bit of money. Enough to find somewhere to sleep tonight. I'd go into town. Get a job.

I took a step outside.

'Please.'

Something in Mum's voice made me look round again. Tears were streaming down her face. For the first time since I'd got home doubt crept into my mind. And guilt.

I didn't want to hurt her. If I was honest, I didn't want to go away either.

All I wanted was the truth.

I took a deep breath. 'Just tell me why I need a bodyguard.'

There was a long pause. Right up until that moment I thought she was making it up. That me needing a bodyguard was based on some stupid imaginary fear of hers that came out of the same place as her endless migraines.

Then she nodded.

'Okay,' she said. 'Come inside and sit down. I'll tell you everything I can.'