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opening extract from

Fightback

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FIGHTBACK

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ONE

'I'm sorry I missed it,' said his father as they made their way out of the brightly lit hall. 'Something came up.'

Kier stuffed the trophy into his bag, along with his gumshield and karate suit.

'It doesn't matter,' he said.

When they got into the car, his father was the first to break the silence.

'I hear he was a tough opponent.'

'Yeah.'

'But you were tougher?'

Kier shrugged. The final jump-kick had been a risk which nearly disqualified him. But, after some discussion, the judges had ruled that it was controlled enough to win him three points and the tournament. His father had missed it of course, same as he missed everything else.

'I guess I just hated him more than he hated me.'

His father turned in his seat, studying him in the half-light.

'What do you mean?'

'My instructor told me the secret of winning is to hate your opponent. He said it was the only way to be the best.'

'Well, he's wrong about that.'

It was raining now; people were running across the car park, silhouetted against the sky.

'Love is stronger than hate, Kier. Find out what matters, that's the real secret. Find out and go after it the best way you can.'

Yeah, right, thought Kier. *Maybe you could have come after me once in a while.*

As they listened to the rain drumming on the roof, his father wiped a patch of steam from the windscreen with his sleeve.

'Listen, Kier, I'm sorry I've not been around much these past few years. But you know, when your mum died, with my job and everything, I didn't really have a choice.'

For a moment, Kier allowed himself to think about how the man sitting next to him could have been someone he knew. But when the other kids had gone home from boarding school for the holidays he had been left watching dust dance in the sunlit hall, waiting for the taxis and planes that

would take him away; off to the summer camps and ski camps where he would swim and trek over mountains with strangers, trying not to think about what might have been.

Kier shrugged.

'Lots of parents send their kids away to school,' he said. 'It's no big deal.'

For a moment it seemed as if his father was about to say more. But then he just rubbed his eyes, turned the key in the ignition and drove in silence towards the exit.

Kier checked the passport in his pocket, knowing that tomorrow the awkwardness would be over and they would be miles apart once more. Closing his eyes, he listened to the clunk of the wipers and the hiss of tyres in the rain.

He awoke to the roar of engines as the car swerved violently to the left, making him bang his head against the side window. A car horn blared and wet tarmac glistened in the glare of headlights.

'Stupid idiot,' said his father, hands gripping the wheel. 'What the hell does he think he's doing?'

Kier turned to see a white van drawing alongside them. The passenger pointed through the window and then the van veered sharply to the left, smashing into the side of their car. They slid across two lanes of motorway, Kier watching his father wrestle

with the wheel as they skidded along the hard shoulder in a squeal of smoking rubber. They finally came to rest with a loud thump against the side of the embankment and the white van pulled over, parking at an angle in front of them.

'Bloody maniac,' said his father angrily, releasing his seat belt. He turned off the engine and wrenched the car door open. As he walked along the hard shoulder towards the van, Kier watched in a daze as the van door slowly opened. Suddenly his father was running back towards the car again, his face white as he threw himself into the driver's seat.

'What's the matter?' Kier asked, watching him fumble with the keys.

'We have to go,' replied his father.

Then the windscreen dissolved in a hot, blinding roar and Kier felt a rush of air as the back window blew out. Suddenly he was staring through a glitter of broken glass at a hooded man with a pump-action shotgun. As the man took aim again, Kier's father floored the accelerator and the back seat exploded, fragments of foam and leather spinning off into the night.

As they accelerated away, Kier turned to looked through the shattered window and saw the two men running back towards the van.

'Who were they?' he asked, unable to believe what had just happened.

But his father didn't seem to hear him.

'I think I need a hospital,' he said, and when Kier glanced over he saw that his father's shirt was soaked in blood.

'What can I do?' Kier asked.

His father shook his head.

'You have to run,' he said. 'When we get to the hospital, you have to run and not look back.'

TWO

'It's going to be all right,' Kier reassured him as they drove through the hospital entrance, 'everything's going to be all right.'

But as the car mounted the central roundabout and came to rest in the middle of some flowerbeds, Kier's father slumped over the wheel and closed his eyes as if, having done enough to get him there, his body was incapable of anything more.

Kier kicked the door open and tumbled out on to the sloping earth, running as fast as he could towards the entrance. Two paramedics emerged, off-duty and smiling at the thought of the evening ahead.

'Help me,' said Kier, grabbing one of them by the sleeve. 'Please. You have to help me.'

They were quick, efficient and professional. Kier walked with the trolley as they pushed his father along the corridor, holding his hand as he slipped in and out of consciousness.

'Kier,' said his father weakly, trying to raise his head from the pillow.

'Shh,' said Kier. 'Don't try to talk.'

'No police,' whispered his father. 'Spike Russell. Fern behind a fox . . . it's great . . . Russell's treat . . . dead . . . '

'Dead?'

'Dead . . . drop . . . dead . . .'

As his father closed his eyes, one of the medics shook his head and gave Kier a sympathetic glance. 'It's OK. He's delirious. He doesn't know what he's saying.'

They took him to an emergency room full of machines and surgical instruments. Kier could hear how quickly and urgently the doctors spoke, giving one another careful instructions.

Then the door closed and Kier was left to watch porters push clanking trolleys along the brightly lit corridor. After ten minutes the door opened and a young nurse emerged, wiping her hands on the front of her apron.

'I'm sorry,' she said, as if it was her fault, crouching in front of him and taking both his hands in hers. 'There was nothing more we could do.'

Kier nodded, numb with shock as he realised that the father he hardly knew was dead. His world was crumbling, dissolving before his eyes.

'Is there anyone we can contact? Someone who can take you home?'

'No.' Kier shook his head. 'There's no one.'

He stared past the nurse's shoulder and saw two men at the far end of the corridor, their faces concealed beneath the dark hoods of their jackets. They were stopping at each of the wards, looking in and checking the beds. As Kier watched, one of them turned to stare at him. He nudged the other man, who looked up and nodded. Then Kier was on his feet and running, the sound of clattering footsteps echoing down the corridor behind him.

He cannoned through a set of double doors and sent a startled nurse stumbling against the wall. Dodging a porter with a trolley, he thumped through a second set of doors and skidded round the corner, bouncing off the wall and jumping down a set of stairs. Momentarily winded, he bent to get his breath and heard voices approaching. As he grasped the banister and swung himself round on to the next set of stairs, there was a muffled crack and a bullet ricocheted off the handrail, whining past his ear like a hungry mosquito.

It was a bad dream, a nightmare, except that he was wide awake in the middle of an ordinary hospital and someone was trying to kill him.

Kier's heart raced and his muscles cried out for

oxygen. But adrenalin kept him moving, sharpening his senses and helping him make decisions that could save his life.

Swinging around on to the final set of steps, he heard the deep thump of a shotgun blast and then the huge picture window in front of him disintegrated, sending shards of glass spinning down into the car park below. Clearing the last four steps in a single jump, he hit the floor and crashed through the doors in front of him. To his left was a small cafe with a handful of late-night visitors sipping their lattes and flicking through the day's news. To the right was a long empty corridor leading to the main entrance.

Logic told him he would never make it.

Fear screamed at him to go.

As the entrance doors slid open, he stumbled out into fresh air just as the first bullet struck the edge of the frame with a noise like a hammer on steel. The second missed his ankle by a millimetre, burying itself deep in the tarmac. As Kier ran across the access road a taxi screeched to a halt and the driver leaned on his horn, swearing at him through the open window. But Kier wasn't stopping for anyone; as another bullet punched through the *Give Way* sign with a metallic clang, he leapt over a low picket fence and into a small patch of woodland.

'There he is!' shouted a voice. 'Over there!'

With a *prrrrrp* like material being torn in half, a hail of bullets ripped through the leaves and branches, exploding bark from tree trunks and kicking up the earth around his feet.

A machine gun?

This was in*sane*.

Ahead, through the trees, Kier could see the main road. Reaching the edge of the woodland, he vaulted the fence, almost colliding with an old woman waiting to cross at the lights. As the lights turned green, a white pick-up truck began to pull away and Kier leapt into the back, throwing himself headlong on to a pile of bricks and plasterboard. He lay there for several minutes, breathing in dust as the truck rumbled on. At the third set of lights he jumped down and sat by the side of the road, staring at a patch of oil and wondering if he would live to see another morning.