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Opening extract from

Circle of Fire

Written by

S. M. Hall

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Circle of Fire

S.M. Hall

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Hannah, who is as brave and feisty as Maya,
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Chapter One

Maya opened her eyes to a room full of shadows. A drumming sound filled her head. When she tried to sit up, a long, thin strand of wire wrapped around her neck. Panic gripped her until she realised it was her iPod – she'd gone to sleep with music plugged into her ears.

Pulling out the earphones, she switched off the music and gazed round the room. Moonlight was seeping in through the open window, silver light glinted on the glass, gauzy curtains flapped in the breeze.

She swung her legs out of bed and sprang to her feet. What an idiot! She'd forgotten to close the window. Her eyes swept the room, darting over every blurry surface, her ears strained for any sound.

Was somebody hiding? Was someone in the room watching her? She waited, hardly daring to breathe. Everything was quiet. No strange sounds or creaks.

Telling herself there was nothing to worry about, she padded over to the window and looked out. A silver moon hung like a giant coin over the dark hills. In the garden below, familiar shapes were fuzzy and blurred; the lawn rippled with swirling patterns. Then she heard it – the crunch of gravel underfoot. She leaned out of the window and saw a dense black shape sliding towards the corner of the house.

The neon alarm clock showed it was almost midnight. She wasn't sure whether the shape had been human or animal, moonlight could play tricks. Was there a prowler? For a few moments she stood listening, but there were no more sinister sounds, just the breeze stirring the trees.

Quietly she closed the window, fastened the security latch, then she undressed, put on her pyjamas and slipped out of her room into the bathroom. On the way back she saw light coming from under her mum's door.

She knocked tentatively and pushed open the door. Her mum, Pamela, was sitting at her desk working on a laptop.

'What's the matter, darling? Can't you sleep?'

Maya stepped into the room. 'Something woke me. You didn't hear anything, did you?'

'No.'

Pam hadn't taken her eyes off the screen; her fingers were still tapping at the keyboard.

Maya hesitated, wondering whether to say more. Her mum seemed absorbed in her work. 'OK. I'll leave you to it, then.'

'Right,' Pam replied tersely, but just as Maya was closing the door, she relented. 'Sorry, Maya. I'm trying to get this report finished. What did you hear?'

'Oh, nothing really. I dropped off to sleep and left my window open, the curtains were blowing about.'

The typing stopped. Pam stood up. 'The alarm's on. If anybody's out there, the sensors will pick it up. Did you close the window?'

Maya nodded. 'Yeah. I'm sure everything's fine now.'

Pam came over and put her arms round Maya's waist. 'I'll contact Security; they'll be out there all night. You probably heard one of their men checking the back of the house.'

'Mmm, I s'pose that's who it was.'

While Pam picked up her radio and spoke to

Security, Maya rested her chin on top of her mum's head and Pam hugged her close, massaging her back and neck.

'Everything's OK,' she said, clicking the radio off. 'I'm sorry you were frightened. This will all be over soon, I promise.'

'I wasn't frightened. I'm just tired of hiding. Sometimes I wish they'd show themselves – make some attempt to get me.'

'No,' Pam said sharply. 'That's exactly why we're here. I don't want you in danger.'

'But I want to know who they are. I want to see them busted – clapped in jail.'

'I'm working on it,' Pam said.

At that moment, the mobile phone lying on her desk buzzed. 'Oh, not at this hour,' she moaned. Picking it up, she checked the screen. 'It's Simon.'

Maya was all ears. Simon was her mum's second in command, so she listened carefully, hoping to pick up some secret, and at the same time seized the opportunity to sit at her mum's desk and scan the computer screen.

The phone conversation yielded nothing, all Pam did was listen. But the text on the screen was intriguing.

The chain of command operates on a pyramid system. In this way each cell is separate but also part of an international network. The organisation known as the Brotherhood thus poses a threat of. . .

'Hey, that's classified information.' Pam swivelled Maya away from the computer.

'Sorry, can't help it. Radar switched on at all times. Who taught me that?'

Pam gave Maya a rueful smile and reached for her hand, pulling her out of the chair. 'You need to get some sleep.'

I'm not the only one, Maya thought, noting the dark circles under her mum's eyes. 'Are you going to be up all night?' she asked.

Pam sighed. 'This investigation is growing by the minute.'

'Tell me.'

'I can't.'

'It's not just about the threat to kidnap me any more, is it?'

'No. But, look, it's way too late to discuss it and anyway all information is—'

There had been little else to occupy Maya's mind over the past few days – now she cut sharply across her mum's words.

'A group of would-be terrorists threatened to kidnap me because they wanted to frighten you off, to stop your investigation. They're plotting something – something big.'

Pam raised her eyebrows and nodded. 'I'm impressed.'

Maya's dark eyes were intense, her expression eager. 'Until you've managed to smash their organisation and trap the leaders, I've got to stay here under guard.'

'I'm afraid so,' Pam said. 'This is turning into the biggest operation the Security Service has ever seen. Intelligence units nationwide – MI5, MI6 – overseas outfits. It's a major threat, a huge responsibility.'

Maya saw her mum's shoulders tense, her eyes flash with the steely determination she was renowned for. She put out her hand and touched Maya's cheek. 'But, I've almost cracked it, we're nearly ready to move.'

'Mum, you will be careful, won't you?'

'I'm always careful.'

Maya looked away, staring towards the darkened window. 'They're Muslims, aren't they? Islamic terrorists?'

'Yes.'

'Maniacs wanting to blow up the whole world.'

'Maya. . . ' Her mother didn't finish, instead, she gave Maya a troubled look.

'I know,' Maya said. 'Not all Muslims are extremists.'

Pam pursed her lips and blew a stream of air up over her face. Her eyes sought Maya's and she held her gaze.

'You of all people should know that,' Pam said quietly.

Maya was silent; half-forgotten sounds and pictures bloomed in her head. She blinked, surprised by the sudden vivid kaleidoscope – bursting shells, falling debris, a sharp smell of burning.

'It's all right to remember,' her mother said.

Maya looked away.

There had been no secrets, she had been told that her family had been murdered in Kosovo – picked out by Serbs because they were Muslim. If Pam hadn't rescued Maya she would have died too. Most people in her village had been wiped out.

'There are extremists on all sides. They're the people I deal with,' Pam said.

'I hate religion,' Maya muttered. 'It sends people mad.'

Pam grimaced. ‘I haven’t done a very good job, have I?’

‘Why should I believe in anything? If my family hadn’t, they’d still be alive.’

‘Your people were Muslim.’

‘I don’t feel any connection, sorry.’ Maya’s face hardened as she turned away.

Pam changed the subject. ‘You still up for that run in the morning?’

‘Yeah. Not much else to do round here.’

‘It’ll be an early start. Seven all right?’

‘I suppose so.’

As her mum reached for a file at the back of the desk a photo fluttered to the floor. Maya picked it up. Taken on her fifteenth birthday, just a few weeks ago, it showed her and Pam in khaki combat suits, arms round each other, grinning at the camera. They’d just completed a challenging assault course.

‘I loved that day,’ Maya said. ‘Best birthday ever.’

Pam smiled. ‘You aced me on the shooting, you were a natural.’

‘And I did a good time on the racing circuit,’ Maya said.

Pam had organised the day at the Police Training

Academy as a birthday treat – a rare day spent together – and they’d had so much fun. It had fuelled Maya’s ambition – it was exciting, exacting, dangerous. She wanted to follow in her mum’s footsteps. She just wished she could start the training right away, instead of having to spend five more years at school and university.

‘Couldn’t I do something to help?’ she asked.

Pam waved the file. ‘I just need one last piece of data. Then, when I’ve turned in my report, we act, quickly, swiftly – dawn raids, house arrests. If we succeed, the world will be a safer place. And you can go back to school and your friends.’

Maya grinned. ‘Go get ‘em, Mum.’

Pam put the file on the desk, opened it and switched back to business mode. She sat down in front of the computer her fingers hovering over the keyboard. ‘OK. So, now I need to finish this report.’

Maya started to back out of the room, but she couldn’t resist one last question. ‘What did Simon want?’

Her mum’s hands dropped to her lap; she sat still for a moment, head bowed then she swivelled round and looked at Maya. ‘He gave me some data from a surveillance team.’ Her eyes darted away, then back

again. She ran her tongue across the top of her teeth. 'Look, I'm going to trust you with something.'

Maya took a step forward, her eyes locked with Pam's. 'What?'

'There are things in this report that even Simon doesn't know. This investigation is so sensitive – it's a political time bomb. I'm the only person who has access to all the files. Tomorrow I'm meeting an informant in Leeds. He's someone I trust but should anything go wrong, I want you remember something.'

'What?'

'A password.'

'What, what is it?'

'Firecracker.'

The word snapped and sizzled as if Pam had spat it into a flame. Maya felt a tingle of excitement fizz in her stomach. She could taste the word on her tongue, she wouldn't forget it – *Firecracker.*

Chapter Two

When Maya's alarm went off next morning, she wished she hadn't been so quick to agree to an early start. As she tied her running shoes she felt wobbly and light-headed – a night of disturbed sleep had taken its toll.

In the kitchen, Helen, Maya's grandmother, had just finished feeding the cluster of cats that hung around the cottage, and was washing out the empty cans. 'Did you sleep all right, dear?' she asked.

'Not really,' Maya said.

'No. You look tired,' Helen said, eyeing her closely. 'What you need is some fun.'

'Chance would be a fine thing,' Maya answered.

'Well, we'll have to see what we can do,' Helen said, stacking the cans on the draining board and