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Breaking the Circle

Written by

S. M. Hall

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Breaking the Circle

S.M. Hall

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Chapter One

The girl stood stone-still in the middle of the pavement. She was small and thin, dressed in black – scuffed leather jacket, tight, frayed jeans and worn boots. Her clothes were too heavy, her face too pale for such a hot late summer day. Beneath a strand of lank, gold hair, her eyes moved restlessly, scanning the people hurrying home.

As Maya drew closer, she was aware that the girl was watching her. When she was level, the girl stepped into her path.

'Got any spare change?'

Maya stopped, patted her pockets, gave an apologetic shrug and shook her head. She couldn't give money to everybody. This area was getting worse, full of crazy people living on the edge.

The girl repeated her request, her voice sharper, more insistent.

A sour smell of sweat came off her as she raised a cupped hand in front of Maya's face. Irritated, Maya reeled back, ready to walk away, but the girl whispered something – words in a foreign language, words that were strange yet also familiar. The words were no doubt curses, but they sent Maya's thoughts spinning. She looked into the girl's face; the eyes that stared back were a startling, luminous gold. Maya felt as though she'd been zapped.

Despite the heat, a shiver ran through her. She tore her eyes away from the girl and stumbled forward. As she walked away, she felt the girl's eyes burning into her skin.

A few steps ahead, Maya knew the girl was following; she could hear her leather jacket rustling, her black boots scuffing the pavement. A split-second decision – should she take the short cut? Her heartbeat quickened as she turned into the narrow alleyway – she wouldn't be bullied into going the long way round.

Keeping her steps deliberate and measured, she walked along the hard dirt path between high walls, a skinny girl at her back – a girl who looked unwashed

and in need of a good meal. Maya wasn't worried, she could sort her out if she had to.

The alley was littered with broken glass, plastic bags and weeds. As Maya dodged the debris, the girl's boots scraped behind her, kicking at a bottle and sending it spinning. A thin tabby cat sprang from the shadows and clawed up the side of the wall. Moving to the edge of the path, Maya stopped and switched her heavy bag to the other shoulder, alert, listening – the girl had stopped too.

Up ahead, the sun was still shining, silhouetting blocks of tall flats against blue sky – beyond them, the park and home. With determined steps, Maya strode forward. If she hadn't stayed at school for athletics practice, she'd be home by now, finishing schoolwork, looking forward to watching *Hollyoaks*. She had no regrets about the races, though – she'd thrashed everybody. A thrill of pride ran through her as she remembered the last race; five hundred metres and she'd clocked a personal best. Soon it would be the inter-schools championship. Bring it on! She was ready.

Head down, plotting a race strategy, she forgot about the girl following. She didn't see the guy behind a screen of bushes, was totally unaware of the

girl taking out a mobile and speaking into it softly, urgently. The first thing she knew was a swish of movement at her heels, a tug at her blazer, a bony hand clamping her shoulder.

'Give me the money. Give me the mobile.' The girl's eyes were like a cat's, liquid amber glowing in her face. 'You, you give me.'

'No!'

Slow to react to a sharp push, Maya was sent reeling. She hit the ground – *whack!*

Fight back, fight back!

Fingers clutched her hair, twisting and wrenching; her schoolbag was ripped from her shoulder.

Charged with anger, Maya swung into action, lashing out, lunging for her bag, grasping the strap. The girl tugged hard but Maya's training kicked in. Reeling the girl in like a fish, she held her tight, then relaxed her grip for a vital split second. Sensing victory, the girl pulled back, but at that precise moment, Maya yanked her down, put an armlock round her neck and rolled her onto her stomach.

'You can't have my bag, right?' Maya said, pushing the girl's head down.

The girl mumbled, her mouth full of dirt.

'Who are you?' Maya asked, jolting the girl's head.

'Get off. Let go!' the girl spluttered, kicking wildly.

Maya held her down. Then a man's voice shouted, 'Leave 'er!'

Hoping for help, Maya glanced over her shoulder. She gulped. A snarling dog was charging towards her, ears pricked, eyes like laser pens, its slavering jaws bared in a vicious snarl. Her eyes were riveted, muscles tensed, but she couldn't move – there was nowhere to run. The dog was so close that any moment now it would sink its teeth into her skin. At a command from the man, the dog dropped into the dirt. A low, savage growl came from its throat, clumps of froth fell from its mouth.

'What's up? Scared?'

A young guy in a black hoodie ambled towards her, his face sharp and bony, eyes half-hidden by the shadow of the hood. As he bent to clip the dog onto a silver chain, she noticed his long, thin nose; his lips turned up in a mocking smile.

A snappy response to his stupid question went through Maya's head.

Too right I'm scared. Isn't that the reason you have that rabid dog with you – to scare the guts out of people?

But she couldn't speak. The dog was hypnotising her with its mad stare, and all the time it was snarling and slavering as if contemplating its next meal. Fear sang through her bones.

They can smell you, they can smell fear.

The boy sniffed and spat as Maya slowly, very slowly, eased herself off the girl, who was still underneath her, and rolled away from the dog.

'Gimme the bag,' the boy ordered.

Maya hesitated – there was no way she was putting her arm near that crazy dog.

'Give it 'ere.'

He yanked the dog away from her as he reached out his hand. The dog pulled sideways, sending the guy slightly off-balance. Fast as lightning, Maya dipped a hand into the bag and grabbed her mobile. It was just going into her pocket when he spotted it.

'I'll 'ave that,' he said. 'Get it, Kay.'

The girl, who'd been silent and still ever since he appeared, levered herself up, limped over and went to take the mobile, but Maya clutched it to her chest.

'It's mine. You can't take it!'

The girl backed away, looking puzzled and uncertain. She tugged at the zip of her leather jacket, hunched her shoulders and stared down at the ground,

biting her knuckles. The fight had gone out of her, but the boy was on a mission and he took charge.

'I can 'ave what I like, or Gunner'll 'ave you. You don't wanna mess with Gunner.'

On cue, the dog snarled. Defeated, Maya opened her hand.

'Take it, Kay,' the boy said, laughing cruelly as the girl limped over and took the mobile. 'What you done to yourself?' he snapped.

The girl, Kay, winced as she put weight on her foot. 'My ankle is hurt.'

'Serves you right. What you doin', robbin' schoolgirls?'

'It's your fault, you ask me for money.'

'So, what you messin' at 'ere? Get back to base an' earn some proper cash.'

Kay sniffed. 'No. I will not do that. I am your girl.'

He leaned forward. 'You're too particular. Think you're special?' He laughed. 'Come on, give that 'ere,' he added, indicating the mobile.

'No, it's mine, it's good. I will sell it, give you money.'

A fist slammed into the girl's arm, sending the phone flying. Maya saw her chance and didn't

hesitate. She caught the mobile, veered round them and ran for her life. In a flash she saw the wall was slightly lower towards the end of the path and threw herself at it, leaping up, fingers clawing at the top of the wall as the dog came roaring towards her. Barking and yelping, it snapped at her heels. She kicked out, her foot connected, thudding into the dog's jaw, sending it reeling.

In the split second it took the dog to recover, she managed to get one elbow on top of the wall. She was just swinging her legs up out of danger when the dog leapt wildly below her, catching a piece of her skirt in its teeth. It hung suspended by the cloth, a bite away from her flesh. She had to do something or it would mangle her leg. Jerking her body sideways, she smashed a fist down on Gunner's forehead. With a strangled gasp, the dog fell.

Triumphant, she hoisted herself up on top of the wall but her mobile slipped out of her hand. There was no time to retrieve it; the dog wasn't down and out. It was yelping and snapping again.

Time to jump!

Landing amongst big tufts of spiky grass, she scrambled to her feet and lurched forwards. There was nothing to use as a weapon – no stick or anything

– but, over in the far corner, she spotted an old brick outbuilding. Racing towards it, she slipped on a sheet of glass. It shattered and a shard of glass razored her foot, but the pain only urged her onward. Behind her, she could hear the dog barking itself into a frenzy, scrabbling over the wall. In the nick of time, she threw herself against the door of the building; mercifully it gave way, catapulting her into the sanctuary of the shed. She turned and kicked the door shut as the dog's nose appeared round the edge. Then, with trembling hands, she picked up a brick from a pile near the door and hammered home a rusty bolt.

Loud commands boomed over the wall. 'Gunner. 'Ere, Gunner!'

Leaning against the door, she listened hard. On the other side, the dog was panting, hot breath seeping through gaps in the door. Would the boy come after it?

Another command. 'Gunner, 'ere! Come 'ere, you useless piece of meat.'

The panting stopped. The grass rustled, broken glass crashed; there was a loud yelp. She waited, every nerve trembling, but the boy didn't come.

Standing in the empty building, she cursed the girl who'd followed her, the scumbag in the hood, the mad

dog and her own stupidity. Torn skirt, bleeding foot, scratched legs, nerves in shreds – why had she been so stubborn and taken the short cut? What an idiot! She should have trusted her instincts – she knew that girl was trouble as soon as she'd laid eyes on her.

Another shout came from a distance.

'What the. . .?' There were more words, the translation lost in the air. What felt like a lifetime passed. Several times she nearly pulled back the bolt on the door, but the thought of the boy and his killer dog lying in wait kept her inside. Pressing her ear to the wooden planks of the door, she heard the shout of children in the playground, and the distant drone of traffic. She turned her head and peered through a crack – nobody was visible, there was no sign of the dog, the guy, or the girl. Finally she screwed up her courage and ventured out, easing the door open bit by bit until she was sure there was no one waiting to ambush her.

Squinting into the evening sunlight, she scouted for an escape route. The waste ground was enclosed by high walls – the way she'd entered seemed the best way out. Carefully avoiding shards of glass and stopping to look and listen every few steps, she picked her way over to the wall. The ground was lower on

this side, the wall high, but a few flying attempts to get a foothold paid off and she was able to swing her legs up and over and drop down onto the path.

A nervous glance up and down the track confirmed that there was no sign of the hooded thug or his dog. So, top priority was to search for her mobile, but she knew right away it had gone. Of course, the boy had spotted it and picked it up. He'd taken her schoolbag containing books and money, her purse containing her bank card, but most upsetting was the loss of the phone that Pam had given her just before she left. It was a secure number which Pam, her mum, might call at any moment. Now she wouldn't be able to answer. A mixture of sadness and anger welled up as she looked again in the spot where she was certain she'd dropped it. It wasn't there. She kicked at a bottle and swore loudly.

Damn him for stealing her mobile! It was complicated enough to stay in touch with her mum without added problems.

There was nothing for it but to head home. She walked warily towards the playground at the end of the path. Children were playing on swings, a couple of men were walking dogs. It was a lovely summer's evening. Gran would be waiting for her in the flat,

but she couldn't even call to tell her she'd be late.

As she crossed in front of a playground on the edge of the estate, a couple of young boys ran up to her – shaved heads, cheeky grins.

'Give us fifty p!' the smallest one demanded.

'No, go away.'

'Go on, tight arse.'

'Shove off. I haven't got any money. Some thieving yob just nicked my purse.'

The boys started to laugh. 'That'd be Gerard. We just seen 'im.'

'He went that way with 'is dog. He's cool, Gerard.'

'Oh yeah. Very cool, with his mad dog and thieving girlfriend.'

'His girlfriend's over there.'

A stone whistled past Maya's ear as she walked towards the place the boys had pointed to. Skirting round some straggly bushes and two upturned shopping trolleys, she emerged into a concrete square and saw the girl, Kay, sitting on a low wall in front of a block of flats. She looked miserable, and made no effort to move as Maya walked up to her.