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Opening extract from

Urban Outlaws

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Published by

Bloomsbury Children's an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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CHAPTER ONE

JACK FENTON STOOD STRUCK DUMB, HIS EYES wide and staring, refusing to believe what he was looking at. *They'd changed it*. *When had they done that? Why?*

He hurried to the door and leant in for a closer look. The old padlock was gone, replaced by a sophisticated key-code. The numbers glowed, mocking him, daring him to try them out. *Step right up, step right up,* they said. *See if Lady Luck's smiling. Give it a shot, you never know . . .* But he *did* know. It was his job to know stuff like that. Even if it only needed a four-digit code, that meant ten thousand possible combinations.

Ten. *Thousand*.

He sighed, and deep in the pit of his stomach, Jack felt a twinge of self-doubt. Three months of planning wasted. How had he overlooked something

so simple? He cursed himself for not giving the place a final check the night before, but how was he supposed to guess something like this? And he still came back to the same question: why had they changed the lock? It made no sense.

He swore under his breath. Now he'd have to –

'What are you doing?' a deep voice boomed.

Jack wheeled round.

Standing further down the alleyway was a security guard.

Where had he come from?

Jack didn't bother to make a run for it. He knew a three-metre-high wall blocked the other end of the alley. The only way out of there was through a locked door or past the security guard.

Brilliant.

The guard's right hand moved to his hip. In the darkness, Jack couldn't tell if he was reaching for a torch or a radio.

'You gonna answer me?' the guard said. 'What are you doing 'ere?'

Jack's mind raced. Should he make up a story? Say something that would get him out of this mess? Perhaps he could distract the guard long enough –

Jack shook himself.

No. Stick to the plan. Always stick to the plan.

The guard unclipped something from his belt.

Jack squinted. Was that . . . a gun?

The guard moved into the light and Jack took an involuntary step back.

Yep, a gun. *Definitely* a gun.

The guard planted his feet shoulder-width apart, gripped the pistol with both hands and pointed it at what Jack could only assume was his head.

Jack's eyes widened in disbelief. The guy was going to shoot a fifteen-year-old boy? *Seriously?*

This was London not Afghanistan. What was he doing with a gun anyway? He was just a security guard.

'Move away from the door,' the guard demanded in a voice that sounded like it was straight out of a film, 'and walk towards me. *Slowly*.'

Jack raised his hands and took a step forward. 'Now would be good,' he breathed through the corner of his mouth into the wireless headset. 'Plan B. In your own time, Charlie.'

As if on cue, a hooded figure dressed all in black sprinted up the alleyway and slid to a halt behind the guard, who started to turn. But he was too slow – there was a sudden crack as Charlie jabbed a stun gun into his side.

The guard went rigid as electricity coursed through his body.

Jack winced. *That had to hurt*.

Charlie pulled the stun gun from the guard's side and, for a moment, neither of them moved.

The guard's arms hung limp. His eyes were vacant and glazed. The pistol slipped from his fingers and clattered to the tarmac.

Charlie kicked the gun away and jabbed him again, this time in the belly. Another crack of electricity sent the guard sprawling backwards. He smacked his head on the concrete and fell unconscious.

Charlie pulled off her hood and lowered the bandana from her nose and mouth. She had long dark hair tied in a ponytail and her bright jade eyes almost glowed in the darkness.

She looked down at the unconscious guard. 'Tough one, wasn't he?'

'Is he dead?'

Charlie knelt down and felt the guard's neck for a pulse. 'Nah, he's alive.'

Eyeing the homemade stun gun in Charlie's hand, Jack made a mental note not to get on the wrong side of her.

Ever.

She was a couple of months younger than he was, and the toughest girl he'd ever met, probably the toughest street kid in London.

Yep, it was good to have her on your side.

Charlie slipped the stun gun into her jacket's inside pocket, grabbed the guard under the arms and looked at Jack. 'Help me with him then.'

Jack ran over, took his legs, and – with a lot of effort – they half carried, half dragged his lifeless form behind a skip and out of sight.

Jack straightened and let out a breath. 'Thank God for Plan B.'

'Yeah, about that,' Charlie glanced around. 'Why are we on Plan B already? A little early to give up on Plan A, don't ya think?'

Jack pointed at the door. 'See for yourself.'

The two of them hurried over.

Charlie examined the keypad, a slight crease furrowing her brow. 'Why did they change it?'

'Exactly what I was wondering.' Jack looked up. The building's first couple of floors were empty. Insurance brokers and telesales companies occupied the rest, and they had individual security on each floor, so no reason to change anything. Besides, what was there to nick?

Charlie unclipped a long hip bag from her thigh, set it on the ground and rummaged inside. Finally, she found what she was looking for – a black box eight centimetres on each side with a digital readout.

With a small screwdriver, Charlie unfastened the front of the keypad, exposing the circuitry behind. 'Hold this.' She handed Jack the black box and unrolled two wires: one red, one grey. She fixed the grey one to the case of the keypad and held the other ready. The concentration on her face was intense. Her lips moved silently as her eyes followed the paths of the circuit.

Jack stayed as still as possible, hardly breathing, not wanting to break her concentration. If Charlie couldn't get them out of this mess then – well, they were in deep trouble.

Finally, Charlie touched the red wire to a terminal inside. 'Hit the button.'

Jack pressed the trigger on the top of the box and the display sprang to life. Numbers scrolled. He glanced around. They were still alone in the alley, but the sooner they got inside, the better.

He looked back at the readout. The numbers moved in a blur, almost too quickly to see. Ten

thousand combinations, right there. He was about to ask how long it would take when there was a click.

Charlie grabbed the handle, pushed and the door swung open.

Jack squinted as fluorescent light spilled into the alleyway, casting their shadows on the opposite wall. 'You're amazing,' he said, handing the box back to her.

Charlie dropped it into her bag and strode into the building. 'I know.'

Jack smiled as he followed her inside.

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On the rooftop, twenty storeys up, they lay flat on their backs, catching their breath.

After a few moments, Jack turned to Charlie. 'Ready?' She nodded. 'OK, let's do this.'

They rolled on to their fronts and peered over the wall. From their vantage point, they had a clear view of the entire south face of the Millbarn building.

Jack took out a pair of mini binoculars from his pocket and surveyed the street below. It was late and most people had already gone home, which meant their target would be easy to spot.

Jack lowered the binoculars and watched Charlie as she removed a small tripod from her hip bag and

set it up. Then she carefully slid out two black telescopic tubes – each five centimetres in diameter, and extending to sixty centimetres long. With infinite care, Charlie then screwed the ends together – making one long tube – and clipped it to the top of the tripod. Last, she connected a bunch of wires to the back.

Jack took out a netbook from his own hip bag, turned it on and slid it over to her. Charlie connected the other end of the wires to the USB ports and ran a quick diagnostic. The optics inside the tube were aligned and calibrated.

It had taken her months to build the sophisticated telescope and, as always, she'd done a brilliant job. The camera itself – a high-resolution CCD – had cost them a fortune, but it was money well spent.

Well, at least Jack hoped so.

An image of the building opposite sprang up on the netbook's display. Charlie used the trackpad and arrow keys to zoom in on the tenth floor, far-right corner.

The light was on in the office. At that moment, as far as Jack could tell, the room was empty. There were several blind spots, so he had no way to be sure.

They could see the back of an LCD monitor sitting on a desk, and the edge of a keyboard underneath. A Lowry painting hung on the far wall, its stick figures walking towards a factory with tall chimneys that billowed smoke into a darkened sky. Jack wondered if it was a fake, but knowing their target, it was the real thing.

Underneath the painting was a shelf, and on the shelf was a chrome vase filled with dried flowers.

Good. Nothing had moved since their recon.

'Ready?' Charlie said.

Jack nodded and held his breath. This was the most dangerous part of the mission and presented the greatest chance of them drawing attention to themselves.

Charlie hit the Enter key.

A green laser beam shot from the end of the customised telescope and hit the chrome vase in the office. The light scanned up and down, each pass taking three seconds. The returned measurement data from the laser scrolled down the left side of the netbook display and, after an agonising ten passes, the laser shut down.

Scan complete, the netbook declared.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. The second part of the plan had gone without a hitch. They now had the exact dimensions of the vase.

He looked at his watch: eight twenty. Which meant they had ten minutes to wait. He pressed a finger to his ear and spoke quietly into the mic of his headset. 'Obi, everything good?'

'It's *Commander* Obi,' came the reply.

Charlie snickered.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Not that again.'

Obi was back at their headquarters, monitoring all the CCTV cameras in the area. He continued, 'I think my title should be *Mission Commander*. Just saying.'

'You're a year younger than us,' Jack said. 'You can't be Commander.' Charlie was still giggling. Jack shot her an exasperated look and said to Obi, 'Just tell me if everything is OK.'

'Running hot,' came the confident reply. There was a short pause, then Obi said, 'We'll talk about it when you get back. Commander Obi, out.'

Jack let out a controlled breath. He'd gone over it a thousand times with all of them – if they messed about, they'd get caught. That simple.

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in March 2014 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 5141 8



Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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