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WINNER

BLOOD TIES
SOPHIE
McKENZIE

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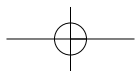
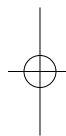
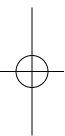
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Part One

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.