



**SPLIT
SECOND**

LIFE CAN CHANGE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

**SOPHIE
MCKENZIE**

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SECOND**

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MCKENZIE**

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For Joe. And the time that is given.

London, the near future

Nat

I glanced at my phone. It was almost three p.m.

Three p.m. was when the bomb would go off.

I raced along the street, my heart banging against my ribs. I *had* to find Lucas. *Canal Street market*. That's what the text had said. That was where Lucas would be. My lungs burned as I gasped at the cold air. I ran faster, pushing through the crowds.

The covered market was packed with shoppers, most of whom were heading for the food stall run by the Future Party. Since the cutbacks had really set in last year, unemployment had risen fast. Now people who would once never have dreamed of taking a handout queued for free food from the only political party in the country that seemed to care. I hurtled past the queue. Most people were staring at the ground as they shuffled along, avoiding eye contact.

There was no sign of Lucas.

I kept running. The bomb wouldn't be here, anyway. Why would anyone want to bomb people so poor they had to queue for food? The next few stalls all sold ethnic clothes – a mix of bold African prints and soft Thai silks. I turned the corner, past the section of the market specialising in baby stuff. No.

No way. Neither Lucas nor the bomb would be here. Not where there were *babies*, for goodness sake. I ran on, panting, past the market clock. It was just four minutes to three. There was hardly any time left. I looked up. The market had a first floor full of cheap toiletries and household goods. Should I go up there or check more of the ground floor?

A security guard strode past. I stared at the radio that hung from his belt. I'd been so focused on finding Lucas I hadn't thought about everyone else in the market. There were lots of people milling about. Lots of children with their mums and dads.

I chased after the security guard. Grabbed his arm. 'Listen,' I said. 'You need to clear the market. Get everyone out.'

The man turned. His face filled with suspicion. 'What did you say?'

'There's a bomb,' I said. 'I don't know exactly where, but it's in the market and it's going to go off in a few minutes.'

The security guard frowned, a look of disbelief on his face. 'What makes you think that, lad?' he said.

'I just do. You have to believe me. *Please.*' Heart pounding, I caught sight of my reflection in the shiny Future Party sign that pointed the way to their free food stall. My hair was messed up, my eyes wild and staring. No wonder the security guard was looking at me like I was crazy. 'You have to clear the whole place.'

'Wait here,' the guard said with a sigh. 'I'll go and get the site manager.'

'No, there's no time.'

But the security guard was already striding away, heading towards the stalls I had just passed. As I turned to the next aisle, intending to run on, I caught a glimpse of a black leather jacket on the stairs up to the first floor. Was that Lucas? I strained my eyes, but the jacket had disappeared, lost in the crowds.

I swerved to the left and raced towards the stairs. I sped past a stall promising fifty percent off piercings and tattoos. A girl about my age stood in front, arguing with a woman. She was gesticulating wildly, her face flushed.

‘Why *not*, Mum?’ she was shouting.

Even racing past at top speed I could see the girl was pretty, with a mass of wild, honey-coloured curls cascading over her shoulders. But there wasn’t time to take a second look. I took the stairs up to the first floor, two steps at a time. It was two minutes to three. And I still hadn’t found Lucas.

Charlie

Mum shook her head. She reached out to smooth a curl off my face. I backed away, furious.

‘Come on, sweetheart, we’ve been over the reasons,’ she said, lowering her voice.

‘It’s just a tattoo,’ I insisted. ‘I’m not going to get anything outrageous. Or big. Maybe a butterfly, or that yin-yang symbol thing.’

Mum pursed her lips and shook her head again. ‘You don’t even know what that symbol *means*, Lottie.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ I snapped. ‘You said I could *choose* what I did with my money. I’ve been saving for ages.’

Mum sighed. I turned away, so angry I wanted to scream.

It wasn’t just the tattoo or Mum using her old name for me. It was *everything*: all the ways that Mum tried to stop me growing up. Dad died when I was very small and Mum and I had been on our own for years. This was great when I was little and had all her attention. But I would be sixteen in a few months and she needed to let me make my own decisions.

‘As I’ve already explained . . .’ Mum said with another sigh. ‘You can’t have a tattoo because it’s permanent – you’re

basically mutilating yourself for life. And it's a waste of money we don't have.'

'It's *half price* here,' I hissed. I know I sounded like a spoilt brat but I was so fed up of us having to count every penny, every day. On my last birthday we hadn't even had a proper cake. 'And it's just a fashion thing. I'm not going to have one anywhere obvious. Maybe on my shoulder or—'

'And it's *painful*,' Mum added. 'It will really hurt.'

'So what?' I said. 'Childbirth's painful. That's what you always say. But you put up with that. I can—'

'Childbirth was worth it,' Mum said. 'A tattoo isn't. Come on, love, there are lots of better things you could do with that money. A tattoo isn't exactly a practical choice.'

'*Please, Mum?*' Tears sprang into my eyes. Just a few years ago, when Mum still had a job, before her war widow's pension was stopped in the government cuts, there had been plenty of money for impractical things. Mum reached for my arm. Her hands were red and rough from her part-time work at the factory. She worked nights but had got up this morning to come to the market for the free food bags. Her face was lined and worn. Once she had used eye make-up and nail varnish. Now she looked old and dowdy.

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed the Asian woman running the tattoo stall watching us. She saw me looking and turned back to the TV where the Mayor of London was speaking direct to camera – another appeal for support for the austerity cuts. I was filled with loathing at the sight of his fat face and sleek, dark hair. He looked like an overfed rat. Just

like the last Mayor – and the past two Prime Ministers – he kept telling the country that we were ‘all in it together’, that more cuts were necessary.

I turned back to Mum. It was obvious from her expression that she wasn’t going to change her mind.

‘I hate you.’ The words shot out of me. I wish I could say that I didn’t really mean them, but in that moment I did.

Mum fixed me with an unhappy look. I’ve often thought back to that moment, the last time I saw her properly. In my memory I can still hear the drone of the Mayor of London’s voice behind us, but what I remember most is Mum’s expression: part disappointment, part hurt, part weariness.

‘I’m sorry, Charlie,’ she said, her voice low and even. ‘You can have a tattoo when you’re eighteen, when you’re free to make your own decisions. But as long as I’m responsible for you it’s not going to happen.’ She paused. We were still looking at each other. I remember the slant of her eyes, just like my own; the curve of her lips, pressed together. ‘Now, let’s go down to the free food stall. There’s already a queue and the meat always runs out fast. I was hoping they might have some lamb. We haven’t had that for ages.’

‘We haven’t had *anything* for ages.’

Mum bit her lip. ‘I know, but—’

‘I’m not coming.’ I folded my arms. I knew I was being childish but I couldn’t stop myself. I was too hurt, too angry. ‘I’m going to look at the clothes stalls.’

‘Okay,’ Mum said. ‘I’ll come and find you when I’m done. Don’t go far. And don’t buy anything until I get back.’

She walked away. Her coat – long and leaf green – swung around her as she headed to the Future Party’s stall where a large crowd of people was already queuing for the free food bags that were handed out every Saturday. A second later Mum disappeared into the crowd.

I glanced over at the tattoo woman. She was still watching the TV. The Future Party’s leader, Roman Riley, was speaking now, his handsome face alive with conviction.

‘Youth unemployment is now running at sixty percent and the Government has the audacity to—’

I moved away. I wasn’t interested in politicians and their talk, though at least Roman Riley’s party organised handouts. The Government only ever took things away.

Still furious with Mum, I wandered to the far corner of the market, idly looking at a rack of cheap jumpers, then a big display of discounted jackets. They were all hideous. I sighed. Mum wanted me to wait nearby. Well, tough. I headed towards the exit, passing a stall selling African-print T-shirts, then another steaming with the scent of coconut curry. I stopped at a sign advertising free noodle soup – *one person, one cup* – hesitating as I wondered whether to get some.

WHAM! The blast knocked me off my feet. I slammed down hard on my back, onto the floor. Winded, I lay there, stunned. What was happening?

Voices rose up around me, shouts and screams. An alarm. Footsteps pounded past me as I struggled up onto my elbows. An elderly woman had been knocked over too. We stared at

each other, then turned to look across the market. Smoke was pouring up above the stalls two or three aisles away.

‘What *was* that?’ I said.

The elderly woman was struggling to her feet. I jumped up. *Mum*. I raced back through the market. People were staggering past, going in the opposite direction. Thick clouds of dust swirled around us. Jackets and jumpers from the stalls I’d passed before were scattered across the floor, blackened and ripped. I headed for the section of the market where the smoke was coming from. My head throbbed. Was the explosion gas? An accident? A bomb?

‘Did you see what happened?’

‘Call an ambulance!’

‘Help me!’

People all around me were yelling. Screaming. I raced towards the smoke. I had to get back to the free food stall. Find Mum. Rubble was all around, counters from stalls splintered and on their sides, clothes and food strewn across the dirt-streaked floor. A man staggered out of the smoke, blood pouring from his face. Another man followed, holding a little boy in his arms, his jacket covered in dust, his eyes wide with shock. Two women held another up between them. More people, blocking my way. I pushed past them into the next aisle.

Mum had been right there, exactly where the smoke was coming from. Terror tightened my throat. I had to find her. My eyes were watering from the thick air. It was hard to breathe. I pushed through the crowds. People were rushing past me,

desperate to get out of the market. Injured people, terrified people.

I forced my way past them. The smoke was even thicker as I passed the tattoo stall. The TV was smashed on the ground, the woman from the stall bent over, groaning. I held my hand over my mouth, choking on the dust. I stumbled, unable to see anything through the smoke. I stopped for a second, trying to make myself focus. The thin, piercing alarm stopped. An announcement sounded, telling everyone to leave the market.

'Make your way to the nearest exit. Make your way to the nearest exit.'

I headed left, towards the free food stall. A small fire was burning out of a pile of cables. Shards of plastic crunched under my feet. Everywhere was blood and dust and metal. Hell. A shoe on its side with a broken heel. A torn poster showing just one side of Roman Riley's face above the words: *Future Pa—*

The smoke cleared slightly. I saw the leaf green of Mum's coat. Her arm flung out behind her head.

And I knew.

I knew but I couldn't face it.

'Mum!' I yelled, and time slowed down as I moved towards her. *'Mum!'*