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Opening extract from  
**Running**

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Published by  
**Matador**

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# ONE

Fifteen years later ...

*‘So who can tell me, what dramatic events of the last twenty years have changed the world into what we know today?’*

Scott, putting the finishing touches to the drawing of a motor bike he’d been doodling on his rough pad, looked up. So did the rest of the class, aware this sudden change of subject by the Newt represented a last-ditch attempt to gain their attention. Droning through the rainfall of the Sahara had been deadly dull and a waste of time; no one ever the slightest bit interested in Africa, since it was unlikely any of them would ever get there. Perhaps, at long last, he had come to his senses and had chased his brain for something actually exciting.

The interactive screen, on the front wall of the classroom, changed shape, a map of the world now filling the space. Hands flew into the air as the year -11 students finally woke up.

‘So, Mary, give me one of these events.’

Mary’s brown eyes brightened enthusiastically. ‘The blowing up of the Iran Nuclear Facility.’

Mr Newman, whose nickname referred to his size rather than his ability to turn into a frog, nodded. ‘And the other?’

Scott didn’t move. Long habit stopped him joining the barrage of hands waving at the Newt. He glanced across at his friend Jameson, eagerly bouncing up and down in his seat, his dark hair and glasses joining in the fun.

‘Me, sir, *Me!*’

*‘Jameson – Jameson – please give someone else the chance to talk for a change. Scott – you rarely say a word in class. Do you know the answer?’*

Scott shook his head. He knew the answer all right. It was the earthquake that killed his mother.

*‘Pity! Okay – Hilary then.’*

*‘The earthquake in the United States.’* The girl sitting next to Scott said, *‘with its resulting tsunami.’*

It was a surprise to hear Hilary speaking up. Since she’d joined the school the previous month, when her parents relocated from London into the calm atmosphere of the Cornish countryside, she’d hardly said a word. And that was such a shame. Scott glanced surreptitiously at her; since she was easily the best looker in class, with a neat figure, a blonde ponytail and a smile a mile wide. Regrettably, she’d also made it abundantly clear to every boy who tried to make a move on her, that she wasn’t interested.

Mr Newman picked up the plastic pointer touching it to the screen and a faint green shadow appeared in the background of the world map. As it mingled with the blue of the ocean it turned turquoise, padding out the landmass of three of the five continents: America, Africa and Asia.

A gasping *‘Wow!’* came from the class.

*‘This was the ribbon of land known as California.’* Mr Newman highlighted the turquoise bulge on the south-west corner of the North American continent. *‘It lay along the St Andreas fault, a notoriously unstable area. There had been a devastating earthquake one hundred years prior to this event, but nothing on this scale.’*

*‘Sir?’*

*‘Yes, Jameson?’*

*‘Was the earthquake connected to the blast in Iran?’*

*‘What an extraordinary question.’* Mr Newman beamed his delight at the interest his class was showing. *‘There’s only a few minutes till the end of the lesson, we can spend it discussing the two events, if you like. Do you think they’re connected, Jameson?’*

‘Well, sir, they could be. I mean, except for the great meteor which did the dinosaurs in, there’s been nothing on this scale for millions of years. It’s too much of a coincidence for two such events to happen within a few days.’

‘But, sir?’

‘Yes, Wesley?’

‘They couldn’t have been linked, sir. The United States were behind the Iran blast, everyone knows that. The earthquake had to be a coincidence. Not even those lunatics in the United States would go round blowing up their own country or would they?’

‘Okay, anyone?’

Hands waved madly in the air.

‘Travers.’

‘But the US denied it, didn’t they, sir?’

‘They did, Travers. Unfortunately the world didn’t believe them. We were on the brink of a world war, this time between the Middle East and the US, when Al Zaitigh claimed responsibility. According to their broadcast, they blew up the nuclear facility because the Iranian people were moving away from the laws of God.’

‘Yes, sir, but that’s the point, sir,’ protested Jameson. ‘The explosion in Iran effectively closed down the world. Nobody was looking anywhere else. I mean, Wesley’s right in a way. The United States wouldn’t have blown themselves up, so somebody else must have done it.’

Scott could see where Jameson was heading – and it made perfect sense. The moment the world knew of the explosion in Iran, the developed countries – the United States in particular – had mobilised their forces to send massive aid and, as a result, became vulnerable to attack.

‘Say it had been planned,’ Jameson plunged enthusiastically into his argument. ‘When the blast happened it was like the entire world lost its head and went running round in circles. If you were a terrorist organisation, wanting to damage the US – that was the perfect time. An undersea nuclear explosion could easily have triggered the earthquake.’

‘It would have had to be a very powerful blast,’ their teacher pointed out.

Hilary raised her hand.

‘Go on, Hilary,’ Mr Newman nodded in her direction.

‘But if there *had been* an organisation with that sort of nuclear capability, surely someone would have known about it. I mean, Iran’s nuclear programme was well documented.’

‘Good point, Hilary. Nice to see you joining in. Keep it up. Anyone else?’

‘What about China, sir? They had the knowledge.’

‘They did, that’s right, Mary. Well, we appear to have strayed over the boundaries into the realm of historical fact, but it doesn’t matter. Personally, I never saw China as a threat. They were busily becoming powerful enough to rival the US by trading – they didn’t need to destroy the world. Yes, Jameson?’

‘That’s the whole point, sir. They didn’t destroy the world, did they? We’re all still here. But whoever did it, they couldn’t have foreseen the tsunami and the rise in sea levels could they?’

‘Valid argument.’

Scott listened. Even if his father hadn’t advised him to play his cards close to his chest, he wouldn’t have joined in. You learned more by listening.

‘Sir?’ A tall, athletic-looking girl, her swimming captain’s badge in a prominent place on her sweater, waved her hand in the air. ‘What exactly did happen?’

‘I’ll go into it in more depth next lesson, Jenny. Briefly, the earthquake went off the Richter scale, and the western coast of California ...’ The plastic pointer rapidly covered the screen, highlighting the turquoise-coloured ribbon of land, ‘disappeared into the Pacific ... from here ... to here.’ The pointer swung up and down the coast. ‘Between the Iran blast and the earthquake, millions of people were killed. Then, while the US was still reeling from this, the tsunami struck. It killed several million more people worldwide and sea levels were left elevated, so enormous flooding took place ... here ... here ... here ... and here.’

The pointer flicked quickly over the west coast of the United States, the Caribbean and countries bordering the Atlantic as far north as Norway, before moving across to the Pacific islands and the eastern seaboard of Russia.

The class fell silent, staring at the rapidly moving pointer, the areas affected lit up like a Christmas tree.

Mary leant across and tugged at Travers's sleeve. 'Was it really like this?' she whispered, a horrified expression on her face.

'And some,' he replied.

'I had no idea. If there's a documentary on telly, Mum usually says: *we don't want to see this* and Dad changes the channel. But it's crazy,' she hissed.

'What were you saying, Mary?' Mr Newton turned back from the board. 'Share it with the class, please.'

Mary flushed pink. 'I was saying to Travers, that no one in their right mind would kill all those people on purpose. I mean ...' she paused and burst out, 'Anybody who did that has to be a serious head-case.'

'Exactly so,' their teacher agreed with her. 'Unfortunately, there was a consensus of opinion – by the nations of the world – that America had become power crazy. Despite the confession by Al Zaitigh, the world believed then, and continues to believe now, that the US was behind the Iran blast and quite possibly the Californian earthquake, too. It was known that America had a secret research facility in the area and, although the Americans strongly denied it, it was concluded they had triggered the underground explosion in error. That is why the United Nations moved to Switzerland. America, accused of mass murder, was immediately ostracised by the rest of the world and all ties severed. Fifteen years later they still continue to protest their innocence, but it will take a hundred years or more – long after the last survivor of the event has died – for them to be readmitted into the global community.'

The jangling of the bell interrupted the appalled silence in which the class had listened. Normal conversation broke out again as the twenty or so students packed away their books and

put on their specs. Mr Newman gazed round his class, delighted that for once his students were leaving one of his lessons on a high.

‘Remember,’ he called after the hurriedly departing throng, ‘exams are in a few weeks and the occasional peek into the Internet might prove useful.’

Five pairs of feet fitted neatly in a row against the wall. Four of the five pairs belonged to Jameson, Mary, Travers and Scott; the fifth to Hilary. She had been walking down the corridor behind the group, quietly minding her own business, when she’d been hijacked. She just had time to hear a muttered, *this way*, before Mary dragged her off down the corridor at high speed.

It was Hilary that broke the silence.

‘Can someone tell me why we’re sitting eating our lunch in the janitor’s cupboard?’

The four friends grinned at her.

‘Jameson’s in hiding,’ explained Mary turning round, her glossy, short brown hair swinging across her face with the movement.

Jameson grinned wickedly. ‘From the Weasel.’

‘It still makes no sense, unless I know who the Weasel is.’

‘You don’t know?’ A chorus of reproaches broke the air.

Hilary flushed. ‘I’m new, remember.’

‘So is Wesley the Weasel,’ groaned Jameson. ‘But, except for using words like janitor, you’re perfectly acceptable because you’ve never once tried to push your way in. Quite the opposite. But Wesley ... he’s a right pain with all his questions – never stops. He’s got this obsession about what subjects I’m planning to study at university. He was spotted by Travers bearing down on us, hence the rapid escape – sorry.’

‘That’s okay, but what’s wrong with janitor?’

‘It’s American.’

‘Oh God! I’m so sorry. There was an American girl at my old school,’ said Hilary, adding quickly, ‘I must have picked it up from her.’

‘American girl! How come?’ Jameson said, eagerly picking up on the word like a puppy worrying a ball.

‘Most probably a refugee. There’s a whole community in London.’ Hilary shrugged. ‘No one talks about them, but they’re there.’

‘Okay, you’re excused.’

‘Okay is American – was, I mean,’ she added.

Travers groaned and buried his head in his hands. ‘I know the government is always on about getting rid of all the Americanisms in our speech, but that’s impossible. It’s like they invented speech.’

‘Do you really think someone set off the earthquake in California, Jay, or were you saying it just for the hell of it?’

Scott quickly changed the subject, the conversation about refugees too close to home for his liking. He was American, even if his birth certificate did say he was born in London. That was one of the secrets – and a big one. *If you’re American you don’t talk about it*, that’s what his dad said when he went to primary school. ‘Never tell anyone anything about your family, not even to your best friend.’ And if you don’t talk about that, it becomes easier and safer never to talk much about anything – even to friends.

‘No, I was searching the net. There was this article. I wanted to find out more.’

‘So what was she like, Hilary – the girl at your school?’

‘Like a girl, Travers, *did you expect something different?*’

Travers, who openly boasted he was as thick as two short planks but get him on the rugby pitch and he had brains enough for fifteen men, was perfectly typecast. Dark and athletically built, he had a broad face almost as wide as it was high. His heavy eyebrows overhung deeply-set brown eyes, with a short muscular neck dissolving into powerful shoulders and chest.

‘You know what I mean,’ he growled. ‘How did she get here?’

Hilary pulled a face. ‘No idea. It’s got to be one of those embarrassing questions you never ask.’

‘I read this article, on the Internet, that thousands of Americans were stranded worldwide. Some of the stories are really interesting, too. For a while there was even an underground organisation, using Canada and Mexico to get them back into the States,’ Jameson leaned forward to look along the line of his friends, ‘so any still left here are probably legal.’

Scott wished he could say, ‘I’m legal.’ Except he didn’t know if they were. Again he tried to change the subject. ‘Dad was saying he’d read a report about kids vanishing – did you see that, Jay?’

‘What sort of kids?’ Jameson asked, taking the bait.

Scott relaxed. ‘Clever ones.’

Travers burst into laughter. ‘Thank God for that, Scott. That rules out Mary and me.’

Scott grinned. ‘Me too! Holy crap, that’s it!’

Hilary jumped and stared at Scott across the line of feet. ‘That’s another American expression,’ she rebuked him.

Scott stopped dead, his cheeks tinged pink, wondering if she could be one of those girls that hated swearing, although to be honest, *Holy crap* could hardly be considered swearing.

‘It’s just an expression,’ Jameson broke in. ‘It doesn’t mean anything. Actually, when you know Scott better, you’ll be grateful for every single word he does let fall, whether it means anything or not. *You’ve* just been in receipt of three whole sentences – count yourself lucky.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘Besides it’s impossible to eradicate every single word – like Travers said – speech would be pretty dull without them.’

‘Thanks for that!’ Scott overlaid his laugh with a scowl. ‘That wasn’t it. I’ve just worked out why the Weasel is stalking you, Jay, he’s after your brain. Better take care. No going out after dark.’

Scott said it seriously but it came out like a joke and four pairs of feet drummed the wall in appreciation.

‘Your dad never said that, Scott, you’re conning us,’ Mary said, when she’d stopped laughing. ‘If it was true we’d have heard it on the news.’

‘That’s what I told him,’ said Scott. But he had.

‘Oh, forget all that,’ Travers said now, taking charge of the conversation. ‘We’ve got a week off. To celebrate; how about you all come over to my house on Saturday – you too, Hilary? Dad’s taking out the boat and we’re going up-river. Mary’s coming.’

‘That is a surprise,’ Scott said with a grin.

‘Love to but can’t.’ Jameson groaned and pulled a face. ‘Family wedding. Got to go to that, worse luck. Can’t you do it Sunday, Travers?’

‘Not my party – shame though. Hilary?’

‘That would be nice. I’ll come but only if Scott’s coming.’

‘Oooooer!’ Jameson fluttered his eyelashes.

‘It’s nothing like that,’ she retorted. ‘If you aren’t there and Scott isn’t either, I shall be playing gooseberry to Travers and Mary – and that will be ghastly. And I’d love to go out on the river.’

‘The ball’s in your court, Scott. By the way, Dad said you simply had to bring your dad. Says he’s got something important he wants to talk to him about. I asked Mum. She said it probably meant he’d get some decent conversation if your dad was there.’

Scott kept his face neutral but inside he was cheering. Wild horses wouldn’t keep him away. ‘Okay, I’ll be there. But you know my dad ...’

‘Actually, to be truthful, Scott, we don’t.’

And neither, thought Scott, do I.