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belch loudly, much to Eddie's amusement, before signaling to Mum that I want to go for a walk.

She glances at her watch and wipes up spilled mustard and sauerkraut with her serviette. She stacks the paper plates before holding the rubbish out for me to take, smiling that annoying, sarcastic smile of hers. 'I'll be heading home in half an hour. If I can't find you by then, make sure you're home by no later than eight; and by eight I mean *pm*, just in case there's any confusion later on.'

I kiss Eddie on the top of his head, avoiding eye contact with Mum. 'Goodnight, munchkin, see ya tomorrow.' He's rubbing his eyes and I know if Mum doesn't leave soon she'll be carrying him all the way home.

Desperate to get away, I leave the noise and crowds and head for the small laneway I use regularly as a shortcut. I'm still close enough that muffled conversations echo behind me. A neon sign above the barber's shop casts a pool of red and green light across the pavement. I scratch around in my pocket, searching for the cigarette and lighter I stashed there earlier.

A shape moves towards me, almost too quick to register, before my body is slammed against the bricks. A wave of adrenalin surges through me. Two hands have me pinned to the wall. A face leans in, eyes blazing with quiet rage.

'Don't move,' it whispers.

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I nod, too stunned to make any sound at all. The boy leans in and I'm caught by a powerful wave of aftershave and body odour. 'I know who you are. I know what you did.' Thick, dark hair falls forward into his eyes. His skin looks dark, but in the strangeness of the neon light it's too hard to see him clearly. 'I've got a message for you and your friends. If it's war you're after – we're happy to give it to you.'

Part of my brain registers the danger I'm in. A little voice tells me to run, get out of here, but any movement I make only forces me back further against the rough bricks. My head turns away from his, eyes squeezed shut to avoid the heat of his anger from spilling over. The buzz of words keeps coming until, finally, his grip loosens. Anger sears through me. Without thinking I wrench my hand free, ball it into a fist, and swing at his face. He reacts instinctively. It's as if no time has passed between my punch and his answering strike. For a moment, I feel nothing. Then pain floods across the side of my face. I crumple to the ground and the guy steps back, surprised, as if he's not sure what just happened. Footsteps echo: someone is running down the lane towards us.

'What the hell is going on?' a voice asks between gasping for air.

A figure looms over me before squatting down to eye level. My head is swimming and stars spark at the edge of my vision. My hand traces a path across my throbbing

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cheek. Dark, concerned eyes connect with mine and suddenly there is no air, no sound.

He turns away and the world pulls into focus again.

‘You *hit* her?’ He grabs my attacker by the front of his shirt and pushes him away, forcing him to stagger backwards down the lane. ‘You were only supposed to be passing on a message!’

My attacker rubs at his jaw. ‘Man, the crazy bitch punched me.’

‘You hit a girl. I knew this was a bad idea.’ He pauses, shaking his head. ‘Just go, before you screw things up even more.’

My attacker looks as if he isn’t sure what to do, then he turns, reluctantly, jogs down the lane and is swallowed by the darkness. A strong arm lifts me to my feet. ‘You’d better put ice on that; it’s starting to swell already.’

I wince and put my hand to my cheekbone. My heart is racing and my brain is struggling to keep up with what’s just happened. This boy is tall and lean, with the same dark hair and eyes as the guy who attacked me. He takes another look at my face and murmurs under his breath in a language I don’t understand. He’s confused, apologetic, then he turns and jogs after his friend. And I’m alone again.

Shaking uncontrollably, my hand searches my pocket for another cigarette, but it comes up empty. Hot tears prick at my eyes as I stumble down the lane.

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I think briefly about calling Cam. My breath is heavy, barely holding back angry sobs and my brain fires a confusing number of suggestions, but really, I just want to go home.