



WINTOUR'S GAME

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LITTLE TIGER
LONDON



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OUT LATE ON A SCHOOL NIGHT

With a click and a swish of night, Alex was in. And she had just two minutes to get back out again.

No problem.

All around her in the darkness, the warehouse hummed, the air thick with oil and industry. Making her way nimbly down the aisle, lights winked at her in the gloom, while the massive machines that towered over her chirruped and sighed as she passed. She was so busy wondering what they made here that it took her a moment to realise she wasn't the only thing out of place.

There was something about this room, something about this whole building, in fact, that made her senses prickly. Something just felt ... *wrong*.

At fourteen, Alex Wintour was pretty young for a thief, especially one with a reputation like hers. Short and lithe, with sharp features and a sharper tongue, her talents among Roz's crew were undisputed. As always on a work night, she was wearing her black jeans, her lucky black biker jacket, and her fringe of auburn hair with its tips

of midnight blue was tucked beneath a black beanie, so it didn't dangle in front of her face like it usually did.

She'd been given everything she'd need: access codes for the doors, a floor plan of the building, even a big red X marking her target. This job should've been a piece of cake.

So why did she feel so uneasy?

Alex stopped, scanning the room, willing her senses to see round corners. Nothing. She tapped her watch, the timer telling her she'd already wasted thirty seconds, so, with a grimace, she pushed the persistent niggle to the back of her mind and moved on.

She made her way quickly towards her target, the control room perched up a set of metal stairs in the back corner. Taking the steps lightly, two at a time, she punched the code she'd been given into the keypad and the door hissed open, revealing the operations for the entire plant. Fixing an extendable steel rod into position across the doorway, Alex cautiously stepped into the room.

Banks of idling consoles winked to her left, stationed beneath windows looking out on to the sleeping facility, but she ignored them, finding what she was looking for on the back wall.

Lined up, row upon row, was a collection of spotlight glass cylinders, each containing a range of indecipherable tech. Her hand traced the middle row of the numbered thirty-centimetre-long containers until she found the one she was after. Inside it, on a small clear plinth, was a nondescript chrome device about the size of a cigarette lighter, with a round blue button at one end. In this room, surrounded by so much imposing technology, it seemed decidedly unimpressive, but it wasn't Alex's job to judge what Roz's

clients wanted stolen or why.

So, slipping a piece of clear plastic the size of a postage stamp from her pocket, Alex peeled away the protective backing and laid it on the fingerprint scanner. Flashing green, the clasps holding the cylinder released it into Alex's gloved hands with a satisfying hiss.

"Oops-a-daisy," she said, casually hurling the container to the floor where it shattered at her feet. Its contents tumbled across the scuffed linoleum, coming to rest by the foot of a battered but orderly desk. As Alex bent to retrieve the device, something on the desktop glinted in the darkness, catching her eye.

It looked like a postcard, but it was black, and embossed in the centre was a large golden T. Beneath that, more gold lettering glittered, forming alien patterns that Alex couldn't decipher and she moved on with a disgruntled huff.

A framed photograph sat next to it of a woodland trail and what she presumed was a family of seven smiling hikers, in descending height, huddled together. All brown skin and bright, brilliant smiles, they were like Russian dolls. Dad in the middle looked proud as punch of his five miniatures, while Mum, though central, appeared somewhat detached, as if above it all.

Alex gave a derisive snort. "Bet they hate each other."

Happy family days out were not something she saw in her future. Roz's operation, the only family she knew, didn't exactly go for picnics in the park.

She scanned the rest of the desk's cluttered surface for anything of interest, but the blueprints and diagrams held no value. Besides, even if Alex had wanted to take any of

this stuff, Roz's instructions had been clear.

Turning to leave, she stepped on a piece of curved glass, one end crunching under her foot, propelling the jagged point of the other into the fleshy part of her ankle.

Pain roared up Alex's leg and she cried out, more startled than hurt. But it was enough to throw her off balance and send one hand flailing. The device, clutched in her fist, hit the closest cylinder with a smart *clink*, sending a crack across its surface. And she didn't need a crystal ball to know what would happen next.

!!WHAP!! !!WHAP!! !!WHAP!! !!WHAP!!

The room exploded in a blinding flash as security lights burst into life. Alex reeled at the sudden brilliance, then, just as she was recovering from the shock, white smoke billowed into the room, quilting it in an instant.

Eyes tearing up, and with smoke filling her mouth, nose and ears, Alex bounded for the door, slithering through just before the rod she'd placed there gave way. The door slammed shut behind her with a disgruntled crunch.

Tripping the alarm had filled the entire plant with a howling siren and the same thick white smoke, and Alex descended the metal staircase into the toxic cloud, coughing and blinking away tears. Dropping the chrome device into her backpack, she whipped off her beanie, covering her mouth and nose, and squinted into the glare. She tried to identify any shape or landmark that could lead her back to the outside world, but everywhere she looked it was the same: a disorientating white-out with hellish red flashes.

She'd been in tighter spots than this, but her innate ability to sniff out an escape route, and an almost sixth

sense for knowing what could be, and often *was*, lying in wait round the corner, had always seen her through.

Alex couldn't explain this ability and she tried not to think about it. But she knew she'd come to rely on it. Which was a shame. Because for some reason it had completely abandoned her now.

Typical.

With light, noise and smoke assaulting her senses, Alex stumbled across the factory floor, hoping she was heading in the direction of the exit. The avenues between the machines were wide and straight, and, even though her sixth sense was failing her, she still had a reasonable picture of the place in her mind. So, pushing back her panic, hands groping at the space in front of her, Alex gritted her teeth and struggled back the way she had come.

Finally, a ghostly green glow floated through the murk. The emergency exit light materialised on the wall before her, a door appearing beneath. Then the keypad was at her trembling fingers.

Jabbing in the code, the door swung open, expelling Alex and a gush of smoke into the glittering dark, where she hit the railing, gasping and coughing at the shock of cool night air. She could hear sirens approaching, but she ignored them. Because, as soon as she was outside, her sixth sense suddenly returned and her mind lit up.

ENGINE
The engine VYRUUMMS into life ...

but—

Wait! I

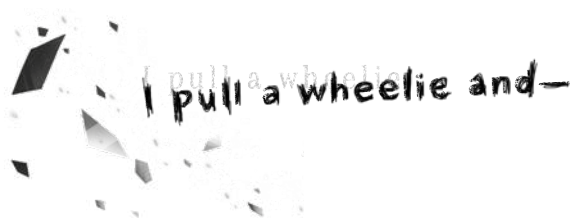
haven't turned the
key yet—

Alex blinked her streaming eyes clear and peered into the shadowy yard that lay in front of the warehouse. Nothing moved. Her motorbike was still at the bottom of the steps where she'd left it. But, glancing at the gate, she could see that the padlock she'd removed so that she could make a quick getaway had been replaced. And *was* that an engine she could hear beneath the wail of approaching sirens?

No point in waiting to find out.

Alex was already halfway down the steps when headlights pinned her startled shadow against the wall. She couldn't tell how many there were, but her silhouette fractured as the bikes emerged from the dark, scrambling noisily across the yard towards her.

Throwing a leg over her bike, she rammed on her helmet and, with a twist of her wrist, the machine roared. She cleared the yard in under a second, her mind ablaze with questions she had no time to answer as she hurtled towards the padlocked gate. The chain was at head height and if she tried to barge through it'd be curtains. But maybe...



Two metres out, Alex kicked down a gear and pulled hard on the handles, lifting the front wheel off the ground and catching the lock. With a spark and a satisfying *clang*, the gate sprang open and she careered through, whooping triumphantly and vanishing up the alley in a streak of red tail lights.



Even at this time of the morning, the streets were alive and cars sped by Alex in a dizzying blur. Behind her, she could hear the muffled roar of her pursuers approaching fast. They weren't giving up that easily, but Alex still had a few tricks up her sleeve.

Ahead, the traffic was beginning to slow at a red light and, with a wolfish grin, she gunned the engine and sped straight into the heart of the busy intersection.

**Blue van, white BMW.
left, right and
I'm through.**

Tyres shrieked, horns blared and alarmed voices clamoured behind her as she mounted the roundabout and sped through the junction. Swerving to avoid the blue van before she even saw it, Alex pulled the bike hard to the left just as a white BMW skimmed past close enough for her to feel the hot breath of its wake. She was already out the other side when she heard the telltale chorus of squealing brakes, cries of panic and a metallic crunch behind her. One down...

She allowed herself a smile as she sped away, but the flashes in her mirror told her that she wasn't out of the woods yet. Her two remaining pursuers were close behind and getting closer.

mmmmNNNNEEEEEAAAAOOOOOOWwww


Hitting the river, she opened the throttle, screaming

across the bridge and into another busy intersection, senses straining to stay one step ahead. She sped through lanes of interweaving traffic and...



ALEX WINTOUR
Alex Wintour.

Welcome
to your future!



Wait, what was *that*?

Her mind only wandered for an instant. But that was all it took.

A 4x4 she hadn't seen coming clipped her back wheel and the tyre exploded. Alex lost control and the bike tore wildly across the tarmac, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. Early morning pedestrians flung themselves out of the way as she clipped the kerb and slammed into a bollard at full speed, thrown from the bike as it folded beneath her like a paper clip. Sailing through the air, Alex hit the nearest wall, clattered into an alley and landed with a wounded, winded grunt.

The world reeled before her, reluctantly edging back into focus as she sat up, pulling off her helmet and letting it clatter at her feet. A few metres away, her beloved bike was a smouldering wreck, but by some miracle she was alive and, flexing her trembling fingers, appeared to be unhurt. Still too stunned to stand, Alex could only watch as the two remaining motorbikes snaked towards her through the bewildered crowds and smoking pile-up she'd left behind. The riders stopped, taking obvious relish in parking by the steaming wreckage of Alex's bike. The closest one removed

his helmet, revealing a slack-jawed thug in his twenties with a shaved head and a waxen pallor. Sunken-eyed and sneering, he fixed a white earbud into one ear and opened his mouth to speak.

A black porsche 718 appears
nowhere, out of
nowhere, screaming
up the lane.
THUNK! and
THUNK!
completely takes them out.

“Huh,” murmured Alex as her pursuers were lit up by the headlights of a sleek black Porsche hurtling towards them up the alley without any apparent intention of stopping.

At the last second, the car spun, skidding in a tight arc. It either didn't see the two riders or it didn't care. Either way, it didn't stop. The back of the car struck them both with a meaty slap, throwing them spreadeagled on top of their bikes, and then shuddered to a halt only metres from where Alex sat.

It remained there a moment, motionless, engine purring like a satisfied cat, before the passenger side door was thrown open to reveal a teenage boy. Ignoring Alex, his slender frame sprang out lightly and he began buffing the spot where the riders had struck the panelling.

After a moment, apparently satisfied, he turned to Alex with a relieved whistle. A tumble of chestnut hair fell in carefully choreographed chaos off a pale, narrow face and

he smiled a little too easily. His dark brown eyes twinkled at her in the gloom.

“Alex! So nice to finally meet you!” he said, pocketing the cloth and extending his hand towards her. “I’m Colman Reece.”

“*Colman?*”

Alex knew the type. A moneyed, privately educated trust-fund brat. The box-fresh trainers, dark trousers and white T-shirt that he wore beneath a navy three-quarter-length jacket reeked of humblebrag wealth. And his hands hadn’t seen a day’s work in their short, privileged life.

“Friends call me Cole,” he said breezily.

She smiled back tightly, making no effort to mask her distaste. “Colman it is then.”

“Oh, we’re gonna be mates, I can tell!” he said, beaming at her, and Alex wanted to reach up and slap the smile off him. If only she had the energy. Nor did she take his proffered hand and, perhaps sensing her hostility, the boy retreated back towards the idling car.

“Get in,” he said, pulling back the passenger seat and waving inside, “and I promise I’ll change your life forever.”

Alex surveyed the carnage all around them. The angry drivers, the unconscious motorbike riders, the approaching sirens and the cocky teenager in the pimped-out Porsche offering her a lift. How had she not seen this coming?

But that didn’t matter right now. She needed to get out of there. Fast.

“No thanks, *Colman*,” she said. “Think I’ll take the bus.”