

## DEVIL

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Run for your life.

That was the thought racing through the man's mind.

Run.

For.

Your.

Life.

He had never been very good at running. At school the cross country races were torture for his breathing, and his aching legs. The crippling stitches that developed in his heaving chest left him gasping for air.

Run for your life.

Now he was well past school age. A diet of beer and fast food, not to mention the regular packs of cigarettes, gave him little hope of getting away from the three men chasing him. No hope, but he had to try.

He was desperate. He knew what they could do to him if they caught him. Would do to him. When they caught him.

The narrow alleyway he ran up was slippery from the recent rain. The summer shower had left the bleak walkways and crumbling tower blocks fresh and clean for a few minutes. Now their natural state had been reclaimed the estate crouched anxiously, hunched, as if waiting for the next step on the downward spiral of decay.

The pinched alleys he ran through were covered in graffiti.

Run for your life.

He knew he was slowing. His lungs were heaving. His legs were numb. His eyes were wide with terror.

He didn't know the men chasing him but he guessed who they were worked for. Guessed why they were after him.

It had been a mistake to think he could get away with telling the truth. All his life he had avoided it with sly winks and looking the other way. The one time he tried to do the decent thing and see where it got him.

Faster, run faster.

For a fleeting moment he thought he could call someone for help. He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and attempted to press a speed dial number while still fleeing. His fingers fumbled, his feet stumbled, and the phone fell from his fingers to bounce onto the concrete ground.

A moment's hesitation while he wondered whether to retrieve it or let it be. Self preservation kicked in. He wasted a precious second looking at the cracked screen lying in a puddle before he kicked on and headed for a stairwell. It would lead to his fifth floor flat. Safety. Possibly.

Huddled around the foot of the stairs was a gang of youths. He ran towards them not expecting trouble, but knowing there would be no help either.

"Scotty," one of them called out.

They were core members of a gang that ran the drugs on the estate. The youngest was thirteen.

"Scotty, you training for the marathon, man?"

He ignored them. Tried not to break his faltering stride as he ran through them.

They attempted to block his way. Messing with him. Mischief. He was about to cry out that they needed to let him past. Needed to let him escape.

Then they caught sight of the three heavy-set men lumbering into view and they parted. Scott glanced over his shoulder. He put one foot on the bottom step and moved upwards.

The gang of youths disappeared. A cloud of smoke. There one moment. Gone the next.

Scott found the stairs harder to run up than he imagined. His legs were finished. The muscles had no more to offer.

His mouth was dry, his lips felt burnt.

He used his hands to grab onto the concrete sides of the stairs. Pushing himself up with what strength he had left. A combination of pure fear and adrenaline. Hands holding on, push. Legs trailing, step by step.

Run for your life was a memory. He was practically crawling now.

Behind him he could hear footsteps. They sounded nearer than before.

He reached the fourth floor before they caught him.

"Scotty."

He could barely speak. His breathing was fast and ragged. His legs were shaking violently.

Two of the men grabbed him. They lifted him up. Turned him upside down. Dangled his head and shoulders over the ledge of the balcony.

Beneath him Scott could see the dirty ground. A burned out car was directly below. If I hit that it might break my fall, he thought.

The arms around his legs were strong. He wouldn't fall while they held him. The arms loosened and he dropped a few inches. His waist was level with the edge of the balcony.

"You've been a naughty boy, Scotty," the man not holding onto him said.

"Sorry. I'll get it sorted."

"You don't know what you've done yet. How can you sort something you don't know about?"

Without changing their grip on his legs the men lowered him still further before lifting him slightly.

"We're a good few feet up here, Scotty. Reckon you'd squash like a ripe tomato. Especially if you fell on your head. Paralysed at least, if you made it."

The man was talking. He had a chance.

"What do you want me to do?"

The man made a sound that might have been a laugh. "We'll have to hurt you, you realize that? Making us run through this dump like that. Not good for our image."

Hurt him? Not kill him?

Run for your life was over. Talking for his life might work.

"I don't know you. What have I done?"

"Been talking to the police, Scotty."

The police. The one time he was telling the truth about something. It had been a mistake to think he could get away with it.

"They found me. Told me..."

"Told you what? That they'd protect you? Where are they now?"

"It was a mistake. I can see that. I'll tell them."

"So you know who we are? Where we're from?"

"I think so."

His legs were lowered further over the edge. They had their arms hooked under his knees. They only had to let him slip and he was gone.

"No!"

"Listen, Scotty. The night you thought you saw Mr Board. You didn't. You were at a poker game. With some friends of ours. They'll vouch for you. Understand?"

He knew they were from Board. His influence was everywhere.

"Poker game. I can't play poker."

"You're not the brightest are you? You didn't see anyone doing anything. Understand? Is that clear enough for you?"

"I'll tell..."

"No. You won't tell the police anything. You'll go to the trial. They'll call you as a witness for the prosecution. They'll ask you what you saw. And you say..."

"I saw nothing. I was playing cards with mates."

"Now you're getting it. You won't change your mind when we've gone?"

"No. No, you can trust me."

He felt his body being lifted. Rough hands grabbed his jacket and pulled him onto the walkway. As his feet touched the ground a fist pummelled into his stomach. The air was expelled from his lungs and he doubled up.

"We know where you live. We know where your mother lives. Just in case you have a change of heart. Decide to play the honest citizen."

A foot swung up and caught him hard between the legs.

He sank to his knees. Groaning.

Fists came at him left and right.

As he lay on the ground and watched the three pairs of legs walking away from him he began to cry.