

Momentum

Also by Saci Lloyd

The Carbon Diaries 2015

The Carbon Diaries 2017

Momentum

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Summary: With energy wars flaring across the globe, oil prices gone crazy, regular power cuts, and soldiers keeping the Outsiders in check, Hunter, one of the privileged of society, is fascinated by the Outsiders, so when he meets Uma he is quickly drawn into her circle of the poor and disenfranchised.

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Pronunciation note:

家 [jee -uh]: The Family. The global social network portal owned by Chinese media corporation Futurax. Estimated global membership: 4 billion.

FOR ALL THE OUTSIDERS

One

High on the edge of the apartment roof, Hunter *knows* what to do. He's set up a good base to jump from; he's positioned his toes just over the edge; he's relaxed, his knees are slightly bent, and he knows to throw his arms forward and make the jump with his whole body in order to maximize the distance. And also he knows to keep it simple; that all he's got to do is focus on the other rooftop, five meters away. It's all about momentum. Focus on the target, not on the ground or the drop.

He gets it, he really does. *So now, Hunter boy, bend your legs, relax, and throw your arms. . .* He shivers, suddenly aware he's been standing up there a long, long time. A gust of wind catches the side of the building, swirling grit and plastic around him. He glances down, at the fourteen-floor drop between his building and the next. He feels fear. He likes it. He hates it. *This is bad for you, this is illegal, this will hurt.* It's like facing a mirror. *This is who you are today.* Ah, what did he go and look down for? He blows out his cheeks. It's just not going to happen, not today. Fool.

Hunter eases himself down onto the roof, pulls out a stick of gum, and leans back on his palms, drumming his heels over the side of the South Quay Estate building. Gutted, rotten, ruined, the apartments lie open all around him, their secrets exposed for all to

see. Not that anybody's looking. Nobody comes here. Or nobody that he knows. Not even the slum, the favela people, live this close to the water. His father would kill him if he knew he was here. But he's never going to know and, anyway, right now, who cares? The pain of the missed jump is fading, and Hunter scans the desolate estate, visualizing all the intricate drops, climbs, runs, twists, vaults, and leaps, scattered like jewels in the concrete sprawl below. Hunter smiles. This. It's the ultimate high. And it's all his.

For a moment, he savors the silence. Just a few blocks to the west, the wealthy city apartments of St. Katharine Docks stick up out of the dreary skyline, sparkling in the late afternoon sun. But here, there's no hum, no thrum, no flicker, no vibration of man-made energy. Nothing. Hunter stretches, feels himself as he really is; a delicate shell of blood and bone strapped aboard a stone ball as it rotates on its axis at twenty-three and a half degrees, spinning around an exploding helium bomb. But so quiet, on mute. Perfect engineering.

In the opposite building, three men dressed in dark gear step out onto the twelfth floor. One waits at the top of the stairwell while the others proceed along the corridor. They walk lightly, with purpose, coming to a stop in front of a red door, the third from the end. The first man steps forward, peers through the security eyehole set into the door. His eye appears, massive, a fish-eye, to the boy staring back at him through the lens on the other side of the door. His pupils dilate. Only a thin sheet of wood separates them. The man presses his ear to the door for a moment before pulling back with a shake of his head. He signals to his partner.

And then together they shoulder-charge the door, smashing the wood clean off its hinges as they explode into the apartment. But the boy is ready and, taking advantage of their momentary imbalance, he hurdles over their bodies, landing on the exposed concrete of the corridor before twisting on his heel and setting off toward the stairs. The man standing there shouts, raises his gun, but the boy is no longer running toward him; swinging himself high onto

a metal ceiling rail, he is now high on the ceiling. His feet connect with the man's head, smashing it back against the wall. A second later he lands on the stained floor before executing a vault over the stair rail to the floor below in one fluid movement.

Landing on the lowest step, he then sets off along the corridor toward the far side of the building. On the floor above, the two men race out of the apartment, shouting, and their calls are answered by more men from below, now scaling the stairs. The boy will be trapped between them. He hesitates for a fraction of a second before changing direction. He races directly at an apartment wall and springs up, catching a water pipe before smashing feet first through a narrow window block above the door, propelling his body through the glass shards, and coming to land inside the hallway of the gutted flat. The men flood down the corridor after him, Koch-MP7 gunfire shattering the door frame. A beat, and then suddenly the balcony door flies open and the boy rolls out on to the terrace, spinning over the ironwork railing before sliding down a pipe on the outer wall. Seconds later, the men appear on the balcony, their gunfire echoing around the ragged estate walls.

And now Hunter can see everything. On the walkway of the building opposite he watches as the boy desperately zigzags across the rutted surface, high-velocity bullets raking the wall behind him—and in a last-ditch attempt to escape, he hurls himself inside a disused lift shaft. Hunter gasps. The boy is like an animal; a human animal. And then, suddenly Hunter catches sight of the armored jeep below, the Caveirão, the death wagon. Kossaks! Heart hammering, he flattens himself against the roof, grips the edge, the brick crumbling beneath his fingers. He can't let them see him. But the boy, where is he? Hunter wills, he screams him to escape.

And then there he is! Launching himself from the lift shaft, he flies out into the air, aiming for a scaffolding rope hanging over the edge of the building. His body arcs outward, graceful, a beautiful curve, high above the earth, and for one shining moment, there's nothing else, just the boy and the sky and the curve. The rope is barely there. But as his body begins to loop downward, the boy

snatches the rope clean out of the air, grasps it tight, and the forward momentum swings him in a great arc across the front of the building. In great swinging leaps he propels himself across the shattered walls, a horizontal run that defies the laws of gravity, before he disappears around the northernmost edge of the estate block.

Keeping low, Hunter scrambles across the shattered tiles to the opposite side of the roof. He can't lose sight of the boy. He's now reached a fire-escape ladder and is hurtling downward, descending in great leaps—but beneath him a Kossak soldier suddenly emerges from a second-floor balcony. He lifts his gun. The boy hasn't seen him. Hunter screams out, but there is no sound. He shouts, but there is only silence. If they hear him they will kill him too. They will find out only later who he is.

And then a sharp metallic flash cuts through the air, but it is the soldier who falls, red pumping from his shoulder. Hunter twists his head. What was that? He sees a flicker of movement from a doorway somewhere below in the estate—and a shout is carried up on the wind. The boy's head snaps around. He stops dead, before suddenly reversing direction again, now climbing back *up* the fire escape with breathtaking speed. But the Kossaks are closing in. There are too many of them. Gunfire and shouts ring out around the enclosed walls. Hunter half-closes his eyes, he can't watch. How can this kid make it? Impossible, but with a final desperate leap the boy throws himself up from the top of the fire-escape steps, catching hold of a roof-gutter pipe by the tips of his fingers.

For a terrible moment, he hangs there, his fingers gripping the buckled plastic as he desperately tries to find a foothold, some way to lever himself up—and then he's done it, he's on the roof! Without pausing for a beat, the boy starts to run across the tiles. Directly toward Hunter's building. Building speed; muscle, sinew, bone, tensing and bunching for the jump between the apartments. And as he reaches the edge, as he launches himself into blank space, the boy throws his arms forward; his whole body a single thought, a single move. Forward! His body battling gravity soars through space.

Hunter gasps: he's going to make it! And then suddenly the boy's body distorts, as if ripped apart. It collapses; the arms slumping motionless, the legs skewing to the side. All movement checked, all momentum destroyed; red holes spatter across his chest—and all energy and grace blown apart, the boy's body drops out of the sky like a stone.

Hunter crawls to the edge of his building, straining his eyes to see where he fell. To him it feels like *his* heart has stopped beating, as if he himself is lying dead on the street. To the Kossaks it's just another dirty Outsider kid down. To the girl, Uma, stashing her crossbow in the basement apartment below, it's another wasted life. She glances up for a second, catches sight of Hunter and freezes. Who's that? Did he see her? Is he a Kossak spy? She'd better check him out, just in case. She makes a soft hissing noise and the dog guarding the door lifts her head, fixing her with clear blue eyes.

Uma jerks her thumb toward the roof. "Lyuba. Follow him. Find out where he comes from, yes?"

The dog stretches, rises to her feet and, pausing at the doorway, listens intently with red-tipped ears.

"Wait! Don't go till you're *sure* the Kossaks are gone."

The dog sighs.

"Don't think I didn't hear that, buddy."

But Lyuba is already gone, a silvery form slipping into the shadows.

Uma drags her sleeve across her cheek, wiping away a tear. Filthy pit of a slum estate; stupid dust always getting in her eyes.