

**PLANESRUNNER**



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PLANESRUNNER



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To Enid, as ever.

Author's Note: There is a Palari dictionary  
at the back of this book.

The car was black. Black body shell, black wheels, black bumpers, black windows. The rain sat on its shiny skin like drops of black oil. A black car on a black night. Everett Singh zipped his jacket up to his chin and flipped up his hood against the cold wind and watched the black car crawl behind his dad, pedalling his bicycle up the Mall. It was a bad bike night. Tree branches lashed and beat. Wind is the cyclist's enemy. The Institute for Contemporary Arts' nonreligious seasonal decorations flapped and rattled. Everett had noticed that every year when Hackney Council put up their Winterval lanterns, a storm would arrive and blow them down again. He had suggested that they put them up a week later. They hadn't even acknowledged his email. This year the storm blew as it blew every year and the decorations were scattered the length of the High Street. Everett Singh noticed things like that: patterns, behaviours, connections, and coincidences.

That was how Everett noticed the car. It hadn't pulled out to skim aggressively past Tejendra on his bike. It kept a slow, steady pace behind him. London cars didn't do that, not with bikes, certainly not on a cold wet Monday night on a rainy Mall ten days before Christmas. His dad wouldn't have noticed it. Once Tejendra got going on his bike, he didn't notice anything. Tejendra had started biking after the split with Everett's mum. He said it was quicker, he had less of a carbon footprint, and it kept him fit. Everett reported this to Divorcedads.com. The site had started as a well-meaning web space where "kids could network about the pain of parental split-up." The kids arrived and turned it into a forum for swapping embarrassing dad stories. The opinion of the forum was that buying a full-suspension mountain bike for four thousand

pounds when the steepest thing you ever rode over was a speed bump was typical of dads when they split up. Slipped-nott wondered why he couldn't have bought a Porsche like everyone else. *Because my dad's not like everyone else*, Everett commented back.

Other dads named their sons after footballers or relatives or people on television. Tejendra named his after a dead scientist. Other dads took their sons to Pizza Express after the football. Tejendra created "cuisine nights" at his new apartment. After every Tottenham home game, he and Everett would cook a feast from a different country. Tejendra liked cooking Thai. Everett was good at Mexican. And other dads took their sons to laser quest or karting or surf lessons. Tejendra took Everett to lectures at the Institute for Contemporary Arts on nanotechnology and freaky economics and what would happen when the oil ran out. It was cool with Everett Singh. Different was never boring.

Here came Tejendra, pushing up the Mall, head down into the wind and the rain, in full fluorescents and flashers and reflectors and Lycra with the big black German car behind him. Punjabi dads should not wear Lycra, Everett thought. He put up his arm to wave. The glow-tubes he'd knotted through the cuffs traced bright curves in the air. Tejendra looked up, waved, wobbled. He was a terrible cyclist. He was almost going backwards in the wind howling down from Constitution Hill. Why didn't the black car go round him? It couldn't have been doing more than ten kilometres per hour. There it went now. It pulled out with a deep roar, then cut in across Tejendra and stopped. Tejendra veered, braked, almost fell.

"Dad!" Everett shouted.

Three men got out of the car. They were dressed in long dark coats. Everett could see Tejendra was about to yell at them. The men were very quick and very sure. One of them wrenched Tejendra's right arm behind his back. A second bundled him into the backseat. The third man picked up the fallen bicycle, opened the boot and threw it in. Doors slammed shut, the black car pulled back into traffic. Very



quick, very sure. Everett stood stunned, his arm still raised to wave. He was not sure he could believe what he had seen. The black car accelerated towards him. Everett stepped back under the arcade along the front of the ICA. The glow tubes, the stupid glow tubes, were like a lighthouse. Everett pulled out his phone. The car swept past him. Tejendra was a patch of fluorescent yellow behind the darkened windows. Everett stepped out and shot a photograph, two photographs, three, four. He kept shooting until the black car vanished into the traffic wheeling around the Victoria Memorial.

Something. He must do something. But Everett couldn't move. This must be what shock felt like. Posttraumatic stress. So many actions he could take. He imagined himself running after the black car, running at full pelt up the rainy Mall, tailing the black car through the rush hour. He could never catch it. It had too much of a lead. The city was too big. He couldn't run that far, that long, that fast. Maybe he could stop a taxi, tell it to follow that car. Tejendra had told him once that every taxi driver longed to be told that. Even if he could ever track the black car through the London traffic, what did he think he could do against three big men who had lifted his father as lightly as a kitten? That was comics stuff. There were no superheroes. He could ask the people huddling under umbrellas, collars turned up, arriving for a public talk on nanotechnology: *Did you see that? Did you?* He could ask the door staff in their smart shirts. They were too busy meeting and greeting. They wouldn't have seen anything. Even if they had, what could they do? So many wrong actions, but what was the right thing, the one right thing? In the end there was one right thing to do. He hit three nines on his phone.

"Hello? Police? My name's Everett Singh. I'm at the ICA on the Mall. My dad has just been kidnapped."

The police station stank. It had been redecorated, and the smell of industrial high-durability silk finish paint had worked through every part of it from front desk to the interview room. Everett wouldn't smell anything else for days. Already it was making his head spin. But that might also have been the bad strip-lighting, the too-hot radiator, the deadly dry air conditioning, the chair that caught him in the back of the knee and cut off his circulation so that his legs were buzzing with pins and needles: any one of the dozens of things about a police station that the police never think might unsettle ordinary people.

"Could I have some water, please?"

"Of course, Everett."

There were two police, a man and a woman. The woman was a Family Liaison Officer and did all the talking. She was meant to be friendly, empathetic, nonthreatening. Everett guessed she was maybe thirty; a little chubby, with over-straightened dyed blonde hair that made her face look big. She looks like a male comedian playing a woman police officer, Everett thought. She'd told Everett her name, but he'd never been any good at names. Leah, Leanne, Leona—something like that. Police shouldn't give you their first names.

The man who took down notes was the exact opposite of Leah-Leanne-Leona. He had sunken cheeks and a moustache like police wore in cop shows back in the '70s, the kind Tejedra watched on Channel Dave. He looked tired, as if nothing could ever surprise him again but he had to be ready for that time when the world might throw something new and hard at him. He was D. S. Milligan. Everett liked that. Leah-Leanne-Leona answered Everett's request,

but Moustache Milligan fetched the water from the cooler in the corner of the room.

“So, Everett, the Institute of Contemporary Arts?” Leah-Leanne-Leona made it sound like the freakiest, most perverse place a dad could take a son; bordering on child abuse.

“It’s his dad’s idea,” Everett’s mum said. First Everett phoned the police; second he phoned home. It had been bad. At first she wouldn’t believe him. Kidnapped, on the Mall, on a Monday night, in the middle of the rush hour. He was making it up, attention seeking—that sort of thing didn’t/couldn’t happen. Not on the Mall. Not ten days before Christmas.

“Mum, I saw them take him.”

Then he was being malicious, getting at her. I know you blame me for your dad, Everett. He’s not coming back. We have to get on with it. We have to get the family right, look after ourselves. I know how you feel. Don’t you think I’m feeling things too?

“No. Mum, listen. It’s not about feeling things. I saw them take him, on the Mall, in a big black Audi. Bike and everything.”

The worst was when he said he was in Belgravia police station. That made her voice go tight. And short. And sharp. The way it did when she wanted to make him feel bad. The shame. Had he no self-respect? He was no different from those Viridi boys. They were never out of police stations. God alone knew where she was going to find a lawyer this time of night. Maybe Milos. He was always good for a favour.

“Mum. Mum. Listen. I don’t need a lawyer. I’m making a statement. That’s all. They can’t do anything unless you’re there.”

It had taken her an hour and a half to crawl in from Stokie and an hour grumbling about the parking and the congestion charge and having to leave Victory-Rose with Mrs. Singh. That old crow Ajeet always put bad ideas into the girl’s head. And this place stank of paint. She found Everett sitting on a bench thumbing through Facebook on his smartphone and eating a Twix from the vending machine. The desk sergeant had bought him a coffee. As Everett had

expected, it was bad and weak. Laura Singh sat down beside him and talked very low and fast because she would be ashamed if the desk sergeant overheard. She wanted Everett to know she didn't blame him. At all. Typical of his father. Typical to land Everett in trouble and not be there.

"Mum . . ."

"Mrs. Singh?"

"Braiden." When had she started calling herself that? Family Liaison Officer Leah-Leanne-Leona introduced herself and led them down the corridors that looked as if they had been painted with sweat to the reeking interview room.

"We go to talks at the ICA," Everett said, looking Leah-Leanne-Leona in the eye. His palms were flat on the table. "Experimental economics, the coming singularity, nanotechnology. Big ideas. They have Nobel Prize winners."

Leah-Leanne-Leona's eyes glazed, but Everett saw that Moustache Milligan had spelled nanotechnology correctly in his notes.

"Okay, Everett. It's good you still have something you can share with your dad. Guy-stuff is good. So, your dad would meet you outside the ICA after work."

"He was coming over from Imperial College."

"He's a scientist," Everett's mum said. Every answer she jumped in ahead of Everett, as if a wrong or careless response from him would be all the evidence the police needed to call social services and take Everett and little sister Victory-Rose into care.

"He's a theoretical physicist," Everett said. Moustache Milligan raised an eyebrow. Everett had always wished he could do that.

"What kind of physics?" Moustache Milligan asked. Leah-Leanne-Leona flared her nostrils. She did the talking here.

"Quantum theory. The Everett Many Worlds Theory. Hugh Everett, he developed it. I'm named after him: Everett Singh. The multiverse, parallel universes, all that, you know?" Everett Singh saw that Moustache Milligan had written *Non-nuke* on his notepad

beside the word *physicist*? “What does that mean?” Everett asked. “Non-nuke.”

Moustache Milligan looked embarrassed.

“You know what the current security situation’s like. If your dad had been a nuclear physicist, that could be an issue.”

“You mean, if he could build atom bombs.”

“We have to consider all kinds of threats.”

“But if he doesn’t build atom bombs, if he’s just a quantum physicist, then he’s not a threat. He’s not so important.”

“Everett!” Laura hissed. But Everett was angry and tired of not being taken seriously. Whether it was Belgravia Police Station or the IT room of Bourne Green Community Academy, it was always always always the same. Mock the Geek. He hadn’t asked for any of this. All he’d done was go to listen to a lecture with his dad. Everett knew better than to expect the world to be fair, but it might occasionally cut him a break.

“Do you know what the Many Worlds Theory is?” Everett said. He leaned forward across the table. Previous occupants had doodled stars and spirals and cubes and the names of football clubs on the peeling plastic. “Every time the smallest least tiniest thing happens, the universe branches. There’s a universe where it happened, and a universe where it didn’t. Every second, every microsecond every day, there are new universes splitting off from this one. For every possible event in history, there’s a universe, out there somewhere, right beside this one.” Everett lifted a finger and drew a line through the air. “A billion universes, just there now. Every possible universe is out there somewhere. This isn’t something someone made up, this is a proper physical theory. That’s what physics means: real, solid, actual. Does that sound not so important to you? It sounds to me like the biggest thing there is.”

“That’s very interesting, Everett.” Leah-Leanne-Leona’s tea mug had a badly rendered picture of a fat tabby cat on its back waving its paws. I CAN HAZ TEE, said the fat cat.

“Everett, don’t waste their time; they don’t want to know,” Laura said. “It’s not relevant.”

“Well, they had some reason for kidnapping him,” Everett said.

“This is what we’re trying to establish, Everett,” Leah-Leanne-Leona said. “Did anyone else see this car and the three men?”

The power went out of Everett. The policewoman had found the valve to his anger, and it had all hissed out of him.

“No,” Everett Singh whispered.

“What was that, Everett?”

“That was a no.”

He should have asked the ICA staff, the people going in to the talk, the dog walkers and the bad weather joggers, *Did you see that, did you?* But you don’t think of things like that when your dad is on his bike one minute and the next lifted off and thrown into the back of a big black Audi.

“I’ve got photographs on my phone,” Everett said. “Here, I can get them up.” A few swipes with his finger and he had them. Tippy tap, up they came one at a time. Crazy angles, tail-lights blurred. Unless you knew what you were looking for you wouldn’t recognize them for snapshots of a kidnapping. The police looked unimpressed. Everett halted at one clear, steady shot where the inside of the black car was momentarily lit up by oncoming headlights.

“See that bit of yellow in the middle of the back window? That’s my dad.” Everett stroked the picture down to the registration plate. He opened up the magnification. The resolution of these little touchphone cameras was rubbish, but at highest magnification there was just enough detail to read the letters and numbers. “There’s something you could check.”

“We could run this through image enhancement,” Detective Sergeant Milligan said.

“We’d need to keep your phone,” Leah-Leanne-Leona said. “Just for a day or two.”

“I don’t want to give it you,” Everett said.

“Everett, let them have it,” Laura said. “Just give it to them and then we can go. God knows what Ajeet’s been telling Victory-Rose.” To Leah-Leanne-Leona, she said, adult to adult, “Honestly, he spends far too much time on those conspiracy theory websites. You should do something about those. Get them banned.”

“I’ll give you the card,” Everett said. He sprang the tiny memory chip out of its housing with his fingernail. “The photographs are on it.” He set it in the middle of the desk. No one moved to take it. “You do believe me, don’t you?”

“I’ll take care of it, Everett,” Moustache Milligan said. He slid the chip into a ziplock plastic bag.

“There are a few things we’d ask you to do,” Leah-Leanne-Leona said. “Precautions. Just in case. If you really want to help us, keep this to yourselves, okay? Don’t go telling people—and no tweeting it or putting it up on Facebook. If anyone does get in touch, whether it’s Mr. Singh . . .”

“Dr. Singh,” Everett interrupted.

“If you say so, Everett. If it’s Dr. Singh himself, or if it’s anyone else, get in touch with us. No matter what they tell you. If he has been kidnapped for a ransom, they always warn you not to get in touch with the police. Don’t do that. Let us know immediately.”

“Ransom? Oh dear God. What did they pick us for?” Laura said. “We’re not rich; we haven’t two pennies to rub together. We can’t afford a ransom.”

“If,” Everett said. “You said ‘if’ he has been kidnapped for a ransom. What other kinds are there?”

“Do you want me to list them?” Moustache Milligan said. “I’ll list them for you. I tell you this, it won’t make you feel better. There’s what we call tiger kidnappings. It’s usually a relative of a bank employee gets taken hostage while the manager opens up the vault and removes the cash. Then there are kidnappings for hostage swaps. There are kidnappings for specialist knowledge—doctors get lifted to patch up some hood who’s been shot up in a gang fight.

Then there's express kidnappings. They lift you and every day march you down to the cash-point to take out the daily limit until the account's empty. It's a flourishing business, son, kidnapping. And then there are the people who just disappear. Gone. Missing persons. It's mostly those, missing persons." Moustache Milligan lifted his ballpoint and looked directly at Everett. "Now son, if you want to give me a statement, you and your mum can go home and let us find your dad."

Everett leaned back his chair and breathed the paint fumes deep inside him.

"Okay, I came down into London after school to meet my dad . . ."