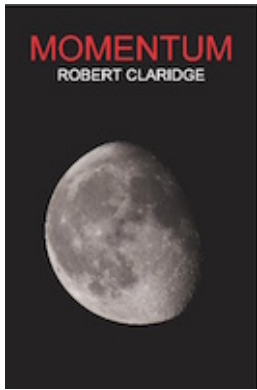


MOMENTUM

ROBERT CLARIDGE





Null-Field is a fantastic technology, world-changing. But, also an unstoppable weapon and frighteningly easy to build. Telling it half-baked will only send a crazy world to the brink even faster. Hunted by every authority, police, military, industrial, and less savory groups, Dave desperately tries to iron out the kinks, and release it some way that won't end up blowing the world to pieces. Then, they kidnap his daughters, and things get serious...

Momentum

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Robert Claridge

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Second Edition

Apr 08, Friday: Practice

“For God’s sake, Mom, like, why do I have to be here just ‘cos *she* likes to kick people?” Annie didn’t really dislike Tae Kwondo, although she was at best mediocre herself. Admittedly the training was hardly her favorite activity (*a bit, like, physical, you know*), but mostly she just hated doing anything that was focused around her sister.

“Give it a rest, Annie. Rachel will be done in a few minutes, and then I’ll drop you to your Dad’s.” sighed Evelyn. She sometimes wondered which girl was the elder. Rachel at 14 often seemed years more mature than Annie’s 17.

Annie wasn’t altogether looking forward to the weekend. She wasn’t as keen as she used to be on visiting with her Dad. He was so *provincial*. Although she wasn’t quite sure what it meant, but it sounded good. Besides, a whole weekend without her Stanley, it was just so unfair, but maybe Dad would let Stanley stay over? Mom was so, so, conservative about that! ALL the girls were sleeping over with their steady guys these days.

Evelyn, on the other hand, was very much looking forward to the break. The thought of spending a weekend by herself was welcome. Although she loved her girls, two teenagers in the house was occasionally difficult (to be kind) and a bit of peace was nice now and then.

Let Dave deal with them for a day or two. A short break’s better than nothing. Maybe he’d appreciate just how hard it got sometimes.

Maybe. Or maybe not. She wondered if Dave would even notice they were there.

“Come on, Annie. Let’s go meet Rach at the changing rooms.”

Annie came up for a quick glance at the real world, auto-piloted toward the changing rooms in back of the Dojo (*‘Dojo’, what a stupid name...*), and sunk back into a rerun of her last couple of sweet hours with Stan, his hands, his lips, his *tongue*...

“Gees, get the lead out guys, Sensei will have closed up and gone home by the time you’re ready. Come ON”, Alister was just as full of himself as ever, bossing his ‘posse’.

Most of the Dojo lads were keen to be considered close to him, and he’d always been the de-facto group leader. Before the Dojo, the street.

He *was* trying to reform a bit. Of course the judge’s requirement helped. No way he was going to juvie if he could help it. His recent blue-belt grading had given him a real buzz. Finally, something he was actually good at and others noticed, man. The new grading didn’t make him the highest rank in the group (Sven had been blue with a red stripe for a couple of months), but he certainly thought it added to his authority. “Put that weapon AWAY, Horse, you’ll scare the girls. Come ON, let’s go already”.

Horse (his mum had named him ‘Amber’ (why?), but best not to call him that unless you had a death wish) arranged his rather extravagant equipment into an oversized jockstrap (only Nancy-boys called them *athletic supporters*), closed his robe and quickly tied his belt, also blue. He didn’t mind Alister’s teasing, they’d been mates seemed like forever.

Alister, Horse and Sven lead the 10 or so senior students out toward the arena in a mad rush through the door. Just like always.

But today, Evelyn and dream-world Annie were coming along the corridor heading to the ladies changing room, beyond the men’s, as Alister burst through the door, head turned back to make another smart remark to Sven. Something caught his eye. He just managed to avoid Evelyn, slightly ahead of Annie, but slammed hard into Annie.

Evelyn hardly registered Alister’s near-miss before Sven, unsighted by Alister, crashed straight into her. She reeled away and hit the wall very hard, her head smashing backwards. Unconscious, she slumped forward. Sven, himself off balance and struggling to work out what was going on, had no chance to grab or help as she toppled, belting her forehead on the floor and breaking her nose, which she thankfully was no longer feeling.

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Annie bounced sideways off Alister, into the wall, and bounced back into Horse as he raced through the changing room door. Suddenly slammed out of a daydream, she was struggling to make it back into the real world. She could see her mum falling like a sack of potatoes as she crashed into Horse.

Horse staggered a bit, but to his credit kept his balance and grabbed at her to try to help steady her. In Tae Kwondo, as in many martial arts, the most common grip is onto the clothing (in formal fighting: the robe or Dobak), rather than directly to the body. Horse's huge hands closed instinctively onto Annie's blouse.

Annie's blouse, however, was somewhat less robust than a Dobak, indeed little more than filmy lightweight cotton. It had no chance, tearing completely off, leaving Annie naked from the waist up. *For goodness sake, Mom, like, just no-one wears a bra these days!*

Alister couldn't get his balance and dropped to his knees, right where Sven, staggering from his encounter with Evelyn, tried to step. The boy behind Sven kept coming forward and bumped Sven further off balance. Sven flung out a leg and hand for balance, catching Annie sharply on the side of the head, just as Horse ripped off her blouse.

Horse's belt, quickly and poorly tied, chose just that moment to completely fall off, and his Dobak gaped open, displaying rather more chest and *equipment* than he'd intended.

From pleasant sensual day-dream to her mum beaten and bleeding on the floor, some thug belting her around the head and ready to put the boot in, some giant stripping her naked and flashing himself!

Annie screamed.

She was a *damn* good screamer. It was an offensive weapon in its own right, and she was giving it her all. The volume and pitch stunned the group of boys still forcing through their door.

Things went from bad to terribly worse.

Emmanuel (Manny) Burgen had trained with the very best. Indeed he was one of those very best. US Marine, transferred to Seals, joint operations with the British SAS, and finally *field work* for NSA (and a few other less well-acknowledged branches of the various services), in a definitely *don't ask, don't tell* capacity.

But even the very best get older. Although age didn't mean old in years. In his profession, age came on fast. Manny found a bent for instructing the up-coming specialists. He brought out their best, and produced specialists acknowledged (in his small circle of other specialists) as being better than anyone might have expected.

He could have stayed in, transferred completely to desk operations, worked up the ranks, become legitimate. But he'd seen and done enough. Too much. It sickened him. Some memories were very hard to face in the wee hours. Inside, he knew he'd done the right things, necessary things, but still difficult decisions. And *necessary* or *best possible option* doesn't help a lot at 3 am, when the faces, the actions, the bodies pile up before your eyes.

In the end he couldn't face the life, couldn't really face the mirror some days. The usual self-destructive pathway, all downhill, didn't seem a good option, so he opted out. Honorable retirement with a bunch of well-earned medals and commendations (some he could even talk about publicly) and far more meaningful: respect among those *he* respected. And, because in the end there's too much risk in a *poor* ex-specialist, a reasonable pension.

Of course it could all disappear without notice happen a loose comment over beer, but then Manny didn't drink much and never in the sort of company that would be likely to ask questions he really shouldn't answer.

Never having been a wastrel, he'd come out financially comfortable and in perhaps surprisingly good health, aside from the early mornings. He decided to try to even the scales and play to his strengths: teaching young guys (and increasingly, girls) self-defense, but more importantly: life skills and self-esteem, through Tae Kwon-do. His Dojo was hardly the best in the universe, even in

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the area he supposed, but it gave him peace of mind and helped him sleep.

Some of the more able kids he took through to national grading. Manny wasn't really in it to compete, but some kids needed to prove themselves, to know their limits. Sometimes positive, sometimes simply to be brutally shown there's always someone that little bit better. His patience and skill meant he was fairly well regarded as a fight coach, and he was proud of some of the outright 'gang-bangers' he'd helped turn around.

Sometimes, however, he wondered why he did it. Fridays were no easier for him than for anyone else. Harder really, he reckoned, because they came to him AFTER school, already bored and ready for mischief.

Oh well, the harder the climb the better the view... he supposed.

Just lately, one particular bright spot was teaching Rachel. There was something about her. Drifting a bit, some issue with her Mom or her Dad, *hardly uncommon, but always world bending for the kid*. Manny could feel there was a *depth* to her, a central unbendable inner strength. He surprised himself by acknowledging that *he* wouldn't like to be the one that breached the outer wall. Reminded him a little of a younger himself, although something more too.

Today he felt she'd really outdone herself, only a few lessons and yet she seemed to have already caught on to the key concept of balance. *Without balance in Tae Kwondo, and in life*, he sometimes tried to lecture the kids, *the best skill was wasted*.

Rachel would be ready for formal grading quite soon, and after only a couple of months of training. He had hopes she might be keen enough to continue.

Rachel was already changed. She'd enjoyed the session today. She felt she was really getting to grips with this foot position and balance concept. Maybe sensei would consider her for grading, and

she wondered what her Dad would think about the progress. He was a little strange about all this self-defense stuff.

Would Dad support me to nationals if I went that far? Would he even notice if I went?

Thump on the wall! What was that? Rachel could feel the cool, calm descend, and see the other girls' startled looks. She concentrated on the sounds.

Weird sound, like the body-blows on the practice mat. But close!

Annie screaming.

Annie's REAL scream.

ANNIE'S SCREAMING!

Annie needed her.

The door to the girl's changing room opened inwards. Too slow. Today the door and most of the frame around it exploded into the corridor.

Rachel had left the changing room.

FLASH: Mom was down, not moving, blood on the floor, Sven above her, leg raised.

FLASH: Annie was naked. HORSE was naked, holding Annie's tattered blouse.

FLASH: Annie's face: slap mark

FLASH: Boys door open, laughing, pushing forward to get at Mom and Annie.

Rachel let herself go. To a place she sort of knew. A place she dreaded, ... but Annie needed her.

Stop them.

STOP THEM

Clear the way.

Mom and Annie behind her.

Back to the wall, Rachel defended her family.

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Manny heard Annie's scream. Yak herdsman in Tibet heard the scream! *That wasn't a frightened screech that was a final desperate scream for help. Only someone in real fear of their life... oh shit!*

He dashed toward the corridor to the changing rooms. A small fountain of people staggered away from him, those who didn't move fast enough to get out of his way.

He heard the changing room door explode: part of him wondered what on earth it could be.

Scream still going: *Faster*. Into the corridor. Confusion, people everywhere.

Rachel standing, blood on her hands.

Sven down.

Alister down.

Horse falling, blood on his chest.

Boys coming through their door.

And Rachel was amongst them, *What, how...?*, striking blindingly fast, so fast *he* could hardly see it, literally. Axe on wood sound as the punches land. Boys dropping, some starting to scramble backwards.

He knew the signs, *Damn it, she's gone berserker*, she could kill the boys, she had to be stopped. First he had to protect the boys, stop Rachel. He'd deal with details later.

One stride, sweep the leg, drop her down, roll and stun.

He was falling before his brain registered the blow. Pain blossomed from his leg, it felt like a broken shin bone, or dislocated knee! *Where did that come from? Why am I down here, how did that happen?*

Rachel was still upright, a couple of other boys down, her back to him now.

Unfortunately this wasn't Manny's first time fighting damaged. *Use the pain, the adrenaline*, he rolled, off balance, recovered,

flicked off his shoulders and came up to a crouch favoring his suddenly inoperative leg.

Pain swarmed over him, swamped his clarity. Training and life experiences he rarely shared with his students let him continue through the pain. *Pain is my friend. Pain means I am still alive*, a mantra he'd needed before, but never quite like this. Gone the teacher/mentor, now the deadly trained and dirty street fighter: *stop her at all costs*.

Hammer-blow from his crouch into her lower back, using the crouch to add spring and impact. Not a *friendly*, this blow could shatter the spine, but Manny was beyond considering consequences, this was knock-down, kick and bite time.

The floor rushed at him devastatingly fast!

Another rib went as he hit (*another one?*).

Terrible pain flared from his arm, shoulder, his head slammed forward, all went black.

Apr 08, Friday: School

Dave was building a rail-gun in his garage. Well, why not? Didn't everyone have some project or other on the go? Dave's joined some deeply esoteric physics, adequate soldering and excellent programming with a love of shooting at stuff. The ultimate geek pastime.

Admittedly his had been on the go for a wee while now, indeed it had outlived his marriage. Many late nights tinkering, many 'discussions' about the time not spent with his family. But when it (finally) worked, they'd be beating a path to his door (you know: *they*). He wondered what it would be like: recognition, money...

Daydreams were wonderful and even nicer lying there enjoying the early Iowa morning, late spring dawn sun steaming through the window, warm lady beside him. All he really wanted was to go back to the garage, get the thing completed.

But the alarm was going to squawk in a minute. Gotta get up, dress properly, off to school and try *somehow* not to give the *students* (his internal name was a lot less flattering) the extensive and brutal reprogramming they so richly deserved. Depressing.

Mind you, it *was* a lovely morning and the alarm hadn't gone quite yet... There was one other thing *always* worth doing. Dave gently slid his hand along Jan's flank, through the curve at her waist, up under the arm and over to softly press her breast, rolling the nipple... *with a bit of luck*...

"For God's sake, Dave, if you want that, then bloody well come to bed at a decent time. Bugger off. Besides, don't you have school, Professor?"

... and apparently luck was out. Again.

Actual mention of school out loud shrunk the desire, and other things, as fast as it arose.

Showered, shaved (well mostly) and reasonably attired (mostly), Dave wandered through the kitchen hoping for... *nope nothing. Again.* Breakfast of instant coffee and a promise to himself to really start having something to eat. Again.

Another round of “introduction to object oriented programming” and “introductory physics” and... *Always something to look forward to*, he supposed.

Is there time to check the program? Yeah why not. Nope, the program was still running. He wondered if the damn thing had hung, but there seemed to be activity on the processor, so he supposed at least something was still working. He shrugged, *look at it tonight.*

Amazingly Dave’s poor old Nissan clunker started first try, but he knew it was going to need some serious attention pretty soon. *Probably just a new battery*, he lied to himself, knowing full well he was just going to have to stop dicking around and track down the problem for real. But Dave’s garage had long since given up hopes of having something as childish as *cars* being fixed in it.

Anyway she started today, so one less aggravation this morning couldn’t be a bad thing. Traffic no worse than usual, maybe a bit better. Seemed like a nice morning and for once almost smiles on the other commute faces. Sometimes at least.

Dave was under no illusions he was any great shakes as a teacher. He loved the subjects, indeed had done quite well, after all he was officially ‘Doctor David Brassey’, in theoretical physics (group theory) no less. But then so were far too many others. Most of them truly brilliant, in a field where merely genius hardly rated a comment and competent with a practical bent was a downright liability. The PhD looked good on the wall, but had only managed to open the sort of teaching doors he didn’t really want.

He was sick of doing the job half-arsed, sticking at it just to pay the bills. At least he didn’t have any extra after-school requirements. Seemed like every day Dave saw the coach and various other enthusiastic teachers taking some sport team or group or other for something after school. Weekend games and practices. ‘Bonding with the student body’ the illustrious Principal Carter called it.

Not there wasn’t a few of the senior girls whose bodies he wouldn’t appreciate to ‘bond’ rather closely with, but he didn’t

think that was the kind of bonding being referred to. In reality, Dave knew he wouldn't have lasted two weeks with that kind of constant contact (coaching, not the one-on-one 'bonding'). Without down-time away from the *students*, he'd be a basket case. Hell, maybe he already was.

Fridays didn't improve the classes. Conscientious enough to have actual lesson plans, or incompetent enough to need them, Dave struggled through the usual gamut of late comers, mild insolence and simply bored-to-tears students. By lunchtime he was wrung out, and looking forward to a break in the teacher's lounge.

He actually enjoyed marking the assignments and whatnot. He could sit there all alone, working at something that didn't answer back. Concentration built an effective wall between him and the usual staffroom bullshit and gradually the other teachers had learned to just leave him alone. After almost ten years, Dave could pretty much guarantee peace through the break.

Half an hour of 'me-time' restored him enough to face the Friday afternoon class. Physics to the senior class was hardly ever a lot of fun, and today looked like being no better than usual. Last period on a beautiful sunny spring Friday in Iowa. Sigh.

"Alexander, how is staring blankly out at the clouds going to help you calculate the acceleration?"

"... uh, oh sorry, I was thinking about the flying lesson my Dad promised me this weekend." Alex thought quickly, they all knew Dave's weak points by now. "Now that's got to be real physics don't it, Dr. Brassey? Taking the wind on the wings, turning and swooping, and..."

Dave could almost see the plane in Alexander's hands as he spoke, and clearly he was really looking forward to the weekend.

Oh to hell with it! "You know how a plane flies, Alex?"

"Yeah, it's magic, sir!" Laughter all round.

"Nearly!" Dave smiled, "We've covered force vectors, so let's look at it. Not really *magic*, it's all to do with angle of attack and..."

Dave wiped off the lesson stuff, and started sketching. The physics class all gathered around, several lightly punching Alex's arm to say 'thanks'.

Actually, Dave was better appreciated than he realized, they all loved the digressions, and in a way learned more useful physics there anyway. Besides, it was a Friday, who could think on a gorgeous Friday afternoon, sun streaming in the windows, warm and springtime and lots of opposite sex within appreciation range. The pheromones were thick, and physics, even flying planes, was not really top of the students' minds.

Dave was pleasantly surprised to find himself in a pretty good mood on the way home. Usually the bitterness of suppressing the urge to give the *students* a deep and personal re-programming had soured the day. He'd enjoyed helping Alex get a grip on aerodynamics (*a teacher could dream*). Certainly a more pleasant final hour for a Friday than usual.

Now back home. Sigh. Maybe they could make it through the weekend without a blow-out. But the girls were coming this weekend, and he somehow doubted it would be smooth running. Jan and Rachel particularly just couldn't seem to... fit.

Jan was, for a wonder, home when he got there, which threw him a bit. "Hi, sweetie, didn't um, expect see you home so early. What do I owe the pleasure?"

"Well, I was thinking. A bit grumpy this morning, and not like I couldn't make the time, so I wondered, if you're still in the mood..."

Dave was even more surprised and for a moment wondered what she was angling for. But the good feeling of the day washed the thought away. He moved over to Jan standing by the door, gently encircled her waist and slid his other hand up her flat stomach cupping a breast.

"Mmmm," Jan crooned, "thought you might..." and wriggled herself back against him.

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Dave lightly nuzzled her neck, gently kneaded her breast, and slid a hand down from her waist. Jan pushed her hips back, rubbing directly onto Dave's suddenly vibrating trousers: "BUZZ... BUZZ... Call from... E-ve-lyn" Dave's bloody eternally damned smart-phone announced.

Jan extricated and turned, face freezing faster than a popping balloon. "For fucks sake!" she screeched, "answer the bitch then!"

Dave struggled to adjust his head, extricate the phone and not scream in frustration. "What IS it, Evelyn", grumpy and still hoarse from arousal.

"Dad, Dad!? Oh god Dad, it's Annie, its Annie, oh god Dad. We're at Tae Kwondo, you gotta get here!! Oh god Dad, you gotta get here..."

"What, what... CALM DOWN ANNIE, calm down. What the fuck's going on, what's happened, where are you?"

"We're at the Dojo, the Dojo. Rachel's flipped out, she's gone Rambo. There's dead people everywhere. Moms dead. Sensei's dead. They're all dead..."

Other voices heard on the phone, shouting, sirens (*sirens?*).

Clarity slammed into Dave, everything slowed down, crystal clear. 'Smoky' taste in his mouth.

ANNIE CALM DOWN

Terribly, terribly calm words. Falling like bricks onto concrete. Already Dave was moving to the door, his face flat, his expression could stun passing birds,

TELL ME

The tone froze Annie's panic. She knew what she was asking, but sometimes you use the tools you have, even if you don't want to. Her Mom was dead, her sister on a killing spree: "We need you, now Dad. We need you here. Now".

THE DOJO. COMING.

Ice water flowing through him. Everything was so bright and clear. The door opening so slowly. His girls needed him, he would be there.

“What are you doing?” Jan quietly. She’d never seen Dave like this, the ‘stillness’. He was almost out the door already, he turned to her, and she froze, startled like a rabbit in the headlights. She had never been more frightened.

TROUBLE. DOJO.

“That bitch AGAIN!” Rational thought was not one of Jan’s strong points. “Every damn time we have 5 bloody seconds, if it’s not HER it’s those fucking kids! Fuck this!”

Ice water, overdrive, calm, coming off the absolute edge a little

STOP NOW, JAN.

WHEN I GET BACK.

Paused in the doorway, keys in hand.

“I won’t BE here. You want that cow, or those fucking brats, then go, GO, but I won’t be here when you get back”.

The *face* looked straight at her. She knew she had never been in more danger. But Dave, the Dave *inside* Dave, catalogued her as no threat. She lived.

THEN GO.

Calm, calm beyond calm. But inside his head, bright, bright red lights. The inside Dave consciously gave control to the ‘overdrive’.

Maybe the car knew better than to give trouble now. Annie needs me. Rachel needs me. Evelyn? Dead. Dead.

Lights on. Horn held down, flashers on. Drivers ducking and diving to avoid him. Traffic lights, who knew. *Annie needs me. Rachel needs me.*

Calm, calm, ice cold. *Faster, get there faster.* Gap there, around that. Gap, gaps opening, clear road. *Faster.*

Lights and horn got the attention and the screaming, moaning engine, giving everything it had. The car sliding and bucking

certainly caught the eye as well. But it was his *face*. Gaps opened because no one wanted that *face* pointed at them.

Somewhere, police saw him, flipped their lights, chased. No chance, they were barely able to keep him in sight, but the siren helped attract more attention, opened more gaps. Dave knew he was well into overdrive, and he'd pay, but... *Annie needs me. Rachel needs me.*

Suddenly, the Dojo. Bright lights, people, police.

Dave calmly, almost gracefully, stepped out of the car, hardly noticing it was still sliding to a halt, tires smoking, engine still revving.

A deputy rolling 'police line' tape watched Dave arrive, the police cruiser screaming along behind. Dave stepped away from the sliding, bucking, revving vehicle, walking very fast toward the Dojo. The deputy raised his hand, "Hey you can't..."

Dave looked over at him.

Not a friendly glance.

Bigger it, my job is to run the tape, let them deal with him inside, the deputy dropped his hand and concentrated on the tape.

The police cruiser slid to a halt as well, but Dave was at the Dojo steps long before the officer could exit the cruiser, let alone bring up his weapon.

Annie needs me. Rachel needs me. Up the front steps.

Clusters of people, gaps opening. Some voluntary, some staggering from Dave's 'assistance'. Keeping control, holding tight. He had no time for these people, but so far no-one seemed to be threatening him: they were still alive.

"Dad, Dad, over here!" Annie's voice.

ANNIE'S voice! Where? There!

Rachel, standing. Annie and Evelyn behind her, against the wall, in the corridor. Rachel standing very still, elbows out, knees a little bent, leaning forward a bit. Face blank, her head turning, eyes

flashing to follow any movement. A very palpable air of deadly menace.

Bodies on the ground. Blood, bodies, LOTS of bodies. Paramedics eyeing Rachel, treating those they can reach, no-one keen to get too close.

RACHEL I'M HERE.

Dave quietly announced, still flat, the words dropping into the noise, seeming to spread a quiet out from him and around his family. Rachel's stare fixed on him as he moved closer, her shoulders bunching, the menace peaking. Dave recognized the signs well, sadly. He struggled himself to come back from responding to the overt threat in kind, this was the girl he was here to *protect*.

A little control, "Its Dad, Rach, it's me, its Dad. You did good, it's ok now, come back, come back now. I got it, I'm here now, I got it, come back..."

Reaching out, Rachel's shoulders coming down, the glazed face clearing. Rachel's eyes rolled back and she suddenly crumpled. Dave easily beside her, caught and lowered her beside Evelyn.

Annie was there too, sitting beside her Mom.

TALK TO ME.

Control, but still very close to flash-point.

Annie could see the overdrive, and had a sudden fear of the weapon she'd primed and pointed. The fear steadied her a bit, "Dad, I'm not clear on it all. Mom and me came out here to get Rach. These boys, I don't know. One of them threw Mom into the wall and one of them grabbed me. Then Rach, Rach was there. Oh God Dad, Rach killed them. Oh God, oh God..." her control slipped.

Dave was standing where Rachel had been, interposed between his girls and the world, turning now more to face outward as Annie finished.

A man in Tae Kwon-do robes limped over, slowly, arm tightly pressed to his side.

He called ahead quietly “Mr. Brassey, it’s Manny Burgen, it’s me Dave, it’s Manny, Dave, let me come over Dave, it’s me, it’s Manny, it’s ok, it’s ok.”

Manny bowed, almost crouched, as Dave swung square on to him. He stood very, very still, he was well aware his life hung by a thread. “It’s me, it’s Manny Burgen, Dave, you know me, it’s ok, it’s ok.”

The eyes unglazed, the stillness smoothed out, a little. Manny dared move again, limped closer to the family. “Let me see Evelyn, Dave, let me see...” Dave moved aside a little, making space.

“Ok, she’s ok, Dave, she’s ok, she’s breathing, she going to be ok.”

Dave could feel his tension dropping, the red tinge almost gone, head coming back. Manny’s quiet words were helping. Rachel hadn’t moved since he’d lowered her.

One of the paramedics moved over toward the crumpled heap that was Horse, attracting Dave’s instant attention.

Threat!

Dave’s head swung to the paramedic. The ambo was watching Dave closely. Self-preservation instinct: he froze.

Manny turned from Evelyn and reached toward Rachel, “Let me look at...” his arm was gripped in a steel vice. His remaining good arm. He felt another bone go from the pressure. A fist was just touching the side of his head.

Manny froze, as frightened as he’d ever been. *How, how? He was facing forward, toward the ambo, how can he be holding me, his fist at my head?* From the side of his eye, he could see Dave, struggling to halt the blow, to stop the follow-up. Dave’s fist rubbed on his temple as Manny trembled a bit.

Manny felt cold on his back, in his belly. *Death’s breath* they’d called it in the SAS. He suddenly needed to pee really badly.

DON’T.

Like the thump of a brick on the ground, Dave's instruction crystal clear. The hand on his arm loosened, bones grated. If he'd been able to, Manny would have thrown up.

Slowly, carefully, Manny stood up, as best he could anyway. *Pain is my friend, Pain means I'm still alive.* He'd been on the receiving end before, but his was no picnic. And this time he was outclassed, something he'd never really felt before.

It didn't help his cold backbone to see Dave's intense stare. He was uncomfortably aware the only way out from here was through Dave himself and that didn't look like the easy option.

"I'm Manny Burgen, Dave, I'm Manny Burgen, it's OK, you can let me look at her, I won't hurt her, it's OK"

"Dad, Dad, it's OK, it's Ok, it's Sensei, Dad, it's Sensei, he won't hurt her, Dad, Dad, come back, oh please, please come back Dad." Annie's soft fearful tone penetrated.

"Manny... Manny", slowly Dave felt himself coming back. The bright, bright red wash remained in his sight, everything was crystal clear, sharp. People moving so slowly, but control was back, at least enough.

"I'm sorry, Manny, your arm, sorry. Had to stop you. She's well over the line. She'd kill you." No mention of what he (Dave) nearly did.

"Both of you?" Manny softly, pain roughening his voice.

Dave understood he was talking about the 'overdrive', "I didn't know about Rach, not for sure. I hoped, just me, just me."

"She'll be ok, then. Let me deal with these", Manny nodded toward the police, paramedics, milling bystanders. "You'll be ok here, wait for me?"

"Ok."

Manny quietly (carefully!) limped passed Dave toward the stunned and frightened looking police and paramedics.

The calm, the stillness, the *face*. Annie knew what it meant, she'd seen it before. Not often, who would want to! But she knew.

She knew when she'd called for him. Her Dad was here, and he'd fixed it, just like she knew only he could.

But now she needed her Dad back. "Dad, Dad, it's Ok, come down Dad, come down, it's me, it's Annie, it's Annie", she didn't reach out. She knew. "It's me, come back Dad, it's me..."

Dave saw her, heard her. Colors came back into the world, the buzzing quieted, the smoky taste remained, but somehow became stale. He could feel himself coming back. Back from the edge. "Talk to me."

"Mom's down, broken nose I think, we need to let the paramedics see her. Rachel's ok, she's fine. They never touched her."

"Why?"

Annie knew what he meant, "I don't know, we were walking down here. Suddenly boys everywhere. Mom's down, I'm like this," indicating her bare upper body, arms folded. "I really don't know what happened. All so fast. I actually... I don't think anyone was trying to hurt us. But I was so scared, Mom down. I screamed. I screamed."

Dave shrugged off his jacket, draping it over her shoulders. "Thanks, Dad," for the jacket, "then Rachel was here. She did all this. Put us behind her. No one allowed close."

"Sensei?"

"Anyone. I couldn't see her move."

"Let's move down here a bit, clear the way, let the ambos in." He easily lifted Rachel, gently, moved a pace or two down the corridor, lowered her, gently. Annie kept clear, well aware her Dad was here, but only barely so. She sat down beside her sister.

Dave brought Evelyn down as well, then stood between his girls and the rest of the world, still not quite off the edge. Annie thought it probably better if her Mom was left behind, where the paramedics could reach her, but now wasn't the time.

Dave saw the mess of doorway to the girl's changing room, the shattered bits all over the corridor. Clearly someone had needed to

be out here, it didn't take a rocket scientist to work out who. Looking to Rachel, no evidence of bruising or cuts.

"Anyone still in there?"

"Outside door." Annie responded. Anyone remaining in the changing room had fled the other way into the parking lot.

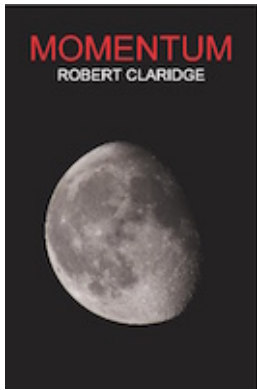
Paramedics moved forward to the pile of bodies, Dave and Annie could see Manny out by the entrance to the Dojo fight room, speaking with a senior deputy who seemed to be running the operation, gesturing (gently) around.

Horse lying like a broken doll, still holding Annie's blouse in his hands, curled over in the classic fetal position. Alister flat on his back, looking for all the world like having a good sleep, but his leg didn't look right. Sven right beside Alister. Face down, and a fair bit of blood. Various of Alister's posse were scattered here and there. One or other was breathing very noisily, a sucking, wet sound.

Stretchers started appearing, slowly the pile evaporated. Paramedic by Horse: "Pneumothorax here, sternum damage. Get the helo, quick, quick. Who's got the oxy kits?" Making no attempt to straighten Horse out, murmuring quietly now, reassuring him.

Another team came over and started inspecting Sven. Carefully checking without moving him. "Two for the helo, looks like neck damage, some other damage. Someone check that leg please," indicating Alister.

Dave looked around, (*Where do you start?*).



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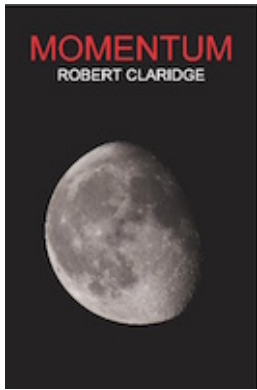
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