

**BOONE SHEPARD
AND THE
PHOTOGRAPHER'S FOLLY**

By Gabriel Bergmoser

Long ago I learned that there are very few facts in this world that are true without doubt. There is always a ‘but’ someone can respond with and if they argue their case well enough that ‘but’ gets in your head and makes you question things you considered to be true. However, one fact that can never be questioned under any circumstances is that photographers are the worst people in the world.

The simple choice to be a person who takes photos basically means that where a heart should be is in fact a black, icy mass of oozing unpleasantness, and as such associating myself in any way with these ‘people’ is something I have always gone to great pains to avoid. Unless, that is, circumstances force me to pretend to be one.

I stood across the road from a stately London manor, dressed in large sunglasses despite the grim and grey weather, a black turtleneck, beret, and a large camera hanging around my neck. Catching sight of my reflection I had to push away a wave of illness. This was not a job I would be proud of.

Taking a long, deep breath, I internally readied myself and crossed the road to the house. Out the front a similarly dressed, rat-like man eyed me as I walked up the garden path to the imposing front door of the place I didn’t want to enter but had to.

‘Who do you think you are?’ he said by way of greeting.

Acting how I thought a photographer would, I adopted a nasty sneer and a heavy Russian accent as I said; ‘You ought to know who I am.’

Obviously he didn’t and only watched me with a raised eyebrow. Shaking my head, I pulled a passport from my pocket and shoved it at him. Looking singularly unimpressed, he took it from me and opened it. His mouth fell into a gape as he looked back up at me.

‘You’re him,’ he said.

‘I am,’ I replied, internally marvelling at how stupid this man had to be to believe my accent. ‘Are you going to let me in?’

‘Of course, Mr Ivanov. I’m sorry I questioned you. If I’d known, I mean, if I’d—’

I pushed past him into the manor.

As far as the terrible doorman was concerned, I was famous Russian photographer Ivan Ivanov, who had recently decided to move to London to take advantage of the non-existent photography opportunities at the *Chronicle* newspaper. My employer, Lord Rasputin Huxley VIII, had spent weeks telling anybody who would listen about Mr Ivanov’s impending arrival, calling his staff members into his office up to three times a day to remind them and even sending a messenger to extract me from a deep undercover assignment in a vicious biker gang

made up of little old ladies to bring me back to London so he could tell me how excited he was. Needless to say, the arrival of Ivan Ivanov was a big deal.

Except Ivan Ivanov didn't exist.

Creating a fake identity is hard. Creating the fake identity of a famous person with a great reputation is practically impossible. Luckily I had a bit of experience with practically impossible things, not that my previous ventures into unfeasible territories had prepared me for just how boring and frustrating this one would be. Still, I had worked at it for months, writing articles about Mr Ivanov's exploits, travelling to Russia, mentioning him in passing conversation at every opportunity and basically doing my best to make the world believe that there was such a person as this famous photographer from whom nobody had ever actually seen a photo. The test of all of it would be this moment; the top secret Muybridge Club was extremely strict about who it let through its doors, and nobody but the world's most respected photographers could ever get in.

But here I was.

As could have been expected, the entry hall was covered in lots and lots of photos, but I didn't bother looking at these. They weren't what I was here for. And as far as I could see there was no-one else in sight, which hopefully meant I could get what I needed and vanish before anyone had any idea I'd ever been here.

'Who the devil are you?'

I jumped and got ready to run. Approaching me from down the hall was a very large, bald man with a stomach that was impressive for its perfect roundness and a moustache that would make for a remarkable curtain in certain houses. He was, of course, dressed all in black and had a tiny camera hanging around his neck.

'Ivan Ivanov,' I said. 'And why was there not more of a greeting party here for me?'

The man stopped in his tracks, eyes going wide. 'Mr Ivanov,' he whispered. 'Dear lord, the man himself.'

My fictional reputation precedes me. 'I demand to know why I have been treated in so outrageous a way,' I went on. 'Both you and your doorman have behaved abominably. This is not the way we behave towards our betters in Russia. Perhaps I should return there and withdraw my generous offer of joining your little English newspaper full of fat English men.'

'No, no; that is most unnecessary,' the man babbled. 'We are honoured, so honoured to have you among us Mr Ivanov. I am Lord Algernon Spencer; perhaps you've heard of me?'

'No.'

An outraged look flashed across Spencer's face and was gone again, replaced by a nauseating attempt at a gracious smile. 'Please; we were just settling in for afternoon tea and scones. Your presence is an unexpected pleasure. We were about to commence on a most interesting conversation about the consistency of Bolivian photo paper. Your expertise would add quite the spice.'

'No thank you,' I said. 'I would much prefer having the time to walk these halls and get to know the place for myself. And perhaps a glimpse at your fabled archives would be in order.'

Spencer winced. 'The archives are only accessible by special written request to the Keeper. Processing usually takes two weeks.'

'Processing will take two minutes,' I said. 'I am Ivan Ivanov and—'

I was interrupted at that point by a commotion from outside.

'And I've already told you eight times, you are not getting in!' the doorman yelled.

'What the devil is that racket?' Spencer looked past me at the door.

'England is proving quite the undignified disappointment,' I said, more to see his increasing panic than anything else.

'Not to worry Mr Ivanov,' he spluttered. 'I'll have this sorted immediately.' He ran past me and pulled open the door. I turned to look outside, ready to make some barbed comment about all the commotion—

—and stopped in my tracks.

It was just my luck that after weeks of preparation I would turn up here on the same day as the tall, blonde, black-clad woman who was in the middle of retorting to the doorman. The moment I saw her I stepped behind the considerable bulk of Spencer as Promethia Peters finished her rant.

'—and if you try to tell me again that you won't let me in I'll punch that bloody smirk right off your stupid face and *then* we'll see who's laughing. Except we won't have to because it'll be me and you'll have a sore face! So *there!*'

'Who in blazes are you?' Spencer asked.

'This is Promethia Peters,' the doorman growled. 'She's been turning up here at least once a week trying to get in. I've told her a million times that she has no place in the Muybridge Club. It's for *real* photographers.'

'How many photos do you take guarding that stupid door?' Promethia demanded.

'The door of the Muybridge Club is not stupid,' Spencer said.

'Make her leave,' I said to Spencer's back, still positioning myself so that Promethia couldn't see me. 'I don't like phot- I mean blondes.'

‘Miss Peters, I’ve had quite enough,’ Spencer said. ‘I am too busy to deal with your rampant childishness. No woman has ever joined the Muybridge Club and none ever will.’ He slammed the door in her face and turned to me with a brave attempt at a smile.

‘You have wasted my time and treated me abominably,’ I said. ‘The only thing that could possibly rectify this would be a visit to your archives. Specifically the 1882 section.’

Spencer closed his eyes and exhaled. ‘Very well. I’ll contact the Keeper and see what can be arranged. In the meantime, if you’ll follow me?’

Trying to hide my stark relief at having evaded Promethia, I followed him down to the end of the hall.

‘You can wait in our museum. I trust you’ll find it most impressive.’

‘I don’t,’ I said.

Spencer was starting to sweat. He came to a halt in front of a door and pushed it open for me. ‘I’ll be back as quickly as I can.’ With that he scarpered up the hall.

The museum, predictably enough, was full of cameras. It was a cavernous room, stretching so far that I had to squint to see the other end. Hanging from the walls were cameras of all shapes and sizes, some large, some small, some disposable, some polaroid, some cutting edge and some ancient. Despite my feelings toward the profession, I was a little awed by the sheer number of different cameras collected in this room. I wandered deeper into the space, looking around at them all, a history stretching far back to the time I was trying to remove any evidence of having existed.

It was the fault of a camera that I was here. Had they only been invented a few years later I would not have had to go such lengths. But here we were. I wondered briefly if one of these many cameras was the one responsible. It was likely, considering the club’s affiliation with the *Chronicle*, but that fact only made me feel worse. Just another reminder of a past that wouldn’t stay buried.

I came to a halt in front of a particularly old camera, the type I knew from where I came from. As I looked at it, unbidden the memories started flashing through my mind, memories I had worked hard to forget. Almost unconsciously I reached out, then—

‘Did you miss the ‘no touching’ sign, Shepard?’

I dropped my hand and spun on the spot. Standing in the doorway, hands on hips and a very satisfied grin on her face, was Promethia Peters.

‘How did you get in?’ I managed.

‘The back door, obviously. How did you– wait.’ Promethia’s eyes lit up. ‘Did you create a fake identity of a famous Russian photographer, spend months convincing the world he existed, disguise yourself and adopt a bad accent just to get in?’

‘No, shut up,’ I said. ‘Peters, look, as lovely as it is to see you, I’m a bit busy here and–’

‘Are you looking for another copy of your precious book?’ she said.

‘Peters, if I wanted a book I wouldn’t come to a photography club. I know full well your people can’t read.’

‘So what is it then?’

‘Absolutely none of your business.’

‘Not even if I tell Spencer the truth about you?’ She gave me a mischievous wink that made me want to kick something.

‘Depends if you can get the words out before he calls the police,’ I said.

‘I wouldn’t bet against me Shepard, I talk a lot and I talk fast. But I might not have to if the famous and respected Ivan Ivanov convinces Spencer to change his stupid regulations.’

I gritted my teeth. As a general rule, helping Promethia Peters do just about anything was not how I liked spending my time. But on the other hand, she had me cornered.

‘Think fast Shepard,’ she said. ‘For both our sakes. The Muybridge Club *really* doesn’t like intruders.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Whatever. Ivanov will drag the club kicking and screaming into the present day. Happy?’

‘See how easy things are when you do what I want?’ Promethia said.

‘Not as easy as they’d be if you just left me alone.’

‘Now where’s the fun in that?’

I was about to tell Promethia exactly what I thought of her idea of fun, when Spencer’s voice echoed through the museum.

‘PROMETHIA PETERS, GET OUT OF THIS BUILDING THIS INSTANT!’ Red-faced and enraged he barrelled towards us, accusing finger pointed at Promethia. ‘MR IVANOV IS A HONOURED GUEST AND I WILL NOT HAVE YOU BESMIRCHING OUR GOOD NAME ANY FURTHER!’

Quickly I stepped between them. ‘Peace, Mr Spencer,’ I said. ‘I wish Miss Peters to stay.’

‘Why the hell would you wish that?’ he demanded.

‘I’m his fiancé,’ Promethia piped up from behind me.

I spun to face her, shocked. *I didn’t agree to this!* But her devious grin told me exactly how aware of that fact she was.

‘Is this... is this true?’ Spencer said.

Grimacing, I turned to face him. ‘Yes. Miss Peters is, um, is my betrothed. I do love her oh so very much.’

‘He fell for me when he saw how good my photography was,’ she said. ‘Mr Ivanov always said that he could only be with a woman who was better at what he did than himself, and he found that woman in me. The best photographer in the world. Isn’t that right Ivan?’

With a superhuman effort, I nodded. ‘It is true. She’s the best there ever was and deserves her place in this club.’

Spencer looked between us, now far beyond confused. His simple brain was clearly trying to understand exactly what was happening to his world. To save him the pain of any further thought, I asked him to take us to the archives.

‘Yes, well, uh... the Keeper isn’t happy about this. She really would prefer if–’

‘You heard the man Spencer.’ Promethia clapped twice. ‘Archives. Now. And wherever he goes, I go.’ She took my hand. ‘Because we simply can’t bear to be separated.’

Looking like he was trying very hard to keep composed, Spencer gestured and together the three of us walked back out into the hall, through another door and down a set of stairs. At the bottom of them was a wall with a life-size black and white photo of a man holding a camera and giving a stern eye to us. Spencer reached out and touched the centre of the lense and, with a groan, the whole wall slid up, revealing the entry to what appeared to be a completely glass elevator car.

‘In here.’ Spencer stepped in. Starting to feel a little apprehensive, I followed along with Promethia. The moment we were inside the elevator began to descend, down into an enormous space that dwarfed the museum upstairs.

When I thought of an archive I thought of the *Chronicle’s* basement of piles upon piles of old books and newspapers roughly arranged in alphabetical order but with no real organisation beyond that. This, however, was something else altogether. The space stretched so far that I could not see the walls, and everywhere, already towering around us as we descended, were very tall black metal filing cabinets with what appeared to be glass drawers set in them. Each one was at least five stories tall and connected by a grid-like network of metal walkways linking each of them. I had never seen anything like it and could only gape as the elevator came to a halt on a platform that branched off into walkways to various different cabinets.

‘Wow,’ Promethia said from next to me. For once, I couldn’t disagree with her.

Spencer stepped out of the elevator and together we followed, looking around at the whole huge expanse of it all as we did.

‘Well!’

My attention was seized by a tall, stick-thin, very old woman marching toward us with no sign of frailty. Her white hair was pulled back in a very tight bun and her wrinkled face was set in a scowl aimed at us.

‘This is the Keeper,’ Spencer said weakly.

‘And this is the impertinent idiot who can’t follow simple rules.’ She pointed at me. “What, do you think you’re better than everyone else?”

I think he does,’ Promethia said. ‘Also aren’t you breaking the rules by being in here?’

‘Shut up,’ she snarled with enough venom to actually make Promethia take a step back. ‘Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t have you both dragged out of here right now.’

‘Madame Keeper—’ Spencer began.

‘Shut your idiot mouth, idiot,’ she spat. ‘I explicitly told you not to let him in here without following the process. If you had any backbone this wouldn’t have been an issue.’

‘Madame Keeper,’ I said. ‘Let me keep this brief.’ I glanced at Promethia, aware of what I was giving away but also aware that this woman was probably not going to put up with much of her time being wasted. ‘I need to access one photo. Just one. I know the exact section; if you take me there I can be out of your hair in five minutes and you never have to see me again. I promise.’

There was silence for a moment as the Keeper considered me through narrowed eyes. Then Spencer spoke.

‘What happened to your accent?’

It took me a moment to realise what he was saying, then Promethia looked at me and muttered ‘idiot’ and suddenly I was running down the walkway as Spencer roared ‘GUARDS!’

I could see, emerging seemingly from nowhere, huge burly guards dressed in black with cameras swinging around their necks and clubs and nets in hand. Apparently the rumours about how well guarded the archives were true after all.

As fast as I could I bolted down the walkway as the clanging behind me announced that several guards were gaining on me. I tried to ignore it and run faster, keeping my eyes on the next cabinet and then –

–I tripped and my feet flew out from under me. Without any handrail to stop my fall there was nothing I could do as I sailed over the edge and down into the dark. Air rushed around me and I saw approaching fast the side of one of the cabinets. I would just miss it and keep plummeting unless I got it just right. I reach out a hand, just managing to snag the handle of the glass drawer. My arm jerked painfully and the rest of my body slammed hard into the side

of the cabinet. Battered and aching but alive, I hung there for a moment and tried to catch my breath.

Except.

The thing about very tall, very thin structures is that often they can be a little fragile. Especially if they aren't built on great foundations. And, as the whole cabinet started to tilt, it was becoming rather clear that as impressive as the archives were they maybe weren't as well built as they could have been. At least not well enough for one of the cabinets to withstand a fool journalist who had just ruined months of careful planning with a stupid slip up slamming into them.

I held on for dear life as the cabinet fell, the sound of tearing metal filling the air as it pulled away from the walkways that surrounded it. Many of the glass drawers started falling open and photos went everywhere, hundreds then thousands of them filling the air. I could see the ground coming up to greet me and closed my eyes then a resounding clang reverberated through the room and, realising I wasn't dead, I looked again to see that the way the cabinet had fallen had caused it to be stopped by one of the far off walkways, jamming it at an angle to the ground. An angle that allowed me to, with great care, get to my feet. Balancing as best I could on this makeshift platform, I ran, down into the dark depths of the archives. I could still hear furious voices above me but they quickly receded as I descended into the shadows at the very base of the space.

My boots hit stone floor. I looked up again; all around me the cabinets stretched far up into the sky. Down here the light was very weak and all I could see ahead was the vague shape of a forest of cabinet bases. It would take them a while to find me down here. So, with a gentle rain of old photos all around me, I set off into the dark, with no real idea of where I was going or how I would get out of here.

Once I discarded my sunglasses and replaced them with my actual glasses I could see slightly better. There wasn't much light, but it was enough to make out where I was going as well as get a better look at the cabinets ahead. Inscribed on the base of the nearest one was a number.

1813.

I looked at it for a moment, then looked to the next one. *1814.* And the next. *1815.* Each cabinet was a year.

Picking up speed, I started moving from one to the other, following the years, continuing until finally I was looking at 1882. A new fear that had nothing to do with the guards was

coming over me. My heart was starting to race. I took a deep breath. *Be strong Boone. This is what you're here for.*

I walked over and opened the first glass drawer. Inside were many large brown envelopes, well preserved within the safe confines of the drawer. I picked up the first one I saw; scrawled on the front was a note saying '*H.G. Wells' New Years Party*'. I went to the next. *Queen Victoria's Brief Modelling Career*. Suppressing a shudder I kept going, rifling through one drawer then moving to the next and the next.

In the fourth drawer, at the point I was starting to have to stretch to reach the envelopes, I found what I was looking for. Two names on the front that caught my breath and tightened something around my heart. I stepped back, still looking at it. I wanted to open it more than anything and at the same time there was nothing I'd ever wanted to do less. Pushing away a vague sense that this was neither the time nor the place, I turned it over. Then—

'Drop it thief!'

I dropped it. Not because I wanted to, because I stupidly had been surprised by this. Emerging from the dark, holding torches, were several of the guards, led by the very angry looking Keeper with a now extremely sweaty Spencer right behind her.

'Boone Shepard,' the Keeper sneered. 'I might have known.'

'You didn't though,' I pointed out. 'So there's that.'

'You're going straight to the police for this,' she said. 'Bursting in here, impersonating a well-respected hero of the profession, trying to dig up our sacred secrets. And you wonder why journalists are the worst people in the world.'

'I tend not to wonder things that aren't true,' I said. 'Because unlike you photographers I'm not a moron.'

'Call us what you like Shepard,' she said. 'You're done. Absolutely nothing is going to save you now.'

I opened my mouth to retort despite knowing she was probably right when a sound filled the air. A kind of chopping, churning sound. A gust of wind went through my hair and the guards, confused, started searching for the disruption.

'What is that?' the Keeper said.

'If I had to guess?' I said. 'It's absolutely nothing.'

With that, throwing up more of the stray photos from the ground into a wild whirlwind, a yellow and black gyrocopter swung down low, over the heads of the guards and pulling around until it was right beside me. And sitting in the pilot seat, wearing goggles and a determined expression, was Promethia Peters.

‘Get on,’ she snapped, and despite the unlikeliness of my rescuer I did not need telling twice. I grabbed a hold of the tail of the chopper as the rotors picked up speed, more photos flew into the air, Promethia snatched one of them and then we were airborne.

‘You’ll pay for this Boone Shepard!’ the Keeper shrieked, but that was the last thing I was worried about as I tried desperately not to fall from the rising gyrocopter. Everything flew past in a blur; the cabinets, the walkways, more stunned guards, the elevator then back up into the height of the space. The chopper, with me barely clinging to it, burst through the door at a side-on angle and up the stairs then into the hall. Many of the photos from the wall were dislodged by the force of the rotors and as they flew around us I looked up just in time to see the heavy oak doors approaching.

‘Promethia!’ I screamed, but it was too late. The gyrocopter hit them head on, the rotors turning the doors into splinters as we blasted out into daylight, up and away from the manor.

We flew over the tops of several more buildings until finally Promethia brought the chopper down, landing gently on a flat roof. I let go and fell right off, my legs far from steady enough to hold me.

‘Well, I’m imagining Huxley will have words with us both after that,’ Promethia said, clambering out of the cockpit.

‘You think?’ I said, trying and failing to stand. I looked up at her and realised I had no idea what to say to her. Actually, I did know what to say but it felt very odd doing it.

‘Thank you.’

‘Welcome,’ she muttered.

This time I managed to stand, if barely. We faced each other.

‘Why did you do it?’ I asked.

‘Because that club is stupid and I realised that I’d rather do something to make them angry than join them,’ Promethia said. ‘Bloody hypocrites.’

‘You’re better off without them,’ I said. ‘The whole thing’s kind of creepy.’

It was then that I noticed what was in her hand.

‘Is this what you wanted?’ she raised the brown envelope.

I nodded.

‘Another big secret?’ she said. ‘Like that book you’re so desperate to destroy?’

I reached out a hand. ‘Please,’ I said.

She watched me steadily and without expression for a moment. Her eyes slowly moved down to the envelope. She went to speak, then stopped. Then she handed it to me.

I had not expected that. I took it without a word.

‘This once,’ she said. ‘This once I’ll let you keep whatever secret you have. But don’t think I’ll go so easy next time. I still plan on figuring you out, Boone Shepard, and when I do you’ll be done for.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ I said.

For another moment we both stood there looking at each other. Then Promethia turned on her heel, climbed back into the gyrocopter and with a roar of rotors and more wild wind she was gone, climbing until she was a distant speck in the sky.

I watched after her for a long time, wondering how to feel about any of what had just happened. Then I returned my attention to the envelope. There was a twisting in my chest that was somehow both warm and painful as I opened it and withdrew the photo inside.

It was very old, black and white. It depicted myself, younger with longer hair and a wide grin, standing next to a woman. She was dressed in a jacket and trousers, her hair was shoulder length, and she had a long musket over her shoulder. She was smiling too, but hers was different; more reserved, as if she knew something I didn’t.

I looked at the photo, and as I did I felt the tears prickling the corners of my eyes. I had told myself I wanted to find it to remove the evidence of things I couldn’t afford anyone to discover. My plan had been to destroy it like I had every other reminder of the time I wanted to eradicate. But now that it was here in my hands, I felt very differently indeed.

I slipped the photo back in its envelope. I could decide what to do with it later. But I didn’t think I would be getting rid of it any time soon.

I glanced back in the direction of the club, then back toward where Promethia Peters had flown away. I hadn’t changed my mind; I didn’t like photographers. They were arrogant and their work took no skill compared to journalism. But maybe what they created had some value after all.

The End