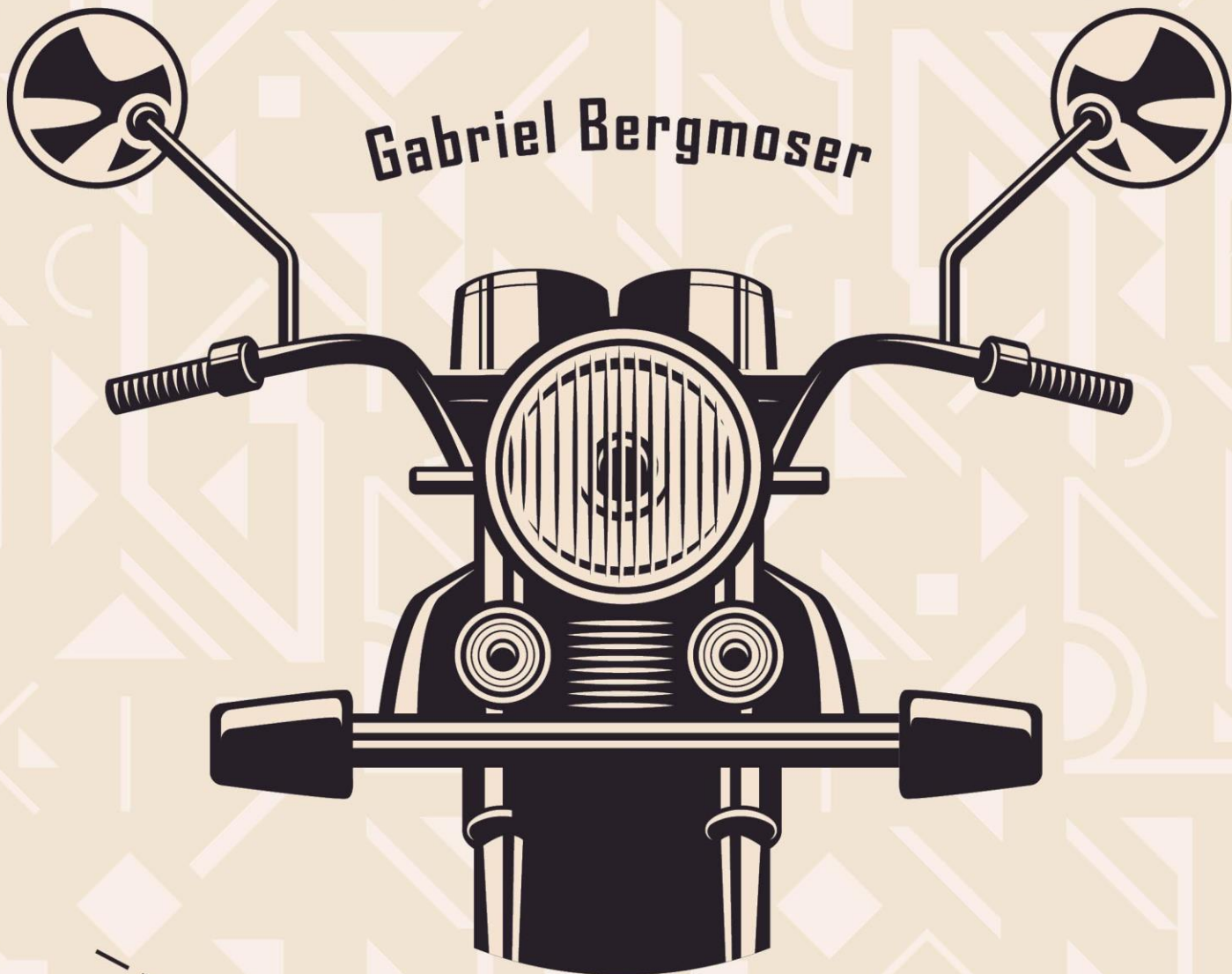


Gabriel Bergmoser



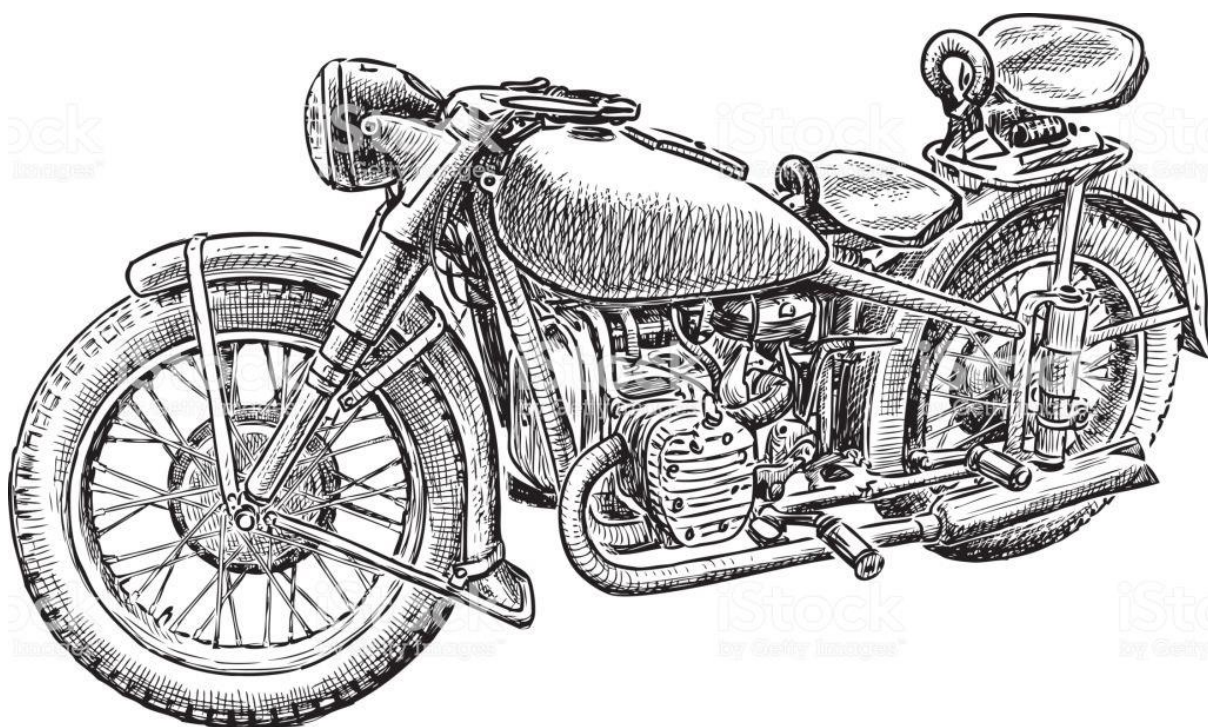
**THE BROKEN
RECORD**

A Boone Shepard Adventure

THE BROKEN RECORD

A Boone Shepard Adventure

By Gabriel Bergmoser



1

On the night of a full moon in the early months of 1965, I stood on the roof of the Greenville Town Library and prepared to break in. The town slept as the wind howled through the distant trees. There was no other sound.

Greenville; a quaint country town full of thatched cottages, rose gardens, cobblestoned streets and middle aged townsfolk who would doff their caps and bid you ‘good day.’ To the untrained eye a sleepy, pleasant little corner of the world where nothing out of the ordinary ever happened.

Crouching back down, I tucked a loose strand of hair under the black woollen cap that topped off my burglar’s ensemble. I eased the heavy duffel bag from my shoulder and winced as it hit the shingled roof with a clatter. I paused, listening carefully for any sign that someone had heard. But there were no alarms or outraged cries. For now I was safe. I grabbed a hold of the edges of the skylight and pried it open, before slowly shifting on to my stomach and sticking my head inside. The library remained dark and still. *I might survive this yet.*

Despite the library’s extensive security system, it had taken only several days of careful observation to realise that this one dusty skylight was never touched. A quick scan with a small pair of binoculars had confirmed that it was unlocked. I had been careful to check every day before making my move and sure enough the weak spot remained.

From my duffel bag I pulled the tools of the trade: clamps, ropes and a harness. My actions now were the result of a week of careful planning, but that did not make me feel any more confident. I knotted the ropes tightly to the clamps then attached them to the edge of the skylight. I pulled on the harness and tightened the straps, tugging on the rope to make sure it could hold my slight weight. Only then did I position myself over the opening.

Maybe it wasn't too late to pack up and forget about this whole stupid mission. But the truth was, even if I backed out now I would only end up trying the next night. So I took a deep breath and a small leap of faith, and lowered myself into the library.

Rows upon rows of dusty old shelves stretched as far as the eye could see, full of books that hadn't been touched in decades. The huge steel bear traps and endless tripwires did not exactly help the ominous image either. Presumably they were there to stop kids from coming in here after dark and talking. Or, at a stretch, to stop someone doing exactly what I planned to do. During the day the place was filled with roving librarians armed with stun guns and batons. They were partial to searching patrons before allowing them to leave, and things could turn unpleasant if they found anything they were not happy with. It had been so frustrating having to leave empty handed each day, but at least I knew it wasn't going anywhere. Just before the library had closed today I had tucked it between two dusty thesauruses directly below the spotlight and hoped that none of the librarians knew as much about the Dewey Decimal system as they did about karate.

The harness pulled around my waist but the knots held firm. Inch by painful inch, I descended until I was level with the tops of the shelves. I was in luck. The small, faded book sat exactly on the shelf where I had left it. Lifting my dangling feet away from the jaws of a shiny bear trap, I reached out with one hand and felt the tip of the spine beneath my fingertips. I couldn't quite grasp it. I dropped my hand to the shelf and pushed myself back. I swung in a small arc backwards and then forwards again, and my index finger found purchase and pulled the book free. I tucked it inside the small satchel that swung from my shoulder. Breathing easily for the first time in a week, I wasted no time in climbing back up the rope. The stars in the night sky shone clear through the open skylight. I scrambled, smiling, on to the roof again, closed the skylight and quickly packed everything up. My work here was done. By tomorrow I would be far, far away and Greenville would be a distant memory.

Then—

‘SHEPARD!’

I froze. That was not a good sound. In fact, of all the sounds that you can hear while caught in the act of burglary, I would argue that a loud, angry exclamation of your surname is the worst. I stood. Lights shone from the lawn in front of the library, dancing over the edge of the roof. I stepped forward and immediately wished I hadn't.

In my time I have seen many angry mobs in varying degrees of murderous rage, but this was on a whole new level. Between the local farmers holding standard issue flaming torches and pitchforks stood

lovely old Mrs McCurdles from down the road pointing a sawn-off shotgun at me, while John the friendly baker had gone for the more threatening battle axe. This was not good. When even a town pastor is aiming a large crossbow at your face you know that you've gotten yourself into trouble.

I raised my hand. 'Hello all! Fancy seeing you here.'

The grotesquely fat Mayor Oxley elbowed his way to the front and pointed a tennis racquet at me. 'Come down, Shepard!' he bellowed, his walrus moustache billowing in all directions. 'We need to have a jolly old chat!'

'Yes, it certainly looks that way. But, as tempting as your offer is, it is rather late and I have things to do.'

'We know what you are!' Mrs McCurdles shrieked. 'You can't hide it anymore!'

Oh dear.

'You meddling bloody types think it's okay to come here and ruin everyone's lives!' Mrs Kensington, head of the Greenville Knitting Association, spat. 'Well we won't be having a bar of it!'

'Alright, there's clearly been some kind of misunderstanding.'

'Misunderstand this!'

I ducked as one of Mrs Kensington's knitting needles flew past my head.

'This is all escalating very quickly,' I said. 'Let's all just calm down, and see if—'

‘No more negotiations,’ the mayor said. ‘Get down here right now, or things will get very unpleasant.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘As opposed to the pleasantness of our current circumstances.’

‘I’m going to count to three,’ the mayor said. ‘And then we’re coming for you.’

Despite the fascinating issue of just how a man of Oxley’s size would climb onto the roof of a two storey building, I had to act fast. This was as angry a mob as I had ever seen, and I had long ago learnt that I was not the best at placating people. ‘Okay. If you give me just one moment, I will...’

I ran. The mob went wild. I dodged the projectiles that clattered on the tiles around me and raced towards the far edge. I jumped without breaking stride and flew out over the courtyard beside the library. In the middle of the yard – right where I had strategically left it – was my motorbike. I landed hard in the cushioned seat and immediately revved the engine. The screams of the crowd were drowned out by my bike as I roared down the streets of Greenville, past all the pretty cottages and immaculate front gardens, toward the main country road that would lead me to safety.

The sounds of inevitable pursuit forced me to look back toward the town. True to form, three men on horses were barrelling after me, followed by a car that looked positively Victorian. There were at least ten people jammed in the tiny vehicle, one of whom was the mayor,

waving his increasingly threatening looking tennis racquet in the air as the car approached.

‘You’re done for, Shepard!’ someone yelled.

I was fairly certain that I was not ‘done for’, but I did not think correcting them would help defuse the situation, so I returned my attention to the road. The town was now well behind me and ahead I could see only the green stretch of fields. The overloaded car would surely get bogged if it left the road, so I swung my bike to the side and tore through the fields, chewed up grass flying all around me. I looked back. The car had left the road and immediately sunk deep into the mud. The horses carried on, but I was outrunning them. It would be okay. Safety was ahead: the rolling hills, the old oak trees, the clear night sky and—

The cliff. The really big cliff. I saw the sharp drop just seconds too late and could only scream as my bike flew over the edge. For the second time that night I was airborne.

Things seemed to slow down. Far below me I could see a winding river and past that, more grass. There was a forest in the distance, and mountains on the horizon. It was a fantastic view, and I took a moment to enjoy it. Then my senses returned, and I pulled hard on the lever that sat just above the front wheel.

The small pouch on the back of my bike opened, letting out a huge parachute. I heard the rustling and the snap as it filled with air and suddenly, with a sharp tug from above, I was no longer falling but peacefully gliding toward beautiful, solid ground below.

A couple of stray bolts flew past me, but they were far off target. Evidently the pastor did not have great aim. I turned in my seat back toward the assembled townsfolk watching from the top of the cliff, and waved.

‘Thanks for the hospitality, Greenville!’ I called. ‘Much appreciated!’

With a smile, I faced forward again. The bike was approaching solid ground. I would have to keep moving and find somewhere to stay but for now, at least, I was safe.

My name is Boone Shepard. I am a journalist, and this is my life.

2

Trundling along a winding road on my bike, I was rather enjoying myself. The lush fields stretched as far as the eye could see, broken only by dry stone walls and solitary oaks. It was hard not to be distracted by the view. For about the first three hours of daylight, anyway. After a while it began to get really, really boring.

The little book tucked into my bag was a weight I was anxious to be rid of. The trick was finding somewhere safe to dispose of it so that nobody could find even a fragment. Though damaging books is a crime that should be punishable by a forced day long lecture on the French Revolution, every rule has an exception and the volume in my bag was mine. I just had to make absolutely sure it was done right.

It was evening by the time I finally found hope in the barren wasteland of aesthetically pleasing tedium. I had just passed a sign telling me that the town of Greenfield was up ahead, when I saw a plain looking cottage up a cobblestoned driveway, a sign out the front reading ‘Everest Homestead: Good Food and Accommodation’.

A tiny, tucked away place like this was exactly what I needed. So I slowed down and rode right up to the front door. I pulled my bike to a halt, removed my helmet and quickly checked my reflection in the window. My brown hair was looking very messy, and my glasses were slightly askew on the tip of my nose, but generally I was presentable. At least I had changed out of my suspicious cat burglar clothes and was back in my usual attire: brown trousers, boots, black vest, red shirt and striped tie. I might have been dusty from a day on the road, but at least I was well dressed.

I knocked. There was the sound of shuffling from inside, then after a moment the door swung open to reveal a short, balding man.

‘Hello,’ I said, extending a hand. ‘Boone Shepard. Rumour has it that this is the place to go for accommodation.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Did this rumour come from the sign out the front that says ‘accommodation’?’

‘The very same.’

‘Right,’ the man said. ‘Well you’d best come in. I’m Roger Everest.’

The house was a homely, cosy sort of place with paintings hanging on the wood panelled walls. I followed Roger through the hall to a room full of comfortable looking armchairs with a crackling fire in the

corner. A teenage girl was curled up in the chair nearest to the fire, reading a book. She had short black hair and was dressed in a plain t-shirt and jeans. She looked up at me over her glasses and smiled.

‘This is my daughter, Clarissa,’ Roger said. ‘Clarissa, this is Mr Shepard.’

The ‘Mr’ he attached to my name made me uncomfortable. ‘Just Boone.’

‘Strange name,’ she said.

‘Very much so, Miss Everest.’

There was a momentary awkward silence.

‘We’re about to start dinner,’ Roger said. ‘Would you care to join us?’

The prospect of more stilted small talk made me want to say no, but I was very aware of the twisting hunger in my stomach. ‘Sounds excellent.’

‘So what’s your story, Boone?’ Clarissa asked, after her father had vanished into the next room.

‘I’m a hermit on a holiday.’

‘Hermits sleep in caves.’

‘That’s offensive to hermits.’

‘Are you a journalist?’

Instinctively I looked around for hidden angry mobs.

She laughed. ‘Have you come from Greenville? They hate meddlers.’

‘I wasn’t meddling!’ I protested. ‘Just a bit of innocent prying.’

Roger stuck his head in the door. ‘Let me take your bag,’ he said, extending a hand. ‘I’ll put it in the guest room. Just up the stairs on the left, so you know.’

‘Oh, that’s fine,’ I said. ‘I’ll hang on to it.’

‘Nonsense.’ He strode into the room and, before I had time to protest and yanked the bag off my shoulder. ‘I won’t have it said we don’t take care of our guests.’ With that, he was gone again.

I glanced at Clarissa. She was watching after him with a frown.

‘I’d ask you to keep my profession quiet,’ I said.

‘I plan on it. Your type isn’t popular around here.’

‘That’s unfair. I didn’t even do anything.’

She looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

‘I swear!’

‘Were there pitchforks?’ she asked. ‘Threats of hanging?’

‘One of the two.’

‘They must have liked you.’

‘I promise I won’t cause trouble.’ I said. ‘I just need to sleep for the night and move on. Harass the next town on the map.’

‘Haven’t got your fill of angry mobs then?’

‘Has anyone?’

Roger called that dinner was ready, so I followed Clarissa through the door into the warmth of the kitchen. Pots and pans and bunches of dried herbs hung from the ceiling and walls. A rickety looking wooden table sat in the middle of the room, bearing a huge serving bowl full of what looked like chicken soup but did not smell like anything safe to

eat. I sat across from Clarissa as Roger took his spot at the head of the table and started dishing out servings.

‘So,’ he said, sliding me a bowl. ‘Tell me about yourself, Boone. What do you do for a living?’

I shot a glance at the smirking Clarissa. ‘I’m a fireman.’

‘Fireman?’ Roger looked surprised. ‘Wouldn’t have expected that.’

‘Why not?’ I could be a fireman if I wanted.

‘Well, you’re not exactly built for it, are you? And how old are you? Eighteen?’

‘Old enough. And if you’re referring to my stature, it helps me dodge the fires. Which is something firemen have to do.’ I tapped the side of my nose knowledgeably.

‘So why are you travelling around the country then?’

‘I’ve gone freelance,’ I said. ‘I find fires, wherever they may be, and I fight them.’

Roger gave his daughter a confused look. ‘That’s a thing?’

‘Of course,’ I said, trying to sound confident. Before Roger could ask me anything else, I made a start on the soup. The smell almost made me gag, and under normal circumstances I doubt I could have stomached it. But I had not eaten for over a day, so I dug in.

‘Hungry?’ Roger asked.

‘Very,’ I said through a mouthful of soup.

‘You’d have to be,’ Clarissa muttered, stirring her soup with an unenthusiastic expression.

‘Sorry if I’m prying,’ Roger said. ‘But I’m just fascinated. Where do you usually sleep? Or eat?’

‘Wherever comes up,’ I said. ‘I have to keep moving, you know? Fires to fight and all that.’

‘Well, I have to say, you’re the most interesting visitor we’ve had in a while,’ Roger said. ‘You even managed to make Clarissa pull her nose out of her book for five seconds.’

‘Glad I could help,’ I said. ‘Anyway, thank you for dinner. Lovely and all, but I need to get to bed.’

‘Already?’ Roger looked disappointed. ‘Dessert’s still to come.’

‘Yes, I’m sure it’ll be an experience,’ I said. ‘But, you know, things to do tomorrow.’

‘Oh. Well at least stay for a drink.’

‘I’ll be right back,’ Clarissa said. I could have sworn she gave me a suspicious look as she got to her feet and left the room.

‘No, it’s quite alright,’ I said. ‘I’ve been on the road all day, I’m very tired.’

‘Well don’t rush off just yet.’ Before I had the chance to protest, Roger had ladled some more soup into my bowl. ‘You’re obviously starving. Another few minutes won’t hurt.’

Forcing a smile and a thanks, I made a start on my second bowl of what I now suspected was rat poison. I could barely focus on the taste, however. *I need to get rid of that book. I’m not going to sleep easy until it’s gone.*

‘So how does someone get into this line of work?’ Roger asked.

‘The compulsive desire to fight fires.’ I nodded. ‘That’s it, really.’

‘Well, I have a lot of respect for that,’ Roger said. ‘You’re doing the world a good service.’

Clarissa returned and sat down. ‘Firefighting?’ she asked.

‘It’s a thing I do.’ I pushed the bowl away. ‘Anyway, I really need to get to bed.’ Before anyone could protest, I was on my feet. ‘I’ll see you later.’ With one last wave, I hurried out of the room.

Stepping out into the hallway, I allowed myself a quick moment of congratulation; it should not be so difficult to excuse yourself. But I had finally escaped, and the book was waiting. I began to walk up the stairs. Photos lined the walls, depicting Roger, Clarissa and a plump, beaming woman I assumed to be Clarissa’s mother. I wondered what had happened to her; they seemed so happy in the pictures.

I reached the landing and headed for the door on the left, marked with the word ‘Guest’. The room was plain: nothing but a single bed, a set of drawers, and a window off to the side. My bag sat at the foot of the bed. I looked at it for a moment. How would I go about this? Burning the book would doubtless attract the attention of my hosts. Ripping it up left too much evidence. There were only a handful of copies in the world, and this was the second I had found. It had been difficult enough to track it down; I was not about to risk its survival.

I knelt and opened the bag, feeling nervous. *It’s just a book Boone. Relax.* I searched through my belongings: clothes, toothbrush, notebook, spare glasses. *Where is it?* I turned the bag upside down and shook it.

Nothing. The book was gone.

3

Morning came and I had barely slept. I sat on the bed, staring out the window, trying to get my head around what had happened. Roger and Clarissa had each left my sight yesterday, so one of them had clearly taken the book. But why? Was it common practice for them to rifle through their guests' possessions? If so, of all things why take a battered old book? Did they not think I would notice that it was gone? The thought that one of them might be reading it right now made me feel sick.

I had started to pace and my nerves spiked every time I passed the door. Was it worth confronting them? It would be easy for the perpetrator to deny it, and if they didn't realise the book was important I didn't want to tip them off. The only thing to do was to act casual and pretend nothing was wrong. The problem was, as my brilliant and convincing impersonation of a fireman had proved, I was no actor. So, hands in pockets and whistling loudly, I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Clarissa sat at the table, reading a newspaper, while Roger was at the stove, fussing over what appeared to be an alternative interpretation of bacon and eggs. Still whistling, I nodded to both my hosts and took a seat.

‘Morning all.’ I plastered a gigantic grin across my face. ‘Great day, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ Roger glanced toward the window. ‘I’ll have to head into town to do some shopping. You coming Clarissa?’

‘Nope,’ she replied, not looking up from the paper.

‘I’ll help,’ I said. ‘I was actually wondering if I could stay another night.’

‘Of course.’ Roger turned to me. ‘But didn’t you say you had to leave early?’

‘Yeah, I realised it’s actually next week I’m scheduled to fight that fire so I’m free today.’

‘Well eat up,’ Roger said. ‘Then I can show you Greenfield. You can learn the layout in case of any future fires.’

‘Good idea. Best stay vigilant.’

Clarissa looked between her father and me, shook her head, and returned to the paper.

‘Anything interesting?’ I asked her, nodding to it.

‘There’s never anything good in *The Chronicle*,’ she replied without looking up. ‘It’s a rubbish paper.’

‘Well, maybe,’ I said. ‘Some of the journalists in there are pretty good.’

‘Not really. This photographer’s okay. Promethia Peters, I think her name is.’

I tried to stop my teeth from gritting.

‘Are you okay Boone?’ Roger asked. ‘You look a little ill.’

‘What? Oh yes, fine,’ I said. ‘Just outraged by the low journalistic standards of *The Chronicle*.’

‘Well, you know what they say about journalists.’ Roger shrugged.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, trying to sound polite.

‘Well, they’re trouble, aren’t they? Always meddling where they’re not meant to. Surprised more of them don’t get themselves killed. Anyway,’ he looked at his watch, ‘we should get moving soon. Finish up, Boone, and we can head off.’

With some difficulty, I proceeded to choke down the specimen in front of me, making sure I kept an eye on Clarissa. Her focus was on the newspaper; the girl was giving nothing away.

The sun was fairly high up when Roger and I left, walking up the road past the house. The sky was blue and whistling birds filled the trees. The landscape was pretty to say the least, but that did not stop the constant urge to look over my shoulder. I wondered if the villagers of Greenville had found a way to get to the bottom of the cliff yet.

But I had bigger things to worry about, and I had to attend to them soon.

‘Clarissa seems to like reading,’ I said.

‘Can barely tear her away from the damn things,’ Roger said. ‘It’s unhealthy is what it is.’

‘Reading?’

‘Well, it’s fine in moderation. But it’s all she ever does. Since her mother died...’ He sighed. ‘She’s a wonderful girl. She just struggles

to connect with people. She spends so much time wrapped up in stories in her own head. She needs to come down to earth.'

For a moment we walked in silence.

'I don't know if that's a bad thing,' I said. 'The world can be hard. Sometimes burying yourself in stories is a defence mechanism.'

'Maybe,' Roger said. 'Personally I think you have to face things to get through them.'

I felt a twinge in my stomach but kept my mouth shut as we passed the brightly coloured 'Welcome to Greenfield' sign.

As it turned out, Greenfield was anything but green. Brown buildings, brown roads; even the grass and trees were different shades of brown. People bustled around in brown suits, dresses and overalls. Walking up the main street, I automatically buried my hands in my pockets, hunched my shoulders and kept my head down. After Greenville, I felt I had to stay inconspicuous. Every look I got seemed to be a threatening one.

Conversation lulled as I followed Roger into the cluttered general store, loitering behind him like a grumpy child as he stocked up on supplies. He occasionally made little comments about his work or the town, but I did not have much to say in response. I was back to thinking about the book. Unless Roger was an exceptionally good liar, it didn't seem like he had taken it. It had to be his daughter. Her curiosity about my work, her snide comments this morning, her mysterious absence from the dinner table last night; it all fit. I just had to figure out what to do next.

It was early afternoon and the clear skies and sun had been invaded by lazily drifting clouds by the time we walked back toward the house. I could see a car, way up ahead, disappearing in a cloud of dust. It was the only sign of human life I'd seen along this road.

'I'll start lunch when we get back,' Roger said. 'Just wait, it's going to be excellent.'

'I'll bet.' We turned up the driveway toward the house. I noticed what seemed to be tire tracks in the dirt. That was strange. They had almost certainly not been there before.

Roger opened the door and we walked inside. 'Clarissa!' He called. 'Let's make a start on lunch!'

We were met with silence.

'Clarissa?' he called again.

I looked back out the door down the driveway. Those were definitely tire tracks.

'That's odd,' Roger said. 'Maybe she's sleeping.' He started to head up the stairs.

I walked back outside and knelt next to the tracks. I reached out and touched them. I stood again and walked to the end of the driveway. The tracks reached the end and disappeared up the road.

'Clarissa!'

I could hear Roger yelling from inside. His voice had become frantic, fearful. I heard the sound of his thudding footsteps and turned. Roger stood in the doorway, staring at me, eyes wide. 'She's gone.' His voice was barely more than a whisper. 'My daughter is gone.'

4

‘We’ll go over the whole house again,’ I said, striding through the front door. ‘As carefully as we can.’

‘There’s no point,’ Roger said. ‘I know the place back to front. If she was here, I would have found her.’

‘Still,’ I said. ‘Just to be sure.’

I started with the room I had stayed in, still a mess from the night before. I checked under the bed, but of course there was nothing, so I moved on to the next room. This seemed to be Roger’s. I stayed in the doorway, feeling intrusive. The room was undecorated save for the pictures of his wife on his bedside table. ‘Clarissa?’ I said. No response. I closed the door. The next room was a bathroom, which I pretty quickly was able to rule out. I crossed the hall and opened the first door.

This had to be Clarissa’s room. The bed in the corner seemed dwarfed by her bookshelves, looking like they were about to explode from sheer overloading. Books seemed to have spilled out all over the floor, surrounding a record player. On the other side of the room was a heap of paper, covered in hastily scrawled notes. There was not enough debris to hide a person, however. Clarissa was not here.

I found Roger standing at the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed and tears in his eyes. ‘Do you think she might have gone out with friends?’ I asked.

‘She doesn’t have any,’ he said. ‘I tell her to go meet people, but she won’t. Her teachers are all worried. She spends too much time alone.’

Nothing wrong with that, I thought, but kept it to myself.

‘She might have gone for a walk...’ Roger said. ‘But she doesn’t, I mean she only really leaves for school. Besides, she knew she had to stay here in case a guest turned up. I don’t think she would go.’

‘No, I doubt that.’

Roger gave me a confused look. In answer, I walked to the front door and pointed at the tracks. ‘They weren’t here when we left,’ I said. ‘They’re still warm, and there was a car down the road as we walked back. My guess? She went with whoever was driving it.’

‘Why would she?’ Roger said.

‘Well,’ I leaned against the door frame, trying to think. ‘Either she knew them, or they didn’t give her any choice.’

‘Why would anyone take my daughter?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I really don’t.’

‘She... she was always writing things. Taking notes. Do you think she made someone angry?’

‘That...’ I frowned. ‘That’s actually very possible. Speaking from experience.’

‘What do you-‘

‘With your permission I’d like to have a look at her room,’ I said. ‘Let’s see if we can find anything.’ *Like a book, perhaps.*

Roger said nothing for a moment. He stared at me, and when he spoke, there was suspicion in his voice. ‘You talk like an investigator.’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘Fires need investigating too.’

‘Right.’ He nodded, but he was still giving me a strange look. ‘Okay. Let’s go.’

Together we went back up the stairs to her room. Opening the door, I was careful to pay closer attention this time. There was a single poster on the wall, of four young men with bowl cuts, holding an assortment of instruments.

‘Who are they?’ I asked.

‘Some new band,’ Roger said. ‘They just sound like noise to me.’

I turned my attention to the pile of notes. I crouched beside them and picked up the first one. Through Clarissa’s almost illegible handwriting, I could make out a variety of words. *Eyebrows shorter. Mouth wider. Guitar misses occasional note when live. Weaker vocals.* None of that made sense. I moved on to the next one, but had no better luck. *Coding in record? Perhaps. Will listen again. Results of lookalike contest inconclusive.*

I handed the papers to Roger. ‘What do you make of these?’

Brow furrowed, he thumbed through them. ‘Apart from being about the Bugs, I can’t tell.’

‘Bugs?’

‘The band.’ He nodded to the poster. ‘She’s written it at the top here. No idea what she’s talking about though.’

I stood and took the papers from him. Indeed, the word Bugs was scrawled in the top corner of each sheet. I looked down at the pile of records. The top one showed the four young men smiling, leaning over a balcony. The band name was at the top, and a title across the bottom named the record *Big Guns*. I picked it up; the one beneath was the Bugs too. And the next, and the next. ‘Clarissa really likes this band.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Roger replied. ‘If she’s not reading, she’s listening to their music. The same damn songs over and over again.’

I reached out and flicked the switch on the record player. Immediately, the sounds of banging drums and guitar sounded, with a voice warbling something I could not make out. The song stopped suddenly. The same part played again. Then again. I saw a crack running down the record.

‘It’s broken,’ Roger said. ‘Has been for ages. But she still listens to it.’

I closed my eyes and tried to hear what the singer was saying.

‘Keep the truth buried.’

I shivered. The same line, over and over. Why was Clarissa listening to this?

‘What else do you know about this band?’ I asked.

‘They’re loud.’

‘This might seem like a strange question, but has Clarissa ever actually said she likes them?’

‘Well...’ Roger looked uncertain. ‘She must do. They’re all she listens to.’

‘But she never *said* she liked them.’

‘Not that I can remember.’

I turned back to the poster. Something seemed a bit strange about it. I walked closer and noticed then that the face of one particular band member was surrounded by almost imperceptible marks. On closer inspections, they seemed to be numbers.

‘Measurements,’ I whispered.

‘What?’ Roger said.

‘She’s measuring parts of his face,’ I pointed out the numbers to Roger. ‘Why?’

‘Because she thinks he’s good looking?’ Roger suggested. ‘I don’t know. Isn’t that what teenage girls do?’

‘Measure people’s faces?’ I looked down at the papers again. *Eyebrows shorter. Mouth wider.* I knelt beside the record again, picked up the top one and looked at the date on the back. 1965. This year. I pulled out the next one down. 1964. I pulled out the bottom one. 1960. This had just the four faces of the band on a black background. I looked closely at the man Clarissa had drawn all over on the poster.

She had done the same here. Not with the same detail, but there were little lines beside his mouth. I held the record up, with the most recent one right next to it. I looked between the two photos, paying close attention to the one man. He looked almost the same. I squinted at one, then the other. It was barely perceptible, and I might have been

imagining it, but his mouth did seem wider in the second image.
'Strange.'

'What is?' Roger asked.

I looked up, surprised. I had almost forgotten he was there. 'She's making comparisons between this man five years ago and today.'

'Why?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.' I returned to the papers on the floor. The next one down had nothing but a name and address on it. 'Do you know a Penelope Carey?'

'No. Why?'

'Because Clarissa has her details written here.' I got to my feet. 'Might be worth paying her a visit.'

'Well let's go,' he said, heading for the door.

'Wait,' I said.

Roger stopped, his expression impatient.

'I'm going alone,' I said.

He stared at me, stunned. 'Excuse me?'

'I... it's nothing personal, but I don't work well with others.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Roger demanded.

'It means that if I'm going to find your daughter, I need to do it alone.' I kept my voice level as Roger approached me.

'She's my daughter. Why the hell would I not come with you?'

'What if she comes home?' I said. 'You need to be here. Besides, finding people like this... it's a skill of mine.'

'You're a firefighter,' Roger said.

‘No,’ I replied with a feeble smile. ‘I’m a journalist.’

There was silence for a moment. Roger looked as though he had been slapped.

‘This is what I do. I investigate things and find answers. Your daughter has obviously stumbled on something.’ I held up the papers.

‘And I suspect someone kidnapped her. So whatever is going on here, I am the best person you could have on your side helping you find her.’

‘And why should I trust you?’

‘Because right now, I’m what you’ve got.’

He looked at me for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was soft. ‘You think you can bring her home?’

‘I know I can.’

‘Okay.’ He nodded. ‘Okay. Go.’

I hurried out of the room, papers in hand. Roger followed me down the stairs. ‘How do you know where to start?’

‘Easy,’ I said. ‘I just have to find this Penelope Carey person. Shouldn’t be too tricky, I just have to take a little trip to...’ I looked at the paper and stopped dead in my tracks.

‘Where?’ Roger pressed.

‘Greenville,’ I muttered.

Great.

Following the river revealed that the rocky cliff eventually lowered enough to allow a rickety bridge to cross it. It was dark by the time I arrived on the town outskirts. I stopped my bike behind a low hill, dismounted, and then slowly crawled up the slope on my stomach. Once I had reached the top, I pulled out my binoculars and began the stakeout.

The lights were out in most of the houses, but one or two townsfolk were obviously still awake. I could see armed guards occasionally in my field of vision, clutching their rifles close as they looked for, presumably, me. Well, it was nice to know I had made an impression. What was not nice was trying to figure out a way back into the town. Worse still was that beyond sneaking in I had no clue what to do. Even if this Penelope Carey hadn't been among the mob that chased me out in the first place she might not even be of any help. I had no way of knowing if this venture into enemy territory would be worth it, but I had nothing else to go off.

So I stayed where I was and watched as minutes turned into hours. The guards passed every five minutes. I tried to gauge the distance between myself and the nearest house. I had never been particularly good at mental calculations. At a sprint it might be possible to cover the distance in time, but one glimpse of me and the guards would shoot. I wondered again whether this was even worth the risk. *It's just a stupid book—*

No. This was not about the book. This was about a girl's life. *You're doing this for Clarissa, Boone. That's it.*

The guard passed again. Well, there was no point in procrastinating. I scrambled over the hill and began to run, keeping my focus on barrelling forward, feet pounding the grassy ground. The town was inching closer, but I could feel my muscles starting to hurt. I gritted my teeth. Then my feet slipped on the wet grass and I landed painfully on my face in the dirt. Not good enough. I forced myself to stand and keep going. The house I was aiming for was closer than ever and finally my feet found pavement and I disappeared into the shadowy gap between houses.

I stood there a moment, trying to catch my breath. The guards would pass again any second. I looked around; where to now? I pulled the paper with the address from my pocket and checked it again. *Penelope Carey, 3 Tree Street.*

I edged along the gap, and saw a street of flowery gardens and immaculate lawns ahead of me. With one quick glance around to make sure I was alone, I hurried out of my safe little alcove and darted down the road to the next turn off; Leaf Place. I kept going. Algae Road was next, then Grass Avenue and finally, at the very end, Tree Street. I stopped and checked my surroundings again. Stillness and silence. It was well past Greenville's bedtime.

Remaining wary, I started up the street, checking until I found number three. It was a small brick house with a bright white front door, bearing a heavy brass knocker. I stared at it for a moment. What now? I felt like kicking myself; I had to learn to think things through better. Even if Penelope Carey was not cut from the same psychopathic cloth

as her neighbours, it wasn't like she was obliged to help. That was assuming, of course, that she was actually linked to whatever was going on. My only hope was an appeal to basic human decency, and I was pretty sure that human decency didn't exist in Greenville.

Then I heard footsteps and voices from up the road. Without thinking I ran up the front steps to the door and tried to open it. Locked. Of course it was locked. Feeling increasingly frantic I looked around and noticed that the window off to the side was slightly ajar. I jumped off the steps, pulled the window open, grabbed the sill and shoved myself through, landing with a painful thud in a dark room. As I stood the lights came on and I was face to face with the barrel of a revolver. Behind it was a woman in a dressing gown. She could only have been a few years older than me but her careworn look undermined that.

I tried to smile as I raised my hands. 'Penelope Carey?'

'Boone Shepard.' Her voice was steely. 'Care to explain just what the hell you think you're doing?'

'Sure.' I took in my surroundings. I appeared to have landed in a sparse yet very neat kitchen. 'You can put down the gun. I'm not going to hurt you.'

'You don't need to reassure me.' She did not lower the weapon. 'You're not exactly threatening.'

'A tender bruise to the ego,' I said. 'Put the gun down, please. I need your help.'

She looked at me for a moment, expression unreadable, then dropped her arm.

I took the paper out of my pocket and handed it to her. ‘I found your name and address in the room of a girl who I suspect has been kidnapped. Her name is Clarissa Everest.’

She looked at the paper with a frown. ‘Never heard of her.’

‘So why has she written down your name?’

‘I’m asking the same question.’ She sat at the kitchen table, still perusing the paper. I watched her face carefully, trying to see if there was a hint of a lie there.

‘You say she was kidnapped,’ Penelope said. ‘Why?’

‘Well, I suspect it has something to do with a band called the Bugs,’ I said. ‘Ever heard of them?’

She snorted. ‘No, of course not. I’ve never heard of the Bugs.’

‘Are you being sarcastic?’

Penelope gave me an incredulous look. ‘Have you been living under a rock?’

‘Kind of.’

‘A journalist who isn’t familiar with the most famous band in the world. No wonder this town figured you out.’

‘Why does your name crop up in a whole pile of notes about this band?’ I pointed to the paper. ‘You’ll see their name written in the top corner there. So what’s the connection?’

A look of confusion came of her face. ‘This girl connected me to the Bugs?’

‘Any idea why?’

‘None. I mean, I like a couple of their songs, but that’s it.’

‘So you can’t think of anything?’ I sat across from her. ‘No tiny little link?’

‘Back up a second. What makes you think the Bugs have anything to do with this girl disappearing?’

‘Her room was full of notes about them,’ I said. ‘And I know investigative notes when I see them. She was looking into something, and I think somebody had a problem with that. So the big question is; what does any of this have to do with you?’

The lines on her face deepened as she closed her eyes, obviously wracking her brain. I waited in silence. *There has to be something. Come on.*

Penelope’s eyes opened. ‘I can think of one thing. But I doubt it has anything to do with this.’

‘Yes?’ I leaned forward.

‘There was a lookalike contest—’

At that exact moment came a knock at the door. Penelope froze, eyes wide as she looked from me to the door. ‘Under the table,’ she whispered. ‘Now.’

I did not need telling twice. I slid out of my chair and under the table as Penelope got to her feet and approached the door. ‘Who is it?’

‘Mrs McCurdles dear,’ the frail sounding voice responded. ‘Can I come in?’

I heard the door open and the sound of shuffling footsteps as she came inside. ‘How can I help you?’ Penelope asked.

‘I just noticed that your lights were still on,’ the old bat said. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Penelope said. ‘Just couldn’t sleep is all.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that dear. Would you like me to make you a cup of tea?’

‘No, it’s fine, really.’

I was trying hard to keep completely still. *Why was everyone in this town an interfering psychopath?*

‘Come now dear. A cup of tea can fix just about anything. Have a seat and I’ll make one for you.’

‘No, look, I was just about to go to bed.’

‘This will help. Have a seat. Go on.’

Even from my awkward position, I knew exactly what expression was on Penelope’s face as she sat and I shuffled to the side to avoid her legs. I could hear Mrs McCurdles fussing over the kettle in a way that sounded far too elaborate for your standard, run of the mill cup of tea.

‘Do you have any honey, dear?’

‘In the fridge.’

‘Good, good. My tea is better with honey. Now, it might just be my old hearing, but were you talking to someone just before?’

A heavy silence fell over the room. I stopped breathing.

‘No,’ Penelope said, voice level. ‘Not at all.’

‘Are you sure? I could have sworn I heard a man’s voice in here.’

‘No idea what that was about.’ Penelope gave a weak laugh. ‘Must have been your imagination.’

There was nothing but the sound of a teaspoon clinking against the mug. When Mrs McCurdles spoke again, her voice was low. ‘Here’s that tea, dear.’

‘Wait, I just remembered,’ Penelope said. ‘I wanted to get your advice on what I’ve been doing with my garden. You seem to be the person to talk to.’

‘I might know a thing or two.’

‘Yeah, well I just want to know if it looks right. While you’re here, do you maybe want to come out the back and have a quick peek?’

I crossed my fingers.

‘Well, I suppose it can’t hurt. You can enter it in the competition this year, finally! Won’t that be exciting?’

‘Very,’ Penelope said through what sounded like gritted teeth.

‘I doubt you’ll beat mine though! Although dear old Agnes has been getting very good lately...’

I heard the scrape of the chair as Penelope stood. ‘Right through here.’

I waited for the voices and footsteps to recede. Once I was sure the room was empty, I crawled out from under the table and strode to the front door. I would hide outside and return once Mrs McCurdles had gone back to her cave, dungeon, or wherever she kept her coffin. I grabbed the door handle and pulled it open...

...only to be faced with my dear old friend the town pastor, his crossbow aimed directly at my head and a wide grin on his bony face.

‘Hello there Mr Shepard,’ he said. ‘Time for some holy confession, don’t you think?’

6

It was early morning when the mayor came for me. I had been frogmarched to the police station and thrown into a concrete cell with nothing but a single bench for comfort. I had settled against the cold wall in the corner as I waited for my fate to be decided. Strangely, I didn’t feel scared. Just worn out. If I had more energy maybe I would have been angrier with myself for just blundering into Greenville with no plan or notion of what to expect. But I just felt horribly sorry about Roger and Clarissa’s situation. I might not have been my fault, but already I had messed up my chance of fixing things. *Typical, Boone. You haven’t learnt anything. You’re just a stupid meddling child with no idea of what you’re doing. She would be ashamed of you.*

By the time Mayor Oxley arrived outside my cell, I felt like I’d been run over by a large steamroller with spikey wheels. It was a feeling that the Mayor did not make any better.

‘Well, well, well Mr Shepard,’ he said, face set in a smug smile. ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’

I shrugged.

‘Shut up; I’m gloating.’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘So, just what is to be done with you?’

‘Something involving physical violence?’

‘Good guess!’ He clapped. ‘Whoever said journalists were stupid?’

‘Whoever did say that?’

‘Silence! I’m not finished.’

‘Sorry. Go on.’

‘Shepard, you have managed to upset my whole town. How does that make you feel?’

‘Wracked by guilt.’

‘I have had to do a lot of consoling. It’s all been very emotionally trying.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘Naturally you need to be punished.’

‘Brilliant.’

The Mayor’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you being sarcastic?’

‘Am I?’ I adopted an innocent expression. ‘Hadn’t noticed.’

He scowled. ‘I don’t like your attitude, Shepard.’

‘It’s my second worst feature.’

The Mayor slammed his hands against the bars. ‘Damn it Shepard! I’m trying to have a serious conversation about your imminent demise! Stop being foolish!’

I made a zipping gesture across my mouth.

‘Good,’ he growled. ‘So, what do you think would be an adequate punishment?’

‘Let me go so I can think about what I’ve done?’

‘Shut UP!’ The Mayor snarled. ‘I did not ask you to speak!’

‘Well—’

‘ENOUGH!’ He was starting to wheeze from the exertion. He stared me down with his bulging eyes. I smiled sweetly up at him.

‘You’re going to hang,’ he said. ‘Midday today. You’re going to hang by the neck until you’re dead.’

‘Hanging is still a thing?’

‘As you will soon find out, very much so.’

‘Right.’ I frowned. ‘So, um, what is my crime exactly?’

The Mayor looked confused. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Well, you’re putting me to death,’ I said. ‘Which is a fairly harsh thing to do to someone. I’m just a little fuzzy on what exactly my crime is.’

‘Well...’ I could almost see the very few brain cells in his oversized head working hard to come up with an answer. ‘Your crime, is, uh, is being a meddling fool journalist.’

‘Oh, good. Here I was worried that it wouldn’t make sense.’

‘You’ve disturbed the peace of my town.’

‘Greenville is certainly peaceful. No, you’re very right Mayor. I’m getting exactly what I deserve.’

‘I’m glad we see eye to eye on this.’ The Mayor beamed.

‘Just, uh, just one little thing though...’ I said slowly. ‘I just can’t help but think of all the townsfolk who I’ve upset. I mean, invading privacy and all that. It’s a pretty horrific crime. I’d hang me. The only issue there is that you’re kind of depriving the town of the chance to sentence me themselves, aren’t you?’

The Mayor stared at me, open mouthed.

‘Really,’ I went on, starting to feel more confident, ‘don’t you think the townsfolk are going to be more satisfied if they get to state their cases and deliver the sentence? Obviously I’ll still hang, so it’s just a technicality, but give them a trial and imagine how much they’re going to like you? After all, a town that hangs criminals together, um, you know, probably hangs more criminals together.’

The Mayor had a look on his face that I suppose qualified as thoughtful. ‘You do raise a good point, Shepard. A very good point.’

‘I like to help out.’

‘Very well.’ He drew himself up to his full height. ‘A trial you shall have. Then you hang. I’ll be back in an hour.’ With one last nod to me, he turned and waddled away up the hall.

I let out a relieved breath. A trial would give me the chance to try to sway opinion away from the whole killing me business. Not that that chance looked especially promising.

Despite sitting there trying to pull some kind of genius escape plot from my tired brain, nothing came, and by the time the town’s two policemen arrived to escort me to my trial I still had nothing. The whole walk from the station and down the main street of the town I did not speak, concentrating on my rather large problem. But still no solution. This was very, very far from good.

We arrived in the cobblestoned town square to find what appeared to be the entire population of Greenville crowded around a set of gallows. As far as devices used for killing people went, this was a particularly

nice contraption; there were several flowerpots around the base and the town children had evidently been allowed to paint pictures of animals, houses and other things all over it. *A community that hangs criminals together...*

‘There he is!’ someone bellowed, and suddenly the whole town was hurling abuse at me, as the police tried to lead me through the press of angry people. I forced a smile and a few nods of acknowledgement as I reached the centre of the throng and was forced up the stairs on to the platform, where Mayor Oxley was already waiting. The noose was hanging beside my head. It was all just a little bit disconcerting.

Oxley raised his hands and the yelling of the crowd lowered to a disgruntled murmuring. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today for the trial of this man.’ He pointed at me. ‘A gossip mongering damn journalist!’

A jumble of angry cries came from the crowd.

‘Now please forgive my language,’ the Mayor said. ‘But I am sure you understand the rage that this man makes me feel.’

The crowd cheered. I scanned the faces I could see. There was Mrs McCurdles, jumping up and down with joy, the town pastor was busy crossing himself... but there was no sign of Penelope.

‘We found him last night invading the house of one of our own,’ the Mayor said. ‘He had the nerve to come back here after we drove him out last time. Well I say NO MORE MERCY!’

The crowd went completely wild.

‘Firstly, I would like to invite some witnesses up here,’ he said. ‘Starting with you, Agnes.’

I wasn’t familiar with that name. In fact, I was pretty sure that I had never seen the short, fat old woman struggling up the stairs in my life. Out of breath, she reached the top, made a rude hand gesture at me, and then turned to the crowd.

‘I met Boone Shepard when he first arrived in this town,’ she began, in her weedy, frail voice. ‘He said he was just a visitor, and he asked me all about my business and my family. Then, I found out that he had written an article about me and sent it to London to run on the front page!’

A collective gasp came from the mob.

Agnes wiped away a tear. ‘He said all sorts of horrid things about my bunions, and claimed that my turnip stew was, and I quote, ‘not very nice’.’

The pastor crossed himself again.

‘Okay, sorry,’ I said. ‘But that literally never happened. I don’t even know who this woman is.’

I was answered by a rotten tomato hitting me in the face. The crowd laughed.

‘Who threw that?’ The Mayor demanded. ‘What selfish idiot is keeping all the tomatoes to themselves? You share them!’

‘What do you not get about this?’ I said. ‘Why would I write an article about her? She’s dead boring!’

Silence. Mrs McCurdles fainted. Agnes' eyes had gone wide. The pastor seemed to be praying under his breath.

'So,' the Mayor turned to me, eyes gleaming. 'We're boring now?'

'Hang him!' someone screamed.

'I think,' the Mayor said, 'that this trial is over.' He turned to the two policemen. 'Get the noose around his neck.'

I tried to struggle, but the police were too strong. One of them held me in place as the other one secured the rope around my neck.

'Alright, come on,' I said, my heart beginning to race. 'This is ridiculous.' I could barely speak through the tightness of the rope.

'The journalist hangs!' the Mayor called over the roaring crowd.

I had gone ice cold. There had to be a way out of this, I always found a way out. The crowd weren't listening though. I was seeing flashes of them; Mrs McCurdles had come to and was back to her excited jumping, a little old man was dancing on the spot, a father had lifted his son on to his shoulder to get a better look.

Then the sound of a gunshot silenced the mob and I felt the rope around my neck go slack. I looked around, bewildered, then heard the familiar buzz of my motorbike and the crowd scattered as Penelope Carey, sped right up to the foot of the gallows, hair blowing in the wind with a smoking gun in her hand. The bike screeched to a halt. Expression determined, she pointed the gun directly at the bemused Mayor. 'Boone, get the hell on.'

Feeling as though my legs were about to give way under me, I hurried down from the gallows and clambered on behind her, flinging

my arms around her waist. With one last look around at the psychotic town, the motorbike screeched back into life and we were gone.

7

We did not stop until we were far, far away from Greenville. The whole ride, I kept my eyes closed and tried to calm myself down. I was free. I had escaped. It was far from the first time I had come close to death, but it was not exactly something you got used to.

Penelope finally brought the bike to a halt by the side of a road next to the tall, shadowy canopy of a large orchard. I dismounted and sat, feeling that awful tiredness return.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked, getting off the bike herself.

‘Why would you want to live in a town like that?’

‘I’m a teacher. Got to go where the work is.’

‘You’re not murderous. I don’t know how you fit in there.’

‘Never really did. But I couldn’t leave.’

‘Why not?’

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. ‘I was hoping Donald would come back.’

‘Donald?’

‘My fiancé.’ She sat beside me on the grass. ‘Donald Gemmell. He went missing a couple of years ago. We were both teachers, so we moved to Greenville to work at their school. Donald taught music, I

taught maths.’ A distant look had come over her face. ‘Greenville obviously was not where either of us wanted to be, but it was okay. Then one day Donald just vanished without a trace. He had left work early, and when I got back home was gone. No note, no clue as to what happened. The police were useless, and nobody had seen anything, so nothing could really be done. I spent a year going around to all the nearby towns and asking if anyone had seen him. I even went to London. Eventually I realised that I would just have to wait in Greenville and hope he would return.’ There were tears in her eyes now. ‘He vanished two weeks before we were meant to be married.’

I could hear birds and the sound of wind rustling the trees. ‘I’m sorry.’

She wiped her eyes. ‘When you told me what happened to this Clarissa girl... it sounded very similar to Donald’s situation.’

‘Was Donald investigating the Bugs too?’

‘No, nothing like that. But there is a link. About a week before he vanished he entered this lookalike contest for one of the members of the band, Hunter Eccleston. People always thought there was a resemblance, but I never saw it.’

‘Did he win?’

‘Yeah, and for that week it was all he talked about.’ She looked over at me. ‘Do you think that might have anything to do with all this?’

‘Not sure. I mean, I don’t see how it can be connected, but at the same time I’m not about to rule out anything that could help.’ I got to

my feet. Tiredness be damned, this mystery was dominating my thoughts again. ‘Tell me about the Bugs.’

‘What do you want to know?’

I started to pace. ‘Anything and everything.’

‘Well, I’m no expert,’ she began, ‘but they started up about five years back. They’re English, and they used to sing a lot of really happy, bouncy kind of songs. They sort of do darker things now. There are four members; Michael McManus and Hunter Eccleston are the lead two. They write all the songs and do most of the vocals, as far as I know. Then there’s the bassist, Kevin Cox, and the drummer, Jimmy Bongo. Anyway, beyond that I’m not sure what else to tell you. They’re pretty catchy, but I never thought they were too special.’

‘I’ll have to get my hands on the music,’ I said, almost to myself.

‘Could you explain to me just how you aren’t familiar with them?’ Penelope asked. ‘I’m not a fan and I know that much. They’re huge. You must have heard of them somewhere.’

‘I do a lot of travelling. I don’t really know much of what’s going on.’

‘You work for a newspaper.’

‘Just call me out of the cultural loop. The issue at hand is, what was Clarissa investigating, and why would it get her kidnapped?’

‘Apparently the band has some secrets.’

‘Secrets that might have resulting in two missing persons cases. So who’s doing the kidnapping? The band?’

‘A bunch of wealthy airheads? Doubt it. If anything, I’d put my money on an agent or a manager.’

‘So what have they got to hide?’

‘People with a lot of money usually have a lot of skeletons in their closets. I doubt the Bugs are any different.’

‘The notes Clarissa was making...’ I tried to remember. ‘She was pointing out aspects of this man’s face. Differences between him five years ago and him now. She’d scribbled all over him on her posters and record covers.’

‘People do age,’ Penelope said dryly. ‘His face probably does look different.’

‘But enough to make notes on...’ I muttered, trying to think. ‘If he...’

The idea hit me like a blow to the head, and suddenly all my tiredness was gone. I turned to Penelope. ‘I need the exact date Donald went missing.’

‘Why?’ she asked, a suspicious look on her face.

‘Just tell me.’ I hurried to the back of my bike, opened my bag and removed my notebook and a pen.

‘February 6, 1963,’ Penelope said, standing.

I scrawled it down and put the book back into my bag. ‘Alright. I might have something.’ I started to get back on my bike.

‘Wait,’ Penelope stood in front of me, placing a hand on the handlebars. ‘Where are you going?’

‘London. I’m going to find answers.’

‘Then I’m coming with you.’

I shook my head. ‘No. I’m sorry, but I don’t do partners.’

‘I saved your life!’ Her expression was incredulous.

‘You did. And I appreciate that. But I’m sorry; I can’t take you.’

‘He’s my fiancé,’ she hissed. ‘If you know something...’

‘I don’t know anything,’ I replied. ‘Just a hunch. But if I find an answer, you will be the first to know. I promise.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘No. You can’t leave.’

I revved the engine. Penelope jumped back, shocked.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But I promise you I will find him.’ I pushed forward the accelerator and shot up the road before Penelope could say another word. I thought I could hear her yelling after me, but I paid it no attention. My thoughts were racing and I needed answers.

Why would the Bugs replace Hunter Eccleston with Donald Gemmell?

8

I hate London.

It had not always been that way. Once I had found the city exciting; full of possibilities and promises, a thrilling beacon for me to head towards after what I had come from. Once the alleys, side streets, buildings and smoky air had filled me with a sense of hope. I didn’t care that it was dirty, smoggy or rundown in places. I didn’t care that it

was full of awful people being unlikeable. What it meant to me outweighed anything else.

Once I had felt that way. Once, before a gunshot, before blood in the snow, before a desperate flight. A tiny moment that changed everything and turned the city of my future into a place I went to deliver articles and get paid. Now, racing along the busy roads, past towering buildings, people yelling out of car windows, bustling shops and the filthy Thames, all I could think about was how much I just couldn't wait to be gone again.

The headquarters of the *Chronicle* newspaper had remained pretty much unchanged since construction in the 1800s. Four stories high, made out of grey granite with gnarled gargoyles looming over every corner; the wide, stately front entrance stood at the top of a staircase, with a date engraved above it. I watched from across the road as people hurried in and out, talking fast to each other, all determined to get stories in before the evening edition. Technically my colleagues, and I didn't recognise a single one of them. I didn't really consider myself an employee of the *Chronicle* anymore. I had sort of just done my own thing over the last year; finding stories and writing them when they came up, living off the occasional payments that came directly from my boss, the rotund Lord Rasputin Huxley VIII.

Hands in pockets, I crossed the road, ducking around the cars that barrelled past. I nodded to the determined looking journalists rushing past as I entered the gigantic marble front hall. The walls were covered in awards and framed pages from particularly big events dating back to

the very beginnings of the paper. I didn't look at any of them; too many painful reminders. I despised this building. I wanted to see it knocked down and replaced with something ugly and modern with no link to the past. Then I could visit without feeling like I was being stabbed in the heart.

Flashing my identification card at the large reception desk, I pushed through the door into the messy expanse of desks, printers, papers and people barking furious orders to each other. The air smelled of ink and warm paper. I kept my head down and walked all the way to the end of the huge room where, easy to miss in the corner, there was an elevator. I pressed the 'down' button and waited, avoiding eye contact with anyone lest I was asked to do something. With the ringing of a bell the elevator arrived, the door opened and I stepped inside. I pressed the level I wanted and waited as it descended into the basement, irritating music crackling from the tinny speakers.

I stepped out into a tiny, brick walled room with nothing but an iron door in the wall across from me. I removed a large key from my back pocket and, with some fumbling, unlocked the heavy padlock keeping it closed. I took hold of the handle and, straining against the weight of the door, pulled it open. The hinges shrieked in protest but finally it gave way.

In front of me was a warehouse sized room. It was full of towering mountains of papers, books, and pretty much anything else that anybody thought was worth saving. There was no real organisation here; just winding, narrow paths between the paper behemoths. They

stretched right up to the high roof. It was always daunting coming here for anything. People had been known to disappear. But I had to begin my investigation somewhere, and the archives seemed to make sense. I knew that the mounds were arranged by alphabet, and as I had only recently been trying to find something important in the B section I knew exactly where to look.

So I began, following the tiny clear path into the confusion. The room was dead silent, in a way that was actually eerie. So much history and memory was stored in here and the archives never made a sound. Every step I took echoed between the paper towers. I shivered. I wished I had a better chance of keeping this visit quick, but I doubted I would be so lucky. The B section was located more or less in the centre of the room; a twisting, towering mass of documents all pertaining to the letter B. If the Bugs really were as famous and huge as everyone said then there ought to be a lot in here worth seeing.

I stood in front of the stack for a moment, preparing myself for the task ahead. It was a very big pile of paper. I tried to get my fledgling hypothesis straight in my head. Hunter Eccleston was replaced with Donald Gemmell. It sounded impossible, but between the lookalike contest and Clarissa's comparisons it made sense. The problem was that it created a whole heap of new questions. Was Donald coerced or did he go willingly? What happened to Hunter Eccleston? I didn't know what I might find here, if anything, but it was the only place I had to start.

I approached the papers, now beginning to realise just what I had gotten myself into. I reached out and picked up the first newspaper on the pile, looking at the headline. *Beach ball Factory Strike!* Not even close. I picked up the next one. *Dancing Bears in Oxford.* No, no good. Aside from the respect I was losing for my own newspaper, I had realised that I would be here a very long time before finding anything useful. I started tearing through the papers faster, but there was nothing of note to be found. Just hundreds of articles about boats, bamboo, blackboards, beds, bombs and breakfasts. Hours passed. I was worn out and sweaty, my hands dark with smudged ink. At one point I actually dozed off for a while, cushioned by the papers, but I was soon awake again and searching.

I don't know how long I was there before I finally found an article about the Bugs. I had been looking for so long that the word seemed almost impossible. I stared at it, mouth hanging open, trying to clear my head of what felt like an eternity of B words. Now, finally, here was what I had been looking for. *Bugs Concert Drives Fans Wild!* I scanned the text. Evidently the Bugs had had a concert that had driven some fans wild. Alright. I dropped the article, ready to kick something, only to realise that every paper in front of me was Bugs related.

I sat, cross legged, and began to read. Most of the articles were about concerts, but here and there were more interesting snippets. Michael McManus had made some offensive religious comment, Hunter Eccleston had left his wife, Jimmy Bongo had been allowed to write a song for a new album. It was about a manatee. Riveting as all this was,

there was nothing that gave me any idea of what had prompted a replacement. What it did give me an idea of was just how popular these people were. Fans turned out in droves for the concerts, and each new album was an event. Every tiny little bit of gossip or news about their lives was met with worldwide attention, and yet somehow I had missed all of it. Actually, I had a pretty good idea of how I had managed that, but it still seemed strange to be so unaware of something so big.

Then, at the bottom of an article dated January 25, 1963, something caught my eye. The piece was about a television interview the band had done, but there was a disclaimer. Hunter Eccleston was not present, as he was recovering from minor injuries sustained in a car accident. I looked at the date again. Eleven days before Donald Gemmell's disappearance and presumably only a couple of days before the lookalike contest. Had Hunter been killed in this accident and hurriedly replaced? It seemed more trouble than it was worth. I would keep it in mind, but I wasn't convinced it was a lead that went anywhere.

As I went to pick up the next paper I realised that something had changed. A new smell had entered the room and it was setting off alarm bells in my head. I got to my feet. Then I heard crackling and realised that I was in very big trouble. I grabbed an armful of papers I had not yet been through and started to run. I glanced back just in time to see flickering tongues of flame appear around the edges of the B pile. I ran faster towards the exit. The thickening smoke was stinging my eyes and I was struggling to breathe. My foot caught on a stray book and my legs flew out from under me. I was on my back, staring up at the roof, feeling

walls of heat closing in around me. I looked back. The fire had completely engulfed the B pile and was moving on to the next one. Ignoring the papers I had dropped I rolled onto my front and started to crawl forward as fast as I could. The crackling had turned into a thundering roar of sound. I couldn't see or hear anything. I could smell nothing but smoke. I tried and failed to force air into my lungs. I could feel myself about to faint.

Then something took hold of the back of my shirt and tugged me up. My hands and feet left the ground and I was airborne. I could hear something else beside the fire now, some kind of strange whirring sound. Wind and smoke raced past me as I went higher and higher.

Then I heard the loud sound of shattering glass and I was suddenly breathing fresh air. I opened my watering eyes to see what looked like the street outside the *Chronicle*. People were yelling and pointing at the fire, which was beginning to pour from the small broken window at ground level. I was still ascending, over the street, over the roof of the *Chronicle*. Then whatever was holding me let go and I landed on the tiled roof harder than I would have liked. I lay there a moment, taking huge, grateful breaths. *I'm alive*. I sat up. Ahead of me I could see the endless grey expanse of London, ominous looking clouds above all of it. Below, shouts and the now distant sounds of the fire.

I got to my feet and turned. What I saw surprised me; a small gyrocopter with a metallic arm and pincer claw attached to the back. The vehicle was painted garish yellow with red stripes along it but I wasn't about to complain.

A woman was leaning against the front of the gyrocopter, looking with nonchalance at her fingernails. She was tall and slim, dressed in black jeans, boots and a black leather jacket. Her blonde hair was held out of her face by a large pair of goggles. She looked up at me with her wide blue eyes and mischievous smile.

‘Hello Boone Shepard,’ she said. ‘Nice to meet you. Now, I’d say you owe me one, wouldn’t you?’

9

‘Not to sound ungrateful,’ I said. ‘But who are you?’

‘Promethia Peters,’ she replied. ‘You may have heard of me.’

I tried to think. ‘No, doesn’t ring a bell.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Typical arrogant journalist. Can’t see anything past your name on the front page.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever been on the front page.’

She laughed. ‘Oh, of course not! What about *Eskimos Laundering Money in Stratford*, by Boone Shepard? Or, alternatively, *The Ongoing Trouble of Cowboy Shootouts in Manchester*, by Boone Shepard?’ She shook her head. ‘Don’t throw me your fake modesty.’

‘Those made the front page?’

She gave me a withering look. ‘Of course they did. Remember those awards for journalistic excellence you won?’

I was starting to feel a little embarrassed. ‘I never went to those ceremonies.’

‘Oh, I know,’ she said. ‘Huxley took great pride in accepting the awards for you.’

I was starting to wonder if I would have preferred being left in the fire. ‘Look, I hate to sound rude, but what do you want from me?’

‘What do I want from you?’ She adopted a thoughtful expression. ‘Hmm. Let’s see. Actually, I don’t even need to think about that. I want in on the Bugs story.’

I didn’t even have to pretend to be surprised by that. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Whatever it is you’ve got cooking up now,’ she said. ‘With the Bugs and the kidnapping of Clarissa Everest.’

Surprise had turned to confusion. ‘Alright, stop,’ I raised both my hands. ‘How do you know about any of this?’

‘What, because I’m not an award winning journalist I can’t follow a case?’

‘No, because it’s beyond me how you could have found out about any of it. Stop being sarcastic.’

‘Fine. I was following you.’

‘You were...’ I opened and closed my mouth, feeling dumbstruck. ‘You were following me? Why would you want to follow me?’

She shrugged. ‘Your charm and good looks. Oh, no, I can’t even say that with a straight face.’ She walked over to me, until we were almost nose to nose. She was slightly taller than I was, and I felt more than a little intimidated as she poked me in the chest. ‘I was following you

because I refuse to believe that you are somehow always able to find the story Huxley wants, no matter how strange or abstract it is. Most journalists get one great story their whole career. You get them all and leave none for the rest of us.'

'You're a journalist?'

'Photographer.'

'What's your problem then? You don't even write the stories!'

'A picture speaks a thousand words. Three photos can convey a story better than any of your three thousand word articles.'

I could hear the sirens of the fire brigade arriving. 'You're an idiot.'

'And you're a fake. What are we gonna do about it?'

'You think I make up my stories?'

'Initially I did, yeah. But the evidence backed you up. So I think you're stealing the stories.'

'You... what?' I could not believe what I was hearing.

'Keep up,' she said. 'I know you're a fraud. So I've been following you since before your little stay in Greenville, trying to catch you out.'

'Well now I know you're on to me,' I said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. 'So you've given the game away.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'Or maybe, chatting to Roger Everest after you vacated the premises of his, I realised that you were on to the biggest story of the year.' She walked back over to the gyrocopter and reached into the tiny cockpit, withdrawing a handful of papers. 'Clarissa Everest's notes. I got them all, then followed you on to Greenville. Snuck in in disguise to see your little escape—' she paused there,

smirking. ‘Oh, that reminds me. If you need to sneak into a town that wants you dead, disguise is better than blundering in at midnight.’ She withdrew a fake moustache from her pocket. ‘One of these goes a long way. Anyway, I followed your tracks and found Penelope Carey on the road. She was not too happy with you, being that you abandoned her in the middle of nowhere, so she told me everything in exchange for a lift. I would have got here sooner if I hadn’t been so chivalrous.’ She leant against her chopper again. ‘So, where does that leave us?’

‘Confused,’ I replied. ‘Totally confused. Do you want this story?’

‘I want a credit on this story,’ she said. ‘Then maybe Huxley will notice me and I’ll get to do more than photograph bake offs. So, I come along with you and in return I don’t tell Huxley you’re a fake.’

‘I’m not a fake.’

‘Yeah, and I’m not a genius.’

‘No, you don’t understand.’ I paused, trying to get my thoughts straight. ‘I’m not going anywhere with you. I work alone.’

‘Times change. You think I’m going to just leave a story this good?’

‘You...’ I could not believe what I was hearing. ‘You think this is about a story? As opposed to, oh, I don’t know, saving someone’s life?’

‘Spare me the bleeding heart rubbish. You’re a terrible actor.’

‘You’re not coming with me,’ I snapped. ‘And that’s that.’

‘Fair enough.’ She nodded. ‘I won’t come with you. You can travel alone. I’ll just happen to be going exactly the same direction as you.’

‘Look, Miss Peters—’

‘Promethia.’

‘Promethia—’

‘You seem to think you have a say in the matter.’

‘Funnily enough I do think that.’

‘That’s cute.’

‘You’re not coming!’ I was starting to feel very angry. ‘End of.’

She smiled sweetly. ‘I would very much like to see you try and stop me.’

I put my head in my hands, trying to stay calm. ‘And just what use do you think you’ll be? You’ll take photos of things. Great. Even if I wanted help on this, someone with anything resembling investigative skills would help.’

‘I found you, didn’t I?’

‘You followed my footsteps exactly!’ I cried. ‘How is that skilful? Tracing a Van Gogh doesn’t make you an artist!’

She laughed. ‘You are actually the most arrogant person in the world.’

‘Yeah, and you are actually certifiably insane,’ I retorted. ‘You’re not coming.’

‘You’re missing the point.’

‘Which is?’

She grinned. ‘You need me.’

‘And why is that?’

She reached into her pocket and withdrew two slips of paper. ‘Because I happen to have two tickets to tonight’s sold out Bugs

concert. And if you want to get up close and personal to the band, this may well be your best shot.'

10

I was still finding it hard to get my head around everything as we walked along the busy road towards the stadium. Mystery aside, I was pretty sure that by burning the archives someone was trying to destroy evidence, if it wasn't just an attempt to kill me. This alone was disturbing; it meant that someone other than Promethia had figured out what I was looking for. It also proved that whatever Clarissa knew was a secret that someone might stop at nothing to keep.

Unfortunately, it was hard to think with a loudly whistling, borderline psychotic photographer walking beside me. I glanced at Promethia. I needed her right up until the concert, and then I would find a way to give her the slip.

I could see the hulking metal stadium up ahead. Hundreds of people were milling about the entrances and even from this far away I could see their band t-shirts and hear their excited yelling. I had never known anybody to get so excited over musicians; it made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. *You're out of your depth, Boone Shepard.*

Promethia came to a halt and reached out a hand to stop me. 'Right. Battle plan time.'

'Battle plan?'

She turned to me. ‘We have to figure out what to do once we’re in there.’

This was a very good point. There was, after all, a fairly big gap between having concert tickets and getting close enough to the band to learn anything interesting. ‘Well, what have you got? I’m not much of a planner.’

‘Never could have guessed,’ she said dryly. ‘Okay, I do have an idea, but you’re gonna have to follow my lead, understand?’

‘Telling me the plan might help.’

She looked at me for a moment, and then shook her head. ‘Nah. You won’t like it.’

I opened my mouth to protest, but she cut me off. ‘We’re going to go in there, take our seats, then I’m going to excuse myself once the band starts up. You follow me five minutes later. Got it?’

I was a little concerned by this. ‘What are you going to do?’

She grinned. ‘Nothing life threatening. Just follow my lead.’

Before I had the chance to get any more information out of her, she turned on her heels and continued to stride toward the stadium.

I hurried after her. ‘You’re going to have to give me more than that.’

‘Nope.’

I stopped in my tracks. ‘Then I’m not coming.’

Promethia kept walking without looking back. ‘Your loss!’

This woman was incorrigible. I ran to catch up.

People in white shirts and red bow ties stood at the gates, checking tickets. I imitated Promethia here, having no idea what the protocol

was. Part of the ticket was ripped off and we were ushered through along with masses of babbling fans on to a steel staircase. Pushed, shoved and roughly manhandled, we were dragged along with the crowd up past a couple of ‘staff only’ doors and through to the seating area. I had to stop for a second to take it all in. There were slowly filling seats curved all the way round to the far end where a comparatively tiny stage was set up. Directly in front of this were a lot of people crammed in and standing, the people in front pressed up against the stage itself. I felt sorry for them; they must have bought the cheap tickets.

‘We’re over here,’ Promethia said, pointing to two empty seats. I followed her and we sat in the hard, uncomfortable plastic contraptions.

‘Is the band really that good?’ I asked.

‘What, you’ve never heard the Bugs before?’

‘Here and there.’ I did not want to have this conversation again, so I left it at that. The stadium was almost completely full now, and I had my doubts about the band being able to drown out the cascade of thrilled voices all around us.

Those doubts were unfounded.

A booming voice echoed across the stadium: ‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you’ve all been waiting for, the greatest band in the world, THE BUGS!’

It was like fifty bombs had gone off at once as the crowd reacted. On the distant stage, I saw four shapes enter, instruments in hand. I squinted, trying to see faces.

Promethia winked at me, got to her feet, and left the way we had come. Scowling, I returned my attention to the stage. I could barely even make out the four black suits from here, let alone any kind of detail. But I could certainly hear them. It was a clanging, rattling, screech of voices almost drowned out by the instruments. Around me the crowd were already on their feet, screaming and jumping about. I put my hands over my ears. This was meant to be music?

Enough was enough. I stood and pushed through the oblivious fans, heading straight to the staircase. Now somewhat separated from the racket, I breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Loving it?’ Promethia’s head popped out of a side door.

‘I’ll love it even more once I’ve had my ears surgically removed. Now, what exactly are you up to?’

‘Come have a look.’ She vanished into the room again.

Feeling more than a little apprehensive, I followed her. The room appeared to be a storage closet, full of mops, buckets and cleaning products. And in the corner...

A young man and woman were unconscious in the corner, both in their underwear, tied to each other with rope and gagged. Promethia held up a pile of clothes that appeared to be the white shirt and red bow tie combination that the staff here wore. ‘Get dressed.’

‘You...’ I could not tear my eyes away from the poor employees. ‘Why?’

‘You wanna get backstage or not?’ Promethia started to get undressed. I looked away. ‘Stop being a prude and get changed,’ she said. ‘We’ve got a couple of hours to find any links we can. Hurry up.’

Reluctant but unable to really disagree with her, I followed suit. After an awkward shuffle, we were both dressed in the poorly fitting uniforms. I rolled up my too long sleeves. Promethia was watching me with a smirk.

‘What?’

‘You look ridiculous.’

‘Says you,’ I retorted. Promethia’s outfit was too short in both the arms and legs; she looked like an overgrown child.

‘It’s not about appearances, Shepard. Now come on.’

With one last glance at Promethia’s victims, I trailed after her out the door and down the stairs. ‘So aside from brutalising innocents, do you have any kind of plan?’

‘Course I do. Who do you think I am, you? The plan is to get backstage. Is that acceptable?’

‘I don’t have any say, do I?’

‘Nope.’ Promethia pushed through the next staff door, revealing a long, dimly lit, dusty corridor. She gave me a questioning look. I responded with a resigned shrug.

‘That’s a unanimous vote,’ she said. ‘Let’s go.’

Together we began down the hall. A couple of identically dressed women passed us, giving a quick nod before continuing on their way. It seemed nobody had any reason for suspicion.

‘Any idea what you’re looking for?’ I asked.

‘Security guards,’ Promethia said.

‘And then what?’

‘Leave the planning to the smart ones, Shepard. Just keep your mouth shut and try to look pretty.’

Biting back a retort, I walked along with her in silence. We reached a side door. Promethia stuck her head in, and then closed it. ‘Bathroom,’ she said, and on we went. She repeated the process at the next door. ‘Kitchen.’ And the next. ‘Haberdashery.’ We reached a turn in the hall, rounded the corner and sure enough, it ended in a large set of double doors, in front of which stood two burly security guards. We quickly ducked back the way we had come.

‘Well?’ I looked at Promethia expectantly. ‘What’s your genius plan?’

‘Follow my lead,’ she said, and rounded the corner again. Highly doubtful about just how well this would all play out, I did the same. I could see both guards stand up a little straighter as we approached, adopting their best tough guy expressions. One of them actually cracked his knuckles.

‘Hello folks,’ Promethia said. ‘How are you?’

One of them grunted something that I assume was meant to be threatening. I gave my biggest grin in response.

‘We’re just here to tidy up the change rooms.’

Tidy up the change rooms? I resisted the urge to glare at Promethia. We had no idea what was behind that door.

‘I dunno,’ the second guard said, with a strained expression on his face. ‘Not meant to let no-one through here.’

‘But you know how precious these celebrities get,’ Promethia said. ‘And they’re all pigs, honestly. Trash the change rooms and then blame the rest of us for it when they get back. Who can be bothered putting up with that? Better we just get it done now, and then the band can leave and we’ll all just get on with our lives.’

The first guard fixed me with a narrow eyed gaze. I did not stop grinning.

‘Come on,’ Promethia said. ‘Trust us. We’re wearing bow ties.’

‘You do raise a fair point.’ The second guard nodded. ‘Head on through.’

They pushed the doors open and we walked on through into the biggest, messiest changing room I had ever seen. Rows upon rows of black suits hung on racks, while some were strewn across the floor. There were four mirrors on opposite walls, with makeup smeared all over them. Here and there were scrappy pages of sheet music.

Promethia turned to me with a relieved smile as the doors closed behind us. ‘See?’ She tapped her forehead. ‘I’m always right.’

‘Dumb luck,’ I said. ‘Now, what are we looking for?’

‘Anything.’ She slid the lock across the doors.

I began lifting up the suits on the floor. There was an unpleasant smell about them that I tried to ignore as I checked the pockets. I could see Promethia rifling through the desk drawers. I glanced at the doors,

wondering how long we had until the guards suspected something was up.

‘What do you think this is?’ Promethia turned to me, holding up a piece of paper.

‘Looks like fan mail.’

‘You reckon there could be something in it?’

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘I’m assuming you’re literate?’

‘I’m assuming you like having fully functioning fingers?’ She scanned the paper.

I walked over to the filthy mirrors and the cluttered tables. There were signed photos everywhere. From memory, this round faced man was Jimmy Bongo. I moved to the next desk. Kevin Cox’s was the same, as was Michael McManus’. I reached the table that Promethia was currently searching, which presumably belonged to Hunter Eccleston.

‘Strange,’ I muttered.

‘What?’ Promethia said.

I pointed to his table. ‘Look. No signed photos, no fan mail.’

‘There’s this,’ Promethia handed me a sheet of paper. It had only a series of numbers on it. ‘What do you think?’

I perused the paper. ‘I think these are—’

At that exact moment someone started banging on the doors. ‘Open up! A booming voice that I did not recognise called out. ‘We know you’re in there.’

‘Thought you could fool us!’ That was the guard. ‘We are mentally smart!’

Promethia and I looked at each other. ‘What do we do?’ she whispered.

‘Give me some paper—now!’

‘Why?’

‘Just do it!’

Promethia ran to the next desk, snatching up one of the fan letters. I studied the numbers in front of me closely.

‘What are you doing?’ she returned with the paper as the knocking and shouting from outside got louder.

‘These are coordinates,’ I said.

‘Well take them and let’s go!’ Promethia said. ‘There’s another door,’ she pointed to the opposite end of the room.

‘Hang on,’ I flipped the fan letter over and started scrawling numbers on the back. ‘If these are important coordinates, they’ll miss them. We’ll copy them down.’ I finished and handed the sheet to Promethia. ‘Okay, let’s go.’

The doors seemed about to collapse. ‘We’ve called the police!’ the new voice said. ‘You’re in big trouble!’

‘Yeah!’ one of the guards cried. ‘Trouble that is big!’

I started to bolt for the door, but something caught my ankle and I landed hard on my face. Wincing, I looked up to see Promethia’s smirk.

‘Sorry Shepard,’ she said. ‘But a shared credit isn’t really good enough for me. Have fun with the police. I’ve got a story to chase.’

With that, she vanished through the opposite door. I heard a screech from the other side as she moved something into the way. I was trapped. I looked back at the double doors. I could hear the guards repeatedly smashing into them, yelling all kinds of threats.

I got to my feet as the doors gave way with a crack and the two panting guards stumbled in, followed by a furious looking bald man in a dark suit.

‘Well,’ the man said. ‘Things aren’t looking good for you, are they Mr Shepard?’

11

The police station in London was a nice surprise after Greenville. I was even brought a coffee as I waited in a grey room with only a table, two chairs and a single swinging light bulb. I had no idea how long they would hold me, or if they would even let me go at all. I thought about Clarissa again. This was my own fault for going along with stupid, awful Promethia Peters. I should have known better than to trust a photographer. Of course she was going to sell me out the second she had a chance. That should have been obvious. Unfortunately, hindsight was doing me no favours here.

The door opened and the bald man from the stadium entered, pulling the door behind him. I heard the lock turn as the man fixed me with his piercing gaze. Up close he looked especially dangerous; he had heavy

black eyebrows and a face that was permanently lined from what must have been a lifetime of frowning.

‘Hello,’ I said.

The man did not speak. He continued to watch me, arms crossed over his chest.

I tried again. ‘Can I help you?’

He pulled out the opposite chair and sat, his unblinking gaze never leaving me.

‘You’re very intimidating,’ I said. ‘Top job. If there was an intimidating award, I bet you’d win it. Hands down.’

‘You think you’re funny, Shepard?’

‘He speaks!’ I flung my arms up in mock excitement.

The man leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. ‘That’s enough.’

I made a lip-zipping gesture.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘Harrington Stone. Manager of the Bugs.’

‘That’s a ridiculous name.’

‘Quiet.’ His tone remained low and menacing. ‘Now, it’s about time we had a little chat.’

‘Is it?’

‘Stop the games!’ he spat. ‘We both damn well know what I’m here regarding, so there’s no point in beating about the bush.’

‘I’m glad we agree. Although I have to say, trying to set me on fire was a bit of an extreme step.’

A look of momentary surprise crossed Stone’s face.

‘Oh yes,’ I went on, seeing my chance to take the upper hand. ‘I mean, very efficient. It was only yesterday that I started looking into this. You work fast Harry.’

‘Don’t call me Harry.’

‘Sorry Harry. But seriously, I’m impressed. Or rather, I would be if you weren’t a total idiot.’

Silence. Stone’s hands clenched into fists. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Clarissa Everest’s notes,’ I said. ‘You take the girl but leave her records. Now I’m no kidnapper, but that seems sloppy, doesn’t it?’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Except I never touched Clarissa Everest. I have no idea where she is.’

Now it was my turn to be surprised.

‘That’s not for lack of trying,’ he continued. ‘She was asking far too many questions. Then right when I make the choice to remove her, she vanishes. Naturally I was keeping a close eye on her, and then you pick up the trail. You, with much better resources than the girl, are a much more pressing problem, and you cannot be allowed to keep sticking your nose into this.’

I smiled. ‘I would love to see you stop me.’

‘I already have.’ An unpleasant smirk was coming over Stone’s face. ‘Being involved with the Bugs has its advantages, and money opens a lot of doors. Or closes them, in your case. Trespassing, conspiracy,

attempted theft.’ He ticked the crimes off on his fingers as he went. ‘Harassment, intended defamation in the case of Greenville and with the right amount of tweaking it would not be hard to make people question whether you had a hand in the disappearance of poor Clarissa. You won’t be leaving here for a very long time.’

‘Fair enough. So what if I was to tell the police what I know?’

‘And what do you know?’ Stone adopted an expression of wide-eyed innocence. ‘Some crackpot conspiracy theory? What evidence do you have? The notes of an obsessed fan? A two year old missing person case? A suspected murder with no hint of a motive? We are untouchable.’

‘Or maybe you just told me what I needed to know.’ I winked at him. ‘See, I never said anything about suspecting murder. But now, I have to say, I sure am suspecting it.’

For the first time, Stone seemed speechless. I leant back in my seat, arms crossed, looking far more confident than I felt.

Stone opened his mouth but before he could talk the door burst open and somehow the dark room was thrown even deeper into shadow by an enormous shape in the doorway. This man was huge; broad and fat and dressed in a grey, pinstriped three piece suit complemented by a top hat and a diamond-topped cane held in a hand shining with rings.

‘Harrington Stone,’ he boomed. ‘Fancy seeing you here, old friend.’

‘Rasputin,’ Stone stood, remaining impassive as he faced off with my boss. ‘It’s been a while.’

‘Still denying me that interview then?’ Lord Rasputin Huxley VIII chuckled. ‘I would pay well.’

‘Sadly my clients only do television.’

Huxley snorted with derision. ‘A passing fad. Now.’ He stepped further into the room, seeming to dominate the entire space. ‘How about you run along and let me berate my insolent employee here? Rest assured, I will see to his swift punishment.’

Stone looked as though he wanted to do anything but. Huxley graciously stepped aside and, with one last pointed glare in my direction, Stone stalked from the room.

Huxley turned to me. His tiny spectacles seemed disproportionate to his big face and even bigger sideburns. He raised a bushy eyebrow as he surveyed me. ‘Just what am I supposed to do with you, Boone?’

‘Give me a raise?’

He snorted. ‘Be grateful I’m even getting you out of here. Come on.’

‘I’m free to go?’

Huxley smiled. ‘Stone’s rich. I’m richer. Now let’s go. You have some explaining to do.’

Unable to believe my luck, I followed Huxley from the room. We walked down a corridor of wanted posters, past policemen and out on to the street. It was late at night now. Most of the shops were closed but there were still people making noise everywhere. Typical London.

‘So,’ Huxley said, as we walked down the stairs of the station. ‘Why the hell were you caught in the change room of the world’s most famous band?’

‘It’s a very long story,’ I said, as Huxley watched me expectantly. ‘But the simple version is that I am on to the biggest story of the year. Possibly the decade.’

‘And it’s to do with the Bugs?’

‘Oh yes. I promise you, this has everything. Murder, intrigue, kidnapping, controversy, fame, cover ups and best of all, it’s going to upset a lot of people.’

I could practically see the money in Huxley’s shining eyes. ‘Well, in that case, don’t let me slow you down. What’s your next step?’

‘I found some coordinates in the change room,’ I said, tapping my head. ‘Memorised them. Not sure where they lead, but it has to be a start, right?’

‘You’d best get moving then,’ Huxley said. ‘One more thing, though. The police said you were with someone else when you were caught. Someone who got away.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, wrinkling my nose. ‘Promethia Peters. A photographer.’

Huxley frowned. ‘Who?’

‘She works for The Chronicle. A complete nuisance.’

‘So you two would get on well then.’

‘Thanks sir.’

‘Is she chasing the same story?’

I laughed. ‘Oh yes. But she’s in for a bit of a nasty shock when she reaches the end of those coordinates I ‘copied’ down for her. A facility

dedicated to the fine art of teaching manatees how to juggle just doesn't have the same punch as a Bugs related murder, does it?'

Huxley chortled. 'Oh dear. But enough mirth. Go out and get me my damn story.'

'Yes sir.' I shook Huxley's hand. With one last wave, he waddled off towards his huge, waiting car.

Finally alone, I closed my eyes and tried to think. If the Bugs didn't take Clarissa then who did? Whatever had happened, the band was the only lead I had left. I thought over the coordinates again. I had no choice. I was going to have to follow this trail to the bitter end, find Clarissa, and get my book back.

12

The smell of salt filled the air, carried by the buffeting wind. I stood on the concrete ground of the harbour, staring out over the turbulent black seawater made only more comforting by the looming dark clouds that covered the sky. I looked again at the tiny sailboat bobbing beside the rotting pier and ramshackle hut, above which sat a painted sign: BOTES 4 HIER. I closed my eyes and tried to force away the nauseous feeling creeping up my stomach. *Terrible idea, Boone.*

I had, in fact, been feeling ill from the moment I rode into Green Harbour; a seaside town full of makeshift wooden houses, winding alleys and the constant, pungent smell of fish. This was where the

coordinates had led me. Well, not here exactly, but to a point several miles off the mainland. It looked as though I would be going sailing.

Note: I hate the water. I hate boats. I hate the smell of salt and fish. I hate seasickness and I hate seafood. There is nothing about the ocean that holds any appeal for me, aside from the things it keeps me away from. This was not on any level what I wanted to be doing.

The tiny old man who owned the ‘bote hier’ business emerged from his hut, puffing on a pipe and squinting at a handful of hastily scrawled papers. He was dressed in a blue captain’s uniform, complete with a hat at a jaunty angle.

‘S’all in order,’ he said in his barely understandable mumble. ‘Be taking good care of me vessel, she be a fine lass.’

I glanced again at the miniscule boat. It seemed smaller than when I’d first seen it, and was it just me or had the waves gotten worse?

‘She be the most seaworthy ship there is,’ the man went on. ‘But yerself I ain’t so sure about. Ye look like ye’d break at the first brisk wind.’

‘Thanks for your expert opinion, I’ll be sure to consider it while the sea smashes your boat apart.’

Before he could give me any more of his invaluable wisdom, I climbed down the small ladder that led to the boat. I paused, closed my eyes, and took the last step. Immediately I was regretting this choice. The boat was rocking about far too much for my liking. Unsteady, I let go of the ladder and sat on the small wooden bench beside the sail.

‘Know where yer goin’?’ the man asked.

‘I have a rough idea,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the boat. It’ll make for a great coffin.’ With that, I unfurled the sail and began pulling on the collected ropes dangling in front of me. With a snapping sound the stained white sail caught the wind and the boat began to move. I had to hold on to my glasses as wave by violent wave the boat ploughed away from the dock and out to the horrible dark expanse of the sea. I might not have liked Green Harbour, but I couldn’t help but look back at it with a kind of longing as I felt my insides churn with every swell of the ocean beneath me. I closed my eyes and held on to the mast. *Why was I doing this?*

Stone claimed the Bugs hadn’t taken Clarissa. While this might not be true, he had no reason to lie, especially as he had pretty much confirmed that Hunter Eccleston was murdered. So where was Clarissa? I still had nothing solid to go on. The reality was, wherever these coordinates led, whatever the Bugs had done and wherever Clarissa Everest was, this was the only lead I had. I had checked the coordinates on a map and found a tiny island, which seemed to me to fit with the whole murder mystery theme. Beyond that though, there was not much of a link to be made. But it was all I had. That said, I was having trouble using that reasoning to calm down my wild and terrified internal screaming.

I had to focus on something else. Hunter Eccleston. So he was probably dead. What had killed him? The rest of the band had to be complicit somehow, or at least know what was going on. They would not be fooled by a double. Maybe Stone was blackmailing them into

silence. Or was Stone just the representative of someone more dangerous? Each question I pursued only led me to dozens more. It was already very confusing. But the point remained that to rescue Clarissa I needed to find out what happened to Hunter Eccleston. Then I could expose the conspiracy, find the girl and then finally get rid of that book it once and for all.

I was now far away from Green Harbour. I was surrounded by nothing but ocean and stormy sky and the turbulence had not calmed down. It was so dark it might as well have been night, but by my watch it wasn't even midday. I did not like the look of any of this, and more than that, I was no longer even sure that I was heading in the right direction. I found myself wishing I hadn't gotten rid of Promethia. Her gyrocopter would have been very useful in this situation. Sadly, Promethia was most likely being confronted by a range of highly talented manatees.

I felt a fat wet drop on my nose. *Oh no. Oh please no.* Within seconds the rain had gone from a drizzle to a torrent. My clothing was soaked through and I couldn't see through the deluge. I hugged the mast as the boat started to bounce up and down with more ferocity than before. The gusts pushed me into the mast and then away from it, as if determined to tear me apart. I gritted my teeth. I felt like my skin was frozen. My clothes were heavy, dripping and cold. The boat flew up again and I almost lost my grip.

The wind was screaming now, assaulting my ears in an awful attack of noise and cold. I heard a crack, then a flapping sound. I was hit by a

squall and the rain was blown sideways, pelting into my face. I reached up and felt the jagged wood of the mast just above my head. The sail was gone. I closed my eyes even tighter. The water pooling in the hull was lapping against my shins. There was a groan from the wood beneath me as the boat crested a wave and came crashing down the other side. With another explosive crack I was underwater.

I could not move or breathe. I opened my eyes, ignoring the salty sting. After the chaos of the storm the silence was almost a relief. I could make out bits of wood and rope drifting past my face. So much for seaworthy. I kicked out and tried to move my arms but they were stuck. In the back of my mind I was scared, but a strange calm had come over me, smothering any panic. Everything was just so quiet...

Then something took hold of my hand and I felt my arm almost ripped off as I was dragged out of the cold water, gasping into the even colder air. The noise of the wind and the rain was back, but I was moving upwards, away from the sea. Then I was on my back on beautiful, wonderful solid wood, staring up at huge sails and some kind of black and white flag. By some miracle my glasses were still on, but they were covered in water and everything was a blur.

I pulled my aching body into an upright position and shook the droplets from my glasses. I seemed to be aboard a big ship. Ropes, barrels and what looked like cannons were tied to the deck. There were two thick masts with gigantic black sails holding their own against the wind. In front of me stood a collection of about twenty men. They were almost all heavysset and dressed in a variety of muted colours. One was

wearing a comically big tricorne hat, a few had eye patches, and they all seemed to be resting their hands on the hilts of... *were those swords?*

The biggest of the group, the man in the tricorne, stepped forward, drawing his large, shiny curved blade. He had a curly black beard, an eye patch and what appeared to be a wooden leg. He bared his teeth as he pointed his sword at me.

‘And just who do ye think ye are?’

A parrot also wearing an eye patch flew down and landed on his shoulder with a horrible squawk. The entire band began to crowd around me I looked up at the flag again. A skull and crossbones grinned back down at me.

Oh no.

13

I scrambled to my feet, backing away from the advancing pirates. ‘Right, um, first of all; hello!’ I smiled. How are we all?’

‘I said,’ the man who must have been the captain growled, ‘who do ye think ye are?’

‘Who do I *think* I am? Odd question, that.’

‘Shut it!’ he snarled. ‘And start talking.’

‘Make him walk the plank,’ another pirate spat.

‘Actually, that’s fine,’ I said. ‘I mean, thank you for saving me and all, but I’ll take my chances with the water.’ I moved for the edge of the ship, only to be stopped by the flat edge of the captain’s sword.

‘Not so fast,’ he said. ‘Answers, boy. Now.’

‘To what?’ I turned to him, trying to ignore my racing heart. ‘My name is Boone Shepard. That’s who I am. The end.’

‘What were ye doing out in the foam?’

‘Sailing? Seemed like nice weather for it.’

The captain’s eyes narrowed. ‘Be that sarcasm?’

‘Never. Sarcasm is the lowest form of humour. I don’t indulge in it.’

The captain stepped up very close to me, so we were almost nose to nose. ‘Ye’d best explain yerself, and fast.’

‘I have,’ I said. ‘That’s the end of the story. If all you were going to do was threaten me, why did you even pull me out of the water?’

‘Curiosity.’

‘Right.’ I was surprised he even knew that word. ‘Well, I’ve satisfied your curiosity, so you can put me back now and we can all get on with our lives. Or rather, you all can. I doubt I’ll be getting on with much after this.’

‘Do ye take us for fools, boy?’

‘Is that a trick question?’

‘We ain’t fools!’ He turned back to the others. ‘Are we, men?’

There was a collective bellow of assent as the captain returned his attention back to me.

‘Can ye guess what we do to those who think us foolish?’

‘Does it by any chance involve a violent death?’

There was an even louder cheer from the men.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Excellent. Just what my day needed.’

‘Ye must admit, ye do deserve it. Wasting our time and all.’

‘You chose to pull me out of the water!’ I cried. ‘Come on! That’s hardly fair.’

‘There be no such thing as fair on the high seas,’ the captain said.

‘But there is such thing as stupidity,’ I snapped. ‘I suppose it’s true what they say about pirates.’

The men fell silent. The captain looked at me with what I think was a frown. ‘What do they say about pirates?’

‘All sorts of horrible things. They insult your intelligence and personal hygiene.’

‘Me hygiene is excellent!’ the captain protested, taking a step back.

I grimaced. ‘Is it, though?’

‘He’s trying to make us feel insecure!’ one of the pirates exclaimed.

The captain slowly raised his sword, pointing it directly at my face.

‘That true, Shepard?’

My mind was racing. My options had narrowed down to either drowning or evisceration. I glanced out at the swirling waves. I looked back at the captain’s fearsome face and then at the equally dangerous looking men behind him. I only had one idea, and I was not sure if it was genius or pure stupidity. Either way, I didn’t have a choice.

‘Maybe I owe you an apology,’ I said.

‘Why?’ the captain said.

I bowed my head and tried to look contrite. ‘I... I lied. I am out here for a reason.’

‘Aha!’ the captain boomed. ‘I knew it! There ain’t no getting’ past me interrogative skills!’

‘You’re right.’ I nodded. ‘I’ve been very stupid.’

‘So? What’s yer reason?’

‘My reason,’ I said slowly, ‘is that I have come into possession of some coordinates...’ I trailed off, keeping my attention on the reactions of the pirates. A few had leaned forward, looking very much in suspense.

‘Aye?’ the captain said.

‘Some coordinates that, allegedly, lead to some...’ I paused for effect, ‘treasure. But you lot probably aren’t interested in that kind of rubbish.’

The captain lowered his sword. There was a new gleam in his beady eyes. ‘Treasure?’ he breathed. The men behind him were muttering to each other, clearly excited.

‘Yes, I know how disappointing this must be for you,’ I said. ‘Now, shall we get on with this plank walking business?’

The captain stroked his beard, not taking his eyes off me. ‘What are these coordinates, exactly?’

‘Oh who cares about that?’ I waved my hand dismissively. ‘You’re much more interested in killing me, right?’

‘I never said that,’ the captain replied. ‘I just, uh, just wanted to welcome ye on to me ship, is all.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘With swords and threats?’

‘A bit of fun!’ The captain did something with his teeth that I think was meant to be a smile. ‘To break the mood a bit!’

‘You wouldn’t want to claim the treasure for yourself, would you?’ I asked.

‘Course not!’ The captain shook his head. ‘Never. That be dishonourable behaviour, that. We don’t go in for such nonsense.’

I scanned the mass of pirates behind him. They were all nodding and trying to look earnest. ‘Well, I suppose you all look trustworthy. How about I propose a deal? I’ll direct you to these coordinates and, if you get me safely home, you can have all the treasure.’

‘All the treasure?’ the captain’s voice had gone weak.

‘All of it,’ I said. ‘All of the treasure that is certainly buried on this island. But you have to do exactly as I say.’

‘Of course,’ the captain said. ‘No doubts.’

‘Alright, listen carefully,’ I said. ‘We’ll head to this island, but I’m not sure what awaits us there. So you’re going to stop the ship and I’m going to row in by myself. If I’m not back in an hour, storm the island and find the treasure.’

‘Hang on,’ the captain looked confused, ‘why don’t we just do that straight up?’

‘Because,’ I said, thinking quickly, ‘if I sneak in by myself there’s less chance of them noticing. We can be away with the treasure before they realise anything’s amiss.’

The captain stared at me, saying nothing. For a moment I wondered if maybe I had given the game away, then his face broke into another of his disturbing attempts at a smile. ‘Makes sense to me,’ he said. ‘Alright mateys, away we go! Treasure awaits. Boone Shepard, get directin’. We’ll be rich men by the morrow!’

The rain had finally slowed to a light drizzle. I could see beams of sunlight breaking through the grey clouds, but it was doing nothing to make me any less waterlogged. That aside though, I was feeling better than I had in a long time.

After all, no matter how bad things got on that island, I could do a whole lot worse than have a band of bloodthirsty pirates as backup. What they would do when they realised there was no treasure was another issue, but right now I was focussing on the situation at hand. I joined the captain at the huge wheel and told him the coordinates. The boat started to turn on the calming water and we moved forward toward the island. And, hopefully, answers.

14

It was late afternoon, the clouds were gone and my clothes had dried by the time the island came into sight. It was the first spot of land in an otherwise uninterrupted stretch of sea, looking like little more than a dark dot amidst all the blue. Part of me had been worried that it didn’t even exist, but here it was, exactly where the coordinates had signified.

‘Is that it?’ the captain turned to me with an expectant look.

‘I’d say so,’ I said. ‘Get a bit closer, and then stop the boat. I’m not sure what kind of security they have, but I don’t want to risk us being noticed. Spyglass?’

The captain handed me his small, wooden telescope. I extended it and looked through the slightly blurred lens at the island. I could make out what looked like a large building, surrounded by trees and sand, but I couldn’t see any detail from so far away. Whatever it was, it looked promising.

‘So, an hour,’ the captain said. ‘We wait an hour, and then we come for ye.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It shouldn’t take me long to find what I need.’

The captain rubbed his hands together. ‘Oh, I can’t wait to get me hands on some treasure.’

‘Well, you will absolutely have some treasure soon. This is definitely not a ruse.’

He patted me hard on the back. ‘Ye do know how to fill a man with trust and confidence, Boone Shepard.’

I waited by the wheel as the captain and his men got to work. Orders were barked and directions given in their odd pirate estimation of English. I turned my attention to the island again. *What’s waiting there? Or rather, who?* Really, the coordinates could be anything. But the fact that the Bugs had them in their change room had to mean that they were important. That was good enough for me.

‘We’ve got yer boat ready.’ The captain appeared beside me, pointing to a tiny rowboat being lowered by rope over the side of the ship. ‘Ye have an hour. Now,’ he stepped in very close to me, so I could smell his surprisingly minty breath, ‘ye *will* return, won’t ye? Yer not playing us?’

‘Not at all. I’d never do an awful thing like that.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Cause if ye do...’ he nodded to his sword. ‘Ye’ll get knifed.’

So it was with this charming promise in mind that I stepped into the second ramshackle wooden boat I’d been in in the last twenty four hours. I held on tight to the edges as the pirates lowered me down. I felt seasick already. I had no desire to repeat any of my previous experience with the storm, yet here I was, swaying in the now gentle wind, closing my eyes and trying to remind myself that it was not a long trip. I would reach the island soon and be on solid, wonderful land. As to what I would do then, well, I was going to have to improvise.

The boat hit the water and rocked slowly with the swells. I looked up to see the entire crew staring down at me. I gave a weak smile and waved, before picking up the oars and starting to row. Stroke by stroke, I moved through the water. I could see fish moving below me. I glanced up at the slowly receding ship. Already my arms were starting to strain.

On I went. The island hardly seemed to be getting any closer, and I was wincing and gritting my teeth more and more. Why had I been so determined to try the stealthy way? I had a ship full of pirates at my disposal! I could have just stormed the island and...

And then what? Try to explain to them all why there was no treasure? Sadly, this was my only real option. I just had to keep on rowing and hope that I reached the shore before my arms fell off.

It was nearing evening by the time the boat finally ground into the wet sand beneath the lapping waves. Grateful to be out of the bloody ocean, I jumped from the boat, taking care to land in the dry sand. Trying to ignore my aching shoulders, I looked around. The sandy embankment led up to a huge, green mansion. It was obviously very expensive, with marble steps leading up to a large and elaborate front door. It was three stories tall and seemed to take up most of the island. Around it were occasional patches of grass and palm trees, but otherwise, this strange, almost fortress looking place seemed to be all there was to be found.

I followed the beach away from the boat toward the trees, scanning the building as I did. It did not look like there was any way in at ground level other than the imposing front door and something told me that just going up and knocking was not a good idea. I reached the trees and ducked behind one, squinting at the building as I did. There were several windows on the upper levels. If I could get close enough to one of those I might be able to sneak in. I couldn't see any signs of decent hand-holds on the walls, so climbing wasn't an option.

Then the incredibly obvious struck me. Of course climbing was an option, I just would not be climbing walls. Some of these trees were quite close to the house. If I could get up the tree, then somehow get across to the window I would be in a much better position. It was not a

perfect plan, but I was very aware of the time limit I had until the pirates came blundering in to find their promised treasure. I would have to hope for the best. I stood and approached the tree closest to the wall, being careful not to make a sound. I hadn't seen any signs of life from the house and was beginning to wonder if the place had been abandoned.

I reached the tree and awkwardly wrapped my arms and legs around the trunk. Very grateful that there was no one watching I began to shimmy up the tree. It was exactly as uncomfortable as one would expect. Between the rough surfaces and splinters I was not in a good mood by the time I reached the point where the hard bark gave way to leaves and coconuts. Trying not to glance down or think about the distance between myself and the ground, I looked across at the window. Several feet away, and slightly below me. This tree did not seem willing to bend down, either.

I no longer felt scared or frustrated. I just felt like a total idiot. Here at this height, hugging a tree, trying to figure out how to get through a window that I could now see was padlocked shut. In the past forty eight hours I had almost been hanged, shot, burnt alive, drowned and stabbed by angry pirates. I still had no idea what it was I was chasing or if Clarissa Everest was alive. I did not even know if she really had taken my book. But here I was; an idiot hanging from a tree with no idea what to do next. I wanted to scream, but I was still in a dangerous position, so I did something even stupider. I grabbed one of the coconuts,

wrenched it from its position and threw it as hard as I could at the window.

The sound of shattering glass rang out in all directions. I froze, staring at the now empty windowsill, eyes wide. *What the hell was that, Boone? How was that a good idea?* I had to get down from the tree, and now. Whoever was in the house had to have heard that. There was no way this could go unnoticed, unless—

Unless there was nobody else here.

I frowned and looked around. I heard a bird chirp. I heard the waves lapping at the beach. But otherwise nothing. The island remained still. The window may have been broken, but there was nobody here to investigate. Despite myself, I grinned. I no longer felt angry. Finally, a piece of luck! I had no time to let it go to waste. I looked from the window to the ground below, judging the distance. I grabbed hold of one of the thick branches above me. With some difficulty, I got both hands around it, then let go of the trunk with my legs. I was dangling now, and the sharp edges of the wood were cutting into my hand, but I didn't care. I began to swing. Back and forward, faster and faster, keeping my gaze fixed on the window. To anybody watching I would look ridiculous, but there wasn't anybody watching.

I let go of the branch and dove forward.

I am a strong believer in the idea that Huxley should pay extra for injuries sustained on the job. If that were the law I'd be a millionaire by now. Hanging from the windowsill by my fingertips, body screaming in pain from my graceless collision with the wall, I could not help but wonder what was so wrong with me that I was doing this job. No dignity, barely any money and the constant threat of death. Yet here I was.

It took me a few agonising seconds to pull myself up and through the window. I hit the floor inside and lay there for a moment on my back, eyes closed, trying to catch my breath. I realised how tired I was. *When was the last time you had a decent sleep, Boone?* Threat of violent demise aside, I could have happily passed out right there. But I still had a job to do.

I forced myself to sit up and look around. I seemed to be in a huge, darkened living room of some kind. There were beautifully carved mahogany tables, plush couches and expensive paintings on the wood panelled walls. It looked like something out of a museum; everything was untouched and pristine. The whole place was kind of creepy.

I got to my feet and crossed the room, keeping my eyes peeled for anything vaguely suspicious. There was nothing that stood out to me though. It just seemed like the luxury lounge room of somebody very rich. Reaching the heavy looking wooden door, I turned the handle. It was unlocked. I stepped out into the dark hall, which was lined with more equally imposing doors. I stood still for a moment and listened. Silence. This house, whatever it was for, was almost certainly

abandoned. I crossed the hall and opened the opposite door. The smell of chlorine hit my nose and I was taken aback by the sight of a long, indoor swimming pool, complete with a waterslide at the end.

I closed the door and looked down the hall; it ended in a winding staircase. Well, I had three levels to explore and not a whole lot of time to do it in. So I made my way down the hall, checking each room as I did. Everything screamed luxury; there was a sauna, a massage parlour, a small yet very well-furnished cinema, a library and several other rooms whose purpose I could not fathom. I reached the staircase with no clearer idea of just what in the world I had walked into, but an increasing sense that I was possibly in over my head.

After a quick mental coin toss, I decided to go down the stairs. Every step I took echoed and made me even more uneasy. I was almost completely certain this house was empty, but even so, I didn't like anything about it. Had it been abandoned? And if so, why and by whom?

I reached the first floor and found that the staircase kept going down, so I continued into a basement and ended up face to face with a steel door not dissimilar to the one that hid the archives of *The Chronicle*. However, this one was new; shiny and polished. And, I discovered as I gave it a push, unlocked. The hinges were obviously well oiled, and the door gave way easily, opening into a completely dark room. After a quick fumble I found the light switch and flicked it. The room was bathed in brilliant white light that made me blink to get used to it.

At the far end of the white-walled room was a stage, complete with red curtains to the sides. A selection of video cameras and microphones were crowded around it, along with more tangles of wires and electrical equipment that I would be terrified to even try and figure out. Beside me, adjacent to the door, was some kind of technical booth, inside which was a chair and a desk covered in knobs, levers and dials. Above this was a light with the words 'ON AIR' printed on it. I had just taken a step toward it when I heard something. I stopped in my tracks, straining my ears to listen.

It was like some kind of distant, whirring buzz, it sounded familiar, but I couldn't think of what it was. It certainly seemed to be getting louder though. I stood where I was until I could hear it right above me, and then it struck me in a moment of panicked realisation; *there's a helicopter landing on the roof*. I looked around, no idea of what to do. I was trapped down here. I would almost certainly be seen if I tried to leave. I heard a thud above me; it had landed. I had no time. I ran to the door, slammed it shut, turned out the light and then, stumbling in the dark, climbed into the cramped booth. I pushed the chair aside and crouched under the desk. I could hear voices and footsteps, muffled by walls and floors. But there were people here. And between the boat and the broken window, I had left a veritable trail of evidence behind me. *Top job, Boone. This is a new low even by your standards.*

The voices were getting closer. I could now make out that they were all loud men. I could hear the same echoing sound of feet on the stairs; *they're coming down here*. Just my luck. I tried to crawl even further

into the space beneath the desk, just as the voices became very clear. The first one I heard was instantly familiar. Harrington Stone.

‘We’ll start down here.’ I heard the door open and a small group of people walk inside the studio. ‘What do we think?’

‘It’s very handsome Harry,’ someone replied. ‘But what’s this you said about a swimming pool?’

‘I want to see the indoor zoo.’

‘There is no indoor zoo, Jimmy.’

‘Then what are we paying for?’

‘Quiet,’ Stone snapped. ‘After everything I did to secure this place for you, you’ll damn well listen.’ I flinched as I heard a thumping directly above my head as someone hit the desk. ‘State of the art recording equipment,’ Stone said. ‘There’s no better in the world. You can even do live broadcasts from here. It goes directly to the major networks. You can make money for shows without ever leaving the house.’

‘Yes, that’s just lovely Harry, but the swimming—’

‘Enough. Have a look at the stage. The cameras. We can do radio and television from here. At the same time if we want. And no more of the likes of Rasputin Huxley pestering us for interviews.’

‘I don’t like interviews,’ the man who had inquired about the zoo said. ‘Too much talking and questions. I get confused.’

The Bugs are right here. I was very aware of my heart about to burst out of my chest. I closed my eyes, tried to ignore an itch behind my ear, and listened.

‘Yes, I know Jimmy,’ Stone said, with the weariness of a man who had dealt with this line of questioning a thousand times over. ‘That’s what this is for. Too many people are asking questions and sniffing around, so I have made sure that this island has everything you can possibly need to make an excellent new record free from prying eyes. Are we happy with that?’

There was a murmur of assent, then a moment of silence. When Stone spoke again, there was a new level of danger in his voice, the same I had heard when he confronted me at the police station. ‘And Hunter? What about you? Are you happy?’

‘Yes,’ came the reply, and I had never in my life heard so much hatred poured into one word. ‘Of course I am. I always am.’

‘Correct response,’ Stone said. ‘Now, I’ll show you the rest of the place, then you have two hours to relax before we start recording. Come along.’

The small group left the room and the light went out again. I sat in the dark, waiting until they were well and truly gone. So this place was some kind of hidden fortress for the Bugs, a paradise away from the likes of Clarissa Everest and me, the nosy people who asked the difficult questions. There was only one tiny problem with that. I was right here. And my questions had only just begun.

I pulled myself out from under the desk and stood. I knew that band would be travelling in a group as Stone took them through the house, so I would be safe as long as I listened and stayed aware of where they were. I was faced with a new problem, however. If this place was brand

new and the Bugs had yet to even spend any time here, I was not about to find anything incriminating. And I did not have long until those pirates came looking for me.

I stood in the dark, eyes closed, trying to think. Then, very slowly, the inklings of an idea came to me. It was not perfect, but it was the best I had.

16

I could hear the voices of the band above me as I reached the first-floor landing. I stood there for a moment, giving myself time to think over my plan again. It was risky to say the least, but it might just prove to be the best way to unravel all of this. Maybe. I was still unsure on a few specifics.

I glanced up the hall. It was lined with expensive looking antique vases and statues, all on little pedestals. They were the kind of things that I imagined Stone thought lent class to the place, things he bought because of the high price tag rather than any actual liking for them.

This, at least, would be satisfying. Making a mental note of where the band was above me, I approached the nearest vase, covered in paintings of manatees in frilly dresses. I took a moment to look over it, then, taking a deep breath, pushed it off its pedestal.

It hit the ground with a louder shattering crack than I could have expected. Shards went everywhere, and I jumped back as baleful yet

well-dressed manatees flew past my feet. I heard instant silence from above and ran for the stairs, reaching them in time to see the bewildered faces of the band appearing above me.

‘Who the hell is that?’ one of them said, as Stone appeared, shoving them out of the way. Our eyes met and I saw his mouth curl into a snarl.

‘Shepard,’ he growled, and reached into his jacket.

Making sure to look as scared as I could, I ran down the stairs toward the basement, as the sound of a gunshot rang out behind me. Instinctively I ducked, but I didn’t feel any deader than usual, so I assumed Stone had missed. I heard the band yelling outraged and scared demands to know what was going on as I reached the metal door and pushed through into the dark room.

I came to a halt and listened. Footsteps, but no voices. Then—

‘Harry, who was that? And why have you got a gun?’

‘Look, just... go and play in the sand, okay? He’s a burglar.’

‘So why did you call him Shepherd?’

‘That’s, um, that’s what he is. His job.’

‘I thought he was a burglar?’

‘He’s both.’

‘How do you know him?’

‘Just... get outside, okay? It’s my job to deal with him, so let me do it. It’s a lovely evening, and I expect a great sandcastle from all of you when I come join you.’

Another silence. I frowned, waiting for anything else.

‘Can it have turrets?’

‘As many as you can make.’

‘What about flags?’

‘Surprise me. Go on. All of you out.’

There was a mumble of dissent, which receded as the band went up the stairs. Nothing was said; Stone was clearly waiting for the band to get out of earshot.

‘I know you’re in there, Shepard,’ he said finally. ‘Now why don’t you come out and make this less painful for all of us?’

I did not speak. I started to back away from the door in the dark.

‘Don’t be stupid, Shepard. This does not have to end badly.’

I kept walking.

‘Shepard, in three seconds I’m coming in there.’

I felt my foot hit the front of the stage. Careful not to trip, I stepped backwards up on to it.

‘One. Two.’

I kept going until I reached the soft curtain at the back of the stage.

‘Three.’

The door burst open and Stone hit the lights at the same time. They turned the room burning white, I saw Stone squint and threw my hands in the air.

‘Wait!’ I said. ‘Don’t shoot.’

‘I warned you,’ he said.

‘Do you blame me for being scared?’

‘Was huddling in here a smart option?’

‘I’m kind of out of smart options, wouldn’t you say?’

He shook his head. 'I was concerned about you, Shepard. But you really are just an idiot meddling journalist.'

We watched each other for a moment. Or rather, I watched his gun. But he didn't seem about to shoot.

'Even so,' I said. 'Aren't you concerned about what I know? Or who else I may have told?'

'Well, I haven't shot you yet, so that is a fair assumption.'

'Just so we're clear, you are going to kill me?'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'You haven't left me with much choice. Although, I will let you decide how painful it will be. It all comes down to what you might like to tell me.'

'Right.' I nodded. 'Okay then. I'll suggest something. Quid, pro, quo. You ask a question, I'll answer it, then it's my turn.'

Stone laughed. 'You're in no position to make demands.'

'I never said it was a demand. It's a suggestion. But considering I've effectively given up my life for this case, I'd appreciate it if you could clear up some details before you put a bullet in me.'

Stone stared at me, eyes narrowed. 'No. I don't think that's going to happen.'

'Fine.' I shrugged. 'Was a worth a try. I guess in the end, I know the crux of it. I know you killed Hunter Eccleston and replaced him with a lookalike. It's a great story, no matter how you look at it. You can't blame me for being this dedicated.'

‘Yes, it’s a brilliant story,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘Completely. The villainous manager murders the musical genius.’ He snorted. ‘*Hunter Eccleston*. A useless idiot if I ever met one. They all are.’

‘But they’re good,’ I said. ‘Well, after a fashion. They make you money.’

‘Yes, it looks that way, doesn’t it?’ he said. ‘If I didn’t write all their songs. If I hadn’t found them, marketed them and made them. And then Hunter, brilliant beloved Hunter, gets too big for his boots. Thinks he can write the songs himself, so he asks me to leave.’

‘Murder seems a bit of an extreme reaction.’

‘Is it?’ he snapped. ‘Really? You work for years, use all your talents before you realise that you won’t get any success unless those songs come from the mouths of a bunch of pretty boy dimwits. So you find them, bring them together, watch the world fall in love with the oh-so-talented Bugs. Sure, they get the credit, but what does it matter? Because *you* know and *they* know that they are nothing without you.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘Hunter had to go. But he was the favourite. The member everyone loved, every girl wanted to kiss, every boy wanted to be. Hunter Eccleston needed to be in the band.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘But it could always be a different Hunter Eccleston.’

‘Enter Donald Gemmell,’ I said. ‘You know, for a man adamant he wouldn’t give me answers, you just spilled a lot.’

‘Nothing you didn’t know already.’

‘Well...’ I grinned. ‘Actually, that’s not entirely the case. Not quite. See, I never actually thought Hunter was dead until you mentioned a

murder conspiracy back at the police station. So a bit of a bluff about knowing that you killed him, and now those pesky details are in place.’

Stone shrugged. ‘It hardly matters. You’re still going to die.’ He began to walk toward me, the gun still trained between my eyes.

‘Actually,’ I glanced at one of the video cameras. ‘I think you’ll find—’

At that exact moment Stone was stopped in his tracks by the sound of a roar from above us. The kind of roar that might be made by a bunch of treasure hungry pirates.

‘What the hell was that?’ Stone hissed, eyes wild as he looked around for the source of the racket.

‘That, Harry,’ I said, ‘would be the cavalry.’

For a moment, Stone seemed frozen to the spot. Then, as if regaining his senses, he jumped on to the stage and before I could move, grabbed me by the scruff of the shirt and put his gun to my head.

‘Right.’ His voice was dangerously low and there was murder in his glare, ‘you’re coming out there with me. Whoever these people are, if they do anything to upset me, you’re dead.’

‘Right,’ I replied. ‘They, um, might not be too concerned by that, but whatever works.’

‘Move,’ Stone said. Awkwardly, with the cold steel of the gun barrel jammed into my forehead, we began to shuffle back toward the door. I chanced one last quick look at the video camera. The red light was still on.

And in all the commotion, Stone had failed to realise that the ‘ON AIR’ sign had been bright green the whole time.

17

Together we moved down the hallway to the open front doors. I could already see that the previously empty beach was full of people, and that those people were most definitely pirates.

‘Don’t say a word,’ Stone muttered. ‘I’ll do the talking.’

We reached the front door and stepped out into the cool evening air. The entire crew was bunched together on the beach, but none of them seemed to notice us. As a matter of fact, they were all crowding to reach the four, very nervous looking band members stuck in the middle. I could see the captain vigorously shaking Jimmy Bongo’s hand.

‘Just brilliant,’ he was saying, and I was surprised to hear that his previously rough voice had somehow transformed into a charming British accent. ‘Your best work yet.’

‘I’m so excited to meet you all!’ another was saying. ‘The missus is going to be so jealous!’

‘We’ll have to have you round for tea and scones,’ a particularly fat pirate was speaking over all the others, bouncing up and down with excitement.

‘What is this?’ Stone asked.

‘I have no idea,’ I said honestly. They had seemed so threatening not that long ago.

It was at this point that one of the pirates noticed us. ‘Hey!’ he said, pointing. ‘It’s still on!’

‘Forget it,’ the captain yelled. ‘It was off the moment we met the Bugs. How often do you get an opportunity like this?’

The fat pirate turned to us with an apologetic look. ‘Sorry chaps. It’s off.’

‘What... what’s off?’ Stone demanded.

‘Is anybody going to do something about this?’ I pointed to the gun barrel pressed into my head.

‘The re-enactment is over,’ the captain said. ‘I need an autograph.’

‘What re-enactment?’

‘The one we were doing,’ the fat pirate said. ‘You know, the latest voyage of the Green Harbour Pirate Re-enactment society.’ He frowned. ‘Weren’t you a part of it?’

‘Well...’ I was lost for words. ‘Aren’t you actually pirates?’

‘Hang on, Harry,’ Michael McManus said. ‘Why have you got that man at gunpoint?’

‘Yes, that,’ I called out, trying to get the attention of the fake pirates. ‘Even if you’re not real pirates, this is a *real* gun about to shoot me in my very *real* head. And I would *really* like it if that didn’t happen.’

‘Shut up,’ Stone said.

At this point I caught the eye of the one member of the band who seemed a little separate from the others, who was watching not with bemusement, but with genuine concern.

‘Hello Donald,’ I said.

‘Enough,’ Stone roared.

The pirates had all fallen silent, eyes on Stone and me. A disbelieving expression had come over Donald Gemmell’s face.

‘Donald?’ Jimmy Bongo looked at his false band mate with confusion. ‘But he’s Hunter!’

‘He’s Donald Gemmell,’ I said. ‘And your manager here killed Hunter.’

Stone shoved me forward. With a yelp and a sharp jolt of pain I hit the stairs and rolled on to the sand. I looked up to see the gun trained at my head.

‘Goodbye, Shepard,’ Stone said.

‘Yes,’ I relied. ‘Say goodbye to me. And say hello to the public recognition you’ve always deserved.’

A flicker of doubt crossed Stone’s face. ‘Excuse me?’

I sat up. ‘Check your state-of-the-art live broadcast cameras downstairs. They’re pretty good at what they do, as it turns out.’

Realisation hit Stone, and I took it as my cue to scramble backwards. With a scream of ‘NO!’ he fired his gun. Sand shot up around me and some of the pirates screamed as I jumped to my feet. The beach had fallen silent. The pirates and the band were staring at Stone, who stood alone at the top of the stairs, looking around at his audience, his horror

growing as he realised just how much he had given away. I stood poised and ready to run if he shot at me again, but he didn't. He didn't even look at me as he turned on his heel and darted back inside.

I didn't hesitate. I bolted after him, up the steps and back into the house. I could see him up ahead, having reached the staircase. He ran up it and I picked up the pace. I hit the stairs seconds after him, hearing his feet pounding above me. I began to climb then was stopped by another gunshot. The bullet ricocheted off the metal stairs and I flinched, expecting the worst, but I was unharmed. I could hear Stone near the top now. I kept going.

One foot after another I tore up the stairs. The staircase ended in open air; the roof of the building. I slowed down, wondering if he was waiting, then I heard the sound of a helicopter starting. I jumped up the last few steps. I landed on the flat roof and saw in front of me the huge, hulking black helicopter. Stone was bent over the controls, the door still open beside him. He glanced over at me and raised his gun, but I knew by now that he was a lousy shot. His bullets whizzed past me and I ran towards him, despite the attack of the wind from the now spinning rotors.

The helicopter started to rise, pulling up and away from the mansion. I reached it just in time to grab a hold of one of the skids and then I was airborne. My arms felt like they were about to be ripped out of their sockets as I was carried up and away, the island shrinking beneath me, the pirates nothing but tiny dots. I was being buffeted by the wind but I was not about to give up.

He has to answer for this. He has to know where Clarissa is.

Drawing on every ounce of strength I had left, I pulled myself up, hooking one elbow then the other over the skid. I looked up at the door handle. It was my only option. Wrapping my hands as tightly as I could around the skid, I closed my eyes, remembered a face I loved, then with a determined cry, vaulted up.

For a split second, I was holding nothing in mid-air. Then my hand found the handle, my foot found the skid and I pulled the door open. I saw Stone's stunned expression for just a moment before I dived inside, colliding with him and sending him out of his seat and into the controls.

The helicopter tilted sharply, spinning out of control. Stone was ignoring me, trying to get his hands around the levers that steered the thing.

'It's finished, Stone!' I yelled, over the sound of the rotors. 'Give up!' I was trying to hold on to the seat but my position was very unsteady.

He turned to me, eyes alight with fury. 'You never learn!' he replied, then kicked me as hard as he could in the chest. Winded, I flew backwards, out the still open door, catching hold of it at the last second. I was now dangling from the wildly veering chopper. I looked down; nothing but sea.

The chopper was leaning as I pulled myself through the door again, clinging to the edge of it, fully aware that even a slight dip could send me flying out into the night. Stone was muttering, to himself as he flicked switches, trying to right the engine.

‘You’ve killed us!’ he shrieked. ‘The controls are wrecked!’

The helicopter was on its side now. I saw something behind Stone’s seat and grabbed it. He was so focused on the engine he didn’t even notice. I quickly donned the parachute and clipped it all into place.

‘Harry,’ I said.

He looked at me, noticing the parachute all too late.

I smiled. ‘Penelope Carey is going to have the best day.’

I jumped out the door. I pulled the string immediately, felt the snap of the parachute as I watched the chopper below turn completely upside down. I held tight as it plummeted, down, down, spiralling and finally colliding with the ocean far below. There was a burst of flames, the sound of an explosion and then nothing but the silence of this clear night all around me.

18

I landed on a beach several miles from Green Harbour. The descent had taken hours, but at least I had had the time to navigate to a decent landing spot. So I landed gently on the soft sand beneath the stars. I made for a road up ahead on which the occasional car was trundling past.

I wasn’t particularly interested in going back to Green Harbour, but I had to get my motorbike before I made my next move. As to what that was I had no idea. I knew the truth about what had happened with the

Bugs now, but it had not helped me in the slightest in finding Clarissa Everest.

Was it possible that whoever had taken her had nothing to do with the Bugs? It seemed unlikely. After all, Stone had had something to hide, something Clarissa had come very close to uncovering. Who else would have any reason to kidnap her?

I finally caught a lift with a strange old man in a beat up truck who seemed to want to talk only about his moose farm (he called them collectively his moosen, which seemed incorrect yet completely excellent), but it was difficult to pay much attention. I stared out the window at the countryside racing by and tried to think. It didn't take me long to realise I was far too tired to form a coherent thought. I had been brutalised in the last few days, and I needed a rest before I could even consider the idea of continuing my search.

Arriving at Green Harbour, I was surprised to find that the town was still very much awake. As we rounded the corner to see the village ahead, I noticed that most of the lights were still on and there appeared to be some kind of commotion down by the water. I watched with a frown as we got closer. There were people everywhere, but it was almost midnight. What was going on?

The driver parked at the edge of the town. I thanked him, got out and began heading down to the docks. The closer I got, the more people there seemed to be, talking with great excitement to each other in the streets.

‘I can’t believe it,’ one girl said. ‘I can’t believe Hunter isn’t really Hunter!’

‘This is so crazy,’ the other one said.

I kept going, nearing the centre of the commotion. There were people everywhere, all craning their necks trying to get a look at something or someone. Frustrated, I finally hurried over to a house that had a few old crates lying out the front. I placed a couple on top of each other, climbed up on to the makeshift platform, and tried to get a look at what was going on.

At the front of the crowd were about thirty journalists, all with notebooks, all asking questions as photographers darted around them, snapping shots of the shell-shocked looking Bugs. The questions were coming thick and fast.

‘What have you got to say about the broadcast?’

‘Who was that man? Is he still alive?’

‘Where is Harrington Stone?’

Slightly separate from the rest of his former band mates, I saw Donald Gemmell, looking tired but very relieved. He was calmly answering questions from a smaller knot of journalists, and, standing beside him, holding his hand tightly, was a smiling Penelope.

‘Well, the thing is, Stone claimed he had Penelope watched,’ Donald was saying. ‘I was too scared to put a foot out of line in case they hurt her.’

I looked back at the band. Michael McManus was talking to an excited journalist. ‘Well, he looks like Hunter, doesn’t he? How were we supposed to know he was fake?’

I turned away. Being on an incriminating broadcast sent straight to major television networks meant that I would soon get much more attention than I wanted. I had to leave now, before anybody recognised me.

I walked away from the crowd, back to where I had left my bike earlier that day. It was in the same spot, tucked in a quiet little park between buildings. I was just about to get on when I heard a voice behind me.

‘That keen to get away?’

I looked up and felt my mouth fall open.

‘C— Clarissa?’

She bowed slightly. ‘The one and only.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Everyone’s here,’ she said. ‘Y’know, the whole Bugs thing. Dad and I wanted to come check it out for ourselves.’

‘But you... I mean, you went... you were kidnapped!’

‘Um, not quite,’ she said. ‘Actually, I just went for a walk.’

‘You went for...’ I felt faint. ‘You went for a *walk*?’

She shrugged. ‘Yeah. Dad had been hassling me to get out of the house, and I was looking at how exciting your life seemed to be, and I just thought, why not? I’ll get out for a bit.’

‘But...’ my head was starting to hurt. ‘But the car... the tracks!’

‘How’s that for luck? They must have come for me the same time I left. Anyway, I got back after a couple of hours. Dad had been running all over town trying to find answers and said you’d gone off to track me down. There was no way to get in touch with you though, so we kind of just had to let you carry on.’

I sat down on my bike. After everything, these last insane days, she had just *gone for a walk*. ‘I don’t...’ I shook my head, trying to think of the right words. ‘I...’ I gave up and just laughed.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said with a sheepish grin. ‘But I’m flattered by the concern.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

‘And you managed to solve it all. I’m seriously impressed.’

‘Well, you did the legwork.’

‘It was kind of just a hobby. Something to fill the time. Now I’m thinking maybe I should leave the house a bit more.’

‘Maybe tell people when you do, though.’

‘And maybe I should give you this back.’

I realised then that she had my book in her hand. I felt my confusion turn to fear. She held it out to me, but I made no move to take it.

‘I finished it,’ she said, keeping her gaze on my face. ‘Good read.’

‘Was it?’

‘Abrupt end. I’d like to know more.’

‘Sorry to disappoint you.’

‘Then again.’ She gave a very, very slight smile. ‘I feel like I got to be a part of the sequel, don’t you?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘No?’ She opened the cover. ‘*Adventures in Modern Journalism, 1882. By Boone Shepard.*’ She looked up at me again. ‘Any idea what that could mean?’

I looked from the title page to Clarissa’s expectant expression. I thought about all the trouble I had gone through for this book and this girl. Then, for some reason, the anxiety gave way to nothing but a sense of sweet, beautiful, calm relief. Everything was okay. Everything would be fine.

‘You know what?’ I said. ‘You can have it. Just do me a favour. Don’t show anyone. Keep it to yourself, okay?’

‘Sure,’ she said, looking confused. ‘Are you going to explain?’

I got on to my bike. ‘Not today.’

‘I’m old enough.’ She sounded indignant.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But I’m not.’

‘Just one question,’ Clarissa said. She looked uncertain about how to phrase it, and when she spoke her voice was gentle. ‘What happened to her?’

For a moment we looked at each other. I forced a smile. ‘Not today.’

She laughed. ‘Okay. You’re a bit mysterious, aren’t you?’

‘Best of luck, Clarissa. I’ll see you around.’

With that, I gunned the engine, rode past her with one last wave and then hit the road. I knew that behind me the town was still going wild about the Bugs, that there were so many questions waiting to be

answered, so many little mysteries still lingering. But they would have to wait. A time for answers would come, but it wasn't today.

I had reached the highway. It stretched far ahead of me, into the black night. I had no idea what was waiting or where I would go next. But right then, at that moment, things were good. The future would come, I would meet it when it did, and I would be okay.

I revved the engine and shot into the night.

THE END