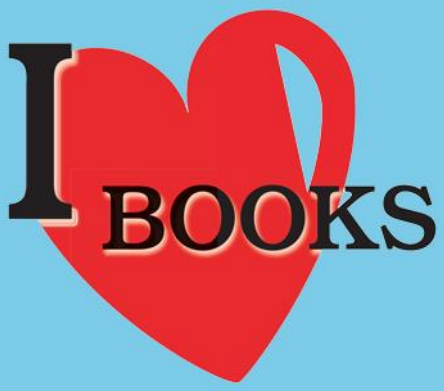


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Opening extract from

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PROLOGUE

It's a terrible feeling to know you're about to die, but not how. I'd triggered a trap, but what trap?

Sand sprinkled onto my back. That shouldn't have been strange: I was in a desert. But I was in a *tunnel* in a desert, and the sand was falling from cracks in its ceiling.

I wriggled on my elbows through the tight space. The sandstone walls pressed closer, as if the tunnel was squeezing me. The sand was picking up speed, streaming from the gaps in the roof. It was thick on the floor, pushing me so high my head brushed against stone.

"Faster!" I screamed. "Crawl faster!"

Sand gushed onto my head, knocking the smart-goggles from my face so that the hazy green of night vision was replaced by darkness. My limbs started to thrash with fear, but that only made things

worse. Each time I cleared an inch to move, the space filled with sand. Now my back was scraping against the ceiling. We weren't crawling any more; we were digging through a gap that was getting smaller every second.

There was sand in my mouth and up my nose. I could hardly breathe. It was pouring through a trap built over five thousand years ago to stop thieves from robbing a sacred tomb. Thieves like me.

"I'm near the opening!" a voice yelled from up ahead. "Too much sand ... I can't quite reach—"

The cry was muffled by the sand. I pressed my face against the ceiling and gasped a last sliver of air.

And then, no more.

We were buried alive.

I tried to keep digging but it was impossible. The weight of sand pressed from all directions like a hundred hands pinning me tight. I thought I saw a flashing light ahead, but my hope faded. The light was in my eyes. It was a warning signal. I was about to die.

No, not like this. Not here, not now we're so close.

I tried to calm myself so I could think. If I could just force my hand down, I could reach my utility belt. Among its gadgets was an ultrasonic explosive device. The blast might cause the tunnel to collapse and free space to escape. But I couldn't move, not even a finger.

This was about as bad as it could get, right?

Just a couple of days ago I was a schoolboy with

terrible grades and an even worse behaviour record. I had the world's strictest parents, a sister who would barely talk to me and a way of causing trouble that drove people nuts. Now, I was a member of a super high-tech treasure-hunting team, searching for a lost tomb so I could save my parents from being turned into mummies by an evil cult.

Things had moved pretty fast.

It all started with me messing up again, hurting people I loved. I'd been trying to make up for it ever since. Only, I'd been in too much of a rush to see the traps.

And here I was, chest on fire, lungs nearly out of air. I heard a distant voice in my earpiece; it was crackly, but the panic was unmistakable.

"Oh my God. Oh my God ... Jake? Listen to me. I have to tell you something. It's about your parents..."

The voice faded. The lights in my eyes grew brighter. Rockets and Catherine wheels fizzing and spinning.

I felt strangely calm all of a sudden, as though my body had accepted death. I wanted my final thoughts to be comforting, but all I could think of was Mum and Dad. The last time I saw them they were crying because of something I'd done – another screw-up by Jake Atlas, troublemaker extraordinaire. I'd broken my promises and shattered their hearts.

I try again to move. Nothing.

So close.

The lights die. The firework show is over.
Mum, Dad... I'm sorry.
I almost made it.

1
TWO DAYS EARLIER

The greatest discovery in the history of archaeology, and it begins in Nando's in Heathrow Airport. I'd ordered a whole chicken, smeared in their hottest sauce. I didn't think I'd like it, probably wouldn't even be able to eat it, but it seemed fun to try.

My sister, Pan – short for Pandora – sat opposite me in the booth. She had her headphones on, as usual, and her raven-black fringe swept down over her eyes like a funeral veil. We were meant to be going on a fun family trip, but Pan couldn't have looked less up for fun if she'd climbed into a coffin, sworn at everyone and pulled the lid shut.

We sat in silence.

Dad made notes for a lecture he was giving with Mum in Cairo. Mum was studying a guidebook. My mum and dad are Egyptologists – experts in the history of Ancient Egypt. Pyramids and pharaohs and

stuff. It may sound strange that an expert in Ancient Egypt would *need* a guidebook, but neither of them had been there in years, not since Pan and me were born. Visiting Aunt Maud in Cornwall was a big adventure for our family, so this should have been exciting. We were going to Egypt! But still we sat in silence.

Beneath the table, my leg began to twitch. I needed to move, needed to do *something*.

I shifted around to see other families in booths, chatting or playing I Spy. Maybe that's what we needed, a game.

"Anyone want to bet I can't eat this whole chicken in less than a minute?" I asked.

Mum didn't look up from her guidebook. "No."

"Let's say a tenner? Ready?"

"No one is betting you, Jake."

I sighed.

My leg twitched faster.

"I spy with my little eye," I said, "something beginning with *T*."

Dad stared at me through thick-lensed glasses. "Where?"

"It's a game, Dad. Something beginning with *T*."

"Oh." He nudged the glasses up his nose, looked around the restaurant. The lenses made his eyes look huge, like a lizard's.

"The Third Intermediate Period?" he said.

"What?"

"Something beginning with *T*. The Third Intermediate Period. The time in Ancient Egyptian history between the death of Pharaoh Ramesses XI and the foundation of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty."

"But... Dad, I can't see that."

He tapped his lecture notes. "It's here in my paper."

"I'll give you a clue."

Mum snapped the guidebook shut. "Please, Jake, concentrate on finishing your meal. We've barely two hours until our flight."

"But we're already at the airport, Mum."

"Don't answer back. Not today."

I *had* to get out of that booth. I wolfed down the food as fast as I could.

"Can I look around the shops?" I asked.

"Yes," Dad said.

"Absolutely not," Mum said.

They glared at each other, a silent battle of the eyes. Mum sighed and returned to her book.

"Fine," she breathed.

Dad slapped a tenner on the table. "See if you can get a new T-shirt. That one is filthy. Be at gate fifteen in half an hour. But, Jake, no trouble."

I nodded. No trouble.

"I mean it, Jake. You promise?"

"Dad, I'm in an airport with armed police. How much trouble can I cause?"

Mum's fingers tightened around her book. "This is a terrible idea," she muttered.

Dad muttered back. “Jane, we said we’d trust him again. And he promised. Didn’t you, Jake?”

I did, again. I promised three times before I left. And that was how it all started, with a promise that I was about to break in the worst possible way.

2

Twenty-five minutes after I promised to stay out of trouble, I'd stuffed a tablet computer up my T-shirt and was about to steal it from an airport shop.

The "urge" was getting worse.

That was the word my counsellor had used. The doctors call it ICD: impulse control disorder. I'm addicted to trouble.

At school I'm always shifting in my seat, looking around, waiting for something to happen. If nothing does, then I *make* it happen. The riskier that thing is, the better. Stealing, fighting, breaking and entering... The truth is, it's the only time I ever feel alive.

I can't even tell you how it happened that time. I only went into the computer shop to check out the new stuff. But I saw two armed officers by the doors, the weasel-faced manager watching for shoplifters and the store detective pretending to be interested

in headphones. And I started thinking about how I could beat all that security.

The next thing I knew, I had disconnected the tablet's alarm cord and was smuggling the tablet from the shop. My heart was going crazy with excitement. It was as if I'd plugged myself into a power socket: electricity was fizzing through my veins.

I'd sworn I'd stop doing stuff like this – to my parents, counsellors, teachers, even the police. But it was like a drug. I needed something to happen, so I had made it happen. Maybe that doesn't make sense, but you've never lived with my mum and dad, where nothing *ever* happens.

Clutching the tablet tighter under my T-shirt, I turned down the laptop aisle and headed for the exit. I snatched glimpses of the store detective in the screens. The guy looked like a movie star, with slicked-back silver hair and a square, stubbled jaw. The stubble parted where a crimson scar ran down his cheek, as if he'd been axed in the face. Was he watching me? Had he seen?

The butterflies in my stomach grew into pterodactyls, gnawing at my guts.

Sweat prickled my back.

Ahead, a double pushchair blocked my path. Screaming babies squabbled for control of a rubber giraffe. Squeezing past, I knocked the toy from the pram, and quickly stuffed it back in.

And then, "Hey, you! Wait!"

My heart stopped and then went double speed.

Everyone turned. Even the babies shut up and stared. It wasn't the detective who'd shouted; it was the manager. The guy really did look like a weasel: round nose, buck teeth, shifty eyes.

"You're stealing a tablet!" he yelled.

My face felt like the surface of the sun, but I managed a "*who, me?*" sort of expression.

"It's up your T-shirt," the manager added.

The police officers turned. One of them nodded, signalling for me to come clean.

I breathed in, lifted my T-shirt.

No tablet.

You think I'm crazy? Those policemen had *guns*. I wasn't just going to shove the thing up my shirt. I had a better plan than that.

I gave the manager a scowl, rolled my eyes at the officers, like there can be no trusting anyone these days, and marched out of the shop.

I felt like I'd just scored in a cup final. I wanted to tear my T-shirt off and run around the departures lounge, whirling it over my head and screaming in delight. But I had to stay cool. My plan wasn't completed yet.

From across the lounge, I watched the mum push the pram from the shop. Her babies were still playing tug-of-war with the rubber giraffe. One of them let go, and the toy flipped to the floor. I was there in a flash, shoving it back into the pram. At the same time,

I took out the tablet I'd stashed there a few seconds earlier.

That feeling is as good as it gets. My plan had worked. The store detective, the police... I'd swiped it from right under their noses. And that manager hadn't even—

Then I saw him. The manager.

He was watching me.

He'd seen.

The babies started screaming, but I was off.

I darted through the duty-free shop and up an escalator to the food hall, where I hid among the tables and watched the police officers come after me. I heard an announcement for a flight to Cairo. *My* flight. Mum and Dad were waiting at the gate...

And then it hit me.

What had I done?

I'd promised. *I'd sworn.*

The urge had taken control, and now that it was gone I felt sick with fear.

Where could I run? My dad had my passport, so I couldn't leave the airport. I was supposed to be going on holiday!

No, I wouldn't give up. I still had a chance if I could make it to the plane.

I peeked over the tables, watching the police officers spread out among the burger restaurants and sandwich shops.

Instinct took over and my mind went from a

muddy puddle of panic to a crystal clear pool. In seconds I knew how to get out of this situation. I'd break into the burger kitchen, burn something to set off a fire alarm to distract the police while I—

"Don't even think about it," a voice said.

I whirled around. Who had spoken?

"Jake Atlas, listen to me."

Then I realized.

It was the tablet. It was the stolen tablet in my hand.

Its screen flicked to life, to show a video of someone I recognized; silver hair, stubbled jaw and shiny red scar.

"The store detective?" I gasped.

"Not exactly, Jake," the man replied. "I was in the store, watching you."

I stared at the screen, my mouth opening and closing like a goldfish's. "I... How do you know my name?" I managed to ask. "Who are you?"

"There's no time for that." The man sounded posh, like an actor. "There are four police officers searching for you. I have their locations marked on a multi-sensor thermographic camera. Do you know what that is?"

"I... *What*?"

"If you do what I say, when I say, I'll get you to gate fifteen, where your parents and sister are waiting."

"How are you on this thing?"

"In three seconds, move from the table to the sushi counter."

"What?"

"Stop saying 'what'."

"What?"

"Go, Jake!"

Bursting from behind the table, I rushed to the sushi café and hid behind a rattling conveyor belt carrying dishes of raw fish.

"Wait," the man instructed. "Wait ... wait ... now duck down."

As I crouched, a police officer marched past on the other side of the conveyor belt.

"They're looking for me," I wheezed.

"Don't waste time saying stupid things," the scarred man replied.

"Please... Who are you?"

"Did you not hear what I just said?"

"Why are you helping me? You're police... You're mucking me around."

"That's right. The airport police ran an extremely complex digital interception program on that tablet just for a laugh. Happens all the time."

"I knew it!"

"I was being sarcastic. Now listen. I am going to tell you what to do and you are going to do it."

For several minutes I did what the man said. Gripping the tablet, I dodged the police, darting from one hiding place to another – a sunglasses shop, a bookstore – and back down the escalator.

Things got even crazier when I rushed into a clothes store.

"Tell the woman at the till your name is Peregrine," the scarred man said.

"What? Why Peregrine?"

"Because you don't want to give her your real name."

"But why *Peregrine*?"

"Why are you arguing about the name?"

"It's a stupid name!"

Really, I had no idea why I was arguing, except that I felt so out of control, so confused and scared. I did what the man said, and the lady in the shop handed me a Hawaiian shirt decorated with red and yellow flowers.

"It's paid for," the scarred man explained. "The police are looking for a boy in a white T-shirt. And your father gave you money for a new shirt so you'll need something to show."

"How did you—"

"You have a clear run now to gate fifteen. Keep the tablet. This is just the start."

"Start? Start of what?"

The tablet died. I pressed the power button, but all I saw was my face reflected in the screen – baffled, breathless, terrified.

Another call for my flight. The final call. I pulled on the shirt, stuffed the tablet down the back of my jeans and did what the scarred man had said.

I ran.