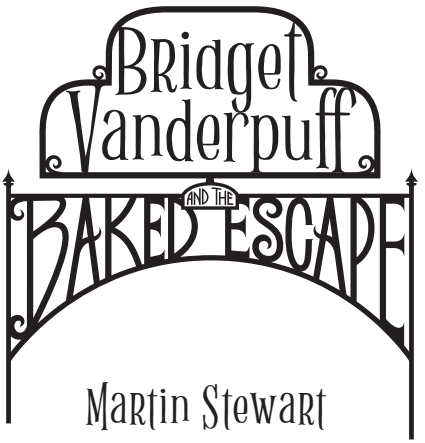


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Bridget Vanderpuff

AND THE BAKED ESCAPE



Martin Stewart

illustrated by David Habben

ZEPHYR

An imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2023
by Head of Zeus Ltd, part of Bloomsbury Plc

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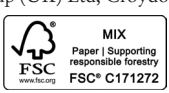
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the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781804549094
ISBN (E): 9781804549070

Designed by Heather Ryerson

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

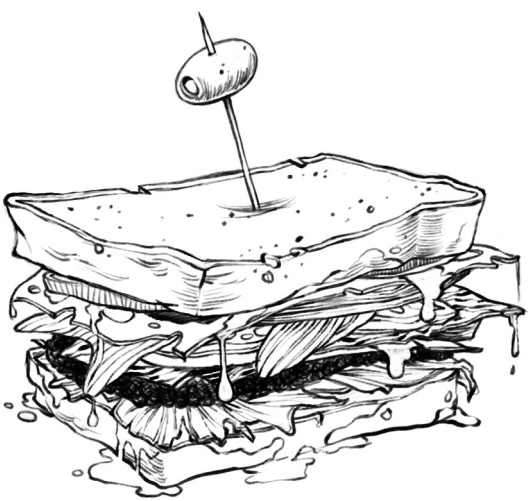
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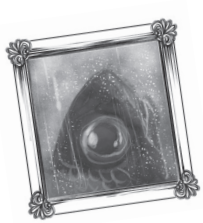


PART ONE

Miss Acrid's Orphanage for Errant Childs









1



A Daring Rescue

bear traps ✳ lockpicks ✳ stuffed dodos

The world outside was swollen with new snow, and its light cut the room like a torch beam.

Bridget Baxter slid a lockpick from her teeth.

'How much longer?' whispered Tom.

'Just a couple of minutes.'

'You said that a couple of minutes ago.'

Bridget raised an eyebrow. Tom clamped his hands over his mouth.

'I'm going as fast as I can, and besides,' Bridget checked the Listening Glass[1] she'd slipped under

[1] A long, stethoscope-like object of Bridget's own invention, the Listening Glass enabled the user to listen round corners, eavesdrop on secrets and keep a lookout during acts of mischief.

the door, 'she's not even in the corridor yet. Calm down.'

'*Calm down*?' hissed Tom. 'You're not the one with your leg in a bear trap! And for *what*? Talking with my mouth full of breakfast?'

'*Singing* with your mouth full,' corrected Bridget. She reached into her thicket of orange hair, found a tweezle-tip lockpick, and eased it into the enormous padlock. 'And you *were* standing on the table.'

Tom shrugged.

'I had to make sure everyone could hear me.'

They giggled silently. Dust sank through the snow-light and settled on Miss Acrid's many hideous things.

On the badly stuffed birds and unread books.

On the stern marble busts and murky paintings.

On the jars of eyeballs and cat-skull cups.

And on Miss Acrid's gigantic, soggy sandwich[2]. Bridget looked at the sandwich, which sat in the centre of Miss Acrid's enormous desk.

[2] Miss Acrid's *only* food was tinned-fish sandwiches – herring and egg muffin for breakfast, anchovy and gherkin panini for lunch, mackerel and cabbage cob for dinner – and consequently she continuously carried a suffocating seafood stink.

Shuddering, she closed her eyes and let her mind drift into her lockpicking hand, shutting down her senses until all that remained was the skin of her fingertips – five little antennas, listening to the lock's secret whispers.

'What are you *doing*?' whispered Tom urgently.

'You don't use your eyes to see inside a lock,' said Bridget softly. 'You see through your fingers.'

'You read that somewhere, didn't you?'

'Of course.'

'In a big, long book?'

'Yes,' said Bridget. 'A wonderful book, full of bravery and love and fun.'



'And padlocks?'

'Yes. Now shush – I'm trying to listen.'

'Through your fingers?'

'Yes!' hissed Bridget. 'Are you *incapable* of silence?'

Tom picked the feathers from a stuffed dodo.

'The Families are coming today,' he said. 'Last time Poppy Parker went to live on Easy Street.'

'That's not a real street, you know,' said Bridget. 'It just means her new parents are rich.'

Bridget remembered it well: Poppy had been whisked away in a handsome, electric airship. Bridget had watched from her hiding spot among the library's chimneys and gargoyles, following the airship's gleaming copper past the village of Belle-on-Sea, towards the great towns and cities beyond the hills.

She thought about the people who came to the Orphanage only once a year, looking for children to love. She imagined their caramel coats and comfortable houses; their glossy hair and wide smiles; how she wished a sweet-smelling family would spread their arms, wrap her in the tightest

most wonderful hug – and take her far, far away from the Orphanage for Errant Childs[3].

But she shook her head, scattering the vision. A shower of sparks burped from the fire.

'What are you thinking about?' said Tom.

Bridget paused for a moment. Tom squeezed her shoulder.

'Maybe this time—'

'This time will be the same as all the others,' said Bridget, turning her attention back to the lock. 'Whenever the Families come, Miss Acrid makes sure I'm shut away, or helping the janitor, or… climbing the chimney stacks! It's never my turn. I'll never find a real home. I've already been here *nine* years.'

'But that isn't so long, really, I mean, some people live to a hundred. Some tortoises live to two hundred! And some rocks have been around since—'

'I'm not a tortoise, though,' said Bridget, twisting

[3] Miss Acrid stubbornly refused to change the Orphanage's name to the 'Orphanage for Errant *Children*'. She had a powerful hatred of irregular plurals, and whenever persons corrected her (like the time she complained to Mrs Pobydd about an infestation of mouses) she would angrily gnash her tooths.



the lockpick with a *sproink*, 'or a pebble. When you're nine years old, nine years is for ever – I've been here *for ever*. And for ever is for ever and that's that. I've seen *countless* Childs find new families, and I— What are you *doing* to that dodo?'

'I'm trying to make him look like Miss Acrid,' said Tom, wrinkling his nose and leaning away from the stuffed bird. Its eyes had narrowed, and the eyebrows were closer together.

'That's pretty good,' said Bridget. 'It's just right. Sort of… surprised about being constipated.'



Tom pushed the dodo's eyebrows even closer and puffed out its cheeks.

'You always get the better of Miss Acrid[4]. How many times have you been thrown into the dungeon?'

Bridget shrugged.

[4] Where other institutions might have a Roll of Honour, the Orphanage for Errant Childs had *Miss Acrid's Roll of Horrid Enemies*, upon which the name of that year's most defiant occupant was scrawled in big black letters. The *Roll of Horrid Enemies* was nine years old, so it was little more than a board on which Mr Falstaff, the janitor, had written 'Bridget Baxter' nine times.

'I stopped counting after the first hundred.'

'Remember when she dropped you in the Bottomless Pit? You were back in her office before she was!'

'Well,' said Bridget modestly, 'she shouldn't call it *bottomless* if—'

'I can't *believe* you hid her Mistress medallion!'

'You'd think,' said Bridget, 'she would *check* her sandwiches—'

'And what did she say when you filled all her teabags with glitter?'

Bridget hopped to her feet, pulling her unruly hair over her ears.

'*Baxter!*' she cried, in perfect imitation of Miss Acrid's shrill and shrieky voice. '*Whaaaaii is my break-fast-brew so spark-elly and shyyy-naaaaaay?*'

They giggled again.

'You will find a real home, Bridget,' said Tom. 'I know you will.'

Bridget's tummy knotted up tight, and she blinked very quickly.

'We both will,' she managed. 'We'll—'

She turned her head.

'What?' said Tom. 'What is it?'

Bridget grabbed the Listening Glass: footsteps – unmistakably Miss Acrid's – thundered in her ears.

'She's coming!'

'Oh, *no*!' whispered Tom. 'Run, Bridget – go! There's no sense in you getting caught when it was me who—'

But Bridget was already kneeling beside the bear trap, eyes tightly shut.

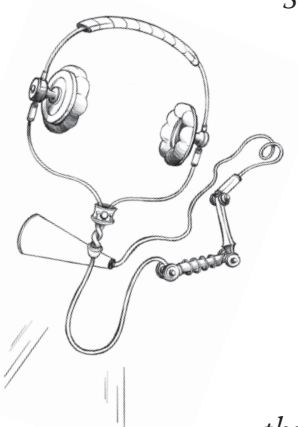
'Bridget—'

'Ssh!'

The Listening Glass was hopping on the floor.

'Go! You needn't—'

'*Sssshh*!' hissed Bridget.



Trying to ignore the rumble of approaching boots, she followed the clever little pattern of the padlock's pins, working the lockpick with twists and tickles and taps until, with a satisfying, solid *thunk*, the pins sang their secret song – and the padlock fell apart.

'You did it!' cried Tom, rubbing his leg as Miss

Acrid's footsteps drew nearer. 'But *now* what do we do? We're trapped!'

Bridget kicked the window, which swung open with a scrape of powdery snow.

A sharp wind cut the children's cheeks.

'Out of the *window*?' said Tom. 'But—'

'I made this from a thousand elastic bands,' said Bridget, unwinding a long rope from around her waist, 'for exactly this situation.'

'You made this so we could jump out of Miss Acrid's window after you'd freed me from a bear trap I got put in for singing 'Look Out, Mr Chipmunk!' while standing on a three-legged table with one foot in a bowl of cold porridge and the other on a piece of burnt toast?'

'Well, maybe not *exactly* this situation,' said Bridget, tying one end of the rope to Miss Acrid's enormous desk, and the other around Tom's middle.

Tom peered uncertainly into the gardens. The distant trees looked like pieces of frosted broccoli, and the Great Maze – a wintery labyrinth of thickets and leaves – sprawled towards the horizon.

'Will it take my weight?' he said.

'Definitely,' said Bridget. Then, because she

never lied, added, 'Probably.'

'*Probably?*' screamed Tom, vanishing out the window.

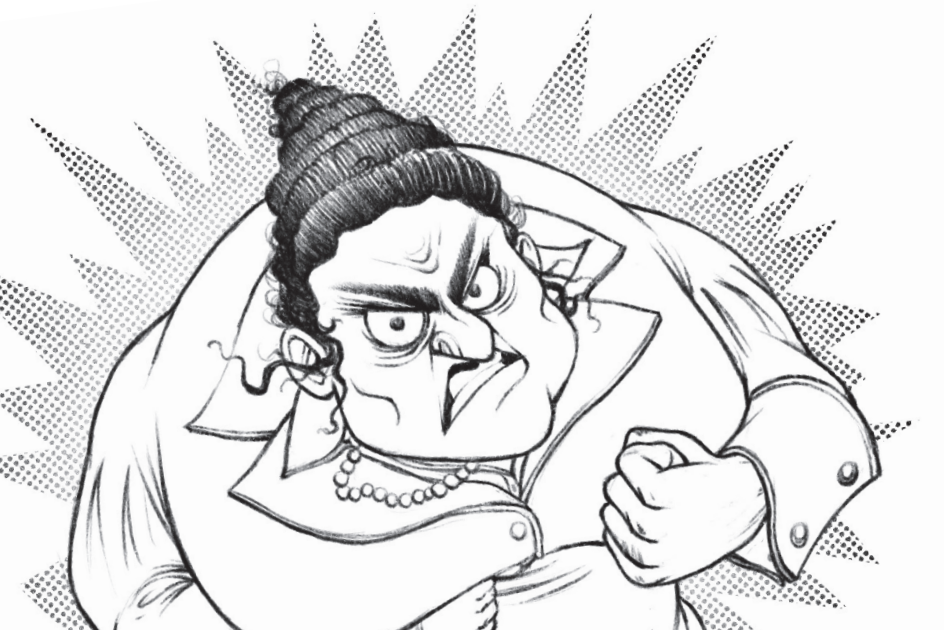
The door burst open.

Miss Acrid, her battleship bosom trembling with rage, her battleaxe nose flaring and high, burst into the room.

'*Baxter*?' she screamed, flexing her grubby fists. '*This* time you've gone *too far*! I'm—'

Bridget picked up the Mistress's disgusting breakfast sandwich. It was heavy and wet and smelled like rotting seaweed.

Miss Acrid froze.





'Now, Baxter…' she said carefully, 'don't do anything silly.'

'Silly like what?' said Bridget. 'Silly like eat your horrible breakfast?'

Miss Acrid took a clomp forward.

'You don't want to do something you'll regret,' she said.

She took another clomp, her giant boot throwing up a cloud of dust.

'Is that so?' said Bridget.

Miss Acrid's eyes widened.

'Be *sensible*,' she snarled. 'And… put… down… my… breakfast.'

Bridget stared into the Mistress's black eyes.

'You know, Miss Acrid,' she said. 'I read somewhere that you only regret the things you *don't* do.'

And she bit so far into the disgusting sandwich the crusts touched her ears.

Miss Acrid went purple, mouth flapping as she filled her lungs with one of her legendary screams.

Bridget hopped on to the enormous desk – and jumped out the window.