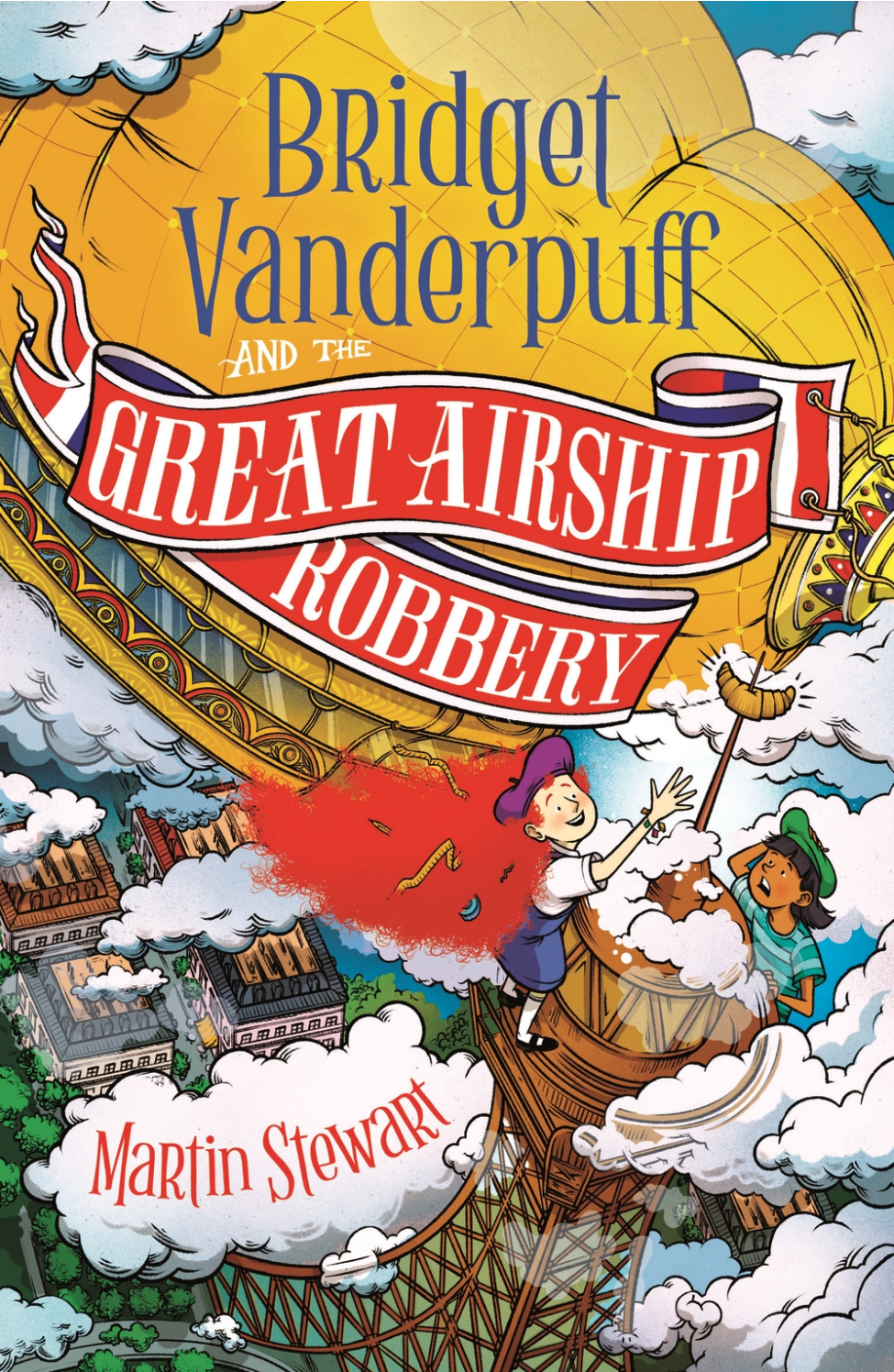

Bridget Vanderpuff
AND THE
GREAT AIRSHIP ROBBERY
Martin Stewart

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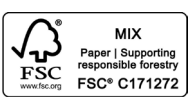
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Head of Zeus Ltd
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1

Hot Pursuit

new case ✶ car chase ✶ cliff face

Bridget braced the bakery bicycle.

'It's no use!' cried Tom, gripping her waist. 'Hungry Horace Harris is getting away!'

'Not if I've got anything to do with it!' shouted Bridget, as the getaway van skidded from the square. 'Hold on!'

She bounced the bike through knots of shrieking villagers.

'*Ug-ug-ug-ug-ug-ug-ug-ug*!' wobbled Tom, his face a cobble-shaken blur.

'That's the spirit!' said Bridget, sliding on to Union and Main.

She sat back and rummaged in her chef whites.

'What are you doing?' screamed Tom.

'Looking for my goggles.'

'But… but… but…' spluttered Tom, '*you're not holding on to the handlebars*!'

The bike hopped over a speedbump, rendering the children briefly airborne. Its wheels shook as they rattled over scattered stones, cobwebs flying from the rusty brakes.

'There!' grinned Bridget, snapping a pair of pilot's goggles over her eyes. '*Now* we can speed up.'

'Speed up?'

Bridget leaned forwards, pedalling until the chain squealed and her hair – vast, red, teeming with self-made inventions – billowed like a vengeful flame. Her curls smothered Tom's screams as the van – black smoke belching from its exhaust – appeared on the horizon.

'It's no use, Harris!' she shouted. '*Nobody* steals cakes in Belle-on-Sea!'

Hungry Horace Harris cut through a gap in the hedge. Bridget swung after him, tyres hissing through the long, wet grass.

Seagulls pinwheeled overhead, eyes fixed on the

pastry in Tom's pocket.

Bridget rolled her eyes.

'Is that *another* Apple Turnoverandover?' she said.

'Poffibwy,' managed Tom, cheeks bulging.

'No wonder the seagulls follow you everywhere,' she yelled. 'You're a picnic on legs!'

The van's rear doors burst open.

Hungry Horace Harris, the world's most notorious cake thief[1], leered from the loading bay.

'Who's driving the van?' gasped Tom.

'Nobody,' said Bridget.

The sea hovered into view. Tom bit his lip.

'Bridget Vanderpuff!' growled Harris, stolen sweet treats spilling free of the van. 'I might've known! Clear off – unless you wants trouble!'

'Clearing off now!' shouted Tom. 'Sorry to have bothered you!'

Bridget dug him in the ribs. The van had crested the rise and was heading downhill – straight for the Cliffs of Belle.

'It's you who's in trouble, Harris!' she called,

[1] Harris was infamous for his theft of, among other bakes, the Ming Dynasty Muffins, Fabergé Springle Egg and the Parthenon Pancakes of Ancient Greece.

wind whipping her face. 'You're running out of land – *and* luck!'

'Gah!' roared Harris, spinning a Splendiferous Pastrycase at the children like a crisp, delicious frisbee.

The Pastrycase *spluffed* Bridget with fruit and cream.

'That was for Ms French!' she yelled. '*And* the world's fartiest poodle[2]!'

Harris bowled bake after bake from the careening van, Swirls and Buns and Bing Bongs soaring through the coastal air.

Bridget ate custard as she ducked and wove, the rickety bike groaning under their weight.

'Mr Constantine's Caramagnificent Donuts!' she gasped.

Splaff!

'Mr Pringle's Butterunctious Crunches!'

Sploff!

'The *mayor's* Deelites!'

Spleeff!

[2] Henri



'Time's up, Harris!' shouted Bridget, her face a mask of twice-whipped cream.

The van burst through the final gate before the cliffs. Harris took a bite from a Fabanananana Swirl, then grinned.

'Never!' he bellowed.

And jumped.

The thief's bulbous frame struck Bridget's front tyre, launching Tom – still in his seated, waist-gripping position – straight into the van.

'Tom!' cried Bridget.

'Bridget!' screamed Tom.

Bridget pedalled like lightning as Harris rolled free.

'Are you hurt?' she panted.

'No!' yelled Tom from the back of the van. 'Luckily I landed on a Trillionaire's Trifle!'

'Thank goodness! We don't have much— *Will you stop eating the trifle*?!'

Tom – his entire face smeared with caramel – shook as though waking from a dream.

'I'm sorry!' he wailed. 'It's just so delicious!'

White-tipped waves loomed ahead, bright in the morning sun. Bridget craned her neck.

The field had an unnerving, cut-off look.

‘Listen to me very carefully!’ she shouted, hopping over a mound of turf. ‘And do exactly as I say!’

Tom ate another scoop of trifle.

‘All right!’

‘Good! Now, when I say jump—’

‘*Jump*?’

‘Exactly!’

‘No! I mean *are you crazy*?’

‘Not in the least,’ said Bridget, as she closed on the runaway vehicle. ‘This is all part of the plan!’

Tom glanced at the approaching cliff.

‘Is that supposed to be reassuring?’

‘*Jump*!’

‘I can’t!’

‘You can!’

Tom held onto the doorframe.

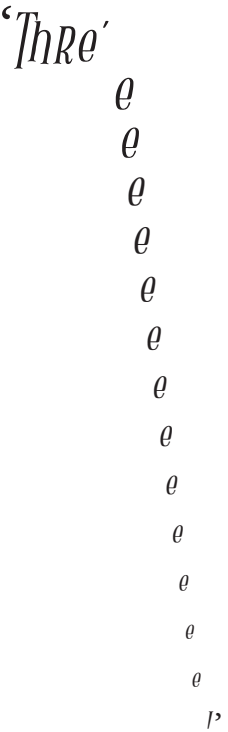
‘I can’t!’

‘Tom,’ yelled Bridget, cheeks tight with the incredible speed, ‘you can do it! But it has to be *now* – you’re about to go over the cliff! Just count to three!’

Tom nodded.

‘One,’ he whispered, licking his lips.

'Two,' he managed, closing his eyes.



The van disappeared over the cliff, dropping like a stone towards the roiling waves and treacherous rocks.

Tom's mouth opened like a big, shiny cave, tonsils trembling as he released a scream of pure, unbridled terror.

Bridget pedalled into mid-air – and dived.



She floated for a heartbeat, then flattened her arms, shooting like a dart towards Tom and the falling van. The wind snapped through her hair, filling her lungs and prickling her skin. She followed the sea's dazzling sun specks all the way to the horizon, where a distant tanker rolled in the swell.

What a lovely morning, she thought, zipping past a startled seagull.

She landed on the van with a thud, grabbing Tom's desperate hand as the rocks closed in.

'*Aaaaaaaargh!*' he screamed.

Bridget grinned.

'Ready?'

‘*Yeeeeeeeeeeessss!*’ howled Tom.

Bridget deployed her paraskirt – and the van vanished beneath their feet.

The vehicle exploded on the rocks, flashing flaming fragments into the sky.

‘*Gaaaaaaaaaaah!*’ wailed Tom, feet flailing as they floated through fire and fumes. ‘We’ll be lost at sea!’

‘We’ll be nothing of the sort,’ said Bridget, as they landed with a gentle *clonk*. ‘Perfect timing, Captain,’ she added, smoothing her skirt. ‘As ever.’

Tom looked around.

Instead of bobbing in freezing water, he was lying on the floor of a grubby wooden dingy with a small man – black-bearded, blistered by sun and crusted with salt – beaming down at him.

‘*Captain Lufty*?’ said Tom. ‘But, but – *how* did— ?’

‘Ye got yer man, Miss Vanderpuff?’ growled the Captain, leaning back to balance his Hat[3].

‘Of course,’ said Bridget. ‘And you your kippers?’

[3] Captain Lufty’s Hat was as tall and wide as a comfortable chair. It was pungent, old and speckled by barnacles. He shared it with a rat named Barry.

'Squeak,' said Barry[4].

Captain Lufty held up a bag of glistening fish.

'Barry an' me are much obliged.'



Seagulls circled overhead.

Tom's mouth opened and shut.

'Kippers?' he spluttered. '*Kippers?*'

'Kippers,' agreed Captain Lufty.

'Squeak!' said Barry.

Bridget raised an eyebrow.

'Ah,' said Tom. 'You've *won* again, haven't you?'

'*We've* won,' said Bridget, her hair a resplendent, wind-blown crown. 'We are a team, after all.'

Police sirens drifted towards them.

A sudden wave slapped Tom in the face.

'Nobody tells me anything,' he muttered.

'Where to, Miss V?' said Captain Lufty, setting the oars in their locks.

'Belle Beach, please,' replied Bridget, hands on hips. 'We've a cake thief to catch!'

[4] Lufty's Hat Rat.