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Opening extract from

Class A

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1. HEAT

Billions of insects fizzed about in the sunset. James and Bruce had given up trying to swat them off. The boys had jogged ten kilometres along a twisted gravel path. It was uphill, heading towards a villa where two eight-year-olds were being held hostage.

'Better give us a minute,' James huffed, leaning forward and resting his palms against his knees. 'I'm wiped.'

If James had wrung out his T-shirt, he could have filled a mug with the sweat.

'I'm a year younger than you,' Bruce said impatiently. 'You should be the one pushing me. It's that gut you're carrying.'

James looked down at himself. 'Give over, I'm hardly fat.'

'Not exactly thin either. You're gonna get crucified at your next medical. They'll put you on a diet and make you run all that off.'

James straightened up and drank some water from his canteen.

'It's not my fault, Bruce. It's genetic. You should have seen the size of my mum before she died.'

Bruce laughed. 'There were three Toffee Crisp and one

Snickers wrapper in our bin last night. That's not genetic, that's you being a pig.'

'We can't all have little stick-insect bodies like you,' James said, bitterly. 'Are you ready?'

'We might as well check the map now we've stopped,' Bruce said. 'See how far it is to the villa.'

James got a map out of his pack. Bruce had a GPS clipped on his shorts. The tiny unit told you your exact position anywhere on the planet to within a couple of metres. Bruce transposed the coordinates on to the map and used his finger to trace the winding gravel path towards the villa.

'Time to go off road,' Bruce said. 'It's less than half a kilometre away.'

'It's really steep,' James said, 'and the ground crumbles around here. It's gonna be a nightmare.'

'Well,' Bruce said, 'unless your plan is to walk up to the front gate of the villa, ring the doorbell and say, *Excuse me love, can we have our hostages back?* I think we'd better cut into the bushes.'

Bruce had a point. James gave up trying to fold the map properly and stuffed it in his pack. Bruce led the way into the scrub, the tinder-dry plants crunching under his trainers. It hadn't rained on the island for two months. There'd been bush fires in the east. When the sky was clear, you could see the plumes of smoke.

James' damp skin soon had a coating of grit. He grabbed on to plants, using them to pull his way up the steep slope. You had to be careful: some plants had barbs, others erupted from the dry ground as soon as you pulled on them, leaving

you holding a clump of roots, clutching desperately for something sturdier before you tumbled backwards.

When they reached the wire fence around the villa, they backed up a few metres and lay flat on the ground, collecting their thoughts. Bruce was moaning something about his hand.

'What are you whinging about?' James asked.

Bruce showed James his palm. Even in the half-light, James could see the blood trickling down Bruce's arm.

'How'd you do that?'

Bruce shrugged. 'Somewhere coming up the hill. I didn't realise until we stopped.'

'I'd better clean it up for you.'

James tipped some water out of his canteen, washing away most of the blood. He got the first aid kit out of his pack; then lit a small torch and clamped it between his teeth, so he could see what he was doing while keeping both hands free. A thorn bulged under the webbing between Bruce's middle fingers.

'Nasty,' James said. 'Does it hurt?'

'What kind of stupid question is that?' Bruce snapped. 'Of course it does.'

'Am I supposed to pull it out?' James asked.

'Yes,' Bruce said wearily. 'Do you ever listen in class? Always remove splinters, unless there is severe and profuse bleeding, or you suspect you've punctured a vein or artery. Then apply disinfectant and a clean dressing or sticking plaster.'

'You sound like you swallowed the textbook,' James said.

'I was on the same first aid course as you, James. Only I

didn't spend the entire three days trying to get off with Susan Kaplan.'

'It's a pity she had a boyfriend.'

'Susan doesn't have a boyfriend,' Bruce said. 'She was just trying to get rid of you.'

'Oh,' James said, crushed. 'I thought she liked me.'

Bruce didn't answer. He was biting down on the strap of his backpack. He didn't want anyone in the villa to hear if the pain made him scream out.

James lined up his tweezers. 'Ready?'

Bruce nodded.

The thorn slid out easily enough. Bruce moaned as a fresh dribble of blood trickled down his hand. James mopped it up, rubbed on antiseptic cream and wound a bandage tightly between Bruce's fingers.

'All done,' James said. 'Are you right to carry on?'

'We can't turn back after going this far.'

'You rest for a minute,' James said. 'I'll sneak up to the fence and check out the security.'

'Watch out for video cameras,' Bruce said. 'They'll be expecting us.'

When James switched off the torch, there was only moonlight left. He shuffled to the fence on his belly. The villa looked impressive: two storeys, four-car garage and a kidney-shaped pool out front. The lawn sprinklers chugged gently, the spouts of water illuminated by the porch lights. There was no sign of any cameras or hi-tech security stuff; just the yellow siren box from a cheapo burglar alarm, which would be switched off while anyone was in the house. James turned back towards Bruce.

'Get up here. It doesn't look too serious.'

James got out his wire cutters and snipped links in the fence, until there was a slot big enough to squeeze through. He followed Bruce over the lawn, crawling swiftly towards the house. James felt something squish against his leg.

'Oh . . . man,' James said, sounding totally revolted. 'Jesus.'

Bruce hushed him up. 'Quiet, for god's sake. What's the matter?'

'I just dragged my knee through a colossal pile of dog crap.'

Bruce couldn't help smiling. James looked set to puke.

'This is bad,' Bruce said.

'Tell me about it. I've had it on my shoe before, but this is on my bare skin.'

'You know what a massive pile of dog mess means?'

'Yeah,' James said. 'It means I'm extremely pissed off.'

'It also means there's a massive dog around here.'

The thought focused James' mind and got him crawling again. They stopped when they got to the wall of the villa, adjacent to a row of French windows. Bruce sat against the wall and checked out the room inside. The light was on. There were leather sofas and a snooker table inside. They tried sliding the French doors, but every one was locked. The keyholes were on the inside, so there was nothing to use their lock guns on.

WOOF.

The boys snapped their necks around. The mother of all rottweilers stood five metres away. The huge beast had muscles swelling through its shiny black coat and strings of drool hanging off its jaw.

'Nice doggy,' Bruce said, trying to keep calm.

The growling dog moved closer, its black eyes staring them down.

'Who's a nice doggy-woggy?' Bruce asked.

'Bruce, I don't think it's gonna roll over and let you tickle its tummy.'

'Well, what's *your* plan?'

'Don't show it any fear,' James quaked. 'We'll stare it down. It's probably as scared of us as we are of it.'

'Yeah,' Bruce said. 'You can tell. The poor thing's cacking itself.'

James began creeping backwards. The dog let out more volcanic barks. A metal hose reel clattered as James backed into it. He considered the reel for a second, before leaning over and unrolling a few metres of the plastic hose. The dog was only a couple of steps away.

'Bruce, you run off and try to open a door,' James gasped. 'I'll try fending it off with this pipe.'

James half hoped the dog would go after Bruce, but it kept its eyes fixed, pacing closer to James until he could feel its damp breath on his legs.

'Nice doggy,' James said.

The rottweiler reared up on its back legs, trying to knock James over. James spun away and the paws squealed down the glass door. James lashed out with the hosepipe. It cracked against the dog's ribcage. The beast made a high-pitched yelp and backed up slightly. James cracked the pipe against the patio tiles, hoping the noise would scare the dog away, but if anything the whipping seemed to have made it crazier.

James felt like his guts were going to drop out, imagining how easily the huge animal could rip into his flesh. James had nearly drowned once. He'd thought nothing could ever be scarier, but this had the edge.

A bolt clicked behind James' head and the French door glided open.

'Would Sir care to step inside?' Bruce asked.

James threw down the hose and leapt through the opening. Bruce rammed the door shut before the rottweiler made a move.

'What took you so long?' James said anxiously, trying to stop his hands from shaking. 'Where is everyone?'

'No sign,' Bruce said. 'Which is definitely weird. They'd have to be deaf not to hear that psycho mutt barking at us.'

James grabbed one of the curtains and used it to wipe the dog crap off his leg.

'That's so gross,' Bruce said. 'At least it's not on your clothes.'

'Have you checked all the rooms out?'

Bruce shook his head. 'I thought I'd make sure you weren't being eaten first, even if it meant we got caught.'

'Fair play,' James said.

They worked their way across the ground floor, creeping up to each door and checking out the rooms. The villa looked lived-in. There were cigarette butts in ashtrays and dirty mugs. There was a Mercedes in the garage. Bruce pocketed the keys.

'There's our getaway vehicle,' he said.

There was no sign of life on the ground floor, which made the staircase likely to be some sort of trap. They stepped up

gingerly, expecting someone to burst on to the landing pointing a gun at them.

There were three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. The two hostages were in the master bedroom. The eight-year-olds, Jake and Laura, were tied to a bedpost, with gags over their mouths. They wore grubby T-shirts and shorts.

James and Bruce pulled the hunting knives off their belts and cut the kids loose. There was no time for greetings.

'Laura,' James barked. 'When did you last see the bad guys? Have you got any idea where they might be?'

Laura was red-faced and seemed listless.

'I dunno,' she shrugged. 'But I'm busting to pee.'

Laura and Jake knew nothing about anything. Bruce and James had been expecting a battle to get at them. This was far too easy.

'We're taking you to the car,' James said.

Laura started limping towards the bathroom. Her ankle was strapped up.

'We don't have time for toilet breaks,' James gasped. 'They've got guns and we haven't.'

'I'm gonna wet my knickers in a minute,' Laura said, bolting herself inside the en-suite bathroom.

James was furious. 'Well, make it snappy.'

'I need to go too,' Jake said.

Bruce shook his head. 'I don't want you disappearing. You can pee in the corner of the garage while I start the car.'

He led Jake downstairs. James waited half a minute before thumping on the bathroom door.

'Laura, come on. What the hell is taking you so long?'

'I'm washing my hands,' Laura said. 'I couldn't find any soap.'

James couldn't believe it.

'For the love of god,' he shouted, hammering his fist on the bolted door. 'We've *got* to get out of here.'

Laura eventually hobbled out of the bathroom. James scooped her over his shoulder and sprinted downstairs to the garage. Bruce sat at the steering wheel inside the car. Laura slid on to the back seat next to Jake.

'It's kaput,' Bruce shouted, getting out of the car and kicking the front wing. 'The key goes in but it won't turn. It's showing a full tank of petrol. I don't know what's wrong with it.'

'It's been sabotaged,' James yelled back. 'I bet you any money this is a trap.'

Bruce looked awkward as the realisation dawned.

'You're right. Let's get out of here.'

James leaned inside the Mercedes.

'Sorry you two,' he said, looking at Jake and Laura. 'Looks like we've got to make a run for it.'

But it was too late. James heard the noise, but only turned around in time to see the gun pointing at him. Bruce screamed out, as James felt two rounds smash into his chest. The pain knocked the air out of his lungs. He stumbled backwards, watching bright red streaks dribbling down his T-shirt.