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opening extract from

Escape From Shadow Island

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Gingerly, Max peeled back the wig to reveal the scalp underneath. It seemed a horrible thing to do – taking the hair off a corpse. The skin of Lopez-Vega's head was smooth and shiny, devoid of even a single hair. Then Max saw it.

Taped to the underside of the wig was a small piece of paper about three centimetres square. Max unstuck the tape and lifted the paper off. Written on one side was a sequence of numbers:

83521113

That was all. No words, just eight numbers. Max knew the piece of paper was important. Why else was it concealed in such a strange place? He studied the numbers. What did they mean?

ONE

Max Cassidy stepped into the spotlight at the front of the stage and gazed out over the packed theatre.

'For my final trick,' he said, speaking softly so that the audience had to strain to hear him. 'I'm going to do something I've never done before – that perhaps no other escapologist has done either. It's the most dangerous escape I've ever attempted.'

It was a simple trick, he explained. He was going to have his wrists handcuffed together and heavy chains wrapped around his body and secured with a padlock. Then he was going to be encased in a thick canvas sack, winched into the air and lowered into a tank of water that had been chilled to just above freezing. Max had approximately half a minute to get out of the handcuffs and chains, rip open the sack and escape from the tank – thirty seconds in which he could drown or freeze to death. It was pretty straightforward, really. Provided nothing went wrong . . .

The audience listened in absolute silence. Attentive faces stared up at him, eyes watching him expectantly.

They'd already seen this tall, good looking teenager escape from knotted ropes and a padlocked trunk, from a straitjacket and a reinforced-steel safe. They'd witnessed him disappear from a cabinet and somehow materialize in the back row of the auditorium. They'd gasped at feats of memory and mind-reading that had left them baffled and hungry for more. But this final trick was something else altogether. Max was an experienced performer, a strong, athletic fourteen-year-old boy – the Half-Pint Houdini, as the press liked to call him – but surely this death-defying escape was going to be too much even for him to pull off successfully.

Max asked for a volunteer to help him and hands shot up around the theatre. Every child had an arm in the air, shouting, 'Me! Me!', clamouring to be chosen.

Max selected a skinny, freckle-faced boy in the fifth row of the stalls who ran eagerly up the steps onto the stage.

'What's your name?' Max asked him.

'Sam.'

'And how old are you, Sam?'

'I'm ten.'

'Sam, I want you to do something. Will you make sure I'm not concealing any key or tool on my body?'

Max held out his arms. He'd swapped the dark suit

and bow tie he'd been wearing earlier in his act for a skintight body suit that covered him from neck to ankles, leaving only his head, hands and feet bare. Sam checked the cuffs of the body suit, then the neckline and the bottoms of the legs.

'Did you find anything?' Max said.

Sam shook his head.

'Would you check my feet now, to make sure there's nothing between my toes? And my hair – there's nothing hidden in my hair, is there?'

The boy inspected Max's feet and head. 'No, there's nothing.'

'Thanks, Sam. Stick around; I'm going to need you again shortly.'

Max glanced sideways at Consuela, his stage assistant. She was standing close by, as usual, a tall, dark, exotic-looking woman in knee-length boots, black trousers and a sparkly red blouse. Her jet-black hair was tied back with a silver clasp, revealing earrings that were as big and gaudy as Christmas-tree decorations.

Consuela came forward carrying a pair of handcuffs. Max stuck out his wrists and she clipped the handcuffs around them. Max held up his arms so the audience could see that his wrists were secured together.

'Sam, would you check the handcuffs, please?' he asked. 'Are they properly fastened?'

'Yes,' Sam said, testing them.

'Consuela will give you the key. Will you keep it safe somewhere for me?'

Sam nodded and slid the key into the pocket of his jeans.

The metal chains came next – six metres of high-tensile steel so strong that you could dangle a bus from them. Consuela wrapped the chains around Max's whole body so that his arms were pinioned across his chest and his legs and ankles were virtually immobilized. The ends of the chains were brought around Max's waist and clamped together with a massive padlock. His shoulders bowed visibly under the weight of the metal.

'Sam,' Max said. 'Would you check the chains and padlock, please?'

The boy did as he was asked; tugging hard to make sure they were secure.

Across the stage, meanwhile, a curtain had been pulled back to reveal a large glass-sided tank about four metres square and two metres deep. It was full of water and looked like a massive tropical-fish tank, only a tropical fish wouldn't have lasted a millisecond in the water the tank contained. It had been cooled to the same temperature as the Arctic Ocean. It was so cold that the glass sides of the tank were beginning to frost

and in places on the surface of the water, a thin crust of ice was forming.

The audience were on the edges of their seats now. Everyone could feel the tension in the atmosphere. It was like an electric charge running through the air, making their skin tingle, their hearts beat a little faster. Max was a gifted escapologist, but he was still only a teenager. Did he *really* know what he was doing?

Max could feel the tension too; see the worry in the faces of the people watching. This was a very risky trick, but he didn't let that unsettle him. The first rule of escapology was to stay calm. Max had had that drummed into him by his father from the first moment he'd started learning tricks. *Stay calm and never panic.* The human body could only function in extreme conditions if you had complete control over it. A few nerves, a few butterflies in the stomach were fine. They were good for keeping you alert, for making sure you concentrated. But if you ever allowed the nerves to turn to fear, that was the time to start worrying. When you were frightened, your emotions got the better of your mind; you lost control and made errors. And for Max, one tiny mistake could be fatal.

Consuela fetched a large canvas sack from the wings and spread out the open end on the floor so Max could shuffle onto it. His ankles were bound by the chain, but

he could just manage to move a few centimetres at a time.

He turned his head, nodding towards two men who had suddenly appeared on a raised platform next to the water tank. They were wearing thick, insulated rubber diving suits.

'These two men,' Max said, 'are on stand-by in case of an emergency. If I'm not out in thirty seconds, they will come in and drag me to safety.'

Consuela lifted up the sides of the sack over Max's head and pulled the drawstring tight. A hook on a wire descended from the gantry above the stage and Consuela attached the sack to it. At the same time, a large clock – a giant stopwatch, really – was lowered into place over the tank. The clock had only one hand, a second hand that would be activated the moment the sack containing Max entered the water.

It was a clever psychological touch – focusing the audience's attention on the time factor, the thirty seconds ticking by as Max struggled to free himself from his bonds. It was already starting to work. People were leaning forward anxiously, their faces taut, their eyes staring at the sack as it was winched into the air. They all knew that this was a truly dangerous trick. Handcuffs and chains were one thing, ice-cold liquid quite another. You could cheat with locks, but there was

no way of cheating with freezing water. Max had to hold his breath; he had to survive the cold.

The sack swung into position over the tank, swaying on the end of the winch. But inside it, things were not going according to plan. By now, Max should already have had the handcuffs and chains off. He should have had them off before the sack even left the floor. There'd be no time once he was in the tank. The second he hit the water, he knew the cold would begin to paralyse him, making it impossible to tackle the locks. At all costs, he had to be free of his bonds before then.

But he couldn't get to the key. He hadn't deceived his helpers, or the audience. The spare key to the handcuffs and the padlock – the same key for both – wasn't hidden on his body. It was hidden *in* his body. Over the years, Max had perfected the art of regurgitation – of swallowing an object and then bringing it back up again at will. He could swallow something small – a key or a coin, for example – and then contract and control the muscles of his stomach and alimentary canal (the tube that ran from his mouth to his stomach) to recover the object. He'd done this trick many times in rehearsals – he never attempted an escape in public unless he'd completed it successfully at least twenty times in private. But tonight, for some inexplicable reason, Max couldn't get the key up. He'd tried twice already and failed both times.

Max knew he had only a few seconds. Once he was underwater and holding his breath, he'd *never* get the key up from his stomach.

He was nervous, and getting more nervous. This shouldn't have been happening. He could do it. He *could*. So why wasn't it working? *Stay calm*, he said to himself. *Concentrate on your breathing. Slow it down. Slow your heartbeat too. Don't panic, you can handle this.*

He closed his eyes, focusing on working the muscles in his throat and chest. He felt them contract, felt the familiar ripple of movement in his stomach. This was it. This was the way it always happened. The key would be coming up, squeezing through his alimentary canal towards his mouth. *Just ease it up. Slowly, take your time.*

But then suddenly, without any obvious reason, the contractions stopped. Max felt a tightness in his throat. He'd failed again. What should he do? The sack was about to be lowered into the water. He could call out to Consuela. Tell her to stop the winch. But he'd never aborted a trick before. If he did so now, his reputation would be shattered, his brief career terminated instantly. It would be all over at fourteen. He couldn't face such humiliation. But if he didn't pull out now, the consequences might be much worse.

Five metres below him, Consuela was watching the

sack intently. There was a smile on her face. She was trying hard to maintain her pose as the confident, supportive assistant. But her eyes were worried and inside she was feeling sick with fear. She knew Max could do this trick. She'd seen him succeed all those times in practice. But practice wasn't the same as performing. Once you were out there on stage in front of a thousand people, everything was different. Inevitably, you were tense, nervous. The whole thing became harder, and more hazardous. Silently, she began to pray for Max. *Please don't let anything happen to him. Get him through this. Please.*

The sack was directly over the centre of the tank now. Every eye in the theatre was fixed on it. Nobody blinked. They were all waiting. Consuela gave a nod to the crane operator in the gantry. The winch motor whirred again and slowly the sack began to descend towards the water.

Max felt the movement. He had time for one last try. *Concentrate. You know you can do it.* It was pitch dark in the sack, but he closed his eyes anyway. It helped him direct his willpower to those hidden muscles inside him. Mind over matter, that was all it was. Channelling your thoughts to one particular area of your body, beaming them in like a laser, making your muscles do exactly what you wanted them to. The mind was

stronger than the body. It could overcome anything. That was the guiding principle of Max's life, and his career as an escapologist.

Deep inside him, the valve at the top of his stomach began to open. The muscles in the walls of the stomach started to contract, to expel the key he had swallowed. The sack was still descending, but Max had shut out all external sensations. He was aware of nothing except those tiny muscular movements at the core of his body. The contractions were getting higher now. Max was finally controlling them, moving the key gradually up towards his mouth.

The bottom of the sack touched the surface of the water. Freezing liquid seeped in around Max's bare toes, but he hardly noticed. The key was coming up. He knew it. The water was above his knees now, creeping higher. The cold took his breath away, but he ignored the numbing pain. Then he was waist deep. The padlock was underwater. *Nearly there*, Max thought. *Just a few more centimetres.* The water flooded up over his chest. It was like a vice around him, crushing him in an icy embrace. His shoulders submerged. The water inched up his neck. Max coughed and suddenly the key was there in his mouth. He lifted his manacled hands and took the key in his fingers, then filled his lungs with air only a fraction of a second before the water closed over his head.

It was cold, colder than anything he'd ever experienced. Even in practice it had never felt so bad. In ideal conditions Max could hold his breath for several minutes, but in water this cold, when his body was fighting not just to keep warm but to keep functioning at all, he would be lucky to last even sixty seconds.

He inserted the key into the lock. His fingers had stiffened so much he could barely move them. There was no feeling anywhere on his skin. The ice-cold liquid all around him had numbed the nerve endings. Max twisted the key. Nothing happened. Was the lock frozen? His heart gave a jolt. He felt a sickness in his stomach, a fear that was turning to panic. *Stay calm . . . concentrate*, he told himself again. He tried the key once more . . . and it turned. The lock clicked back and the handcuffs sprang open.

Max flung the cuffs aside and moved the key to the padlock at his waist, fumbling for the keyhole. How long had he been underwater? Ten, fifteen seconds? He had to move fast. But moving fast was something he simply couldn't do; he was too cold.

In the auditorium, everyone was staring at the second hand of the clock ticking round, then at the sack in the bottom of the glass tank, then back at the clock. Many of the spectators were, like Max, holding their breath. It was so quiet you could hear the ripples

lapping against the sides of the tank as Max struggled to free himself.

Consuela's eyes also flicked from the sack, to the clock, to the two divers waiting next to the tank, watching for her signal. Was Max going to make it? Twenty seconds had elapsed. In practice, he had always been out by now. How much longer should she give him? She didn't know what to do. If she acted too quickly, she'd ruin the trick. If she waited too long, it might be too late for Max. Twenty-five seconds . . . twenty-six . . .

Max found the keyhole. He slid in the key and turned it. The padlock snapped open first time. He grabbed the chains and tore them away from his body. He couldn't take much more of the cold. A moment longer and his heart would stop beating. He reached up, searching for the ripcord to open the sack.

Twenty-eight seconds . . . twenty-nine . . . thirty. Consuela glanced at the clock. She couldn't bear the tension. She had to act. Thirty-one . . . Act now. She looked at the two divers, started to raise her arm . . . But before she could give the signal, the sack suddenly tore open and Max burst out.

His head broke the surface of the water. He gulped in air and splashed to the edge of the tank, pulling himself up the steps and almost falling down onto the stage.

A huge roar, like a volcanic eruption, exploded around the theatre. The audience leaped to their feet, shouting and cheering and waving their arms frantically in the air.

Consuela rushed over to Max and wrapped a blanket over his shoulders. He drew it tightly around his whole body. He was shivering and exhausted – more drained than he would ever let the audience see. But he was also elated. Elated and relieved. He'd pulled it off. He winked at Consuela, then walked to the front of the stage and bowed, acknowledging the adulation and applause. In this business, there was a very thin line between life and death. He'd stayed the right side of that line this time. But only just.