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Opening extract from

The Hangman's Revolution

Written by

Eoin Colfer

Published by

Puffin Books an imprint of Penguin Books Ltd

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
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Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

puffinbooks.com

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Set in 13.5/17.9 pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

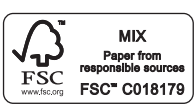
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK
ISBN: 978–0–141–34179–8

TRADE PAPERBACK
ISBN: 978–0–141–34180–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN . . .

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Scottish professor Charles Smart succeeded in stabilizing a time tunnel to Victorian London (constructed from exotic matter with negative energy density, duh). Within months the FBI had established the Witness Anonymous Relocation Programme to stash federal witnesses in the past. When the professor learned that Colonel Box of WARP division was planning to use the wormhole to manipulate governments and regimes, he fled, horrified, into the past, taking his codes with him – a wasted gesture, really, since Colonel Box and his entire unit had disappeared on a mission only days before.

Smart returned to the twenty-first century some years later, but he was far too dead to share his secrets. His arrival had quantum repercussions, which ensnared young FBI consultant Chevron Savano and even younger Riley, a boy from Victorian London who wished to escape the career of assassin mapped out for him by his evil master, the conjurer and murderer for hire Albert Garrick.

Garrick pursued his apprentice to the future and back, but

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he was ultimately cut adrift in the Smarthole with no means to reassemble his physical person.

More stuff happened too. High adventure, close calls and belly laughs – but that's another story (it's quite the story, to be honest) and has no place muddling up this report.

So all's well that ends well for our spirited pair of young adventurers?

For Chevie, not so much, as we will find out.

For Riley, even less so, which will become almost immediately apparent.

Chevie's brief presence in Victorian London caused temporal ripples, which were to have a dire effect on the present. Simply put, Chevron Savano was noticed in the past by the previously mentioned Colonel Box, who had actually set up shop in Victorian London. As a result, the colonel was prompted to have Riley murdered and then move up his world-domination plan by a few days, causing the downfall of major world powers and the emergence of the Boxite Empire. If Chevie had not been noticed, then Box would have stuck to his original Emergence Day and the catacombs where he made his base would have flooded, scuppering his plans forever.

Chevie now lives as a Boxite cadet in a timeline that is not her own. Her mind is rejecting modern-day London and allowing her original memories of time-travel adventures and the FBI to bleed through. For cases like Chevie's, Professor Smart predicted two hypothetical outcomes: either the time traveller drowns the visions in antipsychotic drugs so that he/she may live some kind of normal life, or the visions will

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become so vivid that their discordance with actual events will drive the subject insane.

When we join the story, Chevron Savano's visions are becoming extremely vivid, and if there were antipsychotic drugs handy they certainly would not be wasted on a mere army cadet.

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MOLEY AND GOOGOO

If you go back in time and assassinate Rasputin, then there's no need to go back and assassinate Rasputin. So is old Grigori dead, or isn't he?

– Professor Charles Smart

Boxite Youth Academy. Present-Day London. New Albion. 115 BC (Boxite Calendar)

London town.

Once there had been a magic about the city. Just hearing the name conjured images of Dickens's young trickster Dodger, or of Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street putting his mind to a three-pipe problem, or of any one of a thousand tales of adventure and derring-do that were woven through London's magnificent avenues and shadowy network of backstreets and alleys. For centuries, people had journeyed from across the world to England's capital to see where their favourite stories were set, or perhaps to make their fortune, or maybe to simply stand and gaze at the wonders of Trafalgar Square or Big Ben.

Not any more. Those days of magic were long gone.

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For one thing, the tourist industry did not really exist in the Boxite Empire, and, for another, Big Ben had been torn down decades ago to make room for a giant statue of the Blessed Colonel, whose stone eyes watched over the city and everyone in it. And Big Ben was not the only landmark dragged under by the Boxites. Brick by brick, the Empire was erasing relics of the past and remaking London in its own image: uniform, imposing, grey and implacable.

Almost all of the office buildings were constructed out of poured concrete with little in the way of distinguishing marks, just row upon row of dimly lit windows, lidded by half-drawn blinds. As the older London buildings were worn away by acid rain, they were demolished and replaced by utility blocks dropped in place by mega-copters. The blocks were pre-wired and plumbed and just required connection to the main supplies to be fully operational. London's history was being erased on a daily basis.

One such building that had fallen into disrepair and which was due to be dynamited in six months' time was the Boxite Youth Academy, the officer school for the Empire's military, where cadets from all over the world came to be indoctrinated in the way of the Blessed Colonel.

Inside this most austere academy no attempt had been made to cater to the comfort or physical well-being of the cadets. Benches were hard stone, and thin mattresses were laid on flat planks. The Spartan model was often cited and weak candidates were not encouraged to play to their strengths but instead traded to one of the Boxite Empire's harsher institutes.

Inside her cubicle, seventeen-year-old Cadet Chevron

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Savano woke before the morning's reveille siren but kept her eyes closed in order to prepare herself for the day's nightmares.

No, not nightmares, Chevie thought. *Though the Blessed Colonel knows I have plenty of those. These are daymares. Waking visions.*

Chevie tugged the bed's rough army blanket over her head so that the wall-mounted Boxlights could not even cast a glow on the insides of her eyelids.

What's wrong with me? she wondered. *Why do I see things that aren't there?*

These visions were interfering catastrophically with her training at the Boxite Youth Academy. Chevie's scores had dipped quite sharply in recent days, so much so that the file clipped to the foot of her bed had an orange card tucked into the folder.

An orange card. A review. The first warning and perhaps her last if she could not make a satisfactory show of herself. The academy rules were sacrosanct. One serious slip, and her place would be offered to the next in line.

And it was a long line. Millions of souls long.

Her review was today, and if it went badly she could be sold to a Box soldier factory in Dublin – or worse, to the mines in Newcastle as a spade monkey.

Chevie shuddered.

A spade monkey? Surely that would be a fate worse than death.

Chevron could pinpoint exactly when the visions started. It had been six months ago, on the night she'd sleepwalked down to the academy's musty basement and collapsed in a heap of mysterious half-formed clothes: long ropes of

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drenched, saturated cloth that looped her body like dark serpents. She had been wearing neither nightshirt nor slippers, just this strange material that dissolved into slop as she slowly woke. Then her stomach had convulsed and she'd vomited a strange glowing gel that turned to light particles and drifted away like fireflies.

Light? she remembered thinking.

Am I dying?

Is this death?

But her breath had come in rattling whoops, and Chevie's heart had hammered a testimony to her hold on life.

How did I get here?

Where is here?

Cadet Savano had covered herself with an old dust sheet yanked from a pile of paint cans and she'd stumbled to the top of a wrought-iron staircase, her legs as weak as a newborn's.

I am in a basement of some sort, she'd thought.

This is where the Timepod was, dummy, said a voice in her head. *You've come back*.

This voice, which was to become very familiar, made no sense, and so Chevie had ignored it.

Chevie had pounded on the locked door, calling out for help, which arrived eventually in the lumpily muscled shapes of the academy's night watch: two Thundercats, Clover Vallicose and Lunka Witmeyer, secret police attached to the academy. So Chevie was in the academy, at least.

Thundercats? Chevie had thought. She'd giggled and was instantly horrified.

Thundercats? Why would that name make her giggle? A

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person did not giggle around Thundercats. They were licensed to use necessary and unnecessary force up to, but not exceeding, the infliction of mortal wounds.

How do you exceed mortal wounds? wondered Chevie.

Two days, the Thundercats had told her that night, frowning above their splashback visors. *Two days we've been looking for you, orphan. And you show up in a restricted area. How in the name of the Blessed Colonel did you get down here? And why are you laughing? Do you find us amusing?*

Chevron could only shake her head dumbly. There was nothing in her mind but lingering dreams, confusion and questions that truncated each other before they were fully born.

How did I . . .

What was that . . .

Riley?

Who?

Why?

It was at that moment the visions – visions that would rip her ordered life apart – began. Before her disbelieving eyes the Thundercats had cracked and split into broken mirror images of themselves. They were replaced by an elderly woman with an unruly cone of hair piled on top of her head.

I knew you'd come, she'd said. *Charles said you would, and Charles Smart is never wrong.*

Then the elderly lady had disappeared, and the Thundercats were reassembled – and Chevie found herself thrashing in their arms, desperate to beat her way free from whatever nightmare she had woken into.

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