

SEPTEMBER 2006

A Ford Focus pulled up amidst a line of deserted parking bays as a powerful wave crashed against the adjacent sea wall. The spray turned into an ankle-deep wash that swirled across the wooden promenade, while a line of partially submerged huts fought for survival on the pebble beach below.

The man behind the wheel was fifty years old, with a beer gut and a bloodshot face that gave him a look of permanent sunburn. His name was George Savage.

‘Some storm,’ George said, raising his voice to make himself heard above the rain pelting the metal roof. ‘Haven’t seen one go off like this in donkey’s years.’

The young woman in the passenger seat wore the same uniform as her driver: black trousers and a white shirt with epaulettes bearing the words *HM Customs & Excise*. She pulled a hefty torch out of the glove box before reaching between the seats and grabbing a waterproof jacket out of the back.

‘Are you coming with?’ she asked, though she already knew the answer.

‘No point both of us getting drenched, is there, Vet?’ George grinned.

Yvette Clark hated her partner. George was old, lazy, smelled like a night in the pub and took particular delight in never using her proper name. She was Vet, Vetty, Vetto, Vetster, sweetheart and even occasionally cupcake, but if the word Yvette had ever passed George Savage’s lips, she hadn’t been there to hear it. She could have happily kneed George in the balls, if it wasn’t for the dent it would put in her three-month career as a customs officer.

The wind practically tore the waterproof coat from Yvette’s hands as she stepped out of the passenger door into the darkness. By the time it was zipped up, her shirt was soaked through and she had a horrible vision of George leering at the black bra that would show through when she got back in the car.

Yvette felt sorry for herself as she stepped up to the sea wall. She’d joined customs straight from university, expecting to spend her days uncovering serious fraud and hunting down drug dealers. The recruitment brochure hadn’t mentioned ten-hour shifts patrolling the coastline with an obnoxious pig for company.

And just as it seemed life could get no worse, the wave hit. Bigger than its predecessors, its tip crashed over the wall and kept on coming. Yvette turned to run, but was outmatched and quickly found herself wading in icy water. She lost her footing on the slippery promenade, and grazed the hand she put out to save herself as the receding tide swelled over her shoulders and all but covered her head.

As Yvette gasped from the cold and staggered back to her feet, George triumphantly blasted the horn. It was 1 a.m., but the promenade was illuminated with strings of bulbs and Yvette got a good view of her colleague roaring with laughter from his cocoon behind the flapping windscreen wipers. She wanted to steam over and tell George exactly what she thought of him, but knew that a tantrum would only enrich the story he'd tell everyone back at the office the minute he got the chance.

Close to tears and with salt water burning her eyes, Yvette stumbled back to the wall and slid the powerful torch from her pocket. Anticipating another blast of water, she gripped the railing atop the wall before pointing the beam of light out to sea.

Much to Yvette's surprise, she spotted the very thing she'd come looking for.

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The narrow strip of water between Britain and France is the busiest waterway in the world. At any given moment there are over a thousand ships in the English Channel, ranging from 100,000-tonne supertankers down to one-man sailing boats. With so much traffic, accidents are frequent - and when one of the big boats hits one of the little ones, the little boat always comes off worst.

Three hours before George and Yvette pulled up on the seafront near Brighton, a 15,000-tonne catamaran with two hundred and thirty passengers onboard radioed the coastguard after colliding with a small motor launch. The launch appeared to be damaged and a lifeboat and a French naval helicopter were sent on a rescue mission. Despite the

fact that the launch was listing badly and taking on water, the captain refused help and tried making a run for it. He clearly had something to hide.

The helicopter tracked the crippled boat for ninety minutes as it headed for the safety of international waters, but eventually had to fly back to base for fuel. Under normal circumstances, a naval patrol would have intercepted the launch by this time, stopping it by force if necessary. But the awful conditions had left other boats in distress and resources were stretched to the limit.

As a last resort, the coastguard was asked to track the stricken launch on radar. But tracking a small boat through a stormy sea is close to impossible and the coastguard put out a radio request asking other ships to report sightings of a crippled white launch.

Just after midnight, the captain of a container ship radioed in to say that she'd passed a vessel matching the description. It appeared dangerously close to sinking and was making a desperate attempt to reach the English coast.

With nobody available to intercept the boat at sea, police, customs and coastguard units along a ten-mile stretch of coast were told to head for the seafront and search for the stricken motor launch.

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George Savage sounded put out as his dripping colleague leaned inside the car. 'Bloody hell, are you sure?'

Typical George, Yvette thought. He was clearly annoyed that his peaceful night had been spoiled.

'There's a boat tied up at the end of the jetty. It fits the descriptions and it's listing badly.'

‘Could just be moored there,’ George said thoughtfully, as he dragged a finger over his stubble.

‘There are lights on inside, George. I think it’s the one... I mean, you’d *have* to be desperate to moor a boat outside of a harbour in this weather.’

‘We’d better wait here. I’ll call for backup.’

This pushed Yvette over the edge. ‘For all we know they’ve only just tied up,’ she screamed. ‘The bad guys could be out there *right now*.’

‘Smugglers carry guns, sugar plum. We don’t know what we’re up against.’

Sugar plum . . .

‘I’m sick of you!’ Yvette yelled, as she banged her hand on the top of the car. ‘I tell you what, George; you sit on that giant arse of yours and wait for backup. I’m going to walk up there and try doing my job.’

‘Temper, temper.’ George grinned, as he reached for the radio mic. ‘I’ve been at this game a lot longer than you...’

Yvette knew she’d only get madder if she stood around listening to another lecture on the benefits of thirty years’ experience. She flicked the torch on and set off briskly down the promenade towards the steel jetty.

The rusting structure went fifty metres out to sea and was less than three paces wide, except at the head where it widened out to enable a ship to come alongside. The jetty had been built decades earlier to accommodate pleasure cruisers, but nowadays it only served anglers and a few brave swimmers who used it as a diving platform.

Despite the foul weather and the sheets of water

crashing over the jetty, the lampposts that ran its length were working and Yvette had a decent view of the boat. It appeared to have been hurriedly lashed to a single mooring point.

The crew had scarpered without even turning off the lights, leaving the raging water free to slowly wreck the launch. The windows along one side were shattered and the rear jutted out of the water, as if the bow was flooded. Only the length of rope lashing it to the jetty kept it above the water.

Part of Yvette wanted to encounter the crew and make her first arrest, but her sensible side was relieved to find the baddies long gone.

And then she heard a scream.

Yvette thought she was imagining it, but the noise had coincided with a particularly fierce wave engulfing the head of the jetty. She heard the high-pitched noise again when the water cleared away.

‘Hello,’ she yelled. ‘Is anybody out there?’

A gust of wind ruined her chance of hearing any response, but her shout had apparently reached an audience. Yvette sighted a skinny figure with her arms wrapped around a lamppost. It looked like a child, no more than twelve years old.

‘Holy Father,’ Yvette said to herself, panicking as she fumbled for her radio. ‘George, are you out there? There’s a young girl at the end of the jetty. She’s holding on to the railings for dear life, too scared to move.’

‘I’m coming down,’ George shouted. Even he couldn’t ignore a stricken child.

But Yvette couldn't imagine her partner being of much help. 'What about our backup?' she asked.

'Negative,' George said. 'At least, don't hold your breath. There's tiles coming off houses, trees down in the road and the nearest cop car is dealing with a major accident on the A27: articulated lorry turned over by the gale. Serious injuries.'

'Roger that,' Yvette said. 'I'll have to go get the kid myself.'

'Keep your head on your shoulders and wait till I get there,' George said. 'That's a direct order.'

But despite thirty years in the service of Her Majesty, George had never been promoted and had no authority over his partner.

Yvette was drenched and knew she ought to be shivering, but the tension made her face burn. She wrung her hands as she watched the raging tide, trying to pick a moment to run on to the jetty. She imagined that it might be like the video games she played with her young nephew, hoping for some magical pattern that would allow her to run along the jetty, grab the child and escape unscathed.

But there were no breaks. All Yvette could do was set off quickly and grab the handrail when the waves tried to knock her off. Figuring that bare feet were better than her flat-soled shoes, she slipped them off along with her socks and raincoat. She was already soaked and the waterproof fabric would drag as it billowed in the wind.

'Hold on there, sweetheart,' Yvette shouted, as the wind caught the abandoned coat and whipped it into the air. 'I'm coming to get you.'

She took a deep breath and considered a prayer, but George was coming towards her in the Focus. She didn't want him to stop her, so she settled for a quick kiss of the gold cross around her neck.

When the swirling tide dipped, Yvette vaulted the three steps at the front of the jetty, grasped the metal railing and began to run. The first wave to hit barely broke over the wooden decking, but the fierce wind gave it impressive force and Yvette had to curl her toes into the gap between planks to stop her legs being washed away.

The next wave was huge and swept across the jetty from the opposite direction, pressing her back against the metal railings as the surging water forced its way up her nostrils. She hacked and spat as a break in the wave allowed her to dash another thirty metres, almost making it to the head of the jetty before the next blast.

When the water cleared, the stricken boat was less than five metres away and the child was in clear view. It was a girl, with long blonde hair. She wore leather boots, leggings and a soggy polo neck. Although the girl had been too petrified to let go of the post and make a dash towards the shore, she'd managed to protect herself by wedging her leg into a gap between the post and a rubbish bin.

'Are you OK?' Yvette shouted.

The girl shook her head and said something in a language Yvette couldn't understand. The girl's pale skin and cheap but warm clothing suggested that she hailed from Eastern Europe.

Yvette realised that the runaway boat had been smuggling illegal immigrants. The terrified girl must have become

separated from her companions as they escaped along the jetty, and they'd either thought she'd been washed out to sea or not cared enough to go back and rescue her.

Yvette's next move was the hardest: the head of the jetty was designed for boats to dock and had no handrail. She'd have to wait for a break in the waves and then dash to the girl, grab her and run back. If she timed it wrong, she'd be swept away to certain death: either drowned or brutally smashed against the legs of the jetty or the sea wall.

The sea looked black and the erratic gusts made it hard to time the waves. Yvette tried giving the youngster a reassuring smile, but as she crouched down holding on to the last section of railing, her heart banged like it was trying to hack its way through her chest wall.

She dipped her head as a massive wave reared up. The metal structure made a groan like whale song, then shuddered as the launch strained at its mooring post. Its plastic hull thudded into the side of the jetty.

'Here I come,' Yvette shouted.

It took less than three seconds to reach the girl and wrap an arm around her waist. The youngster's teeth chattered and her skinny body felt eerily cold. Yvette realised that the girl was in the early stages of hypothermia and would be unable to support her own weight.

As Yvette twisted the girl's leg out of the gap, she saw a colossal wave break over the end of the jetty, almost at head height. The water knocked her on to her back, but she managed to keep one arm around the girl.

Yvette felt pure terror as the water lifted her body off the

wooden decking and shoved it towards the edge. She heard the hull of the boat slam again, then something heavy hit the decking directly in front of her.

‘Grab hold,’ George shouted.

Yvette reached out for the object, which she now realised was a tethered life preserver. George had one leg wrapped around the railings and the nylon rope coiled around his chunky wrists. He struggled to hold on as the wave tried to push the two females over the edge.

Yvette and the girl both screamed, coming up for air as the last of the wave drained between the wooden planks. Still clutching the girl, Yvette rolled on to her chest and was horrified to see how close she’d come to going over the side.

She rushed towards George and the relative safety of the railings.

‘I told you to wait,’ George shouted furiously, before they all ducked down, grabbing the railing as a modest wave washed over the deck.

‘I didn’t want you to stop me,’ Yvette said, close to tears and coming to the awkward realisation that she now owed her life to a man she detested. Maybe she’d never like George, with his sexist jabs and nicotine-stained fingernails, but he’d proved himself to be a better man than she’d realised.

As more water rushed over them, Yvette huddled herself around the girl and felt oddly reassured by the fat hand pressing against her shoulder. The nylon cord had sliced George’s wrists and blood streamed along his fingers.

When the last of the water had drained away, Yvette

looked through the railings and saw that the sea around the jetty had taken on an eerie calm.

‘Lull before the storm,’ George said hurriedly. ‘Spot of high pressure, but the big buggers will come back in a minute.’

The wind howled against the structure of the jetty as the break in the waves gave them a clear run back to shore.

1. RUSSIA

Aero City is located in a rural area three hundred kilometres north west of Moscow. Built in the Soviet era, the town was a major centre for aviation research and many of Russia's civil airliners, military transport aircraft and guided missiles were built within its giant factories.

In 1994 the government announced plans to sell the whole of Russian industry under a scheme known as 'mass privatisation'. The process was riddled with corruption and many of Russia's most valuable assets fell into the hands of a small group of men and women who became known as 'the oligarchs'.

One such man was Denis Obidin, who used his position as a junior bank official to fraudulently lend large sums of money to his own wife and parents. Obidin then used the cash to buy up shares that the government had given to factory workers who had no idea of their true worth. By 1996, he owned a slice of the Russian aerospace industry that was thought to be worth more than \$800 million.

Today, Obidin not only controls all of the factories and most of the land and property in Aero City, but has had himself appointed mayor in a rigged election. When a local police chief

announced plans to investigate corruption within Obidin's administration, the officer was found dead in his apartment and Obidin put his brother Vladimir in charge of law enforcement.

Obidin initially laid out grand plans to design and build a modern Russian airliner that could compete with Boeing and Airbus, but his reputation for corruption scared off foreign investors and no airline will purchase aircraft from a company with a shady past and an uncertain future.

After a series of lay-offs, the unemployment rate in Aero City exceeds eighty per cent. Obidin's one remaining factory produces a small number of missiles for the Russian military and upgrades elderly Russian airliners by fitting efficient British jet engines. But with the Russian military slashing its budgets and airlines steadily replacing their fleets with western aircraft, this work is drying up.

Obidin has given up hope of raising the billions needed for his airliner project and put out word to international weapons dealers that everything is for sale. For the right price, a visitor to Aero City can purchase anything from a batch of rocket fuel or blueprints for a missile guidance system, all the way up to a truckload of anti-ship missiles capable of sinking an American aircraft carrier.

(Excerpt from a classified mission briefing for James Adams, August 2006)

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Denis Obidin's luxury home had featured in glossy magazines both in Russia and across northern Europe. The rambling wooden structure was three storeys high, with eight bedrooms, a ballroom where Obidin's wife hosted parties, and an eighty-metre spire at one end. The spire was

topped off with a rotating platform and a retractable dome that would occasionally be opened to reveal a large telescope.

Denis claimed to love astronomy, but everyone knew that the tower was really a sniper post. Wealthy Russians were often targeted by kidnappers and the sniper was a last line of defence against anyone who managed to breach the electrified perimeter, avoid the guard dogs and make it past the machine gun-toting guards who patrolled the compound.

The huge double-glazed windows in Denis Obidin's library looked out over an expanse of forest. The leaves were autumnal and the ground was dusted with snow. A romantic might have found it beautiful, but James Adams could only see cold.

It was warm inside the Obidins' house, with its under-floor heating and a gas generator buried beneath the garage, but the rest of Aero City got its electricity from a decrepit nuclear power station five hundred kilometres away and suffered regular outages. After a month living in Aero City, James had concluded that the only thing in the world worse than school was a school where you spent the entire day wearing fingerless gloves and watching your classmates' breath curling up towards the ceiling.

'It's snowing,' James said, in Russian, as he looked across a long desk at Denis Obidin's six-year-old son, Mark.

James had been learning Russian intensively for three years and was fluent, though his accent was nowhere near good enough for him to pass as a native. James asked Mark to repeat the phrase in English.

'Ziss nowing,' Mark said.

‘Not bad,’ James said cheerfully. ‘Now let’s try English numbers again.’

The little boy shook his head and screwed up his face before breaking into a giant yawn. ‘I’m too tired.’

‘Come on, Mark,’ James said sternly. ‘I’m your tutor and if you don’t concentrate you’re not going to pass your entrance exam.’

Mark broke into an evil smile. ‘I’ll tell my daddy it was your fault and he’ll punish you.’

‘Oh you reckon, do you?’ James scoffed.

Mark folded his arms. ‘My uncle Vladimir is the chief of police. He’s got his own police station and his own cells. He can do whatever he likes.’

‘Maybe he’ll put you in a cell if you don’t pass your exam.’

‘Nah, he loves me,’ Mark grinned. ‘He buys me all the biggest Lego sets. I don’t ever want to go to a stupid English boarding school. I like it here.’

‘At least the classrooms are nice and warm in England,’ James said, giving a shrug. ‘And the lights never go out in the middle of the day. Besides, we all have to do things we don’t like, kiddo. My aunt and uncle make me come here after school every day and teach English to a horrible *smelly* little boy. And all because they’re trying to be nice to your daddy.’

Mark got out of his chair, ran around the desk and tried looking mean as he bunched his fist under James’ nose. ‘I’m not smelly. You’re smelly.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

Mark smiled as he gently nudged his fist against James’ nose.

'GRRRRR,' James bellowed. 'You're dead, you chicken nugget.'

The little boy cracked up laughing as James scooped him off the floor and flipped him upside down so that his hair hung down in strands.

'Now I'll use you as a broom,' James said, as he lowered Mark's head towards the floor and swung him gently from side to side, before setting the youngster down on the edge of the desk.

'Do that again,' Mark squealed, giggling so much that he had spit bubbling out the corner of his mouth.

'I'll do it again, but only if you say *I want to be a broom* in English.'

'Never in *stupid* English,' Mark said indignantly, as he jumped off the table and crashed face first on to a beanbag by the window.

Both boys turned towards the door as it clicked open. Vladimir Obidin stood in the doorway. The powerfully built man wore the crisply tailored uniform of a senior police officer.

'James, you're leaving now,' he said.

James looked at his watch as Mark sighed with disappointment.

'It's only twenty past,' James said.

'There's a meeting here tonight,' Vladimir said. He abruptly changed his tone to one of anger. 'I don't justify myself to children. When I say go, you go.'

Vladimir sent a shiver down James' back. The man had worked for Russian military intelligence and had a reputation for extracting confessions from Aero City's

criminals with a set of dentist's tools and a blow lamp. James tried not to feel intimidated as he said goodbye to Mark, grabbed his backpack and stepped out of the library.

'I've got a long trek home,' James said nervously. 'Can I use the bathroom?'

Vladimir huffed as though James had just imposed some great burden upon him. 'Quickly then.'

James stepped into a plush washroom, with a huge spa bath and beech-panelled walls. He slid off his backpack and - all too aware that Vladimir was on the other side of the door - quietly pulled a Nokia communicator out of the side pocket.

As James flipped it open, he noticed that the communicator had picked up some e-mails. Cellphone coverage in Aero City was flaky and his phone tended to receive a whole bunch of messages and missed calls whenever he passed through an area with good reception. But this wasn't a good moment to read them. He switched to a wireless messaging application and tapped in a four-digit number to access a hidden menu.

James had dropped a dozen pinhead-sized listening devices around the Obidins' house over the three weeks in which he'd been tutoring Mark after school. Rows of bright green signal bars on the communicator screen showed that they were all powered up and transmitting perfectly.

'Shift it,' Vladimir shouted, pounding his fist on the door. 'I'm a busy man.'

'Just shaking off,' James said, as he shoved the communicator inside his pack and raced for the door. At the last minute he remembered to flush the toilet.

Mark gave James a friendly wave from one of the first-floor windows as Vladimir escorted him down the woodchip driveway towards the solid steel gate at the front of the Obidin compound.

‘All right, Slava,’ James nodded, as he passed a guard and stepped through a reinforced steel door cut into a half-metre-thick wall.

The bored and half frozen guard usually exchanged a few sentences with him, but he clammed up under Vladimir’s gaze and didn’t even acknowledge James’ nod.

Once James was out of the compound, he zipped his jacket and pulled up the collar to ward off the cold. For the purposes of this mission, James lived in an apartment block six kilometres away with a fake aunt and uncle. They were posing as weapons dealers who wanted to buy missiles from Denis Obidin. In reality they both worked for MI5.

A bus ran into town from a stop half a kilometre from Obidin’s house, but Aero City’s transportation was erratic. The wait for a bus in sub-zero temperatures was unbearable and on the odd occasion when a bus actually turned up, it was filled with cigarette smoke and mean-tempered pensioners with vile coughs. Running home was the healthier option and it meant James would still be in decent physical shape when he returned to CHERUB campus.

The first part of James’ run took him along a gloomy road, with little traffic and trees packed along each side. He loved this section of his daily run home, with the crisp air and the smell of pine needles. The trees ended when he reached factory seven. A kilometre and a half long, the massive hangar had once employed thirty-five thousand

workers who turned out a three-hundred-seat airliner every ten days.

It had been graffitied and vandalised in the years after closing, but most young families had left Aero City in search of work and taken the city's delinquent teens with them. The only life James had ever seen around the plant were a few homeless boys who lived rough in an abandoned apartment block. They sniffed glue inside the dilapidated remains of a cargo plane and occasionally kicked a half inflated football around inside the hangar.

Once he was sure nobody was about, James stopped running and sat on a concrete step with his back against a fire door that had been taken off its hinges, probably to be burned as firewood. He slid the communicator out of his pocket and checked his messages.

The first was from his girlfriend back at CHERUB campus:

*HAPPY 15TH BIRTHDAY.
MISS U
LOVE U
COME BACK SOON!
HOPE IT'S NOT 2 COLD.
KERRY.*

James had heaps of other birthday messages from friends on campus and even a message from his handler, Meryl Spencer. The oldest unread message was from his sister, Lauren. It had been sent the evening before:

HAPPY BDAY 4 2MORO SCUMBAG!
SORRY THIS IS EARLY. MR LARGE IS
DRAGGING US OFF ON SOME BLOODY
HIKING EXPEDITION.
UR PREZZIE WILL BE WAITING
WHEN U GET HOME!
P.S. KEEP UR HANDS OFF THE
RUSSIAN GIRLS U PERV!

2. SNEAK

Lauren Adams' life had been ruined when a pair of recently qualified CHERUB agents returned from a mission in the USA. The lads had spent much of their time tucking down hamburgers, ice cream and bucket-sized containers of soft drinks, and none of it following the strict exercise regime designed to keep them in shape. Every cherub has to undergo a medical and fitness test after a long mission and both boys failed spectacularly.

CHERUB's handlers and training instructors put their heads together and decided that all of the younger agents needed a sharp reminder about the importance of keeping fit. The reminder would take the form of a three-day hike across the Yorkshire Dales, led by the notorious Norman Large. All CHERUB instructors are tough, but Large was the worst because he got a huge kick out of making kids suffer.

Twenty-six CHERUB agents, all aged twelve or under, were dumped off the back of a truck just after sun-up, and Large gleefully announced that they each had to carry a ten-kilogram metal weight, on top of the tents, utensils, drinking

water and clothing already crammed inside their packs. Hot drinks and porridge were to be served ninety minutes later at a meeting point fifteen kilometres away, and those who didn't make it would go hungry until the evening.

Lauren made it in time for breakfast, but that had been the high point of her day. It was dark now, and she lay inside a two-person tent with swollen ankles and red welts where her pack had chafed her shoulders. She watched the sleeping bag of her best friend, Bethany Parker, swelling and dipping as she breathed.

'Bethany?' Lauren whispered, as she reached across and gave her companion a gentle nudge.

Bethany didn't stir, so Lauren decided that it was safe to wriggle out of her sleeping bag. She'd kept her jeans on, so she only had to slip her unlaced boots over her socks before she crawled up to the zipper holding the tent flaps together and opened it slowly to keep down the noise.

The full moon gave Lauren enough light to see by as she crept between two rows of tents and into a cluster of trees at the edge of the field.

'Rat,' Lauren whispered. 'Are you out there?'

The heavily built twelve-year-old called softly back in his Australian accent. 'Over here.'

Lauren smiled as she sighted Rat, sitting with his back against a tree trunk. 'How's it going?'

'Been better,' Rat said, as he ran a grubby hand through his tangled hair. 'Twisted my ankle when we crossed that lake and my back is *killing* me. You?'

'About the same,' Lauren said, giving a resigned shrug as she sat in the grass and snuggled up beside Rat.

‘How come you’re so late?’

‘Bethany. I thought she was *never* gonna fall asleep.’

The pair turned to face each other and exchanged a quick kiss.

‘Is that all I get?’ Rat asked indignantly.

‘You smell like BO and you’ve got dried-up baked-bean sauce around your mouth.’

Rat tutted. ‘Well Large had us walking and running for like, twelve hours. You’re no pot-pourri yourself.’

Lauren gave some thought to this before leaning in again and giving Rat a much longer kiss.

‘You know,’ Rat said when they broke off, ‘I’ve been thinking.’

‘Riiiiight,’ Lauren grinned. ‘That explains the clanking noise I could hear when you and Andy were walking in front of me earlier.’

‘Seriously,’ Rat said, a touch irritated. ‘We’ve been sneaking around behind everyone’s backs ever since I finished basic training. I reckon it’s time we went public.’

Lauren scowled at the grass between her legs and let out a deep groan. ‘If I’d known you were gonna start on that again I would have stayed in my tent.’

‘I want a *normal* girlfriend. This is driving me nuts.’

Lauren grabbed hold of a branch and hauled herself off the ground. ‘Goodnight, Rathbone.’

‘Don’t be like that,’ Rat said, as he reached out and grabbed Lauren’s trouser leg.

‘Let off or I’ll boot you one.’

‘You’re doing my head in, Lauren.’

‘I like it the way it is. I don’t want the pressure of

everyone talking about us, and making snide remarks and asking what's going on all the time.'

'You're so full of crap,' Rat snorted. 'You're just scared that James will take the mickey. It's totally immature.'

'Hey,' Lauren snarled, raising her voice above a whisper for the first time. 'I'm not immature. Now let go of my *bloody* trousers.'

'You'll have to tell James that you've got a boyfriend sooner or later,' Rat said, as he defiantly tightened his grip and tugged Lauren towards him. 'I mean, he'll get upset if you don't invite him to your wedding and he's bound to suspect something when you start knocking out kids . . .'

'What makes you think I'll ever be getting married?'

'I spent all day looking forward to meeting up with you,' Rat said, as he gave up the struggle and let Lauren go. 'But you know what? I'm sick of this. It's pathetic.'

Rat letting go coincided with an almighty tug from Lauren and the sudden lack of resistance caught her by surprise. She took an awkward stumble, tripped over a tree root and ended up clattering into the low-slung branches of a neighbouring tree.

'Moron,' Lauren growled.

'This was *totally* worth losing an hour's sleep over,' Rat said caustically.

As he stood up, he grabbed a golden object from the pocket of his fleece and threw it at Lauren.

'What's that?' Lauren asked, as she picked it off the ground between her boots.

'Mint Twix bar, limited edition. The one you're totally addicted to.'

Mr Large had given the cherubs strict instructions not to bring extra food or items that weren't on the equipment list.

'Large would have made you exercise till you puked if he'd caught you with this,' Lauren said. She tried to keep up her grouchy tone, but couldn't help letting a rush of warm emotion into her voice.

'I know,' Rat said, trying to make out that he couldn't care less.

Lauren was totally flattered that Rat had taken a huge risk, just so that he could give her a gift. Rat cared about her and why the hell *was* she ashamed of that?

She stepped back towards Rat and gave him a big hug followed by a theatrical smooch on the cheek.

'Sometimes . . .' Lauren smirked, but was unable to finish her thought. 'Sod it, we'll tell everyone. We can go to the cinema together and hang out in each others' rooms and . . .'

Lauren's excitement was contagious and Rat tightened his arms around her back and pulled her feet off the ground. He might have made more of it, if it hadn't been for a blast of pain from the ankle he'd twisted earlier in the day.

'I don't care what James says,' Lauren said happily. 'But there is one condition.'

'What?'

'You've got to get a decent haircut.'

Rat sounded shocked. 'What's wrong with my hair?'

'Nothing,' Lauren said. 'I mean, if I was the sort of girl who went for guys who looked like they had a bird's nest mounted on their head . . .'

Rat self-consciously inspected a strand of his tangled hair. ‘Do you really think it’s that bad?’

Lauren slowly nodded, but her smirk disappeared when she heard the clatter of a diesel engine coming up the dirt path towards the camp.

Rat poked his head out between the branches. ‘It’s Mr Large and Arif in the truck.’

Arif was a nineteen-year-old ex-cherub who was being paid to help out around campus until he returned to university.

‘Dammit,’ Lauren said. ‘They’re right between us and the tents. If Large does an inspection and finds us missing, we’re gonna be so dead.’

The pair crouched down low and watched as the army-green truck came to a halt. Arif sat at the wheel as Mr Large opened the passenger door and stumbled out of the cab.

‘Are you sure you’re OK, Norman?’ Arif asked.

‘I’m a happy man,’ Large boomed, as his giant body rippled with drunken laughter. ‘I can’t wait for the looks on those kids’ faces when they see those granite blocks and the size of the hill they’ve got to drag them up.’

Arif had been through many of Mr Large’s training exercises himself and clearly didn’t share the joke.

‘OK, misery guts,’ Large slurred. ‘You’d better get moving, ’cos the supermarket closes at half twelve. Stick to the cheap sausages and don’t go buying any extra stuff; I want to keep those brats lean and hungry.’

Large slammed the door of the truck and a thick blue plume shot out of the exhaust as Arif pulled away. Back in

the trees, Lauren and Rat exchanged looks of dread as they contemplated spending a day dragging granite blocks up a hill.

‘At least he’s in no state to inspect tents,’ Rat whispered.

‘Yeah, but think of the mood he’ll be in tomorrow if he’s got a hangover.’

Mr Large clearly had no idea that he was being watched as he unself-consciously scratched between his legs and broke into song:

‘I’ve been a wild rover for many a year, and I’ve spent all me money on whiskey and beer . . .’

‘Total saddo,’ Lauren whispered, stifling a giggle. ‘My dad always sang that when he was off his face.’

‘But now I’m returning with gold in great store . . .’

Rat smiled briefly, until he saw Mr Large turn and start walking towards them. The cluster of trees was isolated, which meant they’d be spotted if they tried to run off. All they could do was crouch down low and hope Mr Large didn’t come too close.

‘And it’s no nay never . . .’ Large sang, as he unzipped his fly and began liberally peeing against a trunk less than a metre and a half from Lauren and Rat. ‘*No nay never, no more. Will I plaaaaaaay the wild rover . . .’*

Lauren covered her mouth and gagged slightly as the smell of alcohol-tinged urine caught on the breeze. But Rat couldn’t help seeing the funny side of Mr Large’s singing and the extraordinary capacity of his bladder as the hot liquid steamed in the moonlight.

‘That is soooooo much better,’ Large told himself happily, as he zipped up and turned back towards the tents.

Rat cracked up as soon as Mr Large was out of earshot. 'I thought he was never gonna stop.'

Lauren screwed up her face. 'I don't know why you're laughing. It's all soaked into the knee of your trousers.'

'Eww!' Rat gasped, as he sprang out of the grass.

'Gotcha,' Lauren giggled, as she tore the wrapping off her Twix.

She put one chocolate-covered end in her mouth and closed up to Rat, who bit on the other. The idea was to munch towards each other and end with a kiss, but after the first bite they heard a choking noise.

Lauren looked up in time to see Large's silhouette doubling over, then crashing on to the grass near the tents.

'Holy *shit*,' Rat said as he jumped up, intending to run over and find out what was wrong.

But Lauren pulled him back. 'Maybe he spotted us. It might be one of his tricks.'

Rat looked at her uncertainly. 'Even he wouldn't stoop that low.'

'It's Mr Large,' Lauren muttered. 'He'll do anything, especially to me. He hates my guts.'

Large now lay at the side of the dirt road, his legs twitching as he fought for breath.

'You stay here if you want,' Rat said. 'It looks serious.'

As soon as Rat ran out of the trees, Large gave a desperate scream for help, which finally convinced Lauren that he wasn't play acting.

'Are you OK?' Rat said nervously, as he leaned over Mr Large.

Large's face was white and cold sweat bristled all over

his forehead. 'Do I damn well look OK?'

Lauren arrived a few paces behind Rat and did a better job of remembering her first-aid training. 'Have you got pains down your arms or in your chest?'

'Both,' Large slurred as Lauren undid his belt and loosened his collar.

'He's clammy all over,' Rat said. 'Is it a heart attack?'

'He's got all the symptoms,' Lauren nodded.

The kids hadn't been allowed to bring their mobiles on the training exercise.

'Sir, I need your phone,' Lauren said.

Large managed to briefly point at his trouser pocket before retching violently and erupting into another spasm.

Lauren flipped the mobile open, staring briefly at the wallpaper image of Large's beloved Rottweilers before dialling the CHERUB campus emergency number. She held the phone up to her ear waiting for a connection, but all she heard was a metallic bing-bong sound.

No Service. Please Try Later.

Lauren gave Rat a spooked look. 'There's no signal out here,' she said anxiously. 'Arif's gone off with the truck. We'll have to figure out some way of getting him to the hospital ourselves.'