

CHAPTER 1

Why don't they make mouse-flavoured cat food? Discuss.

Alex Weston smiled. Great essay title: it would do for English and, with a few strategic changes, Food Tech. He reached down to stroke the cream hamster sleeping beside him, without receiving a flicker of response. 'You're awake so little, Skoodle,' he told the fur ball. 'You could be a sleep donor.'

Ignoring his heavy eyes and numb bum Alex started typing, amused at the rubbish he was turning out. He had begun writing about the difficulty of getting food tasters to work in a pet products factory when a soft ping announced the arrival of a message. He flicked a glance down to the time on his screen. Midnight.

Alex clicked on the email from his father. The horrifying contents flashed up in front of him. His parents were missing. Possibly even dead. Mind numb, he stared at the screen. Yet it had come from his father's email address. Shoulders hunched, head drooping, he punched in a reply.

Dad. Someone has hacked your account. Just had a horrible email from your address. It's got to be rubbish but please let me know you're OK.

He picked up a photo of him and his parents with their surfboards: all blond-haired, soaked in seawater, happy, carefree. He gazed at his parents' laughing faces then clutched the picture to his chest. Nauseated, cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck, he stared at the screen. 'Come on, Dad, answer me. You've got to be there,' he whispered.

Body trembling, he waited. *It can't be true*, he kept telling himself, failing to gain control of his fear. Twenty minutes crawled past, hope draining as every second evaporated. Yet no further email arrived. He scanned the message once more, as if rereading would somehow change what it said.

Dear Alex,

If this ever gets to you, something serious will have happened to us. This email has been held on delay and will only go out if we fail to move the send date. Even explorers as careful as we are can come unstuck. If we're still alive, we'll be fighting to get back to you. We're so, so sorry to cause you pain. Aunt Lisa will take care of you. Look to her for love and advice.

'Sorry, Dad,' Alex murmured, shaking his head. 'Can't. If only you knew the truth about her. I care more about Skoodle.'

I know it's a terrible time to ask this, but it's vital that you let our friend Zorrin know that we've disappeared – not returned to England – otherwise disaster may occur, wrecking everything we've fought for. Get a message to him via Ethan Bailey at Frank's Bar on Tikopia. You can't contact Ethan by phone or email as the place is so remote. You'll have to go there. Please do this immediately. Book a flight to the Solomon Islands and then a ticket for Tikopia on a boat called the Coral Grove.

Use the credit card in my top desk drawer and take the envelope of Solomon Island dollars. Take a copy of the map of Tikopia from my netbook, but leave the netbook in England. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to get on to Eridor. Following us could put your own life at risk.

Always remember that we love you.

Dad.

A deep-seated ache gripped his chest, like a boa constrictor squeezing his heart and lungs. Putting down the photo Alex curled round Skoodle, stroking the soft warm body.

The door crashed open. Aunt Lisa lurched in, vodka glass in hand, dyed blonde hair an unbrushed mess, dirty dressing gown flopping open to reveal a stained nightie. ‘Have you had an email from Mark too?’

Alex dropped his eyes back down to Skoodle and nodded.

‘Dreadful news.’ Lisa came over and sat on his bed, wafting the smell of cigarettes and alcohol towards him.

‘You care?’

She drained her glass. ‘Of course I do. It’s a complete disaster. My allowance will stop if they’re dead.’

Alex stared at her. ‘That’s harsh.’

‘Realistic. Also, it takes years to declare somebody dead with no corpse. No bodies, so no inheritance. No cash.’

‘You vicious witch. Are you really saying you’d prefer they were definitely...’ Alex swallowed, ‘... gone forever, instead of there being any chance that they could be alive?’

Lisa gazed at him, face like a disappointed bloodhound. ‘See it my way. I’ve spent a year looking after you with them popping up at intervals like fairy godparents, clutching presents, oozing charm. Each time I’ve had to suddenly become Mrs Perfect.’ She jabbed a dirty nail-bitten finger repeatedly into his chest. ‘I’ve had to put up with filthy sports kit, constant cooking, having a fourteen-year-old eating machine invading my space. And now this. We’ll have to live on what you get. I can’t even sell their house for seven years. At least they can’t interfere any more. From here on I run this place my way.’

‘Same as now. It’s just what’s really important that’s changed.’

‘Shut it. You’ll hand over your allowance or take the consequences. Behave well, then things will only get a bit worse. Remain lazy and lippy...’ She shrugged and staggered to her feet. ‘I’m going downstairs for a top-up.’

Alex dropped his gaze. ‘Vodka won’t give you two dead bodies.’

‘Might give me one. Yours, if you drink enough of it.’ She laughed. ‘Oh, lose the face. They’ve not been around much for a year. You should have got used to being alone. Well... abandoned, really.’

‘It was necessary,’ Alex yelled. ‘They’d never have left me if it wasn’t vital for their work.’

‘Yeah, right. Believe that if you must.’

‘I do believe it, because it’s true. Get out.’

Curling back over Skoodle, Alex thought about the task his father had given him – the last thing he could do for his parents. Whatever it cost him – his home, his friends or even his life – he’d go to Tikopia. If it hadn’t been seriously important they wouldn’t have asked. Then on to Eridor, whatever his dad had said. Maybe they were alive. He had to find them.

Lisa paused at the door. ‘He said he wanted you to take some message somewhere foreign – but even you are not stupid enough to go, are you?’

Raising his head, Alex looked her straight in the eyes. ‘No, of course not.’

CHAPTER 2

Alex leaned against a palm tree in the early morning sun on Point Cruz docks, studying a boat. Grey, its paint blistering, with two tattered flags drooping over the bridge, the *Coral Grove* looked more suited to a scrapyard than to a Solomon Island cruise. No choice. No other boat. He'd have to risk it.

Dumping his rucksack, Alex pulled his mobile out of his jeans and started texting.

Gone to take message to Tikopia.

He hit *Send*. Seconds later, Lisa's reply whizzed back.

Come home instantly.

Sorry. Can't. Boat goes in two hours.

Leaning back against the wall of a boat shed, Alex sat down on an overturned oil drum.

Where are you?

Solomon Islands.

Lisa's reply messages became increasingly threatening as Alex repeatedly refused to return to England. Finally she gave up.

Have it your own way.

Will do.

Sliding the phone back into his jeans Alex gazed at the low forested hills beyond the docks, past distant white sandy beaches framing the turquoise sea, down to the local bustle of the quay as fishermen prepared their boats. Several of the glossy black-haired local children stared at him openly.

Skoodle stuck his head out of Alex's pocket, nose twitching, glancing around.

‘Looks strange to me too.’ Alex stroked the silky cream head. ‘I’m loving the temperature, though.’

A laugh came from nearby. Looking up, Alex saw a boy about his own age with a black ponytail and a round Asian face.

‘Are you really talking to that rat in your pocket?’

‘He’s a hamster. And yes.’

‘Are you crazy?’

‘Don’t think so. But I could be. I’m Alex. The hamster’s Skoodle.’

‘Hoku.’

Putting down a dive tank, Hoku pulled two cartons of mango juice from his rucksack, handing one to Alex. ‘Going somewhere?’

‘Tikopia. On her.’ Alex jerked his thumb towards the *Coral Grove*. ‘If she makes it that far.’

Hoku shrugged. ‘Got two lifeboats. No obvious holes in the hull. I’m risking it too.’

Alex shifted along the oil drum. Hoku sat down and wiped a hand down his cargos, leaving a streak of dirt and oil.

‘You local?’ asked Alex, digging a packet of cookies out of his rucksack.

‘Yup. I help my dad teach scuba-diving on the ships. There are fifty passengers on the *Coral*: a third of them dive, so we’re busy.’

Alex offered a biscuit to Hoku, then gave one to Skoodle. Teeth working like a tree grinder, Skoodle crunched his way through it in four seconds then stared at the packet.

‘Don’t think you could shove any more in, balloon face.’ Hoku winced. ‘Oh, no. Now I’m talking to that animal.’

‘At least you don’t expect him to answer,’ replied Alex, grinning. ‘So you’re not too crazy. Yet.’

‘Who are you travelling with? Your parents?’

The dull heaviness in Alex’s chest returned. Same as every time he thought of them. ‘If only. They’ve disappeared. Don’t know what happened or even if they’re...’ Alex stopped, trying to swallow the enormous lump blocking his throat. ‘Anyway, I found out forty-eight hours ago. Just flown over from London to see if I can find out more.’

‘Bummer. Sorry.’

‘Stuff happens.’

Hoku gazed over the harbour, silent for a minute, then said, ‘So let me get this straight: immediately on landing, you bought a hamster. Not even slightly cool.’

‘Wrong on two counts. Hamsters are dead cool, and Skoodle travelled with me. Nobody knew. He slept most of the way.’

Skoodle started to scramble out of Alex’s pocket. Alex pulled him out and handed the fur ball to Hoku.

‘Hold him for a sec.’

‘Didn’t they pick him up at security? He might have been some sort of mini terrorist.’

Alex shook his head. ‘If I’d put him in my hand luggage they probably would’ve. But I put him in an inside pocket and kept him on me.’ Diving into the top of his rucksack, Alex brought out a deep plastic box. ‘But he’s pretty dangerous at the moment.’

‘Why?’

‘Poop time. Happens every time he eats.’

Transferring his grip, Hoku suspended the small cream body over the ground. Alex stuffed a couple of tissues into the box, then took Skoodle from Hoku and put him in the box too.

Hoku crushed his juice carton and tossed it into a bin. ‘Well, I guess I’d better look out for you. No parents; best friend is a rodent. You’re some loser.’

‘Hang on. Take a look at yourself. Living on a tropical island, surrounded by palm trees, diving off cruise ships – yet you’re making friends with someone who talks to hamsters. Even bigger loser.’

Hoku grinned. ‘Unless being better at being a loser makes me a winner. Want me to show you around the boat?’

‘Sounds great.’ Alex picked Skoodle up off the yellowed tissues, which were now scattered with tiny black pellets, and dropped the furry body into Hoku’s lap. ‘Safe now.’

‘Sure?’

‘Totally.’

Skoodle curled up, closed his eyes and lay still, his breathing deep and rhythmical.

Hoku poked him. 'Surely he can't be asleep already.'

'He is. It's a talent.'

Dropping the poop box into a bin, Alex put Skoodle back into his pocket and slung his rucksack over one shoulder. They strolled along the quay, past holidaymakers who – in their brightly-coloured clothes and constantly chattering – resembled a flock of parrots.

A tall man with long straggling black hair sat on a bench nearby, eyes narrowed, frowning, watching the passengers. Dressed in dark trousers and a long-sleeved top, he looked like a raven: watchful, hunched. His sweatshirt lay on the bench and, as Alex watched, a young woman in a faded floral dress dumped a rattan case of chickens on to it. Turning her back to him, she pulled out her phone and started chatting. The sleek brown-feathered chickens peered out through the holes, heads cocked to one side.

Hoku nudged Alex, pointing. 'That man doesn't seem to have noticed the lady dumping her dirty old box on his clothes.'

'When he grabs his sweatshirt the chickens will go flying. Should be funny.'

As they got to the end of the gangplank, Hoku stopped beside an official in a white shirt and trousers who was holding a clipboard. Hoku leaned over and ran his finger down the passenger sheet. 'New victim for you, Tiki. He's there on the list. Cabin eight.'

Tiki looked down at his list. 'Welcome aboard, Alex Weston.'

There was a clatter behind them, followed by a raucous squawking. They swung round to see the woman's case upended on the ground, chickens flapping and scrabbling for balance. She started shouting at the dark-haired stranger as he strode away towards the ticket office.

Laughing, the boys walked up the swaying gangplank on to the grimy metal boat.

'Interesting smell,' said Alex.

'Oil mixed with seawater. Not great. You get used to it, though.'

'And the rocking?'

‘That too, when you’ve finished vomiting. This cabin is yours. Comfortable enough, but not exactly luxury.’

The small sparsely furnished room contained a few chairs and a narrow bed, which was covered in a bright orange throw. A picture of a volcanic island brightened up one of the grey walls. The tiny shower room was tucked in beside the porthole.

Hoku flung himself into the only comfortable chair while Alex dumped his stuff on the bed, then made a nest for Skoodle out of some tissues and a metal waste-paper bin.

Alex pulled a photo out of his pocket and handed it to Hoku. ‘My parents.’

‘Your dad looks like you: skinny, blond, tall. That your own surfboard you’re holding?’

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘It’s too long. Clumsy.’

‘Like you’re a surfing expert.’

‘Like I really am.’

‘OK. Maybe I’ll try a shorter one some day.’

From far below them came the noise of the engines starting, then the boat began to vibrate. There was a muffled roar from the crowd on the dock and then Alex could feel the boat beginning to move.

Alex opened the cover of his father’s netbook. ‘Anyway, this is what brought me here.’

Hoku leaned forward to have a closer look. ‘Why does the top look so odd?’

‘Cover or lid?’

‘Both.’

‘The lid is a solar panel, powering the machine. My parents were explorers, so they often went to places without electricity. Always had sun, though. The cover is waterproof, for when they ended up being caught in tropical storms.’ Alex clicked on his inbox. ‘This is the email that brought me here. It’s from my dad.’ He swung the screen round.

Hoku read the first few lines, then glanced up. ‘You’re stuffed if you don’t find this Bailey person.’

‘Totally. Eridor’s not on any map or internet search. So either my parents got the name wrong – not likely, or spelled it wrong – equally unlikely – or there’s something weird about it.’

‘I go for weird.’ Hoku finished reading it. ‘And the bit about leaving the netbook?’

Alex shrugged. ‘Ignored it. I wasn’t going to leave anything behind that might help me find them. Would you have a look at a file of my dad’s? I don’t understand much of it but I thought you might, being local. There’s a pile of information about Eridor, including a map which mentions the West Pole.’

‘Sure, but I’ll need to read it later as I’m working in ten minutes. Coming to help?’

‘OK. Better than being here with my brain going round in depressing circles.’

‘Correct.’ Hoku hitched himself out of the chair. ‘I need to get some kit. Bring the netbook. We can work on it as I sort my stuff out.’

Leaving Skoodle sleeping in his waste-paper bin, Alex followed Hoku to his cabin. By the time Hoku had explained all about his diving kit and found a rash vest for Alex, it was time to leave.

‘We’ll come back here after supper and have a go at your dad’s file,’ said Hoku.

They found a group of tourists waiting for them on the deck and pitched in to sort out their diving kit. Soon the boat had left the port far behind, skimming through tranquil turquoise waters past tiny green islands rimmed with sand.

During the afternoon Alex began to feel almost chilled as he helped Hoku. The guests were in holiday mood, chatty and friendly. Yet Alex couldn’t shift the shadow from his mind that these people were having fun together as families. For him, that might never happen again.

Alex learned fast from Hoku, deciding to dive with him at their first stop. By six o’clock it had clouded over.

‘Storm coming,’ said Hoku, glancing up at the sky.

‘Think so? Looks a bit grey, that’s all.’

‘Trust me. It’ll be a biggie. Better pack up and shower.’

As Alex rounded the corner on the way to his cabin, a tall man in black stepped out from a doorway, blocking his path. Alex had only a second to register that it was the man from the dock when a hand grabbed his throat, ramming his head against the wall. Stars filled Alex's vision as iron fingers choked off his air supply. His heart thundered in his chest, pulse pounding in his ears. The man slammed Alex's wrist against the wall. Alex's back arched as pain shot through his arm. He clawed at the stranger's hand. The cold blade of a knife pressed hard against his neck. Alex stopped fighting.

Violet eyes glared at him. 'Your parents had some information I want. I believe that your stupid trusting father would somehow have got it to you. I searched your cabin. It's not there. Where is it?'

The man loosened his grip slightly, giving Alex only just enough breath to reply.

'I've got nothing,' Alex choked out. 'Leave me —'

The vice-like fingers tightened around his windpipe, bruising his throat, not even allowing a grunt in reply. Alex couldn't move enough to shake his head. His ribs ached as his diaphragm spasmed, tearing against the blockage, trying to haul in oxygen. Tiny stars appeared in his darkening vision.

'I'll come for it at midnight. If you don't have it by then I'll kill you. A swift slash through the ribs, body dumped overboard. By the time the boat turns around sharks will have eaten your blood-seeping carcass, whether you'd gone in alive or dead. Clear?'

Sweat trickled down Alex's face as his pupils dilated, his mind filled with the vision of the sharks' feeding frenzy. The hand released him. Alex was aware of running footsteps as the man retreated, but even in his fury he didn't have enough breath to follow him. He dragged in air, coughing, throat aching, head pounding. The stars disappeared as his vision cleared.

Alex reached around to the back of his head, wincing as he found

a soft bruised lump. Holding his left arm across his chest, breathing hard and fast, Alex made it to his cabin. He found Skoodle awake, sitting up on his back paws.

‘Been assaulted,’ he told Skoodle, crouching next to him. ‘I’m angry, but I need to think. Why would a mad stranger want to kill me? He really meant it. How do I stay alive?’ He closed his eyes, his breathing and pulse slowing as his system righted itself. ‘Better go talk to Hoku.’ Putting Skoodle in his pocket he ran to Hoku’s cabin, mind racing.

Hoku opened the door, rubbing his wet hair with a towel. He stopped as soon as he saw Alex. ‘You look serious. What’s wrong?’

‘Someone attacked me.’

Dumping the contents of Hoku’s bin on the floor, Alex placed Skoodle in it. He told Hoku all about what had happened as Hoku listened, frowning.

‘He meant trouble. My head’s splitting. My wrist’s really painful.’

‘Let me look at it. My cousin’s a doctor.’ Hoku prodded the swollen wrist and moved it up and down. ‘Think it’s OK. Still works. It’s pretty red and swollen, though. This guy is serious. Just give him the info.’

Alex shook his head. ‘No way. Maybe hiding it cost my parents their lives, or at least their freedom. If I give in it was a wasted sacrifice. Where can I hide on this boat for the next thirty-six hours?’

‘Nowhere. Believe me, I know this boat inside out. It would be difficult even to hide Skoodle. You’ll need to stay with somebody 24/7.’ Hoku filled the handbasin with cold water.

‘That won’t work. All he needs is two seconds. One thrust of a blade... I’m gone.’

‘Stick your arm in this.’

Alex plunged his slammed wrist into the chilly water. Picking up a jug of water and ice, Hoku dumped it in the basin on top of the red and swollen arm.

‘Sorry, but that’ll help.’ Hoku dropped the empty jug on to a table. ‘Anyway, the bottom line is that you’re not safe anywhere on this boat.’

‘That’s exactly it. I’ll have to get off the *Coral*. Now.’

‘The nearest land is one mile away. Straight down. Or are you intending to swim for ten hours to the nearest island?’

‘Nothing as stupid as that. I’m going to take a lifeboat.’

‘No way. That won’t be safe, either.’

‘Why not?’

‘You know there’s a storm coming. The lifeboat might not survive it.’

Alex frowned. ‘But isn’t bad weather what they’re built for?’

‘Look, they’ve not been properly maintained.’ Hoku began twisting his leather bracelet round his wrist. ‘They reassure the tourists, but no one ever checks them.’

‘Tough. There’s no other option. I’m dead if I stay.’

‘Or if you go. They might have holes... rusty equipment... no supplies.’ Hoku got up and started pacing the cabin, hands shoved into the back pockets of his jeans.

‘There’s no choice. I’ll have to risk it.’

Hoku stopped and faced Alex. ‘You’re either very brave or really not thinking straight.’

‘Neither. It’s just that some chance of living is better than none. I’ll go tonight.’ Alex pulled his wrist out of the icy water and wrapped a towel round it. ‘Tomorrow morning, get the captain to put out a rescue call. Some boat should find me.’

‘Why tomorrow? Why not tonight?’

‘Because the *Coral* would be the closest boat. As she turned round she might find me. I’d have dumped myself in a whole heap of danger and gained nothing.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘He’ll need to see me escape. If I just disappear he might come after you to find out what you know.’

Hoku shrugged. ‘Might anyway.’

Alex shook his head. ‘No point. Once I’ve gone he can’t get the information, so killing or even hurting you would be an unnecessary risk. He’d do better to keep a low profile and see if he could find out which boat rescues me.’

For a few minutes Hoku sat thinking. ‘OK. You’re right,’ he said finally. ‘It’s mad, but it’s the only answer.’

‘So this is my plan. I’ll hide near my cabin before midnight. When he arrives I’ll let him see me, then bolt for the lifeboat.’

‘I’ll help you get away.’

‘That’s really kind, but you could be killed. This is my fight. I can manage alone,’ Alex said, attempting to sound confident.

‘Yeah, right. Like you’ve managed so well alone this far. You’re completely wrong about your surfboard, then you go and get yourself assaulted. You need me, so I’m in.’

‘And if I say “No?”’

‘Tough. You’re stuck with me.’

During the evening the weather howled into a storm, as Hoku had foretold. By late evening typhoon winds tore at the ship, rattling anchor chains. Salt water crashed over the decks, dragging anything loose to disappear into watery depths.

By 11.30 p.m. Alex stood wedged inside a narrow cleaning cupboard at the end of his corridor, netbook in his rucksack, Skoodle in his top pocket. Sweat dripping down the back of his neck, he kept watch through a tiny crack in the panelling.

A few minutes before midnight the stranger strode down the corridor. As soon as the footsteps had passed him, Alex crashed the cupboard door open. As the stranger swung round, Alex bolted, aware of footsteps thundering after him. Eighteen needle-like claws pierced his skin as Skoodle clung on through his shirt.

Heart banging, Alex sprinted up the stairs. As he pulled open the door to the outside deck wind slammed into his body, shoving him backwards. Alex forced his way into the storm, eyes screwed up against the driving rain which soaked him to the skin in seconds. Glancing back over his shoulder, Alex saw the man following. Head down, shoulders hunched, Alex pushed on.

A crash momentarily swung his attention behind him. The man lay sprawled on the deck. A shadow slid back under a table. Alex instinctively understood. Hoku. Tripwire. A leaving present of a few vital seconds. He felt a wave of gratitude at Hoku’s loyalty.

Nearby a lifeboat groaned on its metal davits, like a grotesque cradle rocking in the belly of the storm. Alex stumbled towards it through torrents of water and wrenched up the corner of the tarpaulin. He tumbled into the boat and heaved on the launch mechanism. The lifeboat crashed on to angry seething waters, sending Alex sprawling.

Breathing hard and fast, he reached down to check Skoodle. He could feel the tiny heart hammering against the furry chest wall. Scrambling on to his knees, Alex fumbled for the loose edge of the tarpaulin. Finding it, he ripped back the corner and stuck his head through the hole. Rain pounded his skin, assaulting his eyeballs, as he stared straight into the face of the storm. He no longer felt fear, only triumph that he had escaped assassination.

The stranger stood alone on deck, watching, body motionless, apparently unmoved by the downpour. Alex raised a clenched fist above his head then retreated under the tarpaulin, securing the loose corner with stiff cold fingers.

'At least we're not dead yet, Skoodle. Now we must wait for this boat to survive the storm. If it can.'