

BOTTLES OF EIGHT AND PIECES OF RUM

CHAPTER ONE

Kip sighed. Only one more class. History. Then, brief freedom until tomorrow. He sauntered into class, his tennis shoes squeaking on the linoleum, and sat in his usual seat next to Chad Yates, his best friend. He unzipped his backpack, withdrew his European history book and plunked it heavily on his desk.

Chad leaned over and whispered, "Hey Kip, you ready?"

"Ready? Ready for what? What are you talking about?"

"The oral report, you moron."

Kip stopped opening his notebook and froze.

Chad's eyes widened. "You didn't do it?" He sat back in his chair, a stunned expression on his face. "Oh my gosh—I can't believe it—you don't have it done—"

"No way, Chad. It's due next Monday. You're just saying that because I beat you Saturday at the swim meet."

"Yes way, Kip. If you don't believe me—look at everybody—can't you just feel the tension?"

Kip looked around. Students sat hunched with eyes wide, staring at notes, lips moving silently.

Chad continued, "And get a load of Hacker-Tacker."

Mrs. Tacker sat rigidly behind her desk at the front of the room, her clasped hands resting on her grade book.

Kip groaned. "How come no one told me?"

"Sorry—thought you knew. Good luck."

Kip's hands were already turning clammy and his heart galloped. He slumped in his seat, defeated.

The bell rang.

Mrs. Tacker immediately jumped up, marched to the door, and closed it.

Trapped.

"Today we'll begin our oral reports, five minutes per person, on some aspect of the history of England. Your written reports, remember, are due Wednesday, the day after tomorrow."

Kip checked his watch. 1:51 p.m. Fifty-four minutes of mind-searing torture to go. He calculated the odds on the mini-calculator on his watch. In 54 minutes, there could only be 10 student presentations. There were 26 students. Divide 10 by 26, multiply by 100, and that gave only a 38 percent chance he would be chosen.

Not good enough, he knew.

Mrs. Tacker paced the room, hands braced behind her back. "First and foremost, of course, is content. Second, and of almost equal importance, is presentation. How do you present yourself? Are you sloppy? Do you mumble? Do you talk too fast? Remember, it is the image you present that people will remember."

She halted in front of Kip and her gaze descended.

He had no alternative but to look up.

The severity of her presence, he was sure, was meant to strike terror into the hearts of young people.

It worked.

Her dark-brown hair, accented by numerous streaks of grey, was pulled into a tight bun. The sharp lines of her face appeared etched out of granite; her flint-grey eyes were little pebbles of the same. “Hacker-Tacker” they called her. Student Destroyer. Anyone was fair game, dead meat. Even straight A students preferred a slow roasting death to enduring her class for a year.

When their eyes met, Kip boldly went where no student had gone before. He smiled.

The surprise showed in her face, but she quickly masked it. For a moment, Kip felt a flush of victory.

She continued to stare at him, her eyes unblinking. “If any of you are not ready today, it is an automatic F. I will accept no excuses.”

His smiling lips twitched. His knees started to shake. *Does she know? Is it that obvious?* He blinked twice—couldn’t control himself.

“Who would like to be first?”

Deathly silence.

She perched her skinny posterior on the edge of her desk, crossed her arms, and surveyed her animal kingdom. Queen of the Jungle. She pronounced her sentence. “Angela Allen.”

A wail of despair erupted from the back of the room.

Kip expelled a great quantity of breath.

1:53 p.m. First victim. Nine divided by 25. A 36 percent chance of humiliation and degradation remained.

Not good enough.

Angela strolled to the front of the room. She held a crumpled piece of notebook paper in her hands. Purple ink splotted both sides. She flung her long black hair behind her shoulders, chomped her gum, heaved a great sigh, and began. “My report is on . . .”

“Ms. Allen, please remove your gum.”

Angela shrugged and sauntered over to the metal trash can. *Ting!* She returned to the front of the room.

Mrs. Tacker peered from the edge of her desk over Angela’s shoulder.

“My report is on . . .”

“Ms. Allen, can you think of a more imaginative beginning to your report?”

Angela’s mouth remained poised for her next word. Then she looked out at the class, rolled her eyes, and sighed again.

“Presentation, Ms. Allen, is of foremost importance. Why don’t you start your report with your second sentence?”

Angela scanned her purple dotted paper. “Um—Feudal lords, no wait. Um—there were lots of poor people during the Middle Ages.”

“Better. Continue.”

“They lived on the properties of the feudal lords. It was known as the Feudal Lord sys—no wait.” She brought the paper to within a few inches of her eyes. “System.”

Kip didn’t listen anymore. Angela ticked precious time off the clock, and Kip cheered her annoying stupidity. All the better for him. 1:55 p.m.

While Angela stumbled and scraped her way through her purple blotch of history, Kip concentrated on what he could do for his presentation. Kings and queens? No—he’d need to know all kinds of dates. Roman Catholicism? No. Cromwell? He lived . . . when? 1200? 1300? Was he a good guy or a bad guy? Kip didn’t know.

His fear continued to mount. He hated history. Who cared about a bunch of dead people

anyway? What possible difference could it make in his life?

Angela finished.

Mrs. Tacker scanned the room.

Kip imagined her vision as in a science fiction film. Computerized information flashed on her eyeball screen: SCAN MODE LEVEL 43545. ASSESS STUDENT PREPAREDNESS.

Her digitized eyeballs outlined and analyzed each student. She scanned Kip.

Kip held his breath. *Please no.*

VISUAL – MALE HT – 0509, WT 0155. MESOMORPH. MATCH PROBABILITY 99%. PROCEED TO LEVEL 480 SCAN. MATCH! MATCH! (Flash, flash, flash.) GUILTY – DID NOT DO HOMEWORK. TOTALLY STUPID – WILL MAKE A FOOL OF HIMSELF. AN ABSOLUTE IDIOT – PICK HIM FOR THE LAUGH OF YOUR LIFE.

“Cassie Peterson.”

Cassie lamented the tragic life of Queen Anne Boleyn, while she looked the part: clasping her hands, eyes screwed up in sorrow, voice trembling. Quite dramatic. She finished with a flair, laying her blond head on the executioner’s block, a desk, where she awaited the mighty axe.

2:04.

“Chad Yates.”

“Oh, man.” Chad grabbed his report. His chair scraped the floor as he stood up.

“Mr. Yates, we are waiting. Please don’t dally.”

“Take your time,” whispered Kip.

He didn’t. Two minutes. Tops.

2:07.

“Matt Nielsen.”

Whew! Kip tried not to look relieved each time a name was called. Maintaining an air of nonchalance was his only hope. Six more victims divided by 22 remaining students. Only a 27 percent chance remained.

Not good enough.

The proverbial light bulb went off in Kip’s head, fizzing like the magnesium strip in Stowe’s class. *Pirates!* He could do his report on pirates! The chances of Hacker-Tacker knowing anything about them was probably slim, but Kip knew they must have had a profound effect on the history of England.

Very profound. They must have.

His mind raced.

Five more people made their way to the chopping block while Kip formulated his report. He remembered Grandpa Louis sitting him on his lap when he was about six or seven, and telling him story after story of when Louis was a pirate. It had been “their secret.” Kip had believed every word and had never tired of the stories. Of course, he knew now it wasn’t true.

2:37 p.m. Eight more minutes, one more person. Only a 6 percent chance remained.

Not good enough.

Mrs. Tacker detached herself from the edge of her desk. “Frankly,” she said, “your reports are . . .”

Hope sprouted within him. *Yes! Yes! She was going to lecture them for the next eight minutes! She never spoiled a chance to let them know how abysmal they really were.*

“ . . . abysmal. I expected more from you. This is not first grade anymore, this is ninth. Soon you’ll be adults, out in the real world, not dependent on anyone but yourselves.”

2:38.

“Therefore, I want the next report to be astonishing.”

Next report?

“I want the next report to astound us with its depth of knowledge and its clarity.”

Depth of knowledge? Clarity?

“Kip Blakely, you’re next.”

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