

Mockstars

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Red Button Publishing

To Grandpa: my all-time favourite storyteller

Some of this actually happened.

CHAPTER ONE

I've never been in a fight before.

'Come on then.'

There are many, many reasons for this.

'Don't you talk, mate, or what?'

Being built like one of those pipe-cleaner people you make in nursery school is definitely one of them.

'Oi. Mate.'

My floppy hair is another, because judging by the complete absence of cold fear in this man's eyes, floppy hair is not particularly menacing.

'We need to have a private chat, you and me.'

He presses against my ribcage and corkscrews a meaty fist around the front of my shirt. I can see hundreds of tiny, angry pores opening across his nose and cheeks.

Say something. Diffuse the tension.

'Hello there.'

Hello there? *Hello there?* Who says that in a combat situation?

'Bet you think that was a pretty funny stunt, yeah?'

'No, not at all ... um ... Sir.'

He lifts me two inches off the ground, pushing air through his nostrils like a bull. My feet dangle in space.

'There are two thousand people in here tonight. You got no regard for Elfin Safety?'

I *could* reply that the safety of elves is the least of my concerns right now, but I don't think he'd find it that funny.

'Sorry ... I won't do it again.'

'Damn right you won't.'

I could try punching him. Shall I punch him?

I won't punch him.

'I've been watching you,' he says, venting a gust of stale breath into my face. It smells of pork scratchings. On the other side of the curtain heaves the sweaty might of the London Astoria, ripple and pulse, a beast in the dark.

'You weekend rockstars, you're all the same. Think you own the place.'

'No, I—'

'But you don't. You get me?'

One hand still clamped fast around my shirt, he slowly curls the other into a tight red boulder. His gaze darts downwards to admire the fist, then rolls back up to face me.

Okay. This is now going to happen.

My lungs empty of air.

Every muscle tightens.

His elbow spring-loads backwards, and I close my eyes.

ONE MONTH EARLIER

The Statue of Liberty stands tall and proud above a crowd of onlookers, its famous crown a jagged silhouette against the afternoon sun. Fingers point, feet jostle, cameras flicker and click.

‘How does he stay so still, bruv?’

‘Dunno, he’s like actually the stillest person I has ever seen.’

‘Nah way, he’s moving! Like a lickle tiny bit.’

‘What’s he s’posed to be?’

‘Think he might be that Statue of Liberties.’

Coins clatter on the cobbles.

‘Hey bruv, how do you stay so still? You retarded?’

The Statue of Liberty stirs disdainfully, like an old cat disturbed in sleep, a tired scowl trapped beneath caked-on green paint. All around, Covent Garden is buzzing with tourists and fizzing with noise, a circus of shoppers and street performers. Weaving through the crowd, George and I are striding the red carpet towards the Rock Garden, instruments in hand.

‘Slow down, lads. Bands only.’

The bouncer blocking our path is thug-faced and chunky, his big, bald, neckless head encased in a mobile-phone headset.

He looks like an egg in a call centre.

‘It’s fine: we’re one of the bands. Satellite.’

He sniffs, looks me up and down and shakes his head.

‘You don’t look like a band.’

‘We’ve got instruments, though,’ I protest, pointing at my keyboard case.

‘I can’t just let any old chancer with a saxophone in here, can I?’

‘It’s a keyboard,’ I reply, wounded. The Egg crosses his arms and pushes air through his nostrils, like a bull.

‘Whatever it is, it’s blocking the thoroughfare.’

I’ll block your thoroughfare if you’re not careful.

‘Nobody panic!’ comes a disembodied voice from the stairwell, and seconds later a figure emerges from the dark. A perky-eared man-boy with surprised hair, he’s dressed in a wonkily knotted black tie and a shiny burgundy suit that glints in the sun. He looks like you could dunk him in the bath and he’d come out dry.

‘You must be ChrisnGeorge,’ he says in a triple-distilled Irish accent. ‘Shawn. Apparently I’m in charge here.’

Shawn grips George in a double-armed handshake which makes both their fringes quiver. Watching me from the corner of his eye, the Egg clears his throat and quietly adjusts his headset.

‘So, listen, welcome to the Rock Garden. You’ll love this place – it’s a total craphole.’ His mouth widens into the shape of a laugh, but no sound comes out. ‘Just kidding. Follow me.’

Leaving the sunny bustle of Covent Garden, we follow Shawn through the doorway and begin a spiralling descent into the bowels of the building. Within seconds, the noise of London has dissolved in the underground black.

Shawn is bouncing down the staircase in front of us.

‘Have you come far?’ he calls back.

‘Berkshire, near Reading,’ I reply, struggling beneath the weight of my piano.

‘Aaaah, the Royal County of BERK-shire. Windsor Castle, Legoland. You got the works out there.’

We reach the bottom of the stairs and I set my keyboard down, struggling for breath. Shawn claps his hands together and winks at us.

‘So what’s the party scene like in Reading, boys?’

George thinks for a moment.

‘Doesn’t have one. It’s got a massive PC World, though.’

‘Well, that’s grand,’ replies Shawn, doing his silent laugh-shape again. ‘Now, follow me ...’

Draping his arms around our shoulders, Shawn guides us proudly into the main room. A kaleidoscope of coloured light floods my eyes, momentarily blinding me, before gradually diffusing to reveal an empty venue with a small stage, wiggly leather sofas and a blue, back-lit bar. The tables are set with ashtrays and winking tea-lights, and a large silver glitterball rotates above the dancefloor. Onstage, a dark-eyed stage technician is soundchecking the drum kit, dumbly pounding the kick drum. *Dmmb. Dmmb. Dmm-dmmb*. Behind him hangs a banner that reads: ‘LONDON INDEPENDENT MUSIC AWARDS – *highlighting the very best in emerging live music*’.

‘So there’s the stage, obviously, over by the toilets that’s the sound desk, and this door leads backstage to the dressing room.’

George’s eyes meet mine. A dressing room? Hello Wembley.

‘We’re running a *weeee* bit late on the old soundcheck, but don’t worry. You’re in safe hands with our man Dan.’

Shawn gestures towards a rusting metal cage at the back of the room, dimly lit and deathly silent. The faint outline of a hunched back, motionless black shoulders.

‘Dan’s an absolute biscuit, best in the business. Used to be monitor engineer for Dexy’s Midnight Runners. Now’ – Shawn whips a pen and paper from his back pocket and I tug my gaze away from the beast in the soundcage – ‘while I’ve got you here, how am I introducing you tonight? Y’know, maybe a few words to sum up your sound and whatnot?’

Shawn is looking at George. George is pointing at me.

‘Christoph’s really good at this.’

Shawn turns on his heel.

‘We-ell, um. Okay. So you know acoustic pop like, err, like Crowded House obviously, and then there’s a bit of Turin Brakes type stuff in there as well and I suppose Belle and Sebastian, although I went to see them once and it was just all these limp-armed students mincing about drinking Diet Coke and it kind of made me want to kill myself.’

Shawn blinks.

‘So anyway, so ... um ... so really it’s a *new* kind of melodic pop, with influences spanning rock, alternative and singer-songwriter, that manifests as this commercial-sounding, vocal-based acoustica that isn’t folk – definitely not folk – although I suppose, sometimes, it is a bit folky.’

Shawn’s eyes flicker down to his empty notepad.

‘Oooo-kay. Good. We can work with that. You seen the VIP area?’

He points to a smallish enclave in the corner of the venue, separated from the main room by a black and gold rope.

‘Bit daft, really, but the labels love it.’

I peer inside the low-lit room. Across the table-tops, rows and rows of empty champagne flutes are lined up like tiny glass soldiers.

‘Speaking of labels,’ Shawn continues, ‘I’ve one more thing to tell you before I go ...’

He throws a quick backwards glance at the venue.

‘Bit of industry banter for you ... secret, like.’ He drops his voice to a whisper. ‘It’s all to do with this one fella, *ve-ery* important guy. He’s coming to the show tonight, great pal of mine, works for City Records – one of the *majors*. Head of A and R, complete genius and whatnot. Known him for years. Anyway, he’s under a *laaah*t of pressure at work right now for his next signing to, y’know ... come good. Y’know?’

We both nod.

‘So he comes to me, does Paul, and he says: “Shawn, I can’t be arsed with this scouting crap anymore. You’re a man with your finger on the pulse, where should I be looking?”’ Shawn laughs to himself. ‘Daft. Anyway, he seems to think I know what I’m talking about, and he wants one of my bands. One of my “nominated acts”. And that, my boys, could be you.’

He winks at us again.

‘No pressure.’

My eyes lead me back to the black of the soundcage. Inside, nothing stirs.

‘You know these sorta people, right? They work fast and they don’t take prisoners, which means tonight could be the start of something big ... but only for the right band, and there’s some pretty stiff competition this year.’ He looks at us both for a moment, his gaze suddenly intense. ‘So you two just do whatever it is you need to do tonight, okay? Whatever it takes.’

We both nod in unison. Shawn pops a trilby on his head and steps away from the stage.

‘I’ll be off then, the boys from Satellite.’ He waves a casual hand at the Beast in the Soundcage. ‘I’ll leave you with Dan. You’re in safe hands with Dan, he used to be monitor engineer for Dexy’s Midnight Runners.’

As Shawn saunters off through a nearby doorway, George hoists his guitar onto his shoulder and grins his valley-wide grin.

‘Shall we?’

Mounting the small stage we begin our well-practised process of unzip, plug in, turn on and tap-tap, all beneath the gaze of the Beast in the Soundcage. Within five minutes we’re ready to go, and I play a few test chords on my piano. The sound coming back through the monitors is thin and harsh, a ghostly old piano straining through broken radio.

I lean into the mic.

‘Um ... Dan?’

My words are met with a hard silence, and I strain in the inky blackness for signs of life inside the cage. After a few seconds, the creature stirs, a single lantern casting a mournful orange glow across its jagged, stubble-wrecked features. Dust mites cluster in the gloom.

‘Um ... excuse me ... Dan?’

With Frankensteinian effort, the creature drags its twisted frame forwards so that its eyes hover a mere heartbeat away from the wire mesh of the cage. Freezing breath escapes its nostrils in rhythmic, billowing clouds, and flecks of starlight from the slowly spinning glitterball reveal a haunted look hanging half off its face like dead skin; the terrible visage of a beast that, in some long-forgotten past life, danced but fleetingly in the warm fire of its one true love, only to be so soon plunged into an accursed existence of darkness, bondage and despair.

‘*What?*’ comes the voice from the dark. Nails along sandpaper.

‘Sorry ... nothing,’ I reply, shrinking back behind my keyboard.

‘So here we are,’ says George, standing centre stage with his legs wide apart. ‘Le Garden Du Rock. I think tonight might just be our night, Christoph.’

He strums a triumphant, ringing chord on his guitar, and I gaze out into the shadows, Shawn’s words echoing loud and clear in my mind. *Just do whatever you need to do.*

I look over at George again, and he smiles.

It’s a smile I’ve seen before, and it makes me uneasy.