

For Nan and Pa who lived down the road
and whose arms were always wide open



First published 2014 by FREMANTLE PRESS
25 Quarry Street, Fremantle, Western Australia 6160
www.fremantlepress.com.au

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Printed by Everbest Printing Company, China
Cover design and illustration by traceygibbs.com

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-publication entry
Banyard, Jen, 1958-
Riddle Gully Runaway/ Jen Banyard.
ISBN 978 1921 888 74 8 (pbk.)
A823.3



Government of Western Australia
Department of Culture and the Arts



Fremantle Press is supported by the State Government
through the Department of Culture and the Arts.

Riddle Gully Runaway

JEN BANYARD



FREMANTLE PRESS

CHAPTER ONE

‘If you master others, you are forceful.
If you master yourself, you have inner strength.’

Lao Tzu (6th century BCE), China

Someone had said the view from the top of the rollercoaster was amazing but Will Hopkins had only one thought as the carriage rattled its way up the steep steel incline: ‘I’m only thirteen! I’m too young to die!’

Beside him in the lead car, Pollo di Nozi strained against the safety bar, pointing excitedly. ‘Would you look at that bolt there, Will! It’s wobbling like crazy! This rig needs a good going over with a welding torch if you ask me! There’s another loose one! Look!’

Will stared ahead, across the treetops and the Riddle Gully fairground to the clock tower of the town hall in the distance. His eyes were like golf balls. His knuckles, as they gripped the bar, looked like eight snow-capped mountain-tops. Why had he ever listened to Pollo? Didn’t he know that what Pollo called fun

most often nearly killed him?

Crick-et-y ... crick-et-y ... crick-et-y ... He could hear each cog ratcheting into place, hauling them slowly upward to the crest. Will slid his eyeballs sideways and down and spotted Mr Wrigley, Riddle Gully's oldest mechanic, at the rollercoaster controls. He was shading his eyes and looking up at them. His bottom lip was jutting in a worried pout, Will was sure.

Crick-et-y ... crick-et-y ... Will gulped down the rising lump in his throat.

Pollo jabbed him with her elbow. 'Take a chill pill, Will! No one ever dies up here on these things.' She pointed to the ground below. 'They all die *down there!* In the dirt! Splat! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

Crick-et-y ... Their carriage inched to the crest of the iron-girder mountain. Will saw dotted farms and distant hills, lumpy with trees that looked much nicer from the ground. He saw the steely blue sky stretching around them — perfect if you were an albatross. He felt his heart hammer against his ribcage. The carriage teetered at the peak.

'Here we go!' yelled Pollo. 'The fun's about to ... Whoa-aa-aah!'

Slowly, irrevocably, they tipped. Suddenly, Will

and Pollo were hurtling into a bone-shaking plummet toward earth. Down they flew, their bodies pressed back by centrifugal force or terror — Will couldn't tell which. The car juddered on the narrow rail, sending tremors through their insides, down their limbs to their fingers and toes. Will's teeth jangled and his mouth gaped, but just a terrified squeeze of air, a scream so high-pitched only dogs could hear it, escaped. Beside him, Pollo let go of the bar, threw both arms in the air and hooted like a banshee.

No sooner had they bottomed out than the car swung hard right, throwing Will against Pollo. He was still trying to spit Pollo's long springy hair from his mouth when it swung hard left, flinging Pollo his way, bringing their heads together with a clunk. The tinny taste of blood filled Will's mouth and his tongue began to sting.

Will could see it up ahead — the twenty metre high, gravity-defying Loop of Extinction the rollercoaster was named for — looming against the sky. Ten minutes earlier he and Pollo had laughed at the terror on the upside-down faces of the passengers, their hair flying beneath their heads, their pleading screams as they hurtled around the loop. Now Pollo and Will flew at it

headlong, their car rocking side to side.

They whizzed upwards. The passengers shrieked as a single organism. For a second, Will saw the gleaming steel rollercoaster rail below — then they whipped downwards. As Will's insides were catching up with the rest of him, they rocketed into an S-bend — right, left, right — to the groans and squeals of the riders behind. They missed toward the string of tattered flags that marked the finish. Then, as violently as it had all begun, invisible hooks grabbed their carriage and yanked them to a dead stop.

A lanky teenaged attendant, his baseball cap angled over an ear, leaned across and unlatched the bars. He offered a steadying hand. Pollo didn't seem to notice it and sprang unaided onto the platform.

'That was insane!' she screeched. 'Let's go again!' She hurried toward the exit steps, shouting over her shoulder, 'I'll pay for you, Will, if you've run out of money!'

The attendant hauled Will from the car and gave him a nudge. But Will remained rooted to the spot, his legs wobbling like jelly-snakes, the mob pushing past either side. He stared like a zombie, his mouth hanging open, at the attendant's chest as though hypnotised by

the image on his black T-shirt.

'Ee-yew, Will! You don't look so good.' Pollo was making her way back along the platform to her friend. Will's skin had taken on the colour of boiled cabbage.

The ride attendant unplugged music earphones and jerked his head toward the exit. 'Move along, please, buddy.' Pushing a *tss-tss-tss-tss* cymbal sound through his teeth and dipping his head to the beat, he shrugged and took Will by the armpits. Pollo alongside, he eased Will along the platform and down the metal steps onto the grass thoroughfare, Will's feet trailing unhelpfully.

'Take it easy, eh?' said the attendant, plugging in his earphones and springing back up the steps for the next round of victims.

Will stood on the pathway, swaying, with the crowd at the Riddle Gully annual fair snaking around him and Pollo. He tried to breathe deeply, tried to focus on something other than his squirming insides.

'Gee Will,' said Pollo. 'I've heard of people going green before but I've never actually seen it. I've gotta get a picture!' She pulled her camera from her pocket and snapped before Will could summon the strength to duck.

'You'd better not put that in your newspaper column,' he mumbled.

‘Don’t worry, my friend. My section of the *Coast* is only ever black and white. You’re safe. I’m saving the embarrassing photo spot for Mayor Bullock. Why stop this year, eh?’

Two youths eating hotdogs, with fried onions and pus-like mustard sliding down their fingers, stopped to gawk. ‘Watch out!’ one laughed. ‘This one’s gonna blow!’ They were rocking together, pointing at Will and sniggering, when, with the same suddenness the rollercoaster ride had come to an end, everything Will had eaten at the Riddle Gully fair that afternoon – the hamburger-with-egg, sour cream wedges, chocolate muffin, corn dog, two doughnuts and large blueberry slushy – rocketed up his throat and propelled themselves in a colourful arc towards the boys’ feet.

Pollo clapped a hand to her mouth. The youths gazed from their spattered shoes to Will and back again. Both looked like they wanted to beat him up on the spot but were too disgusted to go near him. They stalked away, muttering and swearing, hurling their hotdogs onto the path. Two ravens flew down and began stabbing at the pink meat, hopping back and forth as pedestrians passed.

Will looked at Pollo sheepishly. ‘Whew! I didn’t feel it coming till the last second.’

‘Well it’s not like you’re a giraffe or anything.’

‘Huh?’

‘A giraffe ... You know, with a mile-long neck. A giraffe would know something was coming. I wonder how long it takes a giraffe to throw up.’

‘Maybe they never do, maybe the gunk never reaches the top,’ said Will. ‘That’d be neat.’

‘I’ll have to ask Dad. He’ll know.’

‘Handy having a vet for a dad sometimes.’

‘Not as handy as you having a police sergeant for a stepdad. That would be brilliant in my line of work! I could get the scoop on Riddle Gully every night over dinner.’

‘It has its ups and downs,’ said Will. ‘HB has this way of getting details out of me before I even know what we’re talking about. Like the time he —’

From the corner of her eye, Pollo could see the rollercoaster attendant, his hi-top sneakers planted wide as he trickled sand from a bucket over Will’s offering. He seemed to be taking extraordinary care over it. His head was tilted towards them and his earphones dangled loose from the pocket of his baggy jeans. Was he eavesdropping on them, wondered Pollo. Getting the low-down on the local arm of the law?

She put a hand on Will's shoulder. 'Say, let's head over to the Kitchens Rule tent. They've got free samples.'

'Good idea!' said Will, his face back to its usual pink. 'I'm hungry all over again now.'

CHAPTER TWO

They ambled in the spring sunshine away from the rollercoaster across the Riddle Gully fairground — a stretch of playing fields ringed by tall, dark Norfolk Island Pines that at the end of each winter, as soon as finals were over, was spruced up for the District Fair.

'My editor needs a report on the fair and I want to do something really special,' said Pollo. Her after-school cadetship as Youth Reporter for the *Coast* regional news network kept Riddle Gully on its toes; it also kept shiny Pollo's dream of becoming a professional investigative journalist like her mum had been. She ran her fingers down the leather thong around her neck to the notepad and pencil tied at the end. 'I'm going to buttonhole the judges in the Pickles and Chutneys Division and get the

dirt on why Mayor Bullock wins it every year. There's funny business going on there, Will, and my readers would love to know what it is, I'm sure.'

They dodged toddlers in strollers, gooey ice-cream puddles and whirligigs on sticks, Pollo taking photos and jotting notes in her pad. People from all across the farming district milled. Adults ran into old friends and sugar-loaded kids zipped like flying beetles between their legs. Tinny music pumped from competing portable sound systems and the smell of sizzling onions wafted on the air. Everyone was excited and happy, wandering the gritty trails between stalls and exhibits, their arms loaded with neon-pink stuffed prizes, second-hand treasures, or cling-wrapped trays of lumpy home-baked goodies.

The rollercoaster was new this year. Someone on the organising committee knew someone in the district Chamber of Commerce who had a cousin who had a friend who owed them a favour ... and hadn't opened a safety manual since the nineteen-sixties, thought Pollo, remembering those rickety bolts. She jotted a note in her pad to follow it up. There could be a story in it.

Pollo and Will stopped at the fairy floss van and each bought a stick.

'The guy at the rollercoaster,' said Will. 'Do you know him?'

'Who? Mr Wrigley?' said Pollo, lifting a sugary blue wisp and dangling it onto her tongue.

'No, the helper with the black T-shirt.'

'Aah! The rollercoaster kid! With the sideways cap! He looks like a breakdancer from the city who's lost his way. I was about to ask if *you* knew him,' said Pollo. 'I think he was listening in on us earlier. He's shady, if you ask me.'

'It's weird,' said Will. 'I've got this feeling I've seen him before. First I thought he came with the crew who put up the rollercoaster 'cos I saw Mayor Bullock yelling at him. Then I saw the logo for that hip-hop group Twisted Lips on his T-shirt and it rang a bell from somewhere. It's a rip-off of a Picasso painting we did at art school called *The Weeping Woman*. Face all over the place. It's probably why I threw up.'

Pollo drummed her fingertips against her chin. 'Mayor Bullock, you say? I wonder if he could be the nephew, Benson Bragg, who's come to stay with him and old Mrs Bullock. It would figure, from what I've heard about this nephew of his.'

'No way!' said Will, withdrawing his face from a puff

of purple floss. ‘Mayor Bullock’s nephew? The mayor’s way too stuffy to be that kid’s uncle. And as for inviting him to stay...’ He tore off some floss and lowered it into his mouth.

‘Aah, but he didn’t, you see. Old Mrs Bullock was in Sherri’s second-hand shop the other day and told Sherri all about it. This Benson kid – her grandson, the mayor’s nephew – was suspended from school. But then his mother – the mayor’s sister – broke her leg and had to go to hospital. And his dad’s away on work. So Benson’s staying with them and the mayor is spitting chips!’

‘Hah!’ Will laughed. ‘Mayor Bullock hates the youth of today, as he calls us – even nerdy kids like you! He’s had it coming.’ He waited for some people to pass and whispered, ‘Did Mrs Bullock say *why* Benson was suspended?’

Pollo leaned close. ‘Stealing! She let it slip. She thought it would be lovely having her grandson to stay with them, even so. But it’s not working out like she hoped. The mayor wants to sort out his nephew with good old-fashioned discipline, as he puts it. Sherri reckons that’s rich because the mayor never had any discipline himself, his mum and dad were such softies. I wonder what turns some people so mean?’

‘I reckon sometimes they just don’t try hard enough,’ said Will. He pushed a hank of fairy floss into his mouth with a finger. ‘It’s dead easy to be a grouch, in my book. But getting along with people, even if you’ve got your own worries and stuff going on – that’s heaps more effort.’

‘Yeah, look at you!’ said Pollo. ‘Since you got busted for the graffiti last summer and had to do that course on dealing with anger, you haven’t blown up once.’

‘Jeepers! I never ever want to dig a hole for myself like that again! It’s funny ... the longer I go without losing it the easier it gets. It’s like I’m getting into the *habit* of being someone who keeps their cool.’

‘Just like Mayor Bullock’s in the habit of being a puffed-up pompous grump!’ laughed Pollo. She checked her watch. ‘Yikes! Speaking of Mayor Bullock, we’d better walk faster. I need to get my story on him, then get home and spruce up Shorn Connery for the Best Dressed Pet parade.’

‘When is it?’ asked Will.

‘Five o’clock. The grand finale! Shorn Connery can’t wait.’

Will frowned. ‘How can you tell that a sheep can’t wait?’

Pollo tutted. 'A supersleuth with finely tuned instincts like me just senses these things, blockhead! Besides, Shorn Connery and I have a special connection. You must know that by now!'

'Yeah, of course I do,' said Will, looking away to hide his smile.

*

They reached the Kitchens Rule tent. Before going in, Pollo aimed her camera at an elderly couple in striped jesters' hats, strolling arm in arm. 'For the record, whatever it was that Benson Bragg took,' she said from behind the lens, 'Sherri didn't seem to think it was serious.'

'But it was still stealing,' said Will.

'Yeah, I guess so,' said Pollo.

'Hmm ... I wonder ...'

Pollo lowered the camera and looked at Will. He carefully scraped the last bits of fairy floss off its stick with his fingernail, walked to a rubbish bin and dropped it in. When he turned back, Pollo's eyes were boring into him and her hands were on her hips.

'You wonder *what?* Are you going to tell me or not?'

Will looked at the passing parade of happy townspeople and farmers. No one seemed to be paying

them much attention. 'D'you know when this Benson kid arrived in Riddle Gully?' he asked, his voice low.

'A week or so ago, I think. Why?'

'Hmm ...'

'Will Hopkins, you know something, don't you?' Pollo smiled pleasantly at Will. 'And you also know I'll bust your head in if you don't tell me!'

'We shouldn't go jumping to conclusions,' said Will.

'I've told you before,' Pollo hissed. 'Drawing conclusions and jumping to conclusions are entirely different things! Just give me the facts and I'll make up my own mind. I have good instincts in these matters. I *am* Youth Reporter —'

'— for the *Coast* news network,' Will finished. 'I know.'

Pollo huffed. 'I want justice and equality for all humankind, Will. And for that I need to give my readers the truth!'

'And juicy news stories,' added Will.

'Well, yes ... that's understood.' Pollo folded her arms and began tapping her foot, glaring at Will.

Will sighed and wished he'd kept his big mouth shut. It was useless. Pollo would bug him until he caved. He may as well get it over with. 'HB was talking to Angela

last night in the kitchen,' he began. He stopped to wave heartily at a mate from school, hoping he'd veer their way. The boy grinned and waved back but, pointing to the phone at his ear, kept walking. Will turned back to Pollo whose eyes were now steely blades.

'Police Sergeant Talks to Wife in Kitchen,' she huffed. 'I can see the headline now! What did he *say* to your mum, Will?'

'I wasn't meant to be listening,' said Will.

'Excellent!' said Pollo. 'Go on!'

'Well, I overheard HB saying how there'd been a funny spate of little things disappearing lately. Rings and watches and stuff. Some of it had been reported at the station, but then at the tennis club yesterday people were talking. It turns out there's a lot more that hasn't been reported. Seems like Riddle Gully either has a petty thief on the loose, or something is making people very forgetful about where they put things.'

'A thief!' whispered Pollo.

'Or a coincidental string of people misplacing things,' cautioned Will. 'Or things could've gone missing ages ago — and it's only when people hear about the other stuff gone missing that they notice. That's what HB reckons has happened.'

'That explains it!' said Pollo.

'Yeah, well, it makes sense,' said Will.

'No! I mean, that explains Aunty Giulia's missing ring! She put it on a fence-post while she was moving rocks in the garden and it disappeared. It belonged to Grandma di Nozi. Old gold and emerald. Aunty Giulia's devastated.' Pollo stroked an invisible beard. 'And all these things vanish just as Mayor Bullock's nephew, a notorious purloiner of other people's property, comes to Riddle Gully. It's a pretty big coincidence, wouldn't you say?'

'It looks incriminating, I admit,' said Will.

'Incriminating! Hah! When you put together what you know and what I know, it's virtual proof Benson Bragg is at the bottom of all this. And if some pasty nephew of Mayor Bullock thinks he can waltz into Riddle Gully and start helping himself to people's valuables, he's got another think coming!'

'Keep your voice down, will you?' said Will, his head pivoting. 'Everyone can hear — and you haven't got a crumb of proof.'

Pollo put her face close to Will's and grinned. 'That's where you come in!'

'Don't look at me!' protested Will. 'I've told you enough already!'

Pollo ignored him. ‘You just need to wheedle a teeny-tiny bit more info out of HB and we can put the squeeze on Benson Bragg. If he’s anything like his uncle, he’ll turn to jelly under pressure.’

‘Oh no, Pollo!’ The sick feeling from the rollercoaster began to squirm in Will all over again.

‘Oh yes, Will! I’m going to turn you into an assistant supersleuth if it kills me!’ She clapped her friend on the shoulder. ‘I can feel a story coming on!’

Will slumped. ‘I was afraid you’d say that.’

CHAPTER THREE

The flaking paint and rust of the fairground stalls had turned a soft gold in the mellowing light. Pollo, stomping along the main thoroughfare, didn’t notice. Not only had she failed to get her story on the mayor and his chutney-swindle but she was late for the Best Dressed Pet parade. They had to get across to the far side of the fairground and her not-so-faithful assistant Shorn Connery was stopping every two seconds to snuffle at each gooey lolly and squashed chip along the grassy path. Hurrying him was futile. It was like he was *trying* to thwart her.

‘You’re going to bust out of that jacket if you don’t stop eating!’ Pollo tugged on his lead. The handsome costume she and Sherri had made for him — the top

half of the dinner suit favoured by his namesake Sean Connery in his famous role as James Bond, Secret Agent 007 — was covered in flecks of dead grass and dobs of Shorn Connery's sticky spittle. She needed more time, not less, before the parade to clean him up and snaffle that first-prize cheque.

She tugged on the lead again. But Shorn Connery had found half a corn-dog this time and wasn't going anywhere. He flicked his stiff, white lashes and glared at Pollo. *Baa-aa-aah!*

Pollo was pretty sure that was ram-talk for 'The more you hurry me, the longer I'll take.'

Just then she had a brainwave. As soon as Shorn Connery was done with the corn-dog, she'd steer him off the main path to the back way — further to walk but quicker for sure.

Two minutes later Pollo and Shorn Connery were making good progress behind the tents and vans. They had just rounded a bend when Pollo spotted a lanky figure on his hands and knees, the toes of his hi-tops digging into the grass. He was peering beneath the canvas back wall of a tent — the white elephant stall if Pollo wasn't mistaken. The rollercoaster kid! Benson Bragg! Pollo glowered. Most of the stall owners kept

their money up against the back wall of their tent — and here was the nephew of Riddle Gully's self-righteous mayor helping himself to it!

She whipped her camera from her pocket and took a photo. At the beep of the shutter, Benson swung around. He saw Pollo and with a quick twist flopped down on his backside — as though he was just a worker taking a break in the shade. He plugged in his earphone buds and began bobbing his head in time to the music.

Pollo kept her eyes fixed on him as she and Shorn Connery passed. Benson swivelled his cap around and tugged it low over his eyes. It's too late for that, thought Pollo, her eyes narrowed. She had Benson Bragg digitally nicked.

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As they neared the marshalling yard for the Best Dressed Pet parade, Pollo saw the mob gathered. She tried to ignore the tightening sensation in her throat. There were heaps of people — three or four deep behind the rope fence with its little orange flags. Some of the adults had spent a little too long at the wine-tasting tent, by the look of them. Would Shorn Connery behave himself? He was strong, even for a ram ... and he wasn't used to crowds.

Two ravens shuffled on the lip of a rubbish bin, their glossy greenish-black throat hackles ruffling in the breeze. One with a small feather angling from its shoulder clamped a fragment of frayed rope in its beak, perhaps for a nest. The other gave a loud, flat caw as they passed. *Arp-arp-aaah!* The cry was almost pitying, thought Pollo, as though Shorn Connery had come last already.

Shorn Connery looked at them from rolled-back eyes and quickened his pace. He wasn't keen on ravens, Pollo knew. They liked to line their nests with his wool, freshly plucked. And he'd seen them pecking the eyes from his fallen comrades on Auntie Giulia and Uncle Pete's farm. That can't have helped. She hoped the birds wouldn't make him skittish here.

Pollo found the registration table and signed up. Behind her, she heard the crisp voice of the high school principal, Ms Piggott, the chief judge and referee. She was wearing a wide straw hat resplendent with silk daisies and was bending down to a boy of about seven whose eyes brimmed with tears. 'I'm sorry, Rooster, but I can't let you enter. Your carp may well have been alive when you painted it to look like a shark, but it's not anymore. It's in the rules. All contestants must be alive.

Look at your fish, lad. It's floating on the surface.'

'But that's how he swims, Miss! He always does that!'

At that moment, Rooster's father strode across. He dropped to one knee and spoke to his son, then looked up to Principal Piggott apologetically. 'I'm sorry, Principal, the wife and I didn't know about all this,' he said, and led the sniffing boy away.

Owners and pets were called to the parade ring. Rooster's late scratching left twenty-one contestants — nine dogs, three chooks, five cats, two pigs, a pony and Shorn Connery. Half the dogs wore wigs with holes cut out for their ears and all three chooks were trying to shake off bonnets. She began to get excited. Even with Mayor Bullock on the judging panel she was in with a chance — and the mayor was wearing his Chutney Division First Prize rosette, so he might be in a good mood. Tommy Mobsby's pig — done up to resemble the Prime Minister — looked like her stiffest competition. But Tommy had helped her clean up Shorn Connery earlier in the marshalling yard, so it was okay if he won.

Pollo spotted her dad alongside Sherri and Will right behind the line of orange bunting, big grins on their faces. She gave them a wave. Seeing Will made her

think of Benson Bragg. She couldn't wait to show Will the photo she'd just snapped of Benson behind the tents.

Principal Piggott took her seat on the judges' platform next to Mr Wise who ran the stock-feed store and Mayor Bullock. The crowd quietened. Deafening marching music suddenly blasted from a speaker and, as owners tried to calm their pets, the volume was hastily lowered. Eventually, Pollo's friend Draino brought her pony under control and the parade began.

The contestants shuffled around the ring to the crackling military music, past the judges, keeping plenty of distance between one another. Beside Pollo, Shorn Connery in his dinner jacket moved with a suaveness that would have made James Bond proud, only stopping to sniff the air when they passed Will, Sherri and Joe di Nozi. When everyone had completed a lap of the ring, the music, mid-crescendo, stopped.

The audience milled as the judges conferred over their clipboards. One or two red-cheeked supporters called out suggestions and their friends laughed cheerily. Draino's pony lifted its tail from under its dragon costume and delivered a load of manure onto the parade ground, drawing hearty applause. Eventually, Principal Piggott stepped up to the microphone.

'A big thank you to all the contestants here today for a marvellous parade — and by contestants, I'm not referring to the human variety!' She waited till a few people chuckled politely. 'The judges have finally managed to reach a decision. Without further ado, I call Mayor Bullock to the podium to present the awards.'

Mayor Bullock levered himself from his chair and swaggered to the podium where three boxes of varying heights were positioned. He ran his gold-ringed fingers over the junction at which his youthfully lush, flaxen toupée met his scalp, checking the wig was sitting straight — a habit he'd not been able to shake. An elderly volunteer with a large metal tray bearing three medals — in bronze, silver and gold — came to stand solemnly beside him.

Principal Piggott cleared her throat. 'In third place, we have Raine Dodd with her pony, Prancer, who is looking splendid today as a medieval dragon.' The crowd clapped heartily as Draino led Prancer to the podium, where Mayor Bullock, his winner's rosette blooming from his lapel, placed the bronze medal over her head and shook her hand.

Pollo bent down and whispered in Shorn Connery's ear. 'One more to go then it's us, old buddy!'

‘In second place,’ beamed Principal Piggott, ‘as James Bond 007, it’s the most debonair sheep in the district, Shorn Connery and his owner Apollonia di Nozi!’ Pollo’s heart sank for an instant, but then she heard Will’s *whoop-whoop!* and saw all the smiling faces and couldn’t help feeling proud. She led Shorn Connery to the podium and, holding onto his lead, stepped onto the second-highest box, leaving Shorn Connery at ground level in front of her. Mayor Bullock shook her hand – not smiling nearly as broadly as he had for Draino – and Pollo waved her silver medal to the cheers of the onlookers.

A hush fell over the audience, broken only by a raven’s *arp-arp-aaah*. ‘And in first place –’ Principal Piggott paused for dramatic effect, ‘– a contestant I’m sure everyone agrees looks distinctly like our Prime Minister, we have Hamlet the pig and his owner Thomas Mobsby!’ A worthy winner, thought Pollo, clapping enthusiastically along with the happy mob. Tommy climbed onto the highest box and shook hands with Pollo and Draino, a huge grin crinkling his face.

Mayor Bullock lifted Tommy’s gold medal from the tray with his ring-bedecked fingers and held it up to the audience, waving it like a magician about to perform a

trick. The medal dangled and flashed in the afternoon sun. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, came a *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* and a whirl of black feathers. A raven swooped down at Mayor Bullock’s hands, its leathery clawed feet extended. The assistant holding the tray yelped and dropped it with a clang onto Mayor Bullock’s foot. Prancer whinnied and jolted, pulling Draino off her box. Shorn Connery, his eyes rolled back, and Hamlet, looking gleeful, belted in opposite directions, either side of Mayor Bullock. They wheeled around him, their leads trailing. The raven – which Pollo now saw was the one from earlier with a wayward feather – hopped about on the ground between them, trying to snatch the dropped shiny medal. Mayor Bullock windmilled his arms at the horde of beasts. The raven flapped its way to Shorn Connery’s rump – where his dinner jacket didn’t reach – and took a quick pluck of wool.

Shorn Connery shot across the parade ground and through the rope barrier, dragging it and its little orange flags with him. The raven flurried upward, alighting on Mayor Bullock’s head, where it crouched, its neck stretched for balance, its talons hooked into the plush carpet of hair beneath. Mayor Bullock stumbled backwards – onto Hamlet who was still sprinting laps

around the podium. The pig sent up an ear-splitting squeal. With two beats of its wings, the raven flew off, glided a short way and landed on the fence-post near its mate – the tuft of Shorn Connery’s wool in its beak and something floppy dangling from its claws.

Mayor Bullock regained his balance and tapped the microphone. ‘Order! Order!’ he barked.

People turned to look at him. Gradually the hubbub petered away. Silence. A camera clicked – Pollo’s. People began covering their mouths, their eyes bright above their hands. More cameras clicked and whirred. More people began to chuckle.

The mayor plucked a starched handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed his face. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped. Slowly his eyeballs rolled up toward his forehead where a breeze was drifting coolly. His eyes widened as his fingers crept to his hairline. He explored his scalp gingerly with his fingertips. Then he began flat-handedly slapping his dome in the search for something lush, soft and shiny – his precious toupée.

Laughter erupted from the mob. The mayor strode to where Principal Piggott stood watching, her hanky over her mouth, her shoulders shaking. He snatched the daisy-covered hat from her head, plonked it on his

own and dashed as fast as a stout fellow can to the dark privacy of his big black car. He revved the engine, did a three-point turn and *vroomed* away, bumping across the field, sending up sprays of dirt.

Arp-arp-aaah! The ravens flapped their glossy black wings and disappeared too, heading for the forest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Will and Pollo leaned back against the tombstone in the Riddle Gully cemetery, Pollo flipping through her notes from their day at the fair. Beneath them lay the bones of Elspeth Mary Turner, ‘Beloved wife of Henry Thompson Turner’, who’d come into the world in 1812 and departed it in 1899. It was their favourite grave. They figured it must contain someone who’d had a happy outlook on life if she’d lasted eighty-seven years back in those days; plus, the lupins nearby were extra lush. Relieved of his dinner suit, Shorn Connery tore at a patch of the purple weeds a little way off.

‘You’ll have fun with your column in this week’s *Coast*,’ said Will.

Pollo’s eyes lit up. ‘Best embarrassing photo of Mayor Bullock ever!’ she said. ‘I have my faithful assistant

Shorn Connery to thank once again!’ She dug out her camera and showed Will the photo she’d taken of the raven and the mayor in a flurry of feathers and fake hair.

Will pointed to the forest across the meadow from the cemetery. ‘I’d say that toupée’s lining a nest somewhere in there by now,’ he laughed.

‘And look what else I’ve got,’ said Pollo. ‘I didn’t have a chance to show you earlier. I took it on my way to the Pet Parade.’ She scrolled back to the photograph of Benson on his hands and knees peering beneath the back wall of the white elephant stall. ‘You can tell it’s Benson Bragg,’ she said, ‘Who else around here dresses like that?’

‘And likes hip-hop music,’ added Will, taking the camera and zooming in. ‘See this logo on the sleeve? It’s the one I was telling you about. Twisted Lips. It’s on the front of his T-shirt too. I was face-to-face with it when he pulled me out of the rollercoaster car.’ He studied the photo. ‘What d’you think he was up to?’

‘I have a theory,’ said Pollo, lowering her voice, though they were always alone in the cemetery. ‘All the stall-owners kept their valuables at the back of their tents, away from everyone passing by out the front. All Benson had to do was poke his head under the back

wall, grab what he wanted and be on his way. He was probably crawling along looking for an opportunity when Shorn Connery and I sprang him.’

‘He might have found one,’ said Will.

‘What do you mean?’

‘An opportunity,’ said Will. ‘HB said Mr Crisp who ran the garden stall was missing a wad of money.’

‘That’s it then! It must have been Benson Bragg.’

‘To be fair, it’s happened before. His wife’s paranoid and hides things without telling him. Three years ago, according to HB, the money turned up in the bottom of a plant pot, and last year they found it months later in a coffee thermos — a bit mouldy but okay. Still ... It could be ...’

‘Even Mrs Crisp couldn’t be that silly a third time, surely!’ said Pollo.

‘You wouldn’t think so,’ said Will.

Baa-aa-aah! Shorn Connery had stopped chewing and was looking towards the forest.

‘What’s he spotted?’ said Will. ‘Bats? It’s about time they came out of their winter hideaways.’ Squinting, he scanned the gloomy twilight sky.

‘I can’t see any,’ said Pollo. ‘Can you?’ Pollo peered in the direction suggested by Shorn Connery’s snout.

Suddenly, against the backdrop of the forest, Pollo discerned a dark thin shape, like a tree-trunk — but one that could walk — moving toward them. She dug an elbow into Will’s ribs and whispered. ‘Look! It’s him — Benson Bragg! He’s been hiding his stash in the forest!’

The youth was picking his way through the meadow toward the graveyard. As he walked, his neck jerked, chook-like, and with each step, his left foot gave a quick waggle before it planted on the ground.

They stared at him swinging his arms, bobbing his head, waggling his foot. Will leaned closer to Pollo. ‘Is he ... dancing?’

‘I do believe he is,’ said Pollo, ‘in his own special thief-like way.’

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As Benson drew near, Will and Pollo could see that he barely had his eyes open — just enough to jig his way around the gravestones. And whatever song was playing through his earphones, he was half-singing, half-mouthing the words with passion like he was the band’s front man himself.

Shorn Connery remained rooted to his spot among the long grass, a stalk of lupin dangling either side of his snout. Suddenly Benson, no more than three metres

in front of him, did a twirl on one sneaker. His hands flew over an invisible drum kit ending in a cymbal clash delivered through his front teeth. *Tss-tsssss!*

Baa-aa-aaah!

Benson leapt vertically and yanked out his earphones. Shorn Connery stared at him, unblinking. ‘What the ...?’ cried Benson. He spotted Will and Pollo sitting on Mrs Turner’s tombstone. ‘You two! What are you doing here?’

‘Admiring your moves,’ said Pollo, getting to her feet. Will did the same, giggling nervously.

‘Punks!’ said Benson.

‘Unco!’ said Pollo.

‘Dweebs!’ said Benson, a smile creeping onto his face.

‘Doofus!’ smirked Pollo.

Benson pointed to Pollo’s unruly head of springy hair. ‘Fuzzball!’ he said, grinning and jigging from the knees up.

Will was beginning to feel left out. ‘Thief!’ he blurted.

Both Pollo and Benson jerked their heads toward Will. *No!* thought Pollo. She hadn’t gathered her facts yet! It was way too early for a direct assault! And here

they were alone in a graveyard with night closing in, with a kid much bigger than them — were they *whiskers* on Benson’s top lip? — who knew she had evidence against him in the camera bulging in her hip pocket. Her hand drifted down to cover it.

Benson tugged his cap tight down onto his skull and glared at Will. ‘What’d you call me, Punk?’

‘Seef!’ Pollo scrambled. ‘He called you a seef! He lisps, the poor thing. You’ve got to feel for him sometimes.’

‘Yeth!’ said Will desperately. ‘I didn’t mean to inthult you ... Honethtly!’

‘Sounded like thief to me,’ Benson grumbled. ‘There’s not even any such word as “seef”.’

‘Yeah, but how old are you?’ said Pollo.

‘Sixteen. What’s it to you, Fuzzball?’

‘Ah, well,’ said Pollo, ‘that explains it. See, we’re only thirteen —’

‘Nearly fourteen!’ interrupted Will, flinching as Pollo’s elbow found his ribs.

‘— thirteen, and in our language a seef is someone who wears their cap sideways ... like you!’

Benson cocked his head to one side. ‘Seef,’ he repeated. He tugged the bill of his cap lower over his left ear. ‘Succinct. Kind of dignified. I don’t mind it.’ A

smile curled onto his face. 'See, if he'd called me a *thief* I would've smashed in Punk's teef!'

He saw Pollo and Will exchange worried glances. 'That was a joke.' He grinned at Will. 'You're the kid who lost his lunch at the rollercoaster today, yeah?'

'The kid? The only one?' said Will.

'Yep. Just you. You're distinguished.'

'Great,' sighed Will.

Pollo had plenty of investigating to do. 'So, what's it like working on a rollercoaster?'

Benson grunted. 'S'okay. It wasn't my idea, but. My uncle made me. Said I had to earn my keep.'

'Your uncle,' said Pollo. 'That's Mayor Bullock, right?'

Benson grunted again. 'Small towns,' he muttered.

'And you're staying with him?' asked Pollo, easing into her enquiries.

'Uh-huh.'

Will winked at Pollo conspiratorially. 'How come?' he said. 'Are you being *punished* for something ... I mean, thumb-thing!'

Benson frowned and began cracking his knuckles.

Pollo jumped in. 'He only means that a lot of people in Riddle Gully aren't too keen on your uncle, and it

would be a punishment, sort of, to have to stay with him.' She glared at Will. 'You don't need to say anything more, Will. You really *must* rest that sore throat of yours.'

'My thore throat?'

'All that screaming on the rollercoaster, remember?'

'Oh yeah. Thorry.'

Benson leaned over Will, bunching the neck of Will's T-shirt in his fist. He glared from Will to Pollo and back. 'You, Punk! You, Fuzzball! Do you think you can mess with me? I'm not stupid!' He let go of Will and shoved his hands in his pockets. He tilted his head back, looking to the darkening sky, breathing sharply. Suddenly he dropped his gaze back to them.

'You know what? I *am* being punished for something. Whatever you've heard is true. I'm a thief; I'm evil; I can't be trusted. As soon as my gran turns her back I'm going to clean her out!' He turned away. 'This place and its gossip make me want to puke.'

'Oh yeah?' said Pollo, pulling out her notepad. 'It might be gossip to you, but if someone's going around stealing from everyone it becomes kind of important to us.'

'Going around stealing?' Benson scowled. 'Here? You're making it up.'

‘Why else were you listening in earlier when we were talking about Will’s stepdad being a police sergeant?’

‘Curiosity,’ he mumbled. ‘Kills cats, not people.’

‘Well, why were you crawling around behind the stalls? Yeah, I saw you. It’s handy for you, I bet, that we small-town folk are so trusting with our things.’

Benson glared at Pollo and Will, a tinny trace of music leaking from his dangling earphones into the damp twilight air. He opened his mouth as though to say something ... then shut it again. Shorn Connery snuffled at the long grass around Benson’s hi-tops but he didn’t seem to notice.

Pollo waited, her pencil poised. Benson suddenly jabbed his finger at the notebook. ‘You can think whatever you like and you can write whatever you want to write in that ... that lame journal of yours. It won’t change who I am.’

He turned to go but discovered that Shorn Connery had developed a taste for the laces of his left sneaker. He waggled his leg but Shorn Connery hung on grimly, enjoying the strange meld of flavours in the dirty shoelace.

Pollo seized the opportunity. ‘So you don’t deny it then! It is you nicking all the stuff and stashing it in the forest!’

‘I’m not denying anything,’ said Benson, in a tug-of-war with Shorn Connery. ‘And I’m not apologising to anyone in this mangy little town – not to my uncle and especially not to you. You can write that in your pad and stick it up your jumper!’ There was a tearing sound as Benson’s shoelace ripped free of Shorn Connery’s molars. ‘Gotta go, Fuzzball, Punk,’ he said. ‘It’s a nice clear night – I’ve got a lot of stealing to do.’ He jammed in his earphones and slouched away.

Shorn Connery stood looking after him. *Baa-aa-aah!*

‘Don’t bother with him, old buddy,’ said Pollo. ‘He’s bad news.’ She tousled the thick wool between Shorn Connery’s ears. ‘*You*, on the other hand, were brilliant once again – stopping him from leaving. I’d never have wangled that confession out of him otherwise!’ She turned to Will, her eyes bright. ‘You heard him! He practically took my notepad and wrote this week’s *Coast* column for me!’ She began scribbling in her notepad. ‘I’m writing it all down so I don’t forget a single word.’

‘He’s a strange one, alright,’ said Will. ‘I wonder if we could find where he hides his stash. We could, you know, double-check our suspicions.’

Pollo shrugged. ‘No need. He admitted to everything.’

‘Well, he didn’t deny it,’ said Will.

‘Same thing,’ said Pollo. ‘*And* he said he wasn’t apologising for anything.’

‘Not to *you*, especially!’ said Will.

‘And that I could write what I wanted about him.’

‘And stick it up your jumper!’ added Will.

‘You know, Will,’ said Pollo, her eyes narrowing, ‘not every single word he said was relevant.’

‘It wasn’t?’

‘No. And I’d just as soon you left it to me to sort out what was and wasn’t. I *am* —’

‘— Youth Reporter for the district,’ said Will. ‘Yeah, yeah.’

Pollo slipped Shorn Connery’s lead over his head. They began picking their way across the cemetery toward the track that ran behind the houses in their street, shivering as the temperature of the spring evening quickly fell.

‘Listen, Will,’ said Pollo. ‘Do you think you could wheedle a few details out of your stepdad about what exactly has gone missing? But don’t tell him why you want it! I want my story to be breaking news — a masterpiece of investigative journalism! Something people will talk about for years!’

‘I s’pose I could try.’

‘Brilliant!’ said Pollo. ‘I’ll make an assistant super-sleuth of you yet, Will Hopkins!’