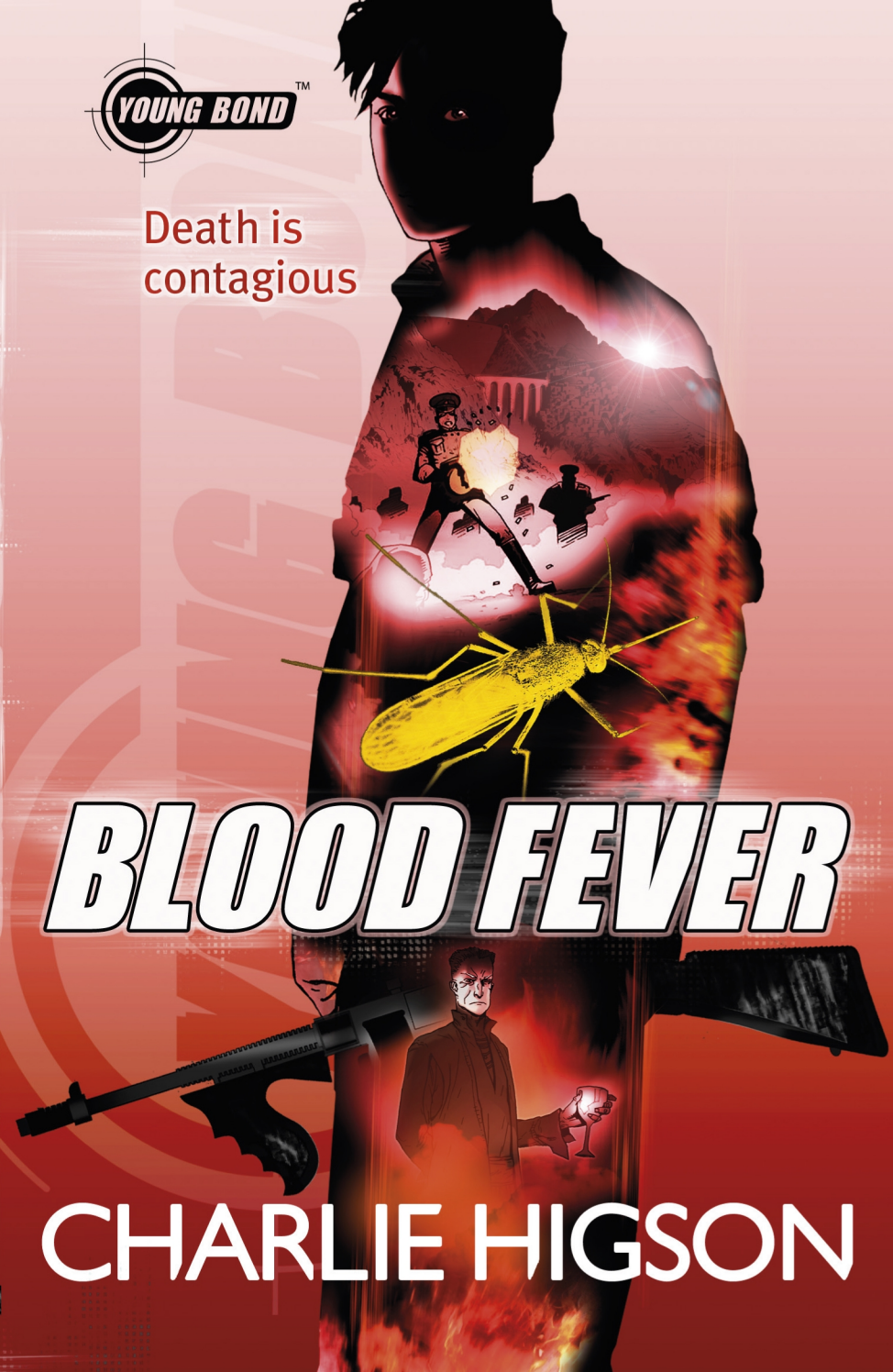
YOUNG BOND™

Death is contagious



BLOOD FEVER

CHARLIE HIGSON

The Magyar

Amy Goodenough was the luckiest girl alive. Here she was, in the Mediterranean, on her father's beautiful yacht, when she should have been at school.

It was a glorious day. Apart from a long black smudge of smoke to the south, the sky was a deep, unbroken blue. She tilted her face up to catch the warmth of the sun, breathed in slowly and smiled. Really, she had no right to be here. A fire had destroyed several of the buildings at her school and it had been forced to close early for the summer. Many of the other girls had been hurriedly packed off to other schools to finish the term, but not Amy. She had easily persuaded her father to let her join him on his annual spring cruise around the Greek islands, on condition that a personal tutor came with them. Since Amy's mother had died of scarlet fever two years ago her father had been very lonely, and he was glad of his daughter's company.

Amy spent the mornings below decks with her tutor, Grace Wainwright, and the rest of the time was hers to enjoy. Grace, a serious and slightly nervous young woman from Leeds, had been strict at first, but the gentle lapping

of the water against the hull and the warm scented air of the Greek islands had soon worked their magic on her. With each day the lessons grew shorter, the worry lines on Grace's face softened and the light shone more brightly in her eyes.

This morning they had finished lessons at eleven o'clock. Grace had sighed and pushed away the book of French grammar they had been struggling over, then stared longingly out through a porthole at a perfect disc of blue sky.

'That's it for today,' she had said. 'Don't tell your father.'

Amy stepped up on to the bulwark and peered into the water. It was rich turquoise and as clear as glass. She could see the anchor chain angling down, surrounded by a school of tiny fish that glinted as they swam in and out of slanting, golden shafts of light.

She flexed her long thin body and prepared to dive in.

'Shouldn't you be studying?' It was her father's voice, but Amy pretended not to hear him, stretched up on to her tiptoes, bent her knees and sprang lightly off the edge of the yacht. For a moment she was suspended in space, the clear blue waters of the Aegean spread out beneath her like a glittering carpet. Then she arced down and the sea raced up to meet her. It was a perfect dive: her body barely disturbed the surface, and the next thing she knew she was down with the fish in a cloud of silver bubbles. She bobbed to the surface and swam away from the yacht towards the nearby rocks that formed a wall around the

little natural harbour they were anchored in. After a while she turned and looked back to see her father standing at the rail waving to her.

'I say! Amy! Should you not be studying?' he called out.

'Grace had a headache, father!' she called back, lying easily. 'We're going to carry on later when it's not so hot.'

'Very well . . . See that you do.'

Her father tried to be severe with her, but in this weather, in these beautiful surroundings, with such a lazy lifestyle, he found it as difficult as Grace to maintain any sense of discipline. Besides, Amy thought, diving down and scattering a shoal of snappers, she had always known how to get round him. It was harder for Mark, her older brother. If there had been a fire at his school, he would have been moved somewhere else instantly and there would have been no question of him coming to Greece.

Their father, Sir Cathal Goodenough, was a sailor through and through. He had joined the navy at sixteen and served under Jellicoe at the Battle of Jutland, before being made an admiral himself in 1917. He had been knighted for his services in the Great War, protecting convoys from submarine attack in the Atlantic. When his wife died he had left the navy, but the sea was in his blood. He hated to be on dry land, and at any opportunity he would be on one of his three yachts: the *Calypso*, which was moored in the West Indies; his racing yacht, the *Circe*, which was kept in Portsmouth; and this one, his most prized vessel, the *Siren*, which overwintered in Nice.

The *Siren* was a three-masted schooner, with ten passenger berths and a crew of eight. Amy looked at her now, sitting serenely at anchor, her gleaming black hull reflected in the water. The yacht was perfectly at home here, and so was Amy. She had learnt to swim almost before she could walk and would sometimes stay in the water for hours on end. She had no need of a bathing cap because, to the horror of her father, she had recently cut off all her long curls and styled her hair into a more fashionable bob. She was often mistaken for a boy, but that didn't bother her. She knew who she was.

She reached the rocks and hauled herself out to sit in the sun and warm herself. It was late May, still early enough in the year for there to be the occasional cold current in the sea.

She shook sparkling droplets from her freckled skin and looked over at the shore. A dense wood of dark-green cypresses grew right down to the little sandy beach where last night they had set up tables and eaten their supper under the stars. The island, one of the Cyclades that spread out across the sea south of Athens, was tiny and uninhabited and didn't even appear on most maps.

A diving knife in a leather sheath was strapped to Amy's leg. It belonged to Louis, the big French first mate, and he had shown her how to prise shellfish from the rocks to eat. Around her waist was strung a net that she used to hold her catch of mussels and clams. Sitting here on the rock, she felt like a savage, a million miles away from England and her boring school. She was the happiest girl in the world and this must surely be paradise.

She heard the ship before she saw it, a dull throbbing sound, but thought nothing of it. The Mediterranean had been a crowded maritime highway for centuries. She busied herself searching for shellfish, dimly aware of the engine noise getting nearer, but it was a shock when she saw a tramp steamer chug into view, pumping smelly, black smoke from its short funnel. She watched as it moved alongside the *Siren* and noisily dropped anchor. Amy could see several crewmen hurrying about the deck, their skin tanned dark brown by the sun, their outfits grimy and stained.

Next to the sleek, clean lines of the yacht, the steamer looked squat and ugly. Amy peered at the name on the side, written in peeling red paint – *Charon*.

The wind shifted, smearing the plume of black smoke across the sun and throwing the harbour into shadow. For a moment Amy, who was standing knee-deep in a rock pool, was chilled, and she shivered.

From the deck of the *Siren*, her father watched the arrival of the steamer with some curiosity. Other than the name, he could see no flags or markings of any kind and wondered why it had chosen to put in here, in this obscure and secluded harbour.

The obvious answer was that she was in some kind of trouble.

'Hello there, *Siren*!'

Goodenough squinted across the water and made out the figure of a stocky blond man, with a neatly trimmed beard.

'Ahoy,' he called back. 'Are you all right, sir?'

'Engine trouble, I'm afraid,' the man called back.

Goodenough tried to place the accent. It sounded Eastern European, but he couldn't pinpoint it exactly.

'Can I be of any assistance?' he shouted. Any seaman was duty-bound to come to the aid of a fellow mariner in trouble at sea. But, even as he shouted the words, he saw that the other ship had already lowered a rowing boat into the water. Without another word, the blond-haired man sprang over the side and landed neatly in the cutter, in a move that was unconventional but highly dramatic.

Six strong sailors pulled at the oars and the boat sped towards the *Siren*.

Goodenough frowned. There was something not quite right about all this. He looked at the crew and saw two Chinese men, two who looked African, a skinny, pale-skinned man with a broken nose, and a nearly naked, hairless and tattooed giant from the South Seas, wearing a woman's straw hat and smoking a fat cigar.

The blond captain stood in the stern of the boat and grinned, his teeth flashing. His arms, which were as thick as his legs and knotted with muscle, were crossed on his broad chest. He wore knee-length boots and a loose, open tunic fastened with a wide belt.

Goodenough saw, with some relief, that at least none of them were armed.

The cutter pulled alongside and the captain sprang up the ladder as effortlessly as if he were skipping up a flight of steps.

He jumped on to the deck and gave a little bow. Up close his eyes were startling. The irises were so pale as to

be almost colourless and were ringed with a grey that seemed to shine like silver.

'Please allow me to introduce myself,' he said. 'I am Zoltan the Magyar.'

'A Hungarian?' said Goodenough, intrigued. 'From a country without a coastline?'

'Yes, sir,' said Zoltan.

'You Hungarians are not known as sailors,' said Goodenough. 'It is unusual to find one captaining a ship.'

'We are an unusual ship with a crew of many nations. You see that we fly no colours? It is because we are a ship of the world.' Zoltan spread out his arms and slowly turned to all points of the compass. 'I love the sea,' he said. 'It reminds me of Az Alföld, the Great Plain of Hungary. A big sky, and miles of nothing in every direction.'

The crew of the cutter were all on deck now, and crowding round Goodenough. He looked into their sullen, dull faces and they looked back at him with an utter lack of interest. He took a step towards the Magyar and offered his hand.

'Welcome aboard,' he said. 'I am the captain of the *Siren*, Sir –'

'I know who you are,' said the Magyar with a grin. 'You are Cathal Goodenough.' He had trouble pronouncing the 'th' and the name came out sounding more like 'Cattle'.

'It's pronounced Cahill, actually,' said Goodenough automatically, and then stopped himself. 'But how did you know my –?'

'With respect,' Zoltan interrupted with quiet authority in his voice, 'it is pronounced however I want to pronounce it.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Goodenough, taken aback. 'There is no cause to be uncivil. I have offered my assistance to you –'

'My apologies,' the Magyar interrupted again and bowed even lower this time, with a faintly mocking manner. 'You are right. There is no need for any unpleasantness. My men will simply take what we have come for and leave.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' said Goodenough. 'Take what?'

Louis, the first mate, and two other crewmen, wearing their crisp white uniforms, were cautiously approaching along the deck.

'This conversation is becoming boring,' said Zoltan. 'Like a boring English tea party. I went to England once. The food was grey, the sky was grey and the people were dull.' He clapped his hands. 'And now that my men are all in position, I can stop this chit-chat and get on with my business, Sir Goodenough.'

'It's just Goodenough, actually,' said the Englishman with some irritation in his voice. 'You would say "Sir Cathal", but never "Sir Goodenough" –'

'I will say whatever I want to say,' Zoltan snapped. 'Now, please don't annoy me. I am attempting to stay calm and polite, like you Englishmen, because when I am angry I do things that I sometimes later regret. Now, please, I am busy . . .'

So saying, Zoltan the Magyar clapped his hands again and a group of men appeared from behind the deckhouse.

With a shock Goodenough realized that while he and his crew had been distracted, another rowing boat had put out from the tramp steamer and several more sailors had climbed aboard. This new group *were* armed – with knives, cutlasses and guns that they quickly handed out to their friends. The huge South Sea Islander was passed a whaling harpoon, which he held lightly in one massive, tattooed hand. With his other hand he removed the cigar from his mouth and then spat a flake of tobacco on to the deck.

'What is the meaning of this?' said Goodenough, outraged – but he knew the meaning all too well.

They were pirates, and there was nothing he could do.

For emergency use there were two rifles and an ancient pre-war pistol locked away in his cabin, but to this day they had never left their strongbox.

And now it was too late.

The first mate, Louis, made a move, but Goodenough glared at him and he stopped. For a captain to have his command taken from him like this was appalling, but it would be madness to try and resist.

It was best just to get it over with.

'This is a private vessel,' he explained as calmly as he could. 'We have no cargo; we have no hold full of treasure. There is a small safe with some money in it, but not a great amount . . .'

The burly Magyar ignored Goodenough and snapped

some orders in Hungarian. A group of his men hurried below decks.

'You have two choices.' Zoltan approached Goodenough. 'You can tell me the combination of your safe, or I can cut it out of your pretty boat with axes.'

Once again Louis stepped forward and in a quick, expert movement Zoltan pulled a small pistol from inside his tunic and levelled it at him.

Goodenough recognized the pistol: it was an Italian navy-issue 9-millimetre Beretta. These men were no scruffy, disorganized opportunists: they were serious professionals.

He quickly gave the combination for the safe and Zoltan shouted another order to his men.

In a moment there were screams from below and Grace Wainwright was dragged on to the deck. She was followed by the pale-skinned sailor carrying the contents of the safe. Zoltan looked from Grace to the haul, then shook his head peevishly and rubbed a temple.

There was a deep, guttural grunt and the tattooed giant tossed something across the deck. Zoltan caught it and his face brightened.

It was a small bronze statuette.

'Thank you, Tree-Trunk,' he said.

Tree-Trunk smiled and exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke.

Zoltan held the statuette up to his mouth with two hands and kissed it.

'Leave that!' yelled Goodenough, his anger getting the better of him. 'That will be of no value to you. It is a very well-documented piece of art. There is nowhere in

the world you could sell it . . . And if you melted it down it would be an absolute tragedy.'

Zoltan smiled, turned slowly and fixed Goodenough with his steel-rimmed gaze.

'I am not a peasant!' he said. 'I am no ignorant *gulyás*. I know what I want. I want this bronze, Sir Cattle.'

'Cahill, man – it's *Car-hill*!'

'Be quiet, you damned Englishman.'

'You know nothing of its true worth,' Goodenough protested.

'I know it is by Donato di Betto Bardi,' said Zoltan. 'Commonly known as Donatello. Fifteenth century, cast in Florence, a model for the design of a fountain that was never built.' He turned the statuette in his hands. 'It is a figure from Greek mythology. A siren. The very siren that this boat was named after. The sirens were monsters – half woman, half bird. With their beautiful voices they tricked passing ships on to the rocks and ate their crews.' He looked at Goodenough. 'Women, Sir Goodenough. You must always be careful of them. They are dangerous.'

'That statuette belonged to my wife,' Goodenough said quietly.

'This statuette was stolen by Napoleon from the Duke of Florence,' said Zoltan. 'And it was stolen from Napoleon by one of your wife's family after Waterloo. Now it is my turn to steal it.'

Goodenough made a grab for the bronze and the Magyar flicked a hand at him, as casually as if he was swatting away a fly, but it was enough to send Goodenough

crashing to the deck. He lay there for a moment, stunned.

Louis cursed and ran at Zoltan but he stopped suddenly and fell back with a gasp. Tree-Trunk had hurled his harpoon into him with such force that half its length protruded from the Frenchman's back. Louis struggled for a few moments on the deck, then lay still.

'I did not want any bloodshed today,' said Zoltan. 'But you have forced my hand.'

Goodenough hauled himself groggily to his feet and glared at Zoltan. 'You are a barbarous pig, sir. A common pirate.'

Zoltan passed the statuette to the tattooed giant and grabbed Goodenough by his shirt.

'Do not make me angry,' he hissed.

Goodenough looked into his eyes; the pale irises seemed to have darkened.

'Take what you want,' Goodenough pleaded, 'but can you not leave the Donatello? It means a great deal to me.'

Zoltan pushed Goodenough away and took the bronze back from Tree-Trunk.

'No,' he said simply.

Despite himself, Goodenough grabbed him.

'You will not take that! I don't care what you do; you can prise it from my dead hands if you wish, but I won't give it up without a fight.'

He took hold of the statuette and grappled over it, pressed right up against Zoltan, who was backed against a bulkhead. They struggled for half a minute before a muffled bang suddenly erupted and there was the smell

of singed flesh and cloth. Goodenough staggered backwards, clutching his stomach.

'You've shot me,' he said and dropped to his knees.

'That is very perceptive of you, Sir Goodenough. I told you not to make me angry.'

'I'll see you rot in hell for this.'

'I doubt it very much. In a few minutes you will be dead. Good day to you.'

So saying, Zoltan the Magyar leapt overboard into the waiting cutter. In a moment he was joined by his oarsmen and they raced back to the steamer. Once there, he climbed over the side and stood on deck, studying the statuette and breathing heavily through his nose. Despite some minor complications it had been a good morning's work. He ran a finger over the shapely curves of the siren's body and smiled. In many ways it had been too easy.

As he turned to go below he suddenly felt a searing pain in his left shoulder and he dropped the bronze to the deck. He spun round and saw a short-haired girl of about fourteen wearing a bathing costume, water dripping from her thin body, a mixture of anger and fear showing on her young face.

Zoltan looked down at his tunic. It was stained dark with his own blood. He put his right hand up to where a cold, dull ache drilled into his shoulder. A knife was stuck fast there; jammed into the joint. Half of him felt like weeping and the other half felt like laughing. This girl had spirit. If he had not turned at the last moment, the knife would have stabbed him next to his spine.

His left arm hung uselessly at his side; the pain and loss of blood were making him weak.

'You're going to regret that you didn't kill me,' he said quietly.

'One day I'll finish the job,' the girl said bitterly.

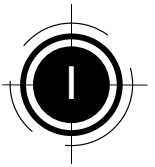
Zoltan was now swamped by his crew, all yelling and shouting in panic. Three of them took hold of the girl.

'Give me air, and bring me wine,' Zoltan snarled. 'Bull's Blood!'

Someone handed him a bottle and he took a long gulp, dribbling the dark-red wine down his chin. Then he steeled himself and, with a furious cry, wrenched the knife out of his shoulder.

'Sink the boat,' he said, flinging the knife into the sea. 'Take the women . . . and kill all the men.'

The knife sank through the silent water, turning and twisting, the blood washing away. It landed in the sand at the bottom and stood there like a cross on an underwater grave.



The Danger Society

James Bond hated feeling trapped. Wherever he was, he always wanted to know that there was a way out. And preferably more than one way out. Lying here in his tiny room at Eton, packed away under the rafters, he pictured the whole building as it slept beneath him. In his mind he wandered the dark maze of corridors and stairways that made up Codrose's house. There were several doors downstairs, but only one that the boys had access to and that would now be locked for the night. It was no concern of his. He had his own way in and out of the building, his own secret route that nobody else knew about.

For James the most important thing was to be free, to be in charge of his own life. He didn't really fit in at Eton, with its endless rules and age-old traditions, but Eton couldn't hold him.

He lay perfectly still in his narrow, uncomfortable bed and listened for any sounds. Nothing. It was all quiet. He slipped out from under his sheets and went over to his ottoman. From the untidy mess within, he took out a pair of black trousers, a dark-blue rugby shirt and a pair

of plimsolls, listening the whole time. He pulled the clothes on over his hated pyjamas. How he wished he didn't have to wear them. Especially on a hot, stuffy night like this, when the air hung heavy and no breeze came in through the open window. But his housemaster, Cecil Codrose, had introduced a rule that all boys in his care should sleep in pyjamas and keep them buttoned up to their necks.

Ever since a fire had gutted one of the houses in 1903, killing two boys, the school had employed 'night watches', elderly ladies and gentlemen from the town who shuffled along the corridors at night sniffing for smoke. James wasn't bothered about his night watch, a little old lady called Florence. She was easily evaded. But he did worry about Codrose. He was fond of creeping around the house at all times of day and night, trying to catch the boys misbehaving, and James had hit on the plan of sprinkling sugar on the bare wooden floorboards so that it crunched underfoot and gave away anyone trying to sneak up on him.

There was no crunch now. No rustle of movement anywhere in the building. For the time being he was safe.

Once dressed, he removed a short section of skirting board and slid out a loose brick from the wall. Behind it was the hiding place where he kept his valuables. He took out his penknife and torch and dropped them into his trouser pocket. Then he put everything back as it was and carefully opened his bedroom door. He kept the hinges and the handle well greased with bacon fat so that it opened without a sound. There was a creak and James paused. But it was only the 200-year-old building settling.

He looked left and right down the corridor, which was lit by a dim electric light at either end. Another of Codrose's ideas. The corridor was empty, apart from a big brown moth that sent huge shadows flapping across the dull green walls.

James's room was on the top floor. To the right was a flight of narrow stairs and a wall separating the boys from Codrose's part of the building. At the other end of the corridor was a storage room whose door was secured shut with a massive, rusty padlock. Halfway down was a washroom and on either side of it was a row of identical doors. Behind each door was a sleeping boy. But while they only dreamt of escape, for James it was a reality.

He always left a clear path through the sugar and soundlessly made his way along the corridor to the washroom. The hinges on this door were also well greased.

He slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

He didn't risk turning on the light. He could make his way through here with his eyes closed, but there was enough of a glow from the moon through the windows to show him a row of tin basins, four big baths and, at the far end, the lavatory stalls. He tiptoed over the tiled floor towards the end stall and went in.

He fished his penknife out of his pocket, opened the blade and, crouching down, levered up a floor tile, exposing the floorboards beneath. Soon he had three more tiles up and he was able to remove a neatly cut square of boards.

It had taken him two sessions to work the tiles loose, slaving away in the dead of night, using tools filched from the School of Mechanics. And it had taken him a further

week to cut through the boards underneath with his penknife, as a saw would have made too much noise. Twice he had nearly been found out. On the first occasion he had heard footsteps outside, but nobody had come in. On the second occasion, though, the door had opened. James just had time to replace the tiles, scoot up the walls of the stall like a monkey and wedge himself on top of the cistern before the lights were turned on and the familiar sound of Codrose's dry cough had filled the night.

James had heard him walking around and then he had glanced into the stall. James caught a brief glimpse of his wiry, grey hair and pale skin before he coughed once more and went on his way.

Since then James hadn't been disturbed and now he was able to use this secret route out of the building whenever he needed to.

Under the floor was a crawl space just large enough to fit his slim body into. He passed the boards down, lowered himself in after them and replaced the tiles above his head.

He could now risk using the torch. He switched it on, illuminating a tiny passage that ran along the entire length of the building between the joists. It was filthy and dusty and laced with blackened cobwebs. He shuffled awkwardly forward on his belly, trying not to make too much noise. Above and below him were sleeping boys, but if they'd ever heard anything they'd kept quiet about it.

James crawled along until he was directly beneath the locked storage room at the end of the corridor. He remembered the night he had first got this far, and how

relieved he had been to discover that several of the floorboards were loose and rotten. It had only taken him a few minutes to prise two of them free. Now he simply pushed them out of his way and wriggled up into the room.

He replaced the boards, stood up, knocking the dust off his dark clothes, and sneezed. Nothing had changed in here since his last visit. The room was piled high with forgotten school junk: broken tables and chairs, rotting camp beds, prehistoric sports equipment and boxes of yellowing books and papers. There was a tiny window in the roof, so encrusted with dirt and dust and birdlime that it barely let in any light at all. James climbed on to a pile of boxes and forced the rusted latch open. Then he folded the window back, grabbed hold of the edge of the frame and hauled himself up. In a moment he was out on the roof, in the fresh air, with the whole of Eton spread out beneath him.

It was a beautiful clear summer's night and the moon was nearly full. James could see over the rooftops down to the river Thames and across to Windsor Castle on the other side. It was close to midnight, but there was still some activity on the streets, the odd car moving about, lights in windows, a barge going upriver towards Maidenhead.

James had planned carefully for this. He had noticed that the storage-room door never seemed to be opened, and, just to make sure, he had fixed a hair across the keyhole in the padlock, sticking it in place with two tiny dabs of grease. A week, two weeks went by and the hair

was undisturbed. A quick check outside had shown him the window and a possible way on to the roof, so then he only needed to work out how to get into the room. Spotting the space beneath the floorboards when a leaking pipe was being repaired in the washroom had solved that problem.

He took a last look around to make sure that the coast was clear, then gingerly crawled up the tiles towards the top of the roof. He used the chimneys to support himself as he went over the crest and slid down the other side on to a flat section of roof, which was set into the top of the building. There was a long, oval glass dome sticking up here and, crouching low so as to avoid making a silhouette against the night sky, James sneaked along until he was looking down into Codrose's study. As often as not the housemaster would be sitting up here at night, writing in his journals with tiny, spidery lettering and drinking from a secret bottle of gin.

James pressed himself against the roof and sidled along, peering down through the murky glass. Sure enough Codrose was there. He was a thin man with a short beard that covered half his face and the cold, dead eyes of a fish. Many of the housemasters at Eton were well loved by the boys, but not Codrose. He was mean and joyless and served the worst food in the school.

James watched him for a while, scratching away with his pen, and wondered what he found to write about. It gave James a feeling of power to be up here, seeing but not being seen. He soon moved on, however. There were things to do.

When he reached the other end of the roof he climbed over the ridge and carefully slid down to a wide stone gutter. He walked along the gutter like a tightrope walker, holding his arms out for balance, until he reached the corner. This was the most dangerous part of the route: jumping across a narrow cobbled alleyway to the building on the other side. He looked down to make sure that there was nobody below, before shuffling back along the gutter to give himself a run-up. He took a deep breath, then raced to the end and hurled himself into the air at the last moment. He landed comfortably, kept up his momentum and continued running across a short flat roof, then leapt across another, smaller gap on the other side. This was James's favourite part of the route, over several easy rooftops, running, jumping, climbing, until he finally arrived at a long, lead-lined gulley which led to the top of the final roof. He darted up it and squeezed between the chimneys, where he was stopped by a boy's voice, hissing in the darkness.

'Who is it?'

'James Bond.'

'Enter.'

The roof of this building was similar to the one at Codrose's, with a flat section set into the top between the chimneys, but this was smaller and had nothing as grand as Codrose's dome. Apart from a small inspection hatch in the middle, it was featureless. But it made a perfect hideout for a group of adventurous boys who called themselves the Danger Society.

There were many clubs at Eton – the Musical Society,

the Film Society, the Natural History Society and the Archaeological Society, for instance. But the Danger Society was different. It was a secret society of boys who liked to take risks. If the Danger Society was ever discovered, its members would be in deep trouble.

James, who was still only in his first year at Eton, was the youngest member; he had been approached by a friend called Andrew Carlton, who was two years older than him. They had got to know each other in the previous half, as terms were called at Eton. Andrew had realized that James was a boy like himself, easily bored by the routine of school, who might like a little spice in his life.

It was easy to join the club. You simply had to make your way to this rooftop den at night without being seen. It had taken James a while to work out how to do it, but he had persevered, and this was the fifth meeting he had attended.

He soon spotted Andrew and he did a quick headcount of the others.

'Five,' he said. 'Who's missing?'

'Gordon Latimer,' said Andrew. 'He's always late. Probably fast asleep, knowing him.'

'And what about Mark Goodenough?' said James. 'Isn't he usually the first here?'

'M-Mark's not going to m-make it tonight,' said Perry Mandeville, the founder and captain of the club. 'He's had some bad news, not bad news like so-and-so's caught a cold or something, proper bad news, he's cut up something rotten, m-most likely won't m-make it again this half.'

Perry was a restless, reckless boy who was always urging

the others to try ever more dangerous escapades. He could never sit still and his words tumbled out in such a mad rush that, as his brain fought to catch up with his mouth, it caused him to stammer.

'What's happened?' said James, sitting down with his back against the wall.

'His family has been lost at sea,' said Perry dramatically. 'In the M-Mediterranean . . .'

'Don't be so sensational,' said Andrew. 'Nobody knows exactly what's happened.' He sat down next to James and handed him some chocolate. 'They were sailing,' he went on, 'and their boat's gone missing.'

'Sounds m-much m-more exciting to say "Lost at sea",' said Perry, fidgeting. 'Sounds like an adventure book, m-maybe they're shipwrecked on a desert island, or something, or they've been eaten by sharks, they do have sharks in the M-Mediterranean, though not very big ones.'

'Yes,' said Andrew. 'And it sounds rather like you hope they *have* been eaten by sharks.'

'That's not fair,' said Perry. 'M-Mark's my friend.'

'Precisely,' said Andrew. 'And this is real life, not a story. We were all kind to you when you had your break-in.'

'What break-in?' said James.

'Happened last half,' said Perry, 'before you joined the society. Burglars broke into our house in London and stole a load of paintings, luckily m-my folks were away at the time, but one of the servants was pretty badly beaten and m-my m-mother and father are still fairly fragile about the whole thing.'

'Exactly,' said Andrew. 'Well, imagine if they *had* been there at the time, and had got hurt. You wouldn't think that was something to make fun of, would you?'

'Sorry,' said Perry. 'But you m-must ad-m-mit, it does all sound rather exciting.'

Andrew sighed and looked heavenward, but, after all, excitement was what the Danger Society was all about. They met here every week, on a different night, chosen at random out of a hat so that they would have no noticeable routine. They didn't really do very much on these nights; it was the getting there that was the important part. Once they were all assembled they'd just sit and chat and smoke cigarettes and plan other activities. But although the Danger Society members may have looked relaxed, they all knew that if they were caught it would be very serious. That was what made these meetings so thrilling. Despite the fact that it was late and James was tired, he felt alive and buzzing with the excitement of being out here at night.

James had had a confusing time since starting at Eton. At Easter he had become entangled in the insane schemes of Lord Randolph Hellebore, the father of a fellow student. James had nearly been killed and had seen things he never wanted to see again. When he had at last recovered from it all he was left with the feeling that life sometimes seemed rather flat.

He had tried to return to being just an ordinary schoolboy, but what he had experienced set him apart from all his friends and no matter how hard he tried to forget it all, he couldn't.

Apart from the risk of falling off the roof, this trip tonight could hardly be said to be truly dangerous, but it was better than lying in bed trying to sleep. His lessons tomorrow would suffer, of course. No matter; there was more to life than Latin grammar. If James worked hard later in the week he would probably catch up. Mr Merriot, his classical tutor, the man who looked after his schooling, often told him off for not working harder, but James was naturally bright and was keeping up with the other boys, so he didn't worry too much.

'Listen,' said Perry. 'I propose a jaunt in the m-motor, daft to leave it sitting there m-mouldering away. What say Andrew and I drive it up to London one night? That'd be something to talk about.'

'Sounds risky,' said James.

'That's what the society is all about,' said Perry. 'I don't m-mind a spot of risk.'

'I wasn't thinking about you,' said James. 'I couldn't care less what happened to you, Perry. I was thinking about the car.'

One of the reasons James was popular with the Danger Society, despite being its youngest member, was that he owned a car. It had belonged to an uncle, who had taught him to drive in it, and when he'd died he'd left it to James. James had persuaded his guardian to let him bring it to Eton, telling her that it would be kept at the school and used by the boys to learn about mechanics, under the careful supervision of a master, of course.

In reality it was kept hidden away in a garage in a backstreet in Windsor near the barracks. The garage

belonged to Perry and he was always planning ways to use the car – a 4.5 litre Bamford and Martin roadster – but they had to be very careful. Not only was it against school rules to drive a car, it was also breaking the law.

They were in the middle of arguing about Perry's proposed trip when they heard hurried footsteps and Gordon Latimer flung himself over the top of the roof and rolled down towards them.

'That's the way to make an entrance!' said Andrew, laughing.

'Shhhh!' said Gordon, twisting on to his knees and crouching low. He was desperately short of breath, his clothing ripped and untidy. 'They're on to us.'

'Who are?' said James, looking around.

'I'm not sure,' said Gordon, his voice high and strained. 'I was spotted. They were looking for me.'

'Who? The police?' asked Andrew.

'Beaks, I think,' said Gordon. 'I've been all over the place trying to shake them off. There's a big search party heading this way. We've got to get out of here.'

Even as Gordon said this, they heard shouts from the street below.

'Split up,' said Andrew and he was off.

In a second all the other boys were up and running in different directions, each taking their own chosen route.

James didn't hesitate. He sprang to his feet, vaulted over the rooftop and was away, his heart hammering against his ribs.

If he had wanted danger, he had it now.