

1 SLASHED RUBBER

Deion Powell was the king of high school. Stubbled and swaggering. *Powell 03* on the back of his practice jersey and a splayed walk imposed by monstrous thighs. An amber late slip flapped in his hand as the starting quarterback bowled the empty hallway, crunching in desert grit trailed from the parking lot.

‘Whatcha staring at?’ Deion snapped instinctively as a skinny ninth grader came out of an empty classroom. He had to hook the door with his sneaker because there was a set of textbooks stacked to his chin.

The kid jolted. Catching the door frame with his shoulder, almost spilling *Algebra 2s*, before Deion’s bunched fist set him off in a rodent scuttle.

But there was too much in Powell’s head to enjoy the humiliation. There’d been a tussle in the locker room after Monday night practice. A minor miracle that the coaches hadn’t found out. And that morning, Deion’s kid sister bounced for the school bus, but doubled back before clearing the driveway. Uptight and wide-eyed, the nine-year-old blurted that the front tires on his truck had been knifed.

So, the quarterback took a city bus and fifteen-minute jog, missing first period and catching a lecture from a tattooed school clerk, who'd heard too many excuses to care if they were true or not. *Third late arrival since summer recess. Can't come and go as you please, making like you're above the rules.*

Stress bulged Deion's veins. Sweat glazed his oak-brown skin. *Should have taken a picture of my tires to show I'm no liar. Five hundred bucks for new ones. Must have been JJ. Will everything kick off again? What if we bump JJ's crew in the hallway? And no way to avoid it in the locker room . . .*

Deion's locker had been decorated by the rally team. *Powell 03*, sprayed through a stencil. *Rock Spring Rockets* stickers and nylon rosettes fixed on with sticky pads. An invite to *Aisha's 18th – Foam Partaaaay* poked out of the door. He tried fitting a face to Aisha's name as he turned the locker dial.

Eighteen, six, twenty-two.

There was a grunt of realisation as Deion let his backpack drop off his shoulder. He usually left football gear in his truck on the school lot. The locker was crammed. Books, baseball cleats, protein shake pouches and a Bluetooth boom box he'd tried selling to a teammate who'd never come through with the money.

Maybe it was easiest to keep hold of the stuff. *Dump it in Terence's VW at recess.* But this made the walk to the locker another waste of time, on a day when everything was going bad.

Calm down. Think straight. Don't let stuff get to you.

'This sucks,' Deion raged, smashing his palm on his locker, and kicking the one below with his size thirteen.

His thoughts had been balled too tight to hear the girl who'd turned into the hallway behind. Pink cotton pumps, a *Rock Spring High* gym shirt and milky, vein-pencilled legs. He'd

startled her and was about to apologise when . . .

Noise ripped. So loud it hurt inside both ears. Blazing light. Heat. The girl screaming. The yellow locker door, unhinged and smashing Deion in the face. Stumbling. Blood. Tripping on something. A mouthful of dust, and ceiling tiles falling like oversized confetti.

2 NOT HARRY POTTER

The klaxon yowled as twenty-four hundred high-schoolers bustled out into sun-blasted gravel and hundred-degree heat. Out of fire doors and down clanking metal stair treads. A few straddled first-floor windows. Smoke plumed from the Zone C annexe as emergency sirens wailed.

The clueless school security guard kept a wary hand on his taser. Teens from the dance studio felt scorching sidewalk on bare soles and a math teacher rolled a kid in a wheelchair past the cholla cacti at Rock Spring High's main entrance.

'This is *not* a fire drill,' a deputy principal yelled, pit stains showing as he waved students away. 'Do not gather at the assembly points. Just get as far from the building as possible.'

'Is there a shooter?' someone asked, almost colliding with a kid who walked backwards, videoing the smoke.

'Heard shots for sure,' another body close to Harry Smirnov said. 'Five or six.'

Harry followed the crowd away from school on a paved path, his jog slowing as bodies funnelled through mesh gates. He was a ninth grader. Fourteen, slender limbs, floppy black bangs, still more boy than man. He'd only been in Las Vegas eight months

since moving from the UK with his aunt.

In the run-up to leaving London, Harry's two best mates joked darkly about American high-school shootings. One even wrote *mind the bullets* in his leaving card and drew a stick man letting rip with an Uzi. Now the joke seemed thin.

'Smoke's from over by the wood shop,' someone behind Harry noted as a guidance counsellor urged teens not to shove at the gate. 'My dad's a carpenter. One place he worked, there was a spark in the dust extraction and the whole joint went boom.'

'Where you going, Harry Potter?' Lupita from Harry's homeroom spat, as he cut off the path. 'Ain't no other gate up there.'

First name Harry, a black mop and an English accent made the nickname inevitable. Even his home-room teacher used it.

Vegas didn't get a lot of rain, but baked-hard ground meant flash floods when a storm hit. The mesh fence around Rock Spring's perimeter ran parallel to a concrete drainage channel, eight feet wide and half as deep. Harry stepped down into the basin, brushing weeds growing through cracks as he started a crouched jog towards the smoke.

He glanced back, but fellow evacuees saw nothing past backs of heads and shuffling limbs. The drain's sides were graffitied, the base littered with occasional pyres made from melted nylon backpacks and black-edged textbooks. These had been squirted with lighter fuel and burnt up by college-bound seniors before summer break.

Harry ducked instinctively as an ambulance skimmed the access road across the fence, lights flashing but siren off. It turned through a set of vehicle gates eighty yards ahead. The storm drain went under this access road, but the thought of

snakes in the dark sent a chill down Harry's spine, so instead of charging through he lay against the gently angled wall, checking the scene as the sun cooked the back of his neck.

Smoke had been tamped by a fire crew, and puddled hose water was evaporating into a rainbow haze. This part of the school was single-storey classrooms, with a taller main assembly hall and lunch room behind. Shatterproof panes had twisted out from their frames, and aluminium roof sheets jutted into the air.

But Harry sensed calm. Two relaxed cops guarded the school's service entrance as a lunch lady in kitchen whites led a fire officer round the edge of the building, seeking a shut-off valve. Harry cupped one ear and listened to a police lieutenant briefing the freshly arrived ambulance crew.

'Some kind of explosive. Got the area cleared out and locked down, but don't hang around inside. We can't be certain it's the only device until there's been a full search.'

Harry's mum had been a photographer and journalist. She'd taken a bullet in the Ukraine and won awards for her vlogs from Brazzaville during the Third Congo War. After living in war zones, her death was ironic: wiped out by an undiagnosed heart defect as she jogged in London's Hyde Park.

Harry had been seven. His mother's death had left him with a mortal fear that his heart could explode, a fascination with news websites and an urge to follow her path.

He read biographies of famous correspondents and photo-journalists. He liked war documentaries and obsessed over films like *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men* where journalists kicked butt. A swanky Nikon camera topped Harry's Christmas wish list, back when his mates were still into *Star Wars* Lego and console games.

Until now, the fourteen-year-old's journalistic experience comprised an Under 12s Photography Prize, rugby and cricket reports for his old school in London and a Rock Spring Neighbourhood News blog that he set up at Digital Arts summer camp. But here was proper news, and Harry had the first camera on the scene.

His fancy Nikon was at home, so his phone would have to do. Harry unlocked with an iris scan and flipped to *advanced camera* mode. Sunlight bleached the screen, so he had to click and hope for the best as he shot the little rainbow and buckled roof.

There was a chance the cops at the door would see Harry dash between the storm drain and the side of the building. He was no rule breaker, but he'd waited half his life for a story. Every crunch of gravel felt like a sonic boom, but Harry timed it well and cracked an exhilarated smile as his back hit the wall by an open window.

What if there are more bombs? What if some nut jumps out of a storeroom with a machine gun? This is such a buzz ... This is why Mum loved it so much.

Harry wiped a dripping brow on the sleeve of his T-shirt, jumped on to the ledge of the sliding window, then down on to a chair, which kids had used as a step when scrambling out fifteen minutes earlier.

The strip lights were dead. The school's crisply conditioned air had warmed and caught enough smoke to sting Harry's eyes. Most kids had grabbed their backpacks, but there were pens and books on desks, clothes over the backs of chairs and a tatty phone left charging.

The classroom door was closed, with water trickling beneath. Harry took four pictures, then kept his ear to the door,

before easing the handle and peeking out. A single hallway ran down this part of the school, lined with yellow senior lockers.

A shut-off sprinkler dripped and mini icebergs of fire-suppressant foam drifted on slow running water. Harry had never seen the hallway with the lights off and he stepped into the gloom, placing his Nikes as quietly as the wet allowed.

To the right, things normalised. A few downed ceiling tiles and the flow of water narrowing as it ran into classrooms. At the far end, light dazzled through skylights where this annexe met the main school building.

Hell lay in the other direction. Water dripped from the ceiling; slow-moving fire foam clumped around a collapsed sub-ceiling that had once held up lamps and ceiling tiles. Some locker doors were dented, others torn open by the force of a blast.

Harry crouched low for a gory snap of a dead rat, its black fur singed to bloody flesh.

Dressed in nylon shorts, he was briefly fascinated as his leg sank ankle-deep into foam. A groan sounded over the sprinkler drips and running water. Then a tortured shout.

‘Leave me, leave me, leave me.’

The voice was young, deep, and came from beyond the downed ceiling. Harry edged to the lockers, where the puddle was shallowest, and crept up to the tangle of metal and light fittings blocking the hallway. Beyond the gloom, sun pierced the torn roof.

‘Let’s have a shot of morphine,’ a neon-jacketed medic told a colleague. Then soothingly, ‘Just need to move you on to the stretcher, baby.’

Harry pushed a dangling wad of pipe insulation out of the way, making a gap big enough to see through. The gloomy walls

and sunlight through the holed ceiling was a photographer's nightmare. Harry played with the exposure controls until the image was usable, then tapped the screen, taking shot after shot.

The explosion had taken place twenty feet beyond the collapsed ceiling. On one side, a dozen lockers had been pancaked. Across the hall, the blast had knocked lockers through drywall, exposing an outer layer of concrete breeze blocks. The floor between was littered with books and athletic gear, all smeared in the creamy fire foam.

The victims had been moved further down the hall. Harry caught drips on his head as he pushed deeper beneath the collapsed ceiling frame and switched to video. After a slight zoom, he filmed a cop helping ambulance crew roll a girl on to a stretcher. She was limp and bloody, but a breathing mask meant she had to be alive.

The other victim lay a few yards beyond, head raised on an air pillow as one of the ambulance staff prepped a morphine jab. His clothes were burnt and face bloody, but Harry knew Deion Powell from his cringeworthy *school spirit; go, team; come to the game and get behind the Rockets* speeches during whole-school assembly.

'Don't move me!' Deion begged.

Harry had visions of some teacher or cop creeping up behind, but kept his nerve, focusing on holding the phone steady, because he wanted his footage to look professional.

'Gotta get you to hospital,' the ambulance guy soothed as he stuck in the morphine. 'Lift you up, nice and slow.'

'It hurts so bad!'

Harry kept filming, his breathing tense and drips hitting his back as a second ambulance team arrived.

‘Gimme another shot for the pain,’ Deion groaned as four medics circled.

‘Lift on three, two . . .’

Deion’s scream burst like a grenade as two medics lifted his arms and another raised his feet for a short lift on to a stretcher.

‘You did real good, QB,’ one medic said. ‘That was the bad part. Now we gonna put your stretcher on to the trolley.’

‘Your mama’s already on her way to hospital, buddy,’ a cop standing behind soothed. ‘She’ll be there waiting.’

‘I can beat this!’ Deion shouted, grasping the side of the stretcher with a slippery, bloodied hand.

‘Again on three.’

As two medics raised Deion’s stretcher up to the wheeled trolley, the one at the back felt his heel slip on the foamy floor.

It wouldn’t have mattered with a normal-sized patient, but Deion’s bulk hung off all sides. As the guy holding the foot end swung the stretcher towards the trolley, the medic who’d slipped didn’t follow. The lift was supposed to be smooth and pain free, but the jolt left strips of Deion’s burnt skin stuck to the stretcher and his spasm of pain tilted it sideways.

Cops cursed and charged in, as Deion rolled off, crashing the side of the trolley and slapping the wet floor. Harry knew he’d filmed something big as Deion howled in agony, lashing furiously and sprawling the guy who was trying to pick him up off the floor.

‘Can’t you be careful?’ Deion boomed as he stopped flailing and let the medic close in with a respirator mask. ‘I’ll be suing all your asses!’

‘We’re doing our best, son,’ someone said.

‘Deep breaths,’ the medic soothed as she held the mask over Deion’s face. ‘Slow, deep, breaths.’

3 A THOUSAND BUCKS

The dining hall smelled of lunch that would never get eaten as Harry cut between tables, wet Nikes squeaking the glossy floor and phone clutched like a bar of precious metal.

‘Why you ain’t evacuated?’ a chef shouted from deep in the kitchen.

‘On my way, sir,’ Harry said obediently.

But instead of going out he pushed through double doors into the main part of the school and bounded stairs two at a time. The upper floor hallway was dim and empty and the second door he tried came open. It was a science room, with no sign that anyone had bailed in a hurry.

‘OK,’ Harry muttered as he took a deep breath. ‘Think.’

He knew what he wanted to achieve, but there were a lot of steps and he needed to get them straight in his head. After kicking the door shut, he strode to the back of the room. If he sat at a desk he might be seen through the classroom door, or from outside. So Harry crouched in a space between a desk and storage unit. If anyone came in, he’d act scared and say he’d been hiding.

Harry rested his back against the wall below a window,

tilted his phone to cut reflections and started flicking through photos. The first shots with the rainbow looked cool, but lacked drama. The abandoned classroom pics were poignant, but again not the wow factor that would excite the webmaster of a news website, or a local TV channel.

His best shots were a pair taken after they'd carried Deion out: a grim pic of the bloody floor where Deion had been lying, and another of the locker with what looked like . . .

Harry zoomed in. Fearing that the cops would return and bust him, he'd snapped rapidly. Luckily the shot on his screen was perfect: Deion's football helmet, dented and bloody, in front of a buckled locker door sprayed with his name.

He cropped the image, used a filter to up the contrast and give the shot more kick, then saved the result. Next he watched the video. The audio was poor and the picture full of long shadows cast by harsh light through the torn roof, but you could tell what was going on, including a clear view of Deion tilting off the trolley.

When the clip ended, Harry opened a video-editing app. He'd played around with making videos for years so his fingers dabbed and swiped artfully. Harry brought up the brightness, and applied an anti-shake algorithm to his footage.

Sound was more of a battle, but he managed to damp the hallway echo and tinker with the frequency balance, so that voices were clearer and you could hear the eerie drips of water close to the microphone. To avoid getting ripped off, he added a semi-opaque graphic in the top right corner of the footage that read © Harry Smirnov.

Harry popped his head above the desks when he heard footsteps out in the hall, but nobody stepped in. Back at the screen, he watched his three minutes of enhanced, shake-free,

footage. It was good, but few folks had the patience to watch three minutes of anything, so he cut two edited versions.

The first was a thirty-second highlight reel, showing Deion screaming as he got lifted off the ground, him being dropped and then ending on his threat to sue. The second was a zoomed eight-second clip of Deion being tipped off the stretcher, then kicking the medic with his giant leg. Zooming meant the footage was blurry, but the light glistening off Deion's burnt body gave it serious impact.

Harry rendered the videos before pushing the two shorter clips to YouTube. The local phone masts were swamped and the upload bar crept, even though he had a solid 5G signal. Once they were online, he made a short entry on his Rock Spring Neighbourhood News website: *Amazing footage of the aftermath. More later!* Then he posted the video clips to Reddit, Facebook and a few other spots where he thought they'd get attention.

The clips instantly clocked a dozen views and Harry trembled less and smiled more as he surfed websites, grabbing email addresses for the news desks of Las Vegas's three local TV stations, plus a couple of prominent Vegas news and tourist websites. He opened *voice* and quietly dictated an email.

I have posted video footage of the aftermath of the Rock Spring High explosion online. You are welcome to use these clips if you credit me and do not blur my name in the clip. I also have high-resolution photographs of the aftermath and a full three-minute clip. These are available exclusively to the first organisation to contact me and agree to pay \$1,000 . . .

Harry stared at the \$1,000 figure. He'd never done stuff like this before and wondered if he was asking for too much, or too little. He edited it to \$1,500, stared at the number and then put it back

to \$1,000 before pressing send.

Refreshing the YouTube page showed that his thirty-second clip already had a hundred and fifty hits and seven comments.

Obvs FAKE!!!!

You can see it's Deion by his legs! How could someone fake this when it just happened?

Harry Smirnov made this? Isn't that the Brit kid who looks like Harry Potter?

Yes.

Medics getting ass sued! LOLs

Where's your QB now Rock Spring homos?

JJ Janssen is better anyways! Still gonna kick Mountain Creek on Friday.

The video neared two hundred views as Harry pocketed his phone. Rendering videos had worked the CPU hard and the phone felt toasty as he pushed it down the mesh pocket of his shorts, then grabbed his pack and headed for the classroom door.

'Tits,' Harry moaned as he peered through the door. The hallway was gloomy, but he could make out a cop by the stairs and a woman in bright orange *Fire Department* overalls.

Harry went back to the main windows. There wasn't a soul amidst the wooden picnic tables on the paved courtyard below. It was only one storey up and there was a solid box gutter he could use to dangle and drop. But this idea crashed when Harry dragged at the sliding window and realised it didn't open fully like the ones at ground level.

He thought about waiting it out, but now the video was online and backed up to his Google account, Harry was less

worried about some teacher or cop forcing him to surrender the footage as evidence.

‘Why in the name are you up here?’ Harry heard, the instant he opened the classroom door.

It was a teacher in overstretched brown leggings. She’d just reached the top of the stairs, behind the cop and fire officer.

‘I needed my bag,’ Harry explained as he reached behind and tapped it.

‘And you waltzed back into a crime scene to fetch it?’ the teacher wailed, placing hands on hips. ‘What if there was another explosive? Where’s your common sense?’

The cop seemed more suspicious. It was the lieutenant Harry had overheard by the gate and he noticed the cop now had blood smeared on his shirt sleeve. Most likely Deion’s.

‘What’s your name, son?’

‘Harry Smirnov.’

‘S M I R N O F F?’ the officer spelled, as he jotted the name in a notebook. ‘Like the vodka?’

Harry shook his head. ‘The proper Russian spelling, with a V, not two Fs.’

‘Uh,’ the officer said, as he crossed out. ‘You know Deion Powell?’

‘Not personally,’ Harry said.

‘And you don’t know anything about this explosion?’

‘I’d have thought anyone that did would have kept their distance,’ Harry pointed out.

‘Don’t get smart,’ the officer rebuked, but his moustache curved into a slight smile as he turned towards the teacher. ‘Can you escort Mr Smirnov off the premises?’

Harry followed the teacher’s short-of-breath waddle down a paved path and all the way to the school’s main entrance. The

ambulances had departed, but the service road beyond the school fence was lined with squad cars and a major-incident command truck.

‘They’re waiting for explosive-sniffing dogs,’ Harry’s guide told another teacher walking in the opposite direction. ‘After that they’ll do a manual search.’

‘JJ wasn’t in school today,’ the teacher replied, shielding her mouth like it was some big secret, even though Harry stood right there.

Three TV news vans were parked on the big turning circle by the school’s main entrance. The student parking lot had mostly emptied out, while the yellow zone where school buses usually parked was busy, with anxious parents waving out of cars, collecting kids who were too young to drive.

‘Got my eye on you,’ Brown Leggings told Harry. ‘Now scoot!’

Once the teacher was out of sight, Harry checked his phone. He had a message from his running buddy, Matt, three minutes old.

Amazing vid! You crazy! Need a ride home?

Harry didn’t reply right away, instead refreshing the YouTube page. After eleven minutes online, the clip was closing on 500 views, with comments off the bottom of the screen. Out of the virtual world, Harry found himself by a lively crowd watching three girls being interviewed for Vegas Thirteen local news.

The producer had selected pretty girls and the trio acted super dramatic, holding hands and tearing up. One girl told the presenter that she was scared they were going to die, while tenth-grade dicks pulled faces in the background.

‘Harry, my boy!’ Matt Silver said.

Harry looked left and saw his best – and so far only – American friend closing in.

Matt had stupidly tangled blond hair and a solid build. He teetered on the verge of Gothdom, in wrecked All Stars, frayed black cargo shorts and a slate grey shirt with embroidered zombies on the back.

Matt and Harry only shared a couple of classes, but they enjoyed running, lived three blocks apart and trained together at least twice a week. Both were fast enough to make the Rockets Athletic Team, but Harry ran to clear his mind rather than compete, while Matt got booted off the squad after he'd ditched class and got busted smoking a joint with some girl.

'You're insane, bro!' Matt said admiringly. 'Going back in like that! School gonna throw a fit, though...'

'You think?' Harry said warily.

'Not evacuating, using your cell on school premises, violating student confidentiality.'

Harry realised he'd not considered all possible consequences as he ran a hand through sweaty hair. 'I got caught up in the moment. My Auntie Kirsten won't be impressed either...'

Matt aimed a thumb towards student parking. 'My sis is offering a ride home, but she ain't gonna wait all day.'

'There's a video on YouTube,' Matt and Harry overheard as they went through the gates into the student parking lot. 'It's Deion Powell. Looks like he's burnt real bad.'

'Who's Harry Smirnov?' a titchy girl asked as she watched his vid on her phone.

Harry buried his smirk as Matt thumped him fondly on the back and whispered, 'Superstar.'

4 **SOFIA SILVER**

A few groups hung around their cars, but the student lot was mostly clear once you got beyond kids hovering round the TV crews. Harry wondered how much trouble he was in, how Aunt Kirsten would react, and desperately hoped some news editor would cough up a thousand bucks to make the risk he'd taken worthwhile.

But his attention flipped the instant he saw Matt's hot sister. Sofia Silver was seventeen, propped on the open tailgate of her Audi SUV. She had brown eyes, cleavage and smooth, freckled skin. A grubby white Havaiana dangled off one foot and her chipped nail varnish and thrift-store vibe jarred with the sixty-thousand-dollar car.

'Found my boy,' Matt said happily.

'You've got some balls, Harry,' Sofia said, smiling.

Matt grabbed shotgun as Harry got confronted by another girl in the back. She was Japanese-American, sat cross-legged, messaging on her phone with black hair streaming down her back.

'Have you met Rie?' Sofia asked.

'Nah,' Harry said.

Rie gave the tiniest glance away from her phone, while Sofia used the dash cam to back out of the parking space.

‘Everyone’s online saying JJ’s behind the explosion,’ Rie announced, slipping her phone into a canvas bag as the Audi joined a short line of student cars waiting to turn on to the highway. ‘JJ’s not a genius, but he’s no dummy either. It’s just *too* obvious.’

‘The teacher who marched me out mentioned JJ,’ Harry said. ‘Who is he?’

‘The Rockets’ backup quarterback,’ Matt said from up front as his big sister merged into traffic. ‘You know what a quarterback is now, don’t you, Harry?’

‘Shut up,’ Harry moaned, before Matt explained for Rie’s benefit.

‘When Harry first came from London, he didn’t *even* know what a quarterback did.’

‘But if you came to Britain, *you* wouldn’t know what the wicket keeper does in cricket,’ Harry said defensively.

Sofia tutted at her brother, then started explaining. ‘Deion Powell is a senior and the Rockets’ starting QB. JJ Janssen is a year younger. He’s backup quarterback, but a lot of fans say he’s more talented.’

‘Way better,’ Rie said.

‘Just because you slept with him in tenth grade . . .’ Sofia teased.

Rie tipped her head back and smiled. ‘And it’s not just his muscles that are big!’

‘Jesus!’ Matt said, thumping the armrest and laughing as Harry flushed with embarrassment.

‘Deion Powell has a chance of a college football scholarship,’ Sofia explained. ‘Coach Henning is a decent guy, so he’s kept

Deion as starting QB, because this is his senior year. The college scouts will be out looking for prospects and Coach wants to give the kid a shot. Next year, JJ will be a senior. He'll be starting quarterback and get *his* shot at college.'

'Seems fair,' Harry said.

'But Deion hasn't been playing great,' Sofia continued. 'He's thrown eleven interceptions and just one touchdown in his last three games. Lots of folks say JJ should be made starting quarterback now if Rock Spring is gonna have any realistic shot at state championships.'

'Like JJ even needs a football scholarship,' Matt hissed bitterly. 'The Janssen family are rich.'

'You're not exactly on food stamps,' Harry noted, as he flicked the back of Matt's head rest.

'Our parents are doctors,' Matt said. 'But Jay Janssen Senior owns casinos, hotels, and . . .'

'He owns that strip mall on Flamingo,' Rie added. 'JJ hooked me up with an employee discount card . . .'

'But that's not how Janssen Senior started off,' Matt said. 'JJ's old man spent time in jail for cocaine dealing, and his casinos are the kind of places where you wipe your feet on the way out.'

'I'd bet my last ten bucks on JJ's girlfriend, Fawn Croker, being involved,' Rie said as Sofia stopped at a red light.

'I *hate* Fawn Croker,' Sofia said, shuddering. 'It's *so* creepy. JJ's in eleventh grade and she's, like, twenty-five.'

'So JJ, or JJ's dad, or his crazy girlfriend could be behind the bomb,' Harry said thoughtfully as the light turned green.

'What if it's nothing to do with football?' Rie suggested. 'Deion's a bully, but nobody would dare snitch on a football player.'

'Why not?' Harry asked.

Matt loved it when he knew something Harry didn't. 'If you

snitch and a player gets kicked off the team, you'll have every football fan in Rock Spring lining up to beat your ass.'

'I guess the cops will focus on the explosives,' Harry said thoughtfully. 'It crumpled lockers and blew a hole in the roof, so it was proper gear, not just fireworks.'

'That's it!' Matt blurted, jerking round so excitedly that his seatbelt locked. 'Charlie Croker!'

'Who dat?' Sofia asked.

'I did a project with Charlie at middle school,' Matt told everyone excitedly. 'She's one grade below, but she was in all the accelerated classes. Super smart and a tomboy. When we had science fair, Charlie did this presentation on demolition and explosives. She had this waxy blob the size of an M&M and we all had to go out into the parking lot to watch her demonstration. She'd made it herself and, I swear, the building shook when she set it off.'

'Charlie Croker,' Harry said, indulging his journalistic lust by opening a note-taking app on his phone. 'Tell me more.'

'Charlie is Fawn's kid sister,' Matt explained. 'Low-rent trailer trash.'

'I heard JJ and Fawn got engaged,' Sofia added.

'For real?' Matt blurted. 'JJ's *seventeen*.'

'It's a redneck freak show,' Rie confirmed, as Harry's phone started vibrating in his hand.

Harry didn't recognise the number. 'Hello?' he said warily.

It was a guy named Ellie Gold. Ellie said he was from Vegas Local, a trashy-but-popular news and listings website. He said he'd pay \$800 for the full video clip and high-resolution photos, plus half of any royalties earned if they got sold on to other news outlets.

'Sounds good to me,' Harry told him.

5 DEL TACO

Harry spread some of his newfound wealth, tapping his phone at the Del Taco drive-by window to pay for Sofia, Rie and Matt's lunch.

'Nobody drops food in my new car,' Sofia ordered as she rolled into an empty parking bay.

Matt passed back Harry's Sprite and street tacos, plus a cream-topped strawberry shake for Rie. Then he baited his sister by daubing sour cream over an air vent.

'Wipe or walk home,' Sofia ordered, then turned back to look at Harry, who noticed shredded lettuce stuck in her front teeth. 'Thanks for the tacos, Harry. It's *so* cool what you did. Sneaking around cops and stuff.'

Rie lowered her milkshake before nodding in agreement. 'I admire that you want to be a photographer and you're going for it. I have *literally* no clue what I want to do with my life.'

Their praise sent Harry's ego through the panoramic glass roof. Matt saw Harry's involuntary grin and felt a duty not to let his friend's head get too big.

'You sent Vegas Local the files already,' Matt noted. 'How do you know this Ellie guy is gonna pay you?'

‘I don’t,’ Harry said. ‘But it’s breaking news. Am I supposed to ask for a contract? Wait for my aunt to get home and read it? This time tomorrow, nobody will give a damn.’

‘Vegas Local is a well-known site,’ Sofia said. ‘Don’t sweat – baby brother’s jealous is all.’

As Sofia drove, Harry checked the thirty-second edit of his video on YouTube. It had clocked 3,000 hits in less than an hour and Vegas Local had put the full version up, together with an article on its home page.

ROCK SPRINGS HIGH EXPLOSION

**EXCLUSIVE FULL VIDEO: HORRIBLY
BURNT QUARTERBACK DROPPED OFF
STRETCHER BY BUNGLING MEDICS!**

Harry pressed play. A compulsory fifteen-second ad for whitening toothpaste made the site seem tacky and the comparison with his dead mum’s award-winning journalism less favourable. And Aunt Kirsten wouldn’t be impressed when she found out that he’d risked arrest, expulsion and the prospect of a shooter, or secondary explosion, just to make a gory clickbait video for a third-rate news site.

‘Have a good one, Harry Potter,’ Rie said cheerfully as he got out of the Audi.

‘Cheers for the ride, Sofia,’ Harry said, then to Matt, ‘Wanna go for a run this evening, when it cools down?’

Matt shook his head. ‘Sorry, pal. Seeing a film with Ciara tonight.’

The Sinatra Executive Apartments was a five-storey complex, made of two horseshoe-shaped blocks with a sun deck and pool in the space between. The woman on reception realised Harry was out of school early, but didn’t care enough

to ask why as he walked past and tapped a plastic fob to access the elevator.

Aunt Kirsten jested about the moody teenager Harry had turned into, but the reality of that hit as he opened the apartment door. Fifteen minutes earlier, Harry had been happy about making eight hundred bucks, with a hot chicken taco and the girls heaping praise. Now he felt like dirt.

He worried that Vegas Local was a sleazy website that would never pay the eight hundred bucks. He had mounds of homework and imagined himself spending the night at his desk, while Matt got frisky with Ciara at the Summerlin Regal.

Harry shouted, 'Anyone home?'

He expected no response and didn't get one.

Harry's aunt, Kirsten Channing, had moved to Vegas to open a swanky restaurant inside the newly built Algarve Casino. The food critics had been kind and tables were booked weeks in advance. This meant Kirsten was crushing sales targets and earning big bonuses, but had little time for her nephew and even less for house hunting.

Eight months after emigrating, they were still in a short-stay corporate apartment. It was twice the size of their old place in London. It had floor-to-ceiling windows with electrochromic dimming glass, a jet tub with sixteen modes and a fridge you could fit a car inside.

But it was a place to live, not a home. Harry loathed the bland abstract art and the smell of the cleaning spray used by the housekeeping service. He couldn't paint his bedroom or put up posters, and the building manager buzzed the intercom when he played music too loud.

Kirsten worked six nights a week and Harry didn't know anyone outside of school, so unless he was hanging with Matt

the hours between school and bed were lonely.

It was approaching two in the afternoon, leaving eight and a half hours to bedtime. Harry grabbed sparkling water and a plate of random tapas-type things out of the fridge. He sat on a stool and flipped the lid of a battered MacBook that lived on the kitchen counter. Kirsten had been using it while working on a recipe and the screen had icing-sugar fingerprints and a whiff of orange essence.

Harry's first thought was to transfer the photos he'd taken earlier and see them on a decent-sized screen. But when the iris scan unlocked his phone, the screen showed the notes he'd made while everyone gossiped in Sofia's car.

JJ Janssen Backup quarterback, 11th grader
Obvious suspect (too obvious!)
Threatened to kill Deion in locker room on Monday
Dad is Jay Janssen Sr, \$\$\$ minted businessman
& former drug dealer

Fawn Croker JJ's fiancée.
25yo!!! Money grabber?

Charlie Croker Fawn's brainy kid sister
8th grader
Made explosives for show and tell!
Did science project with Matt

Making eight hundred bucks had knocked Harry's focus away from the locker mystery, but when he read the notes, the thing that stuck out was Matt's personal connection with Charlie Croker. JJ and Fawn would be suspects, but the cops didn't have Matt's personal knowledge, and Harry wondered if they might take a while to learn about Charlie's explosive-making.

Harry dialled Matt's number.

'That Charlie Croker,' Harry began, 'the one who makes her

own explosives. Did you ever go to her place when you did that science project? Did she have a lab, or a shed, or something where you worked?

Matt sounded patronising. 'Still playing Joey-the-journalist?'

Harry grunted. 'Can you help me or not?'

'She always came to my house because it's nicer,' Matt said warily. 'But I rode in the car one time when my dad dropped her home. I don't know the road name, but it's the corner with the big CVS pharmacy, off North Rainbow.'

'The CVS we pass on the way to school?'

'Exactly,' Matt agreed. 'North Pine Road or Lonely Pine. Something like that. Just after you turn off Rainbow, there's a tire place, then you come to a double-wide trailer home. Blue grey colour, sorta like someone mixed all the leftover paint together. But this was back in seventh grade, so they might have moved since.'

Harry tucked his phone between shoulder and chin so that he could use Google Maps on the MacBook.

'Found it,' Harry said jubilantly as he switched to street view and saw the trailer home, like Matt had described. '1680, Leaning Pines.'

'How you gonna play it?' Matt asked. 'Knock on the front door and ask Charlie if she's blown anyone up?'

'Check the area out, I guess,' Harry said uncertainly. 'I'll grab my good camera. Have a little snoop. Maybe there's a shed with burnt shit, or something. It's a ten-minute taxi and I've got nothing else to do.'

'You need a girlfriend, Harry,' Matt said affectionately. 'Try not to get shot or blown up.'

6 RAINBOW ROAD

Harry googled *Charlie Croker* as he rode in the back of a Prius taxi, with stained seats and a screen blaring ads for Kanye West at Caesar's Palace. Seven hundred and seventy-four search results were topped by a Mr Charlie Croker who sold farm machinery in Iowa and a sweatband-clad Pilates coach. Narrowing the search to *Charlie Croker Rock Springs* proved more productive.

Local Girl Wins National Tech prize

Eleven-year-old Charlie Croker beat out more than 600 rivals, including many high schoolers, to win a \$750 prize and a tour of the world-famous materials lab at the California Institute of Technology.

The accompanying photo showed Charlie with athletic build, coarsely chopped blonde hair and a green sponsors-logo T-shirt that reached her knees. Her most striking features were giant blue eyes and no-brand sneakers, with a big toe poking out the front.

There was a link to another article, but the phone started vibrating and Harry recognised the Vegas Local number.

‘It’s Ellie Gold,’ the voice said, packed with cheesy cheer. ‘Just wanted to let you know your video is clocking ninety views per minute. USA Network and Cox News want a national TV exclusive. I’m playing them off against each other, but the bidding is already up to seven thousand buckaroos!’

Harry’s jaw made a clichéd dive towards the floor of his taxi. ‘I get half of that, right?’

‘Exactly,’ Ellie said. ‘And I’ve put your photos on a news syndication site. Nobody has bought that beautiful bloody-helmet shot yet, but the watermarked preview has had sixty downloads, so it’s gonna sell for sure.’

Harry was excited about the money, but sounded wary. ‘When am I gonna get paid?’

‘Don’t you trust me?’ Ellie said, roaring with laughter. ‘Vegas Local wouldn’t last a week if I didn’t pay my sources. Bounce me some bank details. My minion Sue-Ann will email your paperwork, and as soon as it’s signed you’ll get the eight hundred.’

‘The rest will take time. Big news outlets take months to pay their bills, but people are *loving* the mystery of the blown-up quarterback and your gore-fest stretcher footage has the visual punch to make it a national story. When the dust clears, your cut on this could be well into five figures.’

‘Seriously?’ Harry gawped, imagining how jealous Matt and his mates back in London would be if he made ten big ones . . .

‘You must have a talent for this stuff. Anything else like this happens, you’ll call Ellie first, won’t you?’

‘Sure,’ Harry said.

‘Stay in touch.’

Wow-bloody-wow! National story! I can handle some flak from school and Kirsten for ten grand. I can afford a light field

camera. Drop a grand at the mall. All new running gear, maybe a better laptop. Bet Kirsten will go sensible and make me save at least half for college . . .

The cab had just turned off South Rainbow and they were passing the lot of the big CVS. Harry had used Kirsten's Lucky Cab account and given the 1680 Leaning Pines address, but he could hardly get out right in front of the Crokers' double-wide trailer and start poking around.

'CVS,' Harry spluttered. 'Drop me here.'

Harry wasn't trying to be rude, but it came out that way and the dome-headed driver flicked bitterly at his sat nav. 'It says sixteen eighty.'

'My ma asked me to get some shopping,' Harry lied. 'I forgot. I didn't mean to snap at you.'

The driver stopped sharp, and Harry stepped on to the kerb and pulled on a backpack bulked with his pro-spec Nikon camera.

The CVS had a couple of hundred parking bays, but it was mid-Thursday afternoon and the big pharmacy's only customers were parked in a single row, keeping car interiors cool on the shady side of the building.

Harry pushed on sunglasses as he strode across marked parking bays. The CVS lot ended at a knee-height fence. Matt had mentioned the tire-repair place beyond, but it looked like the Tire Maxx franchise had been closed for years. The corporate logos had blown out of the tall roadside sign, the main glass door wore heavy chains and the sand-blown lot was strewn with beer cans and perished rubber.

Sweat trickled down Harry's back as he upped to a jog. The dirty-blue trailer home came into view as he rounded a self-service car wash with a caved roof. The upbeat feels from

Ellie's call hadn't lasted and Matt's question resurfaced:
How will I play it when I get there?

What am I hoping to find? Why not turn round, buy a Mars ice cream in CVS and go home? But it sucks being home alone . . . If Mum was alive, would she approve of this? Why do I want to do stuff to impress a mum who was never around much even when she was alive? Do I want to be a photojournalist, or have I been telling myself that for so long I've not considered anything else?

Harry's train of thought got diverted at the far side of Tire Maxx. There was a blackened wall and a saucer-like crater, part filled with litter. The asphalt in the base of the crater had weird ripples, and screws and bolts stuck out, clearly having sunk in when the surface was molten. Harry took out his Nikon, taking time to snap the metal shards and cracks in the wall.

He got a fright when a gust set a Coke can clanking down near the road, and remained spooked as he got close to the 1680 lot.

You're not a real journalist. You'll look a total fool if this turns bad . . .

But Harry didn't give in to his doubts.

There was no boundary between Tire Maxx and the trailer home. The land alongside the house had evolved into a junkyard: faded sections of a kids' plastic garden fort, an enclosed towing trailer with two flat wheels, the rusted hulk of a washing machine and enough other junk to give decent cover.

Harry snapped a couple of wide shots, thinking someone might want pictures of the house if it turned into an important part of the story. The spinning fans of roof-mounted air-conditioners ran full blast, but their grumbling wasn't enough to mask the kid bawling inside.

He edged further round the junk, trying to glimpse the far

side of the house. Harry's idea – that he'd get here before the cops – blew up as he saw two parked police cruisers. One had a plain-clothes officer sitting with the passenger door open, finishing off a cigarette.

The trailer's aluminium door crashed as Harry raised his camera. A cruel-looking cop came out, hands over her mouth as she jumped two wooden steps to the ground. Harry aimed his camera round the side of the trailer, flipped to continuous shooting and took a dozen shots as she bent forward, dry heaving.

'You want some water?' the smoking cop said, grabbing a bottle out of the cruiser's door and striding to her aid.

'Stank in that dump to start with – now the crazy kid has shat himself.'

'Are you kidding me?' the smoking cop moaned, shaking his head as he stubbed his cigarette out under his shoe. 'Where's child welfare? They should be here already.'

A third cop came out, gasping for air as a huge scream erupted and something heavy thudded against the wall inside.

'Kid just screams *no attention* and that he wants Charlie, over and over and over,' the new arrival said. 'Gimme that bottle of water.'

The cop drained the water, then flung the plastic bottle away, which landed in the junk a few feet from Harry.

'What a day! What a day!'

The cop paced angrily towards Harry's hiding spot, hands on hips as he hacked phlegm in the dirt. Harry buried his face, gulping as the cop turned back towards the cruisers, two steps from where he'd have noticed Harry's trailing leg.

This isn't worth the risk. That lieutenant at the school seemed suspicious, and if they catch me here ... At the very least they'll

arrest me. Kirsten's face would be a picture at the police station.

As the cop strolled back to his colleagues, Harry retreated at a rapid crawl. When he reached the disused car wash, he got to his feet, his expensive camera in one hand and one knee smeared in black, oily, God-knows-what.

Stupid idea coming here.

Harry moved round the back of Tire Maxx, but only got halfway when a shadow loomed from above. The bright sun silhouetted the figure leaping off the roof. Harry's legs buckled as the body hit him, one arm scraping the metal siding as his palms tore through grit.

A cloud of dirt filled Harry's mouth as he inhaled, setting off a coughing fit as the figure landed on his back. It was a girl, a full head shorter than Harry. She locked a strong arm round his waist. Harry fancied his chances of throwing her off, but before he could move a pistol tip jammed into his cheek.

'Why are you sniffing around?' Charlie Croker demanded. 'Who are you?'