

CASE FILE SIXTEEN:

FIVE SECONDS
TO DOOMSDAY

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN YOU'RE A BRILLIANT SCHOOLBOY detective like me, you have to accept the fact that not everyone is going to like you. By that, I don't mean that some people dislike me *personally*. Oh nooooo, no, no. I am, of course, enormously popular at school and have loads of friends.

A-hem. A-hem.

What I mean is, a brilliant schoolboy detective like me is bound to make enemies. It's unavoidable. When you go around solving crimes you're going to end up with a whole load of criminals who bear a grudge against you. It goes with the job. It's what I believe is called 'an occupational hazard'.

Most of the time these grudges don't amount to very much: I get a bit of a scowl from one or two of the fellow

schoolmates I've successfully brought to justice in the past, but that's normally it. Most of the time, bad guys know they've done wrong and they accept that I'm only doing my job when I unmask them.

However . . .

Now and again I cross swords (as they say) with a villain who's particularly nasty. The sort of pond life who'd try to get their own back on me.

There was the case of the Woodburn twins, Timmy and Jimmy, who'd tried to send their granny mad by pretending there were three of them (it was a trick done with a pair of mirrors and an old curtain, but it's far too complicated to talk about now). After I exposed their little scheme, they started spreading lies about me.

Then there was little baby-faced Michael Gifford, the most innocent-looking kid in the school. He'd hatched an elaborate plan to blackmail an entire class. Once I'd put an end to his plans, he began whacking himself in the eye and telling teachers I'd hit him. Spiteful little so-and-so.

Anyway, none of their evil ideas succeeded.

However . . .

My case file *Five Seconds to Doomsday* reveals all about the worst example of revenge I've ever experienced. This was something altogether different. This was about Revenge, with a capital R. Big time.

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It all started on a Friday morning in June, when I was in my Crime HQ – otherwise known as the garden shed – sorting through some notes on a case I'd labelled *The Adventure of the Impossible Hamster*.

Friday morning? What, no school, I hear you cry? No, that particular Friday was what teachers call a 'Teacher Training Day' and what the pupils of St Egbert's call 'Yeahoo, An Extra Day Off For No Reason, Hahaaa, Whoop Whoop'. (Why can't teachers do their training during the school hols? I mean, they get *weeks* off in the summer. *Weeks!* Anyway, whatever the reason, I think it's *great*. More training for teachers, that's what I say!)

For the whole of that Friday, the Head was hosting some sort of meeting/conference/chit-chat involving half the teachers from half the schools in the entire district. Result: freedom for brilliant schoolboy detectives!

So . . . I was trying to concentrate on sorting out my notes, but I kept hearing a noise. A tiny noise, a sort of tapping. It was difficult to make out at first, because it was masked by the noise of the rain outside. The rain had been falling – steadily, heavily, endlessly – since Monday afternoon, and it was really starting to get on my nerves. Wherever you went, you couldn't quite escape the dull drone of battering raindrops.

Tip-tap . . .

There it was again! I looked up from my notes, frowning. Someone at the door? No, in this rain, anyone who arrived at my shed would be banging loudly to be let in.

Was it the creaking of the shed? No, I'd heard that plenty of times and this wasn't the same sound at all.

Tip-tap . . .

It was coming from the corner, by my filing cabinet of case notes.

Tip-tap . . .

Something caught the light. Something small fell from the ceiling.

Tip-tap . . .

I leaped to my feet! That was a drip of water! The roof was leaking!

For a second or two, I hopped about making panicky *ahh-ooo-ulp* noises. The thought of my precious case notes getting soaked and ruined was too awful to bear! *Quick, I thought to myself, find something to catch the drips in.*

Bang, bang, bang! The shed door shook loudly.

'Saxby, you in there?' yelled a voice from outside.

'Come in!' I yelled back. I was hurriedly searching through some of the boxes of DIY and gardening-type stuff, which I'm forced to share the shed with.

In a flurry of rain and a flapping of his big red umbrella, my great friend George 'Muddy' Whitehouse

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entered and started shaking the rain off his shoes. As readers of my earlier case files will know, Muddy is St Egbert's School's resident expert in all things technical; he's a vital source of useful gadgets when I'm in the middle of an investigation.

'Urgh, it's soaking out there!' he cried.

'It's getting to be the same in here!' I cried. 'A-ha!' I'd found an empty plastic plant pot.

'Never mind that now,' said Muddy, 'I've got an emergency situation!'

'So have I!' I cried. I placed the plant pot underneath the leak. Instead of a *tip-tap*, the drips made a sort of *t-plonk* sound. 'There! What do you think?'

'That's no good,' said Muddy.

'What, you think it's not big enough?' I asked. 'You think the rain will fill it up too quickly?'

'No, it's a plant pot, you twit,' said Muddy. 'It's got drainage holes in the bottom.'

I picked the pot up again. The drips had made a little circular puddle underneath it. Pausing only to let out a yelp of alarm, I went back to searching through the boxes.

'Anyway, are you listening to me?' asked Muddy. 'I said I've got an emergency situation!'

'Yeahyeahyeah,' I said, not looking in his direction for a single moment. 'A-ha!' I'd found a large empty paint

tin. I tipped out the load of dust-covered paintbrushes that were inside it and positioned the tin on top of my filing cabinet.

Now the drips went *k-ping*.

'This is terrible,' I muttered, staring at the wet patch on the roof. 'This is a disaster. What am I going to do?'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, it's just a little leak,' scoffed Muddy. 'You can fix that in five minutes.'

For the first time since he'd arrived, I looked directly at Muddy. His eyes were red-rimmed and he was looking almost tearful.

I suddenly felt very guilty. 'I-I'm sorry, Muddy,' I stammered. 'What on earth's the matter? Here, sit on my Thinking Chair.'

He plonked himself down on my battered old leather armchair. I don't think I'd ever seen my friend looking so miserable. My insides stung with nerves as I wondered what could have happened.

'Norman has been kidnapped!' cried Muddy, unable to contain himself any longer.

'Kidnapped?' I gasped in shock. 'Good grief! Why would anyone want to . . . Hang on, who's Norman?'

CHAPTER Two

FOR A MOMENT OR TWO, Muddy wiped his nose with the back of his hand. The paint tin on the filing cabinet went *k-ping*.

'Do you promise not to laugh?' mumbled Muddy. 'I know what you're like. You'll laugh.'

'I won't, honest,' I told him. 'Who's Norman?'

'My teddy bear,' said Muddy.

'Haaa ha ha ha haaaaaaa!' I stopped myself. 'Sorry.'

'I've had him since I was a baby!' cried Muddy crossly. 'He's very precious!'

'Yes, I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm really sorry. I'm being insensitive. Who kidnapped him? And why?'

'I've no idea,' said Muddy. 'That's why I've come straight to you. They've left this note.'

He took a slightly crumpled envelope from the pocket of his raincoat and handed it over. Tucked inside was a piece of paper and a photo, showing a grubby-looking old teddy bear which had lost an eye. And an ear. And some of its fur.

'He's . . . adorable,' I said, with a grim expression on my face.

'No, he's not,' muttered Muddy. 'He smells. But he's my teddy and I want him back.'

I looked more closely at the photo. There were long fingers clutched around the poor bear's neck. In the background was something shiny but a bit out of focus. I set the photo aside and read what had been printed on the sheet of paper:

Whitehouse,

As you can see, I have Teddy. I thought we could play a little game. Let's call it Hunt Teddy.

Here are the rules. At this moment, Teddy is wedged into a specially adapted food blender. It's very similar to the *Whitehouse Whisk-A-Matic* that you designed (Oh! How ironic!). Only, this one's got sharp blades instead of plastic paddles. And no stupid sticky letters on the side saying *Whitehouse Whisk-A-Matic*.

Teddy's blender is inside a box, which is hidden at a secret location. At precisely 4 p.m. today, Friday, the

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timer inside the box will switch the blender on. Teddy will be s-h-r-e-d-d-e-d. Cut to pieces. Unless, that is, you're clever enough to solve the clues correctly and get to him first. Opening the box will disarm the timer and Teddy will be safe. And that's how you play Hunt Teddy! Good game, eh?

Tick tock, time is ticking away. Here's your first question. Ready?

'There's a lady eating chocolate by a blue fence while she waits to travel to London. Where is she pointing?'

Oh, I nearly forgot. There is one more rule. If you tell anyone about the game, anyone at all, then the timer will be adjusted. You'll find out how. If you break the rule, that is. Bye for now.

'What kind of spiteful creature would do this?' I said quietly, frowning to myself. 'So, Muddy, you read this last bit and came straight over here to tell me?'

'Absolutely,' said Muddy. 'I'm not going to let some bullying, kidnapping gutter-slime scare me into doing what he wants! I know it means a risk to poor Norman but, well, this can't be allowed to happen!'

'Quite right.' I nodded. 'Who knows about Norman? Obviously, you don't show him to many people or I'd have seen him before now.'

Muddy shrugged, slightly embarrassed. 'Well, a few.

Now and again. Here and there. Over the years. Norman's very shy, really. He lives under my pillow. When he meets someone, he likes to be properly introduced, by name, and he tells them, in a quiet voice, all about his adventures in —'

'Er, yeah, that's more info than I need, thanks,' I said quickly, holding up both hands to cut him short. 'And what about this *Whitehouse Whisk-A-Matic*? What's that?'

'Oh, just something I knocked together a couple of months ago,' said Muddy. 'It didn't really work. It was supposed to be a sort of automatic tea stirrer but it ended up breaking the cups. It's just stayed in a box in my laboratory.'

I turned the kidnapper's note, and the photo, over and over in my hands. Both had clearly been produced with an ordinary, everyday computer. I couldn't get any clues from the printing or the paper.

However, there were a couple of minor points I could pick up from the note, bearing in mind what Muddy had just told me.

Compare the note to how Muddy answered my last two questions. Do your observations match mine?



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'This kidnapper is someone who's been to your house fairly recently,' I said, 'but is not someone you've ever introduced Norman to. That should help us narrow the field of suspects.'

'How do you know that?' said Muddy.

I kept on examining the note in minute detail. Reflections rippled across it from the rain sliding down the shed window. Behind me, drops of water continued to *k-ping* into the empty paint tin.

'The kidnapper obviously doesn't know Norman's name,' I said. 'He just calls him *Teddy*, with a capital T. If he was someone you'd shown Norman to, he'd put *I have Norman*, not *I have Teddy*. And it must be someone who's been in your garage – sorry, your Development Laboratory – within the last couple of months. Otherwise he wouldn't know about the *Whisk-A-Matic*, would he?'

Muddy scratched his head. 'Even so, that doesn't narrow it down all that much. Lots of people visit my lab. I'm always mending things. Am I going to have to do a list of everyone I've done a job for?'

I held the photo up to the light. 'No,' I said quietly, almost to myself. 'I've got a pretty good idea who's behind this already.'

'You have?' asked Muddy.

'Mmm,' I said. 'Notice how this isn't a ransom note.'

He hasn't kidnapped Norman to get money or anything out of you. So, he's got some other motive. I think it's revenge.'

'Revenge?' gasped Muddy. 'What have I ever done to anyone?'

'I think,' I said, wincing a bit, 'it's because you've helped me a lot in the past. In my investigations. I think the kidnapper knew perfectly well that you'd come straight to me with this. I think he wants revenge on both of us.'

'Who does?' said Muddy.

'That low-down rat Harry Lovecraft,' I said, almost in a whisper. (Readers of my earlier case files will already know about that low-down rat Harry Lovecraft. He was the sneakiest worm in our school, a smarmy no-gooder whose underhand schemes I'd had to put an end to on many occasions.)

At that point, Muddy said several things I can't repeat here. Then he said, 'Of course! I thought there was something odd about the way he just put *Whitehouse* like that. He always calls you "Smart", doesn't he?'

'Exactly,' I said. 'And you see that out-of-focus, shiny thing in the background of the photo? I think that's one of his trademark shiny shoes. I'm guessing this picture was taken looking down at the floor. Probably on a

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phone, because it's framed long-side-up, and you do that more often with a phone camera.'

I was pretty sure I was right. However, both Muddy and I were slightly shocked that Norman's kidnapper should turn out to be Harry.

'I'm slightly shocked,' gasped Muddy. 'Harry Lovecraft has been behaving himself perfectly all this term. I heard he'd even stopped conning the younger kids out of their dinner money.'

'Yes.' I sighed. 'I'm sure everyone at school has been thinking he's come to his senses and smartened up his act. Obviously, he's been playing us all for fools. He was positively friendly when our year were doing podcasts for the school website the other day. So when has he been to your laboratory, then?'

'About three weeks ago. When we had to do the project on motion and pulleys and all that stuff.'

'Oh yeah.' I nodded. '*Design a Vehicle which Will Move under its Own Power.*'

'That's the one,' said Muddy. 'Harry was one of five people from our class who came over after school one Monday. That sneaky piece of poo must have gone nosing around in my room, found poor Norman, and plotted a kidnap.'

'Could be,' I muttered to myself, taking another close look at the photo. 'Exactly when and how were

the note and photo delivered to your house? Did they come in the post?’

‘No,’ said Muddy. ‘As it’s Friday, my mum’s been at work since quite early, and as it’s a teacher training day, I’ve been in my lab since straight after breakfast. Dad was doing the housework with his iPod up loud. He saw an envelope on the doormat at about eleven o’clock. It could have arrived any time after eight-thirty. It just had *G Whitehouse* printed on it. Dad brought it out to me and went back to his vacuuming. I opened it, read it, cried out in horror, and came straight over here.’

‘You didn’t see Harry, or anyone else, approach the house?’

‘No, I was at the workbench at the back of my lab,’ said Muddy. ‘Someone could easily go to the front door without me spotting them. I’d run an extra power cable from inside the house out to the lab so the door was ajar. Oh no! I even made it easy for Harry to sneak in and take Norman!’

I handed him the note and the photo. ‘You mustn’t blame yourself. This is absolutely typical Harry Lovecraft nastiness. Although I’m still not sure *why* he’s doing it.’

‘I thought you said it was revenge,’ said Muddy.

‘Well, yes,’ I said. ‘But I can’t help feeling he’s gone to a lot of trouble just to play a nasty game. Why make it a

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game anyway? He risks losing, doesn't he? And that would be pretty feeble revenge.'

'Look, this is Harry Lovecraft we're talking about,' said Muddy. 'He'll be one hundred per cent sure he's going to come out on top. He only plays to win. Right?'

'Hmm.' I nodded slowly. 'Worrying, isn't it? For now, all we can do is play along and hope we can get one step ahead of him somewhere along the line. Remind me of that first question he's set you. I mean, us.'

Muddy read it out. 'There's a lady eating chocolate by a blue fence while she waits to travel to London. Where is she pointing?'

'OK, let's think about it logically,' I said.

'How?' cried Muddy. 'It sounds like gibberish.'

'Harry's not going to give us a question we can't answer, is he? Otherwise, why ask it? And anyway, we know he's not cleverer than I am. Soooo . . .' I wrinkled up my nose in thought.

Muddy muttered to himself. 'Why would eating chocolate make you point at something?'

'The box we're looking for is hidden in a secret location,' I said. 'He's leading us somewhere. So my guess is that this question will take us to a *place*.'

'We won't have to go to London, will we?' said Muddy. 'That's miles away!'

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'No, no,' I replied. 'I don't think that's what it means.'

Some definite possibilities occurred to me. I could think of at least a couple of places which might fit this clue – real places where this mysterious woman might be waiting.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?



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'I think this refers to a bus depot or a railway station,' I said. 'Somewhere you'd wait to travel.'

'How about the airport?' suggested Muddy. 'Or even a taxi rank? Or maybe this woman's simply got her own car?'

'If she was using her own car, why would she be waiting?' I said. 'And it sounds unlikely that she'd be taking a taxi, not all the way to London.'

'Then what clue do we have to tell us which type of transport it means?' said Muddy. 'The chocolate?'

'The blue fence!' I cried, hopping to my feet. 'Think about the bus station in town. Does that have a fence around it?'

'Er, no,' said Muddy, pulling a quizzical face and glancing at the shed ceiling.

'And neither does the airport,' I said. 'Or rather, it *does* have a fence, ten metres high and covered in razor wire, but it's not blue. We need to go to the train station! That has those metal railings all along the side by the street, doesn't it?! Painted blue!'

'So who's the lady?' said Muddy.

'We'll find out when we get there!' I cried. I flung the shed door open. The rain pattered heavily against the legs of my trousers, blown in by the cold wind. 'Come on, we haven't a moment to lose!'

I stuffed my notebook into my pocket and fetched my

long, flappy, dark green raincoat and matching wide-brimmed hat from the coat stand in the hall.

‘Where did you get that hideous raincoat?’ gasped Muddy. ‘You look like you’re dressed up as a giant gherkin.’

I paused, looking down at it with a hurt expression on my face. ‘I got it last year on holiday. English seaside resorts are the best places to buy rainwear. What’s wrong with it?’

‘It’s hideous, that’s what’s wrong with it,’ muttered Muddy. ‘And that hat is completely —’

‘Yeah, yeah, you’re starting to sound like Izzy,’ I said grumpily. ‘What’s the time now?’

Muddy checked his watch. ‘Eleven fifty-five exactly.’

‘Right!’ I declared. ‘We have four hours and five minutes to save Norman the teddy bear. The race is on!’