

# 1 LICENCE TO GRILL

Nobody knew it yet, but the fate of the world would be decided on a sizzling Tuesday afternoon. It didn't look like the kind of day anything important might happen. The sun beat down on GoldenCliff Holiday Park with the kind of intensity that could fry an egg on a beach towel. Rows of glinting caravans sat baking in the heat, like giant toasters ready to pop out sunburned holidaymakers. Mums and dads orchestrated the chaos of their families with the precision of air traffic controllers on their sixth coffee. Kids swarmed the ice-cream van like bees around a fallen cone. Teens lay about like forgotten laundry, barely moving except to scroll their

phones. Seagulls circled overhead, calculating their next snack with terrifying accuracy.

It was the first week of the school summer holidays, and Adam Stickland was stuck behind the counter of the so-called GoldenCliff Corner Shop – a name that bugged him every time, since the shop wasn't anywhere near a corner. It was slap bang in the middle of the park. He had been cooped up in there for hours, envying the guests who popped in to stock up on snacks and beach gear before heading out to enjoy their day. He, on the other hand, had responsibilities.

His mum and dad had bought the caravan park five years ago and poured all of their energy – and savings – into making it a success. They were constantly coming up with money-making wheezes. So far, these included a minigolf course, an outdoor cinema, a small petting zoo (home to a deeply serious, fluffy white rabbit named Hoppenheimer), a kids' adventure playground, swan pedaloos and the shop, which sold everything from organic jam to organic sunscreen to organic steak puddings (provided by local artisanal butcher For Your Pies Only). As well as manning the till, Adam's chores also included oiling the swings in the playground, maintaining the seaworthiness of the pedalos, feeding Hoppenheimer and fixing anything that broke. Which

was everything. All the time.

Adam was the park's secret fix-it genius. If something whirred, beeped or made a weird clicking sound, he could sort it. His skills didn't come from books or school – they came from sheer survival. His dad meant well, but his DIY attempts usually ended in disaster. One time, he "fixed" a tap and turned it into a water fountain. Another time, he jammed the printer so badly it coughed up paper like it had the flu. That's when Adam stepped in. Thanks to a YouTube channel called *Licence to Drill*, he taught himself everything from unblocking toilets to rewiring fairy lights. While his dad made things worse with the wrong screws and bolts done up too tight, Adam quietly became the real hero of GoldenCliff – one clever fix at a time.

Today's challenge was a contraption that had seen better days – the park's prized popcorn machine, which had chosen this moment to churn out charred kernels instead of fluffy white clouds of snackable gold.

Standing behind the counter, Adam fiddled inside the popcorn machine with a screwdriver, a paperclip, and the kind of concentration usually reserved for bomb disposal. A stubborn wire finally clicked into place, and the machine let out a hopeful whirr.

A second later – *pop!*



He grinned as the first fluffy kernel burst into the tray. Victory. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, smudging a streak of grease across his eyebrow.

No one noticed, of course. No one ever did. But if GoldenCliff Holiday Park had a secret tech wizard keeping things running, his name was Adam Stickland.

“Hey, Rocket,” Adam said, peering under the counter.

His dog opened one eye, gave a lazy thump of his tail, and went back to pretending he was on duty. With his glossy coat and noble expression, Rocket looked like he belonged on a poster for police dogs. In reality, he was mainly focused on one thing: snacks.

To Adam, that tail wag meant *loyal companion, reporting for service*. To Rocket, it meant *was that roast chicken I smelled, and will some of it be mine?*

“How long until they get here?” Adam wondered aloud.

Adam’s friends Zada and Tyler were due to arrive this afternoon, and he had been waiting a whole year to see them again. The dog seemed to consider the question, then let out a soft bark before resting his head back down. Adam sighed and scratched him behind the ears. His friends’ arrival couldn’t come quickly enough.

Adam had learned the hard way that living on a holiday park wasn’t all fun and games. In fact, most of the year was the opposite of fun. The off-season dragged on for months, with barely a tourist in sight and his parents glued to their laptops, trying to figure out how to bring people back.

That left Adam and Rocket to roam the empty beaches and cliff paths like two lonely explorers. Sometimes they’d wander into the nearby village of Flintlock for a

change of scene, but Flintlock – perched on a hillside above a horseshoe bay – was as pretty as it was boring.

It was the kind of village where it felt like aliens had abducted all the young people, leaving behind only friendly old folks who wanted to stop and chat. Adam knew more about arthritis than any thirteen-year-old reasonably should.

During term time, he caught the bus to school in the nearest town. It was far enough away that no one ever came to visit. So, he lived for summer. When the park filled up. When his friends came back.

Adam had met them – Zada and Tyler – five years ago, during the inaugural GoldenCliff Minigolf Challenge. The fifth hole had featured a volcano that, instead of a mild eruption as planned, exploded in a dramatic shower of confetti. Adam, Tyler and Zada had ducked for cover beneath the giant fairy toadstool on the sixth hole, shielding themselves from the colourful barrage like extras in a really low-budget disaster movie. Tyler still claimed theirs was the only friendship in history that began with paper lava and an oversized mushroom.

Adam called for Rocket, flipped the sign to CLOSED, and locked up the shop. Zada and Tyler would be here any minute. He and Rocket dodged through the busy caravan park, excitement buzzing in his chest. He

scanned the crowd, searching for Zada’s bright-red hair.

“Adam!”

A car pulled into the car park – and there she was, hanging out of the passenger window. But wait – her hair wasn’t red anymore. It was bright pink. Neon pink. And shaved on one side.

She shouted his name again, and he grinned, waving like mad. The car stopped. Zada jumped out and wrapped him in a bear hug that nearly knocked him over.

Zada loved neon. Today she wore a tropical-pink crop top and matching shorts, with electric-blue high-tops. For a second, Adam wondered if her head would glow in the dark. It looked like someone had dipped a lightning bolt in raspberry sherbet. Awesome. And slightly terrifying.

Right on cue, Tyler’s taxi pulled up. While his mum, dad, and little sister wrestled bags from the boot, Tyler hopped out, looking slightly crumpled but grinning all the same. His sandy-blond hair stuck out in every direction, and his green eyes were hidden behind a pair of oversized aviator sunglasses. He wore a T-shirt with *Werelock Holmes* on it – a comic-book hero who was a quiet librarian by day and a stylish, crime-fighting werewolf by full moon. Tyler also had on khaki cargo shorts with more pockets than a pool table, and black

Converse that had clearly seen some action.

Adam didn't care much about fashion. He liked his faded T-shirt and scuffed shorts just fine. Which was lucky, because "new clothes" weren't exactly in the family budget. Every spare penny his parents saved went straight into the holiday park

Tyler approached with the slow, deliberate strides of a man who had already lived a full, tiresome life and now just happened to be trapped in the body of a thirteen year old.

"I have finally arrived at GoldenCliff Holiday Park, where the fun is supposed to be endless and the journey here definitely was." He yawned and offered a weary but sincere fist bump to each of his friends. "Now, where were we?"

He said it as if their conversation had briefly been interrupted and not, as it was, that a year had passed since the three of them were last together. Since their last visit, they'd all finished Year Eight at different schools, stretched out a bit taller, and picked up a few extra worries. Which was exactly why this summer needed to be different – care-free, fun-packed, and absolutely unforgettable.

Zada returned the fist bump. "We were at the part where we start having fun!"



“Fun’s been kind of on hold around here without you guys,” Adam admitted.

“Then I declare the summer of freedom officially open!” Zada said, raising both arms like she was launching a rocket.

“Whoa, can we tone down the excitement, please?” Tyler said. “This afternoon, I’m planning a full schedule of doing absolutely nothing. Sun lounger. Gentle breeze. Faint sound of waves. If it takes more effort than lifting an ice-cream cone, I’m out.”

With that settled, the three of them started chatting about what they wanted to do that week. Adam could already feel something lifting, like summer had finally—

“Adam!”

His mum was waving from outside Reception, eyebrows doing that *urgent mum wiggle*. “Back to work, kiddo! Need you to make a delivery!”

## 2 GROCERIES OF DOOM

Inside the wooden cabin that doubled as the admin HQ of GoldenCliff Holiday Park, Adam’s mum hovered over the printer. It was busy spitting out the piece of paper that was about to ruin his afternoon.

His mum was like a business tycoon trapped in the body of someone who drank herbal tea and wore floaty skirts. She used to be a maths teacher, and now started her days with sunrise yoga on the beach before charging headfirst into emails, spreadsheets, and plans to boost profits. One of her better ideas was a grocery delivery service – not just for the guests at the holiday park, but for the locals in Flintlock too. Naturally, Adam had

been signed up as the delivery rider. Sole delivery rider. Unpaid.

“There’s only one off-site delivery today. Here’s the address,” said his mum, handing him the printout.

Adam scanned the page. “Spyglass Manor?”

Zada raised her eyebrows. “That the haunted house on the cliff?”

Tyler didn’t even glance up from his hammock catalogue. “I thought that place was empty. Well, apart from the ghosts.”

“Some mysterious old guy just bought it,” said Adam. “Apparently, he’s about as child-friendly as a shark in a paddling pool.”

“Rumours, darling,” said his mum, bracelets jingling.

Adam sighed. “I heard the last kid who set foot on his lawn got launched into orbit. Still up there, circling the Earth, messing with satellite signals.”

Tyler grinned. “Yeah, that’s why the Wi-Fi’s rubbish.”

“If that’s true,” said Adam’s mum, “ask him to beam us a better connection.”

Adam grabbed the delivery list. “If I’m not back by dinner, aim a telescope at the sky.”

He whistled for Rocket, and the three of them set off across the park. They hadn’t gone far when Tyler spotted a deckchair and, with zero hesitation, dropped into it like

it had been calling his name.

“We’ll come with you to Spyglass Manor,” said Zada.

Tyler looked up. “We will? I was planning to test this deckchair’s limits all afternoon.” He sighed. “Fine. But only if tomorrow is so lazy that even yawning counts as exercise.”

“Deal,” said Adam.

Soon they were pedalling along the narrow clifftop path, sea glittering on one side through tangles of yellow gorse, Foldacre Farm on the other. Each field had a name. They passed Windy Lee, then Scratchy Bottom, until they reached the one Adam always dreaded – Thor’s Thumb.

It was fenced off for a reason: Thunder and Lightning, two rams with serious attitude. Right now, they were grazing, but their eyes tracked the bikes like they were plotting something.

Rocket barked at them, as if to ask, *Any picnickers today? Maybe someone careless enough to drop a sausage roll?*

“Shh,” said Adam, speeding up.

A second later, a loud bleat rang out. He glanced back. Thunder and Lightning were charging, heads down, horns gleaming. They hit the fence with a crash that made the whole thing shudder.

“High-quality enclosure that,” Tyler remarked. “Not like the stuff they use at Jurassic World. Now, *that’s* some substandard fencing.”

The wind tugged their hair as they flew down the trail. The salty sea air mixed with the sweet smell of wildflowers growing along the path. Adam’s bike basket rattled with every bump, packed full of tins, a dozen eggs, and a bunch of glass jars that clinked dangerously whenever the wheels bounced.

As they rode, he caught them up on everything that had changed since last summer. There was Glow-in-the-Dark Krazy Golf, the Time-Traveller’s Tea Room where afternoon tea was served by staff in period costume (the staff being his mum, dad, and sometimes – unfortunately – him), and Enchanted Forest Stargazing, which mostly involved his dad, a plastic toadstool, and a telescope from the charity shop.

“Oh, and Dad’s latest invention: Ice Cream Alchemy.”

“What could possibly be wrong with ice cream?” asked Zada.

Adam grimaced. “He’s into ... experimental flavours. So far: blueberry and gorgonzola, bacon and maple syrup, and bubblegum with pickled cucumber.”

They all shuddered.

Then it was Zada and Tyler’s turn. Tyler groaned.

“School’s like a full-time job. Bell rings, it’s like clocking in. Homework, projects, more homework. And for what? Grades? A pat on the back? You ever see those old guys feeding pigeons in the park? That’s the dream.”

Zada rolled her eyes. “Wow. That got deep fast. Do you want a biscuit with your midlife crisis?”

“Yeah,” said Adam. “When you said ‘let’s hang out’, I didn’t think you meant in a care home.”

Tyler smirked. “Laugh all you like. One day you’ll understand the true magic of a park bench.”

Adam clapped him on the back. “We’ll visit. Maybe bring snacks for you and the pigeons.” He glanced at Zada. “So, how’s the gaming empire going?”

Zada’s latest obsession was her video-game streaming channel – something the boys knew all about, thanks to her relentless spamming.

She gave Adam a mock glare. “It’s growing, thank you very much. *The Zada Zone* is on track to hit 100,000 subscribers by September.”

In reality, the number was slightly lower. Last they checked, it stood at twenty-three. That included her parents, grandparents, two cousins – and Adam and Tyler. To help boost the count, Adam had even made an account for Rocket. He didn’t have the heart to tell her, but right now the dog had more followers than she did.

Trailing behind, Tyler puffed, “Just don’t forget us when you’re famous. We’ll be your entourage – carrying your consoles and fetching energy drinks.”

“And in return,” said Adam, “you can dedicate your first big tournament win to the guys who knew you when you were just a noob.”

Zada laughed, her voice mixing with the cries of the gulls overhead. “Deal. But only if you help me plan my next stream. It’s got to be epic.”

The path grew steeper and narrower as they neared the old lighthouse at the top of the cliff. They paused to catch their breath and take in the view.

Cutters Cove spread out below – a horseshoe bay of blue-green water and soft sand, dotted with beach umbrellas, swan pedalos, a few fishing huts, and a shack selling the freshest shellfish this side of anywhere. Waves whispered on to shore, and the wooden jetty added a soft knock-knock rhythm as boats bobbed against their ropes.

Cliffs rose all around the cove. A worn stone stairway climbed one side, leading up to Spyglass Manor.

They looked up.

The manor loomed like it didn’t want company – ivy crawling up its cracked stone walls, turrets twisting skyward like they were trying to escape. The windows

were dark and empty, like skull eyes. And high above, a crooked iron weathervane creaked in protest, no matter which way the wind blew.



Adam gulped. “They say the old guy who lives there sits on a throne made of confiscated toys, plotting revenge on childhood itself.”

Rocket gave a low, uneasy woof. His tail stuck out like an exclamation mark.

Tyler squinted at the manor. “Think he’s up there now? Glaring at us through binoculars, grumbling at the sound of our youthful energy?”

“I’ve heard he brushes his teeth with toddler tears,” said Adam.

Tyler shuddered. “Bet he’s got a special room just for scowling. With mirrors. And mood lighting.”

Zada swung off her bike, hoisted it on to one shoulder, and started up the stairs. “Well, let’s go say hi and find out.”

Rocket padded ahead, leading the way. They hadn’t climbed far when they spotted a man sitting in the shade on the steps. His face was lined like old driftwood, eyes set deep beneath a salty squint.

“Isn’t that the shellfish guy from the beach?” Tyler whispered.

“His name’s Crab,” said Adam.

Tyler snorted. “You’re joking.”

Crab was whittling a lump of wood with a small knife, his hands moving like he’d done it a thousand times. He

looked up as they approached.

“Nice afternoon for it,” he said, without saying what it was.

“Hello, Mr Crab,” said Adam.

“What’re you carving?” asked Zada.

“It’s crackin’,” he said, not looking up.

“Well, it certainly is a most accomplished piece of work—” Tyler began, before Crab cut him off.

“No, ye muppet. I said it’s a *kraken*.”

He held up the carving – a sea monster with curling tentacles so detailed it looked like it might wriggle free of his hands.

“Here. Take a look.” He held it out to Zada.

She stepped back. “I’m not supposed to accept wooden sea beasts from strangers.”

“That’s oddly specific,” said Adam.

“I’m paraphrasing.”

Still, she reached out, brushing her fingers across the smooth, twisting wood. “It’s beautiful.”

Crab’s grin widened. “So, what brings you lot up here?”

“We’re delivering groceries to the new owner,” said Adam, nodding toward the manor.

Crab nodded. “Ah, yer. Old Professor Goodspeed.”

Old Mr Crab. Old Professor Goodspeed. Adam

couldn't help thinking *old* was kind of a given around here. Still, at least they had a name now. Professor Goodspeed. Totally normal name for someone who probably slept in a coffin.

"D'you know him?" asked Tyler, leaning against the steps.

Crab's face darkened, wrinkles deepening like a stormy map. "No one knows that man."

Zada frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He's up there all day and night," Crab said, voice dropping to a hush. "Never leaves. Never speaks to anyone. Well, except once. Mrs Northover saw him at the Post Office renewing his road tax. But apart from that? Just stays in that house ... watching."

"Watching what?" asked Tyler.

Crab shrugged.

Adam perked up. "Maybe he's watching for smugglers."

Smuggling was a big part of local history. You could see it in the place names: Cutters Cove, Flintlock, Spyglass Manor. All of them sounded like they came straight from a pirate movie.

The word *smugglers* seemed to flick a switch in Crab's brain.

"Did I ever tell you about my ancestor, Captain Colin

'Cutlass' Crab?" he began. "Ran silk and rum through these waters like nobody's business. Feared by customs men. Loved by the ladies. Had a tattoo of a ferret on his—"

"Wow, look at the time!" said Adam quickly, before things got too anatomically detailed.

But Crab was already off, his voice slipping into full storyteller mode.

"Old Captain Crab was skipper of the *Sea-Witch*," he went on. "Fastest ship ever to kiss the waves. A whispered legend in moonlit coves and shadowed inns. Her sails, black as the abyss, could vanish into the night like they were part of it. No cutter could catch her. She'd outrun the dawn, slipping through the law's fingers like mist through a net."

On a roll now, Crab leaned back on the step and launched into a tale about how Captain Cutlass Crab used his smuggling fortune to build Spyglass Manor – stone by stone, coin by coin, with secret panels, hidden compartments, and even a tunnel that ran all the way from the manor to the cove below.

Zada's eyes lit up. "A secret tunnel? That's awesome."

Tyler frowned. "That sounds like a tripping hazard and a terrible place for draughts."

Crab gave him a sideways look, but didn't miss a beat.

“Built so the crew could vanish without a trace when the King’s men came knocking,” Crab said proudly. “Bricked up now, they say. But tunnels don’t stay hidden forever...”

Then, without warning, he puffed out his chest and began to sing.

*“In days of old, a vessel grand,  
The Sea-Witch sailed to distant land...”*

His voice was surprisingly tuneful, deep and gravelly like waves on shingle. A couple of seagulls even stopped squawking to listen.

Zada gave Adam a look. The kind that said *If we don’t leave now, we’re going to get verse two through nine.*

Adam stepped back, already turning. “Well! This has been deeply educational, but we should really get these groceries up before the eggs hard-boil.”

Crab sang on, undeterred.

*“With sails of black and secrets deep,  
She glided through the ocean’s sweep...”*

They climbed the steep stairs, the song drifting after them, haunting and rhythmic. Rocket trotted ahead, tail

low but wagging cautiously, as if he too wasn’t quite sure what to make of it all.

Adam found himself quietly singing along, almost without thinking.

*“But fate’s cruel hand, it did befall,  
As legends tell, one evening’s squall...”*

He knew the whole thing by heart. After years of being cornered by Crab and hearing every salty tale at least three times, the story of the *Sea-Witch* was lodged in his brain like an old splinter.

*“The ship vanish’d near a rocky shore,  
But left a whisper, evermore.”*

The last note echoed faintly up the cliffside. Adam glanced back once, but Crab had already returned to his whittling, carving slow, careful spirals into the kraken’s tentacles.

As the sound faded, they stepped out on to the clifftop. Spyglass Manor stood before them, its gates slightly ajar – as if the house was holding its breath, waiting. The iron creaked as they passed through, a soft groan that felt more like a warning than a welcome.

They wheeled their bikes along a gravel path that crunched underfoot. Overhead, oak branches swayed, scattering shifting shadows across the ground. The only sounds were the soft rattle of bike chains and the whisper of leaves.

The gravel gave way to a broad forecourt – an old reception area lined with neat hedges standing like guards. At its centre stood a tall, silent fountain. No water flowed now, but the stone was worn smooth by time and memory. They leaned their bikes against its edge and climbed the short steps to the front doors: towering slabs of oak carved with crashing waves, fierce-eyed ships, and twisting sea beasts. In the middle of the left door, a knocker in the shape of a roaring leviathan glared out at them. Its ruby eyes gleamed in the shadows.

Adam lifted the knocker. The clang of metal on wood echoed through the manor.

They waited.

And the ruby eyes watched, unblinking.

“Maybe he’s out?” Zada said.

“Could be,” Adam agreed. “But we’re supposed to deliver these groceries today.”

“Hello, what’s this?” said Tyler, peering at one corner of the upper doorframe, where a small brass telescope was mounted on a bracket, pointing down at them.

“It’s a spyglass,” said Adam.

A tiny red light blinked on its casing. “It’s a security camera,” corrected Tyler.

Zada waved her arms and began jumping up and down. “Hello! Anyone home?”



When, after a minute or two, there was no reply, Adam decided there was nothing else for it and reached for the handle. The door swung open under his touch.

“What are you doing?!” Tyler objected.

“No one locks their doors round here,” Adam explained.

Tyler swallowed. “Not even the man who’s rumoured to grind up children’s joy to season his soup?”

“Relax, Ty,” said Zada. “We’re just going to pop in, leave the groceries in the hall and go.” She paused, turning to Adam. “Right?”

But he had already stepped inside.