

Last Chapter

by Tabatha Wood

He was created completely by accident. A stooge who was never meant to live beyond two chapters. Maurice had originally intended to use him only as a bait and switch; a mere footnote in the tale of another, better man. It soon became clear that such a character was much too big to stay small.

Jebediah Cole came mostly from a place of fiction; imagination touched by the hand of experience, and peppered with a dash of wistful desire. A pastiche of the many strange and dodgy people Maurice once had the misfortune to know. An ex-armed-forces, ex-law-enforcement, leather-faced, battle-worn bounty hunter; he was a solid, deliberate, hulk of a man. Despite his rough edges, arrogance, and sexist attitude — and the fact that he was really little more than a walking cliché — his readers seemed to find the bloke endearing. His fans clamoured to hear more.

His story began in the winter of '87. By '95, he had the first of his own novels. The star of a fast-paced thriller, he journeyed across three continents, followed faithfully by one staunch sidekick, and four foxy women. He drank, smoked, screwed, and punched bad guys as each chapter progressed. The ending saw him get the money, the girl, and a macho badge of honour: a ragged scar that travelled from his chin down to his neck. He plowed through his make-believe life like a juggernaut and his readers loved him for it.

Maurice hated the bastard.

“You can't deny you've made good money off of him,” Katarina remarked that morning, when they met for a coffee on Cuba Street. A flat white for her and a long black for him. Katarina, was his editor, his direct line to publishing and thus his livelihood, but also one of his most oldest and treasured friends. Always honest, often blunt, but mostly locked in a state of being permanently over-caffeinated and suffering from verbal diarrhoea.

Maurice shifted slightly in his seat and took a sip of his now tepid coffee before answering slowly, knowing that whatever answer he gave she would pounce on.

“He's not the only character to make me money, Kat. The Terrace Crew books have been just as successful, if not more, and I actually enjoy writing those stories. Cole is boring me now, it's time to let him rest.”

Katarina snorted derisively. Her heavy, silver earrings tinkled loudly as she moved her head.

“Those books don't have the fan-base, mate, and you know it. They're an afterthought. People only read them when they've run out of Cole to devour. If you want to know what I think — and yes, I can see that you don't, but I'm going to tell you anyway — if you kill off Cole, your readership will riot. There will be an uproar and they will hate you. Sure, that last book will get some good sales, but then you'll fall and you'll shrink, and unless you have some huge and amazing plan to reinvent yourself, your writing career could well be over. You saw what happened to Robbins when he killed off you-know-who.”

“Oh come on, Kat. It's hardly the same. I'm pretty sure my readers aren't hormonal teenagers any more.”

“No, but they are passionate, and a lot of them have followed Cole since the start. They've more than paid your paycheck, Maurice, they've kept the guy alive. Plus, some of them are hormonal housewives. Do you really want them on your tail? Don't forget the fan-fic contingent, eh?” She picked up her cup and cackled gleefully, winking mock-salaciously across the table.

Maurice sighed, folded his arms across his chest and leaned back into his chair. He let her laugh for a while, enjoy the mirth at his expense, before shaking his head in denial.

“He’s just a character, Kat. Made up and purely fictional. I’m not going to start thinking of him as a real person or something, despite what some of those weird women think. Anyway, I’ve been doing this gig for over thirty years now. Time to put the old dog down and move on.”

Katarina stopped smiling and leaned in close. She pointed directly at his chest; her long nails flashed with vivid purple.

“I’m telling you, mate, putting down this particular dog will be a huge mistake.”

Maurice shrugged and drained his cup.

“You have no faith, Katarina. No faith at all.”

Six weeks later Maurice had already decided and planned out Jebediah’s fate: a fatal and surprise encounter with a stray bullet, straight to the brain, just when the reader least expected it. It would end Cole’s story resolutely, with no opportunity for a comeback or reprieve. Maurice planned to introduce a whole new character, perhaps a young woman, spunky and fresh. He could inject some new life into his writing, show his readers his delicate, more empathetic side. Although none of that would extend to Cole, there would be no empathy there. He wanted him dead and gone.

Maurice sat in his usual spot in the Central Library, a desk by the south-east window facing out towards the grass on the Civic Square. An open flask of coffee, brewed freshly that morning, lent a pleasant aroma to the otherwise stale air. His MacBook was switched on, a Pages project open, but he had typed nothing in the hour he’d been sitting there. His thoughts were slow and sticky like the heavy summer heat. He had scribbled a few ideas in his notepad, but they were messy and fragmented. Nothing of substance.

During his train journey into Wellington that morning, he had been overflowing with ideas, but since reaching the library he had spent more time people-watching than committing to his work. It was as if the heat was disconnecting him from his usual self, stealing his inspiration.

He put his chin on his palm and rested on his elbow for a moment. He watched as a figure strode across the Civic Square, a cigarette clamped between his lips, a scowl on his sun-worn leathered face. The man crossed the square of grass and headed towards the steps leading towards the waterfront. He wore a battered leather jacket, far too cumbersome and impractical for the heat; black jeans faded and too tight on his thighs; and scuffed combat boots, worn yet clearly sturdy. His dark blonde hair was two months past a decent haircut and a week’s worth of stubble crawled across his face and neck. He was a tall, broad, imposing man, made entirely of ego and muscle.

There was something about his walk, his swagger, the way he moved with such determination and yet was infinitely, almost delicately, polite. Maurice was fascinated. He could easily have used his bulk to intimidate, to cut a path through the gathered throng of people; City Council workers taking lunch or smoke breaks, a group of teenagers playing football on the grass. Instead, he swayed ballerina-like, weaving his way through the knitted crowd, never once touching another body. That walk, Maurice knew, was the practiced walk of an urban hunter. The walk of a man such as Jebediah Cole.

Maurice watched as the man reached the steps. He paused and removed the cigarette from his mouth and blew a plume of blue-grey smoke into the air. His eyes were downcast; Maurice couldn’t properly see his face.

Look up, Maurice willed. Let me see you.

As if he had heard his thoughts, the man lifted his head, turned slightly and looked directly at him. Their eyes locked.

“Oh my God...”

Maurice felt the blood drain from his cheeks. A roaring noise filled his ears. A pop. A click. His head was too pressured and too full. He felt his chin slip from his palm, and his neck jarred. The man continued to stare in his direction, his eyes powerful and piercing. They delved deep down inside his skin, devouring his soul.

There was no way the man could see him properly from down there. The distance, the glass and the angle would make it impossible. It was surely just some strange coincidence. Yet the stranger held his gaze; five seconds, ten. Maurice felt time stretch and slow down. He could not break the gaze any easier than he could bend a metal bar. His wooden brain, so recently full and muddled, shifted suddenly and swayed into sharp focus.

The man smiled, a shark-like grin, all teeth and no humour, and took another long drag from his cigarette.

Maurice couldn't bear it, couldn't bear the pressured feeling a moment longer. He used all the mental strength that he could muster to force himself to drop his eyes. A breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding came rushing out of him. His pulse thumped in his head, a rhythmic bass drum pulsing and pounding. He felt tired and weak and yet also electrified all at once, like a sudden hit of caffeine had shaken his brain.

Slowly, almost tearfully, although he could not have fully explained why he felt that way, he looked out of the window again towards the steps. The man was gone, no trace of him on the green or on the bridge. Maurice scoped the small crowd of people. Some were sitting and standing, some talking and eating their lunches, a couple were embracing by the gallery. There was no trace of him.

Idiot, Maurice chided himself. *Getting all worked up over nothing at all.*

So the man had looked a little like Jebediah, or how Maurice always thought Jeb might look. There were probably a hundred people in Wellington alone who looked just like him. He was a character, a stereotype; one of the many reasons people liked him was because they identified with his everyman persona. A real Kiwi bloke. Down-to-earth, no-nonsense, and all that.

Maurice knew this, knew it clearly and without question, and yet he couldn't quite shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong.

He picked up his pen and started doodling, tried to get back into the frame of mind to begin writing. He still felt slow, and strangely suffocated. He recognised that horrible, familiar 'wading through treacle' feeling most often experienced when he was suffering from a cold or other similar malaise. It felt like the library had become even hotter. His skin felt tight and prickly. The air was tinged with the smell of stale sweat, warm plastic, and — somewhat inexplicably — burning hair.

He took another sip of his coffee and almost spat it out in horror as his eyes settled on his laptop screen.

Where there had been no words earlier, now there were many strings of them. They marched like black ants across the page, backlit by the white screen. Maurice felt the discomfiting thump of his heartbeat in his head once more, as he tried to stay calm and process what he was seeing. Perhaps he had suffered a seizure of some sort, a brief mental blackout or an intense daydream?

He scanned the words, feeling his unease grow as he absorbed each sentence.

I paused at the bottom of the steps, took the cigarette from my lips and exhaled the smoke. I could feel his eyes on me, watching my every move. Maybe he thought I hadn't clocked him, that I hadn't felt his stare on my back as soon as I'd walked across the quad. I stood for a moment. Let the bastard think I hadn't realised. Then I lifted my head, looked up right at the window, and locked my eyes with his.

Maurice gasped and threw himself backwards in his chair, feeling the plastic push into his spine as he held his body rigid. The smothered feeling returned again, his breathing became harsh and

ragged. He didn't know how long he held himself like that, feeling like he was merely clinging on to consciousness. A hand touched his shoulder; he yelped and jumped in fright.

"Are you alright there, mate?" One of the librarians stared down at him, concerned.

"I'm fine. Sorry," Maurice stuttered, relaxing his posture and straightening his shirt. He offered the man no explanation, merely smiled at him and willed him to go away. After a few moments he seemed to get the hint.

"Alright. Take care, eh?" The concern was still clear on his face as he started to move away towards the other side of the stacks. Maurice simply smiled and nodded, painfully aware of his strange, rictus grin. His teeth locked together like pearly tombstones.

A young woman a few tables down from him, with a pushchair parked next to her, watched him warily, probably wondering if he were ill, or maybe even drunk. He grinned at her too, acknowledging her curiosity while trying to dispel her obvious unease. He felt her eyes stay on him even as he turned away and focused on his laptop once more.

The words were still there, he hadn't imagined them.

I got caught up in the moment, he thought. I must have typed words without realising. Maybe my imagination is so good it tricked me into seeing him. I just wrote what I saw in my mind.

It was a nice idea, but he wasn't fooling anyone, least of all himself. He knew what he had witnessed. Even though it made his blood freeze, and his ears ring, and his heart rattle crazily in his chest, he knew that had seen Jebediah Cole. His character brought to life and made flesh, striding casually around the city that was written as his fictional home. Every part of him screamed out that there was no way it could be him, it was not only illogical but completely impossible, but he felt it in his soul that it was true.

A thought popped into his head unbidden, and somehow, in the craziness of the moment, it made perfect sense.

"I need to catch him. I need to talk to him!"

He rose quickly, gathering his notes and his laptop. Aware of the many pairs of eyes on him, he realised awkwardly that he had spoken his thoughts aloud. He smiled and nodded at those who momentarily held his gaze, and shoved his things into his bag, struggling with the zipper on his backpack. A pen dropped to the floor and as he bent to retrieve it, another hand grabbed it and handed it to him; the librarian. The man handed the pen to him without a word and then clapped him again on his shoulder.

"You take care, mate," the man told him, and yet, instead of feeling his concern, Maurice perceived the words to be more like a threat. His throat felt full, a ball of phlegmy angst, hard and tight in the hollow of his neck. He cleared his throat noisily, and muttered an awkward thank you as he stuffed the pen quickly into his bag. He slung it over his shoulder and walked briskly towards the stairs. He took them, two steps at a time, to the ground floor.

The stranger had a good five minute's head start on him he knew, but with a little luck, he might catch sight of him on the waterfront. He ran out of the library and sprinted towards the steps leading to the bridge, his backpack jostling up and down on his shoulders. He was old, unfit and out of breath. He panted and gasped as his thigh muscles screamed in pain, unused to being put under so much pressure. Startled people ducked out of his way as he lurched across the quad towards them.

Dear God, don't let anyone recognise me, he thought, as he pushed through a throng of bodies — a gaggle of public school girls eating ice-cream in the sunshine.

He reached the top of the steps and looked out towards the harbour and across the bridge. The waterfront was teeming with people; tourists and locals all enjoying the glorious heat. He scanned the many bodies, searching the crowds for a glimpse of black leather or dirty blonde hair. His chest

felt tight, his breath came in wheezing gasps as he tried to catch it and calm himself. He felt the frantic thump of his pulse, hard and heavy in his chest.

A deep voice, as rich and oozing as melted caramel, spoke from somewhere behind him, and he felt suddenly lightheaded, as if all the air had been sucked out of the world.

“Took you long enough.”

Maurice spun around so fast that he was surprised he could move with such speed. His grace however, was lacking. He felt his left ankle pull and pop, exploding in a searing pain.

The man was standing by one of the wooden sculptures erected on the bridge, somehow almost hidden in shadow despite the glare of the sun. He wasn't as big as Maurice had first thought, perhaps only an inch or two taller than himself, but he gave off an air of largeness, of filling the space around him. He sucked on a cigarette held between two nicotine-stained fingers and exhaled, his other hand pushed casually in the pocket of his jeans. His face showed very little emotion; hard, yet also not immediately unkind. Now he was closer, Maurice could see a thick, white line tracing a path through his stubble, from the edge of his chin to just below his left ear.

Maurice was captivated and unsettled all at once.

“Do I...?” he began, but his words came out as a squeak, barely audible. He swallowed, cleared his throat, and tried again. “Do I know you?”

The man gave a wry and humourless laugh, his lip curling in a way Maurice did not like. He sniffed, looked out towards the water and said nothing. Maurice could hardly stand the silence, a thousand thoughts filled his head. He needed to be clearer, more assertive. He tried again, tried to lower the tone of his voice, to sound more gruff and ‘manly’. To appear less frightened than he felt.

“I do know you, don't I?” He could still hear a slight tremor in his voice. He hoped the man hadn't heard it too.

The stranger turned his eyes to meet his once again, slowly and deliberately. He held him in his gaze. Maurice felt his ears buzz, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention, along with the goosebumps on his arms. What seemed like several minutes passed.

“You should. You of all people should, eh?” the stranger said, his accent thick and syrupy. Maurice didn't know how to respond, couldn't make the words make sense in his head.

“Are you...?” He tried, but the man silenced him with a glare and a sneer.

“I've got no time for pleasantries, mate,” he began, although Maurice didn't feel any pleasantness in the man's demeanour at all. “You and I, we both know who we are, and what we have to do. Our purpose is crystal clear. What I'm here for, and what I really want to know your answer to is — why the fuck are you trying to kill me?”

He leaned in close, so close that Maurice could taste the reek of him; smell stale smoke, old coffee, and the musk of dried sweat. The stench, the realness of it, hit him harder than any fist could have done, and he reeled backwards with a yell of surprise.

He struggled to find the words he needed. To ask questions, to give some kind of indignant come-back. All he could manage was, “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

He whimpered and keened like a terrified puppy. Nausea overcame him and a tunnel of white light smothered his vision. He felt his legs give out from underneath him, and the concrete floor rushed up to kiss his cheek.

He awoke in a room in a hospital. Wires and electrodes were attached to almost every part of him, bandages covering the whole of his legs. A tube down his throat made him gag and retch, and instinctively he tried to yank it out. An alarm began to wail from the monitor next to him. A nurse rushed to his bedside and grabbed his hands. More medical staff came to join her and they set to work, both on various parts of him and on the machines he was connected to. They removed the tube. They poked and prodded him. They adjusted the needles in each of his arms, and shone a light

into almost every orifice. Eventually they seemed satisfied that he was fit to be left alone. A middle-aged doctor with a bald head and grey stubble approached him with a gentle smile.

“Kia ora, Maurice. It’s nice to have you back.”

Katarina arrived soon after, her arms overflowing with gifts of grapes and fizzy pop, and an obnoxious yellow teddy bear. For the first time in twenty-five years, since Maurice had first met her, she was oddly silent. Her eyes were full of fear.

His throat was sore and swollen thanks to the tube, but he managed a hoarse croak of a welcome.

“Hey.”

She forced a smile. He saw the beginning of tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

“It’s so good to see you, Maurice. You had us all worried.”

Maurice blinked and gave a barely perceptible nod. He wasn’t used to seeing Katarina like this, so quiet and serious and sad.

“They told you what happened?” she asked.

He blinked again, forced the words out as carefully as he could.

“Accident.”

“Yeah, serious one. You were so bloody lucky.”

“I fell.”

Katarina looked momentarily confused.

“Fell? Nah, mate. You were in a train crash. Massive derailment on the Kāpiti line. You don’t remember?”

Maurice felt his pulse quicken, a wave of anxiety poured over him. The lines on the monitor by his bedside began to twitch and spike.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. Try and calm down, eh? You’re okay now.”

His voice scratched and tore at his throat as he tried to get the words out. A memory so strong and harsh it almost pained him.

“Jebediah there. Real. Real person.”

“Ah, mate, it must have been really bad. You got pretty banged up. You know, lots of people see strange things in those kinds of situations.”

He shook his head as vehemently as he could, feeling the pain in his broken body. The monitor started to beep a loud warning, numbers on the display rising with the pitch.

“No. No train. Saw him on the waterfront. I fell.”

Concern washed over Katarina’s face, she reached out her hand and touched him gently on the hand.

“Maurice, calm down. You need to rest.”

He shook her hand away, his frustration rising with his panic.

“Saw him, Kat. Knew I wanted to kill him.”

“Maurice,” she began, then paused and breathed deeply before replying. “You’ve been crook for nine weeks. We nearly lost you. You took a bloody big bang to the head, and God knows everywhere else. Your legs, aw mate, I mean, you got really badly burned.

“Look, if you’re worried about your manuscript or something, don’t be. Everything you wrote is in the Cloud, and I’ve got to say, it’s some of your best. I can’t wait to get it out there.”

“Manuscript?” Maurice choked.

“Yeah, what you were working on before your accident. I mean, I know this isn’t exactly the time or whatever, but I was pretty blown away. I’m glad you took my advice in the end, decided not to kill him off.”

Frustration gave way to confusion. There was no manuscript, of that much he was certain. Wasn't he? He couldn't think, couldn't remember anything much prior to his meeting with Jebediah. The train? He was on the train like always. He never could write well at home; too many distractions. Then he went to the library, his usual place. He had a notebook, his laptop as well. There were words that appeared without him writing them. No, that sounds crazy. How?

"I think..." he began, as a hospital orderly backed his way into the room, pulling a trolley of food.

The man turned. He picked up a plate, removed the plastic lid covering the meal, and placed it on the table at Maurice's side.

Maurice looked up. He took in the dirty blonde hair two months past a decent haircut. Saw the week's worth of stubble engulfing the man's face and neck. The white line tracing his chin and neck. A tall, broad, imposing man, made entirely of ego and muscle.

He leaned in close towards the bed, flashed a shark-like grin, full of teeth and no humour.

"So, how are you feeling today, Maurice?"

