

Max Cassidy I
Escape from Shadow Island
Paul Adam

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About the Book

'My mum killed my dad, then dragged his body all the way along the beach . . . I don't believe a word of it'

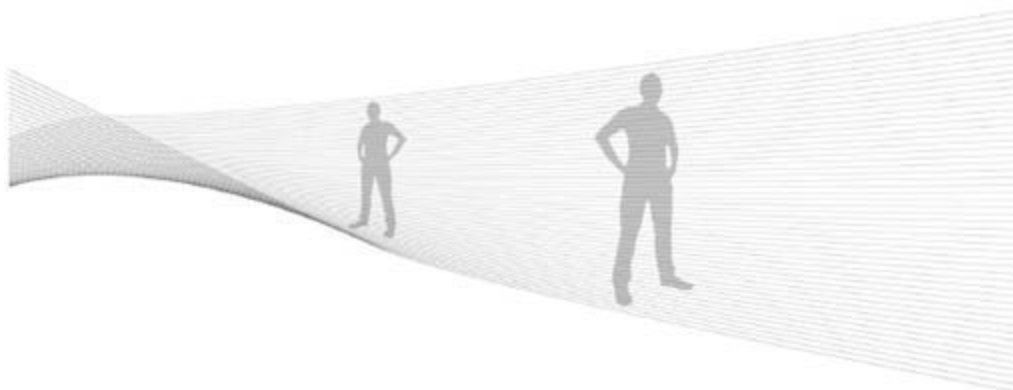
Max Cassidy is a teenage escapologist, so good he's nicknamed the Half-pint Houdini. His father disappeared two years ago and his body has never been found. His mother is now serving a life sentence for her husband's murder.

Max's mission to learn the truth about his family takes him on an thrilling journey, from London to the horrors of the terrifying Shadow Island in central America.

Escapology is dangerous but not nearly as dangerous as real life . . .

escape

from shadow island



PAUL ADAM

RHCP DIGITAL

For R and J

Escapologists like Max undergo years of training before they can try the dangerous stunts like the ones in this book. Random House Children's Books would like to make it clear that we do not recommend you try any of these stunts yourself.

1

MAX CASSIDY STEPPED into the spotlight at the front of the stage and gazed out over the packed theatre.

‘For my final trick,’ he said, speaking softly so that the audience had to strain to hear him. ‘I’m going to do something I’ve never done before – that perhaps no other escapologist has done either. It’s the most dangerous escape I’ve ever attempted.’

It was a simple trick, he explained. He was going to have his wrists handcuffed together and heavy chains wrapped around his body and secured with a padlock. Then he was going to be encased in a thick canvas sack, winched into the air and lowered into a tank of water that had been chilled to just above freezing. Max had approximately half a minute to get out of the handcuffs and chains, rip open the sack and escape from the tank – thirty seconds in which he could drown or freeze to death. It was pretty straightforward, really. Provided nothing went wrong . . .

The audience listened in absolute silence. Attentive faces stared up at him, eyes watching him expectantly. They’d already seen this tall, good looking teenager escape from knotted ropes and a padlocked trunk, from a straitjacket and a reinforced-steel safe. They’d witnessed him disappear from a cabinet and somehow materialize in the back row of the auditorium. They’d gasped at feats of memory and mind-reading that had left them baffled and hungry for more. But this final trick was something else altogether. Max was an experienced performer, a strong, athletic fourteen-year-old boy – the Half-Pint Houdini, as

the press liked to call him – but surely this death-defying escape was going to be too much even for him to pull off successfully.

Max asked for a volunteer to help him and hands shot up around the theatre. Every child had an arm in the air, shouting, ‘Me! Me!’, clamouring to be chosen.

Max selected a skinny, freckle-faced boy in the fifth row of the stalls who ran eagerly up the steps onto the stage.

‘What’s your name?’ Max asked him.

‘Sam.’

‘And how old are you, Sam?’

‘I’m ten.’

‘Sam, I want you to do something. Will you make sure I’m not concealing any key or tool on my body?’

Max held out his arms. He’d swapped the dark suit and bow tie he’d been wearing earlier in his act for a skintight body suit that covered him from neck to ankles, leaving only his head, hands and feet bare. Sam checked the cuffs of the body suit, then the neckline and the bottoms of the legs.

‘Did you find anything?’ Max said.

Sam shook his head.

‘Would you check my feet now, to make sure there’s nothing between my toes? And my hair – there’s nothing hidden in my hair, is there?’

The boy inspected Max’s feet and head. ‘No, there’s nothing.’

‘Thanks, Sam. Stick around; I’m going to need you again shortly.’

Max glanced sideways at Consuela, his stage assistant. She was standing close by, as usual, a tall, dark, exotic-looking woman in knee-length boots, black trousers and a sparkly red blouse. Her jet-black hair was tied back with a silver clasp, revealing earrings that were as big and gaudy as Christmas-tree decorations.

Consuela came forward carrying a pair of handcuffs. Max stuck out his wrists and she clipped the handcuffs around them. Max held up his arms so the audience could see that his wrists were secured together.

‘Sam, would you check the handcuffs, please?’ he asked. ‘Are they properly fastened?’

‘Yes,’ Sam said, testing them.

‘Consuela will give you the key. Will you keep it safe somewhere for me?’

Sam nodded and slid the key into the pocket of his jeans.

The metal chains came next – six metres of high-tensile steel so strong that you could dangle a bus from them. Consuela wrapped the chains around Max’s whole body so that his arms were pinioned across his chest and his legs and ankles were virtually immobilized. The ends of the chains were brought around Max’s waist and clamped together with a massive padlock. His shoulders bowed visibly under the weight of the metal.

‘Sam,’ Max said. ‘Would you check the chains and padlock, please?’

The boy did as he was asked; tugging hard to make sure they were secure.

Across the stage, meanwhile, a curtain had been pulled back to reveal a large glass-sided tank about four metres square and two metres deep. It was full of water and looked like a massive tropical-fish tank, only a tropical fish wouldn’t have lasted a millisecond in the water the tank contained. It had been cooled to the same temperature as the Arctic Ocean. It was so cold that the glass sides of the tank were beginning to frost and in places on the surface of the water, a thin crust of ice was forming.

The audience were on the edges of their seats now. Everyone could feel the tension in the atmosphere. It was like an electric charge running through the air, making their skin tingle, their hearts beat a little faster. Max was a

gifted escapologist, but he was still only a teenager. Did he *really* know what he was doing?

Max could feel the tension too; see the worry in the faces of the people watching. This was a very risky trick, but he didn't let that unsettle him. The first rule of escapology was to stay calm. Max had had that drummed into him by his father from the first moment he'd started learning tricks. *Stay calm and never panic.* The human body could only function in extreme conditions if you had complete control over it. A few nerves, a few butterflies in the stomach were fine. They were good for keeping you alert, for making sure you concentrated. But if you ever allowed the nerves to turn to fear, that was the time to start worrying. When you were frightened, your emotions got the better of your mind; you lost control and made errors. And for Max, one tiny mistake could be fatal.

Consuela fetched a large canvas sack from the wings and spread out the open end on the floor so Max could shuffle onto it. His ankles were bound by the chain, but he could just manage to move a few centimetres at a time.

He turned his head, nodding towards two men who had suddenly appeared on a raised platform next to the water tank. They were wearing thick, insulated rubber diving suits.

'These two men,' Max said, 'are on stand-by in case of an emergency. If I'm not out in thirty seconds, they will come in and drag me to safety.'

Consuela lifted up the sides of the sack over Max's head and pulled the drawstring tight. A hook on a wire descended from the gantry above the stage and Consuela attached the sack to it. At the same time, a large clock - a giant stopwatch, really - was lowered into place over the tank. The clock had only one hand, a second hand that would be activated the moment the sack containing Max entered the water.

It was a clever psychological touch – focusing the audience's attention on the time factor, the thirty seconds ticking by as Max struggled to free himself from his bonds. It was already starting to work. People were leaning forward anxiously, their faces taut, their eyes staring at the sack as it was winched into the air. They all knew that this was a truly dangerous trick. Handcuffs and chains were one thing, ice-cold liquid quite another. You could cheat with locks, but there was no way of cheating with freezing water. Max had to hold his breath; he had to survive the cold.

The sack swung into position over the tank, swaying on the end of the winch. But inside it, things were not going according to plan. By now, Max should already have had the handcuffs and chains off. He should have had them off before the sack even left the floor. There'd be no time once he was in the tank. The second he hit the water, he knew the cold would begin to paralyse him, making it impossible to tackle the locks. At all costs, he had to be free of his bonds before then.

But he couldn't get to the key. He hadn't deceived his helpers, or the audience. The spare key to the handcuffs and the padlock – the same key for both – wasn't hidden on his body. It was hidden *in* his body. Over the years, Max had perfected the art of regurgitation – of swallowing an object and then bringing it back up again at will. He could swallow something small – a key or a coin, for example – and then contract and control the muscles of his stomach and alimentary canal (the tube that ran from his mouth to his stomach) to recover the object. He'd done this trick many times in rehearsals – he never attempted an escape in public unless he'd completed it successfully at least twenty times in private. But tonight, for some inexplicable reason, Max couldn't get the key up. He'd tried twice already and failed both times.

Max knew he had only a few seconds. Once he was underwater and holding his breath, he'd *never* get the key up from his stomach.

He was nervous, and getting more nervous. This shouldn't have been happening. He could do it. He *could*. So why wasn't it working? *Stay calm*, he said to himself. *Concentrate on your breathing. Slow it down. Slow your heartbeat too. Don't panic, you can handle this.*

He closed his eyes, focusing on working the muscles in his throat and chest. He felt them contract, felt the familiar ripple of movement in his stomach. This was it. This was the way it always happened. The key would be coming up, squeezing through his alimentary canal towards his mouth. *Just ease it up. Slowly, take your time.*

But then suddenly, without any obvious reason, the contractions stopped. Max felt a tightness in his throat. He'd failed again. What should he do? The sack was about to be lowered into the water. He could call out to Consuela. Tell her to stop the winch. But he'd never aborted a trick before. If he did so now, his reputation would be shattered, his brief career terminated instantly. It would be all over at fourteen. He couldn't face such humiliation. But if he didn't pull out now, the consequences might be much worse.

Five metres below him, Consuela was watching the sack intently. There was a smile on her face. She was trying hard to maintain her pose as the confident, supportive assistant. But her eyes were worried and inside she was feeling sick with fear. She knew Max could do this trick. She'd seen him succeed all those times in practice. But practice wasn't the same as performing. Once you were out there on stage in front of a thousand people, everything was different. Inevitably, you were tense, nervous. The whole thing became harder, and more hazardous. Silently, she began to pray for Max. *Please don't let anything happen to him. Get him through this. Please.*

The sack was directly over the centre of the tank now. Every eye in the theatre was fixed on it. Nobody blinked. They were all waiting. Consuela gave a nod to the crane operator in the gantry. The winch motor whirred again and slowly the sack began to descend towards the water.

Max felt the movement. He had time for one last try. *Concentrate. You know you can do it.* It was pitch dark in the sack, but he closed his eyes anyway. It helped him direct his willpower to those hidden muscles inside him. Mind over matter, that was all it was. Channelling your thoughts to one particular area of your body, beaming them in like a laser, making your muscles do exactly what you wanted them to. The mind was stronger than the body. It could overcome anything. That was the guiding principle of Max's life, and his career as an escapologist.

Deep inside him, the valve at the top of his stomach began to open. The muscles in the walls of the stomach started to contract, to expel the key he had swallowed. The sack was still descending, but Max had shut out all external sensations. He was aware of nothing except those tiny muscular movements at the core of his body. The contractions were getting higher now. Max was finally controlling them, moving the key gradually up towards his mouth.

The bottom of the sack touched the surface of the water. Freezing liquid seeped in around Max's bare toes, but he hardly noticed. The key was coming up. He knew it. The water was above his knees now, creeping higher. The cold took his breath away, but he ignored the numbing pain. Then he was waist deep. The padlock was underwater. *Nearly there,* Max thought. *Just a few more centimetres.* The water flooded up over his chest. It was like a vice around him, crushing him in an icy embrace. His shoulders submerged. The water inched up his neck. Max coughed and suddenly the key was there in his mouth. He lifted his manacled hands and took the key in his fingers, then filled

his lungs with air only a fraction of a second before the water closed over his head.

It was cold, colder than anything he'd ever experienced. Even in practice it had never felt so bad. In ideal conditions Max could hold his breath for several minutes, but in water this cold, when his body was fighting not just to keep warm but to keep functioning at all, he would be lucky to last even sixty seconds.

He inserted the key into the lock. His fingers had stiffened so much he could barely move them. There was no feeling anywhere on his skin. The ice-cold liquid all around him had numbed the nerve endings. Max twisted the key. Nothing happened. Was the lock frozen? His heart gave a jolt. He felt a sickness in his stomach, a fear that was turning to panic. *Stay calm. . . concentrate*, he told himself again. He tried the key once more . . . and it turned. The lock clicked back and the handcuffs sprang open.

Max flung the cuffs aside and moved the key to the padlock at his waist, fumbling for the keyhole. How long had he been underwater? Ten, fifteen seconds? He had to move fast. But moving fast was something he simply couldn't do; he was too cold.

In the auditorium, everyone was staring at the second hand of the clock ticking round, then at the sack in the bottom of the glass tank, then back at the clock. Many of the spectators were, like Max, holding their breath. It was so quiet you could hear the ripples lapping against the sides of the tank as Max struggled to free himself.

Consuela's eyes also flicked from the sack, to the clock, to the two divers waiting next to the tank, watching for her signal. Was Max going to make it? Twenty seconds had elapsed. In practice, he had always been out by now. How much longer should she give him? She didn't know what to do. If she acted too quickly, she'd ruin the trick. If she waited too long, it might be too late for Max. Twenty-five seconds . . . twenty-six . . .

Max found the keyhole. He slid in the key and turned it. The padlock snapped open first time. He grabbed the chains and tore them away from his body. He couldn't take much more of the cold. A moment longer and his heart would stop beating. He reached up, searching for the ripcord to open the sack.

Twenty-eight seconds . . . twenty-nine . . . thirty. Consuela glanced at the clock. She couldn't bear the tension. She had to act. Thirty-one . . . Act now. She looked at the two divers, started to raise her arm . . . But before she could give the signal, the sack suddenly tore open and Max burst out.

His head broke the surface of the water. He gulped in air and splashed to the edge of the tank, pulling himself up the steps and almost falling down onto the stage.

A huge roar, like a volcanic eruption, exploded around the theatre. The audience leaped to their feet, shouting and cheering and waving their arms frantically in the air.

Consuela rushed over to Max and wrapped a blanket over his shoulders. He drew it tightly around his whole body. He was shivering and exhausted – more drained than he would ever let the audience see. But he was also elated. Elated and relieved. He'd pulled it off. He winked at Consuela, then walked to the front of the stage and bowed, acknowledging the adulation and applause. In this business, there was a very thin line between life and death. He'd stayed the right side of that line this time. But only just.

2

THERE WAS ANOTHER blanket waiting for Max in his dressing room. He discarded the first, which was already cold and damp from the water dripping off his body, and wrapped the fresh blanket around himself, sitting close to the electric heater that Consuela had switched on to warm the room. He was still shivering, his teeth chattering like castanets.

Consuela was standing by the dressing table, boiling a kettle to make Max a mug of hot chocolate.

‘What happened?’ she asked, her English marked with a strong Spanish accent.

He looked at her innocently. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t give me that, Max. I know you too well. Something went wrong, didn’t it?’

‘How could you tell? I was inside a sack, you couldn’t see me.’

‘You took too long, and I could sense it as well,’ Consuela said. ‘I don’t know how, but I could. All this time we’ve worked together, you get a feeling for things like that. I just know when things aren’t going right.’

Max hunched forward over the heater. He ran a hand through his thick blond hair, then rubbed his face. His skin was still cold, but he could feel some sensation returning, feel the nerves recovering from their icy immersion.

‘I couldn’t get the key up,’ he told her. ‘It took me four attempts.’

Consuela went still, the kettle frozen in mid-air over the mug of chocolate powder and milk. She stared at Max in

horror. '*Four?* My God, it's worse than I thought. Max, that trick is too dangerous. I don't think you should do it again.'

Max looked away across the dressing room, but he didn't reply.

'Max, don't pretend you didn't hear.'

'It worked, didn't it?' he said eventually.

'You could have died.'

'I had it under control, there was nothing to worry about.'

This wasn't just bravado, Max pretending to be braver than he really was. With the confidence, perhaps also the folly, of youth, he'd already begun to forget just how serious the situation had been. He'd blanked out the fear he'd felt – and in the sack, with the water creeping up his body, he had been genuinely frightened – and looked back on his failure to recover the key as a minor blip, an unimportant little setback that had posed no significant threat to his wellbeing.

Consuela handed him the mug of hot chocolate and he took a grateful sip, feeling the liquid thawing the ice that was still inside him. She stood over him, looking down with concerned eyes. 'Max, we need to talk about this.'

'Not now, I'm too tired.'

'I don't want you to do that trick again. The risks are too great.'

'There are always risks. I can handle them.'

'Can you?'

'Of course. It won't happen again. It was a fluke. Next time, I'll get the key up first attempt.'

'And if you don't?'

'I will, OK? I'll do some more practice on it.'

'You're so stubborn,' Consuela said. 'Just like your father.' She saw a cloud pass over Max's face and touched him gently on the shoulder. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.'

‘My father would have been proud of me,’ answered Max, a hint of defiance in his voice.

‘I know he would,’ Consuela said.

She pulled out another chair and sat down opposite him. ‘I worry about you, that’s all. Someone has to look after you, Max. And that someone is me. Occasionally, you have to know when to stop, when to stand back and say, “No, this isn’t worth the risk.”’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ Max said.

‘You’re young, you’re still inexperienced. Maybe this is one trick you need to come back to when you’re older.’

‘I’m telling you, it’s not a problem,’ Max insisted. ‘Now, I think I’ll have a shower.’

Consuela sighed and stood up. ‘I know you hate taking advice,’ she said, ‘and I hope I never see it, but if you’re not careful, the day will come when you find yourself in a situation you can’t escape from.’

Max thought about what Consuela had said as he took his shower, the jet of steaming hot water massaging his body, reviving him. He knew she was right about him being stubborn and not listening to advice, but taking risks was in his nature. More than that, it was in his blood. His father, Alexander Cassidy, had been a famous escapologist too. Under his stage name “Alexander the Great”, he’d toured the world for two decades, performing his show to thousands of enraptured spectators.

Max, his only child, had been encouraged from an early age to follow in his father’s footsteps. Some dads taught their sons how to kick a football, or land a fish with a rod. Alexander Cassidy had taught his son how to pick locks and get out of handcuffs. He had taught him the physical skills that his job entailed too – strength, suppleness, agility, breath control. When Max was only a few months old, his father had taken him to a swimming pool and literally thrown him in at the deep end. Max had no memory of it

now, but his mother – who'd also been present – had recounted many times how she'd screamed in terror at the sight of her precious little baby being tossed into the water. But babies have a natural buoyancy, as Alexander Cassidy knew. Max had sunk beneath the surface for a few seconds, then bobbed back up again immediately and floated on his back, gurgling happily at his watching parents.

Water was his element. He loved it, and Alexander had worked on that love, teaching his son to swim before he could walk, then training him to swim underwater to build up his lung capacity. Max could now swim two lengths of an Olympic-sized pool without once surfacing for air. That was a hundred metres underwater. On dry land, in a resting position, Max could hold his breath for nearly three minutes.

His skill with locks was equally impressive. There wasn't a lock in existence that he couldn't break, given the right tools. That talent had shown itself early and been nurtured by his father too. At four, Max could pick a simple padlock. At five he could pick the lock on an average front door. By the age of six he could get out of a pair of handcuffs in less than a minute, and by seven, he'd got that time down to under ten seconds.

When he was eight, showing the rebellious streak that was a fundamental part of his character, Max had picked the lock of the head teacher's office at his junior school one lunch time, using a hair grip he'd borrowed from one of the girls. He had then stolen the keys to the classrooms and gone round the school locking all the doors. With the keys missing, and no locksmith available, the whole school had been given the afternoon off. Suspicion had naturally fallen on Max, whose mastery of locks was already widely known. He'd eventually come clean and confessed, and his parents had been called in. Max had been threatened with exclusion if he ever did anything like that again. His mother had been livid, but his father was less angry. Alex Cassidy

was secretly pleased that his son was showing such excellent prowess with a hair grip.

Max was fascinated by escapology. He liked nothing better than being with his dad, watching and learning how things were done. At first, he simply copied the tricks that his father performed in his shows. Then, as he matured, he'd begun to invent tricks of his own, taking some of his father's ideas and modifying or extending them to make them unique to him. They became Max's tricks, not Alexander's.

He had started performing in private when he was ten, small shows for family and friends at the weekends; his first public show – a low-key event in the basement of a pub – took place a year later. By the time he was twelve, he was doing a show a week at different venues around London and had soon acquired such a reputation as a rising star that the London Cabaret Club – the most prestigious venue in the city – hired him for a short season, billing him as 'The Great Maximilian'. The run had been such a hit that the club had invited him back for a second season a year later, for which Max had devised a whole series of new tricks to tantalize his audience. Some were relatively straightforward and safe; others – like the sack in the cold-water tank – much more dangerous.

Max was supremely sure of his own abilities. He had a self-confidence that bordered on arrogance, a self-confidence that had not been undermined by the evening's events. So one trick hadn't gone exactly as he'd planned. That wasn't a fault with the trick, it was a fault in its execution. He'd work at it – hard work was something Max had never avoided. He'd practise regurgitating objects, he'd build up his resistance to freezing water so that the next time he performed the trick – and he had every intention of doing it again – *nothing* would go wrong.

He turned off the shower and stepped out of the cubicle. He had the dressing room to himself – Consuela would be