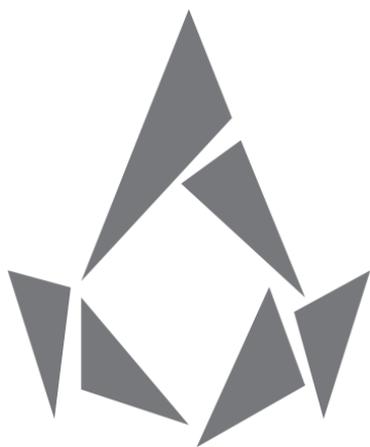


— AN ASSASSIN'S CREED[®] SERIES —

LAST DESCENDANTS



BY
MATTHEW J. KIRBY

SCHOLASTIC INC.

This book was a lot of fun to write, for reasons that I think will be pretty obvious. But the process was made even more fun by the people with whom I had the opportunity to collaborate. First, thanks to Rex Ogle for bringing me on board, and to Michael Petranek for bringing it home. The folks at Ubisoft Montreal have been incredible creative partners, so thanks go out to Aymar Azaïzia, Anouk Bachman, Richard Farrese, and Caroline Lamache. Thanks also to Holly Rawlinson, Andrew Heitz, Samantha Schutz, Debra Dorfman, Charisse Meloto, Lynn Smith, Jane Ashley, Ed Masessa, and Rick DeMonico. With such an awesome team, who needs a Piece of Eden?

—Matthew J. Kirby

Special thanks to Yves Guillemot, Laurent Detoc, Alain Core, Yannis Mallat, Etienne Allonier, Danny Ruiz, Pauline Dutilleul, Marine Gallois, Marc Muraccini, Cécile Russeil, Christopher Dormoy, Yves Lançon, Studio Lounak, Ubisoft Creative Services, Sophie Stumpf, Trey Williamson, Clémence Deleuze, François Tallec, Virginie Sergent, Michael Beadle, Stone Chin, Heather Pond, Andrien Gbinigie, and Stephanie Pecaoco.

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ISBN 978-0-545-85551-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
First printing 2016

Art Direction: Rick DeMonico
Page Design: Yves Lançon

CHAPTER ONE



Owen needed to know. He already knew, but he needed to know it in a way that could be proven. A way that would convince others, including his own grandparents, of his father's innocence. The justice system had failed, and the public didn't care. His father had gone to prison for a murder he didn't commit, where he had died from a stupid ruptured appendix before Owen could even say good-bye. So now it was up to Owen to find out what really happened the night of the bank robbery.

He thought Javier would understand. They'd been friends since third grade, back when Owen's life went to hell. It was true they hadn't been close for a while now, not since elementary school and junior high, but Owen still thought he could count on Javier.

“So will you come with me?” he asked.

They stood outside their high school, in a courtyard on the side of the building, next to a bank of empty bike racks with chipping paint. Three of Javier’s friends, guys Owen didn’t know, stood off to the side, watching them, talking among themselves.

“I don’t know,” Javier said.

“You don’t know?”

Javier said nothing. He just stared.

“Come on. You know this tech stuff better than me. Better than anyone.” Owen looked sidelong at Javier’s friends. “Even if no one else knows that, I know it and you know it.”

Javier looked back at his friends, too. He hadn’t smiled, he hadn’t laughed, he hadn’t changed the hard expression on his face at all since Owen had approached him a few minutes ago and explained his plan. The Javier standing there didn’t even seem to be the same person Owen used to know, the Javier he’d first met after Owen’s dad had gone to prison and his mom had moved them in with her parents. New neighborhood. New school. New bullies beating him up—

“I’ll think about it,” Javier said. “Now I gotta go.” He turned to leave.

“Will you?” Owen asked.

Javier looked back. “Will I what?”

“Think about it.”

“I said I would.” And he walked away.

Owen watched him return to his group, not sure if they could actually be called his friends, the kind of guys Javier used to protect Owen from. As Javier reached them, they gave him questioning nods in Owen’s direction, and Javier just shrugged and shook his head.

Owen had no idea what Javier was into now, how they'd gotten to this point, from best friends to total strangers in the space of a couple of years. It was like that with Owen's mom, too. He would have thought the death of his father three years ago would've brought them closer, but it had just driven their separate islands farther apart. A continental drift that had been gradual, unstoppable, and full of earthquakes.

Owen left school and walked toward his grandparents' house. Whether Javier came through for him or not, he decided he would still go that night. He didn't have a choice. It was up to him.

He needed to know.



When Owen opened the front door, his grandma was sitting in her armchair in the front room watching a game show, the kind that had been on TV longer than Owen had been alive. As he came in, her cat, Gunther, leapt from her lap, and his claws must have dug into her thighs through her housedress, because she yelped and gave a single, slight convulsion. Gunther meowed and strutted over with his tail up to rub against Owen's leg.

Owen bent down to rub behind Gunther's ears. "Hey, Grandma."

"Hello," she said, muting the game show applause. "How was school?"

"Fine," he said.

"How are your grades?"

"Same as they were yesterday."

"You need to bring those up," she said. "Appreciate the value of education. You don't want to end up like your dad."

Owen heard that a lot. It was a freight train of a statement that hit hard and pulled behind it the cargo of every argument, every tear, every hissed conversation, and every shouting match between his grandparents and his mom that Owen had overheard during the trial and since. His grandparents had hated his dad before Owen's mom had married him, and now they hated his memory more. Owen's dad was their "scapeghost," a shade that could be as terrible as they needed him to be, blamed for anything. For everything.

Owen had learned early on not to defend the ghost. But he didn't need to. That wasn't his dad. And soon, everyone would know that.

"I'll bring my grades up," he said. "Where's Grandpa?"

"Out back," she said. "Working on a mower, I think. He could probably use your help."

Owen kept his smirk below skin level. His grandpa never needed help with anything, least of all an engine, which meant there was probably something his grandpa wanted to talk about. Owen dreaded that, but knew he couldn't avoid it, so he nodded and said, "I'll go see."

He walked through the living room, with its old carpet that was either so impervious to stain, or had been so well taken care of, that his grandparents couldn't justify the cost of replacing it, the room's beige, plastered walls hung with his grandma's adequate oil paintings. In the kitchen, he grabbed an orange from a bowl of fruit on the spotless Formica counter, and then he went out the back screen door, which creaked open and banged shut behind him.

The yard, small and manicured to the point of looking plastic, was an amoeba-shaped rug of thick grass surrounded by

flowerbeds, shrubs, and bushes. A few orange and avocado trees grew up against the six-foot-tall, slatted wooden fence that marked the border of his grandma's empire.

Owen walked the brick path along the back side of the house to his grandpa's outpost, the shop that had never once been called a garage that Owen could remember, even though that's what it was. Inside, his grandpa bent over an old lawn mower, a single overhead fluorescent dangling above. He wore his old bib, the same kind of denim overalls he'd had since Owen was a boy.

"Is this one to sell?" Owen asked.

"Nah," his grandpa said. "Repair job. The Egertons down the street."

"You gonna charge them?"

"No," he said. "But they'll probably try to pay me anyway."

"Grandma would say she should pay them for keeping you occupied."

He chuckled. "How do you know she doesn't?"

Owen bit the orange rind with his teeth to start it, tasting the bitterness, and then dug into it with his fingertips, dripping juice as he peeled it away.

"Don't get that on my floor," his grandpa said.

Owen always thought a building called a shop would be exactly the kind of place where you could drip juice on the floor, but that was not the kind of shop his grandpa had, where no tool or piece of equipment or chemical bottle could be found out of place.

"Your grandma ask you about your grades?"

"She did."

"So I don't have to?"

Owen dropped the orange rind into the garbage. “You kinda just did.”

His grandpa looked up from the mower. “True enough.” Then he stood with a part in his hand and walked over to his workbench against the opposite wall, where he tinkered with his back to Owen. “I saw your old friend the other day. What’s his name? Javier?”

“Yeah?” Owen ate a wedge of the orange. It was a sweet one, not sour, barely tart.

“Haven’t seen him around here in quite a while.”

Owen didn’t say anything. Just took another bite.

“You still friends with him?” his grandpa asked.

“Sorta. Not really.”

“Didn’t much like the look of the guys he was with. Gangbangers.”

“How do you know that?” Owen asked.

“I could just tell.”

“That sounds kinda racist, Grandpa. Javier’s not in a gang.”

“I hope not. He always seemed like a good kid.”

Owen ate the last few segments of the orange, getting juice on his chin.

His grandpa still had his back to him, working on the lawn mower part. “You stay clear of those guys, don’t you?”

“Grandpa,” Owen said. “Come on.”

“Just making sure. This neighborhood isn’t what it was when your grandma and I moved here. It was still a pretty decent place even while your mom was growing up, until those last few years of high school.” That was when Owen’s mom had met his dad, but his grandpa left that unsaid, even though Owen knew

he was thinking it. “I’m old and stubborn. I’d never move away from my home. But this isn’t the place I would’ve picked for your mom to raise you. Not anymore.”

“I’m not in a gang.”

“I know you’re not.”

“Then why are we talking about this?”

His grandpa turned around, the glow of the fluorescent light bulb reflecting off his bald head. “I just want you to be careful. You’re fifteen. I know more about how kids are these days than you give me credit for. It’s easy to get pulled down the wrong path. You want to belong somewhere. You start out thinking you can handle it, and before you know it, you’re in over your head in a bad situation.”

Time with his grandpa in the shop usually went like this. It was as much a chance for his grandpa to work on Owen as it was the engine. Owen knew his grandpa meant well. His grandma, too. But they were also wrong about a lot of things.

“Just . . .” His grandpa shook his head and turned back around toward his workbench. “Just be careful. You got homework?”

“Did it at school.”

“Great. Then you can get ahead.”

“School is a treadmill,” Owen said. “How do you get ahead on a treadmill?”

His grandpa chuckled again. “Smart aleck. Get inside and study something.”

Owen smiled and left the shop, returning along the brick path to the back door. Inside the house, he found his grandma had turned off the TV and now worked in the kitchen, slicing

carrots on the counter, a large bowl and a pile of uncut vegetables nearby.

“How’s it going out there?” she asked.

“Fine,” Owen said. “You think I’m in a gang, too?”

“He’s right to worry,” she said. “Lotta good boys around here have fallen in with the wrong crowd. Hard to forget what happened to your father.”

“Yeah, you and grandpa make sure of that.” Owen moved to leave. “I’m going to my room.”

She put the knife down. “We just don’t want that to be you.”

Owen said nothing, because if he opened his mouth, he’d just end up in trouble. So he stalked away from her, through the living room, down the hall, to his bedroom. Once there, he kicked some clothes out of the way so he could shut the door and lock it. He stood there a couple of minutes, breathing hard, staring up at the ceiling.

He knew his dad hadn’t always been perfect. He’d been in some trouble in high school, some shoplifting and vandalism, but nothing too serious. Nothing that would have stuck to him in a way that made his life hard after the age of eighteen. He’d grown out of all that. The man Owen knew had worked hard, stayed clean, and even without a college degree he’d managed to move his family to a tree-lined suburb with bikes on the front lawns and two nice cars in every driveway. But Owen’s grandparents never credited any of that. They only ever saw the high school punk, and after his dad got arrested, the months of the trial were nothing but an extended *See? We were right all along*, directed at Owen’s mom.

But they weren’t right. Neither were the judge nor the jury.

Owen stepped across the floor to his computer and threw himself into the chair at his desk, toppling a tower of empty soda cans near the monitor. He'd been counting on Javier to make sure the technology was safe and looked right, but if Javier never showed up that meant it would all be on Owen. He smacked the keyboard to wake up his computer, and then did a search online, reading about Abstergo Industries, the Animus, something called Helix, and those crazy-expensive entertainment consoles. But it was all corporate-speak hype, varnished by public relations to the point where it gleamed and said nothing. He got a little more from a few message boards, mostly warnings and paranoid rants about a global conspiracy involving Abstergo. But what multinational conglomerate corporation *didn't* involve conspiracy? That seemed to him to be the nature of the game.

A short while and more fruitless searching later, his mom came home from her job at the copy center. Owen heard the front door, her muffled voice out in the living room talking with his grandma, and then a few moments later, a knock on his bedroom door.

Owen shut his browser. "Come in."

The doorknob rattled. "It's locked."

"Oh, sorry." Owen bounced out of his chair to the door, and opened it. "Forgot."

"Everything okay?" His mom stood in the hallway wearing her blue polo uniform shirt, her hair pulled back, maybe a few more gray hairs than the day before.

"Yeah, fine," he said. "Why?"

"Grandma mentioned you and Grandpa had a talk."

Owen shrugged. "Wasn't really different from any other talk we have once or twice a week."

“I guess seeing Javier really rattled him.”

Owen rolled his eyes. “He’s not in a gang.”

“Okay.” She held up her hands, crossed with the short, red lines of a few fresh paper cuts. “If you say so. But it’s a good thing your grandparents worry, you know.”

“Is it?”

“It means they care.”

Owen turned away from the open door and went to fall onto his bed, lying on his back, hands behind his head. “That’s not exactly how I’d put it.”

She stepped into the room. “How would you put it, then?”

“I’d say they care that I don’t go out and rob a bank like my dad.”

His mom stood up straight, as if she’d run into an invisible wall. “Don’t say that.”

“But that’s what they’re thinking.”

“That’s not what I mean. Just . . . don’t say that.”

“Why not? You believe it, too. Or at least, you don’t deny it anymore when they bring it up.”

“Owen, please. I can’t . . .” She glanced toward the door.

“Whatever.” He closed his eyes. “It is what it is.”

His mom stood there a minute longer, and he listened as she crossed the room, wading through his clothes, stepping on food wrappers, and shut the door behind her on her way out.



Later that night, after dinner and dishwashing, Owen heard his mom go to bed in the room next to his, and shortly after that he heard his grandpa shuffle down the hall. It was another couple

of hours before his grandma switched off the laughter and saxophone-heavy music of her late-night talk shows and went to bed. That was when Owen got up, still in his clothes, pulled on a hoodie, and crept from his room. The front door made too much noise, so he went out the back way, careful not to let the screen door bang behind him.

It was a cool night, with a wind that flapped a few newspaper pages down the street. Whereas his grandparents kept their yard and house in postcard condition, many of their neighbors did not. Those that watered their lawns had mostly weeds. Those that didn't had mostly dirt. The sidewalk had cracked and buckled before Owen had moved there, but no one had repaired it since then, and it could trip someone in the dark who didn't know its topography.

Owen had to run to catch the last bus on the route near his grandparents' house, but he made it, and was soon staring through his reflection in the window at the passing streets, heading toward the address Monroe had given him. Although it wasn't an address so much as a location near some factories and warehouses at the edge of the city. He transferred buses twice, fortunately to lines that ran all night, and then walked another mile or so to get there, past graffitied apartment complexes and darkened, gated storefronts.

The section of the industrial park he eventually reached seemed abandoned, with padlocked doors, broken windows, and weeds choking the narrow spaces between the buildings. Infrequent streetlamps smeared the ground with yellow light the color of vomit. Owen was beginning to wonder if Monroe had played him for an idiot, but then he saw the bus parked in the shadows.

It wasn't a vehicle like the ones he'd taken to get there. This bus was old, with distended wheel wells, and between them, a rounded, bulging hood with a wide, angled grill across the front, the kind of model a collector of classic buses would want, if there were actually people out there who collected classic buses. It was painted brown, and the windows were all blacked out, but somehow it didn't seem quite as forsaken as its surroundings.

Footsteps crunched in the gravel behind him, and Owen spun around.

"Relax," Javier said. "It's me." He wore a white hoodie, hands buried deep in the pockets.

Owen let out a breath. "You came."

"I thought about it," Javier said.

"Thanks." Owen nodded toward the bus. "This is it."

"You sure about this?" Javier asked. "Messing around with your DNA? Your brain?"

"I'm sure," Owen said. "I need to know. Besides, other kids have done it."

"That's what I've heard. And Monroe told you this would work?"

"We didn't have time to get into it. He just told me to meet him here."

Javier shrugged. "Then let's go find out."