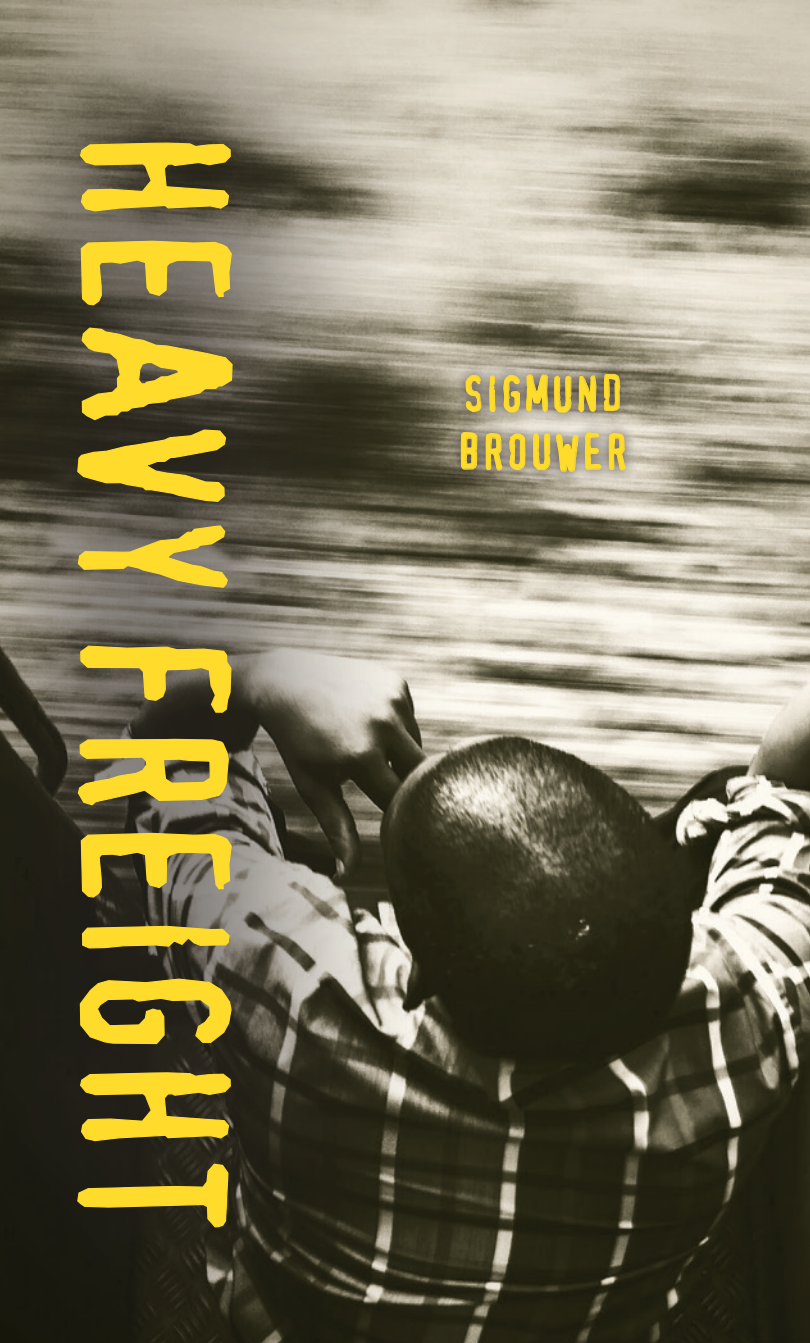


A black and white photograph of a man from the chest up, wearing a plaid shirt. He is looking out over a body of water, which is blurred to suggest motion. The man's head is turned away from the camera, and his hands are resting on his hips. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

SIGMUND
BROUWER

HEAVY FREIGHT

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To Adam Hucal. You rock!

Chapter One

Seriously? Stone thought. Dog? Already?

It was a massive German shepherd in a K-9 vest, closing in fast on him, so near that Stone could hear its claws clicking on the pavement. Not yet midnight, and already Stone's night was about to end.

So much to hate about dog.

Cop in car—no problem. Here on East Hastings, Maxwell Stone knew every inch of alley, every cubby-hole. Headlights and searchlights gave easy warning of any Vancouver Police Department patrol-car approach and lots of time to duck out of sight.

Cop on foot—laughable. Stone was fifteen, looked thirteen. What was a cop going to do, shoot him in the back? Let some lucky bystander scoop it on video and cash in on thirty seconds of YouTube fame?

Second advantage to Stone in the ongoing game called Stone versus VPD were his soft-soled Nikes, a couple of ounces of foam and nylon with air-cushioned soles. Well worth the shoplifting risk. Cops had clunkers for shoes. Cops had belts that weighted them down with flashlight, pistol, mace, handcuffs, radio. Stone ran with Olympic-level speed compared to a cop. Even if he couldn't

lose them on a stretch, he cornered better, a gazelle compared to a rhino.

Stone remembered the winter before, when a cop had skidded on cobblestone on a sharp turn from sidewalk into alley and gone butt sideways, thumping into a snowbank. Stone had stopped, snapped a shot from his smartphone, then posted it later on a social-media account that didn't belong to him. Enjoyed watching it go viral. He'd made sure to email it to the public-relations dork for VPD too. With a message. *Here's one of your men in blue looking like a drunk Frosty the Snowman.*

Cop anytime.

But dog?

That was low. Nasty. Dog you couldn't bluff. Dog couldn't be fooled by lies. Dog couldn't be distracted by five-dollar bills tossed in the air, giving Stone the little head start he needed to escape any human.

Dog was all teeth and blurred legs. And nose. Dog was nose, better than any kind of thermal imaging in the abandoned buildings Stone had roamed since he was a kid.

Five minutes earlier Stone had been doing a simple business transaction with some dude from an out-of-district preppy high school. Bottle of pills for a handful of cash. Preppy Dude had decided that nine inches of height on Stone and having his girlfriend as spectator earned him the right to play tough guy.

Preppy Dude had taken the pills, then sneered and pulled out a knife. Pills in one hand and knife in the other, Preppy Dude had then asked if Stone had a problem with just walking away without any holes in his skin. And without cash.

Stone's response?

Stone had gagged as if terrified, then wiped a hand across his mouth.

Then he'd retched and hurled a hot stream of vomit all over Preppy Dude's chest and knife hand. Normally, Stone didn't shoot vomit at people, but come on—the dude had pulled a knife.

Stone's aim had been perfect, the stream even splattering Preppy Dude's face. Preppy Dude had dropped the knife, shrieked and wiped at his eyes. Shrieked. Yeah. Like a five-year-old girl.

Stone had taken advantage of Preppy Dude's shock, grabbing the knife and snatching back his bottle of pills.

That's when a cruising patrol car had turned into the alley, headlights catching the three of them in a brief frozen pose. Stone with knife in hand, girlfriend with her hands covering her mouth in horror and Preppy Dude flailing around as if Stone had stabbed him.

Not a chance the cop would take Stone's word over the other two's. Stone had dropped the knife—but not the

pills—and bolted, not too worried about the cop actually catching him.

Then dog had appeared. Must have been a K-9 unit in the back of the car. Maybe it had been a training run. The explanation didn't really matter.

Stone was on the run. With dog in pursuit.

He'd heard plenty of stories about dog. Like when VPD handlers were in a bad mood, they gave the attack command instead of the takedown command. Last thing you wanted was a K-9 dragging you down by your privates. Winning a million-dollar lawsuit didn't matter much if getting neutered was the price you paid for it.

Dog. In pursuit.

It was a sprinting bullet of a shadow with deadly and silent intent, focused only on Stone.

Chapter Two

Ahead of him, parked in the darkness of a narrow alley, Stone spotted a painter's van. He could just make out the aluminum ladder strapped to the roof, overhanging it by a couple of feet front and back.

Perfect.

With the dog unleashed and way ahead of the handler, all Stone needed

was a moment out of reach of the dog. Maybe two.

He stayed at full sprint, reaching the van just ahead of the dog.

Stone judged it perfectly. First step on the front bumper, left hand reaching for the base of the antenna near the windshield on the passenger side. He let momentum carry him up the slanted hood, left hand pulling on the antenna to keep him from sliding off, then right hand reaching high to grab the end of the ladder that extended over the roof.

It felt smooth. Left hand releasing the antenna to grab the ladder too. Feet still moving in a fast crab walk up the windshield. Body briefly almost horizontal. Final throw of the feet and a twist that put his hip onto the top part of the ladder. A grunt to slide his body fully on top of the ladder and just like

that, he was on top of the van's roof, ladder between him and the dog.

Not a heartbeat too soon.

The dog had leaped, but its jaws snapped on one of Stone's back pockets. There was the sound of ripping fabric, but Stone was safe. The dog slid down the hood of the van.

Stone scrambled to his feet on the roof of the van, legs straddling the ladder. The dog circled the van, whining in frustration.

All Stone had to do now was figure out how to loosen the ladder from the bungee straps that held it to the van roof and then prop it against the apartment balcony just above the van. Quick climb there would lead him to the fire-escape stairs, and before the cops arrived, he'd be on the roof. From there, if he couldn't figure out a way to escape he deserved to have his butt thrown in jail.

Even so, he and his butt would be all in one piece. No dog dragging him down until the handcuffs arrived.

Then he heard a deep voice. It came from the open window of the passenger side of the van.

“Hello, young man. What exactly are you doing up there?”

Okay, the question didn’t sound exactly like that. It started with words that didn’t belong in church, ended with words that didn’t belong in church, and in the middle questioned Stone’s sanity in an equally aggressive way.

“I’m a tad occupied here,” Stone said, thinking it was great that someone was inside the van. It meant that now he didn’t need to do anything about the ladder. All he had to do was mention the police. To disguise his voice, he snapped back in a perfect British accent, the one he had practiced from watching YouTube videos.

Not posh. This wasn't the time or place to be posh. This was a time to be snarling, street-weary tough. "Go back to picking your nits. The filth will be here soon enough to haul you away."

"Filth?" the guy asked.

"Coppers, you div."

Stone figured that would do it. Dudes parked in a van late at night probably didn't want to encourage a police visit. Not around here. The Downtown Eastside, or DTES—a couple dozen square blocks along East Hastings, between Main Street and Cambie—was one of Vancouver's sketchiest areas. For Stone, kindergarten had not been about the ABCs. Instead he'd learned not to touch needles left behind by druggies. He'd learned to be okay with food from dumpsters. And he'd learned to read body language, because not reading body language meant getting robbed or beaten.

Then he'd learned how to take care of his mom. Because she didn't seem to be good at learning those lessons.

"Hey." Another voice, coming from the driver's side. "It's that British kid. He let the air out of my tires last month."

Uh-oh. Stone had assumed the van dudes were here to make a deal. Had thought he'd be better off disguising his voice. Instead, turned out they were locals. Now he'd have to watch out for them for months.

But first he needed to stay out of reach of the K-9, which was still whining at the side of the van. He'd give himself the luxury of worrying about these guys later. Which meant that since they already knew who he was, it couldn't be any worse to get them really mad.

"Isn't this some hard cheese?" Stone said. "You being the shitehawk

down there and me all cozy and safe up here till the filth arrives to rescue me from you and your guns.”

“No guns here. We’re not idiots.”

Stone said, “That’s not what they’ll hear from me, you manky git.”

“Gonna rip out that tongue of yours,” the voice said.

Stone laughed. He knew the dog was now protection of sorts. “Fine with me, mate.”

The van door began to open. The police dog made a scramble to the sound. The door slammed shut again, and another couple of f-bombs drifted out from both windows.

Yeah. The dog was great protection. Ironic in a delicious way.

Stone turned his attention back to the ladder. It was just held in place by bungee cords. Easy enough to release, if he needed to. But he wouldn’t need to.

Not a chance the two in the van would want to be around when the VPD arrived.

The van's engine started.

Exactly what Stone had expected. He grinned. Nothing like a plan falling into place.

“Okay. Two questions each day. Anything else?”

“Yes. Can you *please* stop calling me Max? And I don’t care if that counts as my first question today.”

“I’ll consider it,” Joseph said, shifting his own backpack and settling in for the ride. “Give me a good reason.”

“We’re riding the rails from here to Halifax, and then back across Canada to Vancouver.” Stone paused for effect. “If you’re going to be my sidekick for that kind of distance, I should get to choose what you call me.”

“Sidekick? I’m your sidekick?”

Stone grinned. “Unless you prefer minion.”

Joseph’s mouth opened and out came a sound Stone had never heard from Joseph before.

Laughter.

Sigmund Brouwer has written dozens of books for both children and adults, including *Devil's Pass*, *Tin Soldier* and *Barracuda* from the Orca Seven series. Sigmund and his family live half the year in Nashville, Tennessee, and half the year in Red Deer, Alberta. He also visits schools to talk about Rock and Roll Literacy. For more information, visit www.sigmundbrouwer.com.