

CHAOS UNLEASHED

ALEC SILLIFANT



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CHAOS

SCHOOLBOY

OPERATIVE

FUGITIVE



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There are lots of people who have been involved in the production of this book, all of whom worked hard, and I thank them for their sterling efforts on my behalf.

Family, friends and co-workers also deserve recognition, for without them, and their support, I doubt very much that this book would have happened in the first place.

And then I have a nagging fear at the back of my mind that I will miss someone out and that would be unforgivable on my part. So I offer up my thanks to all those who truly deserve it, for many and varied reasons, and hope they understand it is to them I am offering my heartfelt gratitude.

Thank you all.

For Brandon, Jake, Alec, Jamie

Having fun is the first priority but after that
the harder things to achieve in life are always
the ones most worth having

Present Day

A WALK IN THE PARK

As usual the intelligence had been accurate. Four guards patrolled the perimeter, each covering one side of the fenced industrial site, armed with assault weapons and reporting in at half-hourly intervals.

Chaos's mouth twitched into a smile as the guard on the north fence made a half-hearted report into the radio microphone pinned to his lapel. "Tango One, twenty-three hundred hours. Situation Black, repeat, Situation Black, over." Lying in wait in the undergrowth he knew he now had thirty minutes to complete his mission.

As he carefully lifted himself from his lying position, a pile of leaves to his side was disturbed. In the still air of the autumn night, the rustling seemed to amplify amongst the trees like a round of applause. The guard spun, his lethal firearm raised at the darkness before him. Chaos froze in his half-crouched pose, unsure if he had been seen or not, but no challenge was issued. The guard continued to scan the wood, trying to pinpoint the location and source of the sound.

Chaos controlled his breathing, forcing it into a slow, steady rhythm. He ignored the tightening grip of pain that pulled at his thigh muscles as he held like a statue. He knew he could not afford to give the guard's eyes the slightest twitch of movement to catch onto.

A hedgehog appeared from the shadow of a tree, oblivious to the tense situation or its role in it. The noise from its movement brought the guard's attention and gun swinging round in its direction. Chaos mentally swore at the stupid creature as it plodded casually up to the back of his right hand and decided that this would be a great place to stop and sniff around.

The guard let out a throaty chuckle, relaxed and lowered his rifle. "Hello, little fella," he said in an almost sing-song voice. "You gave me a bit of a scare."

Chaos watched the guard with the intensity of a tiger watching its prey. Then the guard began to walk towards the hedgehog. 'Just my luck to get Private Tree-hugger,' he thought as the guard carefully crept forwards in an obvious attempt not to scare the small beast away.

As he reached down to scoop the hedgehog up, the guard froze as he realised he was looking into the eyes of another human. For a split second he didn't know what to do. His mind ran through a catalogue of reactions but before he could select one, Chaos saved the guard from having to make a decision with the use of his wrist gun.

The unconscious guard was a dead weight. As he was too big to drag into cover easily, Chaos decided to leave him where he fell. The unkempt grass would keep him hidden. Besides, he counted on being long gone before the man was discovered and it would be eight hours before the tranquilliser dart wore off. Scrambling over to the fence, Chaos made quick work of the metal lattice with bolt cutters. He was soon through the perimeter, scurrying between the maze of storerooms and offices that littered the site in a random design.

He used the cover offered by walls and shadows to hide him from prying CCTV cameras that swept the grounds; avoiding

the glare of security lights that shot pools of light in ineffective directions. It was easy work to move undetected through such sloppy defences and Chaos was soon crouched by a fire door.

From a pocket Chaos pulled out a matt black box the size of a pack of playing cards. It had what looked like a blank credit card attached to it by a flat wire connector. He slipped the card into the card reader by the door handle and flicked a switch on the box. Numbers flickered across a small LCD screen. They blurred too fast for his eyes to follow, so Chaos turned his attention to the immediate area, checking for any sign of movement.

Everything so far was just as he had been told it would be: the lax security, the weakness in the system at the fire door; but he kept alert nonetheless. He knew from experience he could never be sure of anything. Even in an apparently safe situation there was no knowing when another 'hedgehog' might show up to make things more interesting.

A click and the rattling buzz of a latch being held open by electro-magnets drew his attention back to the door. He snatched the card out of the lock, pulled at the door and slipped inside. With deliberate care, he picked up a crumpled cigarette end and jammed the door onto it, leaving it slightly open giving him a quick escape route, should he need it. He checked his watch. He knew he had eighteen minutes remaining before the four patrolling guards would report in again, or at least three of them would. He would have to speed up his progress.

However, speed and haste were two different things, as he had been told numerous times during training. Before he dared venture deeper into the facility he had to check that his box of

tricks had taken care of the building's internal security. Chaos looked up at a movement sensor hanging high up on the wall next to the ceiling. Clever as the electronic gadget was, it, like all equipment, could go wrong. In the final analysis a crude test was the only way to be one hundred per cent sure.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered and waved his arms high above his head. The red light on the sensor blinked on and off rapidly but no alarm was triggered. Beneath his black ski mask, Chaos grinned, giving the pocket where the card reader was stowed again a congratulatory pat.

He'd spent much of the day before memorising the blueprint of the building's layout and the route he would take, so Chaos made no delay in reaching the door of the room he required. The name plate, Dr Watkinson confirmed he had the right place and after quickly forcing the inadequate lock, he was inside the office.

The room was sparsely furnished, as Chaos had expected. Other than the small desk, with a solitary phone, and a chair under the only window, the office was clear of any clutter at all. No pot plants, no filing cabinets, not a single framed photo of a loved one. In contrast to this, each available centimetre of wall space was floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, packed tightly with journals on weighty scientific topics. Chaos remembered from studying Watkinson's file that he was a paranoid technophobe, especially when it came to computers, and the absence of one on his desk supported this.

It was this mistrust of computer technology that meant Chaos had been sent into the field. Normally, the Academy Tech Department hackers would gather all the required information remotely, sliding unnoticed into computer files to lift the electronic data that was needed. But Watkinson's mistrust of the internet and his not totally unfounded belief that all computers were easy prey to spyware meant he employed the old ways of pen and paper to back up his own memory. That was

what Chaos was here to download, in a similarly old-fashioned method.

Details for his mission had been exact right down to which carpet tile needed to be lifted to access the floor safe. With time running out, Chaos was more than pleased to be armed with these facts. He located the safe and reached for another piece of kit. He found himself wondering with amusement what Dr Watkinson would make of such advanced computerised wizardry being operated in his office without his permission.

Placing a small LCD screen on the safe door, he flicked a switch and was given a high resolution, three dimensional picture of the inside workings of the safe's locking mechanism. Chaos's hands moved deftly over the combination wheel as the screen fed him the diagram of complicated tumblers falling into place. Within a minute the safe was open and Chaos was photographing the information he needed from the papers laid out on the office floor.

Chaos checked his watch; six minutes remained until the perimeter guards would check in by radio again. The papers had been replaced; the safe had been relocked and covered with the carpet tile, which just left him with one job to do. He reached into a pouch on his belt and from it produced a can of spray paint. 'Time to give Dr Watkinson an art attack,' he thought to himself, grinning as he shook the can before spraying across the packed shelves of books.

"See, Dr Watkinson, even these low-tech back-up files aren't completely safe from corruption," muttered Chaos as he scrawled the three letters of a well-known animal rights group in a rough design in day-glo yellow across a large block of book spines.

The cry of "Stop right there!" from the office doorway genuinely made Chaos jump. Instinctively and without turning, he slowly raised his hands, still holding the condemning evidence of the spray can.

Chaos heard the familiar sound of a weapon being cocked. “Turn around and identify yourself!” barked his unwelcome discoverer.

He did as he was told, checking his watch with a quick glance as he did so. There were still three minutes before the perimeter guards would report in. If he could get out of this situation quickly enough he could be on his way before things got too hot. Chaos looked at his captor and noted the slight red swelling on the man’s neck. He realised this was the perimeter guard he’d knocked out on his way in. Something was wrong. He should have been down for at least eight hours.

The guard kept his gun trained on the intruder as he read the luminous vandalism. “A-L-F. You one of those animal rights freaks?” he barked.

“Is the hedgehog alright?” asked Chaos calmly in a mocking tone.

“You’re in it deep, mate,” warned the guard. Chaos could see the man was intent on keeping his finger on the assault rifle’s trigger as he fumbled with his other hand to reach his radio microphone. “Tango One. Situation Red. Repeat, Situation Red. Intruder, Sector Seven. Over.” The radio replied with a static hiss.

Chaos realised the guard hadn’t reported in until this point. Maybe he was trying to save face? Trying to get the situation under control before anyone found out, avoid the embarrassment of having been taken out on the job ... especially by some soft animal rights activist. Whether this was true or not didn’t matter, but it would explain the lack of howling alarms and the absence of running personnel.

“Tango One,” tried the guard again. Then again even louder, as if shouting into the radio would make a difference to the blocked signal.

“Do you want me to have a go?” asked Chaos, purposely putting more pressure on the already stressed guard. “I’m quite good with electronics.”

“Shut it, you!” The man abandoned the radio and gripped the weapon with both hands again. “One move from you and I’ll decorate the rest of the office with your guts!”

Chaos nodded slowly to show he understood and that he was ‘shutting it’, pronto.

“Take your mask off!” ordered the guard. “Slowly!”

Chaos reached down with his right hand and pulled the black ski mask up high enough to reveal his face.

The guard’s expression and shoulders dropped simultaneously as he visibly lost the nervous tension in the rest of his body. “Jesus, you’re just a—”

Chaos knew a cue for action when he heard one. Before the armed man could react to his lightning movement, he won the second battle of reflexes that night. His heavy boot collided with the side of the guard’s knee forcing the joint against its normal movement axis. The complex structure of bones snapped with a sickening crack.

The guard folded to the side as his damaged leg could no longer support his weight. As he gave out a high pitched scream, the pain reflex that etched itself across his face also tightened his trigger finger. Bullets sprayed from his gun, cutting an arc as guard and gun fell toward the floor, first drilling the ceiling then ripping pages from the books. Finally they bit into and shattered the office window into a rain of silver fragments.

Chaos kicked the fallen guard’s gun across the office floor to keep it out of his grasp. He could see at that present moment the guard’s hands were only concerned with clamping his shattered leg, as if merely by being there they could heal the damaged limb.

An alarm howled out into the night air and Chaos slid his ski mask back down. Underneath it he was grinning like a cat that had been locked in an aquarium. Leaping through the destroyed

window he rolled onto the concrete below and into the building's shadow, his heart banging like a hammer.

'At last this mission is getting interesting,' thought Chaos. 'Time for a game of evade and escape.' He laughed to himself and then muttered, "Ninety-nine, one hundred, here I come, ready or not."

Chaos sprinted forward and melted into the night.

Three Years Earlier

RECRUITMENT DRIVE

Jake sat in the small office and grinned as the man behind the desk wiped the sweat from his bald head with a tatty greyed handkerchief. He flicked through the loose pages of a file. Stress was eating away at the overweight man.

“What are we going to do with you, Jake?” he said slowly without lifting his head from his reading. “I’m really at a loss this time.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mr Humpty—”

“Humphrey,” corrected the bald man, fixing Jake with a stare that was more plea than threat.

“Yeah, right,” repeated Jake, his dark brown eyes not wavering from the challenge. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Mr Humpty. Something always comes up at the last minute.”

Mr Humphrey lost what little control he had left and leapt to his feet. “There is no last minute this time, Jake.” He tried to shout but it came out more like a squeak of panic. “We’ve run out of options! Look, look,” he added, flicking through the papers in the file. “I’ve tried everything I can to help you but you always do something—”

“To mess it up?”

Mr Humphrey stood like a statue for a second before letting out a deep sigh, obviously trying to let his years of experience get a grip on his composure. "I know you've had problems, Jake. All the kids here have but you ... you seem to wallow in it, revel in it."

Jake stood up from his seat; at eleven years old and five foot four in height he was already two inches taller than his case worker. He knew this made Humpty feel uneasy and he often played on the fact. He pulled a sheet of paper from the file and read from it. "What about Mr and Mrs Rank? Maybe they'd be willing to give me another chance?"

Mr Humphrey snatched the paper from Jake's hand. "Another chance to give them high blood pressure, I suppose. Since they fostered you, they have removed their names from the fostering programme."

"Shame," smiled Jake. "They were such nice people."

"Too nice for you—" began Humphrey before he was able to stop himself. "I'm sorry Jake, I didn't mean that. Please sit down."

As Jake retook his seat he could see a flicker of relief on the face of Mr Humphrey as he regained the height advantage. "What now then? Am I doomed to spend the rest of my days here?" Jake said, indifferently.

Mr Humphrey let a rare smile break through his stressed face. "You don't exactly spend most of your days here anyway, do you Jake? Between running away and spending time in police custody, I think you're more familiar with the outside world than I am."

"You should get out of the office more, widen your experience; or," added Jake with a smirk, "at least try to heighten it anyway."

Mr Humphrey ignored Jake's smart comment, occupying himself instead with straightening and closing Jake's file.

“The fact of the matter, I’m afraid,” he said eventually, looking at Jake with what appeared to be genuine sorrow, “is that it’s out of my hands now.”

“What do you mean?” said Jake, sitting up in his seat and taking full notice for the first time since he’d been called into the oppressive office.

Mr Humphrey lifted Jake’s file and banged the edge of it on the desk a couple of times to tidy the substantial contents before laying it flat once more. “You are not my problem anymore, Jake. You’re being transferred.”

“Transferred,” said Jake, swallowing. “Where to?”

There was a short loud knock on the office door.

“Come in,” snapped Mr Humphrey loudly.

The door was pushed open by a tall, thin man in a dark suit. Everything about the man said ‘tidy and in order’, from the tip of the perfectly cut hair to the shine on his black shoes. With two strides the man was in the office and at Jake’s side.

“Mr Humphrey?” asked the man, holding out his hand in greeting.

“Yes,” replied the bald man, shaking the offered hand, “and you must be?”

“Packard. Sorry I’m a bit late. Terrible trouble with the traffic, but speeding only causes accidents, doesn’t it?”

“Quite true, Mr Packard,” smiled Humphrey, seemingly pleased to be in the presence of someone who didn’t reek of trouble, like most of the people he had to deal with. Jake could sense the unease the short man felt at the other man’s six-foot-plus stature.

Packard turned and looked at Jake. “And you must be Jake,” he said, ruffling his hand through Jake’s thick, brown hair.

Jake pulled his head back, sneering with disgust. He had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that the last two years spent bending Humpty to his will were about to be

thrown away and he was going to have to start all over again on this ... this, touchy-feely prat. Jake stared as defiantly as he could, directly into Packard's eyes, firing the first shot in the war he had silently declared on this new enemy.

Packard absorbed the hard look and continued to smile without flinching. "I can understand you not trusting me, Jake, but soon you and I will be the best of pals. What do you say, hey?"

Jake opened his mouth to voice his opinion on the subject but Mr Humphrey, well aware of Jake's ability to use colourful language, intervened quickly. "Well, here's his file, Mr Packard. I've arranged to have his belongings packed and ready for collection on your way out." He thrust the bulging brown card folder into the man's hand. "I hope ... I'm sure you'll have better luck getting through to Jake than I did." Humphrey glanced down at his desk, unable to hold the look of either of the other two people present in his office.

Jake couldn't help taking pride in Humphrey's genuinely upset look, brought on by the man's deep feeling of failure. It gave him a sense of confidence for his new job of work, namely Packard.

"Well," laughed Packard. "I'll try my best." He paused and looked at Jake again. "Actually *we'll* try our best, won't we, Jakey boy?" he said, ruffling his hair again.

Jake jerked away from the hand so violently he almost fell out of his seat. "My name's Jake," he hissed, vehemently.

"See that?" Packard chortled. "We're already on first name terms."

He held out his hand once again. "Nice to meet you, Mr Humphrey, and sorry about the fleeting visit. I'm running a bit late. Still, you never know, we may meet again; hopefully then we'll have more time to get to know each other better?"

Mr Humphrey smiled vaguely in reply before turning to Jake. "Good luck, Jake," he said, almost offering his hand but stopping

himself at the last second, realising the futility of the gesture.

Jake's grin returned once more. He thought he owed it a final outing for his old adversary. "You too, Mr Humpty. Avoid any high walls; you don't want a great fall or anything like that."

"Come on, mate," said Packard, nudging Jake toward the door. "I'd like to get you settled into your new home before nightfall."

Jake fell forward stubbornly. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, you'll love it," said Packard. "It's perfect for a lad like you."

'We'll see about that,' thought Jake, leaving Humpty's office. The familiar door clicked shut behind him for the last time. As he walked away Jake couldn't help imagining Humpty indulging in a dance of joy in his tiny office; a wobbly, sweaty jig accompanied by a child-like song, something along the lines of 'I've got rid of Highfield. I've got rid of Highfield'. The thought of Humpty being happy did not make Jake feel comfortable at all.

NOT SO GREAT ESCAPE

Right from the point when Packard had insisted on carrying Jake's packed holdall and placing it in the boot of the car, Jake had decided his new adversary was going to be an easy job. Even Humpty, who had gone way out of his way to be gracefully helpful and positive, was a tyrant compared to this ever-pleasant and calm fool. Packard filled every available moment with friendly banter in an obvious attempt to put his new charge at ease and win over his friendship.

After two hours of driving and mindless one-way chatter, Jake was reaching the end of his patience. He turned his head and stared at Packard. "Do you ever shut up?" he said coldly.

For a split second Jake thought he saw a break in Packard's smile. He was just about to congratulate himself on getting a chip in the man's armour of relentless cheerfulness when Packard interrupted his thoughts.

"Would you like me to stop talking, Jake? I can do if you want, it's your choice. I was just trying to break the ice so you and I can become friends as quickly as possible. Then we can work together from there." Packard smiled even more broadly in reply to Jake's stern gaze.

"I am not your friend," hissed Jake.

Packard focused his attention back on the motorway

down which, Jake had noticed, with no surprise, he was travelling at a constant sixty-seven miles per hour. "Maybe not yet, Jake, but I have a feeling we're going to be."

Jake had had enough sugar-coated bull for one day and decided if he couldn't shut Packard up he could at least control the conversation. "Where is this new prison you're taking me to?"

"It's not a prison," chirped Packard. "I like to think of it as an institute of opportunity for troubled youngsters."

"Really," said Jake, showing his disinterest in the man's opinion by turning to look out of the passenger side window.

"It's called St. Margaret's," continued Packard, "though most of the students just call it the Academy. You'll love it. It's set in the most beautiful countryside and—"

"Academy," repeated Jake chewing off the tip of a finger nail and spitting it into the foot well. "Sounds a bit posh."

"I suppose it does," admitted Packard. "To tell you the truth, St. Margaret's used to be exactly that in a past life. It was a boarding school for the children of rich Victorian merchants. Those kids not quite good enough to mix with the aristocracy of the day."

Jake continued to watch the embankment of the motorway glide past his window. "Sounds familiar," he said quietly.

"But it's a fantastic place now. No hint of class or wealth privilege at all," said Packard enthusiastically. "A really modern-thinking establishment with bang up to date educational and training facilities and the accommodation is out of this—"

Jake turned his head to his chatty chauffeur. "Hold

on, you mean I'll live *and* go to school at this place?" He felt his flippant comment about prison was coming back to haunt him.

"That's right," beamed Packard. "The Academy is a completely self-contained unit."

"Twenty-four hours a day?" said Jake, the obvious disgust written in his face. "Every day in the same place?"

"Well," said Packard slowly, "there are field trips and visits to places of interest and the like."

Jake fell into a silence as he mulled over this new turn his life had taken. The thought of being stuck in one place all the time did not appeal to him at all. At least in the last place there was always the opportunity between there and school to slope off and lead his own life, but this Academy thing sounded like prison; prison under a different name. Temporary accommodation overnight in a police cell before being picked up by Humpty was one thing. Being permanently banged up was another thing altogether.

Jake looked at the motorway sign that swept slowly past his window. It told him Birmingham was only eight miles on. 'The Midlands' he thought. 'Bang in the middle of the country; that'll do me. I'll take some finding when I've got every direction to choose from to run in.'

Jake let his face drop and half closed his eyelids.

"Are you alright, Jake?" asked Packard a few moments later when he saw the slack expression on his passenger's face.

Jake swallowed before answering, to add effect. "I think I'm going to be sick," he mumbled, keeping his head bowed.

"Okay, okay," said Packard, straining his neck to help him read the approaching road sign. "There's a service station up ahead.

We'll stop there and get some fresh air and maybe a cup of tea?"

Jake faked a retch.

"Maybe not tea then," said Packard, putting his foot down on the accelerator and speeding up to a breakneck seventy miles per hour. "Hold it in, Jake; we'll be there in a second; breathe deeply ... or something?"

Jake glanced at the sign indicating it was half a mile to the services. Turning his face from Packard he allowed himself a grin that lasted until the car drove off the motorway and into the service station filter lane.

As Packard's car came to a stop, parked perfectly in the middle of the two white lines that marked out the bay, Jake slipped off his seatbelt and opened the passenger door. He leapt from the car and immediately sprinted away, leaving the passenger door wide open. He pounded his feet against the hard tarmac. He kept his eyes on his objective and within seconds he had reached the small wooden fence that separated the service station car park from the fields it bordered. He vaulted over it with a cursory glance over his shoulder. Packard had only just managed to cover a few yards from the car. Jake grinned. "See ya, old pal," he muttered and made his way to freedom.

After a few minutes Jake had settled into a steady jog. He made his way across the field, which wasn't easy due to the waist-high crop, and ploughed furrows in the hard soil. 'Not to worry,' he thought to himself confidently after many experiences in such situations, 'blokes in suits can't run for sh—' Something snagged at his ankle and Jake hit the ground hard. He instinctively threw his hands forward and tried to save his head from taking the full impact of the fall.

"Going somewhere, Highfield?" said a voice from above him. It sounded like Packard, but the tone was different.

Jake rolled over quickly and got to his feet. “That wasn’t a very friendly thing to do,” he said, in a defiant tone, trying to hide his surprise at being caught.

Packard grinned and it bore none of the gentleness of his previous smiling. “Perhaps not, but it certainly got your attention.”

Jake was enraged. He looked at the man before him who was breathing only a little harder than he had been when he was driving and yet he’d managed to catch him with apparent ease. “How the—”

“Basic trigonometry and predictive psychology,” interrupted Packard. “You’ll learn all about it at the Academy.”

“I’m not going to your crappy prison,” hissed Jake, his hands clenching into fists.

“Oh, but you are, Highfield,” replied Packard with a matter-of-fact tone. “I don’t particularly care how you get there. But you are. To be honest with you, I was getting a little tired of the easy, gentle way myself. Not really my style.”

Jake leapt forward. Both feet left the ground in an attempt to make up for the height disadvantage he was facing. Then he swung his fist with all his might at Packard’s face.

The man swayed to the left, drove his knee into Jake’s exposed stomach and then playfully cuffed the boy to the floor with an open hand. “You’ve got spirit, Highfield,” he laughed. “Awful control, but plenty of spirit. Given time, St. Margaret’s will really make something of you.”

Jake stood up again, ignoring the pain in his stomach and the choking effect it was having on his breathing. His brown eyes were damp, forming tears made up of anger and pain in equal measure.

“And again?” said Packard, seeing Jake’s obvious murderous intent. “Excellent, Highfield. Try to be less emotional this time; use your brain before you use your fists.”

Jake snarled like a wild animal and swung out at the man with all he had. He thrashed his fists in huge arcs one after the other; left, right, left, right, each as ineffective at hitting its target as the last. As his arms quickly tired, he tried kicking out, but all his attacks were dodged or blocked by Packard who continued to grin throughout with delight.

“That’s it, Highfield,” said Packard, egging Jake on. “Let it all out.”

Jake’s head pounded with frustration and overheated blood. He ground his teeth one last time and feinting with his left hand threw his right fist. To his surprise it made contact with Packard’s mouth. The man staggered back a pace at the blow, but Jake was too tired to follow up the attack. He stood still. All his remaining physical energy invested in dragging air into his lungs. He was just able to keep his fists ineffectually raised by the power of his will alone.

Packard placed the back of his hand to his lip and pulled it away stained with a smear of blood. “Nice shot, Highfield,” he said, the grin still nailed to his damaged mouth. “You’ve got a solid attack, a bit wayward, but solid nonetheless. Let’s see if your defence is up to anything. Ready?”

Jake discovered he was anything but ready. Open-hand slaps rained in on him from every angle and even though he knew the man was merely toying with him and not using his clenched fists, Jake had no energy left in his body to make any kind of attack in reply. All he could do was stay on his feet and curl from the waist, keeping his arms tight to his sides to protect his ribs and head. Eventually the slaps stopped, but the stinging from their accurate strikes did not.

“Well, that was fun. Wasn’t it, Highfield?” said Packard, fixing his tie.

Jake straightened himself and looked Packard in the eye. “That was assault,” he barked into the man’s face.

Packard chuckled. “Don’t be stupid, Highfield,” he said, pulling on his shirt cuffs. “That was self-defence.” The man’s face suddenly relaxed from its joviality into a blank, emotionless state. “This is assault.”

Jake didn’t see the fist coming but he felt its impact alright. He’d once crashed a bike he’d stolen whilst trying to escape from the police and gone straight over the handlebars face-first into a brick wall. This, he decided, felt worse. He hit the hard ground for a third time with a bone-jarring thud.

“Are you going to lie there moaning for the rest of the day?” said Packard, after a few moments.

Jake looked up through tear-filled eyes and could just make out the outstretched hand. He didn’t need to touch his face to find out whether Packard had also managed to draw blood in revenge for his injury; he could feel it running across his cheeks and hear it trickling into his ears.

“Well?” said Packard, thrusting his hand further forward insistently.

Jake grabbed the hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. He didn’t know what to say. He’d never been hit like that by an adult before. Even the coppers weren’t allowed to touch him, no matter what he’d done.

“I think that makes us even,” said Packard. “We’ve both tapped the claret.”

“What?” said Jake, dabbing at his bloody nose with his sleeve.

Packard passed Jake his handkerchief. “Claret, Highfield.

It's what old-time boxers used to say when they made their opponent bleed."

"Oh," said Jake absently, wiping the blood from his face and then forcing himself, despite the pain, to blow his nose clear. He looked at the crimson hanky. "You've broken my nose."

"No, I haven't," said Packard with a confidence that said 'I could have if I'd wanted to'. "It was just a knock; let you know the score, who's in charge here, that's all."

"But—"

"New life, new rules, Highfield," interrupted Packard sternly, before adding in a calm tone, "I'd happily tell you more but the Headmaster likes to welcome the new students personally and give them the full speech himself." Then suddenly he clapped his hands together and said, "Right, after that little work out I could do with a cup of tea; how about you?"

Jake felt like he had little choice but to nod his agreement; he had no wish to instigate another assault from the man. He fell into step alongside Packard and strode back through the long corn towards the service station.

'Little choice for now, anyway,' thought Jake, a scowl deepening on his face.

ST MARGARETS

It was early evening and the daylight was beginning to fade. Packard was driving down the winding B-road, slowing only for corners before gunning the car along the straighter sections. Boredom made Jake feel like they had been driving for hundreds of miles since leaving the motorway. An endless sea of countryside greenery had passed by his window, broken only by the occasional village or lonely church. Having never known anything but city life, Jake felt like an alien on a strange planet where the dominant life forms were grass and leaves.

Packard changed down two gears, spun the steering wheel hard to the left and heavily applied the brakes. The car stopped in front of an impressive high gate in a wall that Jake assumed must have run in either direction but was hidden from the road by a dense hedge. On the other side of the stone barrier, where this new road continued beyond the gate, was the forest that had kept the car in its cool shadow for some miles previously.

Jake noted the wrought iron gates, at least four metres high, were held in place by two thick, natural stone pillars. These were a further metre higher than the gates, weathered black by years of silent service. On top of the left-hand pillar, Jake noticed a security camera swing to point its suspicious gaze down in their direction.

Jake watched Packard slip his hand under the car's dashboard, obviously operating some kind of remote control. There was a loud buzz and slowly the heavy gates began to sweep inwards, with the odd complaining 'clank', to allow the car through.

The car laboured on the slightly inclined road beyond the gates as its wheels fell into and climbed out of the many dips in the uneven surface. It looked like someone had rolled out a length of tarmac carpet casually between the trees, paying no attention to finishing touches. The black uneven edges of the strip merged roughly with the dead brown sponge that was the forest floor. The trees were densely packed on either side of the car, leaving only a scar of sky amidst the all-consuming gloom to focus upon. Jake turned his head to the left to look into the mass of trees, his eyes finding it hard to send his brain a clear image as the speed of the travelling car blurred his view.

"It goes as far in the other direction as well," Packard said calmly, breaking the silence he'd kept since he had demonstrated to Jake who was in charge.

Jake didn't reply. He could see the trees were tightly packed and a tangle of other vegetation dominated the forest floor. He'd also noticed that they'd travelled a good distance since passing through the gate and there was still no end to the trees in sight. 'It's only a bunch of trees,' thought Jake, and although the wall and the gate were high, he knew from experience he could climb either in his sleep. Something flickered between two trees. Its lighter form threw a contrast with the darker tones of the bark, catching Jake's attention.

"I think I just saw something," said Jake, without thinking or meaning to say it out loud.

"Probably a deer," replied Packard. "Welcome to the Academy, Highfield," he added, with little sense of warmth to his voice.

The nose of the car dipped down as it broke free of the forest boundary. The rough road changed from incline to decline and they now ran between flat grassed grounds. Despite his determined mindset not to be moved or impressed by anything that Packard showed him, Jake found his eyes widening. The curtain of trees was drawn to reveal a building that dominated the landscape. It looked like all the power of nature around it bowed down, as if before a king. From this point of elevation on the road Jake could see that the forest surrounded the grounds in every direction. Its boundary formed a huge circle, in the centre of which St. Margaret's proudly stood. He got the feeling that the trees looked too frightened to approach any closer to this man-made structure.

The tarmac continued on, bringing the imposing building closer and bigger. It ended its casual run by spilling into a huge round patch of almost golden coloured gravel that crunched loudly under the wheels of Packard's car. Now he was up close to the building, Jake could see it was a mix of periods and ideas from different craftsmen.

The central piece of the architectural jigsaw was obviously older than the rest of the front aspect of the building. Extensions had been tagged on either side with some effort to mimic the plain yet sturdy original construction. Columns of windows three floors high ran the length of the building, broken only by the presence of a large arched entrance in the centre of the ground floor, over which a coat of arms had been carved into a sandstone block. A slate roof, high and steep, capped the building like a dark frown, unhappy with the show of unnecessary bright colour the bricks gave off.

Packard parked the car at the foot of a flight of steps that led up to a grand set of half-glazed double doors and switched the

engine off. "Okay, out you get," he ordered.

Jake did as he was told. He looked up at the building. Its three stories seemed to roll forward and loom over him, giving him the weird feeling that St. Margaret's was trying to study him in return.

"Move it, Highfield," barked Packard as he jogged up the steps. "The Headmaster doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Jake slammed the car door shut, followed Packard up the steps and through the outer wooden doors. Inside, Jake discovered the building was even more of a hybrid than it was on the exterior. Down the corridor to his left he could see where the modern world had encroached on the once dominant wood and brass. Slim, white central heating radiators sat under thick dark rails of wood that ran horizontally along the plain walls, which rose up to join the ceiling at perfect angles. Modern high efficiency bulbs sat in ornately worked brass light fittings and the wooden floors were dotted with the tell-tale metal plates that covered power sources.

A voice piped up from his right and Jake turned to see a boy a little older than himself walking up the corridor. "Good evening, sir," said the well turned out pupil in Packard's direction.

Jake stared at the boy, making no effort to hide the sneer that graced his face. 'Creep,' he thought to himself as the boy walked past him and continued on down the corridor. His feelings of distain were cut short by Packard.

"Move it, Highfield," he said and started up a highly polished wooden staircase, taking the steps three at a time.

Jake had to jog to keep up. 'This Headmaster must be one sod if he has this head-case on edge,' thought Jake, as he made his way up to the second floor.

Jake found Packard waiting for him outside a dark panelled door. "Right, Highfield, just two rules when you meet the Headmaster, shut up and stay shut up. Got it?"

Jake grinned. "Are all the other teachers this nervous around the Headmaster?"

"I'm not a teacher," said Packard, pausing slightly to find the right words before continuing. "I'm more of an ex-student who helps out. And take my advice, it will do you good if you are wary of the Headmaster. Believe me." Then he knocked on the door loudly.

"Enter." The command resonated from the other side of the door.

As soon as he put one foot in the Headmaster's office, Jake could tell that here was one place in St. Margaret's where the touch of modernity had little influence. The room wasn't dark, but the décor of wooden panelled walls seemed to be feeding on the light to leave a feeling of gloom in its place. Even the large desk that dominated the floor space looked darkly menacing, like a guard dog ready to pounce. Oil paintings of historic battle scenes adorned the walls and a torn flag hung limply from the ceiling. A huge fireplace that looked too clean to have been used for many years dominated one wall of the room. Above this hung the largest of the bloody scenes of carnage: red-coated men fighting semi-naked African natives.

In the centre of this museum stood a man who looked perfectly at home. He stood tall and proud in his tweed suit behind the desk, tugging gently on his thick grey moustache that blended into his bushy sideburns. His hair too was the colour of polished steel and Jake guessed he had to be at least fifty years old, yet blue eyes shone from his pale skinned face with the energy of a much younger man.

"Sorry we're late, Headmaster," said Packard, pushing Jake in front of the desk and placing the file Mr Humphrey had

given him onto the green leather inlay. “We had a little ... delay in our journey.”

Apart from the Headmaster, Packard and himself, Jake saw the room also held a well built man with tattooed arms. He was wearing a vest and a pair of camouflage pants that were tied tightly at the ankle above highly polished boots. The man’s large, deeply tanned head was shaved smooth and shone like syrup under the ceiling light. A white scar that ran from his ear to his temple stood out like a streak of lightning. He stood as stiff as a statue with his hands clasped behind his back.

In front of him, barely reaching up to the bald man’s chest, was a girl who Jake figured was about the same age as himself. She was thin and pale, but the first thing he noticed about her was her long, thick, untidy dark hair, a fistful of which she was chewing on nervously with the side of her mouth. With her head hung low, the curtain of hair hid most of her face from view.

The Headmaster looked at Packard and then at Jake. He seemed satisfied with the word ‘delay’ as an explanation and sat down into the high-backed leather chair behind his desk. He reached for the file Packard had placed before him and opened it.

“Mr Highfield,” he said slowly after a few moments flicking through the loose leaves of paper, “I am the Headmaster of St. Margaret’s. You will refer to me as such or you will refer to me as ‘sir’, whichever you feel more comfortable with.” He lifted his face from the file and without a hint of humour added, “To my face at least.”

Jake grinned but the Headmaster’s face did not lose its stern expression. He returned his attention to the file before him. “Jake Highfield,” he read out loud. “Abandoned at birth and found outside a café called ‘Jake’s Butty Bar’ on Highfield Road ... and imaginatively named by the nurses that first cared for you.”

“It could have been worse,” said Jake, “I might have been

found outside Hugh's Butty Bar on Jarse Lane."

The Headmaster looked up from his reading. "I shall assume for this one instance that the expression 'A child should be seen and not heard,' is new to you," he said coldly.

'Really?' thought Jake, 'I'll make you hear me, you old dinosaur.' But he only got as far as opening his mouth before Packard's hand fell on his shoulder in a firm warning of silence. Jake closed his mouth.

The Headmaster continued to flick through the pages of the dossier. "Quite an impressive record of mischief for such a young man," he said. "Burglary, joy riding, shoplifting, vandalism, arson...."

"I never started that fire," said Jake calmly.

The Headmaster paused his page flicking. "Of course not, Mr Highfield. The world is full of jails filled with innocent people," he said, his tone laced with disbelief. Jake decided not to push his point; he knew he'd done all the other things in his file. He got the feeling the Headmaster didn't care if he was guilty of one or all of them.

The Headmaster hurried through the last few pages, obviously having seen enough to reach a conclusion. "Well, Mr Highfield, I am sure there are several agencies, not least the police, who will have to cut their overtime now that you are with us."

"I do my best," began Jake before wincing in pain at the grip Packard applied to his shoulder. He couldn't help but notice that the Headmaster and the man in the vest did not even flinch, let alone condemn, the undue use of pain as a control method. As soon as he could, Jake decided, he was getting out of this asylum.

The Headmaster closed the file, got out of his chair and walked over to the single lead-light window in the room. He

removed a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed gently at a smear on the glass. The window dominated the wall behind the desk. The centre of this glazier's masterpiece of bright stained glass depicted St. Margaret standing on the back of a slain dragon, her face an expression of serene tranquility. The fallen dragon, even with its heart pierced by a lance, looked as if he slept peacefully, his soul purged of evil by the blessed female. Around the edge of the expertly cut delicate shapes that formed the scene were clear, diamond-shaped panes of glass which scattered out to fill the remainder of the frame.

"We here at St. Margaret's do not bear grudges about a young man's...." he glanced fleetingly toward the girl in the room before returning to his study of the glass before him, "... or young woman's past. Nor do we pass judgement on them." For a second Jake thought he saw a dream-like serenity fall over the Headmaster's face. "The world's great empires would never have risen had their builders been judged too early in their lives." He paused letting these thoughts sink in before turning again to address Jake and the girl. "Future digression, however, will not be tolerated in the slightest. In its long and proud history, St. Margaret's, in its different forms, has prepared and moulded the young blood of this nation. Taught and nurtured them before sending them out into society proud and ready to make a difference to the world. You have been given to St. Margaret's so you can follow in their footsteps and there can be no deviation from that path." The Headmaster paused again, his face set like stone. "Be assured the rest of society has washed its hands of you. We, and St. Margaret's, are your last hope."

"I..." whispered the girl almost silently.

"Quiet!" barked the man in the vest, making the girl jump

at his voice.

Jake assumed this loud bully was her equivalent to his 'pal' Packard.

"While you are here," continued the Headmaster, regaining the seat behind his desk, "you will do as you are told, when you are told. Without exception. St. Margaret's is not a normal academy and so it follows that you are not normal students. Your actions to date have relieved you of the right to normality and so you are bound to St. Margaret's and all of her rules. You will work for your board, lodging, education and training. There are no free rides at the Academy."

"A boot camp," sneered Jake, earning himself another dose of pain from Packard's grip.

"You will also be expected to take part in certain extra curricular activities," continued the Headmaster, ignoring Jake's comment. "As a form of repayment towards the debt you owe to society, shall we say. But you will learn more about that aspect of your new life as you progress with us at St. Margaret's."

Before Jake could even start to imagine what the Headmaster's last comment meant, he was stopped by the girl at his side.

"I can't stay here!" she screamed, her shaking hands covering her face. "I can't!"

"Quiet!" bellowed the man in the vest again, this time punctuating his demand by hitting the girl so hard with the back of his hand that she was knocked to the floor. There the girl lay, curled up in a ball, her face buried into the carpet, sobbing. The man in the vest clenched his fist and raised it above his head, ready to strike down at his helpless victim.

Jake didn't think; he just reacted. He pulled himself free of Packard's grip and jumped up, sinking his teeth into the raised muscular forearm, dragging it down under his body weight.

The man let out a gasp of pain as Jake bit down as hard as

he could.

A split second later Jake felt Packard's hand grasp him round the back of the neck and squeeze tightly. His automatic response was to scream, thus releasing his grip on the arm between his teeth. His eyes half closed with pain, Jake could just make out the man in the vest turn on him, ready to have his revenge.

"That'll be the last time you use your teeth on me, Boy!" the man growled, pulling his fist back ready to practice some very basic dentistry. Jake could see from the man's sparsely toothed snarl that he was already way ahead of him in those stakes.

"Mr Routledge," said the Headmaster sternly without making the effort to shout. "This is not a barrack room and I will not have undisciplined brawling in it. Do you understand?"

"But Sah—" protested Routledge, his fist still poised and aimed at Jake's screwed-up face.

"Do you understand, Mr Routledge?"

Jake had raised his arms as best he could in an effort to try and block anything that was coming his way.

Routledge kept his eyes on Jake but his body relaxed. "Yes, Sah, I understand, Sah."

"Good," said the Headmaster. "I am sure you and Mr Highfield will get off to a better start once he is on the assault course, Mr Routledge."

Jake saw Routledge's grin grow, revealing only a few teeth. "Yes Sah, I'm sure you're right, Sah!"

The grip on Jake's neck relaxed and he snatched himself free from Packard; daring to allow himself a sneer in the man's direction. 'Great,' he thought, straightening his clothes. 'This loony bin has got an assault course run by a psycho too. Can it get any better?'

"Right, I think we have finished for now," said the Headmaster,

rising from his desk and looking out of the decorative window once more. "Get Mr Highfield and Miss Dunne settled into their new accommodation and make sure they have all the required timetables for their new beginnings."

"Yes, Headmaster," said Packard, pulling Jake by the arm towards the door.

"Get up, Girlie," barked Routledge as he bent down and hauled the girl up off the floor.

The girl had her head lowered and her face was completely hidden by her hair. She was pushed by Routledge out of the Headmaster's office back toward the stairs. Jake could still hear her sobbing and her situation only served to strengthen his own desire to escape as soon as possible.

"Mr Highfield," said the Headmaster as he and Packard reached the door.

"Yes?" replied Jake.

Packard prodded him in the ribs.

"Yes, Headmaster," corrected Jake with as little respect as he could muster.

"I would never have had you down as one for chivalry. There is obviously much more to you than a file full of foolish errors."

"What?" said Jake, confused by the man's statement.

"Saving the damsel in distress," said the Headmaster, retrieving a pipe from his jacket pocket. "We will make a knight of the realm out of you yet, Mr Highfield."

'What are you talking about, you nutter?' Jake thought to himself, but out loud he said, "Yes, Headmaster." At this moment, when his world had been turned upside down and inside out, it was all he could think of to say in reply.

Packard pulled him out of the room and closed the door.

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