

starting

LEWIS SPOTTISWOOD

PUSPHA PATEL

PARKER

LIONEL JACKMAN

DEVONISH

SPOTIKUS

and **MRS BOOTLES**



a book by
**ANDREW
FRANCIS**

Spoticus

and the Children's Revolt

by Andrew Francis

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Chapter One

Let's get a few things sorted first.

***Lewis Spottiswood:** Age 12. Bit ordinary. Parents both work in a local supermarket. Sister called Bev, age 14. Lives on a rather dull road in a rather dull town in the south of England. Goes to an ordinary school which is rather dull. Quite enjoys school and is OK at most lessons. Likes his Gran but she lives in another dull town. Likes games, especially on the PC. No pets. Best friends; Parker and Push. About to become an Enemy of the People.*

That's all you need to know for now.

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It was Friday 7th May and it was the day after the General Election. Lewis was vaguely aware that there was some big change happening to the government but it wasn't really sinking in yet. He was sitting on the settee waiting for his father to get bored with the news. It had been on for ten minutes and he could have been watching the Simpsons.

'Why do they keep going on about the English Elections?' he asked his father. 'Why not Scotland and Wales and Thingy?'

'Read a paper for once,' his father said and tossed him the Daily Trumpet. Lewis scanned down the front page story. "Landslide for Jackman... blah-de-blah, blah-de-blah, First elections to new English Parliament... blah-de-blah, England For Adults take control, blah-de-blah" said the story.

'The other countries in the UK have their own parliaments now,' explained his father, but Lewis was already thinking about giving up on the telly and playing "Sword of Death" on the PC.

He didn't quite realise what was in store for him and his mates in the coming months. He didn't yet appreciate that the small cloud of grown-up lunacy that had had been building up for the past few months was now a fully fledged tornado and was about to sweep down on the children of England. He had yet to grasp that the England For Adults party was about to turn him into a criminal mastermind.

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Colonel Jackman stood by the curtains of the Cabinet Room in Number Ten Downing Street and took a sneaky look at the cheering crowds behind the large iron gates. He was Prime Minister of England and he had achieved a political miracle. Six months before, no one had heard of his England For

Adults party and national politics looked set to continue along the usual boring and predictable course. But he'd changed all that. He had created a legend.

A few minor events had changed the course of history. A boy in North Allerton had won a court case saying that his parents had violated his Human Rights because they wouldn't take him to Disneyland, Florida. Some adults got quite cross about that.

A girl in Middlesborough burned her own house down and her parents were sent to jail for failing to teach her about the danger of playing with matches. Some adults got quite cross about that.

A teacher in Southampton was forced to apologise to the class that had chased her out of school because she hadn't warned them in time that their homework was overdue. Some adults got quite cross about that.

The papers frothed and seethed about the Tide of Unruly Youths who were terrorising the nation. Television documentaries showed pictures of Young People on the Rampage. Politicians started talking about Taking Back the Streets from the hoodlums and the hoodies. And Jackman saw his chance.

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But none of that had any impact on Lewis. Yet. His mate Parker had called round and they were fiddling with Lewis's bike.

Parker was two months older than Lewis but two centimetres shorter. He had moved to the big school from a different junior school from Lewis so they had only known each other for a few months. But they were already life-long friends.

Parker held up his grease-covered fingers and grinned at Lewis from behind them. They had successfully replaced the dislodged chain from Lewis's bike. 'Let's go down the shops,' he said. It was early evening and, being a Friday, there was no homework. Leastways, none that wouldn't keep till last thing on Sunday night. 'I want to pick up my magazine and my sister owes me fifty pence for sweets.'

They pushed their bikes to the gate and were wobbling about on the pavement while trying to mount them when a voice rang out from behind next door's hedge. 'Spotty, wait up,' it said, and it was followed round the corner by the face of Lewis's neighbour, Push.

'Not Spotty,' said Lewis but without conviction. It was no use having a surname like Spottiswood and not expecting his friends to take advantage of it. The fact that he had a blemish-free complexion (but rather mousy hair)

made no difference. He would always be Spotty and he had almost – but not quite – given up minding.

‘Spotty, hold-up,’ said Push. ‘I’ll get my bike. Where are we going?’

‘WE are going to the newsagents,’ said Parker but he didn’t really mind the intrusion. He and Push had been mates since Infants and the fact that she lived next door to his new ‘best friend’ was a bit of a bonus. She was officially “OK for a girl, I suppose.”

‘My Dad is a new Councillor,’ beamed Push as they peddled down Pankhurst Way. ‘He’s part of the District Council and everyone has to call him Councillor Patel.’ Parker groaned. ‘Boring!’ he said, but Push was undeterred.

‘He’s part of the new England For Adults party and he says they are really going to kick some ass in the stupid council. He says they won’t know what’s hit them when they take over on Monday. I think it’s a laugh. My Dad! A Councillor!’

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The Colonel pushed the shiny red button on his desk marked, “Cabinet Secretary”, and waited the 2.4 seconds it took for the government official to slide in through the large oak doors at the end of his office.

‘Yes, Prime Minister?’ he asked.

“YES PRIME MINISTER,” thought Jackman. “I love it!”

He turned slowly to the secretary. ‘Oh, nothing, just testing the button.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister,’ purred the secretary and slid back out of the room.

Jackman waited ten seconds and pushed the button again.

‘Yes, Prime Minister?’ said the secretary as he glided back into the room.

“YES PRIME MINISTER,” thought Jackman. “I will never get tired of hearing that.”

‘Do you like my tie, Mr Secretary?’ (He hadn’t quite memorised his name yet).

‘It’s very nice, Prime Minister.’

‘Good. Thank you,’ he said and waved his hand in a sort of Go Now way.

Thirty seconds later the secretary was back in the room and looking ever so slightly frowny.

‘Yes, Prime Minister?’

‘Get me some milk for Mrs Bootles, would you,’ he said. The Secretary regarded the disgustingly large cat that was sleeping on a fluffy pink cushion in an armchair in the corner.

‘I’m sure that can be arranged, Prime Minister. I’ll have a word with the household staff,’ he bristled.

‘No, I want you to do it. I’m not trusting the job to one of those oiks. You get the milk.’ Jackman pulled himself up to his full five foot eleven and glared at the secretary.

‘I don’t think my job description extends to feeding domestic animals, Mr Prime Minister,’ said the secretary. He had started to sweat a little bit.

‘Do you like your job, Mr Secretary?’ asked Jackman.

‘It’s an honour to serve Her Majesty’s Government, sir.’

‘THEN GET THE MILK,’ bawled the colonel, ‘Or I’ll have you peeling spuds in the kitchen! And it will be your job to make sure no harm comes to Mrs Bootles. And if she so much as waves her tail while you’re in the room, I’ll have you locked up in the Tower of London. NOW GET OUT!’

The secretary took out a spotted handkerchief and dabbed at his sweating forehead. He backed slowly towards the door. He even did a sort of bow before slipping out silently.

Jackman waited thirty seconds and pressed the red button again.

‘Yes, Prime Minister?’

‘You got to say, “Yes, Prime Minister”.’

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The three of them burst into Mr Khan’s shop still laughing at something Parker had said about geography teachers. ‘I’ll have my usual please, Mr Khan,’ said Lewis and slammed a two pound coin on the counter. They were all giggling too hard to notice the tide of red slowly covering the shopkeeper’s face.

‘Get out of my shop!’ he blurted and slammed the till shut with a resounding ching.

‘You wot?’ said Parker. They had all straightened up and stopped laughing now.

‘You can read, can’t you? Get out of my shop,’ he said and pointed at the door.

‘Mr Khan, it’s me, Lewis,’ said Lewis but without effect.

‘You,’ he said, digging a finger into Push’s chest, ‘Go to that door and tell me what it says.’

Push dutifully edged towards the door and peered round it to see what Mr Khan was pointing at. There was a piece of card blu-tacked to the inside of the glass. It looked as if it had been torn from the back of a cornflakes packet. In the middle, in untidy red felt-tipped letters, it said, “CHILDREN

UNDER 16 MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY AN ADULT.
THANKYOU". She read it out aloud.

'So why do you barge in here like you own the place. Things are going to be different from now on. I'm not putting up with you little thieves anymore!'

Lewis considered himself to be a fairly honest boy and he thought his friends were more or less the same. It was true, there were some older kids who crowded into the shop and nicked sweets while Mr Khan was distracted. But that was nothing to do with them.

'I only came in to get my magazine,' said Lewis.

'Then you come back with a responsible adult,' said Mr Khan. 'This is a new era. We're in charge now, not you little buggers.'

Push muttered something about Taking Their Custom Elsewhere as they backed out of the door. Mr Khan had picked up a broom and was waving it with menace.

'What's he mean – New Era?' asked Parker as they slumped down on the wall next to their bikes.

'He's in the same lot as my Dad,' said Push. 'You know, The Adults Party, the thing on the news.'

'Anyone would think we were criminals,' said Lewis and kicked a pebble into the road.

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The Cabinet Secretary had slipped out of Number Ten and nipped along to The Strand where he found a small shop that could sell him toys for cats. He returned with a Catnip-scented mouse, a ball with a bell in it and piece of squeaky foam in the shape of a dog. He was busy introducing Mrs Bootles to her new possessions when Colonel Jackman crept in behind him.

Mrs Bootles was pawing at the mouse with half-hearted disdain, but she wasn't actually waving her tail. The secretary was relieved.

'Treating her with respect, I see. Good. You'll go far.'

The Cabinet Secretary jumped. Secretly, he thought he had already Gone Far and things had taken a bit of a turn for the worse in the last 24 hours. But he would never dream of saying it.

'I want you to get me the Head of Science,' continued Jackman. 'Get him in here now.'

'I'm afraid you haven't actually appointed a Minister for Science and Technology yet, Mr Prime Minister. I could ask the Permanent Under Secretary to join us.'

‘That’s the chappy,’ exclaimed Jackman as he absent-mindedly stroked Mrs Bootles. ‘Get him in here now.’

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While they were sitting on the wall outside the paper shop and reviewing their options, Benny from the tower block came shuffling along. He was wearing a scruffy parka and clutching something in a plastic bag to his chest.

It was Lewis’s mum who called him Benny and said it was something to do with the Falklands War but Lewis didn’t think he looked old enough to be in some old war.

‘Orright, Lew,’ he said and made a little wave.

‘Benny!’ cried Parker. ‘How you doing? What’s in the bag?’

‘I ain’t called Benny,’ muttered Benny and changed his direction of travel to give Parker a wide berth.

‘Gis a look, Benny,’ Push said and made a grab for the bag.

‘Gerroff,’ said Benny and whipped the bag out of reach.

‘Can you go in the shop with us, Benny?’ asked Lewis, ‘Mr Khan says we’re not allowed any more.’

‘Gerroff,’ said Benny and held the bag above his head. Parker started jumping up for it.

‘He’s not a Responsible Adult,’ said Push and she too started leaping up at the elusive bag.

‘You gerroff!’ shouted Benny and the bag flew from his grip and landed on the pavement. A copy of Frogman Super Fighter slid out and flopped into the road.

‘Ooow, he’s a Frogman fan,’ cooed Push. ‘Bit basic, innit Benny? Do you like looking at the pictures?’

‘Are you wearing a Frogman costume under your Y-Fronts, Benny?’ said Parker. He had the comic behind his back and was fending off Benny’s every attempt to reach it.

‘Benny can’t read. Benny can’t read,’ sang Push and joined in the shoving. Then came the smack.

Parker was on the floor and there was a eerie silence.

Benny looked around him as if to see if there were any witnesses and then back at Parker. ‘I ain’t called Benny,’ he said and knelt down to pick up his things. There was a small group of people at the bus shop watching the scene unfold.

Parker’s mouth was wide open and his eyes were staring at Benny in disbelief.

‘He hit me,’ he whispered.

‘You hit him!’ snarled Push. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘He hit me,’ repeated Parker and a bit of wet appeared at the corner of his eye. It wasn’t hurt so much as shock that put it there.

‘You ain’t to call me that,’ said Benny and he started to shuffle away.

‘You hit him! You hit him!’ called Push, turning to the onlookers. ‘He hit him! He’s not allowed to do that.’ She was screaming now.

There was a long pause until a man with one of those pull-along shopping bags lifted his eyes from his paper and stared at Push. ‘Quite right, too,’ he said.

It was as if someone had pushed a button. The entire bus queue turned to each other and all started talking at once. “Bout Time Too”; “Got To Learn”; “Getting Away With It For Too Long”, were some of the things that Lewis heard. Then they all turned back to face the way the bus would come and resumed their silent wait.

Only one old lady was still facing Push. ‘Better get used to it, Kid,’ she said. She didn’t sound unkindly.

Parker got up and rubbed his aching jaw. A small purple bruise was starting to appear.

Chapter Two

Colonel Lionel Jackman (Retired) lived in a leafy avenue near Cheltenham. It was nice. Except for the children who congregated on the corner by the phone box, sometimes until as late as 9.30 AT NIGHT. He didn't like them. And neither did his wife, Dotty, (that was her name).

Colonel and Mrs Jackman didn't have children. They couldn't see the point of them. 'What bloody use are they?' he would ask his wife. 'Horrible, smelly, loud, rude.'

He didn't like children with bikes who rode on the pavement and expected you to get out of the way. He didn't like children with skate boards that made loud kerklunking noises outside his office. He didn't like children with spikes sticking out of their faces or hats on back-to-front.

He talked to people at the Golf Club about it and they agreed with him. He found ten like-minded people and before you could say, "Bring Back National Service", they had formed A Committee. It wasn't long before the committee became A Political Party, with a logo and headed notepaper and a newsletter and all.

Then one of his richer friends gave him a million pound loan and he set up a Party Headquarters and started paying An Organiser. They called themselves England For Adults and they had a mission. They would get some respect from Young People even if they had to beat it into them.

They talked about MANNERS and ELDERS AND BETTERS and something called THE OLD DAYS. Their favourite expression was "It never did me any harm", which usually related to dimly-remembered thrashings they received from sadistic schoolmasters.

But it wasn't going anywhere. They won a few seats on local councils but not enough to get them noticed. And they weren't a national party. The idea of joining England For Adults didn't go down too well in Scotland or Wales or Thingy. So they bobbed along in obscurity and if anyone did mention them it was usually when taking the piss.

But then the government of the day decided they had had enough of one government for the whole of the UK and announced that the next elections would be for a new Parliament for England. And Jackman saw his chance.

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The first bit of law produced by the new government was “The Hoodies and Other Offensive Headgear Act” and it came into force just two weeks after Jackman swept to power in a landslide election victory. He had annihilated the other parties and England For Adults had so many MPs that they could do what they liked.

The new Act first came to the attention of Lewis as he sat round the kitchen table at Parker’s house. Parker’s mum was oiling her javelin on the kitchen table.

Parker took a lot of stick for his mum. She represented the county at the Javelin and she was good. Some said she could be on the way to the next Olympics. But there was no denying that she was quite large. Dean Spiller had once said, ‘Is that your Mum or your Dad?’ to Parker when she met him at the school gate one day to take him to the Dentist’s.

‘Yeah, well she could sort your Dad out any day,’ was Parker’s response. Dean never repeated the comment. Parker was very proud of his mum.

Parker was reading the instruction book for a PC game and Lewis was leaning over his shoulder. Push’s face appeared at the kitchen window and she squealed with delight when she saw the javelin.

‘Hello, Parker’s Mum,’ she said as she squeezed in behind Parker’s chair. ‘Let’s have a look at your spear.’

‘Hello, Pushy,’ said Mrs P, ‘and you can get your hands off. This is a precision instrument.’ She wiped some more gunky looking fluid into the handle.

Pushy poked her tongue out and giggled. ‘Come on, guys,’ she said, ‘we’re not hanging around here all evening. Let’s go down the canal and watch the fishing freaks.’

Parker groaned but shuffled to his feet anyway. It was staying light until late, now that the clocks had gone forward, so they had plenty of mucking about time before homework (and stuff).

‘You ain’t going out with that on,’ said Mrs Parker and tugged at his fleece.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘This,’ she said, wagging the fawn-coloured hood that was sown into the neck. ‘T’aint legal no more. Go and change.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Lewis, glancing down at the date on the newspaper to check if it was April Fools.

‘Don’t you ever listen to the news?’ she said and headed out of the door with all her kit in the direction of the garage.

‘What’s she on about?’ asked Push.

‘Dunno,’ said Parker, ‘Let’s go.’

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The Permanent Under Secretary for Science and Technology stood nervously before his new Prime Minister. Colonel Jackman had Mrs Bootles on his knee and was busy making cooing and clucking noises. ‘Ooos a booty ickle girl, den?’ he said and tickling her belly. He repeated it several times but the cat just scowled.

The Permanent Under Secretary cleared his throat. He was beginning to suspect that the PM had forgotten he was there.

‘Stand still, man,’ the Prime Minister boomed. ‘I can’t stand people who fidget.’ The Permanent Under Secretary flinched.

‘Now,’ said Jackman, ‘I want you to fix something up for me. When I was in the army I read some very interesting reports about what you johnnies were getting up to in your secret bunkers and your expensive laboratories. Mind control. That’s the game. I want something that will control the minds of all the little brats on this island and I want buckets of the stuff. What d’ya say, um?’

The Permanent Under Secretary was confused. The Prime Minister of England had asked him to produce illegal drugs to poison the children of England. He must have misheard.

‘Well, it’s true, Prime Minister, there are some pretty sophisticated Behavioural Adjustment chemicals in our research facilities, but it’s all on paper, really. Never actually make the stuff. Except to test on monkeys and things. All academic really. And totally illegal.’

‘But I’m asking you to make the stuff,’ said Jackman, and he looked up from under his bushy eyebrows and fixed the secretary with a cold stare.

It must be a test, thought the Permanent Under Secretary. A test to see if he was a good and honest servant of the people. Of course. That was it. Just stand firm and the PM would respect him for it.

‘I couldn’t possibly do that, Prime Minister.’ He swallowed hard.

Jackman lent forward and pressed a blue button on his desk, still holding the official in his gaze. Two very large soldiers appeared at the door. They had red caps and large white belts round their middles. The Cabinet Secretary was bobbing about behind them, trying to see round their considerable bodies.

‘Take this worm away and stick him in the cells. He’s not to speak to anyone on the way and he’s to stay there until I say different.’ He turned to the Cabinet Secretary.

‘And bring me a new Permanent Under Secretary for Science and Technology. One who knows how to obey orders.’

* * * * *

They soon got bored with watching the Fishing Freaks. No one was catching anything. They walked along the canal to where the footbridge crossed. It was grey and rusty and shaped like a rainbow. They skipped some stones for a while and watched Arseface Morton smoking a cigarette and spitting.

‘He’s well ‘ard,’ giggled Push and dug her elbow into Lewis’s ribs.

‘Shhh, he’ll hear,’ said Lewis. Arseface looked at his watch and left. A police car slithered across the flyover bridge and came to a halt above the towpath.

They found a bottle and floated it into the middle of the cut and started trying to sink it with whatever came to hand. Another police car edged into sight on the bridge behind them. Two officers got out and started ambling along the path.

Parker said it was pizza night and he ought to think about going. Lewis gave up struggling with a broken paving slab when he noticed a third police officer approaching from the flyover direction. It was time to go anyway.

As they neared the two officers, Lewis began to get a flutter in his tummy. Were they looking for them? Had they seen them lobbing things in the canal? Or had Arseface finally done something criminal instead of just talking about it? He glanced around and saw that they were cut off by the third officer.

‘Any of you lot got a watch?’ said the one with stripes on the shoulder of his jersey.

‘It’s ten past eight, Sergeant,’ beamed Parker and he held out his wrist watch for inspection.

‘Yes, it’s ten past eight, sonny, and what does that mean?’ He didn’t sound amused.

‘That you’re missing Eastenders?’ asked Push and she smiled sweetly.

‘It means you are out after curfew, that’s what it means.’

‘It’s worse than that, Sarge. Have a look at this.’ The third officer had caught up with them and was holding Parker’s hood out sideways for the other to see. ‘He’s wearing Han Hillegal Headgear.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Lewis and immediately regretted it.

‘Think it’s funny, don’t you,’ said the Sergeant. ‘Out after curfew. Wearing a hoody in a public space. It ain’t funny and you lot are going to find out the hard way.’

He started dragging Parker by his hood towards the waiting squad car on the Belgrave Road bridge.

‘Hang on,’ said Push. ‘What are you doing to him?’

The police woman barred the path. ‘You two can bugger off. Go straight home and don’t stop on the way. And don’t let us catch you out after lockdown again.’

‘But, but...’ Lewis fizzled out as he watched them marching Parker away. Parker was twisting his head to look back at them and looking just a bit scared.

Push and Lewis stumped after the retreating officer and got to the bridge in time to see Parker being driven off. He looked kind of small.

‘His Mum wasn’t joking,’ said Push. ‘Hoodies are illegal. Durr!’

‘What curfew?’ asked Lewis.

‘Must have been what they were going on about in assembly. My Dad is always telling me to pay attention. Now I think about it, my Dad was going on about it too. Something about a new Council rule. A byelaw. Something they only do round here. Said it was within their power now and they would be setting an example for the whole country. He could have said he meant me too!’

‘What are we going to do about Parker?’

‘Nothing. Nothing we can do. He’ll be alright.’

Lewis didn’t think she sounded too convincing.

* * * * *

The new Permanent Secretary was much more to Jackman’s liking. Despite being recently elevated to the Head of Science and Technology, Professor Bloodlinker still wore a white lab coat and smelt of hydrochloric acid. He had a purple stain spreading across his breast pocket, presumably from one of the leaky pens lined up there. He had a monocle in one eye and a bad cough.

‘Not possible, I’m afraid, Prime Minister.’ Jackman looked up from the paper he was reading and squinted at the professor. Perhaps he’d made the wrong choice after all. His hand edged towards the blue button.

‘What do you mean, not possible?’

‘Not possible on children,’ said the professor. ‘You see, it’s their brains. They have not stopped growing yet. All sorts of neurons going ping and

pong all over the place. If you try to control their minds their brains just find a new way round the problem. Not possible with children, Prime Minister.’

‘I’m disappointed, Professor.’ His hand hovered over the button again. ‘They told me you were the right man for this job. The children of this country are out of control. How am I going to complete my plans if I can’t brainwash the little blighters?’

‘Not possible on children, Prime Minister, but perfectly feasible on adults. You see, adults are much more susceptible to control than children. They are set in their ways, they already have their brains fully developed. We can design all sorts of drugs to control adults.’

‘And what blithering use is that?’ said Jackman. He was beginning to lose his patience.

‘Well, you need to do something about the children, but you don’t want their whinging parents writing to the newspapers about mistreating their darling children all the time, do you? So why not just drug the parents? Then they won’t care.’

A light went on in Jackman’s head. All sorts of possibilities sprang into his mind in a nanosecond.

‘So we can do what we like to their precious brats and we won’t get a peep out of the parents?’

‘Certainly, Prime Minister.’

‘When can you start?’

* * * * *

Parker got an ASBO – an Anti Social Behaviour Order – and a good telling off from an inspector. They confiscated his fleece and returned it ten minutes later minus the hood. It looked pathetic. His mother had to come down to the station and sign for him.

‘I told you not to go out with that thing on, didn’t I? You sat at that table and I told you. I said, “Don’t go out with that thing on. It’s illegal,” didn’t I? I said to him, “Don’t go out with that thing on,” didn’t I? I told him.’ Mrs Parker was kneading the table with balled fists. Her muscles bulged.

‘We’re sorry if we got him into trouble, Mrs P,’ said Push. They all looked a bit sheepish.

‘Oh, it’s not your fault, Petal,’ said Mrs Parker. ‘It’s this bloody Government. Ridiculous! Turning children into criminals just for wearing the wrong sort of hat.’

Up until this point, Parker hadn't appreciated that he was a criminal now. In his mind, he began to swagger a little bit. But mostly he was just embarrassed. All his mates would know.

Chapter Three

The whole country was barking. Vigilante groups took to the streets armed with bats and clubs. They strutted up and down the leafy avenues of English towns bringing their own brand of law and order. Anyone was fair game – so long as they were kids. Bikes were no longer ridden on pavements (or anywhere, for that matter, since the roads were so full of enormous cars that looked like Armoured Assault Vehicles that it was too risky to go beyond your front gate). Skateboards were confiscated and skateboard parks were flattened. Ball games of all descriptions were discouraged, especially if it involved Banging That Bloody Thing Against My Wall All Day And Night.

Fun was officially banned.

The newspapers said that Grannies could once again roam the streets at night without being fearful of Little Hooligans. And they did. Thousands and thousands of old age pensioners exercised their right to mill about in public well past the time when they would normally be tucking into a Horlicks and a custard cream. They hung around on corners and made nuisances of themselves. They congregated by bus stops and jeered at the young adults. But at least there were no Disgusting Little Yobs about because curfews were popping up in towns and cities all over the land.

Jackman and his government were finding it difficult to keep up. In his dreaming moments he thought it was he who would be leading the country from the front, setting an example, setting the agenda. Except it was ordinary people, inventing their own laws and waiting for the government to catch up. Every time he thought of a new law to screw down on those pesky kids, he'd pick up a newspaper and find some group of citizens or other already doing it. He was a bit put out.

So they rushed out new legislation to try and keep up with the mood of the country. The rather mild Skating in Public Places Act only made it official to do what a lot of adults were doing anyway. Now it was legal to stop any kid you liked and make them remove their in-lines. They didn't even have to be going too fast. And if they had to hobble home in their socks, tough. Serves 'em right. A bit of dog-shit and a few cuts from broken glass won't kill them. And quite a few people made a nice little profit in the second-hand skates business.

And then there was the Homework Act. It was now a criminal offence not to hand your in your homework on time. Teachers still had the usual

sanctions, like detention and lines and sarcasm, but now they could apply to have the parents heavily fined if you missed your double geography assignment – even if the dog was sick on it.

The Maximum Pocket Money Act set the upper limit for weekly allowances at 50p per child. The Children’s TV Act made the television companies remove all the kids’ programmes after five o’clock in the evening. The School Uniform Act made caps compulsory for boys and straw hats compulsory for girls. The lower limit for buying chewing gum became 21 years of age.

There followed the Reasonable Violence Against Children Act. If that kid is playing you up, give him a whoomp. So long as it’s reasonable. The Act didn’t mention any definition of the word reasonable but it was assumed that judges and the courts would fill in the gaps. Funnily enough, there wasn’t a single case of anyone being taking to court for unreasonably hitting a child.

And the Sit Up Straight at the Table Act was followed by the Don’t Answer Back Act. The Take Your Hands Out Of Your Pockets Act and the Mind Your Ps and Qs Act were voted through Parliament on the same afternoon.

Jackman paused for breath. He was well satisfied. The streets of England were free of Annoying Scruffs and the whole country seemed to be sinking back into some comfortable bygone Golden Age that they all thought they could remember but that never really existed. This was New England. A Land Fit For Grown Ups. Hoorah.

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Government Headquarters (Scientific Research) is situated under some chalky hills near Swindon.

On the surface, all you could see was a couple of smallish buildings on a rather drab industrial estate surrounded by a suspiciously large car park. Buried below were laboratories, warehouses, offices, and living quarters, all connected by miles and miles of tunnels.

Professor Bloodlinker was playing with the latest gadget from his spy research team. It was a micro pistol in the shape of a toothbrush. He had strict instructions from the boffins to give it back when he had finished testing it – it wouldn’t do to mix it up with his own toothbrush.

A knock on the door made him swivel round in his chair. ‘Come,’ he said.

The Head of Chemistry entered the windowless room. He hovered near the door until he was quite sure Bloodlinker had replaced the toothbrush on

his desk. He was holding a block of polystyrene which held a number of test tubes. Each one contained a coloured powder.

‘The samples are ready? Good, good,’ said the professor. He lent forward and tapped a test tube with his pen. ‘What does this one do?’

‘That one makes you open to suggestion, Professor. If I told you there was a brown bear living in the cupboard under your stairs you would never go near that cupboard again.’

‘And what about this one?’ The second powder was black and looked as if it was fizzing slightly.

‘This one makes you easy to command. If I say you have to hop around on one leg all day because that’s the law you will hop around on one leg all day. No questions.’

‘Good, good, good,’ said Bloodlinker. ‘And what about this one?’ He tapped the third tube.

‘This one makes you gullible. If I say “By the way, what about that hundred pounds you owe me?”, you will be straight down the bank at lunchtime with your debit card out.’

‘Excellent,’ said Bloodlinker. ‘OK. We’ll have all three. Mix them all up and get them ready to ship. What is this powder at the end?’ he said, tapping a fourth test tube. It was full of grainy white powder.

The scientist coughed gently. ‘That is milk powder, Professor. For my coffee.’

* * * * *

The long summer holidays were crawling closer. Lewis and his mates were hopeful that the New Regime would lighten up a bit as Flintwick Secondary School began to wind down for the break. It had been a difficult few weeks. The teachers were enjoying their new powers. Even old favourites like Ms Dinsbury had gone uber-strict. There was no talking, no larking, no lateness, no running, no day-dreaming, no cheeking, no nothing. Transgressors were marched directly to the Headmaster’s office. He had recently invested in a brand new cane. Even hardcore nutters like Arseface Morton turned up every day and stayed every day.

Lewis’s bag was more than usually heavy as he left home. Three assignments were due that morning and another five the next day. His shoulders sagged. As he rounded the corner to Badger Rise Road he almost tripped over Mrs Baker. She was smaller than Lewis and a little stooped. She was pulling a shopping bag on wheels. Everyone assumed she was a bit dotty.

‘I wouldn’t go that way today, Lewis,’ she said.

‘Hello Mrs Baker,’ Lewis said, untangling his bag strap from where it had caught on the shopping trolley lid. ‘What’s up with that way?’

‘There’s some big people down there and I don’t think they’ve got your best interest at heart.’ She cackled a dry laugh and continued on her way.

‘OK. Thanks,’ Lewis called. She gets battier every day, he thought, and then thought no more about it.

In Toaster Avenue he almost ran smack into the “big people”. There were four men standing in the road. One of them had hold of a pair of third years and was dragging them by the collars in the direction of the school. Lewis sank back into a large leafy bush with hangy-down yellow flowers that was spilling over the adjacent garden wall. He watched the scene through the leaves.

Whatever was going on, it was bad news. The under-arrest kids were struggling and their captor was swearing at them to be still. Lewis was just resolved to take Mrs Baker’s advice when he saw Parker coming round the corner. He yanked him into the hedge.

‘Oi! Oh, it’s you. Wassup Spots?’

‘Shut up and look,’ whispered Lewis and pointed up the road.

‘Oh great. Bloody vigilantes. What do they want? Better find a way round.’

The back alley that ran parallel to the High Street was as good a way as any. It would avoid the main roads and get them to the back entrance of the Flintwick Secondary School without much delay. Parker spent the journey explaining his theories to Lewis.

‘I reckon they’re checking bags for comics. Or maybe they’re handing out beatings to kids who haven’t done their homework. Or maybe the Head’s had one of his garden gnomes nicked again. Or maybe...’

He tailed off. There was a big man standing at the end of the snicket. He was armed with a two-foot wooden stake.

‘Or maybe we’ll try Shelley Road,’ said Parker. They turned on their heels.

An arm shot out from nowhere and a hand clamped onto Lewis’s shoulder. Another hand followed and fastened onto Parker’s upper arm. Their owner stepped out into the alley way from a shadowy doorway.

‘You’re nicked, sonny,’ he snarled at Parker. ‘OK, Bri. I’ve got them,’ he shouted up the alley. The other man waved his club and slid back into his hiding place.

Lewis was wriggling. ‘Ouch, you’re hurting me. What do you want?’

‘You’ve got an appointment, Jim Lad,’ the big man said. ‘It’s Haircut Day and I know someone who is anxious to make your acquaintance.’ He pulled them round and set off in the direction of school.

‘What’s he on about,’ said Parker. ‘I’ve just had my hair cut. And my Mum takes me, thank you very much, not you.’

‘Ooow, that’s cheek, that is. Deserves a slap,’ and he released his grip long enough to fetch Parker a thwack on his ear. Before Parker could recover, the grip was back on his arm and digging in tight. ‘And if you think that’s a proper haircut then you’re in for a surprise, mate.’ They continued in silence.

The main entrance to the school was in Limpopo Drive. The road was thronged with kids and adults in no particular pattern. Someone was shouting and it looked as if someone was trying to form up lines. Many children had accompanying adults still attached to their upper limbs by vice-like hands. Many were being shepherded by adults in ones and twos. Some of the adults had clubs or sticks.

In the centre of the mêlée were set up a number of what appeared to be barbers’ chairs, right there in the open air. They were makeshift affairs. Some looked like the real thing, some were just kitchen chairs with a towel draped over them. There were small trolleys by each chair, each displaying an array of grizzly looking instruments. There were scissors and combs, razors (electric and cut-throat) and sprays, aprons and cloths.

A woman stepped out of the crowd and took charge of the new arrivals. ‘Thank you, Ryan. You, in that line and you, in that line,’ she said, shoving Lewis and Parker in the smalls of their backs.

Lewis was stood behind Rachel Cook. ‘What’s going on?’ he whispered.

Rachel stared at the floor and made like she was coughing. ‘We’re all getting regulation haircuts. Look at that lot over there.’

By the fence next to the main entrance was a row of bewildered looking children. They were all shivering like shorn sheep. The boys had army-style cropped hair and the girls all had shoulder length locks – not above and not below. They looked pathetic.

Lewis recognised Mr Whistler. He used to be a barber but he retired a year or so ago. They called him the Butcher of Bowly Road. The other scissor-wielders were a mixed bunch. Mostly elderly and mostly women. Lewis decided they were all amateurs. Enthusiastic amateurs.

A megaphone crackled into life. ‘Now children.’ Mrs Twine, the school dinner lady, was speaking. ‘You will all get a very good haircut today. One you can be proud of. One your school can be proud of. Not like the mess most of you go about with. This operation has been sanctioned by The

Headmaster, so you can all tell your parents that it's completely official. And free, of course. We would appreciate your co-operation but we can manage this procedure with or without your help. It's up to you. Thank you.'

Lewis's cap was snatched off his head. One of the volunteers was poking him. 'You next. Stick that in your pocket. Up you go.'

He climbed into the first available chair. He was getting a large lady with a bright orange wig perched carelessly on her head. Blooming cheek, thought Lewis.

'Are we going to need the straps, young man?' She grinned down at him.

'No, we are not,' he said as politely as he could. Just get on with it, he thought.

A girl was led away crying from the next chair. About a foot of glorious golden tresses lay on the floor about the seat she had just vacated. Lewis found he was getting angry.

The razor came down. A firm hand steadied the back of his head and the razor whirred round in a clockwise direction.

'Ouch, you're cutting me,' he snarled.

'Sooner you stop fidgeting, sooner it will be over. Now, you don't want me to slip, do you?'

Lewis thought about it. That's exactly what he wanted her to do. He jerked his head forward and arched his back at the same time. The razor shot across his skull and ground to a halt near his ear.

'You little bugger! Look what you've made me do!'

There was blood dripping down Lewis's nose and his head smarted. But it was worth it. A long trench had been cut in his otherwise neat haircut.

'Do you think you can fix it?' he smiled innocently at the big woman.

'Get out of my chair, you little heathen. Mr Dinglewell, if you please. Take this boy to the Head immediately.' A bored looking teacher left off reading his newspaper and stepped over to the chair. He cast a long look over Lewis's head.

'What are you going to do about that?' he asked the lady.

'Nothing I can do. I can't stick it back on, can I? He'll just have to look like that till it grows out. Take him away.' She lashed out with a towel and caught Lewis on his neck.

'Look!' Shouted Lewis as he was led past the queues. 'You too can have a haircut just like mine if you ask nicely.' And right on cue, there was a squeal from the woman leaning over Parker's head.

'What did you do that for, you pillock!'

Parker ducked under the woman's outstretched arm and stuck his thumb up at Lewis. He had a bald patch running from ear to ear.

By the time Lewis was escorted into the building he had heard at least four similar angry exchanges as children opted for non-regulation and involuntary scalplings. The haircutters were powerless to stop them. Even with two or three large blokes holding the heads still, it was still possible to twitch at just the wrong moment.

After about fifty or sixty such disasters they gave up and shaved the rest bald. Even one or two girls. To the school and the teachers it was a dark day of shame and embarrassment. To the pupils, it was a badge of honour. Kids came from miles around to see a "Spotty Cut". Maximum respect.

* * * * *

Pushpa was grounded. Her haircut was partly restored by her Auntie Bhavnita with a sharp pair of scissors on a high stool at the breakfast bar. But it still looked like something the council had done.

Parker was dragged along to his mother's training sessions at the stadium every night for three hours after school. 'I'm not letting you out of my sight,' she said.

Lewis got indefinite detention. The Head said he would get detention every evening until he died. Even after the school holidays, he would still be in detention.

His parents got a letter from the Crown Court. Lewis had been found guilty (in his absence) under the Disobeying A Direct Order From An Adult Act. Mr and Mrs Spottiswood got a fine (which meant no pocket money for Lewis for ever) and had to write a letter to the judge explaining how they were going to set about changing Lewis's "unacceptable behaviour". They weren't best pleased.

He began to notice small changes in the way his parents reacted to things. His Dad was usually annoyed about things like "bloody courts, poking their noses in", but now he just shrugged. He stopped reading a daily newspaper because he said it was the same thing every day and it didn't make any difference anyway.

His Mum started watching a lot more TV. Lewis would come down some evenings (after a mega-homework session) and find her staring with a funny expression at any old rubbish that happened to be on. She even said she thought Noel Edmonds was a "major talent"!

Lewis sat in the flickering light from the box and read a book. A Government Information Film was on in the adverts. The man was saying...

‘Does Your Child Speak Properly? Do they say “Innit” when they mean “Isn’t it”? Do they say “Minger” when they mean “Slightly unattractive person”? Well, now you can do something about it.’

‘Do something about it...’ whispered Mrs Spottiswood. Lewis looked across at her. The vacant stare was back.

The man on the telly read out some numbers you could call to get advice about speaking properly (so you could pass it on to your kids) and a few web addresses to check out.

‘So, no more “wicked” and “whatever”. Your children need to show some respect for The Queen’s English. You don’t have to put up with it anymore!’

‘We don’t have to put up with it anymore...’ droned Mrs Spottiswood.

‘Weird,’ thought Lewis and as his eyes returned to his book he noticed the TV crackle and flash.

Later on, when his Dad had come in from the shed, there was another Government advert.

‘Are You Worried About Your Child’s Sexuality? Is little Johnny spending too much time dressing up with his sisters? Is little Mary climbing too many trees? Are you worried they might grow up to be filthy perverts? Well, there’s no need to worry – just remember this short slogan and you can’t go wrong – BOYS PLAY WITH GUNS AND GIRLS PLAY WITH DOLLS. It’s simple really.’

‘It’s simple really...’ said Lewis’s Mum.

‘Boys play with guns...’ said Mr Spottiswood.

Lewis shook his head and returned to his book.

* * * * *

The Professor’s driver pulled up to the kerb at the end of the pier. He walked round to open the door and put his hand out to steady the scientist as he climbed out of the car. ‘They’re over there,’ he said and jerked his thumb in the direction of the green wrought iron gates at the entrance to the pier. It was late evening and the sky was going from red to purple over a dead flat sea.

Professor Bloodlinker shuffled over to the gates. A large secret service man blocked his path. ‘Clearance,’ he grunted and pointed at the badge round the Professor’s neck. Bloodlinker scowled and held out the security pass for inspection.

‘Arms,’ said the man, making a scarecrow like gesture to show he wanted to search the Professor.

‘You don’t have to frisk me,’ complained the Professor. ‘I have A5 clearance. Now get out of my way.’ He pushed past the goon and headed for the gate. The man stood aside and let him go. Another figure emerged from the lengthening shadows.

‘This way, Professor. The Prime Minister is expecting you.’ The man was wearing an overcoat despite the summery weather.

They boarded the miniature train that would normally be taking seaside holiday makers to the funfair at the end of the rusty Victorian pier. This evening it was deserted except for large men in macs every few metres, looking around nervously and talking quietly into little microphones hanging from their ears. The short train ride took nearly five minutes.

The funfair was even more deserted. It looked spooky in the thickening gloom. The only activity came from a merry-go-round in the middle of the other attractions. It was all lit up and turning serenely round and up and down. A fat man with a brown apron sat in the middle and was working the controls. The only other occupants were Colonel Jackman and his cat.

‘Ah, Professor,’ called the PM. ‘Pull up a horse, why don’t you. Come and join us.’

Bloodlinker grimaced and pulled himself inelegantly onto the moving platform. He teetered and wobbled from horse to horse until he was at the Prime Minister’s side.

‘Good evening, sir,’ he puffed. ‘I fear I am too old to get up on one of those things. I’ll stand, if you don’t mind.’

‘As you wish,’ said Jackman. He was stroking the cat under the chin. ‘It’s Mrs Bootles’ birthday. I promised her a treat. She does love the funfair and the seaside. I think it’s the smell of fish. What have you got for me?’

Bloodlinker pulled his long hands over his cheeks. He forced what he thought was a normal expression onto his face. ‘This is perfectly normal,’ he told himself. If the Prime Minister wants to close down a small holiday resort to give his cat a ride, he’s perfectly entitled to. Mrs Bootles wore her usual disgusted scowl.

‘The results are very encouraging, Prime Minister, we are making steady progress.’ He tightened his grip on the pole supporting the brightly painted horse he was leaning against.

‘Tell me,’ said Jackman and waved at no one in particular.

‘Well, the TV trials are going particularly well. We are running four adverts a night on all the major channels. Each one contains a 0.2 second burst of subliminal messaging. It’s too fast for people to notice but their subconscious brains are absorbing any instructions we care to give them. So

far it's just softening them up – making them nice and susceptible to the main brainwashing programme. Plus, the adverts themselves are going down a storm. The public love all that stuff about good old fashioned values.'

'You there.' Jackman pointed at the man at the controls. 'Make it go faster.' The ride lurched and Bloodlinker staggered. He was beginning to feel a little sick.

'Also, we have secretly bought several of the leading newspapers. The new editors are busy placing the kind of stories you want in front of millions every day. But the major triumph has been in the area of the new Child Tax Allowance. Every parent in the land gets a small amount deducted from their taxes, just for having children. Yes, Prime Minister, it is expensive, but you will get it back ten-fold when you have a compliant nation just waiting for your next commands. The master stroke is the envelopes we send out with the application forms. When they lick them, they get a nice even dose of the psychotropic drug we have prepared. It's neat, yes? It only affects parents so all the sane, childless people of England will be unaffected. And it works so well because it appeals to the basic greed of the average English parent. They all think they are getting something for nothing.' The Professor chuckled.

'Faster,' cried Jackman. 'How does it work?'

There was a creaking noise as the merry-go-round cranked up a gear. The sea and sky outside the ride were beginning to get blurry. Mrs Bootles pricked up her ears. Bloodlinker gulped.

'When they have all taken the appropriate dose they will all be ready to receive their final instructions. You can be sure that you can do what you like to their little brats and they won't lift a finger to stop you. Do you think we could go a little slower?'

'And how many people know about our little scheme?'

'Only me and my little team at Swindon, Prime Minister.'

'Good, good, Professor. You have done well. Now, bugger off, will you.' Jackman raised one leg and gently pushed the Professor in the seat of his pants. Bloodlinker's monocle shot out of eye and his grip failed on the pole that was supporting him. He tottered gently towards the edge of ride with a hint of surprise on his face. He flailed around, trying to grab on to anything to hold on to but his feet slipped on the smooth planks.

'Prime Ministeeeeeeeeerrrrrrr....' he croaked as he shot from the edge of the merry-go-round. His body did an almost perfect somersault in mid air before it landed in a crumpled mess on the coconut shy next door.

The ride slowed to halt.

‘Benson,’ the Prime Minister called out softly. A man in a suit stepped into the light. ‘Send the boys down to Swindon, Benson. We have a little business to attend to. And get me a new professor, would you.’

Chapter Four

The next day was the worst day of Lewis's life. In fact it was the worst day in the history of the universe. Even the Big Bang wasn't this big. The summer holidays were CANCELLED.

'Bloody hell,' said Lewis's dad. A bit of marmitey toast shot out of his mouth and landed in the middle of the newspaper he was reading. 'Bloody Hell!'

'Have you seen this, Sue?' he shouted to his wife, who was polishing her shoes in the hall. 'They've cancelled the school holidays!'

'Do what?' Lewis's mum said, leaning into the kitchen through the serving hatch.

'Do what?' said Lewis, snatching the paper from his dad's clutches.

'BLOODY HELL!'

"The Government announced today," the paper said, "that all school holidays in England have been cancelled. The move came amid rising concerns for the tide of lawlessness and anarchy that engulfs our streets every year when children are released from the close supervision of the education system. The news has been broadly welcomed by Head Teachers' associations and"

The words began to spin in front of Lewis's eyes so he put the paper down and put on the telly. Why were they doing it? How was it going to work? What had they done to deserve this?

The TV news seemed to be one continuous article about the announcement and it soon became clear that he wasn't the only one with questions. 'Once again,' a teacher with a Birmingham accent was saying, 'Once again, the teachers of this country are being asked to clear up the Government's mess. Teachers work with those little bastards day in and day out for week after week and we deserve a bit of a holiday.' The man started to cry.

A "mum" from Hartlepool was filmed in front of school gates. 'I think it's a disgrace. We've got two weeks in Torremolinos lined up, bought and paid for, and I'd like to know who's going to be looking after my three while we're away.'

But, bit by bit, while Lewis scabbled to get his books together and climb into his uniform, a different picture emerged.

“Army says it’s ready to step into the breach,” the telly said. “As more details of the government holiday plan are released it now appears that the military will be responsible for running Army Summer Schools for all school-age children.”

Schools would be converted into boarding schools with dormitories and canteens to house and feed the pupils (now referred to as “cadets”) for the whole summer.

There would be a lot of marching up and down, a lot of saluting and a lot of polishing of boots. There would be running over logs and jumping off things and lots of little fatties would be losing lots of weight. There would be respect for authority and order and responsibility. And, if they were good, there might even be some guns to play with.

Finally, Jackman himself appeared before the cameras in Downing Street. He looked jolly pleased with himself. ‘We’re going to get a bit of backbone into the nation’s youth and the Army is just the organisation to do it,’ he beamed.

A representative from a teachers’ union came on and welcomed the news that most teachers wouldn’t be required for the long break and those who did have to stay behind would be getting double pay. A couple of parents in Wisbech said it was a good idea to give the kids some discipline. There was nothing wrong with the plan, so long as their kids were properly looked after, and, besides which, they hadn’t had a break on their own for fifteen years.

Lewis slid his tie up to his collar and slunk out the door. His parents were still in the kitchen, talking quietly with their heads together. They seemed to be excited about something.

All over the country it was dawning on parents that if they played their cards right they wouldn’t have to see their kids for seven whole weeks.

* * * * *

‘That is well random,’ said Push.

‘That is harsh, man,’ said Parker.

‘That is super harsh,’ said Lewis.

They were sitting on the low wall behind the science block. The usual break time knock-about with a tennis ball had been abandoned by mutual consent and without a word being spoken – no-one was in the mood. Bands of shell-shocked kids stood around in twos and threes with their heads down. An atmosphere of despair as thick as squid’s ink had descended on the school.

Even the teachers noticed the depressed mood of the pupils (not the PE teachers, of course) and went a bit easy with them – at least for the morning, anyway. There was no laughing or sniggering or pushing or running. Children just shuffled from lesson to lesson.

To make matters worse, the end-of-term disco had been cancelled, since there wasn't going to be an end-of-term. And some of the parents said they didn't think it was appropriate to let teenagers of the opposite sex "rive around to loud music" in the same room together.

Lewis could see groups of sixth-formers gathering by the fence and staring at teachers as they went past. They were talking with their heads close and there was quite a lot of angry faces and quite a lot of waving and pointing. The Head sent some of the student teachers out to break up the little gangs and send them back to their classrooms. Something nasty was brewing.

At lunch time a lorry turned up and some men started unloading what looked like bunk beds. An army jeep arrived and an officer in a beret started pacing around the school yard. Two soldiers (Lewis assumed they were privates) followed him around with tape measures and stripy poles.

They had their form teacher for the next class and he announced that there would be an outdoors assembly the following morning. Apparently the school hall was out-of-bounds. Something to do with the builders who had just pulled up outside the main entrance.

* * * * *

Mr and Mrs Spottiswood were not insensitive people. They could tell that their children were not happy; although they couldn't quite work out the reason. Didn't they moan every summer that they had nothing to do and that they were bored? Weren't they always secretly relieved to get back to school after the long break? Well, now they would have a whole summer of fun things to do with soldiers and tanks etc. They would absolutely love it.

But, in order to lift their spirits in the short term, Mr S suggested a trip to the cinema and maybe a burger afterwards. Come the Saturday, they all piled into the little Yaris and headed for the multiplex.

On the way they passed several curious advertising hoardings. There was a giant one outside Sainsburys with a picture of a skinny kid, wearing an MP3 player and blowing bubble gum. The caption said "THE ENEMY WITHIN" in two-foot letters. Another poster had a picture of a pretty girl sitting in front of a dressing table mirror and applying lipstick. This one said "TOMORROW'S PROBLEM FAMILY".

‘Who’s putting these posters up?’ asked Bev, but none of them could make out the small print from the car.

At the cinema there was a new disappointment. ‘Eighteen! How can Harry Potter have an eighteen certificate?’ gawped Lewis, looking up at the poster in the foyer.

‘Must be all that sex and violence,’ said Mrs Spottiswood as she joined them from the popcorn queue. There seemed to be some kind of scrabble behind them - one of the ushers had just put up a sign which said, “Last Popcorn Ever”.

‘No, look,’ said Mr Spottiswood, reading from the poster. “Contains scenes of rebellious children and teenagers with attitude”. Must be a new rule.’

‘Ah well,’ said their mum. ‘We’ll just have to watch Sleeping Beauty instead.’

‘It just gets better and better,’ muttered Lewis. His sister dug him in the ribs with her elbow.

After the film they went next door to Scilly Burgers. There was an unusually large number of stropy and scowling kids leaving the place. It didn’t take them long to discover the reason why.

‘I’ll have a cheese burger and fries and a shake please,’ said Lewis. He was starving.

‘No burgers,’ said the man. ‘Read the signs,’ and he pointed at the large notices plastered around the serving area.

THE SALE OF THE FOLLOWING FOOD
ITEMS IS PROHIBITED TO PERSONS
UNDER THE AGE OF 18 YEARS:
BURGERS
CHEESE BURGERS
ANY OTHER KIND OF BURGER
NUGGETS OF ANY DESCRIPTION
FRENCH FRIES (FORMERLY KNOWN AS
“CHIPS”)
MILKSHAKES, SLUSHIES AND OTHER
SWEET BEVERAGES
BY ORDER OF HM GOVERNMENT.

‘So what can I have?’ asked Lewis, plaintively.

‘We got Carrot Rissoles or Sprout Surprise for the kiddies. And milk.’ said the young man. ‘Or water. And rice pudding for afters. Now ‘urry up, I got a queue ‘ere.’

Mr and Mrs Spottiswood were sensitive people so they ate their burger and fries quickly. Bev and Lewis elected for “nothing”, rather than the menu on offer so they sat and watched with their chins in their hands and their elbows on the table. Lewis tried not to drool.

‘The end of a perfect day,’ he thought.

* * * * *

When he got home Lewis discovered that some kind of virus had been eating the memory on his game console. All his saved games had disappeared and there were some weird messages on the screen. He couldn’t figure out how it could have happened – his machine wasn’t hooked up to the internet or anything dodgy like that. In fact it wasn’t connected to anything else (except the electricity of course).

As he watched, the virus started having a go at the operating system. The screen started zooming in and out and then going all fuzzy. Dinosaurs started appearing on Formula One racing tracks and knights in armour started challenging space death squads to a duel. One by one, the pixels on the display blinked and went out until the whole console looked like a ragged curtain. Then the words ‘BYE BYE’ popped up for a few brief seconds before the screen faded to black for ever.

Somewhere under some hills near Swindon, Benson put his head round the door of a laboratory full of electrical equipment and an extremely scruffy technician. He had his trainers on the bench and was scooping the insides out of a bag of Hoola Hoops.

‘Did it work?’ asked Benson softly.

‘Worked a treat, Mr Benson, worked a treat. Can I turn it off now?’

* * * * *

Lewis sat on the end of Bev’s bed.

‘All I said was I can’t see why you’re getting all weepy-eyed about it.’

Bev slammed a pile of clothes into her suitcase. ‘Just shut up, will you?’

‘I mean, it’s not like you can do anything about it. You just have to accept the inevitable. Be fatalistic, like me.’

‘Why don’t you just get out of my room?’

‘Unless you’re worried about Slick Harry, or whatever his name is. Now you can spend the whole summer with him. Oh no, I’ve just remembered; he goes to my school, not yours.’

‘Get out!’ she screamed. Lewis retreated to the door.

‘Anyway, I don’t know what you think a sixth-former like him is going to see in a munter like you. I’m sure he’ll have forgotten about you by next term.’

A pair of trainers hit the door just as Lewis pulled it shut behind him. He could hear Bev crying. ‘Well, she was asking for that,’ he told himself. ‘She’s not the only one who’s had her summer ruined.’

Chapter Five

The first day of Flintwick Summer School wasn't so bad. If you didn't mind being shouted at and pushed into lines and dressed up and dressed down in silly clothes and marched around a bit and fed from a tin plate of mashed potato and something brown and shouted at a bit more.

It started with a tearful goodbye to his family (his mum's tears, mainly). Bev had already left for her school – she went to the Technology College on the ring road. Lewis had intended to try and smooth things over before she went but somehow he never found the right time.

His dad was long gone with the car so Lewis had to struggle to school with his suitcase. It had wheels so you could pull it along but it was nearly as big as him. It bulged with enough underpants to last until September. There was also a secret compartment with a bar of chocolate in it – don't know how that got in there.

At the school gates he was greeted by a drill sergeant. He was dressed in green (khaki, Pushpa called it), a wide white belt and shiny boots. On his beret he had a silver badge. You could just make out the words "National Youth Service", but only when he was leaning into your face and bawling insults at you, which was something he did quite a lot, Lewis discovered.

'Youyouanyou, over there. You, get your 'ands out of your pockets. You, pick your heels up! You're not at school now.'

A banner hung over the main entrance saying, "WELCOME CADETS".

Lewis joined a queue. Somebody recognisable as one of their old teachers shepherded them and their luggage into the school hall. It had been divided into hundreds of tiny cubicles, each containing two or three bunk beds and a locker. Lewis got allocated to Cubicle 47b with a couple of boys he didn't know.

Next stop was the shower block where two lines (one boys and one girls) were shuffling in through steam-shrouded entrances and two lines of shivering children clad only in towels and clutching their underwear were emerging from the other side.

From there to the Gym where lines of trestle tables were piled high with uniforms and boots. A gang of soldiers was barking orders and pushing bewildered children up against height charts and onto scales. Lewis was informed that he was now NYC506b12977 (977 for short) and he was to

proceed to Table 11 for a medium-sized uniform and Table 24 for small boots “double quick”. His uniform fitted in some places but not others.

There followed an “orientation lecture”, in which some officer with an accent that nobody could understand stood on a chair on the playing fields and spoke to the whole school. It was something about “finding your role in life” and “being a useful member of society” and he assured them that they would all feel they had benefited from the experience by the time they had finished the course. There was quite a lot of coughing and spluttering from his audience by the time he had finished.

Haircuts were checked by a corporal with greasy skin but since most of the pupils had seen “The Butcher” only a few weeks earlier there wasn’t much need for any remedial work. Still, a few of the boys were yanked out of the line and sent off to a makeshift barber shop and came back with shiny scalps. The girls got the regulation shoulder-length cut and were issued with ugly brown hair nets.

Lunch was served from a hatch newly cut into the wall of the canteen. There were large cauldrons of something-or-other and soldiers were slopping big ladles of it into tin plates which had fold up handles. You had to lean against a wall and eat it with a spoon. Parker said it was a kind of stew but Push insisted it was spaghetti with meat balls. There were plenty of other theories as well.

They were allowed 15 minutes of “association” which apparently meant standing around with your mates but not actually doing anything other than talking quietly. Then it was off to their first drill session.

* * * * *

Regimental Sergeant Major McCabe was tall even for a drill instructor. He was seven foot easy and impressively broad in the chest. But it was also quite obvious that he was a bit old to be playing at soldiers. ‘He’ll have been brought out of retirement just to make up the numbers,’ whispered Parker until he was swiped by a corporal. ‘I’m watching you, laddie,’ the corporal snarled.

The sergeant had a stick tucked neatly under his armpit and he occasionally extracted it and waved it around in a menacing way. It was a couple of feet long, highly polished and capped off with a bit of shiny silver. He called it his “pace stick”.

The session started with The Basics. They were arranged into lines and rows, boys and girls together, and addressed from the front by RSM McCabe. He used a method of communication called bellowing.

‘Right then,’ he shouted and the second word came out as a high pitched squeak. ‘We are going to teach you miserable cretins how to stand properly.’ Again, the last word of his sentence sounded like a parrot who had been breathing helium. Lewis laughed.

The sergeant’s eyes narrowed as he looked around, as though sniffing the air. He looked up and down the ranks but, detecting nothing but serious faces, decided to carry on.

‘We are going to teach you to walk.’ The word ‘walk’ was so squeaky that it was almost inaudible. A dog started to bark. Lewis laughed again. This time, the sergeant was on him.

He bounded across the parade ground and landed with his toecaps almost touching Lewis’s boots.

‘Do you think I’m funny, cadet?’ “Cadet” came out as a strangulated whine.

‘No, sir.’

‘Why not? Don’t you think I have a sense of humour?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘WELL I DON’T! I ain’t never had a sense of humour and I ain’t never going to get one!’

Something went wrong inside Lewis’s head. He knew he shouldn’t say it but he went ahead and said it anyway. ‘That’s a double double negative.’

‘YOU WHAT!’

‘If you say, “I ain’t never had a sense of humour”, it means you’ve always had a sense humour. If you say “I ain’t never going to...”’

‘SHHUUDDDDUPPP!’

His stick swung round in a great arc and came to a dead stop a millimetre from the end of Lewis’s nose. He jabbed it forward, jerking Lewis’s head back, until the silver cap was jammed up against Lewis’s left nostril. The sergeant appeared to grow several inches. His back bent forwards until his face was level with Lewis’s.

‘I’ve got a bit of snot at the end of my stick!’

The next 1.5 seconds took several minutes. Lewis saw the sweat running from under the sergeant’s cap and down behind his ear. He smelt fish paste sandwiches and stale tea. He heard the slight shuffling of a hundred feet. He felt fifty pairs of eyes watching the back of his neck. He breathed in.

‘Which end, Sarge?’

The silence crackled. Birds stopped singing.

The sergeant was completely motionless but Lewis could see a lot going on in his eyes. They started off with utter loathing. Then they passed briefly

through confusion and doubt. Next came puzzlement. His body said nothing but his eyes were screaming it out.

I've got a piece... Which end... Snot... Bit of snot... End of my stick... Which end, Sarge...

The sergeant's brain was very small but, even so, it took a long time for The Thought to pass from one end to the other, searching for the place with the answers. The Thought was, "Have I just been insulted?" Bit of snot... Stick... Not my end. His eyes told the whole story. Suddenly The Thought lodged in the right place and he got it. He Had Been Insulted.

At the same moment, Trisha Bengrave laughed. Toby Snell snickered. Della Ali giggled.

The sergeant leaped back a full eighteen inches and landed bolt upright. 'Shut Up, you bastards. SHUT YOUR FACES.'

But it was too late. The front two rows were bent double. The middle row was on the floor and holding their bellies. The back two rows were crying hysterically. Corporals were marching up and down, shouting and trying to drag children to their feet, pushing them with their boots, shaking them. But nothing would stop the laughter.

Lewis was still at attention, his eyes staring straight forward.

The sergeant was bawling in some strange language.

'YoooYooaanYooostopthatbloodyracketyoolittlebastardsIwillavoyourgutsf orgartersyoooscumyoooslags...'

and eventually, 'Take that piece of snot to THE COOLER!'

Two corporals grabbed Lewis by the shoulders and started to drag him off the playing fields. But Lewis was having none of it. He shook them off, stood up straight and marched towards the school buildings, arms swinging. The corporals shrugged and fell in behind him.

The laughter turned to cheers.

Chapter Six

Lewis was led away to Holding Cell B (which looked remarkably like Mr Williams' PE equipment cupboard). The light bulb had been removed and, as the door was locked behind him, he had little choice but to hunker down on the play mats and wait.

By the time the last dribble of light had faded from under the door it was clear to Lewis that supper wasn't on the menu this evening. He pulled together some of the hessian mats, forming a sort of nest to try and keep warm, snuggled down into his new home and waited. Little scurrying noises kept him awake for a while but he imagined they were pixies come to keep an eye on him. Or possibly rats.

Around 6 a.m. (he hadn't been relieved of his wrist watch) he could hear people shuffling around on the other side of the door. At seven, the door was flung open and Corporal Smith stood there with his hands on his hips.

'Been a naughty boy then, Spottiswood?' he grinned. 'You're a right bolshy little bastard, aren't you?'

'I'll have the full continental breakfast, waiter, and can you make sure that the grapefruit isn't too firm,' said Lewis.

Corporal Smith turned on his heels without a word and left, locking the door behind.

At 8 a.m. he returned with a tin plate slopping with the brown stuff they had been acquainted with the day before. Lewis sniffed at it and decided that even fat and gristle were better than the gnawing and rumbling coming from his stomach. Smith plonked an enamel mug of steamy tea down in front of him. It looked about the same colour and consistency as HP Sauce.

Smith gave him ten minutes to clear his plate and then led him out into the drizzly wind sweeping around the play ground.

'Right, Cadet,' he said. 'The Commanding Officer wants a word with you. Stand up straight and don't answer back and you'll be alright.'

* * * * *

Station Commander Captain (Retired) Digby Trenchwood was happy to serve his country again in this time of national crisis but less happy to be dragged away from civilian life (where he was making a packet out of something called "futures") and placed in charge of a bunch of smelly school children.

He understood the need for discipline. He had three children of his own and had ensured they understood who was in charge from a very early age. The fact that one of them was in prison and two of them never spoke to him any more merely proved that he should have been a little firmer with them. But he wished it was some other poor sod who was babysitting these brats and not him.

Corporal Smith marched into the CO's office, arms swinging hysterically, and came to a juddering halt in front of the desk. Lewis ambled in behind him.

'Cadet Spottiswood, SAH,' Smith shouted.

'Thank you, Corporal,' said the Captain, leaning back in his chair and sipping his morning latte. The corporal spun on his heels and marched out again in cartoon soldier fashion.

'Oh Spottiswood. Spottiswood, Spottiswood, Spottiswood, what are we to do with you, Spottiswood? You're a blithering nuisance, you know, Spottiswood. A big disappointment to me. This only my second day in command of this post and already we've got one of you little peasants who thinks they know better than their elders and betters. It's the ingratitude that I can't understand. The government has gone to great expense to provide you with something to do throughout the summer and you seem to resent it. It's perverse, Spottiswood, that's what it is. Now orf you trot and try to behave like a civilised little, er, person, alright?'

'Smith,' he shouted, and the door opened a crack. 'Ten days jankers, Smith.'

Smith bounced back into the room and yanked Lewis by his collar into the corridor.

It occurred to Lewis that he hadn't actually contributed a word to his recent conversation with the Captain. That was probably a good thing, he decided. A smaller part of his mind was wondering what jankers was. Smith soon provided the answer.

'Jankers,' said Smith loudly, 'is what you get for arsing about.' He led Lewis into the kitchen block. On one of the work surfaces was a pile of potatoes the size of a small pony.

'That lot,' said Smith, 'has got peel on.' He handed Lewis a potato peeler. 'When I come back, they won't have peel on. Got it?'

Potatoes is not so bad, thought Lewis, picturing all the more physical forms of punishments that he had been imagining all night.

* * * * *

At eleven o'clock, Parker, Push and half a dozen other were marched in and were presented with dish mops and yesterday's pans to scrub. They had to smash through a couple of centimetres of congealed fat before they could start. It seemed there wasn't a lot to distinguish jankers from ordinary duties in this camp.

'We've just had double maths,' whispered Parker. 'Double maths in the holidays! It's against the Convention of Human Rights.'

'It's a war crime,' said Push from the other side of the room. She was immediately cuffed by the corporal with the thick brown stockings who was supervising them.

Lewis was beginning to wonder if he had got the better part of the deal.

* * * * *

They got through the day somehow. A combination of tedious lectures, impromptu lessons and exhausting drill was pepped up only slightly by an introduction to a rusting Lee Enfield No.IV Mk.I rifle. They got to pull it apart but failed to put it back together.

There was more Brown Stuff for tea but this time it was accompanied by day-glo yellow jelly which had failed to set and was best tackled with a straw. Then it was "drill" on the playground, which consisted of standing in rows and lines and jumping up and down on the spot with arms flailing around like a demented wind farm. Next, they were marched to their barracks (the school hall) and told that they could play cards for an hour. They were handed instructional leaflets on subjects such as unsightly diseases and getting a mirror-like polish on your boots.

Lewis, however, was marched back to the kitchen and presented with a brand new pile of potatoes. He noticed that a small blister was appearing on his peeling thumb.

Lights Out was at nine o'clock. There would be no talking or whispering and Mr Kabanu, the best bowler in the staff cricket team, patrolled the hall with a bag full of blackboard rubbers, which he liberally showered on any miscreants, until the only sound was the creak of his Hush Puppies on the polished wooden floor. Expect for the sound of Boris Pickles sobbing quietly into his pillow which no amount of coercion could diminish.

In the morning it was showers and then Brown Stuff and toast followed by parade. They took their place on the Parade Ground (formerly known as the playground) to hear a lecture from Captain Trenchwood.

A small platform had been set up at the end of the playing fields, next to the netball nets. There stood the Captain and beside him the new School

Chaplain who was about to lead the cadets in some innocuous inter-faith prayers. There was also a young man in an expensive-looking suit.

The Chaplain finished telling them how God was like a bicycle and they all sang “Onward Christian Soldiers”. The Captain stepped forward.

‘Now cadets,’ he boomed, ‘I have some splendid news for you. The Prime Minister of England is embarking on a tour of Youth Training Facilities and he has announced that this school may be, potentially, one which he may be, possibly, willing to visit.’

A flutter of complete indifference swept round the assembled cadets. Captain Trenchwood beetled his brow. ‘I can see you are all very excited about this,’ he tutted. ‘Mr Benson here,’ he gestured towards the young man, ‘will be checking us out to see that we are a suitable venue for the PM, so it’s best behaviour and snappy salutes all day, if you don’t mind. Jolly good, carry on. Dismiss the parade, Sergeant.’

They slopped away for their 15 minutes of “association”.

‘No more spuds today, Lewis?’ grinned Parker.

‘They let me out sometimes, you know.’

‘Old Jackman coming here. That’s got to be worth a mention. I’ve got a few things I’d like to say to him.’ Push nudged him in the back and said, ‘Shhhh.’ A number of the older pupils had been promoted to Cadet Officer status. They had special arm bands to denote their new rank. Some of them were detailed to patrol the school yard and it had become obvious that a few of them were specifically tasked with listening in on the conversations of the younger cadets.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Parker. ‘I haven’t seen a telly for three days.’

After midday Brown Stuff they were led away to another orientation lecture. The teacher in charge said some stuff about civic responsibility and respect and then handed them over to Mr Benson.

Benson had never seen so many Not Grown Up people in any one place before and he was a little bit nervous. Although only in his twenties, he could hardly remember his own childhood, such as it was, and regarded all young people as mutant adults who hadn’t fully formed as yet.

‘Now, children,’ he coughed, eying them suspiciously. ‘I know you will all be very proud that this school has been short listed for a visit by our beloved Prime Minister but there are one or two things that we have to check out before it’s all settled. Colonel Jackman is a very busy person and he doesn’t want to be bothered by a lot of people who don’t have the right attitude. So I’m going to ask you a series of questions and I trust you will give me honest answers. Firstly, who knows what the new party of government is called?’

All eyes turned to the floor to avoid being singled out. After a long pause, Stephanie White's nerve broke and she mumbled, 'The Adults For England Party?'

'That's right,' beamed Benson, 'the Adults For England Party.' This was going to be easier than he thought. 'And who can say what their objectives are?'

Now the ice was broken a few hands went up. Jamila Tonks offered, 'The Adults For England Party want to make sure that children are under control, not like they was before.' She gave an apologetic shrug to the row in front who had turned to scowl at her.

'Yes, and that's a good thing,' said Benson, 'isn't it?' Silence. 'Isn't it?' he repeated.

'Yes, sir,' muttered the class.

'That's right, because for too long you lot had been spoiled and indulged and it wasn't doing you any good, was it?'

'No, sir,' muttered the class.

'And who can tell me what the Seven Cs are?'

Lewis's hand went up. 'Is it the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Mediterranean...?'

Benson interrupted. 'What's your name, boy?'

'Spottiswood, sir. Lewis Spottiswood.'

Benson got out a little black book and wrote it down.

They had actually covered this in Civics the previously week and at least one person in the room had been paying attention. To everyone's surprise it was Push. She dutifully recited the Seven Cs. 'Clean Hands, Clean Teeth, Clean Nails, Clean Thoughts, Clean Conscience, Clean Bedroom, Clean Behind The Ears.' She turned to Parker and muttered under her hand, '...and a clean pair of heels.'

'Of course, you are all entitled to your own opinions and the government wants to hear those opinions. So does anyone think that those are not worthy and lofty goals to aim for?'

The sullen silence wafted around the classroom. 'Anyone at all,' Benson scanned the room.

'No, sir,' muttered the class.

'Wonderful. I'm sure the Prime Minister will be delighted to visit such responsible and thoughtful citizens.' He got up to go but before he left the room he scribbled a hasty note on a page torn from his notebook and handed it to the teacher. The teachers eyes scanned the room until they alighted on Lewis. She didn't look particularly amused. Lewis got the distinct

impression that his expertise with a potato peeler might be in even more demand in the near future.

* * * * *

And so it went. Showers; Brown Stuff; parade; exercises; training; lessons; more training; association; Brown Stuff; lectures; speeches; jumping up on things; jumping down from things; jumping on the spot; waving your arms around; Brown Stuff and jelly; Lights Out; sleep. Day in. Day out.

There was no telly. There were no books. Playing cards was the only approved recreation of any sort and it became almost a religion to them. When they got bored with Snap and Patience, they picked up the rules of Poker from some of the older kids. Lewis became quite good at it and before long he was betting his jelly against promises from fellow cadets to help him with his extra-curricular duties. Which was quite handy since his jankers had been extended to twenty days following the Benson incident. The last few days of his punishment seemed to fly by as great platefuls of potatoes were handed out of the kitchen windows and distributed to the less successful poker players for processing.

All went well until Regimental Sergeant McCabe uncovered the scam and decided that Lewis should learn the art of floor scrubbing. He was allocated a classroom with an unusually grubby, greasy wooden floor and given a bucket of soapy water and a toothbrush. McCabe, it appeared, did have a sense of humour after all. 'Just like old times,' he chuckled to Corporal Smith. 'Just like old times.'

Chapter Seven

Normal summer holidays consist of about two weeks doing sod all, two weeks wondering whether you should be doing something other than sod all, two weeks of complaining about having sod all to do and one week of frantically doing all the things you should have done in the first six weeks before time is up and you are shuffled back to dreaded school in September.

After only two weeks of boot camp, the cadets were beginning to fantasise about normal school, with normal lessons, normal teachers, normal homework and normal detentions. But just when the drudgery and hardship of Flintwick Youth Correction Facility became too much to bear, events took a turn for the better. Or, at least, for the not-quite-so terrible.

A notice appeared on each classroom door announcing that Outward Bounds trips would begin in the next few days.

‘What’s that mean?’ said Lewis, peering over Push’s shoulder.

“‘You will be taken on a coach to Dankstone Moor,’” she read. “‘Cadets will receive one hour of basic survival training from SAS experts. Cadets will then be bussed to various dropping off points on the moor and expected to find their own way back to designated pick up points.’”

‘Well, if it gets me out of scrubbing floors...’ said Lewis.

‘Ohh, goody,’ said Push. ‘I luuuuuv Bear Grylls.’

* * * * *

On Saturday they were herded onto rickety old green-painted buses. The seats smelt of urine and the upholstery had bits of metal poking out in inconvenient places. By virtue of their names being quite close alphabetically, Lewis, Push and Parker were grouped on the same coach. It had yet to occur to the military mind that splitting up such obvious troublemakers was an option. They bagged the back seats until they were forcibly ejected by bigger kids. They had to sit in front of one of the teachers who kept a beady eye on them throughout the journey.

Parker started counting the number of tanks and other military vehicles they passed until the teacher leaned forward and suggested that that kind of thing wasn’t encouraged anymore.

After two hours, they turned off the main road and up a gravelly farm track. Pulling above the tree line, they could see the empty moors stretching for miles ahead of them. When the dust from the bus in front parted, they

could see a complex of low farm buildings nestled under a row of oaks in a sort of dip in the moors. A sign said, “British Army Cadets Survival Training Centre”.

It was about midday so the first thing they were required to do when they disembarked was to sit on the low stone walls surrounding the camp. They were handed a little plastic tray and a plastic fork apiece. On removing the tin foil covers they discovered some grey chalky-looking cakes and some green mushy blobs. They were both Brown Stuff flavoured. ‘Yummy,’ said Parker and he stuck his thumb up to the corporal who was dishing out the trays.

The morning mist had burned away so they stayed outside in the courtyard, seated on folding chairs in the dappling shade of the oak trees. A sergeant emerged from the farmhouse and stood beside a trestle table in front of the group. He looked like a proper, fit soldier with a proper, fully-fitting uniform. Push smirked a bit.

‘Right, you lucky lads,’ he said, indifferent to those female faces staring back at him. He picked up an object in turn from the table besides him. ‘This is a compass. This is a map. This is a water container. And this is a knife. Together they are going to save your lives,’ he announced. ‘Except we can’t give you the knives for obvious reasons.’

For the next hour he described how moss only grew on certain sides of trees (but forgot to mention which side and why it was relevant), how you could get a life-saving drink from a natterjack toad (forgetting to mention that there weren’t any on Dankstone Moor) and how the knives they weren’t allowed to have could help you make a useful shelter using only grass and a copy of the Financial Times.

‘The first law of survival is you should always stick together. An army marches at the pace of the slowest,’ he announced proudly. ‘That is, of course, unless one of you is being an annoying little prick, in which case you get dumped.’

At the end of the hour he banged his fist down on the table and said, ‘Right. Is that all clear? Questions. Now.’ No body had any questions. Nobody had a clue what he was on about. ‘Clear as mud,’ said Parker.

They were each given a piece of paper, which could have been described as a map, a plastic compass and a plastic water bottle. They shuffled back onto the coaches and a teacher went down the aisle handing out black blindfolds

‘You wot?’ said Push.

‘Just put in on, Patel,’ said the teacher. ‘Don’t want to spoil the surprise, do you?’

The coach did a lot of bumping and lurching so they guessed they were going along rough tracks. All except for Lewis, who had slightly misapplied his blindfold and could see vaguely out of the window. After what seemed like a geological era or two they skidded to a halt and the teacher declared that it was time for them to take off their blindfolds. Push had an itchy red rash around her nose where the nylon had been rubbing.

‘Bloody brilliant,’ said Parker. ‘Middle of bloody nowhere,’ as they filed out into the bright sunshine.

Without any ceremony the soldiers, the teachers and the busses retreated back up the track and the twenty, so-called cadets were left standing in a huddle and wondering what to do next. Push surveyed the horizon. There was nothing but bracken, ferns and softly-rolling featureless moors in every direction. Occasional stumpy trees broke up the scenery but there was nothing to suggest where they were or where they should go.

A girl called Lydia, who fancied herself as something of a natural born leader, took control. ‘That,’ she pointed, ‘is south. Because that’s where the sun is and it’s just after midday. And this is the direction the map should go.’ She turned the paper round until the north on the map matched the north on the plastic compass she was holding on the palm of her hand. ‘And that,’ she announced to anyone who was listening, ‘is Head Quarters. That’s where we have to get to.’ She peered at the scale on the map and decided that it was approximately 15 miles across open country.

‘15 miles! We haven’t got any food. And we haven’t got any water, just these empty bottles.’

‘How much money have we got?’ asked Lewis. Parker had a pound. Push had 20p. Simmonds had a ten pound note that his grandmother had snuck into the lining of his suitcase. Piperdy topped it with a twenty, similarly donated by an elderly aunty.

‘What difference does it make?’ said Lydia. ‘There’s nothing to buy out here.’

Lewis turned and pointed in the direction they weren’t supposed to go. ‘About a mile down that road there’s a garage. I bet we could rustle up a sandwich each and maybe a choc ice.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘Because I think my blindfold may have been defective,’ Lewis smirked.

‘Sounds like a plan,’ said Parker and they started heading in the direction Lewis had suggested.

‘But it’s in the wrong direction.’

‘Oh, shut up, Lydia.’ Push walked a few steps back up the road, linked arms with Lydia and dragged her, protesting, after the others.

The mile back to the garage wasn’t taxing. The moor sloped down to a little B road, tucked into a fold in the hills. They even discovered a rather shabby burger joint tacked on to the side of the service station. The owner evidently assumed that cadets in uniform were exempt from the No Burgers For Kids rule and happily took their money off them. There was enough left for a cornet apiece and some Quavers.

Having gorged themselves, they basked in the sunshine on the verge by the forecourt of the garage without a thought to their mission or how they were going to get back to HQ. Even Lydia seemed content to let her food slowly digest, lying on her back and fiddling idly with a bit of straw.

Three quarters of an hour later, two jeeps pulled up by the petrol pumps and soldiers with red caps and “Military Police” written on their arm bands got out. They approached the cadets.

‘Which one of you is Lewis Spottiswood?’ asked the tallest one.

‘That’s me,’ said Lewis and got to his feet.

‘You’re coming with us.’

‘I know this looks bad, officer, but we were only using our initiative.’

‘Save it for the CO, kid.’

‘What makes you think this was my idea?’ asked Lewis.

‘Lucky guess, sonny.’ He pushed Lewis into the back of a jeep. ‘The rest of you; pick up your kit and start walking. That direction.’

As he was whisked away, Lewis saw the burger shop manager being quietly led by a couple of soldiers to the scrubby ground behind his premises.

* * * * *

‘Oh Spottiswood.’ Captain Trenchwood placed his big hands together on his desk and twiddled his thumbs. ‘Spottiswood, Spottiswood, Spottiswood. What are we going to do with you? You’ve let me down again. You’ve let your school down. You’ve let your friends down and now they’re all in trouble. It’s just not good enough, Spottiswood, is it? I’m afraid a spot of jankers isn’t going to suffice this time. I’d bust you to the ranks if you weren’t already the lowest of the low. I’d have a strong word with your parents if it wasn’t for the fact that I’ve been advised that they are in Malaga, Spain and won’t be back for three weeks. The only suitable punishment I can think of that will get through that sorry skull of yours is opprobrium from

your peers. By which I mean; let's see how you like it when your entire squad is punished for your misdeeds. Smith,' he shouted and Smith bounced into the room. 'SAH.'

'Spottiswood's squad is to placed on punishment duties. See to it. And take this piece of filth away,' he said, waving his pen in the general direction of Lewis. Smith marched Lewis into the corridor.

'Oh, and Smith,' he called after him. 'Five days in the cooler for Spottiswood.'

* * * * *

When Lewis was finally let out of Holding Cell B (Mr Williams' PE equipment cupboard) he was a little thinner and his skin was a little sallow. He was led, with some compassion, by Corporal Smith into the playground where he was confronted by the twenty members of his squad who had already endured five days of punishment for his sake.

Lydia, the self-appointed ringleader, stepped to the fore.

'Look at my hands, Lewis.' She held out a pair of blistered red hands with ragged nails. 'Twenty five hours of spud peeling we've had to suffer because of you. And it was worth every minute for that burger,' she grinned.

Chapter Eight

An armour-plated Rolls Royce glided up the school drive and, as it inched into the car park, motorbike outriders peeled away and heavily armed troops jumped from the tailgates of the following lorries. They stood in a cordon around the car, machine guns bristling outwards.

Jackman surfaced from the plush interior of the Rolls, followed by his wife, Dotty. Benson got out the other side with Mrs Bootles on her purple cushion. He had trained himself well and no one could possibly suspect the loathing he held for the creature.

Captain Trenchwood pulled himself upright and snapped a salute in front of the Prime Minister.

‘Welcome to Flintwick Youth Correction Facility, Prime Minister.’

Jackman ignored him and, turning to Benson, asked, ‘What’s this johnie’s name?’

‘Trenchwood, sir, Captain Trenchwood.’

‘Yes, yes, I can see he’s a captain,’ snarled the Prime Minister. ‘I was in the army, you know. Well, Trenchfoot,’ he said, turning to the Captain, ‘let’s get this ghastly beastliness over with. Lead on.’

The Captain’s lip quivered imperceptively. ‘This way, Prime Minister.’ He led him forward a few paces to the small platform facing the assembled cadets.

‘Three cheers for Colonel Jackman,’ he shouted. ‘Hip, Hip...’

500 pairs of eyes stared back at him in sullen silence. ‘...hooray,’ he added limply. ‘Oh, I don’t think they know the words to that one. Make a note, would you, Lieutenant?’ he said, turning to one of his aides.

Benson placed the sleeping Mrs Bootles on the bonnet of the car for a moment. He reached for a pencil and a notebook and made his own note.

‘Never mind,’ said Jackman. ‘What have you got lined up for me, Captain. And if you say drill or PE displays or taking apart rifles, I’ll have you strung up by several important parts of your body. Understood?’

The Captain gulped visibly and turned to whisper urgently to his aide. The aide started making strange arm gestures to other officers at the rear of the parade.

‘Indeed not,’ giggled the Captain nervously. ‘Some of the older recruits have been training with simulated live firearms and are going to put on a display for you, Prime Minister.’

The urgent signals appeared to have been interpreted correctly and several teams of not-that-bothered students wearing PE shorts and vests were rapidly ushered off the field towards the changing rooms. Instead, out of each corner of the playing field, came sixth formers on bicycles and wearing full military fatigues, their face painted in stripy green and brown make-up. The younger cadets, at a given command, split into two groups like a curtains being parted and formed ranks on either side of the field.

The bicycle team from the north corner headed straight for the team from the south and started pelting them with paper bags full of purple and orange flour. Great clouds of technicolour dust drifted towards the platform. Colonel Jackman coughed and Mrs Jackman started patting at her cream-coloured trouser-suit.

The teams from the east and west circled around making menacing gestures until North and South had cleared the decks, whereupon they jumped off their bikes and ran at each other, waving wooden rifles.

‘We hope to demonstrate, Prime Minister,’ said the Captain, proudly, ‘that in a time of crisis you can rely on the youth of the nation to come to the country’s aid. Today’s cadets are tomorrow’s soldiers,’ he preened.

At this point, Squad South had also abandoned their bikes and joined the mêlée brandishing what looked from a distance to be sparklers. When they lobbed them at the feet of Squad North, it became apparent that they were actually firecrackers and about twenty of them went off simultaneously. Squad North danced and squealed and launched a counter-attack against Squad South that didn’t look as though it had been rehearsed. East stood back in bemused silence for a few moments and then decided not to miss the fun. They jumped in with fists flying. Sergeant and corporals ran to the pile of flailing bodies in the centre of the parade ground and tried to pull a few of them out. RSM McCabe let fly with a string of expletives that made Mrs Jackman flinch as he disappeared under a fresh onslaught from Squad West.

The Prime Minister was not amused. ‘Bloody shambles, Trenchrot,’ he said. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever been in a real battle, have you?’ Jackman, too, had never been in a real battle but it was safe to assume that nobody was going to remind him. The Captain started spluttering something about limited funds, lack of rehearsal time and health and safety regulations and then decided that being quiet was the best policy at this precise moment.

‘I’ve seen enough,’ said Jackman. ‘I hope you’ve got a good lunch for me,’ and he started dragging his wife towards the school buildings. Mrs Jackman was still trying to remove purple and orange dust from her clothes and had an expression like someone who has just discovered something smelly

attached to their top lip. Dotty looked at the Prime Minister's assistant. 'Where's Mrs Bootles, Benson?'

Benson, who had been laughing quietly to himself throughout the spectacle had failed to notice that the pillow he was holding was somewhat lighter than it should have been.

'She's gone,' screamed Mrs Jackman.

'I... I...,' spluttered Benson. 'It must have been those fireworks! She got scared and ran off.'

Jackman hunched his shoulders and grabbed Trenchwood by the lapels. 'If that cat isn't found in the next ten minutes I'm going to have you posted to Antarctica. Get it?' He turned to the soldiers who were guarding him. 'Lock-down. Immediately. Nobody leaves the school and nobody moves until that cat is found. Back in the car, Dotty.'

The Prime Minister sat in his car for a whole hour. Sandwiches and a nice claret were brought out to him. Mrs Jackman cried silently. Soldiers, teachers and cadets ran hither and thither but Mrs Bootles was not to be found. Eventually, the Rolls pulled away and a pale-faced Trenchwood retired to his study for a good few fingers of Scotch.

* * * * *

Most teachers like to have a drink at lunchtime. Most soldiers live a hard and disciplined life and wouldn't dream of drinking on duty unless invited to by a senior officer. But most soldiers don't normally work closely with teachers. Put the two together and after a few weeks of close contact with the latter, the soldiers began to pick up some bad habits. One by one, they found themselves slipping away around midday for a swift half down the local pub.

Thus it was that, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, discipline at the school, despite the military presence, wasn't quite what it should be. The Commanding Officer had locked himself in his study with several crates of whisky and, when he did emerge, told anyone who would listen that he didn't give a stuff what happened to the school or the wretched pupils.

The dinner ladies coped heroically with their Brown Stuff duties in the middle of the day but there just weren't enough qualified instructors around to keep a proper eye on all 500 cadets and to give them gainful employment. So the camp's second in command, who was eager to return to proper soldiering, introduced what he called "The Refs Period", which was essentially a two-hour playtime between twelve and two.

On such a playtime, Lewis, Parker and Push were leaning against the pillars of an Elliot hut and pushing Brown Stuff around their tin plates in a desultory manner. Mrs Bootles eased out from under the hut and almost had her nose in Parker's food before he even noticed.

'It's that cat! Quick. Grab it,' he shrieked and lunged to his left. Push lunged to her right and the cat slid effortlessly between them and back into the dark seclusion of the Elliot hut's foundations.

'Arse!' said Parker. 'That's the Prime Minister's cat. There may be a reward. We have to get that thing.' Making "puss, puss" noises and leaving a dribble of Brown Stuff on the pavement next to the hut had no effect whatsoever. But it was clear that Mrs Bootles had found herself a home and wasn't going to be moved for anyone so they retired to construct a plan. Constructing a plan was interrupted by PE and then double physics.

After that, they each had to go to their separate punishment routines. Push was cleaning shoes in the teachers' staff room. Parker had taken over floor-scrubbing duties and Lewis was back on the spuds. At every opportunity they took a sneaky look towards the Elliot hut but there was no sign of movement. The next chance of a chat was the hour or so of Association before Lights-Out. They headed, as usual, for the "barracks" (as they had come to know it) but a small boy stood barring the way to their cubicles.

'You can't go in there,' he said.

'Why not?' asked Parker, politely.

'Because you sodding can't, that's why.'

'Oooh,' said Push, 'a feisty one,' and made to tickle him under his chin. A voice inside said, 'Who is it, Dante?'

'It's Spottiswood. And his little friends.'

'Let 'em in,' said the voice. They stepped past the lookout boy and into the darkened cubicle.

'What's occurring?' asked Parker, when he recognised Lydia. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a circle of familiar faces around her. 'Did you see any teachers or soldiers out there?' she said.

They shook their heads. 'Then come in and sit down. We've got business to discuss.'

They settled themselves on the floor and somebody handed them each an illicit jammie dodger. 'I'll come straight to the point,' said Lydia, importantly. 'This is the first meeting of the Flintwick Escape Committee. Are you in, or do we have to kill you?'

They all nodded in unison. 'Of course we're in,' said Lewis.

‘We’re planning a mass breakout. Your little stunt on the moors showed us that we can do something for ourselves. We don’t have to take their crap all the time. But we didn’t have a plan then. We didn’t follow it through. This time we are going to be organised and we are going to have proper objectives. We’re going to show those soldiers that they can’t push us around anymore.’

Piperdy put up his hand. ‘I’m fed up with this. I haven’t had a proper meal in three weeks. And I haven’t heard from my mum and dad since I got here.’

‘I will never eat another potato in my life,’ said Push, staring at her fingers.

‘I just want to go home,’ said Boris Pickles and he started sniffing again.

‘Yeah. Well we may just have something a bit better than that,’ said Lewis. He glanced from left to right in a conspiratorial sort of way. ‘Underneath Elliot Hut C is a cat and it belongs to Prime Minister Lionel Jackman,’ he announced dramatically.

‘No way,’ gasped Piperdy.

Lewis turned to Lydia. ‘Can you get us out of here at night?’

‘Easy. I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Kabanu likes his cocoa at eleven-thirty every night. We can do more or less what we like while he’s gone. What have you got in mind?’

* * * * *

Lydia slid back the bolt to the corridor window and pocketed the security lock. She and Lewis knelt down and Parker and Push stood on their backs to reach the ledge. When they were safely on the other side, Lydia and Lewis faded back into the shadows to keep watch.

This had been a carefully planned operation. Team A had liberated some salami sausage from the fridge in the teachers’ staff room. Piperdy swore it was irresistible to cats. Team B had located a fuse box underneath the main stairwell which controlled the exterior lights. Team C has rifled through the caretaker’s jacket pockets until they discovered the appropriate keys. Team D had raided the little hut next to Pets Corner and appropriated a portable rabbit hutch which would serve nicely for a cat.

Push and Parker edged from shadow to shadow like shadows. A group of soldiers were gathered on the corner discussing the absence of outside lights but didn’t seem to think it was anything particularly out of the ordinary. They slipped down the side of the girls’ toilets to avoid the squaddies. In the playground proper they quickly identified the Elliot hut and set about baiting the trap. Mrs Bootles was easy meat. She walked boldly into the half-light and gobbled up the first piece of salami that was tossed towards her.

‘Good old Piperdy,’ whispered Parker. ‘Maybe he does know a thing or two.’

‘Nice kitty,’ said Push as she scooped her up and in one move whisked her into the carry case.

‘Yes!’ growled Parker. ‘Mission accomplished.’

‘We’ve got to get back in yet. And we’ve got to keep her quite somehow.’

‘I think Team E have that covered,’ said Parker as they slipped back into the darkness between the huts.

Back in the dorm they had ten minutes to spare. Mr Kabanu was actually watching something on telly in the staff room that invariably finished at ten past midnight. A small group of conspirators was gathered around the open air vent low on the wall behind Parker’s bunk. The cat and carry case were slid through the gap and a giant wad of insulation foam jammed in behind her.

‘She can make as much noise as she likes in there,’ said Parker. ‘Nobody’s going to hear through that.’

‘Poor cat,’ whined Push.

‘She’s got plenty of food.’

With five minutes to spare they looked to Lewis. ‘Is everybody clear,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow morning we make our demands.’

They nodded solemnly and returned to their respective bunks.

Chapter Nine

But tomorrow morning was different. It felt different the moment they got up. Lewis's cold feet hit the cold floor and he knew something was wrong.

The canteen was half empty. Only the tables which housed the lower school were laid with cutlery. Parker scanned the vacant seats and scratched his head. 'They must be on an exercise.'

There was a buzz around one table where Lydia and other members of the FEC (Flintwick Escape Committee) were grabbing a quick word before one of the few remaining teachers split them up.

'How old are you?' she said pointing at Push.

'Twelve and half,' said Push. 'Why?'

'How old are you?' She pointed at Lewis.

'Twelve years and two months,' said Lewis.

'I'm twelve years, eleven months and three weeks. I'll be thirteen on Monday. I'm the oldest person in the room,' she said. Their jaws dropped.

It quickly dawned that it wasn't just the older classes that had disappeared. It was everyone over the age of thirteen. Everyone who was a teenager.

Mrs Chubbly, the dinner lady, had extra toast for them that morning. 'Here you are, chucks,' she said and slid a plate down the table. 'Where is everyone, Mrs Chubbly?' asked Lewis.

'I don't know, dear,' said Mrs Chubbly. 'I expect it's all for the best.' Lewis thought she had been crying.

They grew bolder and went to grab Mr Tofton. 'Where have they all gone, sir?' cried Lewis, tugging at his elbow patch.

'The older children have been relocated,' said Mr Tufton, mechanically. 'Colonel Jackman knows what he's doing,' he said and his eyes glazed over momentarily.

'But where to?' said Lewis.

'I'm afraid that information is classified,' said Tufton. Mrs Chubbly was standing behind him, shaking her head and mouthing words which clearly meant, "He hasn't got a clue".

'Right. I want a meeting of the FEC. First opportunity,' said Lewis.

* * * * *

The school was in uproar. Half the teachers had disappeared, presumably relocated to wherever the older children had gone. Captain Trenchwood was nowhere to be seen at first. It was rumoured that he was now in charge of huskies at the South Pole. After an hour or so, he emerged from his study looking somewhat bleary-eyed and unshaven. He toured each classroom to assure the cadets that the current lack of organisation was only a blip and normal service would be resumed as soon as he could figure out what normal service was supposed to be.

It was quite clear that no one was going to teach any ordinary lessons so they were all let out to the playground and told to do exercises as they had been taught. This inevitably meant that, after a few half-hearted star jumps, they gravitated into small groups, urgently discussing the events of the morning.

The FEC convened down the end of the sports field by the willow coppices, trying to stay out of sight as much as possible.

‘Where does your sister go to school, Lewis?’ asked Lydia.

‘The Tech,’ he replied.

‘Mrs Chubbly said the Tech teenagers had disappeared too.’ Lewis’s face went white. That guilty feeling about the mean things he had said to Bev returned.

‘OK. This changes everything,’ said Lydia. ‘We hit them with our demands and we hit them hard.’ She balled a fist into a palm.

‘No, no,’ said Lewis. ‘Don’t you see? We can’t just make this a local protest. There’s something going on across the country. We’ve got something of national importance in our possession. We need to keep Mrs Bootles back until we know what’s happened to the teenagers.’

They stared at him, expectantly. ‘That’s all I’ve got on that one,’ he said. Everyone looked at their feet and shuffled.

Push came shuffling towards them with a newspaper poking out from underneath her tunic. ‘I found this by the gate. There’s a bundle of them – they just leave them outside for the Station Commander.’

She handed it over to Lewis. The headline screamed, “PRIME MINISTER ANNOUNCES NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE SCHEME”, and then underneath in smaller letters, “Teenagers relocated to Isle of Wight Training Centre. Compulsory service for all 13 to 17 year olds”. Inside, there were pictures of smiling parents saying what a good idea they thought it was.

‘Stuff me,’ said Parker. ‘That’s everyone we know who isn’t stood here right now,’ he gasped.

‘That’s not all,’ said Push. ‘I overheard Tofton talking on his mob. He said there’s something going on at the train station – there’s hundreds of busses there and the goods yards are full of carriages.’

‘That’s it!’ cried Lewis. ‘That’s how they’re getting them down south to the Isle of Wight. They’re putting them on the trains.’

‘My brothers will be on those trains. We can’t just let them whisk them away. We don’t know what’s waiting for them at the Isle of Wight,’ said Lydia.

‘Do you remember Arseface Morton?’ asked Lewis.

‘What, the kid that disappeared?’ said Push.

‘Yeah, well I know where he is. He’s living under one of the flyover bridges. He pops up here occasionally to scrounge a few scraps of food from the canteen. He says he’d rather be sleeping rough than being ordered around by some spud in a uniform. His parents don’t seem to be around anywhere these days.’

‘What’s he got to do with anything?’ asked Lydia.

‘Well, if we’re going to get out of this place we can’t take the cat with us. She’d be a liability on the road. We’d have Jackman’s goons following us everywhere. Arseface is the perfect host for Mrs Bootles. No one’s going to go near him even if they could find him.’

‘Arseface won’t do anything unless you pay him,’ said Push.

‘He’d do anything for cigarettes and I know where we can get hundreds.’

* * * * *

They stood between the pillars under the flyover and whistled. ‘Arseface,’ called Push. ‘Arseface Morton, where are you?’ A head poked out from what, at first sight, appeared to be a pile of sacks, just where the slope of the embankment met the foundations of the bridge. ‘Piss off!’ shouted Arseface, and then, ‘Oh, it’s you,’ when he realised it was Lewis. ‘Got any food?’

‘Better than that,’ said Lewis, and he waved a packet of 200 cigarettes seductively. Arseface was next to him like a shot. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘We’ve got a job for you. There’s another packet like this and I think I can get you some tins and stuff. Keep you going for a few weeks,’ said Lewis. ‘All we want you to do is to look after this cat,’ and he lifted up the carry case and presented the sorry-looking creature for Arseface’s inspection.

Arseface had a name for being a hard case but he had a bit of a soft spot for animals. He probably would have looked after Mrs Bootles without the inducement. After some wrangling they struck a bargain.

‘I think it’s only fair to warn you,’ said Lewis, ‘that this the most wanted cat in the country. If anybody finds you with it you’ll have a brigade of soldiers down here double quick.’

‘Not bothered,’ said Arseface.

Push extracted a phone. She thrust the cat into Arseface’s arms and said, ‘Keep her still, will you?’ She started taking some snaps.

‘Ere, don’t get my face in that. I’ve got a reputation to hide.’

* * * * *

The break-out plan was quite straightforward – they would simply leave. If enough children just walked out of the gate, no amount of squaddies would be able to stop them. Unless they were prepared to open fire.

A few of the inmates elected not to be party to such shocking disobedience so, in the interests of security, they were locked in Holding Cells A and B shortly before the appointed hour. A raid on the canteen stores netted enough dry food for at least a few days on the road and everyone stuffed their army-issue rucksacks with bedding, spare socks etc.

* * * * *

Captain Trenchwood sniffed the air and knew something funny was going on. He left his office and prowled down the corridor. He put his head round the door of the Sergeants’ Mess, grabbed the nearest corporal and dragged him out into the corridor. ‘Come with me, Smith,’ he said, ‘Bring your gun.’

At the library he was met by three teachers who were almost running towards the CO’s office. ‘They’re all going!’ panted Mr Tofton.

‘Pull yourself together, man. Take a deep breath and speak to me slowly,’ said the Captain. He knew how to handle himself in a crisis.

* * * * *

The soldiers sprinted down the drive and got to the school gates just before the first of the children. Lydia and Lewis led the way.

‘Whatever it is you think you are doing,’ Trenchwood shouted, ‘you can stop it right now. Go back to your classrooms this minute. I’m not having any shenanigans from you lot.’

Lewis stepped forward. ‘We’re going to the station, sir. You can’t stop us.’

‘I bloody well can,’ said the Captain. He pushed Corporal Smith in the small of his back. ‘Fire over their heads!’

Corporal Smith shook his head. ‘I don’t think so, sir. They’re only kids.’

‘You’ll bloody well follow orders, Corporal,’ he screamed. ‘Fire!’

The Corporal shook his head again and said, 'Not this time mate.' He shouldered his rifle and sauntered away in the direction of the classrooms, whistling to himself.

The Captain stood in the gateway, waving his hands in the air ineffectually. Children streamed either side of him and out onto the road.

* * * * *

159 eleven and twelve year olds take up quite a lot of room and cars were backed up all the way to the ring road as they made their way down towards the station. Somebody started singing, "Onward Christian Soldiers" (because they didn't really know any other songs) until Push pointed out that she wasn't a Christian and she'd rather they desisted. She caught up with Lewis as they neared Beckham Corner. 'I'll be off now. I'll catch you up at the station.' She crossed the road and into an internet café.

They arrived at the station at 3:55. A bunch of disgruntled adults was standing by the gates and arguing the toss with a station employee. They were complaining that they weren't allowed on the trains and were waving their useless tickets in his face.

On Platform 3, a diesel unit pulling rather old fashioned-looking carriages was edging itself down the south track. Lewis marched up to the nearest person in uniform, pulled his sleeve and demanded to know where the teenagers were.

'All gone, mate,' said the porter. 'Last one's just pulling out now. Right mess they've made and all. Crisp packets everywhere. We've had to cancel all the regular services. It's going to take us days to get everything back in the right order.'

Lewis returned to his friends. 'They've all gone. Every last one of them. We're too late.' A picture of his sister leaning out of a window and staring wistfully back at Flintwick swam into his mind. He couldn't decide if he was feeling sad or angry.

They pushed through the ticket office and thronged onto the station, spilling out left and right along the platform. Just in time to see the last train accelerating away. Anxious faces looked to Lewis for a lead. It was clear that The Plan only extended this far and now they were beginning to wonder what to do next.

'We can't go back to the school,' said Push. 'That Captain Trenchwood is going to have our guts.'

Lewis sighed. 'We should stick to the original plan. We may not be able to catch up with the Isle of Wight kids but we don't have to go back and be pushed about by that bunch.'

'How far is it to the Isle of Wight?' asked a voice at the back.

'About 60 miles to the coast,' said Lewis, 'give or take.'

A man in a grey suit and a pink tie barged his way through the crowd and grabbed Lewis by the lapel. 'You children have got to get off the platform. You're causing an obstruction. The authorities have been called, you know. Why don't you just leave and let us decent people get on with our business?'

That clinched it. It was definitely anger he was feeling.

'You decent people are just letting this happen.' He jumped up onto a pile of crates that were waiting for the post train and addressed the whole crowd. 'You decent people don't seem to give a toss about what's happening right under your noses. Every teenager in this country has been abducted by the government and you just stand around looking like sheep. Well, if you're not going to do anything about it, we are. We're going to the Isle of Wight.'

158 voices behind him shouted, 'YES!'

As they filed towards the exit, a man with a camera round his neck and a notepad in his hand caught Lewis's attention. 'What's your name, kid?'

'Lewis. Lewis Spottiswood is my name.'

The man wrote it down.

* * * * *

That same man found a quiet spot, got his mobile out and phoned the News Desk of the local paper. '*Got a story for you, chief.*'

The News Editor took the story to the office of the Regional Manager. He scanned the page once and decided it was much bigger than just a local bit of news. He picked up the phone and called the national office in London.

Within twenty minutes a fully-fledged story was on the internet.

'CHILDREN'S REVOLT – HUNDREDS OF WILD CHILDREN LOOSE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE.'

There was a picture of Lewis standing on his crates. The caption read, "Lewis Spottiswood, Rebel Leader", and then underneath that in bigger letters;

SPOTICUS

A legend was born.

* * * * *

In his geekier moments, Lewis was a bit of a history freak. He knew all about the Long March of China and the Jarrow Crusade. He knew that revolutions didn't fund themselves. He knew that cold and hungry rebels began to lose their convictions in quick time.

They were camped in the woods just south of Flintwick. Thankfully, it was a warm and balmy August evening and Parker proved that he was a dab hand at lighting fires. Soon everyone was huddled around the cheering glow of campfires and baked beans were sizzling in a dozen pans.

A party had been delegated to fetch water from a tap by a nearby farmhouse and they returned without incident. Lookouts were posted along the perimeter of the woods but so far it didn't look as though anyone was actually following them.

'What are we going to do when the food runs out, Lewis?' Lydia asked. 'Or when it starts raining?'

'We can cope with the rain. All that basic survival training was of some use, you know. And everybody's got waterproofs.'

'What are we going to do,' said Parker, 'when a bunch of soldiers with automatics turn up at the end of the field and mow us down?'

'That ain't going to happen,' said Push. 'You saw what happened to Trenchwood. They can't harm every child here.'

'But there's only 150 of us. We can't resist a whole army.'

The only thing that seemed to be going in their favour was the morale of the troops. Apart from the four or five of them sat around Parker's fire, everyone was in terrific mood. They were free from the school, they were free from the soldiers and they were free from the crappy food they'd been eating for weeks. They were on the road to somewhere and doing something. At last they felt like there was a purpose in life.

It was only Lewis and his mates who went to bed with wrinkled brows and worried looks.

In the morning, however, several lucky things occurred.

Chapter Ten

As they reached the dual carriageway, they saw another stream of children walking along the opposite verge.

After a bit of waving and shouting, Lewis and Lydia crossed over. They were met on the central reservation by a boy about Lewis's age.

'Lewis Spottiswood, I presume.'

Lewis was aghast. 'How do you know my name?'

The boy stuck out his hand. 'We're from Sir Roy Batty High School. If you are heading for the Isle of Wight, can we come too?'

'Sure,' said Lewis, but his face betrayed his puzzlement. By way of explanation, the boy shoved a newspaper into his hands. The front page carried a picture of Lewis, looking stern and statesmanlike. The banner headline simply said, "SPOTICUS".

On the opposite verge, children from the other school raised placards they were carrying. One by one, they started chanting. 'SPOTICUS, SPOTICUS.'

'What the hell is going on?' asked Lewis.

'It seems, mate,' said his new friend, 'that you are famous.'

* * * * *

Jackman was back at his desk.

'I hope this is good news.'

Benson slid into the office with a laptop under his arm. 'It's partially good news, Prime Minister. Mrs Bootles is alive.'

'I know she's alive. I didn't think the little savages had eaten her. Where is she?'

'We don't know exactly, Prime Minister. She's being held hostage.'

The tea that Jackman was drinking was ejected through his nose at high velocity and splattered the papers in front of him. 'YOU WHAT?'

'Pictures of Mrs Bootles have appeared on the internet. An email was sent to this office.'

'Who's doing this, Benson? Why haven't you caught them yet? Why isn't Mrs Bootles back on her chair?'

'The message said; "FREE THE ISLE OF WIGHT MARTYRS", and was signed by a group calling themselves FEC. We don't know where the pictures were taken, Prime Minister. We do know that they were uploaded from an internet café in Flintwick. The café owner is in custody as we speak

but he doesn't appear to know anything. Other than the fact that a girl of about ten or eleven came into his establishment at 3:30 yesterday afternoon. About the same time that children from the nearby school were absconding. And since that's the school where Mrs Bootles went missing, it would appear that one of those children has found the cat and is trying to exploit it for some kind of political end.'

Jackman thought that this was rather stating the obvious. He considered some withering put down but decided sarcasm would be wasted on Benson. Instead, he broke several pencils. He stood up and kicked a waste paper bin. Then he threw a file of papers onto the floor and danced on it.

'I want those little bastards caught. Use any resources you need. MI5, MI6, International Rescue, whatever it takes. But get Mrs Bootles back here and get me the culprits. If one hair on her head is harmed, Benson, you'll answer for it. I suggest you use the Child Finder General.'

* * * * *

The second piece of luck arrived in the shape of Chief Constable Ken Railings. From Lewis's point of view, it didn't look very lucky at first. Police squad cars had been sliding along past the marchers all morning and taking an obvious interest in their progress. Constables had begun to appear at roundabouts and junctions but, so far, had done nothing to interfere.

At last, a squad car purred up next to Lewis and Lydia, matching their pace for several hundred metres. The windows in the back were darkened. A female officer sat in the front passenger seat. On her lap she had a photograph of Lewis. It wasn't the one that appeared in the newspapers. Lewis recognised it as an old school portrait.

Lydia and Lewis stared at each other and then straight ahead. Just when he felt he couldn't bear the tension anymore, the window began to roll down.

'Lewis Spottiswood.' It wasn't a question, more of a statement. 'Get into the car, please.'

'Are you arresting me?'

'No, we're not arresting you. You can return to your friends as soon as you've had a word with the Chief Constable.' Lewis gulped. The back door opened and he slid inside.

Chief Constable Railings was what is politely referred to as "portly". He was in shirtsleeves and beads of sweat pricked his forehead.

'Spottiswood,' said the Chief Constable. 'Have some pop?' The woman in the front seat handed him an ice-cool can of Coke.

'Thank you,' said Lewis.

‘Spottiswood. Making a bit of a nuisance of yourself, aren’t you?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Lewis.

‘Just a bit of a shame that you have to do it on my patch.’

‘Are you going to stop us?’ said Lewis boldly.

‘No, no. I don’t have the authority to stop you. Leastways, I wouldn’t if I could. I don’t want 500 unwashed brats clogging up my nice new police station. I’m here to mark your card, Lewis.’

‘Sir?’

‘My chief concern is safety. 500 children on a major traffic artery is a bit of a logistical problem, you know, and between you and me, you’re not the only children on the move. When you come to the junction with the A417 you’ll be greeted by 700 children from four different schools. Hand me one of those Cokes, would you Constable?’

Lewis kept a straight face.

‘So,’ continued the Chief Constable, ‘what’s going to happen from now on is that my officers will be posted at every roundabout and every major junction. You will report to them if there’s any trouble and they will make sure that you are not too bothered by traffic queues and prying journalists etc.’ Lewis betrayed a moment of surprise. ‘Yes, journalists, Spottiswood, you didn’t think this might not attract a little bit of attention, did you? We’ve been heading them off up until now but I can’t hold them back for ever. Expect the odd camera crew to join you shortly.’

He zapped his Coke open and took a deep slurp. ‘Hot, isn’t it,’ he said cheerily.

‘You mentioned marking my card, sir?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said and mopped his brow. ‘I’m guessing that the reason I haven’t been ordered to stop your little protest is that others are on the way to do just that. They never keep us informed, you know,’ he added petulantly. ‘I’m Gold Command for this district and I’m always the last to hear. But my officers have noticed a build up of green trucks and jeeps and the like. So I think you can guess what’s going to happen next.’

Lewis nodded, sagely.

‘In return for my candour and openness, Spottiswood, I trust you will ensure that your little band doesn’t do anything stupid. It would really annoy me if someone got run over. Have you considered how you are going to feed and water them?’

Lewis said that they had got all that covered. But it was a lie.

* * * * *

They wasted an hour at the next service station, filling up water bottles and queuing for the toilets. The manager stood on the forecourt, eying them malignantly, but didn't interfere. Probably because what little money they had left went on chocolate and chewy things.

Push bought a road atlas so they could check the route. Southampton looked like the best port to head for: although it had the longest of the three ferry crossings to the Isle of Wight it was also the closer to them by a good ten miles.

At one o'clock they found themselves on a wide bit of verge. Lewis called a halt and everyone settle down on the grass to eat lunch. A police inspector in uniform approached them and asked them to stay put for at least an hour while they moved the backlog of traffic round the obstruction. Streams of slow moving cars threaded past them. Most people simply gawped out of their windows but some shook their fists angrily and quite a few parped their horns. It wasn't clear whether this was to show support or disapproval.

Near the end of the tailback, a convoy of large vans, each complete with a satellite dish on its roof, edged past the marchers and pulled as best as they could onto the verge ahead of them. The vans disgorged dozens of adults with cameras and microphone booms. They picked their way through the seated marchers, stopping now and then to ask where they could find Lewis Spottiswood.

Parker took charge. 'I am Mr Spottiswood's agent,' he declared. 'If you want an interview, you'll have to come through me.' A man from the BBC in a suit pushed brusquely past him, but after ten minutes of further searching they realised that nobody was going to give them Lewis's whereabouts. They returned to Parker and interrupted his cheese and pickle sandwich.

'Mr Spottiswood will see gentlemen from the BBC, ITV and Sky News. For five minutes only,' Parker said, importantly. 'The rest of you will have to get your copies from the major networks.' Lewis was pushed to the fore from where he was hiding behind Push.

A little tent materialised from nowhere. It was little more than a parasol on poles but it kept the sun off. Several desks and equipment were arranged in its shade. Lewis recognised a woman from the telly but couldn't quite remember her name. She was bossing the sound recordists. When she saw Lewis, she grabbed him by the arm, bent over him and put on her biggest, most patronising smile. 'Now Lewis, all you have to do is answer our questions clearly and slowly and everything will be fine.'

'Great,' said Lewis, 'I may have a few questions myself.'

The woman looked slightly perplexed. By now, a bank of cameras and microphones had surrounded the little tent and they all appeared to be pointing at Lewis. A fat man in a puffer jacket said, 'Joining studio in five... four... three...' and then switched to waving his fingers.

'Thank you, Peter,' the woman said to wall of cameras. 'You join us on the A34 south of Flintwick. I'm here with Lewis Spottiswood, the leader of the Children's Revolt.' She turned to face him. 'Did you know, Lewis, that the media have dubbed you "Spoticus"? What do you think about that?'

'I'm not the leader of anything,' said Lewis, ignoring the question. 'We're just here to find out what has happened to our brothers and sisters.'

'Now, your intention, it appears, is to walk to the Isle of Wight. What good do you think that will do?'

Lewis squinted into the cameras. 'You can't just disappear half the kids in the country and expect us not to take an interest. Will they be coming for us when we reach our thirteenth birthdays?'

'But this is properly constituted legislation by the government with full consultation. Isn't it a bit late in the day to be raising objections?'

'Full consultation! It's the first we've heard of it. Nobody's told us what's going on. Nobody's asked us what we think.'

'Nevertheless, some would say that your behaviour is reckless. What do your parents have to say about this?'

'None of us have seen our parents for weeks. As far as I'm aware, they're all out of the country, partying in the South of Spain.'

'But aren't you just proving that this kind of wilful disobedience is exactly what the Prime Minister was elected to eliminate? Surely, you'd have to call this off if you had direct orders from your parents?'

'Why don't you get a few of them here and we could talk it over?'

'How do you intend to feed and water ten thousand children?'

Lewis gulped. Ten thousand! 'We've got that covered, thank you.'

'Not to mention sanitary arrangements?'

'All sorted, thank you very much,' said Lewis. The little lie was beginning to gnaw at his stomach again.

'Finally, you seem to have some sort of political agenda. Have you been in negotiations with any dissident groups or opposition parties?'

'We haven't been talking to anybody. In case it's escaped your attention, we've been locked up in a boot camp for the last four weeks.'

The presenter turned back to the camera but before she could speak Lewis interjected. 'I do have something I wish to say to Colonel Jackman, if you don't mind.'

The cameras swung back to Lewis. 'Go on, then,' she said cautiously.

'If you're listening, Colonel Jackman, we don't think it's right that you've stolen all our brothers and sisters. I just want you to know that, when you've thought about it a bit, you'll be very sorry that you did this.'

'Well,' said the presenter, with eyebrows raised. 'With that I'm handing you back to the studio. This is Wilhelmena Caldwell, BBC News 24.'

Before the other networks could pounce, she dragged Lewis to one side. 'You've just been on network TV. That film will be bounced all over the globe and repeated hundreds of times. And you totally blew any chance of winning any friends with your sarcy comments. Not every adult in this country is fooled by Jackman, you know. Have you got a media plan?'

Lewis stared at his feet.

'You better get media savvy, Lewis, or you're never going to change the world!'

The same rigmarole was repeated for Sky News, with more or less the same questions. Lewis thought about the woman from the BBC's comments and he tried to come over more sympathetically. When ITV claimed it was their turn, Lewis called up Lydia and asked her if she'd do the last slot. 'I don't want them to think it's a one-man show,' he explained. He was getting well fed up with this Spoticus business.

He returned to his half-eaten tin of baked beans. When Lydia had finished, the other networks all started to clamour for more interviews until the police intervened and herded them back to their vans.

Chapter Eleven

Parker, sporting a brand-new Sky News baseball cap, flopped down next to Lewis. ‘There’s one more interview you should do.’

‘I’m not doing any more. They’ve got what they need. It’s time we got moving again.’

‘I think you should see this one.’ He slipped a roll of banknotes half out of his pocket so that only Lewis could see it.

‘Where the fridge did you get that?’

‘I thought this might come in handy when we run out of food. See that black van at the end of the TV vans – the one with no windows. The chap inside says there’s double the money if you’ll agree to talk to him.’

‘Do you think it’s a trap?’

‘Dunno, but, just in case, we’ll ask for the money up front.’

Lewis felt reassured.

* * * * *

‘It’s him, isn’t it,’ shouted Jackman. ‘That little bastard has got my cat.’

He was playing and rewinding the interview with Lewis. He turned to the man in front of his desk.

‘Military Intelligence,’ said the man, ‘suggests that you are correct, Prime Minister.’

‘Don’t talk to me about Military Intelligence. Those two words shouldn’t exist in the same sentence,’ he snarled. Behind him, a cinema-size screen was looping the news report. The giant figure of Lewis Spottiswood was saying, ‘...when you’ve thought about it a bit, you’ll be very sorry that you did this’, over and over again.

‘I want that boy’s head on a plate, do you understand, Devonish. I’ve appointed you Child Finder General because you have a certain reputation for thoroughness.’

‘My teams have been fully engaged rounding up the errant teenagers who decided they didn’t want a little holiday on the Isle of Wight, Prime Minister.’

His truculence failed to mollify Jackman. ‘Excuses is all I ever get from you people. Now, do your job. Bring him in!’

‘May I enquire, Prime Minister, what Benson has been up to for the last 24 hours? I don’t believe he has made much progress with the cat problem.’

‘Benson doesn’t work here anymore. Let’s just say,’ said Jackman, ‘that Benson is making a useful contribution to our Motorway Building Programme.’

Devonish backed out of the Cabinet Office and flipped open his mobile. ‘Get me a chopper,’ he said. ‘We’re going to Flintwick.’

* * * * *

Lewis knocked on the side door of the black van. It slid gently open.

‘Lewis, my dear boy,’ said a voice. ‘Step inside, why don’t you.’

‘I think I’ll stay in the sunshine, if it’s OK with you,’ said Lewis politely.

‘Ah,’ said the voice, and it was followed by the round and friendly face of a gentleman in his early sixties. He had ginger sideburns and a large, similarly coloured moustache. ‘I can understand your reluctance. I wouldn’t get in here with me if I was you, if you know what I mean. Let me make you a proposal. See this dog?’

A little Yorkshire Terrier scurried forward and jerked to a halt at the limit of its lead. ‘This is Perkins, my favourite terrier. Why don’t we let young Parker over there hold her?’

Lewis noticed that Parker was hanging around in the bushes.

‘And then, if you are worried about your safety, Perkins can act as hostage. I’m hoping that by the end of our conversation there won’t be any such need for mistrust. But I understand your caution.’

Parker came over and took the dog’s lead, a big grin on his face. Lewis took its place on the step of the van.

‘Have you eaten? Good, good. Take a seat.’ Lewis pulled himself up onto the sumptuous leather upholstery. Glancing around, he discovered that the interior of the van was decked out like some luxury hotel room. There was a television, a small fridge, even a sink and towels.

‘Who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘I am,’ said the old man, ‘your fairy godmother. At least I’d like to be. Allow me to explain. My name is John J. Macreeedy and I’m the owner of a number of successful companies. One of which is Scilly Burgers. I’m a ludicrously wealthy man. At least I was until a few months ago when that mad man Jackman got into power and stopped every child in the land eating my burgers.’

Lewis nodded. ‘Where do we come in?’

‘Ah, I’m coming to that. I rather like the cut of your jib. I saw you on the telly just now and I’d rather like to see your campaign succeed. It’s pure naked self-interest, of course. The most important thing to me is that this

government is exposed as the bunch of wallies they really are. Then we can all get back to business as usual.'

'Selling burgers to kids?' said Lewis. There was a slight hint of disapproval in his voice.

'Ah, I understand where you are coming from, Lewis. Yes, I do make a lot of money out of making people fat. But you could say I've had time to reflect recently. If you help me, I guarantee that my burgers will be the healthiest things on the planet from now on.'

'What do you want us to do?'

'Oh, nothing,' said the old man. 'Just exactly what you're doing now. Just carry on being a nuisance.'

'And the fairy godmother bit?'

'Well, from what I gather, you are about to be joined by about 15,000 similar school children from schools up and down the south of England. There is absolutely no way you can feed and water them.'

'I know,' said Lewis. 'I've been putting off thinking about it.'

'That's where I come in,' said Macreedy. 'These are Giga Credit Cards.' He held up three, wafer-thin, gold-coloured strips, each with a key pad and a tiny screen. He handed one to Lewis.

'It's very heavy for a credit card.'

'That's because it's made of real gold. Only the very rich or famous get to handle one of these. They're yours to keep – well, at least, to borrow for the time being. You have unlimited credit; they are accepted absolutely everywhere and you will find that they will open doors for you in any shop or business all over the country. Please take good care of them – I suggest you only hand them over to your most trusted lieutenants.'

'Wow,' was all that Lewis could say.

'In addition, I've arranged for portable toilets to be stationed on every lay-by from here to Southampton. Please make good use of them.'

'This is great,' said Lewis. 'You've obviously gone to a lot of trouble. But wouldn't it be simpler to just send us a load of coaches? Then we could be in Southampton by teatime.'

'Yes,' said the old man. 'But, I'm afraid, I can't officially be seen to be doing anything for you. Certain forces in this country wouldn't take kindly to me openly supporting a rebellion, even if it is only children. It would be in both our interests if you forgot about this conversation.'

'Why are you different to all the other adults we've come across in the last few days? What happened to the glazed look and the parrot answers?'

‘Yes, I’ve been wondering about that,’ said Macreedy. ‘My people suggest that the government has been indulging in a certain amount of brainwashing. They use subliminal messages on the television and, apparently, the back of stamps are coated with suspicious chemicals. Fortunately, I never watch television and other people lick my stamps for me,’ he smiled. ‘Well, you’d better run along now, sonny. You’ve got a lot of miles to cover.’

‘Thanks Mr Macreedy. There’s one more thing; I don’t suppose you could get us a phone that can’t be traced, could you?’

* * * * *

When Lewis’s head emerged from the van again he discovered that they were moving forward slowly. The march had already started south again and the unseen driver had kept pace with Lydia and the other team leaders.

‘What did he want?’ asked Push.

‘Can I have a word with you and Parker and Lydia?’ said Lewis.

* * * * *

It was agreed that Lydia would look after two of the gold cards and Lewis and his mates would hang onto the third.

At each of the following road junctions they were greeted by more marchers, waving placards and shouting, “Spoticus”.

‘I can’t understand how you’re all finding us,’ said Lewis, shaking hands for the five hundredth time.

‘Oh, that’s simple,’ said the latest newcomer. ‘We just ask the news crews. They’ve been following us everywhere and keeping us informed of your whereabouts. I think they’d be happy to see us all join up – makes more of a story.’

Around about teatime, they came to a service station that had a mini-market attached to it. Lydia and her newly appointed team of quartermasters walked up to the front door and politely asked to speak to the manager.

‘We’d like to purchase some things in your shop.’

‘I’ll bet you would,’ said the manager. ‘I’ve seen you lot on the news and I’ve been expecting you all day. If you think one of you rebellious little animals is setting foot in this store, you’ve got another thing coming. Just move on by.’

‘Will this do?’ asked Lydia and she presented him with a gold card. It glinted in the lowering sun. His eyes went wide and he mumbled, ‘That will do nicely. Please step inside.’

By the time they had finished, the only things left on the mini-market's shelves were potatoes. They even raided the bathroom counter, paying particular attention to blister plasters. Much to Parkers disgust, some people had requested toothbrushes and toothpaste. Every loaf of bread, every piece of fruit and every tin was gone in seconds.

'Don't bother totting it up,' said Lydia to the manager. 'Just charge what you think is fair.' She smiled sweetly.

* * * * *

Half a mile further up the road, they all disgorged into fields on either side of the road and made to camp for the evening. Push's teams disappeared into a nearby coppice and came back with armfuls of logs. Before long there was a huddle of children around each campfire. Pans were unpacked and steam began to rise.

A constant crocodile of children moved up and down the road to the nearest lay-by and the newly installed portaloo's. A farmer turned up on his quad bike, took one look, shook his head and disappeared with his dogs running behind him.

'It looks,' said Parker, 'as though we're unstoppable.'

'Something like that,' said Lewis.

The plunder from the mini-market would ensure that everyone had about enough to eat that night but there wasn't enough to waste. Each campfire presented itself to the quartermasters in turn and was given its allotted share. Arguing about quantities was frowned upon and the quartermaster's word was final.

'Budge up,' said Push as she sat down on the log next to Lewis and dipped her spoon into a bowl of milk and Sugarpuffs. She looked perplexed. 'What the hell are we doing here?' she asked. It was half past ten and the pinky sky was just giving way to velvet purple. 'We're in the middle of nowhere, camping in a field! I've never been camping in my life and I thought I never would. We're going God knows where and we don't know what we're going to do when we get there.'

'We're going to do whatever we can do,' said Lewis.

'That's the plan, is it?' she said and plopped her spoon into the cereal.

'It's the best I've got,' said Lewis.

Lydia poked the fire with a long stick. 'Come on. At least we're out of that bloody school. At least we don't have to be pushed around by zombies anymore.'

‘At least I can get away from Parker’s snoring,’ said Push. ‘I’m turning in.’
She gathered up her sleeping bag and stumped off into the gloom.

Chapter Twelve

The battle of Southampton Road came about an hour into the following day's march.

Lewis had no way of estimating how many had joined their little army. But the little journalist dude who kept turning up on a motorbike said that he thought it was about 18,000 by now. At the first intersection they were met by a stream of marchers, seemingly as large as their own.

'We must be a million strong, now,' said Parker.

'Something like that,' said Lewis.

* * * * *

Devonish's helicopter circled the march. All other helicopters had been cleared from the skies. He was at liberty to sweep up and down the march, picking his targets. Specialist equipment mounted at the open door of the chopper was focusing in on individual children. Facial recognition programmes jabbered and jumped as they sifted through each image and matched them up to a databank. Devonish himself was reviewing the file called "Known Troublemakers".

'Do we have him yet?' said Devonish.

'Yes,' said his companion. 'He's about 50 metres from the front. He's wearing a khaki uniform and a beret.'

'They've ALL got khaki uniforms and berets,' said Devonish, burying his head in his hands.

'And he's got a yellow sleeping bag tied to the top of his rucksack.'

'Good,' said Devonish.

'And he's limping,' said the man, helpfully.

'Have you tagged him?'

'Oh, yes,' said the man. 'We got a dart into his rucksack about five minutes ago. The tracker will keep an eye on him.' He pointed to the monitor screen where a little yellow blip of light indicated one of the figures in the march below them.

* * * * *

The General was a modern general. He knew that the modern army couldn't just do its soldiering and then go home. The modern army had to live in the Age of Communications. It had to be sensitive to Public Opinion.

When it came to the business of rounding up a few naughty school children it wouldn't do to go in too heavy-handed.

'Overkill,' he said to his second-in-command, 'we have to avoid overkill. It mustn't look like David and Goliath, you know. We don't want anyone bleating in the papers about mistreating the little darlings, do we?' Although, he thought to himself, that seemed unlikely these days.

'No, we go in light. One platoon only. Put on a bit of a show for the cameras. I shall personally arrest the ringleader. I'm sure he'll cooperate when he realises that the alternative is likely to be messy. And we'll have one tank, just for effect,' he said, as an afterthought.

* * * * *

Lewis and Lydia were at the head of the march, nervously eyeing a helicopter that was slowly hopping over the hedgerows in the adjacent fields. Push caught up to them and pulled on Lewis's sleeve. 'Can you make that out?' she said, pointing up the road.

They had the south bound lane of the dual carriageway to themselves. The police had blocked it to traffic and motorists were squeezing up and down the north carriageway in single file. Some were hooting, some were waving. They were on a long straight stretch of road, hemmed in by deep drainage ditches on each side.

'It's a tank,' said Parker. 'It's a stonking great army tank.'

They could all make it out now. There was a line of lorries right across the road under a bridge. In front of them stood a green camouflaged tank. Its brutal-looking muzzle was pointing directly towards them.

'They cannot be serious,' said Push.

Lewis shrugged. 'I expect we'll find out in a minute.'

The marchers slowed to a confused halt about 100 metres from the tank. A megaphone crackled and a voice said, 'Is this thing on?' and then coughed.

'Children of England,' boomed the voice. 'The Government has declared your march illegal and, for your own safety, you will be returned to your schools and families. I trust you will understand that this is for the best and give me your full co-operation. I intend to meet with your leader...' he unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket and read, '... a Master Lewis Spottiswood, to accept your complete and unconditional surrender.'

They watched the figure on the tank put down the megaphone and scrambled down from the turret. He got stuck halfway and had to be helped by a squaddie. He sauntered down the road towards them, as though he was on a nice Sunday walk with his family.

‘What do we do?’ said Parker.

‘Let’s wait and see what he has to say,’ said Lewis. ‘Looks like he’s coming on his own.’

‘Unconditional surrender!’ huffed Push. ‘He can stick it up his unconditional ...!’

She was cut short by a loud explosion behind them.

‘What the...’ said Parker, as they strained to see over the waiting marchers. A cloud of orange smoke was billowing indiscriminately from the central reservation about 100 metres back. Children in a semi-circle around it were cowering away. Some were teetering dangerously on the lip of the drainage culvert on their side of the road. Five or six figures were darting in and out of the slow-moving traffic on the other carriageway. They were all dressed in black, with body armour and balaclavas. Some of them had automatic machine guns slung round their shoulders. Two of them had what looked like night-vision goggles clamped to their faces. They careened over the north carriageway, bouncing over cars and dodging skidding lorries.

There was a crack, a flash of light and blue smoke started issuing from the feet of the screaming children nearest the attack.

Back up the road, the General spoke into his headpiece. ‘What the devil’s going on, Spenser?’

A crackly voice came back to him. ‘Looks like Military Intelligence, sir.’

‘Why weren’t we informed?’ shouted the General, turning and gesticulating at the troops behind him.

‘Because they never inform us, sir?’ supposed his Lieutenant. The General could just make out Spenser shrugging from his vantage point on the bonnet of a waiting truck.

The General was good in a crisis. He knew how to adapt to changing circumstances, even if they weren’t as favourable as he had anticipated. He stood his ground for a moment and then decided to walk forward.

‘Which one of you,’ he bawled, ‘is Lewis Spottiswood?’

Absolutely nobody took any notice of him.

The snatch squad had reached the children and were diving into the crowd, apparently searching for someone. ‘Everyone is to keep perfectly still,’ shouted one of the commandos and tossed another smoke grenade.

Crowds have difficulty understanding two contradictory orders at once. Standing Still and Explosions are not compatible. With one mind, they panicked. The children behind the action edged nervously back up the carriageway in the direction they had come. The children in front of the skirmish started running towards the waiting army vehicles.

‘Bugger me,’ said Parker, ‘we’d better get out of here.’ They all started moving rapidly towards the General. Now a crack of machine gun fire sounded from the tank direction and whizzed over their heads. They froze.

The General turned back, looking alarmed. ‘Who gave the order to fire?’

‘Sorry, sir,’ came a little voice in his earphone.

The children fleeing the black-clad figures and their pyrotechnics halted. Danger before them and danger behind. The decider came when the snatch squad let off a few new grenades for added effect, and once again children surged around the General. ‘Stop where you are,’ he shouted as they overwhelmed him. ‘This is a military-controlled zone. You are not to go any further. I demand to speak to Lewis Spottiswood.’

Somebody tapped him on the shoulder and a quiet voice said, ‘Is this your gun, mate?’

The General spun round. Parker was waving a black service revolver about, as though it was a light sabre. The General’s hand shot down to his holster and discovered that the catch had been lifted.

‘How does it work?’ said Parker.

‘Don’t be foolish, boy. That weapon is loaded.’

‘Oh, I guessed that. Is this how you take the safety catch off?’ He slipped back the metal bolt on the top the gun.

‘Give that back before you do yourself an injury.’

‘It’s not pointed at me,’ grinned Parker.

Events unfolded quickly. The helicopter launched itself from the field in which it was waiting. Lurching across the road, it hovered in the field on the marchers’ side. Six black figures were edging along the side of the drainage ditch and heading for a break in the hedge next to the helicopter. They were dragging a boy by the straps on his rucksack.

‘I’m not Lewis Spottiswood. I’m not Lewis Spottiswood,’ the boy protested. ‘I don’t even look like Lewis Spottiswood.’ As they neared, Lewis and his mates tried to make sense of the scene that was unfolding in front of them.

‘He does, though,’ whispered Lydia, ‘he looks just like you.’

Push said, ‘Is that you, mate?’ Lewis punched her arm.

‘Why are you picking on me?’ said the boy. ‘I’m not Lewis Spottiswood. That’s Lew....’ and he started to point.

His gaze met Lewis’s. At once, an understanding passed between them in the blink of an eye. The boy stooped struggling, stood up straight, dusted himself down. With an almost imperceptible wink towards Lewis, he faced

his captors. 'Alright, it's a fair cop. I AM Lewis Spottiswood. I'll come quietly.'

Lewis was overcome with relief and guilt at the same time. He promised himself that he'd find that boy one day and thank him.

'He didn't look a bit like me,' said Lewis to Push.

'He could have been your twin!'

The black figures had reached the helicopter and were bundling the hapless look-alike into a waiting seat and strapping him in. The smoke behind them began to part and the rear section of the march edged forward, mainly out of curiosity.

Parker shouted, 'Make way, make way for the General.' He pushed through the crowd, the General preceding him with his arms raised.

'Shit!' said Lewis. 'Is that a gun?'

'Anybody want a general?' said Parker.

'Nice one, Parker,' said Lewis. 'I think this changes everything, don't you, Lydia?'

He addressed the General. 'Are you wired up to that lot over there?' he said, pointing to the tank.

'I am,' said the General. 'But you won't get anywhere by trying to bully the English Army. We are impervious to threats of personal harm.'

'Well, let's hope your troops don't feel the same way about shooting at their commanding officer. Tell them we're coming through.'

The cheer that went up at the head of the march convinced the people at the back that their best interest was served by going forward. Bit by bit, the protesters turned into one coherent unit again. Parker turned his prize round and pushed him up the road. He waved the gun ostentatiously to attract the attention of the troops. The General muttered into his microphone. 'In the interest of public safety, Lieutenant,' he whispered, 'I think we better let this crowd through. Don't want any misunderstandings, do we?'

Lydia drew Lewis aside. 'It's time for you to go, mate. It won't take that lot in the chopper five minutes to work out that they've got the wrong guy. They're probably DNA-testing him as we speak. You can't be captured; you're much too important to the march. The whole thing would grind to a halt if you were taken. I think you'd better hit the road. I know what you're thinking but I can do it, Lew, I can get this lot to Southampton.'

Lewis shrugged. 'Of course you can. I'm just a figurehead; you're the boss.'

He fumbled in his back pocket and pulled out his gold card.

‘No, hang on to that. You need it. We’ll be alright with two. Take Push and Parker with you. Go rough. Stay hidden. Move only at night. We’ll meet in Southampton, I promise.’

‘OK, boss.’ They grinned at each other.

* * * * *

Thirty or so gun-toting soldiers stood either side of the road like ushers at a wedding. The marchers squeezed past the lorries. Parker stayed close to the General. He had suddenly realised what a juicy target he would make for someone on the bridge. But the only people up there were TV crews. Dozens of cameras strained down at the parade as they filed through the blockade.

The General was whispering into his microphone again. ‘Cameras, Lieutenant, remember the cameras. The eyes of the world are watching. No silliness, do you understand?’

Chapter Thirteen

About half a mile beyond the bridge, Parker ushered the General to the side of the road. They stood and waited for the main body of the walkers to clear. There were cheers as they filed past the captive. Parker waved his gun and took several bows. When the last of the stragglers had gone, he faced the General and said, 'I expect you'll want this back?'

'Do be careful, please,' said the General as Parker clumsily tossed the gun from hand to hand. Then he flipped it over and expertly ejected eight cartridges onto the tarmac.

'Here you go.' He handed the weapon back to the soldier.

'You little sod! You knew what you were doing all along.'

'My Uncle's a soldier. He lets me play with his gun from time to time. Don't come after us or you'll get more of the same.' He turned on his heels and followed the marchers.

* * * * *

'When are we going?' asked Push.

Lewis raised his eyebrows. 'How did you know I'm going? And what makes you think I'm taking you with me?'

'It's obvious, isn't it? I saw you in a huddle with Lydia. We don't have a choice really. They'll be back with another snatch squad within the hour. Parker and I will be your bodyguards.'

'Just a minute...'

Lewis began.
'Don't argue,' said Push. 'I know you were going to ask us. Lydia told me. I thought this was supposed to be a secret organisation!'

* * * * *

Mr and Mrs Spottiswood were having a wonderful time. They hired a car at Malaga Airport and headed up into the Andalusian hills for some peace and quiet. And maybe a spot of walking through orchards and lounging by a pool. The brochure proudly announced that there was no satellite TV. You could escape from the modern world for as long as you liked.

They were blissfully untroubled by anything concerning their children. Mrs Spottiswood even declared that she was feeling slightly normal again. She couldn't put her finger on the cause so she assumed it was the sun and the fresh air and the odd glass of sangria. It never occurred to her that a fortnight without English TV, or licking English stamps (or any of that tasty

new government yoghurt that was supposed to be so good for you) was having a profound effect on her mental health.

But two weeks of isolated countryside was about enough. They craved sand and discos. So they headed for the coast to spend a last week amid the tower blocks of the Costa del Sol.

After a dip in the sea and cooling drinks under the shade of a palm tree, they ambled back to their new hotel. Mrs Spottiswood sat on the bed and dabbed at her hair with a towel. She flicked on the television and announced to her husband that she was just catching up on the news from home.

The first channel she found had news in Spanish. There was a picture of what looked like a riot under a motorway bridge. On second sight, she decided it must be the army on manoeuvres because they were all wearing khaki uniforms and berets. The caption under the film read:

PROBLEMAS GRANDES EN INGLATERRA

She was beginning to wonder if she should return to her book when the word “Inglaterra” caught her attention. ‘Come and have a look at this,’ she shouted to her husband, who was stepping out of the shower. ‘Looks like we’ve missed some sort of kafuffle back home.’

Mr Spottiswood plonked himself down on the bed and stared at the pictures. The announcer said:

SOLDADOS DETUVIERON A LEWIS SPOTTISWOOD

‘Sounded like Lewis Spottiswood,’ chuckled Mr Spottiswood. ‘What are they all doing under that bridge?’ The TV flashed up pictures of exploding grenades accompanied by the rattle of machine guns.

‘Whoa ho,’ said Mr Spottiswood. ‘It’s probably as well that we missed all this lot.’ He slumped back on the bed.

The newscaster said:

LEWIS SPOTTISWOOD LLEVADO EN HELICÓPTERO

‘She definitely said Lewis Spottiswood,’ said Mrs Spottiswood. ‘Fancy that! Some criminal has the same name as our son. I can’t wait to tell him.’

The next picture was that of Lewis from a few days earlier, standing in the station addressing the commuters.

‘Goodness!’ said Mrs Spottiswood. ‘It even looks like Lewis.’

They turned to each other, got up and silently pulled down the suitcases from the top of the wardrobe.

‘Time to go, I think, dear,’ said Mr Spottiswood.

* * * * *

Lewis and Push sat on the kerb and made a show of studying the large Ordnance Survey map that was unfurled in front of them. There was a constant refrain of, “Spoticus!” and “All right, Lew?” from the marchers as they passed. They were asked several times if they were planning the next move. ‘Something like that,’ said Lewis cheerily.

Push occasionally thrust her clenched fist into the air and shouted, ‘YEAH! Go marcher! Stick it on ‘em!’ and other such encouraging remarks.

At last, the tail of the march rounded the corner and a familiar voice called out from the back, ‘Having a rest, you lot?’ Parker swaggered up and bent down to pinch one of Lewis’s crisps. ‘You better not hang around or you’ll get left behind,’ he said.

‘Nice bit of arresting earlier, Parker,’ said Push.

‘Sit down here with us for a minute. There’s been a change of plan.’ said Lewis.

Before the crowd was properly round the corner, the three of them slipped quietly back into the long grass and then made their way to the cover of the hedgerow.

‘Time to disappear,’ said Lewis.

* * * * *

Arseface and Mrs Bootles were now firm friends.

At first, he tied a piece of string to her fur-lined collar; the other end attached to a brick just outside his little camp. But it turned out that Mrs Bootles had a liking for the outdoors. No one tried to groom her or scraped at her with a comb. No one tickled her annoyingly under the chin or poked her with stupid cat toys. No one made her eat that disgusting gourmet cat food four times a day. She did, however, like Brown Stuff. Arseface had buckets of the stuff which he borrowed from the school canteen.

For his part, Arseface liked Mrs Bootles. He recognised in her a soul that didn’t take kindly to being pushed around. He knew within a day that they were kindred spirits. Bit by bit, their trust in each other grew. Eventually he dispensed with the string and Mrs Bootles settled down inside the little bivouac and dozed for twenty-three hours a day. The remaining time she set aside for catching rats, which, she discovered, were in plentiful supply in this neighbourhood.

* * * * *

Malaga Airport was chaotic. The departure lounge was packed with last-minute travellers trying to get seats on non-existent flights. They mostly had

one thing in common; they were parents who had suddenly remembered that they were parents.

Mr Spottiswood waited in a long queue under a sign that said, “ENGLISH RETURNING NATIVES – THIS WAY”. Mrs Spottiswood went to get them yet another cup of coffee. In three hours they had inched forward no more than a couple of metres.

‘Can you see what is happening?’ he said when she returned with a couple of cappuccinos and pile of Euros on a small tray.

‘There’s no one to ask,’ she said. ‘And the ones I do see are pretending that they don’t speak English. The desk at the tour operator is completely deserted. There’s just a sign saying “Back After Lunch”. That was four hours ago.’

Mr Spottiswood slumped down on his suitcase. ‘I don’t know what that boy’s been playing at but we’ve got to find some answers. And Bev! In prison!’

‘It’s not a prison. It’s a Youth Correction Facility.’

They had managed to borrow one of the last English newspapers and discovered, along with everyone else in the queue, that their teenagers were now under lock and key.

‘He is barking, you know,’ said Mrs Spottiswood.

‘Who is?’

‘Jackman. He’s barking mad.’

‘You can’t say that! Just keep your voice down.’

They didn’t notice the gentleman in a blazer and a panama hat who had appeared at their elbow. He raised his hat slightly to Mrs Spottiswood. ‘Mrs Spottiswood?’ he enquired politely.

‘Yes.’

‘Mr and Mrs Spottiswood. Would you step this way please.’

* * * * *

They followed the line of the drainage ditch for about half a mile until it petered out into a concrete pipe. The verge ran straight up to a wood. It was quite easy to find a break in the fence. They cut through a few brambles and into the safety and seclusion of a small beech wood.

Push squatted on her haunches and poked at the mobile they had borrowed from Mr Macreedy. She texted to Arseface:

PUSH: *hav u dun wot i sugestd?*

ARSE: *wot did u sugest agn?*

PUSH: *u know, d ting with d newspapr.*

ARSE: *ob ys. i'm doin it nw.*

PUSH: *hurry ^ pls.*

ARSE: *I'M DOIN IT!!!!!! if u keep txtn me, how cn i take d picture? jst leav me 2 git on with it!!!!!!!!!!*

Five minutes later, the mobile pinged and a photo popped up. It showed Arseface from the chin down, a cat clutched to his breast with one hand and today's newspaper in the other.

'Nice one, Arse,' said Lewis as he looked over Push's shoulder.

'OK, I'm just forwarding this to the Daily Trumpet,' said Push.

* * * * *

The editor of the Daily Trumpet drooled at the picture on his desktop computer. His deputy stood beside him.

'If only we could use this,' said the editor, 'If only... It would be the scoop of the year.'

'Yes, and if we do, we'll have Jackman's heavies down here before you can say "Press Complaints Commission".'

'Send it on to the Prime Minister's office with our compliments,' said the editor and he sighed a heavy sigh.

* * * * *

'This just came through from the editor of the Trumpet, Prime Minister,' said Jackman's new aide. A message popped up on the PM's computer:

THAT WAS A CLOSE RUN THING JACKMAN. SEND ANYMORE SOLDIERS AFTER US AND YOU-KNOW-WHO GETS IT. FEC.

Jackman stared longingly at the attached picture. 'My bootiful Mrs Bootles,' he whimpered.

* * * * *

They found a track through the wood that led in a southerly direction. Push had discovered a GPS app in her phone and was consulting the tiny map. 'There's a lane on the other side of this wood. If we follow that we can avoid the next town.'

They scrambled over a fence and down a steep bank into the sunken lane. And almost directly into the path of an army lorry.

'Crap!' shouted Parker and shoved Lewis back into a thorn push. He landed partly on his backside and partly on Push who started complaining loudly. 'Shut up!' said Parker. He threw himself on top of them.

The lorry screeched past, its giant wheels only inches from their faces. It was followed by a stream of trucks that seemed to rumble on forever. From each tailgate, soldiers were laughing, smoking or staring blankly.

They waited a full five minutes until the roar had died away and extracted themselves from the thorn bush.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Push. ‘Next time you all want a sit down, try sitting on your arses, not on me.’

‘It’s my guess,’ said Parker, ‘that the army is shadowing the march on side roads. They’ll be with us all the way to Southampton.’

‘Well, we can’t move around in the daytime with this lot clogging up the countryside,’ said Lewis.

They climbed back up the bank and into the relative security of the woods. Parker sat on a fallen tree and pulled out some curling service station sandwiches, a packet of Monster Munch apiece and a large bottle of Fanta.

‘What next?’ asked Push.

‘First priority,’ said Lewis, ‘is finding cover. Somewhere to hide. We’ll just have to go to ground till nightfall.’

‘That’s second priority,’ said Parker, settling down to his chicken tikka sandwich. ‘Food is first priority.’ As he spoke, they could hear the distant clatter of a helicopter.

‘What if they’ve got those heat-seeking cameras?’ said Push. ‘What if they’ve got dogs?’

‘I suppose we’d better find somewhere underground,’ said Lewis.

They could hear helicopters in several different directions now. So they hastily golloped down their sandwiches, took a last drink and packed up their rucksacks.

A track led them through the woods, parallel to the main road. It meandered down to a tiny brook. Push leapt it in one go and pulled the others up the opposite bank. Within metres, the stream was swallowed up by a concrete culvert which led to a tunnel under the dual carriageway.

‘Just what we we’re looking for,’ said Lewis.

‘I’m not going down in that lot,’ said Parker.

‘No choice, mate,’ said Lewis and jumped in. It only came up to his ankles but the squishy water seeping into his army-issue boots wasn’t particularly pleasant. The other two shrugged and followed him. They waded down stream until the darkness of the tunnel engulfed them.

An access path was cut into the side of the tunnel. They dragged themselves up the concrete bank and onto the ledge. It was low and they had

to stoop to move along it. At the darkest point, they shed their rucksacks and shook their soggy trouser bottoms.

‘I suppose a fire is out of the question,’ said Parker.

Chapter Fourteen

‘Do take a seat,’ said the man in the straw hat as he ushered the Spottiswoods into an office.

‘Now, Barry and Sue; may I call you Barry and Sue?’ He poured out two glasses of cloudy lemonade from a terracotta pitcher. A large brass fan rotated slowly in the middle of the ceiling and the office was pleasantly cool after the hubbub of the airport terminal.

‘Are you from the tour operators?’ asked Mr Spottiswood.

‘No. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Walter Valentine and I’m the English Consul. I’m here to represent your interests and to keep you informed about the situation back home.’

‘What situation?’ asked Mrs Spottiswood.

‘Well I expect you know by now that your son has got himself mixed up in a spot of bother. We think it would be in everybody’s best interest if you came back with us and helped us talk some sense into him.’

‘That’s what we’ve been trying to do,’ said Mr Spottiswood with a hint of exasperation.

‘How is he?’ asked Mrs Spottiswood. ‘And how’s Bev?’

‘As far as Bev is concerned, there’s nothing to worry about. She’s doing very nicely in the government facility. It’s a bit like a home-from-home, I’m told. Lewis, on the other hand, is being less cooperative. He seems reluctant to talk to the authorities and, at this precise moment, we don’t know exactly where he is.’

‘You don’t know where he is?’ said Mr Spottiswood, pulling at the collar of his own shirt. ‘We left our son in the care of your “English Government” and you’ve gone and lost him!’

‘Not lost him, Mr Spottiswood. He’s run away. He’s being quite a nuisance, actually, and we’re expecting you to sort this out. Bit of parental control, you know? Never goes amiss in these circumstances. Now, you’re booked on the next flight to Luton. It leaves in five minutes, so, if you would just care to hand over your passports, I’ll make sure that all the arrangements are taken care of.’

The interview was apparently over so they stood up and retrieved their luggage trolley.

‘Don’t worry, Mr and Mrs Spottiswood,’ said the Consul. ‘Everything is going to be fine.’

* * * * *

It was eleven o'clock before the three fugitives felt confident about leaving their shelter.

Parker inched his nose out of the tunnel. 'How are we going to find our way in this light?' he whispered.

'Torch,' said Push, reaching into her rucksack.

'We'd be better off without a light,' said Lewis. 'Your eyes get used to the dark and, besides, the batteries aren't going to last all night.'

They were sceptical but agreed to give it a go. Lewis was right. A steady orange glow from nearby city lights reflected off the low clouds. Within ten minutes they found they could pick their way quite easily.

Push studied her GPS map. A bright red line showed the route she had planned while they were in hiding. 'We can cover at least ten miles on footpaths. That should keep us away from the soldiers.'

'Ten miles is all we'll manage at this rate. It will be light by five o'clock,' said Lewis.

'Yeah, but at least there's only three of us. We should be able to do more than the marchers and they were only averaging about 12 miles a day. We'll have to leg it, though.'

* * * * *

Lydia's next camp had to be on the banks next to the road. They had walked into the evening, looking for suitable fields to invade. But there was nothing but heath and low scrubby woodland on either side.

The marchers had discovered that the south of England was a long succession of hill ranges, one after another. Every time they crested a rise, they found another climb ahead of them on the next horizon. Weary-looking delegations from other schools came to the front from time to time to ask Lydia when they could stop. At last, it was the police that called a halt, promising to keep the carriageway free from traffic all night.

There was precious little wood to be found in the thickets and bushes beyond the roadside fence and only a few campfires sprang up. Most of the children had cold food and a cold night. But the weather was holding and the dew was light.

Some were asking about Spoticus's whereabouts. Lydia stuck to the agreed story. Lewis and his mates were off scouting for a good route and food supplies. Piperdy guessed the real reason but he kept his mouth shut.

They climbed up the embankments, unrolled their sleeping bags and flopped where they stood. Apart from Boris Pickles, who refused to settle down until someone found him a hot water bottle.

* * * * *

Lewis, Push and Parker walked on into the small hours of the night. The few hours' kip they had managed on the stony tunnel ledge had hardly refreshed them and they were finding the going difficult. Stumbling around on country paths would not be their first choice of activity in the broad daylight; at night it was ten times more difficult.

Several times they thought they were lost. Until Parker, crosschecking with the Ordnance Survey map, found the occasional names of farms which corresponded with the places they were passing. There were dogs barking constantly, sometimes miles away. They could sense the presence of strangers moving through their territories.

At around two o'clock, they clambered over a stile, down into a stony track and the going got easy. High banks on either side gave them a sense of security but decreased the available light. They stopped occasionally to unlace their boots and waft their pungent feet about in the fresh air. Parker told a hundred or so Knock Knock jokes to keep them amused.

'Knock Knock.'

'Who's there?' they chanted wearily.

'Ike.'

'Ike who?'

'Ike could have sworn we just passed that farm.'

'Not good enough, Parker,' said Push and belted him with her water bottle. Parker responded in kind and the tussle continued for a few hundred metres until it was interrupted by a grey shape lurching up the path towards them.

'Arrgghh!' shouted Push.

'What!' shouted Parker.

'Keep your voices down,' shouted Lewis. The creature stopped, stared at them and waddled off nonchalantly in the other direction.

'It's only a badger.'

'Only a badger?' said Parker. 'They're vicious, they are. They could have your leg off.'

'I think you may be confusing it with a crocodile. Anyway, it's gone. Let's move.'

When they climbed into more open countryside they were troubled by the shadowy outline of cattle moving in the fields they passed. After a dozen or so encounters they stopped freaking and got on with the business of walking. ‘Look, a cow with eight legs,’ said Parker.

‘And two heads,’ said Lewis as a second cow stepped out from behind the silhouette of the first.

At five o’clock a finger of light appeared under the clouds on the horizon and they started thinking about a place to hide for the day.

‘We’ve done 15 miles,’ said Push, proudly. ‘That’s amazing. I wouldn’t exactly call myself a country girl but I think I’m getting the hang of this.’

A pheasant shot out of the gorse bushes on the side of the track and almost flew into her face.

‘Ahhh,’ she cried, ‘Countryside! I hate the countryside. I want a town. Find me a town.’

‘We can’t go near a town. We need somewhere to get our heads down.’

‘Yeah, and what are we going to do when the food runs out? And the water?’

‘Water is a priority,’ agreed Lewis. ‘We’ll just have to raid a farmyard.’

The next farm looked suitable. There was a dog barking in the walled garden but they found a stopcock on the side of a barn, out of sight from the farm house, and quietly filled up their flasks and the pop bottle from yesterday. A voice in the background said, ‘Go orn you daft cow, get back inside,’ evidently addressed to the dog and not the travellers.

‘There’s people up and about already,’ said Lewis. ‘We’d better get a move on.’

* * * * *

Home for the day was a Water Board pumping station. The little brick building was only four metres on a side and was surrounded by high chain-link fences. But there was no padlock on the gate and the door only took a little persuading before it gave under their combined weights. Inside, amongst the pipes, valves and dials, there was a small table and a plastic chair. It was dark and windowless. ‘This will do nicely,’ said Lewis, and they set about their breakfast.

‘I couldn’t half do with a shower,’ said Push.

‘Yes, you couldn’t half do with a shower,’ said Parker. He received a thwack on the back of his head from her beret.

No sooner had they eaten and unrolled their sleeping bags they were soundly and blissfully asleep. Until around seven a.m. when they were jolted

awake by a thunderous sound. It felt as though the earth itself was tearing apart. Parker jumped to the door in time to see four jet fighters streaming overhead at more or less treetop height.

‘I may be paranoid but I have feeling that has something to do with us.’

‘I think it’s a safe bet that it’s got something to do with our little protest,’ said Push. She yawned and pulled the flap of her sleeping bag back over her head. ‘Let’s just hope the Water Board don’t want to use their hut before we can get some sleep.’

* * * * *

Push only partly got her wish. They had woken in the early afternoon and were busy working out how to make what food they had left stretch for a few more days when the man from the Water Board turned up. As he was driving past he noticed the gate swinging loose and the door to the pumping station standing slightly ajar.

Parker heard the clink of the gate. ‘Rucksacks!’ he whispered and they swiftly bundled their meagre bits of fruit and sandwiches into their back packs. A large face appeared at the door and peered in cautiously. When he decided it was just three children he stepped boldly into the frame of the door.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing? This is private property. Get out of here right now. No,’ he changed his mind, ‘you stop where you are.’ He edged back towards the gate, blocking their escape.

The three emerged blinking into the afternoon sunshine.

‘Aren’t you lot supposed to be locked up in some camp somewhere? Are you part of those maniac children blocking the Southampton road?’ He reached for his hip pocket and pulled out a phone. ‘*Put me through to despatch would you please, Janice?*’ and added to the children, ‘There’s laws against trespass. You’re stopping here until the police arrive.’

‘We’ve got to stop him,’ whispered Lewis. ‘He can’t use that phone.’

Push winked at Parker. ‘Jacket joke?’ she said.

‘No, it would never work.’

‘What have you got then?’ she asked.

‘I haven’t got anything.’

‘Jacket joke it is then.’

She smiled innocently at the man. ‘Excuse me, are you sure you put your handbrake on properly?’

‘What are you on about?’ he said, distracted from his phone call.

‘Well, it’s just that your van is rolling backwards.’

‘Shit,’ he cried and turned to the gate. Parker sprang, grabbed the back of the man’s collar and yanked it smartly down, trapping his arms. The man dropped his phone. Push crouched on all fours behind his legs and Lewis, quickly picking up the plot, did his bit. A quick shove and the man fell heavily onto his backside.

‘You little buggers,’ he wailed and struggled to rise.

Lewis whipped up the mobile. ‘We’ll be needing this. I will post it back to you when all this is over.’

They stepped calmly over the wiggling body and through the gate. ‘I think we’d better leg it,’ said Push and they started to trot down the lane. The man was on his feet and screaming abuse after them.

‘He’s bound to have a radio in that van,’ said Parker. ‘We’re screwed if he calls the police.’

They ran blindly up the lane while Push struggled to pull her GPS phone out of her rucksack. ‘Give me a second, we don’t know where we’re going.’

‘Sod that,’ said Parker. ‘Anywhere is better than here.’

They jumped a stile and ran full pelt across a field. They didn’t stop at a little footbridge that led into a wood. Nor when they surfaced into a cow pasture. They finally collapsed into a field of late barley, its browning ears concealing them from view.

‘Oh God, I don’t want to do this anymore,’ said Parker and started to chuckle. It took a moment for the other two to find any humour in their situation. In seconds they were all rolling on their backs, trying to suppress snorting laughter.

‘Where the hell are we?’ laughed Lewis.

‘That’s what I was trying to say. I don’t know where we are,’ said Push.

Parker’s map was useless. Wherever they were was south of the area it covered. Push pulled up the GPS and fiddled with it for five minutes. ‘I think we’re somewhere near this town.’ She pointed to the tiny screen.

‘We’ll just have to follow the sun. Southampton’s got to be somewhere in that direction. If that bloke phoned the police, and they put two and two together, we’re going to need a hiding place.’ The sound of a distant plane made them twitch.

Chapter Fifteen

Travelling without a planned route or recognisable paths proved trickier than they expected. They headed in the general direction of the sun. Where they hoped to find gates they often found dead-end fields and impenetrable hedgerows. Their clothes snagged on every barbed wire fence they had to negotiate.

Push voted for any kind of cover they could find; a ditch would do. Parker was in favour of getting a few more miles under their belts. Lewis settled it by suggesting that they pushed on until they could find something with a concrete roof to put between them and any searching helicopters.

It wasn't long before they heard the dogs.

They tried to stick to the shadows at the edges of fields but crossing open country was inevitable from time to time. At the top of a gently sloping field of corn they stopped for a breather. Parker was squinting in the direction they'd come.

'That's a lot of dogs,' he said.

'Shit,' said Lewis. On the ridge to the north they could see ten or eleven men wading through a cereal crop. Ahead of them, snaky lines of flattened wheat indicated the presence of hounds.

'It's a pack,' said Parker. 'A hunting pack, and we're the fox.'

'Now, we don't know that for sure. We just have to keep calm,' said Push.

A helicopter lurched over a line of horse chestnuts at the end of their field and slewed in their direction. They needed no further persuasion. 'Run!' said Lewis.

They dived straight into the nearest hedge, ignoring the nettles, and slid into a small stream. On the other side, a steep climb led to a virtually impassable barrier of hawthorn and brambles. Parker put his head down and used his back pack as a ram to force his way through. The others followed.

'Make for those trees,' said Lewis and they made a dash across a corner of a meadow. Sheep scattered in every direction. At the boundary of the wood, they stopped to listen. The sound of baying hounds was coming from all around them. The helicopter was just above the trees.

'They must see us now,' said Lewis. 'We'll be plain as daylight on their infra-red cameras.'

'What do we do now?'

‘Push on. It’s all we can do,’ said Lewis. ‘They can’t land that chopper in a wood.’ He prayed that the trees would be more extensive than the coppices they were used to.

Five minutes later, the helicopter was still with them. They found themselves on the ridge of a forested hill, still heading south. The dogs were on the track now. They could hear them smashing through the undergrowth and baying as though they hadn’t been fed for several weeks. At last, the first dog bounded into sight in the distance, hammering down the path behind them. They could almost imagine that they could see the slaver of foam at the creature’s mouth.

‘Quick, dump the packs,’ said Lewis.

‘But we need them,’ said Parker, ‘What are we going to eat?’

‘We won’t need food if they catch us.’

Push grabbed her phone and they chucked the rucksacks into the thickest bushes they could find. They legged it down the track.

‘Do you suppose that will hold them up?’ panted Parker.

‘Not for long.’

They slithered down a bank and bounced through bracken and gorse until they found themselves in a narrow strip of orchard. They could hear the chopper but it sounded as though it was several fields away. Below them, a railway line twisted away to the south.

‘Let’s make for the line,’ said Parker. ‘Those overhead cables will keep the chopper off.’

‘They can’t be so desperate that they’d land on a railway line,’ said Push.

‘We are!’ said Lewis.

They moved swiftly, unencumbered by their heavy packs. In the bottom corner of the orchard they found a gate onto the tracks. A sign said something about a £1000 fine for trespass, which they ignored. It also said they should look both ways, which sounded like good advice. The track was empty in both directions.

‘That way,’ said Lewis. They jogged along the sleepers with their shadows bouncing along the rails behind them.

* * * * *

Devonish was a man to hold a grudge. In his previously life, he’d fought as a mercenary in several foreign wars. He’d worked for various governments as a “fixer”; a job which required illegality of every description. In recent years he had graduated to assassin and could command massive fees from shady criminals throughout the world. Jackman was just his latest client.

When the Spottiswood snatch had gone so spectacularly wrong he was furious. His reputation was based on never failing to complete an assignment and this, he resolved, was not going to be the exception.

Through his head mic he directed the pilot. 'Directly over the track. As low as you can get. Keep 50m behind them.' He flipped channels and spoke to the ground crew who were marshalling the dogs. 'Where are you?'

A voice came back; 'We're on Bodeswell Ridge. We're mustering the dogs and moving down to the road bridge at Harper's Cross.'

'Quick about it, if you please,' snapped Devonish.

The only other man in the helicopter was similarly dressed in black and wearing a helmet with attached night goggles. 'Are we going to take them out now, sir?' he asked.

'No we are not,' said Devonish. 'I'm going to deliver this package in person to the Prime Minister. I want them squealing but unbroken. Take us down just beyond the bridge, pilot,' he commanded.

* * * * *

'Two minutes, I just need two minutes,' gasped Parker. 'I can't run any longer.'

He was leaning back against the parapet of a bridge. Below them was another railway track; a single line that curved under the main line and joined it half a mile to the south.

'We can't stay here,' said Push.

Parker's head lolled to one side. He took a giant gulp of air and staggered back into the centre of the track. 'OK. Let's go,' he panted.

The sound of the dogs had popped up again but they couldn't see any activity. Ahead of them, two dark figures appeared on the tracks as if from nowhere.

'Oh my God,' said Push. 'It's the snatchers.'

The two men walked slowly towards them, machine guns pointing at the ground.

'Now what?' said Parker.

At the same time, the barking grew louder and the first of the dogs crashed onto the line behind them. Now there were twenty or thirty, pelting in their direction. A man sounded a horn and the dogs halted while they were leashed in by their handlers. Then they came on again, straining and snarling.

'Over the edge,' said Lewis. The bridge they stood on had a signal gantry bolted onto its brickwork. It was made up of two vertical pylons that stood

either side of the track, joined by a walkway that held all the signal mechanisms. The metal walkway spanned the length of the bridge, only three metres below the parapet. At one end, a ladder reached up from the track below.

Parker clambered onto the parapet and eased himself over. Unfriendly razor wire decked the gantry's handrail but it was unprotected from above. Still with half a metre to go, he loosed his grip and dropped. The metalwork creaked and groaned under his weight. The others landed beside him.

Devonish sprinted up the track in time to see the three of them disappear over the bridge. Without waiting to see what awaited him, he vaulted the parapet. He landed with a crunch on the handrail of the gantry and bounced inwards onto the walkway, only a metre away from the astonished trio. His hand shot out and gripped Lewis's tunic. 'You're nicked, kiddo,' he snarled.

'Go!' said Lewis. The other two hesitated but obeyed. The second man was on the parapet now, eyeing the prey with relish. Parker and Push made for the ladder. 'Stop where you are, or this kid gets it.'

They hesitated again but Lewis's expression was clear. 'Go!' he implored.

They started again for the ladder. This time Devonish picked up Lewis bodily and, in one fluid motion, had him dangling by his collar over the railway track. 'Stop or Spottiswood dies.'

Lewis kicked uselessly with his legs. The man's huge upper body strength allowed him to hold the boy almost horizontally out from the gantry. There was a good twenty metres to the track below. 'Get down here,' he shouted to the man above him, and then to Parker and Push; 'If you know what's good for you, you'll stop where you are. All three of you have got an appointment with Colonel Jackman.'

Above them, feverish dogs were leaping at the parapet to try and get in on the chase. The peep-parp of a train was almost lost in the cacophony.

'Push, you can't stay,' yelled Lewis. 'You know what you've got to do.'

She knew he was right. She gulped and then nodded. 'Let's go, Parker,' she sniffed.

'OK. Have it your way,' said Devonish and he held his burden further out.

The sound of rusty pieces of metal scraping together was followed by a click, then a clunk. The down-track signal fell into its lower position. Unfortunately for Devonish, that was precisely where his head was at the time. There was sickening thud and Devonish's body went limp.

Lewis dropped. He made a lunge for the gantry. His fingers engaged with the lattice of the walkway and took his full weight. Devonish followed, his

body doing a perfect pirouette before landing with a crunch between the rails. Lewis slammed into the metal work, grasping with his trailing right arm.

‘Lewis!’ screamed Push.

‘TRAIN!’ screamed Parker.

The double-carriage diesel was already slowing for the bend. Lewis whipped his legs up as the train slid underneath him. Its breaks squealed and its horn sounded continuously. It passed straight over the still body of Devonish. Parker and Push were back on the gantry and reaching for Lewis. He edged arm over arm until his legs found purchase on the rungs of the ladder. Four hands grabbed him and pulled him in.

There was no time for triumph or tears. The second assassin crashed onto the walkway and made a grab for them. They shot down the ladder and up the track, away from the now stationary train. Rather than pursue them, the soldier went to inspect the body of his boss.

A guard had clambered down from the back of the train and walked warily back towards them, expecting a grizzly scene. The soldier opened his weapon and let a few rounds whiz up the line, cracking on the gravel around the guard’s feet. He took the hint and hopped back towards the train. Evidently, witnesses were not welcome. By the time the soldier turned, the three targets had disappeared into the bushes. He didn’t follow.

Dogs are no good on ladders and the hunters had no alternative but to backtrack and find a gateway into the fields. Lewis, Push and Parker dodged in and out of bushes until they were round the bend. After half a mile or so, they left the track and ran up a small access path. As it climbed up the side of the valley, they were afforded a good view of the railway line. The dogs were back on the track and picking up the scent.

An arm shot out from the bushes. The hand on the end of the arm connected with Push’s shoulder and yanked her off the path.

‘Waaarrgghh,’ she shrieked.

Parker and Lewis stopped dead in their tracks and dived into the bushes after her. They found Push on her backside, edging away from a man. He was sat cross-legged and giggling.

‘What the devil do you think you’re doing?’ said Parker.

‘Sorry about that, had to get your attention somehow.’

Lewis took a moment to take in the scene. They were inside a hollow circle of gorse bushes. The man was wearing a faded green smock shirt under a tatty waistcoat. On his head he wore a fisherman’s hat, covered in badges, and beneath it poked long, chunky dreadlocks. His face ended in a bushy, straw-coloured beard. His toes peeped out of muddy sandals.

‘What do you want with us?’ said Parker.

‘Little soldier boys and girls, out to play,’ the man tittered. ‘Greybeard wants nothing; just to be left alone. But you bring heap big trouble behind you, don’t you?’ He jerked his head in the direction they had come from. He put his head back and roared with laughter which gradually mutated into a howl. They all stared at each other.

‘Psycho alert!’ said Parker out of the corner of his mouth.

‘He’s as fruity as a nut cake,’ whispered Push.

‘I ain’t mad, and I ain’t deaf,’ said the man.

He looked fierce for a micro-second, then started cackling again.

‘Greybeard is one with the forest, and the forest is one with Greybeard. I’m the guardian of these woods and they are the guardian of me.’

‘And his beard isn’t grey,’ whispered Push.

‘Yes, well, we’d love to stop and chat, Mr Greybeard,’ said Lewis, ‘but I’m afraid we really must be pushing on. Nice to meet you. Goodbye.’

The hand shot out again and caught Lewis’s belt as he was retreating through the gap in the bushes.

‘We have got to go,’ said Lewis, forcibly.

The man looked serious for a moment. ‘Go that way and they will catch you within five minutes,’ he said calmly. Then he started giggling again. ‘Greybeard will sort you out,’ he said cheerfully.

He slid a shoulder bag round to the front and reached into a pocket. He pulled out a tobacco tin. Push could see two pairs of rabbit ears poking out of the main compartment.

‘Let’s go,’ said Push. ‘He’s clearly batzoid. No offence, mister.’

‘None taken. Give me two minutes. If you aren’t totally satisfied with the results you can have your money back.’ He took the tin and clambered out of the gorse. Through the gap they could see him sprinkling black powder in great arcs across the path. He stared down towards the railway line briefly and then dodged back into the bushes. ‘I think we had better retire to a safe distance, don’t you?’

They climbed up the valley and through a line of trees. They crouched behind a tumble-down stone wall and observed. The hunters left the railway line and started up the access path. When the hounds reached the powder they all ran round in circles and howled. Then most of them sat down and started scratching, their long back legs raking furiously at their ears and collars. The hunters pushed and prodded them; eventually resorting to sticks. But the dogs wouldn’t move.

‘He he he. Greybeard’s own special mixture.’ He tapped his nose and winked. ‘Not keen on hunting dogs, me. Not their fault, really, but they’ve got some nasty habits when it comes to foxes. And children!’ He laughed.

‘Well, thank you,’ said Push. ‘That was really kind of you, but we have to keep going I’m afraid. Nice to meet you, again.’ They started heading off.

‘Well, you could do that,’ said Greybeard, cheerfully. ‘Or you could come and have a bite of supper with the missus and me.’ He patted the bag with the rabbits. ‘Stew tonight.’

They hesitated. ‘It might interest you to know that I live in a part of this forest that is very difficult to find, even if you know these parts.’ He took a small tin whistle from his top pocket and started trilling, tunelessly.

‘Well, I suppose...’ said Lewis.

‘That’s settled then,’ said Greybeard.

Chapter Sixteen

He led them deeper and deeper into the woods. Something reminded Push of the story about gingerbread men. Or was it the one with a witch and a cottage? But there was something about Greybeard that engendered trust, even if he was a bit wacky.

Lewis kept an eye on the sky. Whenever he caught a glimpse of the sun, he confirmed that they were still travelling in a southerly direction.

‘How far do you think we are from Southampton, Mr Greybeard?’ asked Lewis.

‘About 25 of your earth miles. And it’s plain “Greybeard”. Not “Mr”. Not for years.’

‘That’s two night’s walk,’ said Lewis, ‘We could be there the day after tomorrow. I think it’s time we contacted Arseface again.’ He caught up with Greybeard. ‘Do you mind if we stopped for a minute? Push has a little errand to perform.’

‘Not a problem, young sir.’ and he immediately squatted on a fallen log. Push sat next to him and pulled out her mobile. He leaned over to take a look.

‘Ooow! Modern magic! I love magic. Is it powered by pixies?’ he said and winked at her. Then he turned away and stared wistfully at nothing in particular. ‘Not dead keen on electricity, to be honest. It makes your karma seep away – seriously drains your astral batteries.’ He edged slowly away from her.

‘Now remember what we agreed,’ said Lewis. ‘If the government spooks are monitoring the phone networks, their machines will pick up on any words that they programme in.’

‘Ooow, have I wandered into some kind of anarchist cell?’ chuckled Greybeard.

‘Here goes,’ said Push and dialled the number. ‘*Can I speak to Mr Wenger?*’ A posh-sounding voice at the other end said, ‘Yarse.’

‘*Hello, Arsef... Hello Mr Wenger. This is March and March Limited. PLC,*’ she added for good measure. ‘*I’m calling about the package we ordered from you.*’

‘Yarse.’

‘*We expect to be at our rendezvous point in two and a half days.*’ she said in her primmest voice. ‘*Will you be able to deliver the package as we discussed?*’

‘Yarse.’

‘And will you be able to bring it personally?’

‘Yarse.’

‘Is he even listening?’ said Push, staring up at the other two.

‘Yarse.’

‘Is that a definite yes, Mr Wenger?’

‘OF COURSE IT IS,’ said Arseface in his normal voice. *‘Now, get off the line!’*

Push looked worried.

‘Well, it’s in the lap of the gods now,’ said Lewis.

‘Best place for it,’ laughed Greybeard, even though he didn’t really know what they were talking about.

Push put away her phone and sat quietly staring into the distance with her hands on her knees. Greybeard had already set off up the track, whistling.

‘Do you suppose he’s dead?’ she said softly.

‘Arseface? You’ve just been talking to him,’ said Parker.

‘Not Arseface. The man on the railway line. Do you suppose he’s dead?’

‘Yes, I think he’s dead,’ said Lewis. There was no way of sugar-coating it. Push began to cry silently.

* * * * *

They skirted along the base of a cliff, picking their way through boulders the size of houses. The rocks had worked their way loose from the top of a cliff in a process that had been going on since the last ice-age. Thick scrubby bushes sprouted from every available crevice. The top of the cliff was lined with overhanging cedars.

They came to a small clearing under a ledge of rock, forming a sheltered bowl. In the middle of clearing was a dome-shaped tent. It was made of bent-over sticks and covered with bits of canvas and plastic sheeting. It was daubed liberally with moss and mud to fill in the cracks. Three goat were tethered by the cliff face, munching contentedly on prickly bushes. There were chickens running loose everywhere and a couple of cats sleeping on a pile of logs. A plume of smoke drifted gently up from a campfire in front of the tent. The word; “HIPPYCAMPUS” was painted onto a sign leaning against the tent.

A woman was sat, cross legged, at the entrance to the tent. She was knitting. She had a blue headscarf in her hair, which was similar to Greybeard’s in colouring and consistency.

‘This is my bird,’ said Greybeard proudly.

‘Don’t call me “bird”,’ said the woman, looking up at last and smiling at the children. ‘I’m not a bird, I’m your loving partner. Silly sausage! He never could get the hang of gender politics,’ she winked at Push.

Greybeard started again. ‘This is my “loving partner”, Bluenettle,’ he said.

‘Don’t call me “Bluenettle”,’ said the woman, in a sing-song welsh accent. ‘He makes up the silliest names for me. He calls me nettle because he says I’ve got a bit of sting to me.’

‘And I calls her blue,’ said Greybeard, ‘cos...’

The woman held up her hand. ‘They won’t want to hear about that. You daft git. My real name is Jennifer. And his is Trevor,’ she giggled.

Greybeard looked crestfallen for a moment.

‘Welcome to our home,’ she said. ‘you can stay here, eat here, sleep here, if you like. And I think you’ll find our charges are very modest.’

‘Oh,’ said Lewis, patting his pockets in embarrassment. ‘I’m afraid we don’t have any money.’

‘Who said anything about money?’ said Jennifer. ‘All that is required is that you tell us your story. That’s the standard tariff around here.’

* * * * *

Push declined the rabbits but tucked cheerfully into the creamy vegetable broth she was served. The other two were happy to sample bunny-rabbit for the first time.

‘This is delicious,’ said Parker, ‘I wish my mum could cook like this.’

‘You could cook like this if you put the effort into it,’ chided Jennifer.

The campfire was stoked up and they lent back contentedly as the shadows lengthened. Greybeard lit a pipe and got out a stone jug of something he described as cider. The children politely declined.

‘What’s it all about, then?’ he said and he cackled for no apparent reason.

‘Yes, let’s have it,’ said Jennifer. ‘Why is a bunch of people with guns and dogs interested in three little shrimps like you? What makes you Enemies Of The People?’

Parker led off with the whole new government thing and Greybeard made chortling noises as if this was all news to him. Push picked up the story from the Summer Camp. Lewis took over when she got to the big breakout. But he failed to mention his pivotal role so Push interrupted and explained that they were in the presence of the world-famous Spoticus.

‘Spartacus, is it?’ said Greybeard. ‘I know a bit about him. He didn’t come to a very good end, I seem to remember.’ Jennifer kicked his heel and he stopped talking.

‘So what’s next?’ she asked.

‘Got to get to Southampton,’ said Lewis.

‘Ooow, that’s going to be tricky,’ said Greybeard. ‘I’ve never seen so many soldier boys at large. I travel from one end of these woods to the other everyday. On my little duties,’ he said, pointing at his game bag. ‘And every time I look out over the fields I see another convoy of blooming lorries going this way or that way. And more helicopters than bluebottles round a cow-pat.’ He lent back on his elbows and took a long tug on his pipe.

‘We have got some friends at the other end of the wood who might be able to help you. Nice people,’ he said dreamily. ‘We trade with them. They get us stuff from the shops in the village and we give them rabbits and a few root vegetables. I think you’d get on well with them. Take you to them if you like?’

‘Yes, but not just now,’ said Jennifer. ‘They need some kip.’

‘We have to get going,’ said Lewis, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off the inviting tent.

‘Three hours,’ said Jennifer. ‘That’s all. We’ll wake you up at midnight, promise.’

* * * * *

All three of them were reluctant to relinquish the snug pile of blankets that Jennifer had tucked them under. Lewis sat up and consulted his wrist watch in the light of a lantern swinging in the door of the tent.

‘Time to go,’ sang Greybeard.

Jennifer gave them all a hug and handed each a parcel wrapped up in grey paper and string. ‘Tuck those in your tunics. Keep you going for a couple of hours at least.’

They turned as they left the clearing. The moonlight picked out her waving figure briefly before she shrank back into the shadows.

‘Who are these people we are going to see?’ asked Parker as he jogged alongside Greybeard.

‘They are what I believe you call Goths.’

‘GOTHS!’ said Parker. He stopped dead in his tracks. ‘Goths! I hate Goths.’

‘Now that ain’t very nice,’ said Greybeard. ‘Why do you hate Goths?’

‘Well, because they’re all so morbid... and black.’

‘That’s all you see on the outside, innit? You haven’t actually talked to any recently, have you? Fact is, they’re outsiders, just like you. And they’ve been on the run much longer than you have. Ever since these camps started.’

‘I like Goths,’ said Push. ‘Leastways, I like the make-up.’
‘Yeah, but the music!’ said Lewis.
‘Goths!’ said Parker.

* * * * *

Greybeard led them over a stile into a small field on the edge of the hill. In the moonlight they could make out the outline of tents. Plumes of smoke from dying fires wafted this way and that in the light breeze. He made a noise like an owl, squatted down and waited.

After two minutes, nothing had happened, so he got up again. ‘Always was a dozy lummox. Think we better try a more conventional approach. VIZZY,’ he shouted. At last, a torch beam erupted inside the nearest tent. It wobbled slowly to the tent flap. A face emerged, picked out by the torch beam.

‘Greybeard?’ said the voice, ‘It’s the middle of the night.’
‘Vizzy, me old mate, I’ve got a job for you.’

* * * * *

The powwow lasted half an hour. Vizzy sat by the fire, which she had re-enlivened with a few logs, and pulled her long leather coat around her knees.

Greybeard acted as their advocate, laying out their story and asking for Vizzy’s help. Lewis was doubtful but Vizzy picked up on the significance of the mission in no time.

‘And when you get to Southampton?’ she asked.

‘We’re not entirely sure about that,’ said Parker. ‘But plans are being developed,’ he added hopefully.

‘Brilliant,’ said Vizzy. ‘It’s about time somebody stuck it to Jackman’s lot. They’ve been harassing us for weeks.’

‘Why haven’t they rounded you up? We heard that snatch squads have been out for days now, pulling in anyone who isn’t in a camp.’

‘Oh, they just ignore us. Seems we’re not a high priority. I guess they think we’re untrainable. We get a worse time from the villages and towns we go through. Mostly they just chase us off. A few shopkeepers are happy to take our money but they won’t let us camp. That’s why we’re up here in the woods. We’re trying to get to Wales. Jennifer says, “everything is lovely in Wales.”’ Vizzy imitated her accent.

‘Well, they don’t have a Jackman, that’s for sure,’ said Push.
‘So can you help?’ asked Lewis.

‘Love to,’ said Vizzy. ‘Whatever you can do to piss Jackman off is fine by us.’

‘We’ll have to get going while it’s still dark.’

‘No need for that,’ said Vizzy. ‘Like I say, they just ignore us at the moment.’

Push looked at the faces around the fire. Greybeard had disappeared. She could just make out his shadowy figure retreating towards the trees.

‘Greybeard,’ she called. He stood at the edge of the wood and waved. ‘Bye,’ she called softly.

Chapter Seventeen

The Second Battle of Southampton Road took place two days after the incident with the tank.

Things had not been going entirely smoothly for Lydia. There was a constant erosion of their numbers as children succumbed to upset stomachs, the common cold, festering blisters or plain old home sickness. A fleet of ambulances was held in reserve by the police. One by one the sick were ferried away. No one was entirely sure where they were being taken but Lydia had the Chief Constable's word that they would be well treated. For some unfathomable reason, Boris Pickles continued to stick it out despite moaning constantly.

Looking on the bright side, every hour brought new recruits, streaming down the slip roads from the surrounding towns and villages. Some had marched for days to intercept them.

The new marchers brought new problems. The march was now strung out over several miles. It was difficult to maintain communications between the tail and the head. Lydia set up a team of runners drawn from fit volunteers. They made their way up and down the route, taking orders from the leaders, listening to problems from the foot sloggers.

The Disappearance of Spoticus problem didn't go away, either. At every bridge, hordes of journalists and TV people fired questions down at them. 'Where's Spoticus? Where's Spoticus?' Piperdy wrote out a statement. It read, "Mr Spottiswood is too busy to talk to you lot so bog off".

Catering was on a different scale now. The road was almost as big as a motorway and service stations were few and far between. They had hit on the idea of pizza deliveries quite early on. But even the larger towns could only supply a fraction of their needs. And a slither of pizza is worse than none at all.

Then Piperdy suggested using supermarket delivery services. He rustled up a web-activated phone and they made a big-time order. Lydia got a call from the supermarket manager. He couldn't quite believe the size of the order. Or the delivery address. When Lydia confirmed the gold card number he became more co-operative.

'I'm going to have to call in favours from every branch in the South,' he said, 'but you'll have your delivery by six o'clock this evening.' The police let the vans through early that evening and a swarm of quartermasters

descended on the convoy, devouring shopping bags and bakery trays like locusts. Every preference was catered for and everyone went to sleep fully sated. Apart for Boris Pickles, who complained that he would normally be tucking into a ricotta and broccoli quiche about this time.

But the biggest headache for Lydia was the certain knowledge that the General would be back for another go.

* * * * *

‘Of course we are going to have another go,’ said the General. ‘That skirmish at the bridge was just my opening gambit. This time we’re going to arrest the lot of them.’

He had patiently explained his tactics over and over to his lieutenants until they began to get the picture. Of course he had meant to surrender his gun – that was a deliberate ploy to try to gain the confidence of the protesters. Of course he had meant to let them stream past the blockade – there was no sense in detaining them once those morons from Military Intelligence had screwed everything up with their ill-fated snatch operation.

‘I’m just biding my time,’ he said. But, in reality, he had only hours to get the job done. Jackman had promised to demote him to private if he screwed up a second time.

‘This time, we go in hard and we go in tooled-up. They won’t be expecting that.’

This, of course, was exactly what Lydia was expecting. It was just that she didn’t know when it would happen. Nor did she have a clue what they would do when they were finally met by the full force of the army.

* * * * *

By the time twenty Goths emerged from their tents the next morning they had been transformed. Tired and grubby faces were replaced by immaculately pale foundation make-up. Ruby, sun-ripened lips were masked in livid purples and coal blacks. Every eye had a lining and every eyebrow was arched. Each head of hair had been sprayed and straightened until it had set solid in whatever attitude its owner desired.

As for the clothes! Push couldn’t imagine how they carried such a wardrobe. It was fair to say that black was the predominant colour, set off by the occasional splash of red tartan or blue velvet. Leather, chains, dog-collars, lacy gloves, frilly cuffs, even top hats all competed for attention. Every seam was straight and every top coat freshly pressed.

‘Epic,’ Push whispered. ‘It’s like they’re going to a party.’

‘Gits,’ said Parker.

‘This little trip is going to take you a long way off your route,’ said Lewis over breakfast.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Vizzy. ‘We haven’t got any appointments for a day or two. But we’re going to get to Wales one day, come what may. It’s our destiny.’

The tents, the sleeping bags and the utensils disappeared into green rucksacks that looked slightly incongruous against the black-clad figures. Fires were raked over, rubbish was buried discretely and the field went back to its original state. Only squares of white grass where the tents had been and a few piles of ash showed that anyone had passed this way.

Push had found her bearings and was busy consulting with Vizzy on the route.

‘I’ve always wanted to see the Isle of Wight,’ said Vizzy distantly. ‘But you know we can’t come that far with you. Southampton won’t be safe for us.’

‘I don’t know how we are going to get to the island. I don’t suppose they will just let thousands of us onto the ferry.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Play it by ear, I guess.’

‘Something will turn up,’ said Lewis.

At the top of the field they popped over a style set into a stone wall and followed a chalky path south along a ridge. Conifer plantations on either side gave way to straggly Scots Pines and then to open vistas.

‘Is that the A34?’ said Parker, pointing down into the valley to his right.

‘Guess so,’ said Push, turning her map the right way up.

‘Is that the marchers?’

The road was laid out below them as if someone had dribbled a grey ribbon along the floor of the valley. From their vantage point they could just hear the peeps from frustrated drivers crawling on the north carriageway. The south carriageway was clear immediately below them and then peppered with tiny black figures starting from about a mile away to the north.

Vizzy was impressed. ‘Wow. There must be millions of them.’

Push started jumping up and waving. ‘Not advisable,’ said Lewis. ‘Not a chance of them seeing us from here but we don’t want to attract any attention.’

‘At least we know we are keeping up with them,’ said Parker.

The cars seemed to be dwindling in numbers, until only a few stragglers were heading up from the south.

‘Strange,’ muttered Lewis. He turned his gaze south.

Where the terrain broadened out, they could make out a junction with a couple of bridges crossing the main road. There was some activity between and around the bridges.

‘Has anyone got a pair of binoculars?’ asked Lewis. A couple of hands went into rucksacks and two were proffered to him. Vizzy took the other pair.

‘I can make out some lorries and, OH MY GOD, tanks!’ she squealed.

‘Pass me the phone, would you?’ said Lewis quietly, turning to Push.

* * * * *

The General stood on the bonnet of a troop-carrier with binoculars in his hands, straining to see what was going on up the road.

‘Here they come. Here they come,’ he said as the first of the marchers rounded the distant bend in the road. ‘No mistakes this time, Charlie me boy,’ he mumbled to himself. ‘Even if those press hawks are watching every move. If the little monsters get funny with me again, I’ll give them something to put on their six o’clock news!’

‘Sorry, sir. Were you talking to me?’ squeaked a voice in his earpiece. The General flicked his microphone off angrily. ‘How long before they get here?’ he said, turning to his Lieutenant.

‘Fifteen minutes,’ said the lieutenant, ‘if they don’t stop this dawdling.’

The dual carriageway was completely sealed for miles in each direction. Both north and south lanes had a line of tanks parked abreast with just enough room for a soldier to squeeze between them. But not the remotest chance that a march could pass. The slopes of the bridge under which they were parked were lined with soldiers three deep. On top of the bridge, every single inch of railing was taken up by a camera or a microphone.

* * * * *

Lydia used the zoom on her camera-phone to review the situation. There was no doubt that the blockade under the bridge was completely impenetrable. But she kept the marchers going until they were within 500 metres of the soldiers. Her pondering was interrupted by the sound of her ring-tone.

‘Yo, Lewis! Are you safe?’

‘Safe enough,’ said Lewis. They briefly compared notes on the past few days.

‘Have you seen the roadblock ahead?’ asked Lewis.

‘We’ve just spotted it. Don’t suppose you could summon up a couple of thousand dragons or eagles or sommat?’

‘Look at the slip roads.’

Lydia turned to Piperdy. ‘What’s he mean, “Look at the slip roads”?’

Piperdy started to laugh. ‘What is it?’ asked Lydia. Soon, other picked up on the reason for his amusement. Then everyone was clutching their sides, pointing and screaming.

‘The slip road,’ murmured Lydia, ‘I can’t believe it!’ She stood with her back to the bridge and flapped her arms. ‘Shhh, keep it down. They may not have noticed.’ The marchers fell silent.

She turned back to her phone. *‘Cheers, Lewis. See you on the other side.’*

* * * * *

The bridge was part of one of those large junctions where one busy road tries to cross another. Two bridges formed part of a roundabout which took the traffic from the crossing road. In between the bridges was a bowl of land, shaped like some ancient Roman amphitheatre. Here, behind the tanks, army lorries were parked nose to tail, waiting to carry off the protestors. There were sloping slip roads on each side of the bridges, both north and south. And those slip roads were unguarded.

‘Who’s guarding the slip roads?’ said the General into his microphone.

‘B Squad,’ came the answer in his headset.

‘No, we’re not,’ said the lieutenant next to him. ‘I’m B Squad. C Squad is doing it.’

‘No we’re not,’ said the man next down the row. ‘I thought you said A Squad had it covered.’

‘Find out who’s guarding the slip roads,’ said the general into his microphone testily.

‘Er, it’s not us,’ said the crackly voice.

‘Oh my God,’ said the General.

* * * * *

The whole march swept quietly but swiftly up the slip road, Lydia leading the way.

‘Get those trucks backed up,’ shouted the General. He clambered awkwardly down from the bonnet of the troop-carrier and tried to squeeze between two tanks. He got stuck about halfway.

The children streamed around the roundabout and onto the south-bound slip road. Two corporals climbed onto the tanks and tried to pull the General out vertically. ‘Never mind me, get those trucks moving. You have to cut them off before they get back onto the main road.’

But the trucks were jammed in, forty deep and bumper to bumper. When their drivers could be found, the rearmost lorries fired up their engines and tried to reverse up the road. All the rest had nowhere to go. It was too little and too late. The lead marchers were already back on the road. And although there was a couple of miles of march still to make the crossing, it was too late to trap them all.

The General unclipped his belt and relieved himself of his gun. A quick yank and he was free. A solid wall of marchers peered down at him from the slip road. He struggled up the bank with assistance from behind from the helpful corporals. 'You lot; to me!' he shouted at the soldiers who were guarding the grassy bits under the bridge. They followed him with guns cocked and ready.

'Get out of the way, you little horror bags,' he shouted as he reached the slip road. He pushed children this way and that, clearing a path towards the roundabout. 'Platoon. Form up!' he bawled and pointed at the ground where white lines marked the circumference of the roundabout. Twenty soldiers bustled in, cutting the march in two.

'Halt,' he shouted at the children. 'Nobody passes this point.' Still puffing and panting from his exertions, the General became conscious that he was surrounded by journalists.

'Are you going to fire on the children, General?' called a man from the BBC.

A hardened war correspondent from ITV began speaking solemnly to camera. 'Not since the fall of Baghdad has such a force of arms been deployed against an opponent so ill-equipped to counter it.'

On the other side of the road, an NBC reporter wanted to know if it was still safe to be standing so close to the action. 'I don't want to get blood on these shoes.'

More and more cameras crowded in on the General until the soldiers were hemmed in by mics and cables. 'Are you going to open fire?' they all clampered. The children, in the meantime, simply stepped around the obstruction and carried on towards the opposite slip road.

'Get out of the way!' blustered the General at the media scrum. 'How can we get a clear shot with you lot in the way?' A microphone made contact with his nose, pushing his head back.

'So you do intend to shoot the children, then?' asked the London correspondent of The Washington Post.

The General was bewildered. 'I... no... we... they... Of course not! What do you take me for?'

He elbowed his way stiffly out of crush of journalists and called for his men to follow. His priority now, he decided, was to salvage as much of his personal dignity as possible. He commanded his men to fall in line and they marched back down the slope towards the tanks. "Tactical withdrawal", he said to himself.

He was met by three of his lieutenants. The middle one walked forward and saluted. 'What are your orders now, Sir?' His face was twitching with suppressed laughter.

'Piss off,' said the General.

Chapter Eighteen

The Goths shouldered their packs and headed off down a lane. A slight haze was clearing slowly and, nestling at the end of the valley, they could see a church spire rising from a circle of thatched roofs. In other circumstances, they might even have appreciated the view.

‘So,’ said Lewis, ‘you’re into all this romantic literature and anarchy and vampires and stuff, are you?’

‘Nah, we just like pissing off our parents, mainly,’ said Vizzy. ‘But we’re not keen on being pushed around. Bit like you, I suppose.’

The village had a sad feel to it. The only children to be seen were toddlers or babies in buggies. All the adults looked as though there was a part of them missing. They each reasoned that everything was perfectly normal because Colonel Jackman had told them it was. But deep inside they knew it wasn’t right; there were no bouncing balls, there were no ice cream vans, there was no laughter. There were no children.

Until a gang of Goths appeared in the High Street. Lewis and friends were persuaded to stick to the middle of the group and try not to look conspicuous. Push had gleefully accepted the offer of some jet black lipstick which she had inexpertly applied herself.

They stopped at a little post office to buy a few supplies. The old lady behind the counter served them in sullen silence. She made a big show of examining Vizzy’s twenty pound note under an ultra-violet light. Satisfied that it was genuine, she slipped it into the till and snarled, ‘Do call again.’ Her son stood at the door, eyeing the shelves to check that nothing disappeared that wasn’t paid for.

‘They always treat us like this,’ said Vizzy. ‘We’re outcasts, pariahs, the scum of the earth.’

‘How are you paying for all this?’ asked Lewis.

‘Let’s just say that my dad is still looking for a replacement for his Jaguar XJ,’ said Vizzy.

They got a few choice looks from the postman and the vicar but nobody was inclined to interfere with them. A jeep rounded the corner. Lewis, Parker and Push instinctively crouched behind their companions. The soldiers in the jeep slowed and took a good look at the Goths. Deciding they were mostly harmless, they drove on at speed.

* * * * *

'I'm just popping out for a bit, Mum,' said the man from the shop as soon as the party of Goths had disappeared round the corner. He lent against the Post Office wall, lit a cigarette and got his mobile out.

'Ere, Denny. It's Taz. You know those ads on the telly about that plonker Spoticus? I reckon I've just clocked him in our shop. Round up the boys and meet me by the cross in half an hour.'

* * * * *

As the dusk gathered, black rain clouds swept in from the west. They climbed a steeply wooded combe along a lane tunnelled by overhanging trees. Where the road levelled off somewhat they discovered small fields behind high stone walls on either side of the road. They looked as though they hadn't been disturbed for some time.

'This will do,' said Vizzy.

They chose a spot where the field dipped and the wind lessened. Rucksacks were unbuckled, tents were unfurled and a steady pile of firewood grew as Goths returned with armfuls from the trees.

Lewis and friends, who had no shelters to prepare, were on cooking duty. Push started to lay out vegetables for a stew.

Vizzy wrinkled her nose and stared at the darkening sky. The first spots landed on her upturned face. 'Better get the tents up first.' But, before a single tent peg was driven into the ground, the evening quiet was split by the roar of motorbikes tearing up the lane behind them.

Denny jumped off his scrambler and pushed open the gate. Taz rolled into the field on his quad bike. He was followed by a dozen or so assorted scramblers and quads. They lined up abreast, cavalry style, at the top of the slope.

'Sitting ducks, eh, Tazzer?' Denny sniggered.

'Let's go get 'em. Stuff the Goths as much as you like, all right? But don't break the boy. He's worth a packet.'

They pulled forward in formation and accelerated towards the astonished campers. The rain started in earnest.

Lewis dropped the billycan he was holding and leapt over the pile of tents and rucksacks. 'Form a square,' he shouted. Somewhere in the dusty corners of his memory he found an idea that soldiers in a square formation were invulnerable to cavalry. Something to do with the Battle of Waterloo. British infantrymen grouped together in squares, their muskets and bayonets bristling outwards like a porcupine. The horses naturally refused to go

anywhere near pointy metal spikes and their riders could be picked off, one by one, as they circled uselessly around the outside.

‘What?’ shouted Vizzy, above the noise of the charge and rattle of rain.

‘Quick,’ said Lewis. ‘Form a square. Six to a side. Facing outwards. Grab a stick.’

They got the idea soon enough and shortly there was knot of Goths in the middle of the field, standing mostly on their camping gear and brandishing firewood. Lewis stood in the middle, stick raised aloft like a battalion commander.

Lewis’s theory was correct in some respects. The leading bike riders were loath to plough straight into the middle of a bunch of stick-wielding bodies. They broke to the left and right, some becoming unseated as they bashed into each other on the other side. What resulted looked more like the US Cavalry fending off Apaches rather than a scene from the Napoleonic Wars. The defenders began to feel pretty secure. They even ventured to lunge their sticks into the wheels of circling bikes. More than one of the villages came over his handlebars as their front wheels juddered to a splintering halt.

‘Nice idea,’ said Vizzy. ‘Where did you get that from?’

‘Oh, some old film, I expect,’ said Lewis. ‘The only way you can break a British Infantry Square is if they lose their nerve and run.’

‘Right,’ said Vizzy, but her quizzical look displayed a certain amount of scepticism.

A crack of thunder rolled across the woods. Then a flash of lightning and another ear-splitting rent. The rain fell in stinging rods. Taz led his squadron back to the brow of the slope. The defenders cheered and jeered.

They regrouped by the gate, in single file formation. ‘Sod this,’ said Taz. ‘I’m going in. Follow me.’ He let his throttle rip and mud shot from his rear wheels, splattering the riders behind him.

When he was half across the field the defenders could just about make out Taz’s face through the pelting rain.

‘Bugger me,’ said Parker. ‘He’s not going to stop.’

‘Hold steady,’ shouted Lewis.

‘He’s not going to stop, Lewis,’ said Push. Vizzy tugged urgently at Lewis’s sleeve.

‘Keep it together,’ cried Lewis.

‘He’s not going to stop, Lewis!’ screamed Vizzy.

With 20 metres to go, Lewis’s nerve broke. ‘He’s not going to stop. RUN!’

The Goths scattered in every direction. The quad bike crunched over the bags and tents and slewed round to pursue the nearest group of fleeing

defenders. Bikers were everywhere, clubbing down the Goths with sticks or just empty fists. Then jumping off their rides to lay into anyone they could catch. Most of the Goths made for the trees where they stumbled over the fence into relative safety. Lewis, Push and Parker had the same idea but were quickly surrounded by bikes. They stood, back to back, swinging their sticks wildly. But to no avail. Lewis was hauled without ceremony onto the back of a quad. A biker knelt on his back while the driver drove back up to the ridge. Push and Parker were frog-marched behind. Taz was waiting.

The biker kicked Lewis off the back of the quad bike and he landed at Taz's feet. 'That's him,' he said. 'Get him on his feet'.

Lewis's brain started calculating:

Run. Didn't work last time we tried it.

Fight them. Too many.

Play dead. Don't be stupid.

Appeal to their better natures. Ditto.

Pay them off. YES, brilliant! NO, we haven't got any money.

Confuse them by doing a strange dance. Maybe not.

Stubborn defiance. Is that all you've got? Yep, stubborn defiance. Might buy some time.

'Take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape,' he spat. Push and Parker looked at each other nervously.

'That ain't very nice,' sneered Taz. 'After all the trouble I've taken to track you down.'

'Can I hit him?' asked Denny.

'I recognise you,' said Lewis. 'You're the moron from the shop.'

'One more word, runt, and I'll give you something to remember me by.'

Lightening played on Taz's leering face.

'You're the one with the ugly mother. The ugly mother who can't count and tried to rip us off.'

'Shut up, Lewis,' whispered Push.

'You're mother smelt of bat droppings and you're shop smelt like Parker's armpits...'

'Thanks,' said Parker.

'...And you look like a baboon has stolen you're face and left its arse in its place.'

Taz slipped down from the back of his quad bike. His hand went to his back pocket and pulled out a large pen-shaped object. There was a click and a glint of light as a six-inch blade snapped out of its casing.

'Do you reckon they'd mind if I slice him a bit before we hand him over?'

Denny giggled and hopped from one foot to the other. 'Go on, Tazzer. Give him some stripes.'

'Oh, the moron's got a knife,' chanted Lewis.

'What exactly is this achieving?' whispered Push. 'He's going to hurt you.'

Lewis glanced up at the sky. 'I know what I'm doing.' He turned to Taz. 'Why don't you hit me with this as well?' he said, scooping up a tent pole and tossing it in a high arc towards the advancing shopkeeper.

'Duck!' he yelled. The three of them hit the muddy ground. Taz caught the pole and held it aloft.

And nothing happened.

Taz laughed. 'Hold them still'.

'What was that all about?' coughed Parker.

'I thought he might get zapped by the lightening,' said Lewis, sheepishly.

'Is this you're first visit to our planet? That's the most pathetic plan ever. That's just the stupidest idea you've ever had. That's the worst plan since the Trojans thought that a giant wooden horse would look good inside their city walls.'

'Now we're all going to get pasted,' added Push.

'Will you three girls stop squabbling while I cut you?' snarled Taz.

A howl curled over the field from the direction of the trees. They all turned their heads. Another howl followed, then another until the night was filled with baying. At the same instant, the rain stopped and the moon crept between the receding clouds. Shadows slipped out of the woods and spread across the fields towards them. The baying turned to shrieks and cackles and ghostly faces emerged from under sweeping capes. Within seconds a horde of slaving vampires was upon them.

There was no need for the stakes they wielded. The villagers ran, some snatching up their bikes, some abandoning them in their race to reach the gate. Even Taz fled without looking back.

Vizzy flopped to the floor in a squelchy heap, gasping for air and laughing. 'You know, Lewis, sometimes it's an advantage to be thought of as spooky freaks.'

The Goths jumped and clapped and some made after the villagers. Lewis was shaking. He clutched at Vizzy's soaking cape. 'I thought we'd had it then.'

'Better find somewhere safer to camp,' she said and started to gather up the scattered bags and pots.

Chapter Nineteen

Jackman was on the road again. He sat in the back of his Rolls Royce, reading important papers. He had a pile on his knee and others scattered around the shiny leather seats. Dotty sat in the opposite corner.

‘Never mind, my dear.’ He leant over and patted her on the knee. ‘We’ll soon have Mrs Bootles back.’

‘I thought you said that man you sent to find her had failed.’

‘Yes, well, he’s not the only string to my bow, you know.’

‘And I thought you said the general who tried to arrest all those naughty children had failed too.’

‘Yes,’ snapped Jackman, ‘which is why I’m going down to Southampton to take charge of the situation personally.’ He picked up the phone by his elbow and spoke to the driver in the front seat. ‘*Put your foot down, George.*’

* * * * *

The great road south finally merged into a motorway. It was the only practical route to their destination. The police had kept their part of the bargain and closed the whole of the south carriageway to traffic. They did nothing to hinder the march; they simply observed and kept the traffic flowing.

Spread out over three motorway lanes and a hard shoulder, the march bunched up considerably. But it was still far too long to see the front from the back and vice versa.

They passed junction after confusing junction until their sense of direction had completely deserted them. Piperdy poured over maps to be sure that the police hadn’t tricked them into a diversion. Eventually, they found themselves on the M271. All around them, the signs of a big city came into sight. There were tower blocks on the horizon and industrial estates on all sides.

* * * * *

On the third day of their alliance with the Goths, Lewis, Push and Parker stood on a low hill and stared down at the city. Close by, giant cranes and derricks lined the waterfront. The river and the sea stretched out into the mist and there, on the horizon, was a low mass of land that they took to be the Isle of Wight.

‘This is as far as we go, mate,’ said Vizzy, ‘I’d love to see your march but we’re not that keen on big crowds at the moment. Before you go, we’ve got a present for you.’ She signalled to three of the girls who suddenly pounced on Parker.

‘What the...’ screeched Parker. ‘Get them off me.’

They dragged him to the ground and began to relieve him of his clothes. Push and Lewis stepped up to intervene. Vizzy waved them off. ‘Leave them to it, will you?’ she grinned.

The girls stopped when they had Parker down to his T-shirt, boxers and socks. One of them knelt on his chest and daubed white paste onto his face from a make-up box. Another applied black eyeliner round his eyes. ‘Keep still or I’ll poke you in the eye.’

The third had unbundled a pile of clothes from a carrier bag and was pulling black drainpipe trousers up his skinny legs. ‘Stop struggling, will you?’

Push began to see the funny side. ‘I was afraid he wouldn’t have agreed,’ said Vizzy, ‘if we’d just asked him politely. We thought we’d better make it a surprise.’

‘What about us?’ said Push.

‘We’ve got the same package for you but I assumed you’d co-operate.’

‘Too right,’ said Push. ‘Bring it on.’

‘This is the only way,’ said Vizzy, ‘that you’re going to get into Southampton without being stopped at the first corner.’

‘Outstanding,’ said Lewis, ‘I can be a Goth. What do I have to do?’

‘Just be yourself,’ said Vizzy.

Parker struggled to his feet. He was clad in a black knee-length velvet greatcoat and a leather waistcoat over a black shirt. His hair had been sprayed and combed into an untidy mohican. His face was white, his eyes black and his lips pinched with a streak of black lipstick.

‘You bastards!’ he shouted, ‘you utter bastards!’

‘Oh, the ingratitude!’ said Vizzy, ‘That’s my best coat.’

Parker calmed down a bit. ‘Yes, well, you could have asked. Thank you. I suppose it will help us to get where we want to go.’

The other two submitted to a similar transformation. Push did a twirl. ‘Monster!’ she purred.

‘Total div,’ said Parker, pointing at Lewis.

‘He looks smart,’ said Push, and she linked arms with both of them.

‘We’re going to be the best Goths in town.’

‘You’re going to be the only Goths in town,’ reminded Vizzy.

They shook hands and there was some crying. Push was told to keep her eyes dry if she could – her make-up was not invulnerable to tears.

‘Thank you for everything.’ She gave Vizzy a big hug.

* * * * *

The end of the line for the marchers was the parks in the middle of Southampton. As thousands of them filtered through the cordoned-off streets, curious shoppers gathered to stare, reminding themselves what children looked like.

The police had decided that the four or five green spaces near the commercial centre of town were the perfect holding zone for the children. As the head of the march ground to a halt in Houndwell Park, the rear was spilling out onto the other lawns and playing fields.

‘But we want to go to the docks,’ protested Lydia to the Chief Constable. He met them at the southern boundary of the park.

‘You’re as close to the docks as you are ever going to get. We can’t get all of you onto the ferries. That is plainly ridiculous.’

‘We’re going to the Isle of Wight,’ said Lydia, ‘and if the Government won’t let us, we’ll stop here, stinking up the place until they change their minds.’ She didn’t say it with any conviction. When spoken aloud it didn’t sound much like a waterproof plan.

‘A delegation from the Government is on its way now,’ said Chief Constable Railings, lamely. ‘You can put any complaints to them. In the meantime, sit down and behave yourselves.’

* * * * *

Vizzy had been right. Their progress into Southampton had attracted only mild curiosity. On one occasion, a shopkeeper waved a broom at them. ‘It’s Mr Khan’s cousin,’ laughed Push. Rounding a street corner, they were confronted by a giant poster pasted onto a hoarding above a bus stop. A four metre tall picture of Lewis’s face was accompanied by the words:

“THE TRAITOR SPOTICUS. HUNT HIM DOWN. HAND HIM OVER. £10,000 REWARD. BY ORDER HM GOVERNMENT”.

‘That explains why those bikers were so keen on capturing you,’ said Push. They hurried on by.

At every turn their anticipation heightened until at last they saw and heard signs of people their own age. Crossing the road from a parade of shops, they peered through park railings and there they were. A sea of bodies sprawled over every inch of available grass.

‘They made it!’ shouted Push and started jumping up and down. ‘Let’s get in there.’

Parker found the nearest drinking fountain and scrubbed his face. ‘I’m not joining up with the others looking like some kind of exile from the Adams Family.’ Push and Lewis followed his example.

It wasn’t immediately apparent which way the front of the march could be found. They kept heading south until they saw a line of police cars ringing the southern edge of the park. They discovered Lydia beside a tall blue column on a plinth. She was sat on a park bench, chomping a baguette.

Lydia stood up quietly and watched the strangely-clothed figures walking down the path towards them. ‘And what have you come as?’ she shouted.

Push ran to greet her. She started squealing and hopping until Lydia hushed her. ‘Don’t make a fuss. We don’t to be too conspicuous.’ But it didn’t stop her putting her arms around all three of them.

‘What’s occurring?’ asked Lewis.

Lydia sat them down and brought them up to speed. ‘So that’s it,’ she said. ‘When the so-called Government Delegation gets here, we’ll just have to try and bluff our way onto those ferries.’

They were interrupted by the phut-phut sound of a small moped, wobbling slowly up the path towards them. The rider was wearing a dark greatcoat and a black helmet with a darkened visor. He pulled up next to Push and flipped his lid up. ‘Delivery for March and March Limited.’

‘Arseface! You made it! You star!’ She wrapped her arms around his neck.

‘Gerroff. You’re crushing the merchandise.’

A lump in his chest wriggled and the face of Mrs Bootle emerged under his chin.

‘You ain’t going to hurt her?’ said Arseface, as he took his helmet off.

‘Of course we’re not going to hurt her,’ said Push.

‘Right. Job done. I’m not going to hang around while you lot get mowed down by soldiers. If you ever make it back to Flintwick, look me up. I’ll still be living under that bridge, most likely. Oh, and if that cat needs a home,’ he added, ‘I suppose I could look after it for a bit longer.’

And with that, he turned and wobbled away.

* * * * *

Mr and Mrs Spottiswood landed at Luton Airport that morning. In common with thousands of other parents, they were making their way to Southampton. Unlike all the others, they had an official escort.

They sat in the back of a limousine. Police outriders on powerful motorbikes cleared the way, two in front and two behind. The English Consul, who had travelled with them from Malaga, flipped his mobile shut. He put it back into his breast pocket and smiled at the Spottiswoods. 'It appears that your child is in Southampton somewhere. At least, that's what the latest intelligence suggests.'

'Has he been arrested?' asked Mr Spottiswood.

'Not just yet. I don't believe he's been identified yet but I'm sure it's only a matter of time.'

'They won't hurt him, will they?' asked Mrs Spottiswood.

'Oh, of course not, Mrs Spottiswood,' reassured the Consul. 'I'm sure everything will proceed properly but this nonsense does have to come to an end. Rapidly.'

The limo pulled into a large public car park. 'I'm afraid we'll have to walk from here,' said the Consul, 'The streets are all cordoned off.'

They found themselves in a steady current of other parents – most sporting Mediterranean tans and inappropriate footwear. Everyone was heading for the park.

* * * * *

Jackman's car pulled up next to the Bargate. He and Dotty alighted and a police escort formed to take them the short distance down to the park. Police officers, two deep, lined the route and behind them, vacant looking parents and locals watched him pass. There was no cheering and no flags. 'Bloody zombies,' he muttered.

Chief Constable Railings met him at the end of the street and guided him to the entrance of the park.

'Where are the ring leaders?' he demanded.

'Over there, Prime Minister.' He pointed to the small group under the blue column.

Jackman stood on the edge of the pavement, arms behind his back, gently bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet. He had the look of someone waiting for something.

Lewis touched Push gently on her shoulder. 'Now's the time,' he said. Push took a deep breath and made her way towards the Prime Minister.

Jackman noticed the diminutive figure in black approaching. 'Delegation, I suppose. Let her through,' he motioned to his police guards. 'Well? What do you want?'

‘Mr Prime Minister,’ said Push, her voice quivering with terror. ‘We, the Children of England...’ she began.

‘Stop all that blathering nonsense,’ said Jackman. ‘What makes you think I want to listen to any demands from you...you traitors. What have you done with my cat?’

Push reached into her back pocket. Edgy policemen towered over her, their hands hovering near their gun holsters. She pulled out Mrs Bootles’ collar and held it out at arms length.

‘If you doubt that we are being serious about this...’ she began again.

‘Shut up!’ said Jackman. He reached out and wrenched the collar out of her grasp. He tossed it towards Dotty. ‘Here you are, my dear. Souvenir of a dead cat.’ Dolly gasped and dropped the collar in horror.

Jackman rounded on Push again. ‘If you think that making pathetic threats to a stupid moggy is going to bring down my Government, you’re more naive than I took you for. Arrest her.’

The Chief Constable hesitated for a moment then walked slowly over to Push and placed his hand on her arm. ‘Better wait here with me, lass.’

A dreadful silence fell on the crowd, only interrupted by whimpering noises coming from Mrs Jackman. She stared with disbelief at the empty cat collar at her feet.

‘Now,’ said Jackman. ‘Down to business.’

Ten men in dark coats and mirrored shades materialised out of the crowd. They stood, five on each side of Jackman, and pulled out revolvers. ‘Nobody moves,’ he yelled. The gunmen, feet planted firmly apart, trained their weapons on Lewis and his group.

‘Which one of you is Lewis Spottiswood?’ shouted the Prime Minister.

Nobody moved.

‘Which One Of You Is Lewis Spottiswood?’ he repeated.

Lewis suddenly felt very tired. He looked around the familiar faces surrounding him and knew that there was no alternative. ‘I’m.....’

Before he could get the words out, Boris Pickles leapt to his feet and shouted, ‘Please Sir. He’s Spoticus. Not me. Can I go home now?’ He pointed directly at Lewis. A hand grabbed Eric’s neck from behind and pulled him firmly back to the ground. ‘Shut your stupid mouth,’ snarled the girl next to him.

Lewis was half on his feet. Jackman’s malevolent gaze settled on him and he smiled. He took a pace forward.

Ten metres away, a small voice in the crowd shouted, ‘I’m Spoticus.’ Then two more voices to the left took up the refrain. ‘No, I’m Spoticus.’ Now

everyone was getting to their feet and roaring. 'I'M SPOTICUS, I'M SPOTICUS.'

The pandemonium lasted for five full minutes. Jackman stood his ground, still bouncing up and down on his feet, and waiting. The shouting died away.

'GET HIM!' he said and the ten gunmen took a pace forward.

But then there was another shout. From the other side of the road, a man broke through the police cordon. 'I'M SPOTICUS,' said Mr Spottiswood. 'AND SO IS MY WIFE.'

The trance was broken. Parents all along the road were surging towards the park. 'I'M SPOTICUS,' shouted Mrs Parker as she ran toward the Prime Minister. 'I'M SPOTICUS,' shouted Mr and Mrs Patel from another corner. 'WE'RE SPOTICUS.'

Jackman shouted to the police but there was nothing they could do. The cordon was broken and in disarray. Hordes were heaving towards him in uncontrollable frenzy.

Mrs Spottiswood stood at the Prime Minister's shoulder and, barging astonished bodyguards aside, she turned him to face her. 'Colonel Lionel Jackman, I'm arresting you in the name of the people. For cruelty to children. And treason against the parents of England.'

'Get off me, you crazy woman,' he shouted. 'Chief Constable. Arrest this woman!'

The Chief Constable shrugged. 'No, I think she's got a point, actually sir. If she doesn't arrest you, I will. Sergeant. Cuff him!'

The bodyguards were hustled away by angry parents, oblivious of the waving revolvers. Jackman started ranting. 'You hooligans. You bloody ingrates. I'm the best thing that's ever happened to this country. And you want to throw it all away? You want those little bastards ruling the streets again?'

'Come on now, please sir,' said the Chief Constable. 'I think you're time's up. You're coming with me.'

'No, I'm bloody not,' said Jackman. He pushed the nearest two children over and started barging his way across the park. Bodies scattered in each direction. Under the blue column, a woman on a mobility scooter was watching the excitement. Jackman grabbed her by the coat and hauled her onto the floor. He jumped onto the machine and decked the pedal, shooting forward at a massive 2mph. 'We'll see who's in charge here,' he yelled.

Chief Constable Railings yawned. 'Go and get him, would you, Sergeant?'

'Allow me,' said Mrs Parker. She took off one of her flip-flops and launched it, javelin style. It went, straight and true, in a graceful arc and

landed on the back of Colonel Jackman's shiny head. He toppled from the scooter and lay quivering like a beached jellyfish. The crowd cheered.

* * * * *

Mrs Jackman looked frightened. She couldn't understand why she was being surrounded by horrible little children. Push walked over to her and helped her to a seat on a park bench. 'We've got something for you, Mrs Jackman. We won't be needing it anymore.'

Parker handed her Mrs Bootles and Push laid the cat in Mrs Jackman's lap. She started to cry again.

Chapter Twenty

When Lewis met up with his parents at last, he got the biggest hug of his life from his mother. ‘Welcome home, mum,’ he said. His dad patted him on the back and said, ‘Well done, son.’ Then he coughed and started whistling.

The Parkers and the Patels went through similar reunions. All around the park, parents were searching for children they hadn’t seen for weeks. They were suddenly aware that something seriously screwy had happened to the whole country.

‘I’m so sorry, Pushpa,’ said Mrs Patel, ‘I’m so sorry,’ and she said it again another twenty of thirty times.

* * * * *

Lewis got to select who made up the delegation that would travel with him to the Isle of Wight.

The Spottiswoods sat in the back of a squad car, this time as honoured guests. It took only five minute to reach the docks. With sirens wailing and blue lights flashing, they screeched to a halt on the jetty outside the high-speed ferry terminal building. Lydia, Push and Parker and the gang were waiting for them with their respective parents. Representatives from all the schools on the march were queuing to board the slower but roomier car ferry.

‘Please take your seats on the top deck,’ said a steward as they were ushered down the covered gangway to the waiting jet-foil catamaran. ‘The crossing will take approximately 25 minutes,’ he added helpfully.

The river was dead calm as they eased away from the Town Quay. When the ferry reached the middle of the channel, the captain let her rip and the boat rose up on the twin hulls, accelerating to its maximum 36 knots.

‘The Leader of Isle of Wight District Council will be waiting for us in Cowes,’ said the Chief Constable. ‘She tells me that she is just as anxious to get rid of the internment camps as you are, Master Spottiswood. It hasn’t been the finest hour in the history of the island. Plays havoc with the tourist industry. I expect they’re quite eager to be helpful.’

They stood by the rail, enjoying the occasional salty spray and the smack of the hulls as they ripped through the waves. A steward was pushing a drinks trolley up the aisle. He was wearing a bulky blue jersey and a peaked hat. ‘Drinks, sir? Coke, lemonade maybe?’

Lewis stared up at his face. Why did this man have a soiled and bloody bandage wrapped round his head?

‘Or would you prefer a deeper drink?’ said Devonish. He hauled Lewis by the neck and held him at arm’s length over the side of the boat. ‘Die, Spottiswood!’

Mrs Spottiswood dropped her glass.

‘Put the boy back in the boat, if you wouldn’t mind, sir.’ The Chief Constable inched towards the assassin. Mr Spottiswood made a lunge for Devonish but the police officer held him back.

A dribble of blood was oozing from the sodden bandage around Devonish’s head. ‘Get back,’ he shouted, ‘or I let the boy go.’

Lewis’s feet kicked and struggled in mid air but he could find no purchase.

‘Put the boy back in the boat,’ repeated the Chief Constable softly. Behind him, four adults (which, until now, everybody assumed to be parents) stood up and pulled out guns. Each was trained on Devonish’s head. Without turning to look at them, the Chief Constable said, ‘My officers will not hesitate to take you out if you harm the boy.’

Devonish scanned the deck. The smallest hint of doubt crossed his face. With his free hand, he reached for the front of his jersey and pulled it up slowly. It concealed an impressive array of automatic weapons and grenades hanging from meaty-looking body armour. ‘Any closer and I’ll blow this whole boat to France and back.’

‘Give it up, son. The war’s over,’ said Railings.

‘For you, maybe. I’ve still got a mission to complete.’ Devonish cocked one leg over the rail and then the other until he and Lewis were both on the outside of the boat and hanging on by just the one arm.

Breath was coming hard to Lewis as he struggled against the vice-like grip around his throat. ‘If... you... put us... in the water,’ he croaked, ‘we... both... die.’

Devonish took one last look at the passengers and he smiled at Lewis. ‘I have never failed to complete an assignment and I don’t intend to start now.’ And he let go.

The Spottiswoods leapt to the rail, followed by Push and Parker. They were just in time to see the small heads of two figures, bobbing away in the wake of the jet-foil.

‘Oh my God,’ shouted Push.

The larger figure disappeared under the water first. An arm flailed around until it made contact with the smaller figure and that too disappeared under the waves. The boat’s siren sounded a long, mournful note.

* * * * *

‘Here, get that down you,’ said the Chief Constable and he handed Lewis a mug of streaming hot soup. The Spottiswoods were sitting on a bench in the ferry terminal in Cowes. Lewis had a blanket round his shoulders and was shivering slightly while his mother mopped his sopping hair with a towel.

Push sat on the bench next to him and shuffled up to him, despite his soaking clothes.

‘Gordon H Cricket!’ said Parker. ‘Why do you have to keep doing this to us?’

‘Pardon me,’ said Lewis, ‘I didn’t invite him on board.’

The ferry captain had slammed the boat into the tightest turn it could manage. But still, it felt like minutes before they were doubling back over the wake they had just created and heading back towards the point where Lewis had gone overboard. They found him clinging to a buoy. There was no sign of Devonish.

‘He grabbed me,’ said Lewis. ‘He was trying to hold me under. But the weight of his body armour was dragging us both down. He let go of me to try and unclip the armour. I shot to the surface. The last time I saw him, he was still struggling and getting deeper and deeper. I popped up just a few metres from that buoy so I struck out for it and held on.’

Royal Navy inflatable launches met them in the middle of the channel and zoomed around in circles. Divers slipped over the stern of the boats and headed down into the deep.

‘We may never find him,’ said the Chief Constable.

* * * * *

In the middle of the Isle of Wight there stood a newly-constructed barracks, covering several hundred hectares. From the crest of the hill, Lewis could see mile after mile of low huts, slinking away towards the sea. High barbed-wire topped fences surrounded the camp, for as far as the eye could see. They were broken every few hundred metres by watch towers sporting gun emplacements and search lights.

‘Go on, they’re waiting for you,’ said the Chief Constable. Lewis gave his parents a sheepish grin and headed alone down the hill towards the camp. The sign above the gates read; ‘Isle of Wight Youth Realignment Centre’. As he approached the guardhouse, the barrier slid silently upwards. He was greeted by the sight of a full colonel in dress uniform, marching smartly up the road towards him.

The colonel came to a halt in front of Lewis and slapped his heels together. His hand shot up to the peak of his cap in a juddering salute. 'SAH. CAMP READY FOR YOR INSPECTION, SAH.'

'Thank you, Colonel. Carry on,' smirked Lewis. He turned and waved to the delegation from Southampton and they followed him down the slope towards the gates.

* * * * *

At six o'clock that evening, the teenagers streamed into the camp car park and onto the waiting buses for relocation to mainland England. The Spottiswoods waited patiently in the Colonel's office until Bev was marched into the room by a sergeant.

'Hello, Lew,' she smiled. 'Been up to no good, I hear.'

* * * * *

The Chief Constable personally escorted the Spottiswoods back to Flintwick.

'What's going to happen to Jackman?' asked Lewis.

'Oh, we'll be taking care of him,' said the Chief Constable. 'I understand that a new government is being formed as we speak. A lot of people got hurt during his brief period of office. Jackman was pretty sick, really. He'll get better treatment than he deserves.'

'What happened to that boy who looked a bit like me?'

'Ah. We think his name was Harry Seldon.'

'Think? Why can't you just ask him?'

'Because,' said the Chief Constable, 'I'm afraid he has disappeared.'

Lewis's heart fell in his chest. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

* * * * *

Mrs Bootles escaped from the Jackmans' house in the leafy avenue near Cheltenham. It took her six months but she did eventually make it all the way to Flintwick. When she found the bridge under the ring road, Arseface Morton was there to welcome her home.

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About the Author



Andrew Francis is a self-employed artist and writer. He lives in Gloucester with his wife and teenage son.

Andrew works in a variety of creative and design disciplines. His activities include: writing; cabinet design and making; graphic design; web design; 3D design; painting; playing and composing music; cartooning; letter carving; stained glass design; blogging and walking guides. Some of his work can be seen at www.francis-emporium.co.uk