

Chapter 8

—SIX MONTHS LATER—

Thursday, September 6th, 1973: School field trips were the worst, Jamie Beckett reflected as he, his two brothers, Billie and Harry, and their friends, Nicholas and Grant Baker, ambled through the zoo. It was one thing to get off school grounds, quite another to be told where and how to do so—a tantalizing taste of freedom, without actually being free. It left him boiling with frustration, and the urge to do something. . . .

Mischievous.

The trouble was, under the beautiful, yet annoyingly vigilant, watch of their biology teacher, Gill Crawford, there wasn't much that he could do. It wasn't as though he and his brothers could disappear for a while, and then reappear later. Their absence would be noted and punished.

Jamie's musings were interrupted when he noticed that he was now ambling on alone. He stopped and turned, looking for the rest of his group.

They were just a few paces back, their attention fixed beyond a wire mesh fence that was some four and a half feet high. Jamie frowned, unable to imagine anything interesting in there. All of the *interesting* animals were caged on all sides, or at least, had higher fences.

"What're you guys looking at?" Jamie asked, coming up beside Nicholas and squinting up at him. Nicholas was tall, but his head wasn't quite blocking the afternoon sun—his wavy, light brown hair was silhouetted by a blinding golden halo of light.

Nicholas spared him a glance. "Rabbits."

Disbelieving, Jamie gazed through the fence. A pair of fluffy, brown rabbits were perched low on a carpet of grass, their cheeks bulging. They were very small, each barely larger than his fist. *Must be baby rabbits*, Jamie thought. He shook his

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head. "Who'd keep rabbits in a zoo?"

Harry nodded. "Pretty ordinary."

"And they breed like mice," Nicholas said. "They'll soon outgrow that little pen."

Jamie laughed, then sobered, his brow furrowing. "Doesn't make sense. If I want to see rabbits, I can go to a pet store. I don't need to come to the zoo for that."

Nicholas nodded to a section of the fence that had a wooden sign posted on it. "What's the sign say?"

Billie crossed over to it. They watched him shake his head once, then return. "It's blank," he replied.

"Well, they look like regular rabbits to me," Harry said.

"Maybe they're here to feed the other animals. . . ." Grant suggested.

Jamie sent him a horrified look. "They wouldn't."

Grant affected a sinister grin. "Crocodiles, perhaps." He made exaggerated chomping motions with his jaw.

Jamie's eyes went wide and traveled back to the rabbits. "They're so small. . . . The crocodiles wouldn't even taste them."

Grant shrugged. "No one eats popcorn one at a time—you've got to take a whole handful."

Jamie's eyes were riveted on the rabbits. *So cute and cuddly.* He imagined them being dumped by the bagful into the hungry, gaping mouths of crocodiles. . . .

"I don't believe it," Jamie said after a while. "I can't see more than two rabbits in there, and they're not even fully grown. You could never feed a crocodile with just them."

Grant wasn't giving up on his theory. "Like Beaver said, they breed like mice."

"Poor things," Harry sighed.

Jamie turned to Nicholas. "What do you think, Beaver?"

"Well . . . it's a possibility, I guess. . . ."

"The crocodiles probably won't even chew." Grant remarked. He nodded to the rabbits in the pen. "They'll just swallow 'em whole."

"You know something, *Bakkies?*" Billie said, using Grant's nickname. Grant turned to him with eyebrows raised. His blond hair did nothing to hide his jutting ears, for which he'd been nicknamed. "You're damn near heartless."

Grant's face cracked into a broad smile. "Don't look at me.

I'm not feeding them to the crocodiles."

"But how you can stand there discussing their fates so graphically is beyond me."

"Well, it's the truth. No sense dressing it up. If you're so worried about them, you could always file a complaint."

"I've got better idea," Jamie said, studying the rabbits again. "One that's sure to save those little furballs."

Nicholas had a bad feeling. "Oh?" he asked, his green eyes narrowing to a frown as he studied Jamie's pudgy face.

"You know the Pets Club we started a while back?"

Nicholas knew all about it. It wasn't much of a Pets Club. They had a few hamsters and a field mouse, which had been creatively termed an "albino pygmy squirrel" in order to get it past the watchful eyes of their matron. Nicholas studied the rabbits now, two and two clicking together in his brain. His bad feeling grew worse. He knew what Jamie was planning.

"You can't," Nicholas protested.

"Cover me. I'm going in," Jamie replied, starting toward the fence. Billie caught on to his brother's plan and followed him to the fence.

Nicholas shot a quick look down the pathway. The rest of the class was up ahead, surprisingly, still in sight. Their teacher was currently pointing out the orangutan exhibit to the rest of the class. No one was looking their way.

But that didn't mean they wouldn't get caught. Nicholas returned his attention to the rabbit pen just in time to see Jamie and Billie scrambling back over the fence, each with a rabbit in hand. He watched with a frown as they tucked the rabbits between their shirts and blazers.

Grant smiled. "I like how you think, Shorty. Who's going to notice another bulge around your middle?"

Jamie glared at Grant.

"And what about Muffy's?" Nicholas asked, looking Billie up and down. "Compared to you, Shorty, he's a veritable beanpole. Someone's bound to notice."

"Walk in front of him, then, Beaver," Harry suggested, a grin splitting his freckled cheeks.

"And you don't suppose someone will notice that we're walking in lockstep?"

Jamie sighed. "Then he can walk hunched over, and if anyone asks, he'll say he's got a stomach ache."

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Nicholas looked skeptical.

“Don’t give me that—*eina!* Keep still you ungrateful little—” Jamie looked down sharply at the round lump roving around beneath his blazer. Billie appeared to be having similar difficulties. Jamie looked up and said, “Some things are worth the risk of getting in trouble. Saving these little rabbits is one of them.”

Nicholas still looked ready to object, but Grant spoke first. “Hey, you *bliksems*,” he said, nodding toward the rest of the class. “If we don’t get back to the group soon, someone’s going to notice us loitering back here.”

There was a chorus of agreement, and everyone hurried to catch up, all except Nicholas. He stayed where he was, scowling at the empty rabbits’ pen. Something didn’t fit. After a moment, he caught up to the others and kept pace beside Jamie.

“You know, I’m not sure that those rabbits needed saving.”

Grant studied him sidelong, beneath carefully raised eyebrows, a hint of a smile on his face. Jamie, on the other hand, was eyeing him skeptically.

“Why put them on display if all they are is crocodile bait?”

Jamie shook his head. “I don’t have time to fathom the inner workings of a zookeeper’s twisted mind, Beaver. Besides, even if we are wrong, they can’t possibly miss a couple of rabbits. All they have to do is go to the pet store and get a couple more.”

Nicholas frowned. “Planning to save *them*, too?”

Jamie met his frown with a glance. “Maybe. One rabbit at a time, Beaver. One rabbit at a time.”

To Nicholas’s surprise, they didn’t get caught. He was sure that a few of their classmates had noticed the strange lump under Jamie’s blazer, the way it periodically shifted, provoking giggles from him, or the way that Billie was clutching his stomach, hunched over like Quasimodo, but none of them seemed willing to inquire within earshot of their teacher. Instead, they settled for sending Jamie curious looks—to which he either responded with a shushing finger or an eloquent zipping motion across his lips.

It was only when they got back to St. Andrew’s that people started to verbalize their questions. Jamie brushed them off impatiently and told them that they would get a chance to see later, after classes.

The five of them hurried up to their dormitory and Harry split off from the group to fetch an old cardboard box he remembered seeing in the boiler room. When Harry returned with the box, the rabbits were dumped unceremoniously inside.

Jamie grimaced and stared down at his finger, at a puncture hole crusted with blood. "I think it bit me."

"Let's see." Harry peered over his brother's shoulder, and Jamie held his finger up to the light.

"He's right!" Harry said.

"You think it might've had rabies?" Jamie asked, paling slightly.

Nicholas looked thoughtful. "A rabid rabbit . . ." He gave a short laugh, and wondered briefly why that sounded so strange. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"I should've left it to be crocodile bait," Jamie moaned. "Now I'm going to have to go to the nurse, and she'll probably insist that I get a rabies shot."

"Have you seen the needle they use to administer it?" Nicholas asked.

Jamie's face paled still further. "No."

"It's a monstrous thing." Nicholas made a gap of two feet between his hands. Jamie's jaw dropped a few centimeters. "And they inject you in your stomach—" Nicholas poked Jamie's stomach to emphasize the point. "—in all the tender spots."

All three Becketts were staring at him now, wide-eyed and pale-faced. "I don't believe you," Jamie said in a quaking voice, his hands clasped protectively around his middle.

Nicholas shrugged.

"Well," Grant said, "he *is* a doctor's son. He should know."

Billie turned to Jamie and slapped him on the back. "You're just going to have to take it like a man."

"I hate needles. I think I'd prefer to have rabies."

Nicholas's expression turned serious. "No you wouldn't. Rabies drives you insane—"

"Not much danger there," Grant said, with an accompanying bubble of laughter from Billie and Harry.

"—and it's fatal."

"Oh," Jamie said, gulping.

There was a momentary pause in the conversation, and

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Grant looked down into the box where the two rabbits were trying to scramble up the sides. “Seems a little small for them. . . .”

“Don’t worry. It’s only temporary,” Billie replied. “We’ll find them a better home after classes.”

“Speaking of which,” Nicholas said, looking down at his watch. “We’re already late.”

Jamie cleared his throat meaningfully. “Hey! What about me? I could be a walking dead man and here you lot are acting like it’s no big deal.”

“You need to go see the school nurse,” Nicholas replied.

“But what am I going to tell her? I can’t exactly say I got bitten by a wild rabbit at the zoo, now can I?”

“Hey . . . that’s right,” Harry said. “That would incriminate us.”

“Tell her it was a squirrel,” Nicholas suggested.

“She’ll blame Alby,” Billie said—Alby was their albino pygmy squirrel (a.k.a. common field mouse).

“Okay, then tell her you got bitten trying to feed one of the meerkats at the zoo—none of them are missing,” Nicholas said.

Jamie looked skeptical.

Nicholas sighed. “Be creative. Whatever you say, just don’t say it was a rabbit.”

Nicholas left the Becketts arguing amongst themselves as to what animal had bitten Jamie, and hurried down the hallway to get to his next class. Grant caught up to him a second later.

“You think it’ll be all right to just leave those rabbits there? Unattended?”

“That’s Shorty’s problem.”

“Yeah, but we’re accessories to his problem.”

Nicholas grimaced. *Bloody Becketts.*

* * *

The following day was Saturday. Nicholas did his best to steer clear of the Beckett Brothers and their newly acquired rabbits. He’d heard from Grant that Jamie had received his first rabies shot. Jamie had been adamant that the needle really was two feet long, although Nicholas suspected that was only because there were rumors that he’d fainted.

Having seen his father administer the post-exposure treatment for rabies, Nicholas knew Jamie was in for another five shots over the next month. That brought a smile to

Nicholas's face as he crossed the schoolyard to the library.

The library was an echoing room with a high, vaulted ceiling, stone walls, and dark, wooden rafters. Row upon row of bookcases—equally dark and wooden—lined the walls and the empty spaces between the couches and coffee tables. Side tables held antique-looking, brass lamps, coasters for drinks, and scattered books.

There was ample room for reading a good book, or for enjoying the morning newspaper along with a cup of coffee and a pastry—both of which could be acquired for a few pieces of change at the in-library cafeteria. A number of students were scattered around the library doing just that, but none of them went by the name of Beckett. Nicholas smiled; the library was the last place he could expect to find one of the Beckett Brothers, which made it a good place to hide from their mischief-making.

Nicholas angled for the cafeteria. He briefly studied the glass display case full of pastries and sandwiches, and placed an order for a peach danish and a coffee. After paying for his order, he began crossing the room to an empty couch, snagged a copy of *The Friend*—Bloemfontein's English morning paper—from a stand along the way, and sat down facing a pair of tall, lattice windows. Nicholas spent a moment sipping his coffee and studying the view out those windows. Outside, the morning sun was sprinkling down through a dark green canopy of old oak trees, speckling the grass in varying shades of green.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" came a quiet, rasping voice from behind him—rasping as though the vocal cords had rusted from disuse. Nicholas recognized the voice.

He cast a look up and over his shoulder, confirming that it was the librarian, Miss Christoffel—or "Cruella de Vil" as she'd been nicknamed by some of the students. She had a pair of sharp, brown eyes which peered out from behind red, horn-rimmed glasses, and her pale white hair was done up in a bun with an orange pencil sticking out of it.

Nicholas smiled. "Hello, Miss Christoffel."

"Reading the paper, I see." She gave an abrupt nod to where his newspaper sat beside him on the couch. "Good. We could use more students like you," she said, and walked away before he could reply.

Nicholas shrugged and turned to pick up his newspaper. He spent a moment skimming the headlines. As his eyes neared the bottom of the page, they stopped, widened, and stared.

“Rare Miniature Argentinean Rabbits Disappear From Zoo”

“No . . .” Nicholas breathed. He skimmed the article, shaking his head. *I knew it! I just knew it. Crocodile bait . . . hah!*

Bloody Becketts. Nicholas gulped down the rest of his coffee and finished his danish in a few man-sized bites. Then, getting up from the couch, he returned the newspaper to the stand, and set a brisk pace from the library to begin his search for the rabbit-nappers.

* * *

Nicholas found the Beckett brothers in the Pets Club, discussing names for its newest members, and congratulating one another for their heroism. He called for their attention and three heads turned as one toward him.

“What is it, Beaver?” Jamie asked, frowning at the serious look on Nicholas’s face.

“I think it would be better if I showed you.”

Billie raised his eyebrows. “Well, aren’t we mysterious.”

“How about a hint?” Harry asked.

Nicholas shook his head. “You’ll see.”

“All right, lead on, then,” Jamie said.

Wordlessly, Nicholas led the trio—still discussing names for their rabbits—back to the library.

When Jamie realized where they were, he wrinkled his nose. “The library?”

“I’m surprised you recognize it,” Nicholas said.

“Oh, I recognize it. The de-Vil sitting in the corner, signing people up, the tortured souls begging for one last chance . . . only thing that’s missing is fire and brimstone.”

Jamie’s brothers snickered, and Nicholas led them to the newspaper stand. They had no idea what they’d done. Nicholas passed the day’s paper to Jamie.

Jamie’s face settled into a pudgy frown as he scanned the page. His brothers clustered around to read over his shoulders. “I don’t see anything. . . . Oh, uh . . . uh oh.”

Nicholas nodded. “Yeah, ‘uh oh’ is right.”

“What?” Harry asked.

Jamie pointed to the headline.

“Oh . . .”

“It’s all Bakkies’s fault!” Jamie complained, studying the newspaper intently.

Billie nodded his agreement. “If he hadn’t gone into such detail about feeding those poor rabbits to the crocodiles, we never would’ve thought to steal—I mean save—them.”

“But that’s just it,” Nicholas said, “*he* didn’t steal those rabbits, *you two* did. And you can bet that’s who’s going to get in trouble for this.”

“How were we supposed to know they were *Argentinean* rabbits?” Jamie asked. “Who’s even heard of an Argentinean rabbit?”

“There was nothing on the sign. . . .” Billie added.

Nicholas shook his head. “You don’t go stealing animals from the zoo. Even if they’re plain, ordinary rabbits.”

“What are we going to do?” Harry asked, licking his lips nervously.

“Turn yourselves in,” Nicholas suggested, his expression smug.

Jamie looked up from the paper to gauge Nicholas's sincerity. Seeing that Nicholas was dead serious, Jamie did a double take. “Are you crazy, Beaver? You know how much trouble we’ll get into for stealing those *rare* little furballs?”

Nicholas held up a finger. “Correction—” He leveled the finger and jabbed it in Jamie’s stomach.

Jamie yelped. “Careful! Rabies shots, remember?”

“—how much trouble *you’ll* get into,” Nicholas finished.

Jamie shook his head sadly. “You knew all about it and you didn’t report us; that makes you an accessory.” He gave an openhanded shrug. “We get in trouble, you get in trouble.”

Nicholas scowled and ground his teeth. “Well, what do you suggest? Someone’s going to put two and two together. We go on a field trip to the zoo, and you come back with a bite on your finger, and get rabies shots from the school nurse. . . .”

“Hmmm . . .” Jamie scratched his head thoughtfully.

“Not like we can just return them,” Harry said.

“Actually . . .” Billie began.

“No.” Jamie’s voice was implacable. “I’m not smuggling those ungrateful rodents back into the zoo.”

Billie turned to him. “But—”

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Jamie cut him off by thrusting a band-aided finger in his face. "Look what it did to me!"

Billie shook his head. "It's the only way. Besides, what's the worst that can happen? You're already getting the rabies shots."

"I don't know, but I don't want to find out either. If one bite equals six needles, maybe two bites equals twelve." He shook his head. "I don't care if it's the only way. I'll turn us in before I hide that little nipper under my blazer again."

Nicholas laughed in spite of himself. Jamie silenced him with a glare, but Nicholas was unable to stop grinning.

"Be reasonable, Shorty," Billie continued. "It has to be you. If someone else takes them back, they could be in for the same treatment you got."

"Them? Are you suggesting that I take *both* of those rabbits back? All by myself?"

Billie shrugged. "You're immune."

"And what if I get bitten again? Won't I need more shots?"

Billie turned to Nicholas, his eyebrows raised.

"You won't need to get extra shots," Nicholas answered, "but if you're worried, just use gloves."

Jamie frowned. "You'd better be right about that."

Nicholas shrugged. "I like the plan, but however you plan to get those rabbits back, you're on your own." Jamie opened his mouth to object, but Nicholas stopped him with a hand. "No buts, Shorty. I was an unwilling participant in this fiasco, and if it comes to it, that's exactly what I'll tell Mr. Crawford." With that, Nicholas turned—

And bumped right into Miss Christoffel, knocking a book out of her hand and sending it skittering across the floor.

"Watch where you're going!" she hissed.

Nicholas bent to pick up the book, and offered her an apologetic look as he held it out to her. "Sorry, Miss Cruellla—I mean, Christoffel," he finished quickly. Her eyes narrowed, and she straightened her glasses before taking the book from him.

Nicholas tried to calm his racing heart. He'd almost called her Cruella de Vil to her face!

The librarian's eyes traveled sideways and lit upon the Beckett brothers. Nicholas followed her gaze. Jamie and his brothers were grinning like idiots, having witnessed the whole

event. It took them a moment to realize that Miss Christoffel's horn-rimmed eyes were now measuring them—as if for fur coats, Nicholas thought.

“What are you three so twinkly about?” she demanded of Jamie, singling him out as the ringleader. “You think bumping into people is funny?”

Their grins faded.

Her nose scrunched with irritation, then returned to its usual position as her eyes widened. “My word, is that you, Jamie? Jamie Beckett? In the library?” Her eyes widened still further as they dipped to the newspaper Jamie was holding. “Reading a *newspaper*?”

Jamie's look became furtive. He hid the newspaper behind his back and carefully slid it onto the stand. “Ah . . . what?” he asked, as if there had never been a newspaper.

Miss Christoffel's gaze edged up to his face, then flicked left and right to Billie and Harry. “And your brothers, too! It's a wonder that I recognize you three at all. Why don't I see you in the library more often?”

“Ah . . .” Jamie grimaced. “We're not big fans of reading, Miss Christoffel.”

“Hmmm. I have just the thing for you. Wait here.”

Jamie sent Nicholas a horrified look. “Is she doing what I think she's doing?”

Nicholas grinned. “I think you're about to be signed up,” he said, backing away.

“Where are you going?” Jamie asked. “You can't leave me here. . . .” His voice was pleading.

“She told *you* to wait here. *I'm* leaving.”

“Good point,” Billie said, and started after Nicholas.

“Muffy!” Jamie blinked, watching as his older brother hurried to catch up with Nicholas.

“Sorry, Shorty,” Harry said, and joined the trio in leaving.

“Checkers!” Jamie called, using his younger brother's nickname.

A few seconds later the librarian returned with a fat book in her hands. Momentarily confused to see that Jamie was the only one who had listened to her by staying put, she cast a wistful look toward the library doors and just managed to see the rapidly retreating forms of Billie and Harry. She turned back to Jamie and gave him a smile that was full of teeth,

thinking that she had a willing pupil. She handed him the book, and he sagged beneath its weight.

“The *Joy of Reading*—unabridged,” she declared. “I’ll be very interested to hear what you think of it.”

Jamie looked down at the book that had been summarily thrust into his hands, and grimaced as if the weight of it would drag him through the floor. It had already succeeded with the corners of his mouth.

* * *

The following day, after chapel, Nicholas was enjoying another coffee and danish in the library, again reading a copy of *The Friend*. He hadn’t heard any more about the Becketts’ plan to return the rabbits to the zoo, though Jamie Beckett had been sending him a nearly constant stream of dirty looks during chapel. He supposed that Jamie was mad at him for leaving him and his brothers to return the rabbits—*Rare Argentinian rabbits*. Nicholas gave a snort of laughter—

And then froze, his lips hovering over the rim of his coffee mug. He’d been reading the headlines again, looking for an interesting story. He’d found it:

“Rare Miniature Argentinean Rabbits Return to Zoo”

Returned? Already? Nicholas frowned and read the article through from beginning to end, looking for any hint that the zoo had found out who was responsible for the mysteriously disappearing and reappearing rabbits.

They hadn’t. The article suggested that the rabbits had found a way out of their pen—stealing themselves—only to return later. Nicholas grinned, wondering how Jamie had managed to do it without getting caught. He’d have to ask him later.

Nicholas got his opportunity sooner than he’d thought. Scarcely minutes after he’d finished reading the article, Jamie Beckett came storming into the library, making a beeline for the couch where he, Nicholas, was sitting.

“Hello, Shorty,” Nicholas said, doing his best to ignore the steamed look on Jamie’s face. He pointed to the news article. “Good work. How did you manage it?”

Jamie snorted. “I lost a few hours of sleep, that’s how.”

Nicholas raised his eyebrows, and sent Jamie a crooked grin. “Risky. You know, that adds breaking and entering to your rap

sheet. . . .”

Jamie glared. “Shut up. I have a bone to pick with you.”

“Oh?” Nicholas asked.

Jamie held up his right hand, fingers splayed. Not only one, but three of Jamie’s fingers were now capped by Band-Aids. Nicholas started laughing. “I thought you were going to use gloves?”

Jamie’s glare turned to a scowl. “I did, but their teeth are long and sharp.”

Nicholas burst into laughter again. He couldn’t help himself, imagining Shorty sneaking over the fence in the dead of night, wincing as the Rabbits bit his fingers. . . .

“Stop laughing, Beaver. It’s not funny!”

Nicholas only laughed harder. “No, no, it really is. Here you were trying to rescue rabbits from being eaten by Crocodiles—” He shot Jamie a smug grin. “—instead they ate your fingers!”

“Yeah, yeah, ha ha. Keep your voice down. If I’d wanted someone to laugh at me, I didn’t have to come looking for you, all I had to do is hang around with Muffy and Checkers.”

“So why *did* you come looking for me?”

“You said I should say it was a meerkat that bit me, and not a rabbit.”

“And?”

“And . . . when I went back to the nurse this morning to get the next of the rabies shots, I asked what sorts of animals carry rabies—for future reference. The nurse went into great detail, listing all manner of creatures—including meerkats.”

“So?” Nicholas asked.

“So, she *didn’t* mention rabbits. And when I asked about them, she cheerfully told me that rabbits don’t carry rabies! If I’d said it was a rabbit that had bitten me, then I wouldn’t have needed these horrid shots!”

Nicholas started laughing again, and this time there was no recovering from it. Jamie stood there for a long moment, enduring the laughter with a frown and as much dignity as he could manage. Only when Nicholas’s stomach was aching and he was gasping for air did he stop laughing. Then he noticed that a number of people had turned to glare at him. He’d forgotten he was in a library. He answered those glares with an apologetic smile and mouthed *sorry* to them.

“Laugh while you can, Beaver.” There was a warning note in

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Jamie's voice that brought Nicholas's head around. He knew what sort of revenge Jamie was implying. Pranks. A Beckett specialty. *Not good*, Nicholas thought. *I'd better try to repair the damage.*

"I'm sorry, Shorty." His apology was tarnished by an involuntary laugh that rippled through his gut. He tried to cover it with a cough. Jamie's eyes narrowed dangerously, so Nicholas hurried to explain, "But if you'd said it was a rabbit bite, people would have caught on. I guess I forgot that rabbits don't carry rabies."

"Wait . . . you *forgot* that rabbits don't carry rabies? You mean that you could have stopped me?"

"Well . . . I wasn't sure one way or the other."

"You weren't *sure*? And you didn't say something?" The color was rising in Jamie's cheeks.

"I guess I didn't give it too much thought. But, hey, now you're free to play with as many meerkats as you want." Nicholas realized belatedly that he was smiling, decided that it wasn't such a good idea, and blanked his expression.

"I think you're altogether too unfeeling about this for your own good."

"Now, Shorty—" Nicholas began.

"That's Jamie to you," he said, holding up a warning finger. It just so happened to be among the injured, and Nicholas had to stifle another laugh. Jamie sent a sidelong glance to his finger, realized his mistake, and tucked it into a fist. "Watch your back, Beaver!" With that, he turned and stalked away. He didn't get very far. Nicholas watched as he all but ran into the librarian.

"Doesn't anyone look where they're going?!" He heard her say. "Oh, it's you. Have you started reading that book yet? How do you like it so far?"

Nicholas looked on with a bemused frown, watching as Jamie shifted from one foot to the other, looking uncomfortable, but Jamie's reply was too soft to hear. Nicholas shrugged and turned away. He picked up his coffee and took an absent-minded sip—

And almost spat the coffee out. It was ice-cold! *What a waste of seventy five cents!* Nicholas thought, swallowing with a grimace. He shook his head and softly muttered: "Bloody Becketts."

Chapter 9

Jamie Beckett sat in Math class, doing his best to look like he was paying attention. Meanwhile, he was doing anything but. The math teacher had an annoying habit of asking people who weren't paying attention to his class to go up to the board and solve problems, so the ruse was unfortunately necessary. He watched absently as the teacher scribbled furiously on the already overcrowded blackboard, wearing his stubby piece of chalk down to an even more pathetic stump. Jamie's eyes followed the scrawl of numbers while his mind drifted elsewhere. He was trying desperately to think of a prank he could play on Nicholas, something that would be suitable revenge for the six rabies shots he'd received a few months ago. With only a week left before the end of classes—and graduation—he needed to think of something soon. He had played plenty of pranks in the meantime, but none of them had been good enough to constitute revenge.

Jamie's eyes drifted to where Nicholas sat taking notes at the front of the class. He eyed the back of Nicholas's head. *If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you let me get those rabies shots on purpose. . . .*

Either way, he was itching for revenge. The trouble was he was running out of time. A thought occurred to him then.

What if . . .

He smiled. It was pretty mean, but not nearly as mean as getting six needles jabbed into him—five of them in the stomach. *Besides*, he thought, grinning to himself, *Beaver will have a year to cool off before I see him again at class reunion.*

"Jamie Beckett . . ."

Jamie snapped out of his pleasantly vengeful thoughts, and realized with a sudden jolt that the teacher had just said his

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name. *Uh-oh*, he thought as he met the teacher's eyes. There was no discernible smile on the teacher's face, but his eyes seemed to be dancing with sadistic glee.

"You look like you can tell us the answer to this problem," the teacher went on. "Why don't you come up to the board and solve it for us?"

Jamie gulped and hesitated for a moment before getting out of his chair and starting down the aisle to the blackboard. On his way there he absently rubbed the good luck charm dangling from a chain around his neck—a gnarled, black monkey claw that he'd bought from a witch doctor with the assurance that it would help him get better grades in math.

* * *

It took considerable patience and no small amount of risk to himself while carrying the contraband around with him, but two days later, after cricket practice, Jamie found the opportunity he had been waiting for. When they came off the field after practice, Nicholas stowed his things in his locker, as usual, and went to take a shower, as usual, but Jamie noticed that this time Nicholas had neglected to lock his locker. He smiled to himself and bought time by making a pretense of being extremely tired from the afternoon's practice. He sat down on a bench in the locker room with his head bowed between his knees, then endured the sympathetic pats on the back and jibes about how out of shape he was. Once everyone had gone to take a shower, he was left all alone in the locker room. All alone . . . with Nicholas's locker at his disposal.

Quickly, now dropping his pretense of fatigue, Jamie got up from the bench where he was sitting and crossed the room to his own locker. Finding his school uniform inside, he dug into the inside pocket of his blazer and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. Hiding the cigarettes in the palm of his hand, he went over to Nicholas's locker, opened the door, and left the pack of cigarettes in plain sight. Then, thinking it would add to the chances of Nicholas getting caught, he left the locker door wide open.

It was the perfect place to plant the contraband, because Nicholas's locker was right next to Carl Hodge's (a.k.a. Jumbo's), who was not only their prefect, but also head boy of the entire school. As such, he would have no choice but to report Nicholas. Jamie snickered and hurried away from the

crime scene. This was going to be good.

* * *

Nicholas turned off the shower, dried himself with his towel, wrapped the towel around his waist, and headed back to the locker room, whistling as he went. He entered the locker room—

And the whistling died abruptly on his lips. An ominous silence hung in the air, and nearly every pair of eyes in the room had settled uncomfortably on him. He slowed to a stop and scanned the wall of faces before him, arrayed with looks that ran the gamut from accusing, to shocked, to sympathetic. He caught Jamie shaking his head in disappointment, but the effect was spoiled by the hint of an impish grin on Jamie's face. What could it be about?

Then Nicholas saw it. There, standing by his open locker, was their prefect, Carl Hodges. He was tapping one palm with a pack of cigarettes and staring at him expectantly.

Nicholas frowned, and with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he asked, "What are you all looking at me for? They aren't mine."

"They were found in *your* locker," Carl replied.

Nicholas's brow shot up. "Well, I didn't put them there."

"Really?" Carl said, crossing the room to stand in front of Nicholas. "You're saying someone planted them? To get you in trouble?"

Nicholas nodded. "That's the only explanation I can think of."

Carl shook his head sadly. "I was hoping you'd admit to it so I could be more lenient on you, but now you're just going to have to go to the housemaster for the usual punishment."

Nicholas frowned. "Ask yourself, Jumbo, if I was smoking, would I be stupid enough to leave a pack of cigarettes in plain sight?"

Carl's eyes narrowed. "Tell you what, Beaver, since I'm such a nice guy, and this is the first time you've been caught smoking, I'm going to give you the option anyway: I send you to Mister Crawford for six of the best, or—" He held the pack of cigarettes out to Nicholas. "—you eat what's left of the pack."

Nicholas grimaced, wondering for a moment who could have planted the cigarettes in his locker. There was only one person who routinely had that kind contraband—not because he was a smoker, but because he was the unofficial black market for

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St. Andrew's—and who might have had the motive. His eyes flicked to Jamie. The miscreant's pudgy cheeks were bulging like a chipmunk's, as though he were trying hard to swallow a mouthful of laughter. *Yeah, I know it was you, Shorty.*

Nicholas returned his attention to the pack of cigarettes in front of him and debated which would be worse: going to the housemaster for punishment, or eating however many cigarettes were in that pack. If he went to the housemaster, his parents would find out about it, whereas if he ate the cigarettes, he wouldn't have to explain anything to them.

"Well?" Carl prompted.

"How many cigarettes are there?"

Carl raised an eyebrow. "You're asking me? They're your cigarettes."

Nicholas gritted his teeth and snatched the pack from Carl. He opened the flap and found exactly six cigarettes inside. *Hmmm . . . six. Not seven or eight, but six cigarettes. Eat six cigarettes, or get six of the best from the housemaster? Numerical justice for getting six rabies shots?* Nicholas shook his head in irritation. *Blast you, Shorty! I told you that it only occurred to me after-wards that rabbits don't carry rabies!*

Nicholas considered the cigarettes. There were only six of them. How bad could it be?

He took the first cigarette out of the pack, popped it into his mouth, and started chewing. It wasn't as bad as he had imagined, but it went down like a wad of old newspaper, and by the time he had swallowed the fourth cigarette, his head was spinning and his stomach was churning. He eyed the last two cigarettes with revulsion, but it was too late to back out now; everyone was watching, and he was almost there. . . .

He popped the last two cigarettes in his mouth and gave a couple of vicious chews before swallowing. It felt like his stomach was doing figure eights. A wave of nausea passed over him, but he wasn't going to give Jamie the satisfaction of letting it show. A scattering of cheers went up through the locker room. Nicholas wasn't the first to choose to eat a pack of cigarettes rather than get sent to the headmaster for smoking, but he probably was the first not to throw up in the process.

"Well . . . I hope you learned your lesson," Carl said, a hint of respect showing through the reproach in his voice. He took the empty pack from Nicholas, crumpled it in his hand, and turned

away.

Nicholas caught Jamie's eye, sent him a triumphant grin, and gave a mocking salute.

It didn't even faze him! Jamie thought.

* * *

The following day, the mail arrived and was handed out, as usual, just before lunch. For Nicholas, it was an unpleasant reminder of the fact that he wouldn't be getting any letters from Elizabeth. He'd given up on that hope a few months into the year, after sending Elizabeth two letters across two months and receiving no reply to either of them. Even assuming the best case—her address had changed—what was stopping her from writing to him? *His* address hadn't changed. But he hadn't heard from her since this time last year, and he was forced to conclude that that was because she no longer wanted to hear from him. Clearly, whatever had been bothering her in Siesta had been more serious than he'd thought.

Nicholas accepted his bundle of envelopes from Grant Baker as the mail was passed around the table. He flipped through the bundle, checking the return address on each envelope. While Nicholas wasn't expecting a letter from Elizabeth, he *was* expecting a letter. Finding what he was looking for, he withdrew one envelope from the bundle and began opening it.

"Looks like we've got our draft notices," Nicholas commented, while opening the envelope. He heard a flurry of activity as others dug through their mail to find their own draft notices. Feeling his pulse accelerate with anticipation, Nicholas opened the envelope, withdrew the piece of paper, and began reading it.

A moment later, a triumphant noise escaped his lips. "I got accepted to the Air Force! Valhalla here I come!" Valhalla was the air force academy in Pretoria—the only air force academy in the country. Nicholas let out a quiet sigh of relief. He had no desire to become a grunt in the Army, where death and injury were a much higher probability, and he wasn't particularly fond of the idea of being stuck at sea for months at a time, either.

"Hey, me too!"

Nicholas looked up and across the table to see Jamie Beckett staring wide-eyed at his own draft notice.

"You're joking," Nicholas said, incredulous. Usually, the air

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force only accepted the more academically oriented candidates, since positions in the Air Force tended to be more cerebral than those offered by the Army.

“Nope, and Billie did, too,” Jamie said, looking up from his draft notice and sending Nicholas a smug grin.

Nicholas grew even more dubious, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. It was shocking enough that Jamie had been accepted, but Billie? He had even been held back a year.

“What did you two do, cheat on your aptitude tests?”

Jamie just went on grinning and shook his head. “Looks like you won’t be getting rid of us after all, hey Beaver?”

Nicholas looked thoughtful. “Yes . . . good point, Shorty. I just hope nothing . . . *unfortunate* happens while we’re going through basic training together.” The memory of eating six cigarettes yesterday morning was still fresh in his mind—and stomach. His appetite still hadn’t fully returned, but like yesterday, he would eat anyway just to deprive Jamie of a reaction.

Jamie frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

Nicholas just smiled. He nodded to Harry Beckett. “Well, at least there’ll only be the two of you there to terrorize me.” Harry, the youngest of the three brothers, had another year to go before he would graduate and be called upon to serve in the armed forces.

Harry didn’t comment on that. He just sat there, quietly going through his mail. No doubt he was feeling left out by the conversation. *But he doesn’t know how lucky he is*, Nicholas thought. Others around the table were reporting with mixtures of glee and dismay that they were being ordered to report to various divisions of the *army*. And there was no guarantee that when Harry was drafted, he wouldn’t also be called upon to join that branch of the military. In fact, it was exceedingly likely. South Africa didn’t have a very large navy or air force, with just one academy allocated for each, but it had dozens of such training facilities for the army.

From Nicholas’s right, Grant let out a whoop as he reported that he would also be joining Nicholas, Jamie, and Billie at Valhalla.

“The more the merrier!” Jamie cried, his expression turning jubilant, but some of his enthusiasm died as he remembered something. “Hey, when do you *blokes* have to report to the

academy?”

Nicholas’s expression soured as he scanned his draft notice. “July third—my birthday. Of all the days they could have picked . . .”

In his peripheral vision Nicholas saw Grant nodding. “Same here.”

Jamie’s face lit up again as he leaned sideways and read from Billie’s draft notice. “Then we’re all going on the same day! We’ll all be going through boot camp together. I can see it now: the Three Musketeers, and their venerable fourth, d’Artagnan, A.K.A. Jamie Beckett!”

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. “Hmmm . . . well, you *do* look like one of the musketeers, Shorty, but not d’Artagnan.”

“Really?” Jamie sat up straighter. “Who, then?”

Nicholas went on, “You’re the spitting image of Porthos . . . in all but one dimension—”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And what might that be?”

“Stature.”

Grant and Billie burst into laughter.

“And I supposed you’d be d’Artagnan, then,” Jamie said.

Nicholas shrugged. “If the uniform fits . . .” Then he broke into a grin. “But one thing’s for sure—it definitely wouldn’t fit you!”

“Hey, guys,” Carl said, interrupting them from the head of the table. “Put your letters away. You can read them later. We’re just about to say grace.”

Nicholas did as he was told, wondering as he did so at the lighthearted way in which most of the students—those at his table, anyway—had received their draft notices. Did any of them actually realize the seriousness of the situation? South Africa was at war on multiple fronts: with itself—via the ANC (African National Congress), which had started out as a peaceful movement to overthrow apartheid in South Africa, but which had grown increasingly violent over time until eventually resorting to terrorism to achieve its goals—with rebel armies fighting for independence in South African-occupied Namibia; with multiple rebel groups fighting for independence from Portugal in Angola and Mozambique; and even in Rhodesia, where South Africa was supporting the break-away government of the British-branded “Rebel,” Rhodesian Ian

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Smith, where two communist-led guerrilla forces were trying to seize power.

In eight months they would all be joining one or more of those myriad conflicts, and it was likely that some of them would not return from the fighting. Nicholas scanned the faces around the table as he stood up for grace, wondering what the future held for each of them. Who would be counted among the dead or injured?

* * *

Clank clank, clank clank, clank clank—

The sound grew louder as it pulled Nicholas from his dream. He sat up and covered a yawn with his hand. Then, suddenly remembering what day it was, he looked around quickly, felt his hair, checked his pillow, his bed . . . and frowned in confusion. It was the last day of school, and no one had thought to play a prank on him.

Then again, he thought, Shorty already got his revenge by planting those cigarettes in my locker. Maybe he felt bad about it and decided to give me a break on the last day of school. Nicholas shrugged as he got out of bed and crossed the cubicle to his locker. He retrieved his towel, soap, and shampoo from the locker, and listened with mounting curiosity as in the distance, above the clamor of the rest of the dormitory waking up, Nicholas heard Bakkies Baker cursing vilely in Afrikaans. Nicholas turned from his locker, his things in hand, and hurried from his cubicle to see what the prefect was on about.

By the time Nicholas got to Grant's cubicle at the other end of the dormitory, a number of others had congregated, snickering and laughing, in the entrance. Predictably, the Beckett brothers were at the front of the crowd, stifling their laughter as they stood just inside the cubicle, blocking the entrance. Nicholas elbowed by them to see what the commotion was about—

And saw Grant, still in his bed, but struggling viciously to get out of it . . . and taking all of his bed sheets with him in the process. It was only after Grant flopped to the floor in a ball of bedding and Nicholas heard him mutter "bloody staples!" that he realized what had happened. Someone had stapled Grant's pajamas to his sheets while he slept. He was renowned for being a deep sleeper.

Nicholas's laughter joined the others now as he watched

Grant struggling on the floor, making loud flapping noises with his sheets, and railing muffled curses and proclamations of revenge at whoever had done this to him.

“Shorty!” Grant roared.

Jamie’s only reply was to laugh harder.

“I know you’re there, Shorty! You’re going to pay for this, you *Bliksem*, I swear you will!”

Nicholas noticed out of the corner of his eye that Jamie appeared to draw himself up at that, managing to look indignant in spite of his mirth.

“Now what would make you think that I’m responsible for your current predicament, Bakkies? Why must *I* always be the one to blame? Did it ever occur to you that I might be as much the innocent victim of all these pranks as yourself?”

The muffled cursing and desperate flapping of sheets had continued all through Jamie’s indignant reply, but now the ball of bedding on the floor grew still and quiet.

“Honestly?” Grant paused. “No, it never occurred to me. You being the innocent victim of a prank rather than its perpetrator is like . . . like saying that Einstein was secretly a halfwit! You’re an evil genius, Shorty, and one day you’re going to pay for it.” The ball of bedding began roiling and cursing again, and Jamie just grinned.

* * *

As it turned out, Nicholas hadn’t escaped the rash of pranks being pulled on the last day of school. When he was in the shower, he’d begun shampooing his hair only to discover that someone had replaced his shampoo with cooking oil. Assuming the identity of the prankster, Nicholas had marched over to Jamie and promptly commandeered *his* shampoo.

Now, as Nicholas was toweling off, he spotted Grant coming up to him. He stopped drying himself to see what Grant wanted.

Grant stopped uncomfortably close and whispered: “Listen, Beaver, I’ve got a plan for how to get Shorty back. I know you have a score to settle with him, too, so here’s what we’re gonna do. I’m going to steal his lucky monkey claw. I just need you to delay him and his brothers here for a few minutes.”

“But how will that—”

Grant grinned. “You’ll see at breakfast.”

Nicholas frowned. “Okay . . .”

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* * *

As they were all sitting down for breakfast, Nicholas noticed that Grant took his seat beside Jamie. A few minutes later, large, steaming pots of oatmeal were delivered to each of the tables in the dining hall, and everyone stood up to say grace.

The housemaster of Story house began to say grace and everyone closed their eyes, silently repeating the words. Knowing instinctively that if Grant was going to make a move, now would be the best time to do it, Nicholas opened one eye—

And saw Grant drop Jamie's lucky monkey claw into the pot of oatmeal in the center of the table. Seeing him watching, Grant grinned and put a finger to his lips. Nicholas's other eye opened, and he looked around discreetly to make sure nobody else at their table was watching. They weren't; all of their eyes were still closed. Nicholas's gaze returned to the pot of oatmeal, and he leaned forward to watch as Grant gave the monkey claw a quick poke with his finger to make sure that both the claw and its accompanying chain sunk beneath the surface.

Nicholas heard that the housemaster was coming to the end of grace, and he straightened, bowed his head, closed his eyes, and stood with his hands clasped innocently in front of him. He joined the others with an audible "amen" and then sat down for breakfast.

Nicholas had to work hard to keep from grinning. Since the monkey claw was close to the surface, and their prefect, Carl Hodges, would be the first to help himself out of the pot of oatmeal, there was a fair chance that . . .

Nicholas watched in anticipation as Carl reached for the pot and began ladling oatmeal into his bowl. After pouring the second ladle full of oatmeal into his bowl, Carl abruptly froze, gazing down into his bowl, the empty ladle held quivering halfway back to the pot, dripping oatmeal onto the table.

"What?" Jamie asked.

Wordlessly, Carl used the ladle to dig around in his bowl for a moment, then lifted it high to reveal a long loop of oatmeal hanging over the side of the ladle. Nicholas smiled, realizing that it was the now-oatmeal-covered chain of Jamie's lucky monkey claw.

Slowly, Carl reached out and grasped the chain between his thumb and forefinger, hoisting the monkey claw from the ladle and holding it dangling and dripping above his bowl for

everyone to see. Carl stared, frowning at the foreign object for a long moment until enough oatmeal had dripped from it to reveal what it was. His eyes narrowed and swept to Jamie, fixing him with an unblinking stare.

“Would you care to explain this, Shorty?” Jumbo asked. All eyes turned to Jamie, waiting for his reply.

Jamie squirmed in his chair. “Ah . . .” He affected an ignorant look. “What is it?”

“You know bloody well what it is.”

Jamie’s look of ignorance didn’t waver. “I do?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Carl scowled. “It’s your blasted monkey claw! And frankly, after this morning, I think we’re all a little tired of your pranks.” Carl glanced pointedly at Grant, who’d had his pajamas stapled to his bed sheets. Carl’s gaze returned to Jamie. “You need to be taught a lesson, Shorty, and this is probably our last opportunity to do it.”

Nicholas grinned.

“Hear hear,” Grant said.

“But this time I really didn’t—” Carl stopped Jamie with a hand. “—do it,” he finished in a small voice.

Carl lowered the monkey claw back into his bowl, then picked up the bowl and began pouring its contents back into the pot. “Since you’ve effectively ruined our oatmeal by adding essence of monkey claw to it . . .” Getting up from his chair, Carl carried the pot over to Jamie and placed it in front of him. “And since it would be a terrible waste to throw it all away . . . I think *you* should eat it. *All* of it.”

Jamie gulped and stared down into the pot. “All of it?” He wasn’t very fond of oatmeal, and the watery gruel that they served for breakfast at St. Andrew’s could hardly even be called that. The thought of having to finish a whole, giant pot full of it made his stomach churn.

“That’s right. Bon appétit, Shorty!” Carl said.

“But what will all of you eat?” Jamie asked, his voice turning hopeful. Surely the others wouldn’t all sit and watch as he devoured their breakfast. He scanned the faces around the table with growing dismay.

“Well, I’ve never much liked oatmeal,” Grant said, wrinkling his nose as he glanced at the pot.

“Me either,” Nicholas said.

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Others around the table added their agreement and Carl went on, "Besides, we still have bacon, eggs, and toast coming. With your share now added to ours, I doubt we'll even miss the oatmeal. Now, eat up." Carl took a scoop of oatmeal from the pot and placed the ladle in Jamie's hand. Jamie reluctantly accepted it, and after a moment's hesitation, lifted the ladle tentatively to his lips, eyeballing it all the way there.

The first few ladles full weren't so bad—he was hungry, after all; in one of them he found his monkey claw again and removed it, placing it on the napkin beside him—but by the time he was about halfway through the pot of oatmeal, the rest of the food arrived. And even though he was already stuffed, Jamie watched enviously as the others passed their bacon, eggs, and toast around the table.

Nicholas caught him staring at the bacon as it passed. "How's your oatmeal?" he asked, grinning.

Jamie tore his eyes away from the bacon and met Nicholas's grin with a scowl.

By the time Jamie was three quarters done with the pot of oatmeal, his jaw was working exceedingly slowly, and perspiration was beading on his forehead. He swallowed another mouthful, then swiped a hand across his brow and shook his head.

"I can't eat anymore," he said, dropping the ladle back into the pot. The others were still enjoying their bacon and eggs on toast, but now watching them eat just made him feel sick rather than envious.

Carl spared a moment from his breakfast to study Jamie. "Are you finished?"

"No . . . almost," Jamie replied, grimacing as he stared back into the pot. He never wanted to see oatmeal again.

Carl nodded. "Good, keep eating."

Jamie looked horrified. "But . . ." Carl raised an eyebrow. "Supposing I refuse?"

Carl dabbed bacon grease from his mouth with his napkin, then cracked his meaty knuckles and sent Jamie a meaningful grin. By virtue of his size, both height and breadth, Carl was an intimidating figure, and he had a surprising amount of muscle lurking beneath his layers. "Then you can wear the remainder."

Jamie gulped. His brothers looked torn between offering

Jamie their support and leaving him to fend for himself. Both Nicholas and Grant, with their own scores to settle with Jamie, wore grins matching Carl's, as if to say that it would be their *pleasure* to help make Jamie wear an oatmeal sweater.

Jamie's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and then he said, "You're bluffing. You're the head boy. You can't do that. You'll get into trouble."

Carl's grin faded and he grew thoughtful, tilting his head up and to the side, staring off into a distant corner of the dining hall. "Yes, I suppose you have a point. Makes you sort of wish it was the last day of school. . . ." His gaze swept slowly back to Jamie, and his grin returned.

Jamie's nose twitched, and his eyes flicked around the table, making him look like a cornered mouse. He made a quick assessment of how much support he had among his fellow students and whether he could get away with leaving the rest of the oatmeal. But everyone was staring expectantly at him, eager to see him finish it. Everyone, except his brothers, who were working hard to appear neutral by focusing on their food rather than the developing confrontation, lest the others remember Jamie's accomplices and decide to get even with them as well. He had no support; everyone had a score to settle with him.

Jamie's eyes dropped and he gazed down into the pot with growing dismay. Then, slowly, he scraped another ladle full of oatmeal out of the pot. As he brought the ladle to his mouth, he squinted, then closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight of it anymore. It was barely warm, and much thicker at the bottom of the pot.

By the time breakfast was finally over and Jamie had forced the last of the oatmeal past quivering lips, he received a round of applause for his efforts. Congratulations reached him from even the most embittered corners of the table, but now it was his turn to be bitter—if only he had the energy left for it. He was sitting slumped in his chair, hands clutching his stomach, motionless except for his eyelids, which were blinking lazily. His ample stomach was distended to the point that he could feel every square centimeter of skin. Now he knew what a balloon felt like just before it popped.

He was dimly aware of the others getting up from the table. Someone—Billie?—patted him on the shoulder, the movement

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shook him just enough to make him fear losing his breakfast. *Maybe that wouldn't be so bad.* . . . he thought, his eyelids fluttering shut.

A moment later, his eyes still closed, he heard a familiar voice say, "Well, I hope you've learned your lesson." Jamie opened one eye to see Grant, the one who had spoken, and Nicholas, both of them grinning smugly down at him. Outrage gave Jamie the strength for a reply.

"I'm going to get you *bliksems*," he groaned.

"Pity it's the last day of school," Grant said.

"I have a long memory. . . ." Jamie trailed off between groans. ". . . like . . . an elephant."

Nicholas began nodding. "And a stomach like one, too."

Grant burst into laughter, and Jamie's other eye opened to glare at them. "Just wait . . . Valhalla . . . I'll get you. . . . Both of you."

"Now, Shorty, don't be like that," Nicholas said. "There's no need to continue these childish pranks in the air force. I think we're all even now, don't you? I ate the cigarettes, Bakkies got stapled to his bed sheets, and you ate the oatmeal. . . ."

A weak, scoffing laugh escaped Jamie's lips, but was quickly cut off and replaced by a groan. "Ooooooh . . ."

Nicholas's grin returned. "Well, we'd better get to chapel. See you there, Shorty."

Jamie made no move to follow as Nicholas and Grant left. As they went, Nicholas considered how well the simple act of placing the monkey claw in the oatmeal had turned out, and congratulated Grant for his prank.

Grant just burst into laughter again.

Poor Shorty . . . Nicholas thought, grinning all the way to the chapel.

* * *

Nicholas saw his parent's car pull into the parking lot below and promptly turned away from the dormitory window. He picked up his black leather suitcase from the bed and left his cubicle. It was time to say goodbye. He'd already said goodbye to a number of his friends, pledging to see them again in a year's time—at their annual old boys' reunion. Now he went to say goodbye to the rest of them. He found Grant first.

"I guess this is it, huh?" Grant said as they shook hands.

Nicholas shrugged. "We'll see each other again in basic

training.” With a nod and a backslapping hug for goodbye, Nicholas released Grant’s hand. As he turned to leave, he noticed Grant’s skivvy, Chris Thomas, standing to one side, looking lost. It was goodbye for him, too, in a way, but no one had taken the time to notice that. He was several years younger than Nicholas and his friends, but they all knew him well from his time spent serving Grant (Bakkies) Baker. On his way to say goodbye to the Becketts, Nicholas laid a hand on Thomas’s shoulder. The boy looked up, startled, and Nicholas said: “See you around, Chris.”

The boy smiled faintly, and nodded.

As Nicholas approached the Becketts, he noticed that the youngest and oldest brothers were clustered around Shorty’s bunk, and Shorty himself was lying splayed out on his bunk like a wounded soldier, his stomach looming over him like a mountain.

Nicholas’s mouth crooked into a grin. As he drew near the trio of trouble-makers, he began to hear Jamie’s groans. Nicholas stopped beside Billie and stood gazing down upon Shorty. Jamie’s eyes were closed, his hands clutched to his belly, and he was breathing in short, shallow gasps.

“Look what you did to him, Beaver!” Billie exclaimed.

“Well, you know, it wasn’t exactly my idea to stick his monkey claw in the oatmeal. . . .”

Jamie’s eyes fluttered open, found Nicholas, narrowed, and then abruptly closed as another groan escaped his lips.

“Do you suppose you can die from eating too much?” Harry asked.

Nicholas’s eyes flicked to Billie, then to Harry, noting the serious expressions on each of their faces. He considered the matter briefly: *Death by oatmeal—what a headline that would make!*

In other news, Jamie Beckett of Saint Andrew’s School died earlier today after eating a whole pot of oatmeal.

Nicholas almost laughed. *No, not particularly likely. . .*

Another groan from Jamie punctuated Nicholas’s thoughts, and he adjusted his expression until he was sure it would strike a chord with the already panicky Becketts. “Hmmm . . . that depends, Checkers. I’ve heard of it in cows. They call it the Blighted Bloat. When a cow eats too much of a certain food, digestion causes the stomach to bloat until it presses against

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the diaphragm and prevents the lungs from expanding, which unfortunately results in rapid suffocation. . . .”

“I’ve heard of that,” Billie said, his eyes wide.

Jamie’s eyes shot open. “Rapid suffocation?” he gasped.

“Yeah, but you don’t need to worry. It’s not like you’re having trouble breathing.” Jamie’s eyes widened further and he looked like he was about to say something to that, but Nicholas held up a hand. “Besides, unlike cows, people eat a varied diet, so it’s difficult to accomplish the same thing. It’s not like we go around munching grains and grasses all day long. . . .” Nicholas trailed off, frowning. “Hmmm . . .”

“What?” Jamie asked.

“Well, I was just thinking . . . oatmeal is sort of a grain . . .” Nicholas allowed his own eyes to widen alarmingly.

“Maybe we’d better call the nurse,” Billie said, sending a hasty glance over his shoulder to the door, as if preparing to run for it.

“No time!” Nicholas said, and dropped his suitcase (for effect) as he went down on his haunches beside Jamie’s bed.

“No time?!” Jamie asked, his eyes wild. “What do you mean no time?”

“There’s only one way to cure the Blighted Bloat, and once it sets in, you’ll be a goner in minutes.”

“Goner?” Jamie’s voice went suddenly soft.

“Shorty, you’ve got to try burping.”

His face scrunched up and his breathing quieted. A second later, he let out his breath and shook his head.

“I can’t.”

“That’s not good. Are you sweating at all?”

“Yes! Like a pig!”

“Even worse.”

“Beaver! You did this to me! If I die, it’ll be on your conscience. Now quick, tell me what to do!”

“That was it.”

“What?!”

“You’ve got to keep trying. And if that doesn’t work . . . a bar of soap, perhaps.”

“A bar of soap?”

“Yes, you need to eat it. The soap allows the gas to form into bubbles and then you’ll burp it all out.”

Jamie’s eyes swept to Billie. “Quick, Muffy, get me a bar of

soap!”

Billie hurried over to his bed, the one adjacent to Jamie’s, opened his suitcase, rifled around for a second, and then returned with a fresh bar of soap. Jamie hesitated half a second before taking it.

“Shorty, the Blighted Bloat is nothing to mess with. Take a few bites at least. That should be enough.”

With a grimace, Jamie sat up, one hand still clasped to his stomach, the other taking the bar of soap from his brother. He began slowly unwrapping it.

“Hurry, Shorty!” Nicholas urged.

With a final grimace, Jamie took a few hesitant bites from the edge of the bar. He chewed with evident distaste and then finally swallowed. “Yeaaa-uck!” he exclaimed.

Nicholas got off his haunches, picked up his suitcase, and stood once more beside the bed, staring down at Jamie. He was having trouble keeping the grin from his face. “How do you feel?”

Jamie shook his head. “Not so g-ood—ooooo, my stomach,” he replied, hiccupping on the last word and subsequently feeling the pressure that put on his over-full stomach.

Nicholas grinned. “That’s a good sign—the hiccups that is.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you’re on the mend.” Nicholas let out a sigh of mock relief. “Well, guys, I’d better go. My parents are waiting for me.”

Jamie nodded, his eyes still wide. “Okay, see you at Valhalla, Beaver.” Nicholas returned the nod and began turning to leave. “And Beaver—” Nicholas turned back. “—thanks. I owe you one.”

“No problem, Shorty, as you said, I wouldn’t want your death on my conscience.”

Billie and Harry said their own goodbyes, and then Nicholas left, waving a quick goodbye to Glen Agliotti and Grant Baker as he went.

Once Nicholas reached the safety of the doorway, he turned around and caught Jamie’s eye. “And Shorty—”

“Ye-ah?” Jamie’s hiccup was audible even from the door.

“Now we’re *really* even.”

Nicholas lingered in the doorway for Jamie’s reaction. Jamie’s brow pinched in confusion for half a second, and then his mouth dropped open. “Why you bloody—”

PRINCECHARMING

That was all Nicholas heard before hurrying from the doorway and down the hall, laughing as he went. Not that there was much chance of Jamie running after him—rolling, perhaps, but not running.

Now he was really going to have to watch his back in the air force. *But maybe the extra discipline there will make it hard for Shorty to get even with me. . . .*

He could only hope.