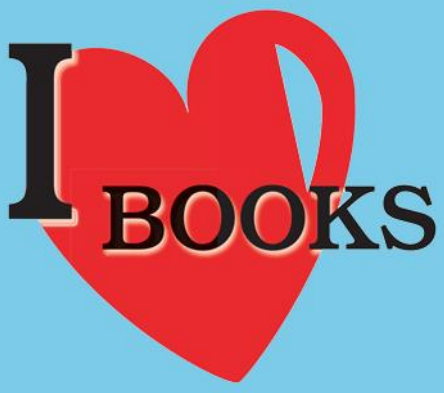

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THE DEMON HEADMASTER

TOTAL CONTROL

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3

EVERY STUDENT IS A STAR

Lizzie and Tyler were still on their way to school. They'd overslept, because of waking up in the night, and Dad hadn't realized, because he'd been so busy looking after Mum. While Ethan was sitting in registration, they were only just leaving their flat. They raced out of the block, but when they reached the road, Lizzie slowed down.

'Better go carefully,' she muttered. 'In case—*you* know.'

'You mean—*him*?' Tyler shivered. It wouldn't be the first time they found Blake waiting for them.

'Hang on while I look.' Lizzie stopped at the corner and peered round into the High Street.

There was no sign of Blake. Actually, there was no sign of *anyone*. The High Street was almost empty. Where were all the other kids who usually trailed in late? Lizzie couldn't see anyone under fifty.

'Maybe we've got it wrong,' she said hopefully. 'Maybe there *isn't* any school today!'

Tyler sighed and shook his head. 'Yes, there is. I looked out of the window while I was eating my breakfast. There were lots of people on their way to school. Come on.' He put his head down and started tramping up the High Street.

Lizzie stared at his back. *He's so small,* she thought.

She clenched her fists and ran after him, wishing she'd learnt kick-boxing while they were in America.

Tyler was just ahead of her as they went round the last corner, into Hazelbrook Road. When he saw the school, he stopped dead. 'Look,' he whispered. '*Look!*'

Lizzie stopped beside him, staring with her mouth open.

The school gates were straight ahead of them. As usual. But they weren't the old wooden gates that had always been there. They were brand-new metal ones, twice as big as the old gates. And arching over them was a huge sky-blue noticeboard that said:

HAZELBROOK ACADEMY

where every student is a star

The new gates were painted gleaming black, to match the words on the sign—and they were shut tightly.

'It looks as though they're locked,' Lizzie said. 'Maybe we can't get in.'

'We have to *try*,' Tyler muttered. He walked up to the gates and pushed at them. They didn't open, but a loud voice sounded from a speaker just under the sign.

'Good morning, Tyler,' it said. 'You are two months, two weeks, fifteen minutes, and twenty seconds late.'

Lizzie nearly fell over. That sounded like Mrs Harriman, the school secretary. Except that Mrs Harriman was always friendly and flustered. This voice

sounded super-efficient.

Tyler tilted his head back, looking up at the speaker. 'We've—um—we've been in America,' he said.

'Dad's written us a letter.' Lizzie took it out of her pocket and waved it.

'You'd better not waste any more time,' said Mrs Harriman's voice. 'Come straight to Reception. There will be a welcomer to greet you there.'

There was a buzz and the gleaming gates swung open in front of them.

'What's a welcomer?' Tyler whispered to Lizzie. 'Why do we need one?'

Lizzie shrugged. 'There's only one way to find out. Come on.'

She pushed Tyler through the gates ahead of her. As she followed him, she glanced over her shoulder. The moment they were inside, the gates swung shut again, with a soft little *click*. Lizzie shivered as she and Tyler headed for the main entrance.

They climbed the steps and the big glass doors opened in front of them. From inside came a solemn, polite voice.

'Good morning, Lizzie. Good morning, Tyler. It's an honour to welcome you to your first day at the *new* Hazelbrook Academy. The school where every student is a star.' The welcomer gave them a wide, friendly smile.

He looked like the perfect student. His face was scrubbed clean, his hair was slicked back, and his sky-blue tie was neatly knotted at the front of his gleaming white shirt. For a second, Lizzie almost didn't recognize him.

Then she felt Tyler shiver beside her. And she saw the bulldog face behind the smile. The broad, hefty shoulders and the brutal, heavy ridge of the welcomer's eyebrows.

It was *Blake*.

She shuddered, before she could stop herself, but Blake didn't seem to notice. He stepped back and waved a hand, ushering them through the doors. When they were inside, he made another little speech.

'As you can see, our school has been wonderfully transformed. You were unlucky to miss the induction on Day One of Hazelbrook Academy (where every student is a star). But Mrs Maron will see you now, to help you catch up with the rest of us.'

'Mrs Maron?' Lizzie frowned. 'Who's that?'

'Our new Deputy Head,' said Blake. 'Appointed by the Headmaster himself. Let me take you to her office.' He set off along the corridor, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure Lizzie and Tyler were following.

'Head*master*?' whispered Tyler.

That was different as well. What had happened to Miss Sefton, the old Head?

Blake led them past the hall and knocked on a door with a shiny new nameplate.

Mrs B. Maron—Deputy Head

They heard the sound of sharp high heels clicking across the room. The door flew open and a brisk, bright voice said, 'Lizzie, Tyler—good morning! I'm delighted

to welcome you to the all-new Hazelbrook Academy.'

Mrs Maron was tall and elegant. Her smile was gleaming. Her neat blonde hair shone and her black shoes had heels like daggers. *Beata Maron: Deputy Head, Public Relations* said the badge on her smart sky-blue jacket.

She waved Lizzie and Tyler into her office. 'Wait there, Blake,' she said. 'I'll need you in a moment, to escort Lizzie and Tyler to the Headmaster's office.' She shut the door, marched across the room and looked down at her computer. 'Before you see the Headmaster, I need to update your records. We don't seem to have your parents' email addresses.'

'They haven't got a computer,' Lizzie said. 'Or a smartphone.'

'Not any more,' said Tyler. 'We had to spend all our money going to America, for Mum's—'

Mrs Maron held up her hand to stop him talking. 'That is not acceptable. It's essential for parents to have access to the school website at all times. I'll have to sort something out.'

She gave a brisk nod and tapped at her computer keyboard. Then she marched back to the door and opened it. Blake was still outside, exactly where they'd left him, standing to attention.

'Take Lizzie and Tyler to the Headmaster's office,' Mrs Maron said. 'Then return to your classroom and continue with your personal timetable.' She waved Lizzie and Tyler out of her room and shut the door smartly behind them.

'Please follow me,' Blake said. 'The Headmaster's office is this way.'

He started down the corridor and Lizzie and Tyler turned to follow him. But they had only taken a couple of steps when there was a strange whirring noise behind them. Looking over her shoulder, Lizzie saw a small sky-blue shape hovering in the air. It was high up, near the ceiling, and it had spindly black legs and a round, bright spot at the front—like a single, gleaming eye. For one horrible moment, she thought it was a giant insect.

Then it moved towards them, and she realized what she was looking at. 'It's a *machine*!' she said.

Blake glanced back and nodded. 'The Headmaster's eyes are everywhere,' he said.

'The Headmaster's *eyes*?' Tyler stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

Blake pointed up at the little blue machine. 'Those are a key part of school security.' He recited the words as if he was reading them. 'They monitor behaviour and ensure that pupils are obedient and safe at all times.'

Lizzie shivered. 'You mean—they're spy drones?'

Just for a second, Blake's eyes flickered, as if she'd surprised him. Then he gave another of his polite smiles. 'Safety and security are essential to efficient learning,' he said, as he started down the corridor again.

Lizzie caught hold of Tyler's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Maybe they'll keep you safe from *him*,' she whispered.

Blake stopped just ahead of them, outside a door that said *Headmaster*. Just at that moment, another

boy came hurrying round the corner beyond him. He bumped into Blake, catching him off balance, and sent him staggering backwards. Blake crashed into the wall on the other side of the corridor, with a loud thud.

Oh no! Lizzie thought. *Now there's going to be trouble.* No one got away with pushing Blake around. Certainly not this boy. He was small and wiry—not much bigger than Tyler. He wouldn't stand a chance when Blake started on him.

But that didn't happen.

Blake blinked and stood up, straightening his tie. Then he looked apologetically at the strange boy. 'My fault for being in your way,' he said. 'Did I hurt you? Sorry, I don't know your name.'

'Ethan,' the boy mumbled. 'I'm Ethan—and I'm fine. It was my fault for not looking.'

'Don't worry about it,' Blake said politely. 'Do you need any help?'

The boy looked up and down the corridor. (Was he new? Lizzie was sure she'd never seen him before.) 'I'm supposed to be going to the changing rooms,' he muttered. 'But I don't know where they are.'

'Go down to the end of this corridor.' Blake pointed the way. 'Then turn left and straight on through the double doors. I'm sorry I can't take you there, but—'

'It's OK,' the boy said quickly. 'I know the way now.' He set off down the corridor.

'Go carefully,' Blake called after him.

Lizzie and Tyler looked at each other. What was going on? How come Blake was being kind and helpful?

It was creepy. Lizzie kept waiting for him to change back to his old self and start thumping someone, but he just went on smiling. Was he—?

She never finished that thought. Because the door to the Headmaster's office swung open suddenly and a deep voice spoke from inside.

'Lizzie Warren and Tyler Warren, come in now.'

'Go on!' Blake gave them each a gentle push.

They stumbled through the doorway—into an empty room. There was a desk on the far side, with a single chair behind it, but no one was sitting at the desk. No one was anywhere to be seen. It was just a square, empty room, like a box.

Tyler edged closer to Lizzie, and she caught hold of his hand and squeezed it tightly. 'Don't worry,' she whispered. 'It'll be all right.'

'Silence!' said the deep voice they had heard before. 'I shall tell you if you are required to speak.'

The sound seemed to be coming from all around them. There had to be speakers somewhere, but Lizzie couldn't see them. It felt as if the room was talking.

'Lizzie Warren, you are a troublemaker,' said the voice.

'I'm not!' Lizzie said. 'I've never—'

'SILENCE!' The sound boomed through the empty air, almost deafening them. 'You are a troublemaker. Last term, you were almost excluded for fighting another student.'

'I had to do it!' Lizzie said fiercely. 'Blake kept bullying Tyler. I couldn't let him—'

The voice interrupted again and this time it was hard and cold. Like ice. ‘Do not waste time making excuses. Stop talking and listen to me.’

Tyler started shaking and Lizzie put her arm round him. ‘It’s OK,’ she whispered.

Tyler didn’t answer. He just turned very pale and pointed across the room.

The air next to the desk had suddenly started shimmering.

It was only a small patch at first, a tiny disturbance, so small it was hardly visible. But it began to spread, growing slowly larger and brighter. Thickening and changing colour. Gradually a shape formed in front of them, appearing out of thin air.

They found themselves looking at a tall man in dark glasses. He was dressed in black, from head to foot, but his hair and his skin were very pale, as though all the colour had been drained out of them.

Tyler gave a little, trembling gasp. ‘What is it?’ he whispered. ‘Is he really here?’

‘I think . . . it’s a hologram,’ Lizzie whispered back. She could hear her voice trembling too.

‘You are not required to speak,’ the man said sharply. ‘You are useless troublemakers, with nothing valuable to say.’ His eyes were still hidden, but his mouth curved into a small, tight smile. ‘But you will not be useless for long. This school will turn you into useful members of society.’ He lifted a hand to take off his glasses. ‘Look at me. Both of you.’

Lizzie shivered. She didn’t want to look, but before she could turn away the dark glasses came off—and she found herself staring into two green eyes like deep pools of water. Deep, deep . . .

No, she thought dizzily. *I won’t look . . . He can’t make me . . .*

But she didn’t finish the thought. Her mind clouded over and everything dissolved in the depths of those cold green eyes. She was falling, falling, falling . . .

And then her mind went blank.