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opening extract from

Bunker 10

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PART 1

PINEGROVE MILITARY INSTALLATION

Monday 24 December 2007

08.00 hours–13.00 hours

08.00

Jimmy Hicks wondered if the army would consider shooting a fifteen year old. After all, what he intended to do amounted to treason.

Hicks sauntered through Pinegrove's complex of corridors, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, a satchel over one shoulder and a book in his hand. He was a tall slim boy, so he slouched to compensate and it made his wavy brown hair flop over his forehead. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was in a military facility, he would have looked like any ordinary schoolboy on his way to class. Even the colour of the passageways looked right—a dull industrial beige that adorned so many school hallways.

Jimmy read as he walked. Or he pretended to read, but his eyes kept darting upwards, scanning the ceiling.

There were small security cameras set at regular intervals into the roof—and those were just the ones he could see. That was good, though. It meant there were too many screens for the staff in the Operations Room to monitor properly. As long as the boy didn't do anything obvious he wouldn't attract attention.

He passed the living quarters and carried on down the corridor. An armed guard at the end of

the passage gave a friendly nod and pointed to the book.

'It's Christmas Eve, Jimmy. No lessons today.'

The guard had no doubt Jimmy Hicks knew this. After all, the boy was a genius.

'Just walking and reading, Bill. That way I get physical exercise along with my mental stimulation.'

'Oh. Right.' The guard glanced at the book cover. *Cosmology in Gauge Field Theory and String Theory* by D. Bailin.

'What the hell are you reading?'

'The physics lab was out of comic books.'

'When I was your age *I* had my head stuck in a *Beano*,' Bill laughed. His smile faded as he realized how dumb *that* must sound—Jimmy Hicks had a security clearance higher than his own. The boy stuffed the book into his bag.

'Yeah. Maybe I should get out more.'

'One weekend leave a month, son, same as me.'

'But *I* get escorted to Glen Isla village at the weekend—there's nothing but a post office and a couple of farmhouses. You do what you like with *your* time off.'

'It's Christmas Eve and I'm here, aren't I?' the guard retorted. 'I'm in the army, Jimmy. I don't have the luxury of doing what I want.'

Jimmy Hicks couldn't argue with that. He pushed his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall.

'How come all Christmas leave is cancelled, Bill?' he asked nonchalantly. 'Nobody tells me anything in this place.'

The guard had a lumpy red face and a bulbous nose. Put a white beard on him, Jimmy thought, and he'd make a passable Saint Nicholas.

'Nice try, son.' Bill looked around at the empty passageway, then relaxed and let his shoulders sag. 'All I know is that something big has come up and now we're all stuck here. At this time of year we're operating on a skeleton crew as it is. There's nobody spare to escort you and the other kids home.'

His jowls drooped a little more and he smacked his lips in disapproval.

'I'm sorry you can't spend Christmas with your folks.'

'If you ever met my parents you wouldn't say that.' Jimmy Hicks fished a bag of half-melted toffees out of his pocket. 'Like a sweet?'

The paper was dark with stains and crusted with brown globs. Bill wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

'I must have been standing too near a radiator.' Jimmy dropped the gooey mess into a stainless-steel bin next to the door. It hit the bottom with a loud thunk—the bin had been emptied half an hour earlier.

But Jimmy Hicks already knew that.

Inside the sweet bag, nestled among the sticky lumps of toffee, was a small transmitter, no larger than a finger.

He had now planted six transmitters between this point and the workstation in his dormitory—all hidden in waste receptacles. He had designed

the devices himself to work as a relay booster system. Now, if he sent a wireless transmission from his computer in the dorm, each hidden device would amplify that signal before sending it on to the next. By the time his transmission reached the last tiny booster it would have enough power to pull a 747 out of the sky.

The bins would be emptied again at 07.00 tomorrow morning. The rubbish would be compacted and all evidence of the transmitters would be obliterated. By that time, however, they would have done their job and he would be gone.

Jimmy shouldered his bag and raised his hand.

'Merry Christmas, Bill.'

'See you tomorrow, pal.' The guard pulled his droopy face into what he hoped was a festive grin. Jimmy waved briefly and strolled back the way he had come. A small smile twitched on the corners of his lips and he turned his face away from the cameras, letting his floppy hair hide the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Since it contained living areas, level one of Pinegrove military base was a low security area—until you reached the far end. There the passageway became a high security zone, hence the guard. Pinegrove's Operations Room was at the end of the corridor and Jimmy certainly didn't have clearance to go *there*.

Never mind. The last transmitter was close enough.

So far Jimmy Hicks knew he hadn't done anything seriously wrong. If the devices were

discovered and traced to him, he'd say it was part of a private experiment he was conducting. Top Brass wouldn't believe him, of course—he'd be labelled a security risk and expelled from his studies at Pinegrove.

But at least he wouldn't be shot.

Once he activated the boosters, however, Jimmy would be crossing a line. He'd be interfering with the security of a top secret UK government facility. He'd be sabotaging a supposedly foolproof defence system. Most of all, he'd be pitting his wits against some of the finest and most ruthless military minds in the world.

His heart was pounding but he gave a grim smile.

The challenge was partly why he was doing this.

But, if he *were* caught, the powers that be would never believe his other reason.

He wanted to impress a girl.

09.20

In the cab of the drab, olive truck Lieutenant Dunwoody opened his sealed orders. The vehicle headed a small convoy heading north and the lieutenant held the envelope between his knees while he removed the contents.

Inside were a few photographs and a thin file marked **TOP SECRET**. Dunwoody studied them carefully, memorizing the contents.

There was an aerial view of Pinegrove—the military installation he was heading for—surrounded by thick forest and ringed by a double perimeter fence. It didn't look much, just a handful of box-shaped, fortified buildings. According to an attached report, however, this was because most of the base was underground.

Dunwoody glanced at the driver but the soldier was concentrating on traversing a winding highland road not much wider than his truck. The lieutenant bent over the report again.

Officially Pinegrove specialized in virtual technology and, to some extent, this was true. The facility boasted the most advanced reality simulators in the world—designed to put soldiers into combat scenarios and test their reactions. Plugged into one of Pinegrove's virtual settings, an officer might find himself facing hostile tribesmen in the

Somalian desert. He could be trapped in a war-ravaged Middle-Eastern street by an armed mob. He might be ordered to evacuate civilians from a burning village under heavy mortar fire.

According to *this* classified report, however, Pinegrove researched more than virtual technology.

Under the base was a labyrinth of laboratories and associated living quarters, six levels in all. Teams at the installation worked on projects as diverse as skin grafting technology, three dimensional mapping, and alternative fuel cells. Above ground, all that could be seen were the Administration Offices, the Vehicle Maintenance Depot, and a building known as the West Wing.

The West Wing consisted of staff training areas and two specially adapted dormitories.

For some reason these dormitories contained children, but the report didn't say why.

Dunwoody mentally filed this unusual information, though it didn't concern him much. The kind of squad he commanded wasn't sent out to deal with trivia.

He and his men had been ordered to Pinegrove because of a problem in the lower levels—an area so highly classified that the report didn't say *what* they would find down there.

And *that* concerned Lieutenant Dunwoody a great deal.

10.00

Jimmy Hicks was thinking.

He sat in a straight-backed chair, in the centre of the dormitory, staring at the wall. Every now and then he twisted a strand of hair round his finger and pulled at it, as if he were coaxing an idea from his head. The other kids ignored him, used to his spells of intense concentration. If it turned out he was having an extraordinary notion then, sooner or later, he'd go next door for peace and quiet. If the idea wasn't going anywhere then neither would he, and he'd eventually join in the conversation.

This particular exchange was about the possibility of time travel. The children in the dormitory were all geniuses. They didn't talk about mundane topics.

'If ah managed tae build a time machine, ah'd use it tae bet on the horses, know?' Diddy Dave laced thin white hands behind his head, pushing a Burberry baseball cap over his beady eyes. He was a pale, sharp-faced fourteen year old, dressed permanently in a shell suit and white trainers. 'I'd take the winnings, play the stock market. Afore ye know it, ahm minted. Next stop, a wee island in the Pacific for me; a semi-detached in the suburbs for mah maw.'

'Time travel doesn't work that way.' Simon sniffed, looking up from the formula he was scribbling in a plastic notepad. 'Even something as

trivial as attending a horse race could have serious repercussions in the future.'

'Dinnae get carried away, man. Ah'd go tae the bookies in Spam Valley, where naebody would rat me oot, know?'

'I've no idea what you just said.'

At thirteen Simon was the youngest of the boys—quiet and a little shy, with unruly hair and round glasses.

'Listen, Harry Potter,' Dave pointed a menacing finger at his bespectacled companion, 'ye dinnae grow up on a Glasgow housing estate soundin' like you've got a mooth full o' marbles, know?' He glanced around scornfully at his companions. 'You wi' yer nose aye stuck in a book and Hicksy, wi' his girly hair? Ye wouldne last five minutes where I grew up without getting a smack in the gob.'

He glanced across at Barn who was lying on the floor reading a comic.

'Well, maybe the big man could.'

Dave had a point—Barn's size was truly impressive for a fourteen year old.

'I saw a TV show about Glasgow once.' Barn propped himself up on a fleshy arm and looked lazily at his companions. 'I think it was *Crimewatch*.'

Simon gave a snigger. Barn was a mathematical genius and could calculate incredibly complex equations in his head. But in every other way he was slower than normal children. Often it was hard to tell when he was joking.

'Aye, well maybe.' Dave looked proudly down at his gleaming clothes. 'Ye dinnae get togs like

these without a bit of nickin', eh? Ahm wearin' mair labels than a jam factory, man.'

'You wrap your presents in Burberry paper, don't you?' Simon grunted.

'Two layers, man.'

'We won't be getting any presents this year, will we?' Barn said unhappily. 'This doesn't seem much like Christmas.'

'What you bumpin' yer gums aboot, big man?' Dave pointed over his shoulder. 'We've got a tree, eh?'

In the corner of the room was an unsteady looking pine sapling. One of the base soldiers had pulled it out of the forest and dragged it upstairs to the dormitory when he found out the children weren't going home for the holidays. Now it sat in a cleaning bucket which was too small for its weight, and the children kept it upright by leaning it against a filing cabinet. To try and cheer up the bedraggled plant, Simon had hung test tubes filled with coloured liquid from its branches. Unfortunately he only had three to spare.

'We've got to decorate this thing properly and get a bigger pot,' he grunted.

'You think I should put up a stocking?' Barn asked solemnly. 'I always got a sock filled with oranges on Christmas day.'

'You sure it wasnae a sack filled with chocolate oranges?' Dave smirked.

'Sorry, Barn,' Simon said regretfully. 'If Santa tried to come down a chimney here, they'd shoot him for trespassing on government property.'

The large boy went back to reading his comic, but his bottom lip was trembling.

'Now look what ye've done, ya bam. Barn's in a total huff.'

Simon hunkered down beside the large boy.

'Listen,' he said confidentially, 'I've been working on a special Christmas present and you'll see it tomorrow. You're going to love it. Everyone is.'

'I dinnae want some toilet roll cover that you crocheted yersel'.' Diddy Dave launched his cap at Simon who swatted it away. It whizzed past Jimmy Hicks and the boy looked round, startled.

'Whit ye thinking there, Hicksy?' Dave called. 'Yiv no' said nothing for an hour.'

Barn and Simon looked expectant. All of the children in the dormitory had phenomenal mental skills of some sort or other, but Jimmy Hicks's IQ was off the scale. It was possible that, some day, one of his ideas would change the world.

'I was wondering what to wear tonight.'

'Eh?'

'I want to look good.' Jimmy Hicks nodded solemnly to himself. 'I'm going on a date.'

'Ye dancer! You chasin' booty, man?'

'Is it Lesley from next door?' Simon asked.

Jimmy Hicks nodded again. 'I think she likes me in black.'

Barn sat up and looked around, bright blue eyes narrowing in his heavy face. The dormitory was clean and antiseptic. Rows of neatly made beds, each with an adjoining locker, lined the walls. Steel mesh latticed the tinted glass in the windows.

Simon guessed what was puzzling the larger boy.

'With all those fashion problems on your mind, Jimmy,' he pointed out, 'you probably just forgot we're inside a top secret base.'

'Aye. Where ye gonnae take her?' Dave jeered. 'The canteen?'

'I thought a moonlight stroll through the forest and then watch the sun rise over the mountains.'

'That sounds romantic,' Simon agreed. 'All you have to do is get past the armed guards, closed circuit cameras topped with lasers, and double barbed-wire fence.'

'Aye, Romeo. Then figure oot how tae get back in, know?'

Jimmy Hicks smiled and his eyes sparkled with dark intelligence.

'I already have.'

There was a snort of derision from the corner.

Cruikshank—the last of the boys in the room—rolled over in his bunk and raised a disbelieving eyebrow. He was a handsome boy with platinum blond hair and bright green eyes. He *could* be friendly and charming when he wanted. He just didn't want to very often.

'How do you propose to get in and out of the base undetected?' he said casually. The others nodded in unison, intrigued as to how their friend intended to pull off this near-impossible feat.

'I'll need everyone's help, of course.' Jimmy Hicks smiled.

'Oh aye?' Dave grunted. 'An' whit's in it fur us?'

'You got anything *more* interesting to do on

Christmas Eve?' Jimmy nodded at the bare dormitory. 'If we pull this off we'll be able to sneak off the base *whenever* we want. No more monthly jaunts to some tiny village in the middle of nowhere.'

Barn gave a loud yawn. 'I like the countryside.'

'That's because you look like a farm animal.'

'I like any outside,' Barn replied, nonplussed. 'I'll help.'

'This will get us into a lot of trouble, won't it?' Simon jotted down a few more symbols on his pad, then frowned and scored them out again.

'Only if we're caught.'

'Simon. If you never got into trouble you wouldn't *be* in here.' Cruikshank sat up on the bed, interested despite himself.

'Point taken. Count me in then.'

'Aye, me too.' Diddy Dave glanced across at Cruikshank. 'What about you, blondie? Gonnae be sociable for a change?'

'It depends how feasible this plan is.' Cruikshank lay back on his bed and put his hands behind his head.

'Yir a moany wee bampot, Crooky, know that?'

'I'll try being nicer if you try being prettier.'

'Go on then, Hicksy,' Dave urged. 'Tell us how you think you're gonna get aff the base.'

Jimmy grinned.

'We're going to have some unexpected help,' he said.