

21% MONSTER

THE BOY WAS SLIGHTLY SHORT FOR A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, BUT HE WAS AS BURLY AS A GROWN MAN. DESPITE HIS OBVIOUS STRENGTH AND THE NATURAL TOUGHNESS OF HIS BROAD FACIAL FEATURES, HE WATCHED MISS INGHART CAREFULLY, EVEN FEARFULLY.

THE IDEA THAT HE HAD DESTROYED AN ENTIRE BUILDING SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE.

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For Mum and Dad

Thank you for believing I could write a book
despite all the evidence to the contrary.

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PROLOGUE

The body-cam video wobbled as the policeman ran, shouting, “Back from the van. Get back from the van!”

All around the car park, teenagers in blue blazers were huddled in groups. The officer ran between them, past a burning school building, towards a small group of kids who were being shepherded by a man away from the fire.

“Not towards the van, mate. AWAY FROM THE VAN!”

The wobbling body-cam image shifted from a boy, frozen in a moment of terror, and centred on the police van that the officer was sprinting towards. One of the back doors was hanging off its hinges, a twisted wreck, and inside some sort of struggle was going on. The officer jumped into the middle of the melee. The video lurched this way and that as an inhuman roar almost drowned out the cries of other officers.

“Calm down, now. Calm down!”

“Cuff him, quick!”

“You’re okay, son, you’re okay!”

Another roar erupted from the middle of the struggle.

“You need to look at me!” shouted the officer wearing the body cam. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you! Calm down! That’s good, now just breathe. That’s it...”

“Okay,” another officer called out, her voice strained with effort. “I’ve cuffed him!”

A blur of light-blue hair filled the body-cam picture as the officer broke away from the struggle. The video veered wildly, as the officer jumped clear of the van and then refocused on the wrecked vehicle. Inside sat a boy with his hands cuffed. His head was down, showing his blueish-blond hair, his extremely broad shoulders heaving as he breathed. He looked up, revealing a young, frightened face with amber-yellow eyes...

The video ended abruptly. Miss Inghart looked at the face staring out of her tablet, committing it to memory, and then glanced at Mr Ducas as he drove. “We have our target.”

Ducas kept his eyes on the road and answered calmly in his distinctive North-Wales accent. “The video’s on social media already?”

“Yes. Somebody leaked it. We don’t have long.”

“Farlington’s two hours away.”

“Make it ninety minutes,” Miss Inghart answered.

“Copy that.” Ducas glanced at her. “What are our orders?” he asked as he accelerated into the outside lane of the motorway, the car’s hidden blue lights now flashing.

Miss Inghart quoted from the secure message she’d received: “Identify whether the target is of interest. If he is, complete a Triple E operation.”

Ducas nodded. “Okay. Do we have info on the target yet? Name? Age?”

“Coming through now...” Miss Inghart read the information and grimaced. “His name is Darren Devlin. He’s twelve years old.”

Ducas raised an eyebrow as he squeezed his way through traffic at high speed. “They’ve confirmed this is Triple E?”

“Affirmative,” Miss Inghart replied. “Extract. Evaluate. Eliminate.”

CHAPTER 1

EXPECTATIONS

Twenty-four hours earlier...

The football slammed into the wall just ahead of Darren. The Year Eleven boys laughed. Darren lowered his head and kept walking. The ball flew past him again, this time brushing his leg. The boys laughed louder. Darren felt anger rise inside him. He stopped and turned.

Alexander Harrison stood grinning, spinning the ball between his hands. He nodded towards the main school block. “Well, go on then, loser. You don’t want to be late for weirdo class.”

Darren hesitated and then walked on. He heard the dull thud of Alexander kicking the ball again. Instinctively, he turned and caught it just centimetres from his face.

“Oooh!” the Year Eleven boys jeered, their eyes drifting from Alexander to Darren, who stared up at them defiantly.

Most of them were at least a head taller than him. He looked around. The last few pupils were leaving the schoolyard for afternoon lessons and there were no teachers in sight.

Alexander reached out a hand. "Give me the ball."

Darren didn't move.

"Come on! We were kidding around. We're done now." The bell for lessons rang. "Hear that?" Alexander asked. "We've all got lessons, right? Come on, where's your sense of humour?"

Darren watched Alexander's face, all fake-reasonable against a background of grinning boys. Anger bubbled inside him as his eyes drifted to the ball. He placed a hard-nailed thumb against either side of the ball and squeezed until he felt them sink through the outer lining. He stared defiantly at Alexander as the ball punctured with a dull pop.

Alexander's mouth fell open as he watched the ball deflate with a loud hiss. "Why, you little—"

Darren didn't wait to find out what Alexander called him. He ran around the corner of the swimming pool building, throwing the ball back at his pursuers, and dodged through a maintenance door. He raced into the boiler room and began to climb a wall as running footsteps drew near. He clambered through the large pipes that criss-crossed the ceiling and pulled his legs up until he was fully hidden. Below him, Alexander burst into view.

"Where are you, you little freak?" he yelled.

Darren watched the top of Alexander's head as the older boy moved through the boiler room beneath him. He held his breath as Alexander stopped and listened. Through the wall, he heard footsteps. The boiler-room door flew open.

"Hey, Alexander!"

Darren grinned at the familiar voice of his big sister.

"What, Daisy?" Alexander shouted.

"You should be in lessons. The boiler room is out of bounds."

"Walk away, Daisy. This has got nothing to do with you. Believe me, you want to keep it that way!"

"Miss Fredricks is out here. Shall I call her over?" Daisy asked sweetly.

Alexander hesitated and then ran out of the room. Darren exhaled slowly with relief.

"Darren, are you in there?" Daisy called from outside. When Darren didn't answer, she added, "I have to go. You need to get to class!"

He listened to her jog away and felt guilty for not responding, but coming down would mean facing Alexander Harrison after school at the main gate. He decided to stay put and rested his head against a water pipe. The slow, steady gurgle of the water soothed him, reminding him of breathing. He shut his eyes and let the warmth and rhythm

take him somewhere dark. Somewhere safe. Somewhere far away from the school he hated so much.

Darren woke with a start. From the ache in his shoulders, he guessed he'd been asleep for hours. He swung down from the pipe, dropped to the floor and listened. Outside seemed quiet. He opened the boiler-room door and groaned when he saw the setting sun.

The schoolyard was empty and the buildings were mostly dark as he made his way towards the main entrance, wondering what time it was. If he was lucky, he could catch a bus and get home before his mum and dad. He ran as far as the car park – but then skidded to a halt as he spotted his mum's car parked in front of the school.

His stomach churned as he turned and trudged towards the headmistress's office, already imagining the look of disappointment on his mum's face. The headmistress's light was on, so Darren drifted past her window and hid safely in the shadows.

Her voice floated out of the window. "Mrs Devlin, Darren disappeared again today – for the whole afternoon."

Darren heard his mum answer. "I'm so sorry, Mrs Carver!"

"This is not the first time he's vanished during the school day."

"We've talked to him about it. We really have."

"As have we. We will also have to speak to him about destruction of property. He deliberately damaged a Year Eleven boy's football today."

"What? I'm so sorry, I really am... I don't know what to say!"

Darren gritted his teeth at the embarrassed tone in his mum's voice.

Mrs Carver sighed. "That's the problem, Mrs Devlin, neither do I. It's not just his behaviour outside class that worries me, either. Darren won't speak up in lessons, and I'm told he often actually *hides* under his desk. He has made absolutely no progress with his reading, even now he's working alone with a teaching assistant. He doesn't seem to want to try reading at all—"

His mum interrupted, the pitch of her voice rising. "But you knew that. You knew all of this when you agreed to teach him here. You said St Bartle's was the perfect school for him! You said the school was ideal for someone with special educational needs."

Mrs Carver chose her words carefully. "I did. I did say that. We are a small school, Mrs Devlin – parents pay a lot of money to send their children here – and we are able to give special help to pupils who struggle, in a way that state schools cannot. I have, however, never before had

a student who makes no progress at all—”

His mum interrupted. “So maybe you were arrogant? We told you how serious his reading problem is and you said ‘Don’t worry’!”

Mrs Carver’s tone hardened. “Nevertheless, you have to understand that all this puts me in a difficult position.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Mrs Devlin, Darren destroyed property today. I’ve had a complaint from a parent. Each time he goes missing, staff have to look for him. I can’t justify Darren’s place at this school if he chooses to make no effort. I’m afraid my next option will be to exclude him permanently.”

“You’re throwing him out? No. No! When you offered Daisy her scholarship, we told you about Darren. We told you we couldn’t have them in different schools. You said you’d take him. You said you’d help him. You *promised!*”

“Mrs Devlin, this is out of my hands. If Darren breaks school rules once more, he is out.”

“If Darren leaves, then so does Daisy,” his mum shouted. “Do you understand? You won’t get to brag about her perfect grades after the summer!”

Darren heard the door slam.

* * *

By the time his mum reached the car, Darren was standing by the passenger door.

“Sorry, Mum.”

She sighed. “Get in.”

He watched his mum’s troubled expression as they drove in silence. Her dark-blue nurse’s uniform was creased and she’d pegged her dark hair up in a messy bun with a pencil, the way she always did when she was tired from a long shift. He felt bad for giving her something to worry about when she should be resting. She opened her mouth to speak as she slowed for a red traffic light.

Darren saved her the trouble. “Mum, I heard.”

She glanced at him as the lights changed. “Okay.” She gripped his hand tightly until she had to change gear. “I’ll explain to your dad.”

Darren didn’t answer, but instead gazed out of the window at the passing hedgerows.

His dad’s car was in the drive when they got home. Darren disappeared to his room and changed into jeans and a T-shirt featuring *The Clash*, his favourite punk band, before he got the call to come down for dinner. He chased a chicken salad around his plate, quietly watching his parents’ subdued conversation with Daisy about her day. She glanced worriedly between the three of them as they all ate, and then volunteered to wash up, leaving Darren alone

with his parents. He looked between his mum and dad, wondering who would speak first.

His dad looked at him. "Darren, Mum explained about today. You know what your head teacher said."

"I'm sorry."

"That's the thing, Darren. You're always sorry, but it keeps happening."

Darren looked down to avoid his dad's eyes.

His dad ran a hand through his thinning blond hair and adjusted his glasses before continuing. "We know how hard you find school, we really do. And we love you. You know that?"

Darren nodded, and risked a fleeting look at his parents. His dad seemed exhausted while his mum's eyes were tearing up. He looked down again. "Yeah, I do."

"It's just..." His dad hesitated. "You need to be more..."

Darren looked up. *Go on, say it*, he thought to himself. *Say what you want to say.*

"Son, you need to be more aware of people's expectations."

Darren sank lower in his chair. "Okay."

"You're twelve now. It's up to you."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

They sat in silence for a moment that drifted into an eternity.

"Off you go," his dad said eventually.

Darren went up to his room and switched on his music, playing the loudest punk song he could find. Under the cover of the noise, he opened his bedroom window and climbed out onto the sill, closing the window behind him. Ignoring the sound of passing cars and the occasional bark of a neighbourhood dog, he tuned in to the quiet of the night: the rhythm of the autumn wind blowing through the trees behind the garden fence and the calls of animals waking from the slumber of the day; the evening's first bats swooping to catch fluttering moths while birds roosted. He clambered down the drainpipe and, checking that his mum wasn't at the window, vaulted over the back fence into the woods beyond.

The darkness was complete. Darren stood, feeling himself relax in the safety of the blackness. A long, thick branch of his favourite sycamore stretched down to him like the arm of an old friend, and he leaped up, grabbed it and climbed until he could see the town of Farlington to the east and Old River Road to the west. The town seemed darker and uglier than usual. The ancient bridge and old market square were mainly hidden from view by the sprawl of newer buildings and roads that stretched to their estate on the edge of town. He looked out at the peacefulness of the river beyond the old road and imagined swimming

upstream to faraway mountains he had never seen. Maybe up there he could find a quiet cave where he'd never have to worry about people's expectations again.

"Tiny?" Being petite like her mother, Daisy had to stand on tiptoe to look over the fence. She called him by the nickname she'd used since he was a toddler. "Tiny?"

"Yeah, Daisy?"

"Help me over."

Darren clambered down and extended a hand from an overhanging branch.

Daisy pulled herself up and sat beside him in the almost total darkness. "I still don't know how you can climb like that."

"Do you want to go higher?"

"Sure," she answered and swung her arms around his neck. Darren climbed back up until he found a branch big enough for both of them, with a view of the river. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Yeah."

She nudged him. "Is it true you ripped up Alexander's ball?"

He grinned. "I only stuck my thumbs in."

"What was his face like?"

Darren mimicked Alexander's gormless open mouth.

Daisy laughed. "He deserved it."

"Maybe," Darren answered glumly. "I got angry. I don't like it when I get angry."

"What did Dad say?"

"I need to be more aware of people's expectations."

Daisy looked unimpressed. "What are you supposed to do with that?"

"Doesn't matter. It's not what he meant."

Daisy looked concerned. "What do you think he meant?"

"I need to be more normal."

Daisy put an arm as far around his shoulders as she could manage. "Don't say that! He's never said that! He loves you, you know."

"Okay."

"I mean it!"

"Okay," Darren answered again, even though he knew exactly what his dad had been thinking. He looked out over the river. "The school are going to chuck me out."

"They can't do that!"

"I do one more thing wrong and I'm out. That's what they said."

"Then I leave too," Daisy said defiantly.

"No."

"Yes."

Darren sighed. "It's your GCSEs soon. You've got to stay. You're clever. That school is right for you. Plus they help

with your dancing, like getting you into that competition tomorrow.”

“You’re more important.”

I’m not, Darren thought. *Dad knows I’m not and I know he’s right*. He shook his head. “That school gets people into Oxfort University and places like that.”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Oxford University.”

“Whatever. You’re good enough to get there. Or that royal dance place.”

“You’re my little brother, Tiny. It won’t mean anything without you being okay at school.”

Darren looked her in the eye. “It would to me.” He ran a hand from the top of his head to the top of hers, hardly having to raise it. “And I’m not so tiny any more.”

“Okay.” There was a tinge of sadness in her voice. “But I’m always going to call you Tiny, you know? I always will.”

Darren grinned. “Yeah, and every time I’m in trouble, you warn me I’ve got a ‘Tiny problem’. I know.”

Daisy tipped her head and looked at him closely. “Wish me luck for tomorrow?” She extended a fist towards him.

Darren clenched his fist and gently bumped his sister’s. His hand was far larger than hers. “Good luck.”

“I’m going to be worrying about you.”

“Don’t.” Darren looked at his sister and sighed. “It’s only one day, right?”

“Just keep a low profile, okay?” she said.

Darren smiled. “I can do that.” He sniffed the shifting breeze. “We’d better go in. Rain’s coming.”

Daisy held on tight again as her brother clambered down. “You’re more amazing than any of them,” she whispered in his ear.

“Keep thinking that,” Darren answered, as he landed and carefully lifted her over the fence; then added in his own mind, *Even if you’re the only one who does, Daisy*.

Later, Darren lay wrapped in his duvet under his bed as the night inched by and heavy rain lashed the window. He felt more awake than he had all day as he stuck in his earbuds and played his favourite bands. He listened to Johnny Rotten ranting his way through a song and wondered if anyone had ever had to speak to him about other people’s expectations.

The day ahead loomed ominously and anger bubbled deep inside as he thought about Mrs Carver, Alexander Harrison and all the rest of them. It crept through his veins, filling him with a strange and powerful nervous energy. He breathed out and pushed the anger down, forcing himself to relax. In the dark safety of the familiar space under his bed, he could let himself admit that he feared the anger inside him more than anything in the world outside.

His anger was more than just a feeling. It was like it had a personality of its own. A destructive genie he had to keep firmly in the bottle.

CHAPTER 2

A WISE DECISION

Miss Inghart looked up from her phone as Ducas rounded a bend, drove towards the school and slowed down. Groups of people were standing randomly in the road and on the pavements. Miss Inghart watched as parents comforted their children and tearful teenagers hugged each other. Ducas drove past a line of TV news crews and pulled up at the blue-and-white tape of a police cordon.

“Who are we today, Miss Inghart?” Ducas asked.

“Serious Crime Squad.”

Ducas took an ID card from Miss Inghart and held it up as a policeman approached the driver’s window. “Scotland Yard Serious Crime,” he said as he passed the ID to the officer.

“Afternoon, Inspector. I didn’t realize we’d gone national with this.”