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Opening extract from

The Killing

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1. UNIFORM

For the past three years George Stein has worked as an economics teacher at the exclusive Trinity Day school near Cambridge. Recently, information has come to light suggesting that Stein may have links with the environmental terrorist group Help Earth. (Excerpt from CHERUB mission briefing for Callum Reilly and Shakeel 'Shak' Dajani.)

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It was a fine day and this part of Cambridge had the whiff of serious money. The immaculate lawns were coiffured by professional gardeners and James drooled over the expensive lumps of German metal parked on the driveways. He was walking with Shakeel and both boys felt self-conscious in the summer uniform of Trinity school. It consisted of a white shirt, a tie, grey trousers with orange piping, an orange and grey blazer and matching felt cap.

'I'm telling you,' James moaned, 'even if you sat down and tried *really* hard, I don't think you could come up with a way to make this uniform look any dumber.'

'I dunno, James. Maybe we could have partridge feathers sticking out of the hats or something.'

'And these trousers were meant for Callum's skinny butt. They're killing my balls.'

Shak couldn't help seeing the funny side of James' discomfort. 'You can't blame Callum for pulling out of the mission at the last minute. It's that stomach bug that's going around campus.'

James nodded. 'I had it last week. I was barely off the bog for two whole days.'

Shak looked at his watch for the millionth time. 'We need to up the pace.'

'What's the big deal?' James asked.

'This isn't some London comprehensive full up with scummy little Arsenal fans like you,' Shak explained. 'Trinity is one of the top fee-paying schools in the country and the pupils aren't allowed to wander around the corridors whenever it suits them. Our arrival's got to coincide with the changeover between third and fourth periods, when there's hundreds of other kids moving around.'

James nodded. 'Gotcha.'

Shak looked at his watch for the millionth and first time as they cut into a cobbled alleyway that was barely wide enough for a single car.

'Come *on*, James.'

'I'm trying,' James said. 'But I'm seriously gonna rip the arse out of these trousers if I'm not careful.'

Once they'd cut between two large houses, the alleyway opened out into a run-down park with knee-high grass and a set of tangled swings. To the boys' left stood a chain-link

fence topped with barbed wire, behind which lay the grounds of Trinity Day. The main gates were carefully monitored during school hours, so this was their only way in.

Shak wandered through the long grass next to the fence, placing his shoe carefully to avoid turds and litter, as he searched for an entry point made by an MI5 operative the previous night. He found the flap cut in the wire behind the trunk of a large tree. Shak lifted it, doffed his cap and attempted a snooty accent. 'After you James, my good man.'

James fed his backpack and hat through the gap, before sliding under. He stood with his back against the tree and brushed dirt off his uniform, while Shak followed.

'All set?' James asked, as he slung his backpack over his shoulder. It weighed a ton and the equipment inside clattered around.

'Cap,' Shak reminded him.

James let out a little gasp as he leaned forward and picked the cap out of the grass. A claxon sounded inside the school building a couple of hundred metres away, indicating a lesson change.

'OK, let's shift,' Shak said.

The boys broke out from behind the tree and began jogging across a rugby pitch towards the school building. As they did, they noticed a groundskeeper striding purposefully towards them from the opposite end of the field.

'You two,' he bellowed.

Because James had been pulled on to the mission at the last minute to replace Callum, he'd only had time to skim through the mission briefing. He looked uneasily at Shak for guidance.

'Don't sweat it,' Shak whispered. 'I've got it covered.'

The groundskeeper intercepted the boys near a set of rugby posts. He was a fit looking fellow with thinning grey hair, dressed in workman's boots and a grubby overall.

'Exactly *what* do you think you're doing out here?' he demanded pompously.

'I was reading under the tree at lunchtime,' Shak explained, pointing backwards with his thumb. 'I left my cap behind.'

'You know the rules of the school, don't you?'

Shak and James both looked confused.

'Don't try playing the fool with me, you *know* as well as I do. If you're not attending a lesson, a match, or an official practice, you do not set foot on the games pitches because it causes unnecessary wear and tear.'

'Yes,' Shak nodded. 'Sorry, sir. I was in a hurry to get to my lesson, that's all.'

'Sorry,' James added. 'But it's not like the pitches are muddy or anything. We're not really tearing them up.'

The groundskeeper took James' comment as a threat to his authority. He swooped down and showered James with spit as he spoke. 'I make the rules here, young man. *You* don't decide when you can and can't set foot on *my* pitches. Got that?'

'Yes, sir,' James said.

'What's your name and house?'

'Joseph Mail, King Henry House,' James lied, recalling one of the few elements of his background story he'd managed to remember from the mission briefing.

'Faisal Asmal, same house,' Shak said.

'Right,' the groundskeeper said, bouncing smugly on the

balls of his feet. 'I'll be reporting both of you to your housemaster and I expect your cheek will have earned you both a detention. Now, you'd better get yourselves to your next lesson.'

'Why'd you answer back?' Shak asked irritably, as the boys walked towards the back entrance of the school.

'I know I shouldn't have,' James said, raising his palms defensively. 'But he was *so* full of himself.'

They passed through a set of double doors into the main school building, then up a short flight of steps and into the busy thoroughfare that ran the length of the ground floor. There was plenty of noise, but the Trinity boys walked purposefully, nodding politely to the teachers standing in the doorways as they entered their classrooms.

'What a bunch of geeks,' James whispered. 'I bet these dudes don't even fart.'

Shak explained the situation as they headed up the stairs to the second floor. 'Every kid has to pass special exams and an interview to get into Trinity. There's always a humungous waiting list, so they can afford to boot out anyone who doesn't toe the line.'

'Bet I wouldn't last long,' James grinned.

By the time they reached the second floor, most kids had found their way to lessons and the classroom doors had been pulled shut. Shak pulled a lock gun from the pocket of his blazer as they passed by a couple of classroom doors. He stopped at the door of an office with a nameplate on it: *Dr George Stein BSc, PhD, Head of Economics and Politics*.

Shak pushed the tip of the lock gun into the keyhole. James stood close by, blocking the view of a bunch of kids

waiting outside a classroom fifteen metres away.

The lock had a simple single-lever mechanism, meaning Shak only had to give the lock gun a brief wiggle and pull on the trigger to open the door. The pair hurriedly stepped into the office and put the latch down so that nobody could burst in on them, even with a key.

'Stein should be teaching two floors up,' Shak said. 'We've got until the next lesson change in thirty-six minutes; let's get to work.'

2. TECHNIQUE

While Shak stepped behind Stein's desk and dropped the Venetian blind, James surveyed the office. It contained nothing exciting: basic desk and chairs, two filing cabinets and a coat rack. Shak used the lock gun to undo the metal cabinets, then began sifting through the files. He was looking for any papers relating to George Stein's personal life, especially anything to do with his campaigning for environmentalist groups.

James sat at the desk and switched on Stein's PC. While the computer booted up, he pulled a miniature JVC notebook from his backpack and ran a network lead between the two computers. Stein's machine demanded a password, but James wasn't flustered. He started up a suite of hacking tools on his computer and used it to run system diagnostics on Stein's machine.

Once the software had gleaned basic information about Stein's hard drive and operating system, James opened another module of the hacking software, which allowed him to view all of Stein's files.

'Candy from a baby,' James smiled confidently.

Now he could see the files, James clicked the *Clone* icon and the notebook began copying the entire contents of Stein's PC on to its hard drive.

'How much data's he got?' Shak asked, as he pulled out the second drawer of the cabinet.

'Eight-point-two gigabytes. The progress bar says it'll take six minutes to copy it all across.'

While the computers went about their business, James shifted some papers and stood on the desk. He reached up and pulled out the metal reflector covering the ceiling-mounted light fitting. The resulting cloud of dust tickled his nostrils as he studied the line of fluorescent tubes above his head.

'Cut them off, Shak.'

Shak leaned across and flipped the light switch. James reached into the fitting and pulled the starter plug from one of the fluorescent tubes before jumping down. He rummaged briefly inside his rucksack, emerging with an apparently identical plastic fitting. But whereas the starter unit James had removed cost less than a pound, the replacement cost three thousand. It was a listening device, consisting of a pinhead-sized microphone, a transmitter and a chip that could store five hours of sound.

Light fittings are perfect for locating listening devices. First because they're usually located in open space high above a room, where it's easy to pick up sound. Second because the device can easily be wired up to source electricity from the mains.

As James went up at full stretch to replace the grille, he heard the ripping noise he'd been dreading all morning. His

trousers had cracked open around the crotch seam, revealing a garish set of boxers.

Shak couldn't help smiling as he flipped the lights back on. 'Nice shorts, J.'

'Man, that feels *good*,' James gasped. 'I might be able to have children after all. What's next?'

'Keys,' Shak reminded him.

'Assuming he's left them in here,' James said, as he walked towards the jacket hanging up by the door.

He fished a bunch of keys from Stein's pocket, then grabbed a packet of wax tablets from his rucksack. Meanwhile, Shak had found some interesting documents in one of the filing cabinets and was copying the pages with a handheld scanner.

The wax tablets separated into two biscuit-sized pieces. James sandwiched each of Stein's keys between a tablet, creating impressions that could be used to make duplicates. By the time James had worked his way through the whole bunch, the laptop had chimed, indicating that it had finished cloning.

James sat back in front of the laptop and used the hacking suite to install spyware on Stein's machine. The spyware program would record every keystroke Stein typed and then transmit it covertly over the Internet to the MI5 monitoring station at Caversham.

Shak had finished rummaging through the filing cabinets. He grabbed a small metal box out of his backpack. It was held together with bits of insulating tape and looked like the creation of a mad professor. In fact, it had been built specifically to capture and replicate the radio signal from the plipper that worked Stein's car alarm.

Shak turned the device on by taping a wire to the top of an AA battery. He flipped a switch on the front of the box to the receive position and asked James to press the plipper on Stein's car key. It took a couple of attempts before a green LED on the front of the gadget flickered, indicating that the signal had been successfully recorded.

'Is that everything?' James asked.

Shak nodded as he checked the time. 'In the bag with six minutes to spare.'

James and Shak did a final check, making sure they'd picked up their equipment and repositioned everything exactly the way they'd found it. When the claxon sounded for the lesson change, the boys darted outside and began heading down to the ground floor. James was conscious of the growing split in his trousers, but none of the Trinity pupils seemed to notice.

At the main entrance of the school building the boys stepped outdoors and turned left, heading down a gentle ramp towards a recently built sports complex that had a teachers' car park beneath it.

The boys caught a whiff of sweat as they passed the entrance to a changing area where a group of Year Ten boys were getting ready for PE. They headed down a corridor lined with historic photos of Trinity rugby teams. After reaching the door leading into the teachers' car park, James did a full three-sixty check before they passed under the *Staff Only* sign and down a flight of bare concrete steps. Everything looked new, with scarcely a tyre mark on the yellow lines dividing up the parking bays.

The boys quickly identified Stein's silver hatchback. Shak

pulled the metal box out of his blazer and flipped the switch across to transmit mode. James slotted a dealer's key in the driver's side door. This key was designed to open any car of this model, but it didn't contain the embedded microchip necessary to silence the alarm.

'Ready?' James asked, waiting for Shak to nod. 'Three, two, one – turn.'

There was a fleeting squeal from the alarm in the instant between James turning the key and Shak cancelling it with the gadget. James dived into the driver's seat and reached across to pull up the little mushroom on the passenger door. By the time Shak climbed in, James had reclined his seat. He pulled the clear cover off the vanity light and unscrewed the tiny bulb and the silver plastic fitting in which it was mounted. Shak reached up and pushed in a specially constructed replacement that contained a listening device. Once it was clipped into place, James replaced the bulb and the outer cover.

Shak briefly rummaged inside the glove box, checking out the various receipts and scraps of paper for anything interesting. He laid a couple of bits out flat on the glove-box lid and copied them with the handheld scanner. James searched over in the rear seats and in the driver's door cubby, but all he found was a road atlas and a mass of crumpled paper cups.

'Is that it?' James asked as he hit the recline lever, making his seat spring back up.

Shak nodded. 'Now we just have to make it out of here without getting busted.'

James opened the car door, but as he stepped out, he

noticed a reedy female outline emerging at the bottom of the staircase.

'Damn,' James whispered, as he quietly pulled shut the car door.

Shak sneaked a glance at the beanpole woman as she lit up a cigarette and puffed as though her life depended on it. The boys had no option but to crouch down low in their seats until she went back upstairs.

They gave it a couple of minutes before following after her. The mission plan called for the boys to hide in a desolate area behind the sports centre for the remaining half-hour of the school day, when they'd be able to walk out of the front gates alongside the real pupils.

As they passed the changing rooms again, James noticed that the PE teacher hadn't locked the door when the kids had gone into the gym. Tantalisingly, more than a dozen pairs of the orange-piped Trinity trousers were scattered about the room.

'Keep an eye out,' James said. 'I'm gonna whip me some trousers.'

Shak wasn't exactly happy about James taking an unnecessary risk, but realised that he wouldn't have wanted to travel back to campus with a giant crack in his trousers either.

James passed by the first few pairs. He was slightly above average size for thirteen, but these Year Ten kids were still bigger. James eventually found a pair that looked right. He ripped off his shoes and quickly slipped into them. Realising that there wasn't time to transfer everything between the two pairs of trousers, he balled up the ripped pair and

crammed them into his backpack on top of everything else.

James stepped out of the changing room and started walking back the way they'd come.

'Wait,' Shak said.

James turned back. 'What's up?'

'Nothing. It's just, while you were changing, I looked through the window and realised what's on the other side of that door. Instead of walking out the front and all the way around the edge of the building, we can go out through there.'

James stepped across the corridor and peered through the frosted glass in the door. It clearly led directly to the back of the building.

James shrugged. 'Why not?'

He pushed down on the handle and nudged the door open with his shoulder. As he did, a loud buzzing sound broke out from a plastic box above their heads. The boys exchanged a shocked look, as a burly PE teacher came steaming out of the gymnasium towards them.

'What the *hell* are you two playing at?'

'Run?' James asked.

Shak didn't answer; James just heard a squeal of shoe leather as his friend set off towards the entrance at full pelt.