

CONDUCTOID

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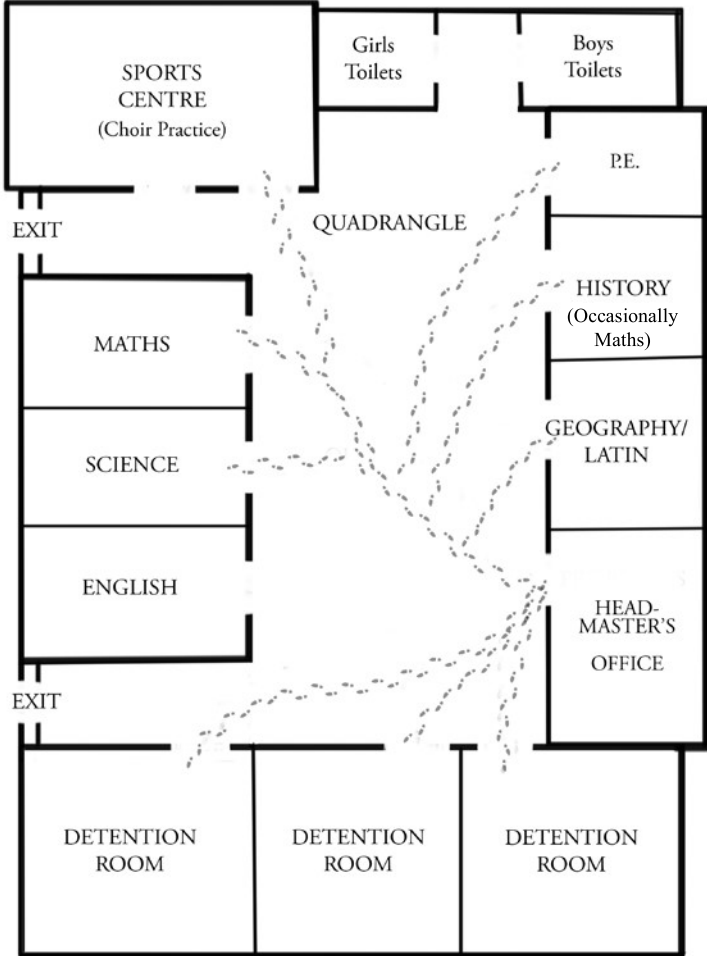


This novel is dedicated to
Miss J
Kitty Kat
Queen Fiona
The Highlander
The Italian Princess



And I suppose Jock

WALTER CROSS MAIN BUILDING







– Chapter One –

Shark Attack

It's amazing, when you close your eyes, what you can see. Initially nothing. Darkness. But if you try really hard, searching into the darkness, an eye emerges. A black pupil with a yellow iris, edges ill defined. Soon the yellow consumes the black, leaving a dandelion. Shining as vibrantly as the sun, the plant's hollow stem burrows into the ground. Then the sun becomes the moon and the flower a white ball of puff. A vicious wind arrives, spitefully dispatching whiskery seeds to the left and right; to the east and west; to the dirt and the darkened sky. The gale thrashes at the torn stem, like a whip, the dandelion snaps back and forward, but the roots hold.

At least, that's what Jack McKay sees.

He was busy observing that very scene during the half-time break of the Championship final. The game had been a classic, too. Scores were tied at two all. Jack sat, legs crossed, eyes closed, head in hands, as a worried coach addressed his players. Rest assured, Jack wasn't worried.

With only seconds of the match to go and scores still tied, the coach had gone from worried to hyperventilating. A little over the top for an under-12 soccer final. Then again, adults are known to take games seriously. Jack wasn't worried.

As planned, Ty crossed the ball into the packed penalty area. Accelerating, Jack dived, right foot fully extended. The keeper: no chance.

Hugged by teammates, everyone wanted to carry him on their shoulders, the opposition included. Naturally, Jack modestly declined. Instead, he casually sauntered behind the change rooms.

Away from prying eyes, he rolled down a sock, examining the device strapped to his ankle. Just as he'd suspected—a fully illuminated Electro-Magnetic Communicator. Time to worry.

Jack jumped into his car. More precisely, he took a sprinting leap into a silver-plated Ferrari Enzo, diving hands first through the open driver's side window, completing the movement with a well-executed tumble turn.

'Afternoon, Jack.'

'Hi, Mum.'

'How was the game?'

'All right.'

Having exchanged pleasantries, Jack held out his hands, fingers pointing upwards. Dutifully, his mother opened the glove box and removed a pair of black leather gloves. She carefully placed them onto her son's expectant digits.

Jack slipped the key into the ignition. With silky precision, he released the clutch and at the same time pressed down on the accelerator. The Enzo purred into action, ignoring red lights and stop signs, racing through the streets. Traffic laws were but a rough guide for a driver of Jack's abilities. Screeching to a halt, for the first time he noted the parking fine attached to his windscreen, welcoming the discovery with a cultured smile.

'I thought my parking had been exceptional, not just fine.'

His mother laughed admiringly. 'What wit.'

Shrugging off the compliment, Jack strode up the driveway and into his bedroom, turning the ticket into confetti along the way.

Instantly appreciating the irony, Jack chuckled dryly. He too could be confetti before the end of the day—a soul-destroying realisation that needed to be ignored. Logic had to prevail over fear. How had the beast escaped? How could it be stopped?

There could be but one solution.

Jack turned on the light, opening his cupboard. Hanging inside were a dozen neatly ironed shirts, hung equal distances apart, a Walter Cross logo embroidered on each front pocket. He parted the shirts to access a keypad located on the back wall. The boy's fingers went to work, typing in a series of numerical commands. Instantly the wall slid down, revealing an elevator shaft. A lift hummed upwards, opening in front of Jack. Inside were a jetpack, an MX13 and a packed lunch.

He grabbed his MX13 and changed the weapon's settings from missiles to laser beams. A flick of a switch increased the power ratio from 'stun' to 'kill'.

Next he seized the jetpack, fastening the device to his slight frame while shoving a sandwich into his mouth. Cheese and baloney, hardly his mother's greatest-ever creation, but Jack didn't like to disappoint. Wiping away the crumbs, he engaged the turbo boosters and gave his mother a shout. The bedroom roof began rolling back.

There was a loud roar followed by a burst of flames as the boosters became fully charged. As always, Jack turned off his light before leaving the room. He then rocketed into the sky.

In moments, the neighbourhood became a collection of bland dots. Still he climbed higher, seeking out an enemy who threatened existence.

As usual, it was the smell that first announced the creature's presence. A putrid and vile stench that stung Jack's eyes and burned his throat. Gagging, he whispered into the chamber of his prized weapon.

'It won't be long, old friend.'

He stared down MX13's titanium scope. There was the beast: wings flapping violently, baring razor-sharp teeth and claws. Evil green eyes filled with rage, screeching blood and death. Jack felt the creature's blind fury and knew that for one of them, there'd be no tomorrow. The question was: who?

That was a question soon to be answered. Little distance separated the two opposed life forces. One

ancient, the other a little younger. This moment had always been predestined. Jack knew it to be so. His hand, now on the trigger, had begun to shake. Keep calm, he lectured.

‘You are Jack McKay. You are Jack McKay. You are ...’

Holding his breath, he took aim for the creature’s one weak spot: that soft piece of scaly skin positioned between its wicked eyes.

But those piercing cries—deafening, unsettling, distracting.

Coolly, he shut out the chaos and pulled the trigger.

Clunk.

‘Never!’ Jack refused to scream despite the searing pain now radiating across his forehead. He clutched for MX13 and found air. All was lost. The screeching—unrelenting.

‘McKay!’

A panic-stricken thought reached out to Jack through the haze. The creature must be upon him.

‘McKay! McKay!’

Suddenly the haze started to clear, revealing a mortifying truth. He had miscalculated. An enemy far worse had come calling. ‘The Shark.’

‘McKay, are you with us? Or are you still in Fairyland?’

Unless there’d been an outbreak of muggings in Fairyland, Jack wasn’t there.

‘How many times have I told you to pay attention in my class?’

How many times? He'd have to be a mathematical genius to answer that question, and Jack wasn't one of those.

Jack's hand went to his throbbing forehead, a sizable lump having already formed. He shifted slightly to the right, feeling for a second lump. On that occasion, the chalk had deflected off a wall before finding its intended target.

'Well?'

'Two spring to mind, sir.'

'Twice?'

Jack's PE teacher looked as if he'd been politely asked to drink a glass of poison.

'Twice, hey. We'll give you twice as much detention and see how you like that.'

There was an obvious answer to that question. Jack decided to ignore it.

'Yes, sir.'

Physical Education really shouldn't have been so difficult. Jack was actually pretty athletic—he just had a minor issue with floating. While competent enough in a bathtub, he struggled in bodies of water with any greater volume. A pool, for example.

Jack's legs would turn to lead and his arms to jelly. This unfortunate combination made it very difficult to swim. He'd thrash around with little forward progress. Exhaustion would follow, leaving him gripping the side, lungs craving air.

Of course, swimming had to be Butch Redden's

favourite sport. The man was a walking tank, with muscles growing upon muscles and hands made for hitting things. Swimming gave Butch the chance to parade around like a peacock in uncomfortably small togs—uncomfortable for the wearer and the watcher.

While in parade mode, he'd glare down at Jack with those beady black eyes of his. Eyes that never blinked. Then the Shark would scream, footing Jack back into the treacherous deep.

'Come on buttercup, I've seen pansies swim faster than you.'

While this seemed highly unlikely, Jack's mouth was always too full of water to argue.

How he hated the Shark. Sadly, Physical Education wasn't the only class in which Jack struggled. He produced consistent academic results—unfortunately, they were consistently poor. And the remarks accompanying those grades were most unflattering. Mrs Fiona McKay had an ever-growing collection of woefully worded reports. What's more, even Jack had to admit they contained a fair whack of truth.

But changing them? That couldn't be more difficult. He wasn't dumb. He knew the general idea of going to school was to learn a thing or two. Jack had told his mother again and again: this year would be different. This year we'd see the 'New Jack McKay'.

He would attend school with the best of intentions, greeting the teacher politely, listening carefully, trying to convince himself of the lesson's great worth. However,

eventually the voice would become a drone, impossible to understand. The drone would soften, creeping into silence, and the teacher would blur, then disappear altogether. That would leave Jack McKay and his dreams.

Dreams of creatures, incredibly vivid and disturbingly clear. But not only that—Jack swore he could feel them. Their touch on his hands, their breath on his face. Even more than that, he could really feel them. He knew how they were feeling—an outpouring of emotion that would often leave him drained.

Jack did his best to avoid detection. Sensing resistance would soon fail, he'd hold up a schoolbook to conceal glazed eyes. Ty would also do his best to come to Jack's aid, elbowing and nudging, trying to snap him out of the latest adventure. But neither of their bests was much good.

Punishment for the crime would be swift. Luckily for Jack, only the Shark used his head as a target. Most teachers settled for the more traditional, torturous form of punishment.

Like so many other days, the sound of the school bell meant the start of a depressing journey. Going first to the headmaster's office, Jack was told of the chosen detention room for the day.

He arrived at the auditorium to find the orchestra in full cry, competing with the sputtering noises of the school's ride-on lawnmower—a surprisingly close contest.

As the contest raged, Jack chose a desk near the room's sole clock and wrote the first of his two hundred lines.

A line so familiar he could write the sentence backwards, sideways and upside down. He'd even tried with a pen put in the crook of his elbow. This time, for something different, Jack wrote left-handed. Whatever the method, he knew the words would be far easier to write than obey.

'I Must Not Daydream.'