

THE PROJECT

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1. BUSTED

"I reckon we would have got away with it if it wasn't for that drunken chipmunk."

Luke managed a grin at Tommy, sitting next to him on the hard slatted bench outside the principal's office.

"Don't sweat it, dude," Tommy said. "I can handle Kerr."

"Yeah right."

Tommy had a coin in his hand and was flipping it up in the air, catching it first on the top side of his fingers, then the underside.

"Seriously," he said. "You know what my dad does, right? I've been in more courtrooms than you've had hot dinners. I'm going to tie this sucker up in so many legal knots that he'll look like a ... pretzel."

"Someone doing yoga," Luke said simultaneously.

"Yep, a pretzel doing yoga," Tommy said.

"I hope so."

"Just back me up on whatever I say."

"No worries about that, bro."

Tommy flipped the coin a couple more times then caught it in the palm of his hand and made a fist.

"How many times?" he asked.

"How many times what?" Luke asked.

"How many times did I toss the coin? Get it right, you can keep the coin."

"Forty-seven," Luke said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"How many of them were heads?" Tommy asked.

"Twenty-nine," Luke said.

"How many tails?"

"All the rest." Luke smiled.

Tommy flipped the coin to him. "That's freaky," he said. "How do you do that?"

"Dunno, bro."

The door to the office opened and Miss Sheck, their homeroom teacher, stood in the gap.

In her early twenties, she observed the strict dress code for teachers at the school with a simple skirt, plain blouse and sensible flat shoes. However, she wore a trace too much eyeliner, there was a suspicious hole in the side of her nose and her sprayed, clipped blond hair seemed to be struggling to bust out, shout, knock itself out. Most of the boys at the school reckoned she was really hot (for a teacher).

"Come in, boys," she said solemnly, but her eyes sparkled, just slightly.

Luke took a deep breath and stood up.

Mr Kerr was a jelly doughnut. Or at least what Luke imagined a jelly doughnut would look like if it ever became principal of a high school. Rolls of fat bulged in places where most people didn't even have places. He always wore a three-piece suit in some kind of vain attempt to conceal the bulges, but it just made them more obvious. A thick shock of red hair added the jelly to the top of the doughnut.

Kerr's office was dominated by a huge, ugly wooden desk in the centre of the room. The corners of the desk were carved knobs that looked like clenched fists, and the panel in the front was vaguely skull-like in design. The desk was in the middle of a bright circle of light created by four small ceiling-mounted spotlights.

Two of the lights seemed to be in Luke's eyes, as if he was a spy under interrogation. *Ve haf vays of makink you talk!*

Kerr was examining a book, the book. Luke cringed a little. The remains of the duct tape were still attached to the bottom and spine of the book, covering part of the title so that it said *The Last of the Mo*. Kerr leaned forwards and slammed the book down right in front of them, one corner jutting out over the edge of the desk, pointing right at Luke. They both stared at it. Kerr glowered at them from under thick orange eyebrows.

"Sit," he said.

They sat.

As he did so, Luke reached out and straightened the book so that it lined up with the edge of the desk. Kerr looked him in the eye, and Luke quickly glanced away.

"Was it worth it?" Kerr asked.

"Sir?" Tommy asked with an expression of utter innocence.

"Was it worth it? Kerr repeated.

Luke began, "I'm not sure what--"

"Tell me why I shouldn't call your parents right now. Tell me why I shouldn't call the police."

Luke drew in his breath sharply and caught Miss Sheck's eyes.

"I don't think there's any need for the police," she said.

If students were angry with Miss Sheck, they called her Miss Shrek, like in the movie, but she really didn't look anything like Shrek. Luke thought she looked more like Princess Fiona, the beautiful princess (in her non-ogre moments).

Mr Kerr shot a glance at Miss Sheck as if she had no right to interfere, but the edges of her mouth curled up into a smile and even he couldn't bring himself to get angry with her.

"I don't know what they let you get away with in New Zealand," Kerr continued. "But in America we have certain standards of behaviour that are expected of our students."

Luke considered telling him that he had once been

suspended from a school in New Zealand for a *certain standard of behaviour*, but decided that it wasn't quite the appropriate moment.

Kerr continued, "You have caused this school a lot of embarrassment. You could have been killed."

It wasn't clear which of those two he considered worse.

Kerr started to go on, in the way that principals do. Some words filtered through, such as "reckless", "impulsive" and "bad influence", but the rest of it seemed to just wash over Luke as if Kerr was speaking a foreign language. Luke kept nodding his head though, and looking sorry.

It had been a simple enough prank, involving the statue of the school founder, a roll of toilet paper, a tube of superglue and a copy of *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper.

In the cold, hard light of day the whole thing seemed a bit silly. But it had seemed funny at the time.

They were climbing down from the statue pedestal when the security patrol drove into the school grounds. They froze, hoping not to be noticed.

That was when the chipmunk, drunk on acorn juice, or maybe just the stupidest chipmunk in the world, had tripped over its own feet in a nearby tree. It landed on Tommy's back, and he leaped off the pedestal with a yell, catching the end of the roll of toilet paper in his mouth on the way down. It unrolled as it fell, twisting out behind

him like a parade day streamer.

Tommy hit the ground and froze, with a mouthful of toilet paper coming out of his mouth and a terrified chipmunk clinging to his back. He stood there like a deer in the headlights.

At that point, as Tommy's dad would say, the *shoop shoop* really hit the fan.

The next morning a hundred cell phone cameras snapped the statue, toilet paper and all. By lunchtime it was on a thousand social networking sites.

But they would have got away with it, if not for that drunken chipmunk.

A fleck of foamy spittle appeared at the corner of Kerr's mouth, and Luke watched it bubble and bounce around with each word.

"We had no choice, sir," Tommy said with an air of wounded dignity when Kerr stopped for breath.

"No choice?" Kerr raised an eyebrow. It looked like a furry orange centipede had just crawled up his forehead.

"No choice," Luke affirmed.

"It's our religion, sir," Tommy said.

Another centipede joined the first. "Your religion."

"Yes, sir." Tommy nodded. "We belong to the Seekers of the Wandering Goat."

Luke nodded with him. "The Wandering Goat."

"You, be quiet." Kerr eyeballed Luke for a second, then turned to Tommy. "Do you boys seriously think you can get away with a prank like this by claiming to be

followers of some phoney religion?"

"Freedom of religion, sir," Tommy said. "Under the First Amendment we cannot be persecuted for our religious practices."

"The Seekers of the Wandering Goat ..." Kerr picked up a file from his desk and leafed through it. "The last time you used this excuse you were the 'Keepers' of the Wandering Goat. Explain that."

He glared at Tommy as if to say gotcha! Tommy froze and started going a slightly off shade of white. *Ve haf vays of makink you talk!*

Luke jumped in, "The goat escaped."

"It escaped."

"The goat," Tommy agreed.

"Yes, now we're the Seekers of the Wandering Goat," Luke said.

"I guess we weren't very good keepers," Tommy said.

"So where is this goat now?" Kerr asked with a sideways glance at Miss Sheck, who was clearly trying not to laugh. She pulled her face back into line with an effort.

"If we knew that, sir, we'd be the Keepers of the Wandering Goat again," Tommy said.

"Or maybe the Finders of the Wandering Goat. We haven't decided yet," Luke added.

Kerr picked up the book again. "It seems to me that you went to a lot of trouble just to avoid doing your book project."

"Reading sucks," Luke said without thinking.

"I don't think we should be forced to read a book that we don't like, sir," Tommy said. "And this is the most boring book in the world."

"Hey, that's just not true." Miss Sheck took a step forwards, raising her hands as if defending herself. "It's an American classic!"

"They could use it to cure insomnia," Luke said.

"And in hospitals instead of anaesthetic," Tommy said.

"I heard the CIA was thinking of reading it to prisoners to extract information," Luke said.

"It starts a little slow, but it turns into one of the greatest adventures of all time," Miss Sheck protested.

Kerr picked at a fragment of duct tape on the spine of the book. "I don't care whether you think it's boring or not. This is your summer vacation project. You have to read it, and write a report on it."

"It's a human rights issue," Tommy said.

"Human rights?" Kerr almost sighed.

"It's our right not to die of boredom," Tommy said.

"It really is the most boring book in the world," Luke said, still staring at the book in question, duct tape and all.

"Yes, sir," Tommy said.

"Okay. Let's say I accept that," Kerr said.

Luke risked a quick glance at Tommy, whose mouth had dropped open. This was too easy.

Even Miss Sheck was looking at Kerr with narrowed, confused eyes.

Kerr sprang the trap shut. "Now all you have to do is to prove that it is the most boring book in the world."

There was a long pause. Tommy and Luke looked at each other. Kerr smiled triumphantly from behind the desk.

"How exactly would we do that, sir?" Luke asked.

"That's up to you. You prove it, and I'll let you choose another book to read for your project. And I'll accept your crazy Keepers of the--"

"Seekers," Tommy said.

"Seekers of the Wandering Goat story. But if you can't, then I will see to it that you spend your summer break reading the book, and I'm going to come down on you like a ton of bricks for the statue thing."

"Sir, I think we need to define the terms of the agreement," Tommy said.

"I bet if you went on Google and looked up 'the most boring book in the world', you would find hundreds of books," Miss Sheck said. "And this one wouldn't even make the list."

"There you go," Kerr said. "If you can find it on an official list of the most boring books in the world, I'll accept that."

"Anywhere on the list?" Luke asked.

"Top ten," Kerr said.

"Sweet as," Luke said.

"Thank you, sir," Tommy said.

"I don't know why you're thanking me. If I were—"

There was a sudden, urgent rap on the door and it flung open. The school secretary, Mrs Seddon, stuck her head through the doorway.

"Yes, Jennifer?" Kerr asked, rather brusquely.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir," she said. "It's the police on the phone."

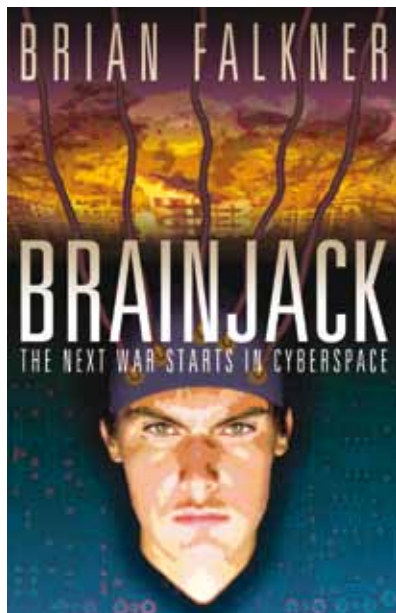
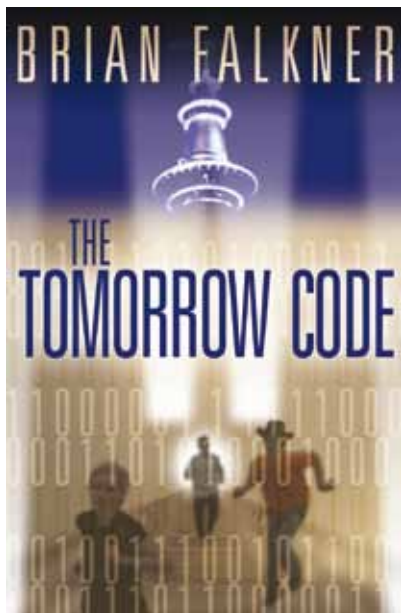
"Yes," Mr Kerr said, those two orange centipedes scurrying back up his forehead.

Luke felt his back crawl with a cold sweat. Had the police somehow been involved already?

But he needn't have worried.

"It's the river," Mrs Seddon said.

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