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# WALKERS

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**d****FICKING****b**  
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# CHAPTER 1

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**T**he Academy clock struck two. Outside, it was the dead of night. Inside, it was quiet at last. Quiet as it could be in a dormitory full of sleepers: Every one of them made some kind of noise, 'course they did. Forty boys in forty beds in this dormitory. Forty boys, and their forty griefs. But just now even the ones who saw monsters in their dreams were quiet. Even the ones who'd cried into their pillows were asleep. Only Jake lay awake in his bed, eyes wide open, and listened.

The Mother had been around a few minutes before, shone her flashlight at each bed. The Father would be around in two hours' time. If he was going, then it must be now. Right now. The last boy left it too late and they caught him. He needed stitches in his leg from the dog bites.

*You can do it. You can.* Jake could hear his dad's voice inside his head, encouraging him.

—Go, he whispered, and he slipped out of bed, pulled on his sneakers, grabbed his backpack, wound a scarf round his neck, tugged his woolen cap down hard. Spare clothes bundled up beneath the covers made the shape of a sleeping boy, good enough to fool the Father's flashlight, he hoped.

Down on his belly, pushing his backpack before him, he swam beneath the beds, pressing hard against the polished floor with his elbows and knees. He'd practiced this.

Keep low, he told himself. Face to the ground.

Twelve beds to reach the door, in each a boy sleeping. The dust was in his nose, in his throat, and he wanted to cough so bad it made his eyes water. Eight beds left, and something caught around his face. He swallowed the cry in his throat. Another boy's dangling bedclothes, tangled round him like a weed.

Sweat slicked beneath his clothes. He could see the door.

A sound. He stopped. There it was again. The sound of the door handle turning. He shuffled back under the last bed. The door opened; he could see a pair of slippers, pink ones: the Mother's. Why was she back? She was walking toward him, shining her flashlight at each bed. If she bent down just a little, she'd see him. Jake's heart was thumping so loud, he was sure she'd hear it. The light beam swung across the floor. She'd stopped on the far side. Jake peered out. She was standing over a new boy's bed—Jake didn't even know his name. Now she was whispering, pulling the boy out. He was very small, maybe five years old. Now she was feeling the sheets, shaking her head, then grabbing the boy's arm and pushing him roughly, shoving him before her. Finally they were gone.

Not for long, though. They'd be back in minutes. Fast as he could, Jake swam beneath the last beds, and out the other side.

Maybe the Mother had left the sensor turned off? Jake looked up. But there it was, in the corner of the ceiling, its red light pulsing gently.

This next part would be harder. If the rope held and he could get through the door quickly enough, he could fool it. It had been done. But if he didn't manage it . . . He felt the hair on his neck bristle. He'd seen another boy punished for trying.

And he'd have to leave the rope hanging there after him. The Mother didn't usually help boys in the night. Usually she just pushed them back through the door and left them to sort things out

for themselves. The new boy might not even remember which his bed was, or know how to change a sheet in the dark. Didn't matter. He wouldn't get any help with it. Unless Jake was out of luck, and tonight was the one night the Mother decided to be kind. But he'd have to risk it. He was too far on to return. He wouldn't make it back to his bed unnoticed. This was his chance, and he just had to go.

He took the rope from his pack. He'd found it, along with a length of clothesline, both coiled in the cobwebs in the grounds-keeper's shed, and he'd hidden them in his trunk these past few days. There was a good twenty feet of rope, he reckoned. It should be enough. He'd practiced for this as best he could. Tied a monkey fist in one end—his dad had taught him the knot—and tied his Arsenal key ring to one end of the rope, to weight it.

A high shelf ran along the edge of the room, with boxes of old books stacked up on it. Jake wasn't interested in the books, but he was interested in the brackets that held the shelf up. In the dormitory's half-dark, he squinted up at the triangular space made by the bracket nearest the door.

He flung the rope in the silence of the sleeping room. It missed, and fell to the ground with a thud loud enough to wake the dead.

Jake froze. He could hear the Mother's voice from the linen cupboard, raised, angry. Had she heard him? If she caught him, he'd have six months on his tariff, no question.

*Go, Jake!* he told himself. And he gathered the rope and threw it again. Tugged. It felt firm.

Somebody muttered something; a bed creaked; again he waited. But the room slept on.

His heart was in his mouth and his hands were damp.

*Don't think about it,* he told himself, and in a single movement, he reached up for the rope, grasped it firmly, and swung, out across the sensor beam. The bracket creaked, just as he dropped down by

the door. A few seconds longer and he'd have pulled it from the wall, crashed to the ground, woken everybody.

*Better be right, JoJo*, he thought, because it was JoJo who said the hubbing wouldn't work so well if you covered up your chip. JoJo, who'd never escape—not with his limp, not a chance.

Jake was out the door, past the linen cupboard and the Parents' room, into the corridor. He was running, fast as he could, quiet as he could, up on his toes, past the other dormitories, past the double doors that led back to the main Academy building, till he reached the far end and the small fire door he'd pinned his hopes on. It opened into a dim stairwell, concrete stairs in half-flight turns. No sensors, or not that he could see, and he took the stairs fast, one hand on the metal rail for balance. At the bottom was another door marked FIRE EXIT, with a broad iron bar for opening. Beyond the door, he'd be outside, into the grounds, and once he was past the guards, he was sure he could make it.

He pushed down hard on the bar.

The door wouldn't open.

He pulled the bar up and pushed it down again, pressing against the door with his shoulder. Still nothing.

*Come on*, he said, because his escape couldn't end here. He had to get out. He waited for a moment to catch his breath, then using the stairs for pace, he ran the last short flight and barged at the door, throwing his weight at it, and this time it gave and he hurtled through, tumbling over his feet onto the dark ground.

Lights glared on instantly, and he lay still, waiting for shouts and dogs. But it was quiet. He'd timed it well and the guard was still on the far side of the Academy.

On his feet, crouching low, he ran for the blackness.