

SCAR ISLAND

DAN GEMEINHART
AUTHOR OF THE HONEST TRUTH



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For all the librarians, teachers, and parents who
dedicate themselves to getting books into the
hands and hearts of our children.
Heroes, one and all.
—Dan

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CHAPTER ONE

A DARK PLACE INDEED

It's no fun shivering when you're wearing handcuffs.

It doesn't help to be seasick, either.

Jonathan Grisby sat hunched over in the wildly rocking boat and tried not to throw up. And he tried not to let his teeth chatter together so hard that they shattered. And he tried, at the same time, to look like he didn't care.

It wasn't easy.

The little boat rocketed off of each wave and crashed into the next with a jolt that sent shots of pain into his rear from the metal bench. His clothes were wet from the salty spray. The wind kept blowing his straight black hair into his eyes, and with his hands cuffed he couldn't brush it away. The sun was already down and every second brought more darkness.

He noticed the boat's pilot grinning at him. It wasn't a nice grin. He was missing most of his teeth, and the few that he still had were brown and crooked. Tobacco juice dribbled out from his bottom lip into his scraggly gray beard.

"Ya look scared!" the pilot shouted over the whine of the outboard motor that he steered with one hand. Jonathan just blinked and looked away.

"'Tis all right to be scared, boy." The pilot eased back on the motor, slowing the boat so that he didn't have to yell. He was still smiling, and his eyes twinkled with a mean hunger.

"I'd be scared, too, if I was goin' where you be goin'." The pilot's smile widened, showing off even more stained teeth.

Jonathan threw back his head to clear the hair from his eyes and looked out over the white-capped ocean, ignoring the leering pilot. He was sitting with his back toward the front of the boat, facing the pilot and the dock they had left minutes before. Next to the pilot sat his partner. He was young, maybe seventeen or eighteen, with a kinder face. Not much more than a kid, really.

"Aw, leave 'im alone, Cyrus," the younger man said. "There's no need to tease 'im."

"I ain't teasin', Patrick. I'm warnin'." The grizzled pilot narrowed his eyes and nodded at Jonathan as he spoke. "Wouldn't be fair to toss him to the wolves with him thinkin' he's goin' on some seaside vacation! 'Tis a dark place yer goin', boy. A dark place indeed."

Jonathan, trying to ignore the old pilot, looked at the younger man, Patrick. Patrick's eyes slid away from his own. Like he felt bad. Like maybe the old man was telling the truth.

"'Course, ye probably knew 'twas a dark place, though, didn't ya?" Cyrus continued. "That's why yer goin' there, after all. A dark place for dark youths such as yourself. Trouble-makers. Delinquents. Criminals." He savored each word in his mouth like a salty piece of bacon.

"How old are ye, boy? Twelve? Thirteen?"

Jonathan bit his lip. He didn't want to talk to Cyrus. But

he was feeling awfully lonely, handcuffed in a boat on the way to prison.

“Something like that,” he said at last, with a shrug.

Cyrus’s mouth widened into a wolf’s grin. “Ah, yer right in the middle, then. Criminal boys, aged ten to fourteen. That’s what Slabhenge is for, idn’t it? Can’t imagine what dark crime ya committed to get yourself sent *here*, boy. They’ll have ya meek as a lamb in no time, I’d wager, beggin’ to run back to yer mama’s lap.”

“Leave him alone, Cyrus.” Patrick spoke again. “There’s no point in taunting him so.”

Cyrus’s eyes widened innocently. “I ain’t trying to taunt him, Patrick! I just feel the boy should know what he’s gettin’ into, is all.”

Patrick frowned and looked out over the water.

“Ah, and there she is!” Cyrus crowed. “Go ahead, boy, turn around and take a look at yer new home!”

Jonathan twisted in his seat and craned his neck to get his first view of the Slabhenge Reformatory School for Troubled Boys over the rusted bow of the boat.

It was a hulking, jagged building of gray stone, surrounded on all sides by the foaming sea. The walls were high, rising up two or three stories from the crashing waves. Several towers stabbed up even higher into the gathering black clouds from each corner of the building. Each was flat-topped and crowned with a black iron railing. A few dark windows dotted the higher parts of the walls. Instead of

glass, they all had thick metal bars. In a movie, it would be where the evil lord lived. Or where the good guy died.

There was no beach, no land, not even any rocks . . . The waves smashed and churned right up against the great square stone blocks of the walls. Jonathan gulped. It was worse than he'd heard—and what he'd heard had been terrible. He ground his teeth together and let the stiff ocean wind dry his angry tears before they could fall from his eyes. His hands, shackled together behind his back, squeezed into fists, then went loose.

"Pretty, ain't it?" Cyrus chuckled. His laugh turned into a cough and finished with a thick spit over the side of the boat. "It weren't always a school, ya know. 'Twas built first fer lunatics and madmen." Cyrus laughed again. "That there, for the first hundred or so years of its miserable existence, was an asylum. A madhouse. A prison fer the criminally insane."

Jonathan's eyes wandered over the moss-covered walls, the bars, the turrets and shadows. It didn't look like the kind of place where the sun would ever shine. Thunder rumbled in the dark clouds above them. He swallowed a salty ball of fear.

"Still is, I s'pose," Cyrus went on. "Only now, the psychos is just younger, is all." He finished with another throaty cackle.

He slowed the motor even more, dragging the ride out as long as he could. They were crawling now toward the stone prison, riding up and sliding down the green-black waves instead of bouncing along their tops.

“I wouldn’t be thinking of escape, either, boy. Never been done. That’s half a mile of ocean we be crossing, chocked with currents and undertows. Plenty of the crazies tried, of course. Threw themselves from the top of them walls there. But the sea is hungry here. It swallowed them all, without a trace. After it dashed their brains ’gainst those walls, of course. Aye, ’tis hungry water ’round here. You can feel it, can’tcha?” Cyrus was almost whispering now, his voice a hissy growl, like a bully telling a ghost story. “Why, it’s eating at Slabhenge itself! See it there, chewing on them walls! Eating away at ’em, wave after wave! Did you know there used to be rocks ’round it? There did! And a pier! And a wee little sandy beach all the way around! But the sea, she’s been nibbling away nigh on a century and a half. And she’ll have it all ’fore she’s through.”

Cyrus punctuated his words with a good-riddance spit into the ocean. Then he cocked a smirking eyebrow at Jonathan. “You got yerself a cozy new home indeed, boy. A nuthouse full of delinquents, being swallowed by the sea. Ha! But don’t you worry . . . if you get homesick, there’s always the rats to keep you company!” Cyrus threw back his head and hollered out a laugh.

Jonathan looked to Patrick, who shrugged apologetically. “Yeah,” he said. “There be plenty of rats.”

They were right in the shadow of the massive walls now. The waves splashing against them were loud. He looked up to the top. There were stones missing, tumbled down into the

ocean. The place was falling apart. They passed a window, two stories up. It was black and barred and shaped like a tombstone. For a moment, Jonathan was sure he saw a pale face looking out at him. He had to catch himself when the boat was rocked by a wave, and when he looked back, the face was gone. He shivered again, only partly because of the cold.

“And here we be,” Cyrus said. He steered the boat up toward a darkened doorway in the wall, the same tombstone shape as the window. A heavy metal gate blocked the entry and, behind it, a huge wooden door. Stone stairs led down from the gate and disappeared into the black water.

The boat nudged up against the submerged stairs and Patrick leapt out onto the steps, a rope in his hands. He tied the boat off to a rusty metal ring jutting out from the prison wall.

“Enjoy yer stay!” Cyrus hollered as Patrick helped Jonathan step out of the boat.

“Don’t let Cyrus scare ya,” Patrick whispered as they climbed the steps toward the door. “Just stay quiet and keep on the Admiral’s good side. Ya’ll be fine.”

“What makes you think I’m scared?”

Patrick looked at Jonathan with raised eyebrows, then up at the dark prison they were entering. “Well, good lord, ain’t ya?”

Jonathan almost smiled. Almost. He looked up at the grim, crumbling walls of his new home. It looked bad. Just as bad as he deserved.

The wooden door creaked open. A giant stood in the doorway, wearing a dark blue uniform with shiny silver buttons. He was skinny as a skeleton but taller than any man Jonathan had seen in real life. His skin was pale, his black hair short, and he had great dark circles under his eyes. Other than one slow blink, nothing on the man's face moved.

"Is this the Jonathan Grisby?" the man asked in a deep, scratchy voice.

"Aye," Patrick answered. "'Tis." He pulled some papers out of his jacket pocket and handed them through the bars.

"How are you, Mr. Vander?" Patrick asked. His voice cracked nervously.

The man only looked at Patrick from under his dark eyebrows, then jangled a huge ring of keys and unlocked the gate. He swung it open just far enough for Jonathan to slip through. Patrick gave his elbow one last squeeze before letting go. The gate clanged shut.

Jonathan felt himself pulled a few steps forward into darkness. The door began closing behind him with a loud creak.

"Good-b—" Patrick started to say, before his voice was cut off by the slamming of the massive door.

A huge hand, hard and strong as iron, closed on Jonathan's shoulder just as the world turned black.