

Chapter 16

Mixed Signals

Late the following afternoon, Jack made his way through the village to spend some of their earned bobs on supplies for the overnigher. He rounded a corner, shortcutting through the empty lot between the bakery and Dr. Garrett's office. There, three boys in identical Boy Scout uniforms had two smaller children, a boy and a little girl, up against a wall, rifling through their pockets. Jack was instantly incensed at the sight. "Hey! Leave them alone!" he roared.

The scouts startled and turned, backing away from their victims.

Jack approached the small children. "Are you all right?" he asked, his face aflame.

"Blimey, what have we here?" One of the scouts asked at seeing Jack dressed in his full kit. "Looks like a Little Orphan Annie commando out begging for scraps." Whilst all attention was on Jack, the children saw their chance to run away and promptly took it.

Before he could turn round, Jack was shoved hard from behind at his shoulders. His head snapped backwards and his helmet was sent flying. He spilled onto the ground, arms forward to break his fall, but both knees were scraped and torn against the hard ground. He scrambled fast

to his feet and turned to his tormenters.

It was Victor Knolls, patrol leader of the Boy Scouts, Ronan Academy Troop, dressed in his full kit, minus his round-brimmed campaign hat. Beside him were two taller boys, Leonard and Christopher, both dressed similarly. Leonard bent down, picked up Jack's pith helmet, and put it on his own head. The three large boys surrounded him. Their number, not their size, gave him pause.

"What the hell"—a shove to his chest—"do you think you're playing at?" He looked Jack over, paying attention to the assorted collection of badges and ribbons on the small boy's white sash.

"There's one Boy Scout troop in this village, and we're it," Victor said.

As Victor spoke, Leonard started grabbing at Jack's St. Michael medal. "Here, what's this rubbish?" he said with a sneer, pulling at it. Because it was pinned to his sash, Jack was pulled forwards along with it. Victor leaned in. "St. Michael, protect us. Aw, isn't that cute?" He laughed. "Protect us, St. Michael," he whimpered in the mocking tone of a weakling—or as Jack heard it—a begging orphan. That only stoked his anger.

"Don't you dare touch that." Jack sneered, and shoved Christopher's hand away—

SMACK!

Victor's slap to his face caught Jack by surprise, but had the same effect as pouring petrol on a bonfire. Heat rose and his ears burned purple with hot blood. Full-on rage blew away the last remaining bit of care he had for his own well-being. He gritted his teeth and wrinkled his nose. As hard and fast as he could, he smashed his shin into Christopher's groin with such force the tall boy instantly doubled over, his pained face now level with Jack's. Seizing the opportunity, Jack full-fisted Christopher square in the nose. There was a sickening *POP* when the cartilage in Christopher's nose gave way. Blood splattered Jack's fist as it gushed from both of the larger boy's nostrils. He dropped to the ground at Jack's feet. Useless sack, Jack thought, proud he'd pulled it off. He was trembling with anger. Two left. Now that's more like it, he thought, suddenly emboldened. It was no longer three-on-one. And two-on-one were odds

he'd faced and beaten before.

"You little shit!" Leonard grabbed Jack, threw him to the ground, then leapt on top of him. Jack scrambled for his whistle, but before he could reach it, Leonard's strong, teenaged legs pinned his arms to his sides.

Taking stock of the quickly changing situation, Jack realised it wasn't good. There's nothing worse than being small, he thought. He felt defenceless, but his rage still burned, so he felt far from hopeless. Rage might cloud one's judgement—but in a fight—it's a lot more useful than hopelessness.

Christopher was in a heap next to him, bleeding, coughing, unable to speak, tears flowing. His red, watery eyes bulged, and he rocked slightly back and forth in the dirt, hands cupping his aching groin as the pain radiated across his face in waves. Now it was Leonard's turn to slap Jack.

SMACK! A stinging palm across the left cheek.

SMACK! A knuckle-filled backhand across the right. He felt his cheek bone start to swell.

"You don't mess with us, especially with no guardian angels around to protect you."

Leonard leaned directly over Jack's face, and let a long string of spit drip from his tongue right onto the smaller boy's mouth. The sun glinted off Leonard's dangling whistle, catching Jack's eye. It was hanging mere inches from his lips. A new strategy sparked in his head. If it was going to work, he needed Leonard's unwitting help.

"Mmmm, yummy." Jack said as he licked the boy's spit from his lips.

"Ewww!" Disgust washed over Victor's face, but Leonard just laughed.

"Hahahaha! Oh, you like that, do you, little boy? You're going to love this." He snorted hard, then hocked up a generous ball of phlegm into his mouth. Jack focused his attention on the boy's dangling whistle. Just a little lower.

"Bugger off!" Jack taunted.

"Well, you're not very bright," Victor said, "but you sure got guts, I'll give you that."

Leonard leaned over, closely lining up his mouth directly over

Jack's. The whistle was as close as it was going to get. In a flash, Jack raised his head from the ground and he locked his teeth and lips around Leonard's whistle. He huffed three sharp blasts as hard as he could, and then three more before Leonard slapped the whistle out of his mouth. "Ahh, right in my bloody ear!" Leonard howled, putting his hand to his buzzing ear.

He hit Jack again—harder—just for fun. Jack shaped his lips and tongue and blasted out a whistle of his own making, sounding exactly like a song bird only much louder—an eardrum-piercing song bird.

"Shut up!" Leonard yelled, cocking his hand back.

SMACK!

Jack stopped whistling.

Not far away, Dougie asked Henry, "Did you hear that?"

"Of course. It's Willy." His eyes opened wide.

"Where was he going? What was he doing today?"

"Dunno. But wherever he is, that was him."

"Go get the others. I'm going towards the direction it came from," Dougie said.

"Don't do anything stupid," Henry reminded him.

"Well, that's not possible, is it?"

"Yeah, right." Henry tore off down the road towards the home. Dougie headed for Jack's trouble signal.

Jack watched Christopher struggle to find his feet. His knees wobbled. He wretched a couple of times as if he were going to throw up. His nose was bleeding. Blood and tears streaked his cheeks. He still hadn't said anything or collected himself, but Jack knew as soon as he did, a retaliatory kick in the balls was coming his way, as payback.

"This is an ace lid, Jackie-girl," Leonard said, adjusting Jack's pith helmet, now perched on his own head. "I might have to keep this as a trophy." He reached for the St. Michael medal and started to unpin it from Jack's sash.

“No!” Jack yelled. He kicked and shifted, rocked and rolled. Leo was forced to hold on, like a rodeo cowboy trying to break a bucking bronco.

“What right do you *lowly orphans* have to your own Scout troop in our village? None. We’re the only scouts round here, the Boy Scouts,” Victor lectured from behind Leonard. “We were first in this village. It’s ours, and until you stupid orphans realise it, I guess we’re going to have to keep reminding you.”

“St. Michael’s beat the Boy Scouts by six hundred years, you bloody moron!” Jack corrected him.

Dougie, feeling every bit the coward, heard it all from safety, hidden around the corner of Dr. Bennett’s building. He’d peeked round to the empty lot and saw Leonard sitting on Jack, slapping away at him. He wanted to rush in, but he also saw blood. He didn’t know whose, but there was blood, and a lot of it. Mostly on that bloke Christopher on the ground. Bet Jack did that, he thought, it’s why he’s getting slapped.

Victor was there, too, going on about Boy Scout this and that whilst beating up a little boy. What does he know? He doesn’t deserve to wear that uniform anyway. Come on, tykes, hurry up.

SMACK!

That was enough. Regardless of what those others would do to him, he wouldn’t let Jack get slapped again. He stepped round the corner when from behind—

“Dougie. You found him?” It was Freddie—and Reggie, Henry, and Willy—dressed to the nines in their kits. He smiled at such a fine sight and gave silent thanks. Atta boy, St. Mike!

Angrily Leonard ripped the St. Michael medal from Jack’s sash, tearing it. Jack watched horrified, as he tossed the small medallion to Victor. “Here. A trophy for you, too.”

“Great.” Victor replied. “One down, five to go.” He pinned it to his own shirt. “Now St. Mikey can protect me.” Victor said. Leonard laughed.

“Oh, I wouldn’t bet on that anytime soon, if I were you.” It was Freddie’s voice. It sounded like the Heavenly Hosts to Jack ears. Leonard stopped laughing and let his grip relax for a split second. Instantly, Jack sensed an opportunity to gain the upper hand and snatched it, freeing his arms and shoving the bigger boy off of him.

Victor turned.

Before him stood the other five medals for his taking, each accompanied by the Scout of St. Michael it was pinned to.

“Did you hear that?” Boy Scout Spencer asked his troop mate Richard.

“What? The whistles? Yeah I heard ‘em.”

“We should go check it out. Who do you think it is?”

“Dunno. Victor, Leo, and Chris are running about somewhere. Let them do it.”

SMACK! Across the back of the head.

“Oww! What’d you do that for?” Richard asked, rubbing his head.

“Because we’re scouts and that signal means trouble, three short blasts on the whistle is a call for help! What’s the point of having these stupid things if we don’t use them?” Spencer replied.

“Well, you don’t have to hit me. Boy Scouts are supposed to be kind, you know.”

Christopher tried his best to stand yet again, but crashed back down to the ground. He attempted to wipe clean his face of the blood and tears, but all he really did was smear himself into a bloody, snotty mess. Jack must have had a go at him before the others jumped him, Reggie surmised. Ah Jack, our terrier. He’s small, but he’s vicious.

Jack stood menacingly over Leonard, who was now cowering at his feet. Reggie watched as Jack kicked dirt in Leonard’s face and snatched his helmet back. Returning it to his head, he leaned in with a pointed finger. “If you ever touch that helmet again,” he pointed at Christopher, “you’ll get what he got. And *don’t* call me Jackie!” he growled.

That's our Jack, Reggie smiled.

Jack marched over and took a spot between Freddie and Reggie. "Guess you're all right then," Freddie said, not taking his eyes off Victor. "Yeah, fine—I think." His face was red from the slapping assault, but it was hard to tell because he was also flushed from his racing heart.

"What'd you do to the big one?" Reggie asked, already guessing as he watched Christopher holding himself. The large boy on the ground was cloaked in the pain, vulnerability and humiliation that every boy the world over works very hard to avoid.

Reggie looked Jack over; dirt, scratches and scrapes, but all the pieces basically still there, minus one small, yet hardly insignificant piece of kit.

"I got a good one in his bits. I think I bruised my shin." Jack said with a grin. Freddie, still eyeing the other boys, smiled too.

"That's not fighting fair, Jack." Freddie reminded him. "That's a low blow."

"So is three-on-one." Jack replied, "One good turn of unsportsmanlike conduct deserves another. Eye-for-an-eye, straight from the Bible."

"I hope when he slapped you on the right, you offered the left." Freddie said.

"I didn't offer, but he sure took." Jack replied, rubbing his swollen, throbbing cheekbone.

"Where's your medal?" Reggie asked. Jack turned and pointed his finger at Victor. Reggie squinted and fixed his gaze, like a radar beam, on Jack's shimmering silver medal dangling off Victor's left breast pocket.

As Spencer and Richard were making their way towards the distress signal, Boy Scouts Seymour, Oscar, William, and Simon joined them at an intersection. They now numbered six.

"Did you lot blow that signal?" Oscar asked.

"No, none of us. Did you?" Simon asked.

"Would I have asked you if we had, stupid?"

Simon shrugged.

"We heard it, too," Richard replied.

“Well, if it wasn’t you, and it wasn’t us...”

“It’s got to be Victor, Christopher or Leonard. Come on, let’s find them.”

“Why don’t they blast again? To give us another fix.”

“Maybe they can’t,” Spencer said.

“Let’s head off. It’ll be dark soon.” Simon said. They headed in the direction of the whistles.

“Victor.” Reggie approached him slowly. He was face-to-face with the 14 year-old boy who was wearing Jack’s medal on his pocket.

“*Patrol Leader* Victor, if you please,” the boy spat. It was easy to tell he was one of those academy boys. The way they talked was a dead giveaway. “We’re the real Boy Scout patrol in this village, not some fake, orphan-made-up rubbish. It’s not our fault you have no parents.” Victor said with a sneer.

“That’s right,” Reggie replied, “haven’t you heard of us? We’re the ‘Hawkhurst Gang.’ No parents to tell us what we can or can’t do. No one to punish us for our misdeeds. We can do whatever we want and no one can stop us. And right now,”—he leaned in close and whispered threateningly—“we want *you* to take off that medal and put it back where you found it.”

At that moment, six Ronan Boy Scouts rounded the corner into the lot. Everyone startled but Reggie, who didn’t so much as flinch. Suddenly outnumbered by three, the tykes instinctively took up to a defensive position: semicircle facing the nine Boy Scouts. Jack covered Reggie—his catapult suddenly loaded, and drawn to let fly—with a bead on Victor’s forehead.

“What’s this?” asked a confused Scout Seymour, pushing his thick glasses up his long nose.

“This,” Victor replied with a sneer, “is called being outnumbered, and”—to Reggie—“I think I’ll be collecting the rest of those medals from you lasses now.”

It took Reggie exactly half-a-second to size up Victor’s reinforcements; Too Tall, Birdlegs, Chunker, Pretty Boy, Nose, and Goggles. His

concern at being outnumbered instantly evaporated: no sweat, this crew.

“But you only have nine,” Reggie taunted. “You’d better wait for the cavalry to arrive.”

“They are the cavalry, you idiot,” Victor snapped. “Don’t they teach you anything in that so-called school of yours?”

“*This* is the cavalry?” Reggie asked, a smile spreading across his face. “In that case, Patrol Leader Victor,” he laughed, “you’d better wait for the armoured division to show up.” On cue, the tykes burst into a fit of laughter. Victor’s face boiled.

“*Attack!*” Victor yelled.

FWAPP! The sound of Jack’s slingshot echoed through the air.

Victor’s head snapped back as the wooden ball connected directly above his right eye with a resounding *CRACK!* It split the skin, and a thin trail of blood trickled down, his eyebrow being the only thing stopping it from seeping into his eye.

The Ronan Boy Scouts not only did not attack, but actually took a step backwards.

Reggie and Dougie fingered their hanging hatchets, ready to draw. Willy had already drawn his. Henry twirled their troop banner flag like a bow staff, showing all that he was ready to use it like one, if need be. Jack reloaded his catapult and dropped to one knee, ready to launch at Victor’s already bleeding forehead.

“This isn’t what we want,” Reggie said calmly, suddenly seeing the danger in this situation. Fifteen boys, boiling tempers and sharp weapons could easily lead to a very bad outcome; blood had already been spilled, and Jack had been the one to spill it - twice. “Three-on-one isn’t a fair fight, especially when the *one* is our smallest. Where’s the honour in that, Patrol Leader?” Reggie asked Victor. “Since when did being a Boy Scout and doing good turns include beating up outnumbered smaller boys?”

“We’re the British Boy Scouts!” Victor screamed, his voice cracking. “This is our Scout district, and you can’t join! It’s as simple as that! The decision wasn’t ours!”

No, thought Reggie, it was your snobby, rich fathers who decided.

“And we’re the Scouts of St. Michael.” Reggie said calmly. “We aren’t here to steal your territory, or take your glory, we just ... we want to be scouts and do our bit.”

“Your *bit*,” Victor spat, “is to remember your place as orphans.”

Jack made a chirping whistle: *incoming!*

“Oh, Vic, wrong answer,” Reggie replied.

FWAPP!

CRACK! Another ball bounced off Victor’s forehead.

“Ow! Stop it!” Victor screamed.

His reinforcements took a second step back.

Reggie glanced over his shoulder at Jack, who was kneeling with another ball loaded and ready fire. He winked at Reggie. Reggie gave him a pointed look that said, excellent shot, really, but come on, I’m trying to accomplish something here. He turned his attention back to Victor.

“Jack did not like that answer,” Reggie said. “Since,” he continued, “the cavalry over there seems a bit reluctant to join the fun, and my guess is the armoured division won’t be arriving any time soon, maybe you should stop talking and just listen.”

He stepped closer. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s do a swap. You put that medal back where it came from, and not only will Jack stop using his shot to pop your pimples, but I’ll also have him dress you and your boy’s wounds. Trust me, that’s a good deal. He’s deadly accurate with that thing.”

Dougie and Willy smiled and nodded their agreement. Freddie continued to stand his ground, ready for anything.

Victor looked over his cavalry standing there, still grossly unaware of what they’d just walked up on.

“What an embarrassingly pathetic display.” Victor conceded. “Nine of them and not a pair of balls in the lot. Well, except for Christopher, and look what they got him. At least you St. Michael’s scouts have each other’s back—like a real patrol—or like brothers would.”

Victor glanced at Jack. He was crouched low to the ground, seated on one bent leg, the other stretched out in front of him. Whilst one eye was closed, the other was locked on his forehead through the gap of the wooden ‘Y’ held in his outstretched hand. The sling was pulled back with

another one of those hard wooden balls ready to fire. He opened his other eye and winked at Victor.

Victor looked straight into Reggie's unblinking eyes. His hands went to his breast pocket, and he began to unpin Jack's medal. Reggie glanced over his shoulder. "Jack, bring your bag. We have wounded scouts here."

"Right," Henry said, "you broke 'em, you fix 'em." Dougie and Freddie sniggered.

As if the entire previous incident hadn't happened, Jack followed as ordered, unloaded and threw his catapult over his shoulder, and trotted fearlessly to where Reggie and Victor stood. Jack reached into his bag and pulled out a small bottle, a roll of gauze, and some pads.

"Willy, here, take these pads to that one over there. Put them under his nose. Hold it until I finish with Patrol Leader Victor here." Willy rolled over to Christopher to do as he was told.

"Drop down—on your knees—so I can reach." Jack said. Victor did so. The British Boy Scouts now began to mill about each of the injured boys, watching Jack wipe, clean, and dress Victor's cut forehead. As Jack tended him, Victor reached up and pinned the medal back onto Jack's sash, exactly where it had been when this mess had started. Quite accidentally, he jabbed Jack's chest with the pin. "Sssss, ow, that hurts!" Jack said.

Victor smirked. "Sorry."

Jack poured alcohol on Victor's open wound. "Sssss, ow, *that* hurts!" Victor said.

Jack smirked. "Sorry."

"Oh, shut it, you big baby. That's just rubbing alcohol. It cleans it," Dougie said.

"I know what it's for. I have my first aid merit." Victor said. His vitriol was quickly evaporating. "Do you have one?" he asked, only slightly sarcastically.

"No, we don't have any badges. Just a handbook, but we all know that thing backwards and forwards, eh, lads?" Jack said.

"It's practically worn out," Henry added.

"We got it from Miss Goold's brother, Billy. He flies a Spit."

Dougie informed them. They all murmured their impressed approval.

“Is that where you got your kit?” Victor asked Freddie, admiring his blue RAF tunic.

“Yes, the lads at that base take pretty good care of us when it comes to things. All we have to do is ask,” he said. “It helps having Miss Goold is about. They’re keen on her, the lot of them.”

“And sometimes we don’t even have to ask, blokes bring stuff by all the time.” Just then Willy rolled past, a pair of Mk III flying goggles perched atop his leather flying helmet, both also gifts from Pilot Officer Billy Goold.

“So you didn’t steal any of it?” Coxey Jr. asked. “My father says folks in town think you lot got sticky fingers.”

Jack applied more alcohol to Victor’s head at the comment.

“Sssss, *ow!*” Victor cried. “*He* said it, not me!”

“Heavens no!” Dougie answered. “If we got caught stealing, Sister Noreen would skin us, hang us out to dry, and sell our hides for shoe leather. She’s a tough bird, that one,” he said.

“Aye, she would,” the others agreed. All the Ronan Boy Scouts laughed.

“It’s true,” Reggie said. “If you think it’s bad having two adults watching after you, try six sometime. Bloke can’t take a leak without someone knowing.”

“No fibbing?” Christopher asked, his voice squeaky through the gauze and his newly rearranged nose. “I thought you lot were the ‘Hawkhurst Gang’ and got the run of the mill.”

The tykes chuckled. “Are you kidding?” Reggie asked. “That was nothing but a lot of blustering and bluffing.”

“The only time we get the run is when there’re errands to do or to get away from the Sisters when they’re looking for a good-night kiss.” Freddie said to Victor with a smirk.

The entire group laughed. “Really, you lads should come visit and see for yourselves sometime.” Reggie said, extending an olive branch to the Ronan Boy Scouts. It was then that a distant air raid siren began to howl through the darkening sky.