# THE BAHUSHNOVAT

A SENTINELS STORY

JOSHUA C. CARROLL

TELLTALES

# 1

# CLARENDON, JONES, & ROGER

*Click. Whiz.*

The machine sprang to life. Tape flowed in circles from one reel to another.

"There we are," said Agent Giles Clarendon with a smile. Headmaster Jones, who stood in the corner of the room, smiled back and tapped his foot nervously.

Clarendon cleared his throat and spoke into the microphone, "Today is January eleven, nineteen and fifty-four, at…" he glanced at his pocket watch, "eleven o'clock in the morning, and this is an investigative interview with Mr. Roger Bryce, head of security for The Sentinels' Kent County Academy." Clarendon's tone was calm, yet serious. "Right then, Mr. Bryce. Give us your account once more, top to bottom if you please."

"Yes, sir," said Roger. His voice was rougher than Clarendon's, with a thick cockney accent. "As I say, sir, it were a tremor what pulsed through the schoolyard when the Bahushnovat crossed the gate. If anybody else noticed, they didn't react. But we felt it, I tell you, and we knew what it meant. Yes, sir. We knew just what it meant."

Clarendon motioned for him to continue.

"There were a couple o' things we did not know, though, sir. The first was why the bloody creature would risk coming to such a well

guarded place; the second was who had brought him through. It's the first day back from winter break, and dozens of students were coming through them gates just then, you see, sir. Any one of 'em could've been the host, willing or no.

"Well, we found out who the unlucky chap was half a moment later when William Marshall—the human lad from Northampton—attracted a small crowd. He was singing for attention like some sort of two-bit huckster. 'Tell me a lie, any lie,' says he, 'and I will tell you the truth of it.'

"Daniel Woodson was the first poor soul to take the bait. 'All right, then,' says he. 'Your mother's a fine woman of spotless repute!' The children all laughed at that. Daniel fancied himself right clever, he did, and grinned ear to ear. But William's face did not change. He touched a hand—the right one, if that matters—to Daniel's forehead, and the poor lad went stiff as stone.

"'You've never met my mother,' says William, 'but *your* mother died giving birth to your little sister, and you hate the girl for it, though you pretend to love her.' He removed his hand, smiled, and shuddered with sheer pleasure on his face."

Headmaster Jones gasped.

"Aye," said Roger, "I shuddered too, I did, but not for pleasure. And Daniel, God help him, went pale as winter. He stood there wavering for a moment, as if he'd seen a ghost. Then he ran away with his face in his hands. The children laughed harder than ever at that. Thought it was all a joke, I suppose.

"Sally Braxton was next. 'I've got one,' says she. 'Though this one might be true. You don't fancy any of the girls at this school.' A roar of 'Oohs' went up from the children. William touched the lass's head. She froze too.

"'William fancies…' the creature began before he caught himself, 'that is, *I* quite fancy Marjorie Johnston. You, however, I find repulsive, both for your horse's grin and for your dull wits.'" Roger paused. "It was a terrible rude thing to say, sir, but it's what he said, and—"

Clarendon interrupted. "It's quite all right, Roger. Accuracy is paramount in such matters. Do go on."

"Very well, then," Roger continued. "Well, the poor lass fell to the

ground when he released her. After a moment, she stumbled to her feet and ran off in tears. We'd seen enough, we had, so that's when we stepped in."

"And, for the record," said Clarendon, "why did you wait until two students had been attacked before you interfered?"

"Well, sir, it's like I said before: we had to be certain what the creature was after. They're right dangerous when provoked, so you have to be prepared to take 'em right away, if you see what I mean. If not—"

"Alas, we know all too well what can go wrong. Thank you. Now tell us how you beat it."

"*Him*, sir. Not *it*. Beggin' your pardon." Roger's cheek twitched once.

"Very well. Him. How did you overcome him?"

"I played his game, sir, but with an ace up my sleeve, so to speak. 'I have a lie for you,' says I. 'More than one, if you please.' The lad licked his lips and stared at me. Then I says, 'You—the one choosing the words, I mean—you're a human lad named William Marshall. You entered these premises this morning at the school's invitation, and you mean no harm to anyone.' The boy laughed and stepped toward me, extending his hand as he came. But I grabbed his arm by the coat sleeve and held it firm and far from my forehead, you see, and I was 'specially careful not to look him in the eye. 'None of that,' says I.

"'All right then,' says he. 'Fair is fair. I am one of the a pentrafax of the tribe called Bahushnovat. I entered this place in the mind of the boy, William, without respect to your rules or your welcome. I am hungry, and I mean to make my feast here whether you like it or not.'

"'And if I resist you?' says I. 'If I confine the boy and keep him far away from his peers, what then?'

"'Then I shall take another host,' says he. 'Perhaps you would do.'

"'Suit yourself,' says I, and I pressed the boy's hand to my head.

"Well, the bloody creature attacked me at once, just as I'd hoped he would, and we caught him by surprise. Bound him up in a corner usually reserved for limericks and cheap jokes, we did, and we've been holding him for you lot ever since."

"You keep referring to yourself as *we*," said Clarendon. "What do you mean by it?"

"I mean *we*. My host, Roger, and me." He said this with as much nonchalance as if he were describing the weather or what he'd had for breakfast.

For several seconds, neither man spoke. Clarendon stared intently at Roger, his brow wrinkled and his lips pressed firmly together. Roger returned his gaze with a smile. The skin beneath his left eye spasmed, but he didn't seem to notice. Headmaster Jones wiped his hands on his trousers and coughed.

"Now," Roger continued, "if you don't mind me asking, sir, I'd like to know how you plan to do it—the extraction, I mean. It's like to be… well…painful. Bloody Bahushnovat is right angry, and he won't leave without a fight."

There was another long pause.

"You are aware, are you not," Clarendon said at last, "that there are council regulations and inter-realm treaties that forbid the union of pentrafax with other intelligent beings?"

"People, sir," said Roger.

"Pardon?"

"Meanin' no offense, of course, sir, but all those documents say 'people,' not 'intelligent beings.' And—again, meanin' no offense—"

Headmaster Jones cut him off, "Now, Roger, I think it would be best if—"

"No, no," said Clarendon. "That is, with your leave, Headmaster, I would like to hear him out."

"Yes. Of course," said Jones. "Very well then. Carry on, Roger."

"Thank you, sir," said Roger. "Well, it's just that in other rulings—take the one about who's allowed to live outside an hidden community, for example—that word, 'people,' well, it only applies to humans, now don't it?"

"That's not the point—"

"Again, with all respect, sir, we disagree, Roger and me. It's *just* the point, ain't it?" His voice rose. He stood and took a step toward Clarendon. "Them laws was made to protect humans. But Roger ain't human, is he? He's a shifter! A Taborian!" His voice grew louder still. "Roger and me, we've been quite happy with this arrangement for

twelve years now, and it's a right good thing I was here with him today to protect this lot. Who else do you suppose—"

Clarendon placed a hand on Roger's chest and said in a quiet, non-threatening tone, "Mr. Bryce, I am not here to hurt you. Please let go of my arm."

Roger's mouth hung open and his eyes went wide. Clarendon's upper arm was clamped in his firm grip. "I…I beg your pardon, sir," said Roger. He let go of Clarendon and backed away. "I didn't—"

"It's quite all right," said Clarendon. "It's been an eventful day for all of us." Then to the headmaster, "Headmaster Jones, the strain of hosting two pentrafax is beginning to wear on our brave friend. Would you be so good as to locate my colleague, Agent Jameson? Let him know that we're ready to begin the extraction whenever he is."

Without a word, Jones crossed the room toward the door. As he passed, Clarendon caught his arm and whispered, "Be a good man, and lock it behind you." Jones nodded and left.

# 2

# SALLY

That night, Sally Braxton woke in a cold sweat. The nightmare had seemed so real. She had run for what felt like hours from a dark shadow that chased her through the schoolhouse. The door to every classroom and closet was locked, every window was jammed, and the shadow was always behind her, just around the corner. At last, she had escaped from the building and run across the schoolyard. Still it came for her. It chased her toward the gate. She knew it would be locked, but—as happens in dreams—she found that the key was in her hand. When she reached the gate, she fumbled with the lock but could not seem to insert the key.

"Hurry, my Sally girl," said a man's voice. "I have something to tell you!"

She looked up and saw her father, standing on the other side, holding a bouquet of daisies, with his arms spread wide and smile on his face.

Sally opened her mouth to scream, but no sound would come. Her father had been dead for three years.

After trying for several minutes to calm herself, Sally surrendered. She sat up. Both hands of the clock on the wall pointed at three. Marjorie, Sally's roommate, snored quietly in the top bunk. Sally slid

her feet into her slippers, snatched her electric torch from the nightstand, and tiptoed out the door.

A half-empty tin of snowman-shaped biscuits and a stack of books sat on the coffee table in the dormitory lobby. Sally took one of each. Then she switched on a small lamp and curled up as best as she could in one of the uncomfortable high-backed chairs that adorned the room. She glanced at the book. It was a leather-bound anthology of the sort meant to look sophisticated on one's shelf. Charles Dickens. Her mother had insisted that she read *Great Expectations* last summer, and she had seen a performance of *A Christmas Carol* when she was little. She hadn't cared much for either, but at the moment, she was grateful for anything to focus on besides the dream. Without bothering to find a proper starting place, Sally flipped the book open to the middle and began to read. Or rather, she tried to read, but—though her eyes performed the ritual zig-zag and her fingers dutifully flipped pages—her conscious mind did not participate.

She lost herself in the memory of her father's voice. He had been so brave in life—a true Sentinel. Now that the shock of seeing him had begun to wear off, she regretted that she had not gone to him. It hadn't been real, of course, but still she wondered. What would he have said to her? And oh, what she would give to feel his arms around her once more, even for a moment, even in a dream. A tear slid down her cheek.

"Sally," a man's voice said.

She gasped and sat up. Men were not allowed in the girls dormitory after dark. "What? Who is it?" She swung the beam of her torch around the lobby. Nothing. "Who's there?" she asked. There was no reply.

Sally did not move for a long time. But at last she took a deep breath and relaxed, deciding that she must have dozed and begun to dream again. Sally rubbed her eyes, took another bite of biscuit, and focused intently on the page.

"'Since I knew you,'" Sally read aloud to keep her mind from wandering, "'I have been troubled by a remorse that I thought would never reproach me again, and have heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent for ever. I have…'"

Something moved in the shadows near the stairwell. Sally jerked her head up and froze. “Wh-wh-who’s there?” she stammered.

“Sally girl,” said the voice, and now she knew it wasn’t a dream, “why won’t you come to me? Be a good girl, and open the gate.”

This time, when Sally opened her mouth to scream, she found her voice.

# 3

# JAMESON

"Bloody machine," Agent Mark Jameson mumbled as he slapped the side of the damaged reel-to-real recorder. His partner, Agent Clarendon, had been right to bring it along. That was smart. But then the idiot had gone and gotten it all banged up, leaving Jameson alone to suffer through the consequences.

Jameson jiggled a switch on the front. The reels turned slowly. He pressed a button and the tape wound backward at high speed. Then he pressed the playback button and rubbed his temples as he listened to the last minutes of the recording once more. There had to be something he was missing.

"Mr. Bryce, I am not here to hurt you. Please let go of my arm."

"I…I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't—"

"It's quite all right. It's been an eventful day for all of us. Headmaster Jones, the strain of hosting two pentrafax is beginning to wear on our brave friend. Please find my colleague, Agent Jameson, and let him know that we're ready to begin the extraction whenever he is."

Jameson stopped the tape. This bit bothered him. Sure, Roger had brought up extraction first, but Clarendon knew as well as he that The Sentinels had no method for extracting a pentrafax. It was just a convenient rumor that they had allowed to circulate. But as far as

Jameson knew, the only way to force a pentrafax to leave its host was to kill the host, and Clarendon was no killer. Even if he had been, he was unarmed. Bryce was taller, heavier, and a shapeshifting Taborian to boot. If Clarendon had been bluffing, he had done so with a worthless hand. Jameson pinched the bridge of his nose and tapped the eraser end of his pencil on his notepad. He suspected that Clarendon's words had been chosen with care. But to what end? At last, he gave up and started the tape machine again.

Here was the now-familiar sound of Jones's oxfords scraping hurriedly across the tile floor; the whispered words, barely audible over the static hiss of the tape; more footsteps; the opening and closing of the door; the lock clicking into place; the moment of silence.

"May I ask you a question?" said Clarendon's voice.

"As you please, guv'nor."

"What's your name?"

"What sort of question is that, eh? It's Roger Bryce, of course."

"No. That is your host's name. What is yours?"

"Me? Why, we pentrafax have no need of names, sir. We provide light and life to our hosts, we do. And they gives us an identity and an anchor to this world."

"Some of the pentrafax have their own names. Jeremiah the Elder—"

"Is a traitor to his own." Roger spit the words with a snarl. The shift in tone was sharp and sudden.

"He is your representative to the council," said Clarendon.

"That plant is no representative of mine."

There was another moment of silence. Then Clarendon spoke, quietly but clearly. He must have leaned toward the microphone, Jameson thought, because the volume increased even as his voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"I have a lie for you, friend, if you're still taking them."

Roger said nothing.

"It's not mine, if I'm honest; it's yours. But it's a good one. Would you like to hear it?"

Silence.

"You—the one choosing the words, I mean—have lived in a symbiotic relationship with Roger Bryce for twelve years now. You outwitted, trapped, and imprisoned a pentrafax of the Bahushnovat today, and soon you will hand him over for extraction."

Roger exploded with laughter. "Well said, sir," he said at last. "You're cleverer than you look. All right. Fair is fair. The truth—"

"No," said Clarendon. "It was your lie. I will tell the truth of it, if you please."

"Be my guest."

"You are not Roger's companion. You are the Bahushnovat. If my guess is right, you're *the* Bahushnovat. The last of your tribe. The rest have either faded or, more likely, been absorbed to make you stronger. You couldn't wait to jump into Bryce's head. You haven't been overpowered by Roger's pentrafax partner, though it doesn't seem he's given up the fight yet. And you didn't come here to feast on children with your silly game. You mean to be caught. You have bigger—"

There was a loud clatter, and the recording ended.

By the time security had arrived, the room had been wrecked, the door wrenched off its hinges, and there was no sign of either Roger or Clarendon. The tape that had recorded the conversation lay strewn across the room, wrinkled and torn in several places. It had taken Jameson several hours to splice it back together.

A lot of good it did him. For all of his listening and analyzing, Jameson had nothing but questions. What was this Bahushnovat really after? What was the point of the game of lies? Where had he gone? And if he were found, what could be done to stop him? Shapeshifting Taborians were problem enough when they went rogue, but one whose mind had been commandeered by a pentrafax, well, that was another matter entirely.

Jameson set the tape machine to reverse and opened the case file again. There were photos of William, Sally, and Daniel with short biographies of each. He scribbled a note to interview each of them separately and to speak with each of their families, then he set the pages aside. He removed two other documents: several pages clipped together that contained all that was known about Roger Bryce and a single page with a single paragraph that contained all that was known

about the Bahushnovat—which is to say, nothing really, except that they tended to abduct human hosts and had been condemned by the council for doing so. Jameson scanned through Roger's biography until he found what he was looking for: the name of someone who might be able to help. Alexander. His name was Alexander.

# 4

# WILLIAM

"Blimey!" said a girl. "That's the third time this week!"

"I told you something was wrong with him," said a boy. "That thing muddled his brain. And not just him. Everyone knows about Sally's little incident, seeing the dead and all that. If you ask me, Headmaster ought to send all three of 'em away before they infect—"

"Hush!" said another voice, firmer and older sounding with an American accent. "You kids back up and give the poor boy some room to breathe. Go on, now. Shoo!"

William Marshall's eyes opened. For a moment, all he could see was a blur of spinning lights and shadows. The tile floor was cold and hard beneath him. His head throbbed.

"Are you all right, Mr. Marshall?" asked the voice again. He felt something rough touch his forehead.

"Yeah," he said, "I…I'm fine." His vision cleared and he could see the hairy face of Dr. Palta, his professor for Advanced Applied Interdimensional Sciences.

"You were talking. You kept saying 'Emily' over and over."

"It was nothing. Honest. I must have," William started, "that is, I probably didn't eat enough breakfast this morning. I'll be fine."

"Not a chance, Mr. Marshall. Not after what you've been through. Go on to the nurse. I'll not have you blacking out in my lab again.

There are specimens in this room that don't play nicely together, you know, and that experiment running over there…If you'd fallen onto it instead of the floor…We can't risk it. Would someone please escort—"

"No!" William shouted, and then winced. "I mean, no. It's all right. I can make it."

William left the classroom alone, but he did not go to the nurses' station as instructed. He'd been there twice this week already, and if this third episode were reported—well, there was no telling what they would do. Expel him? Lock him up in a loony bin, more like.

Instead, William found himself walking toward the woods on the southern end of campus. Sometimes, other students snuck off to the woods to snog or smoke, but at nine in the morning, it was as good a place as any to be alone. And that's what he wanted just now: to be alone. Or at least, that's what he told himself. He just needed a moment to sort this all out.

What bothered William most was not that he kept passing out—the nurse had said that would stop in time as he recovered from the trauma—it was the new memories he had when he came to. He hadn't told anybody. He couldn't get them out of his mind: faces of people he'd never met, the insides of rooms he'd never seen, pain he'd never felt. And fear. So much fear. William had lived a comfortable and safe life until The Incident, and even that had felt more like an unpleasant dream than the invasion he knew it had been. But now, though he had not experienced any of it for himself, he knew the terror of being hunted, of running and hiding in the shadows and praying to any god that would listen that *they* (whoever *they* were) would not find him. He knew what it felt like to watch a friend bleed out, helpless to intervene.

And he knew how it felt to kill.

The details were fuzzy, but the emotions were real. He didn't know how or why, but each time he passed out, new memories (or perhaps the memories of memories) took up residence in his psyche, scratching away at the corner of his mind and screeching for his attention like a stray cat at the door.

Today had been different, though. Today he had seen something he knew: the gate to the school, clear as day. Then the vision had taken

him around the perimeter of the school grounds, tromping over hills and through thickets, just beyond the clearing that paralleled the fenceline, until he had reached a tall elm tree beyond the southernmost border of the school grounds. He had seen thick, hairy arms reach out in front of him and hoist him up into the tree. From this height, he had looked north, over the treetops. In the distance, he could see the gymnasium and library, and nearer, the open school yard. His gaze had traced its way downward, across the wooded area until it reached the tall, high-tech electronic fence that kept intruders out. He had listened for a moment to the low thrumming noise it made. The fence was an intimidating structure of brick and steel and parallel wires made of both earthly and unearthly metals. Nothing grew within ten feet of it. Nothing could.

"They've turned it up," a cockney voice had said in his mind. "There's no gettin' in or out while it's on."

His eyes had then turned toward a small brick shack just inside the fence. Power lines ran from it in every direction. Somehow, he had known—though he had never seen it before—that the controls for the fence were housed in this building, and that, once inside, he would be able disable the power terminal that supplied it. It would be simple. A series of numbers began to repeat in his mind. A passcode. He would need this, he knew, to open the door to the shack.

The voice had laughed then, and the vision had shifted and hazed over until he saw, as if in a dream, a rusted car lying abandoned in a clearing, and inside, his little sister, Emily, gagged and handcuffed, eyes wide with terror.

"You know what to do, boy," the cockney voice had said. "Come right away, and we'll let her go. Delay, and…well…"

William reached the treeline and looked back. Any minute now, students would begin to drift toward their next classes. A year from now, Emily would be twelve, and she would join them—if she was still alive. He turned and marched through the trees.

# 5

# JAMESON & PALTA

The overhead lights flickered and went out. The glow of vacuum tubes faded, and Clarendon's voice dropped several octaves as the tape machine slowed to a stop. The sounds of concerned voices and quick footsteps drifted in from outside. Then the door opened.

"Agent Jameson, we have a problem. The fence—"

"Right. I'm on my way." Jameson snatched up a small black box from the desk where he'd been working and wound the bundle of wires that hung from it around his hand. "Thank you for this, Dr. Palta," he said to the short, hairy professor who had invented the device he held and had alerted him to William's disappearance. "I certainly hope it works."

"As do I, Agent Jameson. As do I."

# 6

# ROGER

A rush of anticipation rose unbidden in Roger Bryce's chest as he scaled the electronic fence unharmed. Agent Clarendon was draped limply over his shoulder, but this was nothing to a body as strong as Roger's. His feet hit the ground, and a moment later, William Marshall emerged from the trees, shaking. Roger placed his palm on the boy's forehead for a few seconds, then they turned and walked together through the thick woods and onto the open schoolyard. Roger dropped the broken and bruised agent to the ground next to William. Clarendon groaned.

Roger turned and stared across the lawn toward the library. For a moment, that other feeling—the looming dread that had clawed at Roger's bowels all morning—receded. Success was so close, he could almost see it. This would force the council's hand. *Soon*, a voice said in Roger's mind, *we will be free to observe the traditions of the tribe, to absorb and to radiate freely, to take what is our right, to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over this ungrateful planet.*

Roger's right cheek twitched. His head jerked. He took a deep breath, and surveyed his surroundings. The schoolyard was empty. Lights were out in all the windows. *Lockdown*, he thought, and for a moment, hope rose in his heart before it was replaced by irritation.

"It's time," he said aloud, "to summon the children."

"Don't," Clarendon croaked from where he stood at the edge of the wood. "It's…not…too late…Roger."

The very sound of the agent's voice infuriated him. Clarendon was to have been his ticket into headquarters; now he had become a nuisance and liability. Without bothering to turn, Roger raised a hand and pressed his fingers together, pantomiming a bird's beak snapping shut. William kicked Clarendon in the mouth.

Roger seated himself on the ground, legs crossed, eyes closed, palms upturned. Two wisps of light, barely visible in the daylight, spiraled from his trembling lips and sped toward the school.

They waited.

In the silence, a memory drifted into Roger's mind: his first day working here. He hadn't been head of security then, only an errand boy. And he'd been so nervous and excited, so eager to impress that he couldn't choose a form. He kept changing his hair, his height, his skin, until at last Headmaster Jones pulled him aside and asked if he wouldn't mind terribly choosing a single uniform (so to speak) while he worked so as not to confuse the rest of the staff. He had settled on a towering, bearded, beast of a man, and he had assumed the same form at work every day since. It made him proud. It made him remember the way Jones had patted him on the back and…

It was gone. He couldn't remember. And he found that, just now, he didn't want to remember. *Must focus now*, he thought, anger burning the back of his neck. *It ain't no time for distractions. No sir. Not today.*

A door on the side of the library opened, and Sally Braxton stumbled out.

Roger stood.

"No!" someone screamed from inside. "Sally! Come back!"

Sally did not go back. She ran clumsily across yard, neck craned to watch over her shoulder the whole way, until she ran smack into Roger Bryce. She stumbled back, then turned and screamed when she saw him.

"There, there," said Roger, licking his lips as he approached the

trembling girl. “Hush, poppet. Come to ol’ Roger. We won’t hurt you, we won’t.” He touched a hand to Sally’s forehead. She stiffened for a moment and then relaxed, glancing between Roger, William, and Clarendon.

“Where’s the other boy?” she asked, expressionless.

# 7

# DANIEL & JONES

Daniel Woodson thrashed on the gymnasium floor. Students screamed and gasped and covered their ears and pointed. Two of the instructors nearby tried to help, but Daniel screamed and swung his limbs violently at anybody who came too close.

"No!" Daniel shouted between gasping, choking breaths. "It's a… lie!" Drool ran from his mouth and smeared across his cheek as his face scraped against the wooden floor. "I…I…" he stammered. A sob escaped from his throat. "Y-Y-You shut up!"

Then he let loose a sickening shriek. His back arched and his body rose to a stand, as if lifted by an invisible hand. The other students cowered and scrambled away. Some cried. Others tried to force open the locked doors.

Headmaster Jones, dressed for cold weather in his bowler hat, leather gloves, and long coat with collar upturned, pressed through the crowd and hurried toward the boy. "Oh, dear God. Mr. Woodson, you poor lad, what is—"

Daniel's head snapped toward the old headmaster, eyelids pried wide apart, lips and tongue twitching, contorting his face into a hideous, writhing mask. His mouth opened, and a wheezing, rasping voice that was not his own came out. "Stand down, little man," he said, "or we'll hurt him, see?" Daniel's hand rose slowly toward his own

face, and his bottom lip began to tremble. A finger pressed into Daniel's left socket, just beneath the eyeball. In it sunk, deeper, deeper, until the first knuckle had disappeared and blood flowed down the boy's face. Daniel's chest expanded and contracted rapidly, but no sound escaped.

"Stop it!" shouted the headmaster. "Stop it this instant, I say!"

"Let us out," the voice hissed, "and there will be no need for us to cause him pain."

"Yes! Yes, of course," said Jones. "Anything. Just stop hurting him."

Daniel removed his finger from his eye and let it fall limp to his side, dripping red onto the floor. His eyeball bulged and pointed in the wrong direction above a bloody and swollen wound. Already, the skin around the injured area was purpling.

"Oh, thank God. Come, lad, we must get you to the nurse at once."

"You will let us go freely, old man, without any more delays."

Jones did not reply. He glanced around the room until he saw a young instructor clutching a ring of keys. "You there," he said. "Miss Pawlowski."

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"I am going to escort Mr. Woodson out of the gymnasium. I'll need you to unlock the door."

"But sir," the instructor protested.

"None of that, now," said Jones. "I'm afraid you'll just have to do as you're told. Understand?"

Miss Pawlowski nodded.

"Good. Now, I'll lead the way with Mr. Woodson, and you follow. Everyone else is to stay put." Daniel's lips twisted into a trembling smile.

"Come along," said Jones as he took the boy by the arm. Daniel jerked away and hissed. "If you want out of this building," said Jones, "you must let me escort you." He grabbed the arm again and pulled the boy, stumbling and writhing, toward the doorway.

The sea of students parted to make way. Miss Pawlowski followed two paces behind the headmaster.

They reached the door, and Jill picked through the assortment of

keys on her keyring until she found the right one. “Are you sure about, this, sir?” she whispered.

“Quite sure, thank you. Now, if you please…”

Miss Pawlowski unlocked the door and pushed it open. The headmaster and the bleeding student walked through, and Jones pushed the door shut behind them. A series of clicks announced that the door had been locked from the inside.

Daniel tried to jerk his arm away, but Jones held tight. A look was exchanged, and Jones pulled the boy toward himself and caught his other arm. Daniel shrieked again. For a moment, all was grunts and flailing arms and feet scuffling on the pavement; the next moment all was silent.

The gymnasium door inched open, and Miss Pawlowski peeked. Headmaster Jones motioned to her from where he knelt beside the limp form of Daniel Woodson. His bowler hat lay on the ground nearby. A series of wires ran from inside the collar of his coat, over the top of his head, and attached to what appeared to be a red crystalline gem mounted onto his forehead with a gray putty, just beneath where his hat would have sat.

In a demonstration of strength that defied his old age, Jones scooped up the young man and held him like a baby. “Miss Pawlowski,” he said, “I’m taking this young man to the nurses’ station. Would you please lock the gymnasium and go find Agent Jameson? Tell him I regret to say that I have already gone off script and made a mess of things here, but he’ll be happy to know that Palta’s device seems to work splendidly.”

# 8

# ROGER

Twenty minutes had passed, and the boy was nowhere to be seen. Roger paced and pulled at his beard. His thoughts were a jumble of what-ifs and plan-Bs, blurred memories that had nothing to do with what was happening here and now. He felt uneasy and distracted. No, that wasn't it; the Bahushnovat was uneasy and distracted. And that was a good thing. The more distracted the Bahushnovat was, the easier it was for Roger to discern his own thoughts and feelings.

"Where *is* he?" demanded Sally Braxton, or rather, Roger decided, some aspect of the Bahushnovat inside her.

"I don't know," Roger heard himself say. He didn't fight it. Best not to draw attention to his lucidity. "The boy is here. Made contact just this morning."

"This is taking too long," said Sally. "Even if we failed to find the boy, we should have returned to ourself by now."

A muffled cry sounded from the direction of the gymnasium, and Roger felt his heart sink. He looked at young Sally. Her face looked as terrified as he felt. *No,* said the voice in his head, *we must put a brave face on it*.

"What do you think," asked Sally with a trembling voice, "has happened to us?"

Roger rose up to his full height against his will, and the Bahushno-

vat's burning anger coursed through his veins. It was taking over again. "Whatever it was," he whispered, "those blighters are going to pay for it." He marched a few steps toward the school. "Jones!" he shouted. "Jones!"

Silence.

Roger growled. "Listen to me, Jones!" he shouted at last, "I'm giving you five minutes to come here and talk, nice-like, before I start hurting people!"

Sally grinned. "That will do it. The fools won't suffer us to hurt the children." After a moment, she added, "Not too rough, mind you. We need them alive."

Roger harrumphed and turned his back on her. Clarendon lay in the grass holding his ribs, an amused smile on his bruised face.

"Do you find this funny, Agent Clarendon?" he asked.

"You have…already…lost," he wheezed through bloody, swollen lips.

"That so?" Roger stomped over to Clarendon, grasped him by the lapels, and lifted him off the ground. "How d'you figure?"

Clarendon smiled and said nothing.

It was the boy, Roger realized. Something had gone awry. He felt the Bahushnovat's uncertainty. Whatever had been sent to fetch the boy had failed and had not even returned to report the trouble. Simultaneous thrills of hope and dread pulsed in his chest. "What did they do to us?" he heard himself ask.

Silence.

"I will get it out of you, I swear it!" Roger slammed a palm onto Clarendon's forehead, and the Bahushnovat rushed through his hand like a fire in his veins. "You've resisted me so far, but you're weak now, and you know it. You dare not lie to me!"

"You're…right…" squeaked Clarendon. "The truth… will set me… free."

Roger felt the heat in his hand intensify. His whole body burned. An image flashed in his mind's eye, and begrudgingly, Roger grew several inches. His muscles bulged, claws sprang from his fingertips, and fangs protruded from his open mouth. "Tell me a LIE," he roared at Clarendon as he shoved him down onto the grass, one hand pressed

firmly against his forehead, the claws of the other now digging into Clarendon's chest.

"Roger," said Sally's panicked voice.

He released the agent and spun around.

"Someone's coming."

# 9

# JAMESON

"Roger Bryce!" shouted agent Jameson as he topped the hill. He felt silly wearing Jones's too-large hat, but there had been no time to come up with a better plan, so this would have to do.

He was greeted with a growl. "And just who might you be? I called for Jones, not some lackey." Roger loomed taller and more muscular atop the hill than he had appeared in his photo. And did he have claws?

Jameson set his jaw and marched on. He would not be intimidated by this shapeshifting Taborian. "I am agent Mark Jameson. And I asked to speak with Roger Bryce, not some pathetic, two-bit kidnapper. Jones is busy interviewing the boy you tried and failed to abduct. We'll have you out of Mr. Bryce in half a moment, but first, I would like to speak with the rightful owner of the body you're illegally inhabiting."

Roger gowled. "No! I don't speak to Jones, you don't speak to Bryce."

Jameson drew a revolver from the holster at his hip and trained it on Bryce's forehead. "You're in no position to bargain. Now stand down," said Jones, "and I will allow you to live."

Sally and William stepped forward, one on either side of Roger. The three opened their mouths and laughed the exact same laugh in

the three distinct voices. Then all three spoke in terrifying unison: "Do you think a bullet will stop us?"

"No," said Jameson. "But it will ruin your plans for today."

"You are outnumbered, human," the three said. "You can't win. Besides, what would your precious council say if you shot three people, two of them students?"

"I won't have to do that," said Jameson. "There's really only one of you that has any strength, and not so much as you would have us believe."

Roger growled.

"You two kids are only cooperating because you're afraid to fight," continued Jameson. "That reminds me." He reached into his coat pocket with his free hand and removed a folded sheet of paper, careful to keep the gun aimed squarely between Roger's eyes. "Sally Braxton, I spoke with your mother this morning. She is taking the train up from London this morning and should arrive in time for lunch. She says she is bringing you a box of pastries from…" he squinted to read the scribbled name, "Malinconico's? I hope I said that correctly." He glanced up and saw the light of recognition in Sally's eyes. "Yes. I see you remember the place. She also said that she is bringing Mr. Coddleswash?"

"Mr. *Cuddlesworth!*" Sally cried. "The bear my father gave me!" Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes.

Roger spun toward her and bared his teeth. "Control her," he growled.

Sally fell to the ground and began to jerk about as if having a seizure. "I've got her," she gasped after a moment. Then she stood and composed herself. "You can tell my mother to go home," she said at last. "I don't care to see her."

"Right. Well then, once we've expelled *you*, we shall speak with Sally and find out whether she would like to see her mother and Mr. Cuddlesworth. Now, William Marshall, Headmaster Jones spoke with your father this morning, and he wished you to know that your sister, Emily, is safe at home. Since you were shouting her name while you were passed out, I can only assume—"

"Lies!" shouted William. "I've seen her!"

"Yes," said the three in unison again, "he lies! We showed you where we put her."

"I'm sure they did," said Jameson. "And I suppose they promised not to hurt her so long as you cooperate. The Bahushnovat feed on lies. I, on the other hand, am an agent of The Sentinels. If you doubt what I've told you, listen to this: It says here that Emily wanted us to tell you that she misses you and that old farmer Wellington let her name the new foal that was born yesterday. She wanted you to know that she's calling it Baba. Does that mean anything to you?" Jameson wadded the paper with one hand and tossed it toward William.

William stooped, picked up the paper ball, straightened it out, read it, then began to weep.

"Pull it together!" shouted Roger.

"No, no," said Jameson, "let it out. Those tears are too honest. The Bahushnovat doesn't like that."

"You shut your lying mouth," said Roger.

"Lying? You would like that wouldn't you? Lies create tension in the brain between the rational and the creative, between morality and self preservation, between integrity and pride, and you've found a way to exploit that tension, to get a foot in the door, so to speak. You love it. You feed on it. Without it, you're too weak to—"

"Enough!" Roger roared. "I'll snap you like twig, and we'll see who is the weak one!" He advanced on Jameson heedless of the gun pointed in his direction.

"Alexander!" screamed Jameson, stumbling backward. "A little help, please!" He pulled back the revolver's hammer with his thumb. "I really don't want to kill Mr. Bryce."

Roger froze mid-stride, a look of bewilderment on his face. "Wh-what is this?" he stammered.

For a moment, all was still.

"Excellent!" said Jameson with a sigh of relief. "You see, Bahushnovat? Clarendon was right; some pentrafax do have their own names. Thank you, Alexander."

"You are...most welcome…sir" Roger said, straining. "Though, I am afraid I can't hold him for long."

"Not to worry," said Jameson. "You won't have to. You see, the

Bahushnovat never really wanted Roger anyway. He wanted Clarendon. How has that worked out? Hmm? It seems to me that none of the minds he's invaded so far will get him what he really wants. Too bad, really. There is one more, though. I am expected to report directly to the council when all of this is over. Did you know that? I'll have a direct audience with Jeremiah the Elder and all the others, face to face. That's all you really wanted, isn't it, Bahushnovat?"

Roger's eyes widened, and he licked his lips.

"If you're willing to bargain, I'll make a deal with you. You let them go, and I'll put down my gun. Then we'll talk. I understand you are fond of a certain game. Perhaps you would like to play it with me?"

Roger stood wide eyed, mouth agape.

"Let them go," said Jameson. "Now."

Roger glanced at William and then at Sally and nodded. Two wisps of white light slipped from the students' mouths and drifted away like smoke on the breeze.

"Very good," said Jameson. He laid the revolver in the grass and stepped away from it. "Now, what was your line again? Something about a lie?"

"Tell me a lie," said Roger, "any lie, and I will tell you the truth of it."

"Yes. That was it. And here's my line: The Sentinels do not now, nor have they ever possessed any means for extracting a pentrafax from its host."

"Is this some bleedin' trick?" Roger hissed.

Jameson held up his open hands. "What trick? I only wanted these innocent people to go free. What happens next is up to you. Come now. I've done my part," said Jameson, "let's have yours."

Roger's eyes shifted between Jameson and the two students. William still knelt weeping on the lawn. Sally stood teary-eyed and trembling.

"Scared, are you?" said Jameson and clicked his tongue. "I knew you were a fake, but I never—"

"You're a bloody fool," said Roger. He thrust his open hand, palm first toward Jameson's face. The black bowler flew from Jameson's head, and the enormous hand hit a tiny, glowing, red stone.

“Push now, Alexander!” yelled Jameson, pushing his forehead against Roger’s massive hand with all his strength.

“It’s not..working,” said Roger in a strained voice. “I think he...knows…something is wrong.”

“Keep pushing!”

“Too...strong…”

“Say something true, the truest thing you know! Shut the door on him!” Jameson groaned and grabbed hold of Roger’s forearm.

“Roger,” said Roger at last, “I love you like a brother. You have been a true friend.”

And with that, the fight was over. Light exploded from the gem; Jameson toppled over backward and scrambled to remove the glowing thing from his forehead; Roger slumped to the ground, exhausted.

Jameson crawled to Clarendon. “Are you all right, old chap?”

“Oh, I expect I shall live,” whispered Clarendon through swollen, bleeding lips. “See to the others.”

He put a hand on Clarendon’s shoulder and stood. Sally sat huddled with William in the grass and wept on the boy’s shoulder. Jameson walked to Roger. “It’s all right now,” he said. “It’s over.”

“He’s…” Roger whispered. “He’s gone.”

“Yes he is,” said Jameson, holding the gem out for Roger to see. “And we’ll put him where he can never hurt you again.”

Roger looked up at him, tears running down his cheeks, eyes hollow and sunken.

“Oh no,” said Jameson. “You don’t mean—”

“Alexander. He’s gone.” Roger choked back a sob. “They’re both gone.” Then the large, strong shapeshifter rolled onto his side, pulled his knees up to his chest, and wept.

# 10

# PALTA

"Are you quite sure you can't…" Agent Jameson began, "That is, are you certain there's no way to—"

"Not safely, I'm afraid," said Dr. Palta. He set down his pen and looked the agent in the eye. "If we open that thing up, it'll be open. Either one of them could come out, or both. We can't risk it. Ever." He picked the pen back up and resumed writing.

"No. You're right, of course. Better not." Jameson sighed. "Poor, poor Roger."

Dr. Palta shook his head and continued to work. "I'm afraid he'll never be the same. Nobody's mind—even a Taborian mind—is equipped to handle that kind of separation."

"Tragic, really," said Jameson. "But I hear the students are recovering nicely, and that's something, now isn't it?"

Dr. Palta raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Ahh. I see. More to it than they're letting on, I suppose. That's the way of it with these things." Jameson drummed his fingers on the desk.

"There," said Dr. Palta as he signed his name. "One technical overview of the device we rigged up, hot off the presses."

Jameson smiled, took the stack of papers from Palta's desk, and flipped through them. "You're really quite clever, you know."

"Lucky. That's all."

"Won't you reconsider the council's offer? We would love to have a mind like yours in London."

"Oh no," said Dr. Palta, "I have too much to do right here. With a lot of hard work and a little more of that good luck, the next generation of Sentinel agents and researchers that come out of this school will discover and invent things that'll make our little contraption seem like a child's toy. I'd rather invest in them."

Jameson chucked. "Very well, then, professor. I'll pass on your regrets." He took the gem from the desk and placed it into a small steel box inside his briefcase, locked it, then closed and locked the briefcase and handcuffed it to his own wrist. "Best of luck to you," he said and held out a hand.

Dr. Palta took the agent's hand in both his paws and shook it. "Thank you. You too. And please tell Agent Clarendon that we all wish him a speedy recovery."

Agent Jameson smiled, nodded, and walked away carrying a locked briefcase that contained a locked steel box that contained a small red gem that contained—and as far as we know, still contains—the last two pentrafax on Earth to have inhabited the mind of another intelligent being.

Or at least, they were the last to be discovered.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Joshua C. Carroll** is the author of The Adventures of Sarah Ann Lewis and the Memory Thieves, the first novel in a series about The Sentinels. He is also a dad/foster dad, and the founder of Dads Who Read. He lives in Fort Worth, Texas with his wife and kids. Learn more at JoshuaCCarroll.com.