

A Cult of One

By: Keith B. Howard

Chapter One

There were just minutes to go on the last day of sixth grade and Jacob Tischler was out in the hallway with Mrs. Dingle for about the hundredth time this year. She looked at him and sighed.

In any school, there are classroom students, who stay in their seats for 180 days a year, and hallway students, who regularly have hushed private conversations with their teachers in the brick hallway. Other kids who walked by smirked at the twosomes, knowing that the one doing all the listening was in trouble.

Jacob was one of the few students in the whole junior high who had moved from being merely a hallway dweller to a part-time office resident, being sent fairly regularly to have a conversation with the principal, Mr. Platine.

"Jacob," Mrs. Dingle said in a whisper, which still managed to echo off the walls, "I'm just so disappointed with the way things have gone this year. You're not a bad boy by any means, but I can't let you behave the way you do. You can't be so disrespectful. Asking me in front of the class if I wear a

jumper when my family goes to a nudist colony. That's just being mean for the sake of a laugh."

She wiped her chalky hands on her navy blue jumper, leaving ghost-like white marks

"I'm trying to be funny for the sake of a laugh, actually," said Jacob, tapping his foot in what was more a fever than a rhythm.

"Right there," she said holding her palm up in front of his face. "That's what I mean. I'm trying to talk to you person to person, and you have to turn it into a joke. Why does everything have to be funny to you?"

He had been serious, but whether he was being serious and kids and teachers thinking he was joking or kidding around and having people take him seriously didn't really matter. This confusion had caused most of his trouble in life. Either way, he spent a lot of time in hallways talking with teachers or in the office talking with Mr. Platine.

"You've got a lot of potential, Jacob, but you're not living up to it. You're a smart boy and you're capable of doing a lot of things. The future is a big place, but you have to do something to get where you want to be," the teacher said, emotion filling her voice, which made Jacob want to giggle.

"I know, Mrs. Dingle," he said, looking down at the floor to hide his smile. He studied the whirling pattern still

faintly visible on the old tile floor. "I'll try harder next year."

"It's not just your effort, it's your goals," she said, rubbing her hands together to get the last chalk of the year off. "Trying harder to be the class clown and to avoid doing your work won't result in success. It'll just be more of the same."

Whenever teachers talked like this, they got a soft, wet look in their eyes, as if they were saying something new, something Jacob hadn't heard every day of his life. That was the problem with having "potential," whatever that was. It was just another way of adults saying they were disappointed. Sometimes he wished he were retarded, so people would be happy he didn't drool or grab his crotch. Instead, he heard words like dismayed or baffled or chagrined or dissatisfied. A chorus from the thesaurus of "You let me down."

Luckily, the bell rang, freeing him from Mrs. Dingle's sincerity. He could leave school and shut the door on sixth grade forever. He'd set a record for days suspended by a 12-year-old, eight days altogether. Mr. Platine, the principal, had informed him of this accomplishment, and was disappointed with the pride Jacob appeared to take.

"Jacob," he'd said, "You make me very tired and very sad. I just don't know what to do with you."

Discovering his ability to make middle-aged men tired and sad was the high point of sixth grade, which just showed what a crummy year it had been.

He waited outside the back door for his friends, Gary and Scott to come out, so they could walk home together. Unfortunately, before they got outside, Bradley Hooker showed up.

"Hi, Jacob," he said in his soft, almost whispery voice. His hand reached up toward his bright red helmet with the Ranger Rick sticker and he scratched his head through one of the holes. "You wanna walk home with me?"

"I was waiting on some other guys, actually," said Jacob, wishing he could disappear Bradley or send him to some alternate galaxy like Mr. Mxyzptlk in Superman comics. Then Bradley could only come around once every 90 days, instead of hang-dogging him on a daily basis.

"Scott and Gary, I suppose," Bradley said with a small sniff, like maybe somebody had farted. "Can I walk with you guys?"

"Sure. I guess," Jacob said, wishing Bradley would read his mind and head off alone.

"Jacob, can I ask you a question?" Bradley asked, trying to look him square in the face.

"I guess."

Jacob stared at the dirt.

"How come you don't like me any more?" said Bradley, the pain of the jilted in his voice.

That was the kind of question that contained its own answer. Guys don't ask that question. Guys don't talk about that stuff. Guys do stuff; they don't have conversations about things.

"I like you okay, Bradley."

The lie was apparent to both of them.

"You just don't like the same stuff as me."

"I know," said Bradley with a sad smile. "I just wish we could go back to the way things used to be. Back when we were close."

Jacob thought that sentence would fit in on "As The World Turns" or "General Hospital." He was both disgusted and angered by Bradley. In response, he hocked up the biggest lugey he could muster and spat at Bradley's left foot. Missed by an inch.

"Ewww, gross," Bradley said, which was just the wrong thing to say.

Bradley wore his helmet all the time. He had been in a car accident the summer before. His mom and dad were talking in the front seat, Bradley reading a Bobbsey Twins book in the back, right before they drove off the road. Nobody was hurt. Not

even a scratch. Even their car didn't need to be fixed. But from that point on, Bradley's mom made him wear a helmet, even watching TV.

Before the Cilleys moved in, Bradley had been his best friend, even though Jacob never really liked him that much. Oh, he had a cool tree house, ten feet off the ground, that his dad built using some fancy architectural plans from a magazine, but he wasn't allowed to go up in it. He also had an aluminum canoe docked down behind his house on Beard's Creek. Bradley's mom didn't care if Jacob went out in it, but her Bradley had to stay on dry land. He even had an expensive mountain bike, but he was only allowed to ride up and down their long driveway, back and forth, like a guinea pig trapped in a cage. And wearing a helmet.

"Hey, Jacob," said Scott, approaching from behind them. "I knew I recognized that smell. Hey, Bradley."

"With that schnozola of yours, you can probably smell a Chinaman's farts," Jacob said, glad to be back among the company of boys. "And you probably get off on it."

"Hi," was all Bradley could muster.

"I got all A's except for a D in math, a C in English and a couple of C pluses," said Scott. "I'll leave off that last part when I tell people, though."

"Hey, Jacob. Hey, Bradley," said Gary, joining them.
"Summer's finally here."

"Actually," said Bradley, "It's only June 18. Summer doesn't begin until June 21."

"This and other useless information available from Bradley Hooker, King of Trivia," said Jacob, with a laugh.

"No, he's right," said Gary. "It is still technically spring."

"And, technically," said Jacob, "Scott's a moron. We still treat him like he has a house in normal."

"Fuck you," said Scott.

The boys walked down Drag Hill behind the junior high. All summer long, early in the morning, like one or two, beer-drunk high school boys would line their cars up at the bottom of the hill, kill their lights to avoid detection and race to the top, the driver in the left-hand lane knowing that if, perchance, a car came down the hill, this would be the last ten seconds of his life. Jacob couldn't wait to be old enough to distill that much fear and excitement into the flash of an eye.

"Hey, Jacob, did you ask your mom about going camping?" said Gary, the wind blowing back his Army fatigue shirt, purchased at the head shop downtown, and carrying the ludicrous name Zybitzky on the nametag. Gary was both big and fat, almost

six feet and 200 pounds, while Scott was even shorter than Jacob, probably five-five, and maybe 120.

They didn't look anything like brothers, what with Gary being dark-skinned and hairy, even on his chest and back and Scott being redheaded and fair-skinned. Jacob looked more like a brother to either of them than they did to each other. Gary and Scott were both 14, but they were only Irish twins, not real ones, because their mother got pregnant with Scott about a month or two after Gary was born.

Jacob pictured Mrs. Cilley nursing Gary while Dr. Cilley was banging her from behind, and then he'd get kind of sick to his stomach. Much of his free time was spent envisioning what his friends' parents looked like when they were doing it, or what he would look like if he were doing his friends' moms. It was his hobby.

"She said she'd have to talk to my dad, which I think means yes," Jacob said, kicking absently at a medium-sized rock on the sidewalk. He'd gotten good at figuring out his parents and their decision-making process, which usually consisted of trying to put off making one, but ultimately letting Jacob do whatever he wanted.

That was one nice thing about having parents who were heavy drinkers. They didn't remember anything they said after nine p.m., so Jacob could quote them as having said any damn thing he

pleased and they were ashamed to admit they didn't remember. Oh, they weren't mean drunks or crazy drunks. They paid their bills and they'd never hit him. It's just that they'd have a couple of martinis before dinner, then they'd nurse whiskey and water all evening until they were pretty much blotto.

"You guys are going camping?" asked Bradley softly, scratching his head again through the helmet. "Where are you going?"

"At the old Adams Farm out on the Lamprey River," Gary said. "By the railroad trestle. I've heard about that thing ever since we moved in, but this is going to be my first time actually seeing it. And jumping off it."

"I've heard it's dangerous in those woods," said Bradley, actually shivering on the 90-degree day. "My dad said he thinks there might be somebody living out in those woods. He was with his forestry students, and one of them thought she saw a man following them, but when they looked for him they couldn't find anything."

"Well," said Scott, dismissing Bradley's concern, "We'll be the men living out there for the next three days. We'll head out after dinner tonight and spend two nights out there, being free men. Jumping off the trestle and dropping forty feet into the river."

"That sounds dangerous and kind of scary," said Bradley, further demonstrating his inarticulateness in the language of boys. "Cool," "bitching" or "a fucking blast" were the appropriate response to hearing of an adventure. Not scary. Never scary.

"It'll put some hair on our balls," said Jacob. "That's for sure."

"Or in your case on your pussy," said Scott, punching Jacob's arms.

"Fuck you," Jacob said in a singsong voice, hitting Scott back.

"See what I mean?" said Scott. "It takes a guy and a girl to fuck, not two guys."

"Oh, I know, you're the real fuckmaster, aren't you?" Jacob said, happy to have somebody to swear with. "What do you call your right hand when you kiss it goodnight?"

Scott was older on paper, but way younger than Jacob inside. Scott still thought girls were gross, but Jacob was interested in getting to know a few. In intimate ways. And not just mothers, either.

His first suspension had been because of a girl. In October in science class he'd begged Carol Tillock to go to the fall dance with him. Although she was a little chunky, she had a friendly and cute face, and she was popular.

Before asking her out, he'd never said anything to her other than, "What page are we on?"

She turned him down, with a sneer and a laugh. Having a pretty face laugh at him hurt, but instead of accepting defeat, he went over to the aquarium in the corner of the room and used the little net to nab a sea minnow. Holding its squirming body between his thumb and forefinger, he walked back to Carol, a big grin on his face.

"Do you like animals?" he demanded.

"Go away, you creep!" Carol said. "What's the matter with you?"

She looked at him with genuine fear.

"Because if you won't go to that dance with me, this little fish is gonna get it," Jacob said, not knowing yet whether he was serious or joking. "And it will be on your head."

"Gross!" she said, actually gagging while talking.

"Last chance, Carol," he taunted. "The dance or the fish. What's it gonna be?"

She turned and walked away. He lifted the flopping fish over his mouth, opened up and dropped it in. Without biting, he swallowed it.

Two day's suspension for disrupting the classroom environment and cruelty to animals. It was the second part that pissed him off. Mrs. Andrews, the nasty old science teacher,

had tuna fish for lunch every day. Jacob knew. He'd had to smell her breath from 12:18 to 1:04 all year. All Jacob had done was eliminate the canning process. He had been environmentally friendly. Isn't that what Earth Day was supposed to be about?

"Stop arguing," said Bradley, twisting his hands together nervously. "It's the first day of summer vacation. We should be happy."

"Okay, Mommy," said Jacob, with a sneer. "You know, even Mister Rogers farts sometimes, and probably swears and even bangs Mrs. Rogers, if you want to know the truth."

"I just don't like fighting," said Bradley. "It makes me nervous."

Bradley was an only child, which Jacob's mom said makes all the difference. Jacob fought with his little sister all the time. Fighting with a brother or a sister or a friend was one of the best things a kid had going for him.

"Why don't we each say one thing we're happy about?" said Bradley, suggesting the kind of solution girls the world over enjoy.

"I'm just glad I can't get suspended from summer vacation," Jacob said, not wanting to look like such an asshole in front of the Cilleys.

"Yeah," said Scott. "I know what you mean. Getting suspended sucks."

"What kind of dumb-ass thing is that to say?" Jacob demanded, not minding the play-fighting with Scott, who would never admit that anything made him "nervous." "You've never once been suspended from school, but now you're trying to jump onto my tough-guy image by saying, 'Yeah.' You couldn't get suspended, Scott, on account of everyone knows you're one step short of retarded. Or one step past. They don't suspend mouth breathers like you. For chrissake, you move your lips when you watch TV."

"Shut up," said Scott.

"Ooooh," Jacob mocked. "'Shut up.' Good one. I'll have to write that one down."

"Fuck you," said Scott with a laugh. "At least I don't get suspended."

"Then don't fucking say, 'Yeah,'" said Jacob, the moral universe restored.

"Shut up, both of you guys," rumbled Gary. "You're getting on my nerves. I just want to go swimming. And jumping. And fishing."

Gary knew a lot about all kinds of animals. He was going to be an ichthyologist, so he especially knew a lot about fish.

Jacob figured he just wanted to sit around all day fishing and getting paid for it.

Of course, Gary also talked about becoming a priest, another job that didn't involve any heavy lifting. He and Scott and their parents went to church once a week, usually Saturday afternoons to get it out of the way. Jacob had gone with them a few times, but one time he knocked over the Holy Water font, which made everyone bless themselves and made Jacob feel like a world-class sinner. Plus, it always freaked him out to see the congregation kneeling while the priest put bread in their mouths. It seemed like a bunch of baby birds waiting for regurgitated worms.

Jacob's father' was Jewish and his mother was nothing, so Jacob thought of God as kind of like a wooden farm cart. Maybe He used to be important to people, but He had long since been replaced by newer and better technology.

Still, religion was the reason for his second suspension.

At Christmas, his mom made a couple dozen sugar cookies in the shapes of crosses. On the way to school, he had brushed all the sugar off them and got out the can of Cheez Whiz he'd snuck out of the house. By the time the party started at nine o'clock, he had created a new blasphemous taste sensation—Cheezit Christs.

Two day's suspension for mocking the beliefs of others and on general principle.

"Bradley," Gary said, stopping to look at the boy's face. "Do you wanna join us? Go camping with us? It's going to be a lot of fun."

While Jacob felt contempt for his former friend, both Scott and Gary would periodically and sincerely reach out to Bradley, but he always seemed to view the offers as dangerous candy from strangers.

"I don't think my mom would let me," he said, looking down at the ground. "I know she'd never let me jump off the trestle. Anyway, it sounds dangerous, sleeping in the woods where there might be a fugitive lunatic."

"What are you going to do instead," sneered Jacob, "stay home and polish your helmet? Ride your bike up and down your driveway?"

"It hurts my feelings when you say things like that," said Bradley, leading with his chin. The other three boys knew the proper response was a round of "Fuck yous." Talking about emotions was in stunningly bad taste, like telling a guy you wanted to bang his sister.

When they reached the cul de sac that was Beard's Landing, Bradley and his hurt feelings continued down the street, while Jacob, Scott and Gary went up the Cilley's driveway to draw up

lists of what they'd need for three days in the woods. They offered the departing Bradley no farewell acknowledgement, and he trudged down the street, his face hanging down as if someone had cut his spinal cord.

"What a loser," Jacob said.

"I feel bad for him," Gary said, picking a piece of grass off his arm. "He's like a girl trapped in a boy's body. That's gotta be some lonely space to farm."

"I guess," said Jacob, jealous of Gary's generosity and expansiveness. Even though Gary knew the schoolboy code, he could somehow rise above it. Rise above it and float. Jacob just lacked that glowing respect for humanity that Gary gave off in waves. His last suspension showed that.

In April, during the first five minutes of Mr. Hodgdon's social studies class.

"Mr. Hodgdon," Jacob asked after raising his hand and being recognized. "Could you do me a favor?"

"What's that, Jacob?" the teacher said, wary any time Jacob opened his mouth.

"Could you give me back my socks?"

"What are you talking about? Why would I have your socks?" he asked with a puzzled tone.

"Oh, you wouldn't have them here" Jacob said. "I left them under your bed last night while you were out bowling. Tell your wife thanks for me."

The sad thing was, he really liked Mr. Hodgdon, and felt like he'd learned some things from him. Hell, the teacher had let him do a report on Superman when they were profiling America's heroes.

Four days. School psychologist.

Summer at last. Two months of peace.

Or war.

Durham, New Hampshire, is a college town, where if you don't teach, you're basically nothing. Bradley's dad was a professor of forestry, and their family used to take Jacob up into the White Mountains sometimes when Dr. Hooker was doing research. Now, though, Bradley stayed home with his mom and his helmet.

Doctor Cilley was a real doctor, a physician. When you live in a place where everybody makes their living through the work of their minds, though, even Dr. Cilley was kind of suspect. He had to use his hands in his work, so doctoring was a kind of manual labor.

Jacob's dad made dentures, which made his family a little bit less than nothing.

Jacob's parents had promised him living on Beard's Landing would be great. There were these ten lots and they were the first family to buy one and build a house on the little peninsula, this little strip of land going out into Beards Creek, which is an estuary, which means it's both salt and fresh water mixed. Jacob's father said the most interesting stuff happens at nature's borders, like the edge of a forest where it changes into a meadow or the base of a mountain, when it's just starting to rise.

Jacob had lived here since he was eight, though, so seeing horseshoe crabs living with muskrats and redwing blackbirds just seemed normal to him.

It was like the old joke where a guy goes to a doctor who asks him about his morning routine.

"Well, I get up, I pee, I throw up, and then I brush my teeth."

"Wait a second," the doctor says. "You throw up every morning?"

"Sure," the guy says. "Doesn't everybody?"

Jacob already lived there three years by the time Scott and Gary moved in. They had lived before in a smaller ranch house in Dover, the next town over. Before them, there was just Bradley for kids on the street. And Jacob's eight-year-old

sister, Jennifer, who doesn't really count for anything. She barely even knew she was alive.

When the Hookers, Bradley's family, moved in across the street, Jacob's parents said the other eight lots would sell, and soon there'd be a ton of kids for him to play with. They couldn't know Charlie White, the developer of the lots, would get caught in some kind of scandal and go bankrupt and kill himself. His widow and his kids and the people he owed money to all fought over who got what until the lawyers had collected enough that there wasn't much left to fight over, and so none of the lots were sold until last fall. For a year, there was just Jacob and eight-year-old Jennifer and Bradley on this long strip into a creek.

Then, the previous fall, the Cilleys moved in and everything changed. For one thing, Scott and Gary were guy guys, not girly guys like Bradley. Almost from the start, Jacob had spent every minute with the Cilleys, as they explored the woods stretching on for miles behind their houses. With Bradley, Jacob had never thought about looking for muskrats or blowing up frogs with firecrackers or searching for Colonial treasure at the falling-down house foundation out in the woods or pretending to be Union troops searching for Confederates.

Now, the boys were lounging in the Cilley's back yard, each of them lying on the freshly mown grass.

"I've prepared a list for each of you," Gary said, all organization. "Look it over and make sure you have everything you need.

Jacob glanced down at his list. It seemed complete. Gary would have thought of everything.

"Besides our personal supply and fishing stuff," Gary continued, "Each of us needs to provide a few other things. I'll bring along the tent, a cooking pan, a first-aid kit and wax-dipped matches."

"Why wax dipped?" asked Jacob, who had only been camping once before, with the Boy Scouts, although he hadn't quite told the Cilleys that.

"You dip wooden kitchen matches in wax," Gary explained, "so that even if they get wet, they'll still light. The friction on the striker melts away all the wax when you light it."

"Pretty cool," whistled Jacob.

"Scott, you're in charge of food. We'll be able to eat fish, but we need other stuff. I've put together a separate list for you. Make sure and snag the stuff from the kitchen. If we're missing anything, let me know and we'll buy it on the way."

"What do you want me to get?" asked Jacob. "The girls and the booze?"

"You're in charge of firepower," Gary said.

"I thought you were handling fire," said Jacob. "Do we need a lighter, too?"

"Not fire. Firepower," Gary said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Armaments."

Jacob closed his mouth while his eyes widened.

"Bradley may be a little timid," Gary said, "but he's right to be concerned about some guy maybe living out in the woods. We'd be stupid not to be able to protect ourselves. Jacob, I want you to get your old man's revolver and five or six rounds of ammunition. Make sure the damn thing's not loaded and keep the bullets separated from the gun. This is for real. We need that gun, but we don't need an accident."

While serving the third day of his April suspension, Jacob had discovered a handgun in his garage, hidden in a white plastic food-service bucket and covered with rags. He pulled it out slowly, amazed by its heft. Jacob had gotten a bb gun when he was seven, followed by an air-powered pellet gun at nine and a .22 rifle for his eleventh birthday. He had killed a few squirrels and a rabbit with the .22, and even gutted them out with his father's help and eaten them. It was conceivable you could kill a man with a .22, although it would probably take a few shots.

When he held up the revolver, though, and sighted for the first time down a real gun barrel, Jacob felt he was at the nexus of power in the universe. He was king of all he surveyed. He was Shiva, the Destroyer. Carefully putting the revolver back on top of the scattered bullets, he covered it with the rags.

At dinner that night, he was as casual as could be in bringing up the matter.

"I was cleaning up in the garage this afternoon, just like you asked me to," he said to his father, "and I found something pretty cool."

"Pretty cool is how I'd describe the idea of you cleaning anything without being asked 20 times first," said his mother with a smile. "I was pleased when I got home to see you'd actually done as we asked."

"Was it Chatty Cathy?" asked Jennifer, referring to a talking doll he and the Cilleys had summarily executed in February with his .22. For the crime of collaborating with the enemy, either the Confederates or the Nazis, he couldn't remember which, Chatty Cathy had had to die.

Her last words, taken down for posterity, were: "I'm wet, Mommy. Change me."

After 15 shots, Chatty Cathy had been nothing but shards in the woods, and the boys hadn't even bothered to clean up after

the event. Let her be a warning to other potential traitors and saboteurs.

"Nope. I found a gun, a revolver, in a white bucket, covered with rags," he said, taking a bite of meatloaf, then spreading butter on a piece of white bread. "There was some ammo with it."

"Oh, that," said his father, putting down his fork and taking a sip of wine. "Before your grandfather moved out to California, he gave me that old thing. I hate to throw it away, but I don't really have any use for it."

"Oh," Jacob replied, nonchalant as possible. "Do you think I could have it?"

"No," his father said, looking sharply at Jacob. "What are you, nuts? The last thing in the world you need is a handgun. Maybe when you're older and maybe when you learn not to get in trouble."

"Now that you're done with this suspension," his mother said, "can you promise us you'll stay out of trouble?"

"I can promise I'll try," he said. "That's the best I can do."

Jacob had told the Cilleys about his discovery the next day, but nothing had come of it. Still, Gary had remembered. Gary remembered everything.

Now, two months later, Jacob lay on the Cilleys grass trying to figure out how much trouble they'd be in if his parents found out he'd taken the gun. On the other hand, he tried to taste the trouble they'd be in if they needed the gun and didn't have it.

"Okay, then," said Gary, interrupting Jacob's calculations. "We'll meet here at 1800 hours. Move out troops."

"That's six o'clock, right?" asked Scott.

"Scott?" said Jacob.

"What."

"If your IQ goes up to 50, you should sell."

"Screw you."

It was good to have friends.