



Phoenix Island

By John Dixon

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WINNER OF THE BRAM STOKER AWARD FOR SUPERIOR ACHIEVEMENT IN A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

John Dixon's critically acclaimed *Phoenix Island* reads like “*Lord of the Flies* meets *Wolverine* and *Cool Hand Luke*” (F. Paul Wilson, creator of Repairman Jack). For fans of *The Bourne Identity*, Alex Rider, and Melissa Marr.

The judge told Carl that one day he'd have to decide exactly what kind of person he would become. But on Phoenix Island, the choice will be made for him.

A champion boxer with a sharp hook and a short temper, sixteen-year-old Carl Freeman has been shuffled from foster home to foster home. He can't seem to stay out of trouble—using his fists to defend weaker classmates from bullies. His latest incident sends his opponent to the emergency room, and now the court is sending Carl to the worst place on earth: *Phoenix Island*.

Classified as a “terminal facility,” it's the end of the line for delinquents who have no home, no family, and no future. Located somewhere far off the coast of the United States—and immune to its laws—the island is a grueling Spartan-style boot camp run by sadistic drill sergeants who show no mercy to their young, orphan trainees. Sentenced to stay until his eighteenth birthday, Carl plans to play by the rules, so he makes friends with his wisecracking bunkmate, Ross, and a mysterious gray-eyed girl named Octavia. But he makes enemies, too, and after a few rough scrapes, he earns himself the nickname “Hollywood” as well as a string of punishments, including a brutal night in the “sweatbox.” But that's nothing compared to what awaits him in the “Chop Shop”—a secret government lab where Carl is given something he never dreamed of.

A new life...A new body. A new brain. Gifts from the fatherly Old Man, who wants to transform Carl into something he's not sure he wants to become. For this is no ordinary government project. Phoenix Island is ground zero for the future of combat intelligence.

And for Carl, it's just the beginning...

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Editorial Review

Review

"This action-packed novel (with YA crossover appeal) combines adventure with extreme violence and concerns a young boxer sent to a very special youth boot camp.... When things come to a head, Carl finds that all of his suspicions about the island prove even worse than he thought in this crisply written and imaginative effort. Dixon's page-turner will keep readers of all ages enthralled. A fast-paced, exciting novel with the promise of future installments." (*Kirkus*)

"An unusual premise makes Dixon's thriller debut a welcome series kickoff... the pacing and smooth prose will have suspense fans waiting for the next book, as well as the upcoming CBS adaptation, *Intelligence*." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Filled with both menace and heart, *Phoenix Island* stands out in all the right ways." (New York Times bestselling author Melissa Marr)

"*Lord of the Flies* meets *Wolverine* and *Cool Hand Luke*. A tribute to the indomitable human spirit that challenges the mob and chooses values over expediency." (F. Paul Wilson, New York Times bestselling creator of Repairman Jack)

"Fast-paced and thoroughly engrossing – I could not put it down!"
(Lissa Price, international bestselling author of *Starters*)

About the Author

John Dixon is a former Golden Gloves boxer, youth services caseworker, prison tutor, and middle school English teacher. You can visit his blog at JohnDixonBooks.com.

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Phoenix Island



WEARING A STIFF BLUE JUMPSUIT and handcuffs, Carl sat with no expression on his face and waited to see what they were going to do to him this time.

They were going to come down hard on him. The judge might even dismiss the case straight to adult court, and then Carl would be looking at jail time, as in real jail, no more juvie, no more boys. Men. Thieves and rapists and murderers. Shanks and gangs. Everything. He'd be lucky to survive a month.

The Dale County Juvenile Court didn't look like a courtroom. It was just a narrow room with two folding tables set end to end. No judge's dais, no jury box, no spectators' gallery. Just the tables and a dozen or so uncomfortable metal chairs flanking them. Carl smelled new carpet and coffee. Fluorescent lights buzzed in the drop ceiling overhead. A furled American flag leaned in one corner, pinned to the wall by a podium pushed up against it to make room.

He avoided eye contact with his foster parents, who sat at the other end of the table, next to Ms. Snyder, the probation officer, and stared instead at his bruised and swollen hands—the scars on his knuckles reading like a twisted road map of the great lengths he'd traveled to arrive here.

Out in the hall, somebody laughed in passing. Carl heard keys jingle. A cop, probably.

The cop in this room looked bored. His leather gun belt creaked as he shifted his weight, watching the judge shuffle through a tall stack of papers.

Carl's mouth was dry and sour with the waiting. Directly across the table, the judge picked up a white Styrofoam cup. Then he put it down and set some papers to one side of the others. Then he looked up. He had watery eyes and deep lines in his face. His hair was a gray mess, and he needed a shave. Despite his robe, he looked more like a burned-out math teacher than a judge. Looking again at the white cup, he finally spoke.

"Could somebody please get me another cup of coffee? Velma? Would you mind?"

A tall woman said okay and stood up and left the room.

"You are an orphan," the judge said, turning his attention to Carl.

"Yes, sir."

"It says here your father was a police officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what does that make you?"

"Sir?"

"The sheriff?"

Chief Watkins snorted. "I'm the damned sheriff."

"Language, Chief. I'd hate to have to find you in contempt of court."

Carl read the men's voices: just a pair of good old boys, having a little fun while they sat one more case together.

Chief Watkins nodded. "Sorry, Your Honor."

"That's all right." Then, looking up at Carl, he said, "You're kind of a hard-ass, aren't you, son?"

Chief Watkins cleared his throat.

"It's all right, Chief. It's my court. I'll be in contempt if I see fit. Answer the question, son. You fashion yourself a hard-ass?"

Carl shrugged. "I don't mean to be."

"You don't mean to be."

“No, sir.”

“And you know what that sounds like to me?”

“No, sir.”

“That sounds like every kid who comes in here.” He looked at the paper. “It says here you’re a boxer?”

Carl nodded. “I was.”

“Chief Watkins used to box a little, didn’t you, Chief?”

“A few smokers back in the navy. Nothing official.”

The judge said, “Our friend here had more than a few fights. How many was it altogether, son?”

“Eighty-seven,” Carl said.

“And out of those eighty-seven matches, how many did you win?”

“Eighty-five.”

The judge raised his shaggy brows. “That is a good record. Were you a champion?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What sort of champion?”

“Seventy-five, ninety, and one fourteen.”

The judge tilted his head, then grinned a little. “No, son, I’m not talking weight classes. I meant what level of champion. City? State? National?”

Carl nodded.

“All three?”

“Yes, sir. Junior Golden Gloves, PAL, and AAU.”

Officer Watkins’s gun belt creaked as he leaned back. “That’s pretty good.”

Carl relaxed a little. Talking boxing did that, made him feel like more than just a throwaway kid awaiting sentencing. Still, he could tell this judge viewed himself as a shoot-from-the-hip kind of guy. A judge like this, he might throw you in a dungeon for life or let you go scot-free, either way, just to see the look on your face.

The judge said, “When I asked if you were a boxer, you said ‘was’ rather than ‘is.’ Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. Was.”

“Was, then. Have you retired?”

“It’s just, I keep moving so much. I haven’t been able to fight—box—for a while.”

“Indeed.”

Velma returned and handed the judge his coffee. “Thank you, dear,” he said. “Mr. and Mrs. Rhoades, are you sure you wouldn’t like some coffee? All right, then. Do you all have anything you’d like to say?”

Carl’s new foster parents looked nervous. He wondered if they had ever been in a courtroom before. Probably not. He felt bad, dragging them in. Mr. Rhoades had almost certainly missed work, and Carl could see Mrs. Rhoades had been crying. She told the judge they hadn’t known Carl long, but he’d been a good boy, very respectful, and Mr. Rhoades nodded. Listening to them, Carl felt a renewed pang of loss. Things could have been good here. Really good.

The judge thanked them, rifled through his papers, and said, “Carl, why did you hurt those boys?”

Carl cleared his throat before saying, “They wouldn’t stop.”

“Could you elaborate, please? I’m trying to decide your fate right now, and I’d like to think I gave you a chance to share your side of the story. I don’t know how it is back in Philadelphia, but it’s not every day I deal with a kid who’s beaten up half the football team. Wouldn’t you agree, Chief Watkins?”

“Yes, Your Honor. I’d say this is downright idiosyncratic.”

“Idiosyncratic, yes. So, Carl, do you mind telling me a little more about whatever it was that led up to this unfortunate incident?”

“I was just sitting there, eating my lunch, and then I heard them laughing, and I looked over, and I saw this one kid—I think his name is Brad—picking on this little kid. Eli something.”

“Yes,” the judge said. “Eli Barringer and Brad Templeton. Brad’s home from the hospital now, in case you were wondering. His jaw’s wired shut. He’ll be sipping breakfast, lunch, and dinner through a straw for the next six months, according to his father. Did you know them?”

“Sir?”

This judge asked questions like a slick boxer used a jab. You never saw them coming, and just when you thought you’d found your rhythm, he knocked you off-balance again.

“This boy, Eli, for instance. Was he a friend of yours?”

“No, sir.”

“You just decided to defend him, then. And did you know Brad Templeton?”

“No, sir.”

“What I’m trying to comprehend is why you would do something like this. No grudge to settle; no

attachment to the victim. Why don't you tell me a little more about how it all happened? Maybe even why."

"I don't know." Carl remembered Eli's thick glasses, his hunched body, and worst of all, his smile—his braces full of white bread and peanut butter. "I just . . . I don't like bullies. I mean, I can't stand them. They were making fun of this kid, and he was sitting there, laughing, because he didn't know what was going on, and everybody kept laughing at him, so I got up and walked over and told them to stop."

"By them you are referring to Brad Templeton?"

"Yes, sir."

"An interesting choice of words, them. This is not the first time something like this has happened."

Carl shook his head.

"I've read your records, son. It took me a good portion of yesterday evening. I must say, to employ Chief Watkins's terminology, that I found your history rather idiosyncratic."

They looked at each other for a second, and the judge said, "Carl, you've been in eighteen different placements in the last four years, and that's not counting short stays like the place where you got that jumpsuit you're wearing. Eighteen. A dozen and a half foster homes, group homes, and juvenile detention facilities in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, and"—he glanced down at the papers—"Idaho. How was Idaho?"

"Cold, sir."

"Cold, yes. I'd imagine. You've accumulated one of the longest rap sheets I've ever seen for a juvenile, and you've only just turned sixteen. And yet something stands out to me. They're all, every last one of them, the same charge—assault—each stemming from the same sort of situation that brought you before me. Someone gave someone else a hard time, and you took it upon yourself to teach him a lesson. Good God, son, I lost track of how many people you have assaulted. And it's not just other children. Oh no. You've punched foster parents and teachers and mall security and even a police officer. A police officer? Son, don't you have a brain?"

Carl looked down. "He had some skateboarder up against the monkey bars, and he kept yelling at the kid and slamming him into the bars, so—"

"Stop," the judge said. "There is no so when you don't like something a police officer is doing. You had no role in that situation. You're lucky he didn't shoot you. I would have shot you. Chief, wouldn't you have shot him?"

"Hands like that? Yeah, I'd have shot him."

Carl wished these two would drop the cutesy act and get down to business. The longer he sat here, the more it felt like disaster brewing.

The judge said, "I don't know whose decision it was to move you all the way down here to North Carolina and drop you into Jessup High, but I intend to find out, and I further intend to have his hide nailed to my shed by sundown." He glanced at Velma, and she nodded and made a note on a clipboard. "You are a rare

person, Carl Freeman. Other than fighting, your record is absolutely spotless. No theft, no drugs, no underage drinking. If it weren't for the fighting, you'd look like a candidate for the glee club."

Carl had heard all of this before. "I don't look for trouble. . . . If they would just stop."

The judge tented his fingers and narrowed his eyes. "Very interesting, Carl. Very interesting, indeed. You said it again. They. Do you feel these people—Brad, the policeman in Ohio—are all in on this together? Part of some club or something?"

"I'm not crazy."

The judge tapped the stack of papers before him. "Your record implies otherwise, I'm afraid. Either you are insane or, at the very least, downright idiosyncratic. It's like you have a superhero complex or something. Mild-mannered schoolboy by day, raging lunatic by night."

Heat rose through Carl's chest and into his face, and his knuckles began to ache again. Why didn't anybody understand? "If I don't stop them, nobody will. Not the kids, not the teachers, nobody. Everybody just sits back and watches. The kids pretend they think it's funny, because they're too scared to say anything, and the teachers pretend they don't see it because they're too lazy to do anything. What am I supposed to do?"

"Lower your voice," Chief Watkins said. He was still leaned back with his big forearms crossed over his chest, but his eyes bore hard into Carl's.

The judge patted the air. "That's okay, Chief. I'm glad the boy's letting his hair down." Then, to Carl, he said, "Now, these boys you attacked, Brad Templeton and the others, they're well-known in the community. Put on car washes, sell candy bars door-to-door, you might know the type. Their mothers and fathers, I see them at the Elks Club on Friday evenings. In the fall, we show up a bit later on Friday nights. See, football is quite popular here in our little corner of the world. Disturbingly so, in fact. It approaches religion at times. You can see the sort of trouble you've caused me?"

Carl nodded, thinking, Here it comes. The jabbing's over; here comes the KO punch.

The judge continued. "Jessup's football season is over before it even got going. The boys with broken noses will be okay, but the ones with busted ribs and wired jaws are out for the season. There are on that team other kids, good kids counting on football scholarships. Who will even scout a team with the record Jessup's going to have this year? No one, that's who. So these boys, instead of going on to college, they'll just mow lawns and load cases of beer into people's trunks for the rest of their lives." The judge stared directly into Carl's eyes, and for the first time, Carl saw anger there. "These are the real victims of your crime. They might not even know it, but I know it, and you know it, and their parents know it. The town is screaming for your blood, son. They'd like to string you up on the fifty-yard line and then feed what's left to the pigs."

"I'm sorry about those other kids." Carl lowered his head. He was sorry. They had never crossed his mind. Worse still, he wasn't sure he could have stopped himself even if they had.

"I believe you are—sorry about them, I mean—but what interests me is, are you sorry about the other boys, too, the ones you hurt?"

Carl remembered the deep green mountainside beyond the cafeteria windows, rags of fog lifting away like departing ghosts. A strange world far from home, everything darkness and void. Remembered the boys, their

cruelty, their laughter when he'd told them to stop. Remembered the fight, all of them coming at him, and then . . . kids on the floor, bleeding, Carl turning himself in.

He raised his eyes and shook his head.

The judge's mouth went thin. "I didn't think so. While I commend your honesty, I must publicly acknowledge that a criminal who shows no remorse for his crimes is, of course, a criminal likely to perpetrate those same crimes in the future. With those hands of yours, I could charge you with assault with a deadly weapon. Eight counts. Forget the juvenile detention center. Chief Watkins would drive you straight to the state penitentiary, where you could serve out a sentence of, oh, a decade or two, right alongside full-grown men. Does that sound good to you?"

"No, sir."

"Or I could hand you over to Windy Pines. They'd put you in a padded cell and drug you up so heavily you wouldn't be able to tie your own shoes. Do you like the sound of that?"

"No, sir."

"The trouble is, I have to live with whatever decision I make here today, and despite your singular idiosyncrasy, I believe you have the potential to become a good man someday. Your father was killed in the line of duty?"

"He died as a result of wounds sustained in the line of duty." If it sounded like a line Carl had said before, it was. Many times.

The judge sighed. "Carl, it is my belief that you are at the present time, regardless of your potential, incapable of controlling your temper should the aforementioned situation arise again."

Carl nodded.

"Judges in the past have taken every approach, from absolute leniency to draconian severity. Nothing has worked. And yet, you have within you this potential. Even your criminal acts have a certain nobility about them, as if you ascribe to a higher code than the rest of humanity. But make no mistake; they are crimes. In light of these factors—the nature and number of your crimes, your seeming inability to control your temper, and the positive potential I see in every other aspect of your character and behavior—I hereby sentence you to Phoenix Island, a military-style boot camp, the term of confinement to begin immediately and to end at the date of your eighteenth birthday, at which point in time you will either return to North Carolina to serve out the remainder of your sentence, a term of six months to three years, at the state penitentiary, or you will earn placement through Phoenix Island, at which time this court will declare your debt paid in full and will furthermore expunge your juvenile record."

Carl swallowed with difficulty. Jail or freedom. Nothing in between.

"There is no parole from Phoenix Island. It is a terminal facility, meaning you will remain there until you are legally an adult. Fail to learn from this opportunity, and I predict you will spend the rest of your life in and out of prison. If, however, you make the most out of this situation, and you learn to give others a second chance, just as I have given you here today, you will be able to lead a good life as a productive member of our society. You get control of that temper of yours, and I think you'd make one hell of a cop."

“Thank you, sir.”

The judge looked Carl dead in the eyes. “There will come a day, son, when you will need to determine exactly who it is you intend to be.”

“Yes, sir.”

The judge finished his coffee, set the empty cup on Carl’s file, and turned to the others. “Questions?”

Ms. Snyder asked for the location and visiting hours.

Yeah, right, Carl thought. If there were two things you learned as an orphan, they were endings and beginnings. Mr. and Mrs. Rhoades were no more likely to visit than were Carl’s dead parents.

The judge closed the matter. “I’m afraid that’s confidential, Ms. Snyder, and irrelevant, as well. Phoenix Island allows no contact with the outside world.”

Users Review

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