

FRESH AND FEROCIOUS. — JAMES PATTERSON

LOCKDOWN

ESCAPE FROM FURNACE

A THRILLER BY

ALEXANDER GORDON SMITH

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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
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Summary: When fourteen-year-old Alex is framed for murder, he becomes an inmate in the Furnace Penitentiary, where brutal inmates and sadistic guards reign, boys who disappear in the middle of the night sometimes return weirdly altered, and escape might just be possible.

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*For our little one,
and all the other lost children.
Always remembered.
Always loved.
Always free.*

LOCKDOWN

ESCAPE FROM FURNACE

*Beneath heaven is hell.
Beneath hell is Furnace.*

NO WAY OUT

IF I STOPPED RUNNING I was dead.

My lungs were on fire, my heart pumping acid, every muscle in my body threatening to cramp. I couldn't even see where I was going anymore, my vision fading as my body prepared to give in. If the siren hadn't been hammering at my eardrums, then I'd have been able to hear my breaths, ragged and desperate, unable to pull in enough air to keep me going.

Just one more flight of stairs, one more and I might make it.

I forced myself to run faster, the metal staircase rattling beneath my clumsy steps. Everywhere around me other kids were panicking, all bolting the same way, to safety. I didn't look back to see what was behind us. I didn't need to. I could picture it in my head, its demonic muzzle, silver eyes, and those teeth—like razor wire.

Someone grabbed my arm, pulling me back. I lost my balance, spilling over the railing. For a second the yard appeared five stories beneath me and I almost let myself go. Better this way than to be devoured, right? Then the beast shrieked through its wet throat and I started running again before I even knew I was doing it.

I heard the rattle of the cell doors, knew they were closing. If I was caught out here, then I was history. I leaped up the last few steps, hurtling down the narrow landing. The inmates jeered from their cells, shouting for me to die. They stuck out their arms and legs to trip me, and it almost worked. I staggered, lurched forward, falling.

Somehow I made it, swinging through the door an instant before it slammed shut, the mechanism locking tight. The creature howled, a banshee's wail that made my skin crawl. I risked looking back through the bars, saw its huge bulk bounding past my cell, no skin to hide its grotesque muscles. There was a scream as it found another victim, but it didn't matter. I was safe.

For now.

"That was close," said a voice behind me. "You're getting good at this."

I didn't answer, just stared out across the prison. Six stories of cells beneath me and God only knew how many more above my head, all buried deep underground. I felt like the weight of the world was pressing down on me, like I'd been buried alive, and the panic began to set in. I closed my eyes, sucking in as much of the hot, stale air as I could, trying to picture the outside world, the sun, the ocean, my family.

All things I would never see again.

"Yup," came the voice, my cellmate. "Bet it's starting to feel like home already."

I opened my eyes and the prison was still there. Furnace Penitentiary. The place they send you to forget about you, to punish you for your crimes, even when you didn't commit them. Only one way in and no way out. Yeah, this was my home now, it would be until I died.

That wouldn't be long. Not with the gangs that eyeballed me from behind their bars. Not with the blacksuits, the guards who ran their shotguns along the railings as they checked the cells. Not with those creatures, raw fury in their eyes and blood on their breath.

And there were worse things in Furnace, much worse. Maybe tonight the blood watch would come and drag me from my cell. Maybe tonight they'd turn me into a monster.

I dropped to my knees, cradling my head in my hands. There had to be a way out of here, a way to escape. I tried to find one in the hurricane of my thoughts, tried to come up with a plan. But all I could think about was how I came to be here, how I went from being a normal kid to an inmate in the worst hellhole on Earth.

How I ended up in Furnace.

TO HELL

I CAN TELL YOU the exact moment that my life went to hell.

I was twelve, two years ago now, and there was trouble at school. No surprise there, I came from a rough part of town and everybody wanted to be a gangster. Each lunchtime the playing field became a battleground for the various groups of friends. Most of the war was fought with words—we'd call each other names, we'd tell one gang to move out of our area (we had control of the jungle gym, and we weren't going to give it up). I didn't realize until much later just how like a prison school can be.

Every now and again something would kick off and fists would start flying. I never threw a punch all my time at school; even the thought of it makes me feel queasy. But that doesn't make me any better than the boys and girls who got their hands dirty. It makes me worse—at least fighting with your own two fists is kind of noble.

That Tuesday started off like a normal day. I had no idea that it was the beginning of the end, my first step on the road to hell. Me and Johnny and Scud had been sitting on the jungle gym, talking about soccer, and about who'd been the best English keeper of all time. It was one of those days when everything just seemed like it was perfect. You know, a blue sky that goes on forever, and so warm that it feels like the sun's wrapped you up in a blanket. When I think back to my life before it turned, I think about this day. I think about how things could have been different, if I'd just walked away.

But I didn't walk away when Toby and Brandon dragged this little kid across the playground. I didn't walk away when they started pushing and shoving him and asking him questions about why his daddy drove him to school in a Range Rover. I didn't walk away when Toby threw the first punch and the kid crumpled. I didn't walk away when Brandon dug the kid's wallet from his pocket and threw it to me.

Instead, I opened that wallet, took out two ten-pound notes, and crammed them into my pocket. Then I turned my back on the sound of muffled punches, and thought about what I'd buy.

That was the exact moment my life went to hell.

"ALWAYS TRUST YOUR instincts, Alex," was something my dad used to say. He was no stranger to trouble: nothing serious, but a couple of dodgy business deals that hadn't gone the way he'd wanted. A good man, if a little lost, and not the sort of person qualified to give you advice like that.

But he was right. Your instincts are there for a reason, and on the day that I walked out of school with Daniel Richards's twenty quid they were screaming for me to find the little kid and give it back. You can probably guess by now that I didn't. No, I learned to ignore my instincts, to switch off that little voice that tells you not to do things, to deny the fact that I hated myself for what I was doing.

And that's how I became a criminal.

The thing is, it was so easy. It started off with me, Toby, and Brandon walking around the playground demanding money from the other kids. The kind of thing you always see in films, just before the big, ugly bully gets his comeuppance. Only I was thin and scrawny, not bad-looking, and I didn't get my comeuppance for another two years.

Loose change, a fiver every now and again, and occasionally some candy—it wasn't enough. When Toby suggested we break into a house or two, Brandon backed out. I didn't. Greed wouldn't let me. So we did; we hit a small bungalow three roads over from my house, one we knew was empty for the night. Around three hundred quid stuffed in a fake can and a bundle of jewelry that we chickened out of selling and ended up throwing in the trash.

I still haven't forgotten the old lady who lived there—glimpsed with a long-dead husband in the faded photographs on the mantelpiece—and the knowledge that those rings meant more to her than any amount of money. But I buried my doubts just like I buried all my other uncomfortable thoughts. Committing any crime can be easy if you don't think about it.

And I never thought about the future, not once. Even though everybody was talking about the tougher police forces. Even though there was zero tolerance on youth crime after the so-called Summer of Slaughter, when the gangs went on killing sprees. Even though they'd built the Furnace Penitentiary—the toughest maximum-security prison in the world for young offenders, the place that would swallow you whole if you were ever unlucky enough to walk through its doors. I remember the shivers that went up my spine when I first saw pictures of Furnace on TV, but I never once thought I'd end up there. Not me.

Of course, I knew I couldn't go on like this forever, but so long as the money kept coming in, I managed to convince myself that I was invincible, that nothing would ever happen to me. On my thirteenth birthday I bought myself a new bike, on my fourteenth a top-of-the-line computer. I was king of the world and nobody could stop me.

But all those dark, horrible feelings I'd buried were still there, I could feel them churning and growing somewhere inside of me. Deep down I knew I was heading for a fall, one that I'd never be able to pick myself up from.

And, as in all good crime movies, that fall came with one last job.

ONE LAST JOB

THE HOUSE WAS EMPTY, we knew it. Toby had been tipped off by a friend of a friend that the owners were away for the week, leaving behind enough electronic equipment to entertain a small country and a massive bundle of cash from their coffee-shop business.

But we were waiting outside just in case, cowering under a small bush in the back garden with only a solid wall of rain between us and a set of big windows.

“Come on, Alex,” muttered Toby, wiping water from his face. “It’s emptier than Elvis’s coffin is there!”

Toby had a thing for Elvis. He loved his music so much that he refused to believe the King was dead. I ignored the comment and scanned the back of the house. The lights were all off and we hadn’t seen a single movement from inside for the half hour we’d been here.

Toby was right, it was probably empty, but the last thing I wanted was to run into some furious guard who’d decided to stay home. It had happened once before when we’d hit a large house out in the countryside and I’d come face-to-face with a man on the way to the toilet. We’d both stared at each other in shock for what seemed like hours, then screamed in perfect harmony. I’d turned and legged it with him on my tail. It was even scarier than it sounds—he’d been stark naked.

Fortunately nothing like that had happened since, but I was eager to avoid any more encounters with homeowners, clothed or not.

Toby nudged me and I nodded, feeling a trickle of cold water slide down my back. We were sheltered from the worst of the downpour by the bush, but every now and again drips would snarl down our faces and necks with an infuriating tickling sensation. Back then I thought it was like Chinese water torture. I know different now.

“Okay,” I whispered, getting to my feet and rubbing the life back into my numb legs. It was a bitterly cold winter night, but through a break in the clouds the light from the moon made the world glow like it was covered in silver polish. If I hadn’t been so focused on breaking the law, I might have stopped to admire the sight.

Taking a deep breath, I jogged across the garden to the sitting room windows, trampling over the flower beds to avoid making a noise on the gravel. I stopped when I heard an angry mutter behind me and turned to see Toby hopping across the mud on one leg and holding his other foot in his hands.

“Cat crap!” he hissed at me, his expression one of disgust mixed with disbelief. “Why do I always manage to put my foot in crap?”

I wanted to smile but I couldn’t. I was too pumped up—adrenaline flooded my whole body like it did before every job, making my heart beat faster than a hummingbird’s wings and sharpening my senses. I felt like an animal, aware of every sound and sight and smell and ready to turn and flee at the first sign of trouble.

Reaching into the long pockets of my coat I pulled out the only two pieces of equipment, aside from a flashlight, that a burglar ever needs—a glass cutter and the sticky dart from a toy gun. Licking the suction cup on the tip of the dart I pressed it against the bottom right pane. After a couple of tugs to make sure it was secure I pressed the blade to the glass and cut a smooth circle. Pocketing the cutter I pulled the dart gently and the glass popped free, leaving a handy hole in the window.

“Voilà!” I whispered, grinning despite the unbearable tension of the situation. “Do the honors, Tobster.”

I stood to one side and looked at Toby, who was trying to clean his shoe on the soil of the flower bed. Each time he wiped it giant clumps of mud stuck to the mess until his shoe was lost in a massive

brown ball—like he'd just put his foot through a coconut.

"Toby!" I shouted. He snapped to attention, pouting.

"These cost a hundred quid," he said.

"Well, buy yourself some new ones with the money you make tonight," I replied, running my hand through my soaking hair. "Buy yourself twenty pairs."

Toby grinned back and walked to the window, sliding his small hand inside and fiddling with the clasp. After a few seconds there was a loud click and the window creaked open.

"Wow," he said, in shock. "That was almost too easy."

I thought so too. It *was* too easy. I should have guessed then that something funny was going on, because greed is a powerful thing, and all I wanted was to get inside and get out again with as much loot as I could carry. If all went to plan, the proceeds from tonight would mean neither of us had to hit another house for months.

"Right, let's do this," I said, gritting my teeth and pulling the window right open. The room inside was dark, but I could make out rows of shelves and a couple of sofas inside. Several unblinking red lights stared at us out of the shadows, and I imagined the eyes of some hellish guard dog that would bound from the darkness, fangs bared—ready to chew any intruders to pieces.

But they weren't eyes, they were the standby lights from a fortune in electronics that would soon be safely in our bags.

"I'll go first," said Toby. "Give me a leg up." He raised his foot but I didn't move.

"I'm not touching that," I said, looking at the giant clumps of mud and crap that looked like they had been welded to his sneaker. "Why don't you give *me* a foot up."

He sighed and linked his two hands together to form a cradle. Bracing my foot in his grip, I pushed upward, getting one knee on the window frame and pulling myself inside. Scanning the dark interior to make sure it was empty, I skipped down onto the floor, not making a sound on the soft carpet.

Toby was at the window holding two duffel bags and I took them from him before grabbing his arm and hoisting him up. He was almost in when his soiled shoe slipped on the wood of the window frame. With a yelp that was deafening after the tense silence, he fell on me, sending us and a nearby plant stand crashing to the floor.

For a second, neither of us could move a muscle. I lay there with Toby's weight on top of me, barely able to hear anything over my thrashing heart. But there was no sound of slamming doors or terrified screams or feet trampling down the stairs. At least we knew for sure now that the house was empty—Toby's clumsiness would have woken the dead.

Pushing him off me, I got to my feet and picked up my bag, offering Toby a hand.

"Sorry about that," he said sheepishly, pulling himself up.

"Never mind, you lump," I replied. "You start putting away some of this electronic stuff, I'm gonna go find the cash."

"Ten-four," said Toby, pulling a flashlight from his bag and aiming the beam at the row of high-tech gadgets lined up underneath the enormous television. I left him to it, pulling out my own flashlight and making my way out of the door.

You never really get over the sensation of being in someone else's house without their permission. Everything is different—the smell, the atmosphere, even the air tastes strange. I guess that's something to do with the reason I'm always in another person's home. It's as if the building itself doesn't want you there, like it's just waiting for you to slip up before it sucks you into some dark room forever.

Trying to ignore my thoughts, I made my way down a small hallway toward the stairs. According to Toby's friend of a friend, the owners had stashed the week's takings in a tin inside their office, along with a bundle of cash from a charity gig they'd held at the weekend. It should be a piece of cake.

It was a fairly old house, but well taken care of and the stairs didn't creak once as I made my way up. I swung my light to and fro to see where I was going, the shadows seeming to dance in front of me like there was an army of goblins hiding in the corners and behind the furniture. I swallowed hard as I neared the top, cursing my imagination.

There were six doors on the long landing, all closed. Carefully twisting the handle of the first, I found myself staring into a pristine white bathroom. The second door opened outward, revealing an empty closet. Well, almost empty—as I was closing the door something rushed at me out of the darkness, slapping me on the forehead. I just about screamed, fighting off my attacker before realizing it was a mop. Shoving it back inside, I kicked the closet shut, no longer caring about noise, and walked past a small chest of drawers to the next door.

Third time lucky, as they say. This one opened into a large room with a desk against one wall. I made my way straight to it and couldn't believe my eyes. On its walnut surface lay a stack of ten-and-twenty-pound notes plus several bags full of coins—what must have been a couple of grand in all.

It was as I was reaching for the cash, a massive grin on my face, that I heard the sound of screaming from downstairs.

I froze, my skin turning to ice, my scalp seeming to shrivel up so tightly that it hurt. The house wasn't empty. Toby had been rumbled by what sounded like a very shocked woman, which meant he'd make for the nearest exit. I, on the other hand, was stuck up here. I snatched the notes and stuffed them into my pocket.

When the shrieks started again, I realized I'd got it wrong. It wasn't the owner screaming—it was Toby.

But the shock of that was nothing compared to the fright I got when I turned around. In the shadow behind the office door, right in front of me, was an enormous figure. A man whose black suit blended perfectly with the walls, but whose two glinting eyes and vast, sinister grin shone out of the darkness like those of a shark in the cold, dead water of the ocean.

FRAMED

I DON'T NEED TO tell you what I did next. I ran, straight for the open door. But the figure was too quick, slamming it shut and reaching out toward me with an arm the size of a tree trunk. I ducked but he moved like lightning, grabbing the flashlight from my fist and throwing it at the wall. It smashed but it hit a shelf, plunging the room into darkness.

Well, almost darkness. All I could see as I backed away from the man were his eyes, which still stood out from the shadows like two silver coins. They followed me each time I made a move, never blinking and so bright that they seemed to burn right into my soul.

I had to get out of the room. I had no idea who this guy was but I was in his house and, judging by the size of him, he could turn me inside out without breaking a sweat. I was wondering whether I could leap through the window without killing myself when he spoke.

“Where you gonna run to?” he said, his voice so deep that it sent a vibration through the floorboards. “I can see you, Alex.”

My heart seemed to stop for an instant as I heard my name. He couldn't know who I was. There was no way. We lived more than a mile away and we never came to this part of town unless we were hitting a house. Then it struck me. He was a cop. He'd been following Toby and me after a previous job and had framed us by setting up this house as bait.

The thought filled me with panic. At last, the thing I never thought would happen was finally happening—I was about to be busted. Another ear-piercing scream penetrated the room from downstairs. What the hell were the police doing to Toby? I suddenly wished I was back at home tucked away in bed and dreaming, wished I had never stolen that money from Daniel Richards. And I knew that if I didn't make it out of this room, I wouldn't be back in my own bed for months, maybe years.

I fingered the money in my pocket, realizing how pathetic I was to risk everything for a few hundred quid—money that would be useless behind bars. But maybe it could prove useful here. Grabbing as many of the notes as I could, I wrenched them from my pocket and threw them at the man. I didn't wait to see what effect they'd have, but dived to the floor, rolling under his reach and scrambling to my feet on the other side of the room.

I couldn't see the door: it was too dark. I slapped my hands furiously against the wall, knowing that I had only seconds before I felt the cop's huge hand on my shoulder. But there was nothing there except shelves and books. Risking a look behind me, I saw the man's two disembodied eyes racing across the room, and it was all I could manage not to collapse to the floor screaming.

Just as he was above me, however, my hand hit the doorframe. Reaching across, I felt the hand and twisted it, ripping the door open so hard that it almost came off its hinges. It struck the man square in the face, but his only response was to laugh—a deep, grating rumble that followed me out onto the landing.

“Run, Alex, run, Alex, run, run, run,” came his voice as I felt my way toward the stairs. What the hell was going on? What kind of cop would say that?

I was running too fast and tripped on the top stair, almost plunging into darkness before I managed to get a hold on the banister. I tried to plan my escape route as I descended. Obviously the room we came in through was now a no-go area—I had no intention of meeting whoever was in there with Toby. There was the front door, which lay directly ahead of the stairs, or I could try to find my way to the back of the house. Either way, I wouldn't get far in the dark.

As it turned out, though, it wasn't the dark that got me. Almost as soon as I propelled myself from

the bottom step every light in the house was switched on simultaneously. I gasped and pressed my hands to my eyes, momentum flinging me into a wall. The illumination had completely thrown me, filling my head with stars and causing me to lose my bearings.

I squinted against the glare to see that the hall was empty. A quick glance at the front door told me there were too many locks to force it open, so I started running toward the back, hoping for a quiet exit.

I couldn't tell you what happened next. I'm not sure if it was the fact that my eyes hadn't adjusted to the light, or if fear and adrenaline did something to my brain, but it was as if a figure simply stepped from the wall. One minute my path was clear, the next it was blocked by another mountainous man—so wide and so tall that he seemed to take up every centimeter of space.

I skidded to a halt, mouth agape. This man too was dressed in a slick black pinstriped suit, with a white shirt and black tie. He looked more like an undertaker than a cop. What scared me most about him, though, was his face. It seemed to be expressionless and grinning at the same time—his silver eyes staring down at me with unmistakable glee, like a boy about to squash a bug.

“Boo,” he said, his thick voice just as deep and dangerous as that of the man upstairs.

I staggered backward, shaking my head. The man had left only one escape route—the way we had come in. I bolted through the sitting room door, ready to fling myself screaming from the window. But what I saw in that room drained the strength from my body, turning my legs to jelly. It took everything I had to remain upright.

The room, which had been deserted less than five minutes ago, was now full of men. Each was almost identical in size, dwarfing the furniture and making the large space feel like a doll's house—each almost identical in looks too, like brothers. And they were all wearing the same immaculate black suits. I counted four in all, and the sound of footsteps behind me made it clear that the other two were in the hall.

But the figure I couldn't take my eyes off was standing in between the giants, twitching and shaking like he was having a fit. He looked tiny in comparison, barely reaching the elbows of his comrade and wore a long, black leather coat that made his bald head look like pale parchment.

I knew now why Toby had been screaming. The man was wearing what looked like a gas mask—an antique, rusted device that covered the lower part of his face and stretched over his shoulder to a tank on his back, like the ones worn by divers. He wheezed noisily through the ancient contraption as if he was having an asthma attack. Peering over the top of the mask, like two raisins set into rancid porridge, were his eyes, and the way they stared at me made me want to curl up and die.

It took me a few moments to notice the frail, shaking body of Toby on the floor beneath one of the men in black. He stared at me with a look of pure terror, his eyes wide, pleading for me to help him. I didn't know what to do, I didn't even know who the men were. Taking another look at the shriveled figure by the window, I found myself praying for the familiar uniforms of the police, not this freakish show of gas masks and goliaths.

“Nice of you to join us, Alex,” said the huge, black-suited man who was standing above Toby. His face was a mirror image of the others', only with what looked like a small mole on his chin. His voice too was indistinguishable from those I had already heard, like distant thunder.

“It looks like everybody here knows my name,” I said, the words coming out of my mouth before I even knew I was speaking. Despite the terror that rooted me to the spot, I was determined not to give these men the satisfaction of seeing my fear. “If I'd known there was a party here tonight I would have brought some cake.”

To my surprise, the men all chuckled at my joke—a noise so deep that it made the remaining glass in the window vibrate. It was the most terrifying sound I'd ever heard.

“We wanted to surprise you,” the man continued.

“Well then, arrest me—arrest us,” I said, just waiting to get out of that room. “You’ve caught u red-handed; take us down to the station and we’ll confess.”

The same grating laughter that set my teeth on edge. When it had finished, the giant man turned his smaller friend as if awaiting a command. Seconds rolled past while the freak in the gas mask studied me and Toby, then he turned his dark eyes to me and nodded.

“What?” I asked, desperate to know what was going on. “What the hell does that guy want?”

“He wants you to say goodbye to your friend,” the man continued. I shook my head, the fear and confusion churning in my stomach. Were they just going to take me and not Toby?

“What?” I repeated. Toby was no longer looking at me, but was staring at the carpet, sobbing uncontrollably.

“They’ve got guns with silencers,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper. “They’re not police, Alex.”

I didn’t understand what Toby had said until the giant man opened his suit jacket to reveal a holstered pistol tucked beneath his armpit. For a second, I felt the world spin as if I was about to pass out, and by the time I’d regained my composure the man had pulled out the silenced handgun and was pointing it at me.

“Last chance to say goodbye,” he said.

I looked at Toby, wanting this nightmare to end, thinking about the things I’d never be able to do if the man pulled the trigger, thinking about how much I’d miss my friends, how much I loved my family. All lost because of greed. It was so stupid! I couldn’t control my emotions anymore and tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision. All I could see was the outline of the man, and the black shadow that was his gun.

“Goodbye, Toby,” I said through sobs. “I’m sorry.”

“Alex,” was all I heard of his reply. Then the black shadow moved, sweeping downward and emitting a low pop that was barely audible against the laughter that once again filled the room. I tried to blink the tears from my eyes, not quite believing what I’d seen. But when my vision had cleared I realized there was no escaping what had just happened.

Toby lay motionless, his eyes blank, the carpet beneath his body the same horrible color as the wound in his head.

It seemed like hours before anyone moved again. It felt as if the connection between my brain and my body had been severed, turning every limb numb. I wanted to feel anger, hatred, sorrow, anything, but all I could do was stare at my friend, at the body that would never move again—a corpse with one dirty shoe. My legs finally gave way and I sank to my knees.

“Catch,” came the booming voice. The giant man tossed the gun to me and I reached out instinctively, grabbing it by the handle and staring at it in shock. For a second, I pointed it at the black-suited brute, but I’d barely held a toy gun before, let alone a real one, and quickly tossed it to the floor.

“Now, if I were you, Alex, I’d make a run for it,” he continued. “I mean, you’ve just broken into a house, stolen a load of cash, and shot your best friend in the head in cold blood. The police aren’t gonna like you one little bit, so why don’t you put those sneakers to good use and run.”

I couldn’t respond, I didn’t know what he was talking about. But suddenly I felt an enormous pair of hands grip me under my arms and hoist me effortlessly to my feet. The same hands turned me around and pushed me roughly toward the front door, which had been unlocked and opened.

“Good luck, Alex,” came the voice from behind me. “Run as hard as you can, or sit and cower outside. Either way we’ll see you real soon.”

I turned and saw the face of the man in black break into a monstrous smile—all teeth and slitted eyes. Then I took one last look at Toby, at rest on his crimson bed, and bolted out into the rain.

ON THE RUN

WHAT'S THE MOST SCARED you've ever been? Maybe at night, after a horror film, lying under your blankets convinced there's a monster in the room. Or one day in the city when you were younger realizing you've lost sight of your mom and dad. Perhaps face-to-face on the playground with someone who wants to beat the living crap out of you.

Multiply those feelings by a million and you get me on a dark, wet night, running as fast as I could on the slippery streets to escape the people who'd shot my best friend. I didn't know which direction was heading in, I just needed to get as far away from that house as possible, and I ran until my legs felt like they were made of lead, until my lungs were on fire and my heart stuttered and stammered like it was about to give out.

Then I collapsed by the side of the road, my wheezing sobs so loud that people in the nearby houses actually pulled back their curtains to see what was going on. But nobody came out to help me, and I didn't blame them. When you've committed a few crimes, something about you changes. It's like you've been marked with a tattoo that only other people can see, and it makes them wary so that they cross the street to avoid you. Even now, as helpless as a newborn baby, my tears conspiring with the rain to soak my jeans, I knew I was alone.

And I also knew that I couldn't stay out in the open. If what that man had said was true, then they were trying to frame me for murder. And that wasn't just a slapped wrist or a month or two in juvie—that was life in prison—in Furnace, with its pits and its punishments and its pain.

Pushing to my feet, I looked at the road sign to get my bearings, realizing that my school wasn't too far from here. I took a deep, shuddering breath and started jogging again, making my way down Briar Avenue and across an abandoned Trafford Road into the row houses that ran along the back of Eastmark High. Toby, Brandon, and I had snuck into school this way countless times to play soccer on the field.

I realized that Toby would never play soccer again, and the thought was like a punch to the gut. But I fought back the tears, tried to push the image of my dead friend from my mind as I cut through an overgrown garden and climbed over the worn fence into the dark, deserted field beyond.

I didn't learn the word *irony* until much later, but I guess it was ironic that I ended up walking across the slick grass to the jungle gym, which rose from the wispy layer of predawn mist like the rusted hull of some ghost ship. It was here that everything had started to go wrong.

It had only been two years since I stole my first cash, but it seemed like forever. I could barely even picture me before that day—a young boy who had never had a bad thought in his life, who wanted to grow up to be a magician, who couldn't care less about money.

I pictured that young boy now, saw him turning his back on his friends and walking off into the sunshine to follow a different path. And I hoped that somewhere, in a different dimension, there was a version of me who wasn't sitting alone on an uncomfortable metal bar in the cold waiting for the police to lock him away forever.

The rain had almost stopped. I climbed a little higher to the platform at the top of the jungle gym and leaned against the rail, looking out across the misty field, eerie in the bright moonlight. Even now and again the glow would be shrouded by a passing rain cloud, throwing the whole world into darkness. Each time it happened I was gripped by terror—the fear that a monstrous dark figure would rise from the fog and snatch me up, carry me away forever. But the moon always fought back, bathing the field and its sole inhabitant in its liquid silver.

My options were few and far between. I could sit here and wait for morning, when the school would

be full of people all looking for me. I could head home—surely the news about Toby’s death wouldn’t have broken yet, and I could talk to my mom and dad about what happened. I could head to Brandon’s house, hide out there until I thought of a better plan. I could run, head for the hills and never look back. Or I could just go to the police, tell them what had really gone on in that house. I mean, there were six giant men and a freak in a gas mask, somebody else must have seen them.

None of those options seemed particularly appealing, so I put them in order of how bad they were. Running seemed like the worst thing I could do, closely followed by waiting here and going to the police. That left Brandon and my own home. I thought about seeing my mom again and it filled me with a strange mix of sadness and joy. Maybe she could just give me a hug and all this would go away. Surely moms had the power to make *anything* go away.

But the thought of confessing to her was almost as unbearable as the thought of a lifetime inside Furnace. It would have to be Brandon’s.

I was so lost in thought that I didn’t notice the change in light until it was almost too late. Looking at my jeans I saw they were shimmering with a red and blue haze, not unlike a disco light. But there was no disco. I snatched my head up to see two police cars sitting a hundred meters away outside the school’s main gate, casting a web of color across the dark grass.

Several armored men were climbing out of the vehicles, most equipped with rifles and flashlights and one holding what looked like a bolt cutter. They walked to the gates, the cop with the cutters using them to snap through the heavy chain before kicking them open. He pointed at the school building, and two of the police with flashlights started running toward it. Then he scanned the playing field, his eyes coming to rest on my jungle gym. He gestured my way.

I ducked behind the rail as two beams of light struck the metal frame, seeking me out. There wasn’t much cover, but the police were too far away to see me. Not for long, though. As I watched, the two men started jogging across the grass in my direction. I shuffled backward across the platform until I reached the rear edge, ready to drop down to the ground.

But before I could, my eye caught a piece of graffiti that I swear had never been there before. Carved into the soft wood of the platform, in large, even letters, were three words that made my blood freeze.

Keep running, Alex.

I traced my fingers across the markings to make sure they were real, but the sensation of splinters on my skin let me know that this was no dream. The men, whoever they were, had known what I’d do before I did.

The sound of footsteps pounding the wet grass reminded me that the police were getting closer. I shoved myself off the rear of the frame, landing awkwardly on the soft ground and backing into the darkness. Turning, I sprinted toward the fence, forcing my tired legs to work. Scrambling out into the overgrown garden, I scanned the street to make sure it was empty, then turned left and started walking toward Brandon’s house.

I hadn’t spoken to Brandon much since Toby and I had started robbing houses instead of students. It was as if he could see that invisible tattoo too, and it was pretty clear from the way he acted now that he was scared of us, of what we’d become. But we’d been close friends once, and even when you’ve been to hell and back your friends stick by you.

I cut up Edwards Avenue, taking another left at the top of the hill and making my way toward Bessemer Road. The houses in this part of town were all huge, their four stories staring out across the tract housing below like they were laughing at them. I guess that’s one of the reasons Brandon had backed out—even though his parents only owned an apartment up here, they weren’t exactly poor. Not that I was stealing bread so that I could stay alive. I’m no *Oliver Twist*.

I spotted the building that Brandon’s apartment was in and crossed the road, trying to stick to the

blanket of shadows that kept most of the street in darkness. All the lights were off, which wasn't surprising given that it was long after midnight, but I knew which room was his. Sneaking in through the front gate, I picked up a couple of small stones from the graveled path and pulled back my arm to launch them at the second-floor window.

Before I could, something grabbed my wrist—a vise-like grip that felt like it could have torn the whole limb off. I yelped, as much from the shock as the pain, and spun around to see a horrible, familiar face standing right behind me, his silver eyes glinting, the same tiny mole on his chin and his soulless smile beaming at me like the Cheshire Cat's. It was impossible—he hadn't been there seconds before, and nobody could move that quickly, that quietly.

“Didn't your mother tell you never to throw stones?” the man in the suit asked, his voice so powerful that it felt as if it was being transmitted right into the center of my brain. I couldn't respond; my whole body felt numb. The man tightened his grip on my arm, bending down until his face was almost touching mine. “Not long till sunrise, Alex,” he said, the scent of his breath like sour milk. “And now you've got these guys to deal with.”

He twisted my wrist, spinning me around and giving me a shove that propelled me back out of the front gate. I tripped on my own feet, staggering backward off the curb and landing in a heap in the road. I glanced up just in time to see a police car slam on its brakes, squealing to a stop seconds before its front bumper made friends with my forehead. I looked back to Brandon's garden, but it was empty—the man in black had vanished just as quickly as he had appeared.

I heard the sound of the car doors opening and I leaped to my feet, backing away from the vehicle. A policeman in beetle-black body armor was making his way toward me, his expression one of concern. A policewoman held back, one hand on her radio, the other on the nasty-looking nightstick that hung from her belt.

“You okay?” the man asked, stepping closer. “You just came out of nowhere. Did we hit you?”

I kept on retreating, my eyes flitting back and forth from the man to the woman. Her radio bleeped, the sound filling the whole street, before a voice spoke from the static. I couldn't make out what she said, but I knew from the way she looked at me that it wasn't good.

“It's him!” she shouted, wrenching the stick from her belt and advancing. Her partner's expression instantly morphed into one of anger, and he pounced, leaping toward me.

Up until tonight, I'd have thought he was a big guy, and quick too. But compared with the men in black the cop looked tiny, and his move was sluggish. I darted to my left, angling my body so that his hands missed me, then swiveled, pushing him square in the back and sending him sprawling onto the wet road. His partner shrieked at me to stop, vaulting over the car's hood with her nightstick held high, ready to knock me into next week.

I don't know how I did it, but somehow I managed to start running again. You must remember how your legs feel after running laps in gym class, when they're so exhausted that it seems like you're running underwater. That was how it felt—leaping back onto the pavement and hurtling down the road, trying to hold off the sobs so I could breathe. When I look back, remembering that policewoman who only chased me to the end of the street before returning to her car, it doesn't seem too bad. In other words, I've run screaming from far worse things since that night, creatures that never stop chasing you.

There was only one place left to go, and I headed there at full pelt. I don't remember the journey, it was as if my brain had shut down so that all my energy could be directed to my feet. And I couldn't stop running, even when I reached my house. If I kept moving, then nobody could catch me—not the police who were gathered outside, not the men in black suits who were waiting in the shadows, not the man in black watching everything through silver eyes. If I could just make it inside, then all the bad things would go away.

So I didn't stop. Not when the police started shouting, not when officers in black masks and

bulletproof vests ran into the street with rifles, not when my mom came racing out of the front door dressed in her pink nightie and slippers, screaming at me to give myself up. I just put my head down and cried to her with all my strength.

I don't know how I even managed to stay upright, the world was spinning so fast, but I made it past the first policeman, my sheer momentum sending him flying. The second backed out of my way, his expression of shock almost comical. I could see my mom, tears streaming down her face, being held back by two policewomen. I could see the open door behind her, the warm glow of the kitchen. If I could just make it, ten more steps, then maybe all this could end. Maybe I could find Daniel Richardson and give him his money back. It was only twenty quid!

I hit the third policeman square on. He was built like a fireplug—all chest and shoulders—and I bounced off, the wind knocked out of me. I charged forward again but it was too much. My legs cramped and I dropped to my knees for the second time that night. I reached out to my mom, and she reached out to me, but the air between us was instantly flooded with black uniforms, blotting her out like flies. Then I was on the ground, strangers' knees in my back, their nightsticks against my skull, and sharp metal around my wrists.

"I didn't do it!" I sobbed. "I didn't do it!"

But I couldn't even lift my head from the sidewalk, and with the weight of the world on my shoulders only the cold, wet concrete beneath me heard my denial.

DENIAL AND DAMNATION

“I DIDN’T DO IT.”

It seemed like the only thing I said for the next few days, a kind of mantra that I kept pumping out as a defense against all the questions and accusations. The first ones at my throat were the cops who threw me into a van, whose taunts and threats cut into me with far more force than the cuffs that bound me to the seat.

“How could you do it?”

“I didn’t do it.”

“He was your friend.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Well, you’re gonna pay, kid.”

“I didn’t do it.”

Next it was the detectives. They started nice, like they always do in the movies, offering deals and leniency if I just confessed. But the more I denied it the harder they got, their questions so relentless that by the third day when they were kicking over my chair and blowing cigarette smoke in my face I barely knew whether I was guilty or not.

Then came Toby’s parents, who sat on the other side of a table clutching each other and screaming at me, their eyes burning with more hatred than I had ever seen in anyone, their anger only held in check by the cops who rested hands on their quivering shoulders and told them I’d get what was coming to me. By this time my mantra was a whisper, little more than a breath, but I kept saying it because, like a breath, it was the only thing keeping me alive.

The worst questions came from the people I loved, my mom and dad. I was separated from them by a dirty plastic window, but there was a far greater barrier between us. I could tell by the way my mom couldn’t meet my eye that she thought I was guilty, and she refused to listen to my pleas just like everybody else. There may as well have been a gorge between us, or a mountain, and by the time she was guided out of the room by my dad’s unsteady hands I couldn’t even find the energy to whisper my denials.

For three weeks I endured an interrogation every day and was thrown into a cell each night. Of course, I told them everything that had happened—the men in the black suits, the sinister figure in the gas mask, the way they had shot Toby in cold blood—but even as I was talking the words seemed ludicrous, hollow. I didn’t blame them for laughing at me, I’d never have believed my story either if I hadn’t lived the nightmare myself.

MY TRIAL WAS an extension of the same empty process. I was marched into court with an armed escort and chained inside a cage—the kind better suited to serial killers and military generals accused of war crimes, not terrified kids. The heavy bars didn’t stop the hatred directed at me when the hearing began. It poured through like ice water from a judge who was already convinced I was a killer, from the jury that had made up its mind about this case as soon as it started, and from the crowd in the public gallery who bayed for my punishment like hyenas. I felt like I was drowning in their contempt, and I just prayed for it to be over, even if it meant sinking without a trace.

My spirits were lifted only once, when midway through the second day the doors of the courtroom opened and two men strode through. Dressed in black and larger than life, they were instantly recognizable—the men who had sent me here. The room fell silent as soon as they entered, even though

judge lowering his voice from respect, or maybe fear.

~~“That’s them!” I shouted as they took their seats. “They’re the men who framed me. They killed Toby!”~~

But the judge simply banged his gavel and fixed me with a contemptuous stare.

“Of course they are,” he said, his voice oily with sarcasm. “These men are representatives from Furnace Penitentiary. Is this what your defense has come to? Accusing anybody of your crimes. Was there? Did I have a disagreement with your accomplice and pull the trigger too?”

The jury laughed, and the men in black suits unveiled their shark grins and flashed their silver eyes at me. I was like a fish on the end of a line, waiting to be reeled in.

It took the jury less than forty minutes to decide my fate. Twelve men and women in a room with my life in their hands, and they condemned me in less time than the first half of a soccer match. Not that I’m trying to pass the buck. I hadn’t killed Toby, but his blood was on my hands just like my blood was on his. If we hadn’t been so stupid, then none of this would have happened. We’d both have been at school just like any other day, tormenting teachers, chasing girls, and being kids.

I’ll never forget the judge’s closing speech when the jury announced the guilty verdict. He stood behind his walnut desk like a pulpit and his booming voice and thrashing limbs like those of a preacher damning the devil.

“Your crimes are heinous and unforgivable,” he shouted, the flecks of foam around his mouth visible even from where I was standing. “Like so many of today’s youth you have taken your life and squandered it, turning to crime instead of honor, sickness instead of decency. You have killed in cold blood, you are a coward and a thief and a murderer, and like all the other festering waste of society who come through this court I am happy to sentence you without remorse and without pity.”

He leaned forward, never taking his eyes off me.

“You knew very well when you pulled that trigger what your punishment would be,” he hissed. “There is no longer any leniency for child offenders, not since the Summer of Slaughter. And like those murderous teenagers you will never again see the light of day. If it was up to me, I would see you hanged by the neck until you were dead. But alas I must settle for this.” He paused again, smiling wickedly to himself. “Or perhaps *settle* is the wrong word. Perhaps this is a fate even worse.”

I knew what was coming. I clenched my fingers around the bars, praying one last time that something would happen to end this sick and twisted dream. But it was too late. It was over.

“Alex Sawyer, I hereby sentence you to life imprisonment at the Furnace Penitentiary with no possibility of parole. You will be taken from here this afternoon and incarcerated for the remainder of your days.”

The resulting wave of cheers and shouts, the banging of the gavel and the roaring in my ears as the truth sank in drowned out the only thing I could think of to say.

“I didn’t do it.”

I DON’T REMEMBER much else about that day. I have a vague recollection of being dragged from the courtroom by the armed guards, the men in black holding open the door and telling me once again that they’d see me very soon. I couldn’t quite remember how to use my legs, so they literally pulled me along the marble-clad corridors, past the crowds with their expressions of hatred and disgust, past my own parents, whose faces I could not make out because they turned away.

I recall only one thing with any clarity. As I was passing a second courtroom the doors flew open to reveal another boy, a similar age to me, being hauled kicking and screaming from inside. He was giving the bailiffs a hard time, his flailing body sending one crashing to the floor and causing the other to reach for his taser. With a flash fifty thousand volts sent the boy hurtling across the corridor.

leaving him in a groaning, smoking pile. But even then I could make out his protests and they sent
chill down my spine.

“It wasn’t me,” he whispered as the men picked him up. “It wasn’t me.”

For the briefest of seconds our eyes met. It was like looking into a mirror—the fear, the panic, the defiance. I knew instantly that what had happened to me had also happened to him. Our dark fates entwined by the same men, our lives broken by an identical deception.

And then he was gone. I was carried down the corridor, my memories of the moment lessening with each step and fading away completely as I climbed into the truck that would take me to my new home. To the place I would spend the rest of my life. To my own personal hell.

To Furnace.

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