

CONFESSIO



I have a confession.

I'm not a good person.

I always said that I only stole from strangers, that I only took stuff they'd never really miss: money and electronics and the sort of things you can't cry over.

But that was a lie. I didn't stop there; I couldn't. I stole from the people I loved, and took the things that meant the most to them. I didn't just break into their cupboards and drawers, I broke into their hearts and ripped out whatever I wanted, anything that would get me a few quid down the market.

So don't go fooling yourself that I'm a good person, that I'm an innocent victim, someone who didn't deserve to be locked up inside the hell on earth known as Furnace Penitentiary. I'm not. Don't get me wrong: I didn't kill my best friend Toby when we broke into that house. No, the blacksuits did it, they shot him then they framed me for his murder. But I've done things that are just as bad. I've killed little parts of people; I've cut them up inside, hurt them so much they wished they were dead.

There isn't time to confess everything, but I have to get this off my chest. If I don't do it now then I might never get the chance. Death's coming up fast. I can feel its cold fingers round my throat.

Two years ago, when I was twelve, my gran died, had a fit in the middle of the night and swallowed her tongue. Mum was devastated, like any daughter would be. She cried for weeks, she didn't eat, she hardly spoke to me or Dad. She'd just sit and hold the little silver locket that Gran had left her, gently stroking the scarred and crumpled photos inside.

I guess I don't really need to tell you what I did. But I'm going to anyway. *I need to.*

I waited till she was asleep one night, ten days or so after Gran had been buried. Then I sneaked into her room and prised that locket from her hand. Ten quid. Ten lousy quid is what I got for it. A handful of dirty coins for the only thing my mum had left of her mum. I watched the man I'd sold it to rip the photos out from inside and chuck them in the bin, and I didn't feel a shred of remorse.

Mum knew I was the one who'd taken it. She never said anything but I could see it in her eyes. There was no warmth there any more, no love. It was like she looked right through me, at a phantom over my shoulder, at the son she wished she could have, the son she'd lost for ever.

See what I mean? I'm not a good person. Don't forget that. It'll make my story easier to stomach if you know that I deserved to be punished for Toby's death,

even though it wasn't me who pulled the trigger – that I deserved to be sent away for life in Furnace, deep in the rancid guts of the planet.

And that I deserved everything that happened to me there. Because Furnace is no ordinary prison, it's a living nightmare perfectly designed for people like me. A place where freaks in gas masks – wheezers, as we called them – stalk the corridors at night and carry boys screaming from their cells. Where those stolen kids are brought back as monsters, all rippling muscles beneath stitched skin. And where the same poor wretches are eventually turned into blacksuits, the warden's soulless guards.

I saw it happen with my own eyes. I saw it happen to Monty. I saw what he'd become, right before he died.

So, never let yourself forget that I'm a bad person, that all us cons are, even the 'good guys' I met inside like Donovan and Zee and Toby (no, not my old friend I'm supposed to have killed – a new friend with the same name). The four of us thought we'd found a way to escape, blowing a hole in the chipping room floor with gas smuggled out of the kitchen. But nobody can run from their own demons. Donovan was taken by the wheezers the night before we broke, and as for the rest of us – me and Zee and my new friend Toby – well, maybe even Furnace was too good for us. It was certainly too good for Gary Owens, the hard-case headcase who discovered our plan and followed along like a bad smell.

No, maybe our fate was to find out what horrors lay in the tunnels *beneath* the prison.

Because that was our way out: the river that runs deep underground below the bowels of Furnace. We didn't know where it led to. We didn't care. Anywhere that wasn't Furnace was good enough for us.

Or so we thought.

Oh yes, beneath heaven is hell, and beneath hell is Furnace. But the horrors that crawl and feast beneath *that* – now that's a truly fitting punishment for someone like me.

So there you have it, my confession. It may not seem like the best time to share it, but it's funny what races through your head when you're plummeting into the darkness with only razor-sharp rocks and rapids to break your fall.

THE RIVER



Falling into that river was like falling into death.

The first thing it stole was my breath, knocked from me as I plunged into liquid ice. I felt my lungs shrivel, every last scrap of oxygen forced out. I tried to snatch in another breath but all I got was cold water, dead fingers forced down my windpipe and filling me with darkness.

The current was too strong, grabbing my body and tossing it from rock to rock like a rag doll. I felt pain tear up my left leg, then my head exploded into light and white noise as I was hurled against the jagged stone. I tried to swim, tried to grab the walls of the tunnel, tried to do anything other than be pounded into a bloody mess of flesh by the sheer force of the water.

And at first I thought I was succeeding, the pain leaving me and making me feel like I was drifting down a river of silk. Only I knew I was still being torn to shreds, the agony replaced by numbness and the kind of sickening warmth you know is just a trick of the mind to keep you calm while the last few drops of life ebb away.

I stopped fighting it, giving myself up to my watery grave. It wasn't fair. Donovan, Zee, Toby and I, we'd done everything right – we'd found the crack in the floor in Room Two, smuggled in the gas-filled gloves from the kitchen and blown the place to splinters. We should have been free. The river was supposed to have been our own private expressway out of Furnace, carrying us laughing to the surface where we could bathe in starlight and howl at the moon and feel the gentle breath of night on our skin.

But instead it was like another of the warden's vicious beasts, a nightmare dog that held us in its foaming jaws and shook us until we were broken.

I was going to die down here, I knew it. And suddenly that didn't seem preferable to life in Furnace. Suddenly I wanted to be back in my cell, in the light and the heat. Because even the most sadistic guard and the cruellest Skull gang member could be bargained with. The river was a force of unrelenting fury that made even the warden seem human.

I felt my body lurch, felt something in the blackness deep inside me snap. I tried again to breathe, my lungs bursting. The roar of the water began to fade as the river took my hearing. I wasn't scared, I wasn't sad. I wasn't anything.

Because that was the last little piece of me that the river stole, bleeding my emotions out and leaving me an empty husk buried in a casket of ice at the bottom of the world.



I wanted to open my eyes but I couldn't. *You're dead*, said a voice, maybe someone else's, maybe my own. *Dead people don't open their eyes.*

That made sense, but I still wanted to open them. Only I couldn't quite remember how. I stared at the darkness, willing something to happen, praying for my vision to work. Very slowly the black screen in front of me parted, a crack of weak golden light sliding into my brain. It carried no heat, but all the same it began to chase away the chills inside my body.

I could feel the numbness recede, and in its place came a deep, pounding agony so profound that I puked. It was mainly river water, but I could feel something else vomited from me too, something barbed and heavy that had been wrapped round my guts ever since I'd jumped.

I tipped back my head, my entire body gripped by freezing fire, and tried to focus on the light. I knew what it was, of course. It was the end, it was the afterlife calling me, the thing people see right on the edge of death. I didn't care any more. It could take me wherever I deserved to go, just so long as it made the pain stop.

I tried to hold out my hands, tried to welcome it. And for a moment the light grew brighter, so intense that I felt like I was bathed in gold. Then it snapped off, dropping me back into darkness, into pain.

You're bad, said the voice, my delirious mind. *And bad people don't go to heaven.*

I tried to scream, but it was too much. The world slipped, shuddered and fell away.



The trembling ground brought me back, pulling me up from the abyss. I didn't even try to open my eyes this time, just clung to the sensation of movement from beneath me, the slightest tremor which let me know I still existed. Although my body throbbed with pain I could tell that I wasn't lying on the cold stone of the tunnel. Whatever it was it was soft and gave out a slight warmth which I gripped with the last of my strength.

I felt a weight on my shoulders, something pulling me towards it. For a moment my mind snapped and I was lying on my bed at home, just a kid snared by fever, my mum hugging me close and refusing to let go even when I tried to squirm away.

Then I heard the roar of the river and it all rushed back like acid – the explosion, the fight with the black-suits, the sound of the mutant dogs as they tried to burrow through the rockfall behind us, then the leap into the unknown. I fought to bring back the memory of my mum, but it was gone, sucked into the shadows like every other part of me. I put my head against the soft ground, trying to burrow into the heat, trying to hide from the fear and the pain.

But they found me, and once again I was pulled into oblivion.



Voices this time. Hammered through my subconscious so hard that I could feel them as much as hear them.

‘... got to move ...’

‘... not leaving him ...’

‘... slit the little man, we’re all gonna die cos of him ...’

‘... can’t go, you’ve got the only light, you can’t ...’

‘... gut him good, better move or you’ll get it too ...’

Drifting out, a black cloud settling over my mind again. I panicked. Something was happening, I needed to be awake. I fought against the agony, against the part of me that just wanted to fade away into nothing. The ground was moving, something holding me tight. Thin arms around my shoulders.

‘Gary, back off, he can still get us out of here. Just give him another minute.’ With each word the shape beneath me vibrated. More memories came flooding back – two friends, jumping by my side, and a third. Gary Owens. The psychopath who’d taken over the Skulls, who’d already stolen God knows how many lives in cold blood.

The thought of him pumped more adrenaline into me than the river had done, and this time I managed to open my eyes. The light was still there, timid and more silver than gold. It beamed out from a shadow beneath it, a black form against the grey walls that was moving my way. I blinked, seeing the red veins of my own retinas splashed across the darkness. The shadow focused, took shape – a muscular body with a dead face that sneered at me.

‘Just in time, little man,’ said Gary, spitting a wad of bloody phlegm on to the rock. I noticed that his face was cut up pretty badly, and a steady stream of crimson

droplets fell from his left sleeve. 'You messed up, got us all killed.'

'Alex?' said a voice from right behind me, making the ground tremble again. I looked up, feeling as though someone was pulling the tendons from my neck with a pair of red-hot tongs. Zee was sitting next to me, cradling me, his body still shivering. I tried to get up but for a second he wouldn't let me, his arms locked tight. I placed a hand on his, squeezing as hard as my sprained fingers would allow, and he finally surrendered.

'Jesus, I thought you were a goner back there,' he said as I struggled upright. 'I saw you go head first into a rock.'

'Did one of you . . .?' I stuttered, trying to keep as still as possible so that the pain wouldn't flare up again. It wasn't working. I put my hands to my temples and they both came away red.

'I did,' said Zee. 'I managed to get a hand on you, drag you out.'

'What about Toby?' I asked. There was silence for a moment, until Zee's shuddering sigh broke it.

'There was no way he was going to make it,' he said finally. 'He was messed up from that explosion. I'm sorry, Alex.'

'We should have left him up there,' I said, the sadness clawing up from my stomach, causing as much agony as the wounds on my skin. My world spun again, visions of Toby – the younger kid I'd met in Furnace – bruised and broken on the rock merged with visions of my old friend with the same name, shot in the head by the

blacksuits and resting on his crimson bed. It was too much, the darkness of the tunnel creeping into my vision once again, the sound of the river muted.

‘Alex, Alex! Stay with us; fight it!’

The words brought me back again, each one a life raft that buoyed me up over the shadows.

‘Did we make it?’ I repeated, staring back down the river. It might have been a product of my feverish mind, but I thought I could see a shaft of light punching down from the roof of the tunnel behind us. It was the hole we’d jumped through, and from it came the unmistakable sound of a siren.

‘Yeah, we made it,’ Gary hissed. ‘Made it pissing distance. Great plan, little man.’

Gary turned, and from the light on his helmet I could make out that we were in a narrow stretch of tunnel, the foaming ribbon of water tearing by like it was trying to suck us back in. It curled off to the left, away from the strip of red rock we were on: not quite large enough for a bank but low enough to scramble on to.

‘We’re still too close,’ Zee said.

‘What we do now?’ said Gary, limping across the narrow ledge until he was towering over me. ‘You better tell me or I swear I’m gonna bust your skull open.’

‘Why do I have to—’ I attempted, but Gary spat his answer at me before I could finish.

‘You dragged us down here, you get us out.’

‘But there’s no way they’ll come after us,’ I said, trying not to scream as I shifted my leg, needles in every

nerve. 'It's suicide. Not even the blacksuits would make that jump.'

I knew as soon as I'd said it that I should have kept my mouth closed. I mean, if I'd learned anything in Furnace it was not to tempt fate. Because fate wants nothing more to do with people like me, except to see us suffer.

Something tumbled from the hole in the ceiling, a writhing form that spun through the flickering light and struck the raging torrent with a splash that was far too big for a man.

'Oh Jesus, they're not sending the guards,' said Zee, his voice breaking.

Another form dropped like a dead weight, this one howling as it hit the water.

'They're sending the dogs.'