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Opening extract from

Nowhere

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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1

Alyn came to with a start, coughing up clumps of snow. He lay dazed for some moments, watching his breath swirl: a silver plume, crumbling in the icy air.

'There he is,' said a voice, buried amid the roaring winds. 'He's down. Good shot.' The sound caused a crow to take flight from a nearby tree, releasing a cascade of tumbling snowflakes.

I didn't make it, Alyn thought. *After everything, I didn't escape . . .*

He felt winded and deflated, but somehow found the strength to struggle to his feet. At the far end of the yard, a line of wardens, clad in their black militaristic uniforms, were stomping towards him. Panic helped Alyn gather his bearings. He turned to the wire-mesh fence and sprinted towards it on stumbling legs.

'He's getting away,' came a cry. 'Get after him!'

Alyn threw himself at the fence, grabbing frantically at the wire with trembling fingers. *Climb*, he commanded,

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pulling himself up. *You can make it; there's not far to go.*

The nearest guard raised his ibis and fired. The shot hit the ground behind Alyn, sending up a spray of snow.

How – or why – his captors had access to such weaponry remained a mystery. The ibis resembled a simple baton, but was able to release a devastating blast of compressed sound. Unlike a gun or rifle, the ibis left no mark and spilled no blood, but this made the weapon no less dangerous, only whoever was using it even more so. Alyn suspected that had the guards ever been on the receiving end they might have been a little less keen to fire so willingly.

'Prisoner Hart!' shouted one of the approaching guards. 'Remove yourself from the fence immediately.'

Alyn peered over his shoulder at the five figures, then back up at the top of the fence. If he could make it to the woods, he might be able to lose them. There was a chance he might die of cold, but that would be better than returning to his cell. Anything would.

He dragged himself further up the fence, unable to feel his fingers.

Breath spilled from his mouth as he struggled with the wire. His lungs burned and his throat felt coarse and cut.

Another shot whizzed past him, wobbling the fence. He could hear the guards continue to advance, crunching through mounds of snow.

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'Remove yourself from the fence,' the guard repeated, closer now. 'This is your final warning.'

I'm almost over, he told himself. *One last pull and I'm there . . . I'm free –*

Just as he was reaching for the top of the fence, the blast hit him between the shoulder blades. Alyn opened his mouth, but only a croak left his lips. His fingers released and then he was falling, the fence retreating from him.

The last thing that flashed through his mind was not so much a thought but a picture. A phantom image of how things might have been: of him sprinting away through the trees to freedom. But now, like everything else, it was gone.

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2

Jes was vacantly watching the falling snow through the steamed canteen windows at the rear of the prison. The room was narrow and low-ceilinged, barely containing the horde of a hundred or so grey uniforms.

Jes combed her fingers through her straight red hair. At any moment the bell would sound and those who had afternoon chores, herself included, would be gathered up and herded outside into the cold.

A ripple of mutters and murmurs swept through the room as the guards emerged through the double doors, dragging an unconscious Alyn behind them. Jes sprang up from her chair and sped through the rows of tables towards the door.

'What have you done to him?' she said, trying to manoeuvre round the procession of guards.

'Get back,' said one of the wardens.

'But I need to –'

The warden pointed the ibis at her chest. 'I said *get back*.'

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Jes froze. She could see from the look in his eyes that she was on the verge of going too far. 'Alyn!' she called across, not advancing a step further. 'Can you hear me? What happened? What did they –'

'Put him there,' announced the chief warden, Martin Adler, nodding his shaven head towards the nearest table. 'I want them all to see him.'

The men carrying Alyn tossed him on to a busy table, knocking a couple of plastic cups and a cold bowl of soup to the floor. The inmates quickly dispersed. Alyn lay still, except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

'We caught him trying to escape,' Adler announced, silencing the nervous chatter in the canteen. He walked slowly round the table, circling the unconscious boy like a predator. 'After all this time there are *still* those of you who don't want to accept your guilt! Those of you who don't want to be rehabilitated. To change. To grow. We've given you too many chances. And this –' Adler pointed at Alyn with his ibis – 'is the last. The next one of you to screw up means *all* of you will face the consequences. So, if any of your peers get any ideas about leaving, I suggest you try to persuade them otherwise. Is that understood?'

The room answered quietly but affirmatively in unison, eyes downcast.

Adler pushed past the other guards to leave the room. 'You won't ever escape!' he shouted without

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looking back, spit flying from his mouth. 'There's nothing out there for you. Not any more.'

Jes bit down on her lip, trying to suppress the anger that had gathered in knots in the pit of her stomach.

Alyn's skin seemed even more sallow than usual and his jagged black fringe hung over his eyes. Jes watched helplessly as the guards dragged him through the double doors to the cells.

Julian, a slim, sixteen-year-old, had quietly slithered up beside her. 'I'm sure he'll be all right,' he said, his pointed features struggling to suppress a smirk.

Jes shot him such a fierce look that her green eyes seemed almost as red as her hair.

'They weren't lying,' he went on. 'I saw everything. He was a fool.'

'He was brave. Something you'd know nothing about.'

'A brave man is just a fool who gets lucky.' Julian started to walk away, but then turned back to her and added, 'I guess Alyn didn't.'

The familiar sight of the barred door came sliding into focus as Alyn awoke. The cell was a drab, rectangular alcove, with two beds beneath the reinforced window. Bars on one side divided the neighbouring cell, whilst the other was hidden from view by a brick wall.

With some considerable effort, Alyn pulled himself up to a sitting position on the thin mattress and gazed

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at the unforgiving landscape. It seemed like it had been winter forever.

The prison, at least what he knew of it, was little more than a concrete cube surrounded by acres of woodland. Only two rows of windows broke the brutal monotony of its stained, weather-beaten exterior. A wire fence encircled the compound, with a set of gates at the front and a solitary lookout tower in the allocated exercise yard at the back. The fence extended deep underground – so much so that crawling beneath it was out of the question.

Alyn pressed his face to the window, and his breath steamed the reinforced glass. Inside, things were just as hopeless. The cells were contained at the front half of the building, overlooking the gates and sides, all of which was off-limits to the inmates. Two tiers in a breezeblock hall, with a walkway running along the upper level, and wardens standing sentry in the centre. While he was lost in thought, a couple of guards appeared at the foot of his cell with a curly-haired boy not much older than sixteen.

'You may as well make yourself at home,' the tallest guard said, yanking open the barred door and shoving him towards the empty bed across from Alyn's. 'You're going to be here for a while.'

As soon as the door closed, Alyn's new cellmate sprang back towards it and started pulling and pounding at the bars.

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‘I’ve not done anything wrong!’ he yelled. ‘*I’m innocent!* Do you hear me? I’ve not done anything – let me out!’

Alyn watched him scream and shout until his northern accent grew hoarse.

‘They aren’t listening. I’ve been here long enough to know that.’

The boy spun round, until then unaware that he wasn’t alone.

‘Who are you?’

‘Your cellmate by the look of things. I’m Alyn.’

He extended his hand. The boy looked at it, then up at Alyn and turned back to the door.

Alyn lowered his hand and winced as a pulse of white hot pain flared between his shoulder blades.

‘Hang on,’ the boy said, examining his cellmate’s grey boiler suit. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Same reason you are. *I’m a criminal*.’

‘A criminal?’

‘There are a hundred of us here,’ Alyn told him. ‘Boys and girls, between thirteen and eighteen, from all over the country. We’re all criminals . . .’

‘But?’

‘But none of us remember committing any crimes.’

‘I know *I* haven’t done anything,’ Ryan said, lowering his voice. ‘We can’t all be wrong, can we?’

‘It’s us versus them,’ Alyn said. ‘We tell them we’re

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innocent; they tell us we're guilty. On and on, back and forth like a game. So far, they're winning.'

'How?'

'Because some of us have even started to believe it. See that girl over there?'

Ryan looked over at a blonde girl in a cell on the far side of the hall, sitting on her bed with her arms round her legs.

'She was brought in about a year ago, not long after me. Apparently, they abducted her one night after school and next thing she's in that cell. They told her she tried robbing a jeweller's. Held a knife to the owner's throat. Of course, she denied it at first . . .'

'And?'

Disappointment showed on Alyn's face. 'Then she started questioning herself – maybe she *had* done it. Maybe she had amnesia, or something. Maybe she was going crazy. After all, they don't just arrest people for no reason, do they? She started off doubting them, then herself, and now . . .'

'Now what?'

'Now she'll tell you everything from the kind of necklace she stole to the shirt the owner was wearing.'

It took several moments for this to sink in. 'You're telling me she was brainwashed or something?'

'We prefer to call it *turned*. They can be very persuasive.'

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The boy gave an uncomfortable laugh. 'This is crazy. You're crazy.'

Alyn said nothing and watched Ryan pace back and forth between the window and the door. He eventually came to a halt.

'They haven't *turned* you yet, have they?'

'Not yet.'

'They won't get me. There's no way.' Ryan dragged his fingers through his hair. 'I won't let them.'

'They'll start by getting you to sign a confession. They'll have your papers ready by this evening.'

'I'm not signing anything.' The boy mumbled something else under his breath and resumed pounding the bars again. When he reluctantly ceased some minutes later, the skin on his hands was flayed and split and speckled with blood.

Alyn watched him. 'I would've told you to stop. But maybe it's healthy to be angry. You'll be confused next, then compliant. Then all you'll think about is escape. It'll be the first thing you think of in the morning and the last thing at night. Then when you can't even think about escape any more, you'll just . . .' Alyn trailed off, then added regretfully, 'You won't even think about anything.'

'Sounds like you've been here too long.' The boy massaged his sore hands and turned to look out of the window.

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Alyn wasn't going to argue. 'Aren't you going to tell me your name?'

'My name's Ryan. Ryan Farrell.' He studied Alyn for a few lingering seconds then walked to the window.

'So where the hell are we?'

'*Nowhere*.'

'Am I gonna get a straight answer out of you or –'

'That's what they call it. *Nowhere*. And, before you ask, they made sure we were unconscious when they brought us, so it's not like we even know how far away we are from anything.'

'What kind of prison won't even tell the prisoners where they are?'

'One like this.'

Ryan wiped the fog on the chilled glass with his sleeve and peered out, cupping his eyes from the reflection.

'What else do you know about *Nowhere*?'

'It's one of the few words in the dictionary that doesn't have a synonym,' Alyn quipped.

'You don't say. What about those stick things the guards carry? I've never seen anything like them before. It's like they're magic wands or something. Or from the future . . .'

'*Ibises*. The guards treat them like they're toys. I once saw them shoot a kid who was taking too long to finish his dinner. They hurt. And if you get shot

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here with one –' Alyn tapped the side of his head – 'chances are you'll forget the last couple of hours. I thought I was going mad at first.'

'Explains why my memory's a little cloudy. I wonder where they got them from.'

'I used to have a friend who was convinced that the most powerful people in the world have access to technology a hundred years more advanced than anything the rest of us know about. I always said he was crazy. Now I'm starting to think he might have had a point.'

'What makes you think that the most powerful people in the world are involved in this?'

'Take a look around,' Alyn said. 'What makes you think they *aren't*?'

Ryan held Alyn's eyes for a couple of moments then deflected the comment with a shrug. 'So why don't you tell me what your crime is?' he said.

'Arson. They say I set fire to a house. There was someone living in it, an old tramp . . .'

'They're saying you killed someone?'

'Accidentally. But yeah. That's what they're saying.'

'And you don't remember a thing? There must be someone who knows where we are . . . What about my parents, my friends? They're just going to think I disappeared –'

'I guess that's kind of the point.'

But, before Alyn could say another word, a group

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of figures convened outside the cell and in stepped a woman in her forties, dark hair pulled back in a bun, wearing a blazer and knee-length skirt. Her expression was stern, as though it had been sculpted by years of contempt.

'Ryan Farrell?'

'Who are you?'

'I suppose you could think of me as a kind of *teacher*. You're coming with me to the interrogation room. We'll be having a little chat.'

'About time. This is a big mistake.'

'You've got a lot to learn, Farrell, starting with knowing when to shut up. Now let's walk.'

'Bye,' Alyn said. 'See you again soon.'

'Not if I can help it.'

You can't, Alyn thought, and he watched the group forcefully lead Ryan out of the cell and turn left on to the walkway.

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