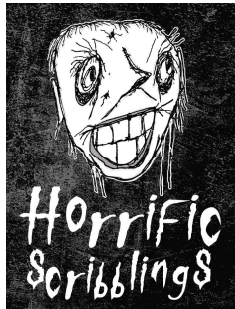


L. ANDREW COOPER

Alex's Escape



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# Contents

1	Part One: Escape to L.A.	1
1:	First Escape	1
2:	Pick Up	12
3:	The Branches	20
4:	Second Escape	26
5:	Building	34
6:	Beautiful People	45
7:	Escape Interrupted	52
8:	Defining Boundaries	60
9:	Third Escape	68
10:	Set Up	77
2	Part Two: Alex's Entertainment	88
11:	His Them	88
12:	Goth Girls and Nerd Boys Rendezvous in Hell	98
13:	Innocence	107
14:	Leave Him	117
15:	Closed Circuit	127
16:	Learning	137
17:	Learning Too Much	146
18:	Duh—I Was Lying!	155
19:	Show Me	164
20:	Alex Becomes a Star	174
3	Part Three: Escape is for Everyone	184
21:	Trouble with the Man	184
22:	Trouble with Men	193
23:	Trouble with Boys	201

24. Into the Escape	213
25. Game On	223
26. Only One	234
27. Grown-Up Games	241
28. Forever Escape	250
29. Escape Incorporated	266
30. Alex's Empire	276
<i>About the Author</i>	288

## Part One: Escape to L.A.

### 1: First Escape

Alex

**A**lex was getting out, but first he had to get in bed, or at least on the bed, wearing the boxer shorts and t-shirt he'd sleep in later, but for now he sat up, spine rigid, eyes wide. The lamp on the nightstand lit the room, but everything blurred because he'd learned to relax his focus, to make his surroundings secondary to what went on in his head, where he had a *mantra*. His inner voice repeated:

I will go to my house.

I will go to my house.

I will go to my house.

After he lost track of how many times he'd repeated the sentence, after the repetition had taken on its own life, an old-fashioned record skipping, his blurred bedroom grew blue electric bolts that forked from his body and branched toward the walls. Silver sparkles crackled in the air, pinpricks from the edge of unconsciousness.

## ALEX'S ESCAPE

Thinking about going into a trance could make getting there impossible, but once he was there, his mind could acknowledge his arrival without making any difference. He had arrived. He had traveled from his house to *his house*. The house within the house. And tonight, things would be different.

He scooted to the edge of his full-sized bed and got to his feet. Tonight, his bedroom didn't matter. The closed door waited for him, and on the other side, the hallway led to his father's office and his parents' bedroom. He was the only kid. Brothers and sisters would have gotten in his way.

That was why he had almost killed his mother once before.

Mom made strong coffee, and she guzzled it, even after she was supposed to give it up.

The hallway walls, usually what Mom called a "Tuscan Yellow" that looked "elegant" in the sun from the foyer's high windows, were red now, and the outside wall had Alex's animals nailed to it. The first had been a rabbit, one he caught on his own in the yard by sneaking up behind it, and just when it saw him, just when it was about to jump away faster than he would have ever been able to catch it, he smashed its head with the long branch he was carrying. He saw blood on brown mottled fur, but the creature was still breathing, so he picked it up and watched it twitch for a while before he sat on the grass with it and took out his pocketknife, which was the best he had at the time. Poking out an eye made the twitching wilder. When he cut from its chin to its tummy, the twitching stopped. Rabbit insides looked like what he imagined people insides looked like.

Next to the rabbit husk, dried out now, the stringy insides hung on the wall, strung out guts, and a little rabbit heart. After that, he downgraded to a couple of squirrels, their bushy tails like ribbons on the wall, but then—THEN—he caught the neighbor's cat in the yard.

Snuffles the Cat.

Snuffles... snuffed it. He cracked himself up with that one over and over.

Snuffles was on the wall, facing outward, cat eyes stretched wide but cat lips stretched wider, a horrible grin, like the kitty's cheeks had tried to escape into its pointed ears. Dried blood matted the orange fur. Alex had eviscerated

Snuffles, too. Hiding insides on the inside seemed like an injustice, didn't it?

In addition to putting Snuffles on display in *his house*, he buried the body in somebody else's yard two blocks away. He wasn't stupid, and when the neighbor—a lesbian cop—called his parents with her suspicions, she didn't have any evidence, and his parents, Dave and Letta Packard, well-educated about their rights and many other subjects, refused to let their son face unsubstantiated accusations.

Nevertheless, Alex heard his father ask his mother behind their closed bedroom door, "What's wrong with Alex?" Dad didn't confront him, though, and neither did Mom. Unsubstantiated.

The first dog he killed must have been a stray because no one ever came looking or asking. It was a mutt that might have been part collie. Alex duct taped its muzzle shut and cut off all four legs and the bushy tail and rolled it around in its own blood while it whined, and he giggled. What was wrong with him? What was wrong with him? Nothing *felt* wrong.

That collie mutt took up the breadth of the decorated hallway wall, all along the baseboard, parts sorted by type, head, legs, quadrisectioned body, tail.

Alex, you don't know what made Mom sick, do you?

No, Dad. Do you?

Vitamin C, cinnamon, castor oil, a few other things he'd had to search for, and to top it all off a splash of bleach that he was sure Mom would smell, no matter how powerful the coffee stink and how stuffed up her allergies made her nose, that acrid reek couldn't hide—

"We've got some very exciting news for you, Alex. You're going to have a little sister!"

Like Hell.

He dumped it all into her oversized mug as she read news on her Kindle at the table in the breakfast nook. He went into the living room and listened for what would happen next. She would smell it, and she would know he did it—

But she guzzled down the whole damned cup before she started coughing and wheezing. Dad had already left for work. Alex was dressed for school, and he had his earbuds in without any music playing. The sound of a chair falling over meant Mom standing up, lurching away from the table. He heard her

#### ALEX'S ESCAPE

stumble through the kitchen, bumping into things, making strange noises but not screaming. She got through the dining room, into the living room, and into Alex's line of sight. The blood on her lips and chin made him stand up, rip out the earbuds, and shout, "Mom!"

Like a good son, he called an ambulance. She lost consciousness before it arrived.

The total of the tragedy included damage to her throat—her voice gained a permanent rasp—as well as to her stomach, and, during the rescue attempts, internal hemorrhaging triggered a miscarriage. Alex would *not* have a little sister.

He didn't know what happened to the fetus in the world beyond his trances, but in *his house*, it was nailed to the wall at the top of the stairs. Alex smiled at it after passing his parents' room and turning toward the stairwell. He descended to the main floor.

On the bottom step he lingered by a doll, a plastic baby with corn silk hair. He'd been following a girl named Christina, maybe eight years old. He tracked her to a playground, and she left the doll on a bench while she went to play on the slide. Her caretaker, an older sister called Frankie, was watching her, not the doll. Alex took the doll and hid behind a tree. When Christina returned to the bench and found the doll missing, she cried and cried and cried. Alex felt happy.

In the kitchen, a butcher knife sat by the sink, gleaming as if a spotlight shone down on it from the ceiling. *They* obviously wanted him to take it, so he did. In the downstairs hall, which connected the breakfast nook to the foyer and stairwell, passing doors to a bathroom, the laundry room, and a walk-in closet, the red walls got darker as the quality of light became... grey.

At the end of the hall, at the broad entryway to the living room, a bicycle with a bent front wheel leaned against the doorless doorframe, a big kid's bike. Sumit, the bike's owner, had been twelve, plus or minus, and Alex had followed him for two weeks before taking his bike. The kid liked to ride to the convenient store close to his suburban neighborhood bubble and look at the candy bars, buying one if he could, and he left his bike outside without locking it. Alex didn't want a bike. He wanted to take Sumit's bike. There

PART ONE: ESCAPE TO L.A.

was a difference. The thing was, Sumit was actually scared to have to walk all that way home. He kept looking back over his shoulder. Alex was there, but Sumit never knew.

Alex delivered the bike to another kid's back yard. Sumit never got it back.

In the greylight where the walls and doors became redder and redder, the floor trembled. He watched doorframes vibrate, shiver, and shift until they leaned, right angles becoming acute and obtuse. Slanted. The house slanted. He listened to their whispers.

Wispy fog seeped upward from between the close blonde slats of the hardwood floor. It brought distortion. It brought change.

"Show me," Alex said.

His house showed him what they could do.

## Letta

The thin layer of fog on the carpet had to mean she was dreaming, but she wasn't the kind of dreamer who thought about dreaming while she was doing it, and she remembered everything from dinner right up to the moment when she'd come out of the bathroom after her right-before-bed pee.

"Dave!"

He was already asleep. Lying on his side, bare back to her, sheet and blanket bunched near the elastic of his tighty-whities... the nice word would be "statuesque," the apter description "like a rock." "DAVE!"

With three staccato snorts he flipped onto his back and rose to his elbows. "Wh-wha?"

"Either we have a serious HVAC problem, or something very weird is going on." Letta bent forward and spread her arms to indicate the foggy floor.

Dave shook his head, sat up all the way, and gazed in the direction indicated. "What the fuck?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"Did you check on Alex?" He got out of bed.

ALEX'S ESCAPE

"When would I have checked on Alex?"

"I don't know." He walked toward the door to the hall.

She wanted him to stop. They needed an idea of what was happening. "Do you think we should—"

"What?"

"I don't know," she said. Nothing felt right.

They went into the hall. Everything was wrong.

The wall that should have been Tuscan Yellow was red, and it was like some kind of sick... Satanic... museum. Guts, and parts, all animal, she hoped. She thought she recognized Snuffles, the kitty that went missing a while ago... and whose mommy suspected Alex. But not even Alex could have done... *this*. Transformed the hallway she'd walked down fifteen minutes ago? Assuming she wasn't dreaming. She had to be dreaming. "Pinch me, Dave."

"What?"

"This has to be a dream." She sounded so stupid. "A nightmare." More accurate, at least.

"We've got to check on Alex," Dave said. He moved into the hall, passing a series of severed dog's legs.

He kept moving. He didn't reach Alex's door. The hall stretched, and the dead animals multiplied. They also became more impressive. Letta didn't even realize she was walking behind her husband until the mutilated deer came into view. The wall had plenty more domestic cats and dogs, but one she could have sworn was a wolf, another a coyote, and the big cat—a mountain lion? The animals' conditions didn't make recognizing what they were any easier. Most had been dismembered, flayed, cut open, or some combination. She saw little method beyond cruelty. The museum, if that's what it was, served only to disgust.

Not too far in front of her, Dave stopped. In an instant, her mind suggested that the small length of hallway between them would expand, and she would walk and walk forever, never reaching him, and it *would* be a nightmare, but it would be real, and she would be trapped and alone, so her legs pumped her feet through the fog against carpet across the short distance that was still

long enough for her to bound against Dave and almost knock him over.

“Jesus!” He grabbed her shoulders, securing them both.

“That hurt,” she said. To herself, at least, she didn’t sound plaintive.

Dave nodded. “I don’t remember a dream ever feeling...”

“No, me neither.”

Together, they looked in the direction where they’d been walking. Alex’s door was practically within reach.

As they looked at it, it opened.

“If at first you don’t succeed?” Dave’s voice did not supply the motivational force required by his word choices. Nevertheless, they tried again.

And succeeded. After a few steps, they stood in Alex’s doorway.

The boy’s bedroom was empty. Part of it looked like a dungeon.

“Do you think he?” Letta asked.

“Do I think *what*?” Dave failed to sound incredulous. He thought what Letta thought.

She reiterated: “Do you think *this is him*?”

“Let’s go downstairs,” Dave said. “Look for our son.”

On the way to the stairs, Letta noticed that the red walls not decorated with dead animal parts had bumps in them, almost like big ripples in the wallpaper, except they had paint, not wallpaper. What they were more like—and Letta didn’t like to think about it—were veins showing beneath skin. After the comparison occurred to her, she thought she could detect a pulse. Going down the stairs, she was sure the walls had a pulse.

Letta and Dave turned into the downstairs hallway and met the same problem they’d had upstairs, only it was a *fait accompli*. The hall had lengthened by a factor of four or five, and though it should have had one door on the right, two on the left, it had four or five times as many, and Letta had a feeling she didn’t want to know what was behind any of them. Cobwebs drooped from the high crooked corners of the vaulted ceiling. She thought she saw movement in all the small places.

She’d been so distracted that her brain only then registered that the lights, which she’d switched on everywhere possible, had always worked, but they’d been wrong. They were wrong because they weren’t the vibrant whites and

## ALEX'S ESCAPE

yellows of typical bulbs but grey lights. What made greylight?

Greylight made what used to be her house into a monstrous shadow.

“Mom, Dad.” Alex’s voice, coming from the living room. Letta and Dave hadn’t entered the hall, so they stood next to the living room’s broad entrance. They turned toward their son.

He sat on the sofa. The butcher knife she used making dinner almost every night was in his right hand.

The sofa sat in a circle of trees. The living room was a circle of trees. Her son and her knife waited for her in a circle of trees. Outside was inside, and she wished she were dreaming but knew that she wasn’t.

## Alex

Mom and Dad really had been going to bed when he’d gone off to his room: Dad stood there looking ridiculous in white briefs, belly dangling, and Mom wore silky pajamas that were lacy across her chest. Alex could see her nipples. He didn’t want to see that. His parents looked like they’d forgotten how old they were.

Not that Alex was the picture of sexy in his t-shirt and boxers, both a little big on him, but he didn’t look *ridiculous*.

The sofa and loveseat had stayed in about the same positions, as had the reclining chair and the rocker, but the coffee table had disappeared, leaving a big gap in the center of the... living room, a center now covered in patches of grass and patches of dirt. The TV seemed a little farther away from the sofa, but it was here, in the area surrounded by trees like the ones in the yard, but unlike in the yard, you couldn’t look through the trees and see the next house. There were only trees.

Alex got off the sofa and wandered into the center of the living room gap. “Mom, Dad, am I glad to see you!”

“Alex, what’s going on?” Dad asked. “Are you okay?”

“A little shook up,” he said. “Are you guys okay?”

PART ONE: ESCAPE TO L.A.

“What’s going on?” From Mom, it sounded like an accusation.

“I got up because I thought I heard something... and then the hall was... different... and I came downstairs. You have to come over here. It feels so real, but it can’t be, can it?” He studied his parents’ faces.

They hesitated.

He added, “I’m so glad you’re here. I was scared.”

Dad took the lead. They joined him in the living room gap. Alex noticed all three of them had bare feet. He felt the dirt between his toes. Soon they’d all have dirt between their toes.

Alex thought Dad would go in for a hug, but he and Mom halted a few feet shy of contact. “What’s with the knife, Alex?”

They were surrounded by *trees in the living room*, and Dad had to ask about the fucking knife? “I told you,” Alex said. “I was scared.”

“Put down the knife,” Mom said.

Alex started walking, not toward his parents, but in an arc around them. They adjusted, keeping distance; Alex maneuvered them more exactly into the gap’s center. “The knife makes me feel safe.”

“We’re here now,” Dad said. “You don’t need it.”

“I’m not a little kid, *Dad*.” He sighed and made his arc into a circle. He was about Dad’s height, taller than Mom. “I know parents aren’t superheroes. Do you think you can stop whatever weird shit is happening?”

“I—”

“PUT IT DOWN!” Mom commanded.

Alex circled, holding the knife at chest level, looking from it to his parents. “It’s only a kitchen knife,” he said.

“Give it to me,” Dad said, and he reached for Alex’s hand that held the knife.

Alex slashed his father’s knuckles. Dad withdrew his hand with a howl. Alex circled, dirt between his toes.

“Alexander Packard, you put down that knife right this instant!” his mother barked.

“The full name treatment. That works.” Alex circled. When he came back around to Dad, who held his bleeding right hand in his left hand, Alex dove

#### ALEX'S ESCAPE

into the circle and sliced the man's left shoulder. The cut was deep. Alex had gotten Mom a knife sharpener for Christmas.

"Dave, do something!"

"WHAT?!"

Alex circled. On the next round, he dodged Dad's grabbing, wobbly arms and slashed his back. Alex thought about Dad's thinning hair. He wondered how hard scalping someone with a butcher knife might be.

"Why, Alex? Why?" Dad sounded pathetic.

Alex circled. As he passed Mom, he faked a lunge at her, and she yelped. He laughed and kept circling.

When he got to Dad, the man finally had his wits. He hunched over, reddened arms out, and went for the tackle, screaming, "RUN, LETTA!"

A glimpse of Mom dashing toward the trees—why would she do that?—was all Alex got before he needed to crouch, stab, and sidestep. The knife plunged into his father's big belly, and Alex dragged it with him as he moved aside, splitting deep flesh. Dad's attempted tackle ended with a bellyflop in the dirt. Alex thought he might take at least a little time, so he straddled his dad's backside (gross) and brought the tip of the knife into his backflesh, over and over. A few times he got around muscle, grooves between ribs, maybe into a kidney, but too much of the back was solid. Alex dismounted and turned the old man over. He was conscious, eyes open, but his body was limp, pumping out blood in a lot of places. Alex stabbed him in the chest and heard the wound make a delightful wheeze. He went at the belly—rapidly—turning it into mash. His breathing was heavy. He was getting tired. Dad wasn't moving anymore, and he didn't have much more to offer, anyway.

But Alex had to go after Mom.

He summoned the energy to run in the direction he'd seen her take into the woods. Before long he heard her footfalls in the brush. She couldn't seem to control her wailing, sobs of panic, desperation, maybe even mourning because she was smart enough to know she'd left her husband to die. And she kept bumping into trees that appeared in her path as if from nowhere. Alex heard her cry out in surprise and pain, imagined the collisions. How could such a thing happen? *Alex, what's going on?*

PART ONE: ESCAPE TO L.A.

Running to catch her made noise, too, and Alex huffed and puffed as he fought exhaustion. He wasn't a fucking jock. He wanted to kill his parents, not do aerobics. The distance between them shrunk, and when Mom came into view, she was looking behind her as often as in front of her, knocking against bushes and trees, each step a near fall. She saw Alex and screamed a raspy scream.

He stopped and called to her: "But Mom, I'm your son!"

She stopped and faced him with an expression so twisted he couldn't have matched words with it. Limited by the chemical burns that never healed, her voice sounded a guttural, primal sound. It wasn't terror, not quite. It was closer to revulsion.

His turn to tackle. Alex brought his mother down into the uneven, rocky forest soil so she lay beneath him on her back. He pressed his left forearm against her neck, and as her face swelled and colored, he asked, "Aren't you glad you're a mother?"

With his right hand, he moved the knife to the crotch of her silky pajama pants. He poked, searching.

Her eyes bulged.

He cut through the fabric. The thin blade found a groove and slipped between her lips. The knife's tip searched for the deeper opening.

"Aren't you glad, mother?"

Her face, changing from red to purple, shook with her head. Side to side? *Was that a "No," Mom?*

He rammed the knife into her vagina.

"Is this what makes you a mother?" he whispered into her ear, pressing his forearm harder into her neck. "Is this where I came from? Is this why I'm here?"

He pushed the knife farther, making circles with the hand gripping the handle, visualizing himself hollowing her out. His fist slipped inside her and drove the knife even farther. To keep pushing, he had to release her neck, but she wasn't fighting back anymore. Knife forward, he drove his arm into her womb, and once he got in past his elbow, he didn't know where the knife and his hand were anymore, anatomically speaking. He kept going, though,

taking the time to get as much of his arm in as possible.

Then he had to cut his way out.

## 2. Pick Up

Bruce

The drive to LAX took more than an hour, which was too much time to think.

Would Alex ask why he hadn't come to the funeral? His sister and her husband had shared a single memorial service and interment ceremony. Bruce assumed they went into the same expanded plot of dirt, but nobody ever told him if they had a double coffin or a single tombstone, and he didn't dare ask. However it had happened—in Georgia, the opposite side of the country, a lifetime away—he felt sure it had followed detailed specifications from Letta and Dave's voluminous will. Bruce could imagine his sister sending late-night, emergency emails to her lawyer with codicils about minutiae. She had kept the document updated, but she had left one fourteen-year-old detail in place. It was inexplicable, but it wasn't an accident. Why had she done it?

"I don't know how you can drive and look so far away at the same time," Aaron said. He wore one of the long-sleeved collared shirts he reserved for meetings with potential investors. He was nervous. They both were. Today, their lives changed forever. The idea of it was so fucking weird. Having a child?

Having a *teenager*?

When Alex was born, Bruce and Letta had a good relationship. They were both in their twenties and full of how wonderful life unburdened by their parents' religious absurdities was. New agnosticism and liberal politics provided sufficient areas for friendly bonding. During a moment in the hospital room early in labor—Letta had an epidural—after Dave stepped out for a smoke, Letta got serious and said she knew that when Bruce was ready,