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JUVILE  
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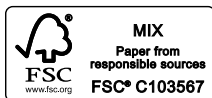
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*For Grandma Lil, Grams, and Sy,  
who put the “great” in great-grandparents*



Also by Gordon Korman

*Born to Rock*

*Don't Care High*

*Losing Joe's Place*

*Pop*

*A Semester in the Life of a Garbage Bag*

*Son of Interflux*

*Son of the Mob*

*Son of the Mob 2: Hollywood Hustle*

*Ungifted*



# CHAPTER ONE

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Gecko Fosse is behind the wheel of a powder blue Infiniti M45 sedan, enjoying the thrum of the idling engine and not thinking. Gecko has elevated not thinking to the level of high art. He's almost as good at it as he is at driving, and that's *very* good.

Right now he's not thinking about the fact that he's too young to hold a license—that he's still got two years to go before he even qualifies for a learner's permit. He's not thinking about what his brother, Reuben, meant when he said he needed to “pick something up” at an electronic games store that closed two hours ago.

Mostly, he's not thinking about the bald guy in the rearview mirror, sprinting up behind him, waving his arms and yelling.

*“Hey, that's my car!”*

The bald guy grabs for the door handle, but Gecko is already squealing away from the curb,

grooving on the burst of acceleration. It's his favorite feeling—that boost of pure power, like a titanic hand propelling him forward.

There's the store, coming up on the left. A flick of Gecko's wrist, a tap on the brake, and the Infiniti is right there. The place is dark. No sign of Reuben and his buddies. Gecko rabbit-punches the leather of the steering wheel, producing a staccato honk of the horn. Reuben leans into the window display of Wiis, waving him urgently away. Gecko stomps on the gas and wheels around the corner out of sight.

Reuben—there's someone not to think about. This is supposed to be his new ride. Gecko's gaze darts to the ignition, which has been ripped out, a pair of wires protruding from the column. No key. Reuben and his friends think they're so gangster, but they're really more like the Keystone Cops. Leave it to them to steal a car and then wave it right in front of the guy who used to own it. And if they're dumb enough to pull something like that, who knows what they're up to inside the House of Games?

He turns left and left again, circling back onto Jackson. It's effortless. The wheel is an extension of his hands, just the way he likes it. Gecko's the car, and the car is Gecko. Not bad, this M45 . . .

Uh-oh. The bald guy's dead ahead, and he's managed to flag down a traffic cop. The cop steps right into the Infiniti's path, holding his hand out like, well, a cop. Gecko slaloms around him and then



floors it. In the blink of an eye, the Infiniti is halfway down the next block. Gecko grins into the mirror. The officer and the car owner scramble helplessly in his wake.

The smile disappears abruptly as his rear view changes. The door of the shop bursts open, and out stumble Reuben and his two cronies, weighed down with huge armloads of video games. One of them actually runs into the traffic cop, bowling him over in a spray of falling boxes.

Gecko shifts into reverse. Now the acceleration is pressing on his chest, propelling him backward. Uh-oh. The light changes. A solid line of traffic is coming at him from the other direction. He presses on the gas, steering with one hand as he peers over his shoulder at the tons of metal hurtling toward him. The gap disappears in a heartbeat, split seconds to impact—

At the last instant, a tiny space opens up between the SUV and a van. Gecko swerves for it, threading the needle. The passenger mirror shatters as the van passes too close.

Gecko slams on the brakes, and Reuben and company pile in, raining disks all over the back seat. The Infiniti screams away.

His brother is the picture of outrage. “What are you doing, Gecko? You trying to get us busted?”

Gecko doesn’t respond. His not thinking kicks back in. He’s not thinking about the stolen car or

what his brother has gotten him into *again*. From the first time Reuben saw him piloting a go-kart, Gecko's fate was sealed. A getaway-driver-in-training since age nine.

The passengers are taking inventory of the haul, squabbling over who gets what, when they first hear the sirens.

Reuben slaps his brother on the back of the head. "Get us out of here, man!"

Gecko is already up to eighty on the avenue, weaving skillfully in and around traffic, using the sidewalk when necessary. Without telegraphing his move, he squeals into an underground parking garage, dutifully taking the ticket from the machine. He sails through the tight rows of parked cars as if taking a Sunday drive on the widest boulevard in town. The exit beckons dead ahead, leading onto a different avenue, this one southbound.

The Infiniti blasts through the wooden barrier, splintering it and sending the pieces flying. In an impressive burst of horsepower, the car streaks through four lanes of moving traffic and whips around the next corner.

That's where it happens. An elderly nanny, pushing a baby carriage in front of her, steps off the curb to cross with the light. It's a split-second decision, and Gecko makes it. He wrenches the steering wheel, and the speeding car brushes the back of the shocked nanny's coat. The right front tire jumps the curb and

plows up onto an old mattress leaning on a pile of trash. With the passenger side climbing and the driver's side still on the road, the Infiniti flips over. For a heart-stopping moment they are airborne, hot video games bouncing around like Ping-Pong balls.

Gravity reverses. A teeth-jarring crash.

Everything goes dark.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Gecko opens the dryer door and staggers back from a blast of arid heat that sears his skin and bakes the moisture out of his eyes, nose, and mouth. He reaches in, burning his fingers on the metal snaps of at least thirty orange jumpsuits.

The industrial-size equipment in the laundry room of the Jerome Atchison Juvenile Detention Center must be powered by volcanic heat, accessed straight from the earth's core, Gecko reflects, trying to blink some tears back to his eyes.

Strange that it would be hard to cry in a place like this. It took all his strength to hold himself back from bawling on day one, when they marched him through the tall gates topped with razor wire. Only thoughts of Reuben in adult prison kept him from completely going to pieces.

*Atchison's probably a picnic by comparison. . . .*

On the other hand, that's Reuben's problem. This

whole mess is one hundred percent his fault. Gecko was the most surprised guy in the world to wake up in the inverted Infiniti and find himself in deep trouble. Grand theft auto; accessory to robbery; driving without a license. There weren't this many charges against Al Capone.

Their mother was so shattered by Reuben's fate, she barely even noticed her younger son sinking into similar quicksand. As for his court-appointed lawyer—at the hearing, the guy seemed relieved that Gecko would be off the streets for a while.

*Probably drives an Infiniti. . . .*

Eventually, the jumpsuits are cool enough to be handled. Gecko teeters under the weight of an enormous armload, drops it on a table, and begins the process of folding. In thirty seconds, the sweat dripping from his brow is dotting the orange cotton. The laundry is actually considered one of the better jobs at Atchison. The road gangs come back with nasty blisters and worse attitudes, and the kitchen crews lose their appetites for months.

The attack is so sudden, so unexpected, that he's captured and immobilized before he has time to utter a sound. A pillowcase is pulled down over his head and past his shoulders to imprison his arms.

He knows exactly what's coming, and it terrifies him. This hazing ritual is legend at Atchison. He's been waiting for it—dreading it—for two months.

He tries to shrug out of the hood, but strong,

rough hands clamp around him. A voice snarls, “Don’t even think it, punk!” He’s aware of at least four or five people around him.

The first blow catches him on the side of the head, just above the ear. It feels like the impact of a Tomahawk missile, although he knows it’s just a bar of soap being swung inside a sock. “Classes” at Atchison are a joke. No one—teacher or student—expects any learning to take place. But the inmates here could write a set of encyclopedias on how to inflict pain.

The second shot is to his rib cage. It’s astounding that a mere bar of soap can hurt this much. It starts his heart racing, but no faster than his mind. His panicked thoughts are of a boy he never met—street name: Q-Bone—who was beaten so badly this way that he died of a heart attack at age fifteen. Or so the story goes.

Another explosion of pain, and Q-Bone’s fate isn’t hard to believe. Will Gecko Fosse be the next rumor?

All at once, the hands imprisoning him melt away, the beating stops, and there are scurrying footsteps.

“Fosse?”

Gecko struggles out of the pillowcase. Mr. Bell, the so-called school’s so-called principal, is standing in the doorway of the laundry room. He’s also the so-called guidance counselor. But from the sidearm he wears, everybody can tell he’s just like all the other adults in this place—a jail guard.

“What are you fooling around for, Fosse? Don’t you know I have to write you up for this?” At Atchison, attempted murder is the victim’s fault.

It never occurs to Gecko to try to explain the situation. These people are in a business where the customer is always wrong. Besides, ratting—even on nameless, faceless kids you can’t identify—earns you more than a bar of soap in here.

“Sorry,” Gecko mumbles finally.

Bell sighs in exasperation. “Follow me. There’s someone to see you in the office.”

All through the labyrinth of corridors, Gecko racks his brain. Who came to see him? And why not during regular visiting hours, in the usual meeting area? Mom? No, not with her working two jobs, and home a hundred fifty miles away. Reuben? He’s behind bars of his own, guarded by men with even bigger guns.

They pause at the security gate and wait for the attendant to buzz them through. He does and pats Gecko down for sharp objects.

“He’s clean.”

The office door is open, and Gecko cranes his neck eagerly to peer inside. His visitor is—he frowns. A total stranger.

The fear races back. *It’s all a mistake. They’ve called the wrong kid. I’m going straight back to the laundry, where those guys can finish the job! I have to figure out a way to defend myself. . . .*

The stranger stands up. “Graham Fosse?”

“That’s Gecko.”

“All right, Gecko. Come on in. Have a seat.”

Warily, Gecko sidles into the room and perches on the edge of a chair.

The newcomer turns to Bell. “Thanks. I can take it from here.”

Bell is reluctant. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Don’t worry. I can handle myself.”

Bell doesn’t budge. “He’s outside lockup. Regulations say he has to be accompanied.”

Gecko sizes up his visitor. He’s about five foot nine—not tall, but not short either, and neither thin nor fat. His hair is kind of sandy—not blond, not dark; red, maybe. He doesn’t have a single distinguishing feature, like a scar, birthmark, or mustache. Even his eyes are not quite blue, not quite brown, not quite green. Gecko can’t imagine anything more difficult than being asked to describe him. He’s practically an *un-guy*.

“I’m Douglas Healy.”

Gecko waits for more. It doesn’t come.

*Should I know this person?*

“I’m the one behind this new program you’ve been hearing about—the alternative living situation.” Healy frowns. “Well, surely you’ve been told you’re a candidate for . . .” His voice trails off. “No?”

Gecko doesn’t know how to respond. He doesn’t



want to get himself into any more trouble, but he's never heard of Douglas Healy, and has no idea what the newcomer is trying to say.

Healy's nondescript eyes flash with anger as he wheels on Bell. "It's taken more than a year to get this program approved! To get the funding in place! I've been talking to *parents*, for God's sake! Are you telling me that nobody even bothered to mention to Gecko that he's being considered?"

Bell shrugs. "This is the first I'm hearing of it. You want to see if the superintendent's in? He'd be the one to ask."

The newcomer lets out an exasperated breath. "The last thing I need is more red tape, thank you very much." He addresses the teenager in the orange jumpsuit. "Gecko, how'd you like to get out of this place? I mean right now—today."

Gecko is wary. When something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. "With you?"

"I've received a New Directions grant from the Garfield Foundation to create a living situation for boys in the juvenile detention system. A halfway house, if you will."

"Halfway to where?" Gecko asks suspiciously.

Healy smiles. "Here's how it works: you live with me and two other boys in an apartment. You go to school; you go into counseling; you do community service. To be blunt, you work your butt off and keep your nose clean. If you're looking for a vacation, this

isn't it. But it also isn't juvie. 'Halfway' means halfway home. You do your time with me, and you walk away from all this. Mess up, and you're right back here."

Outwardly, Gecko betrays little emotion. Inside, though, his brain is processing feverishly. Could this be real—a chance to get out of Atchison? To erase the nightmare of the last two months? To escape the torture that awaits him in the laundry room, if not today, then soon enough?

A dozen possible problems appear in his mind. "What about my family—my mom?" he corrects himself. It's unlikely that Reuben will be a factor in anything for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Bell supplies the answer to that one. "When you're in the system, the Juvenile Justice Department is your family. We can transfer you at our discretion. From our perspective, a halfway house is just an extension of our facilities."

Gecko tries hard to keep his voice steady and his expression unreadable. "What if my mother comes to visit me and I'm not here?"

"I spoke to your mother," Healy says quietly. "She understands that you're being given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You won't be seeing her anytime soon. No contact at all for the first six months. That's a condition of the grant. No phone calls, no e-mails, no letters."

"And if I say no?"

"You won't," Healy replies confidently. "Living in

jail or living free. It's not much of a decision."

Gecko nods. He made the decision back at *right now—today*. To avoid a return visit to that laundry room, he'll happily follow this unperson to the end of the earth.