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DEFENDER  
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REALM



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- ONE -

# Breakout

*Somewhere between five and eight.* That was how many bones Alfie was sure he was about to break as he lost his grip on the drainpipe, fell ten feet, and landed butt-first in the flower bed outside the prison walls.

Alfie was skinny, with thick mousy-brown hair that always seemed to curl down over his face, no matter how much gel he put in it. His eyes were a deep sea green, which hit you more in person than it did in photos. Everyone said he got them from his grandmother. Alfie wiggled his toes and was happy to discover that he could still feel his legs. He sat up, rubbed the back of his neck, and wiped the mud from his watch. It was a little after nine thirty p.m. *Right on schedule.* He had planned this breakout down to the minute. If his calculations were correct, then he wouldn't even be missed for—

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

Then again, Alfie's plans had a habit of going wrong. The gruff voice boomed down from the window he'd just climbed—well, *fallen*—from. By

the time Alfie had scrambled to his feet, he could hear heavy footsteps somewhere inside the cell block, coming his way.

*The Man in Black*, thought Alfie. *There's no way he's stopping me this time. No way.*

Alfie sprinted across the lawn toward the street. Vaulting over a low brick wall, he caught a glimpse of the huge arch of Wembley Stadium glowing in the distance. As much as he hated the prison, he had to admit its position on a hill just outside London gave it some spectacular views. Alfie risked a look back, just in time to see the dark-suited, broad-shouldered man with neatly clipped hair hurdle the wall and tear after him.

“STOP!”

Alfie sped up, legs already on fire with the effort, as he flashed past cars parked along the narrow, tree-lined street. But the Man in Black was closing on him, fast.

“I SAID, STOP!”

Alfie skidded on a patch of leaves and veered into a park that had appeared to his left. He might not be as fast as his pursuer, but the night was on his side. He pushed through some bushes and crouched behind an oak tree. Pressing his face against the cold, wet bark, he ignored his desperate need to gasp down air.

Branches snapped nearby as the Man in Black

bulldozed his way through the scrub. Alfie stayed still and watched him barrel out of the trees, grumbling and cursing with every sapling that whipped across his face. Finally free of their grasp, the Man in Black spun around three hundred and sixty degrees in a desperate search for his prey, and then ran on in the opposite direction.

Alfie finally sucked in a super-sized lungful of air. *That was too close.*

A few minutes later, double-checking that no one was on his trail, Alfie crossed over the Station Road bridge. A train thundered below him on its way out of the city. Every night he would lie awake in his cell listening to the distant rumble from the tracks and dream about hopping onto a train car one day and just seeing where it took him. Mountains would be good, or a forest or lonely moorland. Alfie had always liked the wilderness. Somewhere remote where he could be himself and—

A bus trundled past, faces gazing blankly from the windows. Alfie snapped out of it. What was he thinking? There were too many cameras on the station, too many people. Besides, he had his mission. It was decided. He needed to focus.

Alfie picked up the pace, fished a crumpled baseball cap out of his jacket pocket, and pulled it over his head. The one thing that he'd learned about disguises over the years was that less is more.