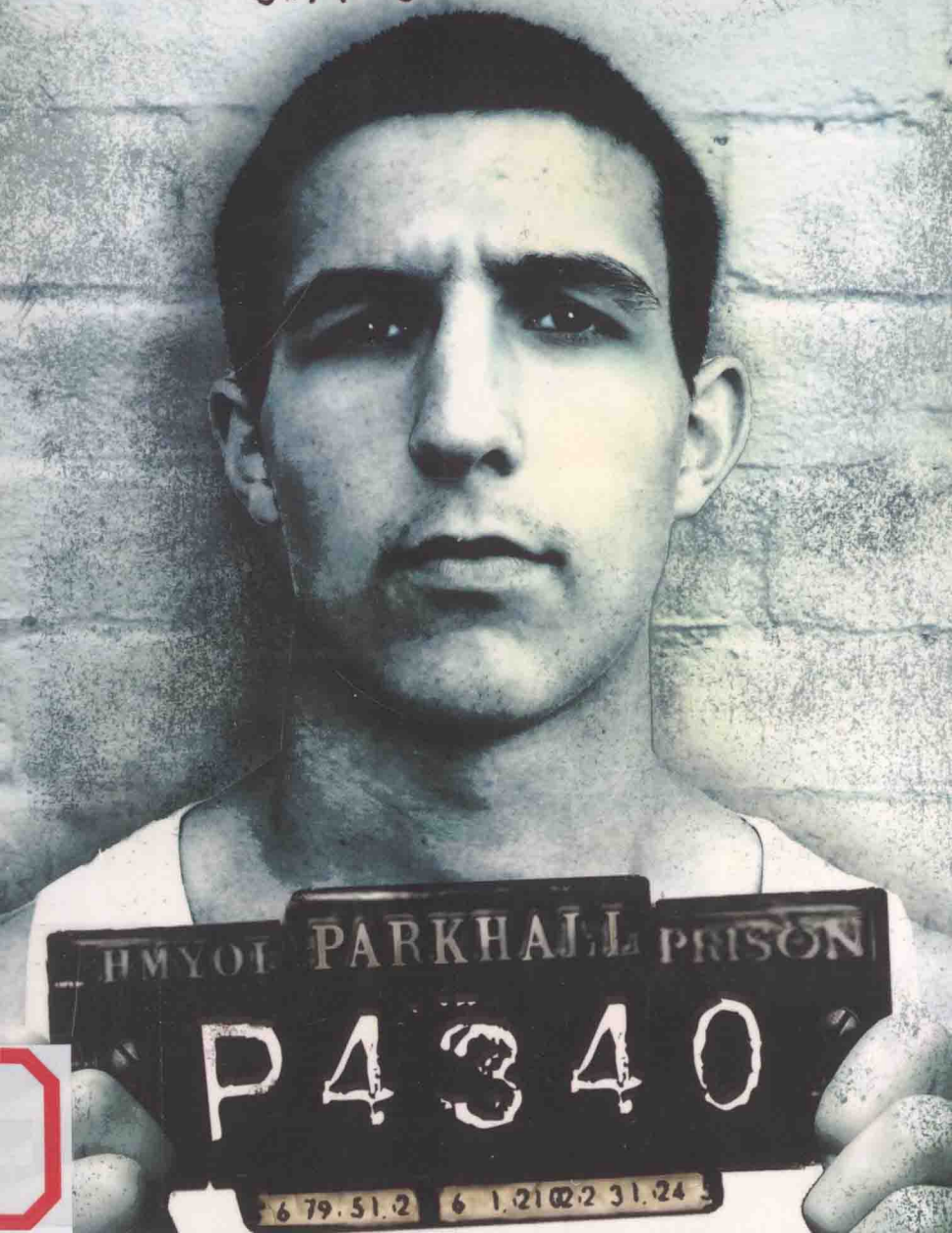


INSIDE

J.A. JARMAN



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For Julie Laslett

CHAPTER 1

‘Open your mouth.’

I looked around.

‘You, Mercer! I’m an officer. Open your mouth.’

Officer? Not police. Wrong uniform. Dark blue.

He stuck his fat face in front of mine.

‘Look left.’ He peered inside my gob. ‘Look right. Up. Close.’ He ticked a box on a clip sheet.

I couldn’t believe this. Him ordering me around like a dog.

What was he?

We were in a corridor below the court. Way below. Up there it had been all polished wood

and suits saying, '*Terribly sorry. Danger to society. Blah blah blah.*' Down here it were doors with spyholes and peeling paint and the smell of piss.

Fat Face put his clipboard on a table.

'Raise your arms. Stand with your legs apart. This is a rub down search. Part of your daily routine from now on, lad.'

He felt me up all over. *Pervert.*

'Arms down. Take your trainer laces out and remove your belt.'

'Why?' I'd had enough of this.

'To stop you harming yourself. Regulations. Some sensitive young persons in custody find the stress gets to them, see.'

He was trying to freak me out.

'I can handle this.' That belt was cool, bought with my own money.

'Good,' he said, 'but it don't make any difference. Regulations are regulations. Now check this list of what I've taken off you. Phone, keys, belt, laces and £1.96? Right?'

I nodded. Arsehole. He'd had the lot.

'Then sign here. This is your property list. It's going in that red bag. You'll get it back at the end of your sentence. Twelve months, is it?' He looked over my shoulder. 'Oh. L-l-lee Mercer.

Your signature's a bit shaky. You sure you're all right?'

Sarky sod.

I said, 'It's freezing down here.' I were only wearing chinos and a shirt. New. Marks and Sparks. To impress the judge. Waste.

'Ah, the cold.' He nodded. 'Don't feel it myself, not in July. Better put your trainers back on.' He took a key from a bunch on his belt. 'Now let's see what you think of our accommodation, shall we?' He unlocked a door and shoved it open.

'In you go. Go on. In you go.' He smirked. 'Handle it?'

CHAPTER 2

A cell. With tiled walls and a little barred window.
High up.

‘Go on.’ He jangled the keys. ‘It’s just for a few hours. This is what we call a holding cell. You are now in the custody of the prison service. I’ve got some ringing round to do to find you a permanent place. Go on. Move.’

A screw then. I felt his mitt on my back. Then the door clanged shut and I heard the key turning in the lock.

A few hours!

I sat on what passed for a bed.

Twelve effing months!

Got up again. Paced the floor. Three steps

one way. Two the other. I've seen dog kennels bigger.

And there was nothing to do.

'I'll always stand by you, Lee.' I could hear Kirstie's words in my head, but she hadn't turned up in court.

Mum was at the front, opposite the dock, looking at her feet or her watch. Wearing her office clothes. She'd smartened up too. And Ken from the community centre, he were at the back, pulling on his beard looking dead sorry.

Hypocrite. He dobbed me in.

And Mum wouldn't look my way. Even when I were sent down. I thought she might say something. Ask the judge for mercy. Or cry.

I were still in cloud-cuckoo-land then.

Twelve effing months! I wanted to shout: *What d'ya mean, arse-face?* But I couldn't. It had got to me. My left knee were shaking. Best not to think about it. Hard not to though. On your own. In the quiet.

Except for the spyhole hatch clattering up and down. About every quarter hour, I reckoned.

It were a relief when all hell broke loose outside the door. Sounded like they were bringing a drunk down. He were effing and blinding and

worse. I needed a slash by then and called out, but no one answered.

I should say now, this account would be twice as long if I included all the swearing, so I'll spare you most of it.

Anyway, after a bit I tried sitting on the floor. That way, with my back to the door I could see feet going by the window in the street outside. Normal life carrying on without me. Going to the arcades or the shops or the pub.

In boots with high heels. Trainers with laces. Pink stilettos. Like Kirstie's. *Was it her coming to see me?*

A couple of seagulls swooped down and started fighting over an ice cream on the pavement. Millsford's by the sea but don't get the wrong idea. It's a dump. Talking of which, I thought I might have to add to the brown stains on the floor when I heard the key in the lock. The door opened and a grey-haired granny screw stood there, pointing at a bell by the door.

'If you need the toilet, lad, you press the cell bell.'

Face like a frog. No neck. Could have been a bloke except for the big boobs.

'Come on. It's at the end of the corridor.'

She stood watching. Even when I said I needed a dump. And she wouldn't let me flush it away.

'Sorry. We check.' She peered in the bowl. 'Oh dear, is your tummy upset?'

Another pervert.

Later, when I was back in the cell, Fat Face came in with Sonia, my social worker. She was black and decent-looking but useless. Fat Face got her a chair and parked himself by the door.

I sat on the so-called bed.

'You must feel awful, Lee.' She had a face like a wet fortnight.

'Cos you dropped me in it.' She could have got me probation or community service if she'd written a decent report.

'No, Lee. You got yourself in this mess. Sooner you accept that the better.'

'I pinched stuff. Everyone does that.'

'No – they – don't, Lee.' She lowered her posh voice. 'Look, I know it's scary.'

'Not!'

'Then why's your leg shaking?'

'Cos I need a drink!'

'Yes, well. Let's think positively, shall we? You'll get help with that inside – and your temper. A

YOI, a Young Offenders Institution, is a prison, Lee, but it's especially for young people. You'll get counselling and—'

I wondered why the ceiling light had bars over it.

'Counselling?' Fat Face jangled his keys. 'His sort don't learn till someone knocks a bit of sense into them, Miss Benson.'

'Screws had better not touch me. I know my rights.'

'I'm sure you do, lad.' He started to open the door. 'But it's not the prison officers you have to watch out for.'

Sonia got up. 'I will come and see you inside, Lee. It'll be Stoke Heath, I think.' She put her hand in her pocket. 'Oh. Your mum sent this.'

'Cigs! Good old mum, but in't she coming to see me?'

'Sorry, packet's empty. Smoking's not allowed in YOIs. But she's written something on the back.'

No smoking! I couldn't believe it.

Nor Mum not coming to see me.

Nor what she wrote.

CHAPTER 3

Dear Lee,

Sorry but it won't do my nerves no good seeing you in there.

I always said you'd end up inside like your dad and now you have so you just have to get on with it.

Mum

Sonia touched my hand. 'You could prove her wrong, Lee.'

'You read it!'

The uniform stepped between us. 'We have a right to read your letters, lad. *Now*. And open your parcels. And listen to your phone calls.'

Sonia said, 'It's for a year, Lee, half that if you keep out of trouble.'

Then they left and the key turned in the lock.

Like your dad.

I were nothing like him.

At some point the granny brought me a slice of pizza, and later on I heard them banging up a few others. But it was the end of the afternoon before the door opened again.

'Right, lad, court's closed now.' Fat Face stood there holding handcuffs. 'Your carriage awaits. Bit of advice before you go, lad. Don't be so lippy. It'll get you in more trouble.'

I'd hardly said a word all day!

But at least we were moving.

'Here, hold out your hands. At the front if you're going to be a good lad.' He cuffed my wrists together. 'Now walk out of the door and wait outside.'

Stop. Wait. Walk forward. Stop. Wait. Walk up the stairs. Wait.

Was this my life from now on?

It were raining in the street outside and there was a white van waiting. Plain, no writing, just a row of little dark windows along the top. A woman yelled 'Scum!' and I wondered if Fat Face

would put a blanket over my head like on the news, but he just said, 'Walk to the rear door. Stop. Get into the first sweat box.'

There were six cubicles, like greyhound traps, in the back of the van. With high metal doors. The door of the one just inside was open.

He undid the cuffs. 'Go on. Climb up and sit.'

The engine was running. He closed the door. I pulled down a little seat.

'Got all the files, Rosie?'

'Yup.' It sounded like the granny screw.

I heard her heaving herself in, and the doors shutting. Then I was thrown against the wall as the driver pulled out.

'Don't you know it's against the effing law not to wear effing seat belts?' That was the drunk I think. 'Are you effing listening? I'll see my effing solicitor about this.'

You get the gist? As I said, it's every second word with cons. Some of the others joined in, but the granny didn't answer and after a bit it went quiet, except for the sound of the engine.

I hate quiet.

Like your dad.

I couldn't believe she'd said that.