

BOOK II

THE PAGE
TURNERS

ECONOMY OF FEAR

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TWO

THE ABDUCTION

Spenser Killick opened his eyes and, through the inky darkness of night, saw the faint outline of his mother sitting at the foot of his bed. She said nothing, and did not touch him, but that was alright. It was enough just to be in her presence, to breathe the same air, and for them each to know the other existed—to know it in the tangible way that can be experienced only by sharing the same space with another human being. She had done this same thing when he was a young boy: come to him in the night and sat watch over him while he slept. Back then, it had comforted him to know, as he fell asleep in a vast and lonely bed, that, if he were to wake in the night, she

would be there, protecting him like a guardian angel.

But now it was her bed that was lonely, and it was she who needed comfort in the night.

“It’s going to be okay, Mom. I promise.”

He saw the blurred motion of her head nodding, slowly, like the silvery form of an actress in a silent film: no sound at all, yet a thousand agonies communicated through the movement of the body, and breath melting into darkness. She rose, ghostlike, and returned to her own room, leaving the faint aroma of her perfume as the only proof she’d been there at all.

He lay in the dark, for a time, cursing his absent father. The man who had abandoned his son, and abandoned his wife.

Eventually, and without Spenser’s even realizing it had happened, the anger subsided enough for slumber to take him in its arms. He went to the place of dreams, and found himself lost amidst the worst of nightmares—the kind you wake from in the dead of night, sitting bolt upright in a hot sweat, still able to feel the lingering touch of death’s hand at your throat.

Yet it could hardly have been a dream, for every part of him felt alive.

Surges of unadulterated terror shot through his body like the revving of an engine. The nerve endings across his skin and down his spine sparked and fired. Blood pumped hard, coursing through his veins in starts and fits, chased down by pounding epinephrine racing forth from his adrenal glands. That animalistic instinct that straightens the back and widens the eyes, and lifts each hair in a warning of danger, functioned in hyper-drive. Every inch of his body told him he was in mortal peril. Yet he could not move.

Spenser tried to shift his foot, and nothing happened. He transferred his focus to his hands, but they were totally unresponsive. Even his neck refused the slightest nudge.

With his body paralyzed, his eyes swept the scene: he was still in his bedroom, but he was no longer alone.

They were around him.

His home had been invaded, plundered, and ruined. His bedroom no longer belonged to him; they had claimed it as their own. Movie posters and action figures were lost to the dark infinite that lay just beyond the immediate presence of these nocturnal invaders. He counted four of them: two on each side of his bed. The blankets and sheets were gone. He lay before them in his pyjamas, frozen and

exposed.

Long, sinewy arms pinned him down, their fingers burning like embers as they pressed against his skin. He tried to cry out, but they'd robbed him of his voice. He had no choice but to lie silent and unmoving, embalmed by a cocoon of terror.

Outside, the November wind blew strong; but Spenser's mind went back to that day in October when everything had changed. He and the two other members of his book club, The Page Turners, had met to discuss their favourite villains. Each of them had given a presentation. Danny Fitch had spoken of Valande the Lover, a vampire from the *Dark Wedding* series. Nate Bourdain had introduced the group to Marras, an evil wizard from the fantasy epic *Paradise Fields*. And Spenser had chosen the villains he found far more terrifying than vampires or wizards: the aliens described by Sally Winters in her abduction memoir, *As Flies to Wanton Boys*. The author claimed that her entire story of abduction was true, that aliens from outer space really did exist—and now here they were, circled about Spenser's bed, just as Sally Winters had described them.

The aliens were real, and they *had* him.

Though the touch of their long, grey fingers brought hot agony, their huge, almond-shaped eyes peered down at him from pale, bulbous heads. Their gaze was like ice. There was no mercy in those eyes, none to be found anywhere behind them—only frozen pools of nothingness, where compassion went to die.

One of the aliens to Spenser's left removed its hand from his arm and placed it over his pudgy belly. There was a sharp tug, and it felt as if Spenser's insides were being pulled out through his belly button. Even in the excruciating pain, his vocal cords remained paralyzed. He could do nothing but endure the agony and pray for the torture to end. Silenced and paralyzed, he'd become a plaything to these hellish apparitions. There could be no escape from their torture.

Darkness spread through the room. Creeping black shadows gobbled up blues and greys. Outside the window, the moon, in a sudden flourish, vanished from the sky, leaving only a charcoal smudge where its thin, sickle form had hovered like an ornament moments before. When it seemed the room would be completely swallowed into black nothingness, the door creaked open and a light from the hallway pierced through the cloak of night, chiselling

out the silhouette of the man standing in the doorway.

For a brief instant, Spenser thought it was his father; but Mr. Killick had been living in Caferton, the small town to the north of Maplewright, for weeks now. Spenser's parents were getting divorced, and his dad had not come to rescue him from the aliens. His father had abandoned him. The man in the doorway was someone else entirely.

The dark figure stepped into the room, and the light from the hall slipped in behind him. A dark hand reached up, removed a pair of sunglasses, and carefully placed them in the inside breast pocket of a black suit. With the fantasy image of his father gone, Spenser recognized the man walking towards him as Staff Sergeant Doug Alderwood, Maplewright Police Force.

The police, thought Spenser. I'm saved.

A generous respite from the pain flowed across the surface of his body, as the aliens turned to face Alderwood. With the alien's touch gone from his skin, the paralysis weakened. "Help... me," he moaned.

Alderwood smiled through the darkness. "I see things are right on schedule."

One of the aliens stepped forward and spoke in an eerie voice. "I am Haukronin. This human has been assigned to me. You are interrupting".

That nightmare feeling of unreality washed back over Spenser. It was too incongruous to hear English words coming from the alien's misshapen and lipless mouth. Alderwood, however, appeared completely unimpressed by the inhuman, unearthly forms speaking to him.

Spenser closed his eyes, gathered his strength, and tried to shout with all of his might. "Help me," he cried, but it came out as little more than a whimper.

Alderwood moved to the side of the bed, pressed past Haukronin and another alien, as if they were nothing to him, and peered down at Spenser in a condescending perusal. His head tilted to the side like a doctor examining an especially ill patient.

"What's that? Help you? Oh, no. I won't be helping you one bit."

"Why? Why would you let them do this to me?"

"Mr. Killick, you and your friends have caused me quite a bit of trouble," said Alderwood. "Burning down that poor Elliot girl's house? Killing her family? What were you thinking?"

“We didn’t... kill anyone,” said Spenser. “We didn’t burn down any house. I don’t know what you are talking about. Please, help me. It hurts so much.”

“Nonsense. I’m afraid these gentlemen and I have come to an agreement regarding how to deal with you best. Yes, they will take care of you; but don’t worry—I’ll see to your friends, Nathan and Daniel.”

“Don’t touch my friends!” said Spenser, rising up on his elbows.

“Enough of this,” said Alderwood. “Take him away.”

“The inspection is incomplete,” said Haukronin. “The specimen must be properly examined prior to extraction.”

“Ridiculous,” said Alderwood. “The boy is a perfect candidate for the program.”

Alderwood’s eyes lingered on a jagged wound, three weeks healed but still held together by spidery sutures, stretching from the corner of Spenser’s mouth up to his temple. “What *have* you and your friends been up to, I wonder,” said Alderwood, quietly. He reached out and flicked the wound with his index finger. A renewed flash of pain shot through Spenser’s body, and he collapsed down onto his back. Alderwood smiled. “He’s a little banged up, but you and I both know he’ll be in much

worse condition before long. I've seen what you've done with some of the others."

Spenser tried to sit up again, but the alien hands pressed him down onto the mattress with their searing touch.

"I always provide you with the finest specimens," continued Alderwood, showing off his best used-car-salesman smile. "Falcon Lake, Harbour Milles... Maplewright won't be any different. You'll be able to inflict infinite pain on this one. He'll scream and scream, but he won't die easily." Alderwood winked at Spenser. "I'm beginning to suspect you grey fellows may not be the first monsters he's faced."

Spenser could make no reply. The burning hands were on him again, and the pain had returned.

The Man in Black shrugged, retrieved the sunglasses from his pocket, and placed them back on his face. "I'll leave you to your work."

Already the night had begun to absorb him into the impenetrable black. Alderwood closed the door behind him, and the room went dark.

There was no light now, only pain, and Spenser lost consciousness.



The November breeze brushed up against his cheek, stinging sharply in the cold. Spenser opened his eyes to the night, finding a star-filled sky. The crescent moon had returned. Shadowy stalks rose up from the ground all around him. The late-autumn smell of rotting corn permeated the crisp, night air.

Spenser got to his feet. He was in the corn fields out behind his farmhouse. He'd walked the long rows of corn under the warm sun a hundred times, but had traversed them at night only once before: as a boy, he'd been out in the fields when the sun had begun to set, and he had lingered too long. With night's descent, panic had set in swiftly; he'd lost sight of the farmhouse, and become disoriented in the towering rows of corn. He could have been just a few metres away from the edge of the field, or in the dead centre, and he would never have known either way. His father had heard his cries and rescued him that night, grudgingly carrying the boy back towards the house as he wept into his father's shoulder; but Dad was gone now, and Spenser dared not wake his mother with shouts for help in the dead of night. The crumbling of her

marriage had left her frail and haggard. Spenser would have to pick a direction and walk blind, or stay where he was and wait until the light of morning.

He tried to focus on which option to choose; but the nightmare lingered in its distracting memory. Even in the cold night, wearing only his pyjamas, his bare feet sinking into the cold soil, he could almost *feel* the lasting heat of the aliens' touch against his flesh. Alderwood's cameo in the dream troubled him as well. What connection had his subconscious mind made between the cruel policeman, who had refused to help him in his time of need, and the aliens from Sally Winter's book, whom he feared with such fervent intensity?

The more pertinent mystery, perhaps, was the question of how he'd ended up out the fields in the middle of the night. Spenser had never sleepwalked before, and he doubted he could have made it down the stairs, out of the house, and through the fields without waking.

He reached up and slid his finger along the stitched wound in his cheek. The feeling of the vampire's fist connecting with his face returned to him with startling

accuracy, and he began to wonder whether this somnambulist wandering was the lingering effects of a concussion.

From out of the darkness behind him, Spenser heard the swishing of movement amongst the dry stalks.

He whirled around, but could see only the shadowy blur of night and the wall of dead stalks and husks before him.

“Who’s there?” he said, the fear from the dream returning swiftly.

The noise came again, this time to his right—the rustle of bodies sliding between the stalks, the patter of feet against soil.

The noises came from the left, then behind him.

He spun about, seeing nothing.

The sounds circled, grew louder, pressed in towards him.

He saw the movement of black stalks swaying against the night sky.

“Who are you?” he yelled. “What do you want from me?”

There was nowhere to go. Any attempt at escape would be running blind, probably right into one of them. The

rustling came at him from all sides, and the swaying stalks, ominous and bleak, were only metres away.

He was going to cry for help, but then he saw *it*—and, once more, he had no voice with which to scream.

The saucer hovered in the sky directly above him, silent in the black night. It was dark, barely visible, like a reflection on water broken by ripples.

As if sensing his presence, the ship came alive with a blinding rainbow of colour that blasted in all directions across the dome of the heavens. Simultaneously, a high-pitched screech tore through the air with such intensity that Spenser was left stumbling and disoriented.

Bewildered by the aural and visual onslaught, half blind, and quite deaf for the moment, he took some time to realize that his feet no longer touched the cold earth. His body floated upwards, pulled toward the dazzling light of the ship by an unstoppable force that had wrapped itself about him in a cold embrace and dragged him up into the sky against his will. He flailed his arms and legs, trying to swim through the air back down towards the ground, but it was of no use. Up, up, he went, drawing ever closer to the ship.

Down below him, across the black fields, he could see

the murky outline of his home and, next to it, the old wooden barn—they looked like mere models from this distance. He understood, in that moment, that he was being torn away from his life and everything he'd ever known. Torn away, and pulled towards untold terrors.

He shut his eyes tight and prayed that it was a dream, but he knew that it was not.

Enjoy this sneak preview? Pre-order *The Page Turners: Economy of Fear* now:

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