

A YOUNG ADULT THRILLER

# REACH OUT



JACOB HUNTER

Jacob Hunter

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*For Aziza, as with everything.*

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# Chapter One

**T**hough sought after, peace was something Jake Landon could never attain.

The wind stroked Jake's face, its brush tantalisingly satisfying. He pulled back another strand of shrubbery, parting it before sticking his leg into the gap it left. The greenery gave way, and he stepped into the open hole. He smelt the mist in the air, revelling in the cold morning breeze.

*One more bit to go*, Jake thought. He braced his stomach, letting the breath push out at all sides, before shouldering his way through to the other side of the bush. Light flooded his vision, along with the image of trees surrounding him in a green halo.

A smile overtook his face, and he let his breath out. Finally, he was here.

The smile never left his face as he sprinted over to a large oak tree with roots running for miles. It was his tree. He'd named it Hope. As to why he had no idea. But the name was apt. Spoke of something higher than himself, something he could come back to. A kind of comfort he had from nothing else.

A shout erupted in the corner of his hearing range. He turned to find nothing except the normal morning breeze. Jake wanted to call out, but the sliver of fear within him stopped the words cold in his throat.

Jake crept up to Hope and paused behind the trunk. He gave a few seconds for the shout to return, but silence pervaded the air. Jake glanced around to make sure he was in the clear before continuing towards his destination. The place he always came to when thoughts raged in his head, when he needed release from his own mind.

Lake Hurricane. Named after a hurricane that had caused it in the first place, ripping parts of the ground up with it and forming the pool of water that was in front of Jake. Jake had first come here when he was seven on a school trip before the forest had been closed to the public, and he loved the way it was surrounded by thick trees, hidden in a way, as if his own secret spot. Jake loved the delicate tip of the water, and the ripples it made when a leaf fell on its surface in the autumn. The lake was almost a perfect circle, except for one little dip in the corner. Jake liked to think that imperfection represented him. He was the imperfection in everyone else's circular, uniform life. Maybe that was why the lake gave him solace.

The shout rang again, piercing through the greenery. Jake's breath hitched, and he hid behind another tree. He didn't want anyone to see him, especially not anyone from school. If they noticed him here, what would they say? Mock him, for sure, mockery was expected. But that would be the least of his worries.

Bruce and Danny would verbally murder him, and the whole class would ostracise him. Jake could take the verbal beating. But being left out, being alone, was something he couldn't endure. Maybe that was why he loved being with nature so much.

Jake wanted to have a garden when he was older. Wanted to have plants of all different kinds, with all different imperfections, in different pots scattered around a greenhouse. And he'd go in the morning to watch them

all, tend to them, look after them. Smell the musky scent in the air and drink it in.

“Jake,” the shout came.

*What the hell is Mum doing here?*

Jake’s body froze, and his eyes scrambled for a better hiding spot. The tree he crouched behind was too thin to cover his fifteen-year-old frame, despite how frail he was.

All he’d wanted to do was relax, away from those at school, away from his mum who badgered him about why he was inadequate or imperfect, not meeting her ridiculous standards.

Jake knew he was a failure. But he didn’t need everyone to remind him every second of every day.

“Jake,” his mum called again, her voice cutting the misty air.

A lump crept up Jake’s throat and clogged his airways. *What do I do?* he thought. His eyes snapped to another tree, tall and thick, but it was on the other side of the lake. If he could make it there, he’d be safe. His mum would go back home after getting tired of searching, and Jake would return an hour later with another excuse.

“Jake, come back here right now. I know you’re there somewhere.”

*She can’t find out. Not for anything.*

The footsteps reached Jake’s ears. The faint crunch of sticks under his mum’s feet as she stepped across the greenery, not caring for the plants in the same way that Jake did. She didn’t love the forest the same way Jake did, and so she could never find out it was Jake’s place of comfort. If his mum came here it would ruin the only safe space he had in life. He had to keep hidden at all costs.

Each step grew progressively louder. The crackle of sticks snapping sounded like bones breaking to Jake. His hands stuck when he rubbed them together. Jake stared at his feet, then at the tree on the other side. He rubbed his wet hands again. They were about to get a whole lot wetter.

Jake's legs tensed.

"Jake, get back here young man."

Jake squeezed his eyes shut. His mum's voice was piercing, and it was only a matter of time before she found him and his private heaven. He couldn't let her see him. He couldn't.

His breath came in gasps. He'd been holding it in for the last twenty seconds unknowingly. *Come on, Jake. Get a backbone, will you?* The tree on the other end was light-years away. The lake seemed to stretch for miles across. But Jake had to get there.

Mind made, Jake stilled the doubts flying around his head, heaved in a huge breath, and leaped leg first into the water just as his mum gave another shout.

Water flooded into his open mouth and invaded his nose. Jake held his breath for dear life as his body sank to the bottom of the lake. His chest lurched for a second, before he stilled his limbs. His feet touched the rough ground. He was faintly aware of shouting coming from above him, but he swept it away from his mind. Instead, he closed his eyes and let the blackness take over.

The sound of water rushing into his head hit Jake's ears. But he didn't care for it. An odd sense of peace filled him, a kind of silence and quiet he had never experienced. He let himself meditate in the quiet, letting it wash over him. Another shout rang from above, but it dimmed into the distance, unable to pierce the shield of water around Jake.

*I could live like this,* Jake thought. Away from his friends, his mum, from the horrors of the past he had to live through. He was alone with his thoughts, a prospect that had always scared him. But it was a beautiful silence, a peaceful solitude.

Jake's eyes snapped open, and the once peaceful silence gave way to a massive pounding in his head. The need for air gripped him at once, his lungs screaming to release a breath. Jake clawed at the water, but it streamed into his eyes and he couldn't see. Dark spots danced at the corner of his vision, pulsing with each second Jake couldn't breathe. He grasped at the sides of the lake, trying to haul himself out of the water. The rock crumbled as his hands scraped it, and then sunk to the bottom of the lake.

*Crap crap crap,* Jake thought.

He remembered having swimming lessons in year five, but they disappeared from his head the instant he needed them. His limbs flailed, and with it his legs kicked into the ground. Instead of rising, Jake's body completely flipped in the black water. His sense of direction vanished. Jake scrambled to get his feet back to the ground, but all he kicked was the water.

His head smacked into a rough surface, sending spots flashing across his vision. *The ground,* thought Jake. He planted his weakened hands on the ground and pushed. He rose a few centimetres in the water and flipped back upright.

*That's it.*

He kicked through the thick water and rose a few more inches. His heart slammed against his ribs, which made his chest convulse. Jake's muscles spasmed as he tried to muster enough strength to get out. The peace vanished, making way for sheer desperation for survival.

The blackness was taking over. The spots in his vision enlarged, taking more of his sight with each second. Jake kicked again and his hand brushed the open air, water streaming down his forearms. He pushed his arm back into the water along with another kick, raising himself a mere agonising inches.

His head broke the surface. Air rushed into his mouth and he gulped it all in. He wheezed in more breaths, feeding his starving lungs. The shouts from earlier were loud and clear, ringing his ears. But he paid them no mind. Survival was the only concern on his mind. Water trickled down his cheeks, letting his eyes see properly. The dark spots blinked once, twice, and slowly receded.

Jake floated for a moment, kicking every few seconds to keep his head above the water. His limbs gained strength again, and the pulsing of his arms stopped.

“Jake, Jake,” a voice said, his mum’s voice. Hands grabbed him and pulled his legs out of the water.

The next thing Jake knew he was propped up against a rough surface that dug into his back. He heaved in breaths, letting the life seep back into him. The taste of the morning mist touched Jake’s tongue once more, along with the smell of trees.

Jake had almost died in the water. A cynical part of him wished he had died, had let the eternal peace take over him.

“What on earth were you thinking?” his mum said.

Jake must have spoken, because the voice gave a reply he couldn’t hear. His mum wrapped him in some cloth, perhaps her jacket or something else. Jake let the warmth replace the coldness of the water which soaked his t-shirt. He waited a moment, letting the chill leave his body for warmth.

Then, the chill returned at once. Mortification rose within Jake, and he shut his eyes, not willing to believe what had happened. What he had let happen.

His voice choked out words. “Mum, I—”

“Shut it. I’ll deal with you when we get home. What on earth were you thinking? Is this where you always disappear off to, then?”

Jake clamped his eyes shut and let his head hit the rough bark behind him. His hair was grimy and water dripped onto his shoulders. The lake’s water had left his face. Tears threatened to drop. He’d never cried in front of his mum, and he didn’t want to make it a habit.

“No, I just came here this one time,” Jake said. His eyes were still shut to keep the tears at bay.

The hand on his shoulder tightened. “I don’t believe you.”

“Please,” Jake said. He had no idea what he was pleading for. Was his mum about to ground him from coming here? She hadn’t said anything yet.

Tears gone, Jake’s eyes opened and he stared at his mum’s face. She looked disappointed, the usual flare of her blue eyes as she recognised his failure to be the son she wanted. Something else was there as well, an emotion Jake couldn’t decipher.

She pulled at Jake’s shoulder, getting him onto his knees. Jake stood up, shrugging her hand off. He wiped his knees and stretched his arms, letting them click into motion.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“You could have died, for god’s sake.” His mum pulled his ear and twisted it. “I don’t want to hear a peep out of you until we get home. Understand?”

Jake winced as he gave a short nod. “All right, now let go. Please.”

His mum retracted her hand and shook her head. She turned and led him out of his little sanctuary. Well, no longer his sanctuary, since his mum had found it. Jake struggled to hold back the returning tears.

As Jake swiped the bush back into place to cover the lake, he glanced at where his mum had hauled him out from. It was that little dip in the lake, the imperfection. Jake's shoulders dropped and his hands went limp. The bush swung back into place. The sanctuary was gone, and likely would never come back, if his mum had anything to say about it.

"Jake, come on, then," his mum said, voice filled with casual venom. "Stop dallying."

"Yeah, Mum," Jake said glumly, his tired legs squelching in the moss as he followed her out of the forest.



## Chapter Two

Jake's back slumped against the wall as he fingered his duvet. The sun was slowly peeking from behind the clouds and streamed in through his window, its rays bright against the blue walls. Jake huffed, got up, and closed the curtains. He wanted the darkness, the same kind of darkness he'd had at the bottom of the lake a few hours ago.

His mum had led him home after he'd almost drowned. She opened the door and let him come inside. A few seconds of respite was all he got before she began shouting at him. As she always did whenever the opportunity struck.

"What was that? Are you trying to get yourself killed?" She jabbed a finger at him, a long, bony finger.

Jake never let himself be goaded into these arguments. He was usually the adult in the situation, funnily enough. He was usually the one who ended it. But the fact that she had found his sanctuary, had ruined his only chance at peace, his only chance at being able to have a respite from life, didn't sit well with him.

"Probably be better if I was dead, wouldn't it." Jake's reply caused the room to still. He could hear his own heartbeat thrice a second.

"What did you say?"

Jake wished he had a clamp over his mouth. Wished he could take those words back, no matter how true they were. He turned and walked towards the stairs, intending to leave before it got ugly, but his mum grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“What do you want?” Jake said.

His mum gave him a punch on the shoulder. It may not have carried the will to hurt, but the sting spread throughout Jake’s body. “You can’t say things like that,” she shouted.

Jake shrugged and continued towards the stairs.

“Jake, don’t walk away from me, young man.”

“So what if I do?” Jake said, turning to face his mum. “When have you ever cared? Was the start of it today?”

“Shut—just shut up, Jake. What were you doing outside?”

“Why were you following me? Are you some kind of stalker, or something?”

His mum took a step closer, her eyes flashing. “You’re forgetting that you’re my son.”

“So, when has that changed anything?”

His mum paused for a moment. Jake had got her. She’d never cared, a truth they were both aware of. He’d gone to the forest a thousand times, possibly more, and she never bothered to check on him once.

Ever since his dad had run away, she was never the same mum he remembered. There was a time when she took him to the park, and they ate ice creams on the bench and he’d go to play on the swings. Laughter and smiles filled their days.

But such times were gone. They made way for hollow days, filled with emptiness and depression. Days where Jake didn’t want to be alive. And he

was sure that his mum felt the same, at times.

“Jake,” his mum started, “I...I do—”

“There’s no point lying,” Jake interrupted. His voice was low, and measured. “Maybe one day you did. But not anymore.”

Jake still wore the soaked t-shirt, but the coldness running through him was not from the water. His mum took her coat off and threw it towards the sofa. It made a thwack as it landed.

“What happened to us, Jake?” his mum asked.

Jake rested his arm on the stairwell. “I’m not...sure.”

“We used to be...”

“Close,” Jake finished with a sigh. “Well, not anymore, I guess.”

His mum nodded, her lips pursed. “Breakfast’s in half an hour. Have a shower and get changed, will you?” His mum had reverted back to her usual cold self. No feelings, just orders. The argument was over.

Sometimes, Jake enjoyed their arguments. For the glimpses of emotions he could get out of her. And maybe for the emotion he could get out of himself, also.

Jake trudged upstairs, but he didn’t change or have a shower. Instead, he sat on his bed, head in hands, not knowing what to do or think. His place, *his*, was gone. And a part of his soul had travelled along with it.

Jake shuddered with another breath.

“Jake, are you coming down to eat?”

Jake didn’t reply. Who cared about food when his life was in tatters, ripped apart by his mum finding out about the forest? He drew another sharp breath, his world closing around him, his life in an elevator where the walls were closing on all sides. Closer and closer they came.

At least he'd been caught on a weekend. Jake couldn't imagine what would happen if people from school had seen him as he trudged back home with sopping wet clothes. He hesitated to think what they would have thought, let alone say to his face at school.

Jake glanced over at his shelves of manga, stacked with books upon books that hadn't felt his touch in years. They'd all been bought for him by his dad when he was with them. Jake recalled the excitement that flooded him at the sight of the volumes, his thrill at reading them before moving onto the next one. After his dad left, he tried to read manga online, but that habit fizzled out within a few weeks.

Sometimes, Jake wanted to throw them away because of his dad's betrayal. But every time he tried, his hands stilled, froze, and the books fell onto the floor again.

The doorbell rang. Twice.

*Who's that?* Jake wondered. No one had knocked on their door in a long time. At least, not since they actually had neighbours to talk to. The house opposite had been empty for a few years.

"Jake, get that will you?"

Jake sighed and left the relative warmth of his bed. His legs were stiff as he climbed down the stairs. The smell of eggs hit him, but they caused nausea within him rather than hunger. He'd get a breakfast bar later, when the hunger worsened to the gnawing point that usually prompted Jake to eat.

"Who is it?" Jake said as he opened the door.

"Me," the voice said. It was a deep growl, and Jake's eyes widened at the massive man in front of him, built like the hulk with a bulging belly. The man spoke with a faint accent, hardly noticeable.

"Okay," said Jake, not knowing what to reply.

They paused like that for a moment, neither knowing what to say. What did one say to a six-foot-plus muscle man in front of them?

Luckily, the man broke the silence. “Sorry, my name is Hugo. I moved in opposite.” Hugo pointed towards the house that had been empty for years. Jake thought it was haunted for a while, before he finally grew out of that horror phase. “Your name is?” the man asked.

“Jake. Jake Landon.”

They shook hands, with the man’s hands almost crushing Jake’s in an iron grip. *This guy spends too much time at the gym*, Jake thought.

“Why are you wet?” the man said, head directed at Jake’s clothes.

Jake glanced down at his t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, which were still damp from the lake. “Nothing,” he said. His mum had already found out about the lake. No chance in hell Jake was about to let a random stranger know.

Thankfully, the man moved on from the topic. “I have a son your age. Maybe you could meet him. Be friends.” As he spoke, Jake noticed the scent of beer and cigarettes reeking from the guy. *He can’t be a good guy if he’s introducing himself along with his addiction.*

“I’m all right,” Jake said. He wanted no more friends, wanted no more reason for someone to hate him. “Is he going to Liston High?”

The man nodded.

“I’ll meet him there, I guess, if he’s in my class.”

Hugo was satisfied with that answer. “I will see you, then.”

Jake nodded, shook Hugo’s massive hand again, trying not to wince from the pressure, and shut the door. The hum of the outdoors ceased and he walked back into the kitchen, where his mum sat nursing a cup of coffee.

“Who was that?” his mum asked. “You were talking for quite a while.”

“New neighbour.”

“What did they want?”

Jake shrugged. “Not much.” Withholding information from his mum gave him the upper hand, no matter how trivial it sounded. He could win at something, at least.

“Well, are you going to eat?” his mum said.

Jake shook his head. “Maybe a bit later.” *Or maybe not*, he finished in his mind.

He went back upstairs to his room, to his blue walls and little desk and wardrobe filled mostly with clothes that were too small for him. This was the only place in the world for him, now that the forest was off-limits in case his mum chased him once more. Perhaps he could go there after school, but someone would follow him. Jake was paranoid about being followed and found.

But maybe he could try again, the next morning.

As Jake sat on his bed once more in the dark, he struggled to breathe as the familiar constricting of his throat gripped him. On his desk was a diary he always wrote in. If he flipped back to the pages from his childhood, in diaries boxed in his wardrobe, he’d find fantastic tales of days out and happiness.

Now, though, his diary wasn’t a form of escape from him, despite him spilling his emotions into ink every night.

Jake needed an escape of some sort. And if he didn’t get it, sooner or later, he would break indefinitely.

## Chapter Three

**L***ook down, look down*, Jake thought as he hurried through the streets towards school. Every morning, he would try to avoid Danny and his boys by sticking his head down and minding his own business. And after his mum grounding him indefinitely, he wasn't in the mood to be accosted.

Left turn, then another right. Cross the road, and turn left again towards the front gate. He'd memorised the directions so he didn't need to show his face, and the sound of cars made sure he was never run over. All he had to do was not get caught.

"Look who it is," a voice said. Jake stopped, knowing it was directed at him. The mirth lined Danny's voice. Jake ground his teeth. He was *not* in the mood for Danny's shenanigans.

Jake raised his head and planted a smile on his face, a fake smile. His lips upturned at the corner but his eyes were downcast. "Wassup," he said.

Danny had piercing, grey eyes and snapped them to Jake's hands. "Why are you shaking, man? We ain't gonna do anything." He bumped Bruce, who stood beside him, with his shoulder. "Right."

Bruce nodded dumbly. "Exactly, fam."

They were surrounded by other students heading into Liston High. But they paid Danny no mind. No one ever did. Not when he was torturing

another one of his victims, though Danny referred to them as friends. But Jake knew better, as a so-called 'friend' of Danny's.

Danny's arm crossed over Bruce's shoulder, and they both laughed as Jake stood still, not knowing what to do.

"What is it?" Jake asked, his voice laced with contempt.

"What's with the voice?" Danny took a menacing step closer, swiping his fringe from his eyes. Bruce, who had short, cropped hair, gave Jake a glare.

Jake stared at the ground, unwilling to meet their eyes. "Nothing. Let's just get to school."

A hand clamped around Jake's shoulder. "Cool, come with us, then. We'll take you there." Fear caused Jake's body to remain rigid, perfect for Danny and Bruce to control. Jake let himself be led towards the school gates, the hand on his shoulder steering him wherever Danny wanted him to go.

"So, how's life?" Danny asked as they crossed the road. A car narrowly missed them, the driver bumping the horn as it passed.

"Oh, piss off," Danny shouted with a laugh, before returning to Jake, waiting for an answer.

Bruce spoke before Jake could get a word in. "He doesn't have a life, remember." Bruce and Danny laughed like he'd told an Oscar-winning joke.

Jake did remember a time when he had friends, back when his mum was normal. But those days were long gone. When he came to secondary school, Danny made sure no one wanted to associate with Jake. Jake made a few friends at the beginning of the year, but they were chased away soon enough.

"Is he right, Jake," Danny said, "that you don't have a life?"



Jake shrugged, a tough ordeal with the hand clamped on his shoulder. “I guess,” he said. That was the rule. Always agree with everything they say, even if it’s a blatant lie.

“So you’re just a loner with no life, then?”

Jake nodded, the lie making his tongue turn arid. Jake had a life, if writing in a diary after a crap day, every day, was any kind of life. The air was cold and Jake let it slide down his throat into his chest. The wind slapped his face, causing his eyes to water. Jake desperately sought to wipe the liquid away, but didn’t want Danny to think he was crying. He couldn’t afford to reveal a sign of weakness.

Danny let go of his shoulder once they reached the gate. “Don’t want anyone seeing that, do we?” Danny joked with a laugh. “Might catch a case or something.” Bruce guffawed with him, the noise grating on Jake’s ears.

“Can’t one of you just shut up?” Jake said, stepping away from the duo as he did so.

A hand slammed into his cheek and sent him sprawling into the front gate. His shoulder twinged with pain, and the taste of blood burst in his mouth and trickled down his throat. He groaned as he lay in a heap, chest heaving as the air was knocked out of him. A hand wrenched his body over and he was kicked twice in the side.

“Don’t say that again, you get me?” Danny’s voice was sharp. He’d never beaten Jake up before, but the threat of future fights was apparent. “Say something, then,” Danny ordered.

Jake struggled to speak for a moment before his throat cleared. “I... won’t,” Jake groaned, clutching his stomach with a limp hand. First, his mum found out about his forest, and now he’d gotten beat up on a Monday morning. Bruce was right, Jake really did have no life.

“Good.” Danny gave him another kick, along with Bruce, causing Jake’s left side to pulse.

Jake lay there for a second, letting the redness in his eyes calm his heartbeat. The faint hum of students conversing sent waves of embarrassment rushing through Jake. They had seen everything, Jake getting beat and kicked. Jake at his weakest.

Jake’s hands shook, and he hit a fist into the concrete beneath him. A flare of anger rose within him, causing his legs to push against the floor. He found his feet a moment later.

Danny and Bruce were a few metres away, joking around as if beating Jake was trivial to them. Their laughter served to ignite Jake’s anger more. Danny and Bruce were about to get it.

Jake’s own fist was curled. He glanced at it, making his mind up, before charging at the unsuspecting duo. His fist swerved in an arc towards Danny’s head, and made contact with Danny’s temple, a flush strike.

“What the hell!” Bruce exclaimed, turning around to face Jake as Danny crumpled to the ground. “What was that for?”

Jake sent a punch towards Bruce, but he dodged it and kicked Jake’s legs. Being as athletic as a bag of milk, Jake’s balance failed him and he fell backwards. Bruce pounced on him quickly, seeking revenge for his friend by hailing punches down.

Blows rained on Jake, from punches to his face to kicks to his already bruised left side. Jake heard students go past and ignore the brawl in the middle of the playground before school. At some point in the beating, Danny had gotten up again and slammed hammer fists straight into Jake’s stomach, as if he was trying to cause internal bleeding.

“This. Is. What. You. Get,” Danny said, a punch accompanying each word and extra pain for Jake.

Jake rolled over to his stomach. His arms clutched his sides for protection. But Danny and Bruce just attacked his back instead, more punches landing perfectly. The pain caused Jake’s head to spin. His sense of direction, sense of anything, was completely lost. He was aware of his head smacking into the ground, causing stars to line his vision.

Jake, desperate to fight back and achieve his revenge, kicked out a leg. His foot connected with something, probably Danny’s leg. All the hit did was cause pain to shoot up Jake’s own leg, right to his pounding head.

“You’ll pay for that,” he heard Danny say.

Then, a shout sounded, and everything ceased. “Stop that.” The voice belonged to MrBrewster, Jake’s form tutor. Footsteps rushed across the concrete towards where Jake was lying. “What’s going on here?” Brewster said.

“Nothing, sir,” Danny said in his most innocent voice. “Jake here decided to randomly punch us from behind. Everyone here can agree with me.”

Jake rolled over to his back and stared at the crowd that had been watching the fight, not daring to interrupt. It was their entertainment, after all. They nodded along with what Danny said, none of them willing to become his next victim.

Brewster looked to Jake, his eyes wide, before turning to Bruce. “And you gave him *this* in return?”

“It wasn’t us, sir,” Bruce said. They both played the innocence off so well. “Jake hurt himself by falling into the gate before he attacked us. Just ask everyone here.”

Using everyone else's testimony was a tactic Danny abused, and Bruce was no different.

"Well, then, Jake," Brewster said, his voice harsher than before, "I'll have to take you to the principal's office. He'll want to hear about this, and then decide what to do with you."

"Is he going to get suspended?" Bruce asked. The excitement sparked in his bright eyes, as if Christmas had come early. Jake sat up with a wince, to which Danny smirked and winked at him, knowing he had caused the hurt pulsating through Jake.

"We'll see about a suspension," Brewster replied. He clamped a hand over Jake's shoulder, the same way Danny had, and hauled him to his feet. "Time to see the principal, Jake. You're in my form, which is a conflict of interest, so I can't decide what to do with you."

Jake turned around and caught sight of Bruce and Danny entertaining the rest of the crowd with stories, probably of Jake's failed attempts at revenge. Their faces were unblemished, unscathed, as if Jake hadn't even done a thing. As if all the punches he threw earlier were fist-shaped pillows merely tickling Danny and Bruce. Jake had dropped Danny, but he wasn't affected in the slightest.

Jake sighed. He had failed, as he always did. And he was in a worse position than before, awaiting trial in the principal's office.

Brewster spoke as they entered the school building, letting the low drum of the playground fall into silence. "It's unlucky the principal decides your punishment for fighting. He's a lot harsher than me." They passed the receptionist, who stared at Jake's face with suspicion.

*As if it could get any worse,* Jake thought, his head hanging low. *The staff hate me.* "Punishment?" Jake said, now realising what Brewster meant.

“But I didn’t do anything.” *He* was the victim, not Danny and Bruce.

“Yes, punishment. The tens of eyewitness accounts speak for themselves. Or are you going to accuse them *all* of lying?”

Jake kept silent, lips pursed, arms locked by his side. The blood in his mouth tasted sour, and he willed to spit it in Brewster’s face. But that would make everything worse. “Fine,” he said instead.

“Fine, indeed,” Brewster said with a click of his teeth. They strolled to the stairway on the right side of the school, past the younger year classrooms. “A harsh punishment, Jake.” Brewster clicked his teeth again. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

## Chapter Four

Jake's leg bounced up and down as he sat in the waiting room outside the principal's office, bag in hand. The anticipation was killing him, a palpable tension that pulsed in his chest every time he breathed.

The door opened, and the principal, Mr Turlin, stood there in his customary white shirt and black blazer, to meet Jake.

"Come in, then," Turlin said, waving Jake in with a thin hand. Jake got up and followed him inside, the door shutting behind him with a click. Turlin sat on his desk, scratching his scruffy beard as he did so. He gestured with an open hand to the chair in front of Jake. "Take a seat."

Jake cautiously pulled the chair out and sat down, placing his bag on the floor beside him. *I thought he'd be shouting*, Jake thought. *Wasn't he meant to be harsh, like Brewster told me?* Turlin was quiet, sometimes cold, from what other students who had gotten in trouble with him said. But the wiry man with fading hair in front of Jake looked incapable of hurting a fly, let alone letting rip into an unsuspecting fifteen-year-old.

"You know why you are here?" Turlin asked.

Jake shook his head. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Turlin placed a hand on his chin and stared at Jake. "I do wonder," Turlin said, twirling his moustache with a finger. "I do wonder whether you

think beating a child up is actually wrong. Is that not what occurs in movies?”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t know, sir, I never really watch movies.” Jake’s heart started beating faster, and sweat broke out on his forehead. He wiped his hand on his trousers and kept his gaze on the brown wood of the shiny table. He expected Turlin to shout at him in response, but the man was silent for a while.

Turlin, then, raised a hand and pointed to his wall. Pictures were lined there, of past students, all with their arms wrapped around Turlin with a hug. They were in front of the school, smiles on their faces as if Liston High was the happiest place in the world.

“I like to see people accomplish their biggest desires,” Turlin said, waving a hand over certain pictures. “That’s Leah, a girl who studied here a few years ago. She wanted to get into Brighton college as her dream, but she was the biggest trouble maker. Always used to chew gum in class and disturb others. I helped her—or moreso she helped herself—and now she is set to study at Oxford University.”

Jake, loath as he was to admit it, loved to hear stories of others succeeding. Perhaps because he was unable to succeed himself, was unable to be that version of a son his mum truly wanted.

Turlin tapped his palm on the table, causing a hollow sound. The window was open, and a breeze came in and ruffled sheets of paper on the desk. Turlin trapped them with a hand, before raising his eyes to meet Jake’s. “What is it that you desire, Jake? What can I do to help you reach that?”

Jake didn’t know what to say. So he shrugged and kept silent. But Turlin was not taking that as an answer.

“I need to know, Jake. There must be something that you want. Something that you desire most, that you want to reach out for and grab with open hands.”

Jake shook his head. “There’s nothing,” he said. Then, before he could stop himself, “Am I not meant to be getting into trouble?”

Turlin’s pale eyes stared at Jake for a while. “Do you *want* to get into trouble?”

“No.”

“Well, what’s the use in not giving you what you want?” Turlin had a point. If he punished Jake, Jake would resent the principal. But if he empowered Jake, steered him away from his so-called trouble-making to accomplish his own dreams, Jake would actually be something other than a failure.

“I...” But the words were lodged in Jake’s throat, and wouldn’t come out. Jake coughed, then swallowed the phlegm that jumped up.

“You what?” Turlin asked, a gleam in his eye.

“I want to be someone other than...than a failure.” Jake’s gaze lowered to the ground, and he swiped his clammy hands across his trousers again.

“You’re not a failure,” Turlin said. But the truth of the matter was apparent, that he was a failure through and through. And nothing Turlin said could change that. “You’re just in the early steps of life. Everyone fails as a child, that’s normal. Even Sam there.”

Jake glanced up. Turlin was pointing at another picture on the wall, a large boy smiling widely in front of the school gates, arms outstretched and a graduation hat atop his head.

“What did he do?” Jake asked.



“He used to bully kids. Much like you do, from what your classmates say.”

A retort bubbled within Jake,. He yearned to say that he never did anything of the sort, to say the truth that Danny and Bruce were the perpetrators. But there was no point in arguing. Everyone had their mind made up about him, whether his teachers, classmates, or his mum. He couldn't stop them, so compliance was the easiest option than arguing all the time.

“Now what's he doing?” Jake asked.

“Instead of bullying people,” Turlin said with a wide smile, “he's the one helping them. He's a counsellor now at a school near here, Keele Primary.”

Jake knew that school. He'd gone there from the age of four, a time when he had a dad, was happy, and had friends to play with in the playground jungle gym.

Turlin's voice brought Jake to the present. “All those on the wall have the same beginnings as you, Jake. They all started off in this very room, for getting in trouble for something. And now they are doing bigger and better things.” He met Jake's eyes. “I believe you can do the same as them.”

Jake doubted Turlin's conviction, but was relieved that he seemed to be getting out of trouble.

“Do what, though?” Jake said. *I'm sure hundreds come into his office, Jake thought. But none of them are like me. Why am I any different from the usual failures?*

“That's the key,” Turlin said. “Do whatever you desire.” Turlin scratched his beard once more. “You do not have to tell me anything now. I am sure in time something will crop up, an ardent desire of yours that grips

you and does not let go for the rest of your life. For now, just know that there is one person that believes you can do better.”

Jake nodded, not knowing what to believe. He had been let down by everyone so often in his life that he couldn't take Turlin at face value. He'd never even spoken to the man before, for crying out loud. And he was speaking as if Jake was the next wonder of the world.

Jake was sure of one thing. That everyone Turlin had helped, despite being trouble makers, were all active at something. Whether disturbing people or bullying. Jake wasn't like them. He was a passive victim to everyone else's subjection, however horrid they were. He wasn't capable of changing like that, no matter what a hopeful principal told him.

Jake turned to grab his bag and leave, but Turlin stopped him.

“There is something, though, that you could do for me. A favour, if you will.” Turlin wore an unreadable expression.

Jake's interest perked up. He's expected a catch to what Turlin was saying. And he was about to receive it. “What?” Jake asked.

Turlin paused for a moment before speaking. “There's a new student joining tomorrow. He's a foreigner from Italy, and his English is not the best.” Turlin spoke as if the prospect of another student to help excited him. “I want you to help him around the school. And be a friend to him.”

Jake froze at Turlin's last words. *Be a friend. I can't be a friend to no one.* But he hadn't misheard Turlin. Turlin wanted the kid who had no friends to somehow throw all of that out of the window and be friendly. How was that ever going to work? Was Turlin a mad man? Surely he knew what a loner Jake was.

“I can't,” Jake blurted.

Turlin gave a small smile, as if he knew something Jake didn't. "Why is that?"

Jake chewed his lip as he thought of a reason. "I don't have any friends," he decided to say whilst staring at the grey clouds through the open window. "How can I...help someone?"

Turlin gave a short laugh. "That's a silly excuse," he said. "You have been ever so polite in our conversation just now. I have no doubt you can make friends with Leon tomorrow."

"But—"

Turlin stopped Jake's protests with a raise of his hand.

"If anything," Turlin said, "I think it's the first step to becoming a person, as you expressed before. After helping him, you may discover more about yourself."

Jake didn't believe him for a second. Turlin's words were wishful, and nothing else. But Jake couldn't exactly refuse to do it. "Fine, I'll help him," Jake said.

Turlin smiled and gestured towards the door. Jake smelt the waves of joy coming from him. How could someone be so happy? "Enjoy the rest of your day," Turlin said. "I hope to see your progress sometime later in the week."

Jake gave a fake grin back and grabbed his bag. He slung it over his shoulder and tucked the chair back in. *No way is this going to go well*, he thought. Befriending the new kid would end in disaster. That was for certain. And Jake would be the victim again.

"Good luck, Jake," Turlin called as Jake opened the door and stepped out.

Jake turned back and said, “Thanks,” before taking another step and closing the door, leaving Turlin to shuffle papers around his desk. Jake stared at the blue door for a second, heart sinking at cracks in the paint. He would have to return to classes, bruised and wrecked, to face Danny and Bruce again. And from tomorrow, he’d have to subject someone else to the same torture.

How much more of a failure could he be?

## Chapter Five

Jake opened his front door and stepped inside, mind jaded from what Turlin had tasked him with before. The rest of the school day was a shambles. He'd been taunted by Danny and Bruce as soon as he entered maths, with Miss Oprah even telling him to be quiet when he wasn't the one speaking. He kept his head down for the rest of the classes, and managed to escape at the end of school without being detected by anyone else. Luckily, no one lived near him. At least he was free from them somewhere.

Jake closed the front door behind him and kicked his shoes off. He turned into the kitchen, hoping to grab a quick breakfast bar for dinner and hiding in his room.

His mum stood there, hands on her hips, glaring at him with red eyes. "Explain to me," she said, jabbing a finger in his direction, "why I got a call from your form tutor today."

Jake stood there, confused. "About what?"

His mum rubbed her temples with pale fingers. "You got into a fight. Your teacher said you initiated the whole thing."

"I didn't, though," said Jake. "It was them. They started the fight." Jake pointed to the purple bruises that lined his cheeks and painted his forehead. "This is what they did to me."

“We can deal with that later,” his mum said. She grabbed the glass of water next to her and took a sip. Her phone was next to that glass, open to some youtube video about a celebrity no one cared about. “Now, I need to know why you’re starting fights at school. Do you know how embarrassing that is for me to hear?”

Jake could barely believe what he was hearing. She was blaming *him* for getting beat up? Could she not see the evidence on his face?

He pointed once more at the bruise on his left cheek, his right side hurting at the action of raising a finger. “See this, Mum? That’s what they did to me. I didn’t start anything. They were the ones who hit me first.”

His mum grabbed her phone and placed it in her blouse pocket. She took another sip of water before speaking. “That’s not the point,” she said. “You should not be getting into fights. That’s the end of it.”

Jake’s eyes widened. “How am I supposed to avoid getting into fights when people want to start them with me? Am I some kind of ghost?”

His mum’s eyebrows scrunched. “Why on earth would anyone want to fight *you*?”

Jake shrugged. “I’d ask the same question. But they do, that’s the point. Whatever you’re hearing isn’t my fault.”

His mum took a step closer, holding Jake’s gaze. The faint smell of perfume hit Jake, the same perfume his mum wore every day to her job as a consultant. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “You’re like a client that claims he runs his business well when it’s falling apart.” She clenched her jaw and stabbed a finger at him. “Stop lying to me.”

Jake felt like punching a wall till his hands bled into a pulp. “I’m telling you I’m not lying.” He pointed to a particularly pear-shaped bruise on his left temple. “Does this lie?”

His mum shook her head. “You never used to lie to me. Or are you saying your teacher is in on the act as well? What reason does he have to lie as well?”

Jake shrugged. “He doesn’t know the whole story, he just came afterward.”

“And what about the rest of your classmates. Are they lying, too?”

Jake couldn’t be bothered anymore. He didn’t have to deal with his mum’s rubbish. He was usually the adult in the situation, after all. With pain pinching his stomach, Jake turned and walked towards the stairs.

“Don’t walk away from me,” his mum shouted, stumbling to catch him.

“So what if I do?” Jake said, resisting the urge to slam a hand into the wall next to him. “When have you ever cared?” They both knew he was speaking about him going to the forest every morning.

“I care when you’re up to no good at school. You’re giving me a bad name, and I can’t accept that from a son of mine.”

Jake took a breath and steeled himself. It was always about her reputation, something he had no control over. The teachers barely knew her, so why was she so worried? It was her reputation, but not about Jake. No one cared about Jake.

Jake’s hands twitched on the stairwell, but he calmed himself before taking the next step up. “I’ve had enough,” Jake said and climbed the rest of the stairs two at a time.

“Where are you going?” his mum said, running to the bottom of the stairs.

“Anywhere but here,” Jake said before slamming the door to his room shut. Silence met him, and he glanced around for something to throw into

the wall next to his bed. His hands grabbed the chair at his desk, but the pain in his muscles stopped him.

What was the point? Did he want to be even more of a failure, someone that breaks things around them when angry? He was turning into a freak. If Jake saw himself at school, he wouldn't be friends, either. His mind flitted back to Turlin's orders. Why on earth would Leon want to be friends with him, whoever the kid was? Or was Turlin a morbid man wanting to see Jake make a failure of himself once more?

The burning need for peace tore through him, for a place away from his worries. Only one place existed where he could get that. He tore off his uniform and threw it on his bed. From his wardrobe, he grabbed a blue t-shirt and jeans. Seconds later, he was dressed and ready to leave.

He opened his bedroom door again and stepped out. It shut behind him with a click, and Jake turned to the stairwell. His mum was midway up the stairs, staring at him with accusing eyes. One of her arms rested on the railings, whilst the other limped by her side.

"Where are you going?" she said, blocking the stairs with an arm across its width.

Jake descended the first few steps, legs already shaking. "I just need to go out," he said, hoping his mum didn't enquire further. But Jake's hopes were seldom answered, as evident by his entire life.

"Where? To that forest again?"

"No, somewhere else."

"I won't let you go if you don't tell me." His mum blocked the stairs fully with her body. There was no way Jake could get past short of pushing her over. Which he wasn't about to do, no matter how much she pissed him off.



“I have to go, Mum,” Jake said, his voice softer than usual.

“Not if you don’t tell me where you’re going.”

A thought flashed in Jake’s mind, a thought so brilliant he struggled to believe he’d never seen it before. He faced his mum, hoping the excitement didn’t reveal itself on his features. “Fine,” he said, willing his voice to be morose.

His mum raised her eyebrow, but took the bait and returned to the living room.

Jake hurried down the stairs and grabbed his trainers before legging it to his bedroom. Shutting his door quietly, Jake slipped into his trainers and, arms swinging, sprinted over to the window and opened it. He glanced at the drop beneath him. It was at least four metres, but he could make it without injuring himself. He opened the window fully and climbed over the radiator onto the windowsill.

His body would just about fit. Just. Jake squeezed his legs and hips through the gap, ignoring the dull pain of the bruises on his side, before ducking his head to be outside the window. The wind brushed his face and he closed his eyes due to the autumn cold. *Now or nothing*, Jake thought, staring at the bush in his front garden. The forest he loved was filled with bushes of a greater magnitude, and Hope. And solace.

Jake stared at the bush, his hands behind him on the windowsill. His muscles ached from holding the position for a minute, and the smell of freedom sunk into his nostrils. With bated breath, Jake let go.

Time stilled for a moment as he fell. Weightlessness gripped him, before the weight of the bush crashed into his body.

The spikes of the greenery scratched his skin as he scrambled amongst the shrubbery. It took a moment to right himself, his legs finding the ground

and pushing himself up. *I should've got a jacket*, Jake thought. *Could've avoided this mess*. But Jake was free, that was all. The wind fully enclosed his body as he escaped the confines of the bush. He brushed his knees free of leaves and stepped out of the front gate, basking in the control he had. His mum was nowhere to be seen, Danny and Bruce and the rest of his class were relegated to an afterthought in the back of his mind.

Jake finally had freedom, despite how fleeting it was, and despite how much trouble it was about to get him in.

## Chapter Six

The air brought with it the sweet scent of freedom, the trees swaying in the breeze as Jake half-jogged, despite sore legs, through the streets towards his forest, towards Hope. The grey clouds promised rain, but even a thunderstorm wouldn't dampen Jake's sense of peace. A car drove past just as he crossed the road, the driver peering at the teenager running in the autumn evening. Jake realised with a start that it was his neighbour, the massive hulk of a man barely fitting in a small Toyota.

*Crap. What if he tells Mum?* His mum and the man had never met, but he'd have to be more careful next time. Anything to avoid his mum getting on his case.

After five minutes of jogging through the darkening streets, crossing roads, and avoiding stray cats, Jake found himself at the entrance to the forest. The proper way in was through the front gate, but Jake was accustomed to the winding routes between the trees. A large fence surrounded the forest, probably to keep wayward cars from crashing into the trees and polluting the area. Or maybe it was to keep the animals in, the occasional rabbits and hedgehogs that Jake encountered.

Jake walked along the fence until he came to Bedlam Roundabout at the edge of Newham. A few metres from the curb was a loose bit of fence, loose from Jake's own doing. Jake pushed down at that part of the fence

with sore arms, which gave way to a tiny dirt hole he'd made a few years ago. As he'd grown, the fit got tighter. But he always managed to make it. He squeezed his frame through the hole, tucked his belly in, and came out the other side.

*Finally, Jake thought. Freedom.*

A bird chirped in a tree above him, and he stared at its brown feathers and long beak. Nature, the only thing he could consider a friend. He basked in the sounds of the forest for a second, not caring if anyone clocked him from the outside world beyond the fence, not caring for the cars that whizzed past the roundabout behind him. Jake sensed the rustle of leaves in the wind, the sound of birds singing as night fell, and the taste of freedom sitting atop his tongue. He drank it in, eyes closed, before opening them to the world.

A freshness took over his movements as he traversed the forest. A kind of confidence that existed in no place else. Jake pushed away trees that blocked the path towards Hope and Lake Hurricane. Fluidity infused his movements as he glided across the mossy ground. The fresh smell of greenery never ceased to amaze him.

Jake came across the familiar trees, each with snapped twigs at their base. Probably from every time Jake came and accidentally stepped on them on his path to the lake. Dents were in the bushes and trees en-route to Hope, no doubt Jake's work over the years.

*Finally, I'm here,* Jake thought, staring at the familiar bush which protected his lake. He peeled it back, as usual, not noticing the leaves moved easier than any of the previous times. Not noticing the footprint in the moss, covered by the shade of darkness.

Jake stepped through the bush, letting the leaves stroke his skin. He exited the other side and turned towards Hope, his tree.

A boy sat at the base of Hope. A knife in his hands. The boy's eyes, which were dark and sharp, snapped to Jake.

"Who are you?" The boy's voice was aggressive, as if Jake had intruded his private space, as if the forest wasn't Jake's playground. A hint of an accent lined the boy's tone, also.

Jake's mouth dried up. The boy spoke exactly like Danny and Bruce did, despite the fact Jake had never seen him before. He wore a huge coat, apt for the evening, and sat with his legs bent at forty-five degrees, feet planted on the ground. He had no intention of leaving.

The boy swiped a lock of his long hair before speaking, "I did ask a question. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I—nothing," Jake said, the will to give up enclosing him almost completely. He glanced back at the bush behind him. Maybe if he slipped out quickly before the boy could say anything, or remember his face, he'd avoid trouble.

"So, you come here for no reason?" The boy lined his voice thick with irony. Jake didn't need to see the snarl to know it was there. "I do not believe you." The knife still sat in the boy's hands, and he ran the shiny tip across his palm.

"Why do you have a knife?" Jake asked, taking a step closer despite the voice in the back of his mind telling him not to.

The boy raised his head, the knife running across his hand. "I like to play with things," the boy said, giving a slight smirk.

*What the hell is this guy on?* Jake took another step, before his muscles seized up from the bruises in his leg being aggravated. He struggled not to

reveal the pain on his features.

“What happened to your face?” the boy asked, pointing a finger at Jake.

Jake touched his face with a hand, wincing as the lumpy bruises flared with pain. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” the boy said. “You were beaten up. Very clear to see. But by who?”

“So, what?” said Jake, rubbing a hand once more over the bruises before letting it fall to his side, where more bruises lay. Jake decided it was his turn to ask questions. “What are you doing here?”

“As you say, nothing.” The boy smiled, as if withholding information was a game to him.

“Tell me your name, at least,” said Jake.

The boy shook his head and pocketed the knife. Jake was about to take a step closer, but hedged against it, his legs twitching. The boy must’ve seen the movement in the dark.

“Stop being so scared,” the boy said. “I am not about to kill you.” When Jake peered at the boy’s face, he noticed dark lines embedded in his white skin. And scars, lots of little ones, jagged lines, scattered across his face.

“You asked me what happened to my face,” Jake said. He pointed a finger at the boy. “What the hell happened to yours?”

The boy instantly glared, and he covered his face with his coat. “None of your worries.”

Jake held both hands in the air, as if the boy was the police. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Sorry.” When the boy had a knife in his pocket, anything could happen. Jake had to play safely. He looked behind the boy, at Hope, and the lake beyond it. He could enjoy the peace and freedom, so long as the boy didn’t interrupt him. Or do anything worse with that knife.

“Do whatever,” the boy said. “I just want to sit.”

Jake nodded, gulped, then cautiously walked past the boy and onto the other side of Hope, the side facing the water. He sat down and propped his back against the wood, letting the two mold together, but he found himself unable to relax. A block resided in his head, a block of worry about the boy with the dark eyes on the other side, the boy with a knife in his pocket, waiting to be used on an unsuspecting victim. Years of being surprise attacked at the hands of Danny and Bruce taught Jake to be careful.

“Relax,” the boy said, as if he could sense Jake’s emotions through Hope. “I will not do anything to you. Yet.”

Jake shot up, arms wild, and rushed over to another tree, the same one he’d been hiding behind the day before to avoid his mum. A faint laugh erupted from the other side of Hope, and embarrassment washed over Jake. *I can’t believe I’m letting a random guy in the forest get to me like this.*

Jake sat cross-legged, watching Hope just in case the boy decided to really do some damage, and tried to let the peace flow through him the way it usually did. But with the threat of danger, Jake couldn’t sink into his meditative state. The water rippled, the trees swayed, the sound of the wind faded, but the peace didn’t permeate the air.

Jake’s hair brushed his eyes, and he wiped it back. His hair might have settled on his head, but his mind didn’t. An uneasy feeling entered him, the one he had moments before his mum found him yesterday. He stared at the water, remembering how the freedom that lay at the bottom of the lake. He wanted to try it again, but the fear of blacking out or dying kept him at bay.

Jake sensed movement to his left, and a twig snapped the relative hum of nature. A glance to Hope told him the boy was no longer sitting there, but standing at the water’s edge instead.

Jake's heartbeat quickened, the danger alarm in his head firing at all cylinders. What on earth was the boy doing here? Jake opened his mouth to speak, but fear of the unknown made it close. The boy appeared to kneel at the edge of the water and dip his hand inside it. After soaking it, he brought the knife from his pocket and dipped that in, too.

*What is he doing?* Jake wondered. Perhaps he had a mental problem, something to do with water, but then again someone with a mental issue wouldn't be able to speak so calm and calculated. Things beyond Jake's knowledge were at play, things which he longed to find out.

The boy grabbed the knife by the hilt and placed it back in his pocket. He glanced over at Jake, smiled, and walked back towards Hope. Jake got to his feet, resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't be able to have peace today, and he should go home and sleep. And if the boy was as eager as Jake was to be in the forest, Jake likely wouldn't come across peace for a long time.

Tired legs and sore arms, Jake walked over to Hope, touching its trunk with his left hand. The boy was at the base again, sitting with the knife running across his palm. He sensed Jake and turned to face him. His hands dropped the knife, and he extended one towards Jake. After a moment's hesitation, Jake shook it, mind coming up with all sorts of theories about the boy, from being a runaway from home to a refugee—hence the accent.

But none came close to the truth.

"You wanted to know my name?" the boy asked.

The uneasiness in Jake tripled in the space of a heartbeat. "Yeah."

The boy pumped Jake's hand once before letting go. "My name is Leon."



*Oh my God.* Recognition flooded Jake's face, and the boy picked up his knife and promptly left the forest through the bush. Jake stood there, recalling what Mr Turlin had said about the new student. His name was Leon, and instinct told Jake it was that same Leon he'd just met.

Jake Landon would have to befriend a psycho. A psycho who carried a knife with him and liked to dip it in lakes. For fun, seemingly.

In the matter of a second, Jake's perspective shifted. Peace, something he had grasped not an hour ago, was suddenly rendered to a distant, irrecoverable memory.

## Chapter Seven

The bumble of the classroom surrounded Jake. Voices drifted around him, chattering about games the night before and random gossip that floated through the Liston hallways, and the smell of girl's perfume sifted through the air. But Jake kept his eyes trained on the grey table before him. Trained, because it was a skill he'd honed over the last three years. Jake's butt was plastered to his chair, his frame unmoving because even a twitch would aggravate the bruises across his body. Chairs scraped against the floor like nails on a chalkboard, and MrBrewster was talking to a student at the front. But Jake's eyes were stuck to the greyness. The never-ending grey —

“All right, class. Listen up.” Brewster's voice caused Jake to perk up. No one sat next to him, especially not after the fight yesterday with Danny and Bruce. The duo sat two tables away from Jake, and was on their phones, as usual, not caring for a word being said by Brewster. The bruises they caused splattered Jake's face, and no sign of them fading presented itself. “We have someone new joining us today,” Brewster said. Jake had been dreading the moment Leon would be introduced to the class ever since they met in the forest. Stomach churning, Jake returned his gaze to the solid, infinite grey as Brewster spoke on. “His name is Leon. Why don't you introduce yourself?”

Leon said something or other, but Jake never heard a word. Fear struck Jake. Fear of raising his head and being recognised by Leon. *He's going to know me anyway*, Jake reasoned internally. *That's what Turlin said. So why am I being like this?*

But that was the story of Jake's life, of being inadequate, unable to think the right thoughts or speak what others wanted. Of being timid and afraid.

"Jake there, lucky for you, has volunteered to help you settle in," Brewster said, causing the whole class to share a collective chuckle. Jake raised his head. Brewster's finger was pointed at him, and Leon next to him had his eyes wide. Jake tried to smile, but forcing his emotions took too much energy from him.

The form classroom was separated into two aisles of tables, and Leon walked through the middle to where Jake was. He sat wordlessly next to Jake, shifting his bag to the tabletop and leaning his head on it. Not for a second did he spare Jake a glance.

"All right, class. I'll get started with the register and then the topic for this form time. It's a good one." Jake had no doubt it was rubbish, as all form times were. A waste of time. He was more concerned about the enigma sitting next to him, the puzzle that was Leon.

*I wonder what his second name is*, Jake thought. Leon's eyes snapped open to meet Jake's.

"What are you looking me for?" Leon accused, narrowing his eyes.

Jake recoiled from the aggressive tone, before remembering that was Leon's normal voice. Harsh and to the point. "Nothing," Jake said.

"Is that what you always say to everything?"

Jake shrugged before breaking eye contact. Leon had a spiderman rucksack, and Jake had no doubt Danny and Bruce would take the mick out

of it whatever chance they got. *Is there a knife in there?*

“No, there is no knife here,” Leon said, as if reading Jake’s mind. Or maybe Jake had said it out loud. His attention was so frazzled he truly didn’t know.

“I never said there was.” The awkwardness reeked from the table so badly Jake was certain everyone else could physically feel it.

Leon shrugged in response and turned to the front. Brewster was speaking about good conduct and the importance of being kind, things that would go over the head of those who needed it the most. Namely a bullying duo.

Of course, he would never say that to their face.

As form time wore on, Jake’s mind flitted back to the aftermath of the forest, his failure at attaining peace all due to Leon’s appearance. He’d gotten home through the front door, choosing not to climb back through the open window, looking haggled in only a t-shirt despite the biting cold of night. His mum opened the door and stared at him. Her face shifted from confused to outraged.

“When did you go outside?” she said, one hand on her hip and eyes narrowed.

“I just went to get some sweets. Forgot the keys.” Jake played off the innocence in his voice. He actually had gone to *Yoyo’s corner shop* for a Haribo, and his mum bought the excuse and let him inside. Jake welcomed the warmth, despite the lack of comfort it brought. Home contained no peace, especially not when his mum shrieked like a banshee to get him to eat dinner.

Jake returned to his room and stared at his shelves of manga for god knows how long. He stared until his eyes watered, then wiped them for a

second only to stare more, wondering what his dad was doing now, how life would have been if his dad was alive and lived with them. The fun, the joy.

“Jake,” a voice called. Jake gasped as his eyes found the present once more. Leon was waving a hand in front of Jake’s eyes, making him see double.

“What?” Jake said, leaning back.

Leon gestured to the empty classroom, save Brewster who was at the front typing on his computer. “Class has all gone,” Leon said.

*Crap, I could be late.* Jake hurried out of his chair and grabbed his bag. He turned to Leon. “We have maths next,” Jake said. Turlin told him that morning that Leon would take the same classes as him, despite likely being in lower sets. Jake led Leon out of the door with a quick bye to Brewster, and they rushed to the maths classroom at the other end of the school.

Jake loathed being late, since it placed everyone’s attention on him. Even if for a split second. That attention always brought trouble, as was the case for the last two years. Danny and Bruce would no doubt make jokes at the back of the class at Jake’s expense, and probably clobber him with their textbooks whilst at it.

And Jake would take it like the weakling he was.

They arrived at the classroom slightly out of breath and, despite the horror of everyone’s gaze on him as he walked to the table on the left side, they sat down with relative ease. Jake had the window seat and viewed the falling leaves in the autumn. He loved the forest as the end of the year neared, as the leaves would pile up and crunch under his feet.

“Who’s the new friend?” a voice immediately teased, and Jake’s heart sank. Every comment that came his way, every insult, would fall on Leon’s head as well. Leon’s first impression of Liston High would be one of

victimhood, all because Turlin made a bad choice in Leon's welcome buddy.

Jake ignored Danny's voice, but Danny never gave up easily. Three seconds later, something hit Jake's head, and he turned to see Danny wearing an innocent expression with an exercise book in his hand.

"What you looking at?" Danny said, before glancing at Bruce and breaking into laughter.

Jake stuttered, "Nothing." He turned to his own textbook and tried to focus. *Quadratic equations, quadratic equations*. The mantra repeated itself in his head in spite of the guffaws and laughs erupting from the table behind him.

"You let them say that to you?" Leon asked, elbowing Jake to get his attention.

Jake shrugged. "I guess. We're friends, innit," he said, using the phrase Danny and Bruce always said when teachers questioned their comments.

"You call them 'friends'?" Leon raised an eyebrow, and Jake lowered his gaze to the table, face red from the embarrassment. Danny and Bruce bullying him was something private that not even his mum was aware of. But now, someone new was being exposed to it, and utter shame surged through Jake.

Throughout the lesson, Leon focussed well despite Danny and Bruce, although he was having trouble with some of the maths. Jake didn't help him in case that put Leon even more in Danny's firing lines.

Miss Gates was all too happy to assist Leon, though, being the foreign student he was. Jake learned Leon was from Italy initially, something he was sure Turlin had mentioned, but moved here a few weeks before. Leon kept the details airtight and said nothing more, despite Jake's yearning to

know about him. The same uneasiness from the day before entered Jake. More details existed in the story. But they eluded Jake.

A sliver of envy crept into Jake as he witnessed Miss Gates come three more times to help Leon. She'd never helped *him* that way, despite knowing he was on his own in everything. Jake couldn't exactly ask the smart ones questions, not when the threat of Danny and Bruce's wrath was the consequence for helping him.

Class ended an hour later with, thankfully, no more incidents, aside from another thwack to the head from Danny near the end. Everyone left again, leaving Leon and Jake alone to go to Citizenship class together.

"Everyone says things about you," Leon revealed. "Bad things."

Jake paused by the art projects on the wall, leaning against an abstract portrait with a hand. "What do they say?"

"That you are a bully, and other things I do not wish to say."

Jake sighed. Trust everyone to demonise him despite knowing the truth. Trust no one was the motto in Jake's book.

"You are not like that, are you?" Leon asked, eyes smoldering.

Jake breathed in, then let the air out in a cold whoosh. He continued walking to English with Leon beside him. They were probably late again. But what did it matter? People would talk regardless, telling others lies about Jake.

"You are not like that?" Leon asked, again.

Jake shrugged, staring at the green door to English. MrEllis was speaking inside, his voice high pitched as he praised Shakespeare for the hundredth thing.

"Jake," Leon pressed.

Another shrug. "At this point, I've got no clue."

# Chapter Eight

At the end of school, Jake had a ritual he went through every day. One of two options. Either stay in class until everyone had left and then wait some time before leaving, or run out as fast as possible to escape early.

Today Jake chose the latter.

“Where are you going so fast?” Leon said as Jake sped out of Geography, almost running into two girls who recoiled from him.

“Sorry,” Jake muttered before darting past them.

“Where are you going?” Leon repeated. He tried to stop Jake with a hand, but Jake shrugged it off and continued.

“Out of here,” said Jake, fast-walking through the hallways. Students turned heads as he ran past, but they weren’t the ones he was trying to avoid. Jake was avoiding bigger predators.

“Slow down,” Leon said, but Jake dimmed his voice to the back of his mind. He was focussed on survival, on leaving Liston unscathed, and Leon couldn’t stop him from getting there. Legs already locked up, Jake reached the reception door and entered the outside cold.

A hand grasped his shoulder and turned him around. Jake flinched, expecting Danny or Bruce to unload with one of their attacks. But it was Leon, instead.



“Why are you running so fast?” Leon was out of breath, and paused for a second. “I need to know the ways out of here.”

Leon was right. Jake was supposed to be showing him around, as Turlin said. But was Jake about to place himself in Danny’s firing line just to appease what Turlin and Leon wanted?

“I’ll show you tomorrow morning,” Jake said.

“No, today.”

Jake glanced back at the reception door, seeing students stream out in packs of two or three, chatter floating amongst them freely. And here was Jake, having no one to walk home with. It was a matter of time before Danny or Bruce came out and decided to give Jake some company.

“I’m sorry,” Jake said. “I can’t.” He turned away from Leon, despite the heaviness in his movements, and all but sprinted out of the school gates.

The wind wrapped him on the way home in a cold embrace. Jake shivered and pulled his coat tighter around him. He’d left Leon on his own in school, and the guilt inside him was palpable. Leon was a sitting target for Danny and Bruce to bully, and for everyone else to laugh at. Leon had been bundled in with Jake, and the class recognised that. Because of Jake, Leon would have no friends, would be picked on, and would no doubt resent Jake for that.

And he could do nothing about it.

Jake let the cold set into his skin and took a shaky breath. It had rained earlier in the day, and the soggiess seeped into Jake’s shoes. Tired all over, Jake turned left at Courtroom Road. Sometimes, Danny and Bruce chased after him to taunt him, but today Jake wasn’t concerned with any of that. His thoughts circled around Leon. Leon would get bullied because of *him*, because *he* was a failure.

Turlin was wrong all along. Jake could never be someone with worth. He would forever remain a piece of trash, wherever he went.

Jake crossed into his street five minutes later, mind fixed on what Leon would have to endure as a result of him, the pain and suffering that would line the next two years until they left secondary school. Jake's attention was, however, gripped by a new scene on his road. His eyes almost broke their sockets.

The massive muscle man, his new neighbour, came out of *Jake's* house.

*What is going on?* Jake thought, but he didn't have to be a genie to know the implications of what was occurring. His mum had found someone new, undoubtedly, and for some inexplicable reason, it killed Jake. Jake waited for the muscle man, Hugo, to return to his own house, and then for another agonising five minutes, before continuing home.

Rage welled within Jake and powered his legs through to his front door. Keys rattling, Jake swung it open and entered. He didn't bother with his shoes. The anger coursing through him didn't care for trivial things like that.

His mum was curled on the sofa in the living room, reading a book. Before her was a table with an empty mug and a few biscuits on a plate. His mum's favourite bourbon biscuits with tea. Jake remembered loving that as a kid, but his taste for it waned as he grew older. As his taste for life grew stale.

Jake's mum glanced up when he came in. "Why are you still wearing your shoes?" she asked, eyes flicking down to Jake's feet.

"Forget about that," Jake said, and his mum almost jumped out of her seat.

"Don't talk to me that way."

“I’ll talk however I want.” Jake almost clamped a hand over his mouth. The force making him speak showed no signs of stopping, though. It was a steely coolness that ran through Jake, that caused everything he did or said to have an edge to it. Like a knife. Did Leon feel that confidence when he held his knife? That cold resolve?

“What’s gotten into you?” Jake’s mum said, standing up from the sofa. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Just the devil,” Jake muttered under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

His mum placed her hands on hips, her customary gesture when angry with Jake. “You come in here and shout at me, and then say, ‘Nothing,’ as if I’m meant to just take it. What do you mistake me for?”

Jake stared at the ground. The rage which fuelled him before had shrivelled. The urge to grab the table and slam it on his mum’s head entered Jake, but that wouldn’t get anyone anywhere.

“Jake, you’ve got to say something. I don’t like—”

“What do you like?” Jake retorted. “Ruining other people’s lives?”

Jake’s mum took a step back at the venom in his voice. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Jake didn’t want to air it out loud. Maybe a part of him just didn’t want to hear it. “You know what’s happening.”

Jake’s mum shook her head, slowly. “Sorry to say it, Jake. I’m not a fortune teller. Now, you’re not eating until you tell me what’s going on with you. Is it what happened in school? I’m sure the punishment you got was justified.”

“It’s not that,” Jake said. His mum still thought he was in the wrong. Just went to show how badly she knew him, if she thought the failure that was Jake bullied and beat up kids at school.

“Well, you’re not leaving, in that case. You have to tell me.”

Jake clamped his eyes shut to compose himself. His mouth betrayed him. “You...you’re banging the new neighbour.”

The silence in the air crackled and sparkled. Jake’s mum was silent, a redness overtaking her cheeks.

“Is that what you’re angry about?” she said.

Jake didn’t want to tell her what she had caused over the years. The crippling self-doubt, lack of confidence, reinforcing why Jake deserved to get bullied. Countless things Jake was angry about. But Jake kept silent about them. Withholding them was a win, a small victory, no matter how ridiculous that sounded.

Instead of airing it all out, Jake replied simply, “Yeah.”

Jake’s mum sighed and ran a hand over her face, pinching her upper nose. She sat back on the sofa and took a sip from the empty mug. The mug remained in her hands as she spoke. “I met him yesterday, whilst you were at school, before you even knew who he was. We agreed to try and make it work. He has a son your age as well, you know. Maybe you could get along.”

Jake could barely believe what he was hearing. His mouth had swung open in shock. How could his mum just jump at the next opportunity she got like that.

“It’s not that surprising, Jake. I’ve been single for years. I deserve a chance at this, don’t I?”

“And ruin the memory of Dad?”

“Your dad *is* a memory. He’s never coming back. And you don’t know what he did to me.”

Jake’s arms shook. He needed to take a seat, to lie down. But he compelled himself to speak instead of running away like he usually did.

“You were the problem,” Jake said. “Not Dad. Dad was perfect to me.”

His mum almost knocked her head off its hinges. “I won’t have you... you praising that deranged lunatic in front of me. If only you knew what that raging alcoholic did to me.”

“And what do you think you’re doing to me by getting with Hugo?”

“I’m not getting with him,” his mum said. She set the mug down. “We’re just talking now, baby steps. I’m a woman with a full-time job, of course, I’m not going to jump in bed with some random man.”

Jake’s heart twisted and ripped in the middle. His mum wasn’t cautious because she had a son to look after, because of her duties towards Jake, but rather due to her job. “Is that how much you hate me?” Jake said.

His mum sighed and folded her legs against the sofa. “It’s nothing to do with you. Frankly, it’s none of your business.”

Jake resigned himself to the fact that he couldn’t change a thing. His mum was getting someone new, replacing his dad, and replacing Jake’s memory of his father along with it. Did she not care for him one bit? Not even for a second?

“Fine,” Jake said. “Hope you have fun with...flipping Hugo.” Jake ran upstairs to his room, shoes still on. His mum didn’t chase or call after him, which caused Jake’s stomach to sink. As soon as Jake saw the shelves of manga he had, his body froze.

*The forest, Jake thought. I need to go to the forest.*

He sprinted to the front door, time remembering to get his keys. He was still wearing his coat, and ran out, slamming the door behind him. The door cracked from the force, but Jake paid it no mind. A voice in the back of Jake's head was disheartened at his mum not calling him back inside, as if she didn't care about him. Something she pretty much confirmed by getting with muscle man so quickly.

Jake's glanced at Hugo's house for a second, and a second surprise smacked him in the face that day. Leon stood there, stiff as solid oak, next to Hugo. Leon's face betrayed the utter fear running through him. He glanced up and met Jake's eyes for a second, before being shoved into the back of Hugo's car.

Hugo had told Jake about his son, that they were the same age. That son was Leon.

And Leon looked like bullies at school were the least of his worries.

## Chapter Nine

Danny laughed as he poked the sides of Jake's stomach with sharp fingers. Jake yelped from the pointed pain stabbing his midsection, and he sprinted into the playground before Danny could do it again. Leon was with him, hurrying before Danny decided he deserved the treatment as well. It had been a week since Jake had seen Leon being hauled into the back of a car by his dad, looking as if his puppy had just died. Jake desperately wanted to ask Leon what happened, but every time the question touched the tip of his tongue, it dissipated with the next breath.

And today was a Friday. Jake had to ask. Otherwise, the question would be lost till next week.

The familiar roar of the playground surrounded them as they walked to the edge. The younger years played on the swings and seesaw, pushing each other and laughing. Jake recalled being on that seesaw, scared for his life as Danny jumped on the other side and sent Jake flying into the atmosphere. The memory sent shivers through him, and he wrapped his jacket tighter around himself. The elders, which was basically Danny and his boys, played football, whilst the year elevens weren't bothered to even talk to anyone that wasn't their year, and just conversed in their corner of the playground.

"Where are we going?" Leon asked.

Jake didn't say anything, but led him to the corner of the school building. They rounded that corner, and Jake sighed with relief at seeing no one was there. A lot of the upper years came here to smoke, since no teachers ever walked around this side of the building. It was private enough, and privacy was what Jake needed, especially for what he was going to ask Leon.

"There is nothing here," Leon said.

"I know," Jake said, glancing around the school building to make sure no one was following them. "I need to ask something. That's why."

A troubled look, not unlike the look he had on Tuesday evening, broke out on Leon's face. "What is it?"

Jake paused for a moment, steeling himself. "I saw you with your dad the other day. I—what is he doing to you?"

Leon looked ready to kill someone. "That is..." Leon turned and tried to walk away, but Jake grabbed him.

"I know how it feels, to be bullied," Jake said, seeing the scars on Leon's face.

"That gives you no right to ask about my father." Leon's accent was more pronounced as he spat the words.

"I never said it did."

"Then why are you asking me. Leave me alone. I don't know why you are with me anyway. People say things about you, and I am starting to believe them."

That hurt Jake more than any comment Danny or Bruce had ever made. "It's not true."

"Then why are you asking me this question?"



Jake paused. Why was he asking Leon? Why was he intruding in Leon's life? Leon was just someone he was meant to help around the school for a month before he found his own feet. So why was Jake so concerned?

"I—I want to help you," Jake said.

Leon clenched his fists and breathed in. "I do not need help," he said. "Please, understand that." The words struggled to leave Leon, as if it pained the boy to say them. More scraps of information were hidden, more to uncover. But if Leon wasn't offering them to him, what was he supposed to do?

"Fine," Jake said. But none of it was fine. Nothing. Not Leon's situation—whatever it was—nor Jake's life.

"Should we go back?" Leon asked, gesturing towards the rest of the playground.

Jake glanced around the side of the building. His eyes sought out Danny and Bruce, who were in the midst of a group of youngsters, their heads swivelling, searching.

"I don't think that's a safe bet," Jake said.

"I see what you mean," Leon said. "It is my turn to help you."

Jake turned to him. "What?"

"You are bullied every day. You are not small, or weak. Why do you let them do that?"

Confusion broke out across Jake. He wasn't the smallest, and his weakness wasn't physical, but mental. "What are you on about?"

"Why don't you fight back?"

Jake rubbed the slowly mellowing bruises on his face. "See these," he said. "This is what happened when I did fight back one time."

"Have you tried recording what they do?"

Jake shook his head. The idea was good, but it wouldn't work. A recording was one thing, but when the entire class was against Jake, the use was nil. Teachers always agreed with Danny and Bruce, always.

"Everyone hates me," said Jake. "They would side with Danny and Bruce, and that wouldn't work."

"What did you say about us?"

Jake's breath hitched and he whirled around to see Danny and Bruce standing before him. Danny wore a smirk on his face, whilst Bruce looked ready to murder.

"What have you been telling Leon about us?" Danny asked, taking a menacing step closer. Danny's fists were clenched, and Jake tensed up, ready to dodge in case that first punch came rocketing his way.

"He has said nothing," Leon said. His voice was like solid metal, rigid and unmoving. Jake wondered whether he could ever reach that same level of confidence.

"And now you're the one lying to us," Bruce said. Jake wished he could punch that face and smash it into a pulp, get revenge for the bruises Bruce had painted him with.

"I am not," Leon said.

"You could join us, you know." Danny twirled his fingers around his hair. "You could be one of us, so much more fun than being with *him*. Why do you chill with someone like Jake, anyway?"

Jake understood that Leon wouldn't chill with him forever, not when better people were in the class to be around, ones that were good friends, ones that weren't failures like Jake.

"He...helps me," Leon chose to say. His words were careful, like a politician's. And like a politician, Jake was sure Leon's words would get

him in trouble.

“Helps you. With what? How to be a loser?” Danny laughed and punched Bruce in the arm. Bruce followed along with Danny and leaned against the wall.

“Break’s ending, isn’t it?” Bruce asked.

Danny nodded. “I think it just did.” He looked out from the side. “Yep, everyone’s going in. Perfect.”

Jake’s panic heightened.

Bruce nodded towards Jake and Leon.

Terror coursed through Jake.

“Wanna give them a few presents before we go back in?” Bruce said.

Danny cracked his fingers, an evil smile painting his face. “Took the words right from my mouth.”

\* \* \*

Soreness and pain. The worst of it broke out across Jake’s face. He was still nursing the new bruises as he sat outside Turlin’s office at the end of the day, waiting to be called in. The waiting room was quiet, giving Jake time to reflect. Danny and Bruce had included Leon in their beatings today, as Jake had predicted. It was only a matter of time before the target shifted to Leon.

Leon had taken it well, though. He didn’t blame Jake, instead saying that Danny and Bruce were ‘idiot bullies’ and ‘deserved’ to die. Jake was sure that Leon would leave him, chill with others that didn’t have a massive

red target painted on them. But the boy hadn't said a word, and gone about his day as normal. As if he was used to getting beat on the regular.

"Come in," a voice said. Jake got up and followed Turlin inside. It was different from the last time he was in here. Turlin's desk had moved over to the window, overlooking the view from the front of the school, a few trees, and a concrete playground. The meeting table was on the left side of the room, tucked in the shadows.

"Excuse the changes," Turlin said, sitting at the head of the meeting table and gesturing to a seat. Jake sat down. The seat was rough and uncomfortable. Jake's hands were clammy, and he rubbed them against the table, not that it changed the sweatiness one bit. "I like to change things up every few weeks," Turlin said. "Turned out that the time had come yesterday."

Jake nodded, not knowing what to say. If he were more confident, more of an actual person, he might have made a comment about the new decorations, or perhaps the darkness that filled the corner of the room they were in. But he didn't, since he wasn't what he dreamed to be.

"Remember what we said in our previous meeting?" Turlin said as a start. The last time they spoke was less of a meeting and more of a telling-off. But Jake rolled with it.

"Yeah, I remember."

"So, how has helping Leon looked for you?"

Jake told him the standard narrative, which he'd formulated for the week in case Turlin called him in. Leon was settling in well, was doing his work, and knew where most of his classes were. Jake spoke nothing of the bullying, nothing of the weird secrets Leon kept, nothing of the taunting that Danny and Bruce subjected Leon to. In the back of his mind, Jake

thought that telling Turlin might be a good thing. But snitching never worked, it only made the bullying worse. Jake had learned that the hard way.

“That’s good,” Turlin said, tapping the table with a finger. His beard was scruffy, probably from all the time he rubbed it. “How about the other thing we discussed? About your desire to be someone?”

Jake paused. He’d forgotten about that. “I guess...it’s going well,” Jake lied.

Turlin nodded. “That’s positive,” he said, though Jake had the hunch that Turlin sensed the lie.

The meeting ended shortly after, with Turlin saying he had emails to answer. Jake trudged home alone that day. Luckily, the meeting took long enough that Danny and Bruce had gone home without seeking their punching bag or another practice session.

What Turlin said rebounded through Jake’s mind on the way home. He *did* want to be someone, did want to be useful, did want to be appreciated.

But would he get that? Would he achieve that, as much as someone like Turlin, or even Leon, believed in him?

The answer was a resounding no.

## Chapter Ten

A week later, on a Saturday, Jake was on a mission. His room was a mess, clothes scattered everywhere, random wrappers and mugs on his desk, waiting to be chucked into the bin, which itself was overflowing. His laptop sat in front of him, the browser opened to Google. The howl of the wind sounded outside his window. Jake got up and closed it, descending the room into silence. An eerie silence.

*Time to see what I find*, Jake thought, sitting back at his desk. Hunger gnawed at him. He'd barely eaten at all today, deciding that living off ready-made crap and snacks was better than having to see his mum downstairs for a meal. Jake couldn't stand the sight of her, and she thought the same of him. It was a weird sort of stalemate, where they both avoided each other so as not to spring another argument for no reason.

Jake had gotten Leon's full name from MrBrewster last Wednesday, though it hadn't been easy. Brewster thought Jake was a troublemaker, so didn't want to offer the information. Jake could've asked Leon himself, but he wouldn't take it well. Especially not after a week of getting bullied by Danny. Not after a week of their first exams in the year, for which Jake had barely revised.

Brewster had given Jake a confused glance. "Why on earth would you want that? And why should I give it to you?"

Jake scratched the back of his head, thinking of something quick. “Well, I was thinking if I got him a present it might be good for him, as like a welcome to this school. But I need to know his full name for the wrapping, right.” Jake held his breath and hoped that was a good enough excuse. Brewster gave him another weird look, but decided to offer the sliver of information. Anything was good at this point, and Leon’s name was a start.

“It’s Colombo,” Brewster said, and Jake struggled to keep the smile off his face. Leon Colombo. It had a nice ring to it. Hugo Colombo sounded like a mass drug dealer, though. Hugo was the danger man, from what Jake had seen of him.

“Thanks,” Jake said, and turned to leave the form room.

“Wait,” Brewster said. “Make sure you don’t do...anything nefarious with it, okay?”

Jake nodded as innocently as he could and left.

And now he was doing something nefarious with the name. But it was required. Leon was in trouble, Jake was sure of it. The uneasiness within him never lied, and it was on full blast whenever around Leon.

‘Leon Colombo’, Jake typed into google and pressed enter. Facebook profiles came up, but none of them were actually Leon. Just others with the same name. Jake tried the same with Hugo, but that was a dead end as well, producing only a random Facebook profile and Reddit page with no leads.

His mum had a Facebook and posted for her workmates, her posts conveniently avoiding Jake at all times. She didn’t want to show her failure of a son to her mates. Even if Jake did find a Facebook, Hugo was probably too careful to keep it public.

‘Leon Colombo school’, Jake tried. That was a dead search as well. Jake wracked his brain, thinking of more search terms.

A noise outside his room made Jake jump from his seat.

“Jake, can I come in?” his mum said. Her voice was lighter than usual, and the danger alarm inside Jake sparked into action.

He lowered his laptop screen and said, “Yeah.”

The door opened to reveal his mum and Hugo standing outside. Their hands were tied together, smiles plastering both of their faces. Hugo was wearing a dress shirt as if they’d got back from a dinner date. His mum wore a red dress Jake hadn’t seen in years, lending more evidence to the notion.

“Hi, Jake,” his mum said, her voice so falsely high that Jake would rather crawl amongst maggots than listen to her. “I wanted you to meet someone, you know Hugo. We decided to make it official.”

Jake internally scoffed. *And to think they were only ‘talking’ a week ago. That was quick. But what did I expect? For her to care about Dad’s memory or anything we had before?*

“Hello,” Jake mumbled under his breath.

“Why are you so shy?” Hugo said, stepping inside his room and looking around as he spoke. “We met before. Remember?”

Jake couldn’t look the muscle man in the eyes. “Yeah, I remember,” Jake said. It had been an awkward encounter, back before Jake met Leon, or uncovered what a dodgy man Hugo Colombo was. He itched to get back to the google searches. Get back to searching for the truth behind the Colombos.

Hugo sat on Jake’s bed and picked something up. “What is this?” he asked, chucking the object up and down a few times.

“Hey, don’t touch that,” Jake said, grabbing the book from Hugo’s hands and cradling it to his chest. It was Jake’s diary, Jake’s secret chest of



thoughts and feelings no other soul had seen, or should see. It felt dirty since Hugo touched it. Jake set it down, gently, on his desk.

“No need to be so angry,” Hugo said with a disapproving frown.

“He’s not normally like this,” Jake’s mum said, her voice light as a feather. The way she made doe eyes at Hugo caused Jake’s urge to puke.

“I am sure he is a good boy,” Hugo said. “But, he has a lot to fix.” Hugo gestured to the mess around the room. “If I did this with my Mama, she would bring the sandal.” Hugo laughed as if he made a Hugo award-winning joke.

“I say the same thing to Jake all the time,” Jake’s mum said. *Of course, she’s going to throw her son under the bus to win points with muscle man,* Jake thought. “He needs to improve, and he knows that. Did you know he’s friends with your son from school?”

Hugo perked up at that and stared at Jake closely. An unreadable expression crossed his eyes. “Friends, you say?”

“Yep, his school teacher told me they’re quite close, too.”

*Why would Brewster say that? Leon’s only mates cos we were dumped together. And now he has to endure the same bullying as me.*

Hugo gazed at Jake strangely, so much so that Jake averted his eyes to the ground.

“Well, we must be going,” Jake’s mum said, coming inside the room and grabbing Hugo’s hand. “We’re staying over at a hotel today. You have the keys, and make sure you clean up anything you use. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

*What the hell,* Jake thought. *She can’t be that into him. Look at him. He screams suspicious.*

*Or is that the thing everyone said about bad boys?*

“You go downstairs,” Hugo said to Jake’s mum. “I will use the lavatory first.”

Hugo’s accent was the same as Leon’s, except it was less noticeable, more diplomatic. As if Hugo was used to getting his own way with words.

Jake planted a smile on his face as they both left. He turned back to his laptop, but the will to search had gone. It was futile. Hugo was too careful, too calculated, from what he sounded like, to leave loose information like that lying on the internet for everyone to see. And even if Jake did find something about him, would it be useful?

A few minutes later, Jake was scrolling through Reddit on his phone when Hugo crossed the doorway. Jake jumped up and ran over to the door.

“Hugo, wait,” Jake said, stopping at his door.

Hugo turned to look at him. “What?”

Jake recoiled at the harsh tone, void of the evenness Hugo spoke with before. Jake gulped before speaking, solidifying his nerves. “I know you’re up to something.”

Hugo smirked. “And what would that be?”

“With Leon,” Jake said.

Hugo’s eyes flashed. “Has he told you anything?”

Jake didn’t want Leon to get in trouble. Anything but another reason for someone to hate Jake, especially since Leon didn’t *hate* Jake yet. “No, Leon hasn’t said a word,” Jake said. “But I can see it in your eyes. You’re hiding something.”

Hugo laughed and raised a hand. He sat it atop Jake’s head and swivelled it around a few times. He searched Jake’s eyes, as if peering into the depths of his soul. “You are just a kid making up stories from whatever you see.” Then, Hugo squeezed his hand so hard Jake’s head ached. “Stay

out of this, understand. And I will make sure Leon knows not to say anything to his ‘friend’.”

Jake nodded into Hugo’s palm. Hugo left the house, closing the door behind him. Jake returned to his room and sighed as he sat on his bed again. Hugo was dangerous, that much was for sure. A force not to be reckoned with. Jake would have to exercise caution. A man like Hugo would kill if necessary.

But Jake’s mind flashed back to Turlin’s words. He had to *be* someone, no matter what everyone around him thought. No matter how low he felt every day. And if that meant going up against someone like Hugo, braving danger and death, then so be it.

*I’ll get to the bottom of this*, Jake thought. Jake looked outside through his window. The lights in Hugo’s house illuminated through the closed curtains.

*Leon must be inside.*

A car started and pulled out of the road, its engine’s rumble fading into the distance.

Jake grabbed his coat and keys, closed the front door behind him, and jogged to the other side of the road.

# Chapter Eleven

Jake crossed the road whilst putting his coat on. Right arm in first, then the left. The way his dad taught him when he was six. His dad also taught him to be someone brave, and courageous. Sad that Jake didn't manage to get that teaching down properly.

The chill still penetrated Jake's skin, despite the coat. He stared up at Leon's house. It was two floors, like every house on Hampton Road. But, Leon's house was the only one with an attic, which had a dusty window at the top with drawn curtains. Lights were flickering on the ground and first floor, which meant Leon was inside. Which meant Jake would be able to talk to him without Hugo, or his mum, there to listen.

Hugo may have threatened Jake, but that wasn't about to stop him.

Jake glanced left and right, just in case Hugo decided to return. Then, seeing the street was empty, Jake ran to Leon's front door. He knocked on the door a few times and waited. His knuckles rapped again after ten seconds, but Leon had no intention of opening the door. All that met Jake was silence.

"Leon," Jake mumbled under his breath, knocking for the third time. Maybe he was in the toilet. Or, the cynical voice inside Jake suggested, he was somewhere else, and the lights were a decoy.

A noise sounded from inside, a shuffling against the floor. Jake heard steps coming closer to the door, and the anticipation within him built. It could be anyone, not just Leon. Jake took a step back. He heard a lock being opened, and took another step back, his legs tensed in case he had to run away. The door opened, but only slightly. Another chain lock was keeping it from being fully ajar, the chain stretching across the gap. Leon was on the other side, gazing at Jake with wide eyes.

“What you doing here?” Leon asked.

Jake paused. *What am I doing here?* “I wanna talk to you,” he said.

Leon’s eyes narrowed. “I told you I do not need your help. Nor do I want it. Leave me alone. This is not the time to talk.”

“Can’t we just chill around? I ain’t trying to help you every time we speak.”

Leon rubbed his chin. He tried to open the door more, but remembered the lock and paused. “Well, I cannot let you inside,” he said, gesturing to the lock.

Jake tried to stop the worry from showing. A lock like that to prevent Leon from getting out was dangerous. What if there was a fire? Or did Hugo not care about things like that? Was Hugo so ignorant as to play games with the life of his only child?

Jake stored that in the back of his mind and pointed to the window above them. “Can’t you jump out?”

Leon gave a short laugh. “That is not possible. How will I get back inside?” The grin on his face pronounced the scars lining his cheeks, and Jake was reminded of his mission. To find the truth of Leon’s past, and what Hugo was doing to him.

Jake recalled the last time he had jumped out the window and forgotten his keys. “That’s true,” he laughed, a fake laugh. “Well, forget that dead idea.” He desperately wanted to inspect the house’s interior to see what Leon was living like. That would give him more ideas on what Hugo was doing. But, obviously, that would never happen.

A pause.

“You wanted to talk,” Leon said. “What about? We cannot stay in silence for ten minutes.”

Jake recalled the icebreaker exercises his nursery used, when he was at an age kids weren’t able to bully, didn’t have the capacity for evil, and had the openness to make friends with everybody.

“What’s your favourite colour?” Jake asked, and the grin on Leon’s face widened.

“Red,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

And the conversation flowed between them, the first conversation they had as friends. At school, there was no time for friendly banter, not when the threat of Danny and Bruce was constantly hanging over their heads.

Jake learned that Leon had a red panda as a child, and that’s why he loved the colour. And that Leon remembered being the smartest person in primary school in Italy, before moving to secondary and being dwarfed by everyone there. He spoke of his memories of his mother, though why she wasn’t present he didn’t venture towards. And Jake didn’t ask about that, either. Jake sought to know how Leon ended up in England, but that was too personal, and Leon would shut up shop if Jake pulled a stunt like that.

“What about a secret?” Jake said.

Leon’s smile froze. “What do you mean, secret?”

“As in, what’s a secret you haven’t told anyone in the world?”

“That is not the point of a secret.”

Jake laughed. “Well, tell me one, at least.”

“Is this your way of getting information?” Leon’s voice was harsh once more, not the light tone he used when bantering about for the last ten minutes.

Jake paused at that, the hand at his side twitching. “No, it’s not that.”

Leon closed the door a little, his face disappearing with each word. “I thought you are a friend, but you are trying to get in my life for no reason.”

“It was a friendly question,” Jake pleaded. “I didn’t mean anything by it.” Jake stepped forwards, but Leon was having none of it.

“Leave me alone, please. I do not want to hear you asking any more questions.”

Jake sighed. “Fine.” It had been going so well, but Jake had to ruin it. The same way he ruined everything else good in his life.

“I do not know *why* you are investigating,” Leon said. “But do not. It is dangerous.”

Jake perked up at that, leaning forward. “What do you mean ‘dangerous’?”

“What did I say about questions?”

Jake sensed Hugo’s influence in Leon, the aggressive leaning forward and stabbing manner of speech. “Are you in trouble?” Jake said, ignoring Leon’s words.

Leon raised a finger through the gap in the door. It was the middle finger, long and thin. He retracted it, before saying, “Piss off.” A small smile crossed Leon’s face before he closed the door. It shut with a click.

Jake stood there for a few seconds, hearing the rattle of the lock sliding in, the footsteps going up the stairs, and the door to, presumably, Leon's room shutting.

*Why can't I do anything worthwhile?* He had come with a mission, and he was useless at it. Of course, he was. He was useless at everything, wasn't he?

"Let's go home," Jake mumbled to himself, leaving Leon's front porch of weeds and stepping onto the pavement.

That's when another surprise hit him in the face.

Hugo's car, a yellow Toyota, just pulled into the road.

*Crap, crap crap crap.* Jake ran to the curb and crouched behind another car, breathing quickening. Hugo's car was loud, the noise like a supercar despite being a small Toyota. He must've fit it with a new engine and turbochargers. The car drove past where Jake was crouched, before reversing into the parking space right beside the car Jake was behind.

*Oh, no,* Jake thought. *He's about to kill me. He's about to kill me.*

Jake heard the engine turn off, the headlights flickering out. What was Hugo doing back so early? Did he, somehow, find out about Jake being at the house? And how? And where was Jake's mum?

Hugo opened the driver's side door, and Jake lurched into motion. He quickly turned the front corner of the car he was behind to crawl in front of the bonnet, and managed to avoid Hugo's sight, who grabbed a phone from his pocket and walked towards his house. Hugo checked up and down the street for something, before nodding to himself and strolling on.

As he came past, Jake crawled over to the right side of the car, keeping an eye out in case Hugo decided to surprise him by turning around. Jake's fingers rubbed over the bump of the keys in his pocket. He'd be able to get



home, unlike last time he was out in secret. Jake looked at Hugo's car, through the back window. Where was his mum? Back at the hotel?

Or somewhere else?

Hugo opened the front door and went inside. Somehow, he was able to get past the chain lock from outside. Jake waited ten seconds after Hugo entered his house before he started moving, legs aching from being crouched so long. He heard shouting behind him, inside Leon's house. He would've investigated, gone closer, and tried to hear what Hugo was saying, but the warning from Hugo earlier put a stop to such inclinations.

Jake went back inside, much to think about running through his head. Leon was in danger. That much was certain, despite what he wanted Jake to believe, what lies he wanted to spew about being perfectly all right. Something bigger than just the two of them was going on. Hugo was acting strange, and even Jake's mum was cryptic, despite her usual hate for him.

Much to think about, indeed. Jake closed his front door behind him and entered the silence. He turned the light on and entered the kitchen to grab leftovers from the fridge. Pasta and chicken. He sat at the table, not bothering to take his coat off. He ate the food cold.

Jake wouldn't be able to ask directly for information to get to the bottom of things. Everyone was against him, hiding information, being intentionally vague.

But Jake had to prove himself. Had to help Leon. Had to become more than a contour of a human being.

*If they won't say anything, Jake thought, then I'll find the truth out myself.*

## Chapter Twelve

The next time Jake saw Leon, the boy held something in his hands, and his eyes were fixed on it. The class was milling into form one at a time, and Brewster hadn't entered yet. He was late, as he usually was. 'Fashionably late,' as he liked to call it. Jake had avoided Danny and Bruce on the way to school, but it was only a matter of time before their torment caught him.

Despite living on the same street, Jake hadn't gone to school with Leon after that first day. Leon always got out earlier, or later, than him, and Jake wasn't about to stalk the boy just to walk to school together. Or, maybe Leon was trying to avoid Danny and Bruce the same way Jake was.

Jake leaned over the table to see what Leon was staring at. It was a comic, or, as Jake peered closer, it was manga! Since when did Leon like manga?

"You like it?" Leon said, glancing up at Jake for a second before his attention was grabbed by the panels of manga again.

Jake's voice died in his throat. "I guess," he said, sitting down next to Leon. The chill of the seat spread through Jake, and he was wary of the danger Danny and Bruce brought as they sat two rows down from them. Jake hadn't spoken to Leon since the day before, where Jake had failed his mission of finding the truth about the Italian teenager. Jake had pushed too

far, but Leon seemed to not care about it, from the jovial attitude he presented.

Or maybe he was putting on a front, as Jake had done for so many years. Not letting anyone see his tears, the school bathroom being his personal haven. Or the forest and Hope, a place he hadn't gone to in a while. He'd go soon, if only to check on the leaves again, make sure the lake was there.

Jake inspected Leon's face and noticed another jagged line running down his cheek. The line was new—Hugo's doing from the night before. Jake had been beaten before, but never by family. What hell was Leon living through at home?

"Are you going to sit there?" Leon said, putting the book down flat on the table and turning to Jake.

"No," Jake said. "I'm not really that into manga is all." It was a fib, but Leon wouldn't know that. Manga brought memories of past love back, of Jake's dad and how they used to read under the sun when he took Jake to the park. But those days filled with laughter were gone. And never coming back.

"That is sad," Leon said. He got the manga and pushed it towards Jake. It was *Bleach*, a manga Jake was familiar with. He had all the volumes sitting on his shelves catching dust. "Take this one and read it," Leon said.

"Not a chance," said Jake, a lot harsher than he meant to. Jake leaned away from the manga as if it carried a virus with it. Leon's eyebrows furrowed before he shrugged and placed the manga back in his bag.

"I wanted to take you to a club in the library," Leon said, facing the front as Brewster came in to take the register.

"What club?" Jake asked.

“A manga club.”

Jake’s body froze. He could hear the two sides of his mind battling each other. On the one hand, he hated manga with a passion, hated the disgust it rose within him. But the yearning to be with a friend was equally as destructive.

“You do not want to go?” Leon said. Brewster was taking the register, rattling the list off, and Jake didn’t answer his name.

“Jake Landon?” Brewster said again, scanning the class. Jake kept silent. Upon seeing Jake, Brewster marked him in with confusion and continued the register.

Leon faced Jake. “What is wrong?”

Jake avoided looking in Leon’s direction. He stared at the grey table with unwavering eyes. “Nothing,” he said.

“That is your answer for everything.”

Jake shook his head, trying to keep the smile off his face. He fidgeted, his hands clammy and his heart beating furiously. *I can’t go with him*, Jake thought. *I won’t be able to handle it. I’ll just be even more of an embarrassment.*

But he was trying to be more of a person, right? And didn’t that involve being out of his comfort zone?

“Are you all right?” Leon asked, leaning over to check Jake’s face.

Jake recoiled. “I’m fine.”

Leon huffed and crossed his arms. “That is a lie.”

“Why are you two talking during form?” Brewster’s voice was loud from the front, and the whole class turned to look at Jake and Leon. Jake’s face went red, and the class laughed. Jake’s tomato-face was something of a running joke in the class, especially when the spotlight turned to him.

Brewster returned to speaking about whatever the day's topic was, probably some advice about how to be kind to people.

"Come with me to the club," Leon whispered under his breath.

Jake took a deep breath. He glanced at Danny and Bruce to his side, knowing they were waiting for the right opportunity to throw a piece of paper or a book at Jake. Jake's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, but he steeled those voices in his head and made his choice.

"Sure," he said, voice calmer than he felt. "I'll come."

"Why are you two still talking?" Brewster hollered, and Jake ducked his head as the hotness flooded his face once more.

But the smile on his face was unmistakable.

\* \* \*

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Jake asked Leon as they strolled down the streets after school, trying to find the library Leon had mentioned.

It was a misty afternoon, with people leaving work and milling about the streets that Jake and Leon travelled through. London might have been a confusing place, but that didn't mean it was a maze. Leon had walked around aimlessly for a good twenty minutes.

"You know where it is?" Leon asked.

Jake nodded with a laugh. "I just wanna see how you manage to find it."

Leon glanced down at his phone, tilting it left and right as if that would make the directions clearer. "I think we go back," he said, pointing to the building they had run four trips around.

“It’s not there,” Jake said. “We’ve been in the same place for like half an hour.”

Leon sighed and pocketed his phone. “I cannot find it,” he said. “Take me there.”

Jake thought about teasing him more, but decided against it. They’d be late for the club if they kept it any longer. Jake led Leon past the building they’d seen before, and then crossed the road. A five-minute walk later, through winding streets and a few junctions, sidestepping pedestrians and cars, they arrived at the library.

“Liston Library?” Leon asked.

Jake pointed to the massive yellow sign in the corner. “This is the one.”

It was a mammoth library, and Jake recalled many days of coming here with his parents as a kid. Jake used to love reading books, and in the corner of the comic section he had found manga. He grabbed one of the volumes and showed his dad, who agreed to buy more for him at the comic store they used to go to. And that was Jake’s introduction to the world of Japanese comics.

But now a dismal and eerie atmosphere filled the library’s halls. The building which at one point was magical to Jake looked like a haunted house, filled with creepy memories around every corner that Jake didn’t want to encounter.

“Let us go in,” Leon said, leading the way across the zebra crossing.

Jake swallowed the lump in his throat and followed Leon through the front gate. They walked up a flight of stairs whose railings were painted blue years back, but were now white.

“This place looks different,” Jake said, walking inside the reception beside Leon and gazing at the posters of new book series on the wall.

“What is this place?” Jake expected memories of the past to attack, but they were at bay. For now.

“I think the club is this way,” Leon said, gesturing to the entrance on the right. The library was so big that it had multiple floors and wings, and if they picked the wrong one it would take long to find their way back, if they ever could.

“Let’s just ask someone,” Jake said. “Otherwise we’ll get lost again.”

The receptionist told them it was on the second floor, to the right side of the bookshelves. They ascended the first flight of stairs and paused at the door which led to the club.

“Let us go,” Leon said, the excitement in his shining eyes unmistakable. Leon’s excitement, however, didn’t rub onto Jake. Rather, apprehension filled Jake to the brim. He hadn’t read a single manga in years, and through the tiny circular window in the second-floor door, he noticed volumes of the stuff.

The uneasiness in Jake was a rocket, and the volumes of manga would be the fuse to light it.

## Chapter Thirteen

Jake's mind was back in year seven. It was the third day of school, and so far he had made a few tentative friends. A girl called Lucy, who had a head the size of a planet, and a dark-skinned boy named Ange, whose afro fascinated Jake. They were standing around in break time, being year sevens and not really knowing where their place in the playground was. The wind carried a warmth with it that day, and Jake spoke with a lightness in his tone, a brightness in his eyes.

It was the first day Jake had encountered Danny and Bruce.

They came behind Jake and poked his sides with pointed fingers, which for an eleven-year-old was an immense amount of pain to endure. Rough bruises formed on his stomach. Blinking away the tears, Jake turned to see the offending guys laughing at his expense, which only caused more tears to come to the fray. *Why are they doing this?* Jake questioned. An answer he wouldn't find even three years later.

Jake peeped back at Lucy and Ange, who were both glancing away from him, turned to the other side. They had known each other in primary, but Jake's friends from primary hadn't come to Liston High. Jake was alone and needed to make friends. But the only two he had made wanted nothing to do with him.



Everything about Liston High was new. The massive school building, with multiple floors, was intimidating. All the big kids who were two feet taller than Jake looked down at him, glaring as if ready to kill. The new uniform, a green blazer with a white shirt his mum bought for him the week before, was too tight, and Jake's breath constricted as he stared at Lucy and Ange walk away from him, muttering to themselves as if Jake never existed.

Jake was alone, at the mercy of Danny and Bruce. Jake sent a prayer to whoever was out there, but that didn't stop the bullies from dishing out the punishment for Jake being alive. They picked on him the rest of that day, and the next week, and the days after that, and it didn't help that Jake was in the same form as them, and in all the same classes, a fact that hadn't changed three years later. That day, Jake, with tears running down his face, had run upstairs at lunchtime, unable to take the hurt anymore, ignoring the looks he got from teachers and other students alike and rushed to the toilet. He thrust the door open, his arms aching from rubbing his eyes so much, and hurried over to the cubicle. He sat on the cold toilet seat, and let his sniffing subside as the chill snuck into his body.

Back then, the toilet was a sanctuary for him, a place he could be alone without being found or taunted. That was until Danny and Bruce found out about it, and then they came in with water sprinklers, filled them up, and pelted a helpless Jake in the cubicle. Jake had gone to the bathroom on the left side of the school the next time, but other students had spotted him and told Danny and Bruce about it, and they migrated their bullying there.

Jake was used to toilets being a place of alone and quiet, and now, Jake sat in the library toilet, crying his eyes out. He couldn't stop the tears. In public, the brave face was easy. He planted it on, looking courageous,

looking like an actual person, but in private all the tumultuous emotions poured out, unable to keep themselves at bay. Jake had predicted a breakdown to occur because of the manga club—that's why he was so cautious to go—but he hadn't expected it so soon.

Leon and he had entered through the door and walked over to where the other kids were sitting. Beanbags lined the floor, and a circle formed, surrounded by shelves of manga. Jake was breathing hard, but tried to calm himself to no avail. The shelves were stocked with all his favourite manga as a child, and he made a point to try and avoid looking at them.

Jake and Leon sat on two beanbags, with another four people already sitting in a circle.

"You guys new?" a girl asked. She had wild, red hair and the biggest eyes that Jake had ever seen.

Leon nodded. "I signed both of us already."

Jake's eyes widened. He didn't know there was a sign-up. And Leon had already signed it for him. *He must've been confident I would go*, Jake thought. Of course, that was considering Leon didn't know of Jake's past with manga. How he loved and hated it.

"Great," the girl said. "I'm Amy, and this is Yin, Gerry, and Nathaniel." The others waved at Leon and Jake. Yin was clearly from east Asia and already had a manga in hand. Gerry and Nathaniel wore glasses and were smaller than the other two, and seemed friendly enough. Leon shook their hands, one at a time, before Jake did the same.

The group descended into a small silence after that. There were sounds of pages being turned and chairs scraping periodically. Jake played with his fingers as the other four got on with reading manga. He was supposed to grab his own to read, but the terror of doing so gripped him like a vice.

“So, what do we do?” Leon asked. Jake almost sighed with relief when Leon broke the silence.

“Well, just grab a manga and start reading,” Amy said, pointing to the shelves and shelves of volumes around them. She gave Leon and Jake a smile before returning to reading, her manicured fingers flicking pages at a rate Jake had never witnessed before.

“Let us get them,” Leon said, standing up. Jake stood with him on shaky legs and followed him to the shelves. Everything was there, from *One Punch Man* to *One Piece* to niche ones like *3-gatsu no lion*. Jake had these all at home, lining his walls, waiting to be opened and rediscovered. Not that he would. Ever.

“Which one do you want?” Leon asked.

Jake shrugged, trying to calm his racing heartbeat. He hadn’t touched a manga in years, hadn’t read the pages of one in longer. And yet he was here, at a club with Leon with manga surrounding him, for no reason other than to keep his friend company, and perhaps try to face his fears no matter how weak he was to do so.

“I like this one,” Leon said, picking up *One Piece* and flicking through some of the pages. “The art is nice.”

“Haven’t you read that before?” Jake asked. “It’s pretty popular.”

Leon gave Jake a strange look. “I thought you have never read manga.”

Jake fidgeted with his blazer sleeve, his face heating up. “I haven’t, no,” he lied.

Leon walked back towards the group and joined them, leaving Jake to pick one. Jake perused the shelves, reading the spines of manga he recognised, manga he’d memorised the stories of, manga he had lived a childhood through. He decided to grab the copy of *Shingeku-no-kyojin* and

stroll back towards the group. The cover almost burned a hole through his palm, and his uniform stuck to his chest. His face was red, no doubt, and the others had worried looks on their features when he returned.

“Are you all right?” Leon said, giving him furtive glances as the others continued reading manga.

“I’m okay,” Jake said, dumping himself onto the beanbag and taking a lungful of air. He needed to calm himself, needed to get the hotness of his cheeks and read something. *What’s going on with me? Why am I being such a...an idiot?*

Jake held the manga for ten minutes, turning it in his fingers, trying to stop thoughts of the past, thoughts of when he actually used to read, from invading his mind. Every time his glance fell towards the manga, a stab to his head came as if it physically hurt him to look at the cover, let alone read through the panels.

After another ten minutes, the others started to notice.

“Jake, you look sick,” Amy said. Gerry nodded with her. Amy got up and came over to Jake. For an unknown reason, panic seized Jake. His eyes flashed and he stumbled back, rolling over the beanbag onto his back on the floor.

“I’m...okay,” he mumbled under his breath, which itself released harshly. He heard shuffling, which meant everyone had gotten up to see what the matter was. *Great, just like school, I look like an idiot here as well.*

“You do not look fine,” Leon said. “Maybe we should go.”

“Like, if he’s not feeling okay,” said Yin, “then staying at home would be the best, you know. Besides, he could always come next week when he’s better. We’ll still be here.”

Jake could sense the others nodding along with Yin, agreeing that Jake was imperfect, just like the dip in Lake Hurricane, the dip that Jake was so infatuated with. Jake's ears burned, and he couldn't take it anymore. It was as if the world was choking him, stopping the air from leaving his lungs.

He yearned for a way out. The uneasiness within him did explode. He threw the manga to his right, hearing it knock into a shelf, before jumping to his feet. Horrified looks met him, with Nathaniel even looking angry, but Jake paid no mind as his legs trembled. He'd gotten those looks all his life. Nothing new. Leon asked a silent question with his eyes, and Jake shook his head.

Thoughts of the past usurped control of Jake's mind, and tears were falling. Jake remembered where the toilets were, and hoped they were in the same place as all those years ago. He ran there, almost falling over twice, opened the cubicle, and slumped on the toilet seat, shivering from the cold burning his back up.

And he was still here, letting the tears sweep themselves aside. He'd calmed down enough to get up and wipe his eyes properly. A deep breath entered his lungs, and he exhaled. Slowly. After collecting himself with another wipe of his eyes, Jake left the cubicle, praying no one was waiting for him outside. They weren't. Jake washed his face, being sure not to gaze at the mirror and see the puffy eyes and streaked cheeks.

He left the bathroom to enter the second floor of the library. The smell of books entered his nose, fresh pages waiting to be read. In the distance, he heard laughter. It was Leon and the rest of the group. Laughing, having fun, without Jake. Jake wasn't welcome there, as he wasn't welcome anywhere. He couldn't even *read* manga, for god's sake. They must've thought him illiterate.

Jake swiftly walked past them without a glance. His schoolbag was lying beside the fallen beanbag, but Leon would bring it for him tomorrow, Jake was sure.

“Wait,” a voice said. Jake was halfway down the stairs, but he turned to an out-of-breath Leon holding his bag in one hand, a manga in the other. Leon recoiled at Jake’s face, and the hand holding his schoolbag froze. “What happened to you?”

Jake grabbed his schoolbag harder than he meant to, almost pulling Leon with it. “What do you think happened?” Jake said. “Look at me. I’m a freak.” Jake blinked away more tears and turned to leave.

“You are not a freak. Everyone here likes you. They want you to come again.”

“Even when I can’t read a flipping book,” Jake said with his back turned.

“Yes, even so.” Jake heard footsteps coming closer down the stairs. Leon was beside him and leaned against the railings. “Why did you have that reaction?”

Jake didn’t want to tell Leon, didn’t want to expose how much of a weakling, of a freak, he really was. He glanced at Leon and said, “We all have our secrets, don’t we?”

Leon kept silent, his face brooding, and Jake took that as a cue to walk the rest of the way down the stairs and out of the library, bag shouldered.

He headed home with clouds dark around him, wind harsh, and predatory thoughts of the past running circles in his mind.

## Chapter Fourteen

Jake heard him before he saw him.

Jake stood outside his front door, handle in hand. Laughter spewed from inside the house, raucous and loud, and it dug a dagger into his heart. His mum was happily joking with someone, and Jake didn't need two guesses to know who it was. The sky started spitting rain down, and it pattered Jake's blazer and dropped to the floor in tiny puddles. But Jake was frozen, body paralysed, not willing to turn the handle and go inside.

Not when he would meet the banes of his existence.

He glanced through the kitchen window. Hugo and his mum were playing with food, chucking random bits of fruit at each other before eating the ones they caught. Jake hadn't seen her so happy in years, but that uneasiness, that hunch, inside him spoke a different story. Something weird about Hugo. Not only was he hurting Leon, a despicable prospect in itself, but the aura around him was dark. He did dark things, knew dark truths, and Jake would find them and prove it to his mum before she was the one crying in pain.

The handle was wet from the rain, and Jake let it slip from his fingers. He sighed, raised his bag on his shoulder, and walked back out through the front porch, closing the little gate behind him. He hurried to the other side

of the road, knowing Leon would come through the left side—if he found his way home properly, that is.

Jake headed to the forest, the place he could find solace, despite the rain getting heavier as he travelled. Rain be damned, Jake needed somewhere to go. Thoughts of his mum came to him through the rain and wind, of how happy she was with his dad, someone Jake actually liked, instead of the way she acted with a thug like Hugo. It was all fake, all a mirage his mum put on. A lie she told herself.

Jake crossed another road to get to the fence surrounding the forest. He peeled back the fence to get to the little hole he made and tucked himself into it. No birds graced the skies today. Jake wouldn't find peace here, he wouldn't find peace anywhere. But, perhaps an easing of the pain was possible.

A sweet, almost heady, scent filled the air, and brought memories with it. His mum used to make cookies for him every weekend that smelt similarly sweet. She would wake up on a Saturday, all smiles, to get Jake out of bed.

"Mum," the eight-year-old Jake would complain, his eyes dreary from waking up, but a smile on his face regardless. His mum would wordlessly walk out as Jake got changed and followed her. He'd brush his teeth and go downstairs, where his mum was stationed in the kitchen. She would have so many different pieces of equipment out, pans and foil and rollers for the slab of dough in the centre of the kitchen table.

She'd never let Jake actually *make* the cookies, but rolling the dough was one of the highlights of his week. His mum would form circles using little cutters, and Jake would use the star-shaped one and stab it into the dough like the warriors in the manga his dad read to him every night. The



cutters were still in the kitchen drawer, right at the back, collecting dust from non-use. Jake would love to stick his hands in the mixture and lick it, much to the dismay of his mum.

*Those days were the best*, Jake thought as he traversed the forest. Water slipped from the leaves and slapped his head as he made his way towards Hope and Lake Hurricane, thoughts of those moments returning once more.

His mum would place them in the oven to bake, and they'd watch TV as his dad woke up from the smell. He'd come downstairs, hair tousled and dishevelled, and sit at the kitchen table nursing a cup of coffee he made himself. Jake loved playing with his dad's hair. It stuck out at all angles and was spiked in the morning before his dad showered.

Once the cookies were made, they'd eat them together while they were still hot, still able to melt in Jake's mouth. Warm cookies tasted the best, and homemade cookies were sweeter than anything else.

Jake hadn't eaten a cookie in six years. His dad had left when he was nine.

*And he's never coming back*, Jake thought. *And I'm never getting that peace back, either.* Jake finally reached the bush that hid his haven. He pushed it out of the way and climbed through, coming out to the sight of Hope.

And to someone else sitting at the base of the tree, as he had done before. Leon. His face was blurred in the dark, but he couldn't be mistaken. He wore school uniform, with his bag around his left shoulder. No knife was held in his hand, fortunately.

Thoughts of turning back and leaving crossed Jake's mind, but he willed them away. "What are you doing here?" Jake asked.

“You still did not answer my question from before,” Leon said, shrugging and standing up. He brushed off his knees and walked towards Jake.

“I can keep secrets as well,” Jake said. “I have my reasons, and you have yours.” If Jake kept speaking about it, memories were bound to come to the fore. And when they did, Jake wasn’t sure he could keep the emotions reined in.

“I have nothing to hide,” Leon said. A lie, Jake was sure. “But you were crying. There is something there.”

Jake’s hand twitched, and he took a step back. The way Leon spoke was like Danny or Bruce, trying to squeeze the truth out of Jake. “There’s nothing there.”

“That is what you always say,” Leon said. “Always to do with nothing. Always a lie.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“Always to do with nothing,” Leon repeated, and Jake’s face burned up from getting caught. Leon said Jake was the one butting in all the time. Well, what was *he* doing then with all the questions, then? What right did he have? He wasn’t the one trying to make something of themselves. Jake was that person.

“What’s with the knives, then?” Jake asked. He had to deflect the attention, somehow. He hated being in the spotlight.

“I like to play with weapons,” Leon said.

“That’s a bit weird, don’t you think. Where did you learn that from? Your dad?”

Leon’s eyes flashed. “So that is why you are upset?” he said. “Because my dad likes your mum.”

Jake's breath hitched. "It's not that, nothing to do with that, actually." His voice barely concealed the truth, however.

A laugh escaped Leon. "You lie all the time, Jake. But you make it so clear when you do."

Jake raised his chin, putting on the tough face. "So, what?"

"You lied about not knowing of manga. I can see the shelves from your bedroom window. Why would you lie about that?"

Jake tensed, aware of the rain dampening his clothes and leaving him sopping. "Like you always say, Leon, it's none of your business. Leave me alone, for god's sake. I don't need someone else trying to slide into my problems and save me."

Leon raised an eyebrow as the rain dripped down his face. "You need saving, and have problems? That I did not know." His voice made clear his suspicions.

"You've got the same, let's be honest here."

Leon shrugged. "Maybe, but I have my secrets, and you have yours."

Jake sighed, letting his muscles relax. "And can we keep it that way?"

Leon paused, before nodding, or giving what looked like a nod from afar. Jake lifted his bag higher up his shoulder and joined Leon in sitting at the base of Hope, leaning his back against the tree's massive trunk. A glance behind him told Jake that Lake Hurricane was in normal order, was still flowing. The forest would always be there for Jake, and Leon was the perfect person to share it with. The little dip in the lake was letting rain from the ground flow into the main body of water. Ruining the perfection. A constant imperfection, like Jake.

Jake imagined life if Hugo and his mum did get together. The family photo would be Hugo, his mum, Leon, and Jake. Jake would be the

imperfection, would be the odd one out. Maybe they'd take the photo without him, and Leon would become the son his mum always wanted. Someone who was unafraid to speak their mind, and be brave and challenging. Someone unfazed by bullies like Danny and Bruce.

*I can't think about that, Jake said. I have to make something of myself, remember, Jake?*

"Jake," Leon called, grabbing Jake's focus. Leon was waving a hand in front of his face.

"What?"

"Our secrets...you say that friends share secrets?"

Jake perked up. "Yeah."

"One day, we can tell each other the secrets. Okay?"

Jake let a slow grin form and kicked a rock across the ground, hearing it skitter before stopping at another tree. The rain poured down, and the downcast clouds over the sky stretched like a permanent sheet of grey. Leon repeated his question as the rain pooled at Jake's feet, trying to climb into his school shoes. Jake waited a moment before giving his reply.

"Sounds perfect."

Though life for Jake, as it always did, would be far from perfect. Jake anticipated how much worse it could—and would—get.

## Chapter Fifteen

The next two weeks passed as if nothing had changed. The skies darkened earlier in the day as autumn stretched into winter, and Jake had to tighten his coat's hold around him to keep the chill out. It also meant less time for him and Leon to go to the forest after school, which they'd started doing every day. They sat at the base of Hope and spoke until their throats were dry from laughter, laughter at the day's events, or random jokes they thought up. Leon, like Jake, was distraught at his dad getting with someone new, especially when that meant the memory of his mum was tarnished. Jake had tried to ask further about that, but Leon shut up shop, lips pursed, eyes fixed on the mossy ground.

They hadn't shared any secrets yet, but soon Jake would get the truth from Leon, and let his own secrets spill.

One such day, a Friday, Jake was heading back home with Leon. His bag was bouncing on his shoulder as they chatted away. They walked slowly, perhaps to elongate the time they spent before returning to homes they didn't care for.

The bullying had intensified at school for Leon, and Danny and Bruce paid as much attention to the Italian as they did to Jake. They called Leon fat, since he had a little chub, and ugly as well. Danny taunted Leon about the scars on his face, and Jake sat there, silent, unable to fight back.

They turned into Hampton road, and Leon went to his house and knocked on the door. Jake stayed back to make sure he wasn't seen. Leon told him it was important his dad never saw Jake, for some reason. When Jake asked further, Leon kept his lips shut. As much as Leon spoke about secrets, he was mighty good at keeping them. Hugo opened the door, and Jake glimpsed the glare he gave Leon, dark and brooding. Hugo glanced around the road for a few seconds, before going back inside and shutting the front door behind him.

Jake waited five minutes before strolling to his front door, dread in his heart at the prospect of entering and seeing his mum. He tossed his shoes aside and stepped into the living room. His mum was dressed up, no doubt going on her tenth date with Hugo in the last month.

"What took you so long?" she asked when Jake came in the doorway. Of course, she didn't care about his well-being, or what he would do at home. It was always about her, about her date Jake was holding up.

Jake gave his customary response. "Nothing."

His mum arched her eyebrow but kept silent. She got up, and Jake clocked she'd painted her nails black. Then, he noticed her entire outfit. She wore a dark dress with slits on the side, a kind of dress Jake would never imagine her wearing when she was with his dad. It was so tight that Jake didn't know how she breathed in it, and he would've sworn she wore a corset underneath the sequins.

"Are you all right?" Jake asked, though he didn't know if it was in a mocking or concerned way.

"I'm fine," his mum snapped, walking on heels past him. Since when did she wear heels in the living room? Especially since she always shouted at Jake for wearing shoes indoors. In the hallway, his mum stumbled

towards the stairs as if she was drunk. Jake hurried over to see what the matter was.

“You’re not fine,” he said.

His mum glared at him. “You were the one holding me up,” she said. “If I was out there I would’ve taken this thing off already.”

Jake’s face scrunched. He didn’t need that mental image. “Fine,” he said. Clearly, she didn’t want his help and only wanted him out of her way. He pushed past his mum and went upstairs to his room, which was messy as always, although Jake did try to clean it the night before. He sat on his desk after changing into an oversized hoodie and light shorts, laptop in front of him.

He’d been searching for information every night for the last two weeks, even watching spy movies to see the information tactics that they used. But it was to no avail. Nothing was stored on the internet about either Leon or Hugo Colombo. It was a clean slate, as if they had wiped all previous records of themselves before coming to England.

And the details of them coming here were hazy as well, from what Jake could gather. Leon was quiet about his previous life, except for the happy memories of childhood. Jake shared a few of his own, but those memories were lined with dark spots both boys didn’t want to discover.

Jake tried to go on Italian websites and use google translate, but all he got were people of the same name. A Hugo De Angelo, whose picture somewhat resembled Hugo Colombo, but there were a lot of security guard muscle men in Italy, and Hugo De Angelo had a wife anyway, as seen in a happy picture with her.

Jake sighed every night after a wasted session of google spying and turned to the manga on his shelves. He hadn’t touched them yet, knowing

the futility of trying to read them. But he had made progress. The manga club was actually enjoyable. He didn't read anything, didn't even touch anything. But he enjoyed speaking to the others there.

Amy was a personality to behold. She was loud and boisterous, often butting into conversations and derailing them to what she wanted to talk about. But she was fun, overall, and made the whole group laugh often. The others were quieter, luckily, otherwise Jake's ears might explode from all the noise.

Nathaniel was oddly perceptive, noticing the things in both manga and real-life that everyone missed. He'd make the odd comment that made everyone think and ponder for a moment.

Yin was a gaming nerd, and his favourites were always games based on anime. He played *Star Wars* and *World of Warcraft* as well, games Jake used to play. Jake was a child the last time he'd wanted to buy a Playstation, and his mum always refused. Reading was good, she'd said, but games ruined the mind. Jake didn't point out the fact that she played games on her phone almost daily.

Gerry didn't speak often but had a heart of gold. She was always glancing at Jake periodically, as if making sure he was okay and not about to have another fit. Gerry spoke in a soft voice, and the whole group had to quiet just to hear what she was saying.

Jake hadn't read anything yet at the club, but spending time with them was the highlight of his week. He sat there and discussed anime with them, since that didn't involve actually reading anything. He remembered all the narratives and stories that filled his childhood. At first, they evoked memories of the past he wanted to avoid, but the last two times he went to the club, he ended up having normal conversations without flipping.



And fortunately, the others hadn't asked about what happened.

Jake closed his laptop after another failed search for information. He leaned back, basking in the light from above him and trying to relax. He cracked a few knuckles, before letting the tension leave his muscles. His legs ached from all the walking to and from the forest, but he wouldn't change that for the world. His eyes closed and he let the silence coalesce around him.

That was when a cry rang out.

Jake's heart stopped. He waited a second, and another cry, similar to the first, filled the hallway outside his room. Jake ran out to see his mum rushing towards the end of the hall.

*What's going on?*

He ran after her, seeing her turn towards the bathroom. Something dripped behind her to the floor. It looked like vomit, yellow and green, staining the red carpet, but Jake couldn't be sure. He ran past the third bedroom that was never in use, just as his mum entered the toilet and slammed the door behind her.

*She's definitely not all right*, Jake thought. He tried to open the bathroom door, but his mum had locked it.

"Mum," he called. "Are you okay?"

He heard retching as a response. Then, the toilet flushing.

"I am fine," his mum said, her voice muffled. She gagged after it, which started another episode of coughing and retching. Jake heard splatters on the toilet seat, which told him his mum was most definitely not fine.

"I'll clean it for you, don't worry," Jake said, in a moment of compassion. Maybe Gerry was rubbing off on him.

"I'll do it," his mum said, but Jake knew she wouldn't.

Jake sat outside the toilet, leaning against the wall twiddling his thumbs, waiting for his mum to finish. The doorbell rang from downstairs. No doubt Hugo waiting for his date to come out. Jake ignored the sound, but his mum must have heard it, because the toilet door suddenly opened and she came tumbling out, wiping her face with a towel.

“Mum, don’t go,” Jake said.

His mum spared him a glance. “I am fine. Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“You’re not, though.”

She ignored him and stumbled towards the stairs. On the way her legs buckled, causing her to collapse to the floor in a pool of her own vomit. Jake hurried over to see blood leaking from her mouth, and the putrid smell smacked him in the face.

*What the...*

Jake racked his brains, trying to remember what the emergency maneuvers were when someone lost consciousness. His mum’s eyes lolled in the back of her head when Jake flipped her over. Her skin was cold to touch, and he put an ear to her chest. A heartbeat thudded against Jake’s temples after a lengthy second.

*Thank god*, Jake thought. He watched her breathe, the smell worsening with each second, and leaned back and sat against the railings of the stairs. His mum rolled a little, but Jake made sure she didn’t squeeze her stomach any more than the dress was doing. Jake grabbed his phone and dialled the emergency number, waiting for the ring to stop before he asked for the ambulance services.

His mum moaned a little. Her dress was tight, maybe even too tight. Was that why she’d vomited so much? Because her stomach was so pinched?

Jake's hands and voice shook as he spoke to the ambulance, who said they'd send someone in less than ten minutes. The rings at the door had stopped, and *that* uneasiness erupted within Jake. That hunch.

Hugo had something to do with his mum's collapse. She lay there, on her back, chest rising and falling with each breath. Vomit slid down her cheek and stained the floor, and her dark dress looked deadly against the red carpet.

Hugo might not have caused her to collapse directly, but his influence, a destructive influence, was painted all over her frozen form.

Hugo was up to something dark.

And Jake seemed to be the only one able to see it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Jake and Leon stood side by side at break time, the silence stretching between them. Jake was quiet, solemn. His arms were by his side, and the icy wind circled around the duo. Jake's eyes were fixed on the grey concrete, unmoving. He hadn't told Leon what had happened the day before, of his mum's collapse and being taken to the hospital.

Jake had been inside for another hour, and no doubt Leon had seen the ambulance from his window. The paramedics had done the usual checks on his mum, and, once certain she was alive, began to get her out of the house. She was stretchered onto the van as Jake watched on, wondering whether he would be orphaned in the next day or two. When they arrived at the hospital, his mum was stripped of her dress and put in a hospital gown, which eased her breathing instantly.

"She'll be fine, son," the head nurse told Jake as he waited outside for information.

"You sure?" Jake's voice betrayed his worry, and the nurse smiled down at him.

"Trust me, she will."

Jake sat there for another hour, hopeful his mum would get released. As much as he hated her, he didn't want to be all alone in the world. Alone,

with no parents, no friends. Other than Leon, but Leon had his own problems, own household issues to deal with.

“Go home, son,” the kindly nurse said, the lines on his forehead flowing into each other. His eyes crinkled as he smiled. “You’re mum’ll be fine. Get some sleep.”

Jake asked to be taken home, and the ambulance van had driven him back to Hampton Road. They hadn’t asked whether he’d be okay on his own, or maybe they thought he was eighteen already from his lanky frame and thin wisps of hair on his chin. Jake had grabbed the keys before he left with the ambulance, luckily, otherwise he’d have slept on the streets that night. Not that he got much sleep in bed, and even when he did, he woke in fits and starts in the middle of the night. His window was open, and that chill set into his skin through the duvet. The heart to close the window didn’t enter Jake. He wanted the fresh air, if only to stop the smell of the vomit he had to clean up.

“Jake,” Leon said, and Jake’s mind jolted to the present. The playground entered his vision again, and Leon’s face in front of him. With the scars and dark eyes.

“What?” Jake said.

Leon paused, as if debating what to say, before he spoke. “What happened yesterday?”

“Remember what we said about secrets?”

Leon nodded. “But I saw the ambulance. Something happened. My dad was going on a date, but then he came home again.”

That was another detail that pissed Jake off. Hugo hadn’t come to see his mum, not even once, even though he had a car to visit with. The so-

called love of his life, one that he had fun with and was apparently a good person to, and he hadn't bothered to check on her. Not once.

Jake's fist clenched at the mention of him. Jake had no idea how he'd get to the hospital to see his mum, not when it was an hour's walk at least. But Jake was used to walking, and tiring his legs was better than sitting at home in silence, fidgeting doing nothing. He'd called his mum's workplace in the morning to tell them the news. They were understanding, thankfully, since Jake didn't want to enter another argument, and told him to call back when his mum was well again.

"Jake," Leon repeated. "Is your mum okay?"

"No," Jake snapped. "No, she's not. Now stop asking me."

Leon pursed his lips, but did stay quiet. Break time ended in silence, and they walked inside the school building, heading towards English. They sat in their usual seats, with Danny and Bruce behind them. Jake didn't need their bullying. He'd avoided them in the morning, and he and Leon always hid in the corner of the playground away from where the duo played football.

His mum was in the hospital, his mind was jaded, and the world was falling apart in front of him. Bullies were the last thing he needed.

"Look who it is," Danny said, strolling past Jake and slapping him in the back of the head. Bruce did the same to Leon, and Jake almost heard Leon grit his teeth.

"Fatty," said Bruce, an insult Leon brushed off easily. Jake wished he had that same level of unaffectedness.

"So, what games should we play today?" Danny taunted.

Jake didn't know what made him say it, but his head was ready to implode. "Shut the hell up."

Others around them gasped at Jake's hostility, and Danny stared at him with wide eyes. Bruce switched his gaze from Jake to Danny, as if he couldn't believe what he heard.

"Did he just say that?" Bruce asked.

Danny brought a closed fist to the top of the table. Both Jake and Leon were turned to face them, challenging them to throw the first blow. The bruises on Jake's face had gone, but if more had to form to get Danny and Bruce out of his way, so be it.

"I think they deserve something, don't they?" Danny said.

Jake glanced at the front of the class. The second English teacher, Miss Josephson, still hadn't arrived. If a fight was about to happen, the circumstances were perfect. Even a crowd was here to watch and film on their phones, probably to upload to *Instagram* later.

"Jake," Leon cried.

Jake turned and was grazed in the nose by Danny's punch, which swung in an arc away from him. Bruce also sent one towards Leon, but Leon ducked away from it quickly. Jake's nose stung and pulsed from the hit, but the pain was manageable. Leon's own fist was raised, but it was then that Miss Josephson entered the class.

"All right, no fighting," she said, her eyes lasering in on the two tables at the back where Bruce, Danny, Leon, and Jake sat. She knew they never got along, yet kept the seats the same as if both duos would eventually get along and sing for the heavens as good friends.

Jake's face burned as the whole class looked at him again. *I'll never get used to that, will I?* But, eventually, the lesson started. Jake grabbed his exercise book from his bag and tried to concentrate on what Josephson was teaching. Creative writing. Jake loved reading stories, or at least used to,

but writing them, being creative, was something he could never succeed at. It was a skill that evaded him, as evident by the countless stories in his exercise book he had half-completed before scrapping.

His mum's face kept flashing in his eyes, though, as his pen moved across the page. The image of her eyes bloodshot and lolling in the back of her head. Her limp arms stretching to the ground and bent at the elbows at an odd angle. The vomit dribbling out of her mouth and slipping down her chin. Images Jake couldn't banish from the forefront of his mind, no matter how hard he tried.

Jake furiously scribbled on his notebook, but nothing got rid of the images. His back smoldered and sweat formed on his forehead. He could tell Leon was worried, but Jake ignored the looks Leon sent his way, and instead fixed his eyes on the greyness of the table and its fraying corners, and then on Miss Josephson whenever she spoke about some language technique.

It was midway through the lesson that the door opened and a student, from what looked like year eight, revealed herself. It was a small girl with hair done in a complicated braid. A clipboard was strapped to her chest and her face turned red as the class' attention switched to her.

"What is it?" Josephson asked.

"Principal Turlin asks for Jake Landon." The girl's tone was clipped, matter-of-fact, as if she was a news reporter. Josephson thanked her, and the girl left.

"Jake, you better get going, then," Josephson said.

Jake grabbed his bag, uniform sticky with sweat, and headed out the door.

*What does Turlin want with me now?*



## Chapter Seventeen

“I wanted to ask about you, Jake,” Turlin said, leaning back in his chair, hands clasped. Confusion ran through Jake’s mind as Turlin smiled at him. “How are you feeling?”

*Why is he asking me that?* Jake rubbed his chin and averted his gaze to the images on the wall. Those kids that Turlin had helped, kids that Jake couldn’t relate to. Kids Jake could never emulate.

Turlin repeated his question, causing Jake to snap his gaze back to the principal.

“I’m feeling all right,” Jake said. A stock response, devoid of emotion. Jake’s voice sounded robotic to his own ears.

Turlin unclasped his hands and lay them flat on the table. His nails were evenly cut, all of them. “Your mum phoned just before, telling me about what happened to her.”

“Did she say anything else?” Jake asked.

Turlin shook his head. “The cause of her being in hospital she did not say. I think it is best you ask her yourself.”

Jake’s shoulders deflated and he slouched back in his chair. He thought his mum would call him by now, but she hadn’t said a word. Not last night, not today morning. *Maybe she’s just resting*, Jake thought. But the thought of her not caring about him slipped into his mind.

“So I ask again, Jake. How are you feeling?”

Jake’s hands were in his lap, and he clenched them tight, his forearm tensing up. “I’m fine,” he said again, though the flashes of his mum’s face in his mind said otherwise. Not that Turlin could see them. *Let him think I’m fine*, Jake thought.

“I do not believe you,” Turlin said.

Jake raised his head. “What?”

“It is easy to tell when a student lies,” Turlin said. “I have had practice for a number of years at it. There’s always something, with every student, which betrays their true emotions.” Jake noticed how Turlin didn’t say the sign Jake exhibited.

Jake shrugged in his most casual manner. “I’m not lying though.” Jake didn’t know what the signs of him fibbing were. The quick intakes of breath, the fidgeting?

Turlin grabbed two cups from his drawer and placed them on the table. Then, he got a two-litre water bottle and poured the liquid into both cups. One cup found its way in front of Jake. Jake hesitated before taking a sip. It was bitter. *Buxton* was like that, though.

“You know, I had a mother in hospital at one time, as well.”

Jake paused in the middle of his next sip. He placed the cup back down and retracted his hand. “You did?”

“I loved her dearly, of course, as you do yours. She had an accident, fell whilst baking me a cake. Her precious head hit the counter and she began bleeding badly.” Turlin’s eyes were elsewhere as he told the story, as if he was reliving the experiences. Jake understood, since he went through the same every second, seeing the horrors of his mum passed out on the floor again.

“What happened?” Jake asked, shaking his head free of memories of last night.

“I panicked, of course,” Turlin said with a laugh.

*How can he laugh about something like that? Is Turlin a secret psychopath?*

“I should’ve just called the ambulance,” Turlin continued. “But I thought I could save the day on my own. And I tried, I really did. Towels on her head to stop the bleeding, or I think it was tissues first I used to soak the blood up.”

“How did she end up?”

Turlin smiled. “I ended up calling an ambulance after my father came in and shouted at me to do so. He did some CPR on my mother, got her sitting up so the blood didn’t pool around her. The ambulance came and took her away. Safe to say I never did get that cake, in the end.”

Turlin was so light about it all, his demeanour jovial and upbeat, as if he was recounting a friend’s birthday party and not his mum’s near-death experience he had played a part in.

Jake kept silent, not knowing what to say. Turlin always had his life in order. From the suit he wore every day, the same black colour, to the crispness of his uncreased, white shirt. Even Turlin’s posture was perfectly straight, with shoulders back at the right level, feet tucked together under the table, knees touching.

“The point is, Jake,” Turlin said, “that you did a very good job last night. You called the ambulance on your own, from what your mother told me, and got her there. You did better than I, and I was years older than you at the time. Your mother is very grateful for that.”

*Then why can't she tell me herself, then?* Jake thought. *Why does she speak more to everyone around me like I don't exist?*

"But, like me, you do not need to do everything on your own," Turlin continued. "You can accept help."

So, that was the moral of the story? That Jake should just let everyone into his life? That was a crap message, especially with the lack of privacy Jake already had.

"I don't get it," Jake said.

Turlin took a sip from the plastic cup, finishing the water with a gulp Jake could visibly see. "You said you want to be someone, right?"

Jake nodded.

"Well, you already are someone. A person that, no doubt, saved their mother's life last night. That is an admirable act, not that of someone with no sense of self."

Jake's breath hitched. That way of thinking... Jake had never encountered that line of thought. But his mum didn't care for him, and would probably find fault in Jake's methods, that Jake didn't help her into a chair, or call an ambulance sooner.

Jake might have actions that were admirable, as Turlin suggested, but his actions were far from the perfection his mum sought. And all he wanted was her approval, right?

"Have you visited her, yet?" Turlin asked.

"No." Truly, Jake had no clue when he would visit her, if he ever would. Or, just wait for her release so she could come back home.

"Well, she can tell you her gratitude herself when you do." Turlin asked whether he wanted more water, and Jake refused. He finished the water, letting its coolness drip to the base of his throat and drop into his empty

stomach. Lunch was next, and Jake briefly wondered whether Leon would join him, or if the bullying from Danny and Bruce worsened in Jake's absence.

"See those pictures on the wall I introduced you to before," Turlin said, pointing towards the pictures he had shown Jake the first time he'd come in here. "All those students had the same initiative as you, the same drive to be independent. But they accepted the help when it came. And it caused their success." The pride in Turlin's voice wasn't a shock, but it was the most emotion Jake had heard from him yet.

"Why am I not different to them?" Jake's voice was croaky, and he cleared his throat before continuing. "How can you see me in them? I ain't the same, from what I know."

Turlin smiled wider than Jake had ever seen on the man's old face. "When you have the level of experience I have, these things you see in everyday life. As a parent always knowing where their child is. Every few years, sometimes every year, a child comes with potential, a child who just needs a little push. You are that child, and let me tell you, I have never once been wrong. So the record is on your side."

Jake let the silence wrap around the table. He put his hands flat on it like Turlin, trying to calm himself. Trying to keep the same cool posture Turlin exuded effortlessly.

"Don't fret," Turlin said. "I know your friend Leon is helping you. He told me about a new club you joined."

Turlin was right. The club helped massively, especially as Jake actually got along with them, Yin and Gerry in particular. And the conversations they had about manga were brilliant. A smile sneaked onto Jake's face.

"I didn't know you and Leon talked," Jake said.

“He’s the one who said I should talk to you.”

“He did?”

“Yes, he is concerned about you as much as I am. He told me of your mother this morning, and then your mother called.”

Jake’s eyes were ready to jump from their sockets. Leon was a nice person, sure, he knew that, but to ask the principal to check on him because Leon wasn’t capable of doing it himself...

“I’ll thank him for that,” Jake said.

“No need. Friends do acts of kindness for each other without the need for verbal gratitude. It is in their very nature, in the essence of friendship itself.”

Jake was familiar with that impulse to help when it was never asked for. He’d get Leon out of the trouble he was in, no matter what it took. Even if it meant braving the danger that was Hugo Colombo.

“Well, that is everything,” Turlin said. “Just a little checkup. I hope to see you again, soon.”

Jake grinned and stood, lighter than he had in weeks. He walked out of the door with a spring in his step. Lunch had begun, and Jake strolled to the playground to find Leon, the rare British sunlight caressing his face, and hearing the faint sway of the oak trees in the wind. Leon was in the same place they always hid, in the left corner of the playground, behind the swings that the year sevens played on.

“What did he say?” Leon asked immediately.

“Hello to you, too.”

Leon laughed, before repeating his question.

“He just asked me how I am, you know.”

“Anything else?”

“Not really,” Jake said, not wanting to tell Leon about Turlin helping him becoming someone with worth. Leon was a friend, but it was too personal, and too embarrassing, to say out loud.

“I have something else,” Leon said, getting his phone from his pocket and flashing the screen at Jake.

“What is it?” Jake said, blinking and peering closer. It was a text message from Leon’s dad. Jake read it once, then again, registering the words Hugo had written. “Today?” Jake asked.

Leon nodded. “We will see her after school.”

## Chapter Eighteen

After school, the scene played out like a kidnapping. He and Leon hurried out of the school before Danny and Bruce, or any of their minions who kept them informed of Jake's whereabouts, could see them. They arrived at Hampton road where Hugo was waiting for them, standing outside his Toyota, phone in hand.

"Let us go," Hugo said, voice gruff. He looked like he didn't want to be there, a cigar pinched between his forefinger and his thumb, smoke billowing from his mouth every few seconds. Leon glanced at Jake and shrugged before leading him into the back of the car. The uneasiness sparked within Jake, and the air smelt of something fishy, something he couldn't quite place.

Leon was still outside and spoke with his dad for a few minutes. A glare painted Hugo's face, as if he hated his son despite what Leon insisted the truth was. Leon's entire body was rigid as Hugo spoke to him.

Jake gazed around the car, seeing if he could find anything odd. But nothing was out of the ordinary. No weird marks, no blood splattered across the doors, no strange objects. Just a regular car. And that regularity put Jake on edge. It was almost too clean, like a hospital's walls, like a serial killer's crime scene.



Another few minutes passed before Leon came in and sat next to Jake. Leon's eyes bore into the back of the driver's seat, which Hugo occupied as he heaved himself into the car, exhaling loudly when he finally settled himself.

"Put your seat belts on," Hugo said without a glance back at them. He plugged in his headphones, no doubt listening to some old Italian rock music. He turned the engine on, the rumble like a growl underneath their seats. Hugo then muttered something under his breath, but Jake couldn't hear it properly. With a cough, Hugo set off, the exhaust spitting fire along the road behind them.

Jake peered outside at the houses that passed them on the way to the hospital. He wished to go home, wished to go to the forest as he and Leon did every day. He wanted peace, but Hugo's car made claustrophobia rise within Jake. The smell of smoke filled the air as Hugo drove along the motorway, with Jake too afraid to ask to open the window. He snuck a glance sideways at Leon, who sat still, unmoving. Not even a limb twitched for a millisecond.

*Why is he like that? Jake thought. Isn't he going to say anything?*

Leon's demeanour was a sign, a sign that something strange was happening. For a moment, panic took hold of Jake. Were they really going to the hospital, or was Hugo taking them somewhere else? Hugo could probably bend a frying pan with the muscles he had, and Jake's head was much softer than stainless steel. Jake stared at the rear-view mirror, and when Hugo met his gaze through the reflection, Jake's eyes averted, his face burning red.

Hugo intimidated him to no end, and it was a relief when Jake noticed the hospital far ahead. They pulled into the car park, and Hugo exited the

car first. He opened the door and let Leon out, before Jake shuffled over to the door and followed him. Just before he stepped out, however, he looked back at the driver's seat. In the side storage of the driver's door, where Hugo undoubtedly stored his belongings, a knife peeked out. Jake's eyes widened at the stained blood at the tip of the knife. Unconsciously, he leaned forward to get a closer look.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him out of the car, his legs dragging against the concrete. "What did you see?" Hugo's voice was solid steel, harder than Jake had ever heard, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed.

Wincing from the pain shooting through his arm, Jake said, "Nothing." *That's what you always say*, Jake could hear Leon's voice in his head.

"Exactly," Hugo said, spittle flying from his mouth in all directions. "You saw nothing. Remember that."

Jake wiped his mouth once Hugo let go and turned around. His heart beat a million miles a minute as Leon wordlessly walked by his side. The image of the knife stuck in Jake's mind. The blood at the tip. Whose blood was that? Was it Leon's? Was Hugo planning to use the knife on Jake as well? Did Hugo use the knife so much he could never clean the stains off?

Nausea overtook Jake, and he clamped a hand over his mouth. He hadn't vomited over his mum's collapse, seeing the lifelessness in her eyes, but a simple knife could make his stomach heave. The urge stayed down, luckily, as they neared the hospital's entrance and went through. Hugo didn't ask where the ward was, instead looking at his phone using the signs.

*I'm such an idiot*, Jake thought. *Of course, Mum spoke to him on the phone. That makes sense.* Yet another thought pressed Jake. *But she couldn't spend a minute calling me, could she?*

Jake sighed as they entered the ward where his mum was, on the second floor. Leon still hadn't said a word, hadn't even tried to whisper under his breath to Jake. His usually talkative self, the one at school and at the manga club, the one Jake remembered vividly, was absolutely gone. Vanished into thin air, as if Hugo's presence stifled Leon's personality.

A nurse asked them to sit in the waiting room, to which Hugo let out a breath that warmed the room by a few degrees. Jake sat, his hands fidgeting in his lap, next to Hugo and Leon. The nurse returned a few minutes later and asked them to go in, one at a time.

Hugo didn't even bother asking Jake if he wanted to go, instead getting up and striding into the ward himself. As if he was the most important person in his mum's life. Hugo probably *was* the most important, Jake mused, loathe as he was to admit it.

When Hugo disappeared from view, Jake turned to Leon. "Why are you so quiet?"

Leon stayed still, then shrugged. And yet didn't speak, his mouth zipped shut.

"Tell me, then," Jake said. *Why is he being like that for?*

Leon pointed towards his pocket, and then placed a finger over his lips. Leon widened the opening to his pocket gently with two fingers, and Jake peered inside. A device sat inside the pocket, some kind of walkie-talkie-looking device. A light on it flashed, and a wire travelled through a hole in Leon's coat up to his hood. It was cleverly hidden, as the coat was charcoal black.

Jake leaned back, blood pumping, and thought for a moment. He remembered the pens and leaflets the hospital gave out. He ran and grabbed

one, wary of Hugo's imminent return. He wrote on the back of the leaflet, 'A recording device?' and handed it to Leon.

Leon's eyes met Jake and, moving ever so slow, he nodded.

A coldness ran through Jake's heart as he took the leaflet back. A second passed for the truth to register in his mind, and Jake flung the leaflet to the ground along with the pen, which skittered across the blue floor. Jake ignored the looks others in the lobby gave him. The impulse to rip the recording device out of Leon's pocket and smash it against the wall entered Jake, but he resisted the urge.

It all made sense. Hugo wore headphones whilst driving, and Jake thought he listened to music. But it was worse than anything Jake could ever imagine. He glanced again at Leon, wondering how on earth he could help his friend. The leaflet lay on the floor. Jake wanted to write another message, but Hugo returned a second later as Jake was about to grab it.

Hugo gave Leon a glare, before looking at Jake. "Go in, she is waiting for you." No warmth in his face, not like the first day Jake had met him. A coldness resided in his up-turned nose and uni-brow, and he jabbed a finger towards the nurse who waited for Jake to get up. Jake nodded, keeping his face impassive, and followed the nurse through the ward, trying his best not to turn to see what Hugo was doing to Leon.

His mind reeled from the discovery of the recording device, but he had to keep his feelings hidden. The hospital was teeming with patients, almost bursting. All kinds of injuries surrounded Jake as he walked, from broken legs to men with a thousand tubes running in and out of their bodies. Some beds had curtains drawn around them, the injuries too gruesome for visitors to see.

“Here she is,” the nurse said with a smile, gesturing towards the last bed at the end of the room.

Jake trod slowly and rounded the corner. His mum sat up in bed, her face paler than Jake had ever seen. Her hands were in her lap, limp and unmoving, and her chest rose up and down with each breath. She wore a white hospital gown, and gave a small smile—the first Jake had seen in weeks—when her eyes noticed Jake. Jake didn’t love his mum, a fact he was sure of, and yet a wave of sadness passed through him at the sorry sight of her. She pointed a limp finger towards the chair next to the bed.

Jake eyed the blue chair for a second, not moving. Then, he shuffled towards it and sat down, his uniform hot despite the fan above them. The fabric was rough, and the armrests were flimsier than a duvet. Jake adjusted his seating position, but comfort wasn’t an option amongst the strong smells of detergent and sanitary products.

“Hello, Jake,” his mum said, her voice weak and croaky. A tube ran from a patch on her fingers to a monitor, which registered her heart’s beat. The colour had been drained from her face, and her lips were dry, void of the lipstick she wore in anticipation for her date.

In Jake’s eyes, his mum was strong, independent, even if she hated him and viewed him as a failure. But the husk of a woman in front of Jake was nothing compared to the mum he remembered.

“Mum,” Jake called, twisting the thick duvet between his fingers, staring into the white. “What happened to you?”

## Chapter Nineteen

Jake's mum refused to look at him. Her eyes were fixed on her lap, on her hands that were clasped together, knuckles white from the pressure. She was lost in another world, a world where the hospital and Jake didn't exist.

"Mum," Jake called again. She jumped up and glanced at him.

"What is it?" she said, voice straining like a thread about to snap.

"What happened? Did they say?"

His mum shook her head. "I—they said it was a stomach ache."

Shock slapped Jake like a frozen fish. *A bloody stomach ache? That the best she can come up with?* "Piss off," Jake said, surprised by the tone of his voice. Harsh and unrelenting. "Please, Mum," Jake continued, softening a little. "Tell the truth. How can I help if you don't say the truth?"

His mum didn't react to him swearing, and instead twisted the duvet under her fingers. "You don't need to help me. It's...I can't explain it."

"Try to," said Jake, sitting up and crossing his arms.

"Well...I guess it started when your dad left us."

Jake's heart jolted, and the temperature in the room rose a few degrees. His attention was piqued. How was she about to blame his dad, the way she always did? "What did Dad do this time?" Jake asked.

“It’s not his fault exactly, though he did start it,” she said, surprising Jake. She blamed everything bad in her life on his dad, everything. “He... well, it’s all to do with me.” His mum swivelled her head to face him, tears in her eyes. “Please, I’m trying, but it’s hard.”

Jake couldn’t bear to see those tears drip down his mum’s cheeks. He stared back into the white of the duvet in his fingers. “If Dad didn’t do anything, then what happened?”

“It was all to do with me,” she repeated, and the bed creaked as she crossed her legs. “I—I was desperate for someone new. Someone after your dad, but I never got anyone.”

Jake remembered. There was a period after his dad’s leaving where his mum was depressive, and yet optimistic as ever. Jake caught her smiling at him as if life was fine, and then going to her room to sulk for hours. He never spoke a word about it to her, choosing to hide in his room where he could cry for his dad on his own.

His mum had come out of that state with renewed confidence in herself. She wore makeup every day, even at home where she didn’t need to. She was more outgoing, a smile always plastered on her face when she spoke to anyone that wasn’t Jake. She flaunted her looks a lot more, yet it didn’t work. None of it did, aside from a few dates that occurred sporadically, even when she went to bars on purpose.

Jake never knew she had been desperate enough to put herself in hospital, the cause to which she hadn’t said yet.

“So, why are you in *here*?” Jake asked, gesturing to the tubes running through her. “It ain’t cos you wanted a new boyfriend back then, that’s for sure.”

“Watch your tone,” his mum croaked, turning to him. “Just because I’m in here doesn’t mean you can be angry.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Jake said. His voice was hardened, and in the back of his mind the impulse to shut up sparked. He quelled it, though, and continued. “Why shouldn’t I be angry that my mum put herself in hospital, leaving me alone.”

Realisation flooded his mum’s features. “Is that what you’re upset about, being alone? The nurses said you were taken care of. And I asked Hugo to check on you.”

*And he didn’t do that, did he?* Jake answered in his mind. “You’ve not been there for years. Not just these two days. How thick...”

His mum narrowed her eyes, sitting up a little. “What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

Jake’s eyes widened. “You actually don’t know?”

Usually, Jake was timid, withdrawn. But a power surged through him, a will to confront his issues, instead of running away from them. It was what Turlin had told him to do. To be someone with a sense of self, someone who didn’t compromise on their values. And his mum lying to him was unacceptable.

“I—maybe I wasn’t the best to you,” his mum broached. “I am human, after all, and we all make mistakes. But that doesn’t mean I was a bad mum, does it?”

Jake shook his head. “I...guess you weren’t a bad mum. You fed me and all that, and paid for whatever I needed. But not much else.”

“Then why are you upset?”

Jake sighed, placing his fingers against his temples and rubbing. The oncoming headache didn’t recede, though. “I guess the mental scars are



worse than the physical ones.”

His mum kept silent, and the sounds of the hospital descended on them. Random beeps going off, nurses shuffling about and treating patients, the occasional shout from the receptionist towards a doctor. A few times, a nurse passed Jake and his mum and glanced in, checking to make sure they hadn’t erupted into a fight.

“You never answered my question,” Jake said when the silence became too much to bear.

“Which was?” His mum’s tone was clipped, formal, as if he wasn’t her son but a police officer interrogating her. Her usual self, the cold mother, was coming out to play.

“Why are you in here?” Jake said.

“I told you, it was your dad—”

“Dad’s been gone for years.” Jake sat up, a glare directed at his mum. “You did this to yourself, and you don’t wanna say what you did specifically.”

“What did I tell you about your tone?”

Jake was fed up with her dodging the question. “Just answer the actual thing already.”

His mum’s lips pursed. She shifted in bed, letting the duvet cover more of her body, as if she was trying to hide underneath it, burying her words in the white of the cotton. “Bulimia,” she whispered.

“What’s that?” Jake asked, though the familiar uneasiness ruptured his mind.

“I—why are you making me admit this?” she said.

Jake clenched his fists. “Mum, tell me.”

“It’s...making myself vomit,” his mum mumbled.

The pieces clicked for Jake, in an instant. The new looks, the healthy diets over the years, the constant mirrors around the house. The few times he caught her checking her figure in the mirror after a session in the gym.

“So, you...make yourself vomit to look good?” Jake said.

His mum avoided his eyes, staring past him into the deep blue curtains. “Basically, yes.”

Jake’s right fist stiffened, and a second later he smashed it into his thigh. “Why would you try that? Why would—”

“Nothing worked,” his mum cried. “I needed to...you don’t understand how bad it was after your dad left. I felt worthless. I felt like I had...no one left.”

Jake’s eyes almost bugged out from their sockets. “How do you think I felt? When you were off on those dates without me, and I was dumped at Raj’s?” Raj had been their old neighbour before he moved to Switzerland, and a frequent babysitter Jake’s mum threw him with. One of Jake’s early friends, especially at the end of primary school, despite how upset Jake was to be at his house.

“I never meant to do that to you,” Jake’s mum said. “I’m sorry if you feel offended.”

Jake noticed the fake apology, but let out a short breath and tried to calm his mind. He released the vice-like grip he had on his leg and attempted to relax. A tightness pulled on his neck and he swivelled his head to get it out. It didn’t work.

“So,” said Jake, leaning forward, “you’re in here because the vomiting went too far?”

His mum nodded slowly. “Yes, that is it.”

Jake sighed. “Fine,” he said, too tired to have another argument, especially not with someone who couldn’t own up to their actions. “Do you know when you get out?”

“In the next few days, I think.” His mum finally met his gaze. “Are you okay on your own at home? Is there enough food to eat? I can ask Hugo to help.”

“I’ll be fine. There are leftovers and stuff.” *And Hugo can piss off*, Jake finished internally.

His mum let her hand drop to the side of the bed. It swayed a few times, limp, veins along the back of her hand jagged and protruding. “I do love you, you know,” she said. “I know I haven’t...shown it much. But I do.”

Jake smelled the lie in the air. He could taste it burning in the back of his throat. The retort was halfway out of his mouth when someone interrupted them.

“We are finished here,” a voice said. It was Hugo. Jake’s back tensed and he turned. The muscle man towered over him and stared at his mum. “We must go. I will see you soon, my love.”

His mum giggled in a girlish fashion, but Jake saw all the signs. The fakeness of her doe eyes, the way she manufactured every movement to make Hugo think she was an angel. It was manipulation at its finest, and nausea pulled at Jake’s stomach at the sight.

“Let us go,” Hugo said, and Jake let himself be led up and out of the ward without a glance back at his mum. She’d said she loved him, but that was a massive lie. And they both knew it.

If his mum could fake her emotions with Hugo, what was stopping her from doing the same with him?

Leon was outside, sitting on the hospital chairs as still as he was before, like a freeze-frame. Jake recalled the recording device in his pocket and understood why Leon was careful. Leon looked anywhere but at them, the object of his gaze being the plain floor.

“Leon, come.” Hugo grabbed the boy and hauled him up. Leon winced from the hold but otherwise didn’t say a word. Jake and Leon were side-by-side as they walked out of the hospital’s glass entrance and into the dark parking lot. The night was cold, the wind bringing with it the air of something dark on the horizon.

Jake would have to be alone again tonight. A part of him was happy, that his mum would finally leave him alone and not judge him, treat him like crap. But still, the loneliness spiking his heart every few seconds wasn’t worth the temporary peace.

Leon nudged Jake’s shoulder and gave him a side glance. Panic pooled within Leon’s wide eyes. Jake was confused. *Why is he so scared? What’s going on?* Leon pointed towards Hugo’s back pocket.

Jake’s blood froze. The leaflet was there, tucked inside Hugo’s pocket, the top of it peeking out. The same leaflet that Jake had written on. Jake stumbled, his knees buckling, but managed to right himself as his knees hit the ground. He got back up and saw Hugo glaring at him. Hugo *knew* of Jake’s discovery.

Fear seized Jake, his arms rigid, his legs pistons moving across the ground. Hugo opened the back door to his car and bundled Jake and Leon inside. Jake’s back hit the seat and he put his seat belt on. Hugo still wore the headphones, and Jake’s hand rested on his schoolbag on the backseat. He tried to stop his arms shaking, stop the fidgeting of his legs up and down. Hotness gripped his face, and Leon didn’t look in his direction as

Hugo started the engine. The rumble caused the seats to vibrate, and Jake's fears heightened with each little shake of the car.

Jake wanted to help Leon, wanted to get him out of his crappy situation.

But Hugo was aware Jake's intentions, and that meant retaliation would strike very soon.

## Chapter Twenty

Tiredness fused into every bone in Jake's body as Hugo drove back home from the hospital. The fear of being caught resided within Jake, but he tried to dampen it before the panic could show on his face. Leon would've been a good person to share his worries with, but when Leon was hooked up with a mic, speaking was the last thing on Jake's mind.

The hum of the car set into Jake's ears, and he laid his head against the seatbelt and listened to the sounds of the night. The whistle of the wind, the random Italian song that Hugo was listening to aloud. Other cars flitted past them as Hugo sped down the highway.

Things took a turn about ten minutes into the car journey. Hugo decided to take the wrong turn, left off the roundabout instead of going the usual route towards Jake's house.

Jake, against his best wishes, decided to speak up. "You missed the turn."

Hugo didn't glance back, instead gazing at Jake through the rearview mirror. His eyes were narrowed. "You think you know the right way," he said. He rolled open the window, one inch at a time. The harsh coldness came in and slapped Jake's face. "Want me to throw you out?" Hugo asked.

Jake shook his head and sank back into the rough seat. One thing Jake was sure of was that Hugo never bluffed. He'd clocked Jake discovering the

recording device. What Jake wondered was if Hugo would do anything about it, or let it slide.

The darkness shrouded the car as it pattered along the motorway. Rain began falling, tapping the windows before slipping to the ground in little puddles. The car squealed as Hugo took the next exit, into another area Jake didn't recognise.

*Where the hell is he going?* Jake thought. He glanced at his phone before placing it flat against the seat. The time was seven in the evening. *What does he have planned?* Hugo was a dodgy man, but did he plan to take action so soon? The yearn to get out of the car and escape Hugo's clutches tore through Jake. A worried glance at Leon told him the boy had fallen asleep, his snores lightly floating around the rear seats of the car.

*Crap,* Jake thought. *He won't see any of this, either.*

Jake resolved to get to the bottom of the issue, but his hands were, metaphorically, tied. He stared out at the trees that flashed past them, remembering his own forest, and Hope. His first friends. He needed that level of peace, but it was irrecoverable, not when Hugo was leading him into the path of doom.

Hugo drove violently, his foot jammed on the pedal. The car screamed as it was pushed to the limit in the town streets. Shops flashed past that Jake didn't recognise, houses that were foreign to him. For someone who had never gone outside Newham, the place Hugo drove through was an abandoned maze.

"Where are we going?" Jake asked, his fingers crossed that Hugo would give a straight answer.

As usual, Hugo didn't. "For a little prize, I should think. You have been a good boy."

Jake's back heated as a shiver rocked him, and a thin sheen of sweat formed on his forehead. *This isn't gonna go well*, Jake thought. His breath came out quicker, and he took a second to regain the calmness akin to what Leon exercised.

A minute later, Hugo drove them into an alleyway with a sharp turn. He got out of the car and slammed the driver's door. Jake leaned forward to get a better view of what he was doing. Weirdly, Hugo hadn't taken the knife in the driver door storage, which Jake thought he would've done after Jake clocked it earlier. Hugo grabbed a cigarette in his hand and lit it. He smoked for a second, probably needing the relief after not smoking for a few hours.

*Was this all he wanted?* Jake questioned. *He could've smoked outside his house. He did that before, didn't he?*

But Hugo had worse ideas that Jake was about to find out.

Jake glanced at Leon. His light snores filled the car, and Jake sought to wake him up in case something happened. Jake couldn't take Hugo on his own, but he and Leon might have a chance.

"Get out," a voice said. The cold smacked Jake, hard, as the car door was ripped open. Jake could almost hear the hinges squeal as Hugo stood in the doorway staring down at him. Jake was frozen for a second.

"Get out, I said," Hugo repeated, reaching into the car with a massive hand. He grabbed Jake's arm and almost tore it from its sockets. Jake fell to the wet ground, his school trousers soaking up the rain as he lay on his scabbed knees. More droplets seeped into his hair and fell down his face. Jake managed to get to his feet and scope his surroundings as Hugo got Leon out of the other side of the car.

It was a square alleyway behind some shops. The area was quiet, with the faint noises of cars a few hundred metres away. Neon lights met Jake



outside the narrow entrance to the alley, and Jake wondered if he should make a run for it before Hugo could get to him.

*But Leon, Jake thought. I can't leave him here on his own.*

Leon stumbled out of the car and crawled over to where Jake was. Leon's eyes were wide awake, aware of what was going on. Jake tried to send a silent question through his gaze, but the rain stunted his sight. Leon's face was streaked with water, a mix of tears and the rain.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked, a surge of bravery running through him despite the realisation that he was in deep crap. He had to put on a farce of confidence, if only to buy him and Leon time.

Hugo rounded on them and took a huge step forward. "You two pissed me off today," Hugo said, raising a hand. The cigarette was held inside, the smoke rising into the air. "And you must be punished."

*Punished? What kind of—*

Hugo strode forward at a pace Jake didn't think possible for the muscle man and jabbed his free hand into Jake's face. Jake's nose exploded with blood and he fell backwards into a puddle. Water squelched around him as the pain wracked his body. He held his nose with a limp hand, the blood trickling down his chin.

"What the hell?" he said, but Hugo was busy with something else.

The cigarette in his hand, Hugo decided, was better on Leon's skin. The first sound Jake heard from the boy was a piercing scream as the burn set into his arm, which Hugo had freed by dashing away Leon's coat.

"Why are you doing that?" Jake said. He stumbled to his feet, legs shaky, and ran forward. Stretching an arm out, Jake grabbed onto Hugo's arm and attempted to pull it away. Hugo swivelled and smacked a palm into Jake's belly, winding him as his stomach convulsed. Jake stepped

backwards to avoid a second hit. His stomach folded in on itself, and he held it with a hand. Hugo was too strong, too powerful, for Jake to handle. And Leon was almost incapacitated at his father's hands. The cigarette was jammed again into Leon's skin, and he cried out for help.

*I'm coming*, Jake thought. He hurried towards Leon and rammed his light body into Hugo. Hugo stumbled backwards for a second, but quickly regained himself. Hugo's eyes were bloodshot. He cracked his knuckles, ready to kill. The cigarette had been put out by the rain, and Hugo's malevolent sneer returned. The muscle man snaked forward as Jake tried to rouse Leon from his disoriented state.

"He will not rise," Hugo said, shaking his head at Jake's attempts. "He knows this is the only way to learn."

"Learn what?" Jake said.

"You will soon learn, too." Hugo raised a hand, clenched it in a fist raised to the heavens, and arced it in a punch to the side of Jake's mouth. A tooth loosened and grazed the right side of his cheek as he fell to the floor. Hugo's second attack was as swift as the first. He landed a kick to Jake's side, just like Danny and Bruce had done weeks ago, before leaning down and staring at Jake's eyes roll into the back of his head. Jake swallowed the loose tooth, along with a mouthful of blood.

"Listen to me," Hugo said, grabbing Jake's head with both hands and forcing Jake to face him. "I am in charge. And if it was not for your mother, I would change your face. Do not disturb me. Do not try to save Leonardo." Hugo looked back at Leon, who leaned against the Toyota catching his breath. "He knows the punishments. And now you do as well."

Hugo left Jake on the ground to withstand the lasting pain. Shocks waved through Jake's body, stretching from the tips of his toe to a pounding

headache. Jake smelt the cigarette's smoke lingering in the air, a reminder of the pain Leon had been subjected to. Jake shuffled along the floor until his back hit a brick wall. He pushed against the wall to stand up, but his legs were gone. He fell back on his ass as Leon was tortured further.

Blows rained on Leon, and Jake was forced to watch his best friend be battered within an inch of his life. Jake's vision blurred, but he blinked the tears away and watched on. Hugo was hitting Leon in all the places no one would realise. Hits to the legs were common, as well as lighting another cigarette and forcing Leon to suffer more burns to the arms.

*No wonder he always wears a long-sleeve to P.E.*, Jake thought. Leon cried out a few more times, the pain rendering him immobile, until the hurt was so bad his throat sputtered into silence.

*Is he dead?* Jake wondered. A momentary panic gripped him, but Leon stirred on the ground, and relief flooded Jake. Hugo picked Leon up and threw him into the back seat of the car, before coming and doing the same to a limp Jake.

Jake smelt blood and the stench of cigarettes. He wiped his face as Hugo continued driving, but the taste of blood didn't leave his mouth. Jake tried to sit up, but he slid down the seat as soon as he did. Leon's form was silent, still, barely conscious for the rest of the journey home.

Twenty minutes later, Hugo turned into Hampton Road and dropped Jake off on the pavement. Jake gained his footing and turned, his back cracking in the process.

"Remember this," Hugo said, puffing his chest out and giving Jake a cynical smile.

"I will," Jake said, his back aching. *I'll remember what you're like so I can save Leon*, Jake finished internally.

Hugo clapped his hands. “Do not mess with me,” he said. He crossed the road and grabbed Leon out of the car. Hugo entered his house with Leon, who was an unmoving, lifeless body being dragged into the front door.

Jake stared around the road, but no one had seen what Hugo had done to them. The streets were empty and silent, the only sound being the swish of the trees in the wind and the rain hitting windows. Jake touched his face with a hand and winced. He imagined *he* was the one being burned with a cigarette, that he was the one suffering the same pain as Leon.

Hugo was an abuser. And at that, he was a morbid torturer.

Jake entered his house, shut the door behind him, and went to sleep with soaking clothes. Sleep evaded him for an hour, but before he dropped off, one thought reigned supreme amongst the countless worries in his mind.

*I'll save Leon and take Hugo down. Even if it's the last thing I get to do.*

# Chapter Twenty One

Jake woke up the next day with a back that felt like it had been stretched to the ends of the earth and then crushed to the size of a pea. He stretched his arms and yawned, only to incite pain running from his left oblique all the way up to his shoulder. His arms were sore and his legs burned like Hugo had used the cigarette on him, and not Leon.

It was a Saturday, so Jake had the day to himself. He made some breakfast after getting out of his soaked school uniform and showering. The water had worsened the slamming headache he'd woken up with, and his shower thoughts were filled with scenarios of how Hugo could've done much worse than he did. Jake yearned to go to the forest and chill, try to relax in a way his house couldn't provide. Try to find some kind of temporary peace. But without Leon, visits there had a gaping hole in them.

Jake ate cereal, Crunchy Nut with freezing cold milk, and sat in the living room lit by the sunlight filtering through the open blinds. Everything was laid out the same as usual. The coffee table his mum always used. A two-seater sofa and a single chair, though they were both rarely sat in. The TV faced Jake as he sat on the two-seater and flicked the switch on. Different channels popped up and Jake scrolled through them for half an hour. When nothing piqued his interest he decided to end his search and wash his cereal bowl.

He went back upstairs to his room and sat on his bed. His desk housed his laptop and other notes he had taken on Leon and Hugo tucked in a notebook away from his mum. His diary lay beside his headrest. He hadn't written an entry in a few days, but was there a point? Reliving the past events would cause more anger, more rage, to spill from his mind onto the inky page.

He stared at the manga on his shelves. A thought jumped to his head.

*The club!*

Jake checked the time on the grey clock stuck to the wall of his room. It was eight-thirty, which meant two hours or so until the club started. He could see Leon there, if Leon actually bothered to show up after the injuries he'd gotten yesterday. And if not, Jake could speak with the others and try to relax his mind that way.

He busied himself with watching YouTube videos on his glitchy phone (the screen continuously flashed due to the rain the day before). When he saw the time was nine-thirty, he grabbed his keys, checked to make sure none of his injuries were visibly present other than the bruised nose, and left his house.

The walk to the library was occupied with thoughts of Leon. Jake had promised to save him, promised to help him out of his situation. But Hugo was proving to be a hard nut to crack. Jake needed to find the truth behind Hugo. He wasn't just another abusive parent. Everything about his personality, his demeanour, was sour. If Jake could find the reality behind Hugo's aggressiveness, his manipulation, his secrecy, then Jake could help a lot more people than just Leon.

*But what is he hiding?* Jake thought as he entered the front gate of the library and stepped through the revolving doors. He climbed two sets of

stairs. *And how can I find out?*

Jake shook his head free from the thoughts. Taking a breath, he entered the second floor and saw the usual group of Amy, Yin, Gerry, and Nathaniel chilling by the beanbags and chairs.

“Jake,” Amy called, smiling and waving him over.

Jake let a small grin creep onto his face as he sat on his normal beanbag. Leon wasn’t here today, and he probably wouldn’t come later. The time was already ten, and Leon was usually one of the earliest ones to arrive. If Jake had a dad like Hugo, he would go early to everything just to leave the house.

“What happened to your face, bro?” Yin said, pointing a finger in Jake’s direction.

“You don’t have to be so forward,” Amy said, giving Yin a disapproving look before turning her gaze to Jake’s face, as did everyone else.

Jake’s face heated up from the attention, and his eyes were downcast. “Nothing,” he said.

“As Leon would say, ‘You always say that.’ What’s the truth, man?” Yin said.

Jake sighed and rubbed his temples with hurting fingers. He hated the questioning, but couldn’t help gladness accompany the fact that they had cared enough to ask. Unlike anyone else at school, even the teachers who were meant to be helping but turned a blind eye instead.

“Guys, we don’t have to ask him,” a soft voice said. It was Gerry, of course, it was. “Jake can tell us in his own time.”

“But, like, why wouldn’t he tell us?” Yin said.

Jake raised his head and stared at the four faces. They waited expectantly. "I got into a fight," he said.

"But, why would anyone fight you?" Yin asked, scrunching his eyebrows.

Jake shrugged.

"He doesn't want to say," Amy said, glaring at Yin. She placed a hand on Jake's forearm, which rested across his knees. "If you need anyone to talk to, come to us."

Gratitude washed over Jake, and he tried to convey it through his eyes. They all smiled at him and the club continued as normal. Jake caught Gerry giving him a few glances throughout, the silent questions un-asked in her mind.

Turlin was right. Jake did need to make friends, did need to have people to help around him. It formed a stepping stone in his path to be someone. To have a sense of self.

Jake conversed with them about manga and, to Nathaniel's surprise, agreed to review some manga panels with him as they discussed what the most effective shape was. It was the first time in the club that Jake had agreed to look at anything.

Jake thought the more aggressively cut panels, jagged lines, and thin cuts, which worked well in action scenes, were better. Whereas Gerry loved the flowery ones in the manga she read, mainly niche, more literary topics.

"Guys," Jake called after the club had finished, a split decision made in his mind.

Amy glanced at him. "Are you going to explain that bruise now?"

Jake shook his head. He caught the sliver of disappointment on Amy's face. The slightest guilt twinged Jake. These were his friends and he was



keeping secrets from them. He shrugged off the guilt and waited for the rest of them to lean in.

“You guys would help me if I needed it, wouldn’t you?” Jake asked. His gaze shifted from one member to the other, making sure the agreement was in their eyes.

“Of course,” Amy said, ever the one to verbalise her thoughts.

“All right,” said Jake. “Because I have something big I need to get to the bottom of. And I need your help.”

“We’ll help you, Jake,” Gerry said, nodding along with everyone.

Jake grinned, the confidence flowing through his words as they left him. “Good,” he said. “But you can’t tell him, okay?”

They each nodded in turn, and Jake began telling them what he needed.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Eight days later, on a Sunday, Jake was sitting on a bus, watching the London scenery of bin bags piled on streets and employees milling around pass by. A baby cried a few seats in front of him, her wails attracting the attention of a red-haired mother who desperately shoved an empty milk bottle into the baby's mouth to shut the infant up.

Jake's legs rocked up and down as the nervous energy coursed through him. The day before, the club had almost let on that they were in on the mission to help Leon. Gerry, multiple times, as well as Amy, almost let the secret out to Leon, but managed to keep their mouths shut in time. The club had passed normally, thank god, but it was a matter of time before Leon clocked onto them. Jake hadn't told them everything, of course, but enough that they got the message. Leon was in danger, and his dad was at fault. And they needed to get to the bottom of things.

Gerry was heartbroken, along with Nathaniel, but Amy and Yin were determined to find a solution. They'd exchanged phone numbers, in case they needed to get into contact with new intel.

Yin, it turned out, was an ace with computers, much better than Jake could ever be. He agreed to do complicated computer searches, although he explained it in much more complex terms than that, mainframes and the like. Amy liked to read and would skim old news articles and see if

anything sat around the library that could aid the investigation. Gerry and Nathaniel agreed to help the other two with anything they needed, should they ask.

The team was set. And their mission was set. Now, Jake had to try his hardest to make sure Leon never found out.

Last week, he and Leon had trekked to the forest every day after school like they usually did. Jake was confused that none of the others in the manga club went to the same school as him. They all went to one across the borough called Kiddman High, and created the club for themselves to speak about manga, since their school didn't have one. They never actually expected anyone else to join, but Jake and Leon were happy surprises.

In the forest, whilst they were leaning against Hope overlooking Lake Hurricane, Jake struggled to keep the truth from Leon. Leon already knew Jake was looking into his dad, even more so after the revelations of the hospital trip. But he didn't suspect Jake enlisting the help of others in the process. Jake had broached the topic of Leon's dad a few times across the week, but Leon was as shut as he had been on the hospital journey.

"Why does he record you?" Jake asked as they sat under the winter breeze. School ended the next week with the half-term holidays in time for the winter break.

Leon shrugged his shoulders, his lips tightly sealed.

"Come on, Leon. You can't keep hiding this from me." Where did the confidence in his tone come from? Where had it been his whole life, at school with Danny and Bruce, at home with his mum?

"Nothing," Leon said.

"That's what you always say," Jake joked, but not even the faintest hint of a smile cracked Leon's face. He was impassive, choosing to stare into the

moss beneath them, at a twig three metres away which twisted like a mangled leg. The twig reminded Jake of the time he'd seen a video online of a bodybuilder breaking his leg on a gym machine. But that pain paled in comparison to what Leon was going through, no doubt.

Leon's silence prompted Jake to speak. "You aren't going to say anything?" he asked.

Leon shook his head.

"He's not recording you now, is he?"

Leon flashed him a glare. "No, he is not. But that does not mean you can...keep interrogating me."

"Fine," Jake said, leaning back with a sigh. Leon didn't need to comply, because Jake already had his assembled team ready to go.

Jake's mum had returned on Monday, an unwelcome surprise when Jake arrived home from school. How his mum had got in Jake never knew. He supposed she had a key in the dress she wore the day she collapsed.

"Hello," his mum said, looking him in the eye. No hint of a glare was there, or the usual annoyance, or even mere contempt. It wasn't fondness or love, not the way she was when Jake's dad was still around, but a neutral look was better than a negative one.

"Hi," Jake muttered, putting his coat back on the peg before shaking the cold from his body. His shoes found their way onto the rack, next to his beat-up trainers.

"They let me back today," his mum said. She looked well, as if nothing had happened. The paleness in her face had faded, and, apart from the gaunt cheeks, no evidence of her bulimia remained.

"That's good." Jake gazed past his mum to the living room, where her customary cup of coffee lay on the table. The TV was on, the hum of the

news swirling its way towards them in the hallway.

“Want a coffee?” his mum asked.

*Why the hell not?* Jake nodded with a “Thanks.”

And so his mum made him a coffee, and they sat in the two-seater sipping the bitter liquid. They didn’t speak, for words weren’t needed. An odd sense of companionship flowed between them. It wasn’t the same as what Jake had with Leon, or the others at the manga club, or even with his dad, but the thin whisper of hope had sparked, and Jake wanted to hold on with all his strength.

Jake finished the coffee with a sip and got up. Before he left, his mum called him.

“What is it?” Jake said, standing in the doorway, leaning against the hinges with a hand.

“Thank you for...speaking with me. Before, at the hospital.”

Jake gave a tiny grin. His mum returned to watching TV, probably *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street*, and Jake walked to his room. The house seemed brighter now that his mum was home. A worry he didn’t have anymore.

Jake sank into the mattress of his bed and stared at the shelves of manga. He hadn’t picked one up and read it, yet, and he likely wouldn’t. But the repulsion from staring at it didn’t rise. And that was a step forward.

A beep tore Jake from his reverie. The announcer on the bus was speaking on the intercom.

“Alight here for Hampton Shopping Centre,” the female voice said.

Jake got up and walked around the mum of three and her pushchair before stepping off the bus into the chill. Hampton Shopping Centre was a busy place where one could buy anything the heart fancied. Shops scattered

the area, both inside to the surrounding roads, and hundreds of shoppers flocked there every day to buy whatever their desires wanted.

Jake, today, sought to buy some new shoes and a jacket, considering the winter was harshening. He'd die from the cold before Hugo got to him. Jake listened to the bustle of shoppers in the early morning for a second, letting the sounds of cars honking and people chatting sink into his ears. He walked to the crossing and waited, glancing around.

A familiar sight caught his eye.

Hugo was on the other side. On his own. A briefcase in his hand. Wearing a suit.

Jake's interest was piqued, along with the fear running through him. *What is he up to?*

In the movies, a briefcase meant a lot of money, usually for illegal dealings. But Jake's life wasn't a movie, wasn't a story, and Hugo could be up to all sorts of shady dealings.

*Or maybe he's just buying a briefcase*, the voice in Jake's mind said.

*Shut up*, Jake internally replied, staring as Hugo scanned right and left twice before crossing the road fifty metres to Jake's right. Jake switched his gaze from the shopping centre to Hugo, the question running through his head.

*I have to, don't I?*

Mind made, Jake crossed the road with everyone else. But his attention was fixed on the muscle man striding on the other side, and the briefcase in his hand. Jake had an obligation towards Leon, and following Hugo was key to that. Key to finding the truth about him.

*Hugo Colombo*, Jake thought, following the man with his eyes and feet, *what on earth are you up to?*

## Chapter Twenty Three

Jake was halfway across the road when Hugo turned and swept his gaze across the street. Jake faced the other way, faking the intention to see if any cars were coming towards him as he crossed. Jake's head heated up as he stared right all the way across the road. Hugo might not be looking his way anymore, but Jake didn't want to take chances. He stared ahead at the bus stop he had gotten off at, and slowly put his hood up to cover his features. Hugo, ever the eagle-eyed man, would instantly recognise him if his face was showing.

It was a cold day, so the hood being up was believable. The chill that set into Jake told him why he needed a new jacket. His current one had holes in it which let the cold in. Hugo, when Jake finally turned his head back, was walking faster than before. The briefcase swung in his hands as if he cared nothing for what was inside. A passer-by tried to stop Hugo to ask something, confusion on their face. But Hugo pushed them aside with a palm, the wiry man falling to the floor as a result.

Jake kept his head down but eyes up staring after Hugo. The road they were on, Hampton High Street, was a long, winding path into the edges of town. Lucky for Jake, as it meant Hugo didn't have anywhere to turn other than any side-roads to the side, which cropped up infrequently.

A hand hardened around Jake's shoulder.

“Stop there, son,” a voice said.

Jake’s head whirled and he shrugged the hand off his body. A policeman stood before him, a glint in his green eyes.

“What is it?” Jake insisted, his head swivelling to keep an eye trained on Hugo, who was all but jogging at this point. Hugo got further and further away, and Jake itched to continue the hunt, if it wasn’t for the stupid policeman in front of him.

“You’re looking awful dodgy, aren’t you?” the policeman said. “And who do you keep looking at?”

Jake snapped his gaze back to the policeman’s face. An old man with wrinkly eyes and a tired face met him. He was clearly past retirement, but the force decided to give him a few final days in the station.

“Nothing,” Jake said, bouncing almost on the balls of his feet.

“Well, how do *I* know you do not have drugs on you, lad? Or some kind of weapon?”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t have any on me.”

“And I can’t trust that.”

A few of the shoppers stared at Jake as they passed. Jake didn’t pay them any mind, but he hated the attention. It was the same as being the odd kid at school, where everyone stared to see how he could be a failure again. A kid with a hoodie and deep blue jeans being stopped by a policeman was a sight everywhere.

“Please, let me go,” Jake said.

“I will,” the policeman said, pointing to Jake’s pockets. “After I search you. Now stop arguing, I’m more than triple your age, you know.”

Jake could see *that*, clearly. He knew the policeman wasn’t allowed to search without a reason to. Looking dodgy wasn’t one of those reasons. But



Jake was running out of time, especially as Hugo was turning into a dot in the far reaches of Jake's vision, and growing smaller. Jake needed to get the police visit over with.

"Fine," he snapped.

The policeman gave him a smirk, patting down his pockets first. "All you youngsters think you control the world," he said with a laugh as he finished searching Jake's hoodie, which was empty. He brushed fingers over Jake's phone when he moved to his jeans. "What is this?" The officer sounded like he'd found a prize.

"My phone," Jake said, grabbing the offending object out of his pocket. His gaze, as the policeman took the phone and inspected it, followed Hugo. Even from hundreds of metres away, the muscle man was distinct and stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Fair enough," the policeman said, handing it back to him. The search was over a minute later, with the policeman grumbling as he left about the new generation, youngsters, and something else Jake wasn't bothered to listen to.

Instead, he stared after Hugo, who had just turned into a side road to the left. Jake sprinted after him, not caring for any of the shoppers that swivelled their heads to look at him. The policeman might think he was running because he had drugs, but more important thoughts rushed through Jake's head.

*If I don't get there, how can I get more info to help Leon?*

Jake ran through the high street, swerving to avoid old ladies with prams and kids peddling with bicycles into his path. The city came alive when it came to its centre, but Jake wanted everyone out of his route

towards Hugo. Hugo strolled through the crowd, but Jake hurtled through them to get to the left turn Hugo had made.

He arrived there and twisted on the balls of his feet. Hugo stood thirty metres away, speaking with someone. In the middle of the street. Jake didn't want to look suspicious, so crossed the street and continued walking along the road. He kept his head high, acting casual as a myriad of thoughts ran through his brain. He tightened the hood to his head, covering both sides of his face.

*Who is that?* he thought. The figure Hugo was speaking to was a thin man with an innocent smile. Wrinkles stretched across his face and every movement seemed able to break the old man's bones. He conversed with Hugo like they were old friends. Hugo tapped the man's shoulder, laughed, and handed him the briefcase. Then, they began walking together through the street.

Jake sought to hear what they were saying. He strode a little faster to get closer to them, though he was on the other side of the road. Cars rushed past him, blinding his vision for seconds at a time. The traffic light caused a large truck to pause in front of Jake, too tall for Jake to peek over it with a side glance.

*Crap*, Jake thought, since he couldn't see the man nor Hugo. He jogged to the side of the truck. Hugo and the man had disappeared. Into thin air, seemingly.

*What the hell?*

An alleyway was next to where they had vanished, and Jake surmised that they had gone inside. Jake steeled himself, the dangers of running blindly into alleys rushing through his head. He'd read about it in manga all

the time, where someone ran into a situation and was surprised by revelations they never expected. And they usually died after that.

Jake disregarded the second fact and focused on the former. He needed information, and that meant one thing. He gazed after Hugo, who was a silhouette in the dark, moving further and further away. Jake ran across the road and, with bated breath, entered the alley.

The sound of the outside world instantly vanished. Jake was plunged into a dim that settled around him. The wind was concentrated into thin lines, and that caused it to whoosh around Jake and tickle the insides of his ears.

He crouched and tiptoed forwards to minimise noise. He'd seen scenes like the one he was traversing through in movies. Dark alleys with stairwells and ugly smells to each side. But movies had protagonists and they had plot armour. Jake didn't have that. He could easily die here, easily seal his fate if Hugo decided to turn around and find him.

Bins surrounded Jake, and he hid behind one just as Hugo turned. Jake held his breath as the silhouette of Hugo bore his gaze backwards. Ten seconds of waiting brewed in the silence, in which Jake's muscles filled with tension. Hugo turned back and Jake stood up fully, suppressing the urge to groan as his legs burned. He hadn't recovered from the running before, and he was expected to flurry around like a spy as if the toll on his muscles didn't exist.

Hugo sauntered through the thin path. The old man by his side was no longer there, and the briefcase had disappeared. Jake glanced behind him for a second, expecting the other man to meet his gaze. But all he could see was cars driving past in the city centre that seemed so far away.

Jake crept forwards once more. Hugo got a phone out of his pocket. He raised it to his ear after tapping some buttons, and Jake anticipated what he would talk about.

“Is it ready?” Hugo spat out. The aggression in his voice surprised Jake, especially as he was in the middle of a random alley surrounded by brick walls and thick quiet. Jake’s breath hitched and he let out a breath slowly so not to make noise.

“Tell me, then,” Hugo was saying. “Are the packages ready? Stop evading the question.”

The person on the other end of the line must have agreed with Hugo, because he then said, “Good. I look forward to it.”

Jake peeked out of the side of the bin. Hugo hung up the phone and continued walking to the other end of the alley, which led back to the city. Jake intended to pursue him, coming out from behind the bin and tiptoeing towards Hugo’s form.

That’s when his phone decided to buzz. Shock splashed across Jake, his body freezing. Hugo spun around, his eyes zeroing in on Jake.

*Crap*, Jake thought, head down to prevent being noticed, clamping a hand around his pocket. His ring tone wasn’t on, luckily, but the vibrations ringing through the air were enough to get Hugo’s attention.

Jake turned and sprinted to the other end of the alley, not letting himself glance back for a second. Footsteps sounded behind him, and Jake burst out the side of the alleyway and took a sharp turn left.

A shop was in front of him, a bakery of some sort, with assortments of items in the display. Jake zipped down his hoodie and, whilst running, threw it off and on top of the little gazebo in front of the bakery. Jake slowed his pace, trying to assimilate with the normal shoppers. He took

money out of his jeans pocket which was intended for the jacket and shoes. The buzzing had stopped, and Jake entered the bakery, the back of his head burning as if Hugo's stare was burying into him.

The cashier asked him what he wanted.

"Anything," Jake said, catching his breath. He remembered what his favourite used to be. "A chocolate chip cookie, actually. The big one there." Jake pointed to the large brown cookies stuffed with melted chips.

"Coming right up," the bubbly girl, no older than eighteen, said. Jake wiped the sweat off his forehead and snuck a glance back. Hugo was outside, but wasn't looking into the shop. His head was manic, whirling every second to find a new person to accuse as the stalker.

Jake let out a sigh of relief, his heart slowing down and fusion leaving his limbs. He relaxed his body, shaking off the panic that seized him when his phone buzzed.

"Here it is," the cashier said, hand outstretched. "A bit of a weird choice. Everyone usually has the light chocolate ones."

Jake accepted the package and held the warm cookie in his hand. "I like to be different," he said, remembering what Turlin told him was necessary to be someone with worth. To be different from the norm, to stand out.

"I'm sure you are," the cashier laughed. "Have a nice day."

*I'm sure I won't*, Jake thought, holding the cookie as he walked back into the cold outside. Hugo had gone, but not from Jake's mind. Jake joined the bus stop back to the shopping centre. Sat down, Jake flicked his phone on. Yin had called him, then sent a message when Jake hadn't picked up in the alleyway.

'Call me back,' the message read. 'I got news to tell you, man.'

## Chapter Twenty Four

**I**t was mid-afternoon when Jake finally got home, jacket and new shoes in hand. He'd been cautious as he bought the items at the shopping centre, aware that Hugo could turn up at any point and snatch him away. But, a nice black jacket and green trainers later, Jake was in one piece on the bus back home.

His mum opened the door and let him inside. The business consultancy hadn't let her back, saying she needed to rest a little before returning to work. Jake's mum was grateful for the extra time off, if a little restless from being pent up at home.

"Oh, by the way," she said when Jake walked into the kitchen to eat lunch. "I'm going on a date today."

"With Hugo?"

His mum gave a confused look. "Who else?"

Jake debated whether to tell his mum the truth. On the one hand, it would get her out of the danger that surrounded Hugo, that surrounded anyone close to him.

But would she believe him? No, so Jake decided to keep quiet and plaster a smile on his face every time his mum mentioned the man.

"Did you like your new trainers?" his mum asked.

Puzzlement phased through Jake. His mum never asked about him, or what he liked, or how he felt. Not for years, in any case.

“They’re nice,” Jake said. “But there were some others I liked as well. Maybe for a birthday present.” Jake hadn’t received a present in years. His mum just threw money at him to go and buy himself something every time December seventh came around. Maybe this year would be something different.

“I’m sorry about that,” his mum said, leaning forward. “I’ll get you something nice this year.”

Jake’s birthday wasn’t for a month. He grinned. “Thanks.”

They spoke for another fifteen minutes, about the weather and work and school. The cracks between them were slowly being bridged, but tension permeated the air. Jake never ventured close to his victimhood at the hands of Danny and Bruce, and his mum never asked. *Does she still think I’m some delinquent?* Jake thought. It was possible, considering she hadn’t heard anything else for a few years from Liston High.

Yin’s call from the alleyway resurfaced in Jake’s mind. “I need to go,” he said. “I need to talk to someone.”

“That new friend of yours?” his mum asked. “What was his name? Leon?”

“Someone else at the club, actually,” Jake said. And he left it at that, since his mum was dating Hugo, which meant she couldn’t be trusted with info. If she let something loose, the investigation would go haywire. And Hugo would retaliate with action. Deadly action.

Jake washed his bowl and went upstairs. He shut the door and closed the windows, even closing the curtains halfway. He listened for a few minutes at the door. His mum shuffled downstairs. The clinking of plates

and glasses told Jake his mum had settled with a coffee in the living room after finishing eating. The TV started playing some program, which meant Jake had time alone to talk to Yin.

He grabbed his phone and called Yin's number. A ringing sounded for a few seconds before Yin picked up.

"Jake," the voice on the other end said. Yin's voice was more high-pitched on the phone, which made Jake chuckle since he sounded like a chipmunk. "Wassup?"

"You called me before," Jake said, sitting down on his bed, one ear trained on the door. He balanced the phone against his ear.

"Yeah, man, I found some good stuff." The excitement coursing through Yin couldn't be mistaken.

"Wanna tell me what that is?"

A pause on the other end. "I'm...not sure I can, bro. What if he's listening to the call? And it's some pretty mad stuff."

Jake laughed. "How on earth would he do that? Is he some like computer genius with hacking or something?"

"If I can do it, then he could for sure. He's airtight, man."

Jake's blood ran cold. If Hugo was that much of a hacker genius, maybe he could trace Jake's phone as being the one buzzing in the alleyway. "Do you think he is?" Jake asked.

"Honestly no clue. Computer searches don't bring nothing, so I guess he's got his online footprint in check. But there's always something, that's a fact."

"And you found one of these things?" Jake rushed his words, eager to find out what it was. Even a glimpse of the information.



“It’s...it’s really bad, man. And you gotta be careful, this guy is dangerous. Don’t go running after him or something.”

Jake swept aside the fact that he had done exactly what Yin warned against. “But you can’t tell me until we see each other in person?” Jake asked.

He could hear the shake of the head at the other end. “Nah, man. I’m too careful, and this investigation has gotten way more serious with what I found. Wait till Saturday, and I’ll tell the rest of them along with you.”

Jake shifted on his bed. A knock sounded at his door. “Gimme a second,” Jake told Yin.

“Jake,” his mum called through the window. “There’s a package for you.”

“I’ll get it in a minute,” Jake said. *Package? What package? I haven’t ordered anything in a while.* He waited a few seconds for the footsteps to return downstairs before speaking. “You said to speak at the club, but won’t Leon be there?”

Yin thought for a moment. “Yeah, that’s true, you know. Meet me after school tomorrow if you can, and I’ll tell you. At the shopping centre.”

Jake remembered what he discovered today, about Hugo and his dealings with strange, old men. “That’s too open, is it not?”

“But it gives us an alibi. Makes it easier to give an explanation in case like someone sees us.” The assuredness of Yin’s voice made Jake believe it was the best choice. But the paranoia within him refused to relinquish its hold on his conscience.

“Maybe a restaurant would be better,” Jake suggested.

“Maybe, but that’s an enclosed space. Harder to get out if the need be. We need like escape routes, right.”

“He’s not going to be there, is he?”

“You never know, Jake. He’s probably got ears and eyes everywhere. Don’t hurt to be careful, you get me?”

Jake rubbed his chin with his left hand, feeling the small hairs there. They grew day by day. “Fine, we’ll meet at the centre. But wear a hoodie to cover your face.”

“Noted, captain,” Yin joked.

Someone shouted on the other end of the call. “Mum’s calling me,” Yin said. Jake heard a woman speaking in another language far away from Yin’s mic. “My room’s not tidy, apparently. See ya.”

“Wait,” Jake said, but Yin hung up the call. The beep told Jake Yin had gone. “I have something to tell you as well,” Jake finished to himself. He sighed and put his phone on his bed. Jake would see if the others were ready to go to Hampton Shopping Centre with him and Yin.

“Jake, your package,” his mum’s voice floated up the stairs.

“Coming,” he said. Jake ran down the stairs and grabbed the box at the bottom. His mum never asked about his deliveries, but Jake hadn’t ordered anything.

*Is it from Hugo?* Jake sense of danger heightened and he approached the package with caution. He bent down until he was eye level with it. There was nothing extraordinary about it, just a regular cardboard box. A stamp was stuck in the right corner, as usual, and Jake’s name and address were written across the front. Nothing else. His name and address were handwritten.

So it was from an individual, not a company. That was odd.

Jake touched the package with a slow hand, letting his fingers travel across the rough surface. He retracted his hand quickly in case something

happened, but the box seemed to be a regular box.

Jake opened the box, peeling off each flap without looking inside. If it was Hugo, would he send a box like this? Wouldn't he be more overt with his attacks? Jake bent to the side and peeked through the flap. Another box sat inside, with a slip of paper next to it. The hairs on his arm stood up, and Jake reached a shaky hand inside the package. He brought it out.

At what it really was, relief flooded through Jake's bones.

It was a manga. *Tokyo Revenge*, one of the manga Jake had wanted to read before his dad left. He'd never got around to reading it, but those at the reading club did know about his wish. Jake's eyes widened and he ripped open the rest of the package in a frenzy. A note rested inside, on an A4 piece of paper, and he picked it up.

'I don't know if you'll ever read it, but it makes a nice present for the new member of our club. Enjoy!'

It was signed by Amy in a neat scrawl. *She's just sending me a present*, Jake thought, taking a few deep breaths and calming down. It wasn't Hugo, wasn't some kind of message for him to back down, or tear gas hidden in a secret canister released when the box was opened. Jake raised the package to throw in the bin outside, but he stopped after a step.

Something else slipped out of the package. Another slip of paper, but tiny in size. So small, in fact, that Jake would've chucked it away if it wasn't for the ink on it. Another message from Amy.

Jake smoothed it out and read.

'I also have something to tell you,' the note said. Nothing else.

The air suddenly hot, Jake quickly grabbed everything and carried it upstairs before his mum could see. He placed it all on his bed, separating the manga, the note-card, and the small written message. Yin and Amy had

come in clutch, especially as Jake hadn't found anything of use. With Gerry and Nate's (as he had asked Jake to call him) help, the team was unstoppable.

Jake picked the manga and placed it on his shelf right at the edge. He hadn't read a manga in years, and maybe he never would, but it made the shelf brighten, made the fraying wood vibrant and colourful despite being a dull brown.

A split decision was made in the next second. Jake grabbed his copy of *One Punch Man*, one of his favourite mangas, and chucked it on his bed before he could change his mind. He threw the cardboard in the bin, placed the note-card on his desk, and shoved the small written message in his pocket.

He'd get to Amy later and invite her to the meeting with Yin. There, they could discuss away with tactics and the new intel they had gathered together, and formulate a new plan as to how to move forward.

Jake was ready to read manga before it was too late. He grabbed *Berserk* with both hands, feeling the cover he hadn't touched in years, feeling the laminate he had ordered and put in himself to protect the back. The colours of the cover were greying a little from overuse years ago, and Jake ran a hand across the spine.

Outside, the clouds parted for the sun's rays to make their way to Jake's window and shine a light into his room through the half-open curtains. Jake let the light caress his face as he gripped the manga.

He opened the first page, slowly, and began reading for the first time in three years.

## Chapter Twenty Five

They'd arranged for the meeting to be on Wednesday after school. Jake wanted to do it on Monday, excited about the prospect of new information, but they had to think about Leon. If Jake suddenly didn't go to the forest with Leon on a Monday, it would be suspicious. And Leon's suspicion was something the team didn't need at the moment.

So, Wednesday it was.

Jake didn't hate school as much as he had a few months ago, which wasn't a thought he would have entertained at the beginning of the year. Danny and Bruce still taunted him, were continuing their antics. But Jake found it hurt less, the insults bouncing off him as if he had a natural armour that repelled negative words.

Turlin was right. Jake was becoming more of a person, had more of a sense of self. And when the inevitable insults came his way, when Danny and Bruce hurled words with all their might, they didn't affect Jake near as much. It frustrated Danny and Bruce to no end, Jake had noticed. And he smiled every time they devised a new plan to get an overreaction from Jake.

The knife still twisted in his gut every time he went into class late, or saw the bullying duo across the playground. But, he believed, inside, that they could do nothing. It was the old mantra. Sticks and stones could break

his bones, but words will never hurt Jake. It wasn't strictly true, but the words hurt less and less the more Danny and Bruce tried.

It was a Tuesday when Jake and Leon settled back in the forest for another hour of speaking, or chilling, in a sense of peace they both couldn't find elsewhere. Especially not Leon as he lived with Hugo. Leon said nothing was the problem at home—he'd said it the multiple times that Jake asked. But why would he want to chill for hours after school every day if not to avoid home life?

Everything to do with Leon, the way he acted, the false confidence he exuded in new situations, spoke towards a bad home life. And yet he refused to admit dark things were going on.

"Why do you always say everything's fine?" Jake asked him as they propped their backs onto Hope's thick trunk.

"What?" Leon said, giving Jake a side glance.

"Why do you always act like...nothing's wrong? You always say I'm the one that claims nothing's the matter. But you're just as bad, if I think about it."

"I am not as bad," Leon said, laughing. But that was a fake action, a facade Leon put up. And the more he did it, the easier Jake found it to notice.

"I'm being serious, Leon," Jake said.

"So am I."

Jake sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was longer now, almost reaching his nose when he pulled it down. It would need a cut, or maybe Jake would sport the new hair. It would be a part of his new personality, his new identity away from the scared, little victim of the past.

The sun brightened the sky today, its light winding through the greenery above them to bring light to the forest. The air was warm and tingled Jake's skin. A possibility floated through the forest, the possibility of truth being revealed.

So, Jake asked a question he hadn't found the answer to for a long time. "Why do you have a knife with you sometimes?"

Leon paused. Jake had caught him the day before with the knife in his bag. The same knife with the bloodstains on it. The same one in the driver's side storage of his dad's car.

"I...don't know," Leon said. His normal reaction to evade a question, and a reaction Jake wouldn't let slide.

"I'm not taking that for an answer," Jake said.

"I do not care what you take."

"Come on," Jake said. "I've seen everything. I literally saw him beat the crap out of you." Leon winced at that, the memory likely running through his mind, but Jake continued, confidence fuelling his words. "I've seen the knife in his car and it's the same one. Why do you insist on carrying it around with you whenever you can?"

Leon paused again, staring at the ground and taking a few breaths. He raised a hand, a limp hand, as if pointing to something, before dropping it again.

"It is control," Leon said, finally.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Leon turned fully to stare at Jake. "It is my way of keeping control. He...uses it on me, you saw before. I like to take it from him."

Leon's English may have been breaking down, but he said it clearly enough for Jake to get the picture. *How didn't I see it before?* Jake thought.

Leon was the abused victim, so of course, if he had the weapon in his hands it would halt everything. If only for one painless day.

“Is that why you had it the first day we were here?” Jake asked.

Leon glanced away and gave a small, infinitesimal nod.

“No wonder,” Jake said, leaning back against Hope. “Why didn’t you have it today?” Leon winced, and Jake noticed the new cuts against his face. And the many more no doubt lining Leon’s body. “He hit you yesterday as well, didn’t he?”

Leon didn’t say a word, didn’t betray the truth of his dad no matter how much Jake needed to know to help Leon. But the silence was enough, and the image of Leon being beaten up at home with nowhere to go entered Jake’s mind. He blinked away the vision and stared at the real Leon in front of him. The person he was friends with for a few months, the one who had taken him to the manga club so he could make more friends. The friend he would save the next day by meeting up with Yin and Amy, and the others, to exchange intel.

“I hope it gets better,” Jake said, turning to face Lake Hurricane. His eyes ran over the lake. The dip in the corner, which he used to believe represented him so often, was as much a part of the lake as it was an outlier. The dip, should it not be there, would make the lake boring, like any other round, regular lake. The irregularity made it interesting. Shiny pearls on a beach were nice, but the ones lined with rough edges, with stories to tell, were the best to hold.

“I hope so, too, Jake,” Leon said, his voice betraying the fact that it wasn’t likely to change. Jake sighed along with Leon and they reverted back to the normal, casual conversation about school and the test with MrBrewster next week.



The next day, Jake was called in by Turlin for another meeting. He was accustomed to them, knowing Turlin wanted to ask how he was and what he was doing in school. Turlin took a great interest in his hobbies, especially when Jake revealed he read a lot of manga before.

“Why don’t you read it now?” Turlin asked. “Hobbies are a good thing to keep, if only to restrain oneself from trouble. I know I got into a lot of *that* as a child. So, why the change?”

Jake stared at the table between them, letting his eyes settle on the infinite brown. “It’s a bit personal.”

“I see. Well, in such a case, I will swiftly switch the subject.”

Turlin had an odd sense of humour, acting grandiose and majestic in a manner that elicited a giggle from Jake more than once.

“What about the other thing?” Turlin asked, with the ‘other thing’ being Jake’s quest to find his personal identity.

“It’s going well,” Jake said, thinking about the meeting occurring later today with the others from the club. “I think I’m really getting there, somehow. As weird as that sounds.” Jake was used to being a failure, being a let down to everyone in his life. But that visage of the past was eroding, at a rate faster than Jake could have anticipated.

“See, Jake. You are not so different from the rest on the wall over there.” Turlin pointed to them again, and Jake really could sense the similarities between himself and the chosen ones, as he called them, on the coveted wall of fame.

“I just hope I get there,” Jake whispered.

Turlin was silent, his nod being the only acknowledgement of Jake’s words, before letting Jake return to his English class.

The rest of the school day passed ever so slowly, with the minutes inching by. Jake itched for the bell to ring so he could run out of school towards the bus stop leading to the shopping centre. During the last lesson of the day, Jake leaned over when Ms James was speaking to a kid near the front. She hated when anyone spoke out of turn, and shouted accordingly loud, so Jake had to be careful.

“I can’t come to the forest today,” Jake muttered.

Leon turned to face him, the disappointment in his eyes faint but noticeable. “Why?”

Jake stared at the table. “I got other stuff to do. Important stuff, related to my mum. Can’t get out of it.” It wasn’t a total lie, but close enough that Leon didn’t question it. He sighed and let Jake quickly run out of the playground at the end of school. Danny and Bruce were nowhere to be seen, thankfully.

Jake glanced back to see a glum-looking Leon walking out of the gates, alone, hands wrapped tight around his bag. *It’s all worth it*, Jake thought as the sorry form of Leon passed him without looking up. He was going to meet up to save Leon from his dad, and that meant suffering small losses along the way. But they would win the war overall, that was for certain.

Jake waited at the bus stop. His phone was in hand, already dialling Yin’s phone to tell him he was coming. Excitement brewed within Jake, anticipation lancing through his body. He bounced on his toes as the bus arrived, and he jumped on when the double doors opened.

Yin and Amy had new information. And Jake was en-route to find out exactly what they’d found.

## Chapter Twenty Six

Jake was the last to arrive. The others were standing in the open in their school uniforms, speaking with each other. Gerry was the first to see him. She waved him over, a smile on her face. A grin formed on Jake, though he tried to keep his face even. He never knew who was around, and even the slightest show of emotion may cause unwanted attention. If there was one thing he hated, it was unwanted attention.

“Wassup?” Yin said, glancing over at Jake.

Jake shook hands with him. “Nothing much.” He shook the hands of everyone else. Jake itched to know what Yin and Amy had found out, but that would have to wait.

“We have to find some really nice place,” Yin said. “Like, where no one can hear us, you know.”

“What about a restaurant?” Gerry suggested.

Jake’s head was already shaking. He stared at the crowds around him, people milling around the shops and chattering away about concerns lighter than what the group was about to discuss. “There’s too many people,” Jake said. “Restaurant’s probably gonna be packed, and then god knows who can overhear us. We need somewhere quieter.”

Yin’s eyes lit up and he grabbed Jake’s shoulder. “I know the perfect place.” With that gleam in his eye, Jake was never the one to refuse.

“Let’s go,” he said, and Yin led them through the shopping centre.

“Would you be so kind as to tell us where we’re actually going?” Amy asked as they walked through the crowds of shoppers to get to their destination. The noise was immense, but Jake learned to drown it out. A habit formed from hearing the insults of Danny and Bruce for years. It served him well for a long time when his mum decided to tell him for the hundredth time that he was a failure to the family.

“Just a little place I’ve always gone to,” Yin said. “You’ll see what I mean. It’s the best place ever, and I get discounts cos he knows me.”

Jake turned to glance at Nathaniel, the quietest of the group. He rarely spoke, but his words were impactful, and usually proposed something the group hadn’t thought of.

“Might as well see what he’s on about,” Nathaniel said, noticing Jake’s look.

“As long as it’s good, I ain’t got no problems,” Jake said.

“I know where he’s taking us,” Gerry said. “And he is right. It is very good. The food, anyway. Not much else.”

They climbed the escalator, Jake grabbing onto the sides. He’d been scared of them ever since he was a kid. He didn’t know why, but a vague memory of almost falling over the edge came to mind. A hazy recollection of a near-death experience. And he didn’t wish that to happen again. So, hands wrapped around the sides. Always.

“That’s the main thing,” Yin said when they reached the top.

“What? The escalator?” Amy said with a laugh.

“No, not that,” said Yin, smacking a hand into his forehead. “I meant the place I’m taking you. It doesn’t look nice, so no one goes there. Perfect for our meetings.”

“Oh, I see,” said Jake. “So the food’s nice, but the decor not so much?”

“See,” said Yin, “Jake gets it. So, why can’t the rest of you?”

Gerry rolled her eyes. “Just take us there, please.”

“That I *can* do,” said Yin, puffing his chest out as the leader of the group and hurrying his steps. Jake looked around as they got there, thinking that Hugo at any moment could jump out and surprise them. And beat him up again.

Jake had many flashbacks to that day. The bruises forming on his face, seeing Leon limp on the floor, blood leaking from his body, the fight out of his arms. Not that he’d put up a fight, anyway. Leon had taken the beating like a victim, the way that Jake had taken the school bullying at the beginning. Jake hated seeing that in himself, but worse was seeing it in someone else. Someone he liked.

“We’re here,” Yin said, gesturing towards the shop in front of them.

“I get what you meant earlier,” Jake said, staring at the horror show in front of him. It was a noodle shack, that much was evident from the massive picture of noodles on the front. A very greasy plate of noodles, that was. A huge pair of chopsticks was painted on the door, but it looked like a three-year-old had done the drawing.

“What is this place?” Amy asked, staring at it with confusion, and a little disgust, in her eyes. “Are you sure the food is nice?”

“Yes,” Yin insisted. “You’re like everyone else that comes around here. They hate the way it looks, and Uncle there never wants to change things. You gotta trust me on this one, though. It’s amazing. Now, come inside, then.”

He led them in, with Jake the last to follow. He closed the door behind him, leaving the noise of the shoppers for some light oriental music.

“What the hell...” Jake muttered, his eyes roving over the decor of the place. Yin had claimed it was bad, but this was a monstrosity Jake had never imagined. The walls were bright green, almost fluorescent, and black tables—eerily black, like in a goth movie—lined each side of the seating area. The chairs were charcoal black, also, as if they were mini Hades’ thrones.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Nathaniel asked, dubiously gazing at the shop’s interior.

“Yeah,” Yin said. He then turned and spoke to the cashier in Chinese. “I’ll pay for these lot,” Yin said in English. “A treat.”

“Your...friends,” the old man said, so old his face almost sagged like an ancient cloth. Lines crisscrossed across his forehead, and he raised a slow hand to guide them towards the beautiful seats at the other end.

“Yeah, my friends,” said Yin. “Just the normal noodles each, okay.”

The man nodded and asked them to sit in broken English.

“What’s his deal?” Jake asked as they got themselves comfortable. The chairs were as rough as they looked, Jake shifting his weight across the seat but never finding a good spot.

“Nothing,” said Yin. “He just can’t speak English properly. And, like you can see right here, the colour scheme ain’t the best. I’ve told him so many times, but bossman never listens to me. Oh, well, the food’s nice, though.”

*Yeah, the place looks really ugly.* But Jake banished the thought from his mind. He was here for a reason, and gallivanting around with his mates in a shopping centre wasn’t part of it.

“So, what did you find out?” Jake asked, lowering his voice.

“Not so fast,” Yin said, gesturing behind Jake. The old man had the food ready. *That was fast.* But then again, no one else was in the shop, and they were probably the first and only customers the man would have. That week. If the state of his shop was anything to go by.

The food was distributed, and piping hot. Steam rose into the air, the smell was heavenly.

“It’s good,” Nathaniel said, disbelief lining his voice.

“I know,” said Yin, already getting a chopstick-full and munching.

“Now, can you tell me?” Jake asked, his food untouched before him.

Yin flicked his gaze around before saying, “Yeah, but you’ll have to listen closely. I don’t know if someone’s listening in.”

“How on earth will they manage that?” Amy said.

Yin gave her a dark look, eyes narrowed. “Trust me on that. *I* can probably get away with something like that. Like, if someone trained was on the case, he’d hear every word. And probably have each of us in mad audio as well.”

“But you’re a genius,” Gerry said.

“Thanks,” said Yin. “But I’m really not that good. There’s loads better than me, and I need to be careful of that, you know.”

Complacency wasn’t the best option, and caution would be wise. He leaned in, extra close, and asked, “Can you tell me now?”

“Fine,” said Yin. The rest of the group leaned in with Jake, silence suddenly pervading the noodle shack. “He’s got...contacts in the city. A lot of them. And I have a suspicion his name isn’t Hugo, the way Jake said.”

A fake name? That would make sense, especially since Jake couldn’t find anything about him. Not even a smidgen.

“Is that why there’s nothing online?” Jake asked.

Yin nodded. “That would make sense. The perfect way to hide your true self. But the thing about this Hugo is that I found his real name.”

The air turned hot, and Jake’s skin tingled with anticipation. “What is it?”

“It’s De Marco,” Yin said.

*De Marco, De Marco, De Marco.* Jake rolled the name a few times around his head, trying to match it with the face. “He doesn’t look like a De Marco,” Jake thought aloud.

“I know,” said Yin. “But he is, that’s a fact for sure.”

“How do you know?” Gerry asked. “What if you’re wrong?”

“Facial recognition software,” Yin said. “It’s new tech, so like there’s not much about it. But a few programs exist that work really well. Jake showed me the pic he took of Hugo on his phone, and I did the rest. It was simple but effective. The program did the heavy work.”

Jake remembered the picture. It was one he took one day when Hugo was outside his house smoking. It wasn’t clear at all, and he took it only to show the group Hugo’s face, since they had never seen Leon’s dad. The fact that Yin was able to use a mere picture to find Hugo’s true identity was astounding.

“And you’re sure this is right?” Jake asked, disbelief running through him.

Yin grabbed an old phone from his pocket. He turned it on and waited for the screen to load. The background of the home screen was a news article, and Jake read it closely. It was about someone called De Marco, in Italy, and the face matched Hugo’s exactly.

“It’s him,” Jake said, leaning back. “It’s definitely him. Yin’s got the right man.” Amy and the others got a good look.



“I found the same article in the foreign section of the library,” Amy said, turning to Jake. “The librarian helped Gerry and me. That’s what I wanted to tell you with that little note.”

“That was smart, by the way,” Jake said. “And thanks for the present.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good read.”

They each took a taste of the noodles thereafter since the food was sufficiently cold. It was delicious, and Jake sucked up a few more forkfuls, lapping up the juice with his tongue. He wasn’t efficient enough to use chopsticks like Yin, but Gerry used them like a seasoned frequenter of Chinese cuisine.

“What does the news article say?” Gerry asked. “I remember finding it with Amy. But we were so excited about the face we never bothered to see what it said.”

“It doesn’t say much,” Yin said, reading it again on his phone. “It’s just a little award. From a man called Francisco. Doesn’t say what the award was for, and god knows why they would give someone like Hugo—sorry, De Marco—an award.”

“That’s the question, is it not,” Amy said. “What would De Marco get an award for? What kind of...” Her voice trailed off, the question dissolving into the air.

Yin raised a finger to signal he had an idea. He swallowed the next mouthful of tasty noodles before speaking. “I think he’s a criminal, as well.” The temperature in the noodle shack dropped instantly.

“A criminal?” Gerry whispered, turning back to make sure no one was listening.

“We’re fine,” Yin reassured. “I asked bossman to make sure no one comes in and listens. Anyway, yeah, a criminal.”

“But a criminal doing what?” Jake asked. He’d always suspected Hugo of being evil. It was the dark demeanour and abusive mentality. He was willing to fall into immoral actions to get his way. Beating his son was one. And other criminal activities formed the rest of Hugo’s repertoire, Jake was sure.

Yin swirled his glass of juice. “I dunno exactly what he does, but there’s a Bitcoin wallet with the name De Marco. And Bitcoin and crypto are the main ways criminals share money. The anonymity and all that.”

“But that could be anyone trying to invest,” Nathaniel said. “How do you tell it’s the De Marco we’re thinking of?”

“It’s a bit complicated,” Yin said. “But Bitcoin basically uses like...they need the computer to have a receipt of different transactions, right. So, you can kind of tell where they are, if you’re savvy enough.”

“And you know he’s on my road, somehow?” Jake asked.

Yin shook his head. “Not that close, but yeah, he’s in the area. And I’d bet my money that it’s him.”

“Are you sure that’s the best idea? Don’t we need better leads to follow, otherwise, it could be a dead end.” Amy’s concerns lingered in the air for a second.

Jake recalled Hugo always being concerned with his phone. Was it too far of a stretch to say he was checking for money coming in from a crypto wallet?

“I think he’s right,” Jake said. The table swivelled their heads.

“Why’s that?” asked Gerry.

“Just a gut feeling. And I dunno, my gut feelings have been pretty good recently.”

Amy didn't want to accept that. "We need something more concrete than some vague GPS data. We're trying to save Leon's life here, not go on a school trip."

"And we need to follow the loose clues we *do* have," Yin said. "We know he's some kind of dodgy bloke. We could get him into prison if we have the right plan to catch him."

"Catch him doing what?" Nathaniel asked.

Amongst the group's silence, an idea sparked in Jake's mind. "I've got one."

They all turned to him, eyes expectant.

"I don't like the way he looks," Amy said, a smile forming on her face.

"Yeah, he's got an idea. And he's got a good one. This is gonna be sick." The excitement in Yin's eyes was positively bursting.

"Well, let us hear it, then," Amy said, with Gerry and Nathaniel nodding in tow.

"Well," said Jake, licking his lips clean of the sumptuous noodles. "It has something to do with a little package."

## Chapter Twenty Seven

The plan was set. All they needed was one person's cooperation. But it was the hardest step of the plan yet. If they didn't manage it, the entire operation would fall under. Would fail, and Jake didn't want to brand himself a failure once more. And they wouldn't be able to save Leon's life, wouldn't be able to catch the criminal De Marco in his act.

Jake hoped to the heavens that Leon would listen to him when the inevitable conversation cropped up. But, if Leon didn't, Jake would sacrifice his friendship for nothing. But Hugo's—De Marco's—sins were far bigger than a mere friendship, and Jake would easily take saving lives over saving relationships.

It wasn't *quite* that strong of a conviction, but the message of 'fake it till you make it' came to mind. Jake had been hesitant around Leon for the rest of the week after that Wednesday. Leon had clocked that something bothered Jake. Of course, he did, since he was a good friend. But, Jake never let on what it was, complaining about home life to get Leon off the chase with a false lead. Guilt raged rampant within Jake for the lies, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Leon the true contents of his worries. He had to delay *that* conversation for now.

The club had met again normally on Saturday. That day was the hardest test of them all. They were all in on the plan, and Amy almost let it loose to

Leon, only for Gerry to come and act innocent to save her.

“It’s a joke we have at school,” Gerry said, voice soft. The room was tense, with Jake glancing between the others. His mouth was dry, an excuse for the weird statement Amy made about abuse absent from his mind.

“What joke?” Leon asked.

“Just about Yin’s mum, you know. Since she always shouts at him.”

Yin nodded. A little too enthusiastically, but it worked. “You know, she used to have this slipper. And when I was a kid, smacked me so hard with it. I used to cry, but now she don’t do it anymore, cos I’m older and wiser, innit.”

Leon flinched, and the rest of the group caught the impulse. Leon had been hit with way worse than slippers, but the group didn’t know that. Jake told them of Leon’s struggles, but not the full extent of the abuse. He wouldn’t betray his friend like that.

*But am I not betraying him by not telling him the plan?* The voice in Jake’s mind was right. But another voice overrode it. *Aren’t you going to tell him, though? Isn’t that part of the plan?* It was, but Jake didn’t have the courage to stop Leon and tell him. So he delayed and delayed.

The following Monday, Jake and Leon were in the forest. New, fresh marks lined Leon’s face, and he winced every time he made the slightest movement or touched something. As if every twitch caused a spark of pain across his body.

*It’ll get better,* Jake promised internally. *I’ll make sure of that.* If only the plan worked.

Jake and Leon sat against Hope, smelling the trees in the air, smelling the peace that the forest exuded. Birds, which rarely came out during the wintertime, chirped in the branches above them. Hope’s mammoth roots

stretched across the ground, snaking their ways through the rest of the forest.

But, Jake was bothered by his inability to tell Leon about the plan, to get him into it so they could stop De Marco for real.

“What is wrong with you?” Leon asked.

“Nothing,” Jake said. A little too quickly for Leon’s liking.

“That is what you always say,” Leon said. “I am your friend. I want to help you.”

Jake’s heart cried out, because Leon was such a good person, yet *he* was the one keeping secrets from him. Jake stared at the ground, into the damp twigs and moss.

“Aren’t we allowed to keep our own secrets?” Jake said, remembering his words from before.

“You are,” said Leon, flicking his gaze ahead at the lake opposite them, at the water ripple as a leaf dipped into it and floated. “But, you know my secrets. A lot of them. And I know not much about yours. So, tell me, Jake Landon.”

Jake sighed, air leaving through his nose. The group at the club was waiting on him to get Leon into the plan. He needed to act. And soon, before they got on his case about it. The words were in his mind, brewing, waiting for release. Jake opened his mouth but nothing came out. The rehearsed words in his mind vanished, and his mouth closed of its own accord, lips pressed together.

“Did you have something to say?” Leon asked.

“I—” But Jake’s throat closed again and he choked. His chest pounded and water brimmed in his eyes from the pressure.

“Are you ill?” Leon said, leaning over and slapping Jake on the back as if food was lodged in his throat.

Leon’s actions did the trick, since the choking stopped. Leaning back with an open chest, Jake tightened his new jacket around his body and shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said, the standard nature of his response not lost on Leon.

“So, what is the matter, then?”

“I said it before. Nothing.” Jake’s mouth turned to acid with the lie. He swallowed and let his guilt drop to the pit of his stomach.

“I will not take that for an answer,” Leon said.

Jake’s own uttering of those words echoed in his mind. Leon was repeating his own advice back to him, his own intrusions into Leon’s life. Jake’s previous invasiveness was horrific, and remorse flooded within him. He had butted into Leon’s life. Yes, to try and save him. But still, the invasion of privacy was like one’s soul being hung out to dry. Dirty laundry being aired.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” Jake promised. The promise served to put his own mind at ease, not just Leon’s.

Leon took that as a decent response. He nodded, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against Hope. “Fine, Jake,” Leon said, voice calm and measured. “Tomorrow, it is.”

Jake hoped he was ready. To recruit Leon or to lose his friendship, he wasn’t sure.

\* \* \*

They walked in silence. Jake's mind was clouded with worries as they treaded around the fence. The ground wasn't snowy just yet, but it had rained the last night. And the cold was very harsh nowadays, biting into Jake's skin with every gust of wind. They found the hole in the fence beside a puddle. Leon jumped in the puddle, splattering Jake's uniform with water.

"Oh, come on," Jake said, laughing as Leon tried to do it again. Jake dodged and told Leon to go in first so he couldn't splash Jake. Jake followed Leon into the forest, closing the fence behind him.

The forest brought with it peace, a sense of tranquillity amongst nature, but today every step across the moss was filled with uncertainty. Jake's legs trembled every time he brought one down in front of the other, following Leon deeper towards Hope.

These steps could be the last Jake took in the forest with Leon. Jake was sure of such a possibility. He didn't want to lose Leon. But to save the boy, Jake needed to sacrifice. That's something that Turlin had taught him. Everyone sacrificed to get what they want, whether time, or money, or something precious like their dignity.

And Jake might have to make the biggest sacrifice of them all to save Leon's life, and many others impacted by De Marco's crimes, whatever they were.

Leon perched himself against one of Hope's massive roots, sitting atop it with his legs stretched out before him, hand resting by his side. Jake sat against the tree as always, staring out at the water with his bag sitting beside him. The light bounced off its surface and lanced through to Jake. He wiped a hand over his face, trepidation coursing through him at the prospect of telling Leon his plan.



“You said you would tell me,” Leon said, shifting himself on Hope’s root. “Today is the day, right.”

Jake nodded. “I did say that, didn’t I?” He laughed to get the tightness out of his chest. It didn’t work. He initially thought Leon would leave a little time before beckoning the question. But Leon wasn’t like Jake, didn’t like to delay. He punched straight for the jugular and didn’t waste time in the process.

“Are you going to tell?” Leon asked.

The water rippled before Jake as a leaf fell into it. The dip in the corner of the lake was prominent today, the ground around it rough and skewed compared to the uniform nature of the rest of the shore. “I am,” said Jake. “I...basically—how am I supposed to say this?”

“Are you going through trouble at home?” Leon asked. “Like—like me.”

Jake let his hand hang limp against the ground. “No,” he said, fear running through him. His mum might dislike him, but physical abuse wasn’t in her arsenal of weapons against him. *I can’t tell him*, Jake thought. *I can’t let go of the only good thing in my life in the last year.*

“Then why are you so bothered, Jake?” Leon asked.

The words were rehearsed and sorted in a box in his mind. Jake hoped with all his heart that he’d never open that box and let the words out. But, the time had come.

“I—well, we have a plan,” Jake said, the words hitting Leon a second later.

Leon’s eyes snapped to him, suspicion filling those orbs. “What is that meant to mean?”

“At the club, I meant,” said Jake. “We made some kind of plan, you know. And the last part was to get you into it.” The rehearsed lines had disappeared from Jake’s mind. It was straight off the dome, and Jake’s back shivered against Hope.

“What kind of plan?” Leon’s voice was even, was measured. Emotionless.

“It’s...about you. And your dad.”

Leon tensed up, his shoulders retracting and chest puffed out. The arm by his side tightened as his fist clenched. “What about my dad?”

Jake’s hand trembled against the ground. “I—we want to help you with your dad’s abuse.”

“You told them about my—”

“No, not that. I—didn’t tell them everything. But I told them you were in trouble and we needed to help you get out of it.”

Leon slid down from Hope’s root to the ground, despite the dampness of the moss. He shivered from the chill settling into his bones. “I do not need help.” Leon’s tone lacked emotion. Jake thought anger would fuel Leon’s words, that contempt or even mere discomfort would drive Leon to respond. But the cool, measured tone Leon exercised was not something Jake expected.

“I have told you this many times,” Leon said. “I do not need your—or anyone else’s—help. Please, stop thinking you can save me...like I am some victim.”

“You are a victim, though,” said Jake, unable to comprehend how Leon didn’t see the truth of the situation. “Do you think De Marco’s actions are out of love?”

Leon's gaze flicked to Jake, his eyes widening. "How do you know his name?"

Jake swept it aside with a wave of his hand. "That's not the point. We are going to help you. It's not just about you. He's doing bad things with other people, too." Jake caught Leon's flinch. "And you know what he's doing. You could help us get the final jump on him and stop him."

"He is my father," Leon said, rubbing a hand against his blazer. "How can I—you're wrong. He is not doing anything to me. I should have never let you know."

"You didn't tell me, remember. It was me. I could see it all along."

Leon stood, his fists clenched. "No, you do not have to help me. You do not have to get in my business. He is my father, and I will not...sell him out."

"But he's beating the crap out of you. Every day, from the looks of it. You wanna live with someone like that?"

Leon stepped towards Jake. *He won't fight me, will he?* Jake's legs tensed, ready to rise if required. Jake's fists moved from the ground to his lap, primed to release a punch if Leon chose violence.

"He is not doing anything," Leon said.

"Look at your face. Look at your arms. I was literally there, Leon. He beat me up as well for trying to interfere in his crimes. And the knife as well, you said yourself he used it on you. And the way he beat you in the alleyway. You can't say he does nothing. That's the biggest lie of the century."

Leon shook his head in a straight, even line. "That was only one time, and that was because I was trying to stop him from hitting you."

“He does that to you all the time. Look at your face. You have marks all over. And I always catch the scars on your arms when the sleeve comes up in P.E.”

Leon shook his head again in that methodical manner. He’d turned from a person to a robot. Jake could see what Turlin meant when someone removed their identity for facades and silhouettes of themselves.

“It is not true,” Leon said. “And you will never know about him.”

The fear inside Jake exploded. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Plan all you want,” Leon said, glancing back at the exit to the forest. “I will not help your plan. I will help nothing. And say ‘bye’ for me to the club as well.”

“You can’t do that.” Jake jumped to his feet, almost stumbling back down in the process. His heart hammered in his chest, pulse wracking his ribs. “You can’t.”

“You are trying to tell me again what to do? Again?”

The tone Leon used was a reminder of the first time Jake found him in the forest. Leon had sat there, knife in hand, staring at the shiny tip whilst keeping to himself. Leon had relied on himself his entire life. And now that Jake sought to help him, that defence mechanism had sprung into action.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jake said, reaching out a hand for Leon to grasp, shake, and use to return towards Hope.

Leon snarled, an expression Jake had never seen on Leon’s features. Darkness phased through Leon’s eyes. “I do not need you. I can survive on my own. Leave me alone, and never speak to me again.”

“Wait,” Jake cried, but it fell on deaf ears. Leon backed out through the bush hiding the lake and disappeared before Jake’s legs could start in motion.

*I've screwed it, Jake thought. I've absolutely cocked it all up.*

His eyes were trained on the bush Leon had left from. The bristles were battered by the wind that circled Jake. It swept his hair to the heavens, revealing a mark on his forehead from the time De Marco beat him up. The bruises eroded, but the mental scars were eternal.

Jake needed to stop De Marco. The conviction running through his soul was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Jake's hand was still extended, elbows fully straight towards where Leon had left.

Jake sought to stop De Marco, but had lost Leon in the process. Tears brimmed, threatening to spill, but he blinked them back into his soul to release at another time.

*Is the sacrifice worth it?*

The thought whizzed around Jake's conscience. An answer to that question he would find very soon.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

Jake's stomach grumbled as his legs walked across the pavement of Hampton Road. Hunger gnawed, yet the will to eat food evaded him. He eyed his house. The lights were on inside. His bag was stretched over his tired shoulders, which ached for some reason. Soreness pervaded Jake's arms, as if he'd just completed a three-hour workout. He'd seen the gym videos on Instagram, and they weren't pretty.

Jake crossed the road, his head turning to view Leon's house. *Is he inside? And if he is, what is he thinking?* Leon's face flashed in Jake's mind, the anger written on those features, the snarl plastered there. A shake of Jake's head caused the image to recede to the recesses of his mind, primed to return at the worst moment.

Disappointment seeped through Jake. He was a failure, as he had been throughout his entire life. His duty was to enlist Leon's help since Leon knew the whole truth about De Marco. And was probably the sole soul who did.

But the plan was over. If Leon's help wasn't available, how would they enact the plan to take De Marco to justice? Jake wanted Leon to get the details of the package, and the place where it would be delivered, so Jake could get the police to capture the muscle man. But without that crucial information, the fight was over.

De Marco had won.

And Jake, as the group's leader, took the brunt of the disappointment. He trudged up to his house, gaze flicking up to his room. The place where many searches across the internet for De Marco's true identity were done. But those searches were futile, the uselessness of them floating through Jake's mind. How much time had he wasted? How much of the group's time had Jake thrown away, enlisting them on the investigation when it was fruitless in the end?

Jake entered his front gate, the metal cold against his numb fingers. He closed it slowly, hearing the metallic clang reverberate in his mind. He sighed, letting all the tension dissipate from his body. Anger at Leon coursed through him in conjunction with the disappointment at himself. Leon could save lives, save himself, but his stupid loyalty to his father prevented him from doing so.

*He'll come around*, Jake thought, hope still present in his bones. But the truth didn't evade him. It slapped him in the face. *But he's so stubborn. Why on earth would he change his mind?*

Jake rapped on his door a few times. His mum was recovering from bulimia. She'd told the consultancy she'd be back from the next week. They'd attempted to get her to take more time off, but his mum's stubbornness was hard to fight. Jake had first-hand experience in trying to do just that. And failing.

His mum opened the door and let him in. Jake went through the motions like a robot. Mechanical, methodical, without feeling. He placed his shoes on the rack and his coat on the peg, after shrugging off his bag to the floor.

"Not even a hello," his mum said, glancing at him through the living room door. She looked healthier, her weight rising. Jake still couldn't

believe she'd been starving herself for De Marco's sake, to be more attractive to him. How much damage had she done just for his approval, the approval of a criminal muscle man?

"I—" But Jake's voice refused to comply with his mind. After the previous conversation he had, Jake didn't want to speak. He paused, took a deep breath. His foot was on the first step as his mum rounded the corner and reached a hand to his shoulder.

"Are you all right?" she said. Her grip was hard, but eyes soft as they bore into Jake.

Jake shrugged her hand off. "I'm fine. Now, can I go upstairs for once?"

"Fine," his mum said, head shaking. She sounded tired of fighting him after years of it. "Come down for dinner once you've cooled off."

She returned to watching TV, and Jake went upstairs thereafter. The door to his room was open from the morning. He closed it before jumping on his bed and grabbing his pillow. He pulled it into his chest, hugging it with all his might. It was the act of a little kid, like Jake was scared of monsters under the bed. But the true skeleton in his closet was lost friendship.

The sun's light smacked him through the window. Jake stared out, seeing Leon's room opposite his on the other side of the road. He walked over and shut the curtains, his room descending into darkness. His diary, fraying at its rough edges, caught his eye, but he disregarded it. When his everyday life was one failure after the other, why would he log it down?

He slumped on his bed, leaning back against the wall and pushing his head into the sides of his knees. He stayed that way for what felt like hours, before raising his head and letting the tears slip down his face.



He couldn't remember the last time he cried. It had been in the fight with De Marco, right? Jake swiped a hand over his eyes, but the water didn't subside. It had a mind of his own, forging paths down his cheeks and dripping off his chin. Was there even a point of wiping the tears away? Shouldn't he let them fall, since no one was here to watch his emotions rein free?

Leon was gone. And Jake couldn't save him. No matter how hard he tried.

Throughout the last months, Jake wanted to be someone bold. Someone who had worth. But he had failed at that. His plan had been to get Leon out of a bad situation. The group at the club would clown him for estranging their friend because of a stupid plan, and Turlin was wrong. As much as he believed in Jake, Jake was not like the chosen ones on his wall. And he never would be.

A knock sounded on his door. Jake perked up, throwing the pillow back to his headrest and sitting up. He swiped his eyes furiously, unwilling to let his mum see his vulnerability at full display.

"Can I come in?" his mum asked.

Jake wiped his trousers, seeing the water had stained them. "Gimme a sec," Jake said, hoping his voice didn't betray his emotions.

"Well, dinner's ready is all I wanted to say. Come downstairs to eat whenever you're ready."

Jake waited for the footsteps to recede. The creak at the bottom of the stairs told him his mum was properly gone, and he dangled his legs across the side of his bed. His feet touched the carpet as he stared at the drawn curtains.

*I better get some food*, Jake thought, letting himself stand and walk out of his room. The hunger clawing his stomach before was gone, replaced by an emptiness he didn't want to fill. *Might as well eat, if only to keep Mum at bay.*

Jake washed his face in the bathroom, making sure all evidence of tears and emotions were eradicated. He avoided his eyes in the mirror, not wanting to see the demons residing within.

His mum sat in the kitchen, a plate of steak and chips in front of her. She took a bite as Jake came in. After she swallowed, she said, "Finally. I thought you would never come down. I don't know what is eating at you today."

"You asked me just before, didn't you? I haven't been up there for long."

"I asked you half an hour ago, but you didn't respond. I thought you were watching something."

*Something much worse*, Jake answered in his mind. He sat opposite his mum after plating his food. A sodden steak and fat chips which looked more grease than potato. Or maybe he was projecting his emotions onto the food. His mum certainly ate with gusto, so it couldn't be that bad. At least the food wasn't a failure, like Jake.

"There's something wrong with you. Something eating at you," his mum said. *Yeah, I'm a failure, but you already know that.* "You have this... dark cloud over your head," his mum continued. She took another bite and swallowed it with a sip of water. "What's the matter, Jake?"

"Nothing," he said. He'd washed his face and made himself presentable, rubbing away the tear tracks. How could she tell something was wrong?

“You’ve been quiet ever since you came home, and you haven’t even taken a bite after being hungry the whole day. What’s going on? You always eat dinner quickly.” His mum set aside her plate and leaned forward, head resting on her hands, elbows planted on the table.

“Nothing,” Jake repeated.

“That’s what you always say,” his mum said. A memory flashed in Jake’s mind. Of Leon saying those same words. He banished the thought and concentrated again on his food. He speared the steak with aggression and shoved the forkful in his mouth.

“Are you happy now?” he asked after finishing the bite. He stabbed another piece of steak, but his mum spoke before he could shovel it in his mouth.

“Is it to do with your friends?” his mum asked.

Jake’s fork stopped midway. His hand slipped and the metal fork clattered against the plate, causing Jake to wince. “It’s nothing to do with that,” he claimed. But the facade was over. His mum saw through everything.

“I literally raised you,” his mum said with a soft laugh. “I know when you’re hiding something. And you’re making it really obvious. Sometimes, clients at the consultancy lie about their valuations and it’s pretty clear.” His mum leaned back and cast a questioning gaze at him. “So, I’ll ask again, what’s the matter with you? Why are you attacking the steak like it just took your favourite brownies?”

A smile cracked Jake’s face, but he retracted it just as quickly. “I…” But his voice trailed off. An internal debate sparked in his mind. Should he tell his mum the truth, or was it better to keep silent?

“Come on, Jake. You can tell me anything.”

But she was in cahoots with De Marco, and wouldn't believe Jake no matter what he said. She could let the investigation loose and tell De Marco what Jake and the others were planning. Her involvement could derail the whole plan.

*But wasn't the plan a flop anyway?* Jake questioned. What harm could it do to tell his mum? He'd have to break the news at some point.

Jake sighed, letting his hands splay out on the tabletop. It was rough, and the smell of steak wafted from his plate to nostrils. Jake breathed it in, letting the tension seep out of his body.

"Are you sure you're okay?" his mum said.

"I—there's something I have to tell you. You might not believe me, but it has to do with why I'm...well, like this. Just let me finish and then...I'll answer questions."

His mum raised her eyebrow. "That's big talk from you. This had better measure up."

Jake let a tiny grin creep onto his face. "It is good, drama-wise, anyway," he said. "And it explains everything."

And so Jake started telling her the entire story. Of how Leon had joined school, and he befriended him because Turlin asked him to. His tale covered the beginnings of his friendship with Leon briefly, before skipping straight to finding out about De Marco—or Hugo, to his mum.

When he told her about De Marco's truth, her eyes bugged out and she almost jumped from her chair.

"I don't believe what you're saying." Her words weren't accusing, but carried an edge to them. As if she was wary that Jake was correct.

Jake's shoulders sank. His gaze shifted to the tabletop, roving over the brown cracks the same way he stared at the grey desk in school.

“I knew you wouldn’t,” he said. He deeply inhaled, letting the air push out at the sides of his stomach, before exhaling. “That’s why I haven’t told you for a long time.”

Uncertainty painted his mum’s face, but she continued. “So...this De Marco, or Hugo, is actually a criminal?”

Jake nodded.

“But...I’ve gone out with the man. He seems fine to me. I thought I could tell if he was a criminal, of all things. He even gives to charity, for god’s sake. How is he some evil person now?”

“He didn’t even tell you his proper name, though,” Jake pointed out. “Hugo Colombo is a personality he made up, for a new life in England.” Jake didn’t know if the last part was true, but it logically flowed well.

The cogs were turning in his mum’s mind, but she wasn’t convinced. “I need proof that is his proper name. Maybe you’re just making this whole thing up. How can I trust you like that, so easily, about something as massive as this?”

Jake smirked. “You’ve known me my whole life, haven’t you?”

“But Hugo doesn’t match up with this De Marco evil overlord you’re describing. He’s ever the gentleman to me. And not a criminal, that’s for sure.”

Jake rubbed the hand over his eyebrows, letting calm wash over his body. *I knew she wouldn’t listen. What was the point of telling her in the first place?*

“I have a picture of him, a news report of him in Italy. Has his face with the name De Marco next to it.”

“Can you show me it?”

Jake shook his head. “I can’t. Yin—my friend at the club—has it, and he doesn’t wanna send it in case De Marco is monitoring signals.”

His mum laughed, running a hand through her hair. “This sounds too far-fetched.” At the sour frown on Jake’s face, she said, “I have a hard time believing it is all I’m saying. Hugo’s really bad with technology, how can he monitor phone signals?”

*Must be another trick he’s playing*, Jake thought, though he didn’t verbalise the accusation.

Jake leaned back in his chair, staring at the light above them. It blinded him for a second and the redness took over his closed eyes. “That’s fine,” Jake said. “You don’t have to believe me. Just...next time you’re on a date with the guy, look at how he really behaves.”

“I’ve already gone on multiple dates with the man. He’s a mysterious fellow, but that’s just his privacy coming into play. I can’t exactly butt into everything in his life.”

Jake was reminded of how he had butt into Leon’s life and tried to change it. Was that a mistake? Should he have kept silent all along, ignorant like his mum was?

“Try to,” Jake said. “Try to gauge his true self. He’s mysterious because he has so much to hide. He even changed his name, for god’s sake. He has to be hiding something, especially since he associates with weirdos.”

His mum narrowed her eyes. “And how did you find all this out?”

Jake’s mouth clamped shut. “There’s pictures of them,” he lied, not wanting to reveal his escapades in the alleyway to follow De Marco. Knowing he was a criminal, that excursion was much more dangerous than Jake once thought.

“Very well,” Jake’s mum said, resting her elbows on the table again. She sighed, the disbelief plastered on her face. “I will try and see what...you think this De Marco is.”

“That’s all I ask,” Jake said, his body deflating as a whoosh of air left him. Tension dissipated from his shoulders, leaving soreness behind. “That’s all I ask,” he said again.

His mum paused before pushing her chair back. The scrape echoed off the walls. “Well, I’m going to chill for now. Eat some more if you need it. You are a growing boy, after all.”

“Thanks,” Jake said. His mum left the door open as she returned to the living room. Jake stared at the spot where she was. He hadn’t been able to get Leon to help them plan, but maybe his mum was the ally all along that they needed.

*But she hates even thinking bad about De Marco. Why on earth would she begin helping a plot against him?*

Jake rested his head on his hands, facing the cracks of the wooden table. He took a deep breath, eyes closed, thinking about all the possibilities that could happen. The plan had been a failure—he had failed to get Leon’s assistance, which was pivotal to the entire operation.

But a semblance of hope grew inside Jake. His mum might be the gel that brought the plan together, as averse as she was to thinking bad of De Marco. Or she might prove to be the splitting point between success and failure.

*Maybe there’s a chance,* Jake thought. And such a chance he would grab onto with all his life.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

Worry thrummed through Jake at the sight. Leon's house had all the lights shut, and that meant he was getting beat, no doubt. In the dark, alone. Shivering against the door as De Marco sought him out with a knife.

Jake hated the images that ran through his mind whenever he thought about his old friend. Because that's who Leon was to him. They were no longer friends, which Leon had confirmed that day in the forest. A fact Jake was still coming to terms with.

Leon hadn't turned up for school the next day, a Thursday. It was the Thursday before the winter break, which usually involved a lot of games instead of actually doing lessons, considering exam week was over.

Jake recalled Leon expressing his excitement over the games on many occasions, whether in school or walks to the forest afterward. But now he was absent. And that sent another shiver of worry through Leon's bones.

He'd all but sprinted through the hallways to Turlin's office. He knocked, and waited for Turlin to give him permission to enter.

Turlin smiled when his eyes fell on Jake. "To what do I owe this occasion?" Turlin said, arms wide. He gestured to the seat in front of him. The layout of his office had changed again. The desk was by the right-side window, overlooking the torrid view of gnarly trees instead of the



playground. The cabinet was near the door, on the left, brimming with bulging folders and files.

“Nothing,” said Jake, his automatic response.

“Now, that is not true and we both know it,” Turlin laughed. Jake sat down, and Turlin said, “You look bothered by something. Is that the reason for your coming here?”

Jake gulped and nodded, eyes fixed on the surface of the table separating him and Turlin. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Turlin swept aside the papers on his desk, almost throwing them to the floor. He leaned forward, as Jake’s mum had done, with his elbows on the table. “Well, what has bothered you today, Jake?”

“I—well, I’m worried about Leon. He isn’t in school today, and I know for a fact that...” Jake let his voice dissipate into the air.

“For a fact that’ what?” Turlin asked.

“Yesterday...he said we aren’t friends anymore,” Jake said. “And now it feels like he’s hiding at home.” *And he’s probably getting beat for it*, Jake finished in his mind. He and Leon may not be friends anymore, but that didn’t mean Jake was prone to betray him. They could each keep their secrets, till death.

“Maybe he just needs some time,” Turlin said. “I know a lot of children that can’t face reality, and want to hide from it all. I was like that as a child, after all.”

“You were?” Jake asked. *He doesn’t strike me as the type to do that.*

“Yes, it was a weird time in my life, as a teenager. Trying to be cool like everyone else at school. It was only when I matured that I grew into my own skin. And that’s why I help children like you become the truest version

of themselves. Because I underwent that same journey myself, and know what it is like.”

Jake stared at Turlin’s eyes, which were glossed over. Memories probably flashed through his mind, his past playing itself like a movie reel.

“So, what do I do?” Jake said, his voice threatening to tremble. His inability to help Leon was a bitter pill to swallow.

Turlin rubbed his chin, which was hairless. “I think it is best to leave him alone,” he said. “He needs his own time and his own space. And it is not good to butt into everything, is it? I would have advised to pay him a visit, but since you say you are not friends anymore, and that he was the one to end it, I would caution against that now.”

Jake leaned back and gave a sigh. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say, to get his friend back nor help him out of the abusive situation he was in. Jake wished he could tell Turlin. The headteacher was so resolute, so confident in himself, that Jake was certain he could fix the situation in his own way. But De Marco was a criminal and possessed the skills to hide information. All it would accomplish telling Turlin was bringing attention to the fact that someone was investigating the abuse. De Marco would cover it up even better, and that would render salvation for Leon unattainable.

“Thanks,” Jake said, letting the air balloon inside him before releasing it in one breath.

“For what?” Turlin said, his eyebrows scrunched.

It was a good question. Jake thought for a second, before deciding on a simple answer. “Just listening to me is all.” Jake scraped his chair across the floor and got up. Turlin was silent, the small smile on his face following Jake out of his office.

A debate formed in Jake's mind as he walked back to class, to tell or not to tell. Questions pervaded his conscience, of what he should do, of regrets about how he dealt with Leon in the past, and whether he would have erased them given the chance to choose again. Was he too pushy, or was it the right thing to do?

All through his life, failure weighed him down. And it coalesced around him. But Jake had to push through it all. He had to save Leon, for himself as much as for the abused boy.

It was later that day where a new development started which sparked panic in every fiber of Jake's being.

Outside Leon's house, a car pulled up. But it wasn't a normal car in the poor area that Jake lived in, but an Alfa Romeo, which caught Jake's eye. He had watched *Top Gear* as a kid, and that brand of car was Italian. Italian, like De Marco and Leon.

Jake pulled himself from bed and approached his curtains, ducking a little so he couldn't be seen clearly in the dark.

A man got out of the car after turning the rumble of the engine off. He was tall and slender, wearing a black overcoat and gloves. A jolt hit Jake as he realised it was the same man in the alleyway. Jake craned his head to get a better glimpse of the man's face, but he hid it well with a large hat.

The man entered the front gate in the dark and knocked on the door. De Marco opened the door and welcomed him in with open arms, a hug, and a wide smile. It was an expression Jake didn't think possible on De Marco's villainous face.

The lights were off in Leon's house, so why was De Marco accepting guests?

*Should I go over? Jake internally asked. And try to spy on them.* He recalled Turlin's words, of Leon hiding from his problems the same way that Turlin had as a child.

*I can't do the same, Jake thought. I can't hide. I have to save Leon.*

Jake stared out at the Alfa Romeo, red coloured, parked in the side of the street. Someone emerged from the front door of Leon's house, which snapped Jake's gaze to it. It was De Marco, dragging something in his massive hands.

It was Leon's body!

Jake stared as Leon's legs raked across the floor. De Marco's hand was clamped around the boy's shoulder, and that grip was strong enough to pull Leon the entire way to the car.

*Crap crap crap,* Jake thought, his eyes fixed on Leon's form being stretched behind De Marco. De Marco pushed Leon to the car and propped him up against it. The darkness clouded Jake's vision, but the fear on Leon's face was unmistakable.

Just as Leon was being bundled into the car, the fight to live entered the boy. He struggled against the hold of De Marco, trying to slap him with limp hands and weak arms. But Leon had been reduced to a pulp already, and the strength had left his limbs. His legs collapsed and he folded to the floor. De Marco picked his frail form up and chucked him into the car with such force that Jake winced at the sight.

De Marco locked the house door before returning to the car. The horizon was yellowing, the darkness approaching as sunset fell on England's skies. Jake glanced at the clock, thoughts running through his mind.

*I should go, he thought. But is it too late? And what the hell are they doing?*

Jake rubbed his hands against his denim jeans. Sweat formed on his forehead. He wiped it away, but more surfaced. The car was starting, its roar loud, and Jake had a few seconds before his chance disappeared.

Jake ran down the stairs and grabbed a pair of socks. His mum was in the living room, confusion painted across her features at the sight of him.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“For a bike ride,” Jake replied, tugging the sock on without sparing her a glance.

“At this time?”

“Yeah, why not?”

His mum shrugged and returned to watching TV, immersing her mind in the world of Eastenders.

Jake grabbed his shoes and put them on with velocity. He pulled open the storeroom door, ignoring the dust that flew into his face. Time was running out, the hourglass in Jake’s mind almost full. He reached both hands inside and grabbed the bike. His bike, which he hadn’t used in years, since his dad’s departure from their family. He’d loved riding before, but now it was to save someone’s life.

Jake darted upstairs and shoved his headphones into his pocket, knowing he would need to make a call.

“Bye,” Jake called, closing the front door slowly as not to draw attention. He barely heard the reply from his mum as he carried his bike outside. He ducked behind the front gate as the Alfa Romeo revved in the street. The driver inside, Jake could see with a craned neck, was speaking

with someone. The back windows were blacked out, rendering the form of Leon unable for Jake to notice.

*He's in there, Jake thought, legs tensing. I have to get to him.*

Jake wouldn't be able to take on De Marco and the other man in one go. But if he could follow them and get the location they were headed to, it was one step closer to getting rid of the criminals. Jake took his phone out and put it on silent, remembering what happened previously in the alleyway. His breath came out in harsh pants. A rumbling sounded, signalling the car's departure. Jake hurried outside his gate and put the headphones in his ears whilst tapping a call over to Yin and the others in the group chat.

He mounted his bike for the first time in years, legs shaky but mind determined. The Alfa Romeo turned at the end of Hampton road, its lights blaring. Jake set his feet on the pedals and pushed.

*I don't care if you say you're my mate or not, I'm coming for you.*

## Chapter Thirty

Jake's legs pumped as he turned right onto another winding road. He kept far back from the Alfa Romeo, not wanting to draw attention to himself. He hadn't ridden a bike in three years. His rusty skills were clear to see. The bike wobbled the first few times he pedalled, and he almost fell off trying to swerve around parked cars.

The night was chilly, with its iciness seeping into Jake's skin through his thin t-shirt. He regretted not grabbing a jacket on the way out, and the night only promised to get colder.

The call had been sent to Yin, Amy, and Gerry. Gerry explained that Nathaniel was at a relative's house for the holidays, since their school had finished.

"You're school's already done?" Jake asked, disbelief lacing his voice.

"I don't think that's the right conversation to have right now."

"Right," said Jake, giving a small laugh despite the dire situation Leon was in. The Alfa Romeo took another left turn, coming up to a massive Tesco. Were De Marco and the driver about to take inside a shop's parking lot?

Jake slowed on his bike, legs tired, keeping distance from the car as it turned into the parking lot.

“Can you guys come outside now?” Jake asked, holding the earbud tight to his head.

“I can,” Yin said. “I can also track the car for you if they haven’t blocked it.”

Jake paused on the bike, stopping as the car stopped. The driver was speaking to someone, from what Jake could make out.

“Are you sure?” Jake asked, mind returning to the phone call. His breath escaped in gasps and pants. His heart pounded from fear and fatigue.

“I guess,” Yin said. “It’s a little complicated, but hey, not that hard once you know what you’re doing.”

“You’re a genius,” Amy said, and Jake could sense Yin’s grin over the phone.

“I’ll feed it to you, Amy, so you can tell us where to go. They probably can’t monitor us from inside a car, can they? Where are you now, Jake?”

“Near some Tesco,” Jake said, staring ahead at the Alfa Romeo. The barrier lifted and the car sped into the huge Tesco parking lot with multiple levels, some descending beneath the ground.

“I’m pretty sure I know which one you’re talking about, man. I’ll be there in a sec, cos I live close.”

“You have a bike?” Jake asked.

“Yeah.”

“Bring that.”

“Affirmative,” Yin said, causing the rest of them to laugh. Jake muted his mic then, watching the Alfa Romeo climb the floors. He tracked it all the way to the top before, inexplicably, the car descended again. He waited a minute, eyes fixed on the car. It went further and further down until it reached the ground floor again. Then, it travelled down to the lower floors.



*I need to go, Jake thought. But Yin ain't here. I can't just leave him.* Jake glanced around, sweeping his gaze across the empty streets. A few lights were on, shops selling chicken and chips. But no Yin.

After a minute, a bike approached Jake from afar. In the dark, it was hard to make out the face. But, as the figure got closer, Jake clocked Yin waving at him.

"This ain't the time for welcomes," Jake said, turning Yin towards the Tesco. "He just went under the ground floor."

"So we better follow, right?" Yin said, already mounting his bike again for the chase.

"Well, they have to come back up at some point, don't they?" Jake pointed out. "We could just wait here for them."

"Yeah, but if they deposit Leon there, we'll never know. We have to see what they're doing, innit."

Jake mounted his bike and pedalled side by side with Yin. They reached the ground floor of the car park. When the evening rolled into night, no controller sat in the toll booth, with an automatic system of paying to get a parking spot in use instead.

Jake and Yin were both pretty slim, so they squeezed themselves and their bikes through the tiny gap in the side. The fit was tight, but they just about came out the other side. Jake released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding when they stepped out onto the ground floor parking lot.

"Where were they again?" Yin asked. "You said something like underground."

"Way down," Jake said. The parking lot was empty, with more smoke billowing from a vent in the corner than cars. He turned to Yin. "Let's go."

They didn't climb back on their bikes, instead rolling them across the ground as they descended each floor. Every time they went down a floor—seven existed in total—Jake craned his neck to ensure they weren't being watched from below.

“What happened to Leon?” Yin said, yawning. He must've been in bed when Jake called him to come out.

“I dunno,” said Jake, trying to get a good look at the floor. The car was nowhere to be seen, and at a time like this, the entire parking lot was empty. “Leon got put in the car by De Marco and some other man,” Jake continued with a whisper, “and then taken here. Other than that, got no clue.”

Yin nodded as they went down another floor. A car pulled up behind them, and Jake stepped aside to let it through. It was a massive Range Rover, with blacked-out windows and shiny rims that blinded Jake as it drove past. Jake ducked his head as it came, hoping the driver never saw them. The chill of the night slapped Yin and Jake's faces. Jake shivered as he treaded down to the next floor.

“He's nowhere,” Yin said. “What the hell are they doing?”

“No idea,” Jake said, grabbing his phone from his pocket. “Did you get Amy to track the car?”

Yin shook his head. “I tried, but it didn't work. For some reason, the car is jamming signals somehow, like they got a black hat inside. Creepy stuff. It's weird, man. But this De Marco guy is a real gangster for that, I've never had anyone else try it.”

They were at the penultimate floor, and after a quick scan, Jake confirmed it was empty. The rumble of an engine spoke of cars present on the bottom floor.

“They're at the bottom,” Jake said.

Yin nodded with a swipe of his hair out of his eyes. "Must be, especially since they weren't anywhere here."

"Let's go." Jake held his breath as he crouched. They quickly crawled across the ground towards the road which led further down, to the basement of the parking lot. Jake remembered movies where scenes like the one he was living through played across the screen. It never went well and usually ended in some horrifying revelation.

Jake shook the dark thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the task at hand. Yin crouched beside him, breath also held. His slender arms were shaking as he held his bike against the wall.

"Are you okay?" Jake asked.

Yin's teeth chattered. "Just cold."

*And scared*, Jake finished for him, but he understood not wanting to admit that.

They reached the bottom of the parking lot a second later. Lights illuminated the middle of the parking spaces, and Jake ducked behind a wall with his bike beside him, barely hidden. Air whooshed through the derelict parking lot as the two cars convened in the middle. Jake held out a hand to keep Yin back.

"Stay," Jake said, leaning over the side of the wall with a craned neck to see what was going on. He couldn't make out the figures accurately, but a person got out of the Range Rover and approached the other car. A briefcase was held in the man's hand, or a massive bag.

Jake leaned forward to get a better look and almost toppled over. His grip on the top of the wall righted him.

"Calm down," Yin said, maneuvering himself to get a better view.

“I don’t know what they’re doing,” Jake said, staring ahead at the scene before them. The man was speaking through the driver-door window, though the words were muffled. Jake shivered as a gust of wind tore through the parking lot, carrying with it the fear coursing through Jake’s body.

Then, De Marco got out of the Alfa Romeo and went to the back window. He tugged the door open and reached inside. Jake’s eyes widened and he clamped a hand over his mouth to stop the gasp from releasing. De Marco had grabbed Leon and hauled him out onto the ground. De Marco wasn’t treating Leon like a son, but like an object. Something he smacked a few times for a bit of fun. A punching bag.

“What is going on?” Jake heard Yin whisper behind him.

Jake kept silent and stared at De Marco drag Leon’s still from across the concrete ground, causing a shuffling noise that pinged off the walls. The other men came around, the engines of their vehicles still rumbling, and stared at Leon closely. One man prodded his face with a gloved hand, whilst the others got a good look by kneeling in front of the boy.

“Are they...” Jake’s voice trailed off as the scene played out before him.

The two men, De Marco and the one from the Range Rover, nodded together. One man handed over the briefcase, to which De Marco gave a cold smile Jake could sense from behind the wall. De Marco threw Leon to the other man, clamped a hand to the briefcase, and turned back to the car.

“Did he just...?” Yin said.

“I think so.”

*Leon just got sold.*

The men shut the car doors with a bang and, in the dim parking lot, the engines rumbles hurt Jake’s ears. He leaned back and hauled himself to his

feet using the wall. His trainer skidded on the floor, and for a breathless moment, he thought they'd heard him.

"We need to go," he said to Yin, who nodded and grabbed his bike. In a circle, they returned to the second-to-bottom floor. Jake and Yin crawled to the other side of the wall and sat down, away from the cars' line of sight.

"Wait for them both to go," Jake said. "And then we'll get out." Jake's words came fast and echoed as the engines beneath them revved.

"Did they just sell him?" Yin asked, sitting beside Jake with his bike flat on the floor.

"Yes," Jake snapped, his temper getting the better of him. He unclenched a fist. A deep breath he took to calm himself. "Just...let's get out and then speak about this, okay."

Yin nodded, silent as the engines' rumbles grew louder. The lights rounded the corner before the cars followed and ascended the floors. Jake listened to the engines quieten, before taking a massive sigh and leaning back against the wall. Beads of sweat ran down his face, and his hands trembled against the cool metal of his bike.

"I think that just happened, like what the hell?" Yin slumped on the floor, leaning against the wall with Jake. Jake's eyes sought out Yin in the dark, and upon seeing the horror on his face, Jake smacked a hand into the wall. A gash snaked across his backhand at the contact, and he winced. But the pain was nothing compared to what Leon had just undergone.

"What was that for?" Yin said.

"Just...we could've helped him, for god's sake. And we just stood there like helpless chickens."

"We couldn't have done nothing, man."

Yin's words were right, yet Jake couldn't see the logic with Leon being bundled off like a bargain at a Sunday market.

"We should've done...something, though, right." Jake smacked his head back against the wall, which caused stars to line his vision. A headache was oncoming, the pounding at the back of Jake's mind a sign of that.

"Calm down, bro," said Yin, standing with his bike in hand. He dusted off his clothes. "We'll get him back. We just need to make another plan and get the others to help, you feel me."

Jake stared at Yin, his hands shaking, his legs immobile and useless. "You sure?" His whisper echoed around the emptiness long after the cars had disappeared. Jake needed hope, and yet its touch seemed so far.

Yin grinned in the dark, extending a hand towards Jake. Jake stood, grasping Yin's palm, and dusted off his clothes before gripping his old bike.

"Are you sure?" Jake repeated, seeking a kind of assuredness he would never get. Jake had thrown Leon's friendship away, and Leon had left. For good.

*I'm such a failure.*

"I'm sure," Yin said. "I...like, I'm sure of it."

The laughs he and Leon had shared in the forest flashed through Jake's mind. The memories, fleeting and passing. Gone. Not because of Leon ostracising him, but because Leon had been carted off like a business transaction.

*That's what the package was, Jake realised. And I was too dumb to see it.*

De Marco was running a cruel business, and Leon was just another product. Jake's fist clenched of its own accord, and his legs filled with energy as he mounted his bike again to return home.

“We’ll get him back,” Jake said, voice gruff. Hope didn’t fill him, but the pull of anger pumped his legs as they rode up the parking lot. Rage, blinding and unadulterated, laced his veins.

“We will,” Yin said, voice firm.

Jake’s fingers gripped the handles of his bike hard. “And we’ll take down anyone who tries to stop us.”

# Chapter Thirty One

Guilt racked Jake in waves. Each coming as quick as the next. Shockwaves of hurt, mental pain, and physical soreness throbbed through him.

“Oi, look who it is,” a voice said. Jake gritted his teeth. He’d taken so many mental shots over the last few weeks, and his resolve remained intact. Danny and Bruce were people he did *not* want to deal with. Not when Leon had been sold like a lamb to the slaughter.

“He ain’t listening to us, is he?” Danny said, the grin in his voice unmistakable. Jake wanted to claw his hands around Danny’s throat and choke him to death. If only it didn’t bring with it the murder charge.

*I could claim mentally ill*, Jake morbidly thought. *Revenge for all the times—*

A hand grabbed Jake’s shoulder and wrenched him back. Jake turned with the hand, face meeting Danny and Bruce’s smiling features. The cruel smirk across Danny’s face was akin to De Marco’s—the upturn of the right side of the lips, as if he knew something about Jake that eluded Jake himself.

“What happened to your best mate?” Danny asked, pointing to the empty seat beside Jake. Sarcasm lined his voice, making that rage inside Jake build.



“Nothing,” Jake said, voice low. He glanced back at Brewster, who was at the front of the class about to take the register. Jake needed calm, to let the peace enter his body. But without Leon, and without being in the forest surrounded by nature, how was he meant to find it?

“Oh, come on,” Bruce said. “He just realised how much of a bad friend you were. If I was him, I would’ve left a long time ago. You can’t even keep some loser like Leon around that’s how much of a failure—”

“Shut. Up,” Jake spat, jaw clenched. Anger brewed within Jake, threatening to spill over into punches and kicks. Jake breathed in deeply, trying to find a spot of calmness. His hands clenched, and that point of rage in his mind grew with each laugh spewing from Danny and Bruce’s gobs. “Shut up,” Jake repeated.

“I think he’s acting big,” Bruce said. He leaned forwards, spittle flying as he growled, “Your friend ain’t here to protect you this time. Not that he could, anyway. Remember that beating before?”

Jake held his ground, not averting his gaze from the bullying duo. Confidence surged through his veins, and he raised a fist and placed it on Danny and Bruce’s table. “I don’t need his protection. Not from scumbags like you.”

Danny’s eyes darkened, a flash of indignation passing through them. “What the hell did you call me?”

Jake cocked his head, a casual movement, unperturbed by the rage flashing in Danny’s eyes. The calmness he had sought earlier ran through him. “You heard me the first time. Unless you need hearing aids along with those new, ugly glasses.”

A fist crossed Jake’s vision. He dodged backwards, expecting it from the short-tempered Bruce who resorted to fists instead of mental wit.

Jake jumped back from another swing of Bruce's arm, this time standing from his seat in the process.

"Get back here," Danny said, but Jake stepped back, staring at them the entire time. He shuffled out of the row and backwards until he reached Brewster's desk. The best way to diffuse a fight was to leave the area. And Jake had done that. Jake turned to face his form tutor, who was staring at the computer, unaware of the attempted fight by Bruce.

"Sorry, sir," Jake said, trying to put on an innocent voice. Breathlessness grasped him like a choke, and he caught his breath before continuing. "I forgot my timetable. Can I have a new one?"

Brewster arched an eyebrow at him. "It's the last day before the holiday. Why on earth would you want a new one?"

"Just for today," Jake said. "I kinda forgot mine, you know. Bad with memorising stuff."

"Yes," Brewster said, giving Jake a look. "I can see that."

Jake didn't know if Brewster was speaking about his exam performance, which was shoddy at best. Not that Jake was ever good at school tests.

Brewster handed him a timetable. Jake gripped the paper in his hands, clenched it, and walked back to his seat. Danny and Bruce were glaring daggers into his back, but Jake paid them no mind. A voice in the back of Jake's mind warned caution, but no more hits came from the duo behind him.

It was like Turlin had advised. When Jake became someone with principles, someone with a sense of self, he would be able to repel any ills in his life. He'd have a way of dealing with it. Danny and Bruce could bring

the best insults their single-digit IQs could produce and Jake would deal with them. The way Leon had for the last two months. Before he had gone.

The embarrassment no longer washed over Jake when attention came his way. Something had altered in the last two months with Leon, something drastic. Turlin had predicted it—the difference in Jake’s behaviour. Jake’s lack of self-confidence blurred him from seeing the truth, but Danny and Bruce, nor the rest of the class, affected him near as much. When he was late for a lesson, he walked to the back and sat down with no trouble. No reddening of the cheeks, hot ears, or sweaty palms.

The rest of the day passed like a blur. Jake did his lessons, concentrating as much as his conscience would allow before throwing another memory of Leon back up. His English teacher commented on his morose attitude, but Jake blocked out her voice and stared at his white page for the next half hour, trying to will a story to flow from his pen.

When he got home, tired from thinking about Leon the whole day, his mum commented on his appearance.

“You look harried,” she said, her tone light and joking.

“I do?” Jake croaked.

His mum’s face softened in a way that hadn’t occurred in the last three years. She stood in the doorway to his room, one hand resting against the side. Her stomach wasn’t a shrunken mess anymore from bulimia, and her face looked full.

“You don’t look fine,” she said, whilst striding into the room. Taking a seat next to Jake on his bed, his mum gazed at him closely, as if inspecting him for scratches and damages.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Jake claimed, throwing his hands up defensively. “See, my face is fine. My hands are fine. Nothing to worry

about.” *Besides*, the voice inside Jake said, *Leon is the one in worse trouble. God knows where he is now.*

“Well, I think not,” his mum said. “You look like someone’s just died.”

Jake flinched, face burning up, considering how real a possibility that was.

“Has someone died?” his mum asked, voice laced with concern.

“Might as well have,” Jake mumbled into his sleeve as he coughed. Why wouldn’t his mum just leave him alone for once?

“What?” The shrill cry of his mum caught Jake’s attention.

“Nothing.”

“You can’t say nothing after replying like *that*,” Jake’s mum said, placing a hand on his shoulder and pulling until he turned to face her. “Who has died? Or might as well have died?”

“It’s not that deep.” *Go away, woman.*

“Jake, I’m going to ask directly. With something that serious, it’s good to spare the B.S.”

His mum was too direct. The question sprung more memories of Jake and Leon, which Jake allowed his mind to dip into, before being swallowed fully.

It was the day in the forest where they’d tried to climb Hope. Jake had never attempted it since he was afraid of heights. Not bound by the same self-limiting beliefs as Jake, Leon hopped onto the base of the tree and began climbing with no difficulties.

Jake stared in awe as Leon jumped to a branch and sat there.

“Come up here,” Leon shouted from the top. A grin formed across Leon’s face. Jake thought he looked like Tarzan, swinging from branches and trees as if he owned the jungle.

“I can’t,” said Jake, stomach churning at the very thought of climbing that high. He wasn’t built for that, and neither were his muscles. Leon was at least a *little* built.

“It’s easy,” Leon replied from the branch. His form swayed as the wind brushed Hope’s leaves onto the ground.

Jake stared at the bottom of the tree, then up at Leon with a sceptical glance. “I think not.”

“Just try it. Grab some of the trees and pull up. You are light, like me.”

Jake shrugged, seeming nonchalant as his heart punched his ribs. Walking to the base of the tree, Jake brought his small hands up. How were they supposed to get him up to where Leon was? They were peanut-sized compared to usual climber hands.

Jake grabbed the holds Leon spoke about, about ten centimetres above his head. He pushed his fingers into them and managed to get himself off the floor with a heave. His breath held itself as he dangled there for a second, legs swinging beneath him.

“That is good,” the shout came from above. Jake’s muscles burned, the ache intensifying in his arms with each grabbing of a handhold and pull. The method Jake used he didn’t know. A swing and push, perhaps. His quads burned from the constant tension. But he *was* climbing the tree, much to Leon’s joy from his perch at the top.

“Come on,” Leon said, his encouragement pushing Jake to another foothold. Hope was an old, in fact ancient, tree. But it wasn’t very tall, despite the wide base and thick trunk which Jake had almost reached the end of. Leon’s level was just above him. He gripped another hold with his hand, upper back tensed to the point of burning. With a throbbing arm’s

push, Jake reached Leon a moment later, sucking in huge lungfuls of air to replenish his depleted oxygen.

“See, it is easy,” said Leon, grabbing Jake’s shoulder with a hand and pulling him to sit down.

Jake gasped for air as the fire in his muscles subsided. “Easy for you to say,” Jake said, settling himself on the branches as his heart settled in his chest. He avoided glancing down to quell inevitable nausea that would fill his stomach. The view wasn’t special, just the other trees in the forest, nor was the spot some kind of tree-house haven.

But that peace which Jake loved, which Jake always sought, floated around them with the light breeze as Jake’s breath, and mind, calmed. The sun had been out that day, its rays filtering through the foliage towards their vantage point in Hope’s branches.

Leon turned to Jake. A grin on his face.

Then, the grin melted into a puddle of flesh. The image dissolved, and a blur filled Jake’s vision.

“Jake,” a voice said. Something gripped Jake’s shoulder. A vice-like hold. He pulled away, panting. He swiped a hand over his eyes, furiously trying to banish the tears that flooded down his cheeks, forging paths across his face.

“Jake, why are you crying? Did someone actually die?”

His mum’s voice echoed in his head. He grabbed both temples and pushed inward, as if that would get rid of the memories. He fell back onto his bed, knocking his head against the wall but ignoring the pulses of pain that flamed him as a result.

“Jake,” his mum called, her weight causing the bed to shift as she leaned over.

Deep breaths found their way into Jake's mouth. The bed beneath him was more akin to ivy, rough and poisonous.

"What is it?" Jake said once he'd regained his breath. He breathed in again, letting the cool air chill his lungs. He wiped the last tears off his face, covering his eyes so he didn't have to see the scowl on his mum's face. One of surprise and disappointment, no doubt, at seeing her son bawl his eyes out like that.

"I—why were you crying?"

*Not this question again,* Jake thought. *Can't she just leave me alone?*

Jake attempted to speak, but his mouth filled with saliva and he choked on it, chest heaving before his throat finally allowed the saliva to be swallowed.

"Jake," his mum called again.

"I'll tell you," Jake said quickly, before his mum could ask the question again. The question that brought back memories of Leon Jake didn't want to hold in his mind anymore.

"Take your time," his mum said.

*I wish I could take forever,* Jake thought, dreading the impending conversation. He might have got over the bullying to an extent, but his mum was someone he could never cross. As much as he had despised her before.

Jake sat up, finally taking his hands off his eyes. Light flooded his vision, which blurred at the edges. Jake stared through the open window, at the bedroom Leon had occupied for two months in that house. A room he would never see again, wherever he was.

*Dead, maybe,* the voice inside Jake remarked. Jake blocked the voice and released the clench of his fists.

“Take your time,” Jake’s mum repeated, placing a hand on his shoulder and rubbing.

“I think it’s time,” Jake said, turning away from Leon’s room to face his mum. “I’ll tell you everything.”



## Chapter Thirty Two

Jake's mind reeled for something to say as his mum stared at him, but blanks came up. He was usually speechless when flustered, when everyone was laughing at him in class. Or the one time he had been called up for a speech as a seven-year-old, in front of the whole assembly. He wasn't the one for the public image. At least, not in crowds.

But now, helplessness grasped him. The lack of words stemmed from not his embarrassment, but the futility of trying to get Leon back. It wouldn't happen, no matter how much Jake wished to will it into existence.

"Jake, you said you would tell me," his mum said, voice as soft as she could manage.

"I—I guess...Leon and me..."

"Why don't I get you some water?" his mum said. Jake nodded, and she left before he could say his thanks.

She was gone for a minute, in which Jake stared at his bookshelves, noticing the manga Amy gave to him stuffed to the side. Amy and the group had made a plan to save Leon, but the plan's failure weighed heavily on Jake.

"Here it is," his mum said, coming back into the room and handing him a glass of water. Jake drank greedily, almost to the point of choking, letting

the cool water flow through his throat to his stomach. He heard it touch down, before drinking the rest of the glass in one gulp.

He wiped his mouth with a sleeve and set his glass down on the bedside table. The clink rang around his mind and added to the headache rushing through his temples. He clamped his eyes shut, letting the darkness wash away the pain for a second.

“What did you want to tell me?” his mum asked.

Jake’s eyes fluttered open. The first words left him, imperfect as they were to describe his feelings. “I—me and Leon have been friends ever since he joined our school.”

“I remember that,” his mum said. “About two months ago they moved in. That’s about when I met Hugo, as well.”

“Yeah. Well, I kind of...knew his dad was doing something with him pretty quickly.”

“His dad was doing what to him?” his mum asked, eyebrow raised.

Jake took a breath in and held it. *I promised to never tell*, Jake thought. *But he’s gone, isn’t he? What’s the point?*

“Basically,” said Jake, priming his mind for the moment of truth. His throat burned, and the headache was in full swing again. “I...Leon’s been kidnapped. Or sold, maybe.”

A gasp sounded from where his mum sat. The hand on his shoulder tightened, before releasing entirely. For some reason, Jake missed the warm contact as his mum stood.

“What on earth are you talking about?” his mum asked.

“I—me and my mate, Yin, saw it happen yesterday.”

Jake just about kept the images of the previous day at bay. Of Leon being hauled and dragged out of the back of a car, and being exchanged for

a briefcase.

His mum massaged her forehead and sighed. “Are you sure what you saw was actually legitimate? That sounds far-fetched.” She was using her business voice, as if negotiating a contract with Jake rather than listening to his thoughts. And the business voice was never a good sign, Jake had years to realise.

“I literally saw him get taken away,” Jake cried. “It was by De Marco—Hugo to you—as well. I saw it with my own eyes.” *And I can’t unsee it.* Jake didn’t know when, but he had stood and met face to face with his mum.

“Don’t get so angry,” Jake’s mum said, directing him back to sitting down. “I believe you now. God knows why I made the mistake of not doing so before.”

“So you agree Hugo is a maniac?”

His mum’s eye twitched. “I don’t know about that, though. There just doesn’t seem to be enough evidence for it, in my opinion.”

“He called Leon his ‘package’ when I heard him. Did he mention that to you?”

His mum’s face lit up. She grabbed his hand. “He said something like that: ‘Just delivered a package’. But that could be anything, right. How do you know it was specifically Leon? And what if Leon returns in a few weeks as normal?”

“It’s Leon, I’m sure of it. And now we have no way of getting him back. They gave De Marco a briefcase. Leon’s been sold, and he’s...never coming back.”

“And that’s what’s been eating at you?”

Jake stared at the red carpet and nodded.

“He’ll come back,” his mum said, shreds of her business voice still present, but it was the standard comfort she could provide. Because no other course of action existed. Leon was lost to them, and unless Jake managed to get into De Marco’s car and follow him next time...

It was impossible.

“I...it’s just so hard with him gone,” Jake said. “Especially as...”

“‘Especially as’ what?”

“I—it’s nothing.” Jake had been meaning to say how he had no one in his life, since his dad had departed from their family. But his mum’s hand in his was warm, tingly. Never in the last three years would he have thought the current scene possible, with his mum comforting him over a friend. He had no friends back then, after all, nor a present mother in his life.

But both existed, even if one was an elusive memory he couldn’t shake off.

“How, though?” Jake asked.

His mum stared at him, her blue eyes meeting his. “‘How’ what?”

“How will we get him back?”

His mum released his hand and rubbed her chin. “I guess...I could try to get some information out of Hugo. If he’d say anything, anyway. I’m not sure how else.” The last part was said with an edge to her voice.

“I...we need to get him back, Mum.”

His mum ruffled his head, the edge to her voice laced within. “Don’t worry, we will.”

Theories jumped to Jake’s mind. Of what was occurring to Leon. Of how he was being tortured by the man that bought him, the same way De Marco had done. He shook his head free of the thoughts, temporarily ridding them for more that would emerge a few minutes later.

“What were you trying before?” Jake’s mum asked.

“We—well, the club and I—had a plan to try and save him. To get De Marco caught in a crime, and that would get him convicted and Leon to safety.” Jake lowered his head. “But with Leon gone, there’s no way we can do that anymore. Even if De Marco did get caught, Leon’s nowhere to be seen.”

“You could still get this De Marco of yours caught. He’s living opposite us, you know.”

An idea flashed in Jake’s mind. “You think there’s something inside that’s useful?”

Maybe if he could get inside and see...

His mum shook her head. “Whatever you’re thinking, I won’t let you put yourself in danger. Not like that story you told me of cycling off to follow De Marco’s car. Never again. From now on, you’re staying put.”

“But we had to,” Jake said, heart sinking along with his rising anger. Was his mum giving up? Didn’t she realise saving Leon was his duty? Not just a hobby, or some kind of heroic gesture he wanted to bestow upon Leon. “I knew there was no point in telling you,” Jake said.

“Do you want to get yourself killed, though? I said we’ll get him back, not die in the process.”

*I deserve to die after leaving Leon like that, though.*

“If you don’t help, I’ll do it myself, anyway.”

His mum stilled. Her gaze was on his face, roving across as if she was seeing someone new instead of the usual child she’d witnessed for the last fifteen years. A sigh overtook her, her shoulders sinking with the breath’s release. Her eyes closed, before opening again with renewed confidence.

“I’m your mother. I won’t let you get yourself in danger like that, not when there’s a criminal on the line. That ain’t happening, not on my watch.”

“I’ll just do it outside your watch, then,” Jake said. His mum had reverted to the mum-of-old. The one that hated Jake, the one that doubted him at every turn. The one that viewed him as a failure.

“Jake, don’t test me. Leon will come back. But I won’t let my son die, or even have the possibility of dying, for his return.”

Jake stared out at Leon’s house opposite. There must be something inside he could use. Something dark and mysterious that pointed to everything wrong with De Marco. And if Jake could find enough information, maybe Leon’s location would crop up. And they could save him, once and for all.

“It’s fine,” Jake said, leaning back on his bed. “We’ll sort it out, one way or another.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

Jake fought to hide the grin. The perfect plan formed in his mind, one that would materialise the next time his mum and De Marco went on a date.

“Jake,” his mum called. “You’re not planning something, are you?”

Jake shook his head. “Honestly, I’m not,” he lied, the fib slipping out easily. Jake was surprised at how he could hide lies.

“Good,” his mum said. “I’m just trying to keep you safe, that’s all. You feel better now?”

Jake nodded, letting his mum’s hands ruffle his hair and drag across his face. She might say all the comforting words in the world, but her refusal to help get Leon back, other than a few words, was useless to Jake.

He had his group, and they had a common mission to get Leon back. And Jake had the perfect plan. He waited for his mum to leave and rested

with an old manga, *Bleach!*, which he was re-reading. He let his mind sink into the story, as much as he could with thoughts of Leon raging.

The next day, a Friday, after school, Jake made a phone call to the group chat. They all picked up.

“Tomorrow at the club, I have some things to tell you.” Silence followed Jake’s words as they sank into the others’ minds. “And,” Jake added after licking his parched lips, “I have a plan of what we can do next.”

## Chapter Thirty Three

The plan was set and in motion the next Tuesday. The weekend had been difficult, especially with the new rift between Jake and his mum. But, after a gruelling first day of the holidays where Jake did nothing but read manga and watch YouTube, the plan took place.

Jake stood to the side of Hampton Road, craning his head around the corner to spy on De Marco's car. His mum and De Marco would be leaving for their date in a few minutes. His mum, about his plan, was none the wiser.

"Are you sure this is gonna work?" Yin said. "Like, man, the second phase is a bit mad." Yin's worries weren't disregarded by Amy, who was with them to help keep look-out once Jake was inside.

Amy gave a shiver as she spoke, the cold circling the trio. "The plan seemed all right. I do not agree with the trespassing, however. I think there are better ways we could do it." Gerry was too small to help but wished them luck, and Nathaniel had gone to a relative's house once the holiday started, and was staying there.

"And what's that?" Jake said, turning to face her. The wind swept his hair over his eyes, and he used a hand to card it back. "This is the fastest way to get the info."

"And what if speed is not the issue?" Amy said.



“It is, though,” said Yin, getting the drone out of his bag and placing it on the ground. “The longer we take, the more time those men have to do whatever to Leon. And we can’t let him get hit more than he is already.”

“It’s just the principle of it, that’s all,” said Amy, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “But I will help, no doubt.”

“Thanks,” said Jake, his hand grazing the wall as he stared into the road. Anyone looking from the outside would be bewildered beyond imagination. Three kids, standing with their shoulders against the wall, waiting. One had a drone in hand, the controller in the other, getting it set up with all the wires. A girl stood with them, twirling her hair with worry.

“I think I see him,” said Jake. The door to Leon’s house swung open ominously. A second later, a figure emerged, wearing a black coat. It was De Marco, Jake was sure. The muscles beneath the jacket were obvious. “He just got out.”

“Lemme get a look,” Yin said, trying to come round the side.

Jake grabbed his shoulder and held him back. “If he sees us, this is all over. Chill for a second.”

Yin nodded. Amy came from behind and stood behind Jake as he spied on De Marco. The man crossed the road and knocked on Jake’s door. A second later, his mum emerged from the door wearing a red dress. The same dress as the day she collapsed.

“What is she wearing?” Yin’s voice appeared at Jake’s left.

“Get back,” Jake ordered, before his gaze returned to his mum and De Marco. His mum got in the car with De Marco after a little kiss that made Jake want to gag. “He’s gone,” Jake said a few seconds later as the car faded into a blot in the distance, before disappearing around a corner altogether.

“It’s time, then,” Yin said, kneeling down in front of his drone. “Time to use my baby.”

“Have you ever practiced with it before?” Amy asked.

“Loads of times,” said Yin, giving her a dubious glance. “Don’t doubt my skills. I’ve been playing with this bad boy for years.”

“Well, you know the plan,” said Jake, gaze flitting around to ensure no one watched them. With De Marco, caution was the best policy, especially as they were in the open.

“Have you got the rock?” Yin asked.

Jake ran a finger over his pocket. The ridges of the rock met his touch, comforting and rough. “Yeah, got it.”

“Might as well get started, then,” said Amy, rounding the corner and striding into the road with her head held high and arms swinging.

Jake turned to Yin. “You’ll be back here, right?”

“Sure thing. Wait for the power to go out, and then climb quickly.”

Yin was about to fly the drone directly into the power lines above the road, disturbing the street. For a good cause, though, so the wave of guilt inside Jake was quelled.

Jake removed the rock from his pocket. He had picked it at the forest the day before, after an hour of searching. For some reason, Jake wanted the perfect looking rock to break Leon’s window, and to that end decided to rummage through the forest. Nothing appeared at the base of Hope, but on the other side of Lake Hurricane, next to a thin, winding tree, Jake found it.

His fingers wrapped around it. He threw it up and down a few times, its weight melding with his hand.

“Ready?” Amy asked, signalling back to Yin with a thumbs up.

“I’m good,” said Jake, staring at the drone as Yin began the flight.

The drone ascended to the height of the power lines first, before moving forwards. The concentration on Yin's face was immense, his face scrunched and hands moving seamlessly to control the drone.

"He's almost there," Amy said, pointing to the drone near the power lines. Yin was a craftsman, so had tied a knife to the edge of the drone. The drone's blades may not be enough to take out the power, but the knife was sure to cut the cords. That meant the CCTV systems inside Leon's house would diminish. Which meant Jake was ready to head inside and conduct his search.

The power line fizzed as the drone crossed it. The knife was wedged into the top of the drone, sticking out like a sore thumb. The knife made contact with the power line, and, after a worrying second of nothing but sparks, the power line cut. Sparks subsided as the drone lowered again, its job finished. The street lights, preemptively lit for the early evening, instantly lost their light.

"Success," Jake said, high-fiving Amy, who jumped up and down beside him.

"Now, the second part," Amy said, pointing to the rock in Jake's hand. Jake looked at the rock, remembering his mission. He reared his hand, letting the rock settle into his right palm. He reached behind his head, letting his arm hang. Then, with a massive step forward, Jake lobbed the rock directly into Leon's window, since the downstairs windows were boarded up.

The smashing of the window reached Jake's ears, along with splinters of glass.

"There we go," Jake muttered under his breath, ignoring the stabs of pain from a shard of glass hitting his arm. The next step had to be done

before the other residents in the street realised the power was gone and came out to check after a few minutes of wondering what happened.

Jake grabbed the dustbin from beside the front door. He pulled it to under Leon's window, the hole in which was just about big enough to squeeze through. Jake's breath grew laboured, along with the beat of his heart.

"Come on," he whispered under his breath as he set the bin in place.

"Jake, hurry," Amy said, herself glancing around to make sure no one was watching. "There's not much time left."

"I'm trying," said Jake, staring up at the window. He needed to time his jump perfectly and latch his fingers on the windowsill. Once there, the climbing would need to be perfect to stumble inside.

Jake climbed atop the bin, almost losing balance when it decided to move on its wheels for a second.

"Am I in a good place?" Jake asked, looking up at the window and judging the distance.

"It is good enough," said Amy, though the doubt in her voice was unmistakable. The whirring of Yin's drone still rang through Jake's ears. It stopped, no doubt Yin turning it off and running back to the edge of the road. Amy would return there, too, once Jake was inside.

Jake settled his legs, making sure the quiver was gone. Then, he bent down, letting his knees cross his toes, before leaping with as much force as he could muster. His head rose about twelve inches, reaching half a metre under the window. His hands shot out to grab the windowsill.

Jake's legs dangled beneath him, and he made the mistake of glancing down.

*Oh, crap*, Jake thought, seeing the ground wobble under him, shifting as his weight danced from side to side. He looked up again, concentrating on his hands and the climb. The vision of climbing in the forest with Leon cropped up again, and Jake recalled letting his legs follow his hands as he pulled.

He did the same now. Pulling with all his might despite the screaming in his upper back muscles. Jake wasn't strong, but the will in his mind carried his ascent. His fingers were white as the force pushed the blood out of them. The wind pushed his hair over his eyes, blocking his vision for a moment. Despite that, Jake produced enough force to get his burning shoulders over the windowsill and then swung his legs up.

His right leg went right through the hole in the wall, grazing on unshattered glass. Jake winced from the pain, but hauled his other leg through and collapsed onto the floor.

The stench of old food and vomit entered his nose, and Jake tasted something foul in the air. His face was flush against the carpet, which smelt rotten, and he first noticed Leon's bed, or whatever the object in front of him was called.

Jake stumbled to his feet, almost knocking into an invisible object behind him. The power was out, so Jake would have to use his phone as a light source. He brought out the flash and shined it on the room.

The horror that met him made bile rise in his throat. Blood was splattered over everything in Jake's line of sight. Jake almost belched at the state of Leon's covers. Covered with blood, pus, and thin like paper. How had Leon slept in something like that? Shivering at night, bathing in his own blood.

*The abuse was worse than I thought.*

Taking a second to ensure the vomit had receded, Jake traversed the rest of the room, shining his light into the nooks and crannies, searching for any signs of abuse. Using the flash feature, Jake took pictures of whatever he found. A loose floorboard with rations of mouldy bread hidden inside, the bed and its covers, the rickety desk which had dents on the side. No doubt Leon's doing, with the knife he often stole from his dad.

Sorrow swept through Jake at the sight of what his former friend had to endure at De Marco's hands. All the more reason that Jake was going to incriminate the man, and get Leon out of the abuse. And through his findings in the rest of the house, Jake would find where Leon was, and get him himself.

"Come on," Jake said, crawling through to the bedroom door. In the corner was a camera. It wasn't on, the red light usually on CCTV cameras not present. Jake sighed with relief. Their plan to get rid of the surveillance systems had worked. De Marco had no way of spying on them, and didn't know Jake was in the house.

*Now, it's up to me,* Jake thought. He was the gel that made the plan work, was the one who would get the information on Leon's whereabouts, and he had to get this part right.

He opened the door. Jake's eyes baulked at the countless locks on the other side of the door. Bolts and keys made an escape for Leon impossible whenever De Marco felt threatened.

*Imagine being locked up here,* Jake thought, shutting the door behind him. He glanced up and down the dark hallway, phone in hand. The hallway was the same as in his own house. A long, winding path to another room at the far end, and stairs which led to the kitchen and living room. Jake took

the path to the other bedroom, stopping when he reached the splintered, wooden door.

*This must be where De Marco sleeps, Jake thought. And I'm about to find out everything.*

## Chapter Thirty Four

Jake clamped a hand over the door handle and pulled. Nothing. He decided to push, but that didn't budge the door one bit. Jake shined his phone light onto the handle. It revealed a lock there, a keyhole.

*De Marco must've locked it.* He'd have to find the key, but De Marco had probably taken it with him. Jake stepped back and rammed his shoulder into the door. A loud crack, but nothing more gave way.

*The door's thin enough,* Jake thought, rubbing a sore shoulder. *If I find something to smash it...*

Jake double backed to Leon's room. He needed a massive object, like a brick, heavy as well. He touched the books on Leon's creaky desk, which were dusty. Leon had never done well in exams. He bounced the science textbook up and down in his hands, but it wasn't sharp enough to bang through the door.

Nothing of use was on Leon's bed, and the rest of the barren room didn't hide any objects large enough to break a door down.

Jake crawled back out of the room and turned to the stairs. Maybe downstairs held something useful. Jake toed the edge of the top step, before shining his way down with his phone light. He lowered himself, one step at a time, each creak resonating in his mind. The silence enveloping him made



every little sound grate on his nerves. Even his own raging heartbeat echoed in his ears.

He heard shouting come from outside, and a few arguments spark. The other residents of Hampton Road had, no doubt, found out about the power failure and the lines being cut.

Jake reached the bottom of the stairs with one final creak, and he paused to catch his breath. Nerves raged within him, and beads of sweat flowed down his face. He wiped them, only for more to descend from his slick hair.

His palms were clammy, especially as the phone's heat permeated through his body. He raised the light as he moved into the kitchen. It looked ordinary, the same as his kitchen at home. The layout was similar, although no table was in the middle for meals. The only meals served were scraps, if the empty plates, scraped clean, from Leon's room were anything to go by.

Jake opened the fridge, hoping to find blocks of ice he could use before they melted. But the fridge was empty, apart from rotten fruit in the back. The stench sent shockwaves through Jake's nose, and he shut the fridge door promptly.

*There must be something*, Jake thought, tiptoeing into the living room. The coffee table in his own living room was absent here, as was the TV. It was barren, and the floorboards had been taken out, in place for a carpet and massive rugs.

*That's it*, Jake thought, an idea springing to his mind. The loose floorboard in Leon's room. If he could rip it out, then it would be perfect for getting into De Marco's room.

He ran back upstairs, ignoring the commotion from outside. Cameras, lots of them, lined the corners of Jake's vision. But they were all turned off, lights not on. With a shiver, Jake entered Leon's room for the third time.

Jake placed a palm over his mouth and nose so the dust didn't enter. His eyes watered at the putrid smell as he neared the loose floorboard. The food inside was as rotten as the fruit in the fridge. Jake pried the floorboard up and pulled as hard as he could manage. The floorboard creaked, splintering through the middle. Another pull was what it took, with Jake being thrown backwards with the floorboard's momentum.

His head bumped into Leon's desk, sending pulses of pain through Jake's head. He ignored each wave of pain and stumbled to his feet, floorboard in one hand, phone in the other.

Back in front of De Marco's room, Jake set his phone on the ground, flash facing up to shed light on the door. Like the rock, Jake reared his hand behind his head. He brought the floorboard down and slammed it into the door.

A massive crack pierced the air, echoing off the walls before dissipating. Jake wondered if anyone outside had heard him. He paused for a second before proceeding again. The second slam caused a crack to snake down the door, from top to bottom. Jake aimed the floorboard at the crack, his arms sore from constant tension. He smashed the board into the door. Another crack sounded, and accompanying it was a hole formed in the centre of the door.

Jake threw the board aside and picked his phone up again. He stepped inside the hole, shoving his too-thick torso through the small gap. The sides of the crack brushed his hip, but the pain subsided once he was in.

*Here we are*, Jake thought, eyes roving over what his phone revealed. He took pictures again, making sure that everything was documented well. In case the police needed some kind of evidence. He pushed his way to the

other end of the room, the smell of victory lining his nose. He palmed some loose papers on De Marco's desk, sensing something written there.

He brought the paper to his eye, the light letting him see its contents. It was a normal letter with bills written by *Thames Water*. Jake threw the paper aside and searched more, trying to find a location, a phone number. Something that could indicate where Leon had been placed.

A particular crumpled piece of paper met Jake's eye. He grabbed it and smoothed out the creases. The phone was pointed at the paper, and Jake read it.

'He is at the position,' the paper said.

Confusion sprinted rings around Jake's mind. What position was the paper talking about? And who was the 'he'? Leon, or someone else that Jake had no idea about?

He snapped a quick picture before moving to the next paper. That was another bill. Jake clicked his teeth, frustration thrumming through his bones despite the discovery. He didn't have much time left, especially if he was to jump back out of Leon's window to escape before De Marco returned.

He jumped over the bed, shining a light into the bedrest. Nothing but random hair products were there. Gels and conditioner. The curtains were drawn, not letting any light get in. Jake hopped to see if the windows were boarded up. They were. No way out here, either.

Jake crossed back to the desk and opened all the drawers. They were empty, apart from more bill letters wedged at the back. From the looks of it. De Marco never paid his bills.

A shout came from outside. "Jake."

It was Amy!

"He's coming," her shrill voice continued, before it cut.

Then, a cry sounded, and Jake's body froze in fright. Amy was being attacked, or maybe she was screaming to get Jake's attention. Jake scrambled to the door, listening for anything more.

Nothing met his ears, eerily no sounds from Amy, and no sounds inside the house except the wind whistling through Leon's window and reaching Jake. Jake turned back, satisfied that the voice had just been his mind, despite how real it sounded. He returned to the desk and grabbed the crunched paper. He stuffed it into his pocket and went prone to see it under the master bed.

That's when a bolt clicked downstairs.

*Crap*, Jake thought, instantly shooting to his feet. His ears trained on the footsteps rising on the stairs as the front door slammed shut. His hands shook, the phones light jittery on the wall. His legs quivered as he crossed the room, silent as he could, and slumped against the wall. There wasn't a way out, and crossing the hall to Leon's room was too risky. Jake would have to hide and pray.

Maybe De Marco wouldn't come and search here for him. Amy's shout had been real, but Jake was too stupid to notice it. Jake slowed his breathing, before stopping completely. His heartbeat pounded in his ears as he shut off the flashlight from his phone. The world descended into darkness.

Jake sneaked in a harsh breath as loud as a gong. He crawled to his side, getting his phone out from beneath him. He needed to get the pictures to someone else, since he might not be able to after this. He thumbed through to Whatsapp, screen wet from his sweaty fingers.

He quickly collected all the photos he had taken and sent them on the group chat, hoping his mobile data was fast enough to get it through. He

sent another quick update: 'I might not make it. Get my mum to follow De Marco if I go missing.' Ominous, but uncomfortably close to the truth.

Jake turned his phone to silent and offed notifications, so the light wouldn't shine if a message came through. The screen's light blinked shut as Jake shut it down and stuffed it in his pocket, along with the note on De Marco's desk.

The footsteps from outside had stopped. The door to Leon's room opening reached Jake's ears. A creak of the door.

*He must've noticed the loose floorboard*, Jake thought, leaning against the wall. He could grab the floorboard and try to fight De Marco. But the man's muscles were too large and too strong for Jake to do anything to him. And the floorboard was discarded somewhere Jake couldn't remember.

Where was his mum? Had De Marco abandoned her again? And who told him that Jake was here? How did he know to return?

Questions swirled through Jake's mind as cramps hit his legs. He groaned, struggling to keep the sound down. A smash rang through the silent house. Rage, no doubt, was thrumming through De Marco, and Jake was about to be the recipient of it.

Jake shivered from the fear. He got up on trembling legs, resolving to somehow find a way out. Hiding wouldn't work, especially as De Marco knew he was here. The loose floorboard was proof of tampering, and downstairs had already been searched.

Jake crawled to the edge of the door. De Marco would notice the hole and try to enter, at which point Jake would dart past him and squeeze himself out.

It wasn't the most foolproof plan, but it was a lifeline Jake could hold onto.

The footsteps creaked closer, and heavy breathing swirled through the crack in the door.

De Marco, Jake was certain, sensed his presence in the room.

“Little shit,” De Marco said, nearing the door. Jake’s throat enclosed, not letting his breath escape. Jake’s arms were frozen against the rough wall, and his legs stiffened as De Marco’s figure appeared on the other side, through the hole.

De Marco growled, a primitive sound, before ramming into the door. He was heavier than a floorboard, and much stronger than Jake. The door instantly fell to the floor a metre from Jake’s body, dust billowing from under it across the room. Jake stopped the impulse to gasp, staring at De Marco’s body come through the door. In the dark, De Marco might not notice him, and that gave a sliver of time to escape.

Jake waited for the perfect moment. De Marco glanced right first.

That was Jake’s chance.

He jumped through the empty doorway as De Marco was blind to the left side. Jake’s body got through, and he sprinted.

Two steps were all he managed.

A hand grabbed at his jacket and clawed him back. Jake’s body was a rag-doll in De Marco’s hands. A groan escaped Jake’s parched lips from the impact of being thrown to the rough floor.

“I knew you were here, you little piece of scum,” De Marco sneered.

Jake sat up, the pain drumming through him. It reached the tips of his fingers. “You’re the only scum here,” he said, head defiant and staring at De Marco.

“Big words for someone young,” De Marco said. Even in the darkness, Jake could make out the snarl on the man’s face. De Marco leaned down,

towering over Jake's frozen form.

Jake searched for some form of escape, but short of a miracle, nothing existed. He backed up, shuffling on his butt until he hit a rough wall.

De Marco walked him down, stalking like a predator with its prey. He raised his fist, eyes flashing. "You are coming with me." His fist hammered down onto Jake's head with incredible force.

Blackness invaded Jake's vision.

## Chapter Thirty Five

Jake woke with a groan escaping his lips. Pain burned through his entire right side, and a pounding headache pulsated his temples every few seconds.

*Where am I?* Jake thought, opening his eyes. But all that met him was an infinite void of darkness. A material was stretched over his eyes, and a gag fastened to his mouth. Jake tried to speak, but nonsense babbled from his mouth, along with strands of saliva that dripped to the floor after soaking into the gag.

Rumbling surrounded him, vibrating against the ground which Jake lay upon. Jake tried to roll over, but the pain erupting in his left arm caused him to still. The pain took what felt like years to subside.

Jake strained his ears to get a bearing of his location. In a car, probably, from the engine noise beneath him and the sound of tires squealing with every turn. It was aggressive driving, the kind of driving De Marco practiced. The car jerked to the left, sending Jake crashing into the other end of wherever he was. In the boot, most likely. Jake listened for any other sounds in the car, of the driver. It smelt like De Marco's car, a musky, heady scent of cologne and death in the air.

Jake breathed in as calmly as possible with a gag in his mouth as his mind whirled. He had to find a way out, but with his hands tied behind his



back, mouth gagged, and no way to contact anyone, that wasn't possible in the slightest.

A shred of defeat sunk its way into Jake's mind, before smashing through his mental boundaries and overtaking completely. His promise to Leon, to save him, would never be fulfilled. Jake was a failure, and his entrapment in the back of De Marco's car, at the muscle man's mercy, was the embodiment of that.

Question circled Jake's mind as the past came crashing back to him. De Marco had returned from his date prematurely to grab Jake. Somehow, despite the power being gone and CCTV cameras down, De Marco had known he was inside. And exactly where he was, at that.

Jake hoped Amy and Yin were all right. The text he'd sent from his phone had gone through before he turned it off in De Marco's room. Jake wished that was enough for them to come for him, and for Leon. But the chances were slim.

Rolling over again, Jake's phone bumped his thigh. De Marco hadn't taken it yet, and that was a lifeline Jake could use in the future.

Jake tried screaming through the gag, his vocal cords straining as the noise echoed through the car.

"Shut up back there," a voice came. It was from Jake's right. Jake tried to roll with the harsh voice, but the roughness of the boot dug into his right shoulder and punctured his skin.

A gasp left Jake, but he gritted his teeth and turned to where De Marco's voice originated. He screeched again through the rough gag, which tore his lips, hoping that someone outside might decide to investigate the car.

"What did I tell you?" De Marco said, voice lined with anger. And hatred.

Jake replied with a scream that tore at his throat. The scream died in an instant, and Jake's mouth was scorched from the effort.

"You're a little shit," De Marco said, jerking the car to the left to spite Jake, who was thrown to the side and into the wall of the car. A thought entered Jake's mind.

*Maybe if I break the window I can get free,* he thought. But the stupidity of the idea then dawned on him. *There's no way I'm doing that with my hands and legs tied.* Helplessness flooded through Jake in waves. The fact of no escape sunk into his skin, causing his body to limp.

Jake tried to spark some resolve into himself. Some kind of fight. Another scream rang through the car, from Jake's mouth to the front of the vehicle, where De Marco sat at the wheel.

"Idiot," De Marco muttered, barely loud enough for Jake to hear. De Marco said something else, but the words were lost as the tires screeched when the car swerved to the left. Disorientation gripped Jake as he was chucked around the boot of the car. His head smacked into the side, and the headache worsened in sharp spikes of pain.

"Taking the piss," De Marco said, turning a little before stopping the car. The driver's door opened before slamming shut. Jake heard footsteps come around the side of the car, fear rising within him.

*Is this where I die?* Jake thought, tugging at his restraints to no avail. His heart beat a million times a minute, and he pulled at the leg ties again. His knees smashed into the side, shooting hurt through his knee caps to the tips of his toes. His movement stopped as De Marco paused outside the boot.

"You deserve this," De Marco said, voice muffled from outside. Jake whipped his head around like a rag-doll, attempting to remove the

blindfold. In the darkness, he heard the boot door open, before the outside cold washed over his body, sending shivers breaking out across his skin. They were in a silent place, where the sounds of the city Jake was fond of—moving vehicles, people speaking, a society—were all gone. Vanished, in its place an eerie solitude.

“You made too much noise,” De Marco hissed, frustration laced in his voice. “Stay silent for another hour.”

A whoosh sounded in front of Jake. It was the last thing he heard before something collided with the side of his head, and the darkness of unconsciousness claimed him again.

\* \* \*

“Is he awake?” someone asked.

Consciousness poked Jake, prodded him. He let it wash over him for a second, awareness creeping into his mind. The blindfold no longer enveloped his eyes, and the leg restraints were gone. His hands, though, were tied behind his back. The ropes rubbed his wrists raw, his skin turned flaky.

“I do not know,” the other voice said. Neither of them was De Marco, and neither of them was aware of Jake being awake.

Jake twitched his legs ever so slightly, trying to regain some of the blood that had left his limbs. His hands ached for movement, but they wouldn’t get any. Jake let his head loll to the side as if he was sleeping, and his mind worked to find a way out.

He was in a large room, from the echoing voices of the two men before him. In the far reaches of his hearing, a child screamed, along with another man shouting. Jake couldn't hear the words being said, and he didn't want to.

*What kind of hell am I in?* Jake asked himself, willing his body to remain still and stop the impulse to squirm. He was to be in the epicentre of child torture, from what he sensed.

"I think he is up," the first voice, gruff and harsh, said. The voice breathed out heavily. "I want my turn, next."

"Boss said it is my turn, though." The voices were accented, though lightly, in a fashion such Jake couldn't place where they were from. Maybe European, but also South American to an extent. Were they related to De Marco, Italian?

A hand slapped Jake's face lightly. Jake's head lolled to the other side, and his eyes twitched. He pretended to wake up, eyes snapping open and placing themselves on the man before him.

"There we are," Gruff said, stepping back and smiling sardonically, as if pride filled him at the prospect of trapping a child. His beard was thick, as was the mane of hair that stretched down to his mid-back. His arms were massive, like De Marco's, and could snap Jake's head in a heartbeat if he so wished.

"I think he likes us," the other man, a smaller version of Gruff, with what looked like a wig of slick hair planted on his head.

Wig grinned at Jake, his eyes gleaming and lips being licked at the prospect of hurting Jake. Jake searched the man's eyes, trying to find a shred of humanity. But, if it existed, it was well hidden under the guise of excitement at abusing Jake.

Did De Marco run some kind of torture chamber for kids? And where *was* Jake, exactly?

Jake's mind hurt from the constant fear thrumming through him. His eyes roved over the room as the men discussed something in front of him. A large, cave-looking structure he was in. The walls were straight steel, coated in metallic paint, but rust was settling into some parts of the metal structure.

"You will not find a way out," Gruff said, stepping in front of Jake to block his view. The stench of cigarettes, something Jake hated, wafted through his nose and tingled. Jake sneezed, snot flying out onto Gruff's overalls and down Jake's mouth.

"You will regret that," Gruff said, leaning down in front of Jake and sneering. "I will have my way with you. Soon." The man reached out and stroked Jake's cheek, his touch poisonous. Jerking his head to the right, Jake tugged at his restraints. Gruff's touch was rough and caused nausea to eat at Jake's stomach.

*He said he'll have his way with me. Does that mean...*

Gruff's hand found its way back to Jake's cheek, stroking some more. The stench of cigarettes permanently marked itself in Jake's nose, and trepidation coursed through him.

Jake's legs, which were free, kicked out on their own accord. They collided with Gruff's midsection, causing the man to groan and reel back.

"You play hard to get," Gruff said, standing and brushing his belly where Jake had kicked. Jake's shoes hadn't been taken off, which added to the impact Gruff received.

"Leave him," the other man, Wig, said. He placed a hand on Gruff's shoulder, which Gruff shrugged off with a jerk. "We will get him later. After we speak with the boss. Come on." Wig met Jake, an unreadable

expression running through his grey eyes, before he turned and walked out of the room, the metal door clanging shut behind him.

“I will have you, one time,” Gruff said, cocking his head back at Jake. A snarl formed on Gruff’s face. He winked, a motion which caused bile to rise in Jake’s throat, before sauntering out of the room. The door banged shut, leaving Jake in the empty silence.

Jake breathed out as if he’d just come out from underwater. He sucked in another breath, fear coursing through him. He needed calm, needed the peace of the forest, something that only Hope and Leon could give.

But here, in a metal cell, existed danger, and fear, and the unknown which Jake didn’t want to encounter. He desperately tugged at his bounds, but the rope dug into his wrists more, shredding the skin. His legs kicked, but the chair was moulded into the ground and didn’t give so much as an inch of movement.

Jake was stuck here, for the other man to torture, to have his way with him. Whatever that meant. Though, a sneaking suspicion crept into Jake, something which made panic ensue in his mind.

Jake sank into the chair, the ache in his back spreading across his entire body. The stench of tobacco surrounded him, as did the sour taste in his dry mouth. Jake licked his parched lips before sending another glance at the door, which showed no signs of opening soon.

He prayed for salvation. Prayed for another chance to save Leon, to fulfil his most inner desire.

But in the dark cell, with a single light above him, bound to a metal, hard chair that revealed no sign of escape, Jake’s chances of accomplishing that were slim. Jake’s body went limp. Accepting defeat, the tension in his hands dissipated.

He awaited his fate.

## Chapter Thirty Six

A sense of time eluded Jake, but what felt like an hour later approached.

The sounds around Jake etched themselves into his mind. Shouting and screaming, screeching, men groaning loudly which confirmed Jake's suspicions of what Gruff wanted to do to him. He clamped his eyes shut, as if that would get rid of the horrifying screams. But they still attacked him, slamming into him every few seconds.

Jake longed to cover his ears with hands, cover them with something which allowed him to forget, allowed him to get the cries away from him. He even longed for sleep, if only to stop the noises darting at him. But no reprieve would reveal itself. Jake would have to endure the sounds from outside, and then endure those same crimes being done to him by Gruff, the maniacal man with a heartless desire.

Tears rushed to the surface of his eyes, and he longed to wipe them away. But his hands were tied. And so was his fate.

Jake stared at the door, praying for someone, a beacon of hope and salvation, to come and save him. He was meant to be the person Turlin believed in, someone who was responsible for themselves. But Jake was useless whilst tied up alone in a steel room in the middle of nowhere, and he hoped that Amy, Yin, or someone came.



Jake's legs ached from the tension pent up in his muscles. Fire burned through his back, and his hands were rubbed to the edge of extinction. The skin tearing apart alongside the strain stretching from his toes to head.

A noise sounded outside the door. Jake's head perked up, despite the pain the simple action caused in his neck.

They were coming for him.

The panic rose in his mind and he tugged at his bounds again. His hands were dry, and the skin ripped off as Jake tugged more, desperate to avoid what Gruff had promised him. His mind whirled as to some kind of escape, but no ideas sprung forth.

He needed Leon, the person who could deal with everything. Leon had been the one who dealt with Danny and Bruce in the best way, not Jake. And if Leon was in the situation Jake was in, he would find a way out somehow.

Jake stared at the door as the sounds came closer and closer. Louder and louder. The footsteps were directly on the door's other side, and they echoed through the vast, empty room.

Jake managed to get himself to sit up off the chair slightly, but his legs ached from the movement. He sank into the chair as the locks outside the door bolted open. The door swung open, revealing Wig striding inside, shutting the door behind him a few steps in.

"Come to claim your prize?" Jake asked, his voice weak and croaky. Bile rose up against his throat, and he swallowed it back down. It settled in his stomach, which growled from hunger or horror Jake didn't know.

"Not exactly," Wig said in a voice that resembled nothing of his earlier accent. Jake's attention was piqued, and he gazed at the man's face as he

neared. The same unreadable expression from earlier painted Wig's eyes. Jake sat in silence, waiting for the man to approach.

*He wants to do...things to me, right?*

But the man brought a knife from his pocket, and Jake's eyes widened.

"You want to play with your meal before you take it?" Jake asked, with a surge of confidence that existed only in his mind.

"Just shut up and let me do my job," Wig said, giving Jake a harsh look before brandishing the knife properly. He swung it through the air as if testing it, staring at the tip closely. "Should be enough," Wig said with a nod. He switched his glance to Jake.

Jake shivered from the trepidation racing through him. The yearn to escape tore through his bones. He couldn't let *that* happen to him. The apprehension rushed through his hands, which tugged at the ropes again. They managed to loosen, but only because so much of his skin had been ripped off that it slid across the red, sore flesh.

Blood leaked to the floor, as did sweat from Jake's face once crossing the path down his cheeks. Hair, slick and wet, splayed across his eyes, and Jake blew it away with a breath he'd been holding for a minute as Wig inspected him. His breath came in pants as Wig edged closer.

"Please," the whisper came from Jake's mouth, involuntarily, as his mind dipped into the far reaches of desperation.

"Just wait," Wig said. "It will be over soon." He glanced around as if someone was spying. Wig hesitated with the knife around Jake's throat. The same expression entered his eyes, and Wig's shoulders deflated. His hand with the knife shook. "I should kill you," Wig said, causing another spike of terror to hit Jake.

Jake squirmed in his seat, trying to throw his body whichever way he could to avoid the knife's deadly edge. "Please," he said again, but Wig wasn't listening.

"But I can't kill another one," Wig said. He brought the knife away from Jake's face, letting it hang by his side and a sigh of relief almost escaped Jake's mouth.

"What are you doing?" Jake said. Tiredness ate at Jake, and he longed to sleep, perhaps even eternally. If only to escape the personal hell he was in.

Wig brought the knife up again, its tip gleaming and shining in the air. He went behind Jake.

"Are you trying to stab me from behind?" Jake mumbled, sucking his shoulder blades together as some kind of defence against a sharp jab of the knife.

"Just stay still. I'm freeing you, for god's sake."

Jake's body stilled and confusion swept through him. He should've just taken the favour despite the motives, but the question escaped his parched, thirsty lips. "Why are you saving me?"

Wig's hand quivered as he held the knife. "I'm just...I need to, all right. I'll explain once we get out of here."

Jake managed a weak nod, and held firm as Wig cut the ropes off his hands with a quick slash. The knife was cool against Jake's skin, and Jake wrung his hands once they were free. He regained control of his fingers, flexing them once, twice, to get the blood gushing in again. Blood dripped from his fingertips slowly falling to the floor.

"It's bad," Wig said, stuffing a hand into his pocket and bringing out a bandage. "Stay still, and I'll put this on you."

Jake thought it best to listen to the man, whoever he was. He held his hands as motionless as he could with the terror running through him. Wig wrapped the bandages around Jake's fingers in a minute, with a precision that spoke of Wig's expertise in first aid, before putting a bit of pressure on the cuts.

"Ouch," Jake said. A hiss escaped his lips as more blood leaked into the bandage, painting it red.

"It's working, then," Wig said, releasing Jake's hands and glancing at the shut door.

Footsteps reached their ears from outside.

Panic erupted inside Jake.

"They're coming," Wig said, grabbing Jake's hand and ignoring the gasp of pain that Jake released. "We need to go."

"Who are you?" Jake asked as Wig all but threw him onto the wall beside the door. Jake placed a hand against the wall to steady himself. Wig brought out another knife from his left pocket, long and jagged and deadly. He handed it to Jake.

"You'll need this," Wig said, jaw tensed, eyes fixed on the door. "We're about to go through a war."

## Chapter Thirty Seven

Jake expected the door to slowly open, with the pursuers scoping the room before entering.

Instead, the door blew off its hinges and smashed into the wall, barely missing Wig, billowing dust around both Wig and Jake.

“Where is he?” a voice, loud and angry, said. Two men rushed inside, their eyes glancing around. Jake noticed Gruff, but the other man, wearing a massive biker’s jacket with a knife in hand, was new.

The duo rushed inside and fixed their eyes on Jake and Wig. They clambered forwards, intent on murdering Jake and Wig, no doubt.

Wig attacked first without a thought, slashing at Gruff. Gruff stepped back to avoid the hit, confusion tearing through his eyes.

“Oi,” Gruff said.

Wig ran forward again with another slash, catching Gruff’s sleeve and causing a tear. Blood dripped onto the floor from the cut.

“Why are you doing this?” Gruff asked, eyes flicking from Wig to Jake. “He is meant to be...”

“I’ve had enough of your nasty sins,” Wig said, spitting on the floor in front of Gruff’s feet. The ultimate act of disrespect.

“Fine,” Gruff said, rubbing his foot against the ground over the saliva. “I will have my fun with you and the other one once it is all over.” Gruff

smiled at Jake, the crimes he was about to commit flashing. Jake couldn't let that happen. He brought the knife up in his own shaky hands, and pointed the shiny tip in Gruff's direction.

Wig attacked with another hack at Gruff, who responded with a dodge of an agility Jake didn't think the man capable of.

Jake took on the other man, Biker, who stumbled forward on swaying legs. Clearly, the men had been expecting to have their way with Jake, from the drunkenness of the man's sway.

Biker raised his own fists, intending to slam them into Jake and knock him unconscious.

"Not on my watch," Jake muttered under his breath. He remembered who he was doing this for—Leon. He had to get Leon out of the danger zone, and Jake was sure Leon was around the place somewhere.

Jake waited for the man to tumble forward before he hacked with the knife. The bright tip flew past the man's ear, but the shake of Jake's hands caused the slash to miss.

*Damnit*, the voice in Jake's mind rang out. He needed to hit his mark, but fear dictated his actions. Jake stumbled backwards as Biker came with his own attack.

Biker slammed a fist into the ground, narrowly missing Jake. Biker fell to the floor as Jake retreated, fear in his eyes. Jake needed calm, needed to assess the situation. He glanced to his right, where Wig was fighting the much more alert Gruff.

Gruff had a hold on Wig's shoulders, a hold Wig was trying to actively get rid of. Wig's knife had skittered across the ground earlier and lay on the floor metres away from the brawling duo.

Wig pushed Gruff off for a moment, but the bigger man initiated the grapple again, large hands clamping onto Wig like claws. Jake heard whispers and shouts being exchanged between the two, but adrenaline forced his concentration back to Biker, who had got off the floor.

Jake clenched a fist around the hilt of the knife and stepped forwards. He may be fifteen, but the power running through him was older. More mature.

He took another step forward, eyes scanning Biker to see where Jake could slash. Jake waited for the perfect moment, where Biker was most vulnerable. Biker walked forwards, fists held out in a boxing stance. Though that covered his face, it meant his hands were left to be hit.

Jake hurtled towards Biker, raising the knife in front of him, its tip lighting his vision. He brought it down onto Biker's raised hands. Biker yelped as the knife cut him. The pain hit Biker in jolts because the man collapsed on the floor and writhed in pain, rolling around.

Jake rushed forwards, intent to finish the job. He crouched, seeing the pain and fear flash through Biker's eyes. Biker turned and placed his erratic gaze on Jake, pleading. He was a monster, as were the rest of the men in the compound, who were raping and torturing the other kids.

He deserved to die. And yet, the will to kill never penetrated Jake. Jake tried to muster the confidence to end the man in front of him, the creature whose punishment should be worse than death. And yet, he couldn't.

He switched his grip on the knife to have the hilt at the bottom. Then, he knocked Biker out with a smash to the temple. Biker's head lolled to the ground, and his limbs went limp.

Jake's gaze, once his breath had returned, turned to Wig and Gruff fighting before him. Wig was struggling, his arms shaking as Gruff held

onto his wrists with large hands. A weapon—a knife—was held in Gruff's left hand, the tip inches away from Wig's eye.

"Help," Wig said. "Get the knife."

Jake scrambled to his feet and rushed over to where the duo fought. He grabbed the knife and dragged the tip through the air, aiming at Gruff's face.

Gruff saw the attack and quickly jumped back, hands fumbling the knife in his hands and dropping it to the floor. The odds were stacking against Gruff, so he decided on one last form of attack.

He bent and grabbed the knife. Then, he threw it through the air towards Wig. Wig dodged, just about, and the knife slammed into the metal wall behind them with a clang. Wig then dived for his own knife on the floor at the same time as Gruff and managed to push it out of the way before Gruff got a hand to it.

"Help me," Wig shouted, and Jake scrambled to where they fought. Gruff and Wig were on the floor, climbing over each other in an attempt to relinquish control of the grapple. Jake leaned over and tried to stab Gruff, but the knife missed and almost hit Wig instead.

Jake retracted the knife and kicked Gruff in the side, causing the man to gasp in pain. Jake kicked, again and again, the pain rendering Gruff almost immobile, with his eyes rolling into the back of his head. That enabled Wig to roll over the man and straddle his waist.

Jake grabbed Wig's knife from the floor and handed it to him.

Wig completed the rest of the job.

"You're a nasty sucker, you know that," Wig said, the accent from before completely forgotten.



“You cannot kill me. He will end you,” Gruff said, though his voice waned, the strain of fighting tolling on his vocal cords.

Jake wondered who the ‘he’ was, but the thought fled from his mind as Wig raised the knife and slammed it down, directly into Gruff’s throat.

The man gargled for a second as life left him, before his head went limp, eyes still open, and neck lolling to the right side. It was the same position Jake had taken when pretending to sleep, and that thought sent shivers down Jake.

The death etched itself into Jake’s memories. The first he had seen. Jake stumbled towards Wig, who stood up on trembling legs.

“We need to get out,” Wig said, glancing over at the door with worry in his eyes. Wig’s hands were shaking in the aftermath of the kill, and he wiped the sweat off his brow.

“Who are you?” Jake asked, but Wig shrugged off the question and pushed forwards.

“We need to leave,” he reiterated, and waved Jake over to the door. “I know the layout of the compound, and the way out is close to here.” He glanced out the door, scoping out any others who might have heard the commotion and come to investigate. “We can make it just in time.”

“What about Leon?” Jake asked, refusing to step forward as the man beckoned him.

“Who’s that?” Wig asked.

“I need to get Leon.”

Wig strode over and clamped a rigid hand over Jake’s shoulder. “I don’t know who this guy is, but we need to leave. Now.”

“No,” Jake said, shrugging off the man’s hand. The knife sat in his other palm, and his fist clenched around it. “We’re gonna get Leon back, and the

rest of them.”

Jake couldn't fail Leon. Not when he was so close to saving him. If Jake gave up *now*, he would never forgive himself.

“But there's loads of kids here. No way can we find this friend of yours and save his sorry ass. There are casualties in war, and he might be one we have to suffer.”

Jake shook his head, glaring at the man. “I'll get him myself. And if you don't help—well, my death is going to be on your hands.”

The internal question flashed in Wig's eyes, before agreement ran through them. He sighed, then raised the knife and scanned out the doorway again.

Wig glanced at the knocked-out Biker on the floor. Jake shook his head, and Wig focussed on the door. He beckoned Jake towards him, leading him out into a narrow hallway with doors all around.

“What does this friend of yours look like?” Wig asked.

“Italian, with somewhat dark skin. Shorter than me, but not by much.”

Recognition flooded Wig's eyes, along with sorrow. “I know the guy. De Marco's very own,” Wig said, tiredness seeping into his voice. “Come this way.”

## Chapter Thirty Eight

Wig led Jake through the winding hallways which stretched across the whole compound. Jake wondered about the location of the compound. In another country?

Metal clanged throughout the compounds, echoing across the walls before reaching Jake's ears. Jake tried to block out the noises, but the adrenaline in his body wouldn't let him. His mind was on high alert, and every noise caused his fear to peak before steadily falling.

"Where is he?" Jake asked as they crawled through the narrow hallways. They turned left at a corner. A hand blocked Jake's path.

"He's far, and wait here." Wig released the hand across Jake, stepped forwards and craned his neck around the turn. He thrust his head back and waited a few seconds, before glancing again.

Coast clear, he waved Jake over and they hugged the wall as they crouched along the next hallway. Spy missions following similar paths sprung to Jake's mind. But spies were professionals. Jake wasn't.

"Are you sure where he is?" Jake asked.

Wig glared at him and placed a finger to his lips as they continued. Doors surrounded them, and every acute noise from inside the rooms hit Jake. Screams of torture caused Jake to jump, and chuckles from disgusting men. Jake could see the ceiling through the window on the doors. Some

were lit by massive bulbs above the centre, as Jake's room had been. Others were dark. The 'business' in those rooms had finished.

"This way," Wig said, leaning over the next turn, this one to the right. Jake flicked a glance over the side and saw a man push a little girl through a door and lock it behind him.

"We can't let them get away with...this," Jake said as Wig pulled him through to the other wall.

"Shut up," Wig said. "We need to get out with this Leon of yours. Stop talking. We can't save everyone."

"So we're just gonna let them?" Jake wasn't trying to be a hero, but letting little kids get murdered, raped, and tortured weighed on his conscience. If he didn't stop it...he was as responsible, wasn't he?

"You think I don't know that," Wig said, glaring at Jake. The pain in Wig's eyes was apparent, and Jake broke the gaze. "I know what happens here. Heck—" Wig caught himself and paused for a second. "I need to stop them all from dying. And we will. After we get out."

Jake nodded and followed Wig through the next hallway. The tension in the air tugged at his clothes, and caused heat to run through him. Sweat broke on his forehead, and he wiped it off with a hand. His hair was slick from the liquid, and his shirt sleeves stuck to his arms.

"It's this door," Wig said after a few more minutes of traversing.

Fear thrummed through Jake at what he would uncover behind the metal door. The gleam from the metal shone in his eyes, and Jake averted his gaze. The door was the same as any other, solid metal, shiny, and with a few splashes of blood on the outside. Jake's eyes found the door's window. The room was lit inside, and voices floated through the door to them. The words spoken were lost on Jake.

“What do we do?” Jake asked, voice straining. Tiredness racked him, his legs trembling, his arms sore from holding onto the knife hard.

“We’ll go in together,” Wig said, flipping the knife in his hand. A nervous habit. “I have a plan. But it might not work. We’ll see.”

Jake decided to trust the mystery man. Wig paused for a moment and took a breath.

“Hurry,” Jake said, clangs sounding in the distance. People were coming closer, no doubt about to see Wig and Jake in the middle of a hallway in the open.

Wig nodded and placed a hand against the locks on the outside of a door. There wasn’t a keyhole, but instead a pass lock as well as a bolt. It reminded Jake of the locks in Leon’s house, the ones on his bedroom door.

*I’m coming for you, Leon. Don’t you worry.*

Wig placed a hand against the locks. He input the passcode quickly as the clangs increased behind Jake. Footsteps. Lots of them.

“Quick,” Jake said, and Wig cut the bolt’s lever with a massive thud. Then, he swung open the door.

The first thing that met Jake was De Marco’s head snapping to the open doorway. Wig and Jake stepped inside, before the door shut behind them, dulling the clangs.

The silence ate at Jake. The air crackled with tension.

An object was in De Marco’s hand.

A gun.

De Marco raised it and pointed it at Wig, and then at Jake. He switched between the two at intervals to make sure neither made a move. Jake stared into the barrel, his life flashing in the darkness.

That weapon could end everything. And Jake understood how real the possibility was, for the first time.

“What is this about?” De Marco asked, eyes shifting from Wig to Jake. “Before I take your head off.” He sneered at Jake, but Jake held his head high. The confidence running through him was palpable, and Jake kept his shoulders back and chest out despite the ache.

“I...he wanted to see Leon,” Wig said. He had a plan, but the stutter spoke otherwise. A sliver of panic snuck into Jake. If Wig’s plan was to fail...

Jake’s gaze tore from De Marco and fixed itself to Leon in the chair in the centre of the room, underneath the high light. Blood was splattered over his head and his clothes, illuminated by the light above him, and for a moment Jake thought Leon was dead. Only the small rise of his chest spoke of life within Leon’s frail body, but Jake’s worries were heightened. If they weren’t quick, Leon might die from sheer blood loss alone.

Jake tore his eyes away from Leon and back to De Marco, whose eyes were narrowed as suspicion ran through those red orbs.

“What are you talking about?” De Marco said, glancing at Jake. He pointed the gun at Wig and cocked it. “You were meant to...play with him, torture him. Not let him free. What if he runs away?”

Wig ran a hand across his brow to wipe the sweat away. He turned to Jake, and the fear in his eyes was unmistakable. Jake hoped, with all his heart, that Wig could get them all out of here. Whatever method he chose.

“And what are those weapons?” De Marco said, gesturing to the knives in both Wig and Jake’s hands with his gun.

“We...” Wig tried to say, but the blood was a testament to their actions with the blades.

“You what?” De Marco said, snarling and stalking closer. Jake could smell the cigarettes in the air, and the stench of blood made its way to his nostrils. It smelt the same as Leon’s bedroom when Jake had broken in. A sign of what occurred in this deadly room.

“You,” De Marco said, gun edging closer to Wig’s face, “are a weird friend of mine. I do not know your motive.”

Wig stepped back, gaze fixed on De Marco. Jake glanced at Leon again, who was tied up the same way Jake had been. Jake desperately wanted to free Leon from his bounds, but that would get him killed. He needed to find a better way, a faster method, to get Leon free.

“Drop the knives,” De Marco ordered.

Wig’s hand twitched.

“Drop it.”

Wig slowly unclenched his fingers, one at a time, and released the knife. It clanged. Jake winced with the piercing sound.

“You, too,” De Marco said, his gun pointed at Jake.

Jake threw his knife away. It skittered across the floor and came to rest near Leon, but not close enough.

*Damnit*, Jake thought. If Leon could’ve got that knife and freed himself somehow...

“Good,” De Marco said, circling the duo of Jake and Wig. Wig clenched his fist but neither said nor did anything. “I like to play with people,” De Marco said. “Leon here is my best toy. But you two can join him. Especially Jake, you imbecile.”

“How did you know I was in there?” Jake asked, referring to De Marco barging back home after Jake broke in.

“Radio signals,” De Marco snarled, teeth bared. “I hear everything. Your screams shall give me great pleasure, like Leon here.”

Leon’s eyes snapped open at the mention of his name. The desperation hidden in his grey orbs spoke out to Jake. But Jake was powerless. Leon’s eyes widened as De Marco pushed the gun in Jake’s direction.

“Who are you?” De Marco said, face now inches away from Wig. “Who do you work for?”

Wig held his ground. “Why on earth should I tell you?”

“I am confused,” De Marco said. “You passed the process of initiation. And you still...kill my men. Why?”

*Initiation? What is he on about?*

De Marco, as if hearing Jake’s internal question, switched his focus to the boy. “You do not know what this man has done? He is as...beautiful as the rest of us.”

Jake glanced at Wig. Wig was meant to be one of the good guys, a spy or something like that. Or one of De Marco’s men who had a change of heart.

But he was as heartless as the rest of them, if what De Marco said was true.

Jake stepped away from them both.

“He is one of us,” De Marco said. “He has raped the most, done the most for me.” De Marco pressed the gun into Wig’s mid-section, the barrel hot. “And now he betrays me. Who did you kill? And who do you work for?”

Wig shivered like they were in a freezer. Waves of fear rolled off Wig’s body like an aura. De Marco was terrifying, and the pressure against Wig’s body from the gun intensified.



“Tell me,” De Marco ordered.

Wig stepped back, but De Marco stepped with him. “Tell me,” he said again.

“Never,” said Wig.

Jake’s surveyed the room. He needed to find a method of taking down De Marco, since that would free Leon. But the room was bare, apart from the knife on the floor. If only he could get to it.

He glanced at Leon, whose eyes were fixed on the scene. The sadness held within passed through the tension in the air and smacked Jake in the face.

The truth hit Jake as he heard De Marco threatening Wig with death and torture in the periphery of his surroundings.

Jake had failed. All his life, he had been a failure. His mum said so, as did Danny and Bruce at school. And, looking at Leon’s near lifeless form in front of him, the darkness in his eyes, the blood seeping from countless wounds across his skin, Jake had failed again.

Then, a metallic gleam flashed in Jake’s vision.

The knife. It lay near Leon’s foot. Jake glanced at it, then switched his vision to Leon, asking the question with his eyes.

Leon nodded, a slight inclination of his head that caused visible pain to spark across his face. Leon scrunched his eyebrows as concentration overtook him. He pulled at his bounds to stretch his legs to the brink, trying to toe the knife.

Jake’s gaze flitted to De Marco, who had Wig against a wall. He whispered threats into Wig’s ear, each causing Wig’s face to redden further. From all accounts, Wig was a wimp in De Marco’s presence, and was even more so when he accompanied Gruff when Jake first woke up.

“You want to die?” De Marco asked.

Leon’s leg was agonisingly close to the knife.

“No,” Wig squeezed out through spent lungs. “But you deserve to die for your crimes.”

De Marco gave a laugh. Leon was almost there. Another inch or two.

“You say *my* crimes. You have done all the crimes that I am guilty of. You are no better.”

Jake prayed that Leon would reach it in time. Time was dwindling as the seconds flitted by.

Leon’s leg almost popped as he stretched it beyond its limits. His foot scraped the edge of the knife, before Leon gave a huge heave of his entire lower body. A groan escaped Leon’s lips as his foot connected with the knife.

Leon had perfect aim. It skidded across the floor towards Jake.

Jake’s foot trapped the knife and he picked it up as De Marco turned.

“What are you—”

But Wig slammed a fist into the back of De Marco’s head.

A gunshot went off. Jake could hear the bullet whizz past his ear as he ducked. It clanged the metal behind him, but the heat from the bullet caressed Jake’s ear.

“Get him,” Wig said, pushing De Marco to the floor as another gunshot erupted. It echoed as the bullet flew wayward. Wig and De Marco were on the floor brawling, as Wig had done with Gruff.

Jake held the knife. The weapon that could end everything.

He rushed over to the fighting men, who rolled over each other trying to regain control of the grappling. Jake had to time it perfectly. He waited for

Wig to gain control of top position, as if they were fighting an MMA match, and then he slashed with the knife.

He sank the gleaming, sharp tip into De Marco's cheek. The knife slipped off his face, but the cut was enough to elicit a howl of pain from De Marco.

Wig was thrown off in a fit of rage, but by then Jake had done enough damage.

The gun, during the fight on the floor, had been flung across the room. To where Leon was bound.

It was then that Leon rose from the seat. The ropes around his hands fell to the floor, and his raw, red wrists released themselves. He bent and grabbed the gun in his shaking hands, his fingers painted crimson, as were his eyes.

"Leonardo," De Marco called, raising his bloodshot eyes.

A look overcame Leon. Darkness, anger, a pain Jake had never seen on his face. The rage coursing through Leon was palpable, and passed through to both Wig and Jake.

Leon pointed the gun.

"Leonardo, please," De Marco cried, edging backwards on his butt until he hit the wall. His head lolled backwards as blood from Jake's cut leaked down his chin.

Jake was frozen, gaze switching from Leon, who held the gun, to De Marco, who had lost the battle. Jake wasn't the one to end it.

Leon was.

Wig stood and shut the door. He used the outside locks to make sure no one else interrupted, trying to save De Marco as his death played out.

“You...are not my father,” Leon said, voice strained, croaky, at the brink of its use. His vocal cords had been stretched by the screaming, but Leon still fought for a voice.

“I am...please.” De Marco’s hands rose in defence, but then fell back to his sides, limp.

“You were never my father. No father...” Leon trailed off, the words lost to him as anger dictated his actions. Leon didn’t need to finish his sentence, and De Marco would never get to answer for his crimes.

The gunshot went off, followed by a squelch. Leon’s aim was perfect. Blood splashed from De Marco’s skull to the rest of the wall, little dots and drips splattering the metal. De Marco’s limp body fell to its side, his eyes clamped shut.

A last expression of fear. A last expression of desperation.

“Come on,” Wig said, beckoning Leon and Jake forward. Leon still held the gun, but it was pointed down. Jake stepped towards Leon, thoughts of what to say racing through him.

No time existed for reunions, however.

Voices floated towards them from outside. Urgent shouts, of those who heard the gunshot, and came to avenge De Marco. People gunning for the trio’s heads. Wig, Jake, and Leon weren’t out of it yet.

They’d got rid of the devil.

But the rest of hell had yet to be escaped.

## Chapter Thirty Nine

“Are we getting out through the front?” Jake asked, weaning his eyes from the metal door to Wig, who shook his head.

“I’ve got no clue,” Wig said, shaking his hands about to get the sense back into them after the fight. The bloody knife was in his hands, and he raised it. “If they come, we’re gonna have to fight our way out.”

Jake glanced at Leon, whose palm wrapped over the gun. “Don’t kill anymore,” Jake said.

“Why not? What they did to me...” Leon’s voice wore a hatred Jake had never witnessed before. How could someone bottle so much emotion in themselves and not erupt?

“Please,” Jake repeated. Jake had been lucky not to kill anyone so far. Leon already gave enough damage. Any more lives lost would be—

A shout erupted, followed by boots hammering the floor.

“They’re here,” Wig said, trying to barricade the door with his body. The room was bare, with nothing that could stop the door from opening. They would have to hope—

Banging ensued on the other side, and voices attacked them through the door.

“Damnit,” Wig groaned. He pushed a shoulder into the door, but he was too weak. His strength waned, before giving way completely.

The door almost blew off its hinges and Wig was sent sprawling to the ground. Jake hurried over and hauled Wig up.

Leon was cold, ice in his veins, a gloom passing through his eyes. “Everyone, stop,” he said, pointing the gun at those entering the room.

“What is going on?” a voice said. It was the same man as before, the one who Jake had taken out. The drunkard, Biker. Blood splattered his face, but his sardonic grin made Jake’s blood boil.

They were monsters. The lot of them.

“Let’s wait a second,” Wig said, raising his hands defensively. The knife was wedged between his legs. The other men with Biker, a man with an Italian cap and another who wore dreadlocks, shook their heads.

“You have another fight on hands,” Dreads said, pointing his own knife at Wig like a sword. “We shall fight honourably. You have murdered my comrade.”

Wig gave a short laugh, though the mirth dissolved into the tension crackling the air. “He is not your comrade. He’d kill you if it came to it.”

“You were one of us,” Biker said. “Why did you change?”

“Nasty bastards,” Wig said, spitting at the feet of Biker. The saliva spread across the floor and stuck to Biker’s boot.

“You will pay for that,” Biker said.

Wig gripped the knife again and pointed it at Biker. “Well, why don’t you come and get me?”

“No,” Jake shouted as Biker leapt forwards. But the damage was done.

Another two gunshots rang out, and Biker collapsed to the floor. Two holes lined his body. One on his forehead, another on his chest. Smoke rose from both holes.

He was dead, and the blood pooling beside him wasn't required as evidence.

"Leon," Jake called, stumbling over to the boy. He placed a hand on his shoulder and met his gaze. "No more killing, please."

Leon's eyes were red. The staunch glare on his face was chilling. "No. They must all die. You do not know what they..." Leon shrugged off Jake's hand and pointed the gun again.

"No," Jake shouted, but Leon's mind was made.

The other two men were shot next, both in the legs. Leon was merciless towards them, shooting again, but missing as the recoil sent his aim wayward. Jake grabbed the gun from Leon's hand and chucked it to the ground to where De Marco's body rested.

"Leon, calm down," Jake said. Jake couldn't let him kill anymore. Whilst they deserved it, Jake couldn't let that kind of guilty conscience weigh Leon down for the rest of his life.

"They have ruined my life," Leon said, jabbing a finger towards the two men writhing on the floor in pain. They cried out as their bodies hopped around on the floor, then unconsciousness took over them.

"He's right," Wig said. "I was a part of them."

"You shut up," Leon said, glaring at Wig. "The only reason I didn't kill you is because you helped me get free."

"I know what I did," Wig said, staring at the ground. The knife was clenched in his right hand. He tightened his grip around the hilt and stalked forwards, motive laid bare to see. "These bastards deserve to die, as well as me. I could finish the job now."

"There must be more people around here," Jake said, eyes snapping from the downed men to the open door. If more of them turned up, the

battle would turn into a full-scale war.

“We need to get out of here,” Wig said, lumbering towards the door on exhausted legs. Tiredness weighed down Jake’s movements, so Leon placed a hand on the small of his back and pushed.

“Come on,” Leon said, and they walked out of the room into the dark hallway. All the lights were off, rendering their vision to only a few metres in front of them.

“Wait,” Jake said, reaching for his pocket. He thumbed the exterior of his pocket, and a familiar bump presented itself. His phone was still there!

He turned it on and flicked to the flashlight.

“I made sure they didn’t take it from you,” Wig said, nodding at Jake’s phone.

Jake paused. That sounded odd. “Who are you?” he asked for what felt like the tenth time that day.

“Some kind of spy. You don’t need to know any more. We need to move.”

Footfalls approached them, boots thudding down the adjacent hallway. More killers, more monsters that Jake, Wig, and Leon would have to deal with.

The hairs on Jake’s arms stood as he held the knife. Blood already stained the metallic tip, and nervousness ate at Jake with the prospect of repeating what damage he had already caused.

They crawled through the hallways away from the footsteps. Backing away before turning a corner into another corridor.

“There’s more people in there,” Jake said, the image of the girl being led inside flashing in his mind. He had to get them.



“We need to save the other children,” Leon said, voice hollow and strained. “They are worse state than me.”

“We don’t have time,” Wig said, breathing heavily as he led them another few metres to a corner.

“You cannot say anything,” Leon said, walking back to the room. “You were the one touching them.”

Wig sighed and ran to where Leon was. Wig’s gaze kept low as they turned back to the door and opened it. Wig knew the passcode, so he was needed if they were to get everyone out.

The little girl inside was asleep, but they didn’t have time. The footsteps near them intensified from dull thuds to hammers smacking the floor.

Jake rushed to the girl and cut her ropes with his knife. Her blond hair, streaked with blood, stuck to her forehead. Her head lay limp by her side. She wasn’t dead, but the life she hung onto was bare. Jake lifted her out as she woke up.

A shrill scream tore through the air.

“Please, don’t,” she cried, fear thrumming through her shaking, little form.

“We won’t do anything,” Jake said, trying to paint a reassuring smile on his face. “We’re getting you out of here. Hold on.”

But there was no time. The footsteps slowed as they closed in on the open door. Figures emerged. Massive, hulking figures.

Trepidation ebbed through Jake’s arm as he raised the knife.

“Who is it?” Wig asked, his voice echoing through the room.

“He touched me,” the girl said. She latched her hands around Jake’s arm whilst pointing to Wig.

“I know,” Jake said, his respect for Wig dropping even lower. “But he’s helping us get you out.”

“I’m scared,” the girl whispered, rubbing her head into Jake’s side. Jake’s heart broke, but he tightened his hold on the knife and stared at the two men who came in. He couldn’t let emotions cloud his actions.

“I should have got the gun,” Leon said.

Jake nodded. Even the mere threat of the gun was a deadly weapon. Instead, they’d have to deal with the two figures, both muscle men with hard faces like De Marco.

“Gareth,” the muscle man on the left said, pointing a finger at Wig. “What are you doing helping them? De Marco will have your head, you fool.”

Wig, or Gareth, spat on the floor. “He won’t do anything.”

“You say that, but you were always the most scared of him,” the second muscle man said. “You pussy.”

The insult didn’t faze Wig for a second. “He’s dead. Dead for good.”

Anger flashed in the muscle men’s eyes. Both muscle men lunged forwards, hands outstretched. Gareth side-stepped them with ease and they crumbled to the floor under the momentum of their weight. They scrambled to their feet, but Gareth forced them back down with strong leg kicks.

“Give me the knife,” Leon commanded, resolve lacing his voice.

Jake thrust it into his palm, and Leon joined the fight as Jake and the girl watched. The hand on Jake’s arm tightened, and Jake looked down at the girl. She stared at the fight, her gaze transfixed.

Leon slashed with fervour, with a determination and venom Jake had never witnessed before. The sweat on Leon’s brow dripped off his chin and flung around with every hack.

In a typical fight, the musclemen would win. But muscles were nothing when two knives slammed into you, full to the hilt, with hatred boiling within the attackers.

Another twenty seconds of brawling passed before the mission was complete. Leon and Gareth stood up, blood staining their clothes and clinging to their faces. They breathed in gasps and wiped their foreheads. Leon's slick hair stuck to his forehead, whilst Gareth swayed in an attempt to balance himself.

Jake didn't want to look, but his body betrayed him. The muscle men had slack faces, with blood seeping from their features. Their arms were slashed to shreds, their faces unrecognisable.

"Are they gone?" a soft voice, the girl's, said.

"I think so," said Jake, turning her head away from the scene. One so young shouldn't have to witness death.

"Let's go," Leon said, wiping the knife on his clothes and starting towards the door.

"No need," Gareth said, pointing to Jake's phone. Leon turned in puzzlement.

Confusion swam to the surface of Jake's mind. "What? Want me to call a taxi or something?"

The girl giggled at his side, her laughter bouncing off the room and lightening the room's atmosphere.

Gareth shook his head. "You've been tracked this whole time. By a mate of yours. And he's the one who told the police force where you were."

A face flashed in Jake's mind. *Yin, it must've been. He's a genius, he is.* "All this time," Jake whispered beneath his breath.

“What are you talking about?” Leon said, gaze switching from Jake to Gareth.

“Leon,” Jake called. “Yin and the group had a plan to save you from your dad. I was caught by him before, but Yin must have tracked my phone the entire time.”

“He’s right,” Gareth said, brushing off the tip of his knife against his jeans. Blood stained the blue fabric. “That’s when the police messaged me. And I could get you guys out with the police coming here.”

“So it was your plan all along?” Jake asked. “To get everyone out of here?”

“Something like that,” Gareth said. “I’m a special forces agent. I have to...sin and watch the others in order to do my job. The real evidence was meant to be presented in a few months, but when a kid’s got the evidence and is phoning the station twelve times, you can’t ignore them.”

“But you...” Leon’s eyes bugged out as his voice trailed off.

Gareth sat on the floor cross-legged, hands clasped in his lap, eyes downcast. “I’m sorry, for everything,” Gareth said. “I didn’t stop them, I didn’t do anything to them for so long. It was all part of the plan, as stupid as the plan was. We should’ve...”

“What’s De Marco doing here?” Jake asked, sitting down as well with the girl next to him. She leaned into his touch, placing her warm, bloody head against his shoulder.

*I’m probably the first friendly she’s seen in a while,* Jake thought sadly.

“He’s some kind of sex trafficker of young kids,” Gareth said. “Paedophile rings for the rich, I guess. Or maybe something else.”

“So, where are we?” Jake asked.

“In one of his compounds. These aren’t the proper rings, those are much more secret and we’ll probably never find them. These rings are everywhere, he’s just one supplier. But he does get money from the lesser paedophiles, like the ones we just killed.”

“And Leon was a part of that?” Jake asked, shifting his gaze to the boy whose body froze, bloody knife in hand.

“I am,” Leon said. “He was doing this to me...the whole time, even at home. He brought me to England for this. I am not even his son.”

Realisation thrummed through Jake. It all made sense. The way De Marco treated him, the fake names. Hiding his past. Why Leon didn’t want to reveal anything about himself or his parents. Calling him Leon instead of his full name. It was all a hoax, a cover-up.

“He took Leon to England to hide crimes in Italy, and smuggle him into the paedophile ring,” Gareth said, wiping sweat from his brow and sniffing the stale air. “We don’t know why people go through things like this. Money, or maybe there’s something dark within a man, something disturbing that needs release.”

“He was in Italian gangs,” Leon said. “De Marco and my father were friends before De Marco mixed with the wrong people. They showed him the money with a life of crime, and De Marco followed that.”

“Do you know anyone else associated with him?” Gareth asked.

“I know their faces, but names and locations, no.” Leon sighed. “But it does not matter. Crimes were done. But it is over now.”

Gareth shook his head. “It’s never over. The mental scars remain, even for someone trained like me. I can’t imagine what it’s like for the rest of you.” He raised his head to Jake. “This is just one of the rings we’ve found. Now, it’s my job to go and bust the next one.”

The darkness in his eyes was not lost to Jake, the soulless nature of his work had taken a toll.

“You don’t want to, do you?” Jake asked.

Gareth let his shoulders sink and wrung his hands. “It’s my job, so what can I do? Sometimes, you have to suffer in order to get the bigger thing, right.”

Jake nodded, his own experiences jumping to mind. He’d gone through hell, suffered in a way he hadn’t anticipated, in order to save Leon. Leon had suffered the most, being tortured and raped, alone in a metal chamber, just so he could escape and kill De Marco.

“You escaped the ropes easily,” Jake said, remembering the way Leon had tossed them to the ground like annoying bracelets.

“I used to do escape artist in Italy,” Leon said with a laugh. “It was my little trick I learnt from my father. De Marco did not know that.”

How he could laugh after the day he’d had Jake didn’t know.

The room they sat in was different to the others, since it had tall windows on both sides. Jake glanced outside, into the dark night that rolled with the shifting clouds. Lights appeared, illuminating the bloodstains on the murky glass. Panic leapt to his throat, but Gareth, who followed his gaze, chuckled.

“That’s just the police,” Gareth said. He stood and brushed off his jeans. “They’re coming to get me and take you guys home. Thank your friend for us, yeah. Persistent as hell.”

Jake gave a short snort. “I will,” he said. “I’ll thank *all* my friends.”

Leon’s head turned to him. A grin painted his face, though his eyes spoke of the trauma he underwent. Jake may have come to save him and

succeeded, but the mental cost to Leon would be accounted for in the coming months.

“Let’s get out of here,” Gareth said, leading Jake and Leon out of the room. The girl, who revealed her name as Amber, held onto Jake’s hand as they strolled out, leaving the stench of blood and guts and death behind.

“The force will get everyone else in here,” Gareth said. “There’s more kids. But don’t you two worry. You’ve done a good job, boys. You should be proud of yourselves.”

“What about me?” Leon asked. “I killed people.”

Gareth stroked his chin as they rounded the corner. “You’ll be fine. The police turn a blind eye when its criminals being killed, especially predators. Not like anyone’s going to prosecute you for it, anyway.”

A shiver of pride drummed through Jake. Not just at Gareth’s words, but the success of his plan finally dawning on him. It was all Turlin had told him. And more and more. He’d accomplished his mission. With a substantial amount of help, they had saved not Leon, but everyone being tortured at the compound. They had stopped a serial paedophile. A lifetime criminal, someone who swindled innocence for profit.

“We did good,” Leon said, eye-bags protruding like badges of exhaustion as he smiled. The terrors he endured were painted across his pupils, grey like a brewing storm. The horrors within those eyes could span lifetimes.

“Yeah,” said Jake, wrapping an arm around Leon’s shoulders, his other arm being held by Amber. They limped out of the compound to the blaring of sirens and flashing of red and blue neon lights. Jake’s grip tightened on Leon, holding his friend close. “We did amazing.”

## Chapter Fourty

School started again the next week, though the will to do work had passed Jake. Concentration eluded Jake as he sat in form time, eyes fixed on the board but mind wandering elsewhere. Soreness from that day racked his muscles, as did the desire to sleep for ten hours at a time. After the events of the previous week, he was spent.

His mum had found out what happened the next day, and anger couldn't describe her emotions vividly enough.

"Why did you put yourself in danger like that?" she asked, a glare marring her face. "After I asked you *not* to plan something, or commit a stupid act."

Jake kept silent, playing with his duvet in his fingers. "I *had* to, Mum. You didn't see what he was going through, what they were all suffering."

"That may be, but it was stupid plans and stupid ideas. You're still young, you don't have to save the world. What did I expect." Jake noticed her words. She didn't say he was a failure. Instead, she said, "Well, you got the job done. And you only have a few injuries to show for it. Thank God." She heaved a sigh that sank her shoulders. A thin smile formed. Small, but enough for the worry in Jake's mind to recede.

Jake let a small grin reveal itself.

"Don't think you aren't grounded," his mum said.



The grin vanished in an instant.

“That’s not fair.”

“Play hero all you want,” his mum said with a laugh. “But I’m your mother, and you ain’t doing that again.”

Jake smiled back. “I’ll make sure next time I tell you before I leave.”

His mum tackled him in a hug and rubbed her knuckles on his head. She, for a singular moment in time, and hopefully for more, turned into the mum of old. The one Jake remembered in his childhood. The roaring figure of solidarity in his life, when his dad had left.

“I’m sorry for not believing you,” his mum said after releasing him from the death grip.

“Don’t worry,” Jake said. “I...I’d be lying if I said I was sorry for leaving. But I’ll try next time to inform you of my escapades.”

“There won’t be a next time, young man,” his mum laughed, before announcing dinner was in half an hour and leaving.

Jake had read manga for the rest of the evening, but for the first time, a block didn’t pervade his thoughts of manga. Before, he’d sworn off the pages because his dad had disappeared from his life. These were all gifts from his dad, from a happier time when he was around. But Jake didn’t need him anymore. He was independent, a person with a sense of self. Not a borrowed personality from his father.

He’d even started using his diary again. His life wasn’t one of peril, of self-doubt, or invading thoughts that never receded. He could write about the club, write about eating out with Yin and Gerry, write about shopping with his mum. The pen and the page held the details of his life, and the ink was a bright shade of black.

His mum hinted at something special for his birthday, which came soon. What it was, however, Jake didn't know. But the surprise would be good, nonetheless.

Jake was his own person. And if he decided to read manga, or start another hobby, that was the most authentic version of himself. To say the manga club had been surprised would be an understatement. He was avidly reading now, managing to churn through several volumes a day, and not seeming to stop for a time either. That holiday, Jake had checked out God knows how many books at the library, the intention to burn through them all in his mind.

"You're insatiable," Amy said.

"Big words," Jake said, shaking his head and shoving it back into the manga he was reading next, a re-read of *One Punch Man*.

"Fine," Amy said. "You're reading. A lot. Happy with my simplification of language?"

"That's better," Jake said, taking a sip from his juice box. "But not enough."

Gerry and Nathaniel laughed, having come back from their vacations. Gerry's hair had grown a lot, and she dyed it blond at the end. It reminded Jake of Amber, who he hadn't seen in weeks. The police told him she'd been returned to her parents, who were no doubt grateful.

Yin sat to the side, reaching for more volumes on the bookshelves. "Where's Leon?" he asked, seeing as he hadn't turned up. His usual seat, next to Jake on the comfy beanbags, hadn't felt his touch in weeks.

Jake looked up. His heart sank and he closed the manga in his hands. "He was with us, and then the police took him. And then he was gone."

The others held their eyes downcast, questions of Leon arising in their mind. The group was incomplete, Leon's absence like an irregular dip in an otherwise perfectly circular lake.

*Where are you, Leon?* Jake thought, but no answers came until school started.

Jake sat in form time, leaning back in his chair. Though his posture was relaxed, his mind was wrought with thoughts of a grey-eyed boy with olive skin. Earlier that day, Danny and Bruce had tried to get to him, pushing him around and taking his bag before school. Jake had shrugged, not reacted the way they wanted, and walked to class. If he needed his bag back, which he didn't since it was the first day of term, he could ask a teacher and get Danny and Bruce in trouble. No biggie.

They returned the bag with a slam once form time started. Jake grinned. The tactic had worked. *Don't give them the reaction, and they'll stop bullying.* He should've employed it much sooner.

Brewster had started the register, but he didn't recite Leon's name. Jake was troubled. *Did Leon leave the school entirely?* Panic crept up Jake's throat in its customary fashion. Was Jake to never see the boy again?

After class, Jake all but sprinted up to Brewster and slapped a hand on his desk. The teacher glanced up, a little alarmed.

"Do you know what happened to him?" he asked.

Brewster's gaze carried confusion. "Who are you on about?"

"Leon, of course. What happened to him?"

Brewster shrugged. "I don't know. Do you not have his contact? You can ask him yourself."

Jake shook his head as he left the room. He rubbed fingers against his temples, the need to see Leon, to make sure he was fine, tearing through

every fibre of his being. He had almost given his life for Leon, and not knowing his situation ate at Jake's stomach like a knife being raked across flesh.

What if Leon was taken away? What if he was incriminated for killing those men? Theories whirled in his mind as he left school that day. The worry intensified as he walked to the bus stop leading home. Students surrounded him on all sides, but Jake paid them no mind. He didn't care what others thought anymore, not after the experienced he'd lived through.

Then, an idea swept through him. *The forest*. That was the only way to calm down. And he needed some of that peace, even just a drop of it. From Hope, from Lake Hurricane.

Jake ran there, legs pumping, feet hammering the ground. He peeled open the fence at the bottom and shoved his lanky body into the hole. The winter cold bit at him, but the new jacket was enough to insulate him from the worst of it. He emerged from the hole and shook off a few leaves. He rounded the corner of a tree and stared at the bush that led to Hope, the secret gateway to peace Jake discovered years ago. He rushed through, ignoring the shrubbery digging into his calloused hands.

Leon was sitting at the base of Hope, leaning against the thick trunk, hands clasped, head tilting backwards.

Jake's eyes bugged and he sprinted over. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in school?" The questions fired from Jake's mouth like bullets.

"Calm down," Leon said, the two words causing Jake's heart rate to slow down and a sliver of relaxation to enter his body. His shoulders deflated.

"You still haven't answered my question," Jake said.

“I will.”

Jake waited, standing up. When Leon remained quiet, Jake crossed over to one of Hope’s massive roots and sat, resting his legs flat against the ground.

“I will be leaving school for a little bit,” Leon revealed.

Jake’s eyes snapped open. He sat up in an instant. “Why? Why can’t you stay?”

“They said I must have some...rehab, I think was the word. Mental rehab. Therapy, kind of.”

Outrage flooded Jake. “Rehab for what? You’re not a psycho.”

Leon met Jake’s gaze and held it. “I killed three people. And have been tortured for years. I need some kind of guidance now. Even just a little bit. I...my mind is not right, and you know that. The way I killed those men.”

Jake settled back against the root. Even *he* had mental scars, and nightmares no doubt would appear. He couldn’t fathom what images flashed in Leon’s mind. “I guess I can understand that,” he said. “But they were the ones torturing you. That was a normal reaction.”

“But you tried to stop me, remember. I was crazy,” Leon said. He sighed, as if exhaling all the problems of his previously troubled life, before continuing. “That is why I agreed to it. I have to, for my own sake.”

“And then you’ll come back, right?”

“I will, but I am not sure when. They will move me to a home soon. I am at a foster home now, but the counselling has their own place for me to stay. I will be there for however long.”

“How long did they say?”

Leon fidgeted with his hands, clasping them before letting them hang. He collected them in his lap once more. “Six months, maybe longer. It

depends on how messed my brain is.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake said.

Bewilderment crossed Leon’s face. “Why do you say that?”

“I could’ve saved you way before. But I was delaying and delaying for the longest time. I...knew something was up, but we had no evidence. I should’ve just done everything sooner.”

“No, it is not your fault,” Leon said. “I should have stopped De Marco. I had chances. I could have killed him a long time before, but my fear held me back. Killing him—that was the first time I overcame my fears.”

Jake stared at Lake Hurricane from behind Hope. The lake shone in the dim sunlight which filtered through the canopy of autumn’s last leaves. It reflected into Jake’s eyes, brightening his world. The dip in Lake Hurricane no longer caught Jake’s vision. It was as much a part of the lake as the uniform circle around the rest of the water. The lake was whole.

The trees released a musky scent which sent peace threading through Jake’s body. His muscles relaxed for the first time in months, tension being exhaled as Jake’s body sank into the moss beneath him.

“We’re friends again, right?” Jake asked. “Even after what you said?”

Visible confusion crossed Leon. “Of course. That was never in doubt. I was angry when I said those words. Not angry at you. Angry at the world.”

The peace Jake had searched for the last three to four years, the peace that eluded him for so long, coalesced around his body. Jake basked in it, letting it wash over him like an ethereal shower. He looked up at the deep sky covered in a sheet of white. Snow would fall later that day, the forecast had said.

The clouds hid a majestic sun, bright and radiating. Jake reached a hand out, as if to touch it, the peace he’d sought for so long pushing his hand

further than he thought possible, like Leon had pushed his leg to kick the knife towards Jake.

“What are you doing?” Leon asked.

Jake didn’t glance over, but instead stretched his hand as far as his arm would allow. He had self-worth, an identity, and Turlin said as much when they met in school earlier that day. He’d framed a picture of Jake on his wall, after being told of Jake’s heroics. It was an old image of Jake in year seven, which Turlin would update once Jake left Liston High.

Turlin was proud of Jake. That pride floated through Jake’s mind. He’d saved Leon, with help from those at the manga club. He’d stopped De Marco, stopped one of the paedophile suppliers from continuing their crimes.

The truth set in Jake’s mind and fuelled his arm. He extended it further, as if trying to grip the distant yet close sun within his palm. Anything could be reached. Even that which was once thought impossible, thought beyond the farthest stretches of life.

All one had to do was muster the strength to reach out far enough and grab it.

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To receive information on new releases and other updates, sign up for Jacob Hunter’s mailing list by [clicking here](#). He promises to never spam.

A review would help the author massively. Please, kindly leave a review of this book if you enjoyed it.

# Afterword

This is the place where I write a bunch of stuff about the story, and how I came to write it, and my thought process behind certain things. Been a while since I've done this.

The idea started out as something vastly different. I had a vision of the ending in my mind, some kind of finale at the rooftop of Jake and Leon's school. Leon was initially meant to be a mentally ill psychopathic teenager that Jake befriends due to sheer desperation. And then there's a whole rollercoaster that Jake goes through as a result.

But when I started writing this book without an outline, without a formal plan, the first scene stemmed from me exploring how desperate someone could be for their own peace, for their own solitude and comfort. I introduced Leon as planned when he joins the school.

But then it all changed. Instead of having a story encompassing the struggle within Jake to stop Leon from being a psychopath, it turned into a coming of age story centred around Jake. Turlin was never a force I wanted to explore in this book, since it was meant to be a novella at first with one plotline. But as the story unravelled, I found myself more and more adding depth to Jake's character arc, trying to see how I could reel everything in and connect the dots—his relationship with his mum, with Leon, with Hugo/De Marco, with Turlin, with himself—at the end.



Definitely my best novel to date, out of the seven I've written. It was thoroughly enjoyable to write. And I hope you enjoyed reading it as much.

As I always say when I finish a book: onto the next one! Post-Apocalypse time! I hope you join me there.