

The background features a faint, stylized illustration of a snake coiled around a globe. Overlaid on this is the Python logo, which consists of two interlocking snakes. The word "PYTHON" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, with the 'O' replaced by the Python logo. Below "PYTHON" is the phrase "THE NEW RECRUIT" in a similar bold, black, sans-serif font, enclosed within large square brackets. A small, stylized snake head is also visible within the 'O' of "PYTHON".

PYTHON

[THE NEW RECRUIT]

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Bite Risk

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PYTHON

THE NEW RECRUIT

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For all the school librarians

1

Zac

A few seconds after Zac Thorne overhears his aunt's monstrous plan, he goes to her bathroom and leaves an anonymous message. He whispers into his phone, flushing the toilet to cover the sound.

He feels pretty good about it for a few minutes. Smiles to himself in the passenger wing-mirror of her car as she drives him home. Finally, he is about to solve the problem of Aunt Madeleine for good.

He's still smirking as they turn down his road. But then, instead of dropping him back home as she is supposed to, she drives straight past. The familiar white gates of his house disappear like ghosts into the night through the rear window.

That's when he notices the plastic-wrapped bunch of flowers on the back seat.

'Your dad wants us *both* to visit Cousin Gregory in hospital,' she says.

Of course that's a lie. Joey Thorne is away for the weekend, unreachable, and unable to forbid it.

Bringing Zac is a power move.

He can't undo the phone call. Whatever is going to happen, he's involved now.

There's only a single bored security guard at the hospital entrance. The ward door is pass-controlled but they slip through after a porter wheeling an empty bed. Aunt Madeleine's heels clack briskly on the polished floor, so that Zac has to half-jog to keep up.

As they round the corner to approach the reception desk, she grabs his hand – for show, or to stop him bolting, he can't tell. The wilting flowers, upside down in her other hand, shed petals with every step, leaving a trail of confetti along the corridor.

The place is almost deserted. Though the reception area is brightly lit, the rooms off the corridor are dim. It's nearly midnight. Most patients are sleeping.

Madeleine passes the flowers to Zac. She places her hands on the counter, pointed red nails gleaming under the harsh light. She clears her throat.

A young nurse with stubble and tired eyes is tapping at a computer, and doesn't look up.

It's so quiet. The rustle of a plastic apron from a room behind them, the clink of a trolley. A couple of night staff. No security, no police.

Zac is relieved, and then very afraid.

He imagines his anonymous message, blinking patiently on some forgotten phone line at the hospital. He should have dialled 999.

‘We’re here to see a patient. Gregory Vale.’

Finally, the nurse gives Madeleine his full attention. ‘Visiting finished five hours ago.’

‘But we’re family!’ she protests. To her, shared blood is a sacred bond. Unless you betray it – then you get what’s coming.

The nurse shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry. It’s policy.’

A swell of hope. Maybe they won’t be allowed in.

Then Zac feels Madeleine’s arm snake around his shoulders, letting him know it’s his turn. His beloved grandmother used to say he had the face of an angel, that it was impossible to refuse him anything. Right now, that feels like a curse. But Madeleine is next to him, watching.

‘Please ...’ He doesn’t even try to sound convincing, but the nurse’s expression softens.

‘Oh, love. Strictly speaking, I shouldn’t ...’ The guy is crumbling.

Don’t let us in. He tries to say it with his eyes.

The nurse winks, with a mischievous, kind smile. ‘Argh. Go on, then. Just this once.’

The scent of the flowers fills Zac’s nostrils. Sweet, decaying.

He steals desperate glances into the rooms as they pass, but nothing stirs.

The nurse leaves them in Gregory Vale's private room, and closes the door. It's dim, lit only by a small bedside lamp on the wall.

Zac looks down at the man in the bed. His head is wrapped in a thick bandage that leaves only his mouth, one closed eye, and his nose uncovered. Tubes emerge from under the bedclothes and hook over a gently beeping machine at the bedside. Numbers go up and down, flash.

Zac strains his ears for shouts, running boots, but there's only the mocking beep of the machine.

No one is going to come.

Between the bandages, the swollen eye opens, and focuses on Zac. It blinks. Then it sees Madeleine.

She leans over as though to kiss him, but stops just short. 'Joey sends his love.'

A sudden awful rasping sound comes from Greg, as though he's desperately trying to blow up a balloon with his nose. His bandaged arms jerk weakly at his sides. The beeping grows frenzied.

'I've brought young Zac to show him how we deal with rats.'

She unzips her handbag, delves inside. A thumb-sized vial of clear liquid is pinched between her long fingers. Carefully, she unscrews the lid. With one hand she forces Gregory's lips open, brings the vial towards them.

'Wait,' Zac blurts out.

Madeleine freezes, glancing back at him. Greg writhes feebly, barely disturbing the sheets pulled tight across his body.

‘What?’

‘Someone’s coming.’

In one quick movement, the lid is back on the vial and returned to her handbag. She straightens, walks to the door and checks through the small square of glass. ‘No one’s coming. What’s the matter with you?’

Zac swallows. He can see the white of Greg’s eye, bloodshot and pleading. ‘Don’t hurt him. Dad would never—’

‘Everybody dies in the end. Today, it’s Greg’s turn.’ She takes a step back towards the bed.

Zac’s hand moves before he even knows he’s made the decision, reaching for her bag.

Madeleine’s eyes widen in outrage. She wrenches away, but he doesn’t let go, and is pulled into her, losing his balance. His other hand, still holding the flowers, shoots out to break his fall, but his weight sends them both crashing into the wall. She lashes out at him, and her handbag goes flying across the room in a shower of petals and plastic wrapping.

And then, out of nowhere, the door crashes open and the room fills with armed police. In time to save Gregory’s life, but seconds too late for Zac.

In the blur of what follows, as he and his aunt are led

down in handcuffs to separate vans, she shoots him a look that leaves him in no doubt: she knows he snitched.

He has betrayed the family.

One way or another, there will be blood.

2

Zac

TWO MONTHS LATER

Zac swings from the bar and lets go, landing accurately on a metal pipe a few centimetres above the floor. He almost has to step off, but after a wobble, he stands steady, knees slightly bent, balancing. He's been pushing himself to his limits lately, trying to nail this jump.

'Nice!' The coach, Patrick, gives Zac an approving nod, before turning back to help the newest kid, who is struggling to master a safety roll. 'Don't try to roll straight over your spine, remember?' Patrick tells him, yet again. There is no trace of impatience in his voice – he treats everyone who turns up at the club with the same energy and enthusiasm.

Rock 'n' Roll is in the suburbs of south-east London, a

thirty-minute walk from the dingy flat Zac is supposed to call home. The parkour club has been a lifesaver since he found it a month ago. He's always been pretty good at gymnastics, but this is different. It's changed the way he thinks about movement. He's learning to hand over control to the part of his brain that instinctively knows where to put his hands and feet, how to move without overthinking. The gym is a chill place, where you can get some coaching, or just come and exercise on the equipment by yourself. It's helping to keep the dark thoughts away.

Of course, he's not supposed to be here. Danny Carter, his covert residential protection officer from the National Crime Agency, has specifically forbidden it. Danny thinks Zac is in his room doing the 'mental challenge' puzzles he set.

Zac is a Protected Person. It's the proper name for the witness-protection scheme, run by the NCA as part of their work fighting organized crime. He has a new surname – Smith – Danny as a tutor instead of school, and a fake, bland backstory to tell anyone who asks. He has to get permission to leave the flat even for a moment. When he was arrested, the cops took away his phone, and it's been replaced with a basic device that he suspects tracks his every move – which is why it's currently turned off. If Zac so much as says hello to anyone, Danny gets an alert and goes straight on his computer to do a background check on them. The whole thing is stupid and unnecessary.

As the cops drove Zac away from the hospital that fateful night, he assumed he'd be back home after questioning. He'd done nothing wrong; in fact, he'd prevented a murder.

But hours turned into days. And then a sympathetic police officer broke the news to Zac: that it wasn't safe for him to go home, because certain members of his family wanted him dead.

Traces of a toxic chemical were found amid broken glass on the floor of the hospital room. It was enough to put Madeleine in jail to await trial, but not enough to stop her ruining his life, by ordering a hit on him.

Zac's first thought was that his dad could protect him. He considered making a break for home – Essex is only across the Thames. But then he found out that Joey Thorne had disappeared, gone into hiding, because there's a warrant out for his arrest, too. Many times, Zac's been tempted to download Hurricane, the secure app that Joey uses to communicate. But Danny will instantly know, and Zac might inadvertently lead them right to him. He misses his dad so much.

But it looks like things might finally change. Danny has said there will be news for him, tomorrow. Hopefully, they've realized this was nothing to do with Joey, and rescinded the arrest warrant. Maybe someone has ticked a box to agree that it's over, and Zac can go home to join him. They'd better have. If not, he plans to make their

lives as difficult as possible until they can't wait to get rid of him.

Someone clears their throat nervously above him, and Zac looks up to see the new kid, trying to balance on a high railing, wobbling like crazy. The boy pushes his glasses more firmly onto his nose, apparently planning to do some kind of move, despite the fact Patrick has asked him to wait.

Zac glances round, but Patrick is busy taking another student through an exercise on the other side of the mat.

'Hey, don't—' Zac calls out, but it's too late. The boy is in the air, twisting at the hip – and falling, head down, totally out of control.

Zac closes the distance between them in a moment, and grabs the falling body, turning it just as the boy's head is centimetres from hitting the mat, swinging him round. He staggers at the impact but manages to stay upright.

'Woah!' The kid twists round as Zac lets go, a huge grin on his face. 'That was amazing! Thanks, Zac! Might have broken my glasses if it weren't for you!'

'Your neck, more like. Hey, Patrick,' he calls. 'You better keep an eye on ...' He trails off as the boy's name escapes him.

'Nikos, remember?'

Zac turns away.

He's not allowed to make friends, but he doesn't want to, anyway. His current situation is temporary, and his real

mates are waiting back home. Besides, this kid just isn't the type he'd get on with.

Unfortunately, Nikos doesn't know how to take a hint.

'So, how long have you—' he begins, but Zac has already escaped halfway across the gym. He spends the last half-hour of the session out of reach on the climbing wall, then heads out through the exit into the muggy summer night before anyone can engage him in conversation.

It's the third evening this week he's slipped out on his own. Danny always threatens consequences, but hasn't followed through. He just acts disappointed and begs him not to do it again, for his own safety. Sometimes Zac wishes Danny would get worked up, so that they could have a proper fight. But the guy is a wimp. No wonder the NCA just use him as a glorified nanny. It's pathetic. Yet Danny seems to pity him.

The arresting cops did, too.

Poor kid, he overheard one officer say that night, to a colleague. *Imagine being Joey Thorne's son. The guy's a monster.*

They couldn't be more wrong.

Zac is too preoccupied to notice the van pulling up ahead of him, and pays no attention when a man gets out of the passenger side. He glances round when the rear doors pop open.

But by then, it's too late.

3

Zac

All his life, Zac has had it drummed into him not to show fear or weakness. He's trying not to show it now – standing, his head covered by a hood, hands tied behind his back – but his body betrays him. His legs are shaking and they won't stop.

Somehow, Madeleine's people have found him. His only hope now is that they will kill him quickly. But it's a faint hope. Madeleine has always liked to see people suffer.

He freezes as someone approaches from behind. They're untying his wrists. Then the black hood is whipped from his head and he blinks in the bright light for a few moments, everything blurry, before his eyes adjust.

He's in an almost empty warehouse. The person who took the hood off and untied him is already disappearing

through a door, closing it behind them. In front of Zac, a man sits at a plastic garden table, hands clasped.

When Zac sees who it is, he draws in a sharp breath.

‘Don’t worry,’ Danny says. ‘You’re safe.’

Zac rubs his wrists. The bonds weren’t tight enough to hurt, or even make a mark, but his hands are trembling, and he needs to do something with them.

‘You ... you’re working for my aunt?’

Danny laughs gently. ‘Of course not. I work for His Majesty’s Government. But I hope,’ he adds, ‘that you see now how important it is to obey my instructions. They’re entirely for your benefit. It’s my job to keep you alive. See how easy it would be for someone to take you?’

‘Wait a minute ... this was just to teach me a *lesson*?’

‘Not only that. I’d planned for us to have our talk tomorrow, but since you turned your phone off again, it struck me that this might help you understand the danger you’re in. And demonstrate a point.’

‘The point being that you’re out of your mind?’ Now he’s shouting. It feels good to replace the fear with anger.

‘Sit down, have a drink of water.’ Danny gestures to a plastic chair on the opposite side of the table.

Zac stays where he is.

‘There’s no way your bosses at the NCA would approve of this. You’re toast.’

‘I don’t work for the NCA.’

‘You got fired? Figures. You suck at your job.’

A polite, if rather tight, smile. 'There's no such thing as a covert residential protection officer. I did not get fired. I work for a different government agency. The NCA handed you over to us a week after your arrest.'

Zac feels he's slipped into a parallel world. 'So you've been lying to me this whole time? Wait, is this one of your stupid tests? Because if it is, you're going to regret it.'

Danny's approach to his education has been quirky, to say the least. There's been no GCSE prep. Instead, he's set endless, bizarre tasks that he calls 'moral puzzles' and 'mental challenges'. Zac has accepted it, reluctantly, just as he's accepted that if he wants to eat a decent meal that hasn't been burned and actually tastes of something, he has to cook it himself. But this time, the guy has gone too far.

Danny holds both palms out towards him in a calming gesture. 'No, it's not a test. That's all done. You passed, with flying colours. Sit down, and let me explain.' He gestures to the chair again.

There's no one else visible in the warehouse, but presumably whoever untied him is just outside the door. Clearly, there's only one way out of here. Zac flips the chair round to straddle it, his arms resting on its back. 'Send me home, or I'll sue you.'

'No can do,' Danny says. 'Essex is out of bounds for the foreseeable future. Your aunt—'

'Yeah, wants me dead. Good thing she's in prison, then.'

‘What makes you think your dad doesn’t want you dead, too? Do you really believe your aunt would have ordered a hit on you without his approval?’

For a second, Zac feels like he’s been punched in the gut. ‘Are you tripping? He’s my *father*. You know nothing about him.’

‘Okay.’

‘My aunt is the bad one. She’s a murderer. My dad isn’t like that. He put up with her more than he should’ve because she’s his sister. He couldn’t see what she was up to.’

‘I see. He’s the nice type of mobster.’ Danny must see the anger flare in Zac’s face, because he quickly adds, ‘Let’s not get distracted. I want to offer you a job.’

Zac can’t help but choke out a laugh. ‘Are you for real?’

‘Very much so.’

‘Why would I want a career in whatever Mickey Mouse outfit this is? I’m going to work with Dad, when all this is over.’

‘Zac, I’m sticking my neck out for you, here. The NCA and MI5 are waiting for me to throw you back to them. They’re very keen to use you as bait to reel in your father.’

Dread forms a cold ball in Zac’s stomach. They can’t do that. Can they?

‘I fought to get you instead.’

‘Why?’

‘You have exceptional observational skills and memory.’

The tests. So *that's* what all those were. They were creating a profile of him. Of all the sneaky, underhand... But Zac hears something underlying Danny's tone. 'And? There must be more.'

'Well. You have another special quality. The one that put you on my radar in the first place.'

'Which is?'

Danny examines his fingernails. 'Now, don't take this the wrong way.'

Unease creeps up Zac's spine.

Danny's eyes finally meet his. 'You've shown you're willing to speak out for what you believe is right. You put that above personal loyalties – loved ones, even.'

A warm flush starts at Zac's collarbone, as he understands what Danny is putting so delicately.

'You need a rat.'

4

Zac

Of course, it's not really a choice. That much becomes clear over the next couple of hours.

'My team is called Python. Our purpose is to disrupt and destroy organized crime.'

'What's it stand for?'

'Excuse me?'

'It's not an acronym?'

Danny hesitates. 'No.' Zac gets the impression he's never thought about that before, and is wondering if he can turn it into one. Then he shakes it off and sits back, folding his hands in his lap. 'Imagine, if you will, a python snake, lying camouflaged in the grass, as a mouse approaches. It's strategic. It observes. Waits for the right moment to act. And when it strikes' – Danny lunges forward, one fist grasping the air in front of him – 'it constricts and controls

its prey before it can react. The mouse doesn't stand a chance. The snake leaves no trace. That is how we operate. We squeeze the life out of organized crime.' He leans back again complacently. He really thinks he's something.

Zac nods, slowly. 'Like a snake. Because you're creepy and spineless?'

The smile drops a little. 'That's a misconception. Snakes have spines. We're stealthy. Silent and deadly.'

'Sounds more like a fart.'

Danny actually looks hurt. Zac can't help but smirk. Got to take the wins where you can.

'The idea is that we're efficient, patient hunters.'

'Got it. And you target defenceless creatures.'

A vein twitches in Danny's temple. Less patient by the second. 'Believe me, there is nothing defenceless about our targets. They are the worst people in this country.'

Zac shakes his head. 'You reckon my dad is the worst. If you think I'd set him up—'

Danny holds up a hand. 'We'd never ask you to do that. Other criminals *are* available, you know.' He winks. It makes Zac want to upturn the table on his smug head and walk out. But for some reason he doesn't.

'You seem to be forgetting I'm fifteen years old.'

'Which makes you perfect for Python. You see, my team is made up solely of unique young people like you. Teenagers whose lives have been damaged by organized crime in different ways, and who have special skills we can

use. They go undercover on our behalf, in situations where adults would cause suspicion. They can be invisible.'

Undercover? Despite himself, Zac feels a tiny thrill. A spy. Like James Bond. But then reality hits.

'Hold up. You expect me to believe you send teenagers to snoop on criminals? There's no way that would be allowed. What about safeguarding?'

'I had no idea you were enjoying being safeguarded so much. Zac, in case you haven't figured it out, our outfit works beyond the usual health and safety regulations. If that's what you're after, I suggest you join the Scouts, or your granny's knitting circle.'

Proof, if any were needed, that Danny never met Zac's grandmother.

Danny narrows his eyes. 'But that's not really who you are, is it? I think you crave a little action.' He continues, 'Criminals do things that aren't *allowed* all the time. Governments are no different. How will we ever win if we play by the rules, when our enemies don't? Python is answerable only to a panel of experts from across all our security agencies. Police and social services are of no relevance to us.'

Zac suppresses a disgusted eye roll. He knew it. It is exactly as his dad always says: *Those people do the same things as us. Worse. But because they're in power, they get away with it.*

Growing up, Zac has always known that people whisper

about Joey Thorne, and the corp. He isn't naive. His dad makes a lot of money by breaking the law in a million different ways, sure. But he isn't hurting anyone. People just don't like seeing someone like him being successful. Someone who doesn't play by their made-up, biased rules, who doesn't just roll over and give up everything he's earned.

They say Joey is violent, but the truth is that he barely ever even raises his voice, and Zac has never seen him get physical. He's warned Zac off street gangs and knives: 'Those people are losers. If you need a blade to feel powerful, you have no power at all.' There's just something about Joey Thorne that commands respect.

A single dad since Zac was three, Joey's turned up to every parents' evening and school play, thrown him lavish birthday parties. He's a hugger, a belly-laughers. He cries at sad movies, though he does it secretly, because if people think you're a sap, they'll take advantage. He's been tough on Zac, sometimes, but only because he loves him. He's spent so many hours trying to make his son into the man he should be.

All Zac has ever wanted is to join the corp and work at his dad's side.

The only reason he can't is because people in authority have decided to punish them.

'Just have a go,' Danny is saying now. 'Meet my team, watch them at work. If it doesn't appeal, you'll at least have

shown willing, and ... maybe I can persuade the Panel to take another look at your dad's arrest warrant, see if it's really necessary. If you refuse, it'll be very hard to stop the security services going all out against the Thorne family.'

'Blackmail. Nice.'

Danny lays his hands flat on the table. 'I know it seems that way. But I promise I have your best interests at heart. I honestly believe this could be the making of you. If it takes a little pressure to get you to agree, then so be it.'

Zac has never felt more powerless, and ashamed. One stupid mistake has put him in this position. But he shrugs like he couldn't care less.

'What the heck. I'll try anything once.'

Danny grins, delighted. 'Good. I've already had your bags dropped off at the hotel where you'll be staying tonight. Your first op starts tomorrow morning.'