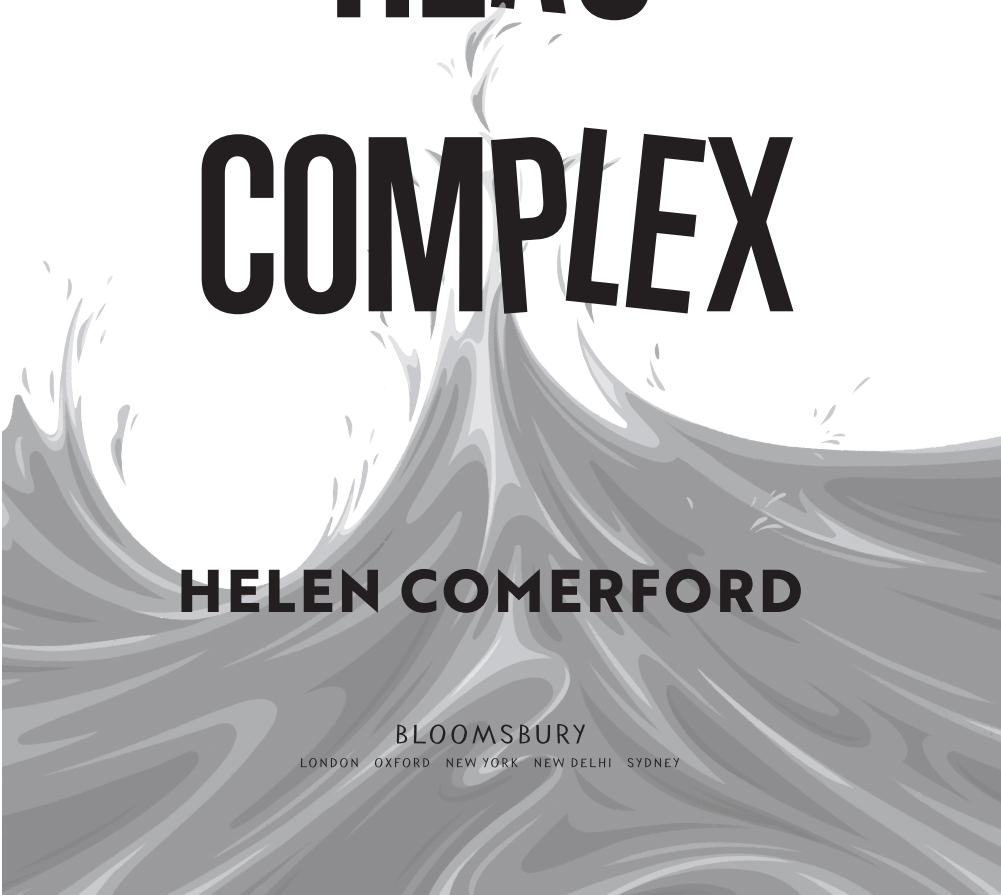


THE HERO COMPLEX





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BLOOMSBURY

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-6763-2; eBook: 978-1-5266-6765-6;
ePDF: 978-1-5266-6764-9

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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*For all the nerds with heroic hearts
(Especially Gareth)*

CHAPTER 1

*‘There was a time when I could have just been a hero.
But my past ... My past is a pair of shoes I thought I could wear in.
I have been crushed. Reshaped by loss. Hardened by the pinch in
my soul.
Now, when I see your dark desires, I understand ... Criminals,
I see you.
There is no shadow that will hide you, not from me.
I am more than a hero—’*

‘Joy!’ I hiss. ‘If you don’t stop monologuing, we’re going to get caught.’

‘Urgh. Fine.’ The dark statue brooding over the quiet High Street morphs back into my best friend as she makes her careful way over to me. We chose the flat roof of shoe shop Size Nines as our lookout, but it’s still a long way to the cobbles below.

‘That gravel voice is going to damage your vocal cords.’

I hold out an arm and steady her as she joins me to sit by the fire exit.

Joy makes her voice even huskier. *'You're no fun tonight, Jenna Ray.'*

'Pssst.' My head thuds gently off the door. I never knew that boredom could make your eyes sting. 'I'm starting to wonder why heroes do this whole hanging-out-on-the-top-of-a-building thing.' I reach into one of the many pockets of the black combat trousers that I bought for our vigilante nights. 'Crisp?'

'I'm pretty sure it's for the silhouette.' Joy takes a handful and winces as the crinkle of the packet echoes through the night. 'We should get stealthier snacks.'

Joy might be developing her tortured vigilante alter-ego, but my insides are heavy with the weight of doing nothing. It has been two months since I defeated King Ron with my surprising new power to control water. Two months since I announced to the world that I was a hero. Now, I've got no idea who I am. The media have started referring to me as *The Jenna Ray Issue*. I am an Issue; not a Love Interest, not an official HPA hero and definitely not normal. That's never going to be an option again. Even though I steer clear of busy places, I am constantly asked if I'm Jenna Ray. I've said 'no' so many times, even my name doesn't feel like mine any more.

At least on these nights with Joy, I can just be a teenage girl, eating crisps on a slightly damp roof, watching another stag party weave across the cobbles. Who knew that after our town survived its prophecy, it would become the must-visit location

for stag and hen do's? On our first night as vigilantes we rescued a drunk stag partyer who fell into the harbour. Joy distracted his mates, whilst I dived in and pulled the man out by his baby grow.

Although I barely used my powers to rescue the adult baby, we thought that we'd cracked the whole 'how to hero without the HPA' thing. But now we've dedicated a fortnight of our summer to late-night heroism and no one else has needed saving. Not even a cat stuck up a tree. It's becoming painfully clear that the residents of Nine Trees don't wait for the cover of night to carry out nefarious deeds. They watch the news and then go to bed.

'Maybe one of them will fall in the river?' Joy crosses her fingers and leans forward to watch two of the stag party have a play fight on the Harbour Bridge.

'Maybe.' What am I doing waiting here patiently for another drunk person to take an ill-advised dip? Maybe my hero name should be the Lifeguard. If we went to the city, I could help people, but the registration chip in my wrist flags when I leave Nine Trees. Going to the city in the middle of the night will ring alarm bells and the British Heroics and Power Authority stopped imploding long enough to make it quite clear that if I use my powers in public, they'll come down on me like the charred remains of the Culture Complex.

Joy sighs heavily as the stag party wander off the bridge and stagger out of sight. 'Fine, Nine Trees. I give up. You are too boring.' She squeezes the crisp in her fist into a fine powder. 'If I could have just punched someone evil. Even shouting

something clever at them whilst you blasted them with water would have been enough. I needed something ...’ The crisp powder drifts into the night as Joy deflates, lowering her head onto her knees.

‘Tea? I can crack open the emergency thermos?’ Guilt twists in my gut as I scan the area. These vigilante nights were never just about me. All I need is a robbery or a lost child or anything at all to keep Joy distracted from—

‘Nick messaged earlier.’ Her voice is muffled by her trousers.

‘Of course he did.’ My lip curls. Nick. He broke my best friend’s heart when he ended their relationship and left early for university, and now he won’t leave her alone.

‘His parents bought him a house. They bought him a *house* in Swansea, Jenna. He’s going to stay there forever.’

‘Maybe something bad will happen to his new home, like a very specific tidal wave,’ I mutter, still scanning the area. ‘Or, maybe, he’ll keep having watery mishaps and go into all his lectures looking like he’s wet himself ...’ Something draws my eye to the roof of the pub opposite. ‘Joy,’ I whisper. ‘Can you see anything on that roof?’

There’s another shift in the shadows by The Drunken Diviner’s chimney, but it could be my imagination. The skin prickles across the back of my neck. This keeps happening; a sense that someone is there, just out of sight. That I’m being watched.

‘There’s nothing there.’ Joy’s eyes narrow as she gazes into the darkness. ‘At least, I think there’s nothing there ...’

A deafening buzz splits the air. My stomach flips and Joy grabs me.

‘Skies! Joy, ow!’ My phone vibrates again and I peel off her vice grip so I can find it.

‘Why isn’t that on silent?!’ Joy exhales shakily. ‘Or, if it’s going to make noise, at least choose that tense droney sound all the action films use. Is it Megan?’

It’s got to be my sister, she’s the only other person who would message me this late. I’ll have to be careful opening her message beside Joy. My best friend knows that Megan is away, but I haven’t been able to tell her the real reason why.

Megan, the new Diviner who the HPA are so desperate to find, has been gone for weeks trying to figure out a prophecy. Six terrifying words that came back night after night, until she finally left.

Destroy the EV, destroy the world.

‘I just have to go north,’ she told me, slinging stuff into a rucksack. ‘I have to figure this out, Jen-bear. The EV, it’s in us. It’s in everything and if it disappears ... I have to go.’

‘I can help,’ I’d tried, but she’d glared at the HPA chip scar on my wrist and left, just like Mum.

The door of the pub opens to expel another noisy group onto the street as I find my phone. It takes me two goes to unlock it and then ... My heart tries to drop and leap at the same time and ends up sort of squeezing.

The messages aren’t from Megan. They’re from Blaze.

‘They’re er ... they’re from ...’

‘What does he say?’ Joy practically climbs on me trying to see my phone.

Hey Jenna, Just had a run in with some EV pigeons! It’s less fun without you! & the new HPA boss started today, maybe things will finally get sorted. 🐦

Also, you never replied about the combat drills. Are you still running them? I can send you a link for pads and gloves? Oops GTG x

Warmth hums through me as I picture him, soft lips pursed as he types. On the night of the storm, Blaze, the hero, told me he loved me, told me he liked me and told me his name, his real name, Laurie Lin, in that order. I haven’t seen him since.

‘It’s just friendly.’ I pass my phone over to Joy, trying to dampen the heat growing in my chest. When I finally see him again, I can’t expect things to just pick up from that kiss in the ruins of the Culture Complex, he might not want that any more. ‘That is just friendly, right?’ I lean into Joy.

‘Ow!’ She rubs her arm. ‘You gave me an electric shock.’

‘Another one? Sorry.’ I shuffle away, but Joy is already focused back on my fledgling-maybe-probably-not-thought romance.

‘Ray.’ She frowns at me. ‘I know you’re new to this, but he says that you make facing psychotic birds fun. This is textbook flirting.’

A little bubble of hope grows in my chest. ‘Oh OK ... So, I’ll reply?’

‘Yes.’ Joy nods encouragingly.

‘And I’ll say ...’ This has to be perfect. I bite my lip. ‘I’ll say ‘Hey ...’

‘Nice.’

‘Blaze ...’

‘Good ...’

‘*You alright?*’ I glance at her.

‘Mother Earth,’ Joy mutters. ‘Just give it here.’

‘Wait.’ I push the bright phone away from our faces.

Three men dressed head to toe in black, with scarves across their faces, slip from shadow to shadow along the High Street. It is so obvious they are up to no good that they might as well be carrying a flashing neon BAD GUYS sign.

‘Criminals!’ Joy shakes my knee ‘It’s happening! *Criminals emerging from the darkness, ready to unleash their—*’

‘Shhh.’ I lean forward to track them.

The biggest man, who could definitely be a rugby player if he wasn’t a criminal, motions to the alley next to the pub and all three disappear into it. Joy grips my arm, jabbing her finger at The Drunken Diviner. A silver haired man bangs out the door. He swerves across the cobbles towards the Harbour Bridge and Joy’s fingers sink into my bicep as the three men re-emerge from the shadows to follow him.

One of them pulls out a weapon.

‘Mother Earth.’ I’m up on my feet and my insides are

buzzing. *Finally*. It's finally time to take action. 'We need to help him.'

'Come on.' Joy is already on her way to the rickety staircase.

We dart out onto the High Street and stick to the shadows of the shop fronts, following as quietly as we can. Thank the skies we already ate those crisps; a random rustle now and they'd spot us in a heartbeat. The silver-haired man meanders up and onto the bridge, stopping in the middle. He sways there with his hands in his pockets and river mist curling up around his ankles. It's almost as if he's waiting for something.

The criminals crouch by the entrance to the bridge and we duck into a bus stop a few metres behind.

'We need to move fast.' Their leader's whisper reaches our hiding place. 'Shoot first. Ask questions later.'

'They're going to kill him?!' Joy peers out, face sets in a determined scowl.

'No.' I nudge her back into the shadows. 'Stay here.'

The mist has already thickened, turning the night a milky grey. The men in black are only just visible as they leap up and rush onto the bridge. A delighted laugh rings out from the silver-haired man and, for some reason, he claps at them before taking a step back and disappearing into the fog.

'Fire!' their leader yells and shots ring out, as the mist swallows them too.

'Stop!' I sprint after them. My hands are out, calling the water, and a powerful wave crashes onto the bridge to surge ahead of me. The flood must take everyone off their feet. Thuds and yells echo back through the fog.

There's a curse ahead and I slow as someone pushes themselves up in front of me. It's the enormous figure of the leader of the criminal gang. He's got his back to me, but he must hear me sloshing to a halt. He spins and steps into the orange glow of the streetlamp. Water is running off him and I'm ready to blast him, but my gaze fixes on the three small letters embossed on his black top.

H

P

A

Feck.

The men in black aren't criminals.

They're HPA soldiers.

Did I just stop the HPA from arresting someone?

The big man storms towards me.

'I'm sorry—' I reach out a hand to dry him, but he grabs the front of my jumper with one hand and lifts me off the ground.

'Jenna Ray!' He peels his damp black scarf off his face to reveal a furious snarl. Any hope that he might not recognise the girl who just flooded the bridge evaporates. 'You are not allowed to use your powers in public.' The street lamp is more than bright enough to see the vein pulsing in his forehead. 'And you just used them against the HPA.'

The other two, soaking wet, soldiers wade through the ankle high water and strings of seaweed to join us.

'Villain.' The smallest man has a red scar across his face. He spits harbour water out of his mouth, as he raises his weapon to point it at me.

‘Let her go!’ Joy splashes her way towards us. ‘Don’t point that thing at me!’ I can’t see them, but the last soldier must be aiming at her. My fingers flex and the water swirling around the men’s boots starts to rise. HPA or not, I’m not going to let them hurt Joy.

‘Alright everyone, enough.’ The silver-haired man marches towards us, completely visible as the mist evaporates around him. ‘Put her down, Sergeant Cadell.’

He has a heavy German accent and as tipsy as he looked earlier, he’s now completely alert, like swerving across the cobblestones was an act. Like nothing here is what I thought it was.

Cadell’s knuckles whiten on my jumper and there’s a sharp tearing sound from the region of my armpit. Megan’s *second date, keeping it casual* jumper won’t be able to survive much more of this.

‘Cadell.’ The silver-haired man stops next to us. ‘This seems like a misunderstanding. This young woman and her friend intervened in what looked like an attack. It’s what you’d have done in her place, ja?’

Cadell grinds his teeth, but he drops me and I step back next to Joy.

‘Alright?’ she murmurs.

‘Uh huh,’ I reply.

‘Ray.’ The silver-haired man pushes past the soldiers, batting their weapons down, and sticks out a hand. ‘I’m Tomas. These gentlemen were running an exercise, I was their target.’

I shake his hand. This Tomas might be important enough to order around HPA soldiers, but he smells faintly of beer and

Cadell is still glaring at me from behind him. This isn't over. I flooded the harbour bridge. I used my powers against HPA soldiers. It doesn't matter how friendly Tomas seems, I am in a whole world of trouble.

'You hid from them in the pub?' Joy asks.

'It was a long day and an even longer exercise.' Tomas shrugs and offers Joy his hand too. 'Ms Jusic.'

'Yes, hello.' Joy shakes his hand before turning to me to mouth '*What is happening?*'

'I think that will do for now, won't it, Sergeant Cadell?' Tomas yawns. 'Congratulations, you and your alpha team finally found me. Let's call in the rest of squad one and go to our beds.'

'She's under arrest.' Cadell jabs a finger towards me and my heart sinks.

'Really?' Tomas sighs. 'We can call her in tomorrow. It's late. Perhaps you stopped for a nap mid-exercise, but I need my sleep. As do these young women.'

'She's under –' the tendons in Cadell's neck tightens as he spits the words out '–arrest. Cuff her, Corporal Armstrong.' Cadell nods at the man with the scar who pulls out a pair of handcuffs.

'Fine.' Tomas holds out a hand to stop the corporal. 'Ms Jusic, it's been a pleasure. Go home. Ray, with me.'

'No,' I say at the same time as Joy blurts out 'You can't take her.'

'She's—' Cadell steps towards us.

'Ja, ja, ja, she's under arrest. *We know.*' Tomas steps in front of me and leans in to whisper in my ear. 'It's easier if you come

back to base with me. No handcuffs, no drama, nothing to report except a little misunderstanding.'

The desire to blast them all with harbour water, grab Joy and run simmers in my stomach, but how would that end? HPA soldiers hunting me down, surrounding our house, helicopters circling, blowing the leaves off our neighbour's trees. Sydney Jones leaping out from behind a bush to report my dramatic capture to the world.

I clench my jaw. It looks like I'm heading back to the HPA.

CHAPTER 2

After they put a chip in my wrist, the HPA gave me a pamphlet called *So you've registered your powers, what next?* I wish I'd read the whole thing. It probably has a section on what the HPA do to registered people who break their rules. At least then I'd know if they're going to lock me away under the museum, or even send me to the Castle, like Ron.

My stomach churns as Tomas puts a gentle hand on my shoulder and guides me across the bridge. I know the way and it's far too short. Cross the lapping water of the harbour, descend a stone set of stairs and there's the entrance to the HPA's subterranean base.

'I'll wake your dad up. We'll get you a lawyer!' Joy calls from behind Cadell's hulking figure. 'Don't you hurt her. I've got my camera ready.'

At least with Joy on the case, I can't disappear into the HPA cells without anyone knowing what happened to me.

The water is mostly gone from the bridge now, but there's still seaweed strewn across the cobbles and I step over a drain that's bubbling in an unsettling way. Why did this all have to happen right next to the HPA? If they'd arrested me in the city, at least I'd have had the terrifying journey along the Wild Road to make a plan. And, if I was still coming up empty, I could have leapt out of the car and taken my chances with the squirrels.

I breathe out *two, three, four*.

My forehead is sticky with sweat, but I need to keep calm. Keep breathing.

We reach the stairs and I try to remember the three things exercise our councillor gave us in our group session.

Name three things you can see:

The orange street lamps, the top of the stone steps down to the HPA, Cadell in the corner of my eye.

And exhale three times.

It's not helping. I clench and unclench my fists and try the next exercise.

Name three things you can hear:

Footsteps on the stairs. Cadell breathing. My pulse echoing in my ears.

Exhale three times.

I can't let this turn into a panic attack. The last time I had one, it felt like my power was trying to explode out of me.

Three more things I can see:

Security's glass door. The scanning booth. Mia.

'Mia?' I splutter as the glass doors swish open and we all troop in.

Mia lifts their eyebrows at me, glossy lips in a thin line. Their outfit is an unsettlingly conventional green jumpsuit and their dark hair is pulled into a simple bun. There are dangly gold earrings that sweep down as far as the dark skin of their collarbone, but this is Mia at their most serious.

Back before Ron was arrested, Mia had usually seemed pleased to see me. They were always busy, running around doing pretty much everything, but they seemed to like me in their own, slightly cynical, way. Not anymore. Now, their dark eyes are hard. Maybe it's because I was working with the Villains last time I was here, or because I sent their boss to prison, or because I just attacked the HPA ... Skies, maybe it's all of the above?

'I'll take her from here.' Mia swipes open the door into the base and beckons to me. I hesitate, looking at the exit. This is my last chance to run, before I end up deep within the HPA. Big hands land on my shoulders, turn me and shove me towards the corridor so hard I lose my balance and land heavily on my hands and knees.

'Sergeant Cadell!' Tomas snaps.

Mia helps me back to my feet and turns to the men. 'Tomas, thank you. And squad one, you're dismissed.'

'But—' Cadell's voice booms from behind me.

'You are dismissed.' Mia's voice is icy. 'This way, Jenna.'

Mia leads me along the concrete corridor and past the windows that look down on the cavernous training studio where Blaze and I first kissed. At least Blaze didn't show up on the bridge. I don't know if he'd have rushed to my rescue or been the one to bring me in. Probably the second, given his

'probation' status that the press have been speculating about. My heart is thrumming in my chest, but it hasn't had to deal with the embarrassment of being arrested by the boy I like, so that's something, I guess.

Halfway up the stairs I realise where we're going. Level -1. This is where the offices are. Where the new boss of the HPA must be. We head along the grey corridors that became so familiar as I went to Ron's office for my lessons in Hero Legacy. Why did I think being a vigilante was a good idea? Heroism always leads me back to Ron's door.

The gold plaque with his name has been removed but as Mia opens it, I still expect to see him standing behind his desk, dressed in an immaculate three-piece suit, shaking his head. *'Well, Miss Ray,'* he'd probably say. *'What have you done now?'* or he'd reach out a hand and try and kill me again.

But the office is empty.

The wood panelling is gone.

The pop art is gone.

The plush red rug is gone.

Ron is gone.

His decadent space has become another brushed concrete HPA office with harsh lighting. The only souvenir from Ron's time is the dark wood desk at the far end which has been set up with new computer screens. The desk was always the most beautiful thing in here. I'd have kept it too.

'Go on,' Mia says.

My footsteps echo on the concrete as I cross the yawning distance between the door and the desk. There are a couple of

boxes with *office* scrawled on them by the wall, but otherwise there's nothing to give me any clues about this new person who holds my fate in their hands. I finally reach the metal chair in front of the desk and sit with my back rigid. Mia walks past me and I expect them to press a button and summon the terrifying new boss of the HPA from their bed, but instead they sit in Ron's old spot.

'So,' Mia says. 'What exactly did you think you were playing at?'

'You're in charge?' My mouth drops open. Mia is the new head of the HPA?

'Don't you dare smile, Jenna Ray!'

I clench my lips. 'I'm not.'

'You just got yourself arrested on my first day in charge!' Mia throws up their hands. 'What were you thinking?! You know you're not allowed to use your powers in public.'

I try the innocent press look that they taught me.

'Don't even *think* about lying to me.' Mia spins their computer screen so I can see a grainy CCTV feed of the Harbour Bridge, where the drains now look like fountains, gushing water back onto the road. 'You were the top of my list. The first thing I was going to address as the new Head of the HPA. You couldn't have given me a day to get settled before pulling something like this?'

'How?' I blurt out and they raise their eyebrows. 'I mean, how are you in charge?'

'You want to know about the interview process?'

'No, but you were in wardrobe ...' I bite my lip. I don't want to annoy them even more than I already have, but Mia nods.

‘I was in wardrobe, I was the Press Secretary, I took care of special projects for Ron like dealing with Love Interests.’ They motion to me. ‘I was the most senior person left standing after the trial, the unofficial deputy that was in no way involved in Ron’s evil plans. This is new and I don’t know how long it will last, but they were desperate and I was here, which means the HPA has its first non-binary boss and I have a chance to make this organisation better.’

‘This is incredible.’ I am smiling now. ‘Congratulations.’

A ghost of a grin crosses Mia’s face before they purse their lips and cross their arms. ‘And now there’s a damp mess on the Harbour Bridge that I am going to have to explain tomorrow. What happened?’

Tomas’ words resurface. ‘It was a misunderstanding. I was passing and I thought someone was being attacked. I couldn’t look the other way.’ I look at Mia as innocently as I can manage.

‘You were just passing.’ Mia’s tone is flat. ‘Dressed like that.’

I shrug. ‘I wear black sometimes.’

Their eyes narrow. ‘When I started out in wardrobe, I dressed Catalejo. He was a vigilante for several years before the Chilean HPA caught up with him and gave him an ultimatum. Join up or go to jail. He chose the HPA, but when it came to his hero outfit, he insisted on keeping his vigilante look. Clothes are power, and the power he needed was black, comfortable and had pockets.’ Mia motions to my trousers.

‘Pockets are practical.’

Mia rolls their eyes. ‘It’s late, Jenna. I want to go to bed, so

I'll cut to the chase. You're being issued with an official caution for using your powers in public.'

I sit forward. That doesn't sound like I'm going to be locked away.

'And an official invitation,' Mia continues. 'To join the HPA as the first female hero.'

My skin goes cold, then hot, and my mind goes into free fall.

An invitation to become an official hero.

The HPA cannot be trusted. That's been drummed into me ever since Mum left, but Mia is the boss now. But Ron was the boss before. But Blaze ... my heart flutters in my chest. If I join the HPA, we'll be team mates. I'll get to see him every day.

'Will you arrest me if I don't join?' I ask, almost hoping that the choice is taken from me, like Catalejo.

Mia shrugs. 'I think we can look the other way if you pull the occasional drunk out of the harbour by their baby grow.'

My jaw tightens. Mia knows everything. The HPA have been keeping tabs on us this whole time. That would explain the sense that I was being watched.

'If you agree to join the HPA, we'll arrange a press conference, announce you to the world,' Mia continues. 'We'll give you a mentor, a hero outfit and train you up to join Blaze in the field.'

Blaze. Even hearing his name sends a thrill through me, but I take a moment to breathe. Shortly before I got tricked into a lighthouse that was blasted into the sea, my family held an intervention. They said that I made bad decisions where Blaze

was involved. I can't do that now. I can't give my life to the HPA just because I'll get to see him and train with him and save people with him and maybe kiss him ...

'It will be hard.' Mia steeples their fingers. 'Harder than it has any right to be. Trailblazers need to be more than perfect, trust me on that.' They give me a small smile. 'You'd need to be flawless, but, Jenna, if this works out who knows what other heroes the HPA will be able to recruit. We could change the face of the HPA forever.'

That's the invitation: Join the broken system to fix the broken system.

'I'd need to be confident that your loyalties lie with us.' Mia locks eyes with me and I know they're talking about the Villains. My bracelet feels heavy on my wrist, but I nod slowly. I'm not agreeing, not yet, but they haven't said that I'd have to cut all ties with my mum and her merry group of anarchists. Maybe, with Mia at the helm, the HPA and the Villains could even find some common ground.

'There's one last thing I need you to be aware of.' Mia looks at the ceiling. 'Love Interests.'

My eyes widen in horror as I picture my first rescue mission with Joy. Was the drunk in the harbour my first official rescue? If joining the HPA means I have to start dating that adult baby, then I am out.

'Love Interests are important for several reasons,' Mia says. 'The media love them, or love to hate them, as you well know. The general, non-powered, public feel a sense of security that the hero

has chosen one of them to be with and protect. And –’ Mia exhales – ‘heroes can’t be with other heroes.’

I frown, thinking back through the heroes and their relationships. There have been male Love Interests, but Mia’s right, there’s never been two heroes together.

Like me and Blaze.

My insides knot as the penny finally drops. After all the pressure to become Blaze’s Love Interest, Mia is now telling me that I can’t be with him.

‘But that’s stupid!’ I blurt out. ‘What possible reason—’

‘It’s International HPA policy.’ Mia cuts me off. ‘Hero-work is too high stakes. You’re the front line of defence against the EV. You can’t afford the distraction of romance with your teammate. I know that you and Blaze became close during your time as his Love Interest, fake or not, but as two heroes ...’

Mia’s voice fades into the background as images of Blaze flood my brain; dark hair, kind brown eyes, sweet smile, dimples;

Rescuing me from the fire.

Arguing with him at BLAZECON.

Saving him from the pigeons.

Kissing him.

‘You can either be a hero or a Love Interest. You can’t be both.’ Mia’s eyes shine with sympathy. ‘The whole world is watching; the other HPAs, the other heroes, the media. If you join me, Jenna, you join me on a knife-edge. If we want to remake the HPA, there’s no space for slip-ups. I’m sorry Jenna, but a relationship with Blaze would be off the table.’