

The graphic features a large, faint, light-gray Python logo in the background, which is a stylized snake coiled around itself. Overlaid on this is the word "PYTHON" in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "O" in "PYTHON" is replaced by a circular icon containing a stylized snake head with its mouth open. Below "PYTHON" is the phrase "[THE NEW RECRUIT]" in a smaller, bold, black, sans-serif font. The word "THE" is enclosed in square brackets, and "NEW RECRUIT" is also enclosed in square brackets. A small circular icon with a crosshair is positioned between the two lines of text, partially overlapping the word "NEW".

PYTHON

[THE NEW RECRUIT]

Also by S. J. Wills:

Bite Risk
Caught Dead
Cold Blood



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For all the school librarians

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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.