

# THE RAINBOW WARRIOR

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## WEBSITE PREVIEW... ENJOY!

### HELLO, OLD GREY

He stares into the oversized mirror and wonders why he is here. He watches the ghostly reflection that gazes back at him, but it's an image that is unwilling to offer him anything, despite their decades of familiarity. He has had a lifetime of asking that same question and never getting anything helpful in return, and so he's doubtful that what looks back at him now will ever give him an answer; not one that makes sense, anyway. So he stands in the corner, out of view and out of the way of all those he knows have so much more right to be here than he does.

He cannot ignore where he is, however hard he tries. He doesn't want to hide away but doesn't know how he can ever beat the voice that taunts him from within. This voice tells him he shouldn't be here, that he so obviously doesn't belong in this world that he can't even begin to understand. He tries to shut it out, to let the music take over, but it's just noise, just beats in the background of a tormenting chorus of his indecision and lost purpose.

He finally finds the courage to turn around, look across the bar and remind himself of everything that is happening around him, and certainly not with him. The noise doesn't stop, with the chatter and laughter of many men, and the music that drowns out any chance of him hearing what they are saying. Some of them sit on oversized chairs, their tight jeans pulled up far above their ankles, whilst others lean against walls, their chiseled chests pushed outwards. He immediately spots them – the few in the many. He easily sees his favorites, spread across the hundreds of perfect bodies, even when they fade in and out of focus, like a blurry TV picture that he can't seem to fix. They could all be his favorites, if he ever dared admit it. Where he doesn't have confidence to find faces he finds arms, their exposed flesh showing muscles he never knew existed. He sees colours and painted markings; far more tattoos than he remembers from back in his day.

His day. He wonders if he ever *had* his day, if he ever did anything that qualified as a mark on the world; anything that would make it worth turning a page in his sorry book.

He keeps looking and some even stare back at him, as they huddle together and whisper things into each other's ears, laughing and pointing at him with the straws of their drinks. They sip and then they snigger, like he's some sort of circus attraction, here for their amusement or perhaps their pity. He doesn't care anymore, as what lines his stomach seems to have given him some sort of shield from their obvious

fascination with him. He looks for what lies beyond the flashing glitter ball and the mass of bodies on the dancefloor, all of them bopping and swaying to some dull, aching beat that has no obvious rhythm he can recognise. He wonders if people still bop and sway these days, or if these are yet more things that only now exist in his world as relics from the past, meaning something only to him.

The tune seems to change, and the room erupts with applause and shouting, like some sort of collective primal scream, as many of them advance towards the central stage, pushing past each other to make it to the middle of nowhere. The growing crowd of sweating bodies swells and multiplies, and it doesn't take long before they collide with the small space he had carved out for himself. He fought hard to be here and he doesn't want to give it up, and so he stands firm, like a sorry, forgotten sandcastle on the beach, left alone to crumble against the relentless tides of life. He isn't built on strong foundations, though; he cannot hold his own against such odds. He nudges his elbow against his attackers, but only a couple of them even turn to see what distracts them, to see the flea that tickles their toned backs.

He stumbles backwards and immediately knows he has been pushed by someone, but his legs move quicker than his eyes can show him the face of his aggressor. When his focus returns he sees a muscled, young man standing before him, with dark stubble and eyes as blue as the ocean. He admits to himself that this man would easily make it onto his list of favourites, although such beauty doesn't mean a lot when accompanied by a thick forearm that keeps pushing against him.

He doesn't fight back against this angry angel, has never had a fight in his life. As the numbers grow and the crowd swells, he retreats further, until he almost becomes at one with the fruit machines that line the bar's side. He stares at them as they make their celebratory noises, their constant flashing like a plea to be noticed, as he wonders why such things of the past are still in here. He looks at the man nearest to him, who has a phone in his hands. His focus is absorbed on this small device, next to those giant square blocks with big, clumsy buttons. He wonders what could hold this man's attention – his face yellow and his shoulders hunched over this miniature world he holds in his palm of his hand.

The evening continues and he stays in his place, only moving along the safety of the wall. He creeps and he lingers, feeling his eyelids constantly close as his focus fades, like a film he can't quite follow any more. He's soon back in front of the large mirror that takes up most of one wall. He watches as men appear from nowhere, each of their unique scents announcing their arrival as they enter his world and stare at the life-sized versions of themselves. They check their teeth and play with their hair but, when they are finished, he doesn't think they look any different. Throughout their short visit they don't see him as they focus only on their reflections. He wonders what they really see; if they notice more than he did the last time he looked.

They leave as quickly as they showed up, their journey outside continuing with friends or partners – whatever you call them these days. It only serves to remind him of his loneliness. It makes him ask again why he is here, why he wants to torment himself so much. If he dug deep enough he would find that very answer; he knows it's lurking just under his skin.

He also knows it is not just the answer that scares him: it's the question. It's been years in the making and has now risen up from the darkest depths, where he so carefully buried it. Like a small devil on his shoulder,

it encourages him, wants him to keep looking, keep pushing for more. Push hard enough until that very question blurts out and escapes forever into the universe.

'No!' he shouts out, his panicked voice not heard over the thumping sound of the speaker just above his head. Right now, in this very moment, he doesn't want to find the answer to the question he has never dared to ask.

What he really wants to do is dance. He wants the music to be even louder than it is now, and for all these men around him to quiet down and clear a path to the small stage, cheering him on as if he is the one they have been waiting for all night. In the absence of a live band, he'd quite like some Bruce Springsteen, anything where vocals win over random noise. He moves away from the mirror, swaying a little as he turns, just hopeful that Power of Love will be the next song. Deep down he knows that it won't be, just as he knows that these men around him won't appreciate anything he can offer.

He knows he should have gone somewhere else, anywhere that would make him feel more welcome. It was Henry who wanted to come to this bar and he hasn't been around for at least an hour. He's here somewhere, though, most likely in the depths of the dance floor, his arm draped around some eager, younger man.

He makes his way to the bar, apologising for every toe he steps on and every shoulder he barges into. It's not a gentleman's apology, there's no effort of a look into their eyes or give them a solemn nod. All he can do is embrace this new determination and keep moving forward, whilst he makes his mumbled excuses to no one in particular. His eyelids open and close as the bar gets a little closer, whilst he hears what they say behind his back, hoping he won't remember the worst of these remarks in the morning.

He soon collides with the one person he wanted to avoid – the same man who barged into him earlier. He is instantly struck by the space he takes up in the world, with every ounce of him a muscled and productive use of what he has been given. He looks at the pecs contained by the tight, pink t-shirt and wonders what they would look like when exposed. He knows he is talking, saying something, but the words don't make any sense, not to him anyway. He just wants to say that he is sorry for earlier and that this man really looks good, and that he should be proud of himself, that he really is very attractive.

But the man is no longer in front of him, as he stumbles into the arms of another. 'Tosser,' he thinks he hears someone say, as he is pushed back and forth. His endless apologies echo in the air around him as he feels something hit his back, knowing it is a strong pair of hands against his weak bones.

He doesn't know how it happened but he's now lying on the floor. There are feet all around him, all clad with trainers – coloured things that he used to call plimsolls during his school days. He clammers at the jeans connected to one of them but, whoever it is, doesn't want to help him. He looks up, into a fading tunnel of tight clothes and angry faces.

The more they laugh, the more scared he feels. He knows he shouldn't be here now, not at this time. He doesn't want to be in his usual bars tonight, though, because on this night he thought he was braver than he ever had been before. He knows that barely a month ago he wouldn't have dared set foot in this place, yet he is here now. It sounds like progress, however much he doesn't want it.

He sees big, black boots appear before him and feels thick hands reach under both his arms, as he moves upwards quicker than his eyes can refocus. He floats across the room as the space he wanted is finally cleared for him. He hears cheering too, realising it is all for him, as some men lift up their glasses and toast towards him. He wonders what they are celebrating but he notices others seem to have the opposite reaction, as they shake their heads or simply turn away from him. One man finally stands out from the crowd. He's one of the laughing few and he points towards his chest, before turning to his friends and shrieking hysterically.

The smell. It is hideous and comes with no warning, spilling out of his mouth and onto his shirt. The more he smells, the more of this stuff his body produces, but he only knows it is happening as he feels the burning fire in his mouth, and the chunks of his lunchtime sandwich pass his teeth on their way to freedom. No one laughs now, as the space between him and every other man seems to widen into an open chasm. He doesn't feel like he's floating any more: he's being dragged away.

He thinks only of home, imagining he is sitting in bed with a cup of tea. He wants those floral pillows that smell faintly of lavender, the half-full glass of water beside his bed and a hot water bottle resting just by his feet. He wants this safety and most of all he wants *her*. He would trade any of this possible future, however darkly seductive it is, if he could just be with *her* until the mutual end that selfishly suited the both of them. In this darkest of places, he craves that familiarity and misses the simple routine that protected him for so long.

As they carry him from the bar, the doors ahead already pushed open, he catches one final glance in that mirror. He doesn't know what stares back at him – it looks pale and skeletal, old and confused. In this weird, new life he has joined, it is full of only strangers. In this scary world of the unknown he doesn't know where to begin, where to hide and when it will end. The reflection still offers him no answers and no comfort as he is thrown outside, into the biting chill of the night air. His drenched shirt clings to his body and those standing before him shout, 'Go fucking home.'

He turns around to see who speaks to him, but they have already closed the door. The truth is that he doesn't know where home is anymore, doesn't know if that familiarity will ever offer him what he needs.

All he really knows is that, in the beginning, there was only Old Grey.

# THE ONE WHO FLAUNTS IT

Run, little boy, run, but don't think you can hide from me.

He keeps advancing, his prey a mere twenty paces ahead of him, feebly staggering behind any bush or tree it can find. He deliberately slows down so that he can look around, almost making it seem as if he has somehow lost sight of his target. In reality, that would never happen; not on a mission as planned as this. He actually uses these precious few seconds to scan the horizon for any signs of potential inference, for anything that could get in his way.

The timing is perfect, as his target ducks behind a large bush. He hears the rustling of leaves and the snapping of twigs as it frantically burrows into the undergrowth. It's not a bad idea; tonight's prey is as black as the night and his t-shirt is as dark as he is. If the boy had run faster and got himself a few more seconds head start, then his plan might just have worked. But not tonight, not on this hunt.

He knows just where his target is and it won't escape him. He slows to a stop, his thick hand grabbing the rough bark of a tree as he swings around, getting ever closer to the moment he longs for. He pushes his foot down in the exact spot where the prey landed and then steps away, looking down to see no indentation; all the moisture has been sucked out of the ground from a thirsty summer in London. Perfect.

He doesn't start running again and it's not because he's out of breath. He could keep going flat out for miles before his thighs even registered the minimal impact of such a light jog. He might weigh 120kg, but thirty years of training mean he can push his body to limits that most others don't even know exist. Take the boy who's hiding, for example. He's skinny and tall, just bone wrapped in a skin of obvious arrogance. Less than an hour ago that same boy laughed and danced, but he's been panting and stumbling ever since he left the bar. His body is already spent and he's not laughing now.

If he could shout more than just a whimper, then perhaps someone would hear and come to his rescue. This certainly won't happen, though, because the drug won't wear off for another hour. When only minutes are required, it means that this boy is all alone with his new nightmare.

He looks over at the bush that hides his prey, the leaves still rustling. He wonders if the boy is trying to make a weapon or if he's finding a gap to peer through, daring a glance at who is approaching. The stench of his fear almost oozes from him, his night so far from what he likely expected.

He surveys the rest of the area, once again checking for any sign that they have been followed. It might be after midnight and dark, but it is Clapham Common, after all. They are near to the main cruising spot and so, once the clubs start to close, this area will be visited by many more of them, all fueled by their dirty vices and drunken desperation. With them will come the industry of those who must serve them, police them and then clean up after them. They put their filth all over this place and then they disappear to their beds. The damage they cause becomes someone else's hangover, whilst they sleep it off in their stinking pits. Only when day breaks and the sun finally rises does normality return and families are able to go about their business, feeling safe and secure from the nightly, drunken terrors that haunt this place.

He growls, knowing the work he has started will never end, the threat never disappearing. As many of them as he plans to fix, more arrive daily, pouring into the bars and clubs – into the machine that has been created to feed them and feed off them. He doesn't know who wins more, but he knows what he must do; who must suffer to bring this threat to an end.

He looks at his watch: 1am. It's now or never. He feels the rush of the hunt surge through him, the thrill of the chase spurring him on to do the work that only he can do. He takes one final breath, telling his mind to keep control of the situation, to acknowledge all mission parameters are still secure. He checks the surrounding area and doesn't register any new threats.

He moves towards the bush as he feels the adrenaline flow through his body, making him tense with purpose. He knows there will be no more stalking for him and no more hiding for the boy; only the advancing fate and judgement that will now consume them both. He's only a few feet away from this moment that has been months in the making and he can almost taste the flesh that awaits him, which he thinks will somehow be symbolic for the both of them. This his first mission in his home country, and a new war that sees his years of emptiness finally replaced with a calling that cuts deep to his core.

'I will cleanse and fix you,' he says, as he pushes his right hand through a gap in the bush. He takes hold of a limb, what he believes to be an arm, and he pulls it.

To his surprise the boy fights back, his other hand punching at whatever he can reach, his small muscles doing nothing to give it any force. His prey makes some mumbled noises, some pleas for mercy, perhaps begging for understanding of what is happening.

He ignores all of this, knowing that what must be done doesn't need explanation. He keeps tugging the boy's body until his head eventually pokes out of the bush. The weight of this thing is barely half of his and so he finds it easy to use one hand as a shield from the weak assault, whilst the other puts a stranglehold around his neck. He pulls harder, as if he is heaving a filthy baby from its womb, but there isn't much noise as its wriggling body leaves the protection of the bush, its legs kicking and arms flapping. They punch the air around him, never quite stretching far enough to do any real damage.

He pins the back of the boy to his own chest for a moment, holding him close as he cups a hand around his mouth and nose. He can hear muffled cries seep through his fingers, as the boy no doubt realises how easily he could suffocate at the hands of this man.

He says nothing, despite the fact he had so many things planned: reasons, threats and a graphic tale of what will happen. Instead, he quietly holds him still as he focuses his thoughts. They both settle into this moment – one without air and the other without any care as to what happens. He pulls the boy's head back, knowing how easily he could break this thing's neck, as he catches a scent of sweat and feels the dampness of its shaved head against his chin. He knows this to be the stench of the impure, doused in alcohol, and this tells him all he needs to know.

The boy tries to breathe, and he does the same. He feels the boy's heartbeat and sees those little messages of fear that have trickled down the boy's face and onto his hand. The whimpered noises from within the muscled mask echo from his own mouth, as he breathes for the both of them. The muffled moans lessen,

and so do the struggles, so he lets him drop down slightly, his grip still firm as he feels a different part of the boy. He senses the t-shirt lift up slightly and he finally removes his hand from over the boy's mouth, moving it downwards as he rubs it across the stomach of his prey. He feels the tightness of his abdominal muscles as he runs a finger along the grooves, arching the boy's body forward so they tense just a little more.

He hears the growl charge out of his mouth, knowing the swelling can grow no further until it is released, and so he throws the boy to the ground. He sees the fear in those dark eyes as the boy tries to back away, pulling himself across the ground. He turns, so obviously preparing to stagger and to run, his constant murmuring telling a story all of its own.

He reaches the boy before he can even break out of his crawl. He kicks him in the stomach, causing him to roll over, the scream louder than he expected. He looks around sharply, fearing someone might hear, realising the ratios of the drug are not right, because the boy shouldn't be able to raise his voice louder than a murmur, his fear caged to only a small echo in this big park. He curses himself, knowing that he erred too much on the side of caution. His worry was that making the concoction any stronger would risk removing any feeling, but he will learn; he will make it right next time.

'You will feel it all,' he mutters, as he looks down at the pathetic mess beneath him. He takes a run up and kicks the boy on the other side of his chest. He thinks he hears ribs crack as the boy lies on his back, crying out in pain as he grips his chest. He is on top of him before he can shout any more, wrapping a thick arm around his body like a python straggling its prey, his hand covering the boy's mouth. He squeezes even tighter, sealing the nostrils, shutting out any possible hope.

He waits for a moment and then flips the boy over and pins him in place, his ample weight holding him in position. With his other hand, he undoes the zipper on his own jeans; no time wasted on a belt, the hours of practise having it released within seconds. He pulls them down just far enough so that he feels it brushing against the fabric of the boy's jeans and, in return, the muffled cries only prove he knows exactly what is coming next. He wonders what the boy would say, if he ever released him. Would he give it up? Would he renounce his ways and promise to find a path to a purer life?

He already knows the true answers to these questions and many more, because he has watched his prey for long enough to pass judgement a hundred times over. He knows that the only outcome is punishment and the only cure is pain, and so he reaches underneath the boy to find the buckle to his belt. He quickly undoes it and rips open his trousers, finally exposing the boy's flesh. He notices how smooth it is, how it has no hair anywhere he expected. The smell of the boy's ass brings him back to the moment, back to the reality of what must happen. He smacks him across his head, openly chastising him for the filth of the job he has been condemned to do.

The boy wriggles and kicks back, as the inevitable moment creeps closer for both of them. He expected the fighting and, in truth, he wanted it. Someone who fought for their survival always gained some respect in his eyes. It was just a shame it had come so late, too far down this dark path. He repeatedly smacks the boy hard across his head, that respect counting for very little when he only needs his silence in the coming moments.

He reaches into his pocket for a condom but realises that he cannot feel what is below. He looks down, needing to check that it can still fulfil its purpose, and he's thankful that it is still with him, still standing ready. It spurs him on, assures him that he can do this. He rips open the condom packet with his teeth and notices his hands are shaking. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself. He thinks back to the war, to when he engaged in return fire with the enemy. Every target counted, and every bullet mattered; a calm breath before peering over the edge was as instinctive as pulling the trigger.

He feels his nerves steady as he pushes the condom down his shaft. It glides down easily, just as he had hoped, the packets' full of practice runs having granted him speed in this hostile territory. He takes a deep breath, ready to begin, just as he notices the shine of the condom wrapper on the grass beside him. He has already let himself down, already forgotten the need to systematically contain all the evidence. He had drilled this routine into his mind – the set format in which he was to conduct this, and he curses himself for forgetting such basics already. He tells himself he should have practiced more, reminds himself that he is better than these mistakes, no matter what the others told him. They don't matter, because they will never understand.

He picks it up and stuffs it into his pocket, momentarily distracted from his prey, and that is when he feels pain shoot through one of his fingers. He has to contain himself from shouting out loud, as he sees that his prisoner hasn't been as absent as he thought. In the silence the boy has waited, plotted and chosen his one chance wisely. He feels blood trickle down his hand and onto his wrist, as he remembers the gloves he was supposed to put on. He looks up to the stars and curses this obvious failure, then he smacks the boy across the head. He smacks him for the bite, he smacks him again for the distraction and again for the forgotten gloves. Only when the boy doesn't move does he stop to calm himself.

He doesn't check the damage to his finger, has no time to administer first aid in the field. He is more concerned to see that the pain has taken some of the blood from where it needs to be, and he worries about being able to do this, about the power needed. He watches as it almost shrinks before him, threatening to leave him in his time of need.

He can get it back, he knows he can, just give him more time. He knows that he must consume the most impure drug to be able to do what is most necessary, and so he focuses on the boy's ass, on the supple target that waits for the taking. He forgets the gloves and doesn't care about any evidence he might leave behind. Perhaps he will smash the boy's teeth in when he is finished, leaving him pure and punished, mixing their different DNA to mush in his mouth.

He thinks about what the boy deserves, about what he is to do, and it gives him the energy to fight on. He feels the rush return and knows it is time, as he looks down at this battle scene and sees the obvious victory laid out before him. He looks at his lengthened mass of judgement, so pale compared to the dark skin of his enemy, and he wastes no more time as he thrusts it deep into the boy.

Something fights back at first, trying to repel his attack, but he soon smashes through these defensive walls. They never stood a chance; never stood for anything but wasteful sodomy. With this relentless entry,

he hears screams that could fill this entire city, but that are contained within the bloodied hand that covers the boy's mouth. He holds tight as he thrusts harder and harder, not stopping for anything or anyone.

The boy tries to pull away, to scramble forward, to retreat from the battle and away from the pain. He wonders what it feels like and thinks it can't be as bad as the boy makes out, not with what he has heard him brag about in the club. He knows he won't brag any more, won't ever do the dark things he so obviously enjoys ever again.

'In the ruins you will be reborn,' he says to the boy.

'No,' he thinks he hears him reply.

He nods, unseen to the boy, as he accepts that they must continue. The war of his mind is not yet won and so he pulls the boy closer, his own body arched over him. He pushes harder and faster, feeling the friction of the fight within the boy's body. He batters at the enemy that is deep inside this young man as he punches his chest.

He keeps pushing, keeps attacking, no matter how hard it has become. He becomes so engrossed, so drawn into the fight, that nothing else matters. He is close to winning, knows the final moment is near and so he must do the most damage with the time he has left. He keeps a tight hold of the boy, who barely moves now, having finally surrendered to the invading force that has come to save him.

He finally looks down, wanting to see the mess he has caused in the name of such good. It's too dark to see anything, too confined to properly assess, but in this engrossed moment something in the distance makes him look back up. He stares forward as he holds the embrace, his shock so obvious as he sees what approaches.

His senses quickly bring him back to reality, back to the wider area. The perimeter has been compromised and he has allowed it to happen. As he holds the boy tight, he stares at the intruder who stumbles forward, staggering into this conflict area without any attempt to hide his presence.

He looks at the old man, his hair a mess and his torn shirt covered in stains, as if he has come from battles of his own. He's not sure if he knows where he is or what boozier he spilled out of, but he wouldn't expect to see this. What civilian ever would? He probably has no clue what this really is and what acts are required to cleanse a soul. All his ripe years and this old timer probably never walked on the wrong side, or ever saw anything like this.

But he has seen it now and, civilian or not, what he has witnessed has sealed his fate.

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This is the right way, I'm sure of it. I have lived in this part of London all my life and I know where I am going. Except that I have never been as drunk as this in my entire life, not on any birthday or any of the few parties I have ever attended, even for my own retirement.

'Two drinks Derek' is what they used to call me. Even on the day they said their final goodbyes, then sent me off with some silver trinket that was the entire weighted worth of my forty-five years' service, I only had my usual two pints of larger. Why change the habit of a lifetime?

I have changed that habit now. I have been more curious tonight than I have been in all my many years on this earth, and now I am paying the price for daring to step away from the safe habits that looked after me for all of my adult life. Even though this night is not yet over, I know I have forgotten most of it. I remember Henry disappearing and I can still recall being carried out of the bar, but the rest of the night is just a jumbled-up mix of flashbacks.

I fall over another ditch, stumbling to the ground. I struggle to push myself back up before I end up lying where I have fallen. I'm not really sure if it is a ditch or rather a simple mound of dirt – a small change in the terrain that caused me to lose my way yet again. I look ahead, seeing the lights at the end of the common, hoping I can make it if I keep trying. I get back up and push myself forward, my legs taking three long, uncoordinated strides.

I try to steady my eyes and focus on what is ahead, using every sense I have left to make sure that this is still the right way, and that my failing mind has not spun me around again. I have headed back towards Clapham several times and I don't have the energy to do it again. As long as I stay on course to the end of the common, then I can follow the road to Wandsworth and, eventually, to home.

I worry about the road, thinking that my constant zig-zag walking could easily lead me into the path of an oncoming bus, but I have no choice. The daring part of me is gone, replaced by a frightened mouse who simply wants to get away from this and never dare do it again. I keep stumbling towards this vain hope, my memory of home the only thing keeping me moving. The common hasn't changed much in a good many years and for that I am thankful, as I set a marker between two clumps of trees and try to keep on course.

As I keep my attention ahead, something catches my eye to the right of me. It seems to take a while for me to process what I am seeing, as if I'm translating from another language into my own. After what could be seconds or minutes, I realise I am no longer moving, and instead, I am absorbed at the sight of two men in the midst of having sex. I have never seen anything like this in real life and I immediately want to get away, to leave them in peace to do what they are obviously enjoying. I'm shocked that this is happening here and now, but I worry more that they will think I'm a pervert who stalks his way around the common in the lustful summer months. I try to move away, to divert towards home, but I still seem to be heading their way. No matter how much I try to veer to the left, to stay clear of them, I somehow get closer.

I'm in no fit state to even look, yet I find myself staring intently, as they don't seem to be in the midst of the passion I would have imagined. I watch them as I try to stay focused, no matter how much it hurts my brain. I see how different they are to each other, so ill-fitted in both their age and their colour. The older man looks to be in charge, because he's the one doing all the thrusting, whilst nothing seems to hold him back. I can't imagine how someone can take that and not feel unbelievable pain. I look to the one who is clearly braver than I will ever be, but he doesn't seem to move much. I wonder if he is in the moment, that maybe you have to focus all your energy to be able to endure such apparent pleasures.

I look again at the older man and I wonder if he is as old as me. He is clearly closer to my age than that of the man he is making love to, but he must still be a decade younger than me. He has also made far better use of his years than I have, with arms the size of my thighs that keep a tight grip on his lover.

The older one suddenly raises an arm and I wonder what he is doing, until I see his fist hammer into the side of the other man. It makes the younger one scream out in pain and I scream with him, as I gasp and cry out at what I've just seen. The young boy suddenly looks towards me, his face creased and stained with blood and sweat. He gets another punch to his ribs as this horror continues.

I stumble towards them, not knowing what I can do. I'm shouting, I can hear it. I'm telling this brute to leave him alone, but I'm not sure the words are properly coming out. My heart beats so fast, as I beg my mind to tell me that this isn't real.

The older man finally looks up at me, having been so absorbed in what he was doing. I wonder if this is normal and perhaps it isn't as painful as I think. I almost convince myself that this could be perfectly okay for some people, and that I don't know what the true realms of gay sex contain. Then I see the blood that covers the hand of the bigger man. It looks as if they have been fighting and, despite his wound, I can tell who has won. He stares at me and I look between him and the younger man, who gazes over at me through bloodshot eyes. He mouths what I think is 'help me' before he receives another blow to his head.

I shout again, my hands over my mouth as I advance forward, the shock gripping my entire body. I feel weightless as I try to make it to them, unsure what I can do and whether I am actually getting any closer. The image in front of me turns into a blur every other second, as I move and then refocus my eyes, not able to do both at the same time.

When the vision next becomes clear, I am closer than I expected, as I see the older man still in his same pose, the young one still bent over in front of him. He stares at me as he hits the boy again and again over the head, his angry face aimed only at me.

'Stop it!' I shout, fairly sure the words made it out this time.

His next punch causes the boy to slump forward, his body unmoving as it holds position where he fell, with his pants around his ankles.

I want to help him and so I move forward, my vision becoming blurred again. I sense movement in my stomach, the same retching feeling that I felt earlier, but I don't want this to happen now. I desperately try to get to him, but I can't keep my body balanced.

I stop as the hulk of a man appears in front of me. He has moved quickly, or I moved slowly, I'm not sure which. I want to tell him that this is very wrong but, before I know what has happened, I am on the ground again. It takes what seems like an eternity for me to get control of my body, yet I don't feel any pain. That doesn't stop me from guessing what just happened.

His legs come into focus as my eyes work their way up the body of the giant stood before me, until I see the trousers that still hang half off him. By the time I find his head, I see that he is staring down at me. The connection of our eyes seems to bring him to life, making him lean down closer. His wild, grey eyes tell me

just how angry one man can get. I have never been this angry, never been this wild, and so I do the only thing I can think of: I get up and try to run.

He must be watching me as I try to escape, amused by my wriggles through the grass, because even in my state I know that I am not making it very far. I suddenly feel hands grip my ankles and my body is dragged along the floor. I want to scream but I can't keep up with how quickly I am moving. He spins me around, my vision finally settling on the younger man, his eyes surrounded by black craters that tell of the long night he has endured.

I look around, desperate to find where our mutual attacker has gone, but my body is too exhausted. My head rests on the grass and I know that I am happy to call it quits. I've never been a fighter and tonight of all nights is not the time to start, not against this man. I can't seem to find him and he isn't walking into my line of sight, so I focus on the young boy.

He is still looking at me, but his expression has changed, his fear seeming to turn into some new horror. He tries to say something, his eyes fixed on something just above me. I want to ask him what's wrong but I cannot speak, cannot do anything because of the pain on the right side of my chest. I scream, but the sound is drowned out by my lack of breath. The pain comes again, this time on my left side and then again on my right side.

When he finally stops, I don't even know where I should look, and I just want him to leave me alone, having taken my turn. I wonder if that's the only reason I'm here: to take some of the beatings for the other one.

I feel a heavy weight on top of me, pinning me down, as if I'm being pushed deep into the dirt, my body forming its own grave in the mud. A hand grips my hair, pulling my head back as I feel his heavy breathing near my left ear, his other hand reaching around my throat. As his grip tightens I wonder if he is going to make this my last night on earth. Perhaps it's the alcohol that still pumps through my system, or perhaps it's the loneliness, but I don't care. I have already given up on this life. I close my eyes and picture my passing, curious that my last moment on this planet will be with a man's hands wrapped around my neck. I have no reason to fight it, only a feeling of regret that those who will stand over my tombstone will number barely a handful. I don't worry about that, because I think only of the one person I want to see.

'I'm coming, Elizabeth,' I say.

I don't feel the darkness I hoped for descend upon me. Instead, I hear his words in my ear: 'I will finish this mission and you will be my witness.'

He angles my head towards the other man and then places it back on the floor, whilst the look in those young eyes tell me he has heard every word. He shakes his own head, his hands lifting him off the floor, ready to flee and forget about me, but I don't blame him. He has so much more to live for and I can only wish for his safe escape.

My head remains where it was positioned, my view a spinning blur. I see him reach the boy long before he can make good on his escape. I see him cup his hands together like he's about to take a golf swing,

except there is no club and all the force is aimed at the boy's back. The power of those two huge joined arms force his victim back to the floor.

I try to move but my broken body can't help me. Instead of my legs or arms coming to my aid, it is my stomach that still has some life left in it; it pushes the remains of my nightmare right up to my throat. I can't even manage to project out the vomit, and so I release it in short gulps that form a puddle around my head.

I see the attacker look down at me and shake his head. I still feel a small amount of liquid dribbling out of my mouth, like a stream that calmly trickles into the pond of despair around me. I don't want to be a witness at this lowest point in my life or know what I will be forced to endure next, and so I close my eyes. They open and close a few times, the dizziness unbearable when I keep them closed, and so I catch every other second of what unfolds before me.

I see a few more punches, the body of the young man pinned back to the floor where I first saw him. He looks at me and then looks away. He's probably sorry I couldn't help him, sorry for how pointless my intrusion has been, and how someone so much better should have been his hero.

The final thing I see is the arms of the man who wants to do such vile things, as he pins the other one down. I look at his thick arm, which is hairy up to his elbow, perhaps hairier than my legs, but certainly just as white. The muscle tenses as he keeps his victim trapped, and that's when I see the tattoo that wraps around the thickest part of his arm. It takes everything I have to focus on the black drawing – the image of a shark that seems to go all the way around his bicep. It's the head that looks at me, with its oversized mouth and rows of teeth that are painted so perfectly, so detailed, that each of them could tell a story of their own.

As the screams of pain and misery echo around me, and the pleas for mercy go unanswered, all I notice is that shark. It looks fearless and powerful, its long body contorting as the arm flexes, almost giving it a life of its own. As its owner makes long grunts in unison with the poor boy's screams, I almost feel a pain I could never comprehend, and I finally see a shark that smiles.