

## Chapter 2



**D**ark rooms and succulents. From the world of violence to the world of pleasure. Jake made his way to the penthouse room. The label was celebrating his victory before he even arrived. Sponsors bought drinks, made deals, shook hands, swapped spit—it was the more vile side of violence. The people who let him fight for a living were the kind that an honest man would want to throw down with.

Jake wasn't that kind of man. It was all necessary. He wasn't a brash youth clouded over with a heart of justice and a love and passion for the sport of fighting. He was 40. He was beaten down by Reality, the cruelest fighter of them all. He saw the world of dark lights and white powder lines as a blurry hallway that led him from one fight to the next, all to avoid the dark back doors where those hot lights couldn't shine. The realm of obscurity—once his body broke like Callum's, that would be his destination.

Until then, he was Raging Jake. Even when he drank until he smiled, that's who he was.

It was a big party for a small group. The penthouse held about 20 people at max. There were only about 15, but they all had a presence that filled the space up faster. The music was

too loud to talk under, so people just shouted intimate secrets plied through loosened lips. A few stood around someone in the kitchen who was snorting lines.

A woman named Katie gave Jake a tumbler. “Special drink for you, darling,” she taunted. Jake couldn’t tell what was in it. The lights and sounds muted out his senses. It tasted like gin when he skulled it. He pulled Katie in for a kiss and tasted the cigarette on her breath.

He went outside, away from the lights and noise to the balcony. The lights and noise sort of chased him out there anyway. The windows still flashed with strobes, and the music thudded against the dull glass. He could feel the vibrations of people talking but could no longer hear what they talked about.

He took out his mobile and checked it. Still one message, and probably the same one. He held it up to his ear and tried hard to listen.

It was still Sara. “... It’s best to come back...Sort a few things out...” It ended earlier than he recalled. He checked why and the battery died. He stared at it, emotionless. His rage was sated, drunken, and held back, but it was there. It was always there about something. He only showed it when a punch could solve his problems.

He went back inside, where everything turned blurry and indistinguishable. The lights and the sounds combined. Jake thought the speakers were in the strobe lights, or the stereo in the corner was somehow producing tangible darkness where all the other lights came from to fill in.

Things got worse as he neared the group. Voices started to

attack him. He was blindsided by physical force. He remembered his fights and felt the punches that once rocked him from heel to toe against the hard 9th wall—the arena's floor. There was no ground in a proper fight. Two men floated and hit each other until one truly fell. The floor was simply a wall to push and pull against. Down was simply a state of mind.

Jake started to feel that sense of down. Every step felt like he was walking into a much deeper hole than he thought, and it startled him when his foot landed on the level. He stumbled through the room, not sure where to go. His wandering made the penthouse seem like a mansion—or a labyrinth. No hard walls blocked him, just walls of noise and color.

“Where you going, Jake?” Katie asked. He couldn't see her, and her voice felt like it was coming from inside of him. Like a thought he couldn't control. He said something but couldn't even hear what it was. Then he left.

The hall lights were a different kind of distractingly bright. It was all one color, which was somehow worse. There were no corners or edges to work around. It was all a uniform visual slush of repeating patterns, door after door. The floor pattern made him feel sick.

Jake wandered even further, not aware of where he truly was until he felt the warm buzz of the air outside. He was on the streets before he knew it and passed by all the late-night clubs and bars that were blurry concoctions of their own. He started sobering up just a little bit, and the voices that were once a mental screen became clearer.

A lot of people were angry outside. There were hot and

hateful words being thrown around. A few drunks meandered their way up to Jake, thinking they could find some sympathy for their problems with him, but he just shoved them away with their unfulfilled drink coupons.

Jake was no one's shoulder. He shoved them away back on their dizzying paths while he stuck to his. He wanted to get somewhere else, away from the distractions and blurring sensations. He wanted to find somewhere quiet, outside in the city streets. It was a completely greedy desire, and he was too drunk to fully understand that it was impossible.

The sounds became less dense, and he picked up on some of the after-party discussions and distractions that were going on. Men were cursing each other out, sometimes on friendly terms and sometimes not. No fights were breaking out, though. All the hot language sounded too shallow to commit to a real fight. Girls were battling off wolf whistles and generally raunchy things while being raunchy themselves just out of earshot.

Cars honked just because they could. They couldn't sober anybody up or get them out of the street. Anyone out driving was less responsible than the drunks who were hitting the legs back to whatever warm bench would accept them in the middle of the night.

Jake was a state removed from his usual TV-ready fare. He had a T-shirt and gym pants on, not the white trunks, and a sponsored robe. All of that was behind him in the penthouse. The silk robe was always heavier than it looked, and it was a loaner. He couldn't even get it dirty on the outside.

A young man headed directly into Jake and spun off of him.

Jake was too solid to knock over, but he was a wavering kind of solid. A boulder on loose gravel, not a tree. The young man took the stiffer end of the shouldering and turned back. He was aggressive. That one dodgy slam ruined his whole evening.

“What’s your fucking problem!”

The tone sent Jake into a defensive stance. The guy came at Jake with his eyes wide and teeth clenched. A fist flew through the air, clear as day and amateurishly slow. Jake let it pass close until the guy was closer. The nearest thing Jake saw that reminded him of the cage was a lamp post.

He took the slurring drunk by the shoulders, swung him hard into the lamp, and stepped in with the speed and intent to plough straight through them both. He dipped his head down and butted the young man’s skull with a crack.

They both went down, not to the 9th wall, but the ground.

## Chapter 3



**D**ark and cold. Jake was barely awake. He didn't recognize where he was or what had happened. He was more dead to the world than when he was a dodging, staggering drunk. He was curled up on the floor of a one-man police holding cell with a stain of dry vomit in the corner, right next to an untouched wall-mounted commode. Mixed in with the sick was a bit of blood from the sore opening on the inside of his cheek.

The cell door opened. A police officer held the door. He looked like he had more important things to be doing that early in the morning. He waited until the cell's visitor walked in with a proud, intolerant stride. It was Brian, Jake's manager. A very slick man who was offset and disturbed by his prize fighter's accommodations.

He saw Jake on the floor huddled up in a fetal position, sound asleep and drooling. He was half-dressed from how he left the party the night before. His shirt was gone. All he had was his track pants and sneakers. Without his sponsorships on his trunks, he just looked like another dye-job bloke that was lucky not to be nursing an open wound in such a festering place.

"Up, Jake!" the officer barked. "You have a visitor!" He