

one

OF ALL THE LAME SHIT ON PINSCHER'S BACKPACK, HIS *War Is Not the Answer* sticker pisses me off the most—even more than his *Practice Nonviolence* button, which makes me want to practice some violence on his face.

It's not enough that I have to listen to him run his mouth all the time. But to have to see all his slogans and crap on his backpack, watch him strut around and show off, laughing like it's all a big joke—it's almost too much to take. Especially on Monday mornings. Especially on a Monday morning after an even more shitastic than usual weekend.

Pinscher catches me looking. One side of his lip curls up, showing his teeth, making him look even more like the dog we named him for in fifth grade.

T.J. would wipe that sneer off his face.

"Matt?" Shauna's hand waves in front of my face. "Hey. You OK?"

"Yeah." Pinscher says something, and the others all look at me, then laugh. "Fine."

Shauna pries my fingers off the locker door and curls her hand around my fist. My hand throbs like I'm still

strangling the cold metal, the hard edge still digging into my palm.

“Forget about him,” Shauna whispers. She moves into the space between Pinscher and me, so close I have to blink and refocus to see her face as more than a bunch of shapes. I can’t even see him around her. Her fingers slide over my knuckles, back and forth, until my hand relaxes. “Seriously, he’s not worth it.”

We stand like that, so close I can’t see anything but her. Her fingers are warm and smooth. I’d forgotten how good her hands feel. Heat races through me. I yank my hand back, remembering why I started avoiding her hands. Touching leads to bad thoughts, which can only lead to total mortification. No benefits with this friendship.

“Yeah, I know.” I rub at my neck, try to shake it off—all of it—the tension left over from Dad’s glare, Pinscher’s stupid laugh, how I can still feel Shauna’s fingers and smell her herbally clean hair.

“What’s going on?” She’s got that worried look again, like she can’t figure out how to fix me, or if I’m worth the effort to try this time.

“Nothing.” I shrug. “The usual.”

She’s not buying it. Means I’m in for an interrogation. I reach into my locker and push my books around, hoping she’ll wait until later or that we can at least get out of the hall first. But when I look up, ready to negotiate, she’s not even looking at me.

She's pointedly *not* looking at Michael, who's hovering down the hall, obviously watching her. Hanging near enough to Pinscher to pretend he's paying attention, but watching Shauna. Could be we're heading for another round of their on-again, off-again drama.

Maybe she'll be too busy to interrogate me.

If I have to watch Shauna get back together with Michael—here, now—I really will put my fist through the wall.

“Are you going to be OK?” She's already hoisting her backpack to run, but her forehead is creased with worry. “I can't be late for homeroom again. Señora Rosenfeld will make me *muerta*.”

“Yeah.” I force a smile. “Go.” I close my locker door carefully, like it's made of glass.

“See you later?” Her brown eyes are squinty and dark. “Matt?”

“Yeah. No, I'm fine. I'll meet you at your car after eighth.”

I'm late for homeroom, but Mrs. Rahman just waves me to my seat. Pinscher's two rows over, playing around with the shit on his backpack. He makes a big show of peeling the paper off a new bumper sticker and pasting it onto the side of the bag. I make myself look at the wall.

The morning crawls by. Through bio and most of English, I wonder what the new sticker says. He was extra careful with it, like he was extra proud.

I make it through lunch, but take the long way to algebra

to avoid, well, everyone, jumping across the threshold just as the second bell rings.

“Nice of you to join us,” Mrs. Tine says, waving me past with her bright-green review-o-rama folder. Like I’ve got a choice.

She practically dances around the room in full-out math love. It’s all review, and I actually get most of it, but Mrs. Tine is cool enough to skip past me when I’m sunk down low in my seat. She only calls on me when I look at her. Today I don’t look at anyone.

Pinscher’s two rows over and up. His backpack is on the floor next to his desk, the new sticker pointed right at me: *Not in My Name*, the words like a strobe light throbbing behind my eyes. Like any of them are over there for him.

All his talk and buttons and crap. His bracelets, like a girl, with the names of dead soldiers, who would have kicked his ass if they ever got the chance. And ever since Pinscher went to that rally in Philly, all he can talk about is Bush and the war. They made him stop wearing his *Bush Lied* crap in school, but he just tripled up with the antiwar stuff—buttons and shirts and stickers about the war, about the “troops,” like he gives a damn about them or what they believe.

Every week some new shirt, paraded around like *he’s* won something.

Bullshit, radiating off his backpack even when his freaking mouth is shut. *War Is a Waste. Not in My Name. Iraqis Are People, Too*. What the hell does that even mean?

The bell makes me jump, banging my knee on the desk. Everyone starts moving, but Mrs. Tine hovers next to me. I slack back and wait. Once the room is empty, she taps the blank page of my notebook, where my notes from class should be.

“Barely hanging on to a C right now, Matt. Don’t blow it.”

She drops my quiz from Friday on top of the blank page and walks away. A green 70 cowers next to my name in the upper right-hand corner of the page. When the school year started, Dad was pushing for all Bs. Now he’d flip for a C. But since I haven’t exactly been paying attention, I’m gonna need a miracle to get through the final and hang on to a C for the year.

The halls are too loud. I cut out the side door and walk around the outside of the building.

When I get to my locker, Pinscher’s still at his, holding court. He pulls his sweatshirt over his head. The T-shirt underneath is pristine, bright white with red letters on the front and red and black on back. Has to be new. The red words on front shout at me: *Support OUR Troops: Bring Them Home . . .* He turns, showing it off. All the black type on back is too small to read from across the hall, but the large red *And not in Pieces* screams off the shirt.

Not.

In.

Pieces.

My books scatter on the floor.

Pinscher turns and flattens back against the lockers. He's talking, but I can't hear him over the roaring in my head. Someone grabs my arm, but I shake him off and pull at Pinscher's shirt.

I need to see.

I spin Pinscher around, shove his face against the lockers. My hand slaps flat against his back. Everything stops except for both of us heaving in air. I hold my hand over the words I couldn't read from across the hall. Up close they're huge.

I'm gonna tear them off him.

"It's a waste, dude," Pinscher says over his shoulder. "Don't you see that? The money, and all the innocent—"

"Shut up."

"I'm supporting them." Fucking asshole. "It has to end before—"

"You have no right—"

"I have every right. It's my—"

He struggles. The shirt rips. I've still got a piece of it. Not enough.

"Get off me!" he yells.

Other voices. Someone pulls me away. I shove back, but then they're between us, someone holding on to Pinscher.

"Put your sweatshirt on," someone says to Pinscher. Pinscher sputters. "Put it on," he—Michael—says again.

"You ripped it?" Pinscher snarls.

I leap at him. Someone forces me back. We wrestle until Michael shoves us both farther away.

“Pete,” Michael says, “just go.”

Pinscher edges around Michael and starts backing toward the office, holding out a piece of the ripped shirt. “Don’t you get it? Bush lied. It was all lies. Every time we torture—”

I break free, slam Michael into the wall, and charge. Pinscher tries to get away, but I’ve got him. We stumble into the lockers. I wedge my arm into his throat and tear at the shirt until I get another chunk.

Pinscher kicks and twists.

I won’t let go.

The shirt rips all the way to Pinscher’s neck.

The others grab at me, but I shake them off and swing.

“My nose!” Pinscher clutches his face. Blood seeps between his fingers, floods his mouth and chin. “You broke my—”

My fist misses his jaw, gets his shoulder. T.J. wouldn’t have missed.

He swings back, but I punch the side of his head, then his neck. We fall.

I swing wildly, both fists. Blood everywhere.

Hands grab at me, pull me. I clamp my knees around Pinscher and keep swinging.

Pinscher covers his face.

T.J.’s voice tells me to go for his ribs. Dad eggs me on.

A roar, and I’m knocked off Pinscher, slammed into the wall. My head bounces off the floor. I spring up, the way T.J. taught me to, aiming for the nearest body. A crash, then glass everywhere.

Pinscher's crawling. I dive for his legs.

Words keep coming. Dad's words.

Wuss.

Show him.

Make him.

Fight.

Harder.

Hoisted up by my arms, I kick out, but I can't find the ground.

I fight, but they're too strong.

I'm hauled back until my feet hit the ground hard, vibrations running up my legs. Ears buzzing.

"Cut it out." Coach Simpson. "You're not going anywhere."

"Stop." From the other side. Mr. Lee. "Matt, stop."

I suck in air. Can't breathe. Gulp in more. Like I was drowning. Now I can breathe.

"Get him out of here."

They pull me down the hall.

Pinscher's *Practice Nonviolence* button is on the floor. I kick it as they drag me by. It skitters all the way down the hall.

two

MY ASS IS NUMB FROM THE HARD PLASTIC CHAIR ACROSS from Principal Pendergrast's office. He parked me here to wait for Dad. Two hours ago.

With nothing to do but wait, I can't get the feel or sounds of the fight out of my head.

That first perfect punch in slow motion, a hazy comet trail following my arm all the way to Pinscher's face. The sound of my fist hitting his nose, the crunch, like smashing crusty ice with my foot. Every drawer or door closing sounds like my head hitting the floor. The tangy, metallic smell of Pinscher's blood surrounds me, making me thirsty and sick.

But when I roll my shoulder or flex my hands, it feels good, like the burn after working out so hard your body is at its limit and you know you're alive. I haven't felt this alive in months—since last April, when T.J. was home on leave.

It felt good to hit someone. I can't say that out loud, but it's the truth.

The door to Principal Pendergrast's office opens. He mutters all the way to the lead secretary's desk and then back around the counter to where I'm sitting. He waits for me to

move my leg out of the path of his scuffed-up loafers before continuing past to the cabinet in the corner. His thinning hair still clings to his head in carefully spaced strands, but his chin, jaw and upper lip are shaded dark with end of the day stubble. He looks like a cartoon character—his face shaded darker to show the hard day he’s had.

“You, Mr. Foster, have absolutely nothing to smile about.”

Pendergrast’s intimidation strategies have nothing on Dad’s. And no matter what I do now, I’m gonna get suspended. I fold my arms and lean back in my chair. I stay that way, even when my shoulder starts to burn, and stare at his shoes, pretending I can’t hear him.

“You think this is funny?” Pendergrast leans in closer. “Do you? Yo, Earth to Mr. Foster.”

I’m not looking at him.

Mrs. Danner, the nice secretary, makes this sound, and then I’m looking at her over the counter. It’s like in sixth grade, when she caught me daring her son, Jared, to spit out the bus window on the field trip to Gettysburg. She flicks her head, and then I’m looking at Pendergrast, despite my plan to ignore him.

“Your language alone requires a suspension under the nonharassment policy. We do not tolerate that word, as you well know.”

“What word?” I was spewing words. I don’t even remember what.

Pendergrast plants his hands on his hips. Oh. Shit. I

must have called Pinscher a faggot somewhere in there. Not for the first, time I wonder if Pendergrast takes “that word” a little personally.

“Well?” He waits for me to say something for myself. I don’t think he wants to hear what I think.

Whatever. He starts talking. I stop listening. Pendergrast acts like there’d have to be some sort of meeting or vote or something before suspending me if only I hadn’t called Pinscher a faggot. Yeah, right. As soon as I had a hold of Pinscher’s shirt, I was gone.

“You hear me?” Pendergrast nudges my shoe. I look at him, but I have no idea what he was saying. He throws his hands in the air and shifts to start over. Please let it be the short version. My head is pounding, and my stomach is trying to eat itself.

“Peter is seriously injured. You broke his nose, and you’d better hope nothing else is broken. Tim, Michael, and David got pretty banged up, and Steven’s going to need stitches in his arm. And that is all before we get to the display case you’re going to pay for.”

I feel a little bad about Michael. He’s OK, at least compared to a lot of the other jerks Shauna’s dated. Stevie’s OK, too. I have nothing against either of them except they got in my way. But Pinscher? Pinscher not so much. I actually feel pretty satisfied with breaking Pinscher’s face.

“Listen.” Pendergrast sags into the chair next to me. “You’re lucky you’re not down at the police station right now.”

He leans so close I can smell his nasty breath. “By rights, you should be. I know Peter and some of the others have been pretty vocal lately. And it’s been a rough bunch of months for you. But you’re not helping yourself by rising to their bait at every turn.”

Every turn? He has no clue how many times a day I have to swallow it all down. Most days it’s all I can do just to keep from ripping Pinscher’s head off.

“I am sure, if the roles were reversed, you would want to express your views on”—he pauses, afraid to say “war” to me maybe—“political issues without getting the crap kicked out of you. Right?”

There’s no point in arguing. No matter what I say, no matter what happens, they’ll never get it, not with everyone snowed by Pinscher. They fall all over him, him and his father, the big-deal professor.

“ . . . learn to roll with it a little more. It may not be fair, but I don’t think I have to tell you that life is not fair.”

No, he doesn’t.

“Seems like you came in this morning spoiling for a fight. At least, that’s what I hear.” From who? “Want to tell me why?”

No way.

“We can help, Matt. But you’ve got to talk to us.”

I’d be in a world of hurt if Pendergrast said anything to Dad. And besides, the parts not really about Pinscher would sound dumb.

Pendergrast scratches his chin. It sounds like sandpaper, the fine kind Mr. Anders gives me for the edges of woodwork or for going over custom cabinets before I stain them.

“OK. Well, there are about three weeks left. You have a chance to salvage this semester if you buckle down . . .”

Right. I’ve fallen into quicksand; the harder I try to concentrate, the less I can. I haven’t opened a book in months.

Pendergrast taps my chair. “Matthew, whatever troubles you’ve had in the past, and despite not being the most dedicated student, you’ve never been a discipline problem until this year. And I get that there are extenuating circumstances, but not even . . . those excuse your behavior today.” He waits, maybe for me to pour out my soul. Not gonna happen. “We’re running out of options with you. My voice-mail’s probably full of worried parents and school-board members, wanting me to assure them that you’re not a danger to anyone. And right now, I can’t do that.”

I push my cut-up knuckles against my leg to keep my face blank.

“I know it’s been tough. But I’d hate to see you get so far off track that you throw away your chance to graduate with your class. If you can get through these last few weeks without incident, get through finals, you could start fresh next year.”

Like that would solve anything. Break my ass? What for? Another year of torture?

“ . . . I know that this time Peter may have started it.”

Bullshit. He waits for me to say something, but it's got to be a trick. Like to get me to start talking. I'm not stupid. No way Pinscher admitted anything.

Pendergrast sighs, shakes his head, and leans back in his chair, moving away from me. Apparently the touchy-feely part of our chat is over.

"Even if Peter instigated it," he continues, "that doesn't make it acceptable to get physical, or to escalate it. You need to figure out how to resolve these kinds of things without violence—walk away or talk it out, anything not to turn to violence. You can't solve things with your fists, Matt, especially when you are bigger and stronger than the other guy."

"Says who?" Dad's voice booms from the doorway.

My ribs and back scream from being jolted to attention, but I hold myself still and straight in the chair. Pendergrast stands up and motions to his office, but Dad's not going anywhere yet. He towers over us, all six two of him, not one regulation salt-and-pepper hair out of place, not one piece of lint on his clothes, not one wrinkle except on his leathered face.

"Seems to me if the other guys started it, and I'm pretty sure you just admitted they did, then it seems to me they just learned the important lesson." Dad's bottom lip juts out for emphasis, like he has just now convinced himself of the truth of the statement. "Don't talk trash to guys who are stronger than you, especially when the trash you're spewing is utter, unadulterated bullshit. Sounds to me like they got what was coming to them."

It'd be nice if Dad stayed on my side, but I know he'll find a way to be pissed at me—like maybe he'll tell me T.J. could have beat them so bad they would have told Pendergrast they kicked their own asses. *You only broke his face? What, Matt, too much of a wuss to break his whole goddamn head? Well, we'll just have to fix that so you learn to hit right.*

Dad shifts his focus from Pendergrast to me. A long, sweat-inducing stare. Then he narrows his eyes and gives me a once-over, his forehead collapsing into wrinkled layers between his hairline and his eyebrows. The look doesn't so much ask if I'm all right as try to assess if anything requires immediate medical attention. Short of a severed limb, there will be no doctors. Stitches are for wimps and pretty boys. We Foster men swear by butterflies, surgical tape, and, for those really stubborn cuts, Super Glue. First time Dad whipped that shit out, T.J. ran for it. But it worked: sealed the cut right up.

I can feel his eyes sliding over me, taking inventory of my wounds. When he looks at my eyes again, I shrug to let him know I'm cool. Not because I am but because I can't let him know just how hurt I let myself get. A shiver races up my spine, and I lock my knees to keep steady. My head can't take another round tonight, not even the openhanded slaps Dad thinks are kidding around.

Pendergrast shifts from foot to foot next to us. He coughs. "Mr. Foster?"

Dad ignores him for one more beat and then stalks into

Pendergrast's office, without even looking at him. Pendergrast follows like he's the one in trouble.

Their voices bleed through the closed office door—not enough to hear the actual words, but I can make out the back and forth. More back than forth as Dad gets on a roll, probably with his big “What is wrong with this country?” speech. I can picture Dad: rising out of his seat, slapping the desk, spearing the air with his finger. After a while it becomes clear that Dad's the only one talking. At least he's blowing off some steam. Blowing off steam is good. The longer he rants at Pendergrast, the less he'll have left for me.

Eventually I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes. Big mistake. With nothing to see but the red-tinged dark of my eyelids, I can't ignore the pain. Everywhere hurts. My right hand, resting on my leg, feels full of wet cement, heavier with every minute. My head pounds in time with my pulse. I open my eyes and shift around until I can see the clock on the far side of the office. Pressing my left thumb against my temple, I watch the second hand on the wall clock.

One minute. Two. The ache in my head pools in my temple, under my thumb. I can't swallow. There's no spit left to swallow. My tongue feels too big, and like it's wrapped in sandpaper.

“Are you thirsty, Matt?” Mrs. Danner asks from behind the counter. “Need some water?”

“Yes, ma'am.” I sit up straighter.

“Come over here.” She waves me around the counter. I

freeze at the invisible line between the waiting area and the secretaries' desks. "It's OK," she says. "Here, sit down."

After I've folded myself into the chair next to her desk, she hands me a large plastic cup of water. The first tentative sip slides around my mouth. Relief, cold and clean and so good. Maybe the best-tasting water I've ever had. I take small sips, swirling it around my tongue each time before swallowing, just to savor it.

"Thanks, Mrs. Danner," I only think to say when half the water is gone. Her eyes crinkle at the edges. For the first time in hours, my gut relaxes. She's clearly not scared of me or worried I'm gonna lose it again. She doesn't even seem that unnerved by Dad. And when she smiles and rests her chin on her hand, I almost feel like me again—like last-year me, not the guy I've turned into.

"Some more?" She pours me another full cup without waiting for an answer.

I take a really big gulp, holding it in my mouth as long as I can before swallowing. My "Thanks" comes out like a gasp. I need to slow down. No way to know how long Dad'll be in there.

"You're in a lot of pain, aren't you?" Mrs. Danner asks.

"Nah, just some scrapes, a few bruises." I flex my swollen hand out in front of me. "No problem."

"No," she says, "inside, you're in a lot of pain, aren't you?"

The question knocks the air out of me more than any of the hits I took.

I can't breathe. Or speak. She won't let me off the hook, staring into my eyes. The vise around my lungs clamps tighter.

Pendergrast's office door swings open and slams against the wall, jarring me free. Saved from Mrs. Danner by Dad.

He looks at the empty chair where I should be. His eyes go wild, and he swings around. But before I can say anything, he sees me and says, "Let's go."

three

DAD DOESN'T SAY ANYTHING ALL THE WAY TO THE CAR, NOT even after we're buckled in and pulling out of the parking space.

At the first red light, we sit in silence. He's not giving me any clue as to how much trouble I'm in.

"Didja shut 'em up?" he finally asks.

"Yes, sir," I reply in the strongest and most assured voice I can muster.

I glance sideways without moving my head—a skill honed by years of gauging my father's moods.

His only response is a slight flexing of the muscle in his jaw.

The light changes, but he doesn't move. I wait for whatever's coming. A car horn sounds behind us. He hits the gas.

Watching him freaks me out. I press my face against the cold glass of the window and watch the houses pass by. He turns out of town, instead of toward home. He doesn't say why, and I don't ask. I don't even care.

Another turn and we're headed to his office. He must have come straight from the site he was inspecting today. He'll want to drop his stuff at the office and check the mail

and messages. Can't deviate from his precious routine, even if his kid is dying in the passenger seat.

Outside his building, he turns off the truck, climbs out, and slams the door behind him. No warnings to stay put, no caring "I'll be right back." Not even a look in my direction. He'll take whatever time he wants, and I'll wait, without saying a word.

I close my eyes and roll my forehead against the glass.

Last spring, in the worst of bad timing, Dad's grand plan, his dream—that I would go to State, rise through the ranks of ROTC, and go on to Officer Candidate School—burst the week before T.J. came home for leave. The college counselor practically laughed in Dad's face when he asked about my chances of getting into State. While she stuttered on about my "options," Dad tuned her out. It was amazing he didn't crack a tooth the way he clenched his jaw for the rest of the short meeting.

After, he didn't let me get in the truck, and he wasn't in the house by the time I walked home. I almost pissed myself when he came in late that night. I was ready to bolt until I heard him head upstairs. He didn't say one word to me the entire week, not until an hour after T.J. got home, when it was becoming obvious. Then he tried to put on a good face, but I could tell the stress of trying not to kill me in front of T.J. was grating on his nerves. I think even T.J. could tell. Maybe that's why T.J. came up with the plan to turn our usual

day hikes into five days away on our own. That or he couldn't take one more day cooped up in our house, either.

From the moment he got home, T.J. couldn't relax for a minute. That whole first afternoon, he twitched and fidgeted. All week he paced around the house. He didn't sit still for long, jumping up five minutes after he sat down, even during meals. He wasn't goofing around or teasing me, or even really seeing any of his old friends. He wasn't talking much at all. And when he did talk, even his voice was different: deeper, lower. I only saw him relax when we took off on our own.

We'd been hiking together since I was twelve. T.J. came back from his first tour with big plans for us to actually *do* stuff together, at least during the few weeks a year he came home on leave. That first time, the "hikes" were like a stroll for him—he was twenty and combat fit; I was scrawny, even for twelve. But every time he visited, we would drive to some state park for an afternoon, and I'd try not to let on how hard those hikes were for me and he'd pretend not to notice. For my fourteenth birthday, he bought me my first really cool pair of boots and a book on the Appalachian Trail. In the front cover, he wrote we'd hike it together someday and until then, we'd be in training. Every time he's been home, we've tackled bigger trails, longer hikes, getting ready one visit at a time.

When he was home last spring, we started talking for real about the Appalachian Trail. We'd need five or six months, maybe seven, to thru-hike the whole thing—not possible while T.J. was still on active duty. But he said we could start

section-hiking it, doing a part every year. My job while he was deployed was to plan the first section hike for the summer after his tour.

That local five-day trip last spring was supposed to be kind of like a trial run. We got a spot at a campground out past Pittsburgh, so we could do a bunch of day hikes on some new, more difficult trails. I thought there was no way that Dad would go for it. But he didn't say anything about the plan, not even when we were packing the truck to leave. Instead, he hovered, staring, making me nervous and T.J. tense.

"Junior." Only Dad called T.J. that. "Run his ass off. Got to start getting him ready for Basic." He was looking at T.J., but he was talking to me. "We're gonna make a man out of him yet. Knock out the pantywaist he's in danger of becoming."

T.J. eyed me, then the truck. But before I could get around and in, Dad cuffed me at the temple, toppling me into the side of the truck.

"Lay off, old man," T.J. said.

"Or what?" Dad stood in the way, keeping T.J. from tossing the last of the bags into the back. "I kicked your ass into gear. Think I'm gonna let this fairy—"

"I said enough." T.J. bumped Dad to the side with his shoulder.

Except for his bleached-out hair, just long enough to curl, T.J. looked more like Dad than ever, with his Dad-like gray-green eyes and his face tanned dark. Dad tensed in combat stance; only the gray in his receding crew cut giving away his

age from behind. T.J. barely looked defensive at all. He was two inches shorter than Dad, but rock solid and seemingly relaxed, except for his jaw and the arms bulging across his chest. I left them to their staring and put my still-scrawny pansy ass in the car, well out of their mutual way.

The standoff ended abruptly with a silent truce—maybe Dad remembered that he wanted T.J. on his side in the campaign to make me enlist, or maybe T.J. decided kicking Dad’s ass would just lead to more crap. Or maybe they both just decided it was stupid, or I wasn’t worth it. Whatever the reason, they both backed off and we were on our way. All cool, except for the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that whatever just happened wasn’t really over.

T.J. and I were stopped at a light fifteen minutes outside of town when T.J. jumped into the conversation we had been avoiding for all of his leave, and probably longer.

“Matt, you’re not seriously thinking of enlisting, are you?”

My gut twisted. “Sure. Why not?”

He scratched at his arm, watching for the light to change. “Any chance you could go to college? You know, if you got your grades up?”

“No.” There didn’t really seem much point in debating the possibility that some shitty school somewhere might take Dad’s money despite my grades. I wasn’t going.

T.J. grunted, shaking his head and tightening his grip on the steering wheel: so much like Dad, with a lot of the frustration, but with the very important lack of desire to kill me.

The light changed. We drove on. And T.J. chewed on whatever he wanted to say. And whatever it was, I knew I didn't want to hear it.

"Hey," I said, trying for levity, "Basic's gotta be a helluva lot better than four more years of school. It's shorter, and who knows, after life with Dad, I might enjoy the gentle strains of a drill sergeant and the predictability of Basic Training. Not to mention meals cooked by someone else at regular intervals."

"No. You wouldn't," T.J. said. "And Basic isn't what I'm worried about."

I didn't need a lecture.

"Matt." He grabbed my shoulder and squeezed it until I looked at him. "I'm not saying you couldn't get through Basic, though I do think it would kick your ass. But later, the reality of actually being in the Army?" T.J. shook his head, rolling to a stop at the next light. "I'm just saying I don't think you want that, and . . . I don't think I want that for you."

"You think I'm not strong enough? I've got a year to get ready. I'll be so—"

"Whoa, killer. Chill. I'm not saying you couldn't make it. I'm saying you'd be miserable. I'm saying you'd hate it. Every day. And I've seen too many guys . . . hate every minute of it." He stared through me until the light turned green, and then he settled in to drive again. "See, I'm saying you'd be better off doing something else, something that can't get you killed."

It felt like he'd punched me. He might as well have said

to leave the fighting to the men, who could handle it, unlike me. I wanted to climb out of the truck and walk home rather than spend the next five days with someone who thought I wasn't good enough, wasn't strong enough—hell, wasn't man enough—to do what he did, and what lots of other guys he knew did.

“Look,” T.J. said. “You don't want to go, right?” I tried to make myself say I wanted it. “Right?” he asked again. The silence stretched until we coasted up to another light. “Then you shouldn't go. Because even when you want it, when you sign on ready for it, it'll kick your ass. But the guys who don't want it? Who sign on 'cause they have to or think they have no other choice? I've seen too many of them crack up in Basic, or worse. The ones who do make it through, well, some of them never really get their feet under them. And by the time they realize what a huge mistake they've made, it's too late, and they're shaking scared the whole fucking time, which makes them dangerous to themselves and to everyone around them.” T.J. looked at me for a quick, tense moment before focusing on the road again. “Too many of them end up dead.”

I couldn't move.

“Being miserable all the time can really screw with your head, can slow you down. Make you sloppy. Get you killed. Get a whole lot of people killed. So if you want it, go for it. I'll cheer you on. But if you don't, if you're just doing it for him, or me, or whatever, then don't fucking sign up. You can't.”

My eyes stung, prickling and blurry.

“Do something else,” he added. “Something where you won’t get shot if you are so miserable that your mind wanders or you just stop caring.”

Having said his piece, T.J. seemed fine with the quiet, with letting it go now that he was done, like we could just push all the you’re-not-good-enough behind us and go pretend everything was great. That he hadn’t just confirmed exactly what I thought he thought of me.

I couldn’t let it go.

“It’s not like I’m really gonna have a choice,” I said, looking out the window. “I’m not going to college. And he’s always said college or—”

“Don’t let him bully you into it. Stall. Figure something else out. Junior college or some other kind of school. Or get a job. I’ll help you deal with Dad. But you’re gonna have to figure out what you’re gonna do instead.”

“Stall?” My voice cracked like it hadn’t in years.

“Jesus, Matt, it’s time to grow a pair. You’re gonna have to stand up to him sometime. Until you do, he’s just gonna keep going at you.”

The shame of hiding in the car while he stared Dad down rushed to my face.

“It’s your life, Matt. What do you want to do? Dad can drag you down to the enlistment office. But even if he hauled you through the door, they wouldn’t accept you unless you willingly signed the papers. So, what do you want?”

“What do I want?” He had to be shitting me. “I want to *not* have you and Dad on my ass all the time.” I wanted Dad to go a week without trying to make me flinch or shoving me into a wall. “You left.” I wanted T.J. to come home, to want to *be* home. Even when he visited, he wasn’t really *here*. “You’re never here. You have no idea. Why . . . I mean . . . who the hell are you to, to . . .” I lost steam when my eyes started stinging worse. “What do I want . . .”

At the next intersection, T.J. turned and looked at me. “Do. Not. Enlist.” Each word bounced off my brain. “Period.”

“Oh, you mean, like you did?” There was so much pressure in my lungs and ears. “And you did OK, right? I mean, you didn’t really want to join, at least not at first, but you made it. You’re OK, right? I can handle it.”

T.J. coasted to the wide shoulder on the side of the road and put the truck in park. He released his seat belt and rubbed his hands over his eyes. He stared out his window for a few seconds before he turned and looked at me again. He crossed his arms over the letters spelling *ARMY* across his shirt and let out this long sigh.

“Matt,” he started, and then trailed off, taking another deep breath and letting it out before continuing, “I chose to go. I talked about it with Dad. I met with the recruiter and decided on my specialization. Me. I chose it.”

Scenes flashed through my head. Dad tossing brochures at him across the dinner table. T.J. slamming his door and yelling. All that summer before, the tension between T.J. and

Dad over it. That last morning, T.J. acting like such a jerk and refusing to have breakfast with us and stomping out to the car. He and Dad yelling at each other in the car while Mrs. Gruber held my shoulders to keep me from running after them.

“I knew, deep down, that I needed to get out of here,” T.J. said. “I was nothing here, less than nothing. And things with Dad . . . Yeah.” T.J. smiled. “I fought Dad. Just enough so he didn’t think I was going ’cause he told me to. But deep down, I was relieved. I wanted to go. It was my best chance to actually become something.”

But. But he, and Dad . . .

“If I had stayed . . .” T.J. shrugged, his arms moving up and down over the letters across his chest. “I have no idea where I’d be, assuming Dad and I didn’t kill each other, or . . .” T.J. swallowed the thought, a sour one by the look on his face. “The point is, this was the right thing for me. For *me*. Then. Now. I’d do it all over again. But, Matt, we’re at war. Wars that aren’t going to end anytime soon. You enlist now, and you’ll be deployed somewhere within a year, maybe sooner.”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight and dry.

“Fine if you’re ready. They’ll train you up, teach you what you need to know. But they can’t teach you to want it. So, if you know what you want, and what you want is to serve, then you choose it—eyes open, fully committed, your choice. But if not . . .”

A shudder rolled through me.

“Yeah,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed it until I looked at him. “If you let him bully you into it before you’re ready, you’re gonna be thoroughly screwed.”

I was screwed no matter what. But . . .

“And if you’re not sure, wait.” He nodded and leaned closer to me. “Wait. It’ll be there. Do something else for a while; see what you want. And if you decide later to join up, then great. It’ll be your decision, and I’ll be there to cheer you on. But don’t do it for him, or me, or because you don’t know what else to do. Do it because you want it, or not at all.”

Something had just shifted between T.J. and me, something big. Like five of the eight and a half years between us evaporated.

“I don’t want you to get yourself killed because you are trying to make him proud—or make me proud—or because you go before you’re ready.” My eyes burned. He laughed, shaking me a little. “Then I really would have to kick your ass.” He was teasing, but I couldn’t look at him.

I rubbed at my eyes. I felt like laughing, but it wouldn’t come. All this time . . . all this time I’d been torturing myself, trying to talk myself into it, like I thought he had. Except not, because he’d wanted to go.

“SNAFU, right?” I finally asked. Situation normal: all fucked up. Like always.

With one more squeeze, he released my shoulder. “More like, Embrace the suck.”

“Huh?” I didn’t know that one.

T.J.’s face shifted into a crooked smile. “Embrace the suck. Yeah, the sitch with Dad and school and all sucks, but deal with it, ’cause you’ve got no other choice but to deal.”

Embrace the suck. Should have been the Foster family motto. For generations. Laughter welled up from nowhere. I jerked with the effort of keeping it in, like holding in a cough. But it bubbled up again, and I just tipped my head back and let it come. I laughed until my eyes streamed, until my sides ached, until T.J. laughed with me, the kind of full-body laugh that makes everything feel good. We laughed until halfhearted hiccups of comfort and familiarity floated between us.

“Matt,” he said, his voice so soft I had to lean a little closer to hear. He wouldn’t look at me, and from the side I couldn’t figure out the look on his face. “I’m a damn good soldier. Damn good.” I could see him laughing at himself inside his own head, even though just a bit of smile and a little huff of laughter shook loose. “But I needed orders and discipline. I needed someone to take me apart and put me back together again, the right way, to make me strong, to give me honor.” T.J. looked at me long and hard. He smiled again, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Whatever else I am, or whatever else I’m ever gonna be, I needed them to make me strong enough to be that man. But you, you’re already smarter than me. And stronger, in your way—you’ve weathered Dad all by yourself. You have nothing to prove. To Dad. To me. To anyone, except

maybe yourself. You'll find your way, a way that uses your smarts, and who you are, and that doesn't involve war."

T.J. put the truck back in gear before I could say anything, and I was glad, because I didn't trust myself to speak.

"Find something else, something that makes *you* happy."

My throat ached, my eyes blurred, but right then, driving down the road with T.J. behind the wheel, I wanted to just head west and keep going, away from Dad, away from T.J. having to report back, away from everything.

I wish we had.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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