

RASHAD

Y*our left! Your left! Your left-right-left! Your left! Your left! Your left-right-left!*
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I left. I left. I left-left-left that wack school and that even more wack ROTC drill team because it was Friday, which to me, and basically every other person on Earth, meant it was time to party. Okay, maybe not everybody on Earth. I'm sure there was a monk somewhere on a mountain who might've been thinking of something else. But I wasn't no monk. Thank God. So for me and my friends, Friday was just another word for party. Monday, Tuesday, Hump Day (because who can resist the word "hump"?), Thursday, and Party. Or as my brother, Spoony, used to say, "Poorty." And that's all I was thinking about as I crammed into a bathroom

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stall after school—partying, and how I wasn't wanting to be in that stiff-ass uniform another minute.

Thankfully, we didn't have to wear it every day. Only on Fridays, which was what they called "uniform days." Fridays. Of all days. Whose dumb idea was that? Anyway, I'd been wearing it since that morning—first bell is at 8:50 a.m.—for drill practice, which is pretty much just a whole bunch of yelling and marching, which is always a great experience right before sitting in class with thirty other students and a teacher either on the verge of tears or yelling for some other kid to head down to the principal's office. Fun.

Let me make something clear: I didn't need ROTC. I didn't want to be part of no military club. Not like it was terrible or anything. As a matter of fact, it was actually just like any other class, except it was Chief Killabrew—funniest last name ever—teaching us all about life skills and being a good person and stuff like that. Better than math, and if it wasn't for the drill crap and the uniform, it really would've just been an easy A to offset some of my Cs, even though I know my pop was trying to use it as some sort of gateway into the military. Not gonna happen. I didn't need ROTC. But I did it, and I did it good, because my dad was pretty much making me. He's one of those dudes who feels like there's no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army. That's literally how he always put it. Word for word.

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"Let me tell you something, son," he'd say, leaning in the doorway of my room. I'd be lying on my bed, doodling in my sketch pad, doing everything physically possible to not just stop drawing and jam the pencils into my ears. He'd continue, "Two weeks after I graduated from high school, my father came to me and said, 'The only people who are going to live in this house are people I'm making love to.'"

"I know, Dad," I'd moan, fully aware of what was coming next because he said it at least once a month. My father was the president of predictability, probably something he learned when he was in the army. Or a police officer. Yep, the old man went from a green uniform, which he wore only for four years—though he talks about the military like he put in twenty—to a blue uniform, which he also only wore for four years before quitting the force to work in an office doing whatever people do in offices: get paid to be bored.

"And I knew what he was trying to tell me: to get out," Dad would drone. "But I didn't know where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I didn't really do that well in school, and well, college just wasn't in the cards."

"And so you joined the army, and it saved your life," I'd finish the story for him, trying to water down my voice, take some of the sting out of it.

"Don't be smart," he'd say, pointing at me with the finger of fury. I never managed to take enough bite out of my tone.

And trust me, I knew not to push it too far. I was just so tired of hearing the same thing over and over again.

"I'm not trying to be smart," I'd reply, calming him down. "I'm just saying."

"Just saying what? You don't need discipline? You don't need to travel the world?"

"Dad—" I'd start, but he would shut me down and barrel on.

"You don't need a free education? You don't need to fight for your country? Huh?"

"Dad, I—" Again, he'd cut me off.

"What is it, Rashad? You don't wanna take after your father? Look around." His voice would lift way higher than necessary and he'd fling his arms all over the place temper-tantrum style, pointing to the walls and windows and pretty much everything else in my room. "I don't think I've done that bad. You and your brother have never had a care in the world!" Then came his favorite saying; it wouldn't have surprised me if he had it tattooed across his chest. "Listen to me. There's no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army."

"David." My mother's voice would come sweeping down the hallway with just enough spice in it to let the old man know that once again, he'd pushed too hard. "Leave him alone. He stays out of trouble and he's a decent student." A *decent student*. I could've had straight As if I wasn't always so

busy sketching and doodling. Some call it a distraction. I call it dedication. But hey, decent was . . . decent.

Then my father's face would soften, made mush by my mother's tone. "Look, can you just try it for me, Rashad? Just in high school. That's all I ask. I begged your brother to do it, and he needed it even more than you do. But he wouldn't listen, and now he's stuck working down at UPS." The way he said it was as if the lack of ROTC had a direct connection to why my older brother worked at UPS. As if only green and blue uniforms were okay, but brown ones meant failure.

"That's a good job. The boy takes care of himself, and him and his girlfriend have their own apartment. Plus he's got all that volunteer work he does with the boys at the rec center. So Spoony's fine," my mother argued. She pushed my father out of the way so she could share the space in the doorway. So I could see her. "And Rashad will be too." Dad shook his head and left the room.

That exact same conversation happened at least twenty times, just like that. So when I got to high school, I just did it. I joined ROTC. Really it's called JROTC, but nobody says the *J*. It stands for the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. I joined to get my dad off my back. To make him happy. Whatever.

The point is, it was Friday, "uniform day," and right after

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the final bell rang I ran to the bathroom with my duffel bag full of clothes to change out of everything green.

Springfield Central High School bathrooms were never empty. There was always somebody in there at the mirror studying whatever facial hair was finally coming in, or sitting on a sink checking their cell phone, skipping class. And after school, especially on a Friday, everybody popped in to make sure plans hadn't been made without them knowing. The bathroom was pretty much like an extension of the locker room, where even the students like me, the ones with no athletic skill whatsoever, could come and talk about the same thing athletes talked about, without all the ass slapping—which, to me, made it an even better place to be.

"Whaddup, 'Shad?" said English Jones, making a way-too-romantic face in the mirror. Model face to the left. Model face to the right. Brush hairline with hand, then come down the face and trace the space where hopefully, one day, a mustache and beard will be. That's how you do it. Mirror-Looking 101, and English was a master at it. English was pretty much a master at everything. He was the stereotypical green-eyed pretty boy with parents who spoiled him, so he had fly clothes and tattoos. Plus his name—his real name—was English, so he pretty much had his pick when it came to the girls. It was like he was born to be the man. Like his parents planned it that way. But, unstereotypically, he wasn't

cocky about it like you would think, which of course made the ladies and the teachers and the principal and the parents and even the basketball coach even more crazy about him. That's right, English was also on the basketball team. The captain. The best player. Because why the hell wouldn't he be?

"What's good, E?" I said, giving him the chin-up nod while pushing my way into a stall. English and I have been close since we were kids, even though he was a year older than me. We were two pieces of a three-piece meal. Shannon Pushcart was the third wing, and the fries—the extra-salty add-on—was Carlos Greene. Carlos and Shannon were also in the bathroom, both leaning into the urinals but looking back at me, which, by the way, is a weird thing to do. Don't ever look at someone else while you're taking a piss. Doesn't matter how well you know a person, it gets weird.

"You partying tonight at Jill's, soldier-boy?" Carlos asked, clowning me about the ROTC thing.

"Of course I'm going. What about you? Or you got basketball practice?" I asked from inside the stall. Then I quickly followed with, "Oh, that's right. You ain't make the team. Again."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!" Shannon gassed the joke up like he always did whenever it wasn't about him. A urinal flushed and I knew it was him who flushed it, because Shannon was the only person who ever flushed the urinals. "I swear that's

never gonna get old," Shannon said, laughter in his voice.

I unbuttoned my jacket—a polyester Christmas tree covered in ornaments—and threw it over the stall door.

"Whatever," Carlos said.

"Yeah, whatever," I shot back.

"Don't y'all ever get tired of cracking the same jokes on each other every day?" English's voice cut in.

"Don't you ever get tired of stroking your own face in the mirror, English?" Carlos clapped back.

Shannon spit-laughed. "Got 'im!"

"Shut up, Shan," English snapped. "And anyway, it's called 'stimulating the follicles.' But y'all wouldn't know nothin' about that."

"But E, seriously, it ain't workin'!" from Shannon.

"Yeah, maybe your follicles just ain't that into you!" Carlos came right behind him. By this point I was doubled over in the stall, laughing.

"But your girlfriend is," English said, with impeccable timing. A snuff shot, straight to the gut.

"Ohhhhhhhh!" Of course, from Shannon again.

"I don't even have no girlfriend," Carlos said. But that didn't matter. Cracking a joke about somebody's girlfriend—real or imaginary—is just a great comeback. At all times. It's just classic, like "your mother" jokes. Carlos sucked his teeth, then shook the joke off like a champ and continued, "That's

why we gotta get to this party, so I can see what these ladies lookin' like."

"I'm with you on that one," English agreed. "Smartest thing you've said all day."

Off went the greenish-blue, short-sleeved, button-up shirt, which I also flung across the top of the door.

"Exactly. That's what I'm talkin' 'bout," Shannon said, way too eager. "See what these ladies lookin' like," he mimicked Carlos, the slightest bit of sarcasm still in his voice. If I picked up on it, I knew Carlos did too.

"I can't tell you what they'll be lookin' like, but I can tell you who they won't be lookin' at . . . you!" Carlos razzed, still on get-back from Shannon being slick and for laughing at my basketball crack. It had been at least three minutes since I made that joke, and he was still holding on to it. So petty.

"Shut up, 'Los. Everybody in here know I got more game than you. In every way," Shannon replied, totally serious.

I kicked my foot up onto the toilet to untie my patent leather shoes. Just so you know, patent leather shoes should only be for men who are getting married. Nothing about patent leather says "war."

"Argue about all this at the party. Just make sure y'all there. It's supposed to be live," English said, the sound of his footsteps moving toward the door. He and Shannon didn't have mandatory basketball practice like usual, but were

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still going to the gym to shoot around because, well, that's what they did every day. For those guys, especially English, basketball was life. English knocked on my stall twice. "Look for me when you get there, dude."

"Bet."

"Later, 'Shad," from Shannon.

"Aight, 'Shad, hit me when you on your way over," Carlos called as the door closed behind them. Carlos grew up right down the street from me, and, like English, was a senior and therefore could drive, and therefore (again) was always my ride to the party. We smoked him with the jokes all the time because he'd tried out for the basketball team every single year, and got cut every single year, because he just wasn't very good. But if you asked him, he was the *niciest* dude to ever touch a ball. What he actually *was* good at, though, was art, which is also why he and I got along. He wasn't into drawing or painting, at least not in the traditional sense. He was into graffiti. A "writer." His tag was LOS(T), and they were all over the school, and our neighborhood, and even the East Side. Whenever we were heading to a party, for him it was just another opportunity to speed around the city in his clunker, the backseat covered in paint markers and spray cans, while he pointed out some of his masterpieces.

Really they were more like *our* masterpieces, because I was the one who gave him some of the concepts for where and how

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to write his tag. For instance, on the side of the neighborhood bank, I told him he should bomb it in money-green block letters. And on the door of the homeless shelter I suggested gold regal letters. And on the backboard of a basketball hoop at the West Side court, I suggested he write it in gang script. I never had the heart to do any actual tagging. I mentioned how my father was, right? Right. Plus Carlos was a pro at it. He knew how to control the nozzle and minimize the drip to get clean tags. Like, perfect. I never really told him, just because that wasn't something we did, but I loved them. All of them.

When I walked out of that stall a few minutes later, I was a different person. It was like the reverse of Clark Kent running into the phone booth and becoming Superman, and instead was like Superman running into the booth and becoming a hopefully much cooler Clark Kent, even though I guess Superman might've been more comfortable in the cape and tight-ass red underwear than an ROTC uniform. But not me. No cape (and for the record, no tight-ass red underwear). I stepped out as regular Rashad Butler: T-shirt, sneakers that I had to perform a quick spit-clean on, and jeans that I pulled up, then sagged down just low enough to complete the look.

My brother had given me this sweet leather jacket that he had outgrown, so I threw that on, and *bam!* I was ready for whatever Friday had in store for me. Hopefully, a little rub-a-dub on Tiffany Watts, the baddest girl in the eleventh grade. At least to me. Carlos always said she looked like a cartoon character. Like he could ever get her. A *cartoon character*? Really? Please. A cartoon character from my *dreams*.

But before I could get to Jill's and get all up on Tiffany, I had a few stops to make. It was still early, and I had a couple bucks, so I could get me some chips and a pack of gum to kill the chip-breath. Can't get girls with the dragon in your mouth. But other than that I was flat broke, and it was never cool to party without cash, just because you always had to have something for the pizza spot—Mother's Pizza—which everyone went to either after the party was over or when the party got shut down early, which happened most of the time. Plus, you had to have money to chip in for whoever's gas tank was going to be getting you to and from the party, like, for instance, Carlos. So I caught a bus over to the West Side to first pick up my snacks, then meet Spoony at UPS, just a few blocks from home, so he could spot me a twenty.

The bus took forever, like it always did on Fridays. Forever. So at Fourth Street, I got off and walked the last few blocks toward Jerry's Corner Mart, the day darkening around me—crazy how early it gets dark in the fall. Jerry's was pretty

much the everything store. They sold it all. Incense, bomber jackets, beanies, snacks, beer, umbrellas, and whatever else you needed. It was named after some dude named Jerry, even though nobody named Jerry ever worked there. Jerry was probably some rich old white dude, chillin' on the East Side, doing his thing with some young supermodel with fake everything on a mattress made of real money. Lotto-ticket money. Cheap-forty-ounce money. Bootleg-DVD money. My money.

I pushed the door to Jerry's open. It chimed like it always did, and the guy behind the counter looked up like he always did, then stepped out from behind the counter, like he always did.

"Wassup, man," I said. He nodded suspiciously. Like he always did. There were only two other people in the store. A policeman and one other customer, back by the beer fridge. The cop wasn't a security guard, the weaponless kind with the iron-on badges. The kind my dad tried to get my brother to apply for because they pay decent money. Nah. This cop was a cop. A real cop. And that wasn't weird because Jerry's was pretty much known for being an easy come-up for a lot of people. You walk in, grab what you want, and walk out. No money spent. But I never stole nothing from anywhere. Again, too scared of what my pops would do to me. Knowing him, he'd probably send me right to military school or some

kind of boot camp, like Scared Straight. He'd probably say something to my mother about how my problem is that I need more push-ups in my life. Luckily, I'm just not the stealing type. But I know a lot of people who are, and there was no better playground for a thief than Jerry's. I guess, though, after a string of hits, Jerry (whoever he is) finally decided to keep a cop on deck.

I bopped down the magazine aisle toward the back of the store, where the chips were. Right by the drinks. Grab your chips, then turn around and hit the fridge for a soda or a beer. Boom. I looked at the chip selection. Like I said, Jerry's had everything. All the stank-breath flavors. Barbecue, sour cream and onion, salt and vinegar, cheddar ranch, flaming hot, and I tried to figure out which would be the one that could be most easily beaten by a stick of gum. But plain wasn't an option. Seriously, who eats plain chips?

While I was trying to figure this out—decisions, decisions—the other person in the store, a white lady who looked like she'd left her office job early—navy-blue skirt, matching blazer, white sneakers—seemed to be dealing with the same dilemma, but with the beer right behind me. And I couldn't blame her. Jerry's had every kind of beer you could think of. At least it seemed that way to me. I didn't really pay her too much mind, though. I figured she was just somebody who probably had a long week at work, and wanted to crack a

cold brew to get her weekend started. My mother did that sometimes. She'd pop the cap off a beer and pour it in a wineglass so she could feel better about all the burping, as if there's a classy way to belch. This lady looked like the type who would do something like that. The type of lady who would treat herself to beer and nachos when her kids were gone to their father's for the weekend.

Now, here's what happened. Pay attention.

I finally picked out my bag of chips—barbecue, tasty, and easily beatable by mint. That settled, I reached in my back pocket for my cell phone to let Spoony know I was on my way. Damn. Left it in my ROTC uniform. So I set my duffel bag on the floor, squatted down to unzip it, the bag of chips tucked under my arm. At the moment the duffel was open, the lady with the beer stepped backward, accidentally bumping me, knocking me off balance. Actually, she didn't really bump me. She tripped over me. I thrust one hand down on the floor to save myself from a nasty face-plant, sending the bag of chips up the aisle, while she toppled over, slowly, trying to catch her balance, but failing and falling half on me and half on the floor. The bottle she was

holding shattered, sudsy beer splattering everywhere.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" the lady cried.

And before I could get myself together, and tell her that it was okay and that I was okay, and to make sure she was okay, the guy who worked at Jerry's who everyone knew wasn't Jerry, shouted, "Hey!" making it clear things were not okay. At first, I thought he was yelling at the lady on some you-broke-it-you-bought-it mess, and I was about to tell him to chill out, but then I realized that he was looking at my open duffel and the bag of chips lying in the aisle. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Me?" I put my finger to my chest, confused.

The cop perked up, slipping between me and the clerk to get a better look. But he wasn't looking at me at all. Not at first. He was looking at the lady, who was now on one knee dusting off her hands.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" the officer asked, concerned.

"Yes, yes, I'm—"

And before she could finish her sentence, the sentence that would've explained that she had tripped and fell over me, the cop cut her off. "Did he do something to you?"

Again, "Me?" What the hell was he talking about? I zipped my duffel bag halfway because I knew that I would have to leave the store very soon.

"No, no, I—" The lady was now standing, clearly perplexed by the question.

"Yeah, he was trying to steal those chips!" the clerk interrupted, shouting over the cop's shoulder. Then, fixing his scowl back on me, he said, "Isn't that right? Isn't that what you were trying to do? Isn't that what you put in your bag?"

Whaaaaa? What was going on? He was accusing me of things that hadn't even happened! Like, he couldn't have been talking to *me*. I wanted to turn around to check and make sure there wasn't some other kid standing behind me, stuffing chips in his backpack or something, but I knew there wasn't. I knew this asshole was talking to . . . at . . . about . . . me. It felt like some kind of bad prank.

"In my bag? Man, ain't nobody stealing nothing," I explained, getting back to my feet. My hands were already up, a reflex from seeing a cop coming toward me. I glanced over at the lady, who was now slowly moving away, toward the cookies and snack cake aisle. "I was just trying to get my phone out my bag when she fell over me—" I tried to explain, but the policeman shut me down quick.

"Shut up," he barked, coming closer.

"Wait, wait, I—"

"I said shut up!" he roared, now rushing me, grabbing me by the arm. "Did you not hear me? You deaf or something?" He led me toward the door while walkie-talkie-ing that he needed backup. Backup? For what? For who?

"No, you don't understand," I pleaded, unsure of what was

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happening. "I have money right here!" With my free hand, I reached into my pocket to grab the dollar I had designated to pay for those stupid chips. But before I could even get my fingers on the money, the cop had me knotted up in a submission hold, my arms twisted behind me, pain searing up to my shoulders. He shoved me through the door and slammed me to the ground. Face-first. Hurt so bad the pain was a color—white, a crunching sound in my ear as bones in my nose cracked. After he slapped the cuffs on me, the metal cutting into my wrists, he yanked at my shirt and pants, searching me. I let out a wail, a sound that came from somewhere deep inside. One I had never made before, coming from a feeling I had never felt before.

My initial reaction to the terrible pain was to move. Not to try to escape, or resist, but just . . . move. It's like when you stub your toe. The first thing you do is throw yourself on the bed or jump around. It was that same reflex. I just needed to move to hopefully calm the pain. But moving wasn't a good idea because every time I flipped and flapped on the pavement, with every natural jerk, the cuffs seemed to tighten, and worse, I caught another blow. A fist in the kidney. A knee in the back. A forearm to the back of the neck.

"Oh, you wanna resist? *You wanna resist?*" the cop kept saying, pounding me. He asked as if he expected me to answer. But I couldn't. And if I could've, I would've told him

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that I didn't want to resist. Plus, I was already in cuffs. I was already . . . stuck. The people on the street watching, their faint murmurs of "Leave him alone" becoming white noise—they knew I didn't want to resist. I really, really didn't. I just wanted him to stop beating me. I just wanted to live. Each blow earthquaked my insides, crushing parts of me I had never seen, parts of me I never knew were there. "Fuckin' thugs can't just do what you're told. Need to learn how to respect authority. And I'm gonna teach you," he taunted, almost whispering in my ear.

There was blood pooling in my mouth—tasted like metal. There were tears pooling in my eyes. I could see someone looking at me, quickly fading into a watery blur. Everything was sideways. Wrong. My ears were clogged, plugged by the pressure. All I could make out was the washed-out grunts of the man leaning over me, hurting me, telling me to stop fighting, even though I wasn't fighting, and then the piercing sound of sirens pulling up.

My brain exploded into a million thoughts and only one thought at the same time—

please
don't
kill me.

QUINN

On Friday nights there were always only two things on my mind: getting the hell out of the house and finding the party. But before I could get my buzz on with Guzzo and Dwyer, I had to take care of Willy. Ma used to want me to stay home with him, but thank God that didn't last long, because the Cambis, our family friends a few blocks away, came to the rescue and invited Willy for their spaghetti-and-movie nights. So Friday afternoons I just needed to get his bag packed and get him over there. He could do it all himself—he was in seventh grade, for God's sake—but Ma hammered me with: "Quinn, you need to take some responsibility." If she wasn't actually in my face, or over my shoulder, across the room, sour-frowning as she said it, then she was a voice in my head making sure I knew she was there.

As usual, Willy beat me home. He left the door open. He was too old to act like a frigging wild animal, but he was the baby of the family and we still treated him like one. He was in the living room with the PlayStation. His life's major achievement was the mastery of all games and how quickly he beat them. His latest was the new version of Grand Theft Auto. Ma hated the game, but when Willy agreed to play soccer, the deal he cut, the little prince, was that he could play GTA as often as he wanted. Whatever. Willy was all charm. He got what he wanted. Whenever he smiled I was sure he put tears in Mrs. Cambi's eyes, which was why they adopted him every Friday night.

"Fuck yeah!" Willy yelled, because he knew it was me walking into the living room, not Ma. On the screen, he blasted someone away with a handgun. He'd stolen a cop car and was cruising through the streets. I knew this part. Soon he'd find the helicopter and go blow up more shit in his virtual world. I hated to admit it, but the game kind of freaked me out.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Turn that down. People'll think I'm beating you or something. You packed?"

He bobbed his head to the soundtrack and ignored me.

"Willy."

"Will, now. It sounds tougher."

"Tough Will, I will kick your ass if you don't get your bag packed now."

"No, you won't." He still had his back to me and I snuck up behind him slowly. "No, you won't, because if you do, I'll tell Ma, and she will kick *your* ass!"

"Maybe," I said, pretzeling his arm behind his head. "But it will be worth it!"

He whined and kicked at my shins, but I lifted him from the floor by the TV and dragged him like that across the room until we were by the couch, where I dropped him face-first. I got a knee on his back. "You had enough?" His face reddened. "Enough?" I pressed harder. He wasn't in pain, smooshed into the cushions of the couch like that. He was just pissed he couldn't free himself. He wanted me to hurt him—he was that stubborn. If I hurt him, he could hurt me with a week's deep shit with Ma.

Thing is, I tackled him once, two years earlier. He was in fifth grade and I was in tenth. I misjudged the distance and as we fell, his head hit the corner of the coffee table. I called the ambulance myself. I got him to the hospital myself. He needed stitches. It was after dinner, so Ma was already at work. I didn't want to call her. I didn't want to bother her. I just wanted to take care of my brother and fix everything before she came home the next morning. But they called her as soon as we got to the hospital, and when she got there, she gave me the third degree right there in front of everybody. Hell of a bawling. I didn't blame her. We all have our roles to play since Dad died.

Plus, now it was a story Willy'd bring up at the kitchen table if he wanted to get out of what I told him he needed to do. For example:

"Eat your green beans."

"Why?"

"You have to. It's healthy."

"What if I don't? You going to smash my face again? You're not my dad."

No. I wasn't a stand-in for Dad. Nobody could be that. When the IED got him in Afghanistan, he became an instant saint in Springfield. I wasn't him. I'd never be him. But I was still supposed to try. That was my role: the dutiful son, the All-American boy with an All-American fifteen-foot deadeye jump shot and an All-American 3.5 GPA.

But sometimes trying to get Willy ready and out the door was an All-American pain in the ass. I got my knee off his back and lifted him from the couch. "Come on, Will," I said. "Please. I gotta get going. Get your bag packed."

He made a big production of catching his breath and calming down and then he stomped off to our room. As soon as I heard him banging drawers and looking for his uniform for his soccer game, I went to the kitchen for my own bit of packing. That was another part of the Friday night routine: I always swiped a flaskful of Ma's bourbon. She needed it to fall asleep when she got back from her shift over at the Uline

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Warehouse—twelve hours straight, so who could blame her? I took it to ignite my Friday night buzz. Me, Guzzo, and Dwyer. We got our drink on to get our party on—weekend warriors to the end.

But I always stole the booze without Willy knowing either, and I got the flask in my jacket pocket while he searched for his shin pads in our room. He couldn't see me taking the booze. His eyes were Ma's eyes were the eyes of all the jackholes in Springfield who looked at me and thought of Dad.

Apparently, I had his eyes. His build. His "All-American" looks. All-American? What the hell was that? I hated that shit. What did it even mean?

I doubled back into the living room and turned off the game and the TV. I checked the house and the lights and all that. Responsible. That's me. "Ready?" I yelled.

"Yeah," Willy said.

"You good, Tough Will?"

"Don't call me that."

"I thought you wanted to be called that—"

"Asshole."

"All right. Let's go."

Once we were outside and I locked up and we were heading down the sidewalk, I threw my arm over his shoulder. He didn't shrug it off, which surprised me, but I was glad for it. I

wasn't his dad or any dad, but I did love being a brother, and I did love the little pain in my ass.

But I didn't love having to walk him to the Cambis'. *Take some responsibility!* Ma never said that to him. He could walk his own damn self! He was twelve, not five. It wasn't far, either, but Ma and the Cambis were paranoid about the two-block stretch between our houses. Supposedly, the neighborhood was going to shit, and supposedly Sal Cambi got chased by a few kids all the way home one day after school and Mrs. Cambi had to threaten to call the police to get them off her front porch. Frankly, I'd seen Sal acting like an ass so many times with Willy, he probably said something and was so dumb about it that he didn't realize it'd get him chased in the first place. The kid was an idiot sometimes, but whatever, I was glad he was friends with Willy, because the Cambis were nice as hell—they fed Willy every Friday night and made him part of their family, and all that kindness got me off the hook from babysitting so I could hang out, like everybody else I knew did.

Everyone in this neighborhood lives in multifamily buildings. We live on the second floor of ours, above old Mr. and Mrs. Langone, for a good rent, Ma says, but the Cambis own their entire building, which, they said, was why they stayed. Otherwise they would have moved a long time ago.

I didn't have to be a parent worrying about rent and electric bills and all that shit to know that when you live in a

neighborhood where they don't fix the streetlights very often, where cops set up one of those elevated lookout stations around the corner and patrol the streets a lot more than they used to when I was little, the neighborhood was on the decline. But I loved the West Side. I'd lived here my whole life. What the hell did people really mean when they said the West Side was on the decline? What'd that say about the people who lived here, like me, or all the damn people who were moving here now?

When we got to the Cambis, Willy sprinted up the front steps. I hung back. He rang the bell and Mrs. Cambi answered the door. Willy dashed past her and Mrs. Cambi waved to me from the doorway. She wore slippers. I stayed right where I was on the sidewalk, not wanting to get too close. Not wanting to get roped into staying longer than I had to. Just wanting to get the hell out and get the party started for the night.

But Mrs. Cambi beckoned me, like usual. "You know you're always welcome too." She leaned against the frame and held the door open. I could smell the sizzling garlic and onions from the street. I didn't remember the last time Ma had cooked for us.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm good. I have things to do."

"Busy man. Of course you do."

"And I wouldn't want to crash Willy's time with his friends."

"It's never crashing when either of you are at our place, Quinn. You know that."

"Thanks again, Mrs. Cambi."

"Regina. Call me Regina. Mrs. Cambi was Joe's mother." She smiled, and it was that smile I saw too often. That proud pity for Saint Springfield's two sons. "You're a good kid, Quinn," she told me.

I nodded and made my way.

That stuff just pissed me off. The world was shitty, and I didn't care if that sounded melodramatic. It was. Yeah, yeah, I was a good kid. A model kid. My dad had been the model man: the guy who, when he was on leave, stood there behind the table at St. Mary's soup kitchen in his pressed Class A blues serving ladle after ladle of chicken soup he'd helped make. Yeah, yeah, model man when he lived, model man after he died. The model man and the model family he left behind.

My dad got blown up in Afghanistan, and Ma and everybody we knew and plenty of people we didn't know but knew his name, all reminded me—he sacrificed for all of us. He sacrificed for the good of our country. He died in the name of freedom. He died to prove to the wackos of the world who didn't believe in democracy, liberal economy, civil rights, and all that shit, that we were right and they were wrong. But for me, my dad was dead, so the frigging wackos won. And, seriously, who are the frigging wackos, anyway? I sure as hell didn't feel sane all the time.

Dwyer and Guzzo had been texting me since I got home, and I knew they were waiting for me in the alley near Jerry's corner store. When I was a block away, I took a quick swig of bourbon and stuffed the flask in my ass pocket, so they'd know I had it. So they'd know I wanted to get the party started too, but I'd had shit to do. I took a swig because I was taking responsibility!

By the time I got to them they were pissed, and they looked like a couple of old ladies bent over and gossiping. Dwyer with his hands thrust in his pockets, shuffling back and forth on his two feet, his skinny arms and legs all fidgety, trying to hide his big-ass head beneath a green hoodie, and typical Guzzo. Guy's built like a bear, but he stood there, with his hands on his hips, thumbs forward, kicking at the edge of the Dumpster like he was checking a tire for air. He threw his hand up when he noticed me. "What the hell?" he said.

"Dude! We've just been sitting here," Dwyer said, wiping at the buzz-cut stubble around his head. "Someone's going to get suspicious."

"No one's going to get suspicious," I told them. "We've scored beer here more times than I can count."

"Whatever," Guzzo said. "This is our last night out for months. Next week, it's back to hell."

"It's not hell," Dwyer said.

"Dude, I hate forced fun," Guzzo continued. "Coach isn't

fooling anyone with his team-building shit. Basketball meetings every Friday and Saturday night mean one thing: no goddamn partying. That's it."

"Man," Dwyer said, giving Guzzo that face that said *You dumb or what?* "You kill me. This is serious. When that scout from Duke shows up, you're going to be the first in line, squeezing his palm. All stupid smiles and clean-cut."

"No, he won't," I said. I bounced in between them and boxed Guzzo back into the Dumpster, keeping my ass low, legs spread. "I'll get there first. 'Hey, man,' I'll tell him. 'People tell me I look good in blue.'" I flashed a big fake smile, and Dwyer laughed.

Guzzo pushed at me, and I held my ground, keeping him pinned, but he's huge, and it didn't take long for him to toss me aside. He swung around in front of me. Frowned. "Fuck that," he said. "You know damn well English is going to be first in line, because everybody's going to talk to him first."

"Not if you step in there," Dwyer told Guzzo. He bounced Guzzo with his shoulder and they went at it for a few seconds, trying to get position on each other, get a leg in front, and box the other one's back. Dwyer's tall but he's all sticks, and Guzzo popped Dwyer's leg with his knee and got in front. He grinned. "Whose house?" he said to me. I laughed. I started bobbing in front of him, like I was going to shake and move past him to some hoop behind him.

"Oh, yeah," I said, dribbling my pretend basketball.

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"Falcons all the way, baby!" Dwyer yelled from behind Guzzo. "Whose house? OUR house!" His cheeks were already so red his freckles seemed to gather all together.

Guzzo, squatting, his arms spread out, and keeping Dwyer behind him, nodded. "Hell, yeah," he said. Then he stopped and stood up and let Dwyer rush past him. Dwyer came at me so quickly, I thought he was going to knock me over. He dipped, pivoted, and swung around me like he was going up for an easy layup behind me. Classic Dwyer. He loved banging in the paint like a giant pinball and fighting for the rim. Guzzo wasn't as much of a fighter. He was just massive; people bounced off him more than he tried to send them flying.

Still, we laughed, but it was because it was all we thought about. It was all everybody was thinking about. It was mid-November. State rankings came out in two weeks. If we were number one, it was only going to get harder.

"Listen," I said. "If this is our last big night, let's make it worth it."

"That's what I'm talking about," Guzzo said, slapping my hand in the air. He pulled a short key on a ring from his pocket and held it in the air like a cartoon superhero. "Shotgun, baby!" he yelled.

He was so loud, Dwyer looked around to see if anybody was watching us from the top of the alley.

"Seriously," Guzzo continued. "How much are we going to

get? I'm shotgunning like ten beers tonight."

By "we," Guzzo meant me, because I usually had more cash than either of them, so I almost always bought the beer, which pissed me off, but I knew they felt bad I paid for their fun more than they paid for mine. And fuck it, we were tight, and that was most important. I'd been friends with Guzzo forever, and when Dwyer had joined us in middle school, everything had only gotten better.

"I have this," I said, patting my back pocket, knowing they could smell it on my breath. "And I don't want to be wasted when I get to Jill's, and you can't be either. You promised me. Seriously."

And that was the other reason I didn't mind buying Guzzo beer. Jill was Guzzo's cousin, and he kept promising he was going to put in a good word for me with her. I'd always liked her. Gearing up for the basketball season, I would go on these epic runs all around town, and I—okay, I admit it—I'd run by her house more than once. You know how it is. Sometimes you just want to cross paths with that one person, on the bus, on the street, wherever, just so you can nod, and say "Wassup," and hope to hell that something more comes of it. Anyway, the last time I'd seen her, she was dragging her younger brother across the street. She'd been wearing these stupid gray sweatpants rolled at the waist, rolled at the ankles, too. She walked barefoot along the walkway. I waved

to her, she waved back, and all I could think was, *How does she make even a stupid pair of sweatpants look so good?*

Everybody knew she threw mad parties, so I was psyched for the night. Everybody'd be hands-up dancing on the first floor, and I'd see if Jill was down with some alone time. And if not, that was cool too, because then I'd be ripping shots with Guz and Dwyer in the kitchen, like we did at most parties anyway.

"Well, let's do this," Guzzo said. "Jerry's, beer, a couple slices at Mother's, and we're good. The party's gonna be a shitshow—Frankie brought over a frigging trunkful." Frankie was another one of Guzzo's cousins, and this was another reason being friends with Guzzo was a good thing. He had an army of cousins around the city, and if you were in the shit and you were tight with Guzzo, you didn't have to look far for help.

Basically, we always got started at Jerry's, because it was the dirtiest little corner store I knew, and the easiest place for us to get beer. Guzzo had lifted a bottle once. I had too. But we didn't try that anymore. And we never bought it ourselves. The clerks behind the counter would never risk selling to underage dudes. But one night I asked a guy on the sidewalk outside if he'd buy us a twelve-pack of tall boys, he agreed, and that had become our weekly routine. It was the safest plan anyway, and we always seemed to find someone who'd buy the beer for us.

The only problem was always this: Whoever we found to buy us the beer would only do it if we paid him extra. There

weren't any Good Samaritan beer angels floating around waiting to gift us our weekly Friday buzz. So beer cost double for us, but whatever, we were seventeen. And I made mint at my summer job and it gave me play money for the year. Plus, Ma was a frigging workhorse, always doing the night shift at Uline so she could get paid more. It meant the money I made was just for me, and whatever I wanted to spend on Willy. But mostly, it went for beer and Friday night dinners at the back window of Mother's Pizza.

We had to hang around for a while, but soon after it was actually dark out, I left Guzzo and Dwyer in the alley and leaned up against the brick wall down the block from Jerry's until I saw a guy making his way up Fourth Street toward us. I recognized him; he'd helped us out before. He was a skinny white dude, who was a little strung out. I told myself that the guy looked like he could use my money to buy himself some food, but he's going to buy more beer anyway. And while I'm fucking judging the guy like that, I'm also digging in my pocket for the money I'm about to give him to buy me and the guys our beer at five thirty in the goddamn afternoon. See what I mean? Who's the sane one now? I'm thinking all this, but on the outside, I was all smiles and handshakes—All-American.

And I was about to hand him my money when the front door to Jerry's whacked open and a cop pushed a younger guy out in front of him. It was only a matter of seconds before the

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cop had thrown the guy to the sidewalk and pressed him face-first into the concrete. I was barely twenty feet away. The guy on the ground was black and he looked like he was around my age, and I wasn't sure, but I thought he was looking at me. He was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him. Did he go to our school? All I could really see was the cop over him, shouting. The cop was white and it took me a second to recognize him, because his face was angled down the whole time, but then, when he raised his head for a second, I realized right away it was Guzzo's older brother, Paul.

Holy shit! Paul! Paul was hitting the other guy, again, and again, smashing his face into the sidewalk. The blood kept coming. I wanted to move; my gut wanted me to rush to help Paul. But I knew enough to know that you stayed out of police business, plus Paul didn't need my help because he was pummeling the guy. So I just stood there, sorta frozen, just watching, transfixed. With one knee and a forearm pinning the guy beneath him, Paul bent low and said something into the guy's ear. I couldn't look away; I didn't even want to. I didn't know what the hell was going on and my own pulse jackhammered through me. I heard sirens coming up the street, and I swear I would have stayed staring if it hadn't been for the cop car that pulled up onto the sidewalk between us. When car doors swung open, I turned and ducked back down the alley to find Guzzo and Dwyer.

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They were waiting near the back and I ran toward them.

"Oh shit," Guzzo said.

Another cop car raced past the entrance to the alley behind me.

"Oh shit," Guzzo said again.

"We have to get out of here now," I hissed.

"What the hell happened?" Guzzo asked.

I looked up at the chain-link fence behind us. It was higher than a basketball rim, maybe fifteen feet. But climbable. On the other side were the tracks to the commuter rail. "Dude," I said, putting my hands on the fence. "It's your brother. He busted some guy in the store. It's fucking ugly and we need to get the hell out of here. Now!"

I started to climb.

"The tracks?" Dwyer asked. "Are you crazy?"

When I got to the top, I looked both ways. No trains. Still, it was probably a high traffic time, so that wouldn't last for long. I dropped one leg on the other side of the fence, swung myself over, and began to climb down.

"What the fuck, man?" Guzzo shouted.

"No one saw me," I said when I hit the ground. "If we get out of here right now, maybe nobody will, and we can all just pretend like we weren't here. Like it didn't happen."

"What happened?" Guzzo asked, one hand on the fence, but hesitating. "Is Paul okay?"

"Yeah, man," I said. "But he just beat the piss out of some kid on the sidewalk and we don't want to be around to have to answer any questions—it was fucking ugly. Now get over here before a train comes."

They hauled ass over the fence, and we ran along the pebble embankment of the railway until we came to the Fourth Street bridge, and then we slid down the embankment to the fence along Fourth Street and climbed over that one. I heard a whistle in the distance, but we all made it over and away from the tracks in plenty of time.

"Paul?" Guzzo said again, his voice cracking.

"It was bad," I admitted.

"What the hell do you think the kid did?" Guzzo asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But whatever he did, your brother just put him in the hospital for it."

"You know what?" Dwyer said. "Let's just get a slice and chill. Seriously."

It was a good plan, but when we got there, I couldn't stop thinking about what I had seen. I swear I thought about the guy on the ground, but mostly I thought about Paul, because Paul was Guzzo's older brother, and after my own father died, Paul had basically been my older brother too. And I couldn't shake that look of rage I'd seen on the face of a man I knew and thought of as family.

Saturday