

ALONE IN THE METAL

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My favorite Bible verse:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:38-39

God Bless everyone! I hope you enjoy the novel!

For my Heavenly Father, who gave me the idea for this book when I was seventeen and led me, for the next fifteen years, to build it into what it is.

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ALONE IN THE METAL

CHAPTER ONE

The mahogany door creaked open, projecting a stream of light into the pitch-black room. Leroy, a lean sixteen-year-old boy with a military fade, poked his head through the crack.

"Aaa-larr-ric," he drew out in a long whisper. No response. He snickered as he squeezed through the small crack, to prevent too much light from seeping into the room, before gently closing the door using the tips of his fingers to hold the knob and twist it, ensuring it wouldn't click when it shut.

Leroy dragged his feet across the carpet, to make as little noise as possible. His socks bunched up at his heel and collected an abundance of static. One would have thought he wanted to become a thunderstorm as many times as he shocked himself. As he trekked across the room, his prank was nearly ruined when he almost tripped over a pile of clothes. He jumped several feet in the air and looked like an unstable toddler taking

its first steps on its tippy toes when he touched back down. Alaric snorted in bed and mumbled in his sleep. Leroy regained his footing and froze like a statue as he trembled in laughter and tried not to breathe. The sheets ruffled and the mattress squeaked. He could tell Alaric had turned over and tried to see through the shadows but couldn't make out which direction he had stirred. Leroy waited for everything to fall silent again before he moved.

His chest heaved with each heavy but quiet exhale as he struggled to not wake his brother. Leroy glanced around at the landmine field of clothes that covered the floor. On the balls of his feet, he inched toward the blackout curtains. He watched them flutter with each gust from the air vent above, allowing small bursts of light to stream into the room briefly before vanishing like phantoms, restoring the darkness. Up close he was able to see that Alaric was facing toward the window. Leroy's fingers nervously gripped the hem of his brother's mattress as he dropped into a squat before crawling to the other side. As a precaution, he bulldozed the clothes in his way into a pile by the bed. Attentive, Leroy reached the other side and hid behind the footboard, listening to Alaric snore.

As always, Leroy thought, he's out like a light. He's got to be the heaviest sleeper I know. This is good. So good!

Leroy positioned himself low on the side of the bed so that Alaric would only be able to see the top half of his face when he woke up. He ripped the blinds open before quickly spinning back into position to watch his master plan unfold.

Alaric winced, attempting to open his eyes as the sun warmed his face. "Uhh, turn out tha... the lights," his voice cracked. "I'm try... ing to sleep." He rubbed his booger-crusting eyes, and fluttered his lids, trying to adjust

to the light. "Who opened those?" he asked with a yawn and a grunt as he glared at his curtains. Suddenly, his vision shifted.

Leroy noticed Alaric was looking at him through his squinted eyelids and knew it was time to put the climax of his prank into action. "RAWR!" he screamed as he flew into the air, throwing his arms up to make himself look like a monster.

Alaric screamed like a mountain lion as Leroy slammed his hands down on the bed, contorting his body. He choked out a weird gurgle noise and crawled toward Alaric, his head twitched from side to side with each movement. Alaric attempted to back away in terror and failed to remember he was on his bed; he fell off onto the cushion of clothes his brother had piled up.

Leroy clutched his stomach as he collapsed onto the bed, unable to contain his laughter. Alaric sprung to his feet, beet red in the face, and stuttered. "Wha-What. What are you do-doing, bro? You could have given me a heart attack. What if I would have died?"

Leroy rubbed his bright green eyes and sat up. "If you died from that, well, I guess I'd have to grow up and dedicate my life to working in the orphanage and never leave as an act of penance."

"Ohh, my heart," gasped Alaric. He gripped his chest, "I think I'm dying," he cried, and flopped onto the bed. He crossed his brown eyes, spit out his tongue, and threw his head to one side, pretending to die. The two howled in laughter.

"Ahh, that was a scare worthy of an award," said Leroy. "Anyway, I came to wake you up. We have cleaning duties today and we might want to hurry so we have time to eat breakfast."

Alaric leaped to his feet, his eyes bulged as he gripped his face in terror.

"You're right! If I miss breakfast... They won't give me any dessert."

"Is that all you care about is sweets?" asked Leroy.

"Um, yeah," replied Alaric, throwing his hand into the air like an overdramatic actor. "Don't you know it's one of the major food groups for a growing boy?"

"I do now," Leroy chuckled with a quizzical, doubtful look.

"Yes," exclaimed Alaric, holding his hand up to count on his fingers, "sweets such as cake, candy, cookies, muffins, and brownies. Then you have all the sodas. Next is cheese, oh," his voice trembled with the ridiculous smile that grew on his face, "you have to love cheese. Cheese makes everything better. Next, you have meat. You can't be a real man without lots of meat. And I think that's it..."

"What about water and vegetables?" asked Leroy, crossing his arms.

Alaric stared at him, dumbfounded. "Do I look like a forest rabbit to you?"

Leroy guffawed. "You are somethin' else, little bro. If it weren't for you, this place would be so boring."

"Hey, it ain't easy being this awesome. It takes a special..." Alaric stroked an invisible beard as he searched his brain, "a special kind of... umm, what's the word?"

"Stupid," whispered Leroy.

"What?" asked Alaric, glancing over at him suspiciously.

"Well, hop up and get ready," said Leroy with a giggle. "I'll meet you in the cafeteria. Even make your plate for you. Just don't take forever."

"I won't," he replied, flinging clothes everywhere. Leroy doubted he had anything clean to wear.

"Go easy on the clothes. It already looks like there was a volcanic

eruption from your dresser," Leroy teased as he kicked a shirt out of his way and sent it soaring toward Alaric. "If this room gets any messier, we'll lose sight of the floor. You do know if you cleaned more, it'd be much easier to find something to wear."

"You should worry about sneaking me an extra dessert," said Alaric, "and I'll worry about my clothes."

"I don't know," hummed Leroy, "we'll see. From the look of this room, you may not even deserve your normal dessert, let alone an extra one."

A balled-up shirt flew across the room. Instinctually, Leroy spun and caught it.

"Nice try," said Leroy. "Still too slow. See you at breakfast." He balled the shirt back up and strolled to the door. Alaric resumed digging through a pile of dirty laundry until Leroy ambushed him with the same T-shirt he had thrown. His door quickly slammed shut and Leroy's laughter echoed from the hallway.



After breakfast, Leroy stood outside the massive, gray-brick building. *God's Home for the Forgotten* hung above the front patio in camouflage. He turned and stared through the steel-barred fence at the small town in the distance, with the feeling of a heavy weight on his chest, as he entered a trance-like state of deep thought.

Tomorrow I will be seventeen. One more year and I'll be able to leave and go find Mom and Dad. I'll start the search right there, in Himsbro, where Alaric and I were born. I just hope Alaric doesn't take it too hard. Or, worse, what if he gets his hopes up, but I don't find them? We'd both be let down.

What if something really bad happens and Alaric is left all alone, never knowing what happened to me?

"Snap out of it. You're doing it again," he mumbled. He closed his eyes and slowly exhaled. "I will tell him tonight. No more hiding this."

"No more hiding what?" Alaric asked with a whisper into Leroy's ear.

"What are you doing?" Leroy nearly leaped out of his skin before looking back at Alaric, who stood behind him with a cheesy grin.

"Figured I'd pay you back for scaring me," Alaric chortled. "What are you going to stop hiding?"

"What? Oh, nothing. I'll tell you about it later. We need to get on with cleaning if we want to have any free time today." Leroy grabbed the buckets and rags before hustling over to the waterspout, away from Alaric.



"The ladders are already set up," said Leroy. "Why don't you take the windows on the left, and I'll take the ones on the right?"

"Alright," Alaric replied with a grin showing he had something cooked up. "I'll bet I can clean all mine before you finish yours."

"Okay," Leroy said, intrigued, then started to ask as his right eyebrow crept toward his hairline, "and what are the terms of this bet you seem to have already plotted in your head?"

"If I win," replied Alaric, rubbing his hands together and blurting out what Leroy already knew was coming, "I get your dessert tonight."

Rolling his eyes, Leroy laughed under his breath. He tapped his forehead with his index finger. "And if I win..." Leroy paused for dramatic effect before propositioning, "I get your desserts for the next week. Deal?

Deal. Alright, it's settled. Let's do this." He reached out, roughed up Alaric's short, curly, black mop hair, and rushed for his windows.

"Hey, wait a minute," Alaric called, "that's not fair. I didn't agree with that. You're cheating."

"Well, you'd better hope you can beat me," Leroy said as he chuckled and scaled the ladder with ease. "Otherwise, you'll be without your most vital food group for a week."

Leroy scrubbed the top of the eight-foot window until the sound of laughter caught his attention. He glanced out over the open field to the screaming kids that played tag by the giant oak tree and the gang of even younger kids on the playground equipment. He gave a half-smile, and his eyes fell downcast as he entered another trance-like state of reflection.

Everyone always acts happy and carefree. No one asks where their parents are. Everyone is so content with living here. It's like they are blind to the fact that we are caged animals. We aren't allowed to leave or go outside the fence until we turn eighteen and, after that, we are trapped and forced to join the military. I mean, it's not as if this is a horrible place. For the most part, the other boys are nice. Sometimes the adults can be fairly strict but, in all fairness, the kids can get out of hand once in a while.

Leroy inadvertently went back to washing the same spot on the window he had already cleaned as his mind started to drift into alertness but then quickly began to trail off again. *Why didn't our parents want us? Total abandonment. What was wrong? Were we that messed up? Why couldn't we be like normal kids?*

He squeezed the washrag, and soapy water streaked down the window; his knuckles rubbed the glass. *It doesn't make sense. They tell us we've been living our whole lives at this orphanage, but I can't remember anything*

before I was eleven. How do I know they're telling the truth? They say they wait until we ask about it to explain it and the shock of finding out is what makes us forget. Why would I wait until eleven to ask? Alaric asked when he turned eight. Several of the kids can't remember before age ten, some nine. Plus, the instructors can't tell us any more about our lives than specific events from each year and all their stories match way too perfectly. What if they are all lying to us? We also never get new kids, we never see potential people who might want to adopt us, and I don't remember anyone ever leaving, even to join the military. I'm the oldest one here and always have been. It doesn't add up. What if our parents did want us and had to leave us someplace safe to protect us from something, and we have been brought up to forget everything until a specific time?

“Leroy, stop it,” he scolded himself out loud, careful to be quiet enough so Alaric wouldn't hear this time. “That's one of the most ridiculous things you have ever thought.”

Leroy blinked his eyes and tried to collect himself. He looked back at his window where James, one of the newer instructors who had arrived just a few months earlier, stood staring up at him from the dining hall, clearly puzzled. Leroy struggled to make eye contact. He nodded, biting the inside of his lip, and dipped his rag back in the bucket, scrubbing the same part of the window for the third time. James nodded and walked off, shaking his head. Leroy nervously watched the departure. He sighed, focusing his eyes back on the task at hand. He stared at his reflection and abruptly stopped scrubbing again.

I don't want to think the instructors are bad people or that they're lying to us, but it's that right there. They look at us as if we are different. Not different like adults to kids or people in charge to those they're in charge of.

Different like something is wrong with us. I know I looked weird talking to myself, but their faces don't say worried like you would think. It's more of a hesitant worry. It's as if they are scared. The only exceptions to have ever graced this place are Ethan and Mrs. Winters.

Leroy's expression evolved into a smile. Ethan was a father figure to all the kids at the orphanage, and Mrs. Winters was the patient and kindhearted headmaster. She could be strict, too. But that came with the job.

At the same time, it didn't matter who Leroy asked, he always got the same run around. They don't know anything about their parents, and this is an anonymous facility. Even Ethan would do this, which didn't make sense, and Leroy could always tell when he lied. Ethan had a bad habit of scratching his left ear lobe when he wasn't being honest. *Why lie about our parents?* Leroy wondered. *What could be so bad that someone as sweet as Ethan would need to manipulate children? Unless Ethan wasn't as kind as he had pretended to be because it was part of his job. Maybe all this is a joke to these people. Lying to us and making us feel unwanted. What if that's how they control us?* His face scrunched up, and his fist turned white from gripping the ladder so tight that it vibrated, tapping the window. Then he heard a voice scream near him.

“Hey!”

Leroy stopped and snapped out of his daze. A group of kids were nearby, playing tag. They looked like they were down to the final two participants. He gulped down a ball of spit and breathed deeply. *Leroy, you need to stop. Ethan wouldn't use you. He loved you and Alaric. If he had been using us, he wouldn't have gotten killed.*

Leroy stopped, remembering the pain of Ethan's death the previous

year. After a fight had broken out in the middle of the night between him and Henry, a new instructor, it ended with Ethan being shot in the head and Henry sentenced to life in prison. They said Henry had a history of violence. Be that as it may, it still didn't make sense. While Ethan could be tough when needed, he was really a teddy bear. He was gentle and soft-spoken most of the time, did everything to avoid fighting or arguing, and he always did his best to settle the kids' differences before they came to blows. There's no way it happened the way they said it did. Plus, he couldn't even remember Henry's face or anything about him. He asked the other kids, too. None of them remembered anything but his name.

Leroy surmised that they likely killed Ethan because he treated the kids so well, and he knew other instructors despised that. Perhaps "Henry" never even existed. He had overheard several of them, a couple of different times, making fun of Ethan. Because of his kind nature, Ethan never got hateful back, no matter what they said. It seemed like most of the instructors viewed the orphans as a bunch of worthless kids that no one wanted and treated them accordingly. For the most part, they acted nice to the kids' faces but then showed their true feelings when they didn't think the boys were around. Leroy had heard one say the children would have been better off being aborted. If they had, he wouldn't have to waste his time babysitting a bunch of kids who were already dead to the world.

What if Ethan really thought the same way too? Leroy's thought process continued to meander. What if he hated us and only acted friendly because it was his job? What if it was just out of respect for Mrs. Winters? Does Mrs. Winters even care? I never stayed long enough to hear full conversations between the adults. I would have been in severe trouble for eavesdropping.

"Stop," he demanded of himself, his breath trembling as he tried to calm down. "Leroy, stop it!"

You're working yourself up again and overthinking things that aren't true. It's your depression. You have to control it. Fight it. He closed his eyes and exhaled. *You can fight this, Leroy. Don't let it control you. Ethan and the therapist told you trauma will make you lash out at the people you love the most because you're hurt. You have to breathe and try to calm down. You know if you do this again, you will upset Alaric.* He took another deep breath. *Clear your thoughts and think positive. Tomorrow is your birthday, and you can bet Alaric is going to do something crazy. He always does. I just wish I could know,* he meandered.

"No," Leroy shook his head. "No-no-no-no-no, stop. I need to stop."

Mom, said a voice in his head.

"Stop."

Dad.

God, please make it stop. I need your help. Leroy gripped the top of his head with his free hand, squeezing hard.

Where are they? his thoughts taunted.

"Stop, stop, stop." *God, please make the thoughts stop,* he prayed.

No one wants you, the voice continued to taunt.

"Shut up!" he shouted through gritted teeth.

They are all your enemies. The voice refused to go away.

"Be quiet. Leave me alone. You're not real!" he barked.

His breathing quickened, his chest tightened, and his mouth grew dry as he ground his teeth. He was seconds from losing control again.

CHAPTER TWO

“LEROY!”

Leroy jumped out of his daze, forgetting he was on a ladder, and nearly fell. He jerked forward, hugging the cold, steel rung to his chest. Leroy slammed into the glass, smudging what he had already cleaned four times. He didn't move for several seconds, as he frantically looked around to get his bearings. He saw nothing helpful, just the sky, the ladder, and his smudged reflection. He gradually shifted his head to notice Alaric standing under him.

“Are you alright?” asked Alaric.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm great,” replied Leroy, reaching for his nose as he leaned back, drawing slow, deep breaths. He peered around, worried someone else might've heard him.

“Are you sure?” Alaric asked again. “You haven't even finished your first window, and I've done all six of mine.”

“What?” replied Leroy. He looked down and realized that what he thought he had washed, he had actually made worse. “Sorry, I got lost in thought, and...” he hesitated, not wishing to upset Alaric.

“It's okay, bro. I can help with yours too,” Alaric said, smirking. “But remember the bet? I won your dessert tonight, and for helping, I earn tomorrow's too.”

Leroy returned the grin with a half-hearted smirk. “Oh, alright, I guess there's no choice. You beat me fair and square.”

“Are you sure you're okay?” asked Alaric. “I can always tell when you're giving me a fake smile.”

“Don't worry,” replied Leroy, scratching his nose. “Just... trying to collect myself. You scared me pretty good. I guess I had been deeper in thought than I realized.”

Alaric nodded, knowing his brother was lying. “Were you thinking about Ethan?” he asked.

“Wha-what?” Leroy replied.

“Were you thinking about Ethan?” Alaric repeated, setting his ladder beside the last window on Leroy's side.

“What makes you ask that?” Leroy's eyes ventured off as he refused to look at his brother.

“You miss him. I do, too,” Alaric replied with a lighthearted smile. “I dream about him sometimes. He was like our dad, and it's only been a little under a year since he died. Of course, it would still upset us. Especially, how it happened,” he finished, discarding the young kid's demeanor he had moments ago.

Leroy stared, his mouth agape in astonishment. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a tortured squeak. *He's never been able to talk about*

Ethan's death before without getting upset, he thought. When did that change? Is he trying to act strong for me? Did I miss something?

Leroy struggled to maintain eye contact with his brother. He focused on his window and scrubbed, hoping it would make it easier to speak. Leroy filled his lungs with the brisk fall air and finally got the words to leave his mouth. "Honestly, that's not what's on my mind. I need to talk to you. I've been wrestling with it because I don't want to upset you."

"Okay," Alaric replied, the worry painted all over his face.

"Would you care if I took a moment to think about how I want to say it?" asked Leroy, not looking at him. He watched Alaric nod through the reflection and dipped his rag in the bucket of soapy water.



Having moved their ladders toward one another to wash the next two windows, Leroy stared at the one in front of him and spoke softly. "So, my plan for when I turn eighteen. . ." He felt Alaric's eyes dart over before he even finished the sentence. ". . . is to search for our parents." With the bombshell dropped, Leroy finally looked over at Alaric who faltered and nearly dropped his towel. He tried to hide it, but his silence and clumsiness said more than any words could have. "What's wrong?" asked Leroy, even though, deep down, he already knew.

Alaric stopped cleaning and sat the rag on a rung. He turned and leaned on the ladder. "You're gonna leave a year after tomorrow... I'm just not ready for that."

"A year is still a long time out," replied Leroy.

"Not long enough," said Alaric. "It feels like the older we get, the faster

the years go," he sighed. "I struggle to remember most of our past and the little I do seems like a blur." Alaric paused and Leroy stayed silent, knowing more was coming. "Once you're gone, I have three more years. What am I supposed to do when you take off? I'll be all alone."

"No, you won't," said Leroy, trying to encourage him, "I'll come visit and your best friends will be here."

"Okay, but I want to find out what happened with mom and dad too," replied Alaric.

"I know you do," consoled Leroy, unable to hide his uneasiness. "But you can't leave the orphanage unless you're adopted or turn eighteen, and don't say I can adopt you," he said, cutting Alaric off before he interrupted. "I would if I could, but the cost to adopt a child is way too much. Plus, when I leave, I'll have no job or money to support you. I wouldn't be able to take care of you the way they can here."

"Yes, you can, bro," Alaric pleaded incredulously. "I'll happily live on the street, as long as I'm with you. You're my only family. I mean, what are the chances we'll ever find mom and dad?"

"While that is true, it's my job as your big brother to keep you safe. Keeping you here is how I can take care of you and look at the same time without worry," argued Leroy. "In three years when you leave, I should be on my feet, and you can live with me. Until then, your best bet is to stay. I'm sorry, I know it hurts. I want it to be different."

"I think you forgot something," said Alaric.

"What?" asked Leroy, a bit confused.

"When you turn eighteen, you join the military. That's one rule of this orphanage you can't escape. Do you think they will just let you do whatever you want in the service?" asked Alaric in triumph, as if he found the one

thing which would help him win this debate.

“You’re right,” replied Leroy. “I will join. Regardless, I’ve done some research on the military, and you can live on or off base. I’ll live off, which is why you can’t come with me. They don’t give you the same help off base as they do on. It will be harder at first, but I’ll have more freedom that way.”

“What if they won’t let you live off base coming from the orphanage? They know you don’t have a home; they might make you stay until you’re good and on your feet,” said Alaric, trying his best to make Leroy agree to take him.

“Even if they do, you still can’t leave with me. I wouldn’t have enough money to take care of both of us. I’d need a job, and any chance I had to search, I would. Plus, if I am deployed right away, where would you stay?” Leroy, tried to make Alaric understand. “I’ve heard tours can be two to four years long. Sometimes even longer for orphans since we don’t have any family. No real reason to come back, at least not according to them. It can’t happen. I’m sorry, bro.”

Silence dominated as they finished and moved to their last windows.

I wish I could calm Alaric down. I hate that he’s upset, Leroy pondered. I want to keep him safe and staying here is the best option. We have no idea how the world will view us. I mean, no one comes to visit the orphanage. Kids don’t wander up to the gate. It’s as if we don’t exist to people out there, and I’d rather be the one to learn the hard way so I can give him a better life.

“Hey, I got it,” said Leroy, perking up, and nearly slipping from the ladder to slap Alaric on the arm.

Alaric looked up, “Got what?”

“A way to make this work where you won’t feel alone or be upset when

I leave.”

“Oh, yeah?” Alaric replied with a sarcastic eye roll.

“Yeah. Since during the week, we have a full schedule with chores, studying, church, and martial arts training, what if I commit to coming every weekend while hunting for mom and dad? Time would fly by because you would have something to look forward to. Plus, I could review all the leads I find, and you can help me figure out the next place to look. It’ll be like we’re searching for them together.”

“Hmm, I still think my idea is better,” said Alaric, not quite sold.

“I know you do, but this way I’ll get settled in a place, and still come to visit you.”

“What happens when you can’t come on a weekend?”

“Unless I’m deployed or working, I don’t see why anyone would stop me. If something comes up, I’ll come for dinner during the week when I’m not at work. I swear.”

Alaric just stared at him.

“I promise when I settle in and there are no signs of me leaving, I have a good job and it is possible for you to live with me, I will come talk to them about adopting you. No matter what it takes.” Leroy reached his pinky out towards Alaric. “Pinky promise.”

“That’s pretty intense,” said Alaric. “You can’t break a pinky promise. That’s more serious than extra dessert.”

“Which is why I am making that pledge with you,” said Leroy, smiling, knowing he won the debate. Alaric reached out and locked pinkies with Leroy. “It’s a pact, every weekend I will come,” said Leroy, shaking their fingers.

“While I still don’t enjoy the idea of you looking for mom and dad by

yourself and leaving me alone, I can agree with this,” said Alaric. “I’ll still miss you, though.”

“I know, but we’ll make it work. And look, we’re finished. Later than expected, but if we hurry with the next two chores, we might have time to hang out and goof off with the other kids.”

“If we hurry?” said Alaric, puffing his chest out all overdramatic. “You mean if you hurry. Last I checked, I had to pick up your slack, slowpoke.”

“Oh, you want to play games? Ha. Okay. Let’s make this interesting,” Leroy smirked, mischievously. “Two chores left. Both are pretty big. You take one, I take the other and see who finishes first. The winner gets the loser’s desserts for the next thirty days.”

Alaric’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. “An entire month of extra dessert,” he muttered to himself. “I could stockpile and hide some for special occasions. There are so many possibilities... Wait, are you including a month after the next two days since I already won your dessert?” he asked.

“It might make it more fun to put your two days up,” chuckled Leroy.

“Ha,” howled Alaric. “No way, you’re trying to weasel your way out of this. It will start after the next two days. I won’t jeopardize the extra desserts I’ve already won. I may need to ration those out to feed my starving belly if you beat me and I’m without dessert for a month.” He shuddered.

Leroy hooted with laughter. “Fair enough. I don’t want you dying without your most vital food. Be careful and don’t get too excited and eat them all up after you lose.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on losing. A ton of desserts are at stake. Which chore am I doing?” Alaric asked. He slid down the ladder, cleaning up his spot

quicker than ever before.

“You get the entrance, and I’ll take the study room,” said Leroy. “The first one to return to the front wins.”

“Deal. Bad luck for you,” Alaric said, skipping into a run. “Your chore is on the other side of the building. Mine’s right in front of us.”

Leroy smirked, “All that matters is who gets to the front first.”



Leroy approached the study hall and noticed one of Mrs. Winters’ windows open. She sat at her desk, lost in the sea of paperwork as evidenced by the mountain-sized piles around her. She leaned back in her chair, looking exhausted and like she might even take a nap right there. She brushed the long, wavy, mushroom-brown hair out of her face. Leroy scooted by in a flash to not disrupt her and slung the study door open, accidentally hitting James, the instructor who had caught Leroy talking to himself earlier. Leroy stumbled back out of shock.

“Oh man, I’m so sorry, Mr. James,” apologized Leroy with a bow. “I didn’t realize you were behind the door.”

“No worries,” James replied, rubbing his forearm where discoloration formed in a small, red circle. “It was an accident.”

“I should pay better attention. Can I do anything to help? Do you need anything?”

“Don’t sweat it, it’s nothing more than a bump,” James replied, covering the red mark on his arm. “Nothing to worry about. Actually, I want to talk to you for a second if you aren’t busy?”

Leroy stepped back to let James out of the study hall. “I’m in the middle

of doing my chores, but I don't think a second or two would hurt."

"Earlier when you were cleaning the windows," James started, and Leroy knew where this was going, "you looked really upset and I think you said something about your mom and pop. Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm okay," replied Leroy. "I sometimes talk with myself about what I plan to do when I turn eighteen and move out. I'm going to try and find mine and Alaric's parents. If I'm not deployed right away when I join the military," he chuckled, rubbing the back of his head.

"I understand. Some advice though, don't get your hopes up too high," said James, gingerly. "It's hard to take, thinking your parents abandoned you. I struggled to accept the fact that my dad left my mom and me. It's not an easy lesson to learn, but I want you to remember this: sometimes, people don't make the best of choices. Even good people are great at making bad decisions."

"Are you saying I'm making a poor decision going to look for my parents?" asked Leroy, offended. "If I made a terrible choice, it would still be worth knowing. I want closure."

"No, I'm not calling it a mistake," replied James. "I just don't want you to take all this time building something up and get crushed at the end. You're a good and kind kid, Leroy. I only want to look out for you." James placed his massive hand on Leroy's shoulder. His hazel eyes and smile portrayed sincerity, but his words said Leroy had all the more reason to be suspicious.

"I appreciate the advice, and I hate to hear your dad abandoned you as well. But I'll be okay. I've thought about this for a while. Every scenario, every situation, I've played it all out in my head."

"You've thought about it a lot longer than you realize," said James.

"Still, what I saw from the mess hall didn't feel like planning to me. You seemed deeply troubled. It reminded me of my brother's depression, and when he had one of his bad days. It looked as if you were fighting something."

"I'm not troubled. I was worried about how Alaric would take the news," replied Leroy.

"I understand," said James. "Just be mindful of your emotions. Try to keep it under control. Sometimes, our feelings can get the better of us, and we make mistakes. You're a smart kid. Be careful and think before you act. I don't want to see you mess up."

"Yes, sir," Leroy replied with a raised brow. His eyes darted around. His nervous fingers picked at the edge of the washcloth behind his back.

"Well, I'll let you finish your chores. Have a good day." James smiled, letting go of Leroy's shoulder and strolling toward the entrance.

Leroy stood in shock for a minute at James' words. *Why would he say that? Is something wrong with my parents? Are they alive? And why do I need to control my emotions? I understand I'm the oldest and everyone looks up to me, but what is wrong with me expressing myself? I can still wonder and keep a positive attitude.*

He glanced back and noticed Mrs. Winters at her window with a notepad. She jotted a couple of things as James walked away. After looking over at Leroy and smiling, she headed back to her desk, but Leroy managed a glimpse of her crystal-blue eyes, usually soft and kind, that were suddenly melting from anger.

He didn't waste his time asking her what James meant, afraid he might catch the tail end of whatever was boiling inside of her and make her more upset. He rushed into the study hall to clean and try to forget the

awkward conversation.

Leroy cracked the door open and slipped in. He tried not to disturb the kids studying. He knew they would finish with their history lecture soon. The one thing which stood out about the lesson for Leroy yesterday was the weird guy named Casanova, who everyone revered as a “lady’s man.” Yet, in reality, Casanova was a rapist who impregnated his daughter. It had been an exciting change from their usual study and research of the different wars, each side’s perspective, and reasons, weapons, tactics, the terrain and how it affected the battles. They read the memoirs of the generals, captains, and other soldiers and discussed how they felt before, during, and after the wars, in an attempt to understand everything about the experience. Leroy found it strange that, while they also studied currency, they never really studied anything else about the world and it was constantly demonstrated to them that they couldn’t make it on their own.

He nodded at Adam, the third in command and the instructor who gave all the lectures. The man seemed to know everything. The boys long-since crowned him the smartest person on Earth. He was the one who taught them history, math, reading, writing, and science. Everything circled back to war, and how they could use each subject to better their skills on the battlefield. Adam even spoke six different languages: Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, French, and Japanese. He taught those to the children as well.

Leroy shuffled to the rear of the room, where the library was located, to clean until the lecture finished. He could see into the back field, through one of the six windows that gave the reading area natural light, where the eight-year-olds were enduring thier Taekwondo lesson in the outer part

of the dojo. Leroy wasn’t surprised. The kids had all advanced to yellow belts the previous week and wanted to celebrate, which resulted in one of the windows getting broken. Jackie, the instructor in charge of martial, had been furious. For punishment, he had them standing outside holding buckets of water as endurance training for the whole session. Jackie could be hard, but when it came to hand-to-hand combat, he was crazy good. Once they reached a black belt, they would be starting a new set of skills. Typically, it was Kung Fu, followed by Karate, and so on. The boys, however, were allowed to vote on it. Leroy was currently studying Jujitsu, his fourth martial art. Everyone in the orphanage would be masters at hand-to-hand combat by the time they turned eighteen. It was basic training for the military on a more intense level, building them up from youth to become the most efficient soldiers of their generation.

The orphans had academic classes three times a week, martial arts practice twice a week, and four days of chores. The tasks differed with the ages of the children, which helped equal out the loads. They assigned older kids less work and bigger jobs, while they dished out smaller duties to the little ones, with two free days a week. The schedules stayed pretty regular to help the kids become familiar with a routine and make sure they always knew what was expected of them. Then they had one optional activity on Wednesdays and Sundays—a Bible study with Mrs. Winters and several instructors. Initially, General Hughes, the founder of the orphanage, said he didn’t want any of that hogwash corrupting the minds of his future soldiers, so they couldn’t have made it mandatory, or Hughes wouldn’t have allowed it to take place at all.

Today was the once-a-week, full chore day for Leroy and Alaric. The other times got split. Lucky for Leroy, his birthday would fall on a free

day for both of them.

Leroy's Weekly Schedule:

Monday: Study and Martial Arts

Tuesday: Chores all-day

Wednesday: Free Day, Bible Study

Thursday: Chores and Martial Arts

Friday: Chores and Study

Saturday: Free Day

Sunday: Study, Chores, and Bible Study

The lecture finished up and Leroy had an easy time completing the room since Adam was strict with his students about cleaning after class. What would have taken over an hour and a half to finish took forty-five minutes. Leroy knew with the help he would win his bet with Alaric. He decided to poke fun at his little brother. To be honest, he wouldn't take Alaric's dessert away for a month. Leroy loved him with all of his heart but keeping him on his toes for the next two or three days would be hilarious.



On his way back from cleaning the study hall, Leroy had already forgotten about the strange conversation with James. He heard the intercom cut out with a flash of static, followed by a panic-stricken scream. Leroy rushed to the entrance. Alaric pounded away at the floor on his knees, screaming.

"No-no-no."

"What's wrong? What's going on?" Leroy asked, rushing up frantically, thinking something terrible had happened.

Alaric glanced up. His trembling hands shook as he pointed at the entrance hall. It looked as if there had been a two-step dance party in the mud. Then it clicked. The intercom system had told everyone to clean up for lunch, and the kids destroyed all the cleaning he had just done.

Leroy smirked, trying his hardest to hold back his laughter, "Man, that's too bad. Now it makes sense why we have chores all day. For reasons like this."

Alaric didn't speak, but went on being overdramatic, his face buried into the ground.

"I know this is hard on you," continued Leroy. His lips pursed as he placed his hand on Alaric's shoulder. He fought to hold back the fit of laughter that exploded in him like fireworks, knowing how devastated his little brother would be. Alaric looked up at Leroy with the most pathetic whimper, shaking his head. The stitch in Leroy's ribs was about to burst. He cleared his throat, about to lose it. "Which means," he said, leaning in slowly toward Alaric's face and whispering, "I win your desserts for a month."

"No," sobbed Alaric, grabbing Leroy by the collar of the shirt and shaking him. "That's not fair. I was as good as done. I want a rematch. This isn't fair," he whined.

Leroy doubled over, dissolving in laughter. "Either way, little bro, I'm finished, and you just admitted you weren't. I won regardless. Plus, I cleaned the study hall with people in it."

"Yeah, bet they didn't go swimming in the mud first," Alaric wailed.

His hand jerked back dramatically, pointing at the last few kids running into the entrance hall looking like monsters out of a Goosebumps novel.

“It’s okay... I’ll help you finish cleaning,” Leroy offered, trying hard to catch his breath. “Just like I’ll help you...” he paused, letting his breath settle, “help you...what was it again?” He rubbed his chin for a quick second and blurted out boisterously, “give me your desserts for the next month!”

“Noo-oo-oo-oo,” screamed Alaric, falling to the ground in a fetal position.

“Come on. . .get up,” Leroy said, chuckling, with long deep breaths. “Let’s hurry and eat lunch. There’s a lot of work to do.”

“A month. A whole month.” Alaric sniffled as Leroy helped him to his feet. “This is the worst day of my life! I’ll be dead in less than a week,” he continued all the way inside.

Leroy had a blast, throughout lunch and the rest of the day, reminding Alaric he won the bet. It was so satisfying to watch him scream “no” and whine over-dramatically.

“Finally, done,” said Leroy sighing as he leaned back against the wall.

“You mean... I’m done,” exaggerated Alaric, slumped on his knees, staring at his reflection on the floor.

“Come on, are you still upset about a month with no sweets?” asked Leroy. Alaric didn’t reply. “Look, I promise to sneak it out of the cafeteria and eat it in front of you painstakingly slowly once a week. The other days? I’ll make you feed it to me at dinner. It’s not too bad. It will pass before you realize it,” chuckled Leroy. Alaric glowered at him for suggesting such a horrific and hateful act. “For now, let’s return all this stuff to the storeroom.” Leroy stuffed his dusting rag in his back pocket and climbed

to his feet. He lifted Alaric off of the ground and picked everything up and sat it neatly by the supply closet.

Children weren’t allowed in the supply room. They signed out the supplies needed for their set of chores. When finished for the day, they stacked it all back up at the door and re-signed the paper. If something was missing when Arthur did inventory, it wouldn’t be difficult to find.



“We’re mega-sorry we messed up your cleaning, Alaric,” said John, Alaric’s best friend. “We didn’t mean to make you lose such a big bet. Why would you put something so important on the line? You normally would never jeopardize your sweets.”

Alaric sat silently and sulked at the table, playing with his food.

“If it helps, we would all be willing to offer you our desserts to make up for it. Every day someone new could give you one,” offered Billy, another close friend.

Alaric jolted up, wide-eyed with a humongous smile.

“It won’t work guys,” interrupted Leroy. “No dessert for a month. Any he receives, whether snuck, given, or stolen, is mine.”

Alaric’s lip quivered as he slumped back down in his chair.

“If you play your cards right, you won’t go the entire month without dessert. You won mine today and tomorrow. With the right ones, you could make them last for a couple of days. Today’s dessert would be perfect. A cookie can last for a while,” Leroy suggested.

Alaric sat up and thought of the possibilities. “A cookie would be good. If I portion it out with little bits each day. It wouldn’t be enough to eat

some every day, but if I split it up a bite every two or three. . ." he thought out loud, stuffing his cheek full of food. "I'll become malnourished, but I won't starve and die."

"Well, there is one issue," said John.

"What?" asked Leroy.

John pointed at Alaric's plate. "I don't know if anyone else has noticed but, this whole time, he has eaten nothing except the desserts. He just stuffed his mouth with the last bit of cookie he won from you. He devoured it almost before he sat down."

Alaric looked at his plate in devastation. He threw himself back in the chair and slid down on the verge of falling out of his seat, playing dead. All the kids, excluding Alaric, at the small circle table, burst into a fit of laughter.

"That's too bad," laughed Leroy. "Better grab a cookie again tomorrow. Might help you a week out of the month."

Alaric shot him a dirty glare, which made everyone laugh more.

"Give him a break, Leroy," said Jacob, slapping Leroy's arm. "He can't help that he stress-eats."

Alaric looked up hopefully, "Thank you, Jacob. Now, tell him he should give me an extra day. I can't help being distraught. It's not my fault."

"Hold on; I didn't say give you extra sweets. I said not to give you too hard of a time," said Jacob, cracking an evil grin. "Did you think I forgot how you, Billy, and John tricked me out of my desserts for a week with a rigged bet? You little swindlers will receive no mercy from me. I just wish I had gotten in on the bet with Leroy."

"Haha ooooooh," Leroy hooped, "that's my best friend!" He fist-bumped Jacob while Alaric buried his face in his arms and tried to drown in his

own self-pity.

"What do you want to do for your birthday tomorrow, Leroy?" Billy asked.

"Not sure. Probably nothing, other than what Alaric has planned for me. Then do the normal stuff I do every day," he replied.

"No way, not good enough," Billy responded. "You got two more birthdays with us. We need to make them the best you will ever have."

"I agree," added John.

"Me too," Jacob chimed in. "I need to send my best friend off in style."

Smiling, Leroy replied, "Well, whatever you guys plan. I'm sure it will be awesome."

"Yeah, great for you and perfect for Alaric," said John and gave Billy a high five.

"How's that?" asked Leroy.

"Alaric is allowed desserts tomorrow," said Billy. "So, throw a big enough party, and it will be a chance for Alaric to sneak extra for portioning out."

Leroy roared with laughter, "This is why you two are his best friends."

Alaric sat tall with a new glimmer of hope in his eyes. "This has to be the most epic party ever. All the desserts we can imagine." Alaric grinned like a mad scientist rubbing his hands together and mumbled, "I'll store up a truckload of desserts. Even if I lost a bet for two months, I would be safe. Hee hee, this is perfect." He turned toward Billy and John. "We need to talk to Mrs. Winters. She let me plan last year with Ethan. She might do it again since I did a good job then. Let's hit her up after dinner. You two seriously have to help me. I need to save up two months' worth to be extra safe."

"Oh," snickered Leroy, "you want to test your theory and see if you can

make it two months?”

“No!” Alaric blurted in haste. A crazed face formed, like he might go mad from the thought alone. “I won’t bet with you again. This is going to be hard enough to hide a month of desserts. I don’t need you interfering. You-you, you butt-sniffer.”

Leroy smirked. “Let’s hope you can hide them well. If I catch you eating a sweet or find a dessert of yours within the thirty days, I will claim it. Any dessert you have when the time starts is technically mine. Especially now since you want to use my party as a sneaky tactic to stock up.”

“Oh, you wait. I’ll disguise them so well, I might even forget where they are. Until I need to eat again,” Alaric said, high-fiving John and Billy. They leaned in together, planning what desserts the cafeteria would let them have for a party and which instructors and kids would help. If they wanted to ask Mrs. Winters for something, they had to be prepared.

Leroy smiled as he thought about the future. *I am going to miss everyone when I leave. I love these guys so much. Waking up every day without these weirdos will be hard, but I have to find our parents. Not just for me, but for Alaric too. I need to make this year the best one yet. Even if I don’t find them, at least I know I’ll still have this family waiting for me back here.*

CHAPTER THREE

Later that night, after dinner, the kids prepared for their showers. In his room, gathering clothes, Leroy realized he had something bulging out of his tail pocket. Pulling out the rag from earlier, he slapped his forehead. *I can’t believe I forgot about the towel.* He shoved it in his pajamas. *I’ll take care of it after I tell Alaric goodnight. Arthur should understand if I explain to him that I just forgot about it.*

The showers were crowded as the first batch of fifteen boys finished and headed back to their rooms while the second set of fifteen took their place to get themselves cleaned up.

“A warm shower was exactly what I needed,” said Leroy, squatting. “Nothing better after a full day of chores. It makes me feel refreshed and brand new.”

“I don’t know, with how hot you like it, I’d feel more like a boiled lobster,” said Alaric. “Now some lukewarm water, that’s where it’s at.

Regardless, I'm just glad tomorrow is a free day for us. We skimmed the barrier of a nuke zone this week with chore rotations."

"What do you mean?" asked Leroy, shifting from the mosquito stretch to the Chinese splits.

"Mess hall duty is tomorrow's full-day chore. Billy and John got dishes," replied Alaric.

Leroy made a sour face. "The worst chore hands down. I wonder who they're paired with. It's a four-person job at a minimum."

"I believe they told me, Jacob, and Damon," replied Alaric, plopping down on his bed.

"Well, luckily those two will clean and help," said Leroy standing up and stretching his back. "At least they aren't stuck with Edward and Sam. I remember the time when we had a mess hall duty with them. They didn't touch a single thing, and we had to work double-time. I was hotter than a freshly fired gun shell. We lucked out when Mrs. Winters took our side after I whipped on him like Bruce Lee in a street fight." Leroy leaned forward in a martial arts stance and threw two sharp jabs and an elbow swaying from side to side. "Now, we don't have to clean with them anymore."

"Hey, what's in your pocket?" asked Alaric, noticing the bulge on his leg.

"I can't believe I forgot again. I'm glad you reminded me," Leroy laughed, patting the hidden cloth. "It is one of our dust rags from earlier. I stuck it in my pocket and spaced putting it back. I planned on taking it to the storage closet after I told you goodnight."

"Well, I don't want to keep you too long. If you get caught out of bed after lights out with inventory that's been missing since earlier, you'll be

in severe trouble," Alaric warned him.

"I'll be okay, don't worry. I'm positive they won't be upset with me. It's time to say goodnight. I'll worry about the rag later." Leroy fell onto Alaric's bed beside him. "Tell me, what did Mrs. Winters say about letting the three musketeers plan my party?"



Leroy stepped out of the room and into the dark hallway. The wall lamps hadn't turned on yet. Thunder rumbled outside, and lightning followed not long after. *The storm is closer than we thought. I counted to three this time.*

Leroy moseyed back toward the entrance, holding the wall to guide him. He watched the drops of water race each other on the windows, backlit by the random lightning strikes. Knowing the first night patrol wouldn't be for an hour in order to give the kids a chance to clean and get in bed gave Leroy confidence that this would be the perfect chance to return the rag without being caught.

The entrance hall was only lit by the occasional lightning flash, which caused him to have to move off memory instead of sight. Until night patrols began, the lights would remain out. To his right was the front door and to his left were the kids' baths. The next door was the storeroom, followed by Mrs. Winters' office, the instructors' showers, the instructors' dorms, the mess hall, and the front door. He would use the wall to guide him and was sure he would be back in bed in no time.

He gripped the wall and came to the supply closet with no hold-ups. Of course, the door was sealed. He searched for the small desk with the

sign-in sheet. He set the rag down and peeked over, noticing Mrs. Winters' door sat open a hair. The lights created a small glow around the frame. Then he heard his name.

"What you did with Leroy today was unacceptable," Mrs. Winters yelled.

He tiptoed to the door, looking to make sure there were no other lights. He leaned in to listen the best he could. The rich smell of freshly brewed coffee permeated from the cracks. *I don't remember anybody talking bad to me today. Who is getting in trouble?*

"What are you talking about? I did nothing wrong," a man replied.

"James, it was before lunch, right outside the study hall, where Leroy hit you trying to finish his chores. I had my window open the whole time. I heard everything you said to him."

James? Wait a minute. We did talk today. He told me to control my emotions and to stop worrying about my parents. He made me feel awkward. It felt as if he tried to insinuate something about me.

"What do you mean? What did I say?" asked James. "I don't recall saying anything out of line to him."

Mrs. Winters pulled a notepad out from her desk and flung it across the office to the coffee table. It glided down and teetered on the edge of a two-foot fall. James grabbed it as it dropped and reviewed it.

"One comment saying, don't get your hopes up, and another informing him, he's been planning on finding his parents for longer than he thought. Plus, several other remarks. They are all recorded on the pad. I stood at the window and listened to the full conversation. Are you trying to get people injured or killed?" asked Mrs. Winters, so infuriated that her face had gone flush.

"No!" exclaimed James, taken aback. "Why would I try to hurt anyone? I was concerned, Mrs. Winters, honest. When I had breakfast, I saw him looking dejected, washing the windows. I merely wanted to make sure he was okay. I meant nothing by it, I assure you."

Mrs. Winters sauntered around her desk and rested on the front, tying her hair into a ponytail. She grew more annoyed by the minute but needed to keep her cool. She reached down, grabbing a manila file.

"You've been with us for..." started Mrs. Winters, flipping through the papers, "...right at three months, correct?"

"Yes ma'am," James replied, straightening up. "Stationed here right after basic."

"Did they not go over the children's files with you? Require you to watch all the videos and run over the protocols before they assigned you at this facility?" asked Mrs. Winters, her annoyance radiating from the blushed circles on her cheeks.

"Yes, ma'am, they did," he replied.

"So," Mrs. Winters said, slapping the file closed, "are you ignoring what you learned before moving here, or do you not care? Which one?" She set the folder down and made her way opposite the coffee table, closing the distance between them but preserving some room as a precaution.

"I don't understand," said James, his hands now speaking with his words. "I was worried about Leroy. He looked distraught during his chores today, and I wanted..."

"Yeah, well, you did it wrong," said Mrs. Winters, cutting him off and stomping her foot hard enough to make him flinch.

James bowed. "Please forgive me. I didn't mean to step out of line."

"At ease," she sighed, rubbing her forehead. *Calm down. You need to be*

professional. Don't get upset and let your emotions control the situation.

"You can't do that anymore. This is your one warning. If it happens again, you'll either be relocated or receive a dishonorable discharge. I take my job at this orphanage as a top priority, as does Hughes, and he is a lot less forgiving."

"Yes, ma'am..." James gulped, glancing back up at her. "Could I ask you something, if it's not too much trouble?"

"You may," she answered.

"Could you please explain to me in better detail what I did wrong and why it was unacceptable? I honestly don't get why you're upset."

Mrs. Winters closed her eyes and exhaled from deep in her chest. "Sit. I guess the higher-ups aren't performing their responsibilities. Doesn't surprise me one bit."

James sat on one of the faux brown leather sofas at the center of Mrs. Winters' office, divided by the matching coffee table. She stood and dragged her feet to a small stand by the exit with all the paperwork she had left for the next day sitting on top. She wasn't in the mood to go into everything at that moment but knew she had no choice since Hughes apparently hadn't bothered to teach this newbie the way he should have.

"May I offer you some coffee?" Mrs. Winters asked. "This will take a while."

"Yes, ma'am, please, I'd love some," replied James, his over-the-top politeness obvious.

He's terrified of me, Mrs. Winters thought to herself, and I haven't even gone into details yet. He won't last another three months.

Mrs. Winters grabbed a tray of coffee, mugs, and mixes, setting it on the table between them, and sat down on the couch.

"What do you know about this institution?" Mrs. Winters asked, pouring him a cup. She slid it over to him and made her own.

"This is a military orphanage founded by Five-Star General Hughes, which houses special children for missions. We are to watch over them and have little to nothing to do with them. Excessive amounts of interaction could cause problems," replied James.

Mrs. Winters let out a sarcastic laugh. "Right there should tell you what you did was wrong. You broke the one rule you said in those few, short sentences." She put two cubes of sugar in her coffee and sat back. "You young kids joining the service must not have any common sense nowadays. But I digress. Do you know what these boys are? Why can't you interact with them?"

"What they are?" asked James, looking offended by her "young kids" comment, yet intrigued by the question.

"And there it is, the topping on Grandma Ruth's cake," Mrs. Winters exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" asked James again, baffled, taking a sip of his coffee. He winced as the steaming liquid seared his upper lip. He set it down to let it cool.

"If you knew these weren't ordinary children, you'd take this job with more caution," said Mrs. Winters, taking a big swig of her coffee. "You wouldn't have done what you did today."

"I know they aren't typical," said James. "They're boys placed here by the military to train as soldiers their entire life because they have no other family. I mean, they're kids trained for war." He stopped, his face disturbed by the thought. "It's on the extreme side, but nothing to merit all this fear. They're babies, and it's not as if we aren't military too," he

replied, taking his coffee and blowing on it.

“Correct. Fractionally. You have no idea what you have gotten yourself into, Mr. Lighthouse,” said Mrs. Winters, her eyes intense. “Let me rephrase my words. If you mess up again, I can promise your chances of being moved or discharged are slim to none. They will kill you.”

Mrs. Winters paused and took a sip of her coffee, not taking her eyes off of James in order to drive in the seriousness of her statement. James’ eyes darted around as the look of intrigue became fear of the unknown. Mrs. Winters finished her sip and stared for another second. She wanted to allow time for everything to settle in. She hoped this pause would be enough for James to realize that this wasn’t what he had signed up for. They blindfolded him and threw him into the line of fire of the worst hurricane in history. He had no idea he was being manipulated. He was merely trying to follow orders as they had trained him to do. Then it hit him like a speeding train, and the moment was evident in a look Mrs. Winters would never be able to describe but recognized all too well. It was a glimpse of terror, confusion, and devastation, followed by his eyes glazing over as if the brain they were attached to suddenly shattered. The look was one only manifested in a person attempting to put the pieces of a puzzle together and then discovering that the pieces they have are not enough to complete the puzzle at all. It is a look displayed by a person realizing they have become nothing more than someone else’s pawn; their life a meaningless toy for someone else to play with, and when they’re used up, they will inevitably. . .well, they’ll see the clock strike twenty-five.

Leroy had to catch himself from falling into the door. The words resonated through his mind. *They placed us... We aren’t normal kids... What are they talking about? Did mom and dad raise me just for this place*

and get rid of me? Is that why they avoid questions about our parents, and why I can’t remember before eleven? Is that when they gave me away? Leroy squatted and leaned as close as possible, holding the door frame for balance.

CHAPTER FOUR

“It looks like you’re ready to begin now,” said Mrs. Winters, giving James a smile.

“I’m not sure what I’m ready for, and why are you smirking?” he asked.

Mrs. Winters laughed once through her nostrils and shifted her gaze to the floor. “Hughes and I will need to discuss the lack of training for you newbies. He has you all in the dark about what truly goes on in this place,” she mumbled under her breath but loud enough to be heard. She shook her head before looking back up and staring into James’ eyes. “Then he drops you here for me to play pick up like everyone here couldn’t die because of it. His paranoia is becoming foolish.” The smile had long vanished. She took another sip of her coffee and laid it on the table. Leaning on the edge of the couch, she crossed her legs and rested her hands on her top knee; an intense aura permeated the room.

“I’m confused. Why is he paranoid?” asked James, incapable of hiding

the worry painted on his face. His hand clutched his wrist, holding the mug of coffee, trying to keep it from shaking. He didn’t dare take a drink. He was sure he would spill it. James sat still on the edge of his seat, as if one move would cause him to drop from the cliff he’d been wavering on.

“Oh, he has a lot to worry about, but let’s focus on the situation at hand,” said Mrs. Winters. “I will be blunt with you because there is no other way to explain this. Dipping it in chocolate only makes you see it as less severe than it is.”

“Alright...” replied James.

Then, like an uncultured swine with no filter, Mrs. Winters spoke, this time with no thought of discretion or care. “These children are not ordinary kids. They are androids. Well, half-human, half-android. It’s a complicated ordeal you need to witness firsthand to truly grasp. Regardless, they are dangerous, and not following orders could result in you and many others getting killed.”

His brows knitted together as James turned his ear toward Mrs. Winters as if he didn’t hear. “What?”

Mrs. Winters nodded. “I figured this would be how it would happen. I can’t believe I have to do this with another one. You newbies need to quit being so eager to throw your life away, and ask questions about everything. Do some research and think before you act, even in the military. I’ll do my best to explain. You will try to rationalize and tell yourself it’s not real until you see it. Everyone does. Most of the world is clueless about this technology, and it’s hidden from most of our government, too. This is a well-organized secret that Hughes has created, and he allows only a select few people to know anything about it.”

“You said I’d be able to see it firsthand. You mean I’ll go to where

Hughes makes them?” asked James.

Mrs. Winters guffawed. “Oh no, they will never allow you to see anything as secret as that. Besides, I’m not aware of any other children other than the ones here. If he made more, I’d be surprised, with all he had to do to hide this facility. If others existed, it would be beyond what I’m permitted to know. I’m sure Hughes can count on his hands. . . Let me rephrase. I’m sure he could count on one hand how many people know the full secret. You can visit the lab in the basement when they do another reset. You can witness everything. It will be enough to make you see that it’s real, and you won’t know anything outside of that. None of us do.” She took her cup and finished her luke-warm coffee.

“Why does he have us here?” James asked. “What’s the point of this orphanage if no one can know anything?” He jumped to the edge of the couch, and having forgotten the coffee in his hand, he spilled it everywhere, just as he feared he would.

“Hughes doesn’t want to take any chances of his research leaking. We are a liability that might jeopardize all he has worked for. Trust me, I’ve heard those words myself,” said Mrs. Winters as she tossed him some napkins. “Add in all he has done to achieve the status he has, and he has a lot to be paranoid about.”

“I still don’t understand why he needs to hide from the country he is protecting,” James stated. “He is keeping us all safe. Why shouldn’t we trust him?” He wiped the coffee from his pants the best he could and squatted down to clean it off the floor.

“Next month marks ten years since Hughes started this experiment,” said Mrs. Winters. “The kids are androids with most of their human aspects left. It’s what he called the ultimate disguise; a tactic Hughes

wanted for optimal success because if American people couldn’t tell the difference, an enemy wouldn’t either. Which is why this facility resembles any military-run orphanage. A spy wouldn’t suspect this place.”

“Makes sense,” said James as he wiped the table free of coffee. “This is a small town in the middle of nowhere. How did he make them into androids? Where did he find the kids?” He threw the napkin and made a two-pointer into the trash bin near the desk.

“Nice shot,” complimented Mrs. Winters. “Well, how he made them is difficult to explain. I will do my best, but a better option is the next time we take one apart, I will let you go to the lab to help. Now, how he found the kids...” she started, her words slowing as her tone neared a whisper, “that’s where the story turns grim.” She became bothered by the last few words. You could see it written on her face. Mrs. Winters, the calm and collected one, unless she was chewing you a new one, was upset.

“If I never know how they came to be and only learned how their humanity was robbed, I’m fine with that,” said James.

“Robbed of their humanity...” Mrs. Winters thought out loud. “I like it; it sums up what happened to these poor children.”



Leroy leaned against the door frame and slumped onto the floor. His breathing short and fast. His brain raced and he couldn’t focus. Everything felt jumbled. He didn’t know if he should run to his room and hide, bust in the door and demand answers, or just run away, but his body stopped working. He sat frozen, listening in shock.



"Well, Himsbro, the town right down the road, is where it all started," began Mrs. Winters. "October 25th, 2031. We were on the verge of the third world war. The Russians threatened America with nuclear bombs if we invaded Iran, which, at that point, made tensions higher. The U.S. had still been recovering from the second civil war that had concluded a year prior, and which Iran had taken full advantage of with several terrorist attacks. Russia and China had become major contenders for the top powerhouses of the world, and it didn't help that they had allied against the U.S. with all the Muslim nations. Russia made it known they'd been developing nuclear research beyond anything we had ever seen before."

"Yeah," James responded, "we sent several troops in to spy on the Russians. We found one of their bases and stole some data. During the mission, they nearly caught one of our men and ended up sparking the war."

"Precisely," explained Mrs. Winters, "and Hughes was over the team who almost got caught. I feel he did it on purpose to test out his new creations a year before the war when America attempted climbing back to its feet. Hughes knew we didn't have a chance against anyone the way America had fallen apart, or the new technology Russia threatened to have. He presented an idea to Saltzman, our former Five-Star General, before Hughes stole his position, and President Stone, to create super soldiers like in the comic books."

"Stole it? How did he steal the position?" James asked.

"A story for another time, trust me," said Mrs. Winters. "Saltzman had no idea what Hughes had up his sleeve and gave him the okay, thinking

he could trust him. He had known Hughes for a long time. The President trusted Saltzman and left the decision to him since he had the trouble of trying to get the country back in order. Anything to give us an advantage would help. Hughes, as crazy as this sounds, picked the state of Texas since it's the most diverse. He studied the populations, towns, and locations. He wrote them down, threw a dart, and hit our little town."

"A little cliché, don't you think?" asked James.

"I agree," Mrs. Winters admitted, "yet he did it. After which Hughes and his special ops team he had been working with under everyone's noses for who knows how long, staked out the town for a month. Then on October 25th, at two in the morning, it began. Ten years ago."

"Wait, the kids are..."

She nodded with pursed lips, "Hughes and his special forces came and stormed the town while everyone slept. They broke into homes and killed many of the families, taking the young boys between the ages of eight and eleven."

"Why eight to eleven, and why only boys?" James asked, looking sick.

"Well, he is sexist," Mrs. Winters stated matter-of-factly before moving on to explain the rest of the answer to James' question. "He chose that age range for the children because they still had human traits about them, including minds, and attitudes, and personalities. This way, he could make them seem as normal as possible. He didn't want to create plain super-soldiers; he wanted to use children to create undefeatable sleeper agents, able to infiltrate places no adult could. Plus, it's easier to make children take orders than it is adults. They may be rebellious but, unlike adults, children are more easily brainwashed. He turned their brains into computers he could control. He molded and shaped every fiber physically,

mentally, and emotionally, with little to no opposition.”

“I-I guess that ma-makes sense...” said James, his eyes dropping as he realized the severity of what Hughes had done. “Did he kill the families of every kid he took?” He struggled to even ask the question.

“No, he didn’t kill all the people,” Mrs. Winters reassured. “He killed enough to make a point and scare the town. With the disarray the country was already in, fear came cheap. After they rounded up twenty-five children, they brought all the families into the main square. He told them they were planning to use this city as a base for military operations and would need their children to assist America with the upcoming war. He asked who would cooperate and who wouldn’t. It didn’t take long for him to acquire five more children. He built the orphanage on the outskirts of town. Then, he warned the citizens not to say a word to family or anyone unless they wanted to disappear from existence. They were not allowed contact with the outside world, and Hughes provided every amenity so the town could survive that way indefinitely. He stationed several of his special forces in the homes of the families they had slaughtered, to make it clear anyone who disobeyed orders would be disposed of.”

“Wait, he destroyed an entire community and forced them into something they didn’t want to do?” James asked, worry flooding back onto his face. “What if they chose to leave and not be a part of it? I know this sounds wrong but, what if they gave their kids willingly and wished to leave?”

She could tell he didn’t want to hear the truth of what he had asked. “Some tried,” said Mrs. Winters, her stomach turning. “Howbeit, Hughes doesn’t take chances. After three more families died, everyone gave up out of fear.”



My family could be dead, Leroy pondered. But, what if they are living in the town, not doing anything to help me. They abandoned me... Everyone has been lying to me. Mom and dad aren’t looking for me. Did they fight, or did they give me up, living their lives while I’m suffering? Leroy’s heart pulverized the inside of his chest as his thoughts continued snowballing into the next one. Is Alaric my actual brother? Leroy closed his eyes and rocked back and forth, trying to calm down. His body twitched slightly as minor shocks tickled his brain.



“How did he make human children into androids yet they look, talk, and act normal?” James asked.

“To be honest,” Mrs. Winters responded, “I still don’t understand everything. It makes little sense to me. It’s something his team had been working on in secret for a long time. I wouldn’t let Hughes know you know. The person who told me isn’t alive anymore because he said too much,” Mrs. Winters continued as she re-filled her coffee mug. “Like I told you, it will be easier to understand if you go observe it in the lab. The best way I can say it is, he removed unnecessary body functions to make them more efficient while keeping most of the basic human elements; this way, they are still human to the normal eye.”

“What do you mean?” asked James, finally finishing what was left of his cup of coffee and sitting back on the couch.

“Well, to age and develop is essential. Growing, they can become

stronger and more capable, making the adult androids he would need. Then he could create new androids and keep the cycle going, improving every time. Removing unnecessary functions is important; for example, sex for the children would be an unnecessary function. Making this an all-boys orphanage, besides me. Taking children from ages eight to eleven before they developed those hormones, he turned them into eunuchs and did everything to lower the drive and desire. It strengthened them because they would be less distracted. That's the one reason I'm in this position. I am a woman, and he knew children needed a mother-figure if he wanted them to act normal. Hughes is a very old-school man. He sees women as only being good for three things. I said before and I'll repeat it, he is sexist."

"Okay, that still doesn't explain how they are androids, though. Manipulation is a powerful tactic, but you're still human," said James. "Using psychological tactics and mutilation turns people to puppets, not machines."

"True, but it's a major part. If he couldn't control them, this would all be pointless. The creation would overpower the creator. Hughes planned and thought of every scenario," said Mrs. Winters, feeling disgusted she could give him any type of credit.

"Can they control them?" James asked, sitting up on the couch.

"They struggled at first, and there were definitely failed experiments. Many people have died. Enemy and ally. Numerous people on our soil. All for his twisted idea."

"What?" James asked, astonished. "Isn't that treason? How can he keep getting away with killing all those innocent civilians?"

"I told you, Saltzman didn't know Hughes' plan. I'm stunned Saltzman

never found out on his own. It didn't help that everyone was terrified. If anyone tried anything, Hughes played it off saying they were people from the civil war trying to stir up trouble. He'd kill them and no one questioned it; we still had unresolved issues in the country."

James shook his downcast head. "How are they dangerous? What makes them actual androids?"

"Well, they injected the kids with a special serum, which increased their strength, speed, stamina, intelligence, the whole nine yards, plus the touchdown. Hughes created superhumans. He mashed the best athletes with the smartest minds in the world. And boom, our children. Now, the next part is where it becomes confusing. I still don't understand how some of it works. He put a powerful layer of titanium under their skin, making them bullet and knife proof, impervious to damage. The infirmary here isn't for them. It's for us."

"Wait a minute, you're telling me they can't be hurt?" asked James, terrified.

"I believe they can, but not hurt in the way you and I can be. Hughes would never make something he isn't able to take down if they try to break his control. His ego wouldn't allow for such to happen."

"Okay, he manipulated them, made them exceed expectations in all fields, and made them bulletproof. I still can't. I just," said James, cupping his hands on his head.

"As I've said multiple times you will have to see it in person. I've seen it more than I'd wish to count, and I'm still baffled. They removed parts of the body and replaced them with machines. The androids are incapable of contracting any disease, and they don't even use the restroom. It's all replaced, yet they still grow as normal kids would. The food powers the

machines in their bodies, like gas, except we can control when the waste steam comes out. Whether in the shower or while they are asleep. Hughes has worked out everything to make it where no one can tell these kids are androids. Not even the children themselves. They chipped the brains and made them puppets. Yet they still have personalities. It's seemingly contradicting, I know. but Hughes managed to pull it off."

"Why don't they remember anything before a certain age? Did he steal their memories?"

"Yes, stole their memories altogether, which is why we know about their pasts, and they don't," answered Mrs. Winters. "He didn't create a false memory or anything; he wiped them clean and made them as simple to control as he possibly could. The main issue with memories is the mind erasing device. Hughes' men have been working nonstop for ten years to fix it. There's a lot of glitches, and those glitches are inconvenient. I don't think the machine is the problem. Whatever it is though, is the reason you're in trouble tonight."

"I don't understand why memories would have me reprimanded," said James.

"Well, after a mission, when the child returns, they're sent to the lab," explained Mrs. Winters. "The lab goes in and uses the M.A.M. or memory altering machine on the computer chips and wires and other electronics implanted in their brains. Ideally, to delete the memory of the mission. Instead, it deletes the past year of their life. For the first two-and-a-half years, it turned out to be our main issue because we didn't realize how much it deleted. The kids would cause one another to malfunction. Something happens with the chips when they try to remember, and instead of one memory, everything, and I mean everything comes

flooding back. All their memories, from before the orphanage, Hughes taking them, killing their families, the experiments, every single one comes rushing back in. Which is why it's important you don't trigger a memory." She paused for a moment, taking a long drink of her coffee. "All this created major issues and resulted in us having to M.A.M. one after another and reM.A.M.ing several. Once we figured it out, it became easier; not perfect, but enough to ease some headaches and stress. But then the instructors would forget they don't remember everything. It wasn't easy. As a result, they implemented the protocol instructing us to have little to do with the children. So, for a time, they kept androids on the battlefield during the war. Otherwise, several would've been erased back to infancy, so to speak, with the number of missions Hughes had. It took time, but we managed to erase everything and have all the children on the same page. Then, to Hughes' dislike, I created the false memories you learned when they stationed you. Finally, we reset the ages back to when Hughes took them."

"Why reset the ages?" asked James.

"For this to appear as a normal orphanage and not cause suspicion. The kids must be a proper age for an orphanage," said Mrs. Winters. "It's more for show, but after a certain age, Hughes does come to retrieve them. They grow, and we can only make them look young for so long. Now, with the missions few and far between, it's become easier to handle. Unless we have a malfunction like you could have caused today. The memory machine bug is still the biggest issue. Ten years and they've made no progress I'm aware of to fix it," she finished.

"What about the other instructors? I see them interacting with the children."

“It’s different for us who have been around for several years,” she replied. “We’ve grown accustomed to watching what we say.”

“Don’t the kids feel lonely?” asked James. She could see the tears he was fighting inside.

“Yeah, they do, you can see it in their eyes. They are alone and confused, but we can’t do anything to help,” replied Mrs. Winters, bothered, yet numb at the same time.

“Why?” cried James. “Why can’t we make it easier on them? Do their lives have to be miserable? Can’t we make it the slightest bit better? What’s wrong with showing compassion?”

“If you spark a memory and cause these kids to malfunction, they could kill everyone in this town and more!” barked Mrs. Winters. “They are trained machines used for killing. I’ve seen more malfunctions than I can count, and too many people die because of ignorant mistakes such as the one you made today. Too many kids, killed because someone thought it wouldn’t be a big deal. It is big! More significant than you could ever imagine. Not just our lives. Children’s lives, and those of the American people, are at stake. Following protocol is the most important rule for a reason.

“I-I’m sorry,” said James.

“I know it’s a lot to accept. Instead of telling the kids to control their emotions, you just worry about yours. If you can’t comply, I’ll request your reassignment tomorrow. It’s your choice,” stated Mrs. Winters, jumping to her feet, bearing down on him.

James gulped, his chest tightened at Mrs. Winters’ intense tone, “I-I-I... um, can I, uh...” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Can I think about it and talk to you tomorrow?” Mrs. Winters gave him a terrifying look.

“Please, I won’t say anything to anyone. I would just like a chance to think over everything you said tonight.”

Mrs. Winters looked him up and down before finally agreeing, “Sure, you have until tomorrow night. Understand this, if you come off in the slightest as unsure, I will make a choice myself to reassign you, and you won’t get a say in the matter. I will not take chances with anyone. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am, I understand,” James replied.



I’m not human. They stole my memories. How could they do that? The instructors...everyone...has been lying to me. What do I do now? If I say anything, they will just make me forget again.



“Is there anything else you would want to discuss with me?” asked Mrs. Winters.

“No ma’am. After all this, I want to go lay down and try to sleep,” James replied with an obvious fake yawn.

Leroy jumped up, realizing they were about to finish their conversation. He rushed back to the dorm hall, slipping through the door just before hearing the instructors’ open and voices pour out. Nervous, not wanting to make any noise, he pulled the door to the edge of the frame. It probably wouldn’t hold long, so he took off for his room at full speed. Luckily, a large rug covered the hall to muffle his heavy steps. He

pushed open his door, closed it with the utmost care, and dove into bed.

“Hey, why’s the door to the kids’ dorm open?” asked Peter, with his thick southern accent.

“Mrs. Winters’s door is open too,” replied Stephen. “You think one mighta been chattin with the headmaster?”

“What is going on out here?” Mrs. Winters shouted, sounding annoyed, as she jerked open her door. “Stephen, Peter, why are you two being so loud?”

“We apologize, ma’am,” replied Stephen, his demeanor changing. “Your door and the one to the children’s dormitory were open.”

“What?” asked Mrs. Winters, worry flooding her face. “Have you checked to see if anyone is out of bed?”

“No, ma’am, we just walked out for our night patrol,” replied Peter.

“Well, stop standing around wondering why a door is open and find out if someone is out of bed!” commanded Mrs. Winters, turning to James. “Did you hear anything out in the hall during our conversation?”

“No,” replied James.

“Oh, I pray no child heard us, for their sake and for ours,” said Mrs. Winters, pinching her forehead.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Mrs. Winters,” said Peter, while Stephen ran off to check the rooms, “this might not even be nuttin’ to break a sweat bout. The door looked like it mighta not shut all the way and popped open. I’ll gone ahead and go with Stephen and check dem rooms to make sure ain’t not a one out of place.”

“Thank you, and report back once you check every child. If you find no issues, continue with the regular night watch. However, tonight I want everyone to be extremely vigilant, just in case.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I think I’m going to go to bed now,” said James.

Mrs. Winters didn’t say anything. She held her arm out to allow him to exit the room and walked back into her office. James headed to his dorm and shut the door behind him. Mrs. Winters flung her door shut and plopped down on the couch, rubbing her forehead.

I can’t believe this is happening. We are going to have another accident at this rate. I can’t handle another disaster. James has to go. He is a sweet person and all, but he is too soft to handle this. He is young, and his emotions still get the better of him, and you can’t let that happen, not here. I don’t know how Hughes will take it. This will make the third reassignment in six months.

She was nervous for James because she knew all too well that her statement about possibly being killed if they reassigned him wasn’t a joke. Although she didn’t know for certain whether the other two were alive or not; she felt horrible kicking them out but also knew she had no choice. They dodged four malfunctions by the skin of their teeth with them. They wouldn’t follow protocol or instructions, and she couldn’t keep taking chances.

Hughes needs to listen to me when it comes to training the newbies. Otherwise, I’ll have to take over training them myself.

A knock on the door startled her out of her thoughts.

“Who is it?” she asked, slightly aggravated.

“It is Stephen and Peter ma’am,” came the reply. “All children are in their beds and accounted for. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Good, you may proceed with your patrol. Just keep an eye out,” said Mrs. Winters.

She sighed and attempted to relax. “Lord, I don’t know how much longer I can do this.” She laid back, stretching out on the couch. “I love these children, but the lies are too much. I don’t want to quit and have Hughes put someone in charge, who will mistreat them, but how can I call myself a Christian and spend every day lying? Heavenly Father, please let your spirit move and help us. Bring the truth to light and help set these children free. I don’t care what happens to me, but I can’t keep doing this. They don’t deserve it.” Mrs. Winters yawned. “Please give me strength, Lord.” Her voice was barely audible, and her lips hardly moved with the last words as her head rolled to the side and a slight snore escaped from her nostrils.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leroy hid under the blankets. A couple of seconds passed, and he could hear feet brush the rug outside. Thunder rumbled above the orphanage. The rain, like pebbles, tapped the window in his room. Then his door creaked open. Light flowed in. The wooden floor groaned under the footsteps of the intruder.

Do they know it was me? No. I have to stay calm and pretend I am asleep. Calm down, Leroy. Calm down, or he will notice. Just relax.

He inched the comforter up, dragging it across his cheek. The faint smell of rain was overpowered by vanilla-bourbon body soap.

It’s Stephen. This should be easy; he’s not the brightest instructor. Make a couple of smacking noises and turn. He’ll run, worried about waking me up.

Shuffling in his bed, Leroy smacked his lips twice, and, as he predicted, the taste of detergent and fabric hit his tongue, followed by the squeaking floor and a closing door. Still hesitant, worried Stephen had lurked

around pretending to have left, he waited to hear the rug scrape the underside of the instructor's worn-out boots. Unfortunately, thunder drummed the clouds above, and lightning cracked across the sky right after, preventing Leroy from hearing the steps but, lucky for him, it stopped in time to make out the sound of the door next to him opening. He sighed and spat out the blanket.

He slowly opened his eyes and jerked back. A round-faced, middle-aged woman hovered just inches from him. Her wide, emerald-green eyes peered straight into his.

"Wake up, Leroy, we-we need to get out-out of here." Her voice was panic-stricken. He could see her arms and shoulders move like she was shaking something beside him, yet he couldn't feel anything. She gasped hard. "The military is outside breaking into people's houses. Please wake up. We have to go."

Leroy leaped out of his skin as his door burst open. Gunfire rang in his ears; he glanced down, trembling under his blanket at the dying woman on his bed. A masked figure rushed over, throwing the woman to the floor, and reached for Leroy. He snatched the comforter over his head and waited. Nothing happened.

It wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't real. I don't know those people. When I pull the blanket down, they will be gone, and my room will be back to normal.

Then a new voice he didn't recognize spoke. He peeked out of the covers. A wrinkled woman sat beside him.

"Hand me the scalpel," she said, coughing up a lung.

Leroy pulled the covers down a tad more to find he wasn't in his room. He was on a weird metal table in a strange cigarette-stained room with

cinderblock walls, and a blinding light dangling above him. He watched the woman draw a dotted line on his abdomen. How? He had a blanket covering him, but he recognized that as the birthmark under his belly button. She placed a scalpel against his skin and glared over her enormous glasses at a young man who stood over a table, hitting something with a hammer, making a loud clang.

"Are you ready with the part, Samuel? Once I cut him open, we need to start right away. It's a delicate process."

"Yes, almost ready, one more piece," said Samuel.

"Hey, who are you guys?" Leroy asked, "What are you two doing to me?" He tried to move but his body didn't respond, even though he could feel the covers rubbing against him. "Why are you pushing a knife against my stomach? Are you planning on cutting me... hey, answer me!"

No answer. The woman watched, impatient, as the young man continued hammering something on the table.

"Done." Samuel lifted a gear into the air and said, triumphantly, "This is the final one we need to replace the stomach."

"Good, stop fooling around and let's finish this. We have several more to do tonight, and I would like some beauty sleep," said the woman. Spittle spewed on Leroy's stomach and the young man's arms. Her eyes fell, and she sliced Leroy's stomach open.

"Hey!" Leroy shouted, seeking to crawl away. But once again his body didn't move. "Hey, stop! What do you think you're doing?" He was struggling, fighting to move his comatose body as blood gushed out of him. "Don't cut me open. Why are you doing this? Hey! Hey, I know you hear me!" Still nothing. Not a word from the man or the woman. Not a look in his direction. "The blanket!" He grabbed the hem and ripped it

over his head again. Curled up, he leaned against the headboard. The shadows returned as if the blanket was a portal. Lifting his hand, he rotated it and waved his fingers. He could see himself moving again, good. He felt his stomach to make sure he didn't have any cuts. Who cares if the lines are there, as long as he was in one piece. Safe. Suddenly, gunshots resonated through his head like the pounding of a drum.

Terrified to look, he gripped the blanket tighter. The gunfire grew louder. Men and women were screaming and crying in his ear. Then a man's voice rang out as clear as a sunny day.

“Operation Predator.”

Leroy peeked out of the blanket, baffled at the strange phrase, and saw the back of a man with short, buzzed, gray hair, with a slight hint of red. He held a patch out in front of Leroy. He knew he didn't reach for it, yet his hands grabbed the patch. Red and yellow with odd symbols he'd never seen.

“This is the enemy patch,” said the man. “Three enemies have made it on our soil. We have them cornered. I want you to eliminate them. Understood?”

Leroy didn't speak. Instead, he scanned the strange tent full of maps and strings everywhere. He found himself out in a field looking up at an abandoned building. Gunfire whizzed by him from both sides.

In a flash, he stood over an injured man, pistol in hand. The man begged in another language, sobbing.

“What's going...” The gun fired and spewed blood all over him. Leroy's body trembled with what little breaths he struggled to take.

- “Leroy, this is your brother Alaric,” said Mrs. Winters, holding Alaric by the shoulders, her face beaming with a smile from ear to ear. Alaric stood before Leroy and looked just as confused as him.

- “Happy fifteenth birthday,” shouted all the boys in the mess hall.

- “Happy fifteenth birthday,” they shouted anew, but this time the decorations weren't the same.

- “Happy seventeenth birthday,” this one flashed twice as well. Both times the children looked older, and the decorations looked different.

- He stood on a ledge overlooking a dark field. It stormed, and gunfire resembled fireflies below. He didn't want to jump. This wasn't safe, but to his horror, he did anyway. He couldn't control it. He slid down the muddy cliff and leaped into the air. Dread filled the pit of his gut as the ground rushed toward him.

- “Alright, start it up,” said the woman from before, standing over him. She had something pressed against his forehead. A loud humming noise radiated through his brain.

Leroy folded himself up against the headboard. He searched his room, then clambered out of bed, scurried to his dresser by the closet, and switched on the rustic cog lamp. His room illuminated from the warm glow of the Edison bulb.

He scanned the open space, seeking to find where the voices had come from. No one. He ambled back over to his bed, where he collapsed and

landed on the floor. Leroy curled up in the fetal position, gripped his scalp, and recalled the images that had just flooded his brain. Memories from the last twenty-one years: his life before, the night they had taken him, the missions, the ten years at the orphanage.

He climbed back onto the edge of the bed and sat down, letting the weakness of his body settle, then staggered back to the wardrobe, grabbed a journal, and flipped off the lamp. He ripped the few pages of random writings out and recorded every detail he could remember, doing his best to piece it all together coherently on the pages. Once finished, he tore out an extra blank page and arranged the diary under his mattress deep enough for no one to find it unless they wanted to. He took the sheet of paper and attempted to scribble a note as the visions continued their barrage of attacks.

Dear Alaric,

You will find this letter well after I am gone. Don't freak out, I'm fine. I'm better than okay now that I know the truth. I want to keep this short. Also, you mustn't tell anyone about this letter. I mean no one at all. Anyway, you should stay in my room while I'm gone and find my journal. It will have all the letters I've left for you. Think of it like a buried treasure. There are a few places I could hide it, but it's so top secret I had to hide it where only you can find it. I don't want you ever to forget that I love you. Be brave, strong, and confident. Have faith and never give up; you are an incredible little brother.

You're one of a kind, with a smile that could brighten up the darkest days. Everyone is lucky to have you as family. I know I was. Have a good one, little bro, till we see each other again.

Love you,
Leroy

Leroy folded the letter and placed it in his pocket. *Have to keep the letter vague until he can read the journal. I'm not going to risk giving them a chance to find out that I know. I want to leave with all the facts and not give them the opportunity to take my memory. I will not be a puppet anymore.* Leroy moved across his room and laid on the floor, watching under the crack of the door, listening for footsteps. Almost on cue, a pair of boots came into view. Ambling, the instructor passed by without stopping.

Okay, Eight doors after me. I have to do this fast. Rushing to his bed, Leroy sat a pillow under the blankets and took the top sheet and pillowcases off. Hurrying back to the door, he gently twisted the knob. The steps made their way back.

Slow, steady breaths.

He pulled the door open just as the shadow passed by. Light gleamed in the crack.

"Stephen, hold up a second."

Leroy halted, grabbing his wrist, and pushed his foot against the door to hold it steady, hoping and praying that Peter didn't turn back around.

"Reckon you can handle things?" Peter continued. "I need to go see a man 'bout a hound dog."

- “Operation Predator.”

Leroy stiffened, knowing what was about to happen. *Not now, not not now... please.* His eyes shifted to his left to see the man from before. Scared to look, he slammed his eyes shut.

- Gunfire popped off behind him.

Leroy jerked, pulling his hands up to his ears. His bedroom door creaked open a hair more and stopped against his foot. The flashback ceased and Leroy came to, shaking. He realized the door had opened just as Stephen’s voice whispered from the hallway.

“Leroy? Are you out of bed?”

Panicking, he slid against the wall, holding the door with his foot. Stephen’s shadow darkened the threshold. Moving his foot as he felt Stephen push on the door, he watched the shadow, holding his breath, pressed between the door and the wall.

“Leroy, if you are awake, you need to answer me this instant,” whispered Stephen.

Leroy watched the shadow move into the room and past the door toward his bed. He took a big deep breath and held it. He matched Stephen’s amble and snuck up behind him. *You can do this, you aren’t killing him, you’re knocking him out. It’s okay.*

He slapped Stephen’s ears, stunning him. Stephen stumbled, trying to hold his balance. Leroy pushed his fingers into Stephen’s collar bone on either side. Stephen dropped to his knees, as Leroy chopped the back of his neck, knocking him out.

Leroy ran back over to the door and closed it. He grabbed the pillowcase off the floor and gagged Stephen. He tied his hands and feet together with long sleeve shirts and dragged him to the closet. Leroy

lifted Stephen’s shirt to reveal an FN 509 tactical issued handgun. He withdrew the firearm and examined it, double-checked the clip to make sure it was full, and shut the closet. Peter’s voice called from outside the door.

“Stephen, where y’at?”

The door to Leroy’s room clicked. Panicking, he spun around attempting to find a place to hide. He jumped into the closet, trampling Stephen. Leroy swung the door shut but stopped it before it clicked. He watched from the crack as light flooded his room again. *I have to be ready if he checks my bed. Please don’t check my bed.* Leroy slipped the pistol into his pocket and prepared for the worst. *I don’t want to kill anyone. I need to put this away.*

Peter looked around and whispered, “Stephen, ya in here?”

No answer. Leroy’s eyes bulged as he watched on his toes. Peter shuffled closer to his bed and stopped. He glanced around one more time and left. From the closet, he could faintly hear Peter go into the room beside him. Leroy stepped out and slid to the door, listening intently as the footsteps faded.

“He best not be in the dagum mess hall sneakin’ food again,” he heard Peter gripe.

I’m safe for the moment. I need to make sure if Stephen wakes up, he can’t make any noise. Back at the closet, he ripped his clothes from several hangers. He untwisted them and then re-twisted them together, wrapping them around Stephen, making it impossible for him to move.

He shut the door and laid back in bed. *Before I do anything, I have to make sure I give Alaric the letter.* Lying awake all night, the flashbacks and memories played in his head. The less he fought and let the memories

flood in, the more detail he saw. Shortly before morning, the worst memory yet played in his mind.

ALONE IN THE METAL

C. A. STAMPLEY



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Summary:

He was created for war but now he's fighting for his own freedom.

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Cody Stampley, lives in a small town in Texas with his wife and four children, two daughters and two sons. Cody loves Jesus and spends his days worshipping God, working, and spending time with his family. His biggest desire is to tell everyone about the good news of Jesus Christ and to write clean, fun novels that everyone can enjoy and are not filled with all the nasty worldly things that have ruined so many books for him and others.