

**RISKING**

**IT**

**ALL**

**SM KOZ**

*Swoon* **READS**

New York

A Swoon Reads Book

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To my dad, who taught me  
“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”

# CHAPTER 1

# PAIGE

**“Fired up!”**

“Fired up!”

“Feeling good!”

“Feeling good!”

“Motivated!”

“Motivated!”

“Ded—”

Alex, the commander of Alpha Battalion, stops our jogging cadence abruptly as Commander Anderson, the dean of students, approaches him.

“Commander Jernigan!” the dean yells, motioning for Alex to join him.

Alex jogs over to the dean and a guy who has stepped out from behind him. This new guy clearly doesn’t belong here. He’s wearing jeans, a long-sleeved red T-shirt, and stylish sneakers that won’t last for a single run during PT—physical training. The most obvious sign he’s not a Wallingford student, though, is his full head of blond hair hanging over his eyes and ears.

Alex makes eye contact with me and motions for me to take over. “Lieutenant Commander Durant is in charge,” he says to our battalion before joining the dean and the new guy.

I step out of line to put myself next to the ten rows of cadets and continue with the cadence.

“Dedicated!!” I yell, getting us back to where we were.

“Dedicated!” the cadets reply, their heavy footsteps keeping time as we pound out our five miles.

“All right!”

“All right!”

This added responsibility puts more pep in my step than usual. As lieutenant commander, I don’t get this job as often as I’d like, though I do have plenty of other responsibilities.

“Everybody!” I yell as we pass under an arch and onto the gravel path that circles our campus. I take a deep breath and smile at the nice view of the mountains. The trees are a little barer than they were yesterday, the ground is littered with a few more red and gold leaves, and mist rises from the valleys, despite it being the middle of the afternoon. If it were up to me, there would only be one season and it’d be fall.

“Everybody!” the cadets reply.

“Fired up!”

“Fired up!”

When we start on our second lap around campus, Alex and the new guy join us. I drop back into line, but Alex motions for me to fall out of formation to stand next to the new guy. I do as he orders and try to get a better look at the guy while staring straight ahead.

He’s shuffling his feet, slumping his shoulders, and huffing and puffing despite just starting to jog at what is really a leisurely pace. Then he stops. He literally stops on the gravel, causing three cadets to run into him, knocking him to the ground.

“What the hell?!” he barks, sending them a glare as they sidestep him and return to their places in line.

“Get up,” I say as the rest of our battalion pulls away.

“No,” he replies, brushing dirt from his sleeve.

“It wasn’t a request; it was an order. Get up.”

“Make me.”

My jaw almost drops at his display of disrespect, but I quickly catch myself. I can’t let him think he’s got the upper hand.

“Get up now or you’ll be disciplined.”

“Fine. I’ll get up,” he says, standing with a smirk.

I nod, happy he came to his senses. “We’ll need to sprint to catch up to them. Commander Jernigan doesn’t tolerate cadets who fall behind,” I reply, looking at the group now far away. “I hope those shoes are more comfortable than they loo—” Where’d he go?

Turning around, I see him sauntering along the path to a bench. Then he sits down. On the bench. During PT.

“Cadet!” I yell. “Your behavior is completely unacceptable!”

“My name’s Logan,” he grumbles before raising his fist into the air and then jutting his middle finger out. This time, my jaw does drop.

It’s clear by this guy’s attitude he’s not here by choice. Wallingford Academy has split admission: half of the cadets, like me, apply and have dreams of a military academy after graduation, and half are sent here by their parents or the court when all other attempts at correcting their behavior have failed. Most of these delinquents, or DQs as we call them, come at the start of a semester, though, not four weeks in. And they aren’t nearly as disrespectful. The drill sergeant usually gets that out of them during their two-week boot camp.

As I begin marching toward the new cadet, Alex comes racing back at us. “What’s the problem, Paige?”

“No problem,” I reply, shaking my head and smoothing back my black hair, making sure none of it has come free from my braid. I don’t want Alex to think I can’t handle the new guy. I’ve never had a problem with DQs before, and I’m not about to start now.

“Why’s Evans sitting down?”

“He’s being petulant. I’ve got it, though.”

“Move your ass now!” Alex yells, ignoring me and causing my jaw to tense and my blood pressure to rise higher than it’s been throughout our run. Later, once we’re alone, I’ll call him out on this. I’m a great cadet and even better officer. Given two more minutes, I would’ve gotten the new guy—Logan Evans, apparently—in line. Alex should know that. Besides being my commander, he’s one of my best friends.

The new guy gives Alex the finger, and suddenly my annoyance disappears. I cringe, waiting for the punishment that’s coming. Poor Evans doesn’t stand a chance.

Alex stalks over to the bench with narrowed eyes and slow, confident steps. “You will never do that to me again. Understand?”

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want,” Evans mutters, meeting Alex’s eyes briefly before dropping his gaze to the ground.

“The correct answer is ‘Yes, sir, Commander Jernigan.’” He rests his hands on his knees and bends down until he’s eye level with Evans. “This cocky attitude of yours might have worked where you’re from, but it’s not going to work here. You will spend your personal time tonight cleaning all the whiteboards in the classrooms.”

“Screw you,” Evans says, standing and trying to push his way past Alex. Except Alex has at least fifty pounds more muscle, so he doesn’t budge, and Evans has to squeeze past him.

“Make that two nights of personal time. Want to try for three? I have no problem standing here the entire afternoon and taking away all your free time for the rest of the semester. In fact, I’d enjoy it.”

Evans pauses, his back to Alex, and his shoulders fall.

“It’s your choice,” Alex says.

Evans slowly turns around and starts jogging at what really is more of a walking pace along the gravel path. Alex nods. “Good decision, cadet.” Then he speeds up to join the rest of our battal-

ion while I accompany Evans. At this pace, we'll never catch the others, but at least he's trying and will eventually get the miles in.

I consider starting a new cadence song with him, but he's already out of breath and red-faced. There's no way he can yell on top of running.

Unfortunately, our crawling pace is going to make me miss the rest of PT. I'll need to figure out a time to get my push-ups and pull-ups in, although I doubt I'll have a chance until late tonight since right after PT, I have cross-country practice, then it's dinner, followed by study hall, and then two hours of personal time, most of which will be spent at debate club. If I'm quick, I can probably fit in my workout after debate club and before lights-out at 10:00 P.M.

Other than debate club and my second round of PT thanks to Evans, it's an exact replica of yesterday. That's one of the nice things about Wallingford—you always know what to expect. There are never any surprises.

Without warning, he turns right onto the lawn, and then sprints between two buildings. Well, it's a sprint for him. I could easily catch up, but I stand staring at his back instead.

So much for no surprises. Where did he find that spurt of energy? And where in the world is he going? The only thing behind those buildings is the staff parking lot and then forest leading up the mountain. Unless he plans on committing grand theft auto or living in the wild, there's nothing for him back there.

With a sigh, I pick up my pace and follow in his footsteps, twice as quickly as he went. It takes a few minutes, but I find him sitting on a yellow cement parking block with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"You have to finish PT," I say, stepping in front of him.

"Nope."

"Yes."

"Look," he says, raising his head, "you'd have better luck convincing me to jump off a cliff than you will getting me to run five miles. It's not going to happen. There's no way in hell I'm doing all this military shit."

He doesn't have a choice. The only way to avoid the strict routine is to leave Wallingford, which I imagine isn't an option for him. But maybe it is. Only one person knows the answer to that. "You can take it up with the dean. Let's go to his office."

With a nod, he says, "I'll head over there in a minute," before stretching out his legs and leaning back on his arms, as though he's enjoying a casual summer afternoon lounging around a pool.

Except it's not summer, there's nothing casual about Wallingford, and our pool is only used for swimming laps, not floating on a raft and soaking up the sun. "I've got to get back to PT. We need to go now."

"I don't need a chaperone."

"I'm sure you understand why I don't trust you to go on your own."

He remains silent, so I continue. "You are free to mess up your life all you want, but I won't have you messing up mine. I need to get back to PT, but I can't do that until you either rejoin PT or I deliver you to the dean."

He stands, but not before sending an annoyed look in my direction. "Fine, let's go to the dean's office."

We cross through the parking lot to a sidewalk and then quietly make our way to the administrative building.

"You've delivered me," he says when he reaches for the door. "You can go back to your pack of brainwashed robots."

"Excuse me?" I reply, my hands landing on my hips. His disrespect seems to have no end.

He waves his hand in the general direction of the athletic field,

where my battalion should be done with their run by now. “I’d hate to mess up your life. Go back to whatever it is you’re supposed to be doing.”

I grit my teeth and bite my tongue. He needs a lesson on how to behave around here, but that responsibility will need to fall on his peer mentor. I can’t be expected to turn him around in only a few minutes.

Hopefully whoever is paired with him will be able to do it quickly because Alex will have zero patience with him if he keeps acting like this. Fortunately, it usually doesn’t take long. My last match was the beginning of my junior year, and it took less than a semester for my good behavior to rub off on her. She went from a C to an A average and from picking fights in her spare time to being a key player on the soccer team.

As far as my responsibility to Evans, it ends here. Since he refused to do PT, I brought him to the dean. Nothing more can be expected of me. I turn on my heel before sprinting back to my battalion.

Throughout the rest of PT, I can’t stop thinking about the guy. He might be the worst cadet I’ve ever seen. Sure, all DQs have issues, but most of them respond to our threats. And want to avoid the dean at all costs, not volunteer to see him. He’s an unusual one, for sure.

I have no idea what the dean’s plan is for him, but boot camp really needs to be in his future. Maybe some hard-core drill-sergeant treatment will be the kick in the pants he needs.

Once we’re done with our exercises, I start to head for my dorm with my roommate, Leah, who also happens to be my best friend. Suddenly, a flash of red between a cluster of pine trees catches my attention. I turn in the direction and stare.

“What’s going on?” Leah asks when she notices I’ve stopped.

“I thought I saw something. Back there,” I reply, pointing. It

was the exact color of Evans's shirt, but it couldn't be Evans. The dean wouldn't allow him to wander around campus alone.

Squinting, she says, "I don't see anything. It was probably just a squirrel."

Convinced she must be right, I nod. For some reason, I've got Evans on my mind. It's ridiculous. He's just another DQ, one who may not even be here by tomorrow morning. It's time to forget about him and how he messed up my PT so I can focus on the important things I've got going on.

Like the urgent discussion I need to have with my dad.

The next morning, in the mess hall, I follow Alex from the buffet line to where Leah and some of our other friends are seated.

They're congratulating Chris on his acceptance into the Naval Academy, which he just received yesterday. I start to say something, but I'm interrupted by a voice behind me. "Lieutenant Commander Durant."

I turn around to find the dean standing there. My stomach drops and the two bites of breakfast I've taken feel like a bowling ball weighing me down. I quickly review everything I've done the past twenty-four hours, but can't come up with anything that would lead to a visit by the dean. I got As on my two tests. All the girls passed their room inspections. Lights-out was seamless. I did get frustrated at cross-country practice when I lost to a junior right in the last 100 yards, but I took out my frustration by running sprints. No one should have a problem with that.

"Sir, yes, sir," I say, sitting at attention, not letting my voice give away my nerves.

"Please come to my office after breakfast." Lowering his voice, he says, "I have something important to discuss with you regarding the new cadet."

I gulp and nod as my stomach drops even lower. Evans. Was I not imagining things in the forest yesterday? Was he somehow sneaking around? That's impossible . . . unless he never went to the dean after I dropped him off.

How could I make such a careless mistake? I should've escorted him into the office. What if he went AWOL? Will the dean hold me responsible? "Yes, sir," I say with another gulp. "I'll report to your office immediately after breakfast."

He turns around without another word and leaves the mess hall.

Leah lowers her fork and gives me a sympathetic look. "What happened?" she asks.

I crack my knuckles. "I'm not sure." I don't want to admit my mistake in front of the other officers.

"Did you sneak off campus?" Deborah, the girl to my left, asks.

"No."

"Were you caught using your phone during school hours?" Alyssa, a girl seated across the table, asks.

"No."

"Are you hiding Twizzlers in your underwear drawer again?" Alex asks with a grin.

I wrinkle my nose at him. Back when I was a freshman, I thought I could keep candy in my room for a late-night snack. Turns out not even your underwear drawer is sacred. It was found within two days, and I ended up in detention for the infraction. That's also when I met Alex, who was there because he kissed a girl in the hallway between classes. Apparently, they didn't know—or didn't care—about the no-PDA-on-campus rule.

That, three years ago, was the first and last time I disobeyed a rule.

"Hey, maybe it's good news," Leah says with a hopeful smile.

I bite my lip, crack my knuckles again, and nod, although it's

not. Nothing positive happened between me and Evans yesterday. I try to take a bite of sausage, but it gets stuck in my throat. Things have been going so well. My application to the Air Force Academy was going to be as strong as I could possibly make it. I had everything planned out. My dream of becoming a fighter pilot was becoming more and more real every passing day.

*Did Evans put all that at risk for me?*

## CHAPTER 2

# PAIGE

**As soon as** the bell rings, I shoot up and rush for the dean's office, unable to handle the suspense any longer. I must know what Evans did, and if my inappropriate actions are going to ruin my chances at the Air Force Academy. I need to have a spotless record. If I'm disciplined for what happened, my dream could be over.

"Sir, Lieutenant Commander Durant reports," I say, saluting him when I reach his open doorway.

He returns the salute and says, "At ease, Lieutenant Commander Durant. Please come in and take a seat."

I enter the room but pause when I see Evans.

"I believe you've already met our new cadet, Logan Evans."

He's slouched in his chair and gives me a half wave and a smirk. My eyes grow wide at his complete lack of respect in front of the dean.

"Yes, sir." I sit down, my back rigid and my hands folded in my lap.

"Since he's joining us in the middle of the semester, he has not had the benefit of our basic training course."

"Yes, sir." That much was obvious yesterday.

"It's impossible to run the full program for one cadet in the middle of the semester, so I'd like for you to provide his training

between classes and your other duties. You're the highest-ranking officer without a current match, so I feel it's the best solution to get him quickly up to speed on our customs and courtesies. Not to mention you're one of the best role models he could have."

"Thank you, sir." All my fear from a few minutes ago disappears. I'm not being disciplined at all. I'm being offered yet another leadership position, which will only improve my chances of getting into the Air Force Academy.

"Are you willing to take on this responsibility?"

"Of course, sir." It's not like there's another answer. If an administrator asks you to do something, you do it. Even if "no" were an acceptable answer, I'd never say it. I'll have to figure out how to add in the new responsibility when my days are already filled second by second, but it will be worth it. I'll make it work somehow. As my dad always says, failure is never an option.

Commander Anderson faces Evans and says, "Lieutenant Commander Durant will teach you how to survive around here, if you let her. I highly suggest you drop the attitude and embrace the opportunity to learn. Insubordination will not be tolerated. If she tells you to jump, you ask how high. Understood?"

Evans's eyes stay on his feet.

"Do I make myself clear?" Commander Anderson says with more force.

Evans nods, still focused on the ground.

"Look at me and say, 'Yes, sir.'"

He raises his eyes, glancing at me only momentarily before focusing on the dean. "Yes, sir," he says quietly, his jaw tight.

"Being respectful of others is expected at Wallingford. We will tolerate nothing less from you. Any sign of disrespect will be swiftly dealt with." He gives Evans a long, hard stare.

Evans visibly swallows and wipes his palms on the pressed creases of his black pants. If the dean's goal was to scare him, he

succeeded. I've never seen a meeting between a new DQ and an administrator, so maybe this is always the approach they take. Fear is a good motivator. Maybe that's why so many of them quickly turn their behavior around.

"Evans, you are dismissed," the dean says.

He stands and walks to the door, but glances back at me for a second with a strange expression—not fear but maybe intrigue or interest. I turn around to focus on the dean once more.

"Do you have any questions about this match?" he says.

I'd love to ask why he's here, but I learned long ago information is given on a "need to know" basis. If I need to know more, they'll tell me. Until then, I'll try to ignore my curiosity. "No, sir."

"Do you have any concerns?"

"No, sir," I say, but then immediately think about his behavior yesterday. He was horrible and nothing I said helped. He did seem to listen to Alex better. And the dean. I practically groan in realization. Evans needs to learn gender means nothing here—all that matters is rank, and I'm several levels higher than him.

I'll just have to be harder on him until he understands. That's easy enough. I can be as hard as I need to be for him to listen.

The dean nods. "Good. Your father wasn't thrilled with this match, but I assured him you could easily handle yourself around Evans if it ever became necessary."

His words cause my muscles to tense. My dad and the dean are best friends and go back to their own time at Wallingford and then later in the Navy SEALs, which means, unfortunately, my dad is much too involved in my life here. I never thought my dad played a role in my matches, but the dean's words leave me wondering. It's not unusual for males and females to be matched, yet all my previous matches have been female. I assumed it was coincidence, but I'm beginning to think my dad might have played a role.

Of course, I can't be too angry with him. I am his only child

and, after my mom died eight years ago, I'm his entire world. He even makes the hour drive just about every other weekend to meet me for dinner. I know he does what he does out of love, even if it sometimes borders on meddling in my life.

After being dismissed, I leave the dean's office with a hall pass and a plan to rush to my calculus class, but Evans is loitering just outside the door, casually leaning on the wall even after he's seen me.

"You need to stand at attention when you see an officer, even a student officer, in an otherwise empty hallway," I say.

He rolls his eyes and blows out a breath. "I told you yesterday I'm not doing all this military shit."

"You don't have a choice. Do it or I'll assign a punishment."

"Go ahead."

He crosses his arms over his chest as he looks past me down the hallway. I follow his gaze, but nothing's there. It's just the white cinder-block walls covered with photos of all the cadets before us.

"Ten push-ups for your attitude," I say.

"What?"

"Drop and give me ten."

"No."

"Then I'll make it twenty."

"What in the hell is wrong with you people?" he says under his breath.

I narrow my eyes at him. This kind of attitude is not going to fly with our instructors. "Your options are to stand up straight or do ten push-ups. I don't care which you choose, but you need to choose right now."

Rolling his eyes, he pushes himself off the wall. "Better?" he asks with a smirk. His arms are still crossed over his chest and his heels aren't together, but I'll take what I can get at this moment. By tomorrow, he'll need to have perfect form.

“We’ll sit together in the mess hall for lunch. You need to quickly learn a few basic rules around here.”

He doesn’t say anything, so I continue. “What’s your first class?”

“Calculus.”

“Really?” I reply without thinking. Most DQs are in more remedial classes. “I mean,” I clear my throat, “me too. Follow me.”

As we start down the hallway, I steal a sideways glance. He’s about my height, maybe an inch shorter. Granted, I’m tall for a girl, so he’s likely average for a guy. He’s not very muscular, which makes me think I can probably do more push-ups than him.

“Whatever the dean told you about me after I left,” Evans says, interrupting my thoughts, “probably isn’t true.”

And his story just got even more mysterious. “He didn’t tell me anything.”

“Oh.”

I turn my head to get a better view of his face. His muscles are taut; his eyes are sad. He looks like a guy who has been beaten down by life.

After an uncomfortable silence, he adds, “I mean, you have to be a little curious . . .”

Yes. More than a little. “It’s none of my business,” I say, giving the response I know the dean would want me to give.

“Is that the way things work around here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone keeps their shit to themselves? No gossip, no rumors?”

I wouldn’t say that’s entirely true. There’s some gossip here, but it’s not like normal high schools. Part of the issue is we don’t have much time to spend gossiping. We only have a few minutes between classes, and idling in the hallway is not allowed. The other part is we’re exhausted. With everything we have to do, it’s hard

to put much energy into spreading rumors. Unless there's something really juicy. Then it will spread like wildfire.

I have to imagine Evans's story is pretty juicy since he's joining us mid-semester, but I don't want to be the one to spread it. If it comes out, I might happen to open my ears, but I'd never fuel the flames because that'd be against our Honor Code. An Honor Code violation is one of the worst things you can be accused of.

"Gossip is kept to a minimum here," I say to answer his question.

We're only a few feet away from the door to our classroom, so I continue. "When we get inside, follow my lead. If I stand at attention, you stand. If I sit, you sit. Do not slouch in your seat. Do not talk unless spoken to. Do not do anything but listen to the instructor. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," he says with a faux salute and a sarcastic tone. "Be a mindless, brainwashed robot like everyone else. Got it."

I narrow my eyes at him.

"What noooow?" he asks, stopping and holding out his hands like I'm being unreasonable.

"One, you should refer to me as 'Lieutenant Commander Durant' or 'ma'am,'" I say, holding out my thumb. I extend my index finger and continue. "Two, you do not salute when uncovered. Three—"

His eyes roam down his body, and then he gives me a confused look.

"What?" I ask.

"From my vantage point, I seem to be fully covered. Is there something I need to know?"

I bite my lip to prevent the smile that threatens to come out. It's easy to forget how our terminology can be confusing. "A cover is your hat. Uncovered means your hat is off, which it must always be indoors."

"Oh, right. Of course. Because using the word 'hat' wouldn't

make any sense.” He rolls his eyes again, and I realize this is something I’ll need to work on with him. Senior officers do not respond kindly to eye rolls.

“Anyway, as I was saying—three, your salute was woefully inadequate should it have been a situation where you were required to salute. And four, if you mock our customs again, you’ll earn yourself two laps.”

“Two laps of what?”

“The track. Each lap is a quarter mile.”

His eyes open wide. “You’re gonna make me run half a mile for an innocent, sarcastic comment?”

“Your innocent, sarcastic comment is an affront to thousands of men and women who have dedicated their lives to preserve our freedoms. I will not tolerate it.”

He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and mutters, “This place is out of control.”

## CHAPTER 3

# LOGAN

**Ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta, ta-da.** The damn bugle blares again, making me feel like I'm at a horse race, not a penitentiary pretending to be a school.

My roommate flips on the light and rushes out of the room. I roll over and pull the wool blanket tighter around my shoulders. It's only day three, and this place is already killing me. I have fifteen minutes' "hygiene" time—which is ridiculous, who can get ready in fifteen minutes?—then it's one thing after another until the bugle signals it's time for bed. I seriously need to find where they store that thing and send it on a farewell voyage down the steep mountain cliffs I passed on my way here.

As I'm imagining the chaos I could cause with one simple act, my roommate returns. "Dude, you have five minutes," he says.

"What would happen if I just stayed in bed all day?"

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then they'd make your life miserable."

"It's already miserable."

"It can always be worse. Much, much worse."

I roll my eyes, but his words convince me to leave the comfort of my bed and throw on the uniform. I know he's right after what

happened my first day. I thought I could disappear for a few hours, but the dean found me hiding in the woods and then wouldn't let me out of his sight, which meant I spent the first night sleeping on a cot in his office while he took the sofa. I didn't even get a blanket. It was probably the worst night I've ever had.

At least I got a bed and a blanket last night.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I stand in the hallway waiting for inspection.

Noah is across the hall from me, next to his room. I met him during personal time last night, and we immediately hit it off because he was also forced to come here. He let me complain about this place the entire two hours without once threatening me like Lieutenant Commander Durant. Paige. Noah told me her first name when I said how ridiculous it is for me to call a girl my same age by a title and her last name.

I lift my chin in greeting to him. He does the same.

Leaning against the wall, I watch all the others. Yesterday morning, I got to skip this part since I was still on the dean's leash.

I have no intention of turning into one of these guys, standing with their shoulders back, head high, and arms straight against their sides. Why on Earth would they submit themselves to this every single morning? Besides appearing ridiculously uncomfortable, it's degrading to have someone look you up and down and decide whether they can make your life even more of a living hell.

"Cadet Evans," Commander Jernigan says when he's directly in front of me. "I know for a fact Lieutenant Commander Durant has taught you the proper way to stand at attention."

"I must've forgotten."

"I see," he says, tapping his chin with his finger. Then he turns and walks away. I can't help but smile. Score one for Logan. I knew eventually I'd win one.

I push off the wall, ready to head for the door and breakfast, but Noah shakes his head. Everyone else continues to stand perfectly still.

“What?” I ask.

Just then, Jernigan returns with a water gun. “Stand up straight,” he says to me.

“Are you serious? You’re threatening me with a water gun?”

He squirts it at my junk. “What are you doing?” I ask, covering the now wet spot on my pants with my hand.

“You will stand at attention or I’ll have fun with this water gun. I’m sure all the girls would love to hear about the new guy who pissed his pants when his commander yelled at him.”

“You’re crazy,” I say, shaking my head.

He squirts it again and leaves a wet mark not even a centimeter from my hand. This prick has got incredible aim.

“Stop it!” I yell.

Another wet spot.

“Seriously. What’s your problem, man?”

Another spot.

“Dude! Enough!”

“Stand at attention.”

I narrow my eyes at him but pull my shoulders back.

He squirts me again.

“I’m standing at attention!”

“Not correctly. Do it the right way.”

I lower my arms and hold them at my sides. Then I slide my feet together.

Another wet spot.

“What now?!” I yell.

“Feet at a forty-five-degree angle. Heels together.”

I do it, and he finally lowers the water gun. With a nod, he says, “That’s better. Now, about your shoes.”

I look down at the shiny black leather on my feet. “What?”

“They’re scuffed.”

“No, they’re not.”

He motions with his finger for me to bend down for a closer look. Then he points to a faint—very faint—white line right above the sole on the left side of my shoe.

“You’ve got to be kidding?”

He raises his eyebrows but remains silent.

“Seriously? No one can even see that.”

“I saw it.”

“You must have, like, Superman vision, then.”

“Fix it. Now!” he barks, apparently not appreciating my humor. “And tuck in your shirt!”

He moves down the line to the next person while I return to my room and search through the closet until I find the black shoe polish. This guy is the biggest asshole I’ve met so far. The first day, he took away my very limited free time just because I can’t run a marathon like him and everyone else. Today it’s how I stand and my shoe. I wonder what tomorrow will be. My now-buzzed hair is an eighth of an inch too long? My socks have too much lint on them? My underwear is too tight?

I run the brush over the white line, which disappears immediately, then put the polish away. The wet spots on my pants have combined, and it does look a little like I pissed myself. I wave my hand over them to try and get them to dry, but the sound of someone clearing his throat catches my attention. Noah is motioning for me to get back in the hallway. I give up on my pants and tuck in my shirt as I take my place again.

Jernigan returns, looks me up and down, and turns away without so much as a word. I shake my head and roll my eyes.

I freaking hate that guy.

The next forty minutes are a complete waste of time. We march

around for way too long, say the Pledge of Allegiance, and finally reach the cafeteria—make that mess hall—for breakfast.

My eyes scan the tables and wood-paneled walls covered with posters of ships and submarines, until I find a familiar face. I join Noah, and then we get in line for food.

“How long did it take before you didn’t want to smash the bugle into a million pieces?” I ask.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Hasn’t happened yet. Six weeks and counting.”

“Great,” I mutter as I take two strips of bacon, then add two more. I don’t usually eat breakfast, but I’m starving this morning. I end up also adding three pancakes, a bowl of grits, and two cartons of chocolate milk to my tray. I consider a cinnamon roll, too, but there’s no space.

“What’s your plan for mandatory athletic time? A team or club sport?” Noah asks as we walk to a table.

I shrug. I haven’t played organized sports since junior high. I used to be pretty good at baseball, but I can’t imagine keeping up with everyone here. Being in shape is obviously a prerequisite for admission. At least for those who want to be here. If, at any time over the past four years, I knew what I know now, I would’ve laid off the video games and television and spent at least a little time outside or in the gym. Now I get to totally embarrass myself in front of Paige and all the other girls who can easily kick my ass.

“Do I have to join a team?” I ask.

“Nah, but then you have to submit a workout plan and have them approve it instead. It’s a big pain.”

It might be worth it if I could get another couple of hours of personal time each day. I could quickly do a few push-ups, then find an isolated corner of the library to hide out. Of course, I don’t have my phone—Jernigan confiscated it as soon as I got here and said I’d only get it back on weekends—and though they have Wi-Fi

for our computers in the lab, they closely control which sites can be visited. So, essentially, I have no internet access. I could always read, though. I wouldn't mind two hours a day to read.

But that would only prolong the embarrassment. Although I managed to avoid PT the first day, Jernigan and Paige never let me out of their sight yesterday. And Jernigan was quick to point out how weak I am.

It was horrible. I mean, a push-up doesn't seem that hard, right? And one wasn't hard. Even two wasn't hard. I actually did okay until about fifteen. Why, for the love of God, do we have to do thirty? The girls only have to do fifteen, but a few of them, Paige included, chose—yes, chose—to do the boys' workout instead. As much as I'd like to chill during my athletic time, wanting to avoid embarrassment will likely make me bust my ass for the first time in years.

"I'm on the soccer club team now and plan to join basketball in a few weeks, if you want to do that," Noah says.

I nod. "Okay. Maybe."

"Good morning, Cadet Green and Cadet Evans."

I cringe when I hear her voice. My few minutes of freedom this morning are over. She's going to pummel me with the history of this school and all the ranks and who I salute and when I stand. It was nonstop yesterday and will probably be the same today.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Commander," I say quietly while I fight an eye roll that threatens to send my eyeballs to the other side of the room.

"Good morning. Is this seat taken?" she asks us.

"No, ma'am," Noah says. "Please join us."

"Thank you."

We eat in silence for a few moments, the easy banter between me and Noah completely gone now that she's here.

After finishing her grits and downing half her orange juice,

she looks at me and says, “How were the rest of your classes yesterday?”

“Fine,” I answer quietly, and then stuff the last of my bacon into my mouth.

“I was impressed by how easily you solved that volume-of-a-frustum problem in calculus.”

My chewing slows, then stops. That’s the first nice thing she’s said to me. It’s the first nice thing anyone has said to me here.

“We haven’t even gotten to that yet. I think Captain Martin was testing you.”

I swallow, then look at her. She smiles, the first I’ve seen from her, before taking a bite of toast. The smile didn’t last for more than a fraction of a second, but damn if it didn’t mess with the image of her I’ve already cemented into my brain: stick-up-the-ass, man-hating, wouldn’t-know-a-good-time-if-it-smacked-her-in-the-face Lieutenant Commander Durant.

She reaches down to her bag on the floor and pulls out a small notebook. “I developed a workout schedule for you over the next month and already got it approved,” she says, handing it to me. “Since I can’t supervise you during athletic time, I’ll be trusting you to complete these exercises on your own. If I find out you’re slacking, there will be consequences.”

And there’s the Paige I expect. I give her a tight-lipped smile when all I want to do is flip her off.

Noah whispers, “Sorry, man.”

I take the notebook from her and scan through the pages. Three-mile run today followed by three sets of fifteen push-ups and four sets of ten pull-ups. Plus about five different kinds of squats and walking lunges. I don’t even know what those are.

“Am I supposed to know what all this sh—crap is?”

“Sh—crap? Is that how normal teens talk these days?”

“I assumed you’d give me two laps for saying ‘shit.’” It’s a reasonable thought since she assigned me two laps yesterday for referring to Wallingford as a hellhole.

She grins again and lets out a small laugh. I find myself returning the smile in spite of my annoyance. There’s something about the break in her stone-cold facade that made my lips react involuntarily. Continuing to watch her, I realize she’s actually kind of pretty, at least when she’s not scowling. She’s athletic and wears her hair like she’s ready to go into battle at any moment. Those aren’t necessarily what most would consider attractive characteristics, but they seem to work on her.

“Thanks for censoring yourself,” she says, “but you don’t need to do it for my benefit. I’ve heard much worse around here.”

I nod, still watching her. Her skin is clear, and her cheeks are a little pink from the cold outside. Her eyes are green like mine, though much brighter. This is the first time I’ve truly looked at her. There’s nothing remarkable about her face, yet I can’t stop staring. Maybe it’s remarkable in how unremarkable it is. She doesn’t do anything to make any of her features stand out. They all just work together to give her a sort of natural prettiness.

“We’ll eat a quick lunch today, and then I’ll show you how to do the exercises,” she says. “Anything less than perfect form during athletic time will be considered slacking.”

Of course, natural beauty can easily be negated by her attitude.

“I’ve also taken the liberty of signing you up as a tutor for the first hour of personal time, seeing as you’re in all the advanced classes here. It will be good for you to share your strengths with other cadets who are struggling.”

“Tutor? You’re joking, right?” I’ve always been a good student, but I like to keep it under the radar. Plus, I’m not exactly a social butterfly. I have two close friends and a semi-serious girlfriend at

home, but we knew everyone at school considered our small group antisocial loners. Or losers. I guess it depended on the day. Either way, I was okay with it.

She raises her eyebrows. "Do you think I joke?"

"Nope," I say, popping the "p." "I can one hundred percent believe you have never joked in your life."

Despite it being the answer I thought she wanted to hear, she purses her lips and focuses back on her breakfast, making it clear our conversation is over.

I take a deep breath and roll my neck. Eight more months until I'm free. Well, as long as the court case goes the way it should. Otherwise, I better get used to being told what to do every minute of the day because it could be my life for many, many years.

## CHAPTER 4

# LOGAN

**“Evans, you’re up,”** Jernigan says.

I grab the bat and practically crawl to home plate. I haven’t played baseball in years. I had no plans of ever stepping on the diamond again, but apparently Wallingford tradition states that juniors and seniors must play against the freshman and sophomores the last Saturday in September. Every year. Rain or shine. Snow or sleet. In sickness and in health. Basically, no matter what. Other than death, there’s no way out of it. I tried.

“We just need a base hit,” he yells. “Don’t let us down!”

I roll my eyes and shake out my arms before drawing the bat up over my shoulder. I couldn’t care less if we win or lose. This is a stupid game I’m being forced to play for a stupid reason.

The first pitch is a bullet right over home plate. My reflexes are way too slow.

“Strike one!” the umpire yells.

The next pitch is an exact replica of the first. This time, I at least get a swing in, but it’s way too late.

“Strike two!”

“Come on, Evans!” Jernigan yells from behind me, rattling the chain-link fence.

I grit my teeth and try to ignore him. One more pitch and I can sit my ass back in the dugout.

The ball comes at me fast and straight once more. It's like this guy is a minor league pitcher or something. I take a deep breath and swing, not expecting much.

Except the bat connects with the ball. There's a loud crack, and I have to squint to see where it goes. Deep to left field, where the outfielder misses it.

"Run! Run!" I hear from behind me.

Right.

I take off and easily get to second base. Two players come in, which puts us up by one in the middle of the second.

The next batter strikes out, ending our turn at bat. When I return to the dugout, Paige is waiting. "Nice hit," she says, smiling.

"Thanks," I mumble before sitting next to Noah.

"Dude," he says, "where'd that come from?"

"I have no idea. Lucky, I guess."

"Yeah, right. You should sign up for the team in the spring."

"I'll pass." I'm not really into organized sports anymore. Or organized anything, really.

The game continues, as well as my luck. I get another double and a single. Jernigan originally didn't have me fielding but, after my second double, decided to put me in the outfield, where I caught a couple pop flies.

The whole thing was annoying. You'd think I would've lost any skills I had after not playing for five years, but apparently not.

In the end, the upperclassmen won 11-8, and we're now at the customary celebration party in the mess hall, complete with ice cream and cake.

If they really wanted us to celebrate, they could've let us have a night in town. Or told us to sleep in tomorrow. I can think of

like a million better ways to celebrate than the dessert we get after every dinner and lunch here.

Noah and I grab some ice cream and start to head toward our usual table, but Paige and another girl stop us.

“So, Evans, did you play baseball at your old school?” Paige asks, then takes a bite of cake.

“Nope.”

“Were you in a league or something?” the other girl asks.

“Nope.”

“He’s just naturally gifted,” Noah says, knocking his shoulder into mine.

I shake my head and start to scoff at him, when Jernigan waltzes over, steps between the two girls, and lays his arms on their shoulders.

“Great game tonight,” he says to the group, though he doesn’t specifically look at me. Which is fine. Good, actually. I’d be thrilled if we never had to look at each other again. If we never had to talk to each other, it’d be even better.

“We were just discussing how well Evans did tonight,” Paige says.

He gives a half nod and what seems like a really forced smile. “I think Jones deserves the MVP, though. His pitching was on fire.”

“Come on,” Paige says, slipping out from under Jernigan’s arm and turning to face him. “Jones walked three players.”

“He struck out a lot more,” Jernigan says.

“Evans hasn’t practiced with us, hasn’t even played baseball, and he drove in five runs and caught at least two fly balls. Was it more?” she asks, looking at me.

I shrug. I honestly don’t remember.

“Three,” Noah says. “And he threw out at least two more at second base.”

Jernigan gives us another forced smile, this time with a clenched jaw. "Well, we'll have to see how the voting goes." Just then, someone else comes up and starts talking to him, taking his attention away from us.

"You totally deserve MVP," Paige's friend says.

I'm about to disagree, when Paige asks, "Have you met Lieutenant Commander Culver? Leah? She's my roommate and best friend."

I shake my head at the same time Leah says, "We're in the same computer programming and physics classes."

"Oh, okay," I mumble. I haven't noticed her. Then again, I don't really pay attention to other cadets during class. I'm usually staring at the clock, urging the minutes to tick by faster.

"Time to vote!" a guy yells, entering the room with a stack of paper slips. He hands one to everyone he passes, along with those tiny mini-golf pencils.

When I get my slip, I toss it in the trash. Even if I wanted to vote on any of the awards, I don't know most of the people's names. I guess I could write "Not Jernigan" for every one. Or vote for Noah for everything, though I don't get the impression he'd really care about an award. He and I seem to have a lot of similarities when it comes to Wallingford.

Noah, Paige, Leah, and I take a seat as they fill out their forms and turn them in, and I finish my chocolate ice cream. When I'm done, I stand, ready to head back to my room.

"Where are you going?" Paige asks.

"To the dorm."

"What about the awards? Don't you want to see who wins what? And if you got MVP?"

"I didn't get MVP."

"You might have. Or maybe something else."

"I don't really want an award."

“What? Why? It’s an honor. Who wouldn’t want an honor like this?”

“Me.”

Her forehead wrinkles, and she gives me a look like I’m the strangest person she’s ever met.

I shrug and turn toward the door, but she quickly stands and blocks my way. “You don’t have permission to leave. The awards ceremony is mandatory for all cadets.”

Of course it is.

“Quiet down, everyone!” Jernigan yells from the front of the room where there’s a table lined with plaques and, for some reason, a big sombrero.

A guy next to him holds up a sheet of paper. “Who’s ready for some awards?!”

Paige is still blocking my path, so I reluctantly return to my seat as the cadets around us start clapping and making noise.

Seriously.

It’s like this is the highlight of their time at Wallingford. It was a freaking required baseball game.

“Before we get to the peer awards, I’m pleased to say we have a cadet who achieved an extra-special feat this year, one that hasn’t been achieved in three years. This cadet managed to strike out four times in one game—which is not an easy thing to do! Cadet Redding, please come forward and accept your well-deserved Golden Sombrero!”

A guy at the table next to me stands and emphatically bows in every direction before racing to the front and donning the large hat.

It’s a ridiculous award making fun of him, but he seems thrilled he was even acknowledged. I’d be hiding under the table, but whatever. Good for him, I guess.

“We’ve tallied the votes for the other awards,” the guy at the

front of the room says. "Let's start with Best Fielding Performance. Drumroll, please . . ." He pauses and looks to Jernigan, who beats on the table with his palms. "The award goes to Cadet Agarwal!"

A girl on the other side of the room stands and rushes to the front table where she accepts the plaque from Jernigan before waving and saying "thanks" to all of us. The other cadets clap and whistle and pound the tables. I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest.

"And now Best Batting Performance goes to . . ."

I yawn and wonder how long this will last. We're supposed to be having personal time right now. It'd be nice to be able to do something I actually want to do, except—

"What are you waiting for?" Noah whispers, nudging me with his elbow.

"Huh?"

"Go get your plaque. You won."

I glance around the room, and everyone is staring at me.

Really? They voted for me? That makes no sense.

When it becomes clear they're not going to stop staring, I slowly stand. What am I going to do with a plaque? I can't remember the last time I won something like this. It must've been years ago.

I squeeze between tables to reach Jernigan and the other guy. Why in the world did people vote for me? And how did they even know my name? I've been here a couple of days, that's it.

Jernigan's holding the plaque, so I approach him. Unlike with the first award, where he was smiling as he handed it to the girl, he's now got a blank expression—not smiling but also not frowning. That has to be an improvement.

I take another step and reach out my hand to accept the engraved metal and wood, except my foot bumps against something. And is then dragged backward as my weight shifts uncontrollably. Before I know it, I'm face-first on the ground.

At Jernigan's feet.

With a throbbing nose. At least it's not bleeding.

I hear some quiet laughing, but nothing like I'd expect. Back at my old school, the room would've erupted. I guess there's something to be said for the self-control of Wallingford cadets.

A hand comes down to eye level, so I reach up to grab it as I search the floor. What in the hell did I trip over? There's nothing on the ground. It's just the polished speckled gray tile all around me.

When I'm back on my feet, I see who offered the helping hand: Jernigan.

And he's smiling now.

Of course he is.

It all makes sense. I didn't trip. I was tripped. That's my punishment for . . . for what? Batting well? He wanted me to get a base hit. You think he'd be happy I got a couple doubles. Apparently, in Jernigan's world, I was supposed to do just good enough so we didn't lose but not so good the other cadets would give me an award. Obviously, I'll never win with him.

"Careful there, cadet," he says with a pleased grin. "I'd hate to see you mess up your pretty face."

"Yeah, right," I scoff, yanking my hand away. "Too bad we don't have a grand dickhead of the universe award," I mutter under my breath as I grab the plaque from him.

"I heard that," he says, still smiling. "Five laps tomorrow."

I really, really should've ignored Paige and gone back to my room earlier. I could be lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, not dealing with Jernigan's shit during personal time. With a shake of my head and sigh, I head back to my table, where Paige, Leah, and Noah congratulate me.

They all ignore my epic face-plant, which I guess is nice. Much nicer than Jernigan anyway. As everyone else moves on to the other awards, I continue to watch him. He's clearly forgotten about

me as he hands out more plaques with a genuine smile and pat on the back, especially when Jones gets MVP. Obviously, his issue is with me. The feeling is mutual. The only problem is, I can't dish it right back without getting laps or push-ups or him embarrassing me in front of everyone else. It's totally unfair. He can do whatever he wants, yet the moment I try to stand up for myself, he gets to make my life miserable?

I don't know anyone in their right mind who would think this is okay.

Yet here I am, thanks to my lawyer. *He* seems to think this is exactly what I need. What I need is to be at home watching a movie with Lora, then having a late night of video games with Gordy and Nate. And sleeping in until noon on Sunday. And spending the rest of the day on the beach.

But none of those things is going to happen anytime soon.

This is my life now.

## CHAPTER 5

# LOGAN

**Four days down**, two hundred fifty-three to go. The one silver lining is sixty-nine of those days are on weekends. On weekends, reveille isn't until seven.

*God*, I think, shaking my head, *now I'm starting to sound like them*. It's not reveille. It's the damn bugle alarm clock. I will never call it reveille.

At least we get an extra hour of sleep on weekends. And, after PT and mandated study hall, we have most of the rest of the day to do whatever we want. The majority of junior and senior students leave campus, but I haven't earned that right yet. Apparently I need a month of good behavior before off-campus privileges will even be considered.

I kick a pinecone off the path to the computer lab and stuff my hands into the pockets of my wool jacket, trying to ward off the chill. As I reach up to yank my beanie lower while cursing my current lack of hair, something hard collides with the back of my head, causing my teeth to rattle.

A football bounces on the ground next to my feet.

"Jesus, man," I say to myself as I lean down to retrieve the ball. Jernigan stands across the quad with his hands outstretched.

"Sorry!" he yells, though he doesn't seem at all apologetic.

I throw the ball in his direction. It's not a perfect spiral, but it does head straight for his face, which lifts my mood a little. Unfortunately, he easily catches it before it can cause any damage. Of course he does. I'm sure he's the kind of guy who automatically excels at any sport, even if he's never played it before. If we suddenly got a cricket team here, he'd probably be not only the captain but also the star player. Rugby? Same thing. God, I hate him.

He and his friends continue toward the parking lot, so I turn around and walk in the direction of the computer lab where I can get Wi-Fi. I blow out a breath, complete with a white puff that makes me realize how freaking cold it really is. Like it-could-snow cold. Being from southeastern Virginia, close to the beach, snow's something I'm lucky to see maybe once every couple of years, which is more than enough. And that's usually in January or February, not late September. I wonder if they'd cancel classes here if it did snow. Back home, school would be out for a week with a couple of inches, but I'm sure they're better prepared for it here. In fact, I'm sure there's not much that could alter Wallingford's perfectly designed schedule.

I pull my jacket closer, then hear a very welcome sound: the bing-bing-bing tone indicating I have a new text. That's another perk of weekends—we get our phones back.

I pull it out of my pocket and glance at the screen, excited to see who from home is writing me.

It's Lora. I start to text back, then realize I need to hear her voice after the last few days. I dial the number and wait for her to answer.

"Logan! Tell me your lawyer changed his mind and you're coming home."

I shake my head and let out a half laugh, half huff. "I wish."

"I've been texting you all week. Why have you been ignoring me?"

"I wasn't. I only got them a little while ago. We don't have access to our phones during the week."

"What?" Her confusion is clear, and I imagine her eyebrows drawn into a furrow above her pale gray eyes.

"This place is basically one step down from juvie."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"You need to get out of there."

"I can't. My lawyer thinks he can get a plea bargain if I stay here until graduation. He said it's my best hope of staying out of prison."

She's silent for a moment, then says, "This sucks."

"No kidding," I reply. I'm innocent but could end up in prison. Had I realized how bad it could be, I might've put a little more thought into my decisions the night of the accident.

"I'm sorry," she says quietly. "I never expected them to—"

"It's fine," I reply, cutting her off. What's done is done. There's no changing anything now. All we can do is hope for the best at this point.

"Thank you—again—for what you're doing. It . . . it means a lot to me," she says with what almost sounds like a snuffle, but I know it can't be. She's never been the overly emotional type of girlfriend. I've never seen her cry, not even at sappy movies. I used to like it because we always avoided the typical girlfriend-boyfriend drama. We were always steady and strong. But, for some reason, it'd be nice to see her equally pissed at life right now. I mean, it is her fault I'm here.

"Yeah, I know," I reply with a sigh.

"On the bright side, it'll be easier for you to avoid your dad there."

"Yeah," I say with a small chuckle. "I guess that is one perk." She, Gordy, and Nate are the only ones who know about my war

with my dad. He and I used to be best friends, but the moment I found out he cheated on my mom, everything tanked. He tried to act like life was exactly the same—showing up to my games or guitar performances, trying to play pickup with me and my friends, bringing donuts and chocolate milk over for breakfast every Sunday morning—but it wasn't.

It never could be.

Which is why I've spent the last five years devising every possible way to avoid him. It's funny that military school never crossed my mind, though Lora's right—this is probably the absolute best way to keep him away from me.

"Hey," I say, thinking I might be able to make things a little less miserable around here, "we can have visitors if you want to come up for a weekend."

"I can stay in your room?" she asks, sounding excited for the first time this call.

"Well . . ." I pause. "No, not really," I mumble. "You can't even come into my dorm. We could hang out in the rec hall."

"Where would I sleep?"

"I'd get you a motel room."

"Can you stay with me there?"

"No," I reply, my shoulders slumping. It would be nice if we could have a little alone time again. Eight months from now is going to feel like forever. "I'm not allowed off campus," I grumble.

"Hmm . . . I doubt my mom will let me go to some remote mountain town and stay in a motel by myself."

"It was just a thought," I say, trying to hide the disappointment.

After a long pause, she adds, "Maybe I could find someone to come with me. I could ask around."

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"And I'd have to find a weekend that would work."

“Yeah, sure.”

It’s her senior year, too. I’m sure she’s got plenty of better things to do than drive all the way here to visit me. Although, to be honest, I can’t for the life of me think of what those things could be. She’s like me—no job, no real responsibilities, no need to study to get good grades. That’s one of the reasons we got along so well—lots of time to do whatever we wanted. Add on mostly absent parents, and we had plenty of freedom to do whatever we wanted, too.

“So,” she says, “That thriller I ordered a few weeks ago finally came.”

“Yeah? How is it?”

“Amazing. I stayed up all night finishing it. You should read it—you’d love it.”

“I’ll have to—” I’m about to say “grab a copy,” but that’s not possible when I (1) can’t leave campus and (2) can’t drive even if I were allowed to leave. And I doubt online shopping sites will make it past Wallingford’s firewall. “Maybe you could send it to me?” I reply with a sigh. This is what life has come to—not even being able to buy a freaking book when you want to.

“Sure.”

I don’t know if it’s the fact that I’m exhausted from all the shit I have to do here or that I’m annoyed she gets to go on with her life like nothing has changed while I’m stuck here, but this conversation, which I had been looking forward to all morning, is suddenly making me want to crawl back into bed.

“I gotta go. Time for PT,” I lie.

“Oh, okay. Text me later. I love you, babe.”

“Love you, too.”

As soon as I hang up, I switch hands so my frozen one can thaw out in my pocket, then start a text to Gordy, my best friend.

*I hate this place, I type.*

Not even a second later, his reply comes. *What's up man? How's the Rambo thing going?*

*I hate my life.*

I expect another immediate reply, but minutes go by with nothing. It's not until I'm inside the computer lab with my laptop booting up on the table in front of me that my phone starts ringing.

As soon as I answer, Gordy says, "How bad is it?"

"Worse than you can imagine."

"Shit."

"I'm ordered around from six in the morning until ten at night. And it's not just by adults. They've got these students with some sort of god complex who try to completely control everything I do."

"Tell them to piss off."

"I tried."

"What happened?"

"They took away my free time. Made me sleep in the dean's office. Run laps. If I don't listen to them, they could legitimately drive me insane."

"Are they allowed to do that? Maybe you need to talk to your lawyer. None of this seems legal."

"You think?"

"Yeah. Maybe your lawyer didn't realize how messed up that place is. Maybe there's another option."

Could he be right? I don't want to get my hopes up, but they rise anyway. As soon as I hang up with Gordy, I'm calling Mr. Needleham.

"You've got your computer with you, right?" Gordy asks.

"Yeah."

"Why haven't you logged in to our game? I kept checking all week. Even skipped a day of school thinking maybe you were keeping vampire hours now or something."

"I tried during personal time but got a nice warning pop-up from the ever-so-charming dean letting me know video games were prohibited."

"Damn."

"Yeah. Apparently personal time isn't actually time you can use for personal interests unless those interests are preapproved."

"What's been preapproved?"

"Oh, plenty of fun activities," I say in a mocking tone, "like working out, studying, participating in drama or some other pointless club, or taking online courses from the community college."

"Maybe you could take a course on video game design from the community college."

I smile. I can always count on Gordy to come up with interesting ideas. I usually support him from a distance, which is why he spends many afternoons in detention while I've been basically unknown to our principal. Well, at least I was until two weekends ago. God, has it only been two weeks since everything went down? It feels like a lifetime ago. Based on how my life has changed, it was a lifetime ago.

"Yeah, maybe I'll try that. Thanks, Gordy."

"No problem, Lo. Call whenever."

*Whenever you need me.* He doesn't say it, but that's what he means. Usually I'm the one helping him after he's gotten into trouble, not the other way around. In fact, two years ago, I would've put all my money on Gordy being the one sitting in military school. Yet here I am while he's still lounging on the couch in his basement.

I hang up and roll my neck. It's Sunday afternoon and instead of wasting the day with Lora or Gordy, I'm stuck in a computer lab with freshman, sophomores, and others who don't have off-campus privileges. It sucks. We're trapped here against our will. Well, at least I'm trapped against my will. I guess some of the others

signed up for this knowing full well what they were getting into. I can't even imagine what would make them consider Wallingford. Things must've been really bad at home if they were willing to come here.

I take a deep breath and dial my lawyer's number. I need to convince him Wallingford is a terrible, terrible idea.

"Hello," he answers.

"Mr. Needleham, it's Logan. Logan Evans."

"Oh, hi. How are you doing? How's your military school?"

"Awful."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"I can't stay here until graduation. This place is horrible," I say in a rush of words.

"Do you want the plea bargain?"

My forehead wrinkles. "Well, yeah. Of course."

"Then we need to prove it to the commonwealth's attorney. You electively choosing to go to Wallingford shows you're on the right track. It'd be a huge mistake to leave."

"Isn't there another school I could go to instead?"

"None of them would take you in the middle of the semester. If you want the plea bargain, you should stay there. I'm sorry it's difficult, but in the grand scheme of things, it's only a few months. Just do what they tell you, keep up your grades, and stay out of trouble. It'll be over before you know it."

I grit my teeth. Easy for him to say it will be over before I know it. He doesn't have to put up with this shit. Every minute here feels like an eternity. At this rate, I'll have a full head of gray hair—make that a buzzed head of gray hair—when next June rolls around.

"I know you can do it," Mr. Needleham says. "You're a good kid, Logan. A good kid who got himself into a bad situation, but you can turn this around."

I shake my head and bite down even harder. I'd love to tell him the truth—that I didn't do anything—but I can't hurt Lora. Instead, I'll stay here making myself miserable while she goes on with her life like nothing happened. When this is all over, she owes me so big.

"You there?" my lawyer asks.

"Yeah."

"Do your best. Who knows, you might even find they have something to offer you. Maybe you'll actually learn to like it there."

My jaw clenches harder yet. There's no way in hell I'd ever like it here. But if staying here is the only way to keep myself out of prison, then I have no choice. I'll have to make it work somehow.

After a terse goodbye, I open up a browser on my laptop and try to navigate to the game I was playing with Gordy before I was sent here. This is why I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up. I had a brief moment of optimism, only to be smacked back down to reality. I'm stuck here. Absolutely stuck and there's nothing I can do about it.

I sigh and wait for the site to connect, but, of course, it's blocked, just like it has been all week.

I know I should find something else—an approved activity—to do instead, but if I'm going to last here, I need to find a way to keep my sanity. It's just a video game during my personal time. It's not a big deal.

With a newfound sense of purpose, I consider how to get around the firewall. Earlier this week, I never attempted it because there was always a teacher monitoring us, but it's just students in here now. And I've got hours to figure it out, if necessary.

Without a second thought, I pull my phone back out of my pocket to turn on the hot spot, but my data connection is virtually nonexistent. Strike one. Luckily that's not my only option. I type in the address for a proxy server I used at my old school.

Unfortunately, Wallingford seems to have a better network manager than my public high school because this site is blocked, too. I try a few others I've heard of, but none of them work. Strike two.

Off the top of my head, I know of one other possibility. If it doesn't work, then I'll need to talk to Nate. He's what you might call a recreational hacker. He does it more for the thrill and just to prove he can do it than to steal any private information. As far as I know, the worst thing he's done is removed a few black marks from Gordy's school record. I could use some help now with my police record, although that's probably a federal offense and I'm not about to drag him down with me.

I pack my computer back up and head outside into the cold again, walking around the entire quad until I finally find a place where my data connection might work. It's in the parking lot, right by the exit gate. I reach over the gate as far as I can, and the connection improves a little. It makes me wonder if Wallingford has some type of high-tech 4G blocker or if I'm just really unlucky with my carrier.

After lowering myself to the curb, I set up the hot spot and drag my laptop out of my bag again. In no time, the Tor download starts, but it's going to take forever with my weak connection. I stuff my hands in my pocket and pull my collar tighter around my neck while I wait.

With nothing else to do, I decide to catch up on texts. I have at least thirty messages from Gordy, each one getting more and more frantic and assuming the worst. The last one, dated this morning, reads, *After three days of unreturned messages, I can only conclude one thing. It's been great knowing you. You'll be missed and all that shit. RIP, Megaloser.* I smile at the nickname. He used to call me that in middle school when we first started hanging out because I had straight As, something which was totally out of the realm of possibility for him.

Glancing around, I see upperclassman continue to pour out of the dorms and into their cars before speeding down the steep road to town. It'd be nice to get away for a few hours, but it's not like town is all that great. Noah told me there's an ice-cream place, a non-chain fast-food burger place, a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, a mom-and-pop hardware store, a gas station, and a small motel. That's it.

A cold breeze whips past me, and I check the status of my download. If it doesn't finish soon, I'll be frozen solid. It's only halfway done, so I draw my knees to my chest and try to conserve body heat. A few students give me curious stares, but no one says anything. Is no one wondering why the new kid is huddled up at the edge of the parking lot, staring at his laptop? Or maybe they're just used to odd behavior from new kids.

After another ten minutes, the screen suddenly changes, which draws my attention. It's done. Thank God. I pack up my things and head back to the warmth of the computer lab, where I configure the VPN. With crossed fingers, I try the video game site again. Boom—the heavily muscled soldiers and scantily clad women slowly come into focus on my screen. I actually did it.

And I think I just gained a better appreciation for why Nate does what he does. There is a weird sense of satisfaction knowing I just outsmarted the Wallingford IT department.

Not even five minutes into my game, someone sits down right next to me, despite the many open seats throughout the room. I ignore the person but use my foot to pull my backpack on the floor closer to me.

“What are you doing?” a familiar and accusatory voice says.

“Huh?” I glance up.

Paige.

She's eyeing my computer with a frown. “Nothing,” I say, closing my laptop.

“Was that a video game?”

“No, of course not.”

“It sure looked like a video game.”

“It was an ad for an online video game development course from the community college,” I lie, thankful Gordy put that idea in my head earlier.

“Really?”

“Sure. How’d you find me anyway? Are you stalking me now?” I ask with a grin, hoping I can make her forget about the damn video game.

She purses her lips. “You were supposed to meet me in the library twenty minutes ago so we could review your plan for the afternoon.”

Right. I totally forgot about that. Or maybe I was subconsciously revolting against being told what to do every freaking second of the day.

“Luckily, Cadet Floyd told me she saw you come in here. Obviously, it’s a good thing she did,” Paige says, waving her hand toward my computer.

“Why? You don’t want me expanding my knowledge with online classes?”

“You do know lying is a violation of our Honor Code, right?”

My eyes roll, despite knowing it drives her crazy.

“Stop that,” she says. “Next time you do it, I’m assigning you laps.”

My eyes automatically look to the ceiling, ready to complete another spin around my skull, when I catch myself. Instead, I settle for a sigh.

“Lying is a major offense here,” she says. “If you lie, I will have to report it to the dean, who will assign you detention. Do you want to change your answer?”

Shit. It’s one thing to have Paige and Jernigan assign me some

stupid punishment, but if the dean gets involved, then my lawyer will probably hear about it. I don't want him to know I'm getting into trouble, especially after our phone call. "Yes, it was a video game."

"It wasn't blocked?"

"Apparently there was a glitch with the firewall." I don't bother telling her I was the glitch. She doesn't need to know that detail.

"Hmmm . . . I see. You're not allowed to play video games at Wallingford. Don't do it again, or I'll have to take disciplinary action."

"Such as?"

She shrugs. "Whatever I find appropriate."

"Laps?" It might be worth a few laps to have a couple of hours of normalcy.

"Maybe. Or scraping the gum off the bottom of all the tables in here. Or cleaning the cinder-block walls with a toothbrush. Or providing IT support to fellow students during personal time since you seem to be so technologically savvy."

Shit.

She obviously realizes there's more to the story. Of course, I seriously doubt there's any gum under these tables. Everyone here is too perfect to do something like that. And the walls are spotless. And in the time I've spent in the computer lab, I've never seen a student need IT help. She really needs to put more thought into useful punishments that would actually benefit the school.

"Okay," I say, not really feeling all that dissuaded. I'll just change seats so if she comes back, I'll see her before she can plop herself next to me. "Anything else?" I ask.

"No," she says, shaking her head. "That's all. I'm headed off campus, and I expect you to be on your best behavior. Have you finished your homework yet?"

"Yes."

"Your workout?"

"No."

"Make sure you finish that. Then read a book or something. There's no reason for you to be in the computer lab if you don't have homework."

"Okay," I reply, tapping my fingers on the tabletop, waiting for her to leave so I can get back to my game. "Anything else?"

"I'll check in with you before lights-out to see what you've accomplished today. Meet me in the library at nine. Don't forget about it again."

"Aye, aye, Captain," I say with a fake salute.

"I'm not a captain," she replies with a frown. "Lieutenant Commander. And you're uncovered. Why are you saluting? You should know all this by now."

"It was a—" I'm about to say "joke," but it's not even worth it. "Right. Aye, aye, Lieutenant Commander. I'll be a good boy today. Scout's honor."

"Were you a Boy Scout?" she asks, suddenly showing more interest in me.

"Um . . . no, not really."

Her head tips ever so slightly to the right and her lips turn down. "You need to read our Honor Code today."

"I read it yesterday."

"It obviously didn't stick. Try again and focus this time." Without another word, she turns around and heads for the door.

I roll my eyes and then give her back another salute, this time with one carefully selected finger. A guy near me quietly chuckles. "That's such a bad idea," he whispers, but the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes make it clear he enjoyed the moment almost as much as I did.