

PROLOGUE

People often ask how I got these scars. There are several slashes along my right arm; faint scratches on my back; a few large scars, thick as leeches, on my shoulders; and a few more on my legs. It looks like I've been wrestling tigers or battling samurai. I'm a street fighter. A rebel. A real badass.

At least that's the story I sometimes try to suggest.

Sometimes I answer their questions with a different story. I tell people the folktale I once heard about the old witch who eats all your scars when you die, and if you don't have enough scars to feed her, she eats out your eyes, leaving you blind in the next world. I tell them I want to be sure that won't happen to me.

But if I'm going to be honest, then I can't do it in a half-assed way. I have to admit the embarrassing stuff, and the bad stuff, and the stuff I wish I hadn't done.

The truth is, I got these scars fighting demons.

That's the short version.

Here's the long.

Part I

*We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

— *THE TEMPEST*, ACT 4, SCENE 1



Me

I WAS THE GUY no one noticed.

Case in point: during my freshman year, I went out for football. It wasn't difficult to make the team—my hometown high school was so small that they barely cut anyone. I didn't suck at football, but I wasn't great at it, either. The only reason I kept playing was because Kinsey Jackson, the girl I'd had a crush on since kindergarten, cheered on the pep squad. Then, as if fate conspired to bring us together, Kinsey drew my locker number for Spirit Week.

It was supposed to be a secret, which pep squad girl had drawn our locker number, but Ginny Goodman told me because she knew I had a thing for Kinsey. For days I imagined what Kinsey might do to my locker to psych me up for the Homecoming Game. I even wrote her a

thank-you letter that I planned on slipping into her locker afterward. The letter was three pages long and ended by asking her to the Homecoming Dance. I pictured her running up to me with pages in hand and whispering *Yes*.

When I got to school the next day, the lockers of all the football players were decorated with glittery red *H*'s for *Huskies*, our mascot. Some players, like Dave McEwan, got four or five *H*'s on their lockers, along with bags of homemade cookies. Guys clamored in the halls, bragging about their decorations while stealing treats from each other.

I hurried to my locker, eager to see what Kinsey had done for me, but there was nothing.

No *H*.

No streamers.

No cookies.

I looked on the floor in case my *H* had fallen off. Then I looked around in case someone had taken my cookies as a joke. That's when I noticed Kinsey flirting with Dave McEwan at the end of the hall.

It's no big deal, I told myself. There are kids who are orphaned, or shipwrecked, or fighting in wars—every story we read in English class focused on someone coping with something big. Compared to their problems, not getting an *H* was definitely not worth talking about. But that was the problem. Nothing in my life was really worth talking about. I was so unremarkable that no one even noticed I'd been forgotten.

The rest of my freshman year drifted by in pretty much the same way. I didn't try out for any other sports or write any more letters to girls I liked. I just coasted through my classes, dreaming of a different life. And maybe I would have gone on like that forever if Principal Kay hadn't called me into her office a few weeks before the school year ended.

She told me to sit and flipped through my file, which didn't take long. There couldn't have been much in it to read, other than some test scores, records of my crappy attendance, and an uninspired grade point average.

"I don't get it," she said.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked.

"That depends, James. What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," I said.

"I see that." She shook her head and frowned. "Your test scores aren't bad."

"Tests are easy."

"Really?" Principal Kay gave me a long look.

I fidgeted, not knowing what she wanted me to say. Did she think I'd cheated or something?

She sifted through a pile of papers on her desk, pulled out a glossy brochure, and handed it to me. "Any chance you might be interested in this?"

I studied the cover. *Discover your potential.* . . . was written above a picture of a kid pouring liquid into a beaker. Along the bottom, in large block letters, it said THE AMERICAN SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS ACADEMY. According

to the brochure, ASMA was “the state’s premiere high school for academically gifted students.” In other words, a refuge for geeks.

I looked at Principal Kay, confused about why she’d given the brochure to me. Science and math weren’t my favorite subjects, and I definitely wasn’t “gifted.” I didn’t consider myself very geeky, either. Sure, I’d scored well on standardized tests and I got decent grades, but classes at my small-town high school were a joke.

“You never know what you’re capable of until you try, James,” Principal Kay said.

I shrugged.

“No one from this school has applied before,” she added.

That caught my attention. “Why not?”

“I suppose other qualified students didn’t want to live away from home.”

I flipped through the brochure again, noticing the dorms in the background of one of the pictures. The campus was more than two hours away. “I’d have to live there?”

“It’s one of the only public residential high schools in the country,” she said. “Quite a unique opportunity.”

On my way back to class, I walked past the pictures of all the varsity football teams for the past fifty years or so. I stopped at my dad’s picture. He was in the third row, second from the end, not smiling. He might have been trying to look tough, but instead he seemed nervous.

I followed the pictures to the end of the hall, where my team picture would eventually hang. The years blurred together into diluted red and tan squares. Uniforms and hairstyles changed, but the players looked the same. At the beginning of the year, Coach Wayne had told us that we should be proud to be part of such a great tradition.

The funny thing was, our football team had never been that great. We were barely even average.

And then there was me—among the average, I was no one.

Everyone in my town had known me for so long, there was no way to get them to see that they didn't really know me at all. To them, I was just the quiet guy who sat behind them in math class. The one who didn't get an *H* and never said anything about it. The sort of guy no one told stories about.

At least that's who I used to be.

I took home the application and filled it out.