

Fallout

Sweat beads and rolls beneath my PT clothes, the condensation making the baggy material cling to my skin. The heavy free weight in my right hand pulls down my arm and my bicep coils to bring it back up to my breasts. I hate arm day. It reminds me of the larger weights I'll never be able to lift. The workout center on base is gray and small. Low lights hang from the ceiling, casting a yellow pall on the machines and my ivory skin. The curls I've fought to tame my entire life frizz at the ends, reacting to the sweat. They may have earned me homecoming queen back home, but they are impractical here; a nuisance.

Reveille breaks through the clinking of weights at 0600 like it has for the past week since I arrived at Camp Arifjan. I finish my set, my reflection squinting back at me. After basic training ended two weeks ago I expected my face to have narrowed and hardened. Instead baby fat that followed me into my eighteenth birthday stuck around making me look soft. Maybe after three-months of training in Kuwait is complete I will finally look like the soldier I want to look like. In the locker room, I strip and shower quickly. If I'm late for breakfast, I'm screwed out of a meal.

"I hear they call this place Camp Arif-Jail." A medium-build girl with short dark hair says to what I assume is her friend. Both girls twist their hair in tight buns and secure their hats.

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Dunno. But it feels like *some* sort of jail with all this metal doesn't it?"

"Definitely. Have you guys been here for a while?"

"A few months for me, but she just got here," she nods to her friend. "You just finished Basic, right? How'd you do?"

“Alright I guess,” I say. The silence falls between us until I turn around and struggle with my hair. I’d been at the top of my class, but my peers tend to assume this means it all comes easily to me instead of the hard work it actually takes. If my life was a movie and I had a montage of those weeks, graduating basic training was the equivalent of Rocky running up those stairs. Progress, but only the beginning of the real stuff. The dog tags jingle as I pull them over my curls; the cold metal branding my skin. Already I am a product of the military’s habits.

Outside, the sun beats down on my heavy ACUs. Dust kicks under my boots and I sweat freely. I itch at my collar and think of Oregon’s cool mountain breezes, but my body isn’t fooled. A flash of blonde in my peripheral vision distracts me. It’s the brunette’s friend from the gym.

“I hear we get to meet the new Sergeant today.”

“At least we’ll actually start our training. I want to get to our real duties already and meet my team,” I say and look down to avoid staring into the sun. By now, the male soldiers have joined us on the way to the mess hall and their voices boom and echo off the barracks. One of them nudges me in the arm with his elbow. He’s tall with dark skin and mouth drawn down at the corners.

“What’s your story, Private? A little small for this, aren’t you?” he asks and laughs.

“Don’t have a story, really. Joined as soon as I could and now I’m here.” I don’t mention that the uniformity of the ACUs gives me the strength in numbers I did not have before. I straighten the Velcro-attached name tape on the chest of my uniform.

The private—Benson, so his name tape reads—raises his eyebrows at my short response and walks back to the larger group laughing behind me. What do I care?

Sergeant Pierce is a strong presence: chestnut hair trimmed to perfection, hard-edged jawline, and squared off shoulders. He stands on the edge of the group and looks each of us up and down. I must look ridiculously short to him; a child in the ranks. I stand up straighter and move a curl out of my eye hoping that everything else is in place. Give someone like Sgt. Pierce a reason to begrudge you, and you might as well kiss a military career goodbye.

“Privates, I will be in charge of your drills for the next twelve weeks. Show up, but don’t show off. I will be able to see those of you who are cut out for this without cockiness.” He clips his words out as if the triviality pains him and continues to assess us. We stand in formation: chests out, hands by our sides, eyes forward but not challenging. Benson stands beside me—making him part of my team—and I resist rolling my eyes. Sergeant Pierce walks down the line slowly and I wish I could wipe my sweaty palms on my ACUs.

“Cooper, tuck in your shirt. This is the Army, not Sunday service where you can hide behind your mommy and play with yourself,” he says. Cooper reddens immediately and tucks in his shirt with a “Yes, Sergeant Pierce!”

He continues his slow walk. A lump forms in my throat when he ends up in front of me. Close enough that I can see the dark freckles on his olive skin. His eyes travel up and down my body slowly, but I assume everything is in order because he continues down the line until he faces us all again.

“This will not be easy. You are soldiers in the United States Army now. Officially. These first weeks of training are to prepare you before most of you go on to Afghanistan. Let’s get started.”

At Chow after drills I sit with the other privates in my team; the compressed wood table smooth on my sore arms. After a full day, our morale is down. The faces around me are pinched

and the lines on their foreheads scrunch together. Sgt. Pierce is a hard ass; I agree with the privates around me.

“I heard Sgt. Baker is more of a hard ass if you can believe it,” a girl says across from me. Her almond eyes squint at the corners when she smiles and eyes the other privates. It’s hardly new information; we’ve all heard the rumors about Sgt. Baker.

“Well Sgt. Pierce has a right to be the way he is. He was promoted to Sergeant after only three years because of his performance in Iraq. If you ask me, he earned it.” I nod. Usually it takes at least four years.

“I heard a rumor he’s well on the way to Staff Sergeant,” I contribute. Someone nods, but no one responds directly and they quickly change subjects.

“Man, I need to get laid,” Ward says loudly. Most of the privates—male and female—laugh.

“Well, at least we’ve got some females to keep us warm at night,” another male jokes. Brier pushes him in the arm, but smiles. I had prepared myself for talk like this. What I hadn’t prepared for was the quick pace of my heartbeat making deep breaths hard.

“Some of us aren’t here to be cuddled by men.” I say it much louder than I’d expected.

“Too good for us, little girl? Or are you here to be cuddled by a woman?”

“Leave her alone. She can’t be more than eighteen.”

“I’m not, but that shouldn’t matter. What, do I either have to be a lesbian or a dependent woman to be in the Army?” I hate their smirks. None of them have to work overtime just to have basic respect. But I look down and eat my beans and steak in silence.

“Reveille is at 0600. Don’t be late,” Sgt. Pierce says from behind me and I jump in my seat. Before he walks away, he gives me a pat on the back and a commiserating smile. He must have heard what we were talking about, but I had it handled.

“I hear he ‘reports for booty,’” Ward says.

“He doesn’t just pierce people with his eyes is what I heard,” another soldier says to guffaws of laughter. I look over to my left where our Sergeant sits with the commanders and talks animatedly. I don’t see him as someone who misses the action—the rest of them aren’t any better. He straightens his back and the fabric stretches over his biceps making mountains on the camouflage landscape. I look away.

For today’s drill we are lined up and each given a large rope. The Platoon Sergeant calls out which knot we should produce and my stomach twists in the ways I know my rope never will. It was my worst category in basic training and I know this training will be the same.

Besides a select few, the others seem to be struggling as much as I am and I force myself to get it right before they can—give them a reason to respect me. The rope chaffs my hand and I relish the blisters that will form. At least I will have something to show for my efforts.

“Private, you’re not tying that rope correctly. Let me show you.” Sergeant grabs the rope from me, his hand brushing my palm in the process, and deftly ties the rope into a bowline knot.

“Thank you, Sergeant Pierce,” I mutter, embarrassed and a little irritated. His extra attention is a bit strange and I feel the hard looks from the other privates—especially Benson and Ward. They both continue to struggle with their ropes, but Sgt. Pierce walks by them and shakes his head slightly. Benson blows out a breath.

“Didn’t know they let babies join the Army,” he says. I don’t expect people to have faith in the petite girl with small hands, but I’m here to prove myself. Benson’s all talk anyway. I

ignore him and focus instead on the tactility of the rope in my hand, pulling one end over the other until I complete the bowline knot for myself. I look around, but no one is paying attention to me.

Hours later I leave the training grounds and head toward the mess hall, picturing a hot dinner. A crunch of gravel to my right makes me turn my head. I catch a glimpse of a large boot before connecting it to Sergeant Pierce. The cadence of our footfall matches and I look forward not knowing if it's appropriate to speak.

"You did good today, soldier," he says.

"Thank you, Sergeant Pierce. I appreciate your guidance," I answer. He nods and walks ahead to the Platoon Sergeant.

Sergeant Pierce and I establish a strange routine. For the next few days, he and I leave drills at approximately the same time and walk toward the mess hall together. Our conversations have been minimal and slightly less awkward.

"You're improving a lot," he says at the end of the week.

"I hope so, Sergeant."

"Call me Henry."

I catch myself staring. This is definitely an unusual request. I remember the first night after drills and the look he must have seen on my face. I don't need his pity but to challenge our higher ups is a luxury none of us can afford.

"Yes Ser—Henry." He laughs at my hesitation.

"It's okay, Rache. I'm a Sergeant, but that doesn't mean I'm not a person too," he says. *Rache*. My father would call me that before my mother died and violent alcoholism took over—I was eight the last time.

“I’d almost forgotten my first name with everyone calling me Fawker,” I say.

“It’s easy to do. I haven’t been anything but Pierce or Sergeant Pierce in a long time.”

“Are you going to continue with the Army?” I’m curious. His discipline and passion is obvious, but even someone like him must get tired of the sand.

“Absolutely. This is all that I’ve wanted. It seems a little monotonous now to you all, but it’s the most rewarding thing you’ll ever do,” he says. His eyes brighten and I know immediately that this is his ‘thing.’ The Army hadn’t always been my number one choice, but I was beginning to feel the pull of the routine and order.

“I can already feel that,” I say. He shoots me a quick smile.

“Every once in a while, when we have a day off, the soldiers go to one of the base bars or movie rooms. Have a beer and get to know one another. You should join us sometime,” he says.

I nod and open the door to the mess hall. “That’d be nice, thanks.”

He walks ahead and I turn to my table of cohorts. Their faces look friendlier after this, eyes crinkled in humor. I guess it wouldn’t kill me to make friends.

After three weeks of drills, our commanders announce that we will have our first four-day weekend starting Friday. The privates and I cheer at the news and the small groups that had begun to form in our team start planning their free day.

Brier walks up to me. “What are you doing Friday, Fawker?”

She and I have become closer in the last few weeks since I sat down at Chow with more energy. She’s one of the few privates who initiated conversation with me and we found out that we are both from small towns in Oregon and raised by our fathers. She’s the kind of person who

draws others in like an electric fence, just enough bite to keep them intrigued. By association, I get more “Hey Fawkers” than I used to.

“Well, Sergeant Pierce had mentioned that groups get together to go to the bars. Want to go if that’s still happening?”

“Pierce?” She drops the formality in surprise. “I mean—yeah. I want to get all buddy-buddy with the guy in charge.”

“Oh come on. He’s just a person.”

“Just be careful. I hear that he does this sometimes with new privates and tries to pursue them.”

“I think you’re being unfair. He’s friendly.”

“If you say so, but don’t come crying to me if—” I turn around when she cuts herself off. Henry stands behind me.

He asks us to join his friends at the base bar and we exchange a look before agreeing. He smiles widely and I smile back with some restraint. If Brier’s right and the rumors about him are true—and I have no doubt that he’s a lady’s man—I don’t want to give him the wrong impression. He pats me on the back and walks away. Brier raises her eyebrows.

That night we gather in front of the barracks on the west end of the base; the night balmy and my skin sticky. The bar is small and smells like Simple Green and vodka, unfortunately a familiar smell. The last and only time I drank was freshman year of high school with an older crowd and pent up anger. Tonight I opt for a club soda with lime and order while the others find a table. Brier hears me and raises a blonde eyebrow. I shake my head slightly.

Henry walks behind me and grabs the drinks from the bartender, brushing his hand against my back in the process. I stiffen and I think he notices. I’m not used to male attention of

any kind and don't know how to interpret it so I ignore it. Throughout the next few hours, Henry and I talk and find we have a lot in common—both from a small town, chose the Army as soon as we could, and love the Jason Bourne movies—and I forget my earlier unease. He hardly says a word to Brier, though, and she looks at the door while nursing her second vodka cranberry. I try bringing her into the conversation but she snaps out short responses and turns away again.

“Do you want to leave?” I ask her. She gives me a look. “Sgt—Henry. We're going to go now. Thanks for the invitation.”

“You sure, Rache?” He's bold and more than a little drunk. I nod my head. “Okay then. I'm sure I'll see you around.” I follow Brier out the door we walk back to our barracks in silence.

I don't think to take his ‘see you around’ parting literally until Henry approaches me after drills the following Monday and asks if I will help him plan the strategy for our field trainings the next two weekends.

“Ugh. We've been at this for hours and it's still no easier. How do you do this all the time?” I look up from the piles of maps and compasses on the table.

“Habit. I've done this for so long. But you're a smart girl.”

If I'd been smart enough, I might have been able to go to college on scholarship.

“Want to take a break?” I nod. “Tell me about yourself then, Rache.”

“There's not much to say.”

“I know you tell the other privates that, but everyone has a story.”

I move the pen over the waterproof notebooks we were writing in. If I tell him my story, I give him power. But I can't be a stranger to everyone.

“My dad is an alcoholic.” It bursts out before I can stop it. “He and my uncle—they fucked me up. And now I’m trying to prove to him and everyone else that I can do this...Anyway, what’s yours?”

He looks me over and pats my back. I don’t like being touched, but I let him. “I’m worried about not becoming Staff Sergeant. We have to pass extra curricular courses online and I’ve never been good at school...” His face pinches and his jaw clicks. Maybe other people would be annoyed at him comparing his school to my father. But weakness is weakness.

“I can help.”

After this, we met every day after drills to continue navigation training for me and course work for him. I tried to ignore the touches from Henry that had increased since our candid conversation the Monday after the bar and focus on the work at hand. It was my chance to prove that I could lead and I took it.

Looking at him now after last weekend’s second successful field mission, I feel a sense of belonging in the Army’s ranks. The privates are unusually relaxed today, as we’ve been told that we will have this weekend off before the final, more intensive half of our training.

Benson looks over at me for a second then turns his head to the larger group. “I hear Fawker is soon on her way to being promoted to special pet.” Everyone laughs. I roll my eyes.

“What, Fawker? Can’t take the heat? All that special attention doesn’t make *you* special,” Ward says.

“It’s not like that guys. We’re helping each other.” I answer. I push around the food on my plate.

“Oh is that what you’re calling it?” Brier asks

“You know it’s not like that, Brier.”

“Well you’re not exactly the best at friendship so who knows,” she answers.

I start to reply, but someone clears his throat loudly from behind me. Ass-kissing smiles are immediately painted on the privates’ faces and I choke on my eggs.

“Soldiers, don’t get too relaxed this weekend. We still have a lot ahead of us,” he says. Yes Sergeants ring out in different octaves from the table. Henry nods and walks away again. He finds me after Chow.

“Rache, how are you? Looks like you’re getting along better with the other privates,” he says from outside the hall.

“Somewhat, Sergeant. Henry, I mean. I never know when it’s okay to call you that...” I look at him. The way he stands with his arm protectively caging me makes me think ‘friends’ is a term he uses loosely around me.

“To you, I’m always Henry.” I wince.

“They talk about you, you know. They have the wrong idea,” I say quickly, my words tumbling. I wipe my sweaty hands on my uniform.

For a moment he looks like the harsh Sergeant he should be to me. Then he smiles. “People always talk. We’re friends, right? They can think what they want. In my experience it’s always loneliness and jealousy that make them say the things they do.”

I nod. It’s been nice to have someone who believes in me—who doesn’t see me as competition for a better position.

“Tonight a few of us are going to watch a movie. Want to come?” he asks. It’s the first social request since our night at the bar.

“Sure.” He winks and tells me to meet him outside my barracks at 1900 before walking away.

When it gets close to 1900, I walk outside to catch some fresh air before I meet the group. Henry is leaning against the metal siding of a building a few doors down kicking a rock with his boots. The soldiers around him seem to be laughing at something, but Henry wears a deep scowl on his face. I stay quiet, curious.

“So how exactly is she ‘helping’ you, Henry?”

“Yeah, I mean, she’s not much bigger than those stray dogs we get on base every once in a while.”

“Shouldn’t *you* be training her like the bitch she is?” His friends laugh harder, spit flying from their mouths. Before I can do anything more than stare at them, Henry looks up and sees me. He smiles, but his eyes remain hard.

“Hey Fawker,” he says, dropping the informality.

I try a smile, fighting my own frustration. “Hey yourself, Sergeant.”

The movie room is a ten-minute walk from where we met and the conversation between us lulls. I try to think of something to say to make us both forget what his friends said. They underestimate me like most people. Instead, we stay quiet and the other soldier’s voices echo off the metal buildings.

“So, what movie are we watching?” I ask Henry after a few minutes. He’s walking quickly and I have to jog to catch up.

“Guess we’ll decide when we get there.” I’m not sure what I’ve done to make him so angry. He looks over at me. By this time, we are a few paces in front of his friends and he walks back to them. I can’t hear from here but they laugh, pat him on the back, and walk away.

“What was that about?”

“They said they’d rather drink.” Weird, but I nod like it’s normal. Maybe he’ll be happier when they’re gone at least.

The building looks like all of the others—low, metal, and sand-colored—except for the plaque next to the door reading “Entertainment Hall.” I push open the door and we rent *Bourne Identity* from the soldier working the desk.

The movie and game room has a low ceiling and multiple televisions surrounding overused couches and chairs. Video game controllers hang from most of the TVs and it smells of cheap beer and greasy popcorn. No one is here despite it being our last free night for a few weeks. Henry gives me the movie to load in the DVD player and closes the door.

“I’m surprised it’s so dead right now,” I say. I fumble with the remote and static bursts from the set.

“Here, I’ve got it.” He brushes my palm when he reaches for the remote and I’m reminded of the way he showed me how to tie the rope. Does he not think I can do these things for myself? When the previews start, he turns off the light and the screen is almost painfully bright to my eyes.

“Were your friends going to come back?”

“Probably not. You know how it can be at the bars. Guess it’s just you and me, Fawker.”

He says the last part jokingly, but his earlier scowl makes me sit rigidly on the couch with my feet on the coffee table and my hands close to my sides. The movie starts and I tell myself not to overthink this; it’s just Henry and we’re just friends. Twenty minutes in, Henry rubs his nose with the back of his hand. The motion catches my eye and I watch his arm stretch over my head and around my shoulder. His hand lowers and he begins slow movements above my breast.

“Henry,” I say while attempting to remove his arm, “What are you doing?”

His silence is a pressure from all sides and I turn away from the movie to look at him. He smiles for the first time since I met him outside the barracks. He stops the movement but his hand stays on my chest. My throat tightens.

“Don’t you like being my pet—all that ‘special attention’?” His remark catches me off guard and I move quickly to my feet, surprising him into removing his arm.

“Henry, is this about people talking about us helping each other? Look, I’m sorry. But like you said, people say things when they’re lonely and jealous. And I didn’t join the Army for a boyfriend so I think I’d better leave.” I begin walking to the door, but he grabs my waist and forces me to sit down again before I take more than two steps.

“Don’t do this, Rache. I know you want it too. All those signals—the touches, going out with us, our conversations,” he says and brushes a curl off my shoulder.

“Let me leave, Henry. You’re better than this! All those things—I just thought we were friends.” I attempt reason, but a chill that has nothing to do with the blasting air conditioner climbs up my legs.

“Well you shouldn’t have been such a fucking tease,” he says and forces my arms down so that my back thumps on the couch. I use every muscle that I’ve gained in the last few months of my trainings and attempt to kick his groin—any part of him—and am met with tighter pressure on my arms. Every pity touch I’ve grudgingly accepted from him replays immediately.

“I don’t need your help you little bitch. You need *me*. I’m a fucking Sergeant. You can go home and brag to all your friends,” he says and covers my protest with his mouth. His tongue is invasive and his saliva tastes of whiskey.

He uses a hand to mute the TV as Jason Bourne fights a soundless enemy. As his mouth smashes into mine, I attempt to bite his tongue but he dodges the move and breaks the skin on

my lip. I yell out and the sound is muffled by his lips. He takes a breath and I seize my opportunity.

“I’m on my period!” I yell and aim for his groin again. He answers by bunching my shirt to my neck and snapping the back on my bra. When he pulls down my pants, we both see the blood. He looks at me and I see nothing of the friend I thought I had. I kick again, my feet bound by my own clothes and he lays his full body weight on them to stop me. His belt jingles when he unbuckles it, his elbow pressed into my stomach to keep me from moving.

“I have diarrhea.” This time, I’m desperate. He rears back his head and squints his eyes, but continues to pull down his pants. This shouldn’t be happening. None of this makes any sense. In training, they took the women aside. Told us if this ever happened to keep fighting, say anything we could to deter the assailant. The bile rises in my throat and I’m thrown back ten years. My uncle also had whiskey on his breath. My dad stood by and watched.

“I have fucking chlamydia you son of a bitch!” Now I’m screaming. This stops Henry and he stares at me, his mouth twisted and eyes wide and wild. Disgust replaces anger. He grabs my waist with a rough hand. For a second, he hesitates. Then, with a crack, he hits the side of my head and the force knocks me back into the arms of the couch. My eyes are fuzzy when I open them seconds later and they adjust to the clock blaring 1950. Henry leans forward before the pressure lifts from my legs and stomach. He rushes to the door, slamming it behind him.

Reveille sounds the next morning as usual, but it sounds tinny and forced. My head pounds and my eyes are bloodshot from getting only an hour of sleep. I focus on the mechanical task of brushing my teeth and forcing my curls into place. In the mess hall I choose an empty

corner and place my oatmeal on the table, the bruise above my ear throbbing. The gummy oats leave a sour taste in my mouth, but I shove them down so I don't have to talk to anyone.

When I approach the training yard, Sergeant Pierce is surrounded by at least five other soldiers. They're laughing at something he's said and my stomach knots. It could be anything, but the way they glance at my approach makes me wish I was alone in my barracks.

Benson walks up to me and pats me on the shoulder. I move out of the touch.

"Nice job boning the guy in charge, Fuckers," he says. We're close enough that the group with Sgt. Pierce can hear. They snigger into their ACUs.

"Yeah, way to get some. Since you're a 'one-night stand' girl apparently, you just let me know any time you're free one night," Ward says and whistles.

I hate that I'm weak.

"Ha. You guys believed that? I had to practically beg him to get off me. It's too bad that he couldn't get his soldier to stand to attention if you know what I mean." I look at Henry then and he turns his head, jaw clicking. For a moment, the privates direct their jeers at him, but the presence of the commanders shuts them up. Even they're not stupid enough to be reported for verbal assault. I spend the rest of drills trying to ignore Sgt. Pierce and the other privates.

Listening to them, though, makes me clench my hands and I realize I can't tell the commanders what happened. Not because he didn't even do the deed—I could still make a case against him if I wanted. But they'd be winning if I told. In their eyes, another weak female soldier who gave a man the wrong impression. I'm better than that.

Henry walks by me and looks me up and down.

“Not good enough. Do it again,” he says of the drill I know I’m doing perfectly. This happens fifteen times before he’s satisfied. The other privates laugh and call out lewdness and even Brier joins them before catching the look on my face.

“Enough.”

“I agree,” I say.

He stares at my saturated PT uniform.

“You wouldn’t even have been worth it, little girl.” He leaves with the upper hand and any shred of dignity I might have had left. I am the weak one again.

Six silent weeks later, I sit on a plane to Afghanistan leaving behind sleepless nights in tin buildings and fake congratulations to Sgt. Pierce on becoming Staff Sergeant. From up here, the base looks like a mirage. The image waves in front of my vision from the thick glass of the plane and I can almost imagine that it is made of sand and will be blown away in the next storm. I pinch the skin between my thumb and pointer finger—a new habit—and direct my thoughts elsewhere. Different sand might just do me some good.

Three years later and Camp Arifjan looks the same. Still a mirage. Still empty. The ceremony will start in ten minutes and my stomach knots. My military issued dress clothes feel itchy on my tanned skin and a stray curl tickles my chin. In a few minutes, all eyes will be on me. In the meantime, I must wrestle with the memories this sandy Hell hole brings.

The gravel crunches beneath my shoes but this time I keep my head up despite the glaring April sun. The low tin building is discernable from the others by the “Congratulations Sergeant Fawker” banner displayed above the door. My lips curl at the corners as I turn the knob and walk to the front to take my seat.

“The Bronze Star was established in 1944 by President Roosevelt. It was created to show recognition to a brave individual in the United States Armed Forces,” the Army Chief of Staff General says to the crowd. “It takes a true act of heroism to earn a Star. Today, we honor Sergeant Rachel Fawker.”

My cheeks burn and I take a deep breath to slow my pulse. I take the route we had practiced earlier to the podium on the stage. Cheers and whistles rise to the ceiling, bounce off the metal, and fall back down like confetti. I pull down the microphone and grip the edges of the wood podium before staring out at the sea of soldiers gathered.

“Thank you General Crowley. It is surreal to be back in Kuwait and see some familiar faces in the audience.” I swallow. The crowd has quieted now and I pause to scan over the faces I had seen in the blur from my seat to the stage: Benson, Ward, Brier. They look the same, maybe a few more wrinkles dusting their foreheads. My gaze lands on a face I hadn’t noticed before. Standing in the back, chestnut hair trimmed closely, arms at his sides: Henry.

“I met many of you at eighteen years old—shy, small, unconfident. I doubt most of you are the same as when we left for Afghanistan. I’m not the same. My tours had many expected and unexpected obstacles and my team has proven themselves time and time again.” I wink at the soldiers sitting in the front row.

“No, we’re not the same as we once were,” I look directly at Henry. His jaw clicks. “But you better believe we’re stronger than we were. Today I receive an incredible honor, an accomplishment that I will look back on ten, fifteen, twenty years from now and still feel the pride I feel in this moment. But I could not have done it without you.

Showing me how brave I could really be.”