

CHAPTER ONE

Miles Draven watched the clock, willing each minute to tick by so that his agony might pass. While Mr. Hannigan's world history lessons dripped the kind of boredom that made him want to slit his wrists, the stinging jab of a needle-sharp pencil at the back of his neck is what stirred Miles' need to flee.

Miles spun around in his desk and scowled at Jack Warren. The super-jock stared back with a wry, knowing grin perched on his etched face. With his sinewy, muscled forearms and massive hands, Jack grabbed the sides of the desk, leaned forward, and whispered, "Turn around, dirtbag."

"Is there a problem?" Mr. Hannigan barked from the front of the room.

The whole class went silent and stopped to gawk at Miles and Jack. Miles had a sinking feeling, the kind he always felt in these situations. He wasn't going to win, no matter what he said or did. Jack was the prodigal son, or something like that, and everyone looked the other way when he broke the rules. Miles, on the other hand, had a notoriously bad reputation. He spent the better part of his days in in-school suspension or the principal's office. This little tussle had all the earmarks of turning against him.

"Miles?" Hannigan called him out specifically this time. He spoke in a slow and deliberate manner. "Is there a problem?"

Jack fell back in his seat, blasé about the whole situation. He ran his fingers through his obnoxious blond hair. Each strand fell back into place like strangers coming together at the start of a flash mob. Every aspect of him irked Miles to the core.

Miles turned back around to face Mr. Hannigan at the front of the

room. He clenched his fists so tight that each knuckle popped aloud. "No," Miles shot back, defeated. "There's no problem."

Beeeeeeep!

A firm hand slammed Miles across the right side of his head. The force of impact nearly knocked him out of his desk. His skull throbbed and a ringing sound deafened his right ear. The whole classroom spun and tilted around him like some sort of nauseating amusement park ride. Seething with anger, Miles stumbled to his feet only to find Jack out of reach, mingling with his crew out the rear door of the classroom. He held the side of his head and fought to focus his wavering eyesight. His feet faltered beneath him, his legs rubbery. Maybe he was better off not confronting Jack at that moment, he decided.

Miles steadied himself against the desk, gathered up his books, and clumsily slid them into his backpack. A congested throng of students pressed close together in conversation and moved from the room at a sloth-like pace. Head down, Miles slipped past them and into the hallway. Merging with the flow of bodies, he decided to take the scenic route around the media center on his way to gym. The shortcut would lead him past Ms. Mitchell's classroom where Jack had study hall next, and Miles wanted to avoid any further confrontations. If he could make it to the gym unscathed, he'd get a break from Jack for a while.

Having made it around the media center without incident, Miles took a right turn at the main lobby and headed down the pallid, windowless guidance wing. A few offices broke the monotony: the office of the athletic director, the faculty lounge, and of course, the guidance suite. A quick sharp left at the end and Miles would be in the clear.

As he reached the final hallway intersection, Miles slowed in his gait and stopped. His head seemed clearer now, his footing more firm. He snuck a glance around the corner and down the hallway to the right to see if Jack was outside Ms. Mitchell's room with Kyle White and Dennis Green, his henchmen. A sigh of relief escaped him as they were nowhere to be seen. Without looking to his left, Miles turned to head toward the gym and ran into a large, muscled body. He knew that smell—*Drakkar*. It enveloped Jack like a cloud. To Miles it reeked of cat litter, but it somehow made the girls melt in all the right places.

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Don't look up, Miles told himself. Not only was Jack far stronger, but he also stood about a foot taller than him. If they locked eyes, then a confrontation would ensue. Desperate to get away, Miles brushed past Jack and kept walking as if his nemesis wasn't there.

Jack, however, seized the moment to tenderize his favorite chew toy. He clamped a powerful hand around Miles' neck from behind and shoved him brutally into the brick wall that lined the corridor outside the gym. His face scraped across the rough stone. His body thudded against the wall. Miles began to crumple from an ache that radiated down his side, but he steadied himself with his hands and continued walking on unsteady feet. A swipe of his palm across his cheek made him suck in breath through clenched teeth. Searing pain shot through his face. Looking at his palm he found a fresh smear of blood. He began to feel a bit dizzy. Then the taunts began.

"Hey, faggot," Jack shouted at him, "bet you can't wait to get in the locker room so you've got something to jerkoff to later!"

Oh, that's original. Miles just shook his head and kept on walking, ignoring the taunts. He tried not to bite at the bait laid out before him. Giving a response would only give Jack what he wanted. Besides, Miles heard the same old crap day-after-day, making him numb to its effects.

Then Dennis chimed in. "Yeah, homo, gonna get hard watching the guys change?"

Miles had nearly made it all the way to the locker room and to relative safety. He passed by the trophy cases and watched Jack and Dennis' reflections in the glass. Their long strides closed the distance between them. Along the hallway, students stopped to watch; the girls snickered nervously, the guys waited for action.

"Bet your parents abandoned you because they knew you were a freakin' queer," Jack laughed as he jabbed with an exceptionally sharp barb. "Probably sold you for a bowl of soup."

That one hit the mark! Miles had no family, no real family that is. He had a foster family, the Lyles, but his own parents had abandoned him at a hospital just hours after they brought him into this world. Once the other kids got hold of that bit of news, especially the cruel ones who felt great joy at making others feel like garbage, the relentless

taunts began. It was the one thing he couldn't ignore. He stood at the brink of snapping. All he needed was a little nudge.

"Faggot!" Jack barked and shoved Miles in the back, sending him lurching forward.

All the jokes, all the heartless taunts filled his mind and clouded his thinking. A deep, primal rage surged through him from his brain down through his body. The pain, the discomfort he carried vanished in a breath, and his blood surged with adrenaline.

Whipping about to his rear, Miles swung his textbook-laden backpack off his shoulder and hurled it like a basketball chest-pass straight at Jack, who never saw it coming. His anger poured forth with a thunderous war cry. The bag struck Jack in the chest, knocking the wind out of him. He teetered backwards on unsteady legs.

Though Miles' foster parents never paid for him to take martial arts lessons, he spent many lonely hours in his room watching old Van Damme and Bruce Lee movies, mimicking the moves he saw on screen until they became instinct. Miles rushed at Jack and planted a violent front kick where his school bag landed. The strike knocked his nemesis off of his feet and flat onto his back against the hard tile floor. Jack's head hit with a crack. He winced with a pained expression and grabbed for the injured area, leaving the rest of his body unprotected.

Miles surrendered to the beast that lurked within and let go of all control. He brought up his leg and stomped on Jack's stomach. The crushing blow doubled him up. And when Miles' foot hit the floor astride his enemy, he pivoted on the balls of his feet and drove his fist downward with a perfectly aimed left cross to Jack's eye that hit with a loud crunch. Without breaking stride, Miles continued to land a flurry of punches to his chest and face. Then Miles felt someone grab a fistful of his shirt and drag him backwards off of Jack.

"Get the Hell off him!" an unidentified voice growled in effort.

Miles stumbled over Jack and then found his footing. With a quick spin, he rounded on Dennis and swung his foot straight up into his balls. The force of the kick made his target crumple to the floor like a paper doll in a moaning, achy heap.

Miles stood, chest heaving, scanning his surroundings for other

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deserving targets to unleash his fury upon. His heart, which thumped like a piston beneath his ribcage, began to slow. The rush of adrenaline that fueled his onslaught receded. All that remained were subtle tremors that tickled their way along his body and a sudden clarity of thought. He felt as though he had awakened from some kind of dream. A makeshift audience of still bodies stood in a misshapen circle around him. They all wore contorted grimaces of shock, gawking at the carnage he had wrought. Miles looked down at his fists, splashed in blood. Beyond them laid his handiwork; Dennis lay on his side, moaning like a dying heifer, his hands cradling his battered balls. And next to him lay Jack, a bloodied, motionless mess. Miles' message was evident—he was done with them. He moved from the defeated figure beneath him. The deliciously gratifying sense of victory that he always believed would accompany his revenge, of having vanquished his foe, did not surface. Instead, a frightened helplessness filled his thoughts. *What did I do?*

Though Miles hated them all, the release of his hurt spilled forth as tears. He screamed an obscenity and made a mad dash down the hallway, knocking students out of the way that blocked his path. The teachers on the scene let him go for the moment and focused their attention on the injured bullies.