

CHAPTER TWO

Morris

I am the one who will take Rudi home.

Normal protocol regarding body escorts is that somebody from the same unit as the deceased is put on the detail. Meaning, in this case, somebody other than me.

Absolutely, over-my-dead-body no.

“Sir,” I say to the officer in charge, “I have a request.”

The officer has seen a lot, as everybody here has seen a lot, so despite the urgency in my voice he’s slow in raising his head from his paperwork. When finally, lazily, he does, he goes wide-eyed as he takes in the sight of me from brain to boots.

It does give me a small thrill to see his expression. It is nearly impossible to get anything but bombed-out boredom from these guys these days.

“Sure, pal,” he says in a nearly human voice. “What d’ya need?”

He is still sizing me up all over even as he politely struggles to pretend that he is not, that he is processing me just the same as every other faceless slob asking for his grace in this graceless situation.

Except, of course, I'm not faceless. I have a face, and it is lacquered in my old pal Rudi's truest, bluest, red blood. I feel the blood trickling down my features and puddling in the hollow of my collarbone. I see my hands, soaked in Rudi, look at my uniform, drenched in Rudi, and I wonder how I even got here, to this man, who makes these decisions.

Beck is still there, right now. I left him with Rudi. With the remains of Rudi. For all I know, he's still trying to revive the poor dope. Even though we know he's gone. Even though we probably knew he was gone from the moment we saw him.

Smart guys like Beck should know better. You would expect them to know better. You would expect the pathetic, mushy types like me to be back there on that trail trying to stanch the blood flowing out of the hopeless body, trying to breathe the kiss of life back into the life that's already kissed us good-bye.

But there you go. You would expect, and you would be wrong. I got straight up, left Rudi in the warm embrace of Beck, and simply knew there was one thing

to do now, one thing that mattered more than every other possible thing.

I had to take Rudi home.

It was *my* pledge, for the love of God. My pledge that brought us here. I forced everybody into this, and the idea was that we were going to look after each other. We were going to look after Rudi.

We failed at that. We did worse, even.

“I need to be the body escort seeing a particular fallen Marine home,” I say.

“I’m sure we can do that,” the officer says, happy to look away from me and back to his stack of sheets of human statistics. “Name of Marine?”

I give it to him.

“I’m sorry,” he says after a long and increasingly desperate troll through the stats. He does, in fact, sound truly sorry. “We don’t have any casualties by that name reported.”

I open my mouth and prepare to shout at him because, really, shouting at somebody in a position like his might feel pretty good right now. Then I realize it’s the opposite. Shouting at this man would feel obscene to me just at this moment.

I hold out my arms instead. I see them glistening with all the wrong things.

Who ever would have thought that one hole in that brain could have produced all that blood?

“He won’t have been reported yet,” I say softly. “But he’s here, if you want verification. And here and here and here.”

I hold out my weary and blood-sodden arms for as long as I can manage it. The officer seems to notice my struggle as my arms sink lower and lower and I foolishly try to hold on.

He reaches out, seizes my putrid, decaying-Rudi wrists, and forces me to lower my arms back to my sides.

“You will see your friend home,” he says. “Every step of the journey. I promise I will see to it.”