After classes and drill training, the first year cadets had an hour of free time before work started. Thomas Murphy laid on his bed, wishing he wasn’t there, wishing that his legs and arms didn’t ache, wishing that he’d make a connection to another cadet. His bed was a top bunk, and when he looked to his left and right, he saw long lines of perfectly tucked in beds. Killing time, Thomas leafed through a book a friend had sent him from back home. The book bored him; he’d read it in early high school. And the military academy actually had a pretty good library. But he was glad that his friends remembered him. He had received one care package in nearly four months, and he missed his old life. On the inside cover of the book, his friends wrote, “Keep your head up, Tommy.” And it made him smile because his friends called him Tommy. Here, he was Murphy. Not even Thomas, which his parents called him. Thomas looked up from his book and glanced left and right, curious if he knew anyone’s name in the barracks. He wasn’t surprised that he couldn’t, but he did feel like shit for it. He thought that he’d change that. He got up and walked to the nearest bunk, where a single cadet was reading.

“Hey, man,” Thomas said, hoping. “These doubles have been killing me lately. I feel just about dead.”

The kid looked at him with resigned eyes. “You heard the drill sergeant, Murphy. He told us that doubles will end when we get into shape. I plan to stick it out till the end. But the drill
sergeant always talks about how some people can’t handle this. You’ll mess up class rankings if you drop out later on.”

Thomas felt awkward and nervous, but he kept talking, hoping to understand more about him. He stood, one arm at his side and one on the top bunk, looking down at the cadet on his bottom bunk. “What about brotherhood?”

“What about it?”

“We’re supposed to be brothers. Brothers watch out for each other.” Thomas had never had a brother, or sister for that matter. He was always curious as to how much having a sibling actually helped someone in life.

“Brothers? This is the second time I’ve ever talked to you, man. We’ve been here for like two weeks, and you seem to be just like everyone else here. What’s the difference? We’re all cadets, anyways.”

“There’s plenty of difference. We’re all people, not cadets. There’s the difference.”

The kid just looked back down at his book. He didn’t say a word at first.

He looked like he wouldn’t respond at all. Thomas began to turn away, but the unnamed cadet put his finger on the page he was reading and closed the book slightly. He met Thomas’ eye, and there was no friendship to be seen. “No. We’re all cadets. We take the same classes, do the same drills, learn the same tactics, dress the same, eat and sleep the same.”

Thomas looked at the cadet and wondered how he came to be like this, wondered what hell this kid went through. Thomas wondered if it made his life easier or not. He wondered if he even realized it.

“Maybe you’re right. I’m Thomas, by the way.”
“Alright, Murphy. Now get out of here please? I’m reading.”

He walked from the bunk bed to the end of the hall, with nobody bothering to look at him as he passed. He kept his eyes straight ahead like a good soldier and didn’t bother to talk to any more of his roommates, knowing it would be more of the same. He wondered if that kid was thinking about who Thomas was. Well, at least I know he likes to read, he thought with a small smirk to himself. Right as he placed his hand on the doorknob to leave, a voice boomed, “Murphy, get over here, ASAP.” Without hesitation, Thomas turned and marched with taught precision to his drill instructor.

“Yes, sir.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Basketball courts, sir.”

“Not anymore, Murphy. You’re cleaning rifles today. Double load. Some fourth year decided not to show up to work today, so I volunteered you.” Thomas felt his entire body flush with anger, his Irish complexion causing his face to turn red and stand out against the taupe of his uniform. He wondered which fourth year had skipped his workload, and why he did it. Whoever it was, he would catch hell for going AWOL.

Thomas turned and marched outside. The trees were changing this time of year, and he wondered if the cades would have to rake the leaves up. He ran a hand through his newly shaved head, still growing accustomed to the uniform haircut he saw everywhere around him. Thomas missed his bright orange hair. He missed his style, too; the tan uniform that everyone wore became constricting after a day. Thomas remembered the freedom his parents gave him. Every choice was his besides his school; West Point was tradition. Thomas grew up seeing the
impending stone walls that always reminded him of a feudal lord’s castle. He stood by the mess hall, not prepared to clean rifles yet. The armory loomed straight ahead of him. The sun felt good against his face, and he wondered about the next four years. He yearned for a cigarette and a coffee, wondering how many other cadets missed those little things that made a day better. He saw himself going through these motions for four years, but he couldn’t see where he’d be at the end of it all. He closed his eyes and raised his head to the sun, soaking the golden rays in.

A passing officer must have seen him, because there was an unforgiving, “Move along, cadet!” in his ear. He followed the directions.

He worked in silence. Thomas wiped the sweat from his brow, his expression strained in the face of sweltering heat. His hands moved methodically, following increasingly more familiar patterns. He was initially pissed at the drill sergeant, but work had doused that flame and let him relax. He let himself accept his orders like he was taught to, which today meant 5 hours in the armory collecting, dismantling, cleaning, and storing every student’s rifle. First, he would sort the rifles from the haphazard pile to clear and tidy alphabetical rows. Then, having double-checked each safety was turned to “off,” he’d empty each magazine’s bullets into a separate bin. He’d then clean and polish the magazines, taking care to clear all dirt and grim. After that, he would start dismantling each rifle and cleaning each part. Rifles were cleaned once a week, with the first half of the alphabet cleaned Tuesday and the last half on Thursday.

He was just about done alphabetizing the rifles when he heard a crash behind him. Before Thomas could fully turn around, he heard the familiar sound of a rifle being picked up, shouldered, and cocked. The motion was drilled so firmly into each cadet that it became second
nature in barely no time. Thomas froze mid-turn. No one would be getting a rifle this time of day; no one should be getting a rifle this time of day. He heard whoever it was check the gun over, flipping the safety off, checking the number of rounds. But then, nothing happened. Slowly, Thomas turned fully to face the man. It was a cadet.

They stared in silence. The patch on his chest read “Nagler,” but he looked like every other cadet with his shaved head and uniform outfit. He repositioned the rifle on his shoulder, then repositioned it again. His quick blue eyes darted every which way, landing briefly on the one shoulder patch Thomas wore indicating his year. More silence. Thomas could see sweat dripping from Nagler.

Thomas took a deep breath. “Look—”

Nagler’s eyes widened, he roared, “No, just lay down, this isn’t about you.” The veins on his neck and arms bulged beneath his standard issue shirt. Thomas’ attempt to talk and calm him down prompted him to action. “You’re a first year, this isn’t about you.” Thomas slowly lay down, keeping his eyes on Nagler the entire time. At the same time, Nagler backed up step by step towards the door through which he came. All Thomas could hear were his heartbeats and his footsteps. He expected to hear that mini explosion and then nothing ever again.

Nagler paused before leaving. He stared at Thomas and said, “Do you know my name? Do you know who I am?” Something in his voice gave Thomas pause. It wasn’t threatening, and he wasn’t trying to throw a reputation around. Before Thomas could answer, he spun about and marched out of the room, hesitating a moment before deciding to turn leftward toward the kitchens. In that moment, Thomas’ only thought was helping him. Thomas sprinted after him before he knew he was doing it.
As he started to smell the marinated pork and baked potatoes they’d feast on, he heard the shot. He pushed the kitchen doors open and first saw the pool of blood creeping towards the drain in the center of the room. It flowed evenly, elegantly, across the pristine white tiles. His eyes traced from the blood back to the cook that they all knew and loved. There was a single shot through his throat, and it sounded like he was still choking. His body convulsed and squirmed, but the man standing over him was still as stone. His eyes unwavering and his hands unshaking, he stared down the officer on KP duty today. The officer stood in front of the sink, hands raised. Nagler hadn’t even looked up when Thomas entered the kitchen.

His voice was as flat as the rifle in his hand. “Do you know my name? Do you know who I am?”

The officer gaped at him, trying to find the right words. “You’re Nagler. You’re a fourth year I think. You’re a--”

Sound exploded from the rifle a second before the cadet’s blood shot from his neck.

“How do you know my name? Do you know who I am?”

Thomas looked up from the cadet dying on the floor. He felt frozen, standing there with two men dying so close to him. The shot still rattled his brain. He couldn’t quite process that Nagler and his rifle turned towards him. Nagler’s eyes did not see Thomas, only his uniform.

The door banged open as the drill sergeant and three other uniforms entered with handguns drawn. Their eyes were fixed on the target like they were trained to do, sparing not even a glance to the two men writhing on the floor. Nagler’s eyes left Thomas and danced between the four new faces in front of him, his rifle still pointed directly at Thomas.

“Nagler, put the rifle down.” The drill sergeant said firmly.
Nagler looked at the drill sergeant and the drill sergeant looked at him. Neither moved, neither took their eyes off each other. Time seemed to stop. The only noise came from the two men gurgling blood, like there was just enough gushing blood to make them choke and not enough power left in them to spit it out.

Nagler’s eyes were clear and angry as he stared the drill sergeant down, “Who am I, drill sergeant?” He repositioned the rifle on his shoulder, pointing the nozzle straight at the drill sergeant’s head. He asked him again, more firmly this time, “Who am I, drill sergeant?”

The drill sergeant didn’t answer at first. Four handguns were cocked at once. The drill sergeant’s eyes were steady, his body relaxed but ready. Nagler looked the opposite. He wouldn’t take his eyes off the drill sergeant at this point. The rifle in his hand was level, but his steadying hand kept fidgeting on the barrel of the gun, as if trying to find something solid to hold on to, something to brace himself. Thomas didn’t take his eyes off the cadet. His anger seemed to be burning out, replaced with nothing but fear. Nagler’s voice sounded like a soldier panicking in a battle, “Who am I, drill sergeant?”

The drill sergeant said, “You’re Nagler, you’re my cadet. And I want you to--”

Nagler fired first, then each of the uniforms on either side of the drill sergeant shot Nagler down. Nagler and the drill sergeant dropped at the same time. The drill sergeant was shot in the head, falling backward instead of onto his stomach. His eyes were open. Nagler fell to his knees first, as if in supplication for something he’d never receive. There was precious blood flowing freely from the three holes in his chest.

He spoke so softly that only Thomas could scarcely hear. “Chris. My name is Chris.” Then he fell onto his stomach, his blood pooling and joining the cook’s and the drill
sergeant’s on the way down the drain. On his stomach, only the crimson soaked shirt distinguished Nagler.

Thomas’s mouth was agape. He was aware that the uniformed officials were talking, but he didn’t feel like registering what they said. His eyes were fixed on the back of Nagler’s shaved head, trying to remember what color eyes he had.

Shifting his weight in his seat, Thomas said, “This isn’t necessary. Really, ma’am. I’m fine.” He didn’t see how this would help, but everyone had to do it. The therapist had been brought in specially to deal with the aftermath of Chris. Thomas had gone from being avoided to coddled by everyone. He wasn’t sure which he hated more.

The therapist smiled a little. “You can call me Rebecca. Ma’am makes me feel old.” She had her legs crossed and her hair up. She didn't wear any makeup to speak of, and she looked worn out.

Thomas suddenly thought about how many of these meeting she had to do. He wondered if she could even count them, wondered if she laid awake at night rehearing all the stories and wishing that she could have never heard it or seen the devastation it caused.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I know a lot has happened to you very quickly, Murphy. How was your week? Has anyone given you a hard time?”
Thomas looked at his lap and said, “No, ma’am. It was a pretty normal week. I did everything that was asked of me. There were a few questions by some guys, but the story circulated on its own.” It took the school two days, but there was a new cook in the kitchens now. Thomas hated seeing him. After two days it was almost like nothing happened, the uniform fit the replacement as well as the first. Now, Thomas always kept his face composed and at attention like he was taught to do.

She nodded her head thoughtfully and scratched some words on the notepad in her lap. “Remember this, Murphy: Nagler was a sick person. There was nothing you can have done to save anybody.”

Thomas looked up slowly from his lap to her, beginning to understand. He said, “I know, ma’am. He was going to do it no matter what. It was inevitable, really. Sooner or later, this had to happen here.”

She seemed pleased, relieved to hear this. “Yes, exactly,” she started, “Your training hasn’t prepared you for anything like that yet.”

“My training? Am I supposed to be trained for this type of thing?”

“Well, yes. You’ll be trained for defusing and handling a violent situation like that. It’s not your fault that first year cadets don’t learn that.” Rebecca spoke simply, stating facts.

“I’m not worried about being blamed for not stopping it.”

“What’re you worried about then?”
Thomas stared out the window and saw a thousand different colors of the fall trees. He noticed how each individual leaf colored the tree a different hue of mustard yellow or crimson red or even a few that were still shamrock green. He saw leaves falling and being trampled as cadets marched in regulated groups. The leaves were so vibrant compared to the tan uniform that each one wore. No one looked up at the leaves or saw the ones falling. They just marched to the commands of a drill sergeant. He wondered how people could see trees everyday and not notice it, how he had never noticed it until so recently.

“Murphy?”

Rebecca’s voice snapped Thomas to attention, his back straightening and his eyes focusing on the woman in front of him. She looked worried, the lines on her forehead widening as her eyes searched Thomas’.

“What are you worried about, Murphy?”

“I suppose I’m just worried why no one knew who Chris was.”

“Chris?” She looked confused for half a heartbeat. “Oh, you mean Christopher. I told you already, it’s not your fault. He had his brothers here. I’m sure he was very close to them, just like you are with the brothers you’ve met here.”

Thomas looked her in the eye; she believed what she said. He thought about the other first years he barely knew. Then, Thomas didn’t say a word, just kept his face at practiced
attention. He turned and looked out the window at the tree, wondering how many leaves would fall today.