



WAR GAMES

We were the only ones left alive.

“It’s up to us now,” Ralf said. “We’ll have to do it on our own.”

We were lying in the shaded undergrowth at the edge of the woods, watching a small stone bunker at the opposite end of the clearing. Guarded by a group of uniformed boys, the derelict gray building wasn’t much to look at, but it was our target; it was the difference between winning and losing. Every single one of the boys lying dead around us had lost their life either defending it or trying to take it.

I shook my head. “We’ll never make it.”

Martin grinned at me and his teeth flashed white against his dirty face. “It’ll be easy.” He was broad and strong — one of our best soldiers. Back in the woods, he’d lifted a boy right off his feet and thrown him down like a sack of potatoes before taking his life.

“But we can’t just go running out there,” I said. “What if there’re others? What if they’re waiting for us in —”

“You worry too much.” Ralf nudged Martin and nodded,

then they stood and began moving back into the cover of the trees. “We’ll distract them; you take the target. Divide and conquer. The only thing that matters is winning.”

“What?”

“Just make sure you take the target,” Ralf whispered as they disappeared into the forest. “And don’t die — because if you do, I’ll kill you.”

It wasn’t long before Ralf and Martin broke from the trees at the far right of the clearing. They came out running, and as soon as the guards at the bunker spotted them, two boys rushed down to challenge them.

Two more boys remained outside the bunker, standing beside the flagpole, scanning the tree line for other attacks. The last boy was still inside and I knew he would be watching, too.

I squeezed my hands into fists, fingernails digging into my palms. *Wait a little longer.*

The two boys who had gone out to meet Ralf and Martin sprinted across the field, giving chase as my friends turned to run, luring them farther away from the bunker. Close to the line of the trees, though, Martin stopped and turned. He lowered his head and rammed his shoulder into the first attacker. The boy went up in the air, over Martin’s back, and landed in a heap on the grass. Ralf crouched, hit the fallen boy once, then tore his life away as Martin faced the second, who slowed and put up his hands, ready to fight. Martin shook his head at him and slammed a fist into his stomach, knocking him flat on his back. He leaned down, tore away the boy’s life, then raised a hand to Ralf. “You ready?” he called.