

HOW THE SPECIALISTS RECRUITED MYSTIC AND BRUISER

“Now you listen to me, young man.” Joe’s foster father jabbed his finger in Joe’s face. “I am *sick* and *tired* of your lax attitude.”

Joe stared blankly at his foster father, the man he’d lived with for the past six months. He wanted to react, but what was the point?

Joe’s foster father took a step closer to him. He began ticking items off on his fingers. “You will rise from bed promptly at five a.m. You have exactly twenty minutes to prepare yourself for the day.” He ticked off another finger. “Breakfast is served at 5:20. And even if you are done before the rest of us, you will remain seated at the table.”

Another finger got ticked off. “Morning chores and prayers are from 5:45 until 6:45. Your mother—”

“She’s not my mother,” Joe quietly interrupted.

His foster father narrowed his eyes. “Your *mother* will have the living room set up for school by seven a.m. You are to be seated with notebook and pencil in hand prior to her starting.” He ticked another finger off. “We do not tolerate tardiness.” He leaned down right in Joe’s face. “Are you getting all of this?”

No, I’m not, Joe wanted to say. What did the man think he was, stupid? “Yes,” Joe answered instead.

His foster father straightened and ticked another finger. “Homework is due . . .” He continued to outline the day, down to every precise second. The same day Joe had been living over and over again since coming here.

It was driving him slowly to the point of insanity.

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His foster father leaned down again, hovering over Joe where he sat in the dining room chair. “If your parents,” he jabbed that stupid finger in Joe’s face again, “had raised you with more structure and stability, you wouldn’t have any problems following orders.”

Digging his fingers into the wooden armrests, Joe got slowly, purposefully to his feet. He stood only five foot ten, but he still had height over the man. “Don’t. You. *Ever* bad mouth my parents. They were two hundred percent more kind and decent than you will ever be.”

It wasn’t often someone could get a rise out of Joe. But his foster father could. Anybody who spoke badly of Joe’s parents would *definitely* get a rise out of him.

The man pulled his shoulders back. “You know what? I’m done with you. I’m calling your social worker and sending you back to the state. I’ve got better things to do than put up with your disrespect and obvious lack of manners.”

“Back to the state?” Joe smirked. “Fine by me. I’d rather live in a thousand boys’ homes than under your roof.”

His foster father turned red all the way up to his military crew cut. He jabbed his finger toward the door. “Get out!” he yelled.

Calmly, Joe nodded, when what he really wanted to do was punch the man in the face.

Turning, Joe strode across the living room, snagged his backpack from beside the couch, and went straight out the front door. He cut across the creek in the back yard and disappeared into the hills of Tennessee. What little Joe had was in his backpack. He’d left a few things back at his foster family’s house. He didn’t care. Everything and everyone Joe had ever loved was gone. Whatever he’d accumulated in the past six months . . . well, it just didn’t matter.

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Joe walked for hours through the Tennessee woods and hills he'd grown up in. He knew how to survive. He wasn't worried. His parents had raised him in nature. Joe could live for months, *years* on what God's earth provided.

Subconsciously, he headed in the direction of where his whole world had come apart six months ago. As he neared the spot, his heart picked up pace, and he nearly buckled with the overwhelming presence of his family's souls, still drifting, still not settled, searching, searching for peace.

Joe emerged from a forest of pine trees and crossed a meadow of dandelions. The same meadow he had played in nearly every day with the commune's other children.

He sucked in a breath with the rush of wind carrying the screams of those who were gone. Sometimes he wished he didn't hear, he didn't feel, he didn't see the pain others had gone through or were currently experiencing. Joe wished his gifts would let him see laughter and happiness, like his mother's had. Why had he inherited the sorrow of the world?

Joe sucked in another breath as the memory of his little sister's wail pierced his heart. Why couldn't he have saved them?

Squeezing his eyes shut, he willed away the sounds, the touch, the images.

Its okay, baby. Joe heard his mom's voice on the wind. *You're home. Go forward. Don't be afraid.*

He opened his eyes and watched the dandelions white seeds float on another rush of August wind. Joe lifted his face to the heavens and absorbed the sun's heat.

Slowly, he moved forward toward the edge of the meadow where the woods began again, marking the border of his home. He stepped into the woods and stood in the shadows, staring at

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the burnt ground where his home used to be. Why anyone would have done this, he'd never know.

Sixty one people, his family, had died that day. And he was the only survivor.

With a deep breath, Joe turned and left the Tennessee ridge he'd always known as home. He made his way through the woods down the hill to the valley. Just like it had been six months ago, the old town had only one grocery store, one post office, a hardware store, and no stop lights. Population: two hundred and fifty people.

He walked into the grocery store and over to the fruit and vegetable section. He loaded up on bananas, tomatoes, and cucumbers, and then grabbed a bag of shelled pecans and a box of powdered milk. Combined with what nature always provided, he'd be able to live for months in the hills.

With a nod to a woman with a baby on her hip, Joe rounded the corner and headed to the cash register.

“In national news, Janie Spieth, seven year old daughter to Wisconsin governor, William Spieth, has gone missing. Experts expect foul play, although no ransom note has been issued. . .”

Joe stared at the black and white television, into the eyes of little Janie Spieth, and felt the familiar tug of her soul. She was alive. Her energy told him that.

He closed his eyes as a chill ran through his body, giving him goose bumps. Little Janie was freezing.

Her sob echoed in Joe's ears, followed by a boat's horn.

An image of a freight liner floated past, and Joe focused on the name painted on its steel side. STOCK AND ROLL LINER he made out.

Little Janie's tear streaked face flashed in his brain as she cuddled a baby doll in the dark.

“cuse me, you gonna go or what?”

Joe’s eyes snapped open, and he turned to see the young woman with her baby. He motioned them ahead to check out and focused back on the television.

“If you have any information,” the reporter continued, “pertaining to the whereabouts of Janie Spieth, please call this number. . .”

Joe memorized the number, quickly paid for his groceries, and went to the nearest pay phone. Disguising his voice, he called it in, just like he had done two hundred and twenty three times before. Two hundred and twenty three children and adults had been located because of him.

That thought brought a smile to his face.

He hung up the phone and turned to grab his groceries from the ground.

“Interesting information you have there. Want to tell me how you got it?”

Joe whipped around to see a dark-haired man staring at him through peculiar light green eyes. Taking a step back, Joe regained his composure. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The man slipped his hands into the front pockets of his camouflaged pants. “I’ve been following you.”

Joe took another step away. “What do you mean you’ve been following me?”

“My people and I have been watching you for the past six months. You’ve placed quite a few similar phone calls from a pay phone near your foster family’s home. We had your voice analyzed and realized you were the same person who’d been calling in leads for a few years now. I saw you leave your foster family’s home this morning. I followed you into the woods, up into the mountains, back to your home, and now down to here.”

“Who are you?” Joe asked.

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The man slipped his hand from his pocket and held it out. “Thomas Liba. I work for the government.”

“The government?” Joe took another step away, not shaking his hand. His parents had warned him about the government.

Mr. Liba put his hand back in his pocket. “Two hundred and twenty three people you’ve helped save. That’s some track record.”

Joe’s eyes widened. This man *did* know a lot.

Mr. Liba nodded to the grocery bag in Joe’s hand. “Can’t survive in the woods on just that. You need other supplies.”

“I was heading to the hardware store,” Joe told him before he realized what he was saying.

“Planning on disappearing?”

Joe didn’t answer him.

“Joe Green,” Mr Liba said his name. “Seventeen years old. Five foot ten. One hundred and eighty five pounds. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Grew up in a commune in the Tennessee hills. Home schooled. Your father was the commune’s teacher, your mother, the healer. Your little sister lived to be ten year’s old. And you, my boy, inherited your mother’s gift of sight. Your world was perfect until earlier this year when your home was targeted in a hate crime by people who only understand one way of life. They brutally—”

Joe squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t. Please.”

“You had gone to gather herbs,” Mr. Liba continued. “There was nothing you could have done. By the time you returned—”

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“Please. Stop.” Joe had seen enough of it already. Had relived it many times. He didn’t need any reminders.

Mr. Liba didn’t say anything else, and after a few seconds Joe opened his eyes, looked straight into Mr. Liba’s, and saw all the way to his soul.

Flashes of his life reeled passed. Him as a little boy being horribly beaten, locked in a closet, starved . . . as a young teenager being ganged up on by older guys . . . as a young man in training along side other men, learning how to fight . . . later in life rescuing people from terrible situations . . .

This man, Mr. Liba, had a stern, but gentle soul. A soul that was a little lost. A soul to be trusted. One full of kindness. Yet one not to be messed with.

This is your destiny. Joe heard his mother’s voice.

Mr. Liba swallowed, and Joe sensed this man had lost a little bit of control and didn’t like it. Mr. Liba knew Joe had just seen his childhood.

Mr. Liba cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “I would appreciate it,” he said, “if you would not share with people what you just saw in me.”

Joe nodded. “We all have our secrets. And I now know I’m supposed to come with you. I also know you’ve got to get to Chicago ASAP. That someone very important needs your help.”

Mr. Liba just looked at Joe. “You’re something else.”

They climbed into the black van parked in the grocery store lot. As they pulled away, Joe’s mind drifted to last year. . . “Jimmy Williams was from Chicago.”

“Twelve years old,” Mr. Liba picked up on the conversation. “Taken from the ball field. Missing one month. You called in the lead that got him rescued.”

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Joe nodded. “Barely in time. The follow up news stories reported Jimmy was near starvation when he was finally found.”

“Yes,” Mr. Liba agreed. “But thanks to you he made it.”

Joe breathed a soft sigh. Yes, Jimmy had made it.

They drove in silence for a while, and Joe closed his eyes, allowing his thoughts to drift with Mr. Liba’s. He was personally connected to someone in Chicago. A man who had an intricate part of Mr. Liba’s past. A man Mr. Liba thought very highly of. A man who had secrets of his own.

Joe opened his eyes, feeling intrusive into Mr. Liba’s emotions, and purposefully cut the connection between them. “Tell me about the Specialists,” he prompted.

A hint of a smile curved Mr. Liba’s lips as he began speaking. That conversation led to another and then another. . .

They only stopped once and eight hours later arrived in Chicago. Mr. Liba pulled up in front of a condemned firehouse. Through the windshield and the dark, Joe studied the deserted building. Something red flashed in his peripheral vision and he turned to see a petite red-headed girl running down the alley toward them.

“That’s her,” TL said.

* * *

Sprinting down the dark Chicago alleyway, Molly jumped a huge puddle, rounded the backside of a dumpster, and shimmied up a six foot tall concrete wall.

She needed needed to get to Red.

Dodging the chunks of glass lining the top of the wall, she swung over and down and landed on her feet.

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He had not sounded good when she left.

She ducked under a CONDEMNED sign, slipped through a hole in the chain linked fence, and trotted up a flight of rickety stairs. Pulling back heavy plastic, Molly climbed through the window of the deserted firehouse she had called home, along with twelve other kids, for the past ten years.

A small battery operated lamp put a dim yellow glow in their bedroom. Mattresses, foam, and old cushions piled with blankets and sheets lined the walls. She'd done everyone's laundry yesterday in the tub downstairs, so it smelled better than usual in here.

Molly turned to the corner where she knew Red, the man who had raised her, would be. He lay bundled up under his own blankets as well as others that kids had laid on him. It was a muggy July night outside, but as usual, Red was freezing cold.

He opened his eyes and looked at Molly.

She grinned. "Hey, Red."

Through his bushy gray beard, Molly made out a few teeth, and knew he was smiling back. He coughed, filling the air with a gurgly lung sound.

Molly looked around at all the empty beds and tried not to show her irritation. "Everybody leave you, huh?" She tried to make a joke.

She'd made it clear many times there was to always be someone, *anyone*, here watching Red. If it weren't for him they'd all still be on the streets.

Ten years ago when she was five years old, Red had found her under a bridge about a mile from where they were now. She'd been in a fight with a boy a few years older. Red had broken the fight up, sent the boy home, and when he found out Molly had no home, Red had

taken her “under his wing.” He’d brought her here to this firehouse and had been the only family she’d ever known. He’d brought her into the world of fighting.

Molly crossed the floor to where he lay and knelt down beside him. She reached out and put her hand on his clammy forehead. As usual it felt hot. *Too* hot.

Slipping her backpack off her shoulders, she rummaged around inside for the things Red had sent her to get: Ibuprofen, Gatorade, and cough medicine.

“Red,” Molly whispered. “Please let me take you to the emergency room.”

He’d been like this for three straight weeks and wasn’t getting any better.

“No,” he rasped and coughed again. “I told you, I’ve been like this before. I’ll be fine.”

Molly sighed. She’d known him ten years and that was what he always said when he got this way. That it was just side effects of things that had happened when he was in the military. To her it seemed more serious than ‘just side effects.’

He didn’t want to go to the hospital because he was afraid.

Afraid they’d find out who he was. Afraid they’d find all of the street kids. Afraid he’d die. Afraid this warehouse would be raided. Afraid of everything and everyone.

And although he’d never admitted it, Molly suspected he was hiding from something, from someone.

Red brought his arm out from under the covers and with a shaky hand opened the cough medicine. Molly handed him four Ibuprofen, and he swallowed them dry, then gurgled down some of the cough stuff and set the bottle aside.

He gave a slight nod for her to go on. “Skedaddle, little one. The fight starts soon.” He pointed a finger at her. “And you promised me you wouldn’t fight tonight. You need a break.”

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Molly nodded slightly as she slipped her hand into his. She studied his dirty fingernails and large rough hands. *Please don't die*, she wanted to say, but knew he'd bop her upside the head if she did.

Red squeezed her fingers. "Go on. I'll be here when you get back."

"Bobby can handle the fights," Molly suggested, referring to one of the other street kids. "I'd rather stay here with you."

"Jonesy will be back any second." Red let go of Molly's hand. "I won't be alone for long."

Jonesy. Molly almost snorted. Jonesy was *the* most irresponsible of the kids that lived here. In fact, Jonesy was the one who was supposed to be watching Red right now.

Slowly, Molly got to her feet, knowing Red would engage in an all out argument with her if she didn't leave.

"Who's fighting tonight?" he rasped.

"Larry the Louse and Charlie big man Cheeseburger." Molly shoved her hands in her back pockets. "Cheeseburger's gonna win."

Red chuckled. "Yeah, he's got Larry two to one in weight."

Molly snorted. "What's that got to do with anything? Everybody's got me in weight."

Red smiled. "True. And you manage to submit 'em every time."

Molly shrugged. "What can I say? I was taught by the best." The best being Red.

She'd never seen another fighter more skilled than him. And although he didn't talk much about his past, he had said he'd been trained in Asia. He'd taught all the other kids that lived here to fight, too. Mostly to defend themselves on the streets. None of the others loved the art as much as Molly, though.

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“I knew the moment I met your scrappy little five-year-old self, you had a gift. You had that boy twice your size bloodied up and in a heap on the ground. Fighting comes naturally for you, Molly. It was easy to teach you. You’ve got it flowing in your blood.” He huffed out a breath. “Yep, you’re something else.” Red chuckled and it rolled right into a coughing fit.

Cringing at the sound, Molly went to her bed, got a roll of toilet paper, and brought it back to him. She unrolled a wad and handed it to him and watched him spit up blood.

“Red,” she whispered.

“Go on now, Molly.”

“Red . . .”

“When’s your next fight?” he changed the subject.

“Not ‘til tomorrow.”

He nodded toward the door. “Go on now.”

Nodding, she backed away, staring at his body as he rolled to his side and put his back to her.

She slipped through the heavy clear plastic covering the doorway and out onto the steel landing. Pulling a slim flashlight from her front pocket, she twisted the head and shined the light down the spiral staircase that led from one floor to the next, five stories down to the bottom.

On floor four, Red and her and some of the other homeless kids had set up a make shift kitchen with stuff they’d found on the streets: A two burner propane camping stove, couple of aluminum bowls for sinks, dishes someone had thrown out right after Christmas, and even an ice box that kept things cool for a week.

On floor three they had running water. Red said someone at city hall forgot to turn it off when they condemned the firehouse some twenty years ago. It wasn’t hot water, but at least it

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was water. There had already been a tub on floor three when Molly came to live here. Red had insisted if she was going to stay she had to bathe every two days, hot water or not.

Molly smiled at the memory. She'd been so filthy when he'd found her fighting that kid in the dirt.

Floor two of the firehouse was nothing. Just steel beams. No floor even.

Floor one was dirty and nasty, but safe. They purposefully stayed clear of it, though, so if anyone on the street happened to look in a window they'd see only a condemned building in dire need of a clean up.

The fight club was in the basement below floor one.

With the fight club on her mind now, Molly put the flashlight in her mouth, stepped from the landing, snaked her body around the steel pole, and whooshed all the way down five stories to the bottom. She crossed the floor to the corner where Red had installed a trap door.

Pulling the rug aside, she used the rope handle and lifted open the hidden door. Sounds of the fight club shot out the opening. Yells, chants, grunts, and a thumping bass from the room's stereo.

A stairwell led from the trap door down to a landing. The landing led to nowhere, just the ceiling rafters of the firehouse's basement. If Molly or one of the other kids that lived with her wanted to get down to the fight club, they simply slid down a rope that had been attached to the rafters.

Tonight, though, Molly would stay in the rafters. She was in charge of emceeing the fights.

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Jogging down the stairwell, she hopped onto the landing, grabbed the bullhorn she'd left there last night, and walked out onto the rafters. From her high up view point she surveyed the crowd.

About thirty of the usual customers. Mostly men. She did recognize a few new people. That was good. That meant the club was growing. All of them entered through a secret passageway in the nearby train station. That was part of the allure. The secretiveness, exclusiveness, the betting, hoping for a gruesome fight. It fulfilled some dark side of them.

Molly didn't care as long as they threw around their money. Money her and Red put aside for all the kids. To one day make a better life. She felt a bit a pride at that. Thanks to her, this fight club existed. She'd begged and begged Red to let her turn the basement into a fight club. Last year, he'd finally given in. And they'd seen nothing but profit since.

A whistle pierced the air above the sound of the crowd. Molly looked down and straight into Bobby's eyes. He winked at her, indicating he'd gotten all the bets and it was time to start.

Hanging onto the steel rafters, Molly held the bullhorn up to her mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen," she yelled. "Welcome to tonight's fiiiiggghhhttt!"

Everyone screamed.

"Tonight," she continued, "we have two of the best street fighters in Chicago. We have Larry the Louse and Charlie big man Cheeseburger."

The crowd roared.

Molly's hand tightened around the bullhorn. "There are no rules in this fight club. Be clean, be dirty. Fight good, fight nasty. Knock 'em out, leave 'em standing. No rules, except . . ." She purposefully paused, just like Red had suggested, knowing it was what the crowd expected, knowing it would get a rise out of them.

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“Blood, blood, blood,” they chanted.

Molly rolled her eyes. “No rules except BLOOD. We have to see BLOOD.”

The crowd roared.

And then everything happened lightning quick. Some of the patrons pulled guns out and yelled, “Freeze!”

Someone else threw a canister and the underground club erupted in smoke.

Molly didn’t spare a second. She sprinted across the dark rafters onto the landing and up the stairs. She shoved open the trap door, climbed through, shut it behind her, and covered it with the rug.

Red. She had to get to Red.

Taking the spiral stairs two at a time, she hoofed it up five stories. And barely winded, she threw the plastic aside and ran into the bedroom. A tall man stood beside where Red lay.

Without a second of thought, Molly flew across the room, caught air, and executed a round house, landing the heel of her left foot in the man’s sternum, right at his lung meridian point.

He stumbled back and gasped for air.

“Stop.” Red commanded.

Molly came down on both feet, hands up, ready for anything that came next. “Who are you?” she asked the man.

The man held his hands up, palms out. “My God, Red, you’re right.”

Red chuckled. “I told you she was something else. This girl’s got a gift.”

Molly didn’t take her gaze off the unknown man.

“Thomas Liba,” Red said, “I’d like you to meet Molly. We have no idea what her last name is or when she was born. But she said she was five when I found her, which would make her almost fifteen now. She’s four foot eleven. Ninety five pounds. Red hair. Green eyes. She is, hands down, the best fighter I’ve ever trained.”

“Molly,” Red continued, “this man is here for you. I want you to go with him.”

Molly still didn’t take her gaze off the man, Thomas Liba. “What are you talking about? I’m not leaving you.”

“Do you remember Tommy, that fourteen year old kid I told you about?” Red asked.

Molly nodded. “Yeah, you said he pulled a knife on you and asked for all your money.”

Thomas Liba chuckled at that. “And my life has never been the same.”

“He was a street kid,” Red put in. “Just like you. I took him in and trained him. This is him, Molly. This is Tommy.”

Molly eyed the man.

Red coughed. “You and I both know I’m sick. I need help. But I can’t go to a hospital. Tommy can help me. He can help you. There’s a lot about my past you don’t know. One day I want to share it with you. But I have to get better.” He paused. “Molly, look at me.”

Slowly, she took her eyes off Thomas Liba and focused down into the face of the only family she’d ever known.

“Go with Tommy,” Red said. “You can trust him. I promise I’ll get better and we’ll see each other again.”

“When?” she asked.

Red shook his head. “I don’t know. But I’ve never broken a promise to you. If I say we’ll see each other again, then we will. If you don’t go with him, I can’t get help. I *won’t* get help.

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And don't worry about the other kids. Tommy's got lots of connections. He's going to make sure they get treated well."

For a long minute, Molly stared into Red's eyes. She would do anything for him. And she knew he would do anything for her. If this was what Red wanted, this was what she would do.

Molly nodded to Thomas Liba. "I'm yours."

He nodded back. "Call me TL."