

"Okay," John sighed. "Dad. . ." *Crash!* The plates fell from Donna's hands to the hardwood floor.

*"Ambush! It's an ambush! Get down, Parker!"*

*John dove under the green folding table, trying to take in his surroundings. The ground was covered with half-eaten rations and tin plates. Gunfire, sirens, men running and screaming orders. Bill Stevens ducked into the tent behind them and returned with a couple of guns and grenades that he dropped in a pile on the ground. John helped some other soldiers flip the table on its side like a barricade and scrambled for the small stockpile of weapons. He pulled the pin on one of the grenades and heaved it over the edge of the table into the direction of the gunfire. It didn't seem to help at all. Stevens jumped up from behind the table and opened fire, screaming and cursing at the enemy until his voice gave out and was merely emitting a high-pitched squeal. When his bullets ran out he reached to his belt for a grenade. The left side of his chest burst open with three or five bullet holes, and Stevens fell limp to the dirt, his hand still clenching at his belt. John crawled over to Stevens' body and grabbed his hand.*

*"I'm right here, Bill. Can you hear my voice? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me, Bill."*

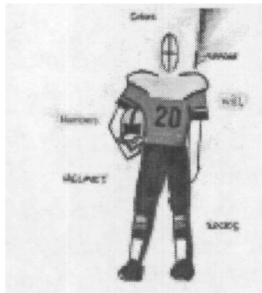
*John felt a slight pressure from a few of Bill's fingers. They twitched a little and then slowly released their grip.*

*"You're gonna be just fine. We're both gonna go home soon. Our lives aren't over yet! Don't leave me here alone!"*

*Bill didn't listen. His blue eyes stared upward in a fixed position and his breathing slowed to a complete stop.*

"Johnny, can you hear me? Johnny?" George stood over his son once again. John looked around at the disheveled dining room. The oak table was on its side and food covered the floor. A chair was lying in John's arms and tears ran down his cheeks. He could hear his mother trying to hide her own sobbing in the kitchen. John got up from the floor and helped his father lift the table upright.

Late that night, John sat on his bed, absorbing the surroundings of his room.



It hadn't changed since the day he left it a year ago. The football trophies stood on his dresser with the small bronze figurines on top in a frozen state of motion; his high school diploma hung in its black frame over his desk. Below it, pictures from

homecomings and proms with girlfriends he'd kept for maybe a month or two each. Those were times he'd suffered through, not knowing himself yet. Not sure of what he wanted. He knew very well what he wanted now. Telling his father what he wanted was the difficult part. His father, the proudest man John had ever known. How could he bear telling him how he felt? It would crush him. He'd never speak to him again, probably put him out on the street.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me," George interrupted his son's thoughts. John jumped, startled by the intrusion.

# Missing the War