

Chapter 4: The Shoulder

Some scars don't show up on the surface.

Some just live in the hinge of a shoulder, in the click of a joint that never sits right again, in the memory of what could've been if pain hadn't stolen the pen halfway through the story.

This one's about my shoulder.

But really, it's about everything that broke and still kept moving.

Wrestling was the first place I ever felt strong.

Not just physically.

Spiritually.

Strategically.

It was a chess match with blood.

It made sense to me in a way the world never had.

There were rules. There was timing. There was discipline.

But also violence.

Also release.

Also truth.

And I was born into it.

Third or fourth—maybe even fifth—generation coach's son. Football, mostly.

Toughness ran through our bloodline like a family business. But my dad? He broke the mold.

He wasn't just some sidelines hardass with a whistle and rage issues.

He was quiet. Gentle. Precise.

And he was a killer.

An elite international football center who picked up wrestling *late*—sophomore year of high school, in a busted-down corner of Downriver Detroit—and still went undefeated in Europe. Made the Olympic qualifying team. Would've gone all the way if America hadn't boycotted the Russian games that year.

That's the legacy I was born into.

And I was the oldest son.

Coach's son.

Prototype. Model. Blueprint.

I wasn't just in his shadow. I *was* his shadow.

Spitting image of him—his laugh, his smile, his walk. The way he leaned forward when he listened. Even his quiet, surgical charisma. I was like George Michael to his Michael Bluth, and yeah—I was proud of it.

It was how he coached me too.

Every day. From before I can even remember.

I grew up learning how to roll out of a half-nelson before I could tie my shoes.

I have memories of being three years old, sobbing, screaming, squirming under his arms as he showed me pressure and angles.

Not abusive. Just intense.

He thought he was manning me up.

And you know what?

I don't resent it.

I'd do the same for my kid.

That's just how it was.

How *we* are.

The athlete wasn't something I became.

It was *installed*.

Before I ever took a step—I was already learning how to fight.

He didn't push me with yelling.

He didn't need to.

He just *trusted* me.

He'd take me to elite tournaments, park me next to kids in custom warm-ups and matching duffels, and send me out there in a wrinkled T-shirt from Goodwill.

I'd be mortified.

But then I'd take my shirt off, walk onto the mat, and *annihilate* these kids.

He trained me to be humble and lethal.

Silent and cunning.

Cocky *during* the match—but in a way that made your opponent feel like it was their idea.

He taught me to whisper to other wrestlers mid-match.

"Don't grab my wrist."

"Go left."

"Take the shot."

They'd listen—then I'd flip them like a trapdoor. We both got a sick satisfaction from it. A kind of holy mischief. Like we were channeling the ancestors. Flipping the script.

He'd bump me up two, sometimes three weight classes—whatever the rules would allow. I was six-foot-two and maybe 160 pounds. Lanky. Wiry. Built like a D3 shooting guard.

And I'd go toe-to-toe with these walking refrigerators. Guys with tree-trunk thighs and necks like anvils.

40 to 50 pounds heavier.

Didn't matter.

They'd try to muscle me.

And I'd drag them around the mat like a cartoon. Cat and mouse.

Fast hands. Loose hips. Long levers.

I'd tire them out, drown them in their own mass, then drop them to the mat and end it.

It was strategy.

It was art.

It was *mine*.

By junior year, I was elite.

I beat state champs.

Nearly took down the returning Greco-Roman national winner in the opening round of a spring tourney—he only escaped on a buzzer-beater flick that wouldn't stand in today's replay era.

And honestly?

That loss *freed me*.

I stopped chasing perfection.

Started having *fun*.

Started smoking a little weed that spring—just enough to hit pause on the chaos and breathe like a human.

That's when my best friend—my guy from way back, who'd eventually be my roommate during the best semester of my life—hit me up.

Said he missed wrestling together. Wanted to enter some Friday night tourneys.

No coaches. No schools. Just us.

We found the loophole:

At 17, we could pay our own USA Wrestling fees, drive ourselves, and compete under our own name.

So we formed a renegade two-man squad.

We called it: **Big Buffalo Patty's**.

Because it sounded *stupid*.

Because it made us laugh.

Because we wanted the announcers to say it into the mic like it was a real D1 program.

"Taking the mat for Big Buffalo Patty's..."

We cracked up every time.

And then we'd win.

Again. And again. And again.

No clipboard. No politics. No weight cut bullshit.

Just us.

Wrestling hard. Laughing harder.

And then it happened.

Classic Greco match.

No leg shots. All upper body.

I went for a throw on a thick-set guy.

Tried to muscle it. No finesse. No setup.

Just brute instinct.

My shoulder didn't just pop.

It *unwound*.

In my autistic brain didn't panic—it *observed*.

I saw it all in slow motion:

Tendons snapping like rubber bands.

Bone scraping socket.

Ligaments peeling.

A wet tearing sound only I could hear.

The pain was surgical—clear, cold, precise.

I let out a scream—not theatrical. Not brave.

It was raw.

Ugly.

Final.

Because I *knew*.

Before the ref even raised a hand.

Before the adrenaline dipped.

I *knew*.

Senior year just changed.

All the summer prep.

The cut weight sessions.

The plastic bags, the saunas, the spitting in

cups, the trash-bag jogs, the jump rope in hot showers.

Gone.

Or worse—*still required* just to stay in the race, knowing I'd never get back to where I was.

And for what?

So I could keep snapping my body for men who only knew my weight class, not my name?

I didn't say it out loud.

But I knew:

I just wanted to chill with my friends, get high, play video games, and be free.

That match gave me the permission I didn't know I needed.

I finished the match.

Won it, somehow.

Then laid flat on the mat in a high school gym, 'Big Buffalo Patty's' echoing through the overhead speakers, shoulder lit like fire, future unraveling with every nerve signal.

And that was the beginning of the end.

It didn't stop there.

The shoulder popped mid-practice.

Mid-warmup.

Once, while I tied my shoe.

I'd wake up and it'd feel off.

Like it had snuck out in my sleep just to remind me who was in charge.

It became a ritual.

Start the match. Feel good.

Guy grabs wrong—*pop*.

Lay down.

Dad jogs to the edge. Lifts, twists—*pop*.

Back in.

Sting. Minute break. Resume.

Sometimes I won with fury.

Other times I barely held on.

The worst were the guys who *knew*.

The ones who *aimed* for it.

Who got excited at the idea of breaking me
open.

And they did. Over and over.

Not physically.

Existentially.

That's the real pain.

When you realize this ends not with glory—but
with a locker room mirror and a silent walk to
your car.

I never fully grieved it.

I just faded out.

Stopped showing up.

Started showing up in hoodies and headphones.

Stopped caring who saw my name on the board.

And people asked what happened.

I said, "Injury."

They nodded. Moved on.

So I did too.

But the truth?

The truth is that wrestling took a piece of me
I'll never get back.

Not because of the violence.

Because I was *good* at it.

And when you're good at something, the world
tells you it's who you are.

So when it ends?

You don't just lose a sport.

You lose your *name*.

For a long time, I thought the shoulder ruined me. I blamed it for most everything.

Missed scholarships.

Lost respect.

The sense that I was supposed to be *more*.

But now?

Now I see it was a gift.

It pulled me off the hamster wheel before the machine swallowed me.

Before I became another broken man yelling at kids to "be tough."

Before I lost every part of myself that wasn't built to win.

Because when it was all stripped away, I had to ask:

Who am I when I'm not winning?

And the answer?

I'm still here.

Still fast. Still fierce. Still strategic.

Just... in a different arena.

I still feel the shoulder sometimes.

Not just in the joint.

In my *spirit*.

Like a hinge that reminds me I made it out.

Like a whisper that says, "*Don't go back.*"

And I don't.

Because now I know the difference between
strength and survival.

And I choose to live.

Not for trophies.

Not for scouts.

Not for applause.

But for *freedom*.

I'm not saying I don't miss it.

The roar. The slam. The raw physics of it all.

But I don't need to destroy myself to feel alive
anymore.

I just need to tell the truth.

And let the scars speak.

Chapter 5: The Basement

If you grew up in the '90s, and your house had a basement, you know what that place really was.

A sanctuary. A bunker. A portal.

Mine was all three.

Upstairs was chaos.

Yelling. Rules. Religion.

Belts. Screaming matches. Shame.

The ever-present tension of a house that only stayed clean for company and smiled for church.

But downstairs?

Downstairs was mine.

Cement floor. Cold air. Cheap wood paneling. One tiny window near the ceiling that let in just enough light to remind you what time of day it wasn't.

It smelled like dryer sheets, unfinished drywall, and something vaguely electrical. The kind of smell that makes your teeth buzz if you're the kind of kid who notices everything.

Which I was.

There was a secondhand couch, the old TV with the VHS slot jammed sideways, and my holy grail: the Sega Genesis.

That machine wasn't just entertainment. It was exodus.

NHL '94 was my gospel. I played it every day for years. I mean every day.

There was blood in that game.

You could fight.

You could slam a dude into the boards and hear the pixelated crowd roar.

It was raw, janky, glorious. It felt like Detroit hockey deserved to feel—chaotic and cold and fast.

And I was unstoppable.

I had a shot. A signature one. I discovered it early and refined it like a master sculptor. You had to bring your offensive player across the blue line, then drag him from left to right and unleash a full-force forehand slap shot.

If you had Al MacInnis on your squad—his 100+ mph slap shot? It was over.

The shot worked 95% of the time.

My friends called it **The Penis Shot**.

No reason. Just adolescent brilliance. It stuck.

It became legend.

Even in college, years later, we'd be four beers in at some off-campus apartment, and someone would say, "Dude, remember the Penis Shot?"

And just like that, we were eleven again.

That game was mine.

My arena. My empire.

My first taste of absolute control.

But it wasn't just about winning.

It was the world-building.

I renamed all the players.

Created imaginary leagues.

Assigned my teachers names like 'Coach Thorndick' and 'Mrs. Tomato Face." Gave my bullies low stats. Made my crushes the team managers.

I did full commentary. Play-by-play. Post-game interviews with myself.

Whole seasons. Whole backstories.

While the world upstairs was burning down, I was in the basement—rebuilding it better.

Sometimes I'd be down there for hours.

Long past bedtime. Sometimes my mom would yell from the top of the stairs.

I'd pretend not to hear her over the crowd noise.

Sometimes she'd storm down, barefoot and furious, and I'd reach for the controller like it was a shield.

That never really worked.

But in the moments between?

I was untouchable.

The music helped too.

I had stacks of burned CDs.

Smashing Pumpkins. Nirvana. Green Day.

Fatboy Slim. Beastie Boys. RAGE.

And the Adam Sandler tape with "Toll Booth Willie" and the goat sketches.

That tape was sacred. Filthy. Hilarious.

Completely inappropriate. Perfect.

That's how I learned to tell stories.

That's how I learned rhythm.

That's how I learned that truth could be ugly
and still be funny.

I'd quote those sketches under my breath in
class the next day. Whisper them to my sister
in the hallway. I'd drop a line during lunch and
see who caught it. Who was *one of us*.

That was my real education.

And the basement?

That was church.

I'd lay on the couch with the lights off, headset
radio in one ear, playing late-night staticy Detroit
rock stations, just vibing in the dark.

Sometimes I'd talk to God.

Not the God from church.

My God.

The one who actually listened. The one who
didn't require costumes or guilt trips. The one
who spoke in delay pedal guitar solos and playoff

overtime wins and weird midnight thoughts that felt too big for a thirteen-year-old to carry alone.

When things got loud upstairs, I'd go quieter down below.

I'd build stories in my head.

Whole alternate lives.

Sometimes I was a pro hockey player.

Sometimes I was a spy.

Sometimes I was just some kid who lived in a world where the adults told the truth.

It wasn't about delusion. It was about staying alive.

When your nervous system is always lit up like a Christmas tree, you find ways to shut the lights off for a while.

For me, that was the game. The music. The carpet. The glow of the screen.

The basement was peace.

It was the only place that didn't demand I perform.

I could cry there. Or not. I could sing. I could scream into a pillow. I could eat cold pizza from two nights ago and wipe my hands on the couch cushion and no one would yell at me.

You don't realize how rare that is until you lose it.

—

I go back there sometimes in dreams.

The lighting is never quite right.

The Sega still works.

Al MacInnis still winds up.

The crowd still chants my name.

The radio's still playing that perfect half-buzzed, half-genius song you can never remember when you wake up.

It's heaven.

And it was mine before I knew what heaven even meant.

—

They say childhood is about innocence.

Mine was about **escape**.

And the basement?

That was the first time I found a door.

And no one else had the key.

Chapter 10: The Baptism

Not all churches have stained glass.

Some have pine trees.

Some have rivers.

Some have smoke in the air, guitars in the dusk,
and stories told by men who've already lived a
few lifetimes past what they deserved to.

That was my church.

That was where I met God for real.

Every August, just before school started,
I'd disappear into the northern woods of Michigan.

A week-long retreat.

No parents.

No curriculum.

Just tents, bonfires, trails, and the kind of
silence that hums like a secret.

It wasn't fancy.

It wasn't corporate.

It wasn't even particularly religious in the
traditional sense.

The main gathering tent was a hand-me-down
from an old Detroit brewery—
a big oval circus-style setup with patches and
rips and character.

Some of the old-timers had worked in the
factory before it shut down.

You could still smell the ghosts of beer and
machinery in the canvas.

It used to be a horse camp.

The trails were still there.

So were the salt blocks.

But now it was just us.

A scattered tribe of misfits, loners, overworked
men, confused boys,

and wild stories waiting to be told.

And me.

There was something holy about that place.

Not the kind of holy that made you kneel.

The kind that made you stand taller.

Because out there, I wasn't the funny kid.
I wasn't the athlete.
I wasn't the problem.
I was just... present.

The nights were the best.

After dinner, we'd circle around the fire.
Grown men would take turns speaking—not
preaching, not teaching.
Just telling the truth.

Their worst moments.

Their mistakes.

Their near-deaths.

Their miracles.

One man talked about holding a gun in his
mouth.

Another talked about walking away from his kids.
Another one admitted he didn't believe in God
anymore,
but he came every year anyway because this
place felt real.

We listened.

Some smoked cigarettes.

Some cried.

No one judged.

Then we'd sing.

Not worship music.

Not hymns.

Songs that felt like road trips and rivers.

Songs that knew about heartbreak and rust and
long roads.

There were acoustic guitars.

There were off-key voices.

There were harmonies that somehow worked
anyway.

I learned more about the human soul from those
songs

than from any sermon I ever heard.

I sang too.

Soft at first.

Then louder.

And no one told me to be quiet.

One year, I got baptized.

It wasn't planned.

There was no white robe,

no camera crew,

no perfectly framed verse on a banner behind
me.

Just the river.

Cold.

Moving.

Ancient.

They asked who wanted to take the step.

I stood up before I knew I had.

We walked a mile through the woods.

All of us.

No one talked much.

Just the sound of boots on pine needles
and the occasional cough or laugh.

The river was wide but shallow.

Brown-green and glowing in the late afternoon
sun.

I stepped in.

Shivering.

But sure.

One of the leaders put his hand on my shoulder.

"You ready?"

I nodded.

And then—I went under.

The water wrapped around me like a whisper.

The cold burned,

but it felt like waking up.

And when I came back up?

I felt... weightless.

Not perfect.

Not new.

But known.

We walked back to camp in silence.

Everyone gave me space.

A few guys nodded.

One clapped me on the back.

Another handed me a towel that smelled like
cedar and old soap.

That night, I stood a little taller.

Sang a little louder.

Felt the fire a little deeper.

The next morning, I led the hike for the younger
boys.

We walked down to the river again.

I told them about the trees.

About how the wind sounded different
when you listened without needing it to say
anything.

I didn't quote scripture.

I didn't tell them what to believe.

I just pointed at the water and said:

"This saved my life."

And then we walked back in silence.

That place gave me something no school,
no church,
no coach ever could:

It gave me permission
to be both soft and strong.

To feel deeply.

To ask questions without fearing the answers.

To believe in something bigger
without having to name it precisely.

And to see God not as a man with a beard and
rules,

But as presence.

As clarity.

As the thing that kept whispering to me
even when I was too busy surviving to listen.

I go back there in my mind all the time.

When things get loud.

When the world feels like a never-ending to-do
list

wrapped in performance and pressure and
pretending.

I go back to that river.

To that fire.

To the night sky filled with more stars than guilt.

And I breathe.

I don't wear a cross.

I don't go to Sunday service.

I don't memorize verses anymore.

But I carry that baptism in everything I do.

It's in my walk.

It's in my writing.

It's in my silence.

It's in the way I look people in the eye when
they expect me to flinch.

It's in the way I've stayed alive,
even when the story tried to kill me.

Because I know now—

There's a part of me no system can touch.

It's already been under.

It's already been claimed.

Not by dogma.

Not by doctrine.

But by truth.

And the truth?

Is cold.

And alive.

And waiting in the river.