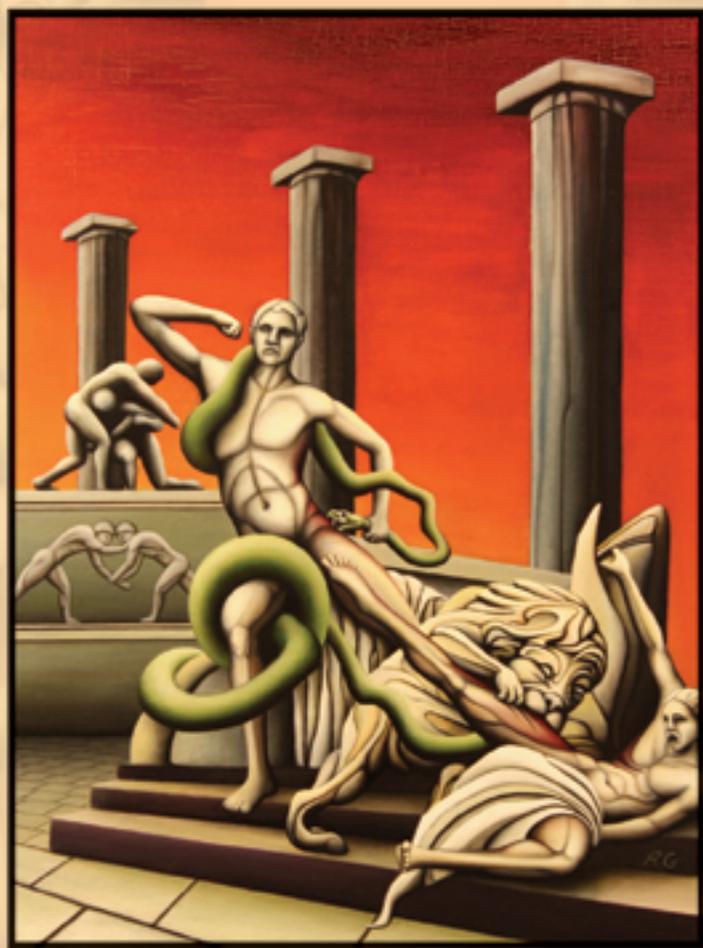
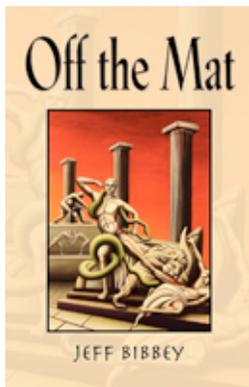


# Off the Mat



JEFF BIBBEY



*Devin Thomsen and Steven Matchik seek intensity. Coach Sean Cardsen can show the way through wrestling...but will it be enough? Devin's existence is steeped in violence. Steven's family has disintegrated. The Braxton, Oregon wrestling team provides a place to fit. In their future is methamphetamine. Bonds are tested in their harrowing journey through addiction, loyalty, and attachment to youth. When action goes Off the Mat, competing requires everything they've learned, and help from above.*

## Off the Mat

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# **OFF THE MAT**

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First Edition

# 1

*February, 2008*

“I’m a runner for Christ now. That’s what I do; I run for Christ. It’s tattooed on my leg, see here. Runner 4 and His picture. Twenty-two miles yesterday. Today just six. But before I left I wrestled for about an hour, training with the team.” Devin Thomsen glanced up at the vaulted ceiling of Union Station, then back down to his calf. “Coach, Steven was really good, you know?”

“I know.” The coach, Sean Cardsen, tried to say more, but his voice cracked and caught. He was speechless, like those before angels. The vision made all the more luminous by contrast with the cavern around them. The place had been renovated but on this night it was lipstick on a crone. A few heels clicked on the tile, incoherent echoes the only voices. Squeaking wet tennis shoes and dragging plastic bags harmonized as the homeless and near-homeless shuffled by, gathering warmth for their next venture outside. Amtrak brought no romance to the old station, and tonight only the buses came, bringing a few on the personal business of subsistence. There were no vacations going on.

The Runner for Christ stood before Cardsen in a green warm-up jacket that said “Medford” open to show a grey T-shirt that said “Northwest Freestyle.” The sleeves hung beyond Devin’s wrists, and his elbows bowed out the way they will on the spare creatures found in the sport of wrestling. His faded Levis were too large, easy to pull up and show the tattoo. Feet dark with grime allowed occasional skin to show through sandal straps. His hair was white-blond and cut short, his skin white as well, almost transparent, taut over his skull and blue neck

veins. Iridescent in the light of the station, he oozed an intensity that increased his presence.

Cardsen waited hours for this moment. They hugged and smiled together as Devin debarked the bus. The coach expected to do most of the talking but now even the small talk of a simple welcome evaporated. He became lost in thoughts of Devin sleeping on filthy floors, of meth and recovery meetings before the boy learned to drive. The Runner looked at him for a moment with a curious smirk, waiting to be led into conversation. Cardsen's eyes glazed over, and he didn't speak.

The Runner let his pant leg fall back over his tattoo and took his travel bag from the floor to his shoulder, taking the initiative to speak. "Do they remember me? Does anyone?"

"They do, and will even more when they see you. It takes a lot of sacrifice for you to come all the way up here. I'm amazed that you did it, and for this. For Alan Matchik, for Steven."

"Especially for this, Coach, especially for this."

Outside Union Station the pavement gleamed wet in the streetlights, drizzle obscuring the windows across the street. The coach led the way to a GMC pickup, eighteen years old and still in solid shape. Cardsen bought it used twelve years ago from a meticulous old man and did his best to be opposite, but his abuse had only glanced off, and the truck looked clean and traditional in the rain. Cardsen's key went in the door, his jaw working back and forth seeking more to say, but nothing came. The events of the past years were a weight. The atmosphere hanging over them suffocated them, how could it not? But this young man, the very idea of him, lifted Cardsen. The old fight, that senseless tenacity, glimmered inside him again. He invited a brighter glow and the return of actual passion. Devin's arrival cemented a miraculous alliance, fuel to drive him forward.

Devin looked out the side window of the truck, his breath condensing on the glass as they crossed over the bridge below

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them. Everything outside the truck became invisible. “His brother Alan? What’s he like now?”

“Wish I knew more, but he’s got to be good or he wouldn’t be where he is today. I’m not sure if we will even speak to him. So much has gone on you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Thirty minutes later the freeways gave way to the suburban roads and then ten minutes later to the edge of Braxton Township. Subdivisions encroached on all sides, choking Cardsen’s place like the blackberry bushes used to. His bi-level house had been intended as a step up for the owners of a dairy in 1978 but the dairy was gone now and a park covered where the main barn had been. In those times, eighteen hundred square feet meant you had it made. Success now meant one of the five thousand square foot houses covering the historical fields of the dairy farm.

They went into the house with quiet voices, the effect canceled as they shed gear on the small landing. Steps led up to the family room, graced by twisted wrought iron rails. Wet coats steamed and dripped as they hung them on the pegs. The coach tossed Devin’s bag to the top of the steps with a thump.

Sonia came out in sweats to meet them as they came up to living room level.

“Sonia, this is Devin. You might remember, from a few years back?”

“Hi, Devin. I...” She stopped herself from ‘have heard a lot about you,’ and went with “Yes, I remember. You’ve grown up!” She shook his hand and then offered him food and drink, which he declined.

By this time Tanya and Cory had come out of their bedrooms and stared at them from the hall. Cardsen made introductions and Devin disarmed the kids with a smile.

*Bibbey*

“You guys are so big now!” The Runner went to Cory and bent over with his hands on his knees. “I remember when you were tiny. You would run out on the mat once in a while and all the action would have to stop!”

“I know,” said a confident eight-year-old Cory. “I used to say ‘Momma, why do big boys wrestle?’”

Devin laughed and pointed at him. “She couldn’t answer you, could she?”

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The Runner looked at his face in the mirror. He pulled the skin of his cheeks tight on each side, satisfied that no blemishes had risen unannounced. He met his own eyes, just for a moment. Contact with his own eyes is how it often began. He turned on the water, took some in his shaking hands, and splashed it up on his face. The reflection showed the burn scars all over the back of his hands, dropping the bottom out of his stomach. Surely Coach noticed them. As he moved into the hall he saw a computer station in the next room. The dim hall light revealed pictures on the wall. He paused, listened for sounds from upstairs, and satisfied there were none, turned on the light and went in. Next to the dusty teaching awards, he saw a curled photo taped to the wall. It was their team. He reached out and touched it. He saw himself in the front sitting Indian-style. Little, a ninety-pounder. He saw the long blonde hair, out of style then, and in style now, but he was opposite again. The picture was too small to see his eyes. Third from the left, in the front row, sat Steven. Alan was also easy to find. His stomach lurched and his jaw muscles tightened.

Seeing the picture started it. A quiet moaning pain rose slowly like from a deep well. There was no cap on that pit, and what was down there was coming up sure as the world, disembodied, raging. Climbing up out of the depths, heading for

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a scream, his unwanted guest began to pound on him from the inside. Devin thought about the Israelites who put blood on the door so that the destroying angel would fly over. The Runner for Christ tried that; digging into himself for blood to offer. He ran his fingers over the scars on his forearms, remembering. That disembodied thing from his gut smelled the blood, circled around waiting for it to dry, and came on harder.

He dropped into a sitting position on the futon mattress on the floor and dug in his bag for the little New Testament; his antacid. The print was too small and he couldn't focus. Scripture reading only worked for him if he read it aloud, and he couldn't do that here. The people upstairs might be curious, and he'd rather not face them like this. Definitely not Coach.

The worst of it loomed ahead, soon, but some wisdom reminded him that he'd weathered it before. What was he going to do anyway? Head out the door and walk two miles to Braxton Town Center and see if tweakers still gathered under the bridge? Show up like a ghost asking to score and have Coach call out the troops for a manhunt? Or worse, have Coach sit at home and give up altogether on all the kids that had wrung him out?

Devin slipped his jeans off. He threw himself to the floor, to push-up position. Without loud breathing or grunting, he went to work.

He did dozens. Hundreds. One hand. Feet up on a chair. Marine style. Spider style. Narrow hands. Wide hands. He stopped for thirty seconds or so when he felt dizzy, panted quietly, and saw visions of his matches at the state tournament. The sweet pain endured when the knee popped again. The comeback in the quarterfinals, the doubles and high crotch takedowns he hit; his mom's hair visible in the stands, the coaches screaming to finish off that guy from Molalla who hadn't been beaten all year. Unbeaten, but Devin near-cradled

*Bibbey*

the guy just like he would some sophomore at a camp. In the semifinals when he ran into the Krazen kid, the high school legend from Roseburg, the dream slipped away. The Runner had been filled with the belief that he just needed to out-hustle his opponent like he always did. Krazen gave him a brutal lesson, proving to him that hustle wouldn't be enough. Too much knowledge and experience missed. For years, Krazen built skill, footwork and muscle memory. Krazen hadn't been smoking crank, doing the twelve steps, or rebuilding a body from scratch. The beginnings of these and other images of himself were aborted and guided back to wrestling by physical and mental ritual. All these things all this conflict, would run by in thirty seconds, and he would call out quietly to Jesus. Thank you, Jesus, and he would push and push some more. And Christ was always dying on the cross through the whole thing, perpetual death, perpetual ecstasy, perpetually purposeful and weirdly joyful.

After an hour, nothing more attacked him from inside. A wave of exhaustion took him. Devin found himself in front of the bathroom mirror drying the beads of sweat that covered his face and arms with a small towel. He rubbed his glistening hair, then gulped water until he thought he'd burst. He took the sweaty towel with him and put it under his bag so that no one else in the house would have to use it, and collapsed on the futon.

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Upstairs, the coach lay back with his hands behind his head, listening to the gentle drum of the rain. He still noticed after all of these years and appreciated the rain for how it helped him sleep. The sound remained a secret reason why he never moved his family away.

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Sonia moved her hand gently on his chest. “What a good-looking young man, and so grown up, but he looks and moves like a cat. He’s got that blonde hair, and his cheekbones are all chiseled and a nice smile.”

“Yeah, he carries no fat on him. I mean none. He runs compulsively. For Christ, that is. He’s always been a good-looking kid, but just a little guy when we met. Now I’d say he might wrestle in the one-forties.”

“One-forties?” Sonia blew air through her lips. “That’s smaller than I am or ever will be again! How can they be built like that and weigh less than me? I can’t remember all of what you’ve told me about Devin, it’s been too much to keep track of. Those eyes of his, wow, they catch you. And they’ve seen some things, haven’t they?”

Cardsen sighed. “He’s in college now, after all he’s been through. So hard to believe, such an incredible thing. I’d like to show him off to some people. That’s where Steven should be right now.” He gulped. He needed to stop talking.

She continued stroking his chest, and spoke to him softly. “What you guys did together then, that was good work. You have to know that. Some of those kids had so little in their lives. What if they never even had those seasons with you?”

## 2

*October, 2002*

The wide steps to the band room were home to gangly arms and legs splayed all over. Half-spilled school backpacks and skateboards for the ride home lay all about. Three pairs of eighth grade veterans wrestled on the steps in their school clothes. In one case, the boy getting the worst of it had his head pointed down the stairs while his backbone painfully spanned three higher steps. Others talked or laughed or stared off in silence, some standing, some sitting. The pack of seventh graders brave enough to come out for wrestling sat near the lower right huddled around a pillar. The pillar offered scant protection against an impatient veteran wrestler grabbing them to deliver a foretaste of what lay ahead. As the minutes ticked off tension built from excitement and fear. A few candidates stood and moved about for relief.

Cardsen walked around the corner, followed by his assistant coach, Matt Waters. Immediately, the older boys did what they could to slow the chaos, audible murmurs, "It's coach." "Hey stop, it's coach." "Sit down, if you know what's good for you."

Cardsen's voice boomed. "Get it quiet."

The coach towered over the knot of seventh graders and he gestured with the clipboard to gather the boys in tight. He saw all those that had wrestled the year before. Cardsen rolled their names over in his mind, no one was missing, a feat, considering the unreliability of a few of them.

The coach couldn't help but register the presence of Steven Matchik, along with his younger brother Alan. Steven leaned back, elbows on the step behind him. His black hair and tan skin stood out against a yellow polo shirt. His brown eyes were set

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in a serious expression, making him look like he was searching for answers. Cardsen knew Steven rarely smiled, and on those occasions he always attracted attention. Steven fell two inches below average in height for his age, but perfectly proportioned. The small strain from the position in which he sat caused veins to emerge from his neck and biceps, like they had been looking for the smallest excuse. The roundness of the back of his hamstrings showed through his corduroy pants. Always remarkably strong and quick, he caught the eyes of his PE teachers from early in elementary school. As a defensive back on the Braxton football team, he hit and hustled for Cardsen like no other. An indifference to the skills required for basketball and baseball led him to wrestling, and he won the district championship in his first year competing. Now he looked at Cardsen intensely and carried the close-lipped smile of someone who knew what was coming.

Carsden made eye contact, clear on what Steven must be thinking. *Here it is. I can win it again. Coach will push me, and I'll never let up. Not once, not ever.*

At the top of the steps, Austin Reichs, their misplaced cowboy, leaned against a door, arms folded, scowling down at Cardsen's feet, eyes out of view. There was always at least one like Austin Reichs. Cardsen didn't need speech to hear him.

A good teacher could hear, "I'm here to kick ass. I'm not here to listen to you. I wrestle for me, not this team." A better teacher would also hear, "I need this because I've got nothing. I need a coach, because I've got no one I can count on." Cardsen heard that, too.

Carsden handed the sign-up sheet around, inquired about physical exams and paperwork, and paused to verbally hammer the two veterans who hadn't done that properly. He talked about shoes, clothes, weight policies, academic eligibility, and the

mats. Cardsen spoke concisely and efficiently. It was his ninth year delivering the opening meeting.

A seventh grader named Eric Lofton raised his hand. He looked about eighty pounds wet, and had wisps of sandy hair that fell all over his tan face. "I've got violin lessons at four on Mondays. So, um, what do you think will happen if I don't change them?"

The predictable snickering and eye rolling began. The older guys smelled blood in the water. This kid was going to be skewered.

Cardsen stared at him. "Are you any good?"

Lofton stammered and looked down. "Not really, I mean, I guess. Well, I'm first chair in Beginning Orchestra, and um you know, I can play part of Hoe Down."

"Lofton, look at me."

Lofton looked up with the saddest brown eyes.

"I expect you to keep getting better on that thing. And after all this is over, you and I are going to jam Hoe Down before the district tournament is that clear?"

Cardsen saw predatory smiles morph to reflect the thrill at his unpredictability. A few laughs came. Also whispers, "Is he serious?"

"We'll do it gentlemen. Count on it."

Lofton's eyes widened.

"That would be cool. But don't tell anybody I listened to no Hoe Down," said Alfred Rice, the team's laconic heavyweight, and sole African-American. The team laughed.

Matt Waters once mused aloud to Cardsen that the sheltered suburban skaters and white trash that blew in and out of Braxton to live with their mom's ex-boyfriend's mom's friend's daughter, wouldn't know a black person from Adam. Rice could be half Bengali and half Samoan for all they knew.

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“Gentlemen, the point is, there are a lot of outside things you guys are committed to. I don’t expect you to give them up. I want you to stick with them. But that doesn’t mean you get to sacrifice your work here. So, try hard to change the time. If that doesn’t work, stay as late as you possibly can before taking off. Obviously, for meets, we have to have you. Most important of all communicate to me what’s going on, I don’t like surprises.”

Now came time for the brief motivational section. Cardsen didn’t need to fake anything here. He firmly believed everything he had to say. He spoke his lines emphatically, not so much because he liked the sound of his own voice, although he’d been accused of that, but because he knew the changes that would happen to all of them in the next ten weeks.

“You start something special today. That you’re here demonstrates courage already. You will begin to become something new, and people outside of here won’t really understand it. Many of your parents won’t understand. You will have to help them, educate them. Your friends outside here won’t understand. They will say things about the uniforms, or being so close to other guys or whatever, but it’s ignorance. People fear what they can’t understand. This is the world’s oldest sport. It is a martial art. It is the martial art of the cradle of civilization. Greece. Turkey. Israel. Iran. Remember that.” Cardsen’s arms moved in sweeping gestures and intimidating points. He could have been preaching a tent revival or hawking a topless show off old Burnside Street in downtown Portland.

“You will push yourself harder than you ever have before, I don’t care what sports you’ve done. I don’t care if you’ve played football, even if you played football for me. We’ll go way farther. You’ll look inside and find something you didn’t even know was there. Old guys, am I lying to you?”

The veterans smiled and nodded at the descriptions and several responded. “No, it’s true, it’s true.”

Lofton thrust his hand up. “I once took rappelling and rock climbing, extreme like, at Yosemite Ranger School. Do you think it will be harder than that?”

“Coach Waters, write this down, Eric Lofton has a Question Restriction Asterisk. He gets two per practice, maximum.” Cardsen turned back to Lofton. “I think it will be slightly tougher than the one at Yosemite but just a little less than the Authentic Mining School at Black Hills National Monument.”

Matt Waters, grinning, made a show of noting on his clipboard.

Lofton, and most of the others, just looked perplexed. Steven Matchik broke a bit of a smile, and so did Ryan Van Gorder, the representative intellect and conscience of the Braxton wrestling team.

“Gentlemen, you will find out that this team will get close. We will look out for each other. Older guys will help the young guys learn. There will be no crap pulled on anybody in the locker room or you will answer to me. I am not forcing friendships or asking people to hang out together that normally don’t. But when you see each other in the halls you will defend and honor each other. I don’t care if you are too fat, too weak, tougher than anybody, or know a lot of wrestling. You will play a role. If you are district champion, or just struggling to get wins on JV, you’ll get coaching from us and I intend to prove it to you. I am most interested in how you improve and provide effort from beginning to end. I know that with this crew, if we just do the right things, the wins will come. Because actually,” Cardsen looked around slowly, “this is a pretty damn good crew already.”

There was an electric response.

“Yeah.” “We win it this year.” “No one touches us this year.” High fives. Austin Reichs rolled his eyes, but then responded to the offer by Ryan Van Gorder of a hand to slap.

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“Go get your gear on. Leave your other stuff right here. You’ll get lockers after practice. We got time for a short one.”

The boys scrambled, falling all over each other to get off the steps.

With the team gone, Waters started laughing. “Niiiiice.”

“What can I say? Gotta know how to hold a crowd.”

By now the men were walking toward the locker room and coach’s office in order to dress out for practice. They turned a corner and blocking the way was Evelyn Cummings, BJH’s finest counselor, with a long-haired blonde boy, eyes downcast, hands thrust into dirty, faded jeans. Cardsen knew the instant he saw the boy that he had wrestler written all over him. Cardsen had an interesting gift, knowing at a glance whether an adolescent, and sometimes a prepubescent, had high odds of wanting to be part of the sport. Something in the body build, the carelessness with hair and clothes, the way they stood. But those things didn’t always match, and still he could tell. Also with the counselor was a woman he suspected to be the boy’s mother. She had wrinkles and tough skin, blonde hair curled back in a modified Farrah Fawcett, jeans and an old Styx T-shirt. A bit tight for a school. She smiled and revealed a forgotten beauty. Evelyn took the mother by the elbow and turned her to face the coaches.

“Sean, this is Alexa Thomsen, and this is Devin. He’s new and he says he wants to wrestle.”

As Cardsen shook Ms. Thomsen’s hand Devin glanced up but didn’t make full eye contact. Cardsen saw piercing blue eyes flash so bright he thought it might hurt if someone looked at them.

“He’ll be in your second period Physical Science.”

Evelyn winked at him. She knew that Cardsen would want the kid in his class. Not only did he want his wrestlers in his class when possible, but he liked getting tough kids of either

gender if he thought they could connect. Of course, if it didn't work out, it was just as miserable for Cardsen as any other teacher, but he never ducked such a challenge. The counselors often knew what would make a good match for either Cardsen or his counterpart, Liselle Wilkins.

Carsden knew what he had to do. Honor mom but immediately make contact with the kid without going through mom. He knew that any growth and connection through the sport would have to come from the young man stepping up alone.

"You've wrestled before?"

Carsden noticed the struggle the kid went through just to look up and the inordinate amount of time for a response. Complications, thought Cardsen. For some reason the kid needs to think on this simple question. For the first time Cardsen locked into those eyes.

"I wrestled last year at my other school. I was our eighty pounder for a while. And I did a little bit of club in elementary. I think I'm more like ninety now."

"That's outstanding. Perfect. We have a close team here and we have all types of kids. We work very hard but we also have fun. I'm Coach Cardsen and this is Coach Waters."

Then Cardsen shook his hand; shook his smaller hand like an adult.

Leaving Devin behind with the counselor, Matt Waters led the way to the coach's office with Sean Cardsen close behind. As the wrestling coaches entered, they saw Shockley, the rookie PE teacher, packing a gym bag near the other end of the room. The young teacher looked up and then back down without acknowledging them.

"Sean, looks like you've been recruiting. We had a pretty solid looking bunch out there on the steps."

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“Yeah, how ‘bout it, Matt? Some characters and some tough stuff. Sheeit, I got a feeling, man. We could be pretty good. We just might have something.”

Sean Cardsen sat down heavily on Shockley’s chair, pulled off his shoes, and propped his stocking feet up on the PE teacher’s desk. His hands interlocked behind his head, pushing up his straight and unruly brown hair. The coach was bulky and thick, with a broad back and arms that looked like they could still do some damage. Not exactly an impressive specimen like a body builder, or the other way, like a runner, but at thirty-seven he hadn’t completely gone to seed either. Yet he was a science teacher, and no one would mistake him for a working man living a hard life. A surgery scar ran like a snake around his left elbow. His Adam’s apple stood out excessively, and his lips stayed together and moved in and out a bit constantly chewing on what to say next.

*Thank God for Matt*, thought Cardsen as he looked over at his assistant who had begun to change out of his teaching clothes. *Life would be pretty tough without him*. Matt Waters taught a program to introduce kids to vocational education, a mixture of shop, life-skills, and career studies, and had been a terrific addition when he transferred in two years ago.

“You know, I hit them up pretty hard at the end of football. Same story every year. I bust their butt out there, so when I ask who wants to spend ten more weeks with me everybody kind of looks at the ground. But the ones that count are here.”

*Who cares?* Cardsen thought. A small corner of the world. A small sport with a small season. Not like high school, where the kids remember their teachers and mentors, telling stories about them all their lives. No, the place everyone thinks they hated and don’t remember, middle school, junior high. If it was so awful like a lot say, why did he see so much joy everyday; all the energy, learning, activity, and emotional intensity. For

example, take his classroom, with its Bunsen burner outlets, linoleum floors, rock and roll memorabilia and mineral crystals. Hot, smelly and hated in August, but those that found a home cried in June when they left. Braxton, his place, it was a good place.

But wrestling is a small sport. And he a small coach. In fact, he was just barely a winning coach if you looked at the records. When coaching high school football a few years back, the veteran coach he worked with told Cardsen that he was the best young football coach he'd seen, and that sticking with it could mean a lot of attention. But this sport, this office, his classroom, those are what ended the ambition for coaching higher. He couldn't leave these small things. *I care, so does Matt. The boys care, even if only their subconscious will remember. One day I'll be fifty-seven, and I'll close that door over there for the last time. I'll ask myself—did I do enough?*

Shockley came over to his desk, now fouled with Cardsen's feet, to retrieve something. Cardsen observed how the small, uptight rookie began to blow more air in and out of his nose as he noticed that his meticulously arranged pencil cup and lesson book had been moved. Cardsen sat perfectly still as the rookie leaned over him and retrieved a cell phone from a shelf. Sensing Matt watching from the lockers, Cardsen couldn't resist the entertainment value.

"What's up?" Cardsen shot off, appearing disinterested.

"Uh, well, just had to get this phone." The poor rookie retained enough pride to have red blotches of anger rising on his face.

Cardsen carried himself like he owned the place, and people sometimes talked in ways that confirmed it. He knew this kid wouldn't challenge him. Shockley moved away toward the door, clearly eager to escape another day in hell.

"Later." said Cardsen.

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Then, right there with his feet up, he ripped a loud one that sounded like a roadie testing the distortion pedal before the big show.

Matt Waters couldn't hold it anymore and he laughed aloud, an attempt at suppression changed it to a crying sound just as the door closed. "That...was the most unprofessional thing I've seen."

Cardsen turned to Matt, very pleased with himself. "You're gagging; you sound like a chimp being strangled. Let it go, man, let it out."

The assistant coach snorted and shook his head with a toothy smile.

"You're pretty new around here too, Matt, so keep watching. You know, sometimes you can just tell. I lay 70-30 odds that poor bastard doesn't make the end of the year. And I give it 90-10 that he's not back next year. And I called it 60-40 at the opening meeting just on his introduction. Ask Gordon, down the hall from me, if you need proof. Gees, we need someone steady in here."

"What do you think he'd rather do?"

"Got a rich daddy. Maybe he'll start him a rafting company on the Deschutes."

Matt laughed again. "Yeah, and in the off-season he'll be working those ski-lifts up on Hood."

Cardsen pulled his feet to the floor and moved to his locker to change clothes.

"Matt, did you see that new kid?"

"I saw him. He looks like he could really be something." Then Matt changed his optimistic tone to sound ironic. "In a lot of ways."

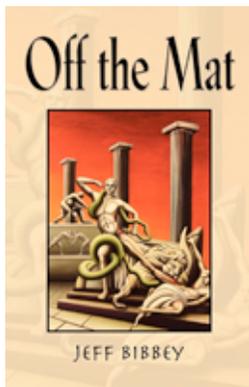
"Well, if you haven't been getting enough social work down at your end of the building wait until we tie in to this crew."

### 3

Devin watched the coaches head down the hall toward the locker room, and he felt a surge of eagerness to dress out and practice with them.

*Already a year since I last wrestled, and so much has changed. I miss LaGrande, well, those kids there, the ones that used to like me. When I could go to birthday parties and even have one, the trampoline we used to have, a lawn and sprinklers. Legos, oh well, seem too old now. Dad's car parts all over. Dad? I'm shaking, I can't do that or this coach'll think I'm a wimp. How tough are the kids here? I remember when I broke Ronny Nolasco's nose last year, he bled, and it was all over me and I liked it. But he was really weak. Then I felt bad. Because he was one of my last friends that would come over or invite me, and that was kind of it for that. Because he knew I did it on purpose, when I didn't have to. I pinned most of my guys, but our coach was so easy and unorganized. And then I missed the last four matches. Gone three weeks to Grandma's, then ineligible. Damn, everyone seems huge here, and I'm small. And this coach is going to be my teacher for science. What if he's mean? Well, I guess I've seen mean before.*

*It's like he already knows me, but how could that be? Because he doesn't know any of it. And it's like he wants me here. It's cool, but is that weird? Why does he want to know a kid?*



*Devin Thomsen and Steven Matchik seek intensity. Coach Sean Cardsen can show the way through wrestling...but will it be enough? Devin's existence is steeped in violence. Steven's family has disintegrated. The Braxton, Oregon wrestling team provides a place to fit. In their future is methamphetamine. Bonds are tested in their harrowing journey through addiction, loyalty, and attachment to youth. When action goes Off the Mat, competing requires everything they've learned, and help from above.*

## **Off the Mat**

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