

Staff Sergeant Trey DeMarcus Warner of the Marine Special Operations Command stepped inside the dive at 1900, nerves jangling from walking there. Mike at the bar nodded, reaching for a bottle of Jack. He said something to the doughy civilian kid sitting in Trey's spot.

Trey liked the space on the end near the exit, where he could keep the wall on one side, now that he was alone—not that he'd have ever come here with his squad. They'd always dissed it as a babysitting place—just past the gates, perfect for new Marines too poor to afford taxis home afterwards.

These days it was pretty much the only place he went off post. The world was still foreign after being overseas—too loud, too many choices. Even going into a damned convenience store made him break into a sweat. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

The doughy kid cleared out before Trey crossed the room. He sat on the still-warm seat, nodded to Mike, and tossed back the whiskey ditch waiting for him on the bar. Fire filled his mouth, relaxing his tight jaw and snaking down to work at the knots inside his chest. His leg stung and prickled. He pulled to ease the sweat pants over his knee—the burns were still too sensitive for him to wear jeans.

Mike set down another and Trey drank off half, scanning the room again. It was the usual crowd tonight—new Marines and the girls who came here like tourists watching zoo animals. If he and his team had known about that, they might have been regulars here.

Trey was a regular now, since he left the hospital two weeks ago. He adjusted his pants leg again. His phone buzzed with a reminder for his 0900 psychiatry intake appointment at Camp Lejune Naval Hospital tomorrow, 8 February.

*Shit.* What the hell was he going to do?

He gulped the rest of his drink. What he was going to do was drink enough to feel more numb than he already did. Unless someone volunteered to help him feel alive for a few hours. Whichever one it was didn't really matter.

"Hey, soldier." A woman in a black tank top came up at his elbow. Latina, a solid seven. A civilian who didn't know that "soldier" was an insult to a Marine. Her friend joined her, a leggy black girl, maybe an eight.

Trey nodded, then ignored them while they tried to flirt. His cutoff for anything to develop was always 2200. After that he'd be too high centered to make a good call. He was an equal opportunity man but waking up to ugly was a whole other deal.

"So do you come here often?" asked the Latina. Her friend sat on her other side.

"Sometimes." *Only every damned night.* He threw back his drink.

"I was wondering if you'd like to get out of here," said the woman, smiling. She ran a red fingernail up his forearm. Until a couple of weeks ago Trey had never realized that being a dick was so attractive to women. *Must be the challenge.*

It was a fair trade—they got a good time and a story about the hardbody they took home and he got an hour or two of sex. He liked to think he gave good value. It worked for a night or three—it wasn't his problem if some of them hoped for more. But

women didn't like the long deployments, or the fact that he couldn't talk about his work, so there was no point.

She cooed, her hand moved up to his shoulder. He'd missed whatever she said. "You seem tense," she said, leaning close enough to give him an eyeful. "Let me help with that. Let's get out of here."

He was getting tense, all right. Trey threw down some cash, drank the rest of his whiskey ditch and followed her out. The girls stood at the driver's side of her car for a giggling conversation while Trey waited on the other side for her to unlock the passenger door.

A loud bang made him duck for cover, reaching for his empty hip, heart racing. Just a backfire. The whiskey churned in his gut. *Jesus*. The black girl left and the Latina turned to him, laughing. "Let's go." Had she seen it? She hopped in and headed to her place.

The neon lights were still jarring. He closed his eyes, concentrating on her hand on his thigh—what was her name again? The Jack was kicking in as they got to her place.

He stumbled upstairs after her, still alive after all.

The next morning Trey reported for his intake evaluation at the outpatient psychiatric clinic, his headache the least of his problems. It was the last place he ever thought he'd be, but now it was mandatory to have an evaluation for PTSD after an incident like his. He wanted no part of this.

After eight years of active duty, he'd learned that there were an infinite number of bullshit things that were required by the military. He'd learned to do them without wasting energy being angry—or even questioning them. Some of them still chafed, no matter how he tried to ignore it.

He stood as tall as he used to feel, back when he was proud to wear the uniform, when he had his brothers' backs and knew they had his. When they rolled out, he was invincible—a damned avenging god—but eighteen days ago he'd become a fraud. Now he was drifting along clinging to thoughts of revenge and buoyed by rage—that only made sense. It didn't mean he needed to be here.

He had to fill out paperwork, lots of it. Parents, alive or not. Where he'd grown up, when he'd joined up. He didn't want to think about those times. He was antsy as hell, worse than a little kid in church. He was grateful for the military discipline which kept him from fidgeting. He rubbed his hand over his face. He was trapped. The room had the same institutional smell that the one did back then, the first time his life had caved in.

In her last few days, his mother had told him that she'd tracked down his grandfather. "I thought there'd be more time, baby, but he seemed decent when we spoke." When he'd protested the idea of moving, she'd told him, "Trey DeMarcus Warner, that's enough. Better some 'old white guy' than all these gangs around here. Besides, he's your blood."

She'd made him promise that he would stay strong, always do the right thing, and go to college someday. The college hadn't happened. He couldn't tell the right thing anymore. He'd tried to be strong, but that was just bullshit now, a pose. And she would not have approved of the way he was coping now.

"Staff Sergeant Warner." His name jerked him out of the past. He scrubbed his damp palms on his fatigues and followed the psychiatrist into the exam room. She was a Major, about thirty-five. No special insignia on her uniform, just the medical corps patch. *At least she's not a civilian.*

"I'm Doctor Carpenter," she said, extending her hand.

"Ma'am."

She waved him to a chair. A goddamned box of tissues sat on the table, menacing as a grenade. His hands tightened on his thighs. Some of his buddies had told him to lie to get out faster, but his grandfather had drilled into him the importance of being truthful—a man of honor—and he tried to do that to respect his memory.

"Staff Sergeant," she began, "You need to understand that this is a routine evaluation, so please try to relax, and answer the questions truthfully. The kind of incident you experienced has a significant chance of short and long-term emotional problems that can cause severe difficulties in a service member's career and home life, so it's important to evaluate everyone. You haven't been singled out for this."

"Yes, Ma'am." That was a good point—they weren't after him in particular. He'd keep that in mind and just try to get through this ASAP.

"I see that you're originally from St. Louis," she said. "A Southern man?" She smiled, trying to get past his guard. She must know that people hated this.

"Yes, Ma'am, to begin with. I moved to Montana to live with my grandfather when my mother died."

"What happened? How old were you?" asked the shrink.

"Cancer. Twelve," replied Trey. What the hell was this, dredging up his childhood? He suppressed the urge to squirm like a grub on a hot plate.

"Why not your father?"

"I never knew him. He died when I was six or eight." Trey said, shifting in his seat. *Jesus*. He tried never to think of his father, let alone talk about him. Trey's father had split from his own family and bailed on Trey's pregnant mother.

"Your history says you signed up at eighteen."

"Yes, Ma'am, after my grandfather died." He'd joined up the second he didn't need his new guardian's signature.

The Major paused, and he braced for incoming pity, but she moved on to his service records. "You're up for promotion to E-7 already. You've been in similar engagements before with MARSOC and have an exemplary record: commendations for heroism, awards."

"We all try, Ma'am." *Shit!* He wasn't trying to sound like a smartass. Some of these female officers were quick to bust your chops over perceived disrespect. He'd meant none, but did she expect him to sit here chatting about how great he was? Did these medical people not know anything? But she didn't dress him down for any

attitude. *She's got a schedule to keep.* That was good to remember. She'd be under time constraints, so this couldn't go on forever.

"My understanding is that your entire squad was killed, and you had a serious concussion."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"We'll need some baseline tests because of the concussion. Are you recovering well?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm fine." She just looked at him. Trey prompted, "Permission to withdraw, Ma'am?"

"Permission denied." She gave him a flat look. "Staff Sergeant, most people would not be 'fine' three weeks after losing their entire squad. It would be common to have feelings of grief, loss, hopelessness, and rage. Some develop a condition called 'survivor's guilt,' in which they feel that they should have been the one who died, not their buddy. Are you having any of these feelings?"

Trey stared at her. What the hell kind of question was that? Of course he did—every damned one of them. They were his brothers and he hadn't prevented it from happening. He was speechless. How could anyone ask him that? It was a real Montana shoeshine. He could either dishonor their memories by shrugging it off as no big deal, or admit that he felt that way every damned day, and be carted off to weave baskets. Finally, he looked at his hands, and said, "They were my brothers." That was the truth and she could take it how she would.

But of course that wasn't enough. She asked about nightmares, daytime triggers, alcohol and drugs, too much sex, inability to have sex, risky sex, fighting. It was stressful enough to make anyone depressed and anxious. He chose his words carefully. He couldn't risk having any problems here, not when he was trying to decide if he should re-up for another four years or leave the military. Either choice filled him with dread.

To cap it all off, she offered him medicines if he felt anxious—meds which might make him impotent. He felt like chewing his own arm off to get out of there—impotent, on top of everything else.

“Ma’am, that would make anyone depressed.”

She laughed, circling things on a card, then gave it to him. “See scheduling on the way out and report back in one week.”

He spent it having nightmares, too much sex, and drinking. None of it helped.

One week later

It was always the same.

Trey woke up gasping, sweat-soaked, the smell of burning diesel and roasted flesh in his nostrils. His buddies were dead. He alone had awakened in the hospital with a concussion, second-degree burns, and a little shrapnel from the explosion. His squad was blown to hell. He was only alive because he happened to be sheltered behind another vehicle. His brothers were gone and he was still here. He'd been told repeatedly that he was lucky—he didn't feel lucky.



It hadn't even happened on a mission—just during a goddamned transport. The consensus was that the little boys probably weren't involved, because this was not how “The Merciful” had operated so far, but this didn't absolve Trey in the jury of his own mind. Maybe if he'd noticed the gold-toothed man sooner, his men would still be here. Trey leaned over the side of the bed dry heaving and trembling.

Later that day Major Carpenter called him back for his second visit. The first one hadn't killed him but it hadn't done a damned thing for him. His chest was tight and his belly had a dull ache. He'd have gotten more out of going fishing, but they wouldn't give him leave until his damned psych evaluation was completed.

“Staff Sergeant Warner,” she greeted him. “How are you doing?”

“Fine, Ma'am.” He waited for it to be over.

She said, “Staff Sergeant, can you tell me how you've been feeling? Or do you prefer that I try to drag it out of you one question at a time?” She spread her hands, palms up. “I know you don't want to be here. But you might as well get something out of it, so it isn't wasted time.”

“Ma'am, with all due respect, this isn't helping.” She'd rip him a new one now for sure, but it was the truth.

Major Carpenter laughed, then tilted her head. “Staff Sergeant, am I correct to assume that with your training, you're skilled in close quarters combat, survival, evasion, and escape? Competent in HALO jumps and demolitions?”

He stared at her, wary. Of course he was. “Yes, Ma'am.”

She leaned forward. “Staff Sergeant, I’ve trained a lot longer for my mission than you have for yours. Perhaps you can extend me the same courtesy.” She smiled, waiting.

*Shit.* He hadn’t meant to trash a fellow Marine. “Yes, Ma’am. I apologize, Ma’am. I’m just not used to talking to anyone about...stuff.” He was grateful for his dark skin that didn’t blush at his mistake.

“That’s understandable,” she said, “but that’s the whole point. This is a safe place to talk with someone who won’t judge you. Someone whose job it is to listen, so that you don’t feel you are being a burden. Someone who’s heard things ten times worse than anything you can imagine telling me, a professional who’s sworn to secrecy. Everything you say here is held confidential under doctor-patient rules. It can’t even be accessed by your other health care workers without special authorization.”

Trey must have looked skeptical at that because she went on. “I’m required to report homicidal or suicidal ideation, and I’m bound to assess whether or not you can continue to function on the job. But those are the only limitations.”

“Well, I’m not suicidal, and I don’t want to kill anyone. I mean, besides ‘The Merciful.’”

“Well, the world would be a better place,” she agreed.

He was shocked at his bark of surprised laughter. *Maybe she’s not so bad.* She was a Marine, after all, just trying to do the best job she could, like all of them.

She grinned at his surprise. She pushed the box of tissues closer to him, and when she saw him recoil, she pulled out two more unopened boxes and set down each with an exaggerated thump. Trey laughed.

“Okay, Staff Sergeant, it’s just you and me, and nothing leaves this room. Let’s do this.”

He breathed deep, then nodded. He’d never run from a challenge.

“You’re still having nightmares?” she asked.

“This is getting really personal, Ma’am.” Trey shifted, a finger pulling at his tight collar.

MAJ Carpenter cocked her head. “Yes, Staff Sergeant, it does. It’s my duty to help you, and yours to cooperate, but it takes real courage to do this.” She stared at him, challenging, and damned if he didn’t cowboy up, from force of habit.

She was really slick at pinning him down with her questions and blocking his attempts to dodge them. It became a little easier when he finally just let ’er buck, too tired to spar.

“I think about them every day—every minute,” he said, “unless I distract myself with alcohol or women.” *Damn.* “Sorry, Ma’am.” She waved it off, and he blundered on, “I feel terrible that I couldn’t stop it. My whole team died because of me.”

“It’s normal to have grief and anger about it—anyone would—especially since your squad was in effect your only family.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Any religious beliefs that are helpful, Staff Sergeant?”

“I was raised Methodist, Ma’am,” he said. “I do believe in God, but I wonder how much he believes in me anymore.” He’d come to understand that he could only depend on himself and his team, but even that was in question now. He stared at his useless hands.

“What else do you believe in?” she asked.

“I believe in the Marine Corps,” Trey said. “And in America.”

“You feel like you let them both down.” It wasn’t a question. “It sounds like your heart won’t believe what your brain knows, that you couldn’t have prevented it.” She got it—that was it exactly.

He nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. The silence stretched.

“So where does that leave you now, Staff Sergeant?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am. I’m not sure what I should do,” he said. He shifted in his seat, pulling at his inseam. “I’ve always had a clear mission, and completed it to the best of my ability. But now I worry that I’ll compromise that, obsessed with making sure I don’t lose any more men.” He stared at his hands. “I feel so guilty about what happened. And I really do want some payback. I think about it every day. That could lead to mistakes, and losing more men.” He looked back up at her. “I don’t know that I can do that again.” Now she’d tell him he was a rear echelon loser.

She nodded, her eyes concerned, no judgment at all. How had he thought this was useless? It was good to let it out—it was poisoning him. His chest tightness eased a bit.

“But the thing is, this is all I know. I always thought I would get out someday, and lead a quiet life. All these years I’ve been a tool—the tip of the spear. What if I can’t make a go of it around regular people? I don’t know what I’d even do if I got out.” His voice dropped as he stared at his hands. “I don’t know if I even deserve a life. I let my buddies down.”

She nodded, continuing her gentle probing. She seemed to understand. It did help. By the time he left he felt wrung out, but that night he didn’t have nightmares, for the first time in weeks, even though he stayed sober.

Trey sat with Major Carpenter two weeks later. He could finally breathe again, since his last visit here.

“Staff Sergeant Warner.” She smiled.

“Ma’am.”

“Your test results are in.” His chest tightened. “There’s no evidence of CTE.” He’d thought that Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy was something only boxers and football players got, but some military men turned into vegetables, too, even without a direct hit.

He let out his breath. “That’s good, Ma’am.”

“How are you doing?”

“Better, Ma’am. And you were right. It did help, last time.” They’d made him go to group and to see a counselor, besides all the testing.

She smiled. “Glad to hear it. Are you making any progress on your decisions?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m going to start outprocessing. I might try contract security work. That’s similar but less intense. It should pay the rent. My contacts will be useful. I’ll probably go to school on the GI bill someday, but right now I’m not sure what I’d study. I just want to get away from everything and have a completely new start—a clean break.” *And get far away from anyone who knows.* He could still serve without risking anyone depending on him. Maybe out of the military he’d have a better shot at revenge, although that was probably a pipe dream.

“After all these years it might be fulfilling to try something completely new,” she agreed. “It’s much scarier than what you know, though.”

“Roger that, Ma’am,” he said. “I just don’t even know where to start. Sometimes I wonder if it’s right, after all the training I’ve had—combat skills, languages, all of it—to turn my back on it.”

“I can see that,” she replied. “On the other, hand, how many years do you think you can give? Ten more? Twenty? It will never be enough, if it’s only done out of duty. You deserve to find some contentment and joy in your own life, not be yoked to duty entirely. It takes time as well as courage for anyone to chart a new course.”

“Funny you should say that, Ma’am,” Trey said. “That’s the hardest thing for me now. I can’t decide if I’m a quitter for leaving or stupid if I stay. I’ll feel guilty either way.”

“Well, Staff Sergeant,” she said, “I can’t tell you what to do, but it’s my experienced professional opinion that you are neither stupid nor a quitter. I think you just need to have some patience. Give it time.”

