

Staff Sergeant Trey DeMarcus Warner held his breath and shoved his foot through his pants leg, past the healing blisters that extended up to his hip. It hurt like a mother but he'd be damned if he'd pay his respects wearing sweat pants.

Hospitalized during the funerals, he'd been out for four days. It was time.

He strode in his civvies to the parking lot outside the on-base housing, hiding his limp so he didn't have to answer any more damned questions. Sweat formed on his back and neck—even in February it could be humid at Camp Lejeune—but now it happened every time he went outside. His stomach churned. This was one trip he wasn't looking forward to.

He was nearly to his rig. A loud bang behind him made him whirl, ducking, reaching for a sidearm that wasn't there. Trey's heart pounded as he scanned for hostiles. Ignoring the pain in his right leg, he eased around the vehicle.

"Rah, bro—chill." Two young Marines headed across the lot, laughing. It was the goddamned door of their truck; distracted, he hadn't heard them climb out. *Assholes*. Trey didn't know them—a couple of boots, straight out of basic, but he didn't call them out.

Instead, Trey DeMarcus Warner of the Marine Special Operations Command, highly decorated veteran of dozens of engagements, stood trembling and hyperventilating, fists clenched, leaning against a car in the parking lot. He ended up calling a goddamned cab.

Trey took a deep breath and knocked on the door of Dawson's house, chest tight. Sheila answered the door, tired eyes brimming. She wore no makeup and her dark roots were showing. Guilt stabbed him.

"Hey, Sheila."

"Trey." Her breath caught and she flung her arms around him, weeping, her huge belly a reproach. She clung to him as if he mattered. A minute later, she let go.

"I'm sorry, Trey—come in."

She sat on the couch beside him, still sniffing. Only six months ago they'd all been here drinking toasts to Dawson's upcoming fatherhood.

"Trey, I'm so glad to see you. Are you okay? They said you were wounded, had a bad concussion." She clung to his hand, a worried frown on her face. "I'm sorry I didn't come to the hospital, I was..." she trailed off. Of course she hadn't come.

"Yeah, doing fine." Trey was alive. "How you doing, Sheila?" He nodded at her belly.

She blew her reddened nose and tried to smile. "Doing good. He's kicking a lot now." She reached to put Trey's hand on her belly. He fought nausea. The kid shoved against his hand. He'd be born without a father because of Trey.

"He kicks like a mule," Trey said. His throat tightened. "Gonna be as strong as his old man." He pulled back and filled his lungs. "Sheila—"

"Hush, Trey. It wasn't your fault." She started to cry again, clinging to him. There was nothing he could do. Sniffing, she went on, "I was so afraid this would happen, you know? So proud of him, but so afraid..." Her voice was thick. "But it wasn't your fault."

She sat hiccuping for a minute, then said, “Look at me—forgot all my manners.”

Heading into the kitchen, she called, “You want some lemonade?” Trey slumped forward, his head in his hands, breathing deep. He sat up straight as Sheila brought in two glasses.

“I’m so glad you came.” Easing onto the couch, she rubbed her back. “Rick always said there was no one on God’s green earth he’d rather have watching his back than you. He loved you like a brother.” She laughed. “Do you remember that time you guys filled Gunny’s car with condoms, right out of boot camp, because he was such a prick?”

Trey’s terse laugh pushed past his tight throat. “Yeah, I tasted rubber for days. We must have spent a hundred bucks on them. It took three hours to blow them all up, we were laughing so hard.”

“And then you almost got caught loading them in. Rick said you ran so fast, you must have been French. A little French girl, the way you yelped.” Dawson always put so much bullshit in his stories, but Trey didn’t argue this time. Sheila grew happier with all the memories. Each thudded into his guilt-laden soul like a brick. After an hour he couldn’t stay any longer.

Trey was almost home when on impulse, he said, “Hey, stop here.” The taxi dropped him off at the Liberty Risk Lounge right outside the gates. He’d never set foot here but after that visit he needed a drink, even though it was barely 16:00. He and his squad always dissed it as a babysitting place—just past the gates, perfect for new boots

too poor to afford taxis home afterwards—or loners with no designated driver. Perfect now for Trey.

The next morning Trey reported for his intake evaluation at the outpatient psychiatric clinic. The headache was 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 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. He didn't belong 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 grateful for the military discipline which kept him from fidgeting, but he was antsy as hell, worse than a little kid in church. 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 fourteen years ago.

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; the men he'd killed had just been following orders—and had families—just like his squad. He'd tried to be strong, but that was just bullshit now, a pose. And his mother wouldn't 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 sweats 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 and Fire Watch and Good Cookie medals.

"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 later.”

“When your mother died? 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.

“What about 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.

“You signed up at eighteen?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He’d joined up the second he didn’t need his new guardian’s signature. “With respect, Ma’am, all this is in my file.”

The Major paused. "For this first visit, I'd like to hear it from you."

"First visit?" Trey said, dismayed. "I hoped we could wrap it up today." He tried his best smile.

The Major was unmoved. "No, you'll need testing and several more visits, minimum."

*Goddammit.* Trey's smile blinked out and a muscle flickered in his jaw.

She flipped 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 you sustained burns and a serious concussion, when—"

"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 ‘survivor’s guilt.’ 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, “I’m doing okay.”

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. Both choices 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.

Trey headed straight from his CTE testing to the Liberty Risk. He'd thought that Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy was something that happened to boxers and football players, but they said he was at risk for his brains rotting from the concussion. *Hell, might as well pickle them now.* The bartender nodded, reaching for a bottle of Jack. He said something to the doughy civilian kid sitting in Trey's spot at the end near the exit. The kid cleared out before Trey crossed the room.

He sat on the still-warm seat, nodded to the bartender, and tossed back the whiskey ditch waiting for him. 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 booze would help with that, too.

The barkeep set down another and Trey drank half, scanning the room again. It was the usual after-work crowd—new Marines and the girls who came here like tourists watching zoo animals.

*Jesus.* If he got CTE what was he going to do? He gulped the rest of his drink. What he was going to do was drink enough to feel even number than he already did. Unless someone volunteered to help him feel alive for a few hours instead. Whichever one it was didn't really matter.

His cutoff for anything to develop was always 22:00. 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. This morning, he couldn't even remember the girl's name, and she wasn't nearly as cute as she was the night before.

Trey drank until 23:00, then staggered home alone.