

SILENT SURVIVOR
BY
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"The United States shall renounce the use of lethal biological agents and weapons, and all other methods of biological warfare. The United States will confine its biological research to defensive measures such as immunization and safety measures."

President Richard M. Nixon in a November 25, 1969 speech titled "Statement on Chemical and Biological Defense Policies and Programs" from Fort Detrick

Prologue

Daintree Australia
Research lab, Mossie Pharmaceuticals
1989
Winter

"Jesus!" Shaking his head in disbelief, the sandy-haired post-doc held up the research file.

"You're sure about this?"

His younger colleague, also a PhD, ran a hand through thick, disheveled locks. "No doubt, mate. It's there in almost every chimp I've autopsied."

"Have you told anyone?"

"Just you," he said, tugging awkwardly at his rumpled jeans.

"What are you gonna do?"

"I've got to let the muckety-mucks at corporate know."

"Whistle blowing can be risky."

"Yeah. Haven't slept for the past few nights wondering how this will affect my career."

He gathered all the notes and stuffed them into his backpack. "But then I realized I have no choice. It's not just the company's national reputation at stake. It's the implications for patients."

"Of course, you're right. Are you leaving tonight?"

"I've booked the eight o'clock to Sydney on Virgin Blue."

"It's almost six. Better get a move on. How 'bout I get my car and drive you to the airport?"

"You sure? Wouldn't want to put you out."

"No worries. Meet me outside in fifteen minutes." His smile was genuine. "After all, what are friends for?"

The winter Australian sun had already slipped into the horizon when the young PhD stepped off the curb without looking. He heard the car before he saw it. A moonless sky made it impossible to see it coming – especially since the driver had deliberately neglected to turn on the headlights. Squeal of tires, an engine's accelerating roar were the last sounds he registered as thirty-six hundred pounds of steel slammed into his body, catapulting him onto and then over the hood of the Holden, landing with a horrible thud on the road. He never heard the car door open or the approaching footsteps falling heavily on asphalt, then quickly fading as the driver, having grabbed the backpack, turned and walked back to his car, satisfied that his problem was solved.

Days later, long after the body was discovered and loaded onto the Port Douglas ME's van and the scene analyzed, the final report labeled the "hit and run" a terrible accident with nothing to

suggest the real truth.

CHAPTER 1

Monday, August 18, 2008
South Florida

Stepping into the darkened VA hospital PTSD clinic, Mackenzie Dodd heard the faint click of the revolver before she saw its barrel pressed against the young sergeant's sweat-beaded temple. The stench of his body odor filled the small space. Standing with his back to the far window, he was eerily illuminated by a tiny, bright swath of early morning light.

“Don't come any farther.”

Mackenzie couldn't recall his last name. PJ something. He'd joined these sessions only a week before - another victim of multiple back-to-back tours in Iraq. So many of these poor vets sent off to seemingly endless Middle East wars. Like her, he hardly spoke in group, but she remembered the handsome twentysomething because last time he'd dressed in tight jeans and a T-shirt that accentuated a muscular physique. Today he'd chosen a full Marine combat uniform. That and his grim-lipped expression made him appear a much older man.

“Stay back.” He pointed the gun at her, the barrel wobbling slightly.

Mackenzie stopped near the open doorway, not sure what to do.

At ten to nine the circle of chairs was empty. None of the other patients had arrived yet. It

would probably be after nine before Dr. Mills showed. The laid-back therapy leader was notoriously late. Mackenzie, on the other hand, was obsessive about being on time, even early – just one manifestation of her need to be in control, no doubt a result of a chaotic childhood and these days, the only sense of control it seemed she had left.

Switching to nursing mode, though a member of the group herself, Mackenzie feigned calm. This young man was obviously on an emotional hair trigger. Anything might set him off.

“You’re PJ, right?” She spoke slowly, measuring each word like someone tiptoeing around a land mine. “I’m Mackenzie. My buds call me Mac.”

PJ remained silent, his stare a blank, but at least he lowered the revolver, holding it shakily at his side.

Desperate to distract him, Mackenzie noticed his half-bitten nails, then spotted the gold band on his left ring finger. She’d discarded her own not long ago. “Think about your wife. Don’t leave her like this.”

Hesitating, as if trying to determine the value in conversation, he finally responded in a low rasp, his tone bitter. “She left me after my last deployment. Moved from San Diego to her mom’s in Deerfield Beach. Sent me a fucking email.” He shook his head. “A fucking email. Said I’d changed too much. Refused my calls. I couldn’t...” His voice trailed off. “I begged her to start over. Said I’d sign up for therapy at the VA. Took me six fucking months to get into this group.” He focused on the ceiling for a moment, then back at Mackenzie. When he blinked, a tear traveled down his cheek. “Last night she said it was too late.”

“It’s never too late.” Mackenzie uttered the words, not sure she believed them. Her own marriage hadn’t survived the war. Swallowing hard, she observed PJ’s shoulder insignia,

remembering Semper Fi tattooed on his bare bicep when he'd worn a T-shirt to the last session.

“Thundering Third?” she asked.

An evanescent smile flickered across PJ's angular face at the mention of the nickname given to the “3/1- 3rd” infantry battalion, 1st marine out of Camp Horno.

Mackenzie had also been deployed from Pendleton. “Were you in Fallujah?”

PJ acknowledged her question with the barest nod.

“Me too,” she said. “Nursing corps. Which operation?”

“First time. Phantom Fury.”

Mackenzie did a quick calculation. That was four years ago. Mid-2004. The 3/1 had been sent in to clear the infamous Jolan District, to reclaim the city of Fallujah from unrest and capture or kill insurgents responsible for the deaths of a Blackwater Security team. Considered the bloodiest battle of the Iraq war, it took its toll on too many youngsters like PJ.

And now the young marine was recounting how he'd been re-deployed back to Iraq in 2005 and again in 2007. “Operation Phantom Thunder in Western Iraq.”

“Wounded?”

Using the barrel of his gun, he traced a thick ribbon of scar that ran from the corner of his mouth to just below his right eye. “I was taking a leak a few yards from our HumVee when the IED killed my two buddies. A fucking leak. Can you believe that? It should have been me.”

Mackenzie exhaled, imagining all the horrors this kid must have seen. She was no psychologist, but she'd suffered her own trauma from that war and was well aware of the internal scars most of these vets carried – especially when they'd dodged a bullet only to watch their comrades die. Survivor's guilt had led to more suicides than the Army was willing to

acknowledge. Just another of their dirty little secrets, she thought bitterly, reminded of her own buried wounds.

“Listen, PJ. I understand. I do.” Her throat was so dry each syllable seemed to stick. “I know about the nightmares, the pain.”

“Then you know I see them everywhere. Dead Hajjis, dead Americans. And their cries. It’s deafening.” He looked at her with sad, dull eyes. “But it all makes perfect sense now. I know what I have to do and it makes so much sense.”

MacKenzie held her breath, dread slinking down her spine from the sheer inevitability of his utterance. It was quiet enough to hear the ticking of the wall clock as the second hand swept closer to the moment when the others would appear. “Please, PJ. Listen to me,” she begged, slowly moving toward him. “You’re upset now, but you can get help here. You don’t have to do this.”

His voice was low and preternaturally calm. “No...no, I have to die. I have to leave this earth and go up to God. I have to be part of God's army with my men. I have to stop the pain. Too much pain. This is the only way.” He put his hands over his ears. “The pain keeps screaming in my head. It never stops. Oh God, stop the pain.”

Approaching footsteps just outside the therapy room made Mackenzie swivel to look and in that split second she heard the unmistakable blast of PJ’s gun. In the small space the sound reverberated like thunder.

“No!” she screamed, turning back to see PJ’s body slump to the floor, a pool of blood forming around his head like a crimson halo. His eyes, mercifully, were closed.

“So you were here all alone with the victim?”

“Sorry?” Mackenzie turned to the West Palm Beach police officer seated beside her, his pen poised over a fresh page in a spiral pad. Handsome in his crisp uniform, he couldn’t have been more than twenty-five or maybe thirty, she thought, aware that he was watching her curiously, probably wondering why she appeared so calm.

It was a ruse. For the past hour she’d been cocooned in a state of shock, her mind numb, as VA administration, hospital security and local law enforcement had swooped in and begun dealing with the situation.

She was perched on one of the empty metal chairs that earlier had been arranged in a circle, anticipating the members of the therapy group.

Now all but two of the chairs had been pushed off to the corners to make room for the number of people flowing in and out. The moment any therapy patients appeared in the doorway, they’d been whisked off, away from the scene, leaving only Mackenzie to answer what seemed like endless questions, first from hospital security and now local police.

“Why did you arrive so early?”

“Why didn't you call for help?”

“How well did you know the victim?”

All questions she’d already asked herself.

But no one had asked the unanswerable: Why *hadn't* she done more to stop PJ?

Mackenzie stared blankly at the wall, trying to ignore the blood congealing on the floor by the window and the flash of the medical examiner’s camera as two men from the ME’s office

lifted the marine's body onto a gurney and wheeled it past her. Too painful to think of a young man's life reduced to this: a stain others would struggle to scrub away.

"Miss Dodd?"

The officer's voice brought her back to the moment. "You were all alone with the victim?"

The victim.

"Yes, I came in around ten to nine and found PJ standing over by the window with a gun to his head. I only met him last week in group. I really didn't know him." Though her expression remained blank, her voice quivered as she relayed her short conversation with the distraught marine. "I tried to stop..." Unable to continue, her emotional dam burst. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Seemingly appearing out of nowhere, Dr. Mills stepped over and gave Mackenzie's shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Officer, I'm the psychiatrist leading this therapy group. I don't really think there's anything Ms. Dodd can add."

Mackenzie turned to look at the doctor, grateful for his intervention.

"You need to go home and rest," he told her.

Mackenzie nodded. She wanted nothing more than to escape the nightmare.

"Oh and take the rear entrance," Mills added, handing her a Kleenex. "I hear there's already a couple of TV vans camped out front. No point in making the sergeant's death a sideshow."

The police officer flipped his pad closed. "Of course, doctor. You're right."

Mackenzie noted the policeman's curious look again before he handed her his card.

“Just in case you think of anything that might be helpful,” he said. “I realize this is difficult for you. Go home.”

Some time after Mackenzie left the hospital, one of the staff grabbed the receiver on his desk phone and dialed a memorized number in Washington. “I’m afraid we’ve had another suicide.”

The curse on the other end was barely audible. “Any physical symptoms?”

“His medical record mentions a complaint of some muscle twitches. Looks like the PA who saw him chalked it up to insomnia related to depression. Gave him a script of Lexapro and sent him back to the PTSD clinic.”

“Guess the good news is your staff’s not only underpaid, but too overworked to recognize the early signs.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Make sure there’s no autopsy.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Can you delete the medical note?”

“Can do.”

“And follow-up with family. Call if they start asking questions.”

“I understand.”

“I hope you do.” The voice on the other end was cold. “This is too valuable an operation. We can’t afford any further leakage.”

“Yes sir,” the administrator said, adding “God bless America” before hanging up.