

You want me to talk about Cody?" White demanded. "What is this, the Jeremy White worst hits collection?"

Michelle remained calm. She hadn't raised her voice once, and in the last exchange had merely sped up the pace of her demanding questions without changing tone. And it had worked, getting White to directly address the emotional trauma from the IED and the death of his squad. Raising her voice would only undo the progress she'd made so far and destroy the chance she had now that there were open emotional wounds to press. "These are important events we need to cover."

"I've got other important events that actually went well, too. Like kicking ISIS's ass with an international Spec Ops team."

"We'll get to those, don't worry."

"Oh goodie," White replied, sarcasm dripping from his words. "Why am I somehow not looking forward to what you have to say about it? Can we just not instead?"

Michelle spread her hands and shrugged. "We could. But then we wouldn't be able to finish your discharge evaluation today."

"You said this wasn't a normal eval though," White scoffed.

"It's your choice. If you don't want to continue, I can leave."

Michelle reached for her briefcase and started to put the clipboard away, but White interrupted, standing and reaching out as if to physically hold her back. Roberts took two steps forward, hand on his baton again, but White reversed direction. It all happened in an eye blink, and Roberts was left standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, with White and Michelle both sitting in their former seats. Exactly as she'd planned.

"So, Cody Pacheco?" Michelle asked, ignoring what had just happened.

White sighed and slumped in his chair. "Yeah. Cody fucking Pacheco. You're not supposed to know his name, by the way. Even with your clearance."

"And why is that?"

"Because the only thing that ties me to him is my juvie record, and that's supposed to be sealed."

Michelle smiled knowingly. "With everything else I clearly know, do you really think that I wouldn't be able to find out about your senior year?"

"Whatever. What do you want to know?"

Michelle picked the clipboard back up and pretended to look for information to buy some time. White was just as dangerous as his files had said. He was fast. He was fast enough that she hadn't even realized he'd moved until it was too late, and she'd been watching for it. If he ever actually intended to attack her, he would succeed. She wouldn't be able to react in time, and neither would Roberts. He had weapons and body armor, but White would take her out before anyone else in the room could even twitch.

But it wouldn't come to that. She knew how to push White's buttons now, to swing him back and forth between fury and calm, from anger to sadness. All she had to do was be firm in her questions and use her words as weapons. White thought that by holding his outrage back and staying in control, he was winning their chess game. He hadn't figured out that Michelle was playing Risk.

"You were a model student in high school," she pretended to read from the clipboard. "You had a combined GPA of 3.8 your

first three years. You went All Conference as starting safety, power forward in basketball, and student body vice president."

"That last one was for show," White interrupted. "You know a VP doesn't actually do anything, right?"

Michelle allowed herself to laugh at that. Emotionally damaged and traumatized he might be, but White was legitimately charming. "Everyone knows that. But it looks good on resumes when you run for president."

"College apps too," White pointed out.

"That too. And it seems like it worked. You said before that you were working with a recruiter. You didn't mention that you'd been accepted to the Marine NROTC at the University of Nebraska."

He had to have seen that coming, especially after Michelle had asked about the recruiter earlier, but that fact still seemed to hit White like a mouthful of skunk. Face screwed up in disgust, he grunted an assent "Yeah. I was."

"So you wanted to be an officer. Did you want to be a sniper?"

"At that point? No. That came later."

"Did you have a specialty in mind?"

White scoffed a little, as though the memory was bitter. "Combat engineer."

"That's quite different from a sniper."

"Things changed," White replied. "My grandpa was a Seabee. He made airstrips in the Pacific Theater in World War II, and then my folks had the hardware store. So, I figured I'd build things. But after Iraq, I realized it was easier to take things down."

"So why not demolitions? Or artillery?"

He shrugged. "Could have worked, I guess. But I went Raider first. And then my marksmanship was good enough I decided to try for sniper. And I was good at that too." He smiled at the accomplishments. It was good that he had moved on from the previous topic, but unfortunately, Michelle was about to knock him back down.

"But you enlisted instead."

"Well after Cody got done with me, I didn't have much of a choice, did I? I was lucky I even graduated after that motherfucker was done with me."

Michelle flipped to another page of notes. "That's right. You had a 3.8 GPA, but your last semester senior year was only a 1.4 with no extracurriculars and a three-month suspension."

White's response was cold and bitter. "Yeah. That happened."

"What did happen? Your academic record says you assaulted another student."

"I'd say to read my file, but it's not supposed to be in there. And you know it all anyway."

"I do," Michelle admitted.

"Then you know I beat the shit out of Cody, and you know why. And you know that when the cops got involved, I had to keep quiet about what he did so that I didn't go to jail."

"You wouldn't have gone to jail. You would have gone to trial."

White snorted. "Bullshit. That asswipe was Tulare royalty. His dad was chief of police, and his mom was on the school board. You think I would have gotten off? They would have thrown away the key. But they decided to let me go so their little golden fuckwit didn't get in trouble."

"But why did it happen?"

"I told you. I beat the shit out of him." The response was humorous rather than evasive, so Michelle didn't try to push harder. She let out a little laugh and gestured for him to continue. When he did, his smile and tone were predatory. "He deserved worse."

"What did he do, though? His high school record is better than yours."

"Sure, his record is," White spat. "Not like he actually earned it."

Michelle continued as though he hadn't said anything. "4.2 GPA, basketball team captain, Honors Club president, star of the school musical... I could go on."

"Oh please do. It's been 10 years since I had to hear about how perfect that motherfucker was. I could really use a reminder."

"He's an Eagle Scout, too. But I take it you don't want to know what he's done since high school?"

White put his hands behind his head and looked at the ceiling, then blew a fat raspberry. "You know what? I really, really don't."

Michelle let a little laughter slip out. He really could be funny. "And I don't need to tell you how your encounter went down in the books."

"Oh no, I was there, remember? He tried to stop me because I had booze in the locker room, and then I beat him up to keep him quiet. He got to be a martyr, I got suspended for three months, and when I got back, I was barely able to catch up enough to graduate."

"So why don't you tell me what happened?"

"I just did."

"I said what happened. Not what got written down."

White stood up quickly. Roberts twitched by the door, but didn't move to stop the gunnery sergeant as he made his way toward the mini fridge next to the sink. White knelt and sighed audibly. "I get that they don't let me have brews. But no caffeine is just fucked up."

"This is still a hospital," Roberts intoned from the door.

"Oh really, fuckwit? I had no idea! I thought you made me piss in a cup every morning for fun!" White stood with a child's juice box in hand. He pulled the minute straw off the back, looked at it in disgust, then stabbed the box and drained it in one long pull. He threw it into a garbage can with more force than could ever have been deemed necessary and let out a shudder. "And it's cran-apple too. I fucking hate cranberry. So. What are you going to make me tell you now?"

"What happened with Cody Pacheco?" Michelle calmly repeated.

White sighed again. "Honestly it's not complicated. It's just fucked up."

"You're avoiding the question."

"No shit, Sherlock." White looked surprised as he said that and blinked hard. "Sorry ma'am, I didn't mean you."

That was a bad sign. He had been warming up and handling everything decently, even if he was using humor to deflect trauma. But now he was shutting down and that couldn't happen. Michelle still needed him to explain everything on his own terms. The humor, she knew, was the key. He had two ways of dealing with the painful memories: either he shut down or joked. The first option was a nonstarter, so she went with the second.

"It's Michelle, remember? That's a fifth tally."

It worked. He groaned, rolled his eyes, and then sat down again. "Fine. You want to know what happened?"

"I want you to tell me."

"He had roofies."

Michelle knew this, of course, so it wasn't a surprise. Neither was Roberts' audible gasp when he put the pieces together a moment later.

White heard it too. "Yeah that's right, asshole. The all-star was going all date-rapey, and when I stopped him, I was the one who got thrown under the bus. Forever."

"How did you know he had flunitrazepam?" Michelle asked.

"*Gesundheit.*"

"Rohypnol."

"Oh, the roofies. I knew because I had ears," White scoffed. "Told everyone in the locker room about how his sophomore girlfriend wouldn't put out so he was going to get her drunk."

"That's-" Roberts started, but White cut him off.

"Fucked up? Yeah. Thanks for noticing. And look what happened."

"What did happen?" Michelle probed.

"I already told you. I beat the shit out of him." He set his jaw, but sighed when Michelle didn't respond. "Okay, eventually I beat the shit out of him. But it's not like I went straight in throwing punches. Even though I wanted to."

"So what happened?" she asked yet again.

White sighed as he searched for words. "I told him that was fucked up. He said whatever, one thing led to another, and we fought."

"No," Michelle stated. "You're leaving things out."

"Do you really think I remember one conversation from ten years ago?"

Michelle just stared at him. "You remember four songs from a playlist on a patrol in Baghdad. You remember the exact length of one of them. You remember the coffee mug your mother broke on September 11. Don't start pretending you're dumb."

"But what if I am?" White shot back. His ire was rising now. "Didn't you see my grades? I failed Art. And fucking PE. How the fuck do you fail PE?"

"By being suspended for most of the semester. You're a sniper. We both know how smart you must be to have achieved that. Now answer the question."

"It's a stupid fucking question," he snapped.

"Is it?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you."

"Do you think a gag order for a juvenile civil dispute 10 years ago matters here?"

He opened his mouth to say something else but shut it stubbornly and took a long, controlled breath through his nose. "I told him to flush the roofies or I'd report him."

"And how did he react?" Michelle asked.

"Laughed it off. Said to go ahead."

"And did you?"

White clenched his jaw. "I was about to. But the fight started instead."

"You're answering without answering again. Should I start keeping track of when you do that, too?" Michelle lifted her pen as though to make a tally mark, but White shook his head. "Who threw the first punch?"

"I did," he muttered.

"You said you were going to report him?"

"I was on my way. I was heading toward the coach's office when I thought about it. The little fucker was right. I could report him, but he'd get rid of the pills and I'd look like I was making up shit. Meanwhile he'd go buy more from the same place he got his GHB and Molly."

"And that's when you punched him?"

"So I went back to the locker room. And I tried to take them. And then the fight started."

"You mean, that's when you punched him," Michelle corrected.

"Yeah, that. Oh crap, you put the clipboard down again."

She smiled at how he'd picked up on that mannerism of hers.

"So you know what's coming next then?"

"Yeah, now you make me feel like shit about this whole mess."

Michelle thought about that. "Perhaps, but that's a side effect. This is the part where I sum up what you've told me. You said that the star student had date rape drugs. You threatened to report him but realized that it wouldn't stop him, so you took matters into your own hands. And after you won the fight, you were charged with assault. Then, you took a plea deal against a rigged system for no jail time, a sealed juvenile record, and a gag order. The criminal record meant you couldn't go to ROTC, but once you turned 18, the file was sealed so you could still enlist."

White blinked. "Uh, yeah. That sounds like pretty much it."

"Except there's one thing I don't get."

"Shit."

"Why were the drugs such a big deal?"

White looked flabbergasted. "Roofies? As in date rape drugs? It says 'rape' right there in the name."

"And you'd never heard of them being used before?" Michelle asked. "You had always reacted exactly this violently to any proposed sexual assault? Really, Hotdog?"

White let out a low growl. "I'm not a rapist."

"But you're still a womanizer."

"I get mine. But I'm not a fucking rapist," he repeated.

"But Cody was, wasn't he?" Michelle let her voice drop into the serious lower tones. "You already said he got GHB regularly."

"I already told you that he had roofies," White argued. "What else do you want me to say?"

"Who was he going to rape?"

"I told you that too. His girlfriend."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know! Why does it matter?" White threw up his hands and stood again, stalking toward the mini fridge.

"Because you're not telling me everything. You already said it was a sophomore. You know who it was."

"I don't, okay?" White yelled into the open fridge.

It was obvious he did. Even Roberts was just watching, waiting for the answer. Michelle went for the kill. "You're many things, Jeremy, but you're not a liar. Who was she?"

White slammed the refrigerator door so hard that one of the hinges broke. When he finally answered, his voice was a scream of anger and pain. "It was Jenna, okay! He was going to rape Jenna! Are you happy now?"

Michelle calmed her voice back to conversational levels.
"And you defended your sister."

"Of course I fucking did!" White raged. "What do you think I was going to do, just let that shit happen? I beat the shit out of that asshole and knocked his fucking face flat for what he was going to do! And what did I get out of it? I got my whole life fucked over! You tell me if that's fair!"

"I never said it was," she replied calmly.

White was still yelling, screaming at the ceiling, and kicking the walls. "You're god damned right it's not!" He picked up a chair and looked like he was going to throw it but slammed it hard against the floor instead. "They tell you to stand up for little guy, to help the defenseless. But in the end, it's the rich fuckers with important parents who do whatever the fuck they want. And people like me who actually do the right thing? We get shit on. No one even fucking says thank you! And then, when I let someone die, I get a fucking medal!"

A squawk of static interrupted him as someone called Roberts' radio. "All clear," he muttered into it.

White panted as he leaned heavily on the chair. The outburst had actually been healthy, as violent as it looked. In the last hour, White had confronted two of the most traumatic events of his life. He was allowed to take some frustration out on a government-issue seating device. But Michelle still had more to unpack. "I'm sure Jenna said thank you."

White's body shook as he clenched the chair's vinyl back. The skin of his fingers was white, and the veins in his neck stood out in incoherent rage. "You think so? Then you really don't fucking know that bitch?"

"She didn't?"

"You already know all the fucking answers," he seethed.

"I want you to tell me."

"She couldn't thank me. Because she wasn't allowed to know," White growled. "All she knew was that I beat the shit out of her god of a boyfriend. The guy who ruled the school and she was so in love with. That went out with her even though she was an underclassman. And then he dumped her, and she blamed me."

The next part was going to hurt him badly, but White was opening up now, and the emotions were raw. Michelle had to keep pushing if she was going to be able to leverage them. "But didn't she get over it eventually?"

White snorted. "Yeah right. I've been a fuckup to her ever since. I'm the bastard that ruined high school for her. Because I picked a fight with her boy toy."

"Because you did the right thing."

"Because I did the right thing."

"And you were punished for it."

"And I was punished for it."

Michelle nodded slowly as White looked up to meet her eyes. "So you found somewhere you could do the right thing without being punished."

"What?"

She moved in on the opening. She had him now. "Spec Ops. The operations are classified. You do the right thing when it's not pretty. And no one holds it against you."

White shook his head. "It's not like that."

"Of course it is. You said yourself that the people who do the right things get punished, and when you mess up, you get rewarded. So you went somewhere that you could do what you

thought was right without being punished, and wouldn't get rewarded because your mistakes would be classified."

"No."

"You became a sniper. And you killed terrible people."

"I killed terrorists."

"Terrorists are terrible people; isn't that what everyone in Tulare thought?" Michelle continued, not slowing down.

"They're terrible people, like Cody."

"That's not what I said."

"And when CJTF-613 came looking for a sniper, you said yes to something even more secret."

"No. Well I mean yes, but--"

"And you continued to kill bad people with even less oversight. So your medals are classified just like your victims."

"You're just twisting things now. It's not like that," White exclaimed.

"Like your Silver Star."

"Don't do this."

"Like your victims in Mosul."

"Stop it!"

Michelle didn't stop. "Your victims like Khalid Yousef."

