

# “STROUD, STROUD, STROUD!”

By Elisha Joseph

Her scrub brush stopped short on the gray tile floor when she heard her company shouting, summoning her in a sort of primitive intercom. When Chief Sanderson, the lead Company Commander, bellowed a recruit’s name from his compartment the company would echo the name of the unlucky recruit in perfect unison. There was no pretending you didn’t hear when seventy people called you. Being called was usually not a good thing; for Samantha Stroud it never was. She tried swallowing, but found she was parched, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth; “cotton mouth,” her mama would have called it. The dryness of her tongue contrasted with the cold sweat that now covered the rest of her body, making her clothes and thick brown hair plaster to her.

The door of the head flung open and Hayes, an overgrown ginger from Tulsa, popped her bug-eyed face through the doorway whisper-screamed, “Stroud, he called for you from his office. You better hurry! All he wants to do is talk to you about your billet. He called the rest of us in while you and Childers were down at laundry.”

Stroud nodded her head, but couldn’t summon any words. She stood, her bare knees crisscrossed with lines from the hour of labor she’d put into the bathroom floor. She was

Texan stout, athletic, but the weight of hearing her own name echoing through the squad bay made her feel as though she was morbidly obese. Walking slowly to the door, dread fell on her as she left the safe haven of the head, the only place her Company Commander wasn’t free to follow her to.

On her way through the female section of the squad bay, Stroud glanced at the clock that hung over her top bunk, its hands resting momentarily at 20:59. Many of her fellow shipmates from X-Ray company had already fallen into their racks for the evening, exhausted, but at ease compared to Stroud and the weight of the secret she bore. She thought of the nights she’d lain awake watching its hands quietly tick the hours away, fighting sleep. She knew once she drifted off he’d be there, haunting her dreams the same way that he haunted her life by day. She would dream of the stares that had turned to words, the words that had turned to hands moving about her body. She knew what was next.

She walked through the door of the main squad bay where the males slept, putting her hair up into a sloppy bun as she went. She noticed her hands didn’t shake the way they used to as she walked toward his compartment. The fear that had once consumed her now had been replaced by something much worse—

defeat. Unlike defeat, fear still carried the feeling of being alive with it, making her sharp and watchful. What fell on her now made her feel dull and heavy, as if she had rotted inside and carried around her own dead weight.

On the quarter deck, the overhead lights shut off and left her alone in the dim passageway. As a little girl, the dark had terrified her and she'd insisted her mama plug in her Donald Duck nightlight before she'd lie down. Now the dark no longer fazed her, but she was more convinced than ever that the monsters she'd always thought lurked in the dark did exist. She knew now that they came out even when the lights were on, when you were wide awake and unable to convince yourself it was just a bad dream.

She stood outside his compartment, not bothering to knock. He knew she was there.

"Get in here, Stroud, we have things to discuss."

She stepped inside, just barely past the door frame. The scar that ran along his right cheek seemed to grow as he smirked at her.

"Close that door behind you. I spoke to everyone else earlier, but I figured I'd save my best for last."

She stepped inside, the click of the door behind her ringing in her ears. She stood at attention in front of the desk his feet were propped up on, his combat boots resting on the file he'd gone through many times since her arrival. He had read it front to back and had the black and white version of Samantha Stroud memorized. To him, the papers within were all she was; an average student, lacking in the academic skill to get a scholarship and though mildly attractive, not enough of a looker to marry out of hard work. He'd observed she kept her mouth shut, worked hard, and would have

encountered little out of the ordinary resistance had she belonged to another company.

He crossed his hands behind his head, his watery blue eyes moving up and down her body. They finally rested on the blue Coast Guard lettering across the full bust. He made no effort to hide his wandering eyes. They were well acquainted now.

"Sector Lower Mississippi River, huh Stroud? Wasn't quite what you bargained for when you joined the Coast Guard, was it?"

The normality of the conversation caught her off guard. She hadn't even been aware that the Coast Guard existed in Memphis. When she'd enlisted, she'd thought of the summer visits her

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family made to Padre Island every year growing up, an annual reprieve from the hard work the entire family put in on her father's ranch. Out of all of the recruits in her company, she had gotten the only inland billet. Clearing her throat, she rushed to answer before his mind drifted elsewhere. An inland billet was the least of her worries at the moment, but she hoped to keep the conversation from

taking a dive into silence and what lay below its surface.

"No, Chief Sanderson, I hadn't. I'll make the best of it."

She kept her eyes glued to the wall behind him, to the commendations for outstanding service, his certificate of completion of the Gunners Mate program, Chief's School, and several other certificates from his tours on various ships and land units. Comically, an MVP certificate from high school, the Joplin MO Fighting Eagles, hung in the midst of his career success—past glory he couldn't let go of.

Still smirking, he stood and walked around the desk as he had done many times since her

arrival. She instinctively tensed, knowing what the nearness of his body would ultimately bring. “Good god, look at that hair. Didn’t we teach you better?” He reached up and grabbed the thick brown hair that had fallen from a bun to a ponytail, his lips brushing her ear. “See, we tell you to keep your hair in a tight bun for a reason, but this place is so PC now it makes me sick to my stomach. These days I have to save these lessons for private. The reason for the bun, Stroud, is that if your hair is loose, I can grab you, do whatever I want with you. Your body has to follow where your head goes.”

Shoving her forward, he wrapped her ponytail around his hand, yanking her head back so hard her neck made a loud pop. She didn’t bother fighting back. The fight was already lost. Her face slammed into a cheap Dollar Store frame on his desk, its edge digging into her cheek, drawing blood. He was muttering something behind her, asking her how a real man felt. Pain shot through her body, queuing her mother’s voice in her mind, as she gave her older sister Leigh Anne The Talk, just before her wedding. “Now darlin’, it’s always a little rough on the first time, but it’s just something we girls have to bear. He loves you just the same...” A single tear rolled down her face, pooling on the image that stared back from the glass of the frame. Stroud held her breath and stared at the face of a small girl with bright blue eyes and a toothless smile, wearing a Coast Guard hat that clearly belonged to someone much larger—his daughter.

Finishing with her, he went into the small head that was attached to his office and began washing up in the sink. She remained frozen in front of his desk, staring down at the trickle of bright red blood running down her leg, soaking into her athletic sock. Like every recruit, his instructions and words had been Gospel for four weeks and she now found herself incapable of functioning unless by his command.

She thought of running out the door but

stayed motionless knowing it was pointless before she’d even fully processed the thought. If she ran, there was nowhere to go. There was no safety net, no person to confide in. To dial 9-1-1 was to be answered by the base fire department, where the Chief’s softball teammates manned the lines. Even the chaplain, Father Bailey, was not a safe option. She had heard the two men chat before chapel last Sunday, making dinner plans for the following night.

“Get in here, Samantha! We’re well acquainted now; I can call you Samantha, can’t I?”

It took a moment for her first name to register with her. It had become so unfamiliar that her reaction to hearing it was delayed. She considered it a part of herself that she would never get back again. She was Stroud now. Seaman Recruit Stroud. “FE-MALE!” From the first day her gender had been spat at her like it was a dirty word, the Coast Guard-approved euphemism for “bitch.”

She slowly made her way into the head, not knowing what else he could possibly do to her. He turned on the shower, making steam immediately fill the small room.

“Strip those clothes off and get in the shower.” He held out the dirty cloth he’d just washed with, streaked with her blood. She stared at him, her last ounce of dignity paralyzing her where she stood. He brushed her sweaty hair back from her face and whispered in her ear, “Don’t act shy now, Stroud. I gave you exactly what you wanted. That’s the only reason women join the military. It’s a little for piety. Oh, and Stroud? Open that pretty mouth of yours to anyone and I’ll tell everyone I caught you and Childers going at it in the ladder well. Don’t you forget, I own you now.”

Closing her eyes, she held her hand out, willing herself to disappear, but knowing that it wouldn’t happen. Gritting her teeth, she did the one thing she had learned to do since joining the Coast Guard. Blindly obey.

When she stepped out of the shower, red from the near scalding water she'd endured, he threw a set of fresh PT gear at her and shook his head. "Get out of here, Stroud. We have a long day ahead tomorrow. I need you rested."

Shaking, she turned and walked out of the room, leaving him with his feet propped up on the desk, hands behind his head, the same position as when she'd first walked in.

Sucking his teeth, he looked at the clock on the wall and realized he should have gone home to his family an hour ago. He thought of the difference between here and the home he had become a stranger to and realized he had no desire to be there. He picked up his phone, SCHEDULE CHANGE, STANDING DUTY. C U TOMORROW NIGHT. Turning off the light, he settled back into his chair, pulling his campaign cover over his eyes, feet back on the desk. Tomorrow he would go home to the family that he was detached from, two screaming toddlers and the wife he never wanted to touch. While he was home, control would be lost, the monotony of family and responsibility dulling his mind. But for now, he was in his domain and he would sleep well. After all, it was good to be god.

In a haze of shock and throbbing pain, Stroud made her way back to the head, but found that she no longer felt safe there anymore. She was positive nowhere on Earth was safe. Rocking back and forth, she wrapped her arms around her knees, shaking from the damp and cold tile floor. Goosebumps covered the legs she hadn't shaved in over two weeks, making the hair stand at attention. She tried to slow her mind, but it all ran together, the words, the smells, the ache of her body. She now felt like she might drown in the tears she'd been determined to hold back for so long.

She thought of her tobacco-chewing, sun-leathered father and how she would never be

able to look at him again. He had raised her to be tough, telling her if any boy ever looked at her cross to "sock 'em in the nose, Sammie!". Her well-meaning mother would smother her, not realizing that affection of any kind now turned her stomach. She thought of her home in Kermit, Texas, and how quickly news from its residents spread like wildfire. She could hear her sister's best friend Becca, the chronic gossip, at the Saturday night bonfire, "Well, this didn't come from me, but did you hear about Leigh Anne's little sister?" Thoughts of home and the familiarity of the things she knew stood at odds with the world she now found herself in, making her head spin.

Quiet blanketed the squad bay and she became conscious of the sound of her own breathing and the noise it made when she blinked her eyes. The answer came to her, a calm sickness settling over her mind. She pulled out the ink pen and performance tracker she was required to carry in her sock and began to write in the capital block letters she'd been brainwashed into using:

MAMA AND DADDY, TRY TO UNDERSTAND. I NEVER WANTED THIS TO HAPPEN. HE DIDN'T GIVE ME A CHOICE, SO I HAVE TO DO WHAT I HAD TO DO. I KNOW YOU WON'T THINK SO, BUT GOD WILL UNDERSTAND. SOMETIMES IT TAKES A SIN TO STOP A SIN. TELL GRANDMA NIECIE I AM SO SORRY. LOVE YOU FOREVER AND ALWAYS. – SAMMIE

Folding the paper, she stuck it into the bottom of the sole of her combat boot, that sat in a gleaming black row under the bench. She was comforted by knowing he wouldn't find it there. Someone else would, maybe the unlucky recruit tasked with collecting her belongings, find it and then they would all know what he was. Feeling the truth she'd just tucked safely away propelled her forward, a tangible connection to the decision she had made.

Creeping her way into the female squad bay, her fingers shook as they mechanically moved through the numbers of the combo lock that hung from her gear locker. “14, 27, 31,” the numbers that gave her access to all the possessions at Cape May. In the darkness of the squad bay her fingers quickly located the coarseness of the length of line she’d been issued the first week to practice the countless knots she’d been instructed to tie. She pulled it out, not risking the additional noise of closing the locker door again. She knew when she would come into the squad bay in the morning, waking the rest of the females by screaming her name, ordering her to get down and push. She thought of the nervous sweat that would bead along his brow when he realized she was no longer there.

She walked to the back of the squad bay and stood under the door that led to the ladder well, hesitating under the glow of the red EXIT sign. Numbness consumed her, taking place of the blind fear that once would have gripped her. She had already crossed the threshold of life before and life after and knew that regardless of what she did now, there was no going back. Quietly, she opened the door and descended into the ladder well that reeked of the fresh coat of international orange they had just applied to the railing yesterday.

Ahead of her, she could hear the waves gently washing up onto the shore behind the low shrubbery that lined the shore. She started toward them, not knowing where else to go. Wincing, she got on all fours and attempted to disappear into the sparse shrubbery, trying to dodge being spotted by the on-duty patrol that roamed around base.

On the other side, she stood and stared at the moonlight glowing on the water, making her feel as though she’d crossed into a dream. Facing the east, she thought of all that lay behind her, the nightmare just over her shoulder and the life and past that was further behind.

Her eyes closed as she heard “Taps” playing, signaling that it was 2200 and time for everyone to retire for the evening. Her grip loosened on the rope, causing it to hit the sand, just as she dropped to her knees and landed beside of it. She closed her eyes and attempted a prayer, but opened them when she realized that there was a gulf between her and God that she would never again be able to bridge.

Finding her legs, she draped the rope around her shoulders and made her way to what was left of the head that had recently been demolished. Sweat stung her eyes as she located the largest piece of concrete that she could lift and hoisted it. Shuffling through the sand, she made her way to the small pier that extended out into deeper water, stopping at its very end.

Staring ahead, she spotted the light of a solitary ship making its way through the night, everyone in the world oblivious to its passing but her. In the distance, a clap of thunder spoke of the harsh weather and seas that lay ahead for the little vessel as it slowly carried on seemingly oblivious. Her head throbbed with the truth she now knew, a burden that felt too great to carry; it was better to sink than weather some storms.

The concrete thudded against the wooden planks as she dropped it and sat beside it, tying one of the many knots that she had learned in Seamanship Class, first around it and then to her own ankle. Taking a deep breath, she scooted the chunk to the edge, scraping her palms, feeling the pain but not caring. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she stared into the water, the lights from the squad bay behind her reflecting against the blackness of the glassy sea, removing any illusion she had of finding comfort in its lonely depths. The east and the west ended in the same destination and though she still breathed, Samantha Stroud knew she could never be revived. Above or below the surface, it made no difference; she had drowned already.