

DEAR KIND SOUL:
By Caelin Silitonga

DANGER: USE EXTREME CAUTION.

A myriad of rickety warning signs hang off the fence in front of Matthew. Sometimes he forgets that there is a world outside of danger. It's a reality that he's well acquainted with – he's an army medic, for heaven's sake. He shakes hands with peril, allowing it to wake him in the morning and tuck him in to sleep. Danger is just as much of a lifeline as the very blood in his veins.

Regardless, the signs stop him in his tracks. He doesn't know why they're there – no soldier would bother to carry so many heavy pieces of metal, and no civilian disregards their life enough to wander into a warzone. The signs mean nothing, and yet Matthew can't move.

THERE IS NOTHING FOR YOU HERE.

His life is out on that battlefield. He's trained for this; his only purpose is to heal, to mend skin and bones, to relieve suffering. If he does not save lives, then he is nothing. He knows this as well as his little sister's face and his best friend's laugh. He's known this ever since he watched a sergeant notify his neighbor of her husband's death.

This battlefield is his everything – so why doesn't he want to go back?

THIS PLACE WILL KILL YOU.

It feels more like a burial ground than it does a battlefield. While he was out there, it hadn't been so bad – the blatant need to do his duty shielded him from the worst of the horrors. Now, every time he closes his eyes, bloody images construct themselves from the darkness: a body so mutilated one can't tell whose side he was on, a face with a dark conglomeration of blood where the eye should be, one soldier convulsing as he wails in pain while another curls up on the filthy ground, whispering final prayers through cracked lips.

Matthew is not hurt, but he bleeds with every single man and woman he finds on the field. His soul withers and dies with every heartbeat. He is not dead, but he can conjure up hundreds of pictures of people who are.

YOU WILL BE IRREVERSIBLY CHANGED.

Matthew's mother does not recognize him.

It happened hours ago, but he can't stop thinking about it. It took him twice as long to take final inventory of his field bag, and he lost count of the bandage rolls three times. Henry, the senior medic, is probably sick and tired of his clumsiness, but Matthew can't focus. The moment simply replays in his head over and over.

You're not my son, she had said. The words were chuckled lightheartedly. They weren't meant to tear Matthew's soul apart like they did. *I think you must have the wrong number*.

It was the right number. She had apologized profusely of course, but the damage had already been done. Matthew stared at himself in a shiny piece of metal afterward – was that wrinkle always there, or had it appeared as he wrapped a tourniquet around a soldier's arm? Were his eyes always that dark, or did the light die out of them as he dug five bullets out of his comrade's stomach? Did his lips always tilt downwards like they do now, or did that only happen because he could not save his lieutenant's life?

"Ready to go, Doccy?"

He has his supplies strapped to his back, and his boots are laced tight. But Matthew can't step forward, not even under Henry's expectant gaze. He needs to get into position; he needs to fight the good fight, but he is rooted to the blood-soaked ground.

IT'S NOT WORTH THE RISK.

"I can't go back."

The confession falls like ash from his lips. Some deep, visceral shame winds its fingers around his throat and chest – he needs to go back, but he can't. That battlefield will kill him, will steal the rest of his soul, will bleed every bit of him to the dirt.

His mother does not recognize him. If he goes back out there, he fears nobody will.

To his surprise, Henry does not shout at him for his incompetence. He does not laugh at his cowardice or scold him for his softness. Instead, he rests a firm hand on his shoulder and gently says, "You're gonna go out anyways."

"I know, but..."

“You have the medicine, and they need it.” He pats the bag on Matthew’s back. “You will never forgive yourself if you don’t.”

This battlefield is his everything. This burial ground will kill every single part of him. Matthew has been prepared to physically die, but he never accounted for the possibility of returning home a mere husk of what he once was. “What if I don’t come back?”

Henry’s gaze hardens with the confidence of a man who has sworn to protect his family, his country, his ideals. “Is that medicine of yours stronger than any bullet out there? Are those quick hands of yours the only thing tethering a soldier to life? Is your duty to serve bigger than any horrible thing out there?”

Matthew swallows. He nods.

“Then you’re going to go back out there, even if it kills you. But kid –” He squeezes his shoulder. “ – your brothers are out there. No matter what happens, we’re there.”

Matthew closes his eyes. This battlefield is his everything. This battlefield might kill him.

“Listen to me. Do you believe all of that with your entire heart?”

No empty husk, no fiery bullet, no horrifying entity is bigger than his duty to serve.

The word is but a hoarse whisper, but he cracks it out despite. “Yes.”

He has the medicine. His brothers do not.

“Then you’re ready. Let’s go, Doc.”

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Matthew walks forward.