

Prologue

It was her sixteenth birthday, but no one in camp mentioned it, not even her father. The birthday meant **she** was eligible to take guard duty on the perimeter of the camp. She waited all day for a sign from her him that she'd been given a duty shift, but none came until 11:30, a half hour after she went to bed, he tossed a rifle onto her cot and ordered her to get ready. She was in uniform under the blanket, worrying he'd forgotten her altogether.

He led her into the vast woods that surrounded their camp, past the dozen shacks that held the camp's families. Each shack had a tiny window and a door; otherwise you'd never know they were built for humans. She lived in a larger cabin with her father, the Colonel. All the windows in the shacks were now dark, for the Colonel strictly enforced 11:00 p.m. lights-out.

She kept her flashlight trained on his boots as she marched behind him. They were the same style of boots he wore in Vietnam. There he had been a colonel. Here he was God.

As they neared the camp's western perimeter she saw Trevor Martin snap to attention and shoulder his rifle. Trevor was a few years older than she was and a suck-up to her father. He'd announced to her last week he intended to ask the Colonel for permission to marry her. She wasn't really surprised by his intentions. It was a move so transparent as to be laughable. The problem was the Colonel would probably approve the marriage, and she would have to comply; even if her mother were alive, she wouldn't

have run interference for her. After treating her as a soldier her entire life, the Colonel seemed suddenly aware his daughter was female, something that clearly didn't sit well with him. She wasn't sure how it sat with her either.

The Colonel stopped in front of Trevor and stood with his hands on his hips, looking around the dark and dense woods. Then he stared straight at him.

“Report.”

“All quiet, sir. Electronic fencing is operational.”

“Very good, corporal. You're relieved.”

The Colonel turned to her. “Do you know what to do?”

She also stood at attention. “Yes, sir.”

She took the radio off her belt and called in to Douglas Anders over at the eastern perimeter.

“Hey, birthday girl,” he said. “Welcome to your first guard duty.”

She looked up at her father, nervous that Douglas said something so personal. Her father wore the same stony expression as always.

“Roger that,” she said, her voice a little creaky. “I'll check back in at 0100.”

She put the radio back on her belt and resumed attention.

“Is there something going on between you and Anders?” the Colonel said.

“No, sir.”

He looked around the area, silent for a moment before looking back at her.

“Carry on. You'll be relieved at 0800.” He turned and marched back the way he came, with Trevor trotting behind him.

Very slowly, she relaxed her stance and put her rifle butt on the ground. She listened as closely as she could. The woods were very dark, but there was noise all around—a constant rustling of leaves, droning insects, acorns and branches falling. She heard a plane overhead, a sound that made her heart pick up its pace as she peered into the dark sky hoping to see it. What did a plane look like up close? What would it be like to fly in one? The only place she'd been outside of camp was to the nearest Idaho town, and those trips were infrequent. She'd concentrate on taking in every detail, every person, place, and thing that existed outside the remote camp she lived in.

Once enough time had passed for her father and Trevor to be back in camp, she put her plan into place. With her rifle hanging from her shoulder, she climbed a tree twenty feet from her guard post and jumped over the electronic fence. The tree had been picked out some weeks before, during one of her many reconnaissance missions through the woods. There was usually some part of each day that allowed her to slip away from the center of camp; when her duties were done, the Colonel occupied elsewhere, and the attentions of all the men, women, and children on their own concerns. She began to realize if she planned carefully, she had a decent chance of making her escape, and beyond that she couldn't begin to imagine. She reasoned if she could make it out of camp alive, chances were she'd figure out what to do next.

She ran straight west as fast as she could, stumbling over and over again on the branches littering the forest floor. Along the way, she pulled a small knapsack from the hollow of a tree. It contained a change of underwear, a bit of food, and a loaded pistol she'd stolen from the armory. The Colonel had not trained his soldiers on sidearms, those being the privilege of rank. But she understood the basics. She knew enough.

She checked her bearings on the small compass she'd found among her father's things. It should be another mile or so to the county road that led into town. She couldn't afford to walk along the road once she got there. She would be hunted, and if she were found, he'd try to kill her. She was sure of that. She had a better chance if she crossed the road and continued into the woods as far as she could get before she had to rest.

When she neared the road, she stepped forward as silently as she could, sensing rather than seeing the break in the trees. A steep embankment led from the edge of the trees to the roadbed, and as she broke through into the clear space she heard a car coming, moving fast. She wondered for a moment whether she should run up and flag it down, plea with whoever was driving to help her, to save her from her father and all the adults in the camp who wouldn't let her leave. She was a prisoner, she wanted to say. But she didn't trust whomever it was she might flag down. They might take her to the authorities, and they would bring her back to the Colonel.

She crouched in the clearing just before the embankment, feeling exposed in the moonlight. Outside the deep forest the silence was nearly complete. Just as she reached for her canteen she heard someone scrambling down the embankment, hitting the bottom about fifty yards north and running full speed toward her—the figure indistinct, but instantly recognizable to her. She swung her rifle around and assumed a prone position, wondering if the gun held one of the Colonel's tracking devices, realizing with shame that of course it was the radio that had a tracking device, and how could she have been so stupid? Then her father began shooting. Two bullets hit just to her right. A third was on its way when her shot found its mark. She could see the look of shock in his mean eyes as he dropped to the ground. She'd always been a much better shot than him.