



CHAPTER I

Don't let him find her.

MY DEAD MOTHER'S DESPERATE PLEA takes my thoughts hostage, shattering my composure and threatening the freedom I long for. Why am I remembering this when nothing's happened in the last thirteen years? All my focus needs to be on passing my final sharpshooting assessment. The cryptic recollection should be the last thing on my mind.

Irritated at the intrusion, I block out her voice and pace around my barracks room as if running the course. A win will earn me the Tactical Skills Program's top graduate title, and I'm determined to claim it. It's the only way to show Marrick Daniels I'd be perfect for his C.S.R. team.

His crime-fighting unit is the best and his vacant position unprecedented. I'll never get another chance. But the memory continues to haunt me.

Damn my mother. Civilian Safety Response soldiers are supposed to have nerves of steel. We could assist local law enforcement in anything from hostage situations to firearm offenses to bomb threats. I'm a day away from graduating, and my nerves have shot through the roof. How can I expect to fight crime if I can't arrest my anxiety?

Frustrated, I give the memory attention it doesn't deserve so I can bury it with my mother. It was the last thing she said to my uncle before the door closed, shutting her out of my life forever. She didn't mention who or why. I assume she referred to my unknown father, although what he'd want is beyond me. He hasn't shown his face in my seventeen years of existence. I'd be lying if I said not having a father doesn't bother me, but after losing my mother, any resemblance to a normal life stopped.

Instead of Sarah, I became known as the orphaned niece of Lieutenant John Wilson, which meant no friends, private tutors, and around-the-clock security. The only places I frequented outside the house were my uncle's office, here at Red Bluff Military Base, a measly twenty-minute drive from our neighborhood, or a private indoor shooting range on the outskirts of Redding with my minders. I couldn't even shop for personal supplies without an escort.

I never complained, never questioned, but now I'm older, my patience with my uncle's control over my life has worn thin.

He's the only family I have, but there's an uncomfortable distance between us, like I'm an unwanted houseguest. I'm certain it's why he insisted I sign up for this program. Once I graduate and get placed on a team, I'll move out of home permanently.

I jump at a rap on the door. It will be my trainer, Staff Sergeant Darius Kingsley, but he's arrived too early to collect me. Growing angrier by the second at how frazzled my nerves are, I yank the door open, only to be knocked aside by Darius, who barges in. Whatever's happened won't be good.

"What's wrong?" I mask my churning emotions with indifference, but Darius pulls off his sunglasses and frowns—he knows me too well.

"They brought forward your start time," he says. "Nixon's out with a fractured hand. Boyd's in the hospital wing after ingesting a banned substance. Gaucini's on course. Let's go." Motioning for me to follow, he jams his sunglasses back on and strides from the room.

I'm glad he spared me a lecture about emotional flare-ups during finals week, but rising anger displaces my anxiety. Intimidation tactics between cadets are normal at any stage of the training program, but Gaucini has done more than make idle threats. He deliberately stomped on

Nixon's hand during their combative assessment yesterday, then started a rumor about Boyd using performance drugs to boost his stamina—an unfounded allegation; Boyd's as clean as me.

Catching up to Darius, I jump down the stairs with him. "Did Gaucini slip something to Boyd?"

"If he did, we'll never prove it," Darius says, taking the path around the northern end of my barracks, the quickest route to the outdoor range.

I grit my teeth—Gaucini is another distraction I don't need.

"We should've reported his threat to me."

Darius grimaces. "I did. You, of all people, should know how it works in this program."

"Get tough or get out? There'll be no one left to graduate if Gaucini has his way."

"I don't like it either, but better to discover a weakness here at Red Bluff than on the streets in Sacramento. Nixon and Boyd knew Gaucini would do his damndest to take them out of contention, but overconfidence made them complacent. As for Gaucini"—Darius clenches his jaw—"if he claims the top graduate title, I'll hand in my resignation."

"That can never happen, so I'll make sure it doesn't."

Darius resigning would be Red Bluff's loss. He's old enough to be my father but is as tough as they come. I've never told him, but I want to be as skilled as him, so I'll be

ready for whoever wants to find me should they ever show their face.

I trust that I am. Darius trains his cadets like elite athletes and his method of incorporating resistance, plyometric, and continuous training over Red Bluff's variety of terrain has produced multiple top graduates, including Marrick. My pulse quickens thinking about him. He won't accept anyone less than the best, even if we share the same trainer. Trying to join his team might be like trying to punch through a brick wall.

I walk on, but Darius grabs my arm and pulls me to a stop.

"Do better than your best. No holding back. Not today. And watch out for Gaucini. This isn't over yet." He lowers his glasses, looks me straight in the eye for emphasis, before continuing along the path.

I smile. Do my best? No holding back? Gladly.

Throughout my training, Darius had me hide my skills to mislead the other cadets. Our ruse protected me against attacks from Gaucini—until yesterday's combative assessment. I won every round, annihilating my opponents with maneuvers that could have put them in the hospital wing with Nixon.

Darius raged, saying I painted a target on my back, proven right when Gaucini cornered me in the gym and threatened to break my shooting hand. Secretly, I don't care. For the past six months, I've done what Darius asked:

kept my points low and stayed out of the spotlight. What he doesn't know is when my adrenaline starts pumping, it wakes something predatory inside me, making it difficult to ignore a challenge. On multiple occasions, I had to sneak into the gym late at night for an extra workout just to wind down.

Adding to my frustration, I've found the program easy, despite Red Bluff claiming it's one of the toughest courses in the military. It's like I've done every aspect of their training before. I have, in theory, because of my uncle's C.S.R. supervisory role. I know the program and understand team expectations. Darius says I'm a natural, and that C.S.R. is what I was born for. I hope I prove him right today.

I catch up to Darius at the end of the path and we stride past the engineering sheds—refurbished aircraft hangars from Red Bluff's days as an air defense command station. They run alongside the airstrip, now training fields, ending at a mesh fence surrounding the outdoor range. The sheds are usually a hive of activity, but the sharpshooting rounds are prime-time entertainment for Red Bluff personnel, and everyone is at the range.

When we reach the entrance, Darius approaches the M.P. on gate duty. "Is Gaucini on course?"

"Yes, Sir," the M.P. says. "Seven targets in."

Darius continues through the gates, quickening his pace. I jog to keep up. The soldiers milling around inside

stare at me. Usually, I'm the unremarkable cadet destined to ruin Darius's track record of producing top graduates. Not now, after my spectacular combative performance. This new attention stirs up my nerves again. With Boyd and Nixon out, the spotlight will be on me—another pressure I hadn't expected.

Darius lifts a rope separating the spectators from the course. We duck under it together and stride across the sun-baked field to the armament bench near the start of the sharpshooting course. A cliff forms a natural wall around the target practice area and the granite radiates late-summer heat. Bullet marks pepper the cliff face, some of them mine; Darius had me shoot wide on purpose during group sessions. I won't shoot wide today.

I pull my half-gloves from the leg pocket of my pants and jam the soft leather deep into the grooves between my fingers, smoothing the creases over my knuckles. A whiff of gun smoke in the breeze settles me; I'm in familiar territory now and my confidence restores. This assessment is also a chance to show my uncle I can look after myself. He'll have to relax his security measures after I graduate, anyway. He won't be responsible for me once I turn eighteen and I'm only three months shy of that. If he remembers my birthday, that is. We've never celebrated it.

"Is my uncle here?" I've rarely seen him since relocating to base.

Darius shakes his head. "He has a video feed of the

assessment directed to his office.”

Would it kill my uncle to come and watch? I glance at the cameras around the range, hoping to convey my disappointment at his failure to show the family support I ache for. Instead, I see two of Marrick’s team members, Red Bluff’s Kelly Olsen, and Lakeport Military Training Academy transfer, Magelon Caruso. They stand near the large screen televising the sharpshooting rounds for the spectators.

I don’t see Marrick, or Reece Matthews, the team’s logistical analyst, another transfer from Lakeport. Reece never comes to base—I don’t know why—but Marrick goes everywhere with his team. He’ll be here somewhere.

On the armament bench, an M1911 pistol lies among the selection of guns. Marrick scored forty out of forty targets using this model. He’s also the only person in T.S.P. history to achieve a perfect score on a Sergeant Hayes’ course. If I match Marrick’s achievement, he’ll have to notice me.

Eager to start, I turn my attention to Darius. “Any advice?”

He pulls off his sunglasses. “This course is designed to fail you. You’ll only get one shot at this, so make every target count. Use your speed. Trust your instincts. Find your zone and stay there until the last buzzer sounds.”

Speed and instinct are my best skills, but the only time I’ve tested them is during my private training sessions

with Darius. What if I didn't hone them enough to get me through this course?

Hayes approaches, clipboard in hand. "Wilson, Sarah. You're up next."

Darius claps his hand on my shoulder. "Remember, one bullet per target." Replacing his sunglasses, he strides back across the field.

One bullet per target is half the challenge. If I miss and shoot twice, I could fail by running short of bullets. An uncomfortable fluttering starts in my stomach, but I don't know why I'm worried. I'm at my peak and ready to tackle this course. Darius will have made sure of that.

It's my mother's memory. It lingers in the back of my mind, niggling for attention. Why today?

Determined to block it out, I collect my gear from Hayes—a SIG Sauer P226, my preferred weapon, the allocated number of magazines, safety vest, helmet, and gun belt. As I load the SIG and slot the extra magazines into my belt pouches, the buzzer sounds, ending Gaucini's round.

The video screen faces away from me, but the murmur from the crowd suggests Gaucini's score isn't high. I search for Darius. He stands next to Kelly and holds up three fingers, then two to show Gaucini scored thirty-two out of forty targets.

With my accuracy, I'll easily beat him. But while a score of thirty-three will win me the assessment and the top

graduate title, it won't impress Marrick.

Gaucini strides from the course, a scowl etched into his square face, sweat pouring from his thick black hair. Seeing me, he smirks and heads in my direction. A smart cadet would move closer to Hayes, who barks target reset instructions to the ground crew through his radio, but I stay put, anger flaring at Gaucini's attack on Nixon.

Gaucini bangs his shoulder against mine, then dumps his gun on the armament bench and strips off his belt and vest.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Wilson," he says. "Word around base is you were hiding in your barracks. Afraid of the competition?"

His cocky attitude is as annoying as his intimidation tactics. "There's no competition with Nixon and Boyd out."

"None left that I can see, either." He looks across the field at Darius. "Don't blame yourself. You showed potential yesterday, but Kingsley's training methods are outdated. Time he retired, if you ask me."

If we weren't near an instructor, I'd shove my fist down Gaucini's throat for his dig at Darius. "Nobody's asking you, so why don't you put your popgun away and watch how it's done from the playpen."

"Funny, Wilson. What say you and I meet afterward? I'll help pick your bullets out of the cliff. They'll make great souvenirs. You can share them with Boyd and Nixon."

His taunt at my aim is easy to ignore, but Boyd and Nixon deserve a better keepsake than a spent bullet. Raising my SIG, I tap my finger on the trigger. Giving Gaucini a lesson in speed and accuracy, the second part of the sharpshooting challenge, would be an ideal gift.

Darius appears in my peripheral and drives his voice into my head with a pointed stare—*Focus, Wilson. Don't waste energy on Gaucini. To beat him, beat the course.*

I turn away, determined to wipe the smile off Gaucini's face with a winning round.

He leers at me. "Funny how you moved into the lead. Weren't you in tenth place at the start of assessment week? I'd say bring your best to beat me, but I guess your uncle has that covered."

His comment strikes a nerve. What if other people think my current position is because of my uncle? Hating the inference, I raise my SIG again, all while glaring a hole through his head.

Gaucini's expression darkens. "Watch it out there, Wilson. You know how this course is. Accidents happen all the time. Not everything's recorded."

Is he planning something worse than a broken hand? Only the target zones are televised, not the areas in between. Tired of his tactics, my temper snaps. "Then you better make sure you don't stand in any of the black zones, or I might accidentally mistake you for a target."

Gaucini grins. "Did you just threaten me, Wilson?"

He speaks loudly enough for Hayes to hear, who lowers his radio and crosses to us.

“You’ve had your chance, Gaucini,” he says, stepping between us. “Get your butt off my course.” He turns to me. “I don’t care who your uncle is. I won’t tolerate threats of any kind. First and final warning, Wilson. Take your position. You start in three minutes.”

I jerk my SIG down, furious with myself for falling for Gaucini’s baiting. To cop a warning right before my round is bad—one more step out of line, intentional or otherwise, will see me booted from the program. But learning Hayes thinks I believe I’m above reprimand because of my uncle is gut-wrenching. How many other instructors share his view?

Fuming, I walk to the start of the course. With so little time to regain focus, I hold Darius’ voice in my head. It’s not enough. We’re trained to fight our enemies, but they’re not all on the streets. One is here, at Red Bluff, and it sits like a chip on my shoulder.

The only way I’ll remove it is to match Marrick’s score with an unforgettable performance to prove beyond a doubt my skills result from hard training, not favoritism.

Otherwise, I’ll always be the privileged niece of a lieutenant.



CHAPTER 2

R ESET COMPLETE. THE COURSE IS clear. Wilson, one minute.” Hayes’ booming voice silences the crowd.

I step into the first firing point, a spray-painted white circle marked with a large number one. Forty consecutively numbered circles identify my shooting zone for each target. They lie ahead in a purpose-built course simulating streets in a high-level crime area near Sacramento.

I can’t see all the circles but remember their locations from the map issued with our start time. The firing points are in front of timber buildings that mimic shop fronts, at the bottom of stairwells leading to upper doorways, or next to cars salvaged from a scrap metal yard to represent traffic. Mannequins dressed as civilians, complete with distracting

multi-colored hats and scarves, add reality to the streets. Hit a civilian and I fail.

I'm confident I won't, but the privileged tag plays on my mind. Needing help to focus, I glance at Darius. Marrick stands next to him.

Does Marrick consider me privileged? He knows I'm related to his boss. We met once, an awkward introduction in my uncle's office before I started training. Awkward on my part because while Marrick's warm smile as he shook my hand felt like a welcome into his private circle, his former team member, Joanna Johansson, made a cutting remark about how my Red Bluff uniform would fit better once I'd earned it.

The perception of privilege would have escalated when my uncle overruled Red Bluff's requirement for all recruits to complete an eight-week basic training course. I went straight into the Tactical Skills Program, the youngest cadet on record.

If Marrick views me this way, I'd reconsider joining his team. I want people around me who value me for who I am and what I can do, not who I'm related to. But if I don't concentrate, I'll be lucky to finish the course, let alone impress Marrick with a perfect score.

His calm demeanor reaches me across the field and settles my anxiety. How he does it, I don't know, but coupled with remarkable tactical skills, it's no wonder he's rated the best leader. I've seen him in action. Civilians

under threat respond positively to his directives and his ability to defuse panic is incredible.

He should add emotional influence to his resume: T.S.P. top graduate at eighteen; leader for three consecutive years, including best-rated team since the military took over C.S.R. training from local law enforcement thirty years ago. His crime-fighting unit is the best I could ever hope to be on, so why shouldn't I attempt to punch through the brick wall surrounding them?

Because I'd take Joanna's position, that's why. And like my mother's memory, her belittling remark continues to haunt me. My uncle would also be my supervisor. How would it look if he insisted on providing extra security for me? Marrick wouldn't want to be monitored around the clock. Damn my mother. Why didn't she say who's after me? And why hasn't my uncle hunted them down? He has an army at his disposal, and Red Bluff's best on call twenty-four-seven. Marrick's team can find anyone.

"Sixty seconds, Wilson," Hayes barks.

I need to focus. I'll deal with my uncle's inaction after this assessment. Forty targets. Top graduate title. Marrick.

Our eyes meet and he doesn't look away. Darius talks to him, nods at me multiple times, but Marrick's attention is solely on me. My concern about Joanna's remark and my uncle's interference could be unfounded. Marrick watches me like I'm exactly who he wants.

“Ten seconds, Wilson.”

I snap all focus back to the course. The first firing zone is outside a shop. In the foreground, two mannequins sit at a round white plastic table. Glare from the tabletop is a sharp reminder that climatic conditions, including haze, rain, and fog, will not always act in our favor. Crimes occur regardless of the weather. To break the glare, I shift to the outer edge of the circle. Vision restored, I relax. With God in the detail and a gun in my hand, the targets don’t stand a chance.

Confidence growing, I imagine the backdrop to be a bustling café. My breathing slows. The spectator’s chatter fades. The trigger warms beneath my finger. There’s nothing, no one. Just me, and my gun, and—

The blare of the start buzzer splits the silence. The target, a flat wooden disk the size of a small dinner plate, pops out from the far side of the wall. I fire, splintering the timber with a perfect first shot. Now to reach the next firing point before the target pops up, the second part of the challenge.

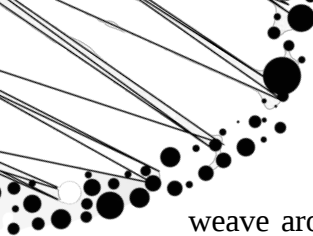
Racing to firing point two, I face an open window in a brick wall. Movement in the lower corner of the window catches my eye. I fire again, shattering the disk. The third firing point is farther along the street, at the bottom of a stairwell. I’m halfway there when the target pops out from a doorway at the top of the stairs. Skidding into the circle, I aim high and fire. The bullet chips the edge of the disk.

My near-miss explains Darius's warning—the speed required is faster than I've practiced. Determined not to fall victim to a course designed to fail me, I sprint to the fourth firing point. The target pops up from behind a car on the opposite side of the street the second I step into the circle.

I shoot—a clean strike—then run around the corner to the next firing point. Obstacles block my path: rubbish bins; a crowd of mannequins representing panicked civilians; another parked car. I leap onto the hood and slide across, landing like a cat on the other side. One stride and I'm back at full speed.

A shiver of exhilaration burns like wildfire up my spine. This is the real me: sharp reflexes, switched on, agile and fast. I'm faster than the other cadets and now everyone at Red Bluff knows it. Cheers from the spectator's mute the sound of my gunfire as I take out target after target. I'm delivering a textbook sharpshooting display, one that will dispel any doubt about my abilities, wipe the chip from my shoulder, and crush the wall around Marrick's team into dust.

As I run from circle to circle, the predatory feeling I get returns. I don't know what it is, but it sharpens my senses and makes me more aware of my surroundings than I ever felt during my practice rounds. The course is no longer a simulation. I imagine real streets, with live civilians to protect and dangerous criminals to hunt down. No movement escapes notice. No target goes undetected. I



weave around obstacles as easily as running in a straight line. I reach every firing point ahead of time, despite oil spills and burning rubbish placed to slow me.

The final firing point is in the middle of a street between two double-storey brick buildings. One of them is makeshift, constructed for the course. The other adjoins the spectator arena, with an adjacent fence covered in bulletproof glass. The upper level is used for storage, the lower level by the course reset crew. Out of bounds to spectators, soldiers cram into the area alongside the building to watch me blast the last target.

The roaring crowd would make focusing difficult had I not been deep in my zone. I register faces, hear my name, but nothing distracts me. When I reach the firing circle, I use precious seconds to study the makeshift building. A dozen tall windows stretch the length of the wall on both levels. Some are open, some closed. The reset crew did a great job erasing all evidence of shots from previous cadets. The windowpanes are intact. No broken glass litters the ground. Will this target be my undoing? I have to find the target to shoot it. It could appear anywhere.

One window at the end isn't open as wide as the others. The narrow gap would test my accuracy if a target popped up there. I double-check the lower-level windows. All are closed and curtained, and they reflect the building behind me. I spot the camera mounted on the wall to record my shot, and a person on the second level holding a rifle.

I'll keep her safe. You have my word.

My uncle's reply to my mother refreshes the memory, freezing my heart. Outside of my uncle's personal security, there's nowhere safer than Red Bluff. Am I overreacting? A soldier could have sneaked inside to get a better view of the course. There are multiple entries on the far side of the building, easy in, easy out. I scrutinize the reflection. It's blurry, but the soldier looks familiar. Square face. Thick black hair.

Watch out for Gaucini.

Darius's warning refreshes Gaucini's threat about accidents on the course. It's him. I'm sure of it. The end of his rifle rests on the window ledge, aimed right at me.

The target pops up in the narrow gap, as I suspected. I ignore it and keep my eye on Gaucini's reflection. Did the sun shift, causing the reflection to darken, or did he adjust his aim? It's hard to tell. He'd have time to shoot and escape the building undetected. In the chaos, he'd mingle with the crowd and appear shocked at the shooting of a niece of a lieutenant. I'm the only one who sees him. Everyone else is looking at me. The target beckons, demanding my last bullet, but what's the good of finishing with a perfect score if I'm dead?

Pivoting, I aim at Gaucini and pull the trigger. The bullet passes within millimeters of the window frame. Gaucini jerks and falls from sight. If he were a target, it would be the shot of the day.

Ignoring the silence that descends on the crowd, I run to the building. Did I kill Gaucini? Or is he slithering from the room like the snake he is? A door opens and I run into Sergeant Walsh, chief of the reset crew.

“Sniper, top floor,” I shout, pushing past him.

I take the nearest stairwell to the second floor and kick open the third door along the corridor, keeping my SIG outstretched, though I’m out of bullets. Gaucini lies on the floor, still gripping the rifle. I walk closer, then stop with a sinking feeling like I swallowed a lead weight.

It’s not Gaucini. It’s a mannequin holding a walking stick. The room is full of similar dummies, dark mops of hair atop square, plastic faces. Tables and chairs are stacked along the walls with bags of clothing stashed beneath. It’s a storage room for the props used on the course.

Outside, the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of my round. Sergeant Walsh steps around me, holding a gun outstretched. He looks at the mannequin, glances at me, then shoves the gun in his belt holster. Nothing needs to be said. It’s written in the bullet hole through the mannequin’s head.

Hayes will record my last shot as shooting into the crowd—it’s an instant fail. I won’t graduate. With one shot, I killed my career.