

## “Boys”

Chittering birds burst from the brush as the soldiers scurried past. Where the firs and shadows were dense, they fell to their stomachs in the dirt. In the muffled silence, Robert thought he could hear his brother's heartbeat. Then Buchanan sniffled and Short Billie snapped a twig. Paw scratched at the earth and whined, the sound loud as a siren. John stroked the dog and hushed it, but the regiment tensed.

‘Keep your heads low, boys,’ John whispered. Robert glanced up at his brother's gleaming eyes. He drew what courage he lacked from that gaze, then tightened his grip around his rifle. John had a way of looking at the world that reassured Robert. He wondered if the other boys felt the same about their brothers.

‘See anything?’ Buchanan asked in the broken notes of a growing boy.

‘There. On the ridge,’ John said, pointing through the trees. Silhouettes flitted along the rugged ridge covered in scree a hundred yards from where they hid. Beyond, the lake showed in blue patches through thick sheets of mountain fog.

‘Five... Six,’ Short Billie counted. ‘We're dead.’

‘Shut up, we're not dead yet,’ John replied.

‘Stewart's got the high ground *and* the numbers,’ Billie argued, raising his voice.

‘Maybe, but we got—’

John never had the time to explain what they had.

A flurry of grenades rained on them as the enemy exploded from nowhere. Screams filled the woods, the rattle of gunfire shattering the silence. John cursed, leaping to his feet and aiming at darting shadows. Buchanan was clipped in the head by a rock and fell backwards with a yelp, blood covering his face. Paw pounced on him playfully, as if it were all a game. Petrified, Robert pressed himself to the cool dirt, clenching his eyes.

‘Get up Bobby! Pow! Pow!’ John roared at his brother, unloading his rifle indiscriminately. Short Billie lobbed two pinecone grenades, whooping with joy as one found its mark and curses came from the enemy ranks.

Robert's knuckles whitened around his stick-rifle, but he could not stand. What if John died and Stewart's lads won *again*? The McCook boys were merciless in victory. Robert opened his eyes to chaos unfurling around him. The enemy was everywhere, their war cries

loud and terrifying. Could the Great War on the other side of the world be *half* as mad as this? John talked about it without fear, almost with desire.

His brother was never afraid.

'Bobby! Get up and fight! Buchanan's down!' John shouted again, chucking a stone at Yellow Ed. The blonde boy toppled over howling and Simple Sam took his place. Stewart roared at his troops. John laughed back.

His brother was never afraid.

'For the Queen!' Robert bellowed, scrambling to his feet. Pride surged through him as he mentioned the faraway monarch and began shooting. 'Pow! Pow!'

The rules of war were simple; only rock and pinecone grenades or shots to the head were deadly — though they deaths came with a chorus of complaints.

Robert aimed, shot, pretended to reload and fired again. He let instinct guide his muzzle and screams announce his shots. At his side, John grinned and together they killed Sam and Mouse.

'Dead! Dead!' John shouted until the boys reluctantly threw down their sticks.

Short Billie died with a shrill cry, clutching his chest. He was a talented actor, his dedication to the game was admirable. Outnumbered, outflanked, pinned down behind a boulder, the brothers looked at each other. John was the best shot in town and he had the shadow of stubble on his cheeks. He never lost.

'With me,' John mouthed.

John was never afraid.

Robert gulped, then nodded. The brothers rolled from cover and, in a cacophony of screams, won the Battle of the Woods...

\*

John, rifle over his shoulder, led the victorious troop back to town. Paw loped ahead, Billie laughed, Buchanan wiped blood from his brow, almost proud of the gash. Robert hopped along, heart still racing. Admiring John's sharp silhouette against the setting sun, he decided his brother would make a fine soldier if the Great War ever came to their corner of the world.

'Johnnie...' Robert began, wanting to glorify him with words instead of thoughts, but as they crested the hill, John froze in his

tracks.

Soldiers, *real* soldiers, stood on the wooden porch of their house.

Their mother was sobbing.

Robert looked up and though he saw his brother's tears he did not understand.

John was never afraid.