

The Ranger

For 15 years, Kristina wore the uniform: she enforced the law, she directed traffic, she rerouted hikers away from post-hibernating black bears, she leapt into emergency rescue helicopters bound for unmapped territory, she put out wildfires, she searched and she rescued. Kristina, The Chequamegon National Forest Ranger, dodged lightening bolts, ate insects in her sleep, and saw a lifetimes worth of sunsets. The ranger, if not leading outdoor groups or saving the lives she reached in time, often patrolled in her charcoal grey Jeep Wrangler, polka-dotted with bird feces and plastic windows decorated with vents the shape of bullet holes. But things were different now; Kristina had been dishonorably discharged.

It had been six months and still Kristina struggled to learn the gridded, urban flatlands of Chicago. She had replaced her ranger uniform for a navy blue jumpsuit adorned with a Registered Emergency Medical Technician arm patch. As she sat in the ambulance, Kristina watched her retired ranger badge, which hung from the rearview mirror, swing to and fro.

Jane, her new trainee, hopped into the passenger seat after restocking the basics in the back of the van. She wore the same jumpsuit as Kristina and diamond earrings. The computer that sat between them buzzed red, displaying an address below the emergency report: male, 68, delirious and then unconscious.

“I’m so excited,” she smiled. “I know I’ve only been doing this for a week, but this is like the best job I’ve ever had.”

Kristina cleared her throat and started the engine. She had driven almost 40 hours in three days – she needed the money to get a lawyer for her husband. It was nearly midnight and she hadn't had a break in hours.

The ambulance beeped loudly as Kristina reversed it out of the ER entrance. "Have you always been an EMT?" Jane grinned and picked at her gold nail polish.

"No," Kristina turned left onto East Huron Street. The lights and sirens remained off; they were only to be used in heavy traffic. She stared at her old badge.

Jane grabbed the dangling badge and pulled it towards her freckled face. "You were a forest ranger?" She watched Kristina nod sharply.

Jane rubbed the badge between her fingers and attempted eye contact with Kristina. "What caused your decision to switch fields?"

The mirror creaked as Kristina adjusted it back, catching her own almond eyes. Kristina stroked the embroidered Black-Billed Magpie on the front flap her beige baseball cap. Her black ponytail stuck out the back of it.

The Black-Billed Magpie is mostly black with a white underbelly, a very long tail, and dark, stout bill. They nest in the top of evergreen trees and are mainly non-migratory. This species is one of the few in which mates stay together for life. The Ranger thought of Ian, her husband, as she sped through the city streets.

Kristina met her husband, Ian, while in her third year at UW Stephen's Point where she was the president of the outdoors club. Kristina loved animals more than people, until that day. Most of the men who signed up for her hikes were hunters who liked to stalk around the group with their hands shaped like pistols making "pew, pew!" noises at birds and bunnies crunching through the autumn leaves. But Ian was a lanky geek, curly brown

hair with glasses, interested in radio and television. Once he adventured on one of Kristina's hikes to research for his next podcast, he never stopped following her lead.

Eight months ago, on the 23rd of October, Ian heard gunshots. Sound was always important to Ian; he was even better than Kristina at identifying birdcalls around their home on the southeast plateau in Chequamegon. The house was older than many of the trees in the national park. It wasn't special – redwood with a large white deck that wrapped around the entire second floor – but it was the only one for miles.

The couple sat in the blood orange Adirondack patio chairs looking over the forest; campfires decorated the trees like constellations. Ian heard the first gunshot.

Kristina grabbed the night vision binoculars from the wicker basket between them and rose from her seat. They listened. The next shot was quieter, no louder than a heavy raindrop on a window air conditioner. Whoever was shooting was using a suppressor.

Kristina radioed the east post as she made her way downstairs, crossing the dingy living room to the front door. "10-31 shots fired. Hear anything?" There was no response.

Their home was packed full of ranger memorabilia such as vintage uniforms and books like *The Business of Nature*. Both her parents were Wisconsin Forest Rangers. Kristina's mother was the collector and Kristina took most of the artifacts from the family home after it was sold. She thought about her mother every single day since she died, and she thought about her father less and less with time. It was an accident, Kristina knew it was an accident, but she would never be able to fully forgive her father.

Kristina never understood how her parents could be hunters and forest rangers at the same time. Kristina never understood how someone could willingly harm an animal of

any kind for any reason. Kristina never understood how a shotgun, in the skilled hands of her father, could misfire, killing her mother and leaving her father essentially unharmed.

A photo of her mother hung on the east wall in the living room. The wall was exposed brick and the windows never seemed to let in as much light as you'd like them too. The place was perfectly clean, but it always felt dusty. Kristina and Ian often admired their cave.

"Let me come with you," Ian pleaded, blocking the front door and holding Kristina's keys hostage. He held them behind his back with one hand while he watched Kristina pull on her forest green ranger jacket and Smokey the Bear style hat.

"What are you going to do? Hit them with your microphone?" Kristina squished his cheeks with the flats of her hands and kissed him on the lips. From his face hung an overgrown beard which he said helped his chronic face-for-radio. "I'm fine – I'm The Ranger!" Kristina mockingly reassured him. She hugged Ian and grabbed her keys all at once. She was stronger than she looked, 5'8" and stocky, yet her head barely reached his shoulders.

"But I'm—" he looked left, then right, then dropped his tone exclaiming, "The Warrior." Ian jolted out several, stiff ninja-esque positions shining the beam around the house. Finally, he clapped the light above his head and tossed it gently to Kristina.

Kristina pursed her lips to one side before smiling. She handed him back the flashlight. "Grab your coat."

Kristina's Jeep was parked just outside the front door, driver's side nearest the house. She started the car, unzipped the windows, and fired up the light bar that sat atop the roof. The lights blasted ahead, revealing a plump owl perched a half mile down the

forest line. Ian jumped down the three grey stone steps below the entrance of the house. The passenger door slammed and they were off.

Ian hummed *Hungry Like the Wolf* by Duran Duran as they scooted through the woods, slowing often to dodge fallen branches and dashing chipmunks. Kristina gripped the wheel harder and smiled.

The ambulance pulled into the half circle enclosed entrance to The Bernardin Building. Kristina jolted to the van to a stop, shut off the engine and removed the keys. She hopped out and jogged to the back of the vehicle, immediately pulling the yellow stretcher out of the back. “Which apartment?”

Jane took the stretcher as Kristina shut the doors. “The penthouse.”

The automatic sliding glass doors welcomed the paramedics into a guarded reception area. Modern furniture and light fixtures were a blur of beige and silver as they jogged through the lobby. The concierge at a granite desk to their left buzzed them through the second set of sliding doors. He followed them into the elevator, scanned his keycard to access the penthouse suite, and stepped out. Kristina and Jane looked at each other through the mirrored doors as they rose to the 21st floor. Jane breathed in pulses.

The elevator opened to a foyer with a crystal chandelier, black granite floors, and the back of a large man lying facedown in a white button up shirt, leather jacket, and black trousers. Kristina couldn’t see his face, but something his jacket struck her. Past the entrance, was a woman sitting at a dark oak dining room table in front of floor to ceiling windows, drinking whiskey neat out of snifter.

“Ma’am,” Kristina called, pulling the gurney behind her. “How long has he been down?”

The woman stood from her seat, bringing her drink with her. She approached Kristina in a floor length red dress that hung from a chunky, black gem halter. The makeup around her eyes was rubbed round and black, like a raccoon. “From about the time I poured this drink.” Her voice was raspy, like cigarettes.

As Kristina rolled the man to his back, she knew. She knew who this man was.

Jane joined Kristina on her knees and checked the man’s pulse. Kristina rose to her feet and turned away; she closed her eyes and covered her mouth. Now she was the one breathing in pulses.

Jane continued to assess the man and said, “Ma’am, he’s stable but I think he’s had a stroke.” She arranged his body in a straight line, so she and Kristina could lift him onto the gurney. She called for Kristina’s assistance, making Kristina spin slowly and stair at the man, unmoving. “We’re going to take him to Northwestern Hospital,” Jane’s tone was professional, but her look toward her partner was fierce and wild-eyed.

Kristina stepped quickly to the man’s feet and she lifted with her legs. The man was so heavy the paramedics barely got him onto the stretcher. The woman in the red dress pulled bobby pins out of her bright blonde hair and dropped them onto the table next to her unconscious companion. Kristina’s eyes never left the man’s slumped face as Jane asked, “Ma’am, we need your husband’s name and medical history.” She started oxygen and placed the clear mask over the man’s mouth and nose before calling for the private elevator, which arrived almost instantaneously. “Will you be joining us in the ambulance?”

The wheels of the cart rumbled over the entrance of the elevator as Kristina and Jane stepped passed the threshold.

The woman waved her hand, “I’ll meet you there. That ambulance is probably filthy.”

The elevator doors closed. The small space was quiet except for soft, stunted breathing and the hiss of tanked oxygen escaping. “I’m not sure what else do for him,” Jane checked the man’s pulse again. “What are you doing? Please help me.”

Kristina faced the corner and watched the red, glowing digital numbers count down. “His name is Carl Brenner,” she whispered. “Just leave him be.”

“But, protocol says—”

“Leave him,” Kristina shouted, for the first time in months.

The wolf’s fur was soft and thicker than usual, both because of the blood and because of the wolf’s natural preparation for winter. Kristina couldn’t help the poor thing. He was already gone. She wrapped her arms around the wolf’s torso, wetting its face with her tears as she bunted it.

The blood was opulent across his white fur in the loud light of the car. Grey wolves had been on the endangered species list for years, and even then, it had never been legal to hunt them. Further, it was always illegal to hunt on Chequamegon National Forest grounds. Whoever did this was fucked both morally and legally.

She stood and Ian wrapped his arms around her neck and kissed the top of her head. They were both covered in the wolf’s lukewarm blood.

After wiping the tears from her eyes, The Ranger turned and ran toward the Jeep. She grabbed the Sig P220 45 Pistol from the glove box, slammed the passenger door, and exclaimed, "I'm going to find this fucking hunter even if I—"

"Kristina! It's me." A heavyhearted voice erupted from between the pine trees. The branches shuffled as someone pushed into the clearing. "Don't shoot. It's me." Both Ian and Kristina knew that raspy voice. The headlights presented a man with buzzed hair and a heavy grey beard, dressed casually but with a jacket identical to Kristina's. He approached with his hands in the air.

The Ranger lowered her gun, but only halfway so it pointed at the black pile of dirt just in front of his feet. "Dad?"

"Jesus. You look like hell." Her father scoffed. His boots were caked in mud though it hadn't rained for days and the wetlands were miles northeast of here. "I heard the gun shots. Josh had to leave East Post for a family emergency," her father smiled, "but I'm here."

"You didn't answer the radio," Kristina cringed. She kept a hateful eye on her father.

"Josh took it with him by accident."

Ian was standing over the wolf. The Ranger looked left at her husband then stepped several feet off to the right nearer to Alan, her father. Her right hand took control of the gun and she lowered it to her side. Nodding toward the blood, Kristina asked, "Have you seen this?"

Alan took a big breath in and blew it out with, "Not up close." He knelt to investigate the wound from several feet away. "Based on the point of entry, I think the

shooter came from the west.” He signaled back toward where Ian and Kristina had come from. “We should head that way.” Standing, Alan moved in the direction of The Ranger toward the Jeep.

“Ian and I just came from there.” Kristina moved to stop her father by reaching out her open hand. Alan retreated, careful not to let her touch him.

Ian shuffled slowly toward the tree line and disappeared; Kristina only saw the effect of his movement – the shaking of the branches of two trees as he walked through them. The pines had not settled from the disruption before Ian emerged again, stepping backward softly with his hands above his head.

Ian’s voice broke as he called for Kristina. A dark haired man with a large nose and a cigar hanging from his mouth had a rifle pressed hard against the center of Ian’s chest. As Ian called for help and retreated, Alan grabbed the gun from Kristina’s side with a practiced hand and aimed it at her right bicep. She stumbled backward against her car and tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry.

“For fucks sake, Carl.” Alan bellowed with a sharp shake of his head. Carl jabbed at Ian causing him to stumble backward. He fell into line next to the wolf. “I told you I had this.”

“Yeah, until you didn’t have it anymore.” He was barely audible through the thick of his cigar and southern accent. The shotgun hung in Carl’s left hand as he used his right to dust off his administrative badge of respect with the back of his glove.

The Ranger began to sweat, her heart thudded deeply, and her muscles swelled. “Mr. Brenner? Sir? I don’t—Why are you—” She dropped to all fours. “Please, Ian...”

“Yes, yes, dear.” Carl chuckled and used the same hand to remove the cigar from his mouth in order to make sure The Ranger heard every word. “I’m sure you’re very surprised by all this and I’m so *sorry* if I’ve upset you.”

Kristina had met Carl only a handful of times; on her first day as a ranger, when he awarded her at distinguished ceremonies, and briefly as he visited her Father’s North Post home in June. Carl spent most of his time in Chicago. He always wore a leather jacket.

The Ranger went for the radio in her back pocket. Just as she engaged it and brought it to her mouth, her father shot at the ground before her. She dropped the radio and jumped to her feet.

“I own this forest, little lady. Don’t you forget that.” Carl honked a deep laugh.

Her body shook out the words, “Nature can not be owned.”

“My government coworkers tend to disagree.” Carl returned the cigar and swirled his gun in a circle around Ian’s head. “Turn around, son.”

“Carl,” Alan commanded, stepping at him without shifting his aim on Kristina.

“Don’t do something stupid. Don’t you dare.”

“Yes, Poppa. I won’t.” With the gun strong against Ian’s back, Carl leaned over to examine the wolf. His eyes lit up at the beauty of it. “I just want y’all to know that I can.”

“Dad...please, we wont say anything. Please.” Kristina said, now crying.

“I know you won’t,” her father smiled.

“Please don’t hurt him.”

Alan faulted, “Carl let’s just leave—“

“You really don’t know your daughter at all, do you?” Carl knelt in his army print hunting pants to handcuff Ian. Before he returned to standing, he removed and pocketed

the bullets and put the shotgun between Ian's hands. "She may not report it today," he spat, "but she will eventually." Carl now approached Kristina; he turned her toward the car and shoved her into the door. The glass tasted like mulch. Alan tossed Carl his handcuffs on command. "Both of you are going to jail for the hunting and killing of an endangered species, while night hunting, on illegal property." The bitter wind picked up. "I wouldn't want that charge on my shoulders," he laughed.

"I can't let you do that," Alan was stiff and steady, if only for a moment.

"Can't let me do what? I've worked my whole life for the privilege of doing whatever I damn well please."

"Don't put my daughter in jail." His sight fell to his feet. "That's all I ask."

He thought for a moment. "All right." Carl used his cigar to point at Ian, "This one goes to jail for hunting." Then at Kristina, "This one loses her job – and all future forest jobs – for covering it up. Voila and vamonos."

Carl dropped Kristina's cuffed hands like a mic and took off across the opening toward his car, using her radio to report the faux incident to commander post. "Alan, you free to hunt next weekend? Southeast post will be clear from now on."

The Ranger laid with Ian and the wolf until the police arrived. Her husband's eyes were weak and wet, as were her own.

Jane was driving with the sirens on, though there wasn't much traffic. The back of the ambulance was cold compared to the outside. LED lights projected the equipment and supplies in perfect definition, but the jumbling of the van turned Kristina's visions blurry. Kristina sat next to Carl, leaning over him. She knew that she should be starting an IV,

taking his blood pressure, injecting tPA. She knew that he had already run out of time, at the least he would be paralyzed. Kristina spat in his face. He blinked open his eyes.

Carl tried to speak, but he was feeble and the oxygen mask sucked away all the sound like a vacuum. Grinding her teeth, Kristina began to cry. “No one will care when you die,” she whispered at him. “You’re a monster, and you will be forgotten.”

By the time the ambulance arrived in the ER pit, Carl’s heart was barely beating and he had lost consciousness again. Residents pulled out the stretcher and Kristina began her report, “Male, 68, stroked out in his home.” The ER staff barely listened to her; they didn’t have time. If Carl was going to survive, he needed serious medical intervention immediately. They rolled him away through the hospital entrance.

Jane came around the van, meeting Kristina at the back. “You didn’t do anything,” She was standing with her hands on her hips. “You practically killed that man.”

Kristina let out the breath she had been holding and rubbed her face with both hands. She smoothed out her eyebrows and folded her arms across her chest. “Some lives just aren’t worth saving.” She smiled, solemn in fresh morning light.