

## CHAPTER ONE

285 days *earlier*

Tuesday, March 9, 1982

ROBERT E. CLARK stepped out of the plane at Howard Air Force Base and was blinded by intense sunlight. It felt as if God had turned an interrogation lamp on him—the only thing missing was His booming voice and a burning bush. He reached for his sunglasses but stopped when his three-year-old began to squirm in the crook of his right arm. He grabbed the stair rail with his left hand, fearing he might stumble down the steps with her. At the bottom, he felt extreme heat rising from the tarmac and saw blurry waves as light refracted near its surface. Disoriented, he forgot to put on his cap and gave no thought to whether his wife had made it down the steps. He just wanted to get inside the terminal... fast. As he approached the open door, a rush of air-conditioned coolness helped him regain his composure.

“Welcome to Panama,” came a Southern drawl from somewhere in the darkness. As Clark’s eyes adjusted to the light inside, a wide, toothy grin appeared. It belonged to a tall, slim officer whose rather long, sun-bleached hair caused him to resemble a lifeguard dressed up in an Army officer’s khaki uniform. “Hot as

hell, isn't it?" he continued, without losing his grin. Then, extending his hand, "I'm Trip... Trip Stephens, your sponsor."

"Hell, yes, it's hot... Robert E. Clark," he said, shaking Trip's hand, "But my friends call me 'Clark.' How do people live in this shit?"

"You'll get used to it," Trip laughed, "You're a Southern boy, aren't you? Let's go get your stuff."

"I've gotta go to the bathroom," blurted a voice nearby, causing Clark to realize for the first time since leaving the plane that his normally talkative wife was behind him, also stunned by their new environment.

"I'm sorry, Sugar. I should've helped you down the steps." He turned to see his wife, cheeks flushed and drenched in sweat.

"I'm all right," she huffed, "but I do have to go to the bathroom."

"Trip, this is my wife, Janelle Clark. And this sweet little thing is Eloise, but we call her 'Ellie'." Ellie smiled at Trip with bright blue eyes and then tucked her face into her daddy's shoulder.

"Delighted to meet y'all."

Clark turned back to his wife. "Why don't you take Ellie and go find the 'facilities,' while Trip and I get the luggage?"

Although the Clark family had flown down from the States on what looked like a civilian passenger jet, the baggage-claim area bore no resemblance to a civilian airport. Instead of a circling carousel of suitcases, there was a pile of duffle bags, suitcases, and boxes thrown in the corner of the terminal. Although Clark had marked their bags with distinctive yellow tags, it took some time to locate all six, which he and Trip lugged to the curb outside the terminal.

Trip left to get his car and returned in a few minutes in a midnight blue, late model BMW 530 with tan leather interior. He jumped out to help Clark with the luggage but, upon opening the trunk, discovered he'd forgotten to unload his golf clubs. That

meant three bags had to ride in the back seat, piled next to Clark and Ellie. Janelle sat in front with Trip.

As Trip drove down the palm-lined streets of Howard Air Force Base, Clark had no idea where he was headed. He knew Trip was taking them across the Panama Canal to Fort Clayton, where he would begin his career as an Army lawyer. He knew that, but he had no inkling of what was in store for him there. Everything he thought he knew about himself, his values, and the world around him was about to be challenged.

But at that moment those challenges were months away. He rode along in blissful ignorance of what was to come, excited about his future and captivated by the natural beauty around him. Red, pink, and yellow flowers formed splashes of vibrant colors against lush green foliage. Palm fronds on the trees lining the street swayed in the breeze against a brilliant blue sky. Crossing the Bridge of Americas, high above the water, they had a spectacular view of the Panama Canal and the Gulf of Panama. Two large, white cruise ships glistened in the sunlight, alongside two drab, box-like freighters, all waiting to enter the Miraflores Locks on their way to the Caribbean. Janelle turned around from the front seat and said, with wide eyes, "You know, Bobby, it's kinda like what Dorothy said: we're not in Georgia anymore."

A condescending smile crossed Trip's face, but it quickly disappeared when the traffic stalled and the grimy face of a small boy appeared outside the driver's side window. He held up a plastic bottle of gray water and a dirty rag, offering to clean the windshield. "Go away!" Trip shouted through the glass, waving his hand. The boy disappeared, and Trip proceeded through the thick traffic. "Sorry, Janelle. Sometimes you have to be rude to these people. Now, where were we? Oh yeah. Tell me about yourselves. Y'all are both from Georgia, right?"

"That's right," Janelle began, "Pemberton, Georgia, right outside Savannah. But, of course, most recently we've been at Fort

Hood and Athens and the JAG School. You know, Trip, Bobby and I have known each other our whole lives.”

“Really?” The thin smile reappeared.

Janelle then proceeded to tell their entire life story to this person whom they’d just met. It wasn’t the first time—she loved to talk about anything and everything to anybody. On their flight to Panama, she’d given the woman in the seat next to her a detailed account of their daughter’s birth.

Her monologue continued. “We dated in high school. During Bobby’s first year at West Point, I wrote him every day. Until he went off to school, the only time we were apart was when we went to church. My daddy and me are Baptists, and Bobby’s family is all Methodist.”

“You know how that goes in a small Southern town, Trip,” Clark offered from the back seat, “most folks are Baptists or Methodists, although there isn’t much difference—they’re all pretty conservative. Folks used to say, ‘Our churches are so conservative even the Episcopalians handle snakes.’”

Trip smiled again. “I’d say that’s pretty conservative. There wasn’t much talk of snakes in my church back home.”

“Where are you from, Trip?” Janelle asked.

“Well, I guess you’d say I’m an Episcopalian from Jackson, Mississippi.”

After a few moments of silence, Clark coughed and said, “Trip, I, uh, I meant no offense by that joke.”

“Oh, none taken, Bobby. Or is it ‘Clark?’”

“It’s ‘Clark.’ Only Janelle and my family call me ‘Bobby’ anymore.”

“Yeah, no offense taken, Clark. It’s actually pretty funny because it’s true—Episcopalians are a pretty formal bunch.” Trip paused, seeming to collect his thoughts. “My family’s been in Mississippi forever...” His voice trailed off as if he’d lost his train of thought—or decided not to continue. After a few moments,

he began again, “Y’all will soon find out that Panama is *a lot* different from the States. I suppose it’s the hot weather that makes people a little crazy. It’s a fascinating place, though. By the way, do either of y’all play golf?”

Before Clark could say anything, Janelle answered, “No, Trip, Bobby doesn’t play any sports. All he does is work. He’s been that way his whole life. In high school all he did was work and study, work and study. He didn’t know how to have fun.”

Clark squirmed in the back seat, causing one of the suitcases to slide in Ellie’s direction. After shoving it back into place, he said, through clenched teeth, “Well, I knew I needed to be prepared for West Point.”

“You worked like a mad man there, too,” she said, turning to the back seat. “Didn’t you say you only slept five hours a night?” She paused when she saw the look on his face and softened her tone. “Bobby, you know everybody in Pemberton was proud of you.” Smiling, she turned back to Trip. “When we thought about West Point, Trip, we thought about the men carved on Stone Mountain—Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeff Davis. For one of our boys to be going to their school was a big deal.”

“The truth is, Trip, none of them thought I’d make it.”

“Well, you never made the football team. You didn’t play any sports.”

“I don’t think Trip is interested in my lack of athletic ability, Janelle,” Clark said with a forced smile.

“Well, you remember when Stanley Griffin came back home from the Air Force Academy when we were seniors. And he’d been the captain of the football team and class president his senior year. People thought if he couldn’t make it...”

“But you obviously did make it through West Point,” Trip interjected. “That must’ve been tough. And you must’ve done pretty well—you were a FLEP, weren’t you? If I remember correctly,

aren't there only twenty-five officers out of hundreds of applicants who get selected for the Funded Legal Education Program?"

"Yeah. That's right. Then I went to law school at the University of Georgia. Where'd you go, Trip?"

"Ole Miss," he sighed. "It's a family tradition: my father and grandfather both went there. If I ever have a son, I'm sure they'll expect him to go there, too. 'Hotty Toddy, Gosh almighty,' and all that..." Trip smiled, but not like a loyal Ole Miss Rebel. After a few moments, he continued, "So, after law school you went to the JAG School in Charlottesville?"

"That's right."

"We had a number of FLEPs in my basic class," Trip offered. "Most of them were West Point graduates. We used to watch them in classes like 'Introduction to Map Reading.' They were bored out of their minds. But they said the training we had on the Uniform Code of Military Justice was much better than what they'd had at West Point or the basic courses in their original branches."

"I'd agree with that," Clark replied. "In fact, I decided to become a JAG, in part, because nobody in my unit, including my company commander, seemed to know how to use the UCMJ to deal with all the BS."

"What do you mean?"

Janelle interrupted. "Are there any malls down here, Trip?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, but you'll find they aren't like the ones back home. Mostly cheap junk. The good shopping is in downtown Panama City. I've found some fine linens and jewelry that were very reasonably priced."

"I was trying to answer Trip's question, Janelle. Trip, you asked what I meant about all the BS. I was referring to what I found when I got to my platoon. Vietnam had been over less than a year, and the Army was exhausted. We had more dirt bags than good soldiers, more high-school dropouts than high-school graduates. And nobody seemed to know how to use the Uniform

Code of Military Justice to get rid of the bad apples. One of my troops even pulled a knife on me. When I told my company commander about it, he just asked me if the guy lunged at me. Can you believe that? What difference should that make?"

"It sounds like you want to be a prosecutor."

"Absolutely."

"Well, we'll have to see what Colonel Allen has to say about that," Trip replied, in a way that suggested there was something important he wasn't saying.

For a moment Clark considered asking him to explain but decided to play it safe. "So, Allen is a full colonel?"

"No. Lieutenant colonel. That's what's authorized for this SJA slot."

"What's an SJA?" Janelle asked, indicating that she was paying attention.

"It's the staff judge advocate," Clark explained from the back seat. "He's the head lawyer in Panama."

Trip turned off the road and pulled up in front of a dreary pink stucco building with a terra cotta tile roof. The mold on the outside walls gave a hint of what they'd discover inside. "This is it," he announced. "The visiting officers' quarters. Unfortunately, y'all will have to stay here for a while. We couldn't put you in for quarters, because you have to do that yourself when you in-process. It isn't too bad, though. At least it's air conditioned, and the food is pretty good."

The oppressive Panamanian heat greeted them again when they got out of the car. Janelle took Ellie inside to get cool, while Clark and Trip hauled in the luggage. They had barely exchanged "good-byes" when Janelle started whispering her list of complaints.

"Trip was right about the air conditioning, but it's really too cool. Do you smell that? It smells like cigarettes and mold at the same time. Ellie should *not* be breathing that stuff."

"We don't have any choice, Janelle. There's no other place to

stay.” She gave him a sullen look, as he turned to approach the registration desk.

Without looking up, the plump woman seated behind the counter mumbled, “How lon’ you gonna stay here?”

“We just arrived from Charleston. Here’s a copy of my orders,” Clark said, pushing the document across the counter.

“I don’ nee’ to see no orders. Capitain Stephens tol’ me you gonna be here until you ge’ into quarters. Did he tell you how lon’?”

“No.”

“Well, you gonna be in Room 215. I’s a nice room.”

“Is there anyone to help us with our bags?”

The clerk looked up for the first time. “No, you gotta tha’ yourself, and you can’ leave dem here. You nee’ to hurry i’ you wanna eat, ‘cause the restauran’ gonna close’ in t’irty minutes, an’ we go’ no room service.”

Great. Welcome to Panama. Turning toward Janelle, Clark was going to suggest that she take Ellie to their room, but she was already on the way. It took him three trips to get all six bags to the room. They held everything the Clark family would have until their furniture, dishes, and other household goods arrived. Because the VOQ was old—and because modern comforts like elevators were low on the Army’s priority list—Clark had to lug the suitcases up narrow stairs two at a time. He felt like a rookie, going through some sort of initiation or rite of passage.

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The next morning Clark got up early to start “in-processing,” an Army term for running all over the installation, clutching reams of paper, and waiting for a clerk to take a copy of your orders and stamp your in-processing checklist with a rubber stamp. Army bureaucracy at its finest. Fortunately, Trip drove Clark around

post, so the process went more quickly than it had on his previous assignments.

As Clark walked into the orderly room of Headquarters Company—the last stop on his inprocessing checklist—he had a flash of *déjà vu*. The smell of musty files, the gray steel desks and chairs, the bulletin board with its neatly arranged documents that no one ever read—all of it brought back memories of his time as a line officer. This company was different, though, because it was not a line unit. It was, instead, the repository for everyone who was assigned to the headquarters staff, and it reminded Clark that he had become what soldiers derisively call a REMF—a rear echelon motherfucker. Still, this was the headquarters company of an infantry brigade, so it was more spit-and-polish than most.

He was completing the last of several forms when the clerk yelled to the company commander. “Sir, the new JAG officer is signing in. I think you’re gonna want to meet him.”

The company commander emerged from his office, and Clark immediately thought of one of his grandmother’s sayings: “he had a grin on his face like a mule eatin’ briars.” Some might have even called it a “shit-eatin’” grin, although this soldier looked like an infantryman from the top of his crew-cut head to the toes of his spit-shined boots. He was fit and trim and appeared to be about the same age as Clark.

His grin grew to a broad smile, and his eyes widened. “You’ve got a Ranger Tab,” he said, referring to the patch Clark proudly wore on the upper left sleeve of his uniform, signifying that he’d graduated from the Army’s toughest school. “You’re a JAG, and you’ve got a muther-fuckin’ Ranger Tab.” Then, looking down at Clark’s orders, his eyes got even bigger. “And your middle name is Elmer! Pleased to meet you,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m Elmer T. Jackson.”

At that moment, Captain Elmer T. Jackson and Captain Robert Elmer Clark bonded for good.

“Yeah, it was my grandfather’s name,” Clark replied, “But I usually just use Robert E. Clark. Uh, no offense, Elmer, but I’ve always been teased about my middle name.”

“Are... you... kidding?” Elmer said the words slowly and deliberately, emphasizing his mock disbelief. Then, the grin reappeared. “It’s a great name. What other name allows you to walk up to a gorgeous woman in a bar and say, ‘Hi, my name is Elmer. I’m all outta glue, but I can still stick to you.’” He paused and stared at Clark with an expectant look.

“That really works for you, huh?”

“Like a charm. Every time.”

As Clark later learned, Elmer wasn’t kidding. His boyish grin and aw-shucks charm made “Elmer” the most well-known name on post, especially among the attractive Panamanian secretaries who worked in the headquarters offices.

Clark was pleased with himself as he settled into Trip’s BMW to head to the JAG Office. It had been a good morning. He had arrived.