

CHAPTER
TWO

JoBell had been supportive, but not excited, about me enlisting. While I was in basic training without my comm or any screen, she wrote me actual paper letters every day, telling me that she hoped I was doing good on my rifle marksmanship or my push-ups and sit-ups for physical training. She said she missed me, and even that she was proud of me, but she never came around to admitting that enlisting had been a good idea. I was pretty sure she'd be mad or at least dump a bunch of I-told-you-so's on me when she found out I had to miss tonight's party because of the Guard.

Driving north on the highway toward the armory near Farragut Falls, I called out, "Hank."

"Wha'chu need, chief?"

"Speaker-call JoBell."

"No problem. I'll put a voice call with JoBell on speaker," Hank said. *"You want to listen to a sample of my newest song while you wait?"*

"No thanks. I'm good."

"No problem. Let me know if you change your mind. Of course you can always add the song to your playlist for only . . . two dollars."

Maybe I should have paid extra for the ad-free version of the digital assistant. Finally JoBell picked up. *"Danny? Are you here? I'll come get you on the Jet Ski."*

“*Cannonball!*” Cal shouted in the background. I heard a big splash and people laughing.

“I’m not at the lake.” I hated lying to JoBell, but if I made her angry over all of this, it would ruin her evening. “Mom’s having a rough night. I need to stay home and help her.”

“*Oh no,*” she said with real concern in her voice. “*Is she okay? Is it a bad attack? Do you want me to come over to help?*”

Despite how uncomfortable I felt making up this story, I had to smile. A lot of girls would be mad that I was bailing. JoBell was just worried about Mom.

“No,” I said. “No, it’s cool. I got this. I’m just bummed I’ll have to miss everything.”

“*Family first, Danny. Your mom is most important. She helped me so much when my mom left Dad and me for that prick dentist. I wish she didn’t have to have it so rough like this. Maybe she could see another doctor? Maybe a different prescription would help?*”

Her caring wasn’t making it any easier to lie. “She’s been to a zillion different doctors, believe me. This anxiety thing is kind of a family curse. Grandma was the same way. Anyway, I don’t want to mess up your party. Have twice as much fun for me.”

“*You know I won’t have half as much fun without you. But I’ll try. I love you.*”

“I love you more,” I said. “Hank, end call.”

“*I’m hangin’ up.*”

I drove on through my ruined night toward the National Guard armory.

After I pulled into the parking lot inside the fence, I shut off the engine and sat back in the quiet stillness for a moment. So far, the Guard had been all about training. At basic, we’d practiced marching, shooting, throwing grenades, and we ran battle drills. Everything we’d done

had been closely supervised under controlled conditions, with enough safety precautions to take all the danger and fun out of it. It sounded like we were going real world tonight. What would that be like?

By eighteen thirty I was in MCU, helmet, and body armor, one of nineteen soldiers crammed inside the cabin of a roaring Chinook helicopter. I'd been on an airplane for the flight to and from basic training, so this was my third flight ever.

It really sucked.

As I settled into the miserable flight, the sweat rolled down my face and back. It wasn't only the heat in the helicopter under all this gear. Every time the Chinook bumped in the air, I felt like my insides were flipping over. Sure, this wasn't close to as bumpy as bull riding, but at least on a bull I felt more in control, and the fall to the ground was short. If this bird went down, I was helpless to do anything but wait to die.

The drive from Freedom Lake down to Boise took about eight hours. They said this flight was supposed to be about an hour and a half. I checked my watch. We should have been getting close.

"All right, listen up, men!" Staff Sergeant Meyers shouted over the engine noise as he walked down the aisle. I looked to Specialist Sparrow to see if she was mad about being called a man, but she was cool. Meyers went on. "The lieutenant has our orders, so stop your gabbing and make sure you pay attention so you know what's going on!"

Nobody had been saying anything. The nine soldiers in my squad sat on the canvas seats lining one side of the bird, staring across the aisle at second squad. These guys were mostly strangers to me. Besides basic training, all I'd ever done with the National Guard was one weekend drill with my unit. First Sergeant Herbokowitz was usually the NCO, the Noncommissioned Officer, who yelled at us, but he was on the other Chinook with third and fourth squads. Second squad's leader, Staff Sergeant Torres, hardly ever said anything. Lieutenant

McFee was supposed to be in charge of the whole platoon, but the problem was LT McFee was really young, which let Meyers think he could run things. Or maybe Meyers was just kind of a dick.

Lieutenant McFee sat in the middle of second squad. He leaned forward in his seat a little and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Okay. This is your op order.” I could hardly hear him over the engine noise, especially with my stupid earplugs in.

Meyers shouted, “Sir, you’re going to have to stand up and be a hell of a lot louder!”

McFee nodded. He rose and slid his finger along his Army-issued comm in its thick green case, maybe trying to bring up the right page. The glow from the screen cast shadows above his cheeks, making him look like a zombie or something. “Paragraph One: Enemy Forces. Okay.” He held his comm closer to his face and squinted. “The situation is that protestors down in Boise in the vicinity of the capitol building are creating a dangerous or potentially dangerous environment. They have thrown rocks, bottles, or other objects at law-enforcement personnel. Some vehicles have been destroyed and a few businesses have been looted. Probable course of action is that the protestors will continue to cause injury and property damage.”

Sergeant Meyers sighed loudly. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the side of his M4 barrel.

Lieutenant McFee shot Meyers a quick, nervous look, but went on. “Friendly forces. Okay. Um. We have local law enforcement in the area. State police. EMTs. Also, um, firefighters. Soldiers from the local Army National Guard headquartered at —”

“Sir?” Sergeant Meyers stood up again. “That’s a bang-on start of a textbook five-paragraph op order. I think we can skip to the mission. These Joes just need the basics.”

Lieutenant McFee took a breath like he was about to say something, but then he blew it out and sat down.