

CHAPTER ONE

A tracer round sliced a bright red streak through the black night in front of me. I grabbed Sweeney and Cal by their coats, pulling them down behind our bunker. Machine guns and rifles opened fire from both sides of the Washington-Idaho border. Given that I had just two months of basic training, a handful of National Guard drills, and a few weeks of sentry duty, I hadn't really practiced fighting a battle to stop the US Army from invading my state.

"Aw yeah, dude!" Cal shouted near my ear. "This is the real deal!"

Sweeney hit me in the shoulder. "Danny, you're the soldier. Just tell us what to do. We'll follow your orders."

I was packing my .45. Cal had Schmidty's AR15. Sweeney still needed a weapon. "Stick with me! Stay low!" I yelled over the roar of gunfire.

The screech of a jet fighter shot past overhead. Cracks like thunder exploded close by. We pushed forward into my squad's bunker.

Inside, PFC Luchen fired his SAW, while Specialist Sparrow sent heavier rounds downrange with her .50-cal. Sergeant Kemp was helping them reload as they burned through their ammo belts. They were both holding down the trigger so long that I worried they'd melt their barrels.

Kemp spotted me. "Wright! What are you doing here!?"

"Here for the fight!" I shouted back. "Got my boys with me."

Kemp handed me and Sweeney M4s, probably Luchen and

Sparrow's regular weapons. "Come on!" He led the way to the firing window. "One shot! One kill! Pick your targets to save ammo."

"Seriously? Just like that? Just jump in?" Cal took aim.

"Yeah!" Kemp said. "But you have to aim carefully so —"

"I can shoot." Cal aimed and pulled the trigger.

At least a whole company of Federal infantry had crossed into Idaho, shooting as they moved through the valley below our firing position. They were supported by machine guns on the Washington side, which opened up to offer suppressive fire. I'd shot an Army staff sergeant back in Spokane to save my friends. Was that the right thing to do? Who knew? To win this fight now, to protect my state, I would have to do it again and shoot as many of the enemy as I could. I'd have to use my best skills to kill American soldiers.

"Let's go, Wright!" Luchen said. He held down the trigger and mowed down a whole charging fire team. "Get in the fight!"

I'd wanted in the war. I hated the damned Fed. A bunch of rounds shattered against the rocks next to me. I lined my sights up on the shadowy form of an advancing Fed and pulled the trigger. Clipped his leg. I found another target. Fired. Pegged his chest. Knocked him down. I fired again and again.

"Aw shit!" Luchen yelled, and pointed way down the hill to our company's base. "They got a mick-lick!" An MCLC was a Mine Clearing Line Charge, a little trailer with a small rocket that pulled a line of C4 charges out over a minefield or wire barrier. The rocket would explode the obstacles and clear a path for the advancing army. With the mick-lick, they could take out our wire obstacles and open the road to our bunker.

Three of our guys ran out, ready to fire an AT4 rocket launcher. One of them was hit twice and fell. A few steps later, another took a round through the throat. The last soldier aimed and fired a rocket.

The mick-lick burst into white-hot flame. The crack of the explosion slammed us a second later.

“Yeah!” Luchen shouted. He high-fived Cal. “Awesome!”

An Apache helicopter gunship swept through the sky, and another rose up from behind some trees. They dodged around firing at each other until one of them went down with its engine burning. The surviving bird dipped down and turned its thirty-millimeter chain gun and Hellfire missiles against the Fed lines. Hundreds of soldiers exploded all over the field.

“We got ‘em!” Cal said. “They ain’t got a chance!”

But our Apache exploded into fiery pieces seconds later, and five M4B Schwarzkopf main battle tanks pushed through the woods from Washington. The tanks fired, and our side of the border erupted. Down the hill, our TOC tent went up in flames. The farmhouse by the road collapsed as well. A second mick-lick moved into position, firing its rocket. Seconds later, its C4 rope exploded and Fed soldiers poured through the gap.

“There’s more Feds than we got bullets!” I shouted.

One of the Schwarzkopfs turned its turret and raised the huge barrel of its main gun toward our bunker.

“Fall back!” Sergeant Kemp slung a full rucksack over his shoulder, an AT4 strapped to the top. “Grab your stuff! We’re bugging out!”

“Bullshit! We can take ‘em!” Cal fired six more rounds.

No we couldn’t. I pulled Cal away from the firing post. Sparrow started to take the .50-cal off its tripod.

“Leave it!” Kemp yelled. He pushed her out of the bunker through the crevice in back. I followed Sweeney and Cal. Luchen was right behind me, carrying his SAW. Kemp covered our six. “Go, go, go!” he shouted.

Behind us, the hill where we'd built our firing position exploded and we were all thrown to the ground. The little radio clipped to Kemp's chest squawked, "*All 476 elements, all 476 elements, this is 476 actual! Fall back! I say again, fall back! Evac truck charlie mike in five. 476 actual, out.*"

"That's the go code!" Kemp yelled. "The whole force is evacuating. We don't make that truck, we're screwed!"

We all bolted through the woods as fast as we could. I fell once, and my M4 hit a log, bouncing up and smacking me in the face. I scrambled to my feet in seconds and ran after my group.

We reached the road only to find our Army five-ton truck speeding away, its tarp in the back on fire. Soldiers inside used fire extinguishers, trying to put out flames that only flared up more in the wind. The truck sped off and disappeared around a bend.

"Shit! That was our last ride!" Luchen yelled. "What do we do now?"

"I parked my truck a ways back there," I said. "We can get out in that."

Kemp nodded. "Let's go."

I turned and led the way back through the woods toward the Beast. I slipped in something as I ran, and then I saw what I'd slipped in.

It wasn't snow. It was some guy's guts. Even worse, the guy was the other team leader in my squad, Sergeant Ribbon. He had a wide-eyed, openmouthed look of shock on his face. Dead.

There wasn't time to mourn him in the right way. Sparrow grabbed his rifle. I took a couple extra thirty-round magazines out of his ammo pouches. Then I closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'll hit 'em back for you. For all of us."

"Hey, over here," said Cal. A moment later, another flash revealed PFC Nelson from my squad, soaked in blood and clutching a chest wound.