

THE LAST FULL MEASURE

TRENT REEDY



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS
AN IMPRINT OF SCHOLASTIC INC.

Copyright © 2016 by Trent Reedy

Photos ©: 268 background: ayzek/Thinkstock; 269: Lisa F. Young/Shutterstock, Inc.; 303: Robert F. Sargent (CPhoM)/Corbis Images; 304: James Brey/iStockphoto.

All rights reserved. Published by Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and the LANTERN LOGO are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Reedy, Trent, author.

Title: The last full measure / Trent Reedy.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2016. | ©2016 | Sequel to: *Burning nation*. | Summary: Danny Wright is considered to be a hero by many in the rebel-held area of Idaho and the Northwest, but he has little faith in what passes for a government there, or in the secretive and repressive Brotherhood — and when nuclear weapons are detonated in Washington, DC, and New York, the Civil War suddenly turns into World War III.

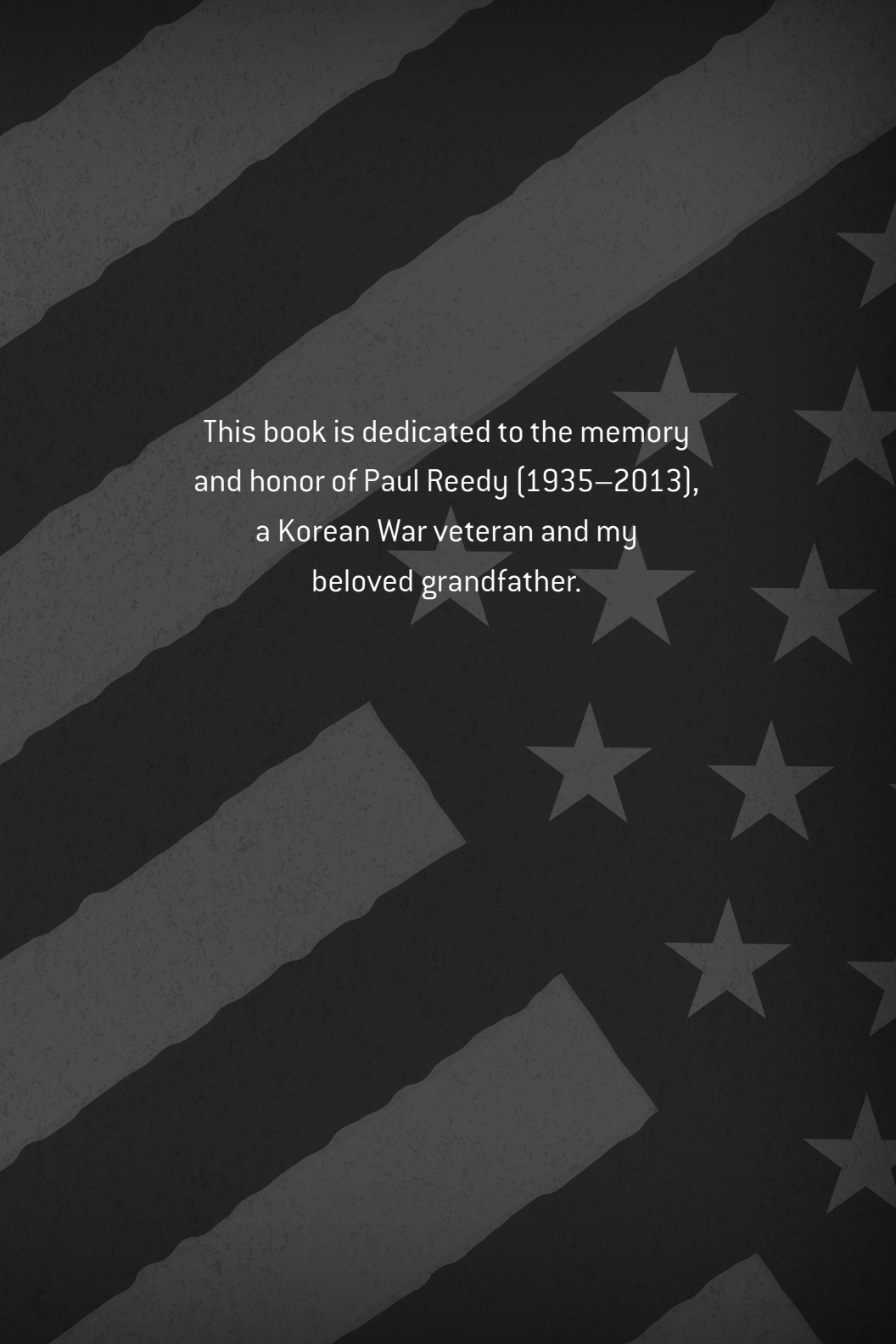
Identifiers: LCCN 2015043454 | ISBN 9780545548779 [hardcover : alk. paper]

Subjects: LCSH: Government, Resistance to—Juvenile fiction. | Civil war—Juvenile fiction. | Guerrillas—Juvenile fiction. | Nuclear warfare—Juvenile fiction. | War stories—Juvenile fiction. | Idaho—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Government, Resistance to—Fiction. | Guerrilla warfare—Fiction. | Nuclear warfare—Fiction. | War—Fiction. | Idaho—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.R25423 Las 2016 | DDC 813.6—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015043454>

10 98 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, May 2016



This book is dedicated to the memory
and honor of Paul Reedy (1935–2013),
a Korean War veteran and my
beloved grandfather.



“It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

President Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address
November 19, 1863

“In time of war, and by a two-thirds majority vote of both houses of the Legislative Assembly, a state of martial law may be imposed, during which time the rights of the people, enumerated in the first twenty-two sections of Article I may be suspended at the discretion of the President of the Republic of Idaho. Martial law shall continue until the President or a simple majority vote of both houses of the Legislative Assembly chooses to restore the rights granted to the people in the first twenty-two sections of Article I.”

Constitution of the Republic of Idaho
Article I, Section 23



↙• You're listening to the Cliffhanger, broadcasting pirate radio to a nation on the edge of the abyss, to a people holding on with bleeding, white-knuckled fingers to keep from falling to their deaths in a useless war. I'm on the move, coming to you over the Internet, shortwave, CB, AM, and sometimes the FM band, wherever I can find a transmitter, and the power to boost my signal and bring you the truth. It's a truth that cannot be silenced. Maybe the warmonger Governor Montaine will try to take me out for having the guts to say that his little crusade to be free isn't worth the high cost. Maybe President Griffith will try to arrest me for violating the Unity Act.

They'll never find me because I'm everywhere and nowhere. The Cliffhanger is your friend in the dark of the night, the voice we all cling to so we can feel safe in our homes while we sleep. The Cliffhanger is the unstoppable voice for peace. Go tell your friends, and keep me tuned in. If you think the warriors have shut me down, think again. I'm out there, up and down the dial. Come find me. Find the truth. I am the Cliffhanger. •↘

CHAPTER
ONE

“Okay, Danny, we’re ready to go live in thirty seconds.”

The voice made me jump. I looked through the double window on my left into the control room, where Paul the producer leaned over the mixer board. He pressed a button and smiled at me. *“Just relax, be natural, and have a good time.”*

I nodded, my headphones heavy on my ears, the sound of my nervous breathing filling the soundproof booth. From the control room, JoBell offered a little wave, but then she went back to watching the dozen or so feeds that brought the news on a full-wall screen. Major Leonard, my old National Guard company commander, stood next to Paul, wearing his plain, old-fashioned olive-drab Idaho Army uniform with his arms folded. We all thought Leonard had died during the Fed invasion, but he’d spent the occupation locked in a US Army prison cell at Federal Idaho Reconstruction Authority headquarters in Coeur d’Alene. After Idaho forces had rescued him and he’d had time to recover, he’d taken over as the commander of the military security escort that had been following me and JoBell around for the last month.

Through a different window right in front of me, Buzz Ellison slid into his own chair in the main studio. He pulled his mike in front of himself and flashed a smile at me. *“Paul,”* Buzz said over the mike, *“are we ready to go?”*

“Everything’s go, Buzz,” Paul answered. *“Buzz will take it from here, Danny.”* The bass rhythm and jangling electric guitar of the

show's intro music filled my headphones. *"Just follow his lead. Don't worry. He's an old pro at this. And in five, four, three."*

Buzz winked at me and launched into the show that my friend Schmidty had listened to for years. Before the war had killed him.

"Greetings! Greetings, fellow patriots! A new record number of you all listening in a new record number of independent countries. Sixteen million people listening to the Buzz Ellison Show, according to the most recent figures. And that's because, in these difficult times, more people than ever are turning toward those values that I, Buzz Ellison, have been talking about for years. From the very beginning, this show has been about a certain ethic, a philosophy of hard work, dedication, and independence. The idea that the individual can succeed without the help of the government, if the government will stop interfering and let him do what he needs to do.

"And that is just what is happening in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Texas, and Oklahoma. People are waking up, fellow patriots. This is the conservative revolution we've been waiting for! I've been saying this for months — years! For over half a century, a certain segment of the United States population has made the mistake of believing the US federal government's lies. They've been told, 'Put your trust in your government. Give your money to your government. Your government will take care of everything.' Ever since President Johnson's 'Great Society' bullshit, the US government has pledged to wipe out poverty, disease, laziness. More specifically, they said, 'Vote Democrat, or vote for traitorous big government Republicans, and your problems will be taken care of.' But people are finally, finally, after all these years saying, 'Wait a minute! Nothing's getting better. In fact, it's getting a whole hell of a lot worse! And so maybe we don't need this giant, bloated US federal government anymore.'

"This is our conservative revolution, fellow patriots. And who is spearheading that revolution?"

“Today . . . You know, in the history of the Buzz Ellison Show, I’ve had very few guests on the program. I’m serious. Maybe five or six guests. I usually don’t need them. People tune in to listen to my magnificence. But today, I’m humbled — and it takes a lot to humble someone of my caliber — but I really am humbled and proud to have on the show someone who truly embodies that patriotic conservative spirit. In the studio today we have Private First Class Daniel Wright of Freedom Lake, Idaho! Private Wright, welcome.”

Buzz popped a cigar in his mouth, flipped open a Zippo, and lit up, puffing his cigar to bring it to life. Now I was on. With millions listening. In the middle of a war.

I hated doing this propaganda shit.

Buzz looked up at me as he flicked the Zippo closed and blew out smoke. *“PFC Wright, can you hear me?”*

I shook myself to get in the game. *“Yes. Yes, I can hear you. Thank you. It’s great to be on the show, Mr. Ellison. Longtime listener. First-time . . . um . . . guest.”*

“I think someone’s a little nervous.” He laughed. *“But call me Buzz. May I call you Daniel?”*

“Sure,” I said. *“Or Danny’s fine.”* I was a little nervous, but that wasn’t my problem.

“Thanks for being on the show today, Danny. How are you enjoying your stay here in Boise?”

He should have said Fortress Boise, since the place had transformed into basically a big Army base. But that’s not what Buzz or President Montaine wanted to hear. My job was to motivate people in their fight against the United States. I tried to wedge little truths in with all my lies. *“It’s been pretty great. Me and my fiancée JoBell are staying in a nice hotel with steady hot water. I haven’t eaten so good in a long time.”* Buzz frowned. *“I mean, we’re eating a lot better up in northern Idaho now that the Fed, er, I mean, the United States*

military has been kicked out.” My face felt hot. I sounded like an idiot. “Just a real good chef at the hotel here, I think. Had some hash browns just this morning. The United States only wishes it could get its hands on potatoes that good.”

Buzz laughed again. “*So you like the food?*” He had always been a pretty big guy. I would have thought that, like the rest of us, he would have slimmed down a little during the occupation. Instead he was the same old Buzz. “*Things are also getting better in other parts of the Republic of Idaho, aren’t they?*”

How was I supposed to know what was going on in other parts of Idaho? Our screen and comm feeds were still out half the time. Same thing with electricity. “Oh yeah. Lots better,” I said. “Way better than under US occupation.”

“I understand that President Montaine has had you on a sort of tour, that you’ve been traveling from country to country, helping to motivate the troops for the cause. Where have you been? What have you seen?”

I’d been all over the new independent countries in the past month. Where should I begin? “Me and JoBell made it to the Republic of Texas. We took this series of short plane rides and secret ground transports all the way to Austin.”

“Yes! You must have arrived just after President Rod Percy and the Republic of Texas Army had come out of Houston and retaken the capitol. Amazing!”

“Um, yeah,” I said. When I got there, the old stone capitol building and a lot of the structures around it were mostly in ruins. Anti-aircraft guns and small missile batteries were set up all over the city. “Part of the Texas capitol building is underground. Some sections have collapsed, but President Percy and his team are hanging in there. It must have been a hell of a fight to take back Austin,” I continued. “The soldiers looked pretty tired. Worn out.”

“But you helped them keep going, didn’t you,” Buzz said.

“I guess.” I’d wanted to puke when I gave them the rebellion sign I’d accidentally invented, raising my left fist and yelling, “Rise up!” But almost all of those Texas soldiers had answered back the same way. “Then we made it to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Half the city was under US control. Oklahoma forces were clear down in the southern suburbs in this area called Jenks.”

“But the fight is going a lot better in Tulsa now,” Buzz cut in. He pointed at me with his cigar. *“Oklahoma has taken most of the city back.”*

“That’s true,” I said. About a week after JoBell and me were flown back north, I heard that most of Tulsa had been saved, if “saved” was the right word for it. From what we’d seen, homes, schools, businesses, parks, and even an old drive-in movie theater had been completely destroyed or were so shot up that nobody could really use them.

“I understand that lately you’ve been back up north, where our freedom fighters have really been sticking it to the United States. How has that been?”

“Almost unbelievable, Buzz,” I said. “We were on a flight that was supposed to land in Cheyenne, Wyoming, last week, but coming in through the dark, instead of seeing streetlights and house lights and stuff, we saw only fires. There was nothing left of Cheyenne. The US had destroyed it. Our pilot diverted to Laramie, but it had fallen to the US too. We were so low on fuel that the pilot had to put us down on a highway. We got out of there fast before the US —” I stopped myself. This wasn’t the kind of story I was supposed to be sharing. “There’s just fighting everywhere.”

“The fight for our freedom is on! What’s been the best part of the trip so far?”

“It’s hard to say, Buzz.” I’d hated so much of it, encouraging all

those soldiers to charge back into the fight. Throwing gas on a fire that moved good people to die in a war I wanted to be done with. I could see Buzz getting frustrated, though, so I needed to do like JoBell said and be the best actor I could be. “Montana was great. Bozeman, Butte, and Missoula were like resort towns. Idaho, Wyoming, and Canada have kind of shielded them from a lot of the ground war. Lot of cows, goats, and other animals even, grazing in people’s yards.”

“Yes, Montana has become a great food supplier for Idaho and Wyoming.”

“But I’ve loved it here in Boise,” I said. “One of my best friends was burned up pretty bad in the fight to end the occupation. He’s getting help in a good hospital. People here have been great. People in all the new independent countries have been great.”

Buzz blew out a plume of smoke on his side of the glass. *“You’ve mentioned your role in the battle to force the US military out of the Republic of Idaho. You broadcast the signal for a number of new countries to take action to break away from the United States. I know I was inspired by your words. How did it feel, after being in hiding and on the run from the US military for so long, to finally be on the offensive, to finally be able to take the fight to them and send them back where they came from?”*

“Good,” I said. And if it hadn’t felt exactly good, it was at least necessary. “I knew that we had to kick out the occupying army if we were ever going to have peace. I figured there was a better chance of that if I helped launch a precision attack, because then less people would get hurt.” I slipped into my standard lines. “You know, the United States needs to realize Idaho ain’t going back to just being a state again. They need to end the war and let us go.”

In the control room, Major Leonard nodded. JoBell offered a thumbs-up and a shrug. Like me, she hated all of this, but we agreed

I had to do it. This tour had been the only way to get Sweeney the surgeries he'd needed. Now he was at the Boise VA hospital, nearing the end of his treatment.

Buzz smiled. *"It's been a difficult war. Before the show today, I watched the press conference with US Secretary of Defense Haden. What did he say?"* He swiped his finger down his comm screen, searching. *"Ah, here it is. He said, and I quote, 'Collateral damage is an unfortunate but acceptable statistical inevitability in modern warfare.' Normally I'd agree with him, but not when he's talking about innocent American civilians! Some US drone operator in Arizona or who knows where chased after freedom fighters who crossed from Wyoming into Nebraska. The drone fired missiles that hit a school in this tiny town of Morrill, Nebraska. Nine kids who were practicing their spring play after school are dead. Two others are in critical condition. Now you watch, Danny. They'll probably blame the kid operating the drone. I'm sure you'll agree that the United States is real good at ordering its soldiers on missions and then turning on them when the mission develops complications. And while they're neck deep in deliberations about that, how many more innocent civilians will the US military murder? I'm honestly surprised that more states don't declare independence."*

He paused and puffed his cigar. Did he want me to answer? Should I say something? I'd been a soldier whose actions had led to collateral damage. I sparked the Battle of Boise that ignited this whole war. I bit my lip to keep control of myself. Would those school kids still be alive if I hadn't started all this?

"Now, Danny . . ." Buzz's voice took on that cold, quiet, serious tone that people reserved for hospitals or for funerals. *"You and your friends and your families have been through a lot. How are you all holding up?"*

All I had left in my life were my friends, and this shit was rough on all of us. Sweeney had been burned so bad that we weren't sure if he was going to make it for a while. Becca had been doing all she could to help the local medics take care of him. JoBell was impatient to get home. And Cal? Shit. The Brotherhood of the White Eagle had made him one of them.

Both Major Leonard and Buzz were looking worried, so I hurried to answer. "We're . . . great, you know. We're all safe. And happy to be free. That's why . . . It's a real honor to be part of the Idaho Army, you know? Growing up, we always read about George Washington and all those guys who fought for our freedom —"

Buzz leaned forward in his chair and pointed at me with his thick cigar. *"Exactly what I've been saying here on the show! George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and the other heroes of the American Revolution founded a great nation based on freedom and conservative principles, but that vision has been corrupted by liberalism in the last half century. Now we have a new George Washington in the form of President James Montaine. So you and your fellow soldiers and all of us are like the new George Washington's soldiers, wouldn't you say?"*

I didn't give a shit about any of that liberal versus conservative stuff. I never had, and I damn sure didn't now. But this interview wasn't really a discussion. "That's exactly what I'd say, Buzz."

JoBell smiled at me from the control room. She's why I was doing this. Montaine had promised that if I played ball and got everybody riled up and ready to fight the United States, he would put me on extended leave, and I could take off with JoBell and our friends if they wanted to come. We'd find someplace safe and leave the war behind.

"Danny?"

Oh shit. I'd missed his question. "I'm sorry, Buzz?"

“Well, I can understand how this is difficult for you to talk about, but I mentioned your mother. Now, the United States murdered your mother simply because she wanted to return to her home and her son in Idaho.”

I rubbed the scar in my aching left hand. This was the plan? To drag out the worst day of my life to put on a good show?

Buzz went on. *“Obviously, that question upset you a great deal. And I can see . . . I can tell from looking at you that this is tough. I only mention it because so many citizens of Idaho and Montana, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and Texas have endured incredibly painful losses. As someone who shares their pain, what would you like to say to them right now?”*

People were missing husbands, brothers, mothers, and friends and family of all kinds. Thousands of people were dead, and I was supposed to say something that would make it all better? “We need to end the war,” I said. Then, catching Buzz’s disapproving look, I went on. “I know it hurts, but we can’t let our losses be for nothing. We have to make it count. We have to . . . sacrifice . . . so that we can be free. We need to beat the United States of America.” I needed to jazz this up, make it sound like something I would have wanted to hear back when I was burning for revenge on the Fed. “And we can win this war! All we have to do is have courage and stay in the fight. Rise up! We will give them a war!”

I hated the words even as I said them, but Buzz smiled and clapped.

“That’s the spirit!” Buzz said. *“I couldn’t have said it any better myself. That’s about all the time we have today for the interview, but thanks for being on the show, Danny. And to all our brave soldiers out there fighting for our freedom against the tyranny of the United States, I think I speak for Danny Wright, and for all of us, when I say keep up the good work. We’re all counting on you, and you’re*

doing a great job. We're going to turn it over to several important updates from the Republic of Idaho Radio News, and then we'll be right back."

"You're clear, Danny," Paul said through my headset. "You can come on out now."

Back in the control room, Paul shook my hand. "Thanks a lot, Danny. Buzz wasn't kidding. We don't have a lot of guests on the show, and you did great. Can I get you some coffee? Water?" He shrugged. "We ran out of water bottles months ago, but the tap is still pretty clean."

"I'm fine. Thanks." I joined JoBell in front of the wall-sized screen, and she pulled me into a tight hug.

"I know that was tough," she whispered. "But this is almost over. We'll go home soon."

"Buzz has another segment after the short news break, and then he wants to talk to you off the air during the longer hard break. Do you mind hanging around until then?" Paul asked.

We had no place to go around here and no ride to get there, even if Major Leonard allowed us to leave, so I nodded. "At least you can watch your news again," I said to JoBell.

"All of it bad." She picked up a comm and tapped to switch the large center feed and the sound to a different channel.

"— tactical redeployment was a terrible idea. By the time US Army and Air Force assets cooperated to retake Fort Sill, insurgents had already seized weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and hardware. So we suffered a demoralizing defeat in Idaho to gain what amounts to a bombed-out shell of a former Army base on some useless ground. The same is true of Fort Hood and other bases in Texas. The US military has control of those places now, but they're essentially destroyed."

JoBell flopped down in a swivel chair. “Old news.” She tapped the comm hard to switch feeds again.

“You’re watching United States Television. USTV. Hope for a united America. The latest combined federal, rebel combatant, and civilian casualty estimate has topped twenty-five thousand, an increase of about eight thousand deaths since —”

Not again. At least three times a week, one side or the other gave us casualty figures. The reports were never in agreement. The US always said more rebels were dying. Idaho said the opposite. “Jo, I can’t stand to hear about —”

She changed feeds. *“In an Entertainment Television exclusive, Kat Simpson, star of the teen vampire blockbuster Nightfall, will be disappointed to learn that her onetime on- and offscreen romance Ron Porter is the father of singer Molly Curtis’s future child. Molly, who only confirmed baby bump speculation last week, says her tour will continue, and daddy-to-be Porter can watch her, quote, ‘twerk that baby into the world.’ Certainly much-needed happy news in the face of the civil war. The baby’s name? Are you ready for this? Ron and Molly plan to name her Peace.”*

“Oh, goody for them,” said JoBell. She shook her head and switched the sound and main screen to another channel.

“President Griffith and the National Nuclear Security Administration are working with the FBI, the NSA, and the military to recover the two missing nuclear warheads —”

“— for a hearing regarding accusations of price gouging for generators, emergency rations, chemical toilets, and other high-demand items —”

“— the largest manhunt in United States history, in the history of the world, is ultimately hampered by a lack of trust. Air Force Colonel Arnold Woodruff and Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Dennis

Doyle, the assumed masterminds behind the theft, were in command at what we are calling Missile Silos One and Two. Both possessed the technical knowledge for removing the Minuteman IV five-hundred-kiloton warheads and for disabling certain security protocols. Both are missing. But with the United States accusing rebel leaders of harboring these men and their accomplices, and with rebel leadership accusing the United States of orchestrating these thefts for its own purposes, the task of finding the suspects becomes increasingly complicated.”

“— for Disease Control in Atlanta has issued a warning about the danger of infection from direct contact with or inadequate storage of human remains. Effective immediately, the following policy has been —”

“— theft and armed robbery through the roof. You know how many homes have been flat-out abandoned by people leavin’ the city? Now we gotta deal with squatters, vandalism, turf wars. And this ain’t just Brooklyn. Ain’t just New York. Got an old cop buddy in Dallas. His homicide division can’t handle all the bodies. How’s they s’posed to separate normal murders from combat deaths? Who handles that? You tell me! Lagging police response times? Get out of here —”

“— If you see something, say something. It will save lives —”

“Damn,” JoBell said. The news might be getting her down, but I think at least a part of her secretly welcomed being informed, that feeling of connectedness to the world and current events she always seemed to crave. She switched the main feed again.

“Federal investigators have confirmed the identity of the human remains found in a hog confinement outside of Shawano, Wisconsin, as those of Army Specialist Randal Bishop, who had been assigned to security at Missile Silo One. Due to the condition of the remains, it was impossible to determine the cause of death, but this discovery

might lend some credence to the theory that those responsible for stealing the nuclear warheads, and the warheads themselves, have quite possibly left the rebel territories —

“Change it,” I said. “Nothing new there. They keep blathering on about the same stuff. They’re looking for the bombs. We get it.”

— Laura Griffith is strong, but she’s also a mother. A grieving mother. She even gave the order to rush the Air Force Academy cadets through their pilot training, which may have contributed to her son being shot down over Idaho. It might not be inappropriate to ask if she is really mentally fit for her current position. It’s a medical fact that there are certain hormonal differences, and when that is coupled with grief, fatigue, and —

“Exactly the kind of sexist crap I’d expect from Fox News,” JoBell said. “Can we get radio in here?”

“This *is* a radio station,” Paul laughed. He made a few taps on the control comm and the audio switched to a radio feed. JoBell swiped and tapped some more.

“From NPR News, this is Everything That Matters. I’m David Benson. New fires have broken out at Texas oil wells and refineries as a result of military —”

Buzz came into the control room. “The only toxic air in here is coming from NPR! Someone switch off that liberal propaganda!” He snatched the comm out of JoBell’s hands and changed the main wall screen to a debate in Congress. “Little C-Span. At least then we can see what those crooks are up to.” The senator on-screen said something about an Emergency Agricultural Bill and a food shortage as Buzz lowered the volume. He puffed on his cigar. “Not bad for your first time, Danny.” He patted my back. “Now for next time, we’ll set you up with a list of good talking points to help you with —”

“Next time?” I asked.

He looked confused. “Well, yes. Didn’t President Montaine tell you? He believes that ongoing appearances on my program will be the best way for you to help with the war effort, the best way for you to motivate people, and I agree.”

“My friend has been in Boise for surgery, but he should be ready to go home soon,” I said. “I was hoping to go with him.”

“And Danny isn’t going to be your sock puppet,” JoBell said. “He’s not going to read some propaganda script that you plopped down in front of him.”

Buzz laughed. “Little spitfire, this one, eh, Danny?”

JoBell folded her arms. “I’m standing right here.”

“Honey, I’m not talking about providing him with a script or making him say anything he doesn’t want to say. I just want to remind him of those parts of his story that so many people have found so inspiring. You gotta relax, sweetheart. You’re starting to sound like Lazy Laura Griffith.”

JoBell glared at him. “I’m not your honey, or your sweetheart.”

Buzz’s jaw stiffened. In the silence, the senator on-screen continued. “*It is our job, our responsibility to the people we represent, to make sure they have enough to eat. Their very lives depend —*”

The lights in the Senate chamber went out. The image shook, and I could just barely make out senators gripping their seats. “*Oh no —*”

The image cut to static and then to a blue screen. A second later, a dozen or so other feeds on the wall screen did the same. “Paul, what’s going on?” Buzz said to his producer. “I thought Montaine’s people had this fixed.”

“I don’t get it.” Paul checked some readouts on a different screen. “We should be up. This is showing all our equipment is —”

At nearly the same time, all the blue screens switched to black with the words “Emergency Alert System” in bold white letters

near the top. Three short screeches sounded, followed by a long, high-pitched tone. Seconds later, our comms began to buzz the same way.

“No,” JoBell whispered. “What now?”

“This is an automated emergency recording from the United States federal government.” The male voice from the screen sounded completely fake, like it was coming from an antique computer. *“A debilitating thermonuclear detonation has been detected in Washington, DC. If you are receiving this message take shelter immediately and conserve all food fuel and water. If you are outdoors find shelter immediately within a sturdy structure ditch or low-lying area. Remain sheltered and await instructions from federal authorities. All government officials designated for the line of presidential succession must immediately transmit their identification codes on Homeland Security Emergency Channel One. Repeating. This is an automated emergency recording from the United States federal government. . . .”*

Thermonuclear detonation. The missing warheads. Griffith had been trying to find them, but she was too late. Now she was gone.

This couldn't be happening.

“All those people,” JoBell cried. I wrapped my arms around her shaking body. “How many live in DC?”

There were tears in the producer's eyes. “I think . . . Buzz. That we'll kind of wrap up . . . I mean, it will be all news now. God help us all.”

Buzz hadn't moved the whole time. A long piece of ash dangled from the end of his cigar. He dropped it and slammed his fist into the center feed of the wall screen. “No!” The screen cracked and sparked. Three lines of deep red blood ran down over the scramble of bright static. “It wasn't supposed to be this way! We were building a true conservative nation! Not a damned . . . Not a nuclear . . . The US is

going to blame Idaho for this. They'll nuke us for this! Damn it!" He kicked over a swivel chair on his way into his studio.

Major Leonard came back from the corner where he'd been on his radio. "I have orders to take you back to your hotel room," he said to me and JoBell. "You'll be secure there. Obviously, the situation has changed."

I rubbed the old, aching ghost wound in my left hand. "Sir, the situation has just gone straight to hell."