

Chapter One

“The rules have changed.”

That’s the first thing I was told when I showed up on my first day back at school. *What rules?* I wanted to ask. *What kind of changes?* But I decided to say nothing and keep my mouth shut.

Why?

Well, because everything about the school freaked me out. The uniforms. The kids staring at those slim

metallic phones. The look on everyone's faces. I can't quite explain it. Let's just say they looked stern and serious. I could tell I wasn't going to like this at all.

"Here," the pinch-faced man in the office said, handing me one of those phones. "Keep this with you at all times. Answer it when it rings. Follow the instructions."

"I don't need a phone," I said. I'd been out of the country for three years. I hadn't used a cell phone in all that time. My parents had a backup satellite phone on the boat, but it was only for emergencies. Fortunately we had never needed it.

"You do now," he said, slapping it into my hand. "It's required. And when you address any staff around here, you refer to them as 'sir' or 'miss.'"

I stared at the shiny metal device and felt its coldness in my hand. "Yes, sir," I said, feeling like I wanted to scream and run out the door. *Be cool, I told myself. You're going to have to adjust, adapt. Learn to live back in the world you left behind.*

"Room 303," Sir said. "Political science. Tell Mr. King you are new. Tell him you are going to need training."

Training? What the hell? Was I some kind of dog?

"And come back and pick up your uniform at noon."

What was with the uniforms? I'd seen all the kids in khaki shirts and black pants—both boys and girls. I figured a lot had changed while I'd been gone.

I walked down the hallway, which smelled like bleach or some other kind of chemical. I entered room 303, and a very young and sour-looking teacher, Mr. King, I supposed, stopped talking and just stared at me. Every kid in the room looked up and stared as well.

"Name?" Mr. King finally barked.

"Blake Pendleton," I said. "I'm new." I was not going to add, *And I need training.* Screw that.

"Sir," he snapped back.

"No, just Blake," I responded. The class laughed.

“You address me as sir.”

“Sorry. I’ll try to remember that.” Oops. “Sir,” I added.

“Don’t try, Pendleton. Do. Now sit.” He nodded toward a desk at the back of the room. I quickly headed there and took my seat. I didn’t remember school being such a hard-ass place. Once I sat down, I could see that all the other students had their phones in front of them on their desks. I set mine down in front of me as well.

There were words in large bold letters on the screen.

Follow the rules.

Do what is right.

Report rule breakers.

As I looked up, I could see the same words were on every student’s phone. But all eyes were looking forward. Mr. King had just switched on an overhead projector. There was a video clip of a

mass of people shouting and fighting in the street. Right. What was this class anyway? Supposedly it was political science.

“Nonconformity leads to chaos,” Sir King said. “Chaos leads to conflict. Conflict leads to more chaos. More chaos leads to collapse. History shows us this pattern over and over.”

And then something very weird happened. The entire class spoke at once, saying, “Until now.” It made me jump. What was going on? When I looked down, there were the words on my phone. And on everyone else’s phone. Those words. And everyone had automatically read them out loud at the same time.

“I couldn’t hear you, Pendleton,” the teacher barked. He’d been looking right at me and had seen that I hadn’t joined in.

“Until now,” I said in a stunned whisper.

“Louder.”