

ARMY BRATS

DAPHNE BENEDIS-GRAB



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CHAPTER 1



The light-blue minivan carrying the Bailey family, their dog, Cupcake, and their most essential belongings, was cruising up the winding mountain road shaded by pine, aspen, and black walnut trees, when a loud shout burst from the way back.

“Stop the car!” Rosie, the youngest Bailey, hollered. “We have a DEFCON twenty-seven back here.”

“There’s no such thing as DEFCON twenty-seven,” twelve-year-old Tom announced wearily to Rosie while Dad pulled the van to the side of the road. Rosie had recently decided to start using army lingo in honor of the family’s move to Fort Patrick. The problem was that Rosie kept forgetting the right terms and making up her own, confusing everyone.

“And I don’t think Cupcake needing a pit stop is a DEFCON anything,” Charlotte added as she fumbled with the car door. She’d been getting carsick from the twisty road, so she was first to scramble out of the van.

“Smell that mountain air,” Dad said appreciatively as the rest of the family piled out onto the side of the road.

All Charlotte smelled was a bunch of trees, but she nodded anyway.

“Good for the lungs,” he went on, pounding his chest for a moment and then coughing a bit.

Charlotte looked at Tom and they both giggled.

“Don’t know my own strength, do I?” Dad asked cheerfully, his dark red hair blowing slightly in the breeze. Thanks to Dad, Tom and Charlotte were red-heads too, but while Dad and Tom had hair that was like burnished copper, Charlotte’s was a light strawberry blond that came with pale skin and freckles she hated almost as much as the sunscreen she had to slather on every time she stepped out into sunlight.

“Did anyone see my sunglasses?” Dad asked. “I think they slid into the backseat when we took that sharp turn outside of DC.”

Charlotte looked in the van. The big plastic glasses Dad claimed were stylish—despite Rosie’s insistence on calling them clown glasses—were resting just under her seat. She reached in and grabbed them.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Dad said, taking them from

her. “And I like your nails—very appropriate for the occasion.”

Charlotte grinned as she held out a hand so Dad could fully admire the tiny white army stars she’d painted on each nail in honor of their move. She loved giving herself fancy and unusual manicures and had a big collection of brightly colored polish.

“Very snazzy,” Dad said, which made both Tom and Charlotte snort a bit. Dad was big on old-fashioned words like *snazzy*.

“How much longer till we get there?” Charlotte asked. She wasn’t sure if it was the mountain air or just standing on solid ground, but the swirling in her stomach was settling down.

“About fifteen more minutes,” Tom answered. Charlotte knew he had been keeping a close eye on the GPS guiding them toward their new home—she was familiar with all of Tom’s travel habits since their family, like all army families, relocated so often.

Charlotte, who had recently turned ten and three quarters and now officially considered herself eleven, was always dismayed when her parents announced a move. No matter how often it happened, it was hard to leave friends and the familiar behind for a new,

uncertain future. The one thing that made the moves easier, of course, was her siblings. They might fight sometimes, but walking into school on the first day was always a million times easier with Tom by her side. Though even that thought made Charlotte anxious, because this year Tom, who had dyslexia, was getting extra help at lunch, leaving Charlotte to face the cafeteria on her own for the first time ever. And she was dreading that.

“I think we’re all set,” Mom said, leading the way out of the woods. She was dressed in khaki pants and a soft T-shirt, but Charlotte knew that as soon as they reached the base, Mom would change into her officer’s uniform to report for duty.

“Roger that,” Dad said, giving Rosie a high five. Delicate Rosie, with her heart-shaped face and silky black hair, looked like a tiny angel. But in her case, looks were quite deceiving.

Charlotte remembered when Mom had sent home the photo of three-year-old Rosie, whom she had met on the streets of Beijing, China. Rosie had slipped away from the orphanage where she lived so she could spend the afternoon pretending to be a dog, darting about and nipping people on the ankle. Everyone else on the

sidewalk was annoyed, but Mom fell instantly in love and decided their family was the perfect fit for the energetic toddler barking up a storm. Since Rosie was an older child (and, Charlotte had always suspected, because Rosie was so high energy), the adoption was expedited. Before they knew it, the Baileys had become a family of five.

If Rosie had turned out to be as sugar sweet as that first photo promised, things might not have worked out so well. But Rosie had the mind and wits of a super-villain, and much to the admiration of her new siblings, quickly established herself as a force to be reckoned with.

And now, as Charlotte climbed back into the van, she knew she couldn't imagine life without Rosie. Even if she was driving everyone crazy with her new army terms.

Rosie settled into the backseat, Cupcake's head in her lap. "Mom does everyone on post get to fly around in birdies?" Rosie asked. Ever since she had found out about the move, Rosie was full of questions about life on base.

"Helicopters are birds, not birdies," Charlotte corrected as she shifted in her seat. She kind of wished

Cupcake would sit with her. Snuggling their big dog, with her barrel chest and short tan fur, was always comforting.

“We won’t be flying birds around post,” Mom added, turning to smile at all three of her kids. “But there’s going to be a lot of other really cool stuff.”

Though the Baileys had lived in a lot of places, this would be their first time living on post. Mom had explained that the base, which was in Virginia, not too far from Washington, DC, was like a small town, with its own school, snack bar, pool, library, and even a movie theater. And everyone who lived there was either in the army or a military dependent, which even Rosie knew was a family member of someone in the army.

“Is Rex there?” Rosie asked. “Cupcake wants to have a playdate with him.”

Rex was a combat dog Mom had met in Afghanistan. She’d sent home a video of the big German shepherd playing Frisbee with his handler during a break, and the whole family had been taken with him.

“No, sweetie, Rex is still working in Afghanistan,” Mom said.

“Because he’s an MVP dog,” Rosie confirmed.

“MWD,” Charlotte said, grinning. “Military Working Dog. Though he *was* an MVP in that Frisbee game.”

Tom laughed, but Rosie was not amused and gave her sister a sharp look, then turned to Cupcake. “Too bad Rex won’t be there,” Rosie told their dog. “But I bet you’ll make other friends.”

“I think that’s true,” Dad said as he adjusted the sun visor. “All of you guys will make good friends at Fort Patrick.” Charlotte noticed him glancing in the rear-view mirror at Rosie when he said this. Her parents had explained to her that Rosie had “issues connecting with her peers.” In regular English that meant Rosie wasn’t good at making friends, something Charlotte had already noticed because Rosie liked being in charge of everything and often interrupted, two things none of the kids in their neighborhood had liked. Rosie wasn’t concerned about this, but Mom and Dad were, signing Rosie up for friendship groups and sessions with the school counselor. So far it had not made a difference, though Charlotte knew her parents were hoping things would change at the post school, which was small and made up of all army kids.