



MEL ODOM

BOOK 1 ★ CALLED TO SERVE

DEPLOYED

MEL ODOM

BOOK 1 ★ CALLED TO SERVE

DEPLOYED



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Mel Odom online at www.melodom.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Deployed

Copyright © 2012 by Mel Odom. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of soldier copyright © by Daniel Bendjy/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of child copyright © by Les Stone/Sygma/Corbis. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of desert road copyright © by Byelikova Oksana/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Edited by Caleb Sjogren

Published in association with the literary agency of Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency, 548 Broadway, #5-E, New York, NY 10012.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[™] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Deployed is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Odom, Mel.

Deployed / Mel Odom.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-4930-5 (sc)

1. Afghan War, 2001—Fiction. 2. United States. Marine Corps—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3565.D53D46 2012

813'.54—dc23

2012019599

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

THE PAST SWAGGERED through the door of Darlton's Bar & Grille in cowboy boots. United States Marine Corps Lance Corporal Bekah Shaw blew out a disgusted breath as she took in the man wearing those boots.

Tall, lean, with hair the color of straw and eyes the color of sapphires, Billy Roy Briggs looked about the same as he had when he'd caught Bekah's attention back in high school. He definitely hadn't changed since Bekah had seen him walk out on their marriage six years ago, right before their son, Travis, was born.

Billy Roy wore faded jeans, a dark-blue cowboy shirt rolled up to mid-forearm, and a beat-up Stetson his daddy had given him when he'd still been throwing fastballs back in high school. The ostrich cowboy boots stood out because he'd tucked his pants legs into them—in true cowboy fashion, as he'd told her on more than one occasion. Red stubble

gleamed on his chin and cheeks. The dark tan had come from working at oil rigs around the state. He'd been on the road for the last few years and seldom returned home.

Bekah hoped he wouldn't notice her. The last thing she needed tonight was another round in that unwinnable fight. She'd learned to let go of Billy Roy, and she liked the direction her life had gone since she'd become a momma and a Marine. Her brunette hair normally dropped to her shoulders, but tonight she'd worn it up because she'd been working in the barn at her granny's house before being invited out.

Darlington's Bar & Grille was a small place where the scent of working men lingered in the air. Diesel fuel, oil field, fresh-cut hay, and barnyard smells all contributed to the mix. The dining area held a couple dozen tables and booths, had sawdust on the floor to absorb spilled beer, and had framed pictures of country-and-western singers on the wall. Connie had chosen a table under concert pictures and album covers of Taylor Swift.

Callum's Creek was a small town, but it held all of Bekah's life except for the last couple years when she'd been activated—first to Iraq, later to Afghanistan. Her daddy was buried in this town after his eighteen-wheeler went out of control when she was four. Her mother, grieving and unstable after losing her husband, had run off and stranded her there when she was six. So her grandpa and granny had finished raising her. Four years ago, she had helped her granny bury her grandpa, and Bekah had never felt more alone in her life.

Even though she'd had a baby six years ago at age nineteen, she'd kept her figure, but she knew that was more from

her Marine reservist career than anything she'd done on her own. Working and being a mom didn't allow much time for an exercise regimen. But the Marines made up for that.

Unfortunately, with everything going on in the world lately, she had also been called into trouble spots around the globe. She hated being taken away from Travis, but she took pride in serving her country and knew that she was making a difference. She'd been activated twice, most recently to Afghanistan's Helmand province.

In fact, she'd only gotten back a month ago and was still struggling to reacclimatize to the civilian world. There was a big difference being back home in Callum's Creek, Oklahoma, and being in Afghanistan, where her life was in constant danger from the Taliban. She was dark from the unforgiving sun, and her lips felt like they were going to be chapped for life. Walking around in civilian clothes—jeans and a T-shirt and a baseball cap—instead of desert fatigues and BDUs felt strange. She kept looking for the assault rifle she normally carried as well.

“Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in.” Connie Hiller sat up in her chair at the table she shared with Bekah. Connie glared daggers at Billy Roy and his companions. “He's got some nerve showing up here.”

Connie was five feet four inches tall—a couple inches shorter than Bekah—and had more generous curves. The years since high school had added a few pounds that she hadn't needed, but she was attractive and knew how to make it all look good. Tonight she wore a silky red blouse and jeans that looked like they'd been painted on. Her hair was frosted

blonde with two blue streaks through it and cut so that it ended at the nape of her neck.

For a moment, Bekah thought Connie was talking about Billy Roy. Then she realized that Connie's ex, Buck Miller, was with Bekah's ex-husband. Getting back from Afghanistan and discovering that Connie and Buck had stopped dating—because Buck had found someone else—wasn't surprising. Neither Connie nor Buck had a good record when it came to being committed. One of them had been bound to break it off. Connie was just miffed that Buck had pulled the trigger first.

Buck was one of Billy Roy's typical hangers-on. Rawboned and raucous, with a shock of brown hair and tattoos showing along his bare arms because he wore a work shirt with the sleeves ripped off, he looked small-town. A stained and frayed John Deere hat was pushed back crookedly from his sunburned face. He wore a lockback knife on his belt, which also sported a huge oval buckle. The wary way he looked around the bar and grill reminded Bekah of a coyote scenting the wind. Coyotes tended to be timid unless they were in a pack. But Billy Roy was all wolf.

Billy Roy usually attracted a crowd around Callum's Creek. He'd been the best pitcher the high school had ever turned out, and he'd been the one everyone thought would make it as a major league baseball player. Instead, after the first year on the road, the triple-A team he'd been playing for had cut him and sent him back home. Billy Roy had performed well in front of a small-town crowd, but he hadn't been able to convert that to success in triple-A ball. He'd claimed he had a shoulder injury that none of the team doctors could find.

The drinking and carousing hadn't helped his career. Bekah had discovered her then-husband's infidelity on Facebook when Connie and some of her other friends had brought their computers over to show her. That had nearly killed Bekah. Especially the fact that she was the last to know. Even her granny had known what would happen, because she'd seen right through Billy Roy from the start. Bekah had felt foolish and it had been a hard thing to accept, but she eventually got over it. She had more going on in her life these days than Billy Roy could have ever given her.

"Do you see them?" Connie was seething. That was one of the things she did best. "They come in here like they know no shame."

Jeanne Salver and Karol Tatum added their own disapproving noises to Connie's scathing comment, following her lead the way they usually did. These two were more Connie's friends than Bekah's. Bekah had known them back in high school, but she'd never gotten close. Jeanne and Karol looked and dressed enough alike that they could have been mistaken for sisters.

"Just stay put," Bekah whispered and reached out to take Connie's upper arm. "You don't want this to turn into something. We just came here for a drink. Not an argument."

Connie swiveled her heavily mascaraed gaze onto Bekah. "Buck cheated on me. Don't tell me you've already forgot how that feels."

"No. But I don't want this to be a scene. This was just a night out. A couple of beers, remember?"

"Well, Billy Roy and his crew shouldn't have shown up

here then, should they?” Connie pulled her arm from Bekah’s grip. “I thought maybe you being in the Marines would teach you something about not being such a doormat.”

That stung. Bekah took pride in her service as a Marine reservist. But just because someone put on a uniform didn’t make them a superhero—or radically change that person’s life. Becoming a Marine reservist three years ago did change Bekah’s life, though. She made a little more money for those weekends and training camps, and she was able to use other programs to better her life and Travis’s. It was a slow, small change, but it was welcome. She’d gotten a little more in control of things. She enjoyed that.

Billy Roy went to the bar and leaned over the counter. He slid over a little and half-sat on one of the stools. Then he proceeded to flirt with the girl working there.

The bartender blossomed under Billy Roy’s attentions. She was blonde and pretty, probably all of twenty-one years old. The young woman leaned into the bar and devoted all of her attention to Billy Roy, who preened like a tomcat. Bekah could practically hear him purring as he grinned at the young woman and told stories.

During their high school years, Billy Roy had told Bekah stories about how he was going to become a big-time Major League Baseball pitcher and how they’d go off to see the world together. She had believed those stories because she’d wanted to, because she’d wanted more than the little town that she’d grown up in.

After being a Marine reservist for three years and being stationed overseas for two short support tours that had been

filled with violence and death, Bekah had begun to think the world outside Callum's Creek wasn't as wonderful as she'd imagined. In fact, she knew several parts of that world weren't wonderful at all. Those experiences gave her a greater appreciation for the smallness of her hometown, but they also made Callum's Creek feel *very* small.

Connie stared at Bekah in disbelief. "Are you just going to let him stand up there like that? Hitting on that girl in front of you?"

Bekah gripped the icy-cold glass of Diet Coke in front of her. She'd only had one beer because she'd driven herself tonight. She'd insisted. Primarily so she could go home when she was ready. Connie had a tendency to stay too late, and Bekah had gotten trapped with her every now and again when they'd been younger.

"He isn't my problem anymore."

The bartender's laughter pealed over the jukebox playing Toby Keith in a corner of the room.

"Do you see the way Billy Roy's carrying on with that tramp?" Connie's eyes blazed.

"If she buys into whatever Billy Roy is selling, then he's her problem. Not mine. I've already had my cure." Bekah picked up her drink and drained the contents. She glanced at her watch. "It's after midnight. I think I'm going to call it a night and go on home."

"It's still early." Jeanne and Karol joined in on the chorus of that particular guilt song.

Bekah forced a grin at Connie and the other women. "One of us is raising a six-year-old. Mornings come a lot earlier."

Connie shook her head. “Don’t let him run you off. It’s taken me almost two weeks to get you to go out.”

“He’s not running me off. And I’ve been busy.”

“A steady diet of slinging hash at a greasy spoon and working on your granny’s place isn’t any way to spend your life.”

“It is for me.” Although she didn’t want to, Bekah felt more than a little angry at Connie. The constant onslaught of Coke and rum was taking its toll on Connie, stripping away her good judgment, and that always made for a bad time. Bekah had had reservations about coming out with her friends tonight for just that reason. But she’d been hungry for the companionship of friends and maybe a little more than ready for the illusion of a normal life. Whatever that was.

“You don’t have to back down from Billy Roy.” Connie frowned in displeasure.

“I’m not backing down.”

“You are.”

Bekah sighed. “Look, I’m not going to sit here and argue with you. I don’t have anything to prove where Billy Roy is concerned. It’s late and I’m leaving.” She stood up.

“Sure.” Connie looked away from her and stood up as well. Bekah knew something was going to happen, and she knew there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop it. “Billy Roy Briggs, since you’re so quick to flash that cash around and buy your buddies drinks, do you have any of that child support money you owe for your boy? ’Cause if you do, Bekah is right here and you can pay her.”

Silently, Bekah cursed the circumstances. If Connie hadn’t been drinking, if Billy Roy hadn’t shown up, if Connie’s

ex-boyfriend hadn't been in the entourage, if Billy Roy hadn't skipped out on the court-arranged payments, tonight wouldn't have been so dicey.

And if Billy Roy hadn't been so prideful.

Stung by Connie's accusation, Billy Roy wiped beer foam from his upper lip with the back of his hand and turned to face her. He was instantly the center of attention in Darlton's, and he stepped into the limelight with the authority of one of those old Hollywood leading men Bekah's granny loved watching so much. He craved attention and knew how to play the hometown crowd. He leaned back against the bar and hooked his elbows on the smooth wood. Theatrically, in a move he'd practiced, he shoved his hat back with a thumb. And smiled.