



# ***KENT'S WATCH***



***TEAM WATCHDOG***

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# **DEANNA ROWLEY**

KENT'S WATCH  
BROTHERHOOD  
PROTECTORS WORLD

TEAM WATCHDOG

BOOK FOUR



**DEANNA L ROWLEY**



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*I'd like to thank my editor, Ann Attwood, for the beautiful job  
she does on my books.*

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# CHAPTER 1



RITA CHAMBERS SHOOK her head and frowned when she thought she heard someone knock on her door. When she heard it again, she looked up to see her assistant, Julie Summers, standing there.

“Yes?” She didn’t mean to sound irritated, but she was in the middle of doing the monthly paperwork and didn’t want any interruptions. Once she saw Julie’s expression, she shook her head, tossed her pen on her desk, and leaned back in her chair with a gigantic sigh.

“What?”

Julie took that as an invitation to come into the office and park herself on the chair facing her boss. “I know you told me not to disturb you for three hours, but it’s been five.”

“No way,” Rita said in shock. She quickly looked at the watch on her wrist, then the clock on the wall behind her. She had learnt that having it behind her kept her from looking at it all the time. Shaking her head, she looked at Julie with a wrinkled nose. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing much. While you’ve been in here, I’ve been going over the applications for the new class.”

Rita nodded her understanding, then frowned. “Do we have enough for the pups involved?”

“More, actually. We have sixteen pups and twenty applications.” Julie looked at her boss and best friend with a grin. “I know we had a cutoff date, but I accepted a new application just this morning.”

“I don’t know. That means there will be four people without a dog to work with.”

“I understand that, but look at it this way, once Princess has her pups, the four that don’t get one out of this batch will be ready to roll once the pups are of age. You won’t have to train the humans, just have them come in and train with a new pup when it’s time..” She shrugged, then looked at Rita with a grin. “Or you’ll only have to give them a refresher course when the pups are ready.”

“I would agree to maybe giving them a refresher course,” Rita mumbled and didn’t see Julie’s grin as she scrubbed her face. “Tell me why you accepted the new application after the cut-off?”

“The guy just moved here to Fool’s Gold last week.”

“Oh, well, he doesn’t let the grass grow beneath his feet, does he.”

“No, and I couldn’t put my finger on it, but he seemed well put together. It’s hard to explain.”

Rita shrugged as she picked up her pen and rolled her chair back into her desk. “I have a few hours of the monthly paperwork to do, then I’ll be done for another month. Is there anyone in those applications that screams no to you?”

“Not at this time. I only have two more to go over their references, then they’ll be done.” Julie rifled through the pages and looked at Rita with a scowl. “Huh.”

“What?”

“I didn’t see this on his application when he handed it in.”

“What? What didn’t you see?” Rita asked in alarm, thinking she would have to be the bad guy, call the man up, and tell him he wasn’t allowed to enroll in her class.

“One of his references.”

“Who is it?”

“Jake Cogburn.”

“From BHP? RJ’s husband? Gunny’s son-in-law?”

“Yes, that Jake.”

“Give me his application and I’ll call him. I want to check on Striker, anyway.” She held her hand out for the application, and set it on the corner of her desk, next to her phone. She looked at Julie with a smirk. “After I get this paperwork done.”

Julie laughed as she stood and made her way out of the door, at the last minute, she turned with a grin. “Do I need to order something from Mattie’s to pick up for you tonight?”

Rita sighed heavily as she looked at her desk, then back at her friend and assistant. “Please, make it a BLT with chips. I don’t like the fries when they arrive soggy.”

“I hear you. I’ll place the order after we close, then go get it. I’ll bring it back before I go home.”

“Thanks, Julie.”

Julie nodded without responding because she knew Rita was already lost in her paperwork. On a grin, she bent down and called Zeke, lying on his bed in the corner, to the door. She took him out to do his business, then after she fed him, she let him back into Rita’s office. The next item on her list was to call in the dinner order for Rita. On a grin, she settled down to do the last calls to the references listed on the applications for the next CSARs training that was coming up in two weeks. It was great that Rita liked to train the people with the dogs they would be using on the search and rescues, but sometimes Julie thought Rita was a little stiff on her rules. Don’t get her wrong, she loved the woman like a sister, they’d been best friends since grade school, but sometimes she wouldn’t bend on her rules. As she pictured Rita standing before the group of people for the next class, the image of Kent Palmer as he’d handed in the last-minute application popped into her mind. She grinned at herself, thinking he might be just what Rita needed to relax.

Four hours later, Julie let herself back into the office of Chambers Search and Rescue and made her way to Rita’s office. Seeing her boss still doing paperwork, she put the bag of food on the corner of her desk and took the dog out again. After she let Zeke back into the office, Julie made sure the

mother dogs and their babies were settling in for the night, and quickly let herself out of the building, making sure to lock up after herself.



RITA TOSSED the pen on the center of her desk and sighed in contentment. She looked over at her dog, Zeke, with a gigantic grin. “All done.” It surprised her that he didn’t immediately jump to his feet and demand to be let out. She looked at the corner of her desk and grinned when she spotted the to-go container sitting there. As she pulled it toward her, she saw the note and laughed. Julie had written that she’d taken Zeke out and noted the time. Shaking her head, Rita devoured half the sandwich and chips before doing anything else. As she slowly ate the second half of her dinner, she picked up the application and studied it.

“Kent Palmer, nice strong name,” she said as she continued to eat and read. After she finished her meal, she took care of the trash and cleaned herself up. With a fresh bottle of water in her hand she settled back down behind the desk to pick up the phone. It was answered on the third ring.

“Cogburn.”

“Jake, it’s Rita.”

“Oh, hey, is everything alright? Do you need the guys for a call?”

“No, no, everything’s fine. I’m calling you on a different matter.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know whether you know this or not, but I’m starting a new class in two weeks. Julie told me that a new application came in after the deadline.”

“You going to accept it? I don’t mean this in a bad way, but I know how much you hate your rules to be broken.”

“Actually, it depends on you.”

“Me, why would I have anything to do with an applicant for your search and rescue training?”

“He listed you as a reference. I wanted to talk to you directly about him.”

“Who?”

“A guy by the name of Kent Palmer.”

“Palmer, Palmer, Palmer, Palmer,” Jake whispered in the phone. “I don’t recall anyone by that name.”

“Says here he was in the military for twenty years.”

“Does he list any other references?”

“Yes, Seth Falco, and Spencer Barnes.”

The line on Jake’s side remained silent for several moments, then came a chuckle. “Ah, I know who you’re talking about now. New guy in town, he arrived with four of his buddies. I had like an hour conversation with them when they first arrived.” He went silent, then chuckled again. “Actually, they work for me, but not full-time. I only call them in when it’s absolutely necessary.”

“So, they do work for you?”

“They will, but not like my guys do.” He paused, then sighed heavily. “Let me put it this way, because of their experience in the military, there may be a chance that we’ll need their services in the future. Until then, they’re basically living their lives as civilians. If Palmer filled out an application for your school, if it were me, I wouldn’t turn him down.”

“Thanks, Jake.” Rita nodded as she made a note in the margin of Kent Palmer’s application. “How is Striker doing?”

“Good, RJ’s been working with him and he’s not so clingy as before.”

“Good, you know you can call if you need to.”

“Thanks, Rita, I’ll pass that along to RJ.”

“You do that.” They rang off from one another and Rita looked over the application again. She wrote a message on a Post-It note, and placed over the front page of the application. On her way out, she laid the papers in the center of Julie’s

desk. She and Zeke left the office for the night, but not before she went to the back of the building and made sure the mother dogs and pups were all settled in for the night. She spent an extra thirty minutes with them. She couldn't resist playing with her favorite pup. He had been born a runt, and she still didn't know whether she would allow him to be in the upcoming class or not. She really, really wanted to keep him for himself. With a smile on her face, she quickly left to head home.



KENT PALMER CALLED out to the person who knocked on his new apartment door to enter, and smiled when it was opened by a friend of his, Spencer Barnes. Though they had served in the military, they hadn't been in the same branch. Where Spencer was a former Navy SEAL, Kent had served in the Air Force as a Pararescue. He was assigned to a special team and his area of expertise was search and rescue, as well as being a combat medical personnel. He had loved everything about his job, but found that after twenty years, it was time to get out. Though he was only thirty-eight, his body couldn't take the wear and tear he put it through every day while on the job. He and his buddies realized about two years before they finally left the Air Force that their job was for younger men. Don't get him wrong, it was great, but his body told him it was time for something different.

“What's up?” Kent asked Spencer as he came in carrying a bag. He immediately went to the kitchen island and set the bag down. In seconds he pulled out two beers and took one over to Kent.

“Thanks.” He opened it and downed half of it before he came up for air. “What brings you here?”

“Noreen's working late, and I thought I'd stop by here to see how you were settling in while I waited for her.”

“Ah.” Kent nodded, then scowled at the other man. “Wait, don't you have a daughter?”

“She's at a friend's house for the night.”

“Got it.” Kent nodded and looked around at the empty boxes. He smiled when Spencer walked over, withdrew a pocket knife, and immediately began breaking down the boxes. Kent shook his head as he continued to unpack. It wasn’t much, and he’d been there for a week, but his things hadn’t been delivered until late that morning. As he unpacked, he talked with Spencer.

“I have to thank you again for letting me sub-let this apartment from you.”

“Not a problem. Since Noreen and I married, we live in her house now, we only used this place when she had to work late, and Chloe was with friends. I think in the last year, we’ve used it maybe six times. Oh, that reminds me,” he said as he walked away, causing Kent to follow him.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to show you that in the spring, when it started warming up, I turned the pilot off to the furnace. I do it every summer. Saves on gas, and there’s not a wall of heat coming from here.” He opened the door where the furnace was, and showed him what he meant. Kent nodded and asked about other things in the apartment, then realized he would have to put new furnace filters on his shopping list.

“Question.”

“What?”

“Does this apartment allow pets.”

“Sort of?” Spencer said it as a question.

“How can you sort of allow pets?” Kent laughed at him as he grabbed another beer and helped finish breaking down the boxes.

“Service dogs are allowed, emotion animals are allowed, but not pets.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Yes, the landlord figures that if any of those animals are allowed, then the dog wouldn’t be home alone all day tearing up the place.”

“Ah, that I can understand.”

“Why? You wanting to get a pet?”

“I do, but it wouldn’t be a pet, if I get accepted, then it would be considered a service dog.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I filled out the application for Chambers Search and Rescue. I’d get one of their pups, train with them, then the pup would be mine afterward. It would still be in training for other things, but when a call came, I’d take it and go out on the call.”

Spencer looked at him for so long, Kent started getting nervous. “What?”

“Nothing, I’m trying to remember what you did in the Air Force.”

Kent laughed as he settled in a chair at the island when Spencer came over and sat in the other one. “I was AFSPECWAR.”

“Remind me again what that is.”

“Air Force Special Warfare, which in reality means Air Force Special Forces. The guys and I were on a team.” At Spencer’s curious look, Kent smiled as he explained, “We were called in to assess a situation. If a visiting dignitary was going someplace, we were most likely called in to see if the area was safe. All our work was done behind enemy lines, and no one knew we were there, not even the visiting bigwig. We assessed the safest routes to and from the location, what were the conditions, anything that could cause a problem for both the client and protector. We even went in to rescue downed soldiers from helicopter or plane crashes. On the team, I was a Pararescue and I specialized in search and rescue, along with being in combat medical.”

“Oh shit. I’ve heard of you guys. No offense, but not you in particular, but definitely what you did.”

“Yeah, we were called in to assess the situation after your last mission went FUBAR and you were kicked out. I think



some of your reinstatement might be based on our reports.”

“Well, if it did or didn’t, I thank you for sticking your neck out for us. It was a long hard road, but we’re finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. According to the last communication we had, we’ll probably be called back to Washington in the next few months to be told to stay away, or given our accreditation back.” Spencer grinned evilly at Kent, enough to cause him to shiver.

“What’s that grin for?”

“It would be the last fuck you to Wally if we get our pensions and benefits reinstated.”

“There is that,” Kent laughed as they sat there and sipped their beers until it was time for Spencer to leave to pick up Noreen from her job.

## CHAPTER 2



KENT HELD the door open for the other people entering the front door of Chambers Search and Rescue before he entered behind them. Today was the first day of training for SAR, short for search and rescue. The first person he noticed was a woman with blonde hair braided down to the center of her back. A beautiful dog was beside her, the woman's looks piqued his interest. The other woman standing up front was the one he had handed his application to a couple of weeks prior. He wondered if the blonde with the dog was there to help the new people with training the pups.

He looked around and saw there were several chairs set up, and before he could do anything, the woman with the braid stood and faced the room. Kent sucked in his breath at her beauty. It took a few seconds to realize she was talking. Thankfully, someone entered then, and he didn't know whether he liked her scowl or not when she had to start all over.

"Welcome to Chambers Search and Rescue. I am Rita Chambers and will be your main training guide for this course."

Kent stood in the back of the room and studied everyone else before him. He stood to his full height of six-foot five, and had his hands relaxed to his sides as he listened to Rita, *such a pretty name*, speak.

"This course will be intense. It usually takes a minimum of six hundred registered hours to train a dog for search and rescue. I want to thank all of you for signing up for this course.

I don't want to scare anyone off, but not everyone is cut out to be a part of a team like this. Some of you will fail."

"What about the dogs?" Kent asked, and only raised his hand slightly when Rita looked around with a glare at who spoke.

"What did you say?"

"What about the dogs, do they fail?"

"I want to say no, that it's the handler's fault, but that's not always the case. In the past, there have been dogs that have failed the course."

"What do you do with them?"

"We work with them to make sure they are trained and can be used in other areas." Rita held up her hand to stop him from asking another question. "Chambers Search and Rescue is my family's business. We have been in operation for forty years. In my grandfather's time, he started the business, there were two dogs that failed. Both of them were retrained and put to work as service dogs. During my father's tenure here at CSAR, there was only one dog that didn't pass the certification. He also failed to meet the requirements to become a service dog. There was nothing wrong with him, and Dad brought him home and we had him as a house pet until he passed."

Kent nodded and looked at the other people in the room and saw they understood what was being said.

"Okay, here is how this is going to work." Rita walked to the front of the room and turned to look at them. "I have sixteen pups in the back. There are twenty of you. Unfortunately, that means four of you won't have a pup to work with. In about an hour, the members of the local search and rescue teams will be here with their dogs. If you do not receive a dog today, at least you can train with the rest of us by getting a feel for what you'll be doing as you work with one of the trained dogs."

"How do we get a dog?" someone in the audience asked.

“It’s totally random. Julie has put all of your names in this bucket,” Rita said as she held out her hand and Julie placed a coffee can in it. Rita shook it and smiled. “In case you don’t know her, this is Julie Summers, she is my right-hand woman. If you have questions and I’m not available, then she’s the person to go to. Do not be afraid to ask questions. This is all new to both you and the dog. Any unasked question may cause harm to the animal, and I will not tolerate that. Don’t assume, ask.”

“How old are they?”

“Three months. The perfect time to start training them. Before we get to choosing the animal for you, let me tell you that this course is intense. Extremely intense. Not only will you be training your dog, but whatever one you pick out is yours for the duration.”

“Duration of what?” someone else asked. “The course?”

“Yes, the course, but you don’t turn the dog in after class. The dog won’t be treated like a piece of equipment to drop off at the end of the day and pick up the next. You take the dog home and continue to train them in not only what they learn here, but also in the rules of your household. I don’t know whether any of you have families or not, or what your current living situation is, but the dog you pick today is yours.” Kent nodded and it seemed like he and Rita had made eye contact the entire time she’d been talking. He smiled when she shook her head as if to clear it.

“Training a dog is expensive. Though we provide you with a dog, part of your application fee goes toward their training. Before you leave today, you will be given the information on your dog. Date of birth, who their parents and grandparents are. All of my dogs are AKC registered, they have had their shots, and checkups with the vet I use. In the information packet, you will also see a list of five vets in the area. The one at the top of the list is the one I use, and the one that has checked out your dog. I don’t want to call them pets, because they are being trained as service dogs. Once both you and your dog pass certification, then you will be put on the roster to be called whenever the call for search and rescue comes in. You’ll

have to make sure Julie has all your contact information. Are there any questions at this time?”

Kent noticed no one said a word and he saw Rita nod.

“Again, don’t be afraid to ask a question. We are all here to learn, and if you don’t ask, then you can’t train your dog properly. If I feel you’re not getting the training, and your dog is suffering for it, you will be asked to leave. In those cases, the dog stays with me.”

“What about the fee we paid?” a male from the crowd called out.

Rita shook her head. “If you read the agreement you signed, it is a non-refundable fee. In other words, you lose it.” She waited to see if anyone said anything else and nodded. “Let’s get to picking out the animals. Again, I have sixteen dogs and twenty of you. When I call your name, go through the green door behind me. I have people back there that will direct you where to go. I will call four of you at a time. I know it’s not a lot of time, but you’ll have fifteen minutes to interact with the pups and pick out the one you want. Remember, from this point on, this animal will be yours in every sense of the word. You will live together, so try to get one that matches your personality.” Rita looked at everyone as she shook the can in her hands. She removed the lid, closed her eyes and pulled out the first small piece of paper.

“Kent Palmer,” she called out, and watched as the man standing in the back of the room grin as he stepped forward. Rita sucked in her breath at his handsomeness. This was the man that had turned his application in late. She only allowed it because he hadn’t been in the area by the cut-off date, and he had glowing references. She nodded as he approached.

“Go through the door and Scott will help you.”

“Thanks.” Kent grinned as he went where he was told. As soon as he walked in the back, he smiled at the noise the pups were making.

“Scott?” Kent asked a man coming out of a cage. “I’m Kent Palmer, the first one.”

“Good. This is how we like to do it. We let you in the cage with them and you can do whatever you want to pick out the one for you. You have fifteen minutes.” He opened the door and Kent went inside. Instead of standing and looking down at the pups climbing his legs, he sat down and let them come to him. He was soon joined by three other people and continued to sit there. All the pups had been climbing all over him, but left him for the others that had arrived.

Kent looked over to the side and saw a pup sitting in the corner observing everything around him. He lay down about four feet from him and propped his head on his hand. “Don’t you look crisp?” he asked the dog. The one he was interacting with was a blue brindle, he wasn’t quite sure of the breed, but he would ask after he picked him. “Looks like you baked a little too long in the oven.” The entire time he talked to the dog, there was steady eye contact between them. Kent held out his hand, and said, “You look like a burnt Tater Tot.” As soon as he said the last two words, the dog stood and quickly approached him. When he sniffed Kent’s finger, he licked the back of his hand and never flinched when Kent petted him.

“Tator Tot, that’s your name, but how about for work, I call you Tate?” Kent watched the dog and decided to try his theory. “Tate,” he said firmly, then pointed to the floor. “Sit.” The dog’s ass hit the ground. “Good boy,” he said, and happened to have some treats on him that Scott had given him. After giving him the treat, Kent stood and patted his thigh. “Tate, come.” He had to bend way down to give the dog a treat, but he quickly followed.

“Scott,” Kent called out, and was quickly joined by the other man.

“I want this one.”

“Blue?”

“Yes, but I’ve decided to rename him.”

“Okay, tell Rita what his new name is. I don’t want to discourage you or anyone else in picking out a dog, but Blue is the runt of his litter. It might take him a few minutes to catch on.”

“He’ll be fine,” Kent said with confidence and looked down at the dog. “Won’t you?” The dog’s entire body wiggled when he wagged his tail. Kent looked at Scott. “Do I take him out on a leash or carry him?”

“Whatever you want to do. The leashes are there if you want one. You will need one for training though.”

“Okay.” Kent walked over to the wall with the leashes and picked out a camo one. He brought it down and had Tator sniff it. “Is this one okay?” He grinned when the dog again wagged his entire body. He quickly snapped it on the collar and when he led him out of the cage, he had to pull back to stop him. “Tate, slow,” Kent said firmly, and saw what he would describe as a shocked look come over the dog’s face. Every time they started forward, Kent stopped him with a firm reprimand. He didn’t jerk the leash, but he wouldn’t move until the pup stopped. By the time they made it back to the front room, the second group of people had gone through.

Out in the main room, Rita looked up and watched as Kent worked with the dog he had picked. It surprised her that he had picked Blue. What surprised her even more was how Kent handled Blue on the leash. By the time they went back to where he had stood before being called to the back, Blue wasn’t fighting the leash as much as he had in the past.

Rita picked up a clipboard and headed toward him. As soon as she reached him, she looked at Kent, and asked, “Permission to pet your dog?”

“Granted,” Kent said as he nodded. He watched as Rita went down to her haunches and reached her hand out to Bluey. As the pup licked her hand, she looked up at Kent with a grin. “I have to say, this little guy is my favorite of these new batches.”

“Scott told me he was a runt?”

“Yes, but he’s come a long way. We almost lost him a couple of times in his first weeks.” Rita stood when Kent offered her a hand up. “I noticed you’ve already started training him on the leash. Very impressive.”

“Thank you. Do I tell you now that I’ve changed his name?”

“Oh?” Rita looked at him in shock.

“What did you call him?”

“Bluey, because he’s a blue brindle. Most people would call him a gray brindle, but technically it’s blue.”

“Ah, to me, he looks like he was in the oven too long and got overly baked. I’m changing his name to Tator Tot, but when we’re training, it will be Tate.” He looked at the dog. “Watch.” With a small treat in his hand, Kent looked down at the dog, firmed his voice, and said, “Tate, sit.” As soon as his little ass hit the floor, he was rewarded with a treat. “Good boy.” Then gave a head rub.

“Wow, very impressive. Have you trained dogs before?”

“Not directly, but I’ve worked with them and their human partners before.”

“Good to know. Stop by and see Julie after class and she’ll give you Bluey’s papers. Excuse me, Tate’s papers.”

By the time everyone had picked out a dog, the others associated with CSAR had arrived, and it was time to take the dogs out for a bathroom break. Once they came back in, Rita was again at the front of the room.

“Okay, now that you have your dogs, I want to say that Kent, Ned, and Vanessa, your dog’s breed is a bull mastiff. Some of their characteristics they have are an independent mind, they are not push-overs, they can be willful and dominant. They want to be the boss. To be a successful handler and owner of them, you have to show them consistency in what you say, and you have to have a firm hand with them. I’ve seen Kent correct Bluey, excuse me, Tate, when he rushed on his leash. Kent would you like to show everyone what I mean?”

Kent nodded. He saw everyone looking at him, then with a treat in his hand, he said firmly, “Tate, come.” He started walking toward the front of the room. When Tate realized they were moving, he ran forward to the extent of his leash, trying



to pull Kent along behind him. Instead of Kent jogging after him, he held the leash firmly and when Tate got to the end of it, Kent wouldn't give him any slack until he stopped pulling against it. In the background, he heard Rita explain what he was doing to the rest of the class. The next hour they spent on how to train their dogs not to pull on the leash.

At one point in the training, Kent had a thought and jerked his head toward Rita, and didn't know whether it surprised him or not to see her looking at him already. "Question."

"What's that?"

"Will our pups have vests to wear while we're training them?"

"They will, but not until tomorrow. Today is all about the two of you getting to know one another."

Just then there was a squealing sound of a hurt dog, and an angry human screamed, "You fucking stupid mutt!" Kent looked up in time to see the man working with a German Shephard pull his foot back to kick the dog. Rita was on him in seconds, but she wasn't fast enough. She reached down and scooped the pup up and out of the way, but the man's foot caught her in the ribs.

Kent looked at Tate, said firmly, "Stay." He dropped the leash then strode over to the man. With his hand on his shoulder, he squeezed and escorted him toward the front door. Three of the men who were employees of CSAR were right behind him. It didn't take long for Rita to join them. He looked around and saw Julie holding the quivering pup in her arms.

"Outside," Rita said between clenched teeth. Kent saw Tate was still where he left him, then took the man outside, since his hand was still clamped on his shoulder.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Rita kept her voice low as she asked the man that question. "You don't mistreat an animal like that."

"He wasn't following my direction."

“You can’t expect an animal that doesn’t know you to follow your every command. It takes time and patience.”

“He did it!” The man threw not only an accusing look, but also pointed a finger at Kent.

“Yes, but he also has a commanding presence when he’s not working with his dog. I said this at the beginning of today’s class, not everyone is cut out to be in this line of work. I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You are no longer welcome here.”

“I want my money back.”

Rita looked at Kent and rolled her eyes. “Shoot me now,” she whispered before turning back to the man. “No. You signed the non-refundable waiver.”

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!” the man screamed at her.

“Tell them I’m here Monday through Saturday, seven in the morning to seven at night.” Rita didn’t bat an eye when the man started swearing and calling her all kinds of unflattering names. They all stayed outside as they watched the man go to his vehicle, and he churned up gravel as he left the lot.

They went back inside, and Kent immediately returned to Tate. “Good boy,” Kent told the dog, and gave him a treat when he found him exactly as he had left him. They spent the next three hours working with their dogs. One of the women that had been left without an animal had taken over the care of the pup that had been abused. From what Kent saw, he knew they would make a great team together. He smiled when he heard the woman call the pup, Charlie. By the time he left, he not only had the file on Tate, but he had purchased the collar and leash he’d used, and made a monetary donation to the center. He was given a lightweight vest for Tate that said he was in training. With that on, Kent took him into the local pet store to purchase all the items he would need for Tator Tot at home. He had decided that when he wore the vest, he would call him Tate. When they were home and the vest was off, he would be referred to as either Tator, or Tator Tot. He would

probably regret it once the smaller than average pup grew into itself, but for now, it was a fitting name for the little bugger.

## CHAPTER 3



RITA SLAMMED INTO HER OFFICE, reached up, pulled her hair, and let out a silent scream. She turned around when the door opened and glared at the people standing there. “What the hell did we miss?” she demanded of Julie and Scott. They had just completed their first training session with the new group of people, and Rita had to kick one of the male participants out of the group because he had abused the pup right in front of everyone. She had no fear about being sued, because everything she saw was on video tape. She’d learned when her father had run the business to make sure the classes were caught on the video system. Not only was it for her own safety, but the tapes had been used in the past for additional training. She remembered one particular instance when a customer repeatedly said he hadn’t done something. It wasn’t until her father had showed him the tape that he realized he had been in the wrong. She made a mental note to get the tape and keep it in her safe in case that man decided to sue her.

She turned her glare to Julie and held her hand out, before she demanded, “I want to see the applications.”

Julie must have anticipated the request because she immediately handed over the folder in her hand. “We did nothing different that we have in the past, Rita. I know you know this, but we can’t know a person’s personality from a bunch of words on an application. You’ll see the notes I made from the references. There was nothing in the application itself, nor the responses from our canned questions for the references.”

Rita flipped through the pages, then paused long enough to look up and turn her glare onto Scott. “Why did you let that man take Bluey? How dare he have my Bluey almost leash trained in the first session!” She knew she sounded crazy flipping from one issue to the next, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. She felt out of control, and didn’t know why.

“Because he wanted him?” Scott replied as a question, and turned his confused look to Julie.

She grinned at him, and said, “You might want to leave the room for this next part.”

“Excuse me?” Both Rita and Scott said at the same time.

Julie turned all her attention to Rita and let out a small sigh. “Rita, you and I have been best friends for damn-near thirty years. What I’m about to say, I’m saying with all the love I have for you. As a best friend, a sister, and your most valued employee.” She didn’t wait for Rita to speak. To hold the other woman off, she held up her hand and looked her directly in the eye. “You need to do one of three things.”

“What’s that?” Rita demanded snidely to her friend and co-worker.

“One, you need to get laid, two, you need to get drunk, or three, you need to buy batteries for your toys. Maybe then you’ll stop being such a bitch.”

“I’m outta here,” Scott said as he hurried toward the door. “I’ll be in the hall if you need me.” He couldn’t leave the room fast enough.

“What did you say to me?” Rita demanded as she glared at her friend.

“You need to get laid. You’re being such a bitch. I know you’re upset with Tim for abusing Charlie, but that’s no reason to take your anger out on Kent. He did nothing wrong with his training with Tate.” Julie didn’t back down, and nodded her head when she saw her friend deflate. “If you want to get technical, then it’s your fault for allowing Bluey, excuse me, Tate, to be put into the program to begin with. You can’t go off when he was picked.”

“Christ on a cracker,” Rita said as she slumped in her chair. “I don’t know what the hell came over me. Yes, I’m pissed at Tim, but there’s something about Kent and his interaction with Bluey...”

“Tate,” Julie interrupted her. “His working name is Tate, his downtime name is Tator Tot.” She grinned when Rita snorted a laugh and rolled her eyes. “What are you going to do?”

“I want you to fax a copy of all the applications to this number.” Rita reached into the middle drawer of her desk and pulled out a business card. “I’ll call them and tell them what happened and to expect the applications.”

“What good would that do?” Julie reached for the card and frowned at it.

“It’s Jake Cogburn over at BHP. Brotherhood Protection. I don’t know what they do, but I do know they do a lot of background work. I’m going to ask him to do a deep check on all the applicants. Especially Tim and Kent.”

“Tim I can understand, but why Kent?”

“There’s something there that’s not adding up. His application says he’s never trained a dog before, but from what I witnessed today, he has some formal training in his background. I want to know what it is.”

“Okay, but remember, don’t be a bitch about it.” Julie didn’t wait to hear what Rita had to say as she headed toward the door. Just before she reached it, she looked back and grinned. “I’m going to send Scott home for the day.”

“Whatever.” Rita waved her away as she picked up the phone to dial.

In the hall, Julie looked at Scott with a grin when the first words out of his mouth was shock that she was still alive. “We’ve been friends for decades, it was just a friendly conversation. If I were you, I wouldn’t say anything like I did, because you’ve only been here for about three years, but we know each other for decades. It’s all good for now. It might

take her a few days to get over being pissed at Tim, but she'll eventually come around."

"Why was she so pissed about Tate?"

Julie grinned as they walked down the hall toward her office. "Personally, between you and me, I think she wanted to keep him for herself."

"Ah, is that why she was watching the pair like a hawk?"

"Probably." Julie entered her office and headed to the fax machine in the corner. "You can go ahead and go home for the day."

"I want to make sure the floors in the back are sanitized before I leave for the day."

"Okay, I just have to fax a few papers then I'll be done for the day. If I don't see you before I leave, I'll see you in the morning."

"Night, Julie." Scott waved and headed toward the back of the building where the pups had been waiting for their new owners. It didn't take him long to get into the task of cleaning the area.

In her office, Rita waited for the phone to ring and had to leave a voice mail. She left a quick but short response that it was an emergency that someone from BHP contact her as soon as possible. She hung up, and went over what had happened earlier that day. She grabbed a pen and started writing up a statement. Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang, and the man identified himself as Stone from BHP.

"What's the problem?" he asked gruffly after introductions were made.

"I don't know what Jake's told you about me, but my name is Rita Chambers, and I am the owner and operator of Chambers Search and Rescue."

"The ones that trains the dogs?"

"Yes. I'll get right to the point." She took the next five minutes to explain what had happened earlier that day and when she finished, she stated her reason for the call. "My

assistant faxed you the applications that we have for everyone and our notes when we called in the reference checks. I was wondering if BHP could do a deep background check on them and tell me if there will be any problems with any of the other applicants like I had today. I'm especially interested in the background of a man by the name of Kent Palmer."

"Is he a problem?"

"No, but there's something about him, I can't quite put my finger on it. It's hard to explain."

"Your gut's screaming, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm on duty now, I'll grab the papers and start on it. When do you need it by?"

"As much as I want it by nine tomorrow morning, I know that's not possible. How about the end of the week?"

"Got it. I'll get what I can to you. You know, whenever I get anything back, I'll fax it over to you." They confirmed the fax number and Rita felt better when she hung up. She sat there and stared into space for several minutes, then drew in a deep breath and let it out in a rush. She looked over in the corner and smiled.

"Ready to go home, Zeke." She laughed when the dog, who had been snoring, was immediately at the door with his tail wagging. Laughing, feeling lighter than when she'd walked into the office, she made sure everything was put away, then she and her dog left not only her office, but the entire facility, locking up behind her. On the way home, she decided to stop and pick up a few groceries, and the dog food she knew Zeke would need once they arrived home. She had given him his last bit that morning.



THE NEXT MORNING, Rita arrived early and frowned when a police cruiser pulled in after her. After letting Zeke out of the vehicle, they both stood there and waited for the sheriff to exit his vehicle.



“Sheriff, what brings you here?” Rita asked as she slowly started toward the door. It was too early to deal with whatever he was here for without any coffee. She had forgotten to purchase some the night before and didn’t have any at home. After holding the door open for him, she immediately went to the small kitchenette in the breakroom and started a pot. Thank goodness Julie or Scott had prepared it the night before, so she only had to turn it on. Neither of them spoke until it finished brewing. Rita had worked with Jim Faulkner several times in the past when she and her crew had been called in on a search and rescue mission.

Once the coffee was done, she poured them both a cup. After the first sip, she looked at him with a small smile. “What brings you here? Do you need me or my team?”

“No,” Jim said as he sipped his coffee, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Late last night, a complaint came in about you.”

“Oh?” Rita thought she knew where it came from, but she wanted Jim to tell her.

“The complainant was drunk and slurred his words. I told the office that I would look into it this morning.”

“And?” Rita prompted when he remained silent for several moments.

“And, you are being accused of assault. Along with another person.”

“Am I allowed to ask who filed the complaint?”

“Timothy Vickers.”

“Okay,” Rita said as she turned on her heel and walked away. At the door to the breakroom she looked back and saw his shocked expression. “Follow me, and I’ll show you exactly what happened.”

“How can you do that?”

“Video.” Rita didn’t say any more as she went to her office. The first thing she did was see if there were any papers on her fax machine, there were. She skimmed over what was

there, and made a copy of three pages. Once she had her copies, she handed them over to the sheriff.

“Those came in overnight from Stone over at BHP. I’m assuming you know him?”

“Yes, he’s married to Sparrow, one of my deputies. What are these?” he asked before he looked at them.

“After what happened yesterday, I called Jake, but got a message. Stone called me back. Anyway, I wanted a deep background check done on all my applicants. After you see this, you’ll understand why.” She cued up her computer and it took a good five minutes to find what she was looking for. Instead of making one copy of it, she made two, one for the sheriff, and one to keep in her safe for herself. She had forgotten to make a copy the night before.

Rita sat back when Jim leaned in and watched what took place and shook his head at her. “Are you freaking kidding me? He actually kicked a puppy?”

“Yes.”

“I recognize Scott and Julie, but who’s the other guy? The one with his hand on Vickers’s shoulder?”

“That’s Kent Palmer.” Rita rifled through the applications on her desk and pulled it so the sheriff could read it.

“Says here that Cogburn is his reference, along with one of the guys out at The Centre.”

“Yeah, his application came in after the cut-off date. I wasn’t going to accept it, but it turns out he just moved to town. Is he the other person Vickers complained about?”

“Yeah, what can you tell me about him?”

“Nothing. I mean I met him for the first time yesterday. You’ll get more information off that application than you’ll get from me. I do know that he knows what he’s doing when it comes to training dogs. It doesn’t say on his application, but the way he worked with his pup told me he’d done it before.”

“Can I have a copy of this?”

“Sure.” Rita took it back, and quickly made a copy of Kent’s and Tim’s applications. She handed them back and said that the others should be here around nine.

“How long do you train today?”

“Nine to three. I can hold Kent back if you want to wait until after class.”

“Why don’t I stop in about a half hour before you’re done so I can observe him. I have to say, I’ve never heard of him before. This will give me time to do a little of my own investigation check on him.”

“I know you won’t take my word for it, but he’s great with the dog he picked out.”

“Which one did he get?”

Rita sighed heavily and looked at him with sad eyes. Jim had been there to see all the dogs about two weeks before the classes started. “Bluey.” At his frown, she grinned. “The brindle bull mastiff. The runt.”

“Really? I thought you wanted to keep him.”

“Yeah, but he went to a good home. At least I hope he did.” She walked back out into the main area of the building, and watched as Jim headed toward the door, saying he would be back before they finished for the day, but to call him if something came up and they had to quit earlier than planned. Rita assured him she would, then headed back to her office. She looked at her watch and made a quick decision.

In her office, she wrote everything up that had happened with Jim, then with that and what she’d written the day before, she sent both statements and the flash drive of Tim Vickers clearly abusing his dog to her lawyer. She explained what had happened, and why Sheriff Jim had been there that morning. It was always better to err on the side of caution in case this went further. She wanted her lawyer to have a heads up in case she had to go to court.

## CHAPTER 4



DURING THEIR LUNCH break from training, Kent sat off to the side with Tate lying beside him. As the dog slept, Kent ate the lunch he had packed for himself that morning. He found it was easier than to go someplace off campus to get something to eat. When he was done, he lounged back beside the dog and looked at the others who had the same idea he had, bringing their own lunch. He frowned when he saw Lisa give Charlie a treat. He couldn't see any reason for it, but it wasn't his place to question her training technique.

"May I join you?" came a voice from above, and Kent gave a start when he saw Rita standing there with Zeke by her side.

"Sure," he waited until she sat, and after Zeke sniffed Tate, he settled down beside the pup. "What's up?" Kent asked, shocked Rita had sought him out. All morning he had the impression that she was pissed at him for some reason.

"Where did you train dogs before?" She didn't waste any time in questioning him.

"I didn't."

"I'm going to call you on that lie," she said bitterly. "Not that it matters, but I hate liars."

"Whatever, but I don't lie. I told you this yesterday, I never trained dogs before, however, I worked with trained dogs and their handlers before. I paid attention and asked questions of the handlers on why he did certain things."

Rita scowled at him, and it took everything Kent had not to get up and walk away from the hostility coming off her in waves. “Believe what you want. Am I failing the class?”

“No,” she bit out reluctantly.

“Then what’s your beef with me. Don’t say nothing, because I’ve felt hostility coming off you in waves all morning.”

Rita continued to glare at him, then with her head turned away, she said, “You need to stay after class.”

“Why? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, yet.” Rita stood and hurried away, making sure Zeke was beside her as she did. Kent shook his head as he watched her go. If it wasn’t for her bitchy attitude, she could be someone he would like to get to know better, but not now. He didn’t know who pissed in her Wheaties, but her attitude was a gigantic turn-off to him. On a heavy sigh, he looked at Tate who was watching him with his head on his paws.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to get you fixed so you don’t have bitch problems in the future.” Kent grinned when the pup gave a slight whine, as if he knew what Kent had just threatened him with.

Before he could get up and head back into the building to continue training for the afternoon session, Julie came over to him to see if everything was okay.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Kent stood, then looked out at the others and shook his head. He turned toward Julie, and asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“What bug crawled up Rita’s ass? She came over a few minutes ago and told me I had to stay after class. She wasn’t nice about it.”

Julie laughed and waved her hand at him in a dismissive manner. “Oh, you’ll have to forgive her, she just needs to get laid. Or drunk, or maybe both.”

“Excuse me?” Kent looked at her in shock. “Did you just say what I think you did?”

“Probably,” Julie laughed, and they both saw Rita turn and glare at the two of them. “Yep, she needs to get laid.” Julie looked at him with a grin, and when she saw his expression, she laughed harder. “Sorry, I’ve known Rita for almost thirty years. We met in the first grade and have been best friends ever since. I learned a long time ago to speak my mind with her. I even told her last night that she needed to find someone and get laid.” She continued to grin as she blew a raspberry at Rita standing on the other side of the small lawn glaring at them. “Or,” she said as she turned back to Kent.

“Or what?”

“Or she needs new batteries in her toys.” Julie was called away then, and Kent sputtered as he saw her walk away. He looked down at his dog and shook his head at him.

“Don’t say it.” He made sure his lunch was picked up, walked Tate over to the doggie bathroom area, picked up after him, disposed of the items, then went back into the building. He was in his usual spot at the back of the room when classes resumed. The entire time only half of his attention was on the instructions Rita was giving. The other half of his attention was on what he could do with Rita to help relieve the tension Julie implied she had, and the many ways he could do it. He shook his head when Rita had to call his name twice to get his attention to the proceedings before him. The thoughts he had made for a long afternoon.

“Mr. Palmer!” came the harsh cry from across the outside training course. Kent looked up and saw Rita standing there glaring at him with her fisted hands on her hips.

“What?”

“Are you going to do as I instructed?”

“No.”

“Are you defying me?”

“No.” Kent glared back at her and never looked away from her. She was spitting mad, and the way her eyes glared, and

her cheeks turned rosy, he had never seen anyone more beautiful. It took what little control he had not to get an erection at what he saw.

“Care to tell me why you’re not doing as instructed? If you continue to defy me, I can always flunk you and take Bluey away from you.”

Kent firmed his jaw as he walked several feet toward her. “First,” he said firmly. “*My* dog’s name is Tate when he is working. Tator or Tator Tot when he is not. Second, it’s ninety-five freaking degrees out here, and the piece of equipment you want my dog to go on has been in the blazing sun for the last four hours. I refuse to allow my dog’s paws to be burnt on that metal.” Kent angrily pointed to the metal equipment Rita wanted to begin training the dogs on. They continued with a glaring contest until Julie came up and stepped between them.

“Okay, folks. It looks like this heat is getting the better of us. Let’s take a break and get some cool water for ourselves and our dogs.” She turned and gripped Rita by the arm and dragged her away. When they were on the other side of the park, with her back to the others, Julie laid into Rita.

“What the hell is your problem, Rita? Why are you antagonizing Kent so much today?”

“I don’t trust him.”

“Why the hell not?”

“He’s lying to me.”

“About what?”

“He’s trained dogs before. There is no way in hell Bluey can be trained that quickly. I want to know who he’s trained before. Let’s hope he’s not a ringer for another training facility and put here as a plant. If that’s the case, I won’t be responsible for what I do to him!”

“First, it’s not Bluey, it’s Tate. Second, what did Stone’s report say?”

“That’s just it,” Rita sighed heavily as she took her eyes off Kent and focused on Julie. “Stone can’t find anything on

him. All he can come up with was that he's former military. Nothing else. No branch of the service, nothing about what he did for them, nothing."

"Maybe he was in a secret department or something. Like Black Ops or something and they can't reveal what they did." Julie turned so she could look across the park to study Kent. "Now that you mention it, I can see him being former military. He stands tall and proud. His shoulders aren't slumped, and his hair, though a little longer than regulation, still looks like a military cut. I say he had a very important job while he served his country." Julie looked at Rita, and saw she continued to throw daggers across the way.

"I'm calling training for the day, and I'm giving them the weekend off." She held up her hand when Rita turned her glare onto her. "There is no reason why these dogs need to be trained here at the facility for thirty hours a week. Three days a week for three hours will be fine. We've done it like that in the past, I don't know why you changed it for this group." When Rita started to challenge her, Julie only raised a brow at her. "Do I have to call Marvin in?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Watch me. Rita, I love you like the sister I never had. But you need to stop being a bitch toward Kent Palmer. He did nothing to you." Julie suddenly reared back and stared at her friend in shock. "Oh my god, are you jealous because he's trained Tate so well so far? Could he be a better trainer than you?"

Rita turned on her heel and left the area without saying a word. Julie noted that she walked toward the path that led into the woods behind the facility. Heaving a sigh, she went over and gathered the others closer.

"I'm sorry for what you witnessed, but I'm calling the training for the day. Take the weekend off. You won't have to report until nine on Monday. Continue to train your dog at your home. When you return, there will be a new training schedule."



“What is it?” Lisa asked as she picked up Charlie and cuddled him in her arms. Kent winced when he pictured her trying to do that in a few months when the pup was hitting the scales at eighty pounds or more. He shook his head to get back into the game.

“Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from nine until noon. That has always been our schedule, and though I shouldn’t admit this, Rita changed it for this session. When it gets closer to certification we will assess you and your dogs and increase training as we see fit. Until then, have a great few days to bond with your dogs.”

Kent waited until the others went inside to gather their items, and after they started leaving, he looked at Julie with raised brows.

“Can I ask you what her beef with me is?”

Julie studied the man before her, and knew he wouldn’t accept anything but the truth from her, so she gave it to him. “Rita said that she doesn’t trust you because you lied about training dogs in the past.” She held up her hand when he tried to speak. “I know, but she also said after what Tim Vickers did to Charlie, she contacted BHP to do a deep background check on everyone here. Yours came back as only being in the military. She’s bound and determined that you trained dogs before.”

“Christ,” Kent said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. When he dropped his hand, he looked at Julie sadly. “I’ll tell you what I told her. I never trained a dog before. However, I worked with several men who had trained military K-9s. I asked questions. There was a time that I had to get a dog out of a sticky situation when his handler wasn’t available. It only worked because we had worked together before. That’s all. She was already trained before that particular mission.”

“I understand, and I don’t want to talk ill of Rita, but there’s a lot of pressure on her with this class. I might have added fuel to the fire for saying what I did.”

“Can I ask what the pressure is, and what fuel did you add?”

“Three months ago, Marvin Chambers retired. He turned the reins over to Rita. Oh, don’t get me wrong, she’s been in this line of work her entire life, but this is the first time she’s been on her own. If you know what I mean. This is her first solo class, and I threatened to call her father if she didn’t back off in harassing you.”

“Damn, that was harsh.”

“It was, but sometimes, you need to handle Rita like you do your dog. With a firm hand.” Julie grinned. “Now that we’ve been best friends for almost thirty years, I can get away with talking to her like that.”

“I understand. I have one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“Earlier, Rita told me I had to stay after class. Do you know why? Or can I leave with the others?”

“Let me check.” Julie pulled her phone from her back pocket and sent a quick text. They didn’t have long to wait. Julie looked up at Kent in shocked surprise when she read the text.

“What?”

“She said Jim needs to talk to you.”

“Who’s Jim?”

“Jim Faulkner, he’s the sheriff.”

Before Kent could respond, a vehicle pulled in, and the two of them turned to see the sheriff’s SUV had parked near the entrance of the building. They, along with Tate, made their way over to him. As soon as he exited his truck, he smiled at Julie, then looked at Kent.

“Palmer?”

“Yes, Kent Palmer.” He held out his hand and after they shook, Sheriff Faulkner pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket. He flipped through several pages, clicked a pen, and looked at him steadily.

“Could you tell me what you witnessed yesterday when Timothy Vickers was assaulted by both you and Rita Chambers.”

Kent stared at him in shock, then snorted a laugh. “If it’s the guy that kicked his puppy, then he wasn’t assaulted. He was calmly removed from the building. The only assault upon his person was my hand on his shoulder, and Ms. Chambers verbally dressed him down for hurting a puppy.”

“You didn’t hunt him down and do this to him?” Jim asked as he reached into his truck and withdrew a folder. He opened it and Kent stared in shock at the man from yesterday’s beat-up face. He had one eye black, the other was swollen shut, and there was a cut above his eyebrow that had at least six stitches. He also had a cut lip, along with bruising along his jaw.

“What do you have there?” Rita asked from beside Kent. He looked down and saw she had her jaw clenched tightly, and wouldn’t look at him.

“The sheriff thinks I did this.” He took one of the photos to show Rita.

“What the hell?” She looked at the picture before she looked back at Jim. “You didn’t tell me about this this morning when you came to talk to me.”

“Yeah, I only came to do a preliminary while Sparrow was in the hospital taking Vickers’s statement. I got your statement this morning, along with the video.” Jim turned to Kent with a scowl. “Where were you last night?”

## CHAPTER 5



“ME?” Kent asked in shocked surprise. “I didn’t do this.”

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose as he sighed heavily. “I know that, but I have to investigate these allegations. No offense, but you’re new here, no one knows anything about you. For all I know you could be a serial killer and you go around and rough up your targets before you go in for the kill.”

“Are there any dead bodies in the area?” Kent asked with a chuckle.

“Not yet,” Jim laughed. “I’m just throwing things out there. I know nothing about you and every damn thing I search comes back redacted.”

“What’s that?” Rita asked

“Private,” both men told her.

Kent looked around and saw the three of them were the only ones left in the parking lot except for the vehicles of the people that worked at CSAR. He looked directly at the sheriff, as he asked. “Can we go inside out of this heat?”

“Sure,” Jim said as he nodded, and they both followed Rita to the building. She led them down the hall to the break room and passed out bottles of water. Rita liked that Kent took care of his dogs needs before his own. As much as she didn’t trust the man and thought he was lying to her about not having trained a dog before, it impressed her how he was with Bluey. She gave herself a mental slap and referred to the dog as Tate in her mind.

They settled around a table and after drinking half a bottle of water, Kent looked at Jim. “What do you want to know?”

“Who are you? Why are you here? What do you do for a living?”

“My name is Kent Palmer. Last month I retired from the Air Force. I did twenty years. While I served my country, I was in a special group called AFSPECWAR.”

“What’s that?” Both Rita and Jim asked.

“It stands for Air Force Special Warfare Reconnaissance Unit.” He held up his hand when he saw the questions come into their expressions. “While on that team, there were five of us, we did different jobs. However, our duties were considered high risk. We went into a situation before anyone else and we did recon of the area. I’m talking buildings, terrain, cyber security, or any part of the job to make sure the client was safe before they arrived. It was our job to basically clear the path for the visiting dignitaries that were going into war-torn areas. If we didn’t deem the area safe, the client was informed of our findings, and suggestions to move to a different location were made. If said dignitary continued to throw their weight around about wanting to be in a particular area, even after being told it was unsafe, they had to sign an agreement that they wouldn’t go after any of our team members, the Air Force, or the military because they defied our findings.” Kent saw awe in their expressions before he nodded once. “The dignitary’s entire entourage had to sign the agreement, or we would refuse to proceed.”

“Holy crap. That’s a lot. What was your job on this team?”

Kent looked directly at Rita, as he answered, “Technically, I was Pararescue, which included me being the point man for search and rescue, and I was the team combat medical personnel. I did all my search and rescue without any help. Meaning I didn’t have an animal to help me.” As he continued to look directly at Rita, he spoke, “I know you think I trained other dogs, but I didn’t. I watched the handlers of military K-9s and asked questions. On occasion, I would have to work

with a dog on a mission. If I did, the handler was right there beside me.”

“That’s why Tate is following your commands then. One thing about the Bull Mastiff is that you have to have a firm hand with him. I see that now. I thought you were trying to show off.”

“How many years did you do this?” Jim asked as he took notes from their conversation.

“Twenty,” Kent answered Jim’s question. He looked at the other man with a grin. “My team and I found that the jobs we did were for younger men. Most of us are only thirty-eight or nine, but after a mission, our bodies would scream that we were at least in our eighties or nineties. It was time to get out, and I’m proud that I served my country for twenty years.” He looked between the two of them. “Because of the extent of what we did, that’s why our files are redacted. My teammates came with me, and I don’t know if you’ve met them yet, but they are Mason Quinn, Asher Nolte, Cruz Lacerda, and Ryder Callahan. Those are the men who I came to Fool’s Gold with.” Kent studied the two of them and he saw understanding in Jim’s expression, and doubt in Rita’s.

“Why are you here?” Jim asked bluntly. “Why Fool’s Gold?”

“Hank Patterson and Jake Cogburn from Brotherhood Protection hired us. We’re basically what you would call the Secret Service for the Brotherhood.” At their confused looks, he smiled at them. “We did our recon with Mason before he took his first detail. You remember when he helped in Isabella’s kidnapping.”

“Okay, got it. A few more questions, then I’m done here. Where exactly do you live?”

Kent gave the address and grinned when Jim frowned at him. “Spencer Barnes let me sub-let his apartment until I can find someplace to live permanently. I want to have a house in the country so Tate can run if he’s not working. Cooped up in an apartment isn’t a life for a dog.” He didn’t look at Rita as he said this.

“Okay, one more question. Where were you last night after leaving here until two in the morning?”

“Home, and no, I don’t have any witnesses.” Kent frowned then cocked his head to the side. “I think the apartment building has outside security cameras. I don’t know whether they work or not, but I picked up some dog supplies after I left here. When I got home with them, I set them up and started training Tate on the rules of the house. I took him out around ten at night, then again at three in the morning. I was inside with him either watching TV or sleeping. I only left my apartment at ten, three, and then six this morning. Each time I was gone for fifteen minutes and cleaned up after Tate.”

“Okay, I know the owner of the apartment building. I’ll swing by and ask if I can see the security footage.” Jim stood and looked sternly at Kent. “I don’t have to tell you not to leave the area.” Jim turned to leave, but turned back quickly. “One last thing, if you’re not here training your dog, or at your apartment, is there any place that you hang out?”

“The Centre. I know Spencer, and I’ve been honing my skills with Logan.”

“Good to know. Again, don’t leave town.”

“I won’t, I’m here to stay. I do have one question for you though.”

“What’s that?”

“I know you can’t tell me, but what’s in Vickers’s background? Again, I know you can’t take what I say to heart, but I had a thought yesterday when I stood there and watched Rita kick him out of the program.”

“What’s that?”

“First, are there any dog fighting rings in the area? I only ask because from what I saw, my first impression was that he wanted to train the pup he got for fighting.” He turned to Rita then. “I’m not telling you how to do your job. I know you’re busy trying to keep an eye on all nineteen of us as well as the dogs. But my military experience awarded me with keen observation skills. I noticed the time Vickers worked with

Charlie, he never named him, and he never rewarded him with a treat.”

“Really?” Rita sat up and stared at him in shock.

“Yes, but on the other spectrum, I have a fear with Lisa and Charlie. Again, I’m only telling you what I’ve observed.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t get me wrong, from what I’ve seen, Lisa seems like a wonderful person. However, she’s constantly slipping treats to Charlie, even if he didn’t do anything to earn them.”

“I’ll have to keep my eye out on her. Thanks for the heads up.” Rita was reluctant to thank him, so she did it grudgingly. They all stood, and after they escorted Jim out, Kent turned to look at her.

“Do you need an escort to your vehicle. The sheriff didn’t say anything, but I think we should be diligent in our surroundings.”

“Do you think he’ll come after me?”

Kent shrugged and sighed heavily. “No clue, but you can never be too careful.”

It took several minutes before Rita answered him. “Thanks, but no thanks. I have Zeke and some pepper spray on my key chain.”

“Okay, but if you need anything, let me know.” He gave her his phone number, and waited until she programmed it in her phone. “Call me,” he said gruffly, and waited until she did. When his phone rang, he looked at it and turned it to her. “Yours?” At her nod, he programmed her name associated with the number. “I’ll see you Monday then.”

Kent turned on his heel and headed toward his truck. After getting Tate settled into his seat in the back passenger side, he got in, started it up, and pulled out. On a whim, he headed to The Centre, he knew the others might be there and wanted to give them a heads up on what might be a potential mission for him. He knew that he would be keeping a close eye on Rita. He needed to find out where she lived without coming across



as a stalker. As he drove through town, he had a thought and made several stops. Once his mission was complete, he couldn't seem to wipe the grin off his face. Because of his secret mission, he decided to wait to go to The Centre the next day when he was off instead.

He looked in the rearview mirror at Tate as he lay in the back seat and laughed. "I might get my ass kicked for what I just did, but it might help in the long run."



HOURS LATER, still unsure of Kent after all she heard him say, Rita let herself out of her office, and gave a start when Zeke gave the alert that someone was nearby. She whipped around and saw a young man standing there with a package.

"May I help you?"

"Package for Rita Chambers."

"I didn't order anything."

"Sorry, I was told to deliver this package to you."

"Do you know who it is from?"

"No, all I know is that a gentleman came in and asked that this be delivered to you as soon as we could put it together."

Rita scowled as she pulled out her phone and accessed a photo of Tim Vickers. She had no clue as to why she had downloaded it to her phone, but it came in handy now. "Is this the gentleman who gave the request?" If it had been Vickers she wouldn't accept the package and call Jim immediately.

The deliveryman leaned in and shook his head as he looked at the photo. "No. The man who made the purchase looked military to me."

She accessed her photos again, and turned the phone to show her a photo of Kent that she had secretly taken on his first day of training. She held in her snort of laughter when she realized that had only been the day before. "Is this the man?"

"Yes," the delivery man agreed, and Rita took the package from him. If it had been confirmed that Vickers had sent her

something, she would have called the sheriff right away. She took the package with her to her vehicle. After getting Zeke settled, she got behind the wheel and headed for her home. On the way, she stopped for groceries again, she needed to pick up the coffee she'd forgotten the day before. She was settled in for the night by six. As she settled in her favorite chair to read a book, she picked up the package Kent had sent her and slowly opened it. It surprised her by how heavy it was.

With it on her lap, she took the metal nail file beside her chair and slit open the tape. The first thing she saw as she opened it was a single folded piece of paper. She withdrew it and frowned at the message.

*"Please use."*

That was it, just two simple words that were written in strong handwriting. Curious, she removed the paper beneath the letter and stared in shock at the contents of the package. It took at least a minute before she threw her head back and laughed. She laughed so hard, she had tears running down her cheeks and she had to tell Zeke that she was okay.

After wiping her tears, she began pulling out several packages of batteries. There was AA, AAA, 9-volt, D-cell, and C-cell. By the time they were all removed from the box and laid out on the coffee table before her, there were six packages of each. She shook her head as she laughed.

When a thought struck her, she picked up her phone and sent a quick text. *"Why so many?"*

She didn't have long to wait for a response. It was returned in seconds. *"Didn't know what size you needed, so I covered all the bases. Hope you put them to good use."*

Kent's response embarrassed her, so she didn't respond to his answer. Instead, she sat there and stared at all the batteries. She wondered if Julie had said something to Kent about Rita needing to get laid. If so, this was doubly embarrassing. Though she had a toy or two in her nightstand, she didn't like to use them unless it was absolutely necessary. She much preferred the personal touch of a man, but she had broken up with her last boyfriend over two years prior. On a sigh, she put

the batteries back in their box and removed it from her sight. When she settled back in her chair and picked up her book, she found it was hard to concentrate. The only thing she could think of was those damn batteries.

On a sigh, she closed her book, tossed it on the couch, rose to her feet, grabbed the damn box and went upstairs to her room.

## CHAPTER 6



KENT GRINNED as he studied his phone after receiving a text from Rita. He knew it was bad of him for what he did, but he figured if Julie was correct in the assumption that Rita needed to get laid, and as much as he liked the idea of maybe doing it himself, he didn't know her enough to offer his services. Instead, he'd stopped at a local pharmacy and purchased several packages of batteries to have delivered to her. He hoped she took the hint to use them, maybe she'd have a better disposition when it came to him and how he trained his dog. When there was no further response, he sighed, knowing it wouldn't come. He had parked in his spot at the apartment complex and got out. Before going inside, he walked Tate. Once in, he quickly got his food and water dishes filled and decided what he wanted for his dinner.

He knew he didn't have to, but he started a log for his activities in case the sheriff needed to question his whereabouts again. After seeing to Tate's needs, he quickly fired up the grill on his stove and cleaned up a potato. Bypassing the salad and veggies, he made quick work of cooking a steak and baked potato. As he ate, he had a sudden thought. With a grin, he picked up his phone and after he made sure his face was clean, he removed his shirt and began snapping selfies. The more he snapped, the wider his grin became. After several minutes, he set his phone aside and continued eating. He didn't want to do the next step impulsively. As he ate, he talked to the dog about his plans and when Tator realized he wasn't getting a treat, or was given any commands to follow, he eventually went over to the bed set up

near the couch and settled down for a nap. Laughing, Kent finished eating, sent a few text messages to his buddies to make plans for the next day, cleaned up after himself, and settled in the living room to read. He wasn't a very big television watcher, but he loved to read books. He was currently on the second book of what he considered to be a fabulous sci-fi thriller. Currently, there were six books available, and he was on book two. He figured if he paced it right, he'd have entertainment for the coming cold months. He had learned while in the service to take his time reading. If he read as fast as he normally did, he would run out of books and be bored until the next one of whatever series he was reading became available.

Hours later, he took Tator out for his bathroom ritual before going to bed. Once in the bedroom, Tator settled in the bed in the crate he had purchased for the little guy. He would probably have to purchase a bigger one later, once Tator became full grown, but for now, the one he purchased would work for several months. Since he was now home twenty-four seven, Kent had all the time in the world to train Tator. Besides, if he was called out on any missions for either search and rescue or the Brotherhood Protection, Tator would be with him. Might as well train him properly from the beginning.

After Kent took a shower and climbed into bed, he plugged his phone into the charger and noted it was going on ten at night. With a grin, he accessed his contact numbers and wrote a quick text.

*"Thought you'd like some inspiration."* Was the short message. He quickly scrolled through the selfies he'd taken earlier, and though he sent fifteen of them, there was only two with his face showing. The others caught his chin, or the side of his face, and his entire chest. He wasn't vain, but he studied the photos and liked how buff he looked. Before he chickened out, he sent the message, placed his phone on the nightstand, and settled in the bed with a grin. Rita strongly disliked him now, he couldn't wait to see what her reaction would be when he saw her again on Monday. Hopefully, she would take the suggestion of the batteries and the photos he'd sent her. His one fear was whether she liked a man with tattoos or not. He

had several, but because of his position in the military, he made sure they could be hidden beneath his uniform. Maybe Julie was right, and Rita needed to get laid. All night, Kent's dreams were full of images of him and Rita having an all-night sex marathon. When he woke, he was so hard he could hammer nails. Before he took Tator out for his morning walk, he jumped in the shower and took care of himself. Afterward, he hung his head, and whispered, "Fuck me. You're going to be the death of me, Rita Chambers. I hope you found some relief. Maybe next time we can do it together, in person." After his shower, he dressed and took Tator out. Once back in his apartment, he made breakfast, and planned what he would do when he met up with his buddies in a couple of hours.



RITA FLOPPED BACK on her bed, picked up the spare pillow beside her, smashed it over her face, and screamed. She didn't know what was wrong with her. All she knew was that she was angry, short-tempered, and wanted to rip Kent Palmer's head from his neck, with no clue as to why. After screaming a second time, she pulled the pillow away from her face when her phone indicated a text had come in. She snatched up her phone like a lifeline.

It took several minutes of shocked silence to grasp the concept of not only what the message referred to, but the photos that were attached.

"Damn," she whispered as she scrolled through them. Never in a million years would she have thought that Kent Palmer had a body like that beneath his clothes. When she'd come home the night before, she'd used her computer to Google some of the things he had told the sheriff that he had done for his job in the military. She couldn't get exact details, but with a little digging and patience she was able to get a broad idea of what he went through. Seeing the pictures of his naked chest, she knew it was him, because there was a mole on his neck that she had stared at several times when she had to interact with him. Seeing the tattoos on his chest and arms made her immediately think of a bad boy. Her ideal man. She

didn't have any, but it was her secret fantasy to have at least a one-night stand with a man covered in tattoos.

On a moan, she slammed her phone on the bed beside her, covered her head with the pillow again, and screamed into it. She didn't let up until she felt a wet nose on her arm. Shaking her head, she removed the pillow to look over at her dog.

"It's okay, Zeke, Mama's just frustrated." He continued to stand there and look at her funny with a cocked head. Rita reassured him that she was fine, and decided to get up and let him out one last time for the night. She went downstairs and unlocked the doggy door for him. Zeke gave a woof and quickly ran outside. Fifteen minutes later, she handed him a treat as he returned. He took it from her and went to his bed in the living room. Rita quickly locked up, and made her way back to her bedroom. As she settled back beneath the covers, she closed her eyes, and seconds later they popped open.

"Damn you, Kent Palmer," she grouched as she flopped the blankets back, made sure her bedroom door was closed, then grabbed the box of batteries she had received earlier. With her toys recharged, she grabbed her phone and accessed her photos. She would deny that she ever did this, but with Kent's face staring at her, she got down to business to try to relieve some of her stress. Almost an hour later she came out of the bathroom after taking a quick shower, opened her door a few inches for when Zeke wanted to come in during the night. This time when she closed her eyes, she had a smile on her face and was able to fall asleep after releasing a stress-free sigh.



KENT CLIMBED out of his truck and held the back door open for Tator to scramble across the seat to climb down. Because he was still little, Kent picked him up and placed him on the ground. He told the dog to stay, as he clipped the leash on him, then reached in for the duffel he'd packed earlier that morning with both of their gear. Today Kent wanted to do some more training with Tator, and to keep up on his own physical training. He was at The Centre and wanted to talk with Logan to see if he had a climbing wall set up, or someplace he could rappel down the side of a mountain with Tator strapped to him.

There was no time like the present to start training him with those skills. Kent figured the more Tator learned, the more versatile he would be out in the field. Today was also the day he was going to teach him to walk beside him without a leash. Armed with the pack, and the pouch of dog treats on his hip, Kent headed toward the front of the building.

It had been a few weeks since he'd seen his buddies. He was eager to catch up with Mason, Cruz, Asher, and Ryder. As soon as he walked in, he saw Mason Quinn standing at the desk, and after holding the door open for Tator, he immediately started forward. As he approached, Asher Nolte joined Mason. They had looked up when the door opened, and turned to wait for Kent to join them.

“What’s up?” Mason asked as Kent approached. He frowned when he looked down at his feet. “What’s that?”

Kent looked down at Tator and grinned at his friends. “A puppy.”

“No shit, but what are you doing with it?”

“He’s mine.” Kent waited until Cruz and Ryder joined them. He waited as they gathered around to explain. “This is the dog I got when I joined CSAR.”

“What’s that?” Asher asked.

“Chambers Search and Rescue. It’s run by Rita Chambers. She provides the dogs, and we can purchase them outright or make a donation. I purchased Tator, along with giving her center a generous donation.”

“What do they do?” Ryder asked.

“She trains dogs and their owners to go out on search and rescue missions. You know, like we used the dogs while on a mission when we served. I had always admired the handlers, and because we’re not really working full-time for the Brotherhood, I thought I’d get a dog, take the courses, and relieve the boredom while between missions.”

“You can always help out here,” Logan Bishop said as he came around the desk and looked down at the pup. “What’s its name?”



“While he’s wearing his vest and in training, or on a mission, it’s Tate.”

“Okay, is there another name he goes by?”

“Yes, when he’s like this, without a vest, and around the house, he’s Tator, or Tator Tot.” Kent grinned when the others threw their heads back and laughed.

“Let me guess,” Cruz said laughingly. “It’s because he looked like he cooked a little too long?”

“Yep. He’s going to be huge when he grows into himself. According to Rita, Tator was the runt of the litter. He’s a blue brindle Bull Mastiff.”

“Holy shit,” they all said as one. “He’s going to be gigantic.”

“I know.” Kent grinned at them. He turned to Logan. “Do you have a climbing wall here? I want to start training Tator to rappel while on my back.”

“I do.”

“Can we join you?” Asher asked. “If we get called out on a mission, don’t you think it would be good if Tator is familiar with all of us?”

“Yes, I didn’t want to put you out, but if you had time, I would love for you to join us on the wall.” They all agreed, and it didn’t take long for them to follow Logan to the back of The Centre to where they needed to be. An hour later, they were all hooked up to their safety equipment. Kent looked at his friends, and said firmly, “While in his vest, he is to be referred to as Tate.”

“Got it,” the others answered as they nodded agreement. They allowed Kent to go first. Though they all knew how to climb, they decided that they would have three of them go up at once. Kent in the middle with a guy on either side of them, while the other two, along with Logan worked the safety lines at the bottom.

Kent turned to the dog and said firmly, “Tate, come.” Everyone watched in shock as the dog hurried forward. He

received a treat and a good boy with a head rub. Kent picked him up and strapped him to his chest.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” Mason asked from his position at the safety lines.

“What do you mean?”

“Think about when Tate is full grown and has to jump out of a helicopter. Do you want him strapped to your front?”

“Yeah,” Spencer Barnes said as he joined them. “Wouldn’t it be better if he starts out strapped to your back?”

Kent studied the dog in his arms, then his friends. “I can see your point, but what if he’s on my back and we’re being shot at? Remember all those missions we were on, and Carl took Whisky down strapped to his front? He covered Whisky’s six with his legs.”

“Ah, that’s right. Sorry.”

“Don’t be, I want us all to be comfortable in training Tate. He needs to be relaxed around you all, not just me. I’m going to be at this most of the day.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know if he’ll get sick the higher we climb or not. That’s why I’m training him here.” He looked at his friends and grinned. “You never know what will happen if we get called out on a mission.”

The others agreed with him, and told him that if he needed them for anything, to call him, and they would come help with any search and rescue mission if they were available. Kent liked that his friends were willing to jump in and help, even though they had their own lives and were retired.

## CHAPTER 7



SUNDAY, around mid-morning, Rita looked up from weeding her flower garden, sat back on her heels, and sighed heavily. She watched as her father, Marvin Chambers, and his dog, Tank, exited his truck. She stayed where she was, and watched as the two dogs greeted each other. Afterward, Zeke went to welcome Marvin, while Tank came to say hi to Rita. She had to laugh as Tank rubbed his eighty-pound body on her. She pushed him off her when he tried to climb on her lap. With a snap of her fingers, she pointed to the ground beside her, and nodded as the dog immediately followed instructions to sit beside her instead of on her. Once Zeke finished welcoming her father, he held out a hand to help her up. She dusted off the seat of her pants, her knees, then tried to rub the dirt off her hands.

By silent agreement, they made their way into her house, and after giving both dogs a treat, Rita sent them into the living room. As she washed her hands, her father started a pot of coffee. She knew then he was there for a special reason. She gave a silent sigh, thinking he was going to question her about her new class at the school. She didn't have long to wait for an answer. As she washed up, her father got the cups ready for the coffee. They settled at the small table by the window to wait for the coffee to finish. Marvin didn't wait to drill her with questions.

“What happened in class?”

“What do you mean?” Rita had no idea what he was referring to.

“Did you and one of your students assault another student.”

“Christ on a cracker. How the hell did you find out?” Rita demanded, but held up her hand to hold off his answer. She rose to her feet and left the room, calling over her shoulder that she would be right back. She was back by the time the coffee was done. Armed with her laptop and the copy of the incident in question on the flash drive, she set everything up while her father fixed their cups of coffee. As he settled down, she told him to press play. She wouldn’t answer any questions until he saw the evidence first.

“Damn it,” Marvin whispered as he scrubbed his face, sat back hard, and stared at her. With both hands in the air in a surrender motion, he shook his head at her. “I’m not criticizing, and from what I saw, you were right to take him outside. There’s no reason why anyone should abuse an animal like that. I do have some questions though.”

Rita studied her father and realized he wasn’t there to ream her a new one for the way things were handled. “What?”

“One, who was the guy that laid his hand on the ass that’s shoulder?”

“Another student.” Rita looked at him with a grin. “He claimed Bluey.”

“Wow, okay, but what’s his name? From what little I saw, he seems to be a force to be reckoned with.”

“He is, his name is Kent Palmer, and I...” she paused as she sighed heavily and slumped back in her chair. “I don’t trust him. At least not fully.”

“Why?” Marvin demanded, not as the former boss of CSAR, but as a father. “Did he do something to you?”

“No,” she refused to look at her father as the image of Kent’s photo on her phone popped in her head and how she had used the batteries he’d sent her while staring at his image. She shook her head and sighed again. She sipped her coffee, then cradled the cup close to her chest as she sighed heavily. After several moments of silence, she looked directly at her

father. "I know I don't have anything to back this up, but I think he's lying to me."

"About?"

"I've asked him repeatedly if he's ever trained a dog before. He repeatedly says no. The only thing he says is that he's been around handlers with K-9s before. He's observed them together and paid attention."

"What's wrong with that?" Marvin asked in confusion. "What has he done that makes him suspicious of him?"

Rita closed her eyes, shook her head, then opened them. "He had Bluey loose leash trained in less than an hour."

"Wow, that's impressive. First, is Bluey still his name? Or did this Palmer change it?"

"He changed it. Said when he was working his name would be Tate, when not working, it would be Tator or Tator Tot."

Marvin threw his head back and laughed. "I can see it. Did he say that Tate baked a little too long in the oven?"

"Yes."

Marvin studied his daughter and cocked his head to one side to study her. It took a few minutes, but he sat up straight and grinned at her. "You like him."

"What? No, I don't."

Marvin continued to grin at her. "Tell me one reason why you don't trust him."

"I just did. Bluey," she started, she wrinkled her nose at her father's expression. "Fine, Tate takes to training better than Tank did. He's miles ahead of the others and if this keeps up, both of them will be graduated before the others."

"Do you think he'll train Tate on his own outside of class?"

"Well, they're supposed to, but I personally think he'll take it further than the basic stuff we teach. Between you and me, I think he'll try to train him military style."

“What makes you think that?” Marvin rose and went for the coffee pot. He refilled their cups, returned the carafe to the stand, and rejoined his daughter at the table.

“When Sheriff Jim came to talk to him, he admitted he was former military. The K-9 experience he had was with military dogs.” Rita frowned when her father let out a long whistle.

“Do you remember what branch?”

“Air Force.”

Marvin scowled at his daughter. “I don’t recall the Air Force using K-9s. Now, if it was the Army or the Marines, I can understand, but isn’t the Air Force all about planes?”

“Apparently not,” Rita said bitterly. She reached over and took the computer from her father and quickly typed in the research she’d done the night before. Once it was ready to be viewed she looked at her father, but didn’t turn the computer toward him.

“After what happened with Vickers, I contacted Jake over at Brotherhood. I told him what happened and wanted an in-depth background check done on all the applicants. Deeper than what we usually do.”

“Okay, I agree with that. That was smart on your part. What did he come up with?”

“Nothing stuck out with the remaining applicants, but this is what I received about Kent.” She opened the file she’d brought with her when she’d retrieved her computer and handed over the stapled pages. She studied her father’s face intently as he flipped through them.

“Holy hell, this is all redacted.” He looked at his daughter in concern. “This either means he was in a secret branch, like Black Ops, or he was a bad egg.”

“I’m going with your first choice.”

“Why?”

“Because when Sheriff Jim asked him questions, I stood two feet away from him and heard everything he had to say. Not once did he falter in his answers. He told Jim that he was

in the Air Force for twenty years. While in he was in a special unit called AFSPECWAR.”

“What’s that?”

“It stands for Air Force Special Warfare. In my research, I’ve found that they received highly specialized training.” She looked at her father and shook her head. “Get this, this is a list of just some of what they were trained to do. Recon, operating behind enemy lines, the team he was on was used to assess any situation, buildings, terrain, cyber opportunities. Kent explained to Jim that his team went in ahead of time if a VIP, or special dignitary would be in the area. They went in, did their job, and reported back to the powers that be whether it was safe or not for that person to be there.”

“Okay, but what aren’t you telling me?”

“During my research,” Rita started, then drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I found several positions the team Kent was on held. Oh, in case you didn’t know, the entire team he was with while in the military retired and they are now working for Jake’s Brotherhood Protectors. According to both Kent and Jake, it’s not permanent, but they are called in when needed. Something like the Brotherhood Secret Service.”

“Wow, what are the positions on the teams?”

Rita turned the computer toward her father, rose from her chair, and went to stand behind him. She pointed to the screen. “Combat Control, Pararescue, Special Reconnaissance, Humanitarian Assistance, and Tactical Air Control. Kent told Jim that he was the team’s Pararescue specialist.”

“What did that entail?”

“Search and Rescue and Combat Medical.”

“Holy shit, did he have a K-9 with him?”

“He says no.”

“Is this the part where you don’t believe him?”

“Yes.” Rita stood back and paced a few steps before she whipped around and stared at her father. “Dad, you should see

him with Bluey, sorry Tate. It's like the pup is an extension of him."

Marvin studied his daughter, then finally shook his head. "I know I said I would never step on your toes after I retired, but what are you saying? Do you want me to come in and see him? Get a feel of him for you?"

"That's just it, I don't know what I want. He says he's never trained a dog before, but to watch him with Tate, it's like poetry in motion. It's hard to explain."

"When is your next class?"

"Monday. I'm back to the regular schedule. Julie told me it was pointless to have classes six days a week." She shook her head and stared at the man she most respected in the entire world. "I don't know how to say this, but he even cautioned me on another student and her treatment of her pup."

"How so?"

"What did you hear about Vickers? Before you saw the video from the compound?"

"I was told that he said you and some guy assaulted him."

"Okay, Jim questioned Kent, as I said, but Kent didn't have any bruised knuckles or anything. I don't know if Jim showed you the photos from the hospital, but Vickers was beat all to hell. One eye was swollen shut, one was barely a slit. He had a split lip, and needed stitches on his cheek and above his brow. From what I saw of the pictures, I'd say the guy that beat him had severely bruised or scraped knuckles. Kent had nothing on his hands."

"Okay, but what does that have to do with what he said about another student?"

"He's observant. He stands in the back of the room and watches everything. All the dogs, all the students, even Scott, Julie, and me. It's unnerving."

"Again, what did he say about the other student?"

"He told me to watch Lisa because she's feeding Charlie too many treats. That he doesn't do anything to earn them."



“What’s their interaction like while training?”

Rita sighed as she settled back in her seat. “Lisa was one of the four that didn’t get a pup. You remember we have sixteen dogs and twenty people?”

“I thought you had nineteen people.”

“No, Julie accepted Kent’s application after the deadline. He’s only been living in Fool’s Gold for a little over a week before he submitted his application.” She shrugged as she looked at her father. “We couldn’t really reject him. I put all the names in the coffee can and drew Kent’s for first pick for a pup.”

“Ah, I understand, so how did Lisa get the pup?”

“Charlie. She was the next one in line, and I gave her the pup Vickers abused. She named him Charlie. I don’t know if she’s over treating him because Vickers kicked him, or because she doesn’t know the meaning of the treats.”

“If you don’t mind, why don’t you let me come in and observe?” Marvin held up his hands and grinned at her. “Just observe.”

“As long as it’s just observing, I don’t see the harm in that.”

“Maybe I can get a feel for your Kent too.”

“He’s not mine,” Rita said quickly, and hadn’t realized she had a look of disappointment on her face as she said it. Marvin made a mental note to keep a close eye on the man when he went there on Monday morning.

## CHAPTER 8



“TATE, COME.” Kent helped Tate down from the truck, strapped the vest on him, then the leash and started toward the building. As soon as the pup lunged, Kent stopped until the puppy stopped pulling on it and looked back at Kent as if to say, “*What are you waiting for.*” With a grin, Kent only raised a brow at the dog, who sat on his haunches to wait for his owner to join him. The heavy sigh the dog released was cute, but Kent wasn’t going to give into the animal’s theatrics.

“Good boy,” he said, and gave him a treat. With his bag in his hand, Kent gave the command for Tate to go forward. He couldn’t wait to see Rita. He didn’t know why, but ever since he’d sent those photos of himself to her, he had been dreaming of her. Over the weekend, he and his buddies, Asher, Mason, Ryder, and Cruz, had hung out at The Centre, and they’d done some rock climbing and rappelling down the side of the mountain a few miles behind the facility the others worked out of. He didn’t know if he would tell Rita what he had been doing yet or not. It all depended on how she treated him. He knew she didn’t trust him, and there was nothing he could do about that. He’d told her the truth numerous times, so now the ball was in her court to see if she would believe him. He smirked at himself, then gave a chuckle out loud. Maybe if she had seen how many times he’d blundered with Tate over the weekend, she would believe him. When a sudden thought struck him, he stopped dead in his tracks, then looked at Tate when the dog jerked on his leash, turned back, and did a doggy glare at him.

“Sorry, I had an epiphany.” Shaking his head, they started forward. With an idea forming in his head, he would go with it if the need arose. The next time Rita verbally doubted him, he would invite her to go with him the next time he took Tator on a training session. He grinned at himself as he pictured helping her strap into her safety harness before rappelling down the side of a mountain. He knew it was bad of him, but maybe he could cop a feel or two. Shaking his head, he continued toward the training center. During his walk through the parking lot, he hadn’t realized he been stared at the entire way by someone inside the building.

Rita walked up to her father and frowned at him. “What’s caught your attention?”

Without looking at her, Marvin pointed toward the window. “Is that Palmer?”

Rita looked and studied the man walking toward the building. Father and daughter saw how he corrected his pup when he lunged forward on the leash. Sighing heavily, she shook her head. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“He’s good.” Marvin looked at Rita in concern. “You’re sure he’s never trained dogs before?”

“He says he hasn’t. Now do you realize why I don’t quite trust him. Look at how well Bluey, sorry, Tate, is doing on a leash.” Rita had a thought and turned to her father with large eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kent told me he thought Lisa was giving Charlie treats he hadn’t earned. Could you keep an eye on them for me during training?”

“Yes, but only if you point them out to me.” He looked at his daughter and shook his head. “You’re going to have to learn that sometimes certain people has the knack to work well with animals. Your Kent Palmer just might be one of them.”

Rita looked out the window and smiled. “The Mini Cooper that just pulled in is Lisa’s vehicle. And he’s not mine.”

Marvin turned back and studied the woman as she got out of her vehicle. He noted the other students parked as close to the building as they could, but Kent Palmer parked in the back of the lot. The furthest away from them. He made a silent vow to keep an open mind about all the students he would observe today. He had to remember he was there to observe only.

Five minutes before class was to begin, Rita, Zeke, Marvin, and Tank left her office and headed toward the main room where they would be training that day. On the way, they paused when Julie came out of her office. She did a double take when she saw the man with Rita and grinned as she rushed him for a hug.

“Marvin, what brings you in today?”

“Nothing much, just wanted to see how the new class is doing.” At her skeptical look, Rita laughed.

“He’s here to check up on me, and I’ve told him a few things. He knows about Vickers.”

“Ah,” Julie said in understanding.

“I’m also here to check out Kent Palmer, Rita told me what she thought about his past training experience.”

“He’s good.” Julie didn’t admit to any more than that.

“Can you do me a favor today?” Rita asked her best friend and right-hand woman at CSAR.

“What’s that?”

“I loathe to admit this, but after talking with Sheriff Jim last week, Kent pointed out that he thought Lisa was giving Charlie treats he didn’t deserve.”

“Ah, I can see where that might be a problem in the future.”

“I know. I’m going to concentrate on today’s lesson, Dad’s going to observe, and I was hoping you could keep an eye on Lisa.”

“I can do that.” She turned to walk down the hall with them. “Marvin, will you be doing any training?”

“Only if it’s needed.” He leaned around Julie and nodded to Rita. “I would like to give my speech though, especially about the certification at the end.”

“Ah, I hadn’t gotten that far. Well, I’ve told them about it, but I never told them the ramifications if the dog doesn’t pass.”

“Don’t forget, the student might not pass either.”

“I know,” Rita said on a sigh as they entered the large room where all the students were there with their dogs.

“Good morning, everyone!” Rita called out to get their attention. She noted that as soon as she spoke everyone got into their positions. She saw Lisa give Charlie a treat as he sat next to her once they settled into their spot, but wasn’t too concerned about that now. “I hope you all had a few good days off. Before we begin today’s lesson, I’d like to introduce you to this man right here. He’s not only my father, but he’s taught me everything I know about training and raising dogs, as well as being a search and rescue volunteer. It’s his love of dogs, and wanting to help others that put the fire in my veins to do the same. Everyone, please welcome Marvin Chambers.”

Rita stepped back and let Marvin step forward. At his side was his dog, Tank, a German Shepherd.

“Hello,” Marvin held up his hands after everyone stopped applauding. “This is Tank,” he laid his hand on the top of the dog’s head. “Like Rita said, I’ve been in this business my entire life. It was my grandfather that started Chambers Search and Rescue. It was passed down to his son, my father, then to me, and now I’ve passed the reins down to Rita. Since I retired at the beginning of the year, this is the first training session I’ve been to. I stay away because I didn’t want to step on Rita’s toes.” He chuckled as he looked back at his daughter. He leaned in like he was whispering.

“Retirement is boring.” That comment received several chuckles, and he nodded as he continued, “I’m only here today to observe. Ignore me and Tank, but...” he paused and looked at everyone. “If I see something being done wrong, I will correct you. This is a big class, the biggest I’ve ever seen here

at CSAR. In the past, the most we've ever taken before was seven or eight." Marvin walked back and forth before the people in the front, and after giving a command to Tank, the dog stayed where he was.

"Why didn't you give him a treat for staying?" Lisa blurted out a question.

"Because you don't always need to reward your dog with a treat." Marvin looked directly at Lisa as he spoke and saw her guilty expression. "As I said, I'm not here to step on Rita's toes, but I do want to reiterate something with all of you. Whether Rita has told you this or not, I will say it. Part of this program is that not only are you training your dog to become a member of the search and rescue team, but we are training you also. At the end of this course, both you and your dog will go through the test to see if you pass. If a dog fails, then there will be discussions as to what will happen to him after the course."

"And the human?" Kent asked from his place propped against the back wall.

Marvin looked directly at the man who asked the question and liked what he saw in his expression.

"If the human fails, then they won't be asked to join the search and rescue team."

"How does the judging go?" Lisa asked with worry all over her face. When Charlie butted his nose into her leg, she reached down to pet him, but slipped him a treat as she did.

"Why did you do that?" Marvin demanded.

"What?"

"Why did you just slip your pup a treat? What did he do to earn one?"

Lisa looked between Marvin and Charlie in shock, then just shrugged it off. "I don't know."

"You'll want to watch how you dole out the treats. A treat is a reward. A treat is food, which means if they receive too much of it, they could get fat and lazy, then fail the

certification examination at the end of the course. Let me tell all you this, the test is intense for both the animal and handler. Neither Rita, Julie, Scott, nor myself will be testing you. We will be at the testing facility, but not performing the exam. Why? Because search and rescue is a serious business. The testing instructors are state level.” Marvin looked at everyone, and the only person that didn’t seem to show concern was Kent Palmer as he stood in the back of the room. When no one said anything, he looked back at Rita.

“I’ll turn it back over to you.”

“Okay, you’ve had four days off, let’s share one-by-one what you trained your dog to do over the time you were away from here. Were there any mishaps? Any triumphs? How did you handle them?”

Rita started at the beginning and randomly pointed to people and they discussed their time away from the formal training for five minutes each. Kent didn’t know if it was deliberate that he was called on last.

“Kent, what did you and Blu... sorry, what did you and Tate do this weekend?” She sucked in her breath at the grin that came over his face.

“I tested his height restrictions.”

“Excuse me?”

Kent pushed himself off the wall and stood tall. He saw everyone looking at him with varying degrees of shock and confusion. He walked several feet away from the wall and looked at everyone before he spoke.

“I know people here think I’ve trained dogs before, however, that is not the case. I have *worked* with K-9s and their handlers in my previous job, but I have never *trained* them. The dogs were already trained by the time I worked with them, and their handler was right there beside us if we needed to use them on a mission.”

“Are you former military?” someone in the crowd asked.

“Yes. Twenty years in the Air Force. My primary job was pararescue, and under that umbrella, I specialized in search

and rescue, and I was a combat medic. When we knew we would need a dog on a mission, we were joined by the dog and his handler. Based on what I learned from them, that is how I am training Tate on my days off.” Kent looked around and saw interest in the others’ faces. In Rita’s he saw interest and in Marvin’s he saw respect.

“These past few days we had off from here, I took Tate out to The Centre on the outskirts of town.”

“Is that where the Yoga classes are?” Julie asked.

“Yes. The men that run it are buddies of mine. I knew them from our service days. I also know the Falco brothers over at the fire station. To be honest, I know Seth more than the others, but that’s neither here nor there. Anyway, the men I served with retired the same time I did, about a year ago. The Brotherhood Protection hired us to work for them when they have a special case. I won’t get into it all, because frankly, it’s none of your all’s business. Let me just say that my buddies and I are like the Secret Service for the Brotherhood. That’s all I’m going to say on that subject.” He nodded once and waited a few moments before he continued.

“Anyway, my buddies were out at the Centre, and they have a climbing wall. I have the special harness one of the handlers from my time in the military told me to purchase.” Kent looked down at Tate and looked back at everyone with a grin. “Once he becomes full grown, I’ll definitely have to purchase a bigger harness.” He waited until everyone laughed, before he continued, “I strapped Tate to me in his harness and we climbed the wall. With my buddies, while on the wall, I passed him over to them.”

“Why would you do that?” Rita asked in confused fascination.

“Because of my military experience, I’ve been on several harrowing missions. There were times when both dog and handler couldn’t get to certain places, by passing the dog to another teammate, that allowed the handler to get to where they needed to go to reach down for the dog. The person who has the dog, can then pass him to his handler.”



Before Kent could continue, Marvin asked a question, “Can you train other dogs to do what you did with Tate this weekend?”

“Possibly, but it would be better if their handler was there. I need to tell you that I didn’t just take Tate up the climbing wall. We did that all of one day. The next two days we went outside to the mountains. We climbed up, then rappelled down. I did it until Tate was comfortable with those duties.” Kent held up his hand. “I’m not saying this is for everyone to do, but this is what I’m training my dog to do.” He looked directly at Rita then. “If, and only if, we get a search and rescue call that requires someone to climb, I’ll be there with Tate. Once he’s mastered the climbing and rappelling, I’m going to teach him about riding in a helicopter.”

Rita snorted a laugh, “You have access to one?”

“Yes.”

## CHAPTER 9



RITA LOOKED at Kent in shock. “Oh.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say after that, and it took her a few minutes to clear her head. She quickly got into the training for that day, and noticed an improvement over several of the handlers. She caught Lisa giving Charlie a treat about every five minutes. Before they broke for the day, Rita took her aside.

“Lisa, I have a few questions for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Why are you giving Charlie treats when there’s no reward involved?”

The other woman shrugged. “I don’t want to come across as a hard-ass, but if Charlie doesn’t pass his final certification, then he won’t become a search and rescue dog.”

“What if I don’t want him to become one? What if I want him for protection?”

“Then that’s a whole different set of training mecca.” Rita scowled at the other woman. “Is that what you want?” Rita watched the uncertainty come across Lisa’s face and subtly waved her father over to them.

“Dad,” Rita said as soon as he approached. “We may have a dilemma here. You have more experience with this. Could you please help?”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“Lisa doesn’t want Charlie to be trained for search and rescue. However,” she said as she looked at her father in

confused concern. “She would like to continue training Charlie, but as a protector, not search and rescue.”

“I see.” Marvin nodded and rubbed his chin. Rita knew from his expression that he was thinking it over. When he looked back at them, he sighed and shook his head. “I’m not saying no to your idea, however, Charlie is here to be trained as search and rescue. Because he is property of CSAR, he will have to be trained that way. The only thing we can do is wait to see if he passes his certification when the time comes. If he does, then that’s what he will do, if he doesn’t, then he can be trained for a personal protection dog. But,” Marvin firmed his voice and looked Lisa directly in the eye. “No more feeding him treats when he doesn’t deserve them. Whether he’s search and rescue, or personal protection, you can’t feed him like I’ve witnessed you do all day. One, it’ll make him fat, and he would be worthless after that, not to mention the health problems he could develop. Two, if you continue with the treats the way you are, then he won’t do what he’s supposed to. The treat is a reward. If he doesn’t do what’s being asked of him, why should he get a reward.”

“But I feel sorry for him after what Tim did to him.”

“He was over it ten minutes after it happened,” Rita said. “Charlie,” she confirmed when Lisa looked confused. “Dogs are resilient, and they bounce back. I don’t mean to be harsh here, but if you continue to give him treats like you are, he’s never going to learn.” Rita looked at her father, and a silent agreement passed between them. Rita braced herself, before she continued, “If you continue to disregard my directives on giving Charlie treats, then I’m going to have to take him away from you to have someone else train him.”

“*NO!*” Lisa yelled and looked around wildly. “I’ll do better, I promise.”

“Please, see that you do.” Rita nodded and watched as Lisa gathered her things to leave. She noticed Kent was gone, and ran after Lisa, but ignored her as she looked around wildly.

“*KENT!*” she cried out, and sighed in relief when the man turned and looked around. Rita started jogging toward him.

She stopped a couple of feet before him. It took her a few seconds to catch her breath. When she did, she looked at him with a grin. “Sorry, I wanted to talk to you before you left.”

“About?” Kent held his breath to see if she would yell at him for sending her the photos of himself, along with the box of batteries. What she did say took him for a loop.

“How old do you think a dog can be in order to learn how to rock climb or rappel?”

“May I ask why you’re asking?”

“I was wondering if I could train Zeke like you’re training Tate.”

“Please, don’t think what I’m about to say is sexist. It isn’t, it’s for safety purposes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“How much do you weigh?” Kent asked bluntly, and saw her expression turn from confusion to anger. He held up his hands, and stressed, “I’m only asking because I’m guessing Zeke is pushing seventy-five to eighty pounds. Will *you* be strong enough to carry him, along with all the gear needed? I’m six-four, almost six-five, I’m guessing you’re around five-five, maybe five-six. I don’t want you to get hurt while trying to train Zeke.”

“I never thought of that,” Rita said, deflated now that he pointed it out to her. “Never mind, I thought I could train Zeke for it.” She rubbed her forehead and looked off into the distance where you could see several mountains. “It’s just that sometimes we have lost hikers up in the mountains. It would be great if I could get Zeke trained to rappel and not have to waste precious time going around to get to the person faster.”

Kent made a quick decision. “Why don’t we cross train?”

“How? What would we do?”

“You come out to The Centre with me the next time we go. I’ll train Zeke, you can train Tate. But not before I see if you can handle Zeke by yourself.”

“You’d be willing to do that?”

Kent grinned. “Until I’m needed at the Brotherhood, or a call comes in for search and rescue, I have nothing but time on my hands.”

“Oh.” Rita didn’t know what else to say. She was silent for at least two minutes before she gave a decisive nod. “Yes, I would love to learn how to rock climb and rappel, not only for myself, but also with Zeke.”

“It would be a pleasure to teach you.”

“Thanks, I can’t do it this week, I have things to do, but I’m free on Saturday.”

“Great, meet me at The Centre at ten?”

“I can do that.” Rita stuck her hand out and they shook. They both jerked their hands back at the contact and grinned at each other. “I’m looking forward to it.” She quickly turned on her heel to head back across the lot to the building, leaving Kent to stare after her dumbfounded. He looked down at Tate and shook his head.

“Should be interesting.” He helped the pup into his truck and headed home. Because he had been at the Centre all weekend, he needed to clean his house. Not that he was expecting anyone to come over, but it would be nice to have a clean space. He had left a pair of socks on the floor and Tate had gotten ahold of one of them. Shaking his head at the memory, he climbed in his truck and headed for home.



DAYS LATER, Kent turned off the water in his shower, opened the door, grabbed a towel and asked sternly, “What do you think you’re doing?” He had caught Tator trying to open the clothes hamper with his nose. The dog quickly sat on his rump and turned his puppy-dog eyes toward Kent.

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” Kent laughed. “It’s not going to work.” He toweled off and walked into his bedroom. The pup sat in the doorway the entire time Kent dressed, and never moved until Kent went to the bedroom door. He had thought he’d latched it before jumping into the shower, but somehow, Tator had opened it. Shaking his head,

he went into the hall, and smiled as he heard the dog's nails on the tile floor. In the kitchen he poured his first cup of coffee for the day. As he reached for the door of his refrigerator, his phone went off.

"Hello?" He didn't bother looking to see who had called him, he'd just answered it.

"Kent? It's Rita."

"Oh, hey, what's up?"

"Class is canceled for today."

"What's wrong?" he immediately asked when he heard the tension in her voice. His first thought was that Vickers had gotten to her. He held his breath as he waited for her response.

Rita was silent for several heartbeats, then he heard a sign over the phone. "I hate to ask, because both you and Tate aren't completely trained yet."

"When and where?" Kent demanded, not caring that he wasn't officially trained by CSAR's regulations.

"Now, at the campground halfway between here and Colorado Springs. There's a missing child. Three years old, last seen last night when they put him to bed in his tent. When the parents got up this morning, they couldn't find him." Rita gave her statement in a monotone.

"We'll be there," Kent agreed, and Rita hung up on him, but not before saying she'd text him the location. Kent quickly dressed his feet, made sure he had everything he'd need for Tate, and hurried out the door, talking to his dog the entire time. With the address programmed in his GPS, he got underway. As soon as he hit the highway, he used the feature on his steering wheel to make a call.

"This better be good," Asher growled into the phone.

"Did he wake you too?" Ryder grouched.

"Fuck, is this a conference call?" Mason asked.

"Yes, Rita called. I don't know whether you guys will be needed or not, but I want to put you on alert."

“For?” Cruz demanded.

“Lost boy, three-years-old, parents saw him when they put him in his tent last night, gone this morning. They’re at a campground halfway from here to The Springs. I texted you the location already. Tate and I are on our way.”

“Will you need us?” Mason asked, all business now.

“Don’t know, I’ll let you know. I just wanted you on alert in case I do have to call you in.”

“Thanks, keep us posted.” They hung up and Kent felt better that his buddies might be able to come in and help if it was warranted. This was the first civilian search and rescue mission he had ever been on, and the first one with his own dog.

He looked over his shoulder at Tate. “No time like the present to teach you tracking skills,” he told the dog and kept driving. Forty minutes later he pulled into the campground and was stopped by the police there.

“I’m sorry, but no one is allow in,” the officer spoke as he stopped Kent.

“I’m Kent Palmer with Chambers Search and Rescue. Rita Chambers called me in.”

“Okay, you’re on my list. Go in about half a mile, take the first right fork, you’re looking for site number one twenty-nine.”

“Thanks, Officer,” Kent said, and slowly started forward. He stopped suddenly and leaned out his window. “If this gets hairy, I’m calling in some help.” He gave the names of his friends to the police officer, watched as he wrote down what he said, and continued forward. Ten minutes later he was parked on the side of the road, had Tator out of the truck, and suited up. He looked down at the pup, and said firmly, “Show time.” Then he started forward.

“Kent,” Rita said as soon as she looked up and saw him. She waited until he came to her. “You’re the only one from the class I called in. No offense to them, but I don’t think they’re ready for this just yet. I only called you in because of the way

you've been training Tate. I think you'll be a big help. I also took your military experience into consideration when I called you."

"Thanks, what do we know so far?"

"This is Michael's picture," Rita said as she handed him her phone. "This was taken yesterday."

"Good, so it's current."

"Yes, the parents put Mikey, that's what they call him, in his section of the tent last night. They stayed up for a few more hours before retiring to their own side. It is a three-room tent with the middle being like a breezeway where they kicked off their shoes and jackets. Mom checked on him, he was sound asleep. They arose at seven this morning and he wasn't in his tent."

Kent looked at his watch and saw it was going on ten. Three hours missing. "What was he last wearing?"

"We hadn't gotten to that yet," Rita said, and indicated for him to follow her.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kelp, this is my associate Kent Palmer, and his dog, Tate. What was Mikey wearing the last time you saw him?"

"His green Incredible Hulk pajamas. It's a tee shirt and shorts."

Kent looked at Rita and could see she thought the same thing he had. Green clothes in green foliage, it would be hard to spot him right away, especially with his blond hair. They got all the information, then Kent pulled a large baggie from his pack.

"Do you mind if I take a piece of his clothing?" At their confused look, he gently explained. "To give the dogs Mikey's scent."

"Oh, sure, let me get you something." Mrs. Kelp started toward the one side of the tent, but Kent stopped her.

"No, let me get it, we don't want different scents to confuse the dogs."



“Oh,” she said, then pointed to the three-man tent on the other side of the site. “Mikey slept on the left side.”

“Thank you,” Kent said gently, then started forward. Inside the tent he found a dirty tee shirt and smiled when he used the bag to pick it up with. He retrieved another bag and picked up a pair of equally dirty shorts. Back outside he showed the parents what he had.

“Why would you want something dirty?” Mr. Kelp asked.

“Because if Mikey played hard while wearing these, then I’m sure he worked up a sweat. That would give off a stronger scent than clean clothes fresh from the laundry.”

“Oh.” The Kelp’s looked on helplessly, but Kent rushed to reassure them.

“We will do everything in our power to find your son and get him back to you.”

“Thank you.” The Kelps stood there in each other’s arms. Kent stepped back to go over to Rita.

“Thank you,” Rita said as she took the bag with the tee shirt in it.

“For?”

“For not promising them you’d bring him back alive. You said you’d do everything in your power. That’s better than an empty promise of bringing him back alive.”

“I agree, that’s why I said it. Before we do this, do you want me to call in my buddies. The ones that went on search and rescue missions with me while we were in the Air Force. I called and gave them the heads up already. They said they could be here as soon as I give the call.”

Rita looked uncertain, so Kent reached out and took her hand in his. “Only if you want them here. I don’t want to step on your toes.”

“It’s not that, I just don’t know how long this will take. Not that there’s a time limit on this, I’m not saying that.”

“I know you aren’t. Why don’t we play it by ear? If we find him right away, then fine. If we don’t, we call them in. Besides, how far can a three-year-old get?” Kent would be kicking himself in the ass later for asking that very question.

“Are we doing this together?”

“What do you mean by that? We have the dogs smell the clothes, then tell them to track, we follow the dogs. I’m sure Mikey didn’t go in different directions. It might seem like he went in circles at first, but once they pick up the trail, we go together.”

“Okay, will there be anyone else out here with us?”

“No, Julie doesn’t have a dog, Dad’s at a convention out of state and he took Tank with him. Scott’s dog is in the middle of having pups.” She grinned at Kent’s shocked look. “Yeah, he didn’t have her fixed when the time came. He said he could control her and she wouldn’t get knocked up.”

Kent grinned, then turned serious. “Okay, let’s do this.” He opened the plastic bag for Tate to smell. Together, he and Rita shoved the bag beneath their dogs’ noses and Kent told Tate firmly, “Tate, find.” The same time Rita said, “Zeke, find.” They pulled the bags away from them, and Kent held his breath when Tate looked around in confusion. Two heartbeats later he let out a sigh of relief when Tate stuck his nose to the ground and began sniffing. With enough lead of the leash, he let Tate go. It took a few minutes, but both dogs picked up the trail of little Mikey at the same time.

## CHAPTER 10



FOUR HOURS after leaving the Kelp campsite, Kent called a halt for a small break. After giving Tate a drink of water, and taking one for himself, he looked over at Rita in concern. He handed her one of the extra bottles he had packed. After sharing it with Zeke, she looked at him in frustration.

“How far can a little boy go?”

“No clue,” Kent said as he wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm and the crook of his elbow. Before he even brought his arm down from his face, Tate jerked on his leash and took off. If Kent hadn’t been sly he would have dropped the leash. Without saying a word, he took off at a dead run after his dog. He looked back once to see Rita and Zeke hot on his heels. Kent lost track of how long they ran when Tate suddenly stopped and waited for the others to catch up.

“What do you have, Tate?” Kent asked the dog, and watched as the pup hunkered down on his belly and slowly crawled to the edge of a cliff. Kent and Rita exchanged worried looks when Zeke did the same thing.

Kent took his pack off, and grabbed several items. One of them was a pair of binoculars. He eased down beside the two dogs and looked over the edge. After giving a long whistle as to how far down it was, he used the glasses to see what he could find. He only hoped it wasn’t some animal that Tate had chased.

“Fuck,” he said as soon as he looked over the side of the cliff. He didn’t need the binoculars to find Mikey. He looked

back at Rita and asked. “Can you rappel?”

“No. That’s why I wanted to work with you on Saturday.”

“Okay,” Kent said as he rolled over to the side and pulled out his phone. After doing something with a few buttons, he pulled a different phone from his pack and looked at Rita’s confused look. “Satellite phone.” He dialed and his expression showed relief only seconds later.

“Mason, it’s Kent. We found the boy, we’re going to need an airlift.” He read numbers off his cell phone, and listened on the other end. After he confirmed, he hung up.

“We can have a chopper here in thirty minutes.” He handed her the satellite phone. “There’s no signal for our cells, use this to call who you have to. Tell them I have a chopper on the way. Ask where they want us to take the boy. I’m going to rappel down with Tate.” Kent looked directly at Rita as he said the next part, “If he’s alive, then Tate can be with him while I get him ready to be lifted out of here.”

“Okay,” Rita said as she took the phone and called it in. By the time Kent was ready to go over the cliff, she had hung up with the person she’d called.

“I called Sheriff Jim. He said to call back when you get down to Mikey and assess the situation. He wants to know his status before he tells you where to go.”

“Roger,” Kent said, and because it felt right, he leaned in, wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and brought her in for a kiss. He kept it short. After he broke it off, he went to the edge and started down.

“Wait!” Rita called after him. At his raised brow, she asked, “How am I to know what you find? How will you get the information to me so I can call it in?”

Kent paused long enough to reach into the front pocket of his pack and pull out a walkie talkie. He handed it to her. “I have another one in my pack.”

“Okay.” She took it and after Kent disappeared, she lay down next to Zeke. The look on the dog’s face when he watched Kent and Tate go over, then at her, was priceless.

“We’ll get to do that soon, Zeke,” Rita whispered as she held her breath the entire time Kent descended. It seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes. As she watched, she liked the fact that he secured Tate to the side of the mountain first before assessing the little boy.

“He’s alive!” Kent’s voice came across the walkie talkie.

“Thank god,” Rita said to Zeke, and decided to wait to answer until she had all the information. She grabbed a small pad of paper and pencil from her pack and started writing down what Kent said. By the time she was done, she shook her head. “I’m going to call Sheriff Jim back.”

“Okay, let me know where to take him. In the meantime, I’ll stabilize him for transport.”

“Will do.” Rita dialed the phone, and it was picked up on the second ring. “Sheriff Jim, it’s Rita.”

“What did you find?”

“He’s alive,” were the first words out of her mouth, and Rita heard a sigh of relief from the sheriff.

“Injuries?”

“Head laceration, left broken arm, right broken leg. Lots and lots of scrapes and bruises.” She looked up when she heard something in the distance. “A chopper is approaching, where do you want Kent to take Mikey?”

“Colorado Springs Memorial. I’ll radio it in and bring the parents with me.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“No, thank you.” They hung up and Rita stuffed the phone in her pack. She grabbed the walkie. “Kent.”

“Here.”

“Sheriff Jim says to take him to Colorado Springs Memorial. He’s going to alert the hospital that you’re on the way. He’s also going to notify the parents and bring them there.”

“Roger, what about you?”

“I’ll head back as soon as Mikey is loaded. Are you riding with him?”

“I am. He woke up and is scared. Tate’s trying to calm him.”

Rita looked over the edge and saw Kent had the boy pinned down with his body. He worked with one hand and soon Tate was there beside the little boy. That seemed to calm him. Five minutes later a chopper hovered over the area and three things were lowered at the same time. A litter, and two men came down. In what seemed like seconds, the boy was put inside the litter, while the men went back into the helicopter. She frowned when only two men went back up and the chopper took off. She looked again and saw someone climbing up the side of the cliff.

Rita stood and waited for Kent to come back up to her.

“You’re not Kent,” she blurted out as soon as the man crested the cliff. He quickly took care of his rappelling equipment and turned to her with a grin.

“Nope, I’m Ryder Callahan. Not that we don’t trust you, but Kent asked one of us to walk back to the campground with you.”

“It’s going to be a long walk,” Rita sighed as she gathered Zeke’s leash, and they started back. “It took us almost four hours to get here. I’d like to know how the hell that little boy got all this way by himself.”

Ryder didn’t have an answer, so he remained silent. Four hours later they walked into the campground and found a police officer and security guard at the entrance. The guard stopped them to inform them that the sheriff, and Kelps had left for the hospital.

“Thank you,” Rita told him, and headed toward her SUV. She turned to Ryder. “Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, Kent gave me his keys,” he said as he pulled them from his pocket. “I parked my truck at his place, I’ll just take his home, and get mine. Are you going to the hospital?”

“Yes, I’ll bring Kent home.”

“Thanks, Rita.” Ryder stuck his hand out to shake, then quickly went to Kent’s truck and drove away. Rita settled Zeke in his seat and got behind the wheel. She turned the radio on low, and when she pulled out onto the highway, she headed toward Colorado Springs instead of home. She used one hand to drive, and another to fish out a protein bar from her pack to munch on as she drove.

Rita sighed in relief when she finally arrived at the hospital. Without saying a word, she parked, and got Zeke from his space in the back seat of the SUV. Once she strapped his vest and leash on him, they headed toward the entrance to the emergency department. Because Zeke wore his vest, he was allowed in the hospital as a service dog. Fifteen yards into the department, Rita stopped to look around, the first person she saw was Kent sitting in a chair against the wall, with Tate lying with his head on his paws beneath his chair. Kent looked haggard as he sat there with his head leaning against the wall, and his eyes closed. When he opened them, he looked directly at Rita, and she felt as if he was looking directly at her soul.

He didn’t even raise his head from the wall when he asked in a gravelly voice that sent shivers to her core and woke her girly parts, “Please, tell me you have a burger and fries in your pocket.”

“Sorry, but we can stop on the way home.”

Kent sat up and scrubbed his face. “When you called me this morning, it was before I even had breakfast. I think I ate my last protein bar when we took that last break before finding Mikey.”

“Sorry, I ate my last one on the way here.” Rita sat beside him, and smiled when Zeke went beneath her chair to be with Tate. “Ryder took your truck to your place, then he went home. We combed the area after he came back up on top.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Yes, it seems like the side of the cliff gave way. With that storm we had last month it’s going to be different in some places.”

“How so?”

“We’re going to have to watch out for places that were solid before that might now be weak or washed out. Well, we’re not going to, as in you and me, but the park rangers and others. That storm hit us hard and there will be washouts all over the area. That’s what Ryder thinks happened. At one point he had a hell of a time getting up from that ledge.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, luckily you’d tied yourself off to a tree further away from the edge. It could have been bad if the side had given away when either you or Ryder were using the ropes.” Rita sat there for some time, and finally looked over at a tired Kent. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I was waiting for a ride, but if it’s okay with you, I’d like to go up to the fifth floor and check in with Mikey’s parents. Because Jim radioed it in, hospital personnel were waiting for us. After about a five-minute assessment, they rushed him to surgery.” He looked at his watch and sighed. “That was almost six hours ago.”

Together they stood, and with the dogs on their leashes, they headed to the elevator. As the doors closed she looked at him, to get his attention, she reached out and took his hand in hers. He seemed to grasp it like a lifeline. “Did he wake up? Do you know what happened?”

“Yes, he did wake up, but he didn’t say what happened. He was scared. I talked to him and let Tate comfort him, but by the time we arrived he was out again. Maybe his parents will know something.” He looked at her sadly as he shook his head. “I know it’s not our place as a search and rescue person to know the why, but sometimes, it helps me sleep better at night knowing it.”

They exited the elevator and started toward the nurses’ station. They were stopped when a woman let out a little scream, and rushed them. Kent caught her before she bowled them over. Through her tears she thanked him for saving her son.



“Do you know what happened?” Kent asked, after he reminded her of who Rita was. It turned out that they were from out of state, and this was the first camping trip they had ever taken. Little Mikey had been fascinated that he could pee outside, and in the middle of the night he had to go. He went outside to do his business, then saw what he called baby lights flying in the air. He tried to catch them and ended up chasing after them, until he fell off the side of the cliff.

“For the life of me,” Mrs. Kelp said. “I have no clue what he means by baby flying lights.”

“Could it be lightning bugs?” Rita asked.

As soon as she said it, the man that had joined them slapped a hand on his forehead. “Probably, we would try to catch them in our backyard at home.”

“How is Mikey?”

“He’s roughed up, broken leg, broken arm, and a deep cut on his head. The other cuts and scrapes are superficial. The doctors want to keep him here for at least three days before he’s released. We’re going to stay here tonight, then tomorrow I’m going back to the campsite to pack everything up. When he’s released from the hospital, we’re going home.”

“May I ask where that is?” Kent asked. He had heard a southern accent as they spoke.

“We’re from Little Rock, Arkansas. This is our first time in Colorado. Might be the last for some time.” He looked at Rita with a sad smile. “No offense to your state.”

“None taken. I’m just glad we were able to find him.”

“Do you have an organization we can donate money to?”

Before Rita could say anything, Kent gave them the name of Rita’s operation. They said their goodbyes, and as the Kelps went back to Mikey’s room, Rita and Kent made for the elevator. Once outside, Kent took Tate to a grassy spot to do his business, then they settled into Rita’s truck. When she asked if he wanted to drive, he said he was okay with her driving.

Before she started the truck, she looked at him with a grin. “Okay, a couple of choices here. One, do you want fast food, or a sit-down restaurant? Two, do you want to eat here in Colorado Springs, or home in Fool’s Gold, or halfway between?”

“I’m not really dressed for a sit-down restaurant.” He pointed to the mud caked on his pants, and that’s when she saw the dried blood on his shirt. “But I don’t like fast-food restaurants. I avoid them unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Do you trust me?”

Kent looked at her hard, then nodded. “Yes, what are you thinking?”

“Why don’t I call in an order from a place I know on the outskirts of town. We can stop and pick it up. Three blocks away is a park we can pull over and eat. The dogs can run a little, and we can eat.”

“Perfect, I’d like a double cheeseburger with the works. Lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and hot peppers. Make that two.”

“Fries, onion rings?”

“Both. With the largest plain iced tea they carry. Better make that two of them also.” He leaned up on his hip, withdrew some money and placed it in the cup holder between them. Rita only nodded and made her call. Thirty minutes later with his arms loaded down with food, and Rita handling the dogs, they sat at a picnic table, divided the food, and dug in. Neither said a word as they ate.

## CHAPTER 11



KENT WIPEd his mouth with his napkin, bunched it up, then tossed it on his empty food containers. He sipped his tea and sighed heavily after he finished. “I’m sorry.”

“For?” Rita frowned at him. “What did you do?”

“I’m not normally that rude and not talk to my date while we eat. My only excuse is that I was starving.”

Rita laughed. “First, we are not on a date. Second, I was just as hungry as you. I didn’t talk either.” She wiped her own mouth and did the same with her napkin. She settled back and looked at him. “Do you feel better?”

“I do.” Kent looked at his watch and winced. “By my calculations, it’s been eighteen hours since I last ate.” He grinned at her. “I’m not counting those protein bars on the trail as eating. They were just a snack.”

“Speaking of,” Rita said as they both gathered their trash, carried it over to the barrels, and gathered their dogs to head back to her truck.

“Speaking of what?” Kent asked as they both put their dogs in the truck. Kent had to lift Tate to get him inside. Rita didn’t say anything as they settled in their seats.

“I’m going to have to replenish my protein bars. I packed the last ones in my bag before leaving the house, and I ate the last one in my bag on my way to the hospital.”

“Ah, do you want to stop on the way home?”

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all, but what do we do with the dogs?”

“Because people know me around here, if Zeke has his vest on, they won’t say anything. They know I train rescue dogs. Most people look at them and see a service dog. I’m not telling you what to do, but I think you should do that with Tate. Get him used to being around other people, especially with his vest on.”

“I can do that.” Kent nodded and settled back in his seat as they headed for home. Neither of them said a word as they settled in for the drive. Once they arrived at the grocery store on the outskirts of town, Kent and Rita exchanged grins when Tate gave a put-out sigh when Kent put his vest on him.

“I know, buddy,” Kent said as he dressed him. “This is our last stop before we get home. Then you can eat and crash for the night.” The look on the puppy’s face was priceless. Both of them were laughing as they walked toward the store, and that was how Tim Vickers found them as he was leaving the store.

“What the fuck are you two doing here?” came an angry voice, and Kent looked up and scowled at the man speaking to them. He was unrecognizable with the bruises on his face. Both Kent and Rita ignored him as they skirted around him and headed toward the entrance to the store. Vickers stepped in front of Rita and threatened her.

“You’ll pay for what you did to me, bitch.”

“I didn’t do anything to you. I don’t know who you hired to do that to you, but it wasn’t me.”

“No, but you told him to do it,” Vickers said angrily as he pointed to Kent.

“I’d suggest you take a step back,” Kent said so coldly that Rita shivered, and Vickers actually took two steps away from them. “I didn’t do what you’re accusing us of. You know this. I don’t know what your end game is, but if you continue to toss around false accusations about the two of us, things won’t look good for you.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Nope, I’m stating facts,” Kent said, and took Rita’s elbow to walk away. At the same time, Vickers took her other one to stop them. Before Kent could say anything, a voice came from behind them.

“Is there a problem here?” Everyone turned and saw Sheriff Faulkner standing there. By this time, they had drawn a crowd of people around them.

“Sheriff, I want to press charges against these two.” Vickers pointed to Rita and Kent. He looked around and began posing for the crowd. “Not only did they do this to me...” He pointed to his face. “But he just threatened me.”

“No he didn’t,” someone from the crowd called out.

“What do I have to do to press charges for him beating me like this and putting me in the hospital?” Kent saw how angry Vickers was becoming and nudged Rita behind him. He handed her Tate’s leash and was ready to step in if needed.

As casual as he could, Jim Faulkner drawled out, “If you can’t pay your hospital bill, why don’t you go see Elroy and Judd Picket? You know, get the two thousand dollars back from them? The money you paid them to mess up your face.”

Kent and Rita exchanged shocked expressions and saw Vickers pale to the point that he bent over to try to suck in some air. Jim walked up to him, laid a hand on his shoulder, and once the other man was under control, he helped him stand, then slapped a pair of cuffs on him.

“Timothy Vickers, you’re under arrest for false accusations of assault.” He ended up duck walking Vickers to his car and had to fight with the man to put him in the back of his SUV. Once Tim was safely inside, he came back over to Rita and Kent. He made sure to be looking at his vehicle the entire time he talked to them.

“Sorry about that. I want you to know that I don’t believe either of you had anything to do with what Tim’s accusing you of. It was Judd’s wife, Maryann, that called me to tell me what she suspected. Her one phone call opened a whole can of worms that might turn into a shit show very soon. If Vickers

lawyers up, he'll be out before tomorrow. Keep an eye out for him. If what Maryann told me pans out, he's dangerous and might come after the two of you for thwarting his efforts."

"Can we asked what his plans are?" Rita asked, and unconsciously stepped closer to Kent. As she placed Tate's leash in his hand, she held onto it for reassurance.

Jim looked around and saw the crowd had disbursed, but still leaned in to speak low to them.

"Maryann said Vickers joined your search and rescue to get a dog to train to be a bait dog for a fighting ring the three of them were going to start."

"Shit," Rita said, and turned her glare onto the SUV. She couldn't see the man inside, but knew he was there. "Did he really pay Elroy and Judd to beat him up?"

"Yes, a thousand dollars each. They showed it to me, and I have pictures of their hands. Knuckles are bruised, cracked skin, and dried blood on them."

"Are they talking?"

"They weren't at first, but then Maryann learned why I was there. She spilled the beans. When Elroy tried to warn her, she only gave him a look and he backed down." Jim chuckled again. "I heard her mention something about her grandma's cast-iron pan."

Rita laughed. "That's what she hit him with once when he did something she didn't like. I saw her the next day and she told me that it had something to do with some scheme Vickers had cooked up."

"I'll look into it. Just a quick question. How do you know Maryann Picket?"

"I went to school with them. Maryann and Elroy married right after graduation. I lost track over the years, but I do know that Vickers didn't grow up here. He's only been in town for a few years. I wouldn't say more than five. When I kicked him out of the facility, that's the first interaction I've ever had with him."

“Ah, so the shit he’s saying that you and he were dating, and Kent took you away from him are lies?”

“What?” Rita asked in shock. “Eew, as if I’d date a man like that. I only allowed him in the school because Julie and Scott were there as buffers. The guy creeps me out.”

“Good to know. Have a good night,” Jim said as he shook their hands, and turned on his heel to head back to his SUV. Rita and Kent stood there until he pulled out of the parking lot, then turned silently and headed into the store. It turned out that they both stocked up on protein bars, and Kent bought extra dog food and treats for Tate. He was also able to pick up a portable water dish for him. It would fit nicely in the pack. Both were lost in their own thoughts as they shopped, checked out, put their stuff in the truck, and the rest of the drive to Kent’s place.

“I’d ask if you want to come in, but if you’re as tired and pissed as I am, I’ll save it for another time.”

“Thank you. You’re right, I am tired, and pissed. It makes me wonder if he’s put anyone as a ringer into the school to try to get someone else to train their dog as a fighter or a bait dog.”

“Didn’t you have Jake do background checks on them?”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone come back suspicious?”

Kent sucked in his breath when Rita turned her tired expression toward him and grinned. The grin lit up her entire face. “Only you.”

“Only me, what?” He had forgotten what he’d asked after seeing how beautiful she was.

“Only you came back as suspicious.”

“How?”

“Your file came back so redacted, that Jake explained that you were former military. I thought you had lied to me about never training dogs before. That’s why I had Jake do a deep background on everyone. Well, that’s not why. I had him do it

the day we kicked Vickers out of the facility. I wanted to know what I missed when I accepted his application, and he kicked Charlie that first day.”

“I totally understand. Did anything suspicious come back?”

“No,” Rita said, and sighed heavily. She turned worried eyes on him. “Should I have him do another deep dive?”

“Why don’t we mention it to him, but how about we do something else.”

“What’s that?”

“First, let’s allow Faulkner to handle him for now. In the meantime, we can always see if there are any fingerprints on his application and get it to Jake to run. Maybe, and this is just a very tired man speaking, but maybe Vickers isn’t who he says he is.”

“Ah, and if he’s booked, and his prints are run, then Jim will be able to find out who he is.”

“Correct. I don’t think there’s anything else we can do at this point. Not until Jim does what he has to do. The only thing we can do is to keep our eyes and ears open, and be very careful if we ever see him again.”

“I agree.” Rita nodded, then shook her head. “Yeah, there’s nothing else we can do. Thank you for today, both you and Tate did a great job.”

“You’re welcome. If you need us again, all you have to do is call.”

“I will, believe you me, I will. Remind me to give you a radio when you come to the clinic the day after tomorrow.”

“Radio?”

“Technically, you’re not supposed to receive it until you pass the course. In my book, after today, you and Tate both passed with flying colors. In a nutshell, the radio is what we use when we get a call. Everyone in search and rescue has one. Unfortunately, we’re only down to Scott and myself. His dog



was in the middle of giving birth. That's why I had this class. We need more people."

"As much as I want to talk more about this, I need to get inside and shower. But I do have one question before I leave you for now."

"What's that?"

"Can you use people that aren't trained for search and rescue?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like today. I called the guys in, and Logan was able to bring them in a helicopter. They helped me get Mikey off that ledge and get him to where he needed to be. Then Ryder came up to come back with you."

"Okay, I can see what you're saying. With the help of your friends, I didn't have to call for a medivac, you were there and it helped save Mikey's life."

"Yeah, when I was waiting at the hospital, I had heard that the medivac they usually used was on scene at a different location, and it would have taken them hours to get to Mikey."

"Let me talk this all over with Dad and see what he says. From my experience, I don't think it would be a problem. I'd like to talk with your friends first before we commit to anything."

"That's doable and perfectly understandable. We're both exhausted now, but why don't you think about it for a few days? Do what you have to do, you know, talk to your father, then maybe we can get together and talk it over. All of us." Kent grinned tiredly at her. "Maybe we can have a cookout or something, to make it more relaxing to talk."

"I'll get back to you," Rita said. She looked at him when he remained sitting there. "Bye. I'm not being rude, but I need to get home."

"Right." Kent shook his head, and at the last minute, he leaned in, gripped the back of her neck, and brought her in for a kiss. He had intended for it to be short and sweet, but it

didn't take long to get hot and heavy. When he broke it off, they were both breathing deeply.

“Until next time,” he said as he kissed the center of her forehead, then hurried out of his door. He quickly got Tate out of the truck, along with his belongings, and shut the door. He stood there and waited until she left before he turned toward his apartment. He wore a grin that felt like it split his entire face wide open when he saw her fumble with the gear shift. With a light step, he directed Tate toward their door, but made sure he did his business before they went in for the night.

Ten minutes after they were inside, Tator was snoring loudly from his bed in the corner of the living room. With a smile, Kent finished taking care of his things, repacked his go bag, then made his way up to his room. He stepped into the hot shower and sighed in contentment as the hot water washed away the day.

## CHAPTER 12



RITA SIGHED HEAVILY when she pulled into her driveway and saw her father's truck parked there. She didn't know whether it was a curse or a blessing that she had given him a key when she'd bought the place. She parked, and looked in the rearview mirror at her dog.

"Looks like we have company, Zeke." She smiled when she thought she heard Zeke moan. They both had a long day under their belt. She didn't know about her dog, but all she wanted was a hot shower and a cold glass of wine. The good thing about her father being there was that she could talk to him about what Kent suggested in having his buddies help if needed.

She opened her door, hopped out, and let Zeke out. Once he hit the ground and went around the back of the house to do his business, she gathered the things she'd bought at the store, and made her way over to the side door. She knew Zeke would come in his door when he was done in the back yard.

"Hey," Rita said as she saw her father standing at the stove with a spoon in his hand. She paused long enough to take a deep breath, then grinned as she smelt the tangy scent of sauce. "What are you doing?"

"Cooking." Marvin looked at his daughter with a grin. It quickly left his face as he really looked at her. "What happened?"

Marvin stood by the stove, and watched as Rita unloaded her arms. After emptying the grocery bag, he nodded when she

opened several packages and dumped them in a backpack, which she promptly hung by the back door, along with Zeke's leash. He waited until she took care of everything, but he quickly poured her a glass of wine. As she settled at the island with a heavy sigh, he waited for her to answer him.

"There was a call."

"Shit, and I was away. How did it go?"

"Not good, at least not at first. Scott's dog, Princess, was in the middle of giving birth, you were gone, and it was just me."

"Shit, what did you do?"

"Don't be mad at me, but I called Kent Palmer in to help." Rita chanced a look at her father, and was surprised he didn't start yelling at her for working with a rookie. "Before you say anything, I've changed my mind about him."

"How so?" Marvin turned the flame down on the sauce simmering in a pan and leaned his hips against the counter. He picked up his own glass of bourbon and sipped it as he studied his daughter intently.

"He may never have trained a dog before, but he knows his shit. The call was for a lost camper. A little boy, he was only three-years-old, Dad."

"Did you find him alive?"

"Yes, thank God. He was five miles from the campsite." Rita held up her hand as her father started asking questions and told him everything that had happened that day. How they had searched for little Mikey, how Tate had alerted them to the edge of a cliff, and even how Kent used his own personal satellite phone to call for help.

"So, Kent asked me a question before I dropped him off." She said in conclusion of her retelling her experiences of the day. It was her way of opening up the subject.

"What was that?" Marvin had begun putting the pasta noodles in the boiling water as he listened to his daughter's tale. He knew she had to get it all out before he could ask any

questions. So far, all the questions he wanted to ask had been answered. As she talked, he'd continued cooking their supper.

“Kent would like to know if we can use his buddies in the future, like we did today. It wasn't until I got back to the campsite with one of his friends that we learned that Medivac was on the other side of the county with an accident over there. They took their patients to Denver. It would have been at least three, maybe more, hours before they could come to get Mikey off that ledge. I don't know if you know any of Kent's buddies, but he moved here with four other men. They were teammates while in the Air Force. The man who drove the chopper to come get Mikey runs several classes out at The Centre on the outside of town.”

“Logan Bishop?”

“Yes.”

“I know Spencer, Logan, and the others that run the Centre. Do you know the names of any of his buddies?”

“I met Ryder, he climbed back up the side of the mountain after the chopper took off for the hospital. Kent went with Tate, Ryder came up and walked back to the campsite with me.” Rita shook her head. “It wasn't my idea, but I'm glad he did. It gave me an opportunity to talk to him. It turns out that he is specially trained in SERE.”

“What is that exactly?”

Rita laughed as she sipped her wine. “I asked him the same question. It is survival, evasion, resistance, and escape. I've taken a few of Spencer Barnes's self-defense classes.” She paused at her father's look of shock. He turned around to face her fully, but Rita held up her hand to ward off any questions. “Dad, I'm a thirty-six-year-old, single female living alone. Out on the trail, on a call, I have Zeke, but he's not always with me. I only took them as a precaution.”

“Okay, nothing happened that you needed to take them?”

“No, Julie was taking yoga classes over there, but they didn't appeal to me. I took the self-defense classes.”

“Okay, make sure you tell me if anything happens.”

“I will, Dad.” She smiled behind his back and shook her head at him. “How much longer before dinner?”

“Twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five. Why?”

“Because I want a shower. I’ll be right back.” She hopped off her chair and hurried out of the room. As she headed up the stairs, she smiled when she saw Zeke come in his doggie door with Tank close behind. She shook her head as she saw her father give them both a treat. With limited time available, she let it go and hurried down the hall to her bedroom. Eighteen minutes later she walked back into the kitchen feeling a lot better after washing the grime and sweat of the day off. She probably could have waited until after dinner, but she didn’t want to offend her father with her appearance. As soon as she entered the kitchen she started setting the small table in the corner and in no time, they both sat down to the meal her father had cooked. Neither said a word until they were halfway through. Rita hadn’t taken as much as she normally would have, and told her father that she and Kent had stopped off to have burgers in the park before they headed for home.

As they finished eating, Rita leaned back with her wine and studied her father intently.

“What?” Marvin scowled at him.

“You’re probably going to be mad at what I’m about to say, and you can come into the training facility to check it out for yourself. I told Kent I would talk it over with you, but after today, I feel as if both Kent and Tate passed to become a member of the search and rescue team. With your permission, I’d like to give Kent one of the radios that other members have.”

“First, you don’t need my permission, Rita. I trust you. I watched him with his dog that day I was there. He’s good, and I agree with you. If you feel he could handle the radio, then by all means, give it to him.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Rita sighed in relief. She studied the man and shook her head in sadness. “Now, I have some bad news to tell you. Maybe not so bad, but it could have gotten ugly earlier.”

“With your search?” Marvin perked up at her statement and tone.

“No. It was after I went to the hospital and picked up Kent and Tate. We had gotten something to eat, and on the way home, we decided to replenish our supplies. On the way into the grocery store, we ran into Timothy Vickers.”

“Oh?” Marvin had drawled the word out, and both brows disappeared beneath the hair flopped on his forehead. “What did he have to say?”

“He again accused both of us of beating him up. If it wasn’t for Sheriff Jim, I don’t know what would have happened. He, Vickers, stood there yelling loudly, attracting a crowd, and accusing us of how we beat him because we didn’t like him.”

“Shit, what happened next?”

“Jim showed up only seconds after he started yelling. He immediately put the cuffs on him and put him in the car. I heard him say something about being under arrest for falsely accusing us of assault. While Vickers sat in the back of his vehicle, he came back to us and told us what happened.”

“Which was?” Marvin prompted when she remained silent.

Rita looked her father dead in the eye as she answered. “First, he told Jim that Kent beat him because he wanted to take me away from him.”

“Come again, I don’t follow.”

“Vickers told Jim that he and I were dating. Kent beat him up and told him to stay away from me, because I was his.”

“I take it by your expression that it was all lies?” Marvin smirked at her look of horror.

“Eew, Dad, I’d never date someone like Vickers. The guy creeps me out. Anyway, Maryann Picket went to Jim and told him that Vickers paid Elroy and Judd a thousand dollars each for them to beat him. They did.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know, after what I learned, I think it might have something to do with CSAR.”

“Come again?” Marvin demanded as he sat up straighter in his chair. “Tell me exactly what you meant with that statement.”

“Vickers only joined CSAR to get a puppy he could train to be a bait dog for a dog-fighting ring. He thought it would be easy to get one of our dogs and only go through the motion of training him our way. He hadn’t expected to be kicked out in the first few hours of being there. I didn’t ask, and I never expected Kent to step in and do what he did.”

“What exactly did he do?”

“He only approached Vickers and laid a hand on his shoulder. He kept that hand there when I told Vickers to go outside. He, Kent, stood beside me as I kicked him out of the class. Scott was right there with the two of us. That was it, I can’t tell you whether Kent squeezed his shoulder or not, all I can tell you is that he placed his hand there and escorted Vickers outside at my command.”

“Wow, okay, did Jim say anything else?”

“He was taking Vickers in to book him on false accusations of assault. I don’t know the legalities of all that and whether he can do that or not. It’s not my concern. Then he was going to go out and have a conversation with Elroy and Judd.” Rita finished her wine and shook her head as she started gathering their dirty dishes. “Do you think there’s a dog-fighting ring in the area?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Marvin answered in wonder. “I would hazard to guess that there isn’t one in Fool’s Gold, but maybe over in Colorado Springs, or even up in Denver. How long has Vickers been living in the area?”

“I don’t know, maybe five years. I never had any interaction with him until the first day the new session started over at CSAR.” Rita shrugged as she took the dishes to the sink. As she cleaned them off to put in the dishwasher, Marvin took care of the food. Rita turned and grinned at him.



“You’re taking half of that home, right? There’s no way I can eat all that before it goes bad.”

Marvin looked at the huge bowl of left-over pasta, and looked at his daughter with a laugh. “Yeah, I can take half of it. I keep forgetting that I’m not cooking for three when I cook.” Rita remained silent because Marvin has been a widower for several years now. Rita’s mother had gotten sick and passed away when Rita was still in college. She had finished and came home, but after a few years, she’d saved her money and bought her own house. While in college, Rita’s grandfather had lived with her parents. Within six months of each other, both of them had passed away, leaving her father alone. That was why she had moved back in when she’d graduated. Once her father was okay on his own, she’d purchased her own house with the money she’d inherited from both her grandfather and mother.

They finished clearing away the supper dishes and food. Once they were done, Marvin started gathering his things and called for Tank to join them. Rita gave the dog a rub down and went to the door to see her father and his dog out. As she opened the door, her father turned to her and kissed her cheek.

“If you want to give Palmer a radio, go ahead. As to the other thing, about calling his friends in, let me get back to you on that.”

“If you’re going to have them investigated, talk to Jake Cogburn over at the Brotherhood Protection. He’s Gunny’s son-in-law. After the stunt Vickers pulled with kicking Charlie, I had Jake do a deep background check on all of them. Nothing came back as suspicious.”

“Thanks, maybe I’ll stop by tomorrow and see Gunny. It’s been a while since we’ve sat down and had a beer together.” He kissed her cheek again, then grinned at his next statement. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but maybe you should get some sleep, you look worn out.”

“I am,” Rita said, not offended by what he said. “I walked almost ten miles today. As soon as you leave, I’m going to bed.”

“Lock up after me.”

“Yes, Dad.” Rita rolled her eyes at him, then shoved him out the door. She shut it, and threw the lock, knowing her father waited until she’d done so. He confirmed it by calling through the door that she was a good girl for doing it. Shaking her head, she went to the living room and watched as he and Tank climbed into his truck, backed out of the driveway, and she waved when he tooted his horn. Fifteen minutes later she was in her bed. It didn’t take long for her to settle down and fall asleep.

## CHAPTER 13



“KENT,” Rita called out as everyone was getting ready to leave after that day’s training session. She watched as he waited for the others to clear out before he came to her.

“What’s up?”

“Please, come back to my office,” she said as she turned on her heel and felt him walk beside her down the hall. As soon as they entered her office, she immediately went behind her desk and looked up at him. “Here,” she said as she handed him a box.

“What’s this?”

“The radio for the search and rescue.” She laid the box on her desk and opened it. “There’s a spare battery, and a charger. I’m sure you won’t need the instructions, but they are there also.”

“What channel or frequency does it stay on?”

Rita was impressed that he knew to ask that, and withdrew the folded piece of paper she’d placed there that morning. She held it up and nodded to him. “This is all you need to know. Keep it on that channel. You’ll hear the call when it comes in.”

“Is it a police channel?”

“No, it’s only for search and rescue. Most of the time it will be Jim Faulkner that will call it in. He’s the one that called me when Mikey went missing. Or one of the other police officers on duty.”

“How exactly does this all work?”

“If Jim, or anyone on the police force, answers a call for a missing person, they go out and investigate. If they can’t find them right away, they call us in. Be warned, nine times out of ten, our calls are for people lost in the wilderness. Jim doesn’t bother calling CSAR if it’s someone missing from town.”

“I understand. In town there are more people to look, or question. In the wilderness the locals won’t be answering any questions.”

“Locals?” Rita frowned at his wording.

“You know,” Kent smirked. “Bears, deer, squirrels, the locals.”

Rita couldn’t help it, she threw her head back and laughed until she had tears streaming down her face. “I don’t mean to laugh at you, but I could picture Jim walking up to a moose and asking if it had seen so and so.” They laughed together for several moments. Rita wiped her eyes and shook her head. “Now, about the other matter we discussed two days ago.”

“What matter is that?” Kent frowned at her.

“Bringing in your friends if needed.”

“Ah, what did you decide?”

“When I got home after dropping you off, my father was at my house. Nothing wrong, he shows up when he’s bored. Anyway, he cooked dinner for us, and I told him what we did and how you’d called in your friends. He’s going to look into the matter and get back to me about calling your buddies in if we need them.”

“Okay, I can deal with that. I’m going over there after I leave here, I can give them a heads up. You know, to see if they’d really want to help. Based on what we did as a living while in the military, I don’t see them saying no.”

“Why don’t you get their answer while Dad does what he has to. In the meantime, could I have their phone numbers?” she asked, and handed him her phone. “Just in case we need them.”

Kent nodded as he took her phone and programmed their numbers in from memory. As he handed it back to her, their fingers touched, and they held on a little too long. Kent cleared his throat. “If they agree to help when needed, would it be okay for me to give them your phone number? This way if you call, your name should pop up and they’d answer it faster than an unknown number.”

“Yes, you have my permission to give it out.” She paused as she cocked her head and scowled at him. “But you have to stress that it’s for work only, no random calls to ask me out on a date.”

“All of the guys except for Ryder and myself are hooked up with someone.” Kent smiled, then asked, “Can I call to ask you out on a date?” Before she could answer, he held up his hand with a grin. “Or can I ask you now? I’d like to take you out to dinner on Friday night.”

“I don’t have any plans. Where would you like to go?”

“Is there any place local? Other than Mattie’s diner?”

“We could go out to Gunny’s bar. He’s Jake Cogburn’s father-in-law. He and RJ run a small ranch, and a bed and breakfast. They have a bar the locals go to. Wait, they don’t serve food.”

“Why don’t we go to Mattie’s, then out to Gunny’s?”

“We can do that. Do you want to meet at Mattie’s?”

“Can I pick you up at six?”

“Sure,” Rita said, and gave him her address. After taking the box from the desk, he used it to salute her. He and Tate left her then. Kent couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. Outside Kent let Tate do his business, he cleaned up after him, then loaded him in the truck. Instead of going home, he headed toward The Centre. Twenty minutes later, he and Tate walked in the front door. He paused when he heard a squeal, and a teenage girl came darting toward her. It shocked Kent that she stopped on a dime and stared at him.

“Mister, may I pet your dog?”

“Who are you?”

“Chloe Rafferty. No, that’s not right, I’m now Chloe Barnes, Dad adopted me.” She turned and pointed to a man behind her. Kent looked up and grinned when he saw Spencer standing there.

“Yes, you may pet him.” Kent told the girl, but went on to explain. “If he had been wearing his orange vest, then the answer would have been no.”

Chloe looked at him with large eyes. “Is he a service dog?”

“He’s being trained as one.”

“For what?”

“Search and rescue.”

“Cool, does he know Miss Rita?”

“He does.” Kent smiled at the teenager. “I got Tate from her, and we are learning together how to do search and rescue.”

“He doesn’t have a lot left to learn, does he?” Cruz asked as he came up beside Spencer. He turned and explained what had happened a few days prior. As he told the tale, others joined them and gave their rendition of what had happened.

Kent waited until they were done, before he spoke, “Speaking of,” he said as he looked at all the men present. “I have a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?” Mason asked from his position of leaning on the counter.

“If it hadn’t been for Logan and his chopper, along with you guys, Mikey wouldn’t have made it.” He held up his hand to explain. “We later learned that the local Medivac was at an accident scene and had to take the victims to Denver. If we had waited for them, it would have been an additional three or four hours before someone could have come for Mikey.”

“Damn,” they all said, and looked at him with raised brows.

“I’m not saying it’s official, or that it will be all the time, but I would like to ask if you guys would be willing to help out again if the situation warranted it. Rita’s father needs to look into the matter, but if you agree, I’d like to give you Rita’s number. With her permission. This way, if her number comes up, then you know you’ll be needed. She only asked one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t use it to call her to ask her on a date.” He grinned when the others shook their heads. “That’s for me to do.” He dropped his bombshell, and the others quickly came around and slapped him on the back. After all the congratulations had been said, and he gave them Rita’s phone number, again stressing that they shouldn’t call her, that they should wait until she called them. It shocked Kent that Spencer asked for her number also. It ended up that he gave the number out to nine people, and Spencer said he would mention it to the Falco brothers the next time he saw them.

“Who are they?” Kent asked in confusion. He thought he knew, but wanted clarification.

“They’re firemen with the local fire department, but they are all former military like us. I’m sure if they’re not out fighting a fire somewhere and you call us in, they’d be more than happy to help.”

“Thanks, man.” Kent shook Spencer’s hand and told his friend to give his number to them. They stood around and talked for several minutes before the people who actually ran The Centre went about their business. Instead of training with Tate, Kent opted to go home. On his way, he stopped and bought more groceries. He found picking up something here and there wasn’t doing it for him, so he had made a list of everything he would need and decided to do all his shopping at once. After serving twenty years in the military, he found civilian life a little challenging at times, especially when he had to make his own meals and didn’t have a mess tent to walk into in order to eat. He took his time, and it was several hours later before he walked back into his apartment. Thank goodness it was on the first floor, and he didn’t have to lug all

the bags up a flight of stairs. It took three trips to get everything inside, and another hour to take care of it all. When all was said and done, he was happy with the results of full cupboards, and he had even stocked up on Tator's food and treats. He was also proud of his stash of protein bars in the cabinets.

With nothing to do the rest of the day, Kent grabbed the book he had purchased and settled into his favorite chair to start reading, making sure he had a large travel mug of coffee at his elbow. While he read, Tator snoozed all day. It felt great to have a day off and some downtime for once.



## CHAPTER 14



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Kent stood in his living room with his hands on his hips and looking down at Tator in confusion. On a whim, he grabbed his phone and quickly dialed.

“Hello?” Rita answered on the second ring.

“Hey, it’s Kent. I’m not calling to cancel our date. I’m about ready to leave, but I have a quick question.”

“What’s that?” Kent heard a laugh in her voice and shook his head.

“I don’t mean to sound stupid, but what do I do with Tator?”

“What do you mean, what do you do with him?”

“I’ve never left him since I got him weeks ago. Do I put him in his crate? Do I let him run loose in the house? What do I do with him?”

“Do you trust him alone in the house?”

Kent looked over on Tator’s bed in the corner and shook his head at the mangled sneaker lying there. While Kent had been in the shower getting ready for his date, Tator had come into his bedroom and grabbed one of his old shoes and began munching on it.

“No, he grabbed one of my shoes when I was in the shower earlier and is now using it as a chew toy.”

“Then I would put him in his crate. But that’s just me. You can use it as a learning tool. Does he sleep in his crate at

night?”

“No, he sleeps either on his bed I got him for the living room, or the one I put in my bedroom.”

“Okay, to save your other footwear, I’d put him in his crate.”

Kent scowled when he heard a giggle after her last statement. “Okay, I’ll see you in a few minutes.” Kent hung up, not giving her a chance to respond. It didn’t take long to get the pup into his crate, talking to him the entire time, actually explaining why he was putting him in there. Once the door was locked behind Tator, Kent stood and shook his head.

“God, I’ve gone crazy talking to a dog about my business.” He continued to shake his head as he grabbed his keys and made sure he had his wallet with him. Five minutes later, he was out the door. At five minutes to six, Kent pulled into a driveway and studied the house before him intently. He liked what he saw. As he exited his truck, he thought about maybe looking into purchasing a house with a large lawn for Tator to roam. He jerked from his musings when the door opened, and Rita stood there.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes, what had you a million miles away when I opened the door?”

Kent put his hand on the small of her back as he escorted her to his truck. He helped her in, then shut the door, and hurried around to the driver’s side. He didn’t answer until he had buckled himself in and started the truck. As he backed out of her driveway, he grinned at her.

“I like your house, it made me wonder if I should look into purchasing something with some land for Tator to run and play. Right now he’s a pup, and the apartment is okay, but when he becomes full grown...” He let his sentence trail off and looked at Rita when she laughed.

“Yeah, he’s going to be massive, you might want to look into more space for him. If you don’t mind my asking, what type of place are you looking for?”

“No apartment. Like we both said, Tator will be massive when he’s full grown. I want at least two acres where he can run. I don’t know if I should fence in the area, or train him not to leave the yard. I hate to have to use one of those shock collars on him to get him to stay where he belongs.” He looked at her with a grin. “I figure with enough training, he’ll learn what his boundaries are.”

“That can be done. That’s how I trained Zeke to stay in the yard. He only left it once when the neighbor was screaming. He went to help.” She laughed and shook her head at a distant memory. “Turned out there was a snake in her garden.”

“Wow, okay. I can see if he’s trained for search and rescue, he’d want to run to help someone in distress.”

“Luckily it was only a garter snake, and I was able to remove it for her. She moved back to the city shortly after that.” They remained in a comfortable silence on their way to town, and by the time they reached Mattie’s diner, they were both hungry. It didn’t take long for them to get a booth in the corner and pick up their menus. Before much time passed, Kent looked at Rita with a scowl.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t normally take someone on a first date to a diner.”

Rita waved her hand away and shook her head at him. “Don’t worry about it. I happen to love Mattie’s food.”

“To be honest, I’ve never been here before.”

“You’re going to love it.” Rita laughed and took the next few minutes to discuss the menu with him. By the time the waitress arrived, they were more than ready to give their food order with their drink request. They sat there and made small talk as they waited for their meal to arrive. When it did, Kent looked down at the steak, baked potato, and heaping scoop of veggies. He looked at both the waitress and Rita with a grin.

“This looks great. Can’t wait to taste it.” He waited until Rita started on her own meal before he used condiments and spices on his, then dug in. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he moaned at the first taste of the steak.

“This is fantastic.”

“I told you.” Rita laughed as she took a bite of her own steak, but a much smaller portion. They continued to eat until both their plates were clean. They opted to decline any dessert, and sat there and talked as they ate and got to know each other better. By the time the check arrived, Kent hadn’t realized over an hour had passed. He paid the bill and helped her to her feet. In the truck, Rita had to give him directions to Gunny’s bar.

On the way to Gunny’s they shared a comfortable silence. As soon as they pulled into the lot, Rita reached out and put her hand on Kent’s forearm. “Let’s go home.”

“What? Why?” Kent asked in shock. He was so shocked by her comment that he slammed on his brakes in the middle of the parking lot. He looked at her, but saw she wasn’t looking at him. He looked up and scowled. “Do you want to give him the satisfaction?” He had seen Timothy Vickers getting out of his truck from a parked row of cars.

“No, not really,” Rita said as Kent pulled into a parking space closer to the building. It made her happy that he waited to get out until Vickers entered the bar. They had to wait longer when his phone went off. As he looked at the screen, he looked at her with a wide grin. His expression caused her to suck in her breath. The image of his face on her phone and what she had done while looking at it came to mind. She quickly turned her head to hide her embarrassment.

“What’s that look for?” Rita asked when she had herself under control.

“I told my buddies we would be here tonight. That’s it, just in passing.”

“And?”

“And they are here, along with several other of my friends. You might even know some of them.” He pointed out the front windshield and Rita turned to look at the people approaching.

“Wow, you know a lot of people here. I know about half of them.”

“Good, let’s get the introductions out of the way. I’m not going to make a big deal about it, but I will mention to them that Vickers is here.” Kent exited his vehicle and hurried around to open the door for Rita. After she was on the ground, they waited for the others to join them. It turned out the five men who ran The Centre were there with their wives or girlfriends, along with three of the Falco brothers, who were with the local fire department. Rita told Kent she knew them, then waited until he introduced his buddies he had served in the military with. She had to remind him that she had already met Ryder. After all the introductions were made, Kent turned to the others, drew in a deep breath, and let it out in a rush.

“Guys, just a heads up, Vickers is inside.”

“Who’s that?” Liberty asked.

“He’s the guy that accused Kent and Rita of beating him up,” Asher, her boyfriend said. They spent the next five minutes telling the group what had occurred on the first day at the training facility and then what happened the next day.

“He kicked a puppy?” Noreen Barnes asked in shock. She turned her glare onto Kent. “You didn’t shoot him?”

“No, I only escorted him outside and Rita kicked him out of the program and off her property.”

“Good for you.”

“Why would he want to do something like that? Kick a puppy?” Esme asked in shock.

“Sheriff Jim Faulkner said the people Vickers paid came forward and told him Vickers wanted a puppy to use as bait for a dog-fighting ring.”

“Shit,” everyone there said as one. They all agreed to keep their eyes and ears open for any information. They willingly said they would report it to the sheriff, but also let both Kent and Rita know so they could have a heads up.

Satisfied, they headed toward the bar, and Seth chuckled as he called out to Kent.

“What’s up?”

“Looks like we’ll have more backup.”

“For?”

“Vickers.”

“How do you figure?” Rita asked him with a scowl.

“You know RJ, right?”

“Yes, she’s Gunny’s daughter, and Jake Cogburn’s wife.”

“Correct. They live here on the property, in that house.” He turned and pointed toward the setting sun.

“I know that.”

“Okay, do you know Sparrow?”

“The deputy sheriff?”

“Yes, she’s married to Stone, who works with Jake.”

“What are you trying to say, Seth?” Kora asked her husband.

“That’s Stone’s truck. If he’s here, then you can bet Sparrow is here with him. She’s probably off duty, but I’m sure she’ll handle any situation with Vickers that crops up.”

“Oh, okay.” Rita didn’t know what else to say, so she left it at that. The group of them entered the bar. While the women looked for a table, the men asked what they wanted and headed to the bar. It turned out they were called over to meet with Sparrow and Stone. It took a few minutes, but they were able to put several tables together so they could all sit together. Rita ended up sitting next to Sparrow with a chair on either side of them empty for their men. It didn’t take long for the men to slowly return with the drinks.

“I have to ask,” Sparrow said at one point. “What brings you all here?”

Rita looked at her with a grin. “This is mine and Kent’s first date. We went to Mattie’s for dinner, then decided to come here for a drink.”

“I mentioned to the guys I would be here, and they were already in the parking lot when we arrived,” Kent continued

the story. He leaned forward enough to look around Rita, and lowered his voice. “Did you see Vickers arrive?”

“What?” Sparrow asked in shock as she looked around wildly. Stone, her husband was the one to put his hand on her forearm to calm her.

“He’s at the end of the bar with Judd and Elroy.”

“Shit.” Sparrow sat back and shook her head. “And here I thought I could have a nice night off with my man.”

“You can,” Stone said as he leaned in and kissed the side of her head. “If anything happens, we’ll do the heavy lifting, and you can come in and slap the cuffs on him.”

“You’re lucky I always carry a set on me.”

“I know.” He grinned at her, and Rita turned away, feeling her face heat with the implied suggestion of handcuffs. Shaking her head she caught Kent’s look, and groaned harder as he wiggled his brows at her. She only shook her head again. To get her mind off what handcuffs could be used for, she turned back to Sparrow.

“What’s with all the people tonight?”

“Oh, there’s a band.”

“Really? When did Gunny start having bands here?” Rita asked in shock.

“Tonight,” came a voice from behind them. Rita turned and jumped to her feet to hug the older man standing behind them. She quickly introduced Kent and the others he didn’t know. Gunny didn’t stick around long as he said he had to make his way over to his other guests.

“Where’s his daughter?” Kent asked a few minutes later.

Rita looked around and grinned. “The brunette behind the bar. The one with the long braid.”

“Ah,” Kent said as he looked over and saw her. He also so Jake Cogburn sitting in a corner, nursing what looked like a soda. He lifted his glass in a silent salute to Kent and his eyes moved to the side to indicate he knew Vickers and his buddies

were there. Kent gave a silent nod back. One great thing about being in the military, it had taught him to catch onto non-verbal signals. He turned back around and rested easier knowing that Jake had his and Rita's back. They didn't have long to wait before the band took to the makeshift stage. Before either of them could ask what type of music the band played, they struck their first cord and Kent turned to Rita with a grin.

“You dance?”

“I do, do you?”

“Yep,” he laughed as he took a quick sip of his beer, stood, and held his hand out to her. He dragged her onto the dance floor, twirled her around, and caught her in his arms as he started a two-step around the dance floor. They were soon joined by several other couples.



## CHAPTER 15



THREE HOURS LATER, Rita was laughing with Kent as they stepped off the dance floor after dancing for the last three songs. As she turned toward their table, she ran into someone.

“I’m sorry,” she laughed at the man, then cringed when she saw she had bumped into Tim Vickers. She immediately jerked away from him when his hands came up and gripped her biceps. Normally, she would assume it was to prevent her from falling, but not in this case. The look on his face, and the way his hands had been bruising in his grip, didn’t cause fear, but it did make her mad.

“Careful there, you don’t want to have your face smashed,” Vickers stuttered his words. The scent of alcohol coming from his breath could stop a freight train. Rita quickly sidestepped him, but Vickers anticipated it and blocked her way. Before he could do or say anything else, Rita felt a hand go around her waist, and a gentle squeeze on her side. She immediately knew it was Kent and felt safe with him there.

“Excuse me,” Rita said politely and tried to side step him again.

“Not so fast, I’d like a dance with you.”

“Sorry, my dance card is full.” Rita shook her head and this time, with Kent’s help she was able to get around the other man. She didn’t get far before her forearm was grabbed and she was pulled away from Kent. As Vickers swung her around, she did the only thing she could think of, she brought her knee up and hit him where it would hurt the most. As soon as he

grabbed himself and bent over, she brought that same knee up and hit him on his chin.

“You’ll pay for that, bitch,” he wheezed out, but still tried to reach out and grab her. Luckily, Kent pulled her back far enough that his hand only grabbed air.

“I don’t think so,” a new voice said from behind him. The three people looked up to see Gunny, Jake, and Stone standing there.

“You’ve had enough to drink, Vickers, it’s time for you to leave,” Gunny said coldly to the man.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, Old Man?” Vickers snarled at Gunny.

“The owner of this bar, and you know it. If you won’t leave peacefully, there are plenty of people to help you out.” At this time the band had taken a break, that was the reason Kent and Rita were coming off the dance floor. Rita looked around and they were surrounded by Kent’s friends, the five men who ran The Centre, and three of the Falco brothers. She looked to the side and saw the women standing there. At the front was Sparrow talking on her phone. She made eye contact with Rita and only nodded twice to her, then pointed to the empty spot beside her. Rita immediately left Kent’s side and went to stand next to Sparrow.

“Stay here,” the other woman whispered to her, and took three steps forward. As she talked, Rita shivered at the coldness in her voice.

“We can do this here, Vickers, or we can take it outside.” She spoke in the same cold tone to the man as she approached.

“Fuck me,” Vickers said when he spotted Sparrow.

“No thank you, that job is for Stone.” She blew her man a kiss and the others chuckled when he play-acted catching it and putting it on his cheek. “I’ve called for backup, they’ll be here in five minutes. Gunny asked you to leave, and we’ll make sure you do. I’ve watched you all night, and in my professional opinion you’ve had too much to drink to drive safely. Unless you want another DUI, I suggest you take the

ride being offered you by the officer that will be here any minute.”

“I’m not done partying.”

“Too bad. Gunny asked you to leave, and if you don’t want to be arrested for harassment, I suggest you go outside now.” Before he could answer, Sparrow stepped up to him, gripped his wrist, brought it around behind his back, lifted it hard and far enough he was on his toes, then she walked him outside. The only people that followed her were her husband, Stone, Jake Cogburn, and Gunny. The others shook their heads as they took their seats at the table.

“That could have been ugly,” Kora Falco said as she sat next to her husband, and shuddered at what she’d said. “Not to sound stupid or anything, but who was that guy?”

“A freaking idiot,” Rita said as she grabbed her glass of ice water and drank half of it down. She studied the people at the table, and spent the next ten minutes telling them what Vickers had done the first day of search and rescue training, and what he had done afterward to try and frame her and Kent.

“Holy crap, people really do that?” Kora asked, shocked.

“Babe, don’t you remember how your stalker came after you because he couldn’t pass the psych eval to get back to work after he was injured on the job? Instead of framing you, he tried to kill you.”

“That’s right,” Kora said as she shook her head, and explained it to the others what had happened to her in the past, and how Seth had saved her. By the time they’d told each other their tales, Sparrow and Stone had returned and taken their seats. Rita didn’t see Gunny, but she saw Jake back at his seat in the bar.

“He’s gone, I had the officer on duty take him home. We probably should have given him a sobriety test and taken him to the station, but frankly, I didn’t want to have to do the paperwork. He got off with a warning this time.” She looked directly at Rita as she said her next part. “Be careful, he was

spouting off a bunch of shit about how you were going to pay for having him beat up. You too, Palmer, he was fit to be tied.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Kent said as he laid his hand over the back of the chair and began rubbing his finger on Rita’s shoulder. After that, there seemed to be a slight heaviness to the atmosphere, and it wasn’t long before everyone began to make noise about going home. It took a few minutes, and by the time the band came back on stage for their last set, the departing couples were walking out the door.

In the parking lot, they all said their goodbyes and the women talked about doing a girls’ night out soon. For the first time ever, Rita felt good about her night out. She normally worked six, sometimes, seven days a week and never went out. Julie used to literally drag her to Mattie’s Diner for a meal every couple of months. With these women, she somehow felt like she could form lasting friendships with them. On a happy sigh, she allowed Kent to help her into his truck. Neither of them said a word until they pulled into her driveway. Instead of getting out after turning the truck off, Kent looked over at her with a smile.

“You look happy.”

“I am,” she laughed. “I haven’t had this much fun in years. What’s great about it is that I’m not upset about what Vickers did.”

“Really?” Kent asked in shocked surprise.

“Kent, I’m not going to let five minutes of rudeness from some asshole ruin hours of fun I had with you.”

Kent smiled as he leaned in, raised his hand to the back of her neck, and slowly brought her in for a kiss. They didn’t come up for air for a very long time. They put their foreheads together, and breathed deeply.

“As much as I want to take you inside and make love to you all night long, I’m going to have to decline at this time.”

“Oh?” Rita asked in shock, not knowing how to answer that. She scowled at him as she backed away. “As much as I’m

starting to like you, I don't think we know each other enough to do that."

"I know, it's just that I only have one condom with me, and I don't trust it."

"Why the hell not?" She cocked her head to the side and asked in confusion. She hadn't realized she'd snapped at him until he cocked his head at the side and stared at her.

"It's over five years old."

"Are you saying you haven't had sex in over five years?" She scowled at him. "I don't believe you."

He only shrugged at her and gave her a sheepish grin. Rita couldn't help it, she burst out laughing. As she waved her hand in front of her face she shook her head at the same time. "I'm not laughing at you. If we're going to continue with whatever tonight was, then I want to be honest with you."

"Okay," Kent said, a little apprehensive as to what she was going to say.

"Remember that package you had delivered to me?"

"Yes." Kent thought he knew where this conversation was going so he grinned and raised his brows at her.

"Let's just say the photos you sent me were an inspiration to use what was in the package."

"Damn," Kent said as he moved in his seat to adjust his erection. "Do you need any more pictures for inspiration?"

"Nope, I got what I need." She smirked at him. "However," she drawled the word out. "I wouldn't be opposed to getting to see you up close and personal when the time comes." She held up her hand to stop what he would say. "*After* we get to know each other better." She sighed in relief when he nodded his agreement to her last statement.

They sat there looking at each other before Kent sighed heavily, then got out of his side of the truck. It took a few moments to adjust himself before he could walk properly. He went to the other side of his truck and helped her from her seat. With his hand on her lower back, he escorted her to her

front door. He didn't leave her hanging. After she unlocked the door, he turned her, lifted her chin, and planted a kiss on her. When they broke apart, he kissed the center of her forehead, and stepped back.

"I better stop, or I won't leave."

"Okay," Rita said with a sigh. She entered the house and turned to look at him.

"I won't leave until I hear the lock engage."

"Okay." She slowly closed the door, looking him in the eye as she did. As soon as it was closed, she looked out the side window as she engaged the lock. He nodded to her, gave a small salute before he turned on his heel and left. Rita watched until she couldn't see his truck any longer, then turned and leaned her back against the door. She looked down as Zeke placed his nose on her hand.

"Hey, baby," she crooned to the dog, and went about getting him ready for bed. She was surprised to see that it was after one in the morning. She hadn't had so much fun in a long time. After letting Zeke out and making sure he had plenty of water, she waited for him to return, then made her way up to her bed. She took a quick shower before climbing between the sheets, she lay there and thought about reaching for her toy, but decided against it. She didn't know how Kent would relieve his own sexual tension, but she wanted hers to build for when they could get together. She made a mental note to make sure to pick up a box of condoms for her house the next time she was in town. Her last thought before falling asleep was to make sure she was away from Fool's Gold when she did so. She didn't need her friends and neighbors knowing her business and speculating on who she was having sex with. No one needed to know but her and Kent.



ACROSS TOWN, Kent pulled into his parking spot at the apartment complex and put his head on the steering wheel. He had wished he'd thought of putting some new condoms in his wallet before his date with Rita. Not that he expected her to put out on their first date, but not having a reliable form of

protection made him look bad. He made a mental note to purchase some the next time he was in town. With a scowl, he lifted his hip, withdrew his wallet, and pulled out the worthless condom. He turned on the light and studied it, shaking his head when he realized the expiration date had occurred almost seven years prior. Oh, he'd had sex in the past seven years, but hadn't used all of his condoms. When he'd been in the military, he'd hooked up with random women who knew the score. The women that wanted bragging rights that they nailed so many servicemen. He was good with that, back then, he didn't want a serious relationship. It wasn't until he met Rita that he began to think that maybe it was time to think about settling down. Rita was the perfect person to settle down with, at least to his way of thinking.

After exiting and locking his truck, he made his way to his apartment. As soon as he entered, he grinned when Tator sat up and began to whine at him. Grabbing his leash, he let the pup out, and took him down for a walk. With it being such a nice night, they stayed outside for almost an hour before going back in. Since he was home for the night, he left Tator out of his crate and made for the bedroom. After a quick shower, he climbed into bed and thought back to how it had felt to have Rita in his arms on the dance floor, in the front of his truck, and at her front door. On a heavy sigh, he made a mental note to make sure he picked up enough condoms to have in his wallet, truck, and night stand for his next date with Rita. He had never thought about having kids, and he didn't know if he wanted them now, but it would be better to have a conversation about that subject with Rita before they slept together. The last thing he heard before falling into a deep sleep was Tator coming into his room and settling into the dog bed in the corner. They both let out a gigantic sigh before they succumbed to slumber. Kent dreamt of what it would be like to have sex with Rita. When he woke, he immediately hopped into the shower and turned it on cold. He didn't want to take himself to task, he wanted to save it for when he was with Rita the next time.

After his shower, he took Tator out for a walk. When they returned, he fed the dog, then made breakfast for himself. He

didn't know why, but he made four breakfast sandwiches, stuck them in his pack, along with not one, but two boxes of protein bars, extra water, and a small bag of food for Tator. The two of them didn't have to go to a training class at CSAR, but Kent wanted to go into The Centre to train with his buddies. Once everything was packed, he made sure he grabbed the radio off the charger, and checked for extra batteries. At the last minute, he tossed in two extra pairs of socks, and a couple of shirts, and underwear. When he was done, it was almost like he had his entire pack he used to carry while in the military. On the way out the door, he grabbed a rain poncho, a small tarp, and a spare food bowl for Tator.

“Let's go,” he told the pup and snapped the leash on him. He looked at his watch and nodded when he realized he would be a couple of minutes early. He laughed when he had to bend down and pick the pup up in order for him to get into the back seat of the truck. Once he was strapped in, he got underway to head out to The Centre.



## CHAPTER 16



KENT TOOK his time getting himself and Tator out of the truck. On the way inside they both lagged and enjoyed the early autumn weather. Just before entering the building, Kent paused and drew in a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. He liked the early morning crispness he drew into his lungs. As he looked out at the mountains, he saw snow on the top of them and knew that winter was on the way. He never told anyone this, but this was his favorite time of year. He stood there and wondered what time of year Rita enjoyed and wanted to know if she would be interested in going for a picnic this weekend. He didn't think they would have many more beautiful days like this before the snow came. With a smile on his face, he entered the building and was halfway to the front desk when he stopped to stare at the men standing there.

“Jake, Stone, Jim, what's up?” He shook their hands as he said their names and stepped back after greeting them.

“Hey, Kent,” Jake Cogburn said. “Glad you're here, I'm about to call the rest of your team in. We're going to meet in the conference room if you want to go in and get settled.”

Kent frowned, but felt he wouldn't be getting any other information until they were all gathered. As much as he enjoyed his time doing what he pleased, he knew he was employed by the Brotherhood, and if they needed him for a job, he would be there. As he walked down the hall with Tator on his leash, he did as asked, but in the back of his mind he wondered if he had enough time to take the dog home before he was sent out on an assignment. He also did a mental list in

his head as to whom the best man would be to send the dog home with if he couldn't do it himself. Once in the breakroom, he only raised his brows at the others either milling around or sitting at a table. He quickly settled his dog near a seat and sat facing the doorway. Fifteen minutes later, the three men he greeted, and his buddies, Mason Quinn, Cruz Lacerda, Asher Nolte, and Ryder Callahan strolled in. After they grabbed drinks, they settled at the table with Kent. That's when he realized the five of them sat at the same table, at another table were the five people who ran The Centre. He didn't recognize the other two people that entered the room with Jake, Jim, and Stone.

Kent liked that Jake didn't waste any time getting to the point.

"I called you guys here, because we may have a situation." He looked directly at Kent's table of men. "As you know, you work for the Brotherhood Protectors as glorified secret service men. You really only go out on a mission for us if there's a need. I'm calling in a need."

"What's up?" Mason asked. Kent, along with the others sat up straighter and became all business.

"Do you all remember that storm we had last month?" Stone asked, and the men snorted their reply.

"What about it?" Kent asked.

"It's been brought to our attention that there may be some problems with some of the hiking trails." Sheriff Jim stepped forward. "These two men are local rangers and they've come to me with concerns about the damage that storm caused."

"I saw some of it," Kent said. At the others' frowns, he elaborated. "Last week when Rita and I went out to find Mikey, the missing child who was camping with his parents. As we tracked the kid, I saw damage from that storm. I also know for a fact that if it hadn't been for that storm, Mikey probably never would have fallen off the trail."

"I agree," Ryder spoke then, and gave his account of what he had witnessed as he'd walked back to the campsite with

Rita.

“Okay, that helps,” one of the rangers spoke. He had pulled out a map and tacked it to the wall to mark the locations Kent and Ryder told him they’d seen the damage in.

“What do you want us to do?” Kent asked when no one said anything for at least a minute.

Jake rubbed the back of his neck as he sighed heavily. “I would like you to work with the rangers to see what trails they are most concerned with.”

“What’s that mean?” Cruz scowled at them.

The second ranger stepped forward. “Next weekend is our biggest hiking weekend of the year. It’s after Labor Day, but before the snow hits. I don’t know where you guys are from, but it’s the weekend when a lot of families come out and hike to look at the fall foliage. You know, it’s time for the leaves to change. Around here, we get a lot of families that hike the trails. We don’t have enough manpower to make sure every single trail is ready for them to be used. We would like you to take the three most used trails and hike them to see if there are any weak spots. These are the trails that have been closed most of the summer, but will be used this coming weekend.” He paused as he looked at them intently. “We only opened them two weeks ago.”

“Ah,” Kent said, and nodded. He looked at his buddies and they did the same thing, but didn’t respond to what the ranger said. As the first ranger had talked, the second one used the map on the wall to point them out. It was very hard to make out, and though Kent had perfect vision, he could barely see it from his vantage point several feet away.

“Well?” the ranger finally asked when they remained silent.

“Well what?” Kent asked. “We’re waiting for you to continue. We know what we have to do, we just need to know where we have to do it.”

“Oh.”

“Here,” Logan Bishop said as he pushed himself off the wall and walked across the room to another one. He pointed to it, and that was when Kent realized it was a map of the area. That one Kent could see plain as day.

“How long has that been there?”

Logan shrugged, then looked at his friends. “Since about a month after we opened,” Spencer Barnes said as he joined Logan at the wall. They all walked over to the map and made room for both rangers to check it out, then pointed out locations.

“Mind if we tag along?” Simon asked as he stood to the side and studied the map.

“Not at all, we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Is there a time crunch on this?” Mason Quinn asked at one point.

“What do you mean?” Stone asked.

“I mean, do you need us to leave now, right this second, or can we go home to gather what we need and meet back here in an hour?”

“Oh,” Stone answered, then turned to the rangers. “That’s up to you guys. We just wanted to tell them what their assignment for the Brotherhood was. The ball is in your court now.”

“Okay, how about you get what you need, then meet us at this ranger station in two hours?” He looked at his watch, then pointed to the area on the map where he wanted them to meet up. They all agreed, and just before the meeting broke up, Kent said that he would be having his dog with him. As they began to depart, he did a mental tally of what was in his pack, and decided he didn’t need to go home, because everything else he would need was already in his truck.

“I’ll meet you guys there,” Kent said. “I’m all packed and what’s not in that one.” He pointed to the pack against the wall. “The rest is already in my truck. This morning I even packed extra food for Tator and myself.” They nodded and departed. As the others left, Kent took his pack out to his truck

and unloaded it, then repacked it with other things. By the time he was done, he felt he had everything he would need to stay out in the wilderness for at least a week. Not that he planned on being there that long, but you never knew. It was always better to have too much than not enough. Thirty minutes later he helped Tator into his seat and got behind the wheel to head to the location the ranger had asked them to meet. When he arrived, he made sure to put Tator's vest on him and it impressed Kent that the dog's entire demeanor seemed to change from a goofy, happy-go-lucky puppy, to a serious dog. He was proud when the pup kept looking back at him waiting for instructions.

"Let's go," Kent said, and moved his hand forward for the dog to lead. He was proud that he didn't lunge and pull on the leash, but was comfortable walking with a loose leash. It impressed Kent how much Tate had learned so far, and how much more he learned almost every hour.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Kent filled Tate's dish with food and another one with water before he sat down and pulled out one of the breakfast sandwiches he had made hours earlier. As he sat there and ate his late lunch, he looked out over the vista and sighed in contentment. He had been all over the world while in the military, and had seen hundreds of different locales, but there was nothing like looking out at the Rockies. There was something about this landscape that soothed his soul. He looked up at a noise, and held tighter to Tate's leash to warn him not to attack. He was so proud of what the dog had been able to do all day. He smiled when Mason Quinn walked into the clearing where he and Tate sat.

"Christ," Mason said as he lowered his pack and sat on a log across from Kent. Without saying anything else, he opened his pack and brought out his own lunch. While they ate, they remained silent. They had worked together enough in the past that they didn't need conversation to fill in the gaps. As the two men ate, they were slowly joined by the others of their team. They all did the same as Mason did when he arrived.

Ryder was the only one that spoke around his sandwich as he took a bite.

“At least we’re not fighting sand.”

The others either laughed outright or chuckled. Once Kent finished his own sandwich and bottle of water, he picked up Tate’s dishes and nodded when the dog settled in at his feet. He knew it would be a little time before he would have to let Tate use the bathroom.

“What did you find?” Kent asked the others as he settled back with a contented sigh.

“Nothing bad,” Cruz said. “Sure, there were weak spots, but nothing was washed out, no flooding.”

“Nothing that would cause major concerns. If the people those rangers said are any type of hiker at all, even a novice, if they pay attention they shouldn’t have any problems navigating the trail.”

“Good. What next?”

“We only have one more trail to check out,” Asher said as he crumbled up the bag his sandwich had been in and stuffed it back into his sack. Before any of them could reply or move Kent jerked, when not only his phone went off, but the radio he’d grabbed from home began to squawk. The first thing he did was grab his phone. He saw Rita’s number on it and grinned.

“Hey, beautiful,” he began, then stopped at her words. “Hold on a minute, I’m going to put you on speaker.” He looked at his buddies and nodded. “It’s Rita, she says there’s a missing hiker.” He pushed some buttons and said loudly, “You’re on speaker.”

“Okay, who are you with?” Rita asked in a clipped tone. Kent knew then she was all business.

“Mason, Cruz, Ryder, and Asher. When did they go missing?”

“Yesterday morning, around ten o’clock. The people he was with wanted to see if they could find him first. They only

reported him missing an hour ago.”

“Why are you being called in?” Mason asked. “I’m assuming it’s for search and rescue? Oh, I’m Mason, by the way.”

“Mason, got it. Search and rescue are being called in because it’s been over twenty-four hours and with the friends not being able to find him, it’s easier for search and rescue to come in. Saves time so the rangers don’t have to double check what the friends already did. I’m about an hour away. Kent, how soon can you get there?”

“Where do we need to be?” Kent asked and moved his body so he could look at the map that Cruz had pulled from his pack and laid out on the ground between them. Rita gave the location and though she couldn’t see, Kent nodded several times.

“Actually, I’m about thirty minutes away.” He explained why he was so close and what he and his buddies had been doing for the rangers.

Suddenly a loud piercing warning sound came from somewhere and Cruz quickly grabbed his phone. He silenced it, read whatever had come across the screen and swore.

“What’s wrong?” Rita demanded. Kent could tell she was running, or walking fast and not standing still. He had heard several doors slam, then a vehicle started up.

“It’s Cruz, I just got a notice come across my phone that a severe storm is heading this way. I don’t think it will be as bad as the one from last month, but they’re sending out warnings.”

“Shit,” Rita said. “This is going to get rough with darkness approaching in a few hours. Kent, Dad and Tank are on their way, they’re about twenty minutes ahead of me.”

“Okay, will anyone else be coming?”

“No, it’s just the three of us. I’ll stop by and talk to the rangers on my way up the mountain. I can only get so far with the truck before I have to walk in.” She gave them the location where she would be parking her truck and the others found it on the map.

“We’re close, we can meet you there.” Kent saw his buddies agree with nods of their own heads.

“Okay, see you soon.” Rita hung up and Kent looked at the others with concern.

“What do you say, do you want to go there and set up a base camp?”

“We can,” Mason said as he rose, and they all made sure they didn’t leave anything behind. “I’ll call it into Jake to update him. I don’t want him to think we’re shirking our duties for the Brotherhood.” After years in the military they had the mentality of carry-in, carry-out, leaving no trace of them ever being there. Before they headed out, Kent made sure he withdrew his walkie and strapped it to the front of him.

“What’s that for?” Asher asked in confusion.

“Oh, it’s the walkie search and rescue uses.”

They didn’t say anything else as they quickly started to their next destination. Mason in the lead, the others followed, with Kent bringing up the rear. The formation was just as they had walked while they’d served together. During the hike, Kent was on the phone with Marvin and told him what they were doing, while Ryder was on his phone with the rangers. No one realized that Mason, true to his word, had called Jake and told him what they were doing.



## CHAPTER 17



RITA PULLED her truck into the small clearing, and sighed in relief when she saw a makeshift tent set up. She quickly grabbed her pack, opened the door for Zeke, and after strapping his vest on him, as well as his leash, she started forward. She was happy to see that her father and Tank had already made it, as well as Kent and Tate.

“Impressive,” she said as she stepped beneath the tent, and saw they had maps and other things at hand. She looked over at her father with a grin. “Might just pay off having a former military guy on the team.”

“Might,” Marvin laughed with his daughter and gave her a quick side hug. “How are we going to do this?”

“You haven’t set up command yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you.” He looked at his watch and shook his head. “I only arrived three minutes ago.”

“Okay.” Rita nodded and looked around at Kent, his buddies, her father, and one ranger. “What’s your name?” she asked the ranger.

“Lorenzo Hughes.”

“Okay, Lorenzo Hughes, what do you know?” They all bent over a map laid out on the ground, because though there was a tent set up, there was no table. Everyone had been squatting around the map and pointing to it when she’d arrived. When he didn’t answer, she sighed heavily, caught Kent’s eye and rolled hers at the other man. “I’m Rita Chambers, I’m in charge of Chambers Search and Rescue.

What are we looking at here?” She had put steel in her voice and saw when Lorenzo realized she was the boss, and not the others. Rita had to give him credit for catching on right away. It didn’t take him long to explain what Kent and his buddies had been doing all morning. That was when Rita realized that the missing hiker was last reported in an area that hadn’t been checked yet. With a nod, she removed her pack and started taking things out of it. When she removed a head lamp and placed it over her head, Kent did the same. He also removed a set of night vision goggles and was glad when Asher handed a pair to Rita to use. What he didn’t like was when Asher adjusted them to her head and instructed her on how to use them. Kent thought he stood a little bit too close to Rita for his comfort.

“Do you really think you’ll need those?” Ranger Hughes asked in confusion.

“Do you really want to tell this missing person’s loved ones that it got dark, so we stopped looking?” Rita snapped her question at him, and saw admiration on the former military men’s faces.

Before he could respond, they all turned when a police SUV pulled in and parked. They waited for the sheriff to join them. It took about three minutes to tell him what had been done that morning, and what their plans were.

“Okay, I’ll stay here,” Jim said as he waved his hand around. “We’ll use this as ground zero.” He held up his hand and jogged over to his vehicle to withdraw something from the back. When he rejoined them, he began passing out items. “Here are some walkies. I know I don’t have to tell you that cell service is spotty up here. If you find anything, radio it in, I have people coming in to help, and they’ll meet me here.”

“Sounds good,” Rita said as she took one of the walkie talkies and clipped it to the strap on her pack. Before they could leave, Asher stopped them.

“I know Jim said the cell service is spotty, so I don’t know if these will work. Here is some comms so we can talk with each other, but don’t have to tie up communications on the

walkies.” Everyone turned to Jim, and he agreed that all forms of communication would be good for the searchers. It didn’t take long for the guys to get wired up. Just before they left, Kent conferred with Jim, and when he was done, he looked at Rita with a nod.

“I made sure Jim had Logan’s phone number in case we need a chopper in a hurry.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” She nodded and picked up Zeke’s leash. As they headed out, they broke off and went in different directions. Rita’s only fear was that they wouldn’t be able to find the missing hiker before dark.

“Wait!” came a voice from behind her, and she turned to see her father and his dog, Tank standing next to Ryder.

“What?”

“What’s the hiker’s name?”

“Oh, sorry, Russell Bridges, thirty-two years old, five-foot ten, about two hundred pounds.” Rita pulled the small piece of paper from her pocket and read from it. “Blond hair, brown eyes. Last seen wearing black jeans, gray tee, black hiking boots, and he had on a bright-red ball cap.”

“Do you have anything of his for the dogs to sniff out?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Marvin said, and they went down different paths. Somehow, Rita ended up being by herself with Zeke on the path she had chosen. She looked at her watch and shook her head. It was going on four in the afternoon, and though they still had hours of daylight left, she knew it would get dark quicker there in the trees than if they were out in the open. She drew in a deep breath and looked down at Zeke. “Let’s go.” She gave the verbal and non-verbal command to her dog, and off they went to look for the missing hiker.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Rita had taken a five-minute break to get a drink of water and make sure Zeke stayed hydrated. The dog looked up from his bowl with a growl, surprising Rita

with his reaction. She tensed up, thinking there might be a wild animal behind her. The next thing she saw was her dog flop over to the side with a knife sticking straight up from his ribs. She looked into his eyes before her world went black.

Three miles away, Kent stopped dead in his tracks and looked around in confusion. He was so still, Tate ended up pulling his leash from Kent's hand, but instead of running off, he turned, looked at his owner, then sat there and waited for him to do something.

"What the fuck?" Kent whispered to himself as he bent down and put his hands on his knees.

"What's wrong?" Mason asked him when he joined his friend on the trail.

"I don't know," Kent answered as he looked around in confusion. "A weird ass feeling came over me."

"What type of feeling?"

"Helplessness."

"Oh, shit," Mason stared at his friend in shock. Before either of them could say or do anything, a squawk came over the radio that Marvin had found something. Mason answered for the two of them, and waited for Kent to get his wits about him before they took off to the location Marvin had given them. Halfway there, Tate, who Kent had picked up his leash again, stopped so suddenly Kent almost ran over him. He refused to move and kept wanting to go in a different direction. On their trek through the woods they had heard others over the walkie that they were heading toward Marvin.

"What's up with him?" Mason asked as he pointed to Tate.

"I don't know," Kent answered in confusion and tried to pull the leash, but the dog refused to move.

"You know I don't know anything about dogs, but he's been great so far today. Do you think he's acting like that because he suspects something?"

"No clue," Kent said, and after exchanging looks with Mason, they both withdrew their sidearms and stood back-to-

back as they turned in a circle to see if there was an immediate threat. When they didn't see, hear, or sense any threats, they kept their guns at their side. With non-verbal communication between the two men, Kent let Tate lead them to wherever he wanted to go. Thirty minutes later the men stopped, and Kent pulled Tate up short. They again looked at each other and did the back-to-back thing with their guns drawn. Tate had led them directly to a small clearing. In the center of it lay Zeke with a knife sticking out of his side. He roused enough to give a small woof when Tate licked his face.

"Shit," Kent said as he rushed to the dog. At the last minute he slowed and quietly talked to the dog to prevent him from biting him. He examined the wound and quickly removed his pack. Because he had been a combat medic while in the service, he knew what to pack for medical supplies. He quickly accessed them and before long he had the knife sticking out of Zeke's side stabilized and gauze wrapped around the protruding handle, trying to stem the flow of blood. Once the dog was stable, he looked up as Mason joined him.

"Is he going to make it?"

"I think so. Did you find Rita?"

"No, but I found her pack." Mason looked over his shoulder and pointed toward a small downed log. Kent saw her pack sitting on the ground next to it. Mason held up his hand to stop him from going for it. "There's signs of someone being dragged away, but I didn't see anything else." He waited and Kent braced himself.

"What else?"

"There's blood." This time, Mason squeezed Kent's forearm to stop him from rushing over. "First, we need to get help for Zeke."

"You do it," Kent said between gritted teeth. "We don't know how long ago this happened. I'm thinking not longer than thirty minutes. The blood on Zeke's wound is starting to clot."

"How are we going to do this?" Mason asked.

“You’re going to take Zeke and get him to Marvin to where they found the trail for the missing hiker.” When it looked like Mason was going to argue, Kent shook his head. “No, you’ve seen how good Tate is, I’ll give him a quick break for some water here, then we’ll pick up Rita’s scent. If her pack is here, then I’m assuming her search and rescue radio, along with the walkie from Jim is with her pack?”

“It is.” Mason shook his head as he answered his friend.

“That leaves the communications that Asher gave us. I’m thinking she either forgot about it, or isn’t able to talk. I’m betting on the latter.” Kent stood and turned in a circle with his hands on his hips, thinking. He quickly turned back around to Mason and swore.

“What?”

“When you get to Marvin, call into Jim and ask him to call who he has to and check on the location of Timothy Vickers.”

“You think he might be behind this?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of. Who else had it in for Rita? Maybe he has some sort of radio that he can monitor our communications. I don’t know.” Kent sighed heavily as he rubbed the back of his neck in frustration.

“Why don’t we call Jim now and get a team over here to help you look?”

“Because that missing hiker is the number one priority. He’s been missing for almost thirty-six hours. It might be in the eighties during the day, but it gets cold in these mountains at night. We don’t know if he’s injured or what. He’s our priority. I’m going to take Tate and look for Rita. Don’t say anything to anyone until you get Zeke to Marvin. He’ll know what to do with him. If we’re lucky, they can find Russell, get Logan to fly him out, and there will be room for Marvin, Tank, and Zeke, who will need a vet as soon as possible.” Kent gave Mason a hard look. “It’s going to be rough carrying the dog to the location, but with any luck, they’ll have found Russell by the time you get there. Once he’s found and on a chopper with Marvin, Tank, and Zeke, then you guys can come find us.” He

dug into his pack and held up the item he had been frantically searching for. He pulled it from its case and looked at Mason. When the other man nodded to him, he activated the beacon and instead of strapping it onto his pack, he strapped it onto one of his belt loops.

“You’re going to want to convince Marvin to look after Zeke and not be hellbent to come find his daughter. It will be your job to convince him that I’m good at my job and I’ll be able to find her.”

“Okay, and thanks for putting that tracker on your body, and not your pack,” Mason said, and the two of them were able to make a sling for Mason to carry Zeke in front of him without disturbing the knife sticking out. As Mason started to leave the area, Kent called to him. Mason scowled after he said what he did.

“Tell Marvin that Zeke is his number one priority. I know he’s going to want to join you in coming back to help look for Rita. If he gives you any hassle, then ask him what Rita would say or do if she found out he didn’t take care of her dog.”

“Shit, you know how to turn the knife, don’t you!” Mason shook his head and looked down at the dog. “No pun attended,” he told the animal, then shook his head. “Be careful and let us know if you find anything.”

“I will.” Kent stood there and watched as Mason started to leave again, but paused when the communications in their ear sprang to life.

“Guys, we hear you,” Asher said. “From what I heard, I agree, get the dog here, then we can go help Kent look for Rita. Marvin doesn’t have our communications, so he doesn’t know yet. We found Russell two minutes ago. It’s going to take a few minutes to get to him. Bishop is on the way, Mason, by the time you get here, we can load you guys up. Kent, you be careful. There’s a storm front coming in and should hit the area around two in the morning. You’ll want to do your best to get a bead on any tracks.”

“Thanks, Asher,” Kent said.

“Oh, and I have cell service here, I stepped away from Marvin and called Sheriff Jim to see about Vickers’s whereabouts. He’ll get back to me, then I’ll let you know when I can.”

“Thanks.” Kent nodded and watched as Mason quickly left the small clearing. After picking up the dish he’d set down for Tate to get a drink, he picked up Rita’s pack and strapped it to his chest. Loaded with both packs, he took Tate to the area where the drag marks started and told him to pick up the scent. It didn’t take more than fifteen seconds before Tate looked at Kent with his entire body wiggling. “Go,” Kent said, and they were off to look for Rita. He made sure the leash was extended for Tate to get several yards ahead of him on the trail as he kept to the tracks.

“I’m coming, Rita. I won’t let anything happen to you on my watch,” he whispered, and hoped like hell she was still alive and could hear his voice over the communications in her ear. He was glad the others remained silent. Well, not so silent, he was able to hear what they were saying as they worked to get Russell out of the situation he had gotten himself in. Hearing his buddies in his ear was like old times, and it kept him grounded as he went looking for his woman. During his trek, he imagined all sorts of torture he could give to Vickers when he found him. In his mind, it couldn’t be anyone except for Vickers who had harmed Rita.



## CHAPTER 18



RITA AWOKE WITH A MOAN, but quickly squashed it when she felt the hard, uncomfortable ground beneath her, and her throbbing head. She couldn't remember if she had ever had such a headache before. It took several minutes before she realized what had happened. She popped her eyes open looking for Zeke, and had to quickly shut them when it felt like she was going to lose the contents of her stomach. Before she could really look around to see where she was, and who had abducted her, she passed out again.

“Umph,” Rita muffled when she felt someone kick her feet. It felt like she could barely open her eyes when she felt it again. It took everything she had to pry them open, and when she did, she curled her lip at the man standing over her.

“Vickers.”

“Yep, bitch. Time to wake up.”

Rita struggled to sit up and realized her hands were tied behind her back. It took a lot of effort to get into a sitting position and Vickers was no help. She had to close her eyes several times to try to ward off the nausea when she moved. She cried out when her hair was pulled, and Vickers screamed in her face for her to move faster. Unable to help it, she leaned over and lost what little contents there were in her stomach. Who cared that it landed on his shoes!

“You fucking bitch!” Vickers screamed and slapped her across the face. The pain radiated from that impact to where she had been hit earlier. She threw up again, then slumped to

the side, unconscious. She had no idea how long she was like that before she heard someone talking in her ear. It took a long time, at least five minutes to realize she heard Kent's voice, but she couldn't see him. That was when she realized she still had the communication device she'd been given before leaving to look for Russell, the missing hiker. She lay there with her eyes shut and listened to Kent as he talked. He told her he was coming for her, that Zeke was going to be okay, and why he knew that. It was a pleasant drone in her ear. The sound of his voice made her feel safe. She passed out again, and woke to being slapped in the face. This time there was nothing in her stomach to cause her to lose its contents, but she did end up dry heaving. She stared blurry-eyed at Vickers as he stood above her. With Kent's voice in her ear, she wasn't afraid.

"What do you want, Vickers?" she asked, and knew when Kent stopped talking that he had heard her. She didn't know if he could hear her captor, but she wanted to get as much information to him as possible so he could find her. She also didn't know what the range was on the unit. She figured the best thing would be was to get Vickers to talking. She cringed at his next statement.

"I'm going to end you, Bitch. I already killed your fucking dog, you are next."

"W-w-what? What did I-I-I ever d-d-do to you? The first t-t-time I ever met you was the f-f-first day of training. I k-k-kicked you out of the p-p-program because you abused your d-d-dog."

"Yeah, all that, but you owe me."

"What t-t-the hell f-f-for?"



KENT STOPPED in the middle of the trail Tate had led him on and had his dog pause. He stood there and listened to what Rita said, and swore. He immediately pulled his phone, sighing in relief when he was able to get a signal. He quickly dialed.

“Yo,” Darius said as he answered on the second ring.

“It’s Kent. I can hear Rita in my ear comms. Can you try to get my location from my tracker?”

“Okay, but what are you worried about?”

“She’s slurring her words, with the amount of blood at the scene of her abduction, I’m fearing she may have a concussion.”

“Got it,” Darius said, and Kent told him to halt. He had heard over the communication device in Rita’s ear that Vickers told her no one was looking for her.

“I don’t know for sure, but it sounds like Vickers has been monitoring our communications through the search and rescue radio. Based on what I just heard, I think he might have a police radio. Are the others still there with you?”

“No, only Sheriff Jim and Sparrow are here. Wait, Jake and Stone just pulled in.”

“Tell them to avoid using the police scanner as much as possible, I want to see if I can hear what he has to say, I can call you back with whatever information he imparts. Maybe it will help Jim out.”

“Understood. I’ve got the location of your cell, unfortunately, we don’t have GPS locations for the communications. Wait, I just found your tracker, it’ll be a few minutes to get your exact location. Do you want me to send the others to you when they’re done loading up the hiker?”

“Please, I don’t know what I’ll be walking into. It’s best to have backup. I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

“Roger,” Darius said, and signed off. Kent shook his head, looked at the dog, and gave the signal for him to proceed. He tuned into what was being said in his ear, and shook his head at the information he heard. He sent a quick text and pulled his earwig from his ear and put it up to the speaker to the phone. He hoped it would work and the others on the other end could hear what was being said. It was a long-shot, but it was all he had until he could find Rita. As he did this, he made sure he had hit record on his phone so if anything happened to Rita, he

had proof that Vickers had been the one to harm her further than he suspected she was already hurt. He knew he was within a mile of her location, because that was how the earwigs worked. Shaking his head, he continued to follow Tate to go rescue Rita.



“H-H-HOW DO I O-O-OWE YOU?” Rita stammered, and shook her head to try to straighten out her stuttering. It didn’t work, except to make her even more dizzy than she already was. She had no idea what was wrong with her. She only knew she had her hands tied behind her back, and her ankles were bound with tape. It was awkward trying to sit up, so she ended up leaning to the side to try and have a conversation with the psycho before her.

“You owe me because you cost me money, bitch. I had promised Petey that I would come through with a bait dog.”

“W-w-who’s P-P-Petey?”

“You’ll never live to tell anyone about it, so I might as well tell you. Oh, and before you get your hopes up that someone is coming after you, think again.” He gave an evil laugh that caused all the hair on Rita’s body to stand on end. She subtly sighed in relief when she heard Kent’s reassuring voice in her ear. She knew then to keep him talking.

“Petey Manchester is the guy who recruits guys like me to find the bait animals for the fights. His boss is even bigger and more important than he his.” When it looked like Rita was going to speak, he shook his head at her. “Like I said, you won’t live to get out of this cave, let alone to see the next sunrise, so I might as well tell you all.” He sounded so proud of himself, that if Rita had anything in her stomach, she would have lost it again.

Little did he know that several miles away, his conversation was being recorded and would be used against him in the very near future.

“As I was saying, Petey Manchester is the guy who recruits guys like me to get the animals for either bait or actual

fighting. It's not just dogs, either. He's also involved with cock fighting, and has six different places he holds these fights. Out of the six, three are for the cocks, three are for the dogs."

"W-w-where are these f-f-fights held?"

"Denver." Vickers sat on a rock and settled in to have a conversation with her. Rita remained silent so he didn't suspect she had someone on the outside listening in. She had heard Kent say that Sheriff Jim and others were listening to the conversation, and he and Tate were still making his way toward her.

"See," Vickers said conversationally. "In the hierarchy of the fighting business, myself and others are considered the lowest rung on the ladder. We need to prove we can get the job done before we can move up. Petey is what you would consider middle to upper management. He's not the top dog." Rita cringed when he laughed at his pun. "He's also not directly under the top dog, he's a couple steps down."

"W-w-who is the top dog?"

"Again, I'm only telling you this because you're going to die in about an hour, so it won't be a problem. Above Petey is Steve Benton. He's some big-wig executive in a downtown office in Denver. Some lawyer or something. Anyway, he's not important. His number-one client is the one that is important. Oh, everyone thinks Benton's calling all the shots, but he's not. It pays to have stupid friends like Elroy and Judd. See, they may act stupid to others around them, but they are great at gathering information. They stand there at the bar and listen to everything being said. They've even gotten jobs where they were able to interact with Benton and his client in a restaurant." He laughed again at his own private joke.

"S-s-so who is the p-p-private client?"

"Craig Collier." Vickers laughed again, and Rita could only barely shrug.

"W-w-who is he?"

"No clue," he laughed again. "All I know is that Petey is scared of him, and when he's running scared, the rest of us are

put to the test. As they say, shit runs downhill. I for one am getting sick and tired of getting shit on. This last bout is all because of you. It's all your fault. If I'm going to climb the ladder to be Mr. Collier's right-hand man, I need to eliminate all the roadblocks. I'm starting with you." Without any warning, he kicked out his leg and his boot made contact with Rita's chest. The impact caused her to lose her breath as she toppled over backward and screamed out in pain when her shoulders felt like they were ripped out of their sockets. The impact was so hard, that she hit her head and passed out again. If she was going to die, she didn't want to see it coming. She thought she heard a shout, but her world went black. She only prayed Kent would forgive her for giving up, and her father would be able to take care of Zeke for her.



OUT ON THE TRAIL, Kent was paying more attention to the conversation between Rita and Vickers that he hadn't noticed when Tate stopped in his tracks. He ended up tripping over him by doing a somersault to avoid stepping on the dog. In the process he dropped the phone and ear piece. It took a few moments to find them, and when he did, he looked at where Tate was staring. He saw the mouth of a cave and sighed in relief. He quickly put the earwig back in his own ear, then talked on the phone.

"Guys, Tate just alerted as to where we think Rita is. I'm going to investigate."

"Be careful," Cruz said. "Heads up, though."

"What's that?"

"We're making our way to you, but we'll be at least two hours behind."

"Why?"

"We ran into a problem getting Russell off the side of the mountain. It's okay now and Logan just left with the chopper. He has Marvin and Zeke with him. We have Tank with us. Marvin gave us a quick rundown on how to handle him. Mason has control of him."

“Good. But what is the problem?”

“The storm is coming in faster than anticipated. I don’t know what it is like in your location, but the wind is picking up here. It’s going to be slow going to try to reach you before the rain hits.”

“Roger that,” Kent hung up the phone and made sure his earwig was in place before he hunkered down beside Tate to take in the terrain. As he looked around from Tate’s vantage point, he could see scuff marks in the dirt. As he looked around, he shook his head, quickly stood, and went back up the trail a few yards, making sure Tate was at his heels. Kent made a quick decision. He removed both packs, and withdrew a bottle of water. Looking around, he nodded as he stepped off the trail, and messed up the ground before he poured the entire bottle of water into the area. He grinned as Tate cocked his head at him, his look said Kent had gone off his rocker. Using a branch, Kent stirred the water to make mud. He first took his fingers to test the consistency, he nodded as he smeared some on his face, then his forearms. He looked at Tate with a grin and quickly took up two scoops of the mud and rubbed it on the sides of the dog. He could have removed the vest, but he wanted to keep it on the dog to let him know he was still working. The mud was to dull the bright neon safety green. He nodded when he was satisfied the brightness had been toned down.

“Better,” Kent chuckled as he ran his dirty hands over Tate and then he stood to wipe them on his pants. He picked up the leash as they made their way to the spot Tate had alerted Kent to earlier. With a short leash, man and animal slowly made their way to the entrance. He didn’t hear anything in his earwig, and started to become worried that he might have lost Rita. Suddenly, Tate stiffened at his side and gave the tiniest growl Kent had ever heard. He looked at the dog, he whipped his head up to see what had his attention and quickly hunkered down beside Tate. Together, they watched as a man came to the entrance to the cave. It was getting dark, but the setting sun shone in his face, and Kent knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was Timothy Vickers. To prove his point in the future,

he quickly pulled out his phone and began snapping photos of not only Vickers, but also of the surrounding area.

Kent thanked the higher power that he had a firm grip on Tate's leash, because suddenly a loud crack of thunder sounded overhead. Kent smirked at Tate when they both saw Vickers duck, and feel his front like he had been shot. Close enough to hear the other man swear, Kent watched as Vickers turned on his heel and disappeared back into the cave. Kent knew nothing of the surrounding terrain, and didn't know if this was a cave used for mining, or was just a hole in the side of the mountain. Going on a whim, he sighed in relief when he had a weak signal. He sent the photos to Sheriff Jim, along with a quick explanation. The second text he sent was asking what that particular cave was used for. He had gotten the coordinates from his phone before sending it. As he waited for a response, he studied the area around him, and sighed in relief when the answer was quick in coming.

It turned out that it was just a cave, but according to Jim, about a mile away was an entrance to a mine that would eventually connect with that particular cave. It helped to have the sheriff with a set of blueprints, and knowledge of the area. Kent sat on his haunches, trying to make a decision. When another round of thunder sounded, with the wind picking up and lightning off in the distance, he made a quick decision. Keeping low to the ground, he started toward the area Jim had said was an entrance to the mine. After he picked up both packs, he stood, confident he wouldn't be seen, then started away from the cave. As he walked, he explained what he was doing and why. He only nodded to the dog when he seemed to understand what Kent was saying. When he was confident in the direction he was going, he paused long enough to send a text to his former teammates to tell them what he was doing. He had also sent the pictures of Vickers at the mouth of the cave, so they knew who to look for, and then the coordinates to both the cave, and the entrance to the mine that Jim had sent him. Confident his buddies would have his back, he picked up the leash and told Tate to double-time it to their destination.



## CHAPTER 19



TIMOTHY VICKERS WENT BACK into the cave and made his way over to the woman lying on the ground. He kicked her feet, but when she didn't move, he kicked her in the ribs as he leaned down and screamed in her face. "Wake the fuck up, bitch!" When she refused to move, he reached in, used a punishing grip on her jaw and turned her face toward him. He sucked in his breath when he saw all the blood on the side of her head. He immediately dropped her head, jumped back, reached up and pulled his own hair.

"Fuck!" he screamed into the cave. Before he panicked anymore, he reached down and felt for a pulse at her neck. It took a few minutes, but he finally felt one and breathed easier. He hated that he had to wipe the blood off his fingers onto his pants. Panicking, he jumped to his feet to give her feet one last kick to see if she would wake up. "As much as I want you dead, I don't want to be around when you kick the bucket," he said, and looked around wildly. With nothing to take with him, he left Rita lying unconscious in a small pool of her own blood and ran for the entrance to the cave. As soon as he rushed out into the open, he screamed as a bolt of lightning came from the sky and struck. Vickers never felt himself fly through the air, or his back hit the solid wall of stone behind him. The only thing he remembered was that he smelt burning skin before he made contact with the ground.

Kent made his way around to where he thought another entrance was, and didn't hesitate to extend Tate's leash to give him the lead. What seemed like hours, but was only about twenty minutes, Tate alerted that he had found the entrance.

Kent gave him a treat, then strapped on his pair of night-vision goggles. As soon as he stepped into the small entrance, a rumble of thunder could be heard overhead. He and his dog exchanged worried looks, and Kent looked at Tate with a grin. “At least the thunder will mask our approach.” The dog seemed to agree with him, and quickly started off. He ended up going one way, but quickly turned around and went another. When he did it the second time, Kent realized they were in an area that broke off in five different directions. He quickly pulled out a florescent marker to toss into the entrance to indicate that was the wrong way. Luckily he had different color ones, and he had tossed red ones inside. It ended up that the fourth hallway Tate took was the correct one. Kent paused and used a green stick to mark that as the correct one. He paused long enough to send out a text to tell the people on the outside what he was doing.

It was faint, but the entire time he made his way to Rita, he had heard thunder booming overhead. The deeper into the cavern, the narrower the path. At one point, he had to remove both packs and push them through. Thankfully, Tate was able to make it through ahead of him, and came back to use his teeth to pull the packs through the small opening. Kent had kept his leash strapped to his wrist as a precaution so he wouldn't take off without him. As soon as he was through the small tunnel, the room they entered opened up and there were only two trails that led off that main room. As soon as the packs were re-strapped to Kent, they both froze and stared at each other in horror when they heard someone scream.

Both man and dog waited until the sound died down, and headed in the direction they thought it came from. Everything seemed to echo off the cavern walls. Kent dropped a green flare in the hallway and prayed it was the correct one. At the other end, Tate stopped suddenly when another ungodly scream rent the air. Kent looked around wildly and saw the entrance to the cave and winced when he saw a flash of lightning crash down and hit the person standing in the center of the opening. He only hoped it wasn't Rita. Before he could think of anything else, he lunged forward when Tate pulled at his leash.

Kent let him have his space, and sighed in relief when he saw Tate make a beeline to a prone figure. When the dog started whimpering, Kent quickly made his way forward. He sucked in his breath when he saw Rita lying there in a prone position. Before he helped her, he removed both packs, staked Tate's leash in the ground close to Rita, and with his gun drawn, he went to investigate what he had witnessed at the front of the cave.

It was slow going, but his progress was masked by the sounds of thunder and lightning coming from outside. Once he made it to the entrance of the cave, he lifted the NVG up and slowly looked outside. He winced when he saw Timothy Vickers lying on the ground several yards from the cave. Slowly, with his gun drawn, he approached. As soon as he was closer, Kent shook his head sadly. He could tell by the position of the body that he was dead. To make sure, he approached, squatted down, then felt for a pulse. Nothing. That was when he saw that one of his shoes was missing and the burnt flesh on the limb was actually smoking.

"Shit," Kent whispered as he pulled his phone. It ended up being the satellite phone, because there was no signal on his cell. He sighed in relief as it was answered before the third ring.

"Faulkner," came the barked reply.

"Jim, it's Kent. I'm at the cave. Vickers is dead."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, it looks like he was hit by lightning."

"And Rita?"

"I'm going back inside to check on her. She was unconscious when I found her, but I wanted to get to Vickers first."

"I understand, I would have done the same thing. Call back when you get an update on her. I'll tell the others that you found her."

"Thanks, Jim." Kent rang off and made his way back to Rita. The first thing he did was pull his phone and take

pictures. He wanted evidence, though he didn't know why, since the person who had kidnapped her was dead. After the photos were taken, he quickly untied her hands and feet, then laid her gently on her back. He assessed her injuries and winced when he got to the wound on her head. Before he began, the first thing he'd done was check for a pulse. It was weak, but steady. Once she was laid out, he made sure he had put one of those silver emergency blankets beneath her, and made sure she didn't have any broken bones. Satisfied he didn't find any on her limbs, he was unsure of her ribs. He did see severe bruising on both sides, and made Tate lie down next to her to keep her warm. The entire time he worked on her she never made a sound or moved. He knew she was unconscious, and expected a severe concussion from the wound on her head. He took his time to bandage it. When there was nothing more he could do for her, he picked up the phone and made his way to the entrance to the cave. The first thing he did was to make sure Vickers's body was still there. He sighed in relief when it was right where he had left it. Before making his call, he decided to go back in and remove another silver emergency blanket from the pack. He placed it over the body and held it down with some rocks. As much as Kent wanted to revive the man and kill him all over again for what he had done to Rita, it would be cruel of him to leave him exposed to the elements. Besides, there was no telling the amount of evidence they could get off him.

By the time he had him covered, there was a loud crack of thunder, then the skies opened up and it began pouring rain in sheets. He stepped several feet into the cave to make his call. Again, he sighed in relief when it was quickly answered.

“It's Palmer.”

“What do you have?”

“She's alive,” Kent said first, and paused when a cheer went up on the other end of the line. Kent closed his eyes and nodded, though no one could see him. He pinched his nose, drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “She's hurt, bad. I didn't find any broken bones, but there is severe bruising on her torso. I suspect she may have broken ribs, or cracked one.”

“Okay, but why do you say she’s hurt bad?”

“She’s unconscious, she never made a sound while I worked on her. She had a deep laceration on her head and there was a pool of blood. I’m suspecting a severe concussion.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. I have her bandaged to the best of my ability with the supplies I have on hand, and Tate is keeping her warm. I don’t know what it’s like where you are, but the skies just opened up here.”

“Yeah, it’s not here yet, but it’s coming. I can actually see the wall of rain move in the distance. Bishop was on standby, but he radioed in to say he can’t fly in this. You’re on your own until this blows over, or morning comes. Whichever comes first.”

“I understand. I’ll hunker down here and keep her calm. Any word on Zeke?”

“None yet. Now that you’ve found her, I’ll radio into your team and clear up here to head over to the hospital.”

“Okay.” Kent went to sign off, then shouted at the last second. “Wait!”

“What?”

“When Logan gets here, do you want us to bring in Vickers’s body?”

“Let me get with Bishop to see how much room he’ll have. I’m assuming you and your dog want to fly down with Rita?”

“That’s a given.” Kent scowled at the phone as he shook his head at the statement.

“Let me do my thing here, then I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks, Jim.” They rang off, and before Kent rushed back to Rita’s side, he was able to find a few items just inside the entrance of the cave. With his arms loaded, he went back and was able to quickly make up a fire. Knowing he would be there all night, he moved Rita closer to keep her warm, then

set about getting food ready for Tate, then himself. The entire time he worked, Rita never woke.

With nothing but time on his hands, and nothing to do until the raging storm outside abated and the rescue team arrived, Kent sat on one side of the fire and began talking. He knew she couldn't hear him, but he told Rita everything about himself. From growing up, all about his military career, and how he felt about her. By the time he was ready for bed, his throat was raw from all the talking. He took Tate out before he settled down for the night, then very gingerly lay on the other side of her. Between man and beast, they kept Rita between them warm and dry. Before he fell asleep, Kent looked down at Rita and whispered as he leaned in and kissed her forehead. "I think I'm falling in love with you. You don't have to worry now, sleep. I won't let anything happen to you on my watch." He settled down and with his arm around her, and his head on her shoulder, he quickly fell asleep.

The sky outside was just beginning to lighten when Kent felt a wet tongue on his cheek. He smelt the puppy breath and laughed as Tate continued to lick his face to get him to wake up. The first thing he did was check on Rita, and sighed in disappointment when there was no change. He quickly grabbed the book he'd taken notes in the day before and wrote down his observations. As soon as he stood, he took Tate outside to do his business. The first thing he did once outside was to look over to see if Vickers's body was still there. He sighed in relief when it hadn't moved. Not that he expected the man to rise from the dead and come after them, but it was nice to know his assessment of the guy was correct and that he was, in fact, dead.

Back in the cave, he stoked the fire, got a pot of coffee started, then fed Tate. As the dog ate, Kent munched on a cold sandwich and checked on Rita. After breakfast, he washed his hands using disinfectant wipes, then set out changing her bandage over her head. He winced in the light of day at the bruise the wound had caused. One side of her entire face was black and blue. If Vickers wasn't already dead, Kent could have killed him for what he had done to Rita. He shook his head and he finished, then cleaned up the bandages, stuffing

them in a plastic bag. He would take them with him, and not leaving them for predators to find. He didn't need four-legged animals to come looking for Rita when they smelled her blood.

He sat there and sipped his coffee and watched as the sun rose higher. At the mouth of the cave, he stood there and watched not only the sky lighten, but a mist slowly rise over the valley below. At a sound he quickly tossed his coffee to the side, set the cup down, and as he rose, his pistol was in his hand. He stepped back into the shadows, and it took about five minutes, but finally Mason, Cruz, Asher, and Ryder came strolling up the hill. With his gun still in his hand, but down to his side, he stepped out into the light.

"Morning," he called out, and saw relief on their faces.

"Please, tell us you have coffee," Mason grouched as he was the first to reach Kent, and gave him a man-hug with a slap on the back.

"At the fire," Kent said as he pointed over his shoulder, and greeted the rest of his buddies the same way. He waited until they all entered, removed their packs and pulled out a cup from their own gear. In no time, there were two more pots of coffee brewing on the fire. They had been in the military so long, that they knew how to be completely self-sufficient when out on a mission.

Cruz squatted before the fire with his hands out to warm them. He looked at Kent with a scowl. "We didn't have a fire last night, it was too wet." He looked over at Rita and shook his head, but used his chin to indicate the woman still lying there. "How is she?"

"Not good, she hasn't woken since I found her. By the amount of blood I found pooled beside her head, she was hit pretty hard. I think she's in a coma."

"Damn," the others said as they shook their heads. It was Ryder who went over and inspected her. He quickly agreed with Kent's assessment. They watched Tank greet Tate, then sniff Rita. After two or three minutes, he laid down beside her and settled with his head on his front paws. Kent smiled when Tate mimicked his actions.

“What’s with the fire blanket outside?” Asher asked after he filled his coffee cup from the fresh pot.

“That’s how I found Vickers. Don’t quote me, but I would say he was struck and killed by lightning.”

“No shit,” Mason said as he jumped to his feet and made his way to the front of the cave. The others quickly followed him. In no time they had the blanket off the body and again agreed with Kent’s assessment. They covered him back up and returned to the fire.

“Did you call it in?”

“Yes, Jim said Bishop refused to fly in last night’s storm, and should be here sometime today.”

“I’m guessing he’s going to wait until the mist clears. You flying down with Rita?”

“I am, and I asked what he wanted to do with Vickers’s body. Sheriff said he’d let me know.” Kent shrugged and refilled his own cup with the hot brew. He sat down next to Rita and laid his free hand on her thigh. “I imagine Bishop will wait until the mist clears.”

“Probably.” They all agreed, and didn’t say anything that they had just mentioned that to him, as they sat there in silence and drank their coffee.

An hour later, they rushed to the entrance when they heard a helicopter overhead. It seemed to hover, then took off, but was back fifteen minutes later. The men on the ground waited as someone was lowered, and once he gave the signal that he was safely down, with the rope still hanging out of the chopper, it took off. The man who came down hurried toward them.

“Stone,” the others said as one. “What’s up?”

“Bishop found a clearing further up the mountain. I’m here to assess the situation and see if we can’t get Rita up there for take-off” The men were so self-sufficient that they knew they would have to use their body bags to get Rita and Vickers up to the helicopter. Kent winced at the thought of putting Rita inside one, but he knew he didn’t have to zip it up. However,



they would zip Vickers in his. They waited for Stone to check out Rita, then Vickers's body. He stood up and shook his head.

"Yeah, that looked like an ugly way to go, but after seeing the damage to Rita, he deserved it."

No one said anything as they cleaned up their area, doused the fire, then they all gently put Rita into a black body bag, only zipping it up to her chest. With her ready, they went outside placed Vickers in his, zipping it completely shut. With Tate and Tank leading the way, the six of them took turns carrying both Rita and Vickers up to the helicopter waiting for them. Luckily, it was only two miles, and it took them an hour to do it. As soon as they were loaded in, the men hopped inside, along with the two dogs, and Bishop nodded to them.

"Where to?" the pilot asked.

"Denver," Stone said, and held up his hand when Kent tried to object. "I'm basing this on Rita's injuries. She's been unconscious for more than twenty-four hours. They have a wider variety of doctors to work on her." Before Kent could object any further, Stone radioed in and when he was done, he looked back at Kent.

"Marvin will meet us there."

"Okay." Deflated, Kent sat back and kept his hand over Rita's as they flew toward their destination.

## CHAPTER 20



KENT LOOKED up when a woman dressed in a set of green scrubs entered the room, and only turned his head to look at her tiredly. It had been almost twenty-four hours since his former teammates had met him at the cave on the mountain and they had been flown to the hospital in Denver. Kent had opted to stay, while the others had taken not only his stuff, but also his dog home with them. Kent had refused to leave until he knew how Rita was.

“Chambers?” the woman in green asked, and since Kent was the only one currently in the waiting room, he slowly stood. The woman came directly to him. “Are you here for Rita Chambers?”

“Yes, I’m her boyfriend, I found her, also. Her father stepped out.”

“Okay, first, I saw the condition she was in, I don’t know if you’ve had medical training before or not, but I agree with what you did to stop the bleeding of her head wound.”

“I was combat medical in the military for twenty years.”

“Oh, wow, okay. If you ever want a job here, I’d give you a recommendation.”

“Thanks, but I don’t have any formal schooling. All my experience came from the military.”

“Okay. Well, it’s going to be a long hard road, but Ms. Chambers will recover, in time.”

“What’s that mean?” Kent asked, and held up his hand when Marvin walked in. They waited until the older man joined them. “This is Rita’s father.”

“Hello, as I was saying, Ms. Chambers will recover, but it will be a long road. She is still currently in a coma. It’s natural and drug-induced.”

“Why?” Kent demanded.

“The natural coma is because of the hit on her head. The drug-induced is in case she wakes up, we can still keep her under to help her heal. Don’t worry,” she quickly reassured them. “We’ll only keep her on those drugs until she shows signs of improving.” The doctor shook her head and rubbed the back of her neck. “The hit to the head did a lot of damage. I’m sure you know we took her immediately to surgery. We saw a blood clot on her CT scan. When we got inside, it was larger than we anticipated, and her brain started swelling.”

“What will be her recovery for her regular motor functions?” Marvin demanded.

“I think once the swelling goes down and she wakes up, then she should make a full recovery. It’s going to be a long haul, but with support, and patience, she can make it back to her regular self.”

“Thank god,” both men said at the same time, and turned back to the doctor.

“What else?” Kent asked.

“As I just said, she had major brain surgery to remove the clot, and her brain swelled. Other than that, she has several broken and cracked ribs. Whoever kidnapped her, they worked her over pretty well. The other reason we’re keeping her in a drug-induced coma is so that her ribs have a chance to start healing. We’ll be keeping her in the ICU until she wakes up naturally. That is even after we take her off the drugs.”

“Do you have a timeline as to when she might wake up?” Marvin asked as he reached out and gripped Kent’s shoulder tightly.

“No. As I said, we’ll keep her on the drug-inducing coma drugs for a couple of weeks, then wean her off them. It will be up to her when she wakes up.”

“Can we see her?” Kent asked.

“She’s in recovery now, but once she’s transferred to ICU, you can see her for ten minutes at a time, but only every two hours.”

“Okay.” Kent nodded and watched as the doctor turned and walked away. He helped Marvin to his seat, and together the two of them sat there for a long time in utter silence. They didn’t become aware of their surroundings again until Sheriff Jim Faulkner and Jake Coghurn walked into the waiting room.

“You okay?” Jake’s question brought them out of their stupor, and he sucked in his breath at the anguish he saw on their faces. “Talk to me,” he demanded, and pulled up a chair to sit next to them.

“Rita’s out of surgery,” Kent began with a shake of his head. “They have her in a drug-induced coma because she has brain swelling. They’re going to keep her that way for a couple of weeks.”

“Anything else?”

“Broken and cracked ribs.”

“What else?”

“Nothing, they won’t know anything until the brain swelling is reduced and they take her off the drugs. Then it will be up to her to wake up.”

“Okay, if you need anything you let us know.” Jake squeezed Kent’s forearm and said the same thing to Marvin.

“What did you find out?” Kent asked the sheriff when he pulled up a chair and took his notebook from his pocket.

“I’d like to get your official statement.”

Kent nodded and said everything he could remember. It took some time, and when he was done, he would say Jim nodded in satisfaction as he put his notebook away.

“Okay, I’ll go back and type that up, so when you get a second, stop into the station and sign it.”

“What aren’t you saying?” Kent asked after several minutes of silence.

“We have everything you were able to get us through the earwig on tape. We’ve begun our investigation, and it turns out Vickers was right. There are illegal cock- and dog-fighting rings here in Denver.” Jim held up his hand to halt what Kent might have said. “I can’t give you details of an ongoing investigation, all I can say is that the names he dropped are being investigated as we speak. At this point, on a scale of one to ten, I would say the information Vickers bragged about hits a nine on that scale. We have a lot more of investigating to do before we can make any arrests.”

“I have a question.” Marvin spoke then.

“What’s that?”

“Do you think any of the people you’re investigating had anything to do with Vickers’s attack on my daughter?”

“No.” Jim was adamant on his response. “Based on what Vickers told Rita, he acted on his own because she embarrassed him by kicking him out of the search and rescue program. He wanted to climb the ladder in this illegal fighting ring and felt your daughter had thwarted his attempts to move up. His attack on her was strictly personal. Rest assured, if in the course of our investigation we find these people had something to do with the attack on Rita, those charges will be added to the ones already pending.”

“Thank you, Jim.” Marvin nodded and stood to go over to the window to stare out.

Jim leaned forward so he was closer to Kent, and lowered his voice. “You going to be able to keep an eye out on Marvin while Rita’s here? He looks like he’s taking it hard.”

“I can.”

“Good, if you need anything, just like Jake said, let me know.” They stood and quickly left. Kent remained seated, and studied the man staring out the window. An hour later they

were told they could go in and see Rita. Kent let Marvin go in first, because he hadn't seen her while she'd been in the cave. He didn't know whether it shocked him or not when Marvin asked Kent to go in with him. The nurses allowed it, but said that it would be only this one time.

Kent knew what he would see, but he wasn't ready for Marvin's response, he had to catch the guy before he hit the floor and man-handled him over to the chair. He didn't say a word when Marvin lowered his head and burst into tears. Kent ignored him, but paid attention to him, as he walked over to the other side of the bed, picked up Rita's hand, and kissed the back of it. He started talking to her and scowled when Marvin yelled at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Talking to her. I believe that she can hear me.”

Marvin sat there for several minutes before he got himself under control. In no time he stood, took Rita's other hand, and talked to her. At one point Kent told him to tell her about Zeke. At the other man's scowl, he explained that her last sighting of her dog was lying there with a knife sticking out of his side. Marvin nodded and told her everything the vet had done, and how fast Zeke was healing. The entire time Marvin talked, Kent watched the monitors, and he swore her heart rate lowered when she was reassured her dog was alive and on the mend.

They ended up staying there for fifteen minutes before they were told they had to leave. In the hall, the nurse said they couldn't come back until after two that afternoon. Since it was only seven in the morning, the men opted to go home, get cleaned up, try to get some sleep and return.

On his way home, Kent stopped by The Centre to pick up Tate and update the guys on Rita's progress. He didn't stay long, and with Tate in tow, he went to his apartment and quickly showered. Not wanting to eat, he made sure Tate was fed and secure before he went to his bedroom and crashed face first on the bed. He didn't move until there was pounding on his front door hours later. The first thing he noticed was Tate

was glued to his side, and after he peeled himself away from the warm body, he slowly made his way to the door. He looked down and grinned when he realized he only wore sweat pants.

He whipped open the door and stared at the man standing there.

“Marvin, is everything okay?”

“Yes and no, but mainly no. Can I come in?”

“Sure,” Kent said as he stepped aside, and quickly told the older man he would be right back. He took Tate out for a walk, and when he returned he smiled at the cup of coffee Marvin placed on the counter. He raised his brows at the plate of scrambled eggs and toast.”

“Sorry, I cook when I’m upset.”

“Okay,” Kent said, and quickly sat at the counter. He smiled when Marvin greeted Tate with a treat, then put food and water in his dishes.

Kent ate and watched Marvin as he puttered around the kitchen. He finally cleared his throat, and when the older man looked at him, he only raised a brow at him.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Okay, you didn’t have to butter me up with a meal, but I thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Marvin drew in a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “What are your feelings for my daughter?”

“I like her.” Kent didn’t hesitate in his response. “Before we went out looking for that missing hiker, we had already been on one date, and were making plans for a second one.”

“Okay, then what I have to propose to you might work out better than I planned.”

“Which is?”

“I can go back to CSAR and continue training you and the others. I’ll have Julie and Scott’s help. I’m not being heartless, but just because my daughter is in the hospital, it doesn’t mean the training class has to suffer.” He shook his head at the

younger man. “If you recall, I ran CSAR for decades before retiring earlier this year. I know what I’m doing.”

“I agree. I was going to see when it would continue.”

“Scott and Julie did it yesterday, and I’ll take back over starting tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good, now this next part is harder.”

“Okay.” Kent drew the word out, and only sipped his coffee as he looked at the older man. He could tell he was struggling with what he wanted to say, but Kent remained silent.

“As much as I love Zeke, I don’t think it would be wise to bring him home from the vet’s office and take him to my place.”

Kent remained silent and let the man finish his thought. “If you wouldn’t mind, I was wondering if you and Tate could move into Rita’s house while she’s in the hospital to take care of Zeke and her house.

Kent cocked his head to the side and scowled, but the longer he thought about it, the more he thought that was a good idea. It would give the dog a better chance of healing faster if he was surrounded by his things.

“Before I answer, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I don’t know if you know this or not, but I was in the military for twenty years.” At Marvin’s scowl, Kent grinned. “Air Force. I was in a Special Warfare division. Anyway, my team didn’t have a K-9 or a handler, but we had worked with them in the past. On two different occasions, I witnessed the handler getting killed in the line of duty.” Kent nodded when Marvin said he was sorry, but shook his head. “The first time it happened, the teammates of the handler immediately removed the dog, and wouldn’t let him near the dead body. I later found out the dog was decommissioned because he couldn’t perform his duties after his handler’s death.”



“Okay, what was the second occasion?”

“On the second occasion, when the handler was killed, the team allowed that dog to ride with his master’s dead body back to base. The dog was fine to work with another handler, and continued his career for another three years before he was retired.”

“What’s your question?”

“Why was that first dog unable to continue, while the second one could?”

“It’s easy really. Dogs know when their handlers, in your case, or owners in Zeke and Rita’s case, are dead. They smell it, and I don’t know how a dog’s mind works, but they seem to be able to process it better if they see the dead body. That first team you described thought they were helping the dog by not allowing him to grieve over his handler’s death. In the long run, it hurt him when he couldn’t perform any longer. While on the other hand, the second team you described was able to let that dog grieve, so when the new handler arrived, he was ready to move on.”

“Okay, that’s what I thought. Now, what do you think if we brought Zeke to the hospital to see Rita?”

Kent thought Marvin would veto that idea immediately, but the longer he took to respond, the clearer his expression became. “I think that might work. If you agree to move into Rita’s house, then we could continue with his routine. You could bring him and Tate to the center for training. Zeke can stay up front with me and Tank, while you and Tate train. Afterward, if you want, I can take Tate home with me, while you take Zeke to the hospital. I don’t think it should be an everyday experience, but maybe a couple times a week.” He paused and studied the other man hard. “I’m assuming you’ll be at the hospital every day?”

“Until she comes home, yes.” Kent nodded as he rose and took his dishes to the sink. “I only see one problem with me moving into Rita’s house.”

“And that is?”

“I’ll have to talk to Spencer Barnes first.”

“Who is that, and why?”

“He is a friend of mine, I met him while we were on different missions for the military. He owns this apartment, and I’m only sub-letting it from him.”

“Do you think he’ll give you any hassles?”

Kent shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ll call him after I get a shower. When does Zeke get out of the vet’s office?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay, I should have an answer by then. Do you want to take Zeke to the hospital right from the vet’s office?”

“We can, I know I can take Tank home and leave him there, what about Tate?”

“I know it’s not right, but I don’t feel good about leaving him by himself yet. I could take him with us, or I could see if Julie would keep an eye on him for a few hours.”

“We can work something out.” Marvin shook his hand and left, saying he would meet him at the hospital in a few hours. After he showered and dressed, Kent put a call into Spencer, and wasn’t surprised that his friend agreed that it would be a good idea for him to move into Rita’s place so Zeke would feel comfortable. He also promised to leave the apartment available until after Rita woke and went home. On a happy note, Kent left Tate in his crate and made his way to the hospital. He figured he’d only be a couple of hours that day, so leaving him alone should be fine.

The visit was uneventful, and before he left, both he and Marvin talked with the nurse on duty and the doctor about their plans for bringing Zeke in the next day. Though reluctant, the doctor agreed to it as long as he was on a leash and controlled at all times.

## CHAPTER 21



THE NEXT TWO weeks set a pattern for Kent. He would get up in the morning and take care of both Tate and Zeke, make his breakfast, and either go to the training facility to continue to train Tator, or to The Centre to train both dogs. In the afternoon, he would leave Tator with either Marvin or Julie, and take Zeke to the hospital with him. Zeke was still healing from the attack on him, but was coming along nicely. The thing about all of his activities that shocked him was that the hospital allowed him to bring Zeke in to see Rita as she lay in her coma. During the first two visits, he had to pick Zeke up and place him on the bed, but after a week, he was able to jump up there by himself. He would sniff Rita, lick her face, then settle at the foot of the bed by her feet. As the dog snoozed, Kent talked to Rita, telling her about his day, and how he was with both Tator and Zeke.

On Friday of the end of the second week with Rita being in the hospital, he was late getting there because Zeke had an appointment with the vet to make sure his stitches could be removed. Since both Julie and Marvin had plans, he had both dogs with him. It shocked him that Tator acted docilely at the vet's office. As soon as they were back in his truck and settled in, he took off toward the hospital.

Walking down the hall with both dogs, Kent stopped several feet from the entrance to Rita's room when there was a lot of activity going on around. He paused and positioned himself to be able to look in, and sighed in relief. He waited until most of the hospital staff exited, then walked in, still wearing a gigantic grin.

“You’re awake.” He could have slapped himself for that inane comment, but was rewarded with a grin when Rita turned her head and looked at him. He didn’t know if her eyes grew large at the sight of him, or her dog. He took it as him. He approached and Zeke immediately hopped up on the bed, sniffed her, then jerked back when she reached up to pet him. After giving him a rub down, he settled at the foot of the bed.

“I’m going to have to break him of that habit when I get home.” Rita shook her head as she looked at her dog at the foot of the bed. She looked up at him with a smile. “Thank you for bringing him here.”

Kent settled down in the chair next to the bed, the one he had occupied for hours in the past, and made sure Tator was beneath the bed, out of the way of any foot traffic.

“We’ve been coming here every day since Zeke’s been out of the vet’s office.” He held up his hand to stop what she was about to say. “We went there this morning, and he received a clean bill of health. The knife Vickers threw at him did some damage, but the vet thinks with the continued training, he will be fine. He missed any vital organs and major veins or arteries. However, the knife nicked the bone, and he might have stiffness. Your Dad and I have been working with him at the CSAR training classes.”

“Good, did Dad step in and resume the training?”

“Yes.” Kent paused, reached out and took her hand in his. “I don’t know if you know this, but you’ve been in a coma for the last two weeks. When I found you, you were out cold.”

“What happened to Vickers?”

“Dead.”

“Did you do it?”

“No, as much as I want to take credit for it, he was dead before I got to you.”

Rita scowled at him and cocked her head to the side. “How?”

Kent looked at her sheepishly, then couldn't contain his grin as he studied her. "Would you believe a bolt of lightning struck him when he stood at the entrance to that cave?"

"No!" Rita answered in shock.

"Yes, when I found him he was dead, I only felt for a pulse, then covered the body. The storm hit and we were alone in that cave until help came the next morning." He went on to tell her all that had been done and concluded his tale with, "The official cause of death for Vickers is weather-related death."

"Damn," Rita said as she took her free hand and scrubbed her forehead. She looked at him with a frown. "What about those people Vickers said that he was trying to get a rung up the ladder with? The people in charge of the fighting rings?"

"The last I heard, Sheriff Jim was working with someone in the Denver police force, and they were doing some heavy investigating before they went forward with any arrests. It turns out that Judd and Elroy Pickett had a lot of information to confirm what Vickers told you. They balked at the idea of taking you hostage. As soon as they were told Vickers was dead, they couldn't get their confessions out fast enough."

"Will they be charged with anything?"

"Not that I know of, they are helping, and they're also saying that your kidnapping was all on Vickers. They didn't even know he was going after you." Kent held up his hand with a shake of his head. "Sheriff Jim believes them."

"Okay, do you think I will have to give a statement?"

"Probably, but we can worry about that once you get out of here. I have to tell you that at Marvin's suggestion, I moved into your house." At her look of shock, he again held up his hand and shook his head. "He said it would be better for Zeke when he got home from the vet's. I know of two incidents when I was in the military that a K-9 handler was killed in the line of duty. The first one, the teammates refused to allow the dog to know he was gone. The dog didn't take it well, and refused to work with his new handler. They had to retire him.

The second time, the teammates allowed the dog to be with his handler during everything, even up to the funeral, and burial. He, the dog, went back to work with a new handler until he was retired three years later.”

Rita was quiet for some time before she nodded. She looked down at the foot of the bed and nodded again. “I can see where Zeke might have gone crazy when he woke from the vet’s and didn’t see me. Did he come to you when you picked him up?”

“I went with Marvin. He picked him up, and we both took him back to your house. Once you get out of here, I’ll make sure you’re settled in, then Tator and I can move out.”

“You don’t have to,” Rita whispered so faintly, Kent had to lean in to hear her.

“What did you say?”

Rita took a deep breath, winced at the pain in her ribs, and with an arm across her middle, she let the breath out slowly. “I said you don’t have to move out. We could see if what we had before my abduction is still there.”

Kent grinned as he leaned in and gently laid his lips over hers. “I’ll make sure that nothing happens to you on my watch.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said as she kissed him. She lifted her head with a grin. “Make sure you have the condoms with you when I get out of the hospital. I’m not saying we’ll do anything right away, but I want to be prepared for when I’m healed enough to do something.”

“That, I can do.” Kent leaned in and kissed her again. That was how Marvin found them, locked in a passionate embrace. He stepped back into the hallway to give them some privacy before he stepped in to see for himself that his daughter had survived her ordeal. He couldn’t wait to welcome Kent into his family. He could breathe easier knowing this daughter would be watched over while in Kent’s care.

# THE END

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Thank you for taking the time to read Kent's Watch. If you enjoyed this book, please give it some love and leave a review on your preferred site.

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# ABOUT DEANNA L. ROWLEY

Deanna has loved to read all her life. She was in the third grade when she fell in love with books while working in the school library. She turned that love of reading into writing. Now Deanna can be found in her writing cave, sharing her keyboard with her furbaby, reading, or making quilts.



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# ABOUT ELLE JAMES

ELLE JAMES also writing as MYLA JACKSON is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling author of books including cowboys, intrigues and paranormal adventures that keep her readers on the edges of their seats. When she's not at her computer, she's traveling, snow skiing, boating, or riding her ATV, dreaming up new stories. Learn more about Elle James at [www.ellejames.com](http://www.ellejames.com)

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