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"[Trinity: Military War Dog] is one of the best Military War Dog novels I have read in years! Thank you, Ronie!"

—Elgin Shaw, former Air Force handler to MWD Max J216





## OTHER BOOKS BY RONIE KENDIG

Trinity: Military War Dog (A Breed Apart #1)
Nightshade (Discarded Heroes #1)
Digitalis (Discarded Heroes #2)
Wolfsbane (Discarded Heroes #3)
Firethorn (Discarded Heroes #4)

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Print ISBN 978-1-61626-601-1

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Cover design: Müllerhaus Publishing Arts, Inc., www.Mullerhaus.net

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, OH 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America.

#### DEDICATION

To all the handlers and their amazing canine counterparts.

Dedicated especially to Vietnam-era handlers

who were forced to leave behind their best friends.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Special thanks to military handlers, who prefer to remain anonymous, for their help and direction.

Thanks to Elgin Shaw, a former Air Force handler and reader, who has encouraged me and shared his story of MWD Max in *Trinity: Military War Dog.* 

Thanks to my agent, Steve Laube, who remains steadfast and constant in an ever-changing industry. For \*not\* pushing me off the ledge but holding me back when I wanted to jump.

A million thanks to Julee Schwarzburg—editor extraordinaire!

Thanks to the Barbour team, relentless in their efforts to make our books successful: Rebecca Germany, Mary Burns, Shalyn Sattler, Elizabeth Shrider, Laura Young, Linda Hang, and Ashley Schrock.

Rel Mollet of RelzReviewz—tireless supporter of fiction but also one of the truest and most genuine people I have ever met.

#### LITERARY LICENSE

In writing about unique settings, specific locations, and invariably the people residing there, a certain level of risk is involved, including the possibility of dishonoring the very people an author intends to honor. With that in mind, I have taken some literary license in *Talon: Combat Team*, including renaming some bases within the U.S. military establishment and creating a new order of warriors within the Chinese Army. I have done this so the book and/or my writing will not negatively reflect on any soldier or officer. With the quickly changing landscape of a combat theater, this seemed imperative and prudent.

# Glossary of Terms/Acronyms

ACUs—Army Combat Uniforms

CLU—Containerized Living Units

CTT dog-Combat Tracking Team dog

DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency

FOB—Forward Operating Base

Glock—A semiautomatic handgun

HUMINT—Human Intelligence

IED—Improvised Explosive Device

JAG—Judge Advocate General

Klicks—Military jargon for kilometers

Lat-long—Latitude and longitude

M4, M4A1, M16A4—Military assault rifles

M203—A grenade launcher

MIA—Missing In Action

MP—Military Police

MRAP—Mine Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicle

MWD—Military War Dog

ODA452—Operation Detachment A (Special Forces A-Team)

RPG—Rocket-Propelled Grenade

SOCOM—Special Operations Command

SureFire—A tactical flashlight

TBI—Traumatic Brain Injury

UAV—Unmanned Aerial Vehicle



## **Prologue**



#### Kariz-e Sefid, Afghanistan Two Years Ago

Flames roared into the sky. A concussive boom punched the oxygen from the air. Eating an IED, the lead Cougar MRAP in the convoy flipped up. As if dancing atop the raging inferno. Shrapnel hurtled from the blast.

"Buffalo!" Sergeant Lee Dawson shouted into the mic, hoping to hear from the lead vehicle.

"Anything?" Gunnery Sergeant Austin Courtland coiled his hand around the lead of his Combat Tracking Team dog. Talon stood braced, alert. His bark reverberated through the steel hull in warning.

Lee slanted a glance at the "observer" who'd come along. "Report!" Peering through the cloud of black smoke and debris, he searched the chaos to make sure the others were still alive.

A breeze stirred the flames just in time to see an RPG streaking toward the front end of their MRAP.

"Get out, get out!" Courtland and Talon launched toward the back door.

"Oh cr—"

BOOM!

The MRAP bucked against the blast but held. Whiplash had nothing on the ramming sensation pounding into his chest now. Fire burst through the engine.

Fear of being cooked alive or choking to death on smoke shoved

Lee from the Cougar MRAP. Coughing and with a hand over his mouth, he choked out, "This way!"

Sand and dirt blasted up, peppering his face. Tiny grains and dust particles swirled under the blazing Afghan sun as he took cover, shouldering his way around the side of the mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle and out of their attacker's line of fire. Plumes of heat warbled along the hull.

"Find me some terrorists," Court shouted over the roar of the fire, then keyed his mic. "Base, this is Echo One. Ambushed and taking fire!"

Peering down the sights of his M16A4 gave Lee nothing but dirt...crumbled building with dirt...and more dirt. "I got nothin'."

"Same," came a shout from behind as Truitt "True" Anderson slid up behind him, a nasty cut across his cheekbone. "Where the *heck* did that RPG come from?" The muzzle of his M4 swept Lee's periphery.

Lee kept his sights aligned, adrenaline pumping through his system faster than the blood. "Court," he yelled over the gunfire that crackled in the blistering afternoon, "what d'you have?"

"Nothing!"

Staying behind the disabled vehicle, Lee searched the road. Only two buildings north. Several south. Focused ahead, he studied the structures. He scanned the roofs. Since the RPG's trajectory had been downward, whoever fired it held an elevated position. The roof of one didn't look strong enough to hold someone, and the other had more holes than coverage. He whipped back to the first, waiting. C'mon! Show your coward head so I can—

"Quirk, report!" Court shouted to the Buffalo team again.

Only crackling and the shouts of the other teams dragging the lead team to safety met the command. Mind locked on the white plastered structure with the right half of the front wall missing told him that's where the attack had originated.

"Use the drone?" Lee shouted, not lifting his gaze from the scope. "It's down!"

Lee wanted to curse. Everything had gone wrong. With the drone down, they'd have to do this the old-fashioned, bloody way. *Mano a mano*. Hand to hand.

Dark flashed in his reticle. "Court, two o'clock."

"Let's clear it out."

Sweat raced along the side of Lee's face and spine as he inched around the MRAP. His boot thumped against something. He glanced down—and flinched at the limp body of his buddy. On a knee, weapon still aimed at the building, he gripped the vest of Quirk, the young corporal.

Wide, unseeing eyes etched with the shock of the moment. Pressing his hand against the chest wound, Lee plunged into assessment mode, ignoring the warm wetness that squished through his fingers. The gaping hole— "Sniper!" *Sweet Lord, help us.* They were ambushed. Sniper. RPG. What prayer did they have left?

"Corpsman!" Lee gripped the man's vest straps. "Quirk, hey. Don't do this, man. No quitting."

Another Marine sprinted toward them, allowing Lee to refocus on breaking this ambush site. Breaking the sick cowards who hid and played lethal games of tag with U.S. troops.

He met the steely gaze of his fire-team members—minus one. Another trio of Marines joined them as their cover team. As he lifted the weapon and trained it on the building, he nodded to Court and True, then darted across the fifteen-foot space that separated the partially disabled convoy from the hideouts.

Halfway across, Court dove to the left.

Tat-tat-tat!

The report rang in Lee's ears as he threw himself against the plaster and cement wall.

"Base, this is Echo One, we need that air support—five minutes ago!" Court nodded to Lee before keying his mic again. "Going in."

Stacked—True behind with his M4 trained on the point of entry—Lee waited for the signal.

A tap on his shoulder.

Lee fired a short burst against the door handle. Balanced on left leg, he slammed his booted heel against the door. *Crack!* It whipped open.

Court stepped around him and tossed a hand grenade into the room. "Frag out!" He jerked back behind Lee, who spined the exterior wall.

Clink...clink...BOOM!

Lee threw himself into motion. Over the threshold, he registered the southernmost wall missing. He swung left. Dust puffed as he rushed

the darkened corner. Light streamed in, taunting the smoke and debris rustled by the grenade. Two steps in, one foot from the wall. His weapon grazed the smoke-drenched interior and cleared a path to the left. He heard Court step in and do the same to the opposite corner. Lee hustled toward the left corner, tracking back and forth, adrenaline on high.

To avoid fratricide Lee called, "Next man in," and hurried along the wall, pieing the room to divide up the coverage.

The swish of tactical pants preceded True as he entered. Effectively covering both corners and the door, the three-man team moved forward. To Lee's left a door boasted a spray of bullet holes. Half a window frame drooped against the wide-open maw in the rear.

"Clear," Court called.

A shadow killed the light.

Lee swung hard right. Movement skittered just beyond the hole in the wall. *Scritch-scritch—* 

"Stairs!" He hustled forward, staring down the muzzle of his weapon.

Behind him, he heard the others cluster. To his right, the wall was missing. To the left, cement and darkness—and that's where the mystery guest had gone. They were blind, so they'd have to use extreme caution. He took up a dominant position. Experience told him Court was behind him and True pulled up the rear.

Eyes trained on the corner in case someone rounded it, Lee knelt and focused on the smooth movement of the team. They'd done this dozens of times. Still, one careless mistake and they were dead.

Court's boots crunched against the dirt floor as he pied out to the right as far as possible. Then slowly advanced to increase his angle of fire farther into the dead space.

"Ready," Lee grunted.

"Move!"

They both angled into the open, True tailing. In the blazing afternoon sun, Lee cleared left—stairs! Just as he'd thought. Open, cement steps. No railing. Just a path up to the roof. He climbed two steps, knowing Court would be one step down and to the side. Lee turned to cover overhead, mentally noting his partner oriented to the front, to cover him from getting shot in the back.

Tracing the edge of the upper level with the tip of his muzzle flash

hider, Lee backstepped carefully up the stairs, sweeping. Covering. Pieing. Though adrenaline and a need to kill the puke who'd taken out the MRAP and killed Quirk sped through his body, Lee wouldn't take another step without fully clearing the area. As he approached the roof, he bent lower with each level until he crouched, the roof skimming his head.

Lee drew in his fears and harnessed them into taking out some cowards. Glanced to the side—to Court. Then True. Both nodded their readiness. He blew a breath from puffed cheeks. Gave a curt nod.

Court went first.

Lee and True followed, weapons ready. They hurried over the lip of the roof, scanning. . . chairs, blankets, a Styrofoam cooler. . . a small room jutted up from the middle.

Tension high, stomach knotted, Lee hurried toward it. Scissor-stepping, he swallowed hard, expecting an enemy combatant to leap out at any second. He and Court cleared the L-shaped corner with ease. Nobody. He was almost disappointed.

"Where are they?" True growled through gritted teeth.

Lee glanced around. Looked over the front of the building and shouted to the team, "Where'd they go?"

Raised arms and shrugs replied.

He kicked the knee-high wall. Cursed. Swiped the beads of sweat from his face and eyes. Another fire team streamed onto the roof. Confusion squeezed his brain. How could he have gotten away? They'd chased him up here. Lee saw him!

"Looks secure," one corporal said as he stalked across the terrace-like roof.

They needed to clear the other building. "Court," he said, looking around. He frowned. Where'd his partner go? Had he already headed for the other building? Lee started for the stairs.

"Let's see what some terrorists were eating and drinking while they waited to kill some Marines."

An ominous fear washed across Lee's shoulders. "No!" He spun—

Fire exploded. The concussion whipped his feet out from under him. Over his head. Lee felt himself sailing through the air, searing heat licking his backside. Then falling. . .falling. . .black.



#### Markoski Residence Baltimore, Maryland

 $T_{o}$  live a lie is to remain alive.

Military documents recorded his name as Dane Markoski. That he's the son of an American missionary and Russian father—Vasily and Eliana Markoski. That he joined the military at eighteen, immediately upon high school graduation. That he soared through the ranks and his distinguished career, replete with badges of valor and courage under fire that revealed his natural ability and ambition toward becoming a career Army officer. A man's man. A hero.

None of it true.

Barefoot, wearing only gray sweatpants, Cardinal—his handle, his only form of tangible identity for the last ten years—gripped the rope he'd anchored into to the steel support of his second-story loft bedroom and pulled himself off the ground. Hand over hand, he climbed, legs spider-posed and held out to maximize the workout to his abs and thighs.

When he reached the top, he gripped the ledge-like floor and performed twenty pull-ups. The reps burning, they taught him discipline. Reminded him that he was weak, that opportunity existed with every breath to become better—or weaker. The Gentle Art of Submission—Jiu-Jitsu—helped him harness the poison that threatened his life every day: anger.

Cardinal lowered himself and took the rope. Angling back, he

moved hand over hand, backward along the hemp that traced the length of his condo, his body parallel to the floor. Breathing hard, arms and abs on fire, he continued the workout he'd started hours earlier.

A fit body equaled a fit mind, the masters had always said.

So had his father. And it was the one thing the general had said that Cardinal heeded. . . willingly.

Behind him the bank of cantilevering windows sat open, allowing a balmy breeze from the Potomac that did nothing to cool or calm him. The news delivered last night served to be the harbinger of death. The final straw that would break the camel's back—his.

Unless Cardinal found a way to turn this around.

He must. Everything—everything—depended on it. Hours training his body and mind to focus and he had nothing. Straightened on the ground, he pressed his palms together and drew in a measuring breath, then slowly blew it out through puffed cheeks.

There, where the sun hit the window, stood a ghost of himself. More apropos than one would expect. What was left of him? Still had the black hair and blue eyes, but what lay beneath those eyes. . .who was it? Was *he* good enough to justify the listing of the commendation medals on his records? At thirty-three, he'd hoped to have more of a legacy than secrecy and anonymity.

Breath evening out, he stared. Willed that person in the glass to find the solution. Solve this disaster. He had a new enemy: time. Beyond the balcony, across the road and stretch of greenery, he spotted a woman jogging with her dog.

A tone flicked through the condo.

Cardinal pulled himself straight and plodded out of the gym, between the sofa and armchairs, to the Spartan kitchen, where he plucked his cell phone from the granite. He registered the number and hesitated. Then pressed the phone to his ear as he watched the woman make her way down the sidewalk. "Yes?"

"Code in."

Cardinal punched a button and the windows slid shut. "Cairo-One-Four-Two-Nine-Nine."

"What do you have?"

They were already breathing down his neck? "It's been six hours."

"I didn't ask what time it was." A long pause strangled the line. "You

don't have a single thing, do you?"

"What do you have?"

"This is not good. The longer we sit on our—"

He would not be made into the weakling here. "Do you have something useful to say, or is this just a social call?"

Wait. . . dog. His gaze snapped to the sidewalk, now occupied by a young mother pushing a stroller.

"I am socially telling you time is running out. If he finds out—"

"The only way he would find out is if I am betrayed. And the only people who can betray me are on this phone call. Since we both know the consequences for betrayal, I'll take it he doesn't know." Cardinal folded up his anger and tucked it under a cloak of civility.

"No need to get all James Bond on me, Cardinal."

"Bond is British and highly overrated." What...what did that file say? His mind rifled through the documents he'd studied and landed on one phrase: *military working dog*. "I have an idea."

"I knew you had it in you." The man's voice boomed with amusement. "What do you need?"

"I'll be there in twenty. Have a team ready."

Cleaned up and garbed in standard military issue, Cardinal drove down South Washington Boulevard to the geometric five-acre, fivering structure that was a nightmare to navigate for the uninitiated. He pulled up to the guard hut, showed his ID, and signed in.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Markoski. He's expecting you."

Cardinal drove through and parked. Inside, he made his way to the second floor. A door opened. General Lance Burnett emerged. "General."

"You're ten minutes late," Burnett said, without looking up from the file in hand. He continued down the drab gray hall, and Cardinal fell into step with him. "We got a lead."

Cardinal's heart skipped a beat, but he waited for the general to continue.

"There was activity on his account, but he must've smelled us snooping because the activity ended before we could get a lock."

"What type of activity?"

"Accessing bank accounts, e-mail, etcetera."

"Isn't that obvious? He knows better than that. I trained him."

"Apparently not well enough." Burnett slapped the file closed and

smacked it against his leg as he flipped the handle on a door and leaned against it.

"Where?"

"Didn't you just hear we couldn't get a lock?"

"Yes."

The general grinned. "Republic of Djibouti."

Cardinal slowed as they entered a conference room where six men in Naval uniforms waited with another team of six—analysts and experts. "Djibouti..." He hadn't seen that coming. "What's he doing there?"

"Hanged if I know."

"It's over 90 percent Islamic." A really bad place to hide when you were obviously white and American. Cardinal nodded to the sailors and took a seat near the head of the table.

The general dropped the file in front of him, roughed a hand over his face, and sighed. "Okay, let's get on with this. Markoski, these men have been briefed on what's happened. Tell us your brilliant idea."



#### Amadore's Fight Club Austin, Texas

"Watch your stance!"

Exhilaration swept through Aspen Courtland as she responded to her trainer's shout and realigned her feet, shoulder-width apart. She threw a jab and followed through with a right. Sweat dripped into her eye, stinging. Today. . .the anniversary. . .

Mario, her opponent, threw a hard right then tried a left jab.

*Block!* The thud against her gloves carried through her upper body. She flipped her mind into the ring again as the impact from his strike rattled down her arm.

Aspen countered and angled to the side. The move could frustrate him by preventing a return hit.

It'd been eight months since the news. But it hurt as if it'd happened today.

Breathing through her nose, jaw relaxed, she engaged a series of redundant punches, all numbing her mind. She couldn't let them get away with this. They had to...do something.

An uppercut.

Shielding, Aspen blocked Mario. Hands and shoulder forward. What if...what if she went in after him? The thought fueled her boxing. In quick succession she fired off several strikes. Going in there—yeah, real smart. Right into the heart of the Middle East, where Americans were served up with every meal.

A jab. A cross. Angling away.

Mario swung at her.

She blocked. So, she couldn't go alone. She'd need a team.

Again—right. Real smart. How would she get a team into the Middle East to track an invisible trail? She slammed a hard right. Connected with Mario's jaw.

"Nice—face!"

Too late. The counterpunch nailed her cheek. She stumbled backward, stunned.

"Take a break, Mario."

Aspen straightened and turned. "No, I'm good." Batting her gloves together, she drew in a ragged breath, hating the look on Amadore's face as he bent through the ropes and entered the ring. "I'm serious." Another tap of her gloves. "Let's do this."

"No, let's not."

Irritation squirreled through her intestines. "Why? I'm—"

"Fighting with fury." Gentle brown eyes held hers. "Not with focus."

He was right. She knew he was. But she had something to work off, and boxing provided the perfect outlet. "I'm good." Glancing around him, she found Mario still in the ring. "Ready?"

"No." Amadore pointed to Mario. "You do this, you never come in my club again. You hear me?"

Mario grinned and held up both gloves in surrender as he backed away then slipped through the ropes.

As her breathing evened out, she tamped down the anger that spiked. "I'm okay, Amadore."

"No." He cupped the back of her head and tugged her close. "What is wrong with my angel today? You are like a big storm off the coast when you come through that door. What gives?"

Aspen swallowed. Peeked into his eyes. . .and caved. He'd been a part of her life since she was a baby—her mother's father. "It's his

birthday." She stuffed her gloves against each other. "He would've been twenty-eight."

The peppering of silver along the sides of his face only made the barrel-chested, former pro boxer look more handsome and distinguished. Even now as the repercussion of her words hit him. "Ah yes. I remember."

Her gaze skirted the boxing ring and fell on the Lab curled up under a bench in the corner, his soulful eyes watching her. "Presumed dead." Her nostrils flared and her eyes stung. "Eight months," she said through ground teeth. "He was only missing eight months and they declared him dead." She fought the trembling in her lower lip. "I thought for sure, he would...that we would...find him."

"Oh my girl." His other arm came up as if to hug her, but Aspen ducked from his touch.

"No worries." Sucking up the dregs of her crumbling composure, she flashed him a thin-lipped smile. "They might have written him off. But I haven't. I'll deal with it."

"I am not sure your way of dealing with things is the right way."

She folded herself through the ropes. On the floor, she looked back up at him and shrugged. "Whatever works, right?"

"Aspen, wait." He was with her in a second. Nudging her to the side, he urged her toward a bench. "Sit."

With a huff, she plopped onto the wood. Using her teeth, she ripped the band and tugged off the gloves as he sat next to her.

"I worry about you."

She frowned.

"No. I see that look in your eye, and I know—this thing? It will end bad."

"It already ended." At least according to the U.S. Marine Corps. Unwinding the wraps from her hands, she tried to shove back the squall of emotion. "Ya know, what I can't figure out..." Her chest rose and fell as the words from the letters and e-mails from the military filled her mind. "Why...why would they declare him dead when there's no body, no proof he died?"

Sorrow pinched the middle-aged Italian's hard features.

"A little blood." She breathed heavily through her nose. "A dog tag with no evidence of a fight or scratches, and a dog with minor injuries." Her gaze automatically slid to the Lab, who pulled himself out from

under the bench and lumbered her way, head down. She smoothed a hand over his head as he sat between her feet. "It doesn't make sense."

"I understand, my angel, but..."

"There's no more 'but,' Amadore. Uncle Sam sealed the note." She climbed to her feet, the weight of the letter she'd opened today pushing against her.

He touched her arm. "Be careful."

She scowled.

"This thing you are planning, I see it in your eyes," he said as he rose and stood over her. "Be careful. Your father would kill me if I let something happen to you. Know what I mean?"

Her heart skipped a beat. How did he know? She opened her mouth to deny it, to deny she would go after Austin.

His laugh cut her off. "No, Angel. I know you better than you know yourself. There is a plan in that beautiful head of yours." The smile remained in place. "Which is why I stopped your session with Mario. That head wasn't in the ring. It was at home, still mourning his birthday."

Aspen tucked her chin. "He's all I've got left, *Nonno*." She drew up her shoulders. "I'm not going to let the Marines relegate my brother to the grave without a fight."



#### Pentagon, Arlington County, Virginia Two Days Later

Say it again."

Cardinal drew in a breath, tempering his frustration. "This isn't my first rodeo, to borrow your phrase, sir."

"Good. Then this should be better than expected." Undaunted, General Lance Burnett, the deputy director of Defense Counter-intelligence and HUMINT Center, popped the top of his umpteenth Dr Pepper of the morning and slurped from the can. With a satisfied sigh, he set it down. "Begin."

Flexing his jaw, Cardinal gave a curt nod. Practice never hurt. Wasted time, but never hurt. "We'll maintain my identity as Markoski. The interview—"

"Sir," Lieutenant Smith announced from the door. "We got Larabie on line 3."

Amusement twinkled in Burnett's eyes. "Let's hope you're as ready as you say."

Cardinal resisted the urge to smirk. "Let the games begin." He strode to the phone, lifted the handset, and pressed 3. "This is Dane Markoski."

"Ah, Mr. Markoski," her voice sailed through the receivers—his and the general's. Cardinal kept his gaze on the old man. "This is Brittain Larabie. You'd e-mailed me about—"

"Please. Can we keep the details"—he added hesitation and concern

to his voice to make this work. He'd never had a problem manipulating the media who manipulated the world. Great satisfaction could be gained from maneuvers like this—"Are you able to meet, Miss Larabie?"

"Um. . .yes. Yes I can. I will have a cameraman with me. You understand, for my own safety, I won't meet strangers alone."

"Alone, or not at all. I'm not trying to murder you, Miss Larabie. I want to tell the truth. I want to do what's right." That sounded all patriotic and gallant.

"Of course. What time and where?"

"Are you familiar with Reston ice-skating pavilion?"

"That's in Virginia."

"Correct."

"That's a bit out of my way, Mr. Markusky."

"Markoski." Why couldn't Americans get that right? No doubt they'd butcher his real last name. "And if it's an inconvenience, I can call—"

"No, it's fine. When shall we meet?"

"The sooner the better. Tomorrow night?" Silence plagued the line, and Cardinal tried to ignore the general waving his hand in a circle. "I'm out of time, Miss Larabie."

"That's fine. I had a dinner date, but I can reschedule."

"Eight o'clock." Cardinal hung up and turned to the general. "Everything is in my medical and military history files?"

"You're not the only good operative I have, Cardinal." General Burnett had never asked for Cardinal's true identity. But the old man probably had it locked in that steel vault he called a brain. All the same, Cardinal felt safer with the moniker than with his real name floating around in paperwork and cyberspace.

Burnett motioned to his lieutenant, who slid a file across the table. "Larabie is best friends with Courtland's twin, Aspen."

Why did people name their kids after cities? Cardinal retrieved the file and lifted it. "Odd. What, are they dating?" He glanced down.

"I sincerely doubt that."

Dread poured through Cardinal's stomach, freezing like an iceberg as he met the blue eyes of a curly haired beauty. He darted his gaze to the general. "A woman?" His pulse thunked against the possibility then spun into chaos. "Austin's twin is a woman? How did I *not* know that?"

The lieutenant shifted, shooting a nervous glance to the general.

Burnett grinned. "Maybe you're not as good as you thought."

Cardinal flung the documents back. "Forget it. Deal's off. I'm not doing this." He stormed toward the door. "We'll find another way."

"Cardinal, you are U.S. Government property. You will do as ordered."

"I won't." Rage flung him back around. "I won't work this woman. Or *any* woman. Not ever. That was Cardinal Rule #1 when you came to me." Breaths came in deep gulps. "I'll find another way to get Courtland back." Anger gave way to desperation. He raked a hand through his hair. "Figure something out."

Silence hung rank and thick in the room. Burnett nodded to the others in the room. "If you'll excuse us." He waited for the room to clear then sat on the edge of the conference table. "Cardinal, I respect what you're saying, but it's impractical. Your protégé vanished two months ago in a remote village in northeast Africa—right out from under your nose. You and I both know that is trouble. If he is still alive, every second matters. We can't afford to waste another minute, let alone two more months figuring something out when you have a working plan right here in front of you."

Cardinal, in a half shake of his head, dragged his gaze downward. "I can't."

Images of innocent brown eyes. . .her laughter. . .seeing her worked over, time and again. *And then the angel flew*. . .

"You knew this." His pulse thumped against his temple as he worked to restrain his temper. "No. Women." Right then, an absolute certainty rushed over him. He stabbed a finger at Burnett. "You." How had he not seen this earlier? Was he too eager to get Courtland back that he hadn't considered all the possibilities? "You knew—you hid from me that Aspen was a woman."

Burnett let out a long sigh. "Son, we've been trying since Austin vanished to find a way to track him and get him back safely. When you came up with this absolutely ingenious plan to use his dog. . .I had no choice."

"We always have a choice."

Shoulders slumped, Burnett crumpled his Dr Pepper can. "No, no we don't. And right now, neither do you."

Lips tight, Cardinal glared at him. "I'm not doing this."

"Do this or you're through." He folded his arms over his chest. "Something's haunting you, and I need you to bury that—for now—and do your job."

"You forget," Cardinal spat out, "I came to you! I offered you my services."

"Yes, but now you're owned. By us." Burnett pushed up and moved to the other end of the table. "I consider myself a nice man who works hard at his job. But that's just it—I have a job. I'm tasked with protecting my country and its citizens. And that means I have to do things I don't like."

Throw that political bull at him, but it wouldn't work. "This isn't my country." Tremors rippled through his arms and legs. What choice did he have? Burnett held more dirt on him, could bury him at the bottom of the sea for ten lifetimes. Or expose his whereabouts to a certain Russian general.

I'm trapped. As always.

Had to get out of there. Disappear. He would not do this. Could not. "I don't owe this country anything. I don't owe *anyone* anything." The words were cruel. And wrong. It was the anger talking. The demons he'd inherited.

"Maybe not, but you *are* a citizen of it. We granted that, remember? And you signed on the line for this job. We own you, Cardinal." Burnett's eyes narrowed. "And that missing boy is your responsibility." He smacked a hand on the table. "Now man up and do what needs to be done!"

Cardinal stormed out of the office, down the hall, the stairs, to the parking garage. In his car, he left the grounds and headed west. Though Reston was only thirty minutes away, traffic dictated the three-hour drive. Familiar with the area, he made his way to a nearby park and planted himself on a bench. He'd promised himself he'd never do this. Never become the epitome of filth and slime that had defined Cardinal's life for twenty years.

Elbows on his knees, he stared at the ground covered in a fresh blanket of wildflowers. Cold seeped into his bones despite the summer heat, but it was nothing like the chill settling over this mission. Over his objective—getting Aspen Courtland to cooperate and think it was her idea.

"I promised," he muttered past his hands, fingers laced and held in front of his lips.

But...Austin.

Cardinal had hand-selected the young man for the field. He'd trained him, guided him, become friends with him. The government intentionally withheld information about Austin's family so Cardinal would not have any impetus or inclination to alter his decision or recruitment.

Nearby a horn honked and snapped him out of his somber thoughts. A quick check of his watch shoved him to his feet. He headed past the hotel, down the sidewalk, and straight toward the pavilion.

The sister—she would want to help, right? This plan he'd concocted depended on the twin's reaction. But he'd thought he was dealing with a guy. Not a woman. A twin was a twin, right? The connection should be there. She should see the imperative nature of using the dog. At least, he hoped she did because he'd take the dog—that'd be so much easier. But they couldn't afford the time or risk to yank the dog and force him to settle in with a new handler.

The dog was the key. And getting to the dog, the key was the sister. Aspen.

He turned into an alley and thrust his fist in the air. "God, why must You torment me? You know what is in me. You know the blood that beats in my heart." Fists over his eyes, he ground his teeth. "Do not...do not let me lose myself."

Was it possible. . .was it at all possible to complete this mission without becoming his father?



A Breed Apart Ranch Texas Hill Country

Soulful brown eyes held hers, eagerness and willingness to go the long, hard mile for her pouring out of them. His eyebrows bounced with meaning.

"Hey, handsome."

He scooted closer, his happy impatience melting her heart. She didn't deserve his loyalty. His passionate attention. But he gave it all the same.

Cupping his face, Aspen smiled down at him. "You are amazing." He smiled.

Or near enough for a Labrador retriever. Talon swiped his tongue along her face, his backside wagging so hard she thought he might wipe out. She rubbed his ears and planted a kiss between his eyes. "Thank you, boy."

"How's it going?"

Aspen straightened and turned toward the voice of Heath Daniels, lead trainer at A Breed Apart. His Belgian Malinois bounded into the training area with zest and zeal Aspen was convinced Talon once possessed. She eyed her blond guy. "We're making progress."

Heath, arms folded over his chest and hands tucked beneath his armpits, smiled at her. "You got him over the hurdles."

Beaming beneath the hidden praise in his words, Aspen grinned back. "Six months ago, I would've thought this was possible." And six months ago, she'd had an uphill battle getting her grandparents to allow Talon to take up residence with her at their sprawling estate. Nana wasn't entirely pleased about having a dog, whose fur sprinkled her marble and gilded décor with yellow hairs. Or Granddad, who had objected to Talon living *in* a house his own father had built at the height of his wealth and power in the roaring twenties. But in time, knowing Talon had been best friends with Austin, they'd relented.

"You're giving him his respect back but also helping him remember he's a dog—the best life." Heath touched her shoulder. "Your brother would be proud if he were here to see this."

Aspen ducked her chin, fighting the stinging in her eyes. "That's just the bear of it, isn't it? If Austin were here, I wouldn't be." The rawness at the back of her throat made it hard to swallow.

"Hey," Heath said, his tone softer. "Don't go there, okay? You can stay true to his memory without feeling guilty about everything. You're doing right by him with the way you're watching out for his partner and best friend." He gave a curt nod. "Understand?"

Surprised at his words, Aspen bobbed her head. "Yeah, I guess so." She clicked Talon's lead on and ruffled his coat, finding as much pleasure in the move as it seemed the six-year-old guy did. "I just don't want Talon to forget Austin."

"Oh, I don't think that will ever happen. Even if it takes years."

"It has taken years. Two, to be exact."

"Yeah, but in a dog's mind, I think that equates to two days. They don't forget smells, and he's got Austin's burned into his head. I'd bet my life on it."

A country song sailed through the air. Aspen started and grabbed the phone from her jacket pocket. "I'd better get this. Hope you have a good session with Trinity."

"We will."

Aspen led Talon from the training ground and headed toward her SUV as she pressed the Talk button on her phone. "Hi, Britt. What's up?"

"Girl, we need to talk."

"Okay, go ahead."

"No. I've got something you need to see."

Aspen slowed at the urgent excitement in her best friend's voice. "Okay..."

"Can you come over?"

"I had some errands—"

"Girl. Listen." Noise crackled over the line, as if Brittain had put her hand over the phone. "Okay, I can't say too much here, but I think... I *think*... I interviewed a man last night, a soldier. You have to see this."

"You're not sure you interviewed a soldier?" Aspen loaded Talon in the back of the SUV in his crate then climbed behind the steering wheel.

"Don't mess with my head. Come to my house. It has to be now. You know I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important, and this goes to the moon and back on importance."

"Wow, how cryptic." Nerves jangled, Aspen turned over the engine.

"I know. But I have to be. And when I get to the studio, I've got to turn this in to the manager to approve. But trust me, you'll want to see this before it goes live. Aspen, this guy was at Kariz-e Sefid."

Aspen's heart climbed into her throat. "I'm on my way." How she got from the ranch to Brittain's condo, she didn't know because her mind was all awhirl and tumbling from the mention of the Afghan city that stole her brother. Was it possible. . .just maybe. . .that she'd been right? Was he alive somewhere? Maybe held hostage by some radical group?

Talon lumbered toward the door with Aspen. She hesitated, ready

to say something positive to the canine who'd been there, who'd seen what happened to Austin but could not speak. "I wish you could—"

The door jerked open.

Brittain's fro spiked out in odd places rather than the perfectly coiffed hairstyle she managed to tame the curls into for her broadcasts. "Girl!" Wide, mahogany eyes held hers. "You are *not* going to believe this."

She reached into the hall and grabbed Aspen's jacket shoulder and pulled. "C'mon. I don't have much time." Halfway across the living room by the time Aspen lured Talon into the apartment, Brittain chattered a hundred miles an hour. "You are not going to believe this man." She threw a look over her shoulder. "But this man? Is *fine*. With a capital *F*."

"What man? How did you meet him?" Aspen shed her coat and trailed her friend to the dining table that cozied up to a bay window in the sunroom.

"That's just it—he e-mailed me. Said he had a story he had to get off his chest. He couldn't live with himself and keep the secret."

Aspen put her hand over her stomach, wishing she hadn't eaten that Angus burger. "What secret?"

Brittain came behind her, set her long, dark fingers on Aspen's shoulders, then guided her to the office and into a plush chair. "See for yourself." She lifted a remote and pressed a button.

Perched on the edge of the chair, Aspen clasped her sweaty palms in her lap. Talon's cold nose nudged her hand. She smiled down at him.

"Could you please state your name for the camera?"

"Are you recording?"

"Yes, is that a problem?"

Pale blue eyes hit the camera head-on. The man shifted. "No. No, I guess not. My name is Dane Markoski."

"You contacted me and said you had to clear your conscience."

"Yes, ma'am. I did—do." He sat up straighter. Broad shoulders. Thick chest. The guy was no stranger to fitness.

"Please, go ahead."

"O-okay. I was in the Army. . . "His story went on for several minutes, noting his unit and what they were doing. "We went to Kariz-e Sefid, and things just felt bad, ya know? We rolled in and things were crazy quiet. Then out of nowhere, we heard the shriek of an RPG rip past our Humvee."

"You weren't in an MRAP?"

"No, ma'am. With funding cuts, we didn't have enough of those to go around. And this was just supposed to be a regular patrol, so. . ." He shrugged. "Sometimes that happens. And it puts lives on the line, but we don't stop fighting, ya know?"

"So I've heard," Brittain said. "Now, you said there was an attack? What happened?"

"Well, the vehicles were targeted, so we went for cover, tried to find the source of the weapons' fire. A SOCOM team headed to the roof of a building." "SOCOM?"

"Special Operations Command. A team of Green Berets were there. They said they'd seen something. But. . .that's when things got strange. . ." He looked up to the right and seemed lost in the memory.

"Please, go on."

He blinked as if startled. "Sorry. I just. . . "His eyes darted around, as if searching for something. "The building exploded, and it threw me into the dirt. As we all came up out of that mess, smoke and dust was everywhere. You almost couldn't see."

"Almost?" Brittain leaned forward. "But you did see, is that right, Mr. Markusky."

"Markoski. And. . ." He gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Yeah, I saw something. Or I think I saw something." He scratched his head.

"What do you think you saw?"

"Well, that's just it. It's not what I saw then, but..."

"But what?"



#### Pentagon, Arlington County, Virginia

Well, the Army seemed really eager to write off one of the men, and then something I saw later...one of the men I'd swear was on top of that roof, who should have died... I saw him in northeast Africa. I was there helping with a relief team.... I thought I saw him there."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure we should say that because"—he glanced directly at the camera—"you know."

Leaning back against the black lacquer conference table, Cardinal stared at the wall-mounted screen. Arms crossed, he ran a hand over his jaw as he thought through the answers he'd given. Had he been too obvious? Or perhaps not obvious enough about the implication.

No, if he'd been too direct, Aspen would've detected something. He'd pored over her records since that meeting. She served in the Air Force as an admin for the judge advocate. Meant she had a good brain.

Knuckles against his mouth, he didn't understand. The plan was perfect. Even Burnett had said so. Why hadn't she made contact?

"Hey, you okay?"

Cardinal glanced over his shoulder to the woman who owned that voice. Lieutenant Brie Hastings. "Yeah, sure." He didn't need to be alone with this girl. She'd made her interest in him known all too well.

"That your new mark?"

Cardinal cursed himself for letting his research notes play on the

wall. He *X*-ed out of the video on the laptop, noting it vanishing from the wall, then slapped the computer shut. He tucked it under his arm and started for the door.

"You know." Brie turned as he walked around her. "The female population isn't as scary as you think. You ought to give us a try."

Cardinal stalked into the hall and continued toward Burnett's office, praying the general had some news.

"Cardinal!"

The urgent, hissed call pulled him around. Lieutenant Smith jogged toward him, his face wrought until he spotted Hastings, slowed with a stupid grin, shot her a "hey," then refocused on Cardinal as he waved a paper.

Cardinal pointed to the paper in the lieutenant's hand. "Is that—?" "E-mail just came through."

Snatching the printed communication, Cardinal felt the first surge of relief in a long time.

SGT Markoski—I want to thank you, personally, for honoring Austin's memory with honesty and integrity. They've relegated my brother to six feet under without a body to place there. Our country has long worked hard to bring home the fallen, so I don't understand how they can forget about my brother so easily. Thank you for remembering him.

It would be nice to talk and trade stories and memories. Austin & I spent a lot of time at Amadore's Fight Club. I'm still there, every Tuesday & Thursday evening, as he and my father taught me to fight to defend myself and to fight for what's right. Semper Fidelis.—A. Courtland.

Cardinal read the e-mail again.

"Not quite the response you expected, huh?" Smith said.

"No, it's not." Cardinal patted his shoulder. "It's better." He started for Burnett's office.

"Better?"

"Get me on the next flight to Austin." Cardinal folded the paper and rounded the corner.

"Huh? But why? She just said—"

"I'll need a team prepped for Djibouti. We'll need to alert Kuhn we're headed his way." Cardinal carded himself through to the offices of General Burnett and a couple of other four-stars.

From the admin's desk, Cardinal looked through the glass pane and held up a hand to Burnett, who waved him in as he talked on the phone.

He leaned in and held up the paper. "She contacted. We're a go."

Holding up one finger, Burnett spoke quietly into his phone. So quietly Cardinal couldn't hear him. But he could read his lips. *Let me take care of it. I know. . . no, he's not a loose cannon. I can—yes, sir.* 

"Problem, sir?"

With a disgusted sigh, the general shook his head. "Always a problem."

Cardinal thumped the e-mail with a finger. "She made contact. I'm on my way up to the Lone Star state."

"Actually, you're not."

Heat spilled down Cardinal's spine as Burnett hung up. He said nothing. Just waited. It always worked better.

"That was General Payne."

A royal *pain* in the backside. Also chief of staff of the Army. Burnett's boss's boss. Cardinal knew where this was going. They never approved of the general using him for operations. They questioned his loyalty. Questioned his motives.

Well, one they had no need to question. The other was his business alone.

"Approval for the Djibouti mission has been rejected."

"On what grounds?"

"Nigeria."

Cardinal smothered his reaction. "Unbelievable." He jerked his head down. Looked to the side. Closed his eyes. Then glanced at Burnett. "We have her and that dog. I put eyes on the target. He's down there. We have to go down there and get him out. If we don't—"

Burnett held up a hand. "I know. And so does Payne. They're sending a team—"

"They send anyone who smells like American military down there, the hounds of hell are going to rip out their hearts. Then you'll lose him for good."

Blue eyes held his. "Son, this is not my first rodeo and you're not Cardinal, god of the spy sea."

The terse words pulled Cardinal off balance. The general had never snarled at him like that. Which meant one of two things: Burnett agreed with Payne, or Burnett was ticked off, too.

Either way, his mission just got tanked. Austin's life had been put in dire straits.

There was no battle to fight here. Payne tied Burnett's hands. Which cut off Cardinal's limbs. And possibly severed the heart of a family—the Courtland's.

Not that they'd ever know their son had been abandoned by their country.

Aspen already knows that. She just didn't have the right definition to MIA: Presumed Dead. To her, it meant they couldn't find a body. Cardinal knew the truth—the U.S. buried the body with its complacency and bureaucracy. He respected laws and procedures.

They defined civilizations, prevented collapses.

They also crippled civilizations. Initiated collapses.

He'd seen it too many times. Cardinal gave a nod of surrender. Gritted his teeth, then turned for the door.

"Cardinal."

He opened the door and dragged his attention back to where it did not want to go.

"Don't."

A smile almost made it to his face.

"I mean it." Burnett leaned forward, rested his arms on his desk. "That very propensity to go rogue is why you got benched. Let them handle this."

"Of course."

"I mean it. I'd hate to see you fly off without his stamp of approval," Burnett said. "Then get down there and need help. They'd be all over my hide." A smile twinkled behind the terse words. "I'd have to send my very best after you to drag your sorry hide back here."

Cardinal stared at the general. The man who'd taken him under his wing, guided him, honed his skills, taught him things, learned things from Cardinal...and always, always saw things the same way Cardinal did.

"Understood."



#### Amadore's Fight Club Austin, Texas

"Good gravy, girl."

Aspen eyed her friend as they headed into Amadore's, assaulted at once with the thick odor of sweat and BO wafting toward them. "What?"

"You only e-mailed him two days ago. What do you expect? He was in DC, for crying out loud. For him to drop everything and come up here?"

Bristling at her best friend's wisdom, Aspen strode back to the women's locker room, which wasn't more than a converted broom closet with a shower well. "He's military. He'll get it. If he was with Austin, then he was a Green Beret."

"Girl, I don't know. I couldn't find record of that."

"You're an investigative reporter, Britt, not the FBI. Records like his would be blacked out or concealed." It was a stretch, but hey, it made her feel better.

Brittain Larabie tossed her bag onto the bench. "What if he doesn't come?"

Aspen turned to her friend. "We went over all of that with the others before I e-mailed him at your condo."

"Yeah," Brittain said, with a roll of her head. "And if I remember, not everyone thought it was a good idea to bring this guy into the plan. In fact, Timbrel said you were digging a grave. And Darci says this man's psych profile showed a lethal dedication to his career. She's not convinced he's right. I was with this guy an hour and he never smiled. I mean—creepy! And—"

"Enough!" Aspen thrust her hands into her hair and tied it back with black elastic as she met Brittain's gaze in the mirror. "We need him—he was there with Austin the day of the attack." Yanking the zipper on her bag, she felt the tension tangling her mind and thoughts. "He knows what happened. Maybe I'll have enough to file an appeal or something with the judge advocate. General Gray and his wife still

invite me to their Christmas parties. They like me. Maybe he'll listen."

"Yeah, and maybe the Easter Bunny will deliver a gold egg."

Aspen glared at her friend. "I don't need your negativity—"

"It's not neg-"

"I know. It's the facts. Negative facts, I'd point out."

Britt let her shoulders sag in an exaggerated way. "What about Austin's fire buddy? He said he doesn't remember this guy."

Aspen rolled her eyes. "Will was a player whose loyalties were with himself." She sighed. "As much as I don't want to put my last hope in this Mar-whatever guy, I will take him over Will any day." When she'd hit Send on that letter, a thread of hope stitched up her broken, angry heart. She plunged her hand into the bag and drew out her wrist wraps.

Warm hands cupped her shoulders, drawing Aspen's gaze from the yellow wraps she secured around her palm and wrist. Compassion oozed from the milk chocolate eyes.

"No." Aspen stepped back. "Don't do that." She snatched the gloves from the bench and strode into the gym, acutely aware how much her best friend wanted to apply the brakes to this before they got started. But Aspen couldn't—wouldn't—let Austin's name end up on some memorial wall. He wasn't dead. She could feel it.

Or...could she?

It'd only been in the wee hours of the morning as she wept over his disappearance that she wondered if their twin connection was still alive. Was he still alive?

Batting the gloves into a better fit, she crossed the open floor, passed the free weights, the ellipticals, and treadmills. At the speed bag, she warmed up. When a slow burn radiated through her muscles, she started for the ring.

Mario straightened as she passed, stilling the kickboxing bag he'd just struck. He grinned. "Hey, beautiful. Ready for more?"

Slipping in her mouth guard, she arched an eyebrow at him.

He whooped.

As she reached for the ropes to step in, Amadore, ghostlike man that he was, appeared out of nowhere. "You with us today, Angel?"

With more conviction than she felt, she nodded.

He pointed to Mario. "You hurt her, you answer to me."

Smiling, she nudged his shoulder then bent through the ropes. She

strode toward the center and met her opponent. All six feet of the man towered over her five-foot-five frame. Muscles rippled beneath his dark skin as those eyes—Timbrel called them lady-killers—sparkled back at her. In the center, she bumped gloves with Mario, their official start signal.

He threw the first punch, launching them into a rigorous workout. Though they were well matched, he always seemed determined to bring her down. She enjoyed the challenge. Much like this new venture of hers—finding her brother. Bringing him back. Darci insisted Aspen had gone one too many rounds in the ring and incurred TBI, traumatic brain injury, to attempt this. But like Aspen, Darci's mind and heart raced at the thought of doing something everyone else said they couldn't.

Would the guy come? Though she wasn't a former intelligence operative like Darci or a borderline Mensa like Khaterah, Aspen had been gifted with an insatiable thirst for truth and justice. But without this guy, without Dane Whatshisname—who named their kid after a dog, anyway?—she could hang up this plan. He had been there. He knew her brother. Knew the location. The terrain. And he still had connections with the military. Desperately needed connections to get them in and out of Afghanistan. Besides, going in with a team of men alone. . .well, even Aspen wasn't that stupid.

Black slammed into her face with a resounding thud.

Aspen spun away, stumbling.

Mario cursed.

"Hey," Amadore's shout sailed through the cavernous, split-level gym. "What'd you do?"

"Nothin'," Mario said.

Aspen sniffled, smelling and tasting the metallic glint of blood. She wiped the warmth from her upper lip and sneered at Mario. "You'll pay," she mumbled around her guard.

Mario grinned, but even beneath that she saw uncertainty as he darted a gaze to Amadore, who loomed over the front counter, his face aflame. "I warned you, Mario. You hurt her—"

Aspen threw a right cross at the distracted man.

His hand flew up and blocked. He angled to the side and countered.

Her mind had left the ring, and that'd cost her some blood. She wouldn't make the mistake again. And now, she had to pay back this

player. Besides, she was tired of Amadore protecting her. The men here needed to know she could hold her own. If she'd proven that in Iraq, she could do it at Amadore's Fight Club, too.

Tracking him around the ring, she deflected several aggressive—and stupid—moves. Mario was running on his victory. He'd die on it, too.

He raised his knee—she shifted, turned slightly, and rammed her elbow down on the meaty part.

Mario flinched and dropped his guard.

Aspen threw a hard right. And connected.

His head snapped back, but he was already in motion. A left jab. Right. Light glinted off the glass-front door—the glare flared across Mario's face. Then Aspen's. Both looked toward the front, ready to holler at whoever had forgotten to pull the curtain to prevent such a distraction.

"Hey," Mario shouted. "The bwind." His mouth guard made him sound like he had rocks in his mouth.

"Sorry, sorry"—Luke, the new hire, rushed and secured the curtain. The streaming sunlight wreathed a tall, muscular figure before the light vanished. Aspen blinked, and when her gaze hit the reception desk in the open-area gym, she froze.