

# Escape to Morning



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*Escape to Morning*

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## Chapter 1

TODAY, MORE THAN any other, reporter Will Masterson prayed that his lies would save lives. Starting with his partner's, Homeland Security Agent Simon Rouss, aka Hafiz Tarkan.

*Please, God, be on my side today.* Will raced on foot down the two-lane, rutted, forest-service road, cursing his stupidity as well as a few new souvenir bruises. He smelled rain in the air as the wind shivered the trees with a late-season breeze. His nose felt thick and caked with clots. He should have known his sympathetic commentaries in the *Moose Bend Journal* toward the recent immigrants flooding over the Canadian border would draw blood with the locals. Blood that would hopefully protect Simon while he embedded deeper into the terrorist cell in the hills.

Because Will knew the men who'd hijacked him and hauled him into the forest to beat the tar out of him over his recent op-ed piece weren't actually disgruntled rednecks but rather international terrorists.

The lie that had just saved Will Masterson's hide, the lie perpetuated by the boys toting 30.06s and wearing work boots, was the only thing keeping Simon from being brutally murdered. Which would only be the first in a hundred—maybe a thou-

sand—murders by the Hayata terrorist cell hiding in the northern Minnesota woods.

If only Will hadn't been ambushed by the double-edged sword called failure sitting in his PO box. A letter from Bonnie. He'd opened it, and the words knifed him through the chest: *Bonnie Strong and Paul Moore invite you to a celebration of life and love in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He should have dropped the invitation to his floorboard and crushed it under his foot. Instead, he'd let the memories, the grief, the failure rush over him and blind him to the three men lying in wait like a nest of rattlers. He should have done better by Lew's wife, protected her, made sure she was safe. Who was this Paul?

A year of undercover work, of slinking around this hick town, praying for a way to destroy the Hayata cell, and it all had to come to a head the same day his mistakes rose from the past to haunt him.

*Sorry, Lew.*

"*Tell Bonnie and the girls I love them.*" Lew's words, hovering in the back of Will's mind could still turn his throat raw after three years. If Simon bought it, Will would be sending yet another letter home to a wife and loved ones.

Soldiers had no business getting married.

Will's breath felt like a razor inside his lungs. A branch clipped him, and blood pooled inside his mouth. Ruts and stone bit into his cowboy boots as he ran, and sweat lined his spine. The sky mirrored his despair in the pallor of gray, the clouds heavy with tears. How long had he been unconscious after they'd thrown him off the four-wheeler?

Better question—how much did they guess about his alliance with Simon? Obviously, the good ol' boys who snatched him as he'd sat in his truck, waiting for his contact, knew Will's habits. *Simon's* habits. They'd found them, despite the fact that

he and Simon had picked the backwoods gravel pit for its remoteness. *But please, please let them believe my lies . . .* which would mean maybe Simon's cover hadn't been blown.

Maybe there wouldn't be another unnamed star embedded in the wall of honor at Langley . . . like Lew's.

Thunder rolled overhead when Will burst from the road onto the gravel pit. Yes, thank you, the thugs/terrorists/angry readers hadn't damaged his wheels. Probably, however, they thought his 1984 Chevy wasn't worth their time.

What they didn't know was that reporter Will Masterson didn't just spend his time penning controversial editorials and writing the crime beat for the local weekly. Under the hood of this baby, he had a 350 Hemi with a high-lift cam and a four-barrel Edelbrock Thunder carb.

They didn't call him Wild Will for nothing. Okay, he'd earned that nickname for different reasons, during a different life. But sometimes the moniker still meant something. Like now as he hopped in and slammed all three hundred and fifty horses to the floor, spitting gravel behind him as he raced to the Howlin' Wolf.

Plan B.

*Please, Simon, be there.* Or, if he'd been forced to make a fast exit, let him have taped his latest intel under Will's favorite table.

After a year of undercover work, he and Simon had one chance—one click in time—to get it right. One opportunity to avenge the thousands of victims who died at the hands of terrorists around the globe. Victims like Lew.

Please, Simon, be there.



The late-afternoon drizzle seemed a fitting backdrop to the painful truth that Search and Rescue (SAR) canine handler

Dannette Lundeen had to voice to the crowd of damp search-and-rescue personnel combing Lookout Mountain near the fields behind the High Pines Rest Center.

June Hanson—dementia patient, age eighty-six, grandmother of seven, great-grandmother of fourteen, and recent escapee from the nursing home—would probably be returned to her family in a body bag.

*Please, Lord, don't let her die alone.* Dannette crouched beside Missy, her German shepherd/golden retriever mix, and scratched the dog's floppy ear. Missy's respirations came one on top of another, her stacked breathing a natural alert for the smell of something near or already dead. Trained in search and rescue, Missy and Dannette had recovered more than their share of casualties, and Dannette read the diminishing potential for success in her animal's demeanor.

Twilight threaded gray fingers around the trees, through the brambled forest, and around shaggy pines and spindly poplars. A crisp breeze, dredged up from the still-soggy earth, whistled against Dannette's hood. She felt chapped, hungry, and worn birch-bark thin. And, with night encroaching, hope had dwindled with the sunshine to a meager shadow.

From her backpack she drew out a water bottle, set down a collapsible bowl, and filled it. Missy lapped greedily.

Fifty feet away, she heard the echo of Kelly's call to her dog, Kirby. The younger SAR shepherd, out on his first real trial, probably hadn't yet picked up the scent cone or Kelly would be radioing Dannette for advice.

The overpowering smell of death scared most dogs. Then again, it didn't exactly warm Dannette's insides with a happy feeling.

Dannette stood and let Missy finish her water. Maybe Missy was wrong. She wasn't Super Dog, although Dannette

had to admit that following Missy's instincts often led them to hideouts unthinkable even to the most keen SAR personnel. And Missy was an air-scent dog, which meant she followed the smells left by the scraping of skin on rocks, trees, and bushes. Sadly, Missy's abilities decreased as the day worsened.

If only it hadn't taken the nursing-home staff an hour after June turned up missing at morning breakfast to call the sheriff's office, then two more hours and the urging of the mayor—June's desperate son—to finally call Kelly, their local, nearly certified K-9 handler. Not only had a late-morning shower diffused the scent cone left by Mrs. Hanson by then, but the variable winds and temperatures had scattered the scent and confused Missy. They'd walked the perimeter in a hasty search for two more hours before Missy caught the scent and alerted them to Mrs. Hanson's trail.

Dannette found that, as usual, the dementia patient didn't stick to the deer trails or clearings. Mrs. Hanson had pushed through honeysuckle and raspberry bushes, climbed over downed birches, crossed a stream, and ascended a hill that should have put her in traction. Even dementia patients who struggled to move in ordinary circumstances proved they still had gumption when some errant impulse revved up their synapses. But Mrs. Hanson had lived a stout life, had run a farm until her husband's death a few years ago, and would probably still be milking her Jersey if her mind hadn't betrayed her. The woman could easily be a mile from here or sitting atop Lookout Mountain.

Or injured.

Or—if Dannette read her dog correctly—dead.

Missy sat on her haunches and licked her lips. Water dripped off her jowls.

Dannette picked up the empty bowl and shoved it back into her backpack. "Okay, ready?"

Missy tilted her head.

“I know, sweetheart. But if it makes you feel any better, I’m glad you’re here. You handle death so much better than Sherlock. He’d have his hackles up and be cowering under that white pine.” She stepped away from Missy, changed her tone. “Find.”

They’d been working on a free search all afternoon, after Missy’s first alert. With Kelly and Kirby twenty-five feet to the west, Dannette let Missy run twenty-five feet or more ahead, quartering the wind for scent debris. Dannette checked her GPS with her map, pinpointed her position, and radioed the incident commander.

“10-4, Search One,” replied Sheriff Fadden.

Dannette pictured the guy as she’d last seen him, wearing a black, lined Windbreaker, his stomach rebelling against the snaps, using a bullhorn to direct traffic at the nursing home. Just what June Hanson’s loved ones needed as they watched the chaos.

To add to their pain, Dannette had seen two news reporters from the local rags already lurking, smelling blood. The leeches.

“Just heard from Search Two,” Fadden continued. “Kirby alerted to scent and Kelly is tracking north toward Lookout Cliff.”

He had a flattened Midwestern accent, although nothing else about him could be labeled flat. Including his ego. One month of working with or around him with the local SAR crew told her that she’d have better luck trying to reason with a bull moose. Dannette had no doubt that if Fadden could get away with it, he’d drop-kick her and her SAR dog back to her home state.

Sadly, he needed her, and they both knew it. On hand to help Kelly and her K-9 Kirby pass their SAR K-9 certification,

Dannette and Missy were the only K-9 unit within two states with the teaching hours and credits to certify the team. Said certification would qualify the sheriff's department for a healthy government grant for rural SAR, an end goal that Fadden never failed to keep in the forefront of Dannette's purpose here in Moose Bend, Minnesota. Unfortunately, in his mind that goal didn't warrant tapping his force for live-victim-search training or scooping from the currently dwindling county SAR fund for K-9 training scents and devices.

The Fadden types in the world didn't put stock in the successes of the canine SAR community and, in fact, stirred up false hopes with their unrealistic, all-or-nothing attitudes. One failure and the entire SAR K-9 reputation suffered; one success and they were heralded as heroes.

It left little room for the long, dark, soggy afternoons that defined SAR K-9 work. If she and Kelly failed to locate Mrs. Hanson, Dannette knew Sheriff Fadden would push what buttons he could to shut down her K-9 training course and send her back to Iowa with a bill for expenses.

Which meant that more people, like Mrs. Hanson and four-year-old Ashley Lundeen, would perish, alone and afraid.

*This is not about Ashley.* Dannette's thoughts recoiled against the familiar stampede of memories, and she shook herself back to the search at hand.

"10-4," Dannette said as she checked her topo map with her flashlight and noted Kelly's sector and direction. She frowned, checked again. "Search One to Search Two, please confirm location."

Kelly's voice came over the line, young and just breathless enough to indicate she was following Kirby at a fast clip. "Crossing Devil's Creek, about one hundred yards from Look-out Cliff."

“10-4,” Dannette acknowledged, her heart thumping. If Kirby had *also* alerted, perhaps Mrs. Hanson still lived and had simply holed up in a location that emitted a putrid odor, a cave with guano or even the remains of a dead animal. Dannette folded up the map, her heart lightening.

She plowed into the fractured, darkening shadows of the forest, watching Missy work the scent. The dog stopped, circled, her nose high, then turned and looked at Dannette. Dannette used her clicker to urge the dog forward. The hand-held device gave instant encouragement without having to rely on verbal cues.

The rain drizzled down into her jacket, and she shivered; she was hungry, cold, tired. But she refused to think of the hot shower waiting. Not until she found Mrs. Hanson.

No one deserved to die alone. Without family.

The thought roughened her throat as she steadied herself on a skinny poplar and climbed over a downed, softened birch.

*Without family.* No, Dannette had a family—her dogs, Sherlock and Missy. Probably the only real family she’d ever had, except perhaps for Jim Micah and the other members of Team Hope. Yeah, they felt like family. At least as far as she’d let them inside her heart.

It simply wasn’t wise to let people that close. Because getting close also meant allowing them a glimpse of the nightmares she still hadn’t shaken.

*This is not about Ashley.* Dannette told herself that twice more as she watched Missy run back to her, the hair on her neck bristled. Her breathing turned rapid as she sat, a passive alert to the target scent.

“Good dog,” Dannette said. “Refind.”

The dog bounded off, far enough ahead to keep the scent but not so far that Dannette couldn’t see her in the growing

darkness. *Please, Lord, have her on the trail of something real and alive.* She could still hear little Robby, June's grandson, pleading in the back of her mind.

*Please find her,* moaned another voice, one buried in her heart.

She pushed through a netting of branches and flinched for only a second when one backhanded her. The smells of decay and loam stirred up from the ground, and foraging animals clung to the night air. Darkness drifted like fine particles through the forest, so gradual as to nearly not recognize its accumulation. A cool breeze carried the echo of barking, a faint tugging on Dannette's ears as she pushed aside tree limbs and stomped through bramble. Hopefully Kirby and Kelly weren't far behind.

Missy waited at the base of a large rooted trio of birches. She looked at Dannette, her ears pricked forward. Dannette put a hand on her back. "Find."

Dannette fought to keep Missy in the beam of her flashlight. They'd have to quit soon, and that thought made her want to weep.

Please, Lord, let us find Mrs. Hanson. Alive.

Missy barked, an active alert that she'd uncovered something. Dannette marked a tree with a reflector, then trudged through the brush after the dog. Missy stood, outlined in a hover of pine.

"Search Two to Search One." Kelly's voice broke over the radio.

Dannette keyed her radio while she tried to get a fix on her canine. "Search One here." The deepening darkness turned the forest into a black-and-white, B-version horror flick, complete with escaping birds and the rustle of ominous wind.

Dannette aimed her flashlight on the ground in front of her. She froze.

Missy stood over a form, a body for sure, dressed in dark pants and a blue Windbreaker, crumpled in the fetal position, its back to her.

Mrs. Hanson?

Her heart banging against her ribs, Dannette held her breath and approached. Missy danced around the form, animated, her breaths fast.

Dannette's chest clogged, and a tiny, panicked voice inside told her to turn and *run*. Dark memories lurked on the fringes of this moment to snare her and suck her down, to drown her.

Dannette held back a gasp and reached for her dog.

The form wore a black bag over its head. The smell of death didn't permeate the air, but the fine hairs prickled on Dannette's neck as she inched away. "Good dog," she whispered.

Static proceeded Kelly's voice, punctuating the moment and frazzling Dannette's tightly strung nerves. "I found her! Mrs. Hanson is alive!"

Dannette's knees gave out, a weakness borne from part relief, part horror. And maybe a little from the ringing in her ears.

Whom exactly had *she* found?

## Chapter 2

WILL PULLED INTO the Howlin' Wolf, and his chest tightened.

No Simon. At least his silver birch half-ton Chevy Silverado wasn't in the lot. Maybe that was good news. Like he'd already been here and gone.

Will shoved his truck into park, dug an old rag out of the glove box, and cleaned the blood from his nose, his mouth. It wasn't uncommon for a bloke to stroll into the Wolf looking like he'd had a run-in with a truck, but the fewer questions the better.

He blew out a breath, put on his game face, and hiked into the bar/burger joint. *Please, Simon, be here.*

The old log-cabin-turned-eatery and Friday night hangout had barely crept into the twentieth century with electricity and indoor plumbing. To expect anything but a raucous jukebox and the smells of beer and grease embedded in the walls would court disappointment. The dingy, dimly lit restaurant proved, however, a perfect clandestine rendezvous spot and plan B checkpoint.

Will beelined to his table near the back—the one with a good view of the door—and sat with his back to the wall, trying not to immediately dive under the table where Simon sometimes pasted the USB pendant with his latest communication.

Willie Nelson crooned from the jukebox, competing with the sounds of sizzling burgers from beyond the double saloon-style doors. Just over Will's head hung a mounted walleye, glassy eyes open in near panic.

Will wondered if he wore the same opened-eyed, *please, no!* expression as he slid his hand under the table and discovered . . . nothing.

A waitress sauntered over, her hair pulled eye-stretchingly tight into a wispy, mousy brown bun. Joanie was already pushing forty, and it made her look about ten years older than that. Not that he cared, but sometimes he wondered if there wasn't a story behind the eyebrow piercing, the missing teeth, and the haunted look in her muddy brown eyes.

Then again, everyone had a story, didn't they?

"Hey there, ace," Joanie said. "The regular?"

"Yeah." He glanced around the room, kept his voice casual. "My friend been in?"

She put two rolls of napkin-wrapped silverware on the table. "The one with the tattoo and beard?"

Will nodded. He certainly didn't mean Sally Appleton from border control. While she had a tattoo, she could hardly be confused with a six-foot-three former linebacker from upstate New York. Still, he supposed Joanie might confuse Sally as his friend, although he'd taken great pains to keep her at a healthy distance while he wheedled information from her.

Not that Sally didn't try to turn their informant-recipient relationship into something PG-13. Last week's working lunch still left a gritty taste in his mouth. Well, *he'd* considered it working. She'd somehow decided that their biweekly get-together merited her wearing a hot pink, spandex T-shirt and low-rise jeans that showed off a—*ouch*—belly-button ring. He could barely look in her general direction the entire meal.

Whereas she had given him a thorough scrutiny, one that had obvious meanings attached. He'd ignored it, just like he had such suggestions for the past three-plus years. He knew where temptation led and ended up. And the residual hollow and used feelings.

Will wondered if he didn't really know what it meant to have a friend of the female persuasion.

Then again, any friendship would require someone getting inside the layers to the real Will Masterson. There was a reason he worked so well under an alias. He'd been operating under one guise or another for most of his life—sheriff's son, troublemaker, Green Beret, and now Homeland hero. He supposed out of them all, the last was the one that gave his life the most resonance. Still, his current profession left little time, ability, or inclination to let the real Will out of hiding. Perhaps women like Sally were all he could hope for.

Oh, he hoped not.

"Your friend hasn't been in," Joanie answered.

Will glanced at the door, then checked his watch.

Maybe Simon was simply late. He'd arrived late a couple of times—once, sporting a black eye, which didn't seed any feelings of calm in Will now. Simon had the rough part of this assignment, and Will knew it.

The uneasy feeling in his gut tightened into a writhe.

Two truckers eased in, followed by the night's chill. One hitched up his jeans as he cased the joint. The other chewed on a ratty toothpick. Their gazes ran over Will before they took stools along the bar.

Will dismissed them and pulled out his cell phone. No signal. Not that he expected any up here in the hills, but a miracle might have been nice.

No, the miracle would be if Simon showed up.

Joanie reappeared with his shake, set it on a napkin, and handed him a straw. “You’re the only guy I know who walks into a place that sells fifteen different microbrews and orders an Oreo shake.”

Will shrugged and gave Joanie a cryptic smile. “Thanks.” He checked his watch again, frustration piling against him. He dipped his straw in the ice cream and stirred as Joanie walked away.

Outside, trucks flew by on their way to Canada and beyond. They splashed grimy spring puddles into the blackened lot. It might be mid-May, but northern Minnesota had just begun to creep out of winter hibernation. Chill still laced the nighttime air, and occasionally Will awoke to frost glazing his windows. It reminded him of South Dakota in October.

Trying to act nonchalant, he took a sip of his shake, letting the sweet chill fill the crannies of his stomach. *Simon, where are you?* Of all the meetings they’d had over the past year, this one weighted their future. Simon knew the stakes and the ticking clock. They had less than a week to round up the package and save the world from another Hayata attack.

If they didn’t, more folded flags would be sent home in place of soldiers like Lew, thanks to the handiwork of a phantom terrorist organization that had the frustrating ability to slip through the CIA’s fingers like Jell-O.

Perhaps if Hayata hadn’t left their fingerprints—in the form of planning, equipment, and execution of the major terrorist attacks—from Irian Jaya to the Philippines to Spain and the Middle East over the past three years, Will wouldn’t be so jumpy about Simon’s absence.

Or his panic might have to do with his own up-close-and-painful encounter with Hayata’s actions.

He considered driving up to the farm and nosing around.

He could say he was writing an article about . . . about—he scanned through his compiled information—predator activity?

That was an understatement. He chuckled ruefully and finished off his shake.

Joanie returned to the table. “I guess your pal isn’t coming.”

Will handed over a wad of ones. “Dunno.” He shrugged on his jacket, aiming for casual, feeling bloated and sick.

“Thanks,” Joanie said and tucked the cash into her apron. “See you next week?”

“Yeah, sure,” Will mumbled. Actually, no. If everything went as planned, he hoped to be long gone by next week. Long gone and mission accomplished.

In fact, by next week, he hoped he’d no longer have to dodge the ghost of Lew Strong.

Will banged out of the restaurant, stood in the fresh air, letting the wind lick his hair. Now cut short, it still felt odd not to have to tie it back, like he had during his stint as a longhair in special ops. The afternoon rain had emptied the clouds and the sky twinkled, a million reminders that almighty God watched. Will swallowed the lump clogging his throat and trudged to his pickup.

He sat in the cab, sorting his options. Now what? Panic nearly drowned the sound of reason. Maybe he *had* been roughed up by a gang of north woods patriots so this wasn’t about Hayata and a terror agenda.

Yeah, right. And he was just a hometown reporter, keeping tabs on the local police beat. He tested a tender spot on his side and knew that he’d find a boot-shaped bruise there tomorrow.

Thankfully, he’d gotten in a couple good licks himself before they’d beaned him with the butt of a rifle and he’d seen stars.

Obviously, those licks hadn’t been enough to keep them from intercepting Simon, however. If he’d ever been here.

Shoving the truck into drive, Will skidded out of the lot toward Moose Bend, some thirty miles east. The rain slicked the roads, turning the pavement shiny. His heartbeat thundered in his chest, fury filling his throat. Please, please don't let his instincts be correct. Not today. Not with months of surveillance and sacrifice behind them. Not with the prize nearly in their hands.

Will headed straight for his cabin, located on the outskirts of town. The moonlight pooled on the hood of his truck as he pulled into the rutted drive. Sitting in the darkness, he stared at the waves pounding the Lake Superior shore and tried to escape the clutch of despair.

When he exited the truck, the breeze slicked his hair back from his face and curled under his leather jacket. He walked to the edge of the grass line and took out his cell phone. It beeped on, catching a meager reception. Figures that the terrorists would be hiding out in one of the few pockets of the world that didn't have cell towers. The closest decent reception was across the lake in Michigan.

The display indicated a text message. Will's pulse quickened as he recognized the sender's address. Simon's. So maybe he wasn't dead. Maybe he was back at the farm, getting his hands on the package right now. The one that General Nazar had promised to send with details of his defection.

Simon might be smuggling it out at this very moment.

Will read the message in the dim light. *Amina*. What did *that* mean? He scowled, scrolled down. Nothing.

Will tapped the cell phone against his forehead, frustrated.

From the truck, he heard the static of the police scanner, then the click and buzzing that proceeded a transmission. "Base to county. We have a 10-48 at Lookout Mountain base. Male, approximately thirty-five years of age. 10-35, ASAP."

10-48. Dead body. Will felt nearly light-headed as he stalked to the truck, turned up the volume, and listened to dispatch confirm the call-out of the medical examiner.

Closing his eyes, he leaned against the truck, tasting bile.

In the pit of his stomach he knew. The dead body was Simon Rouss, aka Hafiz Tarkan.

How he hated it when the bad guys won.



Dannette sat on the back bumper of the truck and ran her hands through Missy's damp fur. She'd removed Missy's trailing harness and the shabrack—the orange SAR rescue vest that identified her as one of the good guys. “Tired?”

Missy laid her head in Dannette's lap, blinking.

“Yeah, me too.”

No—correction. She felt light-years beyond tired. Try exhausted. Dead on her feet. Annihilated. She'd given up any realistic dreams of dropping onto her warm motel bed in the near future. With the activity buzzing around the incident command base, she'd be lucky if she could climb in next to Missy in her kennel in the back of her pickup and catch a five-minute snooze.

She rose, deciding it might be better to walk off the exhaustion than surrender to it. Missy heeled beside her on her lead. Six Suburbans and three pickups were parked in the field beyond the High Pines Rest Center. The ground had been chewed to mud, and headlights pushed the night back to the folds of the poplar and pine forest. Still, darkness crept into the pockets between the vehicles.

Kelly and Kirby held court in one area, the paramedic-in-training triumphant at her canine's success. *As well she should*

be, Dannette thought. They'd all spent more time out in the bush the last few weeks than humans should. Dannette had dragged dummies and human scent through miles of woods, testing Kirby and Kelly to read each other and plot a search, to think like a victim. Finding Mrs. Hanson felt like the prize after a muscle-burning marathon.

Dannette didn't want to think about the scene that might have played out if they hadn't found the elderly woman. Or if the corpse Dannette had found had been Mrs. Hanson instead of some hunter . . . or kidnap victim or whatever. She hadn't examined the murder site—just made sure no one tampered with it before forensics hiked in.

Which felt like it took a couple of centuries.

The county ambulance honked, then moved slowly through the maze of vehicles. A bossy and confused Mrs. Hanson was inside strapped to a gurney. Dannette had gotten a good enough glimpse to confirm that finding her had been an act of God. Mrs. Hanson suffered from slight exposure, disorientation, and a sprained ankle, but she had plenty of kick left in her. Even with a blanket over her shoulders and her family trying to hush her. It was quite possible she would have kept trucking through the forest, her mind on a top-secret quest, until she hit Canada.

Sheriff Fadden seemed in worse shape than Mrs. Hanson. Mayor Tom Hanson had him in a verbal half nelson, wondering why it had taken the county two precious hours to call in the local, albeit temporary, SAR K-9 unit.

Dannette was sure that she or most likely Kelly would pay for the pasty look on Fadden's face the next time the SAR K-9 team asked for funding. Unless, of course, she could get the mayor on her team . . .

"Missy!" Dannette turned to see Robby Hanson as his

arms locked around Missy's neck. Good-natured and kind, Missy stood still while the eight-year-old buried his face into her fur. "Thanks for finding my grammy."

"Thanks, Dannette." Julie Hanson, Tom's wife, strode up. The blonde looked gaunt and as exhausted as Dannette felt. Her short hair had frizzed into a curly Annie bob, and her dissolved mascara streaked down her face. But she smiled as she touched Dannette's arm. "You saved my mother-in-law, and we're grateful."

"Actually Kelly found her, but I'm thanking the Lord with you for His providence." Dannette shot a glance at the departing ambulance. "Will she be okay?"

Julie nodded. "Well, as okay as an eighty-six-year-old Alzheimer's patient can be. She's so spry; it kills us to see her mind destroy her like this." She rubbed her arms. "Poor Tom. He doesn't handle his mother's disease well. It's so frustrating, not to mention heartbreaking."

Dannette nodded, knowing all too well how it felt to stand on the sidelines and watch a loved one suffer. "I'm keeping you all in my prayers."

Julie gave her a one-armed hug. "C'mon, Robby, time to head home."

Robby gave Missy one last hug, then allowed his mother to lead him to their SUV, where Julie's sister and her boys waited. Dannette watched as the sisters embraced. The emotional support of the Hanson family tugged at a soft place in Dannette, and she turned away lest memories swamp her. At moments like this, fatigue had the ability to play her like a marionette. In all likelihood she'd end tonight sitting by the window, staring at the stars, unable to face sleep.

Which would do marvels not only for her appearance but for her ability to file a decent incident report tomorrow. No

wonder she felt—as well as looked—hollowed out these days, dangerously near snapping.

Maybe her SAR pal Jim Micah had been right when he suggested she take a break and head down to Kentucky instead of going canoeing with her NYC friend Sarah over Memorial Day weekend. Although Dannette had missed his and Lacey's engagement party in the fall, she'd come to enjoy the occasional e-mail from Lacey Galloway Montgomery, soon-to-be-Micah. The ex-spy/NSA computer whiz had a frankness about life that Dannette appreciated, and Lacey radiated her salvation in a way that felt both dangerous and intriguing. Although Dannette had been a Christian since childhood and had a solid relationship with God as her friend and companion, seeing redemption in Lacey's eyes made Dannette wonder why she had never wept for joy at the cross, never clung to God like Lacey did with every breath.

Perhaps Dannette had just never needed Him that much. Which was a good thing, right? She hadn't lived a prodigal's life, hadn't walked the alleyways of darkness and sin. So maybe she'd never really understand the showering of grace Lacey felt.

Lacey and her little girl, Emily, had embraced life on their Kentucky farm—a far cry from running from a paid assassin and trying to clear Lacey's name. It seemed both had begun to shake off the horrors of Emily's kidnapping, the event that had finally set them free. Even Lacey's fiancé, Jim Micah, seemed free of the demons that had tormented him. He'd surrendered his twenty-year career as a Green Beret without so much as a flinch. In his last e-mail he'd hinted at wanting to start up some sort of official Team Hope SAR organization.

However, as Dannette mulled over the idea of heading south ASAP, the thought of seeing Lacey again face-to-face made her tremble. She'd shared in Lacey's terror during the

dark hours when Lacey thought her daughter might be dead and, well, seeing it firsthand stirred up too many memories.

“Ms. Lundeen?” Sheriff Fadden motioned her over with a wave.

*Here to serve*, she thought as she led her dog over to the Fadden-Hanson klatch. She pasted on a smile.

Tom wore a grim look. “We’ve done a tentative ID on the corpse, and we think the guy you found is from the community in Silver Creek, about thirty miles from here. Coroner guessed he hasn’t been dead long—probably only a few hours before you found him.”

Dannette couldn’t help the shiver that went through her. Did that mean that if Missy had found Mrs. Hanson’s scent sooner, Dannette might have witnessed a murder?

She let her thoughts stop there and focused on Fadden’s words.

“They’re a quiet bunch, religious even. But this guy has a tattoo on his hand. Maybe that will open up some leads.” He snorted. “Good thing your dog can’t tell the difference between an old lady and a dead guy.”

“That’s my mother you’re referring to,” Tom said in a low, cold voice.

Fadden’s face twitched.

“Missy is trained to follow human scent. Not to give me a full description of the type of scent. I’d say that this case shows exactly what an asset an SAR K-9 unit can be to a police force. Definitely worth the extension of funds to train. Don’t worry; Kelly and Kirby will pass their certification. Especially after today.” She decided to blame the sharpness of her tone on her fatigue.

Tom held up his hand, shot her a warning look. “Have you already given your report to Fadden’s deputies?”

Dannette nodded. "A couple times." She rubbed Missy's ears as the dog sat at her side.

"I can't tell you how grateful Julie and I are for your help today, Dannette. You and Kelly saved my mother's life. Thank you." Tom's gray eyes held warmth to match his tone.

Dannette smiled. "That's what we train for."

Fadden shook his head at the undercurrent in her words.

Well, could she help it that her life was about SAR canine training? She said, "We can thank God for His intervention."

Tom nodded. "What do you say, Fadden? Send this lady home?"

Fadden looked exhausted, bags of fatigue under his eyes. He sighed and rubbed his eyes with a beefy hand. "Yeah, sure. Somebody should get some sleep tonight."

Dannette allowed herself a sliver of sympathy. Fadden would probably spend much of the night processing Dead Guy from the Woods after his brow-wringing from the mayor. Still, a little appreciation from his direction might salve her frayed nerves. She gave him a small smile.

He turned away. "Wouldn't want to overwork you or anything."

*Overwork?* She'd like to remind him who sat in his warm Suburban downing coffee while she tromped through the waterlogged forest for hours. So much for appreciation.

"See you in church Sunday, Tom." Dannette led Missy away before her tongue could turn the moment into something dark and ugly. She usually had a handle on her emotions, but creeps like Fadden infuriated her. They didn't get it that she put her life on the line so others might live and only saw their budget dollars being scraped away for doggy treats. Right now she should remember wisdom, duct-tape her mouth shut, and hide out in the nearest java shop with a cup of chai and a

biscotto. Or maybe a sweet roll. She wondered if Nancy's Nook was still open.

She let Missy off her lead as they exited the ring of vehicles and made her way across the dark field toward the parking lot. Missy ran, finally free from the obedient confines of work. Dannette wished she had a ball to throw.

Headlights turned into the parking lot, scraped across her lonely pickup. Dannette's heart lurched, and she started jogging. "Missy!"

The truck kept on past her parked vehicle and headed into the field.

Dannette stifled a scream as she saw Missy's form pass through the lights. "Missy!"

The dog froze, looked at her. During the snapshot in time all Dannette saw was Missy's sweet brown eyes, asking for directions.

*Come.*

The word clogged in her throat as she watched the truck plow toward Missy.