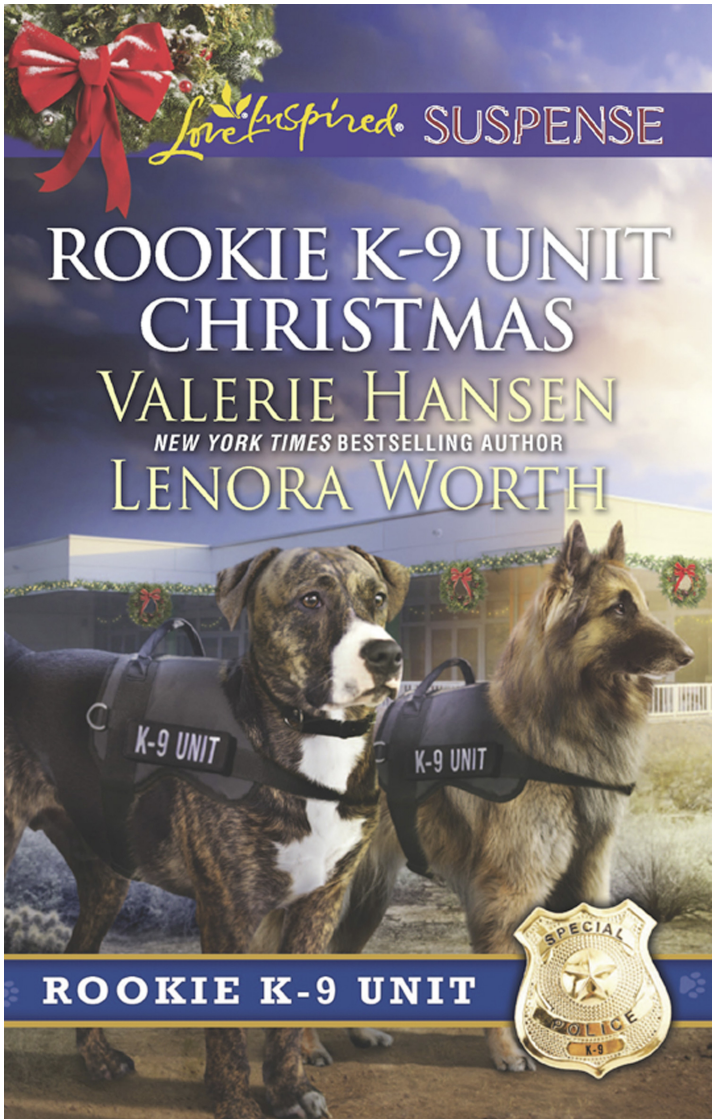

Love Inspired SUSPENSE
ROOKIE K-9 UNIT CHRISTMAS
VALERIE HANSEN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LENORA WORTH
K-9 UNIT
K-9 UNIT
SPECIAL POLICE K9
ROOKIE K-9 UNIT

Lenora Worth
Valerie Hansen

Rookie K-9 Unit Christmas: Surviving Christmas

Аннотация

K-9 HOLIDAY RESCUESurviving Christmas by Valerie HansenWhen single dad Sean Murray returns from a war zone and discovers someone is following him, he turns to his old friend K-9 officer Zoe Trent for help. But as the threat escalates, can Zoe and her police dog find whoever is menacing Sean and his son… and make sure this Christmas isn't their last?Holiday High Alert by Lenora WorthAfter a cryptic note appears in the playground at Josie Callahan's daycare center, rookie K-9 officer Dalton West vows to protect Josie and the kids she loves—especially his daughter, Maisy. And with a stalker closing in, the widower and his four-legged partner are all that stands between Josie and a deadly Christmas.Rookie K-9 Unit: These lawmen solve the toughest cases with the help of their brave canine partners.

K-9 HOLIDAY RESCUE

Surviving Christmas by Valerie Hansen

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Meet the Rookie K-9 Unit officers
and their brave police dog partners

Officer: Zoe Trent

Age: 27

K-9 Partner: Freya the Belgian Tervuren

Assignment: Protect her old friend Sean Murphy and his disabled son from the danger that is stalking them.

Officer: Dalton West

Age: 33

K-9 Partner: Luna the brindle mutt

Assignment: Protect Josie Callahan and her day-care center from the criminals who are targeting it.

VALERIE HANSEN was thirty when she awoke to the presence of the Lord in her life and turned to Jesus. She now lives in a renovated farmhouse in the breathtakingly beautiful Ozark Mountains of Arkansas and is privileged to share her personal faith by telling the stories of her heart for Love Inspired. Life doesn't get much better than that!

LENORA WORTH writes award-winning romance and romantic suspense. Three of her books finaled in the ACFW Carol Awards, and her Love Inspired Suspense novel Body of Evidence became a New York Times bestseller. Her novella in Mistletoe Kisses made her a USA TODAY bestselling author. With sixty books published and millions in print, she goes on adventures with her retired husband, Don, and enjoys reading, baking and shopping...especially shoe shopping. Visit her on the web at lenoraworth.com.

Rookie K9 Unit Christmas
Surviving Christmas
Valerie Hansen
Holiday High Alert
Lenora Worth



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Surviving Christmas
Valerie Hansen

Many thanks to Lenora Worth for her friendship and expert advice as we put these two novellas together.

And continuing love to my Joe, who is with me in spirit, looking over my shoulder and offering moral support as I write. He always will be.

For He shall give His angels charge over thee,
to keep thee in all thy ways.
—Psalms 91:11

ONE

Sean Murphy hated to close his eyes. A terrifying past waited for him in sleep, a past that sometimes invaded even his waking hours. Love for his six-year-old son, Patrick, was what kept him sane, kept him battling to return to normal. Patrick needed him, now more than ever. All they had left was each other.

The St. Louis apartment Sean had rented on his return to the States was small but adequate for the present. The future would take care of itself. At least Sean hoped so. There had been a time when he'd believed God was guiding him through life. Now, he felt adrift.

Fog of sleep dulled his senses, but not so much that he failed to hear a strange sound in the dark. He froze. Listened intently. Heard nothing more. Sighing, he wished he knew how to stop being so jumpy. Every creak of the old building brought irrational fear.

A cadence of soft steps followed. Sean sat bolt upright. "Patrick?"

The sound ceased. Sean slipped out of bed, wishing he still had his rifle and full battle gear. St. Louis might not be Kandahar, but that didn't mean there was no danger. Yes, his emotions were raw. And, yes, chances were that he was merely imagining a threat. There was only one way to find out. He must see for himself.

Since Patrick's near-drowning accident in the swimming pool at his maternal grandparents' estate, the boy had been having trouble with speech as well as motor skills. Therefore, he sometimes sought out his daddy without explanation. That was probably what Sean had heard. Still, he refused to disregard an instinctive warning.

Barefoot, he tiptoed to the open bedroom door and waited in the shadow from the night-light in the hallway. A low mumble

reached him. How could Patrick be talking in his sleep when he had so much trouble doing so awake?

Sean pressed his back to the jamb and slowly eased forward. The voices were clear. For an instant he wished they weren't.

"I ain't killin' no kid. You got that?" one person grumbled.

"We aren't supposed to. Just the father."

"Fine. What if the kid sees us? What then?"

"Nobody'll know we're here if you shut your yap," the other prowler whispered. "Come on."

Sean tensed. He was strong, ready to defend himself, but anything might happen if Patrick awoke. The boy's most frequent utterance was a high-pitched squeal of fright and frustration. If he began to carry on like that, the attackers might change their minds and harm him, too.

Going on the offense was the answer. Sean grabbed the junior baseball bat he'd bought to help Patrick regain coordination and braced himself.

The first man led with his pistol, giving Sean a one-time chance of disarming him. Wood in the child's bat cracked as Sean brought it down on the assailant's wrist. The man dropped the gun, doubled up and howled. His partner didn't wait for him to recover. Instead, he fired blindly in the dark, then turned tail and ran.

Sean dove for the gun and connected. Its owner leaped onto his back and tried to wrest it away. He might have succeeded if he'd had both hands in working order—or if his cohort had stuck

around to help.

Sean continued to struggle with the man in the confines of the narrow hallway. His temple hit a doorjamb. Flashes of light, like exploding mortar shells, blinded him. Noises of war filled his ears. The acrid smell of gunpowder and the portent of death seemed to be everywhere.

A trickle of blood wet his close-cropped hair as survival instinct locked his fingers around the cold metal in his hands. At that moment, nothing could have pried open his grip.

There was a muted crash, then a tinkling, rustling sound. Clarity returned enough to suggest that the first man had stumbled over the Christmas tree he and Patrick had just decorated.

A child screamed.

Patrick!

Lunging, Sean knocked the intruder aside and struggled to his feet, gun in hand. That was enough. The injured man scrambled away, rounded the corner into the living room and disappeared out the door.

Sean wanted to follow. To capture at least one of the thugs who had declared their intent to kill him. But he didn't. Patrick needed him more. The child came first. Always had. Always would.

So, now what?

* * *

Police officer Zoe Trent had recently graduated from Canyon County K-9 Training Center in Desert Valley, Arizona, with

her Belgian Tervuren, Freya. Being partnered with a specialized K-9 had been a goal of hers ever since completing the police academy. Now that it was time to return to her regular assignment in Mesa, Arizona, however, she knew she was going to miss the new friends she'd made during the twelve-week K-9 training program.

Wishing there were an easy way to keep in touch, and knowing they would surely drift apart as normal life resumed, she'd struggled to fall asleep tonight. A Christmas carol ringtone on her cell phone startled her awake.

Freya barked to accompany her muttered, "Hello?"

"Zoe?"

"Yes." Coming alert, she raised on one elbow.

"It's me again. Sean Murphy. Sorry to bother you, but you did tell me to call if I needed anything."

Instant worry for her college chum infused her. "Of course. What's wrong? You sound awful. Have you had another PTSD flashback?"

"It's worse than that."

Her dark eyes narrowed, and she raked stray tendrils of long brown hair away from her face with her free hand. "How can it be worse? It's not Patrick again, is it?"

"He's okay, so far. There's nobody here I can trust, and I really need help. Somebody's trying to kill me."

"What?" How could she express doubt without jeopardizing their seasoned friendship? "Are you sure? I mean, you told me

you'd been a little confused since your medical discharge."

"I know what you're thinking," he countered. "I had the same misgivings. I've been awake for hours since this happened, trying to figure it out. Two guys broke into my apartment, and I fought with one of them."

"Did you call the police?"

"Of course. You know how it is in a big city. If the prowlers had succeeded in shooting me, I'd have gotten more attention."

"The men were armed?"

"Yes. One is now sporting a broken wrist, I hope. I disarmed him and he ran. So did his partner."

Zoe paused to choose her words carefully. "Okay. You had a break-in. What makes you think these guys had murder on their minds?"

"I heard them say they were there to kill me." He hesitated, then added, "I know I wasn't hallucinating because of what happened next. When I hit one on his gun hand, the other fired and left a bullet in the ceiling. The cops took all the evidence. Since nothing was stolen and nobody got shot, they acted like they didn't hold out much hope to catch the guys."

"Unless the ballistics match another case," she said. "Do you think these assailants might have been old friends of Sandra's?" Zoe hated to bring up his late wife but felt compelled to ask. After all, the woman had overdosed while her innocent son was floundering in the deep end of a swimming pool.

"I can't see why drug dealers would have it in for me," Sean

said. “Their business was with Sandra.”

“Agreed. So, how can I help you?”

“You can get me into that service dog program you mentioned when I was first discharged. I need to get my emotions under better control if I intend to survive more real life attacks.”

“Okay. I’ll see the director, Ellen Foxcroft, and put your name on her waiting list.”

“That’s not enough. Not after last night.”

Zoe could tell from his tone that he was approaching an emotional crossroad and wished they were face-to-face so she could judge his condition more accurately. “Are you and Patrick out of danger now?”

“Temporarily. I threw some clothes and stuff into the pickup, and I’ve been driving around, thinking, ever since the police left. I can’t take him back to the apartment. Whoever came after me last night may try again.”

“What about going to your in-laws? They have plenty of room for both of you, don’t they?”

“I’d rather hole up in a cardboard box on the street than rely on them,” Sean said. “The Shepherds were so concerned with excusing Sandra’s addiction and transferring blame, they laid it all on me.”

“Okay. Tell you what,” Zoe said, hoping her growing concern was masked, “why don’t you come on down to Desert Valley to visit me? I was going to head back to Mesa soon, but there’s no hurry. I don’t start my new assignment until after the first of the

year, and the Desert Valley PD can use a few substitute cops here while their regulars take holiday time off."

"What good will a few weeks do me?"

"It'll give you a chance to chill out, for one thing. Besides, once Ellen meets you and Patrick and realizes how special your needs are, maybe she'll make an exception and work you in."

The quiet on the other end of the line troubled her. The Sean Murphy she'd met in college was nothing like this traumatized widower. Coming home from combat with PTSD was bad enough without having to face the death of his spouse and near loss of his only child.

"All right," Sean finally said.

She almost cheered. Instead, she said, "I'm looking forward to it. And to meeting Patrick."

Silence again. Then, "He's not himself yet. He may never be. Doctors keep reminding me there are no guarantees."

"That doesn't matter."

Anger tinged his reply. "Of course it does."

"No," Zoe told him tenderly. "It doesn't. He's your son and you love him. That's enough for me."

Although Sean's goodbye was terse, she could tell he was touched by her total acceptance. She didn't have to see the boy to know he merited a good life with the parent who was willing to sacrifice anything to help him. Everyone deserved a fighting chance at happiness.

Even babies who are born with fatal birth defects, she added,

blinking rapidly. She had not wept for her nameless baby brother since she was five years old and a stranger had come to take him away. Mama had cried then, but Daddy had stood dry-eyed, staring at the tiny, imperfect bundle wrapped in the blue blanket.

That was the last time Zoe had been permitted to talk about the absent baby. It was as if he had never been born, which was apparently exactly what her parents had wanted.

The sense of injustice and concern for the helpless had begun then and had built throughout her formative years, perhaps even directing her path into law enforcement. She didn't trust easily, but she did have a soft heart for the downtrodden.

Like Patrick. And like his daddy.

* * *

Sean's next stop was the bank, where he withdrew all but a few dollars of his savings via the drive-through window. If there was any chance he was being tracked or followed, cash would be a necessity.

And speaking of being followed...

A black SUV seemed to be dogging them. It was back several car lengths, yet changed lanes whenever he did. His hands tightened on the wheel. His little boy was strapped in, of course, but that didn't mean it would be safe to take evasive action, particularly if excessive speed was involved. Where were the cops when you needed them?

Sean whipped around a corner, determined to find a patrol car or police station. He checked his mirrors. The SUV was

gone. Had he merely imagined it trailing them? Imagined was the key, wasn't it? His mind was good at seeing enemies around every corner and behind every door, the way they'd been in Afghanistan. His body had come home, but part of his mind was still over there, still caught up in the fighting.

He couldn't afford to show signs of instability. If the authorities concluded he was an unfit parent, they might take Patrick away. Worse, with no other close relatives available, they might place him with his negligent maternal grandparents.

The only thing that mattered to Sean was his own assurance that Patrick was absolutely safe with him. If he'd thought otherwise, he'd have stepped back and voluntarily relinquished custody.

Glancing in the rearview mirror at his curly haired look-alike strapped into the narrower backseat he smiled. "You getting hungry, buddy?"

Patrick nodded.

"How about a quick burger? You like those, don't you?"

Another nod.

"Sorry," Sean said, urging speech the way the therapist had. "I don't quite understand you. Can you say yes or no?"

The little boy looked back at his daddy with eyes as blue as the sky, smiled and said, "No."

"Did you just make a joke?" Sean's eyes misted.

Patrick's grin spread as he said, "Yes," and Sean was so excited by the possibility he almost let his pickup truck drift to the curb.

In moments, however, his pulse returned to normal. Patrick began to chant, "Yes, no, yes, no," as if neither word meant anything to him.

Monitoring the traffic behind him, Sean picked up some fast food, then headed for the highway that would take him southwest to Desert Valley. He might not have an abundance of friends willing to stand with him, but at least he had one.

He'd checked his side-and rearview mirrors repeatedly and had seen no sign of the SUV that had worried him before. Nevertheless, the sooner he reached Zoe Trent, the better.

* * *

"Sean's an old college friend who just got out of the army on a medical discharge," Zoe told lead K-9 unit trainer Sophie Williams. "I was hoping you could have a word with Ellen Foxcroft and see if she can work him in to the therapy dog program."

"And leave who else out?" Sophie was scowling.

Zoe knew her position as a rookie K-9 officer from Sophie's most recent graduating class gave her very little influence. Nevertheless, she had to keep trying. "Maybe, since I've offered to hang around DVPD until after the holidays and sub, I could volunteer my services to you in my downtime and we could squeeze in an extra student and dog. There's no place else I need to be, and I don't have to report to work with Freya until after the first of the year."

Looking for moral support, Zoe laid her hand on the Belgian

Tervuren's head and scratched behind her silky, erect ears. Fellow students had teased her about being assigned to a dog whose fur almost matched her own dark brown hair. That was fine with her.

"All right. I'll speak to Ellen for you," Sophie said.

Zoe thought she'd better give Sophie a little more information about Sean, including that he and his son would be staying with her. She explained about the PTSD. "And he's a widower. His wife overdosed while she was supposed to be watching their son, Patrick. The boy survived almost drowning but was left with brain damage. It's a really sad story."

"Well, sounds like he has a good friend in you," Sophie said. "All right. As soon as your friend gets settled, bring him in for an interview. What do you intend to do with Sean's son while he's being assessed and maybe trained?"

"I thought I'd see if Marilyn and Josie would accept him in their day care. Patrick does have special needs, though."

Sophie nodded. "Lily likes it there, and Ryder and I are pleased with the facility. She's not my stepdaughter yet but it won't be long."

"Hey, if the police chief approves the place and so do you, I'm sure that'll put Sean at ease." Encouraged and uplifted by her trainer's support, Zoe laid a hand lightly on Sophie's arm. "Thanks. This means a lot to me."

"Don't thank me," Sophie said. "Nothing has happened yet."

"But it will, God willing," Zoe countered with a grin. "This

is the perfect time of the year. Patrick can go to Sunday school and maybe even participate with other kids in the Christmas pageant."

"We can always use another shepherd or angel," Sophie said. "Lily and I are playing Magi. I'm working on camel costumes for Ryder's old dog Titus and another yellow Lab. Probably Tristan McKeller's Jesse." She paused. "Come to think of it, Tristan's a former soldier. Maybe he can offer your friend some advice."

Zoe stopped smiling and shook her head slowly, thoughtfully. Tristan, a Desert Valley police officer, was a good guy, but... "I don't know. Sean may not want to air his problems. It will all come out if and when he qualifies for the Canine Assistance program, of course, but since I didn't ask if I could tell anyone else, would you mind keeping the story to yourself?"

"Of course," Sophie said. "You did mention he had some kind of trouble in St. Louis, though. If it follows him here, I will need to share his story with Ryder."

"I understand. And thanks." Sighing, Zoe remembered her old friend Sean and his boyish good looks. She'd had a crush on him from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, and when he'd proudly announced his plans to marry coed Sandra Shepherd, it had nearly broken her heart.

Hopefully whoever broke into his apartment doesn't figure out where he's gone, she thought, realizing she did believe his story of the attack. If thugs came after him here, their actions would certainly be taken seriously. The advantage she—and Sean

—had while in Desert Valley was her close ties with the police department and the Canyon County K-9 Training Center.

Nobody was going to pull the wool over the eyes of the officials here, let alone fool trained dogs whose senses were so well honed.

The previous batch of rookies and their K-9 partners had helped nab a serial killer. If anyone should be scared of coming to Desert Valley, it should be criminals.

Zoe smiled. Strangers here stood out like bright blossoms on a Cholla cactus in December. Nobody was going to bother Sean and his son. Not while she and her friends were on duty.

TWO

Despite the terrain in Desert Valley being anything but Christmas-like, Sean noticed red and green decorations hung from every light post, and twinkling lights festooned the fronts of businesses along the main street of the small Arizona town.

As he looked for a place to park, he glanced in the rearview mirror at Patrick, who was still fast asleep in his car seat, then pulled to the curb in front of the only official-looking building he saw. He let his truck idle while he called Zoe's cell. "I'm here. Where are you?"

"Already? What did you do, drive night and day?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm in front of the police station. I'd planned to go in and ask for you, but Patrick's asleep and I'd hate to wake him."

"I'm at the training center. It's about a quarter mile east, on

the same road. Can you see the sign from there?"

He peered into the brightness of the rising sun. "I think so. Stay put. I'm on my way."

The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he looked in the side-view mirror to check for oncoming traffic. There was nobody in sight, yet his senses remained on high alert, as they had been since the break-in. Every dark SUV seemed to be on his trail, not to mention a few other models and colors. The sensation was akin to driving on drifting sand that might be hiding an improvised explosive device. Yeah, been there, done that.

His focus shifted. There she was! Sight of the slim, dark-haired woman with a large dog at her side raised Sean's spirits immeasurably. How could he have forgotten how lovely his old friend was? How pleasing it was to be around her?

Zoe waved. Sean's heart beat faster. This reunion felt more like coming home than he'd imagined it would. He was older and wiser, of course. Well, at least older. If he'd been at all wise, he'd have realized how much Zoe had meant to him in the first place.

Cruising to a stop at the low curb, Sean sat behind the wheel and tried to regain control of his emotions. This wasn't another flashback of the kind that left him frightened and fearful. This was the kind that made him want to weep and wrap Zoe in an embrace that should be reserved for close family—or the woman he loved. She was neither, and yet...

Her grin was wide, her dark eyes sparkling. He didn't notice she was decked out in a police uniform and fully armed until he'd

climbed out of the truck. Some men might have found that off-putting, but it pleased Sean greatly.

The decision of whether or not to hug her was taken from him the instant she threw herself into his arms. All he could do was hang on and blink back tears.

To his surprise and relief, her eyes were moist when she released him. She swiped at her cheeks, grinned and sniffled. "Bright sun will do this to me every time."

"Yeah. Me, too." He was so glad to see her he was nearly speechless. The urge to kiss her was too strong to resist, so he brushed his lips against her cheek before straightening to say, "You're looking good."

"Not so bad yourself," she countered with a blush. "You've packed on more muscle since we were in college."

"Compliments of Uncle Sam." His gaze drifted to his truck. "I wish I'd known before, what I know now."

"Yeah, well, time has a way of wising us up whether we like it or not."

"You never married?" he found himself asking.

Zoe laughed softly. "If you asked my chief back in Mesa, he'd say I'm married to my job. I like to think it's worth it." She sobered. "Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"Not that I know of. I kept thinking we were being followed, but it was probably my imagination. I tend to do that. If I hadn't actually fought with those two guys in my apartment, I'd be wondering if the attack was real."

"I asked the chief here, Ryder Hayes, to send for a copy of your incident report," Zoe said. "There wasn't much to it."

"Did it say whether there was news on the ballistics?"

"Not yet. Don't get discouraged. We'll keep an eye on your case."

He scanned her khaki uniform. "Are you working here?"

"Not today, but I do sub. Just getting the dog used to seeing me ready for duty and doing a bit of extra training. Why don't I get my car and you can follow me home. I'm sure you'd like to get Patrick settled and get some rest yourself."

"Home with you? I figured I'd rent a motel room."

"Don't be silly. I have plenty of space."

He eyed the panting dog at their feet. "What about your K-9? Will she be okay with a kid?"

"Yes, she'll be fine. That was part of her training. These dogs can differentiate between felons and friends."

Still concerned, Sean leaned closer to speak more privately even though they were alone. "Patrick is not typical in any sense of the word, Zoe. We're going to have to be very careful when we introduce them. The poor kid has had it rough."

"I understand. I really do," she said. "But didn't his doctors warn against babying him too much?"

"Ensuring his safety is not the same thing. If those guys who broke into our apartment had seen him acting up, they might have shot him just to make him be quiet." Sean squelched a shiver. "When he gets scared and can't communicate, he tends to panic."

"Maybe Freya can help with that, too," Zoe said. "This evening, after supper, I'll invite my trainer and the K-9 cop who founded the assistance dog center to join us for coffee and dessert. That way Patrick won't have to sit through a whole meal with strangers if he isn't able, and they'll still get a good idea of your needs. Okay?"

"Sounds like you've worked it all out."

"I'm doing my best."

"I know you are." Starting to turn toward his truck he said, "Let's go. I'm ready."

* * *

Traffic was predictably light all the way to the rented house. The place was actually too big for one person but was all that had been available, so she'd leased it. Looking back, she wondered if God had arranged the extra room for this purpose. True or not, the notion was comforting.

She motioned Sean to pull into the driveway ahead of her. Instead, he drove onto the sorry excuse for a lawn and left room by the garage for her.

"I meant for you to use the driveway," she said, approaching his truck.

"It all looks the same to me."

"So I gathered. You parked on what's supposed to be the lawn when it gets proper watering."

"Sorry." An eyebrow arched. "Is it always this cold here? When I think of the desert, I picture heat."

"It depends on the elevation and time of year," Zoe said. "A light jacket is usually enough for us, even in the winter. When there's snow in Flagstaff and around the Grand Canyon, it can feel colder, though. It generally warms up during the day and cools off when the sun goes down."

She leaned to peer into his truck and smiled broadly at the little boy who'd just awakened. "You must be Patrick." When the child hid his face, she added, "My name is Zoe."

"That's right," Sean said. "This is the friend I told you about while we were driving. She's a very nice lady."

Still, the child cowered. "I'll go get my partner," she told Sean, adding a smile at Patrick. "Then we'll all go inside together."

Forcing the little boy to act sociable would have been wrong no matter what. Since he was clearly afraid, Zoe wanted to make certain this first meeting with her K-9 went smoothly. Therefore, she ordered Freya to heel and kept her on a short leash.

Sean was carrying Patrick and waiting at the front door of the simple, one-story, stucco home. The boy had his face pressed to his daddy's shoulder, hiding his eyes as if doing that made him invisible.

Sensing his uneasiness, the dog whined and wagged her tail. Zoe was about to silence her when she saw a big blue eye peeking out to see what was making the noise.

"This is Freya," Zoe said. "She lives and works with me. She's really friendly."

The key turned in the lock. Zoe pushed open the door and

stood back. “After you.”

A small hand reached back, and both of the child’s eyes peered over Sean’s shoulder. “Da.”

“Dog? Yes, she’s a dog. A very nice dog,” Zoe said. “Would you like to meet her?”

“Da!”

Zoe laughed. “I think it’s time you put Patrick down, Sean. He may not be ready to accept me,” she whispered, “but it looks like he’s more than ready to have a fur buddy.”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s try it,” she suggested. “Put Patrick down so he and Freya can meet on the same level.” A flat hand in front of the eager K-9’s muzzle kept her from lunging and overwhelming the child the way most dogs would.

As soon as the boy’s shoes touched the floor he ducked behind his daddy’s leg, holding on at the knee. Zoe wasn’t worried. She caught Sean’s eye and shook her head to keep him from interfering, then sat on her heels.

“Patrick, this is Freya.” She looked to her panting partner. “Freya, this is Patrick. Friend.”

There was no doubt the dog agreed. Although she kept her distance as ordered, she began to wiggle as if seated on a hill of swarming ants.

“Put your hand out like this and let her sniff you,” Zoe said, demonstrating. “She can tell you like her by the way your fingers smell.”

Sean interrupted. “Is that true?”

“In a manner of speaking. She can sense fear and pick out gunpowder residue, plus all sorts of icky things I won’t mention. The key is this introduction. It will be your turn as soon as Patrick is done.”

“Maybe I should...”

“Trust me?” she said.

A soft chuckle preceded Sean’s reply. “Since when did you get so bossy?”

“Since I was trained and know what I’m doing.”

“Humph. Okay. You’re the police officer.”

“Yup,” she said with an echoing laugh. “Watch and learn, civilian.”

Another hand signal caused Freya to lie down. Patrick reached forward. She sniffed his fingertips, then licked them. He giggled. “Like me.”

“Yes, she does. And so do I,” Zoe said. As if on cue, the dog rolled over, tail still wagging, legs flopping wide. “She trusts you and wants you to scratch her tummy,” Zoe told the boy. “Go ahead. Her fur is really soft.”

He had to come out from behind Sean and squat to reach the dog’s stomach. Zoe couldn’t have been happier at his rapid response. She grinned up at Sean. “Okay. Your turn. She wouldn’t have rolled over if she was worried about you, so join the party.”

Sean began by crouching, then dropped all the way next to his

son, keeping one arm around him. Patrick eased into his father's lap, followed closely by Freya. The idyllic scene was the kind that made Zoe wish she could snap a photo without disturbing them. Father and son were hugging each other while the dog leaned against Sean's chest and reached up to lick under his chin as if they had known each other for years.

He laughed. "As Patrick said, I think she likes me."

"I'd say so. It's a good thing her main training is in search and rescue. You might be ruining her if she was an attack dog."

"Really?"

Because he looked worried she admitted to teasing. "No. Not really. But it is unusual to see her take to anybody so fast."

"She knows we're the good guys, right, Patrick?" Sean said. The boy nodded his agreement.

Zoe slowly rose. "Tell you what. After you put your things in your room and we go shopping for your favorite foods, maybe I'll have time to teach Patrick how to brush her. Would you like that, honey?"

Again a nod, this time with a shy smile. Zoe had no quarrel with his medical diagnosis. She simply saw more to Patrick's reticence than brain damage. In her opinion, he needed to be showered with love in order to be more confident, to blossom the way she felt he could.

Whether there would be time for her to help enough to matter was not up to her, it was up to her heavenly Father. She was beginning to suspect that Sean's need to come to Desert Valley

was not limited to one objective. There was healing here for him. And for Patrick. And, God willing, for her, as well.

It had been a long time since she'd actually looked forward to having free time and not concentrating on her job 24/7. Truth to tell, she sort of felt like a puppy that had just been let out into a big play yard for the first time. If she hadn't been afraid of frightening Patrick she might have pumped a fist in the air and danced around the room.

THREE

After a quick tour of the house, Sean agreed to ride with Zoe and Freya rather than drive separately to the grocery store. If she had been anybody other than an armed police officer, he wasn't sure what he'd have done. He'd been so used to taking care of himself and being the only responsible adult in his son's life, it felt odd to not stay in full control.

She glanced over at him and smiled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Right. And I'm Santa Claus. Talk to me, Murphy. I know something's bugging you."

Shrugging, he smiled at her. "Actually, I just realized I can relax a little when I'm with you. It's hard to accept."

"What is? Relaxing or trusting me?"

"Not being in command. Since I got back to the States, I've had to do it all. Believe me, the Shepherds didn't like most of my decisions."

"Such as?"

Sean lowered his voice and glanced over his shoulder at the backseat where his son and the dog were having a whispered conversation that included a lot of face licking on Freya's part. "Whether or not to bring Patrick home, for one. They wanted him to either stay in rehab or go to their house for private treatment. When I saw how unhappy he was in the hospital environment and how much better he acted with me, I decided to spring him."

"What did his therapists say?"

It hurt to repeat the negative opinions. "They felt he had made all the progress he probably would, and it didn't matter whether I left him there or took him with me."

"Then you have no reason to feel guilty." Zoe smiled. "Right?"

"Right. All I have to do is get my own act together so I can be a good father to him. If I keep having flashbacks, I may have to relinquish custody—for his sake."

"And give it to whom? I remember when your mom and dad were killed in that auto accident during my second semester of college." She arched her brows. "Surely you wouldn't consider your wife's parents after what you've told me!"

"No, no. Never them. They've already indicated that their idea of handling his problems is to overlook how much he needs love." Although he wanted to turn his face away and retreat, Sean remained stoic. "I had no idea how bad things had gotten while I was in the service. Sandra told me she'd gone home to her family's estate because she was lonely, not because she intended to stay stoned all the time and wanted Mommy and Daddy to

watch Patrick."

"That's what happened?"

"Yeah."

"So, you asked for a discharge?"

"It wasn't that simple. I was on my way to the airport, ready to fly home because of Patrick's accident, when one of my buddies drove over an IED. The explosion took out half the Humvee and killed two men. I was thrown clear. By the time I got out of the hospital, I'd been diagnosed with PTSD, Sandra had died from an overdose and Patrick was still struggling to recover."

"Wow."

Sean nodded soberly. "Yeah. My sentiments exactly."

"You should be thankful you were able to get him away from your in-laws for this trip. I'm sure they didn't like it."

"I didn't tell them. They act as though I'm the reason for everything that went wrong." His jaw set. "Actually, they aren't the only ones. I had a long layover in Minneapolis during the trip home and used the time to pay a condolence visit to the family of one of the men who'd been with me in the Humvee. They slammed the door in my face. I guess they blamed me since they had no one else around to be mad at."

"I'm so sorry."

"As they say, 'No good deed goes unpunished,' right?"

Zoe pulled into the supermarket parking lot, found a space and turned to stare at him. "Could they have been responsible for sending the thugs to harm you?"

"I can't see why. Or how."

"What about Sandra's folks?"

"No. Violence is definitely not their way of handling problems. They have enough money to hire the best lawyers and sue for custody if they want me out of the picture."

He saw her hands fist on the steering wheel as she asked, "Do you think they might resort to that?"

"Unless I can get a grip on my flashbacks and prove I'm stable, it's a possibility. That's another reason why I need the help of a service dog. I've seen for myself what a difference one of those can make. Guys who were hardly able to leave their houses are working again and leading fairly normal lives."

"You managed to drive all the way down here. Are you sure you qualify?"

"I don't know whether I could have made myself act if it hadn't been for Patrick," Sean said flatly. "Whatever I did, I did for him. And that's what I'll keep doing for as long as I'm able."

She patted the back of his hand. "I believe you."

The grocery store was crowded. Zoe grabbed a cart, wiped it down to eliminate germs and stood back. "There you go, Patrick. All ready."

The child buried his face against his father's shoulder and clung to him.

"Wait right here," she said. "I'll be back in a sec."

There was no rule against taking her K-9 partner with her anywhere she went. She had left Freya in the car to simplify their

shopping trip but could now see that had been a mistake. Freya was Patrick's temporary service dog, had been since the moment he'd laid a small hand on her back and let her lead him from room to room in the unfamiliar house.

A working vest identified Freya the way a badge gave Zoe authority. She buckled it on and the dog assumed a more cautious demeanor.

"Good girl. Heel."

Patrick's face lit with a smile. His eyes twinkled. "Da."

"That's right, Patrick," Zoe said. "The dog is coming with us. Can you show her how nicely you sit in the cart?"

She was afraid Sean might balk when it came time to let go. Thankfully, he didn't. Patrick's feet slipped through the leg openings, and he grasped the cart handle as if preparing to ride a bucking bronco.

"Freya will stay right here next to us while we shop," Zoe said. "Will you help me watch her to make sure she behaves?"

The child nodded. "Good da."

"That's right. She's a very good dog."

Sean took up a position on the side opposite the dog so they flanked the boy well. Zoe supposed she couldn't blame him for caution, but some of his choices seemed excessive. Maternal instinct kept insisting that there was no way any child could reach full potential when he or she was kept so close, so guarded, yet she could also identify with the urge to protect Patrick.

As they worked their way through the store, however, her

opinion softened. Sean was gently but firmly requiring the boy to at least try to name whatever food he wanted them to buy. Truth to tell, she would have lost patience if she hadn't known how important the exercise was.

"I didn't think we were ever going to get those tangerines," she commented on their way to checkout. "You did a wonderful job working through the name."

"I watched the doctors," Sean said. "It seemed to me they were making things too simple until I realized that breaking the words into syllables was the way to go." He stepped ahead of her and took out his wallet. "Let me get this. Most of it's for us, anyway."

"I don't mind."

"I know. Humor me."

His smile warmed her cheeks enough that she backed off and let him pay. Freya stayed at the rear of the cart as they both bent to unload it. Zoe was concentrating so completely on Sean, it took her a few seconds to notice the dog's low growl. She grabbed his arm to still him and froze, herself.

His response was immediate, his voice raspy. "What?"

"The dog. Look."

Instead of facing them, tongue lolling and tail wagging, Freya had turned so that her back was to Patrick and the adults. She was staring past the next person in line and focusing on one of the aisles.

Zoe rested the heel of her hand on her holster and straightened. "You finish checking out while I go see what's

wrong."

"No."

The command was so forceful, so packed with emotion, she stopped. He was right. If the dog was sensing danger and had put her back to them, then she was reacting to an unseen threat inside the store. As an off-duty police officer, it was still Zoe's duty to protect and serve. Should she protect her friends and serve the community by calling the station and reporting a possible problem? Maybe. The trouble was, without any visible threat she'd be out of line to do so. Nevertheless, she made the call.

Staying on full alert, Zoe kept her eye on her dog and the other shoppers while Sean loaded the bags in their cart and paid the cashier.

"Ready to go," he said behind her.

"Okay. You lead the way. Look for anybody from your past or things that seem unusual. I'll bring up the rear."

"It was dark when I was attacked in my apartment. I didn't get a good look at either of those guys."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "You know how to judge body language from being in combat. This isn't a lot different."

She heard him sigh before he said, "Yeah, providing I don't see an innocent person and read more into their posture than is really there."

"Better safe than sorry." As soon as the automatic door slid closed behind them she moved to shield the boy despite the fact that Freya had settled down.

Sean noticed. “Looks like the dog is okay now.”

“Yes. The threat was apparently inside. Go ahead and load Patrick and the food into the car while I stand guard. We’ll leave as soon as a local unit arrives.”

“How soon will that be?”

“Hopefully, not long.” She used her cell phone again, then told him, “ETA less than five.”

“Why didn’t you radio?”

“Because I’m not actually on duty now.” Waving to an approaching patrol car she stepped away. “Here they are. Be right back.”

* * *

Sean watched her jog across the parking lot to speak with the other officers. He’d managed to quell unreasonable fear inside the store and was feeling even less jittery now that they were out. Patrick was already in the backseat, as was the working dog. Some of the plastic grocery bags were piled on the floor while others shared the bench seat with the child and the K-9. Sean was surprised to see Freya sitting quietly instead of wiggling as before and stepping on perishables.

“Ah, you’re still in uniform, aren’t you,” he muttered. “Of course. You think you’re on duty.”

At first, he assumed the dog’s ensuing reaction was to his voice. She slowly rose, growling and bristling. The effect of her hair standing up made her look twice as big. And dangerous. But she wasn’t looking at him. Or at his son. Again, she was focused

beyond them.

"Zoe!" Sean shouted.

She whirled, her hand hovering over her holster. "What?"

Sean turned to follow the dog's line of sight. A beefy man wearing a dark vest was walking past in the distance. He could have been anybody. There was no reason for concern. Or was there?

By the time Zoe rejoined him at her car, the stranger had climbed into a dusty red pickup.

She touched Sean's arm. "Did you recognize somebody?"

"No." Frowning, he kept watching as the truck pulled away. "It was your dog again. She really doesn't like that guy in the dirty truck."

"She may have picked up the scent of gunpowder or drugs coming from him. Whatever is wrong, I'd trust her opinion over that of almost any human."

"Okay." Still peering at the truck, Sean caught his breath and reached for Zoe's arm. "Look!"

"What? What do you see that I don't?"

"The passenger," Sean gasped. "His arm. On the open window. It looks like it's in a cast!"

"Why would...?"

"Because I hit one of my attackers with Patrick's baseball bat. Remember?"

"You told me you fought them off. You never mentioned a bat." She was already running back to direct the patrol car. Those

officers jumped into their unit and started in pursuit.

"Do you think they'll catch them?" Sean called as she returned.

A solemn shake of her head was all the answer he got. All he needed. Given the delay starting the pursuit, chances were not good.

"Sorry," Sean said. "I shouldn't have put Patrick in the car. I just thought it would be safer."

"It was. It is. I wouldn't have chased after them in a private vehicle, anyway. It's dangerous enough with red lights and sirens."

He nodded.

"Believe it or not, we don't usually go around acting wild like the cops on TV and in the movies. I have yet to take a class on how to jump onto the top of a speeding car and disarm the suspects inside."

"No?" Despite the recent fright, he couldn't help smiling slightly at the mental picture. "That's too bad. I'd have liked to watch."

"Then rent a DVD. I'm not doing any leaping."

"Not even to entertain Patrick?"

"No, but I do have some ideas for him. If we get you into a class soon, I can recommend a local day care. The police chief's daughter goes there, so you know it's very safe."

Sean had to take a deep breath before trying to answer. "I never thought about having to leave him. I figured he could stay

with me. He'll behave. I know he will. Particularly if he gets to watch dogs."

"And not be allowed to play with them? I doubt it," Zoe said. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We still have to convince Ellen Foxcroft to put you in her program."

"You're right. One thing at a time," Sean said. "Let's go home."

"And keep an eye out for that red truck on the way."

"Oh, yeah." He had already buckled up and was braced to keep watch, front and rear.

Had the would-be assassins really tracked him here? Were they that clever? Was he that careless? He hadn't thought so, but it was beginning to look as if the danger he'd wanted to escape was still with him.

If only he knew why somebody wanted him dead. Knowing why might point him to who and he'd know what to do next. There had to be something. There had to be. He needed to survive for Patrick's sake. Surely God wouldn't punish an innocent child for the mistakes of his parents.

If he still believed in the power of prayer, he might reach out. Beg for protection for his son. However, he had prayed repeatedly for Sandra's redemption and look what the result had been. How could he trust a God who let a child nearly drown? Who deprived the boy of a mother?

That thought brought him up short. In the case of Sandra's untimely death, perhaps that was the only thing that had

protected Patrick from her drug-induced mania. But then the pool. Why the pool?

Sean's mind was whirling, stunned by myriad possibilities, none of which made sense to him. He was a civilian now, ready to take care of his son, but he wasn't whole, either. How could a loving heavenly Father expect to use an earthly father who was so damaged?

And then it hit him. Without Patrick, without purpose, there would be no reason to fight anymore. No reason to try to heal. No reason to have come to Desert Valley, to have reunited with the extraordinary woman seated beside him.

He gazed at Zoe. Right now, he needed her help. Maybe, when all this was over, he'd be able to repay her kindness. He certainly hoped so because now that he had seen her again, he didn't intend to let more long years pass without keeping in closer touch. If he had not had her to reach out to when his life fell apart recently he didn't know how he'd have managed.

Something flashed in the rays of the setting sun, as if glinting off a gun barrel. Sean yelled. Ducked. Unsnapped his seat belt and threw himself over the back of his seat toward Patrick just as a shot rang out.

Freya closed her mouth on Sean's shoulder to stop him but didn't bite hard enough to break the skin.

Zoe swerved toward the curb. "Anybody hit?"

"No," he shouted. "I saw a reflection just in time. Get us out of here!"

"Hang on!"

Temporarily steering with one hand, she punched a button on her cell phone. "Trent here. Possible shots fired. We're almost to my house. It's the old Peterson place on Second, not far from Sophie Williams's. We took fire about a half-mile south. Can't pinpoint the exact location."

Sean barely had hold of the buckle on his seat belt when she dropped the phone and fisted both hands tightly on the wheel. Her jaw was set.

"What did they say?"

"They're on the scene. Found the red truck, abandoned, close to where we were shot at. It was stolen. If the guys took off on foot, they were probably our shooters."

"That makes sense."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I'm getting you and Patrick back inside where you'll be safer. They can't hit you if they can't see you."

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this," Sean said.

"You didn't drag me into anything. I walked in with both eyes open. This is what I do. Why I got into this business. What good is all my special training if I don't use it?"

He recalled one silly way they used to tease each other in college and revived it, hoping his breathlessness wasn't too evident. "So, where's your superhero cape?"

"At the cleaner's," she shot back as she slid the car around a tight corner in perfect control. "I use a badge and a gun, now."

Sean sighed. “That’s my Zoe. Saving the world, one friend at a time.”

He wasn’t happy with the role reversal. Men were supposed to rescue damsels in distress. He snorted quietly. That was not likely to happen when the woman in question was his old friend, Zoe Trent.

FOUR

Zoe didn’t slow much as she entered the open garage. If she hadn’t been concerned about the whole situation, she might have laughed when Sean braced himself on the dash with both hands.

“I’ve been taught defensive driving,” she said. “Don’t panic.”

“Defensive is one thing. Driving through the back wall of a garage is another.”

“Ya think?” A soft chuckle erupted. “Don’t worry. I have complete control.”

“So you say. If you don’t mind, I’ll get out now.”

“I don’t mind a bit.” She was lowering the mechanized garage door behind them with the push of a button. “This side door to the house isn’t locked. Go on in with Patrick. I’ll bring Freya and the groceries.”

“You get the dog. I’ll get the food.”

“Now who’s being bossy?”

“I am.” He’d already bent and picked up his son when she joined him and asked, “Is there a problem with his motor skills, too?”

“Some. Why?”

"Because I thought it would be good for him to walk more. He can lean on Freya again if he needs support."

"He falls easily."

"And how did he learn to walk in the first place?"

She noted Sean's sigh. Perhaps she was being too outspoken. Then again, maybe bluntness was just what he needed. It was possible to love someone or something so much you didn't give it the opportunity to learn and grow. The same was true of the canines in the various programs. If they weren't pushed, they'd not only fail to make progress, they might regress. Training was a daily necessity, as was affection. Each had its place and time.

Leading the way, Zoe entered with the dog at her heels, leaving the door open behind them. When she turned, Sean was gently lowering Patrick to the floor and bending to speak to him.

"I'll be right back, buddy. I have to go get your tangerines and the other stuff we bought. You watch the dog for us like you did at the store, okay?"

The tousled, blond head nodded without hesitation. "Good da."

"Dog." Sean put emphasis on the final letter. "Daw—guh."

To Zoe's surprise and joy, Patrick repeated it perfectly. She would have cheered if she hadn't seen moisture gleaming in his father's eyes. Every small step was a triumph, every properly annunciated word a victory.

"Thank You, Lord, for letting me be a part of this amazing healing process," she whispered, blinking back her own tears.

She'd thought her offer of assistance was meant for one person, and it was actually going to benefit at least two.

Make that three, she added. Not only had her heavenly Father reunited dear friends, He had placed her in a position to render aid and share blessings. No amount of threat, no lowlife with an evil agenda, was going to steal that from her. Not now. Not ever again.

* * *

The scheduled visit with lead K-9 trainer, Sophie Williams, and Ellen Foxcroft, the founder of the assistance dog program, took place as scheduled at Zoe's house. Sean liked both women, and Zoe's introduction of him and his disabled son wasn't maudlin. As a matter of fact, it was so uplifting he wondered if she'd talked her associates right out of helping him.

"I never claimed to be totally helpless," he told the women with a nod toward Patrick. "But as you can see, there are special circumstances. I not only need to be able to function for my own sake, I need to be there for my son. As much as it pains me to admit it, I'm not myself." His elbows were propped on his knees, his hands joined between them while he toyed with his wedding band.

Ellen mirrored his pose. Her reddish hair hung in a single braid down her back. Her gaze was tender. "I know how hard this is for you, Mr. Murphy. The human body sometimes deals with intense trauma in ways that go against everything we expect. That doesn't make us less of a person. It's how we cope with the

aftereffects of disaster that will define who and what we become. By asking for help you've taken a big step, and I want to tell you how impressed I am."

"Just get me well for Patrick," Sean said with passion. "I don't care what it takes. Whatever I have to do, I'll do it. I promise."

"I know you will." She glanced at Sophie. "What do you think of giving Angel another chance?"

The lead trainer smiled and shook her head. "It's easy to see why the folks who donated her named her Ding-a-ling. She really is a sweetheart, but do you really think she's salvageable?"

Zoe had been fidgeting. Now she spoke up. "Why Angel? I mean, she's lovable and partially trained in several disciplines, but she's also terribly headstrong and easily distracted."

"Exactly why she needs a strong, forceful, determined man as her partner," Ellen replied. "Mr. Murphy is right about not being as badly affected as many of our clients, so why not let him give Angel a try? It's that or wash her out of all our programs."

Watching his old friend's expression, Sean could tell she was mulling over the suggestion. A misfit dog for a misfit soldier. What could be better?

Zoe finally nodded. "Okay. How can I help?"

"We'll do introductions first thing in the morning. Bring everybody involved to the training center with you but don't wear your uniform. We want that meeting to be as casual as possible so we can judge Angel's reactions. If she passes that test, we'll make up a training schedule."

The women stood, as did Sean. “Thank you, both,” he said.

Sophie nodded and shook Sean’s hand, then paused and looked to Zoe. “By the way, what was the disturbance at the market all about? I understand from Ryder that a threat may have followed Mr. Murphy to Desert Valley, after all.”

Sean knew she was referring to the chief of police, Ryder Hayes, the same person who had sent for the report about his break-in back in St. Louis.

“It started when I thought I saw somebody who had caused me trouble in St. Louis,” Sean explained. “It turned out they were driving a stolen truck and ditched it right before somebody took a potshot at Zoe’s car.”

Ellen nodded. “I heard we tried using James Harrison’s bloodhound, but he lost their trail. Do you think the incidents were connected?”

“I’m sure beginning to,” Zoe said. “Freya reacted to one of the guys when we were all in the store.”

Sophie nodded. “We’ll all need to be on alert. See you tomorrow morning at eight.”

Sean hung back as Zoe walked her friends to the door. Patrick had curled up on the sofa with Freya. The dog opened one eye, studied him for a second, then closed it, sighed and relaxed. If the new dog he was about to meet was half the canine companion Freya was, he’d be more than satisfied.

It suddenly struck him that canine senses were going to be the answer. If he felt threatened and the dog did not, then he’d know

his imagination was in charge. If, however, the dog reacted as well, he could begin to trust his own senses. To trust himself.

What might it be like to actually lighten up and enjoy life again? Considering the way he'd been feeling, the concept sounded both enticing and out of reach.

Sean shivered, remembering the words of his attackers. They had been sent to kill him. That was all there was to it. If they were here, in Desert Valley, there was no way he'd ever be able to let down his guard. Not if he expected to live long enough to raise his child.

* * *

Zoe took a brief phone call later in the evening. She'd watched the tension building on her friend's face as she'd listened, so the first thing she did was set Sean's mind at ease. "That was Chief Hayes."

"What now?"

"Good news, actually," she said, smiling. "They were able to get usable prints off that stolen red truck. They belonged to local kids who have been in trouble here before, not hit men from St. Louis."

"They're sure?"

"Positive."

"But, the guy we saw in the parking lot was no kid."

"Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, they're also running a partial palm print through the AFIS database to see if there are any matches."

It pained her to see some of the starch go out of Sean's spine. "You can't convince me it's all in my head, so don't even try."

"That's not what I meant. We didn't find any shell casings today, but the bullet in your apartment ceiling was plenty real."

"True. I wish I had a better idea of who has it in for me. I haven't been home long enough to have made new enemies, so it has to be somebody from my past."

"Or Sandra's," Zoe said. "Did you pick up any of her stuff from her parents?"

"Nothing except clothes for Patrick and a few toys."

"Could she have hidden drugs in those?"

"If she did, the proof is back in my old apartment. I left too fast to take much with me."

"I could have Chief Hayes contact the St. Louis department and suggest they do a thorough search. The problem is, if they do turn up illicit drugs, it will look as if you were hiding them."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Zoe shrugged. "At this time it's a moot point. Anybody who thought you were hiding drugs has probably already ransacked the place. You can check when you're done training here and then involve the police if you need to after Christmas. In the meantime I'll be keeping careful watch, just in case. So will my colleagues."

"Mentioning Christmas reminds me," Sean said. "I can understand why you haven't put up holiday decorations, but would you mind if I did a few things for Patrick?"

She clapped her hands. “I’d love it! I wasn’t even considering Christmas when I left Mesa in September.”

“Do you know where we can get a tree?”

“I do. The church youth are having a sale. And rehearsals are starting for the outdoor Christmas pageant, too. We can get Patrick involved in that when we go to church on Sunday.”

The off-putting look on his face was disappointing. “We don’t go to church.”

She made a face. “Why not? You used to.”

“Things change. People change.” He lowered his voice to add, “I’ve changed.”

“Fine. God hasn’t. And whether you admit it or not, your little boy needs to learn about faith. If you won’t go with us, Freya and I will take him.”

“I could stop you.”

“You could try.” Although she no longer wore her holster or uniform, she struck a dominant pose, feet apart, hands fisted on the hips of her jeans, shoulders back. Yes, she was being pushy. And, yes, Patrick was Sean’s responsibility. But she cared so much for both of them it was hard to stand back when she thought there was something she could do or say that would help.

“You’re actually serious.” Sean was frowning.

“You’re right. I am.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. And while you do, I’ll be praying that you come to your senses.”

"Why do you think faith makes sense?"

Zoe began to smile. "The very definition of faith is belief without seeing. You had it once." She jabbed a finger at his chest. "It's still in there. All you have to do is look."

"I have," Sean argued.

She wasn't about to back down. Not when she was convinced he needed his former faith in order to complete his healing. "If I could loan you some of mine I would, but it's an inside job. You can't borrow it or catch it like a cold. You have to seek the Lord yourself."

"God gave up on me long ago," Sean said flatly.

Zoe couldn't help smiling. Instead of continuing to argue, she merely said, "Then you might want to ask how you got here and why you escaped death when the bomb went off on your way to the airport and when those guys tried to kill you in St. Louis and since then, because it seems to me He's rescued you over and over lately."

The expression on her old friend's face was painful to look at when he focused on his only child and said, "I'd gladly have traded those supposed rescues for Patrick's well-being."

Why did bad things happen? She had no idea. But she was certain of one thing. The only way she'd have survived the tragic loss of her baby brother was through a belief that they would someday be reunited in heaven.

And in the meantime, she intended to stand up for earthly justice as best she could. It was foolish to try to discern divine

wisdom or assume she could figure out everything that was occurring. All she knew for sure was that she was glad Sean had come to her and brought his son. Anything beyond that would work out for the best.

Zoe didn't know why she was so positive, but she wasn't about to argue with her conclusions. If it became necessary for her to act as the law enforcement officer she was, then so be it. Rookie or not, she was ready.

Mulling over the recent call about the fingerprints in the stolen truck, she realized Sean was right. The figure they had seen get into it was no teenager. He'd not only looked like an adult, he'd moved like one. Heavy. Purposeful.

Dangerous? Maybe. Probably. She felt a shiver climb her spine like a squirrel skittering up the trunk of a ponderosa pine. At the same time she was encouraging Sean to relax, she was going to have to double her guard. And keep him from realizing it.

FIVE

Their first stop the following morning was to be the training center. Sean had made pancakes for all of them while Zoe tended to the coffee and helped Patrick dress. He had only allowed her to assist the boy because the doctors had recommended changing off caregivers to encourage independence. It had apparently worked because when she entered the kitchen, Patrick was holding her hand and walking. His gait was stiff and somewhat awkward, but he seemed far more capable than previously.

"We came for pancakes." Zoe helped the boy into a chair and tucked a napkin under his chin.

When she paused and looked to Patrick, Sean heard him say, "Please."

"My pleasure." Deeply moved, Sean was turning away to tend the stove when his son added, "Please, Dad-dy." The frying pan faded for a moment while he regained control of his emotions.

When he looked back at the table, Zoe was beaming. "Good, huh?"

"Very good. Thanks for helping."

"Freya helped, too. She pulled on the toes of his socks while he tried to put them on. Patrick had to really fight to get them up."

"By himself?" Sean was astonished.

"Yup. All by himself."

"That's wonderful."

Zoe joined him at the stove. "Why don't you let me finish cooking while you two eat? I'm used to grabbing a quick cup of coffee and whatever I can chew on the run."

"Are we in a hurry?" Sean asked, suspicious.

"You do want to get started with your new dog, don't you?"

His brows knit. "Yes. But I'm getting the idea that there's more to your suggestion than you're letting on. What is it?"

"Nothing. Just..."

"Just what, Zoe?" Instead of going to the table, he lingered close to her. "You may as well tell me. I'm not going to eat a bite

until you do."

"All right." As she raised her face, he saw concern mirrored in the dark depths of her eyes. "They got a hit on the ballistics from the bullet fired in your apartment."

"And?"

"And that gun had been used before. In multiple murders. Whoever came after you was no novice, even if he did behave like one that night."

"Hit men? Somebody sent professional hit men after me? Why?"

"It's anybody's guess," she said. "The only good thing about the information is that they're unlikely to have left the metropolitan area and followed you here."

If she had not been trembling slightly, Sean might have felt more comforted by her conclusion. Taking her elbow, he guided her to the table and urged her into one of the chairs. "Sit. I'll bring you breakfast. And then we'll go get my dog so I can be on my way."

"It doesn't work like that," she insisted. "If you're paired with one of Ellen's assistance dogs, you have to stay in Desert Valley for training."

Sean hesitated. Of course he had to stay. There was no way he'd get the help he needed unless he played by the rules. He filled three plates and delivered them to the table, then busied himself cutting Patrick's food into bite-size pieces while he processed his dilemma.

"I see your point," he finally said. "And I suppose it won't help if I keep running. I was just trying to remove the danger from around you."

"I'm not the one you should be worrying about," she said. "After we see how Angel reacts to Patrick, we'll take Patrick to the day care that I think is best."

"I don't want..."

"I know. You don't want him away from you for a second. I get it. I do. But he'll be safer mixed in with other kids than he is if he stays with you all the time. You're the target, he isn't."

"Apparently. I just wish I knew why. The only important thing in my life is my son."

Zoe frowned. "As far as you know. There has to be something else going on. Someone hired the hit men for a reason. And the guys who are after you seem to be high-end. Who do you know with money to burn?"

"Sandra's parents, Alice and John Shepherd. But like I said, they'd hire a lawyer, not a thug."

"If you say so." She stuffed a bite of pancake into her mouth and licked her lips, momentarily distracting Sean and making him wonder what it would feel like to kiss that sweet mouth for real instead of only in his imagination. Shaking off the unwarranted thought, he said, "Okay. You're right. We'll go visit the day care. But I won't promise I'll leave him."

"Fair enough." Zoe licked her lips again, then reached for his mug. "More coffee?"

Sean was still staring at her tender, sweet mouth. "Huh?"

"Pay attention, Murphy. Do you want a refill?"

Sean merely nodded. He'd been paying attention, all right. To the wrong thing. The more time he spent with Zoe, the more he realized what a fool he had been to marry Sandra. He'd apparently been deluded by his youthful desires and had made the biggest mistake of his life; one it was too late to correct.

Or was it? Studying Zoe and admitting his own shortcomings, he concluded they would never be a good match. Not now. Not when she was so capable and he was damaged goods. Sadly, their chance for happiness had passed. He was simply pleased she'd stepped into his life long enough to render the kind of specialized aid for which she'd been trained.

Those thoughts led him further into the doldrums and left him wondering if she would consider looking after Patrick if something bad happened to him. It wasn't fair to even suggest it, of course, yet he desperately wanted to be able to count on someone he trusted. To know his son would be loved and cared for if the assassins finally succeeded.

Maybe later he'd bring up the subject, Sean decided. If he lived long enough.

A gentle touch on his arm drew him back to the present. Zoe had put down his steaming mug and was leaning closer, staring as if he'd just had an episode of regression. If he turned his head just a little, maybe...

"Earth to Murphy. Are you all right?"

"Fine." He swallowed hard. "Thanks for the coffee."

"Where were you just now? You didn't seem to be fighting a war again."

"Not the shooting kind." He laid his hand over hers and lowered his voice to speak more privately while Patrick happily stuffed himself, ignoring the adults. "I was just imagining the future if something happened to me."

"Well, something won't, so cut it out."

"If something did—" he cleared his throat and continued in a hoarse whisper "—would you consider becoming Patrick's guardian?"

"Me?"

"I know it's a lot to ask, but..."

"I'm not refusing. I'm touched, that's all." She eyed the content child and smiled. "He's the most important person in your whole life and you're offering to trust me to take care of him. Of course I'd do it." She placed her free hand over where theirs were joined, and sniffled.

The moisture glistening in her eyes brought a similar reaction in his as he said, "Thank you."

Next to them, grinning and sticky with syrup, Patrick giggled and echoed, "Tank you," interrupting their moving exchange and destroying the romantic mood.

Zoe recovered first, pulled away and pointed to the boy. "Your daddy will clean you up while I clear the table."

"I will?" Sean lifted an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah. I may have offered to look after him in an emergency, but I'm not starting now. You fed him pancakes, so you get to wash off the sticky."

"You drive a hard bargain, Officer Trent."

She laughed. "You'd better believe it."

Sobering, Sean lifted his son into his arms. "You meant what you said? You'll step in if..."

"Absolutely. And if you're as serious about it as I am, we need to see an attorney and make it official."

It occurred to him to tease about marrying her, instead, then decided it would be cruel to even suggest such a thing. He was not going to place her in an untenable position, nor was he going to take the chance she might actually agree, for Patrick's sake.

"Fine," Sean said, as he left the kitchen. "You make the arrangements, and I'll keep my head down until it's legal."

"You'd better plan on keeping it down a lot longer than that," Zoe shouted after him. "I understand puppies a lot better than I understand little kids."

* * *

It was a delight to tour the training facility with Patrick. Every dog excited him, especially the pups he saw when Zoe kenneled Freya.

Crouching, she pointed to a pile of K-9 vests. "Remember how Freya acted different when she was wearing a police jacket and badge like those? Some of the dogs we have here are not very friendly even when they aren't all dressed up, so you shouldn't try

to pet them without asking first. Understand?"

Patrick's head bobbed, his expression solemn. "Uh-huh."

"Good. Now let's go find my friends." She stood and offered her hand. "We need to introduce you and your daddy to Angel."

Judging by the way his eyes widened and he tugged on her hand, Zoe assumed the reference had confused him. She explained. "That's her name, honey. She's not a real angel, like in the Bible."

He seemed to be searching for a word. "Wings?"

"No, Patrick. No wings. She's just a really sweet dog. Come on. The trainers are waiting for us."

A wry smile on Sean's face reminded her that Sophie and Ellen had warned him about possible problems. If he wasn't open to accepting Angel, Zoe wasn't sure he'd have a second chance. Of course, he wasn't the only one who needed to display camaraderie. The dog's reactions were as important as the human's.

"I'll take care of Patrick for a few minutes while you go with Ellen," Zoe said as soon as pleasantries had been exchanged. "We'll be right out here, watching."

He eyed her casual attire. "You're not armed today."

"Not visibly. This place is always full of officers, so there's no need to worry. Most of the previous rookie class is still here, working for the DVPD, and some of those in my group stayed over to sub so officers like Shane Weston could go home to Flagstaff for Christmas. I think you'll like Tristan McKeller when

you meet him, too. I mentioned him—he's a former soldier, same as you."

"The same? I doubt that." He hesitated. "You do understand why I won't carry a gun, right?"

"Because you don't want to have a flashback episode and make a terrible mistake. I get it. But if you think about all that's happened here and the way you've been protected, you'll see there's no need to be armed."

"I suppose gut feelings don't count."

"Not if they're yours. Sorry," she said, smiling to soften the comment even more. "Give it time. Heal. Work through your nervousness with a service dog by your side. Then you won't even want to be armed."

Sean sighed noisily. "I hope you're right."

"Haven't you heard? I am always right." Nudging him through the doorway after Ellen, she lifted Patrick and balanced him on her hip. "Wow. You're heavy today. Must be from all the pancakes you ate."

"Uh-huh."

As his small arms circled her neck and squeezed, Zoe felt a surge of emotion she had not anticipated. He was all shampoo and soap and syrup and...and love. How had that happened? She'd liked him from their first meeting but had attributed those feelings to her friendship with his father. This was different. This was personal. And very dear.

Toting Patrick to the one-way viewing window, she told him

to watch while his daddy met the dog that might provide their deliverance. Having a bond develop during an initial meeting was iffy, at best. The quirk on Angel's side was her overabundance of love. She could track fairly well, but was more likely to lick a criminal she apprehended than to growl or bite him as she was supposed to. That was what had ultimately washed her out of the K-9 cop program.

Sean was seated in a chair in the center of the room. A side door opened. Sophie started to lead Angel in and was almost jerked off her feet when the dog realized there were other people present.

"You may as well release her," Zoe heard Ellen say.

"Da!" Patrick didn't take his eyes off the leaping, dancing, pulling canine. "Da-gh."

Zoe gave him a squeeze. "That's right. Dog. Very good."

"Daddy."

Tears pooled in Zoe's eyes as she watched the scene unfold. Unleashed, Angel left the trainer at a run, made a dash to Sean and almost knocked him over backward, chair and all, when she tried to jump into his lap.

Of course he did everything wrong after that, including hugging the affectionate dog and letting her lick his face. She made several circles around the room, her nails scrambling on the slick floor, then returned to him to greet him with more exuberance.

All Zoe could do was whisper, "Thank You, Jesus," and swipe

at her damp cheeks. They still had a lot of work ahead of them, but Sean and Patrick Murphy had their service dog. They would be staying in Desert Valley for training.

* * *

The two trainers had managed to corral Angel, fit her with a working harness and put her back on a long leash so Sean could walk her in the fenced training yard.

"How did you know she'd take to my son so fast?" Sean asked Zoe.

"She loves everybody. That's her problem. She'd rather give and receive affection than settle down and work."

"And that makes her good for me how?"

"We'll have to wait and see. If she forms a strong enough bond with your family, she may naturally provide protection."

"Suppose she doesn't. What then?"

Zoe surprised him with a sock on his shoulder. The dog was so busy wiggling and trying to lick Patrick's face she didn't even seem to notice the playful blow.

"Hey. What did you hit me for?"

"Because of your rotten attitude. How can you expect good results when you think so negatively?" She waved her hands in front of him as if erasing the comment. "Never mind. Forget it."

Watching the interaction between Angel and the boy, Sean realized she had a valid point. "You're right. I was being a downer. Sorry. It's just..."

"I know. Let's take it one day at a time." She eyed the happy

dog. “This morning is off to a great start.”

“Can I let her go soon?”

“Why? Don’t you like being pulled along like a musher on a sled in Alaska?”

“Not particularly. I know Ellen said she needed a strong man to control her, but doesn’t she ever quiet down?”

“Actually, letting her run off some of that excess energy might be good.” Zoe grabbed the leash near the harness and firmly commanded, “Sit.”

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