

A movie poster for 'Marc and Dog: Reluctant Partners'. The top half features a close-up of a wolf's face with glowing yellow eyes. Below this, a soldier in military gear is shown in a combat stance, holding a rifle. The background is dark and smoky, with some orange light suggesting fire or explosions. The text 'ANGELA WHITE' is at the top, and 'MARC AND DOG' and 'RELUCTANT PARTNERS' are at the bottom.

ANGELA WHITE

MARC AND DOG
RELUCTANT PARTNERS

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Marc and Dog
Reluctant Partners
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by
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Prologue

“Entire squad got a two-week pass for Labor Day!” Kenn’s voice blared through the locker room. “Can you believe that shit?”

Chris tossed his kit into a locker. “I can’t believe they’re changing the composite score next month. I’m never gonna make Corporal.”

Thunder gestured, including them all. “Command was pleased with us, though.”

“Yep.” Chris slapped his buddy on the arm as the other Marines offered agreement. “Nice work.”

Marc didn’t join in the merriment as he stuffed his military mess kit into a duffle bag. He’d had a great moment and helped clear an area command wanted. It was his job.

Kenn frowned. “Where you goin’, Brady?”

Marc pointed at the fading image of the Shoshone National Forest taped inside his locker. “My usual.”

The tired men around him laughed, but few of them understood why Marc felt the need to go to the American boonies for his peace and quiet. Most of the team preferred to stay local.

Around them, Camp Pendleton was nearly deserted because of the holiday. There were no visitors and not much in the way of staff. Most of

those moving about right now were just here for a few minutes to sign paperwork or gather gear—like Marc and his team.

After almost six years, Marc didn't usually look forward to coming home. He had no one waiting here for him. This time however, he needed the break. Their last days in Herat had been rough. When Intel had run out and command still insisted on pushing forward, the hands-on work had gotten ugly. Marc had received a shock after the final battle, when he'd gone around counting bodies for his squad leader. It had horrified him to tell Reggie that they'd killed three civilians. Reggie hadn't felt the same, insisting those casualties couldn't be avoided when the enemy used them as shields. Marc agreed, but at the same time, he didn't. There should never be an acceptable amount of loss. All life was to be protected. He froze as a flashback slapped him.

"There's another one!"

"Just an old man. Let him go."

"I want to take him in for questioning."

"He was a shield. He doesn't know anything except terror. Let him go."

"He has a gun!"

"Put it down!"

"Do not fire!"

"Take him out!"

Marc shook off the flash, trying not to wince at the mental echo of the shots as two of their squad fired on the villager. They'd found out later his

gun was out of ammo but raising the weapon had started a chain of events Marc had been helpless to stop. Two equally ranked team leaders had given two opposite orders. That wasn't supposed to happen, but it had.

Chris agreed with Marc, but he wanted the team to get along. "Come on, Brady. Let it go. Chad would have."

Marc knew that to be true, but it didn't ease his anger or guilt. "Well, I'm not him, am I?"

No one answered.

Marc slammed the locker shut. "Your mistake is thinking that I've been trying to be him! Chad was my best friend, but he was okay with his team making big mistakes. I'm not. Be clear on that, if nothing else."

Marc slung his kit over a shoulder, missing the rifle that needed to be replaced. Herat hadn't been the least bit friendly. "Until we meet again, *boys*."

Jokes and crude comments followed him, but the noise dropped into an uncomfortable silence as soon as Marc was gone.

Hips wiped his sweaty hands down his wide body. "Will he be okay?"

The rest of the team exchanged looks of concern instead of responding. If their rookie knew Marc wasn't happy, then everyone did, including command. Marc was a good fireteam leader, but he was so aloof that they weren't able to trust him. They'd tried many times to get Marc to hang out and go crazy, so they could dig into who he really

was, but unless they were in trouble or in training, Marc kept to himself. In combat, he was a badass, as they all were, but what their team needed now was to finish bonding, like other groups did. They felt the lack of fellowship keenly.

Marc wouldn't have been surprised by that discovery. He didn't trust them either, despite the years some of them had served together. His past was too riddled with betrayal to allow him to give personal insights very often. Each time he did, he was either betrayed or ended up mourning that person. His love life had been like that and so were the friendships.

His best friend and their former team leader, Chad, had been killed three years ago. Marc had refused to fill that position like it was meaningless, but he was also scared. Letting people in was dangerous.

As he stepped outside, Marc saw a jeep rolling in his direction. Recognizing the driver, he waited.

“Need a ride, Corporal?”

“Thank you, sir.” Marc tossed his kit in the back of his platoon Sergeant's jeep and climbed into the passenger seat. He could feel his team watching from the window now. He tossed them a sharp salute.

Reggie steered around a wide curve, noticing the trail of dust behind them. It was dry; fire season had arrived. “Should be a nice break.”

“Yes, sir.” Marc was glad Reggie had recommended this downtime. His team needed the break. The entire squad did, really. They’d been helping local authorities clear out insurgent strongholds. It hadn’t been pleasant. The locals were just as untrustworthy as those they were fighting, leading to a lot of body bags.

“Command sent your paperwork down last week. Your composite scores were solid.”

Marc let it sink in, not feeling much beyond a bit of relief. Many grunts waited a lot longer than he had for their shot at officer courses. He and Kenn had been indoctrinated as snipers and attached to the 2nd Recon Battalion at Camp Lejeune. Kenn had kept pace with him so far, but Marc wasn’t happy as a Corporal.

“When will my team find out?” Marc assumed he would get a lot of flak over the choice. He’d known that when he approached Reggie about it last year. He’d always planned to climb the ranks.

“When you tell them or you disappear for the courses.” Reggie turned the jeep toward the storage facility without asking. Everyone knew Marc had a vehicle there. A single man always had cash to spend, and wheels and guns were where those free bucks went. Marc had a nice Colt he carried on his downtime. Reggie didn’t understand why the man had bought an old army jeep instead of something nicer, but he hadn’t asked. He assumed Marc was more frugal than others in his platoon.

Reggie pulled up to the gate. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, sir.” Allowing a bit of emotion to show to someone deserving of it, Marc slapped Reggie on the shoulder before climbing out. “Have a nice break.” The large black man was fierce in the pit, and even more so in training. Marc was proud to serve under him.

“Brady.”

Marc turned around reluctantly. He knew what was coming. “Sir?”

“Captain said when you come back, he wants you in his office. That’s the deadline for picking where you go from here. A lot of men want that top slot.”

“Thanks.”

Reggie finished the message. “He also said if a man can’t bond with his fellow fighters, or even a pet, he probably isn’t cut out to be a leader.”

Marc felt that hit deep in his guts. It demanded a response. “Tell him I said sir, yes, sir!”

Reggie cracked a grin. “You’re a badass, Brady.”

Marc shrugged. “I just can’t be pushed that way. He knows it. Not sure why he sent you to tell me, is all.”

Reggie studied Marc, as their CO had instructed him to. *What is it about this Corporal that gives everyone the impressed willies? He’s dangerous, something a Marine has to be, but there’s something else...and it’s off.*

Marc felt the scrutiny, but he didn't have anything else to say on the subject. It was his choice and he would make it. End of story. Marc saluted. "See ya, sir."

Reggie sighed. "Watch your six, Brady. That attitude doesn't encourage friendly intentions."

Marc sniggered as the Sergeant drove off. Reggie and the others were okay, mostly, but Marc had a wall up that few people would ever be able to penetrate. Life was easier that way.

Marc drove out of the storage unit a few minutes later, mind racing over the last battles, his words to the team, their actions and reactions. It had become a habit to evaluate each fight afterward, as most military people did. Finding the mistakes and correcting them was the only way to become better. Marc still wanted that as much as he had when he'd first joined.

The Marine grimaced. Joined wasn't the right word. *More like tricked, betrayed, beaten.*

Marc flipped on the radio and popped in a tape as he hit the highway under a cloudy September afternoon. He didn't need to stop for anything as long as he had a gun and his kit, which he did. He would make this swoop by driving straight through. He might even beat his own personal record. Trying to leave the weight of the world behind, Marc increased his speed. "Let's roll."

Chapter One



Shoshone National Forest

Scene 1

Marc was exhausted by the time he made it to his campsite. No human contact for the drive had been great, but it hadn't helped him stay awake.

He parked and hiked to his spot in a mental fog as the sun sank. The crackling of animals in the woods around him wasn't a concern. He got along with nature. It was people he could do without.

After he put up the tent, Marc hammered the stakes in deep. A stiff wind was hitting him in the face as he worked. He might not wake for a storm, so he needed to be sure his shelter wouldn't blow away with him in it. When that was finished, he tackled a meal.

Marc doused his small fire as soon as he finished cooking the beans and rice. He was nervous about leaving it lit during high winds. Once he collapsed, he doubted he would wake, even for a fire.

An hour after arriving, Marc crawled into his tent and settled on the sleeping bag with his gun, his lantern, and a bottle. “Finally! Time to myself.” He began to get drunk, mind sliding into the past...

Thunk!

The empty bottle dropped to the floor of the tent a short time later, but Marc didn’t notice. He slowly toppled over, passing out with a smile.

Scene 2

Wake up!

Marc muttered, but didn’t wake.

Get up or die, Marine!

Marc’s lashes fluttered. “Angie?”

Run! Marc! Run!

Marc sat up, ears ringing with female screams. He waited for it to clear, like it always did when he dreamed of the past. His life before the service had been ugly. Joining up hadn’t solved that issue, though it was easier for him to control now.

Run!

Marc flinched at the new scream in his ear. He swiveled and found himself alone in the glowing orange tent.

Glowing...? Marc began to wake, smelling smoke and burning chemicals.

The tent's on fire! Marc fumbled for his gun and kit, then crawled from the hot canvas.

Oh, shit. Not just the tent. The woods are on fire!

A flaming branch fell onto the canvas, scattering hot, wooden chips that stuck to his skin as they burnt him.

Marc swiped them off and slung his kit over his shoulder. He scanned the camp, but flames were coming in from two directions. He couldn't save his gear, only himself.

Marc tried to get a clear view of the path he'd taken to get up here, but he couldn't see through the smoke. He used his internal map to pick a direction. "Gotta get to my jeep and find help."

Marc took off jogging northwest, assuming someone had let their campfire get out of control in the high winds that were now whipping around him.

Crack!

Marc ducked a falling branch.

Bang! A bullet slammed into the tree next to his head.

Marc flipped into survival mode. He darted behind the trunk and drew his gun.

Heavy footsteps rushed toward him.

Ambush! Marc stepped out, scanning. He fired at the shadowy form, hitting the man in the head. Blood splattered over the smoky trees and leaves.

Bang!

Another bullet hit the ground near Marc's feet.

"Time to go." Marc took off running into the smoke, pulling his shirt over his mouth. *If they can't see me, they can't kill me.*

Marc hefted himself through the rough forest terrain. Sweat dripped down his cheeks and back in steady droplets that he had no time to wipe away as the fire roared closer. Surrounded on three sides, he stayed low to avoid bullets and thick smoke. Marc headed toward the vehicle he'd left parked at the bottom of this steep ravine, but it was still five minutes away. He tried to move faster.

Marc jumped a log with flames spreading along its mossy trunk, sliding into the dense foliage on the other side. The ground he hadn't been able to see dropped off abruptly.

Marc tucked and rolled, grunting in pain as his body slammed into rocks and branches on the way down.

Landing at the bottom hurt, but Marc couldn't wait for his body to recover. There was no time.

"There he is!"

Marc ran through bullets flying through the smoky morning. He zigzagged toward a thicker patch of foliage and dropped under the hollow side of a fallen log covered in bushes and weeds. Using the thick trunk for cover, he held in a cough and stayed silent as heavy footsteps approached his location.

"I can't see anything!"

Marc caught the glimpse of a shadow in the thickening smoke. He fired his Colt.

The sound echoed faintly through the roar of the fire.

“Over there!”

Sweating, Marc continued to wait, pushing his luck. The flames were only feet away from him now.

“Jack?” *Cough. Cough.* “Where are you?”

Bang!

“Earl?”

Marc’s Colt barked several more times before he was forced to reload while running. He darted into the smoke, choosing a path through the forest that wound down toward the main road. All around him, panicked wildlife was doing the same.

“There he is! There he is!”

“I’ve got him!”

Marc ducked, rolling.

Bullets plunged through the smoke and flames in a wide spray that kept Marc on the ground, where he continued to crawl. He didn’t know who was hunting him yet, but that hadn’t mattered in the past and it didn’t now. Over the years he’d had been in the Corps, Marc had made a lot of enemies and not many friends. The most recent was a quiet, painful trip across the border that had resulted in the deaths of two drug lords. Marc had done that one alone. He’d gotten friendly with the local prostitutes the two men used, then waited until they came by for a visit.

Taking advantage of a pause in the gunfire, Marc darted into the thicker underbrush ahead of him that wasn't on fire yet. He swallowed a groan of relief at the difference. It had to be at least 20° cooler in the shade of all these plants. The memory of tall, cool corn during hot summers tried to come, but Marc shoved it away. He had work to do before he could get lost again with his ghosts.

Marc continued to crawl down the hill. He hit a steep ledge; the ground shifted... He flailed through the air again.

Marc landed with a hard thump on the foliage-padded forest floor below, groaning.

Above, relentless hunters refused to break off the pursuit.

“Down there!”

“Get him!”

Marc flinched to the left too late. A bullet trimmed his arm, causing pain and blood splatter that would be tracked before the fire could burn it up. Holding the bleeding wound, he was forced to abandon his idea of escaping into the underbrush like an animal.

Marc heard half a dozen heavy, clumsy bodies crashing through the weeds and slid behind another thick trunk, Colt still in hand. He needed to even the odds a bit more.

Marc fired.

“He got Danny! He got Danny!”

More heavy steps crashed in Marc's direction.

The Marine took off, occasionally spinning

around to fire off a shot. Hitting one of them would be good, but it was more for defense than offense. This type of firefight wasn't new to Marc. He'd been trained for both long distance and short-range exchanges under rough conditions. He usually excelled at because he kept his body in shape.

Marc heard rushing water and changed direction as he smothered another cough. The fire was still coming in from three sides that would eventually merge. If he stayed on land, he would be surrounded with no escape—exactly what his hunters were hoping for with this type of ambush. It was time to use a new path.

Marc found the water by following the animals. The twisted, narrow creek was dotted with small lives taking cover. A large fox and his mate, a tiny squirrel carrying a pup, and a herd of deer farther upstream with noses high in the air in uneasy awareness. There were also raccoons and possums, even a bear and two cubs near the opposite bank. It would have been amazing if not for the situation.

Marc plunged into the middle of the cold chaos and sank down, hoping his trackers might be inexperienced enough to overlook him among the furry bodies. He stayed ready to defend himself from the beasts if he needed to.

Animals shied from him, but they didn't attack or run back into the flames. Between him and the fire, they knew which one was the bigger threat.

“In the water!”

“What?”

“Get in there!”

Marc couldn't make out more words from under the distorted blur of the creek, but he knew what it meant. He pushed off the rocky bed and let the stream carry him off. Maybe it would bring him out closer to the vehicle he had waiting, but it would definitely protect him from the fire and conserve his energy. After driving straight through to get here, he'd already been beat. The fire had only allowed him a few hours of sleep. He would probably be running on reserve before this was over, but it wasn't the first time he'd had to push this body to its limit to survive. It wasn't a burden to be carried, though. In fact, it was an advantage. With every run, he got stronger.

Behind him, men plunged into the small creek, firing wildly, but the rushing water carried Marc downstream and out of sight. He used the lead on his attackers to form a plan in case there were more combatants waiting for him at the bottom of the hill. Only a few people had known he was coming up here, but those few knew his routines well enough to make it likely that information on his location would also have included where he parked his jeep and what trail he hiked to reach his favorite campsite. He and his team had spent several weekends here over the years. The isolation made it a perfect place to get drunk but not get in trouble.

Marc winced as the rocks on the bottom of the stream scraped his side, thighs, and stomach, but he didn't try to slow down. He needed every few seconds he could get.

When the creek deepened, Marc used his legs to help push forward, lungs starting to burn. He didn't let the risk of traveling without control through the murky water send panic through his mind. It wasn't that he didn't feel the adrenaline surging through his body. He just knew how to control it.

The roar of the fire suddenly grew louder through the water. Marc realized the stream had brought him back into the path of the blaze. He rose long enough to take a quick lungful of air, then plunged back down into the cold liquid, bumping into fallen debris and animals. The water was moving faster now, washing some of the scared creatures from their huddled safety by the banks.

As he scraped over another patch of sharp rocks, Marc felt a furry body slam into his legs. Unexpected, it shot him up out of the water, where he gasped for air and spun around to see what large animal was in the water at his hip.

The scar-covered paddling wolf snapped at him. Sharp teeth tore through the material of Marc's jeans, coming close enough to skin that he could feel the tips of teeth.

Reacting instinctively, Marc used the Colt that was still in his hand to hammer the wolf in the

skull.

Not waiting for the whining animal to recover and retaliate, Marc swam away.

The wolf struggled to the bank, slipping and sliding. The hit had stunned it.

Marc had dealt with wild dogs before and lost two members of his squad. A wolf was sure to be even more deadly.

The wolf made it onto shore, and staggered toward the thicker foliage.

Marc remained in the water, noticing the smoke was lighter, but the amount of wildlife and debris in the water had increased. Flames were everywhere. He could almost feel burning trees falling into this creek upstream to create wide ripples that would soon wash him away. He had to leave this small safety.

Marc scanned the surrounding trees and leaves, unable to see far. He took stock of his injury, which was still bleeding into the water, but it didn't appear to be serious. He chose to keep going to buy more time.

Marc traveled downstream, letting the current pull him along. His heart throbbed in time to the tempo of the water.

Behind him, an eerie howl split the air.

Distracted by the noise, Marc let the current pull him too far toward the bank and found himself washed up on a bed of sharp rocks. Struggling under the weight of wet clothes, he stumbled toward dry land with stinging knees and shins.

While he tried to get his bearings, gunshots again sounded through the din of the fire.

Marc realized his pursuers were close.

A savage snarl echoed, along with more gunshots. Marc was grateful. Maybe the wolf had slowed them down.

Marc slipped into the trees at the edge of the road, not far from where his vehicle was waiting. He scanned the area, noting half a dozen fire engines crawling with yellow-clothed men trying to extinguish the enormous fire.

Thick smoke blew over the dusty road. Marc seized the moment, leaving his cover to jog straight through the firefighters. He drew surprise from the men as he went by, coughing.

“Hey!”

“Where did you come from?”

Marc didn’t stop to answer them. They had work to do, and he needed to get out of here.

Marc ran down the side of the road, swerving around two fleeing deer. Behind him, the three walls of fire had finally merged to create one long bank of death that was destroying everything in its path. Marc wasn’t sure if he would be able to use this road to get off the mountain.

As his jeep came into view, Marc ran faster and holstered his gun. He slid into the driver’s seat in relief, reaching for the keys he’d left in the ignition.

Gravel crunched, alerting him to a mistake. Before Marc could react, a mercenary stood up

next to the jeep. He'd obviously been underneath.

“Where do you think you're going?”

Marc stilled, sighing in recognition. “Jordan. Figures. Prick.”

The man now unslinging his rifle chuckled. “We've missed you, Marcus.”

Marc scanned the tall thin man while his hand began turning the key. “Is the boss's wife still smiling? She was tight!”

The rifle butt hit took him by surprise even though he had instigated it. Marc slumped in the seat, dazed from the blow.

“We shall see who is tight, my friend. We shall see.”

Rough hands pushed Marc over and slid behind the wheel of his jeep.

Marc struggled to come out of the daze, but a fist smacked into his skull. Darkness came.

Chapter Two



Scene 1

The familiar movement of his jeep reacting to unfamiliar hands greeted Marc as he regained consciousness. He added the clues and figured out his mistake. He'd known someone might be waiting below, but he'd forgot to check underneath the vehicle.

Sucking in a breath against his roiling guts, Marc braced his feet. Before the driver knew he was awake, Marc used his elbow and all of his weight to slam into the surprised man. The move neatly shoved the shocked mercenary up and out of the vehicle.

Jordan hit the ground beside the jeep and skidded down the incline, screaming as his ankle snapped.

Marc didn't waste sympathy. This enemy wasn't very smart, but they were ruthless. He

screached to a halt and backed up, diving over the groaning man. Then he did it again.

Marc pulled the jeep over and killed the engine. There were still half a dozen men tracking him, and he wasn't about to lead them back to his hotel room. He'd never get peace if he just let this attack go.

Marc exited the jeep and took a stationary position in the smoky weeds next to the warm vehicle. He didn't think it would be long before someone discovered his new location. He was a prize target in a prime location. No longer protected by his team or society, as far as the mercs were concerned Marc was just another animal in the wilderness. They were already underestimating him. Interrupting this vacation had been a huge mistake. The enemy hadn't given him time to cool off or relax once he'd returned to American soil. They expected a civilian, but they getting the Marine.

Marc heard the slice and swish of a machete being used on the underbrush. He could have slipped off and called his team or local law enforcement, but that would leave the threat to be handled in the future if their superiors approved it. Marc hated that about the military and the police. A bad guy was always bad. They needed to be removed.

Muddy boots neared his hiding place.

Marc shot under the jeep, aiming for brittle ankles.

Big men fell to the ground, screaming.

Certain there were at least three more, Marc slipped back toward the smoky forest, aware of the fire catching up. A myriad of animals were flooding from the forest now, running down the main road that was clogging with firetrucks and reporters. It was amazing to Marc that no one had heard the gunshots, but not a single person glanced in his direction.

Some reporters. At the same time, Marc was glad of the indifference. These mercenaries would kill the media crews and firefighters to get to him. *They would also set a fire to flush him out...*

“Son of a bitch.” Marc started to vanish into the smoldering tree line.

Three sweating, red-eyed men dressed in Afghani clothes materialized through the smoke.

Nearly out of bullets, Marc palmed his knife and motioned. He needed this part to be on his terms. With three men waiting and only two bullets left, Marc didn't want to press his luck. He'd made some amazing shots over the years, but this was different.

“Shoot that sucker!”

The man in the middle, tall and scarred, wore the distinctive brown headscarf of enemy combatants in Afghanistan. Marc strongly disapproved of seeing it on American soil, no matter who was wearing it. In fact, it made him quite angry.

“What are you waiting for? Shoot him!” The

scarred man was obviously the boss.

“I’m out. We all are, remember?”

“Then stab him!”

Marc waited for the right moment, noting that one of the men had the same knife he did, and held it as if he had experience.

Marc fingered the tip of his blade. “How much did you pay to get my location?”

“Actually, *they* paid.” The scarred man stepped closer. “Someone wants you dead—besides us.”

Marc saw a wolf dart across the smoky road and wished it luck as he swung forward unexpectedly.

“Watch out!”

The blade plunged deep into the nearest man’s neck.

Marc danced backward as the first merc slid to his knees and fell over, gurgling.

“Get him!”

The last two men charged.

Marc had drawn them out. He met their fury with a fast draw and his final bullets. One was a chest shot, but the second only hit an arm.

Marc quickly switched to his backup knife. He lunged toward the injured man and spun around, kicking the side of his knee savagely. Marc was hoping the bone would break.

Feeling the end coming, the screaming merc swung while Marc was recovering his balance. The punch knocked him into the flaming grass.

Patting at his head, Marc quickly rolled away

from the heat, ends of his hair on fire. Heavy boots tried to put it out by stomping on his face.

Marc flinched at the crack as his little finger broke, then rage took over the pain of the defensive wound. Barely feeling the knife that pierced his upper arm, Marc shoved upward and slammed his blade into the man's groin.

As the merc fell, screaming in agony, Marc stabbed again, getting a shoulder. He repeated the motion, much like a sewing machine, until he was covered in a grisly camouflage.

Marc didn't stick around to clean up his mess or speak with the authorities. He wasn't calm enough. He climbed into his jeep and drove away. The anger, bright and lethal, he tried to smother with the sight of his gory hands on the steering wheel. He was hurt, but no longer being hunted.

He would stop at a store, change clothes, do some first aid, and then call his commander. It wasn't the first time a loose end had caught up with him, but it was the first time it had occurred at home. His squad was sent to dangerous places to do dangerous things. Not everyone cared for the results.

Pulling his sticky shirt over his nose, Marc weaved in and out of the fire line. The winds were beginning to push against the flames instead of adding strength. In another day or so, the firefighters would have this under control. Then they would find the bodies, but by then, his CO

would have someone in place to handle it. No one had witnessed anything except the firefighters, who were hopefully too busy to remember his description. That would make the cleanup easier.

Soaked, hurting, bleeding, and very angry, Marc kept driving as the sun rose. The scenery ahead was colorful and soothing, but blood was all he could feel, all he could taste. That took time to wear off.

Scene 2

Marc pulled into the deserted 76 station a couple of hours before sunset. The clerk inside stared at his injuries, his burnt, ripped jacket, and his dog tag the entire time that Marc shopped, paid, and pumped his gas.

Must look rough. Marc had stopped and cleaned up a bit before pulling in, but it clearly hadn't been enough. He motioned toward the bathrooms at the side of the small brick building, spotting what he wanted. "Do I need a key?"

The pimply clerk shook his head, now gaping at the gun on Marc's lean hip.

Marc sighed. "Thanks."

He didn't go into the restroom. He strode to the phone next to it and placed a two-minute call that ended with him swearing furiously. His commander was sending his team to escort him back.

"All I wanted was a few days of peace and

quiet!” He stalked back to the jeep, where the clerk immediately resumed staring.

Tired, the Marc spun around.

The kid behind the counter cringed as Marc flung the door open and stomped to a nearby display. He snatched a jar from the shelf, then took it to the counter, glaring at the scared kid. He didn’t speak until it had been paid for.

“Do you know why I use this?”

The clerk gawked at the jar of Noxzema. “No. You don’t have zits.”

Marc rolled his eyes, growling, “I use it so I don’t get them, boy! Wash your damn face. Every day. And pull your pants up!”

Marc stormed back to the jeep, leaving the jar. He squealed tires out of the lot.

As the cool wind soothed the rest of his anger, Marc laughed. Ten years ago, he could have been the youth being yelled at by the Marine. His world had certainly changed. As a grunt, Marc had worked hard and played even harder, but taking lives for a living as a sniper had given him a different perspective on the world. Kids today needed to toughen up. *Self-sufficiency should be encouraged a lot more. At some point, we’re going to pay for not doing that.*

Marc increased his speed as adrenaline flowed from his thoughts. He was employing the same method as while on duty, but he’d perfected it long before he’d joined. His home life hadn’t ever been easy; restful sleep had been hard to come by.

Staying awake was where he thrived, though the occasional pill didn't hurt. As long as he controlled the substance, it was okay. When he couldn't, it would be time to let it go—something Marc didn't understand about his fellow men. Some of the people he'd served with were addicted to everything they tried. They spent their entire checks and leaves abusing themselves and others. Marc preferred to be away from the cause of his turmoil. Camping was his favorite thing to do after a rough mission.

“And I'm going to.” He steered north against the pain in his swelling hand from the broken finger he'd reset and taped. “I'm going to have that few days, even if it kills me.”

Scene 3

Dawn found Marc's jeep parked at the bottom of another steep ravine. He had taken his spare kit and gear from the jeep. He couldn't drive over the huge boulders or trees, so he'd climbed. Marc ignored the soreness in favor of a good view and flat area for his site. This was wild country and it wasn't made for convenience. In fact, it wasn't made for most people. If you didn't know anything about survival, you were in trouble from minute one out here.

Aware that his team would be arriving in the next few hours, Marc set up a base camp. He arranged seats on logs and stumps around a large

rocked-off, self-feeding fire. He was trying a new setup now that was probably against regulations, but Marc didn't care. He'd already encouraged his team to be open about using it. If the uppers had an issue, he would take the punishment. If they didn't, he was golden with a problem solved. He employed tactics that worked. The bosses might not like it, but his men did.

Marc had gotten them out of plenty of scrapes by using methods that weren't approved. That type of bond had allowed them to be one of the most successful teams in their battalion. Marc didn't take credit for it. He was sometimes good at bringing out the best in a man. He liked that feeling. As long as he also did his share, it was enough.

As he labored, Marc let go of his anger over the last deployment. He did love his men... He loved *most* of his men, and he tried hard with the others. Having them around was a comfort in many ways. Now that he had been attacked on American soil, it was best they stayed together. There could be more mercs around, waiting for the opportunity to kill his team.

With that thought in mind, Marc got set to fight his way out again if he needed to. His men would bring ammo and attitude, but they were limited here at home. His CO would have to cover what had really happened. Marc expected to hear it announced that several unknown persons had been caught in the wildfire and died from smoke

inhalation. The bullet and stab wounds wouldn't be mentioned.

Marc settled next to the fire and opened his kit to finish caring for his injuries. Two of them needed stitches, but he'd only bound them until he could make his call and get settled somewhere. It would take a bit. He was covered in slices and scrapes.

Marc checked his charred watch to estimate how long he had until the team arrived. "Ah. Enough for a shower."

Marc dug through his kit, gathering what he needed.

Behind him, a wolf curled up in the cool weeds and watched.

Scene 4

"I see a light!"

Marc paused in scrubbing a layer of mud from his hair, hearing the raucous voices of his squad. He didn't cover himself. Marc had lost his modesty years ago. There was no time for it during combat situations where naked bodies were the least of his problems.

"Whoa ho ho! Marcus!"

Chris, who had the nickname Crisp because of his dark tan, came over and slapped Marc on the ass cheek as he started to rinse with water from his canteen.

Marc, listening for the right moment, stuck his foot out and sent the man to the ground.

Most of the other Marines busted out laughing, impressed that Marc had been able to do it while covered in dingy suds. There was no way he could see.

Kenn dropped down on one of the fallen log seats. He wasn't impressed. "Where's the beer?"

"No beer, no broads." Marc slung water toward Kenn. The Ohio man was a sullen, dangerous tool that Marc was still trying to get comfortable using.

"Figures." Kenn grunted. He didn't care about Brady's newest bruises and breaks; he didn't study them like the others were. "Prick."

Marc snickered, turning his dirty shirt inside out. He used it to dry off and then tossed it into the fire. It was too torn up to be repaired. As he pulled on a clean outfit—jeans and a camo shirt—the men around him settled into place as if he hadn't left them in anger. At this moment, Marc was sorry for taking his emotional issues out on his men, but he wouldn't ever apologize—at least, not with words. That would hurt the respect he'd built. He would show them with actions.

Marc grabbed his clean socks and filthy boots, then dropped down on the log next to Thunder, his XO, who was also quiet. The name had come from the sound of the man's huge feet when he'd first joined their team. Now, it fit because of the noise he made during combat with his guns.

Marc didn't speak as he finished dressing.

When he handed his pouch of tobacco to the SAW gunner at his side, all the men exchanged glances, but they didn't mention it or insist on talking it through. They understood he wasn't mad anymore. Later, if it came up in another conversation, he might try to explain to them how ugly it had felt to watch that villager die. The feeling had followed him onto the bus, the transport plane, and then onto American soil. He'd even been considering leaving the Marines as they touched down.

His enlistment was up at the six-year mark in February and his commander knew it. He'd sent Sergeant Reggie to tell Marc about the composite scores as a reminder that there were other options available. The next time they were in a bad situation, his men would have to kill him or at least knock him out before they could disobey his orders. He would outrank the entire squad in just a few months if he passed the classes.

Tensed up from the memories, Marc forced himself to let it go again. They were right to eliminate any threat to the mission and yet, they were wrong to murder. He hadn't considered that quandary when he'd chosen to become a Marine. He'd thought only dangerous criminals would be in his crosshairs. He'd personally been able to keep to that so far, but he dreaded being in a position where he had to pick between killing an innocent person or protecting his men, because his men would come out of it alive. Trust them or not, he'd never been closer to any other males in his

life and he never expected to be again.

“Where are the others?” Hips retied his pants with his infamous green sash as he came back from taking a leak. He’d gotten it from a girl in Iraq who had claimed she would marry him the next time they met—if he still had the silken token.

Thunder grimaced. “Stuck in college classes.”

“Officer requirements?” Hips had been considering it.

“Yeah. Fuckin’ joke.” Kenn sneered. “Brass smells like ass.” He’d stopped at Corporal.

Marc stayed silent. During waiting times and individual missions, he’d already studied for those classes. He kicked his kit toward Hips, whose real name was Chuck Morris. “Bottle in there somewhere.”

“All right!”

“Yeah, Marcus!”

None of their fourteen-man squad had realized they were coming home during a holiday. All the stores had been closed when they landed at Camp Pendleton, but Marc had retrieved his stash from the locker to take camping.

Worked out in the end, he thought as Dagger and Trippy started roasting a carcass of some kind over the fire. At least he would be able to sleep.

Thunder grinned at Marc. “Good thing you work yourself as hard as you do us or you wouldn’t have survived that run.”

“How far was it?” Marc hadn’t thought to check.

“You were camped in your usual spot that first night?” Kenn loved calculating—anything. He got his map out.

Marc nodded. “I started from there and ended up on the other side of the park, where the news crews were reporting.” He’d followed the same set routine—make camp, get very drunk, hide in the pain of the past until he couldn’t maintain consciousness. This time that had included glimpses of something furry sneaking in to eat his burnt supper, but it was the only deviation.

“Here. We passed them on the way through.” Kenn pointed. “That’s thirty miles, in three hours.”

The team laughed and clapped, whistling.

“The creek helped.” Marc yawned. “God, I feel old. Two years ago, I could have done that with a blindfold on and asked for more.”

“That’s the price we pay for greatness.”

Pride went through the team at Thumper’s comment. All of them knew this was the most mentally alert and physically fit time of their lives.

Music suddenly blared from Kenn’s ever-present radio, drawing groans and grins. Marc did a quick count and found the men more happy than annoyed. He kept his mouth shut.

Because he did, so did the others.

Let them blow it off here, where they can’t get in trouble. Marc went back to his smaller bedroll. He had a tent he might put up later if it rained, but for now, he needed a nap. It had been a long first few days of rest and relaxation.

Dagger kept working on their meal as he spoke. “Reggie said there were two attacks on our squad last night. This was all coordinated by someone with good connections. It wasn’t just some pissants Brady angered with his sweet attitude.”

The Marines chuckled, including Marc. He did have an attitude problem. Snotty was only one of the many voices in his head.

“I heard we lost one.” Crisp bit and spat out the end of the cigar he’d just unwrapped. “Reggie was on the phone when I left. He was talking about Rocko.”

“Damn.” Thumper kept swearing mentally. He and Rocko were friends. They had the same job on their teams and often shared gear and stories.

Crisp lit his cigar, blowing out smoke as he answered. “CO is checking on all members who were at the last three big fights.”

“Command thinks it’s revenge for something recent. What if it isn’t?” Marc’s tone deepened into ugliness. “What if it’s an old ghost still haunting us?”

“Eibar again?”

The group of men went still and cold at Kenn’s question.

Marc felt the cool chill of fate rifling the hairs on his neck. He rubbed the purple, swollen knot on the side of his head. “Jordan gave me the goose egg. I ran him over a few times.”

“Where he goes, Eibar isn’t far away.” Hips

took an angry swig from the bottle.

“Getting tired of that guy.” Dagger fingered the collection of knives on his civilian belt.

“Yeah.” Kenn tilted the bottle up for a long swallow.

Iron guts Kenny, Marc thought, stifling a snicker. “We’ll handle it, maybe. I’ll ask the Captain. Eibar won’t be able to hide if the CO gets us cleared to go hunting.”

Other than Kenn, the men shared glances of excitement. Hunting with Brady was fun.

“After the hit on Chad, he should have been marked.”

That comment made the senior men wince. Hips was their rookie. He’d only been with them a few weeks before Chad’s death. That had been three years ago, and he still hadn’t learned any tact.

“You leave any survivors?” Crisp filled the gap of tense silence, like he always did.

“Unknown.” Marc could feel the Marine inside creeping back out of his cell. “I assume we’re ready for company?”

The men began to add up ammunition, pleasing Marc again. He hadn’t needed to say it. They were getting tight. That was why it felt like home to hear Dagger and Trippy haltingly arguing over the best way to reload ammo and to listen to Kenn hum himself to sleep to the song on the radio. It was also irritating to the part of him that just wanted a few days alone. Now, he couldn’t get

drunk and torture himself with the past. The single bottle was almost gone.

Scene 4

Marc rose up on one elbow. He'd been dozing for hours.

The camp of snoozing, card-playing men went silent and still, instantly on full alert. Marc didn't know it, but he was their first-alert guy. He always heard trouble before anyone else.

"Company." Marc drew his weapon and hid his hand under his leg before resuming his former position.

He listened to the noises as his team faded into the thick forest to wait. The Marines didn't bother to make it appear as if Marc was alone. Situations like these didn't require detailed methods. When the careless mercs found prey, they rushed in without considering details. The majority of enemies they fought overseas were simple. It was sheer numbers or knowledge of the terrain that made them hard to fight.

Careless boots crunched into his campsite.

Marc noted that brown scarf again, but he wasn't fooled by it or the dark skin. These were disgraced military men sent by Eibar in retaliation for multiple offenses, not the least of which was setting fire to three of his coke fields. Sleeping with Eibar's wife had come after, while he was being hunted. The drug lord's beloved spouse was

actually a CIA agent and she'd been very...*into* her work. Marc hadn't been concerned with leaving her there. She hadn't been far above the man she was supposedly controlling.

"Get up!"

Marc glared warningly when the sweaty mercenary would have kicked him. "Where are we going?"

"My boss wants you. Let's go."

"By yourself?" Marc followed the procedure they'd developed for extracting information during situations like these. "You brave or stupid?"

The man bragged as Marc slowly sat up. "I have friends here."

"Good. Be a shame to think half my squad came all the way out here just for you."

The man opened his mouth to answer; Marc raised his gun and fired.

The dead man fell at his boots, but Marc fired a second shot into the top of his skull anyway. He was well trained.

Marc examined the body, confident his men would easily hunt down the remaining mercs. The chance to do it here at home was probably why most of them had cut their own R&R short to come. His squad was made up of fourteen deadly men, but their loyalty was often dependent upon the mission or goal. Marc wanted that to change, but without the right leadership, it wouldn't. All the men in his squad walked the line between good and bad. If he made squad leader, he would fix that

by setting a rigid example of always doing the right thing.

The rest of the Marines held their positions around the site in case the merc's companions were drawn by the shots.

Marc had his team on a mental grid that had developed over years in the service. He watched as they moved in, surrounding enemies. He approved of the nasty knife plunges and brutal neck snaps. This was America, but the main rule of war never changed. It was kill or be killed.

Marc didn't think there could be many hunters left on his trail. He had... Marc caught a blur of charred fur in the high grass and felt his lips stretch in surprise. "Don't shoot the wolf. Pass the word."

The weeds nearby parted and collapsed under the animal's weight. Panting heavily as it took a breather, the wolf eyed Marc with intense dislike.

Marc looted the body unthinkingly, collecting what he wanted. As it occurred to him that there were different rules here at home, a shot echoed and then another. Pain flared in his arm as he was spun sideways.

"I thought *you* had him!" Kenn blared defensively from the tree line as a body thumped to the ground.

Marc slapped a hand over the bleeding trim, his second in that arm. "Nice timing, shit-for-brains."

Kenn flushed as he and the others came out. "Sorry, man."

The rest of the squad continued to ridicule Kenn as Marc covered his newest injury with a bandana. He would do better later when he medicated himself. The swelling in his hand and face was tolerable right now, but later, it might get nasty.

The team was soon joined by two more men from their squad who also carried full gear. Obviously, they'd also chosen to follow their usual patterns, even here. Military was for life.

Kenn tried to distract Marc and the others from his bad timing. "You get them all?"

"That's what the last one said right before Jamie slit his throat." Paul flashed his newest gun. Paul's collection was enormous.

Glad it was over, Marc motioned to the dusty road below. "It's good. You guys can go on out. I'll catch up."

The chorus of groans and denials told Marc his hopes of getting rid of them were for naught. It was rare that an entire squad took time off together at home. With nine of their fourteen here, it was enough to have fun.

Resigned, but not angry, Marc shrugged. "My house is your house." They weren't really friends, but they were comrades in arms and that was enough.

Chapter Three



Scene 1

“**A**re you sure you’re good?” Kenn couldn’t care less, but the words were expected.

Marc delivered a curt nod, out of patience. The last three days had been hard on him. He was ready to let go of his control, but the team was cramping his style with their constant harping and noises.

The bored Marines piled into the vehicles they’d brought up after the action and sped out of sight, covering Marc in salutes and fresh dust.

He wiped it off as he walked back to camp, just glad they were gone. “Sometimes, a guy wants peace and quiet. Being alone is good for my soul.”

Marc tensed at the new sounds echoing to him.

“Get him!”

“Over there!”

“Where?”

“Toward that campfire!”

Marc listened to the ruckus coming toward his finally peaceful site and sighed unhappily. “I just can’t get a break.”

“Catch him!”

“How? He broke my control pole!”

“Use your hands!”

“No way, Bubba!”

Marc fastened the lid on his mug and stood, not covering the Colt on his lean hip. Park rangers were coming through the thick trees toward him. Their green uniforms and tan hats blended nicely with the forest. Ahead of the branches cracking and the foliage rustling, a dark blur streaked across the ground.

“By the tree! There!”

“Mad wolf, mister! Run!”

Marc would have been amused at the wording if not for the desperate animal now breaking through the dense cover around his camp. He wasn’t surprised to discover it was the same animal he’d already had contact with. The wolf couldn’t catch a break either.

The animal was shocked to discover a human in front of him. He scrambled backward awkwardly, slipping. *You! Again!*

Marc instinctively blocked the wolf’s retreat as the three rangers stomped into his camp to surround it.

Before the unorganized men allowed it to escape, Marc stepped forward and clapped his hands loudly. Pain flashed through his broken finger.

The wolf snarled, but thought better of attacking. He fled in the only clear direction, darting inside the dark space of Marc's open tent.

Marc ignored the flabbergasted rangers and hurried forward to zip up the large green canvas.

The wolf tried to tear through it.

They all listened in amazement as the animal declared war and succeeded in tipping the tent so many times that Marc thought it might go over despite his deeply driven anchors.

The burst of energy didn't last long. After running from the fire for days, fighting with the man and dodging bullets from others, the wolf was exhausted. He hadn't gotten much rest or food while the man and his pack sat around their fire, scaring off game when they patrolled the area. He'd had to hunker down and wait. If not for the stream where he'd caught a fish, the wolf might have been too weak to run when the rangers found him. Whimpering, the wolf huddled in the far corner of the tent with its ears low and tail down, growling.

Marc studied the large animal, fascinated with the close view. It was hard to dislike the wolf when it seemed so scared.

"Hey! Who are you?"

"This area is supposed to be empty."

“Turn around.”

Marc kept his hands in sight as he slowly rotated to face the four sweaty men. They were covered in stains and suspicion as they took in his bruises, bandages, and charred coat.

“I’m Corporal Marcus Brady, United States Marine. I’m armed. My identification is in my jacket pocket.”

“You hold still!” The man with an embroidered nametag declaring him Bubba stomped forward. Wide and loud, Bubba’s stomach rolled over the top of his pants like a fanny pack.

The fat man stepped between Marc and the tent flap just as the wolf lunged against the material.

It pulled up the rear stakes and allowed the tent to flip, placing the flap against the ground. It also knocked Bubba on his ass.

Marc smirked.

Bubba didn’t.

“I’m shooting it now!” Bubba declared, forgetting about Marc’s identification as he struggled to get up.

“We don’t usually do things that way.” JD, one of the other rangers, reluctantly protested as a wave of coldness fell over the balmy September morning. “We take them back for processing.”

“No preserve will take that mean sucker!” Bubba shoved to his feet.

JD wanted Bubba to calm down in front of their audience. “We do it by the book.”

“Fine!” Bubba didn’t want to embarrass himself with his lack skill at shooting. “He’s got two days and then I’m taking him out behind the office. No damn animal is worth this trouble.”

“Neither are some people.” Marc’s light tone didn’t reveal his anger, but his teammates would have recognized the moment and gotten out of the crossfire.

Bubba swung around, finally remembering they weren’t alone. “You can get on out of here! Send us a bill for the tent.”

Still deep in Marine mode, Marc grunted in annoyance. “You know, when my buddies left, I thought all the loud mouths were gone.”

Bubba flushed a deep scarlet that made Marc wonder if he was about to have a stroke. *Hasn’t the man ever been insulted before?*

“If you’re not gone in one minute, I’ll arrest you!”

“I have a better idea.” Marc wasn’t surprised the other rangers were staying out of the argument. Bubba was obviously someone important. Marc could tell they didn’t like Bubba or his behavior. That usually meant the person was a relative of the boss and therefore, protected. “How about I buy the wolf from you?”

Bubba’s mouth snapped shut.

Marc could almost see dollar signs pop into the man’s mind. “What’s your price, *Bubba?*” Marc was almost to the place where violence would

occur even if he didn't want it to. For some reason, this man really rubbed against his grain.

"Everything you've got!" Bubba pointed. "Your cash, tent and gear, and that gun."

"Stiff bargain." Marc's sore hand caressed the butt of his 1911. "I have to get more than a wild animal that will try to kill me."

Bubba's happy smile faded a bit. "What do you want?"

"Two front teeth." Marc advanced. "Then we'll be squared away."

The other men watched in shock and uneasy pleasure as Marc took his fee. With two fast, brutal swings, Bubba's mouth became a bleeding mass of flesh. Two gory teeth were spit out between choked screams.

Marc stepped back, automatically wiping his hands down his pants to be certain they were dry enough to grip a weapon if needed. It usually wasn't at this point.

The other rangers gawked at Marc and Bubba's damaged face in uneasy admiration and surprise.

Calming, Marc calmly walked to his tent and rolled it upright as the wolf snarled and whimpered. "What happens if I let him go?"

JD, who had been the boss in this park until Bubba was placed with them, waved at the moaning man. "He'll hunt for it. You might as well kill it now."

Marc had known that already, but he never took the freedom of an animal unless there was no

other choice. He didn't believe in owning pets. "Can you dart him for me before you go?"

"We have a cage in our truck." JD joined Marc as the others tried to help Bubba. "We'll bring it up here and then dart him. You'll have the full two hours that way."

"Thanks." Marc held out his hand.

JD shook, grinning as he realized Marc had never intended to honor a deal with Bubba. "No, thank *you*."

Marc scanned Bubba. "Leak his story to the press. They'll have to send him to a new location."

JD beamed at the suggestion. "I think that could happen. It's pretty juicy."

Marc knelt in front of the flap, staring at the frightened wolf. "I came for a few days of peace and had to run from a fire. I fought with you, fought for my life, and then my team shows up in the mood to party. Now, an asshole comes into my camp and I get *you* out of the deal." Marc sighed. "It's clearly just gonna be one of those breaks."

Marc didn't stick around while the rangers shot the wolf with the tranquilizer dart. He retrieved his jeep, bringing it as close as he could while one of the men helped Bubba to their truck.

Bubba didn't look at Marc or the wolf as he left, still cradling his mouth. The two teeth were in his pocket—shoved there by JD when Bubba had painfully demanded they call the local police. Marc didn't know what JD had said then, but

Bubba had gone gray and hadn't tried to speak again.

Beep!

Marc flipped his pager to silent as he climbed into his jeep. He read the number on the small black box and then slid the pager into his kit. Julia wanted him to come by.

He began to feel better. She had a fenced farm. She was surrounded by Idaho mountains and forests. If the wolf couldn't be tamed a little, maybe he could be set free there. Either way, he would have a soft rack and a hot meal.

JD and the other man were in front of the tent flap when Marc pulled up, watching the wolf fight the drugs. JD and Tom could have been brothers with blond ponytails and green eyes.

"The drugs might take a little longer with him." Tom smiled at Marc. "He's bigger than most Timberwolves."

Marc wondered if the animal might be mixed with a dog somewhere along his family tree, but he didn't ask in case it changed what they were doing here. He didn't want to be responsible for the animal being put down.

"You got some place to take him?" Tom was now filling out a paper on a clipboard.

Marc nodded. "Idaho. Hey, is it legal to release him there?"

"No. Not without permits."

"Figures. Guess we'll have to make friends."

“You got room for him?” Tom demanded suddenly. “Not gonna fight him are you?”

“No.”

“Good.” JD held out a small bag. “Here are some pamphlets on wolves from this area. Might help.”

Marc shoved the paperwork into his jacket pocket and motioned toward the crate they’d sat down. “Is that the cage?”

“Yep.” JD hefted it over. “Watch your fingers. Clever animals discover they can get their mouths and paws through some of the openings.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Marc knelt down again to peer through the flap, feeling sorry for the terrified animal now drooling all over his sleeping bag. “Sorry, boy. Go to sleep for a while. I promise I won’t do this to you again.”

The wolf’s ears flipped back, snout drawing up, but with the last of his energy used, the drugs finally took hold. He slumped over, panting heavily.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.” Tom unzipped the flap. “The drugs make them hot.”

Marc smothered his small fire with dirt as Tom and JD removed the wolf from the tent. Marc was impressed with the care they took not to injure the subdued animal. The bulky cage was lined with thin padding, but Marc doubted that would survive the trip as they placed the wolf inside and locked the door without any more fuss.

“The hardest part is cornering them.” Tom and JD hefted the cage onto Marc’s jeep.

That caught Marc’s attention. “Why did you have to?”

“This wolf’s pack killed a toddler about a month ago. We rounded them all up, but one figured out how to open the cages. The entire pack escaped and we’ve been trying to catch them all again ever since. He’s the last one. If we can’t relocate them, the entire pack will be put down. And they should be.” Tom held out a hand.

Marc shook hands, but he didn’t agree. Wild animals acted wild. They didn’t know any better. This wilderness was no place to be lax with a child. “You sure it’s the right wolf, same pack? I saw this one at my last campsite, thirty miles from here, three days ago.” For some reason, Marc wanted to protect the animal.

“Yes. His size makes him hard to miss. We’ve ended up chasing his pack each time they come through. Almost always for killing livestock.” Tom stood stiffly. “Wolves roam, Mr. Brady—far and wide.”

JD headed for their truck. “Thanks again for Bubba!”

Marc watched them leave without the rebellious feelings he usually carried toward civilian authority. He was in the Marines and he enjoyed that life, but he still hated to be told what to do. As he got older, it was easier to cuss in his head than to have his squad leader bail him out.

After collecting his gear, Marc secured the crate in the jeep with cords from his toolbox and drove out of the wilderness. The damaged tent, he left. The forest would cover it or other animals would use it for shelter and nests. Nature took as much as she gave. The tent was a small price to pay for saving the wolf from Bubba.

Marc chose to hit the highway without stopping at the gas station to make his call. Julia rarely paged him. When she did, she never asked questions or expected him to drop everything and come running. She honestly only wanted one thing. When she'd ridden him enough, she would send him on his way with a funny walk and half a smile. It was the perfect friendship.

Marc glanced at the crate in the mirror, then put his full concentration into the drive. If he tried hard, he could be there by dinner. Her ranch was a few hours west.

Was I expecting her to contact me? Marc asked himself. *Was that why I chose to come here, why I told my team where I was going? If I wanted to be alone, I would be.*

Marc knew that to be true. It had been over a year since he'd spent time with Julia and his body was aware of it, even if his heart wasn't. The wolf would make an excellent reason to leave without supplying her demands if he found that he couldn't. Sometimes her words or actions triggered a dark memory and he fled. He'd had a similar

relationship before Julia, but even with her nose ring, Amber had been too tame. Julia owned a cattle ranch. Cowboy boots, dusty jeans, and a plaid shirt on her were sexy. A dress would have been out of place. She was scarred, tough, erotic.

“But she’s not my Angie.” Marc increased his speed on the mostly empty strip of highway and pushed away his ghosts.

Scene 2

The wolf woke before they arrived at the ranch. Marc heard the snarling first, then the sound of an animal trying to shred the plastic cage. He reluctantly pulled over.

Marc dug through his kit as the snarls and scratches continued, bringing out a few strips of beef jerky. He shoved them through the holes in the crate and then got rolling again without lingering. He was hoping the jerky might distract the wolf, but mostly, he was hoping the cage held for another hour. It had sounded like the animal was going crazy in there; a quick scan had verified it.

Marc listened to the wolf snap down the food, groaning as the fight to be free immediately resumed. “Gonna be a long couple of hours.”

The wolf began to howl, proving him right.

Scene 3

Marc had a nasty headache by the time he arrived at Julia's ranch an hour later. The wolf had continued to shred the cage between emitting long howls that even the high speeds couldn't muffle. He wasn't happy to be caged.

Marc stopped at the gate to Julia's big ranch and hit the buzzer, not certain she would be able to hear him over the increasing howls. This property was large, wooded, and surrounded by a ten-foot wall that he and his team had helped build when Chad and Julia moved here. The team knew their way around the property.

The ranch was nestled in the southeast corner of Idaho, but it didn't look like the national parks that it was so close to. Idaho wasn't welcoming. Marc still wasn't sure why Chad and Julia had chosen this area to settle down, but they'd done well with their cattle. After Chad's death, Julia had refused to leave, working the ranch herself to make ends meet. Marc had stuck around as long as he could after the funeral to get her set, and then returned between deployments, but it was clear that he'd been gone too long this time. The roof tiles scattered in the driveway and the lack of cows in the pasture was unsettling.

"Is that you, Brady?"

Marc had to shout. "Yes! Sorry for the noise!" It was as if the wolf knew he was close to being free. His howls were getting louder.

"Come on in!" The gate buzzed open.

Marc quickly drove through, studying his six in the mirrors. He wasn't expecting trouble here, but as with keeping his hands dry enough to grip his gun or knife, watching his back was ingrained.

The gate shut with a loud clang that Marc barely heard, thanks to the wolf. He drove straight to the rear barn behind the large main house. He usually hid his vehicle there in case Julia had unexpected company, but today, he needed the room.

Marc quickly opened the doors and then drove the jeep in. Tall and wide with a long loft, the barn was lined with shelves and storage spaces all labeled for the contents. Most of them were empty.

After a quick check to be sure the cage would hold a bit longer, Marc shut the barn door as the howls again increased in volume. "Give me a few more minutes, boy."

Marc saw Julia coming from the main house. They had a normal routine that was about to be disturbed, but Marc doubted she would mind. Julia often rescued animals.

Marc smiled at the woman walking his way. The first thing he noticed was her hair. She'd cut it not long before their last hookup and he almost hadn't been able to perform. Clearly, she'd sensed that because it was well below her shoulders now. That willingness to please was part of why he spent downtime with Julia. She didn't always know what he needed, but she was willing to try to find out. It was usually enough.

As long as the lights are off, he added.

Julia increased her pace to a quick trot that shook the right parts and reminded Marc that when the lights went out, she didn't turn them back on until he was happy. It sent a rush of need into his guts, causing welcome to spread across his lightly bearded face.

Julia had been observing his bruises and bandages while judging his mood. Determining it was good, she tossed herself into his arms and molded herself to his hard body.

Marc inhaled deeply as the past flew over him in vanilla waves of agony. It was always the same. A willowy brunette with long curls and that scent lit him up where nothing else could.

Marc slanted his mouth over hers, hand sliding down to cup a cheek and press her closer. His other hand tangled in silken strands as he deepened the kiss. It had been a year. He suddenly felt every second of it.

Julia encouraged the familiarity in public only because he never gave this to her. She hated Marc's lights-off rule; to have him grope her in broad daylight was something of a thrill. When he growled lowly, iron bar pressing into her thigh, she gave in to the unspoken plea, nodding.

Marc led her toward the shed, aware of their audience. Julia owned the ranch, but she also had employees here. She wouldn't care for them witnessing this, even if she was enjoying it.

A wolf's long howl broke the moment.

Julia pulled away, peering around. “That was close. We should go inside. Wild wolves are no joke.”

“Yeah, uh...” Marc sighed, letting go of the soft, but no longer willing flesh in his hands. “I brought a friend.”

“A friend?”

Marc headed back into the barn. “Well, maybe not so much a friend as a wild animal.”

Julia snickered. “Call it whatever you want, Brady. I’m already sold on your Johnson.”

Marc laughed in surprise and felt the Marine finally slip back into his cage as the civilian took over. It was a relief. “Thanks, baby. I needed that.”

Julia snickered, securing the doors behind them. It would be a shame when Marc was gone. *I really do enjoy his company*, she thought. *It’s too bad I married Chad instead of Marc. My life would be totally different.*

Chapter Four



Scene 1

Julia didn't ask questions as the wolf continued to howl. She and Marc had discussed her rescues at length on a previous visit. She assumed the wolf was injured or in danger.

"You'll have to check him out through the cage. I don't want him knocked out again."

Julia was already doing it, shining her neck light. "He's a timberwolf, probably a year old, maybe a little more. He seems healthy. I don't see injuries, other than singed fur. As he moves around, you'll be able to see underneath and check for injuries there. Watch for signs that he's in pain." She stepped back. "You'll need a permit if you want to release him. Might be best to find a shelter or a preserve."

"Maybe."

“If you keep him, settle him down enough for a vet to give him shots. And register him, depending on where you go. Wolves don’t have as many rules as dogs yet, but they’re gaining attention because of all the recent attacks.”

Marc grimaced at the warning. He now owned a wild animal that would kill him if he made a mistake. “I understand. I need to let him out. Is in here, okay?”

Julia glanced around the cobwebbed barn she rarely used anymore. “Should be fine, but I don’t know if there are holes...”

Marc Began walking the perimeter to search for places where the wolf could escape.

Julia scanned the crate, amazed at the damage the wolf had done to the carrier. Another hour of it and the big wolf would be free.

The wolf whimpered, begging to be released. It was easy for him to sense the kind nature of the human female. He’d met her type before, in his home forest.

Julia smiled sympathetically. “Hang on, baby. We’ll get you out of there.”

Finished with his search, Marc motioned her to take the ladder that led to the loft. Neither of them needed to be in reach of the wolf until after it had time to calm down.

Julia climbed to the loft and took a seat on the open edge, eager to observe. She also assumed Marc would finish what he’d started at some point. It was amazing how a one-minute embrace could

fire up her body. He knew how to reach that place inside her that no other man she'd been with could, including her husband. Julia used to wonder if it bothered Marc to sleep with the wife of his dead teammate, but she didn't need to wonder about it anymore. She knew it did.

The wolf lunged against the crate as Marc got close. Marc quickly unsnapped the latch but didn't open the door. He hopped down from the jeep and went to draw a bucket of water from the pump. He knew the wolf required a drink, but Marc also needed the animal to understand food and water came from him. Maybe the animal wouldn't be as aggressive at feeding time once he figured that out.

The wolf lunged against the crate again. This time, the animal gained freedom as the door swung open. He shot out of the crate, leaping from the jeep seat to dart into a dark corner.

"He's out!"

Marc didn't answer Julia's warning. He could already feel the wolf watching him as he gathered the water. He expected an attack. The waves of anger coming from the animal were hard to miss.

Marc placed the bucket on the ground next to the pump, then scoured the barn for the expensive bags of dog food Julia stored here for her pets. Marc noticed the bags hadn't been touched in a while. He wiped away the cobwebs and tore the top bag before pushing it over to spill across the dirt floor.

Marc climbed to the loft. He would have to keep track of the animal's eating and drinking habits. He wouldn't be able to make friends until that happened. Wild animals had basic needs to satisfy before any other new scent or idea could be given time to grow. Sex was another trigger. Marc was glad there were no female animals here. Julia only adopted males. She said the girls were needed on sanctuaries and preserves to help build those populations, but Marc suspected she just liked being the only female on her ranch.

They waited quietly for a few minutes, but the wolf stayed in the far corner shadows, glaring. Only the occasional shuffle or whimper came.

Marc turned to Julia, body swelling as hot need sank into his balls.

When he held out a hand, Julia let him pull her to her feet, not saying anything. When he left his Colt on and took her against the loft window, big hand curled around to please her, she forgot how to speak.

Marc kept his face buried in her hair and pretended she was someone else.

Scene 2

Marc kissed Julia softly on the neck. "Thank you."

Julia fastened her jeans and slumped into the old, shrouded chair by the window. "My pleasure, Grunt."

“We’re here to service, ma’am.” Marc adjusted his damp clothes. “Is this a good time to ask for a favor?”

“Not after the one you just did for yourself.” She laughed, glancing over at him. “Want me to help with the wolf?”

“Yes, please, baby.”

Julia leered again. “You’re using charm. Uh-oh.”

Marc chuckled as he climbed down. The wolf had to get used to him sometime. Might as well be now. “I don’t think he’s injured, but I need to know some basics, like age and general health. I’ll handle it from there.”

“Have you done this before?”

“I’ve worked with dogs in the service.” Marc kept moving away from her, hating the guilt that always came now. That ugly voice spoke up in his mind. *You just fucked your best friend’s wife.*

Marc thought of the times Chad had hinted that Marc should take care of Julia in every way if anything happened, but the guilt was still there. *I loved on her until we both got a release. That’s not a bad thing,* Marc reprimanded himself silently. *Chad’s been gone for years. He doesn’t mind.*

Julia had come to the ladder, feeling the mental wall slam down between them. “I’m sorry.”

Refusing to let the moment be ruined, Marc grinned. “You have the biggest titties I’ve ever played with.”

Her surprised laughter filled the barn, making Marc wince. Julia liked her men to talk dirty to her. Marc didn't mind that, but he'd spotted the wolf. Upon the loud noise, the animal had darted back into the shadows.

"You okay down there?"

Marc settled into the seat of the jeep, lighting a smoke. "Still glowin'. You?"

"A little lonely, but I suspect that won't change. I'm going to the house."

"I'll be over in a bit."

"You know the way."

"I know several." Marc was glad for the silence after she slid down the pole from the loft and disappeared through the office door. She latched it, exiting through the rear office.

Alone at last.

The afternoon slid into early evening while Marc waited for a first contact. He knew from experience that lone wolves didn't usually attack unless provoked, but he also knew it didn't take much to provoke them.

The barn creaked and swayed with the wind, sending the smell of hay and sawdust through the air. There was another odor here too. Marc identified it as abandonment. This barn had been used for storage the last time he was here. People had come and gone daily through those wide double doors. Marc wondered what had happened to make Julia change things. She was a stickler for

regular routines—another reason he liked spending time with her.

Marc heard lapping and leaned back for a brief moment to rest his muscles. When the noise stopped, he shifted back into alertness. Waiting for the soft crunching of food, Marc was unprepared for the crash as a stack of boards was knocked over.

Marc twitched again as something else fell. It sounded like a different stack of boards. He pinpointed the wolf by it. The logs were between the water and the food.

A crunch echoed, telling Marc the wolf was eating. Ripping came next, making him frown. *What's he tearing up?*

Marc started to go find out and then stopped as he realized the wolf was trying to draw prey into his new territory. “Clever.”

Another crash echoed, this one larger.

“Barrels.” So far, it was all easy to fix.

He waited patiently as the wolf circled the barn around him, knocking things over and pawing at the dirt. Marc assumed the animal was throwing challenges, but he knew better than to accept. He needed the wolf to come to him.

Marc patted the sweaty cooler on the front seat. Deepening shadows told him the sun was sinking. He didn't want to do things the hard way, but he had to be back at the base in a week and he couldn't let the wolf go. They had to make friends and it had to happen fast.

Marc heard the pad of determined paws and prepared himself for the coming struggle. Adrenaline pumped through his system, heart thumping as cool nerves settled in. Icy enough to shiver, Marc waited for the leap, hoping he timed it right.

The wolf landed on him an instant later, jaws snapping at his neck.

Marc slammed his skull into the wolf's tender nose, drawing a shocked yelp. He wrapped his legs and arms around the hot, furry body to keep it from fleeing.

Marc ducked wild snaps and smashed the wolf against the seat to get a free hand. He grabbed at the ready meat in the cooler, shoving the bloody deer steak against the wolf's mouth.

The wolf snapped at it automatically. At the first taste, the wolf stopped fighting to greedily consume the meat.

Marc kept the food coming, glad he'd insisted on saving a chunk from his team.

The wolf kept eating, whining and whimpering at the feel of the man wrapped around him. Hunger was a powerful deterrent and meals like this one were rare, even for a predator that ran in a pack.

Marc dropped the last thick piece toward those snapping, snarling jaws, then let go and leapt out of the jeep. He strode to the barn doors as the wolf finished the food and began rooting around in the cooler.

“I’ll be back in the morning.” Marc was proud of himself.

There was no warning. Marc was suddenly hit from behind, slamming into the doorframe. His face broke his fall.

Marc slid to his knees, dazed. *Mistake!*

The wolf lunged forward, meaning to tear out his throat.

Marc swung in defense—hard.

The wolf was driven backwards by the harsh punch, howling in agony. It staggered to the ground and stayed there, obviously feeling nothing but pain.

“Exactly.” Marc slowly stood up. “Bad wolfie!”

The wolf kept braying long enough for Marc to become concerned, but he wasn’t about to tend the animal. He still had too many stars across his vision.

The noises faded to whines and whimpers as Marc felt his head. He came away with bloody fingers. “Brought down by my own wolf. The guys will shit themselves over this.”

The wolf didn’t run as Marc staggered by him, but he tried to snarl. It became a whine.

Marc nodded, and immediately regretted it as pain flipped his guts again. “That’s what we both get. You for being an ass, and me for thinking I had you under control.”

The wolf padded behind him.

Marc dizzily spun around, expression like thunder. “Go lay down!”

To Marc’s shock, the wolf glowered resentfully for a few seconds, then slunk off with its tail between its legs.

It took a few seconds for Marc to make the connection. He’d taken the wolf’s freedom and become the leader of his pack by winning the physical fight.

“Round one, anyway.” Marc was certain there would be more. He scowled. “You don’t even have a name and you’ve already made me bleed. I usually get to slide between a soft pair of legs after that happens.”

Marc was reminded of Julia. He twisted toward the office. “Stay, *doggie*.”

The wolf growled from a dark corner.

Laughing, Marc hurried through the door, quickly latching it.

Marc scanned the property as he came from the barn, spotting three of Julia’s longtime employees. Rusty and his two pals were dark, lean, and well-built, but they weren’t military. Marc assumed they took care of Julia’s needs when none of her service friends could come around, but she had made it clear she preferred men in uniform.

Marc noticed the resentful expressions and grinned a bit despite his pain. He rattled his dog tag as he strode toward the door, leaving them to mutter and flash obscene gestures.

Marc let himself in. Julia's home was lovely. Wooden walls and floors covered in a high shine of tender care was what he had come to expect. Walking through dust where other prints were visible came as a surprise. Since when did Julia let the housekeepers slack off?

The main ranch house held twenty rooms. Julia and Chad had built it with the money she'd gotten from a lawsuit. Marc didn't remember what the case had been about, but the cash from it had allowed the newly married couple to build the home of their dreams. Chad and Julia had been happy here, and after his death, she'd still been content.

Something changed. This feels different.

Before he made it through the long hallway to the dining room, Julia appeared in the doorway to his left.

"I'm in trouble, Brady."

He paused in the dining room doorway, more than a little shocked. This entire side of the house used to be covered in plants. There had been so many of them that he'd often felt as if he was outside.

"I assumed that as soon as I saw the dusty bags in the barn." Marc missed the jungle-like décor that had once filled the room. Julia's plants and pets were her life. "What's going on?"

"One of Chad's...buddies turned up last year." Julia stayed by the door as Marc walked to the sparse table. "He said he was Chad's best friend.

He said they'd been doing rogue ops together, that Chad had left a debt."

"Rogue ops?" Marc questioned, sitting down to a thin stew that smelled better than it looked. Julia had cooked this, not her chef. Marc frowned. "I've never heard that term." He had, of course, but he needed to see how much Julia knew about Chad's shadier activities. There had been a few. One, Marc had refused to be a part of right after they'd become teammates, but he hadn't been hurting for money the way the married men were. He didn't have a home or family..

Angie's smile forced its way into his thoughts. Marc shoved out that relentless ghost and focused on Julia, who was informing him about the last year here.

"Chad owed him money, so he said he would take care of me until it was paid back." Julia's cheeks squashed up in confusion. "I thought *you* were taking care of me."

"So did I." Marc stiffened. "You didn't tell me that you were having trouble. Not one call."

"I wasn't until the lawyers came." Realizing she needed to start from the beginning, Julia sighed. "Chad's policy didn't cover much more than the funeral. I still had to cover the mortgage on the ranch and keep the staff here paid. I took out a loan."

"And when it defaulted, you started selling everything?"

“I sold it all before it defaulted, but the payment didn’t make it to the bank.”

“Stolen?”

“Missing. Chad’s buddy said he would take care of it, but until he finds the thief, he wants me to live with him. I said no, so he shot my dog!”

Marc scowled, noting she hadn’t joined him at the table. “I can hear the lies, Julia. What the hell is going on?”

Julia’s flinched as if he’d hit her.

Marc scanned his late friend’s wife. Bitten fingernails, pale, thinner. “Tell me about the rogue work.”

“The guy says he and Chad made deliveries for cartel clients. They were running drugs or guns or something, and Chad helped them!” She dissolved in tears, sliding into the chair by the door.

Marc let her cry, trying to spot the lies. The problem was, so far, he couldn’t. Only her evasive tone was wrong. Chad had done freelance work for the cartels and Marc had noticed the marker by the barn. He just hadn’t realized it was her yapping little puppy’s grave. “When do I get to meet this buddy?”

Julia flinched again. “He said he’d be back in two weeks, that I’d better be packed and ready to go.”

“Does this buddy have a name?”

Julia finally looked at him. “Jim Carey.”

Marc grimaced. “Jim Carey is dead.”

“I know.”

Marc wasn't sure if she was having a mental moment. "Are you saying a dead man threatened you?"

"He's not dead. You'll see."

Marc had to admit she sounded like she was telling the truth. And if Jim was really alive, then other dead men could be too. *What's going on here?*

Marc spent a few minutes eating while Julia got her emotions under control. When he was finished, he slowly stood up. "I don't believe you."

Julia nodded, voice subdued. "I know. I feel it."

"Want to change your story?"

Julia didn't meet his eye. "You'll see."

She left the room without another word, going toward her bedroom.

Marc didn't ask if he was invited. He would mull it all over and try to decide on a plan of action. That was almost impossible to do until he met this mysterious friend. Marc had made a point of talking to every person at the funeral, hoping there was someone who could care for Julia in his place, but there hadn't been. She was great for a weekend away, but Marc hadn't wanted her to get the idea that he was Chad's replacement. She never had, and they'd enjoyed some wonderful moments together, enough of them that Marc knew her too well for this scared, hopeless act to work. Julia was hell on wheels most days. It was part of why the sex was so hot.

Marc ran a hand through his short, black spikes, sighing unhappily. He should have come back sooner to check on her. He'd let himself believe the letters she always answered, because deep down he'd feared creating a bond with her.

Always a polite guest, Marc took his dishes to the dusty kitchen, giving them a fast rinse. As he scanned the wine bottles in the garbage can and the rest of the neglected kitchen that had once bustled with a cook and two helpers, Marc felt as if he were being watched. It wasn't comforting that it didn't feel like Julia.

Marc retrieved his kit, slinging it over a shoulder as he headed for the barn. He already felt as if he was too close to this situation to comprehend what was really happening. Once he had a theory, he would try to get ready for the confrontation with this *friend*. He expected that to be a wash, but he didn't have two weeks to wait and find out if the person showed up. He had to be back on base in seven days.

Marc stepped into the barn and quickly fastened the door, peering around. He didn't see the wolf, but that didn't mean the animal wasn't waiting for another chance to attack or run.

Fed, satisfied, and sore, Marc climbed to the loft. He put his bedroll by the edge so he could watch for the wolf, but sleep came before he pinpointed the animal in the darkness. If not for the heavy panting from a far corner, he would have

wondered if the wolf had escaped. Exhausted, Marc slept.

Below him, the wolf finally settled down in a corner to do the same. He hadn't been positive the man was coming back, and it had scared him more than traveling in the big box.

Confused, sore, and scared, the wolf laid his head down and rested. *Humans suck.*

Scene 3

Recon time. Marc slipped into Chad's office and shut the door. Dim light from cracked, yellowing blinds revealed thick dust over all the papers and files. It was exactly as Chad had left it, even down to the half-full tray of cigar ashes. Marc had been all through these rooms during his visits, but he'd never snooped. He hadn't had a reason to.

Marc scanned from where he stood, not wanting to add prints to the dust that would tell anyone he'd been in here. When he finished memorizing the scene for later study, he eased out and continued down the hall to Julia's office.

He entered and locked the door, then began picking through the papers on the desk. As he went through them, Marc was aware that the information had been left out so even an idiot could follow it. *And that's what I am. I feel it; I just can't spot the source.*

When Marc left her office, he was still confused. Julia was indeed in big financial trouble

if the paperwork was genuine. The state of the ranch backed up her claims, but the buddy story didn't fit in.

Marc opened the hall door to the private room where Julia had built and outfitted a nursery with everything except a child. It had to torment her to see the empty crib when she came in here, but it was clear from the tracks that she came often. This room had also been left like it was before Chad's death. After his death, Julia had asked Marc to give her a baby, but he'd told her no and avoided visiting for a while. He didn't want kids.

Marc entered the kitchen but he still didn't see any staff. He checked the cabinets and pantry, finding them all dusty or almost bare. The curtains hadn't been washed or dusted in a while, judging from the webs and dirt. The expensive china was gone, as well as the silver and crystal. Julia had been wiped out after Chad's death, but she shouldn't have been. Marc had given her money and she'd had Chad's pension. She'd also had investments and a part time business in town. *Where's the money going?*

Marc went to the stairs and chose to check out the attic first. Julia hadn't come up much here before. It had been storage for all Chad's old books and comics. Marc opened the top door and stopped. The attic had been converted to an efficiency apartment, complete with a kitchenette and bathroom. Unmade cots and beer cans littered

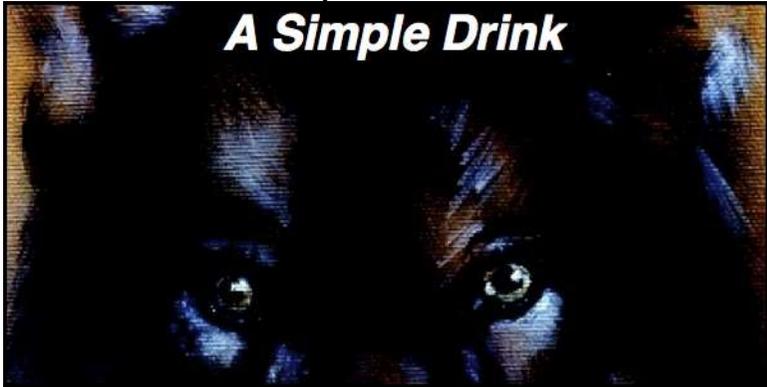
the room. *Someone's been living up here.* Marc's stomach turned as names ran through his mind.

He went down to the basement next, where Chad had put in a workshop. Like before, it held boxes of guns and parts, tubs of brass, and powdery dust on the floor, but the reload station was spotless. It had been used recently and then wiped of prints.

Marc went back up the worn steps and headed for the door. As he started to exit the ranch, he opened the coat closet and dug around. He found Julia's suitcases stacked in the bottom under her winter gear. All of it was packed as if ready for a bugout.

Marc returned to the barn, mind full of pieces waiting for him to twist and turn until they snapped into place.

Chapter Five



1

Marc's first clue that something was wrong came as the sun lightened the dusty barn. Creaking boards said he wasn't alone in the loft.

Marc opened one bleary lid to peer around. He spotted a furry leg and understood the wolf had climbed the ladder.

That's not possible! his groggy mind insisted. *Figure it out later, Marc ordered. Go!*

The wolf lunged forward, almost falling as Marc rolled toward the middle of the loft. His paws scrambled back from the edge as he yelped in terror.

Marc also backed up, trying to snap into alertness to handle the animal. Becoming an instant Marine only happened in battle. Once that coolness fell off, he was like any other person who

didn't care for mornings that lacked coffee and quiet.

Furious about his captivity, the wolf leapt again, snarling.

Marc chose to duck the leaps and snaps. Despite needing the animal to know who was boss, Marc didn't punch. Instead, he taunted it to release his own displeasure at the situation. "Come on, *doggy!* That all you got?"

Marc tried to be careful, timing his ducks and rolls, but twice he was scratched by intent claws searching for his skin. He was also slobbered on and covered in fur as the wolf used up his energy in the futile effort. Because he was defending, Marc wasn't out of breath until the end. The wolf, however, was panting and whimpering even as he jumped again.

Sensing his moment, Marc spun away a last time and waited for the wolf to land to make eye contact. "No more. Done!"

Marc growled lightly, baring his teeth in hopes the communication would be successful.

Marc waited for the wolf to inch forward again. "No!"

Not expecting the loud noise, the wolf flinched, teeth coming out.

Marc pointed toward a corner. "Go!" He didn't think the animal would obey.

The wolf didn't, but he did stop jumping, staring in confusion while he panted.

Marc calmly retrieved his kit. He hadn't planned on them being stuck in the loft together, but it would force the wolf to accept him quicker.

Paws padded after him, but Marc didn't feel the intent to jump. He took a fast glance, and found the wolf a few feet away, staring mistrustfully. "Good boy!"

The wolf snarled hatefully in response.

Scene 2

There was no food or water in the loft and the wolf clearly knew it. The whining from the corner steadily increased over the morning until Marc began humming to drown it out. As he cleaned up and ate from his kit, he tossed scraps that were ignored.

After using pissing out the loft window, Marc studied the ranch through the early morning drizzle. Very few employees came into view over the next hours. He saw none of the normal labor that was required on a ranch this size. Smoke drew his attention, but Marc dismissed it. That wasn't a new fire. Someone was using the caretaker's cabin. Chad and Julia had never gotten around to hiring someone to care for their ranch, so workers used the cabin while laboring on that side of the property.

"No cook, no maid, no moo." Marc hadn't seen one head of cattle the entire time he'd been here. Also, no flower garden, no fields of corn, and no

rescued animals getting in the way of workers. The ranch was shut down.

Julia had a veterinary office in town, though it was only open part-time. She made house calls for emergencies, which made sense to Marc. A cow couldn't be lifted onto a gurney and rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. From what he remembered of Chad's funeral, Julia's neighbors liked her and were glad to have a vet in their community who was also a rancher.

Marc wondered what the neighbors thought of the lack of activity on Julia's ranch now. He assumed they didn't know about most of it. The wall around the property had been built to protect the happy couple from outsiders, but Marc now wondered if that had been another lie. Had Chad used the manpower of his team to erect a wall that blocked his criminal activity from the neighbors and the rest of the world? The feeling of being used, for years, sank into Marc's queasy gut and started it boiling again.

Scene 3

Julia gently closed the door after slipping into the dusty room where no one went anymore. During her marriage to Chad, she'd longed for a baby, but one had never come.

Julia trailed a hand along the crib that hadn't been used, then she dropped carefully into the

fragile rocker she'd purchased for night nursing. A baby was all she wanted.

Julia felt tears slid down her cheeks, and didn't try to stop them. She'd known Chad most of her life. They both had police parents. Or at least, they had. Her mother and father had been killed in a car accident. Chad's parents had been lost to a war when he was a child. They'd only had each other, and it hadn't been enough for her.

Julia listened to the men carrying out the last of her valuables to be sold off in hopes of raising the bank money a second time. She wasn't sure it would be enough, but she doubted the cash would make it to where it was supposed to go. She needed help if she wanted to salvage her life.

Julia glanced around the deserted room, face damp. So much had changed since Chad's funeral. She'd been hit with so many surprises that she was dazed, but through it all, her one true desire hadn't faded. *I was meant to be a mother.*

Julia wiped at her face as a wave of determination settled onto her shoulders. She hadn't given up yet. Marc was here. He would help her and things would get better. They had to. Life couldn't get any worse for her right now unless she died.

Julia flinched as Chad entered the room behind her and shut the door.

He clamped his hands on her shoulders, peering over at the empty crib. "Same Julia,

always wanting what she can't have." Chad inhaled, face tightening. "You smell like him!"

"You told me to get him here and keep him here."

"And you did."

"I always do what you tell me."

"I didn't say you could enjoy it!"

"It's not my fault. Marc's more of a man than you are."

Chad shoved her out of the chair and stormed from the room.

Julia stayed on the floor and cried.

Scene 4

Julia didn't emerge from the wide home until well after noon. She carefully came through the faint patches of mud to the loft window where Marc was standing, smoking.

He was glad she hadn't come out a little sooner and caught him urinating. Like the wolf, when he had to go, he went.

"I have to run into town."

"How's business at the office?"

"I closed it a few months ago. I can't afford the extra set of bills."

"Do the neighbors still call you for help?"

"Sometimes...but I tell them no. It's not safe for me to leave the ranch." She shuddered. "Bad things happen when I'm gone too long. Last time, it was the cook's daughter."

“All your hired help is gone?”

“Yes.”

“And you can’t hire more because you’re broke.”

“Because they wouldn’t be safe. I told the others to go after the girl...fell.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police?”

Julia snorted. “The cops around here care about getting to their next dinner. They’ll file the report and send a copy straight to their contacts. I’d be dead before I could drive home.” She stared at him, eyes haunted. “You can’t tell anyone unless you give me a chance to run. I can’t be here when it goes down.”

Marc didn’t make any promises. “I need to think, and talk to Jim.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I hear from him. If you see a big black truck pull in, that’s him.”

Her face was swollen. She’d obviously spent the morning crying. “Do you need an escort?”

She quickly shook her head and vanished into the garage.

Marc stared in suspicion. Every bit of her behavior was out of character. If he didn’t have the wolf to handle, he would have followed her to town for recon.

The soft pad of feet alerted Marc to the wolf’s dangerous presence. He tensed for a renewed fight and glanced down to find the wild animal at his side, staring through the opening. Brown, black, and grey fur ruffled in anger, showing red

highlights that were fascinating in the glow of the setting sun. In the distance, the forest and hills looked much like the area the wolf had come from. Marc understood the deep-throated whimper.

“Sorry, Dog. But we’ll go to places like that together. It won’t be completely lost for you.”

The wolf peered up, too tired and nauseous to fight. He stared with wide, golden eyes begging Marc to take him home.

Marc felt the crushing pain clearly. Ready for a break from the hours of standing, Marc resumed his spot along the wall, sinking down in relief.

The wolf followed. This time when the human tossed a scrap, the big animal snapped it down.

Marc wasn’t sure what had changed between them, if anything, but he didn’t let his guard down as the wolf came closer for each scrap.

The wolf was hungry and thirsty. He’d been running for a long time before Marc’s den had trapped him. Then the drugs had hit him hard. Wrestling with Marc hadn’t been fun, and the water here had been gone the same hour that he’d found it. The food had been nice, but without water, the wolf was already feeling weak. He knew the man was how he would be given that precious liquid. What he didn’t know was what the human wanted from him in return.

Marc pulled a drink from his canteen and saw the wolf’s head snap up at the scent. Taking a big risk, Marc extended his hand and poured some of the water into it.

The wolf came forward quickly, surprising Marc into a small flinch that made the wolf's snout draw up.

"No." Marc poured more water. When the wolf stuck his snout under the small stream and began licking, Marc kept pouring but stayed ready to react if the animal attacked.

The wolf finished all the water, not noticing the taste of the man's skin at first. As the horrible burning in his throat subsided, the wolf became aware of the scent. It was thick with barn odors and smoke, making the wolf shy away.

Marc capped the canteen and switched to a dry location. He'd spent so many days in the field like this that it didn't seem odd at all. On the other hand, acting civilized and blending back into society was too stressful.

The wolf watched Marc, no longer whining, but longing to feel the forest under his paws, the scent of his pack mates around him in sleep. He'd gotten used to those things since being taken into the group. He'd only been a pup then, but the beta had lost hers and in her grief, hadn't protested when he'd snuck in to suckle. The pack had accepted him once he was covered in her scent, and he'd never left.

His first pack, where there had been siblings and a true, loving mother, hadn't survived a fire. He'd been on his own since before he could hunt, but his new pack had taught him. He'd been fiercely defended as a pup. When his beta mother

had killed the alpha female of their pack over a new litter and taken her place, Dog had also moved up in rank. Life had been good until their alpha had chosen to hunt prey on the human ranch again.

The people in matching fur had shown up soon after and the running had begun. His pack had all been captured, some of them killed, and Dog had been caged in a human building for so long that he'd almost gotten used to the smell of people. He hadn't been happy, though. He'd escaped before the latest fire that had shoved him back into their path. Now, he was stuck in an unfamiliar area with a man who could hurt him. The wolf sank down on his haunches, whining.

Marc groaned. "Not that again, huh?" He patted the straw next to him. "Come on over and I'll rub your belly or something."

The wolf didn't budge.

Marc sighed as a fresh whine sounded. He wanted to let the wolf go free even more now than he already had. "I'm not a bad guy. Don't attack me, I won't hurt you. You'll be fed and have..." Marc stopped, aware that the words were for himself. There was no way the animal understood.

Not sure if anything but time would help, Marc decided to scan the literature JD had given him. He quickly read the details on types, food, and mating habits, becoming interested in the hierarchy. He hadn't known that betas sometimes had pups with the alpha male, against the alpha female's wishes. He wasn't surprised when the pamphlet stated that

the jealous alpha female was a danger to any resulting pups. He glanced over at the wolf. “Was that what happened to you?”

Dog yawned and went back to chew-cleaning his thick fur in front of the window.

Lips curling at his own silliness, Marc read the rest of the information, learning basic details to care for the animal. Most of it he could do, but ranging from ten to one thousand miles was out of his control. He didn’t own property and he wasn’t leaving the service for a wolf.

The wolf padded to the ladder, whining again as he tried to judge the drop. He chose not to leap, going back to the window instead.

When he sank down on his haunches and howled, Marc left him alone. The wolf’s old life was over. Even animals deserved a mourning period.

Scene 5

Marc couldn’t stay awake as evening came.

He’d tried to sleep while his team was around, but their presence had kept him in that mission state where he could only doze. It had felt too much like combat to relax. Relaxing got men killed.

Marc’s lids drooped, shadowy barn going dark for a few seconds. He jerked awake, pinning the wolf’s location. He didn’t know if the animal

would attack again while he slept, but it was foolish to assume otherwise.

The chill in the night air eventually forced Marc into a ball for warmth conservation. The heat from his own body, combined with the solace of his breath, lulled him into a light slumber against his will. When nothing bad happened, deeper sleep came swiftly.

Marc dreamed of a warm body against his that was providing protection that was as angry as it was comforting. Confused, Marc snapped awake to discover golden eyes inches from his. The wolf had gotten a lot closer than he'd anticipated.

Fighting the instant urge to get defensive, Marc yawned and very slowly brought his hand up to wipe at his face. He sometimes tossed and stressed all night. If movement was a trigger, the wolf would have attacked him already. Still, Marc stayed ready to snap the animal's thick neck. The moves were almost routine to him.

Marc blinked as hot breath panted in his face, curdling his stomach. The wolf sniffed his head, his chin...the fur on its tail bushed out.

Marc glowered, patience low. "Don't make me kill you."

The wild animal stared in hatred and frustration.

"I can't take you home. You'll be shot."

The wolf didn't understand.

Tiring of the staring contest, Marc bared his teeth. “Down!”

Surprising the human, the wolf whimpered and very reluctantly did as he’d been ordered. Reclaiming his previous position along Marc’s leg, the wolf began to pant and whine in alternate rhythms.

Marc groaned, closing his lids. “We’re gonna have to find some common ground, mutt.”

The whine changed to a low growl of warning that made Marc snicker. It was followed by a long yawn.

“Let’s get a couple more hours, *Dog*. I’ll need it later when we fix your manners.”

As Marc drifted off, he felt the wolf’s nose against his hand. Soft fur brushed his fingers and then heavy heat dropped onto his knee.

Comforted, Marc let sleep come without fighting. He was safe.

Scene 6

“You still up there?”

Marc snapped awake to discover dawn had come. He swept the barn loft and found the wolf in the open window, growling lowly.

“We’re fine.”

“You need anything?”

She sounded happy that he wasn’t coming down yet. Marc was relieved.

“Nope.” He wasn’t ready to deal with her yet. He was storing details, though. He’d only seen Julia leave the house a couple of times over the last day. Once, she’d gone behind the house and spent time working on the mostly dead rose bushes that had once enveloped the entire home with the sweet scent of flowers. The rest of the time, he hadn’t even seen her through the windows. In the evening, there was only a single light on in her bedroom. She’d changed so drastically it was as if she wasn’t the same person.

Still recovering, Marc slept, not worrying about the wolf. If the animal took a bite of him, he would pay it back in kind. Eventually, Dog would adjust to a new life. Man and beast had been doing it for centuries.

The wolf waited until the human was snoring again before carefully trotting over to sniff. The wolf was tired and still thirsty. Reluctantly, he sank down a few feet away from his new alpha and whined low in his throat until sleep came.

Marc drifted in and out of consciousness as the morning passed, uncomfortable, but not so much that he couldn’t rest. Between sweeps of the loft, Marc’s dreams became the ghost of his past. In those foggy clips of heaven and hell, he was able to find his heart. This was the only place he had one now.

As the day slowly crawled by, the wolf gradually got closer again. He could smell the

water in the man's canteen. He also caught the scent of his home on the man's paws—along with blood, smoke, and fluids from the moving box they'd come here in.

“No...”

The wolf flinched, but quickly realized the man wasn't awake. He edged closer, licking at the hand he'd been watered from.

Marc slowly moved his fingers against the wolf's jaw, ready to jerk out of the way of snapping teeth.

Very thirsty, the wolf allowed it.

Marc was surprised. The wolf had the advantage right now. He'd expected to have to fight the animal a few more times.

The wolf retreated from Marc's fingers, whining again, but when Marc's hand inched toward the canteen, the wolf dropped to his haunches to wait, tongue lolling out eagerly.

Marc poured water into his hand again.

The wolf rushed forward to lick it dry.

Marc kept doing it until the canteen was empty. He wasn't staying up here much longer. The wolf would have to be brought down, one way or another.

The wolf lingered to lick the last drops from the canteen, feeling better. Still angry about his captivity however, the wolf showed gratitude by arching his leg.

“Ah, man!” Marc jumped out of the way, but not before his boot and lower pant leg had been hosed. “Real nice, Dog! Real nice.”

As if he understood the sarcasm, the wolf’s tongue lolled out again like a puppy who’d found something amusing.

Marc shook his boot and his head. “I can see how our relationship is gonna go.”

The wolf lay down in Marc’s warm spot, whining.

“Oh, hell no.” Marc was done. He quickly climbed down to go get a shower. The smell of the wolf was as intolerable as his howling.

The wolf came to the edge as the man disappeared, still whining. He considered leaping again, but in the end, he returned to the warm spot and curled up for another nap. *Training a human is hard.*

Scene 7

Marc heard the bathroom door open. He rinsed his hair in a hurry, ears straining for more noises.

“It’s just me.” Julia slid the shower curtain back and stepped into the tub with him.

Marc froze at the naked body against his. “We shouldn’t do this.”

Julia slid her arms around his waist and let her hands roam. “Okay.”

Marc shut his eyes, body hardening, twitching. “We need to talk about the lies you told me.”

“Okay.” Julia kissed his wet shoulder.

“Mmm... Later, okay?”

Julia nodded against him, hands still roaming.

Marc turned around so he could kiss her, mind already pretending it was someone else.

Julia didn't care. She also didn't care that they were being watched. *I want this!* She held Marc's naked, wet body close and let him do whatever he wanted.

Scene 8

Marc finished in the shower after Julia left and went straight back out to the barn.

If the jeep was parked next to the ladder, the wolf could jump down on his own. While the animal ate and drank his fill, Marc planned to come back to the house and finish recovering in a real bed.

As he entered the barn office, Marc got a cold chill. It reminded him that he believed at least some of Julia's wild tale. He latched the office door and slid into the main barn with a hand on his holster.

Marc spotted the wolf at the edge of the loft, looking like he was considering trying the long jump.

“Don't do that!” Marc hurried to the jeep.

Marc carefully drove the vehicle to where he wanted it and killed the engine. As he slid the keys

into his pocket and stepped out, Marc heard footsteps. He spun around.

Thud!

The rifle butt knocked Marc out. He dropped heavily to the ground as his assailant chuckled cruelly.

“Hiya, *buddy!*”

The wolf watched from the loft as two men dragged his alpha from the barn, not shutting the main doors. Noticing the jeep was closer, the wolf leapt into the driver’s seat gratefully. It felt wonderful to be off the ledge.

Dog nosed through the cooler again, finding nothing, then padded to the pile of crunchy food still on the floor. Once he ate his fill, the wolf began searching for water.

His nose led him from the barn and toward the thick woods bordering the ranch. He could almost feel the cool creek water rushing over his paws.

Dog vanished into the trees as Marc was shoved into a truck and driven north.

Chapter Six



1

Voices brought Marc to alertness; pain shot through his skull and arms. *What happened?* He listened for clues as he fought to wake all the way.

“This won’t go down as easy as you think. I know him, man. He’s dangerous.”

“So are we.”

“Yeah. *We* should kill him.”

“Just make sure his ropes are tight!”

“This is going to go badly. I want to be sent out before Eibar gets here.”

“Fine!” The truck bounced harshly under angry hands.

Marc listened to the conversation through the thick fog of a concussion. As his stomach roiled,

he twisted in time to avoid the mess. The stocky little guy sitting next to him wasn't as lucky.

“Gross!”

“You son of a...” *Thud!*

Marc slumped over at the first retaliatory hit, unable to fight back yet.

“I said don't kill him! He's worth a lot of money.”

Marc stayed down on the seat, trying to keep from puking again. When he recovered, the men in this truck were going to find out what a mistake they'd made.

“How long to the meeting place?”

Marc vaguely recognized the voices, but his injury prevented him from placing them with names.

“Twenty minutes, but our buyer won't be there until later. Chad wants our golden goose secured and waiting.”

Chad?! Marc's stomach lurched again. It all makes sense now. He sprayed across the floorboard.

“Damn! Pull over!”

“No. Deal with it until we get there. The boss said no stops.”

It was a miserable ride for Marc, who now knew what the wolf had felt like while in the crate. He tried to stay still and get control of his guts, but the truck skidding and sliding over the rugged ranch road made it difficult.

“Is he still alive?”

“For now.”

The trip felt much longer than it was. Every bounce of the truck was painful and nauseating. As they arrived, Marc once again vomited.

They aren't using this truck for a while, he thought groggily.

“Pull him out!”

Marc was in no condition to resist as he was dragged from the backseat. Knees thumping against the ground, Marc groaned at the fresh waves of nausea. Vomit flew again.

“Yuck!”

Marc hit the ground hard as his escorts let go to avoid the mess. He continued to empty his stomach, now too dazed to make out the conversation going on around him. All he could tell was that there were multiple people. Their words blended as his head pounded and his eyes throbbed.

“Wipe him off.” A familiar voice chuckled. “He never could hold his guts.”

Marc was hauled up and toward into a small cabin surrounded by tall, blurry trees. He thought it was on the rear of Julia's property, but he couldn't be sure yet.

The cabin was filthy. Layered in dirt and garbage, Marc assumed this was where Chad had been hiding when strangers came to the ranch. Inside the cabin were six big men who stood up menacingly as Marc was shoved toward a chair. He recognized two of them with faint anger.

A small kitchenette with a big knife block beckoned from across the warm room, but Marc ignored it. He would never make it through all of the men before he was shot or knocked out again.

Unresisting, Marc's wrists were secured behind his back and then to a chair. The odor of unwashed bodies coming from this cabin was enough to send his guts back into convulsions. Marc fought to stop it. Blowing all his strength out in chunks wouldn't help.

"Get the fire restarted. The smoke is our signal that he's here."

"I just put it out. It's hot in here!"

"Tough shit. We've got plans to carry out."

"Is the buyer close?"

"He will be soon. Right now, we'll have a Q&A with our old teammate."

More cruel jeers flowed. It made Marc try harder to recover.

"Did you search him?"

"I've got his gun. We put the rest of his effects in a duffle bag to dispose of later."

"I'll take that gun. Always wanted his 1911."

"Hey, what about that wolf he brought? Should I tell the boys to kill it?"

"Why bother? In a couple weeks, the ranch will be sold, and we'll return south. Let it go. He had no right to capture it anyway."

"I rescued it."

Everyone swung to find Marc staring steadily at his former best friend. Tall, dark, and handsome,

Chad had gotten the team into several scrapes with his superior attitude and good looks. However, the base lizards hadn't ever given him the time of day. "Remember that shepherd pup we fed the night Kenn blew up the still?"

Chad leered widely. He was delighted that Marc knew who was behind his discomfort. "Yep. Did you know it died in the fire?"

"I was told you killed it."

"I tossed it in. The fire did the killing." Chad knelt down in front of his captive. "Marcus Brady, badass Marine. I've waited a long time for this moment."

Stalling, Marc acted as if he was trying to focus through his swollen face. "Huh?"

"Pay attention!" Chad slammed the butt of his knife against Marc's knee.

Expecting something more painful, Marc only grunted. He needed more time to get himself under control. There were still three sneering shadows in front of him instead of one.

"Tough bastard, but Eibar's got plans for you." Chad dug the tip of the knife into Marc's jeans and sliced up the thigh. "He wants you castrated first. No chances of a repeat with the wife while you're his *guest*."

Racked with ugly chills, Marc felt the grayness coming. Too many hits had rattled his brain. There was only one thing he was capable of right now.

The knife sliced into his thigh as Chad ripped through another jean swatch. No longer being

cautious, the mercenary reached forward to rip away that side of the pants.

Almost grinning through the disgust, Marc puked in his face.

The resulting chaos of Chad shouting and slinging, men groaning and yelling, and outside guards coming in gave Marc the rest of the time that he needed to form a crude, quick plan. He sucked in deep breaths to help finish clearing his mind. He would definitely need some medical care when this was over.

“Move him to the floor! Get his clothes!” Chad stripped off his shirt.

Three of Chad’s men reluctantly advanced through the mess toward Marc.

Marc let the anger come now, needing it to fuel his body. “How’s the new life, *boys?*”

Two of the men winced. Leon and Jim had both been discharged early, for reasons unknown. The squad had only been told they were moonlighting in ways they shouldn’t have been. “Chad came to you, right? And you sucked up his lies like dogs.”

Neither of them responded.

Marc’s face morphed into the furious team leader they both remembered so well. “I couldn’t be more ashamed of you.”

Marc’s disappointment was a curse to the two men who refused to answer or even meet his eyes.

Marc knew it wouldn’t matter, though. When he ran, they would still try to kill him.

After the chair ropes were loosened, Marc was hauled up by the third, unknown man. He carefully staggered against his captor, hands reaching...

Leon and Jim stayed back, both ashamed of their choices.

Chad saw the trick. "Grab him!"

Marc used his bound hands to grab the gun from an unprotected holster, and then slammed his weight into the surprised man, knocking him into Jim and Leon. The trio tangled and fell, as Marc had counted on. Neither of those former Marines had been gifted with grace or quick reactions.

"Shoot him!" Chad's slippery fingers fumbled for the Colt in his waistband. "Watch the door!"

Marc ran for the window, leaping as hard as he could against the glass.

"No!"

Marc broke through the window easily, but he hit the ground hard and lost his grip on the gun. It slid across the dirt.

Sucking in air through the pain, Marc hurriedly brought his bound hands under his feet to have them in front. The bleeding Marine then grabbed the fallen weapon and stumbled into the woods behind the cabin.

"Get him!"

"Around the back!"

Chad and his men also hurried, but Marc was already out of sight by the time they cleared the side of the old caretaker home.

"Find him! Get everyone out here!"

Marc kept running, stolen M9 ready. He worked the ropes around his wrists as he went.

Heavy boots crunched after him, guns firing. It reminded Marc of his trek through the fire. The flames and the wolf were all that was missing from the moment.

Marc staggered through the damp foliage, stumbling against the trees as he ran. Without any of his gear or weapons, he would once again have to rely on training and wits.

Shoulda kept the boys with me, Marc thought, hitting the deck as boots came toward him. It wouldn't be Chad, who was light on his feet, but that POS would be right behind, waiting to shoot whatever his goons flushed out.

Marc stayed down as the weeds and grass parted. Right as he felt his prone body being discovered, Marc rolled and flipped out a hard leg against the man's ankle.

The merc fell with a loud, surprised shout that would draw attention. Marc lunged forward, using the ropes around his hand to strangle the man.

Marc only eased up when the body slumped. He hadn't used a sleeper hold. This was war.

Multiple voices in several languages echoed. Marc followed the faint rumble of water as he fled. He again flashed to the fire flight as he strode deep into the liquid and ducked under the rushing coldness in relief. He would stay here as long as he could, as he had before, but this time, he wasn't leaving until *all* of them were dead.

Scene 2

Dog found the creek quickly and stayed for a while, drinking and soothing the pads of his feet. They were still sore. So was his side, where the human alpha had crushed him against the moving box.

Around the creek, small animals ducked out of sight, waiting for him to be gone. The breeze was wonderful, but the wolf reluctantly wondered if this was going to be his new home. He had followed the creek north, scenting the animals and people who'd come through here. He wasn't in a hurry to meet any of them. Dog stuck to the cover of bushes and weeds as he began to explore.

The wolf found the property line a short time later. He pawed at the tall wall, hoping he could dig out. He quickly discovered the rock foundation and abandoned the effort. The cages he'd been in before were often made of the same material. He'd once tried to chew through those manmade rocks and broken part of a tooth that still sometimes hurt when he snapped the neck of a rabbit.

Annoyed with this latest prison, the wolf began tracking along the wall.

Dog caught the scent of another canine and followed it. Maybe he could get some information. Where he'd come from, there were smells of data everywhere, but this land seemed devoid of alphas

or betas. This was the first sign of another animal like himself.

Dog followed the trail to a large, dead tree with a wide den dug out below it. He assumed the owner of the odor was inside. He whined lowly, once, to announce his presence.

Get lost!

Dog's head tilted as he tried to peer under the thick stump. He gave another short whine. *Come out.*

No! I'm very busy. Eating my enemies.

Dog shoved his head into the dark hole. He spotted small piles of brittle bones that had been chewed down as far as weak teeth would allow, but there was no time for more as a tiny dog with matted brown fur ran up and bit him on the nose. *Out, you brute! Out!*

Dog withdrew, snout stinging. *How do I get out of here?*

Out?! Ha! There is no out! the small canine yelped. *Deeper! Must go deeper to keep out the big brute! Bad neighbor! Bad neighbor!*

The tiny canine continued to shout and complain, but didn't come out from under the tree.

Dog moved away without gaining any information. Small dogs bit because they were scared. Small wolves often did the same.

Dog pawed at his stinging nose, and then continued his exploration. There had to be a way out.

Dog found several other scents he was tempted to track, but the reaction of the small canine implied the animals here weren't any friendlier than the humans. Discouraged a bit, the wolf kept going until he found the next wall preventing his escape. He didn't waste sore paws trying to dig under it. Instead, he decided to see if he could jump it.

Dog backed up a good distance, judging...

His leap was perfectly timed and high, but it still left him three feet short. He slapped against the warping wood and slid awkwardly down it to land in an ungainly heap on the ground.

Ha! Do it again! a voice brayed from the bushes. *Please do it again! So funny.*

Dog whirled around to find a large animal with antlers laughing at him. The wolf snorted, backing up for another attempt.

The female caribou, which had no trouble clearing the ten-foot fence, waited for the show to go on.

Dog ran faster this time, leaping harder, but he didn't make it as far as the first attempt. As he slid down the wall, scraping fur off, the mocking sounds of amusement rang out again.

Funny! The caribou was braying so hard spittle flew from her huge lips.

Dog's snout drew up in embarrassment and anger, but he didn't think he wanted to challenge the animal just for laughing at his failure. The wolf chose to try once more.

Don't do it! another voice chirped from the top of the wall. *You'll be sorry!*

Dog glanced up at the cackling goose that was hopping to a lower place on the warped fence. *Be quiet!*

The caribou and the goose obeyed, eager for the entertainment.

Knowing he shouldn't, Dog ran toward the fence.

“Look at him falling!” The caribou pawed the ground in uncontrollable fits of laughter, while the goose shouted his amusement in shrill gasps that echoed like a bullet.

Dog picked himself up, getting angry. *How about some help!*

Both animals continued to mock him.

Now furiously embarrassed, Dog backed up again.

Here he goes! the goose cackled from its lower perch. *Wait for it...*

Dog lunged up the wall and grabbed the goose by its foot. As he slid down the fence, goose pecking him and screaming, Dog opened his jaws and snapped down on the annoying bird's neck.

The caribou took off running, certain she was next.

Dog dropped the dead bird, not liking the smell. He'd eaten enough in the barn to let this meal go by.

Dog started to head for the wall again, but stopped. He'd met a fellow canine that could use a good meal, hadn't he?

It only took the wolf a few minutes of running to get back to the large tree den. He heard the small dog still digging below.

The wolf dropped the goose and nosed it into the hole, whining at the fresh, shrill yapping.

Not another intruder! I will bite you! I will claw out your... Food! We have food! A fine goose!

Dog quickly got away from the happy little mutt. He didn't know why he was helping it, but the wolf didn't waste energy worrying over his intentions. He'd often hunted for the pack. This was hardly different.

Dog tracked back to the fence, but headed toward the barn once he reached it. He wanted to go home. This land was unfriendly. The woods in this cell didn't feel right. They weren't welcoming. These trees were harsh, and they didn't speak. The bushes were pointed and cruel to run through, unlike the soft plants he'd enjoyed all his life. He had to convince his human alpha to leave this place.

Dog continued to parallel the widening stream as he made his way back toward the barn. He sniffed and marked as he traveled, vaguely aware of gunshots in the distance. He could also hear shouting, but it was moving away...

The wolf stopped, hearing splashing that was unusual to him even for his newness to the area. Dog stared at the water in amazement as his alpha rose out of the water, gasping.

Marc labored on the ropes, popping up to catch air and study his surroundings. He spotted a wolf by the bank, along with shadows of thin trees, and let the water yank him back under. Almost free, the Marine stayed submerged, using his teeth to tug the loosened rope through. This was honestly the only place he felt safe.

Lungs and eyes burning, Marc felt his feet brush the bottom. He pushed off, ready for oxygen. *Too many hits*, he thought. *No stamina*.

As he broke the surface, Marc bumped into a furry body. He recognized his wolf in surprise.

Dog latched onto Marc's shirt, near the shoulder. Snapping closer for a better hold, the wolf's teeth didn't puncture the skin as he began pulling.

Not too shocked to use it to his advantage, Marc finished freeing himself while the wolf dragged him toward the shore. The rope dropped off as his knee scraped the sandy bottom.

"Good boy!" Marc praised, drawing in beautiful, painful air. "Good, Dog."

The wolf let go, but didn't retreat. Marc reacted out of character as well. He plopped down in the shallows near the wolf to wipe at his face.

Being rescued from the water by a wild wolf wasn't a sign Marc was willing to ignore.

Am I sure, though? Marc asked himself. *Maybe it's someone's pet I'm confusing for a wolf.*

Marc snorted wearily, spotting singed fur to prove the wolf was his. "Part two, huh?"

Surprising Marc again, the wolf glared unhappily and sat down on the bank. Those golden eyes asked why he couldn't be shaken.

"Because I'm not a flea. A sucker sometimes, but not a parasite." Marc got up to wash some of the dirt from his hands, confident he'd lost his pursuers for at least an hour. He needed that time to get food and water into his abused body so he would have the energy to handle what was coming. These woods would be flooded with trucks and lights when the sun faded. Hopefully, they wouldn't use dogs. That noise might alert neighbors if it went on too long.

Marc scanned the landscape, narrowing in on the frame of a tall building in the distance to the north. The sun was going down fast and he needed a place to hole up. Unfortunately, Chad would expect him to go to high ground. If he followed his training now, he was dead.

Marc traveled in the opposite direction of what he assumed was a water tower, staying under the cover of the tall aspen and lodgepole pine trees. Chad might already have a sniper up there doing recon for human movement. With that thought in mind, Marc dropped to his hands and knees and

pawed at the ground. Then he ambled into the denser woods to vanish.

Marc regained his feet, hiding from the tower. He would have to be careful of the assumed sniper as he headed to the ranch.

Marc stopped. Chad would also plan for that. He couldn't go back to the main house. Marc realized he was alone and injured in the middle of an isolated forest. They would squeeze inward and have him covered from all sides. They were likely already doing that.

Marc felt the cold glaze of battle fall over his skin, hatred boiling his guts again. It was like before, except he'd learned from those mistakes. If Chad knew him well, he might account for that too, but Marc was certain his old friend didn't. Following through on loose ends wasn't something the former grunt was capable of. In fact, it was part of what the team had all assumed got Chad killed.

Marc slowly, quietly, explored the small thicket he was in, examining the natural supplies. There were many ways to handle his problems, but the anger inside would only let him pick one. When it was over, Chad would really be dead, and Julia would be dead to him. Innocent or not, she hadn't found the courage to do the right thing. She'd betrayed him for the first and last time. He had no tolerance for that, something Kenn was also going to find out when this was all over. *He let me be trimmed. I know he did. I can't remove him from the team, but I can take a pound of flesh for*

that and I will. I'm going to work him until he quits or finally understands I'm no one to screw with.

Behind Marc, the wolf got to his feet and followed.

Chapter Seven



Scene 1

The wolf followed his new alpha, happy to be on the move. He watched the man examine plants, snapping some off to shove into his fur. He also drank from some of them, making the wolf pant until they came back to the creek. Dog drank his fill, but the man did not. The man also dug in the ground for a long time, getting the wolf's interest. Digging was fun!

Circling around to make sure that he'd been noticed by his alpha, when it drew no reaction, the wolf edged closer to the dirt the man was running his big paws through. The wolf sniffed the ground, smelling carrots and bugs, and then started to dig. He got lost for a moment, worries forgotten as the feel of a kind, loving earth bunched up between his toes.

Marc's chuckle snapped the wolf into a flight position, ears low.

“Easy, boy.” Marc resumed his actions. He observed from the corner of his eye, delighted when the animal also went back to digging. He had no idea if the wolf was playing or copying, but it was entertaining to observe.

Marc piled the wild carrots together, wiping one off to munch on as he scouted for another patch of white flowers. There were two very common types, but they did extremely different things. One was a natural food source. The other caused death.

Marc found a splattered, purple and green stem holding up a wide bunch of white flowers, and noted the location. That was hemlock. The purple stems were a clear warning from nature. The Queen Anne’s lace stems were solid green and safe, though the leaves could cause a toxic rash. The carrot tubers from the lace were sweet.

Marc found a rock with a sharp edge and then chose a tall aspen tree. On the way up the thick, white trunk, Marc found a place where it had been damaged. He happily used his rock knife to carve out thin strips of the inner bark.

When he had a handful, he popped a piece into his mouth to chew on as he climbed higher in the tree to get ready. Many barks were sweet, but the bitterness of this one made him grimace. He didn’t spit it out, however. If he’d had time to wait for the sap to run, he could have broken off branches and caught the sweet, watery substance that was also

full of nutrients. As it was, the bark still served an important purpose as a mild painkiller.

Marc snapped off two small, dying branches as he climbed, also taking handfuls of the thick vines that were wound around all the trees here. The front of his shirt now bulging, Marc settled in the high fork and spent a minute getting his breath back. When he felt like he could, he would prepare the vines. When he finished those, he would carve for a little while and then maybe snooze. He didn't expect much to happen until nightfall. Chad was still busy organizing the rest of the mercs and alerting the house and tower men to the situation. There were only two ways off this ranch—the main entrance or going over the fence. Marc had considered the latter, but pride wouldn't let him keep running. At dusk, things would get interesting.

Busy, Marc forgot about the wolf below. The first whine was the only warning Marc received and then the air rang with sad howls of loneliness and confusion.

“Damn.” Marc had to make the choice quickly. Any of the mercenaries would remember he'd come in with a wolf and follow the noise. Marc stuffed his stash into the impression in the fork of the tall tree and began to climb down. As soon as the wolf saw him, it retreated and stopped howling.

Marc dropped to the earth unsteadily, off balance from the beatings. He needed to be able to end this quickly.

Marc knelt near the patch of purple stems as heavy boots crunched through the spare foliage. The wolf stayed a few feet behind, fur bristling.

Marc had time to wonder what the animal might do and then two of Chad's thugs burst into the area and he no longer had to guess.

The wolf lunged forward and clamped down on the wrist of the man with the scars across his cheek. Screams and crunching followed, then a gunshot. Marc waited for more, but there was silence.

He slowly stood up to discover the wolf sitting near two bodies. Leon's throat had been torn out. Jim had a bullet hole in his cheek. The wolf didn't appear to have a scratch from the battle.

"Nice, Dog!"

The wolf bared its teeth.

Marc laughed harder, not intimidated, but very impressed. He assumed it had been an accident, but it was still good. "You need a promotion."

Marc listened for footsteps, but didn't hear any. He hoped there wasn't a patrol around. He would have to account for the wolf. "You do your part and I'll do mine, okay?"

In response, the wolf sat down and started licking his balls.

"That is not the answer I wanted."

Scene 2

"Do you see anything?"

“No. Stop asking!”

“Sorry.”

“Well, it’s distracting. You can’t listen if you’re talking.”

“Okay.”

“Try harder.”

“I will.”

Marc listened to the rookies go by from his hiding place in the weeds, mentally snickering. Chad still didn’t know how to pick a team.

In the dusky distance, other groups of men were also searching. It was hard for Marc to estimate how many there were, but the numbers would have to be limited or the feds would already be onto this place. He assumed he was dealing with a dozen threats.

In the patch of daisies next to Marc, the wolf was also waiting. Golden eyes gleaming in the occasional beam of moonlight to flash their way, the wolf was a menacing figure. Marc still wasn’t certain if he might need to guard against it. Wild animals were unpredictable and this one was out of its element. However, he now had two guns, thanks to the wolf’s actions. He hadn’t bothered to take anything else. The men hadn’t been dressed or outfitted for hunting in this wilderness. They had nothing he could use.

Marc let the small group of men get almost out of sight. Carefully and quietly, Marc used the evening shadows for cover as he trailed them. He didn’t check to see if the wolf followed.

Marc listened to trucks in the distance, aware of his own weary body and the limits of his looted gear. He didn't like the idea of shooting people in the back. Normally, he might have engaged them to make it more of a fair fight, but in this situation, he had little choice. In range now, Marc raised the M9 and began pulling the trigger.

As the first body fell, it occurred to Marc that he hadn't found a single AK. The headgear had indeed been a cover in case they were caught. These hunters were former military, though not all of them were American. Chad had been busy.

As soon as shots began to echo, the wolf darted into the thicker trees. He wanted to keep going, but the need to stay with Marc was overwhelming. Dog paced a small circle, waiting for it to be over.

When silence came again, he rejoined the man, watching the thunder sticks slide into Marc's fur for storage. Dog didn't like any of these men, but if Marc died, the wolf knew he would never get home. He would have to stay through the fight.

The weary Marine slowly made the trip up to retrieve what he needed from the tree fork, wincing when the wolf immediately resumed whining. It only stopped when Marc reached the ground.

Marc leaned against the trunk while he got to work, fighting the dizziness. The juices from the bark were easing his stomach cramps, but the thirst was annoying. He had roughly one full day left to get a good drink or he would become too

disoriented to defend himself. Chad would be guarding the food and water sources, and he would be watching for a campfire. He would also scare off any potential game tonight with the trucks and lights that were meant to flush Marc into the center of their net. Marc thought it would succeed on most people, even military men. Except, once again, Chad had underestimated his target. Marc had been on this ranch before and he preferred to work alone.

The wolf whined again.

Marc frowned. *Not exactly alone.*

Marc worked faster. The whining would draw someone soon. He needed a little rope to go with the weapons he'd taken.

Marc snickered. The wolf had killed two men. "Maybe I'll draft you."

Sudden silence got Marc's attention. *Danger!*

Marc ducked, following that voice in his head. The wolf sailed over top of him an instant later, growling viciously.

Marc dropped on top of the shouting man, trying to get his arm around a throat. He couldn't risk a shot.

As if also feeling the need to end it, the wolf lunged forward and sank his teeth deep into the man's jaw, crunching harshly.

With no time to be shocked, Marc rose up as the next footsteps came. He lunged, catching the mercenary by surprise. This time he was able to

get an arm in the right place to break the man's neck.

Marc let the body fall and grabbed at the gun. Before he could reach it, another thug yanked him around by the arm. Marc had no choice but to use the gun as they struggled.

The shot echoed loudly.

Marc ran into the deeper shadows as the wolf followed.

In the distance, shouting men headed their way. Random gunshots echoed, shots that Marc would have beaten a teammate for. Whoever was firing at his own men that way shouldn't have access to weapons.

Marc caught the glare of firelight and edged forward. Twice he had to duck behind the cover of a thickly shadowed tree to avoid those who were patrolling, but he and the wolf weren't spotted. These enemies were unobservant, another reason Marc hadn't agreed to run drugs and guns with Chad when he'd been invited. None of the hired hands were reliable. Any operation with them would always end badly.

Finally feeling a chill through his ripped pants, Marc slipped into the firelight of the empty camp, listening to the whines of the wolf that stayed in the shadows. The campsite was empty as the men hunted for him and came back here between searches.

He quickly dropped a handful of crushed leaves and stems into the boiling coffee tin resting

over the fire, hoping the men didn't notice the taste. He wasn't sure of the difference since he'd never drank hemlock tea.

Hurrying, Marc slid back into the cover of the trees and knelt down. He wasn't surprised when the wolf settled nearby, observing intently. Marc pushed away the guilt. He wasn't feeling strong, and he couldn't fight them hand-to-hand. He'd chosen poison instead. As the favorite weapon of a woman, Marc expected it to be very successful. The mercenaries had been told he would try to kill them with his hands or a gun. His brain wouldn't have been mentioned.

Marc felt saliva pool in his mouth as the annoyed gunmen reentered their camp amid grumbles about a forsaken wilderness that was worse than the last one. All three of the men were carrying canteens. He had relied on at least one of them still having water. Otherwise, he had just poisoned what he could have stolen and drank once it cooled. He'd taken a risk.

"Never seen a place so unfriendly." One of the men leaned down to poke the fire with a long stick.

You have no idea how unfriendly it can be, Marc thought. *But you're about to learn.*

"Colder, too," another merc agreed. "Coffee?"

"Hell, yes."

"Yeah."

The three men retrieved their cups, happy to discover the water had come to a boil while they were gone. One of them used his shirt edge to pick

up the pot that had clearly been through many nights like this. He limped tiredly over to the others, pouring.

The three men stirred or swished the murky liquid around with their fingers. One of them flicked something from his finger, muttering about leaves falling into the coffee.

Marc waited in patient stillness. He didn't know how long hemlock would take to work. It might be hours.

More noisy slurps came, and then groans interrupted the peaceful crackle of the fire.

“Hey, I don't feel right...”

“My chest hurts.”

The second merc forced out a choked wheeze. “Me too.”

“You okay?”

Marc heard one body drop to the hard ground, then another. The third man was calling the names of his partners in a panic, but Marc was sure the surviving mercenary would grab his radio at any moment.

Not completely joking, Marc motioned toward the wolf. “Attack!”

To his astonishment, the wolf immediately ran into the firelight and lunged.

He understood me! Marc gaped. By the time he recovered, the third man had stopped screaming or trying to reach his gun. He was slowly suffocating from the harsh teeth squeezing through his Adam's apple when Marc stood up.

The wolf retreated, muzzle dripping.

“Good boy. Good boy, Dog.”

The wolf’s snout relaxed as he stared at Marc, tail slowly returning to normal size. He sat down.

Marc’s mind spun faster than his stomach while he looted the bodies. Any minute now, reinforcements would arrive. His plans had included this, but he hadn’t thought he would feel so weak. He had hoped to go through all of Chad’s camps overnight, leaving a ranch of dead mercs for his traitorous friend to discover come dawn, but that was beyond his limit. He would have to make a stand, and what better place than right here? It would save him time and energy, but first, he had to handle the small wave of men who had been close enough to hear the loudmouth’s panic over his fallen friends. He could hear their boots over the radio.

“Location point four, check in!”

Marc guzzled down the first canteen, sighing in relief at the drink. His throat was like sandpaper from the smoke and then throwing up. He slid the other two water carriers around his neck as the radio sounded again.

“Come in, checkpoint four!”

Marc flipped the radio off as steps came from two directions. He would be able to listen to them now if he didn’t die here.

Marc stepped into the deeper shadows as he took out the remaining gun that still held ammunition. Maybe he would call Chad and taunt

him into showing his ugly face. It was still hard to believe Chad had faked his death to join Eibar's payroll. He'd know his best friend was a little shady, but he'd never suspected the extent.

The wolf followed, going close to where Marc pointed. The animal didn't lie down, but he did sit, encouraging Marc to include him in this next phase of survival. When he attacked, he would order the wolf to do the same and hopefully have the element of surprise to aid him in victory. The wolf was yet another dangerous tool he would wield against his enemies.

Use whatever you have, Marc reminded himself, feeling a bit sarcastic. His first team leader had given him that advice and it had held true, time after time. The thing was, once he'd started viewing his surroundings for survival, he'd been unable to stop. Any area he regularly spent time in was now researched beforehand when he could manage it. Always being able to live off the land had become very important, but he'd never thought to use the wildlife for anything other than food or clothes.

Marc lifted the second gun, the one he'd taken from Dog's kill. After using the M9's ammo in the previous fights, he only had the five shots left in the Berretta. The fresh loot he'd just claimed would help, but he had to survive the coming attack to count those bullets.

Marc tensed as the noise stopped, ready to order the wolf to attack as he did the same...

Two shadows plunged into the firelight.

One was soft and curved.

The other was hard and angry, but Marc
couldn't fire.

Julia was in the way.

Chapter Eight



1

“Come on out, Brady. It’s over.”

There was no response.

Chad put his gun against Julia’s head. “Eibar wants her, but I’ll blow these pretty brains all over the night if you don’t come out right now!”

Marc hadn’t seen this coming. He studied the stiff forms intently, but he didn’t find any signs Julia was a willing hostage. Her tears were currently rolling over Chad’s big arm.

Marc reluctantly lowered the gun, but he didn’t holster it. *Give me a shot*, he begged silently. *Just one*. He already knew there was only one way to be sure of getting the shot, but the Marine wasn’t certain he could do it.

Fighting with himself, Marc grunted. “Hello, *buddy*. Years dead and I see you’re still a boot.”

Ignoring the insult, Chad scanned the bodies on the ground. “And I see you’ve been your usual self. What a boondoggle. Eibar is gonna charge me double for the dead.”

“That’s what you get for hiring the cheapest labor possible.” Marc didn’t make eye contact with Julia as he moved into the light.

Thickly muscled and wearing the long, tacky leather jacket the team had teased him for copying, Chad was an imposing figure in the firelight. *Imposing and crazy*, Marc thought. He had no doubt Chad would shoot his wife. That certainty provided insight to Chad’s fatal flaw. He thought people who followed the rules were incapable of breaking them or changing their behavior. He expected a full surrender.

“Put the gun down.” Chad circled Julia to keep her body between them as Marc approached.

Curious on several levels, Marc stared at Chad. “Was it because she wanted me when she thought you were gone or because I inherited the team? What brought you out from under Eibar’s rock?”

Chad flushed at the direct hit. “That’s my team! They’d have come with me if not for you. They’d be with me right now!”

“Doing security for a cartel?” Marc confirmed incredulously. “You want our team in jobs with drug runners and disgraced gunners?”

“My team!” Chad screamed, causing Julia to wince and curl against him in an effort to avoid his rage.

Marc didn’t respond to either of them. He was just dragging things out, hoping for that clear shot.

Chad made a visible effort to calm himself. “My team, Brady. Long before you, I was there. After you’re gone, they’ll be mine again.”

“As gunners and runners.”

Chad scowled. “That’s a POG view and you know it! Besides, Eibar understands a man isn’t made to serve a clock. He pays everyone well.” Chad glanced at the mess again. “The hired help aren’t nearly as good as a squad of Marines, though. I need my team back, Brady. You have to go away.”

“Got a cover planned for that?” Marc distracted him, subtly inching closer for a better position. He noted Julia’s hands clenching into fists and knew he wouldn’t like the answer.

“We’re going to tell the authorities you attacked her when she refused your advances. Caught in the act, you killed everyone on the ranch. The bodies created with your gun about an hour ago will match that timeline. A lone survivor will have no trouble convincing the police he saw you dump Julia’s body into the river.”

Furious, Marc lowered the stolen weapon to have the advantage of surprise. “Vet goes nuts from PTSD, huh?”

“Yep.” Chad grinned, flashing the old confidence that had gotten them into trouble many times. “Someone might even name a violence law after you.”

Marc still didn’t look at Julia. A choice had been made, but if he saw her terror, he might not be able to follow through.

“Was it good, Corporal? Did it snap around you like a rubber band?” Chad tugged Julia’s cringing form closer. “Did you fuck Jim and Don’s wives too?”

“Nope. Yours was the only backstabbing whore.”

Julia winced. Her tears fell harder.

“That was the only thing she asked for in exchange. Did you know that? All my sweet little Julie wanted was to sleep with you.” Chad’s grip tightened on the gun and the woman. “I want you both dead, Brady!”

The loud, invasive noise of a helicopter approaching rippled through the tense situation.

“Hear that?” Chad taunted. “That’s Eibar. I can’t wait to hand you over.”

Marc didn’t glance up at the helicopter that was no doubt headed for the small clearing near the cabin. Time slowed as his finger found the perfect place on the trigger.

“Drop your gun.” Chad glanced over Marc’s shoulder. “I will kill her to get you. I’m not bluffing.”

Marc had thought he felt people coming up behind him. Chad's telltale flinch had confirmed that impression. Refusing to have sympathy for the woman who'd set him up for this, Marc pulled the trigger.

Julia screamed as the bullet tore through her arm, trimming Chad's tacky jacket on its way to plunge deep into the tree behind the couple.

Julia dropped to her knees as Chad let go, clasping the injury. She screamed again as blood spilled through her fingers.

"You shot her!" Chad accused in stunned surprise.

"And you." Marc fired again.

The bullet went into Chad's cheek, slightly left of where Marc had aimed. It still got the job done, as a Berretta at close range will do.

Dog leapt, knocking Julia out of the line of fire. She hit the ground, breath going out in a rush.

Dog landed on his feet and leapt again, grabbing the wrist of the man about to shoot Marc while he was down.

Blood squirted. Screams echoed.

"Good wolfie!" Crisp fired a shot into the screaming man's head.

Dog let go and swiveled to determine who to attack next.

"That's all of them. Easy boy." Thumper loved animals. Like Marc, he only hated people.

Chad fell on top of Julia, muffling her screams.

Marc spun around, hoping to use the remaining bullets on Chad's sneaking men, but the butt of yet another rifle slammed into his skull and the world once again became blurry. As darkness swam thickly, Marc heard the angry shouts of his squad and the furious growls of his wolf handling the final threat.

"Save the mutt!" Marc staggered toward Dog's sounds. He tripped over a body and sat down heavily, blood running from his nose and cheek. That had been a hard hit.

Dog gave a soft growl, then went to stand over Marc's bloody, burned body.

"I'll bet it's a bitch." Kenn sneered at the animal. "All the bitches like him."

The team laughed at Kenn's jealousy as they secured the site. They left Marc and Dog alone, content to wait for the boss and medical team.

"Where is he?!"

"Over there!"

Gunfire and shouts flooded the area.

Marc winced at the confusion of noises that refused to sort themselves out. He felt the heat of the wolf against his leg as he fought to remain conscious, but the blood pounding through his temples increased until he dropped to his side, groaning.

"Eibar... at... cabin!" Marc forced out.

"Command has a team on the way." Kenn scanned for wounded.

There were none.

Excellent. They'd snuck up while Brady had Chad and his goons distracted. Taking them out once Marc killed Chad had been easy.

Dog's big head tilted at a new noise, ears cocking.

A hole! I am free! I am free!

Dog snorted in tolerant amusement. The yappy loaner had just found the big gap in the wall caused by a grenade during the fight.

Dog let out a loud howl. *Good luck, small yapper. Good luck.*

The little dog yipped back. *And to you my stinky, mean friend. Happy sniffing!*

The wolf stayed against his alpha as men surrounded them. To Dog's relief, they only looked and talked. He didn't know if these new men were good or bad. They weren't hurting his ticket home.

Marc reached out to the wolf, fingers tangling in his soft, dirty fur. "Down, Dog."

Anxious, the wolf nipped at Marc's fingers and then let out a sad whine. He sank to his belly, whimpering as Marc's hand let go.

Paul frowned. "Well, he's out. What do we do?"

"I think he'd be upset if we shot it." Dagger leered. "Maybe Kenn should try to stop the bleeding."

"No good." Jamie overruled that. "You know his temper. If he gets bit, he *will* shoot it. You do it."

Dagger couldn't refuse after offering Kenn up. He moved forward. "Easy, boy. Easy."

The wolf didn't like Dagger. He bared his teeth, growling lowly as rapid gunfire rang out in the distance.

Dagger quickly retreated. "I think we'll wait."

The other Marines sniggered. Some of them went to help Julia with her wound and to patrol the campsite until reinforcements arrived, but all of them took in the details with respect. Marcus Brady was indeed a badass. There was no longer any resentment about him being their leader, even from Kenn. Marc was clearly qualified for the position.

Scene 2

"I'm thirsty." Marc pried open thick lids as loud cheers and greetings came. Head spinning, he carefully glanced up to find himself surrounded by his team and a few other members of their squad. It appeared to be nearing dawn.

My wolf!

Marc found the big animal lying across his boots, staring back with golden orbs showing relief.

"Hey, Dog." Marc held out a hand, wincing at the soreness.

The wolf was grateful that Marc was awake. He slowly eased up his alpha's leg until his snout touched Marc's fingertips. Then, Dog bit him.

Marc jerked his hand away from the gentle bite, swearing, while the other Marines laughed.

The wolf whined, but didn't move.

"We have a love-hate thing going on." Marc slowly sat up, taking stock of his soreness and the camp that had been reset. There were no bodies in sight. "We're still here?"

"Yeah, about that." Crisp motioned toward the other side of the camp. "EMS would like to check you out. They've been waiting."

Marc groaned, taking in the second, larger camp of medics who all looked cold and impatient. In the corner of that area was a small tent Marc instantly recognized. "Captain Palmer came out? Ah, hell."

"He wasn't happy when we made him wait." Trippy grinned. "He said if you weren't up at sunrise, he would shoot the wolf."

Marc realized Dog hadn't let anyone near him while he was unconscious. "Good boy."

The wolf licked Marc's arm once, then put his huge head back on the alpha's leg where the fur was missing. *I want to go home.*

Marc felt that as if the animal had spoken. "Okay."

He pushed himself onto his hurting feet, not surprised when the wolf stayed on his heels. They were bonded now, even if neither of them wanted it.

Dagger began filling him in. "We lost Al and Rocko. Sniper fire. Evidence says it was the same

as here—an ambush by Eibar and his men, plus a few deserters.”

Marc tried not to limp as he walked to the small medical crew. The three men and women were now watching him and the wolf in surprised curiosity. They were out of place here—too many white coverings in all the green and grey—but Marc was glad to have them. He currently had several injuries causing discomfort in varying degrees. The worst, oddly enough, was his shoulder where he’d landed after breaking through the window. He was fairly certain he had huge bruises and scrapes there.

The wolf remained at his side, flinching or snapping at anyone who tried to touch his fur, but he didn’t attack when they started working on Marc. It was as if he understood Marc needed help.

Not certain how much control he now had over the big animal, Marc motioned toward a canteen of water while they took his blood pressure and temperature. “Can I have that?”

Amira, according to her nametag, handed Marc the canteen with a quick smile as she waited for the thermometer to beep. She recorded the number on a small chart and then held up a capped needle. “We’ll start with this. Once you’re all drugged up, I can do anything I want.”

Instead of laughing at the joke, Marc frowned. Her hot gaze going over his abused skin was giving him the creeps for some reason. *She’s odd.*

Amira tried again, smiling generously. “I’ll be nice if you are.”

Marc shrugged, pushing his filthy sleeve up. “That might be the easiest poke I’ve ever been offered.”

Amira flushed at his crude joke as Marc’s men sniggered. They thought they understood. The medicos always wanted to flirt at the wrong time.

Embarrassed, the brunette jabbed the needle into Marc’s big arm.

Marc chose not to ask for her number despite the sense that the sex might be great. He had dealt with vengeful females, but he’d also had the passive kind. Out of the two, passive was easier to walk away from when he was done. Those aggressive types liked to create bonds that lasted forever.

“Sorry.” Marc held still as the woman leaned in to begin checking his injuries. Amira was dusky, with mocha skin and ebony eyes. Marc was willing to bet she was a crossway breezer as well, but he didn’t intend to verify that.

She didn’t respond, sensing his apology wasn’t an encouragement.

Smart, Marc thought. He motioned to the wolf. “Here. Have a drink.”

The clear liquid flowing onto the ground got Dog’s attention, but he refused to drink from it. Instead, Marc was forced to cup his hand and let the animal slake his thirst that way. Their audience was impressed.

Marc was convinced. He would return the wolf to his home and let him take his chances with the rangers now that Bubba had been taken down a peg. He had no right to keep the animal.

“You need to be in the hospital for a few days. They’ll give you some blood, among other things.” Amira stood up to write down her findings. “Multiple stabs, bullet trims, cuts. Broken finger, badly strained shoulder. Dehydration, a bit of sunstroke. Possible concussion—”

“Will I die if I don’t?” Marc interrupted the recital. He didn’t want a dustoff. Being flown out by medical evac would officially make this the worst home time he’d ever had.

Realizing he was another of those stubborn males she was always treating covertly, Amira shook her head, voice softening. “I would prefer a CT of your head, but no. None of the injuries are life threatening. However, someone needs to keep track of that concussion. It appears that you’ve taken multiple blows.” She gave Marc’s CO a stern stare, arms crossing over her ample chest. “I won’t sign a release for him like this.”

“Local hotel has rooms.” Kenn casually reminded the entire team of their recovery time in Jamaica. None of them laughed to give it away.

“Four days, minimum.”

Amira’s words drew small smirks and snickers that were quickly hidden.

“I’ll handle it,” Captain Palmer stated in a gravelly voice that always reminded his men of a tank crushing the skulls of their enemies.

All amusement stopped; moods fell. The boss wasn’t happy...was he? The Captain was also a hardass. Their training and first deployments had shown them he was not someone to be trifled with.

“I see you’ve made friends.” Captain Palmer scanned Marc as the medics stitched, wiped, and bandaged.

The wolf watched him mistrustfully, feeling the tension.

“Yes, sir.” Marc automatically stood up straighter.

Tall and thick, the Captain had earned more medals than anyone in their battalion. He wasn’t afraid to fight as hard as his men did, and they respected him for it. They also feared him a little. Captain Palmer wasn’t friendly. He was serious about the business of war and it showed in every scar and wrinkle.

“At ease.”

Marc didn’t relax his stance. “I did try, sir. Three times.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the story from your girlfriend—”

“She is *nothing* to me.”

Palmer stared at Marc. “Because she set you up?”

“Because she can’t be trusted to do the right thing.” Marc hadn’t bothered to lower his voice,

but he didn't enjoy Julia's resulting flinch. She was in the front of the ambulance, with the window down.

"She could be charged."

"Maybe she should be." Marc turned away from Julia's tears. "Dry her out while you're at it. She likes to drink."

"We've noticed." Amira huffed from Marc's feet, where she was examining his leg injuries. "Her breath is almost flammable. It's in my report, sir."

"Good girl."

Amira grinned at the Captain's praise and got out of the way, sensing he wanted a moment with Marc.

Palmer spoke pointedly. "Amira's not a bad girl."

"Already marked herself off." Marc hated it when anyone tried to play matchmaker, even for a quick tumble. He was beyond fussy. He was deeply scarred. "Not enough control over her emotions."

"Your choice." The CO stored the information. Marc's opinion held weight with him. The girl would go under watch for that issue. Palmer scanned the team waiting patiently for his approval or anger at their actions. He hadn't sent them out here to kill on American soil, only to bring their man home safely, but an evil they'd been chasing for a long time was now under control. It had

worked out well. “Eibar has been taken into custody. Well done.”

The entire team expressed relief, including Marc. Palmer’s anger was intimidating, even for him.

“Since you can’t stay out of trouble, however...” Palmer glared at Marc. “I want to send you to Quantico.”

The implication took a moment to sink in for all of them, except Marc. This was Captain Palmer’s way of asking if he’d made a choice about his future.

“Marc, the mustang!” Jamie blared supportively, even though it would take Marc a long time to officially earn that title. “Never woulda thought.”

“How can he become a mustang if he hasn’t taken any college courses?” Kenn asked snidely.

Captain Palmer ignored the question to hand Marc a rolled certificate. “Top honors in all classes. Congratulations, son.”

Marc took stock of the reactions, noting only Kenn had a problem with it. He slowly shook his head, letting the feeling of their acceptance make the choice. “I don’t want to leave my team, sir, or be stuck in a group that’s already set in their ways. I’m gonna pass.”

Palmer nodded as if he’d been expecting it. “What if I said you can pick your own team after you graduate?”

Marc couldn't refuse that. "Then I'd say I'm honored!"

Palmer shook his hand as the other Marines came over to congratulate him. Most of them thought they would be on the team he chose. Marc thought they were probably right. Even Kenn, with his nasty attitude, was incredibly skilled and toiled with them like a well-oiled machine. Marc would maybe replace one or two, but he doubted it would be more unless the others couldn't keep up with his plans. These men were like brothers to him, even the ones he couldn't stand.

The wolf growled warningly at all the congratulating hands on Marc, causing fresh amusement as the men moved back to give both of them space.

"We have a training program he could be put into." Palmer hadn't retreated. "You'd follow the guidelines, but keep him all the time."

"We'll see." Marc motioned angrily toward the ambulance. "Am I supposed to get in there with her? Is that why she isn't gone yet?"

"No. She got a call out during the chaos. She's the reason we found you."

Marc didn't react.

Palmer frowned. "She promised to testify against Eibar. She also agreed to give details on several murders in this area, as well as information on past shipments. She'll be treated gently."

"So, she wants to say goodbye?" Marc guessed, amazed. "That's some nerve."

“I thought so, too. It’s part of the reason I’m allowing it. Go get it over with. We’ll have you in a hotel room inside the hour.”

Marc didn’t argue or ask what the Captain’s other reasons were. He strode to the ambulance window without showing how much pain his injuries and their treatments were causing.

Julia’s mouth opened, maybe to apologize, but no sound emerged.

Marc studied the guilt on her face, but he also noted the satisfaction. She’d gotten what she wanted... “Chad is gone, and you’ll be taken care of in witness protection instead of becoming a drug lord’s new toy. That’s why you did this.”

Julia didn’t deny it. Now that this moment was here, she had no idea what to say to the man who had freed her.

“You could have told me. I would have helped you.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. Not if you knew what I needed.” She twisted away, hiding more tears. “I am sorry you were hurt, but I did what I had to. Hate me if that makes it easier.”

“I don’t hate you.” Marc sighed in annoyance. “I don’t understand why you had to do it this way. You lied to me.”

“I won’t get another chance to make up for that, will I?”

Marc’s lips thinned.

Julia looked away. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. And to say thank you.”

“That’s it? You’re not going to give me an explanation?”

Julia clamped her lips together.

Marc thought about throwing a nasty remark or even demanding answers, but his emotional control wouldn’t allow it. He settled for leaning through the window and pressing a soft, final kiss to her tensed, damp cheek. “Stay away from me.”

Marc returned to the loyalty of his men without waiting for a response

“I intend to.” Julia’s tears came harder. It would be a few weeks before she knew if this had all been worth the risk of planting the idea in Chad’s crazy head. If it had, she couldn’t be anywhere near Marc for years or he would figure out what she’d done, how she’d played everyone—including his CO—to possibly steal his child.

Julia’s hand settled over her flat stomach, body shaking with sobs. She’d never felt so dirty.

Everyone looked up as a helicopter neared their location. This time, it was a police chopper taking Eibar to the local jail for processing. His angry face was pressed against the window for a last glare at his target.

As if they’d planned it, every member of their squad lifted a middle finger to give the drug lord a special salute. It was in perfect rhythm.

Thunder grunted as the chuckles faded. “I hope we’ve seen the last of him now.”

“Unlikely.” Palmer turned neatly to his jeep and young driver. “He has a rich family across the

border. He won't be home a week before more LBGs are dispatched."

Marc realized he would be away in classes when the next group of little bad guys came.

Palmer slid into the seat as the PFC started the jeep. "I've heard you want to follow in my footsteps."

Marc stiffened. Only Chad and Reggie had heard him say that.

Palmer frowned at him, glaring coldly through layers of scars. The gray hair starting at the edges only made him look meaner. "What do you want from life, Grunt?"

Marc hesitated. "Sir?"

Palmer tilted his hat back, sighing. "If you don't know where you're going, you can't map out how to get there."

"Maybe I'm in it for the ride. Letting fate steer me."

Captain Palmer laughed at him.

Marc waited, embarrassed, but willing to take the direction he knew was coming. As long as it wasn't advice to settle down and have a family.

"Stay away from your past, and ask the question again." Palmer motioned to his driver. "You might be surprised with how things have changed."

Marc saluted, trying not to show his discomfort.

Palmer returned the gesture as he left.

Marc sighed. Letting go of the past wasn't something he was capable of. He'd spent the last six years trying.

Marc ignored the distraught female now being driven away in the ambulance as he joined his men. "Did we get the credit for Eibar or did the locals get it?"

Kenn and the others frowned as Crisp shook his head. "Command said we couldn't go hunting. Heard they sent in a SWAT team to grab him."

"Figures." Marc grunted. "Pricks."

The team snickered.

"What about the LBGs?"

"Got 'em all, as far we know." Thumper handed Marc the bottle of water that the EMS woman had shoved into his hand. He'd pocketed the phone number that came with it. He didn't mind taking Marc's place with that one. "Chad had retired military here from all over the place. Even saw a Russian back there somewhere."

Marc was relieved. Monroe Eibar was an American CIA plant who had fallen for the con to become a true homegrown criminal. *I'm glad he was one of ours*, Marc thought, aware of the wolf staying at his side. *It would suck to think that I risked my life over there just have the same chaos over here.* "Who sold me out?"

"We don't know." Dagger's frown deepened. "Our squad had the exact location, but Julia knew your routine. A few other people in command also had that information. We'll narrow it down."

Marc didn't have any choice but to accept that. Julia knew his routines, but not the locations. Someone, probably in their squad, was a traitor.

All eyes automatically went to Kenn.

Flushing, Kenn raised a finger. "I screwed up on the timing and he got trimmed. Don't get crazy."

"We'll all go crazy if it ever happens again!" Trippy warned Kenn without his usual stutter. "Watch your six."

Kenn rolled his eyes and stomped over to the EMS crew that was preparing to leave.

Marc snickered. He didn't think it was anyone on his team. Kenn was an asshole, not a traitor, but it was nice to have the team's support. They would help him punish Kenn later for that screw up on the timing.

"We'll sniff 'em out." Crisp gestured. "We can use Chad's real death to set a trap."

Marc wasn't concerned at this moment. He'd survived the ambush and one of his many enemies had died. It would be a little while, at least, before the next wave gathered the courage to try. Until then, he had things to do and places to be.

Marc grinned. The choice was easy. "Let the locals go on a wild goose chase this time. We have hotel rooms to make use of."

Scene 3

“I don’t think the manager likes us.” Kenn shut the door to the hotel room and began tossing beers to the team. None of them had slept yet. “Only a small store down the road was open. I talked the owner into giving us a twelve pack, but that’s all he’d part with. No alcohol sold around here on the holidays or Sunday.”

Men caught the drinks or let them sail by to hit someone else. Groans and laughter echoed through the double room. It was all the hotel had left.

Marc, in the bed farthest from the door, was sleeping. The wolf was lying over his ankles.

“Is he finally out?” Kenn stepped closer to Marc.

He stopped when the wolf lifted its big head and growled.

“I’m not touching him.” Kenn laughed with the others, but he already hated Marc’s new pet. He hoped the Marine lost it somewhere.

Dog’s snout drew back. His fur started to rise.

Kenn retreated a step.

Dog laid back down, snorting.

The team laughed again, sending more noise through the room and halls of the Holiday Inn.

Crisp stood up, body rigid. “Did you hear that?”

Silence filled the room. Danger came next.

“We’re all in one place...” Thumper grabbed for his gun.

So did everyone, except Marc.

“Should we wake him?”

Crisp shook his head. “Not unless we’re right. Get ready to roll him off the bed so he’ll be out of the line of fire.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Marc opened his eyes. “You might come up short a few fingers.”

The team rolled eyes or breathed sighs of relief that Marc was awake. Fights were always better with their team leader along for that ride.

“What did you hear?” Kenn wasn’t sure Crisp had heard anything at all.

A loud click echoed outside the door.

“That.” Crisp shoved Marc off the bed, taking a nip from Dog, who followed Marc.

The door to the room flew open.

No one fired yet.

“Come out and we won’t hurt you.”

Almost everyone on the team laughed.

“Get in there!”

“But, boss—”

“Go!”

Gunfire filled the hall and room, spraying walls and furniture.

Marc’s team waited until shadows of men emerged and then did what they did best.

Marc stayed on the floor, winded from the hard thump. He was weak, but he could fight if he needed to. From the sound of steady gunfire, he didn’t. His team hadn’t gotten enough action in the forest or on the ranch. That was part of why he enjoyed being with them. They were just as alike as they weren’t.

Silence fell.

Marc put an arm around Dog to keep him from being caught in the coming crossfire. The stooges were dead. Now, the boss had to come in. “Alive, gentlemen. We need answers.”

Battle mode switched neatly into capture mode. Kenn slid behind the shattered door while Thumper hunkered down behind the shattered television stand.

Footsteps echoed.

A shadow appeared in the doorway.

Kenn grabbed the gun.

Thumper tackled the struggling man.

They all fell in a heap with Kenn covering the gun and Thumper holding arms.

The rest of the team rushed over to help, leaving Marc to guard. He went to the window for a view, wincing at the pain. “No backup.” He kept watching in case he was wrong.

Kenn and the others dragged the shouting man to a chair and bound him to it. He kept shouting.

Crisp shoved his gun into the man’s face.

Silence fell.

“That’s what I thought.” Crisp motioned Marc over with his barrel. “He came for you. You get to work him over.”

“All right!” Marc advanced eagerly.

The small man cringed.

The team laughed.

Marc knelt in front of his enemy and gave a friendly smile. “I have two questions. One you can nod for. The other requires a name. Ready?”

The man nodded, gulping in huge breaths. “It was Eibar.”

“Well, that was question one. Now, how did you know where I’d be?”

“The medical woman tells him.”

Betrayal slapped Marc again. Sadness swamped the smoky room. Amira was always part of the medical crew that their squad used while here at home. Hers was a familiar face they’d been comforted to see and never suspected of selling their information.

“Damn, Brady. Every woman you meet wants to screw you!”

Marc snorted at Kenn’s comment. “It’s karma for the past.” He limped toward the door, wolf at his side. “I’m heading back to the base and asking for an assignment in Ramadi. Maybe I can sleep there.”

Chapter Nine



**Shoshone National Forest
September 16th**

1

Marc tugged on the new cage until it came to the end of the truck's thick tailgate. He was where he'd first encountered the wolf nearly two weeks ago, but the landscape was so different that he'd almost changed his mind. The realization the wolf must have survived wildfires before had convinced Marc he was doing the right thing. The wolf deserved freedom.

Marc flipped the latch on the cage and stepped back. "Welcome home, Dog."

I'm back! I'm here! The wolf lunged from the small prison, knocking it to the ground in the process.

Marc stared. *I heard that.*

No, you didn't! Don't act crazy like the man who fathered you! Marc winced at his mother's scream in his head. No matter how far he traveled, she was always with him.

Marc felt sadness hit when the wolf darted toward the trees without stopping. He was out of sight a second later.

Marc lingered, trying to give the wolf time to change his mind, but the animal didn't return.

An hour later, Marc finally drove away. He felt as though he'd lost his best friend. Killing Chad, who actually had been at one time, was nothing compared to leaving the wolf behind. It made Marc so depressed that he grabbed a beer from the cooler and put the music up as loud as his shitty stereo would go.

In the distance, the howling of a wolf echoed, calling to his kind to tell them of his homecoming.

Scene 2

Two weeks later

“Brady! Call!”

Marc left the classroom with no visible reaction to the announcement, but inside, he immediately began to stress. He'd been at Quantico for two weeks. *Did something happen with my team?*

The halls here were bright and clean, showing pride and tradition at every corner through plaques, maps, flags, and awards. Marc found it all a bit gaudy, and much too pristine to be associated with gritty Marines.

Marc picked up the dangling receiver. “Brady here.”

“Uh, hello. This is the Shoshone National Forest Service. Are you the Marcus Brady I met in Wyoming?”

“Hello, JD.” Marc recognized the voice. “How are you?”

“Great now that Bubba’s been transferred. Hey, thanks for taking my call. When they said you were in class, I wasn’t positive I even had the right number.”

Marc chuckled at the POG opinion. Persons other than grunts had no idea what went on inside the military. They assumed that if the men weren’t fighting, they were drinking or getting into trouble. The fact that college classes were mandatory for most of the promotions hadn’t been fed into stereotypical minds. “What can I do for you, JD?”

“You know, after we came back, I realized I recognized you.”

“Oh?” Marc’s voice went cold. “How’s that?”

“You were in a newspaper article I read. Something about a mob family and the youngest son being the reason they all went to jail.”

“Is there something I can help you with?”
Marc demanded stonily. Flashes of his past were never welcome.

“Hey, no, don’t take it that way! I wanted to tell you that I respect what you did. It couldn’t have been easy.”

“Is that all you wanted?”

“Well, no. You know that wolf we were chasing? He’s back and I’m curious as to how that happened.”

“Very long story. What do you mean by *back*?”

“He’s been a regular visitor here for weeks. We, uh, can’t get rid of him.”

“He went tame?”

“We’re not certain, exactly. He hunts and brings his kills here to eat. He has a nice collection of bones growing under our porch.”

Marc wondered if the wolf was damaged because of what had happened. He was. The amount of trust Marc now had for people was nearing zero. “Is that normal?”

“No, but he isn’t aggressive toward us, so we won’t shoot him. We’re not supposed to interfere unless we have to.”

“Good. Is that all he’s doing? Just won’t leave?”

“He whines.”

The frustration in that answer told Marc all he needed to know. “What do you think his problem is?”

“Honestly? I think he wants you.”

Marc was speechless for a moment. He’d felt a bond, but hadn’t thought the wolf had.

“Mr. Brady?”

“Marc.”

“Cool. Marc, I’d like you to come up, if you can. We’ll videotape it, of course, for our studies.”

“I just got here, JD. I can’t leave for at least three more weeks and maybe not for as long as five. Busy stuff here.”

“I understand, but if you can come any sooner, it would be appreciated. The noise is rather distracting.”

Marc reluctantly agreed. The Captain wasn’t going to like this. “I’ll try.”

Marc hung up and spent a moment considering the best way to handle things. Captain Palmer had offered the wolf a place in one of the training programs. He could ask if that was still open. If so, he might be able to get a leave of absence.

You hate it here. You’re using this as an excuse.

Marc sighed at that mental voice. Deep down, he did hate it here. He wanted to be with his team. He hadn’t expected to come in so lowly ranked and treated.

Marc dialed his CO, making the choice. He would go check on the wolf and help if he could. After that, he would come back and put his heart into the lessons. He owed it to his younger self to explore every opportunity that came his way

during his time in the Marines. The things that he'd suffered in childhood had taught him that pain was a means to an end. His time in the service had reinforced that. Sometimes agony was as necessary as breathing. It all depended on the situation.

“Hello, sir. It’s Corporal Marcus Brady. When you get this message, try not to stroke out. Yes, I know I’m a worthless, overrated snotnose who isn’t fit to shine your turds.” Marc automatically delivered a respectful nod to the brass coming down the hallway. “The urge to bust me all the way back to a fuzz-bucket PFC is understandable.”

The senior man walking by remembered his own calls to his CO when life as an officer was beginning and returned the gesture, snickering. *Fun times*, the Staff Sergeant thought wryly. *Fun times*.

Marc was still going on with his call. “You should have kicked the shit out of me more often, I completely agree. However, sir, I’ve left Officer School on an unscheduled emergency to pick up my dog. I know you’ll understand and see your way clear to allow me to return in three days so you can beat the living grass from my ass. Thank you, sir!”

Marc hung up, still grinning. He loved being a Marine. That was why he’d chosen to take the non-commission courses. Maybe one day he would follow in Palmer’s infamous footsteps. Right now, he doubted he could fill those legendary boots. Some time away would help return his confidence.

He could pass these classes. When he came back, Marc would prove it to his CO and to himself.

Scene 3

The ranger station was a long log cabin set roughly in the center of the park where Marc had been camped when the fire came. Nestled between tall trees and thick bushes, the building was inviting.

It had taken Marc a full day to fly down and then drive in with a rental truck. He hadn't trusted any of their beater cars to make some of the hairpin curves up here. His jeep had been lost to Chad. Crisp had told him later that the vehicle had been burned.

Marc pulled to a stop in front of the wide cabin, seeing shadows in the windows that told him the rangers inside were aware of his arrival.

Marc took his time getting out, studying things the way he always had, but also using the short amount of officer training he'd soaked up. The classes were full of great information. The hard part was dealing with the people. The hostility until he proved himself yet again was nearly intolerable.

Marc spotted the pile of fly-covered bones and remains under the front corner of the porch. It looked like the wolf was making up for the meals he'd missed. The rabbit and deer population here would probably be light this year.

Marc climbed from the hot truck. After three weeks, the wolf was likely feral again, meaning he'd made this trip for nothing. The rangers would eventually drive it back into the wilderness where it belonged.

JD came out to meet him. "He spends hours out hunting every day. Should be coming in shortly."

"How's he been?" Marc held out a hand that JD shook.

"Same as when I called, except that he howls now. Glad you could come down. There aren't many families around here, but we've already had two calls about wolves. Sometimes the locals can get legislation passed that makes us remove them."

"What if he finds a mate or something? A new pack?"

"We hoped for either of those when we first saw him, but he hasn't changed his pattern. We keep track of wolves for the yearly census and he doesn't go far. He hunts, drinks, and then comes here to eat, sleep, and howl. To mate or find a pack, he'd have to go searching. That's what they usually do. Wolves have a wide range, but he's different. He won't leave."

"Like he's waiting for me..."

JD smiled, curious. "You got time to tell us how he escaped?"

"Chewed right through the crate." Even if the truth wasn't classified, Marc never told his stories

to strangers. That type of fame was for politicians and writers.

“Well, I’ll be damned. We’ll put that in the next set of requisition notes.”

Marc picked out the wolf’s shadow coming through the dense trees. He motioned JD to move away, but the man was already retreating to the short porch to observe. The video camera in the window had been running since Marc got out of the truck.

The wolf went straight toward his stash, carrying a plump rabbit by a broken neck.

Marc waited for his scent to reach the animal over the blood of his kill. They were roughly ten feet apart when the wolf glanced up, sniffing.

“You’re slacking.” Marc wasn’t joking. “You didn’t even see me.”

The rabbit dropped to the ground as the wolf trotted over to Marc with his tail up and tongue out. Instead of the nip that Marc was braced for, the wolf immediately sank down on top of his boots, curling up to cover them both.

JD chuckled from the porch, but Marc nodded in understanding. He bent down carefully and extended his hand. “If you bite me this time, I’m punching you in the nose.”

The wolf’s snout drew up, teeth showing, but a whimper came from his throat instead of a growl. Marc turned his hand over, letting his scent be taken in deeper.

The wolf licked his palm.

Marc snorted quietly and rubbed the beautiful fur under the wolf's chin. Gentle but firm, he tried to convey pleasure to the animal in return for being allowed to touch him.

The wolf's tongue lolled out, but he still twisted his head toward Marc's leg as he enjoyed the petting. He wasn't letting the man go this time. He'd returned to his release place to find Marc gone, with no way to track him. He'd made his way here soon after, hoping one of the humans would bring his alpha back. He had tried to return to the wild, but he couldn't. This wasn't his home anymore.

Marc straightened up. "I have papers for him."

"Yeah, your squad leader called. Good man. He said to get you done and out of here."

Marc pried a boot out from under the docile wolf. "I'm goin'."

He slid into the driver's seat of the truck to retrieve the papers. Before he could do anything else, the wolf jumped into his lap, growling lowly. The heavy animal quickly slid into the empty passenger side and stared at him with resentful golden orbs.

JD came over to Marc's door and shut it. He took the papers Marc handed him, still laughing in amazement. "That's some friend you've made."

"His name's Dog."

The wolf's ears snapped up.

"Yep." Marc snickered. "I guess we'll be around again for vacation, when I have time off."

JD shuddered in mock apprehension. “I’ll put the fire marshal on alert.”

Marc stared. “You know.”

JD nodded, tucking a hand into his belt. “Who do you think helped cover the bodies? Local law enforcement doesn’t function here. *I* do.”

Marc hadn’t realized the military would have a relationship this far out. He wasn’t sure if he was happy about that or if he felt like his privacy was gone.

As if he read the thought, JD shook his head. “That’s someone else’s job. I’m just a lackey.”

“Well, I’m a future mustang, so no hard feelings on my end.” Marc held out a hand, shaking with the man. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“Hey!” another ranger yelled from the door. “I just took a call. It’s from a Captain Palmer. He has a message for Corporal Marcus Brady. Is that you?”

Marc groaned, sticking his head out the window. “I’m all ears.”

The young man cleared his throat, flushed. “Okay. This is from him. ‘You tell that overrated snotnose that he has a three-week emergency leave and then I want him back in classes or I’m going to hunt him down and make him shave my asshole. You got that, Grunt?!’”

The younger ranger was scarlet and sweating as he waited for Marc’s reaction.

Marc snapped a sharp salute. “Sir, yes, sir! Thank you, sir!”

JD and Marc were still laughing as he backed out of the driveway.

Marc glanced over at the wolf, who was staring at the rabbit in the driveway.

Sighing, Marc stopped the truck. He waved toward the carcass. “Go get it.”

The wolf was out the window a second later.

Waiting patiently, Marc lit a smoke, suddenly feeling better than he had in a full year. He’d thought he needed the vacation for peace and quiet, but it had turned out to be loyal companionship that he required.

The wolf lunged upward and cleared the window, landing on the seat. He dropped the rabbit on the floor to gaze at his alpha expectantly.

I wasn’t the only one, Marc thought, easing off the brake. Maybe this will work out for both of us. We’re clearly different.

Marc paid attention to the winding road as he left, but his mind immediately returned to Captain Palmer’s advice. When he’d taken the past out of the equation, the future had opened up in ways that he’d never considered. He loved being a grunt. That would stay the same, but from this moment on, he would no longer be the willing outcast who was only tolerated because he was lethal in battle. He would be a leader who taught other men to be deadly to America’s enemies. “It’s a position I’ll execute with honor.”

The End
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Deleted Scene

Marc rose up to complete the act by hand, but Julia moaned, shaking her head. “Depo has us covered, baby. I just got my shot.”

Happy enough to finish where it felt the best, Marc slid deep as he kissed her, letting go of his control. At the height, another face slammed into his mind. That never changed.

Breathing ragged, Marc kissed Julia’s cheek, noting purple splotches and puffy lids. Reality came crashing in as he dislodged himself.

Marc sat on the side of the bed to don his jeans. “You wanna talk now?”

Julia shook her head in satisfaction. “Over dinner.”

Marc didn’t argue. He was ready to eat. Sex had that effect on him. Grabbing his hastily kicked off boots, Marc dropped onto the bed to pull them on. “You good? I can knock you out again; let you sleep if you want.”

Julia chuckled. “I’ve always liked that about you, Brady—how fair you are.”

Marc shrugged. “I like to give back as good as I get.”

Julia frowned slightly, and then drew on a happier thought to enjoy with the chills that she was still feeling. Marc had satisfied her before and during, then took his pleasure. He was the one man

who'd ever bothered to do that for her. It made his trips to the ranch very welcome most days.

Reminded that he wasn't here for her enjoyment this time, Julia sighed. "You can go on. I'll be right there."

Marc left the room humming, but not before pressing a grateful kiss to the top of her head. He wished all women could be like Julia. She never asked for more than he could give.

Author Note

Well, that was a quick ride! I hope you enjoyed this glimpse into Marc and Dog's first meeting and friendship. Perhaps in the future, I'll release more novellas like this to show you the many adventures they went on together. Until then, watch your six and keep reading!

Waving at you,
Angela White

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This book has a related series. It's called Life After War. [This link will take you to the first book](#), where you can read a very generous sample and pick a store of your choice for the rest.

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