

Praise for the A Breed Apart series. . .

TRINITY

“Dodge bullets, cling by your fingertips to an icy cliff—then fall heart first for a wounded hero and his incredible military war dog. You won’t sleep, but please remember to breathe. Ronie Kendig’s rapid-fire fiction: Oorah!”

—Candace Calvert, author of the Mercy Hospital series
and *Trauma Plan*

“Dangerous mysteries drive this moving and compelling military dog story. So vivid and contemporary that it could be happening here and now!”

—Kathy Tyers, author of the Firebird series

“If ‘care about the protagonists’ is the essential element of good fiction, *Trinity* is masterful. A war dog, an intrepid, multiethnic girl, and a healing former Green Beret mix it up with the enemy on the mountain cliffs of Afghanistan. Ronie Kendig has penned a page-turner of the first order.”

—Eric Wiggin, author of *Skinny Dipping at Megunticook Lake*
and *Emily’s Garden*

TALON

“Action, intrigue, and romance the way only Ronie Kendig can write it—this is an author who knows her stuff. With characters you can’t help but love—and a canine you can’t help but fall for—*Talon* is an intense ride punched with high-octane drama that will have you bolting through the pages in a single, sleepless night. *Talon* is Kendig at the top of her game. Whatever you do, do not miss this one.”

—Tosca Lee, *New York Times* bestselling author of
the Books of Mortals series

“Now I know why they label Ronie’s novels ‘Rapid-Fire Fiction’! With inimitable style, this book hooks you from page one and machine-guns you to a satisfying finish. Bravo, Ronie!”

—Creston Mapes, bestselling author of *Fear Has a Name*

“*Talon* was a non-stop, heart-pounding adventure full of twists, turns, and romance. Every time I picked it up, I was transported to Talon and Aspen’s world and felt every emotion that they experienced. It has a little bit of everything to capture the hearts of all readers!”

—Lisa Phillips, Founder/CEO of Retired Military Working Dog Assistance Organization

BEOEWULF

“Realistic characters, great dialogue, popping action—Ronie Kendig lives up to the Rapid-Fire Fiction label with *Beowulf*. I enjoyed the journey.”

—Janice Cantore, author of The Pacific Coast Justice series

“High velocity danger, courage that won’t quit, romantic tension, and a massive dog that will win your heart. Yet another ‘I couldn’t put this down’ read from the fabulous Ronie Kendig.”

—Stephanie Grace Whitson, award-winning author of inspirational fiction

A BREED
APART
TRILOGY

RONIE KENDIG

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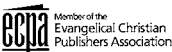
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TRINITY

MILITARY WAR DOG

DEDICATION

*To a special breed of heroes—military working dogs
and their two-legged handlers.*

*Thank you for your grueling work and heroism,
which often goes unnoticed or unthanked!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Brian, you will forever be my hero! Ciara, Keighley, Ryan, and Reagan—thank you for enduring fast food, on-your-own nights, and even forgotten meals as I vanished into foreign countries and other people's lives. Thanks to my amazing in-laws, whose support is unending! I love you, Mom and Dad!

To Al Speegle—Thank you for sending me that e-mail that launched the idea for this series. You are a gentleman with razor-sharp wit. It is an honor to count you as a friend!

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The amazing Burnett Sisters—I hope General Burnett does you proud. I hear he has amazing daughters. Thank you for such incredible encouragement!

Thanks to my Audience of One, who has gifted me with this writing dream, enabling me to follow in His Son's steps by telling stories to impact His kingdom. What a joy and treasure!

LITERARY LICENSE

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

Glossary of Terms/Acronyms

ACUs—Army Combat Uniforms
AFB—Air Force Base
AHOD—All Hands On Deck
BAMC—Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio
CJSOTF-A—Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan
DD214—Official Discharge from Active Duty
DEFCON—Defense readiness Condition
DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency
FOB—Forward Operating Base
Glock—a semiautomatic handgun
HK 9mm, HK USP—Heckler & Koch semiautomatic handgun
HPT—High-Priority Target
HUMINT—Human Intelligence
IED—Improvised Explosive Device
clicks—military jargon for kilometers
lat-long—latitude and longitude
M4, M4A1, M16—military assault rifles
MRAP—Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle
MWD—Military War Dog
ODA—Operational Detachment Alpha (Special Forces A-Team)
PLA—People’s Liberation Army of the People’s Republic of China
PTSD—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RPG—Rocket-Propelled Grenade
RTB—Return To Base
SIS—United Kingdom’s Secret Intelligence Service, otherwise known as MI6
SOCOM—Special Operations Command
SureFire—a tactical flashlight
tango—military slang for target or enemy
TBI—Traumatic Brain Injury
UAV—Unmanned Aerial Vehicle



Prologue



Body rigid, ears trained on the sound coming from the dilapidated structure, she waited. Breaths came in staccato pants, the heat of a brutal Afghan summer beating down on her. While the Kevlar vest provided protection, it also created a thermal blanket that amplified the heat. She panted again and strained with resolute focus on the building. This wasn't her first tour of duty. It wasn't even her second. She'd completed three tours and outranked the Green Berets huddled behind her on the dusty road. Trinity lowered herself to the ground, waiting.

When she took her next breath, drool plopped onto the gritty sand.

"Easy, girl." Staff Sergeant Heath "Ghost" Daniels knelt beside his Special Forces-trained military war dog, his M4 aimed at the building where three men had disappeared. This so-called security mission for the sweep team in prep for an HPT convoy had taken a turn toward interesting. So much for intel that said the area was clean.

"Ghost, what's she got?"

At the sound of team leader Dean "Watterboy" Watters's voice, Heath assessed his sixty-pound Belgian Malinois again. "Nothing," he called to the side, noting Trinity's stance and keen focus.

With the sun at high noon, they would blister out here if they didn't get this road cleared before the general's pack came through at thirteen hundred.

Trinity came up off her hindquarters, muscles rippling beneath her dark, silky coat.

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Heath's pulse kicked up a notch as his gaze darted over the nearly monochrome terrain. What had she detected? Sometimes he wished he had the sharp hearing inherent in dogs.

Having taken cover behind a half-blown wall, Heath peered around the peeling plaster and stared down the sights of his weapon. He let the crosshairs of the reticle trace the structure in which the rebels had taken refuge, but he didn't see anything. No trace of the men who'd scurried away from the sweep team. Men who'd raised the hackles of every member of the team, including Trin.

Snapping and barking, Trinity lunged. For a split second, her paws rose off the ground as she bolted forward. A plume of dust concealed her movement.

In a bound-and-cover movement, Heath and Watterboy hurried after her, making sure they didn't expose themselves to gunfire or RPGs. As they came up on the house, Heath flattened himself against the sun-heated wall.

A scream hurtled through the now-dusty day.

At the telltale sign of Trinity's hit, Heath hoofed it around the corner.

Screaming, an Afghan male bent toward the snarling dog who held his arm tight and jerked it back and forth. Five hundred pounds of pressure per square inch guaranteed submission. Trained not to rip the guy to shreds from head to toe, she maintained her lock on the target.

Heath came up on the guy's right, noting Watterboy on the left. "Down!" he shouted in Pashto. "On your knees."

More screams, this time mingled with tears as the guy warred with his instinct to fight and the order to kneel. Blood streaming down his arm, he dropped to the ground.

"Out!" Heath gave the release command to his canine partner.

Obediently, Trinity disengaged and trotted to his side as Heath maintained control. "My dog is trained to kill," he said in the man's native tongue. "Do not make any sudden moves or she will attack. Do you understand?"

Master Sergeant Tiller nodded his intention to enter the building, and with Sergeant First Class James "Candyman" VanAllen, they led the rest of the team into the structure.

Cradling his arm, the man frantically bobbed his head and whimpered.

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Watterboy moved in to search the man while Heath kept watch. Once they cleared the man of dangerous weapons or materials, Heath led Trinity to the shade where he squirted water into her mouth from the CamelBak bite straw. She lapped it up, then turned in a circle.

“Good girl.” He smoothed his hands over her body, assuring himself she hadn’t been injured during the encounter.

As he straightened, the others streamed back out of the house, faces smeared with dirt and sweat—and frustration. No way. “Empty?”

“One hundred percent.”

Their medic hurried, bandaging the rebel’s wound.

Watterboy faced the rebel. “Where’d they go?”

The tearstained face of the rebel rose to the Special Forces unit. He gave a slow nod behind him.

As Heath glanced over his shoulder, his gut knotted.

A new enemy rose, proud and majestic. With his M4 against his chest, Heath gazed up at the forbidding terrain of the Hindu Kush. He’d flown over them dozens of times, each time grateful they didn’t have to comb through the rugged mountain terrain. The sun bathed the rocky slopes in an orange glow.

He removed his sunglasses and swiped his sleeve across his damp face. He wanted to curse, knowing they’d probably lost the Taliban fighters.

“Ghost, what’s Trinity hit on?”

At the sound of Watterboy’s voice, Heath snapped his gaze to his furry partner. Nose to the ground, she sniffed and maneuvered around a pile of rubble. She immediately sat down, ears perked and trained on the wood and cement.

Like a volcanic eruption, wood and cement shot upward and outward. Two men darted across the road.

Trinity streaked after them, her black-and-amber fur rippling beneath her muscular body. He pitied the idiots. Her snapping echoed through the narrow valley that ensconced them.

“Go!” Watterboy shouted.

Heath sprinted after his partner. In fact, she was his superior by one rank. If anything happened to her, it was his head on the platter. But that’s not what had him sprinting in seventy-pound gear across the singed terrain. It was Trinity. His girl. His only girl.

Heath homed in on the sound of her barking that helped them

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navigate the brutal terrain. Rocks and twigs shifted beneath their thick boots. Trees and shrubs reached over the footpath, as if trying to distract the team with the lure of shade and a slight breeze.

Undeterred, Heath hauled butt up the side of the mountain. As he moved, he glanced up—

There!

Trinity sailed over a crevice and disappeared. A klick up, the path widened. Heath pushed onward, determined to find Trinity. She'd been more loyal and faithful than any friend or girlfriend. She had put her life on the line more times than he could count. He owed it to her to get there and interdict before things went bad.

“Whoa. Hold up,” Watterboy mumbled.

Heath hesitated, one boot higher than the other as he glanced at his friend.

Watterboy's face glistened beneath the stifling heat. “I don't like it.”

“I second the motion.” Candyman took a knee, surveying.

For a split second, Heath took in the terrain he'd vaulted up. Like a sharp V, two sides dropped toward the team. An avalanche would bury them alive. The outcroppings were perfect for snipers.

“SOCOM suspects this area is crawling with Taliban,” Tiller announced as he joined them. “Eyes out.”

Which meant the real possibility of an ambush. Or an IED. Or both. But Heath knew one thing—due to their extreme effectiveness, military war dogs were high-priority targets with obscene bounties. He wasn't letting anyone get a bounty on Trinity.

Barking reverberated through the canyon. A shot rang out, followed by a yelp. Then. . .silence.

Heath burst into a run. His foot slipped on the rocky incline. The thin air pressed on him. Heavy. He felt heavy. But he wasn't stopping. Not till he found Trinity.

As he came up over a rise, a pebble-strewn path stretched out and around a crest in the rugged mountains. And two dozen yards away—Trinity. Pacing, her right back leg dragging. She'd broken behavior.

Something was wrong.

Thinking past the drumming of his pulse, he eased closer, his nerves prickling with anticipation of an attack. He darted a glance around without moving his head and advanced. “Trinity, down.”

She turned, her gold eyes boring into him. Started to sit but rose

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and paced again, this time slower.

“Trin—” That’s when he saw the dark streaks on her hindquarters.
She’s shot!

Instinct shoved him into a crouch, gauging the steep slopes towering over them, knowing the enemy had shot her from some hiding spot. He keyed his mic. “They’ve hit her—wounded her. She’s broken behavior, not responding.”

He inched along the crevice, fixing his gaze on Trinity. Her leg. Hopefully they hadn’t done permanent damage. If he could get an IV in her, she’d have a chance.

A quick check to his six showed him the team, weapons trained as they slunk through the rocky edifice. Fluid, stealthy, the best—pride infused him. Confidence that they’d cover his six enabled him to turn back to his partner. He crouch-ran the last few feet to Trinity. Dropped to his knees.

That’s when he noticed her vest. It lay a dozen feet away. How on earth did that happen? He pushed to his feet and started for it.

Trinity moved in front of him, snarling.

He’d seen the damage those teeth could deliver. “Easy, girl. It’s okay.” After rubbing her tall ears, he moved around her.

She lunged. Snapped. And again, snarled.

Heart in his throat, Heath stilled and drew back. Swallowed against his desert-dry mouth. He noticed the foam at the corners of her mouth. From his CamelBak he loosened the bite grip and squirted some liquid refreshment down to her.

Stance rigid, she stood off with him.

Concerned, he stroked her head. “It’s okay, girl. We’ve got it.” Again, he tried to retrieve her vest.

She lunged. Trapped his hand between her jaws. Five hundred pounds of pressure per square inch clamped through his flesh. Shock insulated the pain—at first. *What’re you doing. . . ?*

Blood slid down across his thumb. This should hurt. Bad. *Real* bad. Thoughts became reality. White-hot fire tore through his muscles and veins, shoving him to his knees. His pulse pounded in his temples. He growled the command, “Out!”

With a whimper, she released him.

Agony pulsed as he cradled his hand. “Down,” he growled.

“What’s happening?” Tiller shouted as he came up on Heath’s nine.

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“Her vest is off,” Heath hissed.

“Think that wound they gave her is messing with her mind?” Watterboy asked as he caught up.

With his uninjured hand on her, Heath held up his other to stem the flow of blood. “Nah. . .” That wasn’t like her. It took a lot to wig her out.

“Let’s get her vest and clear out. This place is ambush central.” Tiller jogged around them.

A growl rumbled through Trinity’s belly. Her upper lip curled into a snarl—

“No!”

BooOOOom!



Wicked and thick, a concoction of haziness and pain pinned him down. His eyes wouldn’t obey his command to open. He felt heavier than the time he leapt from that bridge and blacked out as a kid. He’d come to as a friend hauled him, unconscious, to the surface. That same feeling, heavy but weightless. . .

A voice. . .sweet and soft.

Heath stilled his mind and followed the voice from the void. What. . . she—it was a woman, right? He hadn’t lost that much touch with reality, had he?—what was she saying?

As if his ears broke the water’s lip, her voice became clear.

“. . .all anxiety or pain you might be feeling. Finally, I pray you’d be uplifted by His grace and feel yourself enfolded in the peace of His embrace.”

Peace. . .drifting. . .away. . .so quiet.

Wait. No. Trinity! Where was she? His arms resisted the plea to lift. Fire lit down the side of his neck. He moaned.

At least, he thought he moaned. Maybe his voice wasn’t working—

A gasp nearby.

Still, Heath couldn’t move or respond.

“What are you doing here?” Male, older, gruffer. Who. . . ?

“Shh,” she said. “You’ll wake him.”

“This”—warbling in Heath’s head garbled the words—“bring him back.”

“This isn’t about *him*,” she hissed. “And he won’t remember I’m here.”

“What if he does? That’s a problem—”

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“He won’t!”

Heath’s hearing closed up, his mind drowned in the words that struggled to find purchase against the pain and emptiness devouring him. He struggled. Tried to focus on her voice. That sweet, soft, angelic voice.

Please. . . God, don’t let me forget.

Quiet descended and pushed him back into the depths.



*Wakhan Corridor
Hindu Kush, Afghanistan
One Year Later*

“*Opportunities multiply as they are seized.*” The words of the ancient warrior Sun Tzu held fast in the mind of Wu Jianyu as he hauled himself up over a steep incline, hands digging into the sharp edifice. Weakness meant failure.

He could afford neither weakness nor failure. Not again.

Squatting, he let his gaze take in the breathtaking view. Hazy under the taunt of dawn’s first light, the rugged terrain was terrifyingly beautiful. Already, he and his men had hiked for two weeks, having left the province of Xinjiang, which lay more than a hundred kilometers behind.

When he’d spied the worn path traders, including Marco Polo and the Jesuit priest Benedict Goëz, had used for centuries, he ordered his men away from it and away from prying eyes. To the north rose the formidable land of Tajikistan. Behind him, to the south, stretched the borders of Pakistan. West lay Xinjiang, and east. . .Afghanistan.

His path to honor.

Then there was his path: A central branch that ran through the southern portion of Little Pamir to the Murghab River.

That assumed, of course, one was trying to get into China.

He was not.

Twisting in his crouched position, he drew in a long breath of crisp, cold air. Invigorated, he rose, allowing the mountains and valleys, the rivers that snaked and sparkled beneath the touch of vanishing moonlight, to speak to him. Remind him that he alone had been chosen for this mission. And it was his alone to fail. Or succeed.

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Two more days would deliver them to the province where he could do what was asked of him. And regain what was rightfully his. What had been stolen, ripped from his line of ancestors.

I will not dishonor you again, Father. In fact, to distance his father from the disgrace that had become Jianyu's alone, he'd taken his mother's surname. Thus Wu Jianyu was born. And Zheng Jianyu died. For now.

With one fist closed and one resting atop it, he bowed his head. Closed his eyes. After many minutes of silence and meditation, he once again reached for that which had always been his—emptiness. The chant of the Heart Sutra drifted through his mind and on the wind. It would work. The monk had told him. “. . . *indifferent to any kind of attainment whatsoever but dwelling in Prajna wisdom, is freed of any thought covering, get rid of the fear bred by it, has overcome what can upset and in the end reaches utmost Nirvana.*”

He needed the hope. To fill the empty places.

No, no. That's not what the monk said. Jianyu ground his teeth.

“There is only one place you will find peace, Jianyu.” The voice, soft and silky like a lotus petal, seeped past his barriers. His anger. His brokenness. And melted over him like honey.

“No!” He lowered himself to the ground, bent his legs, and rested his hands, palms upward on his knees. Focused on the Heart Sutra. Repeated the words he'd memorized in the years since she vanished and left him with nothing but dishonor.



One



Chinese Tea House, Maryland

Darci pushed through the heavy red door with the brass dragon handle. On the soft carpet she paused and removed her coat. The hostess looked up from her podium. Her face, with a practiced smile and faked cheeriness, exploded into a genuine welcome. “Darci, so good to see you!”

“And you, Lily.”

The hostess motioned toward the back. “He’s waiting.”

Of course he was. Darci had seen his car in the parking lot. Not that she needed that to know he’d arrived before her. In fact, she was sure he came at least a half hour ahead of schedule every time. He was as cast in his ways as was the porcelain shrine of Buddha sitting behind the central fountain.

Even now, through the opaque rice paper sliding door, she could see her father’s shadowed form. Though she relished their lunches, this would be one she would regret. As she always did when her job took her out of town, away from her father.

Hand on the small handle, Darci took a steadying breath. *Be strong. He loves you. He just doesn’t know how to show it.*

With a quick smile to Lily, who watched with a furrowed brow, Darci slid back the paper door. As she closed it behind her, she slipped off her shoes. The bamboo mat beneath her feet sent a chill up her spine. Afraid to meet his disapproving scowl, she eased onto the empty pillow at the table across from her father.

Darci inclined her head, gaze down as expected. “Sorry I am late,

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Ba.” She wasn’t late, but apologizing seemed to smooth out his frustrations that had taken such strong root in the last few years. Even more so on days like today.

She poured some tea and sipped it, using the little black handleless cup like a shield as she peeked over it to see his face. Hard lines. Burdened lines. The whiskers that framed his mouth were streaked with the paleness of wisdom. Too much for a man his age. There were secrets, family secrets, that he would not share with her. She’d tried to talk of her mother and brother, but they were forbidden subjects.

“You should trim that beard. It makes you look like a grumpy, old Chinese man.”

“That”—his sad eyes met hers for the first time as he lifted his shoulders—“is because I *am* a grumpy, old Chinese man.”

“Li Yung-fa is a kind, gentle soul.” She smiled. “I know. I’m his daughter.” With her spoon, she lifted some rice from the bowl in the middle of the table, her stomach clenching as she watched her father.

The mirth around his eyes faded, the rich brown of his irises seemingly lost in another time. She ached for what he’d lost twenty years ago. What she’d lost. She refused to let their lunch once again take a turn for the depressing. She pushed onward with safer topics.

“How was work this morning?” After setting the pile on her plate, she spooned sauce over it, then chose some beef and broccoli.

“As usual.” His graying goatee flicked as he talked. “Same paperwork. Same mindless games. They waste my abilities. If they would just use me. . .”

So much for safer topics. Darci gave a slow nod. His mood was not encouraging, and when agitated, his already-heavy accent would thicken. No doubt, he would soon spin into full Mandarin, especially with the news she had to deliver. Squeezing some meat and rice between the chopsticks, she lifted the bowl closer.

“Where?”

Darci aimed the first mouthwatering bite toward her lips. “Excuse me?”

The slant in his eyelids pulled taut. “In your eyes rests the weight of the message I see you withhold.”

All these years in America and still he held to the old ways of speaking, as if he were Yoda. She’d teased him without mercy as a teenager, hoping he would be more American. . . less Chinese. Anything to ply a smile out of the rigid face. There had been few smiles then,

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and as of late, even fewer.

Darci set down the bowl and sticks, cupping her hands in her lap, eyes downcast. "I leave tomorrow." She sighed. "I am sorry, Baba. I know this upsets you that I am gone so much."

Shoulders squared, he looked every bit the general he had once been. "Where?"

There was no use lying to him or trying to deceive him. The man worked with some of the highest-ranking officials in the government. If he doubted the veracity of her information, he'd hunt down the truth. Direct, strong, relentless. . . She'd gained a lot of her mother's American features with the fair skin, the European nose, but her father's strong Chinese heritage rang through her long black hair, slightly slanted eyes, and fire-like tenacity.

Which often left her wondering why he had not searched harder for her brother.

An eyebrow bobbed, as if demanding her answer.

"Afghanistan."

A tic jounced in his cheek as it often did when he tried to rein in his emotions. "That is very far."

"More like 'too close to China,' is that it?"

Like a provoked dragon, fire spat from his eyes. His fisted hand pounded the table. "Too far—from here." He thumped his chest. "From me."

Darci lowered her head. "He won't find me, Ba. I will be caref—"

"Like last time?" Fury erupted. "He nearly killed you!"

She would not let this happen again. "*He* is in China. I will be in the mountains. . .nowhere near him or any Chinese." Darci wanted one thing from her father. "Trust me. Believe in me. Yes?"

His whiskers shimmered—twitched. Was his chin bouncing? "I do not want to lose you, Jia!"

Her breath snatched from her lungs. So afraid someone would find them, he had not used her birth name in twenty years. Her superiors had chosen the name for this mission, one she feared would be her last.

Darci placed a hand over his as she crawled around the small square table to his side. She touched his back. "You will not lose me. Not before my time."

His chest rose and fell unevenly. Hands resting on either side of his bowl, he drew back his hands and uncoiled them. After a few seconds, he

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pulled in a long, quiet breath. Then gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“I should only be gone a few weeks.”

Another nod. “What you are doing is good. You serve your country.”

His lip trembled.

An invisible fist reached into her chest and squeezed the organ pumping hard and frantic as she took in all that had just transpired. He'd never been open about his feelings, about his fears. Was it a bad omen?



Two



Texas Hill Country

You'll be tempted to ignore this opportunity, but those marks on your hand have shown you trust that beautiful animal who saved your life. Bring her out. Let her decide if this is right for your team."

Nerves on end, Heath climbed from his truck. Trinity bounded from the bench seat onto the grass that collided with a ten-foot chain-link fence. He pushed the door closed and took in the property that rolled out on each side, as well as the white luxury SUV he'd parked beside.

Trees, some barren of their leaves and others thickly outfitted, and brambles lined the east. A half mile west, a rocky edifice rose a good thirty feet straight up. Twenty feet from his position, within the fenced area, sat training equipment. A complete agility and tactical course set up. Cedar trees hogged the perimeter of the fence. But not a person in sight. He'd half expected someone to emerge from the ranch house perched at the top of the slight incline, but that hadn't happened either.

What on earth?

Rubbing his knuckles along his lips, he hesitated at the unlocked gate. He glanced back down the almost mile-long dirt road that led to the black wrought-iron gate. Sun streamed through the lettering in the arch: A BREED APART. Who was behind this elaborate setup?

"Hello? Anyone here?"

A bitter January wind answered, creaking the branches.

The training facility held too much draw. He let Trinity take in the settings, her attention also focused on the training field. She sniffed

RONIE KENDIG

along the fence line. “What do you think, Trin?”

She returned to him. Trinity swiveled her head back to the front, her black-and-amber coat sparkling in the sun. He smoothed a hand along her dense fur. Her ears perked and her body went rigid.

Heath slanted a look in the direction in which she’d made a hit. A mass of white-blond curls dipped into a beam of sunlight streaming through the cedars as a woman emerged from one of the house-shaped training structures. She glanced back inside and stalled. After much coaxing, a yellow Labrador lumbered from the building.

Anticipation rippled through Trinity’s coat, her muscles taut, all but begging for permission to meet the new dog.

“I know you?” Heath asked. This woman with her gun-shy dog didn’t seem the type to know much about training, let alone his past.

She straightened and came toward the gate. “No, do I know you?” She glanced down at her yellow Lab, who sat off to the side facing away from them, his expressive eyes conveying his skittishness. He hung his head, then flattened himself to the ground.

“You’re the one who invited me here?”

“No, actually,” she said with a smile. “I’m not. My friend Khat lives here with her brother. They invited me.” At the gate, she slipped through and waited for her dog, who had given up about halfway across the yard and lain down. She let out a sigh and turned to Heath with an extended hand. “Aspen Courtland.”

“Heath Daniels. You say you know who owns this place?”

Clap!

Heath jerked toward the wraparound porch and stilled at the figure that emerged from the shadows. “Khouri? No way.”

The low, slow chuckle of a man he knew in the Army rolled through the air as the man strode off the porch. With two legs. How. . .how was that possible? Heath had been there when a Coke-can-turned-IED shattered the guy’s leg and career beyond repair. Just a few months before Heath lost his career, too.

“Hello, Aspen. Khaterah got called out. She’s sorry she couldn’t be here to greet you.”

“No problem,” Courtland said.

Wearing a red knit cap over long brown hair and sporting a thick beard as if he’d never left the field, Jibril Khouri grinned as he met Heath’s gaze again. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

TRINITY: MILITARY WAR DOG

Pulling the guy into a half hug, half back-patting embrace, Heath scrambled to get his bearings. “You always knew how to get my attention.”

“Yes, but you always got the girls. We had to distract you so the rest of us would have a chance.”

Heath shirked the tease and ran a hand over the back of his head, across the scar that changed everything. “Yeah, well, things change.”

“So they do.” Sobered, Jibril stepped back with another pat on Heath’s shoulder, then bent and offered a hand to Trinity. “Hello, girl. Remember me?”

Trinity sniffed his hand, then turned in a circle, her focus locked on the yellow Lab.

“Ah, Trinity has the right idea,” Jibril said with a laugh. “Let’s go into the training area while we wait for our last recruit.”

Uncertainty rooted Heath to the ground. Too many unexplained variables. Too many unknowns. “Khouri, what is this?”

“Now is not the time to be skittish, my friend.” Jibril smiled. “Trust me, just as I trusted you the day Trinity saved my life. Yes?”

Stuffing his frustration and uneasiness, Heath gave a curt nod and followed Jibril, Aspen, and Trinity into the fenced-off area.

“Ah, this is Talon.” Jibril squatted beside the Lab, who lifted his head and cast furtive glances at Jibril. “All the dogs and handlers invited to the ranch today are former military war or working dogs. Talon here has seen more combat than I have. You’ll meet Beowulf and Timbrel Hogan soon—they’re former Navy.”

With a huff, Talon slid down to the ground, propped his lower jaw on his front paws, and let his gaze bounce over the yard. Those eyebrows did more work than his whole body, tracking Trinity around the training grounds. He looked like he was as through with the military as it was with him.

You and me both, buddy.

Tension bunched at the base of Heath’s neck. He stretched it. “So.” He shifted his attention to Aspen. “You’ve seen combat?” That was hard to believe.

“I was Air Force, but no, I haven’t seen combat.” She must’ve seen his confusion. “My brother was his handler. He went MIA and Talon was declared ‘excess.’”

MIA often meant dead. Not enough body parts to ship home. Heath now understood the Lab’s reaction. Trinity had pretty much done