

(This is an Advance Uncorrected Excerpt.)

Friday, Late August

Chapter 1

Deputy Mattie Lu Cobb liked her new partner. In fact, she was quite taken with him. She enjoyed being with him, something she'd found lacking with previous partners, and they seemed compatible. She hoped she could learn to trust him.

She wondered what trust would feel like.

Pulling her cruiser up to a stop sign, Mattie stole a quick glance. Born in Russia, he was a handsome guy: straight black hair, intense brown eyes, and white teeth that flashed when he grinned. Large and muscular, strong and rugged, he was the only one in the department who could outrun her in a cross-country foot race.

In addition to all that, he could sniff out a missing person.

He was Timber Creek County's new police service dog, a German shepherd named Robo. Together, Mattie and Robo made up the first K-9 unit ever mobilized in the small town of Timber Creek, Colorado.

Mattie turned right onto Main Street and accelerated, heading toward the town's only high school. Timber Creek High sat at the end of the nine blocks that made up Main, its backside nestled against the edge of a hogback called Smokers' Hill by students past and present. She was supposed to meet with Sheriff McCoy and John Brennaman, the school principal to discuss

setting up a K-9 inspection program for the school.

Thinking about the meeting set up a swirl of dread that churned in her gut. Her meetings with Mr. Brennaman during her junior year of high school had been decidedly unpleasant.

Would he remember her?

She resisted checking her appearance in the rear view mirror. Usually, she didn't care much about her looks. Her skin, hair, and eyes could be summed up with brown, brown, and brown. And usually, she didn't care that her square chin made her look stubborn and belligerent. Both were true. Today she'd taken time to style her short-cut, wispy hair, so that it softened her features somewhat, and she hoped to send a message to Mr. Brennaman that she'd grown up and was now a different person.

She looked over at Robo. He panted and yawned, his tongue forming a pink curl.

"Whatcha think about how we look?"

Deepening his yawn, Robo's throat squeaked.

"Yeah, I agree. Who cares?"

As she drove, Mattie scanned the streets and sidewalk out of habit. She cruised slowly past Crane's Market, its stucco walls the color of Pepto Bismol.

"So, Robo, you're going to school, huh?"

Facing front with his ears pricked, Robo stood on the gray carpeted platform that replaced the back seat of the Ford Taurus. He looked much more excited than Mattie would ever be about school. But that was Robo. He was one of those dogs that K-9 officers referred to as a high drive, alpha male. It didn't take much to get him excited.

She couldn't believe how her life had changed. It started when she won the assignment of being Robo's handler by beating her colleagues in a cross-country endurance test. The twelve

weeks she'd spent at K-9 Academy were among the best weeks of her life. She'd loved everything about it—learning how to work with and care for the dogs, mixing with the other handlers, learning from the trainers.

Static erupted from the cruiser's radio, followed by the dispatcher's voice: "K-9 One, copy."

Mattie noted her position. She was approaching the Water Hole Bar and Grill. She picked up the transmitter and pressed it on. "Fifth Street and Main. Go ahead."

Rainbow Anderson, the daughter of two hippies who'd settled in Timber Creek sometime during the sixties and the county's improbable dispatcher, responded. "K-9 One, we need you to respond to a 10-88 in progress. Well...it's not in progress this very minute, but...well, I guess you would call this a 10-88 that already happened. Over."

"What suspicious activity? Where? Just say it, Rainbow."

"Up Ute Canyon Road about ten miles. A forest ranger called in a request to investigate suspicious activity and a blood spill."

A blood spill? Hunting out of season? "I'm en route to Timber Creek High School to meet with Sheriff McCoy. What's my priority?"

"The principal called to cancel the meeting at the school earlier. Sorry I didn't call you, but I didn't know you were going, too. Sheriff McCoy is heading up the canyon now."

"Okay."

"Go, code two, up Ute Canyon Road. Ten miles from Ute Canyon turn-off, look for a two-track that veers left and leads to an old hunting cabin."

Mattie signaled a right turn so she could head for the highway. The sheriff obviously thought this could be something important.

"Copy. Show me en route to Ute Canyon. Over."

Code two meant normal response without emergency lights and siren, but she quickly brought the cruiser up to speed. Sheriff McCoy might want her to search for evidence. If so, the sooner she got there, the better, before any of her fellow deputies could unwittingly contaminate the crime scene.

The dread she'd been feeling all morning changed to excitement. When drug traffic through national forest threatened Timber Creek, local merchants and ranchers had purchased a patrol dog for the sheriff's department. This would be her first K-9 assignment since the academy, and she couldn't wait to get started.

Robo huffed a quick bark. In the rearview mirror, Mattie saw him wag his tail and shift from side to side on his front paws. *He must have caught hold of her mood.*

"You know you're going to work, don't you?"

Robo whined, licked the air, and stared out the windshield. At the academy, he'd outperformed all of the other dogs. The few times he'd screwed up, it had been her fault; doing things like not paying close enough attention to his body language, not trusting his instincts. It seemed like she needed training more than Robo. Nervousness tightened her shoulders. The others would be watching. That put pressure on a dog—not to mention the handler—and it could be distracting.

The cruiser ate up the miles and they reached the turn-off to Ute Canyon Road in no time. Leaving the smooth highway behind, she turned onto a hard-packed dirt road covered with loose gravel. It led upward into a canyon that cut through the mountains. She slowed for sharp curves, holding the steering wheel steady as the cruiser rattled over rough areas ribbed with washboard.

Willow and mountain juniper gave way to forests of towering pine: ponderosa with their

sweeping boughs and great stands of stately lodgepole. She rolled down the front windows so she could take in the soothing forest scent to help settle her nerves.

Robo pushed forward to sniff, thrusting his nose through the heavy wire mesh that separated his compartment from the rest of the vehicle. He bobbed his head, obviously getting a nose-full. She could tell from the satisfied look on his face that Robo enjoyed the scent of the forest as much as she did.

Mattie kept checking the odometer while Ute Canyon climbed ever upward. Five miles into the canyon, huge potholes threatened to swallow a wheel entirely. She steered around them, keeping to the middle of the road when she could. Leaving the canyon floor, the road clung to the side of the mountain and rose toward the peaks. Its edge, where there was rarely any guardrail, dropped off in a fifty-foot plunge.

By the time the odometer indicated she'd driven nine miles from the turn off, the road narrowed to little more than one lane. She started up a steep rise, keeping watch for a two-track road that would veer off to the left. She hoped she hadn't missed it.

At the top of the rise, she could see dense evergreen forest that stretched for miles and miles in an undulating mountain panorama. A hundred yards farther, she spotted the two-track winding away through the trees.

"There it is, Robo. I think we've found it."

Robo waved his tail, but kept his eyes on the view outside the windshield.

Mattie slowed to creep forward as she directed the cruiser off the road and down into the ditch to access the two-track. When the roadbed scraped the bottom of the car, they lurched sideways, sending Robo skidding across his platform, though he remained on his feet.

"Sorry about that."

Again, Robo went to the window and sniffed.

After a couple minutes of rough driving, Mattie spotted the sheriff's Jeep and another cruiser parked in front of an old cabin. She'd found the right place. Slowly, she bumped over the rocks in the track and pulled up beside the Jeep.

Sheriff McCoy stepped out of the cabin onto a plank porch, followed by a woman wearing a forest ranger's uniform. Abraham McCoy was a big man, built solid as a tree trunk, with massive shoulders and a thick neck. He had skin the color of a Hershey bar, dark walnut eyes, and a bushy black mustache. He'd grown up in Timber Creek and attended the town high school, just like Mattie, but about fifteen years ahead of her.

Rumor had it that McCoy could have gone to any number of universities on a football scholarship, but he'd chosen to commute to a local junior college instead so he could help his mother care for his ailing father and younger siblings. He'd been a deputy for years before the county electorate voted him in as sheriff.

The first time Mattie met McCoy, she'd been a six-year-old kid, scared to death. Her world and family had just been shattered. He was a young deputy. She could still remember the sad look on his face as he picked her up and carried her to his patrol car. For a moment, she'd felt safe, enfolded in his arms against his solid chest. For one moment.

She switched off the cruiser's engine. Getting out of the vehicle, she told Robo, "You're going to wait here."

He protested with a short *yip*.

In return, Mattie gave him a look that apparently quelled any further urges to kick up a fuss. She walked toward McCoy, meeting him halfway between her car and the cabin.

He introduced the ranger. "This is Sandy Benson of the US Forest Service. She called us

up here.”

Benson gave Mattie a firm handshake. She was a strongly built woman, muscular, a little taller than Mattie’s average height. A broad brimmed ranger’s hat sheltered her auburn hair and fair skin. Her hazel eyes held a look of concern.

“I was telling the sheriff that I saw a pickup truck and dog trailer up here last week. I stopped to talk to the guy, and he said he was doing some search and rescue training with his dogs. Seemed different, him being up here alone. Usually that’s done in groups. But he wasn’t obviously breaking any laws, so I left him to it. When I passed by here this morning, I noticed the same rig.”

McCoy added a detail. “You say that was about eight-fifteen this morning.”

Benson nodded. “I went up Old Flowers Trail to clear some deadfall. About an hour later, I heard a shot coming from this direction. And then a little while later, another shot. By the time I hiked down the trail and drove back here, the rig was gone. I decided to take a look and found a large blood stain on the porch.” She shrugged, spreading a hand out front. “I had no idea what to think, but with the narcotics problems we’ve been having around here lately, I thought I’d better call you guys.”

Coming from inside the cabin, Chief Deputy Ken Brody joined them. Tall, athletic, and built like a wedge, Brody had been Mattie's biggest challenge in the cross-country test to determine Robo's new handler. In fact, Mattie knew he could have whipped her butt if they’d been running on a track. But Brody's center of gravity had been too high to maintain his speed going downhill. Mattie was built lower to the ground with decently muscled hips and powerful legs. It gave her an edge over the other runners.

Brody took an aggressive stance, straightening his back, squaring his shoulders, and

tucking his thumbs into his belt, his right hand cupping his holstered handgun. He narrowed his eyes, ice blue beneath black brows, and stared at Mattie.

She straightened her shoulders and stared back, looking away only when McCoy spoke.

“Ranger Benson recorded the license plate number on the vehicle last week. We tried to run the plate but we can’t connect to the internet up here.”

“There’s nothing inside the cabin,” Brody said. “Floor’s been swept, no footprints. Seems strange for it to be so clean.”

“Yes, that’s odd. Why would someone clean up after themselves?” McCoy said.

“Poaching deer out of season?”

Brody dipped his head in a barely perceptible nod, one of Brody's macho moves that Mattie imagined he practiced in a mirror. “Maybe.”

“I thought that might be a possibility,” Benson said, “but it seems strange for the blood to be up on the porch like that. I doubt if an animal would get shot and bleed out up there.”

Ed Johnson, a rookie who'd joined the department while Mattie was at Academy, came from around the cabin, eyes to the ground. Still in orientation, he'd been riding patrol with Brody. Built like a runner, tall and slender, he had sandy hair and a face full of freckles.

"Find anything out back?" McCoy asked him.

Johnson walked up to join them. "No, nothing but dog tracks."

"Any trash? No items left behind?" Mattie asked.

"No."

McCoy turned to Mattie. “I want you to take your dog and see if you can detect anything we've missed.”

"Do you have something in mind specifically?"

Brody spoke, his voice soft, his words slowly paced as though he were addressing someone of limited intelligence. "If we did, we wouldn't need the dog to look for it, now would we?"

Mattie didn't bother to reply. It had to have been Brody's seniority that had landed him the Chief Deputy position; she couldn't imagine his personality ever winning him anything.

McCoy didn't acknowledge Brody's comment either. "I'd like you to search for anything that could help me decide which direction to go with this. Do we have a crime here or not? Is there any detection of narcotics?"

"I'll get on it."

As Mattie walked back to her vehicle, she saw Robo dancing and grinning in the back. She knew how he felt, and when she reached the car door, she could show all of her excitement and more. It was part of the job.

"Come on, big guy. It's time to go to work." Mattie used a higher pitched voice, something she'd been taught that would rev-up his prey drive and get him ready to search. "Do you want to go to work, Robo? Do ya?"

She opened the door and Robo bailed out. He pranced around at her feet, eyes watching her every move and tail waving. He followed her to the trunk of the car.

"Let's get out your things."

Though it probably wasn't necessary, she kept up a running patter while she unpacked their equipment. Already, Robo could barely contain himself. His trainer had used techniques involving reward and play to train him, and this, combined with a shepherd's natural instinct to assist humans, made Robo love his job. Although he still received rewards to reinforce certain skills, she could tell that the work itself was probably all the reward he needed.

Mattie paused for a moment to walk Robo over to some bushes. "Take a break," she told him, her signal for him to relieve himself. Nothing slowed the momentum of a search like an unplanned potty stop.

She placed Robo's water bowl on the ground, and he slurped a few times. Moisture enhanced a dog's sense of smell. Robo stood still while she put a blue nylon tracking harness on him and exchanged his everyday collar for one that he wore specifically for evidence detection. She clipped a short blue leash to the active ring.

His work collar in place, Robo's attitude switched from happy-go-lucky to all-business. It happened every time, but the abrupt change still amazed Mattie. He stood at attention, ears forward, watching her prepare.

Typically she dressed in a khaki coverall with an arm patch bearing the county emblem. Today, for the meeting at the high school, she'd dressed in her best uniform. Not ideal, but it couldn't be helped, and she decided not to give it a second thought. She strapped on a utility belt bearing several loops and pouches, all packed with her own equipment: a whistle, water and energy food, compass, portable radio, small first aid kit, short strips of blaze-orange flagging tape to mark trails or evidence, and most importantly, a tennis ball for Robo to play with at the end of a successful exercise or mission.

Mattie tied an eighteen inch strip of orange flagging tape to her wrist. It fluttered lightly, telling her that a mild breeze came from the south, across the face of the hill they were standing on, the same direction from which they'd come. She needed to start her evidence search downwind, north of the area in front of the cabin, so she wouldn't contaminate the crime scene herself. She led Robo past the group of men who were still standing near the porch.

"Go to it, Cobb," Brody said as she passed.

His words could've been construed as encouragement, but Mattie knew him better than that. She'd worked with him for seven years, ever since she'd been a rookie herself. Brody tried to appear friendly at times, but she'd learned never to trust it. She ignored him, along with the quiver that had started up in her belly.

Once she reached the spot where she wanted to start, she knelt beside Robo, forced back her stage fright, and focused on her dog. She ruffled the thick, silky fur around his neck.

"Are you ready to work, Robo? Are you ready to find something?"

He gazed into her eyes, and the world faded away. Mattie knew he wouldn't let her down. He knew what to do, and so did she.

She unhooked the leash from the active ring on his collar and transferred it to the dead ring so that she wouldn't inadvertently give him an obedience signal. Standing, she gestured toward the ground in front of him and gave the command specifically used for evidence detection: "Seek."

She expected Robo to put his nose down and start working a grid. They'd done it before in training.

But he didn't.

Robo raised his head and sniffed the breeze, then turned to stare at her, his body rigid, his ears pricked.

Mattie's heart rose to her throat. Was Robo refusing her command? Dismay immobilized her for a few seconds.

"Good dog you got there, Cobb."

"Back off, Brody," Sheriff McCoy said. He nodded at Mattie. "Take your time, Deputy."

She started to reissue the seek command, but swallowed the word when comprehension

hit her. Robo wasn't being disobedient. He was showing her a full alert.

But a full alert for what? Drugs? Something in the forest?

Should she force him to walk the grid like she'd intended, and he could indicate what he'd found when they came to it?

Robo must have known what she was thinking. He walked to the end of his leash and looked south, upwind into the forest. He turned to look at her, his posture stiff and ears forward, his eyes drilling into hers.

Now what the hell do I do? Lead or follow?