

# SURGE

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## **SURGE**

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# Chapter 1

The old 1970's model farm truck with wooden rails built and mounted on the sides, looked as if it could quit at any minute. The truck rocked back and forth across the dirt road in Northern Mexico, creeping slowly in the darkness heading for the border. It carried a load of twenty people who had purchased their freedom in Mexico and were traveling in hopes of reaching America.

They were quiet as they sat with their own thoughts. Some of the people were families, some were couples, and some were coyotes that had made the trip many times traveling into and out of Mexico smuggling people for a hefty price.

Those that were seeking a new life for their families knew that if they got caught trying to cross the border, that the worst thing that would happen is that they would be returned to Mexico. And they would continue to try until finally they would succeed.

Pedro Sanchez was a regular at going back and forth across the border. He knew the route like the back of his hand. His first trip

across the border was in 1956, as a child with his family. He had grown up in America as a forged citizen. His father made his living smuggling items into and out of America. Of course he didn't see it as a crime, but a way of life. Most Mexicans believed that Texas was still part of their country anyway. To them, a piece of paper would never change that fact. There were groups of Mexicans that had been planning for years, the downfall of America. They were all tied together and operated as one, positioned in different parts of the United States.

Pedro was one of those people. He was a leader of one of the groups positioned in Arkansas. There were three other men on the truck that were riding along with Pedro, his protectors. They acted as if they didn't know each other. Their papers had been forged so as to not link the men if they were caught trying to cross the border. Since the group had some of the U. S. border guards in their pocket, it was usually no problem for them to cross the border, as the guards looked the other way.

Pedro had seen the explosion of growth of the group in recent years with the addition of some of the Islamic extremists. The only obstacle standing in their way was Columbia, which was only a matter of time. The routine smuggling route started with Iran. They supplied the weapons to Venezuela in pieces. From there, they would travel through Colombia, make their way into Mexico and right up into the United States where the pieces of the puzzle would be distributed and reassembled at the final destination.

Like a football being passed from one player to the other until finally a touchdown, Pedro thought to himself. He did like that American game.

The truck slowed down and then screeched to a halt. The passengers on the truck had received instructions before the trip. "When the truck stops, run," the driver said.

Pedro was ready. He and the three men jumped from the truck and ran. They knew the trails and lay of the land. When they got closer to the border, Pedro and the men looked to see if their man was in place. He was and their crossing was uneventful as they squeezed through the barb wire and ran quietly back across the border.

Freedom, thought Pedro.

The word Freedom meant something different to the Mexican people. "Free, dumb." If a Mexican made it into America, everything

was free; food, electricity, clothes, housing, education for their children, transportation, and medical care. And Americans were dumb enough to allow it, with their politicians on Capital Hill passing new legislation every day, Pedro thought. And Pedro had been watching the events unfolding in America. He smiled to himself at his brilliant idea as he walked along the dirt road.

When 9-11 happened, Americans awoke from their slumber. They were outraged at the attack on their untouchable country, Pedro thought. The people of America waved their little flags and came together and protested. Pedro sneered thinking about how ridiculous it was. Words, what good were they? The terrorists didn't care about the words of the Americans. Neither did he.

It didn't take long for the American people to return to their old patterns. Once again they were oblivious to things going on around them, not caring about anyone but themselves. Pedro knew that once they returned to their old habits and it was business as usual, it would be easy to put his plan in motion.

But he had to get in to see the men in charge. He knew that he had to bring his brilliant plan to the leaders. It was just pure luck that he learned that his uncle was a friend of a friend of one of the leaders. It hadn't been easy, but he convinced his uncle to help him arrange a meeting with Salvatore Ramirez.

Pedro thought back to the day that he met with Ramirez. He was impressed with the back door approach that Pedro talked about. It was going to take some planning, restructuring their group, and a lot of money. The Group had the money, Pedro had the plan, and over the past few years the group had recruited new members to grow their organization to pull his plan off.

Merging their Mexican group with a Muslim group was something that hadn't been done before. The Muslim group liked the plan even if they despised the Mexican people. The average American person could not even tell a Muslim from a Mexican if they passed one on the street.

Pedro had seen as the red dots continued to grow in numbers and take over American businesses. Hotels and gas stations. People had to sleep. And people had to have gas. Members of the merged group began to purchase gas stations and hotels. Americans had gotten conditioned to the diverse mixture of people, so it would be easy to do

right under their noses. These businesses were not purchased to make money, but as tools, to topple the big giant.

Mexican members of the merged group sought out jobs on farms and went to work, business as usual. There they would obtain some of the materials that the group would use to bring the United States to its knees. A stump blaster, Ammonium Nitrate, a simple fertilizer mixed with kerosene which they purchased at the local hardware store, and a fuse. Boom.

Salvatore shook his head. “We would need a lot of it to be effective. It might raise suspicion.” Pedro explained the rest of the plan.

“If we already own the gas stations, a little bomb in a big tank of gas will create a very big explosion, with enough chaos to divert attention to the big plan. At the same time, set off a small bomb in the hotels and we create more chaos. These businesses will be purchased in major cities. The ammonium nitrate will be taken a little at a time from the farms across America and then delivered to our strategic locations in the cities. We would then synchronize the exact date and time for our members to detonate their packages all across America. As we have seen in the past, America does not react well to an attack on their soil. Their police and emergency system would collapse. Then the biggest blow of all would bring them down. An Electromagnetic Pulse,” he finished excitedly.

Salvatore sat watching Pedro as he played the scenario in his head. It was possible. It would be very difficult to obtain the EMP technology. But if it could be done, Salvatore was all for it. And so it began.

Salvatore returned home to Mexico and began to make inquiries. He approached the Muslim groups that had joined them and they began to help in the search for the materials needed for the EMP.

And then, when a Muslim was elected to the highest office, Pedro knew it was time. The American people had just thanked the Muslims for bombing their country, without saying a word. This new president was definitely changing America. Some people thought that he was a member of the Trilateral Commission, an organization led by some of the wealthiest people in the world, seeking a New World Order. For that to happen, the old way of doing things would have to be extinguished. This new president was doing a bang up job. Trillions of dollars printed to “bail out” some of the largest

Corporations in the world. Food prices were rising, millions of people were out of work and homeless. Tent cities dotted landscapes now as people were forced out of their homes.

Pedro began to laugh, breaking the silence that he and his men had endured for the past six hours. Pedro just couldn't believe that the American people didn't see it. His laughter grew as he thought about it. He began to skip and dance around, as he and his men walked along the path leading to their pick up destination. The three other men glanced over at their leader and kept walking. Soon they began to laugh with him, not knowing what the joke was. Pedro's laughter grew until he was crying, thinking of the other men being so clueless. Just like the American people, the joke was on them.

And soon when all was said and done, he would reclaim his country and return it to his people.



## Chapter 2

The six year old boy crouched in the dark woods, holding his breath and listening to the approaching sound of footsteps moving closer to him. He struggled to be silent as the sweat trickled down his cheek and dripped onto a leaf, sounding like a rock splashing into a lake. The July heat was nearly unbearable. He waved a mosquito away from his ear just as the puppy came into view with his tail wagging, happy to see the boy.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Simon said to his sister. “You cheated!”

“It’s not my fault that we have waaay too many dogs.” Cassie said as she walked up behind the puppy. The puppy began sniffing the ground, and was soon following a curious trail behind her. The fifteen year old girl was not happy to be babysitting her little brother on a Friday night. She was even less happy about playing hide and seek in the creepy woods.

“Time to head back and get ready for bed,” she said.

“I’m not sleepy,” Simon protested.

“Yeah right, I’ll beat you to the house,” Cassie said as she turned to run.

“Hey! Wait! Where is Max?” Simon asked his sister. In a split second, the pup had disappeared. Cassie gasped, stopped in her tracks and turned around to look for the German shepherd puppy. He was nowhere to be seen.

Mom will be furious if she finds out that she lost one of her clients dogs, she thought.

“Oh great!” Mom is gonna kill us if we don’t find that dog!

“You lost him!”

“Shut up!” she said, reaching into her front pants pocket to retrieve her cell phone, but it wasn’t there.

“Great,” she said.

“It was your bright idea to bring him. Next time, why don’t you bring one of our dogs?” Simon said to his sister, being the obnoxious little brother.

“Help me look for the mutt.” She snarled at him through clenched teeth.

“Max, come. Here pup,” Cassie called the pup, making her way deeper into the woods.

“C’mon puppy,” Simon called behind Cassie.

After an hour of walking and calling to the puppy, they were getting tired.

“I need a break,” Cassie said to her brother as she sat down on the ground. He fell to the ground next to her and leaned over on her. “I’m sleepy,” he told her.

“So am I.” Her voice softened as she reached over to hug him to her. She didn’t want him know that they were lost.

The mosquitoes seemed to follow them everywhere. Cassie swatted at the biting insects, trying to keep them off of Simon.

“Okay, let’s head back to the house. Maybe Max went home,” she said, rising from the ground.

She started out at a slow jog pulling Simon with her as she went and pushing the limbs out to the way in front of them. Simon struggled to keep up with his sister.

“Stop, Cassie! You’re going the wrong way!” Simon snatched his hand from hers and walked over to a tree and sat down.

“I’m thirsty,” he said sleepily.

Cassie was out of breath when she stopped running. She looked around her, unsure of which direction to take. Nothing looked familiar to her. Her heart began to race with fear. She slowed her breathing and tried to calm herself.

Why couldn't we live in New York City or Boston? Why on a farm in the deep woods of Arkansas? One day, I will leave this place and I will never come back, she thought to herself, as she joined Simon on the ground.

"Okay, we will rest for a few minutes," she said to her little brother. Even though they argued a lot, they were still close. Sometimes when their mother was gone on a business trip Simon would sneak into her room in the middle of the night and crawl into bed with her. She would awaken the next morning to him pressed up against her back.

She pulled him onto her lap, hugged him to her and leaned back against the tree. She sat listening to the sounds of the woods until finally sleep overcame her.

Cassie awoke with a start. She heard something in the woods. She gently woke Simon from his deep sleep. "Shhh, be quiet," she whispered before bringing her finger up to her lips and motioning for him to be quiet and to listen.

There were voices in the distance. They sounded foreign and she couldn't make out everything that they were saying. "...see you... ..September.....have everything....Nitrate.....Pedro..." Cassie wondered who they were and why they were in the middle of the woods talking like they just ran into each other at the store or something. Cassie and Simon waited quietly, still as statues, afraid to show themselves. She could feel his heart beating rapidly. She rubbed his arm and smiled at him, trying to reassure him that everything would be okay. A few minutes later they heard two cars start and then drive away.

There was a road.

"Come on." Cassie pushed Simon to his feet and grabbed his hand. The boy was like a zombie as he put one foot in front of the other, following his sister.

"I can't Cassie," the boy whined. "I'm too tired."

"Okay," she said as she crouched down in front of him and turned her back to him. "Climb on."

She carried him on her back for half a mile. It was just past midnight. She was tired, every bone in her body hurt and she had blisters on her heels.

When they started their game of hide and seek, they had walked down to the small pond on the south side of their farm. When they arrived at the road, they had traveled two miles south of their farm and were in the National forest that joined their land. Now, with the moon shining, Cassie could see the entrance to their driveway in the distance.

How was she going to explain this? She had lost a clients dog. Their mother was not going to be happy about it. Not to mention, taking Simon out in the woods in the middle of the night. The boy thought he was Daniel Boone already.

She was in big trouble.

Cassie heard a vehicle approaching from behind them just over the hill. Frightened that the men may have returned, she turned and headed off the road and into the woods.

“Simon, get down,” she told her brother as she let him slide off her back onto the ground.

“I’m scared Cassie! Are they gonna shoot us?” he asked fearfully with big eyes.

“No. Be quiet,” she commanded, before pulling him into a crouching position behind a tree to wait for what looked to be a truck to pass.

The truck slowed down and slowly moved along the road until it reached the area where Cassie and Simon had hurried into the woods. The truck stopped and someone stepped out. The man had a flashlight and was shining it into the woods. He had seen them, thought Cassie.

“Cassie? Simon?” Ethan called out to his children. Cassie sighed with relief and dread at the same time.

“Daddy!” Simon sprang up and ran to his father. Ethan lifted him up into his arms and held him close.

Cassie hobbled out of the woods just in time to see the puppy in the truck looking out of the window.

“I’m sorry Dad,” she said.

He reached out and hugged her to him.

“Let’s get home,” he said. Ethan carried Simon to the truck and placed him in the passenger seat next to Cassie and shut the door.

Simon leaned over on his sister, touched her arm and turned his face up to her. “Who is Pedro?” Simon mumbled sleepily and drifted off to sleep.



## Chapter 3

**R**achel slowly pulled the van to a stop and turned the engine off. She stretched her arms out to her side and arched her back. “I’m getting too old for this,” she said to Zeus, her German shepherd dog seated in the passenger seat.

At age forty-two she looked ten years younger. Her 5’7” slim build with golden brown hair and green eyes made men turn and look twice when she walked by. She had never thought much about her beauty, she was too busy living and raising her four children.

She reached down for her purse and opened the door to the van, leaving the keys in the ignition. “Watch it, Zeus” she told the dog. Her long legs carried her into the service station. The cashier behind the counter looked foreign. Maybe from India she thought to herself. “I’m filling up on pump four,” she told him.

“Have a goooood day,” he said in his foreign drawl, after she handed him a hundred dollar bill. She returned to her van and pumped the gas. When she finished pumping the gas and returned from getting

her change, she got into the van and moved it over to the side of the gas station.

Zeus was ready to get out of the van. After four hours on the road, everyone was ready to stretch their legs. Rachel went to the back of the van and opened the doors to the six German shepherd dogs that were in their crates. All of the dogs started barking with their tails wagging. They knew the routine. Time to pee, get fresh water and return to their crates for the remainder of the trip home. She opened the first two crates that held Sasha and Sarah. The two dogs jumped out of the van and stood standing anxiously, waiting for her command. “Go potty” she said to the two dogs who then bounded towards the grassy area.

As she stood waiting for the other dogs to finish, she was aware of people nearby watching the beautiful dogs. Often times she was approached by strangers with questions and children wanting to pet the dogs.

When they were finished doing their business, each dog ran to the van and returned to their crate, just in time for Rachel to hear Zeus growling. She shut the doors and walked around to the driver side of the van to see a man approaching.

“Hello, I’m Mitch Carlson,” he said, extending his hand towards her. “I met you a few months back at Governor Russell’s party, in Dallas.” Zeus began to bark frantically, worried about Rachel. She let him continue to bark as she shook the man’s hand.

“Yes, I remember,” she said, remembering that his date was a drop dead gorgeous supermodel who she couldn’t quite name.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee? I might have a business proposal for you,” he shouted over the barking dog, and motioned towards the small diner next to the service station.

“Zeus, wait,” she commanded the dog to be quiet, and he did.

“Sure. Let me finish up and I’ll be right over,” she said.

“Okay. I’ll order our coffee,” he said and turned to go to the diner.

Rachel couldn’t help but notice the way that he walked with a long confident stride. He was over six feet tall, with dark brown hair and blue eyes that seemed to look right into your soul.

She finished giving Zeus water and then reached up to the air conditioner that was in the ceiling of the van, and turned it on until she returned.

Mitch watched her as she crossed the parking lot. Her hair was pulled up in a pony tail and she had on her sunglasses. She looked like she was dressed for the gym, in shorts and tennis shoes. He remembered seeing her at the party with her husband Ethan Reed. Too bad she's married, he thought to himself.

She slid into the booth across from him and asked, "So, what can I do for you Mr. Carlson?"

"Please, call me Mitch. I am looking for a dog trainer that might have some dogs for sale. Do you have any?" he asked, picking up the coffee pot and reaching over to pour her a cup.

"What type of trainer are you looking for?" she asked.

"Someone, who can train a dog for ranch work. We are looking for a few dogs, trained in herding, with basic obedience and some protection work," Mitch said.

"I see. Well, we have a kennel with around forty dogs that are in training for obedience, protection, herding, tracking or assistance work. I have some dogs that will be available soon," she said. "You are welcome to come out and take a look at what we have to offer or I can send you a video."

"That sounds great. I'd like to take a look at your kennel," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"You are a long way from the border. What brings you up this way? Rachel asked. She remembered that he lived near the Mexico border.

"I came up to buy some Angus heifers."

"How many head of cattle do you run?"

"We have around two thousand head."

Rachel leaned back in the booth and laughed. "That is a lot of cows," she said, shaking her head, trying to imagine what his life must be like. "You may need more than just a few dogs," she said smiling.

My god, what a smile, he thought.

"You are probably right," he smiled back at her, amused that she thought that two thousand was a lot of cows.

"So, how do you know Governor Russell?" she asked him.

"My brother William knows him. He couldn't make it to the party and asked me to go to represent our family," he explained.

"And you?" he asked.

"He is my Godfather," she said proudly. "He and Lisa took me under their wings when I was a teenager."

“It is amazing that he became Governor and that little known fact was kept quiet,” he said. He had voted for the man and liked that he stood for stronger immigration and little gun control.

“He is a very private man that puts his family first,” she said smiling.

Mitch could see that she loved the Governor very much.

“Were you his campaign manager? You sold me. And for the record, I voted for the man,” Mitch laughed.

They continued to talk and before they knew it, almost two hours had passed. Rachel glanced at her watch.

“I have got to hit the road,” she said standing.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said, dropping some cash on the table.

They walked to her van slowly and Mitch realized that he had enjoyed talking to her and was not looking forward to parting ways.

“Let me get you a business card,” she said, opening the driver side door and reaching into her purse. Mitch stepped back a step, unsure of the dog in the van. She handed Mitch the business card while Zeus kept his eyes on the stranger.

“We live two hours from here” she told him. “Give me a call tomorrow and I will be glad to arrange a meeting.” She extended her hand to him. Mitch grasped her warm hand in his and felt the strength behind her grip. She released his hand and smiled as she stepped up and into the van. He glanced down at the card and read her name. “Will do, Ms. Reed,” he said.

He turned to walk back to his car as Rachel shut the door to the van. She turned the key in the ignition and put it into gear. She was anxious to get home as she returned to the road and her thoughts.

As she drove, she thought about Mitch Carlson. She knew that he was a widower, and he had lost his wife and child some years back. There had been many rumors that he was about to marry over the years, but it had never happened. What she didn’t get was why he hadn’t remarried. He was a good looking man and she couldn’t believe that someone hadn’t snatched him up.

Rachel’s thoughts were interrupted by her buzzing cell phone. She reached for it and flipped it open. “Hey Ethan,” she said to her ex-husband. “Hey baby. Where are you?” he asked.

“Just outside of town,” she said. “I should be home in about twenty minutes,” she told him.

“How was the show?”

“We did great. Sasha won winners bitch, Sarah won her class, and the puppies placed in their classes. I can’t complain.”

“That sounds good. Well, we had a scare last night,” Ethan began. He told her about Cassie and Simon and their big adventure.

“Luckily, Max came home by himself.” Ethan told her how he had loaded the pup into the truck and set out to find the children and how scared the two of them looked when he finally found them.

“Thank God that everything worked out!” Rachel said knowing that they could have easily disappeared into the National forest.

“Yeah, we need to have a talk with the two of them. Hurry home, we missed you,” he said.

Rachel flipped her phone shut and tossed it up onto the dashboard.

She was eighteen years old, when she met Ethan. After graduating from the Ellison Institute, she was home for the summer before going on to College. One Friday night, she had gone into a nightclub where her mother was at with her friend Cindy, and sat down with them at the bar. Rachel looked older for her age, so she ordered a drink. Ethan, the bartender, asked to see her I.D. She was underage but he didn’t know that. He just wanted to find out her name. She handed him her license, and with one eyebrow raised, she leaned her head to the side flashed him a smile and asked, “How about that drink now?” She knew that he would serve her the drink, even though she was underage. He put the khamakazi onto the counter and smiled back at the beautiful girl.

She turned up the shot, swallowed and gritted her teeth. “Keep them coming,” she said slapping the counter with the glass and turning the bar stool around to follow the older women to a table. As soon as she sat down, a man twice her age walked over and asked her to dance. As soon as they finished and she sat down again, someone else would ask her. Ethan watched from the bar until she finally sat down to rest. He decided that now was his chance, as he looked at his watch and told Ron the other bartender to take over.

“Don’t do it man,” Ron warned him. Ethan laughed and finished mixing the watered down drink and walked over to Rachel. He sat it down in front of Rachel. “Can I have this dance?” he asked. “Sure” she said carefully standing up. They danced the next three songs and when his break was over, he told her that he had to get back to work, as he walked her back to her table. She sat down and Rachel

leaned over to Cindy and said “That is the man I’m going to marry.” Cindy began to laugh and shook her head, thinking it was time to get the girl home.

Ethan and Rachel started dating the summer before her first year of college. He was five years older, and they were crazy about each other. He was working his way through college, studying to become an engineer and was in his last year. He was smart, good looking and funny. On their first date Rachel asked him if he liked dogs and he said he did. She laughed and told him that she “just couldn’t date a guy that didn’t like dogs.”

By the end of the summer, Rachel knew that she was in love with Ethan. They had spent a lot of time together and when she was about to leave for college, she decided that it was time that he learned about her family.



## Chapter 4

**B**ritta Hardin, with her long grey hair neatly braided and twisted up on her head, sat on the church pew with Rachel's head leaned over on her shoulder. She had come to love this girl as her own, even though she was just her Nanny. Britta had miscarried two children in the early 1930's before the doctor told her she could never have children of her own. After her husband died, Britta returned home to her family land in southern Alabama to live out her days.

In 1968, a new subdivision had been built across the street from Britta. One of the families, the Gleason's, consisted of Kenneth and Mary with their four children Jeanie 12, Kenny 8, Samuel 4, and Rachel 2. She had watched the four children playing outside for a few weeks before she went over to introduce herself to the family. Not long after, Mrs. Gleason asked Britta to move in with them to be their Nanny.

She agreed with one stipulation. She was to have Sunday and Wednesday off for church. On those days Jeanie would watch the two boys while Britta would bring the baby with her to church. So, she

moved into the house with the Gleason's and kept her house vacant across the street with all of her belongings.

Britta got up every morning and walked across the street to feed and water her three German shepherd dogs. Most days Rachel would go with her. If for some reason Rachel slept in, she would be seen coming across the street in her night gown looking for her surrogate mother. The girl loved the old woman more than anything, and she loved the dogs second most. At age three, Rachel would go into the kennel, pour the old water out of the buckets and bring the water buckets to and from the kennels. At age four she would feed and brush the dogs. It made Britta happy to see her so involved with them. She imagined that the girl would carry on her love for the breed. As Rachel grew, so did her knowledge of the German Shepherd dog. Britta would often tell her how the breed had evolved and were brought over to America, about the courage and loyalty that the dogs possessed, and that the dogs would die for her if need be.

"You should always treat them with respect and kindness, but have a firm hand in training them," she would say. Rachel would sit and listen attentively to the old woman and like a sponge soaked up every word.

At age twelve, Rachel would bring Pal, the last of the dogs, out of the kennel and put her through her obedience commands. When they finished, Rachel would lead Pal back to her kennel and sit with the old dog. One morning, Rachel arrived at the kennel to see a blanket thrown over the lifeless form. Pal had died the night before. Rachel walked over to Britta and with tears streaming down her face reached out and hugged the old woman. She didn't want to let go. Their hearts were broken. For weeks after, both Britta and Rachel seemed lost without Pal, as they went about their daily lives.

Rachel came home from school one afternoon and her Mother told her to go across the street to find Britta. Rachel slowly walked towards the kennels. She had not been back over since their loss of Pal. She heard a dog barking. Rachel hastened her steps to the kennel. She walked around the corner of the house to see a six month old, German shepherd puppy. She was saddened but yet glad to see the new pup. Rachel looked over at Britta, who was smiling at her. "She is all yours," she said to Rachel.

Rachel walked towards the fence. She began to cry as she opened the gate. She went in and went down on one knee. The pup ran

up to her wagging her tail wanting to play. Rachel reached out and hugged the pup who then started licking the tears away. The girl cried until she had no tears left.

Every day upon returning home from school, Rachel would race across the street to see her new dog, Queen. Rachel had become a great trainer at the age of fourteen. The dog was already trained in hand signals and voice commands. Anything that Rachel asked of Queen she would happily do.

Britta and Rachel were on the way home from church one night when Rachel asked if she could take Queen to an obedience trial.

“Well, sure,” the old woman said.

“Do you think that she is ready?”

“Well, you are the trainer, what do you think?”

“I know that she is.”

Since Queen was registered, they contacted the Association for the next obedience trial in their area. On a Saturday in June, Rachel and Queen entered the obedience ring. When they left the ring Queen had earned a perfect score. It didn't take long for Queen to finish and earn her Companion Dog title. Then, she went on to earn her Companion Dog Excellent title.

Britta attended every trial. She was the only cheering section that Rachel had since her parents worked shift work at the local mills.

When her parents were not working, they were drinking or fighting. Britta shielded Rachel as much as she could from her parent's behavior. When they were not in church on Sunday and Wednesday, she would quietly take her across the street away from the abuse. Britta would make an excuse to go check on Queen, and Rachel didn't seem to catch on. The two older children Jeanie and Kenny had already moved out of the house. Jeanie had married at nineteen and two years later Kenny moved out, the day after his high school graduation and he seldom visited them.

Samuel had never liked Britta because he knew that she loved Rachel like her own. He was extremely jealous of Rachel because she received all of the attention. He was always gone whenever possible and seemed oblivious to the abuse. Rachel tried to reach out to her brother. She would offer him candy that Britta had hidden for her. Sometimes she would offer to do a chore for him, which he would jump at, although it never changed his dislike for her. He suspected

that she was up to something and he had decided long ago that he wasn't going to fall for it.

No matter how much Britta tried to hide the abuse, Rachel was well aware of it. She remembered the first time that she had seen her father beating her mother. She was two years old and it was before Britta moved in. Rachel toddled up the steps of the den and into the kitchen. She looked down the hallway to see her father on top of her mother, beating her. Years later, when she asked about the incident, Jeanie had told her that he was beating their Mother because she didn't bring him the newspaper. Many times over the years, her father would come home from working the evening shift, drunk, and drag all of the children out of bed and whip them for misbehavior during the day. Her Mother never tried to step in to defend her children. She would sit by crying and beg him to stop hitting them.

On one occasion, when she could stand it no more, Britta stepped between the children and their father and defiantly dared him to hit her. Even in his drunken stupor he knew that it would be a mistake and turned and left the room.

Britta and Rachel had created their own little world. They shared the love of the dogs and each other.

One afternoon Britta asked Rachel to come with her across the street to her house. There was something she wanted to show her. Rachel followed her into the house, down the hall and into the back bedroom. Britta shuffled to the far wall and swung open the two doors of the old wooden schiffarobe. At age eighty-one, Britta was beginning to show her frailty as Rachel was becoming a beautiful young woman at age fifteen.

"Pull the string," she said with her gnarled hand pointing at the floor of the large wooden closet. Rachel reached into the closet and pulled the floorboard up by a string that was folded to the side. Rachel looked down into the blackness of the hole in the floor. She could see the top of a wooden ladder. Rachel told her to go into the basement and look around. "Do not bring anything up, just look," she told Rachel, handing her a flashlight. Britta sat down in a nearby chair to wait while Rachel explored the hidden room.

Rachel reluctantly stepped onto the ladder leading down into the hole and turned on the flashlight. Her legs were shaking. She made her way down into the basement. She counted eight steps as she made her way down. At first, it looked like the steps led to nowhere. When

she got to the bottom of the concrete shelter, there was an opening to the left. She turned and pointed the light into the underground room. The room was twenty feet wide and twenty four feet long. The walls were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling with crates of cans of food, water, lamps, kerosene, linens, clothes and shoes. There were cases of guns and ammunition. M1's from World War II, .22 rifles and numerous caliber pistols.

At the end of the hidden room, there was a single bed and next to it a small bedside table. When Rachel was finished looking around, she climbed back up the steps. She emerged from the hole in the ground with an ashen face and big eyes. She and Britta closed the trap door to the hidden room and shut the doors to the large closet.

The old woman returned to the chair in the room and asked Rachel to come sit down next to her "There is a reason why I showed you my hidden room. When the time comes for me to join our Lord and I am no longer here to protect you, all of my property and belongings will be yours. Should there ever come a day when you need a safe place, you will have it. There is only one other person that knows about the basement He will come to you after I am gone. Tell no one," she said firmly.

Rachel looked at Britta, seeing a whole new side to the woman that she loved beyond words and nodded.

A few months after Britta shared the hidden room with her, Rachel stepped off the school bus to see Queen lying in the field waiting for her. The dog jumped up and ran to her mistress, with her tail wagging. "Good Girl," Rachel praised the dog. "Queen, heel," she commanded the dog, who quickly twisted around to her left side. Rachel and Queen walked through the field and behind six houses in the subdivision before finally reaching their house. "Okay," Rachel said to the dog, giving her freedom.

Rachel carried her book bag into the house and dropped it onto the couch. She called out for Britta but there was no answer. She bounded the three steps that led into the kitchen and turned to go down the hallway to her bedroom. She opened the door and saw Britta lying on the bed. Why is she sleeping so late? Rachel thought. "Britta, are you okay?" she asked reaching out to touch her shoulder and upon feeling her cold, hard body she recoiled in horror. She stood staring at the body that lay on the bed, her mind unable to comprehend. "Britta? Nooo! Britta, wake up!" she screamed. She threw her body over

Britta's, willing her to live. She sobbed uncontrollably for over an hour. Their lives together flashed before her as she remembered the love that only a mother and daughter would know. Exhausted, she slid to Britta's side of the bed, searching for life in the woman who had loved her so.

"I love you Britta," she said to the lifeless form that lay on the bed, before standing. And with her body shaking, she walked out the door of her bedroom. She walked, with Queen following her, across the street to Britta's house and went inside. She opened the doors that led to the secret room and felt her way down the eight ladder rungs in the dark and over to the little bed. She lay crying until finally sleep rescued her from the hole that now consumed her heart.

She awoke to Queen's cold nose under her arm. How did she get down those steps? She began to cry, knowing that the nightmare was real. She felt Queen's soft fur and wondered if the bitch sensed that Britta was gone.

Rachel reached over to the table and felt for the flashlight. She turned it on and made her way to the ladder. She climbed up the ladder and pulled the doors to the shelter shut. She then backed down the ladder and pulled the floor of the little closet down and closed. She returned to the room and sat down in the middle of the floor. The fear that had engulfed her was beginning to lift. She looked around the room to see a box with an envelope taped to it. It had her name written on it. She made her way over and tore the envelope from the box and pressed it to her chest before returning to the bed. She began to cry again as she thought of Britta. She drifted in and out of sleep clutching the envelope that held the last of Britta's thoughts. She awoke and was finally ready to open the letter.

*My Dearest Rachel,*

*By now, I have left you and gone to be with our Lord. I know that you are heartbroken. I am so sorry that I could not stay with you longer. You are the light of my life and even in death our love will never die. You are the daughter that I could never have on my own. God brought you to me for a reason. I have watched you grow from a baby to a beautiful young woman. I have tried to instill in you the difference between right and wrong, with Gods help.*

*You are becoming a woman now. I know that you will go on to do great things in your life. Remember, that no matter where you go or what you do, always try to do Gods will and have a giving, loving heart.*

*I have left all of my worldly possessions to you. There is a small stipend that will enable you to live comfortably. There is also money set aside for you to go to college if you so choose. I once told you that after my death, someone will contact you. His name is Brian Russell. This man is trustworthy and I will rest easy knowing that you have him should you need help. He is a grandson of a long time friend. His grandfather served in the war with Jim and he is the executor of my estate. Should you ever need help, he is the man to call.*

*You will, over time, learn more about me and the life that I led before I became an old woman. I trust that you will not be ashamed.*

*This prayer is for you.*

*My joy, my heart, my love, I pray that our God will guide your every step in life. That our God will bless you, keep you and lift you up when life's trials are too difficult to bear and that you will be strengthened at every turn.*

*Good night my little champion.*

*Britta*

A sob escaped her. Every night at bedtime, since she could remember, after she and Britta finished their prayers, Britta would tell her "Good night my little champion." Her tears began to flow again.

She folded the letter with care. With shaking hands, she placed it back in the envelope and clutched it to her chest.

She wondered if she would ever stop crying.



## Chapter 5

The morning heat from the Texas sun shone into the windows of the twenty five floor building. Brian Russell felt it on his back as he pressed the button on his phone to answer the call that his secretary Olivia had put through. It was a Mr. Gleason. Brian hoped that this wasn't *the* Mr. Gleason. Britta had left Brian's name and phone number with Mr. and Mrs. Gleason in case something ever happened to her.

But it was. Mr. Gleason was calling to let him know that Britta had passed away, as per her instructions. He also said that his daughter Rachel was missing and that there was a search out for her. Brian gave Mr. Gleason his condolences and hung up the phone. He pressed another button to summon Olivia.

"Yes, Mr. Russell?" she inquired as she walked into his office.

"Olivia, cancel all of my appointments for today and get me a flight out to Mobile, Alabama as soon as possible."

"Yes sir," she said hurrying from the room.

He was saddened by the news of Aunt Britta's death. He had known her his whole life and although they were not related by blood, he was very fond of her. Jim and Britta had stayed in contact with he and his family even after his grandfather died. Every birthday he received a card with a savings bond from them. Britta attended all major functions in his life even after Jim died. She had asked him to be her Executor of her estate after he joined his Grandfathers law firm ten years ago. Brian would often fly in to Mobile and help Britta with anything she might need. He had helped her move from the farm in Arkansas to her family home in Alabama. He was the one who had carried the boxes and crates down into the basement, one by one.

Brian knew the history of his Grandfather Paul and Jim. They had served in World War II together in Germany. Britta joined the Red Cross to be near her husband during the war. That is where she fell in love with the German shepherd dogs.

Brian grabbed his briefcase and started putting papers in it. He was not looking forward to this trip. He arrived at the Mobile Regional Airport and rented a car.

As he drove the route to Britta's house, he wondered if Rachel would be there. He suspected that she would have gone into the basement, to surround herself with the memory of Britta. It was dark when he pulled the car into the driveway and turned it off. He reached into his briefcase and retrieved the keys to Britta's house and a flashlight, and slowly entered. He knew the layout of the house, even in the dark.

Queen began to growl at the sound coming from above their heads. She nosed Rachel awake and laid her head down next to her. Rachel looked over towards the doorway of the room and saw a beam of light shine into the opening.

"Rachel, are you in there?" Brian called out to her. "It's Brian."

She remained silent, hoping that he would go away. She didn't want to be found and she wasn't ready to rejoin the world. Brian slowly made his way down the steps. Queen began to growl her warning to stay away. Rachel knew she couldn't hide any longer. "I'm here," she said to the stranger. Brian stepped into the doorway with the flashlight and reached up to turn the light on in the ceiling.

Rachel squeezed her eyes shut tight from the brightness until her eyes adjusted. She told Queen that it was okay and the bitch relaxed. Brian reached his hand out for the dog to smell him and she

then stretched her paw out to shake hands. Brian smiled. Britta had told him about Rachel and Queen. He was happy to know that Britta had found a child to love. It had been Brian who had arranged for Queen to be shipped to Britta after Pal died.

“There are a lot of people worried about you,” he told Rachel. He turned to look at the box that he had brought down just a few weeks earlier and saw that Rachel had found the letter.

“No one cares about me.” Rachel said clutching the letter, as she tried to stop the tears, shaking her head.

“I care about you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

Brian sat down on the floor of the basement and leaned up against a box as he told her about his relationship with Britta. How Britta had sent pictures of her through the years. That he had watched her grow through pictures and the letters that Britta sent to him. He had seen her from a distance, many times, while he was visiting Britta.

“I also know that Britta loved you more than life itself. That is good enough for me,” he said to the young girl.

“We need to let your family know that you are safe and then we have some business to discuss. You already know that Britta left you everything. What you don’t know is the extent of her estate. She did very well for herself after Jim died. We worked together to invest her money. She has a farm in Arkansas, the house and property here in Alabama, and a house in Germany. There is enough money for you to live on and if you are careful, you will never want for anything. Britta placed the estate in trust and I will oversee it just as I have for the past ten years. When you turn twenty one, it will be turned over to you.”

Rachel shook her head back and forth. She didn’t want any of these things. She wanted Britta and her life back. She wanted to continue on as before.

Brian reached out to take Rachel’s hand in his. Tears came to his eyes. “I loved her too. I know that you are hurting right now. Each day will get a little easier.”

She pulled her hand away. “I can’t go back home. There is nothing there for me. I don’t know those people that are supposed to be my family,” she sobbed. “I don’t even like them, much less love them. God forgive me for feeling like this! I want Britta and my life back!” she continued to sob, as Brian listened to the girl.

He looked at her, knowing that Britta had unintentionally alienated Rachel from her family. He couldn't blame her though. Britta loved Rachel so much that she didn't want her to get hurt.

"Rachel, you have options now. What about boarding School? There is a really good school near us that you could attend. Since school is almost out for the year, why don't you just think about it during the summer and we will talk about it a little later?"

She sat quietly thinking about what he had just said, and nodded her head fighting the sobs back.

"I am going back upstairs, so let me know when you are ready to go home," he said.

She nodded her head again and slowly rose to her feet trying to summon the courage to face the world without Britta.

"I'm ready," she said as she swiped at the tears that refused to stop flowing.

"Good girl," Brian said rising to his feet.

Rachel climbed the stairs and gave the command "Queen, come." The bitch jumped up to the fourth step and climbed the rest of the way out. Brian followed them out, shut the doors, locked them and slid the keys into his pocket.

The funeral was two days later. It was a small ceremony with just the Gleason family, Brian, his wife Lisa and a few of the church members in attendance. The room was filled with flowers from people all over the world. Britta had touched many lives with her contributions to charities.

Following the burial in the church cemetery, under an oak tree overlooking the pond, Brian, Lisa and the Gleason family returned to the church sanctuary for the reading of the will.

When everyone was seated, Brian began to read:

"I, Britta Hardin, being of sound mind and body, do hereby make my last will and testament.

I bequeath to:

Jeanie Gleason Gibson, Kenneth Gleason Jr. and Samuel Gleason, \$10,000.00 each, to be used for their college education. Kenneth and Mary Gleason all expenses paid for thirty days to the Alcohol treatment center of your choice.

Rachel Gleason, a scholarship to the Ellison Institute Boarding School, the remainder of my estate, and all of my love.

I appoint Brian Russell to be the trustee of my estate until Rachel Gleason reaches age twenty-one, at which time, my estate will be signed over to her.

Signed,  
Britta Hardin”

Brian watched as Kenneth and Mary looked at each other with disgust.

“How dare that woman presume to think that we would need a treatment center,” Mary said to the room full of people. She rose from her chair and walked out of the room. Rachel remained seated as she watched her family one by one, follow her mother out the door. When the door shut, Rachel wept into her hands. She just didn't understand it. She could not believe those ungrateful people. They didn't deserve anything, but yet Britta had included them in her will. When she had regained her composure, she looked at Brian and asked, “When do I leave?”



## Chapter 6

The following month in June, on her sixteenth birthday, Rachel and the Gleason family celebrated with cake and ice cream. It was a somber occasion. She still missed Britta and was having a hard time adjusting to her death. She could hardly eat or sleep. She spent most of her spare time with Queen, across the street at Britta's house, now hers.

When it was time to open presents, Rachel glanced over into the corner of the room, to see a large item with a blanket over it. Rachel walked over to the item and pulled the blanket off of a beautiful cedar hope chest. On the front was an image of a German shepherd dog that had been burned into the wood. There was a card attached to it that read:

*To my Champion, Love Britta*

Rachel glanced over at her Mother with blood shot eyes and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth.

“It was delivered just before she died and we hid it across the street in the kennel house. Well, I guess I should say *YOUR* kennel house now.”

Her mother, father and Jeanie had started drinking at noon, and by two o’clock in the afternoon they were just about to become nasty. Samuel had left right after eating cake and ice cream and Kenneth Jr. was at work. Rachel was alone with a house full of drunks.

Brian and Lisa arrived just after Rachel opened her presents. He carried a large box into the living room and sat it down. “We better get used to seeing you, huh?” Mary said in a slurred voice. Brian just smiled at her. Britta had told him about their drinking and how things could escalate quickly. He wanted to get Rachel out of there as soon as possible.

Rachel was glad to see Brian and Lisa. She had become fond of them after Britta died. She pulled the wrapping paper off of a box of a set of Gucci luggage.

“What do you need *that* for?” Mary asked drunkenly. Kenneth, who had been sleeping some of his liquor off, awoke to the shrill tone of his wife’s voice, and groggily looked around the room at the people, wondering where they had come from.

“Actually, that is why we are here. I came to discuss Rachel’s education with you. Since Britta left the scholarship for Rachel to attend Ellison, I came to ask your permission for her to go.” Brian said.

Mary looked at her husband, agitated. He was still trying to remember why they were all there.

“I don’t want my baby going off to some school that I have never even seen before,” Mary said. She was buying time and Brian suspected that she was going to milk it for all it was worth.

“I have taken the liberty of making reservations for you and Mr. Gleason to fly out to tour the school with Rachel. It is a fine school. If you agree to let Rachel go, Lisa and I live close enough to help her if she needs anything. We will be glad to visit and check in on her. If you would like, we could fly you up to see her on occasion. And of course, she will be coming home on holidays and vacations,” Brian said. He could see the wheels turning in Mary’s head. She looked like she had hit the jackpot.

“It sounds like you’ve thought of everything,” Mary said. “I am sure that we can agree on something. Don’t you honey?” she said, smiling sweetly at her husband.

Fifty thousand dollars and two weeks after her birthday, Rachel and her parents flew out to tour Ellison Institute. After two days of drinking and a very large hotel room service tab, the Gleason’s agreed to allow Rachel to attend the school. It was an easy sale.

Brian and Lisa agreed to bring Queen up to their place while Rachel was attending Ellison. She would then be able to see the dog when they came to visit her on campus. They had a fenced in yard and had two German shepherd dogs of their own.

Brian asked Rachel what she wanted to do with the contents of the house that she had inherited from Britta.

“I want to keep it for a little while. I’m not ready to say goodbye to Britta yet,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

With the cache in the house, they decided to block the entrance to the basement by moving all of the furniture into the one room, and blocking access to the contents in the hidden room. Brian advised her to change the wooden door with a metal door with two locks on it. Rachel also agreed to have a masonry fence built around the house with a locked gate.

“I really don’t need any of that stuff in the basement,” Rachel told Brian.

“You may, one day. You need to remember that Britta lived through the great depression, World War II and the Vietnam War. She watched the decline of this great country. She wanted to make sure that if you ever needed anything, you would have it. And if and when you decide, we will teach you how to handle the weapons,” Brian said. She wondered who he meant by “we”, but didn’t ask.

With the house secure, Brian, Rachel and her mother left for the airport the following day. They had purchased a shipping crate for Queen. They would all be on the same flight, since Rachel was worried about her dog.

After Mary had signed all of the paperwork for her daughter to attend Ellison and Rachel was moved into her room, Brian escorted Mary to the airport. The woman protested that she was too tired to make the trip back, but Brian was adamant that she return to Alabama. He was glad to see her go, as he watched her board the plane.

Rachel was looking forward to starting her first day of school at Ellison. She had always excelled in her courses and she was hoping that this new school wouldn't be too difficult to master. She soon learned that she didn't have anything to worry about.

Her new roommate was named Tina. She was tall and athletic like Rachel, with strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes. They became friends right away, which was a first for Rachel as she had always been a loner.

By the time she had adjusted to her new routine, it was time for the Thanksgiving holiday. She chose to go to the Russell home instead of flying back to Alabama. She just didn't want to be forced to sit through a fiasco with a bunch of people that didn't even know her. Her parents wouldn't even notice. They would be three sheets to the wind by noon anyway, she thought.

Lisa arrived to pick Rachel up at school, and when she got to the parking lot, she saw Queen in the car waiting for her. The bitch was barking happily with her tail wagging. Rachel struggled with her bags as she ran towards the car.

She was glad to see her dog and Queen was glad to see her girl.

As they were loading her bags in the car, Lisa reached out gave her a big bear hug. "I am so glad that you are coming," she said.

Rachel smiled. "Thanks. It has been a long time since I felt like I belong somewhere," she said.

"You are always welcome with us."

Rachel believed that she meant it.

The day after Thanksgiving, Brian and Lisa asked her if she was ready to visit the farm that she had inherited from Britta.

"Yes! Can we take the dogs?"

"Of course, what would a trip to the farm be without the dogs?" Lisa teased her.

It was a beautiful day for a drive. The farm was about a hundred miles south west of Little Rock and consisted of two hundred acres, a large Victorian farmhouse, a small cottage, a big red barn, two stocked ponds and an indoor/outdoor kennel.

When they arrived at the driveway, Brian got out and unlocked the gate. At first it looked like they were driving into the woods. Brian followed the winding driveway and stopped at a second gate. He unlocked it and they continued on. They topped the hill and Brian again stopped the truck, this time for Rachel to see the glorious site in

the distance. Where the woods ended, Heaven on earth began. Rachel felt like she had come home. The site before her would be etched in her mind forever. The large two story farmhouse sat perched on the hill in the distance behind a pond. The driveway curved to the right around the pond with massive cedar trees on the right of the drive and poplar trees lining the left of the drive. The yard was landscaped beautifully with boulder size rocks and flowers.

Brian got out of the truck again and walked a short ways up the drive, reached down and pulled a rope of three inch diameter barbwire out of the driveway. It was painted brown to blend in with the winter colors. Rachel would have never known that it was there.

They continued around the drive to the house and parked the truck. Brian, Lisa, and Rachel stepped out of the truck, as Rachel, awestruck, looked around her. She couldn't believe that this was hers. It was so secluded that she understood why Britta had moved back to Alabama.

She was due back at school in three days, so their trip to the farm would be a brief two day stay. After they had unpacked the truck, Rachel and the three dogs set out to explore the grounds. The two story red barn could house a lot of animals. It had a concrete floor with twenty stalls, a tack room, a feed room and a wash room. The stairs led to the hay loft above. At the back of the barn was a roofed over loafing shed.

Rachel looked out of the back of the barn to see a small pond in the distance. She wondered if it was part of the property as she turned away from the barn and headed to the kennel house. It was a small ten run kennel. It was made of concrete block and had a separate feed and grooming room.

Just past the kennel was the small cottage with cute little window boxes. The door was painted red and the exterior of the little house was white. There was a small white picket fence that surrounded it. It held a bedroom, a bathroom and a small kitchen area. It reminded her of the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

She returned to the main house for lunch. Afterwards, she walked through the big house, looking around. It was partially furnished since Britta had moved some of her things back to Alabama. There were five bedrooms, a study, the kitchen, living area, laundry room, a parlor in the entranceway, and a basement. The attic in the house was one huge room. Britta and Jim had planned on filling the

house with children, but when they couldn't, they decided to keep the house that they loved so much, and instead filled it with their beloved German shepherd dogs.

Rachel spent the rest of the second day with Brian, Lisa and the dogs. They fished in the pond and threw sticks for the dogs to chase and retrieve from the pond. By then, sadly, it was time to pack up for the trip back to reality.

Tina was glad to see her return since she had stayed on campus for the holiday.

Sometimes Rachel, Tina and some of the other girls would sneak out of their building and go to a bar. Rachel didn't want to look stupid so she just went along with them. She knew how to wing it, since she had grown up with drunks.

When she was bored, she would go out with her new friends. It was innocent fun.

When the Thanksgiving holiday arrived in their second year at Ellison, Tina came with them to the farm. Rachel, Tina, Brian and Lisa decorated the farm for Christmas and when they returned for the holiday the following month a light snow had fallen and dusted the landscape. Rachel had never seen snow before and she loved it.

The two years passed by quickly and when it was time to leave Ellison, Rachel and Tina promised each other to keep in touch, as they tearfully hugged each other goodbye.

## Chapter 7

After Rachel attended her first year of college, she turned nineteen the following summer. She and Ethan continued to date. She decided that she didn't want to go to college and dropped out. She had talked to Brian, who was now like a father to her. She told him that she wanted to follow her dream of becoming a dog trainer. She asked him if he would arrange for her to go to Germany to become an apprentice at Heidelberg Kennels, where Britta had trained. It was one of the best. She was going to stay in the house that Britta had owned and live the life that Britta had lived, even if for a short while.

At first Ethan was not too happy about her leaving him. But he understood that she had to do it. They kept in touch and he flew out to visit her once. It was then that Ethan asked Rachel to marry him. She said yes and they agreed to wait until she returned to the States.

After a year, she returned home to the farm. She had decided not to let anyone know that she was returning. She arrived at the airport, rented a car, and drove the hour and a half to the farm. As she drove around the pond to her house, she felt the calmness return and

she knew that this was home. After catching up with her sleep over the next two days, she phoned Brian.

Olivia buzzed Brian and told him that it was Rachel on the line. He smiled and told her to put the call through.

“Hey, Pop. I'm home for good,” she said simply.

“Why didn't you let me know you were coming? I would have picked you up,” he said.

“I know,” she said, smiling mischievously to herself.

“How was your flight?” he asked her.

“It was good. I am glad to be back on American soil!” She said. “Hey, can you and Lisa bring the children out to the farm this weekend? There are a few things I want to talk to you about. And I want to see my God nephew and niece,” she said.

“Let me check our schedule and I'll let you know,” he said.

“Sounds good,” Rachel said.

They arrived with their two small children Dustin two and Michelle just a year old, along with Queen, on the following Saturday morning, just in time for breakfast. They all sat around the table with Lisa holding Dustin and Rachel holding Michelle, Queen sleeping on the floor. Rachel was happy to see them all.

Lisa filled her in on the antics of the two children and they talked about current events and Queen. Afterwards, Lisa went with the children to lay down for a nap.

Rachel had become a beautiful young woman, Brian thought to himself, of the girl he loved like his own.

“What is on your mind?” he asked Rachel.

“Well, I was thinking about making some changes in my life and I wanted to get your opinion,” she said.

“Go on.”

“For one thing, while I was in Germany, I noticed that the neighborhood around the house was getting to be a little rough. There were a couple of shooting incidents while I was there. So, what do you think about selling the house?”

“And why didn't you tell me about this before young lady?” he chided her. “Because I knew that you would bring me home and I wanted to finish my training. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you, but I was very careful. So, what do you think about selling it?”

“It might be a good idea. I will check into it.”

“Also, I have no interest in living in Alabama. I was thinking that we could donate the property to the church.”

“Are you sure that you want to do that?”

“Yes,” she said. “Britta would be happy about that.”

“Yes, she would,” he said proud of the woman that she had become.

“And the most important thing that I wanted to ask you about....” she hesitated.

“Would you give me away at my wedding?” tears welled up in her eyes and Brian’s too. He stood up and walked around the table to her and hugged her close. “You know that that is a father’s responsibility,” he said to her.

“Yes, I know,” she said.

“I would be honored,” Brian said.

Ethan and Rachel were married at the house in Alabama not long after her return home. She and Ethan decided that since they had met in Alabama and their families were there, that this should be the place. As expected, her parents, Jeanie and Samuel showed up drunk at the wedding. Fortunately there was no trouble and they left shortly after the reception started. Kenneth Jr., along with his new wife Anna, made an appearance and left right after the ceremony.

Brian, Lisa, Ethan and Rachel flew into town the week before the wedding and loaded up the contents of the house onto a moving truck. After the wedding, Brian and Lisa drove the moving truck to the farm in Arkansas and Rachel and Ethan headed to Gulf Shores for their honeymoon. Rachel donated the house, in Britta’s honor, to their church where she had been a charter member and Rachel had grown up.

One year later, she gave birth to twin boys. They named them Evan and Elijah. Four years later, she gave birth to a daughter, Cassie. Shortly after Rachel turned thirty-five, she and Ethan learned unexpectedly that they would be parents again.

It was a boy. They named him Simon Russell Reed.



## Chapter 8

**R**achel was glad to be home. She pulled the van up to the gate that had long since been fitted with an automatic gate opener. It was operated by a solar charged battery. She smiled as she thought of Simon who always commanded “Open Sesame!” when they arrived at the gate. She never got tired of making the drive around her driveway and seeing the picturesque setting of her house on the hill. The string of barb wire had been replaced with a state of the art driveway alarm that sounded in the house and kennel when a vehicle crossed the sensor. She continued past the house and pulled up to the big barn and parked. It was now painted white and had been converted into an indoor/outdoor kennel that housed up to fifty dogs. The upstairs was now an apartment, where Ethan often stayed when she was away on business, to help with the children.

Rachel watched the activity from the van. Simon was leading a German shepherd puppy around by the collar near where Evan and Ethan were working. They were in the training area with a new dog that was in training for herding.

Evan had grown into a handsome young man at twenty, along with his twin brother Eli. Although they were not identical, they both were black headed and brown eyed, Ethan and his Creek Indian ancestry showing through them. Cassie was also black haired and brown eyed, a beauty at fifteen. Simon on the other hand, had taken after her side of the family. He had the golden brown hair with green eyes and had lighter skin. As if he knew that she was thinking of him, the six year old came running towards the van.

“Mommy! You’re home!” the boy screamed happily.

Rachel stepped out of the van just in time to for him to throw his arms around her waist nearly knocking her off her feet. She smiled at him and said “Hey, I can’t breath here.” Zeus jumped out of the van and started licking the back of his neck. Simon released his grip on his mother and started giggling at the dog. “That tickles,” he told Zeus as he tried to shrug the dog away. Zeus then started licking his face as the boy grabbed the dog’s collar. “C’mon lets go,” he told the dog. They started down the hill towards the fenced in training area.

Rachel walked to the back of the van, opened the two doors and started unloading the dogs.

After she finished unloading the van and the dogs were all fed and watered, she went into the house to her study to check her messages. She sat down in her chair at her desk to read them. One was from Tina her old Ellison roommate, Michael reminding her about the Search and Rescue meeting, Brian wanted her to call him, Gustav her contact in Germany for importing dogs and Simon, the little sneak. He had used his father’s cell phone and called the house phone to tell her that he was glad that she was home. Rachel laughed. That boy was going to make her gray before her time. He was such a prankster.

She remembered recently the time that she had gently popped his mouth for saying something disrespectful and he ran to his room, heartbroken. A little while later she told him to come out and he walked out wearing his football helmet with the mouth guard attached.

Ethan knocked on the open door. “What are you laughing at?” he asked her. She smiled and played the recording for him to hear. “That’s our boy,” he said and shook his head.

Ethan sat down in one of the chairs and told her about the progress that Evan was making with Thor and the other training sessions with some of the other dogs.

Evan was turning out to be a good handler. Unlike his twin brother Eli, Evan had chosen not to go to college. He wanted to be a part of the family business. He enjoyed working with the dogs.

Eli had just enrolled at Texas A and M. He liked dogs okay but he just wasn't as passionate about them like his mother.

Rachel heard the front door slam shut and then heard Cassie call out to her. "Mom, where are you? Can I spend the night with Chloe tonight?" she yelled through the walls. She walked into her study and plopped down on the sofa. Rachel sat looking at her daughter. "My trip was great, I'm fine...." Cassie didn't let her finish. "I'm sorry Mom! I am glad that your home!" She rose to hug her mother. "So can I go?"

"Yes, but not until after dinner," Rachel told her.

"Goooosh Mom, I was gonna eat dinner with them. They're having pizza," she whined sounding like she was five.

"Tonight, you're having chicken."

"Ugggh," Cassie rolled her eyes and started to leave the room, but collided into Simon and Zeus.

"There are too many people in this house," Cassie yelled, trying to step around Zeus.

"Just a minute young lady," Rachel said to her daughter. "I want you and Simon to tell me about your adventure the other night."

Cassie wheeled around to face her mother. "I'm really sorry Mom. It won't happen again. I should never have taken Max and Simon out in the woods in the middle of the night. I just thought that if...."

Rachel stopped her daughter in mid sentence. "Cassie, I didn't ask for excuses. I just want to know what happened."

Cassie told her mother what had happened.

Simon jumped in with his two cents worth. "We would have never found the road if we hadn't heard those two guys talking." Simon said. Cassie had deliberately left that part out of her story. She decided that she had better cover her self. "Oh yeah, that was creepy Mom!"

Ethan and Rachel looked at each other and sighed.

"What were they talking about Simon?" Rachel asked him.

"I couldn't hear all they said, but they were talking about some guy named Pedro. I'm hungry Mom. When's dinner?" the boy was out the door before she could respond.

Cassie decided that she might better tell them what she heard.

“Those guys were foreign, Mom. I don’t know from what country, but not ours. They weren’t Mexicans either. They said something about meeting in September with Pedro and something about ammonia.” Cassie finished.

“Cassie, I think that you learned your lesson this time, getting lost in the woods. I am not going to ground you.” Rachel said to her daughter.

“Thank you Mommy!” she said teasingly to her mother, hugged her and quickly left the room.

Rachel and Ethan exchanged glances, concern showing on both of their faces. Rachel spoke first.

“What were these guys doing on our road in the middle of the night? Ammonium Nitrate? I doubt that they are getting it for fertilizer. Should I be worried Ethan?” she asked him.

“I’ll call the sheriff in the morning,” Evan said looking concerned as well.

“Brian called you twice while you were gone.”

“He left a message too. I wonder what is up.” She reached for the phone on the desk, dialed the number and waited. Brian answered on the second ring.

“Hey Pop, what’s up?” she asked.

“Hello my girl. Kenneth is in the hospital. He had a stroke.”

Rachel didn’t know what to say or feel about hearing that her biological father was sick. She hadn’t had any contact with the Gleason’s in over ten years. None. Not a phone call, letter or email. She had tried to keep in touch, sending cards on birthdays or a phone call to check in. But they didn’t seem interested in her, and she was somewhat relieved that she had put her painful past behind her.

“Thanks for letting me know. I just got in, so I’ll call you in the morning okay?”

“You better,” he said.

She hung up the phone and sat in her chair trying to decide what to do. She knew that she should feel something for him, but the man had never been a real father to her. She decided that she just didn’t want to open up old wounds and made a note to send flowers.

“What’s up?” Ethan had remained in the room and looked worriedly at Rachel.

He was still in love with her even though he knew that it was over between them. He had really messed up. He had lost the best thing that had ever happened to him. He was just glad that they had been able to remain friends for the sake of the children.

“Kenneth had a stroke.” Rachel stood from her chair and walked around the desk.

“I am exhausted. I think that I will lie down before dinner,” she said as she started to leave the room.

“I’m gonna head home,” Ethan said, standing to follow her.

“Thanks Ethan,” she said, before wearily climbed the steps up to the second floor to her bedroom. She walked into her room, switched her television on and reached over to the night table for the remote control as she sat down on the bed. She changed the channel to Fox News.

Of course, the news was not good. It never was these days. The economy was on the brink of collapse, two hundred banks had failed, enemies at our border of Mexico, people out of jobs and losing their homes. Crime was rising as people were becoming hungry and desperate.

She remembered seeing a lot more homeless people while she was on her trip. Fewer people were competing at the dog shows. Most people did not want to wrap their mind around the fact that the good ole U S of A was slowly becoming a socialistic country. The government was taking over banks and had recently added national healthcare.

Rachel was glad that Britta had seen that this was coming. She was even happier that Brian had been able to convince her that she needed to keep the cache that Britta had built. She had replaced the food items over the years, updated the supplies, and Ethan had built a bookcase to hide the entrance to the basement. He had also added another hidden basement in the big barn under the feed room.

She was about to turn the television off when a newscast about the drug cartel in Mexico came on. Nine people had been found dead inside a house just outside of Ciudad Juarez. Their throats had been cut and the three women had been raped and beaten before being killed. The report went on to say that some of the violence had also spread to the Phoenix area, with increased gang activity. She pressed the off button. Just like most Americans, she thought. If you just turn the television off, then the atrocities would just disappear; Poof, gone. But

it wasn't gone. There was living, breathing, people that faced these things every day.

She looked over to the opposite wall of her family photos at Britta and Queen, Brian and Lisa with their children, her children's photos taken over the years, Ethan and Rachel's wedding photo. She had chosen to keep it on the wall after they divorced so that Simon would still feel the family connection.

She wondered if she would ever be forced to defend her children, as she stood, walked over to the door and cracked it so that Zeus could get into the room when he made his final rounds in the house.

She returned to the bed, laid back on her pillow and felt the tension from the day leave her body as her thoughts drifted back to the days events and she couldn't help but think about Mitch Carlson.

It had been a long time since she had been attracted to a man, she thought to herself, as she felt her body begin to stir feelings that she had denied herself for way too long. She shook her head and tried to remind herself that her first priority was her children. She didn't need to complicate matters by fantasizing about a man.



## Chapter 9

Monday morning brought rain and thunderstorms to the southern Texas town of Crystal City. It was a welcome sight, since a drought had dominated the area for at least nine months.

Mitch Carlson was planning on repairing fences but since the rain had settled in for the day, he decided to catch up on his phone calls. His first call was to Aaron Garcia his ranch foreman, his right hand man, and also his best friend. He was in the barn assisting a mare in foal and told Mitch that he would be up when he finished. That could take hours, Mitch thought to himself.

Mitch was a widower. His wife and daughter had been killed in an auto accident ten years earlier by a drunk driver. He had never found anyone else that could live up to his wife's memory, so he had led a bachelor's life. He was the most eligible man in town and many women had tried their best to catch his eye.

He was born to parents who had met at the Interment camp in Crystal City during World War II. His father was a guard and his mother was an American born German prisoner. Their family was

small consisting of Mitch, William and Celia and their parents. Since the death of their father in 1989 and their mother in 1993, they seemed to draw even closer to one another. The three of them lived on the ranch, with Williams house on the east corner of the property and Celia's on the west corner. They had inherited the ranch from their father's side of the family. Following the Mexican-American war, Great Grandpa Carlson had been very successful in purchasing thousands of acres of land. Since then, some of the acreage had been sold off. The remaining fifteen hundred acres had been managed very well and the Carlson family lived on and worked their land. They raised cattle, horses, and some vegetable crops.

Mitch looked at the messages on his desk and was about to start returning some of them when Aaron burst into the office. His rain poncho was dripping puddles onto the floor. He removed his poncho and hung it up on the wall.

"We need that rain," he said, more to himself than Mitch. "We got a nice little colt outta Brandy. She did a fine job."

"No problems, I take it." Mitch inquired about the first time mother.

"Notta one."

"Good to hear."

"The truck with the replacement heifers should be here Wednesday. William can't be here since he has a meeting with the governor," he paused and then said, "Oh, and Celia wants to plan a party for Williams fortieth birthday," Aaron said.

Celia was always taking care of them since their parents had died. She was the oldest of the three of them at forty five, Mitch was the middle child at forty three and William was the youngest about to turn forty. Mitch shook his head wondering how she found the time, when she had a family of her own.

William was in his second term as Mayor of Crystal City and with the mention of the Governor, Mitch was reminded of Rachel.

"Hey, before I forget, I ran into a woman on my way home that is a dog trainer. What do you think about calling her out for a consult?" He and Aaron had talked about purchasing some working dogs for the ranch. It was just luck that Mitch had seen Rachel Reed at the gas station.

"Well, that depends," Aaron said.

Here we go again, Mitch thought.

"What did she look like?" Aaron grinned at Mitch.

“Like she would be a good dog trainer,” Mitch shot back.

Everybody he knew was trying to get him married off. Mitch balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Aaron.

Smiling, Aaron stood to his feet with his spurs rattling on his worn cowboy boots.

“I better go check on Brandy. Come over to the house for dinner,” he threw over his shoulder as he shut the door.

Mitch thought about it. Since Aaron was single, he had become a pretty good cook, much better than he could do. He might just take him up on the offer.

Mitch thought back to Rachel at the gas station. He had sat in his car watching her take the dogs out of the van and the way that they responded to her. He could tell that she knew dogs as well as he knew horses and cattle. That kind of knowledge comes from experience.

He reached in his pocket for the business card. He dialed the number and waited.

“Reed K-9 Center,” Rachel greeted him.

“Hello, Rachel.” Mitch recognized her voice. “This is Mitch Carlson. I met with you near Little Rock yesterday.”

“Hi Mitch, how are you?” she asked, her heart beginning to race.

“Good. And you?”

“Great, now that I’m home.”

Mitch laughed. He didn’t like to travel as much as he used to, and could relate.

“I understand what you are saying,” he said. “So when would be a good time for me to come out?”

“Anytime after this week is good.”

“Alright, I’ll check flights and get back with you.”

“Just let me know when and we will have someone pick you up at the airport,” she said.

“Thank you, Ms. Reed. I’ll do it.” He answered in his Texas drawl. Mitch hung up the phone and looked out his window at the rain that continued to fall. He decided to go to the barn and see the new colt.

As he walked down the barn aisle, he thought about how many times he had witnessed the foals being born. His favorite part of ranching was the horses. When he was a kid, he would tag along behind their father, climb up on the stall rail and watch the mare give

birth. He knew that you could tell a lot about a foal, when the imprint training began on the very first day of life. His father would stay with the mare until the foal was born. He would then begin to help her dry the foal with a towel. At the same time he would run his hands all over the foal, pulling the legs gently, rubbing the ears, face, neck and body of the foal. This accustomed the foal to human handling right from the start. He would then help the foal stand and maneuver the foal over to its mother to nurse. At that point, he would leave the mare and foal to bond and return a few times during the day to touch and handle the foal. Mitch knew that this early imprinting was vital to the training of the foal. The first two years of their life were the most important in development and training.

Mitch walked up to the stall and looked in at Brandy and her new boy. He was still slick but he could tell that he was a dark bay with a stripe down his face. His legs looked good and his rump was already full of muscle. Concert had sired a nice one. May be a replacement sire? Mitch wondered.

Aaron walked up with the feed bucket for Brandy. “What’cha think boss?” Aaron asked him.

“He looks good.”

“Yeah, looks like his Daddy,” Aaron commented.

He would know since he was the one that had delivered Concert ten years earlier. It was the night that Melissa and Amy were killed, Mitch remembered. He and Aaron were in the barn waiting for the old mare to deliver when he got the call that they had been in a car accident. It was raining that night too. The accident had occurred just four miles from the ranch. Mitch drove past the two cars that had been pulled off the road. The cars were tangled together as one. He knew then that it was bad. When he arrived at the hospital Celia was already there and when Mitch saw her face, he knew that his life was about to change forever. Celia and Melissa were best friends in high school. Mitch knew right away that it was Melissa that was gone, just by looking at Celia. His world began to crumble as he listened to the Doctor tell him about his daughter Amy and that her chance of survival was very slim. They had done everything that they could. The little girl at age four had been a fighter. She clung to life for over two weeks. Mitch never left her side except to go to the bathroom. He held her hand and prayed that his baby would be alright. He finally gave them the word to “pull the plug.” He knew she was already gone.

Mitch remembered the nightmare of the following year. He had stayed in a drunken stupor for three months. He just couldn't face the world without his family.

Everywhere he looked, he saw Melissa and Amy who looked so much alike with their long blonde hair and blue eyes. He couldn't shake the memory of their perfect life together. During the week, Melissa was a school teacher. On the weekends they would awaken to their little angel, Amy jumping on their bed.

And on Sundays they all saddled up and went riding after church. Amy was a dream to watch on her oversized mount, with her little legs hanging from the huge saddle. She loved to ride. The old gelding, Scout, was a gentle teacher. Mitch had learned to ride on the very same horse.

A few weeks after his daughter died, Mitch had taken his shotgun out to the barn and shot Scout. He watched the horse fall to the ground. He then walked over to the horse, slid to the ground beside him and tried his best to summon the courage to shoot himself. He was distraught and lost. He had no reason to live.

Aaron had heard the shot and came running into the stall where he found Mitch sitting next to the dead horse, staring into space, his mind closed to the idea of living. Aaron removed the gun from Mitch's hands and called Celia. She admitted him to the hospital for exhaustion. She stayed with him for two days and when they finally released him into her care, she and Aaron brought him home. They removed all of the alcohol and guns from the house. Finally, after a few months, Mitch started to rejoin the living, but he was never the same.

"Oh man, boss I'm sorry. I just didn't think about it," Aaron said to Mitch wanting to kick him self for being such an idiot.

Mitch shook the memory from his head.

"Hey, you saved my ass buddy. Don't be sorry."

Mitch reached into his pocket and pulled his knife out. He reached for the bale of hay and cut the two strings away. He folded his knife, put it back into his pocket and then pulled a couple of flakes of hay for Brandy and tossed them into her hay rack.

"I talked to Ms. Reed. I'm flying out there next week. Think you can hold the fort down?" he asked Aaron.

"This ain't the Alamo. I think I can handle it." Aaron said.

Mitch smiled as he left the stall thinking that, had it been the Alamo, Aaron would have kicked some Texas butt.

Aaron and Mitch had grown up on the ranch together. His mother was the cook for the Carlson family. They lived in one of the old bunkhouses. Aaron and Mitch were like brothers and were inseparable. They went to school together and had many times gotten into fights defending each other. Aaron didn't fear anything. He had once been dared to climb one of the windmills when they were teenagers, by a schoolmate. Aaron had done it and was soon accepted as one of the coolest kids in school. Mitch was glad that it had been Aaron instead of him since he would not have wanted to climb the thirty foot structure.

Mitch looked up to see Celia shut the door to her SUV. The rain had slacked off and Celia ran for the office door. Her umbrella was caught by the wind and pulled from her hand. Mitch ran out to catch it for her. Celia was laughing at him dancing around in the wind and rain trying to catch her umbrella. After he managed to get the umbrella, he and Celia went into the office.

"Thanks little brother."

"You're welcome. I wouldn't want one of my horses eyes being poked out by that thing flying through the air." Mitch teased her.

"So how was your trip?" she asked.

"It was good. The heifers will be delivered Wednesday. I think that they are going to improve our breeding program. Aaron will be here to meet the truck. I hear you're planning a party."

"That is why I stopped by. I want to plan a party for Williams fortieth birthday."

"Sis, his birthday is six weeks away. Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" He smiled at her. She had done the same thing for his fortieth birthday.

"Well no. You can never be too careful. I don't want to leave anyone out, and I want this to be special for him," she argued.

"Most people want to forget their birthdays. You.... on the other hand, want to make sure they don't," he laughed.

"You're damn right," she said, getting annoyed at him. "Every day is a gift and we can't forget that for one minute," she said as her voice cracked.

Mitch was surprised at her. She wasn't one to cry at the drop of a pin. He walked over to her, knelt down and reached out for her hand.

“Hey sis, what’s up?” he asked worriedly.

She shook her head, trying to evade him. “You know how women get. I am entitled, you know.”

“Are you sure?” he asked her, not convinced.

“Of course I am.” She patted his hand trying to change the subject.

“Okay, if you say so.” He returned to his seat behind the desk.

“Would you mind getting me a flight out to Little Rock for next Monday?”

“Is there a problem with the heifers?” she asked him.

“No. I met a dog trainer on my trip home. I’m going out to look at their dogs. Maybe we can get started on the herding dogs and make our jobs easier around here,” he said. He didn’t mention that the trainer was a woman. He didn’t feel like hearing it.



## Chapter 10

Mitch stepped off of the airplane tarmac and threw the strap of his carry on bag over his shoulder. When he got to the waiting area he looked towards the windows where people were waiting for passengers to arrive and watching the airplanes taxi down the runway.

When he called Rachel to let her know his flight time, she had insisted on picking him up at the airport and him staying at the farm while he was here. He was looking for her in the airport but he saw the dog first. Zeus was lying down next to Rachel who was wearing khaki shorts and a light green shirt with her company logo Reed K-9 Center. The dog had a service dog vest on. She was kneeling down next to a boy that looked to be around five years old. The little boy pointed at a plane coming in for a landing. His face was lit up with wonder as he watched the planes come and go. Mitch smiled, remembering when he was small and had done the very same thing with his father.

“Hello Ms. Reed,” Mitch said to Rachel as he approached her cautiously, mindful of Zeus.

She stood up from her kneeling position and turned to face him. Zeus pushed up to a sitting position watching the stranger, but showed no aggression. A smile spread across Rachel's face as she extended her hand to Mitch. "Hello Mr. Carlson. Good to see you again," she said to him.

"Likewise," he said returning the smile and tipping his hat. He looked down at the little boy who then, as if on cue, extended his hand out to Mitch and said "Hello Mr. Carlson, I'm Simon Reed." Mitch smiled at the boy, amused at his matter of fact way that he had introduced himself.

"Nice to meet you," Mitch said.

"Likewise," Simon replied.

Mitch burst out laughing. This boy would one day be a mover and shaker, he thought to himself.

"Quite a helper you have there," he said to Rachel.

She smiled and said "I hope that you don't mind, but he always asks to come and see the planes."

"Not at all," Mitch said to her.

The three of them and Zeus turned and headed towards the exit, since Mitch had just brought his carry on bag. He noticed that Zeus stayed on the left side of Rachel automatically. She had not given the dog one command since he arrived. The dog watched her like she was a goddess. Mitch could see why. She had a way of drawing you in without her trying to. She wasn't aware of it, but Mitch could see the way that perfect strangers looked at her while they were in the airport. Rachel was oblivious. She was sure of herself and comfortable with anyone that she met.

Mitch loaded his bag into the Suburban that also displayed the Reed company logo.

Simon opened the back door and Zeus jumped into the seat. The drive to the farm was about a forty-five minute trip. Once they were on the road, Simon soon dozed off to sleep and Zeus laid his head in his lap.

"So Mitch, tell me about your ranch," Rachel invited him into conversation.

My God she is beautiful. He cleared his throat. This is business, he reminded himself.

"We raise Quarter horses, Angus Cattle and some crops. In the past ten years we have had a problem with the illegals growing in

numbers and it is staggering. They will often steal crops out of the fields and kill calves and butcher them on the spot. They carry salt with them to put the meat in. When they get a few miles down the road they will cook it on an open fire and then go on their way. And of course, the crime has increased with the drug cartels branching out. The news media is not reporting a lot of what is going on at our Mexican border. We are only thirty five miles from the border. All of our workers carry a gun when they are out working in the fields. My sister and brother agree with me that we need to bring in some dogs. We need some herders, protection and tracking dogs. We intend to track down these thieves and bring them to justice. We are hoping that the word will get out that our ranch is to be avoided at all costs. We have considered selling the ranch and moving North, but this is our family land.”

Rachel could hear the concern in his voice. He loved his family and ranch and he didn't want to be forced to leave it. She could understand how he felt. She didn't know what she would do if faced with the same problem.

Yes I do, she thought to herself, whatever it takes.

“Will the dogs be around children?” Rachel inquired. She often “interviewed” people that were interested in her dogs. She wanted to make the best possible match. “No. My wife and daughter were killed by a drunk driver ten years ago.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” she said and meant it.

“Thank you.”

They traveled in silence for a few minutes and then she began to ask him the usual questions. Will the dog be an inside or outside dog? Housed in a kennel or a yard? Who would be responsible for the care of the dog? She continued with her questions until she was satisfied that her dogs would be going into a good environment.

“Excuse me a moment,” she said, as she reached for her cell phone to call Ethan. They were ten minutes from the house and she wanted to let them know so that they could be ready for the demonstration.

When they arrived, Rachel pulled the Suburban under the shade tree next to the training area. Rachel let the windows down and turned off the engine.

“Zeus, Stay,” Rachel commanded the dog to stay with Simon.

Rachel led Mitch over to the covered sitting area that had an outdoor kitchen, table and chairs and a small equipment room. It sat on a hill overlooking the training area where Ethan and Evan were working with Thor, a Rottweiler that was in training for protection.

Rachel brought a pitcher of sweet tea and glasses to the table as she and Mitch sat down to watch the demonstration.

Evan was wearing a bite suit with a club in his hand and Ethan was holding the dogs lead. Evan began to run away from the dog. When he had gone about fifty feet, Ethan yelled out “Stop! Or I’ll send the dog.” Thor was pulling and barking excitedly, ready to go. Evan continued to run as Ethan released the dog. Thor jumped forward and with all of the strength in his bulging muscles, covered the fifty feet in seconds. He shot through the air like a torpedo and slammed into Evan. His mouth clamped down on the closest arm of this would be intruder. Evan lifted the dog up off the ground and began to swing the dog around in the air, Thor tightening his grip on the arm sleeve. He then began to hit the dog lightly with the club. The dog bit down harder on the protected arm in the sleeve. Ethan caught up with them, and took hold of Thor’s collar and gave the “Off” command. Thor reluctantly released the arm and returned to the ground. He continued to bark aggressively at this intruder that he had captured. Ethan snapped the lead on Thor and began walking him away from Evan. Thor had stopped barking and was still watching the supposed intruder as he and Ethan were walking away. Evan raised the club and advanced towards Ethan and Thor. The dog turned and began to bark aggressively waiting for the command from Ethan to attack, who then gave the word and dropped the lead. Thor again ran at the intruder and grabbed the sleeved arm. Evan repeated the previous scenario until Ethan had the lead and pulled the dog off. They ended the session as Ethan led Thor to the covered kennels next to the training area.

He then went to the next kennel and snapped the lead on a Border collie. The dog began to bark and wag her tail. She was ready to work. In the mean time Evan had taken the heavy bite suit off and had gone to the end of the training area to turn five sheep into the fenced in area. Mitch and Rachel watched the display as Ethan brought the collie into the area with the sheep. He took the lead off of the dog and gave her the command to move the sheep. The dog dropped her head and tail and began stalking the sheep. She glared at the sheep as she went to the right of the group and turned them. She kept the sheep

in a tight group and drove them to the end of the training area. She then turned and went to the left of the sheep. She squeezed the sheep into the small pen and dropped to the ground. She continued to watch the sheep until Ethan shut the gate. Mitch watched as Ethan praised the dog and tossed her a treat. She was barking and wagging her tail. The dog was happy that she had done a good job.

Rachel opened her phone and called Ethan.

“Hey, I’m going to send Zeus down for a tracking demo. Let me know when you are ready,” Rachel said.

Ethan put the collie back into the kennel. Mitch watched the two men talk and then Ethan headed to the far end of the training area, went into the woods, returned to the fence and back into the woods again. He turned and walked along the fence that surrounded the area. Mitch and Rachel could see Ethan as he leaned up against a tree in the woods and signaled to Rachel.

“Zeus, Here,” she called the dog.

Mitch turned to see Zeus jump through the window of the Suburban and come to Rachel and sit in front of her. “Good boy,” Rachel praised the dog. She gave the dog a hand signal for him to heel at her side and the dog twisted around to her left side and sat. Rachel began to walk to the edge of the sitting area with Zeus at her side. She stopped and looked down into the training area at Evan who then called Zeus. “Go.” Rachel commanded the dog as she swung her arm towards Evan.

Zeus started towards Evan, scaled the fence and when he reached him the dog sat in front, waiting for further instructions. Evan pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and let Zeus smell it. Mitch watched as Evan gave the dog the command to “Find”.

Zeus began sniffing the ground until he found the scent. The dog hurried his pace as he sniffed the ground and went into the woods following the trail that Ethan had left. The dog emerged from the woods with his nose still to the ground, followed the fence and then went into the woods again and found Ethan at the tree. Rachel and Mitch watched as Zeus began to bark and wag his tail letting Evan know that he had found Ethan. Evan pulled a ball from his pocket and tossed it into the air in front of Zeus who then caught it, ending the session.

Mitch shook his head. “That was amazing,” Mitch said.

Rachel smiled. “Thank you.”

“You really like your job don’t you?” he watched her, impressed.

“I am the luckiest woman in the world to be able to do what I love. If it hadn’t been for Britta, my life would have been very different,” Rachel said.

She told him her story about how she had come to love the dogs through Britta and her decision to make this her lifelong career. She explained how she and Ethan had decided to grow this into a family business, as the children began to show interest in the dogs. She also told him about some of the clients and their dogs, her work in Search and Rescue, and some of the service dogs that she had trained. They discussed the training, housing and handling of the dogs.

“Mitch, whoever will be handling the dogs will need to be trained as well. They will need to learn the proper commands in order to get the job done, whatever that may be. I think that it would be best for us to bring the dogs out, get them set up and have a few handling classes in order to teach the new handlers how to effectively work the dogs,” Rachel said. “That is, of course, if you decide to go with our company.”

Mitch took a sip of his tea. He sat quietly thinking about all that he had seen today. She was a great dog trainer. The dogs were well taken care of and were healthy. He liked what he had seen so far. “How soon can we get this going?”

“Right away,” she said as she extended her hand out to shake his.

With their part of the presentation over, Ethan, Evan and Zeus approached them. Zeus came running up to Rachel like an excited child with his toy. The dog dropped the ball in front of her and waited for her to throw it. She reached for the ball and threw it into the distance as Zeus chased after it.

Rachel handed a glass of tea to her son and then poured one for Ethan.

“Thanks Mom,” Evan said as he turned the glass of tea up and drank it all.

Ethan extended his hand to Mitch and introduced himself. “Hello, I’m Ethan Reed, and our son Evan,” he nodded towards him.

Mitch shook his hand and replied, “Mitch Carlson.” And then shook hands with Evan.

“That was an impressive demonstration. How long does it take to get a dog to this level of training?” he asked.

“Thor is two years old, which is a good age to start the advanced protection training,” Rachel replied. “Training actually starts at birth, with a technique called imprinting. When the pups are in the whelping box, they are all handled daily and stimulated with touch. Then at around two weeks of age when their eyes open and they are crawling around good, I change out their bedding to a different type surface. At three weeks of age toys are put in the whelping box. At four weeks of age they will begin to crawl out of their whelping box and explore the world outside. We then put obstacles around them to climb over. We hang plastic bags up to blow in the wind. At eight weeks of age they get a collar and leash attached to drag around for short intervals during the day. From that point on, their training becomes a game to them and they look forward to learning.”

“We do imprinting on the horses too,” Mitch said. “It really enhances a strong bond with people.”

Rachel smiled. “Yes, it does.” She was glad that she had met a fellow animal trainer and that her dogs would be going into a good environment.

“Mitch, grab your bag and I’ll show you to the guest house,” Ethan said.

“Nice to meet you,” Evan said to Mitch as he stood up to go to the kennel.

“Dinner is at five. Make yourself at home. If you like to fish, there are poles and equipment in the shed next to the pond. If you need anything just call me on my cell phone,” Rachel said as she handed him his bag out of the back of the Suburban.

Ethan and Mitch made small talk as they walked along the path from the training area. They arrived at the cottage that was now used as a guest house for clients.

“Come on up to the house whenever you get ready,” Ethan said pointing towards the main house.

Mitch opened the door to the quaint, comfortable cottage. He tossed his bag on the couch and went into the kitchenette and washed his hands and face. There were canned drinks in the small fridge, along with a vegetable tray. Fresh flowers were on the table. He got a drink and carried the food over to the couch and sat down. He thought about what he had seen since he had arrived and he liked this place.

He liked Rachel too, maybe too much. He wondered what she was doing right now. Maybe she was taking a shower? He thought about her tall slim body, long hair, her mouth and her green eyes that he just melted into when he looked at her.

“Oh hell, I have got to stop this. She’s married,” he said out loud to himself as if to concrete it in his mind. Mitch knew that he should stop thinking about a woman like her. She was married and with a happy family. Maybe I’m jealous of something that I know I can’t have, Mitch thought to himself. The sooner I get this business deal done, the better.

