

Chapter One

Officer Rowdy Cooper took a sip of coffee as he slowly maneuvered his truck through the industrial park. They'd had a rash of burglaries in the area and Admin was putting pressure on the graveyard guys to catch the perps. Burbank, the hotshot captain over the Investigations Bureau, insisted it was one guy acting alone but Rowdy wasn't buying it. He just didn't see how one guy could steal that much merchandise in such a short amount of time. He was certain there were at least two, maybe three guys acting together. The latest numbers circulating the precinct were upwards of sixty thousand in cash and merchandise missing, and the number was growing weekly. Chief Steven Griggs was furious. He wanted the burglars caught, yesterday! The Mayor had been pushing for a resolution before, but after last night he was on the warpath. Mayor Gregory Adams was all about politics. When one of his largest contributors got victimized, heads rolled. Currently, Chief Griggs' head was the Mayor's primary target. Rowdy hated politics and he hated threats even worse. So far, Griggs was handling the pressure. Rowdy didn't envy the man. He liked Chief Griggs, far more than he had ever liked his predecessor. Griggs was a street cop at heart. He looked out for his men, but demanded hard work and dedication in return.

Rowdy aimed to please. He was an officer of the law and believed in equal justice for all. Which is why his entire squad had made catching the burglar a priority weeks ago... without pressure from the mayor. They'd spent every free moment they had patrolling the commercial areas of the city, trying to catch the burglars in action. Unfortunately, Sweeney Industries was hit last night. Tens of thousands of dollars' worth of equipment was stolen and Theodore Sweeney was beyond livid. To make matters worse, Sweeney was not only a campaign contributor, but a close friend to Mayor Adams. Adams of course blew a gasket when he heard his financial backer was the victim of a crime. Catching the burglar had become a priority, not only for the police department, but for the Mayor's office as well. Rowdy loved being a cop. He loved catching bad guys, which is why he loved working the graveyard shift. He was a hunter of men. His current prey was nothing more than an interesting challenge. The burglars may be clever but as with all criminals, they were getting cocky. Sooner or later they'd get caught - they all did. This time, Rowdy was determined to be the one doing the catching.

He shot a glance to the back of the truck then slowed even more to survey the area. Knight was getting antsy. That was all Rowdy needed to know. Something wasn't quite right and the trouble was close by. Knight, an eight-year-old German Shepherd and Rowdy's K9 partner, was never wrong. Rowdy's life had been saved more than once because Knight sensed something Rowdy had missed. As he made a right turn onto Amelia Avenue, Knight went nuts. He was pacing back and forth with so much force the truck began to rock. Rowdy spotted a beat up old pickup parked on the side of the road and immediately grabbed his mic. He could see from here that the bed was full of expensive equipment. He was going to need backup and fast. He glanced

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around, but couldn't see his suspect; or suspects. The truck cab was obviously empty. Maybe the perps were still inside the building.

"Kilo 3," he spoke into the handset as he pulled his truck to a stop blocking in the suspect vehicle. He usually preferred the element of surprise, but he'd already lost that with Knight in the back making so much noise.

"Go ahead, Kilo 3," the dispatcher replied.

"I'm in Chesterfield, Amelia Avenue on a burglary in progress and I need a back." Rowdy rattled off the address, the plate number and a brief description of the truck. Dispatch asked for an available unit, but received no response. The fine hair on the back of Rowdy's neck stood up and an uncomfortable tingle ran down his spine. He needed to free Knight; they were going to have to handle this on their own. The bad guys weren't going to wait for help to arrive.

"Charlie 1, I'm clearing the shopping center but I'm a ways out," Sergeant Stratton replied, tension evident in his voice. "Leave this call assigned to Charlie 52, he'll clear when he's finished." Sirens could be heard in the background. "Who do we have closer?" he demanded as he accelerated onto the roadway, tires squealing in protest. "I want a back for Kilo 3 and I want it now."

"Charlie 63 is on a parking problem a few blocks away, but I haven't been able to raise him," the dispatcher advised.

"Charlie 63," Sergeant Stratton bellowed across the airwaves. His tone conveyed his impatience. No one in their right mind would ignore Stratton at a time like this.

"Charlie 63," came the reply.

"Clear your detail and respond to Amelia Avenue immediately," Stratton took a deep breath in a futile attempt to rein in his fury. "I'm on my way. Do not leave the scene until I approve it, personally." The radio went silent for several seconds. Everyone listening knew what that meant. Officer Davis had some explaining to do. Rowdy never asked for a back unless there was trouble. There was no excuse Davis could give that would save him from the Sarge's wrath. Ignoring a fellow officer's call for assistance was taboo. Ignoring it to remain on a parking problem was unforgiveable, but not unexpected from Gary Davis. The man was a dinosaur. He should have retired years ago. Even in his prime, he'd been lackluster at best. Now he was useless, occupying an allocation that could go to someone who actually wanted to work. Rather than force the issue, Admin transferred him back on the street six months ago, hoping it would force him out. No such luck. The man was out of shape, lazy and stubborn. He put the men he worked with at risk, but was too arrogant and bullheaded to retire.

"10-4," Officer Davis reluctantly agreed. He knew he was in trouble. He knew he should have responded to assist Officer Cooper, but he hadn't wanted to get involved. This call was

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bound to be a cluster and Davis wanted no part of it. He had heard the call for help the instant it came across but he'd silently waited, hoping someone else would step up and respond so he wouldn't have to. He was too old for this shit. Nobody knew it yet, but he'd finally decided to pull the plug. He was just waiting for the retirement board to send him the final paperwork. Just a few more days and he'd be moving to sunny Florida to live a long, happy and relaxing life. He certainly wasn't going to put himself in harm's way over a stupid burglar. Dynamo Officer Rowdy Cooper would just have to fend for himself. He had to obey his sergeant's order to respond to the call, but Stratton couldn't control how quickly he got there or what he did when he finally arrived.

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Rowdy slid from the truck mentally cursing recent budget cuts. How many times had his sergeant put in a request for remotes to operate the back gate on all their K9 trucks? But no, the department couldn't afford it. So here he was, putting his very life in danger to get to the back cage and release his dog... manually. Rowdy paused when he heard a noise to the right. Knight began to bark and growl, circling the truck even faster now. Rowdy pulled his weapon and surveyed the area. Danger was lurking in the shadows; he could feel it all the way down to his bones. Knight was only confirming what Rowdy already knew: they were sitting ducks and on their own. Man he wished his dog was outside that truck right now.

Rowdy took another step forward then hesitated. Every instinct he had told him to stay close to his vehicle. He glanced to the right again, then made a decision. He needed his dog. Before he could second guess himself, Rowdy pushed his back against the cold metal siding of the truck and silently took another step. Once he reached the back panel, he slowly reached his arm around and fumbled for the release. Within seconds, Rowdy's fingers slid over the spring loaded lever and the gate swung open. Two things happened at once: Knight sprang from the truck, and a shot rang out. Rowdy's leg exploded in pain, he'd been shot in the thigh. Knight didn't hesitate for a second. The well trained dog disappeared, engulfed in darkness as he sprinted toward the shooter. Rowdy was torn. Should he follow Knight, or stay and deal with the second suspect? He focused on the sounds around him and made his decision. He was on his own until he neutralized the threat to his right. Rowdy reached into the truck and grabbed a spare leash, wrapping it tightly around his leg. If he was lucky that would slow the flow of blood oozing from his wound.

Rowdy forced himself to ignore the pain and focus on the sounds around him. Gravel occasionally crunched underfoot as the suspect drew closer. The guy was approaching from the rear and slightly right of his K9 truck. Rowdy smiled and started to relax. He could handle this, just a regular day at the office. He instantly changed his mind when he heard the unmistakable sound of a hammer being cocked. Rowdy froze in place and silently waited for just the right moment to act. Another shot rang out, but he was prepared for it. He fired back, positive he'd hit his mark. The man lunged from the shadows and fired again. A second bullet struck Rowdy in

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the chest. He always wore a vest so he was protected, but the force of the impact knocked him to his knees. He raised his gun and fired again. This time he knew he'd hit his mark, but the man still kept coming. Rowdy fired again, aiming for the man's head. Maybe the suspect was wearing a vest, too. Without street lights, it was too dark to tell if the guy was bleeding. Rowdy's final shot hit its mark a second too late. As the suspect went down he pulled the trigger. One last round echoed into the night as pain exploded through Rowdy's head, then his world went black.

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Officer Davis heard what sounded like gunfire. He was torn... rush in to help, or claim he'd gotten lost? He was already in trouble, but could he live with himself if Rowdy Cooper died because he wasn't there? On the other hand, he never had been that good at shooting. He barely qualified when they were forced to go to the range. Who was to say he could even save his fellow officer anyway. It was more likely he'd just die too, a second casualty in this senseless war on crime. And for what? Property the owners would just turn into their insurance company anyway. But he was too close to risk a detour now. Someone might see him and then he would be in trouble. He took another turn, slowly inching his way onto Amelia Avenue, and immediately slammed on his brakes.

The scene before him made him physically ill. Cooper was lying on the ground, bleeding profusely. Another man was spread out a few yards away from the K9 truck. Well, Davis assumed it was a man. The body was face down in the gravel. Blood was seeping from somewhere beneath it, creating a tiny blood river that slowly cascaded over dirt and small rocks before it finally settled in a pool next to the sidewalk. Davis sat, mesmerized for a full minute before he pulled his attention from the growing puddle and glanced around. Rowdy's K9 partner was on alert, guarding another man who was huddled in a fetal position on the ground. The dog was growling, hair standing up, clearly in attack mode. There was no way Davis would be getting out of his car. He was terrified of dogs as it was, police dogs took that fear to a whole new level. He cringed when he heard a car door slam and swung around to see his sergeant running to Rowdy's aid.

"Officer down," Sergeant Stratton barked over the radio. "I need additional backup and a medical chopper, now!" The radio went silent for a moment as he studied the dog. "I also need someone familiar with Cooper's dog to respond. We have a slight situation here." The man being guarded by the dog was on the ground screaming like a girl. There was a black handgun lying just out of reach. Stratton could see what looked like blood splattered around the area near the gun. He glanced back at Rowdy's K9 partner. The dog was standing perfectly still, but leaning slightly forward, clearly waiting for a reason to attack again. His ears were pulled back and his hair was standing straight up as he focused intently on the suspect. The guy slid no more than an inch backwards. Knight growled, a low vicious sound that grew in volume and intensity with each passing second. The suspect froze in place and started to cry. Stratton knew he needed help. He

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looked at Davis in disgust. The wuss was still cowering inside his cruiser. No help there. He'd deal with Davis later. For now, he needed to do what he could for Rowdy and hope the dog didn't kill the other suspect before help arrived.

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Sergeant Andy Cooper's car fishtailed as he took a corner too fast. Rowdy was in trouble. And when he got his hands on that no good Davis... Coop didn't finish the thought, he was too busy trying to get his car back under control. Okay, he had to slow down. He'd caught air going over that railroad crossing. But his kid brother was in trouble. The instant Rowdy asked for a back, Coop knew it was serious. Rowdy had Knight and that was usually enough. Coop could count on one hand the number of times Rowdy had asked for backup and every one of them had been ugly. His brother had good instincts. They both did. They'd gotten them from their father, the best cop Coop had ever known. "Come on Rowdy, get on the air and tell us everything is under control."

He slowed to take another corner then accelerated. He was entering the commercial side of the city now. There would be very little traffic out here at this time of night. His heart dropped to his stomach when he heard Stratton's traffic. "Officer down," could only mean Rowdy, especially with the follow-up. Knight was on the loose. Coop barely slowed as he took the turn onto Amelia Avenue. The instant he saw the scene, his breathing became labored. If he didn't get a grip, he'd go into a full panic from the shock. After shoving his car into park, he threw open his door and ran. Rowdy was lying on the ground, not moving. There was so much blood. Could his brother even live after losing that much blood? He slid to a stop then dropped to his knees as he tried to blink back the moisture gathering in his eyes. "Rowdy," he choked out as he slowly reached down and pressed his finger against his brother's neck. There was a pulse, but it was so weak.

Coop stood and ran his hand through his hair. Stratton was better with medical emergencies than he was. It was best to stay out of his friend's way. His brother was in good hands and right now Coop couldn't think. He had to turn away from his brother's helpless body if he was ever going to calm down. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he turned his back to his brother and glanced around the darkened area. He immediately spotted the other man. He was a few yards away and had been shot in the head. At least Rowdy had time to fire back. Was there only one suspect or had Rowdy been ambushed by multiple threats? That's when Coop snapped back into cop mode. Stratton was taking care of Rowdy, but he needed to make sure they were safe. They were sitting ducks out here in the open. He slowly surveyed the area until his focus landed on Knight; who was still guarding the other suspect. Coop forced himself to move forward, hoping he could control Rowdy's dog. "Good boy," he said softly as he approached. "Very good boy, Knight," he said, pausing to wait for the dog to react. He felt vulnerable and too exposed but he also knew Knight would warn him if there was another threat.

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Coop let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding when Knight's ears perked up and he stopped growling. The man on the ground misread the situation and began to crab walk backwards. Coop spotted the gun just a few feet away. The situation was getting worse by the second. He unsnapped his own gun and pulled it from the holster, not knowing if the man was going to lunge for the gun or simply back away from the dog.

Knight refocused on the man and started to growl again as he inched forward ready to attack.

The guy yelled at Coop, "Get that thing away from me." He pivoted and pushed onto his hands and knees then lunged forward in an attempt to flee. That was all Knight needed. He sprang through the air, sinking his teeth into the back of the guy's thigh. Coop was surprised at the grace and precision of the dog's attack. He'd never actually seen Knight in action before.

"Not the brightest thing you've ever done," Coop said, amazed at the man's stupidity. He shook his head as he slid his weapon back into his holster. "Stop fighting or you'll make it worse," Coop ordered as he moved forward to kick the gun further out of reach.

"Get him off," the man screamed. "Get him off!" Then he began to sob.

Knight disengaged from his target, circled once then crouched, hair standing on end as he resumed an aggressive posture; waiting for his prey to make his next move. "How many of you were there?" The suspect didn't respond. He was frozen in place, staring intently, as Knight released a low guttural growl. "Answer me," Coop demanded. "Was it just the two of you? Or were there more? I'm not calling off the dog until I get an answer. And don't lie to me. Knight here can smell a lie a mile away. You don't even want to know what he does to liars."

"No," the man said, then screamed again. "Just us two."

"Knight," Coop said, trying to sooth the dog as he approached. "Good boy," he coaxed taking another step forward. He glanced over his shoulder when he heard the helicopter approach. He didn't have time for this. He needed to be with Rowdy. He needed to know if his brother was still alive. Coop was so focused on the problem at hand that he didn't even hear the other cars arrive. So he was taken by surprise when Officer Johnson, another K9 Officer, stepped up beside him.

"I've got this, Coop," Johnson said softly. "Knight knows me and we've trained for this." He held up a leash. "Go on, you need to head to the hospital. Rowdy's in bad shape. Chacon can help me with the suspect." The cop cocked his head to the side, signaling a second officer that was standing beside him.

"Thanks." Sergeant Andy Cooper nodded and turned back toward the helicopter. He reached it just as they were about to load Rowdy inside. He took a step forward, but was stopped by Sergeant Stratton.

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“No, Coop,” his friend said soberly. “Let them do their job.” He pulled on Coop’s arm, guiding him back towards Rowdy’s truck.

Coop looked around and for the first time realized just how many cops had arrived. Where were these guys when Rowdy had needed them? He pulled away from Stratton and marched to Gary Davis’ vehicle. The coward was still inside. “Get out,” he demanded. “Before I help you out.”

“Coop,” Stratton warned. “I’ll handle it. He’s my guy. I’ll take care of it.”

Coop didn’t budge. “He’s a disgrace to the badge,” Coop spit out. “The man has no business being a cop.”

“I know,” Stratton agreed, taking Coop’s arm and pulling him in the opposite direction. He scanned the area and called out to one of his men, “Hey, Lockman.”

A uniformed officer turned and immediately jogged over to his sergeant. He paused when he saw Coop, not sure what to say. Before he could think of something that didn’t sound lame, Stratton addressed him.

“You got the new guy with you again tonight?” Stratton asked.

“Uh... yeah,” he said turning back to his sergeant. “Why?”

“I need you to transport Sergeant Cooper’s car to the office. I’m taking him to the hospital as soon as I deal with Davis. I also need to arrange for someone to secure Rowdy’s stuff.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Lockman said. “Sergeant Morris just arrived,” he pointed to another K9 truck. “It sounded like his Unit would be taking care of Rowdy’s truck and his dog. I’ll just go find him and make sure,” then he turned back to Coop. “We’re all sick over what happened here tonight. Give our best to Rowdy when you see him and tell him we’re all here for him. Anything he needs, all he has to do is ask.”

“Thanks,” Coop said softly. He was grateful for the support and Lockman’s optimism. Rowdy wasn’t gone, yet. Coop knew his brother’s chance of survival wasn’t good, but he wouldn’t give up hope. He couldn’t. He wasn’t sure he could take another loss. Rowdy had to pull through this. Coop needed him. Both sergeants looked up when Chief Griggs approached.

“Andy,” he said as he placed his large hand on Coop’s shoulder in support. “We need to get you to the hospital. Let me find you a ride.”

“I’ll take him sir,” Stratton said, glancing around. “But I need to deal with Davis first.”

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Chief Griggs' face hardened. "I'll deal with Davis." He inhaled a long, deep breath. "I realize I'm stepping on toes here and I'm sorry, but as Chief I'm pulling rank. I want to handle this one personally."

"No offense taken," Stratton said, relieved. He wanted to handle Davis himself but he was also afraid he'd do physical damage to the man; which would definitely get him fired. This way, he could get his friend to the hospital and still know Davis would pay for being inept. Chief Griggs wasn't known for his patience with incompetence.

"Go on," Griggs told Stratton. "Get Cooper to the hospital. We'll handle things here."

"Thank you, sir," Coop said as he turned and headed to Stratton's car.

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Rowdy slid his eyes open then groaned. His head was killing him and the light coming through the window wasn't helping. He tried to cover his eyes with his arm, but realized he was attached to all kinds of wires.

"Rowdy," Maggie said, rushing to the side of the bed. "Finally," she choked out.

Coop stood and closed the blinds, realizing the light was bothering his brother. Once the blinds were closed, he moved to the wall and flipped the switch. "See if that's better," he said moving in behind his wife. The only light in the room was a soft glow seeping in through the open door.

Rowdy cautiously opened one eye, then the other. "You look as bad as I feel, Coop." He tried to push himself up, but stopped when his head began to throb even more. He glanced at Maggie. She looked exhausted. "What happened?" he asked, trying to remember how he'd gotten here.

"You don't remember?" Coop asked, worried.

"The burglars," he finally said. "Is Knight okay?" He was concerned for the mutt he loved like family. He'd completely lost track of his dog once Knight took off after the first shooter. Rowdy had been too busy dodging bullets. He forced his mind to concentrate. Had Knight been shot, too?

"Knight is fine. Johnson's keeping him at his place until you get out," Coop said, moving closer to the bed. "What do you remember?"

Rowdy thought for a moment. "I remember patrolling the industrial park. We'd been working it for weeks. But with the Mayor breathing down Griggs' back, we all split up. Morris had the

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whole Unit working that night but individually, you know? We all had the dogs to back us and we had strict orders to call it in immediately if we spotted anything suspicious.”

“That answers why you called for backup so quickly,” Coop told him.

“I’m going to go get a nurse,” Maggie said, tension in her voice.

Once the door closed, Rowdy turned to his brother. “Is she okay?”

“No,” Coop sighed. “This has been rough on her. She’s not sleeping or eating for that matter. She refuses to leave your side. I thought I was bad but with every passing day, Maggie has gotten worse.”

“Every passing day?” Rowdy asked, frowning his brow. “How long have I been here?”

“Two and a half weeks,” Coop said, pulling a chair closer to the bed then sinking into it. He scrubbed his hands across his face, then moved one hand back to rub his neck, letting the other one drop to the arm rest.

“Seriously?” Rowdy asked worried about the toll this ordeal was taking on his brother. “And the two of you have been here the whole time? Who’s watching Bryan?”

“He’s staying with Maggie’s mother,” Coop admitted. “This has been hard on him, too. Marsha said he’s not sleeping. I’ve stopped by every day but he’s withdrawn and won’t talk to me. He’s only eight, he doesn’t know how to deal with something like this. Hell, I’m thirty-four and I don’t know how to deal with it. What kind of example is that for my son?”

“I’m sorry, man,” Rowdy said, horrified at what he’d put his entire family through. “Why don’t you grab Maggie and head home for a while? I mean, I’m okay now so go take care of your family.”

“You’re my family,” Coop said, shaking his head. “We’ll take off in a while. But first tell me what you can remember. Then I’ll update you before the doctor arrives.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Rowdy said, thinking. His head was killing him, but he could remember everything. “I pulled up and spotted the truck. It had some equipment in the back and I knew it had to be our burglars. I called for a back but nobody was available, so I figured it was up to me and Knight. He was going nuts in the back of the truck. I got that feeling, you know the one, I was sure danger was lurking.”

“Yeah,” Coop agreed. It was like an extra sense. A lot of cops had it, and the good ones always listened. It’s what kept them alive.

“Anyway, I felt like a sitting duck. I knew I had to get Knight out of the truck and instinct told me not to go out in the open and drop the cage. So, I stuck close to the vehicle hoping it would

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hide me enough to hit the release. Knight flew out the back and took off. That's when I knew there were at least two of them. At about that same moment, the guy shot me. My leg was on fire but I couldn't go after him and Knight - there was a second threat and he was headed my way. The second suspect fired and missed. I shot back. I was so sure I'd hit him but he just kept coming... firing at me the entire time. He struck me in the chest, but the vest took that one. It did knock me to the ground, hurt like a bugger. I fired off another shot and I know that one hit him, but it still didn't faze him. The guy must have been wearing a vest or something. That's when I knew my only option was a head shot. I aimed and fired off one more round, then my head exploded and I think I must have blacked out."

"He wasn't wearing a vest," Coop told him. "I might be in trouble for telling you this before you talk to the DA and Internal Affairs, but you hit him every time. He was hyped up on meth. Your first round wasn't fatal. It caught him in the shoulder. The second one was a little off, barely missed the heart, but it would have been fatal and should have stopped him. Obviously the head shot did the trick. The investigators figure he went down instantly. Just dumb luck he got off a round before he went down."

"I take it the last shot got my head?" Rowdy said soberly. He was lucky to be alive.

"Yeah," Coop said, forcing a smile. "Lucky for you there's nothing vital in there."

"Funny," Rowdy said, grinning. Before he could come up with a smart reply the door opened and Maggie returned with a man who Rowdy figured must be the doctor.

"So, my patient has finally decided to wake up," the doctor said cheerfully. "How do you feel?"

"Like I got shot in the head," Rowdy grumbled. "Killer headache and I can't move with all these wires."

The doctor smiled. "Yes," was all he said as he studied Rowdy intently. "I see the lights are off, was that your doing?"

"It was mine," Coop told him. "When Rowdy woke up, the light was too painful."

"Well then, I guess you're not going to be too happy about my light test. Can't be helped. Are you hungry?" The doctor asked as he flicked on a pen light and forced open each eye. Once he finished, he began pushing and prodding, making Rowdy uncomfortable.

"No," Rowdy said. "Not really." He closed his eyes and waited for the pain to subside.

"That's to be expected," the doctor said taking a step back. "Everything looks good. I'll have the nurse bring something in for the headache. Just press the button and let the staff know when you get hungry. For now I want to keep you on broth or Jell-O. I'll give you a pass tonight

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if you don't think you can stomach anything but I expect you to eat in the morning." Then he turned, nodded to Maggie, and left.

Rowdy gave Coop a questioning look. "That was odd."

"Actually, it was pretty normal for him," Maggie said, lowering herself into the chair Coop had vacated. "The other doctor is more personable. I mean that one's okay, but he doesn't really tell you anything earth shattering or helpful."

A uniformed officer stuck his head into the room. "Hey Rowdy," he said grinning, "Glad you're back among the living." He turned to Coop. "The Chief's been informed of the patient's condition. I also called Troy. He's on his way."

"Thanks, Martin," Coop said, turning to stare out the window.

"Coop, do they have to do this now?" Maggie asked, clearly distraught. "I mean, Rowdy just woke up. Do you really think he's up for a long interrogation?"

"No," Coop said soberly. "But it's not up to me. And it's not up to Rowdy, either."

Rowdy took Maggie's hand. "Hey, Magpie. I'm good. Stop worrying about me. This is procedure. I signed up for it when I took the job."

Maggie nodded and brushed away a tear.

Coop straightened. "I'm going to go downstairs and wait for Troy," then he turned to Maggie. "He's the union rep. I can't be in there with Rowdy, but Troy can. I want to talk to him before they get started."

Rowdy smiled. "You want to give him orders and tell him what will happen if he doesn't obey."

Coop smiled. "That too," then he disappeared out the door.

"Hey, Maggie," Rowdy said once he was sure Coop was gone. "Talk to me, those dark circles under your eyes aren't only for me."

"I don't have dark circles," she protested, but knew she probably did.

"Seriously? They're as black as Toby's butt." He grinned, satisfied that had gotten a rise out of her.

"Rowdy Cooper! You are awful," she scolded. "I'm amazed the ACLU hasn't broken down your door yet."

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“What?” Rowdy asked innocently. “That rangy mutt of yours has the blackest butt I’ve ever seen.” He was referring to their son’s black lab, Toby, but he knew she would still take offense. “Anyway, I may be politically incorrect, but I’ve never violated anyone’s civil liberties. I’m irreverent about everyone equally,” he shrugged. “It’s just part of my charm,” then he sobered. “Don’t try to change the subject, Mags. What’s wrong?”

Maggie stood and walked to the window. She wanted to look out, but knew the sun’s glare would hurt Rowdy’s eyes so she turned back to face him. “I’m a mess and I hate it. I hate what I’ve become. I can’t sleep, if I do I have nightmares. I practically have a panic attack every time Coop heads off to work. I’m a cop’s wife. I’m supposed to be strong. I knew his job was dangerous when I married him. I signed on for this. Coop loves being a cop, it’s in his blood. It’s all he’s ever wanted to be and I’m putting him in danger. I try to be strong, but he can see right through me. I know I’m a distraction. I’m a weak, sappy wife. Everything I’ve always hated, I’ve become.” She was crying now. “But I don’t know how to stop it.”

“Mags,” Rowdy said softly. “Come here,” he held out a hand. Maggie hesitated then moved forward, dropping back into the chair and taking Rowdy’s hand. “You’re being too hard on yourself. You’re human and you had a scare,” he smiled. “So, ten percent is about me, ninety percent about Coop? That makes me feel better already.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes at Rowdy. “More like forty/sixty,” she inhaled. “You scared us, Rowdy. We were both sure we were going to lose you, but we pretended otherwise. Coop’s been so worried. You’re the only family he’s got left. And then his blubbering, weak wife goes off the deep end and he doesn’t even have me for support. I’m such a failure. I keep telling myself to pull it together. I know it’s not helping. I know the odds are in his favor. It’s far more likely that Coop will work for thirty years and never get injured than it is that he will get killed in the line. But no matter how logical I try to be about this, I still can’t sleep. I can’t eat and when I do sleep the nightmares are awful.”

“Tell me about them,” Rowdy urged, worried. He’d never seen Maggie like this and it surprised him. She was always so spunky and confident. She was the perfect cop’s wife, even when his brother joined SWAT. She knew the risks and still supported his decisions. No wonder Coop was so out of sorts.

“Sometimes they’re about you. Sometimes they’re about Coop. Mostly they start with you and then turn into Coop,” she started to elaborate.

“What do you mean?” Rowdy asked.

“They are always about one of you getting shot. The worst ones are when I’m there. Either you or Coop get shot, and I rush to you to try and stop the bleeding. Whether it starts out as you or Coop doesn’t matter. It always ends up being Andy. The ending, before I wake up, is always one of two endings. It’s either me and Bryan dressed in black standing over Coop’s casket, or I’m

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sitting on the floor next to him trying to stop the bleeding when he dies. I'm covered in blood and I start screaming. I can't hide them from Andy because if it's the last ending I actually wake up screaming. If it's the first ending, I wake up sobbing uncontrollably."

"Well," Rowdy said slowly. "I don't think it takes a professional to analyze this for you. My encounter has you worried you're going to lose my brother. I'm not surprised by your reaction, why are you?"

"You always knew I was weak?" Maggie asked, horrified.

"You're not weak, Magpie." He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it in comfort. "Coop is your life, just like you are Coop's life. I envy the connection you two have. It's that rare, forever kind of love just like my parents had. Giving birth to Bryan only made that connection stronger. Sure, you've always known Coop had a dangerous job but watching me go through this has brought it closer to home. We both know how devastated you would be if anything ever happened to my brother. I think those fears have always been there, in the back of your mind. This has just brought them to the forefront. It's natural to worry about the man you love. Especially when he's a cop. But Mags, Coop is a sergeant now. He's not out in the thick of things. Sure, he runs into danger occasionally but it's not the same as it was before. When you start to panic, just remember that. Most of the time Sergeant Andy Cooper is off having coffee and harassing his men. Your husband used to be on SWAT. He's well trained, very tactically savvy and he's not out responding to the dangerous calls anymore. This will pass, I promise. You're always going to worry and you should. But don't let it control your life. Give it time."

Maggie wiped her face and stood. "I need your bathroom before the world arrives to harass you. I really wish I could stay and protect you, or that Andy could be there. I don't like this," she scowled. "I really don't like this at all."

Rowdy smiled. "Take a breath, momma bear. I'm okay with it. Troy will be there. If it's too hard on me, he'll insist we take a break. If I know my brother, he's threatening the man's life as we speak. If Troy lets the interview go too long, he'll answer to Andy Cooper."

Maggie did smile at that. "I agree, your brother is one of a kind."

Coop stepped back into the room, relieved to see his wife smiling. Not the fake, forced smile she'd been giving him for weeks, but a genuine smile. "That I am," he said, moving to Maggie and enfolding her in his arms.

Maggie wrapped herself around Coop and held on. "And I'm the luckiest woman in the world." She went up on tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Coop wiped the moisture from Maggie's face. "You've been crying," he frowned. He hadn't been gone that long. What had he missed?

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“Only a little,” she said, stepping away and moving into the bathroom.

Coop turned to Rowdy but before he could say a word Chief Griggs entered the room.

“I’m glad to see you’re awake Cooper,” Griggs said as he scrutinized Rowdy.

“Thank you, sir,” Rowdy said, but he didn’t move. “Unfortunately, I can’t move yet so the interview will have to take place like this.”

“That’s not a problem,” Griggs said, glancing around for a chair. “Michelle Tingey from the District Attorney’s office will be conducting the interview today. She has assured me she will not take too much of your time.”

Both Coop and Rowdy relaxed. Michelle Tingey was good at her job. She was also very pro law enforcement. If she was doing the interview it would be quick and to the point. Rowdy should be cleared in matter of days.

“I’ve approved Lieutenant Christensen from IA to sit in,” Griggs continued. “However, I am not allowing him to ask any questions at this time. He can take as many notes as he likes, and he’s been told he can ask for clarification if necessary, but he will not be conducting an interrogation today. I don’t see a need for it and I won’t allow my people to hamper your recovery.”

“Thanks,” Rowdy said, unsure how to respond. They all watched as Maggie slipped from the bathroom and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

“Do you have any questions before we start?” Griggs asked.

“I do have one question,” Rowdy said, glancing from the Chief to his brother. “I don’t know if you can answer it though.”

“What’s that?” Coop asked.

“Coop, you said I’ve been out for over two weeks. Why is that? I mean the doctor came in for about two minutes, but he didn’t say if I have brain damage or why I’ve been out cold for so long.”

“I can answer that while you get Michelle and Troy Nelson. He’s going to sit in as Rowdy’s rep,” Coop told the Chief.

“Okay,” Chief Griggs said with a nod. “I’ll be right back.”

“The bullet hit you in the side of the head,” Coop began. “You had lost a lot of blood already because of the leg wound. But then you had internal bleeding in your brain. After a couple MRIs they decided to operate. Once they removed the bullet, the doctors had you in a medically induced coma for the first ten days. They said it was necessary for your recovery because of the bleeding

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and the drainage tube,” Coop grinned. “They assured me they would pull the tube before all your brains leaked out, but we’ll have to wait and see if that’s really true.”

Rowdy smiled. His brother was finally starting to get back to normal. “The rest was up to you. We’ve been worried because the doctors had no idea how long it would take you to come out of the coma. The longer it took, the lower the odds that you would ever wake up.”

“No wonder Maggie’s so upset,” Rowdy realized. “She’s worried about you.”

“I know,” Coop admitted. “But I don’t know how to help her. I keep wondering if I should just find another profession.”

Rowdy was floored by that. Coop could never be anything but a cop. “I think maybe you are just as messed up by this incident as she is. Don’t do anything stupid. She’ll come around. And if she doesn’t, then you can think about a different career. I’d hate to see you make a rash decision and regret it the rest of your life.”

Coop didn’t make any promises. He didn’t have time to say anything. Chief Griggs and the small group entered the room and Coop excused himself. He had a lot to think about. But he was certain of one thing, Maggie wouldn’t simply get over this. He was starting to believe some kind of change was the only thing that would help. He was also worried about Rowdy. They didn’t know the extent of his damage yet, but the doctors had pretty much guaranteed Rowdy would not recover completely. If he did, it certainly would not be in time to return to work. The department’s policy was extremely restrictive. They only had three months from the time of the incident to apply for a medical retirement. If Rowdy didn’t act within that time frame, he was screwed. That wasn’t nearly enough time for his brother to recover. Coop figured there was about a ninety nine percent chance Rowdy would have to take a medical retirement from the department. He worried the blow was going to be more than Rowdy could take. Coop wasn’t the only one with cop in his blood.