

CHAPTER 1

Last Ditch Effort

Summer 2005

Ouray, Colorado

If the helicopter shifts, we're dead. Dead like the guy we're looking for.

So much can go wrong up here. Peering out the open door, I look down at the fast-moving, unforgiving terrain. Far above the tree line, where the air is thin, volcanic rock breaks into huge spires and fins. Freeze-thaw cycles have crumbled the cliffs into strange, gargoyle-like shapes, and every crevice is filled with snow.

Tasha, my black Labrador retriever and avalanche-dog partner, is wedged between the pilot and me. Her bum presses against the pilot's right hip while she digs her furry elbows into my thighs and settles her barrel chest onto my lap. Her webbed feet, splayed wide from years of digging in avalanche debris, dangle off my leg and out the helicopter's open doorway. In our haste to hot-load the helicopter moments ago, I had nixed Tasha's restraining device. As the helicopter blades shave the air closer to the towering 13,492-foot peak, I vise-grip her neck with my arm, pulling her closer, concerned she'll try to jump or scramble onto the pilot's lap. Wiggling my toes inside my ski boots helps to keep them from falling asleep. That's all I dare move. If Tasha or I make a sudden movement, the two-seat crop duster helicopter, used to spray pesticides on cornfields, might fall out of the sky.

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We're about to land by putting one skid onto a couloir, a steep narrow gully, hemmed in by sheer cliff walls on the upper flanks of Whitehouse Mountain in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado.

As we near our forbidding landing site, I try to avoid looking down at the four-thousand-foot drop, where dawn just turned to daylight over the towering evergreen trees, now shrunk to matchsticks. Warm air turns to cold, and my knuckles are blue as I squeeze the grab handle above the door frame.

Thirty-nine days earlier, a single-engine plane crashed on Whitehouse Mountain, killing all four passengers on board: Richard Mills—the man we are looking for—his four-year-old son, and his parents. Days of bad weather, coupled by avalanche hazard and extreme terrain, had thwarted any rescue effort. Eventually, members of the local search-and-rescue team, Ouray Mountain Rescue, were transported to the wreckage one by one. Over several weeks of searching they found, strewn over a half-mile-long path, pieces of twisted metal, clothing, children's books, and three partially buried bodies. The team located all but Richard. Then, deeming the recovery mission too dangerous, the local sheriff had suspended the search. Until now.

All hope is on my sixty-pound retriever and five-foot-three me.

We're the last-ditch effort, and we've got one hour to find him.

After a decade as my search-and-rescue partner, Tasha has a few gray hairs on her chin, but still looks and acts like a pup. In human years, she's seventy and I'm forty-three. Her career is almost over, and then mine will be, too.

Tasha and I are one of a few elite high-altitude volunteer search-and-rescue dog teams in the United States. We live in Crested Butte, Colorado. We don't get paid for our work, not even a bag of kibble, yet we're up here risking our lives.

Inside the helicopter, Tasha's silky ears flap against her

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blocky head as air blasts through my side of the helicopter. Her chest swells and retracts, panting breathlessly as the air thins. Her tongue is pasty white. Her breath stinks. I can't tell if her excessive panting is from nerves or the food she gobbled down last night when she nosed open my suitcase and devoured eight cups of dry kibble, plastic bag and all. Her bloated belly feels like a stuffed sausage.

I want to wring her neck.

How could she do that to me? Ten years of training, sacrifices, and proving our worth to a community of doubters, many hoping I would fail. This mission is the pinnacle of our career, and because of Tasha's gluttony we might fail, if we don't die first.

The pilot reduces power, and the helicopter edges closer to the mountain. Boulders as big as cars litter our search area with fresh gray rubble, evidence of violent daily rock fall. Because of the danger, we only have to get in, find Richard's body, and get out: the morning sun shining on the avalanche path will cause snow to melt, releasing rocks that could pierce our flesh and crush our bones.

"Sue, see that speck down there?" The pilot's voice crackles in my headphones. "That's Bill." He points to a narrow, snowy couloir in front of us. "He's chopping out a landing zone." The pilot stares straight ahead at the colossal mountain and concentrates on placing his skid onto the thin landing strip—no wider or taller than I am. I squint out the bubble-shaped window but can't see Bill.

A sharp wobble of the helicopter jolts me with adrenaline. My body jerks. I cling to Tasha. I don't dare let go. To calm my nerves, and her nerves too, I hum a soothing melody into her ear, one she's been hearing for a decade. "Good girl, Black Dog, *doo-tee-dooo* ... I love you." I shut my eyes, praying the blades don't hit the slope. I put my boot against the bubble window and press an

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imaginary brake pedal to stop our forward momentum and brace for impact. The chopper edges toward the sheer wall. Somewhere on this peak, a family's despair is buried beneath tons of avalanche debris. Will *my* family soon join in their despair?

Suddenly, I spot Bill running toward a rock wall, protecting himself from the rotors and shielding his face from the growing blizzard of blowing snow. He's engulfed in the white tornado whirling beneath the chopper blades. I lose sight of him. The helicopter's skid thunks onto the landing strip. Tasha jerks up and digs her nails into my legs. It's painful, but I don't move a muscle.

My eyes fixate on the pilot for direction. He focuses on the blade whapping an arm's length away from the snow. "Time to go," he yells.

Yanking off my helmet with one hand, I pin Tasha into my lap with the other. The deafening roar of the engine makes giving verbal commands to Tasha impossible. I rely on our years of communicating through eye contact and hand signals to show her when to exit. Bill crawls on hands and knees to meet us. He waits in a crouch, as directed by the pilot, until the bird steadies.

"You're going to have to jump!" the pilot shouts at me.

"Jump?" I worry about Tasha's distended abdomen. She could rupture her gut if she lands on her belly. Then I remember the raspy plea of Ed Jones, the uncle of the missing man. "I'm not leaving Colorado until all my family members are accounted for. I've been scouring these mountains for over thirty days." Ed's desperation had convinced me I had to come out here. We're his last hope. Ten years ago, when I blindly launched into this volunteer search-dog career, I promised I would never leave anyone behind. I've kept my word so far.

The helicopter shudders. I clutch the handle and, for an instant, I question what I am doing here. My husband's pissed. He told me not to come, tried to order me not to get on the

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chopper. Yet here I am, in the path of an avalanche, risking Tasha's life and my own. Somehow, I find it easier to jump out of a helicopter than to talk to my husband about our relationship. Is my ego driving this? My promise to the family? Or is it that I have something to prove?

My eyes lock onto the pilot's. He nods, *now*. Before I ease Tasha into Bill's extended arms, I look to her to tell me something. Anything. I know I'll never bond with another being like I have with her. Everything we've struggled for hinges on this moment. Her kind brown eyes, full of confidence and foggy cataracts, stare into mine. Her calmness quells my shaking body.

"Tasha," I whisper into her ear, "Time to go."

After cuing her with a wrist flick, she lunges out and spread-eagles onto Bill's face and chest, knocking him backward. The two regain their feet and run together toward the rock for protection. Slipping off my seat, I sit on the floor. One at a time, my boots find purchase on the icy skid. Slinging my pack over my shoulder, I let go of the safety handle, then jump.