

# BATTLE SCARS

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

Ray McKenna sat on her brand-new leather couch, struggling to breathe with the acrid dust of the Iraqi desert burning her nose. Outside her Bodega Bay home, waves crashed against the rocky shore and set the quiet cadence of beachfront life. Inside her mind, she was thousands of miles away, the explosion that had reduced her unit's Humvee to smoking wreckage jolting her once again. One minute they were rolling through the streets of Al Hillah en route to the local medical clinic, and the next she was crawling in the dirt past a uniformed soldier so disfigured she didn't recognize him. Desperate to help the few men who cried out in pain, she didn't allow herself to mourn the ones who couldn't.

But this was only a flashback. She was safe and nobody could hurt her now. Dr. Evans had told her to focus on her breathing when this happened, but sometimes her body wouldn't obey. This was obviously one of those times.

As the memories took over, despair rolled through her. Rough male hands grasped her wrists and dragged her over the hard ground. They lifted her and threw her into a vehicle, causing a sickening disorientation. She longed to breathe, but how could she with that black hood over her head, suffocating her with its musty heat?

A long, wet tongue worked its way between her fingers, snapping Ray out of the past and focusing her on the heavy, steel gray head on her thigh. She blinked at Jagger, the Great Dane who stared mournfully into her eyes, then exhaled. Wordlessly, she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on as tight as she could without choking him. He

rested against her, as though returning the hug. Soon her breathing returned to normal.

“Good boy,” Ray murmured, kissing his short fur. Her heart still pounded like a wild, caged bird’s, but the worst was over. “Good boy, Jagger.”

After a moment, she pulled away from Jagger and glanced at the clock. Her first online therapy session would start in ten minutes. When she’d moved from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to the Northern California coast, she intended to escape everything—except her therapist. The rapport and trust they had established in the nearly two years since Ray came home from Iraq was irreplaceable. And though Dr. Evans was obviously concerned about her sudden decision to relocate, she seemed to sense what their relationship meant to Ray. So she agreed to continue their sessions over the webcam, even if she didn’t think the situation was ideal.

If she was being honest, Ray was just as happy not to have to leave the house for therapy. And she knew that was exactly what Dr. Evans worried about.

Jagger yawned and laid his head on her thigh again. Scratching the top of his broad skull, Ray said, “You do good work, my friend.” Did she want to admit to Dr. Evans that she’d just suffered such a severe flashback, the worst she’d had in a while? But Dr. Evans had been right about Jagger. After only three weeks with him as her psychiatric therapy dog, the symptoms of her posttraumatic stress disorder were easing. Even when she had an episode, he could somehow bring her out of it with ease.

He was a miracle, the first she’d enjoyed since the one that saved her life over there.

Ray groaned as she rose from the couch, using Jagger’s strong back to steady her as she fought for balance. Though she’d been able to retire the cane almost a year and a half ago, the healed fractures in her left leg still bothered her, especially when she sat for too long. The blustery coastal weather probably didn’t help, but she’d always dreamed of living near the ocean. Though her compensation payments from the VA would never make her wealthy, they did allow her to make that one dream a reality, achy joints be damned.

“Come on, boy,” Ray said as she walked stiff-legged toward the kitchen. He would follow her whether she asked or not, but she

enjoyed talking to him. Before Jagger, she would spend hours or even days alone, in silence. Having him around reminded her of the pleasure of conversation, albeit one-sided in their case. “Let’s get something to drink before we log in.”

She hadn’t been in the new house long enough to stock up the fridge, but she had brought plenty of water with her. She drank it constantly now, having learned true thirst during her time in the desert. The rows of plastic bottles in her fridge were an embarrassment of riches, something she once would have taken for granted but now relished. Grabbing one, she twisted off the cap and took a long, hard pull. She groaned with pleasure at the way the cold water coated her tongue, the sensuous caress of liquid sliding down her throat.

Ray laughed at the heady bliss of the sensation, a sound that came out more humorless than she felt. “Better than sex,” she told Jagger, then took another drink. She closed her eyes, forcing her mind away from her melancholy, the awful certainty of her statement. Yes, this water was better than the sex she would never have again, with the unknown man she could never fully trust. Not that anyone would want to put up with her and her many issues anyway. “Way better.”

She’d set up her computer in the small room she’d designated her office. That seemed too generous a description for the cheap, pressed-wood desk, the ergonomic chair, and the aging PC she’d put in there. But she would come to do her most serious work here, the arduous task of piecing herself back together again. She’d been at it for eighteen months already and saw no end. Sure, she was better, but she was starting to worry that she’d never approach normal again.

Ray fired up the webcam and logged in to the chat program Dr. Evans had recommended. Seeing that Dr. Evans was already online, she clicked the button to initiate their video conference. After a couple of telephone-like rings, a video window opened and her serious-looking therapist sat staring at her.

“Success,” Dr. Evans said, cracking a smile.

“The wonders of technology.” Ray adjusted her webcam so she could lean back in her chair, hoping to get more comfortable. “Hi, Dr. Evans.”

“Hello, Ray. It’s good to see you.”

“You, too.” And that was the truth. Therapy was painful at times, and Dr. Evans had a tendency to push her in directions she’d rather

not go, but it helped to have someone to talk to. "How's the weather there?"

"Two feet of snow this morning, thanks for asking. How about you?"

Ray glanced out the window, grinning as she took in the peaceful sight of sea birds floating on the ocean wind. "Perfect."

"Getting settled in?"

"Pretty well. I've unpacked most of my boxes. Starting to feel more at home."

"Good. Have you had a chance to explore Bodega Bay?"

"A little." Ray had walked around her property, at least. Even ventured down the road during one late-evening walk with Jagger. But she knew that wasn't what Dr. Evans was asking. "I haven't had a lot of opportunity yet."

"You should make it a priority. Remember what we talked about, Ray. This move won't be a positive change if you allow it to push you back into hiding."

"I know."

"Gone to the grocery store?"

Ray thought of her nearly empty fridge. "Busted."

"I think that would be a good first step, don't you?"

She sighed. "You know I hate grocery shopping." Ray always seemed to draw plenty of stares in checkout lines. After all, less than two years ago her face had been plastered on the many magazines sold there.

"That's why I suggested it."

"Remind me again why the VA recommended such an antagonistic therapist?"

"I prefer to think of myself as caring." Dr. Evans moved closer to the camera, staring at her with that sincere gaze that used to make Ray squirm in discomfort. Now she found it strangely reassuring. "I do care about you, Ray. I don't want to see you throw away all the progress we've made."

"Neither do I. Trust me, it's been hard won."

"I know it has. On another subject, how is your therapy dog working out?"

Ray angled the webcam so that Jagger's large, smiling face was

in the frame. He sat beside her quietly, as he always did unless she released him. “Jagger. He’s amazing.”

Dr. Evans chuckled. “Wow. Big dog.”

“One hundred seventy pounds. I always wanted a Great Dane, and when I found out they had one in the therapy-dog program, I jumped at the chance.” When Ray arrived at the service-dog training facility for her introduction to her new companion and the first of their training sessions together, she had loved him immediately. Every moment since then only served to further solidify her affection for him. “He makes me feel safe.”

“I expect he would.”

“Not that he has a mean bone in his body.” Ray put an arm around him, planting a kiss on a soft, floppy ear. “He’d probably be more inclined to cuddle a bad guy to death than anything.”

“How have you been coping with the PTSD? Any flashbacks or panic attacks?”

Ray hesitated, hating to admit that she’d just had a particularly nasty episode less than a half hour earlier.

Dr. Evans gave a knowing nod. “I’ll take that as a yes. How was—you said his name is Jagger?”

“After Mick.” Classic rock was the closest thing to heaven here on earth, so naming her dog after one of its legends was a no-brainer. “I thought about calling him McJagger, but decided to spare him.”

Dr. Evans laughed loud and hard, and Ray swelled with pride. She convinced herself often that she couldn’t communicate with other humans anymore, that she was so far removed from social niceties that she was irrelevant, but occasionally she glimpsed her own potential. Making Dr. Evans laugh brightened her day.

“How was Jagger during your episode?” Dr. Evans said when her laughter subsided. “Did he help guide you through it?”

“I had a flashback right before logging in, actually. First one in a while. Jagger put his head on my leg and licked my hand, pulled me right out of it.”

“Excellent.”

“I’m sleeping better, too. I still have the nightmares sometimes, but having Jagger there with me when I wake up, well, it really helps.” Aware that she was nearly gushing, Ray stopped talking and looked at

Jagger for a moment. He gazed directly into her eyes, then opened his massive jaw in a loud yawn. She looked back at the webcam with a grin. "Like I said, he makes me feel really safe."

"I am so happy to hear this."

"I want to thank you for suggesting that I apply to the therapy-dog program. I'll be honest with you. It's only been three weeks, but I'm more hopeful since getting him than I have been since I got home."

"Now we just need to get you to the grocery store."

Ray groaned. "Can't we just focus on my successes for a minute?"

"Absolutely. I'm so happy Jagger is making such a difference. But the world doesn't consist of only you and Jagger, no matter how much you wish it did."

"That's not true." Ray scowled. "I like having you here, too."

"Except when I badger you to go shopping, right?" When Ray didn't answer, Dr. Evans said, "Okay, so let's talk about Jagger. You're taking him on walks, I hope?"

"Of course."

"Off your own property?"

"A little bit."

"How about the vet?" Dr. Evans asked. "Have you taken him to the vet yet?"

"The vet? Why? He's totally healthy. The therapy-dog program gave me his records. He got all his vaccinations a month and a half ago."

"Listen, you've got a dog now. He may be there for your mental benefit, but he's still a living creature, and your responsibility. Companion animals need to go to the vet on occasion. Even if he doesn't need to right now, it'd be a good idea to figure out where the local vet clinic is and take him in for an initial visit."

Ray groaned, and Jagger leaned against her as though sensing her distress. "You're killing me, Doc."

"Listen, don't do it for me. Don't even do it for yourself. Do it for Jagger."

Ray turned her head and found her new best friend staring back at her. He nudged her with his nose, and any resistance she had instantly crumbled. "She's using you against me, buddy."

Jagger's mouth widened into what Ray was convinced was a shit-

eating grin, tongue unfurling and nostrils flaring. How could she deny this dog anything?

Narrowing her eyes, Ray looked back at the camera. “Fine, I’ll make him an appointment.”

Dr. Evans seemed extremely satisfied. “And give that boy a biscuit for me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”