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RIVAL FORCES

D.D. AYRES



Praise for the K-9 Rescue series by D.D. Ayres

“*Irresistible Force* is simply fabulous! With exhilarating action and stunning sensuality, Ayers draws you in and doesn’t let go.”

—Cherry Adair, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Incredible! You’ll be on the edge of your seat to see if the heroine can make it out alive.”

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“Ayres brings gritty realism and sexy heat to this romantic suspense series.”

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RIVAL FORCES

D.D. Ayres



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*To my brother Michael and his wife Marlene.
Love ya, M&M!*

PROLOGUE

December 30, FBI Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

“What do you mean he’s gone? Gone where?”

“We are unable to provide that information at present.” The deputy U.S. marshal in the Phoenix office sounded miserable. “When Dr. Gunnar didn’t make his check-in call this morning, we came to the house.”

“Any signs of a struggle?”

“No. The apartment is neat and locked up. He didn’t pack but his wallet is missing.”

FBI task force supervisor Jamal Jackson ran a hand over his sleek dome. Three months in witness protection, and suddenly their key witness was in the wind. This was not good. “Sounds like something spooked him.”

“Yes, sir. That’s our judgment.”

“Find him. Now.”

Jackson glanced at his calendar. Missing witness. Hell of a way to start the New Year weekend.

CHAPTER ONE

December 30, South-Central Idaho

The high-pitched shriek warned Kye McGarren of an incident taking place on ski slope three. He shifted the view in his field glasses in time to see a female skier plow into a snowbank that formed one edge of the slope and tumble headfirst onto the other side.

“Your turn.”

Kye lowered his glasses to find his ski patrol partner for the week, Joe Saunders, grinning at him from their perch at the top of the slope. “I’m cutting you slack, old man. She looks hot. But I’ve already got a date for tomorrow night’s New Year’s Eve party.”

Kye grunted. At thirty-six, he was hardly old. Moreover, it was against company policy for staff to socialize with guests. Not that he would bring that up here. Technically, Joe had seniority. What Joe and the SAR squad members didn’t know was that they worked for Kye.

“Call it in. I’ll sit second until the EMS guys get

there.” Kye adjusted his goggles and then picked up Lily, his SAR K-9, and slung her across his shoulders.

Lily, a forty-pound Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever, often called a toller, confidently straddled Kye’s shoulders. Ski patrol dogs often piggybacked with their handlers to their target.

Kye grabbed his poles off the edge of his snowmobile and pushed off down the hill in a silky swoosh.

Lily barked, a bright eager sound that from a distance sounded a bit like a coyote. Often mistaken for small golden retrievers, tollers had bright-red fur but possessed higher energy and intelligence. With a white blaze down her chest, a rosy-pink nose, and a narrow wedge-shaped head like a fox’s, Lily looked dainty. But she was as tough as a wolf, with the balance and agility of a mountain goat. No terrain was too tough or too steep. She also had a nose that could pinpoint human scents buried beneath several feet of dirt, mud, water, or snow with equal ease.

He came up on the group of skiers who had paused at the edge of the slope where the female skier had gone off into the rough a little faster than necessary. They were laughing and taking pictures with their cell phones.

“Move back. Now.” Kye’s commands instantly parted the gawkers.

He lowered Lily to the ground and rubbed her fur her briskly with both hands to energize and warm her. “Ready, Lily. Search! Search!”

With her flag of a tail held high, Lily barked twice as she plunged over the berm. SAR dogs worked off the leash in snow. It allowed them to cover search territory much faster than a slower-moving human could. In an avalanche situation, seconds counted.

Even as Kye dug his poles in the ground and kicked off his skis, Lily was barking in a key that meant she had found something.

The skier, in a bright-pink parka, was about ten feet beyond the edge of the slope, skis and poles scattered in the snow. She was kneeling in unpacked powder, and digging. If the volume of her curses was any indication, she was okay.

Kye waded through the calf-deep powder to the skier. “Are you injured? In pain? Any other problems?”

“Your shitty ski slope’s the problem. I almost died.” She didn’t spare him a glance as she continued to paw the snow. “I’ve lost my Dolce and Gabbana goggles!”

Kye rested a gloved hand lightly on her shoulder. “Are you certain you’re okay?”

She quick-rolled her shoulder to shrug off his touch without glancing up. “I’m suing. I swear, if I don’t find my stuff, I’m suing.”

Kye sighed as he glanced at Lily. “Search. Article.”

With the skier’s scent in her nostrils to guide her, Lily happily complied. On this gig, it wasn’t unusual for her to be asked to find glasses, cell phones, and other gear. A few quick circles and Lily found the spot where something with the skier’s scent lay buried. Digging quickly, she produced the goggles.

Kye took a waterproof chew toy from his pocket and tossed it to Lily as reward. “Good girl!” He dusted the snow off the goggles before handing them to the skier.

She shoved a handful of thick blond hair from her face and finally glanced up.

Seeing him for the first time, her gaze widened and her jaw fell open. Then she smiled and held out her hand. “I’m Shari.”

“McGarren.”

She used his grip to pull herself to her feet then didn't let go. “Did anybody ever tell you you look like that action-movie actor The Rock?”

“No.”

“Well, you do. And he's *sooo* hot!”

“Uh-huh.” She thought comparing him to some random movie star was going stroke his ego? Thanks but no thanks. Still, The Rock? He hid a smile.

Kye lowered his goggles. “You need to get back and change before a chill sets in.”

She touched his arm again. “How about you come along and warm me up?”

Ignoring her, he pointed at the snowplow two EMTs had pulled up. “They'll take care of you.”

After a quick conversation with the EMTs, Kye put on his skis, scooped up Lily, and headed for the bottom of the slope.

This assignment wasn't working out as he'd planned. He was here to relax. Sort of. A working vacation. The only kind he allowed himself. Too much time on his hands gave him time to think about what might be missing from his life. That's why he kept busy.

Four years ago he and Oliver Kelly, an Aussie with an appetite for adventure and a keen understanding of K-9 dogmanship, had formed a professional search-and-rescue company. They named it BAR K-9s, short for Bolt Action Rescue K-9 Service. Everyone quickly shortened it to BARKS.

They managed more than two dozen teams of K-9 handlers and dogs who worked every sort of search and rescue, from natural and man-made disasters to war zone recovery and jobs where local law enforcement needed

additional expertise in tracking and rescue. Even ski patrol. Whatever kept them in the black.

At the end of his shift, Kye returned to his room and stripped out of his ski gear, every major muscle group protesting the day's effort. Within minutes he was settled into the liquid heat of his personal hot tub laced with a muscle soak that smelled of birch bark. "Ah, sweet."

A huff answered his sigh of contentment. Lily watched him from the doorway with her head kicked over. That was her puzzled look. As much as she liked streams, ponds, and snow, she didn't understand the use of water when it was hot and bubbly. On the other hand, she saw nothing wrong with making a snack out of his worn skivvies. A pair of them hung from her mouth.

"Lil-lee." Kye stretched out her name for emphasis. "Drop it. Now."

She looked away, mouthing the tighty whities a few more times before unhinging her jaw and letting the soggy material drop to the floor.

It was her only fault. Lily was mouthy.

Kye decided her fondness for his undies was a form of affection. He'd never met a woman who wanted to chew his drawers. Well, except for that one time. In his thirty-six years, he'd met some wild women.

He picked up and tossed Lily one of the chew toys he kept lying around as preferable to his personal items. "Good girl. Out."

Lily picked it up, glancing at him reproachfully before turning tail and walking out.

"And don't chew my socks or tee or . . . anything." He leaned back and stretched both muscular arms along the rim of the tub to let the heated bubbles work the kinks out. The warmth of the water reminded him of home.

Hawaii born and bred, his full name was Kekoa Alena Maleko McGarren. Kye for short. He'd spent his childhood seeking and riding the smooth rolling curl of a perfect wave. Skiing had its pleasures. Surfing was riding barefoot on the back of a sea god.

He loved nothing better than the feel of a wave beneath his board, undulating like a live thing. Crouched with his arms wide, he felt like a tern swooping along on the flow of a sea breeze. Salt on his lips. The sting of seawater in his eyes. The caress of the wind on his sun-bronzed shoulders. Life didn't get any better.

He opened his eyes and squinted at the bubbling water surrounding him. What the fuck was he doing here when he could be stretched out over the warm undulating body of a smiling wahine who tasted of sea salt and sunshine?

The sound of Hawaiian drummers woke him from a dream of warm salt breezes and a nighttime family beach luau with a perfectly roasted pig wrapped in banana leaves that had just been dug up from its sandy pit.

The smell of imaginary roasted pork lingered as he jabbed the ANSWER button on his phone without bothering to check caller ID. "Yeah?"

"Battise here."

Kye jerked fully awake at the sound of Law's voice. They'd served together in the military police CID overseas but hadn't exchanged a word in years. "I knew I should have turned over instead of answering."

"This isn't a social call, McGarren."

Kye sat up and rubbed his eyes. His ex-buddy's tone was professional, and distancing. Better that way. "Okay. Shoot."

“It’s a personal matter.” A pause. “There’s no one else I trust with this.”

Those words put Kye on alert. He would have bet a year’s wages that he’d be the last man on earth Law would trust for anything. “What do you want me to do?”

“Check up on Yardley Summers, my half sister.”

The answer made the hair on Kye’s arms stiffen. “You screwing with me? Yard’s your sister?”

“You know her?”

Kye’s turn to pause. Everyone in U.S. K-9 law enforcement knew Yardley Summers as one of the top K-9 trainers in the country. He just wasn’t prepared to admit exactly how well he’d once known her. But considering her brother’s request, he didn’t seem to have a choice.

“Your sister and I have a history.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Your sister and I have a history that’s none of your goddamn business.”

“Then it’s not relevant.”

Law was letting him off the hook. Kye wasn’t sure he should be grateful. Law must have a hell of a job for him. “What’s this about?”

“Yard’s been seeing this guy for over a year but I only know the bare bones about him. His name is Dr. David Gunnar. He’s with Doctors Without Borders. I wouldn’t know that much except that he’s disappeared, and Yard’s convinced he’s in some kind of trouble. She called me only because she’s gotten nowhere through her usual contacts. My gut tells me if they won’t help, something’s not right.”

“Right.” Though they hadn’t been in touch in years, Kye knew enough about Yardley’s reputation to know

her “contacts” included all levels of law enforcement up to and including the FBI. Even so. “Relationship issues sound like a job for big brother.”

“It will be if I find out he simply walked out on her. Right now I’ve got a situation here I can’t get away from. Meanwhile, I need to know Yard’s not going to go off on her own until I can find out what the deal is with the guy she thinks she wants to marry.”

Marry. Kye would pay money to meet the man who thought he could handle Yardley Summers. *Wait.* That’s what Law was offering him a chance to do, for free. He was now too curious to hang up.

“I can’t get away until late tomorrow.”

“That’ll work. You’ll find her at Harmonie Kennels. Keep her there.”

“You’re talking about Yard. She’ll be doing pretty much what she wants.”

With the conversation over, Kye leaned back on his pillows and settled Lily on his chest. She poked her nose into his right armpit and settled in while he lay there thinking.

Yardley Summers. He hadn’t allowed himself to dwell on thoughts of her in a dozen years. Sure, she popped up on his radar from time to time. But he’d avoided running into her. Because, hell, he supposed one never forgot a first love.

Kye sighed. He’d never in his life tangled with a woman the way he had with her. Young and beautiful, she had a way with dogs that bordered on spooky. She was also stubborn, defiant, and suspicious of everyone’s motives. She had good reasons. That didn’t keep him from falling for her harder and faster than anyone with a fully functional brain should.

For most guys first love happened early, at fifteen or sixteen, when they were 90 percent dick and 10 percent reason. He'd been twenty-four. Even so, meeting Yardley had been all about a sudden unexpected heat and wonder that had knocked him sideways.

Kye blew out a breath, feeling the heat of a long-ago craving race across his skin. The memory of Yard's volatile black eyes and feel of her rare dark-red hair sliding through his fingers as their lips clung together still stung like a scorpion.

For about a minute he'd thought he would be her hero, her knight in shining armor. Then reality landed on him like jackboots. At that point in his life, all he'd had was the army and a dog. He wasn't in a position to jeopardize either.

“Shit.”

Lily lifted her head and began licking his chin, an indication that she was reading the uptick in pheromones caused by his thoughts. He pulled his dog in more closely to reassure her he was okay.

There was no reason for him to feel sorry for Yard. She'd gotten her happily-ever-after. Her father, the old bastard, had left her Harmonie Kennels—despite what he'd threatened.

Time to put what might have been away. But the deep stirring caused by Law's call continued to swirl in his gut.

He rubbed his sleep-gritted eyes, regretting the lost dream of roasted pig. He should have said no to Law. In fact, he still could. His ticket to Hawaii was practically doing a hula on the bedside table. His mouth began to water with possibilities of *kalua pua'a*. He would text Law. Say *Sorry, bro, my homeland calls*.

But he wasn't going to. He wasn't an immature hot-head rushing headlong to the rescue this time. He was a man with hard times and years of experience behind him. Yard was in trouble. So what if the very idea had those rusty trumpets in his head inconveniently blaring to life? He just hoped they weren't playing taps for his peace of mind.