



DR. MALLORY

AND THE

UNDERCOVER

DOG-DAD

ERIN STEVENSON

Dr. Mallory and
the Undercover
Dog-Dad

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Dedication

To my favorite dog dads, Brian, Peter,
Andrew, and Andy.
And to Watson, cover dog model extraordinaire.

1

As the plane made its final descent into Nashville, Garrett stared out the window at the sprawling city. Funny, it didn't look that different from Phoenix. There were more trees, and the mountains were more rounded than jagged, but other than that, he didn't anticipate great differences. They would have the same traffic snarls, chain restaurants, and big box stores. The same crimes—major and petty. The same people, ready to stab you in the back.

Garrett sighed and ran his hand over his jaw. He still wasn't used to the stubble and itched for a haircut. But Wyatt had insisted his recent unkempt look was perfect for this assignment.

The wheels kissed the runway, and the jet taxied to the terminal. "Welcome to Music City, USA," the chipper flight attendant gushed. A smattering of cheers and applause rippled through the cabin. She prattled on about the Grand Ole Opry and other area attractions.

Garrett tuned her out. He'd purposefully chosen an aisle seat so he could stretch his leg, but almost four hours was pushing it. He stood to retrieve his carry-on, tested his left side for weight bearing, and sucked in a breath.

By the time Garrett arrived at baggage claim, his leg throbbed, but he could walk without visibly limping. Fortunately, the line at the car rental desk was short. Soon, he climbed into a quintessential non-descript vehicle. He checked his messages and plugged in the address Wyatt had texted, and then called his old friend.

“What’s up, man? You in Nash already?” Wyatt’s familiar drawl boomed from the speaker.

Garrett smiled and adjusted the volume. “Yep. We landed a little early, and I’m in the car headed for Autumn—” he searched for the word. “Whatever it is.”

“Springs. Autumn Springs.” Wyatt laughed. “Every third town in the South is something-springs. Hey, how’s the car? Big enough for you?”

Garrett squirmed. “It’ll do. It won’t draw any attention, which is the point.”

“I really appreciate you coming. The problems are escalating, and we’re spread too thin.” Wyatt was the county sheriff, and a rash of home burglaries had broken out in the small towns without their own police departments a few months ago. Autumn Springs, in particular.

“Well, it’s not as if I was doing anything.”

“How’s the knee coming along?”

“Slow. But that’s to be expected when a bullet shatters it.”

An uneasy silence ensued. Wyatt cleared his throat. “How’s your faith, bro?”

Garrett swallowed a sharp retort. “It’s been better. I can’t see any good in this. I didn’t choose a career in

law enforcement to sit behind a desk, but that could be my life for the next thirty-five years." He slammed a fist on the steering wheel. "If we had been five seconds earlier or later—"

"Hey, Garrett." Wyatt's voice held no censure. "Don't go down those paths. It'll eat you alive. Remember Idaho Valley?"

A reminder of God's protection pricked Garrett's heart. "You're right, Wy. Thanks for the reminder." He squared his shoulders. "It'll be good for me to get out of Phoenix for a while. Clue me in on what I'm doing."

"We have a rental house for you. On the small side, but it'll be fine. My people stocked enough things in the fridge and pantry to get you through a day or two. For now, get your bearings and settle into small-town life. Keep your eyes and ears open and listen for anything that might help us get a handle on this. We'll circle back in a couple days and go from there."

"Roger that." Garrett pulled onto the southbound highway and set the cruise control. He didn't need to attract any unwanted attention. "Thanks, Wyatt."

"No, thank *you*, Garrett. Got your cover story straight?"

"Sure do. I'm a software engineer who works from home, ready to start fresh in a new place after a painful divorce." The last part wasn't entirely his true circumstances, but close enough.

"We set up a home office for you. All the latest stuff. I think you'll like it. I'll text you the address."

Garrett smiled. "Thanks, Wyatt. Talk with you soon."

“Ah, one more thing. You’ll find something else at the house that we think will add credibility to your cover story.”

Something in Wyatt’s voice raised Garrett’s suspicions. “What are you not telling me?”

Noise crackled over the speaker. “Sorry—can’t—you’re breaking—” The connection went dead.

Garrett shook his head and ended the call. No doubt about it, his old buddy was up to something.

2

Mallory lifted her face to the sun, closed her eyes, and breathed in the crisp, pure fall air. If there was ever a perfect day to be in Autumn Springs, Tennessee, this was it. Everyone's favorite season was fall, but Mallory had never been one to follow the crowd. Spring was her favorite time of year when it kicked winter to the curb and laid out the welcome mat for summer.

She glanced over the half-dozen vehicles in the parking lot. All were familiar except a mid-size silver sedan with Washington, DC plates. Interesting.

Loud barking shook her out of her reverie, and her SUV shook with its impatient occupants.

"OK, OK, y'all. I'm sorry. I was daydreaming." She opened the back hatch and expertly took the leads for her four companions for this afternoon, her own border collie mix and corgi, plus a mini-Aussie, and a golden retriever. As soon as she arranged them and closed and locked the vehicle, they strained at their leashes and pulled Mallory along.

"Who loves the dog park? Does Scooter love the dog park? Yes, you do." The corgi looked back at her.

Mallory trotted to keep pace with them. Once they were inside the second gate, she unclipped their

leashes. Scooter and Coco ran to the water bowls, while Jolly and Daisy rocketed away to chase other dogs. Mallory clipped all four leashes to the chain-link fence and leaned over, removed the ever-present hair tie from her wrist and secured her thick blonde hair in a high ponytail.

The gate closed behind her. "Hey, Mal. You have a big group today."

"Hey, Jenny. Hey, Milo." The bulldog ignored her and waddled off. "Yeah, I always end up with more than I intended." Park rules stated that no one could bring more than two dogs in, but everyone looked the other way in Mallory's case.

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" Jenny grinned and clipped Milo's leash to the fence.

"Absolutely perfect."

Jenny folded her hands before her and sighed. "And it's pumpkin time," she squealed. "I'm obsessed with pumpkin lattes. I even put aside money in my budget so I can get one every day." Her green eyes danced.

Mallory forced a pleasant smile, but the fact was, she couldn't stand pumpkin and grew weary of the hoopla every fall. Whenever she thought she'd heard about the most outrageous pumpkin product, another came along to take its place.

A kerfuffle by the water bowl gave her an easy out. "Coco, it's OK. There's plenty more." She pressed the button to dispense the water. A sleek, black lab lapped noisily next to the little Aussie. Mallory patted Coco's head. "There's enough for everyone." She

stroked the lab's neck. "Hey, Juno. There's a good boy."

The dogs ran off, and fortunately, Pumpkin Jenny was now on the other side of the park.

Mallory set off down the asphalt path and waved to the other dog moms and dads. She recognized everyone except a tall, fit man with longish, dirty-blond hair. He wore jeans, a T-shirt advertising a Phoenix sports team, and earbuds. Which dog belonged to him?

Soon, she had her answer when she saw Daisy running with a golden-brown rottweiler chow mix. They brought a smile to Mallory's face.

She continued to watch the man. He had to be the owner of the sedan. Why would someone from Washington, DC be in Autumn Springs? Mallory's mind raced, and she suppressed a gasp. That had to be it. The FBI had sent in someone to solve the wave of home burglaries in Carlisle County.

Well, the man looked more like a dishwasher at a restaurant than an FBI operative. But that was good. After all, the point of being an undercover agent was not to look like one. He walked at a brisk pace and stared straight ahead. Every few steps, there was a hitch in his stride. He didn't seem particularly interested in his dog.

Wait, maybe he wasn't FBI after all. Wouldn't a trained undercover agent be able to act out his dog-lover part well? For that matter, why would the FBI care about a small-town burglary case? A new, frightening thought ran through her mind. What if this

guy was the burglar?

Oh, boy, here came Jolly. The little border collie mix adored any living being, canine or human. Everyone at the dog park loved it when Jolly came looking for pets. She ran next to the man and jumped. Keeping his gaze straight ahead, he reached down with one hand and batted her away.

What in the world? Everyone at the dog park welcomed all the dogs. Mallory watched him do it again, and then a third time, accompanied by a scowl at Jolly, who was unfazed.

Time for the Dog Mom gloves to come off. Mallory marched across the grass. She really didn't care who this guy was. "Hey," she shouted.

Jolly ran toward her, tongue lolling out.

"You're fine, baby. Such a good girl." Mallory ruffled Jolly's short fur, and the dog took off after Margo Reyes' beagle.

Mallory approached the man from behind. "Hey. Hello?" She tapped on his elbow.

He slowed to a stop and turned. A sapphire blue gaze speared her like a laser and stole Mallory's breath. Whoa, he was attractive. A little scruffy, but off-the-charts gorgeous. A deep frown overtook his face as he pulled one earbud out. "Yeah?"

"Hi. I just, um, well, I wondered why you were so unfriendly to my dog."

The frown deepened. "Unfriendly?"

"Well, yes. How would you feel if I slapped your dog away?"

Confusion painted his features. "I guess I wouldn't

feel anything. It's a dog."

Mallory gasped. "It's a *dog*? That's all you have to say? Dogs are people, too."

The man burst out laughing, which revealed white teeth and boosted his handsomeness into the stratosphere. "Dogs are people? Lady, you're a little—" he pointed his index finger at his head, rotated it, then reinserted his earbud, and left.

"Why do you come to a dog park if you don't like dogs?" Mallory shouted at his broad back. Handsome or not, any man who didn't love dogs scored a zero in Mallory's book. Even less than zero.

3

When Garrett and his new canine partner arrived back at the rental house, he took the empty food and water bowls out of the crate and filled them. Then he set out to find something to eat. While he waited for his soup to heat, he leaned against the counter and yawned. What were Wyatt and his team thinking? When Garrett had arrived at the tidy little house in mid-afternoon, it looked perfect. His delight turned to disbelief when he walked into the kitchen and saw a large dog in a gigantic crate.

He read the note on the table. *We found a common thread in the burglaries; all the victims have dogs. Don't know what it means, but what better way for you to fit in? Meet Sergeant Pepper.* Feeding instructions followed, along with a suggestion to walk the dog twice daily and/or go to the local dog park (directions attached). That was it.

Garrett hadn't even unpacked. He grabbed the leash and drove to the dog park. The dog could run freely, and Garrett could stretch his legs and get in a good walk, as his physical therapist ordered. Things were great until that nutty lady got in his face. *Dogs are people, too? Takes all kinds.* But he had to admire her spunk. Even when she'd yelled at him, he had a hard

time not smiling at her cute Southern accent. She was seriously pretty, too, in a homecoming queen, cheerleader type of way. More beauty than brains, probably.

Garrett finished his soup, tidied up, and noticed the dog's food, untouched. Guess he wasn't hungry. Where was he? A quick peek into the living room showed him curled on the sofa, asleep. Even though Garrett wasn't crazy about dogs, the sight softened his heart. All that fresh air and running with other dogs must have worn him out.

"It would be silly to call you Sergeant Pepper. You'll just be Sarge," he murmured.

Garrett yawned again. Time to unpack, grab a shower, and hit the bed. His leg still throbbed, so he took a pain pill. He'd been careful to not get dependent on them but followed the PT's advice to listen to his body and take one occasionally when he overdid things. It had been a long day.

When he was ready for bed, he checked on Sarge again. Still sleeping. It was OK to let a dog sleep on the couch, right? The instructions hadn't said to put him in the crate at night.

The pain pills, hot shower, and long day of travel through multiple time zones caused Garrett to fall into a deep sleep. The next thing he heard was whining. He sat up, not sure for a moment where he was. Right. Tennessee. Working on a case for Wyatt. *Dog*.

When he switched on the bedside lamp, Sarge stood in the doorway. "Hey, Sarge, what's up?" He probably needed to go out.

The dog whined again, then opened his mouth. His back bowed, his chest expanded, and a stream of yellow liquid poured out, right onto the floor.

Garrett jumped up. "Oh no, Sarge. Um, let's go outside." He went to the door and beckoned with his hand. What should you say to a dog to get him to follow you? "Come, Sarge," he said in the most commanding voice he could muster.

The dog took a couple of steps toward Garrett, then retched again. This time, Garrett saw faint red streaks. He rubbed his jaw. Sarge's soulful, honey-brown gaze pulled at him. "Um, I'll help you, buddy."

Garrett pulled out his phone and opened a search engine. He typed in "dog vomiting yellow liquid," and his jaw dropped. Almost *eight million* results? He ran a hand through his shaggy hair and yawned, then clicked on the first entry. *When to consult a vet* jumped off the page, and Garrett followed the link. *If your dog is vomiting and you see any blood, seek professional help immediately. There could be internal damage.*

This was going from bad to worse. Garrett had been in town for a few hours, was responsible for the well-being of an animal, and had no idea what he was doing. Did Autumn Springs even have a vet? Would he have to drive back to Nashville to find help? Maybe he should get Sarge into the crate so he wouldn't vomit everywhere. But it was too big to fit in the rental car.

Then, reality slammed into his foggy brain. He was under the influence of a strong painkiller and had no business driving. Sarge heaved again, and Garrett's heart stopped. *Think.* After a moment, he grabbed a

blanket and gathered the dog up. Sarge was almost dead weight, and he rested his head on Garrett's shoulder. "I'll get you some help, buddy." He gently laid Sarge on the sofa and grabbed a towel from the kitchen to keep nearby.

Garrett sat next to the dog and stroked his fur. His brain still wasn't operating at full capacity. He searched for a vet in Autumn Springs and was relieved when one came up. It even had an after-hours emergency number, which he punched in.

A woman answered. "Carlisle County Veterinary Cooperative, may I help you?"

"Yeah, hi. I, um, have a dog who's really sick, vomiting yellow stuff and I think it has some blood in it."

"Male or female?"

"Male."

"How long has he been vomiting?"

"About ten minutes."

"Breed?"

"Hmm, I really don't know." If a dog wasn't an obvious breed such as a collie, poodle, or Dalmatian, Garrett was clueless.

"Age?"

"Ah, I don't know. I just got him today."

"From a shelter, a store, or a private party?"

Garrett scrubbed a hand over his face. Where to begin? "Private party."

"Does he have all his shots?"

Shots? "Um, I guess I'm not sure."

"Did you get any papers with him?"

“Um, no.”

“Rabies is the most important. Look at his tags.”

“Tags?” This woman must think Garrett was an imbecile.

“On his collar.”

“Oh, OK.” He located those and squinted to read what was engraved. “Yes, he has a rabies tag.”

“Good. Dr. Morris is on call tonight. Take the dog to the clinic in Autumn Springs. Do you know where that is?”

Garrett sighed and leaned his elbows on his knees. “The thing is—no. I arrived here today from out of state. And I’m—um, recovering from an injury and took a pain pill before I went to bed. I can’t safely operate a motor vehicle.”

“Is there someone who could drive you there?”

Frustration bubbled in his chest. “No. I don’t know anyone here. Is there any way the vet would make a house call?”

“Well, I don’t know. That’s highly unusual—”

Garrett cut her off. “I’ll pay double the rate, triple, whatever.” He connected with Sarge’s dull gaze. At least the poor thing had stopped throwing up.

“Let me call Dr. Morris and see. What’s y’all’s address?”

“Hold on a sec, let me get it.” Garrett retrieved it from his text messages and read it to the woman. She verified his phone number, told him she would talk with the vet and call him back, and disconnected.

Garrett sank into the couch and stroked Sarge’s head. *Please, God, soften the vet’s heart. This dog needs*

help.

4

Mallory's phone woke her from a restless slumber. She rarely slept well when she was on call. She and four other vets in the county rotated the duties. As she expected, it was the after-hours number.

"This is Dr. Morris."

"Hey, Dr. M, it's Stacey. I have an emergency call."

"Hey, Stace." Mallory put her phone on speaker, turned on the light, and reached for a pair of scrub pants. "What's up?" She grew incredulous as Stacey gave her the particulars. "Wow, that's a strange request, but if the animal needs help, of course I'll go. Text me the address?" She secretly hoped it wasn't way out on one of the fringes of the county.

"Sure will. Thanks, Dr. M. Y'all be careful out there."

"I will, Stacey. Bye."

Mallory quickly finished dressing and laced up her tennis shoes. When her phone pinged, she was relieved to see the address was in Autumn Springs. The house was only a block from where her childhood best friend had lived.

Ten minutes later, she arrived and parked behind the car in the driveway. Her heart sank. The chances of *two* cars with DC plates in Autumn Springs was slim to

none. The poor rottweiler chow must be in trouble. She grabbed her medical bag, walked up the porch steps, and rang the bell. The light snapped on and the door opened.

Agent Hunk, Dog Enemy, filled the doorway. He wore a heather gray t-shirt and plaid sleep pants. His deep blue eyes darkened a shade, and he looked at Mallory in confusion.

"Can I help you?"

Mallory straightened her spine. "I'm Dr. Morris, the veterinarian," she said crisply. "I understand there's an emergency?"

The man's eyes widened, and he opened the screen door. "Oh, um, come in." As Mallory scooted past him, she caught a whiff of fresh-from-the-shower scent and almost stumbled. Her attention went immediately to the dog on the sofa. She sat next to him and stroked his fur. "What's his name?"

"Sarge."

"How old is he?"

"Um, I don't know."

"Tell me what's happening with Sarge."

"Um, I put food in his bowl when we got home from the, ah, dog park, but he didn't eat anything, he came in here, got on the couch, and went to sleep. And then I took a shower and went to bed, and I woke up to the sound of him retching."

Mallory palpated the dog's stomach, but he didn't flinch or show any signs of pain. "How long since he last vomited?"

"Probably about forty-five minutes."