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Irresistible Force
Force of Attraction
Primal Force

PRIMAL FORCE

D.D. Ayres



St. Martin's Paperbacks

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PRIMAL FORCE

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*This book is for my readers: past, present, and future.
You make the effort worthwhile. Thank you.*



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I took some liberties in this novel. The dog training program set in Arkansas that includes a component in a women's correctional center is fictional. My inspiration for such a program came from Patriot Paws located in Rockwall, Texas. Patriot Paws is a not-for-profit agency that trains service dogs for vets. Their mission says it all: “. . . to train and provide service dogs of the highest quality at no cost to disabled American veterans and others with mobile disabilities and PTSD in order to help restore their physical and emotional independence.” Patriot Paws, and many other organizations like it, are providing a vital service to our veterans.

Thank you, Patriot Paws, for allowing me to ask a hundred questions, observe classes, and meet the wonderful staff: Lori, April, Jay, and all the others. You run a first-class operation with skill, heart, and generosity.

Thanks to my K-9 law enforcement expert for the entire series, Brad Thompson. A former senior handler and instructor/trainer of the Fort Worth PD K9 Unit, he's currently assigned to the Special Investigations Unit, where he's

responsible for public integrity investigations, executive and dignitary protection and surveillance, and counter-surveillance activities.

As always, my editor Rose Hilliard. She sees no obstacles, only opportunities to make it better.

And my agent Denise Marcil. You're the best!

PROLOGUE

“What the hell do you mean by calling me on this line?”

“Sorry, sir. I couldn’t get through on the other.”

“Hang up, dammit.”

“What’s wrong, dear?”

Harold Tice smiled at his wife, who had rolled over in bed to look at him. “Business. Always business.” He patted her thigh. “You go back to sleep. I’ll take this into my study.”

He checked to make certain he was on a secure line before returning the call from his desk phone. “Yeah?”

“There’s been an inquiry into one of those files you asked us to keep an eye on, sir. The military file on former U.S. Army Military Police criminal investigations 31D Special Agent Lauray Battise was pulled this week.”

“Who pulled it and why?”

“I didn’t get that information. Would you like me to look into it?”

“Don’t bother.”

After he hung up, Tice remained seated, drumming his fingers on his desktop. In Arkansas, the name Tice was

synonymous with wealth and influence. If there was big money to be made, Tice Industries, a trucking and transportation company, usually had a cut of it. He wasn't a sentimental man, or an idealist. He was hard-nosed and pragmatic. It was his job to keep the family company going, by whatever means necessary. Only two incidents, both occurring four years earlier, had threatened his turn at the helm. One was local, and had been resolved. The other had taken place half a world away.

Tice's fingers paused in mid-drumming. The problem of MP Battise had been the more dangerous. Yet that incident had seemingly gone away after Battise was wounded in the field in Afghanistan. Lucky coincidence?

He'd never asked for the details. Even so, he had continued to keep an eye on mistakes that carried the potential for harm, however remote. The fact that someone was looking into Battise's file could be nothing. More than likely was nothing. Better to do nothing. A man in his position couldn't afford to be too curious.

"Are you coming back to bed?"

Tice looked up to find his wife in the doorway. "Will it be worth it?"

She smiled and whipped back her robe to flash him a leggy length of bare skin.

"In that case." He stood up. "You warm up the sheets while I make one last call."

When she had gone, he picked up the phone and dialed another number.

"I hear we have a wounded vet, a former U.S. Army criminal investigator named Lauray Battise, living in my son's district. Might make for good PR. Find out where he is and what he does for a living."

Enemies kept close. A man in his position couldn't afford to be too careful, either.

CHAPTER ONE

He was running.

The best part of any day. Straight up a steep mountain incline. Knee lifts as important as foot-falls. The jackhammer explosion of quads and calves propelled him off the ground and up the terrain in a zigzag pattern. One after the other, his boots hit the rocky earth, springing him forward, taking him higher.

His heart was pumping like a motor with a hemi attached. The sky above a pale-yellow dome of heat. The earth beneath him hard, desert dry, unforgiving.

It didn't matter. He was almost there. Almost at the summit. The scraping of air in and out of his lungs was the end-all, be-all of the moment.

Finally, there was no more ground in front of him.

He bent at the waist, gasping greedily for all the oxygen his lungs could wring from the thin air. His quads trembled. His calves burned. Sweat

evaporated right out of his pores. He'd be dangerously depleted soon.

He stood up, arms thrown wide, staring out across the natural cauldron where the Afghani town below lay sprawled like lumpy brown fungus. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He had achieved his goal.

Top of the world, Ma.

One second, silence in the narrow but familiar street of an Afghan village, interrupted only by his partner's excited bark. The next, a consuming white-hot brilliance. Then the searing pain of a body on fire.

Someone was screaming. Echoing in his head the sounds he could no longer make. Where was his K-9 Scud?

Rifle fire and then a canine yelp of pain came from just above him. Scud! Scud was hurt! He tried to turn his head but the effort was too great.

He was shaking uncontrollably. Shock was setting in. He was trained to resist it. Must control that. But . . .

Can't breathe. Can't—

Lauray “Law” Battise jerked awake to the wettest kiss of his life. There was plenty of tongue and heated breathing and—um, she might have brushed first. Her breath was two Tic Tacs short of yummy. Well, hell. It was wartime. He needed release, anything to block out the memories. Resigned, he reached for his bed partner, already hoping his nightmare hadn't preempted the possibility of a morning hard-on.

Instead of an armful of warm naked woman, he embraced a heavy muscular body encased in curly dense fur. “What the fuck?”

Law opened his eyes and frowned down the length of his nose at his unwelcome bed companion. Sixty-five pounds of dog the color of a rusted-out car lay stretched out on top of him, her muzzle just touching his chin.

Even through the haze of his flashback, he knew the dog was evaluating his odor, teasing apart the cocktail of chemicals called pheromones, to test whether he was still in the throes of a full-blown episode.

Calm but alert, she licked at the sweat running from his chin whiskers down onto his throat then paused to gaze at him with golden-brown eyes of concern.

He pointed at the floor. "*Heruntersteigen.*"

She merely stared at him.

"*Heruntersteig—*" Oh, right. Civilian dog. She didn't know German commands, the language of most military and civil law enforcement K-9s. This docile pooch only knew words like *fetch*, *sit*, *heel*, and *go potty*.

"Get down."

She immediately did as he asked. But moved no farther away than the side of his bed, where she stared at him with soft doggy eyes.

Law sat up and stripped a hand down his face, wiping away the sweat of anxiety. The acrid smell of rocket propellant had yet to evaporate from his imagination. He flicked on the nightstand light as his gaze tracked the small perimeter of the hotel room for intruders. The action was so ingrained in his psyche that he wasn't fully aware of it.

The room was empty. Even so, he was about to rise and double-check the door lock when the cell phone tucked under his pillow began to vibrate. He grabbed for it.

"Got yourself a dog?" His half sister Yardley's voice was unmistakable.

Law's eyes narrowed on the mix of golden retriever and poodle with a rusted-red coat, coal-black nose, floppy ears,

and enormous curling tail. “What I’ve got here is a giant Cheez Doodle. Jesus. Who names a working dog *Sa-manta!*”

“Still having flashbacks?” Yardley Summers always cut to the heart of a matter.

Law didn’t lie. And he never backed down. His go-to response for any question he didn’t want to answer was silence.

“I’ll take that as a yes. We had a deal.”

“More like extortion.”

He grunted at the memory of his half sister arriving without warning at his door six months earlier. He’d just failed his law enforcement physical, for the second time. His prosthetic leg was good, but not hard-charging pursuit-and-apprehension-reliable enough to put him back on patrol with the Arkansas State Police. So he’d handed in his resignation. Instead of accepting it, his trooper sergeant had put him on extended leave and called Yardley, the only kin Law listed in his personal file.

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“You were in no condition. I’ve never seen anything more pathetic than you drunk and drowning in self-pity.”

Law ground his teeth to keep silent.

After showing up on his doorstep, Yardley had cussed a blue streak as she’d bullied him into the shower then all but spoon-fed him her “special” homemade soup. She didn’t mention it contained a cocktail of all the meds he had been avoiding until he was cross-eyed and sliding out of his chair.

Three days later, when she was certain he was wide-awake and could function, she’d left behind a filled-out copy of an application for Warriors Wolf Pack. Attached was a note that said: *Do this and I will do what you asked.* That was six months ago. She hadn’t been in touch until now.

“You called at the ass crack of dawn for a reason, Yard?”

“I need to know that you’re taking this PTSD dog idea seriously.”

The hair on Law’s neck rose as his fist tightened around the phone. “You found out something.”

“I don’t have the full intel yet. These days snail mail is safer than the Internet. By the time you’ve done your ten-day training, I’ll have it.”

“Right.” Law punched the END button and lobbed his phone onto the mattress. If Yard knew him, he knew her, too. She wouldn’t have called unless she already had something. He didn’t need to ask how she’d gotten the information. Yardley Summers had connections that would make a CIA spook jealous.

Staring off into space, Law flexed his hands to pump off a little of his anger as a familiar resentment swelled in him. He hated asking for help. Even from Yardley. Had never in his life asked for it, or accepted it. Even now he hadn’t reached out to members of his former unit because instinct or stubbornness—or paranoia—told him not to.

But his life had turned to shit after the explosion in Afghanistan four years earlier. He needed answers, about what had happened to him, and to his military police K-9 partner, Scud.

During his last tour of active military police duty he’d been paired with an Alpha-male Belgian Malinois named Scud who could control crowds, take down a sniper, and locate IEDs all in the same day.

Scud was loyal but he wasn’t always friendly. Most handlers wouldn’t take him on. Yet Law had seen in the tough loner a reflection of himself. They weren’t buddies, yet they became a team, moving and working as one, anticipating the needs of the other in daily life-and-death situations.

Law rubbed hard at one of the scars hidden beneath the bush of beard along his left jaw. The explosion he never saw coming had strafed his body and shredded his left leg, and killed Scud outright. He knew what to counsel himself. *It wasn't my fault.* But the thing about that was, if it wasn't his fault, whose was it?

Pain squeezed Law's heart but he fought the emotion. If tortured, he would have lied about his feelings for Scud with his final breath. Never again would he allow himself to be that vulnerable.

His guilt over Scud had strengthened during the last year. Before that, he'd been too busy trying to heal and restore what was left of his mangled body. It wasn't until nine months ago, as he was trying to reclaim his life as a state trooper, that symptoms of PTSD kicked in hard, taking a turn at wrecking his psyche. Was his subconscious, finally, trying to tease out the answers to what had happened that day? Or was he now just a messed-up loser who needed a dog to keep him from freaking out in public?

"Screw it." He could handle this on his own. Alone.

He stood up. And hit the floor with a thud.

"Shit!" It had been a long time since he'd forgotten to compensate the distribution of his body weight for one leg. The delusion of having two legs must have been the left-over result of his running dream.

He swung out a hand for his prosthesis lying on a nearby chair. It was out of reach. Before he could scoot closer, Samantha moved quickly to pick up the artificial leg with her mouth. She brought it over and placed it gently in his lap without being asked.

"Good dog, Sam—dog." He felt silly calling her by that long-ass Samantha name.

Law hoisted himself back up on the mattress and reached for the pouch of doggy treats WWP had given him to reward his companion for her work. Half a service dog's

daily food supply was handed out in the form of rewards. He held out a few small nuggets, which she gobbled up. He dug into the bag again, figuring he owed her.

“So here’s the deal. I’m calling you Sam until I turn you back in. You good with that, Sam?”

She gazed up at him with calm adoration and tongue-lolling satisfaction.

Crap. Sam even had a nice smile.

Okay, so the dog was getting to him. She was more than a pampered pet. She was everything the WWP promised: attentive, smart, intuitive, and helpful. The perfect service companion . . . for someone else. He didn’t deserve this dog’s help or loyalty. He’d lost that right when Scud died. He couldn’t be responsible for another companion’s life. Ever again.

Law turned to inspect his injured limb to make certain his fall hadn’t caused any damage. Some pain, more or less, was always with him. There were better things to think about. For instance, the attractive dog trainer Jori—something. He hadn’t caught her full name.

His K-9 instructor side appreciated watching her technique while working with the dogs. The purely male part of him enjoyed watching the way her pants pulled tight across the very nice curves of her butt and how her tee pulled taut against the swell of her breasts as she worked. She was the kind of woman who didn’t need to show skin to be sexy. It was in the way she handled herself. The subtle huskiness of her voice was sexy as hell, too. Her straightforward manner kept the other four vets smiling and at ease as she helped them understand the capabilities of their specially trained new service dogs. Except him. *Him*, she ignored.

Law smiled to himself. She must have read something predatory in his expression that first day. He couldn’t argue with her judgment. Jori gave him an itch.

Maybe it was the long honey-brown braid she wore, twitching down her back as she moved. Made him want to wrap that braid around his forearm and haul her in by it. Each time she touched his hand to loosen his grip on the leash or to adjust his position with his dog, he fought the urge to reach out and touch back. And then go on touching and holding, wanting to kiss and caress her until he had persuaded her to be naked under him.

Law pushed an impatient hand through longish thick black hair. He probably shouldn't be thinking dirty thoughts about his instructor. Jori didn't look like an easy lay. He didn't have time for anything else.

He knew what women said about him: *Good in bed but impossible to love.*

True enough. He was insensitive, untrustworthy, possessed of a quick temper, and selfish. He'd enjoy the company of any willing woman. But he never let it get personal, or stand in his way. In that, he was his father's son.

"Nothing short of all fucked up," he muttered to himself.

He picked up the liner to sheathe his stump, rolled and smoothed it on, then picked up his prosthesis. Now, *this* baby was worth being excited about. This techno wonder was going to get his trooper job back. Without that concrete measure of his worth as a man, his struggle to get better was worthless.

Three months ago, he'd succeeded in getting his old prosthetic leg swapped out for one with sophisticated military-grade microprocessor-controlled devices. With gyroscopes, accelerators, hydraulics, and sensory points to turn muscle contractions into device response, the new leg gave him great stability and mobility. With it he could walk, climb stairs, even run without thinking about it—as long as he remembered to strap it on.

He stood up, this time with the expected results. As close to good-as-new as he was going to get.

If he hurried he could get in some gym time before he left for Richmond, Virginia, the nearest airport to where Yardley lived. The best cure for a PTSD episode was to push himself, hard, until his heart was pumping like a jackhammer and his muscles trembled with fatigue. Only at the peak of exhaustion did his mind sometimes shut down long enough to give him peace.

Unless . . . he could convince Jori to do the dirty with him before he left. In and out? A one-off in their lives?

He shook his head at his unruly thoughts. *Bad, Law. Phooey, Law. She's not for you.*

Samantha watched with concerned eyes as her Alpha dressed himself. She knew he was Alpha because of the tone of his voice and the strong virile scent that labeled him the dominant partner.

She smelled others things on him as well, like anger, fear, and anxiety. She didn't like those smells. They made her uncomfortable, much like the veterinarian's office. The cloying odors of injury, sickness, and fear from other animals could not be scrubbed away by antiseptics. Those smells were worse than the shots she occasionally received.

As the Alpha passed her, Samantha pushed her nose forward and sniffed his pant leg.

"Don't."

She drew back. His tone was harsh. As if she'd done something wrong. Didn't he know? She was trained to pay attention, and to find ways to make the fear and anxiety stop when those pheromones emanated from him. She had done that this morning, even if he didn't seem to understand at the time why she had woken him. That was okay. He would learn. He was her chosen Alpha.

Three days ago five men and their family members had come to WWP. Each brought a reek of smell fragments from his daily life. Some were familiar, others the unique combination of their own bodies, homes, and habits. One man was ill. Two had had coffee and cigarettes for breakfast. She even knew by their shared smells which humans belonged to the same pack.

But one man's scent was different. His odor was a cocktail of emotional markers that included anger, pain, and sadness. And more. He smelled alone. There were no other human scents on him. No animal scents, either.

Most of the people Samantha had encountered in the twenty-five months of her life carried the scents of their companions, human and/or pet. This Alpha smelled of isolation. That was not good for a pack animal.

The only time Samantha had felt this way was when, as a puppy, she'd been abandoned at a shelter. All the smells were strange. None of her litter or her mother. She was fed and watered, but otherwise left alone in a cage that prevented her from running or playing with the other dogs. Until Alpha Kelli found and brought her to WWP.

She loved being in the WWP pack. There were lots of dogs to play with, and human Alphas to love and teach and protect her. Even when she moved from Alpha to Alpha for training, she was always treated as part of the pack.

But now things were different.

She had felt the excitement in the WWP pack the day the strangers came. She sensed that things were about to change, yet again. One of the strangers would take her home.

Yet no one handed her off. They simply dropped her leash and let her roam among the strangers, sniffing out a need. Her choice. It was not hard.

The sad man needed her to be his pack. She'd picked

that up the first day. No Alpha, even the strongest, was healthy when he was without his pack.

The Alpha dropped his wallet and cursed.

Samantha hurried over and scooped it up in her mouth before he could bend down for it. He looked surprised then frowned. She felt confused by his frown. Then proud when he took the wallet from her.

He nodded at her but did not offer the affection of his hand or a treat. "*Gute Hund.*"

She licked his hand to show that she didn't mind that he didn't know how to behave. He would learn.

She did not always understand his words, but she would learn.

When he sat to tie his shoe, she moved close and weighed her big head on his thigh. She watched him, her eyebrows twitching up and down as if she could signal to him that he was not alone anymore. She would help with the sadness, and calm his worries. She was now his pack.