

Chapter Six

Jackpotting: The practice of giving an unusually large reward to a scentwork dog to encourage further searching behavior.

Saturday, July 22, 10:55 AM
Shadowlawn neighborhood
Virginia Beach, Virginia

A win had never felt further away.

They'd been searching for hours but had yet to find a single live victim. Mostly, the houses were empty of humans, which was actually a good thing. Meg was worried that people had vacated their houses too late and been swept away, and search teams had yet to find them. She was also worried about Hawk, who was showing signs of depression. He still stood in the front of the boat, but he didn't stand on the edge of the bow anymore. His head was high enough to scent, but he held it lower than before, and his tail no longer waved proudly, instead hanging still and lifeless. But he gamely searched, his nose constantly scenting the air around him, looking for a single trace of life.

She snapped a picture of her dog, double-checked to make sure she had cell reception, and texted it to Brian.

We're not doing so well. How about you?

She had no idea if he had reception, but she felt better for reaching out to him. It was less than a minute before her phone buzzed.

It's not good here either. One live victim but he may not make it. A family of 4, all dead. 2 single vics, dead. Lacey is feeling it. She's chewing on her paw again.

He included a photo of Lacey, standing between his knees, her head down. Lacey was an excellent search dog, but even Brian knew her biggest weakness was discouragement during difficult searches and falling back on self-destructive habits. Brian would be working hard right now to keep her spirits up, which was especially difficult for handlers when they were feeling like giving up themselves because it all seemed like wasted effort.

She knew because she was feeling that pull herself. Her best way to help them was to pump Brian back up.

Do your best. Remember, even closure for the families is work well done. None of it is wasted effort. First bottle of red wine after shift is on me.

His answer was only seconds in coming:

Deal! :)

He and Lacey would be okay. They'd all be okay. But a few drinks tonight in the company of friends who'd had a similarly awful day wouldn't be amiss.

Meg turned to Smythe. "Have you had any reports from—" She cut off abruptly as Hawk's body stiffened under her hand, his muscles tensing as his head whipped up. "Hawk?"

"He's got something?" Smythe stared over the dog's shoulder as if to spot whatever Hawk sensed.

"Definitely. Hawk, what is it, boy?"

Head held high, nose working furiously, Hawk climbed back up onto the prow to push himself higher. He froze for one instant and then before Meg could command him to stop, he gathered and launched himself off the boat. For a moment, there was a shimmer of glossy black fur over his lithe body, stretched out long in flight, then a splash as he hit the water and frantically started to swim for a two-story colonial-style house. All that showed above the water line were the tops of two dormer windows, their roof peaks, and the twin chimneys that flanked the house.

"Hawk!" Meg jumped up and leaned over the bow, but her dog was already ten feet in front of the boat.

Behind her Smythe barked commands to MacDougall to follow her dog and the boat smoothly sped up as he opened the throttle.

Hawk got to the edge of the roof and pulled himself unsteadily up, then got his balance. He ran over to one of the windows and stood, his feet still in inches of water, barking into the darkened house.

It was only once they were within feet of the house that Meg heard the scream. She whipped around, to stare at the men in the boat. "Do you hear that?"

"Private MacDougall, hold," Smythe ordered.

MacDougall throttled down the engine to a quiet hum.

Help!

"There it is again." Meg braced her hands on the stiff, inflated edge of the bow, her gaze locked on her dog. The boat jerked as they started up again, moving fast. "He knew. He could not only smell a victim, he could hear him too." She eyed the edge of the roof. *Six feet, four feet, two...* She jumped from the boat, landing at the edge of the roof and throwing herself forward to catch herself on the upward slant. Hands planted against the grainy surface, she checked for her dog. Hawk was still at the window, nose pressed to the glass. Meg pushed off the roof and straightened. "Hawk, come." He

turned and looked at her, but didn't move. "Come." She reinforced the command with the hand signal and he backed away from the window. "I know you want to get in there, buddy, but you have to let us help them. Stay."

Meg pushed past her dog and moved to the window. The water covered two thirds of the glass, causing her to stand far enough up the roof that she could reach to wrap her fingers over the dormer roof edge and lean around to look in. It was dark inside and she couldn't distinguish anything in the gloom. She pounded her free fist on the glass. "Hello! Is anyone in here?"

The small face popped into the window so quickly it startled her and she nearly let go of her hold to fall into the flood waters below. It was a boy, about nine or ten years old, pressing both hands to the glass where he stood in about three or four feet of water. His face was sheet white and his eyes were huge and sunken in fear. "We're here! We need help."

"We'll get you out. Is there anyone with you?"

"My two sisters. And my mom. But something's wrong with her. And my dad..." Tears welled in his eyes. "He never made it upstairs."

Meg forced her face to remain neutral, but if the father had stayed downstairs in an attempt to keep out the flood waters, he'd died there. "Hang on." She swung back onto the roof proper, scanning the surface.

"How many in there?" Smythe asked.

"Four. We may have a medical emergency with the mother. The kids are okay but scared. Sounds like the father drowned. Body is likely downstairs in the house." She scanned the roof. "This must be a kind of attic up here. It's got windows, but barely any headroom. How do we get in?"

"There are a couple of roof vents on the back side of the peak," Charles said. "But honestly, the fastest way is going to be through that window. If it opens, it's likely from the bottom, below water. We may have to break it."

"Evaluate the situation," Smythe said. "Then let's move fast."

Charles ran over to talk to the boy, and was back in seconds. "Windows don't open. They've been painted shut forever, he says."

"Break it then. Use the pry bar."

"I'll get him to move back," Meg said. Returning to the window, she leaned in to peer through the glass, letting her eyes acclimatize to the lack of light. The attic ran the length of the house and the only light came from the two windows, but it was enough. The space was filled with water, but above the surface, old furniture and boxes protruded. A wooden cupboard toward the back of the house had a little girl sitting on it, her feet dangling only inches above the water. Meg squinted, staring at her hunched form. Then she jerked upright as she realized the little girl was curled around an even tinier baby. "We have an infant," she called. "Not sure about the status. I don't see the mother." She rapped on the window. "Hello!"

The small boy appeared, struggling through the water, following an invisible path.

“I’m Meg. What’s your name?”

“Teddy.”

“Teddy, we’re going to get you out. But we’re going to need to break the window to do it. I need you to move back and keep everyone else back so you don’t get hit by flying glass. Can you do that for me?”

The boy nodded. “Can you help my mom?”

“Let’s get you out. Then we can help your mom.”

“We’re ready behind you.” MacDougall’s voice came from around the corner of the dormer window.

Meg pressed a hand flat against the glass. “Okay, Teddy, move back as far as you can. And keep everyone else back. We’re coming in.”

Meg pushed off, stumbling a bit in the shallow water as she moved away from the dormer and back toward Hawk. She sat beside him and wrapped an arm around him to tip her head against his. “Good boy, Hawk. You found them. Four of them. You’re amazing.” Then she laughed as he slurped his tongue up her cheek, feeling light for the first time all morning.

There was the crash of breaking glass, followed by the crunch of the pry bar knocking out any remaining shards.

“Stay here, Hawk. We’ll send the kids over to you. They’re going to need you.”

Meg sidled over to the dormer as Charles grabbed the upper casement of the window and swung his legs through the gap and slipped into the attic. In just a moment, he was back at the window, a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms that he handed to MacDougall. They daisy-chained the baby from hand to hand up the roof and away from the water until the infant was settled in Meg’s arms.

Meg pushed the pastel rainbow afghan away from the child’s face and found herself staring down into the sleeping face of a tiny baby, maybe only a couple of weeks old at most. “You’ve had a more exciting start to your life than most of us ever have,” she murmured to the infant. “It’s a good thing you won’t remember a moment of it.”

A small girl of about four came next, dressed in sodden pajamas, and clutching an equally bedraggled teddy bear. She brightened when Smythe set her down on the roof beside Hawk. A small hand reached out toward the dog, but then she stopped, looking uncertain.

Meg resettled the baby in the crook of her right arm and stroked Hawk with her left hand. “Go ahead, you can touch him. He’s very friendly.”

“He found us, didn’t he?” Teddy inched along the roof toward them.

“He did. We were way out there in our boat”—Meg pointed out to the middle of the street, down several houses—“and he smelled you or heard you because he didn’t even wait for us; he jumped right out of the boat and started swimming for you.”

“He did?” The little girl’s eyes were wide as saucers. “He can do that?”

“He sure can. Hawk is a search dog. That’s what he does. He finds lost people.”

“Cool!” Teddy’s grin faded away as his mother was passed out through the window. Meg immediately realized his concern. The woman’s body seemed beyond her control and the left side of her face drooped.

Stroke.

“Teddy, sit down. I need you to hold the baby. Can you do that for me?”

He nodded and sat down on the other side of Hawk from his sister. Meg passed him the baby, then bent down to her dog, purposely keeping her voice low. “Hawk, guard.”

She was already pulling out her cell phone as she met the men carrying the woman up the roof. “How is she?”

“Not good.” Smythe mumbled. “Very confused.”

“I think she’s having a stroke.” She hit speed dial on her phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“A paramedic.” *Come on, Todd, pick up. I know you’re busy but I need you for thirty seconds.*

“Webb.”

“It’s Meg. I know you’re busy, but we’ve just rescued someone who I think is having a stroke. What do we do?”

“Hang on.” Meg heard his muffled voice, as if he had covered the phone, then he was back. “I’m here. Symptoms?”

“Confusion, possible disorientation. The left side of her face is drooping. She’s trying to speak, but all that’s coming out is gibberish. She doesn’t have control of the left side of her body.”

“She’s showing symptoms of aphasia. You called it, that’s a stroke all right. How long has she been like this?”

“We just found her. She was trapped in an attic with her roughly ten-year-old son, four-year-old daughter and a newborn baby. The son has been keeping everyone safe.” Meg turned her back on the children and dropped her voice. “The son says the father is still on the lower floors of the house. The water is up to the roof line.”

“Damn. That isn’t going to end well. Okay, back to mom. If she’s postpartum, she’s likely thrown a clot and is having an ischemic stroke. The most important thing is to get emergency services there ASAP, which may not be easy. Give them the scenario, because they need to get clot busters into her now and the clock is ticking. Can you find out from the kid how long she’s been down?”

“Hang on.” Meg turned back to Teddy. “Teddy? How long has your mom been sick?”

His forehead wrinkled with distress. “Don’t know exactly. We didn’t have any power. It was just dark.”

“Can you guess? Just do your best. It will help us get your mom the medical help she needs.”

The boy shrugged. "Maybe two hours?"

Two hours. He'd been holding his family together with his father dead below, his mother dying in front of him, and his two small sisters in his care. All at about ten years of age.

She gave him a sunny smile. "That's great, Teddy. That will help your mom." She turned away again and spoke into the phone. "Did you hear that? Two hours?"

"About that, yeah. Hard to judge time in the dark in the middle of a hurricane though. Meg, you've only got four and a half hours to get tPA into her to avoid lasting effects. Get someone to call 911 and give them the scenario. They're going to need to airlift her and her family out and administer the tPA on the way. It's her only chance."

Meg relayed the information to Smythe, who immediately got on the phone, ordering the help they needed.

"Thanks, Todd," Meg said. "Sorry to bother you when you're busy, but I didn't know who else to grab quickly."

"No worries. Tell the kid he did great. That's a gutsy little guy. He's saved his mom's life. And he's going to need her to get over the trauma of losing his father like this."

"In spades. Now we've both got to get back to it. Thanks again. See you tonight." She ended the call.

Smythe put his radio down. "Coast Guard is sending out a rescue chopper. They'll get her and the kids to the nearest ER and get her treated." He looked over at Hawk. "That's a great dog."

Meg grinned down at her partner, surrounded by children, looking pleased as punch as he happily accepted their pets and hugs. "Yes, he is. And this is what he lives for. Now he'll be able to keep working for hours." She walked over to them and sat down near the little girl. "Hi, honey. I'm Meg. What's your name?"

"Laura."

"What a pretty name." Meg patted the soaked head of the bear. "What about this fine fellow?"

"That's Bubsy. He doesn't like being wet."

"Well, Bubsy will go with you and you'll all get dry, okay?"

"Whoa. What is that?"

Meg followed Teddy's pointed finger, staring at the water, not seeing anything at first. Then there was a shimmer just under the surface and she spotted two shadowy bodies cutting through the water. She watched the agile swimmers, not able to make out their forms. Then one of them broke the surface and she recognized the squat body. "They're harbor seals. Where did they come from?"

"I wonder if they're from the Virginia aquarium?" MacDougall said. "It's just to the west of us and I bet the aquarium is flooded and some of the animals escaped."

"Do you think they're going out to join the pods of wild seals?" Teddy asked. "I've seen them out in the bay before."

“I bet that’s exactly what they’re doing. They’re headed out to the ocean and to freedom.”

It was a win for the seals and a win for them, even if they’d arrived too late to help the last member of the family. They’d take what they could get.

“Here, Teddy, your arms must be getting tired. Let me hold the baby for a bit.” Meg slipped the infant from her brother’s arms, settling her securely in her own

It wasn’t a search without tragedy, but they finally had their win. And the confidence that gave them-would carry them through whatever else the day threw at them.