

STILL WATERS

AN FBI K-9 NOVEL



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CHAPTER 1

Napoo: A British slang term from World War I, a pronunciation of French *il n'y en a plus* or *il n'y a plus* (“there is no more”). It means something is finished, inoperative, or someone is dead.

Friday, October 18, 8:44 AM
Boundary Waters Canoe Area
Superior National Forest, Minnesota

The boat ghosted over water, slicing almost silently through a vivid reflection of blue sky and wispy clouds. At the edge of the narrow lake, stands of pine towered above ragged piles of granite, while mist danced atop the still surface near the shoreline. High overhead, a raptor glided, wings outstretched, riding the upper-level wind, its prey safe far below.

Not yet time to kill.

At the front of the boat, the black Labrador stood with his front paws braced on the curve of the inflatable bow, his head high, nose constantly scenting the air, the plume of his tail waving back and forth. A dog in his element, on the hunt, waiting for the first sign of the trail.

“Has he got it?”

Meg Jennings, search-and-rescue dog handler for the

FBI's Human Scent Evidence Team, took her eyes off her dog just long enough to glance over her shoulder at the man clad in a wet suit, buoyancy control vest, and air tank, sitting farther back in the boat. Like her, he was perched on the rounded side of the boat, but he also held a GPS unit in one hand, careful to ensure only he could see the screen.

Meg moved to keep her eye on her dog, but turned her head enough that her voice would carry and not get lost in the wind the boat generated as they traversed the lake. "I don't think so. I'm still learning Hawk's signs for a water-based search, but based on his physical stance, he hasn't picked up anything yet."

Meg turned her attention back to Hawk and tightened her hold on the leash, wrapping it around her hand one more time. An experienced search-and-rescue dog, Hawk had done water searches before—as he had after Hurricane Cole struck the Eastern Seaboard the previous year—but those had really been transports over water to get to land searches. And as a black Lab who loved his time in the water, Meg didn't want him to get overenthusiastic about catching a scent and leaping out of the boat to track it like he would on land.

Have faith. You know he's better trained than that.

She did know—a simple voice command would keep him in place. And, in case of a crisis, the use of his "don't mess with me" name—Talon—demanded instant compliance. Even if he did go overboard, not only was he an excellent swimmer, but he wore a life jacket, just like the humans in the boat.

Safety first. You couldn't help a victim if you were in trouble yourself.

Today they were training a different skill. On land, Hawk was an excellent tracking and trailing dog over a range of terrains and through varied conditions. But there were times

when a search ended at a body of water where it would be more useful if he could continue. Granted, any search over water was bound to actually be more in the purview of the dogs of the FBI Victim Recovery Team—who were trained to search out human remains versus the living victims, who were the target of the Human Scent Evidence Team—but cross-training would only improve their overall search success. It was a sad but true fact that not all their searches ended in a live rescue.

Special-Agent-in-Charge Craig Beaumont, who led the Human Scent Evidence Team, had approved Meg and Brian Foster's request for this training weekend. Brian and his German shepherd, Lacey, were often paired with Meg and Hawk because of how well the dogs worked together and their resulting success rate. The handlers and their dogs were mandated by the FBI to refresh and upgrade their training as part of their positions on the Forensic Canine Unit, but when Craig heard that part of the weekend was also a trials competition against other law enforcement agencies, he gave his enthusiastic approval. Outside his office, Meg and Brian had shared a high five, pleased their strategy to sell the trip to Minnesota, based on Craig's competitive nature and his love of showing off his teams' skills, had been successful.

Brian and Lacey were somewhere out on the water as well, but considering the breadth of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and the number of small lakes and rivers, they could be anywhere this morning. Part of the Superior Natural Forest, Boundary Waters was a widespread interconnected chain of waterways, distant from any towns and even most roads. Visitors to the area generally portaged their way into the interior. For these trials, the organizers, Search Dogs of America, had picked an area still accessible by land vehicles, allowing the competitors and their dogs to drive in, instead of being solely reliant on boating skills.

However, as this was a designated wilderness area, the SDA had sought, and received, approval to use outboard motors for the training sessions, since the distance to be covered was considerable. Nonpolluting equipment was required as part of the agreement, so the boats used electric outboard motors.

At first, the lack of noise as they left the shore had seemed jarring, but Meg quickly settled in, enjoying being able to talk without shouting and to hear birdcalls coming from the surrounding forests. There were four people accompanying Hawk: Meg, Charlie Allen, the pilot, Claire Hughes, the trainer, and Salvatore Gallo, the diver. It was a small group, but each of the eight dog-and-handler pairs involved in the training needed a full team each morning, so they were running with the bare minimum of personnel. Had it been an actual search, there would have been a separate team of divers in a second boat. But, in this case, they were looking for a “hide”—a perforated metal canister containing a small piece of decaying human tissue. Unlike other areas in the world, in the United States, training could be done using donated human samples, instead of pork or another substitute, so the dogs were able to learn on the precise blend of decomposition chemicals they’d need to react to in a real situation.

The water search mimicked their typical land search strategy with an important reversal. On land, they’d start downwind, working into the breeze, weaving back and forth, trying to catch a telltale particle of scent. When he found it, Hawk would weave out of the scent plume, then turn and come back into it, cutting across the scent cone until he came out the other side. Then he’d move back into it, each pass getting narrower and narrower as he worked his way to the origin of the scent cone and a single pinpoint location.

However, for water searches, the strategy was to start

upwind and work down, crisscrossing the body of water laterally in a similar pattern to Hawk's land route. They followed the wind, hoping Hawk would react the moment he entered the scent plume. Then, they could go back upwind, taking him out of the scent, and back in on shorter and shorter passes, until they found the exact position of the hide.

Meg knew this was going to be a challenge, even for a trained scent dog like Hawk. Land scents were one thing—scent particles were blown by the wind in predictable patterns, even if differences in altitude and urban or geographical obstacles got in the way. That was their bread and butter, and, as a team, they consistently nailed it. But Meg wasn't sure how Hawk would do today. His nose was sharp, but this search would require leveled-up skills. The hide was likely thirty or forty feet below the surface of the water, possibly dropped into silt or underwater plant life. Scent particles from the decomposing tissue had to filter out of the container, into the water, and then diffuse up to the surface, where they would catch the wind. The number of particles making it to open air would only be a minute fraction of what Hawk was used to working with. Not to mention, out here in the middle of the lake, the wind had picked up considerably; so, would the air current simply whisk away what small amount of scent remained? And even if Hawk caught the scent, once they took him out of it, would it be possible for him to catch it again and again as they narrowed down the location?

He was good, but was he *that* good?

The moment Hawk's stance changed, Meg knew they were about to find out. His body tense, his tail still, Hawk leaned out, his nose working frantically. His rear end wiggled, dipped, and then he had to catch his balance as the boat bobbed slightly. He let out a series of sharp barks.

"Good boy!" Meg stroked a hand over his hip. "His

alert is normally a sit, but I think he's figuring out that won't work on water."

"He tried to sit, but didn't like how it made him unsteady, so he adapted." Short and slight, with her wavy, blond-streaked hair whipped into a frenzy by the wind, Claire grinned in approval. "Smart boy. Bring us around and let's try another pass."

The moment they left the scent plume, Hawk relaxed, becoming more watchful than intent.

Meg studied him, cataloging how he was actively working this search. "Apparently, we're both learning as we go. How long does it take for the dogs to pick this up?"

"It depends on the dog. Experienced dogs, like Hawk, can sometimes nail it on the first try. In that case, we're doing more training of you as his handler, so you know how to help him, since he's utterly reliant on you getting him and his nose where he needs to be out here on the water. It's the handler's responsibility to direct the boat pilot. If you can't get him to the exact location, he can't help you. I'll show you how it's done this time. Tomorrow you're going to show me." Claire looked over her shoulder to where an older man with stooped shoulders and a belly that hinted at a love of beer sat at the tiller. "Charlie, bring us around one hundred eighty degrees. I want to narrow this down."

With a bob of his black ball cap, Charlie arced them in a curve.

"We're on the north side of the lake," Claire continued. "I want to circle to the south side and bring him into it from that direction to get an idea of how far across the breadth of the water we need to limit the search area."

"Have you ever had dogs so into the search they jump out and try to do it themselves?"

Claire's laugh answered the question before she spoke.

“Oh yeah, then it’s fun to drag them into the boat by their life jacket. But they can’t search that way. They’d have to expend too much effort swimming to be able to concentrate on picking up scent this scant.”

An image filled Meg’s mind—Hawk in the Potomac River about ten feet in front of her, his head above water as he swam as if his life depended on it around sunken World War I vessels. It hadn’t been his life at stake, but her sister Cara’s. Hawk had unerringly led her, her partner, firefighter/paramedic Todd Webb, and her sister’s partner, *Washington Post* investigative reporter Clay McCord, to where a maniacal killer had tied Cara to one of the disintegrating ships, and left her to drown as the tide rose. Hawk had saved Cara’s life that day, but it had been hard work and the scent had been 100 percent above water and essentially a glowing neon arrow for the dog. The scent he was looking for today would be *much* harder to find.

“No swimming for you today, buddy. At least not until we’re back on shore.”

Hawk turned around at the sound of her voice, his tongue lolling in a canine grin, and wagged his tail.

Sometimes she swore he understood every word she said, and not just her commands.

The boat circled to the north, then east, coming within about thirty feet of the shore, the mist eddying around them as the winds eased near the trees, and then headed north again.

“Find it, Hawk. Find the scent again.” As part of the training, before they’d left shore, the dogs had been exposed to a small bit of decaying tissue to give them the mixture of scents they’d be looking for out on open water. Hawk could find human scent in the wilderness, or, if given a specific scent, could find it in the midst of a crowd, but this was an odor Meg wasn’t sure he’d even identify as

human. He might just think it was a game to find rotten eggs, for all she knew.

They were back to the center of the lake when Hawk's motion stilled, and he leaned forward over the bow. Another twenty feet and he barked twice.

"Good boy, Hawk."

"Back west again, Charlie, out of the scent. Then north and we'll come south into the plume." Claire's eyes were fixed on the dog. "He's doing great." Her gaze flicked up to Meg. "Do you see what we're doing here?"

"You're essentially gridding off the scent."

"Exactly. This isn't like a land search. You're unlikely to have any concentration of scent over a one-hundred-yard swath, especially on a lake this calm. There are currents because of all the interconnected waterways. But it was a dry summer, and not much rain so far this fall; as a result, the levels are down, and the water isn't running like it does in the spring. And keeping in mind the hide has been in place for about two hours, you need to get a feel for how far the molecules have diffused laterally in the water and then up to the surface. The highest concentration will, of course, be directly above the hide, but depending on how deep it is, how long it's been there, and the dog's sensitivity, he may alert farther out. Part of the process is training them with a second tell, or watching for them to develop their own, when they're over the most concentrated scent on top of the hide. So, more than on land, you have to work out the details of the search before you step into the boat—how long a victim has been missing, the currents in the body of water you're searching, wind and weather conditions. You're a team on land, but even more so on the water. He's the nose, but you have to be the strategic brains of the search."

"Does that team aspect sometimes doom the dog if the handler can't lead the search well?"

“Absolutely. The best nose in the world won’t help if you can’t get it to the site of the victim.”

“No pressure,” Meg muttered, her gaze fixed over Hawk’s head to the expanse of water beyond.

“I’m not worried. I know about you two.”

Meg’s head jerked back to stare at the trainer.

“I’m helping out the SDA this weekend, but I’m not a Minnesotan. I’m from Maryland. And I know about some of your cases.” Claire smiled down at Hawk. “I pay attention to news stories with dogs. And you guys keep making headlines.”

“My sister’s partner is with the *Washington Post*,” Meg said dryly. “I can’t do anything without him wanting to write about it.”

Claire chuckled. “I bet. But as I said, I’m not worried. You’re established, and I can see the bond between you. You’ll nail this.”

The boat circled around and then motored south again.

“Okay, Hawk, find it, buddy. Find the scent.”

This time, there was almost no hesitation before Hawk alerted with a triple bark.

“Is the scent stronger here?” Meg asked. “Or is he figuring out what he’s supposed to do?”

Claire waved both hands back and forth. “Could be one or the other. This early in his training, it may just be him recognizing the scent earlier. Later, when he’s more established, it will indicate a greater concentration.” She gave new orders to the pilot to circle around.

Their circles became smaller and smaller.

One circle netted them no scent, but Claire wasn’t concerned. “Knowing where the scent *isn’t* is just as important as knowing where it *is*. And he can’t direct us, so we’re reading between the lines of his response, especially while you’re learning too.”

On the following circle, as they came around to the east,

Hawk let out a sharp series of barks and threw himself down on the curved edge of the bow, his head dangling over the side as his nose stretched toward the water.

Meg shortened the leash, keeping a solid hold on it as she leaned forward to see into the water, but she couldn't distinguish anything in the murky depths. "Is this it?"

"Charlie, mark this spot, and let's circle back to it." Claire studied the dog almost hanging off the boat. "I know it's in this quadrant, but I don't know the exact location. They only give me a vague location to determine if the dog has missed the mark altogether, so we're not wasting training time. They don't want me to know specifics so I can't influence you or Hawk. This entire process has to be dog led. And I'd say he's done that."

The boat moved in a tight circle, slowed, and stopped when Hawk barked again. "Hawk, good boy. Come back into the boat. Sit." Meg's eyebrows curved upward in surprise when the dog didn't move. She gave the leash a tug, but met the resistance of solid muscle.

"He may not want to move, even at your command. He thinks his job's not done because he can't find the concentrated scent yet."

"Give me a few minutes, and I'll be able to confirm if we're in the right place," Sal said, his eyes still fixed on the GPS unit in his hand.

"You know where the hide should be?" Meg confirmed. "It's still transmitting?"

"Yup."

Meg waited for a few beats of silence, battling back her competitive nature and a sudden need to shake him. "And?"

"We're right above the signal."

Every muscle in Meg relaxed in relief. She knew it was silly—this wasn't a real search, there was no life on the line, and likely in a search like this, there never would

be—but Hawk staying at the top of his game was important to both of them.

“I just need to check,” Sal continued. “It’s doubtful the transmitter has become dislodged at the exact spot of your dog’s alert, but let’s make sure.” He pulled his goggles down into place, slipped his mouthpiece in, and bit down. He looked at Charlie, who held the coil of rope Sal would take down with him to indicate if he had any trouble. Charlie gave him a thumbs-up, which Sal returned. Then he glanced quickly over his shoulder to make sure the water was clear, raised his right hand to cover his regulator with his palm, holding his goggles in place with two fingers, covered the goggles strap with his other hand at the back of his head, and rolled backward over the edge into the lake with a shimmy of flippers. He surfaced, gave the occupants of the boat the okay signal, grabbed the rope, and disappeared under the water. Charlie let the rope play out, a black stripe every ten feet marking Sal’s progress. Ten feet, then twenty. Then more, stopping just short of sixty feet.

Straightening, Meg looked over the edge as the water settled into its normal choppiness. “That’s pretty deep.”

“A little deeper than intended, for sure. We try not to make these first forays discouraging for the dogs. We thought it would be more like forty feet here, but sometimes the topography of these bodies of water isn’t as consistent as we think.”

“How hard will it be for him to find the hide?”

“Shouldn’t be too bad. The tissue is in a container, attached to a floater on a four-foot cord, so he’s looking for the floater, not the hide, which could be lost in the plant life or sediment at the bottom of the lake. It’s going to be dark down there”—Claire squinted into the sun-bright sky—“even on a day like today, but he has his flashlight.”

They waited for a few minutes in silence. Hawk wanted to stay perched on the bow, so Meg left him in peace, sitting beside him, one hand resting on his sun-warmed fur just behind his navy-blue-and-yellow FBI life jacket. The wind gently blew every loose strand of long black hair not tied back into her ponytail around her face. Even though they'd been enjoying an unusually warm fall, the breeze was cool, but here on the open water, the sun kept them from being cold. Motion at the edge of the lake caught Meg's attention, and for a moment, she wasn't sure what she was looking at as something moved across the water. But then it was joined by another, and another, and another, and she realized a family of otters was swimming near the shore. A smile curved her lips as they cavorted in the shallows; as a city dweller, albeit one who often did searches through outdoor environments—moments for work, not relaxation—she didn't get much of a chance to just enjoy the peace of nature.

Which was exactly what Todd had told her when he was convincing her to turn this trip into a mini-vacation.

Todd. That made her wonder how he and his brothers were managing at the campsite. Hopefully, they'd brought everything they'd need because there would be no dashing out to a store to pick up supplies, not way out in the wilderness like this.

"Two tugs," Charlie announced. "He's coming up. Keep in mind he's going to have to do a three-minute safety stop at fifteen feet to avoid the bends." He started coiling the rope, which lay lax between his hands as the diver rose in the water.

Finally the float broke the surface, bright white to catch the light of the flashlight below, followed by a stream of bubbles and then Sal's head as he surfaced.

He spit out his mouthpiece and grinned up at Meg and

Claire as his right hand broke the surface, holding a silver metal tin with circular perforations in the top of the magnetic lid, and a loop on the side where a woven cord was neatly tied, before disappearing into the water. Meg was instantly hit with a waft of putrid sulfur that turned her stomach.

With a bark, Hawk dropped back into the boat, his tail wagging furiously.

“Good boy, Hawk. You did it!” Meg followed her praise with a jerky treat, which he happily sank down on the floor of the boat to eat. “I don’t normally reward him with food after a search, but I want to make connections in his head right now.”

Claire nodded her approval. “Totally agree. This is new enough for him that you want him to understand he did it correctly.”

Charlie dropped the rope, pulled the lid off a rectangular plastic bin at his feet, and extended it. “For the love of God, put that away.”

Sal tossed the canister into the bin, and then Charlie set it on the floor, allowing him to reel in the cord and floater. He snapped the lid on tight and turned his face into the wind, trying to breathe only fresh air. “How can something that small stink so much?”

“Decomp chemicals are nasty, no doubt about it.” Claire waited as Sal kicked his way out of the water, giving a twist as he did to sit on the side of the boat, his flippers still in the water. “Was Hawk precise? Was the hide right here?”

“Not only was it right here, when it dropped, it burrowed into the silt by a good six inches.” Sal studied Hawk as he happily finished his treat. “He not only nailed the location, he did it sixty feet down and with less scent than usual because it had to percolate through the silt be-

fore it hit the water to filter up to the surface. I'm impressed."

Claire ran a hand over Hawk's head. "Me too. Good boy, Hawk." She looked up and met Meg's eyes. "Land and water capabilities. With this added skill set, you guys are going to be in great demand."

Meg beamed down at her dog, taking in his eyes, so bright and alert, as if to say, *What's next?* "Hawk says, 'Bring it on!'"

CHAPTER 2

Briefing: A meeting before a search during which search teams are given information in order to initiate and execute the search.

*Friday, October 18, 11:28 AM
Boundary Waters Canoe Area
Superior National Forest, Minnesota*

“**M**eg! Over here!” The sound of her name drew Meg’s attention up the hill, away from the water’s edge, where they had disembarked fifteen minutes earlier, and along the path leading into the forest. She instantly recognized Brian Foster’s tall, athletic form and dark hair. The arm he waved over his head and the German shepherd sitting at his knee only cemented the identification. She waved back and changed direction. “Hawk, come on, boy, let’s go see Lacey.” At Lacey’s name, Hawk’s ears perked and his pace quickened. Meg chuckled and grinned down at her dog. “You two are like an old married couple who can’t bear to be separated for long.”

As Meg climbed the hill toward Brian, she took in his cargo pants, unzipped navy FBI windbreaker, and Henley

beneath, all of which were splattered with water. “Did you swim to shore?”

“Not me.” Brian cast a flat stare down at his dog. “Her.” Lacey grinned up at Meg, her long pink tongue lolling sideways out of her mouth, her tail thumping packed dirt scattered with a bright carpet of autumn’s fallen color, her spiky fur telling the tale of a quick swim after her morning’s work.

“Couldn’t resist, could she?”

“Not even kind of. Good thing it’s a warm day for this time of year. How did you keep Hawk out of the water?”

“I didn’t.” Meg pinched a fold of Brian’s shirt between her thumb and index finger and rubbed the wet material. “I stepped away when he shook off. And then sat in the sun with him on the beach for ten minutes to dry off.”

“Yeah, I didn’t quite make it out of range.” Brian rolled his eyes, but then belied his exasperation by dropping a hand onto Lacey’s head and stroking fondly.

Like she would for Hawk, Meg knew Brian would do anything for Lacey. Always would have, but following Lacey’s near-fatal brush with a cougar in the spring, their bond had only grown stronger as he’d nursed her away from the brink of death, and then coached her back into top form. “How did you guys do this morning?”

“Fantastic. Lacey got it on the first try. It took her a few rounds to pinpoint the exact position because the hide was located in an area of the lake where the wind funneled around a corner, making an eddy. But we’ve dealt with obstacles like that on land, haven’t we, Lacey-girl? We just had to apply some of that strategy to this new situation and she narrowed it down once the trainer and I got her into the right location. How about Hawk?”

“Nailed it.”

“Of course he did. Like we expected anything else from either of them.”

“I admit I wasn’t sure. It’s not like either of them are Theo,” Meg said, referring to Scott Park’s bloodhound, the best nose in the Human Scent Evidence Team. “Knowing how sparse the scent is, I wasn’t sure how either of them would do.”

“Oh, ye of little faith. I knew they’d rock it.” Brian peered uphill toward a clearing. “Now they need to rock the first trial. As far as I’m concerned, either of them can win, but it needs to be one of them, not one of the other teams. Craig is a little overly invested in our whipping some serious ass this weekend.”

“I’ll say. He’s competitive at the best of times, but did you see when he realized the Connecticut State Police were going to be sending a team?”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, sure, it’s one of the oldest K-9 teams in America, but him being buds with the department’s lieutenant colonel really brought out his competitive side.”

“Hey, it got us here. I can work with it. Or you can.” Meg’s gaze traveled from Hawk to Lacey. “I agree. As long as one of us takes it this weekend, I’m happy. We’re two teams against six others. That’s a one-in-four chance.”

“With these guys, we have a better than one-in-four chance.”

“Totally agree.” She pushed back the cuff of her jacket to reveal the time on her fitness tracker. “We better get moving. We’re supposed to start at noon, right?”

“Yes. And I want to take ten minutes to give Lacey a light meal. I don’t want her weighed down and, while she had a good breakfast, I don’t know how long this search will be. I want to give her a boost.” Brian shrugged to re-settle the backpack he carried, just as Meg did, that contained all their supplies.

“Me too. Let’s move then.”

Brian and Meg made their way into the woods, following the path up the hill to the clearing above. Once there

they moved toward the edge of the forest, avoiding the other dogs and handlers rapidly filling the space, and gave their dogs a little high-energy kibble and some water. They downed a couple of energy bars themselves, because the dogs weren't alone in needing to keep their energy high during the upcoming search. Then they buckled their now-dry dogs into their FBI vests, signaling it was time to go to work. Leaving their backpacks together at the edge of the trees, they both put on fanny packs carrying a minimum of emergency supplies, including their satellite phones. By eleven fifty-five, they joined the group of handlers and dogs milling in a loose circle, mostly as single teams, but one other pair of handlers and dogs stood together, as Meg did with Brian.

Meg scanned their competition. During the drive out, while Todd was at the wheel, she'd taken the time to look up the groups entered in the trials, and while she didn't know the individual handlers' names, she knew their organizations. Everyone was out of official uniform, but wore the more casual call signs of their organizations—like the FBI windbreakers she and Brian wore—and the dogs wore the colors and insignia of their departments.

A chocolate Lab in a khaki vest with the Connecticut State Police crest sat patiently at the feet of his handler, a broad-shouldered man with an umber complexion and muscular build, his kinky black hair shaved close to his scalp. He looked as relaxed as his dog, his eyes scanning the circle, his smile a flash of white teeth. He stood in cargo pants with his hiking boots braced, his hands tucked inside the kangaroo pocket of his Connecticut State Police hoodie, the leash emerging to droop nearly to the ground beside his dog. His gaze landed on Meg and Brian and his smile broke wider. He gave them a nod, before moving on to study the other competitors.

Meg leaned into Brian. "CSP handler over there just

picked us out. Apparently, the competition is being echoed in their office as well.”

“He looks pretty mellow about it.” Brian frowned. “I’m not sure if that’s because he’s easygoing, or because he thinks he has us whooped before we even start.”

“CSP only sent one team, so that helps. It’s the New York State Police who sent two.”

She nodded toward where two men stood with matching German shepherds, both wearing green camo police vests. They sat motionless, but they constantly watched the dogs around them. Meg noted that even here, the animals were working in tandem, just as Hawk and Lacey would, with each dog covering their own side of the circle. Unlike the CSP Lab, these dogs were at attention, the leashes between them and their handlers held with almost no slack. The two men were both in cargo pants and navy New York State Police jackets to ward off the breeze. Their high and tight haircuts paired with their unsmiling faces made them look unnaturally militaristic in the typically more relaxed search-and-rescue crowd. The matching outfits and haircuts almost made them look like twins, except one man had dark eyes, while the other’s were ice blue.

“I don’t like the look of those dogs,” Brian murmured.

Meg studied the New York State dog teams. “While we all do tracking, they definitely look more like apprehension dogs than search-and-rescue. When I was on the Richmond PD with Deuce, we saw a lot of dogs like that. Always on, always vigilant. As a patrol dog in urban Richmond, Deuce was like that to a certain extent.” Meg felt a pang as she thought about her days in the RPD, patrolling with her German shepherd, until he was cut down apprehending a suspect, and died in her arms while they waited for help to arrive.

“Why would they be here for a weekend training like this?”

“Probably because the New York State Police so heavily trains its dogs for apprehension, I bet they have a lot of dogs to fill that role. But it’s a big state, with a lot of natural spaces, so having some dogs capable of water searches would be useful. They have somewhere around one hundred dogs in that department, so they can afford to diversify skills. And while I can see the need for training, those dogs look like machines.” She looked down at Hawk, lying placidly at her feet, and Lacey, sitting quietly between herself and Brian. “Makes our two look like amateur hour.”

“Until we get started. They’re just resting until it’s time to go to work. They know the drill.”

“They sure do. And those dogs may be on alert because they’re in work mode with their vests on. Now, *that’s* a beautiful dog.”

“Which one?”

“The black Belgian Malinois from Wyoming, to the left of the stables.”

The long-haired Malinois wore a black vest that blended into its fur so well, the black-and-yellow crest with the silhouette of a rider on a bucking bronco popped bright. Laramie County Sheriff’s Office. A tall, leggy redhead stood beside the dog, her hair tied back in a no-nonsense ponytail. Wearing yoga pants and a Laramie County sweat-shirt, she bounced on her toes, like a runner jonesing in the starting blocks. Her eyes darted around the circle as if trying to take everything in at once. Like its handler, the dog also appeared unsettled, sitting tall and straight, almost as if the leash was just a little too tight.

“Gorgeous dog,” said Brian, “but she could loosen up her hold on him a bit.”

“I was thinking the same thing. She’s either nervous

about the trial or the dog misbehaving, and is keeping it close. Too close.”

“It’s just a competition. If they don’t win, their jobs aren’t on the line.”

Meg sent Brian a sideways glance. “So we’re not worrying about winning now?”

“Hell no.” He shot back a sly grin. “*They* shouldn’t worry about it, though, because we’ve got it in the bag.”

“That’s better.” Meg took in the next team. A petite woman, her blond hair heavily threaded with gray, wearing a blue-and-gold tracksuit with the Cook County Sheriff’s Office shield embroidered over her left breast, stood beside a massive tan-and-black bloodhound. “Look at the size of that bloodhound. His ears are bigger than my spread hand.”

“He’s massive. At least he looks alert and ready to go. Makes Theo look like a slug.”

Meg chuckled. “Never stand when you can sit. Never sit when you can lie down.”

“If this one is energetic and has a typical bloodhound nose, he may be our toughest competition. Unless he moves like Theo, and then we have nothing to worry about because the trial is based on time. And if he’s not like Theo, then he must be well trained; otherwise, that’s a lot of dog for someone of her build to handle.”

The look Meg sent him could have chilled water. “Her build or her age?”

“Her *build*,” he repeated. “She may be the oldest competitor here, but if she’s in shape—and it sure looks like it to me—then she can run circles around your average couch-surfing twenty-something. But she’s petite for a dog of that size.”

The last team was another German shepherd, this one in a navy vest with the symbol of a bear inside a sheriff’s

star. The man holding the leash looked like he'd just stepped off his surfboard and run up from the beach, from his sun-kissed tan, to the bleached-blond curls that flopped over his forehead, to the baggy, wrinkled khaki pants and the loose Henley under his navy jacket. His dog looked equally Zen.

"Is that beach boy from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office?" Brian asked.

"Looks like it."

"You think they need a dog who can find people in the concrete canyon of the Los Angeles River?"

"That's mostly the LAPD in the downtown urban center. Get out of the city and into the mountains where the sheriff's office has jurisdiction, and these dogs are tracking through nature and around bodies of water and rivers. They have the Pacific as well, but what they learn here will be less useful there simply because of currents. A body in the ocean isn't going to stay in place."

"I wonder if he takes his dog surfing?"

"You laugh, but there are lots of dogs who surf, and there are lots of owners who love sharing the activity with them. I mean, really, what's surfing but another type of parkour?" Meg referred to the exercise she and Brian did with the dogs, where they put the dogs through their paces of balance and agility using steps, blocks, railings, teeter-totters, jumps, and tubes.

"When you put it that way . . ."

Meg pointed in the direction of a man and woman dressed in SDA red-on-black windbreakers cresting the top of the hill. "Looks like we're about to start."

Brian interlaced his fingers, turned his hands palm out, and stretched, cracking his knuckles. "Excellent. Let's do this."

The man and woman stepped to the end of the circle, in-

serting themselves into the group, the CSP officer stepping sideways with his dog to give them a little more room. The woman was middle-aged, with gray sprinkled through her short brown curls, but her face revealed the slightly wrinkled weathering that spoke of an outdoor lifestyle. Like the man, she wore jeans and scuffed, muddy hiking boots, with a windbreaker over a wiry frame. Holding a clipboard, she stepped forward a pace into the circle, her eyes scanning the participants with a smile. “On behalf of Search Dogs of America, welcome to you all. I caught the last part of your training this morning and it looked like things were going well. And the trainers said they were encouraged about how smoothly the session had gone.”

One of the two New York State handlers leaned toward his colleague and murmured something that made the other man crack a grin. Meg glanced sideways at Brian to see if he’d seen it, only to find his narrowed gaze fixed on the two men who were apparently making fun of either the SDA spokeswoman or the training they provided.

But the woman continued, seemingly having missed the exchange. “I’m Teresa Bowfin, regional director of North Central SDA, and the organizer of this weekend. And I’m happy to introduce you to Isaac Thatcher, our main trial judge. Isaac has been in search-and-rescue for about thirty years with a number of goldens, and is still active with the California Rescue Dog Association with his current golden, Petunia.”

Easily twenty years older than Bowfin, Thatcher still had the build of a man who did regular exercise. Most judges in canine activities were previous competitors, and were often owners and trainers, so Meg wasn’t surprised Thatcher would still be involved in search-and-rescue. It wasn’t age that slowed a handler down; it was their health or that of their dog.

Thatcher raised his hand in greeting. “Welcome, all. And you’re close, Teresa, but I’ve only been in search-and-rescue for about twenty-five years. I’m not *that* old.” He gave Bowfin a mock-stern look, and then ruined it by chuckling and running a hand over his graying sandy hair. “I’m looking forward to seeing you all in action shortly.”

“As am I,” Bowfin continued. She raised the clipboard she’d been holding against her hip. “Now, because I was involved in the organization of the event and spoke to some of you personally, I asked one of the trial observers to assign each of you a randomly selected number for your starting position in this afternoon’s trial. This is the order.” She scanned down the list. “First up is Rita Pratt, Laramie County Sheriff’s Office.”

All eyes swiveled to the redhead and her Belgian Malinois. Pratt gave Bowfin a short nod.

“Next is Brian Foster, FBI Human Scent Evidence Team.”

Brian raised his hand in acknowledgment.

“Next is Shay McGraw, LA County Sheriff’s Office. Then Lamonte Dix, Connecticut State Police, Mandy Fief, Cook County Sheriff’s Office, and Damon Glenn, New York State Police.”

As the names were called, Meg found the handlers where they stood with their dog in the circle, mentally naming each one. They’d be together all weekend, and even though they were competitors now, the search-and-rescue world was small and every fresh contact could be a new person to rely on in a future search scenario.

“Finally we have Meg Jennings, FBI Human Scent Evidence Team, and Gerhard Elan, New York State Police,” Bowfin continued, and then lowered her clipboard. “I’ll be starting you off at your given time over there, in that break in the trees where the trail leads away from the

water. Each dog will be given a scent sample of the hide you'll be looking for. You'll start on that trail, but don't expect to stay on it. Taking air currents into account, we've set the hide so at a certain point along the trail, your scent dog will pick up the odor and will redirect. If you stay on the trail to the end, you've missed the hide. The trial will be timed, with your synchronized time marked at the find by two independent trial observers when you call your dog's alert. A third trial observer will be stationed out of sight along the trail, and Mr. Thatcher will be observing the entire trial directly streamed from a number of remote satellite cameras, which will feed to his laptop here. Afterward, times will be calculated and we'll announce the leaderboard. We'll space the competitors out by ten minutes to ensure no one is being visually followed."

"What about trails being followed?" Pratt asked. "I'm first, which means every path I leave is an advantage to everyone who comes behind me. And by the time the last team goes through, they'll have a huge advantage."

"What the . . ." Brian muttered under his breath.

Meg was equally surprised. Any competitor who had done a trial like this before knew how the run would work. Random selection made it as fair as possible, and, yes, perhaps the first competitor could lay down a trail, but it all depended on airflow and eddies and the dog's working pattern. This wasn't going to be a straight trail to the hide. First the dogs had to find the specific scent and then narrow in on it. Chances of any dog following in a previous dog's exact footsteps for the entire run were practically zero.

Bowfin's frown said she had no time for this kind of protest. "If you're letting your dog lead, unless he or she is purposely following the previous team and not the specific

scent of the hide they're tasked to find, they'll be making their own way. There will be no disadvantage. It's all up to the dogs. Any other questions?" She paused for a moment, scanning the group, but no one spoke. "No? Then we'll meet back here at four o'clock for the results of the first trial. Best of luck to you all."

"Good luck, partner." Brian held out his fist and Meg bumped hers against it. "Let's nail this."

CHAPTER 3

Rural SAR: A search conducted across farmland or woodland in a sparsely populated area.

Friday, October 18, 1:05 PM

Boundary Waters Canoe Area

Superior National Forest, Minnesota

The forest was quiet, with only the barest whistle of wind rustling the treetops far overhead. Below, there was only the rhythmic pounding of Meg's hiking boots and Hawk's paws on the dirt trail. They'd started five minutes earlier, having given Glenn ten minutes to get ahead of them. They were on the trail, moving at a steady jog, having used some of their lead time to do a quick warm-up by jogging around the clearing and doing a few stretches, so by the time they were able to start, both she and Hawk were raring to go.

The trail led them deep into the woods. Tall stands of autumn-bright trees surrounded them, and thick ground cover laid a carpet on both sides of the path. The forest was dense, a mixture of deciduous and evergreens, limiting their view of the surrounding area. Meg dropped her left hand onto the can of bear spray clipped to her yoga pants. She'd had to use it in the past, but hoped it wouldn't

be a problem today, both from a safety and a time standpoint. If she got tied up avoiding a bear, it would eat into their trial time. But at this time of year, after a summer of nature's bounty, and as the bears looked toward hibernation, she hoped any bear she met would be fat and satisfied already, and the cubs would be old enough any mother bear wouldn't feel the need to instantly attack if she and Hawk crossed paths with them.

Been there, done that. Once was more than enough.

During the compound bow case in Georgia, she and Hawk had spent entirely too much time out in the middle of nowhere, including one terrifying night lost in the Co-hutta Wilderness, where they'd fallen down a steep hill, losing all their supplies and communication equipment, then been tossed in a spring-swollen river, where they almost drowned in the rapids. After they dragged themselves out of the water, Meg was nearly bitten by a rattlesnake, and then they were set on by a pack of coyotes. All she wanted today was a nice quiet run through the forest. The trail could be as hard as necessary, but if she didn't see so much as a squirrel, Meg would be happy.

Hawk had yet to find the scent, but Meg wasn't worried. If she'd been the one setting up the hide, she'd have put the cross-breeze from it at least ten minutes into the run, and, more than likely, out of this thick forest where the scent would be somewhat strangled by the lack of air-flow, risking competitors missing it altogether. She could tell from Hawk's stance that he was in the zone, his head high, nose working furiously, sampling the air, waiting for that first hint of scent. His tail was high and his pace was brisk. He was on the hunt.

He'd find the scent. He always did.

The path led up a steady incline, more and more of the forest floor broken by large spears of moss-covered gran-

ite erupting through the dirt. In front of them, the trees grew sparse, and then they broke out on top of a cliff face.

“Hawk, slow. We’re not going to risk a misstep up here.”

Hawk instantly obeyed, slowing from a trot into a walk, knowing instinctively to stay away from the edge. The path here was easily twenty feet across, a cleared area over flat-topped slabs of rock, and they both gave the edge a wide berth.

Meg’s heart rate immediately spiked. For someone who was afraid of heights, even hugging the tree line was entirely too close to the edge.

Part of her brain could appreciate the stunning vista: The sun shone down onto the sinuous river that flowed along the bottom of the cliff, bound on either side by wide swaths of forest. The warm fall had extended the full colors of autumn a few extra weeks, and the valley below was a glorious spattering of brilliant crimson, fiery orange, and luminous amber. Water sparkled below, from the river at their feet, to the scattering of lakes in every direction. From this height, the varied landscape of the wilderness around them was laid bare.

The rest of her body reacted with an adrenaline spike that screamed *Run . . .*

If Todd had been here, he’d perch on the rock, dangling his legs over the edge as he soaked up the beauty below. She, on the other hand, would only ever be up here for work because she had to be.

Speaking of work, time to move this along. “Come on, Hawk. Find the scent. You can do it, buddy.”

Safely over the top of the cliff face and back into the trees. They’d only gone about forty feet when Hawk’s pace slowed, his head high, and his tail held tall and motionless.

He has it.

“Good boy, Hawk.”

She ran the tips of her fingers down the warm fur near the base of his tail as he looked back at her, his eyes bright. If she ever thought she'd dragged him into search-and-rescue, and demanded too much of him on these searches, it was moments like this that reassured her that her dog was never happier than when they were out working together. Unless he had Lacey with him as well—that was pretty much a perfect day from Hawk's point of view.

“I knew you'd get it. Now follow the scent, Hawk.” She dropped back a few steps, letting out the long leash between them a little bit, giving him more room to work.

Hawk ran along the path for another thirty feet or so, and then slowed only momentarily, before turning between a giant oak and a pine tree to enter the undergrowth, cutting back at an angle to the direction they'd already come.

Meg scanned the area around them. Bright with autumn's hue, the forest was still thick, shorter trees and bushes filling a lot of the open spaces, with ground cover spreading over the rest. Large boulders dotted the area, shaded pale green with lichen and moss. There was a slight trace of a breeze she hadn't been able to detect before, likely why Hawk had been able to pick up the scent. Recalling Pratt's complaint, she studied the greenery around them, but couldn't spot a sign of any of the competitors who had gone before them—not a broken branch, crushed stem, or a boot print left in soft soil. If they'd come this far, they'd gone a slightly different way.

Hawk immediately fell into his typical search pattern, working downstream of the scent, running nearly perpendicular to the scent cone until he lost it, then looping back into it, working his way toward it in ever-narrowing passes. He kept up as fast a trot as he could in the thick under-

growth, staying true to his direction with his only deviations being for obstacles.

Meg checked the time on her fitness tracker. Just past twenty minutes in, and from Hawk's behavior, they were closing in.

The sound of running water met her ears, pulling her attention from her dog to the terrain to the southeast, where the forest seemed to open up into the light beyond. She'd given Brian a hard time about getting wet this morning and now she was possibly going to get her own dunking.

They broke from the trees to a ravine probably sixty feet wide. Water wound between the two forested boundaries to trip over jagged rocks in a parallel triplet of waterfalls. Below, the river spread wide and shallow over the bottom of the ravine, pooling at the bottom of the waterfalls, then separating into multiple channels to slither through a tumble of larger rocks. As Hawk came to stop at the edge of the twenty-foot drop, a quick scan of both sides of the riverbed cemented her strategy.

Twenty feet wasn't great, but she could handle it. She'd certainly handled worse.

"Down, across, and then up again, Hawk. Then we'll have to pick up the trail again on that side." She unclipped his leash from his vest, coiled and stuffed it into her jacket pocket. Not that she anticipated any issues, but Hawk's freedom of movement was paramount in any situation where he could fall. Or where she could, taking him with her. Better for them to be separated. And, as usual, she was the part of the team at a disadvantage. Hawk's four feet and lower center of gravity would make this a much easier exercise for him.

"Hawk, come." Quickly judging the easiest and safest route down to the riverbed, Meg led the way, following a series of ledges and rocky outcroppings to drop down

below. What she did in ninety seconds, Hawk did in thirty. “Show-off. You’re going to beat me here too. With me, Hawk.” She wound her way across the rocky riverbed, staying atop the larger rocks as the water rushed around them. Meg picked her way carefully, selecting each rock and testing her weight on it to make sure it wouldn’t roll underfoot, whereas Hawk gleefully jumped from rock to rock, sure-footed in every movement. As always, it made Meg glad for the hours she and Brian spent taking the dogs to parks and playgrounds to run around climbing sets and over stone walls. The agility he showed in each outing made him confident in the real world. She wouldn’t have him any other way.

Partway across, Hawk paused, his nose angled high, sampling the air, and elation punched through Meg. *Still has the scent.*

They made it to the far side, and then Hawk led the way up to the top in a series of leaps as Meg steadily climbed behind him. Straightening to stand, Meg clipped on his leash. “Okay, Hawk, find it.”

They were off again. Back into the woods, pushing through branches and dancing around trees as they jogged up a steep rise.

Hawk faltered as they topped the rise, first darting in the expected direction, then abruptly doubling back. He stopped, his head swinging first in one direction, then the other.

“Hawk? What’s wrong?”

It wasn’t unheard of for him to lose the scent. It had happened before, but usually he signaled that loss with a whine. Now he was silent. Studying him, Meg could only identify his behavior as confusion.

An obstruction blocking the scent, so it’s weaker in this location? A second scent cross-polluting the air?

Meg scanned the terrain upwind. Part of her job as the

handler was to logic out any challenges the search presented. Obstacles, like a building or a large hill, could direct scent up and over their heads, causing Hawk to miss the scent altogether. Or, depending on wind speeds, if the scent fell on the other side of the obstacle, swirling eddies could form at ground level and the scent exiting the eddy could go in any direction. It was a mild day, starting to border on cool now, so convection—hot air rising and taking scent with it—wouldn't play a part. But the terrain itself, all hills and valleys to obstruct or channel the wind, increased the difficulty of the search.

But this was what they did. They knew how to work this.

She and Hawk were standing on top of the hill, so the scent should have been blowing directly over them. And while they'd just been in a hollow, the ground upwind was relatively flat. Hawk had already brought them through the worst of the terrain so far.

Meg crouched down beside Hawk, running a hand down his back soothingly. "Hawk, you're doing great. Just keep it up." She knew he didn't understand all her words; he was smart, but no dog was fluent in English. But he absolutely understood her tone and what her touch conveyed. Love. Trust. Partnership. And, most important in this moment, patience to get the job done right. "You had the scent, buddy. Find it. Find the scent."

Hawk took three steps forward as Meg straightened, then paused, changed direction, took two more steps. Stopped again.

Then he seemed to settle, picked a direction, and settled into a trot. Meg relaxed fractionally; he had the scent again.

But forty-five seconds later, he didn't.

Meg was entirely baffled. She'd never seen him behave like this before. He seemed . . . lost.

“Okay, Hawk, clock’s ticking here. Let’s go to where you lost the scent and start again. Come.”

She hurried them back to where he’d first seemed conflicted. She crouched down next to him. “Let’s start again. Let’s find the scent. Do your best; no lives are on the line, it’s just a competition. We can do it, buddy. Now find, Hawk. Find.”

She pushed to her feet, gnawing on her bottom lip. Wins were important and a bad search could rattle a dog’s confidence. It was why on sites like Ground Zero, after 9/11, when the dogs didn’t find anyone alive, rescuers hid in the rubble so the search-and-rescue canines could have a “win,” even if the humans knew it wasn’t real. It would keep dogs from getting depressed and keep them on task. And the last thing Meg wanted on a weekend when she needed Hawk on point with new training was—

Hawk pivoted, picking his direction, his steps sure. Either a fresh wave of scent had reached him, or he’d resolved any conflicting scents, but he’d chosen his target and was back on the trail, his head up, his gaze laser focused on the terrain in front of him, and his tail waving proudly.

There’s my boy.

After that, it was less than five minutes to the hide. Hawk pushed his way through a dense thicket of bushes, Meg right behind him. Thorny branches snagged her shirt and grasped the edges of her hair as she squeezed through after him and she had to raise her left forearm over her face to protect her eyes. Then she was on the other side, and dropped her arm to find Hawk sitting proudly at the base of a towering white pine, his tail thumping the dirt happily.

Meg circled the tree to find a perforated silver container tucked into the lee of two gnarled roots. “Alert!” she called to the trial observers. She couldn’t see them, but they could

see her, and her time would be marked on her call. She checked her stopwatch—thirty-seven minutes and twelve seconds. *Way too long*. But she lavished praise on her dog nonetheless. “Good boy, Hawk! Good job!”

After that loss of time, they certainly weren’t going to come in first for this course, but there were still two more to go. They weren’t out of the running yet. And Brian and Lacey may have already nailed this round. She’d be happy to see them take first place.

They’d pull back, and she’d get out her GPS and get them to the clearing, avoiding the path they’d just followed so they wouldn’t run afoul of the remaining team.

Then they’d see who’d won the day.