

# STORM RISING

A black and white photograph of a dog running through water in front of a destroyed house. The dog is in the foreground, running towards the right, with water splashing around its legs. The background shows a house that has been severely damaged, with debris scattered around it. The overall scene is dramatic and suggests a story of survival and rescue.

AN  
F.B.I. K-9  
NOVEL

SARA DRISCOLL

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SARA  
DRISCOLL



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# CHAPTER 1

*Landfall:* Coming ashore after a trip over water.

*Friday, July 21, 10:04 PM*  
*Jennings residence*  
*Arlington, Virginia*

“Meg, come look at this.”

Meg Jennings looked up from packing at the sound of her sister’s voice. She tucked several folded athletic shirts into her duffel bag, then jogged out of her bedroom and down the hall.

She found her sister Cara perched on the edge of the sofa, her attention focused on the flat-screen TV at the far end of the living room. Cara’s brindle greyhound, Blink, gave a low whine from where he sat on the floor beside her and pushed his nose against her knee. Cara reached out blindly to stroke his head, crooning to him softly, her eyes never leaving the screen.

Meg took in the breathtaking scene splashed across fifty-two inches. The stark white lettering on the brilliant red news ticker labeled the area as Nags Head, North Carolina. Nags Head was unmistakably under attack. The fact that Mother Nature was the marauding force would make no difference to the outcome. Huge waves crashed

ashore, trees bent nearly sideways in the roaring wind, and lethal pieces of debris were whipped into the air by the gale.

“It’s making landfall now?”

“Yes. And Clay is out there somewhere in the middle of it.”

Meg took in Cara’s motionless stance and stiff shoulders. Her sister was silent, but her body language shouted her concern. Meg came close enough to rub a hand down her sister’s back. “Hey.” She waited until Cara tore her eyes from the TV and looked up at her. “He’ll be okay. It’ll take more than Hurricane Cole to take him down. He survived Iraq and other war zones; he’ll survive this. Besides, he’s not a storm chaser for The Weather Channel, he’s writing a story for the *Washington Post*. TV reporters will be out in the gale. McCord will be undercover, finding the personal interest pieces.”

Hearing his owner’s name, Cody went from lying prone to standing on his back feet with his front paws pressed to Cara’s thighs in a single motion. He jammed his wet nose into the hollow of her throat and Cara pressed both hands to his shoulders in response. “Down, Cody. You know better.” The twelve-month-old golden retriever dropped obediently to the ground and grinned up at her, his entire back end undulating with his enthusiastic tail wags. “Did you hear Daddy’s name?” Cara ruffled the puppy’s ears and sighed. “Cody misses him.”

“He’s doing fine and you know it.” Meg dropped onto the couch beside her sister. They were so similar, almost carbon copies of each other—tall and athletic, gifted with the ice-blue eyes and the long, glossy black hair of their Black Irish paternal grandmother. “Cody loves you and he loves the pack.” Meg’s gaze drifted over the two dogs sleeping in a pile on the oversized dog bed against the far wall—her own black Lab, Hawk, and Cara’s mini blue pit

bull, Saki. “He loves to spend time here. The only thing that would make it better is McCord being here too.” Meg relaxed back against the couch cushions and cocked an eyebrow at her sister. “Like he did night before last.”

Cara flushed up to her hairline. “You . . . knew he was here?”

“Of course I knew he was here. You’re an adult. You don’t need to justify your relationships to me. I’m not Mom. Not that you’d need to justify them to her either.”

“I didn’t know if you’d find it awkward. We share this house, so maybe I should have cleared it with you first.”

“It’s not like you brought home a stranger. It’s McCord. And I saw this happening two months ago.” Meg regarded Cara, as much best friend as younger sister, and wagged her fingers in a give-it-to-me gesture. “Now stop being stingy with the details. Just because I knew him first doesn’t mean I don’t want all the sisterly dirt.” She leaned in close so she could drop her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “How was he?”

At that, Cara laughed and flopped back onto the couch beside Meg, turning her head toward her sister. The glint in her eye answered Meg’s question before she spoke. “Absolutely fantastic.”

Meg grinned at her slyly and sat back. “I would expect nothing less.”

Cara turned sideways on the sofa, snuggling into the soft cushions, some of the tenseness relaxing from her frame. “While we’re on the subject of sisterly dirt, what about you and Todd?”

An image of the firefighter/paramedic in question sprang into Meg’s mind: tall and dark, with the muscular build of a man used to sprinting up stairs wearing sixty pounds of gear with one hundred pounds of fire hose tossed over his shoulder. They’d met last May when a vengeful man had acted on his personal grudge by blowing

up government buildings with C-4-loaded drones, uncaring of the innocent bystanders inside who ended up as collateral damage. DC Fire and Emergency Medical Services had been called in along with any available teams from the FBI's Human Scent Evidence Team—Meg and Hawk among them—to rescue the live victims and recover the dead. Together, Meg and Lieutenant Todd Webb had saved the life of a young girl and a bond had been forged.

“Getting close, but we’re not quite there yet.” Meg’s tone was easy. “I’ve been away so much in the last few months—out in California helping with the mudslides and then in Colorado after that avalanche, not to mention local deployments. Add into that his schedule at the firehouse and things are moving slowly. Which is fine for both of us. We’re not in a rush.”

“Sometimes that’s the best way. Does he know you’re headed out of town again?”

“He knew it was likely, but I haven’t talked to him since Craig made it official.” Craig Beaumont, Supervisory Special Agent for the Forensic Canine Unit’s Human Scent Evidence Team, had only called an hour ago with their orders. “I wanted to pack first,” Meg continued, “then I’ll give him a call and let him know we’re headed to Virginia Beach.”

Cara shifted to look back at the TV. The scene had changed from the sand dunes of Nags Head to the charming pastel three-story houses of Hatteras. The whitecap-topped, churning sea roared up to smash in front doors while the wind screamed and torrents of rain fell at a steep angle. “This is going to be bad.”

“It is.” Meg’s attention was drawn across the room where Hawk stood up and stretched after his nap, and then wandered over to her. “Hi, buddy. How’s my boy?” She stroked a hand down his glossy black fur and he sighed in pleasure. “They’re saying this one could be up there with Sandy. The only good thing is this time they had



a better handle on the track of the storm from the beginning and got the appropriate warnings out earlier. But you know we're going to lose people despite all the warnings and evac orders."

East Coast weather forecasters had been talking about Hurricane Cole for almost a week, their concerns becoming more strident as the storm approached. It was early in the season for a storm of this ferocity, but the talking heads were already discussing the impact of climate change on extreme weather events. A particularly warm Caribbean Sea and its evaporating water helped produce the dense cloud system that spun into a tropical storm before forming a hurricane. At first, they were hoping the storm would do what nineteen out of twenty Atlantic hurricanes do—curve east and burn out over the Atlantic. However, the usual high-pressure system over Bermuda that blocks and turns those storms hadn't materialized, and the hurricane had hugged the U.S. coast, running parallel up the Eastern Seaboard following the warm Gulf Stream. Then a blocking high over Greenland paired with an undulating jet stream over the continental United States and Canada drove the storm westward, where it rolled over the barrier islands of North Carolina and onto land.

The governors of North and South Carolina and Virginia had given evacuation orders for communities on the coast, but, as always, some inhabitants refused to leave their homes, preferring to take their chances with Mother Nature rather than risk all their worldly possessions to looters taking advantage of a natural disaster. Those who'd opted to stay had been warned that, after a certain point, they were on their own. Emergency services couldn't risk the lives of first responders coming to rescue them if they got into trouble because of their decision to stay.

And yet, they remained.

Those were the people Meg and her teammates would



be sent in to locate and rescue once the storm passed. Or, more likely, recover, because by that time, for many, it would be too late. Meg studied Hawk, who looked up at her with bright eyes full of love and loyalty. “I think the body count is going to be pretty high, and you know how hard that kind of search is on the dogs. I have a bad feeling about this whole deployment.”

“They think Virginia Beach will be hit that hard?”

“As long as I lived and served in Richmond, I’ve only been to Virginia Beach that one time with you and Mom and Dad when we were teenagers, so I don’t know that much about it and my visual memory is filtered through the eyes of a teenager. I can tell you what the beaches and the snack shacks looked like; I couldn’t tell you about population density, elevation, and emergency services strength or normal response times. But Craig says it’s been considered a hurricane risk for a long time. All that low-lying beachfront with no protective barrier islands and nearly forty thousand people living in a floodplain at sea level, within a quarter mile of the water’s edge. Hurricane landfall is not their problem. It’s being on the side of the counterclockwise rotation of the storm. Landfall gets the eye, but that side of the storm, north and east of the eye, gets gale force winds forcing a wall of water up onto land as the ocean floor slants upward and it has nowhere else to go. They think the storm surge is going to be comparable to Hurricane Sandy.”

“From what they were just saying on TV, it’s the worst of all possible scenarios, high tide during a new moon, which makes it higher, massive waves and then the storm surge on top of that—that’s called the storm tide—all piling onto land with sustained winds near one hundred miles per hour. It’s downgraded from a Category Three storm, but even making landfall at Category Two, the storm tide could be thirty or forty feet high.”

Meg's hand stilled on Hawk's back. "A three-story wall of water. I can't imagine the terror of that coming right for you."

"It wouldn't be if they left." Cara's voice had an unforgiving edge. "Okay, maybe if you're an adult you can make that choice for yourself and if you choose wrong, you'll pay the price. So be it. But people keep their kids and pets with them. Protecting your stuff is a stupid reason to die. They're things; they can be replaced. The life of a child, or pet, can't."

"I agree one hundred percent. It'll probably be at about one hundred and fifty percent by tomorrow when I'm in the middle of the recovery. But—" She cut off when her cell phone rang. "Hold on. I have to get this. It could be Craig with updated instructions." She picked up her phone and scanned the name on the display. "Not Craig. It's Todd." She accepted the call. "Hey."

"Hey. Have you gotten your orders yet?"

"Yes. We're bugging out early tomorrow for Virginia Beach. They want us there for first light, but not before. We need to let the storm pass, and we're going to need light for searching because I'm sure the power will be out by then. Probably is now, in fact. Cara and I are just watching landfall on TV."

"I'm hearing that power is already out. So . . . can I hitch a ride with you?"

"To Virginia Beach? It's not a great time for a vacation, not there anyway."

Webb laughed. "Not for a vacation, for work. I've been deployed out to the Virginia Beach and Norfolk area for mutual aid."

"Mutual aid?"

"It's the agreement DCFEMS has with Virginia and Maryland. When we need help, they come to us. When they need help, we go to them. No questions asked. Right

now, that whole area is short on EMS personnel due to budget cuts.”

“And since you’re dual-trained as a firefighter and a paramedic, you’re the perfect person to go.”

“Exactly. They’ve got equipment, but they’re lacking in trained personnel. They’re sending a bunch of us, but if I can hitch a ride with you, it’ll keep my truck off roads that will already be flooded and clogged with debris and rescue vehicles. You need your vehicle because it’s got Hawk’s special traveling compartment, but have you got room for another passenger and the gear I need to take with me?”

“Sure. And I’d love the company on the way in. I need to start early though. Probably about three thirty?”

“Works for me. Time for us both to get a few hours of shut-eye. See you about three fifteen.”

Meg said good night and hung up.

“Todd’s going too?” Cara asked.

“Yes. It sounds like DCFEMS is sending a group of them in, but we’re going to carpool to the coast.”

“Makes sense.” Cara laid a hand on her sister’s arm. “You be careful. You *and* Hawk. I know you’re a pro at this, but some of these searches can be pretty treacherous. Structures will be unstable, and flooding will be a constant problem.”

“Of course I will.” Meg gave her a pointed look. “And I don’t want you sitting at home here, you and the dogs, fretting about the lot of us. We’ll all stay safe.”

Cara reached over, picked up the remote and turned off the TV. “I know. It’s probably just listening to these news reports about the storm. It’s making me twitchy.”

“I promise to stay in touch as much as I can. Both power and communication could be iffy, so don’t panic if it’s radio silence for a while.” Meg stood and gave Hawk the hand signal to come. “Now I have to finish packing, then grab a few hours of sleep.”

“Get me up before you go. I want to see you off.”

“You sure? It’s going to be way early.”

“I can go back to bed after you’re gone. Get me up.”

“You got it.”

Meg cast one last look at the dark TV screen, but the images were imprinted on her brain. Hundreds of people had died during Hurricane Sandy, and almost two thousand from Katrina. Time would reveal what the impact of Hurricane Cole would be.

*Bring home the ones you can.*

Craig’s words to her just before she stepped through the doors following the bombing at the James L. Whitten Building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., echoed in her brain. They had a job to do: Whether living or dead, they would bring the victims home.