

Chapter 1

Tracking Canine: A search dog that will follow the ground scent of a person who has passed through an area where the dog is searching.

Tuesday, April 11, 8:02 AM
Monocacy National Battlefield
Monocacy, Maryland

The world whipped by in a blur of color. The nearly translucent green of new spring lined the path. Sunlight trickled through the canopy, dappling the barely visible path beneath her pounding feet, while bursts of blue and pink flowers spotted the underbrush. To her right, the Monocacy River shimmered in the sun, water tumbling over shallow rapids as it ran toward the Potomac.

Megan Jennings ignored the water squelching noisily in her soggy hiking boots and focused instead on the black Labrador running ahead. Hawk ran with his nose skimming the ground, his thick tail held stiff and high. The chase was on, and he was in his element. Pausing briefly, he pushed through the broken underbrush, following a path that meandered through the trees, a path that nearly wasn't, unless you knew what to look for.

They were looking for a killer.

Meg swallowed hard, thinking of the body she'd left behind only minutes before with the crime scene techs. Par-

tially buried in the soft river mud, the girl had been young, maybe only thirteen or fourteen. All fair hair and gangly limbs, still with that layer of baby fat all teenage girls swear they'll never lose, but often do in a rush of maturity that leaves them with curves in all the right places. Sadly, this girl would never reach that age.

Cases involving children were the worst. In all her time doing scent identification and tracking, it was the children—missing, or worse, dead—that tore at Meg the most. All that promise, cut brutally short; a life gone in an instant of misadventure or cruelty.

Her gaze flicked across the wide expanse of the Monocacy. About a hundred feet upstream, the navy of Brian's standard-issue FBI windbreaker was barely visible through the trees where he jogged behind his German shepherd, Lacey.

The call to the FBI K-9 unit had come at just the right time, Meg reflected. In fact, it was only the day before that Brian had perched on the corner of her desk while she was finalizing the report from her last case. Playing with anything he could lay hands on and generally interrupting her concentration, he'd complained for ten solid minutes that Lacey was bored. She cast a glance once again across the river at Brian's bobbing head. Lacey wasn't bored. *He* was bored. More than that, he needed a fix. Search and rescue was their addiction, and saving lives their drug of choice. She understood his pain—she also wanted to be out there. Besides, when cases followed in quick succession, it kept the dogs on their game.

So when a body was discovered on federal land by a predawn dog walker, both teams had been raring to go. Not their case of choice—no life would be saved here—but a part of their job. The body's location away from any convenient place to park a car, paired with faint boot prints leading into and away from the scene, gave the investigating agents hope that the killer had come and gone on foot, a

perfect scenario for overland tracking. Lacey and Hawk were trained search and rescue dogs, but excelled equally at the kind of scent work required to track both criminal suspects and lost innocents.

The dogs executed a spiral search originating at the center of the scene before locating the outbound scent trail. Meg and Brian unleashed their dogs and the animals didn't hesitate. To their surprise, Lacey immediately trotted east down the wide dirt path hugging the river's edge, while Hawk headed toward the muddy bank. Without pausing, he plunged into the rocky rapids separating the south bank from the diminutive island that obstructed most of the channel under the I-270 bridge. Meg met Brian's eyes briefly before jumping knee deep into the water after her dog. They knew exactly what this meant: either they had two suspects on their hands who had fled in different directions, or a single perp had returned using a different path to revisit his kill.

The frigid spring water was a shock to Meg's system, and the murky, rocky bottom was treacherous underfoot, but she gamely waded after her dog. Hawk nimbly sprang forward, a water dog naturally at home in his surroundings. He scrambled onto the opposite shore, stopping briefly for an enthusiastic shake.

Meg raised a hand to shield her face from flying droplets as she clambered out onto dry land. She only had a few seconds to catch her breath, lost during the icy plunge, before Hawk had the scent and was off.

They'd followed the scent ever since, hugging the riverbank. But now Hawk abruptly stopped, giving his characteristic whine indicating he'd lost the trail. Meg jogged up behind him, hanging back a few feet to give him room to work. "Hawk, find it," she encouraged. "Find it."

Huge soulful brown eyes gazed up at her—a bond reestablished, a purpose cemented—then he started rooting through

the underbrush surrounding a towering white sycamore, its tiny yellowish-green flowers draping in delicate chains through young leaves. Suddenly his body stiffened as he focused on an area to the left of the path, leading away from the river. Meg balanced on the balls of her feet. She knew this moment: this was when Hawk would take off in a leap of renewed energy on a fresh path and she'd have to strain to keep up.

As expected, Hawk bounded straight up the hill, tearing into a newly plowed field. Loose dirt slipping beneath her hiking boots, Meg glanced at the white, two-story farmhouse to her left, sending up a silent apology to the absent worker who was in the midst of planting this year's crop, only to have a woman and her dog jogging through his freshly tilled soil. She had visited this local battlefield with family previously, so she identified the farmhouse: the Best Farm, overrun by Union and Confederate soldiers alike on July 9, 1864. She and Hawk were ruining the efforts of some National Park Service employee who worked the land to re-create the look of that one-hundred-fifty-year-old tragedy.

Hawk made a beeline toward the 14th New Jersey Monument, gathered himself, and then sailed over the low rail fence separating the memorial from the plowed field. "Hawk, wait!" The dog froze and glanced back at his handler. Meg scrambled over the fence and jumped down onto neatly clipped green grass. "Good boy. Free. Find it!" Hawk darted across the lawn toward a stand of trees on the far side.

Shielding her eyes, Meg glanced up at the memorial. Wearing the traditional slouched kepi hat and full Union blues, the soldier atop the tall squared column leaned casually on the stock of his rifle while his free hand dug into the pouch on his right hip. The soldier's presence reminded

Meg that the victim at the riverbank wasn't the only person to have met a bloody end on this land.

Hawk was gaining speed now, as if the scent was stronger, allowing him the luxury of a faster pace without losing the trail. Her heart pounding, Meg paced herself, thankful those very painful jogging sessions with her dog at 5 AM were paying off. It was inhumane to jog before the sun came up and, more importantly, before she'd had at least two coffees. But, because of the habit, she and Hawk were fit and ready to take on any terrain for any length of time.

The radio at her belt crackled and Brian's voice broke through a haze of static. "Meg, we've just gone under the Urbana Pike and are still heading east. I've lost visual; what's your location?"

Meg tugged the radio off her belt as she and Hawk slipped into the cool shade of a stand of trees. "We're north of you, almost at the pike ourselves." She paused to drag air into her oxygen-starved lungs. "Looks like we're headed for the railroad track and the junction. Will keep you apprised."

"Roger that. Same here." A final click and the radio went silent.

Hawk scabbled over the loose rocks lining the incline leading up to the sun-swept rail line. "Hawk, wait." Meg clipped her radio back onto her belt and studied the train tracks. The shiny metal of the rails told her this line was still in use. They could proceed but it had to be with caution. "Hawk, slow. Find it, but slow."

Hawk didn't try to cross the rails; instead, he hugged the edge of the track bed at a healthy distance from danger. Almost immediately, the track split at a switch, forking in different directions, but Hawk continued along the right-hand spur, heading south again. This was the Mono-

cacy rail junction, one of the reasons the Confederate Army had wanted to seize the town—he who commanded the rail lines in that war held the upper hand.

In less than a minute, as they followed the curving track to the right, their next challenge came into view. “Oh, hell. Hawk, stop.” The dog halted, but restlessly shifted his weight from paw to paw. He whined and looked up at Meg. She reached down and stroked his silky fur. “I know, bub, I know. He went that way. But give me a second here.”

Ahead of them was the single-track trestle traversing the Monocacy River. Not a difficult crossing, unless a train came while they were stranded far above the water. Then there would be nowhere to go but straight down. Way, way down. This early in spring, the banks were near to overflowing and the river was a rushing torrent; if the fall didn’t kill them, drowning would be a very real possibility.

She pulled the radio off her belt. “Brian, we have a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Brian’s words came hard through gasping breaths. He and Lacey were still on the move.

“The trail is leading us back to your side, but over the train trestle.”

“Is it safe?”

“As long as we don’t meet a train.” She glanced back up the track. The fork Hawk had not taken stretched beyond them to the north, but the track they’d followed from the west disappeared from view into the trees. South of them, the track curved away into the forest. “I can’t see the far side of the river. Hear any trains coming?”

“Lacey, stop.” For a moment, all Meg could hear was Brian’s labored breathing. “I don’t hear anything. If I do, I’ll warn you. And I’ll call in our location to the railroad to tell them we’re on the tracks.”

“Okay. We’re on our way; let me know if you hear anything. I bet we’ll be over and clear before you even hear

back.” She eyed the narrow expanse of track. “But if there is a train, or if you don’t hear from me inside of ten minutes, have a team scour the riverbanks downstream. In case we went over.”

“Are you sure about this? I know how you feel about heights.”

A vision of the young girl filled her mind—waxy skin, clouded, staring eyes, and brutally torn flesh. Meg owed it to that girl to give her best. Their best. She set her jaw. “Oh yeah, I know. Doesn’t matter. We need to keep going. I’ll contact you after we cross. Meg out.”

“Good luck.”

She cut contact. “Gonna need it,” she mumbled.

One more quick look in both directions, one more moment of stillness with only the sounds of her dog panting and her own heavy breathing filling her ears. It was now or never. “Let’s go, Hawk. Slow.” There would be time to find the trail again on the far side; for now what mattered was getting across.

Hawk went first, picking his way carefully along the west side of the trestle where the offset track allowed extra room to walk. Meg was very conscious that while there was enough room to exit a disabled locomotive, were a train to speed by, the vortex of air produced would knock them from the narrow span and send them spinning into the abyss below.

A series of railroad ties over a steel base and stone pilings spanned the bridge, but the gap between the ties was easily five to six inches. Through the empty space, water rushed by forty feet below at dizzying speed. It was mesmerizing, that tumbling, swirling water, enough to make Meg’s head swim. So far below. So very, very far . . .

With effort, Meg forced her gaze up toward the thick trees on the far bank. *You know the deal: you ignore the fact that heights freak you the hell out, and you get to*

enjoy a lovely walk on a rickety old bridge. She took a deep breath and eased forward, placing her feet carefully to navigate the gaps. *Eyes ahead. Just think of it as a nice walk over the boards of the back porch.* She focused on Hawk and let his swaying back end guide her. Ten feet. Fifteen. *Doing great.*

Ahead, Hawk's paw slid on a creosote-coated railroad tie, still damp and slick from last night's rain, and he stumbled, all four feet scrabbling for purchase. Meg's fear of heights vaporized. She lunged forward to help him, but tripped over the raised edge of an uneven railroad tie. She landed hard on her knees and one hand, the other hand shooting through the gap between the ties and scraping a layer of skin off the inside of her wrist when the sleeve of her FBI windbreaker snagged on the upper surface of the wood. "Jesus Christ, Meg," she admonished, grasping her aching wrist. "Pay. Attention."

Two sounds struck at once—the piercing screech of the train whistle from the far side of the bridge and Brian's frantic voice bursting from her radio. "Meg! Meg! Train headed right for you. Get off the track!"

Her head snapped toward the sound of the whistle as her heart stuttered. No train yet—it was still buried in the trees—but the faint chug of the engine was swiftly growing louder. A frantic glance backward showed the north bank was closer to her, but Hawk had progressed enough that the south bank was closer to him. She lunged to her feet and started to run toward him. Right for the train. "Talon, go. *Go!*"

Years of training that demanded instant and unquestioning obedience in response to his "don't mess with me" name on top of an instinctive reaction to the panic lacing Meg's voice had Hawk bolting along the trestle, somehow keeping his feet firmly beneath him. Breath sawing, Meg

pelted after him. One hundred feet. Adrenaline flooded her veins, making her feet fly. Her ears roared with the sound of her own raging blood. Eighty feet to go.

The whistle blew again. The grind of wheels against the rails sliced the air. Sixty feet. The tracks beneath her shook violently. It was nearly upon them.

Forty feet.

The locomotive barreled around the bend, a black monster snaking along the track, followed by tanker cars and loads of lumber. *Death on wheels. And they were headed right for it.*

“Run!” Even though Hawk was pulling away from her, she screamed to spur him on. But as the whistle blasted again and the squeal of wheels grew louder, she wasn’t sure he could hear her.

Twenty feet.

Hawk leapt off the trestle, his lithe body stretching long and graceful as he hurtled into the tall grass on the far bank. Meg put on a final burst of speed, spurred by raw fear, the intense effort ripping a scream of agony from her lips as she dove for safety a second before the engine thundered past. She hit the ground with a cry, air slamming from her lungs. She tumbled over and over, through long grass and thorns and sharp fallen branches until she came to rest on her back, blinking up at the sunlight sifting through the leaves. The trailing cars flew past with a screech of wheels on steel, whipping the tall grasses into a wild frenzy over her head while the ground shuddered beneath her. Her eyes fluttered shut, sudden exhaustion overtaking her.

She was conscious first of Hawk’s whine, then the warm lap of his tongue on her cheek. She slowly became aware of Brian’s bellows through the radio. “Meg! Meg, are you all right?”

She reached for her dog, burying her face in the softness

of his fur and glorying in the heavy beat of her heart nearly banging through her rib cage. She was still alive, and so was Hawk. But it had been close. Too close.

She fumbled at her radio. With a groan, she pulled it off her belt, still feeling the imprint of the case in her bruised skin. “Meg—” Her voice was a raspy croak, so she cleared her throat and tried again. “Meg here.”

“Oh, thank God. You scared the life out of me.”

“I scared it out of me too. That was *way* too close. Like fractions of a second too close.” She pushed up on her elbow to see Hawk already searching the area. He gave a sharp bark and looked back toward her. She could practically hear his thoughts: *Come on, already. What are you waiting for?* “Hawk’s got the scent again and is ready to rock ’n’ roll.” The last car whizzed by, the rhythmic clacking of wheels on the track fading. “And we’re clear.”

“You up to finishing this?”

Meg rolled to her knees. Bracing one foot on the trampled grass, she lurched upright to stand, swaying for a second while she got her bearings. “Affirmative. We’re on the move again. Meg out.”

Pulling the hair tie from her now lopsided ponytail, she gathered up the long, dark strands with an experienced hand, tying them back once again. “Okay, Hawk. Find it.”

Meg tried not to wince as she ordered her battered body to follow Hawk across the now empty track to reenter the forest. After a few minutes’ jog over a faint path, she stopped at the tree line, squinting in the morning sunlight. On the far side of the wide clearing, a brick bungalow nestled into a clump of pines. A late model sedan sat in the driveway.

To her right, Brian and Lacey broke through the trees halfway around the clearing, Lacey bounding over some low scrub and Brian stumbling through with considerably less grace. He quickly took in the house and grounds.

Meg pulled the leash from her pocket, snapping it on Hawk's vest. They melted back into the trees, Brian following her lead to meet just inside the tree line.

"Two separate paths leading back to the same place," Meg said. "What do you think the chances are that this isn't the perp?"

"Exceedingly small." Brian squinted through the trees. "Car's in the driveway. No guarantee, of course, but the perp could be home. We need to see if there's a back door. Then we need backup. Don't know if anyone is armed in there and we can't risk the dogs."

"No way, no how." Meg unholstered her Glock 19, grateful for the FBI's requirement that the Human Scent Evidence Teams carry firearms in case of danger from a suspect while out tracking. She indicated the rear of the house. "Let's check it out."

Brian palmed his own gun and led the way, Lacey trotting at his heels. Staying deep inside the tree line, they circled to the back of the bungalow. They hunkered down behind a clump of leafy bushes to study the residence.

A large picture window framed with yellow gingham curtains looked out into a backyard scattered with children's toys. Smaller, bedroom-style windows dotted one end of the house, while wide, sliding glass doors led out to a concrete patio on the other end.

"Kids." Meg frowned at the toddler toys. "Young enough to be home at this time of day too. We definitely need backup. This can't go south with children around." She holstered her weapon and pulled out her cell phone to call for additional agents, outlining the location based on their current GPS coordinates and trail activity.

Meg pulled a compact pair of binoculars out of a jacket pocket. She scanned the back of the house, moving from the kitchen window to the glass doors. She was just about to scan back when a movement caught her eye. "Wait."

“See something?” Brian leaned in closer, as if he could look through the lenses with her.

Meg squinted in silence. *Come on, come on . . .* Then she spotted it again. “Yes! There’s a guy sitting in an armchair on the far side of the couch. Maybe watching TV.” She dropped the glasses. “Let’s split up. I’ll go back toward the road, intercept the incoming agents. You stay here and keep an eye on our guy. Make sure he doesn’t rabbit out the back.” She handed him the binoculars. “Let me know the second he moves.”

“Will do.” Brian took the glasses and settled onto his knees. He located and focused on their target. “Got him. Go.”

“Hawk, come.” Hawk shot to his feet, matching his pace to hers exactly as they slipped through the forest like shadows. Shadows intent on catching a killer.

Chapter 2

Overhead Team: A highly trained, quick response search and rescue management team that can respond to assist with search planning, coordination, and operations. The overhead team usually consists of a search manager and one or two assistants.

Tuesday, April 11, 3:06 PM
Jennings residence
Arlington, Virginia

“**W**hen he opened the door and saw the agents, you could see it in his eyes. He wasn’t going to let himself get caught.” Meg took a sip of coffee and sighed in contentment, sinking back into her favorite old recliner. It had been a long day, from the early chase, through the arrest, to reams of follow-up paperwork, and finally to coming home to clean up her dog, who still wore the muddy remnants of a plunge into the creek followed by a sprint through a freshly plowed field.

“Did the guy try to make a break for it?” Meg’s sister Cara sat across from her, squeezed into one corner of the couch by a sprawled red brindle greyhound lying on his back against the cushions, all four feet in the air. The dog twitched in his sleep, one clawed foot raking lightly down Cara’s bare arm. She rolled her eyes and gave the dog a gentle push. “Blink, for heaven’s sake, stop poking at me.”

Meg grinned at her younger sister. Separated by only eighteen months, the girls were often mistaken for twins with their towering height—nearly six feet was tall for a woman—athletic builds, ice-blue eyes, and long, straight black hair, a genetic gift from their paternal Irish grandmother. “You love him, and you know it.”

Cara rubbed one hand over the deeply concave belly and the dog instantly quieted under her touch. “Big, dumb lug. Of course I love him.” The blue pit bull, curled over her feet to spill onto the carpet, raised her square head. Cara scratched her behind her ears. “You too, Saki. Don’t be jealous.” Saki settled back down with a loud, breezy sigh.

Meg’s gaze dropped to Hawk, fast asleep on his dog bed beside her chair, and then skipped up to her sister. It was moments like this that reminded her how lucky she was.

A year earlier, realistic in the face of skyrocketing housing prices in the Washington, DC, area, Cara had suggested they pool their resources and buy a house together in Arlington. Meg agreed and the arrangement had worked out perfectly for both of them ever since.

Their location put Meg fifteen minutes away from both her office at the Hoover Building in downtown DC, and just as important, Ronald Reagan National Airport for when she and Hawk were assigned out-of-town cases. However, the convenient location was only one positive aspect of their living together.

Raised by crusading parents who worked tirelessly at their central Virginia animal rescue and who never met a stray not worth saving, the sisters grew up with dogs as an integral part of their lives. Meg and Cara adopted animals from the rescue with an eye to turning them into working dogs. While between jobs, Meg had rescued Hawk as an abandoned and sickly puppy, nursed him back to health, and then trained him into a top-notch search and rescue canine. Gentle Saki was a runt found by the side of a road,

the entire litter discarded by a backyard breeder because of birth defects and disease. She was now a certified therapy dog, enchanting both young and old with her mesmerizing blue eyes, cleft lip, and affectionate disposition. From AIDS hospice patients to the elderly, few could resist her charms, and nothing made Saki happier than curling up on a bed or couch with someone who badly needed her company. Their third dog, Blink, was a retired racing dog. Not a good candidate as a working dog—to say Blink was both dim and neurotic was a huge understatement—he was a companion to both dogs and never happier than when they all slept together in a tangled pile.

Once they settled in Arlington, Cara took the leap and fulfilled a lifelong dream of establishing an obedience and training school. She rented space in a strip mall a dozen blocks from home and set up both an indoor training area and an outdoor agility range for training during good weather. She'd already graduated half a dozen classes and word of mouth was making her quite popular among the DC set who wanted a well-behaved dog to show off to colleagues and friends.

Cara picked up the crossword puzzle book previously abandoned on the end table and started absently flipping through it, skipping over page after page of puzzles completely filled with blue ink.

“Don't tell me you've finished another one.” Meg shook her head, bemused at her sister's ability for word games.

“These are all too easy. I need a better challenge.” Cara tossed the book carelessly back onto the table and picked up her coffee instead. “So finish your story. Did the guy run?”

“He tried. Took off through the house for the back door, probably heading toward the battlefield again, since he seems to consider that a safe zone.”

“Safe enough to drop the bodies of innocent girls . . .” Cara muttered.

“He got the surprise of his life when he reached the patio door to find another three agents standing there, guns drawn, waiting for him.” Meg’s smile was nearly feral, but then the mental picture of a broken child bloomed and her glee in the takedown faded. “His terrified kids and wife were home at the time. We tried to make it easy on them, but he refused to go down without a fight.”

“He murdered a young girl but had kids of his own? Could you tell if he’d ever hurt them?”

“Too early to say, but they were young. The oldest was probably no more than four. I think his preferences ran a little older than that.” Meg spit out words that left her with a bad taste in her mouth.

“But not much.”

“No, not much. They might have been in real danger in a few years. What was brutally clear was the wife had no idea what he’d been doing in his spare time. There’s no doubt Hawk and Lacey were right on the money. We found trophies of his kills tucked into a drawer in the bedroom. And not just from today’s victim. There were indications of male victims too, so there may be some additional cases we’ll be able to close from this.”

“Guess this guy won’t be getting out for a while.”

“If ever. No judge is going to grant bail because he’s a genuine flight risk. And it’s going to be a slam dunk for the jury with what we have.” She ran her fingers lightly over Hawk’s back. He was so deeply asleep he didn’t even twitch. “The dogs did a great job. There wasn’t any other obvious evidence at the scene to link to the perp. We might have gotten DNA evidence downstream, but without the dogs we wouldn’t have found him so quickly. And who knows who else might have died in the meantime.”

Cara raised her cup in a toast. “You guys rocked it. Now that you’re home—”

Meg’s cell phone rang and she leaned forward to pick it

up off the coffee table. “Sorry, give me a sec. . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“What?” Cara set down her cup and shifted forward on the couch.

Meg stared at the caller ID on her phone: Supervisory Special Agent Craig Beaumont, her section chief at the Bureau. “It’s Craig. Why would he call? He knows we’ve already put in a full day.”

“Maybe you missed something in your three hundred pages of paperwork.” Cara looked pointedly at the phone in Meg’s hand. “Only one way to find out.”

Meg answered the call. “Jennings.”

“Meg, I need you to come back in.” Craig’s normally calm voice barked in her ear, his words unusually accentuated.

“Craig, we’ve just gotten off shift. Hawk is finally resting. Do you need the on-call list? I think—”

“I know who’s on call. And I know you’ve just closed the Monocacy case, but I need you and Hawk. *Now.*”

The emphasis made Meg’s blood run cold. She met her sister’s eyes, seeing the question there. “What happened?”

“A bomb went off in the Department of Agriculture building. The courtyard in the middle of the north building appears to be the epicenter of the blast. It’s the middle of the workday, so the building was full. To make matters worse, although it’s not a public building, some rural school board from Virginia made special arrangements for its students to tour the facility and they were inside at the time.” Craig ignored Meg’s gasp of shock and continued. “I don’t know how many are dead or injured, but part of the building collapsed and we have people trapped. Lauren and Rocco are still in New York City, Pat and Sadie are in Washington State with that landslide, and we lent Scott and Theo to the Louisiana Department of Corrections while they’re trying to track down that escaped con-

vict. Metropolitan PD are sending in all available K-9 units, but you know that unit is mostly tracking and detection dogs, not search and rescue. They need your skills and we're here to respond quickly. I called Brian; he and Lacey were on their way to Vermont. They've turned around and will be back in three or four hours, but I need another team now."

It was the truth of their relatively new and still fairly small unit—sometimes it was nearly impossible to rotate off shift depending on circumstances and existing national deployments. "It's okay. We're available for however long you need us."

Cara got to her feet and headed for the mudroom where Meg kept her K-9 gear. The sounds of her collecting equipment filtered into the family room.

"Thanks." Craig paused, the tension over the line growing as he seemed to be at a loss for words. "Meg . . ."

"Yes."

"I'm seeing early reports already." He cleared his throat roughly. "It's bad. Really bad. So hurry. And just . . . be prepared. I know you're no newbie, but . . ."

Dread curdled in Meg's stomach, all contentment and relaxation dissolving as if an intangible mist. "We're on our way."

Chapter 3

Mutual Aid Search: A large-scale search that cannot be handled by just one organization.

Tuesday, April 11, 4:17 PM
Washington, DC

The roadblocks were set up further out than Meg expected. In the distance, beyond the newly leafed trees, smoke was rising, black and sluggish, over the National Mall—a sign of what lay ahead.

DC cops were out in full force on the 14th Street Bridge, diverting all traffic away from Route 1, which led straight into the downtown core. Instead, they directed cars onto the Southwest Freeway toward the NASA building. Pulling onto the left shoulder, Meg glanced at Hawk through the mesh of the enclosure that replaced the backseat in her SUV. Dark eyes watched her steadily. “Hang on, buddy. I’ll be right back.”

She got out of the car, pulling her FBI identification out of her pocket when one of the DC cops moved to block her path. She opened her flip case and extended it. “Meg Jennings, FBI, Forensic Canine Unit. I’m under orders to proceed to the site of the explosion.” She jerked a thumb toward her SUV. “I need to get my dog in there ASAP for search and rescue.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The officer turned and motioned to one of the other cops. “FBI search and rescue. Help her get through.”

With a nod of thanks, Meg jogged back to the car. Within minutes, they were speeding along the deserted Route 1, the police car in front running with full lights and siren. Meg drove with her window down, the strong odors of sulfur and burnt plastic already permeating the vehicle, even from this distance. The smell was strong enough she could taste its bitterness, but she didn’t close the window. This was only the beginning of getting them both ready to face the task at hand.

Just past the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the road was clogged with emergency vehicles, so they shot down C Street to 12th and then onto Jefferson. The cop pulled over to the side of the road just past the Freer Gallery. He pushed out of his car and strode over to her as she climbed out of the SUV. “This is as close as I can get you.” His gaze drifted to the west toward Jefferson Drive SW and the front of the building where firefighters ran inside, coiled hoses tossed over shoulders. “Good luck in there.”

“Thanks.” Opening the rear door of the SUV, she found Hawk crouched at the entrance. “Hawk, out.” He leaped down with ease, and stood still and quiet at her feet while she snapped on his leash. Once they were on site, she’d let him run free with no risk of catching the lead on anything that could trap or hang him. But while they were about to enter the chaos of emergency vehicles, shouting first responders, and the power struggle of who was in charge, she needed to keep a hold on him. From the back hatch of the SUV, she grabbed her backpack, already filled with everything they might need—bottled water, a collapsible bowl, a first aid kit, dog shoes, a spare radio, and a selection of tools. She was already dressed for the location in her navy FBI coveralls and sturdy steel-toed boots. Tuck-

ing her hard hat and heavy leather gloves under her arm, she slammed the hatch. They took off at a light jog down Jefferson Drive SW.

To outsiders, rescue efforts at disaster sites always looked like chaos run amok. But to the experienced, there was order and hierarchy in the chaos. Even while weaving through fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances, Meg tried to locate the emergency operations center. She found it set up at the edge of the Mall, across the street from the Whitten Building. The District of Columbia Emergency Management Agency must have made it across the Potomac from their home base in the Barry Farm neighborhood in less time than the crow flies. Sturdy, portable tables were set up under the shade trees, with large building maps spread wide over them and men and women huddled around in groups. Meg spotted Craig, with his dark hair and craggy face, in his FBI windbreaker speaking to one of the local district fire chiefs. She headed toward him.

Craig glanced up from the map, relief fractionally relaxing the deep lines of concern around his eyes. “Good, you’re here. Chief Campbell, this is Meg Jennings and Hawk, one of the search and rescue teams in the Forensic Canine Unit.”

They shook hands. “What’s the status?” Meg asked. “Can we get in right away?”

“Fire’s extinguished.” Chief Campbell studied the building from under the rim of his battered white helmet. “The blast took out some of the sprinkler systems in the building, allowing the fire to take hold, but we have it under control now.”

“Is the building evacuated?”

“Of anyone who can walk. We got a dozen or more out while we extinguished the fire, but we know there are more inside. We’ve had cell phone calls from people trapped here”—he tapped a spot on the first-floor map with a heavy,

gloved finger—“and here on the second floor. And no one has been able to reach the secretary of Agriculture.”

“You know for sure he was inside the building?” Craig asked.

“He was. And the president knows it too. His chief of staff is breathing down Emergency Response’s neck right now, looking for answers.”

“Because if the secretary is dead, it’s more important to the president than a bunch of dead kids?” The words slipped out before Meg could stop them, but one look at the furrow deepening Craig’s brow told her she’d gone too far. She held up a hand to stave off a well-deserved rebuke. “And that wasn’t fair. Sorry. I hate cases with kids. They never bring out the best in me. Do we know what happened here?”

“We’ve had reports of a drone flying over the Mall. Several people saw it go up over the Whitten Building ten or fifteen seconds before the explosion.”

“A drone?” Turning, Meg considered the Washington Monument, the top of which speared majestically into the blue sky above the trees of the Mall. “Those things aren’t legal inside DC’s no-fly zone. Why the hell wasn’t it taken down?”

“There are snipers on the roof of the White House, but they’re not stationed out here on the Mall. Even if it was reported, there’d be no time to stop it. Not that most people would assume it was dangerous. They’d think it was just a stunt or someone shooting video footage.”

Meg glanced toward the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles clustered around the Whitten Building. “Couldn’t be farther from the truth. The drone delivered a bomb?”

“No one got that good a look at it, but that’s our current theory,” Campbell said. He outlined a wide rectangle on the map’s ground floor. “This ground floor courtyard is surrounded by a balcony on the second floor. Overhead is

a huge skylight, and the third to fifth floors of the building encircle the courtyard outside the skylight. We think the drone flew in from the top of the courtyard and either landed on the skylight or hovered just above it. When the bomb detonated, it shattered the skylight, brought down most of the balcony, and took out the offices lining the courtyard. It was damned ingenious. Central delivery for the most damage possible. The outside walls of the Whitten Building are solid white marble, but that inner courtyard was never meant to be seen by the public. It was just brick, which doesn't have nearly the same structural integrity. And there were a lot of windows. We're seeing significant glass-related injuries from in the offices surrounding the blast site."

"Deaths?"

Campbell's jaw hardened and he nodded curtly.

Shrugging off her backpack, Meg knelt beside her dog. After a moment of rooting inside the bag, she pulled out four mesh and leather dog boots with sturdy rubber soles. They only used Hawk's boots for the worst of scenes, when he was at greatest risk of injury, and this scene certainly qualified. Hawk lifted one foot at a time, allowing her to easily slip on the boot and Velcro it securely into place. "Where do you need us?" Meg asked, glancing upward.

"The courtyard, where the worst structural damage is. We know some people are trapped there, and we're already going after them."

She pulled her gloves out of her hard hat and jammed it firmly on her head. "What radio channel do you want me on?"

"Twelve."

"Will do." She started to step away, but Craig caught her arm. Her eyes rose questioningly to his.

"The courtyard. We're getting reports that's where some

of the kids were on their tour when the bomb went off. They were on the second-floor balcony or on the courtyard floor when it collapsed. They're fifth graders, Meg. Maybe nine or ten years old. They're going to be hurt and they're going to be scared. Bring home the ones you can."

His message was clear—some of the kids might be dead. If she found any, she was to move on. Concentrate on the living. "Got it." Meg pulled on her gloves and squared her shoulders. As well prepared as she might try to be, she suspected there was no way to prepare for this. "We're going in. Hawk, heel."

Tuesday, April 11, 4:34 PM
Washington, DC

It was like going through the gates of Hell.

The shock wave accompanying the explosion had blown out the glass-paneled front doors. Shards of glass were scattered over the front sidewalk and spilled into the front parking lot, now full of ladder trucks, snaking fire hoses, and lakes of water. Smoke continued to roll through the arched doorways of the three entrances, set deeply into the heavy stone of the ground floor.

Rising majestically to the fifth floor, twelve tower-ing Corinthian columns skimmed the classic Beaux Arts building, framing rows of windows, now shattered, cracked, or opaque with smoke and grime. The deeply etched words DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE were carved above the portico.

Meg unsnapped Hawk's leash, coiled and stuffed it into one of the many pockets in her coveralls. After taking one last big breath of relatively clean air, she stepped through the center door and into a dim foyer leading directly to the center courtyard. In the distance, from deep within the building, came the shouts and reverberating crashes of a

full rescue in progress. "Hawk, with me." Hawk fell into step at her side, stepping around the largest chunks of detritus.

They crossed the foyer, daylight receding as they moved into the building. As in any fire scene, all power to the building was cut, so the only light poured in from outside and was quickly snuffed out in the dark corners of the lobby. This peripheral area of the building wasn't in bad shape, as it was protected from the worst of the centralized blast by the bulk of the structure. Deeper inside, more and more debris littered the ground, hampering their progress. Papers had blown in from surrounding offices, concrete and brick dust coated every surface, and a crumpled wedding photo lay half buried in crushed plaster, one corner missing, as if ripped from its frame before coming to rest here.

The light grew stronger as they approached the courtyard, and then they were standing in the doorway, staring into a war zone. Time wound down to a stop, finally holding motionless as Meg's breath caught in her lungs.

Above their heads, daylight streamed in through the skeleton of the shattered skylight. Originally covering nearly the entire length and breadth of the courtyard as a series of small square panes embedded in larger panels, now only the edges of the skylight still held misshapen fragments of glass. The middle of the span was simply empty air, rent by the tangled steel trusses that once supported the weight of the arched glass. The brickwork of the inner walls had fractured and crumbled to litter the ground, rising in piles toward the outer edges of the courtyard. Sections of balcony still jutted from the wall, mere inches that wouldn't have been enough to prevent a child from dropping into the abyss.

The remains of a Grecian fountain still dominated the center of the room, but the tiered, scalloped bowls had

topped to the floor in shattered fragments. Water leaked from the cracked basins and ran in rivulets over the floor, washing the dust of destruction from shiny marble. Scraps of material, some bright, some charred black and crumbled, littered the floor or mixed with chunks of brick and concrete. In some long-disused portion of her brain, Meg recognized tattered sections of the state flags she'd learned in elementary school.

With a gasping indrawn breath, time abruptly snapped back, marching forward once again. All around were the shouts of the firemen—“*Fire department! Call out!*”—the sounds of power tools, moans of the injured, and weak cries of those still trapped. Meg bent down to meet Hawk's eyes. “Hawk, find them.”

Hawk jumped into action, climbing the piles of rubble, his nose down, every inch beneath his feet sniffed before moving on with agility and sureness. Meg struggled behind him, acrid smoke rising from the wreckage in dark wisps to choke her. The air was filled with a particulate haze that coated the lungs and covered her teeth with grit. She thought of the mask in her pack, the one all first responders were supposed to wear in the post-9/11 era. Then she looked down at Hawk, unprotected in the environment. What was good enough for her dog was good enough for her.

Hawk was only four or five feet up the pile when he gave a whine and suddenly swerved left, pushing his nose frantically against ragged pieces of brick and chunks of plaster. Awkwardly balanced on the pile, he lowered his haunches in a half sit.

Meg clambered up behind him. “Good boy. Let me see.” Grabbing a large chunk, she started lifting pieces out of the way as fast as she could. She nearly shrieked when a hand shot from under a section of wooden flooring to grab her wrist. “Hang on, we have you. Hang on.” Turn-

ing to glance backward, she yelled, "I need some help here."

Two firefighters across the courtyard dropped the hoses they carried and ran toward her. Meg slid backward and watched them make quick work of the debris, carefully extracting a rail-thin boy. He was covered in dust and blood, and cradled his arm against his chest, struggling not to cry as the firefighters did their best not to jostle him.

"Wait." The boy's voice was a rough rasp, but carried enough urgency that the men froze. He reached out with his good arm and lightly grasped Hawk's fur. "What's his name?"

Meg knelt down near the boy. "Hawk."

Hawk, hearing his name, moved closer to the boy, who tipped his head against the dog's neck. Meg only heard the barest thread of his whispered "thank you" before the men carried him away.

Pulling off a glove, Meg ran a hand over Hawk's head. "Good boy, Hawk. Find them." She tugged her glove back on and their search continued.

Over the next hours, they found five more victims—three injured children and two women, one injured, and one dead—a blessing perhaps considering the extent of the burns on her body. One boy was in critical condition. The rescued woman, the children's teacher, was nearly hysterical when they pulled her free, asking about each child by name.

They'd been at it for nearly nine hours when they found a victim close to the west wall, near the World War I Memorial. Hawk alerted as usual, but then gave a frantic whine. The bottom fell out of Meg's exhausted stomach. That kind of audible signal could only mean one thing: Hawk sensed a critical victim. So far they'd been lucky and the only fatalities had been adults, but they all knew the longer

the search went on, the higher the chances of losing a child.

Getting to the victim was not going to be easy. Close to the epicenter of the blast, large portions of structural steel had been ripped away when the balcony collapsed, and the bricks and rubble were trapped under and woven through dense sections of twisted metal.

Meg started digging while simultaneously calling for help. At the sound of heavy boots behind her, she looked up to meet the dark eyes of a firefighter who'd helped her several times already that day. Because they'd crossed paths a few times, she'd taken note of the name on the back of his turnout coat—Webb.

“Let me get in there.” Not unkindly, Webb pushed past her, using his superior strength to lift larger pieces of debris out of the way.

While he worked, Meg shifted back to avoid getting in his way. To her left, part of a marble memorial showed above the tangled steel, brick, and concrete. A navy sailor stood facing an army soldier, each carrying a rifle. Between the two men were listed the names of the dead lost during World War I. A beautiful work of art, carved of stark white marble, a meaningful memorial to those gone before. Now it was defaced with splatters of blood and tiny bits of charred tissue hurled by the force of the blast. The honorable memory of war marred by the dishonorable remnants of a warlike act. She turned back to Webb, unable to look at the memorial any longer.

She frowned, studying Webb's progress. *This is taking too long.* Turning toward the courtyard, Meg glanced around to see if anyone else could lend a hand. Brian and Lacey were taking a very quick break by the fountain, Lacey thirstily lapping water from the collapsible bowl Brian held for her. She finished and Brian stuffed the bowl into his bag. Turning, he caught Meg's eye and gave her a nod before they

climbed the pile against the south wall, Lacey already searching for the next victim.

Across the room, a number of firefighters shored up one of the walls in an attempt to free at least one hidden victim. No one was free; time to lend a hand, whether Webb wanted it or not. A life could be in the balance.

Trying to stay out of his way as he strained to move some of the larger chunks, Meg cleared some of the lighter pieces, constantly checking to see if they could get a visual on the victim. Between their efforts, in only a few minutes, they could look into the framework of metal beneath the rubble, light radiating from the portable rescue spotlights filtering through to illuminate the space below.

Beneath them lay a girl, her huge eyes locked on them. Her face was covered with dust and grime, several tear tracks washing her pale skin clean.

Meg leaned closer. "Sweetheart, we're going to get you out. Are you hurt?"

"My side." The reply was weak and shaky.

"Hold on." Without looking away from the girl, Meg held out a hand to Webb. "Hand me your flashlight." She waited while he pulled a flashlight from one of the pockets in his heavy pants and laid it across her palm. Flipping it on, she shone it down into the gloom, only allowing herself a brief moment to take in the crimson stain spread over the girl's torso and the jagged edge of the metal support beam nearby covered in a dark gleam that could only be blood.

She's watching you. Don't stare or you'll scare her more. She forced her voice to stay steady and to calmly meet the girl's eyes, even as adrenaline rushed like ice through her system. "Hang on, honey. You're doing great. You're going to be fine. Just hang on, we're almost there."

Meg pulled back and turned to Webb, the harsh beam of the flashlight illuminating his face and highlighting the

gold flecks in his brown eyes. “How’s your medical training?” She kept her voice low, so only he could hear her over the ambient noise.

“Great. I’m dual-trained as a firefighter and EMS.” He matched her volume, his eyes narrowing on her face. “Bad?”

She nodded. “I think so.”

Webb took back the flashlight and leaned in. “Hi, honey, my name’s Todd. What’s yours?” His gaze slid from one end of the void to the other, taking in the girl’s condition.

The girl’s weak voice floated up. “Jill.”

“Okay, Jill. We’ve just got to figure a few things out up here, but we’ll have you out real soon.” He turned off the flashlight and pulled back. He caught Meg’s arm, drawing her away from the opening.

“What do you think?” Meg whispered.

“She’s under a lot of debris.” He kept his tone low and even, but the flat press of his lips and his pinched forehead clearly conveyed his concern. “And she’s been sliced pretty badly by that support beam. The question is how deep the laceration goes and whether it’s hit any internal organs.”

“If it has, could she bleed out before we get to her?” Meg’s attention jerked back to the gap at a painful keening from below.

“It’s a possibility.” He pulled his radio off his belt and relayed the situation, then asked for additional men and several pieces of equipment.

Still sitting near the opening, Hawk gave a whine. Meg touched his shoulder. “What’s wrong, boy?”

Hawk pulled away to pace back and forth as well as he could over the uneven surface around the gap.

“What’s wrong with your dog?”

“He’s distressed that she’s hurting. He feels useless and wants to be down there.”

“Could he get there?”

“Could he—” Meg pulled back. Send Hawk down into

the rubble? If he tried, it could be a disaster should he get stuck or the area collapsed. She and Hawk were bonded; if anything happened to him, it would be a devastating blow. To lose a dog through old age or illness was one thing, but to purposely send him to his possible death?

Not again.

Icy cold washed over her at the thought of losing her dog, and her fingers involuntarily rose to touch the necklace she always wore . . . except when working difficult recovery scenes. Her gloved fingertips touched only the flat cloth of her coveralls. In her mind's eye she saw the necklace where she'd left it laid across her jewelry box—a flat glass pendant of electric blue and midnight black, interspersed with twining lines of powdery gray. It was a remembrance necklace, and only her family knew the secret of those lines—they were all she had left of her first K-9, Deuce. A glass artist had taken some of his ashes and made the keepsake for her so she always had a piece of him close.

Deuce. Her first heart dog. Her K-9 partner on the Richmond, Virginia, police force. Fallen in the line of duty, cut down by a bullet during a suspect's desperate bid for escape. Even fatally wounded, Deuce had brought down his man. And then never risen again. She'd known the agony of other officers' deaths while on the job, but losing Deuce had just about killed her. It had certainly driven her off the force and in search of a new career.

Regular people simply didn't understand the bond between a dog and their K-9 handler. She hadn't really even understood it fully herself, thinking that bond could never be repeated. Until Hawk came into her life and set her on her new path. Into search and rescue, into the FBI. And now to think about sending Hawk possibly down to his death? "I don't know. . . ." She trailed off, uncertain.

"He'd probably do her some good. Right now, she's

panicking, elevating her heart rate, and increasing the bleed rate. If he could get in there and calm her down, it might just buy us enough time to get her out alive. We have other dogs on site now. Can you spare the time away from the search to have him concentrate on just one victim?"

"We were supposed to be done an hour ago, so my replacement's already here." Her gaze flicked to Brian and Lacey to her right. "We just kept working anyway. You really think it will make a difference?"

"I think it might save her life."

Meg flipped on the flashlight again, analyzing the narrow path between the metal supports into the gap. She was too big to fit through, but Hawk could make it. She turned to find Hawk's gaze locked on hers, his desire obvious to her in their depths. He needed to be down there. It really wasn't her decision.

"Let's see if he can make it through." She shone the flashlight down into the hole, steadying the hand that wanted to shake with nervous tension at the risk Hawk was taking. She pointed down at the girl with her free hand so there was no mistaking her command. "Hawk, beside."

He didn't need to be told twice. Picking his way into the gap, he snaked his body through the metal trusses and over tumbled piles of brick and concrete.

"Jill? Hawk's coming down to keep you company while we work to get you out."

For the first time, the pale face raised in something akin to hope, a slender shaking hand reaching out to touch fur gray with dust and grit. Hawk settled beside her, tucking his body gently against her uninjured side. Jill wrapped one bloody arm around him and buried her face against his neck.

Meg turned back to Webb. Beyond him, three other firefighters climbed the rubble toward them.

Webb leaned into the hole. "Jill, we're going to have to cut some of the metal to get to you. Keep your face down, okay?" He gave Meg a gentle backward push. "You need to step back now. Let us work."

With a roar, one of the firefighters started a circular saw and began cutting through the metal trusses.

It was slow work as they systematically cut trusses and removed sections from the pile, careful not to weaken the structure around them and further endanger the girl and dog below. Every minute or so, they'd stop and Webb called down into the hole. "Jill, honey, how you holding up?" The first few times, the girl replied, her voice getting weaker and weaker. By the fourth time, only Hawk's whine greeted them.

"Can't you go faster?" Meg asked, sotto voce.

"We're going as fast as we can." Webb's words ground through gritted teeth as he lifted a section of metal beam and heaved it down the pile. "If we rush and cut through one of the support beams, the pile will collapse and they'll both die. And maybe take one of us with them." His face was grim as the saw roared to life again.

Nevertheless, the men worked with an added level of urgency. Time was running out and they all knew it.

"That should do it." A large, African-American firefighter pulled the last section of truss that blocked the way out of the gap. "You'll have to get in there to see what else you'll need."

"Going in." Webb set his helmet off to the side. He threw a last glance at Meg and went head first into the hole, army-crawling down into the pit, flashlight clutched in one hand to light his way. Up above, the other men shone their lights down, watching his progress. Finally at the bottom, he squeezed past Hawk with a murmured, "Good boy. Jill? Jill!" He tossed off his gloves, fingers sliding over her throat,

searching for a pulse. "Pulse is weak and thready, but she's still with us. I need Hawk out of here before I move her; we're too short on space otherwise. Can you call him?"

Meg leaned over the gap. "Hawk, come."

Hawk gently pulled away from the girl. The upward footing was precarious, but he scrambled back up toward Meg and then out onto the pile, carefully avoiding the razor-sharp metal ends left by the saw.

"Here she comes." It was difficult maneuvering in tight quarters, but Webb managed to lift Jill's limp body and pass it up to the ready arms above. Two firefighters hurried as fast as possible to the courtyard floor and then ran for the ambulance waiting at the back door.

Webb hauled himself out, his face coated with grime.

"What do you think?" Meg asked. "Is she going to make it?"

"She's lost a lot of blood, but she's young and strong. They'll be running fluids already. I think she's got a chance as long as she hasn't lacerated her spleen or liver." Turning away, he spat out a mouthful of the stone dust he'd breathed in the pile. "God damn whoever did this. Little kids shouldn't have to live through something like this." He spoke quietly, but every syllable was filled with rage. He gave her a tight-lipped nod, then shouldered his equipment and trudged back down the pile to help the next victim.

Meg's tenuous hold on the emotion that bubbled just below the surface wavered at the vehemence in Webb's tone. Unspeakable fury filled her as her control slipped, fury at the person or persons who did this, fury at a God who would put children and adults in the path of such madmen. Fury that because of someone's selfish actions, once again her own dog was in jeopardy. Red hazed the edges of her vision and her hands balled into fists, short nails biting into her palms. She wanted to hurt the person who had

done this. No, hurt was too gentle, too mild for the type of person who would harm the young and kill the inconsequential. She wanted to rip him limb from limb, and watch him suffer like his victims.

Hawk's low whine brought her back to the present. Back to sanity. Back to the world of those who helped, and who saved when they could. That was her world. Retribution and punishment were not her job. She was about life. True, part of life was death. There were always those they couldn't save, but knowing that, experiencing it time and again, never made it any easier.

There was more to do. Time was ticking since the blast, and the longer victims were lost, the less chance there was of saving them. Craig had told her more than an hour ago to go home, but she needed to be here. Needed to find the missing.

Focus on the ones you haven't found yet. They're depending on you.

Meg pushed purposefully to her feet. "Hawk, find them."

He immediately put his nose down, searching for a scent trail.

*Wednesday, April 12, 2:41 AM
Washington, DC*

Meg and Hawk stepped out of the building and into the chilly night. After the heat and closeness of the disaster scene, the early spring night air was so clear and sharp it almost hurt to breathe. She stopped, taking a few steadying breaths. Out with the smoke and haze, in with the fresh and clean.

They started across the parking lot. It was ablaze with spotlights, but the number of emergency vehicles had scaled

down. The rescue efforts continued, but the estimated head count indicated there were only a dozen or so people still missing and they had mostly been in close proximity to the blast epicenter. No one was sure how many of them would be left to rescue.

“Meg!”

Meg looked up to see a tall, rangy blonde in coveralls accompanied by a border collie in an FBI vest speed-walking toward them.

“Lauren.” Meg halted in surprise, Hawk automatically stopping at her side. “I thought you were in New York City.”

“We were.” Lauren looked up at the Whitten Building. For a moment, anguish sketched across her lovely face; too many years of facing this kind of scene had taught her what to expect before she even set foot inside. Then the mask was back in place, determination squaring her shoulders. “We were done there, so I caught the first train back as soon as I heard, knowing Rocco would be needed.” Lauren reached down and stroked a hand over her dog’s silky black and white fur. “Fucking bastards who did this. I hear we’ve lost nine so far, with more still missing. And Craig said kids were caught in the blast.”

“Only adult fatalities so far. But twenty-one kids injured, some critically.” Meg swallowed harshly. “Three are still missing. I wanted to keep going, but Craig finally ordered me out.”

“How long have you been at it?”

“I lost track of time. We started around four-thirty.”

“Over ten hours. You know very well Craig was right to get you out of there before you got so exhausted you made a mistake, or you or Hawk got hurt.”

“There are still people trapped in there.” Meg could hear the frustration and banked grief in her own voice and

tried to bear down to steady herself. “And family members waiting to hear about the fates of their loved ones. Some of who did nothing more terrible than go to work this morning to earn money to put food on the family table. And now they won’t ever be coming home.” She closed her eyes, but dull, staring eyes, charred flesh, and blood-splattered marble soldiers followed her into the dark, so she opened them again, and forced herself to focus on light. On life.

Lauren laid a hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You’ve done your part for today. It’s time for fresh teams to take over. Go home. Rest. Come back later today to help again if they still need us.” She stepped back, Rocco moving as one with her when she turned and headed into the bomb site.

Meg and Hawk trudged down Jefferson toward the Freer Gallery. Every passing step seemed harder than the last as the adrenaline that had kept her going all night trickled away, leaving her wrung out and empty. Passing one of the deserted park benches at the corner of 12th Street, she finally admitted defeat. “Hawk, wait. I need a minute.”

Meg made it to the bench where she collapsed, burying her head in her hands and letting her hard hat clatter to the ground. She clenched her eyes closed, but she couldn’t shut out the images of what she’d seen today. *Dismembered bodies. Blood smears on concrete and steel. Desperate reaching fingers. A child’s charred and torn backpack, ripped from her body by the force of the blast.* She shuddered while horrific images played through her mind in a never-ending loop.

The nudge of Hawk’s damp nose against her fingers reminded her she wasn’t alone, not during the search, not now, not ever, so long as Hawk was with her. Looking up, she found him at her feet, squeezing his sturdy chest be-

tween her knees. She wrapped her arms around him, taking comfort in his warmth and solid strength. Ignoring the grit covering them both, she buried her face in the fur of his neck.

And there, finally away from the death and destruction, she wept out her despair.