



*Properly trained, a man can be a dog's
best friend.*

COREY FORD



ONE

On a chilly morning in February with a misty rain shuttering the windows, Devin and Rosie Cauldwell made slow, sleepy love. It was day three of their week's vacation—and month two of their attempt to conceive a second child. Their three-year-old son, Hugh, was the result of a long weekend on Orcas Island in the San Juans and—Rosie was convinced—a rainy afternoon and a bottle of Pinot Noir.

They hoped to repeat their success with a return visit to Orcas, and happily applied themselves to the mission at hand while their toddler slept with his beloved Wubby in the next room.

It was too early in the day for wine, but Rosie took the quiet rain as an omen.

When they were snuggled up together, loose and warm from sex, she smiled.

“Who had the best idea ever?”

Devin gave her ass an easy squeeze. “You did.”

“Hang on, because I just had another one.”

“I think I need a few minutes, first.”

NORA ROBERTS

She laughed, rolled and propped herself on his chest to grin at him. “Get your mind off sex, Sleazy.”

“I think I need a few minutes for that, too.”

“Pancakes. We need pancakes. Rainy morning, our cozy little house. Definitely calls for pancakes.”

He squinted at her. “Who’s making them?”

“Let the fates decide.”

She scooted up, and in a long-standing Cauldwell family tradition they let the balance hang on Rock, Paper, Scissors—best two out of three.

“Damn it,” she muttered when he crushed her scissors with his rock.

“Superior skill wins out.”

“My ass. But fair’s fair—and I have to pee anyway.” She bent down to give him a smacking kiss, then jumped out of bed. “I love vacation,” she said as she dashed into the bathroom.

She especially loved this vacation, she thought, with her two handsome men. If the rain kept up, or got heavier, they’d play games inside. But if it let up, maybe they’d strap Hugh in the carrier and take a bike ride, or just go for a long hike.

Hugh just loved it here, loved the birds, the lake, the deer they’d spotted and of course the rabbits—all brothers to his faithful Wubby.

And maybe he’d have a brother of his own in the fall. She was ovulating—not that she was obsessing about getting pregnant. But counting days wasn’t obsessing, she thought as she caught her sleep- and sex-mussed hair back in a band. It was just being self-aware.

She grabbed a sweatshirt and some flannel pants, glanced back at Devin, who’d gone back to snoozing.

She really thought they’d hit the money shot.

Delighted with the idea, she pulled on heavy socks, then glanced at the watch she’d left on the dresser.

“Gosh, it’s after eight. We must’ve worn Hugh out last night for him to sleep this late.”

THE SEARCH

“Probably the rain,” Devin mumbled.

“Yeah, probably.”

Still, she turned out of their room for his, as she did every morning, at home or away. She moved quietly, content to let him sleep—a bonus if she could grab her first cup of coffee before she heard the first *Mommy* of the day.

She peeked in, expecting to find him curled up with his stuffed bunny. The empty bed didn’t bring panic. He might’ve gotten up to pee, just as she had. He’d gotten so good with his potty training.

Even when she didn’t find him in the little bathroom off the hall, she didn’t panic. Since he was habitually an early riser, they’d encouraged him to play for a bit before waking them. She usually heard him, talking to his toys or running his cars, but she’d been a little distracted having vacation sex.

God, she thought as she started downstairs, what if he’d looked in when they were doing it? No, he’d have walked right in and asked what game they were playing.

With a half laugh, she turned into the pretty living room, expecting to see her little boy on the floor surrounded by the toys of his choice.

When she didn’t, the first fingers of unease tickled up her throat.

She called his name, moving quickly now, sliding a little on the hardwood floors in her socks.

Panic struck, a knife in the belly.

The kitchen door stood wide open.

SHORTLY AFTER NINE, Fiona Bristow pulled up at the pretty vacation house in the heart of Moran State Park. Rain fizzed along the ground more than pattered, but its steadiness promised sloppy tracking. She signaled her partner to stay in the truck, then got out to approach one of the local deputies.

“Davey.”

“Hey, Fee. You got here fast.”

“I didn’t have far to go. The others are on their way. Are we using the house for base camp or do you want us to set up?”

“We’re using it. You’ll want to talk to the parents, but I’ll give you the basics. Hugh Cauldwell, age three, blond and blue. Last seen wearing Spider-Man pajamas.”

Fiona saw his mouth tighten a little. Davey had a boy about the same age as Hugh, and she imagined he had a pair of Spider-Man pj’s, too.

“The mother first noticed he was missing at about eight-fifteen,” Davey continued. “Found the back door open. No visible signs of forced entry or an intruder. The mother alerted the father. They called it in right away, and they ran around, calling for him, looking in the immediate area.”

And tracked up the place, Fiona mused. But who could blame them?

“We did a house-and-grounds search, to make sure he wasn’t just hiding.” Davey turned back to Fiona with rain dripping off the bill of his cap. “He’s not in the house, and his mother says he has his stuffed bunny with him. He sleeps with it, carts it around habitually. We’ve got rangers on the search, McMahan and Matt are out there,” he added, referring to the sheriff and a young deputy.

“McMahan cleared me to call in your unit, and assigned me to base.”

“We’ll set up and get started. I’d like to interview the parents now, if that’s good for you.”

He gestured toward the house. “They’re scared, as you’d expect—and they want to go out and look for him. You might help me talk them down from that.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Thinking of that, she went back to the truck, opened the door for her partner. Peck hopped out and walked with her and Davey to the house.

At Davey’s nod, Fiona crossed to the couple, who rose from their huddle on the couch. The woman clutched a little red fire engine.

“Mr. and Mrs. Cauldwell, I’m Fiona Bristow with Canine Search and

THE SEARCH

Rescue. This is Peck.” She laid a hand on the head of the chocolate Lab. “The rest of my unit’s on the way. We’re going to help look for Hugh.”

“You need to go. You need to go right now. He’s only three.”

“Yes, ma’am. The rest of my unit will be here any minute. It would help us if I get some information first.”

“We told the police and the rangers everything.” Devin looked toward the window. “I need to go out there, look for him. We’re wasting time here.”

“Believe me, Mr. Cauldwell, the police and the rangers are doing everything they can to find Hugh. They called us because finding him is everyone’s priority. We’re trained, and your little boy is our only focus now. We’re going to coordinate with the police and the park rangers. I need to make sure I have all the information so we optimize our resources. You realized Hugh was missing about eight-fifteen, is that right?”

Tears swam fresh into Rosie’s eyes. “I should’ve checked on him earlier. He hardly ever sleeps past seven. I should’ve—”

“Mrs. Cauldwell . . . Rosie,” Fiona corrected, using the first name to comfort. “You don’t want to blame yourself. Little boys are curious, aren’t they? Has Hugh ever left the house by himself before?”

“Never, never. I thought he’d come down to play, then I couldn’t find him, and I went back to the kitchen. And the door . . . the door was open. Wide open. And I couldn’t find him.”

“Maybe you could show me.” Fiona signaled to Peck to follow. “He’s wearing his pajamas?”

“Spider-Man. He’ll be cold, and wet, and scared.” Her shoulders shook as they moved back to the kitchen. “I don’t understand what you can do that the police can’t.”

“We’re another resource, and Peck? He’s trained for this. He’s been on dozens of searches.”

Rosie swiped tears off her cheeks. “Hugh likes dogs. He likes animals. If the dog barks, maybe Hugh will hear and come back.”

Fiona said nothing, but opened the back door, then squatted down to

take in the view from the level of a three-year-old boy. *Likes animals*. “I bet you can see a lot of wildlife around here. Deer, fox, rabbits.”

“Yes. Yes. It’s so different from Seattle. He loves watching out the windows, or from the deck. And we’ve taken hikes and bike rides.”

“Is Hugh shy?”

“No. Oh no, he’s adventurous and sociable. Fearless. Oh God.”

Instinctively Fiona put an arm around Rosie’s shaking shoulders. “Rosie, I’m going to set up here in the kitchen, if that’s okay. What I need you to do is to get me five things Hugh wore recently. Yesterday’s socks, underwear, shirt, like that. Five small items of clothing. Try not to handle them. Put them in these.”

Fiona took plastic bags from her kit.

“We’re a unit of five. Five handlers, five dogs. We’ll each use something of Hugh’s to give the dogs his scent.”

“They . . . they track him?”

Easier to agree than to try to explain air-scenting, scent cones, skin rafts. The boy had already been gone more than an hour. “That’s right. Does he have a favorite treat? Something he likes especially, something you might give him when he’s been good?”

“You mean like . . .” Pushing at her hair, Rosie looked around blankly. “He loves gummy worms.”

“Great. Do you have any?”

“I . . . yes.”

“If you could get the clothes and the worms,” Fiona said with a smile. “I’m going to set up. I hear my unit, so I’m going to set up.”

“Okay. Okay. Please . . . He’s just three.”

Rosie dashed out. Fiona shared a brief look with Peck, then began to set up operations.

As her team came in, human and canine, she briefed them and began to assign search sectors while poring over her maps. She knew the area, and knew it well.

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A paradise, she thought, for those looking for serenity, scenery, an escape from streets and traffic, buildings, crowds. And for a lost little boy, a world filled with hazards. Creeks, lakes, rocks.

More than thirty miles of foot trails, she thought, over five thousand acres of forest to swallow up a three-year-old and his stuffed rabbit.

“We’ve got a heavy drizzle, so we’ll keep the search grids close and cover this area.” As field OL—operational leader—Fiona outlined their sections on the map while Davey listed data on a large whiteboard. “We’ll overlap some with the other teams, but let’s keep good communications so we don’t step on our own feet.”

“He’s going to be wet and chilled by now.” Meg Greene, mother of two and recent grandmother, looked at her husband, Chuck. “Poor little guy.”

“And a kid that age? He’s got no sense of direction. He’ll wander anywhere.” James Hutton frowned as he checked his radio.

“He might tire out, just curl up and sleep.” Lori Dyson nodded toward her German shepherd, Pip. “He might not hear the searchers calling for him, but our guys will sniff him out.”

“That’s the plan. Everyone has their coordinates? Radios checked, packs checked? Make sure you set your compass bearings. With Mai in emergency surgery, Davey’s solo base OL, so we’ll check in with him as we cover our sectors.”

She stopped as the Cauldwells came back in.

“I have . . .” Rosie’s chin wobbled. “I have what you asked for.”

“That’s great.” Fiona crossed to her, then laid her hands on the terrified mother’s shoulders. “You hold good thoughts. Everyone out there has only one thing to do, one thing on their mind: find Hugh and bring him home.”

She took the bags, passed them out to her unit. “Okay, let’s go get him.”

With the others, she walked outside, hitched on her pack. Peck stood by her side, the slight quiver in his body the only sign he was anxious to

get started. She and the others spread out to take their assigned sectors, and like the rest of her unit, she set her compass bearing.

She opened the bag holding a little sock, offered it to Peck's nose.

"This is Hugh. It's Hugh. Hugh's just a little boy, Peck. This is Hugh."

He sniffed enthusiastically—a dog who knew his job. He glanced up at her, sniffed again, then looked deep into her eyes, body quivering as if to say, *Okay, I've got it! Let's move!*

"Find Hugh." She added her hand signal, and Peck lifted his nose in the air. "Let's find Hugh!"

She waited, watching him scent and circle, let him take the lead as he prowled and paced. The thin, steady rain posed an obstacle, but Peck worked well in the rain.

She remained where she was, giving him verbal encouragement as he tracked the air and the wet pattered on the bright yellow of her wind-breaker.

When he moved east, she followed him into the thickening trees.

At five, Peck was a vet, a seventy-pound chocolate Lab—strong, smart and tireless. He would, Fiona knew, search for hours in any conditions, over any terrain, for the living or for the dead. She had only to ask it of him.

Together, they moved through deep forest, over ground soft and soggy with needles shed from the towering Douglas firs and old-growth cedars, over and around clumps of mushrooms and nurse logs coated with rich green moss, through brambles edgy with thorn. While they searched, Fiona kept an eye on her partner's body language, made note of landmarks, checked her compass. Every few minutes, Peck glanced back to let her know he was on the case.

"Find Hugh. Let's find Hugh, Peck."

He alerted, showing interest in a patch of ground around a nurse log.

"Got something, do you? That's good. Good boy." She flagged the alert first with bright blue tape, then stood with him, scanning the area, calling Hugh's name. Then closing her eyes to listen.

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All she heard was the soft sizzle of rain and the whisper of wind through the trees.

When he nudged her, Fiona took the sock out of her pocket, opened the bag so Peck could refresh the scent.

“Find Hugh,” she repeated. “Let’s find Hugh.”

He moved off again, and in her sturdy boots, Fiona stepped over the log and followed. When Peck angled south, she called her new position in to base, checked in with her team members.

The kid had been out for a minimum of two hours, she thought. A lifetime for worried parents.

But toddlers didn’t have any real sense of time. Children of his age were very mobile, she mused, and didn’t always understand the concept of being lost. They wandered, distracted by sights and sounds, and had considerable endurance, so it might be hours of that wandering before Hugh tired out and realized he wanted his mother.

She watched a rabbit skitter away into the brush. Peck had too much dignity to do more than spare it a passing glance.

But a little boy? Fiona thought. One who loved his “Wubby,” who enjoyed animals? One his mother said was fascinated by the forest? Wouldn’t he want to try to catch it, probably hoping to play with it? He’d try, wouldn’t he, to follow it? City boy, she thought, enchanted with the woods, the wild-life, the *other* of it all.

How could he resist?

She understood it, the magic of it. She’d been a city girl once herself, charmed and hypnotized by the green shadows, the dance of light, the sheer vastness of trees and hills and sea.

A child could so easily lose himself in the acres and acres of parkland.

He’s cold, she thought. Hungry now and scared. He wants his mother.

When the rain increased, they continued on, the tireless dog, the tall woman in rough pants and rougher boots. Her tail of pale red hair hung in a wet rope down her back, while lake-blue eyes searched the gloom.

When Peck angled again, heading down a winding slope, she drew a picture in her mind. Less than a quarter of a mile farther, if they continued in this direction, they'd come to the creek that marked the southeast border of her sector. Chuck and his Quirk searched the other side. Fast water in the creek this time of year, she thought, cold and fast, the verges slippery with moss and rain.

She hoped the little guy hadn't gone too close or, worse, tried to cross it.

And the wind was changing, she realized. Goddamn it. They'd adjust. She'd refresh the scent again, give Peck a quick water break. They'd nearly clocked two hours in the field, and though Peck had alerted strongly three times, she'd yet to see a sign of the boy—a bit of cloth on a bramble, a print in the softened ground. She'd flagged the alerts in blue, used orange tape to mark their progress and knew they'd cross-tracked once or twice.

Check in with Chuck, she decided. If Peck's on the scent and the kid crossed the creek . . .

She didn't allow herself to think *fell in*. Not yet.

Even as she reached for her radio, Peck alerted again. This time he broke into a run, shooting her the briefest of glances over his shoulder.

And she saw the light in his eyes.

"Hugh!" She lifted her voice over the now pounding rain and whistling wind.

She didn't hear the boy, but she heard Peck's three quick barks.

Like the dog, Fiona broke into a run.

She skidded a little as she rounded the turn on the downward slope.

And she saw near the banks of the busy creek—a bit too near for her peace of mind—a very wet little boy sprawled on the ground with his arms full of dog.

"Hey, Hugh, hi." She crossed the distance quickly, squatted down, pulling off her pack as she went. "I'm Fiona, and this is Peck."

"Doggie." He wept it into Peck's fur. "Doggie."

THE SEARCH

“He’s a good doggie. He’s the best doggie ever.”

As Peck thumped his tail in agreement, Fiona pulled a space blanket out of her pack. “I’m going to wrap you up—and Wubby, too. Is that Wubby?”

“Wubby fell down.”

“So I see. It’s okay. We’ll get you both warm, okay? Did you hurt yourself? Uh-oh.”

She said it cheerfully as she draped the blanket over his shoulders and saw the mud and blood on his feet. “Ouch, huh? We’re going to fix you all up.”

His arms still around Peck, Hugh turned his cheek and sent Fiona a pitiful, bottom-lip-wobbling look. “I want Mommy.”

“I bet you do. We’re going to take you to Mommy, me and Peck. Here, look what Mommy sent you.” She pulled out the little bag of gummy worms.

“Bad boy,” Hugh said, but he eyed the candy with interest while he clung to Peck.

“Mommy’s not mad. Daddy’s not either. Here you go.” She gave him the bag, pulled out her radio. When Hugh offered a worm to Peck, Peck gave Fiona a sidelong glance.

Can I? Huh? Can I?

“Go ahead—and say thank you.”

Peck took the candy delicately from the boy, gulped it down, then thanked him with a sloppy kiss that made Hugh giggle.

With that sound warming her heart, Fiona contacted base.

“We’ve got him. Safe and sound. Tell Mom he’s eating his gummy worms and we’ll be on our way home.” She winked at Hugh, who fed the filthy and wet stuffed rabbit, then popped the same candy into his own mouth. “He’s got some minor cuts and scrapes, he’s wet, but he’s alert. Over.”

“Copy that. Good work, Fee. Do you need help? Over.”

“We’ve got it. Heading in. I’ll keep you updated. Over and out.”

NORA ROBERTS

“Better wash those down,” she suggested, and offered Hugh her canteen.

“Whazit?”

“It’s just water.”

“I like juice.”

“We’ll make sure you get some when we get back. Drink a little, okay?”

He did what he was told, sniffing. “I peed outside, like Daddy showed me. Not in my pants.”

She grinned at him and thought of Peck’s strong alerts. “You did good. How about a piggyback ride?”

As they had at the sight of the candy, his eyes brightened. “Okay.”

She wrapped the blanket securely around him, then turned so he could climb onto her back. “You call me Fee. If you need something, you just say, Fee, I need or I want.”

“Doggie.”

“He’s coming, too. He’ll lead the way.” From her crouch she rubbed Peck, hugged him hard. “Good dog, Peck. Good dog. Return!”

With the pack slung over her shoulder and the boy on her back, the three of them began the hike out of the woods.

“Did you open the door by yourself, Hugh?”

“Bad boy,” he murmured.

Well, yeah, she thought, but who wasn’t bad now and then? “What did you see out the window?”

“Wubbies. Wubby said let’s go see the wubbies.”

“Uh-huh.” Smart kid, she thought. Blame it on the rabbit.

Hugh began to chatter then, so fast and in the toddlerese that defeated her on every third word. But she got the gist.

Mommy and Daddy sleeping, bunnies out the window, what could you do? Then, if she interpreted correctly, the house disappeared and he couldn’t find it. Mommy didn’t come when he called, and he was going to get a time-out. He hated time-outs.

THE SEARCH

She got the picture because even saying “time-out” made him cry with his face pressed against her back.

“Well, if you get one, I think Wubby needs one, too. Look, hey, Hugh, look. It’s Bambi and his mom.”

He lifted his head, still sniffing. Then tears were forgotten as he squealed at the sight of the fawn and doe. Then he sighed, laid his head on her shoulder when she boosted him up a bit. “I getting hungry.”

“I guess you are. You’ve had a really big adventure.” She managed to dig a power bar out of her pack.

It took less time to hike out than it had to search through, but by the time the trees began to thin the boy weighed like a stone on her back.

Revived, rested, fascinated with everything, Hugh talked nonstop. Amused, Fiona let him ramble and dreamed of a vat of coffee, an enormous burger and a gallon bucket of fries.

When she spotted the house through the trees, she dug out another gear and quickened her pace. They’d barely cleared the line when Rosie and Devin ran out of the house.

Fiona crouched. “Off you go, Hugh. Run to Mommy.”

She stayed down, slung her arm around Peck, whose entire body wagged with joy.

“Yeah,” she murmured to him as Devin beat his wife by a couple lopes and snatched Hugh up. Then the three of them were twined together in a tangle of limbs and tears. “Yeah, it’s a good day. You’re the man, Peck.”

With her son safe in her arms, Rosie hurried toward the house. Devin broke away to walk unsteadily to Fiona.

“Thank you. I don’t know how to . . .”

“You’re welcome. He’s a great kid.”

“He’s . . . everything. Thank you so much.” As his eyes filled, Devin wrapped his arms around Fiona and, much as Hugh had, dropped his head on her shoulder. “I can’t tell you.”

NORA ROBERTS

“You don’t have to.” Her own eyes stung as she patted his back. “Peck found him. He’s the one. He’d be pleased if you shook his hand.”

“Oh.” Devin scrubbed at his face, drew in a couple steadying breaths. “Thank you, Peck. Thank you.” He crouched, offered his hand.

Peck smiled as dogs do and placed his paw in Devin’s hand.

“Can I . . . can I hug him?”

“He’d love it.”

On a deep, shuddering sigh, Devin hugged Peck’s neck, pressed his face to the fur. Over the man’s shoulder, Peck sent Fiona a twinkling look.

Wasn’t that fun? he seemed to say. *Can we do it again?*