*She finds the lost. She never found him.*

# UNTIL IT IS FOUND

A CHRISTIAN K-9 ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

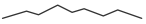
HARROW RIDGE SEARCH & RESCUE · BOOK ONE



SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School

# UNTIL IT IS FOUND



HARROW RIDGE SEARCH & RESCUE

*Until It Is Found*

Book Two · coming soon

# Until It Is Found

*A Christian K-9 Romantic Suspense*

HARROW RIDGE SEARCH & RESCUE · BOOK ONE

SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School



Thinking School

*Until It Is Found*
A Christian K-9 Romantic Suspense
Harrow Ridge Search & Rescue, Book One

Copyright © 2026 by Susan McDowell. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations in reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Harrow Ridge and Larkin County are imaginary. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible, which is in the public domain.

Susan McDowell is a pen name.

First published by Thinking School, 2026.

*For everyone still out in the dark.*
*Someone is looking for you.*

*What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost,* until he find it?

LUKE 15:4

# Contents


Chapter One · *Wren* 11
Chapter Two · *Caleb* 19
Chapter Three · *Wren* 26
Chapter Four · *Caleb* 35
Chapter Five · *Wren* 42
Chapter Six · *Caleb* 48
Chapter Seven · *Wren* 55
Chapter Eight · *Caleb* 62
Chapter Nine · *Wren* 69
Chapter Ten · *Caleb* 79
Chapter Eleven · *Wren* 84
Chapter Twelve · *Caleb* 90
Chapter Thirteen · *Wren* 97
Chapter Fourteen · *Caleb* 103
Chapter Fifteen · *Wren* 111
Chapter Sixteen · *Caleb* 119
Chapter Seventeen · *Wren* 126
Chapter Eighteen · *Caleb* 134
Chapter Nineteen · *Wren* 145
Chapter Twenty · *Caleb* 156
Chapter Twenty-One · *Wren* 162
Chapter Twenty-Two · *Caleb* 171
Chapter Twenty-Three · *Wren* 177
Chapter Twenty-Four · *Caleb* 184
Chapter Twenty-Five · *Wren* 191
Chapter Twenty-Six · *Caleb* 199
Chapter Twenty-Seven · *Wren* 205

Chapter Twenty-Eight · *Caleb* 211
Chapter Twenty-Nine · *Wren* 218
Chapter Thirty · *Caleb* 224
Chapter Thirty-One · *Wren* 232
Chapter Thirty-Two · *Caleb* 238
Epilogue · *Wren* 247
A Note from the Author 255
For Book Clubs and Small Groups 257
Coming Next 259
A Small Request 261
About the Author 263

# 1

## WREN

LACEY DUNN HAD been missing for forty hours, and the mountain was not giving her back.

The fog came up out of the hollows before dawn the way it always did in October, slow and white and patient, as if the mountain were breathing out. Wren Calloway stood at the tailgate of her truck at the Coldwater trailhead with a paper bag in one gloved hand and a bloodhound leaning against her shins. The bag held a gray fleece headband that belonged to the missing girl. Twenty years old. The same age, give or take, as the last person this mountain had swallowed.

"You ready, Junie?"

Juniper did not answer, because Juniper was a bloodhound and considered most questions beneath her. She sat on Wren's boot, eighty-one pounds of liver-and-tan wrinkles, and let a rope of drool unspool toward the gravel. Her long ears hung like velvet curtains. Her eyes, red-rimmed and sorrowful, watched the line of the woods.

"She's ready," Paula Greer said from behind the command table she'd set up under the trailhead kiosk. Paula had been Larkin County Search and Rescue's incident commander for eleven years and an eighth-grade science teacher for twenty-six before that, and

she still talked to grown men in ball caps the way she'd talked to thirteen-year-olds who forgot their lab goggles. "That dog was born ready. It's you I worry about. When did you last eat?"

"I had coffee."

"Coffee is not food, Wren."

"It's a bean." Wren slid the harness over Junie's head, checked the buckle, clipped the long lead to the ring between her shoulder blades. The moment the harness went on, the dog changed. Her tail lifted. Her nose, which had been idly cataloguing the trailhead—deer, cigarette butts, somebody's dropped french fry—went still and aimed. "Lacey's car hasn't been moved?"

"Not an inch since the deputy found it Tuesday night." Paula nodded at the little blue hatchback parked crooked at the far end of the lot, still wearing an Appalachian State parking sticker and a bumper magnet shaped like a rock hammer. "Her roommate says she came up to sample at the old mica mine. Something about pegmatites. Don't ask me—I taught biology."

"The mine's fenced."

"The fence is about as useful as a screen door on a submarine, and you know it." Paula tapped the map pinned under a sheet of plastic. "Team Two's working the river trail. Sheriff wants the river covered first. Her phone's last ping came off the tower on Bald Knob, which could put her anywhere in a three-mile circle."

Wren looked at the map, at the blue thread of the Larkin River winding down out of the gap and the dotted line of Coldwater Road switchbacking up past the mine. She didn't need the map. She had grown up on this mountain. She knew where the river went and how fast it ran after rain, and she knew what people said when they couldn't find someone near it.

*The river took him.* That's what they'd said eight years ago. Kindly, in casseroles and cards. *The river took him, honey. It was a terrible storm.*

She folded the thought away and held the paper bag low.

"Junie. Scent."

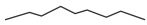
The bloodhound buried her face in the bag. Wren counted silently—four, five, six—while Junie pulled the scent into the folds of her skin and the long scroll of her nose, filed it, owned it. Then Wren said the words she had said a hundred times on a hundred mornings like this one.

"Find her."

Junie swung her head once toward the hatchback, once toward the river trail where Team Two had gone, and then, without hesitation, plunged into the laurel on the uphill side of the lot, where there was no trail at all.

"Wren," Paula called after her. "The sheriff said—"

"Junie didn't hear the sheriff," Wren called back, and let the dog take her.



The first hour was rhododendron.

The mountain people called it a laurel hell, and Wren had never heard a better name for anything. The rhododendron grew in twisted, waist-high tangles that closed over your head and caught at your pack and your hair and your boots, and the only way through was the way the bears went, low and stubborn. Junie went low and stubborn. Wren went after her, the lead looped in one fist, the radio crackling on her shoulder.

The dog never doubted. That was the thing Wren loved most and envied most about her. A bloodhound on a trail did not stop to wonder whether the trail was worth following, whether the person at the end of it was still alive, whether God had been paying atten-

tion when they got lost. A bloodhound followed the scent because the scent was there.

At the top of the laurel they broke out into open hardwoods—oak and hickory and the sourwoods gone red as coals—and the fog thinned enough that Wren could see the old mine road cutting across the slope below them, two gravel ruts grown up in broom sedge. Junie crossed it at a trot and kept climbing.

Wren's stomach went tight.

She knew where they were going before she saw the fence. Chain-link, eight feet high once, now sagging in loops between leaning posts. A sign so rusted only half of it remained: DANGER—ABANDONED MINE—STAY OUT—STAY AL—. Somebody had cut a gap in the fence years ago and somebody else had wired it shut and somebody else had cut it again. Junie went through the gap without slowing, and Wren ducked after her.

The Coldwater Mica Mine had closed before Wren's mother was born. What was left of it lay scattered across a shelf of the mountain like the bones of something large: the concrete footings of a crusher house, a tailings pile glittering silver with flakes of mica, the black square mouth of an adit cut into the hillside and boarded over, and farther up, behind a second, sturdier fence, the collar of Shaft No. 3.

Junie went straight to the shaft.

"Easy." Wren shortened the lead, her heart thudding. "Easy, girl. Show me."

The bloodhound put her nose down at the base of the inner fence where the ground was scuffed bare, and then she did something Wren had seen her do only a handful of times: she sat down hard, threw back her head, and bayed. The sound rolled out across the slope, deep and mournful, the old music that hounds had been singing on these ridges for two hundred years.

On the ground beside Junie's front paws lay a geologist's rock hammer with a yellow rubber grip. Someone had written L. DUNN on the handle in silver marker.

Wren keyed her radio. Her voice came out steadier than she felt. "Command, Calloway. I'm at the Coldwater mine, Shaft Three. I have a find. Subject's rock hammer, positively labeled." She crouched, not touching it. On the flat rock next to the hammer was a dark smear, dried brown. "Possible blood. And there's a rope."

There was. A red-and-blue climbing rope, tied off with a tidy figure-eight to the steel rail of the old headframe, ran over the lip of the shaft and down into the dark.

"Copy, Wren." Paula's voice, crisp. "Do not approach the collar. I'm sending Tuck with the rope kit. Sheriff's on his way up."

Wren looked at the rope. It hung slack. Nobody was on it.

"Lacey?" she called. "Lacey Dunn? Can you hear me?"

The mountain swallowed her voice. Far down in the shaft, water dripped.

Tuck Haney arrived forty minutes later, red-bearded and sweating, with sixty pounds of rope gear on his back and a grin that faded as soon as he saw the shaft. Tuck was a lineman for the power co-op who climbed utility poles in ice storms for a living and dangled off cliffs on the weekends for fun, and Wren had never once seen him look nervous.

He looked nervous now.

"That's a long way down," he said, peering over the rotten timber collar with a headlamp. "Old-timers said Three goes eighty, ninety feet before it hits the drift. There's a ledge about ten down. Her rope runs to it and then past." He straightened. "If she went down there, Wren—"

"I know."

"I'm saying. If she went down there and that rope didn't hold her—"

"I know, Tuck."

He looked at her, and then at Junie, who was lying with her chin on her paws beside the hammer, refusing to leave it. "Right," he said. "Let's get her home either way."

They rigged a fresh anchor off the headframe and a backup off a tree, the way Tuck had taught her when she first joined the team at nineteen, and Tuck clipped in and went over the edge with his headlamp bobbing.

Sheriff Hollis Brandt came up the mine road in his county truck while Tuck was still descending.

He climbed out slow, the way men in their sixties climbed out of trucks, one hand on the door frame, and he came across the shelf with two travel cups of coffee and his hat in his other hand. He had been the sheriff of Larkin County for six years and a deputy for twenty-six before that, and he had founded the search and rescue team the year Wren was born. He'd taught her to read a topo map at his kitchen table while his wife, June, fed her pound cake. He'd stood beside her father at the river eight years ago in the rain. He was the closest thing to an uncle she had.

"Wren." He handed her a coffee. "Paula says your hound went off the reservation."

"She went where the scent went."

"Lacey's car's pointed at the river trail."

"Cars point all kinds of ways." She took a sip of the coffee to have something to do. It was sweet and too hot. He'd remembered she took sugar. "This is her hammer, Uncle Hollis. Junie doesn't make mistakes like that."

He stood for a second looking at the hammer, at the rope, at the black mouth of the shaft, and something crossed his face that Wren

would think about later—a stillness, a gray look, like a man who had stepped on a stair that wasn't there. Then it passed, and he was Hollis again, tired and kind, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Shaft Three," he said. "I'd hoped never to see this place again."

"You searched it? Before?"

"We searched every hole on this mountain that year, darlin'. You know that." He put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Don't go back there. Not today."

The radio on her shoulder hissed.

"Wren." Tuck's voice, strange and flat, echoing up out of the ground. "Wren, I'm at the bottom of the shaft."

She keyed it. "Is she there?"

A long pause. Water dripping. Static.

"No," Tuck said. "Not her. There's—Wren, there's somebody down here. Been here a long time."

The coffee cup slipped out of her hand. It hit the mica-spangled ground and rolled, spilling, and she didn't move to pick it up. Beside her, Hollis Brandt had gone completely still.

"How long?" Her own voice sounded far away.

"Long time. Years." Tuck breathed hard into the mic. "Clothes are mostly gone. There's—hang on." A scrape, a rustle. "There's a wristwatch. I'm not supposed to touch anything, I know, but it's sitting right on top and I don't want it washing away if we get rain before the crime scene folks come. I'm bagging it. I'm coming up."

It took him eleven minutes to climb out. Wren counted every one of them. When he came over the collar, gray-faced, his gloves black with old mud, he didn't look at the sheriff. He looked at her.

He held out a plastic evidence bag. Inside was a black Timex Ironman, its band rotted to a stub, its face scratched and fogged.

Wren didn't need to turn it over. She knew what was engraved on the back. She had paid a man at the mall in Asheville eleven dol-

lars to engrave it the summer Danny turned seventeen, because he'd made varsity cross-country and because she was twenty-two and thought a watch was a grown-up kind of present.

She turned it over anyway.

RUN YOUR RACE —W

"Oh," Wren said, quietly, the way a person speaks when the floor gives way. "Oh, Danny."

Junie got up from beside the rock hammer, crossed the broken ground, and leaned her whole heavy body against Wren's legs, and kept her standing.

# 2

## CALEB

SPECIAL AGENT CALEB Rourke had been with the State Bureau of Investigation for three years, and in three years he had learned that the worst calls always came while he was holding something hot.

This time it was a breakfast burrito from the gas station on Patton Avenue. He was balancing it on his knee in the parking deck below the SBI's Western District office in Asheville, trying to get the foil open one-handed, when his phone lit up with his supervisor's name.

"Rourke."

"Where are you?" Assistant Special Agent in Charge Denise Morrow did not believe in hello.

"Parking deck. Eating."

"Stop eating. Larkin County's requested assistance. They had a missing college student since Tuesday—that's still open—and this morning their search team pulled human remains out of an old mine shaft. Not the student. Old remains. Sheriff thinks they're a local kid who went missing eight years ago."

Caleb set the burrito on the dashboard very carefully, as though it might go off.

"Larkin County," he said.

"You're from there, aren't you? That's what your file says."

"Harrow Ridge."

"Then you know the roads. Sheriff Brandt asked for you by name." Morrow paused, and he could hear her typing. "Is that a problem? If it's a problem, tell me now. I'll send Hutchins."

He looked out the windshield at the concrete wall of the parking deck. Somebody had spray-painted a lopsided heart on it in pink, and somebody else had tried to scrub it off and only smeared it.

*Old remains. A local kid. Eight years.*

There was only one local kid who had gone missing on that mountain eight years ago.

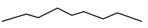
"Who's the victim?" he said, though he knew.

"Tentative ID from personal effects. A Daniel Calloway, seventeen at the time of disappearance." More typing. "You know the family?"

He knew the family. He'd eaten Sunday dinner at the family's table more times than he could count. He'd taught the victim to throw a curveball in the family's backyard. He'd been going to marry the victim's sister.

He'd been the last person to see the victim alive, except for whoever had put him in a mine shaft.

"I knew him," Caleb said. "It's not a problem. I'm on my way."



The road from Asheville to Harrow Ridge climbed for an hour through country that got steeper and narrower and more beautiful with every mile, until the four lanes became two and the two became a ribbon of patched asphalt hung on the side of the mountain with nothing between it and the valley but a guardrail and a prayer.

Caleb had not driven it in a long time. Two years ago, for his mother's—no. His mother had been gone twelve years. Two years

ago had been his father's sixty-fourth birthday, an awkward lunch at the Ridge Diner that ended with Eli Rourke reaching across the table and squeezing his hand and Caleb looking at his watch. And then last month, after the surgery, a day and a half in the hospital in Asheville, never up the mountain at all. His father had called it a "plumbing job" and made jokes about his zipper scar to the nurses. Caleb had stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets and his chest full of something he couldn't name.

He hadn't been up this road since he'd left for basic training eight years ago. He'd told himself it was work. Two tours in Afghanistan, then the academy, then the Bureau. Work was a good reason. Work was always a good reason.

The leaves were turning. He'd forgotten what that looked like up here—not the polite postcard orange of the lowlands, but a whole mountainside on fire: sourwood scarlet, sugar maple gold, poplar yellow as butter, the black-green of hemlock and rhododendron underneath like coals under the flame. He came around the shoulder of Bald Knob and the whole of Harrow Ridge opened up below him, the white steeple of his father's church, the brick courthouse, the water tower with its faded painted apple, the Larkin River glinting in the gap.

His hands tightened on the wheel. He kept driving.



The Coldwater mine was a crime scene by the time he got there, which meant it was a carnival: two county cruisers, a fire department brush truck, the search and rescue team's battered ambulance, an unmarked van from the medical examiner's office, and a yellow tape perimeter strung from fence post to fence post with a young deputy guarding it who looked about fifteen.

Caleb showed his credentials. The deputy studied them like they might be counterfeit, then lifted the tape.

"Sheriff's up top by the shaft," the deputy said. "Sir? They said you're from here."

"A long time ago."

"Then you knew him? The—" The kid swallowed. "The Calloway boy?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," the kid said, and Caleb nodded, because there was nothing else to do, and walked up the hill.

Hollis Brandt met him halfway. The sheriff looked older than Caleb remembered—the mustache gone white, the shoulders rounder under the brown uniform jacket, the face under the hat carved deeper by the years and by whatever this morning had been. But the grip was the same when he took Caleb's hand. And then the sheriff pulled him in, hat and all, and held on.

"Son," Hollis said into his shoulder. "I am so sorry you had to come home for this."

Caleb stood stiff for a second and then made himself pat the man's back. Hollis Brandt had coached his Little League team. Hollis Brandt had pinned his Eagle Scout badge on him because his father had been at the hospital with his mother that day. Hollis Brandt had stood at Danny's search command post in the rain for nine days straight and only left when they dragged him.

"Tell me," Caleb said.

Hollis let go and told him, in the flat, efficient way of an old cop: the missing student, the search, the bloodhound that ignored the river and climbed straight to the mine, the rock hammer, the blood, the rope, the shaft. The remains on the floor of the drift, eighty-four feet down. The watch.

"It's Danny," Hollis said. "Tuck Haney brought the watch up. Wren identified it."

Caleb's throat closed.

"Wren," he said. "Wren was here?"

"Son." Hollis's face was gentle. "Wren *found* him. That's her dog."

She was standing at the tape line on the uphill side of the scene with the bloodhound sitting at her feet, and the first thing Caleb thought, absurdly, was that she'd cut her hair.

It used to fall halfway down her back, brown and heavy, and she'd worn it in a braid that thumped against her shoulder blades when she ran. Now it barely reached her collar. The wind off the ridge pushed it across her face and she didn't bother to move it. She was wearing an orange SAR jacket and canvas work pants and muddy boots, and she was thinner than he remembered, and she was watching two technicians in white Tyvek lower a stretcher basket into the shaft, and she did not turn around when he walked up behind her.

The dog turned around. The dog looked at him with an expression of profound, wrinkled suspicion, and then looked back at the shaft.

"Wren."

She didn't move for a moment. Then she said, without looking at him, "They said they'd sent somebody from the SBI. I told myself it wouldn't be you."

"I asked them not to send me," he said, which was a lie, and then, because he couldn't stand a lie in this place, "No. That's not true. They asked if it was a problem. I said no."

Now she turned.

Her eyes were the same. That was the thing that undid him, more than the hair or the thinness or the grief-hollowed face. Gray-green, like creek water over stone, with the same fierce clear steadiness that had looked at him across a high school chemistry lab when