

PAW 1828

Chapter 1828

On the Mountainside.

Some rescue personnel had recovered from their discomfort and continued searching outward.

Led by Dong Xuebing and Zhang Dongfang, the temporary rescue command center was set up here on the mountainside, with a makeshift rain shelter erected.

“Secretary Dong, County Mayor Zhang,” a firefighter entered the shelter.

“Have we received any updates on the rescue efforts?” Dong Xuebing asked him.

“The first team hasn't found any missing teachers or students. The second team has reached the mountaintop but hasn't found anything either. They only discovered some fruit peels and snack wrappers. Since it's not a large amount, we can't confirm if the students left them; they could have been discarded by other visitors yesterday or this morning,” the firefighter explained. “So, we can't be sure the students were ever at the top, which makes it impossible to narrow the search area.”

This was terrible news.

They had lost contact with the teachers and students for nearly four hours. It was already afternoon; if this continued, they might not finish until nightfall.

Zhang Dongfang was at a loss.

Other officials were equally grave.

“Continue the search,” Dong Xuebing ordered. “Pay attention to any sounds.”

“Understood.” The firefighter replied and quickly exited.

Inside the shelter, only Dong Xuebing remained somewhat calm. It wasn't that he believed the rescue workers would truly find the teachers and students; he believed his shout should be audible to them. His voice could help them find their direction and way out if they were lost in the mountains. Even if there were obstacles, the direction would surely be right, increasing the chances of rescue. What worried him was that they might have gone too far. If they had gone to the back mountains, the sound would undoubtedly be refracted and echoed between the ravines, uncertain the direction.

Dong Xuebing took a moment to calm himself and then took charge of the command. He stood in the rain with an umbrella, directing the entire operation.

Zhang Dongfang also wanted to assist in the command; at least, it would have been symbolically meaningful. However, his heart hadn't fully recovered from the fright Dong Xuebing had given him, so he sat still, reluctant to move. At his age, his body couldn't compare to that of younger people, and he had been caught in the rain, so he wasn't feeling well.

Dong Xuebing noticed this. "County Mayor Zhang, let me have someone help you down the mountain."

Zhang Dongfang stubbornly shook his head. "No, I can hold on."

"Light injuries don't keep you from duty." A reporter from a newspaper took a picture of Zhang Dongfang, capturing his weak and fatigued expression.

This was a show.

Dong Xuebing shook his head internally and didn't bother to intervene.

Meng Hanmei, however, was anxiously watching from the side. She was now part of Dong Xuebing's camp and had to consider her side's interests. Zhang Dongfang was the first to arrive on-site to direct the rescue efforts. He persisted at the front lines in such poor physical condition. Once the media reported this, it would undoubtedly create a different impression. In contrast, since Dong Xuebing's arrival, he has not accepted any media interviews. When Meng Hanmei first arrived, she had heard that Dong Xuebing had told reporters not to complicate matters during a live broadcast for the whole county. This might indicate that officials understood that Zhang Dongfang was putting on a show, while Dong Xuebing appeared to be getting things done. However, the general public might not perceive it that way; at the very least, Dong Xuebing's signals were unclear.

Meng Hanmei felt that Dong Xuebing was still too stubborn and inflexible. At this time, a little showmanship wouldn't hurt; everyone was doing it.

"Secretary," Meng Hanmei said softly.

"Shine the lights and wave them around. Hmm, Director Meng, what is it?" Dong Xuebing glanced at her while directing the others.

Meng Hanmei tactfully suggested, "Are you thinking about the reporters?"

Dong Xuebing immediately responded, "Don't worry about them; we must save people first."

She couldn't persuade him, so Meng Hanmei decided not to press further.

Suddenly, an excited voice rang out from the mountain, "I hear voices! I hear the children's voices up here!"

"What?"

"Where?"

"Where are they? I can't see anyone!"

Everyone immediately became agitated, talking over one another.

Dong Xuebing dashed out with his umbrella, shouting, "Everyone, quiet down!"

After his earlier shout, everyone trembled at Dong Xuebing's voice; it was a conditioned reflex.

The area fell silent at once.

Then, the voices coming from the mountain became more apparent.

“Is anyone there?”

“Help us!”

“We’re here!”

Dong Xuebing quickly determined the direction. Although he couldn’t see the children, their shouts made it clear they were indeed kids. “Get ready to rescue them!” he commanded, striding purposefully up the mountain.

Without Dong Xuebing needing to say more, the rescue personnel quickly gathered around. Those still searching in other areas were alerted through their walkie-talkies and headed toward the children’s voices.

Finally, the first group of rescue personnel made contact with the missing teachers and students.

Dong Xuebing, Chang Lin, and the others continued to hurry up the mountain while Zhang Dongfang, some county officials, and a large group of reporters strained to keep up.

The walkie-talkie crackled to life.

“We found them!” came a jubilant voice from the other end.

Dong Xuebing hurriedly asked, “What’s the situation with the personnel?”

“They’re all very exhausted; many can’t walk anymore. We’re having the teachers count heads. It seems like everyone is accounted for. They had been hiding in a rock cave to avoid the rain and got lost. After hearing Secretary Dong’s shout, they followed the sound to find rescue. If it weren’t for your voice leading them in the right direction, we might have had to search that cave until tomorrow,” the person explained.

“Take good care of the children; we’ll be there soon,” Dong Xuebing replied.

As the walkie-talkie fell silent, Meng Hanmei let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness!”

“It should be thanks to Secretary Dong,” Chang Lin said, giving a thumbs-up. “That shout of his was incredible; I’m impressed.”

Many other officials nearby laughed upon hearing this.

Dong Xuebing was also in good spirits and joked, “I’ve had a loud voice since I was a kid.”

Zhang Dongfang cursed inwardly, thinking that one shout had nearly given him a heart attack. That wasn’t just a loud voice!

Gradually, they could see the rescue team’s lights in the distance. The people trailing behind were increasingly lagging, mostly bureaucrats and office workers who had been slogging through the rain for quite a while. After being startled by Dong Xuebing once, many could hardly keep climbing the mountain. Led by Zhang Dongfang, many people were struggling, and some young men were starting to fall behind.

Only Dong Xuebing continued to move swiftly, not even breaking a sweat.

Su Yan also fell behind, panting heavily as he held up the umbrella, watching Dong Xuebing's figure grow more distant.

Dong Xuebing didn’t wait for them. Seeing the lights getting closer, he quickened, almost springing forward with each step. Suddenly, a searchlight from a small clearing on the hillside pierced his line of sight. He squinted to adjust, and the next moment, Dong Xuebing breathed a sigh of relief as he spotted nearly a hundred teachers and students struggling through the rain with the help of rescue workers.

“Secretary Dong!” The leading rescue personnel quickly rushed over.

Dong Xuebing asked, “Is everyone here? Are there any injured?”

The rescuer replied, “Everyone is accounted for. There are some injuries; a few have fallen, but they’re not serious. However, several students have gotten drenched and have high fevers. Some others are not in good condition and are quite scared.”

“Get them down the mountain. The ground is slippery; be careful of the road and everyone’s safety,” Dong Xuebing instructed.

The nearly hundred teachers and students were covered in mud and had no rain gear, looking utterly miserable. The sheer number of people made Dong Xuebing furrow his brow because they didn’t have enough rescue personnel to assist everyone individually; they could only protect and help the frightened students down the mountain.

At this moment, Zhang Dongfang and Meng Hanmei also made it up.

The television station crew was panting heavily, but they immediately started filming. Although the signal couldn’t be transmitted from there, they could record firsthand footage.

Zhang Dongfang was nearly supported up the hill by two people. Upon seeing the students, his expression turned highly emotional. He pulled his hands away from the two nearby officials and strode forward. “Students, I’m so sorry you’ve been scared. Let’s hurry down the mountain; don’t be afraid. We’re here for you!”

The camera focused on Zhang Dongfang once again.

Many female students started crying. They had been worried and fearful, and now they were finally going to be rescued, and the tears wouldn’t stop flowing.

Zhang Dongfang went up to comfort them.

Dong Xuebing also walked over but didn’t say a word of comfort. He didn’t check on the students or teachers; instead, he directly reached out and shoved his only umbrella into a female student’s hands.

The rain was pouring heavily.

In an instant, Dong Xuebing was soaked to the bone.

Secretary Su Yan gasped and hurried over to hold the umbrella for Dong Xuebing. “Secretary!”

Dong Xuebing expressionlessly pushed Su Yan's umbrella away. "Don't worry about me; protect the children as they go down." After speaking, he looked at a teacher and asked, "How many students have high fevers?"

The female teacher realized who Dong Xuebing was after seeing how others referred to him and treated him. She immediately became tense. "There are two serious cases over there."

She pointed, and Dong Xuebing's gaze landed on a boy and a girl looking weak and pale. Due to the poor conditions and insufficient rescue personnel, everyone could only help each other; they couldn't expect stretchers to carry people. The two students looked like they were about to collapse, struggling to walk.

"I understand." Without another word, Dong Xuebing stepped forward, squeezed into the crowd of students, and quickly scooped up the two feverish students under his arms, like picking up chicks, and headed down the mountain.

The camera captured this moment.

Everyone was dumbfounded, thinking, "Are you carrying plastic bags? It looks so effortless!"